

FACT\* SHEET #4: WHAT DO ACADEMICS, ADVOCATES & STATE LWV'S THINK  
ABOUT PRIMARY ELECTION REFORM?

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This final of four Fact Sheets summarizes the results of questionnaire/interviews we conducted with academic researchers and voting advocates across the U.S. and leads up to the final phase of our LWVO study -- the consensus process at this year's end. As our 20+ subjects ventured informed opinions rather than empirical findings, we must read this Fact\* Sheet with that proverbial asterisk. We were able to contact personally about 10 experts and 10 state Leagues.

Respondents did not express a philosophical preference as to whether primary elections should be an internal party process whereby party members select their nominees, or a nonpartisan process whereby the general electorate winnows down a broader field of candidates. Nonetheless, all the state Leagues and most of the experts we consulted viewed Ohio's SEMI-closed (others often call it semi-open), partisan primary election system positively. They felt that party members could, if they wished, cross-over to vote in another party's primary, while unaffiliated voters could also request a party ballot if desired. Respondents were not aware, however, of Ohio's statutes (currently not enforced) regarding official challenges to primary voters who do so. And, of course, many primary voters do not realize or take advantage of Ohio's cross-over possibilities

Of those experts & activists who preferred alternative forms, some spoke favorably of nonpartisan primaries where the top two primary winners advance to the general election. We note here that about half of Ohio's c. 250 charter municipalities have already opted for such a system. A few other experts noted that, for local governments, it can also save considerable expense to do away with primaries entirely. In a separate survey of seven cities and some Leagues in Oregon, California and Maine, we note some interest in "Ranked Choice Voting," which also does away with primaries, this time by inviting voters to designate their first, second, and third choices among the candidates. The consensus questions and Study Guide which follow soon will give members details and pro/con arguments for these and other options, so that they can reach informed opinions on each.

We also asked our respondents to consider some goals that any primary election system should strive for, so that we can evaluate any future proposals we may encounter in our state or local jurisdictions. Most thought these important -- to increase voter participation, enfranchise unaffiliated voters, simplify election administration, lessen partisan polarization and improve competitiveness. We ran a number of other goals by them as well, but those simply did not make the cut. A few notable experts even cautioned that there are many good ideas but that "tinkering with election systems will probably not accomplish many of them." One more cautionary note was expressed by all: Unanticipated consequences would likely accompany many if not all of the structural reform options discussed -- which is not to discourage the conversation, but only to encourage deeper digging.

One issue which we did not ask for nevertheless came up often between the lines -- that of the opposition to systemic primary election change by the political parties, who are very concerned

with any structural reforms with potential for strengthening or weakening them. Some expressed the opinion that political parties actually do more to help than to hinder voting in all the states. We found a clear difference of opinion between those who want to empower independent voters and those who believe in strong political parties.

These Fact Sheets (the other three are in past issues of the Voter available under the Member Area of [www.lwvohio.org](http://www.lwvohio.org)) present a condensed overview of the work our PES Study Committee has just completed. We invite you -- no, urge you -- both to review them and to look for the consensus questions and PES Study Guide as soon as they go up on the LWVO website in late September. While elections are still hot on our minds, AFTER our November 8 exertions, all Local Leagues need to sit down together and ponder whether and/or how Ohio (or our towns!) should or could improve on the way we run our state's primary elections.