



A Report on Partisan Competition in State Legislative Elections, 2014

Two-Party Contests Hit Lowest Point in Past 7 Cycles

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Major party competition for the nation's more than 5,800 state legislative seats up for election has dropped again this year, falling to its lowest level in the past seven federal election cycles. Based on data collected from all of the states holding regular general elections for their state legislative chambers, 57.41% of those contests involve competition between Democratic and Republican candidates. That is nearly 3 percent less than the rate of competition in 2012, the second lowest year in data analyzed.

The data includes states holding elections in both Presidential and Midterm Congressional Election Years from 2002 to 2014, and has been collected as part of an ongoing effort to measure partisan competition in the states.

This report provides evidence of the variation over this period in competition overall and between the two state legislative houses in all states holding regular elections this fall. States with elections in non-federal years are not included in the analysis. Nebraska, which has a unicameral legislature, is not included in the partisan discussion but does show that 84 percent of its Senate seats have contested non-partisan races. Otherwise, contests are included if there are candidates for both major parties seeking election, even if in a multi-member district there may not be candidates for both major parties for all the seats involved.

Trend: Declining Competition

This year's races for state legislatures are generally not expected to produce major change of party control among the nation's chambers. The relative decline in active two-party contests makes that even less likely. A total of 57.41 percent of seats nationally are being contested by Democrats and Republicans, continuing a downward trend seen since 2008, when partisan matchups reached a Twenty-first Century high of 64.47 percent (See Appendix). State Senate posts, which are always more contested than seats in the lower chambers, still hit a low of only 60.97 percent, while the House/Assembly races dropped to 57.11 percent. Competition had increased in the years leading up to 2008, as both parties expanded the state legislative playing fields.

Explanations for the drop may include general factors and perhaps at least one state-specific reason. With elections in 2012 having been conducted under new district lines, potential challengers may have been dissuaded from running by the performance of incumbents in the previous elections or by redistricting that produced fewer marginal districts. This election year does not seem to have the kind of strong lean toward one party or the other, although Republicans enjoy a slight advantage in seats contested. Expensive and intense campaigns for statewide offices such as U.S. Senator and Governor have consumed resources and attention that might otherwise have allowed for more focus on legislatures.

Finally, California's 2012 move to a "top two" general election in which the two candidates who received the largest number of votes in the June primary advance to the general election regardless of party appears to have produced enough districts where voters will be choosing among two candidates of the same party to drop the Golden State out of the ranks of "most competitive" states. In 2010, 92 percent of California's districts had candidates from both major parties, while this year that number dropped to 73 percent.

Comparison across Years, 2002-2014

Year	Total % Contested	% Contested House	% Contested Senate
2002	61.60%	60.62%	64.25%
2004	64.61%	64.49%	64.75%
2006	63.29%	61.84%	68.11%
2008	64.47%	64.03%	66.73%
2010	63.63%	62.26%	68.12%
2012	60.31%	60.03%	61.37%
2014	57.41%	56.90%	59.63%

Where is competition highest?

Four “M” states stretching across the northern border of the US have the highest level of partisan competition: Michigan, Maine, Minnesota and Montana. These states all have more than 90 percent of their seats contested by the major parties, with Michigan scoring 100 percent. The top ten states have better than 80 percent competition. There is remarkable stability among these states, as Michigan has been in the top five states every year since 2006, and Minnesota and Maine appearing four of five times over that span. It is also noteworthy that all four of these states have had legislative control by both parties during the past 12 years.

Top 10 Most Competitive States Overall

	State	% Contested House	% Contested Senate	Total % Contested
1	Michigan	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
2	Maine	96.03%	100.00%	96.77%
3	Minnesota	93.28%	N/A	93.28%
4	Montana	87.00%	92.00%	88.00%
5	Hawaii	92.50%	63.64%	86.27%
6	Nebraska	N/A	84.00%	84.00%
7	Ohio	82.83%	82.35%	82.76%
8	Utah	81.33%	85.71%	82.02%
9	West Virginia	77.61%	94.12%	80.95%
10	New Hampshire	79.25%	95.83%	80.19%

Where is competition lowest?

Five states have one-third or fewer of their seats contested this year, with Georgia ranking last in competition. Barely more than one in five seats in the Peach State legislature features a Democrat vs. Republican choice. All five of the least competitive states feature state legislatures that are dominated by one party. Georgia, South Carolina, Texas and Wyoming all feature overwhelming advantage for the GOP, and Rhode Island’s legislature has a commanding Democratic majority. As with the most competitive states, the same states tend to appear election after election on the list of least competitive. Georgia had a spot in all five elections since 2006, and South Carolina and Wyoming are in the bottom five in four of the five elections. Democratic-heavy Massachusetts appears three times.

Top 10 Least Competitive States Overall

	State	% Contested House	% Contested Senate	Total % Contested
1	Georgia	18.33%	28.57%	20.76%
2	South Carolina	24.19%	N/A	24.19%
3	Rhode Island	32.00%	23.68%	29.20%
4	Texas	30.00%	53.33%	32.12%
5	Wyoming	35.00%	26.67%	33.33%
6	Oklahoma	34.65%	52.00%	38.10%
7	Massachusetts	36.25%	47.50%	38.50%
8	Florida	42.02%	25.00%	39.57%
9	Arkansas	44.00%	16.67%	39.83%
10	Vermont	39.86%	46.67%	41.04%

Party differences are minor

Overall, Republicans are contesting 80.5 percent of legislative seats and Democratic candidates are running in 77.1 percent, a smaller difference than seen in the 2006 and 2008 election for Democrats and probably reflecting the current Republican overall majority in state legislative seats. Without a strong partisan tilt to the 2014 election, the appeal of a legislative candidacy has been only slightly higher for Republicans compared to Democrats.

Total Competitiveness by Party

Party	% Contested House	% Contested Senate	% Contested Total
Republican	80.36%	81.28%	80.53%
Democratic	76.71%	78.90%	77.12%

Summary

On November 5, voters are likely to awake to a largely unchanged state legislative landscape, and part of the reason will be a decline in the level of two-party competition for these offices. While a number of factors may be related to the drop in races, states largely fall into regular patterns of more or less competition. At the same time, the circumstances of individual election years do seem to figure in the calculation of potential state legislative candidates as to whether undertaking a campaign will be worth the effort. In “wave” years (2006 and 2008 for Democrats, 2010 for the GOP), potential candidates seem able to detect a favorable or hostile attitude toward their party and act accordingly. In 2016, the activity of potential state legislative candidates may be a leading indicator of the partisan lean. In 2014, the modest decline of competition, spread fairly evenly across the parties suggests modest change.

Appendix

All States Alphabetically

State	% Contested House	% Contested Senate	Total % Contested
Alabama	40.00%	48.57%	42.14%
Alaska	67.50%	64.29%	66.67%
Arizona	55.00%	70.00%	60.00%
Arkansas	44.00%	16.67%	39.83%
California	75.00%	65.00%	73.00%
Colorado	80.00%	72.22%	78.31%
Connecticut	73.51%	75.00%	73.80%
Delaware	53.66%	70.00%	56.86%
Florida	42.02%	25.00%	39.57%
Georgia	18.33%	28.57%	20.76%
Hawaii	92.50%	63.64%	86.27%
Idaho	55.71%	45.71%	52.38%
Illinois	47.46%	26.32%	44.53%
Indiana	45.00%	92.00%	54.40%
Iowa	42.00%	44.00%	42.40%
Kansas	60.00%	N/A	60.00%
Kentucky	55.00%	47.37%	53.78%
Maine	96.03%	100.00%	96.77%
Maryland	74.63%	51.06%	64.91%
Massachusetts	36.25%	47.50%	38.50%
Michigan	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
Minnesota	93.28%	N/A	93.28%
Missouri	55.21%	41.18%	53.89%
Montana	87.00%	92.00%	88.00%
Nebraska	N/A	84.00%	84.00%
Nevada	61.90%	63.64%	62.26%
New Hampshire	79.25%	95.83%	80.19%
New Mexico	47.14%	N/A	47.14%
New York	59.33%	53.97%	57.75%
North Carolina	50.00%	58.00%	52.35%
North Dakota	37.50%	75.00%	56.25%
Ohio	82.83%	82.35%	82.76%
Oklahoma	34.65%	52.00%	38.10%
Oregon	53.33%	60.00%	54.67%

Pennsylvania	42.86%	60.00%	44.74%
Rhode Island	32.00%	23.68%	29.20%
South Carolina	24.19%	N/A	24.19%
South Dakota	64.86%	48.57%	56.94%
Tennessee	39.39%	52.94%	41.38%
Texas	30.00%	53.33%	32.12%
Utah	81.33%	85.71%	82.02%
Vermont	39.86%	46.67%	41.04%
Washington	60.20%	76.00%	63.41%
West Virginia	77.61%	94.12%	80.95%
Wisconsin	47.47%	82.35%	52.59%
Wyoming	35.00%	26.67%	33.33%

All States Listed from Most to Least Competitive

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Kansas	60.00%	N/A	60.00%
New York	59.33%	53.97%	57.75%
South Dakota	64.86%	48.57%	56.94%
Delaware	53.66%	70.00%	56.86%
North Dakota	37.50%	75.00%	56.25%
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October 30, 2014