

Types of Primary Elections

A primary election is an election used either to narrow the field of candidates for a given elective office or to determine the nominees for political parties in advance of a general election. Primary elections can take several different forms. The terms of participation (e.g., whether only registered party members can vote in a party's primary) in primary elections can vary by jurisdiction, political party, and the office or offices up for election.

There are six general types of primary elections employed in the United States today:

1) Closed primary:

Only voters registered with a particular party may vote in that party's primary election. So if you are registered as a Democrat, you can only vote for Democratic candidates. If you're a registered Republican you can only vote for Republican candidates. If you are registered with a minor party, you can only vote in that party's primary-if they hold one. The top vote-getter for each party moves on to the general election.

Unaffiliated/independent voters cannot vote in closed primary elections.

States with closed primaries include: Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Idaho, Kentucky, Maryland, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Maine, Oregon, Pennsylvania

2) Open partisan primary with partisan registration:

Unaffiliated/independent voters may choose a major party ballot line in the primary; either Republican or Democrat. Voters who are already affiliated with a political party- Republican, Democrat or minor party- can vote only in that party's primary

States with a partisan primary and partisan voter registration include: Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Utah, West Virginia, Wyoming.

3) Open partisan primary with nonpartisan registration:

Voters are not required to formally affiliate/unaffiliated with a party. Every voter can choose a ballot line-Republican or Democrat-to vote in the primary.

States with a partisan open primary and nonpartisan voter registration include: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, North Carolina, *North Dakota (no voter registration), Ohio, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, Wisconsin

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4) Top two open primary:

Top two open primaries are currently used for statewide elections in Washington, California and for state legislature in Nebraska. In this type of election, there is no Republican primary or Democratic primary. There is one primary, run by the state, with all candidates and all parties (or no party) listed. Every voter can participate and vote for every candidate, regardless of party. The top-two vote getters move on to the general election.

States with a top two open primary: California, Washington. *Nebraska (state legislative races only)

5) Runoff primary:

This system eliminates the primary election altogether. Instead, all candidates, regardless of party affiliation, run on the same ballot in November. If a candidate receives more than half of the votes, that candidate is elected. If no candidate wins with a majority, the top two vote-getters face off in a December runoff election.

States with a runoff primary: Louisiana

6) Nonpartisan local primary:

Many counties and municipalities use nonpartisan primaries such as those for city council, county commissioner, or judges. Candidates are listed without party affiliation and all registered voters can vote. A candidate for a nonpartisan office who is on the primary ballot is selected if he or she wins more than 50% of the vote. If not, there is a runoff election in November between the top two candidates.

More than 80 percent of American cities use nonpartisan elections for local office. Of the 30 Largest Cities in America, 23 hold nonpartisan elections including Los Angeles, Chicago, Phoenix, San Antonio and Dallas.