

SUMMARY of TALK by VLADIMIR KOGAN, PhD; Asst. Prof. of Political Science, OSU
-- LWVGC Hot Topics Lecture, November 19, 2pm

In his analysis of Primary Elections in Ohio and elsewhere, Dr. Kogan focussed especially upon the typical primary voter, the erroneous assumptions many people make about voters, and the common reasons given for primary election reform. In ongoing free exchange with approximately 30 League members and visitors, he also addressed their numerous questions and ventured a short but surprising list of modest solutions.

The Primary Voter: He affirmed the characterization of primary voters as only the most interested, politically active or partisan of all party members, which explains their He also noted that most “independent” voters are very disinterested except perhaps in high profile races, where most reliably vote for the same party’s candidates, if they vote at all. Research shows that only 10% of independents are truly so. He expressed doubt that much could be done to change voter behavior or attitudes, although he did think that candidates themselves could do a better job of serving their interests if they had better ways of finding out what their would-be constituents think.

Disproven Assumptions: He refuted, with examples and research findings, four widespread beliefs by concluding: Voters in competitive districts are actually more polarized than are those in “safe,” uncompetitive districts! Voters actually don’t switch their candidate preferences because of issues, but rather they revise their opinions on issues because of those voiced by their preferred candidates! Candidates actually do not perceive very well where voters stand on issues. And.... Voters do not really want bipartisan solutions and rarely reward legislators who compromise.

Reasons for Primary Election Reform: He explained why he does not believe that various primary election system changes would improve turnout or polarization very much. The only elections that attract much voter turnout feature highly competitive or presidential contests. He also said that polarization is a non-issue, because few voters are able to distinguish levels of moderation or extremism among candidates. He addressed the two other main issues of costs and competitiveness during question and answer sessions.

Responses to Miscellaneous Questions:

* Top-Two Nonpartisan Primaries do not improve turnout but, by advancing two candidates, they do increase general election participation, even if both candidates are of the same party. In that sense, they increase competitiveness. They almost always eliminate 3rd party aspirants, however.

* Ranked Choice Voting, like that just adopted in a Maine referendum, eliminate costly primaries and may decrease polarization a bit, but they increase informational demands upon voters which leads to many “exhausted ballots” and only plurality victors.

* Political parties are pragmatically focussed upon trying to gain or retain political power and thus are moderating influences on their more extreme fringe elements, particularly resistant to outside influence and money. In general, parties should be strengthened rather than weakened.

* Costs of election administration and campaigning are greatly reduced when primaries are eliminated or when races are uncontested. However, cost savings should not be a prime goal.

* Municipal primaries attract even less voter interest than do those in even-numbered years. He thinks the way to improve turnout for those races would be to hold them the same years as those elections for state and national races, although they could get lost on the long ballots.

* Ohio's laws permitting pollworkers to challenge primary voters who switch party ballots are rarely enforced and otherwise do not represent much of a problem since very few voters change party ballots anyway.

* There may be some legislative interest in enacting primary election changes, due to the fact that in today's highly polarized climate many incumbents fear being "primaried" in their next race by well-funded outsiders on their more extreme flanks.

* The main purpose of primary elections, in summary and after some thought, ought to tilt in the direction of preserving or strengthening the influence of the political parties rather than in the direction of further weakening them. That is because, by maintaining some control of their nominating process, they tend to pick more experienced candidates closer to the electoral mainstream.

Modest Solutions: Dr. Kogan's presentation concluded with three modest proposals that he feels would help to improve elections in general and primaries in particular. First, fix the informational shortcomings that cause legislators not to know what their constituents want. Second, encourage MORE, not less, money in politics -- both small and large donations should increase, and they should go directly to political parties w/ disclosure rules, not directly to candidates or darkly to SuperPacs and outside groups. And third, increase party influence in candidate selection. He did not specifically take a position for or against any particular primary election system for Ohio.