

An Open and Closed Case
End Taxation Without Representation: Repeal Closed Primaries

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Pennsylvania is the birthplace of the party primary election.

In 1842, the Democrats of Crawford County, Pa., decided to try what was then a bold experiment in participatory democracy. The county party invited all its members to vote to determine who the Democratic nominees in an upcoming election should be. It was the first direct primary election in the nation, and for a time was known as the “Crawford County System”.

Also in 1842, the fastest way to travel across Pennsylvania was by canal boat, made possible by an ingenious invention. The Portage Railroad dragged canal boats out of the water in Hollidaysburg, hauled them up and over the Alleghenies, and then put them back into the water on their way to Johnstown, Pittsburgh, and points west. It was known as the “wonder of America”.

Then, in 1854 the Horseshoe Curve was built in Altoona that made it possible to take the train through the Alleghenies. The Portage Railroad closed that same year, and today, canal boats can mostly be found in museums.

Times change. One era's bold invention becomes another's museum piece.

It's time to sentence Pennsylvania's closed party primaries to that same fate.

For more than a million law-abiding citizens living here in the birthplace of democracy, this archaic system chips away every year at a sacred right: their chance at a fair say in how their local, school, county, state, and federal taxes are raised and spent. At the same time, these voters have to pay for the very elections that they're excluded from. It's taxation without representation.

Pennsylvania is one of only nine states across the nation that clings to the most restrictive form of a primary election. Only voters who have previously registered with a party may vote in that party's primary.

It's high time to move to a new system where every voter has a genuine voice every spring. Let each party's registered voters continue participating in their party's primary. Invite independent voters to cast a ballot in whichever party's primary they prefer.

This overdue change is supported by healthy majorities of ordinary voters from every political camp, from libertarian to progressive, from Trump voters to fans of Bernie Sanders. It's been endorsed in the last few years by virtually every media outlet in the state.

Closed primaries force taxpayers to pay for elections that they cannot participate in while shutting out more than 1.1 million voters in Pennsylvania.

It's time to repeal closed primaries.

It's fair to all taxpayers

Closed primaries subject hordes of voters, of all ages, to a modern version of taxation without representation. Primary elections decide many local, state, and congressional seats. The winner of the primary most often breezes to victory in the fall. These elections cost Pennsylvania taxpayers more than \$20 million a year.

"We pay taxes, and we can't participate," says Stephen Bouikidis, a founder of the advocacy group Independent Pennsylvanians.

Creates opportunities for Independent Voters

One in eight Pennsylvania voters belongs to this category, the fastest-growing in the Commonwealth. Since 2016, the ranks of unaffiliated and independent voters have grown 30% faster than GOP registrations and 30 times faster than Democratic registrations. This despite the unfortunate irony that these voters get to vote for virtually nothing.

Closed primaries cheat primary voters of any say in who will be on the general election ballot in November. This system often leaves many voters with no meaningful say in who represents them in Congress, who decides how their town, school system, county, or Commonwealth government gets run.

A Ballot PA survey of independent voters in Pennsylvania, carried out by Mark Harris of Osage Research in the fall of 2021 found that independents would likely benefit both parties. Asked which party primary they would vote in if they could, 38% said Republican, 31% Democrat, and 31% said they were undecided. More voters at the polls in a primary election create more chances for either party to win.

Benefits both parties

When the White House is not on the ballot, turnout in midterm general elections plummets. But primary turnout in such years is even lower still, less than half the turnout in the general election. When you exclude 12% of voters from even participating, it leads to lower turnout.

While repealing closed primaries enjoys wide support, sometimes critics claim that ending closed primaries would allow parties to engage in mischief in opposing primaries. Their argument is simply false. It could happen under our current closed primary system if it were true. And if the parties want to control who votes in the primary elections, they should pay for "their" elections.

It's a straightforward administrative change

At a time when county election directors have been under enormous stress, it's important not to add to their administrative burden. A half dozen or so current or former election directors contacted by Ballot PA—from Erie to Philadelphia, with stops along the way—have suggested that implementing this process seems straightforward. Given proper time and guidance, and benefiting from the experience of states like New Hampshire and Massachusetts that have held similar primary elections for decades, they are confident that the change could be implemented efficiently and effectively. One election director suggested that on a 1-10 scale of least to most difficult, he'd give it about a 3.

Ending closed primaries is a thoroughly nonpartisan solution to the fundamental unfairness of forcing voters to pay for elections they can't participate in. It is a solution that enjoys broad, bipartisan support among voters.

It's time to tell everyone in Pennsylvania: No more taxation without representation. No more closed primaries that shut more than a million Pennsylvania voters of a full right to vote even though their tax dollars pay for primaries.

About Ballot PA

[Ballot PA](#) is an initiative of the Committee of Seventy. It is a growing coalition of civic and citizen groups leading the charge in Pennsylvania for this change that includes Business for America, Veterans for Political Innovation, the League of Women Voters of PA, Common Cause PA, Independent Pennsylvanians, Philly Set Go, Pittsburgh Urban Magnet Project (PUMP), and more. Ballot PA is also supported by two former statewide party leaders, Democrat T.J. Rooney and Republican Alan Novak. It is chaired by David Thornburgh, longtime civic leader, former CEO of the Committee of Seventy, and second son of former Republican Pennsylvania Governor and US Attorney General Dick Thornburgh.