

Opinion: Open Oklahoma primaries for better voter turnout and less divided government

Adam Kupetsky, May 24, 2024



For nearly a decade, I've watched increasing numbers of politicians squirm while governing, afraid their extreme political flanks will call them out as apostates to their liberal, conservative or populist political faiths.

It's not easy addressing serious — and real — issues while trying to please voters who focus their money and energy electing people on promises to rigidly pursue their specific agenda.

The pressure to bow to the extreme is made worse in Oklahoma because we subject candidates to closed primaries. These contests also deny Oklahomans the opportunity to meaningfully vote in our elections.

To be elected in our state, candidates must win party primary elections, which tend to attract voters from the far ends of the party. Those are the ones motivated to cast ballots in primaries, so candidates cater to that uber-partisan ideology.

When that happens in both political parties, it leaves a choice of two nominees entrenched in hyper-partisanship.

As a result, general elections often exclude candidates who might appeal to a broader cross-section of moderate voters from both parties.

Voters who might support those moderate candidates tend to sit out the election. At best, they vote for a candidate they dislike the least. Either way, they have no good voting options.

This year, nearly 35 of the 127 legislative seats up for election will be decided in the primary, and that is on top of the 50 races that are not being contested, according to [Tulsa World reporter Randy Krehbiel](#). That leaves many voters without a vote.

A growing number of Oklahoma voters are identifying as independents, making up a current 19% of all registered voters. The Democratic Party allows independents to ask for a ballot in its primary, but they are excluded from Republican and Libertarian party primaries. With the dominance of the Republican Party in Oklahoma, that's a lot of voters being excluded.

Closed primaries assume people are loyal to just one party. But there are multiple times in Oklahoma in which Democratic voters would have supported a Republican, if that person had survived the primary. In those cases, that candidate potentially would have represented more of us citizens than the chosen few party regulars.

If everyone were allowed to vote in the primary, it is likely that Oklahoma would have better laws. When lawmakers are entrenched in their party ideology, they ignore the greater demands. In Oklahoma, that can be seen in the successful citizen petition initiatives such as Medicaid expansion, criminal justice reforms, alcohol sales reforms and medical marijuana.

Ironically, the Legislature is seeking to make those petitions harder to pass.

When half of the Oklahoma races are not contested, candidates in those offices never have their positions or beliefs challenged. They remain beholden to parties and platforms rather than to the people they represent.

An argument from Oklahoma Republican Party leaders to keep closed primaries is rooted in the right to choose their own candidates. But, in Oklahoma, all taxpayers fund their primary election. The state is not just letting parties choose its candidates; it is complicit in limiting the right of independents and moderate voters to vote.

These days, many young voters register as independents because they are disgusted with party politics. By excluding moderates from elections, parties are perpetuating the very system rejected by these young voters.

Oklahoma [ranks last](#) in [voter participation](#) and [is among 19 states with closed or partially closed primaries](#). States with various open primary designs are finding success in getting more people to vote.

The most simple system is to allow anyone, including independents, to vote in an election primary, putting everyone on the ballot — like in our city council or school board races. If no candidate achieves 50% of the vote, then the top two finishers have a runoff.

Even in those open primaries, candidates from a state's majority party tend to win. But the winning candidates usually have support from a cross-section of voters from other parties. Open primaries force candidates to find more common ground to represent a greater share of the population.

In Tulsa, open elections have worked well in electing a moderate (yet still conservative) mayor who is well-respected, worked to improve Tulsa and is genuinely interested in having support across the political spectrum. Our city has found open elections effective for city and school representatives, as well.

For the vast majority of us, these open elections are a refreshing example of how the government can find a way to improve society without throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

Adam Kupetsky is a civic advocate and a former member of the Tulsa World Community Advisory Board.