

## CALIFORNIA'S NEW ELECTORAL REFORMS: HOW DID THEY WORK?

Eric McGhee and Daniel Krimm

Results as of 9 a.m., 6/8/12

### ► **New electoral reforms were designed to shake up the status quo.**

California voters recently adopted two ambitious electoral reforms that first took effect in the recent primary election. One reform is the establishment of new district boundaries for the state Assembly, state Senate, and U.S. Congress, drawn by a citizens' commission. (Ten years ago, the state legislature drew the lines and largely protected incumbents in the process.) The other reform is a new "top two" primary system that combines all candidates on a single ballot for all voters, with the two candidates who receive the most votes, regardless of party, advancing to the fall election. Both reforms were intended to change the makeup of the state legislature to increase its accountability to voters and its ability to reach consensus on major issues.

### ► **The new districts have disrupted established incumbents ...**

The reforms are more complementary than reinforcing, with each having its own effect. The redistricting has disrupted established incumbents. There are fewer safe seats, and the average incumbent had a district that was 45% new territory. In races for the U.S. Congress, incumbents were forced to run against each other in two districts, and there was the largest number of open seats—nine—since 1992. The number of open Assembly seats, 35, was also well above average for the last decade. Only the number of open Senate seats—nine—was within typical bounds.

### ► **... while the top-two primary has altered traditional patterns of competition.**

More incumbents faced primary challenges from within their own party this year than they have on average in the last five election cycles (42% vs. 18%). Redistricting does not fully explain this change, because incumbents in districts that changed a great deal were not substantially more likely to face a challenge than those in districts that did not change so much. Instead, the top-two was probably the stronger cause, since it gives primary challengers a better chance of appearing in the fall election. Indeed, almost all of the increase in primary challenges occurred in seats where the odds of a same-party runoff were the best. The top-two also discouraged competition from minor parties, who are no longer guaranteed a spot on the fall ballot: districts with no minor or independent candidate were up (72%, up from 53%). Districts without a candidate from one of the major parties were also more common this year (16%, up from 7% over the last five elections).

### ► **The reforms led to closer outcomes.**

The average vote margin was 22 points between first- and second-place finishers and 11 points between second and third. By comparison, when the results of past primary elections are tabulated for a single ballot, as in the top-two, both margins are larger—suggesting that past races were not as competitive. Why might the top-two increase competition? Two possibilities: a greater number of competitive candidates and increased opportunity for voters to cross party lines. Today, in 59% of the races, one candidate has already received more than 50% of the vote. This number would also have been larger in the past.

### ► **The political establishment suffered some defeats, but mostly saw victories.**

All incumbents who ran this year advanced to the fall campaign, and all but four finished in first place. Likewise, 101 of 113 non-incumbent candidates endorsed by the major parties advanced. There will also be 28 same-party runoffs, which fell almost entirely in safe seats. The one exception is Congressional District 31 in San Bernardino County, which has more registered Democrats than Republicans but will advance two Republicans (Gary Miller and Bob Dutton) to the fall campaign. Finally, there were 37 "no party preference" candidates who rejected both party labels; five of them advanced to the fall election, all in seats considered safe for either one of the major parties.



The reforms have disrupted old patterns of competition

District	Assembly (80 seats)		Senate (20 seats per election, 40 total)		U.S. House (53 seats)	
	2012	Average 2002-10	2012	Average 2002-10	2012	Average 2002-10
Open seats	44%	37%	45%	49%	17%	5%
Same-party competition	63	46	45	39	79	51
Same-party incumbent challenge	33	8	27	2	52	31
One major party absent	14	6	25	12	17	7

Source: California Secretary of State.

Notes: "Open seats" refers to districts where no incumbent is running. "Same-party competition" is the percentage of districts where at least one major party has at least two candidates. "Same-party incumbent challenge" is the percentage of incumbents running for reelection who face a challenge from within their own party. "One party absent" is the percentage of districts where one major party has no candidate.

Competition was fiercer and will continue to the fall election in more places

District	Assembly (80 Seats)		Senate (20 seats per election, 40 total)		U.S. House (53 Seats)	
	2012	Average 2002-10	2012	Average 2002-10	2012	Average 2002-10
Same-party runoff	23%	11%	10%	15%	15%	7%
Winner > 50%	50	70	80	77	66	88
Average gap between 1st- and 2nd-place finishers	19	28	20	30	28	39
Average gap between 2nd- and 3rd-place finishers	8	16	19	19	14	17

Source: California Secretary of State.

Notes: Comparison numbers for 2002-2010 were calculated as if the results of those contests had been combined on a single ballot, as they were for the top-two primary. "Same-party runoff" refers to the percentage of districts where two candidates of the same party will face each other in the fall. "Winner > 50%" is the percentage of top vote-getters who received more than half the vote. "Average gap" is the gap in vote share between the first- and second-place finishers, and second- and third-place finishers, respectively. The gap in vote share between the second and third place finishers shows share of votes required to change the top two finishers.

Source: California Secretary of State.

Contact: mcghee@ppic.org

Supported with funding from the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation

