



Linda Ricke: Give independents a primary voice

*By Linda Ricke
My View*

In August, Florida voters decided which candidates would be on the ballot for the general election in November.

More accurately, a small number of Republicans and Democrats narrowed the field and decided whom the rest of us can vote for this November.

Many find this system fair. After all, Republicans and Democrats are the two major parties, so it's only fair that they have a private election to winnow down the number of candidates from each party before the general election.

But what about the 2.5 million Floridians who are registered voters but not affiliated with either of the major parties?

These voters were left out of the process except for nonpartisan races such as city and county commissions, school boards and judicial races. In an attempt to open up elections, Florida voters in 1998 amended our state constitution to say, "If all the candidates for an office have the same party affiliation and the winner of the primary election will not face any opposition in the general election (i.e. no write-in candidates have qualified), then all registered voters can vote for any of the candidates for the office in the primary election."

Later, the Legislature essentially voided the amendment when it added the section in parentheses: "no write-in candidates have qualified."

The parties have taken advantage of this loophole by putting up straw write-in candidates in the general election to keep the primary elections closed to voters of all parties.

This is a sham.

Elections, primary and general, are paid for by all Floridians, not out of the Democratic and Republican party coffers. They should be open to all voters who take the time to register and go to the trouble to travel to their local precincts and exercise their right to vote.

With all the talk about partisan politics and the gridlock, more and more voters identify themselves as independents. They do not want to align themselves with any party.

This is especially true among younger voters, the vast majority of whom have no interest in party affiliation of any kind. This trend shows no evidence of waning. As more and more people are identifying themselves as independents, with a closed-primary system such as we have in Florida, fewer and fewer people are making the decisions that affect all of us.

This must change. Our own governor, running for the U.S. Senate, could not cast his ballot in either race in the primary election of Aug. 24.

It is time for Florida to join the ranks of the majority of states (33) with open primaries.

In June, Californians approved a Top Two Primary. This is a system in which any registered voter can vote for any candidate for a particular office, regardless of party affiliation. The top two vote-getters go on to the general election. In other words, voters choose the candidate, not the party. This is done here in local, nonpartisan races, when no one candidate gets 50 percent plus one vote in the primary.

It has been said that if independents would vote as a block, they could change the outcome of many, if not most, elections in this country. Independents are by nature, well, independent. They do not agree on all of the major issues, but they do have political goals. Their main objectives include bringing meaningful structural reform to politics by ending the two-party domination of our primary elections, to redraw the convoluted borders of congressional districts that virtually ensure single-party rule in many districts, and to bring about nonpartisan administration of elections.

The time is ripe to change our antiquated primary system in Florida. We won't change things by voting in the reactionary manner where we simply switch the party that's in charge every two or four years. We don't need anger. We don't need apathy. We don't need to surrender, thinking we're helpless. We need to tell our legislators that we want choice. We want candidates who can get things accomplished without having to answer to a party. The bottom line is that they answer to us. It's time we demand nothing less.

Additional Facts

FIND OUT MORE: If you would like to join Florida Sunshine Independents in their efforts or to sign the petition in support of making Florida an open primary state, go to flindependents.blogspot.com or Independentvoting.org.

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