

## Key Data

- Taxpayers spend **nearly \$288 million** on primaries in closed-primary states that exclude more than 26 million voters.
- Non-partisan primaries have been found to reduce ideological extremes among legislators.
- The benefits of non-partisan primaries differ significantly when only the top two candidates advance to a general election (as is the case in California and Washington) as opposed to the top 4-5 advancing to a general election using ranked choice voting (as is the case in Alaska where the top 4 advance to the general election).

## Just The Facts Issue Brief

# NON-PARTISAN PRIMARIES

### What is a non-partisan primary?

A non-partisan primary is open to all candidates and voters, regardless of party. Depending on state law, the top two or more candidates advance to the general election. Washington and California have non-partisan primaries in which only the top two finishers advance to the general election. Alaska has a non-partisan primary in which the top four finishers advance to the general election and that general election utilizes ranked choice voting.

### Why is this issue important?

Primaries usually determine which candidates appear on the general election ballot. Partisan primaries are financed by the public but controlled by the parties themselves.

### Status in Connecticut

Connecticut has a system of partisan primaries. The primaries are run by the two major parties but paid for by the public. State party conventions select party nominees over 90% of the time. In the less than 10% of races in which primaries are held, the parties exclude the 41% of state voters who aren't affiliated with a party even though the state pays for the primaries.

### Important questions states, communities and citizens should ask

1. Do the major parties have too much control over publicly funded elections and, as a result, over who gets to appear on the general election ballot?
2. What's more important, the right of parties to choose their own candidates in publicly funded primaries, or the right of voters to participate in the elections they fund?
3. Do closed, partisan primaries produce more extreme candidates? If so, is that bad?
4. If only the top two candidates from a non-partisan primary advance to the general election as in California and Washington State, does it actually reduce competition by making it harder for other candidates to get on the general election ballot?

## Key supporting Arguments

- **Non-partisan primaries would produce candidates who are less extreme.** Ideological extremes have too much control over who appears on the general election ballot because they are usually over-represented among voters who participate in partisan primaries.
- **Today, 85% of U.S. elections are decided in partisan primaries**—which generally have low voter participation rates—rather than in a general election.
- **If the public pays for it, the public should have access to it.** Taxpayers fund primary elections, but the partisan primary system allows the major parties to use public dollars to finance primaries that exclude unaffiliated voters.
- **Non-partisan primaries would eliminate the fear of being “primaried,”** which often pushes elected officials to embrace more extreme positions.

## Key Opposing Arguments

- **The two-party system has served the nation well;** we should reform the parties, not the system.
- **Non-partisan primaries other than top two primaries require use of ranked choice voting** in the general election and ranked choice voting is a bad idea.
- **Top two non-partisan primaries can actually reduce electoral competition** by making it extremely difficult for a third-party or independent candidate to get on the general election ballot.

Connecticut Compact is an initiative launched by American Compact, Inc., a 501(c)3 non-profit seeking to build consensus on pressing challenges and opportunities in selected states, starting with Connecticut.