



OP ED: Vote in the Primary to Select Candidates for the General Election

May 2022

Primary election voting is now underway in New Mexico. Unfortunately, voter turnout in primaries is often relatively low compared with general elections. Nationally in 2018, the last non-presidential primary, only about one in five eligible voters cast a ballot. This means that a very small group of voters, and a group less representative of the general electorate, is determining which candidates will appear on the general election ballot in November.

One factor contributing to lower turnout is eligibility to participate. New Mexico, for example, requires that a voter be affiliated with one of the three major parties (Democratic, Republican, or Libertarian), leaving out those who have declined to state a party affiliation (often referred to as independent voters). The reasoning behind this restriction is that party members are the only ones who should participate in selecting the person who will represent the party in the general election. However, with increasing numbers of voters choosing not to affiliate with a party, many voters are excluded from an important step in the process. For example, in Dona Ana County almost 27% of voters decline to state a party; statewide the number is 22.5%. In our current political climate, there is cause to wonder whether excluding so many people is a good idea. Notably, younger voters are less likely to indicate a major party preference and so more likely to be left out.

New Mexico allows those not registered with a major party to join just prior to voting in the relevant primary. (This opportunity to change party affiliation during primary voting is not available to those who are already members of major parties.) A voter wanting to return to decline-to-state or minor party status then can change their registration back -- but not until 45 days after the primary election day.

During the last New Mexico legislative session there was a proposal to simplify this process but it did not come to a final vote. Under that proposal the voter would receive a ballot for their preferred primary without having to register as a party member.

Other states have adopted alternative mechanisms for conducting primaries. One of the most recent changes occurred in Alaska where voters in the primary can select from all candidates for an office, regardless of party. The top four vote-getters then appear on the general election ballot and the state uses ranked choice voting to ensure that the final choice has at least 50% of the vote.

This season the League of Women Voters of New Mexico has invited all candidates to participate in the nonpartisan online voter guide at VOTE411.org. There voters can type in their address and identify all candidates on their ballot. responses in the candidates' own words to questions about their background and positions. If you do not find responses from your candidates, please encourage them to participate. Make a plan to vote no later than June 7, learn about the candidates and cast your ballot.

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