



Chair Bowman and members of the committee, I submit this testimony in support of HJR 201 on behalf of *Common Ground – United We Stand*, a non-partisan non-profit focused on encouraging civic engagement and helping people understand legislative and public policy processes. We proudly support system reforms which enable people to participate in our democratic processes. All politics is local, and therefore all politics is about people.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

Oregon's closed primary system bars more than **1.3 million Oregonians from a meaningful opportunity to decide who represents them in elected offices**. Disenfranchising Oregonians is antithetical to the principals of our representative democracy, and we can change it.

I want to be clear, the problem HJR 201 solves is the categorical exclusion of more than 40% of Oregonians from fully participating in our democratic processes. Oregonians possess the right to vote for whomever they believe best represents their interests, values, and beliefs. Oregon's current system violates this fundamental right by forcing people to be members of a private organization they may not align with, simply to fully exercise their constitutional right.

The functional outcome of Oregon's closed primary system is that most general elections are decided in the primary. Blue districts are blue, red districts are red – and only a few contested purple districts exist, particularly for state legislative races. This simple fact underscores why the system needs to be changed to enfranchise Oregon voters who are not members of a major party.

## OREGONIANS WANT TO DECIDE

I frequently talk with Oregonians who do not want to be a member of either major political party, or any party at all. Some disagree with the platform and policies, while others don't like the organization itself. Many Oregonians align with each party on some issues, while disagreeing with each party on others. Exercising this personal choice, as protected by the First Amendment, should not result in the abrogation of constitutional rights.

The current emotional, vitriolic, and partisan state of politics in our country directly results from polarizing hyper-partisan political rhetoric which forces people to sort themselves into one camp or the other. As [Pew](#) research shows, members of each party increasingly see members of the other party as immoral and dishonest – politics has become personal, our social fabric and personal relationships are eroding. Continuing to force voters to choose a party will not begin to bridge the sociopolitical chasm dividing our country. Election system reforms are a necessary, but not independently sufficient, ingredient to restoring healthy political conversations. More work in other realms will be necessary. But today, in this session, the process can begin.

## ADDRESSING OPPOSITION ARGUMENTS

I'd like to take a moment to address opposition arguments that I've heard and anticipate will continue throughout this discussion.

One argument I have heard, and which I am confident will be raised again, possibly in this hearing, begins with the question – can't parties already choose to open their primaries? The answer is yes. Yet the logical follow-up question is never asked, let alone answered – so why don't they?

One possible explanation, or part of an explanation, for the Democratic Party is why would they? Oregon is a blue state, has been a blue state, and will be a blue state for the foreseeable future. A few supporting data points:

- 1987 - Oregon's last Republican Governor, Vic Atiyeh, term ended.
- 2004 to present – Democrats hold Oregon State Senate majority.
- 2006 to present – Democrats hold Oregon House of Representative majority (co-speakers in 2010).
- 2009 - Oregon's last Republican U.S. senator, Gordon Smith, term ended.
- 2021 - Last Republicans to hold a statewide office, Dennis Richardson/Bev Clarno, term ended.
- Democrats currently hold a super majority in both state legislative chambers.
- Five of the six congressional seats are held by Democrats, and
- Per the Secretary of State's January 2026 voter registration numbers, there are:
  - 1,142,917 Non-affiliated (37%)
  - 980,233 registered Democrats (32%)
  - 726,582 registered Republicans (24%)
  - 219,413 registered minor party and "other" (7%)

What incentive does the Democratic Party have to change their near complete ongoing domination of state and federal politics?

I can only surmise as to why the Republicans don't open their primaries, which may involve the party's requirement for 100% ideological loyalty. The culture war anvil which anchors Republican politics in deep red states like Texas and Oklahoma, is the same anvil that is sinking the Oregon Republican Party, in my opinion. Oregonians have repeatedly, and overwhelmingly, rejected core components of the national Republican agenda. It seems the rational and logical decision for the Oregon Republican Party to compete statewide is to adapt its platform to align better with Oregonians' values and interests, which appear to be different than the national party's interests. Yet the Oregon Republican Party keeps their primary closed, which as a private

organization, is within their purview. HJR 201 enables parties to continue restricting their primaries, but they then bear the associated financial cost to do so.

Undoubtedly, other opposition arguments will revolve around the downstream effects to political participants – parties, advocates, interest groups, and funders, etc. While this is a natural path for the discussion to take, and secondary effect considerations should be discussed, the discussion should not derail passing our proposed solution addressing the fundamental fact that **more than 1.3 million Oregonians are prohibited from a meaningful opportunity to fully participate in the process to elect who will represent them**. The other political players will adapt to the system that Oregonians choose. *Players shouldn't make the rules; the tail doesn't wag the dog.*

Compelling Oregonians to become members of private organizations violates their individual rights. I've spoken to many people who register with the major party in their district just to vote in the primaries. As previously stated, others clearly make a different choice. Additionally, forcing Oregonians to make this choice skews an important data point – one which I used earlier, voter registration numbers are likely inflated. Numerous conversations have informed my opinion that many Oregonians possess a strong independent streak. They want a government that is more socially liberal than one party's platform, and more fiscally and administratively conservative than the other. The binomial choice provided by the two major parties does not accurately reflect Oregonians' true preferences, nor does it sufficiently satiate their hunger for a pragmatic government focused on improving their lives and addressing their pressing daily concerns.

In considering opposition arguments, I think it is important to recognize the self-interested nature of political actors. Certainly, membership organizations have a duty and responsibility to represent their members, but in this case, all members are Oregonians first. Arguments to maintain the status quo should be highly scrutinized and viewed through the lens of identifying and understanding how that organization benefits.

As I've seen before, some partisan political actors will use vague secondary effect arguments to create doubt and uncertainty; capitalizing on our shared human nature to resist change. I question the motives of actors whose arguments result in maintaining the status quo, and who do not provide solutions to mitigate their concerns. Again, political actors are self-interested, and I can foresee circumstances where they put politics before people.

## **CONCLUSION**

Our solution will likely not change the fact that blue districts will remain blue, and red districts will remain red. **But what will change is that our system will further embrace our democratic principles by protecting Oregonians' right to a meaningful opportunity to decide who**

**represents them.** *Protecting our inalienable rights, liberties, and freedoms should not be partisan, it should be the common ground rallying and unifying Oregonians.*

I appreciate the opportunity to submit testimony and the committee's willingness to consider our proposal.

Respectfully,

*Charles Conrad*

Charlie Conrad

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