HJ 48: INTERIM STUDY OF MOVING THE DATE OF THE FEDERAL PRIMARY ELECTION

FINAL REPORT TO THE 70TH MONTANA LEGISLATURE

State Administration and Veterans' Affairs Interim Committee

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MONTANA LEGISLATURE

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This report is a summary of the work of the State Administration and Veterans' Affairs Interim Committee, specific to the State Administration and Veterans' Affairs (SAVA) Interim Committee's 2025-2026 House Joint Resolution 48 (2025) study as outlined in the SAVA Interim Committee's 2025-26 work plan and HJ 48. Members received additional information and public testimony on the subject, and this report is an effort to highlight key information and the processes followed by the SAVA Interim Committee in reaching its conclusions. To review additional information, including audio minutes and exhibits, visit the SAVA Interim Committee website: https://committees.legmt.gov/#/nonStandingCommittees/3?tab=Details.

A full report, including links to the documents referenced in this print report, is available at the SAVA Interim Committee website: https://committees.legmt.gov/#/nonStandingCommittees/3?tab=Details.

HJ 48 FINAL REPORT

INTRODUCTION

The House State Administration Committee introduced HJ 48: Interim Study of Moving the Date of the Primary Election during the 2025 session in response to several bills that would have changed various election dates. The committee heard testimony from multiple entities that any changes needed further study to thoroughly identify affected areas of law and understand the real-world implications of such changes. At the June 2025 Legislative Council meeting, the council assigned HJ 48 to the SAVA Interim Committee. At the September 2025 SAVA meeting, committee members voted to allocate 0.25 FTE to HJ 48 in the committee work plan.

CURRENT ELECTION SCHEDULE

Under the current schedule, school elections are held yearly on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in May (section 20-20-105, MCA) and primary elections are held in even-numbered years before a general election on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in June (section 13-1-107, MCA). The current date for school elections was set in 1999, and the date for primary elections was set in 1979.

TASKS LISTED IN HJ 48 STUDY RESOLUTION

The following tasks are included in the HJ 48 study resolution:

- Study moving the date of Montana's primary election.
- Examine existing dates, deadlines, and other procedures in Montana law that would need to be adjusted in order to change the date of the primary election.
- Assess any potential conflicts with the current timeline for the decennial districting and apportionment processes.
- Evaluate the impact of the changes on election administrators and voters.
- Examine the impact to other election cycles of moving the primary election date and identify possible areas for consolidation and efficiency.
- Identify the possible benefits, drawbacks, and tradeoffs for the voters of Montana as a result of moving the date of the primary election.
- Develop legislation to introduce during the 70th legislative session that includes a new primary election date and all necessary changes to the Montana Code Annotated to implement the date change.
- Consult with all interested stakeholders, including but not limited to county election administrators, the Office of the Secretary of State, local and tribal government leaders, school administrators and officials, the Office of Public Instruction, stakeholder groups, and interested citizens.

COMMITTEE FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

FINDINGS

- The majority of presidential primary elections are held in March.
- Montana has one of the later primary election dates in the United States.
- Some states separate presidential primaries from state primaries, holding the presidential primary early in the year and the state primary in late summer or early fall.
- Relative to other states, Montana's voter turnout for primary elections is high, with a peak of 54.9% in 2020 and a low of 33% in 2000.
- There does not seem to be a consistent increase in voter turnout when a state moves its primary election to an earlier date; voter turnout appears more closely tied to which candidates are running for the presidential nomination.
- The school election schedule is closely tied to the school funding model, and changes to the election timeline would have ripple effects on the overall funding process.
- Many current election judges in Montana leave the state for some portion of the winter months, so moving the primary election earlier could make it harder to recruit election judges.
- Moving the date of the primary election earlier in the year – depending on the new date chosen – could mean candidates would need to campaign in the winter months, potentially leading to increased costs and hardship for candidates.
- Changing the date of the primary election and/or the school election would require a significant overhaul of the MCA, particularly Titles 13 and 20.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The SAVA Interim Committee recommends keeping the primary and school election dates unchanged to avoid complications for the administration of elections and the school funding cycle.

PROPOSED LEGISLATION

PD3 — Changing the Filing Deadlines for Special District Elections

- This idea was proposed by the election administrators. It would align the filing deadlines for special district elections with those of school elections, allowing more time for candidate recruitment.
- *Approved 11-0 by the committee at its July 9, 2026, meeting.*

SUMMARY OF COMMITTEE WORK BY MEETING DATE

The following is a summary of the work done on HJ 48 at each SAVA meeting during the 2025–2026 interim. The summary includes speaker names, overviews of remarks, and links to documents shared with the committee at each meeting.

JULY 30, 2025

The SAVA Interim Committee discussed its draft work plan for the interim and tentatively decided to allocate 0.25 FTE to the HJ 48 study.

MEETING MATERIALS, WRITTEN PUBLIC COMMENT, AND HANDOUTS

- HJ 48 study resolution

SEPTEMBER 25, 2025

The September meeting agenda included two panel discussions with state officials and election administrators regarding the current primary schedule and considerations for making changes. The committee adopted its draft work plan, including the 0.25 FTE allocation for the HJ 48 study.

MEETING MATERIALS, WRITTEN PUBLIC COMMENT, AND HANDOUTS

- HJ 48 study resolution
- 2025 Municipal Primary and General Election Calendar (SOS)
- 2025 Special Purpose District Election Calendar (SOS)
- School Election Calendar 2025 (OPI)
- 2025–2026 Ballot Issue Calendar (SOS)
- 2024 Presidential Primary Dates and Candidate Filing Deadlines for Ballot Access (Federal Election Commission (FEC))
- 2026 Congressional Primary Election Dates (FEC)
- Montana School Boards Association (MTSBA) memo
- House Bill 774 (2023) from Rep. Mike Hopkins
- Senate Joint Resolution 14 (2013) study page from the 2013–2014 SAVA Interim Committee

PANEL DISCUSSIONS

The panels included the following speakers:

- Lance Melton, MTSBA
- Andrea Mohammadi, OPI
- Cheryl Wilson, COPP
- Deb Belford, COPP
- Toni Kramer, Lake County Elections Administrator
- Regina Plettenberg, Ravalli County Clerk and Recorder
- Eric Semerad, Gallatin County Clerk and Recorder

HIGH-LEVEL SUMMARY OF PANELISTS' INPUT

- The current school funding process and timeline are complicated and would need to be overhauled to change the date of the school election.

- Consolidating all elections would create lengthier and more complex ballots with more ballot splits, which could lead to voter fatigue, voter drop-off, voter confusion, election judge confusion, higher election costs, and greater potential for human error in processing more complex ballots.
- Consolidating all elections could lead to higher candidate engagement and higher voter turnout.
- Moving the primary election to March and leaving the school election in May would create more time between the elections and reduce some of the administrative burden on election administrators under the current schedule.
- Moving the primary to January or February could create barriers for candidates and voters related to winter weather. The change would likely impact the pool of election judges, as many go south for the winter.

REQUESTS FOR THE NEXT SAVA MEETING

- The committee asked election administrators to survey their members to determine how many manage school elections for their county and to suggest new primary dates that would be feasible from an election administrator's standpoint.
- The committee agreed to discuss the following questions during the next meeting:
  - Why should we move the date of the federal primary?
  - What obstacles would we face by moving the date?
  - What cannot be changed?

NOVEMBER 17, 2025

The agenda included remarks from stakeholders, an overview of a survey of Montana election administrators, and committee discussion about the next steps for the HJ 48 study.

MEETING MATERIALS, WRITTEN PUBLIC COMMENT, AND HANDOUTS

- HJ 48 study resolution
- Election Directive #01-2015 (SOS, 2015) regarding satellite election offices
- Lake County Satellite Survey General Election 2022
- Summary of Montana's Tribal Nations' Election Schedules
- Election administrator survey results
- Public comment for November 17, 2025, SAVA meeting

STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES

Here is a high-level summary of the remarks of Keaton Sunchild of Western Native Voice:

- There is a general concern that Indian Country issues and rural issues get moved to the backburner in national, presidential campaigns; these policy gaps could be better addressed by moving up the primary date, and Montana could play a more prominent role in the national conversation.
- The main consideration for the study is the logistics of the date change, as many deadlines and procedures will need to be adjusted; but this can be addressed with enough thought, planning, and flexibility. It may also require changes to the satellite location request process.

SURVEY OF ELECTION ADMINISTRATORS

Regina Plettenberg, Ravalli County Clerk & Recorder, and Toni Kramer, Lake County Election Administrator, shared a high-level overview of the survey responses:

- Common threads among the responses were:
  - not combining primary and school elections (because of the complexity);

  - making the elections farther apart (at least five weeks); and
  - that lots of pieces of the MCA will need to be updated.
- Most respondents requested that no changes be made to the current schedule; however, nine of 46 indicated that a March date would be acceptable if needed.
- Respondents shared concerns about moving the primary earlier, including the impact of winter weather and difficulties with election judge recruitment, as many current judges go south for the winter.

REQUESTS FOR THE NEXT SAVA MEETING

- Input from school officials about changing their election dates and timeline and what the major impediments would be with both an earlier and a later date
- Overview of voter turnout data for other states with earlier primary election dates
- Staff to model these three scenarios:
  - Scenario #1: Keep the primary and the school elections separate, but make them both earlier by about a month
  - Scenario #2: Keep the primary and the school elections separate, but move the primary earlier and the school election later
  - Scenario #3: Combine the primary and school elections and move them earlier

JANUARY 12, 2026

The agenda included a panel discussion of school leaders, staff presentations about the committee survey responses, voter turnout trends in other states, and the model calendars requested at the previous meeting, as well as committee conversation about the next steps for the study.

MEETING MATERIALS, WRITTEN PUBLIC COMMENT, AND HANDOUTS

- Draft Study Plan — HJ 48: Study of Moving the Date of the Federal Primary Election
- School Election Calendar 2026 (OPI)
- 2026 Primary and General Election Calendar (SOS)
- MTSBA memo
- All MT Election Law that Relates to MT Public School Elections (MASBO)
- SAVA [Interim] Committee Member Survey re. HJ 48 Primary Date Study" (updated December 31, 2025)
- Modeling Possible Changes to the Election Calendar (HJ 48 Study)
- Presidential Primary Dates & Turnout 2000–2024
- States That Moved Their Primaries Earlier and Outcomes" (election administrator research)
- MT HJ 48 — Proposal to Move Montana's Primary Election to March or April Survey Results (election administrator comments)
- Election administrator survey 2 re. moving primary date

PANEL DISCUSSION — SCHOOL ELECTION AND SCHOOL FUNDING SCHEDULES

The panel included the following speakers:

- Katie Bloodgood, OPI
- Andrea Mohammadi, OPI
- Nicole Thuotte, OPI
- Shay Baize, MASBO
- Lance Melton, MTSBA
- Eric Semerad, Gallatin County Clerk and Recorder

HIGH-LEVEL SUMMARY OF PANELISTS' INPUT

- Any change in election timing would be significant because the current school budgeting and election processes are closely connected.
- All election laws (school, special district, primary, and general) are deeply interconnected.
- There is significant concern about unintended consequences.
- If the Legislature does change the date, panelists ask that there be a statutory two-year grace period to identify additional laws and procedures that need to be changed and to ensure that election results cannot be invalidated due to unintentional errors during the transition.
- If a change does need to happen, it would be easier to make the date earlier rather than later.
- The 2025 bill de-coupled the filing deadlines for school and special district elections; they request that the 2027 Legislature consider realigning them.
- There existing overlap between the primary and school elections is complicated. Panelists expressed concern that combining them would make things more complicated and more difficult.

COMMITTEE SURVEY RESULTS

Committee staff shared the following overview of the committee survey results:

- The majority of committee members believe the main reasons to change the date of the federal primary election are to:
  - increase voter turnout; and
  - give Montana voters more influence at the national level.
- The majority of committee members believe the main reasons not to change are the:
  - logistical challenges; and
  - conflicts with school elections and other elections.
- The majority of committee members believe the study's primary goal is to give Montanans a stronger voice at the national level. No committee members said it was to combine the primary and school elections.
- The committee was a little more divided about the options discussed during the November meeting, but five members voted not to make any change to the current system, which were the most votes for any of the options presented.

MODELING POSSIBLE CHANGES TO THE PRIMARY DATE

Staff presented the handout "Modeling Possible Changes to the Election Calendar (HJ 48 Study)," which was requested during the January meeting:

- Scenario #1: Keep the primary and the school elections separate, but make them both earlier by about a month
- Scenario #2: Keep the primary and the school elections separate, but move the primary earlier and the school election later
- Scenario #3: Combine the primary and school elections and move them earlier

VOTER TURNOUT TRENDS IN OTHER STATES

The committee discussed the "Presidential Primary Dates & Turnout 2000–2024" spreadsheet prepared by staff, which showed Montana consistently in the top five states for primary voter turnout and no solid correlation between earlier primary dates and increased voter turnout in other states.

COMMITTEE WORK SESSION AND REQUESTS FOR THE NEXT SAVA MEETING

The committee voted to wait until the March meeting to decide whether to move forward with the study.

MARCH 9, 2026

The agenda included a staff summary of the work done on the study to date and a committee discussion of next steps for the study.

MEETING MATERIALS, WRITTEN PUBLIC COMMENT, AND HANDOUTS

- Summary of Committee Work on HJ 48: Study of Moving the Date of the Primary Election
- Stakeholder comments re. HJ 48 (MTSBA)

COMMITTEE WORK SESSION

The committee voted 7-4 to continue with the HJ 48 study. Next, the committee discussed and voted on a proposal to move the primary and school election dates two weeks earlier. The proposal failed, and the committee decided to postpone a final decision about the study until the May 4, 2026, meeting.

MAY 4, 2026

The agenda included a staff presentation about proposed legislation in other states related to primary election dates, an overview of additional calendar models, and committee discussion.

MEETING MATERIALS, WRITTEN PUBLIC COMMENT, AND HANDOUTS

- Summary of Committee Work on HJ 48: Study of Moving the Date of the Primary Election
- Model #1: Keep Primary & School Elections Separate and Move Each 2 Weeks Earlier
- Model #2: Keep Primary & School Elections Separate and Move Each 2 Weeks Earlier
- Model #3: Keep School Election as Is and Move Primary Election to Super Tuesday
- Presidential Primary & Caucus Dates 2000–2028
- Primary Date Count by Month" (2000–2028)
- MASBO testimony re. HJ 48 (March 16, 2026)
- Michael Waterman email re. HJ 48 (April 1, 2026)

COMMITTEE WORK SESSION

The committee discussed the research presented by staff, the calendar models that showed the timeline for moving the dates of the primary and school elections earlier, proposed legislation in other states, and the public comment heard throughout the interim. After discussion, the committee voted 7-4 to end the study and to recommend leaving the primary election and school election dates as is.

JULY 9, 2026

The agenda included a committee work session to discuss and vote on the draft final report and PD6.

MEETING MATERIALS, WRITTEN PUBLIC COMMENT, AND HANDOUTS

- Draft HJ 48 Final Report
- PD3 – Changing filing deadlines for special districts (updated)

COMMITTEE WORK SESSION

The committee voted unanimously to approve PD3 and Senator Morigeau was assigned to carry it. The committee voted unanimously to approve the final report.

APPENDIX A: STATE ADMINISTRATION AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS INTERIM COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Before the close of each legislative session, House and Senate leadership appoint lawmakers to interim committees. The members of the State Administrative and Veterans' Affairs Interim Committee, like most other interim committees, serve one 20-month term. Members who are reelected to the Legislature, subject to overall term limits and if appointed, may serve again on an interim committee. This information is included in order to comply with section 2-15-155, MCA.

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