



**Governance Program**

*Democracy Project*

# National Primary Turnout Hits New Record Low

95–100 Million Citizens May Sit Out General  
Election

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BIPARTISAN POLICY CENTER



## Governance Program

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#### ABOUT BPC

Founded in 2007 by former Senate Majority Leaders Howard Baker, Tom Daschle, Bob Dole and George Mitchell, Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) is a non-profit organization that drives principled solutions through rigorous analysis, reasoned negotiation and respectful dialogue. With projects in multiple issue areas, BPC combines politically balanced policymaking with strong, proactive advocacy and outreach.

#### ABOUT THE DEMOCRACY PROJECT

In 2010, BPC launched the Democracy Project, bringing together diverse voices to support efforts to improve the ability of government to grapple with the nation's challenges. The project is guided by an Advisory Committee co-chaired by former Secretary of Agriculture and BPC Senior Fellow Dan Glickman, former Secretary of the Interior and Governor from Idaho Dirk Kempthorne and AOL co-founder Steve Case. The co-chairs all share similar concerns about the lack of civil discourse in the current political environment, the rules and structures that inhibit shared progress. The advisory committee includes some of the nation's top government, civic, business, military and academic leaders to guide its work.

#### DISCLAIMER

This white paper is the product of the Bipartisan Policy Center's Democracy Project. The findings and recommendations expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views or opinions of the Bipartisan Policy Center, its founders, its board of directors, or its projects.

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# Executive Summary

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## National Primary Turnout Hits New Record Low in States: 49 New Record Lows; Only Three Record Highs

### **95 – 100 MILLION CITIZENS MAY SIT OUT GENERAL ELECTION**

Average voter turnout in the 2012 statewide primaries – for president, governor and U.S. Senate – slumped to the lowest level since presidential primaries proliferated in 1972.

Based on the 41 states which held statewide primaries in both parties, turnout was 17.3 percent of eligible citizens. If the five states which held only Republican primaries are added to this total, turnout was 15.9 percent of eligible citizens. In all, 32,909,443 citizens voted out of an eligible citizen electorate for the states which held statewide primaries (five did not) of 207,581,000.

Turnout reached record lows for presidential election years in 15 of 41 states which held statewide primaries in both parties. Democratic turnout dropped to record lows in 26 of 41 primaries. In the 46 states where Republican primaries were held, there were eight record lows and three record highs.

Based on these results and other factors, it is likely that between 95 and 100 million eligible American citizens will not vote in November.

These were among the findings of a Bipartisan Policy Center/Center for the Study of the American Electorate report on primary based on final and official tallies in the 45 states and the District of Columbia which held primaries for president, governor and/or U.S. Senate.

Among other findings:

- While the lack of a presidential contest in the Democratic Party was partially responsible for the low level of voter turnout, the 17.3 percent 2012 primary turnout in states with primaries in both parties was lower than the primaries in previous elections in which only one party had a presidential contest. In 2004, primary turnout was 18.9 percent of eligibles; in 1996, it was 19.6; in 1984 turnout was 24.5 percent and in 1972, it was 30.6 nearly double the percentage who voted this year.
- Overall turnout in states that held primaries in both parties and before Rick Santorum withdrew from the contest after the Wisconsin primary was the lowest ever as compared to a similar cessation of presidential competition in previous years. Republican turnout was lower than 2008, 2000, and 1976 but higher than 1996, 1988 and 1980. After Republican presidential competition ended but including

primary races for U.S. Senate and governor, both total turnout and Republican turnout was lower than any presidential contest year except 2000.

- Compared to 2008, overall primary turnout in states with primaries in both parties was higher in only three states – North Dakota (up 13.1 percentage points), Nebraska (2.4) and Wyoming (0.2). Republican turnout as compared to 2008 primary turnout was higher in 16 states lower in 26 (there were four fewer GOP primaries in 2008). Democratic turnout was higher in just two states, North Dakota (up 3.3 percentage points) and Washington (1.1).
- Overall low presidential election year primary turnout records in states with primaries in both parties were set in Arkansas (14.7 percent of eligibles), California (20.8), Connecticut (10.4), Florida (14.9), Georgia (15.3), Illinois (17.9), Maine (5.6), Maryland (14.1), Minnesota (8.5), Nevada (9.8), New Hampshire (30.6), New Mexico (15.9), Ohio (20.3), Oregon (21.8), and West Virginia (20.9).
- Turnout was at a record low for presidential election year Republican primaries in California (8.2 percent of eligibles), Maine (2.6), Nevada (5.6), New York (1.4), Oregon (10.2), Virginia (4.6) and West Virginia (7.7). New record highs were reported in Alabama (17.0), Mississippi (13.4) and North Carolina (14.0).
- Democratic statewide presidential year primary turnout was at record lows in Alabama (5.3 percent of eligibles), Arkansas (7.6), California (11.7), Florida (6.5), Georgia (2.1), Illinois (7.4), Indiana (4.6), Kentucky (6.3), Louisiana (4.5), Maine (2.8), Maryland (8.0), Massachusetts (2.9), Missouri (7.0), Montana (11.5), Nebraska (6.2), Nevada (4.2), New Hampshire (7.5), New Mexico (9.7), Ohio (6.3), Oklahoma (4.1), Oregon (11.6), Pennsylvania (7.2), Tennessee (3.4), Texas (3.6), West Virginia (14.0) and Wyoming (4.00).

The highest overall turnout in states with primaries in both parties was recorded in Wisconsin (30.9 percent of eligibles in the gubernatorial recall primary) followed by Montana (30.9), North Dakota (30.6), New Hampshire (30.6) and Washington (29.2). The lowest overall turnout occurred in Maine (5.6 percent of eligibles) followed by New Jersey (8.2), Minnesota (8.8) Nevada (9.8) and Connecticut (10.0).

The greatest increase in overall turnout as compared to the statewide primaries of 2008 was in North Dakota (13.1 percentage points), followed by Nebraska (2.4) and Wyoming (0.2). The greatest decrease was in Massachusetts (minus 27.4 percentage points), followed by New Hampshire (23.3), New Jersey (21.1), Ohio (20.1), Vermont (20.0) and Rhode Island (19.3)

The highest Democratic turnout in states with primaries in both parties was in Hawaii (23.9 percent of eligibles), followed by Washington (16.7), Wisconsin (15.8), West Virginia (14.0) and North Carolina (13.9). The lowest Democratic turnout was recorded in Georgia (2.1 percent of eligibles), followed by Maine (2.8), Massachusetts (2.9), Tennessee (3.4) and Texas (3.6).

There were only two states in which Democratic primary turnout increased as compared to 2008 – North Dakota (up 3.3 percentage points) and Washington (1.1). The greatest decrease was recorded in Massachusetts (minus 24.5 percentage points), followed by Vermont (24.0), Indiana (27.5), New Hampshire (22.1), Ohio (21.3) and Pennsylvania (17.4).

Republican turnout was highest in New Hampshire (24.5 percent of eligibles), followed by North Dakota (19.6), Wyoming (19.0), Wisconsin (18.5), Montana (18.2) and South Carolina (17.30). Republican turnout was lowest in the District of Columbia (1.1 percent of eligibles), followed by New York (1.4), Rhode Island (1.9), Maine (2.6), Minnesota (3.2) and New Jersey (3.8)

The largest increase in GOP turnout as compared to the 2008 primary season was recorded in North Dakota (up 9.7 percentage points), followed by Wisconsin (8.7), Mississippi (6.7), North Carolina (6.1), Montana (5.2) and Indiana (4.8). New Jersey recorded the greatest decrease in Republican turnout (minus 5.9 percentage points), followed by California (4.9), Virginia (4.2), Arkansas (4.0), New York (3.9) and Delaware (3.6).

This report compares turnout rates for primaries that are closed – only party registrants can vote for nominees – and open to all registered citizens or modified open – open to citizens registered for the party in whose primary a citizen is voting and those unaffiliated with any major party. There are tables on this issue both in the summary charts of this release and in the detailed charts at the end of this report. But the inescapable conclusion to be drawn from the preponderance of the data is that open and modified open primaries have modestly higher turnout than closed primaries.

There is, in addition, one other issue that deserves mention. Both California and Washington have adopted a “top two” primary system where all the candidates for a particular office are lumped together on the ballot and the top two vote getters compete in the general election. Candidates who run can state their preferences for a particular party next to their name on the ballot as a guide to voters. The reasoning behind the top two system is that it may increase turnout and may yield more centrist candidates which could, in turn, reduce political polarization. In addition Washington has so liberalized absentee voting that almost all ballots are cast by mail and about half of California’s votes are cast in absentia – both on the belief that these voting modifications will enhance turnout.

This year is the first that “top two” has been used in California and Washington, and while no firm conclusions can be on the basis of a one-time experiment, with respect to turnout, the results are not encouraging. California recorded the lowest turnout for a presidential year statewide primary in its history and Washington’s turnout was the third lowest ever. The premise of enabling more centrist candidates was not tested. In both California and Washington the leading figures on the ballot for each major party were not challenged.

One other item should be noted. Oregon has moved to all-mail voting. Washington is virtually there and California’s citizens’ use of mailed ballots has been constantly rising.

Oregon and California had the lowest presidential year primary turnout in their history and Washington's was the third lowest.