

# The Built-In Danger of Open Primaries

By Leslie Mills

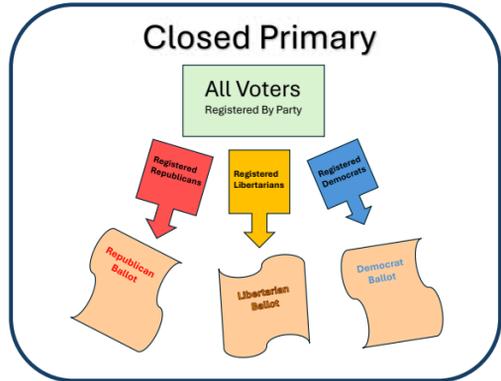
Open Primary Election Season is underway in Montana for 2026. The Primary Election will be held on June 2, 2026. This election will choose the candidates for the General Election in November. The information that follows describes the process for Open Primaries versus Closed Primaries.

Montana does not have Closed Primaries. It is important that voters understand them both to be able to understand the inherent problem that arises with every Open Primary held in the state.

First, a brief description of Closed Primaries is in order. **Closed Primaries** are not used in Montana due to legislation that passed in 2015. This legislation, HB 454, was introduced, supported and eventually passed through the efforts of Rep. Steve Fitzpatrick – “R” eleven years ago. He was ultimately censured by the MTGOP for his role in this legislation as it is diametrically opposed to the MTGOP Platform. The following is the process of Closed Primaries:

In Closed Primaries, party candidates for the fall General Election are decided by a process in which

- Voters register by party affiliation.
- The party a voter registers with determines the ballot a voter receives. Hence, Democrats vote the Democrat Ballot, Libertarians vote the Libertarian Ballot, and Republicans vote the Republican Ballot.
- This allows voters from each party – Democrat, Libertarian, and Republican – to determine their candidate for the General Election *without interference from other parties.*
- There is no “crossover” voting between parties. This process is shown in the graphic Figure 1:



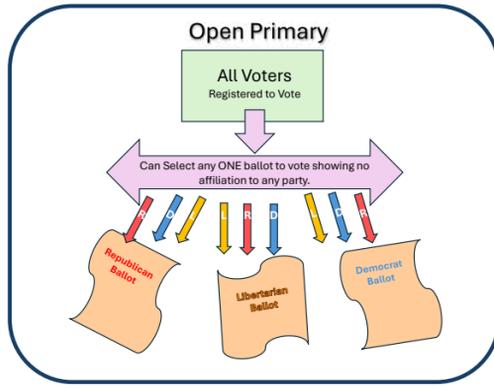
**The major concern cited against Closed Primaries was that some individual voters don’t want to have to register with a particular party, often deciding not to vote at all.**

### What is an Open Primary?

As stated previously, Montana codified Open Primaries through Legislation (HB454) written by liberal Republican Steve Fitzpatrick which was passed in 2015 giving the state of Montana Open Primaries in direct opposition to the MT GOP Platform. The process for Open Primaries is different than the process for Closed Primaries and can lead to some interesting strategies and plans that disrupt voting outcomes. What follows describes the Open Primary process and is shown in the accompanying graphic to help readers understand the differences in Open Primaries.

Unlike Closed Primaries, in Open Primaries:

- Voters simply register *to vote* without designating a particular party.
- When voters arrive at the polls or when they receive mail-in ballots, voters receive **ALL THREE party ballots** - Democrat, Libertarian, and Republican.
- They must choose only ONE ballot on which to vote. Voters vote the one ballot of their choice.
- Confusion regarding this process in the past has invalidated ballots where a voter used all three ballots, casting ballots for different parties at the same time.



### What are problems beyond this confusion?

Beyond the confusion described that has occurred, a more insidious issue evolved as parties determined ways to manipulate the voting outcome ultimately impacting everyone’s votes. The plan that springs from Open Primary voting relies on uninformed voters relying on “the letter after the name” to inform their voting. Further, Open Primaries are ripe for strategies of manipulating outcomes through “Crossover Voting”, which was an issue in the 2024 primary. There are signs that it could happen again in 2026. Crossover voting is explained by accompanying graphics Figure 3.

As a strategy in Montana Open Primaries, candidates can identify *at will* with any party they want to *regardless of their political ideology.* In the current Open Primary, no less than three candidates have done this: Josh Racki, Tony Rosales and Kevin Leatherbarrow. Racki, the County Attorney in Cascade County, has run as a Democrat in the past, but changed parties in November 2025 to run as a Republican. Both Rosales and Leatherbarrow have run previously as Libertarian candidates, but have changed parties as recently as January 2026, to also run as Republicans. Questions to ask yourself:

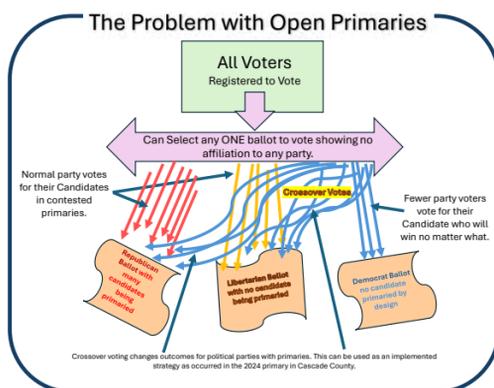
- Does this signal a change in ideology or simply a strategy?
- Or is it more important to have an “R” after their names on the ballot?

It is interesting to note that more candidates reassigning their party affiliations are moving *to* the Republican Party. Rarely do Republicans move to the Democrat or Libertarian parties. The answer to the question “Why?” has always been, “To win, of course!” Thus, voters could have “Liberal Republicans” as well as “Democrats” on the ballot with an “R” firmly planted after their names. With an “R” firmly planted behind their names, former liberals/democrat candidates count on voters *not knowing their values and probably not their voting record.*

Another strategy that can and possibly has been used in Open Primaries is to deceptively run a candidate in the opposing party (a “plant”) to disrupt the voting with multiple candidates vying to win the primary, splitting the vote. It is often noted the Democrat Party rarely has candidates challenging each other in the primary unlike Republicans.

### What is “Crossover Voting”?

Crossover voting naturally occurs during Open Primaries as individual voters choose a party to vote within. However, deceptive strategies require communicated planning to be implemented to scale in Open Primaries. A party communicating with party members, counting on party voters to vote outside their regular party, can disrupt voting anticipated by voters “not in the know”. Uninformed voters are unaware of the tactic.



The problem occurs when one party has no candidates being “primaried.” This unchallenged candidate will obviously win without anyone voting for them. This Party then encourages their members to NOT vote their ballot for the unopposed candidate of their party who will win anyway, but **to**

“crossover” and vote for the opposing party’s secondary candidate who they want to win, often unseating a popular incumbent candidate for a challenger candidate. With one, two or even three challengers in this party’s primary, “crossover voting” will wreak havoc on the outcome.

This may sound hypothetical, but this has happened and could be set to happen again. In 2024 Cascade County saw three conservative incumbents lose to challengers in this way. With numerous candidates in the Republican Party’s ballot again this year, this strategy could again be in play. THIS is the danger of Open Primaries.

### Are these strategies deceptive?

These tactics are very deceptive for an uninformed voter who may simply look for the “R” after a candidate’s name. If they know nothing about the candidates beyond “the R”, they may be confused by numerous candidates with “R” after their names. In cases where there are multiple “R”s to choose from, uninformed voters are often guessing. Later, they may find themselves wondering why the “conservative R” candidate they voted for is now in legislature and voting just like the Liberal Democrats as happened in the 2025 Legislative Session.

### Are these strategies in Open Primaries real?

These strategies are real and occurred in the 2024 Primary Election, unseating conservative incumbents (Steve and Lola Galloway and Rae Grulkowski) with liberals who identified as “R”. They were “Republicans in Name Only,” or RINOs. Liberals in Cascade County even bragged on social media that “Our plan worked! We got rid of the conservatives!”

This strategy could be set to occur again in 2026 as nearly all Republicans are facing Primary opponents, and none of the Democrats are not.

### How to fight the Open Primary “Gambit”

To fight this process of Open Primaries in Montana, voters have many ways to help their voting be thoughtful and not manipulated. It requires voters to view their right to vote as a responsibility as well. The best fight against these strategies afoot is to **be an INFORMED, responsible voter** by:

1. knowing candidates’ beliefs and core values (Ideology – See associated article included in this issue, too!)
2. knowing candidates’ histories:
  - a. Have you had an opportunity to hear them speak and not just read a newspaper or online story?
  - b. Did they just change parties? If yes, why?
  - c. What is their voting history? How did they vote previously on issues about which you are concerned? You can look up a legislator’s voting record and watch recorded local government meetings.

### Conclusion

It is the citizen’s civic duty to vote, and even more so to vote responsibly. Casting an uninformed vote is not only irresponsible, it can also be harmful to all of Montana as the way elected officials vote affects ALL of Montana, not just their constituents. To be a responsible informed voter,

- Know your candidate’s ideology and history as well as your own.
- Ask yourself if what this candidate says and does is reflective of your needs and ideals.
- Get to know the candidates. You can learn about candidates by:
  1. talking with people you trust about the issues and the candidates.
  2. attending public meetings and debates, such as Pachyderm Club where every week you can hear public figures and candidates speak, debate, and answer your questions.
  3. Reading to learn about the issues you care about, know who these candidates really are, know what they stand for, and know what they say they will do FOR YOU if elected.

**Be Informed! Be Involved! Be Visible! Be Vocal!**

**Every vote counts! 🗳️**