

Making Democracy Work Series – Primary Elections

What is a Primary Election?

A primary is an election that allows members of a political party to choose a candidate to represent them in an upcoming general election. Primary elections occur ahead of general elections to determine who will be representing their party in each district's general election.

Types of Primary Elections

Primary elections can take more than one form. Below are common formats that states use across the country.

- **Closed Primary:** In a closed primary, a voter must be registered with the political party in order to cast a vote in the primary election for that party. Typically, the voter affiliates with the political party of their choice and can only vote in that party's primary election. Independent and unaffiliated voters are excluded from participating in the process.
 - **Partially Closed Primary:** In a partially closed primary, political parties are allowed to choose whether to allow unaffiliated voters or voters registered with a different party to participate in their primary election before each election cycle. For example, a political party may decide to allow unaffiliated voters to cast a ballot in their primary but exclude members of opposing political parties.
- **Open Primary:** In an open primary, voters may choose which party's primary election to vote in without declaring or registering with a political party. For example, a voter could vote in the Republican Party's primary one year and the Democratic Party's primary the next without ever declaring for either party or needing to change their affiliation. Voters cannot vote in the primary election of multiple political parties in a single election cycle.
 - **Partially Open Primary:** In this system, voters that are registered with one party are allowed to vote in the primary of a different party, but they must either publicly declare their ballot choice or their ballot selection may result in changing their affiliation to the corresponding party.
 - **Open to Unaffiliated Voters Primary:** In these primaries, unaffiliated voters are allowed to participate in any party primary. Voters that are registered with one party are not permitted to vote in the primary of a different party, but a voter that is registered with no party may vote in any primary that they choose. All voters may only participate in one party's primary. In some states an unaffiliated voter that participates in a primary must become affiliated with that party when

they cast their ballot. In other states, an unaffiliated voter may maintain their unaffiliated status after voting in the primary of a political party.

- **Top-two primary:** In a top-two primary, all of the candidates are listed on the same ballot. From there, the two candidates with the top two most votes, regardless of party, advance to the general election. For example, if there were 3 Republicans, 2 Democrats, and 1 Libertarian candidate, they would all be on the same ballot available to all eligible voters. This means that in the general election there could be two candidates from the same party or two candidates from any two parties.
- **Top-four primary:** Top-four primary systems take the same format as top-two, the difference being that the top four vote-getters move on to the general election (regardless of party).

[Review the National Conference of State Legislatures' chart of primary systems by state here.](#)

New Jersey Primary Elections

Primary Election System: *Open to Unaffiliated Voters.*

In New Jersey, only voters who are registered members of a political party may participate in nominating that party's candidates. Unaffiliated voters can declare a party up to and on election day. There is a 55-day deadline for affiliated voters to change their party affiliation to vote in the primary election of a different party by declaring a new party through a paper form. Currently, only the Republican and Democratic parties use a primary election system to select nominees.

Why do Primary Elections Matter?

- **Primary elections determine who is on the ballot in the general election.** There may be multiple candidates for your party running in a primary election, but only one or two (depending on the office) will make it to the general election. When you cast a vote in a primary election, you are voting for who will represent your party in the upcoming general election.

Why Should I Vote in a Primary Election?

- **To support a candidate who will represent your interests in the general election.** In primary elections, candidates have platforms and backgrounds that differ even though they belong to the same political party. Voting in a primary election makes it more likely that the person representing your party in the general election closely reflects your interests and values.
- **To demonstrate which policies you think should be key pieces of your party's platform.** Primary elections are your opportunity to vote for the candidates that hold positions that you believe should be priorities of your party. When large numbers of

voters cast their ballot for a candidate that holds a strong position on a policy, those votes indicate to the larger party structure that there is a strong base that supports that policy. In the past this has elevated issues, like free college tuition, to a prominent position within the larger party's platform.

- **To show new or growing support for candidates or policies within your party.** When new ideas or candidates are introduced, they might not gain full support from the party right away. But showing up to primary elections and engaging in district forums and events builds momentum for your issue that can be captured in future primary elections.
- **When civic engagement is strong, our democracy is strong.** By voting in every election, we are demonstrating that constituents are active, are paying attention, and are engaging in the democratic process. This holds our candidates and elected officials accountable to the constituents they represent, knowing that their policies and conduct are on the ballot every election.
- **Every vote matters.** Particularly in primary elections, where New Jersey still faces low turnout, a single vote can make a difference. These elections sometimes come down to a small handful of votes. You have power, use your voice and vote.