

Submitter: Phil Keisling  
On Behalf Of:  
Committee: House Committee On Rules  
Measure, Appointment or Topic: HJR201

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To: House Rules Committee  
From: Phil Keisling (3408 SE 8th Avenue, Portland, OR 97202)

I served as Oregon Secretary of State from 1991-99, and as a state Representative from then House District 12 in SE and SW Portland from 1989-91.

Over the decades, Oregon has been a recognized, “first in the nation” innovator in the realm of democracy reform, pioneering and implementing path-breaking laws to empower Oregon voters and boost voter turnout, especially with our vote-by mail and automatic voter registration (AVR) laws.

I’m proud that as of today, eight states and D.C. have adopted what I call full “Vote at Home” election systems – and more than 20 have followed Oregon’s lead in adopting AVR.

So it is especially painful to see that when it comes to fully enfranchising Oregon’s 1.149 million non-affiliated voters -- fast approaching 40% of all registered voters -- Oregon is truly a national laggard.

We collectively should all be ashamed. Even more to the point, it’s long past time to do something about it.

Today, fewer than 60% Oregon voters belong to either the Democratic or Republican parties.

Yet for the vast majority of the Oregon Legislature’s 90 members, winning one’s “members only” primary nomination election is far more consequential to winning office than the November general election.

You know it, and I know it -- as do all the political insiders, journalists, and lobbyists who fill these halls each session.

I remember after my own 1988 legislative victory in a heavily Democratic House district, my Republican opponent told me that if she’d actually known how lop-sided the voter registration statistics were in the district, she never would have filed for office.

And to put a finer point on it, every year we allow this situation to persist we make an even bigger mockery of the concept of “representative democracy.”

There’s also a profound generational inequity in this system, that too often gets overlooked, but which further erodes the legitimacy of our most basic political institutions.

Based on the most recent report from the Oregon Secretary of State as to the age profile of primary voters, I estimate that in the most recent May 2024 primary the median age of those who actually cast a ballot -- half older, half younger-- was approximately 62.

Ponder that statistic for a moment. Think about the “none of the above” message that is being conveyed -- by my children, by your children, even our grandchildren -- as to the value and the hope they place in our existing political system.

And this isn’t just a “youngest vs oldest” dynamic. Among voters aged 18 to 64, when you add non-affiliated voters to those who belong to minor political parties -- 1 million voters total -- half of all 18-64 registered voters are neither registered Democrats or Republicans.

At 70, I’m now a member of Oregon’s only age cohort -- 65 and older voters -- where Democrats and Republicans still dominate the voter rolls.

Yet who, over the course of their remaining lives, will be far more affected by the decisions that you and other Oregon elected officials will make -- or fail to make -- than those far younger than I and fellow Oregonians of my particular vintage?

Indeed, while many have lamented America’s “political gerontocracy problem” -- as reflected in the advanced age of so many who serve as elected officials -- arguably as important, if not more so, is the steadily advancing age of those who are doing the actual electing.

It is both a matter of basic equity -- and enlightened self-interest if we truly care about a robust, participatory democracy – to include voters who prefer to be unaffiliated with any political party on an equal basis, in every election.

Please give all voters the chance with HJR 201 to pull Oregon out of its "members only" darkness of closed primaries into the full light of equal participation for non-affiliated voters.

Thank you..