

Primary Election Systems Study Committee Report:
“Fact Sheet 2: What We Need To Know About Local Primary Elections”
 — By Lynda Mayer and Dot Christenson, Primary Election System Study Committee

Most Municipal Corporations in Ohio hold partisan primaries, as prescribed by State Law, on the first Tuesday after the first Monday of May (except in Presidential years.) However, many Ohio municipal corporations have Home Rule Charters, which means they can adopt nonpartisan variations and even different dates their citizens may prefer. To sort out and understand this, the committee researched Ohio Law and surveyed administrators or officials in 15 county Boards of Elections and 20 townships around the state, checking how their primaries work and how they think things might work better. From our detailed final report, members might find the following short summary of our findings interesting.

1. **Voter turnout in Ohio primaries is lamentable.** Turnout in recent years ranged between 5% to 37% depending not on structure but on where there were high-profile races, which issues or candidates may have been on the primary ballot. The average turnout in this spot survey was 15.61%. In our small sample, we found 16.6% turned out in the partisan primaries while 13.6% did so in nonpartisan primaries, not a statistically significant difference.
2. **The partisan process is enshrined in State Law.** The stated “primary purpose” is that party members alone select their party’s nominees in May. Candidates collect signatures from their party’s membership lists, and candidates must also submit a pledge of party loyalty with their filing. Proponents of this election system say that party involvement promotes increased voter registration, publicity and turnout. Townships generally do not have primaries, although larger ones have a standardized option.
3. **Many Ohio Charter municipal corporations have deviated from the partisan model.** Proponents of nonpartisan variations say that local issues are rarely ideological and that it is wrong to exclude unaffiliated and minor-party voters from important decisions that affect their civic lives. Other arguments center around an expectation of wider turnout, less partisanship and more competitive general elections. Still, several academics argue that structural variations in primary systems may make little difference in voter turnout.
4. **Other variables may influence the small turnout differences observed.** Apart from the current primary system employed and the high- or low-profile contests mentioned above, other factors influence turnout including timing, weather, vote-by-mail opportunity, population density, and the amount of voter information available. Some local officials also blame either apathy or satisfaction for poor participation in their primaries.
5. **Many local voters rarely experience a local primary at all.** This is partly because some charter municipal corporations -- with or without December runoffs in the case of no clear majority winner-- choose to dispense with primaries altogether and run all races at-large on a nonpartisan ballot in November. Other municipal corporations or townships attract so few candidates for local office that there is no need to go through with the exercise at all.
6. **Ohio primary voters have freedom to “crossover” to a different party’s ballot.** Any unaffiliated voter may ask for a particular party ballot and, likewise, a voter listed in one party can request a primary ballot of another party.

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It is of interest to note that Ohio Law gives poll workers the right to challenge such a request and to require such a voter to declare a genuine change of allegiance. However, several recent Secretaries of State have discouraged such challenges. If a voter crosses over to another party ballot, it is recorded and their names will appear on future voter registration lists for the newly declared party.

7. From the data collected to date, there was no evidence of polarization attributable to the use of one primary election system over another. Only one city reported a partisan insurgency that took advantage of a small voter turnout.

8. Administrative difficulties arise in populous counties with multiple primary dates and types. Board of elections officials find that various types and timing of municipal primaries, along with corresponding filing and voting deadlines and frequent “Special Elections” to decide school levies or fill vacancies, make for considerable added expense, inefficiency and extra work.

In the upcoming months, the Primary Election System Study group will interview a number of out-of-state cities that have experimented with voting systems as yet untried in Ohio, including “Ranked Choice Voting.” However, the committee has learned enough from their research to date to bring to League members several possible suggestions for how to improve Ohio's primary election system. Committee members are currently undertaking nearly 40 more interviews with experts, advocates, and other State Leagues. We will also observe a representative sample of down-ballot March 15 legislative and county primary contests. Watch for Fact Sheets #3 and #4 in future VOTERS, which will further update you on the progress of the Primary Election System Study Committee's work.