

Submitter: Jon Wright

On Behalf Of:

Committee: House Committee On Rules

Measure, Appointment or Topic: HB3166

While the idea of a unified primary, where all candidates are presented to all voters with the top two advancing to the general election, may seem like a fair and inclusive system, it introduces significant risks that could further erode the public's trust of Oregon's electoral process. Specifically, it opens the door for strategic manipulation by voters who could intentionally vote for the weakest candidate from the "other side" to manipulate the general election outcome.

Oregon's political landscape is highly competitive, with a large number of independent voters and strong participation from smaller parties. This diversity means that voters often make their choices based on issues and ideology instead of simply on party affiliation. However, a unified primary could lead to a dangerous situation where voters from one side of the political spectrum intentionally vote for a candidate whom they perceive as weak or unelectable, with the aim of improving the chances of their own preferred candidate in the general election.

This type of strategic voting—aka "voting for the spoiler"—would be far easier in a unified primary system. For example, if conservative voters in Oregon know that a liberal candidate with extreme views is likely to be an easier target for defeat in the general election, they may vote for that candidate, so that their preferred conservative candidate has an easier chance of winning in November. Similarly, liberal voters might target a far right Republican candidate, ensuring that their preferred liberal candidate has an easier path to victory in the general election.

This manipulation would distort the democratic process. Instead of voting for the candidate they genuinely believe is best suited to represent them, voters would be incentivized to vote strategically—potentially choosing candidates who does not align with their actual values—just to ensure their preferred candidate has a better shot at winning the general election. This not only undermines the integrity of the election but also leads to outcomes that may not truly reflect the will of the electorate.

Moreover, Oregon's history of competitive races and the strong presence of independent and smaller-party voters makes it especially susceptible to this kind of gaming of the system. In Oregon's current system, voters are already able to express their genuine preferences for third-party candidates, and strategic voting is limited. But in a unified primary, this vulnerability could be exacerbated, especially as voters might increasingly feel they need to vote not for who they truly support, but for whom they think will be easier to beat in the next round.

Additionally, such manipulation could lead to an erosion of trust in the election

process. Voters may become disillusioned with a system where the results are influenced not by the popularity or ability of candidates but by strategic maneuvers and tactical voting. This could result in lower voter turnout and disengagement, as the public realizes that the primary process no longer represents genuine preferences but rather a contest of who can outsmart whom.

In conclusion, while a unified primary may sound like a way to create a more inclusive system, it will actually lead to significant problems by encouraging strategic voting and manipulation. Oregon's political diversity and independent voter base make it particularly vulnerable to this kind of system gaming, which could distort election outcomes and reduce trust in the electoral process. To preserve the integrity of Oregon's democracy, we should focus on reforms that enhance fair representation, rather than opening the door to tactical manipulation that undermines voter intent.