

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Is fusion voting a new idea?

No. Fusion 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. Fusion ballots were used in Oregon until 1895, when big banking, steel, and railroad interests pushed the legislature to outlaw them.

Would fusion lead to more people voting for third parties?

Even with fusion, most voters will continue voting for the same parties they do now. In fact, the major parties often find that fusion is a good way to reach out to new voters. But for voters who already vote for third parties, or who stay home on election day, ballot freedom 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 is fusion used today?

Fusion is still legal in Connecticut, Delaware, Idaho, Mississippi, New York, South Carolina, and Vermont. Fusion tickets 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 fusion generally have three or fewer recognized third parties. Many states without fusion 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. Fusion is also called ballot freedom because it's about more options, not less. 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 fusion affect primary elections?

It only affects only 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 fusion, many voters *do* vote on minor party lines.

How do we restore fusion in Oregon?

All it takes is a simple change in state law, which can be either passed by the legislature or approved by voters in a ballot initiative.

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.

For more information or to get involved, email info@openballotvoting.org.

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

The Oregon Ballot Freedom Project
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FUSION VOTING

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

When most people hear “fusion” they think nuclear power. But what they should think is, a simple election reform that solves the problem of third parties.

Because 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 do this because the voting rules in Oregon, 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, ballot-freedom – but it all means the same thing. We call it *fusion voting*, and we believe it is time for Oregon to revive it.

The Mechanics

Fusion 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 “ballot freedom” to support major-party candidates or run 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 fusion voting, voters have the option of voting for candidates 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 OREGON HISTORY

Fusion was legal throughout the 19th century in Oregon, and it was common for both major parties to run fusion tickets with various smaller third parties. But fusion ballots became most important in the 1890s, with the rise of the Populist Party.

The Populists were a major force in rural areas throughout the Midwest and West, and parts of the South. Populists ran joint candidacies with both major parties, depending on which was more responsive to the needs of small farmers and artisans. In Oregon, a quarter of the 1892 electoral votes went to a joint Populist-Democratic ticket. In several mid-1890s Oregon elections, fusion tickets of Populists and a major party together took over 50 percent of the vote, even though neither party had a majority by itself. By allowing the Populists to elect candidates, fusion voting gave Oregon's struggling small farmers a voice in state government.

The small farmers wanted affordable railroad rates to ship their produce to markets, and relief from onerous debts. In 1895, the railroad and banking interests that opposed these reforms succeeded in banning fusion voting. While a joint Democratic-Populist ticket had won a majority in elections just before ballot freedom was abolished, in the 1896 Presidential election the Republicans eked out a narrow victory.

In the 1890s, third parties – not only the Populists but also the Citizens Party, the Union Party, and others – regularly elected more than a tenth of Oregon's legislature. In 1895, there were 12 third-party legislators. Ten years later, there were none. As one Populist put it, the end of fusion voting “practically disenfranchise[d] every citizen who does not happen to be a member of the party in power.”