THE OKLAHOMAN

Open primaries are no threat to conservatism — they're a return to it | Opinion

Pat McFerron Guest Columnist

As a lifelong conservative, a Republican pollster, and someone who has spent decades helping Republican candidates win in Oklahoma and across the country, I understand the instinct to be cautious when it comes to changes in how we conduct our elections. But I also believe that when a system no longer serves the principles we claim to uphold, we must be willing to reform it.

That's why I support State Question 836 — the ballot initiative proposing open primaries — and why I believe my fellow conservatives should, too.

Let me be clear: SQ 836 is not about allowing Democrats to vote in Republican primaries. It proposes instead to eliminate partisan primaries altogether and restore fairness and accountability to a system that's increasingly broken. Under SQ 836, all candidates — Republican, Democrat, independent or otherwise —appear on the same ballot, and all voters, regardless of party, get to choose the candidate they believe is best. The top two vote-getters then advance to the general election.

This reform is rooted in the foundational principles of conservatism — especially fairness, accountability and respect for individual rights. It puts an end to a system where taxpayers are forced to fund elections

they are not allowed to participate in. That practice runs counter to both fiscal responsibility and the conservative rejection of taxation without representation. Political parties are essentially private organizations, yet primaries are publicly funded — even though many voters are locked out from participating. No conservative should accept a structure where citizens are compelled to financially support elections that systematically exclude them.

The result of that exclusion is widespread voter disenfranchisement. In 2024, 86% of Oklahoma's federal, state and county offices either had no general election or a general election that was rendered virtually meaningless because there were not two major party candidates on the ballot. That left hundreds of thousands of voters — Republicans in heavily Democratic districts (like my district in Norman), Democrats in Republican strongholds, and independents across the board — without a meaningful vote. This isn't just a technical flaw; it's a structural failure that denies representation to large swaths of the electorate. If we believe in responsive government and equal representation, we can't ignore how many Oklahomans are shut out under the current system.

SQ 836 also protects the constitutional right of freedom of association. I fought for Oklahoma's Right-to-Work law because I believed no one should be compelled to join a union just to earn a living. I feel the same about our current primary system. It is wrong to force someone to join a political party just to cast a meaningful ballot. Whether the dominant party is Democrat or Republican, the principle remains: No one should be required to affiliate with a private organization in order to participate in a publicly funded election.

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Some worry that open primaries will weaken party organizations, but I see it as an opportunity to reinvigorate them. Since the Citizens United court decision that greenlit unlimited corporate spending in elections, grassroots activists have often been overshadowed by corporate dark money groups. SQ 836 offers a chance for the grassroots to reclaim influence. With all candidates on one ballot, party organizations will have more incentive — and more power — to engage early and endorse candidates who represent their values. That engagement can make a real difference in determining who advances to the general election.

Finally, SQ 836 creates a system that rewards candidates who can appeal to more than just a narrow partisan base. It fosters competition. It demands better ideas. And it leads to outcomes that more closely reflect the will of the people. Isn't that what we want in a representative republic?

As conservatives, we talk often about fairness, freedom, and accountability. SQ 836 delivers on all three. It's time to stop defending a status quo that no longer works and embrace a reform that strengthens our democracy, respects our principles and empowers our voters.

This isn't a threat to conservatism — it's a return to it.

Pat McFerron is a principal in a consulting firm, CMA Strategies, that does regular polling for businesses and political candidates.