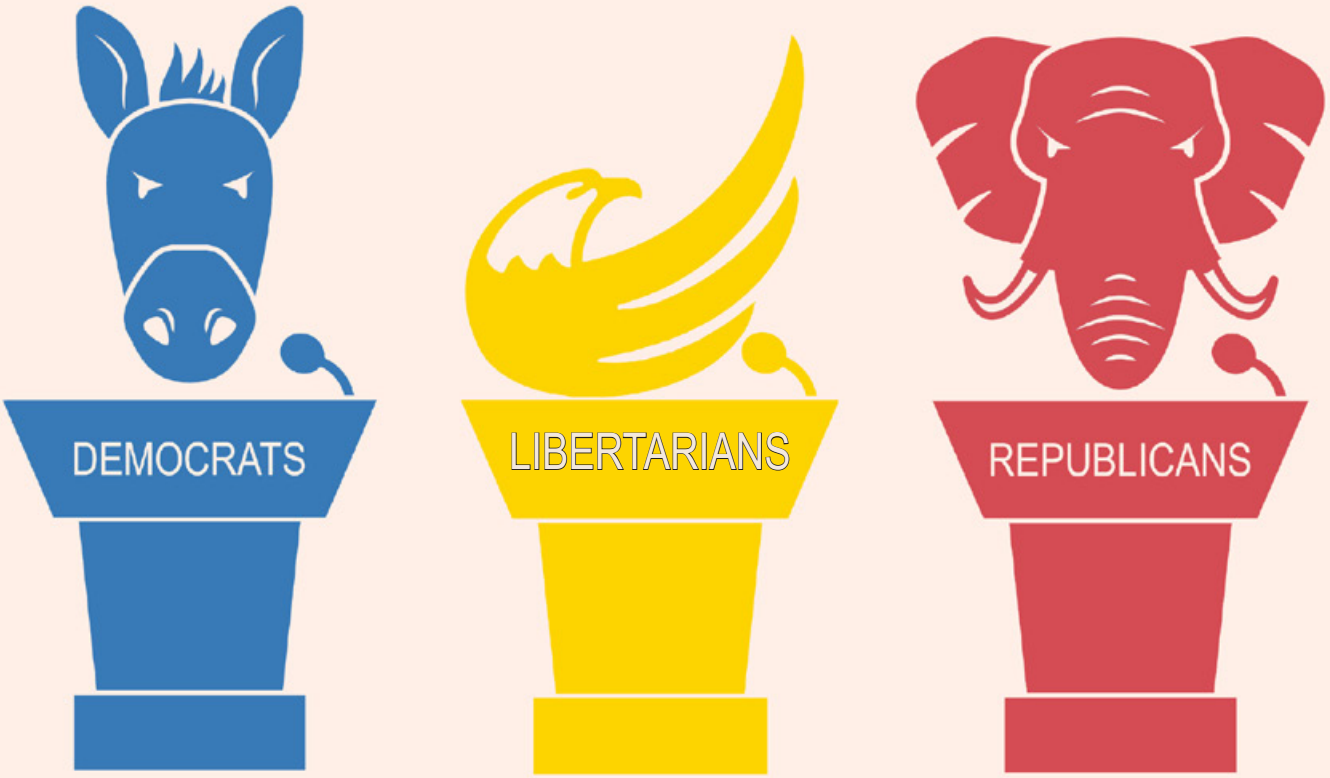

Politics, Primaries, & Polarization:

What about the Oklahoma People?

The Oklahoma Academy
Moving Ideas Into Action

2024 Oklahoma Academy Town Hall, October 27–30

The Oklahoma Academy for State Goals is a statewide nonprofit, nonpartisan, membership organization founded by Governor Henry Bellmon to bring public attention to policy issues, provide objective, thorough research and act as a catalyst for positive change.

After his first term as governor, Bellmon knew there was a need for open, nonpartisan dialogue in the young state. He sought to create a public policy organization that was independent, nonpartisan and inclusive. The purpose of which was to provide citizens the opportunity to participate in a truly democratic process designed to shape the future of Oklahoma. To this day, The Oklahoma Academy upholds Bellmon's vision and the organization's long-standing reputation as the state's premier citizen-based organization for nonpartisan public policy development.

From its inception in 1967 to its revitalization in 1985 to its adoption of the Town Hall process in 2001, The Oklahoma Academy has maintained its relevance in raising awareness and creating public policy for a better Oklahoma. Despite its small staff and limited resources, The Oklahoma Academy generates and manages an impressive amount of public policy information, engages the citizens of Oklahoma in discussing and developing policy recommendations and works ardently with the community leaders and policymakers to implement the resulting ideas through community and legislative action. To date more than 112 pieces of legislation passed since the adoption of the Town Hall process in 2001.

The Academy Process identifies areas of need and problems facing Oklahoma, conducts research on identified critical issues, and develops long range goals, consensus recommendations, and agendas for action.

Through the Town Hall conference process, citizens are given the opportunity to honestly and openly discuss the issues, determine the solutions, and collaborate to develop public policies that they believe will achieve the greatest good. Then, the attendees are empowered to contact their legislators and other policymakers about the proposed policies.

The Academy has covered a wide range of topics, including education, small business development, government structure, crime, technology and the future, and the state's constitution.

Building Awareness, Developing Policies, Inspiring Oklahomans to Move Ideas Into Action!

The Oklahoma Academy, P.O. Box 968, Norman, OK 73070
Phone: (405) 307-0986 Email: lynn@okacademy.org
www.okacademy.org

THE OKLAHOMA ACADEMY

Town Hall

Academy President and CEO

Hello 2024 Town Hall Participants!

JULIE KNUTSON
President and CEO

This year's Town Hall will focus on a very important topic, "Politics, Primaries, & Polarization: What about the Oklahoma People?". This is a local, state and national issue; rarely does a day go by that we don't hear something regarding the lack of voting, political polarization, or the lack of civility in our elections. It is not an easily solved problem; it has many facets. It requires a diligent look and set of discussions that will result in workable solutions. That is why you are a part of this Town Hall!

I am thrilled you accepted the invitation to participate in this important Town Hall focus. In accepting this invitation, you must be prepared and ready for open, honest discussion and deliberation. This background resource book has been purposely developed to help you do that. It is expected that you read the document prior to coming to the Town Hall and be familiar with all of the aspects within the topic of the state of politics, primaries and voter engagement, polarization, and the role of the people in our political system. Some of you work directly or indirectly in the in this arena, and therefore may feel you know all there is to know about the topic. However, no matter how much we know in a given area, we can all learn! Others participating recognize that the lack of voter engagement must be addressed, but do not necessarily know all of the specific aspects that need to be considered. This background resource document is developed to provide many sides of the issue. If you do not read the document, you will not be prepared, and you will stifle your group's discussion and ability to formulate recommendations to solve the problems.

In accepting this invitation to participate you have also accepted the responsibility to represent others in your geographic, demographic and vocational area as you discuss and deliberate the Question Discussion Outline for your group at the Town Hall. You'll be working with other participants at Town Hall to openly and honestly talk about and collaborate on solid and creative solutions in a variety of areas having to do with politics, primaries, and polarization. It is critical to be prepared. As a Town Hall member, your voice can be heard should you choose it to be.

From March through July this year we held community "listening sessions" on this issue. By "listening session" we mean an opportunity to hear from citizens on their thoughts and concerns about the lack of voter engagement, ballot initiatives, closed/open primaries, and civility. The discussions were very valuable. Many thanks to the following Academy members for their help in organizing these sessions in their parts of the state: John McArthur, Dwight Hughes, Dan Schiedel, Michael Gordon, Rachel Hutchings, Kim Holland, John Feaver, Steve Valencia, and Jeff Greenlee.

Your Assignment and Role…

Take advantage of your unique opportunity in this collaborative work. Be prepared. Listen actively, share your thoughts, knowledge, concerns, and ideas. Be willing to learn. The work of the Town Hall is much easier, more satisfying if you are prepared. The better prepared you are, the richer the discussions and the better the consensus recommendations and solutions are!

Begin reading and taking notes!

I look forward to seeing you at Town Hall 2024.

Julie J Knutson

Julie Knutson
President / CEO
The Oklahoma Academy

THE OKLAHOMA ACADEMY
Town Hall

2024 Town Hall Leadership

HOWARD BARNETT JR.
Town Hall Chair

As Chair of the Town Hall, I appreciate your willingness to participate in the Oklahoma Academy's 2024 Town Hall. In today's political landscape, the issues associated with politics, primaries, and polarization dominate discussions and headlines. However, amidst the noise, it's essential not to lose sight of the most crucial element: the people. This year's Town Hall conference aims to delve deep into this fundamental aspect of governance and democracy by exploring how we can center political discourse and action around the well-being and interests of the Oklahoma people.

Polarization itself, for instance, can have significant effects on the populace. It can lead to increased partisanship, where people are more likely to support their party regardless of the actual policies or actions of its candidates. This can create an "us versus them" mentality, hindering constructive dialogue and cooperation between different groups.

Moreover, extreme polarization can exacerbate social divisions and stifle compromise, making it difficult to address pressing issues facing society. It can also contribute to political gridlock, where lawmakers struggle to pass legislation due to ideological differences.

Ultimately, the key to mitigating these challenges lies in fostering a political culture that prioritizes the common good over partisan interests, encourages respectful discourse, and values compromise and cooperation. This requires active engagement from citizens, a robust civil society, and leaders willing to bridge divides rather than deepen them. By focusing on the people and their needs, rather than solely on party politics, we can work towards a more inclusive and effective political system.

Over the course of three days, we will bring together leading experts, policymakers, activists, and citizens to engage in thoughtful discussions, panels, and workshops on a variety of topics, including: the role of primaries in shaping political discourse, polarization in politics, and the people's role in our system.

Our goal is not only to analyze the challenges we face but also to identify concrete solutions and actionable steps that can be taken to address them. By centering our discussions around the people and their needs, we believe we can work towards a more inclusive, responsive, and effective political system.

Our citizens, children, and communities deserve this timely topic. Your ability to have thoughtful conversations that respectfully convey your experience in this area will be deeply important in the coming days. Being present for the sessions in a way that contributes to the dialogue shows your commitment to the betterment of the state of Oklahoma.

I fervently hope that you will not find yourself constrained by any unnecessary boundaries as you deliberate the themes of this Town Hall assembly and, over its two and a half days, that you arrive at a set of recommendations for improving the living and working conditions and qualities of our marvelous state. Thank you for your continued interest in supporting the mission of the Oklahoma Academy for State Goals to provide a forum that encourages civil discourse in a way that builds consensus.

Howard B. Barnett Jr.

Howard Barnett, Jr.
Town Hall Chair
of Counsel, Barnett Family Law Firm

THE OKLAHOMA ACADEMY
Town Hall

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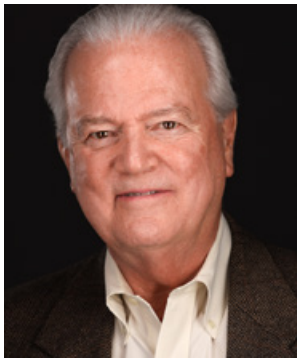
THE OKLAHOMA ACADEMY
Town Hall

Thoughts from the Town Hall Research Chair...



CRAIG KNUTSON
Town Hall Research Chair

In my capacity as Town Hall Research Chair, I am obligated to search wide and deep for balanced opinions on all sides of a topic. One of my many searches landed me at the website of the Idaho Capital Sun, where they provided an article covering the states with the lowest election turnout rates. As a lead-in, they reported that the U.S. ranked 31st, out of the 50 most developed countries, in voter turnout rates. Then they proceeded with a breakdown of the bottom ten states "led" by Tennessee (with the lowest rate), followed closely by West Virginia, Mississippi, and OKLAHOMA (47th at 47.7%).. They provided their rationale as to why (election laws, ballot composition, stringent voting laws, etc.). For a state that claims it wants to be a TOP TEN STATE, we have our work cut out for us.

Another search led me to the other side of the country — Washington D.C. and American University. They recently held an event called Comedy Saves Democracy, put on by the School of Communication's Center for Media and Social Impact. The event featured original material from comedians who travel all parts of the country. It was developed to answer the question: Could America's deep-seated polarization be solved with jokes? Caty Borum, the E.D of the Center, opined that "when we think about issues that we face in this country — the climate crisis, racial injustice, environmental justice, and gender equity — they are made profoundly more difficult to address when we remain polarized. The heart of democracy is people's belief that they can work together."

In light of her comments and the sold-out and successful event they put on, I'd like to share ten of my favorite jokes related to politics and the polarized state in which we find ourselves. They come, as do the vast majority of the background resource document, from hours of searching this topic. They are in no particular order, although I will end with Oklahoma's favorite son, Will Rogers.

- If con is the opposite of pro, then Congress is the opposite of progress.
- We don't approve of political jokes — we've seen too many get elected.
- A politician will find an excuse to get out of anything except office.
- America is a country that produces citizens who will cross the ocean to fight for democracy but won't cross the street to vote.
- Stop repeat offenders. Don't re-elect them.
- I remember when Halloween was the scariest night of the year. Now, it's Election Night.
- Politics is the art of looking for trouble, finding it, misdiagnosing it, and misapplying the wrong remedies.
- What's the difference between baseball and politics? In baseball, you're out if you're caught stealing.
- Politics is the most accurate word in the English language. Poly = many, Ticks = blood-sucking parasites; and
- There is no trick to being a humorist when you have the entire government working for you!!

Let me close on a more serious note, by sharing a few more words of wisdom from Ms. Borum: Democracy relies on the same principles of collaboration and compromise. "Democracy completely fails once we give up on the power of people to actually come together and do collective decision-making. It's on us to try to find ways to listen to one another and to work past polarization."

I hope each of you have fun (laugh a lot) and apply Caty's powerful messages at this Town Hall.

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Listening Session Report

What do the people think: Listening Session Report

Oklahoma Academy Research Committee

INTRODUCTION

This report presents the key findings from a series of 10 Listening Sessions conducted across communities in Oklahoma prior to the Town Hall. These sessions aimed to explore local perspectives on critical political issues, including the State of Politics, Primaries and Voter Engagement, Political Polarization, and the Role of the Oklahoma People to Initiate Statewide Legislation. In each session, participants were asked the same 16 questions, ensuring consistency across discussions and allowing for the identification of common themes, as well as variations in viewpoints across the state.

1. The State of Politics in Oklahoma
Across all communities, there was a shared sense of frustration with the current state of politics. Many participants expressed concerns about a being moderately informed on the key political issues facing Oklahoma. While the majority of the participants believed that the state government were only somewhat effective in addressing the needs of the citizens. Several respondents highlighted a perceived disconnect between state leadership and the needs of ordinary citizens, with some suggesting that Oklahoma's political landscape is overly focused on partisan conflicts rather than problem-solving.

However, a few participants noted efforts to address state challenges as positive steps forward. Nevertheless, the general sentiment was that these efforts are just below average to average at best without broader changes to the political culture in Oklahoma.

2. Primaries and Voter Engagement
Voter engagement was a major topic of concern during the sessions. Many participants noted low voter turnout during primary elections, which they attributed to a lack of awareness about the importance of these elections. Several pointed out that the outcome of primaries often determines the final election results, given Oklahoma's political makeup.

Participants also highlighted barriers to voter engagement, such as limited access to polling stations in rural areas, and a perceived lack of accessible information about candidates and their platforms. Younger participants, in particular, voiced frustration over not feeling adequately informed or encouraged to participate in the political process.

At the same time, some communities mentioned growing efforts to increase voter education and engagement, particularly through social media campaigns, local civic groups, and outreach by civic organizations.

3. Political Polarization
Political polarization was a prominent theme throughout the sessions, with many participants expressing concerns about the deepening ideological divides in the state. A common view was that political polarization has increased significantly in the past decade with people becoming so entrenched in their positions that compromise and collaboration have become nearly impossible.

In several sessions, participants spoke about how this polarization has affected their own communities, leading to strained relationships between neighbors, friends, and even family members. Some participants expressed concerns that the media and national politics have exacerbated divisions by focusing on extreme viewpoints and sensationalized narratives, rather than fostering thoughtful discussions on local issues.

However, many participants also emphasized the importance of finding common ground and rebuilding trust across the political spectrum. Some community members suggested that Oklahoma's shared values around community, faith, and family could serve as a foundation for healing political divisions.

4. The Role of the Oklahoma People in Initiating Statewide Legislation
Participants in all communities expressed a strong sense of civic duty and recognized the power of the people to initiate statewide legislation through the initiative and referendum process. Many respondents expressed pride in Oklahoma's relatively accessible mechanisms for direct democracy, which allow citizens to bypass the legislature and place issues on the ballot for a vote.

However, concerns were raised about the complexity of the process and the increasing involvement of out-of-state interest groups in shaping statewide ballot initiatives. Several participants suggested that, while the people of Oklahoma should continue to have the ability to drive legislative changes, there should be safeguards in place to ensure that initiatives truly

reflect the will of the local population rather than outside influences.

Furthermore, many participants emphasized the need for greater civic education around the legislative process, so that more Oklahomans feel empowered to participate in the democratic process and advocate for the issues that matter to them.

CONCLUSION

The 10 Listening Sessions revealed a politically engaged but deeply concerned populace in Oklahoma. While there is frustration with the current state of politics, there is also hope for reform and a desire for greater participation in the political process. The importance of voter engagement, especially by the younger voters in elections, was highlighted, along with the need to address the growing political polarization in the state. Finally, participants underscored the significance of the initiative process as a tool for the people of Oklahoma to directly influence statewide legislation, while also advocating for reforms that would ensure this process remains civil, fair, and transparent.

The discussions across these communities reflect both the challenges and the opportunities facing Oklahoma's political future, with a shared commitment to working toward a more civil, responsive, and effective political system.

The following are the 16 questions with the overall consensus response from each community to each question:

How **informed** do you feel about key political issues facing Oklahoma today?

Community	Not at All	Somewhat	Moderately	Very	Extremely
OKC (15)			X		
OKC (8)				X	
Tulsa (11)				X	
Broken Arrow (10)			X		
Bartlesville (9)			X		
Pryor (12)			X		
Wagoner (21)			X		
Enid (13)			X		
Altus (17)			X		
Lawton (5)				X	

How **effective** do you believe the Oklahoma state government is in addressing the needs of its citizens?

Community	Not at All	Somewhat	Moderately	Very	Extremely
OKC (15)		X			
OKC (8)		X			
Tulsa (11)		X			
Broken Arrow (10)		X			
Bartlesville (9)			X		
Pryor (12)		X			
Wagoner (21)		X			
Enid (13)		X			
Altus (17)			X		
Lawton (5)		X			

How informed do you feel about key political issues facing Oklaohma today?

Community	Not at All	Somewhat	Moderately	Very	Extremely
OKC (15)			X		
OKC (8)				X	
Tulsa (11)				X	
Broken Arrow (10)			X		
Bartlesville (9)			X		
Pryor (12)			X		
Wagoner (21)			X		
Enid (13)			X		
Altus (17)			X		
Lawton (5)				X	

How **optimistic** are you about the future of politics in Oklahoma?

Community	Not at All	Somewhat	Moderately	Very	Completely
OKC (15)		X			
OKC (8)		X			
Tulsa (11)		X			
Broken Arrow (10)		X			
Bartlesville (9)			X		
Pryor (12)		X			
Wagoner (21)		X			
Enid (13)			X		
Altus (17)			X		
Lawton (5)		X			

How **accessible** do you find the process of participating in primary elections in Oklahoma?

Community	Not at All	Somewhat	Moderately	Very	Extremely
OKC (15)			X		
OKC (8)				X	
Tulsa (11)			X		
Broken Arrow (10)			X		
Bartlesville (9)				X	
Pryor (12)			X		
Wagoner (21)				X	
Enid (13)				X	
Altus (17)				X	
Lawton (5)			X		

To what extent do you think voter turnout in Oklahoma's primary elections reflects the level of political **engagement** in the state?

Community	Not at All	Somewhat	Moderately	Very	Completely
OKC (15)			X		
OKC (8)				X	
Tulsa (11)			X		
Broken Arrow (10)		X			
Bartlesville (9)			X		
Pryor (12)			X		
Wagoner (21)			X		
Enid (13)			X		
Altus (17)			X		
Lawton (5)			X		

How **supportive** are you of open primaries being used in Oklahoma?

Community	Not at All	Somewhat	Moderately	Very	Extremely
OKC (15)				X	
OKC (8)				X	
Tulsa (11)					X
Broken Arrow (10)				X	
Bartlesville (9)			X		
Pryor (12)				X	
Wagoner (21)				X	
Enid (13)			X		
Altus (17)			X		
Lawton (5)			X		

How **confident** are you that the primary election process in Oklahoma ensured fair representation of all eligible

Community	Not at All	Somewhat	Moderately	Very	Extremely
OKC (15)		X			
OKC (8)	X				
Tulsa (11)		X			
Broken Arrow (10)			X		
Bartlesville (9)			X		
Pryor (12)			X		
Wagoner (21)			X		
Enid (13)			X		
Altus (17)			X		
Lawton (5)			X		

To what **extent** do you feel that political polarization has increased in the past decade?

Community	Not at All	Somewhat	Moderately	Significantly	Extremely
OKC (15)					X
OKC (8)					X
Tulsa (11)					X
Broken Arrow (10)					X
Bartlesville (9)				X	
Pryor (12)					X
Wagoner(21)				X	
Enid (13)				X	
Altus (17)				X	
Lawton (5)				X	

How **often** do you avoid discussions about politics to prevent arguments with others?

Community	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
OKC (15)			X		
OKC (8)			X		
Tulsa (11)			X		
Broken Arrow (10)				X	
Bartlesville (9)			X		
Pryor (12)				X	
Wagoner (21)				X	
Enid (13)			X		
Altus (17)			X		
Lawton (5)				X	

How much do you think your political views are influenced by your social media feed?

Community	Not at All	Somewhat	Moderately	Very	Extremely
OKC (15)		X			
OKC (8)		X			
Tulsa (11)		X			
Broken Arrow (10)		X			
Bartlesville (9)		X			
Pryor (12)			X		
Wagoner (21)		X			
Enid (13)		X			
Altus (17)			X		
Lawton (5)		X			

How confident are you that people with different political beliefs can find common ground on important issues?

Community	Not at All	Somewhat	Moderately	Very	Extremely
OKC (15)			X		
OKC (8)			X		
Tulsa (11)			X		
Broken Arrow (10)		X			
Bartlesville (9)			X		
Pryor (12)			X		
Wagoner (21)			X		
Enid (13)			X		
Altus (17)		X			
Lawton (5)			X		

How important do you believe it is for citizens to have the ability to initiate statewide legislation in Oklahoma?

Community	Not at All	Somewhat	Moderately	Very	Extremely
OKC (15)				X	
OKC (8)					X
Tulsa (11)					X
Broken Arrow (10)				X	
Bartlesville (9)			X		
Pryor (12)				X	
Wagoner (21)				X	
Enid (13)				X	
Altus (17)				X	
Lawton (5)					X

How **satisfied** are you with the current process and requirements for initiating statewide legislation in Oklahoma?

Community	Very dissat.	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very satisfied
OKC (15)		X			
OKC (8)			X		
Tulsa (11)		X			
Broken Arrow (10)		X			
Bartlesville (9)			X		
Pryor (12)			X		
Wagoner (21)			X		
Enid (13)			X		
Altus (17)			X		
Lawton (5)		X			

How **transparent** do you perceive the initiative petition process to be in Oklahoma?

Community	Not at All	Somewhat	Moderately	Very	Extremely
OKC (15)			X		
OKC (8)			X		
Tulsa (11)		X			
Broken Arrow (10)		X			
Bartlesville (9)			X		
Pryor (12)			X		
Wagoner (21)			X		
Enid (13)			X		
Altus (17)			X		
Lawton (5)			X		

How **often** do you think initiatives proposed by citizens align with the long-term interests of Oklahoma as a whole?

Community	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
OKC (15)			X		
OKC (8)			X		
Tulsa (11)			X		
Broken Arrow (10)			X		
Bartlesville (9)			X		
Pryor (12)			X		
Wagoner (21)			X		
Enid (13)			X		
Altus (17)			X		
Lawton (5)			X		

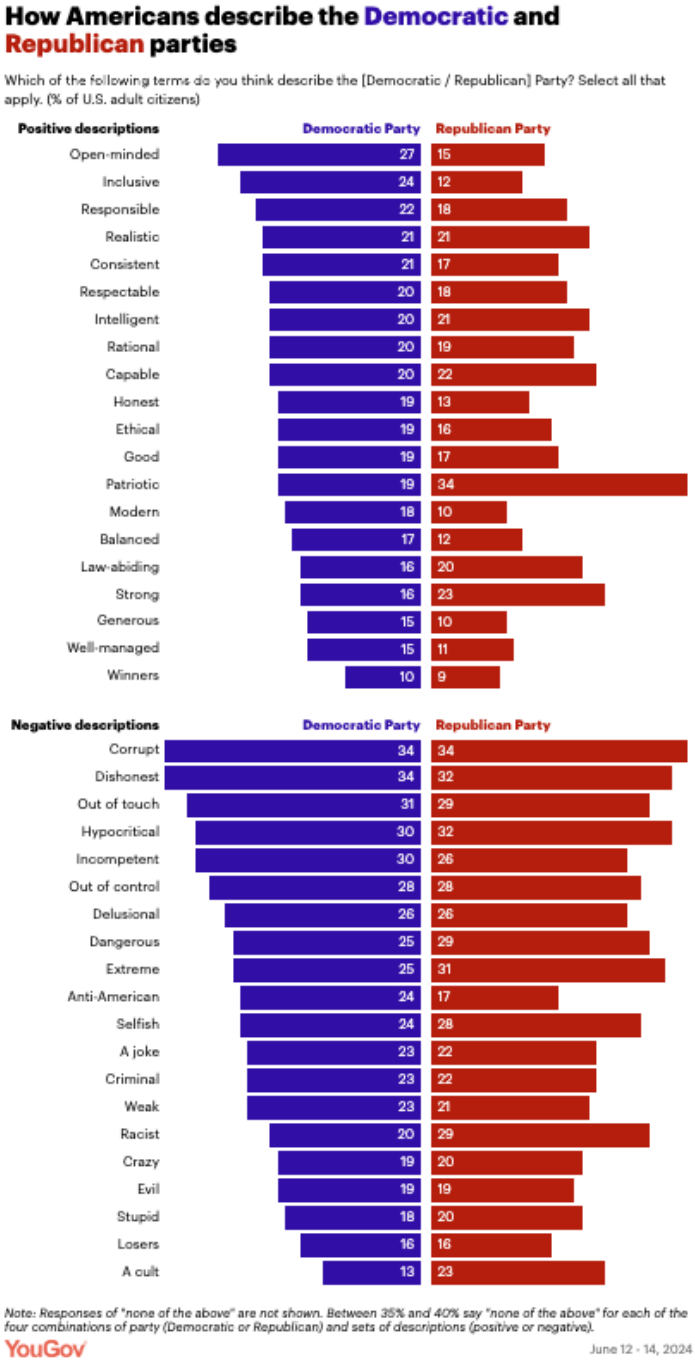
Section 1

The State of Politics

How Americans describe the Democratic and Republican parties

Jamie Ballard, YouGov, July 8, 2024

A new YouGov survey asked Americans which positive and negative traits they associate with the Democratic and Republican parties. Each party is described as corrupt by 34% of Americans, and similar shares describe each political party as dishonest.



In a series of questions, Americans were asked which of 20 positive terms and 20 negative terms they think describe the Democratic Party, and which of the same terms describe the Republican Party. The terms were derived from an earlier survey that asked respondents, in an open-ended question, "Finish the following sentence: The Democratic Party is…" and an equivalent question about the Republican Party. The poll was conducted after Donald Trump's conviction on 34 felony charges, and before the first presidential debate.

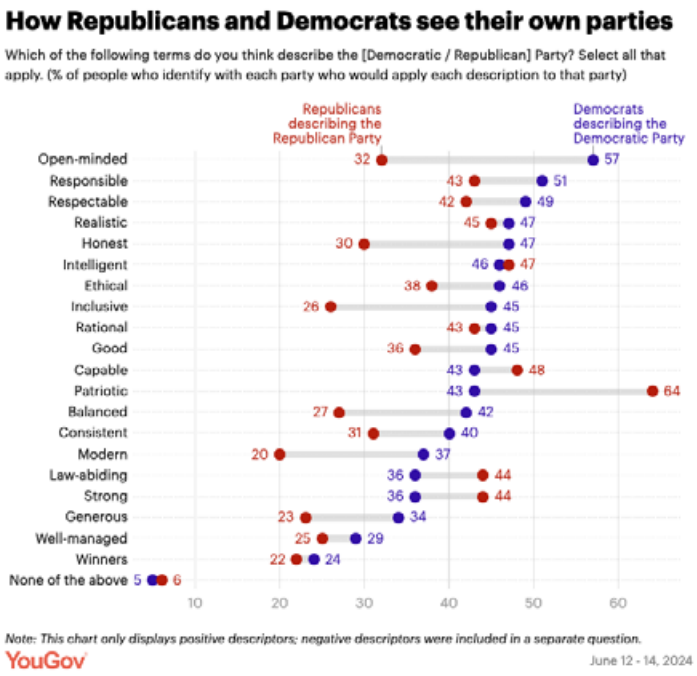
Among the list of positive traits included in the poll questions, the positive descriptors Americans are most likely to associate with the Republican Party are patriotic (34%), strong (23%), and capable (22%). The positive traits Americans are most likely to associate with the Democratic Party — among those provided — are open-minded (27%), inclusive (24%), and responsible (22%). Relatively few see either the Democratic (10%) or Republican (9%) parties as winners. Among the biggest gaps in Americans' positive perceptions of the two parties: By 34% to 19% they are more likely to say the Republican Party is patriotic, and by 27% to 15% they are more likely to say the Democratic Party is open-minded.

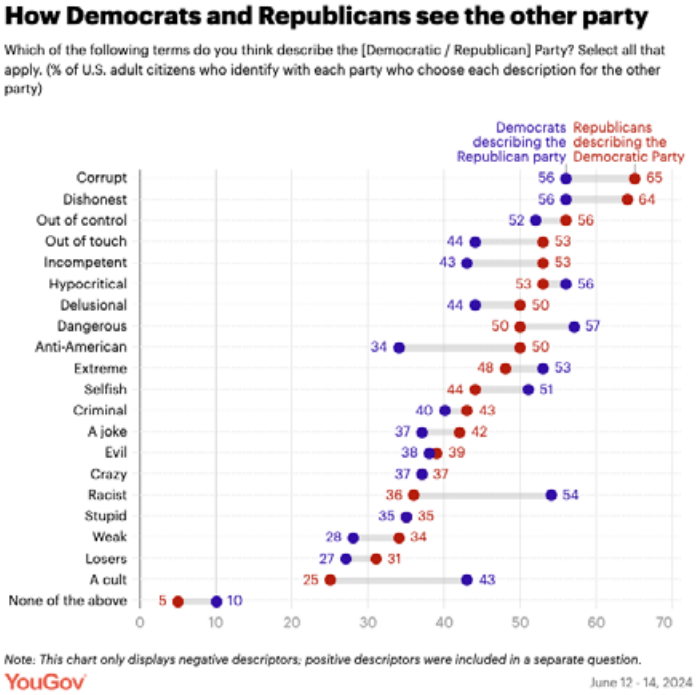
The survey also presented Americans with a list of negative traits that they could select to describe each party. Around one-third describe the Republican Party as each of the following: corrupt (34%), dishonest (32%), hypocritical (32%), and extreme (31%). Among the options provided, the negative traits Americans are most likely to associate with the Democratic Party are corrupt (34%), dishonest (34%), and out of touch (31%). Among the biggest gaps in Americans' negative perceptions of the two parties: By 23% to 13% they are more likely to say the Republican Party is a cult, and by 24% to 17% they are more likely to say the Democratic Party is anti-American.

How do Democrats and Republicans see their own parties? Among the list of positive adjectives offered as response options, Republicans are most likely to describe their party as patriotic (64%), capable (48%), intelligent (47%), and realistic (45%). Democrats are most likely to describe their party as open-minded (57%), responsible (51%), respectable (49%), realistic (47%), and honest (47%). Only 32% of Republicans say their party is open-minded, and only 43% of Democrats say their party is patriotic. Just 30% of Republicans describe their party as honest. By 45% to 26%, Democrats are more likely to call their party inclusive; by 37% to 20% they are more likely to call their party modern.

Asked which negative terms describe the Democratic Party, 11% of Democrats say weak, 9% say incompetent, and 8% say out of touch. 67% of Democrats say none of the available negative options describe their party.

Among the available negative descriptors for the Republican party, 13% of Republicans say weak, 9% say out of





touch, and 8% say corrupt. 66% of Republicans say none of the available negative options describe their party.

Majorities of Democrats and Republicans hold several different negative views of the other party. Among the negative descriptions offered, the ones Republicans are most likely to choose in describing the Democratic Party are corrupt (65%), dishonest (64%), and out of control (56%). The descriptions Democrats are most likely to choose to describe the Republican Party are dangerous (57%), dishonest (56%), corrupt (56%), and hypocritical (56%).

Democrats are much more likely to describe the Republican Party as racist (54%) than vice versa (36% of Republicans say the Democratic Party is racist). They also are more likely to describe the Republican Party as a cult than Republicans are to say the same about the Democratic Party (43% vs. 25%).

Republicans are much more likely to describe the Democratic Party as anti-American (50% vs. 34% of Democrats who chose this descriptor for the Republican Party). Republicans also are more likely to describe the Democratic Party as corrupt (65% vs. 56% of Democrats who describe the Republican Party this way), dishonest (64% vs. 56%), out of touch (53% vs. 44%), and incompetent (53% vs. 43%). 10% of Republicans describe the Democratic Party as consistent; 6% say the party is inclusive and 6% say it is well-managed. 63% of Republicans say none of the available positive descriptions fit the Democratic Party.

Most Democrats (59%) say none of the available positive descriptions apply to the Republican Party, though 13% of Democrats see the Republican Party as strong and 11% say it is patriotic.

— Taylor Orth and Carl Bialik contributed to this article

Methodology: This YouGov poll was conducted online on June 12 - 14, 2024 among 1,105 U.S. adult citizens. Respondents were selected from YouGov's opt-in panel using sample matching. A random sample (stratified by gender, age, race, education, geographic region, and voter registration) was selected from the 2019 American Community Survey. The sample was weighted according to gender, age, race, education, 2020 election turnout and presidential vote, baseline party identification, and current voter registration status. Demographic weighting targets come from the 2019 American Community Survey. Baseline party identification is the respondent's most recent answer given prior to November 1, 2022, and is weighted to the estimated distribution at that time (33% Democratic, 31% Republican). The margin of error for the overall sample in each survey is approximately 4%.

Is America a democracy or a republic? Yes, it is.

Ron Elving, NPR, September 10, 2022

What do we call the system of government in the U.S.? Are we a democracy or a republic?

The conundrum is, well, as the common expression goes, "as old as the republic itself."

But it's not just a question for scholars and semanticists any more.

Since the election of 2020, supporters of former President Donald Trump have become notably more willing to assert their belief that voting in America is suspect. That Trump won an election he lost. That "millions of ballots" were uncounted or miscounted. That voting by mail was fraught with abuse.

Despite the lack of evidence, and the judgments of election officials from both parties and judges appointed by presidents from both parties, election denialism has become not only a thing, but a movement. And when critics call this an attack on democracy, some election deniers respond by saying the U.S. is not a democracy, it is a republic.

Robert Draper of The New York Times published a piece on Republicans who say this in August. He cited a GOP candidate for the Arizona state legislature, Selina Bliss, saying: "We are not a democracy. Nowhere in the Constitution does it use the word 'democracy.' I think of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. That's not us."

But a democratic republic is us. Exactly.

Throughout our history we have functioned as both. Put another way, we have utilized characteristics of both. The people decide, but they do so through elected representatives working in pre-established, rule-bound and intentionally balky institutions such as Congress and the courts.

The government seated in Washington, D.C., represents a democratic republic, which governs a federated union of states, each of which in turn has its own democratic-republican government for its jurisdiction.

The relationship between the democratic and republican elements of this equation has been a dynamic and essential part of our history. But it has not always been easy, and in our time the friction between them has become yet another flashpoint in our partisan wars.

Going to war over weaponized words

We regularly hear people on the left speak of conservatives destroying democracy, and just as regularly we hear conservatives say Democrats have no respect for the Constitution. To add to the confusion, the two camps often swap their lines of attack and defense. Republicans call Democrats enemies of democracy, Democrats rail against what they see as Republican disrespect for the Constitution.

And that also makes sense, in a way, as both sides want to be the champions of both democracy and the Constitution, and to advertise themselves as such to the voters.

Yes, as a polity, we think we are and can be both. We aspire to be both. But in practice that can prove difficult. And in our time, when so much of the public discourse happens on Twitter and cable TV news, the terms have become increasingly weaponized.

"Equality and democracy are under assault," said President Biden on the steps of Independence Hall last week. "We do ourselves no favor to pretend otherwise."

Biden at Independence Hall used the word democracy 31 times, including three times in one sentence. He used the word republic just twice.

Republicans, by contrast, have seemed of late to be stressing the role of the republic and its restraint on democracy. Sen. Mike Lee of Utah, an outspoken Republican but hardly an outlier, got considerable attention for saying bluntly on Twitter in October 2020: "We are not a democracy."

Lee then posted online an explanation of what he meant. It said, in part: "Our system is best described as a constitutional republic [where] power is not found in mere majorities, but in carefully balanced power."

Lee went on to catalog how difficult it was for majorities in Congress to pass legislation, get it signed by a president and watch it undergo judicial review. Lee's point was that he was OK with all that. It was the intent of the founders.

"In the absence of consensus," Lee wrote, "there isn't supposed to be federal law."

Writing in 2020 in The Atlantic, George Thomas, the Wohlford Professor of American Political Institutions at Claremont McKenna College, found "some truth to this insistence" on calling the U.S. a republic but added: "It is mostly disingenuous. The Constitution was meant to foster a complex form of majority rule, not enable minority rule."

This is not just a quibble over terms. It is a fundamental battle over what American government aspires to be. Are we a democracy where the voice of the people is, like it says in Latin on some of our official buildings (Vox Populi, Vox Dei), the voice of God?

Or are we a republic? That is to say, a government of laws not of men, deriving its authority not by divine right of inheritance or strength of arms but by reason and by adherence to the mechanisms of the Constitution.

Calling things by their proper names

It's also not a coincidence that those names tend to suggest which end of the democratic-republican bargain they favor. Our current parties trace their roots to a common ancestor in a party begun by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison in the early decades of nationhood.

That party formed in opposition to the original party of George Washington and John Adams, known as the Federalists because they emphasized the central authority of the combined 13 states (the original 13 colonies that had rebelled against the crown of England).

Jefferson and others who rose in opposition were called, naturally enough, anti-Federalists. Jefferson liked the word republican and used it a lot, in part for the anti-monarchist emphasis.

Others thought the term had less meaning because so many different kinds of viewpoints claimed it. The party eventually took on the label of Democratic-Republicans. That moniker might have been too much of a mouthful to enunciate, and its coalition may have been too wide to sustain.

At the time, there were also voters and candidates who preferred calling themselves National Republicans, especially in New England. That element morphed into the Whigs, while the Democratic-Republicans dominated in the South and eventually became simply Democrats — the preference of President Andrew Jackson.

In the 1850s, exhausted by the North-South tensions that were leading to the Civil War, the Whigs gave way to a new party originating in the Great Lakes region. The new party's biggest issue was abolition, but they adopted (perhaps at the suggestion of journalist Horace Greeley) the previously orphaned half of the old Democratic-Republican Party name. They have since been known simply as Republicans.

But both terms have far deeper origins in the ancient world

The Athenian democracy in Greece around 500 BCE denoted the right of the people (demos) to personify power (kratos) and meant it to include an entire polity – or at least its males. Something like 5,000 citizens were enfranchised to participate, and when they chose to delegate some of the governing task to a smaller body they still had 500 members of that council (boule).

Thomas says "the founding generation" in the U.S. never considered the Greek model workable beyond a limited area (idealized perhaps by the New England town hall). Thomas says that generation was "deeply skeptical of what it called 'pure democracy' and defended the American experiment as 'wholly republican."

That is, it was a government of the people not of royalty. It also incorporated some of the inspiration referenced in the Latin word republic, a hearkening back to the Romans who established the first Senate around 750 BCE.

Thomas says the American experiment has been about harmonizing democratic and republican models, two "popular forms of government," each of which "drew its legitimacy from the people and depended on rule by the people."

The essential difference was the role of representatives to substitute for the gathering of all the people at one point in time and space.

"To take this as a rejection of democracy misses how the idea of government by the people, including both a democracy and a republic, was understood when the Constitution was drafted and ratified," Thomas said. "It misses, too, how we understand the idea of democracy today."

One way to understand that idea was articulated by Jefferson himself way back in 1816, when he wrote: "We may say with truth and meaning, that governments are more or less republican as they have more or less of the element of popular election and control in their composition." [emphasis added]

It is hard to imagine a better statement of the two concepts as they may be comingled and act in concert.

It falls to our generation to renew that understanding in the context of our own time, two full centuries later.

Understanding democratic decline in the United States

Vanessa Williamson, The Brookings Institution, October 17, 2023

Experts agree that the health of U.S. democracy has declined in recent years—but what does that mean? The United States is experiencing two major forms of democratic erosion in its governing institutions: election manipulation and executive overreach.

Most obviously, after the 2020 election, the sitting president, despite admitting privately that he had lost, attempted to subvert the results and remain in office. But democratic erosion in the United States is not synonymous with Donald Trump. Since 2010, state legislatures have instituted laws intended to reduce voters' access to the ballot, politicize election administration, and foreclose electoral competition via extreme gerrymandering. The United States has also seen substantial expansions of executive power and serious efforts to erode the independence of the civil service. Against these pressures, the gridlocked and hyperpartisan Congress is poorly equipped to provide unbiased oversight and accountability of the executive, and there are serious questions about the impartiality of the judiciary.

What is democratic decline?

Globally, it is increasingly rare for an authoritarian to come to power via a coup. Instead, democracies in decline usually experience a slow but steady erosion. The process is often incremental and episodic. Each step is only partial. There can be intermediate moments of apparent stability or equilibrium. In the words of political scientists Daniel Ziblatt and Steven Levitsky:

> "The electoral road to breakdown is dangerously deceptive… People still vote. Elected autocrats maintain a veneer of democracy while eviscerating its substance. Many government efforts to subvert democracy are 'legal,' in the sense that they are approved by the legislature or accepted by the courts."

Political scientists use a variety of terms to describe this phenomenon, including "democratic erosion," "democratic backsliding," "democratic regression," and "autocratization."

Whatever the terminology, democratic decline has ramifications throughout society. It is associated with certain changes in public attitudes, including vilification of members of the opposing party and widespread misinformation. There tends to be a decline in non-governmental institutions critical to a healthy public sphere, such as an independent media, a vibrant education system, and an engaged civil society. All these symptoms of decline are present in the United States.

This report, however, focuses on democratic decline in the government itself because democratic backsliding tends to be driven by the choices of political leaders, not a sudden groundswell of authoritarianism in the general populace.

The United States is experiencing two major forms of democratic erosion in its governing institutions:

- Strategic manipulation of elections. Distinct from "voter fraud," which is almost non-existent in the United States, election manipulation has become increasingly common and increasingly extreme. Examples include election procedures that make it harder to vote (like inadequate polling facilities) or that reduce the opposing party's representation (like gerrymandering).

- Executive aggrandizement. Even a legitimately elected leader can undermine democracy if they eliminate governmental "checks and balances" or consolidate power in unaccountable institutions. The United States has seen substantial expansions of executive power and serious efforts to erode the independence of the civil service. In addition, there are serious questions about the impartiality of the judiciary.

Before we examine democratic decline in the United States in the 21st century, it is important to recognize the historical context.

Many longstanding aspects of America's governing institutions can reasonably be criticized as anti-democratic or a danger to civil liberties. The Senate and Electoral College are part of the Constitution; the filibuster and the doctrine of "judicial supremacy" date back to the 19th century. The United States has always relied on winner-takes-all geographically based representation, which can result in substantial misrepresentation when partisans are segregated—even absent intentional gerrymandering. In addition, though the nation's founders saw a standing army and strong executive as dangers to the republic, the power of the presidency has steadily increased over time and the American military has for decades been by far the most expensive in the world.

Most significantly, the United States only achieved nearly universal suffrage after 1965, when the federal government finally protected the voting rights of Black Americans in the South. The period since universal suffrage has seen massive expansions in policing and incarceration. The pathologies that beset American governance today are a part of the long backlash to the successes of the Civil Rights Movement.

The idiosyncrasies of American government and the nation's long history of race-based political exclusion create specific susceptibilities to democratic erosion, but the United States is far from alone in seeing its democracy erode. Democracy is in decline around the world. For the first time in decades, there are more closed autocracies than liberal democracies in the world.

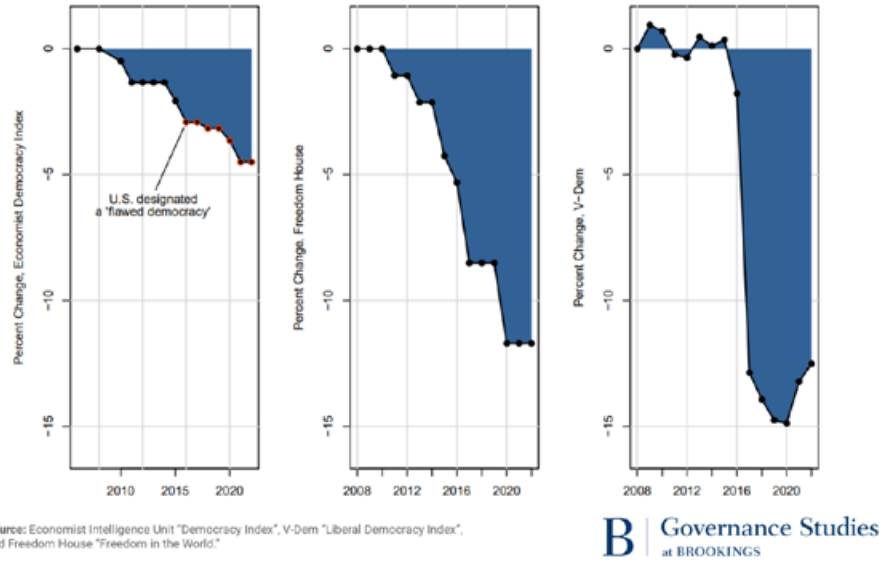
Experts downgrade U.S. democracy

In 2020, then-President Trump, knowing that he had failed to win re-election, refused to concede and instead sought to subvert the vote counting and certification process. On January 6th, with President Trump's encouragement, his supporters stormed the Capitol. The House Select Committee that investigated the January 6th attack concluded that the president had engaged in a "multi-part conspiracy to overturn the lawful results of the 2020 Presidential election."

But 2020 does not mark the beginning of democratic decline in the United States. Precise quantitative measures of democracy are difficult to develop—there are, for example, multiple metrics used just to define gerrymandering. But to measure the core elements of democracy between countries and over time, social scientists have developed a robust toolkit of indices that track and aggregate indicators of electoral processes,

FIGURE 1

Experts agree that U.S. democracy is in decline



Source: Economist Intelligence Unit "Democracy Index", V-Dem "Liberal Democracy Index", and Freedom House "Freedom in the World."

political participation, government functioning, and civil liberties. These indices vary somewhat in their measurement strategies, but across the board, they demonstrate substantial erosion of democratic functioning in the United States for years before President Trump's 2020 election subversion attempt.

According to the Economist, the United States now ranks not among the world's "full democracies" (such as Canada, Japan, and most of Western Europe) but among the "flawed democracies" (such as Greece, Israel, Poland, and Brazil).

Figure 1, above, summarizes the ratings the United States has received since 2008 in the Economist's Democracy Index, Freedom House's measure of Freedom in the World, and the "V-Dem" index from the Varieties of Democracy Institute at the University of Gothenburg. These indices come to a consistent conclusion: Freedom and democracy in the United States is in decline. According to the Economist, the United States now ranks not among the world's "full democracies" (such as Canada, Japan, and most of Western Europe) but among the "flawed democracies" (such as Greece, Israel, Poland, and Brazil).

What is driving these shifts? As early as 2018, the researchers at the Varieties of Democracy Institute identified concerns about inadequate checks on executive power and the freedom and fairness of elections, issues that also feature in Freedom House and Economist analyses.

Strategic manipulation of elections

The American states have diverged substantially in their commitment to democratic practices. While some states have expanded voter access and strengthened impartial election administration, other states have moved in the opposite direction.

Political scientist Jake Grumbach has developed the most comprehensive and rigorous measure of state-level electoral democracy, the State Democracy Index (SDI), which takes account of factors like polling place wait times, red tape voter registration procedures, and gerrymandering. The SDI quantifies the divergence occurring between U.S. states. In 2018, 17 states had a higher SDI than they did during the period from 2000 to 2010, indicating a stronger democracy in those states. The other states, however, have seen their SDI decline—some by a very substantial margin.

Figure 2 on the next page shows the 12 states at the bottom of the SDI. Almost all the states scoring poorly in 2018 have seen very large declines since 2010; these weak-democracy states have weakened recently and drastically.

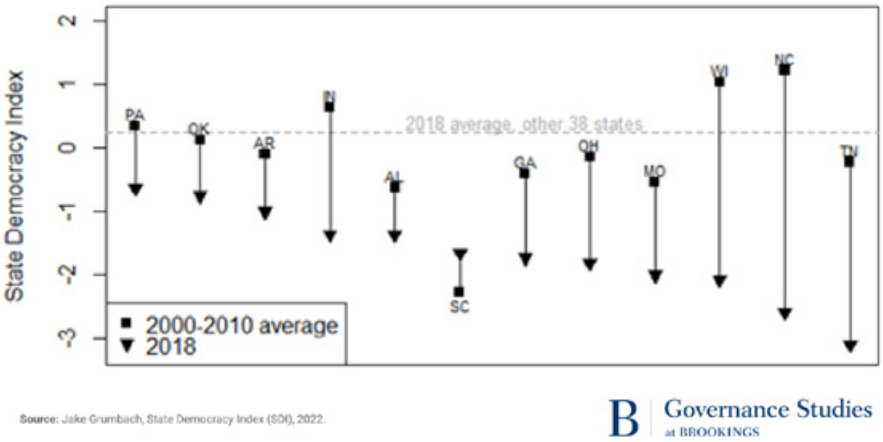
At least as important as the magnitude of the decline is the reason for this erosion of electoral democracy. Grumbach finds that partisan polarization has a "minimal role" in explaining the states' democratic backsliding, but that Republican control of state government "dramatically reduces states' democratic performance." Grumbach's finding confirms earlier research identifying the association between GOP control and the adoption of measures to restrict access to the ballot. The declining commitment to democracy is occurring both at an elite level and in the base of the party; survey research demonstrates that "ethnic antagonism" has eroded "Republicans' commitment to democracy."

What has happened since 2020?

Since 2020, there have been promising signs for American democracy. For one, those who participated in the 2020 election subversion effort have faced investigation and, in

FIGURE 2

Democratic erosion across U.S. states



Source: Jake Grumbach, State Democracy Index (SDI), 2022.

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some cases, prosecutions; these processes bode well for the continuance of the rule of law. In addition, the 2022 elections occurred without major incident. However, we have not seen a change in the fundamental political dynamics that led to the erosion of U.S. democracy. As long as a major political party remains uncommitted to accepting legitimate electoral defeat, democracy cannot be reasonably described as secure.

Crucially, there have been legal consequences for those who participated in the events on January 6th and for others who attempted to subvert the 2020 election. Over 1,000 participants in the January 6th invasion of the Capitol have been charged, and over 600 have pled guilty. For his attempted election subversion, Trump has been indicted on federal conspiracy charges and on racketeering charges in the state of Georgia.

Given the weakness of democracy in many American states and the attempted election subversion that occurred in 2020, there were reasonable worries about the 2022 elections. It was not clear whether defeated candidates would follow the election subversion playbook laid out by former President Trump. In addition, there were "election-denying" candidates running for state positions that would have given them substantial authority over election administration. On both fronts, the results were reassuring. Candidates generally conceded defeat soon after it was clear they had lost. The election-denying candidates running for major state positions in battleground states did not win. That said, the politicization of election administration has not ceased. Until recently, election administration was demonstrably nonpartisan, but in many states it has now become a partisan issue. Since 2020, state legislatures have passed dozens of laws to increase partisan control over election administration and vote counting procedures. Politicization also continues at the local level, with many veteran election administrators retiring and in some cases being replaced with election deniers.

It is not at all obvious that the GOP rank and file will accept legitimate defeats in 2024, or that all prominent party leaders will validate free and fair election outcomes unless they are Republican victories.

More broadly, there is no longer a bipartisan consensus on the set of rules that govern the transfer of power. Trump remains the front-runner in the 2024 Republican presidential primary, and most of his opponents for the nomination have vowed to support him even if he is convicted of election-related crimes. The other leading contender for the GOP nomination, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, for years refused to say whether he thought the 2020 election result was legitimate, and has campaigned for many prominent election deniers. The Republican National Committee described the attempted election subversion as "legitimate political discourse." There are a larger number of election deniers in Congress today than in 2021. About two-thirds of Republican voters still deny that Biden legitimately won the 2020 election. It is not at all obvious that the GOP rank and file will accept legitimate defeats in 2024, or that all prominent party leaders will validate free and fair election outcomes unless they are Republican victories.

Executive aggrandizement

Democratic erosion can occur between elections. Even a legitimately elected leader can become an autocrat through executive aggrandizement: consolidating power by reducing the independence of the civil service and by undermining the "checks and balances" provided by the legislature and judicial system.

The civil service is essential to good governance, but it is also a critical component of modern democratic practice. For one, government agencies collect and release vitally important data that citizens use to assess whether politicians are doing a good job. It is critical, therefore, that government agencies in charge of reporting politically salient information (like unemployment rates or government spending figures) are not corrupted by partisan considerations. Voters need access to unbiased information. In addition, election integrity is threatened if incumbents can weaponize the provision of government services or government jobs for partisan ends—as anyone familiar with the history of machine politics in Chicago or New York can attest. Would-be autocrats commonly seek to mobilize the powers of the state to undercut political opposition and tighten their grasp on power both between and during elections. State institutions are either debilitated or become bulwarks of the ruling party.

To an unprecedented degree, the Trump administration and its allies sought to delegitimize, incapacitate, and politicize the independent civil service. Throughout his term and as part of his attempted election subversion, President Trump pressured and fired senior officials in the Justice Department. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Trump administration

interfered with the health reports provided by the Centers for Disease Control. Civil servants at every level of government experienced retaliation when their work did not comport with the claims or preferences of the administration. Entire offices were relocated to distant cities, forcing employees to uproot their families or quit. Attacks on the honesty of individual election officials, health officials, and others became commonplace, in some cases provoking threats of violence against them. Shortly before the 2020 election, President Trump released an executive order, "Schedule F," intended to give him the authority to fire as many as 50,000 career civil servants. Preparations are underway to continue this process of power consolidation under a future Republican president, whether or not that president is Trump.

Unfortunately, dysfunction in Congress leaves the legislature poorly positioned to check expansions of executive authority. At times, legislators have taken active steps that have contributed to democratic erosion. In 2016, Senate Republicans chose to leave a Supreme Court vacancy open for a year, rather than consider a nomination from President Barack Obama—an unprecedented move that increased the partisan skew of the judiciary. More recently, Republicans in Congress, with a few notable exceptions, have tolerated or supported President Trump's election subversion efforts. But even more than its hyperpartisanship, the gridlock and inertia of the legislature make the first branch of government unable to provide the appropriate checks and balances on the executive or judiciary. Congress is slow to act, and even with united party control, often fails to make headway on policy items purported to be at the top of the party agenda.

What about the courts?

Unlike the legislature, the Supreme Court's power has grown substantially over time. An independent judiciary can provide a strong check on attempted election manipulation and executive aggrandizement; would-be autocrats commonly seek to curtail the powers of the judiciary or to put the courts under the control of loyalists. An important question, then, is the impartiality of the judiciary and the commitment of the courts to preserving democratic processes. The contemporary Supreme Court's record is far from reassuring. What is more, the contemporary Court seems very comfortable expanding the scope of its authority; to the extent judicial decision-making approaches legislating, it violates democratic standards that put the power to make laws in the hands of an elected body.

Today, most Americans —including most Democrats and most Republicans—believe the Court is motivated primarily by politics, rather than by the law.

Judicial decision-making has never met the ideal of perfect impartiality, but the Supreme Court has become exceptionally conservative and partisan in recent years, while bypassing standard procedures, precedents, and norms that had previously governed the Court. President Trump was able to nominate three members to the Supreme Court, as well as an unusually high number of appeals court judges. Justice Clarence Thomas has come under scrutiny for his connections to the Trump team that attempted to overturn the 2020 election.

Today, most Americans —including most Democrats and most Republicans—believe the Court is motivated primarily by politics, rather than by the law.

On questions of executive aggrandizement, the courts, including many very conservative judges, issued a long string of defeats to the Trump administration. On matters of administrative law, Trump lost nearly 80% of the time. But this was, legal observers agree, in large part because the administration evinced a startling disregard for even basic aspects of legal and administrative process. It is not obvious that Trump's pattern of defeat would be repeated under a more procedurally competent administration. Scholars have suggested that the Supreme Court under John Roberts seems inclined to approve a much broader scope of presidential authority over the civil service. In addition, conservative members of the Court seem poised to roll back the federal bureaucracy's longstanding regulatory functions.

The Supreme Court has also narrowed the scope of voting rights protections and expanded its interventions in elections as they occur. Starting in 2013, the Court began cutting back the 1965 Voting Rights Act (VRA) that outlawed racially discriminatory voting practices, allowing states to implement procedures previously barred as discriminatory. In 2020, the Supreme Court intervened to block several emergency efforts intended to make voting easier during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2022, the Court took the unusual step of staying an injunction against Alabama's redistricting map that a lower court found discriminatory, effectively ensuring that the map would be in place for the election.

In addition, the Supreme Court has expanded its authority in the adjudication of disputed elections. In 2000, the Supreme Court overturned a lower court ruling in the 2000 election case, Bush v. Gore, stopping a recount of votes in Florida and ensuring the election of President George W. Bush. This ruling was at the time seen as anomalous, and the majority opinion itself included limiting language suggesting that the case should not be used as precedent. Today, however, three participants in the Bush 2000 legal effort are now on the Supreme Court, and Justice Kavanaugh has cited Bush v. Gore in a 2020 election case. The recent decision in Moore v. Harper reinforced the role of the court system, and particularly the Supreme Court, in settling election disputes.

Conclusion

The effort by President Trump to subvert the 2020 election is the most obvious, but far from the only, example of democratic backsliding in the United States. State legislatures under GOP control have moved to reduce voters' access to the ballot and to politicize election administration. President Trump also engaged in unprecedented efforts to undermine the independent civil service. The Supreme Court has increased its authority over election adjudication, narrowed the scope of voting rights protections, and seems inclined to support some politicization of executive branch administration. Hyperpartisanship and gridlock leave Congress poorly positioned to provide checks on executive and judicial power.

OPINION: How the race to extremes is wrecking American politics

Seth Gabrielson, The Michigan Daily, October 23, 2023

Recently, I discussed political polarization with my father. As is natural with a father and son, we didn't agree on every policy issue, but we did agree on one thing: neither major political party represents our opinions. Many Americans would agree with us, with more than 70% of Americans in 2022 dissatisfied by the direction our elected officials are taking the country. Political polarization has become so entrenched in our nation that democracy has become a shouting match of who can tear the other side down the quickest and most vocally, rather than an attempt to represent the will of the people. In this political climate, the elected officials who hold the most eye-catching extreme views get the vast majority of media attention and are then the most likely to be elected.

While a multitude of factors — social media, the transition from news to entertainment, divisive social issues — contribute to political polarization, none are so ingrained in the infrastructure of our political process as the primary system. Primary elections, which select nominees for each respective political party, are not representative of the will of the people, rather the will of activists, leading to polarization.

Only about a quarter of registered voters participate in primary elections; those who do participate are extremely loyal to the party that they vote for and often have more extreme political ideologies, which motivate them to be active in primaries. Additionally, in today's gerrymandered political atmosphere, more than 80% of general elections are no longer competitive, which means that the primary is often the deciding factor between different nominees, leading to extreme political ideologies having a more influential role in American politics.

Not only are primary elections polarizing and unrepresentative, but they also reduce compromise in Washington, D.C.. Because activists with extreme party views decide the vast majority of elections, those who are elected often refuse reasonable compromises that would represent the will of the people in favor of the ideologies they represent and pleasing primary voters.

In an effort to combat this, many now advocate for open political primaries where any voter affiliated with any party can vote in any primary election. Open primaries would reduce polarization effectively because they allow for the 46% of Americans who aren't affiliated with either major political party to elect candidates that represent their ideals. Additionally, this group of unaffiliated voters represents the largest subset of American voters holding overwhelmingly centrist political ideologies. If allowed to vote in primary elections, their voice has the potential to moderate our political discourse. Support for moderating voices in politics has grown so strong that 63% of the U.S. now says that they would support a new third party in U.S. elections, particularly one that holds centrist views, rather than liberal or conservative views.

Support for open primaries has moved some states into change regarding their primary process. In states such as California and Nebraska, voters adopted a top-two system, where the two representatives with the most primary votes proceed to the general election. Alaska has adopted a similar system, but one where the four most selected representatives of each party proceed to the general election. By allowing more nominees in the general election, partisan primary voters are less favored, and candidates must compete for the votes of all the people in the general election, leading more centrist candidates to win, in theory.

Unfortunately, research into the efficacy of this new primary system shows lacking results. In a study published by the Legislative Studies Quarterly, there was little shift toward moderate views for nominees under California's top-two primary system.

In an effort to counteract the steadfast partisanism under these systems, some advocate that true moderation can only be achieved if we allow for as many voters as possible to vote in as many primaries as they wish. In doing so, opposing parties would have to elect officials that have broad public appeal, thus allowing increased compromise in Congress because elected officials are no longer completely beholden to extreme partisan voters and values.

Some argue that allowing crossover in primary elections would result in strategic voting, where members of opposing parties attempt to infiltrate the primaries of the opposing party in order to elect weaker candidates. To a certain extent, this is a real possibility within this new system. However, if both parties were to participate in these mischievous tactics, their efforts would cancel each other out, leading to more centrist candidates, which would further the cause of voter representation. Additionally, research into this area showed no increase in strategic voting in current open election systems. Allowing for increased participation in all primary proceedings would not result in diluted ideologies or hostile political takeovers; it would give way to increased political compromise, without which our government cannot function.

Seth Gabrielson is an Opinion Columnist studying physics and aerospace engineering.

American elections are getting less predictable; there's a reason for that.

John Opdycke, The Hill, November 30, 2021

Much has been written about the recent elections in Virginia and New Jersey and what they mean for the Democratic and GOP brands heading into the midterms. Most share two core assumptions: The Red vs. Blue paradigm is still the most accurate way to understand political outcomes, and the increasingly unpredictable gyrations of voters are but a natural pendulum within two party political life.

Polls are routinely wrong — by wide margins. Voters seem to be acting and reacting to a new set of rules and concerns. Political analysts should be asking "What's going on? Do we need new ways and new tools to understand voters? Is something happening in America that we don't quite get?" But that's not what's happening.

Case in point is how the analyst community relates to independent voters.

The largest and fastest growing segment of the electorate is now independent voters: 40 percent to 45 percent of American voters are registered to vote or identify themselves as independents, a trend that is on the uptick in red, blue and purple states. This includes 50 percent of younger Americans. In the 30 states that register by party, "no-party-affiliation" voters are on track to be the largest or second largest group of registrants by 2030.

Most political scientists and analysts consider this trend to be unimportant, not worth studying or understanding.

Some go so far as to insist that independents are not really independents. They are "party leaners." It is standard practice among polling firms to ask people how they identify themselves, and then to ask people who say "independent" which party they lean towards. Thus, an electorate that is 40 percent independent, 30 percent Democratic and 30 percent Republican magically becomes an electorate that is roughly 50 percent Democratic and 50 percent Republican.

Political science insists that the voters should fit the analysis, not the other way around.

It's a clever trick. And it works in the short term. You simply reclassify independent voters as Democratic or Republican fellow-travelers and then feed their views and opinions into the existing algorithms and analytical frameworks. You generate end-product that seems to make sense: "Democrats need to distance themselves from woke extremism;" "Republicans should emphasize small business recovery and less regulation." It works.

And yet it doesn't.

We live in an era of insurgencies. Outsiders like Ross Perot, Barack Obama, Bernie Sanders, AOC, Andrew Yang and Donald Trump (to name a few) dominate the political landscape. They tap into … something. A desire for disruption, a hunger for cross-ideological (even contradictory-ideological or non-ideological) forms of political expression, a craving for authenticity over platform consistency. I won't slap on convenient labels nor attempt to link these disjointed uprisings into one cohesive narrative — but it seems obvious to me that an analytical approach that insists upon ignoring significant shifts in how the American people identify themselves is going to miss the mark when it comes to understanding this current/emerging era of insurgency and disruption.

In Virginia, independent voters, who supported Biden by 19 points over Trump in 2020, supported Republican Glenn Youngkin over Democrat Terry McAulliffe by 9 points — a 28-point swing. Many young people — the majority of them independents — stayed home. Insisting that independents are "partisans lite" covers over a very fluid and dynamic situation. What a missed opportunity to dig deeper into what's going on.

The decision to register to vote as an independent has consequences. It makes you a second-class citizen in many states, unable to vote in primaries, serve on boards of elections, or even work the polls. You are legally barred from running for judge in Delaware if you are not a Democrat or Republican. Despite the costs, Americans are increasingly choosing this identity.

My experience, as someone who has led dozens of campaigns to give independents full voting rights in primary elections, is that voters who identify and/or register to vote as independent do so for concrete reasons, ranging from the mundane to the profound. Political analysts should be jumping over each other to dig deeper into this emerging phenomenon. Instead, independents are — poof — disappeared with the click of a button, magically to reappear as partisan leaners. Problem solved. Opportunity missed.

There is something going on in American politics. Understanding that it starts with listening to the American people, millions of whom are going independent would be a start. They have a lot to say. And we have much to learn.

John Opdycke is the President of Open Primaries, a national election reform organization.

The timing of local elections

Christopher R. Berry, University of Chicago

While federal and state races garner the most media attention, the vast majority of elections in the United States are for offices in local government. Collectively, these local positions total nearly half a million elected officials. Despite their importance, and increased relevance to the average citizen, turnout in local elections is startlingly low, often less than 20%. Electoral laws allow local governments to set the dates for their election cycles, with many opting intentionally to set local elections to be 'off-cycle' from federal election dates. These local elections that occur asynchronously from higher-draw elections, such as state or federal races, tend to have extremely low turnout rates.

Empirical research is conclusive that synchronous elections have a strong, sometimes doubling, effect on voter turnout. The higher turnout rate encourages a voter population that is demographically closer to the whole of the electorate and produces more representative candidates. Despite synchronous elections' impact on voter turnout, many critics argue that voter participation should not be artificially increased, preferring the draws of issues or candidates. This "selective participation" would allow elections to be decided by the most interested and knowledgeable voters. Further, critics argue that off-cycle municipal elections allow voters a chance to focus on local issues.

Empirical research demonstrates that special interest groups are disproportionately influential in local elections when turnout is low. Voters in local elections are disproportionately white, affluent, and elderly. Elderly voters cast ballots at 2-5 times the rate of voters aged 18 to 34, resulting in an average gap of 15 years between the median age of voters and the median age of the voting-eligible population.

Comparatively, voters in synced local elections are more representative of the electorate overall, and candidates in synced elections are more likely to hold preferences that are aligned with their constituents. Additionally, merging local and higher-draw elections lowers the cost of election administration, but may capture a swath of additional voters who are less informed about the nuances of local issues.

This prompts us to consider the benefits of high turnout versus the potential pitfalls of an 'uninformed voter' who absent a synchronous election would not engage in local races. First, the idea that poll access should be restricted to the most knowledgeable voters is anti-democratic and runs counter to US election law. Second, the most knowledgeable voters may have interests that diverge from "the masses." Regardless of whether election turnout should be artificially bolstered, conclusive research supports that synced elections can drastically increase the turnout rate in local elections.

> ***"Democracy is the worst form of government, except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time."*** — *Winston Churchill*

Why some Republican-led states are limiting who can vote in party primaries

Ashley Lopez, NPR, July 8, 2024

States across the country have in recent years opened up their primary elections, making them nonpartisan or allowing independent or unaffiliated voters to cast ballots in party primaries.

Some Republican-led states are moving in the opposite direction.

GOP lawmakers in these states are trying to restrict who can participate in primaries, in an effort to have more ideological purity among their nominees.

Take Louisiana. For years the state has had nonpartisan primaries, in which all candidates regardless of party appear on the same ballot.

Robert Hogan, a political science professor at Louisiana State University, says that system has been very popular with voters and has been lauded by election reformers nationwide.

But the GOP has recently soured on it. In particular, new Republican Gov. Jeff Landry has called the state's nonpartisan primaries a "relic of the past."

In a speech at the beginning of a special legislative session this year, he told lawmakers that a closed primary system — which only allows registered members of a party to vote in that party's primary — would result "in a stronger, more unified team of elected leaders" in the state.

"Every voting-aged citizen in Louisiana may or may not join the political party of his or her choosing," he said. "If you do choose to join a political party, it is only fair and right that you have the ability to select your party's candidates for office, without the interference of another party."

At Landry's urging, lawmakers in Louisiana voted to replace its nonpartisan primary system with certain closed primaries. Starting in 2026, there will be closed primaries for congressional elections, as well as the state Supreme Court and some other elected offices.

"I think a lot of people will not say it out loud," Hogan said, "but I think the motivating force is basically a desire to create a system that will produce winners that are more ideologically pure."

He said Republicans these days want a system that weeds out candidates who aren't conservative enough — or what they call "RINOs," short for "Republicans in Name Only."

"And the poster child for this issue is Bill Cassidy," Hogan said.

Republican Sen. Bill Cassidy broke with most of his party in voting to convict Donald Trump in his impeachment trial for his involvement in efforts to overturn the 2020 election. Cassidy's vote rankled many Republicans back home.

"They don't like him for those reasons," Hogan said. "And they know that he is somebody who does appeal to Democrats and does appeal to moderate voters in the state. And if you can create a system where you won't elect those sorts of people, then that's what they want."

In Wyoming, lawmakers last year passed rules further limiting participation in the state's already-closed primary elections.

Jennifer Green is a registered Republican in Wyoming, even though she is not a conservative. She said the state's closed primaries leave voters with few choices in a place where the GOP sweeps general elections.

"To have a voice in politics, you kind of need to be a Republican," she told NPR.

Green said this strategy has allowed her to weigh in on some pivotal primary races. For example, when former Congresswoman Liz Cheney was up for reelection in 2022, Green said she wanted to be sure to vote for her.

"I despise Liz Cheney, her politics, and we disagree on just about everything," she said. "But in the primaries, I voted for her because she was right on the Jan. 6 hearings and she will go down [on] the right side of history."

Some Republicans in the state argue many non-GOP voters weighed in on that primary. Wyoming Secretary of State Chuck Gray, a Republican, said voters took advantage of a law that allows voters to register on Election Day.

"I mean, this was a real problem," he told NPR. "Individuals switching into the primary on the day of the election and then switching back on the way out of the polls — it was very problematic."

Even though Cheney lost her race despite this alleged help from non-conservatives, Wyoming Republicans sought to outlaw party-switching close to an election, to limit what is often referred to as "crossover voting." Last year lawmakers passed legislation prohibiting voters from making any changes to their party affiliation up to three months before an election.

Gray said that, in general, non-party members shouldn't vote in party primary elections.

"It dilutes our primary system, he said. "It creates incentives for people who don't share a party's values to nonetheless prevent voters of that party from electing a candidate that represents the party's platform."

The Republican moves go against an overarching trend

Along with Louisiana and Wyoming, Republicans in other states — including Colorado, Tennessee and Texas — have been pushing new limits on party primaries, including excluding independent and unaffiliated voters.

That's even though most of the country has been moving in the opposite direction, said Nick Troiano, the founding executive director of Unite America, a philanthropic venture fund that invests in nonpartisan electoral reforms.

"Overall, the overarching trend over the last decade is a story of states opening rather than closing their primaries," he said.

Troiano said more states are making room for independent and unaffiliated voters in primaries because they are a growing part of the electorate. And he said states moving the other way are doing so for ideological reasons.

"Moving towards a more closed system is weaponizing the election process to impose purity tests on partisanship and ideology," Troiano said.

Concerns about more extreme candidates

In Louisiana, Democratic state Sen. Jay Luneau said he's worried the changes to some of Louisiana's primary elections will make the state's politics more extreme.

"It's going to push out, unfortunately, I believe, a lot of those people who are in the middle, which I think is desperately what we need in this state, in this country, is to get back to the middle where we were before we went to all of these extremes," he said.

Studies suggest there is evidence that open and nonpartisan elections do have some effect moderating candidates in a campaign because they are structurally forced to appeal to a wider range of voters. However, experts say broader reforms are needed to make sure more moderate candidates choose to run in the first place.

Troiano said the move to close primaries is ultimately politically shortsighted.

"The rational thing for a party to do when a growing market share of voters are leaving both political parties to become independents is to open their nominating process to welcome a broader swath of the electorate and to build support for their ideas and for their candidates," he said.

He said while there could be a long-term electoral cost for the GOP, in the short term this is expected to lead to what Republicans want: candidates who are more partisan and won't do things like vote to impeach Trump.

How can voters regain agency in our system?

Leslie Graves, Ballotpedia Founder and CEO, The Pathfinder , May 31, 2024

These two things are true every election, regardless of the candidates or the issues: We're told "every vote counts," and that candidates will "work hard to earn our vote."

But does every vote really count, or are politicians only concerned about votes from particular voters, and take the rest for granted? Perhaps they no longer need to work hard to earn our vote because their party affiliation has come to matter more to voters than anything else.

If these two basic tenets about elections are no longer true – if politicians can count on voters to cast their ballots obediently with Team Red or Team Blue no matter what – lamentably, campaigns will concentrate their efforts on a few voters in a few places. They won't need to earn every vote everywhere.

And worse, this profound partisan polarization will mean that as voters, we've lost our agency– our sense of control–and become separated and defined by red and blue, elephant and donkey.

The current presidential race is a prime example of what happens when voters abandon their agency. In their "Behind the Curtain" column in Axios, Mike Allen and Jim VandeHei write that the political professionals they are talking to firmly believe that just six states – and in the end, possibly just Pennsylvania – will decide whether President Joe Biden or former President Donald Trump wins in November.

How can a national election of such importance be reduced to so few voters in so few states? Because voters have already done the work of sorting themselves into one candidate's column or another's. Allen and VandeHei write:

Roughly 244 million Americans will be eligible to vote. But 99.5% of us won't be deciders: We won't vote. Or we always vote the same way. Or we live in states virtually certain to be red or blue.

That's a very tough pill to swallow. And democracy advocates will instinctively recoil from such a deterministic view of voters and voting.

But underlying the hard-nosed assumptions about voting behavior are even more troubling assumptions about how we got here. As Nate Silver, founder of FiveThirtyEight, writes, politics has become less about a contest between ideas – if it ever really was such a thing – and more about our "personal identity" or "which team we're on."

"People are trying to figure out where they fit in — who's on their side and who isn't. And this works in both directions: people can be attracted to a group or negatively polarized by it. People have different reasons for arguing about politics, and can derive value from a sense of social belonging and receiving reinforcement that their choices are honorable and righteous."

Research on down-ballot voting seems to back up this idea. Writing about partisan voting trends in U.S. House elections since 2008, J. Miles Coleman notes:

Of the 435 districts in the House, the vast majority of districts have voted straight party since 2008… All told, 379 districts started in 2008 by backing the nominee of either party and have not deviated since.

Against this backdrop, it looks like our democracy isn't nearly as vibrant as the 24-hour news cycle makes it appear, or as healthy as students of democracy know it should be.

Voters reclaiming their agency – an essential ingredient of the slow voting approach I discussed in my previous column – is a way to put our civic life on a healthier, more engaging, more meaningful track.

It takes time and effort. And courage. As Silver writes, political issues are increasingly about people "trying to figure out where they fit in — who's on their side and who isn't." That's a recipe for conformity. How, then, can we reclaim our agency without making ourselves outcasts in the neighborhood, or the butt of jokes at family gatherings?

In addition to the steps I talked about in last month's column, let's add one more: we need to develop what author Nir Eyal calls "the skill of the skill of the future" – the ability to be "indistractable."

Modern politics is built around distracting people. And too often, what people are distracted from are the events and issues closest to them—both geographically and perhaps personally. We've seen the results of this distraction at the local level – where the policies are enacted that affect how our kids are educated, our trash collected, our streets maintained, and our neighborhoods kept safe. It's here that voter engagement and agency is at low ebb, where it needs instead to be a steady flow

We can reclaim our vote and regain our agency. How? Make the effort to ignore, or at least minimize, the distractions of the 24-hour news cycle and permanent campaigning.

Instead, take the time we might otherwise spend scrolling "breaking news" headlines or wading through online videos to take a look at the agenda for the next school board meeting. Or look over a candidate's replies to issue surveys like the one Ballotpedia conducts for candidates at all levels of government.

Every action we take that makes us less distracted, more informed, and more confident about our role in the democratic process enriches our lives, and our politics. Let's get started.

How well the major parties represent Americans, the public's feelings about more political parties

Pew Research Center, September 19, 2023

The Democratic and Republican parties are both viewed unfavorably by majorities of Americans. And while most adults say they feel at least somewhat well-represented by at least one of the two parties, a quarter (25%) say neither party represents the interests of people like them even somewhat well.

Reflecting dissatisfaction with the major parties, even among some loyal partisans, many Americans continue to be open to the possibility of having more political parties. Younger adults and those with loose partisan attachments are particularly likely to express a desire for more parties.

Among all U.S. adults, 37% say "I wish there were more political parties to choose from" describes their views extremely or very well; another 31% say it describes their feelings somewhat well.

Additional parties, however, are not seen as a promising fix for the country's gridlock. Only about a quarter of Americans (26%) say having more than two major parties would make it easier to solve the country's problems. A nearly identical share (24%) say it would make this harder.

And just a third think it is likely an independent candidate will win the White House in the next 25 years; 66% view this possibility as very or somewhat unlikely.

How different are the Republican and Democratic parties?

A narrow majority of Americans (54%) say there is a great deal of difference between what the Republican and Democratic parties stand for. Another 35% say there is a fair amount of difference in their values, while just 10% say there is hardly any difference between the two parties.

The share seeing a great deal of difference between the parties hasn't changed much in recent years, but Americans remain more likely to see major differences between the parties than they were a few decades ago.

These views continue to vary by age, political engagement and the strength of a person's ties to a party.

Age
Among adults ages 18 to 29, fewer than half (41%) say there is a great deal of difference in what the parties stand for. Older age groups are more likely to see big differences between the parties, with those 65 and older most likely to say this.

Level of political engagement
Two-thirds of the most politically engaged Americans think there is a great deal of difference between the parties. Slightly more than half of those with medium engagement (54%) and 42% of those with low engagement say the same. Political engagement is based on people's interest in politics, as well as how often they follow government and public affairs and discuss politics.

Strength of partisanship
Nearly three-quarters of strong Republicans (73%) and 72% of strong Democrats say there is a great deal of difference between the parties, compared with smaller shares of those who affiliate with a party, but not strongly, and those who lean to a party.

Views of how well the parties represent people's interests

Large shares of Americans who identify with the Republican or Democratic Party say they feel well-represented – though relatively few feel very well-represented.

Those who only lean toward a party, by contrast, tend to be more skeptical of how well their party represents them.

- 71% of all Republicans and Republican-leaning independents say their party represents their interests very or somewhat well. Those who affiliate with the Republican Party are more likely to express this view (82%) than those who lean toward the GOP (55%).

- There are similar differences between Democrats and Democratic leaners. More than eight-in-ten Democrats (85%) say they feel well-represented, compared with 58% of Democratic-leaning independents.

Most Americans feel represented by at least one of the parties

Among all U.S. adults, roughly a third say they feel well-represented by the Democratic Party, but not the Republican Party; about as many (30%) feel represented by the Republican Party but not the Democratic Party.

A quarter (25%) say neither party represents them well, while 9% feel well-represented by both parties.

About four-in-ten independents and those who identify with other parties (41%) say neither major party represents people like them well. Identical shares of independents who lean toward the GOP and the Democratic Party (38% each) say neither party represents them well.

Demographic differences in people's views of which party, if any, represents them well

Americans' views of how well the Republican and Democratic parties represent the interests of people like them vary across race, ethnicity, age, education and community type. These patterns largely mirror groups' party identification and voting patterns.

More Republican-oriented demographic groups, such as older people, White adults and rural residents, are more likely to say the Republican Party, rather than Democratic Party, represents them well.

The reverse is true for Democratic-oriented groups, such as Black, Hispanic and Asian adults, as well as people with a postgraduate degree.

While three-in-ten adults under age 50 say neither party represents them well, a smaller share of people 50 and older (20%) say this.

What if there were more political parties?
Independents and those who identify with other parties are more supportive of the idea of having more parties to choose from.

Nearly half of all independents (47%) say they wish for more parties. However, a larger share of independents who lean toward the Democratic Party say this than among those who lean toward the Republican Party (56% vs. 43%, respectively).

People who identify as Democrats also are more interested than Republican identifiers in having additional parties. Democratic identifiers are 10 percentage points more likely than GOP identifiers to say that wishing for more parties describes their views extremely or very well (35% vs. 25%).

Would more parties make solving problems easier or harder?

Despite the interest in having more parties to choose from, only 26% of the public says it would make the country's problems easier to solve.

A similar share of Americans say having more major parties would make solving problems harder (24%). Another quarter say more parties wouldn't have an impact on the nation's ability to solve its problems, while 24% are unsure what impact it would have.

Younger adults are more likely than older Americans to say that more major parties would make it easier to address the country's problems. About four-in-ten adults ages 18 to 29 say this, compared with 12% of those 65 and older.

Partisan leaners also are more likely than partisans to say that more political parties would make it easier to address the country's problems. More than four-in-ten Democratic leaners (44%) and about three-in-ten Republican leaners (29%) say it would make solving problems easier. This compares with a quarter of those who identify as Democrats and 15% of Republican identifiers.

How likely is it that an independent candidate will become president?

Few Americans think a candidate independent of the Republican and Democratic parties will win a presidential election in the next 25 years. About two-thirds of adults (66%) say it is very (36%) or somewhat unlikely (30%) this will happen.

There are no partisan differences in these expectations, and independents are only slightly more likely than partisan identifiers to say this is likely.

Two-thirds in both partisan coalitions say this is unlikely, as do 62% of independents and those who identify with other parties (including 66% of Republican-leaning independents and 64% of Democratic-leaning independents).

Americans who feel unrepresented by the parties have highly negative views of the political system

Compared with those who say they feel represented by the Republican or Democratic parties, the quarter of Americans who say neither party represents them well stand out for their negative views of much of the U.S. political system.

- **Those who feel unrepresented by the parties are less optimistic about the future of the political system.** Just 21% of Americans who feel unrepresented by both parties say they have a lot of or some confidence in the future of the system. This compares with 32% of those who feel represented well by the Republican Party, 49% of those who feel represented by the Democratic Party and 59% of those who say both parties represent them well.

- **Adults who feel unrepresented doubt voting "by people like them" can impact the direction of the country.** At least half of those who feel represented by the GOP (56%) or the Democrats (72%) say that their votes can affect the direction of the country at least some. By contrast, a far smaller share (35%) of those who feel unrepresented say this.

- **Americans who say they are unrepresented by the parties also say political candidates do not share their views.** About a quarter of those who say neither party represents them well (26%) say there is usually at least one candidate who shares their views. But clear majorities of those who feel represented by at least one of the two major parties say there is usually a candidate with their views.

- **Negative evaluations of members of Congress are higher among those who feel neither party represents them.** About four-in-ten of those who are represented well by one party but not the other (39% of those represented by the GOP and 43% of those represented by the Democrats) say members of Congress care about the people they represent at least some of the time. The share saying this falls to 22% among those who say neither party represents them well.

- **Americans who feel unrepresented by the parties pay less attention to government and public affairs.** About three-in-ten Americans who feel unrepresented by a major party (31%) say they follow government most of the time, compared with about half of those who say one of the two parties but not the other represents them well. (The 9% of Americans who feel well-represented by both parties are the least likely to be politically attentive.)

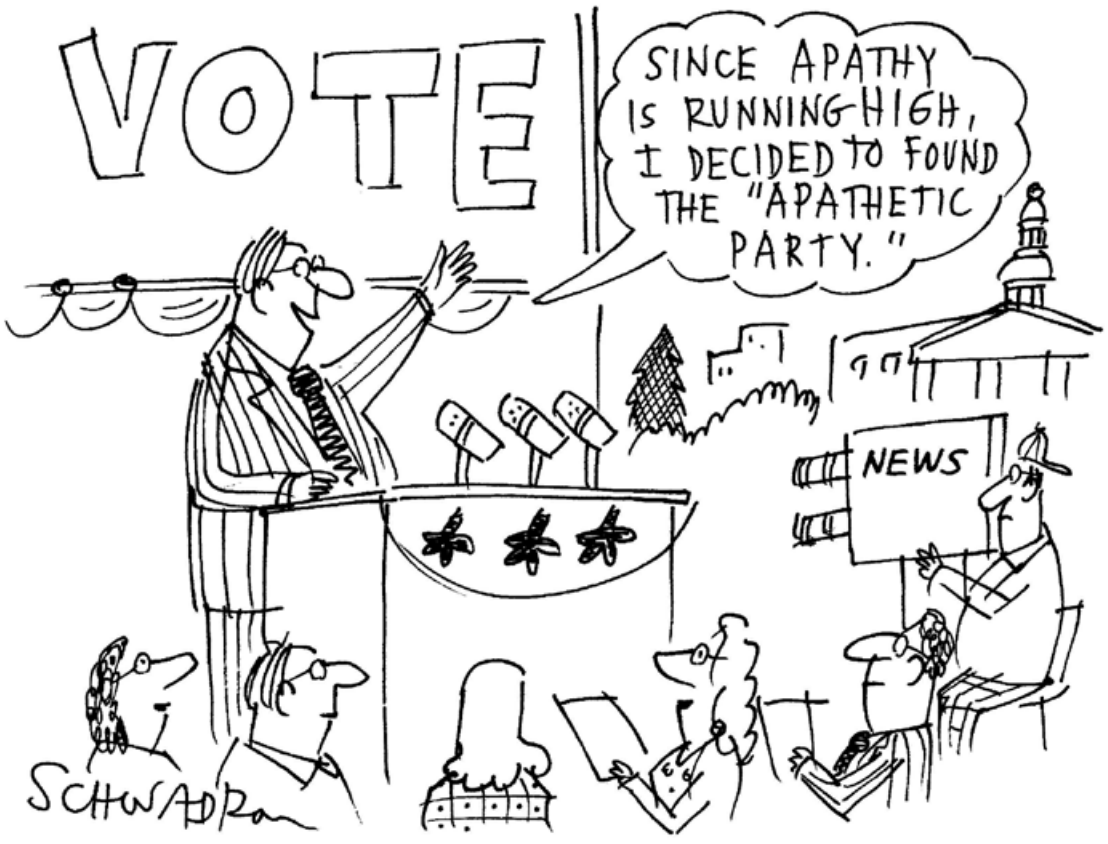
- **The desire for more political parties is higher among those who feel unrepresented by both parties.** Half of those unrepresented by the parties say they "wish there were more political parties," compared with four-in-ten or fewer in the other groups.

The Americans who say neither the Republican Party nor the Democratic Party represent people like them well give consistently lower job ratings to their district's House representative, state governor and local elected officials:

- 28% in this group say their **U.S. representative** is doing a good job. Nearly half of those who feel well-represented by at least one of the two major parties view their representative's performance positively.

- 40% who feel unrepresented say their **governor** does a good job. At least half of those in other groups approve of their governor's performance.

- While about six-in-ten of those who feel well-represented by at least one party view their **local elected officials'** job performance positively, a far smaller share (41%) of those who don't feel well-represented say this.



More than Red and Blue: Executive Summary

Protect Democracy, October 5, 2023

The United States is not immune from the global trends challenging democracies. Like many other countries, American democracy is under pressure. In particular, political parties in the United States have emerged as a point of weakness, a vulnerability in the system rather than a bulwark of democracy.

The American Political Science Association (APSA) and Protect Democracy have partnered to support the APSA Presidential Task Force on Political Parties in summarizing for a general audience the existing political science research on responsible political party behavior. Leaders and parties who behave responsibly engage in institutional forbearance, refraining from using the full breadth and scope of their politically allocated power, when doing so would undermine the democratic system. They also adhere to the norm of mutual toleration, respecting one another as legitimate players in the political system. Today, American political parties fall short on both. We don't pretend that both parties face equal challenges on this front – as many chapters indicate, the bulk of the problematic party behavior today comes from the contemporary Republican Party. But the research presented here can be applied to party responsibility across the ideological spectrum.

There is substantial skepticism of political parties in the United States, a feature of our political culture dating to the founding. Yet research on democracies around the world yields the consistent finding that political parties are an essential feature of nearly all large democracies.

What are the functions of political parties in democracies?

Political parties play a range of vital roles, especially in large, diverse democracies. These include:

- Connecting interests and groups together in coalition,
- Mobilizing voters and resources during campaigns,
- Organizing political ideas more coherently and providing a "brand" that voters can easily identify, simplifying decision-making and providing inter-party accountability,
- Coordinating office holders to advance policies and provide effective governance, and
- Constraining individual politicians from acting against democratic norms and rules.

There are many ways in which political parties in the US are failing to fulfill these functions or doing so in ways that do not meet the standards of forbearance and mutual toleration inherent in responsible party behavior.

Americans do not express much trust in political parties, consistently ranking them below the police, judges, and even the legislatures which parties help to organize. In this, Americans are like citizens in other democracies. While extreme distrust of parties might weaken democracy, some skepticism is healthy, with various democracies taking measures to protect against parties that might threaten the democratic order.

How did we get here? What explains the current state of American political parties?

The US party system has changed several times throughout its history, moving from a set of elite groups organizing inside Congress and the Executive branch, to more mass-based parties. Over time the contours of the system have shifted several times, with different geographic, identity, and policy divisions distinguishing parties.

Several features and trends help to explain the current contours of the American party system and the party behavior within it:

- While partisan ties are connected to many factors, racial identification and racial views are a central feature of partisanship, even more so than in the recent past. This realignment has generated problematic electoral incentives and spurred efforts to restrict access to the democratic process to sway elections and entrench parties in power.
- American parties have always been remarkably permeable, providing opportunities for different groups to shape parties and for parties to reach out to new interests. But this permeability also raises the risk of party capture by antidemocratic actors.
- The innovation of party primaries democratized the nomination process but also lead to a loss of control of the party by its leaders. Party leaders have ways of influencing primary outcomes, but the significant coordination difficulties posed by the current campaign environment limits their ability to provide effective gatekeeping.
- Parties have become organizationally weaker due to the rise of the partisan news media and social media. Changes in campaign finance law have empowered groups at the expense of parties themselves, inhibiting the ability of parties to serve as gatekeepers against antidemocratic forces.

What's to be done? What does political science tell us about possibilities for change?

While there is no single panacea, research offers insights into several potential avenues for change. These insights include:

- The accumulated body of research cautions against a Pollyannaish hope that voters will spontaneously realign the party system away from polarized divisions. Voters are far more driven by psychological dynamics favoring in-group bias and the two major parties have adopted mobilization strategies that interact with this tendency in different ways. Though still unlikely, there is some possibility for a partisan realignment around pro-democracy issues which could be fostered by various methods of reducing animosity among voters.

- Change could conceivably come not from voters writ-large, but from pressure via factions or from organized social movements. Such movements have a complex history of interaction with US political parties. Typically emerging when parties are not proactively addressing the concerns of some mass group, social movements are sometimes successful in reshaping parties, but at other times their influence is limited.

- Ultimately, parties' behavior is driven by the incentives they face, so the surrounding institutional landscape may need to change as well. Electoral system reforms such as ranked choice voting or proportional representation can alter the incentives parties face and provide new opportunities to break gridlock and combat anti-democratic forces. Following the lead of states that have begun experimenting with a range of reforms could help create a less permissive environment for irresponsible behavior and democratic backsliding.

In sum, political parties in the United States operate in a social, political, and legal environment that leaves them vulnerable to capture by antidemocratic influences and frequently incentivizes irresponsible political behavior. Scholarship on these topics offers practitioners guidance for the challenges that will need to be met to successfully reform. The causes of parties' current behavior are multifaceted. There is likely no single change that will address all of them, but there are paths forward.

The analysis, views, and conclusions contained herein reflect those of the author(s) and do not reflect the views of the American Political Science Association or Protect Democracy.

Read the full report from More than Red and Blue: Political Parties and American Democracy at https://protectdemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/APSA-PD-Political-Parties-Report-FINAL.pdf

> ***"No one party can fool all of the people all of the time; that's why we have two parties."*** *— Bob Hope*

9 GOP-led attorneys general sue Biden administration over voter registration efforts

Darrell Ehrlick, Oklahoma Voice, August 20, 2024

Nine states, including Kansas and Oklahoma, are challenging an executive order by President Joe Biden that would enlist federal agencies to help register residents to vote, and those states say the order undermines their power to control elections, calling it federally subsidized program aimed at boosting Democratic and left-leaning blocs.

Kansas Attorney General Kris Kobach and Montana Attorney General Austin Knudsen filed the federal lawsuit in court in Wichita, Kansas. The nine states are Montana, Kansas, Iowa, South Dakota, Mississippi, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oklahoma and South Carolina.

The heart of the lawsuit is Executive Order 14019, which was issued on March 10, 2021.

The states challenging the executive order say that Biden converts various federal agencies, turning them in part into "a voter registration organization" illegally. The attorneys general say that elections, including voter registration, are solely the province of states, guaranteed by the Tenth Amendment of the United States Constitution.

Moreover, the states said that it's an example of the federal government trying to usurp the sovereignty of the states, and giving the states no other choice than to resort to federal court. The lawsuit said the states were never invited into the process, never allowed to comment, and they accuse the Biden administration of hiding the plans.

"In response to requests under the Freedom of Information Act, the Biden-Harris Administration has asserted the plans are subject to privilege and may be withheld from public scrutiny," the lawsuit claims.

The lawsuit lists a number of federal agencies as defendants, including the U.S. Treasury, the U.S. Department of Justice, the U.S. Department of The Interior, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Department of Labor, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the U.S. Department of Education.

The lawsuit also claims that the National Voter Registration Act means that federal agencies cannot stand in the way of citizens voting, but it also said that voter registration activity is left to the states, and Biden's order oversteps its authority.

The 41-page suit outlines a number of ways the executive order commands the federal agencies to help bolster the efforts to register voters, for example:

The suit accuses the Department of Justice of providing information to those who remain eligible to vote while in federal custody, as well as preparing prisoners about voting laws and rights before reentry. It says that the Department of the Interior will disseminate information about registering and voting at schools operated by the Bureau of Indian Education and tribal colleges and universities. The order also encourages the Department of Agriculture to provide nonpartisan voter information through its borrowers and lenders about registration and voting. Designating 2,400 American Job Centers, which provide employment guidance, training and career services, to become voter registration agencies under the National Voter Registration Act. Allowing public housing community areas space for certain election-related activities, including voter registration or voter drop boxes for early voting. The lawsuit said that the order allows the Department of Education to allow federal work study funds to "support voter registration" activities.

"There is little detail about how agencies determine whether a third-party organization is 'approved,' 'non-partisan,' or what third-party organizations an agency can work with to promote voter registration," the lawsuit said. "A rule that permits federal agencies to engage in voter registration activities trenches on States' constitutionally protected sovereign rights."

From a practical standpoint, the states claim that the federal government's executive order doesn't just exceed the constitution, but could threaten efforts in the individual states.

"The vast resources of the federal government render it unique among all possible entities engaged in voter registration. Because of the resources it can bring to bear, the federal government can engage in voter registration activities on a scale that will, as a practical matter, swamp any state's attempt to regulate the government's actions," the lawsuit said.

Knudsen, Montana's Attorney General, echoed that sentiment when he announced the lawsuit from Helena on Tuesday.

"Fair elections are an essential part of our country's republic. Congress gave the states the power to oversee elections years ago," Knudsen said. "I will not stand by while the Biden-Harris administration attempts to shamelessly garner votes by employing its own agencies to register voters and disregard states' own voter registration systems, putting the integrity of our elections at risk."

The states also said that encouraging a variety of different

agencies without proper training put the elections at risk of fraud.

"They failed to consider the risk of fraud or to implement actions to prevent fraud, which threatens the integrity of state administration of elections," the states said. "This includes, at a minimum, ensuring that illegal aliens do not register to vote through the plans the agency defendants put in place."

It is already against federal law for non-citizens to vote in elections.

The states conclude the lawsuit by saying that the plans in the executive order weren't motivated to help resident register to vote, rather they are part of a Democrat plan.

"(The executive order) was motivated by a partisan desire to unfairly increase the Democrat vote as shown by the fact that the order came from left-wing, progressive groups," the suit claims. "The purpose is to promote left-wing politicians and policies at elections."

Notes

This is a resource document for you to use.
Take notes, highlight, use as a text book.

Notes on the evolution of Oklahoma Politics

Rodger A. Randle, OU Center for Studies in Democracy and Culture

Oklahoma was born in politics.

The state of Oklahoma was formed by combining two territories, Oklahoma Territory and Indian Territory, to create a new state. Never before in American history had a territory not entered the Union as an independent state. It was originally anticipated that Indian Territory would become the State of Sequoyah and Oklahoma Territory would become the State of Oklahoma. However, politics intervened. The national administration, Republican at the time, feared the creation of two new states that would both likely elect two Democrat senators each. President Theodore Roosevelt brokered a compromise that would combine the two territories into a single state, thus sending only two new (Democrat) senators to Washington, and thus making less of an impact on the balance of power at the Capitol.

In the long-term, of course, this had a great importance for Tulsa. If the State of Sequoyah had been created, Tulsa would have become its dominant urban center. At the time of statehood Muskogee was bigger than Tulsa and probably would have become the capital city of the new state. Muskogee was where the Constitutional Convention for the State of Sequoyah was held in 1905. Over time, of course, the oil boom in the Tulsa region would have placed us in a position of political and economic leadership in the State of Sequoyah, instead of the alienated relationship that we have had with the capital(s) of the State of Oklahoma. The relationship of Tulsa and state government would have been dramatically different in the State of Sequoyah, and this likely would have had a profound effect on Tulsa's cultural development.

It was not only the politics of party balance in Washington that affected Congress's decision to block the creation of the State of Sequoyah. Racism against native peoples also undoubtedly played a role. Turning "Indian Territory" into the "State of Sequoyah" would have created a state with a a large population of Native Americans. Maybe the people of the State of Sequoyah would have even elected Native Americans to represent them in the all-male, all-White United States Senate! It was much safer for the power establishment at the Capitol to combine Oklahoma Territory and Indian Territory into a single state, thus diluting the impact of Native American voters and guaranteeing a clear White majority among the new state's electorate.

Ten states in our country are named after historical people. Eight of these states are named after Europeans who never once set foot in North America, and one is named after a European immigrant. Only one state, the State of Washington, is named after a person born in North America. The State of Sequoyah would have been the second. And it would have been the only state carrying the name of a Native American. The scoreboard: Europeans 8, Native Americans 0.

The winners write the history books, we are reminded, and this has certainly happened in the case of the State of Oklahoma. Many things that predated the forced merger of the two territories are now taught as "Oklahoma" history. We read about our "Oklahoma territorial governors", for example ...but Indian Territory never had territorial governors. That only happened over in Oklahoma Territory. There were no land runs in Indian Territory. And in the case of the many settlers who slipped across the borders of the land run lands early and entered illegally (the so-called "sooners"), they were Oklahoma Territory people, not Indian Territory people. (We should note that today Oklahomans celebrate those law-breaking "sooners" even as they point with disapproval at the latter day undocumented immigrants arriving in our state.)

Settlement patterns in Indian Territory and Oklahoma Territory were different, but in both cases settlers brought their politics with them. In the northern part of the state, settlers heavily came from the North and brought Republican politics. In the southern part of the state, settlers came heavily from the South and brought Democratic politics. In recent decades Oklahoma politics has shifted, but for more than half of Oklahoma history the voting map of the state was divided along the middle between Democrats and Republicans.

Oklahoma was born in the politics of Washington D.C., but it was also born into the politics of American populism. Oklahoma of the statehood era was primarily rural, populated by small farmers and the town communities that served them. Our populism was rural and grew out of the hostility of farmers against the big economic interests that held power over them, especially the railroads. This hostility extended against Eastern bankers and all those that were felt to take advantage of the economic powerlessness of Oklahoma's rural populations.

We see this populism expressed very neatly in our state's constitution, the longest in the nation. The populist controlled majority that wrote the constitution feared that the interests of big money would dominate state politics and that the best protection against the mischief of these powerful forces was to write as many protections as possible in the constitution itself. Our constitution, for example, specifies the flash point for kerosene (widely used on farms). It also provided for one of the longest lists in the country of state officials to be directly elected at the ballot box. This was changed in the 1970's, but the provision was originally enacted to guarantee to citizens the right to pick the people who would regulate their interests rather than leaving these

important posts to gubernatorial appointment, appointments that might be made by governors under the influence of the railroads and the bankers. The constitution also provided that changes to the constitution could only happen by a vote of the people themselves, thus insulating the protections contained in it from shady maneuvers at the State Capitol.

Oklahoma used to be thought of as a state dominated by Democrats, and indeed Democrats controlled state offices and held an overwhelming majority in the legislature up until relatively recently. Republicans, however, constituted a significant minority and occasionally won secondary offices or a U.S. Senate seat. Races were sometimes competitive, but Democrats almost always emerged as the winners.

We can look back at the presidential election of 1952 as marking the beginning of Oklahoma's shift to the Republican Party. In that year the Republican candidate, Dwight Eisenhower, received about the same percentage of the vote in Oklahoma as he received nationwide. This repeated in 1956. In 1960 the Democrats nominated John Kennedy, a Roman Catholic, and there was strong rejection of his candidacy by Oklahoma Protestants. His percentage of the vote in Oklahoma was far behind what he received nationwide.

In every presidential election since 1960 the Democratic candidate has run behind the party's national results, often significantly and sometimes dramatically. In time, the shift that began at the presidential election level began to began to be reflected in state and local races.

In 1962 Oklahoma elected a Republican as governor for the first time in the state's history. Today, of course, Republicans consistently win statewide elections and control the state legislature with a majority that equals what Democrats at one time enjoyed.

Tulsa, with many of its important leaders having come from Eastern states, was a strong base of support for the Republican Party in Oklahoma. In this sense, Tulsa shared the political origins of other northern Oklahoma counties. Because of Tulsa's economic importance and population size, its influence in the Republican Party remained highly significant in the state until well into the second half of Oklahoma history. Up until the 1970s or 80s, Tulsa was the "capital city" of the Oklahoma Republican Party. It was the capital city in the sense of being the largest and most important center of Republicanism in Oklahoma, and it was also the "capital" of the party in the sense that it was the place from which most of the party's funding came. Tulsa's role diluted as more Oklahomans switched to the Republican Party. The Republicanism of Tulsa was influenced by leaders whose roots were in northeastern American economic conservatism and old-fashioned "good government" values. As the party expanded and grew in Oklahoma, however, Tulsa's influence declined and new registrants in the party tended to prioritize social conservatism.

Oklahoma's transition from being a Democratic state to a Republican one is not altogether surprising. Oklahoma Democrats, mostly Southern in origin, tended to be conservative like Democrats in southern states. The white southern migration to the Republican Party following the civil rights legislation of the 1960s was mirrored in Oklahoma. Northern Oklahoma already had a strong Republican tradition, and the addition of the new adherents exiting the Democratic Party produced a solid Republican party majority in the state. Sen. Robert Kerr, a Democrat and former governor, was a powerful force in Oklahoma politics for many years. He was a conservative like most Democrats from the South (though orig. He was a very perceptive observer of Oklahoma political trends, and he predicted this political shift before his death on January 1, 1964.

For the first half of our history, Oklahoma had a rural dominated state government. Up until intervention by the federal courts in the 1960s, the Oklahoma House and Senate reapportioned themselves after each decennial federal census in accordance with what they thought best, without any regard to equality of population in the districts that they drew. For many decades Tulsa was given seven members of the Oklahoma House, out of a total of 124 members. The Senate had forty-four members and Tulsa was allowed to have one of them. Oklahoma County was also limited to one member of the Senate. At the time of court mandated reapportionment, Tulsa and Oklahoma counties had 30% the states population between them but only 5% of the representation in the Oklahoma Legislature. Some of the rural districts had population that were quite small, but the country legislators who drew the legislative maps had no desire to cede power to the big cities. Gross inequality in the sizes of legislative districts continued until the 1960's when federal courts adopted the principle of "one man, one vote". This resulted in the forced re-drawing of legislative districts based upon the principle of equality of population.

The reapportionment of the legislature caused a seismic shift in power at the Capitol, though rural influences still tended to be very strong. This was true partly because of the influence of some of the longtime legislators, but also for the obvious reason that a majority of the state at the time of reapportionment was still non-urban. Nevertheless, the two cities started making gains as a result of their increased legislative influence. This was most visible in terms of state-supported higher education: junior colleges offering professional courses and the first two academic years towards a bachelor's degree were created in Tulsa and Oklahoma City. The new big city legislators also sought to insure a fairer distribution of state expenditures between the cities and the rural counties.

The increased urban representation at the Capitol was somewhat diluted in its political impact, however, because the city legislative delegations were politically divided between the two parties. As legislative power works in Oklahoma, real influence on public policy lies inside the caucus of the party with the majority of legislative members. Democrat and Republican votes are of equal weight

on the floors of the House and Senate, but legislative policy is effectively decided inside the closed door meetings of majority party caucuses.

Oklahoma's Constitution created one of the weakest executive branches of state government in the nation. This was a reflection of the populist influence in the Constitutional Convention. The populists feared concentrated executive power that could be corrupted by big economic interests. The weakness of the governor in the Oklahoma system was further exacerbated by two developments that began in the 1930's and 1940's. One was the creation of the Oklahoma Public Welfare Commission during the Depression era. The Commission was given earmarked sales tax funding that did not require legislative appropriation (or oversight). Its director for over 30 years was one of the towering and historic figures in Oklahoma government, L. E. Rader. The welfare operations of the state extended into every county, and and the department ran institutions scattered across the state. Each county welfare office, and each institution, offered opportunities for political patronage in the home districts of Oklahoma legislators. They also gave Rader the ability to extend other kinds of useful favors, and he was a gifted and skilled manipulator of the powers available to him. Many of the legislative leaders (and governors) answered to Mr. Rader, rather than him answering to the them. Rader accumulated exceptional power and he knew how to use it.

Another long-time power was E. T. Dunlap, for two decades the Chancellor of the Oklahoma State System of Higher Education. The Oklahoma State System of Higher Education was a constitutional creation dating from the 1940's, and it guaranteed colleges and universities independence from political influence. This amendment created a higher education system governed by a nine person constitutional board, the State Regents for Higher Education. Under this constitutional system, the Oklahoma legislature makes a single lump sum appropriation to the State Regents and the they are the ones who decide how to distribute it, not the legislators. At the time of the creation of the system, Oklahoma governors were not allowed to succeed themselves, and therefore the number nine was significant because it meant that no single governor could ever appoint a majority of the members of the regents.

For many decades the Welfare Commission and the State Regents for Higher Education between them received over half of state expenditures, but with very limited oversight by Oklahoma elected officials. Both Rader and Dunlap liked it that way, of course, and they were clever and creative in keeping prying legislators at bay. When troublesome requests for information were submitted to Mr. Rader, he would reply by sending cardboard boxes full of computer printouts and copies of records. The legislators, who had very limited staff, lacked the ability to comb through all the stacks of information that they received, but they also could not complain that Rader had not been responsive. The legislators would simply shrug their shoulders and move on to some other topic. Chancellor E. T. Dunlap, on the other hand, was a talker. You always wanted to be careful what you asked him, otherwise his answer would begin with a detailed explanation of the history of the process by which the constitutional amendment creating the State System of Higher Education was adopted in the 1940's and then he would continue by explaining in detail every change made through the years up until he got to the point in history that contained the answer to the question you had asked. All of this could take an exhaustive among of time. As one legislative wit (who later became president of a small college) described it, "The job of the Chancellor is to come to legislative committee meetings and to talk until there isn't time for questions."

Robert S. Kerr is an interesting example of political leaders in earlier Oklahoma, though he was certainly one of the most exceptional, and successful, of them. In many ways he mirrored the economic and cultural evolution of Oklahoma. He was born in humble circumstances but achieved wealth in the oil business. He began in politics as a supporter of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and ended up a conservative. Once he entered politics after first having built his business interests, his rise was rapid. He gained early national attention when he was selected by President Roosevelt as keynote speaker at the Democratic national convention in 1944, just two years after his election as Governor (his first public office). The New York Times's coverage of the speech praised his oratorical skills, saying the speech was delivered from "the eloquent lips of Gov. Kerr." He was elected to the Senate in 1948, and reelected twice after that. In Washington he gained a reputation as a talented dealmaker and became known as the "uncrowned king" of the Senate. "I'm opposed to any combine that I'm not in on," was one of his sayings. His wheeling and dealing in Washington was very beneficial for Oklahoma, of course. He is responsible for the Kerr-McClellan Arkansas River Navigation System that resulted in Tulsa becoming a port city, connected by water to New Orleans. The navigation system is just one example of his impacts on Oklahoma. Another important legacy is the Kerr Foundation in Oklahoma City, now headed by Lou Kerr, which is heavily involved in supporting educational activities.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of Oklahoma is that it is made up of six distinct cultural regions. It's typical for states to have more than one identifiable cultural region (think of t Louisiana with its southern Catholic French region and its northern Protestant region or New York State with its upstate and downstate regions). Every state has multiple geographic distinctions ...but what is significant in Oklahoma, and different from most other states, is that we have six distinct cultural regions despite our relatively small population.

If we divide the state in half between the North and the South, we have two regions based on the settlement of the North by people from the northern part of the United States, and the South settled by people from southern states. That

gives us two regions, but the eastern and western halves of these sections of the state are geographically and economically different. The North and South of Oklahoma may have originally been settled by pioneers who shared much in common, but, as people adapted to the nature of the land and and the economic possibilities of each region, natural adjustments evolved over time in cultural values and norms. This, then, gives us four cultural regions: the northern and southern halves of the eastern and western halves of the state.

Then we add Tulsa and Oklahoma City as additional cultural regions, both distinct from each other at the same time they are distinctly different from the rural parts of the state. Tulsa has a strong eastern American cultural influence. Oklahoma City, on the other hand, is representative of "western" American culture. We are a state with two major cities, each separated by 100 miles of highway and 1000 miles of cultural differences.

The two urban cultural areas plus the four non-urban ones gives us a total of six cultural regions that make up Oklahoma. The existence of six separate regions ...regions with conflicting priorities and values, all inside a state that is not heavily populated... has always undermined our state's ability to develop coherent and sustained public policies. In Oklahoma, "coming together" has always been difficult. It is likely to remain so. From one cultural region to another in Oklahoma the channels of communication between leadership groups are usually weak. This means that the leaders that influence public policy choices through their influence on public opinion (and through their relationships with elected officials) don't talk to each other as they should and don't even understand each other as they should. Without these leaders coming together to create state-wide consensuses on issues, it is difficult for real public policy progress to be made in Oklahoma.

(P.S. Organizations that work towards building communication bridges, like the Oklahoma Academy, do exist and are critically important, but they need broader and deeper support.)

> ***"An honest politician stands out like a do-it-yourself haircut."*** *— Arnold H. Glasow*

Curiosities of Oklahoma Politics: "Put this in your pipe and smoke it!"

Rodger A. Randle, OU Center for Studies in Democracy and Culture

"Put this in your pipe and smoke it!" is an old fashioned way to say that here is something for you to think about...

What follows are facts and curiosities of Oklahoma politics and government... things for you to think about as you try to understand how our state became what it is.

Oklahoma's Red Flag.

The original Oklahoma flag, pictured at the top of this page, was adopted in 1911. It was our first official flag, even though we had already been a state for four years before it was adopted. It only lasted until 1925 when it was replaced by an early variant of our current flag. Opposition to the flag developed because of the large amount of the color red used in its design. 1925 was only a few years after the Russian revolution and people didn't like the association between the red flag of Oklahoma and the red flag of the USSR.

Homegrown Populism.

Populism was a significant characteristic of early Oklahoma, and it was expressed in part through support for the Socialist Party. In fact, in 1914 the socialist vote for congressional candidates was higher in Oklahoma than in any other state in the country. During that period we had socialist members of the Oklahoma legislature, and a nationally prominent socialist magazine was published in Oklahoma City by Oscar Ameringer. Oklahoma socialism was rural socialism, however, and motivated by the grievances of small farmers. Socialists were not strong either Oklahoma City or Tulsa. The same profile of voter in early Oklahoma that supported the socialists now supports Donald Trump.

It took over 50 years before a Tulsan was elected governor of the state.

1958 saw the first election of an Oklahoma governor from Tulsa. It was also the first election won through skillful use of television. Television only became widespread in Oklahoma in the early 1950s, and no candidate had ever used it with much effect. The successful candidate was a telegenic 32 year old County Attorney from Tulsa, J. Howard Edmondson. He tapped into a latent reform sentiment in the state and upset the candidate supported by most of the state's political establishment (what Edmondson labeled the "Old Guard"). In the general election he carried every county and won by the largest margin in history. No candidate for governor ever again ignored the power of television ...but few have ever been as effective on the small screen as Edmondson. Since Edmondson's election, four more Tulsans have been elected governor and Oklahoma City has elected two (plus George Nigh, who was from McAlester but living in OKC at the time of his election as governor).

The decline of the Democratic Party in Oklahoma began with a rural-urban split.

Edmondson entered into office with an ambitious reform agenda. He succeeded in leading an effort to institute a merit system in state employment, replacing the old political patronage system in practice at that time. Competitive bidding was also introduced in state government, and prohibition of the sale of alcoholic beverages was ended by the voters after a colorful campaign orchestrated by Gov. Edmondson. Other reforms, mostly directed towards county government, were attempted at the ballot box but roundly defeated. The reforms produced a rural backlash and by the time Edmondson left office his popularity was low. He was succeeded as the Democratic Party nominee for governor in 1962 by the "old guard" political leader he had defeated overwhelmingly four years earlier. The reforms he won in state government were historically important, but one of the by-products of his reform administration was a rural-urban divide in Oklahoma that fractured and wounded the Democratic Party.

Racial calm in Oklahoma in the 1950's.

Sometimes the most significant news is that the dog didn't bark. Oklahoma's governor from 1955 to 1959 was Raymond Gary, a politician from the "Little Dixie" region of the state. In May of 1954, the year before he took office, the United States Supreme Court issued its ruling in Brown vs. Board of Education mandating racial integration of the public schools. Politics was roiled throughout the South and many demagogic public officials whipped the flames of racial animosity. In Little Rock, in Oklahoma's neighboring state of Arkansas, President Eisenhower called in the National Guard to assist in integrating the schools. In Oklahoma, however, we had none of the problems experienced in many Southern states. This was not luck. It was the product of quiet and firm leadership from Gov. Raymond Gary. His efforts never made headlines, but racial tensions didn't make headlines either. He made it clear we would follow the law of the land, though our state leaders didn't see any need to rush.

Will Rogers.

When Will Rogers was asked about his political affiliation,

he replied, "I'm not a member of any organized political party. I'm a Democrat."

Legislatures and governors.

We are accustomed to fighting between the governor and the legislative leaders, but this has not always been the case. Up until 1961 governors picked the heads of the House and Senate. This did not guarantee harmony between the two branches of government, but it represented a level of influence by the executive branch over the legislative that long ago disappeared. This didn't mean that the legislators and the governors always got along well. Gov. Alfalfa Bill Murray's desk in the state capitol was chained to the floor. He explained that was to keep the legislature from stealing it.

We are the gubernatorial impeachment capital of the United States.

There have only been eight governors impeached and removed from office in all of American history. Two of the impeachments were in Oklahoma, 25% of the total. These both occurred in the 1920's, and both are revealing about the state at that time. One was Jack Walton. He was removed from office in 1923 because of his active opposition to the Ku Klux Klan. The other was Henry Johnston, impeached and removed from office in 1929. His crime? He campaigned energetically for Al Smith for president the year before. Smith was a Roman Catholic and an advocate for ending prohibition of liquor. Despite Oklahoma's Democratic leanings, Smith was bitterly opposed in Baptist Oklahoma. Both governors had other issues, of course, but these were the proximate causes of their impeachments and removal.

The metamorphosis of the State Capitol.

When I was first elected to the Oklahoma legislature in 1970 the Oklahoma State Capitol Building was like a run-down rural courthouse. The spittoons had only recently been removed when I got there. Today, and many, many millions of dollars later, it is an elegant showcase. It is worth a visit. These changes happened after the Republicans took power in the legislatures. Republicans are not as tolerant of shabbiness as we Democrats were.

United States Speaker of the House.

Carl Albert achieved the highest federal government rank of any Oklahoman He served as Speaker of the House, succeeding Sam Rayburn whose district was on the Texas side of the Red River, across from Albert's. He was Speaker when Richard Nixon's vice-president, Spiro Agnew, resigned and left the vice presidency vacant, and again when Nixon himself resigned, making Albert first in line behind the president in line of succession on two different occasions. Albert was known as "The Little Giant from Little Dixie", a reference to his small stature and his birthplace in Pittsburg County in southern Oklahoma. Jokes were told about his size. One joke was about the time when Wilbur Mills, a prominent congressman from Arkansas, got into a scandal at the Tidal Basin in Washington with a local stripper who went by the stage name of "Fannie Fox, the Argentine Firecracker". According to the story Carl Albert was present, but when the police arrived but he hid in the glove compartment of the car.

Fake polls? We had one!

Nowadays we hear about "fake polls", but we once had a real fake poll that actually determined the winner of a gubernatorial election in Oklahoma. This was in 1938 and Alfalfa Bill Murray was attempting a return to the governorship. Unlike in most years before or after, in 1938 Oklahoma did not provide for a runoff in the gubernatorial primary. Whichever candidate got the most votes was going to be the winner regardless of the percentage of the vote that he won. There were three major candidates, each running neck and neck. Antipathy against Murray was strong and voters were seeking to figure out which of the alternative candidates had the best shot at beating him. The Daily Oklahoma newspaper, which was strongly supporting Leon Phillips for the post, put out a poll late in the campaign that showed that Phillips was the one most likely to be able to defeat Murray. The paper had the biggest circulation in the state and the influence of the poll was tremendous. Anti-Murray voters flocked to Phillips and he emerged victorious. Later investigative work showed that the poll was fictitious, but it accomplished the Daily Oklahoman's purpose.

Once upon a time politics was entertainment that people enjoyed.

By the 1970's television entertainment had become king, dooming the community gatherings that once were the staple of politics in rural Oklahoma. In small towns political events were local entertainment during the campaign season. These gatherings would take the form of "pie suppers", where pies would be auctioned off for some charity, or simply as "speakin's", and they gave folks an opportunity to get together in a social setting and enjoy the free entertainment offered by the politicians. Life was slower in those days, but politics was much more of a community participatory activity than it is today. With the decline of personal participation in political activities, the importance of TV advertising grew. With the increased dependence of campaigns on television, the cost of campaigns has gone up. The political power and influence of the interest groups that provide the money for the TV ads has increased as the dependence of the politicians on TV has grown.

John Steinbeck and the Okies.

Counties west of Oklahoma City are the part of the state most influenced by the decline in rural population. Many of the counties were settled by farmers whose land exhausted itself after a few years. Ranching, more appropriate to the region, has now mostly replaced farming in the dryer areas. The Dust Bowl also played a big part in de-populating large areas of western Oklahoma. John Steinbeck's book about the Dust Bowl, The Grapes of Wrath, created the national image of the Okie. Needless to say, Steinbeck became persona non grata in our state. People hated his book, and they hated the movie based on it even more. A couple of years ago New York Times columnist David Brooks spoke in Tulsa and made reference to Steinbeck by name. He was from back East and didn't know any better. It was the first time I had ever heard anyone dare to speak John Steinbeck's name out loud in a public setting in Oklahoma in my whole life, but there were no gasps and nobody booed. Times have changed. Or maybe people have just forgotten.

Indian Territory, Oklahoma Territory.

The first newspaper published in Oklahoma was bilingual, English and Cherokee. It was published in Indian Territory, of course. The first institution of higher education in Oklahoma was Cherokee, also in Indian Territory. Indian Territory had a head start in education, but Oklahoma Territory soon took the lead, and has held it ever since thanks to support from state government. OU and OSU (Oklahoma A&M in those days) were opened in Oklahoma Territory in 1890. The old Oklahoma Territory still receives dramatically more money from state government for education than the eastern half of the state. Oklahoma Territory got the better part of the bargain in higher education, as well as getting the state capital and most of the major state institutions. The state seal symbolizes the coming together of Indian Territory and Oklahoma Territory to form the State of Oklahoma by the handshake of of a White man and an Indian, but I believe one side came out of the handshake with a better deal than the other. This was not the first time Indians have had this experience, of course.

Cowboys and Indians.

The symbols of OU and OSU mirror the symbolism in the state seal. OSU is the proud home of the "Cowboys", and for most of its history OU used Indian symbols. Up until 1970, the football team mascot was "Little Red".

County names tell stories.

The names of Oklahoma counties reveal a lot about our history. Indian tribal names, of course, are common. We have also have county names that reference the economic activity predominate in its region: Alfalfa County, Coal County, and Cotton County. In the northern part of the state, settled mostly by people from the North who brought their Republican politics with them, we have counties named after Republican presidents: Grant County and Garfield County. Blaine County was names after a defeated Republican candidate for president, James G. Blaine. A county along the Red River was named after a defeated Democratic candidate for president, William Jennings Bryan, and two counties were named for successful Democratic candidates: Andrew Jackson and Thomas Jefferson.

Mischief in the counting of the ballots.

The electronic voting system used in Oklahoma today is quite secure. Back in the days when we used paper ballots opportunities for mischief were much greater. There were lots of tricks of the trade. Paper ballots were hand counted. A woman counter, for example, could hide a piece of pencil lead under her long fingernail and mark votes for any offices that had been left blank on the ballot. This could be done without other counters noticing. More frequently, there were alleged cases of counters colluding among themselves. Especially in the poorer counties of the state politics was a serious business because many patronage jobs depended on the outcome of the voting. There was lots of motivation to push the vote counting to a desired outcome. Back in the days when Democrats tended regularly to win state elections, Republicans complained that in Little Dixie, the Democrat stronghold of the state, they wouldn't start counting their votes until after all of the Republican counties had announced their totals and the Democrats knew how many votes they needed to come out ahead.

Another Alfalfa Bill Murray story.

Alfalfa Bill Murray, one of the most colorful of early Oklahoma political figures, was an inveterate racist and he was not shy about sharing his views. He served as governor in the early 30s, and his son, Johnston, was elected in 1950. When his son was governor the size of the governor's staff was much smaller than today and the long hallway leading to the governor's office was open to the public. Down the length of the hallway there were several benches, and on the bench right outside the governor's office Alfalfa Bill would spend many of his days sitting with a selection of racist pamphlets he had written, available for sale to visitors who had come to see his son, the Governor.

Oklahomans are skilled gerrymanderers.

Oklahoma, like many other states, has always been a skilled practitioner of gerrymandering. For many years we had a Republican congressman from Enid, Page Belcher. This was in the days when Democrats held all of the congressional seats in Oklahoma but his, and Belcher's district was carefully drawn to include almost all of the Republican

voting counties in Oklahoma. These were all in northern Oklahoma. Belcher's district included Tulsa (the center of Oklahoma Republicanism in those days) and, using Pawnee County as a bridge, connected to the Republican counties extending all the way from Tulsa to the borders of Colorado and New Mexico.

No liberals or moderates, please.

It has been nearly 50 years since Oklahoma has had a truly liberal US Senator representing the state in Washington. Fred R. Harris was the last. He was elected to a partial term in 1964 and to a full term in 1966. He left office in 1972, unpopular because of his opposition to the Vietnam war and because of his support for the Great Society programs of Pres. Lyndon Johnson. He was not seen as a liberal at the time he was first elected, so Oklahoma did not "knowingly" elect a liberal when it voted him in office. Our politics has always tended conservative. Henry Bellmon, a Republican former governor, was elected to the US Senate In 1968 and served two terms. He was respected on both sides of the aisle in the Senate, and worked well with members of both parties. He did not seek reelection in 1980 fearing that his fame in Washington as a political moderate would cause him to be defeated in the Oklahoma Republican primary. Bellmon returned to office as governor in 1986.

Why the President Pro Tem is the top dog of the Senate.

The top officer in the Oklahoma State Senate is the President Pro Tempore. In the news, we usually see the position referred to as "President Pro Tem", or just "Pro Tem", but the real title is "President Pro Tempore". "Pro Tempore" is Latin for "for the time", and herein lies an interesting story about the State Senate. Constitutionally, the Lieutenant Governor is the President of the Senate. Governors and lieutenant governors, however, take office in January. The legislature, on the other hand, is sworn in at the end of November following the elections earlier that month. When the Senate meets in November it needs to elect officers that will serve "for the time" until the Lieutenant Governor takes office in January and can begin functioning as President of the Senate. During this period of time the President Pro Tem hires the Senate staff and names the committee chairs and members and generally gets everything organized for the coming legislative session. By the time the President of the Senate, the Lieutenant Governor, is ready to start work as President of the Senate there is nothing left to be done. If he shows up at the Senate expecting to run things, he (or someday "she") is courteously told that he is not needed and should go back to his own office and find something useful to do with his time.

Notes

This is a resource document for you to use.
Take notes, highlight, use as a text book.

Party control of Oklahoma state government

Ballotpedia

Oklahoma has a Republican trifecta and a Republican triplex. The Republican Party controls the offices of governor, secretary of state, attorney general, and both chambers of the state legislature.

As of August 20, 2024, there are 23 Republican trifectas, 17 Democratic trifectas, and 10 divided governments where neither party holds trifecta control.

As of August 20, 2024, there are 25 Republican triplexes, 20 Democratic triplexes, and 5 divided governments where neither party holds triplex control.

A state government trifecta is a term to describe when one political party holds majorities in both chambers of the state legislature and the governor's office. A state government triplex is a term to describe when one political party holds the following three positions in a state's government: governor, attorney general, and secretary of state.

Historical party control

Oklahoma Party Control: 1992-2024

Five years of Democratic trifectas • Fourteen years of Republican trifectas

Year	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	00	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
Governor	D	D	D	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R
Senate	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	S	S	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R
House	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R	R

Legislative party competitiveness score

Professors of Political Science Gerald Gamm and Thad Kousser, University of Rochester and University of California San Diego, respectively, claim that states with competitive party systems spend more on education, health, and transportation. They base this on a study of each state's party competitiveness from 1880 (or year of statehood) to 2010. They assigned each state legislature a competitiveness score, which "can range from 100% if the two parties are evenly matched to 0% if one party holds every seat in a legislature."

The below chart shows the state's legislative party competitiveness score from 1910 to 1990. The chart offers a look into competitiveness prior to Ballotpedia's 1992 analysis.

Oklahoma politics launched with constitutional chaos

William W. Savage, Jr, NonDoc, April 22, 2024

If you haven't been paying attention, the Oklahoma Legislature is back in session and headed for its homestretch. Look at all the cowboy hats.

The governor, the attorney general and the "education" guy are in place and doing their respective things. Here, one may say, we are going again.

Throw in negotiations with sovereign tribal nations, and we're guaranteed snits, spats and to-dos aplenty. Sometimes I feel sorry for my son, who covers the Capitol every week and writes some sort of newsletter, among other things.

Of course, if the Oklahoma Legislature looks like chaos — well, that's how our state got started at the turn of the last century.

William H. "Alfalfa Bill" Murray, left, served as speaker of the Oklahoma Constitutional Convention in November 1906 in Guthrie. (Oklahoma Historical Society)

A microcosm of our initial population?

First, when America furthered its frontier West into more and more Indigenous territory, the area had land runs. Chaos on the hoof. Then, the white folks started calling for statehood. Eleven years passed before there were enough people living here for the place to qualify.

Republicans were in control in Washington, and their feet dragged on the question of statehood because they feared Oklahoma would be a Democratic stronghold, and they wanted time to build Republican power here, via political appointments and whatnot.

So, we were tools before we were tools.

Anyhow, along came the Oklahoma Enabling Act of June 16, 1906, which wrote the recipe to be followed in the creation of a new state.

The so-called Twin Territories — Oklahoma and Indian — were to be joined, and each would send 55 delegates (plus two from the Osage Nation) to a constitutional convention in Guthrie, a Republican outpost that was, according to the Enabling Act, to be the state's capital until at least 1913.

The convention first met on Nov. 20, 1906. Of the 112 delegates, 100 were Democrats, and that was it for Republicans until the first coming of Henry Bellmon.

About the delegates, we know this: Their average age was 43. Among them stood 47 farmers, 27 lawyers, 12 businessmen, six preachers, three teachers, two physicians and one student. Besides them, the wag would say, 14 other people with no visible means of support also attended.

Was that a microcosm of our initial population? Hard to say. I am told even fewer lawyers and physicians serve in the Legislature now, but the teacher and preacher numbers have climbed.

Populist fear of centralized power

The president of the 1906 constitutional convention was none other than that soon-to-be nationally known bigot, crackpot and whatnot named William H. "Alfalfa Bill" Murray.

He began the proceedings by having the delegates join together in singing Nearer, My God to Thee, the hymn that would be played six years later on the deck of the sinking Titanic.

Perhaps Murray had a premonition, and not about a big boat.

The convention produced a 45,000-word constitution that President Theodore Roosevelt hated because Democrats had written it, but no legal reason existed for rejecting it because the document followed the stipulations of the Enabling Act to the letter. (I forbear particulars, except to note that in Oklahoma you cannot have more than one spouse at a time. Having them serially is another matter, but the Legislature works on that, from time to time.)

The Oklahoma Constitution was praised for its populist and progressive content, with many provisions limiting centralized control and empowering the Legislature as the institution most responsive to the will of the people.

Scholars wrote about it, but nit-pickers were not silent, complaining that the document was too detailed. Good grief, the thing even specified the flash point of kerosene, a provision designed to prevent corporate greed error that could result in towns burning to the ground if it were cut with cheaper fuels. Such atrocity had happened elsewhere.

A constitutional convention redo? Be careful what you wish

From time to time, the electorate is invited to help remove outdated parts of the Oklahoma Constitution.

I recall the election in which the section requiring state payments to widows of Civil War veterans was excised. Someone had noticed that, on account of the passage of time, there were no such widows left.

Over the decades, voters have been asked to decide several questions related to the Oklahoma Constitution, which has been amended more than 200 times. In recent years, we have voted on liquor laws (twice), marijuana laws (twice, to different results), the separation of church and state, expanding Medicaid coverage, modifying school funding options, and whether to elect the governor and lieutenant governor jointly.

The results have hardly painted a straight ideological line.

I learned recently that Cherokee Nation citizens will be asked this June whether to call their own convention for revision of the tribe's constitution. Various Oklahoma political factions sometimes float the idea of a new state constitutional convention as well.

If the state were to have a new constitutional convention, every moron in America with something to suggest would show up and try to participate, just as Carry Nation lobbied the original convention to prohibit consumption of alcohol. Ultimately, Gov. Charles Haskell successfully pushed the proposal as a separate article to be approved months later, and prohibition continued in Oklahoma for a quarter of a century after the rest of the country had reversed course.

By that measure, our path to Medicaid expansion felt relatively quick. Nonetheless, calling a new constitutional convention in Oklahoma would revive the recipe for chaos, to be sure. These days, 45,000 words would hardly do it.

In the meantime, perhaps the best we can hope for is legislators whose mothers taught them it's impolite to wear your cowboy hat in the House — or the Senate.

> ***"Why don't they pass a Constitutional Amendment prohibiting anybody from learning anything? If it works as good as Prohibition did, in five years we will have the smartest people on earth."*** *— Will Rogers*

Has Oklahoma always trended conservative? Polling expert looks at voting history.

William C. Wertz, The Oklahoman, August 28, 2024

More than most, Pat McFerron knows what Oklahomans are thinking.

By the age of 12, growing up in Nowata in northeastern Oklahoma, McFerron was campaigning door-to-door for a local congressman. In his 20s, shortly after graduation from college, he was working for an Oklahoma City company to pass a major bond issue, calling potential voters to ask for their support.

Now, about three decades later, he's a principal in a consulting firm, CMA Strategies, that does regular polling for businesses and political candidates. He is an adviser to and business partner with Oklahoma's 4th District U.S. Rep. Tom Cole, recently named chairman of the powerful House Appropriations Committee. Ballotpedia, the nonpartisan online political encyclopedia, calls McFerron one of the nation's "top influencers."

Q: It often seems that no one makes a move these days without checking the polls, particularly the politicians. And many are conflicting and may not necessarily be accurate, right?

A: Right. We do polling all over the country, and what I generally say is you get what you pay for. So if it's free and you're reading about it or learning about it on TV, how much is it worth?

Q: But you do enough polling to get a sense over time of trends that are supported by later election outcomes. I've always been curious ... what caused Oklahoma to switch from being a Democratic state to a Republican one?

A: This happened across most of rural America and especially the rural South. The fundamental beliefs of Oklahomans have not changed. I have access to polling data going back to 1982. At that point 70% of Oklahomans identified as being conservative. It's about 68% today. I think what's happened, with the advent of cable news accelerated by social media channels, is that Oklahomans are now able to place themselves more in a national context than a local contest. So when they look at someone like an AOC (Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the outspoken liberal Democratic congresswoman from New York), they say, 'Oh, no. That's not who I am. I'm a conservative. I'm on the other side.' Their ideologies haven't changed.

Q: The parties have changed, then. You often hear, "I didn't leave the party. The party left me."

A: Yeah. I think what we've had is a natural alignment of ideologies with parties. Oklahomans are more focused on the issues that are being talked about nationwide than they are local economic issues and that sort of thing. Someone told me that there was a county clerk race in the last primary and they were talking about immigration as an issue. But that's what motivates people and gets eyeballs not just on newspapers and websites and TV, but to direct mailers, as well.

Q: Have you seen a shift in political involvement, where the process has basically been taken over by people with extreme views on both ends of the spectrum? Is that contributing to the polarization we see all over the country?

A: Yes. I will tell you I think that as a voting society we have shifted away from consensus building to market share. That's the way I put it. You're criticized under the current system for trying to bring people together, and you're rewarded for being intense. The example I use is Marjorie Taylor Greene (the outspoken conservative Republican congresswoman from Georgia). She and AOC are the same person.

Q: Does it seem like the moderates have left the playing field and the battle is between the extremes on both sides?

A: I don't know that there are a great deal of moderates, but there are a lot of people who are disinterested. I think they have left because they're frustrated, and they don't see the impact in their daily lives. They don't think their vote matters because the reality is in Oklahoma, in the general election, it really doesn't. We were 50th in the nation last year because, again, those November elections just don't matter in the state.

Q: Is finding a moderate, or compromise approach to a complicated problem like immigration even possible?

A: On immigration I've done some polling. The one thing Oklahomans agree on is that neither party wants to solve the problem. 80% will say neither Republicans or Democrats want to solve the immigration issue because they want to use it as a political issue. I think that's somewhat accurate, wouldn't you say?

Q: So was it a misguided effort for (Republican Sen.) James Lankford to try to build a bipartisan consensus on immigration?

A: It depends on what your goal is. If your goal is to solve the immigration crisis, then, yes, it's the right thing to do. If your goal is to demonstrate your extremist bonafides, then no. But was it a statesman-like thing to do? Yes. I know from polling that with the general population he came off looking good. It did hurt him among Republican primary

voters. But is it anything that makes him vulnerable? No.

Q: Do you see a growing dissatisfaction with the political parties?

A: I think the real dissatisfaction is among those that aren't even registered to vote. It's not like they're so turned off. They just don't want to engage. I think it's something we really have to solve. I don't know if there's any panacea. I'm going to be working on a project to create what I'm calling a unified primary in Oklahoma. This would be a primary in which members of both parties would be on the same ballot. And then the people would pick the top two to vote on in the general election. It could be two Republicans or two Democrats. And I think that would make our November elections matter again.

Q: This would take a state initiative vote to establish, to change the system?

A: Yeah, it would be a state question.

Q: Are you seeing more and more efforts to basically bypass state legislatures by going the initiative route? That's been happening in some states on the abortion issue.

A: Yeah, I think anytime you have one party control, the primaries control the legislature. So you have the ability for the legislature to be at odds with where the general public is. I think most people are pro-life. The question becomes where you define that. Most Oklahomans still believe that abortion should be very, very rare, only in the case of rape, incest, life of the mother. This is another area, like immigration, where you see a lot of political opportunism going on.

Q: What are the issues that your polling shows are of greatest concern to people in Oklahoma?

A: Education and the economy are the top two concerns. Now they might disagree on what to do on those issues, but those are the top two. The one that's probably growing is about public safety, and that has an element of immigration in it. Crime, fentanyl use in particular, that's something else that's growing. And what you see pop up a little more right now is concern about infrastructure — roads, bridges, potholes, water systems and everything else.

Q: Oklahomans, including Republican primary voters in 2016, weren't as enthusiastic about Donald Trump then as they seem to be today. Trump lost to Ted Cruz in that primary vote. Do you think Trump is popular in Oklahoma because of his conservative positions or his personality?

A: No, no. He has a populist streak that is very appealing to Oklahomans. It's really broadened some of the Republicans. He might be closer to Woody Guthrie on some things on the populist side. Anti-establishment. That's really what Oklahoma's roots are and where its strength is, absolutely. I believe he's tapped into that.

"Jumping The Shark" as bad in politics as on TV

Joe Dorman, Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy, June 24, 2024

Growing up as a child in the 1970s, I enjoyed my fair share of television shows. One of my favorites was "Happy Days," celebrating its 50th anniversary this year.

"Happy Days" starred Ron Howard, a Duncan native, who played Richie Cunningham. The show followed the Cunningham family and friends, one of whom was Arthur "Fonzie" Fonzarelli. Fonzie epitomized coolness for his teenage neighbor, and a lot of kids like me.

In Season 5, a three-part episode included a plot where Fonzie jumps over a shark on water skis. The term "jumping the shark" came to mean any creative work that is out of ideas and relies on extreme exaggeration.

Oklahomans saw many candidates "jump the shark" with their campaign literature and promises this year. People running for office made extreme overstatements on how bad their opponents are, or they promised policies that simply cannot happen without drastic changes. The side effect of this type of campaigning discourages many middle-of-the-road, or moderate, Americans – frustrated with the extremist rhetoric – from even voting.

As evidence, only 20 to 25 percent of registered Republican voters bothered to vote, with the only statewide race garnering just over 237,000 total votes. Democrats had no statewide elections, so turnout was even more sparse with just local races occurring. Expect the turnout percentage to be even less in the August 27 runoff elections.

What is dangerous about the campaign rhetoric is that the candidates want to appeal to the few they know will show up, moving policies farther to the extreme positions. Case in point, you will hear much about rejecting federal funds for operating government services, and you will also hear candidates want to cut taxes.

Our state government runs on a finite amount of money based upon our state tax collections. Some of those programs receive matching funds from federal taxes collected, including education/schools, children's support services, road building, and health care programs, with the latter sometimes getting a seven-to-one match from federal appropriations.

If federal funds are rejected, the state must either drastically cut services or raise state taxes to pay for those programs. Here is the kicker, those federal funds many candidates say they do not want…that is our money, taxes we have paid to the federal government. If we do not accept them, you can bet some other state will.

One example is the rejection by the state of funds to provide food support in the summer for children who qualify for the free and reduced lunch program. The nonprofit sector is simply cannot meet the demand of hungry children, so the Legislature allocated more than $8 million of state money to assist with needs this year, a much-needed boost, and thank you to the state lawmakers who did that.

That $8 million of state dollars is only a fraction of the $42 million in federal matching dollars that was turned away. That difference of $36 million was taken from Oklahoma families who would have spent it in local grocery stores, making it an even bigger boost to our economy. Instead, it went to other states' children.

Be wary of the rhetoric when it starts back up in August and again for November 5, the General Election; do not fall for exaggerations, and certainly do not sit out by not voting.

Voters need to elect reasonable, rational candidates who will vote on policies for the best interest of Oklahomans, and especially for children who cannot vote for themselves. If a candidate is going to "jump the shark" with their campaign promises, do you really want them to make decisions all Oklahomans?

Election losses by high-ranking Republicans are reshaping Oklahoma's Legislature

M. Scott Carter, The Oklahoman, August 29, 2024

For the second time in as many months, a high-powered Republican member of the Oklahoma Legislature crashed and burned on election night, an indication that infighting among the GOP is increasing and the party's far right-wing is now a major voice in state elections.

The defeat of state Rep. Kevin Wallace, chairman of the powerful House Appropriations and Budget Committee, comes after Ada voters ousted state Sen. Greg McCortney, who had been tapped to be the next leader of the Oklahoma Senate.

Both men had plenty of campaign funds, were well organized and held high profile positions that kept their names in front of the voters. McCortney was the Senate's majority floor leader before he became its heir-apparent leader.

Yet both still lost.

McCortney fell in an ugly primary battle that involved the governor and a dark money group charged with painting him as a liberal whose sole goal was to defund the police. Wallace lost Tuesday in an even uglier primary runoff that turned on issues such as human poop as fertilizer, land owned by non-U.S. citizens and wind power.

McCortney's loss in June threw the Senate into a leadership battle, the echoes of which are still moving through the Capitol. Wallace's loss is now reverberating throughout the House of Representatives. Wallace's race, which could add up to the most expensive state legislative race in the history of Oklahoma, saw more than $1 million spent between both candidates.

Unlike McCortney, who had Gov. Kevin Stitt as a critic, Wallace was supported by the Republican governor, who even came to Wallace's district and knocked on doors.

This summer, Wallace and other lawmakers have been pushed to address the state's controversial school Superintendent Ryan Walters. And though it's unclear whether or not Walters is popular in Wallace's district, Wallace's loss now clouds the issue of an investigation by the Legislative Office of Fiscal Transparency into Walters and his agency, the Oklahoma State Department of Education.

So why are powerful Republicans like Wallace and McCortney getting the ax?

No easy answer to why powerful incumbents lost

The answer isn't easy.

Understanding the defeat of Wallace and McCourtney involves a lesson in dark money groups, political spin, outrage from the governor, the personalities of both lawmakers, their relationship to their legislative districts, tax cuts, past legislate votes, public fear, redistricting, and the types of hyper-local issues that can swing elections.

"This may be the only time in the political history of this state, that the pro tempore, speaker, the floor leaders in both the House and the Senate, the appropriations chairman in both the House and the Senate all are departing the same year, so against their will and some because they are term limited," said Cal Hobson, a former Senate pro tempore.

The current political climate in Oklahoma, Hobson said, "is quite a story."

While Hobson said Wallace's defeat surprised him, he said the loss can't be pinned on a single issue but to several. "There are a bunch of local issues," Hobson said. "Including the spreading of human fertilizer."

That fertilizer, known as biosolids, was a hotly contested issue in the district. In a story published by Investigate Midwest, Wallace acknowledged he had used biosolids on his farm. According to the online news outlet, Wallace was confronted during a candidate forum in June by some constituents who asked why he wouldn't come out against the fertilizer, which they called "humanure."

"The biosolids sludge is regulated by the Department of Environmental Quality, I have used it twice … it has been legal to use in this state for eight years now," Wallace said at the forum. Wallace acknowledged he had received complaints from his neighbors, but "property rights is what I'm for … (and) I'm not breaking the law," he told the audience."

Wallace could not be reached for comment on this story.

District issues played a role in Wallace, McCortney's losses

The poop problem, plus questions about Wallace's relationship with his district quickly became issues in the campaign. Other issues came into play, too.

One of those issues, Iowa Tribe Chairman Jacob Keyes said, was wind turbines.

"Honestly, part of that loss − in Lincoln County − was the battle over the turbine farms trying to come in," he said. "I think people in the county didn't view him (Wallace) as being strong enough against the wind turbines. Most of the negativity about him I saw was on that topic."

Wallace also faced criticism from his opponents about what

they viewed as a lack of pushback against Chinese ownership of land in Oklahoma.

Outgoing House Majority Leader Jon Echols said the race highlighted the differences in what government officials and elected leaders believe voters are interested in and what the voters, themselves, say they are interested in.

"Those differences are stark," Echols said.

Like others, McCortney, the former Senate majority leader, said there is more than one answer to the question of why voters ousted their incumbent leaders. "When you're in a runoff, it's expected to be a fight," he said.

"I don't think anyone knows the full answer," he said. "It's not consistent ideologically, it's not just different groups who went in here or lose in there," McCortney said. "I don't know that anyone has really figured out the pattern. Except, perhaps, low-turnout elections are bad for incumbents."

Since his loss in June, McCortney said he's been contacted by an many voters who didn't believe there was a problem in his race, and therefore stayed home.

"In my race I have had an incredible number of people — the people that I worked with, the people that were engaged, the people I was shoulder to shoulder fighting on issues with — who, on some level admitted to me they didn't think there was any way I would lose, and so they didn't vote," he said.

Low voter turnout continues to be an issue

Hobson, Echols and McCortney all agreed that low voter turnout has been and continues to be a problem in Oklahoma elections. "It affects elections, there is no doubt," McCortney said.

Data underscores this. Several studies have shown Oklahoma has some of the lowest voter turnout rates in the nation. In 2020, Michael McDonald, a political science professor at the University of Florida told Tulsa television station KTUL that Oklahoma was "near the bottom of the pack" for voter turnout.

Solving the problem will be difficult, Echols said. "Primaries are family fights," he said. "One thing that became clear is that voter turnout in a lot of these races was abysmally low and its what decides the races. We have to find a way to increase engagement inside the political process."

Both Wallace and McCortney's races, Echols said, went extremely negative. Those types of races need to be analyzed to help prepare for future campaigns, Echols said. "We need to go back and learn lessons from these races about what gets out voters and what doesn't," he said. "That's the only thing left to do."

And what about next year?

With new leadership guaranteed in both chambers of the Legislature, the 2025 session could be contentious. Even though the Senate and House are both expected to have GOP supermajorities, not only will they have new leaders, the will have new chairpersons of what is considered the most powerful legislative committee: Appropriations.

House Democrats say they have their concerns, too. Wallace's loss raises questions about the recently announced investigation of the Oklahoma State Department of Education by the Legislative Office of Fiscal Transparency, state Rep. Mickey Dollens said.

"I'm not sure what's going to happen there," Dollens said. "Since 2016, Chairman Wallace has always been the one to present the budget to Democrats. He's been available to answer questions about the budget. Now we have new players."

The leadership of the House will go to Republican Rep. Kyle Hilbert, of Bristow. Dollens said he expects Hilbert to do well, but that the fallout from the elections could cause the GOP caucus double down on cultural war issues and possibly move the caucus further to the right in an effort to avoid future primary confrontations.

"It think this is another really good reason on why we need open primaries in Oklahoma," he said. "It gives candidates the chance to campaign to a broader electorate and not have to worry about pandering to the fringe bases in order to win a primary."

Open primaries, Dollens said, would eliminate the continued election of far right fringe candidates being elected.

In addition to all he legislative changes, Stitt is expected to push hard for his agenda during his final two years in office. The governor has already gone public with another call for additional tax cuts and what some lawmakers call, legacy building legislation.

Still, even with a difficult session expected, both McCortney and Echols say they expect that the Legislature, in the end, will do the right thing, without saying what, exactly, that meant.

"The degree of difficulty has gone up, but I think there will be strong leadership on both sides," McCortney said. And even though neither he nor Wallace will be in office next year, McCortney said he remains positive.

"I think everything will be OK," he said.

COMMENTARY: Oklahoma law doesn't give voters the power to remove state and county officials. It should.

Chris Powell, Oklahoma Voice, August 20, 2024

Most home rule charter municipalities in our state, including Oklahoma City and Tulsa, have a recall procedure by which citizens may remove a city elected official.

Nineteen states, including our neighbors in Kansas, Louisiana, and Colorado, have a method to recall a statewide elected official.

But while some city charters give voters the power to hold municipal officials accountable through the recall process, Oklahoma law contains no provisions that allows voters to attempt to remove state and county elected officials before their term ends.

It's time for this to change.

McCurtain County Sheriff Kevin Clardy was recorded making comments about lynching Black people and killing journalists in March 2023. While he was defeated for reelection in the primary in June, Clardy is still in office through the end of the year. With no legal means to remove him, McCurtain County residents continue to be stuck with Clardy as their top law enforcement officer.

Corporation Commissioner Todd Hiett is alleged to have groped a man at a conference of regulatory officials in June. Hiett claims no memory of the incident but has admitted to being intoxicated and having a drinking problem for which he is seeking treatment.

While he has stepped down as chair of the Corporation Commission, he is refusing to resign his position as one of the three commissioners. An investigation is underway into his conduct, but since the incident occurred out of state and there's no report of charges being filed, it's very likely that Hiett will stay in office until the end of his term in January 2027.

State Superintendent of Education Ryan Walters has been the subject of repeated calls for impeachment, the most recent by several prominent Republican legislators. He's facing questions about whether he followed open records and meetings laws and whether he's allocating public funds appropriately. He is being investigated by the Legislative Office of Fiscal Transparency (LOFT). However, Speaker Charles McCall has stated that he will not consider the impeachment request unless 51 of the 81 Republicans in the Oklahoma House join in support. In a similar situation to Hiett and Clardy, barring a conviction for a criminal act, Oklahomans can expect Walters to continue in office until the end of his term in 2027.

With each of these officials, it seems likely that an effort would be made to remove them from office through a recall, if only such a process existed that applied to state and county officials.

Would a citizen-led recall attempt in these cases be able to get on the ballot, and if so, would it then receive the support of voters to be successful? It's impossible to say.

But it seems clear that it's long overdue for our state lawmakers to craft and pass a legislative referendum to give citizens the ability to recall an objectionable elected official at any level of government in the state through direct democracy.

Recall is a much needed tool to make the politicians answerable to the people.

Chris Powell is the chair of the Oklahoma Libertarian Party and was the party's first nominee for Governor in 2018.

Young voters in U.S. and Oklahoma less likely to vote in 2024 or pick a political side

Nuria Martinez-Keel, Oklahoma Voice, September 25, 2023

National polling and Oklahoma-specific data indicate young voters are more politically disengaged than older generations but also might be less polarized.

About a third of young adults don't intend to vote or participate civically in the 2024 elections, and 61% said they don't align with either major political party, national polling of Americans age 18-24 found.

The civic-focused Institute for Citizens & Scholars surveyed more than 4,000 young adults in August. Results showed young adults are more willing to have conversations with people of different views and identified themselves at or near the ideological center, creating optimism that Generation Z could help tackle polarization, the institute reported.

In Oklahoma, registering as an independent voter is a popular option among young people sick of partisanship, said Andy Moore, CEO and founder of the local civic engagement nonprofit Let's Fix This.

Independent is the second most common party affiliation for registered Oklahoma voters age 18-24, state Election Board data shows. Only the Republican party has more registered voters from this age group.

There are over 16,000 fewer registered Democrats aged 24 or younger than independents in the state.

Independent voters in Oklahoma can participate in Democratic primary elections, but they're barred from casting ballots in Republican and Libertarian primaries, which decide several key races in the heavily conservative state.

Moore said this leaves many young Oklahomans feeling excluded from the political process.

"Then they get frustrated that their choice not to align with a particular party blocks them out of decisions being made," he said. "They don't feel welcome and, as a result, don't participate."

Only 20% of registered voters aged 18-24 cast ballots in the 2022 general election, which decided Oklahoma's governor and other statewide races, an Oklahoma Voice analysis found. That's well below the turnout rate among all registered voters in November 2022, which the state Election Board reported was about 50%.

The national poll also indicates elevated rates of political disengagement among young adults across the country.

It found 48% of respondents intend to vote in the 2024 general election while 33% don't plan to engage at all.

The share of Generation Z who plans to vote in the 2024 general election was 20% lower than the national average, according to the report.

Most said they don't identify as either a Republican or a Democrat, and 51% placed themselves at or close to the ideological center, saying they're either moderate, somewhat conservative or somewhat liberal.

Respondents said they aren't more involved in politics because they don't feel informed enough, don't have enough time or money, or don't believe their participation matters.

"This poll is a wake-up call," the institute's president, Rajiv Vinnakota, said in a statement. "We urgently need to do more to civically prepare, activate, and support young adults."

The Next Great Migration: The Rise of Independent Voters

Jeremy Gruber and John Opdycke, Open Primaries Education Fund, 2020

Oklahoma

- **Independent voters projected second largest group of voters**
- **Independent voters projected third largest group of voters**
- **Democratic Party in decline and Republican Party increase in membership**

2005	Republicans: 822,131 (38%)	
	Democrats: 1,100,263 (51%)	
	Independent: 227,163 (11%)	
	3rd Party: 0 (0%)	
	Total: 2,149,557	
2010	Republicans: 813,158 (40%)	
	Democrats: 999,855 (49%)	
	Independent: 225,607 (11%)	
	3rd Party: 0 (0%)	
	Total: 2,038,620	

2015	Republicans: 886,153 (44%)	
	Democrats: 882,686 (43%)	
	Independent: 261,429 (13%)	
	3rd Party: 9 (less than 1%)	
	Total: 2,030,277	
2020	Republicans: 1,008,569 (48%)	
	Democrats: 738,256 (35%)	
	Independent: 332,111 (16%)	
	3rd Party: 11,171 (less than 1%)	
	Total: 2,090,107	

2005-2020

Republicans have gone from 38% to 48% of the electorate.

A 10% increase in 15 years, 0.67% annually.

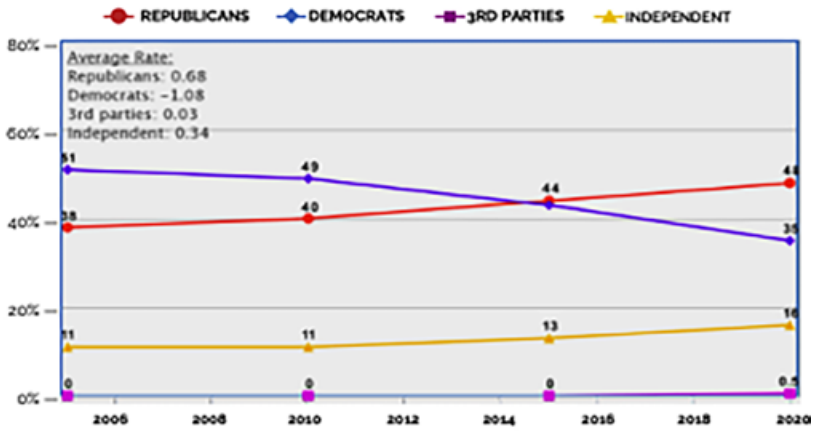
Democrats have gone from 51% to 35% of the electorate.

A 16% decrease in 15 years, 1.07% annually.

Independents have gone from 11% to 16% of the electorate

A 5% increase in 15 years, 0.33% annually.

3rd parties have grown slightly but remained under 1% of the electorate.



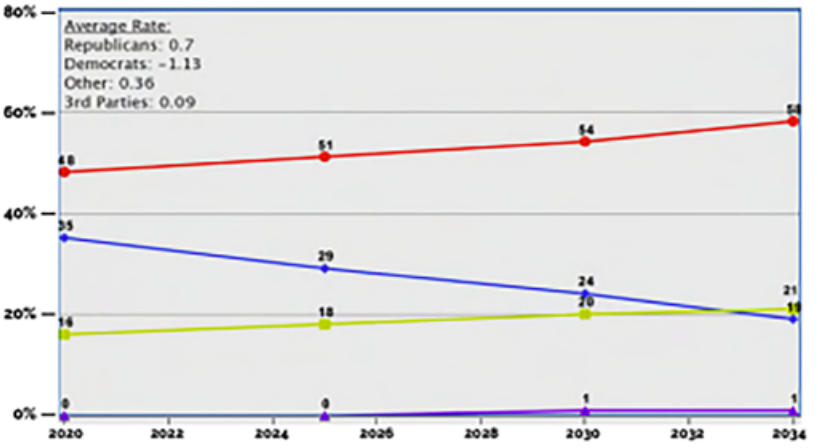
2035 Predictions

Republicans: 10% increase from 48% to **58% of the electorate.**

Democrats: 16% decrease from 35% to **19% of the electorate.**

Independents: 5% increase from 16% to **21% of the electorate.**

3rd Parties: 1% increase from less than 1% to **slightly over 1% of the electorate.**



Oklahoma registered voters (as of May 2024): 2,343,736

- Republican: 1.2 million
- Democrat: 650,000
- Independent: 453,000
- Libertarian: 22,500

Independent voters multiply in numbers, not influence, in Oklahoma

Steve Metzer, Tulsa World, June 24, 2024

In terms of percentage growth, new independent voter registrations have outpaced new Republican registrations in Oklahoma in recent years.

However, independents haven't demonstrated much influence on elections in a state that has grown increasingly conservative.

Since June 2014, independent voter registrations in the Sooner State have swelled by 84.15%, according to statistics kept by the Oklahoma State Election Board. By comparison, Republican registrations have increased over the past decade by 42.52%.

The Democratic Party, once the clearly dominant party in Oklahoma, has declined in terms of voter registrations by 26.39% over the past 10 years. The Libertarian Party, comparatively much smaller, wasn't reflected in voter registration stats in 2014. Since June 2019, it has increased in registrations by 177.77%.

According to the Gallup organization, numbers of people who self-identify as independent have increased even more impressively across the rest of the country. In a May survey, 42% of respondents said they considered themselves independent, while 30% considered themselves Democrats and 28% considered themselves Republicans.

However, Gallup noted that many who register as independents actually "lean" either to the left or right. According to a report from the Pew Research Center, about two-thirds of registered voters identify as partisan, almost evenly split between those who say they are Republican (32% of voters) and those who say they are Democrat (33%). Roughly a third identify as independents or something else (35%), with most of those voters leaning toward one of the two major parties.

While some might see the rise in independent voter registration as a positive sign that people will be more likely to research candidates and their stances on issues before making voting decisions, that may not be the case. In fact, Seth McKee, a political science professor at Oklahoma State University, said research has shown that independent voters may actually be less engaged.

"They're swayable, but they're also much less participatory, so that's the double-edged sword there. You can go after them as voters that might come over to one side or another, but they're also much less likely to vote in the end," he said.

McKee said the increase in independent voter registration in Oklahoma and nationwide may be more reflective of people being fed up with the current partisan rancor of politics than anything else.

Matt Hindman, who chairs the Political Science Department at the University of Tulsa, said that even if independents are as likely as Republicans or Democrats to vote, they may also be as partisan.

"The number of partisan leaners far outweigh the 'true independents,'" Hindman wrote in an email. "So … no, we don't actually have more people who are willing to learn about or vote for the 'other side.' In fact, relative to previous eras, we see more people voting for Democrats or Republicans up and down the ballot, and fewer people splitting their votes across parties."

Oklahoma Election Board Secretary Paul Ziriax said the increase in independent registrations in Oklahoma has been part of a broad shift that has played out for more than a decade. He noted that once people have registered to vote in one party or another or as an independent, they're not very likely to make a switch. So, despite Oklahoma voting strongly conservative for decades, it wasn't until 2015 that Republican voter registrations surpassed Democratic registrations in the state.

"We have seen pretty rapid growth in the number of registered independents in the last decade or so, so couple that with the growth of Republicans and the decline in registered Democrats, and there has been a remarkable shift," Ziriax said.

In June 2014, 1,994,336 total voters were registered in the state, including 856,000 Republicans, 883,000 Democrats and 246,000 independents.

Five years later, in June 2019, there were 2,050,450 registered voters in the state, including roughly 986,000 Republicans, 736,000 Democrats, 318,000 independents and 10,100 Libertarians.

As of June of this year, there are 2,343,736 registered voters statewide, including roughly 1,220,000 Republicans, 650,000 Democrats, 453,000 independents and 22,500 Libertarians.

Ziriax said registration trends have tracked fairly evenly across most counties.

"It's not perfectly even, but I think generally speaking the statewide trend in growth of Republicans and independents and corresponding decline in Democrats has occurred in virtually every county," he said. "When you look at growth in independent voters in Oklahoma, Tulsa and Cleveland counties, you might see the percentage of independents in those counties is greater than in rural counties."

In June 2014, out of 327,876 registered voters in Tulsa County, there were 166,543 registered Republicans, 119,564 Democrats and 41,769 independents.

In Tulsa County five years ago, there were 340,140 total registered voters, including 171,389 Republicans, 112,406 Democrats, 54,632 independents and 1,713 Libertarians.

Currently in Tulsa County, there are 386,242 total registered voters, including 185,683 Republicans, 115,068 Democrats, 81,518 independents and 3,973 Libertarians.

The data show that the number of registered Republicans in Tulsa County has increased by 19,140 over the past 10 years, or by 11.49%. The number of Democrats recorded in the county has decreased by 4,496, or by 3.76%.

The number of Tulsa County registered independent voters has increased by 39,749, or by 95.16%. The number of Libertarians has increased by 2,260, or by 131.93%.

Notes

This is a resource document for you to use.
Take notes, highlight, use as a text book.

Oklahoma is not alone. Uncontested races are a growing trend nationwide.

Lionel Ramos, KGOU, June 10, 2024

Before Oklahoma voters cast their ballots for primaries on June 18, more than a third of the legislative offices are already decided. Uncontested races are a trend nationwide, especially in Republican-led states.

Fifty of the 127 seats in the House and Senate have already been won, accounting for 40 percent of legislative elections in Oklahoma this year.

And it's too late for anyone to oppose those running for their district uncontested. The official candidate filing period ended back in early April.

Oklahoma is not the only state where some public office hopefuls — and people wanting to keep their elected positions — are running without a contest, according to an analysis by the national elections-tracking nonprofit Ballotpedia.

Ballotpedia has tracked 242 elections in Oklahoma so far at the state and local levels, and according to the nonprofit's analysis, 53 of them, or 22 percent, were uncontested. Other states that have seen a similar number of elections have seen even fewer candidates see competition.

In West Virginia, of 258 races tracked, 76 percent of them were one-person affairs. In Nebraska, Ballotpedia analysts looked at 137 races and found that 71.7 percent were uncontested. In Texas, where 1,333 races were followed, 69 percent of them didn't involve any contest.

Nationally, the nonprofit has tracked almost 20,000 elections in 47 states through May, and 72 percent of them have been uncontested. Oklahoma, so far, has seen more competition in its elections than most states this year.

Still, for every race, only one person is hoping to win; a certain size constituency is not getting to choose who represents them.

For House and Senate Districts in Oklahoma, that amounts to about 40,000 to 80,000 voters per district not casting a ballot with their choice of state-level lawmakers checked off this November.

> ***"If God had wanted us to vote, he would have given us candidates."*** *— Jay Leno*

Section 2

Primaries and Voter Engagement

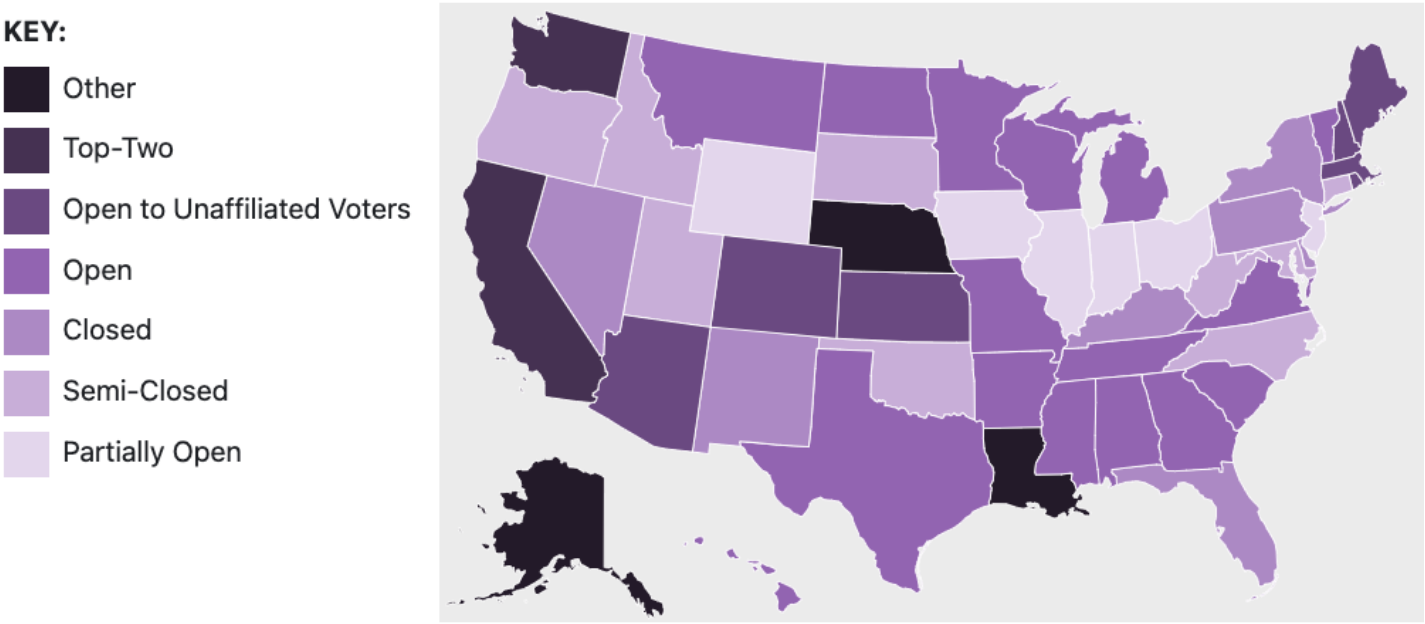
JUNE 18 VOTER TURNOUT

- Less than 250,000 of Oklahomans voted on June 18
- Only around 20-25% of registered Republicans voted in the June 18 primary
- Turnout in Democratic primaries was between 15-18%
- The only statewide office on this year's ballot was corporation commissioner, and it drew the fewest number of votes since 2012.

What is a primary election and is it the same everywhere?

The Council of State Governments, March 4, 2024

Primary Election Types by State



A primary election is an election where political parties choose their candidates for the general election. In a primary election, candidates are nominated rather than elected. In the general election, the nominated candidates from opposing parties face off against one another.

States have specific laws on what defines a political party and the threshold of votes a candidate must receive for nomination. More information on this is available from the National Association of Secretaries of State. Primary elections are administered by state and local election offices on behalf of the political parties. State law determines whether the primary is a partially open, semi-closed, closed, open to unaffiliated voters, open or top-two election.

Partially Open Primary

The partially open primary system allows voters to cast ballots regardless of party affiliation. Voters do so publicly or it may be construed as an attempt to register with the opposing party. For example, Iowa requires voters to select a party when registering to vote. Still, it permits primary voters to publicly switch parties to cast their ballot on primary election day. This then automatically changes their voter registration to the party whose primary they are participating in.

States with partially open primaries include Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, New Jersey, Ohio and Wyoming.

Semi-closed Primary

In a semi-closed primary, independent voters, or those without a party affiliation, may pick which party's primary they want to cast their ballot in. However, individuals who are enrolled with a party may only cast their ballot during that party's primary. A voter who is registered as a Democrat, for instance, may only cast their ballot in a Democratic primary. Still, a voter registered as an independent can cast their ballot in either a Democratic or Republican primary.

States with a semi-closed primary include Connecticut, Idaho, Maryland, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah and West Virginia.

Closed Primary

A closed primary is an election in which only registered members of a particular political party can vote. In other words, a voter chooses either the Democratic Party or the Republican Party on their voter registration application and may only vote for members of that party.

Voters can only cast their ballots in a closed primary for the party with which they are enrolled. For instance, a Republican primary election is only open to voters who are registered as Republicans. In states with closed primaries, absentee voters are frequently required to select a party affiliation on their voter registration form to participate in the state's primary elections.

States with a closed primary include Delaware, Florida, Kentucky, Nevada, New Mexico, New York and Pennsylvania.

Open to Unaffiliated Voters Primary

Many states restrict registered members of one party from voting in the primary of another, allowing only unattached voters to participate in whichever party primary they want. Because a Democrat cannot vote in a Republican Party primary or vice versa, this system is not an actual open primary.

Unaffiliated voters in New Hampshire must express their party preference at the polls to participate in that party's primary. Unaffiliated voters in Colorado must either indicate which party they want on their ballot at the polls or return just one party's mail ballot. Although the decision is made public, the voter's unaffiliated status remains unchanged.

States with a primary open to unaffiliated voters include Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Rhode Island.

Open Primary

A voter with any political affiliation is eligible to cast their ballot in an open primary for any party. For example, a voter who is registered as a Democrat has the option to cast a ballot in the Republican primary. Voters may only participate in one party's primary, and many states do not require voters to declare their political allegiance when they register to vote. The way open primaries for absentee votes are conducted varies between states.

States with open primary voting include Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Hawaii, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, North Dakota, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Virginia and Wisconsin.

Top-Two Primary

A top-two primary system allows all candidates to run and all voters to vote in one single primary election, regardless of party affiliation, with the top-two vote getters moving on to the general election. This means that the general election could see a face-off between candidates of the same party. Washington was the first state to implement a top-two primary system for state and federal elections in 2004. California later adopted this strategy in 2010.

Other Primary Processes

Legislative elections in Louisiana and Nebraska share specific characteristics with top-two primaries, but they differ.

All candidates in Louisiana run on the same ticket on the day of the general election. If no single candidate receives more than 50% of the vote, the two candidates that receive the most votes compete in a runoff six weeks later. Another way to explain this is that there is no primary election — only a general election for all candidates — with a runoff as necessary.

Because Nebraska's Legislature is nonpartisan, only state legislative elections are conducted using a system similar to the top-two primary system. Partisan affiliation labels are not shown next to the names of state legislative candidates. This is a process similar to local nonpartisan offices around the country.

A ballot initiative establishing a top-four primary for state executive, state legislative and congressional elections was approved by voters in Alaska in 2020. The process for a top-four primary is the same as in a top-two: All candidates are on a single ballot and all voters vote regardless of party affiliation. In a top-four primary, the top-four candidates with the most votes move on to the general election.

Presidential Candidate Selection

The presidential selection may be held in the exact same way as state election primaries and on the exact same day. However, some states do hold the presidential primary separately on either a separate day, or, sometimes, utilizing another method of candidate selection. For instance, some states use caucuses for their presidential candidate selection. According to analysis by the National Conference of State Legislatures, 39 states use the same process, while 11 states differ. In three of the states that differ — Alaska, Hawaii and North Dakota — political parties run the election.

Super Tuesday

Super Tuesday is identified as the day when the greatest number of states and territories hold their presidential primary or caucus. In 2024, those states and territories are:

- Alabama
- Alaska (Republican Party only)
- Arkansas
- American Samoa
- California
- Colorado
- Iowa (Democratic Party only)
- Maine
- Massachusetts
- Minnesota
- North Carolina
- Oklahoma
- Tennessee
- Texas
- Utah
- Vermont
- Virginia

Why is it Important to Vote in the Primaries?

Primary elections allow the voter to select from a field of candidates who their political party is expected to nominate to run in the general election. Based on voter turnout and primary results, parties may redesign their election strategy and allocate more or less attention and resources towards certain demographics, states and issues that can serve to moderate the outcomes.

What is and isn't a primary election?

The Council of State Governments, November 2, 2023

A Primary Election is an election where the political parties choose their candidates for the general election. In the general election, candidates from opposing parties face off against one another. In a primary election, candidates are nominated rather than elected. In order to be nominated by a political party, a candidate must receive at least 35% of the votes cast for that office by members of their political party and receive more votes than anybody else in their party for that race. However, in the case of how primary elections are administered, that depends on the State. States decide whether they would like a partially open, semi-closed, closed, open to unaffiliated voters, open or top two election.

Partially Open Primary

The Partially Open system allows voters to cast ballots regardless of party affiliation. Still, they must do so publicly or it may be construed as an attempt to register with the opposing party. For example, Iowa requires voters to select a party when registering to vote. Still, it permits primary voters to publicly switch parties to cast their ballot on primary election day. To identify their supporters, some state parties keep track of who votes in their primary.

States with Partially Open primaries include Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, New Jersey, Ohio and Wyoming.

Semi-closed Primary

In a semi-closed primary, Independent voters, or those without a party affiliation, may pick which party's primary they want to cast their ballot in; however, individuals who are enrolled with a party may only cast their ballot during that party's primary. A voter who is registered as a Democrat, for instance, may only cast their ballot in a Democratic primary. Still, a voter registered as an Independent can cast their ballot in either a Democratic or Republican primary.

States with a Semi-closed primary include Connecticut, Idaho, Maryland, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah and West Virginia.

Closed Primary

A closed primary is an election in which only registered members of a particular political party can vote. In other words, a voter chooses either the Democratic Party or the Republican Party on their voter registration application and may only vote for members of that party.

Voters can only cast their ballots in a closed primary for the party with which they are enrolled. For instance, a Republican primary election is only open to voters who are registered as Republicans. In States with closed primaries, absentee voters are frequently required to select a party affiliation on their voter registration form to participate in the State's primary elections.

States with a closed primary include Delaware, Florida, Kentucky, Nevada, New Mexico, New York and Pennsylvania.

Open to Unaffiliated Voters Primary

Many states restrict registered members of one party from voting in the primary of another, allowing only unattached voters to participate in whichever party primary they want. Because a Democrat cannot vote in a Republican party primary or vice versa, this system is not an actual open primary. Unaffiliated voters in New Hampshire must express their party preference at the polls to participate in that party's primary. Unaffiliated voters in Colorado must either indicate which party they want on their ballot at the polls or return just one party's mail ballot. Although the decision is made public, the voter's unaffiliated status remains unchanged.

States with open to Unaffiliated Voters primary include: Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Rhode Island.

Open Primary

A voter with any political affiliation is eligible to cast their ballot in an open primary for any party. For example, a voter who is registered as a Democrat has the option to cast a ballot in the Republican primary. Voters may only participate in one party's primary and many States do not require voters to declare their political allegiance when they register to vote. The way open primaries for absentee votes are conducted varies between states. States with open primary voting include Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Hawaii, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, North Dakota, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Virginia and Wisconsin.

Top-Two Primary

Washington was the first State to implement a top-two primary system for state and federal elections in 2004. California adopted this strategy in 2010. In Nebraska, only state legislative elections are conducted using a top-two primary system. Partisan affiliation labels are not shown next to the names of state legislative candidates since Nebraska's state legislature is nonpartisan. A ballot initiative establishing a top-four primary for state executive, State legislative and congressional elections was approved by Alaskan voters in 2020. Additionally, ranked-choice voting was implemented for general elections for the positions mentioned above and the presidency.

California and Washington primarily use the "top two" primary format.

Presidential Primary Rules

Regarding Presidential Primary Rules, the states thoroughly differ in the systems the states choose to use. Some states hold their State and presidential primaries on the same day; others hold the other elections weeks or months apart.

Other Primary Processes

Legislative elections in Nebraska and Louisiana share specific characteristics with top-two primaries, but they differ.

All candidates in Louisiana run on the same ticket on the day of the general election before being narrowed down to a top two. The top two then compete in a runoff six weeks after the election if no candidate earns more than 50% of the vote. One way to look at this is to suggest that there is only a general election for all candidates, with a runoff as necessary and no primary elections.

Alaska's top-four open primary system is unique and used for state and congressional elections.

Legislators are chosen in Nebraska in a nonpartisan election. As a result, they run unaffiliated and are all listed on the same nonpartisan primary ballot. In local, nonpartisan offices around the country, this arrangement is typical.

Why is it Important to Vote in the Primaries?

Primary elections allow the voter, the chance to select from a field of candidates who your political party should ultimately nominate to run in the general election. Based on voter turnout and primary results, parties may redesign their election strategy and allocate more or less attention and resources towards certain demographics, states and issues which can serve to moderate the outcomes.

Notes

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Take notes, highlight, use as a text book.

Open vs. Closed Primary: Exploring different primary election systems

Emily Dexter, Good Party, June 20, 2023

What is the purpose of a primary election, and what are the types of primary elections? This guide will provide the answers to these questions, while discussing the advantages and disadvantages of each primary election system.

Introduction to Primary Elections

Primary elections narrow down the number of candidates that will appear on the ballot during general elections. The results of a primary election determine which candidates will appear on the ballot during the general election. Primary elections help to make the election process more efficient. They also influence or sometimes determine the outcome of the general election.

Primary elections take place at both the state and federal level. However, different states have different rules for their primary elections. The main two types of primaries are open and closed primaries. In both systems, voters cast their votes in the primary of a specific political party.

What Is an Open Primary System?

An open primary system allows voters to vote in whichever party's primary they choose, regardless of the voter's party affiliation. Each voter can only vote in one party's primary.

The main advantage of an open primary system is that voters do not have to be registered with a specific party to participate. This makes it easier for independent voters to have their voices heard.

Voter turnout is generally higher in open primaries, compared to close primaries. According to the Bipartisan Policy Center, states that adopted open primary systems saw an average voter turnout of 24.5 percent, while states with closed primary systems saw an average voter turnout of 20.7 percent.

One point to consider with open primaries is that "crossover" or strategic voting can occur, when voters affiliated with one party vote in another party's primary. For example, a Republican might vote in their state's Democratic primary. If this voter lives in a state dominated by Democrats, they might be hoping to see a more moderate candidate elected, knowing there is little chance of a Republican candidate winning. Another motivation could be the voter's desire to vote for a Democratic candidate they perceive as weak or unviable, in hopes that that candidate will be easier to defeat in the general election. Consequently, a main concern with open primaries is the potential dilution of party ideology.

The following states use open primaries in state elections:

- Alabama
- Arkansas
- Georgia
- Hawaii
- Michigan
- Minnesota
- Mississippi
- Missouri
- Montana
- North Dakota
- South Carolina
- Texas
- Vermont
- Virginia
- Wisconsin

Note: This guide's lists of states' primary systems come from the National Conference of State Legislatures.

What Is a Closed Primary System?

A closed primary system allows only voters who are registered with a political party to vote in that party's primary. To vote in a Republican primary, a voter in this system would have to be registered with the Republican party.

An advantage of closed primaries is that voters affiliated with one party cannot try to sabotage the outcome of another party's primary. Party ideology can then be preserved more easily. Supporters of closed primaries would argue that this preservation is important to the democratic process, while critics may argue that keeping primaries closed along party lines adds fuel to political polarization.

A disadvantage of closed primaries is decreased voter participation. Independent and unaffiliated voters may also find themselves more excluded from a closed primary system.

The following states use closed primaries in state elections:

- Delaware
- Florida
- Kentucky
- Maryland
- Nevada
- New Mexico
- New York
- Oregon
- Pennsylvania
- Tennessee

Open vs. Closed Primaries: Key Differences

To review, here are four key differences between open and closed primaries:

1. Open primaries allow voters to vote in whichever primary they choose. Closed primaries require voters to be registered with a party in order to vote in that party's primary.

2. Open primaries have higher voter participation than closed primaries.

3. Closed primaries reduce the chance of "crossover" voting, which can happen in an open primary system when voters affiliated with one party strategically vote in the other party's primary.

4. Independent and unaffiliated voters are more often eligible to participate in open primaries than closed primaries.

Other Types of Primary Systems

There are more types of primaries than just open and closed primary systems. The following are other types of primary systems in the United States:

Partially-Closed Primary

This system is similar to a closed primary, except that parties can choose whether to allow unaffiliated voters to participate in their primary. This system allows for greater flexibility, but can also lead to confusion about voter eligibility.

The following states use partially-closed primaries in state elections:

- Connecticut
- Idaho
- North Carolina
- Oklahoma
- South Dakota
- Utah

Partially-Open Primary

Like in an open primary, voters in a partially-open primary system can choose whichever primary they would like to participate in. Unlike in an open primary, voters either publicly declare which primary ballot they choose, or become registered with the party whose ballot they choose, depending on their state. This system remains more open than a closed primary, but also reinforces the dominance of the two-party system.

The following states use partially-open primaries in state elections:

- Illinois
- Indiana
- Iowa
- Ohio
- Wyoming

Open to Unaffiliated Voters

This system requires voters who are registered with a party to only vote in that party's primary, but also allows unaffiliated voters to choose which primary they would like to participate in, without disrupting their unaffiliated status.

The following states use primaries that are open to unaffiliated voters in state elections:

- Arizona
- Colorado
- Kansas
- Maine
- Massachusetts
- New Hampshire
- New Jersey
- Rhode Island
- West Virginia

Top-Two Primary

In a top-two primary, all candidates appear on one common ballot. Voters may still be asked to state their party affiliation or preference, but in this system, the top two candidates who receive the most votes in the primary advance to the general election, regardless of party affiliation.

The following states use top-two primaries in state elections:

- California
- Washington

Other Types of Primaries

Louisiana's primaries are similar to the top-two system. In Louisiana, if a candidate wins over half the vote, that candidate is elected immediately. Otherwise, the top two candidates move on to a run-off election.

Nebraska elects legislators on a nonpartisan basis, without including a partisan designation on the ballot. Alaska uses a top-four open primary system.

Considerations for Voters

Open and closed primaries are the most common types of primary election systems in the United States, though many states use hybrid or variant systems. Understanding how your state's primary election system works can help you be an informed voter.

It is important to keep in mind that the above lists of states' primary election systems apply to state elections. Federal or presidential elections work slightly differently, as some states use the primary system and others use the caucus system.

In the end, it is up to you to decide which primary election system you think is most fair and equitable. As you think about the different systems, consider your own values and level of party affiliation. How important is it for independent and unaffiliated voters to have an equal say in primary elections? How much do you participate in primaries? How important in your view is partisan ideology?

Conclusion

Open and closed primaries offer distinct advantages and disadvantages. Open primaries can increase voter participation, while closed primaries can help to preserve party ideology. Whatever primary election system your state uses, be sure to register to vote and participate in your state's primary!

Arguments for and against closed primaries

Ballotpedia

A closed primary is a type of primary election where only voters who are formally affiliated with a political party in advance of the election date are allowed to participate in that party's primary. It is one of four primary election types defined by Ballotpedia. The other types include:

- open primaries, where voters either do not have to formally affiliate with a political party in order to vote in its primary or can declare their party affiliation at the polls on the day of the primary;
- hybrid primaries, where previously unaffiliated voters may participate in the partisan primary of their choice; and
- top-two, top-four, and blanket primaries, where all candidates are listed on the same ballot, regardless of party, and multiple winners advance to the general election.

HIGHLIGHTS

- In 20 states, at least one political party conducts open primaries for congressional and state-level offices.
- In 15 states and the District of Columbia, at least one political party conducts closed primaries for congressional and state-level offices.
- In 14 states, at least one political party conducts semi-closed primaries for congressional and state-level offices.
- In 4 states where political parties are responsible for administering their own primaries, one party adopted closed primaries, while another party adopted semi-closed primaries. These states are included in the totals for both categories.
- In 5 states, top-two primaries or a variation are used. These state primaries are considered a separate entity and are not included in the totals for open, closed, or semi-closed primaries.

Whether primary elections should be closed is a subject of debate.

Supporters of closed primaries argue that parties have a right to allow only members to select nominees, that closed primaries prevent sabotage instead of disenfranchising non-party members, that closed primaries don't produce more ideologically extreme nominees, and that public funding doesn't preclude closed primaries.

Opponents of closed primaries argue that primaries should be open to all registered voters because they are publicly funded, that closed primaries could produce more ideologically extreme nominees, that primary elections often decide races in some locations, and that instances of sabotage in non-closed primaries are rare.

On this page, you will find:

- Arguments at a glance: A brief summary of support and opposition arguments
- Support arguments in detail: Detailed support arguments from a variety of sources
- Opposition arguments in detail: Detailed opposition arguments from a variety of sources
- Primary type by state: Primary types by state and party
- Further reading: Links to resources with more information on primary elections

Arguments at a glance

This section includes quotes briefly summarizing some of the most prevalent arguments for and against closed primaries.

Support

"Political parties at every level of government choose their nominees through primaries. That's the most important decision a party can make—and an organization's most important decisions should be made by members of that organization. Joining a political party in the United States is a pretty simple procedure. ... Allowing Independents and Republicans to select the Democrats' next nominees, or some other combination, is a good way to destroy a party and its meaning."

— Seth Masket, University of Denver and the Pacific Standard (2018)

Opposition

"We have had primary elections to select nominees for general elections at the local, state and federal level for more than a century. They began as an alternative to having party bosses at each level simply name the candidates they wanted. As the system has evolved, however, primaries have come to be dominated by ideological partisans who please the more agenda-driven elements in either party who are the most likely to participate in primaries. There is comparatively little incentive to reach out to voters who might fall somewhere between the two parties."

—Ron Elving, NPR (2022)

Support arguments in detail

Four arguments in favor of closed primaries are that political parties have a right to allow only members to select nominees, that closed primaries prevent sabotage instead of disenfranchising non-party members, that closed primaries don't produce more ideologically extreme nominees, and that public funding doesn't preclude closed primaries. This section includes quotes from a variety of sources that exemplify these arguments.

Political parties have a right to only allow members to select their nominees

In a 2023 article for the American Conservative, Frank DeVito wrote that political parties have a right to restrict their nominating processes to members only:

"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 decide to be part of it. If people do not agree with the policy preferences of the Republican platform or its 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 more people outside the party. But that is not the point of a primary. The primary is meant to select the candidate preferred by the party. If open primary advocates want more moderate candidates who they believe are more representative of the voters, they should consider nominating an independent candidate."

— Frank DeVito, The American Conservative (2023)

Closed primaries prevent sabotage; they don't disenfranchise non-party members

In a 2023 report for the Yankee Institute, Chris Tohir argued that closed primaries do not disenfranchise voters; instead, they prevent non-party members from sabotaging the electoral process.

According to its website, the Yankee Institute says it is a state-based think tank that is "committed to empowering the people of Connecticut to forge a brighter future..."

"American politics has a strong history and tradition of the power and autonomy of political parties to elect their own candidates with minimal interference. Requiring that someone be a party member to vote in a primary is not disenfranchisement — it is freedom of association. As previously stated, open primaries have little, to no, impact on selecting more moderate candidates, while closed primaries most accurately reflect the will of the party members in whom they want to represent them in a general election. Therefore, the consequence to Connecticut voters is that, if they are affiliated with a party, their voice would be diluted by outsiders looking to sink or raise certain candidates that don't believe in the party's values. Put in another way, Democrats can troll Republicans and/or Republicans can troll Democrats by distorting the vote. The primary would be weaponized.

"The question we should ask is why? Why offer open primaries as a solution to a non-issue in the state's electoral process? That remains to be seen, but, for now, Connecticut should stay true to the old adage: if it ain't broke, don't fix it."

— Chris Tohir, staff writer,
The Yankee Institute (2023)

Closed primaries don't produce more ideologically extreme nominees

In a 2017 article in the Pacific Standard, Seth Masket wrote about research he conducted with other political scientists. According to Masket, they found that closed primaries do not result in more ideologically extreme nominees than open primaries:

"The logic of the open primary is pretty straightforward. Under a closed primary, only people who are registered party members (usually for some time) are permitted to vote. Those party registrants tend to be die-hard partisans, and the candidates they pick will tend to be from the ideological extremes. Independent voters, who might legitimately want a more moderate set of nominees, are forbidden from participating. Allow them in, and you end up not only with more moderate nominees, but nominees who recognize it's in their interests to keep moderate independent voters happy while they serve in office.

"Eric McGhee, Boris Shor, Nolan McCarty, Steve Rogers, and I tested this assumption in a large-scale study a few years ago. We looked at two decades of voting behavior by state legislators across all 50 states, and we compared legislators based on the type of primary system that nominated them. ...

"What we found was somewhat surprising. Legislators elected from closed primary systems are no more or less extreme than those from open primary systems."

— Seth Masket, University of Denver
and the Pacific Standard (2017)

Public funding doesn't preclude closed primaries

In November 2018, New Mexico Secretary of State Maggie Toulouse Oliver (D) was sued by the group Open Primaries Education Fund, which argued that states should not fund closed primaries because those primaries are exclusionary and benefit political parties. In response, Oliver argued that primary elections, including closed primaries, are essential government functions that merit state funding.

"Election Code provisions govern virtually every nuance of the primary election process, including a chapter devoted specifically to primaries. ... Our primaries are administered and run solely by the Secretary of State and county clerks...; political parties play no formal role in administering the conduct of primary elections. Polling place locations are determined and administered by county government...and standardized voting systems (i.e.

voting machines) are purchased by the State, and maintained, stored and deployed by counties. .... All expenditures made from the public fisc for the purpose of funding primaries are allocated to, and expended by the Secretary or county clerks. No public monies are paid to political parties for the conduct of primary elections. The government runs and controls primary elections, and maintains complete control over taxpayer funds expended for that purpose.

'That primary elections like New Mexico's have evolved into a well-established government function has become something of a truism. Indeed, in determining that U.S. constitutional protections apply to protect the primary electorate (generally with respect to racial discrimination), and that political parties are "state actors" for such purposes, the United States Supreme Court has long held that primaries are government functions."

—Maggie Toulouse Oliver,
New Mexico secretary of state (2018)

Opposition arguments in detail

Four arguments against closed primaries are that primaries should be open to all registered voters because they are publicly funded, that closed primaries could produce more ideologically extreme nominees, that primary elections often decide races in some locations, and that instances of sabotage in non-closed primaries are rare. This section includes quotes from a variety of sources that exemplify these arguments.

Primaries should be open to all registered voters because they are publicly funded

In a 2020 guest column in the Orlando Sentinel, former Illinois state representative Choice Edwards (D) wrote that primary elections should be open to all registered voters because they are publicly funded:

"All taxpayers fund elections both primary and general elections. By denying every voter an unfettered opportunity to vote in each as they please is tantamount to taxation without representation. Private political parties and other special interests have predetermined desired outcomes that may be quite partisan or single issue. However, unaffiliated voters only want to be enabled to vote for the person of their choosing from among all the candidates on the ballot, not just those of a particular private political party.

"If private political parties want exclusivity in determining their standard-bearers, let them foot the bill for that and not use government staff and resources for their discriminatory activity."

— Choice Edwards, guest columnist,
Orlando Sentinel (2020)

Closed primaries produce more ideologically extreme candidates

In a 2021 article in The Atlantic, Nick Troiano wrote about the possibility for closed primaries to produce more ideologically extreme candidates:

"In a majority of states, laws prohibit either unaffiliated voters or members of the other party from participating in these elections, sometimes both. And among those who can participate, very few do. Despite record turnout in the November 2020 election, just 10 percent of eligible voters nationwide cast ballots in primaries that effectively decided the outcome of more than 80 percent of U.S. House elections, according to a new report by Unite America, an organization I lead.

"Partisan primaries motivate legislators to keep in lockstep with a narrow and extreme slice of the electorate rather than govern in the public interest—a dynamic that has now come to threaten democracy itself. As then-President Donald Trump told his supporters right before the insurrection, 'You have to get your people to fight … We have to primary the hell out of the ones that don't fight. You primary them."

— Nick Troiano, The Atlantic (2021)

In some locations, the primary election decides the race

Pennsylvania House of Representatives majority leader Dave Reed (R) introduced House Bill 2448 in 2018. The bill, which died in committee, would have allowed independent and non-affiliated voters to cast ballots in party primaries. Reed argued that many races are decided in primary elections, such as those in which only one major party has candidates running.

"With nearly 750,000 of our state's voters now registered as independent or non-affiliated, the time has come stop excluding them from a significant portion of our electoral process. Too many races, especially local races, find finality in the spring election, and these voters should not be left out."

—Dave Reed, Pennsylvania state representative (2018)

Instances of non-members trying to sabotage the nominating process in non-closed primaries are rare

FairVote, which describes itself as a nonprofit organization researching and advocating voting reforms to make democracy more functional and representative, wrote about the potential for non-party members to sabotage the nominating process:

"One area of contention in open primaries is "crossover" voting. It most often involves voters affiliated with one political party voting in the primary of another political party to influence that party's nomination. For example, if a district routinely elects the Democratic nominee, Republican voters may vote in the Democratic party primary to attempt to influence the outcome. This could be a good-faith attempt to select a more conservative Democratic nominee who would be palatable to the Republican voters, or it could be sabotage, an attempt to nominate a weaker candidate who is easier to defeat in the general election. ...

"People who align with a given party may theoretically still vote in another party's primary if they are registered as independent. The potential for such tactical party registration is also present in the strictest of closed primaries."

— FairVote (2023)

The U.S. has a 'primary problem,' say advocates for a new election systems

Ashley Lopez, KGOU, September 18, 2023

Most state and federal primary elections in the U.S. are divided up by political party, and many are only open to voters who are members of a party.

Reform-minded advocates and many political scientists say this system is not working. They say relatively small numbers of voters are selecting their nominee — often in a district or state that leans strongly toward one party, so whoever wins the primary cruises to victory in a general election.

The group Unite America underscores what it terms the "primary problem" with this finding: In 2020, "only 10% of eligible Americans nationwide cast ballots in primary elections that effectively decided the winners in a supermajority (83%) of Congressional seats."

Experts and advocates say this electoral process excludes voters and leads to more extreme candidates who mainly appeal to activists, and could be exacerbating partisan polarization.

That's why there is a movement to rethink how states set up their primary elections and how voters choose which candidates advance to a general election.

From smoke-filled rooms to party primary elections

Modern-day party primaries in the U.S. originated about 100 years ago, according to Kevin Kosar, senior fellow at a right-leaning think tank called the American Enterprise Institute. He says the earlier system "was often riddled with corruption," and party primaries were created to allow voters a say in who got on their ballots.

"Back in those days, voters and various good government groups got fed up with candidates for office," Kosar says. "Those who appeared on the ballot were being selected by party bosses in smoke-filled back rooms. So the idea was, let's take this party selection process and open it up to the public."

Jeremy Gruber, senior vice president for the advocacy group Open Primaries, says at first, political parties were not happy with this change.

"Parties decided to make peace with primary elections," he says. "And rather than fight them, they began to claim [primaries] were theirs, not the voters'."

That's why at the beginning most primary elections were "closed," meaning you had to be registered with a party to participate. Gruber says initially these primaries worked well because almost everybody was either a Democrat or Republican.

Closed vs. open primary systems

But in the past few decades more voters have identified as independent.

"What's happened is the electorate has gone through a massive sea change over the last 25 years," Gruber says. "Now, independents are the largest and fastest-growing group of voters in the country. Over 50% of our young people — the next generation of voters, millennials and Gen Z voters — are independent."

This is at least partly why many states have moved away from closed primaries. Only 16 states — including populous Florida and New York — still have either completely or partially closed primaries.

"So if you're an independent voter in those 16 states ... you do not get the right to participate in the primary," Gruber says. "Your taxes pay for them, but you don't get the right to participate. You only can participate in the general elections."

Lawmakers in Pennsylvania and New Mexico, for example, have considered legislation that would open their closed primaries to independent voters by letting them pick a party primary ballot to fill out.

There are efforts in some states to close primaries, however. In Colorado, the Republican Party sued the state in an effort to close its primary elections so that unaffiliated voters — Colorado's largest voting bloc — can't vote in them. In their suit, Republicans say political parties have the right "to choose their nominees for office without interference by those who are not members of the party."

Supporters of closed primaries have argued that sabotage from non-members is a serious issue and that voters who want to vote can simply register with the party that's most closely aligned with their views. According to the Pew Research Center, the vast majority of independent voters tend to "lean" toward either the Republican or Democratic Party.

The polarization problem in U.S. primaries

Gruber says states with closed primaries also have more polarization.

"You are starting to see states that shut out independent voters have primary elections that are more and more insular and are producing candidates that are less and less representative because fewer and fewer people are able to participate in them," he says. "And that's throwing the whole system of democracy in elections out of whack."

AEI's Kosar says polarization isn't unique to closed primary states, though. Voters have self-sorted themselves and are polarized on their own, but he puts some blame on partisan primaries.

"After 100 years of experimentation with this, we see that there are clear problems with this system — not least of which is that it produces candidates who frequently aren't particularly representative of the average voter," Kosar says. "And that is an issue for democracy."

Gruber says this is why nonpartisan primary elections are ideal. He says candidates who run in a nonpartisan system "no longer have sort of the necessary fealty to their party's agenda," compared with candidates who have to run in a party primary.

"They can run based upon entirely how they see their constituency and the issues that their constituency prioritizes," Gruber says. "You're starting to see a lot more representative politicians coming out of all of these systems ... so, we believe that a move to nonpartisan primaries as a public function is in the best interests of every state."

5 states with nonpartisan primary elections

There are currently five states that run federal or statewide nonpartisan primaries: California, Nebraska, Washington, Alaska and Louisiana.

In these systems, all candidates from all parties are listed on the same ballot, and voters can vote for any candidate. In California, Washington and Nebraska's statehouse elections, the top two vote-getters — regardless of party — move on to the general election. In Alaska, the top four vote-getters move on. These systems are often referred to as "top-two" and "top-four" primaries.

Louisiana has perhaps the most unique system. In October during odd-numbered years and in November during even-numbered years, all the candidates appear on the same ballot. If a candidate wins in a majority (50% plus one vote) in their race, they win that election outright. If no candidate wins a majority, the top two vote-getters — regardless of party — run in a second election the following month. In that second election, whoever gets the most votes wins.

Kosar says states considering moving to a nonpartisan system will have to choose what works best for their population.

"Different voting systems are going to work differently depending on the demographics," he says. "A voting system that produces the best results for a purple state may not work so well in a deep red state."

For example, he says, a top-two system would work well in a purple state because you are likely to get two candidates from different parties.

"But if it's a deeply blue or deeply red state, you're going to have a very narrow difference between the two candidates being put forth," Kosar says. "And that may not be the best."

More states are considering nonpartisan primaries. There are tentative proposals in South Dakota and Idaho, for instance. And Nevada voters will weigh final approval of a nonpartisan "top-five" system next year.

What research says about nonpartisan primaries

Gruber, the open primary advocate, says existing nonpartisan systems have already led to some significant changes. In California and Washington, which have had top-two primaries for over a decade, he says he's seen "quite a few things that I think are very positive," including more bipartisanship.

But as far as whether these systems have led to the election of more moderate candidates, research has been mixed. A 2017 study published by Cambridge University found "an inconsistent effect since the reform was adopted" in both California and Washington.

"The evidence for post-reform moderation is stronger in California than in Washington, but some of this stronger effect appears to stem from a contemporaneous policy change—district lines drawn by an independent redistricting commission—while still more might have emerged from a change in term limits that was also adopted at the same time," the researchers wrote.

A newer study, from 2020 from the University of Southern California, however, did find evidence that the top-two system in that state "reduced ideological extremity among legislators, relative to those elected in closed primary systems." Researchers wrote that the "ideological moderation in top-two and open primaries" was found among both incumbents and newly elected legislators.

Andrew Sinclair, an assistant professor at Claremont McKenna College in California, says the effect of nonpartisan primaries on voter engagement and satisfaction is somewhat mixed so far.

In deep red or deep blue states, general elections are not competitive and tend to disengage some voters. But if candidates are chosen in a top-two system, there could be a pretty competitive race between two candidates in the same party.

For example, a top-two primary could have a moderating effect in a race between two Democrats in a deeply Democratic state. That's because presumably Republican and independent voters would weigh in on the race too.

"The argument for moderation is that possibly the more moderate Democrat would have an advantage in that election," Sinclair says, "or perhaps the more competent or the more pragmatic [candidate]."

But Sinclair says concretely identifying that this system "actually has produced a moderating effect is hard" for a whole bunch of reasons.

"There are some political science papers that argue that there is one," he says. "Some argue that there isn't, but that it produces these types of elections in those places is pretty indisputable."

And elections with top-two candidates of the same party can have a serious downside, Sinclair says.

"The downside of the top two is that in those kinds of elections some Republicans don't vote," he says. "Some Republicans will say, 'Well, there's no, you know, person of my own party on the ballot, so I'm just going to skip this race.' And that's true. There is some roll-off in participation."

But Sinclair says this roll-off is what creates moderation.

"What it effectively has done is move the Democratic primary into the general election in those places," he says. "And that dramatically increases the number of Democrats and independents participating, and not all of the Republicans roll off ... and even if some Republicans roll off, you get some Republicans voting. And that's the pathway for moderation."

Regardless of the various tradeoffs, Kosar says, ideally states would be more experimental with how they structure elections so that politics become more palatable to voters — which he thinks is a laudable goal.

"A number of these electoral reforms aim to either depolarize or at least disincentivize gratuitous, bad or toxic behavior, which in many cases is rewarded by the current system," he says. "Being a jerk, being obnoxious, savaging others is rewarded. So if you change the incentives, the politicians are going to run differently. And I think a lot of people like that."

"Waiting for results on election night is like waiting for your grade on a group project. I know I did my part right, but I'm worried the rest of you screwed it up."

Poll: Voters overwhelmingly support eliminating partisan primaries, requiring majority winners

Ross Sherman, Unite America, August 7, 2023

A new poll finds that overwhelming majorities support two key principles of election reform: (1) All voters should be able to vote for any candidate in every taxpayer-funded election, and (2) candidates should have to earn majority support to win. Most voters also assume that these principles are already true of our elections, but that's not the case in all but a handful of states.

Significant majorities of Democrats, Republicans, and independents also agree on how we get there: by replacing partisan primaries with nonpartisan primaries and requiring majority winners in general elections (such as through instant runoffs). However, the election reform movement must continue to make the case to voters that these changes are solutions to government dysfunction.

The 2024 presidential election cycle is already well underway, yet most Americans are pessimistic about our two likely choices, as well as our democracy as a whole. One key reason: The Primary Problem is alive and well, with less than 10% of Americans effectively electing 83% of the U.S. House in both 2020 and 2022.

A Citizen Data poll commissioned by Unite America in 2023 asked voters if they agreed with two key principles that we believe any new election system should support. The findings are overwhelming:

91% agree that all voters should be able to vote for any candidate in every taxpayer-funded election
76% agree that candidates should have to earn majority support to win an election
Tellingly, 70% of respondents believed that both of these statements are already true, despite the fact that neither is. Currently, 30 states have restrictions in place that limit who can vote in certain primary elections, which are taxpayer-funded. The vast majority of states also hold plurality elections, allowing candidates to win with less than majority support in contests with three or more candidates.

But here's the good news: voters agree generally on how we fix that problem. A 2022 poll commissioned by Unite America found that 65% of voters support replacing partisan primaries with nonpartisan primaries and requiring majority winners in general elections. Even more encouraging, this support is not limited to one party. Significant majorities of Democrats (71%), Republicans (56%), and independents (68%) support the policy changes. There are even encouraging signs among those who did not show support: just 13% of respondents said they were outright opposed, while the remaining 22% are unsure and could be open to persuasion.

While neither poll asked about specific types of primary reform (i.e. Top Two, Top Four, or the Louisiana Model), the trend is clear: Voters support the main concepts required to solve the Primary Problem. This is a positive first step toward building widespread public support for specific policy solutions.

However, it's clear that election reform organizations and our allies have more work to do in order to convince voters that these reforms will help reduce government dysfunction. For instance, the 2022 poll found that 45% of voters believe our government is in need of "real, significant, and fundamental change," but just 12% said the same of our elections. Additionally, respondents were asked to choose which factor they believe most negatively impacts the health of our democracy. Presented with a list of 13 options, a plurality (21%) chose "corruption by the people in charge," while just 2% chose "partisan primaries," which was the least common response.

One way to help voters understand the connection between our election system (and partisan primaries in particular) and their dissatisfaction with government is to share the stories of voters who have experienced the positive impacts of election reforms. There is mounting evidence to suggest that voters do not just like reform proposals in theory. Those who have experienced new election reforms report high levels of satisfaction, and that they find the reforms easy to understand.

For example, exit polling of Alaska voters conducted immediately following the state's first top-four nonpartisan primary found that 62% of voters approve of the reform. Nearly 80% found it "easy" to fill out a ranked choice ballot, while nearly 60% said Alaska's elections were more competitive in 2022.

Perhaps even more illuminating than the results of exit polls is the testimony from Alaska voters in favor of the reforms. Recently, the Alaska Legislature held a hearing on the state's top-four nonpartisan primaries and instant runoff general elections. Below are a few quotes from voters explaining why they support their state's election system:

"I have voted in every state election since I moved to Alaska in 1970, and I was very pleased with the open primary and the results of the 2022 elections. I had a larger field of candidates to choose from, not just from the party that I would normally vote for. Given the divides in our state, I look for candidates regardless of party or affiliation who pledged to work across the aisle. Alaskans have diverse experience and opinions and we need to find ways to work together and craft reasonable laws." - Odette E.

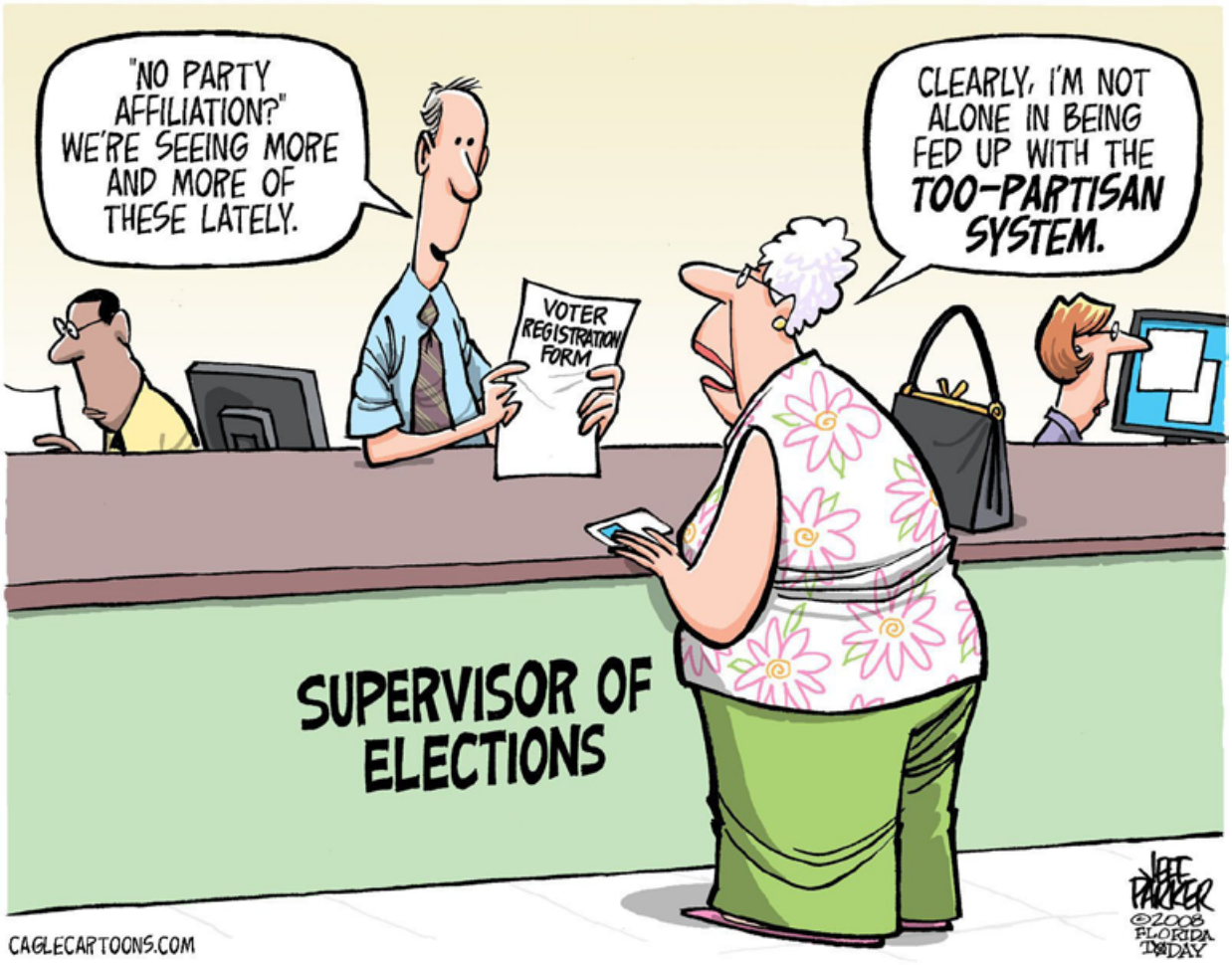
"I did not have to game the system to vote for whom I thought was the most electable. I just voted for whom I thought was best." - Mark D.

"I feel liberated because I am no longer forced to deal with this closed primary where the whole list of choices that I have are controlled by either the Republican Party or the Democratic Party." - Catherine M.

"[The new system] has magnified our ability to select the kind of leaders we need to have as we progress into the 21st century. I'm saying that partly as a great, great grandfather of a great, great grandson who's not quite a year old yet… It's easy, it's democratic, and it empowers voting Alaskans, the majority." - Mark S.

"Alaska has had a House and now a Senate with bipartisan majorities. This is really unusual in American governance, and I applaud it. Let's have more of it, not less." - Sylvia K.

The story is clear: Large majorities of voters support election reform, and those who have participated in reformed election systems view them not only as an improvement, but as an antidote for dysfunctional, unrepresentative government. As more jurisdictions embrace reform, the viability and effectiveness of election reform as a solution will likely only become clearer to more voters.



Securing our elections starts with changing the primary process

Nick Troiano, Restoring America, August 21, 2024

With a historic number of open all-candidate primary initiatives on the ballot, 2024 is poised to be remembered as the year voters demanded a better way to conduct elections. This type of electoral innovation is exactly what the founders intended.

Most people agree that immigration, the national debt, and education are urgent problems, yet year after year these issues go unaddressed. More often than not, politicians would rather use these issues as political cudgels to win the next election rather than achieve a legislative outcome that improves the lives of their constituents. And they do so because the closed primary system incentivizes political grandstanding over the hard work of legislating solutions.

Fortunately, the founders gave us the tools to fix these problems. A record number of states — particularly the conservative strongholds of South Dakota, Idaho, and Montana — are pursuing ballot initiatives to make government more accountable. Each aims to replace traditional party primaries with all-candidate primaries, ensuring all voters have the freedom to vote for any candidate, regardless of party, in every taxpayer-funded election. Four states, including Alaska and Louisiana, already have such a system.

Some fear that this will give one party an advantage. But the group that will benefit the most is independent voters. Currently making up 43% of voters, they are the largest voting bloc in the country.

Independents will inevitably decide the 2024 election, yet nearly 24 million of them in 22 states were locked out of the presidential primary. That includes millions of veterans, half of whom identify as political independents. In the states with closed presidential primaries, the share of voters not registered with a major party has increased by nearly 20% since 2010.

It's not just independents leading the charge for a different primary process. Grassroots Republicans are behind these efforts as well because they realize that their success will lead to more free, fair, and secure elections for all voters.

In Idaho, for example, there are two ballot initiatives this November that would improve their elections: one to abolish party primaries and replace them with open all-candidate primaries, and the other to ensure only citizens can vote. Five other states — Arizona, Colorado, Montana, Nevada, and South Dakota — are pursuing similar measures to strengthen and safeguard our electoral system.

Partisan actors have falsely labeled open primary ballot initiatives and related voter-led movements as shams to help Democrats. Not only has electoral reform received bipartisan support in places where it has been enacted, but conservatives continue to be successful under these improved systems. Of the 15 states with "open primaries," 11 have Republican governors. Louisiana, one of the four states that did away with party primaries entirely, just elected a governor who ran on a "MAGA-style agenda."

And in 2021, the Virginia GOP updated its nominating process to incorporate more voices within the party and ended up choosing Glenn Youngkin. Youngkin went on to be the first Republican to win the governor's seat since Bob McDonnell in 2010, a GOP victory that may not have happened without reform.

When Alaska switched from a traditional closed primary system to nonpartisan primaries, strong conservatives were elected statewide. Most prominently, Gov. Mike Dunleavy enjoys strong approval ratings and has a track record of conservative policy wins for Alaskans. The one statewide Democrat that was elected in Alaska has been noted for her bipartisan work, notably on expanding energy exploration in Alaska, much to the consternation of the Biden administration.

And while Democratic Party leaders often claim to be the "party of democracy," their vociferous opposition to similar proposals for fairer elections in Colorado, Nevada, and South Dakota expose their hypocrisy as they put up perpetual roadblocks to accountability and ballot box access to citizens in those states.

Thanks to the founders' wisdom, the Constitution grants states the right to determine the "time, place, and manner" of elections. Since then, states have led the way in making our elections freer and fairer, allowing the direct election of senators, removing arbitrary literacy tests, and expanding voting rights to nonlandowners, women, and African Americans.

That's the beauty of our federalist system. By further inviting more people to have a role in the electoral experiment the founders envisioned, we move closer to a more representative America. This November offers an opportunity for millions of people in six more states to make that vision a reality.

Nick Troiano is the author of The Primary Solution: Rescuing Our Democracy From the Fringes and the executive director of Unite America, a philanthropic venture fund that invests in nonpartisan election reform.

In a time of national division, polarizing primaries are part of the problem

Ron Elving, NPR, June 18, 2022

The congressional hearings into the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol are revealing how former President Donald Trump strove to stay in office by any means necessary.

They are also revealing the depth of division within our country.

A poll by Morning Consult this week found 84% of Democrats approving of the committee's mission but just 20% of Republicans.

It would be a mistake to say the country has never been this divided. This weekend we mark Juneteenth Day, a reminder that we had a civil war over the single greatest inequality in our history. But it is nonetheless disturbing to realize how a century and a half later we have again reached a moment when the words "civil war" are used in reference to the present.

It is said the best medicine for what ails democracy is more democracy. But what does more democracy mean? If it just means more of the kind of politics we have now then it hardly offers a remedy.

Our current system produces a Congress and many state legislatures that have abysmal ratings from the voters and yet record high reelection rates for their individual members.

We need new mechanisms to reform, if not replace, the kinds of democratic processes we have. And efforts to find better processes are underway around the country, starting with the party primary system, which is a big reason the extremes tend to pull the parties further apart.

Primary voting is almost by definition dominated by activists, who tend to be more ideological. More moderate candidates who might represent the majority of citizens in a state or a district are at a disadvantage.

The primary problem

We have had primary elections to select nominees for general elections at the local, state and federal level for more than a century. They began as an alternative to having party bosses at each level simply name the candidates they wanted.

As the system has evolved, however, primaries have come to be dominated by ideological partisans who please the more agenda-driven elements in either party who are the most likely to participate in primaries.

There is comparatively little incentive to reach out to voters who might fall somewhere between the two parties. And that is especially true as computer-assisted gerrymandering creates more districts that are "safe" for one party or the other in November elections.

That is increasingly problematic as fewer Americans identify with either major party. At the end of 2021, Gallup found 42% of Americans identified as independents — with 29% identifying as Democrats and 27% as Republicans. Roughly half the states that have registration by party now have more people registering as independents than as Democrats or Republicans. Gallup has also found the percentage of Americans favoring creation of a new major party has risen above 60% for the first time.

Rather than respond to this by seeking common ground, the parties have continued to move further away from each other. Stanford political scientist Adam Bonica, among others, has charted this trend across the past four decades, demonstrating how the parties' nominees for Congress have become more ideological and further apart. While the political center was inhabited by a substantial fraction of nominees in both parties in 1980, it is almost entirely deserted today.

We should not think of this as simply a puzzle for professors. The growing gap affects our national life. In 2019, a Public Religion Research Institute study published in The Atlantic found Americans were more likely to object to their children marrying someone from the other political party than to someone from a different religion or race. Research by others has found much the same.

One idea is to deemphasize party by having independent commissions draw the district lines rather than the legislators themselves. This has shown promise, although in some cases the commissions have become partisan or their work product has been rejected by elected officials who are partisans.

Another approach is to eliminate registration by party, allowing primary voters to choose nominees from the slate offered by either party. Taking this a step further, some states are allowing primary voters to choose among candidates from either major party or from another party or no party at all.

Elevating access and choice

There may also be a ray of hope for lessened partisanship in the system known as ranked choice voting. Some find the phrase itself off-putting or suspect a scheme to torpedo candidates they like. Others just find it hard to understand.

One of the cardinal rules about comedy is that jokes don't work if you have to explain the punchline. Something similar may be true of voting systems. They may not inspire

greater confidence if you have to explain why they should.

But the special election for Congress in Alaska this year offers an example of how it can work. The state's longtime congressman, Don Young, died in March as he was beginning his 50th year in Congress.

Rather than holding the usual party primaries, Alaska is trying out a system its voters adopted by ballot measure in 2020. All candidates for Young's seat appeared on one ballot this month (June 11) regardless of party affiliation. That made for a lot of reading, as no less than 48 Alaskans qualified for that ballot.

How it works

Under the new system, the top four finishers in the June round of voting advance to a runoff on Aug. 16. And when they appear on that ballot the voters will not be asked just to choose one but to rank all four.

Best known of the four is the state's former governor, Sarah Palin, who was also the vice presidential nominee of the Republican Party in 2008. She resigned as governor in 2009 and has since been primarily a media figure on Fox News and elsewhere.

Palin, who was endorsed by Trump, topped the results in the June round with about 28%. Second at 19% was another Republican with name recognition, Nick Begich III, and two others made the cut with smaller shares.

Under the traditional primary system, Palin's plurality would have put her in Congress. Or in a runoff with Begich.

Instead, Alaska's ranked-choice runoff will give the voters a wider choice and a chance to effect an outcome closer to a general consensus.

Palin may be the first choice of more August voters than anyone, but as a controversial figure throughout her career she may also be the third or fourth choice for many. In the end, a better mix of first-choice and second-choice scores could elevate Begich or possibly one of the other two.

Palin's showing in such a large field was impressive, in one sense. But more than 70% of those voters preferred someone else. By giving voters another chance to consider a winnowed field, the new system not only ensures a greater consensus but lets the voters themselves create that consensus.

Spokespersons for both the two major parties in Alaska told Liz Ruskin of Alaska Public Media they did not consider this a good test of the new system as the circumstances are so unusual. And Palin's presence alone makes this an outlier.

But it is also understandable that party officials would have doubts about a system that lessens the importance of party. Candidates who have to face primary voters from outside their own party will campaign differently from those facing only their own partisans. Their need for top-choice rankings would compete with the need to minimize their last-choice rankings.

Whether or not something of this kind could ever work for November elections on a national level, it is not hard to see it making a difference state by state and in elections at the local level — including Eric Adams' mayoral victory in New York City last year.

Whether or not ranked choice discourages negative campaigning, as some have claimed, it certainly changes the incentives for emphasizing one's party or ideological credentials. It should encourage candidates of all kinds to move away from their base of support to compete for voters between the bases.

It may be too much of a change or too much of a challenge. But it is surely no more radical than the original idea of democracy itself — or the expansions of access to voting that created the body politic as we know it.

A good alternative to closed primaries? Myths & Facts about open primaries.

Chris Tohir, Yankee Institute for Public Policy, April 5 , 2023

In 2008, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the constitutionality of open primaries with its decision in Washington State Grange v. Washington State Republican Party. Since then, open primaries have gained popularity with few comprehending whether the system is beneficial for democratic elections and its ramifications.

Now, the idea has reached Connecticut. Two bills proposed earlier in this session — H.B. 6248 and S.B. 386 — would have allowed for open primaries. But what exactly does 'open primary' mean and what are the arguments for and against it?

Like our ranked choice voting brief, Yankee Institute is analyzing the variations of open primaries, the facts and myths proponents and opponents state, and its consequences if Connecticut were to adopt the method.

What are Open Primaries?

In an open primary, voters of any affiliation may vote in the primary of any party. For example, a registered Democrat can vote for a Republican candidate in the Republican primary. However, they cannot vote in more than one party's primary.

Open primaries stand in contrast to closed primaries. Under the closed primary system, which is current practice in Connecticut, a voter must affiliate formally with a political party in advance of the election date to participate in that party's primary. Currently, there are 15 states that have open primaries. They are: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Hawaii, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, North Dakota, South Carolina, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

Variations of Open Primaries

Open to Unaffiliated Voters

Though not all 'open primaries' are created equal, as there a several variations. Some states allow only unaffiliated voters to participate in any party primary they choose, but do not allow voters who are registered with one party to vote in another party's primary. For example, a Republican cannot cross over and vote in a Democrat primary, or vice versa.

The states that employ this variation are: Arizona, Colorado, Kansas, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Rhode Island, and West Virginia.

Top-Two and Top-Four Primaries

The top-two system is used for all primaries in Washington and California except when choosing presidential candidates. Alaska began using a top-four primary system in the 2022 Alaska's at-large congressional district special election. In this system, the top two (or top four) vote-receivers in each race, regardless of party, advance to the general election. This can sometimes result in two candidates from the same party facing off against each other.

Myths and Facts about Open Primaries

In theory, open primaries sound like an excellent way to increase voter turnout and minimize disenfranchisement and extreme candidates, and overall promote the democratic values of the U.S. electoral process. One benefit of this election system is that it eliminates the state conducting primaries for the major parties to choose general election candidates. It's easy to implement because there is one common ballot, which can save both time and money. However, it's also important to recognize that ease of open primaries can come with costs.

Myth: Open primaries help prevent disenfranchisement of non-party members.

Proponents of open primaries claim that closed primaries disenfranchise many Americans by excluding independent and unaffiliated voters. As of now, roughly 50% of the voting population is unaffiliated. As this population continues to grow, there is concern that voters won't have as great of a voice in who gets elected, and will be effectively disenfranchised. This sounds valid but ignores the fact that no eligible voter is ever barred from participating in the primary election process.

Fact: Open primaries do not necessarily contribute to disenfranchisement — eligible voters are never barred from joining a political party or voting in the general election.

It is indisputable that everyone has the right to vote in a general election regardless of affiliation. This right, however, does not extend to who votes in a primary. A political party can decide who can vote in its primary. But joining one is easy — often only requiring that a prospective mem-

ber checks a box on a registration form. Moreover, they do not require membership dues or loyalty oaths, so a voter can still maintain his or her independence of thought.

Given the ease and accessibility of joining a political party, it is difficult to argue that closed primaries disenfranchise voters, and that open primaries would be superior in this regard.

Myth: Open primaries lead to more moderate candidates and less polarization.

The argument goes as follows: since closed primaries are only open to one party, candidates in these contests should be encouraged to appeal to the more ideologically extreme. Independent voters who want a more moderate candidate are prevented from participating. Allowing independents to vote will force candidates to consider them and, thus, promote more moderate politics in general.

Fact: The type of primary has little to no impact on how moderate the candidates are.

Political scientist Seth Masket and a group of other election experts tested this assumption by looking at two decades of voting behavior by state legislators across all 50 states. What they discovered is that legislators elected from closed primary systems are no more or less extreme than those from open primary systems, writing, "We find that the openness of a primary election has little, if any, effect on the extremism of the politicians it produces." In an article for the Pacific Standard, Masket reiterated his test's conclusion examining California during the 1990s. He noted there were a few, minimal effects with an open primary system that may have moderated legislators, but the vast evidence points to no effect at all.

Masket also concluded that parties are "pretty good" at choosing candidates "they prefer," adding that "even if independents are allowed to participate in primaries, that does not mean they will. People unaffiliated with a party tend, on average, to be less interested in politics and less likely to vote."

Myth: Open primaries don't result in the dilution of the nominating process.

Supporters of open primaries downplay the occurrence of diluting the nominating process, often remarking that it is such an anomaly that it does not need to be seriously considered.

Fact: Open primaries allow non-party members to misrepresent the party's nomination.

Since independents can vote for either party in open primaries, the end result may not accurately represent the views of party members. This can lead to a nominated candidate who does not represent most party members. For example, in the 2008 New Hampshire presidential primaries, Mitt Romney won among registered Republicans, but John McCain won overall. Similarly, in South Carolina, Mike Huckabee won among Republicans, but McCain won the state. This demonstrates how in major elections open primaries can distort the will of actual party members.

Closing Thoughts

American politics has a strong history and tradition of the power and autonomy of political parties to elect their own candidates with minimal interference. Requiring that someone be a party member to vote in a primary is not disenfranchisement — it is freedom of association. As previously stated, open primaries have little, to no, impact on selecting more moderate candidates, while closed primaries most accurately reflect the will of the party members in whom they want to represent them in a general election. Therefore, the consequence to Connecticut voters is that, if they are affiliated with a party, their voice would be diluted by outsiders looking to sink or raise certain candidates that don't believe in the party's values. Put in another way, Democrats can troll Republicans and/or Republicans can troll Democrats by distorting the vote. The primary would be weaponized.

The question we should ask is why? Why offer open primaries as a solution to a non-issue in the state's electoral process? That remains to be seen, but, for now, Connecticut should stay true to the old adage: if it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Open season on open primaries

Madison Fernandez, POLITICO, January 17, 2023

The largest percent of Americans identify as independents rather than with the Democratic or Republican parties. But in some states around the country, those non-affiliated voters aren't able to take part in primary elections. Now that state legislative sessions are kicking off for the year, lawmakers across the country — in states with both open and closed primaries — are mulling changes to their primary systems.

Some of these changes would limit the ability for non-affiliated voters to take part in primary elections, and some would include them in the primary process. Who can vote in a primary varies by state, and in some cases, political parties are able to choose if non-affiliated voters can take part in their primaries.

Proponents of open primaries, or a primary election in which voters do not have to declare their party affiliation, say that it includes more voters in the process — especially as chunks of voters aren't registered with either of the two major political parties.

But some still have their concerns. New Hampshire state Rep. Michael Moffett, who sponsored a bill that proposes requiring voters to affiliate with a party at least four months before the primary, said that closed primaries "ensure the integrity of the primary" by making sure "the people who vote in the primary are truly members of the party."

New Hampshire is a state known for its independent voters. Currently, undeclared voters can choose which party's primary to vote in on the primary Election Day and then immediately unregister from that party before leaving the polling place.

— A similar push to restrict open primaries is happening in Alaska, which had its first full run with top-four open primaries and ranked choice voting last cycle — a system that led to Democratic Rep. Mary Peltola filling the seat held by late Republican Rep. Don Young for decades.

Republican state legislators are now introducing bills looking to eliminate the open primary and ranked choice voting systems. Currently in Alaska primaries, voters can vote for one candidate, regardless of party affiliation. The four candidates who receive the most votes proceed to the general election. The proposals call for registered voters to only vote in their party's primary and allows nonpartisan voters to take part, although the political parties can decide if they expand participation to voters of another party or restrict participation from nonpartisan voters.

— Over in Wyoming, Republican representatives are renewing an effort to ban crossover voting, specifically voters changing their party affiliation around three months before a primary. It's an effort Wyoming Republicans — and former President Donald Trump — have been pushing for over the years.

Wyoming voters can change their party affiliation at least 14 days before the election or at the polls. Last August, some Democrats switched their party affiliation to Republican ahead of the primary as part of an unsuccessful attempt to help former Republican Rep. Liz Cheney defeat now-Rep. Harriet Hageman, who had Trump's backing.

— In Texas, a Republican-backed bill proposes changing the open primary system so voters can only vote in the primary election of the party they're affiliated with. Registered voters would have to indicate their party affiliations before the end of the year, or they'd be listed as an independent and unable to vote in a party's primary.

But some states are also looking to open their primaries. Nine states have closed primary elections, meaning only voters who are registered with a political party can vote for candidates of that party, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

— In one of those states, New Mexico, two Democratic state representatives introduced a bill to allow voters who aren't affiliated with a party to participate in a primary election by requesting a ballot from one of the parties participating in the election.

As of the end of December, around 23 percent of voters in New Mexico were independent, affiliated with no party or declined to select a party. Similar bills to open up New Mexico's primary system have been introduced in the legislature in recent years, but none have been successful.

— A similar bipartisan bill was introduced in the Delaware House. Over 20 percent of registered voters are not registered with a party in the state and cannot vote in a primary election.

Beyond action in state legislatures, some campaigns are also working to implement open primaries. Nevada is pushing for open primaries, coupled with ranked choice voting, through a constitutional amendment that was on the ballot in November. Voters narrowly approved that ballot measure, but before any changes are made, voters must pass it again in 2024. And in Oregon, another closed primary state, a public comment period is being held on a draft ballot title intended for the November 2024 ballot proposing open primaries for state legislative, congressional and statewide elected offices. Around 40 percent of registered voters in the state are non-affiliated or independent.

Open primary and ranked-choice voting is good for conservatives, Wasilla, and Alaska

Representative Jesse Sumner, Must Read Alaska, August 17, 2024

I was born and raised in the Mat-Su Valley, am a proud supporter of President Donald Trump, and I believe the open primary and ranked choice voting system benefits Alaska conservatives—especially in Wasilla.

I've always believed in the values that make Alaska unique: independence, resilience, and fairness. Our state's electoral system should reflect these values, ensuring that every Alaskan's voice is heard and that our leaders represent the broadest possible support. Open primaries and ranked choice voting (RCV) are the best ways to achieve this, and as a Republican, I've seen firsthand how these systems benefit our party and our state.

I grew up in Wasilla, with my mom working as a geologist and my dad building homes. My upbringing taught me the value of hard work and self-reliance—values that have always resonated with me. After college, I returned home to contribute to our community, eventually running for the assembly, then the legislature. Serving in public office has been an eye-opener, showing me just how challenging it can be to get things done in government. But I've always believed that less regulation and smaller government are the best ways to let people live their lives freely and prosperously.

These beliefs are why I'm such a strong advocate for open primaries and ranked choice voting. In the 2022 House races, Republicans Julie Coulombe and Tom McKay won their seats thanks to RCV, which helped our party secure a majority in the House. This led to a historic moment for Wasilla, with Cathy Tilton becoming the first House Speaker from our community. For the first time in more than six years, Republicans have a majority in the House. Open primaries and RCV made it possible for us to come together and form a majority caucus.

The critics who claim RCV doesn't work for conservatives are simply wrong. If we look back at past elections, it's clear that RCV could have prevented some significant Democratic victories. Take the 1994 gubernatorial race, where Tony Knowles won by just 0.3% over Republican Jim Campbell. With RCV in place, the 38,000 voters who chose other candidates would have had their second and third choices counted, likely swinging the election in Campbell's favor. Similarly, in the 2008 U.S. Senate race, Senator Ted Stevens lost by 1.3% to Mark Begich. Many of the 18,000 voters who supported third-party candidates would have likely ranked Stevens as their second choice, giving him the edge he needed to win.

Open primaries and RCV don't just benefit individual candidates—they benefit our entire party and the principles we stand for. These systems ensure that conservative candidates can build broad coalitions of support, preventing vote-splitting that could allow a liberal candidate to win with less than 50% of the vote. This is especially important in a state like Alaska, where many residents, like me, value small government, limited regulation, and the freedom to live our lives without unnecessary government interference.

Some argue that Republicans should drop out after the primary if they get fewer votes, but that would be a mistake and lead to history repeating itself. We don't want a repeat of 2022, when the U.S House seat went to a Democrat. In an RCV election, even if someone doesn't rank you first, their vote can still count for you in later rounds. This is why it's crucial for Republicans to stay in the race and continue to fight for every vote.

At the end of the day, open primaries and ranked choice voting are tools that allow conservatives to consistently control state government—because whether they're affiliated with a party or not, most Alaskans lean conservative. If you believe in small government and personal freedom, the open primary and ranked choice voting system is essential to preserving Alaska's unique spirit.

Jesse Sumner is a state House representative. He lives in Wasilla with his wife and children.

Why I'm against open primaries & ranked-choice voting for Alaska conservatives

Michael Tavoliero, Must Read Alaska, August 17, 2024

While the Jesse Sumner's Must Read Alaska column presents a case for open primaries and ranked choice voting (RCV) as beneficial to Alaska conservatives, there are several reasons why I challenge this view, particularly from the perspective of preserving traditional conservative values and the integrity of the electoral process.

On one hand, Sumner advocates for "less regulation and smaller government" as the best way to ensure freedom and prosperity. This philosophy typically aligns with a preference for straightforward, minimalistic systems that limit government intervention and complexity. It is also a dog whistle for progressive ideology, which now overwhelms Alaska's political fabric.

However, in the same breath, he supports open primaries and ranked-choice voting (RCV). These are systems that introduce more regulation, complexity, and government involvement in the electoral process. These statements by Sumner may not appear disingenuous to him, but they contradict the fundamental principles he claims to uphold.

Open primaries and RCV are designed to modify how elections function, requiring additional rules, oversight, and administrative processes. This stands in contrast to the principle of smaller government, which would favor less regulation and simpler, more direct voting methods. Therefore, by advocating for these more complex electoral systems, Sumner contradicts his own stated belief in minimal government interference, revealing a lack of coherence in his reasoning. This dissonance suggests a self-delusion, as he fails to recognize how his support for these systems undermines the very principles of limited government that he claims to prioritize.

Open primaries and RCV blur the lines between political parties, allowing non-Republicans to influence the outcome of Republican primaries and erode both party integrity and conservative values.

This dilutes the party's core principles and could lead to the selection of candidates who do not fully represent conservative values. A prime example is the current senior U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski, for whom the open primary and ranked-choice general was designed.

In a closed primary, only registered Republicans would have a say in choosing their candidate, ensuring that the nominee aligns closely with the party's ideology. Open primaries, on the other hand, can lead to the nomination of candidates who appeal to a broader, less ideologically consistent electorate, potentially weakening the party's stance on key issues like small government and personal freedom. Open primaries and RCV are susceptible to strategic voting, where voters may rank candidates from opposing parties lower or manipulate their rankings to ensure a less desirable candidate from another party wins. This could result in candidates being elected who do not genuinely reflect the majority preference of conservative voters. Traditional first-past-the-post systems, where the candidate with the most votes wins, are straightforward and less prone to such manipulation, preserving the integrity of the electoral process.

RCV can be confusing for voters, particularly those who are not well-versed in the intricacies of the voting process. The added complexity may discourage voter participation or lead to spoiled ballots, particularly among older or less educated voters who might struggle with the ranking process. In contrast, a simpler voting system ensures that every voter can easily understand and participate in the electoral process, maintaining high levels of voter engagement and confidence in the outcomes.

Sumner argues that RCV benefits conservatives by preventing vote-splitting. However, RCV could also lead to unintended consequences, such as the election of moderate or less conservative candidates, as it encourages candidates to appeal to a broader base, potentially diluting conservative principles.

In a state like Alaska, where the electorate is diverse and includes a significant number of non-partisan voters, RCV could lead to outcomes that do not fully align with conservative values, undermining the influence of the conservative base.

The 2022 U.S. congressional race was won by vote splitting because conservatives who chose not to rank had to split their vote between choices on the conservative side.

Sumner cites past elections where RCV might have changed the outcome in favor of Republicans, but it's also important to recognize that conservatives have successfully won elections in Alaska without RCV. Traditional voting systems have allowed conservatives to maintain significant influence in state politics, even when faced with close races. There's no guarantee that RCV would consistently benefit conservatives, and the traditional system has proven its effectiveness in electing conservative leaders who align with the values of their constituents.

Traditional primary systems foster competition within the party, encouraging candidates to clearly define their platforms and appeal directly to the party's base. Open primaries and RCV, however, reduce this intra-party competition, potentially leading to a less vibrant and dynamic political environment. By preserving traditional primary systems,

conservatives can ensure that candidates who best represent the party's values emerge as the nominees, strengthening the party's ideological consistency and appeal.

The notion that ranked-choice voting curtails the amount of dark money in Alaska's election system is also problematic in the context of Sumner's statement. While RCV was promoted as a way to reduce the influence of dark money by making it harder for outside groups to sway election outcomes through negative campaigning, the reality is more complex.

Dark money, political spending by organizations that do not disclose their donors, can still play a significant role under RCV. We are currently witnessing this potential with the huge amounts of money fronted by the National Republican Congressional Committee supporting the US Congressional candidate, Nancy Dahlstrom.

In fact, the need for candidates to appeal to a broader audience in multiple rounds of voting could increase the incentive for dark money groups to influence voters through targeted messaging across various rounds. This adds another layer of contradiction to Mr. Sumner's argument, as his support for RCV, justified by his belief in less regulation and smaller government, overlooks the fact that RCV might not effectively reduce dark money's influence and could even complicate efforts to identify and limit such interference.

While open primaries and ranked choice voting may have some benefits, they also pose significant risks to the integrity of conservative values, the electoral process, and the party's ability to consistently elect leaders who truly represent the principles of small government, personal freedom, and traditional values.

Conservatives in Alaska should carefully consider whether these systems align with their long-term goals or whether traditional voting methods better serve the party's interests and the state's unique political landscape.

Michael Tavoliero is a senior writer at Must Read Alaska.

OPINION: Ranked choice may die in Alaska

Kimberley A. Strassel, The Wall Street Journal, August 29, 2024

How is the electoral experiment known as ranked-choice voting faring in the real world? Ask Alaskans, who are rushing to kill it—even as outsider supporters pull out the stops to keep the mess in place.

Lower-48 millionaire dilettantes in 2020 targeted the state's small media market and voting population to impose a statewide ranked-choice voting system. Alaskans were presented with a mind-boggling 25-page initiative that broadly promised "better elections." Few knew what they were voting for (what the outsiders intended), and it barely passed.

In March 2022 Rep. Don Young died, setting up the first jungle primary under the new system. The mob of 48 candidates denied Alaskans any chance at knowing the field or hearing substantive debate. The unwieldy ballot became a state joke, with citizens grimly noting that they might as well choose candidates by throwing a dart.

The top four finishers advanced to the general election, in which voters were asked to rank them in order of preference. The complex process was made more insane when one of the four finalists suspended her campaign, prompting litigation over whether the fifth-place finisher could replace her. (He could.) The campaigning featured shifting alliances, back-room deals, and misleading explanations. The system for reporting results was slow and opaque, leaving Alaskans deeply suspicious. The process also disenfranchised the many voters who chose to vote for just one candidate, meaning their ballot was "exhausted" if their choice was eliminated in the first round. Two Republicans split the vote, and Democrat Mary Peltola won in a state that Donald Trump carried two years earlier by 10 points.

Furious at being made guinea pigs, Alaskan conservatives are fighting back. Last week's House primary featured Ms. Peltola and 11 other candidates, nine of whom received fewer than 3,000 votes combined. Two prominent Republicans fought to advance. Nick Begich (who ran in 2022) promised to withdraw if he finished third, while Lt. Gov Nancy Dahlstrom vowed to stay in no matter what.

When Ms. Dahlstrom placed third, threatening another GOP split, conservative voters lost their minds. Her Facebook page exploded with demands: "DROP OUT." "You are being selfish." "Read the room." State GOP leaders called for her withdrawal; conservatives started a petition; national Republicans took aim. Her political future in peril, Ms. Dahlstrom quit.

Bottom line: The general election will feature Ms. Peltola vs. Mr. Begich and two no-names with no support. With classic can-do spirit, Alaskans engineered their own head-to-head contest.

But the interlopers aren't done. The 2020 initiative campaign was funded by left-leaning groups and wealthy liberals in the lower 48 that provided millions to an outfit called Alaskans for Better Elections. Its lawyer, Scott Kendall, is waging an ugly lawfare campaign against Alaskans working to right their system. When more than 37,000 signed a petition to get repeal on this year's ballot, he filed an ethics complaint against the signature gatherers and sued to have the petition thrown out on technicalities. The state Supreme Court a week ago kicked his suit to the curb.

Now ranked-choice backers are blanketing TV and radio airwaves with new ads hilariously claiming that "smart conservatives" will vote to keep the system because it helps elect conservatives. The ads are sponsored by a mysterious group called Conservative Majority Fund, which looks to be spending a bundle. We don't know, because it appears not to be registered with Alaska's Public Offices Commission, the state's disclosure regulator.

Suzanne Downing of Must Read Alaska obtained the ad disclosures on public file at radio stations. Among the officers of the group listed was Bryan Schroder, a former U.S. attorney who until recently worked at the same small Anchorage law firm as Mr. Kendall. Mr. Kendall also once worked for Sen. Lisa Murkowski, whose supporters helped usher in ranked choice and used it to get her re-elected in 2022. Ah, "cleaner" and "better" elections. (Mr. Schroder didn't return a call seeking comment.)

Glitches and complexity are one thing, but what Alaskans most detest about ranked choice is that it's the political equivalent of the participation trophy. Instead of a majority voting for the "best" candidate—someone with history, ideas, principles—it's a system designed to elect the person who is least offensive to the most people. Even its proponents acknowledge that they aim to elect "consensus" candidates. Yet we don't seek the lowest common denominator in CEOs, doctors, airline pilots or schoolteachers. We certainly shouldn't reward it in public life.

No doubt some proponents believe ranked-choice voting is an answer to today's partisanship, though many want to use it to game the system for partisan ends. Polarization is a legitimate problem. But ranked-choice voting is a bad idea that won't solve the underlying causes of gridlock, such as gerry

How open primaries empower communities of color

Dr Jessie Fields, Independent Voter News, Updated August 14, 2022

Editor's Note: This op-ed originally appeared in the South Florida Sun Sentinel and has been republished in its entirety with permission from the author.

This November, Florida voters have the chance to expand the voting rights of all registered voters by supporting "All Voters Vote" — Amendment 3.

As a Black woman and a physician who grew up in the social isolation of poverty in the Black community of South Philadelphia, I support Joe Biden's decision to choose Kamala Harris as his running mate. She is a woman of color and a talented politician. And as she said at her announcement, she stands on the shoulders of women of color who came before her.

Sen. Harris is a Democrat elected to the U.S. Senate in California's "top two" open primary system and is the visible product of an inclusive and democratic system that allows new leaders to rise to the top. This puts her in a unique position to demonstrate the benefits of an election system in which all voters — including independent voters like me — have full and equal rights.

Amendment 3, which is on the Florida ballot this November, will establish an open, primary for state offices, ending the exclusion of 3.5 million independent voters — including hundreds of thousands of people of color — from voting in primaries. This system is not new. It is currently used throughout Florida for municipal and many county elections.

After it was enacted in California, the Black legislative caucus grew by 50%, the Latino legislative caucus grew by 25%, and voter approval of the legislature grew from 14% to 42% — all in just eight years. It's a system that is fair to everyone, empowers communities of color and allows all voters to vote for any candidate. Prominent civil rights attorneys, including Michael Hardy, the executive vice president of the National Action Network, believe that open primaries are the next chapter in the fight for voting rights.

But in Florida, scare tactics are circulating. Political operatives are telling Black voters that if the closed primary system is reformed, Black people will no longer be elected. This is false. It's merely the latest attempt to lock Black voters into place and prevent us from maximizing our political power.

The truth is that nonpartisan primaries enhance our power. It opens up the process and creates possibilities for new candidates, new coalitions and new leaders to thrive. That's why young African American elected officials Rasheen Aldridge, Michael Butler, Tishaura Jones, and Marty Joe Murray Jr. are building a multi-racial coalition to enact nonpartisan top-two primaries with approval voting in St. Louis this November.

In Chicago, a top-two nonpartisan system propelled two Black women to the general election and then put Lori Lightfoot in City Hall. The number of people of color elected in California — including Kamala Harris — soared after closed partisan primaries were abolished there in 2010. 35% of African Americans under the age of 30 now identify as political independents. Shouldn't we fight for a system that allows all Americans — and all Black people — to fully participate?

Supporting Joe and Kamala does not mean that we should ignore ways that the Democratic Party does stifle the full participation of the African American community. Yes, the Republican Party has taken the lead when it comes to voter suppression, disenfranchisement, punishing former felons, closing primaries and gerrymandering. But both parties protect their control of voters.

When the Republican Party sued to kick Amendment 3 off the 2020 ballot, they were joined by the state Democratic Party. And when closed primaries became an issue in the Democrat's 2016 presidential primaries, young people of all races demanded that the party change its rules to allow independents to vote. But the party establishment opposed those changes.

I'm supporting Amendment 3, and I hope you will too. No one should be required to join a political party in order to vote, and no one should be punished for refusing to do so. The Black Lives Matter movement has inspired a new generation of activists making new demands for racial justice. It's time for a new generation of Black leaders and voters to establish a new set of rules for exercising political power as well.

Editorial: Get behind proposed Oklahoma primary change to a united ballot with party labels

Tulsa World Editorial Board, August 16, 2024

Efforts to end Oklahoma's exclusionary primary elections are underway, and voters ought to get behind the effort. It would allow all voters regardless of party affiliation a say in their representatives. It would improve choices on the ballot and inspire better voter participation.

Oklahoma taxpayers pay for the current primary elections, which is unfair to the tens of thousands of voters who are unable to cast a ballot because they are of a different party or unaffiliated. It's generated an overall apathy and candidates catering to an extreme end of party politics.

The state ranks last in the nation in voter participation. More than 70% of legislative seats in the last three election cycles have been decided in primaries or were uncontested. The restrictive primary system is partly to blame.

Other states found better primary systems generating more candidates to offer diverse viewpoints to the governance. State party leaders and some in elected office to balk; they fear a loss of power. Because of this, change will likely only happen through a grassroots, citizen-led effort.

Oklahoma United announced it plans to seek a citizen petition to amend the state constitution for unified ballot with partisan labels, as reported by Corey Jones of the Lee Enterprises Public Service Journalism Team. Its goal is to have a ballot question in place for the November 2026 election.

The proposed unified ballot works similar to municipal and school board elections with some key differences. One would be candidates listing their party affiliation, so elections remain partisan. Another would be the top two candidates going to a general election, regardless of the number of ballots separating the two.

So, the general election could be two people of the same party or of differing parties. If only two candidates file to run, then they would go directly to the November general election because the primary would be unnecessary. This would affect U.S. congressional, statewide legislative, statewide executive, county offices and district attorney races.

Nothing stops a political party from putting forth a candidate. If the party is strong, then that endorsement would hold influence. But, taxpayers won't be paying for their choice, and other candidates from the party would be allowed on the ballot.

Tulsa Mayor G.T. Bynum is among several leaders in the state supporting the idea. As a city councilor and mayor, he ran on an open ballot.

"I say this as a Republican who is not afraid of competing with Democrats and independents in the competition of ideas — nor should any Republicans in Oklahoma. If we have confidence in what we believe in and the message that we deliver and the positions that we have, then we should not be afraid of competition. We should welcome it.

"And so, again, I think competition in the marketplace of ideas, just like in any other field, only serves to improve the eventual outcome for the customer."

Oklahomans embrace their freedoms, and that's what this is about: freedom to seek office and freedom to vote, regardless of fealty to political party bosses.

Little logic to open primaries

Jonathan Small, The Journal Record, August 22, 2024

Backers of an "open primary" system in Oklahoma claim our state's current election system is fatally flawed and would be better if it looked more like California's.

That alone is a clue that the proposed system is no panacea.

Since 2010, California voters have been subjected to a "top two" primary system. All candidates from all parties are placed on a single primary ballot, and all voters can cast ballots for any candidate. The top two finishers then proceed to the general election.

In Oklahoma, the system is different. In Republican primaries, only registered Republicans may participate, while in Democratic primaries, registered Democrats and independents may participate.

The winner of each party's primary then proceeds to the general election ballot, while independent candidates proceed directly to the general.

Now a group calling itself Oklahoma United argues we need to junk Oklahoma's current primary election and instead adopt California-style "top two" elections.

Oklahoma United argues closed primaries are "particularly unfair to independents," who may be "completely disenfranchised or forced to join a political party."

Yet, if one is a registered independent, you have proactively chosen not to participate in a party primary process. You are not being stripped of the right to vote.

Furthermore, California's outcomes highlight the problems created by a "top two" primary.

In several instances, the top-two system has meant California voters had a choice of a Democrat or another Democrat in the November general election.

In one California state senate seat in 2022, two Democratic candidates advanced to the general election in a Republican-leaning district because the GOP vote was split among several candidates in the primary. Thus, a supposed less-partisan system produced a partisan outcome well out-of-line with actual voter preferences.

Similar outcomes could occur in Oklahoma, particularly in areas where one party has a strong registration advantage. Will Democrats who dislike seeing Republicans typically win in state races be happier if their selection is limited to two Republicans in November?

The reality is that Oklahoma's current system requires candidates to appeal to both their party base (in primaries) and the broader electorate (in the general). It's reasonable to suspect that those pushing the top-two system are driven less by a desire for civic improvement than disappointment that their favored candidates lack the appeal required to win Oklahoma elections.

Jonathan Small serves as president of the Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs

COMMENTARY: Problems plague top-two primaries. Here are the top-two reasons Oklahomans should avoid them.

Cindy Alexander, Oklahoma Voice, March 28, 2024

There has recently been a great deal of attention to issues surrounding Oklahoma's primary election process.

There is no disputing the fact that voters who have registered as "no party," commonly identified as independent voters, are being shortchanged. Their tax dollars are paying for a primary election process in which their voice is limited. Currently, they may vote in Democratic primaries but not Republican primaries.

This inequity could be easily solved by allowing all voters to choose to vote in one primary election of any party. This is how primary elections are conducted in Texas.

A different approach is being suggested by a group planning to file an initiative petition to change how primary elections are conducted in Oklahoma.

Their approach, the use of a top-two primary, allows all voters to vote in a single primary in which all candidates running for the office are listed. The two candidates with the most votes proceed to the general election. This is how primary elections are conducted in California.

There are two big problems with top-two primaries — vote-splitting and general election barriers.

Vote-splitting occurs when candidates with similar platforms split the votes of like-minded people. When this occurs, the winner or winners of an election may have the support of only a minority of voters.

Consider what might have happened if the 2018 Oklahoma gubernatorial primary had been a top-two primary. There were 10 Republicans, 2 Democrats, and 3 Libertarians running. If the Republican and Libertarian candidates had split the votes of conservative voters, the two Democratic candidates could have moved forward to the general election. That would have resulted in either Drew Edmondson or Connie Johnson as governor, instead of Kevin Stitt.

The other problem with top-two primaries is, that in the absence of vote-splitting, the system creates a significant barrier to the general election ballot for minority party and alternate party candidates. Furthermore, those candidates advancing to the general election are chosen by a small number of politically active people.

Primary elections have low voter turnout.

A study published in 2017 in the journal Electoral Studies evaluated the reasons for that and identified the following: the belief that the stakes were lower, and the costs of voting were higher; less social pressure to turn out; and, exclusionary beliefs about who should participate. In other words, voters defer to those they think know and care more about the contests.

In a recent article published in the Oklahoma Voice, Oklahoma City Mayor David Holt said the following, referring to primary elections, "It forces the biggest decisions to be made in August in the runoff by the fewest number of people, and those people come from a very narrow perspective."

Proponents of top-two primaries like to say that they increase voter turnout, but recent numbers tell a different story. In the California 2022 top-two gubernatorial primary, only 33% of registered voters bothered to vote, even though ballots are automatically mailed to all voters.

Compare that to the 2022 Oklahoma gubernatorial primary election.

Oklahoma does not automatically mail ballots to all voters. Independent voters could only vote in the Democratic primary, and Libertarians did not have a primary so could not vote at all.

There were 2.2 million registered voters on June 1, 2022. This number included about 395,100 voters registered as independents and about 18,800 registered Libertarians. The combined number of votes cast in the Democratic and Republican 2022 gubernatorial primaries was 527,678 for a voter turnout of just over 23%.

The voter turnout in California does not seem that much higher in comparison, given the fact that so many registered voters in Oklahoma did not have a primary in which to vote.

One might argue that it was the appearance of a ballot in the voter's mailbox that made the difference.

Bringing open primaries, the kind in which all voters could vote in any one primary election, to Oklahoma would result in all the benefits espoused by the proponents of top-two primaries without the risk a general election ballot limited to candidates not supported by the majority of voters and chosen by a small number of politically active people with a narrow perspective.

Cindy Alexander is a retired veterinarian residing in Stillwater. She describes herself as a full-time volunteer organizer and activist. She is a charter member of Indivisible Oklahoma and is the co-founder and co-leader of both Indivisible Stillwater and the Oklahoma Direct Democracy Team.

Closed primaries make it so that Super Tuesday isn't so super for more than 6 million independent voters

Nick Troiano and John Opdycke, U.S. News & World Report, March 4, 2024

Though the parties and pundits have been quick to anoint President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump as their presumptive nominees, many voters still have an important opportunity to make their voices heard on Super Tuesday. Republican Nikki Haley and Democrat Dean Phillips, for example, may be long shots within their primaries, but they are also legitimate vehicles for voters to express a desire for an alternative to a presidential rematch that more than two-thirds of Americans say they do not want.

This frustration with the likely 2024 presidential matchup is especially true among independent voters. Yet on Super Tuesday, closed presidential primaries (where only voters registered with a party can participate) in four states (Alaska, California, Oklahoma and Utah) deny 6.2 million independents a true choice in the contest for the White House. While the Democratic parties in these states allow independent voters to participate in their primaries this cycle, independents are not permitted to vote in the Republican primaries – which feature the only competitive national contest in 2024, between Trump and Haley.

This systemic silencing of the nation's largest and fastest-growing segment of the electorate is outrageous – and it has profound negative consequences not only for our democracy, but the political parties themselves.

Nationally, 43% of voters identify as independent, compared to 27% for both Democrats and Republicans. In 22 states, 23.5 million independent voters are locked out of closed primaries for president or Congress in 2024 – up nearly 20% over the last decade. In fact, 3 out of 4 voters consider it a "violation of voting rights," according to a January poll conducted by Change Research for Unite America. These "excluded independent" voters are disproportionately younger and more likely to be veterans than the general population. While they express frustration with government gridlock and both major political parties, they hold strong opinions on policies. Independents vote for people, not parties.

Contrary to popular belief, independents are not disengaged or uninterested in participating. More than 80% say they want the freedom to vote in Democratic or Republican primaries for president in 2024, and 87% support opening primaries to independent voters.

Partisans will reflexively say that if independents want to vote in party primaries, they should register with a party. This "join the party if you want a voice" mentality is un-American. After all, primary elections are funded by the taxpayers. In U.S. House or other down-ballot races, where gerrymandering and geographic self-sorting mean most districts heavily favor one party or the other, primaries are often the only election that matters.

The parties should embrace open systems, not fight them. Indeed, the political party that is first to not exclude independent voters by opening their primaries may actually have a lot to gain. Open primaries could help each party nominate candidates that voters actually like. Republicans and Democrats alike have learned this lesson the hard way. In 2022, the GOP lost a slew of winnable Senate races in places like Pennsylvania because they nominated unpopular candidates in closed primaries. That same year, Democrats lost a competitive U.S. House seat in Oregon when the incumbent Democrat was primaried out of office and the party moved forward with a candidate with less general election appeal.

Polling also shows that independent voters are likely to reward the party and its candidates who champion their voting rights. According to the recent Change Research poll, 58% of excluded independents would be more likely to support the Democratic or Republican party if they embraced their voting rights.

Both parties could send a powerful message by embracing all voters, not just more partisan ones, in their elections. Maine legislators recognized this in 2022 when they passed a law opening the state's primaries. In 2024, for the first time ever, Maine's nearly 275,000 independent voters will have a say in choosing general election candidates.

Five states (Alaska, California, Louisiana, Nebraska and Washington) have gone even further than open primaries. For congressional and statewide races, they've replaced traditional party primaries that have separate Democratic and Republican ballots with fully nonpartisan contests that have a single, all-candidate ballot. In these elections, every eligible voter has the right to vote for any candidate in every election, regardless of party. Citizens are working to advance ballot initiatives for nonpartisan primaries in several states this year, including Nevada, Colorado, Montana, Idaho and South Dakota.

Changing our election rules to make them more democratic is an American tradition. A century ago, we scrapped the time-honored tradition of party bosses choosing nominees in proverbial smoke-filled rooms to give voters a more direct say via primaries. That was well before the time when independent voters outnumbered members of any major party. It is past time we continue to innovate and improve our elections.

Now, Super Tuesday isn't looking so super. Indeed, millions of independent voters will be locked out of choosing who they might really want, and millions more will stay home because they don't like their choices. The time has come to let independent voters fully participate. Our people, our country – and even our political parties – will be better for it.

Closed primary elections — like Idaho's — fuel extremism

McKay Cunningham, States Newsroom, June 8, 2024

How do we know elected officials actually represent us? The recent primary election will push the Idaho Legislature even further toward political extremism, but do legislators truly reflect the people they were elected to represent?

As a constitutional law professor, I often repeated the now hackneyed phrase that the right to vote is preservative of all other rights. But the devil dwells in details. So, a more specific query: what voting system produces candidates who most accurately represent their constituents?

A host of political scientists characterize "closed primaries" as a voting system that facilitates extreme candidates, particularly in states like Idaho where one party has a supermajority. Closed primaries bar voters who are not formally affiliated with a political party from participating in that party's primary.

Indeed, it's a system that effectively truncates the right to vote itself for many Idahoans. There are approximately 270,000 independent voters in Idaho. Two weeks ago, when independent voters went to the polls in the primary election, they could only vote for three races. All three were judges. All three were running unopposed. Conversely, voters formally affiliated with the Republican party decided who will be state senators, state representatives, our U.S. congressional representative, county commissioner, sheriff, and county prosecutor.

The number of "independent" voters is growing nationwide, and as a result, states like Idaho that shut out independent voters produce elections that are more and more insular and candidates who are less and less representative.

Back to the original question: How do we know that our elected officials accurately represent us? According to the Idaho Policy Institute's annual survey, "Idahoans trust public libraries and librarians (69%) to choose the books that are made available in them." And yet, the Idaho Legislature passed a law exposing libraries to civil liability for providing books that the Idaho Legislature deems harmful.

Even hot button issues like abortion demonstrate a gap between what Idahoans want and what the legislature is doing. The same survey revealed that only one-third of Idahoans favor Idaho's existing abortion law, while 58% favor expanding exceptions to it.

Partisan closed primaries motivate legislators to cater to a narrow and extreme slice of the electorate rather than govern in the public interest. The Idaho Freedom Foundation, for example, publishes score cards for each legislator as a "purity test" to determine fealty to a partisan agenda. The Idaho Republican Party censured several Republican lawmakers for not following the platform closely enough, including House Majority Leader, Megan Blanksma, who was ousted from her leadership post for failing to perfectly follow the will of party leaders.

By contrast, candidates in an open primary have less fealty to their party's agenda, and can run based on the issues facing their constituency. States that have open primaries allow all citizens to vote in all elections, regardless of party affiliation, and as a result, elect leaders who focus on solving real problems rather than manufacturing controversies that turn us against each other.

Most of Idaho's legislators are beneficiaries of the closed primary system and have no appetite to change it. But Idahoans can do so themselves. A voter initiative will likely be on the ballot this November. It proposes open primaries and is endorsed by a number of prominent Democrats and Republicans. Open primaries do not give more power to Republicans or Democrats; they give more power to voters, and they represent a better way to ensure that our representatives are indeed representative.

Report: Colorado's primary problem

Carlo Macomber and Beth Hladick, Unite America Institute, May 2024

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Colorado has long been a leader in election modernization. Over the last decade, the state has implemented several election reforms, including establishing a secure vote by mail system, allowing independent voters to participate in partisan primaries, and combatting partisan gerrymandering through the creation of independent redistricting commissions.

Despite these reforms, a fundamental issue continues to undermine the fairness and representativeness of the state's elections: the use of partisan primaries and plurality-winner elections. This problem is exacerbated by other electoral processes used in Colorado, including party caucuses. These flaws in the election system collectively suppress the will of the majority, dampen voter participation, distort representation, and fuel political division and dysfunction.

This report demonstrates that Colorado, like most states across the country, has a "Primary Problem." It also presents evidence that implementing nonpartisan primaries and majority-winner general elections can provide voters with greater choice, power, and better representation within the political system. The findings of this report include:

Very few voters effectively choose most of the state's congressional and state legislative leaders.

- In 2022: Geographic self-sorting has led to 75% of congressional seats and 83% of state house seats being so heavily Democratic or Republican ("safe") that the dominant party's primary election is the only consequential election. Fewer than 25% of eligible Coloradans turned out in partisan primaries.

- These two factors illustrate why a small minority of Coloradans effectively choose their representatives. Only voters who participate in the decisive races — nearly always dominant party primaries in safe districts — cast meaningful votes. Consequently, a mere 13% of eligible voters effectively determined the composition of the state house, while 18% decided the state's eight-member U.S. House delegation. Electoral competition in Colorado is rare. Voters often lack meaningful choice on their ballot when deciding who represents them.

- During the 2012-2020 redistricting cycle, more than half of the state's voters (those in five of the seven congressional districts) never had the opportunity to vote in a competitive general election. In these districts, the partisan primary was the decisive contest, effectively silencing general election voters.

- In 2022, three of six safe congressional districts only had one candidate on the ballot in the dominant party's primary, denying an estimated 1.7 million Colorado voters a meaningful choice in their representation in Washington, D.C.

- In 2022, 54 out of 65 state house seats were effectively decided in primaries, and 42 of those had only one candidate running in the dominant party primary. This denied an estimated 2.7 million Colorado voters meaningful choice in their representation in Denver.

- In the 2018 and 2020 election cycles, the last two in which the entire state senate was elected under the same district boundaries, primaries effectively determined the winners in 31 out of 35 seats. Of those 31 seats, 25 had only a single candidate running in the dominant party's primary.

Partisan primaries fuel political division and dysfunction in Colorado.

- With little competition in the general election, most leaders' only threat to reelection is the potential of being "primaried" by a candidate to their ideological extreme.

- A small, often unrepresentative subset of voters wields disproportionate influence over election results. This dynamic encourages elected officials to pander to their party's base rather than serving the interests of their entire constituency.

- At the state legislative level, the result is that Colorado is the most polarized state legislature in the country. The Primary Problem has likely contributed to recent breakdowns in bipartisan and intra-party compromise in the legislature.

- At the federal level, the ability to primary incumbents enabled Rep. Lauren Boebert (R) to successfully challenge incumbent Rep. Scott Tipton (R) in 2020.

Nonpartisan primaries can solve Colorado's Primary Problem.

- States have the autonomy to adopt nonpartisan primaries, as exemplified by Alaska, California, Louisiana, Nebraska, and Washington. In a nonpartisan primary, all voters participate in a single primary featuring candidates from all parties on the same ballot. The candidates receiving the most votes advance to the general election, where a candidate

must secure a majority of the vote to be elected.

- By granting all voters a meaningful voice, nonpartisan primaries tend to generate higher participation rates compared to traditional partisan primaries. Moreover, the outcomes of nonpartisan primaries are more likely to be representative of the entire electorate rather than just a small subset of partisan voters. Lastly, nonpartisan primaries create incentives for elected officials to govern in a more collaborative and consensus-oriented manner.

- Colorado has a history of adopting election reforms that put voters first, including open partisan primaries, a full vote by mail system, and independent redistricting commissions. In 2016, Propositions 107 and 108 enfranchised the state's independents in primary elections — the largest bloc of voters in the state (48%). This has resulted in hundreds of thousands of independents participating in primaries in each of the last three election cycles.

- In a May 2023 statewide poll of Colorado voters, nearly 60% said that the current election system "needs improvement," including majorities of Democrats, Republicans, and independents.

CONCLUSION

Partisan primaries are not a required part of the American election process. In fact, there is nothing in the U.S. Constitution about parties, never mind primary elections. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Progressive Era reformers fought for mandatory direct primaries to democratize candidate nominations. The previous nomination system — the "caucus and convention system" — was controlled by powerful party machines and denied average voters any say in who would appear on their ballots. It was not until 1904 that Wisconsin became the first state to hold mandatory partisan primaries for all offices. The vast majority of states followed suit within the next decade. However, as this report demonstrates, additional primary reform is needed.

A proposed ballot initiative — if passed by voters in 2024 — would implement top-four nonpartisan primaries in Colorado. All voters would have equal access to pick any candidate they want in the primary election, regardless of party affiliation, for each office on their ballot. In the general election, voters would be able to rank the candidates, and, if necessary, instant runoffs would be conducted to ensure majority winners. If the reform is enacted, political parties will still have an important role to play in recruiting, endorsing, and supporting candidates. This proposal simply ensures that an election system funded by all taxpayers and administered by the government serves the public interest first and foremost.

Read the full Unite America Institute report at: https://www.uniteamerica.org/articles/new-ua-institute-report-colorados-primary-problem

OPINION: Closed primaries are the New Jim Crow in Louisiana

Jeremy Gruber, The Hill, January 15, 2024

Do Black voters matter only if they are Republicans or Democrats?

That's the question Louisianans are facing as newly elected Gov. Jeff Landry has called for a special session of the legislature to tackle the way the state conducts its elections. Much of the national focus has been on whether their response will adequately comply with a recent federal judge's ruling that currently drawn congressional boundaries violate the Voting Rights Act by diluting the power of Black voters.

But the governor's rushed attempt at closing the state's primary elections poses an equally dire threat — disenfranchising almost a quarter of all Black voters in the state.

Louisiana has operated a unique open primary election model for almost 50 years. All voters get to participate and all candidates appear on one public ballot, with the election typically occurring in either October or November, depending on the year. If a candidate gets a majority vote, they win the election outright; if not, the top two candidates advance to a runoff.

The governor wants to change that model, and he's backed by Republican Party activists who believe closing the primaries will lead to more ideological conservatives winning office. It's not just a one-party affair — the move is also supported by some Democrats who want their party's registered voters to have the last word in choosing Democratic candidates.

If these leaders were to have their way, almost a third of the entire electorate — nearly a million voters that are independent and not registered with either major party — would be shut out in closed congressional, state and local primary elections.

In Louisiana, that increasingly means Black voters. More than 200,000 black voters are registered as independents in the state. That's almost a quarter of the entire Black voting population.

Closed primaries may be taxpayer funded, but only registered Democrats or Republicans are allowed to vote in them. The scale of such a change would be the largest single act of voter disenfranchisement in the state, and would represent a return to the politics of Jim Crow from decades past where primaries, among so many other aspects of the franchise, were closed to Black voters.

And don't think access to the general election offers any respite. Louisiana runs some of the least competitive general elections in the country. In the last election season for the state legislature, in 2019, over a third of all races saw candidates running unopposed, and only 6 percent of races between the House and Senate elections for state were competitive. For most voters in Louisiana, general election races are nothing more than the type of "show" elections you might expect to see in an autocratic state. The primaries are the races that matter in Louisiana.

It's not just about Black independents either. There are more than 700,000 Black voters registered with the state Democratic Party. Under the current open primary system, they have the right to choose the best candidate in the primaries, including in the vast number of races where a Republican is the only candidate likely to make the general election ballot. Black Democrats under the Landry proposal would be forced to make a choice: register as a Democrat and be assured that, outside some local races, your vote doesn't matter, or register Republican to impact who governs. Both parties are hoping these voters "stay in their lanes."

Unfortunately, Louisiana is not alone. Efforts to close the primaries are building all across the South.

The Texas Republican Party will have a question on this year's primary ballot to build support for rollback in their state. The Tennessee League of Women Voters is currently suing the state of Tennessee over legislation that was passed requiring signs at all polling locations to erroneously declare that independents choosing a ballot in the state's open primary are in violation of the law. Virginia and Missouri have recently introduced legislation to close the primaries outright.

Where's the outcry? Is 200,000 Black voters denied the franchise not a high enough number to get the country's attention?

Closing Louisiana's primaries is voter suppression. Let's fight to give every American full and equal access to every election.

Jeremy Gruber, JD, is senior vice president of Open Primaries, a national election reform organization.

Higgins: Closed party primaries needed in Louisiana

Congressman Clay Higgins, January 15, 2024

The Louisiana Legislature has convened for an important special session that will determine the future of our state's electoral processes. This includes a critical vote on Governor Jeff Landry's bill to implement closed primaries, which must pass.

Closed primaries are overdue and needed to move Louisiana forward. Our current system is unique in all the wrong ways, and thankfully we have a Governor and State Legislature in place with the courage to push for necessary changes.

I was honored to participate in meetings of Louisiana's Closed Party Primary Task Force in 2020. We heard many of the arguments for and against each of the primary election systems, and I know that a tremendous amount of consideration has gone into the process. It's clear, though, that closed primaries represent the best path forward for the State of Louisiana.

The current jungle primary system puts Louisiana at a disadvantage. In contrast to other states, our primary elections take place in November and often require a costly and time-consuming December runoff. The resulting delay also means that Louisiana's federal representatives are a month behind our peers in building a staff, receiving briefings, noting committee preferences, and performing other critical transition tasks. While this is of lesser impact for incumbents, it is a challenge for Louisiana's newly elected representatives. It's a disadvantage my office faced in 2017, though we worked hard to overcome and get to work for South Louisiana's citizenry. However, the underlying problem is 100% avoidable. Moving to a closed primary system addresses this disparity and puts Louisiana on the same playing field as other states.

Further, the jungle primary system prevents Louisiana's political parties from selecting their preferred candidates. Each major party, Democratic and Republican, deserves an opportunity to choose its nominee ahead of the general election. Closed primaries afford the fairest system for voters and ensure that both major parties have representation on the final ballot.

Closed primaries also limit the ability of candidates to deceive voters, registering under one party affiliation while espousing views that do not match. Too often in Louisiana's elections, we have seen moderate Democrats switch their affiliation to Republican for electoral advantage. This practice is wrong and should be discouraged. With closed party primaries, voters can better vet candidates on their values and core principles. For Republicans, that means ensuring that we are choosing true conservatives to represent our party in each election. We learned difficult lessons in the 2015 and 2019 gubernatorial elections, and it's time to fix Louisiana's primary system.

While change can be intimidating, Louisiana is not untested in its ability to implement or administer closed primaries. Presidential primary elections, which will be held this year, follow the same closed party system. We also have historical precedent to follow as many of our current elected officials were successfully chosen in closed primary contests between 2008 and 2010. The formula already exists, and it works in Louisiana. The result is a simpler, more straightforward fall ballot with one Democrat, one Republican, and ballot-qualified Independent, Libertarian, or Other Party candidates.

As the Louisiana Legislature debates closed primary changes this week, it is important for all citizens to make their voices heard. Contact your state representatives and state senators. We have an opportunity to enact much-needed electoral reforms. Structural change is required to drive our state forward, and it begins with passing Governor Landry's bill for closed primaries.

Congressman Clay Higgins (R-LA) represents Louisiana's 3rd District in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Do primary voters strategically vote in the opposition's primary?

John Johnson, Lubar Center / Marquette Law School Poll, February 20, 2019

Periodically political enthusiasts express concern that members of a particular political party will conspire to swing the result of the opposing party's primary election by strategically voting for a candidate who does not express the actual will of that party's "real" voters. This form of bad-faith strategic voting is sometimes called party raiding.

Party raiding is only feasible in states with open primaries, and fear of it is sometimes used as a argument in favor closed primary systems, which only allow registered partisans to vote in their respective primaries.

Wisconsin is an open primary state. In fact, the state's Election Commission maintains no records of party affiliation whatsoever. Every party's primary contests share space on a single ballot. Voters choose their preferred party in the privacy of the voting booth. No state presents fewer barriers to strategic party raiding than Wisconsin.

Nonetheless, there is no evidence that this kind of voting behavior occurs at all in Wisconsin. As I mentioned, registered voters do not have the option to formally affiliate with a party in Wisconsin. We can, however, measure party identification through public opinion data.

I pooled the results of three Marquette Law School Polls preceding the 2016 presidential preference vote and three surveys preceding the 2018 partisan primary. The combined dataset includes 3,515 likely voters. Each respondent was asked if they planned to vote in either the Republican primary, the Democratic primary, or if they didn't plan to vote at all. We also recorded answers from respondents who insisted they would vote in "both" primaries, even though this would result in a spoiled ballot if carried out.

Respondents were also asked if they "usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, or an Independent." Those who answered "independent" were then asked, "Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican Party or to the Democratic Party?" We consider those who answered affirmatively as "leaning" partisans.

Below is how each partisan group planned to vote in the upcoming primary.

An identical share (2%) of Republicans and Democrats planned to vote in the other party's primary. Even if this tiny share of people were indeed "party raiding," they cancelled each other out. But there is no good evidence suggesting they weren't voting in good faith. In the following general elections the share of self-identified Democrats or Republicans voting for a nominee of the other party exceeded 2%, so it's quite likely that some share of self-identified Democratic voters genuinely preferred one of the Republican primary candidates and vice versa.

Stated intentions of Wisconsin primary voters by party ID, data from 2016 and 2018

PARTYID	REPUBLICAN PRIMARY	DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY	WON'T VOTE	BOTH	DON'T KNOW	REFUSED
Rep	89	2	5	1	3	0
Lean Rep	77	4	9	1	7	1
Ind	25	16	17	3	36	4
Lean Dem	7	75	8	1	9	1
Dem	2	89	5	1	3	0

Crossover voting is uncommon, even in Wisconsin's wide-open primaries

John Johnson, Lubar Center, Marquette Law School Poll, November 22, 2023

In some states, only officially registered members are allowed to vote in a party's primary. Not so in Wisconsin, which lacks any kind of party registration and where voters can choose to cast a ballot in whichever primary they please. They must pick only one, but all the party primaries—Republican, Democratic, Libertarian, Green, etc.—are all printed on a single ballot.

The main argument for closed primaries is that they prevent crossover voting, particularly party raiding. Party raiding refers to members of a different party disingenuously casting ballots in another party's primary, thereby thwarting the will of the target party's actual members.

Despite these fears, existing research shows that crossover voting is uncommon. When it does happen, it's usually "simply because [crossover voters] prefer those candidates to the candidates offered in their own party's primary, or they view their own party primary as a foregone conclusion and want the best possible set of candidates to choose from in the general election." Deliberate party raiding, almost never matters.

Wisconsin is a good place to measure crossover voting, since our election system offers no obstacles to voters doing this. Data from the Marquette Law School Poll is consistent with the existing research showing little-to-no meaningful amount of crossover voting. I last wrote about this in 2019. Here is an update.

Because there are so few crossover voters, I pooled several survey waves preceding each election to calculate the following statistics. I don't include statistics from the 2022 primary because we didn't intended primary participation in a comparable way.

The April 2016 primary vote in Wisconsin was still contested among both Democratic and Republican presidential hopefuls. In surveys leading up to that election, about 2% of self-identified Republicans and 3% of Democrats told us they planned to vote in the other party's primary.

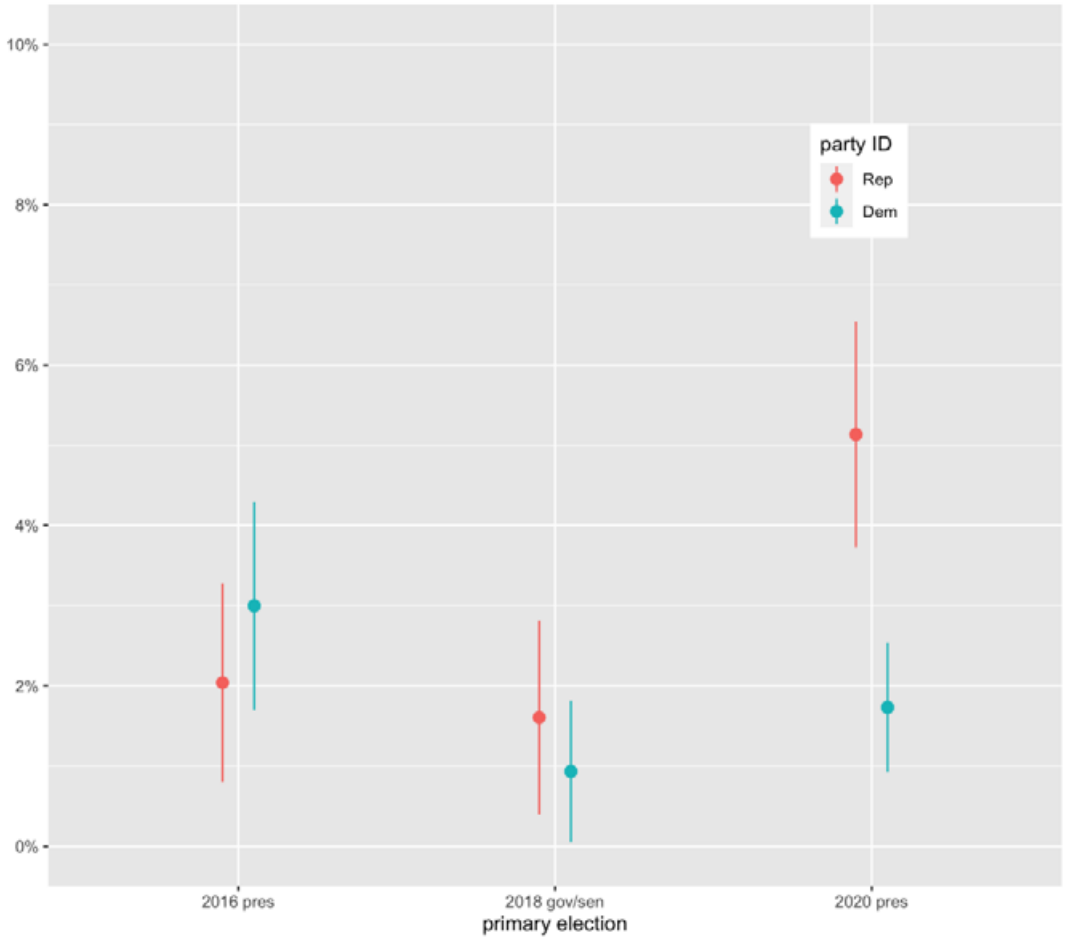
Similarly, the 2018 August partisan primary featured a competitive gubernatorial contest between Democrats and a contested Senate primary among Republicans. Less than 2% of the self-reported members of either party planned to crossover to the other party's primary.

In both 2016 and 2018, the shares of each party planning to vote in the other primary were statistically indiscernible. That's not true of 2020, when clearly more Republicans voted in the Democratic presidential primary than vice versa. This isn't surprising, given that the Democratic presidential primary was competitive, while the Republican primary to renominate incumbent Donald Trump was a formality.

Across the six survey waves we fielded preceding the 2020

Proportion of each party's voters planning to vote in the other party's primary

Among WI registered voters who identify as a Republican or Democrat. Error bars show the 95% confidence interval.



In Marquette Law School Polls during survey waves preceding each primary. Analysis by John D. Johnson (@jdjmke).

primary, we found that about 5% of Republicans planned to vote in the Democratic primary, compared to just 2% of Democrats planning to vote in the Republican primary.

It would be a mistake to assume that these crossover voters are engaging in strategic "party raiding." It's more likely that the small numbers of voters who identify with one party but choose to switch primaries are expressing a sincere preference between the other party's candidates.

In the graph below, I've pooled the responses across all three primaries, 2016, 2018, and 2020. For both Democrats and Republicans, I calculate their average self-described ideology on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is "very conservative" and 5 is "very liberal."

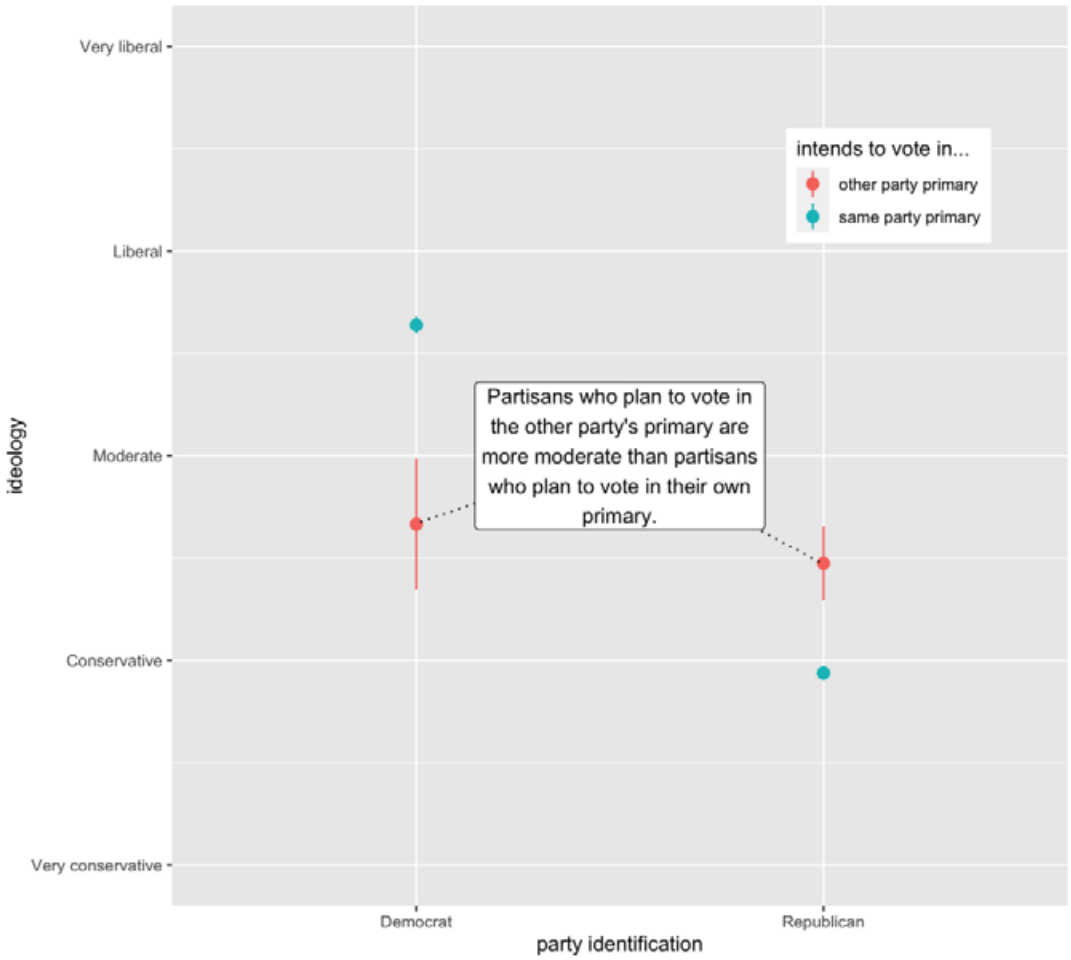
Democrats who plan to vote in the Republican party are noticeably more conservative than Democrats who are staying in their own primary. Likewise, Republicans crossing to the Democratic party are less conservative than Republicans staying in their own primary.

The average self-reported ideology of Republican and Democratic primary crossover voters are so similar to each other that they are statistically indistinguishable in this sample.

In 2020, slightly more Republicans intended to be crossover voters than Democrats, presumably because the Democratic presidential primary was more interesting. Depending on the outcomes from the first series of state primaries, the situation may be reversed in 2024.

Average self-reported ideology by preferred primary

among Democratic and Republican Wisconsin registered voters, error bars show the 95% confidence interval



Data from the Marquette Law School Poll, survey waves preceding the 2016 presidential primary, 2018 senate/gubernatorial primary, and 2020 presidential primary. Graph and analysis by John D. Johnson (@jdjmke).

Open primaries, closed primaries, and ranked-choice voting are options for structuring party primary elections

John Kanelis, KETR, January 16, 2024

What if they called for an election and no one took part?

Is that a far-fetched question? According to some observers of the Texas political primary election system, it would seem to be not such a stretch. The Texas open primary system, says a longtime political science professor and political junkie, is geared toward favoring only the most dedicated partisans on either side of the great – and widening – divide in Texas.

The University of Houston's Brandon Rottinghaus, a 46-year-old Plano native who's taught political science at U of H for the past 17 years, said the "primary system by design is tailored for candidates to speak only a limited audience. Primary voters in the Republican Party, for example, are older, wealthier and are focused on a narrower range of issues."

North Texas residents who live in Texas House District 2 are going to the polls soon to elect one of two Republicans to the seat vacated when the Legislature expelled former GOP Rep. Bryan Slaton after Slaton – who hails from Royse City – engaged in a sexual act with an underage staffer after giving her alcohol.

The candidates seeking to take over that seat are Brett Money and Jill Dutton, both Republicans, both conservative and both seeking to outflank each other on the right side of the spectrum. Money and Dutton will face off in a Jan. 30 special election runoff. The winner will serve as a member of the Legislature for the rest of the year. There exists a certain irony in all of this because Slaton was first elected to the Texas House in 2020 when he defeated fellow conservative -- Republican state Rep. Dan Flynn -- in a hotly contested primary. Slaton was able to run to the right of Flynn, seemingly with little wiggle room on that end of the spectrum.

But wait! Then the Republicans – and Democrats – will have another primary election on March 5, when the rest of the state goes to the polls to nominate candidates for various county, state and federal offices.

"These primaries just don't speak to a lot of voters, to a broad cross-section of voters," Rottinghaus said.

The culprits are many, Rottinghaus said. He singled out legislative gerrymandering, which Republicans have used to their maximum advantage since taking control of the Legislature in the mid-1990s. The law requires the Legislature to redraw legislative and congressional districts every 10 years after the Census is taken. Legislative House and Senate districts are redrawn essentially to benefit the political party that controls the Legislature.

Given the Republican strength in Texas, Democratic primary races are becoming more rare, said Rottinghaus. One Democratic primary of note, he said, is occurring this year in Senate District 16, a Dallas district represented by Nathan Johnson, who is being challenged by Victoria Neave Criado, who is surrendering her House seat for a chance at serving in the Senate.

"Democratic numbers have shrunk in Texas, while the number of Republicans challenging Republican incumbents is increasing," Rottinghaus said. He added that Democratic primary candidates seek to do in reverse what occurs in GOP primaries, with candidates seeking to outflank each other on the "far left."

There once was a time in Texas when Democrats ran the political process and gerrymandered districts to protect Democratic incumbents against Republican challengers. It worked – most of the time! One notable failure of Democratic gerrymandering occurred in the 1994 congressional election in the Texas Panhandle.

The 1991 Legislature gerrymandered the 13th U.S. House district by splitting Amarillo into two House districts. The 13th Congressional District included the northern portion of Amarillo, while the 19th Congressional District included Amarillo's southern half. The 13th – with its trove of Democratic voters – was represented in Congress by Democrat Bill Sarpalius, who was elected to the House in 1988; the 19th was represented by Republican Larry Combest.

When the ballots were counted, though, in November 1994, Republican challenger Mac Thornberry – who ran Combest's staff – ousted Sarpalius from what was supposed to be a safe Democratic seat. Thus, gerrymandering doesn't always work.

Are there ways to bolster voter turnout? Rottinghaus believes ways do exist to get more moderate Texans involved in the primary system.

Texas operates under an "open primary" process, in which voters go to the polls on Primary Election Day and choose which party to cast their votes. "Our system tends to exclude more voters than include them." He said the system we have in Texas tends to place greater power in the hands of fewer people. "When you have more people voting, you can dilute some of that power," he said.

One option for improving the system has been tried in other states that have what Rottinghaus calls a "ranked primary system." It allows primary voters to rank their candidates seeking a party's nomination. The no. 1-ranked candidate finishes first, with second-, third- and other candidates finishing in order. If a candidate fails to reach the 50% plus one vote majority to win outright, then, say, the top three candidates engage in an "instant runoff." That would continue until a candidate obtains a majority vote.

"Having everyone get a second choice has been shown to produce more moderate candidates," Rottinghaus said.

Rottinghaus – who earned his bachelor's degree from Purdue University and his master's and doctoral degrees in political science from Northwestern University – dismisses the prevalence of what he calls "strategic voting" in which voters from one party cast ballots in the other party's primary; theoretically, they are seeking to nominate the weakest candidate in that party's field. "Republicans seemingly only want Republicans voting in their primary," Rottinghaus said, adding that in Texas, "Democrats seem to favor the open primary system we have."

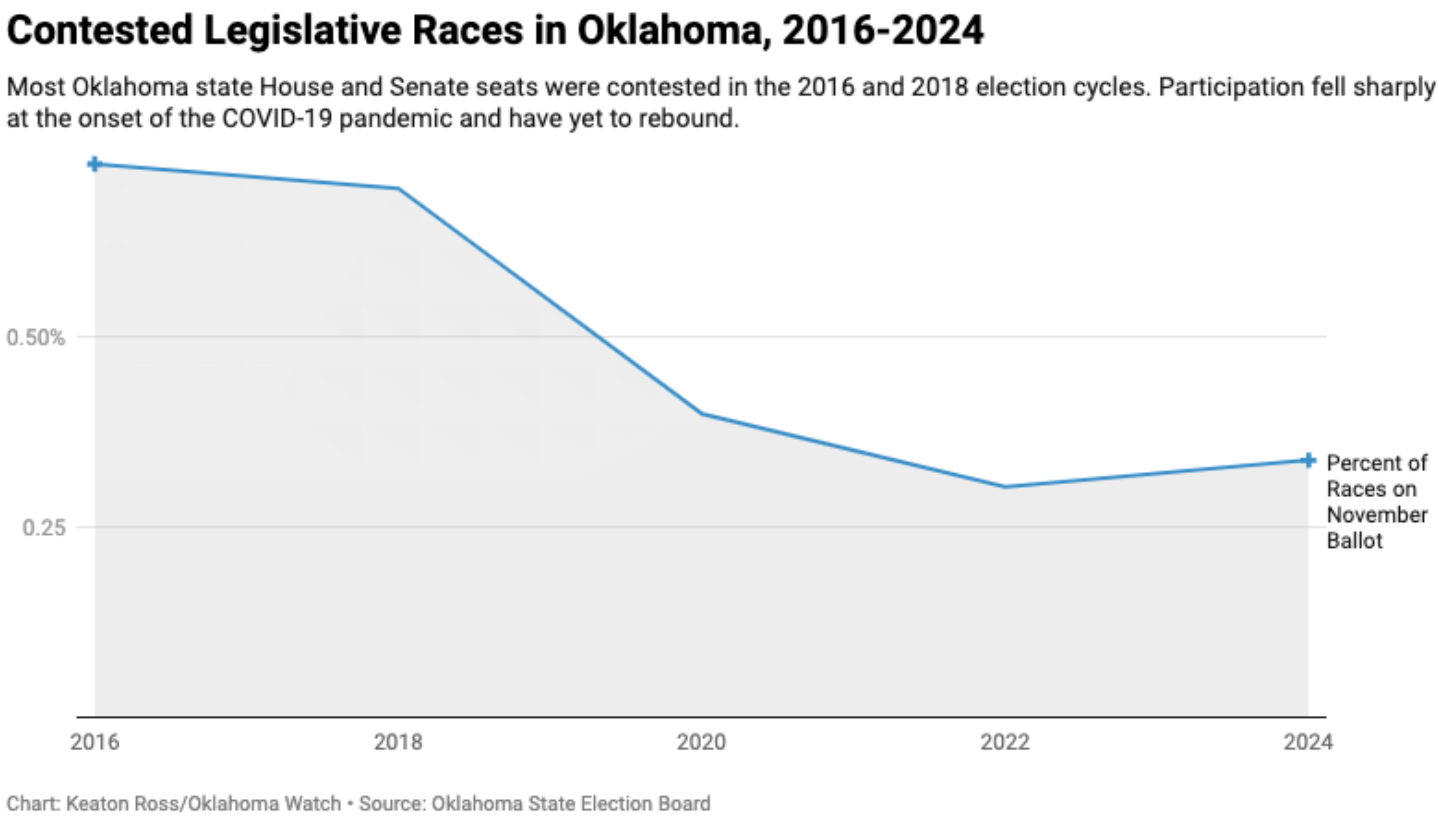
As for voters who live in regions where one-party presence is so powerful that the other party fails to produce any primary battles, Rottinghaus said that "you are forced to go where the action is."

This election year, as it has been for many years in Texas, most of the electoral "action" is occurring within the Republican Party.

> ***"A man without a vote is a man without protection."*** *— Lyndon B. Johnson*

Uncontested: Nearly half of legislative races have already been decided

Keaton Ross, Oklahoma Watch, April 10, 2024



For the third consecutive general election cycle, most Oklahoma voters won't elect their state lawmakers in November.

Fifty of the 127 State and House seats up for re-election were decided at 5 p.m. Friday, April 5, when just one candidate filed for office. Thirty-five races will be settled in the June 18 primary or Aug. 27 runoff election. The Oklahoma Democratic Party has opened its 2024 primaries to independents while the Republican and Libertarian parties will hold closed contests.

Former Rep. Avery Frix, who vacated his House seat in 2022 to run for Congress, won the Senate District 9 election outright when no one filed to run against him. Outgoing Sen. Dewayne Pemberton, who announced in February he would not seek reelection, faced a Democratic challenger in both his 2016 and 2020 campaigns.

After a record number of candidates filed for office during the 2018 teacher walkout, party leaders blamed the COVID-19 pandemic on a lackluster showing in 2020. When nearly 70% of races did not appear on the November ballot in 2022, with several Republicans winning previously competitive districts outright, Democratic party officials blamed the Republican-dominated Legislature for making districts less competitive during redistricting.

Uncompetitive races can cause voters to become apathetic and less interested in the democratic process, studies have found. A 2011 Georgetown University study found state legislators who run unopposed tend to be less effective and engaged with constituents.

Brett Sharp, a political science professor at the University of Central Oklahoma, said the increasing nationalization of local politics and the rising political spending has made it more difficult for Democrats to be competitive in rural areas. Running a competitive campaign in a House district with about 39,000 residents can cost tens of thousands of dollars.

Voter apathy and increased odds of political corruption are among the top consequences of uncompetitive races, Sharp said, referencing political scandals in the early 1990s when Democrats controlled the state.

"Part of democracy is participating and feeling like you have a say," Sharp said. "When it gets down to one party dominating race by race and people aren't even showing up on the ballot and are automatically placed into office, it has an effect on us as citizens."

Lawmakers and voter advocates have floated several changes, including retention ballots and open primaries, as solutions to make elected officials more accountable to voters.

House Bill 1917 by Rep. Andy Fugate, D-Del Cty, would place unopposed legislative candidates on a retention ballot each general election cycle and automatically call a special election if they do not receive at least 51% of votes. The measure, which was introduced last session, did not receive a hearing in the House Rules Committee and is effectively dead.

Supporters of an effort to establish open primaries in Oklahoma, which would place candidates of all parties on the June primary election ballot with the top two advancing to the general election, say they are making progress towards collecting signatures for an initiative petition. If the system was in place this year, more than 60% of legislative races would be decided in November.

Supporters of open primaries argue the method gives more power to independents, who account for about 20% of Oklahoma voters, and moderates campaigns.

"I think the most vital aspect of it is that everyone votes, so you're incentivized whether you have an R, a D or nothing behind your name to build a coalition with people beyond parties," said Oklahoma City Mayor David Holt, who served as a Republican state senator in Senate District 30 from 2010 to 2018, at a November panel on repealing closed primaries.

Critics, including members of Gov. Kevin Stitt's Election and Campaign Finance Task Force, contend open primaries too often result in two candidates with similar views advancing to the general election.

"Such a primary system can have the effect of reducing options for voters despite its intent, and any unintended consequences should therefore be cautiously contemplated before it is instituted in Oklahoma," the report reads.

U.S. House Seats, Corporation Commission Opening Draw Dozens of Candidates

All five members of Oklahoma's congressional delegation filed for reelection, with four drawing a challenger from an opposing party.

Registered Republicans will decide Oklahoma's Third Congressional District race, where two Republicans filed to run against incumbent Rep. Frank Lucas. In 2021, Oklahoma lawmakers expanded the mostly rural district to include portions of urban Oklahoma City.

Three Republicans, Democrat Harold Spradling and Libertarian Chad Williams filed to succeed longtime Corporation Commissioner Bob Anthony, who faces a term limit. Former Secretary of State and Senate President Brian Bingman, former journalist Russell Ray and welder Justin Hornback will face off on June 18 for the Republican party's nomination.

Notes

This is a resource document for you to use.
Take notes, highlight, use as a text book.

OPINION: Why shrinking Democratic voter registration in Oklahoma is a reason for lower raw vote count

Jeff Berrong, The Oklahoman, March 31, 2024

After reading a few news articles about the lower voter turnout in the Democratic Party's Presidential Preferential Primary in Oklahoma on March 5, I wanted to place this election in proper historical context.

The most important thing to remember is that voter turnout will always be low if there is not an operational campaign that activates lower-propensity voters. This holds true regardless of party or election.

Not having a competitive election generally means not having an active campaign to engage voters. This is typical in party primaries for an incumbent president seeking re-election and was true for President Joe Biden in 2024.

Even though the Democratic electorate's 14.1% voter turnout was certainly low for President Biden's re-election primary in 2024, it was actually better than the 12% of registered party voters that came out to vote when President Barack Obama was on the primary ballot for re-election in 2012 or the 9.2% of registered Republican voters who showed up for President George W. Bush's re-election primary in 2004.

The long-term trend of shrinking Democratic voter registration in Oklahoma is another reason for the lower raw vote count. In 1988, the first election after Oklahoma switched from a caucus system to a presidential primary, nearly 67% of voters in Oklahoma were registered as Democrats and only 30% were registered as Republicans.

Fast-forward 36 years later to 2024 and only 28% of voters are registered Democrats with nearly 52% now Republicans. This means that in Oklahoma's closed primary system, the number of active Democratic voters is dramatically lower than the number of voters who can participate in the Republican primary.

How Oklahoma's political makeup has changed

A unique product of Oklahoma's political history is the number of predominantly older, conservative, rural voters who originally registered as Democrats back in the 1960s, '70s and '80s. The political reality of the closed primary system and the overwhelming Democratic registration advantage of that era made it pointless for them to register as Republicans if they wanted to participate in elections that were settled in the partisan primary. These voters were essentially "Democrats in Name Only," or DINOs, as we'll call them.

In primary elections for federal office, depending upon the candidate mix, DINO voters typically either supported a candidate not perceived as a "national" Democrat or instead purposely voted for the least electable Democrat for the general election before deserting the ticket to vote for the Republican nominee in November.

At the presidential primary level, this rural, conservative DINO phenomenon has still manifested itself in several ways over the last 20 years. In 2004, former general Wesley Clark scored his only primary victory in Oklahoma after being perceived as the least "national" Democrat. In 2016, Bernie Sanders was able to combine his support from progressives with a very strong anti-Hillary Clinton rural vote to cruise to an unexpectedly large 10-point win in the Sooner State.

When President Obama ran for re-election in 2012, he did not have any credible or well-known opposition in the primaries. However, running against four unknown primary challengers in Oklahoma, he still lost 14 rural western and southeastern counties and had very narrow plurality victories in most of the non-urban counties. Buoyed by his 81% and 76% supermajority victories in Oklahoma and Tulsa counties respectively, President Obama's statewide margin of victory was an anemic 57%. That is practically unheard of for an incumbent president with no real opposition.

The vestiges of this DINO effect were still present in 2024, but much less noticeable. President Biden, running for re-election with no real primary opposition, only lost one rural county. While his margins in many rural counties were still quite depressed, they were much higher than President Obama's were in 2012 so that after factoring in the 82% and 80% supermajorities in the two most populous counties, President Biden's statewide majority was a much more respectable 73%.

How do you get Oklahomans to the polls?

Here's what all this tells us: For the foreseeable future, the number of voters participating in the Democratic presidential primary will be vastly less than those participating in the Republican primary as our state's voter registration is now mostly in sync with the partisan political realignment that has occurred over the past 40 years.

Also, today's Democratic primary electorate is much more likely to stick with their party nominees in general elections.

Finally, regardless of party, if people are actively campaigned to, they are much more likely to vote. I expect that competitive presidential primaries in both parties in 2028 will once again dramatically increase the turnout percentages from where they were in 2024.

Jeff Berrong, of Weatherford, a former staffer for former U.S. Rep Dan Boren and serves as chair of the Oklahoma Policy Institute's board of directors.

Incumbents not safe in primary

Randy Krehbiel, Tulsa World, June 20, 2024

The fractiousness accompanying the Oklahoma Republican Party's supermajority status in state government showed itself again in Tuesday's primaries.

Four GOP incumbents, including the Senate president pro tem-elect, were defeated. Three, including the House Appropriations and Budget Committee chairman, were forced into the Aug. 27 runoffs.

That might not seem like a lot — 21 other incumbents won primaries Tuesday — but until recently it would have been an almost unprecedented event. From 2000-2014, a total of only three incumbents lost primaries or runoff s.

Then, in 2016 alone, three incumbents, all Republicans, were taken out.

And in 2018, an even dozen were beaten.

That was followed by six in 2020 and three in 2022. All but one were Republicans, and after a big shift to the middle in 2018, the trend has been toward candidates perceived as more conservative — although that might not be exactly accurate, either.

"Left and right might not be the correct dimensions anymore," said Mike Crespin, director of the Carl Albert Center at the University of Oklahoma.

Long-time political observer and consultant Pat McFerron said a lot of the pontificating over who is the most conservative is really an attempt to establish policy differences where very little actually exists.

"It's like saying, "We're all going to get chocolate chip cookies. Some will have walnuts. Some will have pecans,'" McFerron said. "They're 90% the same."

The primary system does encourage negativity, McFerron said.

"We no longer build consensus," he said. "We build market share."

Because most state elections these days are determined solely or largely in Republican primaries, and those primaries attract fewer but more partisan voters than general elections, campaigns try to distinguish their candidates by casting suspicion on opponents' loyalty to a party or ideology.

"There is a formula for running a primary," said McFerron. "It's so wellknown that everybody does the same thing. The only difference is the negativity."

Not incidentally, the large proportion of elected offices decided in primaries and runoffs means decisions about who represents Oklahomans are being made by a smaller and smaller share of the population.

Three of the four incumbents losing Tuesday were senators, and two of those were allies of term-limited Senate President Pro Tem Greg Treat.

One, Sen. Greg McCortney, R-Ada, was in line to succeed Treat as president pro tem.

The fourth incumbent to lose, Rep. John Talley, R-Stillwater, is considered one of the most liked and respected members of the House, but apparently he was insufficiently conservative for the rural Republicans of Payne County and northeastern Logan County.

A total of nine Republican legislative primaries are headed to runoffs. The three incumbents are Sen. Blake "Cowboy" Stephens, R-Tahlequah, Rep. Dean Davis, R-Broken Arrow, and Rep. Kevin Wallace, R-Wellston.

Some interpreted Tuesday's elections as a good day for Gov. Kevin Stitt, who endorsed Jonathan Wingard, the Ada snake breeder who knocked off McCortney, and several other winning Senate candidates, including Bixby Mayor Brian Guthrie.

He also endorsed Dr. Julie McIntosh, Stephens' runoff challenger.

With Treat term-limited, McCortney beaten and Sen. Roger Thompson, R-Okemah, having resigned, the perception is that Stitt might be able to overcome the Senate resistance that prevented the income tax cut he wanted so badly this year.

But Jim Dunlap, a retired state senator who has spent decades around the Capitol, said the results were "more of a mixed bag."

Concerning, he said, was the extraordinarily low turnout, especially in the Tulsa area. Less than 15% of registered Republicans cast ballots in the 1st congressional district Republican primary.

Turnout in three highly contested Republican state Senate primaries — SD 37 (17.9%), SD 33 (16.8%) and SD 33 (20.2%) — was well below expectations.

Even the 4th District congressional GOP primary, which received national attention and prompted massive advertising expenditures, attracted fewer votes than two years ago.

"I don't know the problem, but it could be negative campaigning," said Dunlap.

He said the average person has come to regard government and politics as things to be avoided.

"We need to get civic organizations involved again. Even churches," he said.

Crespin and McFerron attributed the low turnout mainly to the lack of statewide, top-of-the-ticket races. The only statewide office on this year's ballot was corporation commissioner, and it drew the fewest number of votes since 2012.

Turnout in Democratic primaries was even lower Tuesday, but because there were far fewer of them and Republicans are so dominate current state politics, the GOP races are of far more import.

Of course, for decades the situation was reversed — Democrats held a supermajority that often fractured. But in those days, the parties tended to exercise more control.

McFerron attributes the GOP's current factionalism largely to a weakening of the party structure caused by the sharp rise in independent expenditures by unaffiliated (at least in theory) groups.

"It's taken away the discipline of the party," he said.

Dunlap also cited the weakening of parties brought by the 2011 U.S. Supreme Court decision in the Citizens United case, which opened the floodgates to independent spending.

The upheaval at the ballot box reflects infighting within the state party ranks. On Monday, a faction calling itself "Awake Oklahoma" called for state party Chairman Nathan Dahm, a term-limited state senator from Broken Arrow, to resign, in part because he blocked this year's attempted censure of U.S. Sen. James Lankford.

Such internal strife has caused many long-time Republicans to back away from the party, but it does not seem to have slowed the growth of GOP registration or winning percentages in general elections. No Democrat has won or even come very close to winning a statewide vote in Oklahoma since 2006.

> ***"I believe people who go into politics want to do the right thing. And then they hit a big wall of re-election and the pettiness of politics. In the end, politics gets in the way of the business of people."*** *— Kevin Costner*

Editorial: What will it take to get Tulsans to vote?

Tulsa World, August 31, 2024

Among the details of Tuesday's municipal elections, one fact stands out: The vast majority of Tulsans don't vote. Three-fourths of residents opted out of choosing their mayor and city councilors.

It's a frustration because there is no insight for this apathy. Some say August isn't a good month for elections. Some say it's campaign fatigue. Some make arguments about candidate quality or political burnout.

Those are just flimsy excuses to explain these voter choices. It's also not new.

Tuesday's Tulsa municipal election attracted 26% of registered voters, the lowest since the city went to a strong-mayor and council form of government. The past mayoral election turnout: 34% (2020), 28% (2016), 36% (2013), 31% (2009), 35% (2006), 29% (2002), 31% (1998) and 28% (1994).

Tulsa's history has been one of civic disengagement. That's a shame because it means our representative democracy isn't truly representative.

Low voter turnout means the political middle gets most overlooked as motivated voters usually come from the partisan ends.

Predicting local elections comes down to this obvious observation: It depends on who shows up at the polls.

The City Council districts ranged in turnout from the lowest of 2,401 in District 3 to 10,441 in District 8.

Incumbents Vanessa Hall-Harper (District 1), Laura Bellis (District 4), Christian Bengel (District 6) and Phil Lakin Jr. (District 9) were re-elected. Newcomer Jackie Dutton was chosen to represent District 3. Former councilor Karen Gilbert won District 5.

Incumbent Lori Decter Wright (District 7) missed meeting the 50% threshold by 1.4%, going to a runoff.

Emerging from races with five candidates are Anthony Archie and Stephanie Reisdorph in District 2 and incumbent Jayme Fowler and former legislator Carol Bush in District 9.

The nailbiter was in the mayor's race, narrowing the field of seven candidates to two: state Rep. Monroe Nichols and County Commissioner Karen Keith. They will meet in the Nov. 5 runoff.

Only 710 votes separated Nichols, who won the most votes, and third place finisher, Brent VanNorman. Tulsans are fortunate that the most qualified mayoral candidates topped the results.

Presidential elections attract the most voters, galvanized by national politics. In Tulsa, it hovers around 50%. That's still not good, especially since Oklahoma ranked last in voter participation in the last presidential election.

We congratulate the winning and advancing candidates. But, we urge more work to improving voter engagement. Voting rights were hard fought, and too many people are taking them for granted.

COMMENTARY: Political accountability depends on participation in elections

Andy Moore, Oklahoma Voice, August 29, 2023

Oklahoma persistently has one of the lowest rates of voter participation in the country.

Our voter registration is low and our voter turnout is also low — a double whammy.

Of the state's estimated 3 million eligible voters, roughly one-third are not registered, and another third do not vote regularly. In most elections, more Oklahoma voters stay home than cast a ballot.

Voters stay home because we have been led to believe our voice and our vote do not matter. The message is reaffirmed by the national media focusing on so-called "swing states" like Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Ohio while ignoring the rest of the country.

Media didn't invent this narrative. They are merely describing our political system as it exists today: structurally broken.

Gerrymandering and restrictive voting laws have created districts that can be reliably won cycle after cycle, regardless of how the incumbent performs while in office.

When districts are designed to be uncompetitive, it has a chilling effect on other candidates running. So, those who do run can end up winning by default.

Since many have recently launched their reelection campaigns, it's a good time to remember that more than half of the members of the Oklahoma state Legislature did not face an opponent in their last election.

No rallies. No debates. They just won because they put their name on the ballot. Elections are supposed to be how voters can directly hold politicians accountable, but there is no accountability if they can win without a single vote being cast.

For the few politicians who do draw a challenger, most of the time it is someone from their own party during the primaries, and when those elections are decided in closed primaries, it means a small minority of voters end up making decisions for the whole country.

Unite America, a national, cross-partisan group aptly calls this "the Primary Problem" facing our country. In 2022, 83% of Congress was elected by just 8% of voters nationwide.

But hope is not lost. The solution to the problems facing our democracy is not to tune out, but rather to lean in, to recognize that we have the power to make change and to put that power to work. Oklahomans don't vote because they've been led to believe that their vote doesn't matter, but now is our chance to set the record straight.

A former legislator once told me that there are two things that matter in politics: money and influence. If you have the money to give, I suggest supporting the candidates you like or nonprofits that work to increase civic participation.

I also encourage you to use your influence, however big or small it may be.

No matter who you are, there are people in your life right now who do not vote regularly.

But, they might — if you help them.

Think about your friends, your family, your coworkers, your neighbors, the people at your church, the other parents at the soccer field, your adult children, maybe even your spouse or partner. Do you know if they're registered to vote? Have you asked them?

Did you know that Oklahoma has online voter registration now? It's so easy. Do not underestimate your ability to influence the people around you.

If you're reading this and are considering running for office, why not take the plunge? Especially if it's for a position that is frequently uncontested. Remember, we don't vote anyone out — we can only vote for someone else.

A healthy democracy requires competition, so even if you lose, you've done a great public service by creating some accountability in that race.

We are living in a unique point in history, and we should not squander or turn away from our duty to do what is right. The fight for democracy in America is as old as the country itself, and the battles being fought today are just as important as they were in 1776, 1863, 1942, or 1964.

In the words of former President Dwight Eisenhower: "Politics ought to be the part-time profession of every citizen who would protect the rights and privileges of free men."

Andy Moore is the founder and CEO of Let's Fix This, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that promotes civic engagement.

DA Cabelka seeks new election in Comanche County sheriff's runoff

Mike W. Ray, Southwest Ledger, August 31, 2024

District Attorney Kyle Cabelka filed a petition last Friday seeking a new election in the Republican Comanche County sheriff's election.

The petition was filed with the Comanche County District Court, and a copy of that document can be found here: *https://drive.google.com/file/d/1WS7P72mx5bmgPCWifuN-vZ3nU0d2jdXM5/view*

A copy of the document was delivered to the office of Comanche County Election Board Secretary Amy Sims "but we haven't accepted it yet," the Southwest Ledger was told at 4:20 p.m. Friday. "We're waiting for some guidance from" the office of Oklahoma Attorney General Gentner Drummond.

In a related matter, the Oklahoma State Election Board sent a team to Lawton last Thursday to examine records from the sheriff's runoff race and reportedly discovered several irregularities.

The investigation was triggered by the comments of an unidentified man who called the local television station to report he is a Democrat but was nevertheless given a ballot for the Republican-only runoff between Michael Merritt and Andy Moon.

Cabelka's petition asks the district court to deny certification of the election.

"I was shocked when I watched the KSWO news story about Comanche County citizens who were allowed to improperly vote in this election," Cabelka wrote in a prepared statement. "That news story caused me to look further into the results of the runoff election. Based on what I have observed by conduct from local election officials that were at the precincts on August 27, the confusion from the Comanche County Election Board Secretary, and the conversations that I have had with representatives from the State Election Board, I now question the integrity of the runoff election as well as have little confidence in the election results.

In a letter sent to State Election Board Secretary Paul Ziriax, five southwest Oklahoma lawmakers wrote, "Given the importance of ensuring free and fair elections, we are deeply concerned that other ineligible voters may have received an incorrect ballot." The legislators said "this clear breach of electoral protocol occurred despite at least one voter contacting the Comanche County Election Board regarding the incorrect ballot…"

The legislators were Reps. Trey Caldwell, Daniel Pae and Rande Worthen (all R-Lawton), Rep. Toni Hasenbeck (R-Elgin), and Sen. Dusty Deevers (R-Elgin).

Their concern wasn't misplaced.

Apparently the caller wasn't the only Democrat who voted in the GOP-only sheriff's race.

Comanche County has 40 voting precincts. Caldwell told the Southwest Ledger that an examination of ballots cast in two precincts, 27 and 28sub, found that the number of ballots cast in the sheriff's runoff was four more than the number of Republicans who signed in to vote that day.

Twelve Republicans voted at Precinct 28sub, but 15 ballots were counted in the sheriff's race, Caldwell said. Similarly, the number of ballots cast in Precinct 27 in the sheriff's race exceeded by one the number of Republicans who voted in that precinct, he said. Voters from both precincts cast their ballots at the same location – Great Plains Coliseum in Lawton – and received their ballots from the same precinct workers.

Also, at least one irregularity was discovered in Precinct 31, Cabelka reported.

All registered Republican voters in Comanche County were eligible to vote in the sheriff's runoff, and only Republicans were eligible to vote in the Comanche County District 1 commissioner's race.

In Lawton, all registered voters were eligible to vote in the mayor's race and on the PROPEL 2040 sales tax extension. Other ballots were issued for the non-partisan Ward 1 and Ward 2 City Council races.

Sims acknowledged the distribution of an incorrect ballot on election day.

KSWO-TV reported Sims also said that once a ballot enters the system, there's nothing they can do about it. "Ballots cannot be traced to any particular voter," Misha Mohr, the State Election Board's public information officer, told the Ledger.

Those six extra votes in the sheriff's runoff didn't make even a ripple in the outcome of that race. Merritt defeated Moon by 628 votes: 3,595 to 2,967.

However, the legislators cited a state law which decrees that voters may only vote using the primary ballot under the party in which they are registered; it provides that "no registered voter shall be permitted to vote in any Primary Election or Runoff Primary Election of any political party except the political party of which his registration form shows him to be a member…"

"The right to vote is a fundamental expression of our American freedoms, and it must be fiercely protected to ensure the integrity of the November 5 presidential election," the legislators wrote in their letter. "We must guarantee that each voter's voice is safeguarded and that every aspect of our electoral process remains secure and trustworthy."

SW Okla. legislators ask Ziriax to 'step in'

The five legislators asked Ziriax to "step in and ensure that a thorough review and audit is made of the situation and that appropriate action is taken if these allegations prove to be true… A transparent investigation is crucial to maintaining public trust in our electoral process."

"Considering the current mood about election integrity, we need a third-party verification of whether this was an isolated incident," Caldwell said.

Sims reported that a precinct worker who mistakenly gave the Democrat a ballot in the Republican sheriff's runoff was "counseled." However, the Ledger was told that the precinct worker is no longer affiliated with the county election board; if that report is accurate, it was unclear whether the poll worker was dismissed or resigned.

The State Election Board declined to discuss the disciplinary measure. "Any type of action taken to address a precinct official's performance would be considered a personnel matter of the county election board," Mohr told the Ledger.

Oklahoma poll workers receive training every two years. Topics covered include "violations of law, persons entitled to vote, ballot distribution, voting in primary elections, and routine procedures," Mohr wrote.

Bad timing of encomiums

Ironically, the Comanche County election snafu occurred one day after Ziriax announced that "recent independent reviews of Oklahoma's election system have shown it to be safe and secure…" And it occurred two days before an eastern Oklahoma legislator commented on "the consistently high performance of the State of Oklahoma in election integrity."

Ziriax announced Aug. 26 that post-election audits performed after Oklahoma's statewide June primary elections "confirmed the accuracy of the state's voting system with a 100% match of the certified election results."

Ziriax also noted that recent independent reviews of Oklahoma's election system have shown it to be safe and secure – including a Governor's Task Force study and an analysis by the Legislative Office of Fiscal Transparency.

Meanwhile, state Rep. Jim Olsen (R-Roland) issued a press release Aug. 29 in which he reported that the Heritage Foundation – an activist American conservative think tank based in Washington, D.C. – rated Oklahoma's "election integrity" No. 5 in the nation.

In the Comanche County election faux pas, the number of people who voted was not in question. Instead, Caldwell pointed out, the issue was members of the Democrat party being given ballots to vote in a closed Republican race.

Advocates detail new voting plan

Corey Jones,Public Service Journalism Team, Tulsa World, August 12, 2024

Organizers of a grassroots effort to open Oklahoma's primary elections to all voters say they've settled on which form the revised primaries should take and aim to have a ballot question ready for the gubernatorial general election in November 2026.

In a recent Tulsa World interview, Oklahoma United leaders said they're drafting language for a citizen petition to amend the state constitution to have a "top-two, unified ballot with partisan labels." It would eliminate partisan primaries and allow each registered voter to cast a ballot for any candidate in primary elections.

In other words, every candidate in a race would be on the same primary ballot. Next to each candidate's name would be whether they are registered as a Republican, Democrat, independent or Libertarian.

Every registered voter — regardless of party affiliation or lack thereof — would be allowed to cast a ballot for the candidate of their choice. And then the top two vote-getters in each race would face off in the general election. If only two candidates file for a race, then both would forgo the primary and be placed on the general ballot in November.

Tulsa Mayor G.T. Bynum, who has been at the forefront of Oklahoma United's efforts, told the World it's important to distinguish that the proposed format isn't a nonpartisan election because partisan labels would stay on the ballot, unlike the city's municipal elections that have no such labels.

Bynum said a unified primary ballot simply breaks down partisan silos so every person can vote for who they believe is the best candidate right from the start — regardless of party.

"I say this as a Republican who is not afraid of competing with Democrats and independents in the competition of ideas — nor should any Republicans in Oklahoma," Bynum said. "If we have confidence in what we believe in and the message that we deliver and the positions that we have, then we should not be afraid of competition. We should welcome it.

"And so, again, I think competition in the marketplace of ideas, just like in any other field, only serves to improve the eventual outcome for the customer."

Oklahoma has a partially closed primary system in which recognized political parties can choose to keep their primaries closed, preventing anyone from outside of the respective party from voting in that party's primary.

The Republican and Libertarian Parties in Oklahoma hold closed primaries, while the state's Democratic Party allows independents to vote in its primaries.

Oklahoma United hopes to finalize its ballot question language in the near future. Once submitted to the Secretary of State's Office, opponents will have a chance to challenge the sufficiency or constitutionality of the petition language.

Its proposed changes would cover all partisan offices in the state except for presidential. Judicial and municipal elections wouldn't be touched.

A Lee Enterprises Public service Journalism team analysis of publicly available voter data for the 2022 midterm primary illustrates how Oklahoma's partially closed system stifles voter participation.

In districts with contested U.S. House races, about 49% of registered voters — or 889,880 eligible Oklahomans — were shut out from casting a ballot in them.

Similarly, about 45% of registered voters — or 350,669 eligible Oklahomans — in contested state House races and about 40% — or 252,197 — in contested state senate races were blocked from voting in them.

And 31 of those 52 contested state and federal seats — about 60% — were decided outright by the primary and not the general election, meaning hundreds of thousands of registered voters who were disallowed a primary voice had no vote at all for who would represent them in public office.

So all U.S. congressional, statewide legislative, statewide executive, county offices and district attorney races would become unified primaries in which all candidates for an elected seat will appear on the same ballot for all voters.

Pat McFerron, pollster and campaign consultant for Oklahoma United, said his polling shows Oklahomans support a top-two form of open primary.

McFerron said Oklahomans are familiar with the top-two format because it's used in municipal elections, so it isn't a foreign concept like ranked choice voting or a top-four approach. As for party labels, he said Oklahoma United doesn't see a reason to take away that candidate informa-

tion from voters.

He said voters regardless of affiliation are disenfranchised under the state's current system because the "elections of consequence" are primaries, not the general, and occur when the fewest voters are allowed to participate.

"Right now, our November elections in Oklahoma just really do not matter much," McFerron said.

After Oklahoma's runoffs on Aug. 27 enter the books, 84 of 127 (66%) state legislative seats up for vote this year will have been decided before the general election takes place Nov. 5, according to a Tulsa World review of the races.

Of those 84 seats decided before the general election, 50 are unopposed, 29 are Republican primaries only, and five are Democratic primaries only.

Margaret Kobos, founder and CEO of Oklahoma United, called lack of primary participation and awareness a problem that that affects the daily lives of residents.

Kobos said a unified primary ballot would encourage candidates to refocus conversations and campaigns on issues rather than "random distractions," as well as appeal to a broader base instead of catering to a small segment of voters.

"We're all paying for these elections. We should all be able to vote in them," Kobos said. "Take a Corporation Commission race or district attorney race — these are positions that are supposed to serve all of us, not a certain fragment of a party."

World Staff Writer Randy Krehbiel contributed to this report.

Corey Jones of Tulsa is a member of Lee Enterprises' Public Service Journalism team.

> ***"We do not have government by the majority. We have government by the majority who participate."*** *— Thomas Jefferson*

Straight-party voting

Oklahoma State Election Board

"Straight party" voting is available to all voters during general elections. "Straight party" voting allows voters to mark a single box, designating their votes to candidates of a single political party in all partisan elections. In other words, by checking the "straight party" option for "Party A," the voting device will record a vote for all "Party A" candidates on the ballot. (You do not have to be a registered voter of a political party to utilize that party's "straight party" option.)

You can override the "straight party" option for a single race. For instance, if you choose the "straight party" option for "Party A," but then select a candidate from "Party B" for a single race, the vote for the "Party B" candidate will override the "straight party" option for that race.

IMPORTANT: The "straight party" option can only be applied to races where a candidate from that political party appears on the ballot. In other words, if you select the "Party C" option, but there are only two candidates for a particular race – "Party A" candidate and "Party B" candidate – the voting device will leave that race blank. You can override the blank vote for that race, by selecting a candidate of your choice. Your decision for that race will not affect your "straight party" option for other races.

The "straight party" option is not available for nonpartisan races, such as judicial elections.

Propositions or questions on the ballot must be individually marked.

It is strongly recommended that you review your ballot before inserting it into the voting device to ensure that you have cast a vote for all candidates and/or issues of your choice.

"Straight party" options are available for all Republican, Democratic, and Libertarian races. Since Independents are not part of a recognized political party, there is not a "straight party" option for Independents.

Straight-party voting a cop-out for losing candidates

Jonathan Small, Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs, November 28, 2022

Following this month's election results, some officials claim that straight-party voting is a major problem in Oklahoma. They imply many Oklahomans really wanted to vote for candidates from the other party but instead simply checked the straight-party option. Some Democrats suggest their failure in top-of-the-ballot races is a byproduct of straight-party ballots.

That's believable only if you ignore common sense. The most high-profile race in Oklahoma this year was the governor's race. It was literally the top spot on the ballot. Are we to believe voters really wanted to vote for Democratic candidate Joy Hofmeister rather than Republican Gov. Kevin Stitt (or vice versa) but instead checked the straight-party box and never looked a few inches down their ballots?

Notably, the ACLU of Oklahoma claimed it received reports from Oklahoma and Cleveland counties of voters being improperly encouraged to vote straight party by poll workers. Those were two of only three counties won by Hofmeister. Does that mean straight-party voting inflated Hofmeister's numbers?

About 1.155 million ballots were cast in Oklahoma this month. About 480,000 were marked "straight party." The split was 69.82% for Republicans, 29.08% for Democrats, and 1.10% for Libertarians.

The share of Oklahomans voting straight party has increased over recent election cycles, but that doesn't automatically mean people don't know who they are supporting, particularly in major races. And even in down-ballot races where candidates are not well known, people often use political party affiliation, which often represents public policy leanings, to determine preference even when marking a specific candidate box.

Also, if you mark the "straight party" line but then fill in a box for a specific candidate from the opposite party, state law specifies the mark for the individual candidate counts. The State Election Board could not report how often that happened when contacted recently, but it is not unusual.

And straight-party has been an option literally since statehood. One 1907 ballot on display at the Oklahoma Election Board shows voters could choose between the Republican, Democratic, and Socialist tickets that year.

One Democratic lawmaker who sought in recent years to eliminate straight-party voting described it as a relic from a time when many voters were illiterate and chose a party symbol rather than the candidate. Yet it makes little sense to say people today are somehow less informed than their predecessors if they select the straight-party option.

For decades, Oklahoma Democrats held political majorities and weren't concerned about straight-party voting. It's now that Republicans hold political majorities that some Democrats see a problem with straight-party voting.

The reality is this: Many people use party brands to determine which candidate to support. And many voters split their ticket.

Successful candidates tailor their message to, and successfully turn out, their straight-party voters as well as ticket-splitters who support them. Those who blame the straight-party option for losses are only highlighting why their candidacies failed.

After setting record, should Oklahoma end straight-ticket voting?

Trevor Brown, Oklahoma Watch, Updated January 13, 2022

More Oklahomans than ever before skipped over selecting individual candidates and instead voted for their party's entire slate of candidates with a single pen stroke in 2020.

Oklahoma State Election Board data shows that more than 710,200 — or 45.5% of all voters — chose the straight-party voting option during last year's general election.

That is the most number of straight-party ballots, as well as the highest share of voters choosing this option, in at least the last three presidential elections. In 2016, 36.3% voted using the straight-ticket option and 37.5% voted this way in 2012.

Of those who selected the straight-ticket option last year, 71% were Republicans, 28% Democrats and Libertarians accounted for about 1%. Heading into the election, about 50% of Oklahoma registered voters were Republicans, 33% were Democrats, 16% were independents and less than 1% were libertarians.

The rise in straight-ticket voting comes as a growing number of states have done away with the option.

After a wave of legislative activity across the nation during the past couple decades, Oklahoma is now one of just six states — along with Alabama, Indiana, Michigan, Kentucky and South Carolina — that still allows straight-party voting for partisan offices.

And some state lawmakers are hoping that Oklahoma will leave that group.

Sen. J.J. Dossett, D-Tulsa, introduced legislation ahead of this year's upcoming legislative session to ban end straight-ticket voting in the state.

He told the Southwest Ledger after filing the bill last month that the voting method is outdated and disincentivizes voters from researching and evaluating individual candidates.

Oklahoma Watch
No Favorites No Falsehoods No Fear

"When Oklahoma was founded more than a century ago, many voters were illiterate and perhaps didn't have access to information about the candidates," he told the paper. "(Voters were) more isolated in 1907 and might not have known who the candidates were. So they based their selections on political parties and cast their votes on an emblem or a character: a rooster or donkey for the Democratic Party, an eagle or an elephant for the Republican Party."

Rep. Trish Ranson, D-Stillwater, is sponsoring a similar bill in the House.

Supporters of straight-ticket voting say the option is a time-saving convenience that helps speed the voting process.

As in Oklahoma, many of the legislative efforts to end straight-ticket voting have been led by Democrats. But support doesn't always follow party lines.

In Texas, for instance, Republican lawmakers recently were successful in passing a law banning straight-ticket voting.

That move then was opposed by the Texas Democratic Party, which sued while arguing that eliminating straight-ticket voting is unconstitutional and intentionally discriminatory because it could trigger longer lines and waiting times at polling places that serve Hispanic and black voters, according to the Texas Tribune. That lawsuit, however, was unsuccessful.

Since 2017, there have been three previous attempts from Oklahoma lawmakers — two from Democrats and one from a Republican — to end straight-party voting.

All three bills died without a committee hearing.

Bill looks to remove straight party voting option from Oklahoma ballots

Kateleigh Mills, KOSU, January 23, 2023

An Oklahoma lawmaker is hoping to end the practice of straight party voting.

Straight party voting allows a voter to select only a political party on their ballot, and all candidates who are part of that party will get one vote.

Senate Bill 568, authored by Democratic State Senator Mary Boren looks to amend parts of Oklahoma law, removing the straight party option and updating language to be gender-neutral.

Oklahoma is one of six states in the nation to still offer straight party voting, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. The other states that offered it in 2022 included Alabama, Indiana, Kentucky, Michigan and South Carolina.

Recently, some states have started to remove it from their voting process, including Texas, Utah and Iowa.

But having the option is still somewhat complicated. Some proponents of straight party voting say the option makes voting quick and easy, while some critics say that it discourages voters from researching individual candidates, but it can also confuse voters too.

That confusion can result in questions like: If I mark the straight party box - will that override individual votes I make? The answer for Oklahomans is that individual votes take precedence over straight party voting.

Despite the conversations about whether it should be available, data from the state election officials prove that the option is still relatively popular for Oklahoma voters.

In the November 2022 election, more than 40% of voters used the option.

The political middle is getting things done in OKC

David Holt, The Dallas Morning News, January 28, 2023

As Americans, we are routinely told that our political discourse is polarized, that we are utterly divided. In Oklahoma City, we're choosing a different path.

By demography and political registration, OKC is a microcosm of the nation. Nonwhite residents represent almost half our city. Our county voted for the Republican for president by exactly one point in 2020. These even splits could be interpreted as leading indicators of political division. But instead, time and again, Oklahoma City navigates potentially divisive topics and accomplishes things with a consensus that cuts across demographic and partisan lines.

We are certainly not the only American city getting things done, even in this supposed age of polarization. Cities like ours are doing things the way all of America once did — by fostering a political culture that embraces pluralism, pragmatism and compromise. This requires leaders who set an example, but it can also be aided by electoral systems that incentivize this behavior.

In the current vernacular, Oklahoma City is politically purple, as is the nation. In OKC, we can see the mathematical challenge plainly. If one "side" attempted to achieve only its desired outcomes, it would fail. There just isn't enough of any one group to dominate. The folly at the national level is that they can't see that. Fifty-one percent doesn't accomplish much, if anything, and yet that struggle to reach 51 and dominate the 49 continues, election after election. In the end, the only real winner is gridlock.

But we want to get things done in OKC, so we have looked past 51% solutions. Instead, we move through consensus.

Since 1980, Oklahoma City has risen from the 37th-largest city to the 20th-largest. That success has been fueled by a local sales tax initiative that invests in quality of life, known locally as MAPS (Metropolitan Area Projects). In 2019, we had the opportunity to pursue the fourth iteration, dubbed MAPS 4. It ultimately developed into a $1.1 billion initiative funding 16 projects that meet a broad spectrum of challenges and opportunities. MAPS 4 ranges from mental health services and a civil rights center to economic development and stadiums. The mix of projects reflects many different worldviews, and different projects were pleasing to different constituencies, including people from both major political parties. I would often joke that only the mayor liked all 16 projects, but I would remind people that this was OK. In fact, that spirit of compromise was exactly the way things are supposed to work.

MAPS 4 was approved with 72% of the vote, and it is a mathematical certainty that many Republicans and Democrats voted the same way that day.

Similarly, at my own election night watch parties in 2018 and 2022, I could look out at crowds I knew were an almost even mix of Democrats and Republicans, with lots of independents sprinkled in. This is as it should be, but not many election night watch parties look that way across America today.

MAPS 4 reflects an approach we take on every issue in Oklahoma City. We respect pluralism — the reality that we will never all think the same and we will never permanently defeat the "other side." Pluralism is the reality that we must coexist. In Oklahoma City, we also accept pragmatism and compromise. We don't just listen to each other, we actually incorporate ideas from all perspectives into the outcome, even if one faction remains unconvinced. We recognize that some things are important to other people. We accept that others can "win," as long as we do, too.

Don't get me wrong, this approach requires nurturing every single day. It demands self-control on social media and it requires getting out of our bubbles to listen and learn. It takes leadership. It requires leaders to talk about how we get things done as much as we talk about the outcomes. But we have succeeded with this approach in OKC, and I see other cities that do as well. Mayors and cities have to get things done. We can't afford to waste time on the nonsense that happens at the state and federal levels.

It is worth noting that in American cities, we also often have electoral systems that incentivize this behavior. In Oklahoma City, as in many cities, we elect mayors through a nonpartisan, top-two system. This is quite different from the closed, partisan primaries that choose leaders at the state and federal levels in most states.

This is significant. How you elect people determines everything else. If you want to see effective governance like we have in Oklahoma City, you need electoral reform in states that have closed, partisan primaries.

Better systems can take many forms (top two, top four, ranked choice, etc.), but there are two fundamentals to pursue: Every candidate should have to face all the voters, and every voter should receive a ballot with all the candidates. Systems with those qualities allow for coalition-building and consensus. In contrast, closed partisan primaries elevate the extremes and reward pandering to a small subset of the electorate. We need electoral systems that don't silo us. We need systems that allow the much larger electorate in the middle to work together, regardless of party registration.

Are some people in this country polarized? Sure. But there are 60%-70% of us in the middle who may come from different parties, but we want to work together and get things done. I see that every day in Oklahoma City. Despite the conventional wisdom, America is not polarized, but we have let those who are dominate the discourse for too long.

Those of us who want to work together are the real majority in this country, and we need to assert ourselves.

David Holt is the 36th mayor of Oklahoma City. He wrote this for The Dallas Morning News.

Part of our Opinion series The American Middle, this essay describes how Oklahoma City, with no dominant majority, is getting things done through pragmatism and compromise.

100 years of citizenship: Tribal advocates urge more Native voter participation

Felix Clary, Tulsa World, June 17, 2024

This year is the 100th anniversary of the Indian Citizenship Act, yet tribal leaders and advocates say too many Natives are still hesitant to vote in local, state and federal elections.

For the past two decades, Oklahoma's voter turnout rate has been around 55%. Fourteen percent of Oklahoma's population identifies as Native American, with two of the largest tribes being Muscogee and Cherokee.

Less than 20% of Muscogee Nation citizens were registered to vote this year as of June 1. In 2021, the Cherokee Nation estimated that 45,000 Cherokee citizens were registered to vote, a significant increase over previous years but still amounting to around 100,000 Cherokee citizens not registered to vote in the state.

"In Oklahoma, Natives are still living with historic trauma. There is still a lot of mistrust with federal processes. The tribes here lived through boarding schools, removal from our homelands, and so many things," said Ginny Underwood, a Comanche with Rock the Native Vote.

Rock the Native Vote is one of many Native voting campaigns in Oklahoma. Underwood said that in the years she has campaigned for Native adults to register to vote in local, state and federal elections, she has seen voter anxiety in Native people centered around mistrust for state and federal governments.

"Maybe we're jaded, and rightfully so, but we need to help people understand that if we show up in numbers, it can have positive impacts, like getting elected officials that support tribal sovereignty," Underwood said.

'What is at stake when we vote?'

Voting is still 60 years young for Native American citizens, says Randy Knight, a Cherokee law student at the University of Tulsa College of Law.

The Indian Citizenship Act gave Native people the right to U.S. citizenship, but it wasn't until 1965, with passage of the Voting Rights Act, that all Native adults and other racial minorities were ensured of the right to vote.

Knight noted that it wasn't until 2019 that the Native American Voting Rights Act was passed by Congress, giving tribes the ability to increase polling sites and expand the types of facilities they use for voter registration.

The act states that there is a wide gap between the voter registration and turnout rates of eligible Native citizens and non-Native citizens.

It says Native voter access is obstructed by nontraditional addresses for residents on reservations, as well as "a lack of accessible registration and polling sites, either due to conditions such as geography, lack of paved roads, the absence of reliable and affordable broadband connectivity, and restrictions on the time and place that people can register and vote."

The act posed the solution of annual consultations between tribal leaders and the Department of Justice to resolve voting-related issues.

"I think there are some tools we've been given in the last four years that can help with Native voter turnout, and I think we'll start to see the fruits of that in this 2024 election," said Knight.

He said that engaging in voting is a form of assimilation, but one that is necessary at this point in history. Since passage of the Native American Voting Rights Act and the recognition of tribal sovereignty through the McGirt decision, he said that "we're seeing right now how important it is for people to engage in the system, whether they like it or not, because one of the ways to change the system is to engage with it."

Shawnee Chief Ben Barnes said the Warrior Up and Vote campaign expresses an even stricter message than Rock the Native Vote.

"We need to look at it like, 'What is at stake when we vote? What bills do we want passed?' We need to make sure people we elect on state and national levels truly understand what sovereignty means," he said in a Tulsa World interview.

According to the Native American Rights Fund, 66% of the known eligible Native American voting population is registered to vote. More than 1 million Native American residents are eligible to vote in the United States.

Engagement on issues 'doesn't always turn into voter turnout'

Oklahoma tribes have also made efforts in the past four years to increase Native voter registration.

Cherokee Nation Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr. is hopeful that the next generation of Cherokee citizens will be more engaged in voting.

"We have to identify the issues in terms of public policy and connect them to politics," he said. "From here forward, Cherokees are particularly motivated to have a governor of Oklahoma who is respectful to tribes and won't be hostile."

A recent issue that Hoskin has discussed is Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt's attempts to dismantle tribal tag agencies.

For Hoskin, this is a threat to tribal sovereignty, fueled by Stitt's concern for state toll road profit loss.

Knight warned that while young people, Native or non-Native, may be passionate about political issues, that doesn't mean they will vote.

"You see the young generations get all riled up for an election, and they seem really engaged, but that doesn't always turn into voter turnout," he said.

The Muscogee Nation has worked to diagnose voter apathy in the tribe for the past four years, looking for a remedy. Spokesman Jason Salsman said the most common symptom of voter apathy is a feeling of invisibility.

"You see a lot of politicians being critical of the McGirt decision. They don't really see things from a Native perspective. That can make you feel like you are not being heard and sometimes make you feel like you're invisible in your own state," Salsman said.

"Well, this is subscribing to a false mentality. We have to get people to understand that if they go to the polls, you can let your voice be heard."

He said Native people in Oklahoma have learned a lot about resilience and enduring spirit in the past 100 years. He thinks one of the biggest lessons they have learned is what it means to be a citizen of a sovereign Native nation while also being a U.S. citizen.

"When people say we have to walk in two worlds, that is what they mean. It's not easy. It's not a simple reckoning inside your soul. We're still fighting for people to understand and respect us in 2024," he said.

> ***"One of the penalties for refusing to participate in politics is that you end up being governed by your inferiors."*** *— Plato*

2 out of 3 Gen Z voters in Arizona say they will vote in November, ASU survey finds

Mark J. Scarp, ASU News, June 24, 2024

Two out of three Gen Z registered voters in Arizona say they plan to vote in this year's general election, while four in five say the two major political parties don't represent them, according to results of a new Arizona State University survey.

ASU's Center for an Independent and Sustainable Democracy interviewed 1,315 Arizona registered voters ages 20 to 30 in May. The center posted results in a new report titled "Frustrated but Engaged: Gen Z Attitudes on Voting, Parties and Issues in 2024."

The survey is supported by a grant from the Arizona Citizens Clean Elections Commission. It has a margin of error of plus-or-minus 2.7%.

Sixty-six percent of Gen Z voters surveyed said they plan to cast ballots in November, the survey found. Of those, a like number of Democrats and Republicans, 78% each, say they plan to vote, as do 53% of independents, according to center Co-Director and Professor Thom Reilly of the ASU School of Public Affairs, part of the Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions.

But a commanding majority of respondents — four out of five — say the two major parties aren't compatible with people their age or the country's best interests.

"They overwhelmingly say the two parties are not working for them," said Reilly, who said the survey found 80% of respondents disagree with the statement: "The current political system works for my generation, and both Republican and Democratic politicians want what's best for the country."

Forty-nine percent of respondents — more than those who say they affiliate with the two parties combined — say they are registered independents. About one-third identify as Latino

The 30-page report's title, "Frustrated but Engaged," reflects a dual attitude among 30-and-younger voters, Reilly said.

"Arizona Gen Z voters are ready to step in to take over as the boomers fade away, but they are profoundly frustrated with the political world that has been handed down to them," he said. "They are not ready to give up on democracy, but they want to participate on their own terms."

Several ballot initiatives that will go to Arizona voters this November could draw younger voters to the polls, said Jackie Salit, center co-director and a School of Public Affairs professor of practice.

"Particularly striking was the finding that independent Gen Z voters who did not vote in 2022 were more likely than their Democrat and Republican counterparts to say that ballot initiatives on abortion rights, open primaries and funding for public education would motivate them to vote," Salit said.

The survey's overall findings indicate that a potential uptick in Gen Z voter turnout this year would come from independents, she said.

Young voters identify top issues

Ninety percent of respondents say the cost of living is a serious concern to them, followed by affordable housing (86%) and protecting the water supply (81%). Health care is next with 79%, followed by fair and secure elections (78%), jobs (76%) and reproductive rights (74%), according to the report.

Farther down the list are gasoline prices (56%) and reducing student debt (49%). Only 25% consider a proposed U.S. ban on TikTok to be a major concern, Reilly said.

Independents and Democrats were aligned on affordable housing, health care, reproductive rights and climate change in the survey, while independents' support is similar to that of Republicans regarding fair and secure elections, taxes, gas prices and gun rights, the report said.

Water availability is a regional issue, with strong concerns among young voters in Arizona that might not be reflected in views of voters of similar ages in other states, Reilly said.

Gen Z registered voters ages 20–30 make up 19% of the Arizona voting-age population. Reilly said, and 18% of all registered voters. However, only about 10% of the total ballots cast in the 2022 general election came from this age group.

Among likely Arizona ballot measures in the November election, 93% of Democrats and 70% of independents surveyed say establishing a fundamental right to abortion before fetal viability through a state constitutional amendment would "more likely" impact their decision to vote.

Clean Elections Executive Director Tom Collins said the center's research findings are crucial to comprehend the increasing influence of younger voters and how to reach them.

"Understanding how Gen Z voters see our electoral system is particularly important for outreach to build and sustain democratic principles," Collins said.

The Arizona Citizens Clean Election Commission is a nonpartisan, voter-centered state agency that fosters greater citizen participation via the election process and voter education.

Opinion: Ways to get out the youth vote

Melissa Abdo, Tulsa World, July 28, 2024

The University of Tulsa was recently recognized by the All In Campus Democracy Challenge for having a highly established action plan to increase nonpartisan democratic engagement by promoting civic learning and voter participation among its students.

TU President Brad Carson noted the importance of creating a culture that encourages informed, active citizenship and developing the next generation of leaders.

In recent years, the youth vote has trended upward, yet it continues to fall well below older voter groups in turnout. Younger people are often mobile, moving to pursue an education or job opportunity, and have not had the same amount of time to develop consistent voting patterns or awareness of various registration and absentee ballot deadlines. They may be unfamiliar with local candidates and local issues in their new city or county.

Having an enormous stake in the future, however, young voters have valuable perspectives and bring fresh ideas and energy to critical issues. We should seek out and encourage their participation.

Apathy is often mentioned as a reason for suppressed youth turnout, but data may tell a different side of the story.

The nonpartisan Center for Information & Research of Civic Learning and Engagement has studied the youth vote for over 20 years. Recent data show 55% of Oklahomans ages 18-29 report discussing political and social issues with friends and family, yet only 15% of that age group voted in the 2022 elections, leaving Oklahoma among the four lowest states for voter turnout of people eligible to register.

Younger voters cited several reasons for not voting — a few we can help address. “Didn’t know how to register,” “Missed the deadline” and “Problem with absentee voting” are all voting barriers that can be reduced through education, planning and demystifying the process for first-time voters.

Here are a few points to remind young people of as they prepare for upcoming elections:

- Oklahoma residents who are at least 17½ may register to vote if they will turn 18 before the next election.
- College students may register with their permanent home address or their campus address.
- Voters unable to make it to their home precinct to vote in person on election day may request an absentee ballot. (It must be notarized before submitting.)
- Sample ballots may be downloaded from the to preview before heading to the polls.
- Reminders of important registration, absentee ballot requests and Election Day deadlines may be added to phones or planners.
- State and county election board websites where students are registered should be checked for the most current information.

Like voters of any age, young voters want to feel heard, but they don’t have the same experiences of talking to candidates or casting ballots. By discussing the process of registering and voting, we help remove any intimidation or uncertainty that might prevent them from taking part in one of their most important responsibilities as engaged citizens.

I hope voters of all ages will attend the Aug. 1 “Candidate Conversations,” a municipal forum hosted by the Tulsa World, the Tulsa Press Club, the Tulsa Voter Coalition and TU. Tulsans will have the opportunity to hear from candidates running for City Council and mayor.

The event begins with a meet and greet with City Council candidates at 5:30 p.m. outside TU’s Lorton Performance Center, 550 S. Gary Place, and then moves inside for a 7 p.m. mayoral forum. Bring a young person with you so they can hear directly from those running for office and register to vote in the Aug. 27 election!

Young or old, we all share in our city’s future, and it’s exciting to think that the young people you help register to vote today will be our leaders of tomorrow.

A dozen ways to increase voting in the United States

E.J. Dionne Jr. and Miles Rapoport, Carnegie Corporation of New York, September 12, 2022

Universal civic duty voting is a logical leap forward from the Voting Rights Act of 1965 — and it would provide much — needed protections to the right to vote. Our proposal is designed to vindicate the liberating purposes of the 1965 law and the rights guaranteed in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments of the Constitution. When the United States Supreme Court gutted key provisions of the Voting Rights Act in Shelby County v. Holder, it unleashed a new wave of voter suppression, rolling back advances once thought secure. A vibrant democracy movement, in turn, pushed back against the vote suppressors and worked actively for reforms that would increase participation.

A demand for universal civic duty voting is also a demand for such reforms, which would put an end to the cycles of inclusion and exclusion that have been part of our nation's story from the beginning. As our polling has shown, many Americans worry that civic duty voting will not work unless it is implemented along with other changes to our system. We agree. A range of gateway reforms is inextricably linked to the successful introduction of universal participation.

The example of Australia is instructive: that country's system works well because the requirement to vote works in tandem with a range of voter-friendly policies. Election day is conveniently scheduled on a Saturday, for example. Registration and access to the ballot are made easy, and election officials are required to make energetic, affirmative outreach efforts to ensure that citizens are registered. Voting opportunities, including mail-in voting, early voting, and numerous polling places, are extensive. Because everyone must vote, the practice of intimidating people at polling places so they won't vote is nonexistent. And the country's system of election administration is nonpartisan and professional, reducing the opportunities and temptations to tilt rules and practices in favor of one side.

The reforms we propose build on the work of the voting rights and democracy movements, and they should be promoted by federal law. Gateway reforms fall into three categories: expanding opportunities to register, increasing the options for voting, and strengthening effective election administration.

Expanding Opportunities to Register

1. Same-Day Voter Registration

Historically, the requirement to register in advance of voting was enacted as an intentional hurdle to participation, targeting the influx of immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries while also preventing the extension of the right to vote for Black Americans. It has also for years been standard practice to rationalize deadlines cutting off registration well before election day as necessary to give election officials time to create accurate lists of eligible voters.

But technological advances and the digitization of voting rolls make this rationale for advanced registration anachronistic. Same-day registration encourages new voters to enter the process, and also allows existing voters to update or correct errors in their registrations. The procedure, first adopted in the mid-1970s in Maine, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, has consistently led to significant increases in voter participation, without any major problems of implementation. The number of states that offer same-day registration has grown dramatically. In 2020, 21 states and the District of Columbia offered people the opportunity to use it, and it made a difference; consistent with earlier studies, states with same-day registration had turnout rates 5 percent higher than states without it.

2. Automatic Voter Registration

Twenty states and the District of Columbia have adopted policies that automatically register citizens to vote and update an existing voter registration whenever a citizen interacts with the state Department of Motor Vehicles and, in some jurisdictions, other governmental or social service agencies that collect citizenship information. Citizens typically are given the opportunity to opt out of registering, rather than being required to opt in. Oregon was the first state to move away from the opt-in model when the state implemented automatic registration in 2016. In that year alone, more than 225,000 residents were automatically registered through Oregon's Department of Motor Vehicles. The process, still relatively new, has rapidly expanded. In cases where ineligible voters (such as noncitizens) are mistakenly added to the rolls, states should enact "safe harbor" provisions to protect those added to the rolls by mistake. California and Vermont have such provisions to protect noncitizens in the small number of cases where this has taken place. Since immigration is a federal responsibility, Congress should enact national protections along these lines as well.

3. Restoring the Right to Vote for Citizens with Felony Convictions

Nearly all states, thanks to significant progress achieved over the last decade, now allow citizens with felony convictions to have their voting rights restored after completion of their sentence. However, the policies concerning the way that probation, parole, and the payment of fines and fees are handled vary considerably across states, as the Florida battle showed. Entirely decoupling people's right to vote from their incarceration status — as Maine, Vermont, and Washington, D.C., have done — would be a major step forward. At a minimum, a uniform standard that provides full restoration of voting rights after a person's release from prison would remove this functionally and historically racist barrier to voting.

4. Online Registration
Forty states and the District of Columbia now allow people to register online. This cost-saving measure, first implemented in Arizona in 2002, has eased voting registration for many. The COVID-19 pandemic gave additional impetus for online registration, as options for in-person registration narrowed in 2020.

5. Preregistration of 16- and 17-Year-Olds
Twenty-three states now allow eligible young people to preregister before they are 18 years old. Their names are then automatically placed on the electoral rolls upon their 18th birthday. Preregistration allows schools the opportunity to engage and educate students in civics and voting in high school before they disperse to the workforce or to college. Some studies have shown that this early registration makes it more likely that young people will become voters when they reach voting age.

Increasing the Options for Voting

States have also made significant progress since the days when voting was largely restricted to the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November — a vestige of a federal law enacted in 1845 based on the needs of farmers in what was then a heavily agricultural nation. The election of 2020, in which an astonishing 111 million people voted by means other than in person on that second Tuesday, shows just how far we have come from that anachronistic concept of voting.

6. Early Voting
Forty-three states and the District of Columbia now allow people to vote before election day. A 2020 study on the impact of early voting in Ohio by the American Economic Journal found "substantial positive impacts of early voting on turnout, equal to 0.22 percentage points of additional turnout per additional early voting day." In the 2020 election, 25 percent of voters cast their votes early in person.

The number of days that early voting is permitted and how convenient the process is made vary greatly between states. For example, early voting in Florida must begin at least 10 days before an election, while Virginia enacted a law in the 2020 legislative session allowing 45 days of early voting. Expanded early voting was also one of the successful adaptations made during the COVID-19 crisis. Federal policies to require states to offer at least 15 days of early voting would be an important step in the right direction.

7. Vote by Mail
Expanding mail-in voting was a central focus of efforts to allow people to vote safely in the 2020 elections. In addition, many states sent ballot applications, or ballots themselves, to every voter in their jurisdictions. Although most states initially made the expansions applicable only for the pandemic year, a number of states have moved to make the expansion permanent. Sixteen states, either by legislation or in their state constitutions, still require voters to provide an excuse in order to vote by absentee. They should join the other 29 states and the District of Columbia in the move toward no-excuse absentee voting. Five states — Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, Utah, and Washington — have gone beyond no-excuse absentee ballots by sending ballots to all or almost all eligible voters. California did the same for the 2020 election, as did Montana, Nevada, New Jersey, Vermont, and the District of Columbia. The results of the mail voting expansion were dramatic. Forty-five percent of all voters voted by mail. While all states had increases in turnout compared to 2016, the states that had full or close-to-full voting by mail had a 9 percent increase in turnout, compared to a 5 percent increase in states that did not do so. Expanded mail-in voting should clearly be a permanent part of our election process.

8. Flexible Election Day Options
During the pandemic, many states invested in innovative efforts to make polling places safe. These efforts would be equally useful in a nation free of COVID-19. Curbside voting is one example: poll workers took ballots or portable machines to voters' cars, eliminating the need to stand in line. Some jurisdictions used mobile voting centers. The use of drop boxes grew dramatically, for both early and election day voting. It also seems obvious that the successes during the pandemic in recruiting and training a new generation of election workers should be replicated in calmer times. Widely available early voting also improves the experience for election day voters by reducing the number of voters who need to use a single polling place. The shortened lines and wait times achieved in 2020 should be the goal for every election.

9. Convenient Placement of Accessible Precincts and Vote Centers
The success of universal voting will also depend on the convenient placement of polling places and the effective use of vote centers. This can be especially important for rural and Indigenous voters who often need to travel long distances to cast a ballot — particularly in tribal lands, where access is now often severely limited. Quantity matters: all jurisdictions should place precincts and vote centers in enough places to ensure ease of voting for all citizens.

Voters with disabilities can have their right to vote impaired when voting sites lack wheelchair accessibility or present other physical challenges All voting centers should meet Americans with Disabilities Act requirements and allow people with disabilities maximum access and privacy in their voting process. Colorado currently conducts and releases audits that detail counties' compliance with federal accessibility standards in their polling places after each election, and the rest of the country should follow suit.

All these reforms make sense with or without universal civic duty voting. But a system that would require everyone to vote must do all it can to remove obstacles to citizens carrying out their responsibilities.

Strengthening Effective Election Administration
Even good election policies can be undermined if election administration does not inspire confidence among voters

that their participation is valued and that their votes will count. Election administration had not been a topic that made anyone's heart beat faster, yet one heartening result of the 2020 pandemic election was the transformation of many election officials into national heroes. Like other essential workers — for essential they were — they deserved the acclaim. The honor we accorded them should inspire far more interest in the measures we need to take to administer elections professionally and effectively, another essential step toward universal civic duty voting. Laws in some states to undercut the nonpartisan administration of elections must be challenged both through federal legislation and in the courts. Election subversion has become as significant a threat to voting rights as voter suppression.

10. Maintenance of Voting Lists

Every jurisdiction must maintain accurate and up-to-date voting lists. Even with civic duty voting in place, it will be necessary to guard against overly aggressive purging policies, which often remove eligible voters from the electoral rolls. Aggressive purges have resulted in major legal battles in a number of states, as recounted earlier. States should carefully follow the list management procedures specified in the National Voter Registration Act and engage in careful cross-state cooperation through the Electronic Registration Information Center.

11. Adequate Funding of Election Administration

The funding of elections became a major issue during the COVID-19 crisis, and substantial federal support on an ongoing basis will be required to make voting accessible to all citizens. Elections are typically an afterthought in local budgeting. This must change. Together, all levels of government must come to see investments in the election process as critical investments in democracy itself.

Building on 2020

The registration and voting reforms advanced by organizers, advocates, and forward-looking election officials are encouraging and important. They have had real effects on turnout. Expanded voting opportunities in blue, red, and purple states are positive steps toward increased participation. Embracing and building on these achievements — and, yes, resisting efforts to roll them back — will improve American democracy now, and give universal civic duty voting its best opportunity to succeed.

E. J. Dionne Jr. is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, a syndicated columnist for the Washington Post, University Professor at Georgetown University, and visiting professor at Harvard University.

Miles Rapoport is executive director of 100% Democracy: An Initiative for Universal Voting and the senior practice fellow in American Democracy at the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation at the Harvard Kennedy School. He formerly served in the Connecticut state legislature and as secretary of the state. He is a past president of Demos and of Common Cause.

Section 3

Addressing Polarization

Fixing Congress: Operations improve, bipartisanship and civility need attention

J.D. Rackey and Michael Thorning, Bipartisan Policy Center, April 18, 2024

If you ask the public what they think of Congress, decades of polling shows that you'll get a negative response. If you ask the staff who work in Congress, you're likely to get similarly cynical and dejected answers. But a new survey of senior staff suggests that some aspects of Congressional operations have noticeably improved in recent years, reaffirming that Congress has the power to change.

Since 2019, Congress has been engaged in an effort to take stock of its internal operations, assess its strength compared to that of the sprawling executive branch, and boost its overall capacity that has been waning for decades. Essentially, Congress has been examining how it can get better at writing laws, helping constituents, and overseeing the federal government. These efforts were initiated by the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress, which operated from 2019 to 2023 and passed over 200 bipartisan recommendations aimed at improving the first branch. In 2023, the Committee on House Administration established a new Subcommittee on Modernization to implement the Select Committee's recommendations and seek out new ideas for boosting congressional capacity.

These two member-led efforts, alongside counterparts in congressional support agencies and numerous external stakeholders, have diligently worked to improve the internal operations of the House of Representatives. Among other things, the congressional modernization movement has sought to address issues related to staff capacity, operational infrastructure, and the workplace culture of Capitol Hill. A new report from the Congressional Management Foundation (CMF) provides a snapshot of the impact of this work thus far.

When it comes to boosting congressional capacity, the CMF report finds that senior congressional staff are noticing improvement. Across eight different measures including access to nonpartisan policy expertise, human resource support, and technological infrastructure there was a marked increase in respondents who were Very Satisfied with the institution's performance, ranging from +6% to +20% across all measures since CMF's last report in 2022.

These findings underscore the tremendous successes of the modernization movement. As former Representatives Rodney Davis (R-IL) and Ed Perlmutter (D-CO) highlight in a recent op-ed, Congress has already implemented many of the technology and infrastructure recommendations of the Select Committee, and the efforts of the Modernization Subcommittee have led to the recognition of Congress as a world leader for its approach to generative AI within a legislature.

Beyond technology, there have also been numerous advances in human resource support on Capitol Hill. The Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) has launched numerous new programs to provide best practices and institutional support to the 441 otherwise independent member offices that have varying levels of management experience, such as a coaching program for staff, a centralized HR hub, and the House Intern Resource Office. These developments help further Congress's ability to recruit, train, and retain high-quality staff, which is of particular importance in a tight labor market where positions outside the institution often come with better pay and improved work-life balance.

The CMF report also brings some nuance to the ongoing narrative of congressional dysfunction. Respondents from both parties overwhelmingly believe that civility and bipartisanship among members and staff are necessary ingredients to the functioning of the legislature. However, they are almost entirely unsatisfied with the current state of either, noting it is difficult to build relationships across party lines. Republicans and Democrats also agree that there is little incentive for doing so, and that the rhetoric used by some senators and representatives promotes division among staffers.

As one interview subject noted, "Relationships among staff appear to be much better than at the elected level. However, Members and Senators' polarizing comments discourage staff from working together even when there is a good personal relationship."

Addressing norms of civility and bipartisan collaboration is a more difficult problem to solve. Congressional leaders can't mandate that members and staff simply "behave nicer" to one another.

The Select Committee identified several ways to help address these types of concerns. For example, Congress could provide information to members and staff about external organizations and resources focused on identifying and fostering common ground. To incentivize greater focus on legislative work rather than messaging politics, it could reassess chamber rules and build new technology to acknowledge a wider range of member contributions to legislation. Congress can also create more forums and opportunities that facilitate cooperation. For instance, committees could hold bipartisan agenda setting retreats, host nonpartisan pre-hearing briefings, and conduct more domestic policy delegation trips, all of which would foster policy learning and facilitate the growth of bipartisan relationships. Congress could even host a bipartisan retreat for the entire institution as it has in the past.

Unlike operations, technology, and human resources-related recommendations, many of the Select Committee's civility and bipartisan collaboration recommendations remain unimplemented. One recent glimmer of hope is the creation of a staff collaboration space meant to provide a forum for staff from different offices—and parties—to easily meet.

As the CMF report notes and scores of people have lamented for years, in many ways, Congress is broken. But not irredeemably so. One leader of the modernization movement, Representative Derek Kilmer (D-WA), often quips, "if you want things to be different in Congress, then you have to do things differently." This report's findings indicate that this is true; congressional staff have noticed improvement in the areas where Congress has enacted policy and practice changes to its internal operations. Solutions exist to the problems that plague Congress, and things can get better if the institution has the will and courage to implement them.

How politics got so polarized

Elizabeth Kolbert, The New Yorker, December 27, 2021

On June 19, 1954, eleven boys from Oklahoma City boarded a bus bound for Robbers Cave State Park, about a hundred and fifty miles to the southeast. The boys had never met before, but all had just completed fifth grade and came from middle-income families. All were white and Protestant. When they reached the park, the boys were assigned to a cabin at an empty Boy Scout camp. They dubbed themselves the Rattlers.

The following day, a second group of boys—also all white, Protestant, and middle class—arrived at the camp. They were assigned to a cabin that could not be seen from the first. They decided to call themselves the Eagles.

For a week, the two groups went about their activities—swimming, tossing a baseball, sitting around a campfire—unaware of the other. The groups had separate swimming holes, and their meal hours were staggered, so they didn't meet at the mess hall. As they ate, played, and tussled, each band developed its own social hierarchy and, hence, its own mores. The Rattlers, for instance, took to cursing. The Eagles frowned on profanity.

Toward the end of the week, the two groups learned about each other. The reaction was swift. Each group wanted to challenge the other to a contest, and their counsellors scheduled a tournament.

On the first day, the Rattlers won at both baseball and tug-of-war. The Eagles were livid. One of them declared that the Rattlers were too big. They couldn't be fifth graders; they had to be older. The Eagles, on the way back to their cabin that evening, noticed that their rivals had attached a team flag to the backstop of the baseball field. They tore it down and set it on fire. The next morning, the two groups got into a fistfight, which had to be broken up by the counsellors.

That day, the group's positions reversed. The Eagles won the baseball game, a development they attributed to their prayers for victory and to their rivals' foul mouths. Then they won at tug-of-war. The Rattlers responded to these setbacks by raiding the Eagles' cabin after the Eagles had gone to sleep. The Eagles staged a counterraid while their adversaries were at breakfast. Finding their beds overturned, the Rattlers accused the Eagles of being "communists."

As tensions mounted, both groups became increasingly aggressive and self-justifying. The Rattlers decided that they'd lost at baseball because the Eagles had better bats. They turned a pair of jeans they'd stolen from the Eagles into a banner, and marched around with it. The Eagles accused the Rattlers of cowardice, for having staged their raid at night. They stockpiled rocks for use in case of another incursion. When the Eagles won the tournament, each boy received a medal and a penknife. The Rattlers immediately stole them.

At this point, members of both groups announced that they wanted nothing more to do with the other. But their counsellors, who were really grad students, were just getting going. They brought the bands together for another contest—of the sort that only a social scientist could love. Hundreds of beans were strewn in the dirt, and each boy was given a minute to collect as many as he could in a paper bag. Then, one by one, the boys were called up and the contents of their bags ostensibly projected onto a screen for everyone to count. In fact, the bags were never opened; the same beans were projected onto the screen over and over, in different arrangements. The Rattlers saw what they wanted to, and so did the Eagles. By the former's reckoning, each Rattler had gathered, on average, ten per cent more beans than his rivals. By the latter's, the Eagles were the better bean-picker-uppers by a margin of twenty per cent.

The whole elaborate experiment is now regarded as a classic of social psychology. The participants had been chosen because they were so much alike. All it took for them to come to loathe one another was a different totem animal and a contest for some penknives. In the aftermath of the Second World War, these results were unsettling. They still are.

Americans today seem to be divided into two cabins: the Donkeys and the Elephants. According to a YouGov survey, sixty per cent of Democrats regard the opposing party as "a serious threat to the United States." For Republicans, that figure approaches seventy per cent. A Pew survey found that more than half of all Republicans and nearly half of all Democrats believe their political opponents to be "immoral." Another Pew survey, taken a few months before the 2020 election, found that seven out of ten Democrats who were looking for a relationship wouldn't date a Donald Trump voter, and almost five out of ten Republicans wouldn't date someone who supported Hillary Clinton.

Even infectious diseases are now subject to partisan conflict. In a Marquette University Law School poll from November, seventy per cent of Democrats said that they considered covid a "serious problem" in their state, compared with only thirty per cent of Republicans. The day after the World Health Organization declared Omicron a "variant of concern," Representative Ronny Jackson, a Texas Republican, labelled the newly detected strain a Democratic trick to justify absentee voting. "Here comes the MEV—the Midterm Election Variant," Jackson, who served as Physician to the President under Trump and also under Barack Obama, tweeted.

How did America get this way? Partisans have a simple answer: the other side has gone nuts! Historians and political scientists tend to look for more nuanced explanations. In the past few years, they have produced a veritable Presidential library's worth of books with titles like "Fault Lines," "Angry Politics," "Must Politics Be War?," and "The Partisan Next Door."

Lilliana Mason is a political scientist at Johns Hopkins. In "Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity," she notes that not so very long ago the two parties were hard to tell apart, both demographically and ideologically. In the early nineteen-fifties, Blacks were split more or less evenly between the two parties, and so were whites. The same held for men, Catholics, and union members. The parties' platforms, meanwhile, were so similar that the American Political Science Association issued a plea that Democrats and Republicans make more of an effort to distinguish themselves: "Alternatives between the parties are defined so badly that it is often difficult to determine what the election has decided even in broadest terms."

The fifties, Mason notes, were "not a time of social peace." Americans fought, often in ugly ways, over, among many other things, Communism, school desegregation, and immigration. The parties were such tangles, though, that these battles didn't break down along partisan lines. Americans, Mason writes, could "engage in social prejudice and vitriol, but this was decoupled from their political choices."

Then came what she calls the great "sorting." In the wake of the civil-rights movement, the women's movement, Richard Nixon's Southern Strategy, and Roe v. Wade, the G.O.P. became whiter, more churchgoing, and more male than its counterpart. These differences, already significant by the early nineteen-nineties, had become even more pronounced by the twenty-tens.

"We have gone from two parties that are a little bit different in a lot of ways to two parties that are very different in a few powerful ways," Mason says. As the two parties sorted socially, they also drifted apart ideologically, fulfilling the Political Science Association's plea. In the past few election cycles, there's been no mistaking the Republican Party's platform for the Democrats'.

By now, party, race, faith, and even TV viewing habits are all correlated. (One study, based on TiVo data, found that the twenty television shows most popular among Republicans were completely different from those favored by Democrats.) As a result, Mason argues, Americans no longer juggle several, potentially conflicting group identities; they associate with one, all-encompassing group, which confers what she calls a "mega-identity."

When people feel their "mega-identity" challenged, they get mega-upset. Increasingly, Washington politics—and also Albany, Madison, and Tallahassee politics—have been reduced to "us" versus "them," that most basic (and dangerous) of human dynamics. As Mason puts it, "We have more self-esteem real estate to protect as our identities are linked together."

Mason draws on the work of Henri Tajfel, a Polish-born psychologist who taught at Oxford in the nineteen-sixties. (Tajfel, a Jew, was attending the Sorbonne when the Second World War broke out; he fought in the French Army, spent five years as a German P.O.W., and returned home to learn that most of his family had been killed.) In a series of now famous experiments, Tajfel divided participants into meaningless groups. In one instance, participants were told that they had been sorted according to whether they'd over- or under-estimated the number of dots on a screen; in another, they were told that their group assignments had been entirely random. They immediately began to favor members of their own group. When Tajfel asked them to allocate money to the other participants, they consistently gave less to those in the other group. This happened even when they were told that, if they handed out the money evenly, everyone would get more. Given a choice between maximizing the benefits to both groups and depriving both groups but depriving "them" of more, participants chose the latter. "It is the winning that seems more important," Tajfel noted.

Trump, it seems safe to say, never read Tajfel's work. But he seems to have intuitively grasped it. During the 2016 campaign, Mason notes, he frequently changed his position on matters of policy. The one thing he never wavered on was the importance of victory. "We're going to win at every level," he told a crowd in Albany. "We're going to win so much, you may even get tired of winning."

In January, 2018, Facebook announced that it was changing the algorithm it used to determine which posts users see in their News Feed. Ostensibly, the change was designed to promote "meaningful interactions between people." After the 2016 campaign, the company had been heavily criticized for helping to spread disinformation, much of it originating from fake, Russian-backed accounts. The new algorithm was supposed to encourage "back-and-forth discussion" by boosting content that elicited emotional reactions.

The new system, by most accounts, proved even worse than the old. As perhaps should have been anticipated, the posts that tended to prompt the most reaction were the most politically provocative. The new algorithm thus produced a kind of vicious, or furious, cycle: the more outrage a post inspired, the more it was promoted, and so on.

How much has the rise of social media contributed to the spread of hyperpartisanship? Quite a bit, argues Chris Bail, a professor of sociology and public policy at Duke University and the author of "Breaking the Social Media Prism: How to Make Our Platforms Less Polarizing" (Princeton). Use of social media, Bail writes, "pushes people further apart."

The standard explanation for this is the so-called echo-chamber effect. On Facebook, people "friend" people

with similar views—either their genuine friends or celebrities and other public figures they admire. Trump supporters tend to hear from other Trump supporters, and Trump haters from other Trump haters. A study by researchers inside Facebook showed that only about a quarter of the news content that Democrats post on the platform is viewed by Republicans, and vice versa. A study of Twitter use found similar patterns. Meanwhile, myriad studies, many dating back to before the Internet was ever dreamed of, have demonstrated that, when people confer with others who agree with them, their views become more extreme. Social scientists have dubbed this effect "group polarization," and many worry that the Web has devolved into one vast group-polarization palooza.

"It seems plain that the Internet is serving, for many, as a breeding ground for extremism, precisely because like-minded people are connecting with greater ease and frequency with one another, and often without hearing contrary views," Cass Sunstein, a professor at Harvard Law School, writes in "#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media."

Bail, who directs Duke's Polarization Lab, disagrees with the standard account, at least in part. Social media, he allows, does encourage political extremists to become more extreme; the more outrageous the content they post, the more likes and new followers they attract, and the more status they acquire. For this group, Bail writes, "social media enables a kind of microcelebrity."

But the bulk of Facebook and Twitter users are more centrist. They aren't particularly interested in the latest partisan wrangle. For these users, "posting online about politics simply carries more risk than it's worth," Bail argues. By absenting themselves from online political discussions, moderates allow the extremists to dominate, and this, Bail says, promotes a "profound form of distortion." Extrapolating from the arguments they encounter, social-media users on either side conclude that those on the other are more extreme than they actually are. This phenomenon has become known as false polarization. "Social media has sent false polarization into hyperdrive," Bail observes.

My grandfather, a refugee from Nazi Germany, was all too aware of the hazards of us-versus-them thinking. And yet, upon arriving in New York, midway through F.D.R.'s second term, he became a passionate partisan. He often invoked Philipp Scheidemann, who served as Germany's Chancellor at the close of the First World War, and then, in 1919, resigned in protest over the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. The hand that signed the treaty, Scheidemann declared, should wither away. Around Election Day, my grandfather liked to say that any hand that pulled the lever for a Republican should suffer a similar fate.

My mother inherited my grandfather's politics and passed them down to me. For several years during the George W. Bush Administration, I drove around with a bumper sticker that read "Republicans for Voldemort." I thought the bumper sticker was funny. Eventually, though, I had to remove it, because too many people in town took it as a sign of support for the G.O.P.

Several recent books on polarization argue that if, as a nation, we are to overcome the problem, we have to start with ourselves. "The first step is for citizens to recognize their own impairments," Taylor Dotson, a professor of social science at the New Mexico Institute of Mining and Technology, writes in "The Divide: How Fanatical Certitude Is Destroying Democracy" (M.I.T.). In "The Way Out: How to Overcome Toxic Polarization" (Columbia), Peter T. Coleman, a professor of psychology and education at Columbia, counsels, "Think and reflect critically on your own thinking."

"We need to work on ourselves," Robert B. Talisse, a philosophy professor at Vanderbilt, urges in "Sustaining Democracy: What We Owe to the Other Side" (Oxford). "We need to find ways to manage belief polarization within ourselves and our alliances."

The trouble with the partisan-heal-thyself approach, at least as this partisan sees it, is twofold. First, those who have done the most to polarize America seem the least inclined to recognize their own "impairments." Try to imagine Donald Trump sitting in Mar-a-Lago, munching on a Big Mac and reflecting critically on his "own thinking."

Second, the fact that each party regards the other as a "serious threat" doesn't mean that they are equally threatening. The January 6th attack on the Capitol, the ongoing attempts to discredit the 2020 election, the new state laws that will make it more difficult for millions of people to vote, particularly in communities of color—only one party is responsible for these. In November, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, a watchdog group, added the U.S. to its list of "backsliding democracies." Although the group's report didn't explicitly blame the Republicans, it came pretty close: "A historic turning point came in 2020–2021 when former President Donald Trump questioned the legitimacy of the 2020 election results in the United States. Baseless allegations of electoral fraud and related disinformation undermined fundamental trust in the electoral process."

As the Times columnist Ezra Klein points out, the great sorting in American politics has led to a great asymmetry. "Our political system is built around geographic units, all of which privilege sparse, rural areas over dense, urban ones," he writes in "Why We're Polarized" (Avid Reader). This effect is most obvious in the U.S. Senate, where each voter from Wyoming enjoys, for all intents and purposes, seventy times the clout of her counterpart from California, and it's also clear in the Electoral College. (It's more subtle but, according to political scientists, still significant in the House of Representatives.)

Klein says that the Republicans, with overrepresented rural counties on their side, can afford to move a lot further from

the center than the Democrats can. "The G.O.P.'s geographic advantage permits it to run campaigns aimed at a voter well to the right of the median American," he writes. Conversely, "to win, Democrats don't just need to appeal to the voter in the middle. They need to appeal to voters well to the right of the middle."

Republicans, Klein notes, have lost the popular vote in six of the past seven Presidential elections. If they had also lost the White House six times, presumably they would have come up with a broader, more inclusive message. Instead, in 2000 and then again in 2016, despite having lost, the G.O.P. won. This could easily happen again in 2024.

Such is the state of the union these days that no forum seems too small or too sleepy to be polarized. In October, noting a "disturbing spike" in threats of violence against local school-board members, the U.S. Attorney General, Merrick Garland, directed the Justice Department and the F.B.I. to come up with a plan to combat the trend. Predictably, Garland's directive itself became the focus of partisan attacks: at a hearing on Capitol Hill, Senator Tom Cotton, Republican of Arkansas, accused the Attorney General of "siccing the Feds on parents at school boards across America."

"You should resign in disgrace," Cotton said, wagging his finger at Garland.

If thoughtful self-examination isn't going to get America out of its rut, what is? According to Stephen Marche, a novelist and a former columnist for Esquire, the answer is obvious. "The United States is coming to an end," he declares at the start of "The Next Civil War: Dispatches from the American Future" (Avid Reader). Indeed, he writes, "running battles between protestors and militias, armed rebels attempting to kidnap sitting governors, uncertainty about the peaceful transition of power—reading about them in another country, you would think a civil war had already begun."

Marche is Canadian, and he sees this as key. Americans have become so invested in their duelling narratives that they can't acknowledge the obvious; it takes an outsider to reveal it to them. "My nationality gives me a specific advantage in describing an imminent American collapse," Marche writes. He describes Canada as Horatio to the U.S.'s Hamlet—"a close and sympathetic and mostly irrelevant witness" to the drama's main action.

"The Next Civil War" might be called a work of speculative non-fiction; some parts are reported, others invented. The book is structured as a series of possible disasters, each of which sends the U.S. spiralling into chaos. In one, the President is assassinated when she makes a surprise stop at a Jamba Juice. In a second, a dirty bomb destroys the U.S. Capitol. In a third, a collection of white-supremacist militia groups converge on a rural bridge that the government has closed for repairs. The U.S. Army is called in; eventually, weary of the standoff, it blows the militia members to bits.

Marche is fond of sweeping claims. "No American president of either party, now and for the foreseeable future, can be an icon of unity, only of division," he writes at one point. "Once shared purpose disappears, it's gone," he declares later in the same chapter. Unfortunately, too many of his pronouncements ring true, such as "When the crisis comes, the institutions won't be there."

Each of Marche's scenarios results in a different form of social breakdown. The carnage at the bridge is followed by a simmering insurgency; the Capitol bombing by government repression, widespread rioting, and summary executions. Toward the close of the book, Marche entertains the possibility that the U.S. could be broken into four separate countries, roughly corresponding to the Northeast, the West Coast, the Midwest plus the Southeast, and Texas. "Disunion could be liberation," he notes.

The Robbers Cave experiment suggests another way out. After having nudged the Eagles and the Rattlers toward conflict, the researchers wanted to see if they could be nudged back. They brought the boys together for a variety of peaceable activities. One day, for example, they arranged for the two groups to meet up in the mess hall for lunch. The result was a food fight. Since "contact situations" weren't working, the researchers moved on to what they called "superordinate goals." They staged a series of crises—a water shortage, a supply-truck breakdown—that could be resolved only if the boys coöperated. Dealing with these manufactured emergencies made the groups a lot friendlier toward each another, to the point where, on the trip back to Oklahoma City, the Rattlers used five dollars they'd won from the bean-collecting contest to treat the Eagles to malteds.

Could "superordinate goals" help depolarize America? There would seem to be no shortage of crises for the two parties to work together on. The hitch, of course, is that they'd first need to agree on what these are. ♦

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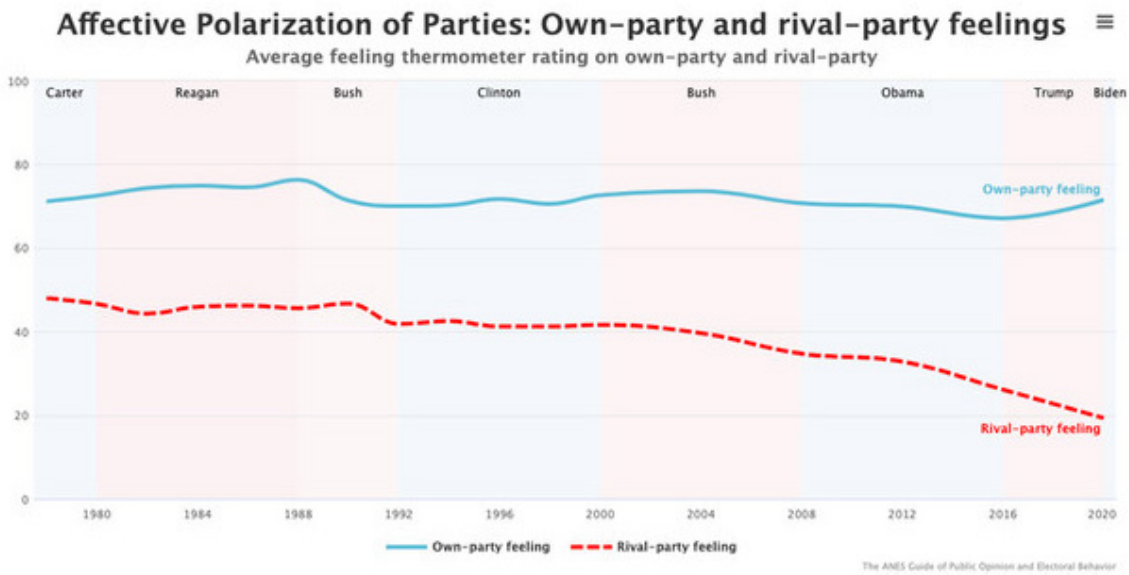
Increasing polarization: Americans harbor more hostility towards rival party

Cory Smith, The National Desk, February 21, 2024



New research confirms that Americans are just as polarized as they seem.

Researchers from Rice and Stanford universities sat out to address concerns with how political surveys are conducted.

Response rates for the surveys have fallen, and partisan devotees might be more willing to take part. The thought was that the results might be skewed and make the polarization issue look worse than it really is.

But Matthew Tyler, an assistant professor of politics at Rice, said his study with Shanto Iyengar of Stanford confirmed that the results showing growing polarization aren't just the product of an overrepresentation of partisan diehards.

Tyler said they looked specifically at something called "affective polarization" as measured by the oft-cited American National Election Studies.

The surveys they examined were intended to gauge how warmly Americans feel about folks on the other side of the political aisle.

They weren't looking at voting habits, ideology or positions on specific issues.

Generally, such surveys let Americans rate the opposition on a 0-100 scale. A high score means they think warmly of people in the rival party. A low score means they think poorly of them.

The ANES' time series for the so-called "feeling thermometer" of rival party members came in at just 19.3 in 2020, down from 41.6 the survey captured 20 years earlier.

A different ANES measurement shows 44% of voters are also now considered "strong" partisans, up from just over 30% who fell into that grouping 20 years ago. Meanwhile, the shares of both "weak" partisans and independents have fallen.

Just around 12% of voters are true independents – the critical and unattached voters who can sway the outcome of an election.

How have Americans become so polarized?

"You could spend a whole semester on trying to answer that question," Oklahoma State University politics professor Seth McKee chuckled Wednesday.

McKee said he uses words such as "sorting" and "tribalism" to describe the polarization.

Voters get cues from politicians, and political views have become more nationalized, McKee said.

"We just don't have as many of what we call cross-pressured voters, meaning that they hold beliefs and have demographic profiles that pull them in both partisan directions," McKee said.

And he blamed a lack of leadership and accountability for allowing Americans to move further apart.

Polarization is a "massive danger" to the nation, McKee said.

In the most extreme case, you run the risk of a Jan. 6-style event.

But every day it makes it harder for Americans and the lawmakers who represent them to find compromise and work toward solutions to shared problems.

McKee said the recent failure of the Senate border compromise is a great example of polarization getting in the way of governing.

"It's so binary," he said of how Republicans and Democrats increasingly view their side as right and the other side as wrong.

Is there any hope of Americans becoming less polarized?

"That is the $64 million question in American politics," McKee said.

Point of View: Will increasing turnout so everyone votes reduce polarization and extreme partisanship?

Michael Neblo, Jason Brennan, & Whitney Quesenbery, The Georgetown Institute for the Study of Markets & Ethics

Engaging Constituents is Essential to Depolarizing Congress

By Michael Neblo – Professor of Political Science and (by courtesy) Philosophy, Communication, and Public Policy at The Ohio State University

Political extremism and polarization are at their highest levels in over a century, while civic participation plus trust and approval of Congress are at near all-time lows. Gridlock, obstruction, and resistance are now normal, at a time when the country faces crucial problems requiring action. People wonder if the country could once again veer into civil war or if we're already in a cold one.

Direct solutions such as depolarizing the partisan wings are likely impossible in this age of fragmented media, while creating more competitive congressional districts requires those who have been elected on one set of rules to change them. Rather than thinking outside of the box, a more viable solution is making the box bigger, i.e., increasing new voter turnout to shift the political incentives driving polarization.

Countering Constituent Disengagement and Interest Group Politics

To increase voter turnout, we have to get beyond misleading accounts attributing non-participation to apathy or even satisfaction with the status quo. Disengagement comes from constituents' sense of being disconnected from the work of their representatives and their beliefs that politics is responsive to organized interests, rather than to the concerns of average voters. Traditional constituent engagement opportunities have mostly become venues for interest group politics. While such opportunities have their place, interest group politics tends to drive out all but the most motivated individuals, and to distort representatives' views of the range of opinion amongst the full breadth of their constituents. This process reinforces the perception that elected officials respond only to organized interests, which leads to further disengagement and low civic participation, thus creating a vicious cycle where members can only engage with and represent "the loudest voices in the room."

Of course, political candidates sometimes do make efforts to recruit new voters into the system, but motivating those already soured on conventional politics is a heavy lift. For over a decade now, the Connecting to Congress initiative has been bringing together members of Congress with a representative cross-section of their districts in independently moderated online Deliberative Town Halls (DTHs) to test a different mode of constituent engagement. The results were striking:

- DTHs attracted constituents from every walk of life—in fact, those people most frustrated with politics as usual were the most likely to attend.
- The design of the events—with participants reviewing non-partisan background materials and engaging in deliberation guided by impartial facilitators—resulted in high-quality, informed conversations, not talking points and simplistic arguments.
- Participants became 10% more likely to vote after participating in the town hall.

These events involved randomized control trials to make sure that these effects were due to the DTHs and not self-selection.

Changing Congress Through Constituent Engagement

Scaling up the opportunities for regular people to participate in DTHs could encourage enough new voters to have a significant effect. Over time, this could create new incentives in Congress: power that comes from the ability to engage and serve all constituents as opposed to pleasing a small base by slinging mud or pushing extremist policies. And even short of that, deliberative constituent engagement has other benefits. For example, our team convened a series of small group, citizen-to-citizen forums aimed at identifying common ground on the issue of immigration. After these forums, participants reported that they understood the views of others much better, had more respect for other views, and even became more sympathetic to potential actions they initially opposed.

The other great advantage of this kind of constituent engagement is that it can be done now. Deliberative engagement doesn't rely on elected officials to take the first step. These forums can be organized and promoted by civil society.

Letting the two angriest people in the car take turns yanking the wheel back and forth is a formula for a wreck. If we can get more deliberative participation, we all stand a much better chance of getting someplace we actually want to go—and in one piece.

Polarization is Here to Stay

By Jason Brennan – Flanagan Family Professor of Ethics, Economics, and Public Policy, Georgetown University

Increased political participation would not reduce polarization. On the contrary, increased participation would probably make polarization worse. Increasing participation would not mean the quiet middle would exert a moderating influence on the more

active extremes; it would mean the mostly apathetic middle would become mean, intolerant jerks, like most current voters.

In "Hearing the Other Side," Diana Mutz asks Democrats and Republicans why someone might vote the other way. Most citizens respond, "that's easy; the other side is stupid and evil." Citizens who respond like this participate early and often, are members of political clubs, and give money to politics.

However, the citizens who can explain others' points of view stay home and don't vote. Citizens who do not care about politics also stay home. In short, politically active citizens are close-minded, faithful partisans. The people who do not participate are either the few that understand different points of view or the many who find politics boring.

Are Moderate Voters Really Moderate?

It is true that non-voters are less partisan. But do not confuse them for genuine moderates committed to middle-ground politics. Instead, political scientists find that most "moderate" voters are simply disinterested in politics. By analogy, I would show up as moderate if polled about current celebrity feuds not because I think the truth is in-between, but because I do not care.

If we induced everyone to vote and participate, more of these seemingly "moderate" voters would flood the polls. This would not itself reduce polarization among voters; it would simply mean that politically apathetic citizens would vote more.

You might think that this would nevertheless reduce polarization in Congress. Perhaps if the apathetic middle voted, then winning politicians would need to cater to the middle. This conjecture is reasonable but false. One reason for this is that most apathetic moderates, despite calling themselves independent, are "closet partisans." This means the typical, self-described "independent" voter always votes for the same party every time they vote.

When they vote, they do not much care what the party or candidate they support wants to do. As Donald Kinder and Nathan Kalmoe demonstrate in their book "Neither Liberal nor Conservative," most voters are ideologically innocent and do not vote for a party because they agree with that party's politics. Most voters are ignorant and do not know what the party or candidate they support has done, plans to do, or realistically can do. Most voters vote for the same party over and over regardless of what the party proposes to do, whether the party pushes a moderate or extreme agenda, and regardless of how well the party performs.

Thus, inducing so-called moderates to vote will not alter political outcomes because they do not seek out and push for moderate candidates. If we push them to vote, most will just vote a straight party ballot regardless of what the party wants.

Polarized Neighborhoods: Political Self-Segregation

The other reason increased participation will not reduce congressional polarization involves districting. Since the 1960s, Americans have self-segregated into zip codes and districts by party affiliation. Democrats live among Democrats and Republicans among Republicans. Which party wins a district depends entirely on who lives in that district. Thanks to self-segregation, the median citizen is either a strong Democrat or Republican. If everyone voted, the typical electoral district would remain strongly red or blue, and so elected officials would remain polarized.

Indeed, increasing political participation would probably increase polarization. It would be like throwing fire on the flames. Our best evidence in political science and political psychology shows that when people start participating in politics, they tend to become nastier, meaner, less tolerant, more close-minded, and more extreme. Politics make us mean and dumb. Getting apathetic voters to participate more would mean making these apathetic citizens as nasty and mean as current politically active citizens.

Your Vote Does Not Matter

The reasons why are well-understood: Individual votes make no difference. The probability that you will change the outcome of a major election is nearly zero. Voting with, say, the goal of helping Ukraine is about as effective as throwing money into a bottle in Cape Cod, hoping the bottle will wash up on the Ukrainian shores. How you vote has never made a difference and never will. How we vote matters, but how any one of us votes does not. That's indeed the point of democracy.

Voters know it, too, and this explains their behavior. If voters genuinely believed their individual votes made a difference, we would expect them to be well-informed, pay careful attention to what parties plan to do, be well-versed in the social sciences so that they can assess party platforms, keep track of what their candidates did, and welcome evidence proving they are mistaken. But when political scientists and psychologists investigate voter behavior, they find the opposite. Citizens know next to nothing about politics, and they reason in biased ways that do not track with the truth. Most citizens do not know what their party plans to do. Of those who do, most will parrot whatever platform their party pushes. If the party changes, they also change but are unaware they "changed their minds." The typical Democrat is not a Democrat because they are pro-gun control; they are pro-gun control because they are a Democrat.

Citizens do not in fact vote to induce the government to change policies. After all, most have little idea what their party has done, will do, or could do. Instead, politics is about signaling to other members of your identity group that you are a faithful member of that group.

The psychology behind voting is the same as the psychology behind sports. I show my fellow Bostonians that I am one of them by wearing Red Sox gear and hating the Yankees. You show fellow farmers you are one of them by voting Republican and hating the Democrats. You show fellow college professors you are one of them by voting Democrat and hating the Republicans. Since individual votes don't matter, voters use their political identity for social benefits.

Reforming Today's Voting System
To reduce polarization, we should instead change voting systems. The United States uses "first-past-the-post" voting; whoever gets the most votes wins. This system reliably produces two major political parties. Because we only have two major parties, citizens can easily sort themselves into two groups, segregate their jobs and homes by politics, and indulge in being hateful and intolerant of others.

If the US instead had 15 major parties, citizens would be forced to get along. But that means changing to a proportional voting system, that is, a system in which parties win seats based on what percentage of voters support them. While first-past-the-post produces two big parties, proportional voting systems tend to produce many smaller parties.

This reform will never happen because the Democratic and Republican leaders know about Duverger's Law. They know that first-past-the-post protects their duopoly while other voting methods would destroy it. Thus, they will not support reforms to the current voting system. So, polarization is here to stay. Get used to it.

Making Democracy Robust with 100% Voter Turnout

By Whitney Quesenbery – Co-Founder and Director, Center for Civic Design

For so much of American history, the right to vote has been restricted—limited to landowners, to white people, and to men. Even after the 15th and 19th Amendments gave citizens of all races, colors, and genders the right to vote, politicians passed new laws to roll back access to the polls. Policies using literacy tests, felony disenfranchisement, and racial gerrymandering are shamefully aimed to create unequal access to voting. Even voter registration was introduced in the 1800s based on fears of newer, poorer Americans. Those legacies live on today, meaning we have never heard everyone's voice in our elections.

Approaches to Achieving Full Participation
In a new book, E. J. Dionne and Miles Rapoport call the idea of full participation "100% democracy." It is an aspiration to the ideals of American democracy. Those who argue for Australian-style required voting, or "civic duty voting", believe it will change the nature of election campaigns by turning out the base to appeal to a wider audience.

Similarly, arguments for ranked-choice voting claim that it allows voters to make more nuanced decisions about candidates, rather than focusing entirely on who they predict will win in a polarized battle. Advocates for ranked-choice voting believe that it encourages more people to vote and produces greater campaign civility because candidates have to appeal to supporters of their opponents to gain a place in the ranking.

But to reach 100% democracy, we have to do more than remove barriers. We must actively invite everyone to participate by running elections that give everyone equal access. Rather than simply inviting more voters from a single category, we must invite every community. Instead of one group of habitual voters and die-hard partisans at the ends of a political spectrum, we must invite a more comprehensive range of perspectives and opinions.

The Guise of Voter Apathy and Disinterest
Too often, people who don't vote are called apathetic. But in a recent Texas primary election, nearly 25,000 absentee ballots (approximately 12% of the ballots) were rejected. Here, voters made an effort to request a ballot, mark it, and mail it in. Early reports also suggest that those rejected ballots were disproportionately from communities of color. So much diversity of opinion was lost, preventing advocates and campaigns from considering them. Isn't that more likely to increase polarization than to reduce it?

Those voters—and so many others in our civic design research over the years—are likely to be exactly the sort of people who are accused of being apathetic. But we don't believe that—they may be confused, disheartened, angry at being excluded, or simply discouraged, but they are not apathetic.

Other voters are called uninformed. One high school social studies teacher in California told us about teaching his students to understand what's on their ballots, but he concluded that he himself never felt that he had enough information to feel confident voting on some of the issues come Election Day. Here is someone who cares about elections, teaches the next generation, and lives in a state that mails a voter guide to every voter. If he feels under-prepared, how many others feel even more so? Feeling unprepared is not the same as being uninterested.

When we read election information, we understand why people feel excluded. Election information uses arcane terminology and legal jargon. Our research on the complexity of signature forms on ballot envelopes shows how easily we could change this if we only had the will (and legislative authority) to write everything in plain language. Maybe if people could understand what they would be voting for, they would be more willing to vote. People who give up because they are stumped by legalese are not apathetic; they are shut out of the process.

Culture and communication also have a role to play. Social media and online news have no boundaries, so news travels widely. Rick Hasen points out that "stuck in the middle of these [partisan] voting wars are the voters themselves, who have become more polarized" as a result. In our interviews with New York City voters in 2020, stories from all the way across the country in Orange County, California about unauthorized ballot drop boxes made them anxious about whether newly introduced drop boxes in their city were safe to use. Those who hear misinformation and resultantly change their voting behaviors are not apathetic. Misinformation makes them distrust the election system and lose confidence that their voices will be heard.

Transforming Interested Bystanders and Modernizing Voting Practices

Research by Kate Krontiris and colleagues on Understanding America's "Interested Bystander": A Complicated Relationship with Civic Duty suggests a different explanation for why many don't vote. They suggest that almost half of potential voters are interested bystanders "paying attention to issues around them, but not actively voicing their opinions or taking action on those issues." An interested bystander acts when civic actions are easy and align with one's self-interest. They may not be focused on politics, but they are engaged in their communities. They volunteer, donate to causes, and report a wide range of neighborhood activities. Other research on civic identity suggests that it must be developed through practice and active social expression at many levels. Voters need to hear the echoes of their own voices in the election results and look for leaders who reflect—and listen to—their communities.

Turning interested bystanders into voters isn't magic—it's no surprise that when states make it easy to vote, people show up in greater numbers and from more diverse backgrounds. Minnesota and Colorado, two states with consistently high turnout, have a thoughtful combination of policies and a statewide culture that supports voters. One of my favorite policies in Minnesota allows a registered voter to vouch for a neighbor for same-day voter registration. Colorado mails ballots to every voter's mailbox, offers prepaid postage, provides convenient drop-off locations, and makes a point by calling their voting locations Voter Service and Polling Centers.

Automatic voter registration (AVR) is perhaps the most effective modern practice for encouraging participation, even when the decision is made at the last minute. An analysis of Oregon's AVR in a report by the Center for American Progress shows that AVR increased both registration and turnout among people who were "unlikely to have done so otherwise"—for instance, younger Hispanic voters and older rural voters. The result is a more representative, politically diverse, and less polarized electorate.

Policies like these form the groundwork that makes full turnout possible. They enable a better expression of democracy, giving everyone an equal right and ability to vote so that all voices are heard—rather than deciding which voices are worthy of being heard. Higher turnout alone will not reduce polarization, but equal participation just might.

We have a lot of work to do to live up to the ideals of this country and invite everyone to bring their voices to the ballot box. That is reason enough to work toward the goal of 100% democracy.

Notes

This is a resource document for you to use.
Take notes, highlight, use as a text book.

Election administration in America – partisan by design

Jeremy Gruber, John Opdycke, Thom Reilly, and Jacqueline Salit, Open Primaries Education Fund

Introduction:

The United States is one of the few countries in the western world in which partisans run the election administration system.

There is virtually no firewall between electoral competitors and electoral administrators, leaving the voting public at the mercy of shifting partisan currents. The escalating controversies over election outcomes – over who won and who lost and whether the system is rigged – would not be possible but for the fact that the system is ALREADY profoundly partisan. As Edward Foley, director of the election law program at Ohio State University's Moritz College of Law describes it:

> *We allow partisans to run the system both in the front end of the process and at the back end, and this is particularly problematic at the back end when you have a close election.*

The 2020 Presidential election brought the issue of how America's elections are run into sharp focus. Everyday Americans' concerns over ensuring fair administration of the right to vote were amplified and manipulated. Partisanship at every level-local, state and federal -- has shaken Americans' trust in the entire system. How can voters trust our electoral system if they think the people in charge are playing for one team or the other?

The vulnerability of partisan administration of elections has been apparent since at least 2000, when the Supreme Court's Bush v. Gore decision ended an embroiled Florida recount that decided the Presidential election. A close election in Ohio in the 2004 Presidential race almost led to a similar recount that would have involved state election boards and judges evaluating the same "hanging chads" that fueled the 2000 Florida recount. America's system of election administration has come under increasing scrutiny over the past two decades, while public trust in that system has deteriorated.

Since the 2020 Presidential election, Republican legislators in numerous "red states" have taken steps to tighten their grip on voting and election procedures. At the same time, Democratic legislators, in the states they control, have worked to jigger the system to their advantage. As Russell Berman notes in The Atlantic:

"Although Democrats like to call out Republicans for trying to suppress voting, the states they control in the Northeast make casting a ballot more difficult than anywhere else."

Both sides have had initiatives rejected by the courts on the grounds that they are too partisan and insufficiently neutral. Thus, a question is raised: How shall democracy-minded Americans who are frustrated with partisanship and who value a healthy and dynamical approach to managing our economic, social, cultural and international policies respond to the "line in the sand" strategies of the governing parties? Has the time come to assert a new set of rules and paradigms that reject party control of the electoral process and rest on a different set of process needs?

Rules for how the two major parties-Democratic and Republican-control the participation and administration of our country's elections are ingrained at every level of each state's electoral code. Secretaries of State serve parties, not the public. In many states poll worker positions are limited to party members and are oftentimes appointed by sitting members of the legislature. In even more states, if you are not a registered Republican or Democrat, you are prohibited from serving on the state or local boards of elections as an election judge.

The role of election administrators is significant. They oversee all aspects of conducting elections and implementing election policies and procedures at the state and local level. On the local level, election administrators determine who can vote, where they can vote, and how they can vote. Their responsibilities include maintaining voter registration lists, drawing precincts, selecting polling place sites, procuring equipment, recruiting, and training poll workers, canvassing the vote, and evaluating and implementing improvements to the electoral process itself. At the state level, election administration covers a spectrum of election-related logistics, including the maintenance of the state-wide voter registration file and the implementation of federal and state laws and policies concerning elections. This can include ballot design, polling place hours, and provisional ballot use.

A recent report by the Carter Center highlights the threat to our democracy partisan control of election administration poses, finding that it:

> *Essentially communicates that it is only the two leading political parties whose interests should be considered in state elections administration, not election officials, not voters, and not independent or third-party candidates.*

Many of those now waving flags over the partisan character of election administration would have you believe this is a new phenomenon. It is not new, and it was not established overnight. It's the organic outgrowth of a system with no firewalls, based on a flawed concept of parity and the self-serving construct that bipartisanship is equivalent to nonpartisanship.

Parity, not Independence

Political parties are designed to compete with each other to win elections. That is their core purpose. At every juncture, when permitted to do so, the parties design rules to ensure the other party is not advantaged. That is the basis of parity. Party parity has become the foundational principle of America's electoral process. This premise is "baked in" at the very top: the Federal Election Commission. The FEC is the nation's designated protector of election integrity at the federal level. The six members of the Commission are appointed by the President (after approval by each party's leaders) and confirmed by the Senate. Every other federal regulatory commission has an odd number of commissioners, so that the body can function and pass rulings efficiently and decisively. The FEC has six commissioners, three Democrats and three Republicans, as the specifies that no more than three members of the FEC can belong to one party, ergo, the FEC is a bipartisan powersharing entity. It is designed to ensure that neither party has an advantage. It also ensures that a) enforcement is virtually impossible because crucial votes end in a 3-3 tie, and b) independents, the largest self-identified bloc of voters in the country, have no representation.

At the state and county level, most boards of elections follow the FEC model. Each major party is granted 50% control of the regulatory body, thus ensuring that no party can "game" the rules or the outcome of an election. As long as states were politically diverse, and most Americans were members of the two major parties, this model functioned - albeit imperfectly.

The more recent breakdown of this increasingly vulnerable system results from two long term trends in American politics-the rise of the independent voter and the increasing stratification of states into supermajority control by one of the two major parties. The "partisan parity" paradigm now serves to erode public trust and intensify partisan gamesmanship, which in turn further erodes public trust.

Why Partisan Parity Doesn't Work

Today, we are witnessing a major realignment of political affiliation in the United States. Democratic party membership reached its zenith in 1964 at 51% and has been declining ever since. Republican Party membership grew to a high of 31% in 1990 and has since declined.8 Independent voters are now the fastest growing group of registered voters in the country. They are the largest or second largest group of voters in half the states in the country that register voters by party. This growth is across all regions of the United States. At current rates of growth, independent voters will become the largest or second largest group of registered voters in 24 of the 30 states that require registration by party by 2035.9 What's more, the Gallup polling organization has found that between 40% and 50% of Americans self-identify as independents regardless of the registration requirements in a particular state.

An election system based on major party parity, now completely shuts out a quarter to a half of the voting population in each state from playing a role in any aspect of the administration of the franchise -putting election administration into the hands of an increasingly small-and increasingly partisan - set of actors. Combine that with the fact that many more states and counties are dominated by one-party supermajorities than in the past. That means Republican dominated states are becoming more Republican and Democratic Party dominated states are becoming more Democratic. Very few states with political equilibrium exist anymore. An election administration system based on major party parity itself has become ill-suited to this political reality.

As The Economist recently declared:

> *Partisan election administration is a greater worry today than voter suppression.*

THOSE WHO MAKE THE RULES, RULE

You might imagine that if you were to read through the electoral code of any particular state, you would find a dry recitation of rules for how elections should be conducted to ensure a fair and impartial outcome. You would be wrong. Rather, the electoral code of every state is ripe with rules for how the two major parties-Republican and Democrat-prioritize their power at the exclusion of everyone else. There has been some focus of late on how states choose their top election official, usually the Secretary of State. Very little research, though, has focused on how major party interests are "privileged" throughout the entirety of election administration at the state level-an important and broader distinction from some studies that have focused solely on "exclusion" of voters.

We reviewed the electoral codes of all thirty states with partisan voter registration systems where party membership or alignment is built into the registration process. Key findings include:

- 27 of the 30 States Restrict or Privilege Boards of Elections, Canvassers or Related Boards to Major Party Members.
- 27 of the 30 States Restrict or Privilege Poll Workers/Watchers/Inspectors/Registrars to Major Party Membership.
- 11 of 30 States Restrict or Privilege Election Judges to Major Party Membership.
- 16 of 30 States Privilege Access to Voter Data to Major Party Members.
- 12 of 30 States have Campaign Finance Laws that Privileges Major Party Members.
- 19 of 30 States Privilege Major Parties in Voter Registration

Conclusion:

Everyone recognizes that in sports, the competing teams should not control the umpires or referees. Through a complicated process over many decades, that is exactly what we have in the United States. The two major political parties--in parity--control every aspect of electoral rule making and administration, despite the fact that most Americans would prefer a nonpartisan system of election administration.

Nonpartisan election administration is the norm in most western democracies. Electoral agencies are legally and administratively shielded from political party organizations and actors. The officials tasked with establishing polling sites and counting the votes represent the government, not the parties.

We hope this report offers some context for the depth of the problem America is facing. A partisan election system that requires party parity to ensure fairness is vulnerable to manipulation, now more than ever. There is a growing consensus that nonpartisan redistricting commissions and campaign finance enforcement are necessary to ensure democratic outcomes. It is critical that we enlarge this conversation to include nonpartisan administration of our elections to ensure that election officials are not making discriminatory determinations of who gets on the ballot, who gets to vote, how voter rolls are purged and how votes are counted.

No amount of reform will fully address the vulnerability of our election system to partisan manipulation until we address the very partisan structure of election administration itself.

> ***"The future of this republic is in the hands of the American voter."*** *— Dwight D. Eisenhower*

A nation moving apart

The WEEK U.S., November 27, 2023

Americans are increasingly sorting themselves into communities with shared politics. Is this bad for democracy? Here's everything you need to know:

How politically segregated is the U.S.?

Democratic and Republican voters are now more geographically clustered within states than at any point since the Civil War, according to a recent study by economists at the University of Maryland and Northwestern University. Nearly 80% of Americans today live in a state where a single party controls both the governorship and the legislature. And there are also sharp partisan divides within states. The Cook Political Report rates about 81% of the country's 435 congressional districts as noncompetitive for 2024, up from 58% in 1999. That's in part because of gerrymandering, explains analyst Dave Wasserman, but mostly because "the electorate has simply become much more homogeneous" in many districts. A 2021 Harvard study found at least 98% of Americans live in census tracts with some level of partisan segregation. For about 25 million voters, segregation is so extreme that only 1 in 10 neighborhood encounters is likely to be with a supporter of the opposite party. "Even within a neighborhood, Democrats and Republicans are separating from each other a little bit," said study co-author Ryan D. Enos. "There's something pretty fundamental going on here."

What's driving geographic polarization?

Some Americans deliberately move for political reasons, such as objections to new state laws on abortion, firearms, or LGBTQ rights — and, in recent years, Covid restrictions. Lynn Seeden, a 59-year-old portrait photographer from Orange County, California, relocated to the Dallas–Fort Worth area in 2021. At her first stop for gas in Texas, "people weren't wearing masks, nobody cared," she told NPR. "It's kind of like heaven on earth." In one March poll, 40% of Americans said they were somewhat or very likely to relocate to a state that better fit their political beliefs. But research suggests few move solely for political reasons. A Census survey found 84% of Americans who moved in 2022 did so for jobs, housing, or family. Still, partisan sorting happens anyway because many pocketbook concerns overlap with political ones. In 2022, 817,669 people left California, 545,598 left New York and 344,027 left Illinois — mostly to low-tax, lower-cost red states such as Florida and Texas, which gained 738,969 and 668,338 new residents respectively. And geographical polarization is not simply a result of people moving, but also of long-term changes within the two parties and their constituencies.

What kind of changes?

Before the 1970s, the major parties were far less ideologically uniform. The Northeast had plenty of socially liberal "Rockefeller Republicans," while the South had many socially conservative Democrats. But Democratic involvement in civil rights legislation led some white Southerners to switch parties, and the culture wars of the 1970s and '80s sorted liberals into the Democratic Party and conservatives into the GOP. Over recent decades, the urban/rural divide between the parties has also expanded into a chasm. In the 2020 presidential election, Joe Biden won 91% of the country's most populous counties, while Donald Trump took more than 2,500 of the remaining 3,000 counties. Increasingly, Democrats are higher-educated city dwellers who work in white-collar jobs, while more of the rural white working class has trended Republican.

Is partisan sorting a problem?

For individuals, it can feel comforting to live among people with similar beliefs and backgrounds, and under a state government that enacts policies they support. But such segregation could be bad for the nation's political health. "Groups of like-minded people tend to become more extreme over time in the way that they're like-minded," said Bill Bishop, author of The Big Sort. Such clustering can reinforce the sense that people outside the bubble are the enemy: In a 2022 Pew survey, majorities of Democrats and Republicans said they viewed members of the other party as more "immoral" and "dishonest." Under half in each party said the same in 2016. With fewer voters in the middle, lawmakers have less incentive to reach across the aisle and compromise. And with less compromise and experimentation needed, states increasingly emulate policies enacted by other states controlled by the same party — or follow the agenda of partisan interest groups such as the National Rifle Association. "The old phrase 'all politics is local' no longer applies to the political parties," said political scientist Jacob Grumbach, "but it does apply to American political institutions."

Can this polarization be reduced?

Not easily. Party affiliation has become as much a cultural identity, with its own set of lifestyle preferences, as it is a set of political beliefs. Biden, for example, won 85% of U.S. counties with at least one Whole Foods in 2020, but only 32% of those with a Cracker Barrel. Political scien-

tist Lee Drutman argues that a radical election rethink is needed to "cool the heated polarization that is currently breaking our democracy." He's in favor of scrapping single-member House districts and replacing them with larger multimember districts, with seats parceled out according to the percentage of the vote that each party receives. That system, known as proportional representation, would increase the number of competitive seats and force candidates to reach beyond their party's base. Such reforms are a long shot, Drutman admits. But the U.S. is "in uncharted territory," he notes. "It's time to take alternatives seriously while we still have time to consider them."

Transgender exiles in America

For many transgender people, the question of whether to move to another state has taken on newfound urgency. Laws banning hormone treatments and surgeries for trans-identifying minors have been enacted in at least 20 states in recent years; seven restrict Medicaid coverage of such treatments for adults. At least 10 have adopted laws barring people from bathrooms that don't correspond to their birth-assigned sex. It isn't yet clear whether such laws have sparked a wave of relocations. But in a March Washington Post/KFF survey of transgender Americans, 27% said they had moved to a new neighborhood, city, or state in search of a more accepting place to live. Some families of trans-identifying children have felt compelled to relocate. Earlier this year, the Noble family — whose 16-year-old son Julien is trans — moved from red Iowa to blue Minnesota. "We've been [in Iowa] our whole lives," said mom Jennie Noble. "But when it came down to it, we have to support our son. We have to keep him safe."

"You'll never get ahead if you wait to hear their position before disagreeing with it."

Poll: Political division widely blamed for attempt on Trump's life

Kathryn McNutt, The Journal Record, August 2, 2024

The extreme political division that grips the United States today may be the one thing all parties can agree on.

A new poll reveals that 50% of Americans place "a great deal" of responsibility for last month's assassination attempt of former President Donald Trump on political division. Only 10% said it had "none at all."

The poll also shows that 30% place "a great deal" of responsibility for the attempt on Trump's life on the way Republicans talk about politics and 23% said the same about the way Democrats talk about politics.

The poll from the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research was conducted July 25-29, using a sample of 1,143 adults from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population.

Political science professor James Davenport said reversing the hostility will be extremely difficult because all our institutions feed into the polarization – the media, political parties, special interest groups, religious institutions and even nonprofit organizations.

"Are we willing to back away from this attitude and position that we have developed over the last few years?" said Davenport, associate dean for social sciences at Rose State College.

"It's got to be a ground-up thing," he said. "It will have to be people saying, 'I want a different direction,' and then voting that way."

However, the hostility could keep voters from the polls. "The more negativity, the more voter turnout is depressed," Davenport said. "It's actually a campaign strategy."

He cited Pew Research Center data showing that Republicans and Democrats increasingly dislike one another, distrust one another and are more motivated by this hostility than they are by positive feelings toward their own parties. According to the study, large majorities of partisans in the sample regarded those of the other party as more "immoral" and more "dishonest" than most people.

Viewing people who have a different point of view as hostile rather than as fellow citizens is eroding social trust and social cooperation, Davenport said.

"Democracy relies on social relationships," he said. Meanwhile, Republicans and Democrats are identifying each other as a threat to democracy.

Oklahoma City enjoys "a unique political culture," Mayor David Holt said in his recent State of the City address.

"Oklahoma County was 50-50 in the last presidential election. Its demographics almost exactly mirror the country," Holt said. "But Oklahoma City is ignoring the extremes of American politics. We aren't polarized. We are putting aside the things that could divide us, including and especially our political party labels, and we are working together as 'One OKC' to get things done."

The mayor pointed to the 2023 annual survey of Oklahoma City residents, in which 71% of respondents said that the city is heading in the right direction. He also noted that voters approved the new downtown arena plan by 71% and passed the MAPS 4 tax by 72%.

"These numbers tell a consistent story. We are moving forward through consensus, and with a seemingly unbreakable coalition of 70% of residents who are unified around our city's direction," Holt said.

"This unique political culture requires intentionality from elected city leadership, buy-in from civic leaders at this (Greater Oklahoma City) Chamber and across the civic life of our city, the commitment of our voters and also a commitment from our city management," he said.

Why tribalism took over our politics

Aaron Zitner, The Wall Street Journal, Updated August 26, 2023

Ahead of his arrest on Thursday in Georgia, Donald Trump repeatedly told his supporters about the legal peril he faced from charges of election interference. But the danger wasn't his alone, he said. "In the end, they're not coming after me. They're coming after you," he told a campaign rally.

It was the latest example of the Republican former president employing a potent driver of America's partisan divide: group identity. Decades of social science research show that our need for collective belonging is forceful enough to reshape how we view facts and affect our voting decisions. When our group is threatened, we rise to its defense.

The research helps explain why Trump has solidified his standing as the front-runner for the Republican presidential nomination despite facing four indictments since April. The former president has been especially adept at building loyalty by asserting that his supporters are threatened by outside forces. His false claims that he was the rightful winner of the 2020 election, which have triggered much of his legal peril, have been adopted by many of his supporters.

Democrats are using the tactic, too, if not as forcefully as Trump. The Biden campaign criticized Republicans in Wednesday's presidential debate as "extreme candidates" who would undermine democracy, and President Biden himself has accused "MAGA Republicans" of trying to destroy our systems of government.

The split in the electorate has left many Americans fatigued and worried that partisanship is undermining the country's ability to solve its problems. Calling themselves America's "exhausted majority," tens of thousands of people have joined civic groups, with names such as Braver Angels, Listen First and Unify America, and are holding cross-party conversations in search of ways to lower the temperature in political discourse.

Yet the research on the power of group identity suggests the push for a more respectful political culture faces a disquieting challenge. The human brain in many circumstances is more suited to tribalism and conflict than to civility and reasoned debate.

The differences between the parties are clearer than before. Demographic characteristics are now major indicators of party preference, with noncollege white and more religious Americans increasingly identifying as Republicans, while Democrats now win most nonwhite voters and a majority of white people with a college degree.

"Instead of going into the voting booth and asking, 'What do I want my elected representatives to do for me,' they're thinking, 'If my party loses, it's not just that my policy preferences aren't going to get done,' " said Lilliana Mason, a Johns Hopkins University political scientist. "It's who I think I am, my place in the world, my religion, my race, the many parts of my identity are all wrapped up in that one vote."

Trump, in responding to his indictment in Georgia for conspiring to overturn his 2020 loss in that state, amplified the sense of threat by telling a party gathering that they were engaged in a "final battle" that he described as "an epic struggle to rescue our country from the sinister forces within who hate it." The criminal prosecutions, his campaign said in a fundraising email Thursday, were designed "to intimidate you out of voting to save your country."

More than 60% of Republicans and more than half of Democrats now view the other party "very unfavorably," about three times the shares when Pew Research Center polled on it in the early 1990s. Several polls find that more than 70% within each party think the other party's leaders are a danger to democracy or back an agenda that would destroy the country.

Party allegiance can affect our judgment and behavior, many experiments show. When Shanto Iyengar of Stanford University and Sean J. Westwood, then at Princeton University, asked a group of Democrats and Republicans to review the résumés of two fictitious high-school students in a 2015 study, their subjects proved more likely to award a scholarship to the student who matched their own party affiliation. People in the experiment gave political party more weight than the student's race or even grade-point average.

In a landmark 2013 study, Dan Kahan, a Yale University law professor, and colleagues assessed the math skills of about 1,000 adults, a mix of self-described liberals, conservatives and moderates. Then, the researchers gave them a politically inflected math problem to solve, presenting data that pointed to whether cities that had banned concealed handguns experienced a decrease or increase in crime. In half the tests, solving the problem correctly showed that a concealed-carry ban reduced crime rates. In the other half, the correct solution would suggest that crime had risen.

The result was striking: The more adept the test-takers were at math, the more likely they were to get the correct answer—but only when the right answer matched their political outlook. When the right answer ran contrary to their political stance—that is, when liberals drew a version of the problem suggesting that gun control was ineffective—they tended to give the wrong answer. They were no more likely to solve the problem correctly than were people in the study who were less adept at math.

To explain why the animosity in American politics is greater today than in the past, some researchers have focused on the nation's political "sorting"—the fact that Americans have shifted their allegiances so that the membership of each party is now far more uniform. In the past, each party had a mix of people who leaned conservative and liberal, rural residents and urbanites, the religiously devout and those less observant.

Data from the General Social Survey, a 50-year public opinion study run by NORC, a nonpartisan research group, shows that this is less the case today. Americans in the past were more likely to meet people different than themselves, which created opportunities for reducing group bias and creating conditions for compromise.

Today, our partisan identities have come into alignment with the other facets of our identity, which heightens our intolerance of each other even beyond our actual political disagreements, Mason said. Political party has become a "mega-identity," she said, magnifying a voter's political allegiances and amplifying the biases that innately come from belonging to a group.

"When you go to cast a ballot, whatever part of your identity is under the most threat is going to influence your choice the most," Mason said.

Researchers have been trying to use what they have learned about social identity to develop tactics to diminish hostility between the parties.

One recent experiment led by Stanford researchers showed 25 messages to a large set of Americans, and then assessed their views of the opposite political party and other attitudes. The tested "interventions" included videos and quizzes intended to show that many people within each party hold centrist views on policy and exaggerate the presence of hard-line views among the other party.

The strategies that worked best at reducing partisan animosity essentially modeled good behavior, highlighting what Democrats and Republicans have in common as Americans or presenting people making a good-faith effort to understand someone with differing views, said Robb Willer, a Stanford sociologist who led the research. But follow-up work showed that the effects diminished over time.

Researchers tested a TV ad that featured both Utah Gov. Spencer Cox, a Republican, and his Democratic opponent for governor in 2020, Chris Peterson, in which they committed to honoring the presidential election results. Cox last month began a one-year term as chairman of the National Governors Association and said he would devote much of the year to promoting civility in politics through a "Disagree Better" program that draws on the Stanford research.

Willer said the most effective messages might be broadcast at an important time in the election calendar, or used in school civics classes.

"It's a bit of a David and Goliath situation, to be sure," Willer said. "All the more reason to invent a slingshot."

> ***"Yet every two years the American politics industry fills the airwaves with the most virulent, scurrilous, wall-to-wall character assassination of nearly every political practitioner in the country — and then declares itself puzzled that America has lost trust in its politicians."*** *— Charles Krauthammer*

U.S. is polarizing faster than other democracies, study finds

Brown University, January 21, 2020

Political polarization among Americans has grown rapidly in the last 40 years — more than in Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia or Germany — a phenomenon possibly due to increased racial division, the rise of partisan cable news and changes in the composition of the Democratic and Republican parties.

That's according to new research co-authored by Jesse Shapiro, a professor of political economy at Brown University. The study, conducted alongside Stanford University economists Levi Boxell and Matthew Gentzkow, was released on Monday, Jan. 20, as a National Bureau of Economic Research working paper.

In the study, Shapiro and colleagues present the first ever multi-nation evidence on long-term trends in "affective polarization" — a phenomenon in which citizens feel more negatively toward other political parties than toward their own. They found that in the U.S., affective polarization has increased more dramatically since the late 1970s than in the eight other countries they examined — the U.K., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, Switzerland, Norway and Sweden.

"A lot of analysis on polarization is focused on the U.S., so we thought it could be interesting to put the U.S. in context and see whether it is part of a global trend or whether it looks more exceptional," Shapiro said. "We found that the trend in the U.S. is indeed exceptional."

Using data from four decades of public opinion surveys conducted in the nine countries, the researchers used a so-called "feeling thermometer" to rate attitudes on a scale from 0 to 100, where 0 reflected no negative feelings toward other parties. They found that in 1978, the average American rated the members of their own political party 27 points higher than members of the other major party. By 2016, Americans were rating their own party 45.9 points higher than the other party, on average. In other words, negative feelings toward members of the other party compared to one's own party increased by an average of 4.8 points per decade.

The researchers found that polarization had also risen in Canada, New Zealand and Switzerland in the last 40 years, but to a lesser extent. In the U.K., Australia, Germany, Norway and Sweden, polarization decreased.

Why has the U.S. become so much more polarized? Shapiro said it may be partly because, since the 1970s, major political parties have become increasingly aligned with certain ideologies, races and religious identities. For example, Republicans are now more likely to be religious, while Democrats are more likely to be secular.

"There's evidence that within the U.S., the two major political parties have become more homogeneous in certain ways, including ideologically and socially," Shapiro said. "So when you identify with a certain party and you're looking across the aisle, the people you're looking at are more different from you than they were a few decades ago."

That "party sorting" seems to be less pronounced in some of the other countries included in the study, Shapiro said — but it has perhaps played a role in deepening divisions in Canada.

Another explanation for the increase in polarization — one that also seems relatively unique to the U.S., according to Shapiro — is the rise of 24-hour partisan cable news. Shapiro noted that in the countries where political polarization has fallen in the last four decades, public broadcasting received more public funding than it did in the U.S.

The trio argue that the data speak against the rise of the internet as a major cause of political polarization because all nine countries have seen a pronounced rise in internet use, but not all of them have seen a rise in polarization. The conclusion is consistent with other studies they have conducted, including one in 2018 that cast doubt on the hypothesized role of the web in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and another in 2017 that concluded greater internet use among Americans is not associated with faster growth in polarization.

Shapiro said that understanding the root causes of political polarization, both in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world, could help politicians and citizens alike understand how the phenomenon may be driving their decisions and preferences — and it could ultimately reveal strategies for bridging divides.

"There are good reasons to think that when people in different political camps cease to respect each other, it's harder to make political compromises and create good public policy," Shapiro said. "There's also some evidence that a person's political identity can influence their behavior — what they buy, where they live, who they hire. If we can understand what's driving partisan divides, we may be able to take steps to reduce them."

The polarization paradox: Elected officials and voters have shifted in opposite directions

William A. Galston, The Brookings Institution, January 20, 2023

During the past four decades, the two major political parties have steadily moved farther away from each other and are now as deeply divided as they have been for more than a century. For most of this period, analysts agree, Republican elected officials have moved more to the right than Democratic officials have to the left.

But there's a paradox: since the early 1990s, according to Gallup, Democratic voters have shifted more to the left than Republican voters have to the right. In 1994, the second year of Bill Clinton's presidency, 25% of Democrats thought of themselves as liberal and the same share—25%—called themselves conservative. A strong plurality of Democrats—48%—identified as moderate.

By 2022, the second year of Joe Biden's presidency, the picture had entirely changed. An outright majority of Democrats—54%—now called themselves liberal, while the share of conservatives fell to just 10%. Moderates, who once outnumbered the party's liberals by 23 percentage points, now trailed them by 18 points.

The Republican Party has changed far less during this period, largely because it has long been more ideologically homogeneous at the grassroots. In 1994, 58% of Republicans were conservative, a figure that rose to 72% in 2022. During these three decades, Republican moderates fell from 33% to 22% while Republican liberals (already an endangered species in the early 1990s), declined from eight percent to just five percent.

For Democrats, the ideological changes have varied significantly along racial and ethnic lines. In 1994, White, Black, and Hispanic Democrats were equally likely to think of themselves as liberal. But during the next three decades, the share of White Democrats who identify as liberal rose by 37 points, from 26% to 63%, while Black and Hispanic Democrats rose by less than half as much, to 39% and 41%, respectively.

The outcome: unlike three decades ago, the Democrat Party is now a coalition of White Liberals and non-white voters the majority of whom think of themselves as moderate or conservative. It is not a coincidence that the majority of Whites who voted for Joe Biden in 2020 rarely if ever attend church, while more than 90% of Black Biden supporters attend monthly or more. Nor was it an anomaly that the mostly Black primary voters in South Carolina backed Joe Biden, the most moderate Democratic candidate in 2020, propelling him to victory in the 2020 contest for the presidential nomination.

The analysis for Hispanics is more complex. Most attend religious services regularly, but Hispanic Catholics are more likely to identify with Democrats than are Hispanic evangelicals, whose share of the Hispanic vote has been increasing significantly. We also know that Hispanics are skeptical of parties they regard as increasingly liberal and conservative. In a survey released on January 18, 2023, 46% of Hispanic voters said that the Democratic Party has moved too far to the left, compared to 41% who said that the Republican Party has moved too far to the right. These figures mirror the electorate as a whole—more evidence that Hispanics are becoming a swing vote rather than a reliable pillar of the Democratic base.

This analysis of ideological change within the parties leaves several questions unanswered. Many voters are liberal on economic issues but conservative on cultural issues, or vice versa. When such voters identify themselves ideologically, it is not always clear which element of their outlook is taking priority. Nor is it clear that the meaning of ideological labels has remained constant over time.

Still, there is a close and enduring relationship between ideological self-identification and voting patterns. Almost all liberals will vote for Democrats and conservatives for Republicans, while moderates are more likely to shift between parties based on the specific choices they confront. Hillary Clinton received just 52% of the moderate vote in her 2016 defeat while Joe Biden garnered 64% in his 2020 victory. Because almost 4 in 10 voters are moderates, their votes are often decisive.

Although the analysis of party coalitions through the lens of ideology is imperfect, it helps reveal the structure of party competition, and it explains why going too far in one direction or the other can diminish a party's chances of winning, as it did in 2020 and in key state races in 2022.

Are American voters really as polarized as they seem? Rice research suggests yes

Amy McCaig, Rice University, February 19, 2024

A new study of American voters by researchers at Rice University and Stanford University shows that while response rates to political surveys are on the decline, people are more polarized than ever.

Evidence of political polarization in the U.S. largely comes from a single source, the American National Election Studies (ANES) feeling thermometer time series. While historic response rates have been as high as 80%, the response rate in recent years has dropped below 50%.

"The decreased survey response rate called into question the accuracy of reports of extreme political divisiveness, which is why we wanted to dig deeper. In addition, more people are taking surveys online versus a door-to-door format," said Matthew Tyler, an assistant professor of political science at Rice and lead author of the study published online in the American Political Science Review.

To gauge whether the survey provides an accurate measure of political polarization, Tyler and study co-author Shanto Iyengar of Stanford, considered several reasons why the ANES might make polarization seem worse than it actually is.

For example, some people who really care about their political party might be overrepresented in the survey; people who strongly identify with their party might be more likely to take part, which could make the results look more extreme; reading about politics while taking the survey might make people feel more negatively toward the other party; and letting people take the survey online might give different results.

"Our findings suggest that the way the ANES survey is done can make affective polarization seem worse than it really is. But even after we accounted for that, we found that people are still becoming more negative toward the other party over time," Tyler said. "This shows that the increase in negative feelings toward the other party is real and not just because of how the surveys are done."

To reach this conclusion, the researchers compared the ANES survey with the much less political General Social Survey, described as the "only full-probability, personal-interview survey designed to monitor changes in both social characteristics and attitudes currently being conducted in the United States." The researchers then designed a method of survey evaluation that mimics less politically charged questionnaires which asked about lifestyle choices, living environments, consumer decisions, dining preferences and other information.

"The idea behind this survey design was to target and evaluate people who weren't to the extreme left or far right on the political spectrum," Tyler said. "We wanted to better understand how mainstream people were feeling about the political environment today."

Ultimately, the researchers found that even more mainstream Americans are feeling more polarized than ever. Tyler said he hopes future work will examine how this can be reduced, especially as people are spending more time on social media and not interacting in person as much as in the past.

> ***"There is too much at stake for us to surrender to the politics of polarization."***
>
> *— Brad Henry*

Polarization in America: two possible futures

Gordon Heltzel and Kristin Laurin, National Library of Medicine, May 6, 2020

Highlights

- Polarization, that is, the separation and clustering of political attitudes, is good for democracy in small doses.
- However, excessive polarization leads people to disregard views different from their own, making it hard to achieve democratic solutions to societal problems.
- America has reached record-high levels of polarization, and is now excessively polarized.
- Theory and evidence suggest two possible futures: polarization decreases and stabilizes, or it self-reinforces, increasing further.
- Interventions should correct misperceptions of polarization resulting from stereotypes, extremists, poll bias, and negativity.

Abstract

The rise of polarization over the past 25 years has many Americans worried about the state of politics. This worry is understandable: up to a point, polarization can help democracies, but when it becomes too vast, such that entire swaths of the population refuse to consider each other's views, this thwarts democratic methods for solving societal problems. Given widespread polarization in America, what lies ahead? We describe two possible futures, each based on different sets of theory and evidence. On one hand, polarization may be on a self-reinforcing upward trajectory fueled by misperception and avoidance; on the other hand it may have recently reached the apex of its pendulum swing. We conclude that it is too early to know which future we are approaching, but that our ability to address misperceptions may be one key factor.

Recall the last time you heard a news story about political foes disrespecting and ignoring each other. Now recall the last time you heard a news story about political foes respectfully listening to each other. Many Americans find the latter increasingly difficult, as news stories document the negative effects of rising political polarization in recent decades. As polarization has risen, so have Americans' worries: 90% believe their country is divided over politics and 60% feel pessimistic about their country overcoming these divisions to solve its biggest problems. What does the future hold? We argue that, at its current level, polarization threatens the stability of American democracy, then offer two alternative predictions for its trajectory.

Current polarization

Political polarization occurs when subsets of a population adopt increasingly dissimilar attitudes toward parties and party members (i.e., affective polarization;), as well as ideologies and policies (ideological polarization;).1 With little-to-no polarization, most people support a mixture of liberal and conservative stances across issues, and they can support one party without disliking others. With very high polarization, large, separate clusters of the population endorse ideologically consistent stances across all issues, and love their own party while loathing the other(s).

Polarization recently reached an all-time high in the US. In the last half century, members of both parties have reported increasingly extreme ideological views, a trend more pronounced among Republicans than Democrats, especially in the last decade. More than ever, Americans endorse their party's stance across all issues. Since the 1990s, Americans' liking for their own party and dislike for opponents have both increased. For example, 80% of Americans today feel unfavorable towards their partisan foes, and the portion feeling very unfavorable has nearly tripled since 1994. These trends have led scholars to speculate that politics is a unique intergroup domain wherein people's hate for opponents exceeds their affinity for co-partisans.

Polarization and democracy

Does polarization help or hurt democracies?

Political scientists continue to debate the costs and benefits of polarization. At its best, polarization can be benign, and produce more effective, stable democracies. It encourages civic engagement: Polarized citizens more often vote, protest, and join political movements, all of which are necessary for functioning democracy and help disrupt undesirable status quos. Polarization also entails pluralistic policy alternatives; this is crucial for democracies, which rely on citizens being able to consider multiple policies and have thorough, constructive debates between them. Ideally, this kind of engagement and pluralism ultimately produce effective, stable government: It helps societies identify policies that are both optimal for solving their biggest problems, and unlikely to be overturned when a new party takes power since they are mutually agreed-upon.

At its worst, polarization is pernicious, posing a challenge to the democratic process. Highly polarized citizens often refuse to engage with each other, reactively dismissing out of hand both potential flaws in their own views and potential merits of their other opponents'. Under these conditions, constructive debates are impossible and mutually acceptable policies elusive.

Of course, people might feel morally compelled to polarize, even to this pernicious degree. For example, if one half of a society begins to embrace morally abhorrent ideas (i.e., white supremacy; Neo-Nazi ideologies), the other half might be justified in polarizing away from them, refusing to engage with or consisder their views. A full philosophi-

cal discussion of the morality of polarization falls beyond the scope of this paper (see Refs.). Nonetheless, in a world where one half of a population refuse to engage with the other, even if this is the most morally correct choice, democratic processes can no longer operate effectively. The only policies considered are those loved by one party and despised by the other; one side eventually ekes out a narrow victory, leaving the other desperate to delegitimize it. In short, when polarization inspires revulsion, democracies run the risk of breaking down.

Is contemporary polarization helping or hurting American democracy?

Recent research in psychology has primarily highlighted the negative consequences of polarization in America. Americans accept smaller paychecks to avoid listening to opposing partisans, move to new places to surround themselves with ideologically similar residents, and swipe left on people with whom they disagree politically. Polarized Americans are more willing to exclude people with opposing political beliefs than to exclude people of other races —a jarring comparison considering the prevalence of race-based exclusion.

Likewise, Americans have trouble critically evaluating the flaws and merits of policies. Instead, they seek information that confirms their partisan preferences and disregard facts that counter them. Out of loyalty, they treat core party issues as immune to debate and suppress their opponents' views.

In short, recent psychological findings suggest that Americans are refusing to interact with politically dissimilar others, and are motivated to overlook both the inadequacies in policies they support and the merits of opposing policies. Even if they feel—even if they are—morally justified in both avoiding opponents and their beliefs while doubling down on their own, this carries pragmatic risks. In a system where the two polarized parties represent sizeable portions of the population, democratic processes may lead to suboptimal, oft-overturned policies that inadequately address societal problems.

Future polarization

Given the current state of polarization, what lies ahead for America? Extant theorizing leads us to consider two alternative futures.

Possible future #1: polarization is a self-reinforcing cycle that will continue to increase

Polarization may be bound to increase, owing to a self-reinforcing cycle. This cycle could take many forms, one of which is described in this very issue. Drawing from these sources, we briefly review evidence that Americans overperceive polarization then reactively distance themselves from opponents, thereby increasing actual polarization; from here, they will again over perceive this now-elevated polarization, creating a self-perpetuating upward spiral.

Americans overestimate the extremity of both their opponents' and co-partisans' views, to the point where they perceive partisan opinion gaps to be twice their true size. They also perceive vast partisan differences in moral values, even though both liberals and conservatives endorse similar core moral values (i.e., care, fairness) and disavow harm to others.

There are at least three sources contributing to these overestimates. First, biased polling measures may be inviting evidence for polarization with division-inciting questions. For example, Republicans report more polarized attitudes toward 'the opposing party' than 'the Democratic Party', and divisive policy terms increase partisan opinion discrepancies.

Second, though fewer than 10% of Americans identify as extremely liberal or conservative, this minority pervades political discourse: News stories cover their views more often, they are twice as likely to post about politics on social media, and because they use negative, angry language to morally condemn opponents, their messages are more likely to spread through social networks. This disproportionately vocal minority may skew people's perceptions of the modal views on each side.

Third, the psychological weight of bad news leads Americans to overestimate polarization . Negative political content (e.g., stories of disrespect and close-mindedness, distressing poll results, extremists' messages) grabs attention, dwells in memory, and colors our impressions of politics more than equally positive content.

Compounding these three processes, routinely exaggerated political polarization likely engenders a self-perpetuating cycle. When citizens overestimate polarization, they often dislike and avoid their opponents, which can, in turn, increase actual polarization: Disliking opponents may cause people to adopt preferences even further from those of the opponents, and avoiding opponents creates political echo chambers (especially among conservatives) that reinforce partisans' pre-existing views. Likewise, when partisans overestimate how much they are hated by their opponents, they feel licensed to hate their opponents more in response. Thus, people tend to overestimate polarization, which leads them to gradually shift further and further away from who they perceive their opponents to be.

Possible future #2: polarization is a pendulum that has reached its apex

Alternatively, though, polarization may have reached its peak, owing to Americans' growing resentment for polarization and its consequences. Their resentment has grown for two reasons. First (and most directly), polarization leads to more extreme policy alternatives, which Americans find unappealing, even when they come from their own party.

Second (and more indirectly), Americans disapprove of

polarization's consequences. They feel that the quality of political discussion has deteriorated, featuring too many insults and not enough factual debate, and they are embarrassed about their current politicians' antagonistic behavior. Rather than applauding party representatives who berate opponents, they prefer civil, respectful political relations; this is especially true among liberals. Likewise, they believe political closed-mindedness is unintelligent and morally wrong, and reject co-partisans who refuse to consider opposing views, even socially excluding these dogmatic co-partisans.

When polarization leads fellow partisans to become disrespectful and close-minded, Americans respond by detaching from their parties and beliefs, resulting in weaker polarization. For example, upon seeing co-partisans disrespect opponents and ignore their views, Americans disidentify with their parties, instead moving toward more moderate positions.

Which future is most likely?

Existing empirical findings provide mixed evidence as to which of the possible futures is in fact emerging. First, we consider evidence of polarization from public polls. On one hand, polls in the past decade show flat or even decreased rates of polarization. Despite 2016's contentious election, Americans showed no change in their preference for their own party over the opposing party between 2014 and 2017. Although dislike for political opponents increased sharply starting in 1994, since 2012 this trend has barely fluctuated. Across four polls from 2011 to 2017, Pew gathered Democrats' and Republicans' attitudes on ten different issues; Partisans' attitudes have either converged or remained stable across five issues (government business regulation; government waste; corporate profits; homosexuality; immigration).

On the other hand, partisans' attitudes have grown further apart across the other five issues (welfare; helping the needy; addressing inequalities for Black people; military strength; environmental policy). And although polarization remained stable before and after Trump's election, upcoming elections could highlight and exacerbate partisan divides. Moreover, infectious diseases typically evoke prejudice against groups whose norms oppose one's own, so the current COVID-19 pandemic could further exacerbate already high levels of affective polarization.

Turning to behavioral indicators of polarization, on one hand, despite concerns from scholars about sustained, record-high polarization, many consequences of polarization have not manifested. For example, Americans in 2017 were no more likely than Americans in 2014 to suppress unfavorable news about their party, to exclude political opponents, or to support criminal investigations of opposing politicians. Likewise, even today's most fervent partisans would rather help their party than harm opponents. For example, most partisans would rather allocate money to both co-partisans and opposing partisans than to co-partisans exclusively, and would rather publish favorable news about their own party than disparaging news about opponents.

On the other hand, and more troublingly, polarization's most destructive consequences have worsened in recent years. For example, Americans' support for tear gassing counter-party protesters has risen since 2012, and 5–15% of partisans support violence against political opponents. Likewise, politically motivated hate crimes and aggression have increased recently, especially among the alt-right. For example, after Trump's election in 2017, the United States witnessed 1600 more hate crimes than its annual average.

Conclusion

Extant theory and evidence paint two different pictures of the future: Polarization may continue to rise in a self-perpetuating cycle, or it may have reached its peak and even begun its downward arc. In fact, both processes may be at work simultaneously. One key factor in determining which will win out may be whether political and media institutions are able combat misperceptions of polarization. To the extent they do so successfully, this might intercept polarization's self-perpetuating cycle, and help re-establish the existence of at least some common ground between the parties.

> ***"The person who agrees with you 80 percent of the time is a friend and an ally – not a 20 percent traitor."*** *–Ronald Reagan*

Tribalism in politics

Daniel R. Stalder Ph.D, Psychology Today, June 18, 2018

A high school valedictorian recently gave a graduation speech in which he shared an inspirational quote:

"Don't just get involved. Fight for your seat at the table. Better yet, fight for a seat at the head of the table."

The student attributed the quote to a beloved political figure. The audience cheered.

Then he corrected himself and attributed the quote to a leader from the other political party. The cheering "quickly died" (accompanied by "some collective groaning") (Novelly, 2018).

What appeared to happen is called "reactive devaluation." Once we discover it was the other side who said or supports something, then we withdraw or withhold our support. It doesn't seem to matter what was said or proposed (Ross & Stillinger, 1991).

In the valedictorian story, the cheered political figure was Donald Trump. The true source of the inspirational quote was Barack Obama. The quote wasn't so inspirational anymore. Maybe it never was.

It's not about the quote. It's the quotee.

Reflecting back on his years in the Senate while Obama was president, Republican George Voinovich acknowledged that "if he [Obama] was for it" then "we had to be against it" (Grunwald, 2012).

Both conservatives and liberals show this bias, not that it's every conservative and liberal. A 2003 study titled "Party over Policy" showed that liberal college students changed their tune about a generous welfare policy when they were told it was supported by congressional Republicans but not Democrats (Cohen, 2003).

Not that conservatives and liberals show this group-centric bias equally. Conservatives tend to be more group-centric on average, which can have pros and cons (Kruglanski et al., 2006).

Research has also shown bipartisan bias. When Ronald Reagan was president, American participants supported a supposed Reagan proposal for USSR nuclear disarmament, but not when the same exact proposal was attributed to Mikhail Gorbachev. Israeli participants supported an actual Israeli-based peace proposal until they were told the proposal came from Palestinians. And so on (Maoz et al., 2002).

This general topic is also called tribalism, which has been spiking in American politics. Some politicians may be stoking it, but there are multiple reasons we engage in it.

Maybe after years or decades of mistreatment by the other side, we are understandably suspicious of anything they say. It may be simple conditioning.

Maybe we don't want to admit that the other side has a good idea because we don't want to be criticized or rejected by our own people. This is part of groupthink. In Congress, politicians don't want to be primaried out of their next election.

Maybe we can't admit the other side has a good idea because of our own egos, especially if we have publicly criticized the other side and rallied for our side. When it comes to ego protection, it's easy to misperceive or reinterpret a good idea as bad.

Maybe a politician or media outlet on our side has demonized the other side. Learning that a demon is behind a proposal would understandably make us less enthusiastic. This is part of the ad hominem fallacy—devaluing an argument not on its merits but because of perceived negative qualities of those who proposed it.

Maybe we can't admit the other side has a good idea because it would feel like we're giving in to the enemy. After all the unforgivable wrongs committed by the other side, it might feel unfair or unjust to give them any credit, even if they're doing the right thing in the moment.

The bottom line is that, for largely psychological reasons, we might lie to others or ourselves about the value of a proposal if it came from our sworn enemies.

Learning about tribalism and reactive devaluation has a chance to reduce this bias (Nasie, 2014). Aside from the knowledge itself, it can be humbling to see your fellow liberals or conservatives twist and distort their perceptions so hypocritically. Such hypocrisy in your own group can be embarrassing and an ego threat. This threat might be reduced if you yourself try to see things in more clear-sighted or logical ways. Look beyond who made the proposal. Prove that you're not like the others in your group.

Learning about logical fallacies, like the ad hominem fallacy, can more directly help to reduce bias. One challenge here is that most of us think we're already logical and the other side is always irrational. It's part of what's called naïve realism, although in some cases, of course, the other side really is messed up (Stalder, 2018).

I hate to say it, given how angry and disgusted we can get at the other side, but it might help to try to find something, however small, to like or compliment about the other side. That might offset the demonizing if nothing else.

Put another way, if you have some friends on Facebook who are from the other political side, go ahead and disagree when they talk policy or politics, but you can still click "like" on their cute dog posts.

Update: Partisan gaps expand most on government power, climate

Frank Newport, Gallup, August 7, 2023

Republicans and Democrats are highly polarized on a number of prominent U.S. social and policy issues, but there has been significant variation in the trends associated with these partisan gaps over the past two decades. The gaps have increased significantly on some issues but have changed much less on others, even with broad shifts in Americans' attitudes that affect both partisan groups.

Political polarization since 2003 has increased most significantly on issues related to federal government power, global warming and the environment, education, abortion, foreign trade, immigration, gun laws, the government's role in providing healthcare, and income tax fairness. Increased polarization has been less evident on certain moral issues and satisfaction with the state of race relations.

Trends at Three Points in Time
The current analysis examines attitudes measured in Gallup polls conducted at roughly 10-year intervals between 2003 and 2023. A prior Gallup analysis, looking at the trend in partisans' stances on a smaller number of U.S. issues between 2000 and 2017, found many of the same patterns.

In all, 24 issues are included in this review. As was the case in 2017, these do not represent the universe of all possible topics but are those that have particular societal importance based on visibility, political prominence and news coverage. The baseline year for each trend is Gallup's measurement 20 years ago, typically 2003, followed by the measurement 10 years ago, typically 2013, and then the most recent measure from either 2022 or 2023.

The partisan analysis is based on a comparison of Democratic identifiers and Democratic-leaning independents versus Republican identifiers and leaners. The results using this measure of "leaned party" differ slightly from the results that are obtained when looking at Democrats and Republicans without leaning independents included, but the overall patterns are the same using both approaches.

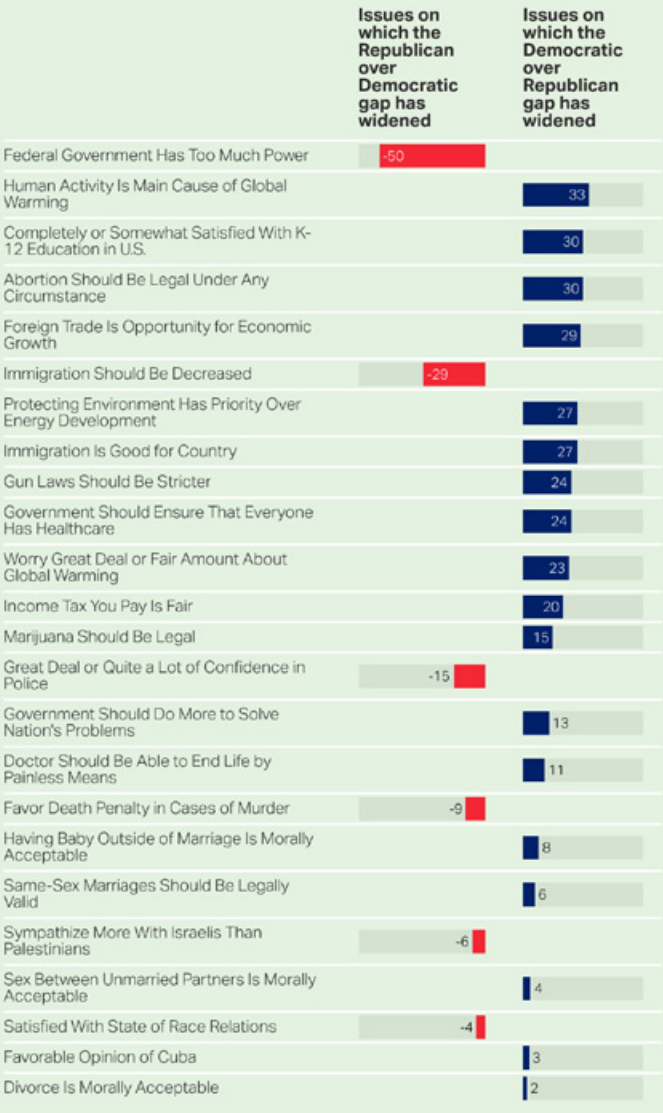
The Partisan Gaps Over Time

Over the past two decades, partisan gaps on all of the issues included in this analysis have either remained roughly the same or expanded. This reinforces the fundamental (albeit not surprising) conclusion that when Americans are divided into two groups based on their political identity, they are also predictably divided into two groups on a wide range of politically and socially important issues.

From the broadest perspective, the issues and topics on which the partisan gaps have grown the most since 2003 are (predictably) the issues that have been at the forefront of the political and ideological battleground in recent years and that have gained high visibility in the media. These include views of government power, global warming and the environment, education, abortion, foreign trade, immigration, gun laws, healthcare, and income tax.

Attitudes on other issues have undergone less change over time -- in some instances, resulting in partisan gaps that have stayed roughly the same since 2003. These include views on the moral acceptability of various issues such as sex before marriage and having a baby outside of wedlock and satisfaction with the state of race relations.

Changes in Partisan Gaps on Selected Issues, 2003 vs. 2023



The partisan analysis is based on a comparison of Democratic identifiers and Democratic-leaning independents versus Republican identifiers and leaners. Numbers represent the percentage-point differences in the gaps between Democratic agreement and Republican agreement in 2023 compared with 2003. Issues with a blue change are those on which the Democratic over Republican gap has widened. Issues with a red change are those on which the Republican over Democratic gap has widened.

GALLUP

The charts below present these changes in partisan gaps over time in more specific detail, including the responses of the two partisan groups at each of the three points in time used in this analysis.

Issues on Which There Has Been Significant Change Over the Past Two Decades

- There was virtually no gap between Democrats and Republicans in 2003 on perceptions that the government has too much power. This reflected, at least in part, the continuing aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, a time marked by unusual public consensus on the role of government in addressing major problems like terrorism. By 2013, however, during the Democratic presidency of Barack Obama, Republicans had become much more likely than Democrats to believe the federal government has too much power, creating a large partisan gap in 2013 that has continued this year.

- Democrats have steadily become more concerned about global warming and convinced that human activity is the main cause of global warming over the past two decades. Republicans' worry about global warming, in contrast, edged down slightly in both 2013 and 2023, creating larger partisan gaps in each of those two years. Similarly, Republicans' views that global warming is the result of human activity dropped between 2003 and 2013, expanding the difference with Democrats' views, and this gap has expanded even more this year. A significant 2003 gap in views that protecting the environment should be prioritized over the development of energy sources grew in 2013 and has widened further this year, as Democrats have become increasingly likely to agree with the environmental prioritization position. Republicans' views, as was the case for their views on humans' role in global warming, have stayed roughly constant over the past decade.

- In 2003, Republicans were slightly more satisfied than Democrats with K-12 education. That Republican edge has now flipped to a Democratic advantage, reflecting a drop in Republicans' satisfaction with education.
- Democrats' views that abortion should be legal under any circumstance increased significantly this year compared with 10 and 20 years earlier, while Republicans' much lower agreement with legal abortion has remained relatively constant. The change in Democratic views on abortion likely reflects their reaction to the June 2022 Dobbs decision that overturned Roe v. Wade. The result: The partisan gap on abortion evident in 2003 and 2013 has expanded this year to be one of the largest gaps measured.

- There was little disagreement between Democrats and Republicans in either 2003 or 2013 in terms of views that foreign trade represents economic opportunity. But in recent years, Democrats' agreement with that sentiment has increased significantly. That change -- coupled with Republicans having similar views in 2013 and 2023 -- has resulted in a substantial partisan gap in views of foreign trade.

- Two questions on immigration included in this analysis show different trend patterns. Republicans' views that immigration is good for the country have dropped significantly, while Democrats' views have remained roughly stable, resulting in an increased partisan gap. Both groups have moved in opposite directions on the question of decreasing immigration, with Republicans becoming more likely and Democrats less likely to say that immigration should be de-

creased. The net result is a significantly increased partisan gap in 2023 compared with 10 and 20 years earlier.

- Democrats are much more likely than Republicans to say the country needs stricter gun laws, as was the case in 2003 and 2013. Both Democrats' and Republicans' views that there should be stricter laws have edged up since 2013, maintaining but not expanding the substantial partisan gap.

- Democratic and Republican views that the government should ensure everyone has healthcare have been predictably divergent in each of the three years included in this analysis. Republicans became particularly less supportive in 2013, with a modest pullback from that view since. But this change, combined with an increase in the already high Democratic sentiment, puts this issue as one of the two with the largest partisan gaps of any of the measures included in the analysis.

- There was almost no partisan gap in perceptions of the fairness of the amount of income tax that individuals paid in 2003 (perhaps reflecting the 9/11 aftermath), but the gap has expanded in the decades since. Republicans have become substantially less likely to say that the income tax they pay is fair, while Democrats' more positive views have remained generally steady.

Issues on Which There Has Been Less Substantial Change Over the Past Two Decades

- Since 2003, Democrats have been more likely than Republicans to say that marijuana should be legalized. The percentage of each partisan group agreeing with legalizing marijuana increased in lockstep in 2013 and then again in 2022, but the Democratic increase has been modestly larger than Republicans', resulting in a somewhat bigger partisan gap on this issue when measured last year than 20 years ago.

- Democrats' support for legalizing same-sex marriage has steadily increased over the past two decades. Republicans are much less likely to share this sentiment in general, but their support for legalized same-sex marriage nevertheless has increased significantly since 2013. The result has been a fairly constant partisan gap on the issue over the decades, even as both groups have become more supportive.

- Democrats are more accepting than Republicans on each of three moral and values issues included in this analysis -- having a baby outside of marriage, sex between unmarried partners, and divorce. Both groups have been increasingly likely to say these issues are morally acceptable, resulting in fairly constant partisan gaps in 2003, 2013 and 2023.

- Both partisan groups held similar views about doctor-assisted suicide in 2003 and 2013, but Democrats this year have become somewhat more likely to view the practice as acceptable, while Republicans have become somewhat less so. This has created a significant partisan gap compared with the 2003 measurement.

- Republicans had slightly more confidence in the police than Democrats in 2003, but Republicans' confidence level edged down in 2013, resulting in almost no partisan gap that year between their views and the views of Democrats. Democrats' confidence in the police has plunged in the past decade among heightened sensitivity to racial injustice in policing, while Republicans' confidence has edged down only slightly, once again creating a significant gap when measured last year.

- Democrats, not surprisingly, have been significantly more likely than Republicans to say the government should do more to solve the nation's problems in 2003, 2013 and again last year -- without a lot of major change in the resulting partisan gap across the past two decades.

- The partisan gap in support for the death penalty in cases of murder has been consistent throughout the past two decades, with Republicans much more likely to be in favor. However, both groups' support is modestly lower now than in 2013.

- Republicans are more likely than Democrats to say they sympathize with the Israelis rather than the Palestinians in the Middle East situation, as was the case in 2003 and 2013. But Democrats' sympathy with the Israelis has dropped significantly compared with the previous measures (particularly 2013), resulting in a somewhat increased partisan gap.

- Both partisan groups have become less satisfied with the state of race relations in the U.S. since 2013, when there was virtually no difference between the two groups. The Democratic decline in satisfaction is larger than it is among Republicans, meaning that the partisan gap evident in 2003 has returned, albeit somewhat larger this year than in 2003.

- Both partisan groups' favorable opinions of Cuba have edged up since 2003, with Democrats consistently holding a somewhat more positive view than Republicans. The size of the gap has remained roughly the same over time.

Public opinion on each of the issues included in this analysis is formed, sustained and changed as the result of a large number of factors, many of which are idiosyncratic to the history and nature of the particular issue involved.

One of these factors is the impact of the party of the president in the White House. Generally speaking, Americans are more positive about issues and situations when their party controls the presidency than when it does not. Democrats occupied the White House in 2013 and do so this year, so the party in the White House presumably isn't a factor in 2013 vs. 2023 comparisons. A Republican occupied the White House in 2003, however -- which could be a factor affecting the comparison of Americans' issue positions in that year to 2013 and 2023, particularly on questions that evaluate the state of the nation, such as attitudes toward government power and satisfaction with education.

There Are Partisan Gaps on All Issues, Although Variable in Size

The 24 issues and topics included in this analysis were selected because of their prominence in political discussions and controversies, so it comes as no shock to find universal, although variable, differences in how Republicans and Democrats view each of them as outlined in this analysis.

These gaps have shifted over time, as noted, ending in a situation wherein the largest gaps in the latest available data appear in views on the government's role in providing healthcare, global warming and environmental issues, gun laws, abortion, and the role of the federal government. None of these are surprising to students of contemporary politics, and more detailed discussions of why these issues have developed such significant political fissures in the U.S. today are provided in the Gallup analyses linked in the paragraphs above. *(Links can be found at https://news.gallup.com/poll/509129/update-partisan-gaps-expand-government-power-climate.aspx)*

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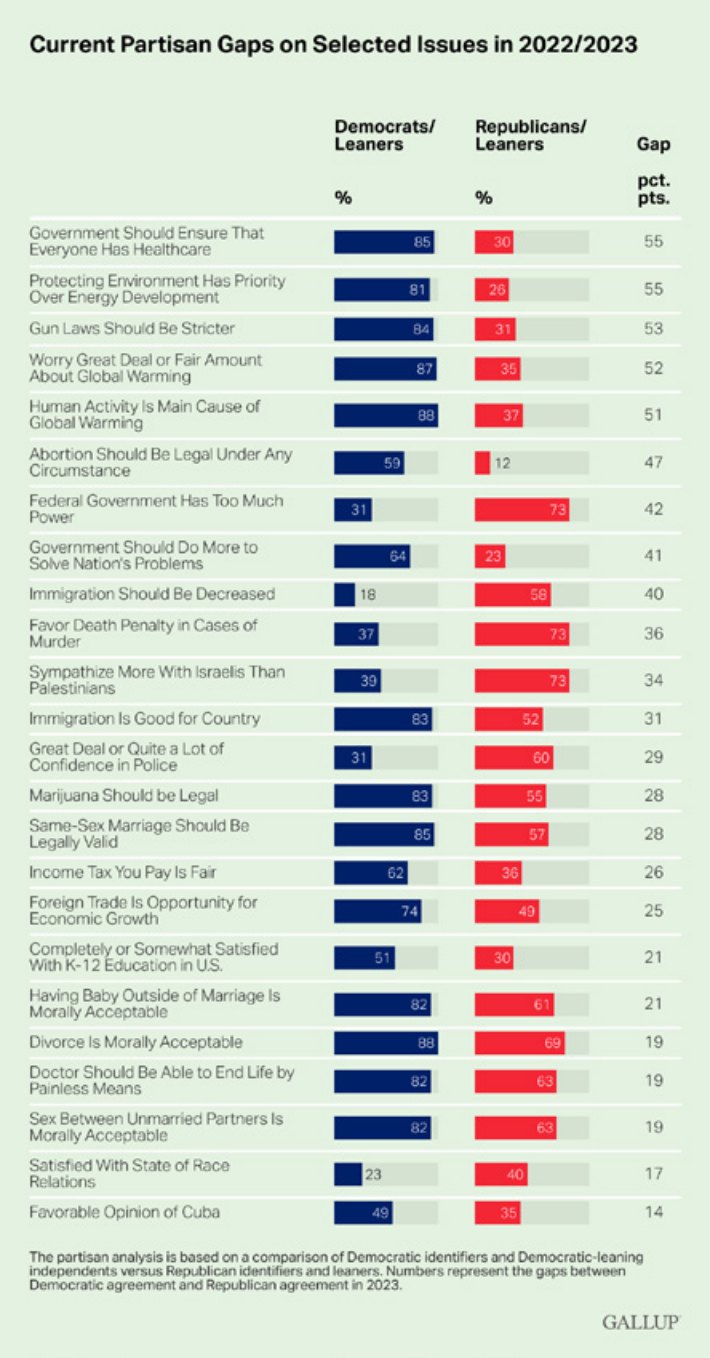
Bottom Line

Political polarization remains an enormously important part of the U.S. political landscape. There are significant -- and in some instances, huge -- partisan differences today in views on all 24 issues included in this analysis. This confirms the fundamental foundation for any analysis of U.S. politics -- the fact that individuals' political identity is highly correlated with their views of social and policy issues, resulting in substantial differences in how issues are viewed across political segments. This in turn reflects the fact that the two major political parties have staked out widely differing positions on the types of issues included in this analysis.

Americans' political identity arises from a number of sources, and it's possible that Americans' position on issues helps them settle in on their partisanship. And, once a person has established their partisan leanings, the party's platform (often amplified by partisan media consumption) can in turn be a factor in reinforcing the individual's position on social and political issues.



The consequences of the type of issue polarization reviewed in this analysis are widespread. The division in issues positions between parties, for one thing, can mean there is little variation within parties, which in turn can mean that choice of candidates in primaries can depend on how strongly the candidates profess allegiance to the party's positions and on non-issues factors such as personality, character and history.

Gallup's analysis six years ago concluded that "Republicans and Democrats over the years have increasingly diverged in their opinions on a number of important policy and social issues." That statement remains true today for some issues, based on a more detailed analysis of long-term trends, but the current analysis reveals that steady increases in the partisan gaps are by no means universal across all issues.

We can mend our national division

Walter Olson, Michael Sozan, and Cissy Jackson, Cato Institute, August 18, 2024

We're living through an age in which American democracy and the rule of law face deep challenges. Mob violence, vicious rhetoric and even attempted assassinations have raised fears that we as a nation can no longer work out our differences peacefully at the ballot box.

In 2023 alone, there were 8,008 threats against members of Congress of both parties. Violent threats are also aimed at public servants involved in the judicial process, including judges, prosecutors, court personnel, juries and their families. In part due to a record number of threats, 39% of state and local election officials resigned in 2022, taking with them valuable institutional knowledge about administering elections. More than two-thirds of Americans across party lines now believe the republic is under threat, and almost 50% believe future presidential election losses will result in violence.

What can we do about this as individuals?

Among us, we three authors differ on any number of issues. But we agree on these ideas for lowering the temperature and getting American politics back on a more constructive track:

1) Don't rationalize violence. Political violence is an escalating spiral: Many people see an attack on their side and think hitting back equally hard or harder is fair play. Leaders and authority figures play a special role. When they throw the rules aside, many followers do too. So hold your leaders to a high standard of restraint and respect for the Constitution and the rule of law and accept that criminally destructive acts call for punishment, whichever side commits them.

2) Confront extremism and dehumanization on your own side. Calling out offensive talk from the other side is the easy part. It's harder but more important to speak up when it comes from people you mostly agree with.

3) Don't blame whole groups for things individuals do. Don't say "they" carried out the latest act of political violence when it was really one individual or a hotheaded few. "They," meaning everyone who votes differently than you, didn't collectively throw the rock or make the hateful comments on social media. Most ordinary members of that other party or faction lead everyday lives much like yours and learned about the incident the same way you did.

4) Don't contribute to undermining trust in our election system. America is lucky: Even now, our democracy is the envy of most of the world. Any system can stand to be improved, but ours is generally well-run and its results trustworthy. Instead of forwarding the latest spicy online rumor, check out the voices of veteran state and local election administrators who have lately been joining across party and regional lines to dispel myths about our elections.

5) Protect the election process. We need to protect election officials and workers from violence and intimidation and also safeguard back-end election processes like certification from risks, including the danger that insiders will refuse to carry out their legal duties. Congress's 2022 update to the Electoral Count Act stands as a fine example of how to accomplish bipartisan election process reforms. Relatedly, while public budget resources are inevitably limited, holding elections is a core function of government, and it's a mistake to starve local administrators of the resources they need to do their jobs properly.

6) Promote civics education. The late Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor devoted much of her retirement to rebuilding America's long-eroded civics education capacity. She wisely understood that a populace that does not grasp the basics of how government or elections work is all the more open to false rumors or a demagogue's lies. And it can make a difference from day one for students (and indeed persons of all ages) to know which parts of the government are responsible for what, how to get involved in their communities, and how to distinguish rumors or disinformation from reliable sources.

7) Look at structural voting reforms that could help us move past our polarization. Curbs on partisan gerrymandering would be a good start. Quite a few localities have lately introduced voting methods that offer hope of bridging gaps between different groups, such as ranked-choice voting, open primaries or the innovative combination of the two now used in Alaska, where participants report seeing more consensus-building and civil debate across the political spectrum.

It will require many such steps to take us back from the brink, but it's worth starting today. The future we save may be our own.

Political Differences? Neighbors may make a move.

Bryan McKenzie, UVA Today, February 16, 2024

Politics not only make for strange bedfellows, but also for bad neighbors, apparently.

People are more likely to sell their homes and move out of a neighborhood if new neighbors whose political views are opposite of theirs move in, according to research by University of Virginia economists.

The study, published last week in The Journal of Finance, uses information gleaned from North Carolina public records. It found residents were 4% more likely to sell their property and move within two years if their new neighbors have opposite political views, compared to residents whose new neighbors share their politics.

"Political identity and partisanship are salient features of today's society," the researchers wrote in the paper. "Using deeds records and voter rolls, we show that current residents are more likely to sell their homes when opposite-party neighbors move in nearby than when unaffiliated or same-party neighbors do.

"We document that an aversion to living near members of the opposite party is an important factor affecting households' home-sale decisions. Our causal test shows that households are willing to sell their homes and move – an enormously costly activity – when presented with opposite-party neighbors," they wrote.

Although the figures are believed to be representative of society at large, the data was limited to North Carolina. Researchers used public records to focus on residents who were politically affiliated. The desire to move away was seen in both Republicans and Democrats.

"That we're seeing any movement there at all is kind of surprising because moving is very expensive," said W. Ben McCartney, assistant professor of commerce at the McIntire School of Commerce and a faculty affiliate of UVA's White Ruffin Byron Center for Real Estate, who led the research. "You can imagine that, if you didn't like your new neighbor, you would just send more angry tweets, or something.

"The main finding in the paper is that people who get a new neighbor with opposite-party affiliation are 3.41 percentage points more likely to move. That's 4% more likely than someone whose new neighbor is of the same affiliation," he said. "We're estimating it's about 1% of all moves. That may not seem like a lot, but that is thousands of moves every year."

John Orellana-Li and Calvin Zhang, financial economists at the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia, joined McCartney in the research.

McCartney said there are many reasons why people move into and out of communities and why some cities and neighborhoods are predominately Republican or Democrat.

"There are regions and cities and big chunks of space across the country that are going to be bright blue and bright red, and we know even before November rolls around that parts of Virginia are going to be very red and others very blue," McCartney said. "It's not just a rural/urban divide. It can break down into neighborhoods as well."

Some neighborhoods attract residents based on "amenity bundles," such as local public or private schools, parks or even restaurants that attract residents, McCartney explained. People may move in or out based on those amenities.

"So, there are two competing theories for why you might have politically segregated cities and built environments. On the one hand, it could be because people who value similar things end up living together. Or it could be because people don't like living with people flying Joe Biden flags or with 'Let's Go Brandon' stickers on their car. They think, 'I don't want to see that every day, so I'm going to move.' Both end up resulting in a politically segregated city, but for two very different reasons."

What the research tried to do was separate the reasons using real estate transaction information and public records regarding political affiliations in North Carolina, paring down the apparent reasons to simply politics.

"Disentangling the potential causes in the data is really hard, so we fixed the amenity bundle so the only thing that's different between the residents we studied was who is getting the opposite-party neighbor and who is not," McCartney said. "When we see the current residents getting the opposite-party neighbors are more likely to move, that's first-order evidence that there's something about the new neighbor that's causing them to move."

McCartney said the study shows the nation's political divide is real.

"This is, therefore, strong evidence that political polarization isn't just a Twitter phenomenon, but also affects major life decisions," he said.

The growing evidence that Americans are less divided than you may think

Karl Vick, Time, July 2, 2024

In January 2021, in the turbulent wake of the last presidential contest, a former professor named Todd Rose asked some 2,000 people a question. The survey was, at least on the surface, designed to deduce what kind of country Americans would like future generations to inherit.

Each person was presented with 55 separate goal statements for the nation—"People have individual rights" was one; "People have high-quality health care" was another—and asked to rank them in order of importance. Each person was also asked how each goal would be ranked by "other people."

When the results were tallied, the surprise was not that "People have individual rights" came in first, or that "People have high-quality health care" finished second. The surprise was the third highest priority: "Successfully address climate change." We know that's a surprise because, on the list of what "other people" considered important, climate came in 33rd. In other words, no one thought their fellow Americans saw climate as the high-priority item nearly everyone actually considered it to be.

That gap—between what we ourselves think and what we reckon others must be thinking—may hold the power to upend a great deal of what we believe we know about American civic life.

"People are lousy at figuring out what the group thinks," Rose says. This collective blind spot is a quirk he would underline to students when he was teaching the neuroscience of learning at Harvard. At Populace, the think tank he co-founded to put such knowledge to practical use, the foible plays a prominent role in efforts to undo what Rose calls the "shared illusion" that Americans are hopelessly divided.

And divided we certainly think we are. The only thing Americans seem to agree on is that Americans cannot agree on anything. It's hardly worth summarizing the headlines about doom and radicalization. In the prelude to a November ballot featuring the candidate synonymous with polarization, all the dapple and nuance of life is once again being reduced to a binary. Choose a side: red or blue.

Yet in the wintry interval between Jan. 6 and Inauguration Day 2021, that Populace survey, dubbed the American Aspirations Index, found "stunning agreement" on national goals across every segment of the U.S. population, including, to a significant extent, among those who voted for Donald Trump and those who voted for Joe Biden. On the few points where the survey registered disagreement (notably, on immigration and borders), the dissent was intense. But intense disagreement was the exception, not the rule.

Much of what news reports, politicians, and pollsters call polarization, Rose understands as "learned divisiveness"—division propagated by the assumption that it exists even where it does not.

It's a bold, and boldly optimistic, notion, but a notion supported by more than just one survey. At universities across the U.S., researchers have been looking hard at the mechanics of polarization. Picture them under the hood, bent over the engine that's supposed to be driving us, possibly over a cliff. Every now and then, one reaches back with something they've managed to pry loose, sets it on the fender. These studies, hiding under titles like "Reducing Explicit Blatant Dehumanization by Correcting Exaggerated Meta-Perceptions," together make up a growing body of evidence that challenges the received wisdom about this political moment.

Maybe, they suggest, America has the wrong idea about polarization. It may not be nearly the engine we thought. It's possible that what it produces, as much as anything, is noise.

Consider: Ordinary people in both parties turn out to like ordinary people in the other party well enough. In a 2021 study in the Journal of Politics, researchers found that when a person in one political party was asked what they think of someone in the other party, their answer was pretty negative. That certainly sounds like polarization. But it turns out the "someones" respondents had in mind were partisans holding forth on cable news.

If told the truth—that a typical member of the opposite party actually holds moderate views and talks about politics only occasionally—the animus dissolved into indifference. And if told that the same moderate person only rarely discusses politics, the sentiment edged into the positive zone. These folks might actually get along.

"There are people who are certainly polarized," says Yanna Krupnikov, a study co-author now at the University of Michigan. "They are 100% polarized. They deeply hate the other side. They are extraordinarily loud. They are extraordinarily important in American politics." But those people, she adds, are not typical Americans. They are people who live and breathe politics—the partisans and activists whom academics refer to in this context as elites.

"Elite politics is quite polarized," Krupnikov says. "So the question is, does that mean everyone else is?"

Why not ask "everyone else" whether America is really that divided? Pollsters do, all the time. But there's a problem. Ordinary folks think Americans are much more partisan than they are. In the same study, people grossly overestimated (by 78%) the size of the most polarized group within each party—that is, Democrats who call themselves liberal and Republicans

who call themselves conservative. At the same time, ordinary Americans grossly underestimated (by 77%) the share of the other party who are moderate. That share is, in fact, at least half of either party. "People probably are exactly right about how polarized their leaders are," says Robb Willer, a sociologist at Stanford. "They get it very wrong for the general public."

It gets worse: the more involved in politics a person is, the more distorted their view of the other side, a 2019 YouGov survey found. In other words, engagement in civic life actually serves to narrow one's perspective on the world.

That hardly recommends today's politics, and goes a long way toward explaining why many people avoid partisans. "They dislike people who are really ideologically extreme, who are very politically invested, who want to come and talk to them about politics," says Matthew Levendusky, a University of Pennsylvania professor of political science. And it's not as if they're trying to avoid confrontation, he adds: "It's also the case that people aren't really that fond of people from their own side who want to talk to them about politics."

So people who do like to talk about politics talk to each other instead, and a striking social dynamic plays out: political enthusiasts will pretend to be even more polarized than they are. For a 2023 study published in Public Opinion Quarterly, people who described themselves as heavily invested in politics admitted that they would dial up their anger to impress fellow partisans. According to Elizabeth C. Connors, the University of South Carolina professor who conducted the study, the falseness partisans described about their own behavior reached levels "rarely seen in social sciences."

Her takeaway: "If you're a partisan and you're going to say you're a Republican or you're going to say you're a Democrat, you need to be a polarized one. Or else you're not a good one."

Such performative behavior of course complicates efforts to gauge how divided Americans have become. "If you ask a true racist their views, they're going to lower the temperature, and report that they're less racist than they actually are," says Sean J. Westwood, who studies polarization at Dartmouth. "If you ask someone about partisanship and partisan hatred, they tend to do the reverse."

So, yes, American politics has grown more divided—but largely among people who live and breathe politics. And these people exaggerate their own polarity to win the approval of other people who also live and breathe politics. It's also true that the number of these people has grown over the past 40 years, as more Republicans identified as conservative and more Democrats as liberal.

That growth is a big reason that, for example, the U.S. House of Representatives is no longer actually representative. Most House seats—often by design—are for districts dominated by one party, so the decisive election is the primary, a low-turnout affair in which the enthusiasm of activists has outsize impact.

And, once in Washington, studies show, the Congressperson routinely cast votes more ideological than their typical constituents. But, still, in neither party do the ideologues make up the majority, even if it sure can feel that way. In truth, most Americans agree on most things.

"That's kind of surprising to a lot of people," says James Druckman, a political scientist at the University of Rochester. "But it's pretty well documented that the typical voter of each party is not that far from the typical voter of the other party on most issues. If you look at other countries, the distance is a lot greater."

Yet that relatively modest distance seems like a chasm, in no small part because of what's called "conformity bias." Researchers have long known that when asked a question by a pollster, people tend to color their reply by what they think they're expected to say. This idea can make it easier to understand why, when the national narrative is about extremes, as it is now, moderate people self-report as being less moderate than they really are.

"This tug toward the fringes," as Populace's Rose calls it, threatens to empty out the middle ground where many Americans might prefer to stay, but fear they'll be alone there. Their isolation may be an illusion—like the idea that no one but you cares about climate change—but it can feel real enough.

Remember how bad humans are at figuring out what other people are thinking, at least as a group? It's reinforced by another bug in our mental software. Our brains mistake repetition for majority opinion.

As the delightful subtitle on a 2007 study in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology put it: "A repetitive voice can sound like a chorus." The study gathered people in a group to discuss something, then asked individuals to state the majority opinion of the group. What people offered up was the opinion they had heard several times—even when it had been voiced by just one person, saying the same thing over and over. Other studies have documented the same phenomenon.

"Your brain has this stupid shortcut for how it estimates the majority," says Rose. The shortcut sheds light on why people frequently mistake the views of political activists, such as those on Fox News Channel and MSNBC, for the views of most Americans. Regular viewers do appear to be genuinely polarized. But in a 2022 study, Fox News viewers who were paid to watch CNN registered a significant moderation in their views after just a few weeks. "You change their media environment and their attitudes change pretty meaningfully," says University of California, Berkeley, political scientist David Broockman.

But for those who don't embrace an ideology, the "tug toward the fringes" can be a source of stress. Populace figured out a way to measure this unease in another of its surveys—one that helps explain how we know moderates are inhibited about revealing their views to pollsters.

This survey, in 2022, aimed to avoid the distortions of conformity bias by masking both the respondent's identity and, more subtly, the question being asked, by hiding the "target" among a series of multiple-choice questions. Because this method requires several rounds of polling to see which results are significant, it's expensive and time-consuming—but it's thought to reliably reveal information people might not consciously choose to share. ("The IRS uses this," Rose says.)

Among the revelations of "Private Opinion in America" is that men are less supportive of abortion being a matter between a woman and her doctor than public surveys suggest, but also that people are less concerned than other polls suggest about the amount of time public schools spend talking about race.

On many topics, the gap was fairly small—a few percentage points—between the opinion someone held privately and the one publicly expressed. And the results varied by demographic and political party. Yet every group polled registered double-digit gaps on at least one issue.

One group in particular was revealed to have struggled mightily to be candid with ordinary pollsters. For political independents, people without a party, the gap between private thought and public expression ran to double digits on more than half the issues—a striking amount of dissonance. This discrepancy ought to seem odd. After all, political moderates still constitute the majority in the U.S. electorate. But in a public sphere dominated by extremes, independents are made to feel that they have no place.

A more striking measure of that distress popped up in Gallup's annual poll asking Americans, "What one country anywhere in the world do you consider to be the United States' worst enemy today?" One of the options is "the United States itself." This year, that was the choice of 2% of Democrats and 1% of Republicans. But 11% of independents judged the U.S. as its own worst enemy—more than selected either North Korea or Iran.

People do, of course, disagree. If they didn't, there wouldn't be much need for democracy. There are real differences in opinion on topics that are, to many Americans, a matter of life and death. It matters that you vote. And there's a reason the past decade or so has been a time in which friendships, families, and civic life have been riven by politics. Which is to say, no discussion of polarization can ignore Donald Trump. Division is kind of his brand. Whether or not Trump deliberately exploited the national tug toward the extremes to get elected in 2016, the trend accelerated during his time in office.

When it comes to measuring perceived polarization, political scientists regard the quadrennial surveys by American National Election Studies as the gold standard. Every four years, it asks members of one party how warmly or coolly they feel toward the other party. During Trump's term, the temperature dropped a record amount. Studies of presidential rhetoric note that he stood out among modern Presidents for seldom using language intended to unite the country.

And yet, at the end of those four years, moderates remained the majority, even as politics grew nastier. "National unity" actually turns out to be of scant interest to most people, finishing 50th in the American Aspirations survey. "Treating one another with respect," however, ranked 14th. In a country where most people agree on most things, the acid tone of public debate amounts to a paradox that Lilliana Mason, a political psychologist at Johns Hopkins, captured in the title of a 2014 paper, "I Disrespectfully Agree."

Mason says insult politics masks the underlying congruity on most issues by stirring emotions attached to differences in sensibility or social identity—the "culture war" topics that animate activists on both sides. "Americans are, on average, moderate on most policy preferences," she says. "But one of the things that our current politics does is it makes us think the most about the policies that we get the most mad about."

Fortunately, when people learn the truth about the other side, they feel better.

"Polarization appears to be largely driven by misperceptions," Rachel Kleinfeld concluded in a sweeping survey of the topic for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Even the worst reports going around—that, for instance, significant numbers of Americans supposedly favor armed revolt—turn out to be misleading. Those polls reflect a perception that the "other side" is already planning violence. Informed of the actual situation, the reaction recedes. Stanford's Willer says the propensity for political violence is overreported by 300% to 400%.

Mason agrees. In so many studies, people register surprise that their assumptions about their rivals are wrong. "They're like, 'Oh, I didn't know that,' and then they feel better about the other side," she says. "And then they go out into the real world and everything around them is like no, no, no, they're demons. And so the effect doesn't last, right? It has to be everywhere."

What looks like a gulf may be more like a flooded sidewalk—shared space that's still there, just really hard to see. In American Aspirations, more respondents said politicians should focus on finding common ground than said politicians should be fighting for them. But—sure enough—they also thought "other people" felt the opposite.

And of course November looms, with its promise of cleaving the nation down the middle with a this-or-that choice. Yet face to face, most people still get along, especially if they're polite enough not to talk only about politics all the time.

But even if they do, look: In 2022, a Berkeley study followed what scholars have determined are the most insular partisans of all—liberal Democrats—as they knocked on doors in conservative neighborhoods, canvassing for votes. The activists didn't change many minds. But afterward, many reported a new respect for people who saw things differently. —With reporting by Julia Zorthian

Bipartisan report seeks ways to counter extreme polarization that has created distrust in elections

Gary Fields, The Associated Press, February 6, 2024

Extreme partisanship combined with a complicated and highly decentralized voting system have led to a loss of faith in election results among some in the U.S., according to a bipartisan report released Tuesday that calls for greater transparency and steps to make voting easier.

The report noted that even in "normal times" elections are complex in a nation with thousands of voting jurisdictions and where the rules vary widely from state to state, and even between local governments.

"Of course, these are not normal times," it said, noting that rancor and rhetoric have replaced problem-solving. "Nowhere is this more evident than with the partisan gamesmanship played over the very heart of this great democracy — the way we elect our leaders."

The report by The Carter Center and the Baker Institute for Public Policy lays out 10 principles for trying to balance equal access to the polls with ensuring the integrity of election results.

Among other things, it recommends election laws that are clear and well-communicated, easy but secure voter registration, regular audits of local voting procedures and transparency in counting the votes.

In part, the report says its recommendations are an attempt to address "a tumultuous period of domestic unrest, one of the most polarized in American history."

The principles are part of a cooperative effort that began in 2020 between the two institutions. It was inspired by the collaboration between former President Jimmy Carter, a Democrat, and former Republican Secretary of State James A. Baker III in 2005, when they served as co-chairs of the bipartisan Commission on Federal Election Reform.

The two organizations have worked together on other issues, including several conferences on U.S. elections, but the principles released Tuesday are their first to examine the nation's election system and policies.

David Carroll, director of the Carter Center's Democracy Program, said the lack of uniformity in election laws and procedures represents "the beauty, the complexity and the challenge" of running elections and guiding public perception in the U.S. The country has some 10,000 voting jurisdictions.

Election integrity has been a concern in the aftermath of the 2020 election, as former President Donald Trump and his allies made false claims of widespread fraud and spread conspiracy theories about voting machines. Recounts, reviews and audits in the battleground states where Trump contested his 2020 loss repeatedly showed that Biden had won. Trump's former attorney general also acknowledged that there was no widespread voter fraud, and Trump lost dozens of court challenges, including several before judges he appointed.

Carroll said challenging election results and the integrity of the voting process is a relatively new development.

"Extreme polarization really has led, I think, to more questioning of election processes that, ironically, have only improved significantly over the last 25 years," he said. "So while the doubts have gone up, the processes have actually become tighter and tighter and better and better."

Mark Jones, a political scientist at Rice University and co-director of the Baker Institute's Presidential Elections Program, said the majority of states have been making improvements to areas such as voter registration, flexibility in voting and voting technology.

"No state is perfect, nor is our goal to have every state be homogenous," he said.

The group's principles are suggestions for making further improvements, he said. If voter photo ID is a requirement, for example, "make sure that everybody who needs one can get one without a great deal of effort or hardship," Jones said.

The groups also are encouraging states to have votes counted as close to Election Day as possible. Waiting a week — or several weeks — for an outcome undermines confidence in the system, he said.

Amy Cohen, executive director of the National Association of State Election Directors, said she had not seen the recommendations but said election officials are constantly trying to improve. She said there are "thousands" of elections each year and that each one is seen "as an opportunity to iterate and improve and get better."

Election officials are aware that the length of time it takes to announce results can have an effect on some voters' trust in the outcome, she said. She noted that the timelines for counting mailed ballots are not directed by election officials but rather set by statutes passed by state legislatures.

"We need to normalize the fact that it just takes longer to tabulate election results accurately," she said.

In the current environment, she agreed that educating voters about those processes should be a priority.

"Given the proliferation of false information about elections, proactive communication and communication in general has taken on a lot more importance," she said.

Choose unity, not division

Chris Walsh, George W. Bush Institute, June 10, 2024

While many people have fallen into the trap of believing that politics has irrevocably divided our country, it's not true.

There is reason for hope over the state of America's union despite any catastrophizing around the 2024 elections because of our commitment to pluralism. That's the social tolerance that allows people of conflicting beliefs and different backgrounds to coexist peacefully.

Pluralism is profoundly important for a democracy of 330 million very different people. Keeping America off the path of dissolution – or even civil war – means maintaining its commitment to pluralism. The good news is that most Americans already agree on unifying elements like our nation's ideals and founding documents.

Our task as we enter this election cycle (and beyond) is to keep it that way as we reconcile myriad differences with shared American identity. "It's pluralism or war," New York Times columnist David French warned during the George W. Bush Presidential Center's recent Forum on Leadership in April.

The George W. Bush Institute's exploration of pluralism has consistently found that its effects are strongest when different groups are bound by a shared purpose, goal, or common obstacle.

Thankfully, most Americans with different ideologies agree on core principles such as the right to vote, equal protection under the law, free speech and assembly, and religious liberty, according to a recent study from the Associated Press and the University of Chicago's nonpartisan research institution NORC.

This research reminds us that Americans, despite their stark differences, have the same foundations for a shared identity – common ideals, founding documents, and a liberal democratic culture that has emerged from both.

Acknowledging this isn't frivolous optimism. It's the daily reality of many in this country who live peacefully and freely among neighbors with different politics, religions, and ethnicities. Often, we don't appreciate the extraordinary ordinariness of this experience.

For example, French explained the "Miracle of Franklin Road" outside of Nashville, where he lives. Recounting his drives down this road, he described "megachurch after megachurch" sharing the space with mosques and synagogues.

Instead of enmity or violence between faiths, French said, "the main conflict is position in the buffet line after church." This reality exists because pluralism is working and amplifies the potency of our shared freedoms that allow us to worship or speak as we please.

That doesn't mean we agree on everything. In fact, democracy and free societies emphasize disagreement.

Nor does it dismiss the serious challenges to social cohesion that the United States faces. Most prominently, Harvard professor Arthur Brooks has described a growing culture of contempt – widespread conviction that those with whom we disagree are worthless – as eroding our national fabric. We currently see this reflected in our politics and on college campuses.

To that point, the Bush Institute has been focused on reclaiming a sense of optimism for the country and goodwill toward fellow Americans.

Critics on both the left and the right may respond to this call, however, by suggesting this moment doesn't allow for optimism or compassion. They would argue that there's a binary choice to decide who leads the country. If both options are bad, one is still worse – even to the point of threatening our democracy's existence – they might say. Therefore, they may decide to lower the moral standards by which they judge candidates or to get into the muck with political opponents to "save the country."

This mindset causes some to disengage from civic life altogether. It imbues national elections, particularly for the presidency, with apocalyptic significance for others. Neither approach is good for strengthening our commitment to pluralism.

And that's not to disregard voter concerns over the country's future. There's a reason Ronald Reagan's words resonated when he said, "Freedom is a fragile thing and it's never more than one generation away from extinction."

If Americans on the right and the left were less committed to core values, as the research indicates, Reagan's charge might carry more urgency today.

Consider, though, that our challenges, while serious, are far from America's darkest hour – a distinction that certainly lies with our Civil War.

And in the past century alone, prominent leaders have sharply tested our Constitution or commitment to pluralism. Woodrow Wilson encouraged the passage of the Sedition Act of 1918 that disregarded First Amendment rights and jailed government critics. Franklin Delano Roosevelt ordered the internment of loyal American citizens "deemed a threat to national security" during World War II. Richard Nixon oversaw the Watergate scandal. And most recently, Donald Trump did little to dissuade supporters from storming the Capitol and disrupting the peaceful transfer of power.

Our Republic has endured all this.

Today, the country is much less divided on core American values than many may think. That's fantastic news for maintaining our pluralistic society and it should inspire confidence that the nation will continue enduring – even when our preferred candidates or parties lose.

More importantly, it means the country is positioned to choose pluralism over war.

In praise of dissent

Mark Griffin, Current, July 3, 2023

Conservative Californians move to Florida, fleeing high taxes and progressive-activist educators, while progressive Oklahomans move to Chicago to access transgender medical care. Welcome to the "great sort." Behold red states become redder and blue states become bluer as people cluster in like-minded political spaces: states, cities, zip codes. The exceptions just prove the rule. Rural Oregon does have a host of red counties, and college towns like Oberlin float like cobalt satellites above the bright-red farmlands of Ohio. But the overall pattern is clear.

Perhaps this demographic sorting was bound to happen. Maybe there is something to be said for the phrase "good fences make good neighbors." But dangers lurk. As political parties have come to monopolize certain geographical and institutional locations, democratic dissent has become rarer and democratic dialogue endangered.

It wasn't always like this. When I started college, Reagan was popular in what we now call blue states, and Democrats still won elections in statewide races in the South. One could point to more-liberal and more-conservative regions, but political views were more diffuse, more spread across the map. And for the most part expressing dissent carried less risk.

I still believe in progress. I believe that, all things considered, the world is a better place for most people most of the time than it was a generation ago. But it's also true that the moral arc of the universe is a jagged one, and things sometimes move in reverse. It's this jagged image I keep in mind as I pen these words in praise of dissent, an endangered democratic art.

I started college in 1980 with no political convictions to speak of—or none beyond a general belief in the benevolence of the U.S. and a general appreciation for the religious liberties that were denied to those behind the "iron curtain." I'd just graduated from a Christian high school in the South and had spent the first fifteen years of my life in Mexico, raised as the child of missionaries. I would have been surprised to learn of the political role that evangelicals would play over the next few decades. To be sure, there were folks like my uncle in Tulsa who were campaigning for Reagan. But on the other hand, there was that grandfather of mine, an Arkansas-born coal miner and a die-hard Democrat, who looked like he belonged on the set of John Ford's Grapes of Wrath. And hadn't Carter, a Democrat, made a big deal about being a born-again Christian?

My naïve detachment from politics met its acid test during my sophomore year, in the early years of the Reagan Administration, when I met a student who had just arrived from Guatemala as a political exile. I still have these vivid memories of walking into his dorm room to the arresting sight of a picture hung above his bed, in the manner of a memorial. I remember how he informed me, with the stoic idealism of the young Che Guevara in The Motorcycle Diaries, that the picture was of his late older brother, a leftist doctor just murdered (or "disappeared") by the Guatemalan government.

Having lived in Mexico as a child, I had no trouble understanding the desperate straits that were driving Latin American peasants and workers to take up arms: the destitution, the iron-clad class divide. But it came as a shock to learn that pro-U.S. governments of Latin America, which I'd always considered more or less benign, were murdering civilians on a scale that rivaled the Holocaust. Ernesto's brother had been just one of the hundreds of thousands of victims of a horror that was happening across the region.

Of the two parties, it was the Democrats who, in that particular context, carried the banner of human rights. Carter, just out of office, had stood up to right-wing Latin American dictators and "death squads" in a way that Reagan, in his Cold-War zeal, never would. And that became the basis for my own dissenting political views. I felt like quite an outlier when in 1984, in Stillwater, Oklahoma, I cast my first vote for Walter Mondale. I was out of step not just with the average Oklahoma voter but with the naive patriotism that (as far as I could tell) had taken hold across the map. There was no great social cost for me. I felt more ignored than stigmatized—like a sullen, reluctant participant in a series of pep rallies.

In today's lingo, I've been a blue voter (albeit ambivalent, and sometimes dissenting) since then. I recall an acute ambivalence in 2000, after Bill Clinton's two terms in office, when it was obvious that the Democratic establishment had shifted its main allegiance from the traditional working class (like my Arkansas grandparents) to the white-collar managerial class (heretofore known as yuppies). It was Ralph Nader who called attention to the growing divide between the "haves" and the "have-nots" that had been overseen not just by Republican administrations but now under Clinton too. Nader was an outsider who criticized neoliberalism in the name of a more traditional brand of liberalism. He was a prophet railing against the abandonment of places like Flint, Michigan and Booneville, Arkansas (my grandparents' hometown), places that had begun a spiral of descent into boarded-up, dilapidated ghost towns.

The Nader campaign was a moment of dissent within Blue America. It was a reminder that—as Michael Lind puts it—politics doesn't just have the standard left-right axis. It also has an insider-outsider one. I'll leave the question of whether Nader's campaign was a net plus or minus to the historians. But he was saying things that needed to be said.

But it's the unprecedented events of this last decade (since 2015 more or less) that have me concerned for the status of political freedom and dissent as such. I don't think that most Americans need to be informed about the intense political tribalism that has engulfed us. It's not hard to picture some future dystopian scenario where America becomes two self-contained monoliths (all walls and no bridges) in a perpetual state of cold (if not outright) civil war.

If there's an antidote to all this, it will have to be found in something like John Inazu's "confident pluralism." Inazu argues that if we're to "survive and thrive through deep difference" we must embrace a robust interpretation of First Amendment rights: a broad inclusion of groups that might have profound disagreements about the common good, and (of course) a broad acceptance of dissent.

I had something like this in mind in 2020 when I joined Braver Angels, an organization committed to political depolarization. The name references Lincoln's appeal in his first inaugural address to "the better angels of our nature." Now, in the midst of what some are calling a "cold civil war," the organization proposes to build bridges across ideological divides. If we're ever to succeed in this de-polarizing task, we'll need to honor dissent between and within Red and Blue spaces. We'll need a robust pluralism.

What would this look like in practice? Well, there are instances of it here and there, scenarios that I'd like to see replicated. There is, for example, Bentonville, Arkansas: bohemian bicyclers and downtown pubs confident enough to brandish rainbow flags, dissenting from the prevailing political climate of the state. On the other side of the ideological spectrum, there is the traditionalist Catholic Robert George, making his case for the common good in the hallowed halls of Princeton, placing the words of Pope Benedict alongside those of Michel Foucault.

These bold anomalies are what depolarization and confident pluralism look like. As long as there are examples of this sort, there is hope.

Mark Griffin is Professor of Spanish at Oklahoma City University. He was born and raised in Mexico, where his parents served as career missionaries. He is co-author of Living on the Borders: What the Church Can Learn from Ethnic Immigrant Cultures (Brazos Press, 2004) and has written articles on modern Latin American and Spanish literature.

> ***"There are always too many Democratic congressmen, too many Republican congressmen, and never enough U.S. congressmen."*** *— Anonymous*

Words not violence

Rev. Gary Peluso-Verdend, PhD, Braver Angels, September 2024

Gary Peluso-Verdend, PhD
Theologian in Residence
Boston Avenue United Methodist Church

Using words is humankind's greatest alternative to violence. I read somewhere that Freud quipped the first person who threw an insult rather than a spear is the founder of civilization. The late Catholic theologian and public intellectual John Courtney Murray wrote that civilization is a group of people "locked together in argument."

Anthropologists claim that homo sapiens became the dominant human group due to two attributes: our capacity for violence and our capacity to cooperate for a common good. Woe to the civilization, however, which surrenders a common good to factions cooperating to defeat their fellow-members-turned-enemies (real and imagined), where violence rather than argument prevails.

I concur with those who claim America is an ideal, an experiment. Self-rule with maximum doses of freedom, responsibility, and equality of opportunity. In order for that experiment to work, we Americans must create and enrich the cultural soil for democracy to flourish. And a fundamental ingredient in that healthy soil is our capacity for conversation and argument. One could argue that capacity, that soil, has never existed strongly enough for our nation's better angels to flourish.

That capacity for conversation and argument is clearly lacking in today's society. Braver Angels is one of the organizations committed to depolarizing American culture—at the fundamental level of how we are stewarding the soil for democracy. Treat the other as a human being. Seek first to understand rather than to be understood. Do not ignore, deny, fear, or dismiss differences but do seek common ground. Make the ground by walking rather than assuming we must re-discover a Golden Age. Both treat others as they want to be treated and as well as you want to be treated. Act with opponents as if we need marriage counseling rather than divorce counseling.

I identify as a Christian. I am a lifelong United Methodist. I've been a member of the clergy since 1979. Based on my experience in congregations, my doctoral work at the University of Chicago, and my leadership in graduate theological seminaries, my primary "project" question became: what is the nature of the community we seek? What, practically speaking, is the best kind of community we can achieve—whether in a religious or a secular setting? I'm still working on these questions! But I can say for certain that a community's capacity to have the conversations and arguments it needs to have is a chief indicator of whether or not that community, or that society, has a promising future.

Who does our hate serve?

Julian Adorney, Braver Angels, August 1, 2024

I used to hate the person who abused me. They hurt me, badly, over and over again; and for years afterwards I used to lie awake at night seething with hatred for them. My hate felt right. It felt justified.

But eventually, I realized that I had to let my hatred go. Why? For two reasons.

First, my hate wasn't doing anything to the person who abused me. Day after day my pulse would pound with rage as I thought about them. But here's the problem. We hadn't spoken in years. We were no longer in each others' lives. So what was my hate accomplishing? I was thinking violent thoughts and hoping that my abuser would pick up on them via…what? A psychic link? Some sort of telepathic connection that I didn't know about but that I hoped, somehow, existed?

It occurred to me that my hatred wasn't accomplishing any of my goals.

I think about this a lot in our current political climate. I have friends who hate Kamala Harris and friends who hate Trump. Cards on the table, I would rather vote for Harris than Trump. But suppose I hated Trump. Would that endow me with more votes? Would it magically deposit more money in my bank account, so I could donate more to Team Harris? Would my hatred give me more hours in the day that I could use to phone bank and volunteer? I don't think so.

I think we can fight our opponents without hating them. I think we can oppose them without hating them. I think we can vote, donate money, canvass and phone bank, and do everything else to stop them from winning election or reelection…all without hating them. When it comes to politics, I don't think our hatred does us any good.

The second reason I started to let go of my hate was that it was making me miserable. It was gnawing at my bones as I paced the small living room of my apartment. It was sapping my energy. It was eating up my free time. It was distracting me from work, from time with friends and family…from life.

Hatred, as the old saying goes, is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die.

And then one day I started to let go of my hatred (and the letting go was, to be clear, a long process). And life started to open up before me. I had more free time. I had more energy. I was able to be more present with friends and family. I met my beautiful wife. I became less miserable. And as I let go of my hatred, something else started to seep in in its place. Peace. Joy. Connection. Love. The sheer beauty of being fully awake to the present moment.

Elections are important. Politics is important. Fighting for what we believe in is important. But I look at my friends who hate Harris, and my friends who hate Trump. And I wonder if they aren't missing out, just a little bit, on the richness and fullness of life. I wonder if their hate might not be crowding out, just a little bit, something better.

Because here's the truth…when I look back on how my life opened up after I started the process of letting go of my hate, I'm struck powerfully by a single thought: I wish I had let it go sooner.

What former Gov. Walters has to say about the polarization of current politics

Former Gov. David Walters, The Oklahoman, October 13, 2023

In an era marked by intense political polarization and ideological divides, the importance of cooperative governing, collaboration and compromise is worth a moment.

Republican Speaker Kevin McCarthy is now a former for having the temerity to collaborate with Democrats to extend the deadline for the shutdown of the U.S. government. We could put this in the "No Good Deed Goes Unpunished" file, but let's instead use it for a moment of recognition that the ability to work with opponents is not merely a political virtue; it is a fundamental necessity for conducting the business of our diverse nation and state.

Sadly, the frustration many citizens feel today is a reflection of the growing disconnect between political leaders and their duty to serve the greater good. Public policy and discourse cannot always be about trying to make the opponent look bad or, worse, making up facts and issues to justify divisive tactics when politically useful. Oklahoma's low voter registration and turnout is a symptom of this frustration.

As former governors, we may offer unique perspectives on leadership, one that underscores the merits of collaboration and compromise.

When a majority Democratic Legislature was not willing to pass certain reforms that I advocated as governor in the early 1990s, I invited the entire Republican delegation to the Governor's Mansion for breakfast and had a productive conversation. We made some friends at breakfast that helped with the cause and we nudged the majority party to consider more of the reforms.

The essence of democracy lies in the halls of legislatures and congresses where different voices converge, where debates are held and where laws are forged. It is in these spaces that the values of cooperation and compromise are meant to shine.

Collaboration acknowledges differing viewpoints are not to be feared but embraced as essential components of a healthy debate. By engaging in dialogue with political opponents, lawmakers have the opportunity to refine their ideas, to test the strength of their arguments, and ultimately to arrive at policies that are more robust and balanced.

Compromise acknowledges that absolute adherence to one's principles can lead to gridlock and stagnation. Through compromise, elected officials might not satisfy every ideological extreme but can, nevertheless, make tangible improvements in the lives of their constituents.

The belief in the importance of collaboration and compromise is grounded in the recognition that elected officials are servants of the people, not the representatives of a single faction or ideology.

Cooperation and compromise is a demonstration of strength, humility and commitment to fulfilling the responsibilities entrusted by the electorate. They permeate the very essence of a healthy democracy. They enable a nation to navigate crises, manage conflicts and adapt to changing circumstances. They foster a sense of unity and shared purpose, transcending party lines and ideological divides.

My prayer is that elected officials at all levels of government heed this call, recognizing that their foremost duty is to serve the best interests of all citizens. Only through cooperation and compromise can we rekindle the spirit of democratic governance and restore the faith of the people in their political institutions. It is not a choice but an imperative for a thriving and united state and nation.

David Walters served as the 24th governor of the state of Oklahoma.

Political polarization solutions

Chicago Harris School of Public Policy

Following is a non-exhaustive list of ideas that have been proposed by scholars and other thought leaders. Please send us your ideas for additions or elaborations.

Reform the Election Process

- Abolish primary elections and let state and local party organizations choose nominees.
- Get rid of closed primaries.
- Adopt a top-two or top-four unified primary election – open to all registered voters -- in which the top vote-getters regardless of party advance to the general election. (ex.: California; Washington)
- Adopt instant run-off elections.
- End the official neutrality of party organizations in primary elections and instead encourage (when useful) party organizations to endorse candidates in primary elections, thereby allowing certain candidates to use the party "brand."
- Elect members of Congress only in presidential election years.
- Adopt non-partisan ballots such as those commonly used at the municipal level.

Assure Proportionality

- Reserve some seats for allocation to the party receiving the most votes if the party receiving the most votes does not also win the most seats.
- Adopt proportional representation.

Make the Redistricting Process Less Partisan

- Authorize impartial commissions to draw election district boundaries in order to stop gerrymandering.

Increase Turnout

- Make voting mandatory.
- Adopt a lottery or other incentives to increase voter turnout.
- Stop voter suppression.
- Specify a single date when all states would hold their non-presidential primary elections.
- Construct GOTV efforts that target moderate voters who frequently do not vote.

Reform the Campaign Finance System. (The intention of some of these reform ideas is to strengthen candidate campaign committees and/or parties relative to outside groups.)

- Adopt public financing of political campaigns.
- Adopt public financing of campaigns with the funds channeled through political party organizations.
- Allow voters to allocate public funds to candidates or multi-candidate PACs through vouchers.
- Place stricter limits on contributions where limits are high or non-existent.
- Raise limits for contributions to official candidate campaign committees.
- Raise limits for contributions to political parties.
- Restore the "soft money" loophole for party organizations.
- Limit campaign spending by independent groups.
- Limit contributions to independent groups.

Reform the Legislative Process

- Abolish the filibuster.
- Adopt supermajority selection of the Speaker of the House.
- Reinstitute earmarks.
- Adopt a parliamentary system.
- Reduce transparency, allowing more latitude for negotiation and compromise.
- For federal judicial appointments, remove the supermajority requirement and instead adopt a storable vote system that allows senators to cast multiple votes (from their aggregate judicial vote budget) for nominees they strongly support or oppose.

- Eliminate the debt ceiling.
- Make obstruction more costly by reinstating single-tracking in the Senate so that the Senate cannot have two or more pieces of legislation pending on the floor at the same time.
- Instead of filibuster and cloture, require 41 Senators to vote to stop a vote on a bill.
- Require filibusters to be "talking" filibusters.
- Promote and encourage repeated interparty interactions and facilitate interparty relationships among legislators.

Improve Voter Knowledge and Encourage Voter Respect for Differing Perspectives

- Use data science to extract and summarize information from campaign finances records and other large data sets in order to provide better informational cues to voters.
- Work with news organizations and social media websites to develop tools and strategies that facilitate more thoughtful, balanced and respectful consideration (by their audiences) of differing viewpoints.
- Strengthen fact-checking initiatives. Expand civic education and civic news exposure among young people. Increase interest by utilizing agerelevant content.

Other

- Create a (most likely small or regional) Centrist Party which might change the dynamics in Congress.
- Incentivize incumbents to seek re-election and stay in office longer.
- Encourage public acceptance of the need for log-rolling (i.e. side payments) when such side payments are legitimate and in the public interest.

Note: *Many of the above ideas are addressed in depth in the essays compiled in Solutions to Political Polarization in America, Cambridge University Press, 2015, edited by Nathaniel Persily. This book is an excellent starting point for anyone wishing to learn more about polarization and proposed solutions.*

Notes

This is a resource document for you to use.
Take notes, highlight, use as a text book.

Rebuilding respect

William McKenzie, George W. Bush Institute, 2024

The rising number of Americans intent on restoring trust and civility in our national discourse further proves the theorem that for every action there is an opposite and equal reaction. Two pollsters, Celinda Lake and Ed Goeas, are the latest to join the movement. This odd couple – Lake is a Democrat and Goeas a Republican – wrote A Question of Respect to explain how the United States got into its current distemper and how it can be resolved. The last word in their title is the one the authors consider the most essential. "We were not writing a book on civility; we were writing about respect," Goeas explains in his part of the introduction. "Respect is the essential core that informs how we interact with one another in all areas of life. Without respect, on a political or personal level, there is no possibility of coming together in meaningful, positive, healing ways – which we and the country desperately need."

The authors exemplify this respect personally through their own friendship, which grew out of a conference both attended in Hungary in the fall of 1990. Their backgrounds helped the relationship grow from there. Goeas, the Republican, grew up in a Democratic family. Lake, the Democrat, was raised in a Republican family. For the last 30 years, they jointly have conducted the Battleground Poll that surveys voters' attitudes on topical political issues, such as their views about Congress. The Georgetown University Institute of Politics and Public Service now sponsors their poll, and Goeas and Lake offer their respective interpretations on each survey's results. In 2019, in partnership with the same institution, they also jointly launched a civility poll.

Direct exposure to the United States' divisions through their work on these polls prompted Goeas and Lake to co-author this insightful, easy-to-read book. In their diagnosis of the current problem, one compelling statistic they discuss comes from the American National Election Studies Trust in Government Survey. The organization's index has shown a decline in trust in government since the height of Ronald Reagan's Presidency, ratcheting downward from a score of 47 out of a possible 100 points to 16.8 points in 2020.

A more recent survey confirms Americans' growing mistrust of their institutions: A New York Times/Siena College poll in July found that a majority of Americans believe their system of government does not work. As these and other data points Goeas and Lake highlight make painfully clear, the United States badly needs smart solutions. To their credit, they spend much of their book discussing them.

Play to Americans seeking solutions

These days, it may often seem like the United States is awash in pessimism and cynicism. In some cases, those isms have grown into contempt for people on the other side of the aisle. The book, however, points out that a range of individuals and organizations are working hard to restore Americans' respect for one another. Among the groups the authors cite are Unite America and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Local Voices Network. The former is a cross-partisan organization that works on issues like protecting elections, overturning gerrymandering, and reforming electoral systems – all to create a more representative, functional government. The latter provides moderated online community discussions to help neighbors interact with those who hold different views. The MIT network also hosts in-person community discussions. In both cases, the purpose is to create opportunities for people to listen, speak, and be heard. Goeas and Lake term MIT's network the "humanization of political discourse.

My Bush Institute colleague Chris Walsh and I are engaged in a similar project we call "The Pluralism Challenge." Through the program, we highlight individuals and organizations that promote tolerance for those with different backgrounds, views, or beliefs and provide a safe place to express or practice those beliefs. We also identify factors that help pluralism take root.

Elected officials will not naturally practice pluralism; they need incentives to do so.

One thing that stands out from our research is that elected officials will not naturally practice pluralism; they need incentives to do so. The strongest incentive, of course, is winning votes. You might think that one of the best ways to win the most votes would be to campaign to a wider, more moderate voter base. Yet that strategy largely has been abandoned today, due to politicians' fear of losing their next party primary – elections in which only a small minority of voters, but typically the most extreme ones, take part.

Here, too, a number of people and groups are working to address this problem. David Holt, a Republican now in his second term as the mayor of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, recommends a two-round election system. The two-round system puts the top two vote-getters of the initial round in a second-round runoff (if no contender wins a majority in the initial round). The winner of the second-round runoff is then elected. In addition to Oklahoma City, cities like Dallas, Texas, and states like California use this format or a variation of it. The benefit of this system is that it allows candidates to run at large without party affiliation. Holt argues that this arrangement forces candidates to appeal to a wide swath of voters, and his experience backs him up. He cites the system as instrumental in helping Oklahoma City voters pass the fourth installment of the city's $1.1 billion Metropolitan Area Projects (MAPS) initiative in 2019. The projects ranged from mental health services to a civil rights

center to economic development and stadiums.

This two-round election system and others like it require politicians to promote pluralist policies and grant the winner a mandate to provide solutions with broad appeal. According to Lake and Goeas, the system reaches voters who care less about partisan ideology and more about solving their community's problems. Lake and Goeas dub these people "solution voters." They cite the Battleground Poll to support their claim that Americans are more practical than ideological. That important point should guide leaders to focus more on compromise issues like repairing our physical and technological infrastructure than on stand-your-ground issues like abortion. The former are more practical in nature, focusing on problems like which bridges or highways need repairing in a community or state. The latter are usually moral issues that are informed by a voter's most deeply held values. Those indeed are important matters, but they're much harder to resolve and lead to more partisan bitterness. Focusing instead on compromise issues would both fix the pressing problems of a given community and lower partisan tensions through cross-party collaboration.

Look to women and students

Many of the leaders that Goeas and Lake cite in their discussion of solutions happen to be women and young adults. That's no accident. Lake at one point describes how, in 2013, Republican Sens. Susan Collins of Maine, Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, and Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire worked with Democratic Sens. Barbara Mikulski of Maryland and Patty Murray of Washington to break an impasse over the federal budget that threatened to shut down the government. Lake writes that these women succeeded where their male colleagues failed because they shared the experience of overcoming gender barriers. "They also spent time together and knew each other … as people," she writes. That's because, along with other female senators, they had long held regular potluck dinners and met one another's families. As Lake notes, such dinners alone will not resuscitate American democracy. But casual interactions are important, since they provide leaders and citizens a chance to interact with people who hold different views – something Lake calls "deliberative democracy."

The authors also detail a generational shift. They cite a 2022 Battleground Poll where 58% of respondents said that "young people are the best hope for the future." According to the pollsters, young respondents overwhelmingly affirmed that belief. Intrigued by this finding, Lake and Goeas convened a focus group of 10 Georgetown students and seven young, non-college educated adults from across the United States. The participants emphasized that respect must be earned every day and contended that their generation could fix our broken political system through respect, shared understanding, and listening. "Not to put the blame on older generations," one young woman told the authors, "but it almost feels like they're shifting the burden of the responsibilities to make a change on us. But it also gives me a sense of urgency because I think pretty much every young person that I know wants to make a change."

One survey doesn't provide conclusive evidence, but other young Americans clearly share this sentiment, as is demonstrated by the growth of trust-building efforts like BridgeUSA, a national student organization that trains young Americans to engage in healthy conflict – that is, to disagree respectfully.

Building trust in the media

In describing today's media, Goeas and Lake rightly include both traditional news organizations (TV, radio, print) and social media (Facebook, X, Instagram, et al.). When it comes to TV, Goeas and Lake make the important point that cable networks adeptly cover news stories on topics that yield predictable partisan reactions. The authors go further and write that "cable news has become a toxic, polarizing format" and reflects how "outlets use negativity to generate clicks and eyeballs, which translates to dollars." By narrowcasting their stories that confirm their viewers' biases, the pollsters argue, the cable news networks define issues such as immigration or the war in Ukraine in partisan ways and harden partisanship. The solution, Goeas and Lake argue, would be for networks to focus more on facts and news reports that are aimed at all Americans, not just those of a particular political stripe. Reporting on all sides of a story is hard work, but shoe-leather journalism counters the silo effect of Americans hearing only one side of a topic.

Of course, the financial model rewards the current system, so change is going to have to come from us as consumers. If we vote with our feet and turn away from toxic television, we can start to create an incentive for cable stations to provide something other than today's polarizing reporting and formats.

Social media presents different problems. Numerous Battleground Polls show that Americans see social media as a contributing factor to the larger decline in respect for other views. A good way to start fixing this would be for the platforms to become more transparent about how they moderate content and customize information for personal consumption. And, the authors argue, consumers should stop and look at the source of the information they find on social media feeds before accepting it as the truth and reposting it.

Playing to solution voters, looking to women and young adults for leadership, and building trust in the media alone will not lead to greater respect. Yet they are some of the strategies our nation needs to move past the mounting rage that characterizes contemporary politics. A Question of Respect doesn't provide all the answers, but it shows us the path to a less polarized atmosphere by emphasizing the fundamental role of listening to and honoring the views of others.

How governors are working on solutions amid intense political polarization

Judy Woodruff and Frank Carlson, PBS News, February 28, 2024

At a time of intense polarization across the country and bitter partisan battles in Washington, some of the nation's governors are attempting to find a way forward to solve their own states' problems. Judy Woodruff sat down with two governors from opposing sides to talk about their call to disagree better. It's part of her series, America at a Crossroads.

Full Transcript

Notice: Transcripts are machine and human generated and lightly edited for accuracy. They may contain errors.

Geoff Bennett:
At a time of intense polarization across the country and bitter partisan battles in Washington, some of the nation's governors are attempting to find a way forward to solve their own state's problems.

Judy Woodruff recently sat down with two governors from opposing sides to talk about their call to disagree better.

It's part of her ongoing series America at a Crossroads.

Gov. Eric Holcomb (R-IN):
Hello. I'm Eric Holcomb, Republican governor of Indiana.

Clint Lamb (D), Former Mayor of Sullivan, Indiana:
And I'm Clint Lamb, Democratic mayor of the city of Sullivan.

Judy Woodruff:
Republican and Democratic leaders sitting down for a meal.

Gov. Mike Parson (R-MO):
And like any good neighbor, we will continue to disagree on plenty of things.

Gov. Laura Kelly (D-KS):
Like barbecue, tax policy, or who's the bigger Chiefs fan.

Judy Woodruff:
Encouraging Americans to engage in respectful dialogue.

Gov. Wes Moore(D-MD):
But we can have our differences without being divisive or hateful.

Judy Woodruff:
This series from the National Governors Association is the brainchild of NGA President Spencer Cox.

Gov. Spencer Cox (R-UT):
You and I probably disagree on a few things. And that's OK.

Judy Woodruff:
The first-term Republican governor from Utah wants to show Americans how to disagree better.

Gov. Spencer Cox:
Our country is deeply divided. And most Americans are tired of the division.

We see dysfunction in Congress. We see this deep polarization that's happening all across the country. And so we had this crazy idea that we could focus on disagreeing better, reminding Americans how to disagree without hating each other and how to try to actually find solutions to some of our biggest problems.

Judy Woodruff:
Last week, as governors from across the country gathered in Washington for their winter summit, I met Governors Cox and Wes Moore, the first-term Democrat from Maryland, at an event hosted by the Economic Club of Washington to talk about why they're pushing this initiative now.

Gov. Spencer Cox:
It's been a fantastic opportunity for us to remember that there's nothing more un-American than hating our fellow Americans.

Gov. Wes Moore:
We are not going to get anything done if we just simply scream into a wind or if we're just talking to an echo chamber. Our ability to be able to be productive, our ability to be able to be effective means that we have to work across the aisle.

It means that we have to be able to meet with people who, even if you at the end of the process disagree with the conclusion, they will at least respect the process, that you heard them, that they understood where you came from, and that you understood where they came from.

Judy Woodruff:
Governor Moore, I want to ask you about how you work through some of the most difficult, most divisive issues of our time. One of them is immigration.

What's an example of a way to even talk about immigration that would be productive?

Gov. Wes Moore:
Yes.

I think the thing that we can all fundamentally agree to is that the system that we have in place right now, it does not work. And so the reason that I signed a letter with eight other governors saying that we are urging Congress to

move on this, what was so frustrating watching a bill that was literally worked on with the president, Democrats, and even conservative Republicans, like Senator Lankford, to go down in flames, why it was so frustrating is that the consequences fall on our shoulders.

And that's why we need a measurement of action.

Judy Woodruff:
So could you, Governor Cox — you're a Republican. You have seen what's happened. You heard — you know that it's the Republicans in the House who are saying, we're not going to go along with this.

What's a way through this?

Gov. Spencer Cox:
Well, the way through is, unfortunately, we need Congress to start doing their job and the president to enforce the laws. Those — it's really that simple.

This is the least divisive of the most divisive issues. If you poll Republicans and Democrats, everyone agrees. They just do. Democrats believe we need to secure the border and Republicans believe we need to fix illegal immigration. I can tell you right now, if Governor Moore and I were asked to solve this problem, even if you just had all 50 governors solve this problem, we could sit down and do it in a weekend.

Judy Woodruff:
Of course, there are real and substantive differences over how to move forward on divisive issues like reproductive rights, transgender policy, and diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives.

Just recently, Governor Cox signed legislation in Utah banning DEI programs in state government and universities, prohibiting gender-affirming care and surgery for minors, and mandating that trans people use the bathrooms that correspond with their gender assigned at birth in public schools and state-owned buildings.

Both Cox and Moore emphasize that disagree better doesn't mean there won't be real disagreements at the end of the day.

Gov. Spencer Cox:
The process matters. I think the process is really important and the way we treat each other. And the way we have approached DEI is a little different than other states. We're trying to focus on government not discriminating on the basis of color, but helping everyone who's struggling.

We want everyone to feel included. We think inclusiveness is very important. We think diversity is very important. And how we do that, how we use the power of the state to do that is also really important. And that's where there is definitely some disagreement. Sometimes, too much gets lumped into DEI that really isn't DEI.

And understanding what the philosophy is behind it is really important. And so, yes, there are major disagreements when it comes to DEI, but, at the end of the day, I think we're seeking the same thing. And that is that everyone feels included, that everyone has the same opportunity, that we're — the deck is not stacked against anyone.

That really matters to me and I think it matters to most Americans.

Gov. Wes Moore:
And I think there — that's exactly right that we want to make sure that everyone is just getting a fair shot at open success.

We know that a lot of the discrepancies and a lot of the disparities that we have seen in our society, that we still see to this day, everything from wealth gaps, to housing gaps, to educational gaps, they haven't been by accident. There have been government policies that have helped to create that.

The reason that we look at things like a racial wealth gap, for example, you can't understand that without understanding things like the Homestead Act, the unequal application of the G.I. Bill, historic redlining. You can't understand how the racial wealth gap has ballooned to 10-1 in this country without understanding that it's been government policies that have helped to create that level of gap.

What is government's role to help to address the inequities that government helped to create?

Gov. Spencer Cox:

I'm Spencer Cox, your Republican candidate for Utah governor.

Chris Peterson (D), Former Utah Gubernatorial Candidate:
And I'm Chris Peterson, your Democratic candidate for governor.

Judy Woodruff:

Yet another issue starkly dividing the country is trust in elections. In 2020, as he ran for his first term as governor, Governor Cox joined his Democratic competitor in a pledge to honor the outcome of the election, whatever the results.

Chris Peterson:
And whether you vote by mail or in person, we will fully support the results of the upcoming presidential election, regardless of the outcome.

Judy Woodruff:
Researchers at Stanford studying polarization told me last year that this kind of public act by leaders can make a real difference in ratcheting down partisan animosity.

And yet, right now, the latest poll shows 69 percent of Republicans say they don't believe Joe Biden legitimately won the election in 2020 to be president. How do we move forward when there's a disagreement on something as fundamental as that?

Gov. Spencer Cox:
Yes, that's a tough one, for sure, there's no question. And I'm very fascinated about how and why that's been able to happen, that myth has been perpetuated so much, when we have had legal proceeding after legal proceeding that has shown that none of those allegations were true.

And it's difficult in this new era, where we have social media and we can surround ourselves with information that just confirms whatever we want to believe, our biases, instead of actual truth and seeking for truth. And that deeply concerns me as a nation. We need good people who are willing to stand up and speak the truth, even if it's unpopular.

And I will certainly continue to do that.

Gov. Wes Moore:
I ran against an election denier, where, when asked the question, would he accept the results of the election, his answer literally was, it depends on the results of the election.

And so it's a very difficult baseline. Let's just start that conversation with that. But I think the thing that we continue to have to do is understand why that exists. And for a lot of people, it is a lack of trust. It's a lack of trust in institutions. That statistic is something — it's actually saying something much bigger.

It's not just about elections. It's not about an election. Do we trust our institutions to actually make our lives better?

Judy Woodruff:
You're all about trying to get people to listen to the other side. And yet the person who is the likely Republican nominee for president this year is someone who seems to pride himself, Governor Moore, on being a divider, rather than a uniter. And that is former President Trump.

How do you do this work under those circumstances?

Gov. Wes Moore:
Because I'm not doing this work because I'm pushing against Donald Trump. I'm doing this work because there was over a million Marylanders who said, we want you to do the job and remember us.

I don't get up in the morning and think to myself, what do I have to do to combat the ills of Donald Trump, or his vitriolic language, or the absurdity of some of the things that he says on a repeated basis. I'm doing this work because there are 6.3 million people who are asking me every single day to remember them, not him.

Gov. Spencer Cox:
When we elevate kind of a single election, it leads to more problematic behavior.

If this really is the most important election in the history of the United States, then every side should be doing everything possible to win, even if it's maybe not legitimate, right? And that's a dangerous way to look at things.

Our country is bigger and better than any single person or any single president. We have 50 states, 50 states where we're innovating, where we're stealing ideas from each other, where we're fixing actual problems. America is so much better and more resilient than Joe Biden or Donald Trump.

And thank goodness we are because that's how we have made it through the last eight years and it's how we're going to make it through the next four no matter who gets elected. And so I just — I believe in us. I believe in the American people, and I believe that we should be engaging with the American people to find out why they feel so attacked all of the time and to try to make life better for them.

Judy Woodruff:
A call to all Americans to focus on finding solutions, compromise and listening to each other.

For the "PBS NewsHour," I'm Judy Woodruff in Washington.

A big, pluralistic democracy needs to think about unity differently

Chris Walsh, George W. Bush Institute, August 20, 2024

"Unity" is a tricky word for a liberal, pluralistic democracy. Our general inclination – particularly given the toxic state of American politics – is that unity is a good thing in this context. I'm sure many of us, if asked, would say our democracy needs more of it.

As a devout pluralist, though, there's something about the word that makes me uneasy. A democracy of 330 million very different people is going to disagree messily … a lot. And it should! Otherwise, it would cease to be "liberal" or "pluralistic" very quickly.

Terms like "democracy" and "pluralism" should conjure visons of competing groups with conflicting ideas, stark disagreements, and finding ways to navigate differences without violence.

None of that sounds much like unity, which includes definitions in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary like "the quality or state of not being multiple; oneness," or "a condition of harmony," or "continuity without deviation or change (as in purpose or action)."

Unity can also put off some dystopian vibes reminiscent of 1984 or The Borg – a cybernetic Star Trek villain which assimilates all humanoid life into its single hive mind. When we think about the word in these negative shades, it understandably generates anxiety over groupthink or imposed harmony.

And yet, our country is the United States of America. Despite people of vastly different backgrounds and beliefs, we are united around foundational values and documents.

Unity isn't an inherently bad thing, either, particularly in times of crisis. For example, our country became largely united in the wake of shocking attacks like Pearl Harbor and 9/11, which boosted a sense of shared patriotism and resilience among citizens.

It's these contradictory forces of unity and pluralism, though, that make America possible. How, then, do we reconcile and maintain them?

The American Enterprise Institute's (AEI) Yuval Levin provides great insight on this front in his new book American Covenant. As he explains, unity in the American context is not thinking alike, but acting together despite our differences. This is a much better way to think about the meaning of unity within our pluralistic democracy.

Levin summarized his book's main points during a recent AEI event. Here's an excerpt from that conversation, where he brilliantly articulates the above point and how our founding documents make it work:

> *We have to work at finding ways to understand our country not in terms of "they" of "those terrible people who are going to ruin everything if they win the next election," but in terms of "we." All of us who in some way share a future in common as Americans.*
>
> *That's not a case for being nice. It's not a case for a truce or even for civility – you make a truce with enemies. Citizens are not enemies. Our options are not war or truce.*
>
> *We are meant to argue with each other precisely because we do share a future in common. We are arguing about that future and what it ought to be. And the stakes are high exactly because we are a "we."*
>
> *"We" is actually a very important word in the American political tradition. It's the first word of that amazing second sentence of the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident."*
>
> *It's the first word of the Constitution: "We the people of the United States."*
>
> *And that's not a coincidence. Both of those documents are expressed in the first person plural because they are both examples of a people taking ownership of its common fate as a nation; acting together politically. The Declaration expresses a common commitment to a set of ideals that then underlie a decision, an act of separation taken in common.*
>
> *The Constitution builds on that premise. Embraces those principles. But it does something that in practical terms may be even more complicated. It establishes a political framework for a society that generally agrees about those fundamental principles, but doesn't agree about much else. Doesn't even agree about exactly what those principles mean as a practical matter in a lot of situations. That disagrees about a lot all the time.*
>
> *The Constitution is exactly about how to make that "we" a reality as a practical matter in the face of division.*

We must be able to "act together" as Levin says. This could take various forms that include good-faith arguments over the issues, negotiating political outcomes that mutually satisfy competing stakeholders, or even accepting political losses with the understanding that there will always be opportunities to refine and pursue preferred policies.

Paradoxically, our national "unity," or whatever you want to call it, depends upon maintaining this commitment that we can simultaneously belong to the United States as a whole – bound by values and principles – and be sovereign individuals who disagree sharply with fellow citizens.

And we have a system, if Americans remain faithful to it, that allows us to dispute our issues without resorting to violent chaos; that protects our God-given rights and allows our full participation even when we're in the "out group." That blessing should never be taken for granted.

What are the solutions to political polarization?

Lee De-Wit, Sander Van Der Linden, and Cameron Brick, The Greater Good Science Center, July 2, 2019

What drives political polarization?

Is it simply disagreement over the great issues of the day? Not necessarily. Recent research by the More in Common Foundation found that more than three-fourths of Americans support both stricter gun laws and a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants brought here as children. Roughly the same number of Americans agree "that our differences are not so great that we cannot come together."

Are they right?

The More in Common results could be interpreted to suggest that we can build bipartisan support for specific policies by focusing more on their boring nuts and bolts. Unfortunately, however, voters don't evaluate policies in isolation. Research has highlighted that people actively use partisan cues when evaluating different policies.

For example, a study by Carlee Beth Hawkins and Brian Nosek shows that labeling policies as "Democrat" or "Republican" can influence policy support, depending on the implicit bias of participants toward each party. A 2017 study by David Tannenbaum and colleagues finds that support for policy "nudges"—such as changing 401k retirement accounts to opt-out rather than opt-in—was heavily influenced by whether they were framed as supporting the goals of the Democratic or Republican party. This was true of regular U.S. citizens and for senior government leaders. Similarly, a 2018 study by Leaf Van Boven and colleagues finds that the majority of Republicans agree that climate change is happening—but their support for policy solutions declined when presented by Democrats.

In other words, people like policies proposed by members of their own in-group—and they don't like ideas generated by out-groups. This dynamic is not new. Since the 1950s, social psychologists have tried to understand what pits groups against each other—and today, they're applying these insights to figure out what is happening in the United States. This research doesn't provide definitive answers, but it does suggest some potential solutions, from changes to the voting system to the development of common goals that might enable groups to work together.

How morality becomes partisan

The More in Common report illustrates that some of the most divisive topics often involve deep moral beliefs. For example, different political groups are very polarized on beliefs about responsibility, such as "people's outcomes in life are determined largely by forces outside of their control," or "people are largely responsible for their own outcomes in life." Similarly, liberals and conservatives are very divided on questions of whether parenting should focus on cultivating a child's curiosity versus good manners, or independence versus respect for elders.

In a new study published this year, Annemarie S. Walter and David P. Redlawsk directly pitted people's moral concerns with their partisan identity. They presented 2,000 participants with examples of different moral violations by different actors. Based on previous research, Walter and Redlawsk had thought that the nature of the moral violation might be the most significant factor in people's evaluations, as there are reasons to think that liberals and conservatives are concerned with some moral violations more than others. What they found, however, is that it wasn't the nature of the moral violation that was most important. Instead, it was the political allegiance of the violator. Democrats in the study were prone to giving Democrats a pass; the same was even more true of Republicans.

This partisan influence on policy preferences and moral judgements is a cause for both hope and concern. On one hand, it reiterates a point made by Daniel Yudkin in a New York Times op-ed about the More in Common report: that the U.S. may actually be less politically polarized based on certain moral or policy issues—at least when there aren't clear partisan associations. On the other hand, it highlights that as soon as a moral or political issue becomes associated with a particular party, it can become polarizing.

This is why it increasingly feels like U.S. politics has entered into a vicious cycle, whereby the moral and emotional language used to galvanize one side is directly antagonizing the other. The us-and-them nature of the debate has led to such a breakdown of trust that even hearing a policy proposed by the other side can be enough to trigger opposition to that policy. New policies (whatever their merit) can therefore quickly become symbols of conflict for the two sides to rally around.

What are the solutions?

This suggests that while there might be various political seeds that have helped drive the recent spike in polarization, it has gotten to a point where polarization is being exacerbated by some of the psychological processes that shape how we interpret identity and groups. This is a significant point to understand because it highlights that if we are to address polarization, we need to think not just about political solutions, but also solutions that are grounded in our understanding of social psychology.

1. Intergroup contact. The "contact hypothesis" suggests that getting to know each other can reduce prejudice between groups. However, social contact can be done well and done badly. As we discussed in

a previous article, following political opponents on Twitter can make people more extreme in their political views. It turns out that many conditions have to be met for contact to reduce prejudice, including having contact be sustained, with more than one member of the group, including a genuine exchange of ideas, and between individuals of similar social rank. These conditions have been very difficult to meet in designing social policies.

One promising civic model for enabling more meaningful contact between groups in conflict involves "Citizens Assemblies," where representative citizens are brought together to deliberate over challenging social or political issues. These assemblies can be thought of as a kind of jury duty for political deliberation, and they offer a platform for different groups to discuss issues in a way that can highlight where common ground exists and how it can be acted upon.

For example, Ireland has run several Citizens Assembles since 2016 that made policy recommendations that have been credited with advances in Ireland's approach to climate change. Indeed, participants in a recent Citizens Assembly on Brexit, run by Alan Renwick and colleagues at University College London, came to a compromise that could resolve the current impasse surrounding the U.K.'s decision to leave the European Union.

2. Perspective taking. Perhaps one of the most important aspects of contact is that it might enable one to see things from another's perspective. The promise of perspective taking was recently illustrated in an experiment to attempt to change support for issues faced by transgender minorities. In this intervention, a brief exchange exploring a range of issues from the perspective of a trans individual was sufficient to shift people's attitudes on this controversial topic. Indeed, the attitude change seemed to persist even six months later, which is unusual for brief psychological interventions.

In his book The Better Angels of Our Nature, Pinker argues that the printing press may have had an important role in increasing levels of empathy following the Enlightenment by making it easier to read stories framed in the perspective of others. Indeed, Pinker speculates that some of the literature written from the perspective of black slaves may have been instrumental to the abolition of slavery.

Considering the revolution in communication technology in our lifetimes, social media may have done more to promote taking sides than seeing the world through the eyes of another. Social media companies, and the governments that regulate them, clearly need to reflect on the extent to which these platforms encourage "side taking" instead of "perspective taking."

3. Superordinate goals. One of the clearest solutions from the psychological literature is that identity-based conflicts require common goals or a "superordinate" sense of identity to bring people back together. In other words, we need a large sense of ourselves that is able to bridge smaller differences. This need to create a superordinate identity has clearly been intuitive to rulers for centuries, who would use various traditions and ceremonies to help build alliances between different countries and cultures.

Of course, superordinate goals also come with a potential risk. Whenever we form an in-group, we also create out-groups. As Richard Dawkins recently tweeted:

"National pride has evil consequences. Prefer pride in humanity. German pride gave us Hitler, American pride gave us Trump, British pride gave us Brexit. If you must have pride, be proud that Homo sapiens could produce a Darwin, Shakespeare, Mandela, Einstein, Beethoven."

Unfortunately, drawing a parallel between Trump and Hitler is perhaps itself an illustration of the polarized nature of modern discourse. Dawkins does have a point, however: The use of a superordinate identity such as American or European has potential risks. So, should we just think of ourselves as humans—or is the idea of "humanity" too abstract? Former British prime minister Theresa May famously criticized such a universalist perspective, stating: "If you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere."

Is that true? Research suggests that a universalist perspective might well have underappreciated benefits. Sam McFarland and colleagues recently reviewed this topic and found that those who identify highly as citizens of the world are indeed more empathic. Of course, those who are more empathic might simply identify more as international citizens. This idea warrants further testing, particularly as McFarland and colleagues identify several factors that might serve to further develop this sense of international citizenship.

4. Proportional voting. While searching for psychological solutions to polarization, it's important not to ignore the context in which political decisions are made, and to think about the way in which different political systems will engage with, and exacerbate, aspects of our psychology.

The U.S. is one of the few countries to be dominated by just two political parties. This fact is almost certainly a reflection of the "winner take all"/"first past the post" voting system. Many countries employ a proportional (or mixed) system, which means that if a party gets 5 percent of the popular vote, they will receive 5 percent of the seats in a given representative body. In the U.S., this party would almost certainly get no representation—which could worsen the us-and-them dynamic of the U.S. political system.

For now, however, there isn't systematic evidence comparing the extent of identity-based politics with the political system used in the U.S. Unfortunately, that kind of large-scale, cross-country research is often the most difficult to obtain, but could be exactly what we need to understand how different voting systems might influence polarization.

That said, there is evidence that more proportional systems have higher levels of voter turnout (at least for supporters of smaller parties). In turn, that increase in turnout is correlated with citizens being more likely to report feeling that their vote makes a difference. This doesn't necessarily stop politics becoming less polarized, but it might make it harder for the extremes to come to dominate.

> **5. Voting for policies, not for parties.** Another potential solution to identity-based policy preferences is to hold direct referendums on specific issues. Among large territories, California and Switzerland both regularly use referendums to address complex policy topics. Referendums are used less frequently in other countries to try to resolve controversial topics, as was the case with gay marriage in Australia or voting reform in New Zealand. When designed well, referendums might cut across existing partisan divides, and if a clear majority is reached, they can signal a new social norm that can help a country move forward.

For those who are familiar with the fallout from the recent Brexit referendum in the U.K., however, this suggestion would probably seem a little laughable. Contemptuous, even. Indeed, there is evidence that the referendum in the U.K. has itself spilled over into a new form of emotional polarization, as recent data from YouGov highlights that (especially younger) "Remain" supporters would not want to see a close relative marry a "Leaver" (a member of the opposing political camp). There's another problem as well: While Australians did indeed vote to legalize same-sex marriage, it could have gone the other way; allowing the majority to vote on the civil and human rights of a minority is very risky.

Like many complex political systems, however, referendums can be designed well and designed badly. In countries with more established systems of direct democracy, the U.K. referendum wouldn't have even been legal. For example, in Switzerland, referendums have to be about precisely defined changes to the law, not vaguely defined outcomes. In New Zealand's referendum on the voting system, an independent educational body was created to inform both sides of the debate without taking a position (as the British government controversially did during the Brexit referendum).

The psychological impact of more direct voting systems is worthy of further enquiry. When poorly implemented, referendums risk causing new fault lines along which polarization can manifest. When well implemented, referendums might cut across existing lines of polarization and help establish a new social norm that can move a country forward.

From reframing issues to tap into a superordinate sense of identity, to promoting forms of contact that encourage perspective taking, social psychology does offer some useful ideas for thinking about how to tackle polarization. Furthermore, social psychology provides insights into the potential implications of different kinds of voting systems and the way in which they might exacerbate or diminish identity-based politics. As we have been careful to try and illustrate, however, experiments in social psychology do not yield off-the-shelf solutions that would be effective in all political contexts. Nevertheless, the farther that modern politics sinks into a self-fulfilling cycle of identity-based polarization, the more we'll need new insights from social science.

Lawmakers grapple with partisan polarization in legislative session

Teegan Smith, OU Daily, February 23, 2024

Oklahoma Rep. Jacob Rosecrants (D-Norman), Rep. Annie Menz (D-Norman), Norman City Council Ward 4 Councilmember Helen Grant, Rep. Jared Deck (D-Norman) and Norman Mayor Larry Heikkila during the Undergraduate Student Congress 2022 post election forum on Dec. 5. Ray Bahner/OU Daily

With a contentious presidential election coming in the fall, increased tension surrounding international conflict and divisiveness among politicians, Norman's legislators face new challenges with deep partisanship and social media conflict heading into the second session of the 59th Legislature.

Kicking off the session, Gov. Kevin Stitt gave his sixth State of the State address, focusing on tax cuts, business, safety and education. His goal of making Oklahoma a top 10 state, he said, is only just beginning.

"In 2019, I addressed this body for the very first time," Stitt said during his address on Feb. 5. "And I laid out a vision to make Oklahoma top 10 in everything we do. I said, 'The Oklahoma turnaround starts right now.'"

Norman's state legislators, made up of three Democratic representatives, a Democratic senator and a Republican senator, hope to make progress in a state with a Republican supermajority and little bipartisan collaboration.

Oklahoma's political landscape

Larry Ferguson served in the Oklahoma House of Representatives for 20 years. Ferguson came from a family of newspaper publishers in rural parts of the state, including Cleveland, Pawnee and Hominy.

While serving in Oklahoma politics, Ferguson, a Republican, watched as the state's Legislature was predominantly run by Democrats. The state's governor flipped from party to party throughout his time as a representative.

Oklahoma politics look vastly different today, with the state's top officials leaning increasingly more conservative and passing executive orders and laws coinciding with recent Republican ideology, partly influenced by the rhetoric of former President Donald J. Trump.

Stitt and his Republican counterparts in the Senate and House presented and passed one of the most restrictive abortion bans in the country, called for review and bans of diversity, equity and inclusion programming at universities and instituted conservative policies in schools.

Ferguson said Stitt has a "very one-sided attitude," but the Legislature is better about being bipartisan on most topics. However, Ferguson said the Legislature is facing leadership issues and that problems arise when leadership isn't getting input from the entire state.

"Your vote should represent the people that elected you, I don't know how much of that's going to happen when they get started," Ferguson said.

Norman's sole Republican delegate, Sen. Rob Standridge, said he hopes to see beneficial leadership changes in the

Senate before his tenure is over, and one of the main areas he differs from his party's values is regarding corporate welfare.

He listed an example of the money Oklahoma planned to give to the electronics company Panasonic to build a battery plant in the state. Standridge said the last thing Panasonic needs is more money.

"The difference today is that the Republican Party is in total disarray. We have people running for Republican seats that aren't Republican," Standridge said.

Ferguson said the Legislature is ultimately a battle between legislators from Oklahoma City and Tulsa and those from smaller towns across the state. The problem is they either don't have leadership at all or they have too many leaders, Ferguson said.

"If your leadership doesn't have a good input throughout the state and they're not listening to people except those in their neighborhood, I think it creates a big problem," Ferguson said.

The majority of core and East Norman is split evenly between Republican and Democratic voters, demonstrating a tangible polarity in the values of Norman residents. In the past four years alone, Norman has experienced partisan divisiveness in its own city council. Homelessness, police funding and the effects of a global pandemic brought local politics to the forefront of Norman residents' minds.

Sen. Mary Boren (D-Norman) acknowledged Norman is a unique community compared to the rest of Oklahoma, and her district, which makes up core and East Norman, has different viewpoints and values that she strives to represent.

One of eight Democratic senators, Boren said she often struggles to find time to, first, be heard, and second, to agree with the 40 Republican senators.

"I kind of end up becoming a dissenting voice to a lot of things at the Capitol and I feel that's my primary responsibility in representing the people of Norman, … to be adept at articulating that dissenting minority, even marginalized perspective on issues that impact Oklahoma," Boren said.

Standridge said the voters in his district, which encompasses the areas outside of OU and core Norman, know where he stands on policy and he has stayed the same in his values since he was first elected.

"Everybody in my district knows exactly where I'm at," Standridge said. "There's some that disagree with me. I respect that and I do absolutely talk to and visit with every one of my constituents that want to talk to me and help them however I can."

In the wake of his interim study on DEI, Standridge said his number one issue is to codify the removal of those programs from Oklahoma's public universities. Standridge also said he is still working to protect children from obscene materials with legislation like Senate Bill 1056 from last session.

National political tensions are on the rise as well after the Oklahoma Republican Party approved a resolution to condemn and censure Sen. James Lankford (R-Okla.) for his bipartisan border bill negotiations.

The $118 billion deal would have provided around $20 billion for new migrant policies and immigrant restrictions on the southern border, while the rest of the money would be divided to provide humanitarian aid to Ukraine and Israel and support their war efforts along with other U.S. foreign interests.

Republican leaders in Congress condemned the bill and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) said the bill wouldn't go anywhere, with many Republicans planning to vote against it during the procedural vote. Trump expressed complete opposition to the bill and demanded Republicans reject it, also claiming that he never endorsed Lankford for reelection in 2022. On Feb. 7, the Senate blocked the border bill from advancing.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) said the backlash on the bill is a "new Republican line on the border," and that the goal posts for negotiations have moved because of this.

Increasing tensions in national politics could be attributed to the upcoming presidential election in November and Norman legislators discussed this as one of the reasons the country and the state are witnessing growing polarization.

Norman legislators cited social media as a factor contributing to political divisiveness. Legislators also acknowledged that Norman is a uniquely diverse community compared to the rest of the state.

Standridge said social media is extraordinarily divisive and blames it for the immature rhetoric in the U.S. at large.

"I put my policies there and people want to gripe at you or cuss at you. That's not the right way to do it," Standridge said.

Boren said the divisiveness caused by social media is lucrative. She cited how people engage more with toxicity on social media and that's how the platforms sell ads.

"We know that divisiveness in politics is an easy way to raise funds and even to get elected or to keep power," Boren said. "It's an economic model that works within politics as well."

Rep. Annie Menz (D-Norman), who represents Ward 5 and

the Lake Thunderbird area of Norman, said she believes social media exacerbates political divisiveness because people are expected to have knee-jerk reactions, while Boren acknowledged the barriers that social media breaks down.

"Social media is new and it has broken down natural geographic barriers that people may have felt safe to stay in their own corners of the world," Boren said. "People feel threatened when they can't control their bubble and social media can penetrate that bubble."

Rep. Jacob Rosecrants (D-Norman) said social media is a factor in the polarization of current politics. He said it's now harder than ever to distinguish the truth because of social media.

"It's on the voter to, unfortunately, have to dig through all this crap. That's why I think it's made such a negative effect on politics," Rosecrants said.

Rosecrants, a frequent poster on social media platform X, formerly known as Twitter, said social media can help and hurt both everyday citizens and politicians.

"It's an excellent way to get your voice out there without spending hundreds of thousands of dollars," Rosecrants said.

The current legislative session is expected to feature heavy-hitting legislation and national talking points, given the looming presidential election. Many of the topics include mental health, policies aiming to better control the Oklahoma State Department of Education and immigration policies.

Looking forward

Norman legislators discussed concerns with State Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters and leadership within the State Department of Education. Walters was elected in November 2022 and will be up for reelection in 2026.

Menz said one of the main topics this legislative session will deal with is crises in the state public education system, particularly actions taken by Walters.

Throughout Walters' term, controversies with his leadership have been prominent, including a partnership with a right-wing nonprofit online education program PragerU, mismanagement of teacher sign-on bonuses and the introduction of a program to raise teacher salaries without increasing state funding to school districts.

"A big topic is going to be public education and trying to not just mitigate the disaster that is Ryan Walters, but also trying to put pieces back together that he leaves in his wake," Menz said.

During the upcoming session, Rep. Jared Deck (D-Norman) is focused on accountability and wants to ensure the executive branch is held to the same standards as the Legislature, specifically the State Department of Education.

Deck cited the administration of the department as one of the main concerns of his district, which extends north of Highway 9 to Rock Creek Road at the district's northernmost point, including OU and core Norman. Recently, multiple teachers across the state who were incorrectly awarded bonuses received letters demanding they give the money back to the department before the end of February. Kristina Stadelman, a mother of five and a special education teacher in the Oklahoma City metro area, was one of these teachers and joined a lawsuit to challenge the demands.

"The State Department of Education did not do a thorough job in the application process and has now asked some of those teachers to pay that money back, which will literally bankrupt some families," Deck said.

Rosecrants, a former sixth grade social studies teacher, has been a representative since 2017, when he was inspired to run for office after becoming frustrated with Oklahoma's education system. At the time, Oklahoma was in a near decade-long streak of the most funding cuts to education but had success with new assessment policies and programs for immigrant students to graduate high school.

In light of recent events with Walters and the State Department of Education's misstep with teacher bonuses, Rosecrants said he views Walters and his rhetoric as a clear and present danger to Oklahoma public schools.

"Folks need to understand what is going on, and they need to see it in broad daylight rather than in the dark," Rosecrants said.

Ferguson said the misuse of school funding across the state is a large problem.

In June, a state audit found that about 20% of grant funds meant for educational purposes were misused.

Ferguson said the disorganization of where funds are going for private and public schools is a concern.

"We need to take care of where they're going," Ferguson said. "If we spend all the money on private schools, then they're starting to hurt public schools the majority of the students go to."

Deck said he believes mental health will also be a focal point in regard to funding and expanding services across Oklahoma this legislative session.

In September, the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services announced the planned construction of a new mental health hospital in Oklahoma

City to replace Griffin Memorial Hospital in Norman as the state's primary mental health facility. The new hospital will feature 330 beds and is predicted to serve 275 adults and 55 adolescents daily.

In 2023, Menz authored House Bill 2724 that would create the Oklahoma Housing Authority Act and reward landlords under certain criteria, but the bill didn't pass into law.

Menz said homelessness in Norman is a big concern she hears from constituents and is an issue spanning the U.S. The bill she advocated for would have provided a one-time bonus to landlords who keep Section 8 housing voucher tenants for a certain amount of time.

Section 8 housing is the primary federal program by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development that helps low-income families and disabled and elderly individuals find safe, affordable housing.

She said this bill would have combated stigma by incentivizing landlords to accommodate individuals utilizing Section 8 housing, giving people more consistency and stability in their lives so they can get back on their feet.

"My bill specifically is angled toward landlords, incentivizing landlords to not only accept Section 8 housing vouchers, but to keep a good relationship with those tenants," Menz said.

As Menz's district includes Ward 5 and the Lake Thunderbird areas of Norman, her primary goal is to support and stand with those in her district who are fighting to keep their homes amid turnpike construction plans.

ACCESS Oklahoma is the Oklahoma Turnpike Authority's plan to relieve Interstate-35 congestion via construction of new routes over the next 15 years. The plans include highways through rural Norman directly west of Lake Thunderbird and through areas of Moore, Newcastle, Noble and Slaughterville.

"I want to stand up for the people in my district who are fighting for their homes to keep the turnpike from getting built," Menz said.

Boren said she expects to see more bills this session related to reproductive health care, such as bills aimed at preventing women from traveling out of state for reproductive care.

In 2022, over 2,100 pregnant Oklahomans traveled to Kansas or Colorado to receive abortion services. Boren said the anti-women health care rhetoric works for the current leadership in the state Capitol and mentioned the partisanship on the topic.

"It's a great moneymaker. It's a great way for them to keep power and it's a great way for them to justify defunding government services," Boren said.

Boren thinks there will be a new trend over the next five to 20 years regarding the growing impact of tribal sovereignty, citing the tribes' success in lobbying to override several of the governor's vetoes. Last summer, the Oklahoma Legislature overrode Stitt's vetoes regarding tribal compacts on the sale of tobacco and motor vehicle licenses issued by tribes.

In Stitt's State of the State address, he compared the tribal governments of eastern Oklahoma to that of the Navajo reservation in Arizona. Stitt said the jurisdiction across the state is confusing and clarification of law enforcement relationships between the state and tribes is vital.

Cherokee Nation Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr. expressed disappointment in Stitt's rhetoric during the address and said the governor is treating the tribes as problems that need to be solved. In an X thread after the address, Hoskin said the governor continues to waste resources on legal battles due to lack of communication and collaboration between the state and the tribes.

According to a statement by Hoskin, a statewide poll in 2023 suggested 80% of Oklahomans agree tribes contribute to the well-being of the state, compared to 53% two decades ago.

"At the legislative level, the tribes have the political power to get a supermajority to advance tribal sovereignty," Boren said. "That has made the governor weaker."

Entering the second session of the 59th Legislature, Norman's legislators confront challenges arising from deep partisanship and social media conflict. Acknowledging the state's Republican supermajority, legislators grapple with limited bipartisan collaboration.

The impact of social media on political divisiveness is recognized by lawmakers, who observe its role in amplifying rhetoric and hindering bipartisan efforts. The legislative session unfolds against a backdrop of national tensions and will address issues such as education, housing, health care and tribal sovereignty.

Ferguson said the leadership of both parties in Oklahoma is misrepresenting the concerns and values of their constituencies. He said the current leadership assumes that everything going on in Oklahoma is fine, but it's not.

"I think elected people have lost some of their desire to stand up and take a position; they're there, and they show up, and they vote however the majority is voting," Ferguson said. "There hasn't been any big leadership that has stood out."

This story was edited by Karoline Leonard, Anusha Fathepure and Peggy Dodd. Lily Battles, Avery Avery, Mary Ann Livingood and Nikkie Aisha copy edited this story.

OUR VIEW: We encourage bipartisanship

Norman Transcript Editorial Board, August 4, 2024

Bipartisanship.

Consensus building.

Reaching across the aisle.

Cooperation.

Unity.

Mutual respect.

Statesmanship.

The lost arts of politics.

When it comes to politics and governing, we are broken.

Our political landscape is more polarized than ever. Conservatives and progressives have little in common and little interest in finding consensus.

There seems to be nothing which the right and the left can agree on or work together on, and that means nothing gets done.

Nevertheless, transparency — the public right to know — ought to be something everyone can agree on regardless of party affiliation.

Unbelievably, we have even found ways to be partisan about government transparency.

Conservatives want to reveal the secrets of liberals and liberals want to expose the actions of conservatives.

The right to know is not liberal, conservative, Republican, Democrat, independent or Libertarian.

But it always seems the minority party is the champion of transparency until it becomes the majority party.

All politicians stump pledging to be transparent and open, until they are in office, and have something they want to hide.

Transparency is essential in local, state and federal government and must transcend parties and political ideologies.

Essentially, there are no checks and balances when officials broker deals behind closed doors and conceal documents that contain important information that the public has the right, and often the need, to know.

Whether it is property taxes, sales taxes, business taxes, state-shared dollars or federal grants, loans and funding, government is 100% taxpayer funded and the public always has the right to know how its money is being spent.

At the local level, decisions being made, dollars being doled out and records being kept by city hall, the county commission, the board of education or the utility district belong to all of us.

Elected officials should embrace open government, champion the public right to know, and then find other ways to build consensus, cooperate, find opportunities for bipartisanship and serve the public good.

Section 4

The Role of the People

The ballot measures aim to reduce partisanship. Can they fix American politics?

Michael Wines, The New York Times, June 25, 2024

Americans of both parties routinely express deep concern about the state of the country's democracy. This fall, many voters may have a chance to do something about it, by voting on state ballot measures related to the nuts and bolts of elections and governance.

Eight states, including Ohio and seven others largely in the West, appear all but certain to field ballot measures that would either overhaul redistricting or rewrite election rules to discourage hyper-partisanship and give voters a greater voice in choosing candidates.

Redistricting ballot measures are not uncommon, but since the advent of citizen-backed ballot initiatives in the early 1900s no other year has had more than three election-system initiatives, according to the online elections database Ballotpedia.

"I just feel like the voice of the people has gotten more and more diluted," Kathy Cunningham, a 55-year-old bioscience consultant from Cincinnati, said last month after signing a petition for an Ohio ballot measure that would undo the state's gerrymandered political maps. "When you have such a huge imbalance of power, how do you get that back? It creates the perception that we're living in a democracy, when maybe we're not."

Ohio is a particular hotbed of discontent, a state where dysfunction, particularly a $60 million bribery scandal, and thoroughly gerrymandered maps have left many in the state cynical and unhappy with the state of their government.

Hundreds of thousands of Ohioans have signed petitions drafted by a strategically named group, Citizens Not Politicians, toward an elusive goal: undoing the gerrymandered political maps that have awarded Republicans supermajority control of the Legislature and a lopsided majority of the state's 15 House seats.

An initiative that would let an independent commission draw political maps instead of politicians appears all but certain to be on the November ballot.

Proposals in six other states — Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada and South Dakota — would abolish closed or semi-closed primary elections in favor of primaries open to any candidate and all voters. (Closed primaries are open only to voters registered with the primary's party; semi-closed primaries bar voters from other parties, but allow unaffiliated voters to cast ballots.)

The Colorado and Nevada measures would also supplant conventional winner-take-all elections with ranked-choice voting, in which voters rate the top four or five candidates in order of preference. Oregon's Democratic-led Legislature also has voted largely along party lines to place a ranked-choice measure on the November ballot.

Backers of these campaigns say they are tapping into a deep well of voter unhappiness with a political system that ignores the priorities of ordinary people.

"The closed primary system is hard-wired to reward partisanship," said Joe Kirby, a retired Sioux Falls business executive who is leading the South Dakota effort. "We want to have a Legislature that reflects South Dakota values," — not the values, he said, of the 17 percent who turned out for this month's primary election.

The stated goal of all these proposals is to draw more voters into the democratic process, especially in the many primary elections where turnout is low and voters with extreme views have outsize influence.

Closed primaries, the argument goes, rob independent voters — a growing segment of the electorate, and in some states now the largest one — of a voice in choosing general election candidates. Candidates in open primaries have an incentive to court not only independents but also voters of the opposing party, which, in theory at least, should steer them closer to the political center.

And gerrymandered maps make elections so lopsided that parties with little chance of winning often don't bother to field general-election candidates. (Nationally, about four in 10 state legislative races have only one candidate.) In those cases, the general election winner only has to win over primary voters, not the broader electorate that turns out in November.

Advocates of ranked-choice elections say they not only give voters a greater say in choosing the ultimate winner of a political contest, but also reward candidates who try to win over a broad swath of the electorate.

It is no accident that electing more moderates would change the conditions that have made the G.O.P. a hothouse for far-right extremists, said Richard L. Hasen, an election-law expert and director of the Safeguarding Democracy Project at the University of California, Los Angeles, School of Law.

"So much of this has to do with the battle for the soul of the Republican Party," he said.

Not everyone buys the logic. Academic research suggests that ending gerrymandering and adopting certain versions of ranked-choice voting can indeed dampen hyper-partisanship and promote cooperation. But the evidence favoring open primaries is more mixed.

The proposed fixes nevertheless have supporters across the political spectrum in most states. They are among the top priorities of groups that favor structural changes in the American political system and deep-pocketed donors often associated with liberal causes. State groups campaigning to enact them are not only bipartisan, but also are run mostly by moderate Republicans in deeply red states like Idaho, Montana and South Dakota.

Republican Party leaders are less supportive. Legislatures in Arizona and Missouri have placed measures on November ballots to ban ranked-choice voting, mandate closed primaries, or both. In Alaska, a citizen-led initiative also will ask voters to repeal the state's ranked-choice election system.

Supporters of the G.O.P. leadership are expected to pour money into opposing many of those ballot measures. The likely result is a string of expensive ballot fights this fall.

The high political stakes in Ohio — new political maps could loosen the Republicans' current grip on 10 of the state's 15 congressional seats — mean that the battle over the redistricting amendment could consume tens of millions of dollars.

One evening last month, Claire Wagner, a volunteer for Citizens Not Politicians and a member of the Ohio League of Women Voters, collected more than 20 signatures on petitions for the redistricting amendment at the Rhinegeist Brewery, a beer hall near downtown Cincinnati.

The signers were a motley lot. There were Elizabeth Fisher-Smith, 63, and Leigh Smith, 64, from the liberal Hyde Park neighborhood of Cincinnati, which for decades was drawn into the western tip of the rural, conservative Second Congressional District (it is now in the First District). There was Catherine Cervantes, 47, of conservative West Chester township north of Cincinnati, who likened gerrymandering to the discrimination against African American migrants recounted in the prizewinning book "The Warmth of Other Suns."

Organized opposition to the amendment is imminent. A former treasurer for Republican political campaigns registered this spring as treasurer of a group called Ohioans for Fair Districts that is expected to fight the measure.

The Republican president of the State Senate, Matt Huffman, previewed opposition arguments in a February interview with The Cincinnati Enquirer, saying the campaign was "clearly an attempt by far-left groups, folks from outside the United States, to make sure they get people who they want elected. It's gerrymandering at its finest."

The early money favoring the redistricting amendment has come largely from left-leaning donors, including the American Civil Liberties Union, teachers' unions and the Sixteen Thirty Fund, a major donor to progressive and pro-democracy causes whose biggest financial supporters include a Swiss billionaire, Hansjörg Wyss.

But support for the amendment also crosses party lines. The de facto leader of the campaign, Maureen O'Connor, is a former Republican chief justice of the Ohio Supreme Court who cast several deciding votes to overturn the last set of political maps. Stumping for the amendment, she said in an interview with The New York Times, is "the most important thing I've ever done."

However laudable, many experts and activists say that the proposed fixes are weak medicine to cure what ails American democracy.

"Everyone agrees that our political system is dysfunctional," said Nate Persily, a leading expert on voting and democracy at Stanford Law School. "But this is not a particularly effective way to deal with our hair-on-fire moment. When insurrectionists are breaking down the Capitol doors, there's only so much that changing primary election rules is going to do."

But Chuck Coughlin, a former campaign manager and an aide to two Republican governors in Arizona, figures that anything that weakens the stranglehold of the two parties is a step in the right direction.

He is now the strategist behind Make Elections Fair Arizona, a campaign for an Arizona ballot measure to abolish semi-closed primaries in the state. It has already gathered 100,000 more signatures than the 384,000 needed to place the measure on the November ballot.

"Everyone's unhappy with both parties except the extreme partisans," he said.

Could referendums defuse political polarization?

Andrew Gelman, Columbia University, August 17, 2022

The recent referendum in Kansas (in which 59% of voters "decided against removing the right to abortion from the State Constitution") made me think about the general idea of referendums as a way to defuse political polarization.

This came up a few months ago around the time of the Supreme Court decision, when we discussed abortion attitudes in Oklahoma. According to Pew Research, 51% of adults in Oklahoma say abortion should be legal in all or most cases, and 45% say illegal in all or most cases—but when the state legislature considered a bill that "prohibits abortion from the moment of fertilization," they voted 73 to 16 in favor.

The extreme vote in the legislature, so starkly different from the balance of public opinion in the state, is not a shock. As I wrote at the time, it does not defy political gravity for a legislature to vote in a way different from public opinion: issues are bundled, the whole thing is tangled up with national politics, also there's some sort of pent-up demand from activists who can push anti-abortion legislation in a way that they could not do for fifty years. So, lots going on.

The point is that voters don't have many options. If you want to vote Republican, you pretty much have to choose anti-abortion. Polarization in action.

A referendum, though, opens up more possibilities.

The role of referendums in a representative democracy is not always clear. Sometimes political scientists have opposed referendums on the grounds that they sidestep the political process. A referendum just gives you one choice, but on a complicated issue, legislators have staffs and can evaluate, deliberate, and find a compromise solution.

Given this, I can think of three reasons to have referendums on major policies:

1. Political polarization. As in the Oklahoma abortion example, sometimes a legislature can't or won't "evaluate, deliberate, and find a compromise solution." That's fine—it's not the legislature's job to compromise on an issue that they favor by a 73-16 margin—but it's a failure from the standpoint of representing the popular will.

2. Principal-agent problems. A few decades ago, California had successful referendums on taxes and term limits. These are two issues where legislators of both parties are, to some extent, interested parties: tax cuts reduce the government's power, and term limits threaten to remove people from the legislature entirely. So an extra-legislative solution can make sense.

3. Finally, it's a safety valve: the threat of referendum can motivate a legislature to action.

I'm not saying that referendums are absolutely necessary: in a functioning democratic system, officeholders can ultimately be removed from office by the voters. But, given the general view that politics in the United States is too polarized, it might be worth considering the value of referendums as a force for moderation.

Having said this, I guess we should consider the opposite position, which is that referendums can increase polarization, with the example of the Brexit vote in the U.K. And, hey! here's a research article, "Divided by the Vote: Affective Polarization in the Wake of the Brexit Referendum," by Sara Hobolt, Thomas Leeper, and James Tilley, who write of "affective polarization, not by partisanship, but instead by identification with opinion-based groups." I guess the difference is that British politics is not polarized by party in the same way as politics in the U.S. Yes, voters have strong party allegiances in Britain, as they have in the U.S. for a long time—but strong party ID is not the same as political polarization. Consider, for example, the U.S. in the 1950s.

Anyway, I think the topic is worth further research.

History of Initiative & Referendum in Oklahoma

Initiative & Referendum Institute and Ballotpedia

In Oklahoma, the first initiative was put forward in 1908. As of 2022, 93 initiatives appeared on the statewide ballot, of which, 43 passed and 50 failed, meaning an approval rate of 46.24%. The first initiative--Initiative 1, State Question 5--failed at the ballot box.

In the 22-year period from 2000 through 2022, 10 initiatives appeared on the ballot, of which five passed and five failed.

Numbering system for Oklahoma initiatives

Since the very beginning in 1908, the government of Oklahoma has numbered all ballot measures consecutively, calling them all "state questions." At the same time, the government has separately and consecutively numbered all proposed citizen initiatives and legislative referrals. As a result, for example, Oklahoma Initiative 7--the seventh initiative proposed in the state--is also known as "Oklahoma State Question 15" because, counting both legislative referrals and initiatives, it was the 15th statewide question to be placed before the state's voters.

Early history

Efforts to see to it that the Oklahoma Constitution included a provision to allow citizens to place initiatives on the ballot were begun by Theodore Sturgis of Perry, Oklahoma. Sturgis founded the Direct Legislation League when Oklahoma was still a territory, in 1899--eight years prior to statehood.

The I&R movement in Oklahoma soon picked up a formidable champion: Robert Latham Owen, who became the state's U.S. senator. Through the efforts of Sturgis' growing League, 102 of the 112 delegates elected in 1906 to Oklahoma's founding constitutional convention were committed in writing to supporting I&R. By an overwhelming majority, in 1907 the convention voted 80 to 5 to include I&R in the constitution. Oklahoma's initiative and referendum provision required that for any ballot measure to pass, it must be approved not just by a majority of the ballots cast on the proposition, but by a majority of all ballots cast in the election.

First successful initiative

The state's first successful initiative--Oklahoma Initiative 7 (1910)--appeared on the Oklahoma ballot in a June 11, 1910 special election. It proposed two questions: (1) Shall a permanent state capitol be established, and (2) if "yes" on the first, shall the capitol be at (a) Guthrie, (b) Oklahoma City, or (c) Shawnee? It passed, and voters chose Oklahoma City by a wide margin. However, the Oklahoma Supreme Court overruled their decision owing to the ballot's deviation from the single-subject rule. Nevertheless, Oklahoma City ultimately became the permanent state capital.

Other historical Initiatives

In the August 1910 primary, Oklahomans passed Oklahoma Initiative 10, an initiative requiring a literacy test as a qualification for voting, which included a "grandfather clause" that made it apply solely to blacks. The U.S. Supreme Court (223 U.S. 347) struck down the measure as unconstitutional. Yet the election had been unfair for another reason as well: racist state officials, instead of printing "yes" and "no" on ballots, printed in small type: "For the amendment." Anyone wishing to vote against it was supposed to scratch out those words with a pencil. If they left their ballot as it was, it was counted as a vote in favor. In some precincts voters were not even provided with pencils. Casting further doubt on the accuracy of the 1910 vote count was a "literacy test" measure placed on the ballot by the legislature in the 1916 primary, six years later: voters rejected it by a 59 percent margin.

On the 1910 ballot, voters rejected Oklahoma Initiative 11, an initiative to allow liquor sales in cities, which had been prohibited in Oklahoma's original constitution. It was the first of several Prohibition-repeal initiatives. The Oklahoma humorist Will Rogers would later say, "Oklahomans vote dry as long as they can stagger to the polls." Indeed, liquor was so plentiful that voters in 1914 passed an initiative to make "drunkenness and excessive use of intoxicating liquors" cause for the impeachment of elected officials.

In 1912, a majority of the voters favored one initiative to require the direct election (by the people, instead of by state legislators) of U.S. senators, and another to move the state capital to Guthrie. The first was superseded by passage of the Seventeenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, ratified the following year, while the second failed to win a majority of all ballots cast in the election.

The worst victim of the supermajority requirement was the 1914 gubernatorial candidate Charles West, who sponsored four initiatives: one to reduce the number of appellate courts, a second to reduce the property tax by 29 percent, a third to tax oil and gas production, and a fourth to abolish the state senate, thereby creating a unicameral legislature. All four garnered majorities of ballots cast on each proposition, but not majorities of the total cast in the election, and therefore failed. In 1916 this unfair requirement brought down two more initiatives, to the chagrin of their Socialist sponsors. Ironically, the measures were designed to ensure the fairness of elections. One would have altered voting registration procedures; the other would have created a state election board composed of three members, one appointed by each of the state's three major political parties (the Socialists were the third-largest party at that time). In the 1920s, corruption in state government prompted an initiative to establish a procedure to convene the legislature promptly to investigate allegations of corruption; it passed

by a nearly three to one margin but was thrown out by the state supreme court, which ruled that it was not the proper subject of a constitutional amendment. When the court threw out a 1926 initiative that would have established a procedure for contesting property tax levies, however, its sponsors persisted: they rewrote their initiative in conformity to the court's requirements, and voters passed it the second time in 1928 by a margin of nearly five to one. The Great Depression hit Oklahoma hard, and Oklahomans turned to the initiative process to propose economic reforms. Among these were a 1935 initiative establishing a state welfare program and appropriating $2.5 million for it (passed by a 65 percent margin); a 1936 initiative increasing the automobile tag and sales taxes to provide assistance to needy elderly and disabled persons and children (approved by a 60 percent margin); and a 1936 constitutional amendment authorizing the latter initiative statute (passed by a 62 percent margin).

In the 1940s Oklahomans passed initiatives that provided retirement pensions for teachers (1942), allowed local property tax increases to aid schools (1946), and allowed the legislature to raise additional school funds (1946).

The only initiative to gain approval in the 1950s was a 1956 reapportionment measure; despite a four to three margin in favor, it failed to get a majority of those voting in the election. In the 1960s two more initiatives failed for the same reason: a 1962 reapportionment proposal and a 1964 measure changing the property tax limits. In 1974 the state constitution was finally amended so that an initiative would win if a majority of those voting on the individual initiative approved it. However, in 2001, the state legislature placed a constitutional amendment on the ballot that would have required twice the number of signatures for initiatives pertaining to wildlife. This action was taken to stop animal protection advocates attempts to ban cockfighting in the state, however the voters defeated it.

> ***"Democracy is measured not by its leaders doing extraordinary things, but by its citizens doing things extraordinarily well."***
>
> *— John Gardner*

What journalists need to know about potential threats to the ballot initiative process

Josh Visnaw, The Journalist's Resource, October 19, 2022

In the aftermath of the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, efforts to restrict voting access have intensified. The Brennan Center for Justice estimates that 405 restrictive voting bills have been proposed in 39 state legislatures in 2022 alone, with seven states having enacted 10 different laws this year to make voting access harder for some Americans.

These efforts have also included the restriction of ballot initiatives — an exercise in direct democracy that allows voters to bypass state legislatures to enact new laws, amend state constitutions or repeal existing laws. According to the Ballot Initiative Strategy Center, a left-leaning advocacy organization, at least 146 bills were introduced in 2021 by Republicans in 32 states that intended to restrict the processes of ballot initiatives. According to a BISC information sheet, "21 of 25 bills enacted or referred to voters in 2021 were direct threats to the ballot initiative process."

Understanding the threat to ballot initiatives and their impact on U.S. society can help journalists better comprehend the election in such polarizing times. But first, it's important to understand what they are and how they work.

What is a ballot initiative?

Ballot initiatives are in a family referred to as ballot measures or ballot propositions, which also include referendums and legislative measures.

- Legislative measure: As explained by the Initiative & Referendum Institute at the University of Southern California, a legislative measure is a proposal placed on the ballot by a state's legislature. All 50 states permit legislative measures on their ballots.

- Referendum: A referendum is a proposal to repeal an existing law, giving voters the opportunity to decide whether to keep or revoke the law. Twenty-four states permit referendums, according to IRI.

- Ballot initiative: An initiative is a proposal of a new law or constitutional amendment. Both initiatives and referendums require the signatures of a specific number of citizens to qualify for the ballot.

In the U.S., 24 states have an initiative process, which allows voters the ability to bypass their state legislature through indirect and direct proposals for statutes and, in some states, constitutional amendments on a ballot.

There are two types of initiatives: direct and indirect. Direct initiatives are placed directly on the ballot. Indirect initiatives are first submitted to state legislatures and only end up on a ballot if the legislature rejects it, submits a different proposal or fails to act. As the National Council of State Legislatures explains on its website: "In some states with the indirect process, the legislature may submit a competing measure which appears on the ballot along with the original proposal. States with some form of the indirect process are Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, Nevada and Ohio. In Utah and Washington, proponents may choose either method."

The modern American history of ballot initiatives begins in South Dakota, which was the first state to adopt the initiative process in 1898, helping launch a prominent feature of the American Progressive Era. Theodore Roosevelt's address to the Ohio Constitutional Convention in 1912 underscores the historical usage of ballot initiatives to enact social change by ordinary citizens.

> *"I believe in the initiative and the referendum, which should be used not to destroy representative government, but to correct it whenever it becomes misrepresentative. Here again I am concerned not with theories but with actual facts. If in any state the people are themselves satisfied with their present representative system, then it is of course their right to keep that system unchanged; and it is nobody's business but theirs. But in actual practice it has been found in very many states that legislative bodies have not been responsive to the popular will. Therefore I believe that the state should provide for the possibility of direct popular action in order to make good such legislative failure."*
>
> **Theodore Roosevelt**

Ballot initiatives are also enshrined in the Crow Tribe of Indians' Constitution.

How does a ballot initiative make it to the ballot?

On its website, the NCSL provides a straightforward explanation of the qualification process:

"No two states have exactly the same requirements for qualifying initiatives to be placed on the ballot. Generally, however, the process includes these steps:

1. Preliminary filing of a proposed petition with a designated state official;

2. Review of the petition for conformance with statutory requirements and, in several states, a review of the language of the proposal;

3. 3. Preparation of a ballot title and summary;

4. 4. Circulation of the petition to obtain the required number of signatures of registered voters, usually a percentage of the votes cast for a statewide office in the preceding general election; and

5. 5. Submission of the petitions to the state elections official, who must verify the number of signatures."

If enough valid signatures are obtained, the question goes on the ballot or, in states with the indirect process, is sent to the legislature.

Each state has different requirements for each part of the process, including subject matter, signature collection, submission timeline, petition content, ballot access and passage. Through every step of the process, some states make it easier to get an initiative on the ballot than others. Journalists who cover local elections should familiarize themselves with their states' requirements.

For a comprehensive list of requirements by state, visit NCSL, which offers these examples of how requirements can vary at every step of the qualification process:

Examples of how state ballot measure requirements can vary

Subject matter: Mississippi's state constitution forbids amending or repealing their right-to-work provision. Florida's constitution requires a two-thirds vote to pass on amendments that propose a tax or fee not in place as of 1994.

Number of signatures required: Illinois requires 8% of the votes cast for governor in the last gubernatorial election. Wyoming calls for 15% of total ballots cast in the previous general election.

Submission timeline: Nebraska allows two years for collection of signatures, with a deadline of four months before the general election. Oklahoma provides 90 days from the beginning of circulation.

Petition content: In Arizona, proponents draft the title and summary of the initiative. South Dakota tasks the attorney general, after receiving written comments from the Legislative Research Council.

Ballot access: Ohio requires a successful ballot initiative to be placed on the next regular/general election. Montana does, too, in addition to allowing the legislature to order a special election.

Passage: Thirteen states require a simple majority to pass, while 10 states allow legislatures to change measures without any time limits or supermajority requirements after passage.

Source: National Conference of State Legislatures Initiative and Referendum Processes

What are the threats to the ballot initiative process?

While Roosevelt spoke in favor of the utility of ballot initiatives — as a check on legislative bodies who don't adequately respond to the popular will — modern usage has ushered in a new era of political tactics to place hurdles at every step of the initiative process.

Consider a recent example in Oklahoma, which already has some of the harshest requirements for an initiative to appear on a ballot on Election Day. First, petitioners must submit initiative language to both the secretary of state and attorney general. Even if they survive legal challenges in the ballot proposal process, they have the shortest period to circulate petitions in the U.S. — just 90 days to gather hundreds of thousands of signatures.

In July, proponents of State Question 820 successfully overcame most of the procedural hurdles and turned in over 160,000 signatures — 94,911 above the necessary threshold — after just 60 days. A "yes" vote on SQ 820 would legalize recreational marijuana for adults above 21 and decriminalize possession and use. If the question had made it to the ballot, Oklahoma would have joined five other states deciding on marijuana legalization in the 2022 midterm elections.

However, a delay occurred during the signature verification process and the Oklahoma Supreme Court recently decided to not allow the question to appear on the November ballot, deciding there wasn't enough time to prepare ballots for absentee and overseas voting.

Gov. Kevin Stitt can now decide to place it on a special statewide election. Such elections historically have a much lower turnout than a midterm or general election.

This is familiar territory for Stitt. He placed a state question for Medicaid expansion on a ballot in a low-turnout election in the summer of 2020, vocally opposing the measure. Still, voters approved the Medicaid expansion initiative, giving healthcare coverage to an estimated 200,000 Oklahomans.

Proponents of SQ 820 have argued the signature verification process was problematic. The previous seven ballot initiatives had taken three weeks to be verified, while SQ 820 took seven weeks. Proponents were surprised that a new requirement sent signatures to a third-party vendor for verification — Western Petition Systems, a company founded by political pollster Bill Shapard.

An open records request by Oklahoma Watch found that

there was no record of the vendor completing contractual obligations of running tests to ensure efficiency.

Due to an unusually restrictive ballot initiative process in Oklahoma, just seven ballot initiatives have appeared on a state election ballot in the last decade. Alongside Medicaid expansion, voters also approved measures to legalize medical marijuana and reform the state's criminal justice system. Now, the state legislature is proposing three pieces of legislation that make it even more difficult to pass a state ballot question, including increasing the threshold for passage from a simple majority to 55% and imposing a signature threshold per county.

The trend of disrupting the process of citizen-led ballot initiatives is becoming a more popular political tactic in other states, too.

In 2018, two ballot initiatives in Michigan were circulated and passed the signature threshold, allowing citizens to vote on measures in the November election. The measures would increase the state minimum wage to $12 per hour and require small businesses to provide paid sick leave to their workers.

The legislature in Michigan decided to preemptively adopt the two initiatives the September before the election, instead of allowing them to be put on the ballot, and then amended them.

Liberal groups who proposed the ballot initiatives claim the "Adopt and Amend" strategy resulted in the state legislature intentionally watering down the bills signed by outgoing, term-limited Republican Gov. Rick Snyder. While the legislature had preemptively adopted the implementation of raising the wage to $12 per hour, it amended the initiative so the raise would not be implemented until 2030.

In the 2018 midterm election where the two ballot initiatives would have been placed, voters overwhelmingly passed three initiatives that did make it onto the Michigan ballot: they legalized recreational marijuana, instituted an independent group to reverse gerrymandered districts and increased access to voting and same-day voter registration.

In July 2022, Michigan's Court of Claims ruled that the "Adopt and Amend" tactic used in 2018 was unconstitutional.

In the upcoming midterm elections, efforts to place hurdles in front of adopting citizen-led initiatives have made it to the ballots themselves. In Arizona and Arkansas, voters will decide on whether to amend state constitutions that raise the thresholds to adopt ballot measures and widen the capabilities for legislators to repeal and amend a ballot.

This past summer brought some victories for those in defense of ballot initiatives. Voters in South Dakota rejected the state legislature's attempt at offering a ballot initiative that would make it harder to pass measures that raise taxes. In June, a federal judge rejected an attempt by Florida lawmakers in 2021 to limit financial contributions to legal organizations supporting ballot initiatives, ruling that the law violated the First Amendment. (In the past two decades, voters in Florida have used ballot initiatives to legalize marijuana, increase the minimum wage and restore voting rights for formerly incarcerated citizens — measures the state legislature and Gov. Ron DeSantis were all against.)

Highlighting procedural obstruction and anti-democracy tactics for political purposes is just the first step in reporting on this issue. More investigation and monitoring are needed to understand what interest groups stand to benefit in the clamp down of direct democracy.

For instance, recent research offers insight into the money at stake for opponents of state marijuana legalization. Researchers predict cannabis legalization will decrease the stock market value of major pharmaceutical firms and reduce demand for costly prescription drugs through state Medicaid programs. Additionally, churches and their affiliates — which are tax-exempt — have spent millions to oppose ballot initiatives on gay marriage and abortion rights.

It may be easier to cover the horse race of political candidates in the November elections, but ballot initiatives across the country will shape the lives of millions of Americans immediately — including those most marginalized. Ballot initiatives in 2022 include proposals to enshrine the right to abortion in state constitutions; raise the minimum wage; increase taxes on the wealthy to fund infrastructure, education and affordable housing; reform criminal justice; expand Medicaid; protect predatory debt collection; restrict employees' ability to collectively bargain; and remove language from state constitutions that condone slavery as capital punishment.

To learn more about ballot measures, see our research roundup, "Ballot measures: Research shows how wording, ballot format and local news coverage can influence voters."

Dollens to review state's initiative petition process

M. Scott Carter, Southwest Ledger, August 14, 2023

A state lawmaker wants to take yet another look at the Oklahoma's initiative petition process.

Outlined in the Oklahoma Constitution the state's Initiative and Referendum Process allows residents to submit proposals for laws and constitutional amendments directly to the public for a vote.

The process has been used since statehood.

Last week state Rep. Mickey Dollens (D-Oklahoma City) said he would host an interim study to "examine attempts to undermine the citizen-led ballot initiative petition process." Dollens issued a media statement saying he plans to create an opportunity for experts, stakeholders and concerned citizens to come together and examine the importance and the need to protect the initiative petition process.

"The initiative petition process is a cornerstone of our democracy, enabling everyday citizens to change the law," Dollens said. "We must safeguard this process and ensure it remains accessible and fair for all Oklahomans."

Throughout the state's history, hundreds of constitutional amendments and statutes have been proposed through the initiative and referendum process, including at least four state questions – one proposed by then-Governor Charles Haskell and later thrown out by the Oklahoma Supreme Court – to move the State Capitol from Guthrie to Oklahoma City, a proposal that would have amended the constitution by preventing the resubmission of failed state questions, a 1916 state question that would have given Oklahoma women the right to vote, another state questions that would have attempted to overturn the federal amendment to the U.S. Constitution on women's suffrage, a 1924 proposal that would have required journalists to be licensed and required the management of each newspaper to preserve an original since manuscript of every article and headline and outlines procedures to remove journalists from their jobs and a 1948 petition to recognize the Progressive Party of Oklahoma.

Other initiative petitions – which were successful – amended the Constitution to require a public vote on all future tax increases, two questions that dramatically changed the state's criminal justice system and proposals that legalized parimutuel gambling and the use of medical marijuana.

Dollens said initiative petitions allow voters to implement policies when the Legislature fails to act.

However, this process is under attack in many states, including Oklahoma, he said. Dollens said Republican lawmakers across the U.S. continue to file legislation that would have made it near impossible to pass popular state questions regarding Medicaid expansion, medical marijuana, and criminal justice reform.

"Our study aims to shed light on the current state of the initiative petition process, explore potential areas for improvement, and address the concerning trend of legislation that seeks to mute the voices of voters," Dollens said. "We must ensure that our democratic processes are preserved and strengthened."

Oklahoma is one of 24 states that allow citizens to initiate legislation through the petition process. Oklahoma has a single-subject rule for both initiated statutes and constitutional amendments.

COMMENTARY: Oklahoma voters have been decisive with initiative petitions. Lawmakers should show some respect.

Janelle Stecklein, Oklahoma Voice, March 25, 2024

Oklahoma politicians have developed a nasty habit of questioning the will of the voters.

Whenever there's an election outcome for a citizen-led petition that they don't like, lawmakers like to spout off that voters didn't know what they were doing as they come up with creative — and often offensive – ways to circumvent the will of the people.

They made the legalization of medical marijuana chaotic by refusing to quickly put reasonable rules in place.

They've pushed back against a ban on cockfighting by arguing that voters don't actually want it to be a felony offense.

And, despite voters making it clear that they embrace a clear delineation between church and state, legislators continue to file bills encouraging Ten Commandment monuments or policies that blur those lines.

But their biggest two punching bags appear to be State Question 780 — a citizen-led criminal justice reform initiative — and the state's constitutionally protected initiative petition process that gives Oklahomans the opportunity to get their own reforms on the ballot.

House Speaker Charles McCall has proposed House Bill 1105, adding additional hurdles to the overall process. The bill, which advanced out of the House largely along party lines, would require those wanting to circulate a petition to pay $1,000 up front. Signature collectors would have to undergo a criminal background check, and the bill expands the timeline to object to a measure from 10 to 90 days.

There have been other proposals in recent years that would require a certain number of signatures from various congressional districts, meaning one quadrant of the state could single handedly destroy a reform that everyone else wants.

It's already really difficult and expensive for Oklahomans to get their own measures on the ballot, and we certainly don't need any ham-handed efforts making it more complicated.

There's a certain irony in watching lawmakers trying to make democracy more complex for their constituents even while ensuring that their own access remains simple.

See, they love putting their own state questions on the ballot. All they require of themselves is a majority vote of the Legislature to do so, and they have no interest in raising the qualifying bar for themselves.

Meanwhile, it appears that since 2018, lawmakers have only gotten one of their own direct-to-ballot reforms approved by voters. That one dealt with crime victims' rights.

Voters smashed their dreams of tapping into the Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust to pay for Medicaid expansion. They said heck no to a measure dealing with property taxes, one authored by nearly all state senators that would have created the "Oklahoma Vision Fund" and another that would have required the governor and lieutenant governor to be jointly elected.

Voters approved two voter-initiated petitions during the same period — Medicaid expansion and medicinal marijuana legalization, according to state records. They rejected others.

Oklahomans take seriously their power at the ballot box, and they're just not voting yes willy-nilly. They know what they're doing when they vote despite what some lawmakers would have you believe.

In 2016, Oklahomans were sick of having the highest incarceration rate in the nation. They were done spending their hard-earned tax dollars on locking up nonviolent offenders. So advocates took matters into their own hands, collected signatures and got State Question 780 placed on the November ballot.

SQ 780 reclassified some drug possession crimes and minor property offenses as misdemeanors.

Voters statewide approved it with 58% support.

But you wouldn't know that by everything lawmakers have done since then to reverse it.

The latest effort is one filed by Republican Rep. John George that seeks to lower the threshold for a theft to be classified as a felony. House lawmakers approved changing it back to $500 even after voters overwhelmingly chose to increase it to $1,000.

George argued that thefts have increased dramatically since the question passed, and that he's not concerned with reducing the prison population, but instead with keeping people and property safe, Oklahoma Voice reporter Barbara Hoberock reported.

He warned that retail theft could put locally owned stores out of business.

A yes vote, he told his colleagues, is being "smart on crime," while a no vote is "soft on crime."

In reality, a yes vote is the equivalent of not respecting the will of the people.

To clarify, property crimes have actually been decreasing since 2021, according to Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation crime statistics. Overall, they're down 13.7% from 2021.

Voters know exactly what they're doing when they cast their ballot — whether for broader issue-based reforms or specific candidates or parties.

It's patently offensive — and frankly alarming — when legislators don't respect the outcome.

As we all know, there's a general rule of thumb in contested democratic elections: someone is going to be unhappy with the outcome.

Most reasonable people respect our neighbor's differing opinions, accept that they won't win every time and move on.

It's time for lawmakers to move on, too.

We know what we're doing, so let's let democracy prevail, and let's respect the intelligence of our voters.

Janelle Stecklein is editor of Oklahoma Voice. An award-winning journalist, Stecklein has been covering Oklahoma government and politics since moving to the state in 2014.

Initiative petition process is vital to Oklahoma's democracy: Lawmakers should keep it accessible

Cole Allen, Oklahoma Policy Institute, Updated July 22, 2024

Oklahoma's lawmakers must keep our democracy strong and stop putting forward legislation designed to diminish the power of the initiative petition and state question process in Oklahoma. In 2020, Oklahomans passed State Question 802 to expand Medicaid access in Oklahoma, continuing a years-long pattern of approving people-centric ballot initiatives. In response, the Oklahoma Legislature has since heard numerous bills to make the state question process less effective. This has been part of a larger national push to make direct democracy (such as the state question process) less powerful, which is a concerning trend.

As it currently exists, the initiative petition process in Oklahoma is an effective and secure way for citizens to make the changes they want to see — and vote down the ones they don't. It exists as both a tool for everyday citizens to have their voices directly heard on the issues that matter most to them, as well as an important check on our lawmakers to ensure that legislative action aligns with the will of the people. Making the initiative petition process less accessible hurts Oklahoma's democracy. Our lawmakers should continue to protect the state question process and allow Oklahoma voters to directly voice their opinion on policies that affect their lives.

The state question process works and is secure

The state questions process has a proven track record for giving citizens a direct voice in our state's democracy. Despite this, lawmakers have increased their attempts to make it more difficult for citizens to put initiatives on the ballot. They have also proposed raising the approval requirements for these state questions to pass. Senate Bill 518, filed in the 2023 legislative session, aimed to allow for a $750 filing fee for initiatives, lengthen the time allowed to contest initiatives in court, and increase the number of data points needed to verify signatures. The bill's author argued that this bill would be a "pro-active" move to ensure the security of the citizen initiative process. However, the process works as is, and this call for increasing security seems to be a solution looking for a non-existent problem. While this bill passed the Senate, it was not heard in its House committee.

Currently, the state question processes allow voters to act directly to change policy. It also requires petitioners to clear some hurdles, including two separate periods where the petition can be contested in court, collecting a high number of signatures in a short amount of time, and verification of the signatures by the state. This process can be extremely costly for petitioners from covering legal fees and paying for enough signature collectors to meet the extremely tight turnaround time. For example, the Yes on 820 campaign spent nearly $4.8 million to advance SQ 820, which would have allowed for recreational marijuana and reformed parts of Oklahoma's criminal justice system. Additionally, the Yes on 802 campaign spent more than $5.5 million on legal fees, signature gathering, and campaign materials to promote Medicaid expansion. The high financial barrier of entry already restricts the number of filed petitions that make it to the ballot. Those that do, however, undergo a rigorous verification process to ensure that the collected signatures accurately reflect the will of Oklahomans to vote on the proposed initiative.

Historically, the Oklahoma Secretary of State's office would verify signatures internally. However, the Secretary of State passed the process to a third-party vendor, Western Petition Systems LLC, for SQ 820. This contract costs the state $300,000 per year no matter how many initiative petitions are filed for verification in any given year. Despite this high cost, the vendor was unable to process the signatures for SQ 820 efficiently, and the computer program the company used routinely produced errors, according to the SQ 820 campaign. Comparing the timeline to State Question 802, which was approved in June 2020, SQ 820 moved at a much slower pace; the state verified nearly 300,000 signatures in 11 business days while Western Petition Systems LLC verified nearly 117,000 signatures in 30 business days. The private contractor took nearly three times as long to verify a third of the signatures the Secretary of State's office was able to accomplish for SQ 802.

After the signatures were eventually verified, the proposed state question proceeded to the Oklahoma Supreme Court, where no contests were filed that challenged the genuineness of the verified signatures. In spite of the inefficiency of the vendor-led process, SQ 820 made it to the ballot, demonstrating that the issue of recreational marijuana was of significant interest to the people.

The organizers of SQ 820, like all previous citizen initiatives, filed their initiative, worked with the Secretary of State's office to ensure their proposed changes were constitutional, collected signatures, had them verified, and proved in the Supreme Court that their process aligned with the Oklahoma Constitution and statutes. Once on the ballot, the people of Oklahoma voted no. The process worked as intended, and the people's will was directly heard.

If lawmakers were truly interested in making the signature collection and verification processes work better for Oklahomans, they could consider extending the signature collection period to be more in line with other states with a citizen-led initiative system. Currently, Oklahoma has the shortest collection timeline, allowing 90 days for signature collection, compared to the national average of roughly one year. Further, legislators should consider bringing the signature verification process back to the state to ensure both efficacy and cost savings for taxpayers.

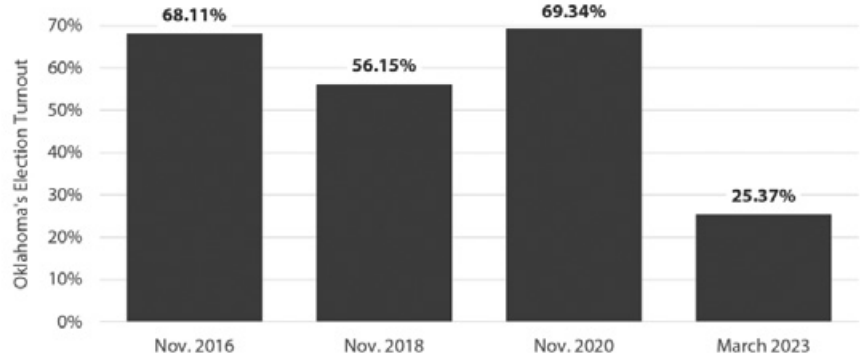
Despite low turnout, the state question process remains important

The March 7, 2023 election for SQ 820 saw a turnout of just

1 in 4 registered Oklahoma voters, which marks the lowest turnout for a state question in the past 10 years. Despite low turnout on this single state question, the initiative petition process remains an integral part of Oklahoma's democracy and should be protected. Polling data from 2022 indicates that 9 in 10 Oklahomans want to protect their access to the initiative petition process. This overwhelmingly demonstrates that Oklahomans view the initiative petition process as an integral part of our state's democracy.

The March 7 vote was the most recent example of Oklahoma's low turnout problem, which limits the effectiveness of the democratic process. SQ 820 was the only state question vote since 2005 that did not take place with another state election, and one of only three to not be placed on the ballot for a November general election in the last decade. Since 2016, state questions on general election ballots have had significantly higher turnout than state questions placed on a non-general election ballot.

SQ 820 was an outlier in turnout for state questions



Source: Oklahoma Election Board
NOTE: November 2016: SQs 776, 777, 779, 780, 781, 790, 792. November 2018: SQs 793, 794, 798, 800, 801. November 2020: SQs 805, 814. March 2023: SQ 820

OKPOLICY Oklahoma Policy Institute

General elections in November have much higher turnout due in part to the high levels of media coverage and voter outreach by campaigns, the state, and non-profit organizations. Primaries and special elections, however, receive much less attention; as a result, they experience lower turnout. Turnout data reported by the State Election Board show that the March 2023 special election had less than half the turnout of general elections since 2016. The State Election Board does not provide official turnout rates for general elections before 2016 or any primary elections. However, approximations indicate that the June 2018 and June 2020 primary elections, which had SQ 788 (medical marijuana) and SQ 802 (Medicaid expansion), respectively, had significantly lower turnout than November general elections in the same year but higher turnout than the March 2023 special election.

The SQ 820 organizers had targeted the November 2022 general election for voters to consider the state question. Had the signature count been as efficient as previous years, the state question could have been approved in time to appear on the November 2022 ballot. However, the delay prompted the governor's decision to place SQ 820 on a special election, which significantly drove down turnout from what it would have been,had the target date been reached. While it is unknown whether or not the outcome of the election would have changed, it is clear that the extremely low turnout for the SQ 820 special election is an outlier. It does not indicate that Oklahomans lack interest in state questions or distrust the process of the initiative petition.

The initiative petition is important to Oklahoma's democracy

The initiative petition process is a key part of Oklahoma's democracy and should remain accessible to all Oklahomans. The framers of the Oklahoma constitution understood the importance of this when they called the initiative "the first power reserved to the people" in Article 5. The state constitution ensures that the people have an avenue through which they can create, approve, and revoke statutory and constitutional changes directly, without the interference of the Legislature. This works to both balance and complement the powers of the Legislature and other branches of Oklahoma's government. By granting the people this right, the state constitution ensures that citizens remain the ultimate authority over their own lives.

Oklahomans have used this power judiciously to make the changes they wish to see in this state. Oklahomans have: created an independent Ethics Commission to protect the government from corruption and competing interests; limited the state's ability to raise taxes; passed crucial criminal justice reform; and expanded Medicaid access among many other state questions that have passed. They have also used their power to vote down policies and changes they did not want to see such as raising the state sales tax and, most recently, recreational marijuana.

The legislature should keep the initiative process accessible

The initiative and referendum process allows Oklahomans to propose and vote on changes to statute and the constitution that directly affect their lives. This is an integral part of Oklahoma's democratic process that not all states utilize. As such, Oklahoma's lawmakers should work to keep the process effective and protect the people's access to it. The Legislature made the right call by stopping SB 518, one of the most recent attempts to make the state question process harder. Lawmakers should continue to stop bills that would create more hurdles and reduce the accessibility and efficacy of the initiative petition process. Having the Secretary of State retake control of the verification process would be a positive step in ensuring that signatures are counted and verified efficiently and accurately. It also would represent savings for taxpayers. The state should also work to increase voter turnout through policies that make voting more accessible such as implementing online voter registration, expanding early voting opportunities, and allowing for same day voter registration. Furthermore, the governor should refrain from placing state questions on their own election dates in order to ensure better turnout. Democracy in Oklahoma is better served when citizens know they have voice in their government and the surety that their political will is honored.

EDITORIAL: Initiative petition process doesn't need 'fixed'

Enid News & Eagle Editorial Board, February 29, 2024

The Oklahoma Legislature is again looking at ways to make it more difficult for voter-led petition drives to get on the state ballot, or to increase the threshold of votes needed for approval.

Such changes need to be killed.

Oklahoma currently has a good and reasonable process regarding initiative petitions. It is not easy for such questions to get on the ballot. In the last decade, nearly 40 citizen-led initiative petitions have been filed. But, only seven of those qualified for a ballot, and voters approved some and rejected some. The system seems to be working appropriately.

Oklahoma's ballot initiative process is enshrined in the state Constitution. The Legislature does not have the independent authority to change most aspects of the initiative petition process. It can, if desired, vote to put a constitutional amendment to a statewide vote of the people.

That system continues to be reasonable — accessible, but not irresponsibly easy.

Oklahoma has deep populist roots and a good system of direct democracy through the initiative petition process. The initiative process provided by the Oklahoma Constitution is based in principles of agrarian populism. Since statehood, Oklahomans have had a general distrust of government trying to exercise too much authority over the individual. The initiative process allows a path, if enough people agree, for Oklahoma residents to put a question on the state ballot.

So, when does that happen? Usually a petition happens when the Legislature refuses to do its job, or it acts in a way that angers a substantial number of people.

Legislators need to stop trying to thwart the initiative petition process. We don't need to add additional burdens to this direct democracy procedure that has been Oklahoma's legacy.

If legislators want fewer citizen-led petitions, they need to work harder on the serious needs we face instead of kicking the can down the road.

"If you have a plan, we want to hear it. Tell your community leaders, your local officials, your governor, and your team in Washington. Believe me, your ideas count. An individual can make a difference."

— George H.W. Bush

New laws will make ballot initiative process more restrictive, lawmaker says

M. Scott Carter, The Oklahoman, June 30, 2024

Mickey Dollens said he tried to warn people.

The state representative who spent the 2024 legislative session fighting to protect Oklahoma's initiative and referendum process said new laws passed this year will make it more difficult to get future state questions in front of the voters.

Dollens, an Oklahoma City Democrat, said House Bill 1105 — signed by Gov. Kevin Stitt in late April — was the main vehicle for "stalling most ballot initiatives going forward." The bill extends the challenge period for a state question proposal from 10 days to 90 days.

"It's going to have an immediate impact on State Question 832," Dollens said. That state question would gradually increase the minimum wage. And though supporters of the proposal have until July 14 to collect signatures, Dollens said opponents can file challenges to the question until Oct. 12.

"Doing that would keep the state question off the November ballot," he said.

The bill, which passed by large margins in both the Oklahoma House of Representatives and the state Senate, was one of several pieces of legislation that would make major changes to Oklahoma's initiative petition process.

State Sen. Julie Daniels, a Republican from Bartlesville, was the author of the bill. Emails sent to Daniels requesting comment were not answered.

A second bill, this one written by state Sen. Lonnie Paxton, made petition signature verification more difficult. The existing law required signatures on initiative petitions to come with at least three out of five data points that can be matched to the signer's voter registration card for the signature to count. Those points included legal first name, legal last name, zip code, house number, and numerical month and day of birth.

Paxton's bill, signed by Gov. Stitt in late April, increased the requirement up to four data points. It also allowed the secretary of state to charge a filing fee of up to $750.

Oklahoma has a long, storied past with initiative petitions

Part of the first state constitutional convention, Oklahoma's Initiative and Referendum process is more than 100 years old and very well used.

Modeled after an Oregon law, Oklahoma's initiative and referendum clause has sparked more than 800 initiative petitions since statehood. Many of those state questions were referred to voters through the Legislature, while others sprouted from the general public.

The process is pretty straightforward: supporters circulate a petition that spells out the state question and if the required number of signatures are collected — 15% of the legal, registered voters to amend the Constitution and 8% to propose a state law — then the question is sent for a public vote.

Records show that since statehood, Oklahomans have cast ballots on more than 400 state questions.

The process works and it's secure, Cole Allen, an analyst with the Oklahoma Policy Institute, wrote in a posting on the organization's website.

"The initiative petition process is a key part of Oklahoma's democracy and should remain accessible to all Oklahomans. The framers of the Oklahoma constitution understood the importance of this when they called the initiative 'the first power reserved to the people' in Article 5," Allen wrote. "The state constitution ensures that the people have an avenue through which they can create, approve, and revoke statutory and constitutional changes directly, without the interference of the Legislature. This works to both balance and compliment the powers of the Legislature and other branches of Oklahoma's government."

Bob Burke, a long-time attorney in Oklahoma City and an expert on the state's Constitution, said he was against lengthening the protest period and said it would have a negative effect on future petitions.

"I believe it will adversely affect the right of the people to petition their government for a statewide election on a certain issue. The law, in my opinion, is an attempt to cut down on the number of initiative petitions on issues that end up on the ballot," he said. "The delegates to the Oklahoma Constitutional Convention were greatly concerned about the intrusion of government into their lives. They also wanted the people to have a major opportunity to petition the government to amend the state Constitution. Oklahoma is in a unique position that a vote of the people can even veto a bill that is passed by the Legislature."

Like Dollens, Burke said he was concerned that by increasing requirements for state questions, lawmakers are limiting the opportunity for Oklahomans to have an impact on state government.

"What is wrong with allowing our citizens to seek an opportunity for all citizens in the state to vote yea or nay against issues that affect our lives? That is a fundamental

right in our democracy," Burke said.

Dollens: Fight to protect initiative and referendum process never ends

While the tweaks to the state's initiative and referendum process seem small, Dollens said, the changes made by lawmakers this year will have serious, long-term effects on Oklahoma's ballot initiative process.

Dollens said the Republican-controlled Legislature wants to restrict the ballot initiative process because they fear voters will embrace issues that the GOP opposes.

"My goal is to equip Oklahomans with the knowledge of how these legislative tactics are chipping away at voters' freedoms," Dollens said. "But ultimately it has to come down to the people of Okahoma holding lawmakers accountable as the votes on future restrictions come up in the future."

It's pretty alarming, Dollens said, how quickly lawmakers have embraced new restrictions on the ballot initiative process.

"The people need to know just how the Legislature has taken what is already one of the most restrictive ballot initiative systems in the country and made it even more restrictive," Dollens said.

Notes

This is a resource document for you to use.
Take notes, highlight, use as a text book.

Oklahoma election task force recommends fighting dark money by lifting contribution limits

Clifton Adcock, The Frontier, April 4, 2024

Gov. Kevin Stitt's Task Force on Campaign Finance and Election Threats recommends allowing politicians to accept unlimited contributions from individual and political parties in order to weaken the influence of dark money in state races. The task force also recommends Oklahoma triple campaign contribution limits from political action committees to candidates from $5,000 per election to $15,000.

Though it was not listed as a recommendation, the task force also said in a report issued Monday it "would not oppose lifting" the current restrictions against politicians receiving direct monetary contributions from corporations and unions.

Stitt created the task force in November 2023 to study campaign finance, foreign investment and interference in Oklahoma elections.

The nine-person task force is made up of eight Republicans and one registered independent, according to voter registration records. Four of the nine task force members are former Oklahoma Republican Party officials. Two members, including task force chairman A.J. Ferate, have been responsible for forming dark money groups, which can raise and spend unlimited funds on elections while hiding their donors. Members were appointed by Stitt, Senate President Pro Tempore Greg Treat, House Speaker Charles McCall. The task force also included State Election Board Secretary Paul Ziriax and Secretary of State Josh Cockroft.

The task force said in its report it believes "significant change" is needed to keep outside special interest groups from outspending candidates in political races.

Ferate said in an interview with The Frontier that the state should seek to bring more power back to the state's major political parties and significantly increase contribution limits to candidates. Current regulations cap individual donations to candidates at $3,300 per election and contributions from political action committees to $5,000 per election.

"The recommendation is to try to bring balance back to the relationship between political parties and candidates on one hand, and the independent expenditure groups on the other," Ferate said. "I think that independent expenditure groups are at a very meaningfully significant advantage over candidates and political parties right now. And the only way that we can restore it is to allow everybody to play on the same level playing field by extremely similar rules in order to actually accomplish some sort of a parity and give back the candidates the ability to control their own message."

Alicia Andrews, chairwoman of the Oklahoma Democratic Party, questioned the lack of non-Republican representation on the task force and how any of the recommendations would be enforced without increasing funding for the Oklahoma Ethics Commission.

But she would still like to see some of the recommendations enacted. Oklahoma's campaign contribution limits make fundraising harder and encourage the formation of dark money groups to get around the rules, she said.

Governor's task force on campaign finance and election threats

State of Oklahoma

On Nov. 1, 2023, Governor J. Kevin Stitt issued Executive Order 2023-29, creating the Governor's Task Force on Campaign Finance and Election Threats. This group of nine members was charged to rigorously assess campaign finance, scrutinize foreign investment and combat foreign interference in Oklahoma elections.

As society navigates the complexities of modern democracy, understanding the dynamics of campaign finance and recognizing potential threats to electoral processes are crucial for upholding the integrity of our democratic institutions.

With the rise of disinformation campaigns, cyberattacks and foreign interference, safeguarding the integrity of elections has become paramount. This document offers insights into these emerging challenges and proposes actionable strategies to mitigate risks and enhance electoral security.

By fostering informed dialogue and catalyzing meaningful action, it is the mission of the Task Force to contribute to the preservation of democratic values and the promotion of free and fair elections.

Finally, it is the hope of the Task Force that this report serves as a valuable resource, guiding stakeholders towards meaningful dialogue and effective solutions.

Executive Summary

Governor Kevin Stitt announced the Governor's Task Force on Campaign Finance and Election Threats (Task Force) at the beginning of November 2023. It is an effort to examine our election systems and ethics regulations to determine what, if any, changes are necessary to assure that our elections are secure, and that appropriate competitive balance exists in our ethics regulations.

During the past three months, the Task Force has examined state law and listened to the perspectives of stakeholders, both formally and informally, and deliberated topics among the members.

The Task Force, upon reviewing the Executive Order from the Governor, applied the following definition to determine a threat: A threat is defined as an issue that may cause serious harm or interference with the integrity of our elections and ethics regulations, or have the potential to cause serious harm or interference to our election and ethics integrity.

The threshold question that the Task Force considered in deliberating Oklahoma's relevant statutes, regulations, and our recommendations is "How does Oklahoma's current approach impact the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution?" Certainly, this analysis may on its face appear to affect our state's ethics laws more disproportionately than our election rules. But in areas of free expression and regulation of independent expenditures, some of the considerations on how the Legislature may play a role in forming election policy must be considered as well.

The Task Force spent a significant amount of time scrutinizing Oklahoma's election systems and rules, and met with individuals that have conducted reviews of Oklahoma's elections or have critiques of the system. Following a full analysis of Oklahoma's system, the Task Force concludes that our election system is one of the best systems in the nation. Elections are con- ducted with integrity and efficiency. Audits are conducted to verify results. But most importantly, officials focus on their mission, driven to conduct a fair and unbiased election. This does not mean that the Task Force does not have recommendations to change the system. Currently, randomized post-election audits are required by the Secretary of the State Election Board, but are not mandated by statute. Some municipalities have contemplated adopting ranked-choice voting, which has in some cases created confusion and incorrect election results in other states. There is no requirement under Oklahoma law for election board secretaries or members to publicly disclose campaign contributions to candidates to their fellow board members, which could raise questions about conflicts of interest. These are easy fixes that do not fundamentally alter the strong system that we should be proud to possess.

Despite the wishes of many in Oklahoma, the U.S. Supreme Court has spoken, and independent expenditures are constitutional in the United States. Oklahoma does not have a mechanism to reverse the long line of Supreme Court precedent, nor can we simply ignore it. But Oklahoma does have the ability to require more rigid reporting and accountability of the officers of the entity. Further, Oklahoma can, and should, reverse the paradigm that our candidates have operated under—at a disadvantage to independent expenditures—that subjects the contributions they receive to full public disclosure and limits under false concerns about influence that do not account for the millions of dollars spent against them with scant disclosure. It's time for the paradigm to shift.

Through the Task Force's "emerging considerations" section, the Task Force explores areas that it determined did not at this time rise to the level of a threat but should be monitored. These include how county and local ethics reporting and violations are managed, the move toward open, or jungle, primaries, and state-tribal interplay related to reporting of eligibility of voters to the Oklahoma State Election Board, and prosecution of election violations.

Through the recommendations advanced in the next section, this Task Force strongly recommends that changes

should be made. Among other areas, specific action should be taken in such areas as the use of Artificial Intelligence in electioneering, mandatory post-election auditing of election results, violations for foreign influence in state elections, and a fresh regulatory structure that allows for unlimited contributions from natural born individuals directly to candidates rather than hiding dollars from sunlight.

Findings and Recommendations

The Task Force strongly recommends that the Legislature, election board, or the ethics com- mission undertake the following actions to assure our elections are safe and secure, and a competitive balance is available in our ethics laws.

Election Recommendations

1. To ensure that conflicts of interest are avoided, the Legislature should enact appropriate legislation to regulate and/or require disclosure of campaign contributions by the secretaries and members of the State Election Board and county election boards.

2. After nearly every election, the Secretary of the Oklahoma State Election Board orders a post-election audit of at least one race in every county to verify the accuracy in the election results. However, post-election audits are discretionary under current law. The Legislature should amend state law to make random post-election audits mandatory.

3. Under the federal Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act, Oklahoma and other states must meet certain requirements to assure that members of the uniformed services and other citizens overseas are provided access to vote by absentee ballot in their home state. Many decades ago, the Oklahoma Legislature went further than the federal law required when it created a fax system for returning voted ballots from these individuals. The system is rarely used today as the fax machine is essentially obsolete but has the potential to create questions surrounding ballot integrity. The fax system is less secure than other methods of returning absentee ballots, such as mail, private delivery service, or in-person. Additionally, state and federal law require absentee ballots to be sent to these voters 45 days prior to federal and state elections— including by secure electronic delivery upon request—allowing far more time to return voted absentee ballots by traditional methods. The Task Force recommends that the Legislature examine replacing or eliminating the statute allowing for the return of absentee ballots by facsimile device for overseas citizens.

4. In some states and localities, ranked-choice voting has become a new approach to conducting voting. Many localities that have undertaken ranked-choice voting have seen slowed results and lengthy result times. Such inefficiency has in some situations sown distrust of election results. In Tacoma, WA, the municipality conducted one election under the system before abandoning it. In Berkley, CA, the wrong candidate was thrown out in the first round of voting, and the "winner" sworn in, before a university audit of the results found an error that resulted in the initial losing candidate actually winning the race. Other evidence points to an increase in voter error, and slower results. Further, the costs of converting our election systems to support ranked-choice voting are significant and would be undertaken without merit. Oklahoma's accuracy and efficiency in ballot counting is admired nationally. Because of this, the Task Force recommends banning ranked-choice voting as a method of counting elections in Oklahoma.

5. In order to regulate the use of misrepresentations in elections like those that are possible by means of artificial intelligence such as voice, video, or both, the Ethics Commission should create disclosure rules about misrepresentation, and the Legislature should review existing laws and new statutes other states are adopting to ensure these are sufficient to protect campaigns, elections, and the public from the emerging technology known as "artificial intelligence" (AI). Ethics Reform Recommendations

6. In order to provide Oklahoma's law enforcement community an investigative and prosecutorial authority, the Legislature should enact legislation to ban foreign expenditures under penalty of felony.

7. The U.S. Supreme Court has detailed in opinions since Buckley v. Valeo and continuing through Citizens United v. FEC, that speech through independent expenditures cannot be abridged in ethics regulation. But the courts have upheld some reporting requirements, so long as those requirements do not violate Alabama v. NAACP and Americans for Prosperity v. Bonta. The Task Force recommends that the Ethics Commission add additional disclosure requirements to independent expenditure filings, including the following:

    a. Enforce existing domicile requirement for the treasurers of independent expenditure entities in Oklahoma.

    b. Incorporation of the independent expenditure entity must be in Oklahoma.

    c. Provide a phone number that is answered by a person situated in Oklahoma more than five hours a day.

    d. The treasurer shall personally certify that no campaign funds came from foreign sources under penalty of personal liability under the law.

8. Candidates and the political parties that support them are not currently allowed under Oklahoma law to effectively compete against independent expenditures. Independent expenditure entities are allowed to raise anonymously unlimited amounts of money where candidates and political parties may not. In one example studied, independent expenditures had a 4 to 1 spending advantage against the candidate that was opposed. In another, the statewide candidate spent a nominal amount while the independent expenditure effort that supported the candidate spent orders of magnitude more than either candidate in the race. Candidates, not independent expenditures, should run races. Candidates should also have the ability to respond to independent expenditure groups with equal ability to raise funds. The Task Force proposes:

    a. Eliminating contribution limits for all natural persons that donate directly to a candidate or political party's accounts regulated by the Oklahoma Ethics Commission.

    b. Increase the contribution limits for Limited Partnerships, Limited Liability Companies, tribes, PACs, and other non-corporate entities to candidates to $15,000.00, indexed for inflation every election cycle. Such entities could receive contributions from their members without limit. (Corporations and unions are banned from contributing under current Oklahoma law. The Task Force would not oppose lifting these restrictions but is not recommending it as part of this report.)

    c. The Ethics Commission should provide for unlimited transfers between political parties and their candidates.

    d. In order to reduce redundancy in campaign expenditures and to allow appropriate coordination between house and senate party caucuses and their members, the Ethics Commission should provide for caucus party committees similar to the entities that exist at the federal level.

9. Oklahoma's current cumulative reporting threshold for a contribution is $50.00. The FEC has not increased its reporting limit from $200 since 1975, a rate that by today's dollar valuation is $1,153.63. To encourage a diversity of smaller contributors to become involved in campaigns without risk of doxing or other adverse effects to their employment opportunities, Oklahoma should increase the cumulative initial contribution reporting requirement to $200.00 indexed for inflation.

10. Because of the recommendations above, the definition of coordination Oklahoma currently operates under would be overly burdensome and illogical. Oklahoma's coordination definition should be redefined to allow coordination up to the limits prescribed under the above recommendations with entities allowed to participate under the law.

Emerging Considerations

11. Tribal-state relations are in some respects at a point of inflection following the decision in McGirt v. Oklahoma. The Task Force does not comment on the case to wade into the jurisdictional friction that encircles the decision, but in order to recommend partnership between Oklahoma and the tribes on two specific areas:

    a. The Oklahoma State Election Board should communicate with tribal authorities, to assure that felons are not authorized to vote in Oklahoma elections.

    b. The Task Force encourages cooperation between the tribes and the State of Oklahoma to resolve jurisdictional questions related to election crimes and campaign finance violations.

12. Under the current Oklahoma Ethics Commission Rules, ethics reports for county and local officers and candidates are filed with local officials. These local officials, however, possess no regulatory authority beyond acceptance of the reports, and any investigatory or regulatory action remains with the Oklahoma Ethics Commission. The Task Force recommends that the Ethics Commission clarify and reassert its regulatory authority or more fully release its jurisdiction so that local district attorneys may undertake investigatory and prosecutorial authority.

13. Some jurisdictions have started merging primaries and holding open, or jungle, primaries under the guise of opening up the primary system to all voters. Primaries were designed for political parties to advance a particular nominee to the general election for consideration against the nominee of other political parties. In many instances, open primaries thwart political party options and the general elections often have two individuals of the same party as an option. Such a primary system can have the effect of reducing options for voters despite its intent, and any unintended consequences should therefore be cautiously contemplated before it is instituted in Oklahoma.

Read the full taskforce report at https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/24530064-task_force_on_campaign_finance_and_election_threats

As Oklahoma considers loosening campaign finance rules, outside groups run wild

Clifton Adcock, The Frontier, August 15, 2024

Independent expenditure groups continue to shower Oklahoma politicians with millions as the state eyes ways to reign in the secretive groups' spending.

The financial support from these shadowy groups added up to more than the candidate spent through their own campaigns during the June 18 primary, Oklahoma Ethics Commission records show.

Former Secretary of State Brian Bingman, who won the Republican primary in the race for a seat on the Oklahoma Corporation Commission, was the largest beneficiary of independent expenditures and dark money in state races. The three-member Corporation Commission regulates much of the state's oil and gas, telecommunications and utility industries in the state.

Four groups backed by the energy and communications industries spent a total of at least $471,845 in support of Bingman. That's $84,000 more than Bingman's own campaign spent on the primary, Ethics Commission records show.

Bingman did not return a phone message from The Frontier seeking comment.

The dark money group Alliance for Secure Energy spent $294,745 in support of Bingman.

Alliance for Secure Energy is led by former Oklahoma Corporation Commissioner Jeff Cloud, and bills itself as supporting "policies and regulations that impact infrastructure expansion and upgrades, new electric generation, environmental stewardship, economic development, sustainability and affordability." Bingman was the only candidate the group supported in the primary.

Bingman will face Democrat Harold Spradling and Libertarian Chad Williams in the Nov. 5 general election.

Governor Kevin Stitt's Task Force on Campaign Finance and Election Threats issued a report in March with recommendations for new campaign rules. The task force recommended some new rules for independent expenditure groups, such as requiring them to have a working phone number that is answered for at least five hours a day. But most recommendations were geared toward allowing larger direct donations to candidates and political parties.

If adopted, the recommendations would significantly increase the ability of political parties to transfer funds and coordinate with candidates and create a less regulated campaign finance system similar to those of Virginia, Texas, Utah and Nebraska, task force chairman Anthony Ferate told an Ethics Commission working group on July 11. Other recommendations include relaxing donation limits and de-regulating campaign coordination and monetary transfers between candidates and political parties.

"It would put us in a less-regulated system than most states," Ferate said. "But, again, all of the states are beginning to deal with this independent expenditure element."

Relaxing campaign rules would give candidates a "free market opportunity" to draw donors away from independent expenditure groups, Ferate said. The hope is that doing so would shift the balance of monetary power and the ability to control campaign messaging away from those groups to state political parties and candidates, he said.

"That's really the route that our task force tried to go down the road of, is if we can't stop expenditures, how do we make campaigns more competitive to control the messages, and so that's what we did with our recommendations," Ferate said.

But removing donor limits and coordination bans will likely result in state elections becoming more expensive, with little added clarity on who is trying to influence voters, said Elizabeth Shimek, senior counsel for campaign finance for the Campaign Legal Center, a watchdog group that advocates for enforcement of campaign finance laws and transparency in elections.

"Policy like campaign contribution limits and coordination bans are some of the few mechanisms that are in place to prevent wealthy special interests from spending unlimited money in elections and rigging the political system in their favor," Shimek said. "Removing these policies doesn't result in less money in elections, it results in a free-for-all where the voices with the most money often end up being the loudest in the room."

Independent expenditure groups, and specifically nonprofit "dark money" groups have been involved in numerous political corruption and bribery cases since the U.S. Supreme Court allowed them to participate in elections in 2010. The groups have had an increasing presence and influence in elections at all levels, from local school board races to the U.S. Supreme Court.

In recent years, other states have adopted stricter requirements on dark money disclosure that have so far survived legal challenges.

Montana's Legislature passed the DISCLOSE Act in 2015, which requires nonprofits spending in elections to register with the state as political committees and report contributors. Arizona voters passed the Voters Right to Know Act in 2022, which requires nonprofits that meet certain conditions participating in elections to disclose the true source of their funds.

Shimek, who is one of the attorneys defending the Voters Right to Know Act in court challenges, said the law gives Arizona voters the ability to parse out who is trying to influence their vote.

"Giving people more information about that message lets them better assess who is asking them for their attention," Shimek said.

In February, Rep. Cody Maynard, R-Durant, who faced attacks from an independent expenditure group in 2022, proposed an ethics rule based largely on the Arizona law. But he withdrew that proposal before an Ethics Commission meeting, saying the issue was complex. He said he wanted to review feedback he had received and possibly come back with a new proposal later.

Maynard declined to comment on the task force recommendations.

The Ethics Commission held three working group meetings this summer to consider the task force recommendations and draft proposed campaign finance rules.

Citizens are rapidly losing faith in the system in the face of tens of millions in untraceable political contributions from anonymous organizations, one state lawmaker said.

"I can tell you that people are concerned. They're almost fed up to a point of no return with money in politics. That's what we hear all the time when we're talking to our constituents," Rep. Tom Gann, R-Inola, said at a June 25 working group meeting in Tulsa.

"I think the key is less money, more transparency," he said.

What are 'independent expenditure' groups?

- **Super PACs are allowed to raise and spend unlimited amounts of money on a candidate, but must report their spending and donors to the campaign finance regulatory agency.**
- **501(c)(4) "social welfare" nonprofit groups are often referred to as "dark money" groups because of their secretive nature, can raise and spend unlimited funds on politics and are not required to publicly reveal their donors, but under IRS rules cannot spend a majority of their funds on politics.**

Sham websites, fake organizations and unreported spending

The dark money group Catalyst Oklahoma was the biggest spender in June primaries, dropping more than $379,000 in support of seven candidates around the state, mostly spent on mailers, canvassing and digital ads, Ethics Commission records show.

Catalyst was formed in 2013 and has ties to the State Chamber of Commerce and the conservative think tank Oklahoma Council of Public Affairs. Catalyst's treasurer and registered fundraiser is an Oklahoma political operative named Allen Wright.

Wright also helped create the Foundation for Unity and Leadership, a dark money group that campaigned against District 15 Republican State House candidate Tim Turner during this year's primary.

Turner overcame attacks from multiple dark money groups to beat four other candidates in the Republican primary for House District 15, which includes most of Haskell County. There was no Democrat in the race, so Turner will be the next representative for the district. Some of the dark money groups didn't file reports on the spending or incorporation paperwork that would reveal some basic information.

Catalyst did not report spending money in Turner's race, but the candidate posted a picture of a mailer on his personal Facebook page that shows a disclaimer stating it was paid for and created by Catalyst Oklahoma.

Catalyst and Foundation for Unity are listed as having the same address of an Edmond real estate business owned by Wright's wife and sister-in-law.

Wright blamed the unreported Catalyst mailer supporting Turner on a vendor error and said he was working with the Ethics Commission on the issue.

Turner also faced attacks from a sham website that attempted to pass as the page for the official Oklahoma Republican Party. The website is a near-replica of the party's actual page but many of the links don't work, and one leads to the fundraising arm of the Democratic National Committee.

The fake site also includes a page titled "The Real Tim Turner," which accuses Turner of mismanagement, corruption and self-dealing when he was the Haskell County Sheriff from 2016 to 2022. The site also has a disclaimer at the bottom stating it was created by a group named "Citizens for Honest Politicians."

No group by that name filed any reports with the Ethics Commission or Federal Election Commission. A search of incorporation records across several states did not reveal any registered nonprofit corporations by that name.

There are few mentions of Citizens for Honest Politicians

online, except for a handful of posts by a citizen-created Facebook group called City of Stigler News and More, which bills itself as a parody page.

The Facebook group's administrator said Citizens for Honest Politicians is not actually a corporate entity but was used to keep the identity of the person who created the site a secret. The group administrator said they knew who created the site, but declined to provide their name.

Oklahoma Republican Party officials told The Frontier they had not seen the website and did not know who was behind it, but planned to bring it to the attention of party leadership and their attorneys.

Turner said he didn't know who was behind the website.

"When you have groups like this right here, I think transparency is key," Turner said. "If you're going to hold candidates accountable, you need to hold the other groups that are producing information that is false accountable as well."

At least two independent expenditure groups also supported Turner during the primary.

Turner also said he did not know who was behind those groups.

"Politics has become so expensive that it takes a lot of money, even to be defeated."

— Will Rogers

As Kevin Stitt called for more election spending transparency, his supporters used dark money to hide donors

Clifton Adcock, The Frontier, August 22, 2024

When he took the podium before a joint session of the Oklahoma Legislature to deliver his 2023 State of the State address, Gov. Kevin Stitt was basking in the glow of a solid re-election victory a few months earlier, having overcome millions of dollars worth of negative attack ads attacks against him paid for by shadowy political groups.

It was time, Stitt told the Legislature, to ensure the state's voters knew who was spending big money to get politicians elected.

"Protecting Oklahomans means protecting the integrity of our elections," Stitt said. "I'm calling for stronger transparency laws. Because Oklahomans deserve to know exactly who is funding political campaigns. A democracy is doomed when special interests can spread lies and leverage blank checks to buy elections."

Stitt issued an executive order in November 2023 creating a task force to examine and make recommendations on campaign finance and foreign interference in Oklahoma's elections.

But less than a month before Stitt issued that executive order, members of his campaign staff, along with a handful of wealthy supporters, were busy setting up their own state political action committee fueled by dark money, according to corporate and campaign records. The group 46 Action would reward the governor's allies in the Senate with supportive ads during the primary election.

The group spent more than $100,000 leading up to the June 2024 primary election. All of 46 Action's funding came from 46 Forward, a political nonprofit organization that doesn't have to disclose its donors. The arrangement helped mask the political action committee's true funders.

46 Forward was formed in October 2023, corporate records show.

Officers and agents for 46 Action have worked for Stitt in the governor's office, for his campaign and transition team or for a separate federal political action committee that has provided support for Stitt's allies, records show.

46 Action's treasurer is Donelle Harder, Stitt's chief political strategist and campaign manager, according to Oklahoma Ethics Commission records. Harder has worked for Stitt's campaign since 2017.

Harder did not answer questions from The Frontier about 46 Action or 46 Forward, about the group's major donors or how much involvement Stitt had with the group. She said she was just the treasurer and not leading the group.

"46 Action is an entity that supports conservative candidates and causes in Oklahoma and ran only positive ads for Republican candidates in the 2024 primary," Harder said in the statement. "All of the entities activities and expenses are available in the ethics report."

A spokeswoman for Stitt's office did not respond to written questions or phone messages from The Frontier.

Spending records show 46 Action bought political ads supporting seven Republican state Senate candidates Stitt had previously endorsed — Julie McIntosh; Shane Jett; Rick Wolfe; Cody Rogers; Micheal Bergstrom; Casey Murdock and Brian Guthrie.

All of the seven candidates also received direct donations before the primary from Turnaround Team PAC, a federal political action committee tied to Stitt.

None of the Senate candidates who spoke with The Frontier said they were aware that the group was linked to the governor's office.

But candidates who benefit from a group's largesse often know exactly who the money is coming from, former state GOP head and chair of the Governor's Task Force on Campaign Finance and Election Threats Anthony Ferate told an Ethics Commission working group during its July 11 meeting.

"Super PACs and candidates can share attorneys under the law, and they can share donor information," Ferate said. "That's not coordination under the law. So will that candidate know what money has been contributed by what person? Yeah, probably."

As with many independent expenditure groups, voters had access to almost no information about 46 Action before the June primary. It was not required to report its donors to the Oklahoma Ethics Commission before the election. And often, even the officials who regulate those groups never know who is truly behind them.

"We don't know who these individuals are in instances," Ferate said. "We have guesses, we have concepts of who they are, but we don't know. We don't know who the money is coming from in a lot of these instances."

The group lists its address as a UPS store in Tulsa and first registered with the Oklahoma Ethics Commission on May 21 — too late to file a quarterly report on its fundraising

and spending before the June primary.

According to campaign reports filed after the primary, 46 Action was funded with two donations totaling $125,000 from the nonprofit 46 Forward.

Records show 46 Forward was founded by Tulsa resident Romney McGuire, the wife of Corbin McGuire, who has been described as a "close friend" of Stitt's, engineer and businessman Rodolfo "Rudy" Blanco and Richard Tanenbaum, CEO of the real estate developer Gardner Tanenbaum Holdings. The Frontier reached out to 46 Forward's founders, but didn't get any response.

Ethics Commission records show that all of Blanco and McGuire's state-level political donations since 2017 have been for Stitt or his allies.

46 Action lists two Stitt associates as its registered agents. Kevin Broghamer also serves as treasurer for the Turnaround Team PAC. Broghamer also worked for both of Stitt's inaugural committees and was his campaign treasurer, ethics records show. Geoffrey Long is a former Oklahoma Ethics Commission attorney who served as Stitt's campaign lawyer, a member of his transition staff and also worked for both of Stitt's inaugural committees.

Thus far, 46 Action has not reported spending in advance of runoff elections.
46 Action mostly backed winners in Senate Republican primaries. Five of the seven candidates it supported won their primaries or are headed to a runoff on Aug. 27, including one challenger who upset an incumbent state Senator.

- Sen. Micheal Bergstrom of Senate District 1 won his primary outright and will not face an opponent in the general election.
- Julie McIntosh earned enough votes to send her to the runoff election against Blake Stephens in the Senate District 3 race. The winner there will face independent Margaret Cook in the general election.
- Sen. Casey Murdock was able to claim victory in his Senate District 27 primary election and will not face an opponent in the general election.
- Sen. Shane Jett won a four-way race in the Senate District 17 primary and will not face a general election opponent.
- Brian Guthrie was able to beat incumbent Sen. Jeff Boatman in the Senate District 25 primary. Guthrie will face Democrat Karen Gaddis in the general election.
- Rick Wolfe lost to Spencer Kern for the Senate District 31 seat being vacated by Chris Kidd, who chose not to run for re-election. Kern will not face a challenger in the general election.
- Incumbent Sen. Cody Rogers, of Senate District 37, was heavily opposed by two dark money groups and lost to challenger Aaron Reinhardt during the primary. Reinhardt will face independent Andrew Nutter in the Nov. 5 general election.

Tracing the source of dark money-fueled attack ads that helped topple the Oklahoma Senate's next leader

Clifton Adcock, The Frontier, August 26, 2024

Oklahoma's former Secretary of Public Safety and his business partner were the main funders of a political action committee that bought attack ads to help unseat a state lawmaker who was next in line to lead the Oklahoma Senate.

The state political action committee Advance Right is part of a tangled web of shadowy political groups that try to hide the identity of donors and influence elections in Oklahoma. The Frontier used interviews, corporate records and campaign spending reports to trace the ties between them.

Advance Right campaigned to unseat Sen. Greg McCortney, R-Ada. McCortney was set to become the next Senate President Pro Tempore before losing in the June Republican primary to challenger Jonathan Wingard. The group spent $91,826 on mailers, text messages, yard signs and cable television ads campaigning against McCortney.

Advance Right purchased a television ad claiming McCortney had a "liberal" voting record, donors tied to President Joe Biden and was in favor of "drag queen parades, defunding police threats," and "helping illegals get a license." McCortney hit back in a Facebook post and an ad of his own, saying "a life-long government bureaucrat and his dark money buddies in Edmond" were behind the attacks.

Wingard won the primary with 51% of the vote and will become the next senator for District 13 because there were no other candidates in the race.

Before the vote, Chip Keating, son of former Oklahoma Gov. Frank Keating and former Secretary of Public Safety for Stitt, and real estate developer Michael Mallick funneled $100,000 in donations to Advance Right through a Texas-based company they own, records show.

In a telephone interview with The Frontier, Keating confirmed that he and Mallick were the primary funding source for Advance Right's attack on McCortney.

Keating targeted McCortney with attack ads after the senator suggested putting a second round of funding for a planned law enforcement training center in Lincoln County on hold during the Legislature's public budget negotiations this year

Keating is chairman of the nonprofit Oklahoma State Troopers Foundation and a former Highway Patrol officer. He had been working for about 15 years to bring the need for a new state law enforcement training center to the attention of public officials, and viewed McCortney's suggestion to halt spending and possibly claw back earlier funding as a threat.

"To me, he's trying to defund the police," Keating said. "The work we do as citizens is to benefit the men and women in blue and our first responders. And Senator McCortney was going to be a direct threat to that, and so we wanted to get involved."

In a phone interview with The Frontier, McCortney said he had heard rumors that Keating was funding the ads.

McCortney said he has never met Keating.

"I don't know if he's ever even driven a car through Senate District 13 — to decide to dump a bunch of his money to take out a senator … it's a pretty sad state of affairs in politics," McCortney said. "It wasn't a campaign between two people for Senate District 13. It was a guy from Senate District 13 being attacked by a rich guy from Nichols Hills."

Keating said he funded Advance Right for the attacks so he could decide what the ads against McCortney would say. This was one reason a governor's task force earlier this year recommended removing caps on political contributions to candidates and easing other campaign spending rules.

"You can't control the messaging when you give a direct donation to the campaign, so when you're doing it this way, I mean, we were the funders of this PAC, so we got to control the message," Keating said.

It can be a challenge for voters to find out who is behind independent political groups like Advance Right. The Frontier found ties between Advance Right and other political groups that didn't report spending, donors, or used only partial names or initials to identify their organizers.

Advance Right's only other donor was Liberty Action Fund Inc., a nonprofit dark money group incorporated in Delaware that is not legally required to disclose its donors.

The Frontier was able to trace Advance Right and Liberty Action Fund to the Tulsa-based political consulting firm Tomahawk Strategies through corporate records, interviews and campaign finance reports. Firm co-founder John Fritz declined to answer questions.

Liberty Action Fund also gave to another political action committee called Oklahomans for a Positive Change PAC. The PAC sent out mailers during this year's Tulsa County Commissioner Democratic primary, records show.

Oklahomans for a Positive Change spent at least $18,336 in support of candidates Maria Barnes and Sarah Gray and opposing candidate Jim Rea. The group lists itself as a po-

litical action committee, but was not registered with either the Oklahoma Ethics Commission or the Federal Election Commission and did not file organizational paperwork with the Tulsa County Election Board, which is tasked with collecting independent expenditure reports in county-level races.

The group identified itself with only a long acronym on political ads — OKFAPCPAC — and only provided the first initials and last names of its officers on campaign filings.

Luke Paulson is another name that shows up in Advance Right campaign reporting records. He is the treasurer for the separate, federally-registered PAC named Advance Right Super PAC, which is the state-registered Advance Right PAC's sole donor. Paulson told The Frontier that he also helped organize Liberty Action Fund.

Records show Liberty Action Fund was established in 2022 in Delaware, a state with notoriously opaque corporate registration laws.

Notes

This is a resource document for you to use.
Take notes, highlight, use as a text book.

Oklahomans' political influence measured in dollars

Randy Krehbiel, Tulsa World, Updated August 16, 2024

While Oklahoma presidential votes may not count as much as some other states', Oklahoma dollars do.

A reminder of this was Friday's Oklahoma City fundraiser for the Republican National Committee and GOP Presidential nominee Donald Trump. Attendees paid $5,000 to get in the door and $15,000 to have their picture taken with vice presidential nominee JD Vance.

A seat at the head table cost $100,000.

Almost all of that money will go to campaigns in competitive states such as Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania.

Because Oklahoma is so reliably Republican, Oklahomans' biggest influence on national politics — aside from some of the people they elect — is cash. Tens of millions in cash every election cycle.

The Federal Election Commission has recorded 800,000 transactions involving Oklahoma donors and federal office-seekers and federal political action committees since Jan. 1, 2023. And that doesn't count so-called "dark money" contributions or state and local campaigns.

In fact, Oklahoma's No. 1 political donor this election cycle gave the biggest share of her $8.3 million in contributions to state elections — in Ohio.

According to the OpenSecrets.org data base, Tulsan Lynn Schusterman contributed $3.5 million to Ohioans United for Reproductive Rights, an organization that led a successful 2023 ballot initiative in that state for abortion rights.

Schusterman also gave at least $750,000 to One Person, One Vote, an Ohio group that defeated a ballot initiative that would have raised the minimum vote needed for passage of the abortion rights measure and future ballot propositions.

She also gave $1,075,000 to Planned Parenthood's federal political action committee.

Schusterman also contributed $900,000 to the Democracy First PAC, which campaigned against election deniers, and $500,000 to the Wisconsin Democratic Party.

Smaller amounts have gone to state and federal PACs and candidates from Maine to Alaska — but not to any presidential campaigns.

One of the nation's leading philanthropists, Schusterman's reportable political contributions appear to surpass all other Oklahomans' this election cycle, based on an analysis of three databases, including OpenSecrets', through July 20.

Top 10 Oklahoma political donors
As reported to federal and state authorities

Lynn Schusterman	$8,338,834
Joe & Kelly Craft	$3,507,900
Continental Resources	$2,522,500
Stacy Schusterman	$2,274,434
Chickasaw Nation	$1,575,940
Larry & Polly Nichols	$1,512,500
Harold Hamm	$1,445,950
Devon Energy	$1,199,900
Cherokee Nation	$608,500
Rooney Holdings	$600,000

Source: OpenSecrets.org, Oklahoma Ethics Commission, Federal Election Commission

Schusterman and her daughter, Stacy Schusterman, who's contributed almost $2.3 million, are unusual among Oklahoma's largest donors in that they give almost entirely to Democrats and associated causes and because almost all of their contributions go out of state.

Tulsans Joe and Kelly Craft, second on the list with $3.5 million, also give most of their money out of state, including at least $1.5 million to a state PAC in their native Kentucky.

Third on the list is Oklahoma City-based Continental Resources, whose five contributions totaled $2.5 million, including $1 million to Trump's Make America Great Again Inc.

Stacy Schusterman is fourth. Her contributions included $1 million to the U.S. Senate Democrats' PAC and $400,000 to the Wisconsin Democratic Party.

Unlike most of the top donors, the Chickasaw Nation's contributions are genuinely bipartisan, apparently driven more by practical considerations than by ideology.

About two-thirds of the Chickasaws' $1.6 million in contributions were to federal committees, with the rest going to state politics.

Oklahomans might be surprised to learn that the Chickasaw's single largest contribution has been $100,000 to Republican Texas Gov. Greg Abbott. All told, the tribe has showered around $250,000 on Texas politicians, who are not subject to state contribution limits.

The Chickasaws' involvement is likely tied to protecting their casinos along the Texas border. According to the Dallas Morning News, North Texas interests hired 76 lobbyists to push for casinos in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex last legislative session and aren't letting up.

Of the 10 largest donors, seven are primarily identified with the fossil fuels sector, and several are interrelated.

Harold Hamm, for instance, is the founder and executive chairman of Continental Resources. Hamm has contributed at least $1.4 million individually.

Larry Nichols, a founder of Devon Energy, and his wife, Polly Nichols, have given more than $1.5 million, while Devon has contributed $1.2 million.

The figures cited are for this election cycle only, from Jan. 1, 2023, to July 20, 2024, and do not include contributions to local elections or to dark money campaigns that do not report donors.

> ***"If you want to study the social and political history of modern nations study hell."***
>
> *— Thomas Merton*

Public funding of U.S. elections

Alexander Fouirnaies, University of Chicago

Private fundraising in US elections corrupts the incentives of elected officials, advantages entrenched elites, and harms electoral competition. Private fundraising splits the priorities of novice politicians, forcing huge time investments in fundraising to deter challengers and build election coffers. Studies suggest that a dependent relationship with large private donors could give politicians incentives to spend too much time fundraising or to give too many policy favors to special interests relative to the broader public.

By limiting the need to raise money from private groups, public funding programs could align the interests of citizens and elected officials better than private funding systems. Public funding programs create a competitive alternative to private funding by matching the support of small-donor contributions to candidates if the candidates can document support and adhere to spending maximums.

The two main types of public funding of electoral campaigns that are currently used in state and local elections are partial public funding programs (sometimes called "matching funds" programs) and full public funding programs (sometimes called "clean elections" programs).

The best evidence on public funding programs suggests that policy makers face a trade-off: Public funding programs promote electoral competition and candidate entry, but they may also encourage ideological extremism and polarization. Empirical evidence suggests that public funding programs promote candidate entry and electoral competition.

When comparing data on all 99 state legislative chambers from 1976 to 2018, a study found that number of candidates who ran in a state before and after the state introduced (or repealed) a public funding program found that public funding caused an increase in the number of candidates running for office. In the average state legislature, public funding encourages approximately 18 extra candidates to run for a state legislative seat, the equivalent of an extra candidate in one out of five seats. This lower barrier to participation widened the field of candidates but also gave leeway for extremist, niche candidates to emerge and succeed.

People may reasonably disagree about whether entrenched political elites are more concerning than ideological polarization in contemporary American politics, but discussion about campaign finance reforms should openly consider this trade-off. It is unclear whether a public funding option undermines the influence of moneyed special interest groups. Cursory research suggests that politicians who opt into public funding options might spend less overall time fundraising, but there is no causal evidence that this results in superior electoral outcomes.

While initial data is promising, opponents argue that public funding programs are still relatively niche - there are only a small number of elections with public funding. Among those, there are few gubernatorial and presidential elections where candidates had the public funding option. Consequently, most of the empirical evidence is based on state legislative elections from a handful of states.

Civility is our eternal project

Chris Walsh, George W. Bush Institute, July 24, 2024

Imagine someone who believes something you find outrageous, foolish, or even dangerous.

The idea of giving that person your valuable time and listening to them seems counterintuitive, but you do it. Now, despite stark disagreement, imagine you also recognize their inherent human dignity and respond to them with grace instead of derision or scorn. Finally, you depart each other's company in good humor while still disagreeing over some big issues.

That thought experiment may sound daunting, or even pollyannish, but it's the price of healthy American democracy. Respectful disagreement provides a preferable alternative to political violence. But it also serves as a catalyst for fostering relationships, overcoming hyperpolarization, and cultivating the best ideas for solving everyday problems. And it's a practice that requires our eternal dedication.

This is the charge of civility.

"The determined choice of trust over cynicism, of community over chaos. And this commitment, if we keep it, is a way to shared accomplishment," as President George W. Bush put it in his first inaugural address – which is worth your time if you haven't read it.

We need the people in our country who challenge us in various ways – socially, ideologically, intellectually – even when it's unpleasant. They better equip us to preserve social peace and find solutions to common issues by forcing us to consider, even empathize with, different perspectives.

And through respectful disagreement, those same people sharpen our own thinking or actions by forcing us to articulate our views and confront the potential shortcomings. This can also infuse us with a little humility.

Obtaining a better, nuanced understanding of myriad views also makes it harder to hyperbolize people's actual positions or demonize them. At the very least, such engagements provide an opportunity to improve our personal temperament by practicing patience and compassion.

We're not the first people to struggle with hyperpolarization. We're certainly not the first Americans to experience how it poisons society. And if our free Republic endures, we won't be the last.

Thankfully, as Alexandra O. Hudson, author of The Soul of Civility explains in her book, we're more than capable of overcoming this challenge. An ancient lineage of scholars spanning the globe have catalogued the practices that serve as antibodies to incivility. Their collective wisdom assesses that, "relationships, like civilization, are fragile" and that, "minimizing the threats to them by restraining selfishness, and considering how our presentation and conduct affect others, buttresses both friendship and community."

Practicing healthy disagreement – where we passionately argue ideas or beliefs without demonizing people or groups – qualifies.

It's fantastic news that Republican Governor of Utah Spencer Cox, the outgoing chair of the National Governor's Association, is evolving his yearlong Disagree Better Initiative into a new nonprofit. Through this project, he has rallied leaders nationwide on promoting the absolute necessity of Americans engaging in healthier debate. Otherwise, as he told us on The Stratgerist podcast, "we're screwed" as a nation.

Disagree Better convened events across the country and amassed various resources and research on how people can develop and practice this skill.

It also recruited governors – Democrats and Republicans – to publicly showcase respectful engagement through a blitz of short, social media videos. Each vignette emphasizes that disagreement is "OK" and even "crucial" for American democracy. And as Cox explains, "conflict isn't bad, it's the way we disagree that matters."

In one, Democratic Governor of Maryland Wes Moore and Cox acknowledge their different political positions and upbringings, but share a fist bump over being proud Americans who love college basketball and sport "stylish haircuts."

Another features Wyoming Governor Mark Gordon, a Republican, and New Mexico Governor Michelle Lujan Grisham, a Democrat, pointing to respectful disagreement as one of America's most time-honored traditions – along with rejecting the metric system (amen!).

These simple acts of civility constitute serious courage in a climate where bashing political opponents is normal and leaders fear threats of violence for deviating from party orthodoxy.

These videos also made a real impact on Americans. A Stanford University study found that participants exposed to the Disagree Better ads showed decreased "partisan animosity" and increased "conversational receptiveness and support for bipartisanship."

The research further revealed incentives for political leaders and candidates to model civility. It found that voters – primary, general, even the most hardcore partisans – showed increased likability towards the participating

governors after watching the ads.

"It's enough of an effect size to where if you were in the context of a campaign, you might consider doing disagree better to advance your candidacy," Stanford University Professor Rob Willer, the study leader, noted.

Besides, as James Madison argued in Federalist 10, ending disagreement would be impossible without removing liberty or imposing conformity – which he likened to eliminating air because it feeds destructive fires. So, the preservation of our very freedom is also tied to disagreeing better.

Navigating our differences requires something that doesn't devolve into violence or contempt for fellow citizens – both of which corrode national cohesion. We call that "thing" by different names: pluralism, civility, disagreeing better. But they all get at the idea captured by our national motto of e pluribus unum, "out of many one."

Practicing these things could be as simple as listening patiently to another perspective. Or, instead of trying to win an argument, demonstrate curiosity about the other side's position. Above all, critique ideas, not people. And it's likely we'll find compromise or common ground in some areas as we continue to disagree strongly in others (which is perfectly OK, even healthy).

"Americans are generous and strong and decent, not because we believe in ourselves, but because we hold beliefs beyond ourselves," President Bush once observed.

We have a duty as citizens to rise above our selfishness; exercise civility; and live the values of freedom, justice, opportunity, and compassion that make our country great.

And we're capable of doing so.

A Republican and a Democrat make the case for civility in politics

Cathy Wurzer and Heidi Raschke, Minnesota Public Radio, April 8, 2024

Given the polarization of the American electorate, one might wonder if bipartisan civil discourse is still possible.

Former North Dakota U.S. Sen. Heidi Heitkamp, a Democrat, and former North Dakota Gov. Ed Schafer, a Republican, have been in the political trenches for years. And they say not only is that kind of old-style, decent conversation possible, it's necessary.

The two recently hosted a free talk at Concordia College in Moorhead to encourage people to break out of a cycle of cultural divisions, public outrage and mistrust. They talked with MPR News host Cathy Wurzer as part of our Talking Sense project, which helps Minnesotans have better political conversations.

What made you decide to have this conversation?

Schafer: There's so much political rancor today. When this opportunity came up, it made a lot of sense since Sen. Heitkamp, then Attorney General Heitcamp, and I worked together in the Capitol for the people of North Dakota and focused on getting something done for the people.

Heitkamp: Well, let me tell you what I'm seeing, because I spend a lot of time with students. I'm currently the director of the Institute of Politics in Chicago. And what I hear from students is they don't want to be involved in politics.

They think it's a mean business, they think you have to hate the person on the other side. And my concern is they've not experienced the kind of relationship that Gov. Schafer and I had when we were both in state government. And I'm not saying it was always "Kumbaya," but we figured out how to get along and actually have fun on many occasions.

I'm hoping we can model that and tell people: You don't have to buy into the rancor, you can conduct yourself differently. And that means that you can run for office, you can engage in public service.

Do you find lawmakers are whiplashed by voters because folks want their lawmakers to work together, but a majority also say they're tired of their leaders compromising their values and ideals? They want leaders who will stand up to the other side. What's behind that apparent contradiction?

Heitkamp: I think you're always going to have the 20 to 30 percent that are the loudest, and they get the most airtime. Then the people in the middle say, "just get your job done." I think that we're just listening to people who see the opposition as the enemy, and not as an opponent that needs to be listened to.

How do you suggest folks coming up — younger lawmakers and leaders — start to treat each other with respect and decency?

Schafer: I think that the difficult thing is to separate that public policy discussion from the political discussions. If you focus on the public policy, it's good. If you want to develop something that's best for the people, you have to understand the humaneness of all this.

It's just not someone that you're fighting with over politics — there's a real person there. We need to get out of our cubicles, get off of social media. Community is built with a handshake and a hug, and a slap on the back.

We have to bring people together face to face, which then allows you to understand you're both human beings, you're both caring, you both arrive at your conclusions in a good way. And they might be different. But that doesn't mean they're wrong.

Heitkamp: The advice that I give people when they say, "so and so is mad at me," or, "this person is my political opponent," and they go, "what should I do?" I say, go to some event that they're at and stand next to them. Because it's really hard to be that mad at somebody who is right there.

The other advice I would give to young people is: It doesn't have to be that way. Don't get caught up in other people's ideas of how you should conduct your business. Live your values, and then even if it doesn't work out, if you don't get reelected, you hold your head up high and you figure out another way to be of service.

You two are modeling good statesmanship. Who else do you see on the national scene modeling good behavior?

Schafer: There are many, many people out there who are models of good public servants. The problem is we don't

see them. The media focuses on the bad folks and the rancor and the angst.

Heitkamp: There are people like Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, who was behind every major piece of legislation that passed, whether it was CHIPS, whether it was the Inflation Reduction Act. She frustrated a lot of more progressive Democrats, but yet she was in the arena, working to get things done. I don't know that the infrastructure bill would have happened without her.

On the other side, there's a guy named Sen. Todd Young. To Ed's point, you've not heard of him. And probably the best example I can give people is Sen. Patty Murray, from Washington. And Sen. Susan Collins literally led the appropriations committee and got almost unanimous support for the 12 funding bills, but that didn't get focused on.

All of the rancor gets focused on. There are people who are doing the work. There are unsung heroes, and I have to say, I would throw Sen. Amy Klobuchar into that mix.

We've been focusing on our elected leaders, but what do you hope everyday folks take with them into their lives after this conversation?

Heitkamp: You love the people in your life, the people who are in your family. Don't let a political belief, for voting for one side or the other, don't let them separate you. And talk less, listen more. That's always a good piece of advice. My dad used to say, "God gave you one mouth and two ears" and that "you should use them proportionally."

Schafer: We take this stuff much too seriously. You got to have this belief that we have a great system, that it's going to work out, that we're resilient, that we can have hope out there, that things move forward.

You know, that this is a discussion to have, there's differences of opinion. But you know, it's not the most important thing in the history of the world. Focus on your family and your care and your love for each other and have civil good conversations.

What it's like to teach civics amid political polarization, intense scrutiny

Jennifer Palmer, Oklahoma Watch, May 4, 2023

Chatter filled Beatrice Mitchell's 8th grade social studies class on a recent afternoon. "Two more minutes before we start presenting," Mitchell announced.

At each table, students took a quick vote to decide who would represent them. A girl with long red and black braids was up first. Zaniyah Williams read her group's answer about Nat Turner, who in 1831 led the only effective slave rebellion in U.S. history.

"It says he's a preacher, but he's going around killing people. It doesn't sit right," she said.

Mitchell asked her to elaborate. How does that make you feel? Was he justified?

Another student took a turn. "I'm in the middle," he said. "Yes, he killed a lot of people. But slave masters also killed people and made people suffer."

The class at F.D. Moon Middle School in Oklahoma City is part of a pilot for a social studies curriculum built on encouraging students to engage in civil discourse and celebrate American ideals while also examining darker chapters of history.

Many of those weighty topics are underscored by race. Slavery. The Holocaust. The Tulsa Race Massacre.

Overshadowing that teaching today is extreme political polarization and an intense scrutiny of teachers. Oklahoma's one of at least 36 states that prohibits certain classroom discussions on race or gender, including what are considered "divisive concepts."

Oklahoma's law, House Bill 1775, passed in 2021, comes with stiff penalties. The state could downgrade school districts' accreditation and strip educators of their teaching credentials. It's part of a national effort by some conservative activists to prevent schools from teaching what's considered "critical race theory," an academic framework that examines how policies and laws uphold systemic racism.

But at the same time, there's an urgent push for more and better civics education. Many adults lack foundational knowledge in American history and government and aren't civically engaged.

The program Mitchell's class is piloting aims to be a solution. It was created by iCivics, an organization founded by retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, who was alarmed by Americans' lack of understanding in how the country's constitutional democracy is supposed to work.

Oklahoma Watch
No Favorites No Falsehoods No Fear

iCivics started by creating digital games with themes like constitutional rights and the branches of government that are used by millions of students each year.

The organization developed its U.S. History core curriculum based on the Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy, a joint project with iCivics, Harvard, Tufts and Arizona State universities.

Oklahoma City Public Schools is one of three districts piloting the curriculum; the others are in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Jefferson County, Colorado.

Mitchell, who's been teaching 13 years, is a big fan.

Students are retaining the material and taking ownership of their learning, she said.

"Up until this point (in their schooling), they're being told what to think, what to do," Mitchell said. "It blows their mind when I say 'what do you think ?'"

Mitchell said she used to imitate voices of historical characters like George Washington to keep her 13 and 14 year old students engaged. This content is so rich, she hasn't had to do that this year. "It's not the bland history most are used to," she said.

Though it's only the first year, there are signs the pilot is working. All of Mitchell's 8th grade students passed the U.S. naturalization test, a new graduation requirement starting this school year.

Across the district, 68% of 8th graders passed (students can take the quiz each year starting in 8th grade.)

And a recent survey found just 1 in 3 adults can pass the exam, even though 40 percent said U.S. history was their favorite subject in school. Oklahoma's passing rate was even lower at 1 in 4 adults.

A majority of adults across the political spectrum agree students need a more robust social studies education. Scores released Wednesday show U.S. 8th graders' knowledge of history and civics dropped significantly between 2018 and 2022, according to the Nation's Report Card.

But what gets taught, and how, and which texts are used, continues to be a significant source of disagreement and

polarization.

iCivics has not avoided that controversy. While the organization is committed to nonpartisanship, it does uphold moral imperatives like racial justice, its director, Louise Dubé, said in an interview.

And its mission to provide equitable access to civics education has, at times, drawn criticism from conservatives. Equity is the E in DEI, another target of politicians who say education has gone too "woke."

The Oklahoma Board of Education last week requested a special report of all school districts regarding spending on diversity, equity and inclusion programs at the request of State Superintendent Ryan Walters. Walters, a former history teacher, claimed such programs are "Marxist at its core."

It's unknown whether this program would fall under DEI spending.

The goal of iCivics is to ensure every student has access to high-quality history and civics education by training teachers to feel confident using inquiry-based learning, which is essentially guiding students to use critical thinking by asking the right questions.

"We're not making a curriculum or a program for kids in red areas or blue areas or purple areas. We're making curriculum and designing programs for all kids in America, no matter where they are," said Emma Humphries, Chief Education Officer at iCivics.

Of the three states where iCivics is piloting its curriculum, Oklahoma is the only one with a so-called anti-critical race theory law. Humphries, though, said that wasn't an issue. "I just don't think there was anything in there that was problematic or ran counter to the law," she said.

The curriculum was customized to align with Oklahoma's standards, but no changes were needed based on the law, which specifically protects teachers' ability to teach concepts laid out in the state standards.

The law prohibits teaching eight concepts, including that one race is superior to another, that someone is inherently racist because of their race, or that someone should feel discomfort or guilt because of their race or sex.

That doesn't mean teachers aren't afraid of violating the law, intentionally or unintentionally, or being accused of doing so. Many people misinterpret the law to mean students can't feel uncomfortable at all.

"I would assume legislators know that we can't fully control how any one person's going to feel in a given moment. But what we can control is what we present and the primary sources we use and the discussion questions we ask," Humphries said.

Reading the language of the bill convinced Dave Corcoran, an assistant professor of history and coordinator of social studies education at Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, it was written by people who never spent time in classrooms.

"People don't understand that education is a really dynamic process and there's lots of emotions that will circulate for any given topic," said Corcoran, who has taught in middle and high schools and mentors student teachers and observes them in the classroom.

House Bill 1775, he said, has had little to no effect on how educators are prepared, aside from causing fear.

But he's also seeing increasing interest in teaching social studies, especially among women. Some of them are offended they didn't receive a robust civics education and want to do better.

"The responsibility of social studies teachers is citizenship education, right? It's about developing students that are engaged in communities. Voter participation is just one indication of that, but it is pathetic here," Corcoran said.

Civics education necessary for a brighter future

Joe Dorman, Oklahoma Institute for Child Advocacy

Our public schools provide an array of opportunities for students to become good citizens, from student government to civics education. In fact, America recently celebrated "Civics Education Week," noting the importance of the subject for both students and society.

Student government teaches public service. Good government requires young people to become active voters once they reach the age of 18 and beyond. That understanding led OICA to offer a program called Kid Governor® to elementary schools.

Kid Governor® provides curriculum to 5th grade classroom teachers developed with lessons about state government, voting, and elections. OICA additionally created an educational comic book showing how the process works in our State Capitol and ends with games to teach about definitions tied in with government lessons. All of this is free for schools and covered by the funds we raise.

In Kid Governor®, participating classrooms hold elections among the students, naming winners who become nominees. In the state race, the nominees submit two-minute videos outlining positive ideas they would like to see become law. A committee selects the top seven finalists, and their videos are sent to the classrooms for the students to watch, along with a ballot like ones used in Oklahoma state elections. The student receiving the most votes is elected Oklahoma's Kid Governor®. This teaches the importance of civic engagement.

In 2022, Mila O'Brien of Enid was selected to be the state's Kid Governor®; she has done a phenomenal job promoting youth mental health issues statewide, speaking to civic organizations and classrooms, and lawmakers like Rep. Jeff Boatman, R-Tulsa, who authored Maria's Law to enhance youth mental health.

We started with great interest for this school year. More than two dozen classrooms enrolled early in Kid Governor®; but by the time the program was to begin in October, each classroom had backed out. The reasons were disheartening, but unfortunately valid, and broke along three issues:

- Classroom overcrowding was the most frequent response. One teacher explained to us she had 52 fifth-graders due to another teacher leaving with no available replacement.

- Teachers reported the need to focus on the lessons in which fifth-graders would be tested by the state, and there was no time for additional items such as our specialized civics curriculum.

- Finally, many teachers told us they were afraid of retribution should they implement anything that might be viewed by some as "indoctrination" of students.

We explained that the state Department of Education had approved the lessons, and that Gov. Kevin Stitt and former Govs. Mary Fallin, Brad Henry, Frank Keating, David Walters, and George Nigh all endorsed the program. Even so, that assurance did not ease teachers' concerns.

There are fixes for overcrowded classrooms through incentives to enter the field of education and overcoming learning loss through additional tutoring, but resolving the anxiety of educators is tougher. Elected officials need to consider the plight of what teachers, parents and students alike are facing, and have rational, civil conversations about solutions, followed by implementation.

We are not giving up easily. Mila will serve an additional year as Kid Governor® while the program adapts. OICA plans to partner with another program to hold the lessons and election as an extracurricular activity in the Fall. Not an ideal situation, but still providing lessons for many students.

Please help us encourage young Oklahomans to learn more about civics education, and if you know a 5th grader who would be interested, reach out to our office at https://www.oica.org so we can connect them with a local Kid Governor® program. Please also contact Oklahoma's policymakers and express your desire to seek solutions to these challenges.

Core lessons of good citizenship sorely needed by all Americans

Margot Habiby, The Oklahoman, November 26, 2024

Strengthening our democracy starts with teaching children about our values and electoral process from their earliest years.

One of the best ways American schools have done this for generations is through student government. When children have the opportunity to run or vote for student council, they learn how elections and campaigns work, how to wade through election materials with a discerning eye, and about the temptation to turn races into popularity contests. Teachers also can use voting as a hook to teach about American government, the Constitution, current events, polling and disagreeing with civility.

These are the core lessons of good citizenship sorely needed by all Americans, but we're falling short. Civics education is in crisis, with eighth-graders' knowledge and skills in democratic citizenship, government, and American constitutional democracy falling for the first time ever in 2022 data from the Nation's Report Card.

Students need more knowledge about American democracy, so let's lean into one of the best real-world primers we have for participatory democracy: student government.

A fifth-grader I know spent the summer excitedly planning a run for student council at his public elementary school in Texas. He and a group of friends planned to run as a ticket and worked on campaign materials and slogans. But months into the school year, the school administration first canceled the election and then brought it back after parent complaints. But there were caveats: Campaigning was forbidden. Candidates could make one poster each and deliver one speech, which they'd ideally work on at home. And candidates couldn't form tickets.

One child was disqualified for doing what he thought you did in elections — he texted his friends, told them he was running, and urged them to vote for him, their friend. Another parent told her child candidate to avoid talking to "anybody about anything until the thing is over because I don't want him to get kicked out of the election."

The administration may very well have had good reasons for its decisions — like overworked teachers and an election process that has gone wrong in the past. But the school administration is missing an amazing opportunity for kids to learn by doing.

Instead of canceling — and then reinstating — a much reduced election with rules so strict parents were telling their kids not to speak to one another, the school could have used student government to provide an excellent opportunity to model why democracy is important and get kids excited about voting. That's what our country needs right now.

It's worth noting that many of the students at this school are immigrants or the children of immigrants, among the first in their families to be exposed to American-style democracy. School is the perfect place for young Americans to learn to become engaged citizens.

Of course, this is true of American-born children as well. It rapidly became clear that all the kids at this school needed basic lessons about voting and voting rights, about campaigns and integrity. One child tried to buy votes because he was never taught that he shouldn't. (He was disqualified — briefly — until someone explained.) Another didn't realize candidates could vote for themselves.

If we want all our children to grow up to be good citizens, we need to explicitly show them what that looks like and requires from each of us.

The Institute for Citizens & Scholars, formerly the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, released a survey in September showing that Americans between 18 and 34 lack basic civics knowledge, and just 4% were able to correctly answer four standard civics questions. Two were on the constitutional design of U.S. government institutions, one was on the Bill of Rights, and one was on current events/party control of the Legislature.

There's no doubt that democracy can be messy, but teaching our kids about democracy is a sacred trust. If we ever want Americans to come together again with shared democratic values, we must start by bringing that to life in our children's classrooms.

Margot Habiby is deputy director of communications at the George W. Bush Institute.

Civic readiness insights

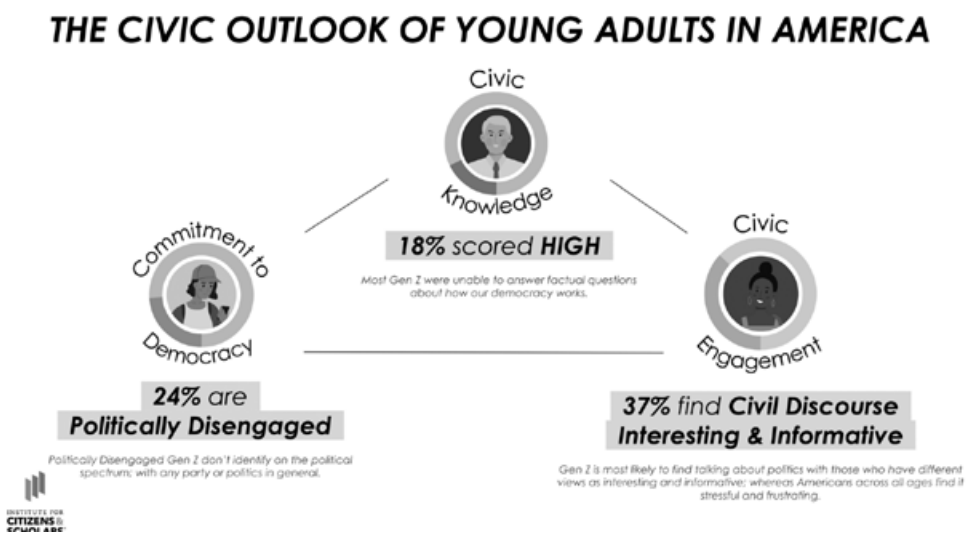
Institute for Citizens & Scholars

The Civic Outlook of Young Adults in America is a first-of-its-kind national survey of 18–24-year-old Americans that sheds light on their civic knowledge, engagement, and commitment to democracy. Part of our multi-year research initiative to measure holistic youth civic preparedness in America, Citizens & Scholars commissioned Citizen Data to conduct a poll that surveyed 4,008 young adults across the country.

Civic Readiness Insights

The research reveals a strong correlation between increased civic knowledge and engagement in our democracy:

- 66% of those who score high on civic knowledge intend to vote in the next general election versus only 44% of those who score low on civic knowledge.
- 51% of those who score high on civic knowledge state that their vote matters versus only 47% of those who score low on civic knowledge.
- 80% of those who score high on civic knowledge plan to engage in at least one civic activity in 2024 versus only 64% of those who score low on civic knowledge.
- 62% of those who score high on civic knowledge reject violence that suppresses opposition versus only 49% of those who score low on civic knowledge.

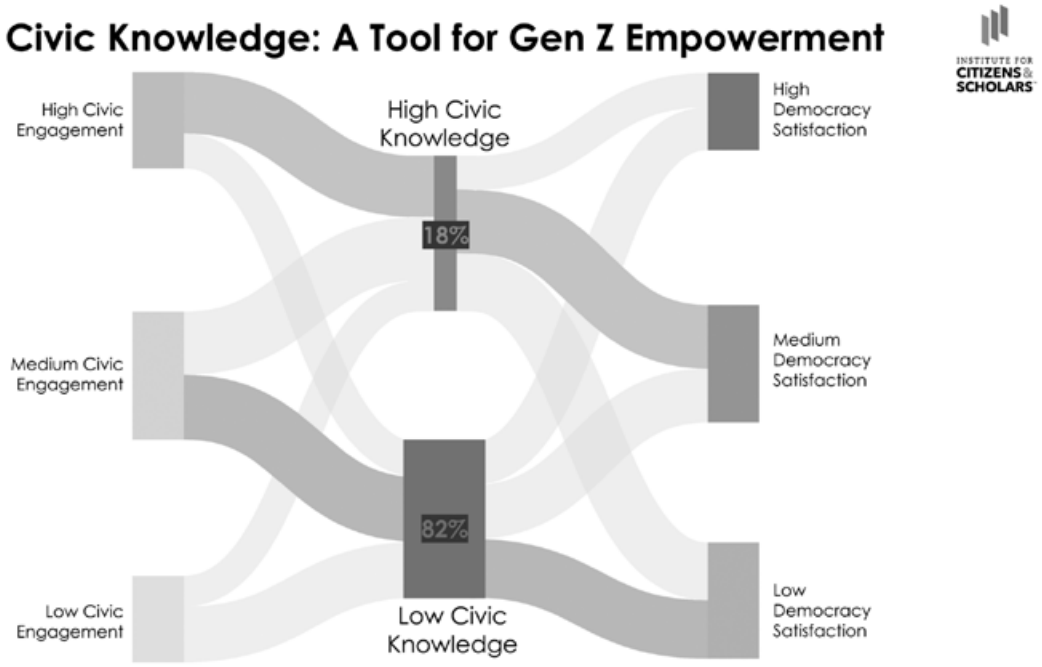


On Civic Knowledge:

- High scoring respondents indicated less pride in an American identity than low scorers.
- High scoring respondents were more likely to indicate that democracy is defined by traditional components of democracy, such as elections, and rule by/of/for the people than low scorers who were more likely to indicate equality, justice, and fairness.
- High scoring respondents were more likely to indicate that engagement with those they disagree with is stressful and frustrating than low scorers.
- Low scorers were more likely to indicate engagement with those they disagree with is interesting and informative.
- High scoring respondents were substantially more likely to indicate an intention to vote in both primary and general elections in 2024 than low scorers.
- High scoring respondents were more likely to indicate that a lack of time prevents their further engagement. Low-scoring respondents were more likely to indicate that they don't feel informed enough to engage.

On Civic Engagement:

- Respondents engaging in zero civic activities are more likely to be open to violence.
- Higher civic engagement levels translate into more trust across the board, though the distribution was the same comparing "some" and "no" levels of civic engagement.
- Those reporting no civic engagement activities are less likely to have clearly formed definitions for democracy across the board (meaning they checked multiple different response options), but have a greater likelihood of prioritizing liberty.
- Those who are more engaged are more likely to place elections relatively higher in their definitions of democracy than those with no civic engagement activities.
- Those engaging in no civic activities are more likely to view politics as boring/ pointless or unsure than those reporting some civic engagement.



- Respondents reporting no civic engagement reported more community engagement. This is why there is no correlation between civic engagement (perhaps perceived as being more political in nature) and community engagement.

On Civic Commitment:

- Lower democracy satisfaction is coupled with lower trust in other generations, while the trustworthiness of institutions is the same for any satisfaction level.
- Lower satisfaction levels are coupled with lower American pride.
- Across all democracy satisfaction levels, the respondents' definitions of democracy: equality, justice, and fairness; are largely the same.
- Respondents with high satisfaction are more likely to find conversations with those they disagree with more interesting/informative; while those with low satisfaction find it more stressful/frustrating.
- Less satisfied respondents report a higher likelihood of voting than those with higher satisfaction. Those with higher satisfaction report more plans to engage in non-voting political activities than those who are less satisfied.
- Less satisfied respondents report they don't participate in politics because people don't listen to each other. Those with high satisfaction say they don't feel informed enough and don't have enough time to participate.

Oklahoma's election laws inhibit voter participation, create more extreme candidates, experts say

Emma Murphy, Oklahoma Voice, August 30, 2024

Oklahoma's voting system is leading to low turnout rates, the election of more extreme candidates and disenfranchisement of voters who are excluded from participating in primary elections, experts said.

That's prompting conversations about whether reforms are needed to increase voter participation rates and how the state can ensure hundreds of thousands of independent voters have a voice at the ballot box at a time when most outcomes are determined months ahead of November's general election.

In 2022, only seven of the 168 offices filed with the Oklahoma State Election Board were decided during the general election. The other 161 races were decided in primaries, runoffs or were noncompetitive.

In Oklahoma House District 20's Republican runoff on Tuesday, Jonathan Wilk defeated Mike Whaley with 50.03% of the vote. The race was decided by two votes, according to the unofficial results from the State Election Board, and Wilks will face Democrat Mitchell Jacob in the Nov. 5 general election.

There are 38,918 constituents in this district, but with only 3,334 votes cast in this Republican runoff election, only 8.57% of the district cast a vote.

Oklahoma ranks 50th in voter turnout during the last presidential election in November 2020, according to a report from the New Hampshire Secretary of State's office. Only Texas had a lower turnout.

Because of the state's closed primaries and low voter turnout, Seth McKee, political science professor at Oklahoma State University, said many elections are decided before the general election. He said this means it's easier for more extreme candidates to prevail in these elections where turnout "drops off a cliff" compared with general elections.

"You can get extremists who really play to the Republican base because it's all about winning that primary," he said. "And when you think about primary participation, that's really low too. And so a lot of those people might be somewhat more ideological."

Pat McFerron, a political consultant with CMA Strategies, said turnout for November elections is so low because there aren't as many competitive elections in Oklahoma by that time.

"There's not going to be a great variation, quite frankly, between the different Republican candidates running," he said. "You're going to get a chocolate chip cookie, just one might have nuts, and the other one not. So what that does to the campaign is you have to differentiate yourself, and you do that through negative campaigning."

McFerron said low voter turnout is part of a cycle that needs to be broken in Oklahoma.

He described the state's current system as "market share politics" where a candidate doesn't need to appeal to the majority of voters, but just needs to motivate enough people to show up to the polls.

"I think that we have to do something to have every elected official stand before every voter at some point. That's the only way we can break this cycle," he said. "Right now there's no differentiation between the candidates that are being chosen in the primary. So that leads to negative campaigning, which discourages people from voting, which leads to fewer people turning out, which leads to even more strident, negative campaigning, which leads to fewer people voting."

Alicia Andrews, chair of the Oklahoma Democratic Party, said the one-party control of the state Legislature makes registered voters from all political parties think their vote doesn't matter.

"They (Republicans) feel like it's a foregone conclusion, and that they don't need to vote because it's going to be a Republican anyway. And so it's working on both sides," Andrews said. "It's making Democrats feel like it doesn't matter because there aren't Democrats, in their opinion, getting elected, and Republicans feel like it doesn't matter because they're in a supermajority and they're just gonna stay in the supermajority."

Andrews said Democrats need to continue to challenge Republicans in every election to give voters a choice and ensure that candidates are campaigning and informing voters of their platform. Andrews said she was on a ballot Tuesday, simply to force her opponent to campaign and force her to earn the seat.

She said that she hopes for higher turnout in November with Vice President Kamala Harris facing former President Donald Trump to become the next United States president.

"I think that more people in Oklahoma will turn out because there's a lot more excitement," Andrews said. "And it's this kind of thing that gets people. … Something has to speak to them. And I think with Vice President Harris entering into the race, it changes what the race was."

Calls for election reforms

Groups advocating for open primaries in Oklahoma say that the state's current system prevents thousands of Oklahomans from participating in elections.

Oklahoma United, founded in 2021, is a nonpartisan group proposing a change from the state's current partially closed primaries to an open primary system.

In Oklahoma, voters can only vote in the primary for the party they are registered with. The Republican, Libertarian and Democratic parties can allow independents to vote in their primaries, but only the Democratic Party allows it.

According to the Oklahoma State Election Board, there are over 358,000 active voters registered as independents in the state.

Margaret Kobos, founder and CEO of Oklahoma United, said the group is working to get their proposed plan on the ballot in November 2026 because they don't want to wait on the Legislature.

Under the group's proposal, all Oklahoma voters would be eligible to participate in one primary with all candidates being on the same ballot with their party affiliation identified.

"Our movement really is all about giving people choices, giving all the voters all the choices, seeing all the candidates in front of them," Kobos said. "So instead of a very small fraction who might happen to turn out in a closed primary, we feel like it benefits the parties, it benefits candidates. It provides a path for new candidates and people who might have space in their lives to volunteer for the good of all of us."

Amber England, a spokesperson for a state question seeking to raise the minimum wage, said reform needs to go beyond open primaries and include removing restrictions on early voting, mail in voting and primaries.

Some of these restrictions are short window for early voting, lack of same day voter registration and a requirement to produce identification in order to vote.

"Oklahomans don't believe that the problems that they face every day are getting solved by politicians, and so they don't think their vote matters," she said. "And so they just don't vote because they're disengaged, and that is problematic because the legislature focuses on culture war issues and scoring political points instead of actually addressing real problems."

England said that is why Oklahomans are able to act on state questions for "real" issues the Legislature doesn't focus on.

"You can see sometimes that voters will pass policies that the Legislature just won't touch, and it's because Oklahomans are reasonable, and our Legislature really isn't a reflection of how Oklahomans view what problems need to be solved," she said.

Notes

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At OU, Paul Ryan laments current political landscape, calls for more civility

American Idea Foundation Staff, NonDoc, April 1, 2024

This week, American Idea Foundation President Paul Ryan delivered the keynote address at the University of Oklahoma's Presidential Speakers Series Spring 2024 event. Talking with over 700 Oklahoma residents and supporters of the University, former Speaker Ryan discussed the challenges facing younger Americans, how they can rise to meet these challenges, and how we can preserve America's timeless principles for generations to come.

Excerpts from press coverage of Speaker Ryan's time in Norman, Oklahoma follow.

Norman Transcript: Ryan laments current political landscape, asks for more civility

Former Speaker of the House and 2012 Vice President Nominee Paul Ryan told Norman residents that the U.S. needs more civility in politics as the keynote speaker for the University of Oklahoma's Presidential Speakers Series.

Ryan told The Transcript that Oklahoma holds a special place in his heart since he married his wife, Janna, who is from Madill.

"I come to Oklahoma a lot because my wife is from Madill and their family ranch is there. I come to Oklahoma every year to hunt and fish in Madill, and I've been going to OU games for the last 20 years," Ryan said….

He said his biggest concern for young people is that they are witnessing an unprecedented tone as far as political dialogue.

"I think it's really important that young people, particularly college students, get a sense that politics and political discussion is not just about anger and personality destruction," Ryan said. "There are bigger issues to talk about, and there are civil discussions to be had….

"I think younger Americans get fed this content 24/7 via social media algorithms that often play on the emotions of anger and fear, and they push people further into illogical corners that dumbs down policy and ratchets up partisanship," Ryan said.

Journal Record: Ryan: Future depends on Congress

If you're looking for good news or encouragement, don't go to Paul Ryan, the former speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives and former running mate of presidential candidate Mitt Romney.

While affable and charismatic on the outside, the Republican is a realist and a deficit hawk on the inside. He paints a dire picture of America's future, and he gives it to you right between the eyes.

The future of Social Security and Medicare, the national debt and the crisis on the border, Ryan has been in the trenches over all those issues. And even though he left Congress in 2015, he says the problems and the dysfunction are the same as they were the day he stepped down. The only thing that's changed is that the cans have been kicked further down the road.

Ryan was in Norman last week as a guest presenter for the University of Oklahoma's State of American Politics Presidential Speakers Series.

In an interview with The Journal Record, Ryan said everyone in Congress knows how to solve the border crisis because they've all studied it. But the political agendas are standing in the way, just as they were in the 20 years he served as a House member from Wisconsin.

Alongside lecturing at the Spring 2024 Presidential Speaker's Series, Ryan held a public forum in the Price College of Business, where he discussed discouragement for young voters, populism's role in the modern Republican party and the role of college students in the future of democracy.

According to Ryan, young voters are dissuaded from politics due to a lack of representation in both political parties, citing the ages of presidential candidates President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump.

"Younger voters are going to be drawn more towards younger people," Ryan said. "Both parties have a problem with both of our tops of the ticket, Joe Biden and Donald Trump are basically 80 or pushing 80. Right now, younger people are seeing what's out there and are looking for something else."

Ryan said college students are responsible for decreasing political polarization. He added students should continue community involvement following college and seek diversity.

"It's your job to try and take the sting out of the coarseness of our political dialogue and bring civility back in public conversations and the way you do that is you drop the phone and go and get yourself involved in civil society," Ryan said. "Get involved in something out of college, where you're spending time with people who don't look or

think like you or don't come from where you come from, and learn how other peoples' perspectives work."

Ryan said the modern Republican party utilizes populism dedicated to a single person, Trump. He added personality-based populism is not durable, citing Trump's potential to receive one more term.

"If your populism is untethered to any core set of ideas and principles, and in our current moment, tied to a person or a personality, that's not good populism – that's unhealthy populism," Ryan said. "It's not an ideology, it's not a philosophy, it's just a person and it's a very inconsistent person at that."

Ryan said the Republican party requires "soul-searching" following Trump's eventual departure from the public eye. Instead of Trump-related populism, Ryan believes Republicans will need to appeal to the majority of voters, fusing nationalists and traditional conservatives.

"Some kind of fusion of those policies and ideas hopefully will manifest itself into a coherent philosophy that is capable of speaking to the needs of the country and is capable of winning the hearts and the minds of a majority of the country," Ryan said. "But that's not going to happen until we're through this moment and this moment is built around the guy."

You can watch Ryan's full address at the University of Oklahoma here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-jzoH45cqE8g

Social media influencers may affect more than voter opinions

Francisco Tutella, Pennsylvania State University, December 1, 2023

If Thanksgiving dinner conversations have turned into heated political arguments over the past two decades, social media may be to blame. Popular social media figures — or influencers — who create or share distorted political messages may cause political parties to moderate their policies to win over independent voters in general elections but tend to polarize the rest of society, according to researchers who created a model to study how social media may affect election cycles.

The researchers reported their findings today (Dec. 1) in the journal Management Information Systems Quarterly.

"Social media has become entrenched in day-to-day events and especially in the last few election cycles. The discussion around social media has focused on its role in polarizing people," said study co-author Wael Jabr, assistant professor of supply chain and information systems at Penn State. "Are we sure that social media is indeed the culprit? Previous research shows that polarization has been on the increase for the last three or four decades, way before social media came into our lives. This became the driver to do a study on the impact of social media on the whole election cycle — on people, candidates and traditional media like newspapers and TV."

The researchers used a "Hotelling" model to study how social media influencers may affect political parties, citizens and traditional media outlets. Widely used in business and political science, the model provides a framework to simplify social interactions among multiple participants and better understand their decision-making.

"One way to study social media's effects on elections is to collect data and see what is happening, but as we studied and tried to understand the social media phenomenon, we realized that it's complex," Jabr said. "We decided, as a first step, to look at the phenomenon analytically through a model, which removes all the noise and lets us focus on a couple factors — in this case, social media influencers."

Imagine the model as a line with political party A on the extreme left and political party B on the extreme right, with the citizen, or median voter, somewhere in between, explained Jabr. Each party takes a position on a topic, like taxation or immigration, that stands in stark contrast to the other party's position. The voter may start closer on the line to party A, but with the right amount of effort, party B can persuade the voter to go the extra distance and support the party.

The research team used this base framework to model how political parties, median voters and traditional media outlets interact without social media. In this base scenario, political parties and media outlets have information that is not immediately available to citizens, but which citizens need to make decisions about whom to vote for in the general election. Then the research team added influencers, who also have access to this information, to the equation to study how social media could affect each group.

The researchers found that when social media influencers share distorted political messages, like misinformation and disinformation, to gain followers and increase their profits, political parties have to moderate their policy positions to attract median voters and win general elections. However, traditional media outlets' editorial positions become more extreme, and the opinions of citizens swayed by influencers grow more polarized.

"We found that the introduction of social media changes a party's policy positions in two ways: there is an ideology effect, and there is an election effect," Jabr said.

Each political party conforms to a specific ideology, such as supporting high or low tax rates for wealthy individuals. In American elections, the ideology effect plays a more prominent role in primary elections, where party policy positions tend to tilt toward the extremes, according to Jabr. But the median voter is best understood as a moderate independent, and independents make up roughly one-third of the American electorate. These voters can tip the general election toward one party or the other, which is where the election effect comes in to play. Parties have to moderate their policy positions — such as lowering their proposed tax rates for the highest income brackets — to persuade independent voters to support them and win general elections, Jabr said.

Social media influencers have a more extreme effect on the rest of society, according to the researchers. As more people turn to social media for their news, influencers and traditional media outlets begin competing for the same audiences. To stand out from the crowd and attract more followers, influencers distort their messaging. In response, the opinions of citizens who are swayed by the influencers become more polarized. Traditional media outlets continue reporting objective news, said Jabr, but their editorial positions — think of political pundits who offer opinions instead of objective analysis on trending news stories — become more extreme as well.

"On the one hand, enhanced communication technologies enable voters to be more informed of public policies, so policymakers need to take into account this effect and moderate their positions," he said. "On the other hand, technological advancements also make information distortion less costly for influencers, leading to a more polarized society."

The findings suggest that policymakers need to consider the effects of social media while putting in place mechanisms to prevent influencers from distorting information. Potential mechanisms may include working with social media platforms and using artificial intelligence tools to validate content and label misleading posts, Jabr said.

The researchers are currently working on extending their work to examine the role of social media platforms' filtering algorithms in the promotion and censorship of content and the algorithms' potential effects on elections.

Political rage on social media is making us cynical

Tevah Platt, Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan, March 11, 2024

Political anger and cynicism are rising in the United States and in many democracies worldwide, and both are associated with exposure to political attacks on social media, a new University of Michigan study shows.

Americans use social media to find information and news about politics, but much of the content they see in their feeds is hostile, uncivil and attacking, said lead author Ariel Hasell, assistant professor of communication and media and an affiliate of the Center for Political Studies at the U-M Institute for Social Research.

Hasell and colleagues investigated whether exposure to political attacks on social media is associated with political cynicism, and if so, whether emotions like anger and anxiety play a role in this process.

They found that people who were exposed to more political attacks on social media were more politically cynical, and that perceived exposure to these attacks was associated with more anger about the state of the U.S., which was subsequently related to greater levels of political cynicism.

Their results, based on a panel survey of 1,800 American adults fielded during the 2020 election, were recently published in the International Journal of Press/Politics.

"It's important to understand how feelings of cynicism emerge because we're seeing many democratic governments facing crises of legitimacy," Hasell said. "Our findings provide some of the first evidence of how exposure to political attacks on social media might relate to political cynicism in the context of a U.S. presidential election."

Cynicism in a democracy

Hasell and colleagues define political cynicism as an attitude that's rooted in distrust of political actors' motivations. It goes further than healthy skepticism, they say, because it involves wholesale rejection of people and processes in democracy, and an underlying belief that politicians are guided by corrupt, self-serving, personal interests, rather than service to the public good.

"Cynicism can be a rational response to actual corruption and breaches of trust by those in power," said co-author Audrey Halversen, doctoral student in the Department of Communication and Media. "But it is a matter of concern among scholars of democracy because of its potential to delegitimize democratic processes, reinforce negative attitudes, distort people's interpretations of political information, and cause some citizens to withdraw from politics."

Pew Research Center polls show the American public's confidence in government has reached its lowest point in decades, and perceptions that self-interest and corruption are guiding government action have bred cynicism across the political spectrum. The U-M study tested the theory that this increase in cynicism might be linked to political social media use.

Social media influence

Political content on social media is often toxic, and we can expect to see political hostility surge online this summer and fall as we approach the presidential election, Hasell said.

Prior research has shown that political attacks communicated by independent actors (rather than candidates) can be especially influential in shaping political beliefs. Social media algorithms reward and amplify attacks precisely because they're engaging. Studies show this makes outrage more potent and visible, giving users a warped view of what the public believes.

"If your main source of news is social media, you are more likely to perceive politics as hostile and angry," Hasell said. "And beyond the feelings that political attacks provoke, it matters how people perceive and read the temperature of 'public emotions' because this can impact assessments about the country's well-being and its ability to solve problems and accomplish goals."

The panel survey in the U-M study asked participants about their social media usage and whether they had been exposed to political attacks against Trump and Republicans, or against Biden and Democrats, on social media. It included a set of questions to measure political cynicism among respondents, and asked about their feelings about the state of the U.S. as a country.

Anger and anxiety

Public anger in American politics has reached a fevered pitch in the last decade, and data show it is rising among American voters heading into the first presidential election since the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol.

An 2019 NBC/Wall Street Journal poll found nearly 7 in 10 Americans reported being angry about the political establishment and a 2023 survey by the Public Religion Research Institute showed that about a quarter of Americans agree that "true American patriots may have to resort to violence in order to save our country." This is up from 15% in 2021.

Anxiety is another negative emotion, which can be elicited by uncertainty, risk aversion and threats, especially if they are vague, unknown or perceived to be beyond one's control, the researchers said. Political fearmongering and social media toxicity can drive anxiety during a presidential election by creating uncertainty about political outcomes

and by creating a generalized sense of political hostility that is beyond an individual's control.

"Negative emotions are not necessarily bad for democracy," Hasell said. "Emotions like anxiety and anger can drive people to the polls, motivate advocacy, and get people to seek and think more deeply about political information. But relentless negativity about the state of a country 'under threat' can also make people frustrated, disgruntled and disengaged. Anger can affect our ability to see things as they are, and make measured decisions that are important in a democracy."

A 'concerning' cycle

The study found evidence that exposure to political attacks on social media contributes to anxiety, anger and political cynicism, but that anger is the emotion that relates to cynicism.

"As more people turn to social media for news and information, it's likely that they'll be more repeatedly exposed to political attacks, which may further promote political cynicism," Hasell said. "This is concerning because cynicism can make it harder for people to make sense of political information. It can lead people down a road of apathy and disengagement, or toward fringe parties and antidemocratic forms of participation."

Can citizens who use social media do anything to break that pattern?

"An easy way to avoid getting angry and cynical is to be mindful about focusing on nonhostile, civil dialogue," Hasell said. "If you are seeing a lot of hostility in your social media, you can think about re-curating and unfollowing people who are fomenting this kind of hostility. We don't find that social media use in itself is making people angry and cynical, it has to do with how we decide to use it."

Brian Weeks of the U-M Department of Communication and Media and Center for Political Studies at the Institute for Social Research was also a co-author on the Michigan study.

Notes

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Social media seen as mostly good for democracy across many nations, but U.S. is a major outlier

Richard Wike, Laura Silver, Janell Fetterolf, Christine Huang, Sarah Austin, Laura Clancy and Sneha Gubbala, Pew Research Center, December 6, 2022

As people across the globe have increasingly turned to Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and other platforms to get their news and express their opinions, the sphere of social media has become a new public space for discussing – and often arguing bitterly – about political and social issues. And in the mind of many analysts, social media is one of the major reasons for the declining health of democracy in nations around the world.

However, as a new Pew Research Center survey of 19 advanced economies shows, ordinary citizens see social media as both a constructive and destructive component of political life, and overall most believe it has actually had a positive impact on democracy. Across the countries polled, a median of 57% say social media has been more of a good thing for their democracy, with 35% saying it has been a bad thing.

There are substantial cross-national differences on this question, however, and the United States is a clear outlier: Just 34% of U.S. adults think social media has been good for democracy, while 64% say it has had a bad impact. In fact, the U.S. is an outlier on a number of measures, with larger shares of Americans seeing social media as divisive.

Even in countries where assessments of social media's impact are largely positive, most believe it has had some pernicious effects – in particular, it has led to manipulation and division within societies. A median of 84% across the 19 countries surveyed believe access to the internet and social media have made people easier to manipulate with false information and rumors. A recent analysis of the same survey shows that a median of 70% across the 19 nations consider the spread of false information online to be a major threat, second only to climate change on a list of global threats.

Additionally, a median of 65% think it has made people more divided in their political opinions. More than four-in-ten say it has made people less civil in how they talk about politics (only about a quarter say it has made people more civil).

So given the online world's manipulation, divisiveness and lack of civility, what's to like? How can this acrimonious sea of false information be good for democracy? Part of the answer may be that it gives people a sense of empowerment at a time when few feel empowered. Majorities in nearly every country surveyed say their political system does not allow people like them to have an influence in politics. In nine nations, including the U.S., seven-in-ten or more express that view.

Online platforms may help people feel less powerless in a few ways. First, social media informs them. As a recent Pew Research Center report highlighted, majorities in these countries believe that staying informed about domestic and international events is part of being a good citizen, and it is clear that people believe the internet and social media make it easier to stay informed. Nearly three-quarters say the internet and social media have made people more informed about current events in their own country as well as in other countries. Young adults are especially likely to hold these views.

Also, most of those surveyed see social media as an effective tool for accomplishing political goals. Majorities in most countries say it is at least somewhat effective at raising public awareness, changing people's minds about issues, getting elected officials to pay attention to issues and influencing policy decisions.

For some, social media is also an outlet for expression. In South Korea, for example, roughly half of social media users say they sometimes or often post or share things online about political or social issues. However, in the other countries polled, posting about these issues is less common, and in 12 nations four-in-ten or more say they never post about political or social topics. These are among the major findings of a Pew Research Center survey, conducted from Feb. 14 to June 3, 2022, among 24,525 adults in 19 nations.

Americans most likely to say social media has been bad for democracy

Majorities in most of the nations surveyed believe social media has been a good thing for democracy in their country. Assessments are especially positive in Singapore, Malaysia, Poland, Sweden, Hungary and Israel, where 65% or more hold this view (for data on how international research organizations assess the quality of democracy in the countries surveyed, see Appendix A).

In contrast, Americans are the most negative about the impact of social media on democracy: 64% say it has been bad. Republicans and independents who lean toward the Republican Party (74%) are much more likely than Democrats and Democratic leaners (57%) to see the ill effects of social media on the political system.

Half or more also say social media has been bad for democracy in the Netherlands, France and Australia.

In addition to being the most negative about social media's influence on democracy, Americans are consistently among

the most negative in their assessments of specific ways social media has affected politics and society. For example, 79% in the U.S. believe access to the internet and social media has made people more divided in their political opinions, the highest percentage among the 19 countries polled.

Similarly, 69% of Americans say the internet and social media have made people less civil in how they talk about politics – again the highest share among the nations in the study.

To compare how publics evaluate the impact of the internet and social media on society, we created an index that combines responses to six questions regarding whether the internet makes people:

1. less informed about current events in their country,
2. more divided in their political opinions,
3. less accepting of people from different backgrounds,
4. easier to manipulate with false information and rumors,
5. less informed about current events in other countries, and
6. less civil in the way they talk about politics.

The negative positions on all of these questions were coded as 1 while positive or "no impact" responses were coded as 0. For each respondent, scores on the overall index can range from 0, indicating they see no negative effects of the internet and social media across these questions, to 6, meaning a negative answer to all six questions. See Appendix B for more information about how the index was created.

Looking at the data this way illustrates the degree to which Americans stand out for their negative take on social media's impact. The average score among U.S. respondents is 3.05, the highest – and therefore the most negative – in the survey. Dutch, Hungarian and Australian respondents are also more negative than others. In contrast, Malaysians, Israelis, Poles and Singaporeans offer less negative assessments.

The rapid growth of social media

Pew Research Center has been asking about social media usage for the past decade, and trend data from several nations polled over that time period highlights the extent to which these platforms have become pervasive in recent years. Growth has been especially dramatic in Japan, where just 30% used social media in 2012, compared with 75% today. Social media has also increased markedly in France, Poland, Spain, the U.S. and the United Kingdom. Even in Germany, which lags significantly behind these other nations in social media usage, there has been a notable increase since 2012.

In every nation surveyed, young people are more likely than others to use social media. However, the age gap has closed over the past decade. When looking again at data from seven nations polled in both 2012 and 2022, growth in usage has been especially steep among 30- to 49-year-olds and those ages 50 and older. For example, nearly all British 18- to 29-year-olds were already social media users in 2012, but there has been significant growth among the two older age groups during the past 10 years.

Young people more likely to see benefits of social media

Overall, young adults are more likely than older adults to use the internet, own a smartphone and use social media. For more information on age differences in technology use, as well as differences by education and income, see the detailed tables accompanying this report.

In addition to using social media more than their older counterparts, young adults often stand out in their views about the impact of social media.

Adults ages 18 to 29 are more likely than those 50 and older to say social media has been good for democracy in 12 out of 19 nations surveyed. For instance, while 87% of 18- to 29-year-old Poles believe social media has had a positive effect on politics, just 46% of those 50 and older agree.

Young adults are also often more likely to say the internet and social media has made people more informed about domestic and international events, and they are especially likely to say these technologies have made people more accepting of others from different backgrounds.

In many cases, young people are also especially likely to consider social media an effective tool in the political realm, particularly regarding its capacity to change people's minds on social issues and to raise awareness of those issues.

The big idea: should we keep politics out of social media?

Amy Fleming, The Guardian, January 23, 2024

It may be a long time since social media lost its innocence. But, two decades after Facebook was founded, it can feel as though sharing political views, expressing solidarity or posting cathartic outpourings on personal accounts is an increasingly high-stakes game. This has been thrown into sharp relief by the Israel-Gaza war, with people shedding jobs and friends after making statements online.

Gone is any illusion that one's followers form a neat echo chamber of like-minded humans. It may have felt like that back in 2015, when millions applied a rainbow wash over their profile pictures to support marriage equality, or in 2020, when a similar number Instagrammed a black square to show that black lives mattered. When it comes to issues surrounding the conflict in the Middle East, even within otherwise politically aligned groups, raw divisions have been exposed. They're stirred up further by algorithms, ignorance (few of us are subject experts), disinformation and minds well primed for the polarising effects of the internet.

So would we be better off keeping our views off the stage of social media altogether? James Dennis, who has studied political expression online for 15 years, is struck by an increasing reluctance to get involved due to "reputational concerns". Instead, people are becoming "what I describe as 'listeners', who use social media to consume political information but avoid forms of public political expression".

Could this herald a reversion to type? After all, these networks originally attracted mass membership as lighthearted, practical ways to connect with friends and family. But then again, so much has changed. "We've had social media in our lives for about 20 years," says Debbie Ball, data and society lecturer at the University of Westminster and King's College London, who researches how platforms are designed to be persuasive and influence user behaviour. "We're all … much more comfortable posting our views online." She acknowledges, however, that writing about political issues can sometimes lead to dark places, funnelling users into a "whole ecosystem of bad actors spreading disinformation and political campaigning". Most social media algorithms are programmed to optimise the spread of inflammatory content, "fuelling the maelstrom of online political debate and, despite what the dominant companies like Meta say, it's not to champion freedom of speech, it's all to encourage people to post more, create more content and to keep making money out of people's data".

In other words, posting about politics can draw disinformation into your feeds, as keywords are liable to be picked up by campaigning organisations and troll factories. You don't even have to say anything yourself. "It only takes someone to repost something to further drift into a disinformation environment and get embroiled in something more divisive," says Ball, whose own timeline has become studded with propaganda related to her posts. X, in particular, she points out, is now a "lax information environment with Elon Musk doing away with Twitter's previous ban on political advertising, as well as sacking much of the moderation team". All eyes are now on Threads, to see if its policy of deprioritising news does anything to slow the spread of conspiracy theories and the like.

Not that users are blind to the risks. When the Pew Research Center asked people across 19 countries about their attitudes towards social media in 2022, it found that a median of 84% believed "access to the internet and social media have made people easier to manipulate with false information and rumours". Some 70% thought the spread of false information online was "a major threat, second only to climate change". Even so, when others start posting on an issue, getting involved can be hard to resist. Analysis of data from Meta in 2015 found that people were more likely to alter their own profile pictures to support a cause if their friends did. This peer pressure was a greater factor than religion, politics or age.

Not everyone is susceptible. And, according to Dennis, rather than airing their views publicly, many people are now having discussions on private messaging apps – "namely WhatsApp, but also direct messaging on Snapchat and Instagram for younger audiences". Users view these channels as "safe spaces where they can have challenging conversations with close contacts, such as partners, family members, or friends". Recently, his research has focused particularly on young people, for whom "these spaces are incredibly helpful for testing out political ideas".

Sometimes, though, even refraining from public posting can be interpreted as a political act: either you don't care or worse, you're concealing or are in denial about your own prejudices. That stance has met with its own backlash: Ball says she has noticed people coming out recently to declare "It's OK not to post."

Ultimately, it's a personal choice. Some people feel strongly that social media is a means of raising awareness about neglected issues, or showing support to those facing injustice. Campaigns and hashtags have at times made a difference, and prompted political shifts in the real world. But in an age of insidious algorithms and ineffective moderation, getting political on platforms that care more about making money than driving change may have to come with a health warning.

How to overcome tribalism, the shouty minority and Facebook toxicity

Mark Brolin, POLITICO, November 7, 2021

Have modern politics become irredeemably tribal? In September, Thomas Friedman decried the "virus of tribalism" infecting the United States and other democracies. "Politics in the United States continues to feel increasingly tribal and divisive," noted CNN's Christiane Amanpour in 2018. If there's one thing pundits have agreed on over the last few years — particularly in the Trump era — it's that tribalism in politics is on the rise, and that's a problem.

Or maybe it's not that new — and the underlying problem lies inside us.

For my recent book, I spent months in conversation with a handful of thinkers who wrestle with the big questions driving populist politics today. One of them was Jonathan Haidt, whose 2013 book, Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion, astutely presaged the current conversation about tribal politics. He puts the blame not at the feet of Facebook or either party, but on humans' basic need to define teams and camps, and belong to one of them. Throughout the history of the world, elaborate Hero-versus-Villain narratives have regularly been spun to glorify one political camp and demonize another. Who's in charge never really matters.

Haidt, a social psychologist, suggested in his book — and still believes — this inclination might have an evolutionary background: Clans and villages that were bad at cooperating were often conquered by their less divided neighbors. This might have wired us to appreciate tribal kinship. It also may have wired us to prefer defending our reputations rather than defending the truth — another aspect of politics that infuriates journalists and pundits but appears to be built into the system. (Haidt reveals in his book that his eureka moment, in this respect, occurred when his wife asked why he had failed to do the dishes. Only afterwards did he grasp that his mind automatically invented an elaborate, and false, defense story that even he believed at first).

But he also thinks the problem has gotten far worse in the past decade, with social media creating a kind of outrage machine that feeds on, even amplifies these tendencies.

So the real challenge isn't how to get tribalism out of politics. It's how to design a system that pays heed to our inherent shortcomings. In a recent interview with Haidt, he zeroed in on two critical ingredients: political reform and social media reform. "The worst number of political parties to have in a country is one," he says. "But the second worst number is two."

Two political tribes, equally convinced they possess the moral high-ground, might seek to rule through open confrontation with the aim to subjugate. On the other hand, three political tribes or more can be more incentivized to seek alliances. But with the country's two-party system unlikely to go anywhere any time soon, Haidt suggests steps to rein in the power of the extremes on both sides.

One idea: requiring open primaries for all elections so people don't have to be a member of a certain party to vote. Another is detoxifying the public square through a serious social media overhaul, an idea gaining more currency after the revelations of Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen.

The following transcript of our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

In just about every way that counts, we are living during the most prosperous era ever. Yet, paradoxically, numerous politicians and voters are fighting tooth and nail while seemingly set on identifying mainly problems and differences. It is easy to see that, while the intellectual debate is so sensitive, it must be a very challenging climate not least for a social psychologist. Then again, from an analytical perspective, is it also an especially fascinating time?

Oh yes. This is the best time to be a social scientist since the 1960s or the 1930s. Those are the three great times of political, social and moral upheaval. There are a number of cycles in history. Cultures go up such as for example ancient Greece or during the days of Ibn Khaldun in the 14th century. Then follows a period of decay and dissolution before going up again. I think Peter Turchin correctly predicted, back in 2010, that we were due for a cycle change around 2020. He got that exactly right. So this is a time of enormous change which necessarily feels like decay and destruction. If history is a guide, this period will last several more years. We could experience a substantial rise in violence. But in five or 10 years, probably, things will begin to get better and more stable. We will have a new equilibrium with a variety of new society settings.

I also find it intriguing that when people have been tribal and angry before, during say the past five decades, there has usually been a clear for-or-against issue. Such as the Vietnam war, the battle for civil rights, the battle for or against Reaganesque deregulation or for or against the Iraq War. Today, however, many are emotional and tribal even though it is actually really hard, often, to say over what specifically. So my question is this: When grown-up politicians are now offering little more than emotional school ground mudslinging, is the functional purpose — at least partly — to conceal that policy differences might not be so large after all?

I would say that we are in a fundamentally new era — since 2012 — which makes it difficult to use history as a guide. As I see it as there is a before time, which is before 2009, and there is an after time, which is after 2012. What changed in between those years is that Facebook added the like button and Twitter added the retweet button. Thereby social media became far more engaging. Millions of people flooded on. All journalists flooded on to Twitter. I talk in my book about how societies create a Moral Matrix. Between 2009 and 2012 social media essentially knocked over the Tower of Babel. In the biblical story of Babel, God thinks humans are getting too powerful. So he says "Let us go down and confound their language so that they may not understand one another." That is what happened to us between 2009 and 2012. Before 2009 there was some semblance of sanity, there was some vague connection between the Moral Matrix and some underlying physical reality. By 2012-2013, that connection had been severed. So now any set of beliefs can be fostered in a community completely separate from any objective reality. This is especially happening to the extremes. The far-right has always had conspiracy theories — that it is very clear in the United States at least — but never before have we had one that drew in the majority of Republicans. Crazy conspiracy theories that draw in most of the two major parties. On the far left we have a woke ideology which has an unbroken track record of failure and destruction when entering institutions. Yet institutions keep adopting it. So, while I pointed to cycles of history before, this one really could be different because the means of knowledge production are now broken. It is not clear how we fix them.

Do you also think that the populist camps and the establishment camps are mutually dependent when locking horns? What I mean is, do the most tribal angry populists need liberal wokery to have something tangible to protest against? Whereas the tribal liberals might need the shoutiness of many key populists in order to come across as more balanced even when they take things too far?

Absolutely. The major dynamic here is called the polarization cycle. Not all conflicts are polarization cycles, but you get such cycles when you have two groups at either extremes, groups that each believe they are in an existential struggle for survival. Especially when you also have a media environment that feeds the worst statements and actions of the other side instead of the average statements and actions. So each side is then driven towards more and more passion by all the anecdotes and stories that supposedly confirm the radicalism of the other side. Both sides also believe the end justifies the means so neither side will care about due process and law. Victory must be had at all cost. Then, yes, you get a polarization cycle that can easily lead to violence. In America we are absolutely experiencing a polarization cycle.

In Europe as well.

I would say ours is worse because we have two parties. The worst number of political parties to have in a country is one. But the second worst number is two.

Are we in public debate, collectively, attaching too much weight to the angry and loud people? Since the angry people will almost per definition be ever present and stir things up for example on social media? Whereas the real moderates — including the real grown-ups — might stay away from all such destructive engagements? You argue in your book that we, going forward, should stress similarities much more. By stressing similarities rather than differences, do we bring out the better side of angry people while also making it easier for the less aggressive voter and politicians to step forward? Including perhaps those shyer and calmer?

It has always been the case that the extremes are louder. What happened between 2009 and 2012 is that American tech companies created an outrage machine. This outrage machine greatly amplified the power of the extremes. The extremes got nastier and nastier so that people in the middle — the middle make up about 80 or 90 percent — now feel so intimidated they largely keep quiet. That, again, is why I say everything changed between 2009 or 2012. The social dynamic now is really different from anything that ever existed before 2009. So all of our understanding of society and politics before 2009 must be questioned. Some previous findings are still valid, and some are not. We do not know which parts are still valid.

Like no one else you also describe in your book that morality binds and blinds. You argue that liberals often insist on looking upon conservatives as relics from the past whereas conservatives often insist on looking upon liberals as obsessed with tearing down the very fabric that holds society together. Then again, you also suggest that it does not have to be like this if we acknowledge the much underdiscussed similarities and also that liberals and conservatives — when they do differ — also often complement one another. What can we do, in practice, to encourage the live-and-let live approach? Stop voting until at least somebody starts offering real bipartisanship rather than empty promises of such bipartisanship? Or something else?

It is almost impossible to change society. You have to look institution by institution. In the U.S. Congress there is so much we could do. If we simply eliminated closed party primaries and required all states and all elections to have open primaries, then elections would not be decided just by extremes. So that is one of the most important things, that is one of the big factors explaining why Congress became so polarized in the 1990s. There are all kinds of rule changes in the U.S. Congress that would incentivize those working within to work together rather than do everything they can to make the other side fail. So in Congress there really is a lot we could do by changing voting practices and rules.

Also on social media there is a lot we could do. What I would like most is add two dials. I would like Facebook and Twitter to give me two dials. One allows me to set a filter — a minimum bar for integrated complexity or nuance. So I can filter out people who never show integrated complexity or nuance. They disappear from my social world and I disappear from theirs. They cannot see me, I cannot see them. With the other dial I want to be able to set a maximum level of aggression. I could very easily code people. The point is that content moderation is hopeless. It can never work well. User ratings on the other hand would have a gigantic impact and is easy to do. So if we simply had those two dials on social media it would greatly dampen the power of the extremes. Since people would know that the consequences would be negative, personally, if out of line. Right now people are instead trained or reinforced to say outrageous, angry and disruptive things. The platforms really do reinforce such behavior. If we change the reinforcement pattern — so that the more disruptive you are the fewer people you reach — then Twitter will change in a month. So we have to look institution by institution, company by company, platform by platform — and distinguish between what is empowering the extremes and what is giving voice to the majority in the middle.

You are also arguing in The Righteous Mind that we need to work more proactively to turn into star listeners. We need to learn how to listen to what the other side is really saying — instead of simply trying to make the other side adopt our outlook. How do we go about this?

It is very hard to do directly. What I now think about, that I did not talk about in The Righteous Mind, is that the human mind has two basic patterns: Approach and Avoid. Approach circuits are located at the front left of the brain and these deal with positive emotions. Avoid is at the front right cortex and deal mostly with negative emotions. When people are in explore mode, they see opportunity and are curious and want to learn. When people are in defend mode, they see only threats and are not open to learning. They cling to their team and want to defeat the other team. You cannot just make people listen unless [you] first put them in explore mode. This is very hard to do in the public square. But if you again go institution by institution, we might be able to make a difference. Take the university. Right now in American universities, we are reinforcing the idea that everything is racist, sexist and homophobic. We also encourage students to identify themselves as marginalized. Even though we are talking about the most anti-racist and pro-gay institutions in the world. By still putting our students in defend mode they become angry activists. They do not listen much and they do not learn much. What we should have in university are policies that as much as possible seek to put everyone in explore mode. People would then be more curious and also listen more. As a social psychologist I usually recommend indirect approaches or social approaches. These are the powerful levers. Trying to directly convince people to do something or think differently is very difficult.

I take it this is why you have also stressed many times that it is impossible to hate and learn at the same time. You have also said you are a centrist of sorts and are not really choosing between liberalism and conservatism. But you still highlight that we betray our student generations when exposing them mainly to the liberal outlook. By now many others within the academic sphere appear to think so as well as evident by the Heterodox Academy which now, according to the website, links together around 5,000 people. Do you feel that your battle for more opinion diversity is finally gaining momentum?

Well, yes, the viewpoint for opinion diversity is gaining momentum. However, the insanity, the wokeness, the authoritarianism, the craziness is also accelerating faster. So things are getting worse and so are the opposing forces. In 2015, when I started Heterodox Academy, most professors said: "Come on, you are exaggerating, these are just a few anecdotes, a few random stories from university. This is not a real thing." By 2017 very few were saying that. By 2017 most professors had seen it. Now everybody sees it not just in universities but in companies, in high schools, in the media. There is a madness, there is a stupidity — and certainly also a fear — that is growing and spreading.

So if connecting what you just said with your outlook going forward; are we reaching a point when people are tiring of both liberals if constantly woke and of populists if constantly angry? Since the academic sphere is a wokery stronghold, perhaps it is not so representative of the rest of society?

The polling shows that the majority of almost every group — Black, white, liberal, conservative — dislikes political correctness. I do not know what the polling says about the right-wing extremity; I think that depends on what the Republicans think so I do not know what people think about the far right. But a fundamental law of our times is that the average does not matter. So even if 80 percent of people are fed up, it does not matter since after 2012 the dynamics are different. In the old times 80 percent was bigger than the 20 percent — or at least as big as 20 percent. Now 80 percent is not nearly as big as the 20 percent. So, yes, most people are fed up but it does not mean things will change.

Final question. If you would suddenly transform into the president of the United States, what would be the first one or two things you would do to depolarize society?

I would convene a panel of political leaders and constitutional lawyers to do whatever we could to change voting processes and congressional rules. To depolarize the U.S. Congress and also the state legislatures. We have to get our government working. Right now we have what we call a deliberative democracy and yet we have no deliberation

and only minimal democracy. So we cannot expect young people to believe that democracy is great when they have never seen it work. So political reform is the first thing I would do. The second thing I would do is to reform social media. No, actually, that is maybe the first thing I would do since, because of the shape of social media since 2012, you really cannot do anything. So the very first thing I would do is to realize social media reform. In the United States, the First Amendment places restrictions on what government can do regarding speech but I think there is a compelling national interest to detoxify the public square. If Twitter and Facebook are now key parts of the public square — and they are dangerous, dirty places that make citizens afraid to speak — I think there really is a compelling national interest to make these sites less toxic. It can easily be done. During experiments they have done it themselves, but while also reducing engagement they do not make it happen for real. So these are the two things. If you get social media reform and congressional reform right then we are still in bad shape but, crucially, at least it becomes possible to start doing something about it. Right now we really cannot do anything.

Just one other thing. You said something about centrism. I am a centrist but my centrism is all about process. It is not about categorically avoiding the extremes. Truth is a process and because of our flaws, our confirmation bias and our social motives, we are not well designed to find the truth. In the physical world we are good at finding the fastest way to get from point A to point B; but we are not able to identify the truth about social and political matters that affect our identity or our teams. The amazing discovery in Europe, in the 1600s, was the development of communities of men who gathered in coffee shops and talked about ideas and findings. This was the beginning of the scientific revolution. The process was key, not suddenly smarter scientists. A community was created in which people with different ideas checked each other. This was crucial since we cannot overcome our confirmation bias ourselves. As a consequence we need people to check us. So, my sense is not that we all need to be centrists, that would not work. My centrism is based on the notion that we are all flawed, we are all irrational but amazing things happen in the right way given norms that promote engagement rather than attack. So if you have the U.S. Congress, or the Houses of Parliament, or a jury, or a classroom — and people who feel they will be together for a long time and need to accomplish things together and moreover will not be rewarded for attacking and destroying — then you have the means by which the truth can emerge from imperfect non-truth seeking individuals. So that is my centrism and that is why I created the Heterodox Academy and Open Mind. Because I see us losing it in universities.

I am sure 95 percent of people would appreciate if their environments were to function in exactly that way. Even if this means continuously coming across people with different opinions.

That is right and right now 95 is not larger than 5, but once we get social media reform I think 95 really can be larger than 5.

Notes

This is a resource document for you to use.
Take notes, highlight, use as a text book.

The new media's role in politics

Diana Owen, Georgetown University, OpenMind, 2017

The new media environment is dynamic and continues to develop in novel, sometimes unanticipated, ways that have serious consequences for democratic governance and politics. New media have radically altered the way that government institutions operate, the way that political leaders communicate, the manner in which elections are contested, and citizen engagement. This chapter will briefly address the evolution of new media, before examining in greater detail their role in and consequences for political life.

New political media are forms of communication that facilitate the production, dissemination, and exchange of political content on platforms and within networks that accommodate interaction and collaboration. They have evolved rapidly over the past three decades, and continue to develop in novel, sometimes unanticipated ways. New media have wide-ranging implications for democratic governance and political practices. They have radically altered the ways in which government institutions operate and political leaders communicate. They have transformed the political media system, and redefined the role of journalists. They have redefined the way elections are contested, and how citizens engage in politics.

The rise of new media has complicated the political media system. Legacy media consisting of established mass media institutions that predate the Internet, such as newspapers, radio shows, and television news programs, coexist with new media that are the outgrowth of technological innovation. While legacy media maintain relatively stable formats, the litany of new media, which includes websites, blogs, video-sharing platforms, digital apps, and social media, are continually expanding in innovative ways. Mass media designed to deliver general interest news to broad audiences have been joined by niche sources that narrowcast to discrete users (Stroud, 2011). New media can relay information directly to individuals without the intervention of editorial or institutional gatekeepers, which are intrinsic to legacy forms. Thus, new media have introduced an increased level of instability and unpredictability into the political communication process.

The relationship between legacy media and new media is symbiotic. Legacy media have incorporated new media into their reporting strategies. They distribute material across an array of old and new communication platforms. They rely on new media sources to meet the ever-increasing demand for content. Despite competition from new media, the audiences for traditional media remain robust, even if they are not as formidable as in the past. Readers of the print edition of The New York Times and viewers of the nightly network news programs far outnumber those accessing the most popular political news websites (Wired Staff, 2017). Cable and network television news remain the primary sources of political information for people over the age of thirty (Mitchell and Holcomb, 2016). Consequently, new media rely on their legacy counterparts to gain legitimacy and popularize their content.

Ideally, the media serve several essential roles in a democratic society. Their primary purpose is to inform the public, providing citizens with the information needed to make thoughtful decisions about leadership and policy. The media act as watchdogs checking government actions. They set the agenda for public discussion of issues, and provide a forum for political expression. They also facilitate community building by helping people to find common causes, identify civic groups, and work toward solutions to societal problems.

New media have the potential to satisfy these textbook functions. They provide unprecedented access to information, and can reach even disinterested audience members through personalized, peer-to-peer channels, like Facebook. As average people join forces with the established press to perform the watchdog role, public officials are subject to greater scrutiny. Issues and events that might be outside the purview of mainstream journalists can be brought into prominence by ordinary citizens. New media can foster community building that transcends physical boundaries through their extensive networking capabilities. Although legacy media coverage of political events correlates with increased political engagement among the mass public, mainstream journalists do not believe that encouraging participation is their responsibility (Hayes and Lawless, 2016). However, new media explicitly seek to directly engage the public in political activities, such as voting, contacting public officials, volunteering in their communities, and taking part in protest movements.

At the same time, the new media era has acerbated trends that undercut the ideal aims of a democratic press. The media disseminate a tremendous amount of political content, but much of the material is trivial, unreliable, and polarizing. The watchdog role pre-new media had been performed largely by trained journalists who, under the best of circumstances, focused on uncovering the facts surrounding serious political transgressions. Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein inspired a generation of investigative journalists after revealing President Richard Nixon's role in the break-in at the Democratic Party headquarters at the Watergate Hotel, forcing his resignation (Shepard, 2012). Much news in the new media era is defined by coverage of a never-ending barrage of sensational scandals—be they real, exaggerated, or entirely fabricated—that often are only tangentially related to governing.

This chapter begins by briefly addressing the evolution of new media in the United States to establish the core characteristics of the current political media system. We then

will focus on the role of media in providing information in a democratic polity, and will examine the ways in which new media have impacted this role. The diversity of content disseminated by new media has created opportunities, such as the ability for more voices to be heard. However, the questionable quality of much of this information raises serious issues for democratic discourse. Next, we will discuss how the new media are integral to political coverage in a post-truth society, where falsehoods infused with tidbits of fact pass as news. Finally, we will contemplate the ways in which the watchdog press is being overshadowed by the mouthpiece press which serves as a publicity machine for politicians.

THE EVOLUTION OF NEW MEDIA

New media emerged in the late 1980s when entertainment platforms, like talk radio, television talk shows, and tabloid newspapers, took on prominent political roles and gave rise to the infotainment genre. Infotainment obscures the lines between news and entertainment, and privileges sensational, scandal-driven stories over hard news (Jebril, et al., 2013). Politicians turned to new media to circumvent the mainstream press' control over the news agenda. The infotainment emphasis of new media at this early stage offered political leaders and candidates a friendlier venue for presenting themselves to the public than did hard news outlets (Moy, et al., 2009). During the 1992 presidential election, Democratic candidate Bill Clinton famously appeared on Arsenio Hall's television talk show wearing sunglasses and playing the saxophone, which created a warm, personal image that set the tone for his campaign (Diamond, et al., 1993). The fusing of politics and entertainment attracted audiences that typically had been disinterested in public affairs (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2011). It also prompted the ascendance of celebrity politicians, and set the stage for a "reality TV" president like Donald Trump decades later.

Political observers and scholars contemplated the advent of a "new media populism" that would engage disenfranchised citizens and facilitate a more active role for the public in political discourse. New media had the potential to enhance people's access to political information, facilitate wider-ranging political discourse, and foster participation. Initially, the public responded positively to the more accessible communication channels, calling in to political talk programs and participating in online town hall meetings. However, new media's authentic populist potential was undercut by the fact that the new political media system evolved haphazardly, with no guiding principles or goals. It was heavily dominated by commercial interests and those already holding privileged positions in politics and the news industry. Public enthusiasm eventually gave way to ambivalence and cynicism, especially as the novelty of the first phase of new media wore off (Davis and Owen, 1998).

The next phase in the development of new media unfolded in conjunction with the application of emerging digital communications technologies to politics that made possible entirely new outlets and content delivery systems. The digital environment and the platforms it supports greatly transformed the political media system. Beginning in the mid-1990s, new political media platforms quickly progressed from the rudimentary "brochureware" website, used by Bill Clinton's presidential campaign in 1992, to encompass sites with interactive features, discussion boards, blogs, online fundraising platforms, volunteer recruitment sites, and meet-ups. The public became more involved with the actual production and distribution of political content. Citizen journalists were eyewitnesses to events that professional journalists did not cover. Non-elites offered their perspectives on political affairs to politicians and peers. Members of the public also were responsible for recording and posting videos that could go viral and influence the course of events (Wallsten, 2010). In 2006, for example, the reelection campaign of Republican Senator George Allen was derailed by a viral video in which he used the term "macaca," a racial slur, to refer to a young man of Indian ancestry who was attending his campaign rally (Craig and Shear, 2006).

A third phase in the evolution of new media is marked by Democratic candidate Barack Obama's groundbreaking digital campaign strategy in the 2008 presidential election. Obama's team revolutionized the use of social media in an election they felt was unwinnable using traditional techniques. The campaign made use of advanced digital media features that capitalized on the networking, collaboration, and community-building potential of social media to create a political movement. The Obama campaign website was a full-service, multimedia center where voters not only could access information, they also could watch and share videos, view and distribute campaign ads, post comments, and blog. Supporters could donate, volunteer, and purchase campaign logo items, like tee shirts and caps. The campaign was active on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, as well as a range of other social media platforms that catered to particular constituencies, such as BlackPlanet, AsianAve, and Glee. The campaign pioneered digital microtargeting tactics. It used social media to collect data on people's political and consumer preferences, and created voter profiles to pursue specific groups, such as young professional voters, with customized messages.

The new media trends established in the 2008 campaign have carried over to the realm of government and politics more generally. Social media have become a pervasive force in politics, altering the communication dynamics between political leaders, journalists, and the public. They have opened up wider avenues for instantaneous political discourse and debate. Research indicates that people's access to social media networks has a positive effect on their sense of political efficacy and tendency to participate in politics (Gil de Zuniga, et al., 2010). However, there also has been backlash when social media discourse has become too nasty, and users have blocked content or dropped out of their social media networks (Linder, 2016). Social media allow people to efficiently organize and leverage their collective influence. Thus, political leaders are held more accountable because their actions are constantly probed on social media.

At the same time, legacy media organizations have come to rely on aspects of new media. Newspapers, in particular, have experienced financial hardships due adverse financial market conditions, declining advertising revenues, and competition from proliferating news sources. The size of traditional newsrooms in the U.S. has shrunk by more than 20,000 positions in the past twenty years, and global newsrooms have experienced a similar decline (Owen, 2017). Legacy news organizations have cut investigative units, and only around one-third of reporters are assigned to political beats (Mitchell and Holcomb, 2016). Alicia Shepard, a former media ombudsman and media literacy advocate, opined, "When newspapers can't even cover daily journalism, how are they going to invest in long-term, expensive investigative reporting?" (2012). Still, journalists working for legacy organizations continue to do the yeoman's share of serious news gathering and investigative reporting. Mainstream journalists have come to rely heavily on new media content as a source of news. These trends have seriously influenced the quality and nature of news content as well as the style of political reporting, which has become more heavily infused with infotainment and quotes from Twitter feeds.

PROVIDING POLITICAL INFORMATION

The complexities of the new media system are reflected in the diversity of available content. The information distributed via the vast communications network runs the gamut from fact-based, investigative reporting from professional journalists to brash fabrications or "alternative facts"—to use the term coined by President Trump's advisor Kellyanne Conway—proffered by the alternative press (Graham, 2017). In the new media era, the boundaries that separate these disparate types of information have become increasing muddled. Professional media editors who regulate the flow of information by applying news principles and standards associated with the public good have become scarce (Willis, 1987). They have been replaced by social media and analytics editors whose primary motivation is to draw users to content regardless of its news value. Audience members have to work hard to distinguish fact from fiction, and to differentiate what matters from what is inconsequential.

A number of explanations can be offered for the shift in the quality and quantity of political information. The technological affordances of new media allow content to propagate seemingly without limits. Social media have a dramatically different structure than previous media platforms. Content can be relayed with no significant third-party filtering, fact-checking, or editorial judgement. Individuals lacking prior journalism training or reputation can reach many users at lightningfast speed. Messages multiply as they are shared across news platforms and via personal social networking accounts (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017).

In addition, the economic incentives underpinning new media companies, such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter, are predicated on attracting large audiences that will draw advertising revenue. Political content is used to drive consumers to social media products, rather than to perform the public service function of informing the citizenry. Commercial pressures lead media organizations to feature incendiary stories that receive the most attention. Further, while platforms proliferate, similar content is dispersed widely as media power is concentrated in a small number of old and new media corporations (McChesney, 2015). Search engines direct users to a limited selection of heavily trafficked and well-financed sites (Hindman, 2009; Pariser, 2011).

Other explanations focus on the nature of the American political environment that has become extremely polarized, prompting the emergence of political agendas that promote rogue politics. A 2017 Pew Research Center study revealed that the gap between Democrats and Republicans on core political values, including the role of government, race, immigration, the social safety net, national security, taxes, and environmental protection, have grown to epic proportions for the modern era. Two-thirds of Americans fall solidly in the liberal or conservative camp, with few holding a mix of ideological positions (Pew Research Center, 2017; Kiley, 2017).

Speech on new media reflects these stark political divisions, and frequently devolves into expressions of hostility and ad hominem attacks. President Donald Trump used Twitter to ignite a controversy over NFL players who protested racial oppression during the playing of the national anthem before games. He used a derogatory term to refer to players, who are predominantly African American, and urged team owners to fire those supporting the demonstration. Trump's social media blasts accused the players of disrespecting the flag and the military, which misrepresents the protest agenda and has divided the public along political and racial lines.

Political divisions are reflected in the presence of media "echo chambers," where people select their news and information sources based on their affinity for the politics of other users. Modern-day new media echo chambers began to form during the first phase of new media, as conservative talk radio hosts, like Rush Limbaugh, attracted dedicated followers (Jamieson and Cappella, 2010). Social media has hastened the development of echo chambers, as they facilitate people's exposure to information shared by like-minded individuals in their personal digital networks, with 62% of adult Americans getting their news from social media platforms. Even politically disinterested social media users frequently encounter news articles unintentionally as they scan their feed (Gottfried and Shearer, 2016). The ability of social media to isolate people from exposure to those with differing viewpoints exacerbates political polarization.

A significant segment of the public perceives journalists as removed elites who do not share their conservative values. Political analyst Nate Silver (2017) contends that the national press has been operating in a politically homogenous, metropolitan, liberal-leaning bubble that has become attached to "Establishment Influentials". He maintains that the mainstream media are out-of-touch with a wide swath

of the public. During the recent election this became clear as legacy media institutions are unable to connect effectively with the frustration and anger of people outside of high education and income circles (Camosy, 2016).

Some scholars argue that new media are closing the gap between distant journalists and the mass public by giving voice to those who have felt left out (Duggan and Smith, 2016). The Tea Party, a conservative political movement focused around issues about taxation and the national debt, used social networks for political mobilization in the 2010 midterm elections. Tea Party candidates employed social media to reshape public discourse around the campaign, forging a sense of solidarity among groups who previously felt disenfranchised (Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin, 2011). Candidates pushing an extreme agenda have amplified this trend. Highly partisan, flamboyant congressional candidates, on both sides of the aisle, who spark political disagreement and indignant rhetoric garner the most supporters on Facebook. They use social media to solidify their political base (Messing and Weisel, 2017).

POST-TRUTH MEDIA

American author Ralph Keyes (2004) observes that society has entered a posttruth era. Deception has become a defining characteristic of modern life, and is so pervasive that people are desensitized to its implications. He laments the fact that ambiguous statements containing a kernel of authenticity, but falling short of the truth, have become the currency of politicians, reporters, corporate executives, and other power-brokers.

Journalist Susan Glasser (2016) argues that journalism has come to reflect the realities of reporting in post-truth America. Objective facts are subordinate to emotional appeals and personal beliefs in shaping public opinion. The public has difficulty distinguishing relevant news about weighty policy issues from the extraneous clamor that permeates the media. The work of investigative journalists has in some ways has become more insightful and informed than in the past due to the vast resources available for researching stories, including greater access to government archives and big data analysis. However, well-documented stories are obscured by the constant drone of repetitive, sensationalized trivia-bites that dominate old and new media. Reflecting on coverage of the last American presidential contest, Glasser states, "The media scandal of 2016 isn't so much about what reporters fail to tell the American public; it's about what they did report on, and the fact that it didn't seem to matter" (2016).

Evidence that Glasser's concerns are well-founded can be compiled by examining media content on a daily basis. Post-truth media was prominent during the 2016 presidential election. Media accounts of the election were infused with misinformation, baseless rumors, and outright lies. False stories and unverified factoids emanated from fabricated news sites as well as the social media accounts of the candidates and their surrogates. Republican nominee Donald Trump used his Twitter feed to push out sensational, unverified statements that would dominate the news agenda, a practice he maintained after assuming the presidency. He alleged that the father of Ted Cruz, his challenger for the nomination, was involved in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and perpetuated the false claim that President Barack Obama was not born in the United States (Carson, 2017). False news stories infiltrated reports by legacy media organizations as they relied heavily on digital sources for information. Cable news organizations like CNN and MSNBC amplified Trump's unfounded claims, such as his allegations that Muslims in New Jersey celebrated the fall of the World Trade Center on 9/11, even as they criticized their veracity (Shafer, 2015).

Contrived controversies detract from coverage of important issues related to policy, process, and governance (Horton, 2017). In October of 2017, President Donald Trump and Senator Bob Corker (R-TN) exchanged a series of insults as Congress considered major tax reforms. The feud dominated coverage of the battle over tax legislation on new media, and commanded the front page of The New York Times. Among the many insults slung over the course of several weeks, Trump referred to Corker as "Liddle Bob," and tweeted that Corker "couldn't get elected dog catcher." Corker called the White House "an adult day care center," and labeled Trump "an utterly untruthful president" (Sullivan, 2017).

THE ASCENDANCE OF FAKE NEWS

The most extreme illustration of the concept of post-truth reporting is the rise of fake news. The definition of fake news has shifted over time, and continues to be fluid. Initially, the term "fake news" referred to news parodies and satire, such as The Daily Show, The Colbert Report, and Weekend Update on Saturday Night Live. During the 2016 campaign, the concept of fake news was attached to fictitious stories made to appear as if they were real news articles. These stories were disseminated on websites that had the appearance of legitimate news platforms or blogs, such as Infowars, The Rightest, and National Report. A 2017 compilation documented 122 sites that routinely publish fake news (Chao, et al., 2017). Authors are paid—sometimes thousands of dollars—to write or record false information. Some of these authors are based in locations outside of the United States, including Russia (Shane, 2017). They make use of social media interactions and algorithms to disseminate content to specific ideological constituencies. Fabricated stories are spread virally by social bots, automated software that replicates messages by masquerading as a person (Emerging Technology from the arXiv, 2017).

Fake news stories play to people's preexisting beliefs about political leaders, parties, organizations, and the mainstream news media. While some fake news stories are outright fabrications, others contain elements of truth that make them seem credible to audiences ensconced in echo chambers. Conspiracy theories, hoaxes, and lies were spread efficiently through Facebook, Snapchat, and other social media, and reached millions of voters in the 2016 election

(Oremus, 2016). For example, a fabricated story on The Denver Gardian, a fake site meant to emulate the legitimate newspaper, The Denver Post, reported that an F.B.I. agent connected with an investigation into Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton's emails had murdered his wife and shot himself. Other erroneous reports claimed that Pope Francis had endorsed Donald Trump and that Hillary Clinton had sold weapons to ISIS (Rogers and Bromwich, 2016).

Conditions in the new media age have been ripe for the proliferation of fake news. The new media system has lifted many of the obstacles to producing and distributing news that were present in the previous mass media age. While vestiges of the digital divide persist, especially among lower-income families (Klein, 2017), barriers to new media access have been lowered. The cost of producing and distributing information on a wide scale have been reduced. The logistics and skills necessary to create content are less formidable. Social networking sites make it possible to build and maintain audiences of like-minded people who will trust posted content. Fake news proliferates widely through social media, especially Facebook and Twitter. In fact, fake news stories are spread more widely on Facebook than factual mainstream media reports (Silverman, 2016). Audiences are fooled and confused by fake news, which confounds basic facts about politics and government with fiction. A 2016 Pew Research Center report found that 64% of the American public found that made-up news created a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current events, and an additional 24% believed fake news caused some confusion (Barthel, Mitchell, and Holcomb, 2016). Finally, legal challenges to fake news and the distribution of false content are much more difficult to pose, as it is costly and time-consuming to sue publishers for spreading false information.

An alternative meaning of fake news emerged after the presidential election. At his first press conference as President-elect, Donald Trump appropriated the term "fake news" as a derogatory reference to the mainstream press. Pointing at CNN journalist Jim Acosta, who was attempting to ask a question, Trump exclaimed, "You are fake news!" Trump and his acolytes frequently employ the "fake news" moniker when attempting to delegitimize the legacy media, including The New York Times and The Washington Post, for reporting they consider to be unfavorable (Carson, 2017). Weary of Trump repeatedly invoking the "fake news" label, CNN launched a "Facts First" campaign in response to "consistent attacks from Washington and beyond." A thirty second video shows an image of an apple, with the voice over:

This is an apple. Some people might try to tell you this is a banana. They might scream banana, banana, banana, over and over and over again. They might put banana in all caps. You might even start to believe that this is a banana. But it's not. This is an apple.

Facts are facts. They aren't colored by emotion or bias. They are indisputable. There is no alternative to a fact. Facts explain things. What they are, how they happened. Facts are not interpretations. Once facts are established, opinions can be formed. And while opinions matter, they don't change the facts. (https://www.cnncreativemarketing.com/project/cnn_factsfirst/)

WATCHDOG PRESS OR POLITICIANS' MOUTHPIECE

The notion of the press as a political watchdog casts the media as a guardian of the public interest. The watchdog press provides a check on government abuses by supplying citizens with information and forcing government transparency. Public support for the media's watchdog role is substantial, with a Pew Research Center study finding that 70% of Americans believe that press reporting can "prevent leaders from doing things that shouldn't be done" (Chinni and Bronston, 2017).

New media have enhanced the capacity of reporters to fulfill their watchdog role, even in an era of dwindling resources for investigative journalism. Information can be shared readily through formal media sources, as local news outlets can pass information about breaking events to national organizations. News also can be documented and shared by citizens through social networks. When a vicious category 5 hurricane devastated Puerto Rico and the American government's response was slow, journalists were able to surface the story as residents and first responders took to social media to provide first-hand accounts to national journalists who had difficulty reaching the island (Vernon, 2017).

However, there are aspects of the media's watchdog role that have become more difficult to fulfill. Countering outright lies by public officials has almost become an exercise in futility, even as fact-checking has become its own category of news. The Washington Post's "Fact Checker" identified almost 1,500 false claims made by President Trump in just over 250 days in office (www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker). Sites focusing on setting the record straight, such as PolitiFact, Snopes, and FactCheck, can barely keep pace with the amount of material that requires checking Despite these efforts, false information on the air and online has multiplied.

There is evidence to suggest that the new media allow political leaders to do an end-run around the watchdog press. In some ways, the press has moved from being a watchdog to a mouthpiece for politicians. This tendency is exacerbated by the fact that there is a revolving door where working journalists move between positions in the media and government. Some scholars maintain that this revolving door compromises the objectivity of journalists who view a government job as the source of their next paycheck (Shepard, 1997).

The media act as a mouthpiece for political leaders by publicizing their words and actions even when their news value is questionable. President Donald Trump uses Twitter as a mechanism for getting messages directly to his followers

while averting journalistic and political gatekeepers, including high ranking members of his personal staff. Many of his tweets are of questionable news value, except for the fact that they emanate from the president's personal social media account. Yet the press act as a mouthpiece by promoting his tweets. A silly or vicious tween can dominate several news cycles. In an interview with Fox Business Network's Maria Bartiomo, President Trump gave his reason for using social media to communication with the public and the press that supports the notion of the mouthpiece media:

Tweeting is like a typewriter—when I put it out, you put it immediately on your show. I mean, the other day, I put something out, two seconds later I am watching your show, it's up… You know, you have to keep people interested. But, social media, without social media, I am not sure that we would be here talking I would probably not be here talking (Tatum, 2017).

When rumors and conspiracy theories are believed, they can have serious consequences. This point is illustrated by the "PizzaGate" conspiracy theory that spread on social media during the 2016 presidential election. Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and her campaign chairman, John Podesta, were accused of engaging in satanic rituals where they personally "chopped up and raped" children. Wikileaks released personal emails from Podesta's account indicating that he enjoyed eating at a pizza restaurant Washington, D.C. The Twitter hashtag #pizzagate began trending. Rumors alleging that the restaurant's owner was running a child sex ring began circulating. Believing the rumors to be true, a man drove from North Carolina to liberate the purported child sex slaves. He fired an assault rifle inside the pizza restaurant as staff and patrons fled. He is currently serving a four-year prison sentence (Aisch, et al., 2016; Fisher, et al., 2016).

CONCLUSION

New media have both expanded and undercut the traditional roles of the press in a democratic society. On the positive side, they have vastly increased the potential for political information to reach even the most disinterested citizens. They enable the creation of digital public squares where opinions can be openly shared. They have created new avenues for engagement that allow the public to connect in new ways with government, and to contribute to the flow of political information.

At the same time, the coalescence of the rise of new media and post-truth society has made for a precarious situation that subverts their beneficial aspects. Presently, it appears as if there are few effective checks on the rising tide of false information. Substituting scandal coverage for serious investigative journalism has weakened the press' watchdog role. The ambiguous position of the media as a mouthpiece for politicians renders journalists complicit in the proliferation of bad information and faulty facts. It is important to recognize that American journalism has never experienced a "golden age" where facts always prevailed and responsible reporting was absolute. However, the current era may mark a new low for the democratic imperative of a free press.

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