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Voter Participation in Top Two Elections

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You asked for information on voter turnout in the four states with top two election systems. You also wished to know if a top two system affected the number of candidates who participated in primary elections in these states.

As you are aware, the four states with top two primary systems are California, Louisiana, Nebraska, and Washington.¹ As Louisiana has had its system in place for over 40 years, and Nebraska for far longer, it was not possible to identify whether their systems increased or decreased voter turnout in elections. Also, although Washington State only implemented its top two system in 2004, historic data on voter turnout rates prior to the change was not readily available.² Therefore, we focused our review on California, which implemented its system in 2010.

According to our review, it appears that neither voter turnout nor candidate participation has changed significantly in California since its top two system was implemented. We spoke at length with Kim Alexander, president of The California Voter Foundation, regarding the experience of top two elections in California.³ Ms. Alexander generally lauded the system, asserting that it creates more competition for incumbents and allows voters, no matter their party affiliation, to choose the two finalists for a given office. She relates, however, that there is no evidence, at this point, that the system has either increased or decreased voter turnout or the number of candidates participating in primary elections.

Ms. Alexander referred us to a page on her foundation's website, www.calvoter.org/voter/elections/index.html, which provides primary and general election information from 1994-2016. From this site, you can see the number of candidates on the ballot for elections in each California district.⁴ We perused a number of these elections, both before and after the top two system was implemented in California, and found no discernable difference in candidate participation, as Ms. Alexander had indicated was the case. She also pointed us to a 2016 document from the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), entitled "Assessing the Top Two Primary," which provides an analysis of the top two system.⁵ The piece includes the following:

For the state senate and US House, far more candidates under the top two have faced at least one candidate from their own party, a trend that shows no sign of letting up in 2016. But intra-party challenges for the assembly have faded to the point where such competition is not much more common than before the reform. The top two has actually discouraged some major-party candidates in heavily partisan districts from running, since such candidates are no longer guaranteed a place on the fall ballot.

The full document can be accessed at http://ppic.org/main/blog_detail.asp?i=2070.

¹ Nebraska's top two elections are for nonpartisan legislative races only.

² A 2016 article in *The Olympian* indicates that voter turnout has declined slightly over the past eight years in Washington. This article can be viewed at www.theolympian.com/news/politics-government/article95206707.html#storylink=cpy.

³ Ms. Alexander can be reached at (916) 441-2494. The California Voter Foundation is a non-partisan entity that endeavors to advance the responsible use of technology to improve the democratic process, www.calvoter.org/index.html.

⁴ From this site, click on the year and the election type (primary or general), then the "congress" tab, and, finally, select "U.S. House Races." From there you will see, for each district, how many candidates ran for office. You can also view this information for other national elections and state assembly races from this site.

⁵ The PPIC is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank that aims to inform and improve public policy in California through independent, objective, nonpartisan research, <http://ppic.org/main/home.asp>.

In Table 1, we provide voter turnout rates in statewide primary elections in California from 2006 through 2016.

Table 1: California Voter Turnout Rates in Statewide Primary Elections, 2006-2016					
Prior to Top Two			Top Two System		
2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016
23%	40%	24%	22%	18%	34%

While likely of little comparative value (between top two and other systems), we also provide, in Table 2, voter turnout data for the states with top two election systems in the 2008, 2012, and 2016 primary and general elections. Across the country, voter turnout rates in general elections have been relatively consistent over the last several decades, between 48 and 57 percent from 1980 to 2016. This is much lower, however, than many other countries. A Pew Research Center 2016 study on this point, “U.S Voter Turnout Trails Most Developed Countries,” can be viewed at www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/08/02/u-s-voter-turnout-trails-most-developed-countries/. Also, The United States Elections Project provides state turnout rates in general and primary elections from 2000-2016, at www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/voter-turnout-data.

Table 2: Voter Turnout Rates in Statewide Elections in States with Top Two Systems						
	2008		2012		2016	
	Primary	General	Primary	General	Primary	General
California	40%	59%	22%	55%	34%	59%
Louisiana	18%	62%	10%	59%	18%	61%
Nebraska	23%	64%	26%	61%	27%	64%
Washington	43%	85%	38%	81%	35%	78%

Notes: Percentages are rounded. Turnout rates for primaries and general elections in presidential years (such as these) are typically higher across the county.

Sources: California and Washington figures came from their respective state election webpages: www.sos.ca.gov/elections/prior-elections/statewide-election-results/statewide-direct-primary-election-june-3-2014/statement-vote; and <https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/research/Data-and-Statistics.aspx>, respectively. We identified data for Louisiana and Nebraska on the U.S. Election Project website at www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/voter-turnout-data, as well as the Nebraska election site at www.sos.ne.gov/elec/prev_elec/.

We hope this is helpful. If you have questions or need additional information, please let us know.