

Supporters of SD Open Primaries Initiative Address Rotarians

Vermillion
PLAIN TALK

By Sarah Wetzel for the Plain Talk Mar 22, 2024

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Jeanelle Lust and Tom Heinz spoke at last week's Vermillion Rotary Club meeting giving information about the South Dakota Open Primaries initiative.

The initiative involves a petition to put open primaries on the South Dakota Ballot.

According to an information video Lust shared, the way elections are set up, representatives are decided mostly from primary elections, not general elections, which tend to be the most partisan and have the lowest participation.

"The result is a small, often extreme, minority of voters end up deciding the vast majority of our elections," the video explained. "And that's how we keep getting a divided and dysfunctional Congress that fails to represent 'We the People.'"

According to a Washington Post article Lust referenced, another reason Congress is so polarized and uncooperative is that when representatives behave more moderately, they run the risk of losing to a more extreme candidate in the primary elections of their state where the more extreme-minded voters participate.

"Even if the person running against them in the primary election didn't win, they know that's a risk for them," Lust said. "They tend to not be willing to co-sponsor legislation with someone from the other party because they're afraid of the risk of being primaried when they get back home."

According to Lust, nonpartisan primaries, which are already being used in California, Washington and Nebraska, can solve the primary problem.

"Nonpartisan primaries give every voter an equal voice, have higher voter participation rates, produce more representative outcomes and improve governing incentives by ensuring elected leaders are accountable to a broader swath of the electorate," Lust said. "One recent study found that, among new members of Congress elected between 2003-2018, those elected in the top-two nonpartisan primaries were more than 18 percentage points less extreme than those elected in closed partisan primaries."

The nonpartisan group "Open Primaries" spearheading this issue was started by Joe Kirby, De Knudson, Thomas Dempster and Drey Samuelson, all very politically involved individuals.



Jeanelle Lust of the South Dakota Open Primaries Initiative joined the Vermillion Rotary Club on March 13 to outline the reasons they seek to bring to South Dakota voters a Constitutional amendment changing the primaries in South Dakota to open primaries. She notes that the current party primaries tend to encourage a lack of cooperation among elected officials. Additionally, South Dakota primaries are paid for by all of us, but the current system doesn't allow over 145,000 South Dakotans to fully participate in the party primary process. Courtesy Of Vermillion Rotary Club

"Our ballot initiative gives voters in 2024 a chance to change the state's constitution to establish a top-two open primary for the offices of governor, all legislative offices, all county offices, the United States Senate or the United States House of Representatives. (For those offices) we would have a nonpartisan primary," Lust said. "What that means is you have one election when everybody from every party is on the primary and every voter whether they're a Democrat or Republican or Independent, a Libertarian, a Communist -- they can vote in that election and the top-two vote-getters in that election are the ones that go on to the general election."

This runs in contrast with the current system where each party runs their own primary elections and Independent voters are allowed to vote in the Democratic primaries but not the Republican.

"In this state it's really the Republican primary that matters," Lust said. "Right now, in the state Independent voters actually outnumber Democratic voters so we have

a large swath of Independent voters in this state that don't get to participate in choosing who is going to be on the general election ballot."

She said the goal is to let all registered voters have the chance to vote and have a say in who is elected no matter their party affiliation.

This makes sense because, as Lust pointed out, everyone pays the tax dollars which pay for primary elections in the first place.

"Primary elections are conducted with taxpayer money, even in closed primary states like South Dakota," Lust said. "Independents pay for elections they cannot vote in. That's not fair."

It is critical to make primary elections more fair because they have a powerful deciding factor.

"In 2022, 86% of legislative elections were uncontested or minimally contested in the general election," Lust said. "So that means that by the time you got to the general election there's basically one person...The majority of our state senate didn't have anyone running against them in the general election. There's nothing competitive about that."

"South Dakota embraces conservative values like fairness and competition," she said. "We believe South Dakota will be a better place when more South Dakotans are involved in the election process and all will benefit from competitive elections where successful candidates try to appeal to all voters not just the most extreme of their party."

Lust said that in states where this open primary system has been adopted, it hasn't changed their political makeup.

"South Dakota is going to stay a red state when this is adopted," she said. "But it might be a slightly more moderate red state."

According to a fiscal note, open primaries would cost the taxpayers more; however, the reason for that is open primaries increase voter turnout so more ballots will need to be printed, which Lust considers to be a good thing.

"We're going to have more people voting, according to the attorney general's office, if this passes," she said. "That can only be good for everybody."

Heinz also spoke at the meeting to voice his support for the petition.

Heinz, a business owner from Dakota Dunes, first became a supporter of open primaries after reading how certain issues relevant to a few were elevated while other issues affecting a wider group of people would go neglected.

"We have many uncontested contests," Heinz said. "We need a better system for hiring the people that govern us."

According to Heinz, open primaries harm no one except professional politicians who depend on extreme partisan politics to become re-elected.

"For average persons like you and me, open primaries make all the sense in the world," Heinz said. "Is it going to fix everything in our state in a year or two? No. But it does introduce more competition which incentivizes people to listen and appeal to a broader range of perspectives than they must right now where their candidates are protected by a monopolistic closed system."

As an economic monopoly harms ordinary citizens, a political monopoly harms the general public, he said.

"The results are stagnation, dysfunction, not innovation," Heinz said. "To ensure our business remains sustainable for our children and grandchildren, we continue reinvesting. Similarly, I view my investment in South Dakota Open Primaries equally important. Assuring South Dakota's future is more creative, more productive and has a stronger government by including more people in the legislative process, both candidates and voters."

Ensuring that all voices are heard is one factor that will hopefully slow the outward migration of people from the state, he said, making South Dakota a more attractive place for graduates to remain.

Heinz shared how he is one of the Independent voters who pays a lot of taxes with little say on how they are spent.

"Open primaries are that first step in sending the message that all voices are welcome here," Heinz said.

He said the initiative petitions currently have around 42,000 signatures with a goal of 50,000.

Heinz and Lust both encouraged listeners to support the petition both by signing and by providing financial support to further the initiative.

To find out more about the initiative, you can visit their website: www.sdopenprimaries.org.