

Secretary Gale submitted this article to Nebraska newspapers for their consideration.

## **Closed primary elections serve an important purpose**

By John Gale

With the presidential primary season underway, Americans are hearing a lot about open and closed primaries.

An open primary allows a registered independent to vote for races in either the Republican or Democratic primary. A closed primary is limited to registered voters of that particular party. Nebraska is a closed primary state.

There are some who advocate that Nebraska adopt an open primary system, as a way to promote more democracy and accommodate the growing number of independents in the state.

Let me offer a counter view. I believe an open primary system would seriously weaken our two-party system.

We have depended upon a two-party system from the beginning of our nation, even though the U.S. Constitution didn't address the issue. The Republican and Democratic parties have regularly traded the role of governing on the state and federal level.

Clear differences of principle and policy have existed between them and have allowed people to choose the party and the candidates that best reflect their views. From their ranks came the campaign workers, party leaders and candidates, working as a team to promote their vision for laws and government programs.

We need parties to advance ideals and principles that a majority of citizens can coalesce behind at times of general elections. Majority rule sustains the rule of law. Hence, our strong two-party system is essential.

Registered party members voting in a closed primary have the assurance of knowing that whichever candidate prevails, that candidate will largely share the fundamental principles of their party.

In an open primary, choices become more a matter of popularity and less of principle. Consequently, campaigns are less of a grass-roots effort by party members and are more concentrated on spending money for ads, mailings and paid workers. Thus, the candidates without clear party credentials are advantaged by the vote of independents, and the party faithful can be divided or dissuaded at the time of the general election.

Independents are customarily wary of the parties and don't often serve as campaign workers or hold fund-raisers for candidates. Those who do the yeoman work in the trenches – knocking on doors, making phone calls, raising money, putting up yard signs – are those who deserve the right to choose their party candidates without the skewing of the primary by independents.

It is argued that independents don't always have input into who appears on the general election ballot. There are alternatives for such voters. The easiest is to become a registered

member of a party. There also is the ability to form a new party or petition a nonpartisan candidate onto the general election ballot.

Twenty-six states have closed primaries, 21 states have open primaries and three states use hybrid systems, according to the Council of State Governments.

Although Nebraska is listed as a closed primary state, that doesn't tell the whole story.

Members of the Legislature are elected on a nonpartisan basis, which is unique in the United States. Under a U.S. Supreme Court decision, independents in Nebraska are allowed to select a party's primary ballot for U.S. Senate and House seats. In addition, the vast majority of offices in Nebraska are elected on a nonpartisan basis.

The result is that independents exercise a much larger voice in Nebraska than they do in other states that have closed primary systems.

Nebraska partisan races are concentrated in the state constitutional offices and county offices. It's not as much as parties would like, but it still is enough to stimulate enthusiastic grass-roots campaigns.

The Nebraska closed primary system serves a valuable purpose in our nation's tradition of having a strong two-party system.

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