

# Top-four Primaries and Instant Runoffs: The Alaska Story

With Constitutional Initiatives 126 and 127 on the horizon, Montanans can look to Alaska to learn about open primaries and instant runoffs.

If voters approve Constitutional Initiatives 126 and 127 in November 2024, Montana would shift to an election system much like Alaska's. CI-126 would implement the same top-four primary that Alaskans use to select general election candidates. Separately, Alaska's instant runoff system is one option that the Montana legislature could enact to satisfy CI-127's majority winner requirement.

## Alaska's system, explained

**Alaskans voted for it** | In 2020, Alaskans approved a top-four open primary with instant runoff voting for general elections. The election system went into effect in 2022 for all statewide races (president, governor, US Senate, and US House) and state legislative races. The only races where the system does not apply are presidential primaries, which are party elections not administered by the state.

**All parties on one primary election ballot** | In the **open primary**, every voter, regardless of party registration, receives **one ballot** that lists every candidate in every race. In this style of primary, voters can support a mix of Republicans, Democrats, independents and third-party candidates, or they can vote along party lines. The top four vote-getters in each race advance to the general election.

**General election winners have majority support** | In the instant runoff **general election**, voters rank the candidates from **most to least favorite**. Once the polls close, election officials count everyone's first-choice vote. Candidates receiving a majority of the first-choice votes win in the first round (this happened in 81 percent of Alaska contests in 2022). If no candidate achieves a majority with first-choice votes alone, then the candidate with the fewest first-choice votes is eliminated. The voters who prefer the eliminated candidate have their vote count for their next preference on their ballot. This process continues until a candidate receives a majority of the remaining votes.

# How Alaskans used their new election system

## Voters were free to split their tickets—and they did

Voters could choose between candidates of all parties in their primary elections—maybe a local Democrat for their state House race, a Republican for the US Senate contest, and a nonpartisan candidate for Governor. And they took advantage of that new opportunity, as [more than half of voters](#) picked candidates from multiple different political parties in 2022.

## Candidates worked to earn support from more voters

Candidates had to make their case to *all* voters in a high-turnout general election, not just to those fewer, generally more partisan voters who turn out for primaries. Take South Anchorage Republican [Cathy Giessel](#), a conservative who drew ire from other Republicans over her bipartisan approach to balancing the budget. In 2020, Giessel lost her race for re-election in a closed partisan primary where only 5,700 Republicans cast a ballot (18 percent of the registered voters in the district). Under the new system, Giessel made it through the open primary *and* won the general election when all voters got to weigh in—16,700 Alaskans of all political stripes (55 percent of the registered voters in the district).

## Winners represented the state’s political landscape

Elected officials reflected the state’s broad array of political sentiments. Voters elected

- moderate Democrat [Mary Peltola](#) for US House (defeating Sarah Palin),
- moderate Republican [Lisa Murkowski](#) for US Senate,
- conservative Republican [Mike Dunleavy](#) for governor against a range of different contenders,
- a [Republican-led state House](#), and
- a state Senate governed by a [bipartisan coalition](#).

Though Alaska typically votes for Republicans at the presidential level, more than twice as many Alaskans are registered independents (58 percent of registered voters) as are registered Republicans (24 percent). So while the state leans more conservative than liberal, it doesn’t necessarily lean more Republican. The top-four primary and instant runoff general open up lanes for moderate Republicans, moderate Democrats, and nonpartisan candidates to run, win, and help govern.

