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The Case for Closed Primaries

Millions of Americans believe that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from Donald Trump.

People were understandably suspicious when it took several days in some states to count ballots, yet in other states the results were known later that election night. Reports of ballot stuffing also caused people to lose faith in the electoral process. Ballot harvesting — in which third parties collect completed ballots and return them on behalf of voters — is another practice that has undermined election integrity in the minds of many, as is the mailing of ballots to all registered voters. After all, ballots can be sent to addresses where registered voters no longer live, or can be intercepted from mailboxes, allowing someone else to then vote in place of the real registered voter. This is especially a problem if voters do not have to show an ID to a notary.



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And there are other, more insidious, ways that the election process can be manipulated to diminish the influence of well-informed voters. We will examine some of those in this article.

Understanding the threats to election integrity is important, because once people lose confidence in the ability to settle their differences in a civil manner — either at the ballot box or with the jury box — many will become alienated and stop participating, or else seek violent means of settling those differences.

The Importance of Primary Voters

In states with closed primaries, party candidates are typically selected by well-informed voters, giving “the masses” a clearer ideological choice during the general election. A closed primary is one in which only people who are actually registered as members of a specific political party are allowed to vote to choose the candidate to represent that party in the general election.

The closed primary seems quite logical. One would not expect Baptists to participate in the election of the pope in the Roman Catholic Church, or that Methodists should select deacons in a local Baptist congregation. If someone desires to be part of the process in selecting the candidate of the Republican Party, then that person should join the Republican Party.

Closed-primary voters are also less numerous, and in the Republican primary they tend to be more conservative and better informed. Likewise, those who cast ballots in the Democratic primary are more likely to be liberal and better informed regarding the ideas that motivate those on the Left.



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Those who skip the closed primary but then vote in the general election tend to be less informed and more “moderate,” so to speak. The closed primary gives these voters a clearer choice between a candidate who is more conservative and one is more liberal, at least theoretically.

Why would better-informed voters tend to have stronger opinions than the average voter? The answer is simple. An individual tends to have a stronger opinion on something on which he or she is more informed. If one were asked to rate the top 10 Major League Baseball players of all time, a person who has less interest in Major League Baseball is likely to have a weaker opinion about this. On the other hand, a person who has studied the history of baseball, and has played the game, will tend to have a more informed opinion — and a stronger one.

The same thing is true in politics. A person who has read and understands the U.S. Constitution, who has studied history and political philosophy, and who realizes that limited government is critical to our individual liberty and prosperity, will usually have a stronger motivation to become active in the political process.

Open Primaries

Self-described “moderates” typically favor open primaries or other deviations from the closed-primary system. This is often because they want more “moderate” voters like themselves to vote.

A recent fundraiser in Oklahoma demonstrates that the goal of opening primaries to nonmembers of the Republican Party (i.e., an “open primary”) is to move Republican officeholders more to the left — or as they put it, to a more “moderate” position. Three political personalities prominent in Oklahoma were featured in a recent edition of *The Oklahoman* newspaper.

Oklahoma City Mayor David Holt was among the participants advocating ending the state’s closed primary system. Holt was a registered Republican during his tenure in the Oklahoma Legislature, where he earned a mere 13 percent on the Oklahoma Conservative Index in 2017.

Tulsa Mayor G.T. Bynum, another well-known RINO (Republican in Name Only) in the Sooner State, explained why he supports the open-primary system, arguing that it leads “to more effective government by reducing the potential for partisanship in office.” Of course, a government can be extremely “effective” yet still be a government under which we would not wish to live. Adolf Hitler, Mao Zedong, and Joseph Stalin ran very “effective” governments. By contrast, our nation was founded on the idea that the role of government is to protect our God-given liberties, not just be “effective.”

The *Oklahoman* article, which chose not to quote anyone who opposed open primaries, factually erred when it said that participant Mickey Edwards was a prominent “Republican” along with Holt and Oklahoma Labor Commissioner Leslie Osborn. While Holt and Osborn — both of whom previously served in the Oklahoma Legislature with low conservative ratings — remain registered Republicans, Mickey Edwards does not. It is true that Edwards was once a registered Republican, but he formally left the party a few years ago.

Before exiting the party, Edwards had already drifted away from the strongly conservative stance he had taken earlier in his political career, when he represented an Oklahoma congressional district from 1977-1993. After a 16-year tenure, Edwards lost in the Republican (closed) primary due to a scandal involving the House Bank — like many other members, he was allowed to write checks for amounts beyond what he had in his account.



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Facilitating fraud: Mail-in ballots, while “convenient,” are more susceptible to fraud. Ballots mailed to voters, especially those who have not requested them, can go to addresses where the legitimate, registered voters no longer live. (Alcorn Imagery/Adobe Stock)



He later landed a job teaching at an Ivy League college. For whatever reason — whether he changed his philosophy to better suit that of an Ivy League professor, or he was simply insincere with earlier stances — he has moved to the left. He joined the left-leaning Brookings Institution and the globalist Council on Foreign Relations, and has also held a high-ranking office in the globalist Aspen Institute. He voted for Barack Obama in 2008 and endorsed Joe Biden in 2020. At a book signing held at the University of Oklahoma, he lamented that Utah had chosen Mike Lee to replace a more “moderate” Republican.

Edwards also explained his opposition to the closed primary: It “doesn’t encourage the selection of candidates who might have more moderate or centrist views.”

This is what the push for an open primary is all about — moving the Republican Party closer to the Democratic Party. The name of the group promoting open primaries in Oklahoma is Oklahomans United for Progress.

Because of the open-primary system, we see the less-conservative Republicans garner support from Democrats, who cross over to vote for them. Such mischief is not limited to the Republican primaries, of course. In 2008, radio commentator Rush Limbaugh encouraged Republicans to vote in Democratic presidential primaries for Hillary Clinton. This was not to help Clinton win the Democratic nomination, but simply to delay the capturing of the party’s nomination by Obama.

Advocates of the open primary are not bashful as to the reason they support them. Seth Masket of the University of Denver was blunt. The primaries have “evolved” to the point that they are “dominated by ideological partisans” who are more likely to participate in the primaries, and he does not like that. But who defines “ideological partisan”?

In a 2023 article for *The American Conservative*, Frank DeVito wrote, “Political parties are not meant to be open to outsiders. Every American voter is free to join the Republican Party. But the party is a closed association, meant to gather and represent the policy preferences of the people who decided to be part of it.”

DeVito added, “If people do not agree with the policy preferences of the Republican platform or its



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chosen Republican candidates, those people are free to be part of another political party, or none at all. The primary election is the modern mechanism for the political party to select *its own candidate*. Open primary advocates want to accomplish the goal of having more moderate candidates that are palatable to people outside a party. But that is not the point of a primary. The primary is meant to select the candidate preferred *by the party*.” (Emphasis in original.)

“Jungle Primaries” and Ranked-choice Voting

Another departure from the closed-primary system is the “jungle primary,” as used in California and Louisiana. In those states, political parties are not even allowed to have their own primaries. All candidates, regardless of political party, are placed in one primary election. If a candidate obtains a simple majority, then that candidate is elected. However, if no one receives a majority, then the top two candidates, regardless of party, advance to the general election. Consequently, one could have two Democrats in the general election, or two Republicans.

One of the problems with such a system is that a person can win the nomination without getting the support of the majority of the party. In Louisiana years ago, the first-place candidate was former Governor Edwin Edwards, a Democrat, and in second place was Republican David Duke, a former leader of the Ku Klux Klan. Though name recognition enabled both to make the “general election,” neither had anywhere close to a majority of the vote, and neither likely would have won a closed primary.

Edwards had previously been indicted in a bribery scandal, and after he narrowly beat Duke in the general election, he was indicted again — and convicted. In Louisiana, voters called it a choice between the bigot and the crook.

Jungle primaries can also lead to “vote splitting.” For instance, if the majority party fielded a dozen candidates and the opposition party only had two or three, the opposition-party candidates could advance to the general election after winning only a tiny percentage of the vote.

In addition to jungle primaries, another scheme intended to promote more “centrist” candidates at the expense of more-conservative hopefuls is “ranked-choice voting.” In ranked-choice voting, voters are asked to vote for their first choice as well as their second choice, in a variant of the jungle primary. This has tended to help more “moderate” candidates, as was the case in a recent election in Alaska. Conservative voters, in this scenario, are prone to vote for the more-conservative Republican candidate, then make their second choice a less-conservative Republican hopeful. Then, if no one gets a majority of the vote (which is highly likely), that second-choice person uses votes from more-moderate Republicans and more-moderate Democrats to outperform the more-conservative Republican.

If this sounds confusing, it is. Confused voters are commonplace in ranked-choice voting.

Nationwide Movement

One supporter for open primaries in Idaho is former Idaho Attorney General Jim Jones. He was clear that his reason for opposing closed primaries is that they allow more-conservative candidates to win the primaries. Support for open primaries “was the only way I could see we could straighten out Idaho politics,” he said. “The Republican primary was closed in 2012, and ever since that, the legislature has gone further and further to the right.”



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Support for open primaries is nationwide, and well organized. Open Primaries is a national organization pushing to end closed primaries. As noted on the group's website, openprimaries.org:

Open Primaries is a movement of diverse Americans who believe in a simple, yet radical idea: No American should be required to join a political party to exercise their right to vote.

The mission of Open Primaries is to advocate for open and nonpartisan primary systems, counter efforts to impose closed primaries, educate voters and policymakers, advance litigation, train spokespeople, conduct and support research, and participate in the building of local, state and national open primaries coalitions.

Beside that quote on the site is a photograph of a woman holding a sign reading, "Closed Primary = Voter Suppression." Of course, "voter suppression" is a charge leveled quite often by Democrats to help their candidates at the expense of Republicans. In other words, all of these efforts are aimed at electing more Democrats — and more Republicans who will vote like Democrats.



Education, not shortcuts: Rather than promoting quick "solutions" such as open primaries or term limits, The John Birch Society promotes a better-informed electorate, educated in the constitutional principles upon which our Republic was founded. Shown is *TNA* senior editor Alex Newman speaking at a JBS event in Missouri.

What We Can Do

It is rather silly to urge people to vote when they have no idea who is running, or what the candidates stand for. Yet every election, huge voter turnouts are praised, while low voter turnouts are lamented. If people have to be shamed into voting, they are almost certainly less informed. If voting is important, then we should no more encourage uninformed people to vote than encourage uninformed lawyers to take on law cases — particularly cases in which our own future is on the line. When it comes to voting, our mantra should be: "Do not vote — unless you cast an informed ballot." What we need are more voters who are informed on the principles of constitutional government, not more ill-informed voters. Better-informed voters will then elect better officeholders.

This is why The John Birch Society (the parent organization of *The New American*) favors *education* in constitutional principles, followed by informed *action* in the political process to make a difference.



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There are no shortcuts, such as term limits or a constitutional convention. Limiting terms without a better-informed electorate simply leads to the same type of office-holders as before, and a constitutional convention when so many Americans are not educated in the principles of limited government and individual liberty will simply lead to a situation much worse than what we have now.

Americans concerned about the future of the country need to oppose these efforts to increase the impact of uninformed voters.



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