

To: House Committee on Rules
From: Bill Vollmer, resident NE Portland
Re: support for HJR201
Date: Feb 3, 2026

I am submitting this testimony in support of HJR201.

The concept of unified primaries is not new. Indeed, Oregon is in the minority on this issue. Nationwide, the proportion of primary elections that are closed to unaffiliated voters dropped from 36% in 2000 to 31% in 2024.

Oregon's primary system disenfranchises the 37% of Oregon voters who are not affiliated with any party. They have no say in who they get to vote on in the general election. In addition, closed primaries tend to nominate candidates at the extremes of the political spectrum, making nomination of more centrist candidates who might appeal to members of both parties extremely difficult. Under a unified primary system, all registered voters could participate and it is likely that more moderate candidates will make it to the general election since successful candidates will most likely need to appeal to a broad swath of voters.

Reports from the [BipartisanPolicyCenter](#), [UniteAmerica](#) and other groups note the following findings:

1. Primary voters are less representative of the pool of eligible voters than are general election electorates
2. Open and nonpartisan primaries tend to produce more representative electorates than do closed primaries
3. When states allow unaffiliated voters to participate in primaries, voter turnout increases and the electorate grows more demographically and politically representative
4. Unified primaries lead to greater candidate diversity, greater competition, and reduced partisan polarization

Furthermore, the language of this bill avoids some of the problems in how such primaries are conducted in other states. Of particular importance, candidates can have party affiliations listed after their names only if those parties have formally endorsed the candidate. This provision avoids two problems that have occurred elsewhere. First, it greatly minimizes the chance that a multitude of candidates from a majority party could cancel out one another's votes with the result that no member of the majority party advances to the general election. All the majority party needs to do is endorse only one candidate. This would ensure that only that candidate would have the party's affiliation listed on the ballot. This provision of the bill would also eliminate the type of dirty tricks whereby one party could put forward multiple candidates listed under the opposite party's affiliation in a similar attempt to create this dilution effect.

Additionally, unlike previous "top 2 primary" measures and unlike the systems in California and Washington, HJR201 would still allow anyone to get on the general election ballot by collecting sufficient voter signatures, such as Betsy Johnson did in 2022. Also, any political party can opt out of the unified primary and nominate candidates directly to the general election ballot if they meet certain requirements.

A unified primary should also encourage candidates to reach out to Oregon's many smaller parties seeking their support. These parties currently constitute 7% of the Oregon electorate. Reaching out to these groups for their endorsement should not only increase the influence of those minor parties, but yet again promote the election of more centrist candidates who can appeal to a wide spectrum of voters.

The fact that unified primaries lead to greater candidate diversity and increased competition for elected offices should be seen as a big plus. A unified primary should reward candidates who can appeal not only to the extremes of their own party, but also to centrists in all parties. In turn, centrist legislators are likely to lead to a more functional Legislature rather than the gridlock that so often besets us.

Finally, some would argue that if unaffiliated voters want to vote in the primary they should register with a party. Maybe, but a good counter argument is that it is the State, not the Parties, who pays for and administers the primaries. Since the tax dollars of unaffiliated voters, currently 37% of registered voters, thus help pay for the running of those primaries, it seems only fair that they should get to vote in them. Also, remember that the law still allows parties to opt out of the unified primary and to hold, and pay for, their own primaries if they want to be absolutely sure that one of their candidates will appear on the general ballot.