

Editor's Pick

Opinion: Unified primary would end political polarization, toxicity in Oklahoma politics



Oklahoma is a land of generous and kind people, professional opportunity and a great quality of life, which is why both of us moved here and have stayed here since the early 1980s.

While Oklahomans have diverging political views, almost everyone agrees the state will need vibrant, successful public schools staffed with talented teachers if we want younger generations to continue to choose the Sooner State as their home. Success on this front is not a given. Supporting, maintaining and continuously improving our schools has always been a challenge. Lately, however, the teachers



in our orbit (including several family members and loved ones) have gone from cautiously optimistic to panicked about the future of education in Oklahoma.

The usual concerns about funding and resources – while still present – have been replaced with alarm over ill-defined mandates coming down from state officials with an extreme agenda at odds with the values and beliefs of the majority of Oklahomans.

The purpose of this op-ed is not to catalogue the political turmoil surrounding our public schools; readers of the the Tulsa World are familiar with it. Rather, we want to draw attention to how our system of choosing elected officials is contributing to extremism and distraction from commonsense solutions supported by most Oklahomans.

The gulf between the priorities of our elected officials and everyday Oklahomans can be laid squarely at the feet of our closed primary system. This is a system that has empowered small minorities (literally 20% or less of the voting population) of highly motivated, ideological partisans to select our candidates in primaries paid for by Oklahoma taxpayers but not open to all voters.

In the closed primary system, independents and Democrats are prohibited from voting in Republican primaries. Likewise, Republicans cannot vote in the Democratic primaries. By the time most of us vote in November, the vast majority of major party candidates either run unopposed in general elections or win in landslides.

The result of this closed system is that many Oklahomans have simply tuned out politics and opted not to vote. In the last presidential election, Oklahomans ranked 50th in the nation in voter participation. Turnout is particularly dismal among voters under 30, less than one-in-four of whom voted in November 2022.



Voter apathy and our closed, exclusionary primary system have created a vicious cycle of extremism.

Oklahoma's moderate silent majority has increasingly opted not to participate in our elections, meaning the 15% to 20% of partisans who are allowed to and choose to participate in primaries hold the vast majority of our political power.

These are the only people whose whims our elected officials cater to, and they do not align with the concerns of the average citizen.

The solution is to change our system of voting from a closed primary to what is called a "unified primary." In such a system, every voter can participate in our primaries, regardless of their party registration. And every candidate, regardless of party, will appear on one unified primary ballot, with the top two vote-getters moving to a November general election.

Only when we move to that more open, inclusive system will we create an environment where every voter — not just fringe partisans — truly matters. When every voter matters, politicians either adopt the widely shared priorities and values of their constituents or are voted out of office.

That's when we can get back to, for instance, our teachers focusing on what they do best — improving student performance in reading and math — as opposed to being forced to fight in culture war.

We are both at the stage in our lives and careers when we are asking ourselves what we can do to leave a positive legacy and a positive impact on our Tulsa and Oklahoma communities. We can think of nothing better than to advocate for the kind of commonsense changes in our democratic institutions that will increase voter participation, close the ideological divide between voters and politicians and deliver a new generation of civil servants that shares the priorities of all citizens of Oklahoma, not just the vocal minority.



We can achieve all that by pursuing open primary elections and ending the exclusionary and overly polarizing status quo.

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