Submitter:	Phil Keisling
On Behalf Of:	HB 3166
Committee:	House Committee On Rules
Measure, Appointment or Topic:	HB3166

To: House Rules Committee
From: Phil Keisling (3408 SE 8th Avenue, Portland, OR 97202)
Re: Support for Unified Primary Act (HB 3166-2)
I served as Oregon Secretary of State from 1991-99, and as a state Representative prior to that. Over the decades, Oregon has been a recognized, "first in the nation" innovator in the realm of democracy reform, pioneering and implementing powerful laws to empower Oregon voters and boost voter turnout, especially with our vote-by-mail and automatic voter registration (AVR) laws.

I'm proud that as of today, eight states and D.C. have adopted what I call full "Vote at Home" election systems – and more than 20 have followed Oregon's lead in adopting AVR.
So it is especially painful to see that when it comes to fully enfranchising Oregon's more than 1 million non-affiliated voters, Oregon is truly a national laggard.

While HB 3166-2 isn't perfect, it would go a long way to helping right decades of bad public policy in this state, which has consigned Oregon's non-affiliated voters to second-class citizenship when it comes to their ability to participate in the primary elections. This is an especially grievous inequity given that these closed, major party-members only contests are essentially "all that matter" in the vast majority of partisan races, here in Oregon and across the U.S.

Nonaffiliated voters (NAVs) today outnumber Democrats and Republicans. Their ranks have grown 4x the rate of major parties since 2016, when AVR was enacted. And by tolerating a system that clearly works to suppress the voices of younger voters, it's a demographic fact that we're disproportionately suppressing the voices of more racially diverse voters, too.

Indeed, as of the November 2024 election, the Oregon Secretary of state reports that almost half of the state's voters under 50 are now NAVs. Little wonder that in the last, May 2024 primary, the median age – half older, half younger – of those who actually cast ballots in the primary was about 64 years of age.

Merely "inviting" or making it easier for nonaffiliated voters "re-register" in a major party" isn't just ineffective. Its disrespectful. Primary elections are paid for by Oregon taxpayers. And it is both a matter of equity -- and enlightened self-interest if we truly care about a robust, participatory democracy – to actively work to include these voters on an equal basis in these key contests.

I strongly believe that nothing Oregon could do today would do more to boost voter turnout and decrease polarization -- a conclusion that's also backed up by research from the Princeton Electoral Innovation Lab, Bipartisan Policy Center, Unite America Institute, Sightline Institute and other well-respected sources.

While the proposed Top-2+ policy in HB 3166-2 isn't perfect, its clear intent is to let all registered Oregon voters to vote in these primary elections, on an equal basis. And if our highly professional, remarkably hard-working election officials are able to send the same ballot, to all their voters, it will significantly ease their administrative burdens and costs as well.

(Though if I may be permitted, I would also strongly encourage you and your legislative colleagues to right another decades-long wrong, and provide our 36 counties with significant, dedicated funding to help defray the costs of running these state-mandated elections, whose costs now fall almost wholly on local taxpayers.)

I recognize this is a complicated arena, and I'm aware that current amendments to HB 3166 have made significant changes to the original bill – which would have established a "Top 5 + RCV" election system. Whether you support or oppose that idea, given Measure 117's defeat last fall, that's simply not a viable reform option at this time.

But none of that is a reason for inaction, especially when this decades-long inequity – the disenfranchisement of non-affiliated voters in Oregon – continues to grow with each passing year.

Thank you.