

Types of Open 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 in primary elections varies by jurisdiction, political party, and the office or offices up for election.

Many states continue to employ closed partisan primaries. In these elections, only voters registered to vote with a particular party may choose that party's ballot on election day to select the party's nominee. 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.

Used in: Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Idaho, Kentucky, Maryland, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Utah and Wyoming.

Fundamentally, an open primary election allows all registered voters to participate. While there are variations by state, there are six general types of open primary elections employed in the United States today. They are:

Partisan Open Primaries: The purpose of a partisan primary is to select a party nominee.

1) 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 only vote in that party's primary

Used in: Arizona, Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, West Virginia, Maine.



2) Open partisan primary with nonpartisan registration:

Voters do not affiliate with a party as part of the voter registration process. Every voter can choose a ballot line-Republican or Democrat-to vote in the primary.

Used in: 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, and Wisconsin.

Nonpartisan Open Primaries: The purpose of a nonpartisan open primary is to narrow the field of candidates for a given elective office.

3) Top two open primary with party labels:

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

Used in: California, Washington.

4) Top two open primary without party labels:

Top two open primaries without party labels are currently used for state legislative offices in Nebraska. Many counties and municipalities also use a variation of this form for mayoral, city council, county commissioner, or judicial positions. More than 80 percent of American cities, including 23 of the 30 largest cities in America use this form.

In this type of election, there is no Republican primary or Democratic primary. There is one nonpartisan open primary with all candidates listed without any political party affiliation. Every voter can participate and vote for any candidate, regardless of party. The top-two vote getters move on to the general election.

Used in: Nebraska and most American cities.

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5) Top four open primary with ranked choice voting:

Top four open primaries are currently used in Alaska. Like the top two system, the election is nonpartisan. There is no Republican or Democratic Party primary. All the candidates and all parties (or no party) are listed. Every voter can participate and vote for any candidate, regardless of party. In this system, the top four vote getters move on to the general election where ranked choice voting is used to determine the winner.

Used in: Alaska.

6) Open primary runoff:

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 50% 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.

Used in: Louisiana.