

KEVIN JOHNSON

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.

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

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.
