

Top Two Primary in California, June 2012: By the Numbers

On June 5, California held its first “top two” primary. In races for Congress and state legislature, all candidates competed against one another. Voters cast one vote, and the top two finishers advanced. These numbers (subject to minor changes after all votes are tallied) deserve serious attention.

200 of 212 party-endorsed candidates won: Major party organizations dominated outcomes

The major parties endorsed 212 candidates in Top Two primary races for Congress and the legislature. 200 of those candidates advanced to November and are favored in the great majority of races. Every incumbent seeking re-election advanced, and only four did not finish in first place. Of non-incumbent endorsed candidates, 101 of 113 won.

1.35% of ballots spoiled in Senate race: Many San Francisco voters were confused

The Top Two is supposed to be simple. Voters vote for one candidate, and the top two finishers win. But voters in San Francisco (and likely elsewhere) had trouble with the system. In the U.S. Senate race, 1.35% of ballots cast in San Francisco were invalidated due to “overvotes” for more than one candidate, including 1.67% of vote-by-mail ballots. Overvote rates were over 6% in 18 precincts.

San Francisco voters had trouble in races with fewer candidates as well: 0.84% of ballots were invalided in Nancy Pelosi’s CD-12 race with six candidates, and 0.57% of ballots in Jackie Speier’s CD-14 races with three candidates. (In contrast, in 2011’s mayoral election with ranked choice voting and 16 candidates, only 0.42% of voters cast overvotes.)

69% of voters lost out in U.S. House race: In CD-8, winners combined for 30.8% of vote

In an open seat race for Congress (CD-8), nearly seven in ten voters cast votes for losing candidates. In the much higher turnout election in the fall, voters will choose between two candidates who received a combined total of 25,000 votes (30.8% of the total).

29.7% of CD-31 is white: But low Latino turnout and split votes advance only white Republicans

District 31 is a Democratic-leaning congressional district. Barack Obama ran more than 4% above his

national average in the district in 2008, meaning that a Democrat would be favored in an open seat race by more than 8%. The overall district population is less than 30% white and close to a majority Latino.

But the general election contest will be between two white Republicans: incumbent Gary Miller, who won 26.8%, and Republican Bob Dutton, who won 25%. Latino Democrat Pete Aguilar finished with 22.6%, but was knocked out because of relatively low Democratic turnout and the fact that the three remaining candidates also ran as Democrats. If any had not run, Aguilar likely would have finished second and been the favorite in November.

10 state senate candidates lost: In 20 state senate primaries, few candidates ran for office

The state senate elections were particularly uneventful. Despite redistricting and four-year terms that mean these races will not be contested again until 2016, most races had only one or two qualified candidates. Only ten candidates were defeated.

40 of 63 races with 4 candidates may have had “wrong” wins: Did split votes spoil outcomes?

Out of 63 races with at least four candidates, the margin of victory between the second and third place candidates was less than the total votes cast for candidates trailing in fourth and below. In other words, the two winners in these 40 races would have been different if backers of candidates outside the top three had instead voted for the third-place candidate. These races may have had “spoiler” candidates.

11.5% turnout of non-major party voters: Independent voters did not respond to Top Two

Voter turnout overall was among the lowest ever in a statewide primary election in California. In Los Angeles County (as of June 11), only 11.5% of voters registered as independents or with a minor party cast ballots. That turnout contrasted with 28.2% of Republicans and 21.0% of Democrats. But most Californians will not have a chance to consider non-major party candidates in any election other than the race for president (which did not rely on Top Two).

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