

Editorial: Update Oklahoma election laws to give voters freedom to make more candidate choices

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Oklahoma's bottom ranking in voter turnout is likely the consequence of the state's woefully outdated and exclusionary election laws. It's time Oklahoma voters demand a better marketplace for ideas and the freedom to make choices.

In 2022, nearly 900,000 Oklahoma voters were shut out of voting in contested races, [according to a national analysis](#) by the Lee Enterprises Public Service Journalism team. About 58% (31 of 53) of those contested state and federal races were decided outright in primaries that were closed to all but party members.

It doesn't have to be that way. The majority of states have some form of open primaries and have much more engaged civic involvement as a result. Oklahoma has examples within the state showing how open ballots encourage better public discourse.

For example, the Tulsa mayor and city councilors are elected on nonpartisan, open ballots. Campaigns are focused on selling as many voters on their ideas as possible. Candidates knock on more doors, public forums cater to all constituents, and every eligible Tulsa voter has the freedom to choose who they feel has the best pitch.

The ballot is simple: All candidates are put on a list. The top two winners go to a general election, unless one gets more than 50% of the vote. For decades, the result has been a diverse council with a range of perspectives and backgrounds, and mayor who seek a consensus among city leaders and residents.

Tulsa has thrived under this election system. Oklahoma would benefit by doing something similar.

Moving to open primaries is about freedom and choice. Political parties still play a role, and some states put the party designation next to candidates' names on ballots. The reform would be updating the system to involve all voters in deciding on government representatives.

This isn't a radical idea. But pushback will come from political party leaders and sitting elected officials fearful of losing power or influence. If a party's candidates have the best vision and plans for an office, then voters will respond — that's the free market approach.

However, incumbents got elected because this current system works for them, even if it's not working for all Oklahoma voters. They won't support a change.

That leaves the initiative petition route, which can be onerous and expensive. It's also the mechanism used often in Oklahoma when lawmakers ignore the will of the people.

The biggest threat to the American form of democracy is voter apathy, not fraud. Instead of wringing hands over whether to watermark mailed ballots or require more identification, remove obstacles preventing voters from casting a ballot.

Give voters the freedom to consider all candidates and all ideas. That's the truest form of a representative republic.