



Foundations First #20: The Primary Process

What Is a Primary Election and Why Does It Matter?

For many Americans, primary season arrives quietly, with little fanfare compared to the general election in November. Yet in much of the country, the primary election is the election. A primary election is the process by which political parties select their nominees for the general election. Depending on the state, primaries may be:

- Closed (only registered party members can vote in that party's primary)
- Open (voters may choose which party's primary to vote in, regardless of registration)
- Semi-closed or semi-open (variations allowing unaffiliated voters limited participation)
- Top-four primaries with ranked-choice general elections (e.g., Alaska)
- Top-two or "jungle" primaries (all candidates appear on one ballot; the top two advance regardless of party, as used in California and Washington)

Primaries exist because American elections are largely organized around political parties. The general election ballot is typically limited to party nominees and a small number of independent or minor-party candidates. In many congressional, legislative, and local districts, one party consistently dominates general elections. Political scientists often measure district competitiveness using metrics like the Cook Partisan Voting Index (PVI), which estimates how strongly a district leans toward one party relative to the nation. In very partisan districts, the opposing party's nominee has little chance of winning in November. In these districts, the primary effectively decides who will hold office. That means the decisive electorate may not be the broad community, but rather the small subset of voters who turn out in the primary.

Who Votes in Primaries?

One of the most significant features of the American primary system is low participation. According to the U.S. Elections Project, turnout in presidential general elections regularly exceeds 60% of the voting-eligible population. By contrast, primary turnout is typically far lower, especially in midterm and local election years. In many congressional and state legislative primaries, turnout can fall between 15–30% of registered voters and often lower as a share of eligible voters. In some local races, particularly municipal or state legislative contests without major statewide attention, turnout may dip into the low teens or single digits. Low participation matters for several reasons:

1. **A Small Electorate Makes Big Decisions:** When 10–20% of eligible voters vote for a nominee in a safe district, that small group is selecting the official for the community.
2. **Primary Voters Differ from General Election Voters:** Research shows that primary electorates tend to be older, more politically engaged, and more ideologically consistent with party platforms.
3. **Incentives Shift Toward the Most Motivated Voters:** Candidates tailor their campaigns to the voters most likely to show up. When turnout is low, campaigns focus heavily on mobilizing ideologically reliable supporters rather than persuading the broader middle of the electorate.

This does not mean primary voters are extreme or unrepresentative by intent. It means that participation patterns shape outcomes and incentives follow participation.



How Primaries Influence Polarization and Governance

Low-turnout primaries do more than determine nominees. They shape political behavior. The following are a couple of the most noticeable forms of how low-turnout primaries do so.

Incentives and Messaging

In competitive primaries, candidates often differentiate themselves from rivals within their own party. Because the electorate is smaller and more ideologically attentive, candidates may emphasize sharper contrasts and clearer ideological commitments. Political scientists have debated the extent to which primaries drive polarization. Some research suggests that ideological donors and activists have significant influence in primary contests, potentially reinforcing more ideologically distinct candidates. Other studies indicate that broader political sorting and geographic polarization also play major roles. Regardless of the cause, the structure of primary elections can reward candidates who appeal strongly to highly engaged partisan voters rather than to cross-partisan coalitions.

Legislative Behavior

Once in office, elected officials often remain attentive to the voters most likely to participate in their next primary. In safe districts, the greater threat to reelection may come from a primary challenger rather than from the opposing party in November. This dynamic can influence:

- Policy positioning
- Willingness to compromise
- Tone and rhetoric
- Engagement in bipartisan coalition-building

Scholars have observed that when legislators fear primary challenges from their ideological flank, they may adopt more rigid positions to deter challengers.

Voter Disconnection

When voters skip primaries but participate in general elections, particularly in districts where the general outcome is effectively predetermined, they may feel that their vote carries little weight. Over time, this can reinforce cynicism about political representation. Yet the missed opportunity often occurs earlier in the cycle.

Strengthening Democratic Participation in Primaries

If primary elections frequently determine who governs, broader participation is essential for representative outcomes.

Understanding the Process

Voters can take several practical steps. They can verify their registration status and party affiliation, especially in closed primary states. They can track candidate filing deadlines, which will vary by state. They can review candidate platforms and public records before early voting begins and work to understand ballot structure, including whether the state uses open, closed, or top-two systems.



Recognizing “Early-Deciding” Elections

A district labeled “safe” is not necessarily uncompetitive, it may simply be competitive earlier in the year. The decisive contest may occur in March, April, or June rather than November. Participation at that stage ensures that:

- A broader cross-section of the community influences the outcome.
- Candidates must build coalitions across factions within their party.
- Campaign messaging reflects community-wide concerns rather than narrow segments.

Civic Culture and Constitutional Principles

Healthy democratic systems rely on engagement where decisions are actually made. Primary elections are not procedural formalities; they are gateways to public office. If participation is limited to a small share of voters, outcomes will reflect that limited participation. Expanding engagement in primaries:

- Broadens representation
- Aligns incentives with the full electorate
- Strengthens accountability
- Encourages coalition-building
- Reinforces constitutional norms and rule-of-law principles through broader civic involvement

When Primaries Produce Unrepresentative Leadership

One of the most significant consequences of the current primary system is that it can produce leaders who are less representative of the communities they serve. Because primaries often attract only a small share of eligible voters, the group that effectively chooses nominees may not reflect the broader electorate in terms of ideology, priorities, or demographics.

In districts where one party is dominant, the primary election frequently determines the eventual officeholder. When that decisive contest is decided by a small and highly engaged segment of voters, the resulting nominee may represent the preferences of that narrow electorate rather than the full community. In practical terms, a candidate can secure office by appealing strongly to a small faction of voters even if that candidate would not have been the first choice of the broader electorate.

This dynamic creates a structural gap between public opinion and political representation. Surveys consistently show that large portions of the American public hold more moderate or mixed policy views than the positions commonly associated with partisan political debates. Yet candidates who appeal to that broader middle may face disadvantages in primary contests if their potential supporters are less likely to participate in those elections. Over time, this can produce legislatures and governing bodies that appear more ideologically rigid than the voters they represent.

In effect, the system can filter candidates through a narrow stage before the general public ever has the opportunity to weigh in. By the time the broader electorate participates in November, the range of viable choices has often already been determined by a much smaller



electorate months earlier. The result is not necessarily the outcome most voters would have chosen if the full community had participated in the decisive election.

Reforms that Reward Responsible Leadership

If the current primary system often rewards candidates who appeal to narrow factions of voters, reforms to the election process can help create conditions where broadly appealing, responsible leaders are more likely to succeed. Many candidates who focus on pragmatic problem-solving, constitutional norms, and responsible governance can struggle in low-turnout primaries, even when their views align closely with the broader electorate. When the decisive stage of an election is dominated by a small, highly engaged slice of voters, candidates who appeal to a wider coalition may be filtered out before the general public ever has a chance to weigh in.

This dynamic has been especially visible in recent years for candidates who emphasize institutional stability, democratic norms, and cross-party cooperation. These candidates often perform well with general election voters and with independents, but they may face steep obstacles in primaries where turnout is small and incentives reward sharper ideological positioning. As a result, the system can sideline leaders who might otherwise build broad support across their communities.

Several reforms have been proposed to address this challenge by widening participation and rewarding coalition-building earlier in the election cycle.

One approach is nonpartisan primaries, in which all candidates compete on the same ballot regardless of party affiliation. Instead of competing only for a party's most consistent voters, candidates must appeal to a broader electorate from the start. This structure can create space for candidates who prioritize competence, stability, and pragmatic governance.

Another reform involves top-four primaries followed by ranked-choice voting in the general election, a system designed to allow multiple viable candidates to advance and give voters the opportunity to express a range of preferences. Because candidates benefit from earning second- and third-choice support, the system encourages more constructive campaigns and rewards those who can build wider coalitions.

Finally, expanding participation in primaries, including allowing independent voters to participate more fully, can better align the electorate deciding nominations with the electorate that ultimately governs. When the voters participating in the decisive stage of elections more closely resemble the broader public, candidates who emphasize responsible leadership and democratic principles have a clearer path to success.

Reforms like these do not guarantee any particular outcome, but they can help ensure that candidates who appeal to the broad middle of the electorate (rather than to narrow factions) have a fair opportunity to compete and win.

Conclusion: Where Democracy Actually Begins

Democracy does not begin in November. In many communities, it begins months earlier during primary elections that often determine who will ultimately hold office. In heavily partisan districts, the decisive choice happens in the primary, not the general election. When



participation in that stage is limited, the outcome reflects a narrow slice of the electorate rather than the full community.

The future direction of governance is frequently shaped in these overlooked contests. Primary elections influence not only who wins, but how candidates campaign and how officials govern. When engagement is narrow, incentives narrow. When participation broadens, representation strengthens.

Ensuring that these elections reflect the community requires awareness of when and how primaries operate, and a commitment to participating at the point of decision. A healthy democracy depends on engagement where power is actually determined. In many places, that moment comes long before November.