

## Open primary could heal Florida's low voter turnout Advocates say opening the vote to all is the best way to increase voting.

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By Matt Dixon

Voter turnout in primary elections is notoriously weak, especially in Florida thanks in part to the state's closed system, some experts say.

Their solution? Go to an open primary. That, they say, will bring more voters to the poll.

Other factors - such as rainy weather, other events scheduled for the same day (the first day of school, for instance), the candidates running and other conditions - can all thin the group of potential voters on election day.

But some argue that the state's [low turnout numbers Tuesday](#) - about 20 percent of registered voters - are a result of the state's primary system, which allows someone to vote for a candidate only if they are registered with that candidate's political party. Because major candidates usually run as Republicans or Democrats, this system leaves the millions of voters outside of those parties unable to vote in some of the state's biggest races.

This year's gubernatorial primary was highly contentious, and passionate races usually bring out more voters. But because the candidates were aligned with major parties, millions of voters were left unable to chime in on the race.

"It's like being able to go to the dance, but not being able to dance," said Duval County Supervisor of Election Jerry Holland, who believes voter turnout would increase under an open primary system.

Others also believe that the current system provides little incentive for voters outside of the major parties to vote.

"I think clearly [an open primary] would improve voter turnout," said Aubrey Jewett, a political scientist at the University of Central Florida. "It just seems like the best way to [increase turnout]."

Tuesday's primary helps underscore the fact that voters outside of the major parties vote far less than their counterparts.

In Northeast Florida, 34 percent of registered Republicans and 19 percent of registered Democrats voted last week.

That number was only 8 percent for voters who do not belong to one of the major parties, according to supervisor of election data.

So, why not just become a Republican or Democrat?

**"You should not have to register with a party to vote," argued Linda Ricke, a former Jacksonville resident and founder of Sunshine Independents. "It should be a choice."**

**Her group is affiliated with IndependentVoting.org, a national organization that advocates for open primaries.**

Generally, the biggest opposition to open primaries, which are used in some variation by 17 states, comes from the political parties themselves.

They argue that it is their right to select candidates internally, and that an open primary can lead to voters in other parties cross-voting to select what is perceived to be the other party's weakest candidate.

A Florida Democratic Party spokesman said his party would defer to lawmakers on the issue, and the Republican Party of Florida did not return requests for comment.

Michael McDonald, a senior fellow with the Brookings Institution, said that open primaries can force state parties to become more restrictive.

"If the state selects to have an open primary, the parties could become more exclusive by holding caucuses or conventions to select their candidates" instead of letting voters do it, said McDonald, who has also done consulting work for the U.S. Election Assistance Commission.

**Ricke points to the growth of voters outside of the major parties - up 240,000 since 2006 - as further evidence that an open primary system is needed in Florida.**

**"With a closed primary, fewer and fewer people will be electing the people that impact all of us," she said.**

### Low turnout

Though overall voter turnout for last week's primary was lower than expected, the numbers were particularly low for those who are not registered with one of the two major parties. Many argue that opening the state's primary system to allow people to vote across party lines would help bring larger numbers of those voters to the polls. Below is a list of voter turnout figures from last week's primary.

#### - Clay County

Republican: 33 percent

Democrat: 17 percent

No affiliation: 6 percent

#### - Duval County

Republican: 33 percent

Democrat: 19 percent

No affiliation: 10 percent

#### - St. Johns County

Republican: 33 percent

Democrat: 18 percent

No affiliation: 6 percent

#### - Nassau County

Republican: 37 percent

Democrat: 22 percent

No affiliation: 10 percent