

Closed Primaries Are Just Fine; **Closed General Elections Are A Serious Problem**

By Roy Minet (Rev. 06/10/18)

In a free country, which we like to think we still have, it is natural for people who share similar philosophies or objectives to associate and form political parties. Such groups may “nominate” candidates for everyone’s consideration in a general election.

Two such parties have decided that they will choose which candidates they wish to offer by having their members vote (a “primary” election).

A political party is a private organization. It would be improper, and also would make no sense, to have people who are not part of the organization “crash the party” and interfere with the group’s internal candidate selection process. It also is highly improper to force people who are not members of the organization to pay for these primary elections.

Someone who is forced to pay for an election might well feel that they should be able to participate in it. But that is backward. The correct solution obviously is to not force non-members to pay. Political parties certainly must be free to hold primary elections, but entirely at their own expense. No taxpayer dollars should ever go to benefit any private political organization!

Unfortunately, forcing all taxpayers to pay for just some “favored” parties’ nominating processes (as well as much of their national convention costs) is only the tip of the iceberg.

What we really need to be concerned about is that general elections are effectively closed, not to voters, but to any candidate who is neither a Democrat nor a Republican. Worse, many general election races are effectively closed to all but the candidates of a single party (either R or D).

As is typical in many states, approximately half of the elections for Pennsylvania state representative have only one (1) candidate on the ballot. That’s no choice at all for voters. You can’t claim to have “won” an election if you were the only choice.

The Democratic and Republican parties have shared power, tag-team style, for far too long. They may disagree on some issues, but they strongly agree that they very much like staying in power and do not like competition. They have conspired to erect a set of barriers which effectively suppresses their competition.

Vigorous competition in the marketplace assures high quality products at the lowest possible prices. Similarly, vigorous and viable competition for elective offices drives higher quality in government at the lowest price. Lacking meaningful competition for decades, government quality has suffered badly and its price has skyrocketed.

Polling data clearly shows that people sense the problems. Respect for Congress borders on contempt. Affiliation with the D and R parties has steadily declined and in 2017 stood at only 28.8% for D and

26.8% for R (Gallup). Meanwhile, affiliation with other parties and independents has grown to 42.1%, way more than for either the R or the D party and approaching a majority. It is a good bet that actual D and R support is even lower since both inertia and being able to vote in primaries tend to prop up their registrations.

Yet the old, declining parties remain ensconced, nominating candidates who are unable to achieve anything close to majority support, thus putting most voters in the position of having to vote for the lesser of two evils. It's no wonder we are vehemently polarized to the point of losing civility.

There are many things that need to be fixed, but here are three really big ones.

First, eliminate any possibility of gerrymandering. Commissions that draw electoral districts are problematic, but might provide some improvement if very carefully done. The best and simplest solution is to use a procedure or algorithm to draw boundaries completely impartially, based strictly on population and geography. Excellent procedures have already been developed and proposed.

Second, drastically reduce the artificial barriers to ballot access. It should be reasonably and equally easy for any political party, and even individuals, to get on the general election ballot. Too many choices would be far better than too few. Ideally, every race would offer about four options. If, in practice, we find too many races where there are ten or twelve candidates, then maybe the barriers need to be raised again – just slightly.

Third, replace plurality with a good ranked-choice voting method. It has been known for more than two centuries that plurality (the option receiving the most votes wins, whether or not a majority) is one of the very worst methods. A ranked-choice voting (RCV) system allows voters two or three choices. If your first choice is eliminated, your second choice then counts exactly as if it had been your first choice. This removes that irresistible pressure to vote insincerely for the “lesser of evils.” Instant runoff voting (IRV) has been tried in some areas, but is only slightly better than plurality. Much better RCV methods are known and should be used instead.

Open general elections would truly be a breath of fresh air and would make it possible for our country to break out of its polarization “death spiral.” But establishment politicians will not relinquish their grasp on power and status willingly...

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