

# Primaries, What Are They Good For?



By Paul Engel

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- We are in the middle of another primary season. But have you considered what the purpose behind these primaries?
- Why do we have an election season before the election?
- Why does the American taxpayer fund elections for private organizations?

I propose that all elections for the board members of non-profit corporations should be run by the state at taxpayer expense. After all, we already have taxpayer funded elections for private organizations. We call them “Primaries”.

While this year’s presidential primaries are pretty much a fait accompli, there are still hundreds, if not thousands, of primary elections that will be held over the next few months. In some cases the race is so partisan that the primary effectively decides the race and the general election is moot. What’s the purpose of these taxpayer funded private elections? Why to limit your choices on election day, of course. So why do we keep paying for someone else to take away our choices?

## **Before Primaries**

It may surprise many of you, but the word “primary” did not exist in the Constitution until 1964, with the ratification of the Twenty-Fourth Amendment.

The right of citizens of the United States to vote in any

primary or other election for President or Vice President, for electors for President or Vice President, or for Senator or Representative in Congress, shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any State by reason of failure to pay any poll tax or other tax.

### [U.S. Constitution, Amendment XXIV](#)

The reason is quite simple. Though there were a few primaries in the United States as early as the 1840s, [it wasn't until the early 20th century that they became widespread](#). In fact, the modern primary is merely the latest attempt by political parties to control elections. Starting in the colonial period, and continuing into the 19th century, political parties widely used caucuses to choose their candidates for state and local offices. Although the use of caucuses declined in the 20th century, several states still use them to choose their state's political parties' candidates for President. Concerns about abuses of the caucus system led state political parties to adopt conventions as the method of choosing their candidates. However, abuses of this system has led to their general demise, with the exception of the national parties choices of their presidential candidate. For the most part, conventions have been replaced by primaries elections in the 20th century. The process of political parties choosing their candidates became more and more influential as we changed how we voted.

### **How We Vote**

For the first 50 years of our history, people did not vote by secret ballot. Rather, people voted "viva voce", or by voice. This helps explain why Article II of the Constitution requires Presidential Electors to vote by ballot.

The Electors shall meet in their respective States, and vote by Ballot for two Persons, of whom one at least shall not be an Inhabitant of the same State with themselves.

### [U.S. Constitution, Article II, Section 1, Clause 3](#)

Imagine walking into a courthouse, swearing on a Bible that you were who you claimed to be, and had not already voted, then announcing in front of the entire room your name and who you were voting for? That's how it was done until the early 19th century. While this may sound crazy to modern ears, the party atmosphere that surrounded voting probably explains why turnouts routinely reached as high as 85%.

In the early 19th century, states started adopting the paper ballot, but not like the ones we see today. The original paper ballot was nothing but a blank scrap of paper, which you would write in your candidate's name and drop it in a box. In an attempt to be helpful, Newspapers began printing blank ballots, listing only the offices which were up for election. Voters could clip these ballots out of the paper, write in their candidates name, and drop them in the ballot box. How long do you think it was before political parties figured out a way to influence the vote? If your answer is "Not long", you'd be correct.

By the mid-19th century, state Democrat and Republican parties were printing flyers with not only the offices, but the parties candidate already filled in. It was legal for people to simply drop these pre-printed "tickets" in the ballot box, which certainly made voting down the party line easier. This, of course, led to claims of fraud, which led the states of New York and Massachusetts in 1888 to require voters to only use ballots printed by the state. These ballots resemble what we see today, listing not only the offices, but all the candidates who were running for those offices. By using state laws to hamper a candidate's ability to be on said ballot, the political parties have been able to regulate who you get to vote for in the actual elections.

States do allow write-in voting, but the laws often make it extremely difficult to win a race that way. For example, most states have a requirement that the candidate's name be legible, written a certain way, and that it be spelled

properly. Joe Biden ran a write-in campaign for the Democratic primary in New Hampshire. I wonder if the rules required people to write in “Joe Biden”, “Joseph Biden”, “Joseph R. Biden”, or “Joseph Robinette Biden”? Not only does a write-in candidate have to convince people to vote for them, they also have to train them to spell their name correctly. That is probably why, since the general adoption of state printed ballots, only [two congressional races have been won by a write-in candidates](#), Strom Thurmond in 1954 and Charlie Wilson in 2006.

## **Controlling the Vote**

Now the states are not only in control of who is on the ballot, but allow the state political parties to make that decision for them. This creates a very incestuous relationship, where those in office make the laws that make sure the political parties have an advantage. Which leaves us with the situation where the political parties tell us which of their members the people will be “allowed” to vote for. Of course we’re told that it’s the people in the parties who are choosing their candidates, but the last two presidential elections exposed that to be a lie. In both 2016 and 2020, Bernie Sanders was leading the race for the Democratic nomination for President, only to have his chance taken away by party machinations. While that might be the most blatant example, it certainly isn’t the only time political parties have influenced the nomination process. Through money, power, and influence, the American people are told who would be the “most electable” candidate or who would best represents “the party”, all to get us to choose the candidate the party wants. The higher the office, the more time, money, and influence the parties expend to tell you how to vote. By the time we get to Election Day, most of the decisions have already been made, because most people vote for their party’s candidate. And as a last insult to our injury, the states have their own taxpayers paying to help take away your choice. We’ve even created a

phrase I hear almost every election: We're told we have to choose the lesser of two evils. Of course it's never mentioned that the two evils were chosen by the political parties.

## **Publicly Funded**

Since these primaries are run by the state, the taxpayer gets to pay the bill. Not just the printing of the ballot, but insuring they are distributed to each and every county. Then, of course, the county has to pay to make sure the ballots are available at each polling station. Then there's the manpower needed at those polling stations, a cost that is ever increasing as election day has been expanded to election week, and even election month. Then there are the ballot collection, counting, and reporting. And let's not forget what happens if there's a run-off or a problem? Paid for by the good ole' We the People, run by the state, and controlled by the political parties. All so that on the actual Election Day you are psychologically directed to choose only from those candidates the political parties have approved.

What most people don't seem to realize is that your state's political parties are non-profit corporations. Which means that primaries are actually elections for private organizations, the political parties. So not only are you the taxpayer paying for elections for private organizations, your own state laws are used to allow those private organizations to limit who you see on the ballot. How corrupt does that sound to you?

## **Is There a Solution?**

I've seen several people make suggestions to solve this problem, and a few states have tried. Some states have an "Open Primary", where an individual can vote in a primary without being affiliated with that party. Some states have started using "Ranked Choice Voting", where people choose up to three candidates, followed by a rather complicated process

that is used to weed the selection down to one. Others use a "Jungle Primary", also known as a "Cajun Primary" or "Louisiana Majority Vote" system, where all candidates are on the ballot. If an individual gets a majority of the vote for an office, they win. If not, then there is a run-off election between the top two vote getters. This has the advantage of getting rid of the primary, but often requires a later run-off vote.

Personally, I like the idea of just having all of the candidates eligible and running for an office on the ballot, like we see in both Ranked Choice Voting and Jungle Primaries. Of the two, I much prefer the latter. Although it does frequently delay the decision, it doesn't have the complicated "whittle down" process of Ranked Choice, and I think the cost in both time and money for a Louisiana Majority Vote are offset by the improved ability to accurately represent the will of the voters. Maybe there's another idea or an even better system. If there is, I'm not aware of it, but would be interested. So if you have what you think is a better idea, please let me know.

## **Conclusion**

It seems this idea of the political primary or its variants, have become so much a part of our election process, most people don't even realize it's a relatively new thing. While I have no problem with political parties choosing their preferred candidate, I am opposed to them doing all they can to limit my choices to those candidates.

Imagine walking into a voting booth, and the ballot listing all the names of the people who have qualified to run for office? There still needs to be some vetting process for candidates, some paperwork to request access to the ballot, and probably some process to insure there is enough support to warrant being included. Beyond that, let all comers be on the ballot and let the people decide. I know what I'm saying

sounds radical, but really it's just a return to how things used to be. I'm not saying we should go back to voice voting, but shouldn't We the People be the deciders of who we can vote for, rather than the political parties? Don't we denigrate countries like Iran and Venezuela where political actors limit the choices on the ballot? I'm not naive enough to think such a change could happen in the current spirit of revenge between our two largest political parties. For everyone who wished for a chance to vote for a third-party candidate though, shouldn't we be working to make it more possible, rather than following those fighting tribes further down the road to the ruin of our public liberty?

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