

# **Federal Primary Election Runoffs and Voter Turnout Decline, 1994-2010**

**July 2011**

**By: Katherine Sicienski, William Hix, and Rob Richie**

## **Summary of Facts and Findings**

### Near-Universal Decline in Turnout:

- Of 146 regularly scheduled primary runoffs in 1994 to 2008, all but five of them resulted in a turnout decline, on average by 31.5%.

### Largest Turnout Decrease:

- The largest decrease in turnout took place in the 2008 Democratic runoff for U.S. House in Texas' 32nd district, which saw a 93.88% decline in turnout from the primary to the runoff election.

### Average Decrease in Turnout, U.S. Senate and U.S. House:

- 39.65% in Senate runoffs and 33.54% in House runoffs.

### Average Decrease in Turnout, by Party:

- 36.36% in Democratic primary runoffs and 33.15% in Republican primary runoffs.

### Comeback Winners:

- Out of 146 runoffs, 43 (29.45%) resulted in a primary winner who trailed in the first round. Of these, 22 (about half) would go on to win the general election. All 22 were then re-elected in the following election cycle and 14 of them are still in office as of July, 2011.

### General Election Success:

- Of the 146 nominees who won a primary runoff, 62 (42.47%) went on to win the general election.

### Current Incumbents:

- Of the 62 candidates who won the general election after winning a primary runoff, 36 are still in federal office as of July 2011. These incumbents include Congressman Ron Paul and Senator Jim DeMint, both of whom trailed in the first round of the primary.

### Primary-Runoff Gap, a Key Factor:

- The more time between election rounds, the higher the negative impact of voter turnout. Primary elections with a gap of more than thirty days had an average decline in voter participation of 45.09%, while those with a gap of twenty days or less had an average 28.27% decline in turnout.

## **Introduction**

Primary runoffs are elections between the top two vote-getters that are held after the initial primary should no candidate surpass a certain vote threshold (typically a majority) in the first round. Laudable in principle, runoffs increase the likelihood that nominees have representative support and give voters a greater ability to express their preferences with less “wasted” votes.

But traditional runoff systems also have flaws. Perhaps most obvious and problematic is a prevalence of decreasing turnout for the second stage of the primary, endangering the very purpose of these elections, which is to enhance the ability of voters in party primaries to select a truly representative candidate. Without a means to ensure high levels of voter participation in both stages of a primary election, the effectiveness of holding these runoffs is reduced.

Runoff elections have a long history in the United States and other nations. Most nations that hold presidential elections using the national popular vote system also employ runoff elections.<sup>1</sup> In the 19th century, many U.S. House general elections were decided by runoffs. Today, many cities use runoff systems to elect mayors, and several states use runoff rules in general elections. Georgia and Louisiana employ the system in federal and states general elections, while Washington and California have an automatic runoff system where the top-two finishers from the first round of voting (in June in California and in August in Washington) face off in the November election for state and federal races. Nebraska uses a similar system for its state elections.

The most widespread use of the runoffs in the United States is in state-level federal office primaries. Despite the advantages of runoffs, their downsides contribute to the more common use of simple plurality voting, a system in which winning candidates from a multi-candidate race might have lost in a one-on-one race to a competitor. Other downsides to runoff elections include the fact that they can cost jurisdictions millions of dollars in extra administration costs and nearly double the campaign funds necessary to win the party nomination. Negativity typically increases during runoff campaigns, and logistical problems often arise for the officials mounting a second election.

As previously mentioned, a particularly acute problem is the decline in voter turnout that almost always occurs between the first election and the runoff contest. Decreased turnout negates the representative nature of a runoff, weakening the value of runoffs altogether. In order to quantify and attempt to explain turnout declines, we analyzed all federal primary runoff elections held between 1994 and 2010. This study compares declines in primary runoff voter participation, both historically and within each year and identifies many factors that may affect turnout in runoffs. These numerous factors include: competitiveness, comeback contests (in which the runoff winner trailed in the original primary), and the gap between the initial election and the runoff contest.

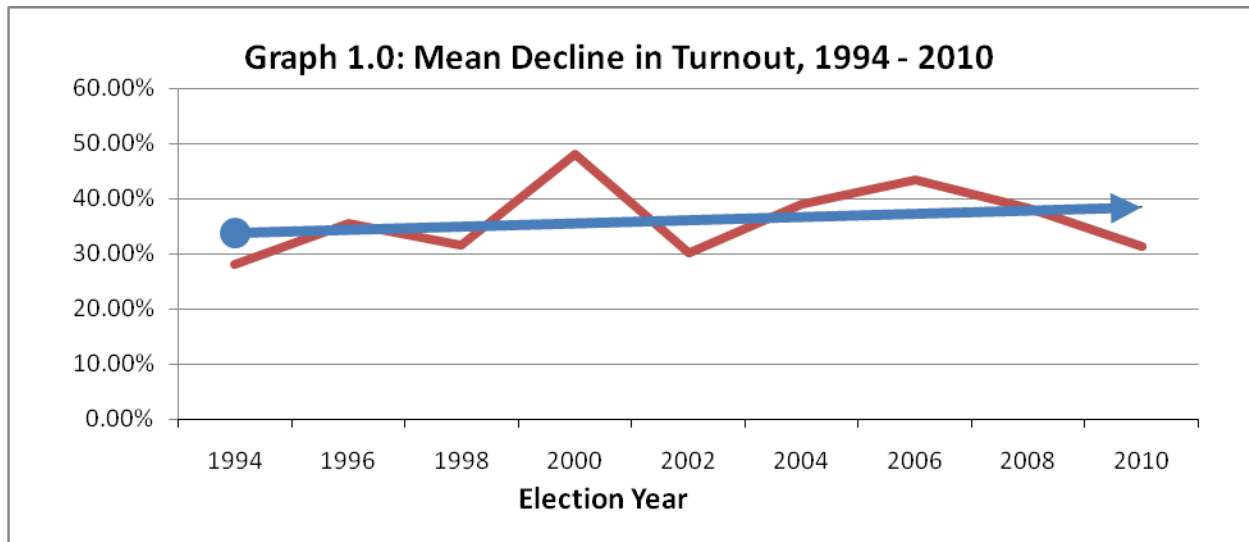
---

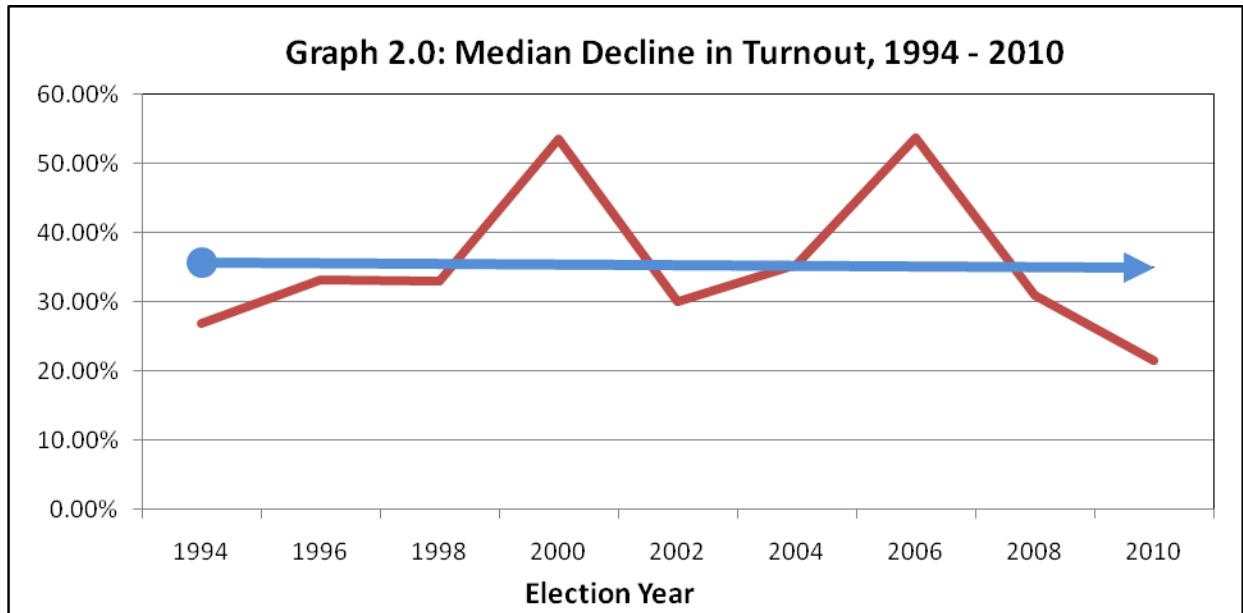
<sup>1</sup> [http://archive.fairvote.org/reports/researchreports/majority\\_rule\\_int06.pdf](http://archive.fairvote.org/reports/researchreports/majority_rule_int06.pdf)

## I. Overall Turnout Decline in Primary Runoffs

Year	Number of Runoffs	Mean Turnout Dropoff	Median Turnout Dropoff
2010	30	31.20%	21.44%
2008	12	38.39%	31.05%
2006	8	43.31%	53.71%
2004	12	38.96%	35.44%
2002	13	30.20%	29.98%
2000	8	47.96%	53.57%
1998	12	31.62%	33.07%
1996	31	35.56%	33.17%
1994	20	28.10%	26.88%
Total	146	34.46%	32.20%

All but five of the federal primary runoffs that took place between 1994 and 2010 experienced a decline in turnout between the two elections. For all the elections, the mean turnout decline was 34.30% and the median decline was 31.54%. Overall, year-based calculations show the same trend, although with some deviation in the degree of turnout decline. The mean turnout decline, per year, shows a very slight increasing trend (Graph 1.0); while the median turnout decline, per year, displays a slight downward trend (Graph 2.0).





For both measures of turnout decline, the years 2000 and 2006 represent deviations from this steady trend, with turnout declining significantly more in these periods than in the surrounding years. It is unclear what caused these increases, though it may be related to the nature of the races in those years.

In 2000, the outlier primary races were in Texas, in the U.S. Senate race and the U.S. House races in the 11th and 24th districts, and in Mississippi's U.S. Senate contest. Among these elections, turnout decreased, on average, by 65.01% between the primary and the runoff election. Turnout decline in 2006 was exacerbated by a 58% or higher decrease in runoffs in Texas' U.S. Senate and U.S. House 10th district, in Mississippi's U.S. Senate race, and in South Carolina's U.S. House 1st district. These four races had an average 66.3% decrease in turnout.

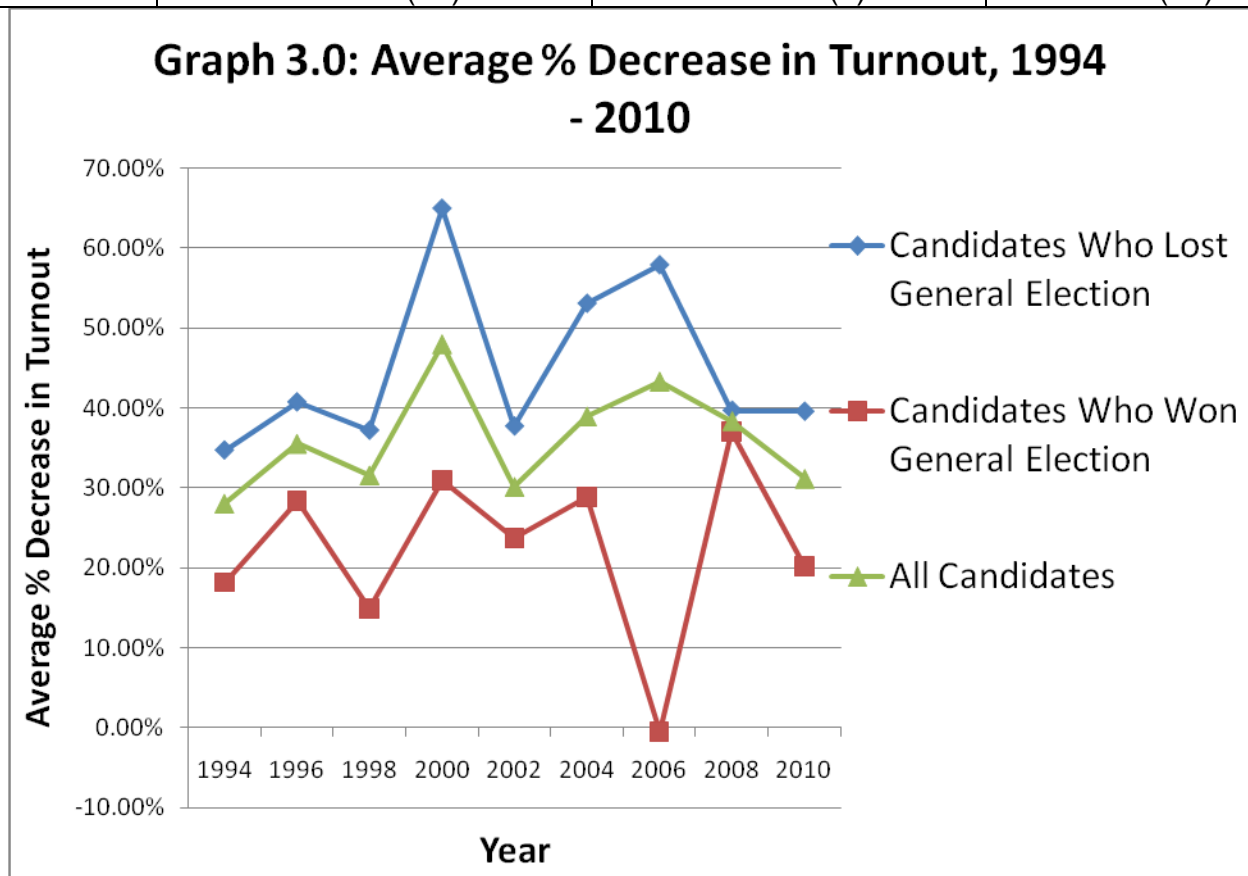
## **II. Factors in Turnout Decline: Competitiveness in Runoff and Viability of Nominees\***

*\*This analysis is only comprehensive for 1996-2010; some data from 1994 is included.*

### ***A – Candidates Who Won vs. Candidates Who Lost the General Election***

When splitting turnout data into two groups – turnout in primaries where the nominee went on to win the general election and turnout in primaries where the nominee lost the general election – a trend becomes clear.

Turnout Decline Between Initial Primary Elections and Primary Runoffs			
Year	Candidates who Lost the General Election (# of Races)	Candidates who Won the General Election (# of Races)	All Candidates (# of Races)
2010	39.57% (17)	20.25% (13)	31.20% (30)
2008	39.68% (6)	37.09% (6)	38.39% (12)
2006	57.93% (6)	-0.53% (2)	43.31% (8)
2004	53.10% (4)	28.86% (7)	38.96% (11)
2002	37.72% (6)	23.75% (7)	30.20% (13)
2000	65.01% (3)	30.91% (4)	47.96% (7)
1998	37.19% (9)	14.94% (3)	31.62% (12)
1996	40.74% (18)	28.39% (13)	35.56% (31)
1994	34.71% (12)	18.20% (8)	28.10% (20)



For each year, the average turnout decline for candidates who lost the general election was higher than that of candidates who would go on to win the general election and in every year except 2008, the difference was considerable. This may be due to money spent in the runoff, as candidates who are seen as a viable in the general election will likely raise and spend more money. It is also possible that this difference of turnout decline is due to voter apathy toward candidates that they believe are unlikely to win the general election.

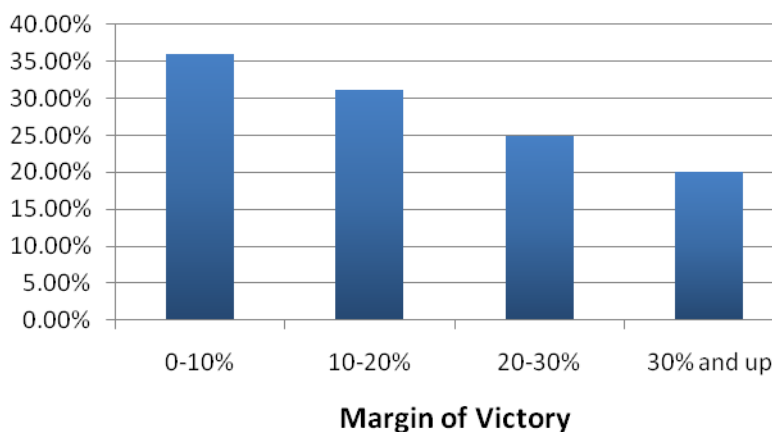
However, in order to know if the competitiveness of the two candidates, or of the two major parties, affected primary runoff turnout, we examined the exact margins of victory for all runoff participants.

**B – Margin of Victory and Continued Turnout**

To examine the impact of general election competitiveness for both victories and defeats, we took the absolute value of both the margin of victory (for winning candidates) and the margin of loss (for losing candidates) and compiled the information into different categories. Splitting the data into both 5% and 10% intervals, we found that the closer the general election (and the smaller the margin of victory), the less the decline in runoff turnout. However, the data was neither perfectly linear nor congruous – suggesting the presence of intervening factors.

Graph 4.0 displays the median turnout decline for nominees who then won the general election – and shows an almost perfect relationship between turnout decline and the margin of victory. For candidates who won the general election, turnout decline was lowest in cases where the candidate would win by a landslide (30% or higher margin of victory) and greater in races culminating in close general elections. This suggests that money may have been a factor yet again, where contributors focused more resources (allowing for more spending) on the primary runoff to select a candidate who would be a lock come November. It may also mean that candidates who generated strong support and turnout in a runoff election were able to carry that momentum into the general election.

**Graph 4.0: Median Turnout Decline for Candidates Who Won the General Election, by Margin of Victory**



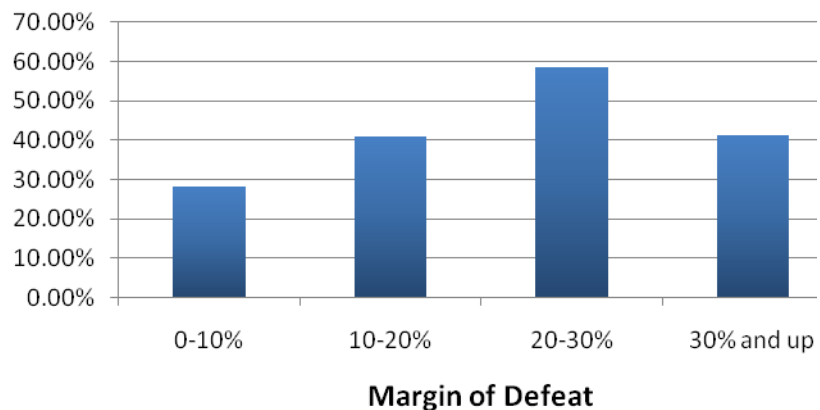
Margin of Victory	Number of Races
0 - 10%	17
10% - 20%	8
20% - 30%	12
30% and up	18

For candidates who lost the general election, Graph 5.0 shows a very different trend. While not a completely linear relationship, losing candidates in close general elections saw the lowest decrease in turnout between the first primary and the runoff election,

while higher margins of defeat saw increasing turnout declines. The closest margin of victory (0-10%) was more than ten percentage points lower than the next largest turnout decline. Races with a 20-30% margin of defeat in the general election had the highest turnout decline – with almost 60% of voters not returning to vote in the primary runoff. This would confirm the thesis that political actors are taking note of the general election, and shows a trend exactly opposite of Graph 4.0.

Margin of Defeat	Number of Races
0 - 10%	17
10% - 20%	8
20% - 30%	12
30% and up	18

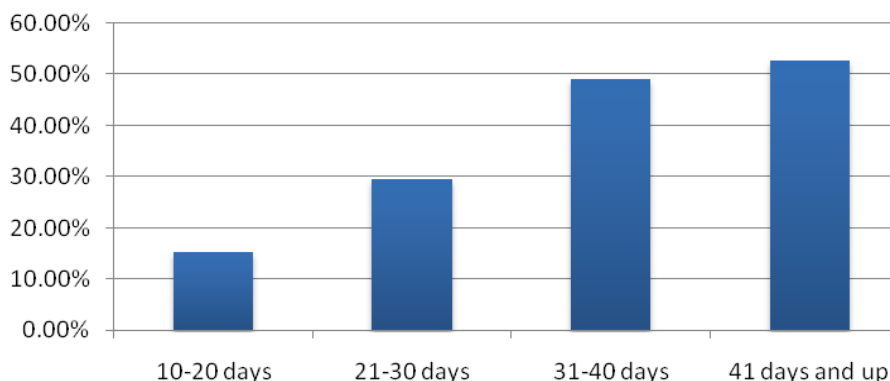
**Graph 5.0: Median Turnout Decline for Candidates Who Lost the General Election, by Margin of Defeat**



### III. Gap in Days between Election Rounds

In recent years, based in large part due to federal requirements, lawmakers in several states have acted to increase the gap between initial primary elections and runoffs in order to increase access to overseas voters, especially those in the military. But there seems to be a startling pattern that raises doubts about the merits of increasing the time between the rounds of a runoff: the greater the number of days between election rounds, the greater the decline in turnout.

**Graph 6.0: Percent Median Turnout Decline, by Election Gap**



Election Gap	Number of Races
10-20 Days	9
21-30 Days	84
31-40 Days	16
41 Days and up	16

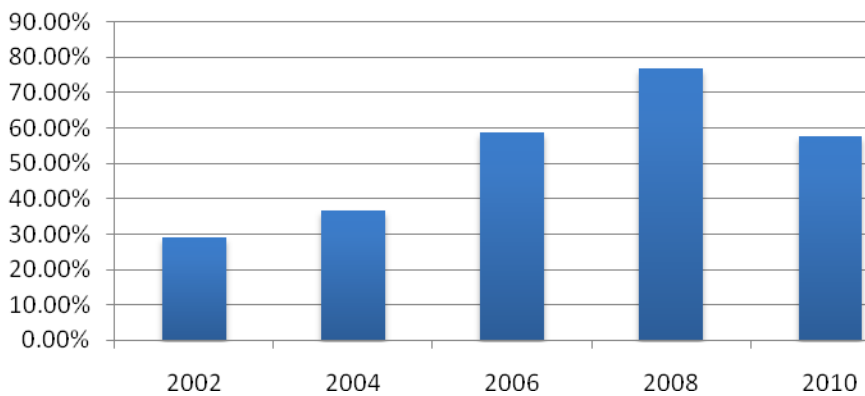
Graph 6.0 shows that runoffs held further away from the first election experience significantly lower voter turnout. Runoffs held 41 days or more after the original primary saw median turnout declines more than three times greater than runoffs held ten to twenty days after the original primary election. This data clearly shows that primaries and runoffs that are separated by a greater period of time are likely to have much higher turnout declines, a fact that should have ramifications in future policy planning.

The fact that turnout is more likely to be sustained in runoffs that are relatively close to the first round suggests that voters might be more likely to see the runoff as part of a single contest when the two rounds are held close together. Media coverage of the two rounds is more likely to be continuous, for example, and campaign operations for getting out the vote may be easier to sustain.

We realize that other factors may influence why turnout seems to stay more constant when election rounds are closer, and it will be the subject of a supplementary report. It is revealing, however, to look at Texas, as it has increased its number of days between runoffs.

In 2002, the gap between the original primary elections and the primary runoff in Texas was only 28 days. In 2004, that gap increased to 35 days and remained at that level until 2010 when it increased yet again to 42 days. There has been a general increasingly trend in the turnout decline for this races, which is cause for concern given Texas’ plans to increases the gap between its future primary elections and runoffs to an unprecedented 77 days.

**Graph 7.0: Median Turnout Decline, Texas, 2002-2010**



Year	Number of Races
2002	4
2004	5
2006	3
2008	2
2010	7

**IV. Statewide Runoffs Affecting House Race Turnout**

U.S. House primary runoff elections in which there was a statewide candidate (U.S. Senate or gubernatorial) candidate at the top of the runoff ballot typically experienced significantly lower decreases in participation than races with only congressional district candidates. During the period examined, thirty-three U.S. House primary runoff elections took place when there was Senate or gubernatorial runoff. These elections had an average turnout decline of 21.49% (the median was 19.72%). House contests in which no statewide office was at stake experienced larger turnout drops between

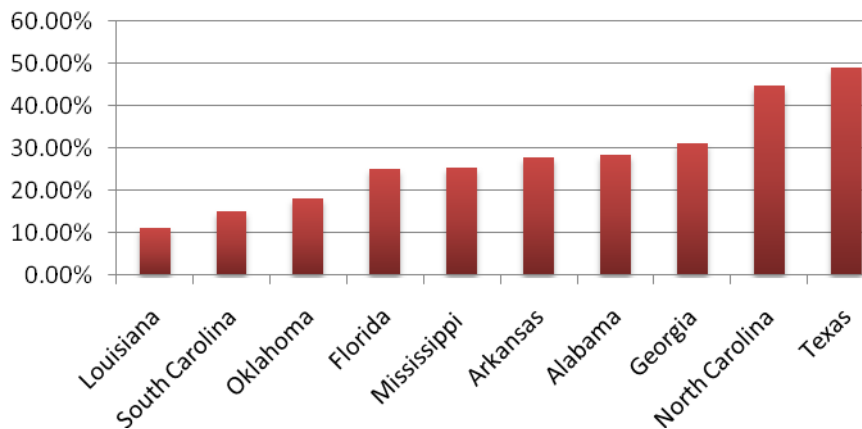
elections--the average turnout decline was 37.66% (the median was 36.87%).

The implications of this fact are clear: voters are typically more likely to participate in higher-profile state races than congressional races. One key reason for lower turnout in the great majority of runoff is the second round is much less likely to coincide with a high profile race than the first.

### **V. Turnout Decline Differences State-by-State**

Ten states have held primary runoffs since 1994: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas. Florida has since abandoned runoff elections, while Louisiana has given up the traditional primary system to return to its 'Cajun primary' general election system.. As shown below in Graph 7.0, Texas and North Carolina have experienced the largest median voter turnout declines, 48.97% and 44.60% respectively.

**Graph 8.0: Median Turnout Decline, by State**

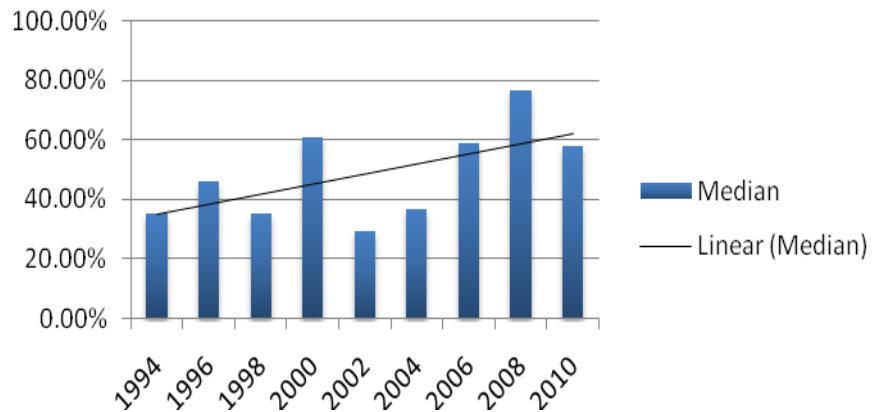


State	Number of Races
Louisiana	4
South Carolina	11
Oklahoma	11
Florida	9
Mississippi	15
Arkansas	10
Alabama	16
Georgia	16
North Carolina	10
Texas	44

Texas has also had the most primary runoffs, with a total of 44 federal primary runoffs in nine election cycles. Producing a trend line for the average turnout decline in Texas by year suggests that turnout decline in Texas is on the rise. As examined earlier in this report, the more days between rounds of elections, the larger the likely decline in turnout, and Texas' primary-runoff gap has been steadily increasing since the early 2000's as it has increased that gap.

Year	Number of Races
1994	4
1996	10
1998	5
2000	4
2002	4
2004	5
2006	3
2008	2
2010	7

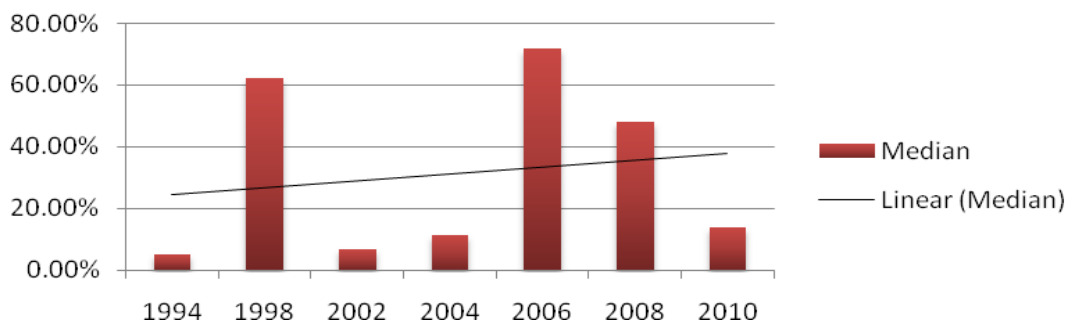
**Graph 9.0: Median Turnout Decline, Texas**



Louisiana experienced the smallest median turnout decline, although this is most likely due to the fact that three of its four runoff elections took place in a 2008 special election cycle, which may have aided turnout in the runoff. Louisiana's 2010 primary runoff was also an outlier, as turnout actually increased by 44%. The reasons for this are unclear, but it is possible that it relates to the timing of the election and runoff – the new first round took place in August, earlier than any previous primary in the state in many years. Note that three additional runoffs occurred in Louisiana in 2008 – however, they were delayed due to the Hurricane Gustav and actually took place on the day of the general election of the president, making their turnout out of place in this analysis.

South Carolina had the next lowest decline in turnout, with a median of 14.97%. A brief glance at Graph 9.0 shows that this state had three very high turnout decline years (2008 – 47.95%, 2006 – 71.67%, and 1998 – 62.14%), however, these were years where there was only one runoff in the state. Years with numerous races had considerably higher turnout and more data points, making them more reliable measurements.

**Graph 10.0: Median Turnout Decline, South Carolina**



## **VII. Recommendations for Policymakers**

While the level of turnout decreases between initial primary elections and primary runoffs has, on the whole, remained relatively stable since 1994, there are undeniable trends in the data that could aid officials in conducting more successful elections.

Data suggests that the candidates' general election competitiveness has an effect on runoff turnout, and that statewide runoffs most likely boost turnout. However, neither of these factors can be controlled by state policy. The one factor that leads to a clear policy suggestion is the length of time between election rounds. Our study shows that the longer the time between the original primary and the runoff election, the lower the number of voters who will return to the polls.

Longer gaps depressed turnout, with gaps forty days or longer having the highest turnout decline. Texas' trend of ever-increasing distance between primary elections and primary runoffs is continuing into 2012. The state has scheduled a 77-day gap between initial elections and primary runoffs for the 2012 cycle – a gap that our findings would suggest could have an alarming effect on turnout if there were no competitive statewide runoff elections. As it turns out, Texas in 2012 will have a wide-open U.S. Senate race that is expected to result in a Republican primary runoff, with any Republican primary winner to be highly favored in the general election. Therefore, it may end up being an abnormal year for evaluating its policies for their impact on turnout.

As a general matter, however, the best way to halt turnout declines in runoffs is through a straightforward reform: combining these two separate elections into one with a system called instant runoff voting (also known as ranked choice voting or preferential voting). Instant runoff voting would allow primary voters in these states to rank all candidates in order of preference. If no one candidate achieved the requisite threshold in the first choice ballots (often a majority of voters, 50%, but occasionally 40% or another number), the bottom ranked candidate would then be removed from the race and each of those ballots would be re-tabulated for their second choice. Or, to simulate a runoff more exactly, only the top two candidates might advance to the second round of counting, a rule that is necessary to apply when the winning threshold is less than 50%.

Instant runoff voting essentially combines the initial primary election and the runoff into one contest, ensuring that voters receive an adequate opportunity to express their wishes, without the burden of returning to the polls for another election.

For states that want to keep two different election dates, we would recommend keeping them as close together as possible. One way to avoid long gaps in time to accommodate overseas voters is to follow the practice [in Arkansas, Louisiana and South Carolina, as detailed in FairVote's recent report *Legality of the Use of Ranked Choice Absentee Ballots for Military and Overseas Voters in Runoff Election*]. Overseas voters receive two primary ballots: one for the first round and a ranked choice ballot for the prospective runoff. If there is a runoff election, the runoff ballots are used to determine the results, with the ballot counting as a vote for the candidate ranked highest on the ballot among those candidates who have advanced in the runoff. This allows

---

overseas voters fair access to the ballot, but also allows election officials to keep the runoff closer to the initial election date and boost overall turnout.



FairVote  
6930 Carroll Avenue  
Suite 610  
Takoma Park, MD 20912

FairVote is a non-partisan electoral reform organization seeking fair elections with meaningful choices. Our vision of “the way democracy will be” includes an equally protected right to vote, instant runoff voting for executive elections and proportional voting for legislative elections.

FairVote’s **Research Report** series analyzes American and international elections and election practices, studying the effect on voter participation, fairness in representation and competitive choice.

FairVote | [www.fairvote.org](http://www.fairvote.org) | 301-270-4616