



## COMMENTARY


# Can hyper-partisan national politics convince both parties to support open primaries in Oregon?

A bill to be heard in the Legislature this week will help to answer this question.

| TIM NESBITT

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 A hearing this week in the Oregon legislature will test lawmakers' appetite for an open primary system, columnist Tim Nesbitt says. (Ron Cooper/Oregon Capital Chronicle)

Will events at the national level help break the hold that the Democratic and Republican parties have over the selection of

candidates in Oregon's closed primaries? That could be one effect of the chaos in Washington D.C. that is disrupting party politics at the local level.

[Support for open primaries](#) has been growing steadily in Oregon as more voters opt for "non-affiliated" status. These voters, who now comprise [37% of the electorate](#), outnumber registered voters in each of the two major parties.

But they remain shut out of the primary process by Democratic and Republican leaders who have regularly used rally-round-the-party appeals to their members to block any change to the current system.

Meanwhile, member loyalty has been waning in both major parties, and the hyper-partisan chaos at the national level is likely to accelerate this trend.

What are moderate Republicans to think when Elon Musk threatens to "primary" any Republican member of Congress who opposes his evisceration of the federal workforce? That chainsaw Musk waves around is also meant to keep Republicans like Eastern Oregon's Rep. Cliff Bentz in thrall to a DOGE agenda that threatens Medicaid coverage for more than 250,000 of his constituents.

And what are dispirited Democrats to think when their leaders in D.C. appear to be wandering in a wilderness of their own making? When Oregon's two Democratic Senators are openly critical of their party's leader in the Senate, this is not a party with the unity and strategy needed to meet this moment and maintain the confidence of its members.

But discomfort and disillusion among the ranks in both parties may be just what's needed to end closed primaries here in Oregon. That's because it will take more support from both Democrats and Republicans to get this done.

So, it will be interesting to see how Democratic and Republican lawmakers respond to [HB 3166](#), which would open up and expand our primary elections to all candidates and all voters on a "single unified primary" ballot. Now scheduled for a hearing Wednesday morning before the House Rules Committee, the bill was introduced by four Democratic legislators but has yet to pick up any Republican support.

There are [strong arguments](#) to be delivered in support of HB 3166 – based on the record-high number of non-affiliated voters, solid levels of public support for this reform and the unfairness of excluding the largest group of voters in the state from the all-important candidate selection process.

Still, these are policy arguments, not political arguments. And it's political pressure from the ground up that will be needed to overcome the entrenched self-interest of the major parties.

HB 3166 faces an uphill battle in the Legislature, given that most of its occupants hail from safely partisan districts where they effectively won their seats in closed party primaries.

But the organizations supporting HB 3166, including the Independent Party of Oregon, know this only too well. These are the same groups that threatened to push a [campaign finance reform initiative](#) to the ballot, which forced the Legislature to enact a compromise proposal last year.

HB 3166 can set the stage for advancing a similar strategy. It will give air time to the need for this reform, rally supporters and test the opposition. It will also give added credibility to lawmakers who are willing to pursue this issue within their party caucuses. And if the bill fails in this session, well, that's why we have the initiative process.

The power plays we're witnessing in Washington D.C. may be keeping Congressional Republicans in line. But it's not helping Republican voters who care more about their health care than they do about an oligarch's anti-government agenda, as Rep. Bentz learned at a [recent town hall in his district](#).

More voters in staunchly Republican districts may yet come to view open primaries as a welcome response to the heavy-handed enforcement of a hyper-partisan agenda within their party.

Also, despite the disarray in the leadership of the national Democratic Party, I think most Democratic voters are likely to reject a hard-left response to the MAGA movement in favor of a more practical, economically-focused agenda that can win Congressional seats and secure national majorities in future elections.

For voters in both parties, these course corrections will be easier to achieve by expanding the electorate in primary elections and forcing the oligarchs with chainsaws and special interest groups

with partisan war chests to answer to a broader and more broad-minded electorate.

If I'm right, we should see greater acceptance of the need for electoral reforms to make both parties more responsive to the electorate at large, both here in Oregon and in other states as well. If I'm wrong, even modest reforms like open primaries will be beside the point, and we'll continue to be drawn into more perilous partisan territory.



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Tim Nesbitt, a former union leader in Oregon, served as an adviser to Governors Ted Kulongoski and John Kitzhaber and later helped to design Measure 98 in 2016, which provided extra, targeted funding for Oregon's high schools.

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