

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

**DRAFT FINAL REPORT TO THE 70TH
MONTANA LEGISLATURE**



State Administration and Veterans' Affairs Interim Committee

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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 Interim Committee’s 2025-2026 HJ 48 study as outlined in the State Administration and Veterans’ Affairs Interim Committee’s 2025-26 [work plan](#) and [House Joint Resolution 48 \(2025\)](#). 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 State Administration and Veterans’ Affairs Interim Committee in reaching its conclusions. To review additional information, including audio minutes, and exhibits, visit the State Administration and Veterans’ Affairs 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 State Administration and Veterans’ Affairs 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 such 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 State Administration and Veterans' Affairs (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.

During the January 2026 SAVA meeting, committee members agreed to hold a work session during their March 2026 meeting to determine next steps for the study. This memo is intended to provide a high-level summary of the presentations, panels, and research completed from July 2025 – January 2026 and to serve as a tool for committee members as they decide the next steps for the study.

CURRENT ELECTION SCHEDULE

Under the current schedule, the school election is held yearly on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in May (20-20-105, MCA) and the primary election is held in even-numbered years before a general election on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in June (13-1-107, MCA). The current date for the school election was set in 1999 and the date for the primary election 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 & 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 their presidential primary from their state primary, holding the presidential primary early in the year and the state primary in late summer or early fall.
- In comparison to other states, Montana has relatively high voter turnout for primary elections, 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 states move their primary election to an earlier date. Rather, it appears that voter turnout is 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 to the overall funding process.
- Many of the 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 that 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 overall of the Montana Code Annotated, particularly Titles 13 and 20.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The State Administration and Veterans' Affairs Interim Committee recommends keeping the school election and primary elections dates as is to avoid potential complications for the administration of elections and to the school funding cycle.

PROPOSED LEGISLATION

- PD3 – Changing the filing deadlines for special district elections
 - This idea was proposed by the election administrators and would align the filing deadlines for special district elections to align with those of school elections, allowing more time for candidate recruitment.

SUMMARY OF COMMITTEE WORK BY MEETING DATE

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

JULY 30, 2025

SAVA discussed their 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 2 panel discussions with state officials and election administrators regarding the current primary schedule and considerations for making changes. The committee adopted their 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 & General Election Calendar](#)
- [2024-2025 Special Purpose District Election Calendar](#)
- [2025 School Election Calendar](#)
- [2025-2026 Ballot Issue Calendar](#)
- [2024 Federal Primary Election Dates by State](#)
- [2026 Congressional Primary Election Dates](#)
- [Montana School Boards Association Memo](#)
- [HB 774 \(2023\) from Rep. Hopkins](#)
- [SJ 14 \(2013\) study page from the 2013-2014 SAVA committee](#)

PANEL DISCUSSIONS

The panels included the following speakers:

- Lance Melton, Montana School Boards Association
- Andrea Mohammadi, Office of Public Instruction
- Cheryl Wilson, Office of the Commissioner of Political Practices
- Deb Belford, Office of the Commissioner of Political Practices
- Toni Kramer, Lake County Elections Administrator
- Regina Plettenberg, Ravalli County Clerk & Recorder
- Eric Semerad, Gallatin County Clerk & 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 requested 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 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](#)
- [2015 Election Directive #01-2015 re. Satellite Election Offices](#)
- [Lake County Satellite Survey – General Election 2022](#)
- [Summary of Tribal Nations' Election Calendars](#)
- [Election Administrator Survey Results](#)
- [Public Comment for November 17, 2025, SAVA Meeting](#)

STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES

Here is a high-level summary of the remarks of Mr. 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 can be addressed with enough thought, planning, and flexibility; 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 5 weeks); and
 - that lots of pieces of MCA will need to be updated

- Most respondents requested that no changes be made to the current schedule; 9 of 46 respondents 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 of the current judges are snowbirds

REQUESTS FOR THE NEXT SAVA MEETING

- Input from school officials about changing their election date/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 3 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 HJ 48 Study Plan](#)
- [2026 OPI School Election Calendar](#)
- [2026 SOS Federal Primary and General Election Calendar](#)
- [Montana School Boards Association Memo](#)
- [MASBO Handout – MT Election Laws Related to School Elections](#)
- [Results of Committee Survey re. HJ 48 Study \(Updated 12/31/2025\)](#)
- [Staff Memo – Modeling Possible Changes to Election Calendar](#)
- [Staff Spreadsheet – Primary Dates & Voter Turnout 2000-2024](#)
- [Election Administrator Research – Changes to Primary Date in Other States](#)
- [Election Administrator Comments re. Moving Primary Date](#)
- [Election Administrator Survey #2 re. Moving Primary Date](#)

PANEL DISCUSSION – SCHOOL ELECTION AND SCHOOL FUNDING SCHEDULES

The panel included the following speakers:

- Katie Bloodgood, Office of Public Instruction (OPI)
- Andrea Mohammadi, Office of Public Instruction (OPI)
- Nicole Thuotte, Office of Public Instruction (OPI)
- Shay Baize, Montana Association of School Business Officials (MASBO)
- Lance Melton, Montana School Boards Association (MTSBA)
- Eric Semerad, Gallatin County Election Administrator

HIGH-LEVEL SUMMARY OF PANELISTS' INPUT

- Any change in election timing would be significant as the current school budgeting and election processes are closely connected
- All election laws (school, special district, primary, and general) are deeply interconnected
- Significant concern about unintended consequences
- If the Legislature does change the date, ask that there be a statutory 2-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
- 2025 bill de-coupled the filing deadlines for school and special district elections; request that the 2027 Legislature consider realigning them
- Concern that there is already some overlap between school elections and the primary election which is complicated and 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 1) increase voter turnout and 2) give Montana voters more influence at the national level.
- The majority of committee members believe the main reasons not to change are 1) the logistical challenges and 2) the conflicts with school elections/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 with school elections.
- The committee was a little more divided on which of the options discussed during the November meeting, but 5 members voted not to make any change to the current system, which was the most votes for any of the options presented.

MODELING POSSIBLE CHANGES TO THE PRIMARY DATE

Staff presented the handout mapping out the following scenarios, 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 voter turnout trends spreadsheet prepared by staff, which showed that Montana is consistently in the top 5 states for primary voter turnout and that there does not appear to be a solid correlation between earlier primary dates and increased voter turnout in other states.

COMMITTEE WORK SESSION / 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

- [Staff Memo – Summary of Committee Work on HJ 48](#)
- [Stakeholder Comments re. HJ 48](#)

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 school election and the primary election dates two weeks earlier. The proposal failed and the committee decided to postpone a final decision about the study to 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 some additional calendar models, and committee discussion.

MEETING MATERIALS, WRITTEN PUBLIC COMMENT, AND HANDOUTS

- [Staff Memo – Summary of Committee Work on HJ 48 Study \(March 2026\)](#)
- [Staff Spreadsheet – Election Calendar Model #1](#)
- [Staff Spreadsheet – Election Calendar Model #2](#)
- [Staff Spreadsheet – Election Calendar Model #3](#)
- [Staff Spreadsheet – Presidential Primary Dates 2000-2028](#)
- [Staff Handout – Primary Date Count by Month 2000-2028](#)
- [MASBO Testimony re. HJ 48 \(April 2026\)](#)
- [Michael Waterman Email re. HJ 48 \(April 2026\)](#)

COMMITTEE WORK SESSION

The committee discussed the research presented by staff, the calendar models that showed the timeline for moving the dates of the school and primary 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 not propose any changes to the election calendar.

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 2-15-155, MCA.

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