

OREGONIANS' VALUES AND BELIEFS ABOUT ELECTION REFORM

Prepared for the Yarg Foundation by the Oregon Values and Beliefs Center

January 2024

Introduction: This summary report, including strategic considerations and recommendations, was completed by the [Oregon Values and Beliefs Center](http://www.oregonvbc.org) in partnership with the Yarg Foundation. It incorporates quantitative and qualitative research findings from OVBC studies conducted in 2023 and described below. This report is meant to assist the broader public with planning, policymaking, and communications about election reform.

Oregonians Support Changes in Our Systems of Self-Government but Their Opinions Range from “Reform Curious” to “Reform Ready” Across Issue Areas

A majority of Oregonians are dissatisfied with the structure of elections, the conduct of campaigns, the role of political parties, and the effectiveness of their representatives in state and local government, and they are open to reforms in all of these areas at both the state and local levels.

Support for electoral and governance reforms is both evolving and dispersing across the landscape of public opinion. Majorities have crystalized in support of reforms that are more familiar to them and have a history of debate in recent decades. But, when it comes to embracing new and untested reforms, Oregonians are more curious than ready.

Reform Curious

Oregonians statewide are interested in major changes in how we elect our representatives and how we might restructure our system of representation at both the state and local levels. Ranked-choice voting heads their list in the first category, while the concept of multi-member districts captures their interest in the second.

But their interest in reforms in these areas is nascent, which we describe as “reform curious” but not yet “reform ready,” despite Portlander’s recent launch of these reforms.

Reform Ready

Support for campaign finance reform appears to have matured to the point that supporters have the wind at their backs with initiative petitions that are circulating for the November 2024 ballot that would limit contributions to candidates.

Also, those who reject the closed party primary system coalesce around the more familiar concept of simply opening up the major party primaries to all voters, but they split over reforms like “top two” primaries.

Methodology and Terminology

We gathered the above findings and drew our conclusions from two OVBC projects:

- A statewide survey (referred to herein as the “survey”), conducted of 1,807 Oregon residents ages 18 and up, conducted December 19, 2023, through January 7, 2024, with a margin of error of +/-2.3% for its full sample.
- A more extensive survey, the OVBC Typology Study (referred to herein as the “study”), conducted September 12, 2023, through October 23, 2023. This study, for which analysis and reporting remains ongoing, reached more than 3,600 respondents and had a margin of error of 1.6% for its full sample.

The general findings of both the survey and the larger study were generally consistent across most subgroups of respondents, however, differences among respondents were found most often among age cohorts, strata of educational attainment and household income, and political party affiliations. Other, less frequent, variations are noted where they appear.

Age cohorts are categorized and described as follows: Adults aged 18-29 (Generation Z) and 30-44 (Millennials), whom we refer to as “young” and “younger-middle-aged” respectively, or, as a group, as “younger Oregonians;” and, adults aged 45-54, 55-74, and 75+, whom we refer to as “older” Oregonians.

Educational Attainment captures three categories: High school graduates or less; those with some college; and those who hold four-year and post-graduate degrees.

Household Income is categorized as follows: Less than \$25,000 per year; \$25,000-\$49,999; \$50,000-\$74,999; \$75,000-\$99,999; \$100,000-\$149,999; and, \$150,000 and above. In this report, we refer to the first two categories as “lower income.”

Political Party Affiliation captures self-reported identifications of Democrats (36% of the total), Republicans (25%), as well as minor party, unaffiliated and unregistered voters (40%). We refer to this last group as “Others” in the following analysis. This last category represents the largest group of voting-age adults, though their lower turnouts tend to diminish their impact in elections.

Other categories of respondents cited herein as relevant to our findings include Gender, Rural residency, Race/Ethnicity, and Newcomers to Oregon.

A separate set of findings and analysis is presented for Portland residents, given their recent approval of a new system of elections and representation for the city.

Survey Questions: Phrasing and Detailed Responses

Readers are directed to the survey documents for the specific wording of questions, the tally of responses to each, and subgroup variations. In the findings and analyses herein:

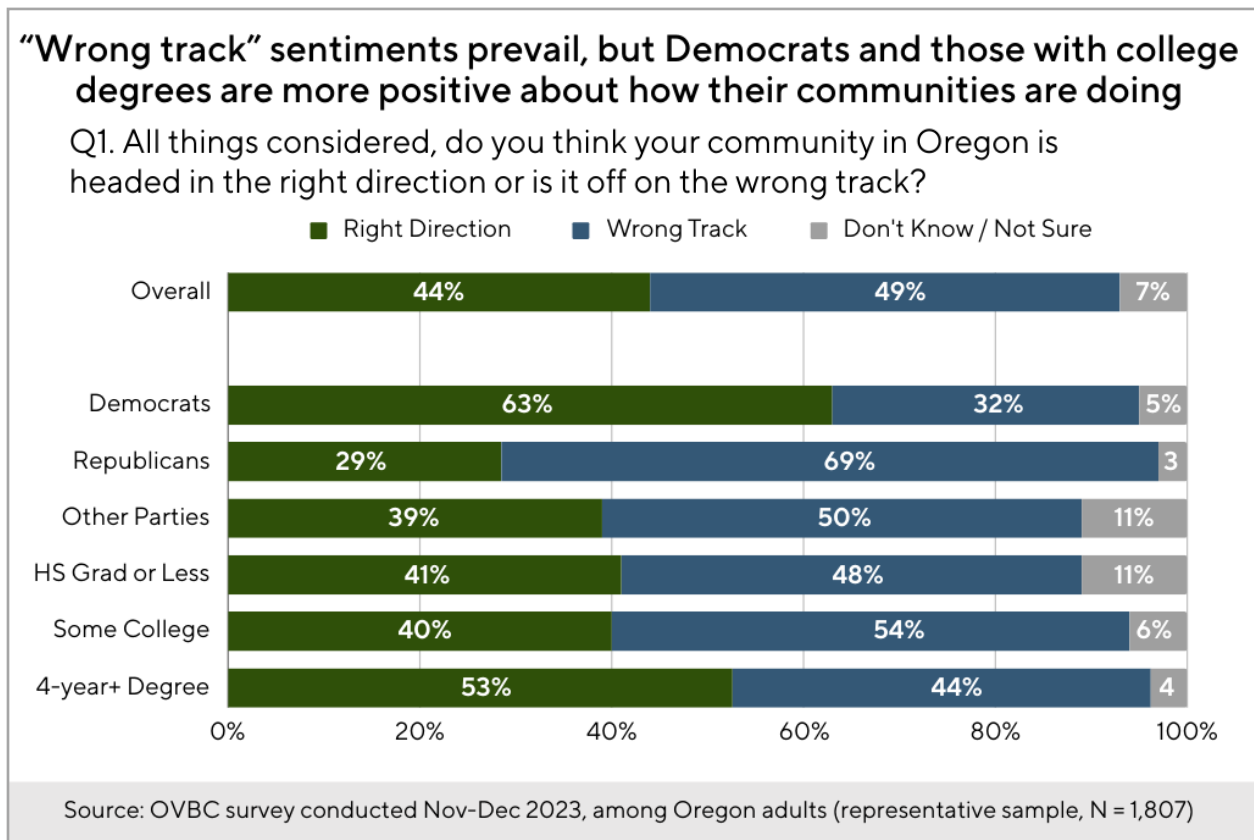
- Question numbers are provided for reference to the annotated questionnaire and crosstabs for both the most recent survey (captioned Nov-Dec survey) and the 2023 Typology study.
- Due to rounding, the percentages reported below may not add up to 100% or compare exactly to the percentages for the same question in the annotated questionnaire and/or crosstabs.

- Quotes from respondents' open-ended comments are excerpted from a document entitled Anonymous Verbatims, which includes responses to “your biggest hope for your community” in 2024 (Survey Question 6), “your biggest fear for our community” in 2024 (Survey Question 7), “comments on any of the questions relating to elections and governance (Survey Question 15), and “thoughts...about possible changes to our governance and current election systems in Oregon” (Survey Question 24).

These documents can be found on the Oregon Values and Beliefs website at www.OregonVBC.org.

Some Glimmers of Optimism, But with Widely Held Concerns About Social and Political Divisions

*General Findings
(Survey Questions 1-5.)*



Our survey identified Oregonians' views of how things are going in their communities (44% right direction, 49% wrong track) and their feelings about the upcoming year (52% optimistic, 45% not). By comparison, our Typology study showed wrong track sentiment at 53% for the state last year and 69% for the nation, with only 41% viewing the state as on the right track and even fewer (27%) extending that opinion to the nation as a whole.

Note that the survey framed its initial questions regarding respondents' communities, while the Typology study referred to the state. In general, our surveys over the years

have found more negativity about how things are going at the national level, but less at the state level and community level.

However, concerns about social and political divisions remain top of mind for respondents regardless of their right track/wrong track perceptions and their hopes for 2024.

“The political climate is so divided, nobody can work for the better of the state...”

--Deschutes County woman, 55-64, Republican

“Petty mudslinging in political arenas is a depressing waste of time, energy and money...”

--Lane County woman, 75+, Democrat

In our survey, roughly three out of four respondents think their community is socially and politically divided (74%) and are worried about these divisions (77%). Their views on whether “your community can come together and bridge this divide” reflect a great uncertainty: 35% think they can, 27% think they can’t, while a plurality (38%) can’t decide one way or the other.

The Typology study found nearly identical levels of concern for the state as a whole: 74% of respondents perceived the state as socially and politically divided, while 82% reported they were worried about these divisions, and 36% thought “We can come together and bridge this divide.”

Even with a little less “wrong track” feeling and some notable optimism at the local level, the wounds of social and political division have not healed. The perceptions of these divisions and a low level of confidence in the ability to mend them are evident in responses to both the survey and the Typology study in regard to local communities and the state as a whole.

Notable Differences within Sub-groups

Respondents varied little in their recognition of social and political divisions in their communities, their worries about these divisions, and their sense of whether we will be able to come together to heal these divisions, with a few exceptions.

Age: Young and younger-middle-aged adults are twice as likely to be very optimistic about the future, with roughly 20% very optimistic in their expectations for 2024 compared to less than 10% among older adults.

Political Party Affiliation: The effect of partisan identities was starkly evident in respondents’ views of how things are going in their communities. Democrats were far more likely to see things headed on the right track (63%) rather than the wrong track (32%), while Republicans were the opposite in their perceptions (28% right track, 68% wrong track). Others split the difference (39% right track, 50% wrong track).

Also, Democrats are more optimistic about 2024 (58%) than Republicans (46%) and Others (50%).

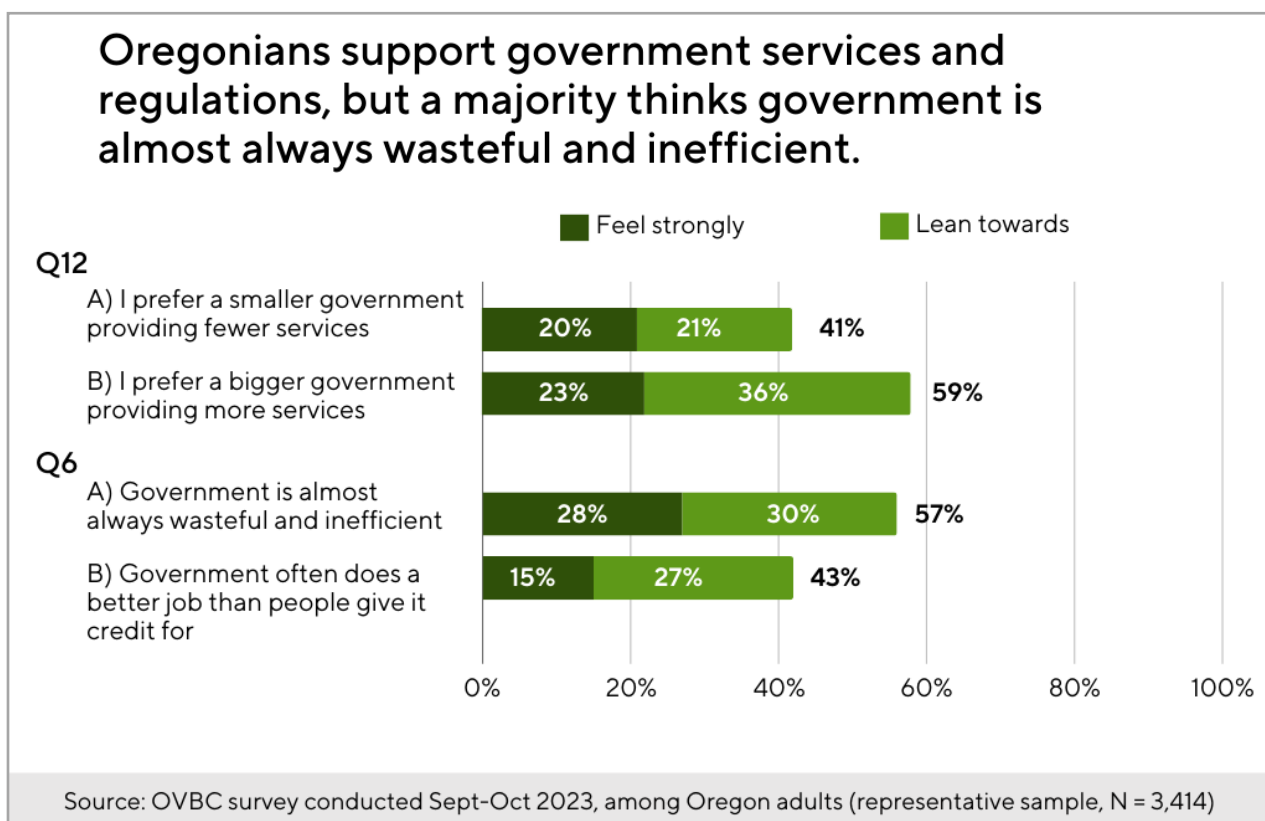
Gender: Persons who identify as “non-binary or other” (2% of survey respondents) reported being “very worried” about social and political divisions in their communities by a large margin (48% vs. 23%-24% for men and women) and “not at all optimistic” about 2024 (20% vs. 12%-

13% for women and men). These were differences of intensity, as the combined numbers for “very” and “somewhat” opinions tended to deliver similar totals across all genders.

Race/Ethnicity: BIPOC respondents were slightly less likely to see social and political divide in the communities (69% vs. 75% for white respondents), were more inclined to think we can come together to bridge these differences (40% vs. 34%), and were notably more optimistic about the coming year (62% vs. 49%).

Support for Government Contrasts with an Overall Negative Opinion of Its Efficiency

*General Findings
(Typology Study Questions 6, 7, 11, 12, 34, and 35.)*



Oregonians generally support an activist government. Our Typology study found solid majorities in favor of:

- “A bigger government providing more services” (59%) over a “smaller government providing fewer services” (41%);
- Government regulation of business as “necessary to protect the public interest” (59%) rather than doing “more harm than good” (41%), and,
- Stronger environmental laws and regulations as “worth the cost” (63%) rather than “cost(ing) too many jobs and hurt(ing) the economy” (37%).

Similarly, most Oregonians would prefer to keep or strengthen rather than relax our current land use and environmental protections by margins of 68%-22% (land use) and 75%-15% (environment).

But Oregonians are not happy with the government they have. Almost six in ten (57%) respondents in the Typology study thought that “government is almost always wasteful and inefficient,” while only four in ten (43%) grant that “government often does a better job than people give it credit for.”

There is Broad Dissatisfaction with Our System of Self-Governance, from Our Method of Elections to the Exercise of Representation

“The electoral process is flawed and either needs to be replaced or refined to better represent all constituents, not just those with the strongest voices and deepest pockets.”

--Deschutes County woman, 55-64, Democrat

“...Voters are disillusioned and have zero faith that politicians have their best interests in mind...”

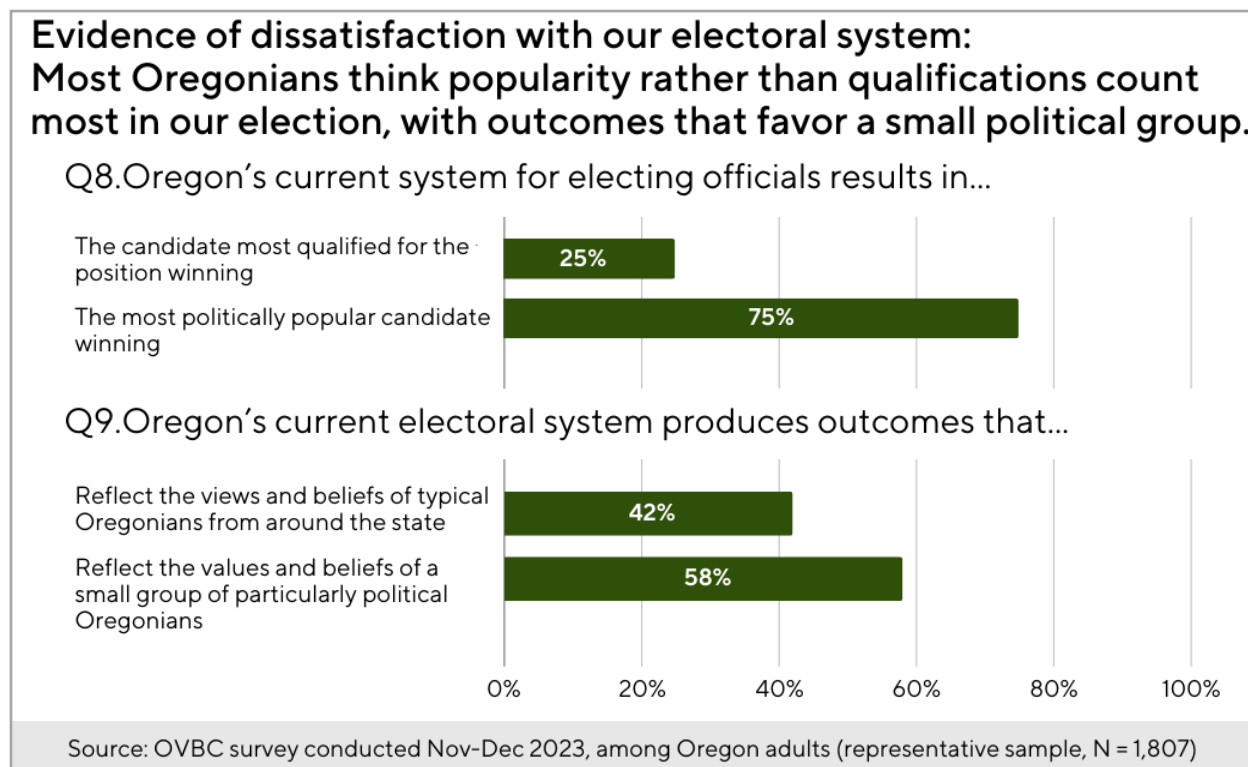
--Clatsop County woman, 18-29, Democrat

“Despite the demonstrated needs of folks without stable housing, elected officials routinely ignore their needs...But anyone can plunk down six figures or more in donations to election campaigns and get all the attention they want.”

--Multnomah County non-binary, 30-44, Republican

General Findings

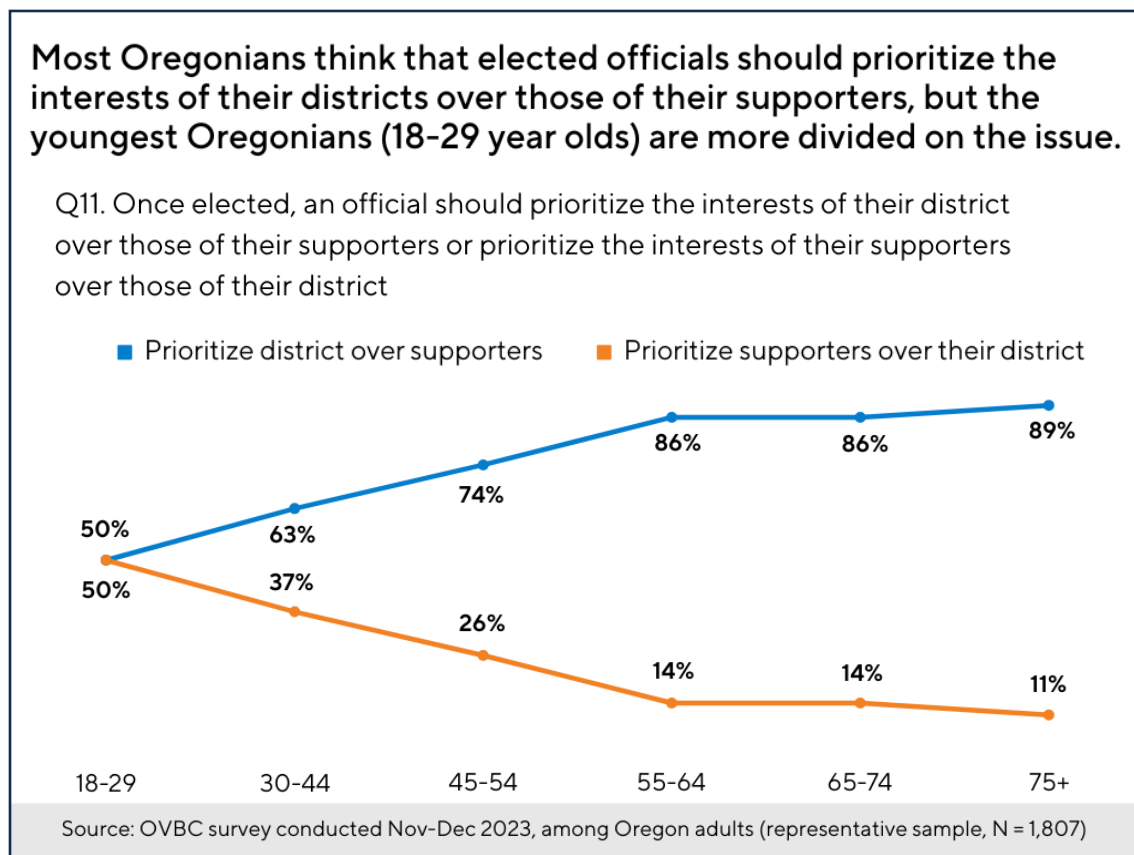
(Survey Questions 8-14, and Typology Study Question 14.)



We find dissatisfaction tending to cynicism prevalent in Oregonians' views of our electoral systems. Only one in four (25%) respondents to our survey think that our elections result in “the candidate most qualified for the position winning,” while three in four (75%) think that “the most politically popular candidate” prevails. A clear majority thinks that “Oregon’s current electoral system produces outcomes that reflect the views and beliefs of a small group of particularly political Oregonians” (58%) rather than “the views and beliefs of typical Oregonians from around the state” (42%).

Underlying these views, we can discern an embrace of traditional good government principles.

Survey respondents largely agreed that “once elected, an official should prioritize the interests of their district rather than their supporters” (71%) and that “all generations should be treated equally” in the allocation of public resources (66%).

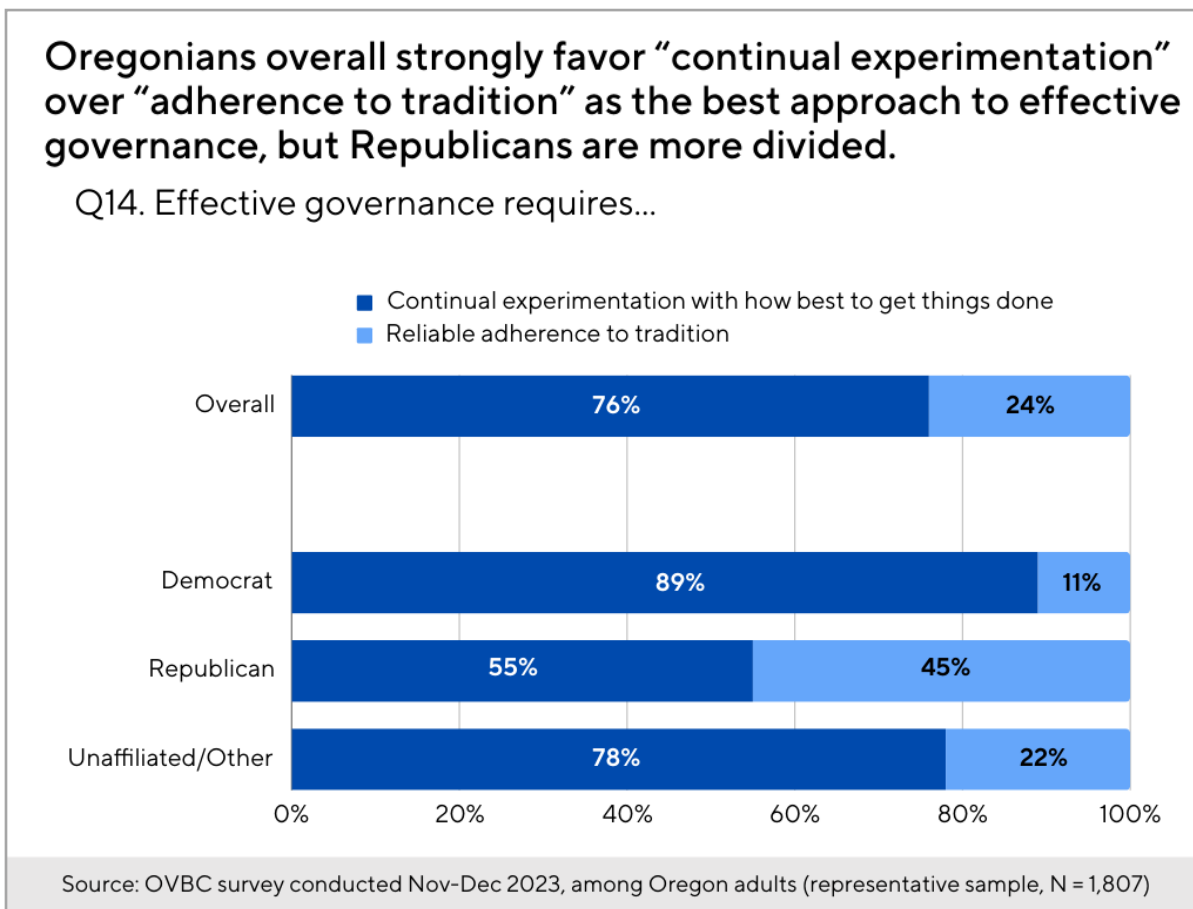


Similarly, in our Typology study, almost three in four (74%) respondents agreed that “compromise is how things get done in politics even though it sometimes (means) sacrificing for the greater good,” while only one in four (26%) favored the hardline view that “compromise in politics is just selling out on what you believe.”

These are centering rather than fragmenting tendencies, reaffirming a broad consensus in favor of bridging divides to better serve the common interests of all.

At the same time, these traditional views do not reflect support for a “good old days” style of government. Roughly three in four survey respondents think that “future generations deserve

more formal representation and more consideration by current government institutions” (73%), and that “effective governance requires continual experimentation with how best to get things done” (76%).



Oregonians overall strongly favor “continual experimentation” over “adherence to tradition” as the best approach to effective governance, with Republicans being more divided.

Finally, almost three out of four respondents (72%) agreed that “voters in Oregon need to receive more reliable information about the issues and candidates on the ballot,” while 28% think voters “already have access to enough information to cast their vote.”

Notable Differences within Sub-Groups

Age: More than a third (roughly 35%) of young and younger-middle-aged adults think that the current system results in the election of the most qualified candidates for office, compared to less than half that percentage (about 15%) of older adults who share this view. Even more notably, a majority (52%) of the youngest cohort (18-29-year-olds) thinks the current electoral system produces outcomes that reflect the views of typical Oregonians from around the state, compared to 42% of Oregonians of all age groups.

Further, young and younger-middle-aged adults are far more likely to think that candidates who win elections should prioritize the interests of their supporters over those of their districts. Fully 50% of 18-29 year-olds and 37% of 30-44 year-olds favor this approach to governing, compared to roughly 20% of older adults. On this question, in particular, there is a near-perfect correlation

between age and opinion: Younger Oregonians are more likely to want elected officials to favor their supporters; older Oregonians are more likely to want them to favor representation of a district's interests, with increasing levels of support for the latter rising with one's age, approaching 90% for seniors.

This aged-based divergence of opinion moderated somewhat in respondents' preferences for "effective government," when respondents were given a choice between "continual experimentation with how best to get things done" and "reliable adherence to tradition." The youngest cohort of respondents strongly favored the former (81%), but all other age groups were not far behind, with support at roughly 75% for continual experimentation.

Educational Attainment and Household Income: Those with a high school education or less and those in lower income households (below \$50,000 per year) were more likely to think that the most qualified candidates are prevailing in our elections, while those with college degrees and higher incomes (above \$75,000 per year) were more likely to think that elections were going to the most politically popular candidates.

Also, those from the lowest income households (below \$25,000) were more inclined to think that our electoral system produces outcomes that reflect the values and beliefs of typical Oregonians than respondents in all other income groups.

The survey also found that those with less formal education and lower incomes were more likely to feel they need more information about issues and candidates on the ballot.

Finally, on the question of how respondents prefer elected candidates to respond to their constituents, another clear pattern emerged: Those with less formal education and in lower income households were far more likely to want to see elected officials favor their supporters (47% and 43% respectively). Those with higher formal education level and household incomes went in the other direction, wanting to see elected officials prioritize the interests of their districts over those of their supporters by margins that increased steadily with education and income to as high as 94%.

Rural: Rural residents were slightly less supportive than others of "continual experimentation" in government and slightly more inclined to support "reliable adherence to tradition," but they still favored the former by a margin of 70% to 30%.

Political Party Affiliation: In their views about approaches to representation, however, Democrats were less likely than Republicans and others to think that elected officials should prioritize the interests of their supporters (18% of Democrats, 31% of Republicans, 35% of Others). Still, strong majorities in all three groups preferred that officials prioritize the interests of their districts (Democrats 82%, Republicans 69%, Others 65%). Note that the views of younger respondents on this issue (above) go counter to this consensus.

In regard to other governance issues, Democrats are more likely to favor "continual experimentation" over "adherence to tradition" to get things done (89% to 11%), while Republicans favor tradition (55%) over experimentation (45%). Others are closer to Democrats on this issue, favoring experimentation (78%) over tradition (22%).

Race/Ethnicity: BIPOC respondents are much more likely than their white counterparts to think that elected candidates should prioritize the interests of their supporters (44% vs. 24%) and

were more mixed about their political parties – less unsatisfied, less satisfied and more likely to align with neither position (27% to 19%).

Oregonians’ Dissatisfaction with our Systems of Self-Governance Extends to Both Major Political Parties

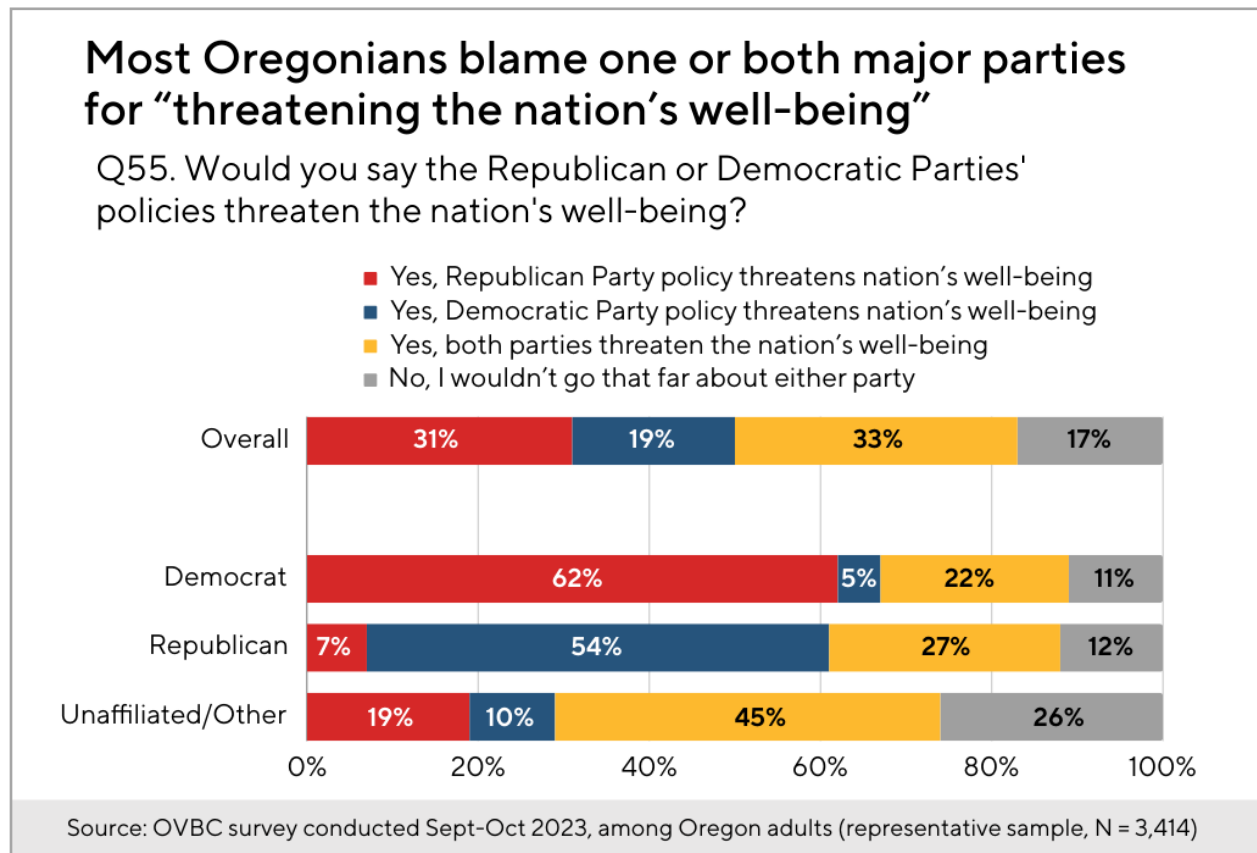
“The problem in the political realm can be summed up very easily – everything has become too polarized. The Rs are too far right and the Ds are too far left. There is no compromise. If you vote against your party line your own party will punish you. It is unfortunate that the term ‘getting primaried’ is a part of our culture.”

--Lincoln County man, 55-64, Democrat

General Findings

(Survey Questions 16 and 17, and Typology Study Question 55.)

Most Oregonians blame one or both major parties for “threatening the nation’s well being”.



Survey respondents do not view our political parties as agents for a more representative or effective government. Only one in three respondents is very (9%) or somewhat (25%) satisfied with the political party they are affiliated with, and a notable plurality (42%) think the Democratic and Republican parties have too much say in selecting candidates to compete in Oregon’s general elections (compared to 9% who think that the major parties have too little power and 24% who don’t know.)

Even harsher views were evident in response to a question in our Typology study asking whether respondents viewed the policies of the Democratic Party or the Republican Party as “threaten(ing) the nation’s well-being.” Fewer than one in five (17%) rejected that assertion, while a plurality (33%) put both parties in the category of threatening the nation’s well-being. The remaining respondents blamed the Republican Party (31%) or the Democratic Party (19%) for these effects.

Taken as a whole, these views appear to motivate a multi-partisan interest in, and receptiveness to, reforms in our systems of representative government, tempered by uncertainty about their best formulations.

Notable Differences within Sub-Groups

Age: Young and young middle-aged respondents were more likely to report that they are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with their parties. Their answers to this question were likely influenced by the higher levels of unaffiliated voters in this age group. On the other hand, the youngest respondents (aged 18-29) were less likely to agree that “the Democratic and Republican parties have too much say in selecting candidates to compete in our general election(s),” with only 31% expressing that opinion compared to slightly more than 45% of voters aged 30 and over.

Younger voters are also less dissatisfied with our system of political representation.

Educational Attainment and Household Income: Those with less formal education and lower incomes were less likely to think that the Democratic and Republican parties have too much power in selecting candidates who advance to the general election (34% and 32%), compared to those with college degrees and higher household income levels (\$100,000 or more) who supported that assertion at rates of 49% and 54%.

Gender: Non-binary respondents are much more dissatisfied with their political parties (46% vs. 25% for men and women).

Political Party Affiliation: Democrats are more satisfied with their party (54%) than Republicans (42%), but dissatisfaction is evident in both parties (30% among Democrats, 35% among Republicans). Notably, the view that Democrats and Republicans have too much say in selecting general election candidates has similar levels of support in both major parties (Democrats 35%, Republicans 37%), while agreement rises to 50% among Other respondents.

With a Few Exceptions, Oregonians Haven’t Yet Advanced from “Reform Curious” to “Reform Ready”

“I’m down to try something different as the current system isn’t working.”

--Deschutes County woman, 30-44, Democrat

“I am not sure I would want multiple representatives. After reading this survey. I believe I would want to research it a little more to get better information.”

--Marion County woman, 65-74, Democrat

“I worked my county's elections for over 10 years. Voters can't keep up with the current system, please don't muddle it more!”

--Multnomah County woman, 45-54, Democrat

When presented with a menu of reforms, respondents choose different, although similar, paths to many of the same goals. But, with several exceptions, strong majorities fail to materialize in support of a single reform.

Those exceptions can be found in the strong levels of support we identified for campaign finance reform and open primaries when respondents are offered the choice of a single, clearly formulated alternative to the status quo. Otherwise, the split over different paths to reform remains a cautionary finding for advocates of change.

We analyzed the range of responses, from “reform curious” to “reform ready” in each of the following issue areas:

- Unlimited vs. limited campaign contributions,
- Closed vs. open party primaries,
- Plurality vs. majority elections, runoffs and ranked-choice voting, and
- Single-member vs. multi-member districts.

In response to this menu of reform options, we note that young and young-middle-aged respondents were somewhat less likely to commit to, and more likely to say they don’t know their position on, specific proposals.

Campaign Finance Reform Has Broad Support

General Findings

(Typology Study Questions 23 and 38.)

With campaign finance reform, however, there is broad interest and super-majority support for reforms to limit campaign contributions to candidates. Respondents offered many unprompted comments like the following in response to the open-ended questions in our survey.

“Big money must be taken out of politics. Campaign finance reform is essential so that political power cannot be bought...”

--Lane County woman, 75+, Democrat

“Our top priority is to get money out of politics. It’s the only way to make things truly fair. Currently, politicians can be bought. Which puts all the power in the hands of just the rich...”

--Wheeler County woman, 45-54, Non-affiliated

“There needs to be stricter laws about campaign money. The rich and corrupt currently are our only option and they do not represent us.”

--Clatsop county woman, 18-29, Democrat

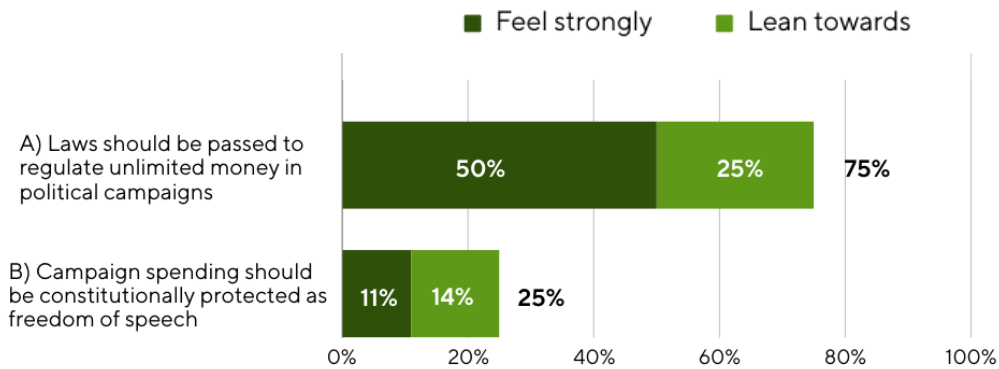
“The other big issue is the influence of money on elections, which...requires candidates to worry more about funding for reelection versus what their constituents need.”

--Benton County man, 55-64, Minor party

Beyond the solicitation of comments, our survey did not probe respondents’ opinions on this subject, as we had done so in last year’s Typology study. That study showed 50% strong support and 75% overall support for regulating unlimited money in political campaigns.

Oregonians strongly support the regulation of money in political campaigns

Q23. Please indicate which statement (either A or B) comes closest to your view, even if neither represents your view exactly



Source: OVBC survey conducted Sept-Oct 2023, among Oregon adults (representative sample, N = 3,414)

Competing initiatives headed to the November 2024 ballot in Oregon to establish campaign spending limits will benefit from this level of initial support and from a decades-long series of campaigns to bring this approach to fruition. However, if voters are offered two competing proposals on the same ballot, even super-majority support for a common goal can splinter into lesser levels of support for each proposal. For example, in our Typology study, we also asked respondents to indicate their preferred options for reforming our campaign finance system. In their responses, increased transparency topped donation limits, with support for the latter declining to 56%. (See [Implications for Reforms in the Current Political Environment](#), below.)

Notable Differences Within Sub-Groups

There was consistent support across all sub-groups for limiting unregulated money in political campaigns, with a few exceptions where support was weaker but still exceeded 60%.

Age: Respondents age 18-29 were weaker in their support of limiting unregulated money in political campaigns at 60% vs. 75% for all respondents. Support for this reform rose steadily through the older age cohorts to a level of 89% support among seniors (65 and older).

Educational Attainment: Respondents with high school diplomas or less weighed in at 63% in favor of this reform.

Newcomers to Oregon: Respondents who have lived in Oregon for five years or less were less supportive of this reform (68%) than longer-term residents.

Support is Coalescing for Open Primaries

“I think we should be able to vote across political parties in the primaries...not a ballot for Republicans, Democrats, etc. I want to be able to vote for the best candidate no matter the political party.”

--Washington County woman, 65-74, Republican

“I have been a registered independent voter for decades and would like to be able to vote in the primary. The difficulty of being a Republican or Democrat is that you are only given Republican or Democratic candidates to vote for. I would like the option of voting who I think is the best candidate no matter the political party.”

--Clackamas County woman, 65-74, Independent Party

“...Primary elections should be OPEN TO ALL (open primaries), this would result in more centrist (more accurately reflecting the voters' moderate views) candidates being in a general election. This would strongly decrease divisiveness.”

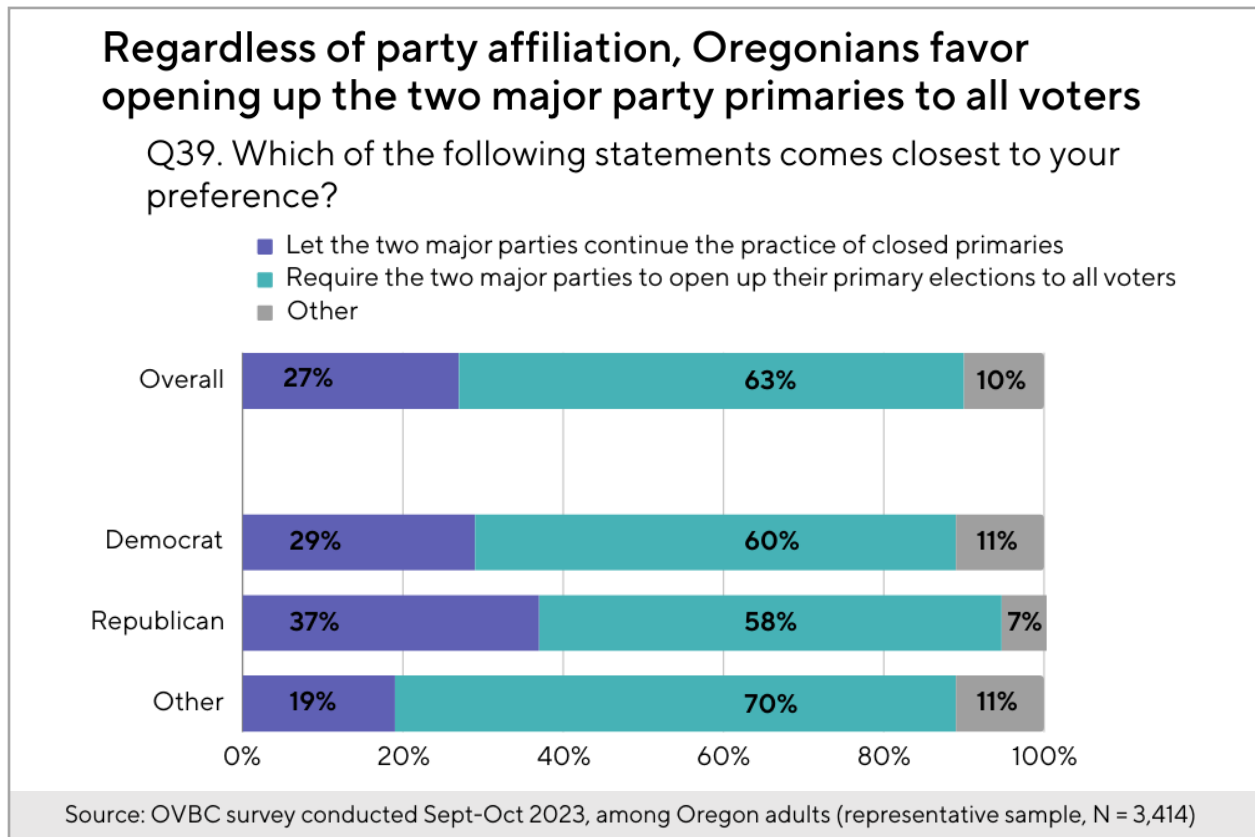
--Yamhill County man, 55-64, Democrat

General Findings

(Split-sampled Survey Questions 18 and 19, and Typology Study Question 39.)

When survey respondents were asked whether the two major parties should continue with their practice of limiting participation in their primaries to their own registered voters, only 21% affirmed that practice in one split sample, while 41% preferred opening up these primaries to all voters, and 16% supported non-partisan, top-two primaries instead. In another sample that offered an additional alternative, only 17% affirmed the current party primary system, while various alternative approaches garnered support at levels of 28%, 22%, and 16%.

By contrast, when given just the two options of having the major parties continue with the practice of closed primaries or requiring them to open their primaries to all voters, respondents to the Typology study coalesced in support of the latter: Support for the status quo peaked at 27%, while support for opening up the major party primaries settled at 63%.



When offered multiple alternatives to the current practice of continuing with closed primaries, Oregonians were less likely to support the status quo, as the “reform curious” dynamic tended to draw more of them away from supporting the current system. But when offered the single alternative of open primaries, support for the latter retained a sizable supermajority.

Notable Differences Within Sub-Groups

Age: Age was a consistent predictor of opposition to the current system of closed primaries and support for opening them up to all voters. In our Typology study, older respondents, aged 45 and above, were more likely to support the current system (30%) than younger respondents (22%). And the variations in support for opening the major party primaries to all voters was even more notable. Almost three out of four (73%) younger Oregonians supported that approach, compared to 58% of older Oregonians.

Political Party Affiliation: Keeping the current system of closed primaries draws greater support from Republicans (29% and 35% in two split samples) than Democrats (18% and 21%) and least of all from Others (10% and 14%).

Respondents in all three groups favor alternatives to the closed primary, of which the most popular is the proposal for opening up party primaries to all voters, which elicited support from 46% of Democrats, 30% of Republicans, and 43% of Others. Notably, the least popular of several alternatives to closed primaries was the idea of “top two” primaries without party affiliations. Oregonians want to lessen party control of the primary nominating process, but they don’t want to do away with party labels on the ballot.

Newcomers to Oregon: Respondents who have lived in Oregon for five years or less were even more supportive of open primaries, at 74% support. This group comprised almost one in ten respondents, so it can be a significant voting bloc.

Support for Change in Our Methods of Elections Splits Among Options, From Majority Runoffs to Ranked-Choice Voting

General Findings

(Survey Question 20 and Typology Study Question 40.)

A majority of respondents want to change our method of electing representatives but differ on the best way to do so.

“I think that two-party winner-take-all all elections have become a poor way to elect representation. Branding takes precedence over ideas. I would like to see candidates elected on the strength of their ideas and practical ability to get things done, requiring more of voters to know and decide among options when they vote.”

--Lane County woman, 65-74, Democrat

“I think Oregon would do better if we had a second round of voting for the top two candidates.”

--Clackamas County man, 30-44, Republican

“We need rank choice voting. I’m a bleeding-heart liberal but I don’t want anyone as liberal as me in charge. I want moderate centrists to be the decision-makers, compromising for the good of all. Rank Choice Voting pushes candidates to the middle - it eliminates the need to pander to the fringes (on either side).”

--Washington County woman, 65-74, Democrat

“NO WAY should Oregon allow 1st, 2nd and 3rd choice voting! Voters are confused enough, they don’t need this type of voting to add more confusion, uncertainty and cause even lower voter turnout...”

--Yamhill County woman, 55-64, Independent Party

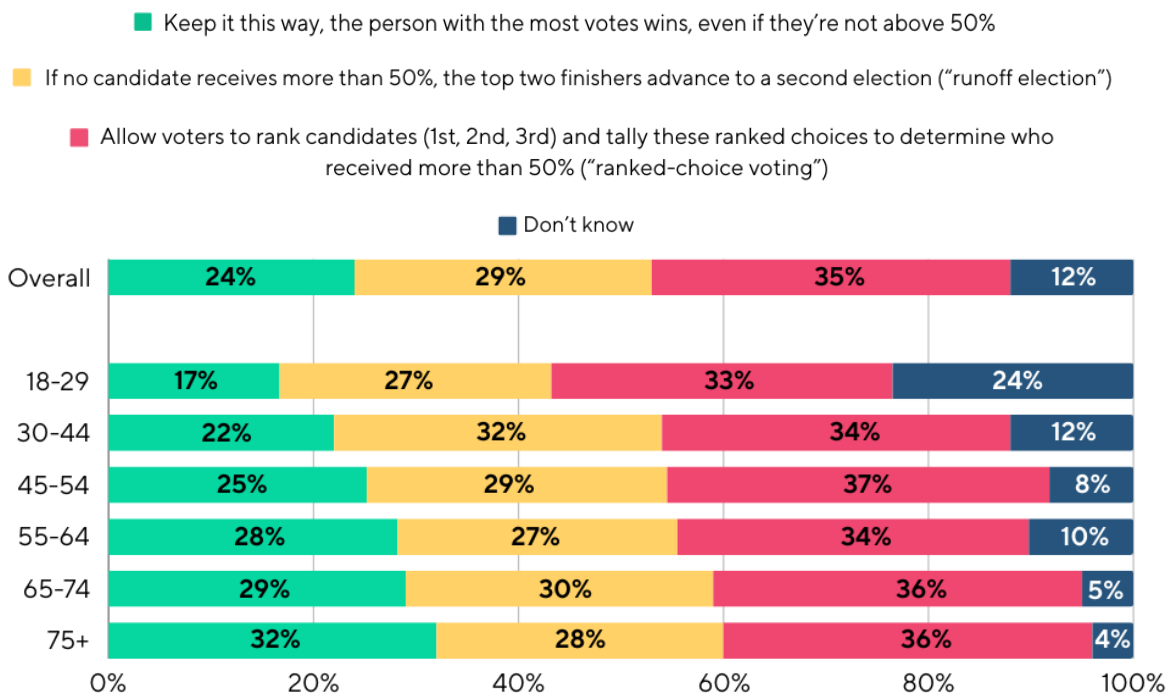
“Ranked-choice voting would be an absolutely incredible advancement. Absolutely no more concerns about ‘throwing away your vote’ if your favorite candidate isn’t the one you think is the most popular.”

--Clackamas County man, 30-44, Democrat

When asked about our current system of “first past the post” elections in our survey, in which winners can prevail with less than 50% of the vote, only 24% of Oregonians want to stay with this system, while 35% favor shifting to ranked-choice voting and 29% prefer requiring runoffs when necessary to determine a majority winner.

Oregonians of all ages do not support our current system of electing representatives, but are divided over alternatives

Q20. Runoff Elections vs. Ranked-Choice Voting: Would you prefer to



Source: OVBC survey conducted Nov-Dec 2023, among Oregon adults (representative sample, N = 1,807)

Our Typology study captured similar responses: 37% of respondents favored ranked-choice voting, 30% favored runoffs, and 30% wanted to stay with the current system.

Notable Differences

Age: Older voters (aged 45 and above) were slightly more likely to support the status quo, including the first-past-the-post method of deciding elections that delivers less-than-50% winners (approaching 30% in one survey question); while younger voters were slightly less likely to support this method of electing candidates. But, on the questions that offered multiple versions of reforms, there was little difference in support across all age cohorts.

Political Party Affiliation: When it comes to voting systems, Republicans are split in their preferences for the current “first past the post” method (30%) and requiring run-off elections (40%), while Democrats favor ranked-choice voting (44%) over keeping the status quo (25%) or requiring run-offs (24%).

Educational Attainment and Household Income: College graduates and higher-income respondents were slightly more likely to support the status quo of closed-party primaries.

Race/Ethnicity: BIPOC respondents were slightly less likely to favor ranked-choice voting (31% vs. 36% for white respondents).

Rural: Rural residents were more supportive of runoff elections (34% vs. 27% for non-rural residents) and less supportive of ranked-choice voting among the reforms tested (27% vs. 38%).

Multi-Member Districts Elicit Near Majority Support

“A multi-member district could force more compromise, which is sorely lacking these days since the two political parties require allegiance and forbid compromise.”

--Washington County woman, 65-74, Democrat

“It is absurd to think that we need multiple winners all of a sudden. How in the world would this make things better? It will only confuse voters about who represents them: When things go wrong, who do they hold accountable?”

--Multnomah County man, 45-54, Democrat

“Multiple representatives would likely do a better job of representing the area, but I'm not sure the system costs and revamping everything would be possible. Also not sure that the top two parties would allow for more diversity, or if we'd just see more candidates that are the same party-liners we have now.”

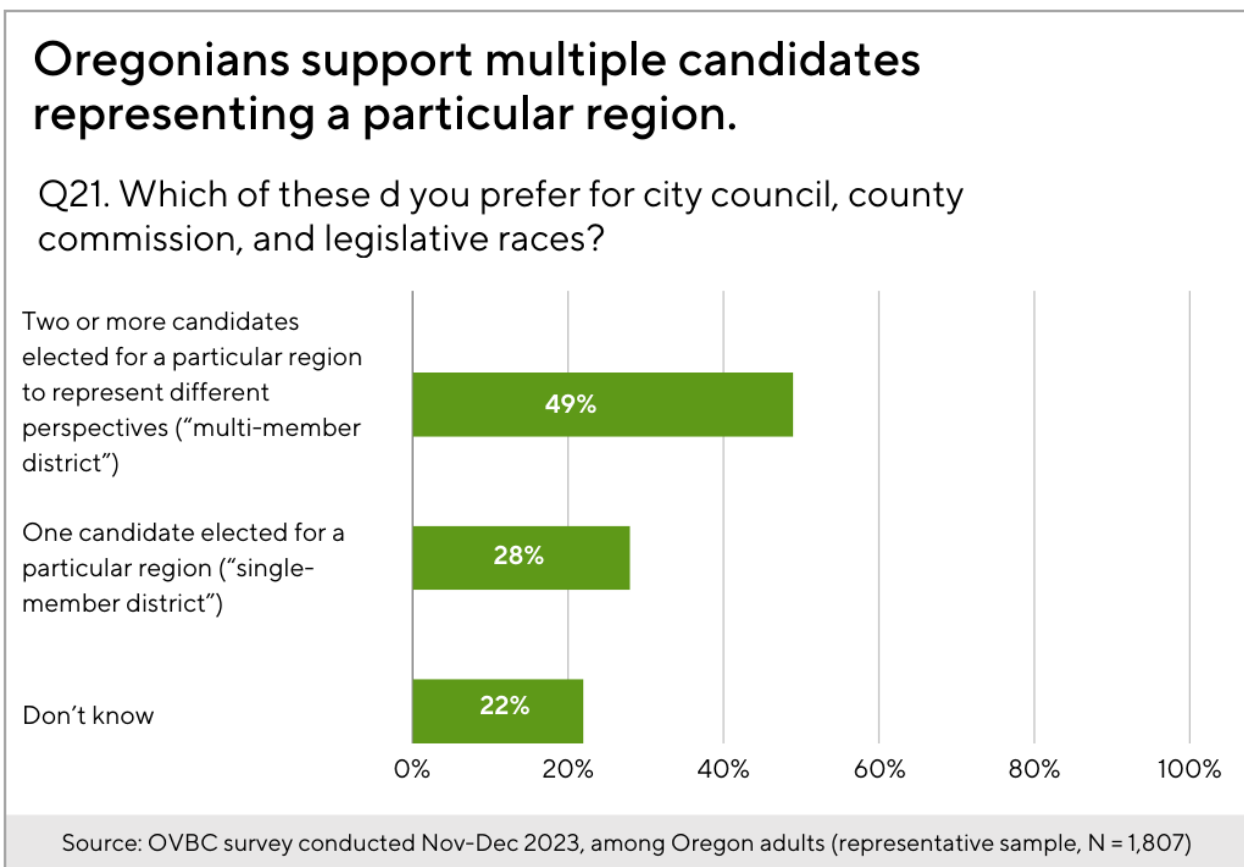
--Klamath County woman, 55-64, Non-affiliated

General Findings (Survey Questions 21-23)

In this section of our survey, where respondents were offered binary choices, the results show a strong interest in radical change – namely, ending the long-standing practice of having districts represented by a single elected official (single-member districts) in favor of a system in which

“two or more candidates are elected for a particular region to represent different perspectives” (multi-member districts). Asked which approach they favored, a near majority of respondents (49%) chose multi-member districts over single-member districts (28%) with the remainder (22%) undecided.

Asked again about the relative effectiveness of single-member and multi-member district representation in state and local government, a strong plurality (46%) of survey respondents agreed that “multiple candidates in an election that allows more than one winner, with the top two or three representing the area, would do a better job of getting things done for all voters.” A lesser 35% thought otherwise, agreeing with the claim that “a candidate who wins a single-winner election with the most votes is better able to achieve consensus on an elected body and get things done for all voters.”



As would be expected from these findings, survey respondents affirmed their preference for multi-member districts and ranked-choice voting for city councils (50%), county commissions (49%), and the state legislature (47%). The support was more “somewhat” than “strong” and about 20% were unsure.

When presented with a binary choice between the status quo and a single alternative, one would expect to see a coalescence of support for reform. However, our survey and study results show that reaching majority support for many of these changes is far from certain when those who are undecided or only “somewhat” supportive of a specific proposal eventually make up their minds. One out of five respondents in our survey remained undecided on either approach.

Also, observations of campaigns over the years confirm that strong and well-funded opposition efforts invariably erode support for reforms in the course of an election or a legislative session. (See Implications for Reforms in the Current Political Environment, below.)

Notable Differences

Age: In binary choice questions related to single-member vs. multi-member districts, we found notable differences between younger and older respondents. In response to a survey question testing views of the more effective method of representation, a majority of respondents aged 18-54 agreed that two or three candidates elected from a district “would do a better job of getting things done for all voters.” By contrast, older respondents disagreed, supporting by strong pluralities the claim that a single-winner candidate who gains the most votes would be “better able to achieve consensus on an elected body and get things done for all voters.”

A majority of younger survey respondents aged 18-54 favor multi-member districts over single-member districts. And, although older respondents continue to show plurality support for multi-member districts, that support declines in older age brackets and turns into opposition among those older than 75.

Educational Attainment and Household Income: College graduates and higher-income respondents were slightly more likely to support the status quo of closed-party primaries and single-member districts,

Gender: Men are far more likely than women to support the single-member-district approach to representation by a margin of 36% to 21% and to favor single-winner elections as the better path to effective representation (42% to 29%). But their support for multi-member districts was nearly identical (48% for men, 50% for women). The difference is that a sizable proportion of women (29%) are undecided about supporting the multi-member district approach.

In response to our questions about reforms, BIPOC respondents were slightly less likely to favor ranked-choice voting (31% vs. 36% for white respondents), slightly more likely to favor multi-member districts (53% vs. 48%), and somewhat more likely to feel that such systems do a better job of getting things done for all voters (50% vs. 44%).

Political Party Affiliation: There is near majority support for multi-member districts among respondents in both the major parties and those who are unaffiliated or minor party members, although their reasons for doing so may differ. Both Democrats and Others think that multiple representatives from a single district can better get things done for all voters (45% and 51% respectively), and both groups support moving to multi-member districts by 2-1 margins. But Republicans seem of two minds on these questions. They think candidates who prevail in single-winner elections can better get things done (47% to 38%), but they flip in their choice of multi-member districts over single-member districts, supporting the former 48% to 36%. This may reflect the allure of a multi-winner system to voters whose party has failed to win statewide offices or secure a majority in the state legislature.

Portland Charter Reforms: A Bellwether or a Cautionary Tale

Our survey looked separately at residents of the City of Portland as a potential bellwether of Oregonians’ receptivity to election reforms, some of which we tested in this survey and were

contained in the city's [Measure 26-228](#), which was approved by a margin of 58% to 42% in November of last year.

Relevant to this survey, Measure 26-228 amended the city's charter to create multi-member districts for the City Council and adopted two versions of ranked-choice voting for city officials. One version of ranked-choice voting will be used for single-winner elections for mayor and auditor, while another version will be used to determine winners in the city's new multi-member districts.

Portland residents, who comprised almost one in every five respondents, showed some differences from their non-Portland counterparts in their opinions of the electoral and governance changes tested in this survey. They were:

- Slightly more inclined to favor "continual experimentation" over "adherence to tradition" (81% vs. 75% in the rest of the state);
- Slightly more inclined to be satisfied with their political parties (39% vs. 32%);
- Less inclined to favor runoff elections (22% vs. 31%); and,
- More supportive of ranked-choice voting than respondents in the rest of the state (44% vs. 33%).

However, Portlanders' support for ranked-choice voting is no different than that of Democrats statewide, who support this method of voting in the same proportion (44%).

And, our survey findings suggest that Portlanders' opinions about representation have not caught up with the changes they approved in the city's charter amendment. Portland respondents were slightly less likely to favor multi-member districts (47%) than respondents in the rest of the state (50%). They were also slightly less likely to think that the election of multiple candidates from a district would do a better job of getting things done for all voters (43% vs. 46% in the rest of the state).

It appears that the architects of Portland's charter amendment did not have a head start over the rest of the state when it came to voter support for the electoral reforms they brought to the ballot. Rather, it is likely that they benefited from voters' impatience with the city's failures in governance and its outmoded system of government as the motivators for changing the city's governance model.

Whether voters in the rest of the state will now be inclined to follow Portland's lead in enacting similar electoral and representational changes may depend on how Portland's new voting system is received when rolled out for this year's November election and how successful its multi-member governance structure proves to be in overcoming the city's problems.

Implications for Reforms in the Current Political Environment

The findings of this survey reveal a citizenry in Oregon dissatisfied with the method of electing its representatives and with the structure of its representative government.

Our Typology study found similar dissatisfactions with the efficiency of government, despite strong support for the role of government in providing services, protecting the environment, and maintaining our land use system.

But focusing the dissatisfactions of the citizenry on specific reforms remains a work in progress, given the diversity of preferences that survey respondents demonstrated when it comes to understanding and choosing among competing proposals and aligning them with their stated preferences. For example, only 24% of respondents favor keeping our first-past-the-post method of electing candidates who fail to pass the 50% threshold to win elections. But a near majority of the same respondents favor the creation of multi-member districts to give voice to a greater cross-section of Oregonians – which in turn will require the election of candidates with less, often far less, than 50% of the vote. Getting to a clearer understanding of the effects of reforms of this kind can easily upend the first-impression findings of this survey.

Still, in this environment, there is an advantage for first movers and for those who build support for reforms over multiple election cycles and can show success at the local level before seeking statewide adoption.

The success of the Portland Charter amendment in 2023, which contained both electoral and structural reforms in a single package, is proof of a first-mover advantage, where voters are frustrated by a failure of governance.

The long-haul strategy of campaign finance reform advocates is another model that can lead to success. Initiative sponsors amended the state constitution to enable limits on contributions to candidates with the passage of Measure 107 in the 2020 election, after failing with a similar amendment in 2006. Contribution limits have since been approved by voters and successfully implemented in Portland and Multnomah County. Advocates are now advancing an initiative ([IP 9](#)) to the state ballot in November 2024 to establish campaign contribution limits for all state and local offices in Oregon. They have since been joined by labor union advocates pursuing a competing initiative on the same subject for the same ballot.

Our Typology study suggests that, if a single measure qualifies for the ballot, it will start with strong support from voters across the state. But, if voters are presented with two alternatives on the same ballot, there is a chance that neither measure will secure majority support.

Meanwhile, a first test of voters' support for reforming our election methods statewide is headed to the November 2024 ballot in the form of a legislative referral ([HB 2004](#)) enacted in 2023). This measure proposes to establish ranked-choice voting for statewide and Congressional elections and to permit that method of voting to be used for the election of city, county, and school district offices. As with campaign finance reform, a statewide vote on this reform could be complicated by a competing proposal for a system of STAR voting, in which voters award preference votes among a field of candidates and let a tally of their preferences determine the winner. This proposal is currently circulating as an initiative ([IP-11](#)) for the same November 2024 ballot. If both proposals end up on the same ballot, it is possible that majority support for moving beyond our current electoral system will splinter into less-than-majority support for alternative solutions.

Further, if only the legislative referral for ranked-choice voting goes forward, confusion over the voting experience in Portland could complicate perceptions of this approach for state voters. Portlanders will be confronted with two forms of ranked-choice voting in the same November 2024 election, one of which will likely entail long lists of candidates vying for three slots in each of four new districts. That experience in Portland may not help and could hurt the receptivity of voters statewide to follow Portland's lead in enacting ranked-choice voting.

“Ranked-choice and multi-member districts seem like a good idea, but we really don’t know how that would work out, so we need to review the results after a few (3?) years and be ready to acknowledge any mistakes.”

--Washington County man, 75+, Democrat

In summary, the table is being set this year for a first round of statewide votes to determine the interest of Oregonians in alternative election reforms. Whatever succeeds, as happened with Portland’s charter amendment, will gain a first-mover advantage in the effort of experimentation in government that 76% of Oregonians say they want to see. But disappointment with the Portland experience or the failure of measures on the statewide ballot will underscore other findings that emerged in our survey, namely that voters will need more information and understanding of what reforms will accomplish before providing a majority for their enactment.