

# The Oregonian

By the Editorial Board

8/18/2015

The Independent Party of Oregon [officially became the state's third major party](#) this month, which means it's eligible to participate in publicly funded primary elections. Its membership may be relatively tiny – just 5 percent of registered voters – but the party has managed to capitalize on some math that should worry both Democrats and Republicans: More than half a million registered voters – almost a quarter of the state's total – feel no kinship with either of the Big Two parties or any of the state's numerous minor parties. They're politically engaged – they're registered to vote, after all – but they don't have a political home ... and many are looking.

The Independent Party deserves credit for sweeping so many of Oregon's large population of disaffected voters beneath its tent. If nothing else, the party's success should motivate the two "major" major parties to pay greater attention to Oregon's legion of the nonaffiliated. Of course, this would involve a significant change of course for Oregon's dominant Democratic Party, which seems determined to undermine the upstart to which so many nonaffiliated voters have been gravitating.

ven without legislative interference, the Independent Party would face difficult prospects in the months ahead. A publicly funded primary isn't much good without candidates, and the party must find people to run under its banner by mid-September. The party is emphasizing legislative races next year rather than statewide races, says secretary Sal Peralta. However, the party's identity will be determined in large part by the candidates it attracts for statewide offices. The clock is ticking.

A less immediate challenge than finding good candidates – but surely a more serious one – is [Oregon's newly enacted "motor voter" law](#), which automatically registers Oregonians to vote using Driver and Motor Vehicle Services data. It was easy to register in Oregon already, and, in fact, those who wanted to could do so at the DMV.

The meaningful differences now are that the process is automatic and the state seeks consent only *after* it's set in motion. Soon-to-be-registered voters receive a postcard in the mail. By returning it, they can choose a political party or remain unregistered. If they do nothing, they join the ranks of Oregon's nonaffiliated voters.

The legislation passed [without a single Republican vote](#), which tells you something about its anticipated partisan impact. Those who have the most to lose, however, are members of the Independent Party, which is almost certain to lose its major-party status, at least temporarily, as a result of the law. A party joins the state's major leagues when its members account for at least 5 percent of all registered voters. By flooding the voting rolls with hundreds of thousands of people who haven't asked to be registered, the state is likely to push the Independent Party back into the minor leagues after 2016. Thus do those in political power crush the competition.

As cynical as it may be, Oregon's motor voter law does have one thing to recommend it: Lawmakers cannot, with a straight face anyway, object to the Independent Party's open-primary proposal. If only one major party decides to open its primary to nonaffiliated voters, as the Independent Party intends to do, says Peralta, its ballots should be sent to them automatically. Instead, the state sends postcards to nonaffiliated voters, and only those who respond in the affirmative receive ballots from parties willing to open their primaries. Having just decided to register people to vote automatically and ask their permission later, the Legislature can hardly oppose a proposal that would automatically give all of these automatically registered people a greater say in workings of their government.

In fact, changing state law to this end is an appropriate task for the Legislature's short 2016 session. And what with the pending 2016 primary, the Legislature can even feel good about tacking on [an emergency clause](#) to make the law effective immediately upon being signed by Gov. (and former Secretary of State) Kate Brown, whose "motor voter" bill also carried an emergency clause.

Will the Legislature thus change the law? Time will tell. Its failure to do so, however, would underscore the need for the kind of moderate and inclusive representation the Independent Party believes its candidates will deliver.