The Case for Open Primaries in Oregon

At Community Outreach Events, members of the League of Women Voters of Lane County often conduct “bead polls” as a way to draw people to their table and prompt conversations. Especially around primary season, the poll question is: “Open or Closed Primaries: Which do you prefer?”

That question starts a lot of discussions, especially with voters who aren’t familiar with Oregon’s closed primary system, says LWVLC Membership Chair Ruth Seeger. “We can tell them that almost 45 percent of Lane County voters who are unaffiliated don’t get to vote in the primary, and we can share information on how to switch their party affiliation for that election if they want to vote. We tell them, ‘This is the system we have now, and this is one way to work around it.’”

Following those conversations, a majority of those participating in the poll cast their beads in the Open Primary jar, she adds. Those informal poll results reflect a trend of moving toward more open primaries to re-enfranchise voters registered as nonaffiliated or members of smaller parties.

In Oregon, though, state legislative bills and ballot measures calling for more open primaries have thus far been unsuccessful. Under current state law, the decision on whether to open primaries to nonaffiliated voters rests with the two major political parties, an option those parties have only rarely chosen. Across the state and in Lane County, the result is that the largest block of registered voters cannot participate in selecting candidates for state and federal offices in the November general election.

LWVOR Position

The League of Women Voters of Oregon adopted this position on open primaries in June 2023 (in concurrence with the LWV Maryland position):

LWVOR supports more open primary elections, either through:

a. Party primary elections in which unaffiliated voters as well as party members would be permitted to vote in a primary election to choose the nominees of the parties; or

b. Individual candidate-based primary elections in which all voters choose among all candidates from all parties on the same ballot with the candidates’ party affiliations listed. The subsequent general election ballot would include either

i. a predetermined number of candidates without regard to partisan affiliation; or

ii. those candidates receiving a predetermined percentage of the total primary vote.

Types of Primaries

Reliance on primaries to narrow the field of candidates who appear on the general election ballot is a relatively recent practice in the United States. Party leaders largely steered candidate selection until the Progressive Era of the early 20th century, when political reformers set out to democratize this process. One of the earliest primaries was in Wisconsin in 1906, following voter approval of this new election form through referendum (giving citizens the right to vote on such measures was, in itself, another Progressive reform). By 1916, 25 of the then-48 states had launched their own primaries, including Oregon, which held its first primary in 1912.

Across the nation, states have adopted a variety of primary election forms in the intervening years:

- Closed—only voters registered with a party may vote to nominate that party's candidate for the general election.
- Partially closed—each party decides before the election cycle begins whether to let nonaffiliated voters or other party members vote in their primaries.
- Open to nonaffiliated only—these citizens may choose a party ballot; voters registered with a political party cannot cross over to vote in another party's primary.
- Partially open—voters must publicly declare which party's ballot they want to cast.
- Open—voters can choose to vote in any party's primary without a public declaration.
- Top-two / top-four / top-five—all candidates for an office are listed on the same ballot, regardless of their party affiliation; the top finishers advance to the general election. California, Washington, and Alaska have adopted this type of primary. Louisiana's variation on this form, sometimes referred to as a "jungle primary," foregoes a general election if the top candidate in the primary wins at least 50 percent plus one vote; otherwise, a run-off election is held six weeks after the primary.

According to Ballotpedia, Oregon is among 23 states in which at least one political party conducts closed primaries for congressional and state-level offices. The Democratic and Republican parties in Oregon currently hold closed primaries, though both have opened those elections to other voters in the past. Most recently, the Oregon Republican Party opened statewide primaries for attorney general, secretary of state, and treasurer to nonaffiliated voters in 2012, though none of those races were contested.

Arguments for and against Closed Primaries

Advocates of closed primaries contend that permitting only party members to select nominees is the best way to ensure that those candidates represent the party's values and policy preferences. Open primaries could entice voters to cross over in an attempt to nominate opposition party candidates who might face a tougher race in the general election, they suggest.

Opponents of closed primaries argue that publicly funded primaries should be open to all registered voters and contend that closed primaries are likely to produce more ideologically extreme candidates. In some voting districts, the electorate is so skewed toward one major party or the other that the primary election effectively decides the race before nonaffiliated voters or those registered with smaller parties have an opportunity to vote.

Support for more open primaries may be gaining slowly in states, like Oregon, where voters are increasingly distancing themselves from the traditional two-party system. A 2024 nationwide Gallup poll found that a record high 43 percent of respondents identified as independent voters. According to the Independent Voter Project, as of June 2026, 46 percent of Oregon voters are not affiliated with either major party; 31 percent are registered Democrats, and 23 percent are registered Republicans. Lane County voters reflect those state and national statistics: As of April 2026, the Lane County Clerk's Office tallies 285,064 registered voters, including 100,290 registered as Democrats (35.2 percent), 61,533 Republicans (21.6 percent), and 123,241 (43.2 percent) registered with smaller parties or not affiliated with a political party.

Research by the Bipartisan Policy Center found that primaries open to nonaffiliated voters rose from 17 percent to 25 percent of all primary elections over the past two decades. The switch to more open primaries immediately increased voter participation: Turnout rose 5 percent in states that opened their primaries to voters not registered as Democrats or Republicans. More open primaries also increased Asian and Latino voter participation and the nonaffiliated share of the electorate, the study found. Increasing primary turnout would be a welcome change in Oregon: In the 2024 election cycle, only 35.8 percent of voters cast ballots in the spring primary, compared to 75.4 percent in the general election.

Efforts to Change Oregon's Primary Election Structure

Advocates of more inclusive candidate selection have tried repeatedly to open the state's primaries to a wider range of voters. In the 2008 general election, Measure 65 called for a

blanket primary in which all candidates, regardless of party affiliation, for the offices of president, governor and other directly elected state officers, U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, and state legislators would be listed on the same ballot for all voters, with the top two candidates moving on to the general election. That measure failed by an almost two-to-one margin, and a similar referendum in 2014, Measure 90, was defeated in an even more lopsided vote.

All Oregon Votes, a nonpartisan state action committee, failed to get enough signatures on petitions for similar measures in 2022 and 2024. The group also supported Initiative 55, called the Voter Fairness Act, whose petitioners included former Governor Ted Kulongoski; that proposal aimed to write open primaries into the state constitution but failed to obtain the necessary 156,231 signatures to make it on to the November 2026 ballot.

Oregon's closed primary system was also the subject of a lawsuit filed in Marion County by retired attorney and All Oregon Votes member Mark Porter, claiming that barring nonaffiliated voters from participation violated the state constitution. That lawsuit was dismissed in January 2026.

A bill before the Oregon State Legislature in 2025, HB 3166, sought to introduce a "unified primary" advancing the top five candidates—later amended to the top two vote getters—from all parties and independent candidacies to the general election. The bill, which was not advanced by the House Committee on Rules, drew testimony from more than 600 Oregonians, both in opposition and support.

Many opponents of HB 3166 likened the proposed unified primary to Measure 117 calling for ranked choice voting, which was defeated by Oregon voters in a 2024 state referendum. Several pointed out that nonaffiliated voters wishing to participate in one of the major primary races can easily change their party affiliation.

Testifying on behalf of the bill, representatives of the Oregon Election Reform Coalition (which includes the state's Progressive and Independent parties, Common Ground, Veterans for All Voters, and the Indivisible Network) argued that the current closed primary system disenfranchises almost half of registered voters, including younger and more diverse Oregonians; inhibits competition; and skews election results toward more extreme candidates and platforms.

Also weighing in on HB 3166 were LWVOR representatives Barbara Klein (then acting president) and Norman Turrill (governance coordinator), who wrote to the Rules

Committee that the State League supports efforts to move toward more open primaries, but not to a top-two model:

> After several long-term studies on election systems (2008, 2017, 2023), the LWVOR has continued to reject the idea that a top-two election system offers adequate representation to voters. Systems advancing two or even three candidates to a winner-take-all ballot for the general election encourage vote splitting, manipulation and strategic voting during the primary. Washington state and California both have top-two systems that have frequently resulted in general election races in which one of the major parties is not on the ballot. Whether due to one of the major parties having a clear population advantage or where vote splitting has produced a general ballot with two candidates from only one party (sometimes even the minority party), it reduces the choice for voters. Considering voter registrations, Oregon could see many districts with only Democrats proceeding to the general ballot (for the major parties), and some districts (although fewer) with only Republicans. The original HB 3166 bill advanced five candidates with a change in the ballot county system to best provide representation and serve voters.
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> LWVOR looks forward to the day when we have an improved election system protecting all political parties and open to all voters. A unified primary (one ballot with all candidates for all voters) is part of our goal, based on our positions. We appreciate that HB 3166 is promoting that part of our goal—a unified primary.

In a recent interview with an LWVLC Advocacy Committee member, State Rep. John Lively (D Springfield), who cosponsored HB 3166, said he expects similar legislation to be introduced in future sessions "until, maybe, something changes … because right now a larger and larger group are unaffiliated or haven't joined a party and can't participate. So, primaries are being decided by just a small percentage of registered voters."

Lively said leaders of the two major parties oppose open primaries, "holding on to what they see as one of the real controls they have over who the candidates are that get into the general election." He has seen some support among fellow Democrats in the Oregon House to open primaries to nonaffiliated voters but no consensus on how to structure those elections; the bill's sponsors changed from a top-five format to top-two in an unsuccessful attempt to win over party leaders, and conversations among open primary advocates are ongoing about how to structure future bills.

Support for more open primaries among citizens and their elected representatives could grow if the number of nonaffiliated voters continues to climb—and those voters discover that they can't participate in candidate selection, Lively suggested. At the very least, he said, the state Democratic and Republican parties should be working harder to educate those voters "to understand what their options really are after they've registered the first time."

Next Steps for Advocacy

In an analysis of HB 3166, Robert Close of All Oregon Votes made this argument for more open primaries:

> With inclusive primaries and sound election methods, all Oregonians would enjoy equal primary voting rights, candidates from any party or no party would receive equal treatment by the state, the general election would feature only viable candidates vetted by all eligible voters, and the winning candidate would always be the one most preferred by voters. Oregon's democracy would truly be "free and equal" as promised in the state constitution.

Proponents of expanding voter access to primary elections continue their efforts, but if recent referenda and legislative results are any indication, they will face an uphill battle. As Lively noted, the tendency to default to the traditional way of doing things is a powerful force.

Based on the LWVOR position favoring more open primaries, the question before members of the League of Women Voters of Lane County is: What can and should we do to educate Lane County voters on possible pathways to make primary elections more inclusive and representative and to increase voter participation? Our Community Outreach events have already taken a productive step in that direction by engaging citizens in conversations about Oregon's primary structure.

You can learn more about primary election reform efforts by clicking on the links in the Sources to this report and connecting with organizations like the Oregon Election Reform Coalition (https://www.electionreform.info/) and All Oregon Votes (https://www.alloregonvotes.org/).

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