










High Costs and Low Turnout for U.S. Runoff Elections

	1ST CHOICE	2ND CHOICE	3RD CHOICE
CANDIDATE A			
CANDIDATE B			
CANDIDATE C			


David de la Fuente

Senior Political Analyst

[@dpdelafuente](https://twitter.com/dpdelafuente)

Deb Otis

Senior Research Analyst, FairVote

Primary runoff elections are used in seven states, primarily in the American South, but they have a sordid past. They were devised in the South in the late 19th and early 20th Century to help solidify one-party control of the region. Democratic Party bosses wanted something that could help unite Democratic voters ahead of a general election to ensure the Republican Party couldn't peel off disaffected Democrats while also disempowering Black voters to never be able to nominate someone with a plurality and split White field. As SMU professor Cal Jillson told the Washington Post in 2014, "The primaries were an attempt both to enlarge the group that awarded the nomination, but also to provide an opportunity for whites if they factionalized to come back during a runoff."¹

These runoff elections still exist across much of the South (Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Texas). Two of those states, Georgia and Louisiana, use runoff elections for both primary and general elections.

The traditional two-round runoff system comes with additional costs, including taxpayer dollars to fund the administration of a second election and non-monetary societal costs such as reduced voter turnout in the decisive final round.

Today, the majority requirement for elections is no longer seen as a tool for disenfranchisement. In fact, places in the U.S. which use a modern form of the majority requirement have experienced the exact opposite. Ranked choice voting, or “instant runoff” voting, is also a majoritarian system but it leads to an increase in representation for people of color, both on the ballot and in elected office. ² Past work by FairVote explores the ways in which voters of color and candidates of color benefit from ranked choice voting. ³

Primary Runoffs in Texas Can Increase Costs by 50% or More

Four counties in Texas responded to requests for data on election spending. Texas uses runoff elections only for party primaries which do not result in a majority winner during the general election. Costs vary considerably between counties, but overall we can conclude that primary runoffs often cost each county hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Year	Jurisdiction	Primary Cost	Runoff Cost	Runoff as % of First Round	Primary cost / voter	Runoff cost / voter
2018	Harris County, TX	\$1,169,548	\$310,061	27%	\$13	\$6
2020	Harris County, TX	\$1,696,591	\$669,674	39%	\$6	\$4
2018	Dallas County, TX	\$1,165,002	\$536,238	46%	\$23	\$19
2020	Dallas County, TX	\$1,131,990	\$622,450	55%	\$5	\$5
2018	Travis County, TX	\$1,046,596	\$477,016	46%	\$16	\$11
2020	Travis County, TX	\$1,273,637	\$891,354	70%	\$6	\$7
2018	Bexar County, TX	\$410,967	\$526,090	128%	\$8	\$20
2020	Collin County, TX	\$586,146	\$281,000	48%	\$4	\$5
2018	Collin County, TX	\$478,566	\$279,089	58%	\$5	\$12
2020	Tarrant County, TX	\$1,085,896.18	\$627,523.56	58%	\$4	\$6
2018	Tarrant County, TX	\$572,264.97	\$479,342.63	84%	\$3	\$9
2020	Fort Bend, TX	\$302,680.38	\$263,943.40	87%	\$2	\$3
2018	Fort Bend, TX	\$189,026.13	\$87,124.47	46%	\$3	\$4

Source: Data is from state-specific freedom of information requests to state and county election administrators. Data can be shared upon request.



If we extrapolate these costs to every runoff voter in Texas, assuming the median cost of \$7 per voter applies statewide, the 2018 and 2020 runoffs could have cost as much as \$6M and \$11M statewide.

Louisiana Runoffs Bring a \$5 Million Price Tag

Louisiana’s two-round runoff method is unique in that the first round is treated as a primary, sometimes known as a “jungle primary” because it is non-partisan, and the runoff is treated as the general election. However, from a cost analysis perspective, the duplication of costs is similar to that of typical two-round runoffs.

Year	Jurisdiction	Office	First Round	Runoff as % of First Round	Primary cost / voter	Runoff cost / voter	Runoff cost / voter
2016	Louisiana	Senate	\$6,066,275	\$5,337,471	88%	\$3	\$6
2019	Louisiana	Governor	\$6,126,549	\$5,461,348	89%	\$5	\$4

Source: Data is from state-specific freedom of information requests to state and county election administrators.
Data can be shared upon request.



Each statewide runoff studied cost almost as much as the first round of the election, nearly doubling overall election spending and costing Louisiana taxpayers over \$5M each year.

Turnout Declines in Runoff Elections

In addition to extra expenses, runoff elections also typically attract a smaller group of voters than general elections. Previous research from FairVote has shown that turnout typically declines by 38% between primary elections and primary runoff elections, with Texas experiencing one of the largest declines at 42%. Turnout for voters of color typically falls at an even greater rate. The table below shows the turnout declines for the elections included in this study.

Year	Jurisdiction	Office	Date of First Round	Date of Runoff	Turnout First Round	Turnout Runoff	Turn-out % Change
2018	Harris County, TX	Various Fed + State	3/6/18	5/22/18	90,052	49,790	-45%
2020	Harris County TX	Various Fed + State	3/3/20	7/14/20	302,495	168,333	-44%
2018	Dallas County, TX	Various Fed + State	3/6/18	5/22/18	51,058	27,948	-45%
2020	Dallas County, TX	Various Fed + State	3/3/20	7/14/20	224,040	128,420	-43%
2018	Travis County, TX	Various Fed + State	3/6/18	5/22/18	63,830	45,363	-29%
2020	Travis County, TX	Various Fed + State	3/3/20	7/14/20	209,642	126,579	-40%
2018	Bexar County, TX	Various Fed + State	3/6/18	5/22/18	49,153	25,985	-47%
2018	Tarrant County, TX	Various Fed + State	3/6/18	5/22/18	177,193	56,104	-68%
2020	Tarrant County, TX	Various Fed + State	3/3/20	7/14/20	280,316	110,629	-61%
2018	Collin County, TX	Various Fed + State	3/6/18	5/22/18	100,747	23,915	-76%
2020	Collin County, TX	Various Fed + State	3/3/20	7/14/20	153,709	52,356	-66%
2018	Fort Bend, TX	Various Fed + State	3/6/18	5/22/18	64,029	21,990	-66%
2020	Fort Bend, TX	Various Fed + State	3/3/20	7/14/20	126,848	78,716	-38%
2016	Louisiana	Senate	11/8/16	12/10/16	1,933,635	884,007	-54%
2019	Louisiana	Governor	10/12/19	11/16/19	1,343,481	1,508,784	12%

Source: Data is from state-specific freedom of information requests to state and county election administrators.
Data can be shared upon request.



This table quantifies the strong disincentive for voters to return to the polls and vote again for the same office. In most cases, barely more than half of first-round voters participated in the runoff

election.

The Louisiana 2019 Gubernatorial runoff is a notable outlier as the only election in which the runoff turnout increased. In that case, the runoff election was held in November, a time when voters may be more likely to expect an election. Additionally, that election featured four serious candidates, including one Democrat and three Republicans, and everyone was expecting a runoff featuring one candidate from both major parties, so quite a few voters may have sat out the first round waiting to see what their options would be in November.

In every election in this study, the November election had higher turnout than the “off-cycle” election. Based on this evidence, states and counties should aim to hold the decisive election in November, when turnout is highest.

The Solution: Ranked Choice Voting

There is a solution that would enshrine majority rule, which is arguably the sole positive attribute of runoff elections, while reducing costs, improving voter experience, and improving representation for women and people of color.

A ranked choice voting election would eliminate the need for primary runoffs. Voters could simply rank their choices during the first round, which would eliminate the hassle of returning for a second round of voting. However, election administrators could continue counting ballots through multiple rounds until a candidate wins an absolute majority of support relative to their opponents.

Ranked choice voting would also ensure that the majority winners win a majority of a higher pool of voters, as runoff elections tend to see turnout decrease precipitously. In the Texas primary examples above, turnout routinely fell 50% or more, and that was even true of the Louisiana Senate election in 2016.

While upgrading our election system to implement ranked choice voting elections comes with a small cost, it pales in comparison to the costs of a separate runoff election. Likewise, the voters themselves have a reduced burden by only having to make one trip to their voting location or send one mail ballot instead of voting twice in a short time period.

About Us

David de la Fuente is a senior political analyst at Third Way.

Deb Otis is a senior research analyst at FairVote.

TOPICS

ELECTIONS 302

ENDNOTES

1. Wilson, Reid. Runoff elections a relic of the Democratic South. 2014, June 4. *Washington Post*.
2. John, S., Smith, H., & Zack, E. (2018). The alternative vote: Do changes in single-member voting systems affect descriptive representation of women and minorities? *Electoral Studies*, 54.
3. Otis, D. & Dell, N. (2021). Ranked Choice Voting Elections Benefit Candidates and Voters of Color. FairVote.