

PRIMARY ELECTIONS IN OHIO AND PARTY AFFILIATION

An area poll worker (and League member) tells the true story of an encounter with a voter during a past primary election. As the voter approached the precinct sign-in table the worker asked for the voters name and address, in order to verify it in the polling book. The worker then asked the voter for her party affiliation and was met with the reply, “None of your d--- business!”

Obviously the offended individual was not aware of the peculiarities of primary elections and the role they play in our democratic process. Ohio has a direct, closed primary election process, which means that candidate voting is limited to those citizens who have declared their party affiliation. Non affiliated voters *may choose* to become officially affiliated with a particular party by requesting that party’s ballot at a primary election. When a voter declares a party preference at a primary election in Ohio, they are then considered members of that political party. This is where the confusion appears to begin in the minds of some voters.

Primary elections are held to narrow the field of candidates for the general election in the fall. In Ohio, the primary is frequently used to select party officials and “nominate” candidates who will run for office in the fall general election. When you register to vote for a specific party in a primary, your vote helps that party choose the strongest candidate to run against candidates from other political parties in the general election. Party affiliation is in no way binding in the general election in the fall when a voter may privately choose whichever candidate they consider to be the most qualified.

Voters who have participated in previous primary elections and wish to change their party affiliation may do so at the polling place on primary election day. To change party affiliation a voter has to simply state that he/she wishes to change party affiliation. The voter may be asked to sign a statement saying they wish to be affiliated with, and support the principles of, the party whose primary ballot they are requesting.

Issues may be voted on at a primary election as well. Issues are on a separate nonpartisan ballot and voters may vote on issues at a primary election without stating a party affiliation. Voters can vote on issues regardless of whether they vote on any candidates.

The Ohio Revised Code defines three types of political parties in Ohio. A major political party is the one whose nominee for governor received at least 20 percent of the vote in the last election. An intermediate party is one whose candidate received between ten and 20 percent of the vote. A minor party is one whose candidate received at least five percent but less than ten percent of the vote or who has filed a petition signed by one percent of the voters at the last election for governor. Parties are no longer officially recognized by the state if that party fails to poll five percent of the total vote cast for governor.

Question: How does Ohio differ from other states, like New Hampshire, regarding the record of a voter’s party affiliation?

During New Hampshire’s recent primary election it was reported by the media that the large number of undeclared voters could have an impact on the primary election results. This large “list” of undeclared voters is the result of a difference between how New Hampshire and Ohio treat a voter’s party affiliation.

In Ohio, your party affiliation of record is a result of the party ballot you cast during a primary election. And, once that ballot is cast, an Ohio voter remains a “member” of that party until another primary election when he/she may choose to change that party affiliation.

However in New Hampshire that state’s election law allows an undeclared voter to declare a party at the polls, vote the ballot of that party, and then change his/her party affiliation back to undeclared status by simply completing a form available at the polling place. That form must be completed by the voter before leaving the polling place, or his/her ballot will place them on the “list” of the declared party. This is just one example of the differences in election law that exist across the country.

The above information is a summary of information contained in a League of Women Voters publication entitled: Know Your Ohio Government and also from the New Hampshire Secretary of State’s website (www.sos.nh.gov/vote.htm)