

Non-Partisan Ballot Labels

2014 POLICY GUIDE



State and Local Policy

August 2014

Voters are more likely to participate and vote in ways that reflect their interests when they have a clearer understanding of candidates' views and associations.

The Problem: Due to state laws or local decisions, seven in ten American cities have nonpartisan elections for city leaders, including Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Detroit, and Los Angeles. Non-partisan ballots typically only include the candidate's name. Similarly, most party primaries list candidates' names without other information.

This lack of information can make it harder for voters to cast votes in ways that reflect their views and interests. Primary and local races often receive less media coverage, and whatever coverage is given may miss many potential voters, especially young adults. As a result, voters often must elect candidates with limited exposure to them and without easy ways to distinguish among them on the ballot. Such voters often resort to voting based on name recognition (influenced heavily by campaign spending) or factors like ethnicity and gender that may be apparent from names. Many voters skip these elections entirely because they do not see a connection to issues they care about.

The Solution: Candidates should have the opportunity to indicate on the ballot their official endorsements from prominent associations and individuals that, if legal, could include political parties. Non-partisan ballot labels could also allow candidates to list their position on an important issue or a current ballot measure.

Allowing candidates to display endorsements or their views on a ballot issue allows voters to make more informed choices, but depending on choices in implementation, can be consistent with laws mandating non-partisan elections.

Voters are more likely to make informed choices when they have more guidance on the ballot. With non-partisan ballot labels, new forms of association reflected by online organizing can find expression on the ballot, better connecting a broader range of voters to the political process. Ultimately winners can earn more legitimacy when elected by a larger and more informed electorate.

Key Facts

Around 70% of local elections are non-partisan, while ballots in nearly 100% of party primaries provide no way to distinguish among candidates of the same party.

Fiscal Impact

Little to none. Every election already requires election officials to print or provide ballots with the names of candidates. Creating additional lines displaying non-partisan labels usually will not add to costs, although new ballot designs should be tested for usability.

Related Reforms

- Reasonable Ballot Access
- Civic Education
- Usability Testing for Ballots
- Voter Guides

Part Two Resources

- Model statute