

Kentucky's closed primaries exclude fastest-growing voter group

By McKenna Horsley
Kentucky Lantern

On May 19, about 1 in 10 registered Kentucky voters will not be eligible to cast a ballot in the state's partisan primaries because they are not Republicans or Democrats.

Kentucky is one of eight states in the nation that have closed primaries, or primaries that allow only registered members of the Republican and Democratic parties to cast ballots in those parties' primaries. Still, Kentuckians in increasing numbers have been registering as independent or third party in recent years.

Some elected officials, including Republican Secretary of State Michael Adams, have voiced support for opening the state's primaries. However, Kentucky's top GOP legislative leaders — Senate President Robert Stivers and House Speaker David Osborne — said last week that they would oppose opening primaries.

"There's too many shenanigans and too many other things that can happen,"

Stivers told reporters. He argued that all Kentucky voters have the ability to choose a party when they register and was wary of members of an opposing party trying to influence the outcome of the other's primary.

"If you want to vote in a primary, choose your party," Stivers said. "Everybody will get to vote in the fall."

Osborne said that House Republicans have discussed the idea from

time to time, but "I think anything that would be a truly open primary would be a non-starter."

"I have always believed that parties should pick their own nominee, so somebody would have to convince me, but I would love a way to find, especially in primaries, a way to generate more voter participation," Osborne said. Republicans hold most statewide offices and supermajorities in the state House and Senate.

Increasingly, primary elections decide future office holders. Sixty-one of the 119 General Assembly seats on the ballot this year will have uncontested general elections in the fall, meaning winners will be decided in May.

"We select so many ultimate office holders in primaries, and yet, there are places in this state that will turn out, eight, nine, 10%, and that's not a good representation of the electorate," Osborne said.

Adams told the Lantern he's supported the idea of opening primaries for a few years because "it makes a lot of sense on a few levels."

Independent voters are the fastest growing voter bloc in the state, he said.

The form of open primaries Adams backs lets independent voters choose which primary they want to vote in, which, he says, encourages the top two political parties to

court independents instead of "just responding to the most zealous parts of their base."

"They're taxpayers. They're voters. They have every right to vote,

and it's unfair, I think, to them to tax them to pay for the elections and then not let them vote, especially as the primaries become more and more important," Adams said.

one way or another." "My biggest thing is allowing those independents and third-party voters to have a say at some point in the electoral cycle," he said. "And right

That might be the kind of half measure that's necessary to get this across the line," Adams said.

However, Adams is not optimistic that any of this could change by the

Miller said.

Others disagree. Former Republican Party of Kentucky spokesman Tres Watson said that if voters have an interest in voting in a party's primary, they should change their registration.

"I don't think that we would let the University of Louisville pick the starters for the University of Kentucky in the UK-UofL game," Watson said. "And I don't think that we should allow members who choose not to associate with a political party choose that party's nominees for office."

In the past, independents were voters who thought the two major parties didn't go far enough with their beliefs, Watson said, and now they are typically more in the political center.

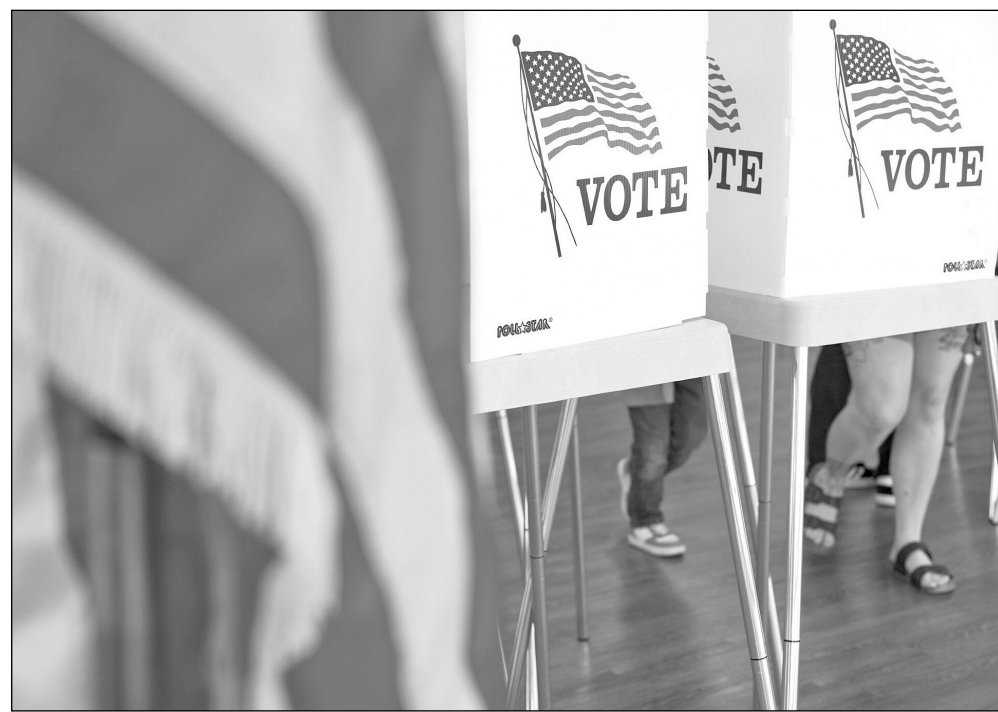
"And that's the wrong tactic to take," he said. "If you're frustrated with the direction of your party, get more active in primaries."

Joshua A. Douglas, an election law expert and University of Kentucky professor, said there is "literally no evidence" that "party raiding," or the idea that one opposing political party will direct voters to vote in the other's primary, actually happens. It would require "a lot of coordination," he added.

In general though, closed primaries mean independent voters can't participate in elections.

"Because of partisan gerrymandering, in many places, the primary is the only game in town, and so therefore having closed primaries means that many voters are shut out of the only election that actually matters," Douglas said.

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KENTUCKY LANTERN PHOTO BY AUSTIN ANTHONY

Registered independents are the fastest growing group of Kentucky voters. They are ineligible to vote in party primary elections.

"Increasingly because of political polarization, rural areas are getting more Republican and urban areas are getting more Democratic, and the primary becomes the general."

One Democratic lawmaker, Rep. Adam Moore, of Lexington, is working on legislation that would introduce "inclusive primaries" in Kentucky. His proposal would open primaries to registered independent and third-party voters if multiple candidates of the same party are running and there is no opposing party candidate in the general election.

"It's a foot in the door to make sure that when the primary election becomes the general election that independents and third-party voters get to have their say," Moore said.

As for opening primaries in general, Moore said he was "open to the idea of it," but "it's not a hill I'm going to die on

now, when you just have multiple people in one primary only, then those voters have zero say that entire electoral cycle."

Moore said he's talked to a few county clerks about the idea, as well as Adams.

Asked about Moore's proposal, Adams said that he was not at a point where he could endorse Moore's bill, but had advised the lawmaker to make it simple to get it across the finish line and to find a GOP co-sponsor.

If lawmakers are not comfortable at present with changing the law, Adams suggested making it optional for parties to have open primaries. The National Conference of State Legislatures calls that a "partially closed" primary, and it can be found in nine states, including Kentucky neighbor West Virginia.

"That encourages the parties to want to court the independents, but it doesn't force it on a party.

upcoming May primary. It would be "a major undertaking" not just for the legislative process, but election officials who will have to run that election," he added.

Former Democratic state Treasurer Jonathan Miller told the Lantern he was open to Moore's idea, but he's also for letting voters choose their primary when they go to the ballot box. He said a current issue facing voters is gerrymandered districts, where only one party can win. In closed primaries, voters tend to pick "more radical" candidates as the winners.

Miller said that while opening primaries would benefit Democrats it also would benefit "mainstream conservative Republicans."

"This would enable the election of more people who are reflective of what would be the center of the Republican Party, as opposed to the far right of the Republican Party,"

KY Proud hosts Retail Readiness Workshop to support ag. producers

Special to the News-Graphic

Kentucky Proud, the official marketing program of the Kentucky Department of Agriculture, hosted a one-day Retail Readiness workshop in Lexington, equipping Kentucky producers with strategies to expand their market reach.

The workshop, now in its second year, partnered with the Kentucky Center for Agriculture and Rural Development (KCARD) and the University of Kentucky's MarketReady Producer Training Program, providing an overview of marketing trends, peer-to-peer panels, discussions, product reviews, and advice from a variety of local retailers, as well as hands-on workshops for marketing planning and story development.

"We had an astounding turnout at the one-day workshop for Kentucky agriculture producers," Agriculture Commis-

sioner Jonathan Shell said. "Agriculture is economic development and creating pathways to help our producers develop a plan for a larger market share benefits for both the producers and the state."

Attendees learned from the retail community including representatives from Meijer, Kroger, Stepping Stone Farm, and The Frazier History Museum Gift Shop to identify local products that are best matched for placement, as well as the process for new vendors and safety certifications.

"Partnering with Kentucky Proud and participating in events like today's provides us with a valuable opportunity to build direct relationships with local suppliers," said Meijer Supplier Relations Manager Travis Reams.

Attendees heard from other agricultural producers such as the Kentucky Cattlemen's

Association and Wildcat Mountain Dairy who are successfully selling in the retail space and support their products with marketing plans.

"I made two contacts for new business from the exposure and networking. I want to focus on sampling where we are already located to build up sales," said Leslea Barnes, third-generation farmer from

Barnes Farm & Milling Company. "I intend to utilize existing email database options to reach customers for repeat orders and to maximize the return on the point of sale software I already have. I'd like to focus on building up and improving where we are and use that knowledge to expand to other locations."

Each participant left

the workshop with the building blocks for a personalized marketing plan and an outline for their story, ready to approach potential buyers with confidence. Participants also submitted products to be reviewed anonymously by mass retailers, specialty retailers, and industry design professionals who provided coaching and feedback on the overall

marketability and attractiveness of their items.

The workshop served as a steppingstone for producers preparing for a Kentucky Proud Vendor Expo taking place Sept. 18, 2026, at the Shelbyville Conference Center. The expo will provide an exclusive buyer event for emerging Kentucky Proud retail ready members.

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