

What Are Primary Elections, and Why Do We Have Them?

The elections most familiar to voters are the General Elections held in November for President or Governor. There are many other races at the same time, but in each race, only one Democrat and one Republican (at most) are on the ballot.

Why aren't there more Democrats and Republicans on the ballot? Answer: the Democrat and Republican parties in Texas hold Primary (meaning "first") Elections in March. Voting in the Primary is the first step in taking part in the party conventions. In these primaries, voters in each party hold their own elections to choose the ONE candidate they want to appear on the ballot in November. Why do they do this?

Primary Elections protect voters. Without a Primary, the candidates from the most-popular party can "split the vote" and allow a candidate from the less-popular party to win. How can this happen?

In a simple example, voters typically vote 60% for the Sunshine Party and 40% for the Clueless Party. Because the Sunshine Party is so popular, there are more candidates from the Sunshine Party than the Clueless Party in this race. Let's assume there is no Primary, and 4 Sunshine Party candidates are running against 2 Clueless Party candidates.

General Election (no Primary)				
	<u>Sunshine Party</u>		<u>Clueless Party</u>	
Candidate A:	225	Candidate X:	250	Winner
Candidate B:	200	Candidate Y:	150	
Candidate C:	100			
Candidate D:	75			
Total Sunshine Votes:	600	Clueless Votes:	400	

Problem: Clueless Candidate X won with 25 votes more than the next-closest candidate. Sunshine candidate voters were shortchanged even though they were in the majority. Why? There were too many candidates on the ballot. The Sunshine voters had so many choices that their candidates knocked each other out of the race. They needed to decide which ONE candidate they wanted on the ballot.

Solution: Have an election of just Sunshine party voters BEFORE the General Election, and the Clueless Party can have their own election, too. All the candidates who want to run can enter the Primary without taking votes from their party's candidate in the General Election.

Rewind: Let the party voters pick one candidate to represent them. Assume the same 1000 people voted, 600 for the Sunshine Party candidates, and 400 for the Clueless Party candidates:

<u>Sunshine</u>		
<u>Party Primary</u>		
Candidate A:	225	Winner
Candidate B:	200	
Candidate C:	100	
Candidate D:	75	
Total Sunshine Votes:	600	

<u>Clueless Party Primary</u>		
Candidate X:	250	Winner
Candidate Y:	150	
Clueless Votes:	400	

Each party has now chosen its one candidate for the General Election. Candidate A of the Sunshine Party will face Candidate X of the Clueless Party in November. (This example assumes there is no runoff election – more later.)

In the General Election in November, 1000 people vote again, 600 for the Sunshine Party candidate, and 400 for the Clueless Party candidate:

<u>General Election (with Primary)</u>				
<u>Sunshine Party</u>		<u>Clueless Party</u>		
Candidate A:	600	Winner	Candidate X:	400

This time, the Sunshine Party candidate won, probably more closely representing the will of the people than a General Election without a Primary.

The above example is very simple to illustrate the need for a Primary. However, there are some factors that can make the process a little more complicated.

1. If no one candidate in the Primary gets more than 50% of the total votes cast in that race, there would be another election, called a runoff, between the top two finishers. The winner of the runoff goes on to the General Election. The runoff is held because voters sometimes choose the second-place candidate over the first-place Primary winner. In this example, Candidate B could defeat Candidate A in the runoff and would go on to the General Election.
2. This example also assumed the same number of voters in each election. In reality, the Primary elections have far fewer voters than the General Election. ***Each individual vote has a proportionally larger impact in the Primary than in the General Election*** because of the lower voter turnout.
3. The example also assumed that all the Sunshine Primary voters voted for the Primary winner in the General Election. However, if Primary voters are very displeased with the Primary winner, they may not vote for him in the General Election. ***Not voting for the Primary winner, or voting for a third-party candidate, can result in the other party's candidate winning the election.***
4. Voters in the Primary sometimes want to choose the straight-party option. That is not possible in the Primary because ***all candidates in a party primary claim to belong to that party.*** They're either all Sunshine or all Clueless.

