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Top 4 Nonpartisan Primary – Ranked Choice Voting Final

We have a government in which the two parties cater to their bases. There are few competitive elections. Most are dominated by negative campaigning. There are few remaining moderates. Government is polarized. Officials of the two parties will not work together to get things done. Governments in Washington and throughout the country are in gridlock. It is time to consider a better electoral system that will work for all the people.

In our White Papers, we have supported Nonpartisan primaries and Ranked Choice Voting (RCV). However, there is one concept that could resolve many of the issues with both and truly reform our political system. This concept, which has been eloquently presented by Professor Michael Porter of Harvard Business School and Katherine Gehl, a successful businesswoman, is the best idea we have heard.

Here is how this system would work.

- Primary elections would be nonpartisan. Any qualified candidate could run. The top four vote-getters, regardless of party affiliation, would move to the general election.
- The general election between these four candidates would be decided by Ranked Choice Voting (RCV).

This system utilizes the advantages of both nonpartisan primaries and Ranked Choice Voting while minimizing the disadvantages of each system.

Top 4 Nonpartisan Primaries

In the primary, any qualified candidate can run, regardless of party. The top four vote-getters will move to the general election. These Top 4 Nonpartisan Primaries should result in many candidates expressing divergent positions, high turnout, competitive elections, more opportunities for independents and moderates, much less negative campaigning, less control by big money donors, and more willingness by the winners to govern in a bipartisan or nonpartisan manner.

- Because the primaries are nonpartisan, independents and moderates would be encouraged to run. This would lead to a large number of competitive candidates advocating different positions.
- Turnout should be extremely high because, with a large number of candidates competing for the final four spots, most voters will have at least one candidate whose positions they support.
- With four candidates moving to the general election, the risk of having both candidates from the same party or too many similar candidates splitting the vote is overcome. This has been one of the weaknesses of the Top 2 Nonpartisan Primary system.

- Since candidates want to win the general election, this system is likely to lead to less extreme positions, less mudslinging, and more civil campaigns. A candidate that takes extreme positions or engages in negative campaigning may make it through the primary, but that candidate is unlikely to win the final election. With Ranked Choice Voting in the final election, the candidates who are most likely to win are those who can build coalitions.
- Big money donations become less important. In a jurisdiction controlled by one party, big money only needs to ensure that its candidate in the dominant party primary wins. With four candidates moving the final election, the power of big money is severely limited.
- Since the winning candidates will be chosen by all the voters, instead of the party bases, they should be more willing to govern in a bipartisan or nonpartisan manner. With more bipartisan or nonpartisan officials, government should function better and actually serve the interests of the people.

Ranked Choice Voting Final Election

With four candidates, the final election will be decided by Ranked Choice Voting (RCV). There will be one election in which voters rank the candidates in order of preference. In this system, the candidate with the least number of votes will be eliminated after the first round. Voters that gave that candidate a #1 will have their votes transferred to the candidate to whom they gave a #2. These rounds will continue until one candidate has received 50% of the remaining votes. That candidate will be declared the winner.

This system has many advantages. It should lead to high turnout, winners who espouse moderate positions, and much less negative campaigning, less influence by big money, and elected officials who are willing to govern in a bipartisan or nonpartisan manner.

- In current primary elections with RCV, many votes are “exhausted”. In other words, they are disqualified because voters do not fill out all of their choices. With four candidates in the final (general) election, voters are more likely to fill out all of their choices. This should ensure that almost all votes will count.
- Less educated voters will not be disadvantaged. When there are a large number of candidates in a primary election with RCV, less educated voters are less likely than more educated voters to fill out all of the choices. With only four candidates in the final, this should not be an issue.
- With four candidates in the final election, turnout should be extremely high because voters will have multiple choices.
- With four candidates, elections will be more competitive.
- Winning candidates will likely be those who appeal to the broadest coalition of voters. The key to victory may not be receiving the most #1 votes. Rather it will be getting the #2 or #3 votes from the other candidates who are eliminated.
- Polarizing candidates and candidates staging negative campaigns are likely to lose, because while they may receive many #1 votes, they are less likely to receive many #2 and #3 votes.
- Winning candidates will be less indebted to big money donors or party leaders. As a result, they will be more willing to govern in a bipartisan or nonpartisan manner.

This system will thus lead to more independents and moderates being elected, higher turnout, more cooperation between candidates, and less negative campaigning.

This all sounds very exciting, so the question is—why don't all jurisdictions use this system?

There are two major reasons why this system has not been implemented:

- It threatens the two major political parties and
- It is complicated.

This system of nonpartisan primaries with the top four advancing to the final elections (settled by RCV) directly threatens the control of the two parties and their bases.

- In nonpartisan primaries, the parties lose much of their control over the nomination process. The party's favored candidate does not gain a substantial benefit from the party's nomination or a favored spot on the ballot.
- The presence of independents in the race threatens to undermine the control of the dominant party in the jurisdiction. Voters select the candidates they like, not the ones the party tells them to like.
- A process that tends to support moderates directly threatens the bases of each party. Right-wing Republicans and left-wing Democrats can win in traditional party primaries, but they will often fail to win in this system. Without control of the process, parties lose their power.
- Big money will give less support to the individual parties and instead focus on individual candidates. Big money is the lifeblood of both parties.
- Since the officials will be elected by the voters, the two parties will have less power to force these officials to tow the party line.

In California, Democrats, like Nancy Pelosi, and Republicans, like Kevin McCarthy, have railed against nonpartisan primaries. If political leaders do not like nonpartisan primaries, they will really hate this system.

The question that citizens should ask is: Are the two parties really serving the needs of the people? Under these two parties, we have a system that is polarized. There are few competitive elections. There is little bipartisanship. Government on a national level appears broken. Perhaps the parties should serve the people instead of the other way around.

This system is also complicated.

- Except in a few states, voters have not experienced nonpartisan primaries.
- Except in Maine and a few cities, voters have not participated in elections with Ranked Choice Voting.
- Many voters like the security of knowing their party is controlling the election and do not want to take the trouble of learning a new system.

However, we believe this system can be easily explained and that complexities can be overcome with proper education. Once a few municipalities or states begin to utilize this system, others will begin to understand its benefits.

CONCLUSION

We currently have a system of government in which the two parties cater to their bases. There are few competitive elections. Independents and third-party candidates have virtually no opportunity to be elected. Most elections are dominated by negative campaigning. There are few remaining moderates. Government is polarized. Officials of the two parties will not work together to get things accomplished.

The concept of having open nonpartisan primaries with the Top 4 candidates moving to a final election that will be decided by Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) solves most of these issues. With this system, we should have more candidates, higher turnout, more moderation in campaigning and governing, less control by big money interests, and representatives who are willing to govern in a bipartisan or nonpartisan manner, so that government stops being paralyzed.

We think this is the type of government our country deserves. We think this election reform could bring about major positive changes.