

# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

## Is open-ballot voting a new idea?

No. Open ballot voting was once universally legal, and was largely responsible for the success of the various third parties that fought for abolition, women's suffrage, and the interests of family farmers in the 19th century. Open ballots were a common practice during the late 1800s in Maine and played an essential role in the 1878 and 1880 elections, each time allowing a joint Democratic-Greenback candidate to win the election. These elections are considered the initial reason why Republican-controlled state legislatures sought to ban fusion starting in the 1890s.

## Why do we want more people voting for third parties?

Even with open-ballot voting, most voters will continue voting for the same parties they do now. But for voters who already vote for third parties, or who stay home on election day, open-ballot voting will give them the real voice in state politics that they currently lack. For others, a vote on a third-party line will let them send a clearer message about the issues they care about.

## Where are open ballot used today?

Open ballots are still legal in Connecticut, Delaware, Mississippi, New York, South Carolina, and Vermont. They are most commonly used in New York and Connecticut.

## Would this result in lots of new parties cluttering the ballot and confusing voters?

No. States with open ballots generally have three or fewer recognized third parties. Many states without open ballots have far more.

## What if a party gives its endorsement to someone who doesn't want it?

Candidates will be free to accept or reject nomination, just as they are today.

## Would independent parties be forced to endorse major-party candidates?

Not at all. Open ballot voting is about more options, not less. With open ballots, alternative parties will be free to choose whether they want to cross-endorse another party's candidate, run their own, or stay out of a race altogether.

## How does open ballot affect primary elections?

It only affects general elections. The rules for primaries will not change.

## Why would someone vote for the same candidate on a third party line instead of the major party?

Some people might like a particular candidate but not want to support his or her party. Some might want to show support for the party that they feel represents them. Some might use the third party endorsement as a "seal of approval," showing which candidates share their values. And some might want to send a message on a particular issue. Whatever the reasons, in states with open ballots, a large portion of voters do vote on minor party lines.

For more information or to get involved, email [info@openballotvoting.org](mailto:info@openballotvoting.org).

### More resources on fusion voting

- Peter H. Argersinger, "A Place on the Ballot: Fusion Politics and Antifusion Laws" 85 *American Historical Review* 287, 288 (1980)
- Steve Cobble and Sarah Siskind, *Fusion: Multiple Party Nomination in the United States* (2003, Center for a New Democracy)
- Lisa J. Disch, *The Tyranny of the Two-Party System* (2002, Columbia University Press)
- Melissa R. Michelson and Scott Susin, "What's in a Name: The Power of Fusion Politics in a Local Election," *Polity*, Vol. 36, 2004.

# What Is Fusion?

- a Some kind of nuclear power
- b A practical, common-sense reform to election law
- c A long-standing tradition in American elections
- d A way to increase voter turnout and reduce partisan bickering
- e All of the above

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# FUSION VOTING

## What It Is, How It Works, and Why It's The Right Choice for Maine

In elections today, third parties can be a problem. At best, they encourage votes for candidates who can't win. At worst, they act as "spoilers," with votes cast for them having the opposite of their intended effect. And because they have little impact on the real world of policy-making, they leave some of our most active, committed citizens effectively shut out of the political process.

This wasn't always the case. For much of our country's history, minor parties played a vital role engaging voters and bringing new ideas into the political mainstream. Parties like the Free-Soilers, Greenback, Prohibition, and most famously, the Populists ran candidates in thousands of elections, in coalition with one of the major parties, and so avoided the "wasted vote" problem that makes third parties marginal today. They invigorated our democracy by bringing ideas like abolition, the eight-hour day, and even temperance into the public discussion.

They were able to accomplish this because the voting rules in Maine, as in every other state, used to be different. The electoral system we used for the first 135 years in this country is called different things by different historians—cross-endorsement, multiple party nomination, plural nomination, and fusion—but it all means the same thing. We call it open ballot voting, and we believe it is time for Maine to revive it.

### The Mechanics

Open ballot voting has just one difference from current election rules: Different parties can nominate the same candidate, yet keep their own place on the ballot. That may sound small, but it has a big impact. By giving third parties the choice of supporting major-party candidates or running their own, it solves the "spoiler" and "wasted vote" problems. And by creating a more informative ballot, it leads to better-educated voters and more accountable, issue-oriented politics.

With open-ballot voting, voters have the option of voting for a candidate on the line of any party that has endorsed them. Votes for each party are tallied separately, but added together to determine the winner. When voters see that several parties have endorsed a candidate, they have more information about where that candidate stands. And when candidates win with third-party votes, they have a better sense of what voters want.

### SAMPLE BALLOT

**Governor**  
Vote for one

**Mary Smith**  
Major Party 1

**John Jones**  
Major Party 2

**Mary Smith**  
Oregon Party

Write In

## FIVE WAYS FUSION VOTING IS GOOD FOR DEMOCRACY

- 1 Fusion increases voter participation.** In elections today, participation is high among some groups, but overall turnout is near record lows. Polls show that the idea of a third party is especially attractive to groups with low turnout rates. By allowing meaningful votes for third parties, ballot freedom will help bring these disaffected voters to the polls.
- 2 Fusion solves the "spoiler" and "wasted vote" problems,** by allowing voters to choose third parties without "spoiling" (helping elect their least-preferred candidate) or wasting their vote. People are free to vote for a third party and for a candidate who can actually win.
- 3 Fusion ballots provide more information for voters.** A ballot that shows which other parties have endorsed a major-party candidate helps voters make informed choices. Consider a major-party candidate who also runs with the nomination of the Fair Trade or Right to Life parties. Voters now know where they stand on a critical issue – something major party labels alone don't convey. This is especially helpful in "down-ballot" races, where voters may have little information about the candidates.
- 4 Fusion increases accountability.** Voters get to pick a candidate and a party, so the results don't just say who won, they say why. That sends a clear message to elected officials, and leads to a more responsive, accountable politics.
- 5 Fusion helps break legislative logjams and lead to more issue-based politics.** In New York State, where fusion is still used, some of the biggest legislative breakthroughs have come on issues championed by a minor party. Two examples: The Conservative Party helped push tax cuts through the Democratic Assembly, and the Working Families Party helped push a minimum wage increase through the Republican State Senate. By basing their appeal on specific issues, third parties can build a base of support that bridges partisan divides, and reward elected officials who deliver results.

### FUSION VOTING IN MAINE HISTORY

OPEN BALLOT VOTING IN MAINE HISTORY - Open ballot voting has a long history in Maine politics. In 1878 and 1880, the Democratic and Greenback Parties fused to win the governorship. In 1880 that "fusion" victory was razor-thin – only 226 votes – prompting some historians to point to this election as the impetus for the Republican-controlled legislature to ban open ballot voting in Maine. Following Maine's lead, Republican-controlled state legislatures across the country began banning open ballot voting throughout the 1890s.

TODAY - In 2007, 40% of Maine voters are not enrolled in the Democratic or Republican parties. That translates to 409,582 potential voters who could be brought into coalition with one of the major parties by re-legalizing open ballot voting.