

2022

# Ballot Initiatives Impact Analysis

*How ballot initiatives impacted voter participation and progressive policy outcomes in the midterm elections*

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# Summary

## Overview

Ballot initiatives are a powerful method of direct democracy, providing voters with a route for advancing popular policy. Ballot initiatives are particularly useful in states where extreme gerrymandering enables partisan state legislatures to obstruct progress and pass unpopular policy, with limited accountability from voters. With the rightward shift of the Supreme Court in recent years, ballot initiatives have become even more important, allowing voters to enshrine civil rights in their state constitutions even as federal protections are eroded. Moreover, ballot initiatives offer a unique alternative to partisan races for engaging low propensity voters in a given election cycle. In 2022, voters across the country voted on a wide range of ballot initiatives, ranging from issues such as criminal justice reform and economic justice to reproductive freedom. The impact of ballot initiatives on voter participation in 2022, however, remains largely unclear. Moreover, whether specific issues were more motivating to different groups of voters, and whether there was a geographic divide in support for different issue areas, has not been assessed.

## Purpose

To gain a better understanding of how ballot initiatives can impact voter participation and advance progressive policy, this report addressed two outstanding questions:

***#1 How did support for ballot initiatives compare to support for Democratic candidates in rural and metro counties?***

***#2 Did ballot initiatives impact turnout among communities of the New American Majority (young, BIPOC, female voters)?***

The focus of this analysis was on 20 of the ballot initiatives BISC supported across 11 states: AR, AZ, KS, KY, MA, MI, MT, NE, OR, TN, and VT. These ballot initiatives spanned 5 main issue areas: criminal justice reform, democracy reform, economic justice, initiative reform, and reproductive freedom.

## Results

75% of the ballot initiatives analyzed in this report were successful, including all those related to criminal justice reform (3/3) and reproductive freedom (5/5), the majority of those related to economic justice (3/4), and half of those related to democracy reform (2/4) and initiative reform (2/4). In general, support for these ballot initiatives far-exceeded support for Democratic candidates, particularly in rural areas. Moreover, these ballot initiatives had a strong positive effect on turnout of historically low propensity voters. Specifically, in states with reproductive freedom initiatives, turnout of young, BIPOC, and female voters was considerably higher than in states without. Similarly, in states with democracy reform initiatives, turnout of young and BIPOC voters was higher than in states without, but this effect was specific for voters in metro areas.

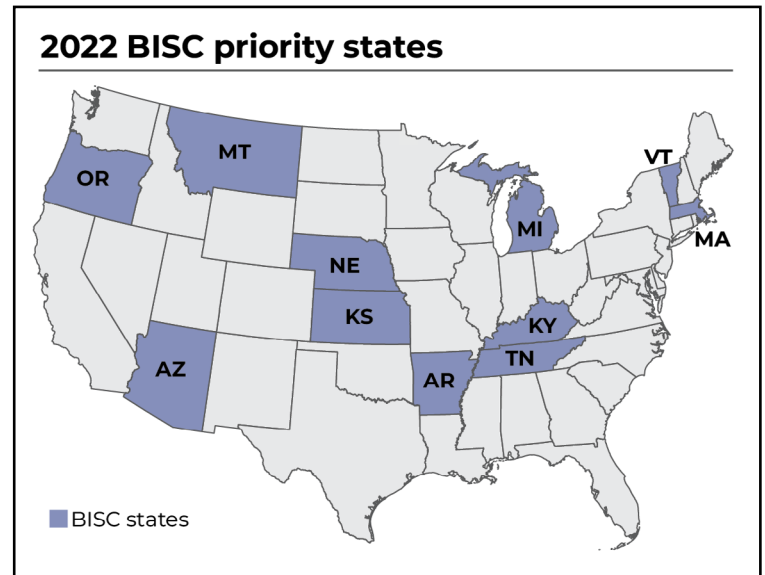
## Conclusions

The success of reproductive freedom initiatives in states as diverse as Michigan, Vermont, Kansas, Kentucky, and Montana, and the success of criminal justice reform in states as diverse as Oregon, Tennessee, and Vermont, highlights the power of ballot initiatives in advancing progressive policy regardless of perceived partisanship in a given state. Importantly, the passage of initiatives weakening the ballot initiative process and making it more difficult for voters to vote should be heeded as a warning for future ballot initiatives.

# Background

## Overview

Ballot initiatives are an effective tool for advancing popular policy, particularly in states where bipartisan support for progressive policies can be obstructed by partisan control of state legislatures. For this report, the Ballot Initiative Strategy Center (BISC) supported a total of 20 ballot initiatives across 11 states. These initiatives spanned five main issue areas: criminal justice, democracy reform, economic justice, initiative reform, and reproductive freedom. Overall, 75% of the initiatives covered in this report were victorious (i.e., initiatives supported by BISC passed, initiatives opposed by BISC failed).



## Ballot initiatives can advance progressive policies, even in conservative states

Of the five issue areas targeted in 2022, the most successful was reproductive freedom, with victories in Michigan, Vermont, Kansas, Kentucky, and Montana. Reproductive freedom had a particularly strong motivating effect on young voters, BIPOC voters, and female voters, in rural and metro areas, highlighting the bipartisan support of reproductive autonomy. Criminal justice reform initiatives were also successful, with voters in Oregon, Tennessee, and Vermont removing slavery as a criminal punishment. Economic justice initiatives in Arizona, Nebraska, and Massachusetts were successful, but a right-to-work initiative passed in Tennessee. Democracy reform and initiative reform measures had mixed results, particularly in states with multiple initiatives on the ballot. Initiatives in states with a single initiative on the ballot were all successful, while all defeats were in states with multiple initiatives on the ballot. Notably, two of the initiatives opposed by BISC that passed impose stricter restrictions on the ballot initiative process, which should be taken into consideration for planning initiatives in future cycles.

## Research questions

To understand more about how ballot initiatives can impact policymaking and voter participation, this report will answer two key questions:

***#1 How did support for ballot initiatives compare to support for Democratic candidates in rural and metro counties?***

***#2 Did ballot initiatives impact turnout among communities of the New American Majority (young, BIPOC, and female voters)?***

The overarching goal of this report is to provide empirical evidence of how ballot initiatives can motivate turnout of specific types of voters, with a particular focus on how broad consensus for progressive policies can be built in rural areas and other traditionally conservative bastions.

# Priority Initiatives

State	Initiative	Issue Area	Description	Position	Outcome
Arkansas	AR-2	Initiative reform	60% approval needed for amendments and initiatives	Oppose	Failed
Arizona	AZ-128	Initiative reform	Allow legislature to repeal approved ballot initiatives	Oppose	Failed
Arizona	AZ-129	Initiative reform	Require single subject for ballot initiatives	Oppose	Passed
Arizona	AZ-132	Initiative reform	60% approval for tax-related ballot initiatives	Oppose	Passed
Arizona	AZ-209	Economic justice	Limit medical debt interest rates	Support	Passed
Arizona	AZ-211	Democracy reform	Require disclosure of funding sources for IEs	Oppose	Passed
Arizona	AZ-309	Democracy reform	Additional requirements for mail-in voting	Oppose	Failed
Kansas	KS-1	Reproductive freedom	No constitutional right to abortion	Oppose	Failed
Kentucky	KY-2	Reproductive freedom	No constitutional right to abortion	Oppose	Failed
Massachusetts	MA-1	Economic justice	Wealth tax to fund education and transportation	Support	Passed
Michigan	MI-2	Democracy reform	Establish early voting, expanding absentee voting	Support	Passed
Michigan	MI-3	Reproductive freedom	Create constitutional right to reproductive freedom	Support	Passed
Montana	MT-131	Reproductive freedom	Require medical care for fetus after abortion	Oppose	Failed
Nebraska	NE-432	Democracy reform	Implement photo ID requirement for voting	Oppose	Passed
Nebraska	NE-433	Economic justice	Increase minimum wage to \$15 by 2026	Support	Passed
Oregon	OR-112	Criminal justice	Ban slavery as criminal punishment	Support	Passed
Tennessee	TN-1	Economic justice	Add right-to-work law to state constitution	Oppose	Passed
Tennessee	TN-3	Criminal justice	Ban slavery as criminal punishment	Support	Passed
Vermont	VT-2	Criminal justice	Ban slavery as criminal punishment	Support	Passed
Vermont	VT-5	Reproductive freedom	Create constitutional right to reproductive freedom	Support	Passed

Information for each ballot initiative included in this report. Initiative = State code and initiative number; Issue area = classification of issue for data analysis; Description = summary of ballot initiative text; Position = BISC's stated position for each initiative; Outcome = final result for each initiative (color-coded based on BISC's position: green = victory, red = defeat).

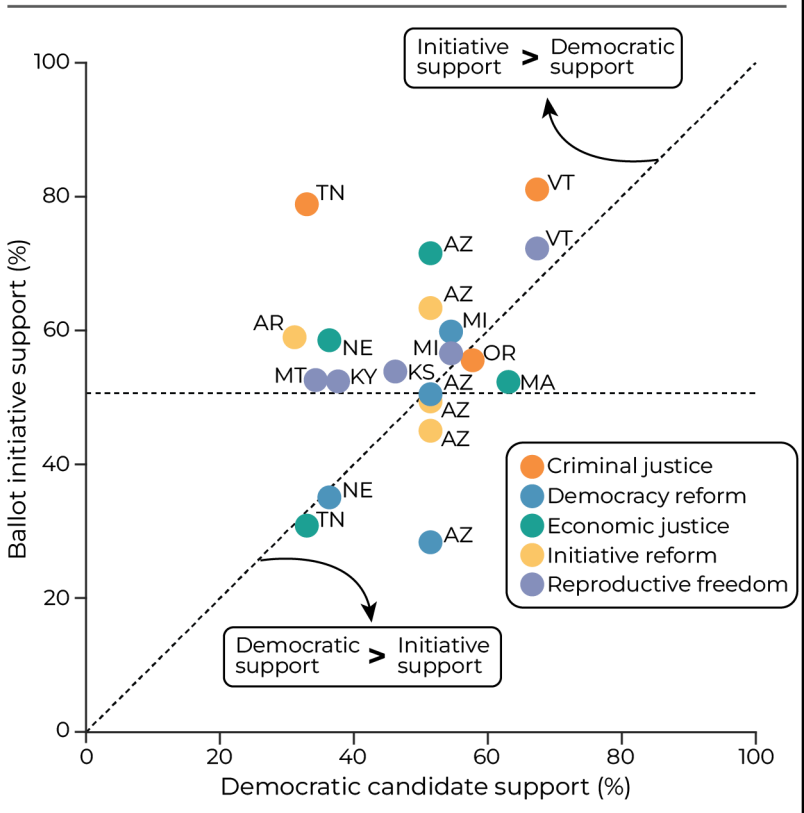
# How did support for ballot initiatives compare to support for Democratic candidates in rural versus metro counties in 2022?

## Progressive issues are more popular than Democratic candidates

Many progressive policies – including those associated with economic justice, reproductive freedom, and democracy – are widely popular with the American electorate, yet many voters who support these policies tend to vote for candidates who oppose them (i.e., Republican candidates). In 2022, 60% of the ballot initiatives tracked by BISC outperformed Democratic candidates, and 100% of these initiatives were victorious. Conversely, only 37% of the initiatives that underperformed Democratic candidates were victorious. **Ballot initiatives offer a unique opportunity to pass progressive policies, but the path to victory requires a strong coalition of bipartisan voters.**

Overall, the ballot initiatives covered in this report were largely successful (i.e., the final outcome matched BISC's position), including all those related to criminal justice reform (3/3) and reproductive freedom (5/5), the majority related to economic justice (3/4), and half of those related to democracy reform (2/4) and initiative reform (2/4). In this section, the vote breakdown for ballot initiatives of each of these five issue areas will be explored in-depth, with a particular focus on how support for these issues varied in rural and metro areas.

**Ballot initiatives that received more support than Democratic candidates were victorious**



Correlation between ballot initiative support (y-axis) and Democratic candidate support (x-axis). Ballot initiative support indicates agreement with BISC stance. Horizontal dashed line = 50% support for ballot initiative, diagonal dashed line = equal support for ballot initiative and Democratic candidate. Each dot represents a different ballot initiative, colored by issue type.

# Criminal justice initiatives

## Voters support removing slavery from state constitutions

BISC supported three criminal justice ballot initiatives in 2022, all related to eliminating slavery and indentured servitude as a punishment for a criminal offense. All three measures – OR-112, TN-3, and VT-3 – were approved by voters, though support for each varied considerably: the margin of victory in VT and TN exceeded 60%, while the margin in OR was just 12%. Moreover, there was a stark contrast between these three states in where support came from.

## Criminal justice reform was universally popular in Tennessee and Vermont

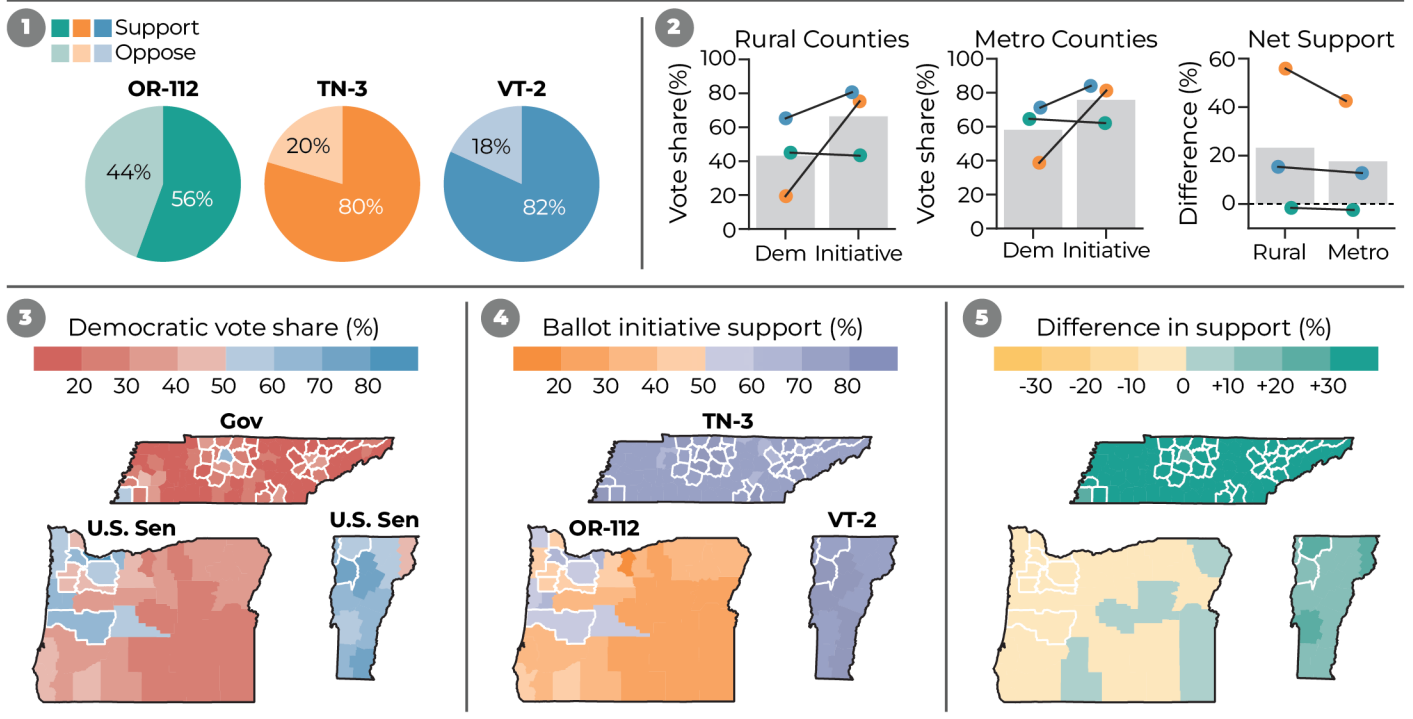
In both Tennessee and Vermont, a majority of voters in every county supported initiatives

abolishing slavery as a punishment for criminal offenses, and support for these initiatives was substantially greater than support for Democratic candidates for U.S. Senate and Governor in both solid-R Tennessee and solid-D Vermont. TN-3 outperformed Jason Martin (D) by a 4:1 margin in rural Tennessee (75% vs 19%) and a 2:1 margin in metro Tennessee (81% vs 39%), receiving 720,000 more votes statewide than Martin. Similarly, VT-2 outperformed Peter Welch (D) in both rural Vermont (81% vs 65%) and metro Vermont (84% vs 71%), receiving 42,000 more votes statewide than Welch.

## Criminal justice reform narrowly passed in Oregon

The margin for a similar initiative abolishing slavery as a punishment for criminal offenses was much closer in Oregon, outperforming Ron Wyden (D) in just 8 of 36 counties. OR-112 underperformed Wyden in both rural Oregon (43% vs 45%) and metro Oregon (62% vs 65%), receiving 30,000 fewer votes statewide than Wyden.

### Support for ballot initiatives banning slavery far-exceeded support for Democratic candidates in Tennessee and Vermont, but not Oregon



**1** Vote share for each ballot initiative. **2** Margin of support for Democratic candidates and ballot initiatives in (left) rural counties and (center) metro counties, and the net difference in support for ballot initiatives (ballot initiative % – Democratic candidate %) in rural and metro counties. Dots colors correspond to pie chart colors (e.g., orange dots = TN). **3** Margin of support for Democratic and Republican candidates for statewide office. **4** Margin of support for ballot initiatives in each state, where “support” indicates agreement with BISC stance. **5** Net difference in support for ballot initiatives. White outlines = metro counties.

# Democracy reform initiatives

## Support for democracy reform is complex and depends largely on the specifics

Of the four democracy reform initiatives BISC endorsed in 2022, two were victories (the passage of MI-2 and defeat of AZ-309) and two were losses (the passage of NE-432 and AZ-211).

## Voters support expanding voting periods

Despite rampant misinformation surrounding early and mail-in voting, support for expanding (MI-2) and maintaining (AZ-309) these methods of voting was widespread. MI-2 outperformed Gretchen Whitmer (D) in both rural counties (53% vs 44%) and metro counties (63% vs 59%),

while AZ-309 outperformed Mark Kelly (D) in rural counties (43% vs 42%) but not metro counties (52% vs 53%).

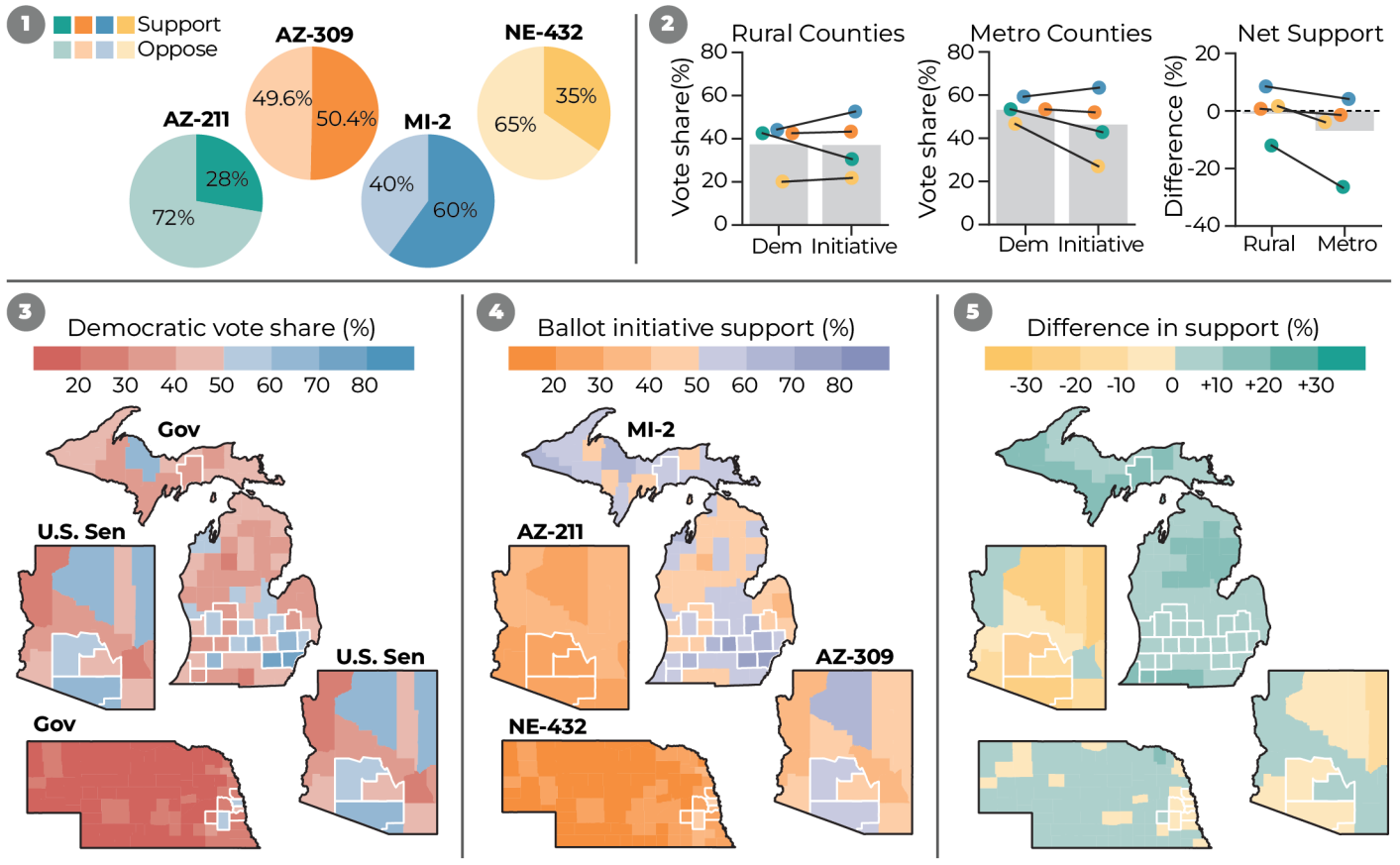
## Voters in Nebraska support voter IDs

NE-432, an initiative opposed by BISC that introduced a photo ID requirement for voting, was widely popular, receiving more than 50% support in every county, both rural and metro.

## Voters in Arizona support transparency

AZ-211, an initiative opposed by BISC that claimed to increase transparency around funding of ballot initiatives but actually introduced obstacles for initiative funding from national organizations, received more than 50% support in every county, both rural and metro. In fact, support for this initiative outpaced support for Kelly by a wider margin in metro counties than rural counties.

### Support for democracy reform ballot initiatives varied in Arizona, and outpaced Democratic candidate support across all of Michigan and in rural Nebraska



**1** Vote share for each ballot initiative. **2** Margin of support for Democratic candidates and ballot initiatives in (left) rural counties and (center) metro counties, and the net difference in support for ballot initiatives (ballot initiative % – Democratic candidate %) in rural and metro counties. Dots colors correspond to pie chart colors (e.g., yellow dots = NE). **3** Margin of support for Democratic and Republican candidates for statewide office. **4** Margin of support for ballot initiatives in each state, where “support” indicates agreement with BISC stance. **5** Net difference in support for ballot initiatives. White outlines = metro counties.



# Economic justice initiatives

## Voters supported progressive economic policies, but not collective bargaining

All three ballot initiatives supported by BISC that related to progressive taxation and income passed (AZ-209, MA-1, and NE-433), while one initiative opposed by BISC that weakened collective bargaining passed (TN-1). Support for all four initiatives exceeded support for Democratic candidates by a wider margin in rural counties than metro counties, indicating bipartisan support for economic justice policies.

## Progressive taxation initiatives were widely popular

Support for AZ-209 (limiting medical debt interest rates) was universal, outperforming Mark Kelly (D) in both rural counties (71% vs 43%) and metro counties (72% vs 53%).

Conversely, MA-1 (implementing a wealth tax to fund education and transportation programs) narrowly passed with 52% statewide, underperforming Maura Healey (D) in both rural counties (56% vs 64%) and metro counties (52% vs 63%).

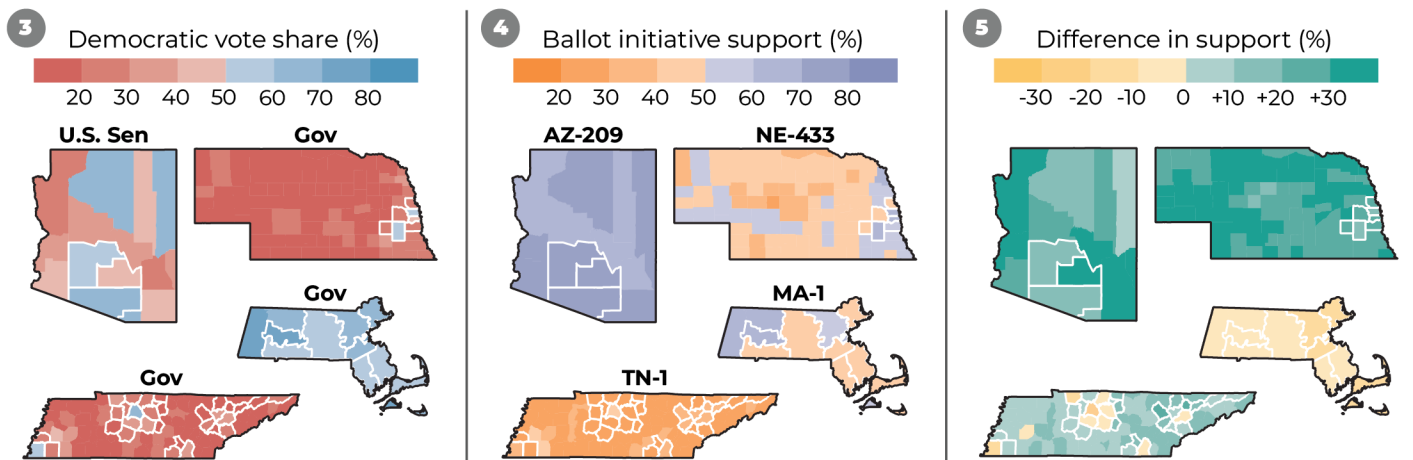
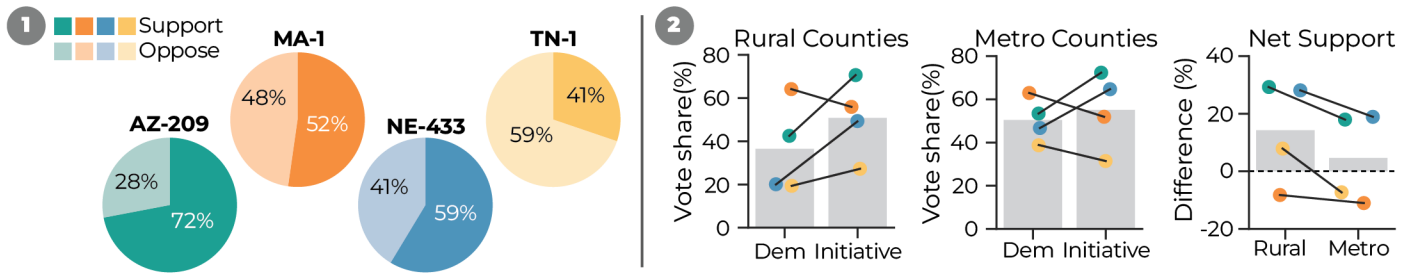
## Voters in Nebraska support a living wage

NE-433, an initiative supported by BISC that increases the minimum wage to \$15 by 2026, passed by an 18% margin statewide, overperforming Carol Blood (D) in both rural counties (49% to 20%) and metro counties (65% to 47%).

## Collective bargaining suffered a defeat

TN-1, an initiative opposed by BISC that amended the constitution to add a right-to-work provision, also passed by an 18% margin, with majority support from every county, both rural (72%) and metro (59%).

### Support for economic ballot initiatives outpaced Democratic candidate support in rural Tennessee and across Arizona and Nebraska, but not in Massachusetts



**1** Vote share for each ballot initiative. **2** Margin of support for Democratic candidates and ballot initiatives in (left) rural counties and (center) metro counties, and the net difference in support for ballot initiatives (ballot initiative % – Democratic candidate %) in rural and metro counties. Dots colors correspond to pie chart colors (e.g., green dots = AZ). **3** Margin of support for Democratic and Republican candidates for statewide office. **4** Margin of support for ballot initiatives in each state, where “support” indicates agreement with BISC stance. **5** Net difference in support for ballot initiatives. White outlines = metro counties.

# Initiative reform ballot measures

## Voters have mixed feelings about changes to the ballot initiative process

BISC opposed four ballot initiatives related to reforming the ballot initiative process in 2022; two of these were defeated (AR-2 and AZ-128), but two were adopted (AZ-128 and AZ-132). The variable support in Arizona alone highlights the complexity of initiative reform, making it difficult to draw takeaways on the popularity of reforming the initiative process.

## Similar reforms, different outcomes

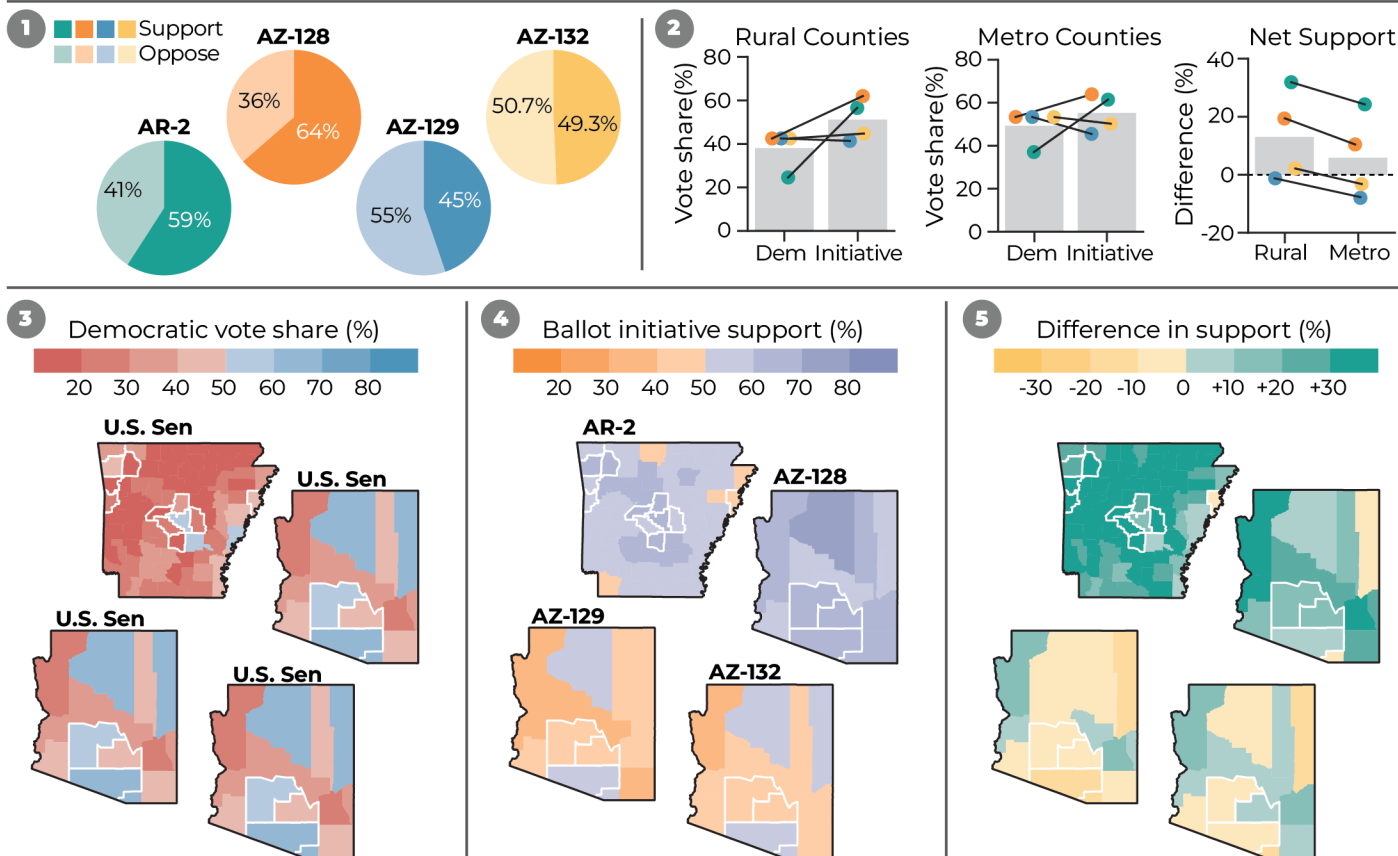
Voters in Arkansas and Arizona voted on similar ballot initiatives, one adopting a 60% threshold

to approve ballot initiatives and constitutional amendments (AR-2) and one adopting a 60% threshold to approve ballot initiatives related to taxation (AZ-132). AR-2 was defeated, outpacing Natalie James (D) in both rural Arkansas (57% vs 25%) and metro Arkansas (61% vs 25%), while AZ-132 was adopted, with opposition outpacing Mark Kelly (D) in rural Arizona (45% vs 43%) but not metro Arizona (50% vs 53%).

## Autonomy over ballot initiatives

Arizona voters rejected AZ-128 (allowing state lawmakers to repeal voter-approved ballot initiatives) by a wide margin, with opposition outpacing support for Mark Kelly (D) in both rural Arizona (62% vs 43%) and metro Arizona (64% vs 53%). However, Arizona voters narrowly approved AZ-132 (requiring initiatives to have a single issue) by <2%, with AZ-132 opposition underperforming Kelly in metro Arizona by 3%.

### Support for reforming the ballot initiative process varied across Arizona, but exceeded Democratic candidate support in Arkansas, particularly in rural counties



**1** Vote share for each ballot initiative. **2** Margin of support for Democratic candidates and ballot initiatives in (left) rural counties and (center) metro counties, and the net difference in support for ballot initiatives (ballot initiative % – Democratic candidate %) in rural and metro counties. Dots colors correspond to pie chart colors (e.g., green dots = AR). **3** Margin of support for Democratic and Republican candidates for statewide office. **4** Margin of support for ballot initiatives in each state, where “support” indicates agreement with BISC stance. **5** Net difference in support for ballot initiatives. White outlines = metro counties.

# Reproductive freedom initiatives

## Reproductive freedom is a winning issue

All five reproductive freedom ballot initiatives were victorious in 2022. Statewide support for all of these initiatives exceeded support for Democratic candidates, highlighting bipartisan support for abortion across the country.

## Voters support access to abortion

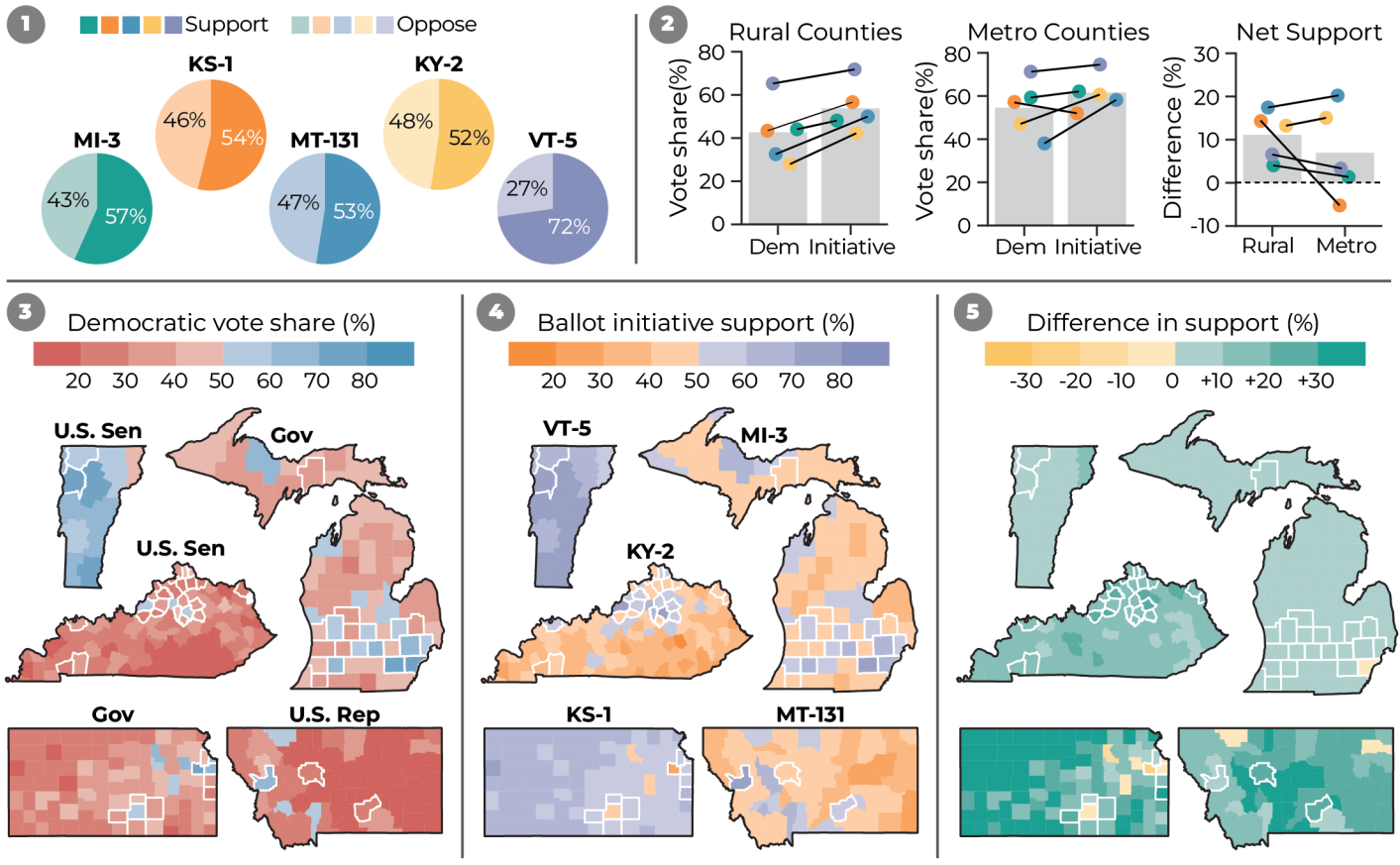
Initiatives establishing a constitutional right to abortion received widespread support in both Michigan and Vermont. MI-3 outpaced Gretchen Whitmer (D) in both rural Michigan (48% vs 44%) and metro Michigan (61% vs 59%), with narrow margins throughout most of the state. VT-5 outpaced Peter Welch (D) in both

rural Vermont (72% vs 65%) and metro Vermont (75% vs 71%), and support for VT-5 exceeded 50% in every county.

## Voters oppose abortion bans

Initiatives banning abortion received solid opposition in both Kansas and Kentucky. 97% of Kansas' counties opposed KS-1 during the 2022 Primary Election, with KS-1 opposition outpacing support for Laura Kelly (D) in rural Kansas (57% vs 43%) but not metro Kansas (52% vs 57%). Opposition to KY-2 outpaced support for Charles Booker (D) in both rural (42% vs 28%) and metro Kentucky (62% vs 47%), with more voters opposing KY-2 than supporting Booker in every county. Voters narrowly rejected MT-131 (requiring fetal medical care after abortions) by a 6% margin, with MT-131 outpacing Democratic congressional candidates in both rural Montana (50% vs 33%) and metro Montana (58% vs 38%).

### Reproductive freedom ballot initiatives were widely popular and outpaced support for Democratic candidates, particularly in rural counties



**1** Vote share for each ballot initiative. **2** Margin of support for Democratic candidates and ballot initiatives in (left) rural counties and (center) metro counties, and the net difference in support for ballot initiatives (ballot initiative % – Democratic candidate %) in rural and metro counties. Dots colors correspond to pie chart colors (e.g., green dots = MI). **3** Margin of support for Democratic and Republican candidates for statewide office. **4** Margin of support for ballot initiatives in each state, where "support" indicates agreement with BISC stance. **5** Net difference in support for ballot initiatives. White outlines = metro counties.

# Did ballot initiatives impact turnout among communities of the New American Majority?

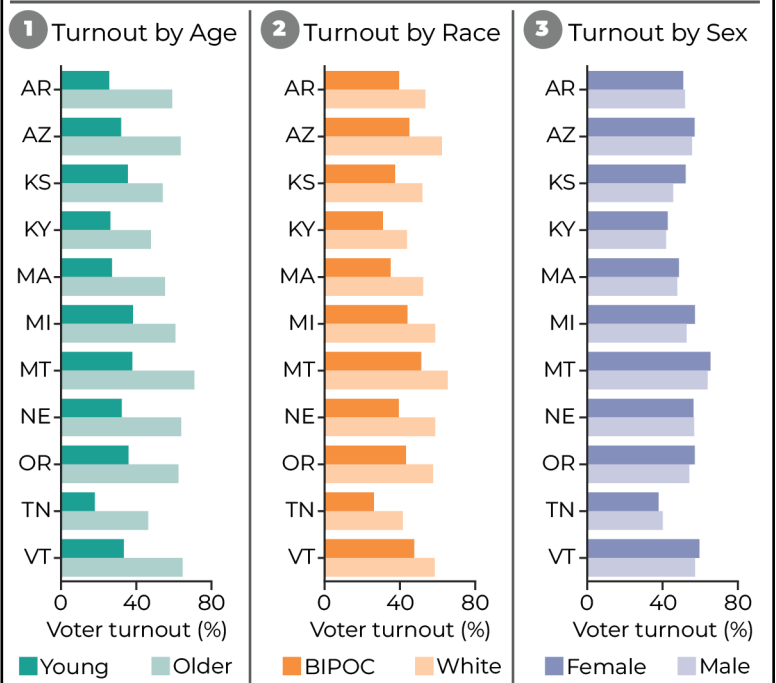
## Turnout of young and BIPOC voters was dramatically lower than older and White voters, but reproductive freedom initiatives narrowed the gap

Overall, trends in voter turnout in the eleven states included in this analysis were comparable to national trends: (1) voter turnout increases linearly with age, with voters >35 years old voting at ~2x the rate of voters 18-34 years old; (2) voter turnout is higher among White voters than all BIPOC voters, with the lowest turnout among Black and Hispanic voters; and (3) voter turnout was modestly higher among Female than Male voters. However, there was some notable variability in certain states, suggesting a possible role for ballot initiatives in propelling turnout of lower-propensity voters. ***In particular, reproductive freedom initiatives narrowed the age- and race-gap in voter turnout, with a 12% smaller turnout gap between young and older voters and a 4% smaller turnout gap between BIPOC and White voters in states with reproductive freedom ballot initiatives.*** Moreover, the relative turnout gap between these groups had a

large impact on the overall fate of certain ballot initiatives. For example, in Tennessee, where an initiative restricting collective bargaining was adopted, the turnout gap between young and older voters and between BIPOC and White voters was greater than in any other state, and turnout among male voters was higher than among female voters.

In this section, voter turnout will be examined between different demographic groups and across different geographic areas (rural vs metro), with a focus on assessing how specific issues as ballot initiatives impacted voter turnout. The goal here is to understand how ballot initiatives can motivate turnout among low-propensity voters to pass progressive policies.

### Voter turnout differed significantly by age and race, but not sex, in every state



**1** Turnout for young (18-34 years old) and older (35+ years old) voters in each state. **2** Turnout for BIPOC (AAPI, Black, Hispanic, and Native American) and White voters in each state. **3** Turnout for female and male voters in each state.

# Turnout of young & older voters\*

## Reproductive freedom is a motivator for young voters

Across the eleven states included in these analyses, turnout of young voters was ~28% lower than turnout of older voters. However, this gap was lower in states with reproductive freedom on the ballot. Turnout among young voters was greater in all states with reproductive freedom initiatives than in states without, and the difference in turnout was greater in rural (+6.7%) than metro counties (+6.2%). Conversely, turnout among older voters was comparable in states with and without reproductive freedom initiatives, and the difference was greater in metro (+1.7%) than rural counties (+1.2%).

## Democracy reform motivates voters in metro areas

States with democracy reform initiatives had higher turnout among older voters in general (rural: +3.8%, metro: +5.1%) and among young voters in metro counties (+4.5%).

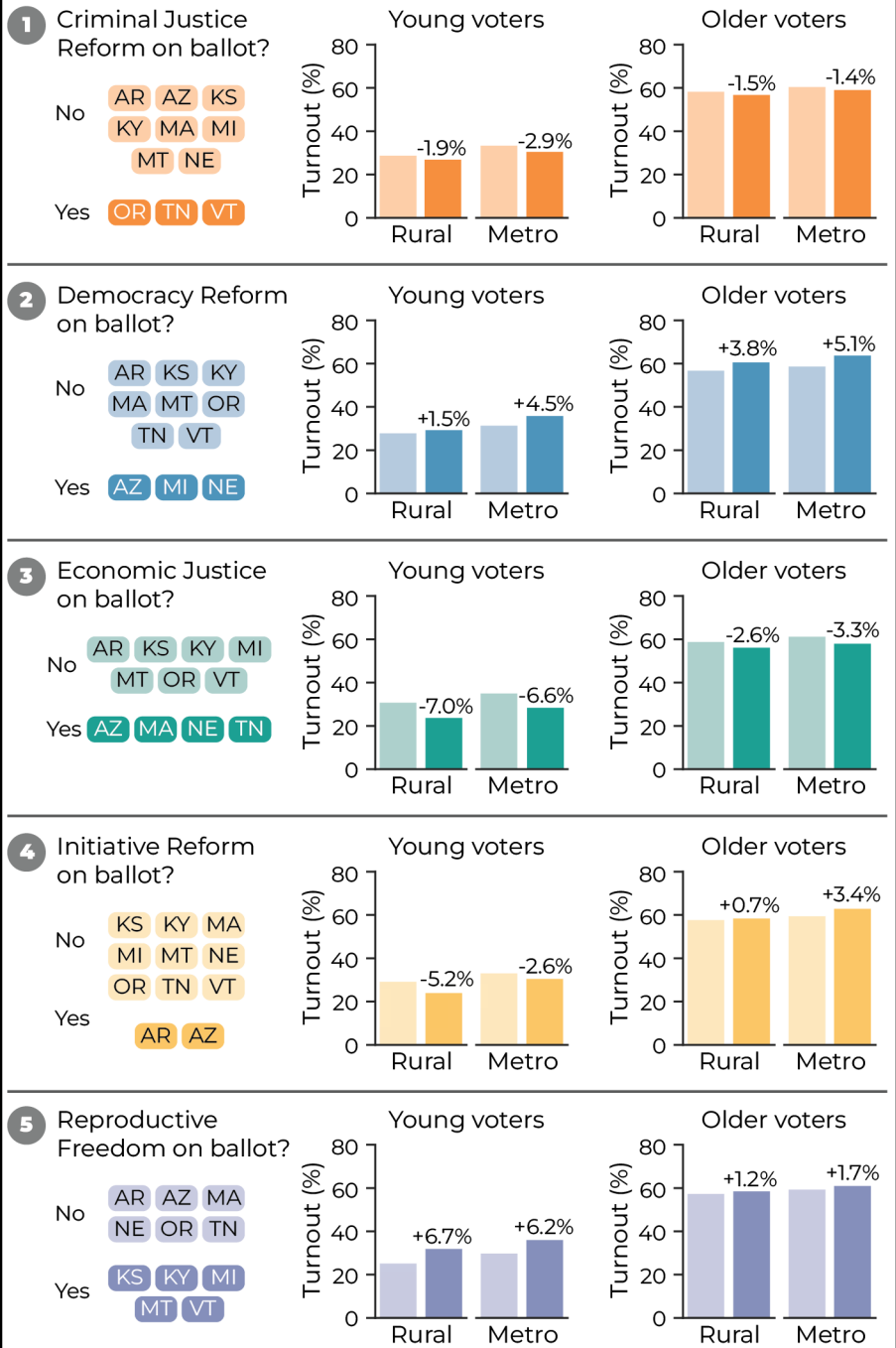
## Criminal justice reform does not appear to drive turnout

States with criminal justice reform initiatives saw lower turnout among both young voters (rural: -1.9%, metro: -2.9%) and older voters (rural: -1.5%, metro: -1.4%).

## Initiative reforms did not compel young voter turnout

The two states with initiative reform ballot measures (Arizona and Arkansas) saw lower turnout among young voters in rural areas (-5.2%) and metro areas (-2.6%). Importantly, a sample of two states is insufficient to draw any major conclusions on how this issue may impact young turnout.

## Reproductive freedom ballot initiatives elevated turnout of young but not older voters



Turnout in rural versus metro counties among young voters (18-34 years old; center) and older voters (35+ years old; right). States are grouped based on the presence or absence of ballot initiatives of a given issue (left): **1** Criminal Justice Reform, **2** Democracy Reform, **3** Economic Justice, **4** Initiative Reform, and **5** Reproductive Freedom. Values above pairs of bars give the difference in turnout between states with and without that type of ballot issue.

\*For a more detailed breakdown of turnout by discrete age brackets, see Appendix 1 on page 17

# Turnout of BIPOC & White voters\*

## Reproductive freedom is a motivator for BIPOC voters

Of the five issues areas included in this analysis, reproductive freedom had the largest impact on BIPOC voter turnout, with higher turnout in both rural (+2.9%) and metro areas (+3.9%) compared to states without reproductive freedom initiatives on the ballot. Conversely, White voter turnout in states with reproductive freedom on the ballot was comparable to states without such initiatives in both rural (+0.3%) and metro areas (+1.7%). Together, these data suggest reproductive freedom may be a stronger motivator for BIPOC voters than White voters, particularly in metro areas.

## Democracy reform is a motivator for White voters

Voter turnout in states with democracy reform initiatives was higher than in states without, but the effect size of this difference varied by race and location: the effect on turnout was higher for White voters (metro: +7.0%, rural: +5.8%) than BIPOC voters (metro: +4.4%, rural: +1.7%).

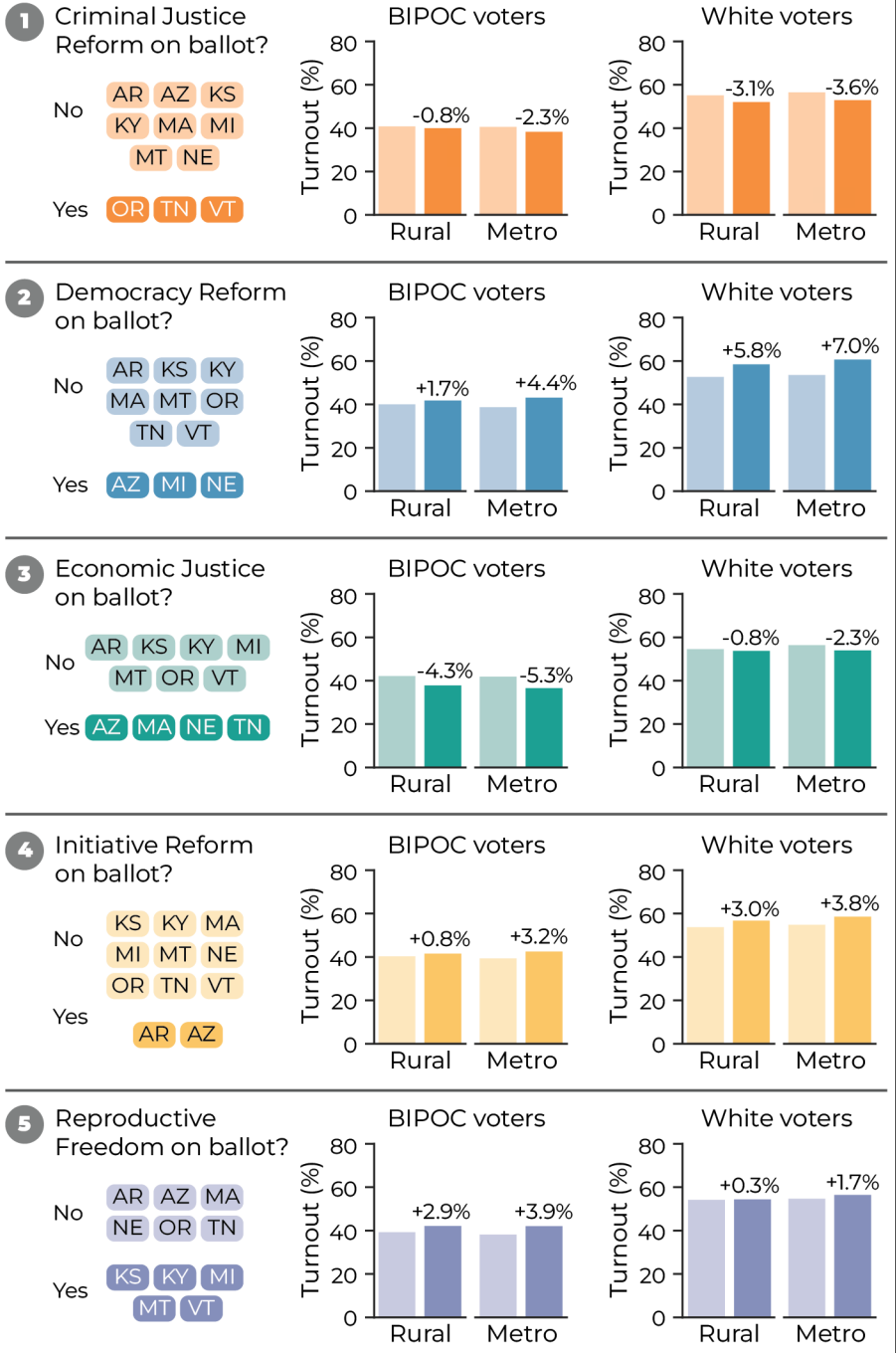
## Economic justice may not be a motivator for BIPOC voters

Turnout of BIPOC voters was noticeably lower in states with economic justice initiatives on the ballot, in both rural areas (-4.3%) and metro areas (-5.3%).

## Criminal justice may not be a motivator for White voters

Turnout of White voters was noticeably lower in states with criminal justice initiatives on the ballot, in both rural areas (-3.1%) and metro areas (-3.6%).

## Reproductive freedom and democracy reform ballot initiatives elevated BIPOC and White voter turnout, respectively



Turnout in rural versus metro counties among BIPOC voters (AAPI, Black, Hispanic, or Native American; center) and White voters (right). States are grouped based on the presence or absence of ballot initiatives of a given issue (left): **1** Criminal Justice Reform, **2** Democracy Reform, **3** Economic Justice, **4** Initiative Reform, and **5** Reproductive Freedom. Values above pairs of bars give the difference in turnout between states with and without that type of ballot issue.

\*For a more detailed breakdown of turnout by race, see Appendix 2 on page 18

# Turnout of female & male voters

## Reproductive freedom is a motivator for female voters

Reproductive freedom initiatives had a significant effect on voter turnout that was dependent on both sex and location: the relative increase in turnout in states with reproductive freedom initiatives was largest for female metro voters (+4.4%) and female rural voters (+2.5%), modest for male metro voters (+1.5%), and non-existent for male rural voters (no difference).

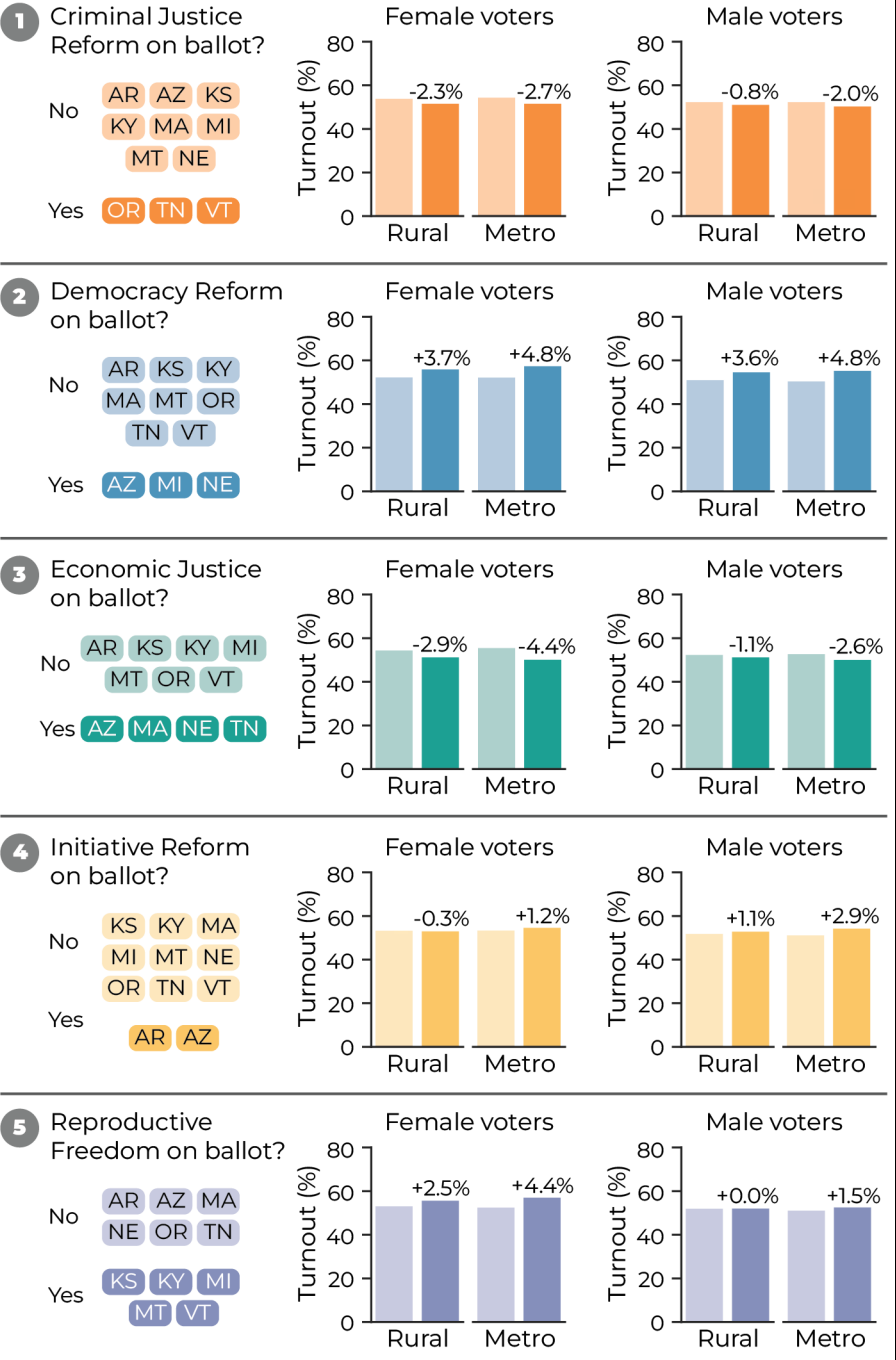
## Democracy reform is a motivator for metro voters

Voter turnout in states with democracy reform initiatives was higher than in states without, and the effect size of this difference varied by location but not sex: the effect on turnout was high for metro voters (female: +4.8%, male: +4.8%) and moderate for rural voters (female: +3.7%, male: +3.6%).

## Criminal justice and initiative reform are stronger motivators for male voters

Voter turnout in states with criminal justice initiatives was lower than in states without, and this effect varied by sex: turnout of male voters was mildly lower (rural: -0.8%, metro: -2.0%), while turnout of female voters was moderately lower (rural: -2.3%, metro: -2.7%). On the other hand, turnout in states with initiative reform issues on the ballot was higher than in states without, though again this effect varied by sex: turnout of female voters was comparable (rural: -0.3%, metro: 1.2%), while turnout of male voters was higher (rural: +1.1%, metro: +2.9%).

## Reproductive freedom ballot initiatives elevated female voter turnout, while democracy reform initiatives elevated male and female voter turnout



Turnout in rural versus metro counties among female voters (center) and male voters (right). States are grouped based on the presence or absence of ballot initiatives of a given issue (left): **1** Criminal Justice Reform, **2** Democracy Reform, **3** Economic Justice, **4** Initiative Reform, and **5** Reproductive Freedom. Values above pairs of bars give the difference in turnout between states with and without that type of ballot issue.

# Conclusions

## Summary

With the exception of Massachusetts and Oregon, ballot initiatives covered in this report outperformed Democratic candidates across the board, both in rural and metro counties, highlighting the power of ballot initiatives for engaging bipartisan coalitions to pass progressive policy. Interestingly, ballot initiatives with clear, concise messaging – for example, those enshrining reproductive freedom or removing slavery as a punishment for criminal offenses – were widely popular, while those that were more nuanced – for example, those modifying the ballot initiative process itself – had mixed results. This, along with the passage of initiatives weakening the ballot initiative process and making it more difficult for voters to vote, should be considered for future ballot initiative campaigns. While nationwide trends in vote turnout generally held true in the states covered in this report (i.e., higher turnout among White voters than BIPOC voters, higher turnout among older voters than younger voters), specific ballot initiative issues helped close the turnout gap in notable ways. In particular, turnout of AAPI, Hispanic, Native American, and young voters was higher in states with reproductive justice initiatives on the ballot than in states without, highlighting reproductive rights as a strong motivator for these groups of voters.

## Caveats & limitations

Several important limitations should be taken into consideration when interpreting the findings presented in this report. First and foremost, the states included in these analyses do not collect race data during voter registration, so all race data is modeled and provided by the data vendor Catalist. While extensive validation is done on this model, there is still likely to be some discrepancies in this data. Second, the analyses in this report focused on a subset of ballot initiatives in a subset of states, rather than all ballot initiatives in every state. While this set of states is geographically and demographically diverse, caution should be used when extrapolating the trends in this report to other states, at least until additional work has been done to validate these findings. Finally, the ballot initiatives covered in this report are by no means exhaustive, either within issue areas specifically or with the issue areas broadly. For example, all issues related to criminal justice reform in this report were essentially the same, so whether support for criminal justice reform more broadly can be drawn from these data are unclear.

## Future direction

To gain an even better understanding of how ballot initiatives can be used to engage voters and pass progressive policy, future work should expand and follow-up on the findings in this report. First, future ballot initiative impact analyses should include a broader set of ballot initiatives and more (if not all) states, which would allow more rigorous, powerful statistical analyses. Second, to understand how initial support for ballot initiatives impacts turnout, ballot initiative campaigns should coordinate with America Votes and State Voices tables so turnout of initial signees of ballot initiatives can be determined. This would be a particularly powerful tool for targeted get-out-the-vote efforts of these initial signees, who tend to be lower propensity voters (younger, BIPOC voters). Third, including analyses into spending (pro- and anti-) and outreach for specific ballot initiatives would be useful for understanding how these additional factors can contribute to initiative support. For example, if an economic justice initiative (like Tennessee's right-to-work initiative) underperformed relative to Democratic candidates, it would be useful to see if skewed spending by one side contributed to such underperformance. Finally, longitudinal analyses should be used to compare turnout within a specific state when an issue is or is not on the ballot, since turnout tends to vary widely across states but not within a given state.



# Appendix 1: Voter turnout by age

	<b>18-34</b>		<b>35-49</b>		<b>50-64</b>		<b>65+</b>	
	<b>Rural</b>	<b>Metro</b>	<b>Rural</b>	<b>Metro</b>	<b>Rural</b>	<b>Metro</b>	<b>Rural</b>	<b>Metro</b>
<b>Criminal justice?</b>								
No	28.7%	33.3%	44.6%	47.7%	59.5%	61.4%	70.3%	72.0%
Yes	26.8%	30.4%	42.8%	46.3%	57.8%	60.1%	69.5%	70.5%
Difference	-1.9%	-2.9%	-1.8%	-1.4%	-1.7%	-1.3%	-0.8%	-1.5%
<b>Democracy reform?</b>								
No	27.7%	31.3%	43.5%	46.1%	58.1%	60.0%	68.6%	69.9%
Yes	29.2%	35.8%	46.0%	50.6%	61.6%	64.4%	74.0%	76.0%
Difference	+1.5%	+4.5%	+2.5%	+4.5%	+3.5%	+4.4%	+1.4%	+6.1%
<b>Economic justice?</b>								
No	30.7%	34.9%	45.9%	49.1%	59.8%	62.1%	70.4%	72.4%
Yes	23.7%	28.3%	41.1%	44.2%	57.7%	59.3%	69.5%	70.2%
Difference	-7.0%	-6.6%	-4.8%	-4.9%	-2.1%	-2.8%	-0.9%	-2.2%
<b>Initiative reform?</b>								
No	29.1%	33.0%	44.4%	46.9%	58.6%	60.2%	69.9%	71.0%
Yes	23.9%	30.4%	43.1%	49.3%	61.1%	64.7%	70.8%	74.5%
Difference	-5.2%	-2.6%	-1.3%	+2.4%	+2.5%	+4.5%	+0.9%	+3.5%
<b>Reproductive freedom?</b>								
No	25.1%	29.7%	43.0%	46.2%	59.0%	60.6%	69.7%	70.9%
Yes	31.8%	35.9%	45.6%	48.7%	60.6%	61.6%	70.5%	72.5%
Difference	+6.7%	+6.8%	+2.6%	+2.5%	+1.6%	+1.0%	+0.8%	+1.6%

Voter turnout by race and geography (rural vs metro). States are grouped based on the presence or absence of a ballot initiative of a specific issue: "No" = no ballot initiative of that issue, "Yes" = ballot initiative of that issue, "Difference" = difference in voter turnout.

Criminal justice: "No" states = AR, AZ, KS, KY, MA, MI, MT, NE; "Yes" states = OR, TN, VT.  
Democracy reform: "No" states = AR, KS, KY, MA, MT, OR, TN, VT; "Yes" states = AZ, MI, NE.  
Economic justice: "No" states = AR, KS, KY, MI, MT, OR, VT; "Yes" states = AZ, MA, NE TN.  
Initiative reform: "No" states = KS, KY, MA, MI, MT, NE, OR, TN, VT; "Yes" states = AR, AZ.  
Reproductive freedom: "No" states = AR, AZ, MA, NE, OR, TN; "Yes" states = KS, KY, MI, MT, VT.

# Appendix 2: Voter turnout by race

	AAPI		Black		Hispanic		Native		White	
	Rural	Metro	Rural	Metro	Rural	Metro	Rural	Metro	Rural	Metro
<b>Criminal justice?</b>										
No	43.4%	41.8%	39.6%	39.5%	33.7%	35.2%	46.3%	45.6%	55.1%	56.5%
Yes	41.9%	37.6%	40.2%	36.2%	33.5%	35.2%	44.1%	44.1%	52.0%	52.9%
Difference	-1.5%	-4.2%	+0.6%	-3.3%	-0.2%	none	-2.2%	-1.5%	-3.1%	-3.6%
<b>Democracy reform?</b>										
No	41.9%	38.8%	39.8%	37.9%	33.7%	33.9%	44.9%	44.2%	52.7%	53.6%
Yes	46.1%	45.5%	39.6%	40.4%	33.5%	38.5%	48.0%	47.9%	58.5%	60.6%
Difference	+4.2%	+6.7%	-0.2%	+2.5%	-0.2%	+4.6%	+3.1%	+3.7%	+5.8%	+7.0%
<b>Economic justice?</b>										
No	44.5%	42.2%	40.4%	40.0%	36.2%	37.5%	47.4%	47.6%	54.5%	56.3%
Yes	40.5%	38.0%	38.6%	36.1%	29.2%	31.2%	42.9%	41.0%	53.7%	54.0%
Difference	-4.0%	-4.2%	-1.8%	-3.9%	-7.0%	-6.3%	-4.5%	-6.6%	-0.8%	-2.3%
<b>Initiative reform?</b>										
No	42.7%	39.8%	39.3%	37.8%	33.8%	35.1%	45.4%	44.5%	53.7%	54.8%
Yes	44.4%	44.4%	41.7%	41.9%	33.0%	35.3%	47.1%	48.2%	56.7%	58.5%
Difference	+1.7%	+4.6%	+2.4%	+4.1%	+0.8%	+0.2%	+1.7%	+3.7%	+3.0%	+3.7%
<b>Reproductive freedom?</b>										
No	42.2%	39.5%	39.9%	37.5%	30.0%	32.0%	44.8%	43.5%	54.1%	54.7%
Yes	44.0%	42.0%	39.6%	39.9%	37.9%	39.0%	46.8%	47.2%	54.4%	56.4%
Difference	+1.8%	+2.5%	-0.3%	+2.4%	+7.9%	+7.0%	+2.0%	+3.7%	+0.3%	+1.7%

Voter turnout by race and geography (rural vs metro). For most states, race data is modeled rather than collected during voter registration, so actual turnout numbers may vary. States are grouped based on the presence or absence of a ballot initiative of a specific issue: "No" = no ballot initiative of that issue, "Yes" = ballot initiative of that issue, "Difference" = difference in voter turnout.

Criminal justice: "No" states = AR, AZ, KS, KY, MA, MI, MT, NE; "Yes" states = OR, TN, VT.

Democracy reform: "No" states = AR, KS, KY, MA, MT, OR, TN, VT; "Yes" states = AZ, MI, NE.

Economic justice: "No" states = AR, KS, KY, MI, MT, OR, VT; "Yes" states = AZ, MA, NE TN.

Initiative reform: "No" states = KS, KY, MA, MI, MT, NE, OR, TN, VT; "Yes" states = AR, AZ.

Reproductive freedom: "No" states = AR, AZ, MA, NE, OR, TN; "Yes" states = KS, KY, MI, MT, VT.

# Methodology

## Election Results

County level election results data – including votes cast for and against each ballot initiative and votes cast for top-of-ticket Democratic and Republican candidates – were downloaded from each state's Secretary of State websites. Data included the 2022 Primary Election for Kansas and the 2022 General Election for all other states. All data was processed with Python, and visualized with Python and QGIS. To facilitate comparison across different initiatives, the results of all initiatives were analyzed based on BISC's stated position on each. For example, votes *for* MI-3 (establishing constitutional right to reproductive freedom) and *against* KS-1 (establishing no constitutional right to abortion) were both coded as "support" (i.e., in support of BISC's position). To understand how support for different issues compared to general partisan support, the vote margin for each initiative (vote difference (%) between "support" and "oppose") was compared with the vote margin for the closest to-of-ticket partisan contest in that state (vote difference (%) between the Democratic and Republican candidates). Since Montana did not have a statewide, partisan race in 2022, the total votes cast for each congressional district (per county) was used instead; U.S. Senate or Governor races were used for all other states. To understand how results differed in rural and metro areas, counties were classified as "metro" or "rural" using the National Center for Health Statistics Urban-Rural Classification criteria<sup>1</sup>, where counties containing a metropolitan statistical area were classified as "metro" and all other counties were classified as "rural". Election results data was visualized using: pie charts, to show the final vote breakdown for each initiative; paired bar charts, to show the difference in support for initiatives and partisan candidates in rural vs metro areas; and choropleth maps, to visualize vote share (%) for initiatives and candidates at the county level. Importantly, only the eleven states and five issue areas listed above were included in any of these analyses, so additional research will be needed to understand how the trends observed in this report map onto other states and issue areas.

## Voter Turnout

County level voter data – including total registered voters and total voters who voted in the 2022 Primary Election and 2022 General Election broken down by age, race, and sex – were accessed via VAN and shared by the America Votes data team. As with the election results data, voter turnout data included the 2022 Primary Election for Kansas and the 2022 General Election for all other states. All data was processed and visualized using Python. To understand how different issues impact voter turnout, voters were clustered into binary groups for age (young: 18-34 years old; older: 35+ years old), race (BIPOC: AAPI, Black, Hispanic, or Native American; White: white alone), and sex (female, male), and turnout for each group was compared across rural and metro areas of states with and without ballot initiatives of each of five issue areas: Criminal Justice, Democracy Reform, Economic Justice, Initiative Reform, and Reproductive Freedom. Voter turnout data was visualized using: paired bar charts to compare turnout between each demographic factor; and paired bar charts to compare turnout within a given demographic group across two factors: location (rural vs metro) and issue area (presence vs absence of ballot initiative). For more states included in these analyses, race data is not collected during voter registration, so all race data is modeled using Catalist's proprietary algorithm and actual data may vary.

<sup>1</sup>Ingram DD, Franco SJ (2012). NCHS urban-rural classification scheme for counties. National Center for Health Statistics. Vital Health Stat 2(154).