



## OPINION | ANDY CRAIG: Primary problem

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In 2022, 21 percent of voters cast a Republican ballot in the May primary, while 5 percent participated on the Democratic side. A few weeks later, just 4 percent of eligible voters showed up for the primary runoffs. Yet it was this small minority who effectively decided the real outcomes. In November, when twice as many Arkansans vote, the general election is usually little more than a formality.

For a state whose motto boasts of popular sovereignty, only a quarter of the electorate really chooses who governs. But it doesn't have to be this way. Arkansas might soon have the opportunity to make its elected representatives much more representative, through a reform known as Final (or Top) Four.

In 2020, disputes over petition signatures led the state Supreme Court to remove a Final Four initiative from the ballot. But voters may get another opportunity to have their say next year, if proponents are successful with their renewed petition drive. That effort is worth supporting.

Under Final Four, all voters would be able to vote in a nonpartisan primary, choosing from among all the candidates running. But instead of being tantamount to election, the primary would only winnow the field down to the four candidates with the most support, regardless of party affiliation.

Candidates then advance to the general election, putting the final decision where it belongs, when most people go to the polls. As an additional benefit, the abysmally low-turnout primary runoffs could be eliminated, along with the cost to taxpayers.

To ensure a representative outcome, voters are allowed to rank the four finalists in an instant runoff. If no candidate receives a majority of first-choice votes, these preferences are taken into account to elect the candidate with the broadest support. This innovative feature avoids the problem of spoilers, where candidates opposed by a majority of voters can be elected with less than half the vote.

An instant-runoff ballot also discourages negative campaigning, because it rewards positive appeals for second-choice votes. Few would disagree that less mudslinging during campaign season would be an improvement. It's been the biggest benefit cited by voters and candidates in Utah, where several municipalities have recently adopted instant runoffs in their local elections.

The dominance of the primary casts a dark shadow in Arkansas history, hearkening back to the worst days of segregationist one-party rule. Turning a party primary into the de facto real election was one device, among others, for maintaining Jim Crow, insulating it from both disenfranchised Black citizens and white opponents.

Moving power out of the general election isn't just a theoretical problem. We have seen how it can, at worst, destroy the very foundations of representative government. Today, Republicans have replaced Democrats as the state's dominant party, and vast strides have been made toward equality since the days of Orval Faubus. While the harms of an overpowered partisan primary are not as extreme as they once were, the problem has not gone away.

John Adams, contemplating the design of new states' constitutions in 1776, wrote that "the representative assembly should be an exact portrait, in miniature, of the people at large, as it should think, feel, reason and act like them. Great care should be taken in the formation of it, to prevent unfair, partial and corrupt elections."

One way to make those in power better resemble "the people at large" is to ensure elections are decided on Election Day, by the people at large. Regnat populus, the people rule. Not some of the people, but the whole people.

By reforming a broken electoral system, Arkansas can ensure every voice is heard and every vote counts.

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