



# Primary Election Systems

**An LWVO Study**

# **CONSENSUS QUESTIONS**

## **with pros and cons**

**Question #1.** What do you believe is the MORE important purpose of primary elections?

- a. A way for political party members alone to choose their nominees (**partisan**)
- b. A way for all voters, regardless of political party membership, to narrow the field of candidates (**nonpartisan**)

Would your answer to the above vary, depending on the level of government for which the election is being held? **YES / NO**

## **Q#1a. A way for political parties to choose their nominees (partisan)**

### **Pros:**

- Enables political parties to choose their nominees.
- Political parties should have a strong role in determining which candidates speak for them.
- Parties as grassroots, quasi-public organizations focused on winning electoral majorities tend to resist extremes.
- Costs less to appeal to party voters than whole electorate.
- Differing partisan & ideological approaches of parties provides important voter information about candidates.
- Voters belonging to a major political party will almost always have a candidate of their party running in the election.

## **Q#1a. A way for political parties to choose their nominees (partisan)**

### **Cons:**

- **Voters who are not members of a party have no voice.**
- **In highly partisan districts the general election is effectively decided in the primary – and only members of one party have a meaningful vote.**
- **In highly partisan districts, the general elections are often uncontested.**
- **Many feel that political parties are too powerful and polarizing.**
- **Turnout in primary elections is generally low, and turnout might improve if unaffiliated voters were permitted to vote. However there is no research supporting this.**

## **Q#1b.** A way for all voters, to narrow the field of candidates (**nonpartisan**)

### **Pros:**

- All voters can participate.
- They may weaken political parties, which some would welcome.
- They might result in higher rates of participation.
- In a party-dominated district, unaffiliated voters or members of other parties may be able to influence the selection.
- Top-two nonpartisan primaries result in contested general elections and may result in more voter turnout.
- Primary candidates would have to appeal to a much broader cross-section of voters and may therefore be more responsive to them when finally in office.
- Elected officials ultimately represent constituents of differing allegiances, and should be nominated by a diverse electorate.

## **Q#1b. A way for all voters, to narrow the field of candidates (**nonpartisan**)**

### **Cons:**

- They could weaken parties by undermining their ability to select their own candidates.
- They could cause independent, outside funders and movements to gain influence.
- Some nonpartisan alternative election systems can be complex (such as ranked choice voting, which omits primaries entirely) and might confuse voters or discourage participation
- Appealing to the entire electorate in the primary and then waging a contested general election campaign might increase the cost of running for office.
- There is no compelling data that supports conclusions regarding changes in voter turnout or in the selection of more moderate candidates.

**Question #2.** If you answered **YES** in the second part of **Q#1**, indicate your preference for **partisan (P)** or **nonpartisan (NP)** before each of the following levels of government.

- a. U.S. House and Senate races
- b. Statewide office races  
(Governor, Auditor, Treasurer, etc.)
- c. OH House and Senate races
- d. Countywide office races  
(Commissioner, Recorder, Prosecutor, etc.)
- e. City, Village or Township races

# **Q#2a. U.S. Senate/House offices**

## **For partisan primaries:**

- **Partisan & ideological approaches often differ; so party identity constitutes important voter information about candidates.**
- **Voters favoring the minority party in a congressional district dominated by the other party often have a candidate they can support in a general election, whereas in a top-two, nonpartisan primary, they may be forced to choose between two candidates from the dominant party in the general election.**

# **Q#2a. U.S. Senate/House offices**

## **For nonpartisan primaries:**

- **Primary candidates would have to appeal to a much broader cross-section of Ohio voters and may therefore be more responsive to them when in office.**
- **There is rarely a viable general election challenge to the majority party's primary winner. Nonpartisan, top two primaries would at least result in general election competition, whether from the same or another political party.**

## **Q#2b. Ohio statewide races**

### **For partisan primaries:**

- These statewide offices are traditional stepping-stones to higher office, in Ohio or nationally. They help political parties fill their pipelines with future leadership talent.

### **For nonpartisan primaries:**

- These statewide offices, except for governor, are primarily administrative rather than policy-making. Administrative talent is not limited to candidates of one party or another, and should emerge from a nonpartisan field narrowed down by voters of all stripes.

# **Q#2c. OH House and Senate races**

## **For partisan primaries:**

- **State senators and representatives, like their Washington counterparts, should be nominated predominantly by their fellow party members, as they are often called upon to help carry out their party's duties or agenda.**

## **For nonpartisan primaries:**

- **Although most state senators and representatives, like their Washington counterparts, are themselves party members, they must ultimately represent many constituents of differing allegiances, so it is only right that they also be nominated by a diverse electorate.**

# **Q#2d. County Government races**

## **For partisan primaries:**

- **County party committees are major organizational links in the two-party system and play a major role in nurturing leadership, furnishing ballot information, and rallying turnout for county elections. They play an important electoral role, and this function should not be weakened.**

## **For nonpartisan primaries:**

- **Counties are concerned mostly with infrastructure maintenance, health and human services administration, tax assessment and collection, and the administration of justice. Partisan differences should take a back seat to more important competence and management issues.**

# **Q#2e. City, Village & Township races**

## **For partisan primaries:**

- **Citizen-politicians of different parties may approach local issues differently.**
- **Local parties provide important voter information and turnout efforts, and they nurture future political leaders. This role could shrink if primaries were no longer partisan.**
- **Local candidates in partisan races do not have to spend as much money when they appeal to a narrower primary electorate. Nonpartisan primaries with top two general elections would increase the cost of campaigning.**

# **Q#2e. City, Village & Township races**

## **For nonpartisan primaries:**

- **Local issues (e.g. “fixing potholes”) rarely reflect partisan or ideological differences.**
- **Local voters are likely to know personally and want to vote for or against candidates in more than one political party, especially in elections closer to home.**
- **Local candidates for office should have to appeal to all voters, not just to those in their own political parties, which would lead to better representation in the public interest.**

**Question #3.** What principles should a good primary election system encourage?

(✓all that are important and/or achievable)

- a. Increase voter participation
- b. Enfranchise independent or third party voters who otherwise have no voice
- c. Preserve strong political parties
- d. Strengthen the viability of third parties
- e. Simplify administration of elections
- f. Lessen partisan polarization
- g. Reduce costs of elections
- h. Result in more competitive general elections.
- i. Other

# **Q#3a. Increase voter participation**

## **Pros:**

- **Voter participation is key for a healthy democracy.**
- **This goal is important and central to the mission of the League of Women Voters.**

## **Cons:**

- **Not every potential voter wants to keep informed and vote on every race in every primary election. Citizens also have the right not to vote.**
- **There is no compelling evidence that different primary election systems increase voter participation. Other factors could include profile of the race, easier registration, online voting, or better information about the available choices.**

# **Q#3b. Enfranchise independent or 3<sup>rd</sup> party voters who otherwise have no voice**

## **Pros:**

- **Voters with no party or minor party affiliation comprise a significant percentage of the electorate.**
- **This is achievable. Primaries can be structured in a number of ways so that all voters can participate.**

## **Q#3b. Enfranchise independent or 3<sup>rd</sup> party voters who otherwise have no voice**

### **Cons:**

- **Only political party members should vote to select that party's nominees. Unaffiliated voters could nominate a weaker candidate or one who doesn't reflect the party's program and policies.**
- **Opening primaries to unaffiliated voters could undermine the integrity of the political party system, open the door to outside special interests, or actually decrease voter participation.**

## **Q#3c. Preserve strong political parties**

### **Pros:**

- **Political parties promote political stability, recruit and support candidates for office, and provide important political cues for voters. They tend to be motivated by pragmatic thinking.**
- **Political parties have a right to the freedom of association, recognized by the Supreme Court. Therefore the Court struck down primary systems that allow a single voter to vote on candidates for more than one political party in the same primary election (see “blanket primary” in the glossary).**
- **Systems that permit only political party members to vote in their primary would strengthen the parties.**

## **Q#3c. Preserve strong political parties**

### **Cons:**

- **Strong political parties can stifle independent candidates as well as limit the field of primary candidates to those they endorse and support.**
- **Strong political parties may be at the root of hyper-partisanship, gridlock and much of the dysfunction we see in government today.**

## **Q#3d. Strengthen the viability of 3rd parties**

### **Pros:**

- **Viable third parties could increase options for Ohio voters, who are currently limited to selecting only Democratic or Republican primary ballots.**
- **Third parties are often the incubators of new ideas and strategies, so it is important that they be heard.**
- **Improved primary access can correct unfair obstacles to general election ballot access such as high threshold requirements for signatures.**

## **Q#3d. Strengthen the viability of 3rd parties**

### **Cons:**

- **Most likely this goal is not achievable through primary election structure. For third parties to be strengthened, there must be a path for them to win in a general election. The traditional strength of the two-party system and the “winner-take-all” slant of elections preclude such a path.**
- **Third parties are already allowed fairly easy access to a primary ballot in Ohio.**
- **With minor party candidates, a general election candidate is less likely to win majority support.**

## **Q#3e. Simplify administration of elections**

### **Pros:**

- **When voters understand how elections are conducted, they are more likely to see the system as fair. Simplicity of election administration also makes the job of conducting elections easier for election officials.**
- **Streamlining the election system is achievable in a number of ways, such as uniform dates and tabulation systems.**

## **Q#3e. Simplify administration of elections**

### **Cons:**

- **Simplicity of election administration does not necessarily equate with fairness.**
- **Making life easier for election officials should not be a goal of election systems.**
- **Some methods to simplify might actually compromise the fairness and/or accuracy of the election process.**

## **Q#3f. Lessen partisan polarization**

### **Pros:**

- **More of the work of government would be accomplished if officeholders were less polarized and both sides could compromise.**
- **Closed primary systems may encourage candidates to take extreme positions in order to attract votes from their political party's base. Open or nonpartisan systems might encourage candidates to take more moderate positions in order to appeal to a broader spectrum of voters.**

## **Q#3f. Lessen partisan polarization**

### **Cons:**

- **Because Ohio, like the United States, has only two major parties, one will almost always have a majority of voter support. That party can, and should be able to, drive government decision-making.**
- **There is no compelling evidence that a change in primary systems would result in more moderate elected officials. The current political polarization may be a true reflection of the polarized political views of the electorate.**

## **Q#3g. Reduce costs of elections**

### **Pros:**

- **Elections can be a considerable expense for local governments and boards of elections, which is one of the incentives cited by localities that have chosen to eliminate primaries entirely (See several strategies in Question #4). Costly new technologies, early voting on weekends, additional polling locations and postage all run up costs.**
- **The costs to candidates of running for office can also be formidable. In general, those costs go up as competitiveness increases. The least costly campaigns are those by incumbent officeholders with no opposition. High expenses can deter would-be challengers.**

## **Q#3g. Reduce costs of elections**

### **Cons:**

- **Other goals should take priority over costs, when adopting an election system.**
- **Several systems designed to reduce election costs may actually result in higher costs in other ways, such as more cumbersome ways to tally results or expensive hard- or software.**
- **Some strategies to economize might actually compromise the fairness and/or accuracy of the election process.**

## **Q#3h. Result in more competitive general elections**

### **Pros:**

- **In non-competitive districts, the dominant party's primary winner typically wins the general election easily. That ultimate winner has therefore been elected by a small number of primary voters of one political party. This distorts elected officials' ability to represent all of their constituents fairly.**
- **This goal is achievable. Several alternative election systems are designed to produce more general elections that are contested. These are discussed in the Question #4 study guide section to follow.**

## **Q#3h. Result in more competitive general elections**

### **Cons:**

- **An easier and more achievable way to attack this problem would be through redistricting reform.**
- **Reforms that seek to increase competitiveness in elections may have the unintended consequences of weakening political parties. That could lead to increased activity by outside interests and funders.**
- **Reforms could increase difficulty or informational demands on voters.**

**Question #4.** Ohio's current system for local, county and statewide offices is a **semi-closed, partisan primary election**, in which the voter may request any party allot at the time of the election, and the voter may be challenged if he/she changed party affiliation. Do you want to keep Ohio's current system? **YES or NO?**

## **Q#4. Do you want to keep Ohio's current semi-closed, partisan primary system?**

### **Pros:**

- **Ohio's system, for the most part, allows party members to choose their own candidates.**
- **It discourages sabotage via crossover voting in the other party's primary.**
- **It permits thoughtful voters to reaffirm or rethink their partisan identities each year.**
- **Strong parties play an important and active role in voter information and turnout efforts.**
- **Printing and mailing costs are less, because candidates need appeal only to their own party's voters.**

## **Q#4. Do you want to keep Ohio's current semi-closed, partisan primary system?**

### **Cons:**

- **Ohio's independents are disenfranchised during the primary and often even in the general election in races that are contested only in the primary.**
- **It may depress turnout by all but the most engaged party faithful. This may result in the nomination of more extreme candidates and exacerbate polarization.**
- **This system often seems to produce uncompetitive general elections, where all meaningful voting takes place during the dominant party's primary election.**

**Question #4 (cont.).** If you answered **no** above, which of the following systems would you prefer? You may choose more than one.

- a. A closed, partisan primary election
- b. An open, partisan primary election
- c. An open, nonpartisan, “top-two” primary
- d. A nonpartisan general election with a runoff election if no candidate achieves a majority (no primary)
- e. “Ranked choice voting” or “instant runoff voting” in the general election (no primary)
- f. “Approval voting,” a voting system for the general election (no primary)

## **Q#4a. A closed, partisan primary election**

### **Pros:**

- **Party members alone choose their own candidate.**
- **This system keeps people who do not choose a party out of the process.**
- **Avoids strategic voting or sabotage by making crossover voting very difficult.**
- **Political parties should play a strong role in all aspects of the election process.**

## **Q#4a. A closed, partisan primary election**

### **Cons:**

- **In uncompetitive districts, primary races are likely to be decided by a small minority of the electorate.**
- **Independents cannot vote in a primary without affiliating with a party.**
- **Changing affiliation must be planned well ahead of time.**
- **Candidates sometimes become more extreme in their views and ideologies, in order to cater to the base.**

## **Q#4b. An open, partisan primary election**

### **Pros:**

- **Everyone would be able to vote in primary elections, although only for the candidates of their chosen party.**
- **More moderate candidates might run and appeal to independent voters.**
- **This system constitutes the best of Ohio's current system while eliminating the questionable practice of challenges and loyalty statements.**

## **Q#4b. An open, partisan primary election**

### **Cons:**

- **Open primaries make strategic crossover voting or sabotage more likely.**
- **They make party identity and differences less relevant and could weaken parties and party discipline.**
- **Only party members should be selecting their party's nominees.**

## **Q#4c. An open, nonpartisan, “top-two” primary**

### **Pros:**

- **Parties cease to matter as much because consensus building must reach across the entire electorate.**
- **All registered voters may participate; therefore, candidates must appeal to more voters in the electorate.**
- **Strategic voting or sabotage would be difficult to execute.**
- **The person ultimately elected achieves a majority, rather than a plurality, of voter support**
- **In theory, these primaries may produce more moderate candidates.**
- **A competitive general election is more likely.**

## **Q#4c. An open, nonpartisan, “top-two” primary**

### **Cons:**

- **It could increase campaign spending because candidates must reach the entire electorate.**
- **Independent or write-in general election candidates, if permitted, could add additional names to the top-two ballot, possibly necessitating a runoff to avoid a plurality winner.**
- **Political parties would be weakened.**
- **It would have a negative impact on minor party candidates, who can currently make it to the general election. Top two could eliminate them in the primary.**
- **The top two may be of the same political party, which silences the voice of the minority party voters.**

## **Q#4d. No primary - a nonpartisan general election with possible runoff**

### **Pros:**

- **Doing away with the primary saves considerable administrative and campaigning expense.**
- **Candidates must appeal to a large spectrum of voters,**
- **Candidates who belong to a minority party or no party may have a better chance of success.**
- **Cooperation among elected officials of various party affiliations may be more likely.**
- **The politics and ideology associated with political parties are not important to the simple process of providing essential local governmental services**

## **Q#4d. No primary - a nonpartisan general election with possible runoff**

### **Cons:**

- **If a party affiliation cue is not available, voters may turn to irrelevant candidate attributes to make their choice.**
- **Partisanship may be a healthy thing. At its best it is about choices, values and issues.**
- **This system may not work at the statewide level of government if plurality winners or run-off elections are to be avoided.**
- **Such elections run the risk of plurality winners, unless they require runoffs.**
- **Runoffs increase costs, tend to draw low turnout, and shorten by a month the transition period needed for the newly elected to take office in early January.**

## **Q#4e. No primary - “ranked choice voting” in general election**

### **Pros:**

- **Majority winners are produced without the need for either primary or run-off elections.**
- **Voters can express more nuanced preferences among the candidates. Their second or third choice may well win even if their first choice does not.**
- **It might increase voter participation.**
- **It might reduce negative campaigning, if a candidate still has to appeal to voters for whom he or she might not be the first choice.**
- **It eliminates strategic voting or sabotage through crossover voting.**

## **Q#4e. No primary - “ranked choice voting” in general election**

### **Cons:**

- **To count votes, ranked-choice voting requires complex software that many current voting machine installations cannot handle.**
- **Ranking candidates is more difficult for voters than choosing only one, thus increasing the informational demands associated with voting.**
- **In practice, this system has proved confusing and difficult to explain to voters.**
- **Currently there is no evidence that this would increase voter participation.**

## **Q#4f. No primary - approval voting in general election**

### **Pros:**

- **The ballot is simple, in that voters just check off those candidates they deem acceptable.**
- **Calculation is simple, in that tallying up requires only simple addition in one step.**
- **It might increase voter participation or reduce negative campaigning.**

## **Q#4f. No primary - approval voting in general election**

### **Cons:**

- **Voters cannot indicate a “strong” approval for one candidate or a “weak” approval for another.**
- **There are no precedents for how this would work in public elections.**
- **In a large field, the winning candidate might not have the support of a majority of the voters.**