

History of Primary Elections

Until 1905, Wisconsin candidates for public office were selected through caucuses or conventions composed of delegates, eligible voters, or members of a political party. Since then, candidates have been chosen in primary elections; the nominating caucus remains as an optional method of selecting candidates for town and village offices only. Aspirants must file a declaration of candidacy to run in a primary election, and they usually are required to file nomination papers signed by a specified number of persons eligible to vote in the jurisdiction or district in which they seek office.

Partisan August Primary

The purpose of the August (formerly September) Partisan Primary is to **select a "party's" nominees** for the general election in November. In a partisan primary, the voter may vote on the ballot of only one political party (unlike the general election where it is possible to select any party's candidate for a particular office). Frustrated voters often object that their choices are limited because they are not permitted to vote for candidates of more than one party. What they need to understand is that the primary is a **nominating device** for the political parties; its purpose is to nominate the candidates that one political party will support against the nominees of the other parties in the general election.

Most states have a closed primary system that requires voters to publicly declare their party affiliation before they can receive the primary ballot of that party. Wisconsin's "open primary" law does not require voters to make a public declaration of their party preference. Instead, the voter is given the primary ballots of all parties but, once inside the voting booth, may cast only one party's ballot.

Candidates for partisan office must appear on the August primary ballot, **even if unopposed, in order to be nominated** by their respective parties. The candidate receiving the largest number of party votes for an office becomes the party's nominee in the November election. (In the case of a special election, which is held at a time other than the general election to fill a vacated partisan office, a primary is not held if there is no more than one candidate for a party's nomination.)

The Partisan August Primary should be distinguished from the Nonpartisan February primary. The purpose of the February primary is to reduce the field of candidates for each non-partisan office from three or more down to two. The purpose of the August primary is to **nominate** one candidate to represent a party for a particular office. In other words, a nonpartisan primary election must be held in February if three or more candidates run for one of the offices on the April ballot and no caucus is held to nominate candidates. The two persons receiving the highest number of votes for the specific office in the February primary are nominated to run as finalists in the nonpartisan April election.