

TULSA WORLD



Opinion: Time for Oklahoma to open primary elections to include all voters in deciding leaders

Rev. Mareo Johnson, 4/2/24

As the presidential election ramps up and Oklahoma's closed primaries come up this summer, as an independent voter, I believe that it's fair to include all voters in the election process regardless of party affiliation.

When I first became an independent voter about 10 years ago, I had no idea that one day independent voters would jump in popularity to make up nearly half of U.S. voters. **Gallup reports** that voters identifying as independent peaked at 46% in September, but has hovered at or above 40% for about two years.

An interesting historical note is that **President George Washington** is the only president to represent no political party as an independent voter. But since the nation's founding, the party system has dominated the political system.

An independent voter is a person who is nonpartisan, not affiliated with any particular party. Independent voters believe wholeheartedly that the U.S. Constitution is the bonding decree that governs our nation. We believe it ought to be the common bond of values that guide us through our differences.

Yet, millions of independents are "the fastest growing part of the electorate" are locked out of voting in closed partisan primaries. This is a crisis that should be addressed with solutions.

Primary elections are publicly funded, and no American should have to join a party to vote in an election their tax dollars paid for. Some voters are looking at closed primaries as a hindrance to our democracy. Others have a more dire view, of such exclusion being unhealthy to democracy.

Other states have updated their election laws to reflect this change in view, **either through a ballot initiative or legislative changes.**

In 2004, Washington voters approved an initiative to become the first state to adopt a top-two primary system for congressional and state-level elections. California voters did the same in 2010. In **2020, Alaska** voters passed a measure for a top-four primary. Nebraska has a top-two system, but its Legislature is nonpartisan.

The Maine Legislature in 2021 passed in a notable bipartisan vote a measure that opens primary elections. In total 20 states have opened primaries. Many of those are considered red states such as Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Montana, North Dakota and Tennessee.

These are just a few examples where leaders are taking serious efforts to reform closed primary elections. Numbers are growing for calls to reform our closed primary system in Oklahoma and elsewhere.

We are at a crucial time where leaders have a chance to do what's right for all Americans. This is a time when we must work more together than not. This is a time when we must put the advancement of all ahead of individual agendas.

We must come together to form an alternative in our electorate that supports every American voter. Open primaries for all would be a change in a positive direction, opening the door of better possibilities as a nation.

In almost every state, independent voters are the largest or second largest group of registered voters. Nationally, that includes over 50% of young people, 49% of veterans and growing numbers of voters of color.

In Oklahoma, independent voter registrations haven't reached that level but represent 20% of the voters. However, independent registrations have grown by 3.1% in the state since 2020.

Regardless of the growing popularity of independent voters, there is a moral and ethical case of open primaries.

Closed primaries can be viewed as a form of voter suppression. As politically unaffiliated voters increase, closed primaries lock out bigger parts of our electorate. These voters are left out of determining their leaders.

A good question to ask yourself: Does a person have to register with a party just to take part in the election process?

Open primaries bring more inclusiveness into the political process. We need inclusiveness more now than ever before. We need everyone working together. If we can work more together, we can establish and accomplish more as a nation.



The Rev. Mareo Johnson is the founder and pastor of The Seeking the Kingdom Ministries, president of United Nations Association of Eastern Oklahoma and founder and executive director of Black Lives Matter Tulsa Chapter.

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