

Proposal For New LWVUS Study: “ALTERNATIVES TO PARTISAN PRIMARIES” *

Submitted By:

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SCOPE

We propose a national study to explore state, county or local primary election provisions to determine the kinds of primaries that have the best chance to increase voter participation and provide competitive general elections. The study would concentrate on publicly administered primaries but would also consider effects of party-conducted nominating processes and look at how independent and minor-party voters’ interests are considered in primaries.

This study will:

- Select and classify examples of primary systems from federal to municipal primaries;
- Gather turnout and other information describing the nomination procedures from state election laws, constitutions, and county or city government charters;
- Compare current primary systems to newly proposed variants currently in the public discussion;
- Formulate general principles about primary systems that would likely increase turnout, result in more competitive general elections, and possibly lessen political polarization in all elections.

The need for such a study is grounded in recent election reporting and research which shows that most state and federal legislative district lines have been drawn in ways that exaggerate political homogeneity, resulting in non-representative, skewed legislatures and unaccountable “safe seats.” As general elections become increasingly predictable, primaries are the elections where one’s vote has a realistic possibility of influencing an election outcome. And yet, partisan primaries often prohibit cross-over voting and appear to disenfranchise non-affiliated or third-party voters. With traditionally sparse turnout (largely each party’s activist base), primary winners then commonly advance to a weakly contested or uncontested general election.

An Internet survey of state LWV positions found no state with a position relating to primary elections, even though likely action can only be taken at state (or local) levels. An in-depth understanding of primary systems can lead to the adoption of general principles or positions that augment the League’s existing election-related positions and provide effective guidance to evaluation and action at state, county and municipal levels.

BASIS IN EXISTING LWVUS PUBLIC POLICY POSITIONS:

Principles (www.lwv.org/content/principles):

“The League of Women Voters believes.....

— "...that that every citizen should be protected in the right to vote. . . .”

— "...that responsible government should be responsive to the will of the people. . . .”

Positions: (www.lwv.org/content/public-policy-positions)

— Representative Government: Promote an open governmental system that is representative, accountable and responsive.

— Voting Rights/Citizen’s Right to Vote: Protect the right of all citizens to vote; encourage all citizens to vote.

Statements: (www.lwv.org/content/protecting-and-engaging-voters)

— "Rooted in the movement that secured the right to vote for women, the League has worked to . . . enhance access to the vote. . . . Our work has evolved . . . to ensuring that all eligible voters... have the opportunity and information to exercise their right to vote.”

— "Voting Rights: We seek to protect and expand voting rights through proactive reforms.”

— "Election Reforms: We work to improve how elections operate at all levels and support proactive reforms to keep our nation's elections, free, fair, and accessible.”

*** DEFINITIONS:**

Partisan Primaries – closed and semi-closed primaries, where the only voters in a primary election already are or automatically become members of that political party

Alternatives – all variations of, or alternatives to, the above-defined “partisan primaries”, both those already in use around the country and those which have been proposed in theory

