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BIPARTISAN OPEN PRIMARIES LEGISLATION INTRODUCED
Proposal would allow 900,000 independent voters to vote on candidates in taxpayer-funded primary elections

ERIE, PA – Senator Dan Laughlin (R-Erie) today introduced legislation, SB690, that would significantly expand the franchise in Pennsylvania by allowing independent voters to participate in either the Democratic or Republican primaries.

The Commonwealth is now one of only nine states with fully closed primary elections, barring nearly 1.3 million registered voters—15 percent of the electorate—from participating in spring primary elections. This is especially consequential in odd-numbered election years, where candidates are vying for numerous local offices and powerful judgeships; the winners often face little or no competition in the general election before entering public office.

Senator Laughlin’s legislation encompasses the same proposal as former Senator President Pro Tempore Joe Scarnati’s SB300, which would enable independent voters unaffiliated with any political party from choosing either the Democratic or Republican ballot each spring. Democratic and Republican voters would still be bound to their own primary ballots, and other third party voters and candidates would continue to participate in the general election.

Last session’s bill passed the Senate in a historic 42-8 vote, the only instance in recent memory where a legislative chamber anywhere in the United States had approved open primaries legislation. Other states evolving their primary elections to expand the electorate and address political polarization are doing so with a citizen-driven initiative process that is unavailable in Pennsylvania.



“We’ll continue to have the benefit of observing how other states implement various primary and electoral reforms, including promising innovations with nonpartisan primaries and ranked-choice voting,” said Committee of Seventy CEO David Thornburgh. “But for now, allowing independent voters unaffiliated with any political party to have a say on people who will represent them in public office should be a no-brainer.”

Pennsylvania’s closed primaries, which limit voter participation to only Democratic and Republican registered voters, have been the status quo since the advent of direct primaries as a critical reform in the late 18th century. But in recent years, the number of voters unaffiliated with any political party has steadily grown, as has political polarization and legislative gridlock over major issues, especially in Washington D.C.

“I’ve been an independent voter and have organized around this issue since 2006,” said Jennifer Bullock, founding director of Independent Pennsylvanians. “And it’s been remarkable to see the surge of interest in finally opening our primaries to taxpaying Pennsylvanians who don’t affiliate with any political party. We believe expanding the franchise makes our politics and governance stronger.”

View the [video from the press conference](#) Sen. Laughlin hosted with the League of Women Voters on the [Open Primaries PA Facebook page](#).

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Open Primaries PA is a growing coalition of civic and business organizations committed to open and free elections in Pennsylvania that lead to responsive and accountable government. Learn more about the coalition and why Pennsylvania’s closed primary system must change at OpenPrimariesPA.org. Follow us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

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