

# Top Four

POLICY GUIDE



State Policy

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*States using or considering the “Top Two” system can implement a simple change to enhance voter choice and competition.*

**The Problem:** The “Top Two” system of election has drawn increasing attention as a means of addressing political issues with electoral reform. It consists of a preliminary election in which all candidates seeking office compete and each voter has one vote, followed by a general election between the two candidates who received the most votes in the preliminary election. However, limiting the general election to exactly two candidates severely limits voter choice and can lead to bizarre unanticipated consequences in the preliminary election.

For example, in California’s congressional district 31 race in 2012, vote-splitting and variable turnout between rounds resulted in a majority-Democratic and majority-minority district advancing only two conservative white Republicans to the general election. In Washington, political interests avoid vote-splitting and intraparty races by deciding in advance which candidates will

advance and pushing only those two candidates.

**The Solution:** The use of a nonpartisan preliminary election can be retained while resolving the issues with Top Two via two simple changes: first, advance *four* candidates to the general election instead of only two; second, conduct the general election by ranked choice voting. This keeps the goal of opening the primaries while simultaneously opening the general election.

Simulations of how such a system might operate using election results from California and Washington suggest that nearly every election would include both major parties as well as two candidates from the majority party, enhancing competition. It also suggests that unaffiliated and alternative party candidates would be able to participate on a much fairer level, with a threshold to advance to the general election of around 5%, depending on the competitiveness of the particular race.

## Key Facts

**Washington:** In Washington congressional elections, all but one race in three election cycles has featured a single frontrunner Democrat and a single frontrunner Republican.

**California:** In 2012, Democrats did an average of seven points better in the general election than in the preliminary election in competitive races, due to poor turnout among minority and Democratic voters in the preliminary election.

## Part Two Resources

- The Top Two System in Action: Washington State 2008-2012
- Fixing Top Two in California

## Fiscal Impact

States may save money by using a single preliminary ballot rather than separate party primaries. The use of ranked choice voting may require short-term expenditures to adjust administration practices.

## Related Reforms

- Ranked Choice Voting
- Ballot Access