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ELECTION RUNOFFS

Georgia is holding runoff elections Jan. 5 for its two Senate seats. Why?

Runoff elections are used in some states – and in many countries – after an election in which no candidate gains the majority of votes. Whenever three or more candidates are competing in an election with a single winner, there is a possibility that no candidate will receive more than 50 percent of the vote.

In both of Georgia's November Senate races, the leading candidates received less than 50 percent (you can find the vote breakdowns for the two races [here](#) and [here](#)). Under Georgia law, that triggers second-round runoffs between the top two candidates.

How many states use this kind of runoff, and how often do they take place?

Georgia and Louisiana are the only states to use a runoff system for general elections. Ten states use a runoff for primary elections. Primaries are more likely than general elections to have many candidates, and as a result are more likely not to yield a majority winner.

The states that use runoffs for primary elections are Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina (if no candidate receives more than 30%), Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota (if no candidate receives more than 35%), and Texas.

General election runoffs happen infrequently. Since 2000 in Georgia and Louisiana, roughly seven percent of general elections for U.S. congressional seats or governorships have resulted in runoffs. Runoffs occur more frequently in primary elections, taking place in roughly 15% of House and Senate primaries in the 10 states listed above.

Election systems with runoffs are common internationally. At least [50 countries](#) elect their president via a two-round system, with a runoff if there is no majority winner in the first round.

What are the arguments for an election system with a runoff?

Runoffs reduce the likelihood that a candidate opposed by the majority of voters will win an election. A candidate who wins an election with less than 50 percent (often called a “plurality winner”) could have benefited from a situation in which most voters wanted a different type of candidate but divided their votes among two or more similar candidates. A plurality winner may have the support of only one faction of the electorate and may be strongly opposed by the majority.

Plurality winners are quite common. In back-to-back election years, Massachusetts has sent new members to the House of Representatives who won primaries with less than 23% of the vote. Without a runoff system, there is no way of knowing if these two plurality winners would have been the second choice of most of the voters who voted for other candidates.

A 2018 [analysis](#) found that 80 members of the House of Representatives entered Congress after winning a primary election with less than 35% of the vote. Moreover, these “low-plurality winners” scored significantly higher on a measure of partisanship and ideological intensity than members who won their primary with a majority of the vote, illustrating that voting systems without runoffs are more likely to empower political extremes.

A related argument for runoffs is that they can help prevent a range of problems associated with “spoiler” candidates. In a simple plurality system, independent or third-party candidates with little chance of winning can change the outcome of an election by taking votes away from a stronger candidate of similar ideology. Whether or not a potential “spoiler” candidate gets on the ballot has become a fraught political issue, leading at times to accusations of fraud against election officials. In Florida in 2020, two apparently fake independent candidacies were created by political operatives and probably [changed the outcome](#) of two state legislative elections by syphoning votes from expected winners. With a runoff election, such schemes would have little impact.

An election without a runoff also can create pressure for similar candidates to step out of a race to avoid diluting voter supporter. This pattern can arise, for example, in districts with a large minority population, where multiple minority candidates could divide the vote of the minority community.

And what are the arguments against using runoffs?

The main argument is that they are costly. From an election administration point of view, a runoff requires nearly all of the same steps as the general election, putting significant pressure on already tight local and state election budgets. The Georgia runoff, for example, will likely cost more than \$1 million to administer. There is also the additional cost incurred for the second round of election campaigning. By some [estimates](#), up to \$1 billion will be spent in support of the four campaigns in the Georgia runoffs. There is also a time cost for voters, who must return to the polls.

Another concern about runoff elections is that they are often less effective than expected at determining the true majority preference because voter turnout usually declines for the runoff round – often substantially. A recent [study](#) of primary runoffs since 1994 found that, on average, the number of voters in the runoff round was 37% lower than the number for the preceding general election. In North Carolina, runoff turnout was so low (below 50%) that the state legislature opted to change the law so that a candidate need only receive 30% of the vote to win.

Also, some [argue](#) that runoff elections arose in the context of efforts in the South to prevent African-American candidates from winning elections. Although historians debate the origins of these election rules, racial segregation clearly played a role. However, with the passage of the Voting Rights Act and the establishment of majority-minority districts, the requirement that a candidate receive a majority is less likely to keep a minority candidate from being elected, and it may in some cases aid minority candidates.

How does ranked-choice voting fit into this discussion?

Ranked-choice voting is often called “instant runoff voting.” It uses [a ballot](#) with spaces for voters to rank all of the candidates running for a given office in order of preference. If a candidate receives more than 50% of the first-choice votes, the election is over, and that candidate is the winner. However, if no candidate receives more than 50%, a series of calculations takes place that are similar to runoff elections. In each round, the bottom candidate is eliminated, and the ballots for that candidate are reallocated based on those voters’ next choices. This process continues until one candidate crosses 50 percent.

Ranked-choice voting achieves all the advantages of a runoff election without the added cost, and with much less drop-off in participation.

States that have adopted ranked-choice voting have done so in response to issues related to plurality winners. Maine, the first ranked-choice voting state, has many independent voters and strong independent candidates, and as a result, under simple plurality rules, elections for key offices such as governor often resulted in plurality or low-plurality winners. Maine voters first approved statewide use of ranked-choice voting during a referendum in 2017, and the system is now used for all statewide elections, including presidential elections.

Alaska has a somewhat similar history, illustrated by the unusual distinction that Alaska’s Lisa Murkowski is the only senator in U.S. history to win a seat three times in a row without garnering a majority of the vote. In 2020, Alaska voted to adopt ranked-choice voting for all statewide general elections, including presidential elections. In the same reform package, Alaskans decided to replace party primaries for state executive, state legislative, and congressional elections with open “top four” primaries, from which the four top candidates pass on to the general election, which in turn is conducted with ranked-choice voting.

Ranked-choice voting opponents contend that the system violates the principle of one-person-one-vote. This hypothesis was the basis of a lawsuit in Maine by incumbent Representative Bruce Poliquin, who was ahead in the first round of a 2018 ranked-choice election before losing in the instant runoff. In this and other legal actions, several judges have ruled that ranked-choice voting does not violate one-person-one-vote. Nevertheless, the criticism persists. It was, for example, the reason that the chairman of Massachusetts’ GOP opposed a 2020 ranked-choice voting ballot initiative.

Understanding ranked-choice voting as a type of runoff election helps illustrate this point. In the Georgia runoff, voters are being asked to come back to express their preference between the remaining candidates after lower vote-getters were eliminated. Ranked-choice essentially works the same way – by bringing voters’ ballots back to express their preference on the remaining candidates. In both approaches, every voter has one vote in each round.

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