

DRAFT STUDY PLAN – HJ 48: STUDY OF MOVING THE DATE OF THE FEDERAL PRIMARY ELECTION

STATE ADMINISTRATION AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS INTERIM COMMITTEE
PREPARED BY REBECCA C. POWER – JANUARY 2026

INTRODUCTION

At the June 2025 Legislative Council meeting, the council assigned HJ 48: Study of Moving the Date of the Primary Election to the State Administration and Veterans' Affairs (SAVA) Interim Committee. During the September 2025 SAVA meeting, committee members voted to allocated 0.25 FTE to HJ 48 in the committee work plan. This includes multiple staff papers and presentations, several panels of stakeholders, state officials, and national officials, an outline of proposed changes to the election calendar, a final report, and committee legislation to introduce during the 2027 legislative session. This study plan is a road map for the committee to assist in planning and time management related to the study for the remainder of the interim. This document will be updated after each committee work session.

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 on other elections of changing the primary election date and identify possible areas for consolidation and efficiency.
- Identify the possible benefits, drawbacks, and tradeoffs for the voters of Montana 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 the changes needed 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.

POSSIBLE CHANGES IDENTIFIED BY COMMITTEE

As of the November 2025 meeting, committee members identified the following possible changes to the current primary election schedule:

- Keep the primary and the school elections separate, but make them both earlier by about a month
- Keep the primary and the school elections separate, but move the primary earlier and the school election later
- Combine the primary and school elections and move them earlier (combining seems to be the least popular amongst committee members)
- No changes

INTERIM STUDY PROCESS & PROPOSED TIMELINE

The following is a proposed timeline for the HJ 48 study, including the typical phases of an interim study and the topics/presentations requested by the committee.

MEETING	AGENDA ITEMS	COMMITTEE ACTION ITEMS
PHASE ONE: GATHER INFORMATION <i>The first phase of the study is carried out over the first few meetings of the interim, when the committee:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> reviews staff research papers and other informational materials on study topics; hears presentations by experts on various aspects of the study topics; and takes public comment from interested parties, who may offer specific study-related suggestions. 		
July 30, 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Introduction of study resolution and discussion of draft work plan Public comment / stakeholder input 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Approve draft SAVA work plan and HJ 48 FTE allocation
September 25, 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Panel discussions with state officials and election administrators re. the current primary schedule and considerations for making changes Public comment / stakeholder input 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Finalize SAVA work plan and HJ 48 FTE allocation
November 17, 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discussion of election administrator survey results Committee conversation re. questions from September <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Why should we move the date of the federal primary? What obstacles would we face by moving the date? What cannot be changed? Committee work session Public comment / stakeholder input 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify topics for January agenda
January 12, 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Panel discussion re. school election and school funding timelines Committee survey results Modeling possible changes to primary date Voter turnout trends in other states Committee work session Public comment / stakeholder input 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify topics for March agenda Begin to discuss narrowing focus of study and identifying specific issues to address in final report and committee legislation
PHASE TWO: IDENTIFY ISSUES & NARROW FOCUS <i>In the second phase, the Committee spends a meeting or two narrowing the focus of the study. Members identify topics or questions they'd like to analyze further. This phase helps members concentrate on the issues they consider to be of the greatest importance and obtain any additional information needed to make final recommendations.</i>		
March 9, 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Presentations TBD Committee work session Public comment / stakeholder input 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Finalize specific issues to address in final report and committee legislation and begin to discuss

		possible approaches for each / begin discussing committee legislation
PHASE THREE: ANALYZE INFORMATION & IDENTIFY OPTIONS FOR ACTION <i>During the third stage, members review and decide on options for action. Potential solutions, including legislation, are usually reviewed and refined at multiple meetings before the Committee takes final action.</i>		
May 4, 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentations TBD • Committee work session • Public comment / stakeholder input 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue discussion of possible approaches for identified issues and give bill drafting directions to staff for committee legislation
July 7, 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Committee work session • Public comment / stakeholder input 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review draft HJ 48 final report • Review draft HJ 48 committee legislation
PHASE FOUR: FINALIZE FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, & DELIVERABLES <i>By the end of the interim, the committee should finalize a set of findings and recommendations and complete any deliverables including a final report and, possibly, committee legislation for the next legislative session.</i>		
September 2, 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Committee work session • Public comment / stakeholder input 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finalize HJ 48 final report • Finalize HJ 48 committee legislation