2018 Primary Election Turnout and Reforms

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Introduction

It is common to hear pundits, politicians, and experts decry low voter turnout in the United States relative to other democracies. There are many reasons to desire higher voter turnout in all elections, but primary election turnout in particular is more in need of attention than general election turnout. It is far too low considering the importance of primaries in choosing representatives at all levels of government.

The U.S. election process is typically comprised of two components: a nominating contest, in which parties select their standard-bearers, and a general election, in which those party standard-bearers compete for elected office. In the United States, general elections are usually conducted in November of even-numbered years, though some states hold their statewide contests on odd-numbered years.

This paper focuses on the nominating contests held during midterm election cycles. Focusing specifically on midterm election cycles, which tend to see lower voter turnout than during presidential election years, gives researchers the purest view of participation in elections for Congress.

There are limitations to studying midterm nominating contests. Unlike presidential cycles, which can be compared every four years, midterm cycles are not on the same schedule. Each state has two senators, so over a 12-year span, there will be two midterm cycles with a statewide Senate election and one without a Senate contest. Similarly, about one-third of states do not have statewide gubernatorial elections that coincide with midterm federal contests. The lack of statewide races is known to depress turnout and should be considered when taking a national view of turnout during the nomination process.

The vast majority of nominating contests used for congressional elections are primaries. While some states allow parties to choose other means of selecting nominees, all states in 2018 used primaries. During this election cycle, there were states in which parties used conventions to whittle down the number of candidates eligible to appear on a primary ballot. Additional research is needed to determine how this may affect turnout during the primary election contest that is open to the public.

The majority of this analysis covers turnout during primary nominating contests, which the Bipartisan Policy Center's Commission on Political Reform identified as far too low. As the commission stated in its report *Governing in a Polarized America*, "Increasing participation in party primaries is good for the parties as well as the country, and setting higher turnout goals for primaries should be a national priority."[1]

The commission also found that low-turnout midterm primaries erode the credibility of U.S. democracy and may allow more extreme candidates to reach general elections and attain office. Higher participation means that the primary electorate would more likely match that of the general electorate and the population at large.

This paper examines turnout during the 2018 primary elections, conducted in 49 states and the District of Columbia, compared with turnout during the 2014 and 2010 midterm election cycles. (Louisiana holds its primary on Election Day.) The paper will then analyze how some recommendations made by BPC's Commission on Political Reform show promise as ways to increase voter participation. There will also be a brief summary of some other factors that are correlated with higher turnout but for which further research is needed to justify policy change.

Summary of Findings

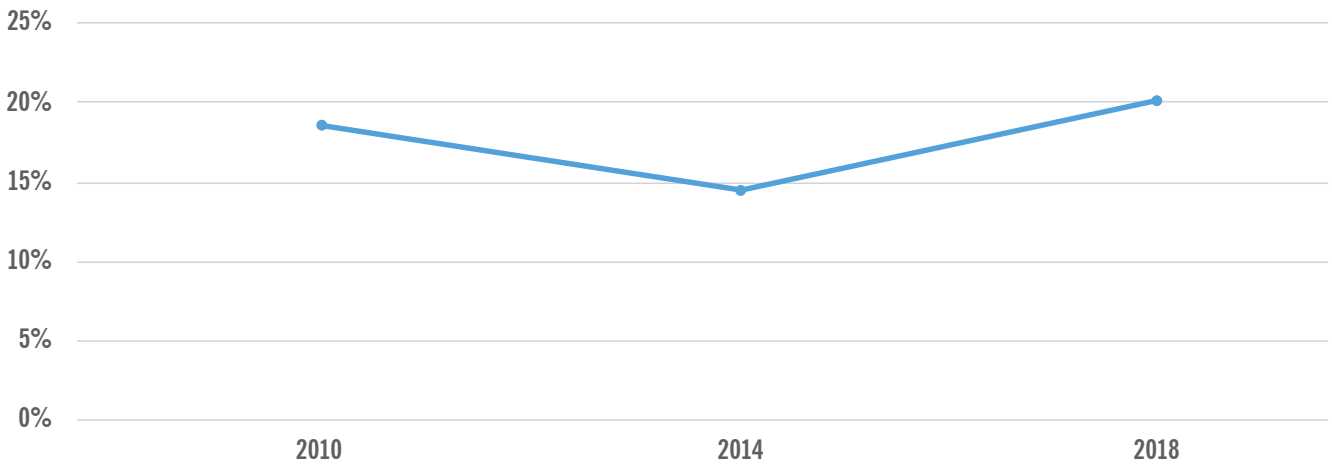
- Turnout of all eligible voters in 2018 was 19.9 percent. That compares with 14.3 percent in 2014 and 18.3 percent in 2010.
- During the 2018 primary election contests, 46,287,000 ballots were cast. Of these, 23,001,000 ballots were cast for Democratic candidates and 20,462,000 were cast for Republican candidates. Therefore, in 2018, 9.9 percent of eligible voters cast a vote for a Democratic candidate, 8.8 percent for a Republican candidate, and 80 percent cast no vote at all.
- The states that already exceed the BPC Commission on Political Reform's target of 30 percent primary turnout by 2020 are Missouri, Montana, Oklahoma, Washington, and Wyoming.
- The states with the least turnout in 2018 are Iowa, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, and Virginia. Each had 12 percent participation or less.
- Initial evidence confirms that some of the commission's recommendations to increase primary turnout work. Those recommendations include adopting open primaries and consolidating primary election dates.
- Other policy reforms that were not considered by the commission in 2014 but that are found to correlate with higher primary participation include holding primaries for state offices at the same time as federal offices, holding primaries in summer, allowing voters to cast ballots in uncontested races, and reconsidering nominating conventions.
- Factors that impact turnout but remain outside the control of policymakers include the presence of statewide contests on the ballot in a given year, the opportunity for every eligible voter to participate in a primary, and higher levels of partisanship.

Primary Turnout in 2018 and Recent Midterm Cycles

The good news is that voter turnout during the 2018 midterm primaries is up compared with both 2014 and 2010. The more than 46 million ballots cast in 2018 is also the high-water mark of the last three midterm primaries and may be the most ballots ever cast during the nominating process for congressional elections. This total compares with 32 million total ballots cast in 2014 and 40 million in 2010.

In this paper turnout is calculated a few different ways, which are fully explained in Appendix B. Nationwide, the total ballots cast as a percentage of the overall eligible electorate was 19.9 percent in 2018, up from 14.3 percent four years ago and 18.3 percent in 2010 (Figure 1). Still, despite the bump in turnout, only about one in five eligible voters participated in choosing nominees for the midterm elections this year.

Figure 1. National Midterm Primary Turnout, 2010-2018



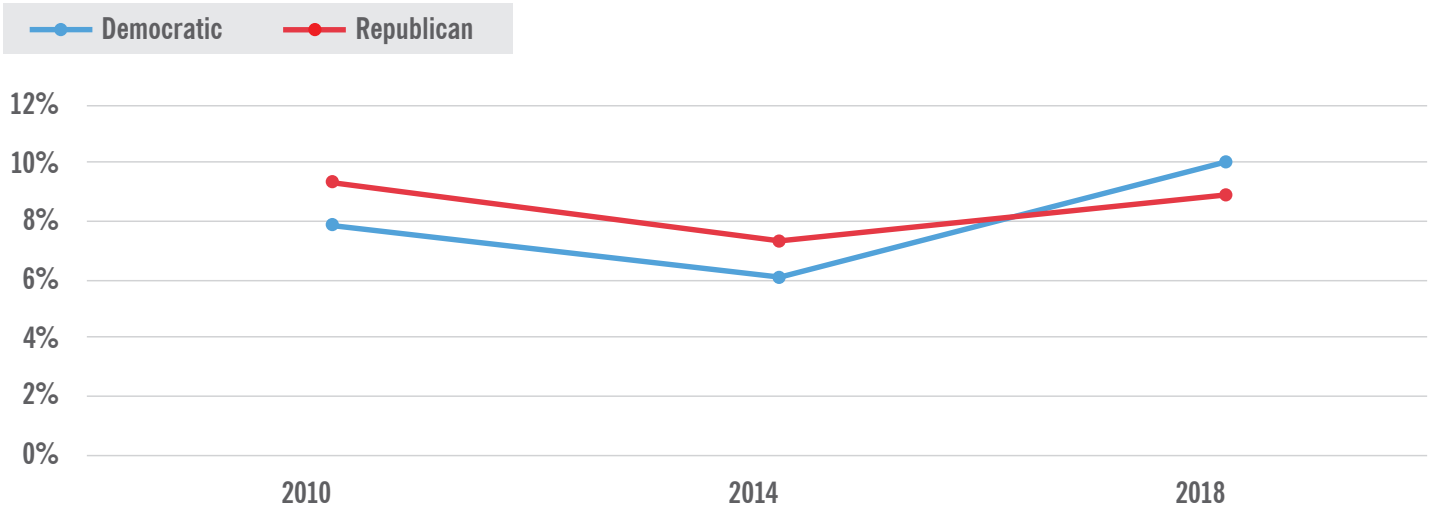
Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

Another way to calculate and compare turnout in primary elections for 2018 and over time is to average the state eligible-voter turnout rates. In this method, average state turnout among 2018 primaries was 21 percent. This is substantially up from 2014, when average state turnout was 16.1 percent, and slightly up from the 19.4 percent average in 2010. When calculating turnout, the authors exclude runoff election contests that occur as part of the nominating primary contest unless otherwise specified.

Throughout the past three midterm primary cycles, the turnout of eligible voters casting ballots for Republican candidates has never averaged above 10 percent. The numbers have been even lower for Democratic Party votes, as shown in Figure 2. In 2018, the pinnacle of turnout over the past three cycles, only 9.9 percent of voters cast ballots for Democratic candidates, while 8.8 percent were cast for Republican candidates during the primary season. The vast majority of the voters cast no ballots at all. In 2014, only 6 percent of the voting-eligible population cast primary votes for Democratic candidates, and less than 8 percent of the population cast a primary vote for Republican candidates. Among eligible voters, 85 percent didn't vote at all during the 2014 primary elections. And in 2010, only 7.8 percent of the voting-eligible population cast primary votes for Democratic candidates and 9.3 percent cast primary votes for Republican candidates, which means nearly 83 percent of eligible voters didn't participate in that primary season.

This year marks the first midterm primary election cycle in at least a decade where more voters cast ballots for Democratic candidates than Republicans: 23 million votes were cast for Democrats, compared with 20.5 million for Republicans.

Figure 2. Midterm Primary Turnout for each Party as a Percentage of all Eligible Voters



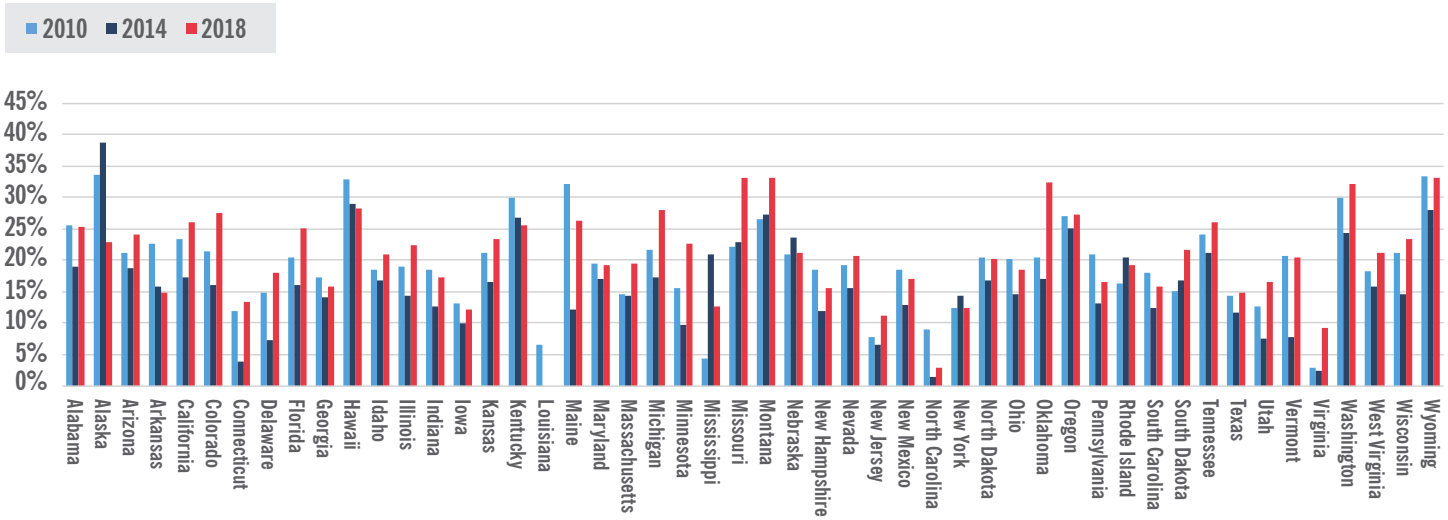
Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

While turnout this year is low compared with general midterm and presidential elections, it is significantly elevated from past years. Several factors may be contributing to Americans' increased involvement in the democratic process. Historically strong partisanship and polarization has increased the stakes in primary elections, while historically weak congressional approval ratings have eroded the incumbency advantage. This has led to more candidates, more contested primaries, and therefore more choice at the ballot box. Additionally, control for both the House and the Senate were up in the air this year, further increasing the importance of the primaries in determining the landscape for the general election come November. Finally, party trends are also coming into play. Turnout for Republican candidates has typically been much more consistent than turnout for Democrats. Republican control of the White House and Congress is thus contributing to a surge in participation among Democrats, driving an increase in overall turnout.

Figure 3, which displays the turnout rates of every state in the past three nonpresidential primary elections, shows the variations both within and between states. Two points are worth emphasizing. In nearly every state, primary turnout in 2014 was noticeably lower than turnout in 2010 and 2018, while this year's turnout was typically higher than the previous two midterms.

Additionally, this graph illustrates how widespread low-turnout primaries are. Only nine states have attained 30 percent turnout at least once in the last three nonpresidential primary elections: Alaska, Hawaii, Kentucky, Maine, Missouri, Montana, Oklahoma, Washington, and Wyoming. Only Alaska has reached 35 percent turnout, and it did so only once. On the other hand, eight states have never attained 15 percent turnout—just half of the commission's goalpost—in midterm primaries over the past decade: Connecticut, Iowa, Louisiana, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia.

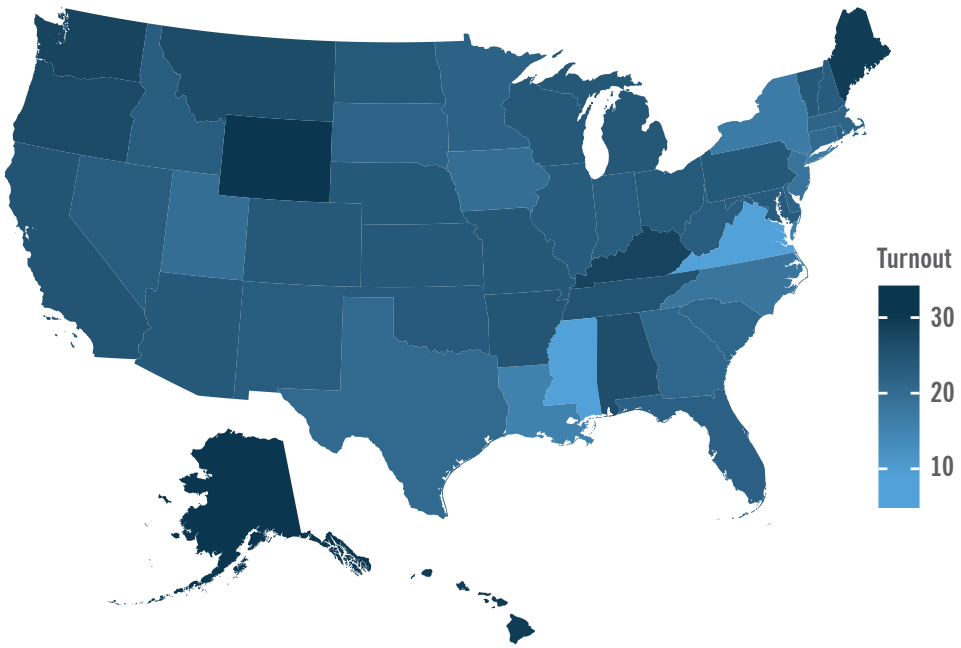
Figure 3. Midterm Primary Turnout by State



Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

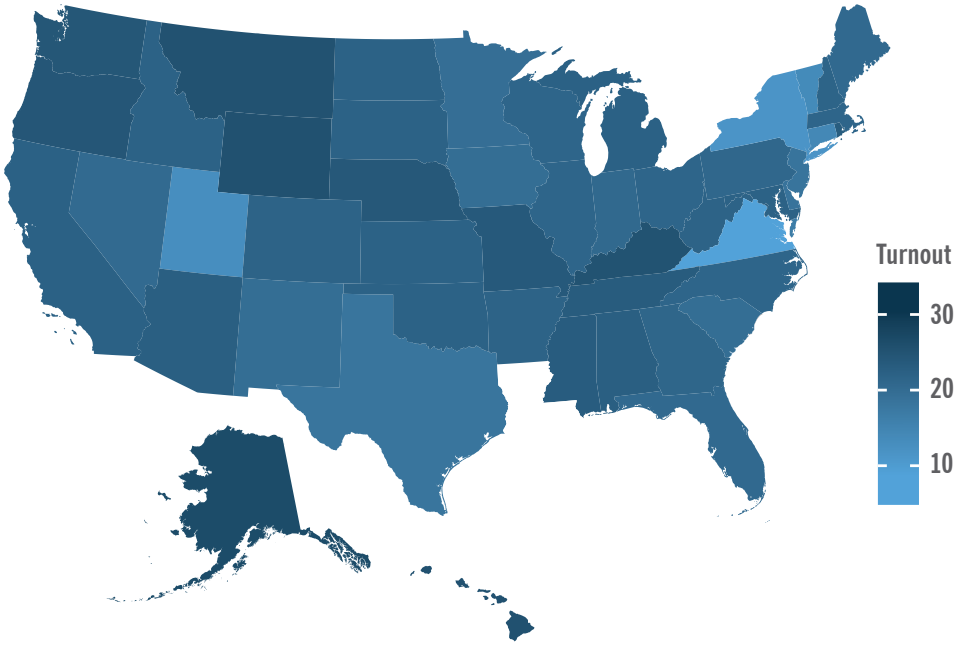
National primary turnout maps by year are also illuminating (Figures 4-6). Western states have generally had the highest turnout rates, followed by Midwestern states. Southern and Northeastern states typically have lower primary turnout. View complete primary turnout rates for the past three midterm primary cycles in Appendix A.

Figure 4. 2010 Primary Turnout by State



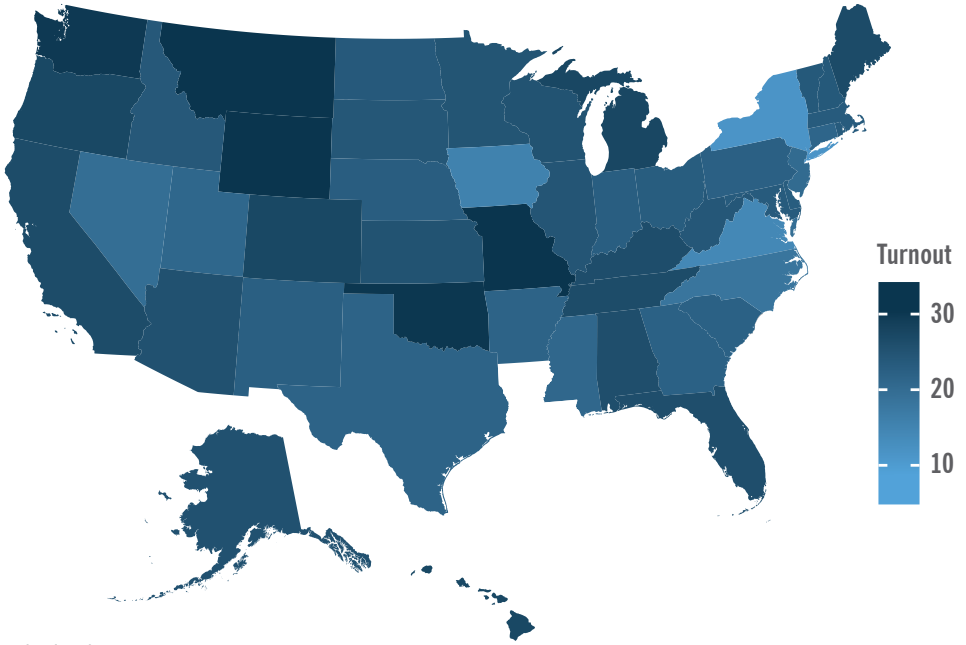
Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

Figure 5. 2014 Primary Turnout by State



Source: BPC analysis of state election data.
*Louisiana is excluded because it did not hold a primary before the November general election.

Figure 6. 2018 Primary Turnout by State



Source: BPC analysis of state election data.
*Louisiana is excluded because it did not hold a primary before the November general election.

This year, Missouri, Montana, Oklahoma, and Wyoming all led the pack with primary turnout rates of 33 percent each, and Washington was close behind with 32 percent turnout. Montana and Missouri both featured high-profile Senate competitions this year.

Table 1. 2018 Primary Election Turnout

Highest Turnout States	Turnout
Montana	33%
Missouri	33%
Wyoming	33%
Oklahoma	33%
Washington	32%

Lowest Turnout States	Turnout
New York	3%
Virginia	9%
New Jersey	11%
Iowa	12%
North Carolina	12%

Biggest Gains (from 2014)	Change in Turnout
Oklahoma	+15%
Maine	+14%
Minnesota	+13%
Vermont	+13%
Colorado	+11%

Biggest Slides (from 2014)	Change in Turnout
Alaska	-16%
Mississippi	-8%
Nebraska	-3%
North Carolina	-2%
Kentucky	-1%

Source: BPC analysis of state election data.
*New York, Virginia, and North Carolina did not hold statewide primary elections for both major parties.
*Turnout changes are expressed in percentage points.

On the other hand, New York's federal primary drew the smallest amount of participation, with only 3 percent of eligible voters casting ballots. This is likely due to the state holding separate primaries for federal and state offices in the same year, and the federal primary didn't feature a contested statewide race for either major party. Virginia's primary garnered only 9 percent participation, followed by New Jersey with 11 percent, and Iowa and North Carolina with 12 percent each.

Table 2 lists the turnout rate and Democratic and Republican vote totals for 10 states that feature a competitive Senate race in this year's general midterm election. Several of these states had well above average primary turnout, no doubt in part due to a competitive primary for these high-leverage Senate races. The table also lists the percentage of eligible voters who did not participate in each election. Nonparticipation dwarfs the partisan vote totals in every case, putting into perspective how few Americans currently participate in nominating Democratic and Republican congressional candidates.

Table 2. 2018 Primary Turnout Comparison - Battleground States

		2018	2014	2010
Arizona	Turnout	24.2%	18.8%	21.2%
	Democratic Votes	10.6%	6.9%	7.4%
	Republican Votes	13.5%	11.8%	13.7%
	Nonparticipation	75.8%	81.2%	78.8%
Florida	Turnout	25.2%	16.1%	20.5%
	Democratic Votes	10.7%	6.5%	7.7%
	Republican Votes	11.6%	7.4%	10.8%
	Nonparticipation	74.8%	83.9%	79.5%
Indiana	Turnout	17.4%	12.6%	18.4%
	Democratic Votes	5.8%	3.1%	5.2%
	Republican Votes	10.1%	7.2%	11.3%
	Nonparticipation	82.6%	87.4%	81.6%
Missouri	Turnout	33.1%	23.0%	22.1%
	Democratic Votes	13.5%	6.7%	7.0%
	Republican Votes	14.8%	9.3%	12.7%
	Nonparticipation	66.9%	77.0%	77.9%
Montana	Turnout	33.2%	27.4%	26.6%
	Democratic Votes	13.5%	9.5%	8.1%
	Republican Votes	18.0%	16.6%	16.7%
	Nonparticipation	66.8%	72.6%	73.4%
Nevada	Turnout	15.5%	11.8%	18.4%
	Democratic Votes	6.9%	3.8%	6.7%
	Republican Votes	6.7%	6.2%	10.1%
	Nonparticipation	84.5%	88.2%	81.6%
Ohio	Turnout	18.4%	14.5%	20.3%
	Democratic Votes	7.9%	5.7%	8.5%
	Republican Votes	9.5%	7.3%	9.7%
	Nonparticipation	81.6%	85.5%	79.7%
Tennessee	Turnout	26.1%	21.2%	24.2%
	Democratic Votes	8.0%	5.3%	6.4%
	Republican Votes	16.5%	14.6%	16.3%
	Nonparticipation	73.9%	78.8%	75.8%
Texas	Turnout	14.8%	11.6%	14.4%
	Democratic Votes	5.6%	3.2%	4.2%
	Republican Votes	8.2%	7.7%	9.2%
	Nonparticipation	85.2%	88.4%	85.6%
Wisconsin	Turnout	23.4%	14.6%	21.3%
	Democratic Votes	11.8%	7.2%	5.5%
	Republican Votes	10.0%	5.5%	14.4%
	Nonparticipation	76.6%	85.4%	78.7%

Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

Note: In Arizona's 2010 and 2014 elections and in all Ohio elections, Democratic and Republican votes are total ballots counted (TBC) turnout. In all other states, Democratic and Republican votes reflect Highest Office (HO) turnout.

CPR's Policy Recommendations that May Impact Primary Election Turnout

While turnout rates are higher in 2018, they remain significantly below the goals for stand-alone congressional primary turnout, which were set by the Commission on Political Reform in its report *Governing in a Polarized America*. The commission recommended that congressional primary turnout increase to 30 percent of eligible voters by 2020 and 35 percent by 2026. There has been only slight improvement in midterm primary turnout rates since the report was published in 2014.

Two of the commission's recommendations in particular may yield the most promise for policymakers seeking to increase turnout during the primaries: make primaries more open to all voters and consolidate primaries on a few dates.

OPENING PRIMARIES UP

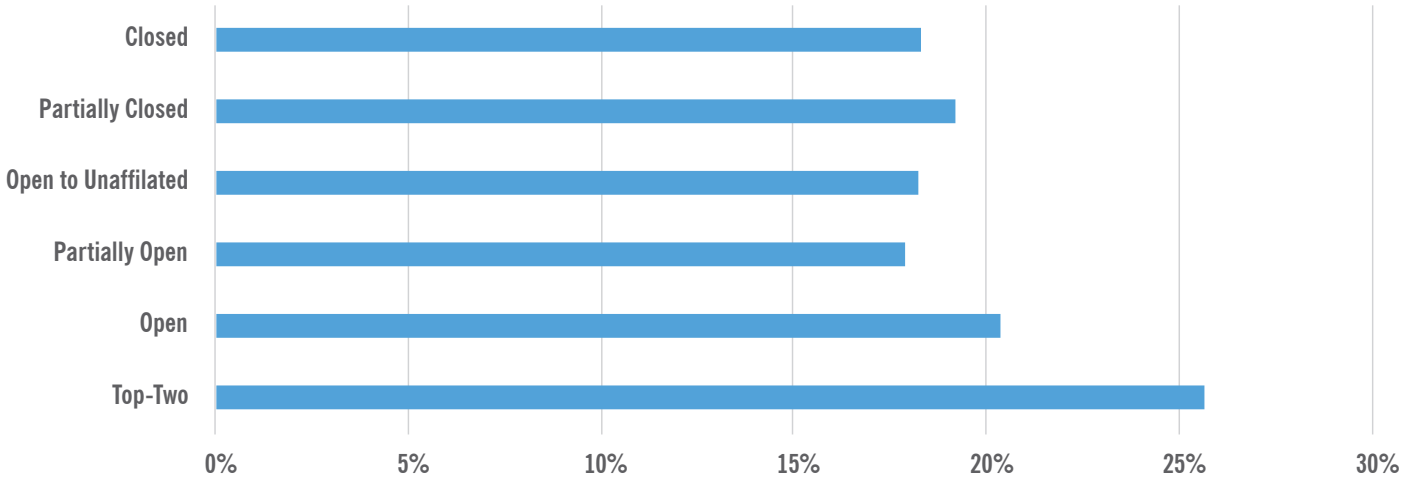
The Commission on Political Reform recommended states adopt open primaries to allow more eligible voters to participate in the candidate selection process. This analysis shows that states with open primaries do have higher turnout (Figure 7). According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, nine states have completely closed primary systems, in which only registered party members are allowed to vote;[2] 17 states have either closed or partially closed primary rules, meaning individual parties within each state can restrict participation to only previously registered party members; and an additional eight states only allow unaffiliated voters to participate in the primary of their choice. In the 2018 primary election cycle, only 16 states held fully open forms of primary elections.

The commission recommends states adopt open or semi-open primaries, partly because opening up primaries to independents can increase primary turnout and partly because their presence can help moderate candidates and lead to nominees whose views are more closely aligned with the general public. Previous research has shown that open primaries result in more moderate and representative primary electorates.[3,4]

In the 2018 primary cycle, states with fully open or "top-two" primaries had an average turnout of 23.9 percent, compared with 19.9 percent for states with semi-open primaries and 18.6 percent for states with closed primaries. Over the past three midterm cycles, states with fully open primaries have averaged turnout of 21.1 percent, versus 17.9 percent for semi-open states and 17.7 percent for closed states (Figure 8). Although primary type did not maintain statistical significance in a multivariate regression, in bivariate analysis states with fully open primary systems did enjoy a statistically significant turnout advantage compared with states with less open systems.

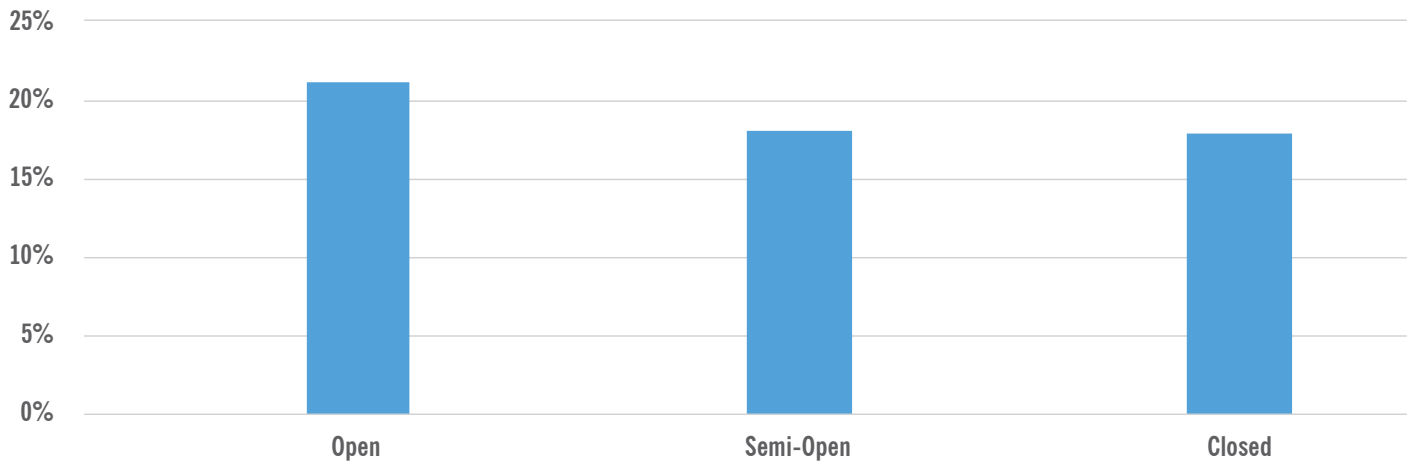
While some party purists argue that only party members should be able to vote in a primary to select their nominees, the reality is that many unaffiliated voters lean strongly toward one side. If a party wants to broaden its reach for the general election, allowing independents to cast ballots in primaries could help with both party building and boosting turnout.

Figure 7. Midterm Primary Turnout by Election Type



Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

Figure 8. Midterm Primary Turnout by Election Type

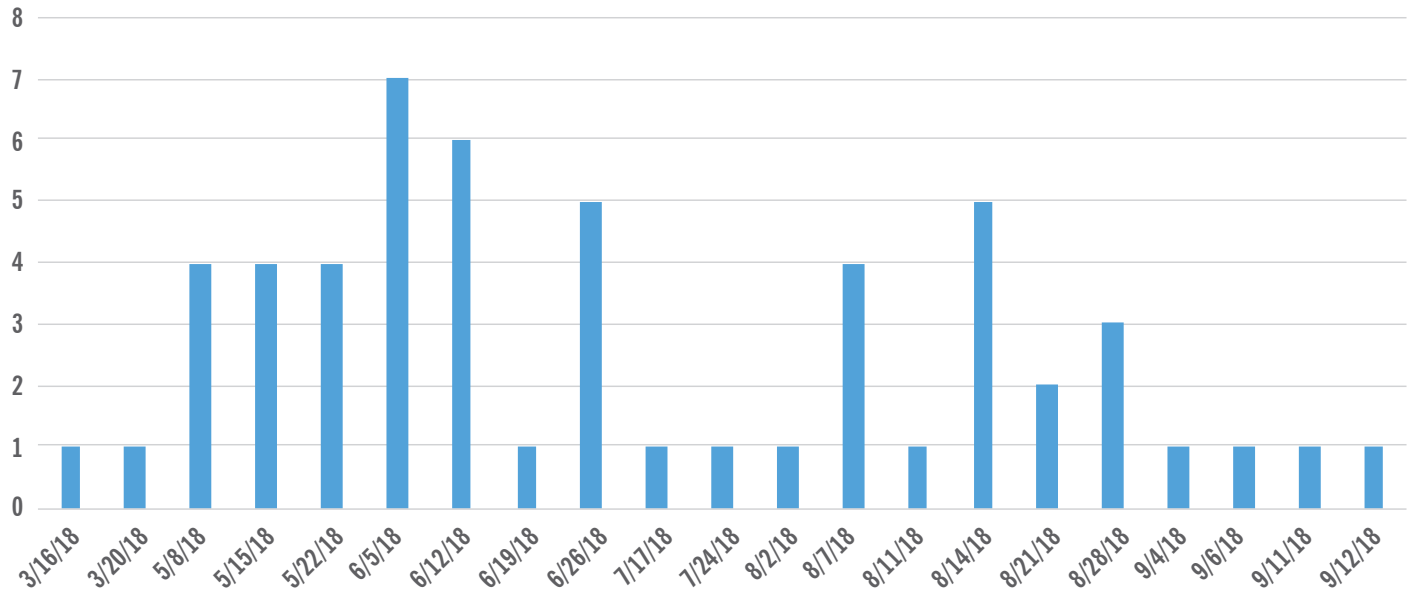


Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

CONSOLIDATING PRIMARY DATES

The commission recommended that states agree to a single, national primary day. The new analysis found that states that held their primary on the same day as a neighboring state saw a 14 percent boost in participation. Figure 9 shows how scattered the nonpresidential federal primary calendar currently is. In 2018, states held their primary elections anywhere between March and September, with no more than 11 states holding their election (general or runoff) on the same day, and no more than four states holding their election at the same time in the same region. All told, voters cast primary ballots on 21 different days. Because the election calendar is scattered, most primaries receive scant media attention. If states hold their primaries simultaneously, this would boost media attention, leading to greater public awareness and participation. This is especially true of states in the same region, as shared media markets will be saturated by election coverage.

Figure 9. 2018 Primary Calendar



Source: BPC analysis of state election data.
*Includes runoff primary dates.

BPC's Commission on Political Reform recommends holding all congressional primaries on the same day in nonpresidential election cycles: "As the process works now, many casual voters are unaware of the timing of primary elections and thus do not participate. A common or national primary day (applicable to nonpresidential elections) will increase media attention and awareness, potentially leading to more participation."[5]

The new analysis provides the first evidence substantiating the commission's recommendations concerning grouping primaries and the effect on turnout. States that held their primaries on the same day as other neighboring states had an additional 2.1 percentage points of turnout compared with states that held loner primaries, all else being equal and including runoffs. This effect would likely increase if states consolidate primary election dates—meaning a very sizeable boost if one common primary date is achieved.

Other Policies that Could Boost Turnout

The analysis revealed several other factors that could result in higher primary election turnout but which were not considered by the Commission on Political Reform. At this time, BPC is not formally recommending any of these specific policy reforms as additional research continues to determine their impact on turnout and the election process.

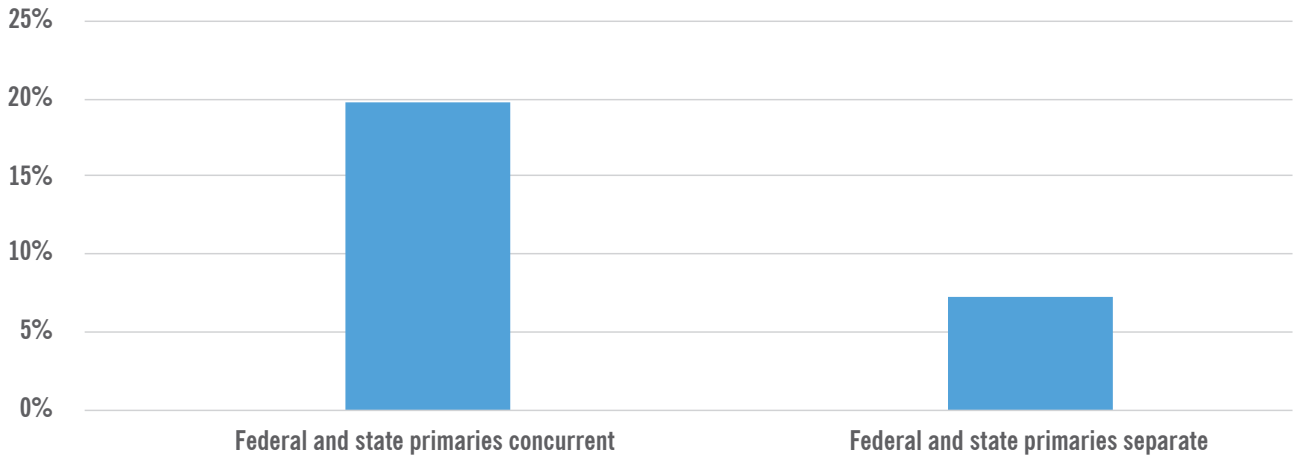
COMBINING STATE AND FEDERAL PRIMARIES

States could hold primaries for state offices at the same time as primaries for federal offices. Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, and Virginia currently hold primaries for state legislative and executive offices at a different time from primaries for federal office. New York holds federal and state primaries on the same calendar year but in different months, while the other three states hold their state primary and general elections on odd years. Over the past three midterm primary cycles, states that held concurrent federal and state elections averaged turnout of 19.9 percent. States that held separate federal and state primaries averaged only 7.4 percent turnout (Figure 10).

These states had on average 35 percent less primary turnout than states that held their legislative and federal elections simultaneously, all else being equal and including runoffs. Holding state and federal primaries concurrently would likely boost turnout, providing voters more convenience to have their voices heard and leading to nominees whose views more accurately reflect the general electorate.

Except for the case of New York, this reform would require state constitutional changes with respect to when state legislative and gubernatorial elections are conducted.

Figure 10. Midterm Primary Turnout by Federal and State Election Concurrence



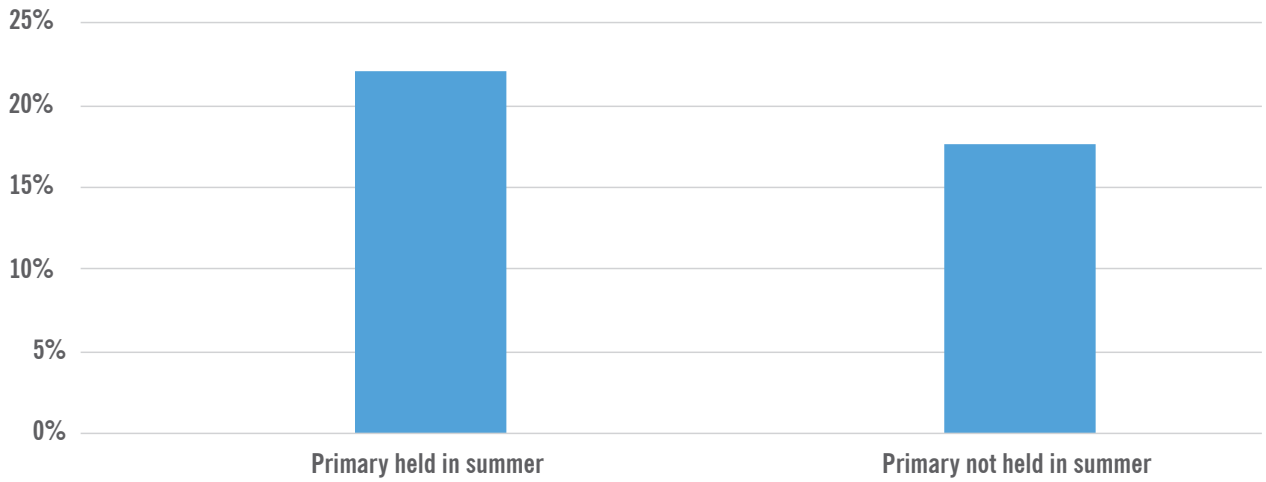
Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

HOLDING PRIMARIES DURING SUMMER MONTHS

While moving toward a common election date or dates, states could consider holding primary elections during the summer months. Contrary to initial expectations, states that hold their primaries during the summer months (July or August) tended to have higher turnout than states that hold primaries in the spring or fall. As shown in Figure 11, over the past three midterm primary cycles, states with summer primaries have averaged a turnout rate of 22 percent, compared with 17.5 percent for the cooler-season state primaries. This holds up in multivariate analysis: Summer primary elections enjoyed on average 17 percent higher turnout than non-summer primary elections, once other factors were accounted for. This translates to around a 2 to 3 percentage point boost in turnout.

The authors can only speculate on why this counterintuitive finding appears. Perhaps with school out and more adults off from work, people have more time to think about politics and come to the ballot box. It is also possible that as the general election date gets closer, more people pay attention to primary contests. Regardless, over a limited sample, the summer months proved to be a better time for midterm primary contests than expected.

Figure 11. Midterm Primary Turnout by Season

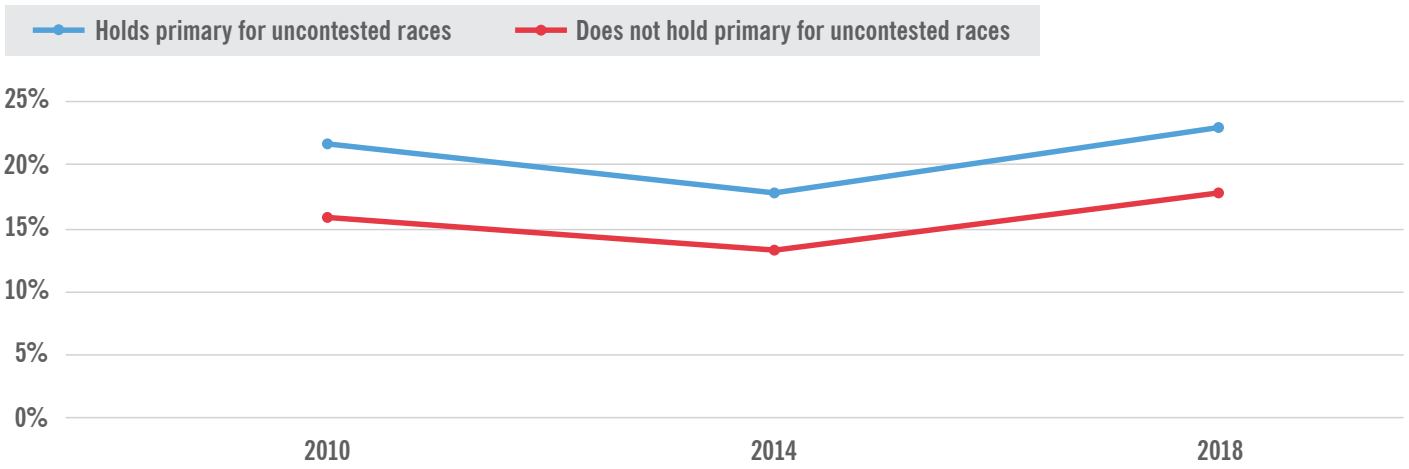


Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

ALLOWING VOTES IN UNCONTESTED RACES

States could allow voters to cast ballots in uncontested primary elections. Currently, 16 states do not allow voters to register their opinion in races where only one candidate has filed. In the 2018 primary election cycle, states that allowed voters to cast ballots in all contests averaged 22.6 percent turnout. States that only allowed voters to vote in contested primaries averaged a turnout rate of only 17.6 percent (Figure 12). While this variable did not maintain statistical significance in a multivariate regression, in bivariate analysis states that allowed votes in uncontested primary races did enjoy a statistically significant boost in turnout. This could prove a simple way to ensure every voice is heard in the democratic process—allowing voters to register their approval or disapproval of uncontested candidates, spurring additional competition in future elections, and boosting turnout.

Figure 12. Midterm Primary Turnout by Treatment of Uncontested Races



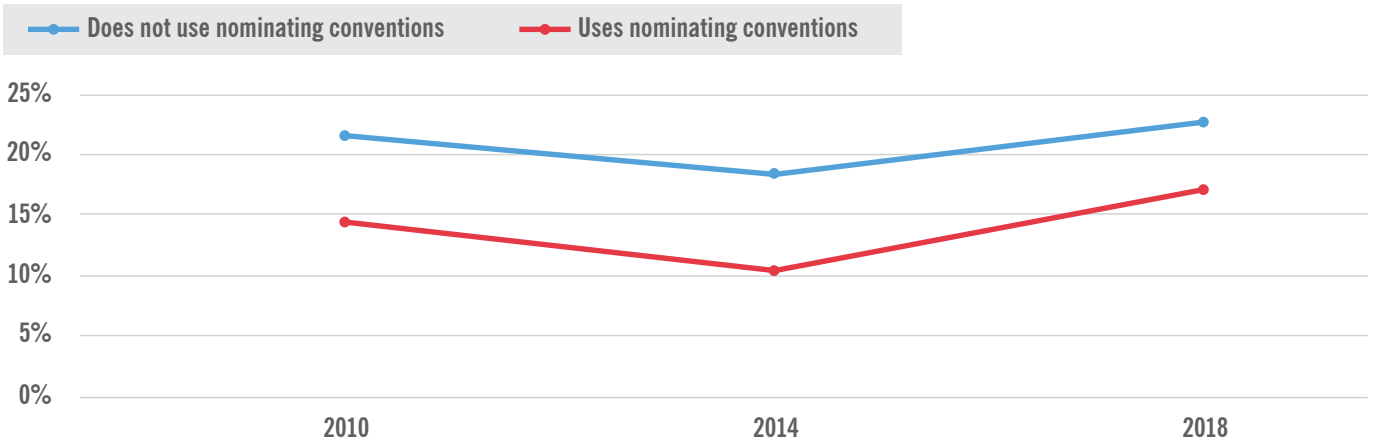
Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

RECONSIDERING NOMINATING CONVENTIONS

States could move away from selecting candidates via nominating conventions. While no states completely replace primaries with nominating conventions, a number of states hold party conventions for midterm elections that either replace certain primary races or limit which candidates can appear on the ballot. In the 2018 primary cycle, 13 states held nominating conventions that reduced people's ability to select candidates via primaries.

Limiting the general public's choice of primary candidates was found to significantly lower primary turnout rates. As shown in Figure 13, states that did not use nominating conventions in 2018 averaged primary turnout of 22.5 percent, while those that did averaged only 16.9 percent turnout. Once accounting for the effects of other factors, states that used nominating conventions had 4 percentage points less turnout than states that did not, a 39 percent reduction in participation.

Figure 13. Midterm Primary Turnout by Use of Nominating Conventions



Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

Nominating conventions present a trade-off between party influence and public participation. One potential solution is for parties to hold conventions where delegates vote to endorse candidates, without that endorsement affecting ballot access.

Non-Policy Factors that Impact Turnout

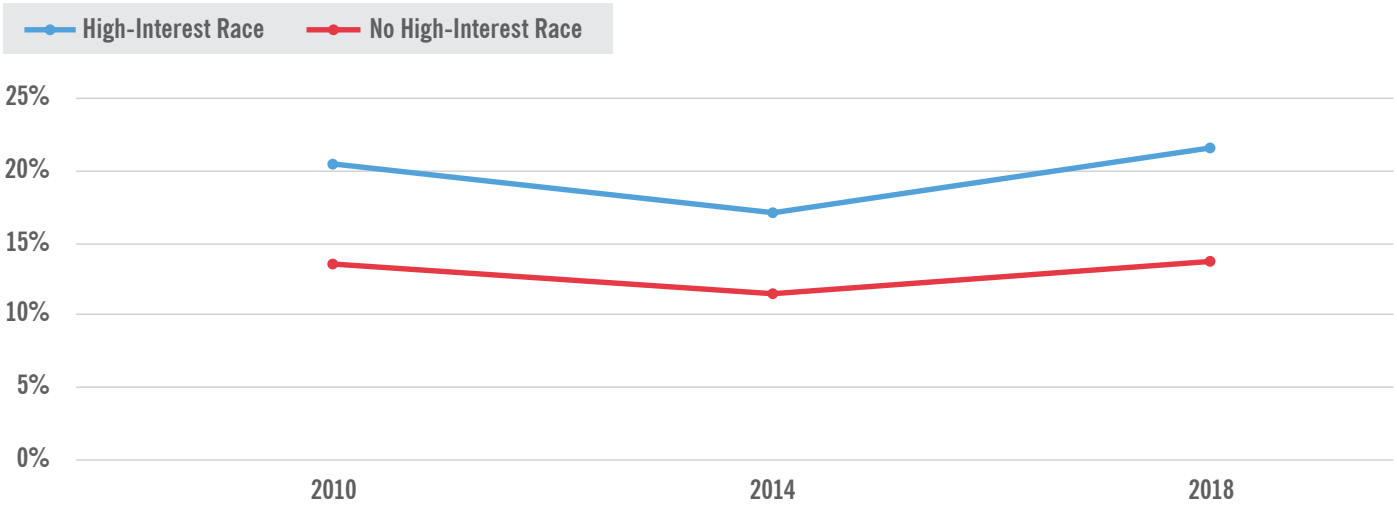
Several factors significantly impact turnout but are largely out of the hands of policymakers. The national political environment changes from year to year, increasing or diminishing turnout across the board. Additionally, certain regions in the United States have stronger cultures of electoral participation. Western states seem to enjoy higher participation, with an average turnout rate 35 percent higher than other regions, all else being equal and including runoffs. This report focuses on three: the presence of statewide contests, the opportunity for every eligible voter to participate, and high partisanship.

STATEWIDE CONTESTS

The overall turnout percentages included in this report incorporate nonfederal statewide races and referenda conducted on the same ballot as federal midterm contests. In each cycle, about two-thirds of the states also have federal senatorial statewide primaries. Primary elections that include statewide contests are associated with higher turnout than stand-alone congressional primaries. Since statewide population figures were used as the total electorate to calculate turnout and eligible voter data is not available at the congressional district level, a direct measure for stand-alone congressional primaries is not possible.

This BPC analysis includes all voters in the state eligible to participate in the general election. Therefore, in states without a "top-of-the-ticket race," turnout appears more depressed than it may in fact be because many voters may only have uncontested or weakly contested congressional or local races in which to participate. Over the past three midterm primary cycles, states without a referendum or contested Senate or gubernatorial contest—in other words, states without a high-interest statewide contest—averaged a turnout rate of only 12.6 percent (Figure 14).

Figure 14. Midterm Primary Turnout by Presence of a High-Interest Statewide Contest



Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

On the flip side, primaries that feature contested and competitive top-ticket races, such as Senate or gubernatorial contests, generally attract higher turnout. In 2018, states that featured at least one contested top-ticket race averaged primary turnout of 21.5 percent, compared with only 13.6 percent in states without a contested top-ticket contest. While states cannot force more candidates to run for high-profile races, they can implement policies to increase the chances that primaries will feature top-ticket races on the ballot. Such policies include conducting federal and state primaries at the same time, allowing voters to vote for uncontested races, and lowering barriers to candidate participation (such as reconsidering nominating conventions).

Referenda, ballot questions, and constitutional amendments attract significantly more turnout to primary elections as well. Moving referenda to primaries has policy implications beyond turnout, however. It may be that the issues of such importance as to require referenda should be decided by the greatest number of eligible voters possible. These are better placed in higher-turnout general midterms or, better yet, during presidential elections.

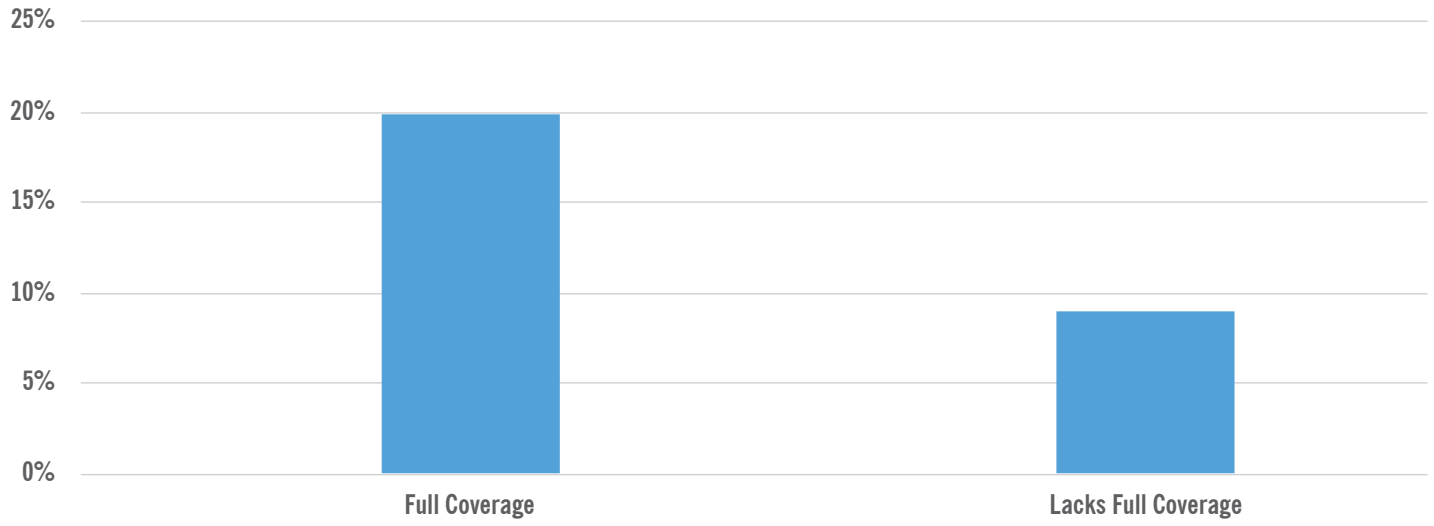
A significant percentage of voters who do participate in primaries only vote on statewide referenda, ballot questions, or for third-party candidates who are not competitive in general elections. The percentage of the voting-eligible electorate who cast ballots in Democratic Party and Republican Party primaries is thus a truer measure of the primary participation that affects the general election race. Major party primary participation is incredibly low across the board, as previously shown in Figure 2.

ELECTIONS FOR ALL ELIGIBLE VOTERS

Closely related to top-ticket races and referenda is whether states grant an opportunity for every eligible voter to participate in primaries. A number of states routinely do not grant all voters that opportunity, meaning that some voters are excluded altogether from the primary process. This is usually due to a combination of factors: the lack of contested statewide primary contests for both major parties, a reduction in the number of candidates on the ballot through nominating conventions, and rules that only allow voters to cast ballots in contested races.

The difference in turnout is stark. Figure 15 illustrates that over the past three midterm primary cycles, states with primaries that covered all voters in both major parties averaged 19.8 percent turnout, while those that failed to do so averaged only 9 percent. Eight states have not granted the opportunity for full eligible-voter participation in primaries over the past three midterm elections. This has been the case in Utah and Virginia all three times, while this has been the case in New York the past two times.

Figure 15. Midterm Primary Turnout by Election Coverage



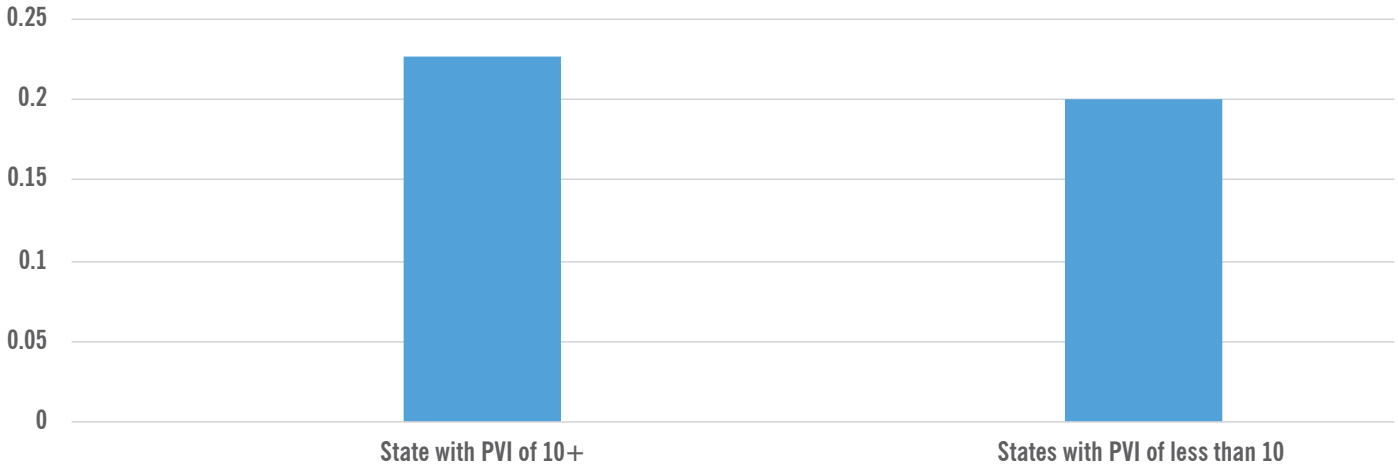
Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

HIGH PARTISANSHIP

Highly partisan states also tend to have higher primary turnout. Because less competitive general elections mean that the primary winner is almost guaranteed victory, the primary contest takes on increased importance in determining the general election, thus spurring additional turnout. In the 2018 primary cycle, states with absolute Partisan Voting Index (PVI) scores of 10 or greater averaged 22.5 percent turnout, while those with scores of less than 10 averaged turnout of 19.9 percent (Figure 16). This finding held up in bivariate analysis; every 10 additional points of PVI translated to a 2.9 percentage point boost in average primary turnout.

This trend is opposite of what happens in general elections. So-called "battleground states," those that most closely match the nation politically, tend to have the most competitive elections and thus higher-than-average turnout.

Figure 16. 2018 Midterm Primary Turnout by Partisanship



Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

Conclusion

The findings of this analysis of primary turnout rates for the last three midterm federal election cycles are clear: nonpresidential primary turnout remains inadequately low. It is critical that steps be taken to improve turnout. As stated by the Commission on Political Reform in its report *Governing in a Polarized America*:

> Encouraging a broader view of participation benefits the parties and the public. Making primary elections more visible to the general public will necessitate a new breed of candidates willing to seek broad support within his or her party. . .and the electorate as a whole during the general election.[6]

This study provides strong evidence for the commission's recommendations to boost primary turnout. States should open up primaries to all eligible voters and move to a single, national primary date or at least consider regionally homogenous dates. It also provides initial evidence that a series of additional policies may increase participation: combining primaries for state offices with federal offices, holding primaries during the summer months, allowing voters to cast ballots for uncontested races, and reconsidering nominating conventions that reduce candidate ballot access.

These steps will lead to a more engaged and involved public and will help strengthen America's democracy in the years to come.

Appendix A: Data Tables

A1. 2010 State Primary Turnout Rates

		Turnout Rates					Eligible Voters	Votes Cast				
State	Runoff Election?	Total Ballots Counted (TBC)	Highest Office (HO)	Total Votes	Democratic Party	Republican Party	Voting-Eligible Population (VEP)	Total Ballots Counted (TBC)	Highest Office (HO)	Total Votes	Democratic Votes	Republican Votes
USA		18.0%	16.9%	17.6%	7.3%	9.7%	217,447,836	43,430,911	40,745,972	42,423,094	17,998,238	22,686,481
AL		25.7%	24.1%	24.1%	9.4%	14.6%	3,369,751	867,542	811,227	811,227	318,330	492,897
AL	x	18.5%	17.3%	17.3%	3.5%	13.8%	3,369,751	623,327	582,865	582,865	117,129	465,736
AK		33.7%	33.1%	33.7%	10.1%	22.7%	486,992	164,047	161,005	164,047	48,945	110,688
AZ		21.2%	20.2%	21.2%	7.4%	13.7%	4,401,298	933,650	888,069	933,650	326,830	600,998
AR		22.7%	22.3%	22.7%	15.9%	6.8%	2,117,261	480,539	471,615	480,539	335,720	144,819
AR	x	14.1%	13.9%	14.1%	12.4%	1.7%	2,117,261	297,784	294,575	297,784	262,199	35,585
CA		23.3%	22.1%	23.3%	10.8%	10.2%	24,254,979	5,654,993	5,354,258	5,654,993	2,619,668	2,476,923
CO		21.4%	20.7%	21.4%	9.4%	11.3%	3,616,994	774,071	750,463	774,071	341,133	409,330
CT		11.9%	11.7%	11.9%	7.1%	4.8%	2,593,617	307,729	303,247	307,729	182,975	124,754
DE		14.9%	14.0%	14.0%	5.4%	8.9%	647,344	96,590	90,320	90,320	34,721	57,584
FL		20.5%	18.5%	20.5%	7.7%	10.8%	11,933,198	2,449,807	2,212,711	2,449,807	918,273	1,294,438
GA		17.2%	16.1%	16.1%	5.9%	10.2%	6,697,481	1,150,660	1,075,966	1,075,966	395,467	680,499
GA	x	10.9%	10.2%	10.2%	1.5%	8.7%	6,697,481	727,982	680,726	680,726	101,175	579,551
HI		32.8%	31.6%	32.8%	26.9%	5.1%	893,570	292,992	282,412	292,992	240,120	45,733
ID		18.5%	17.4%	18.5%	2.5%	14.9%	1,097,829	203,015	190,523	203,015	27,412	163,111
IL		18.9%	18.2%	18.9%	9.9%	8.3%	9,286,387	1,758,489	1,688,372	1,758,489	915,726	767,485
IN		18.4%	16.6%	18.4%	5.2%	11.3%	4,854,776	892,403	804,017	892,403	253,648	550,369
IA		13.1%	12.8%	13.1%	3.2%	10.0%	2,306,078	302,950	295,502	302,950	73,218	229,732
KS		21.2%	20.3%	21.2%	4.1%	16.2%	2,023,293	429,344	410,909	429,344	82,190	328,719
KY		30.0%	28.1%	30.0%	16.8%	11.3%	3,114,078	935,736	873,934	935,736	521,659	352,275
LA		6.5%	6.3%	6.5%	3.2%	3.0%	3,320,230	215,136	209,964	215,136	106,071	97,967
LA	x	21.1%	19.7%	19.7%	7.1%	12.6%	3,320,230	700,915	655,416	655,416	236,257	419,159
ME		32.1%	30.0%	30.0%	11.6%	12.4%	1,063,908	341,025	318,888	318,888	122,936	131,407
MD		19.4%	18.4%	19.4%	12.2%	6.9%	4,131,873	802,981	759,315	802,981	505,392	283,133
MA		14.6%	12.4%	14.6%	9.7%	4.8%	5,006,230	729,017	622,398	729,017	487,817	241,070
MI		21.8%	20.6%	21.8%	6.9%	13.7%	7,637,970	1,668,805	1,577,206	1,668,805	528,822	1,048,384
MN		15.5%	15.1%	15.5%	11.3%	3.3%	3,917,658	606,394	590,259	606,394	442,137	130,408
MS		4.3%	4.0%	4.0%	0.4%	3.7%	1,985,726	85,515	79,964	79,964	7,271	72,693
MS	x	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.0%	0.3%	1,985,726	5,728	5,356	5,356	-	5,356
MO		22.1%	20.7%	20.7%	7.0%	12.7%	4,560,515	1,008,003	942,570	942,570	317,591	579,348
MT		26.6%	24.7%	26.6%	8.1%	16.7%	776,286	206,791	192,100	206,791	62,499	129,601
NE		20.9%	17.6%	20.9%	6.1%	13.2%	1,328,410	278,238	233,657	278,238	81,480	175,960
NV		18.4%	16.8%	18.4%	6.7%	10.1%	1,738,314	320,648	291,733	320,648	116,027	175,706
NH		19.2%	17.6%	19.2%	5.8%	13.4%	1,053,630	202,070	185,649	202,070	60,898	141,172
NJ		7.8%	6.7%	7.8%	3.4%	4.3%	6,169,293	478,513	413,138	478,513	211,806	266,707
NM		18.5%	17.7%	18.5%	9.7%	8.8%	1,401,112	258,614	248,448	258,614	135,965	122,649
NY		9.0%	8.4%	8.4%	4.8%	3.5%	13,751,227	1,240,560	1,160,031	1,160,031	661,296	479,684
NC		12.4%	11.6%	11.6%	6.2%	5.4%	6,898,748	852,660	797,311	797,311	425,343	371,968
NC	x	3.1%	2.7%	3.1%	2.3%	0.9%	6,898,748	213,692	183,533	213,692	159,081	64,777
ND		20.4%	18.4%	20.4%	5.7%	13.0%	500,511	102,066	92,106	102,066	28,404	65,205
OH		20.3%	19.0%	20.3%	8.5%	9.7%	8,935,275	1,814,194	1,701,279	1,814,194	759,765	868,000
OK		20.5%	19.2%	19.2%	9.9%	9.3%	2,672,950	548,353	512,757	512,757	263,688	249,069
OK	x	5.4%	5.1%	5.1%	0.6%	4.5%	2,672,950	145,413	135,974	135,974	16,106	119,868
OR		27.1%	23.7%	27.1%	13.5%	11.4%	2,903,721	787,847	688,491	787,847	391,929	331,718
PA		20.9%	19.6%	19.6%	10.8%	8.8%	9,783,173	2,045,717	1,912,922	1,912,922	1,055,780	857,142
RI		16.3%	14.6%	16.3%	13.7%	2.5%	785,113	127,621	114,659	127,621	107,582	19,758
SC		18.1%	17.7%	18.1%	5.7%	12.3%	3,446,141	623,418	611,599	623,418	197,593	425,449
SC	x	11.5%	11.0%	11.5%	1.4%	10.4%	3,446,141	394,747	379,838	394,747	48,975	359,334
SD		15.2%	14.5%	15.2%	0.8%	13.7%	611,467	92,822	88,645	92,822	4,828	83,817
TN		24.2%	22.6%	22.6%	6.4%	16.3%	4,463,544	1,080,437	1,010,302	1,010,302	284,894	725,408
TX		14.4%	13.5%	13.5%	4.2%	9.2%	16,094,902	2,315,391	2,165,090	2,165,090	680,548	1,484,542
TX	x	3.2%	2.9%	2.9%	0.9%	2.1%	16,094,902	507,502	474,558	474,558	138,891	335,667
UT		12.6%	11.8%	12.6%	1.8%	10.1%	1,914,322	240,551	226,711	240,551	34,294	192,417
VT		20.8%	20.4%	20.8%	14.8%	5.9%	505,005	105,164	102,813	105,164	74,598	30,015
VA		2.9%	2.9%	2.9%	0.0%	2.9%	5,329,101	155,045	154,393	155,045	-	154,393
WA		29.9%	29.5%	29.9%	14.3%	14.7%	4,915,707	1,471,791	1,450,126	1,471,791	703,890	723,316
WV		18.2%	17.0%	17.0%	11.0%	6.0%	1,459,559	265,664	248,419	248,419	160,763	87,190
WI		21.3%	19.9%	19.9%	5.5%	14.4%	4,298,018	916,522	857,027	857,027	235,762	618,828
WY		33.5%	32.7%	33.5%	6.3%	27.2%	393,271	131,691	128,611	131,691	24,721	106,970

Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

Note: United States turnout rates reflect average state turnout. Unofficial data is used in Alabama's primary for Macon and Wilcox counties, and for TBC numbers in Alabama's runoff primary. The following primaries lack full coverage: New York, North Carolina, Utah, and Virginia. The following runoff primaries lack full coverage: Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Texas. TBC is estimated from HO in states where HO and Total Votes numbers are equal. HO turnout is estimated from TBC turnout for Kentucky and North Carolina's primaries.

A2. 2014 State Primary Turnout Rates

		Turnout Rates					Eligible Voters	Votes Cast				
State	Runoff Election?	Total Ballots Counted (TBC)	Highest Office (HO)	Total Votes	Democratic Party	Republican Party	Voting-Eligible Population (VEP)	Total Ballots Counted (TBC)	Highest Office (HO)	Total Votes	Democratic Votes	Republican Votes
USA		15.2%	14.1%	14.9%	5.9%	8.6%	223,758,730	34,884,798	32,516,416	34,276,161	13,986,347	18,302,590
AL		19.0%	17.7%	17.7%	5.1%	12.6%	3,453,869	654,681	612,183	612,183	177,658	434,525
AL	x	7.3%	6.8%	6.8%	0.7%	5.9%	3,453,869	252,470	236,081	236,081	24,547	204,617
AK		38.8%	38.0%	38.8%	14.4%	22.8%	498,159	193,097	189,463	193,097	71,923	113,752
AZ		18.8%	17.9%	18.8%	6.9%	11.8%	4,661,903	877,270	835,972	877,270	320,239	549,423
AR		15.8%	15.2%	15.8%	7.0%	8.2%	2,186,909	346,318	332,568	346,318	153,343	179,225
AR	x	4.2%	3.5%	4.2%	0.1%	4.1%	2,186,909	92,941	76,689	92,941	2,789	90,152
CA		17.2%	16.7%	17.2%	9.2%	6.7%	25,986,932	4,461,346	4,333,028	4,461,346	2,391,810	1,729,985
CO		16.1%	15.2%	16.1%	5.4%	9.7%	3,946,419	634,181	599,152	634,181	214,403	384,749
CT		3.8%	3.6%	3.6%	0.6%	2.9%	2,694,056	103,378	96,667	96,667	17,241	79,426
DE		7.3%	6.9%	6.9%	3.2%	3.7%	684,792	50,292	47,027	47,027	21,987	25,040
FL		16.1%	13.9%	16.1%	6.5%	7.4%	12,899,644	2,079,354	1,786,940	2,079,354	837,796	949,144
GA		14.2%	13.7%	14.2%	5.1%	8.9%	6,946,449	987,618	951,737	987,618	353,049	617,391
GA	x	9.1%	8.9%	9.1%	2.1%	7.0%	6,946,449	630,804	619,021	630,804	142,775	488,029
HI		29.0%	28.0%	29.0%	23.8%	4.4%	999,207	289,398	280,264	289,398	237,915	44,142
ID		16.9%	15.5%	16.9%	2.2%	13.3%	1,167,054	196,982	180,948	196,982	25,638	155,310
IL		14.3%	13.3%	14.3%	4.7%	8.6%	9,509,454	1,357,807	1,267,028	1,357,807	448,025	819,710
IN		12.6%	10.7%	12.6%	3.1%	7.2%	4,898,621	617,156	524,586	617,156	151,217	352,619
IA		10.0%	9.5%	10.0%	3.1%	6.8%	2,327,214	233,090	220,893	233,090	72,065	159,409
KS		16.6%	15.6%	16.6%	3.1%	12.5%	2,109,869	350,699	330,159	350,699	66,357	264,340
KY		26.8%	24.2%	26.8%	12.8%	11.3%	3,133,672	840,724	757,640	840,724	402,524	355,116
ME		12.1%	10.3%	12.1%	6.1%	5.8%	1,073,873	130,067	110,317	130,067	65,085	62,313
MD		17.0%	16.1%	17.0%	11.3%	5.2%	4,357,716	739,678	700,028	739,678	494,016	225,917
MA		14.3%	13.9%	14.3%	11.1%	3.2%	5,016,596	716,028	697,313	716,028	556,092	159,936
MI		17.4%	16.2%	17.4%	6.7%	8.0%	7,687,030	1,339,681	1,246,229	1,339,681	513,263	617,720
MN		9.8%	9.3%	9.8%	4.7%	4.5%	4,095,317	401,878	381,191	401,878	193,347	184,110
MS		20.9%	19.6%	19.6%	4.2%	15.4%	2,068,310	418,793	404,768	404,768	85,866	318,902
MS	x	20.2%	18.9%	18.9%	0.5%	18.5%	2,068,310	420,066	391,608	391,608	9,387	382,221
MO		23.0%	21.5%	21.5%	6.7%	9.3%	4,660,337	1,069,655	1,000,220	1,000,220	312,493	431,778
MT		27.4%	26.1%	27.4%	9.5%	16.6%	799,002	218,882	208,616	218,882	75,991	132,625
NE		23.7%	21.3%	23.7%	5.6%	16.4%	1,370,549	324,227	292,336	324,227	77,044	225,212
NV		11.8%	10.1%	11.8%	3.8%	6.2%	1,885,677	222,240	190,301	222,240	72,521	117,780
NH		15.6%	14.6%	15.6%	4.1%	11.4%	1,063,406	165,459	155,580	165,459	43,359	121,454
NJ		6.5%	5.5%	6.5%	3.8%	2.8%	6,364,947	416,065	347,436	416,065	240,749	175,316
NM		13.0%	12.3%	13.0%	7.3%	4.2%	1,560,773	202,327	191,350	202,327	113,502	65,979
NY		1.4%	1.3%	1.3%	0.7%	0.7%	14,233,621	204,908	191,607	191,607	94,518	94,630
NC		14.3%	13.5%	14.3%	6.7%	6.8%	7,193,886	1,028,600	972,944	1,028,600	482,369	488,555
ND		16.8%	14.7%	16.8%	5.4%	9.1%	555,640	93,624	81,919	93,624	30,154	50,446
OH		14.5%	13.5%	14.5%	5.7%	7.3%	9,043,596	1,307,351	1,224,480	1,307,351	512,453	659,995
OK		17.0%	15.9%	15.9%	6.1%	9.7%	2,738,063	464,899	434,721	434,721	167,863	266,858
OK	x	6.6%	6.2%	6.2%	3.5%	2.7%	2,738,063	180,945	169,199	169,199	95,991	73,208
OR		25.2%	18.9%	25.2%	10.9%	21.5%	3,015,611	758,604	570,523	758,604	329,569	649,136
PA		13.2%	12.3%	12.3%	8.4%	4.0%	10,111,850	1,332,242	1,245,761	1,245,761	845,009	400,752
RI		20.4%	19.7%	20.4%	16.4%	4.0%	811,204	165,690	160,024	165,690	133,063	32,582
SC		12.5%	12.2%	12.5%	3.5%	8.8%	3,618,138	452,990	443,122	452,990	126,133	316,989
SC	x	5.0%	4.8%	5.0%	1.1%	3.7%	3,618,138	179,218	173,974	179,218	39,810	134,164
SD		16.7%	16.1%	16.7%	4.8%	11.9%	635,326	105,863	102,092	105,863	30,366	75,497
TN		21.2%	19.8%	19.8%	5.3%	14.6%	4,587,722	972,090	908,988	908,988	240,949	668,039
TX		11.6%	10.9%	10.9%	3.2%	7.7%	17,666,878	2,051,262	1,918,107	1,918,107	560,033	1,358,074
TX	x	5.8%	5.4%	5.4%	1.1%	4.3%	17,666,878	1,020,294	954,063	954,063	201,283	752,780
UT		7.5%	6.9%	7.5%	-	-	1,987,619	148,691	138,125	148,691	-	-
VT		7.7%	7.1%	7.7%	4.3%	3.3%	508,880	39,356	36,288	39,356	21,763	17,043
VA		2.3%	2.2%	2.2%	0.8%	1.5%	5,639,529	129,766	121,342	121,342	43,376	82,474
WA		24.3%	23.6%	24.3%	11.5%	10.7%	5,034,615	1,222,710	1,188,256	1,222,710	581,029	539,265
WV		15.8%	14.8%	14.8%	9.1%	5.8%	1,481,570	234,748	219,510	219,510	134,188	85,322
WI		14.6%	12.7%	14.6%	7.2%	5.5%	4,364,245	638,677	552,349	638,677	312,106	240,102
WY		28%	27%	28%	4%	23%	422,983	117,618	113,683	117,618	18,306	99,312

Source: BPC analysis of state election data.
Note: United States turnout rates reflect average state turnout. The following primaries lack full coverage: Connecticut, New York, Utah, and Virginia. The following runoff primaries lack full coverage: Arkansas, Mississippi, and Oklahoma. TBC is estimated from HO in states where HO and Total Votes numbers are equal.

A3. 2018 State Primary Turnout Rates

		Turnout Rates					Eligible Voters	Votes Cast				
State	Runoff Election?	Total Ballots Counted (TBC)	Highest Office (HO)	Total Votes	Democratic Party	Republican Party	Voting-Eligible Population (VEP)	Total Ballots Counted (TBC)	Highest Office (HO)	Total Votes	Democratic Votes	Republican Votes
USA		19.4%	18.3%	19.0%	8.9%	9.3%	232,227,179	49,268,075	46,560,255	48,403,910	23,886,737	22,416,585
AL		25.4%	24.8%	25.4%	8.5%	16.9%	3,534,300	898,662	874,904	898,662	299,158	597,171
AL	x	12.2%	11.0%	12.2%	1.2%	9.7%	3,534,300	431,328	387,466	431,328	43,902	343,564
AK		22.9%	22.1%	22.9%	8.5%	14.4%	504,642	115,727	111,727	115,727	43,011	72,716
AZ		24.2%	23.4%	24.2%	10.6%	13.5%	4,989,820	1,208,113	1,168,156	1,208,113	526,574	672,452
AR		14.8%	14.1%	14.8%	4.8%	9.3%	2,220,411	327,629	312,324	327,629	105,919	206,405
AR	x	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.0%	0.3%	2,220,411	6,963	6,781	6,963	-	6,963
CA		26.1%	25.4%	26.1%	15.9%	9.2%	27,354,773	7,141,987	6,961,254	7,141,987	4,350,513	2,519,136
CO		27.5%	27.0%	27.5%	15.1%	11.9%	4,216,791	1,161,575	1,139,814	1,161,115	637,002	503,205
CT		13.3%	13.0%	13.3%	8.1%	5.3%	2,741,566	365,922	355,401	365,922	220,697	145,225
DE		18.1%	16.9%	16.9%	11.6%	5.3%	714,917	129,306	120,912	120,912	83,042	37,870
FL		25.2%	22.3%	25.2%	10.7%	11.6%	14,187,220	3,574,032	3,162,888	3,574,032	1,519,492	1,643,396
GA		15.8%	15.5%	15.8%	7.5%	8.3%	7,478,745	1,183,156	1,162,530	1,183,156	563,445	619,711
GA	x	10.0%	9.8%	10.0%	2.1%	7.9%	7,478,745	751,310	736,315	751,310	159,925	591,385
HI		28.2%	27.1%	28.2%	24.4%	3.2%	1,016,459	286,180	275,274	286,180	247,932	32,610
ID		21.0%	20.6%	21.0%	5.2%	15.4%	1,261,366	264,320	260,418	264,320	65,882	194,536
IL		22.4%	21.8%	22.4%	14.4%	7.9%	9,389,014	2,103,634	2,046,710	2,103,634	1,348,157	739,834
IN		17.4%	15.9%	17.4%	5.8%	10.1%	5,015,710	870,336	799,579	870,336	292,879	506,700
IA		12.1%	11.6%	12.1%	7.6%	4.4%	2,390,109	289,852	276,387	289,852	182,736	105,183
KS		23.4%	21.9%	21.9%	7.2%	14.7%	2,164,804	506,304	473,438	473,438	156,273	317,165
KY		25.7%	24.1%	25.7%	14.5%	10.8%	3,135,939	806,248	754,208	806,248	453,832	339,791
ME		26.4%	26.0%	26.4%	12.4%	9.5%	1,068,353	281,521	278,191	281,521	132,795	101,585
MD		19.3%	18.1%	18.1%	13.3%	4.7%	4,455,027	861,554	805,627	805,625	594,692	210,935
MA		19.5%	17.9%	19.5%	14.0%	5.4%	5,156,227	1,004,605	923,684	1,004,605	721,089	280,697
MI		28.1%	26.9%	28.1%	14.4%	12.6%	7,865,081	2,206,977	2,117,998	2,206,977	1,131,447	989,576
MN		22.7%	22.2%	22.7%	14.3%	7.9%	4,079,635	925,554	904,649	925,554	583,735	320,914
MS		12.6%	11.8%	11.8%	4.2%	7.5%	2,084,779	262,116	245,101	245,101	87,931	157,170
MS	x	3.2%	3.0%	3.0%	1.9%	1.2%	2,084,779	132,423	123,827	123,827	75,305	48,522
MO		33.1%	31.0%	31.0%	13.5%	14.8%	4,497,661	1,489,976	1,393,256	1,393,256	607,577	664,889
MT		33.2%	31.7%	33.2%	13.5%	18.0%	851,251	282,704	269,880	282,704	114,948	153,346
NE		21.1%	18.7%	21.1%	6.6%	12.1%	1,403,033	296,000	263,056	296,000	92,760	169,094
NV		15.5%	13.6%	15.5%	6.9%	6.7%	2,121,679	329,863	287,604	329,863	145,420	142,184
NH		20.7%	19.7%	20.7%	11.5%	9.1%	1,104,174	228,262	217,401	228,262	126,474	100,590
NJ		11.1%	10.2%	11.1%	7.2%	4.0%	6,307,067	703,103	645,151	703,103	455,052	250,572
NM		17.1%	16.4%	17.1%	11.5%	4.9%	1,535,945	262,357	251,683	262,357	175,898	75,162
NY		2.8%	2.6%	2.6%	2.4%	0.2%	14,105,785	391,439	366,029	366,029	343,322	21,472
NC		12.4%	11.6%	12.4%	4.9%	3.2%	7,748,962	957,627	895,816	957,627	376,557	245,461
ND		20.2%	18.8%	20.2%	12.3%	6.5%	569,205	115,226	107,283	115,226	70,133	36,883
OH		18.4%	17.3%	18.4%	7.9%	9.5%	9,089,472	1,673,162	1,573,556	1,673,162	721,070	865,662
OK		32.5%	30.4%	30.4%	13.5%	15.4%	2,936,255	954,733	892,758	892,758	395,494	452,606
OK	x	16.0%	14.9%	14.9%	4.6%	10.3%	2,936,255	468,371	437,967	437,967	134,833	302,208
OR		27.2%	22.0%	27.2%	12.6%	9.9%	3,335,063	908,166	733,699	908,166	418,605	329,969
PA		16.6%	15.5%	15.5%	7.8%	7.7%	9,906,948	1,645,908	1,539,066	1,539,066	775,660	763,406
RI		19.2%	18.0%	18.0%	14.0%	3.9%	840,475	161,442	150,962	150,962	117,875	33,087
SC		15.9%	15.7%	15.9%	6.3%	9.4%	3,913,195	621,841	613,014	621,841	245,031	367,983
SC	x	9.8%	9.7%	9.8%	1.0%	8.8%	3,913,195	385,254	380,859	385,254	37,224	343,635
SD		21.8%	20.6%	21.8%	1.2%	16.1%	647,656	141,044	133,586	141,044	8,070	104,043
TN		26.1%	24.4%	24.4%	8.0%	16.5%	4,809,085	1,256,617	1,175,045	1,175,045	382,157	792,888
TX		14.8%	13.8%	13.8%	5.6%	8.2%	18,936,798	2,799,780	2,618,036	2,618,036	1,068,463	1,549,573
TX	x	4.3%	4.0%	4.0%	2.3%	1.7%	18,936,798	805,233	752,962	752,962	434,889	318,073
UT		16.5%	15.4%	15.4%	0.6%	14.8%	2,268,328	373,767	349,504	349,515	12,712	336,792
VT		20.4%	19.8%	20.4%	13.3%	7.0%	527,334	107,637	104,454	107,637	70,007	36,987
VA		9.2%	8.5%	9.2%	3.8%	5.4%	5,791,571	530,369	490,204	530,369	220,111	310,258
WA		32.1%	31.1%	32.1%	18.1%	11.6%	5,470,311	1,753,545	1,700,840	1,753,545	989,462	634,190
WV		21.3%	19.8%	21.3%	10.7%	9.1%	1,507,617	320,937	298,825	320,937	161,252	137,573
WI		23.4%	21.9%	21.9%	11.8%	10.0%	4,554,755	1,066,569	997,334	997,334	538,857	455,830
WY		33.1%	32.0%	33.1%	4.6%	27.9%	421,868	139,809	134,862	139,809	19,459	117,752

Source: BPC analysis of state election data.
Note: United States turnout rates reflect average state turnout. The following primaries lack full coverage: Kentucky, Mississippi, South Dakota, Utah, and Virginia. The following runoff primaries lack full coverage: Arkansas, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas. TBC is estimated from HO in states where HO and Total Votes numbers are equal.

Appendix B: Data and Methodology

DATA SAMPLE

The sample consisted of state primary and primary runoff elections for federal offices that took place in 2010, 2014, and 2018. Runoffs that did not involve federal races were included in the dataset if their primary counterpart included federal races. States that held primaries that did not include any federal races due to a lack of contested contests were included, such as Connecticut's 2014 primary. Dedicated primary elections for state offices were excluded, such as New York's separate primary for state offices in 2014 and 2018. Louisiana's 2014 and 2018 primaries were also excluded, as they occurred on Election Day and thus functioned as general election events. Primaries for special elections were not included. These criteria left a sample size of 171 primary elections, of which 148 were primary contests and 23 were runoff primary contests.

Throughout this paper, turnout figures exclude runoff primaries unless otherwise specified.

TURNOUT

Voting-Eligible Population

Voting-eligible population (VEP) captures the total number of people who are legally eligible to vote, taking into account age, citizenship status, and criminal record. This was calculated by subtracting the number of noncitizens and ineligible felons from the voting-age population (VAP) of each state. VAP data is from the 2010 and 2014 Current Population Survey (CPS) Annual Social and Economic Supplements.[7] 2018 figures were derived by extrapolating the 2016 and 2017 CPS adult civilian persons for each state.[8]

Noncitizen population data is from the 2010 and 2014 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Supplemental Estimates.[9,10] Figures from 2018 were extrapolated from 2014 and 2016 ACS estimates. In each case, the percentage of noncitizens was calculated for each state and then used to derive the adult noncitizen population.

Ineligible felon estimates for 2010 are from The Sentencing Project's report *State-Level Estimates of Felon Disenfranchisement in the United States, 2010*.[11] This data was extrapolated to 2014, taking into account intervening policy changes in California, Delaware, Indiana, South Dakota, and Vermont. Figures from 2018 were derived by extrapolating data from The Sentencing Project's report *6 Million Lost Voters: State-Level Estimates of Felony Disenfranchisement, 2016*.[12] Intervening policy changes in Alabama, California, Delaware, Iowa, Maryland, Nevada, New York, South Dakota, and Virginia were also taken into account.

Votes Counted

Three measures of participation were calculated: total ballots counted (TBC), which captures how many eligible votes were counted in each primary; highest office (HO), which captures the greatest number of votes counted for each party's single race, referendum, or series of non-overlapping legislative districts with the greatest number of votes; and "Total Votes," which captures the most accurate measure of participation directly provided by each state. Election data was derived from each state's official election reporting website. HO usually took the form of a gubernatorial or Senate race or a statewide referendum. In primaries without votes for any of those races, HO was calculated using the statewide office that garnered the greatest number of total votes. When no statewide election took place, HO was calculated by adding together the vote totals of the elections with non-overlapping district boundaries that garnered the greatest number of total votes. Where HO did not take the form of a nonpartisan office or cross-party referendum vote, a state's overall HO turnout was calculated by adding the HO of each party that participated in that state's primary. Votes for write-in candidates were counted as part of HO for states that reported such figures.

TBC is the preferred method of calculating turnout. It was collected for each state that directly reported the metric and for states that provided detailed enough election results to calculate TBC. For each state where both TBC and HO turnout figures could be calculated, a difference quotient was measured. This quotient was then averaged across all states, with the resultant mean used to estimate TBC for states where it could not otherwise be determined. TBC was found to be, on average, 6.9 percent higher than HO. This is due to a combination of overvotes and undervotes that are not reflected by the HO calculation.

A third measure of participation, Total Votes, is the most accurate measure of votes derived directly from official state election data—TBC where possible, and HO otherwise. The Total Votes measure of turnout was used for Democratic and Republican vote totals (in other words, TBC where directly reported by states and HO otherwise).

In the case of Kentucky and North Carolina's 2018 primaries, the lack of a statewide race made HO difficult to calculate. Instead, state-provided TBC figures were used to estimate HO based on the average HO/TBC difference calculated among all states with both available figures. Utah's 2014 primary turnout was difficult to calculate due to the lack of statewide primary races or centralized reporting. HO was estimated from an extrapolation of the number of votes in Utah's most populous counties based on total population covered by those counties.

Turnout Rate

Three measures of turnout rate were calculated. "TBC Turnout" is the TBC vote count for each primary election divided by the corresponding state's VEP. "HO Turnout" is the HO vote count for each primary election divided by the corresponding state's VEP. "Total Votes Turnout" is the Total Votes vote count divided by the corresponding state's VEP. TBC Turnout was used throughout this paper, except for Democratic and Republican turnout, for which Total Votes Turnout was used. All three measures were used for robustness tests and appear in Appendix A.

These calculated turnout rates are conservative measures of total turnout in that they account for all potentially eligible voters rather than all registered voters. This decision was made for several reasons. First, the reliability and accuracy of registration rates varies greatly by state. Deriving turnout rates from registration data brings these same reliability and accuracy issues to the interpretation of differences in primary turnout. Second, VEP-derived turnout is a truer picture of the public's participation in elections. Otherwise-eligible voters who are not registered should indeed be included in measures of primary turnout. Finally, using party registration figures would reward states who limit primary eligibility to only those voters who have officially registered with a party. We do not see value in reporting high turnout for a state simply because the pool of eligible voters is restricted compared with other states. Using VEP rewards states that turn out a larger percentage of their voting-eligible population, regardless of that state's specific registration laws or primary type.

Party Turnout

Democratic and Republican vote totals use Total Votes. They are more conservative measures of participation than each state's overall Total Votes since they more frequently reflect HO values than TBC and exclude third-party or unaffiliated voter participation. In top-two primaries, party vote totals reflect the HO vote totals for candidates of each respective party. "Democratic Turnout" and "Republican Turnout" refers to the percentage of a state's voting-eligible population that voted in the respective major party's primary. They do not reflect the percentage of that party's registered voters or identified members that participated.

OTHER VARIABLES

In addition to calculating midterm primary turnout rates, this study examines which other factors may boost or diminish turnout. Each variable tested is described below.

Coverage

Coverage reflects whether every eligible voter in the state can vote in a primary for a major party. A state primary lacks full coverage when this isn't the case—usually when there was no competitive statewide election or referenda, not all congressional districts were competitive, and the state did not allow voters to cast ballots in uncontested races. It is also a common occurrence in runoff primaries. A race that was uncompetitive but could still be voted for on the ballot counted as coverage, as the voter could choose to vote or not vote for that candidate, and in most states the voter could write in a candidate of their choice. States that lacked full coverage were coded as 1 for "Lacks full coverage" and otherwise coded as 0. A quantitative variable was also constructed to estimate what proportion of people could participate in their preferred major-party primary. Full coverage for both parties was coded as 2 for the "Lacks Full Coverage Scale" variable. Full coverage for one party and no coverage for the other

major party was coded as 1, and no election coverage for either major party would theoretically be coded as 0. Partial coverage was quantified based on the percentage of congressional or legislative races that voters could participate in. The following primaries required an estimation of coverage based on city or county races: Utah's 2014 primary, Arkansas's 2018 runoff primary, Texas's 2018 runoff primary, and Alabama's 2018 runoff primary.

Top-Ticket Races

The presence of a competitive top-of-the-ticket race may encourage turnout. Gubernatorial and Senate races for major parties that involved at least two names on the ballot were counted as top-ticket races. The variable "Top-Ticket Races" consisted of the number of contested gubernatorial and Senate races across major parties, ranging between 0 and 4. "Top-Ticket Binary" was coded as 1 when a top-ticket race occurred and 0 otherwise. The number of major parties with a top-ticket race, labeled "Top Party Race," ranged between 0 and 2. "Top Democratic" and "Top Republican" were two binary disaggregates of Top Party Race. "Top Democratic" was coded as 1 when a top-ticket Democratic race occurred and 0 otherwise, while "Top Republican" was coded likewise for Republican races. Similarly, "Top Senate" was coded as 1 when a contested Senate race occurred and 0 otherwise, while "Top Governor" was coded as 1 when a gubernatorial race occurred and 0 otherwise.

Referenda

Several states allow statewide referenda to be placed on primary election ballots. These legally binding, cross-party decisions may boost turnout by both encouraging partisans to vote and allowing nonaffiliated voters to participate in the primary. States were coded as having a referendum if a ballot question could be voted on by any eligible voter and the result of that ballot question was binding. This includes ballot measures, constitutional amendments, constitutional measures, special referenda, legislative referenda, binding propositions, state issues, state questions, state measures, and initiated measures. This does not include party questions, advisory questions, or nonbinding propositions. Fourteen states placed binding referenda on their primary ballots at least once in the past three midterm cycles.

Nominating Conventions

In many states, parties host nominating conventions or caucuses in which delegates vote for candidates for federal and/or state offices. Which positions are concerned, who is allowed to participate, and what the vote actually decides varies widely from state to state. Some states use these contests in lieu of primary elections altogether, while others use them to decide who will be on the primary ballot, who will get party resources, or who simply gets the party's official endorsement. For the purposes of this analysis, states were considered as using nominating conventions when at least one major party used this vote to have a material effect on the ability of candidates to appear on the primary ballot. This includes states where candidates who obtain a certain threshold of delegate support receive automatic placement on the ballot, while candidates who fall below that threshold either are shut out altogether or must collect signatures to secure ballot access. It also includes states where winning candidates automatically claim the party's nomination, or where candidates are automatically nominated with a certain threshold of support. Additionally, states where regional nominating conventions impart these same benefits to House candidates were included. It does not include states whose nominating conventions only provide endorsements and/or monetary support to winning candidates, or states that do not hold nominating conventions. Although North Dakota's nominating convention technically granted automatic ballot access to the winning candidate, any candidate could file for ballot access without collecting signatures; thus, this state was not considered as holding a nominating convention. Data came from internet searches for Democratic and Republican nominating conventions for each state.

PVI

Cook Partisan Voting Index scores were used to control for the effect statewide partisanship has on primaries. In general, states that lean more heavily Democratic or Republican are expected to have higher primary turnout. This is because the general election will be less competitive, increasing the importance of the primary in determining the eventual winner. PVI was measured as an absolute value, meaning strongly Democratic and Republican states were scored identically. Because state PVI scores are calculated using the last two presidential elections, lagged two-election averages were used, such that 2012 and 2016 election results were used for 2018 PVI scores, 2008 and 2012 election results were used for 2014 PVI scores, and 2004 and 2008 election results were used for 2010 PVI scores. Past presidential election data was from Dave Leip's *Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections*.[13]

Legislative and Runoff Elections

Most states hold primaries for state legislative races concurrently with primaries for national offices. A handful of states do not. Louisiana, Mississippi, New York, New Jersey, and Virginia held at least one nonpresidential congressional primary between 2010 and 2018 that did not include state legislative races. Primary elections that did not include state legislative races were coded as 1 under "No State Legislative Election" and 0 otherwise.

Eight states have used runoff elections in the past three midterm primary election cycles to determine winners in cases where no candidate achieves a majority of support in the first primary election. These states are Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas. In regression tests where runoff primaries were included, these elections were coded as 1 under the variable "Runoff Election."

Primary Type

There are a wide range of state laws regarding who can participate in partisan primary elections. The National Conference of State Legislature (NCSL)'s primary-type classification system was used to group states. "Open" states allow any eligible voter to participate in the primary of their choice. "Partially Open" systems allow voters to choose which primary to participate in, but voters must declare this choice publicly or informally promise party allegiance. "Open to Unaffiliated" systems allow previously unaffiliated voters to participate in the primary of their choice but restricts affiliated voters to their current party affiliation. "Partially Closed" systems allow parties to close their elections to affiliated voters. "Closed" systems require voters to be previously registered with a party to participate in their primary election. "Top-Two" systems require all candidates for office to run on the same ballot, advancing the top two vote getters to the general election regardless of party affiliation. This six-part classification scheme was reduced to an open/not-open binary, where "Open," "Partially Open," "Open to Unaffiliated," and "Top-Two" systems were coded as 1 while "Partially Closed" and "Closed" systems were coded as 0. It was also reduced to a three-part classification of "Open," "Semi-Open," and "Closed." In this scheme, "Open" and "Top-Two" states were coded as "Open"; "Partially Open," "Open to Unaffiliated," and "Partially Closed" states were classified as "Semi-Open"; and "Closed" states were classified as "Closed." NCSL-provided classifications for 2010, 2014, and 2018 were used, along with a search for law changes using NCSL's Election Reform Legislation Database (for 2010) and State Elections Legislation Database (for 2011-2018).

Date, Region, and Concurrence

The date for each election was from the NCSL's State Primary Election Dates and was checked against official state election reports.[14] Year was coded for each election (2010, 2014, or 2018). Day of the week was also coded as a binary variable: 0 if the election took place on Tuesday, and 1 if it took place on another day. (Hawaii holds midterm primary elections on Saturdays, and Louisiana did so in 2010, while Tennessee holds them on Thursdays.) If an election occurred during the months of July or August, it was coded as a summer election. A four-part Census region division was used, classifying states as Northeast, South, Midwest, or West.

Election concurrence data was also collected. A binary simultaneous variable was coded for each election—1 if that election occurred at the same time as another state's election, and 0 if it was the only state primary election to occur on that day. The number of simultaneous primary elections held that day was also recorded, ranging from 1 (if only a single primary election was held) to 10. Two regional concurrence variables were also tested. A binary regional concurrence variable was coded 1 where a state's primary election occurred on the same day as another state's election in the same region, and 0 otherwise. The number of simultaneous primary elections held in the same region on a state's Election Day was also recorded, ranging from 1 (if no other primary elections occurred in the same region) to 4. These concurrence metrics were measured both including and excluding runoff elections from consideration, so that regression models that excluded runoff primaries also excluded counting these elections in measures of concurrence.

Uncontested Contests

States do not handle uncontested primary contests uniformly. Some states allow voters to vote for an uncontested candidate, give them the option to write in a name, or even vote for "none of the above." Other states do not allow primary votes for uncontested contests. States that did not allow voters to cast ballots for uncontested primary races were coded as 1 under "Uncontested No Vote," and 0 otherwise. Data was derived from each state's official primary election results. This variable was only used in the dataset excluding runoff primaries, as runoffs only involve contested races.

METHODOLOGY

Using the dataset that includes runoff primaries, univariate analysis of each factor and bivariate analysis of each independent factor was conducted. Correlations for each variable were then calculated. Each unrelated variable with the highest correlation was regressed on the dependent variable. A bidirectional stepwise analysis was also run, yielding similar results. For parsimony and readability, the election coverage variable was switched from ordinal to binary while Top Party Races was substituted for variables measuring the presence of a top Republican race and a gubernatorial race (Model I). This did not substantively alter the results of the model.

Model I: TBC Turnout Using Midterm Primary and Primary Runoff Elections

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)	15.313	1.492	10.26	< 2e-16 ***
Lacks Full Coverage	-3.91	1.362	-2.87	0.00467 **
Region Northeast	0.24	1.259	0.19	0.849
Region South	-0.38	1.129	-0.34	0.737
Region West	5.403	1.063	5.08	1.1e-06 ***
Nominating Convention	-4.324	1.001	-4.32	2.8e-05 ***
Year 2014	-3.014	0.856	-3.52	0.00056 ***
Year 2018	1.327	0.861	1.54	0.125
Runoff Election	-5.722	1.414	-4.05	8.1e-05 ***
Referendum	4.98	1.118	4.45	1.6e-05 ***
Summer	2.275	0.821	2.77	0.00628 **
Regional Concurrence	2.146	0.828	2.59	0.01046 *
No State Leg Elections	-4.006	1.431	-2.8	0.00577 **
Not Tuesday	3.648	1.709	2.13	0.03435 *
Top Party Races	1.083	0.598	1.81	0.07235 .

Significance codes: '***' = 0; '**' = < 0.001; '*' = < 0.05; '.' = < 0.1 **Residual standard error:** 4.55 on 156 degrees of freedom
Multiple R-squared: 0.691 **Adjusted R-squared:** 0.663 **F-statistic:** 24.9 on 14 and 156 DF **p-value:** <2e-16

Model I exhibited no multicollinearity issues and was found to have good overall fit. Two outliers were identified: Louisiana's 2010 primary and Mississippi's 2014 runoff primary. Louisiana's race had lower-than-predicted turnout, likely due to its unusual nature as the state's only midterm primary election in 40 years. Mississippi's runoff election featured higher-than-predicted turnout, likely due to a closely contested Republican Senate race that was decided by fewer than 700 votes. Neither outlier had significant leverage or Cook's Distance scores.

A plot of the residuals revealed a slight right skew, evidence of a potential violation of Normality (although less worrisome given a sample size approaching 200). The dependent variable was square-root-transformed to ensure the conditions for interpretation were satisfied (Model II). While the fit of Model II was slightly better, the direction and magnitude of factor correlations were nearly identical to Model I. For this reason, and due to the difficulties in interpreting the results of a model with a transformed dependent variable, Model I was used for the interpretation of variables.

Model II: The Square Root of TBC Turnout Using Midterm Primary and Primary Runoff Elections

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)	1.321	0.569	2.32	0.02140 *
Lacks Full Coverage Scale	1.275	0.284	4.49	1.4e-05 ***
Region Northeast	-0.029	0.153	-0.19	0.851
Region South	-0.093	0.138	-0.68	0.499
Region West	0.530	0.130	4.08	7.1e-05 ***
Year 2014	-0.378	0.104	-3.63	0.00039 ***
Year 2018	0.111	0.105	1.06	0.290
Referendum	0.567	0.136	4.17	5.1e-05 ***
Runoff Election	-0.824	0.169	-4.88	2.6e-06 ***
Nominating Convention	-0.525	0.121	-4.35	2.4e-05 ***
Top Republican	0.343	0.121	2.83	0.00521 **
No State Leg Elections	-0.488	0.182	-2.67	0.00828 **
Summer	0.227	0.100	2.28	0.02401 *
Regional Concurrence	0.249	0.101	2.47	0.01477 *
Not Tuesday	0.412	0.208	1.98	0.04931 *
Lacks Full Coverage	0.465	0.299	1.56	0.122

Significance codes: '***' = 0; '**' = < 0.001; '*' = < 0.05; '.' = < 0.1 **Residual standard error:** 0.553 on 155 degrees of freedom
Multiple R-squared: 0.753 **Adjusted R-squared:** 0.729 **F-statistic:** 31.6 on 15 and 155 DF **p-value:** <2e-16

An identical method of analysis was used for the dataset excluding runoff primaries (Model III). Election concurrence metrics were swapped for their non-runoff substitutes, while the uncontested contest variable was only tested with this dataset and the runoff election variable was not tested. Model III is broadly consistent with Model I.

Model III: TBC Turnout Using Midterm Primary Elections

	Estimate	Std. Error	t value	Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)	16.18	1.279	12.66	< 2e-16 ***
No State Leg Elections	-5.643	1.573	-3.59	0.00047 ***
Region Northeast	0.518	1.229	0.42	0.674
Region South	0.308	1.106	0.28	0.781
Region West	5.332	1.042	5.12	1.1e-06 ***
Nominating Convention	-3.935	1.006	-3.91	0.00014 ***
Year 2014	-3.319	0.881	-3.77	0.00025 ***
Year 2018	1.795	0.889	2.02	0.04538 *
Referendum	4.746	1.101	4.31	3.1e-05 ***
Lacks Full Coverage	-5.293	1.535	-3.45	0.00076 ***
Summer	2.700	0.866	3.12	0.00222 **
Regional Concurrence	1.84	0.854	2.15	0.03298 *
PVI	0.105	0.069	1.52	0.131
Not Tuesday	2.490	1.776	1.4	0.163

Significance codes: '***' = 0; '**' = < 0.001; '*' = < 0.05; '.' = < 0.1 **Residual standard error:** 4.37 on 134 degrees of freedom
Multiple R-squared: 0.666 **Adjusted R-squared:** 0.634 **F-statistic:** 20.6 on 13 and 134 DF **p-value:** <2e-16

An additional four robustness tests were conducted. Each remaining measure of turnout (HO and Total Votes) was tested for both datasets. Results were broadly consistent across all tests. Year, region, full election coverage, referenda, concurrent state legislative elections, nominating conventions, season, and regional election concurrence were statistically significant in most or all of the models. The runoff election variable was statistically significant in models where it was tested. Day of the week lost significance in models that excluded runoffs, likely due to an insufficient number of data points in the smaller dataset. Variables measuring the presence of top-ticket races had inconsistent results across models that excluded runoffs due to increasing multicollinearity issues with election coverage in the smaller dataset.

Endnotes

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Notes

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