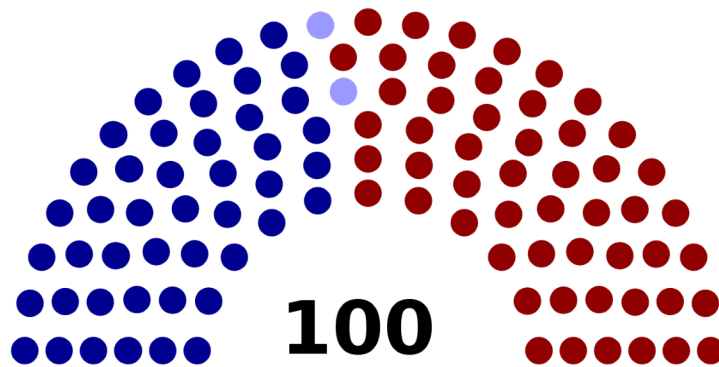# Down Ballot 2020:

Competitive Senate Races

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Because the Senate will be key to enabling or checking

what the President can and cannot do

regardless of who wins the White House

27 September 2020

Table of Contents

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to provide readers with sufficient information to make informed decisions about which Democratic Senate candidates to support, either financially or otherwise.

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DownBallot2020@gmail.com

If you have suggestions to improve content or the presentation, feel free to send them to the same address.

Executive Summary

- *There is still reason to be optimistic that Democrats can win the Senate this year, despite the Supreme Court situation.*

- Although Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's tragic death has added new dynamics to the national American political scene, at this point there are few substantial changes in the Senate outlook.

- Based on current polls, the most likely November scenario is that Joe Biden wins the White House and Senator Doug Jones (D) loses Alabama. In this case ***Democrats will need a net gain four seats*** to win the Senate.

- If both Joe Biden and Doug Jones lose, Democrats will need five seats. Hence, ***the target should be five seats***.

- Of the ***six competitive Republican seats***:

    o Arizona and Colorado are very competitive at this point

    o Maine and North Carolina are moderately competitive

    o Iowa and Montana are borderline competitive

- There are three additional races that bear watching: Alaska, Kansas, and South Carolina. These states may come into play and are currently on the Watch List.

- Again, there is reason to be optimistic, but it's not a given.

There is much to be done between now and November.

Senate Dynamics

A number of articles have been written about the political situation following Justice Ginsburg's death, and trying to sort them out and digest them can be confusing. I have singled out one article that I think is relevant to this report.

The link below is to an analysis by Nate Silver, at 538. In discussing the Supreme Court, he argues that the Senate is inherently tilted towards the GOP due to the rural effect. He makes the case that there is normally a 6% advantage for the GOP just based on state demographics. Every once in a while something happens that causes Republican complacency and Democratic energy, and Democrats take the Senate. But it is not the norm.

This relates to the Electoral College, also. Several articles have been written over the past several years about how the country's demographics gives Republicans a slight advantage in the Electoral College.

The key point is this: if Nate Silver is correct, the combination of White House and Senate being controlled by Democrats is a relatively rare event. In other words…

This is a very special election, and perhaps one of those rare times Democrats might be able to capture both the White House and the Senate. **Let's do it!**

[The Senate's Rural Skew Makes It Very Hard for Democrats to Win the Supreme Court](#)

Polling Analysis

At this point, polling is probably the primary useful metric for assessing the races. This section discusses how polling is used to make support recommendations.

Table 1, below, shows the weighted averages of all 538-rated[1] polls in the six competitive races we've been following going back to the beginning of June. As you can see in column 4, North Carolina and Arizona have been polled extensively; Montana and Colorado not so much; and Iowa and Maine are in the middle.

The column of interest is the third column, "Average Difference." This is the difference in weighted averages between the Democratic challenger and the GOP incumbent based on the polls that were used. For example, in Arizona the Democratic challenger leads the GOP incumbent by 8.2% in the weighted averages of 28 polls going back to 16 July.

Using the methodology, Arizona and Colorado appear strong, Maine and North Carolina appear moderately strong, and Iowa and Montana appear borderline.

	Dem	GOP	Average Difference	No. of Polls	Earliest Poll Date
Arizona	50.4	42.2	8.2	28	16-Jul
Colorado	49.9	41.2	8.7	6	30-Jun
Iowa	45.2	42.6	2.6	11	10-Jun
Maine	47.2	42.0	5.2	15	3-Jul
Montana	44.8	46.9	-2.1	6	10-Jul
North Carolina	46.7	41.1	5.6	33	23-Jul

Table 1: Weighted Averages of All Polls Since June

Table 2, on the next page, is based on just recent polls. "Recent polls" are considered wither the 10 most recent 538-rated polls, or all the 538-rated polls since the beginning of September, whichever is larger.

In some cases, like Arizona and North Carolina (both of which have been polled extensively) the 10 most recent polls were used. Montana, Colorado, and Iowa have 1, 2, and 3 polls, respectively, due to the sparsity of polling. But they are all from the last month.

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[1] See Appendix A for a discussion of the 538 ratings and how they are used.

	Dem	GOP	Average Difference	No. of Polls	Earliest Poll Date
Arizona	49.7	42.7	7.0	10	11-Sep
Colorado	50.5	42.0	8.5	2	1-Sep
Iowa	45.3	42.7	2.6	3	17-Sep
Maine	47.4	41.4	6.0	7	5-Sep
Montana	44.0	45.0	-1.0	1	5-Sep
North Carolina	45.7	40.6	5.1	10	11-Sep

Table 2: Weighted Averages of Recent Polls

Table 3 compares the third columns of Tables 1 and 2, and shows the differences. The differences are shown in Column 3, "Change," and they can be thought of as the trends in each race (although the sparsity of polling in Montana, Colorado, and Iowa cautions against drawing hard conclusions in those states).

	Average Difference (All)	Average Difference (Recent)	Change	No. of Recent Polls
Arizona	8.2	7.0	-1.2	10
Colorado	8.7	8.5	-0.2	2
Iowa	2.6	2.6	0.0	3
Maine	5.2	6.0	0.8	7
Montana	-2.1	-1.0	1.1	1
North Carolina	5.6	5.1	-0.5	10

Table 3: The Difference in Differences

The differences in weighted averages in Arizona, Colorado, and North Carolina have decreased. This suggests those races are tightening.

The differences in weighted averages in Maine and Montana have increased. This suggests those races are improving for Democrats. Iowa has remained stable.

For the purpose of considering which races to support, we look at the following:

Arizona. Although this race appears to have tightened, the Democratic lead is still a solid 7.0.

Colorado. This race also appears to have tightened, but again the Democratic lead still remains strong at 8.5.

Maine. The Democratic lead in Maine is also relatively strong at 6.0, and it is moving in the right direction.

Montana. The change, although small, is heading in the right direction.[2]

Iowa. The Democratic lead here has remained unchanged and is in Toss Up territory. Furthermore, the GOP incumbent – Joni Ernst – is on the Senate Judiciary Committee, which is certain to have some impact on the race in coming weeks.

North Carolina. Although the Democratic lead here is decent at 5.1, it has moved in the wrong direction and is getting close to margin-or-error territory. Furthermore, as with Iowa, the GOP incumbent – in this case, Thom Tillis – is also on the Senate Judiciary Committee, and that is certain to have some impact on the race in coming weeks.

So the current recommendations for support (see next page) are:

- Theresa Greenfield, in Iowa
- Cal Cunningham, in North Carolina

To be clear, the analysis of polling like this, in particular with such the wide range of polls taken, is not what anyone would consider scientific. But it seems to be a reasonable thing at this point.

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[2] Montana's current lead is misleading (pardon the pun). The sole Montana poll in September inadvertently included the Green Party candidate, Wendie Fredrickson, when in fact the Green Party had been taken out of the race. Ms. Fredrickson received 4% of the vote, and the conventional wisdom is that the Democratic candidate would have otherwise received all or most of this.

Recommendations for Donations and Support

Four of the six competitive candidates are doing relatively well. The following two candidates are the candidates currently in most need of support. There are several ways you can support them:

- o Donate (even $5) via their campaign websites
- o Volunteer to do phone banking
- o Volunteer to do post carding
- o Use social media to advertise their campaign websites
- o Forward this report to like-minded people you know

Iowa

Theresa Greenfield (D), in Iowa, is polling competitively with Joni Ernst (R), but is lagging somewhat financially, and Ernst will almost certainly be getting free air time with the Senate Judiciary hearings.

https://greenfieldforiowa.com/

North Carolina

Cal Cunningham (D) has been maintaining a small but significant lead in polling against Thom Tillis (R), but the race is tightening and Tillis will almost certainly be getting free air time with the Senate Judiciary hearings.

https://www.calfornc.com/

Competitive States

Arizona (Special election)

Candidates

Dem Challenger: Mark Kelly - Former Naval aviator, with combat experience in the first Gulf War. Retired as a Captain (0-6). Former astronaut. Married to former-U.S. Representative Gabby Giffords. No political experience.

Website: https://markkelly.com/
Wikipedia Page: Mark Kelly

GOP Incumbent: Martha McSally - Former U.S. Air Force officer. Flew combat missions and commanded a fighter squadron. Retired as a Colonel (0-6). Served as U.S. representative from 2015 – 2019. Ran for Senate and lost. Was appointed to this seat when John McCain died.

The Arizona race is a special election, and by law the ballots much be canvassed by each county by 30 November. The Secretary of State, who certifies elections, is a Democrat. So in theory, if Mark Kelly (D) wins the election, he could be sitting in the U.S. Senate chamber on or about 01 December. This may have been one factor in the GOP deciding to vote on the Supreme Court nominee before the election.

Kelly is looking good in the polls. The weighted averages over the last 10 538-rated polls, going back to 11 September, are:

- Kelly: 49.7%
- McSally: 42.7%

And a recent Vox article indicates Kelly is using the same playbook that Senator Kyrsten Sinema (D) used to defeat McSally in 2018:

> Can Democrats Pull Off Another Senate Win in Arizona?

Kelly and McSally are scheduled to have their first debate on 06 October.

Colorado

Candidates

> **Dem Challenger:** John Hickenlooper - Former Colorado Governor (2011 – 2019), geologist, and business owner. Entered 2020 Democratic Presidential primaries, but dropped out.
>
> Website: https://hickenlooper.com/
> Wikipedia Page: John Hickenlooper
>
> **GOP Incumbent:** Cory Gardner – First-term Senator. Member of Colorado House of Representatives (2005 – 2011) and then U.S. Representative (2011 – 2015).

This has been a relatively stable race since the Colorado primaries, and it appears to be barely affected by the Supreme Court issue. Cory Gardner (R) has stated he will support voting on Donald Trump's nominee, but it does not appear to have affected the dynamics of the race - Hickenlooper (D) still leads in the admittedly sparse polls and is considered the favorite to win by almost all pundits.

The most recent poll, Morning Consult on 20 September, shows:

- Hickenlooper: 49.9%
- Gardner: 41.2%

These results are consistent with the mean averages of six 538-rated polls going back to 30 June:

- Hickenlooper: 50.5%
- Gardner: 42.0%

Hickenlooper and Gardner are scheduled to have their first debate on 13 October.

Iowa

Candidates

> **Dem Challenger:** Teresa Greenfield - President of a Des Moines-based commercial real-estate firm. Ran for Iowa 3rd Congressional district in 2018, but was disqualified before the primary.
>
> Website: https://greenfieldforiowa.com/
> Wikipedia Page: None
>
> **GOP Incumbent:** Joni Ernst – First-term Senator. Served in Iowa National Guard (1993 – 2015), and retired at a Lieutenant Colonel (0-5). Served in Iowa State Senate from 2011 – 2014.

The weighted averages in polls have given Theresa Greenfield a consistent 2.6% for the past three months. This is statistically within the margin of error, and from that point of view the race is a toss-up. Indeed, all three pundits – Cook, Sabato, Gonzales – rate it a Toss Up.

Joni Ernst is on the Senate Judiciary Committee, and this obviously gives her a serious boost among Iowa's GOP voters. It may also provide her with free air time during the forthcoming Senate confirmation hearings.

The possible downside for Ernst is that – although Senate Judiciary rules do not *require* members to attend all hearings – she may find herself torn between campaigning and being part of the hearings.

Joni Ernst's position is almost certainly firing up Iowa's Democratic voters, too, and giving Theresa Greenfield some additional press in response to any comments or interviews Ernst may make.

At this point the media reports in Iowa have Greenfield accusing Ernst of being a flip-flopper, and Ernst accusing Greenfield of wanting to stack the courts.

Greenfield and Ernst are scheduled to debate on 15 October.

Maine

Candidates

Dem Challenger: Sara Gideon - State of Maine Speaker of the House. First elected in 2012 to represent Maine's District 48. Elected Speaker of the House in 2018.

Website: https://saragideon.com/
Wikipedia Page: Sarah Gideon

GOP Incumbent: Susan Collins – Four-term incumbent. First elected to Senate in 1996.

Susan Collins's popularity among Maine voters has been slipping since her Brent Kavanaugh vote and her impeachment vote. Polls of every sort going back to early-July have her trailing challenger Sara Gideon.

Although Collins has declared she will not vote for Donald Trump's Supreme Court nominee because it's too close to the election, that does not seem to have helped her standing much.

Collins and Gideon debated on 11 September. There was no knock blow from either side, but a number of analysts seemed to believe that Gideon had the stronger performance.

Those issues aside, Maine recently settled the legal challenge to Rank Choice Voting RCV), and it will be used for the 3 November vote. Appendix B contains a brief description and example of RCV, which is considered an advantage to the Democrats.

Larry Sabato recently moved Maine from a Toss Up to Leans Blue.

Montana

Candidates

Dem Challenger: Steve Bullock - Currently serving second term as Governor, but is term-limited. Former state Attorney General. Chaired the National Governor's Association.

Website: https://stevebullock.com/
Wikipedia Page: Steve Bullock

GOP Incumbent: Steve Daines – First-term Senator. U.S. Representative for one term.

This is a very difficult race to have an opinion about due to very sparse polling, stale fundraising numbers, and lack of national media attention.

The most recent 538-rated poll, by Sienna College/NY Times on 16 September, shows:

Bullock: 44%
Daines: 45%

These numbers are slightly misleading because the poll inadvertently included Green Party candidate Wendie Fredrickson, who received 4% in the poll. In fact, the Green Party had previously been struck from the ballot and should not have been included in the poll. The conventional wisdom is that most of those Green Party votes would go to Bullock.

From a qualitative viewpoint, Bullock is stronger than the poll numbers indicate:

• He is a popular two-term governor

• Montana has elected 20 Democratic Senators out of 24 Senate races since WWII, and the current second Senator, Jon Tester, is a Democrat

Actor Jeff Bridges – The Dude in "The Big Lebowski" – is a Montana resident and has begun campaigning for Bullock and Montana Democrats.

The Dude Abides: "Big Lebowski Star Stumps for Montana Dems

North Carolina

Candidates

Dem Challenger: Cal Cunningham - Army Reserve JAG officer (Bronze Star recipient). North Carolina State Senator from the 23rd district from 2001 to 2003. Ran for U.S. Senate seat in 2010 but was defeated in a runoff.

Website: https://www.calfornc.com/
Wikipedia Page: Cal Cunningham

11 Sep: Candidate Profile - WAVY

GOP Incumbent: Thom Tillis – First-term Senator. Served in the North Carolina House of Representatives from 2006 – 2104. Was elected Speaker in 2011.

As with Joni Ernst (R) in Iowa, Thom Tillis is on the Senate Judiciary Committee, and this gives him a serious boost among North Carolina's GOP voters. It may also provide him with free air time during the forthcoming Senate confirmation hearings.

Cal Cunningham (D) has been maintaining a decent – but not bulletproof – lead in polling. That weighted average of that lead has slipped recently from 5.6% to 5.1%.

The GOP considers this a "must win" state, and one Republican has described it as "a knife fight in a phone booth until the end." They are putting everything into this race, and Democrats need to do the same.

Recent News stories about this race:

- North Carolina's all-important Senate race explained

- Cal Cunningham interview & how he'll win the North Carolina race

- Opinion: With Supreme Court flip-flop Tillis seeks to hold his seat by abdicating his job

Watch List States

Alaska

Candidates

Independent Challenger: Al Gros – Orthopedic surgeon and commercial fisherman – Native-born Alaskan – First-time politician.

Website: https://dralgrossak.com
Wikipedia Page: None

GOP Incumbent: Dan Sullivan – Native of Ohio – First-term Senator. Served as Alaska Attorney General for several years.

Alaska is notoriously difficult to poll due to the vast distances and dispersed population. With only three electoral votes, Alaska is not being followed too closely in general, and the Senate race even less so.

The most recent 538-rated poll (PPP, rated B, 28 Aug) had Gros and Sullivan even at 43%.

Although Alaska has been reliably Republican on almost all levels – think: Sarah Palin – Alaskans pride themselves on being independent. Global warming is starting to take a toll in Alaska, and the environment is of particular concern. A recently-revealed secret recording of mining executives discussing complicity with Senator Dan Sullivan (R) is apparently causing significant ripples:

A Secret Recording of Mine Executives is Shaking Up the Alaska Senate Race

In short, this is a race that could be a contender.

Kansas

Candidates

Democratic Candidate: Barbara Bollier – Surgeon – Former Republican – Kansas state politician

Website: https://bollierforkansas.com
Wikipedia Page: Barbara Bollier

GOP Candidate: Roger Marshall – Obstetrician – U.S. representative (one term)

As this race is filling a vacant seat, both Bollier and Marshall are candidates, and neither is an incumbent.

Kansas has not elected a Democratic Senator since 1932. Roger Marshall (R) won the 04 August GOP Senate primary, in which 328,000 Republican voters turned out, and only 177,000 Democratic voters turned out. On the surface, this should be Marshall's election.

That said, on the Democratic side Barbara Bollier is a former Republican state Senator and a physician. She is a staunch education advocate who left the Republican party because of the party's continual cuts in education (among other things). In Q2, she raised more money than any candidate for any federal, state, or local office has ever raised in any quarter in the entire history of Kansas. And in the most recent of very few polls, dated 19 September, she tied with Marshall at 43%.

Former GOP Senator Nancy Kassebaum recently endorsed Bollier on 17 September:

https://www.kansascity.com/news/politics-government/article245780930.html

The GOP has some real concerns about this seat:

The GOP is devoting millions more to defend a Kansas Senate seat is hasn't lost since 1932

Another good poll or two could put this race in the competitive category.

South Carolina

Candidates

Democratic Challenger: Jaime Harrison – South Carolina politician

Website: https://jaimeharrison.com/
Wikipedia Page: Jaime Harrison

GOP Incumbent: Lindsey Graham – Three-term Senator – Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

This is a perhaps the most interesting race of 2020.

Lindsey Graham is the well-known former running mate of John McCain. He is well-known for having abandoned almost all of his principles when Donald Trump got elected, and for having abandoned his remaining principles when Ruth Bader Ginsburg died. Even in deeply red South Carolina this has proven too much for some people, and Graham's principal financial backer has not only refused more financial backing, but has taken out ads disparaging Graham.

Jaime Harrison is an extremely charismatic politician with a great personal success story. He was chair of the South Carolina Democratic Party, and is currently an associate chair for the Democratic National Committee.

Harrison has seriously outraised Graham, and he has been very competitive in polling.

According to one analysis, Democrats have a strong floor of about 40% in South Carolina, but no Democratic candidate has ever broken above the 44% ceiling. One of the things that makes this race interesting is that in recent polling Harrison broke that ceiling when he tied Graham, 48% to 48%.

Again, perhaps the most interesting race of 2020.

Appendix A: 538 Poll Rating and Weighted Averages

Nate Silver is a fairly highly-regarded data analytics person, and he maintains a website called 538.

538 has a wealth of data and analysis on politics (as well as sports and a few other topics). Among other things, 538 keep a running track of Senate polls. Here is a link to the Arizona Senate polls:

538 Arizona Senate Polls

For each poll, 538 lists the dates of the poll, the pollster, and the type of polls (e.g., registered voters (RV) vs likely voters (LV)). It also assigns a letter grade ranging from A+ at the upper end to D- at the lower end.

The most recent seven Arizona polls look like this:

Dates	Grade	Pollster	Size	Type	Kelly	McSally
15-22 Sep	B-	Data for Progress	481	LV	47	38
17-19 Sep	B/C	Hart Research	400	LV	55	43
18-20 Sep	C-	Change Research	262	LV	51	43
15-20 Sep	A+	ABC News/WaPo	579	LV	49	48
15-20 Sep	A+	ABC News/WaPo	701	RV	50	45
11-17 Sep	B-	Ipsos	565	LV	50	41
11-20 Sep	B/C	Morning Consult	907	LV	49	40
14-16 Sep		Fabrizio, Lee & Assoc.	800	LV	48	46

To compute weighted averages, I first assign college-type numbers to the various letter grades to get weights:

A+	A	A-	A/B	B+	B	B-	B/C	C+	C	C-	C/D	D+	D	D-	
4.25	4.00	3.75	3.50	3.25	3.00	2.75	2.50	2.25	2.00	1.75	1.50	1.25	1.00	0.75	0.00

Notice that in the case of no letter grade, a 0.00 weight is given.

1. I reduce the list to just likely voters and multiply each result by the weight to get weighted products:

Dates	Grade	Weight	Pollster	Size	Type	Kelly		McSally	
15-22 Sep	B-	2.75	Data for Progress	481	LV	47	129.25	38	104.50
17-19 Sep	B/C	2.50	Hart Research	400	LV	55	137.50	43	107.50
18-20 Sep	C-	1.75	Change Research	262	LV	51	89.25	43	75.25
15-20 Sep	A+	4.25	ABC News/WaPo	579	LV	49	208.25	48	204.00
11-17 Sep	B-	2.75	Ipsos	565	LV	50	137.50	41	112.75
11-20 Sep	B/C	2.50	Morning Consult	907	LV	49	122.50	40	100.00
14-16 Sep		0.00	Fabrizio, Lee & Assoc.	800	LV	48	0.00	46	0.00

2. I add the weights and the weighted products:

Dates	Grade	Weight	Pollster	Size	Type	Kelly		McSally	
15-22 Sep	B-	2.75	Data for Progress	481	LV	47	129.25	38	104.50
17-19 Sep	B/C	2.50	Hart Research	400	LV	55	137.50	43	107.50
18-20 Sep	C-	1.75	Change Research	262	LV	51	89.25	43	75.25
15-20 Sep	A+	4.25	ABC News/WaPo	579	LV	49	208.25	48	204.00
11-17 Sep	B-	2.75	Ipsos	565	LV	50	137.50	41	112.75
11-20 Sep	B/C	2.50	Morning Consult	907	LV	49	122.50	40	100.00
14-16 Sep		0.00	Fabrizio, Lee & Assoc.	800	LV	48	0.00	46	0.00
		16.5					824.25		704.00

3. I divide the sum of the weighted products by the sum of the weights:

Dates	Grade	Weight	Pollster	Size	Type	Kelly		McSally	
15-22 Sep	B-	2.75	Data for Progress	481	LV	47	129.25	38	104.50
17-19 Sep	B/C	2.50	Hart Research	400	LV	55	137.50	43	107.50
18-20 Sep	C-	1.75	Change Research	262	LV	51	89.25	43	75.25
15-20 Sep	A+	4.25	ABC News/WaPo	579	LV	49	208.25	48	204.00
11-17 Sep	B-	2.75	Ipsos	565	LV	50	137.50	41	112.75
11-20 Sep	B/C	2.50	Morning Consult	907	LV	49	122.50	40	100.00
14-16 Sep		0.00	Fabrizio, Lee & Assoc.	800	LV	48	0.00	46	0.00
		16.5					824.25		704.00
							49.9		42.7

As you can see, the poll of 14-16 September has no bearing on the weighted averages because 538 did not rate the poll.

Appendix B: Ranked Choice Voting

Ballotpedia describes rank choice voting as follows:

1. Voters rank the candidates for a given office by preference on their ballots.

2. If a candidate wins an outright majority of first-preference votes (i.e., 50 percent plus one), he or she will be declared the winner.

3. If, on the other hand, no candidates win an outright majority of first-preference votes, the candidate with the fewest first-preference votes is eliminated.

4. All first-preference votes for the failed candidate are eliminated, lifting the second-preference choices indicated on those ballots.

5. A new tally is conducted to determine whether any candidate has won an outright majority of the adjusted voters.

6. The process is repeated until a candidate wins a majority of votes cast.

Imagine that five ballots were cast for three parties: Democrats, Republicans, and Greens.

Rank	Ballot 1	Ballot 2	Ballot 3	Ballot 4	Ballot 5
1	Democrat	Democrat	Republican	Republican	Green
2	Republican	Green	Green	Green	Democrat
3	Green	Republican	Democrat	Democrat	Republican

In the first round, Democrats and Republicans are tied with two first-preference votes each, and the Green Party has the fewest – i.e., one – first preference votes. So it is eliminated, and the second-preference vote on that ballot moves up.

Rank	Ballot 1	Ballot 2	Ballot 3	Ballot 4	Ballot 5
1	Democrat	Democrat	Republican	Republican	Democrat
2	Republican	Green	Green	Green	Republican
3	Green	Republican	Democrat	Democrat	

Now the Democratic candidate has three votes, and the Republican candidate has two votes. So the Democratic candidate wins.

Closing Thoughts