

Citizen Engagement Corner

A PATH TO INCREASED VOTER PARTICIPATION - OPEN PRIMARIES

League of Women Voters of Brookline

The November 6th mid-term elections saw unprecedented turnouts nationwide, reflecting a large wave of enthusiasm and participation of groups traditionally not voting. Brookline had a high turnout of 67.6% registered voters.

Pundits attribute this turnout to many factors, including reaction to the current political climate and commitment to broader inclusion of the nation's diversity and responsiveness to its needs. The role of Independents (unaffiliated with any party) is growing, an ever larger percentage of the American electorate.

To sustain and increase voter turnout and participation, voters need to believe their vote matters and that their choices are more accurately reflected in the outcome. One strategy is Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) -- see the June 7, 2018 Engaged Citizen Corner article on RCV. The first congressional race in the nation to be decided by RCV was Democrat Jared Golden, who emerged as the winner of Maine's 2nd Congressional District race on November 6th. However, the result was challenged by his Republican opponent, who requested a recount and has asked a federal judge to order a second election.

But many are advocating for more voter engagement at the beginning of the election process, *i.e.*, primary elections. According to proponents, open primaries are an option that could boost turnout in primary campaigns, give voters more choices, and potentially lead to more moderate Democrats and Republicans.

Open Primaries: Voters can cast a vote in a primary, regardless of political affiliation, so long as they are registered to vote. The voter may choose in which party's primary to participate. Twenty-eight states currently hold fully open primary elections, according to the National Conference of State Legislators (NCSL).

Closed Primaries: Only voters who are registered members of a political party prior to the primary may participate in choosing that party's candidates. There are nine closed primary states, according to the NCSL.

Semi-closed or Hybrid Primary: Voters who have not previously chosen a political party have the option to choose which party's primary to vote in, while voters registered with a party may only vote in that party's primary. Massachusetts has a hybrid primary system. This system represents a middle ground in that independent or unaffiliated voters can still participate.

As of October 30, 2018, Brookline had 37,724 registered voters - 18,025 Democrats; 2,134 Republicans; 17,238 Unenrolled (formerly called Independent); and 327 in various political designations.

Seven states with partially closed primaries leave it up to the parties themselves, which operate the primaries, to decide if independent and third-party voters can participate.

Variations on the theme: California and Washington have a top-two open primary, where every voter gets the same ballot in the primary for most federal and state races, excluding president (as the vote for president is actually for electoral college delegates). Nebraska has had this system in place for its state legislature since 1934. One legislator declared that rather than division into teams, "Our system is relationship-based, not party-based."

According to John Opdycke, president of Open Primaries, these non-partisan elections directly challenge the grip of the two major political parties, which is exacerbated by partisan gerrymandering. If primaries were outside parties' control, millions more people not registered Democrat or Republican could participate at the beginning of the process. He also suggests that since regulating big money in politics is so difficult, an alternative is to empower the American people with more access, more power and ability to affect outcomes.

There have been legal challenges, including one filed in November 2018 in New Mexico arguing that closed primaries constitute an unconstitutional donation to a private entity (political parties), paid for by public funds and New Mexico taxpayers.

Stay tuned...

Prepared and submitted by a member of the League of Women Voters of Brookline (LWVB). The League is a nonpartisan organization that encourages informed and active participation in government and that works to influence public policy through education and advocacy.