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Wednesday, July 09, 2014



## It's time for Maryland election reform

Here's Montgomery Councilman Marc Elrich's idea for boosting voter turnout: a series of ongoing radio/TV public service announcements educating voters about the importance of the County Council.

Yeah, that's right, another ridiculous, self-serving program that won't deal, one iota, with the abysmal voter turnout, but may justify creating a new "County Department of Voter Awareness" with its own offices, staff and budget. For the world's Elriches, the answer to every social problem is more government.

Well, here's my idea: radical election reform. Let's scrap Maryland's primary election system, which is undemocratic and helps contribute to political polarization. Thanks to closed primaries, the people who govern us are more politically extreme than those they govern.

Here's why: Maryland, like most states, has closed primaries, which means the two candidates we choose from in November are preselected for us by party primary elections. These low-turnout primaries, limited to party voters, permit a small number of people to control who eventually gets elected, especially in a one-party state like Maryland, where the Democratic primary is the de facto election.

On June 24, councilman at-large Elrich was the top vote getter, but with only 16 percent of Montgomery's registered Dems and a mere 9 percent of all county voters. Similarly, gubernatorial winner Anthony Brown got only 11.7 percent of the state's registered Dems and only 6.4 percent of all voters. Some mandate.

An election system, enshrined in state law, that gives a small fraction of voters amplified control over who's elected violates the spirit of "one person, one vote" fashioned by the U.S. Supreme Court 50 years ago, striking down state election systems, like Maryland's, that gave rural voters more voting power than urban voters. Giving a small number of Dems and Republicans control over our general election ballot is equally wrong.

Also, closed primaries contribute to the political polarization that's strangling compromise in our government. Primaries limited to only Dems or to only Republicans produce nominees who reflect party ideology, not mainstream ideology.

So the Dems elect nominees who are slaves to labor unions, environmental extremists, the gay lobby, radical feminists and minority groups. Similarly, GOP nominees owe their souls to business, evangelicals and the tea party.

Several Maryland primaries last month saw Republicans purge incumbents who "weren't conservative enough." including an Anne Arundel councilman toppled by an arch-conservative who allegedly belongs to a national hate group.

Great — in November, we get to choose between whichever liberal extremists or conservative extremists the party special interests send us. No wonder voter turnout stinks.

So let's blow up the closed primaries and start from scratch. Simply letting "unaffiliated voters" (registered voters who

### MY MARYLAND



 Blair Lee

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reject being Dems or Republicans) participate in the party primaries is half-hearted reform.

Instead, let's adopt a "top-two" primary system like California, Washington and Louisiana have.

In a "top-two" primary, every candidate, regardless of party, runs on a single ballot and all voters, regardless of affiliation, may vote. The top two vote getters, regardless of party, face each other in the general election. It doesn't matter if the finalists belong to the same party or not.

But, because all of Maryland's voters participate equally in the primary, most candidates will move to the middle away from their party ideology in order to win. Thus, the two finalists and the eventual winner are likely to be mainstream moderates.

But won't this ruin the political parties? Maybe, but so what? What's more important, your state or your party?

And, by the way, the political parties are already shrinking. Thirty years ago, 69 percent of Maryland's voters were Dems. Today, it's only 55 percent.

Twenty years ago, 29 percent of Maryland voters were Republicans. Today, it's only 26 percent. Meanwhile, independents and "others" have grown from 7 percent in 1984 to 19 percent today.

And please don't pretend that Maryland enjoys a competitive, two-party system. On Nov. 4, 37 percent of our state legislature candidates will automatically win because they are unopposed or are running in multi-member districts without a full slate of opponents. All of Maryland's statewide officials are Dems, as is 88 percent of our Congressional delegation.

Dems control veto-proof majorities in the General Assembly and govern the residents of Montgomery, PG and Baltimore city, from the White House all the way down to the courthouse. So please tell me exactly what good political parties do us other than propping up a political cartel.

I admit that primary election reform won't be easy. It means changing state laws that are controlled by the very incumbents who operate and benefit from the status quo. Other likely obstructionists include labor unions and the other special interests who control the Dem Party. Also, African-Americans will cry "foul" because "top two" primaries dilute the voting power blacks exercise in Dem primaries.

But blacks can't have it both ways. In Mississippi last month, when Black Dems derailed a tea party Republican by voting in a runoff primary for Republican U.S. Sen. Thad Cochran, Jesse Jackson crowed, "You cannot win in the new South or in national elections with all-white primaries. This is a new America today."

Well, all-black and predominantly-black Dem primaries in Maryland are just as wrong, Rev. Jackson, aren't they?

Who will lead this election reform movement? An odd coalition made up of good government types (League of Women Voters, ACLU, editorial writers) and folks who gain most from a more moderate state government (taxpayers, business people and, if they have any sense, Republicans).

And once these reformers fix Maryland's flawed primaries, they can confront Maryland's corrupt gerrymandering system.

Blair Lee is chairman of the board of Lee Development Group in Silver Spring and a regular commentator for WBAL radio. His past columns are available at [www.gazette.net/blairlee](http://www.gazette.net/blairlee). His email address is [blairleeiv@gmail.com](mailto:blairleeiv@gmail.com).

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August 4, 2014 6:19 am

Blair Lee advocates a "top-two" primary, but there seems to be little evidence (<http://www.dailybreeze.com/government-and-politics/20140502/californias-top-two-primary-election-system-does-not-stimulate-voter-turnout-study-says>) that it will appreciably increase voter participation. The Connecticut League of Woman Voters concluded (<http://www.publicnewsservice.org/2014-07-07/civic-engagement/study-no-specific-remedy-for-low-voter-turnout-in-ct-primary/a40299-1>) "that it doesn't seem to matter whether it's an open, top-two, or closed primary. They're all pretty comparable in the rates of voter turnout."

What good are a gaggle of candidates who "will move to the middle" for the primaries, only to govern far differently after winning the election?

So what system of voting should those serious about increasing voter turnout get behind? Fair Vote, located in Montgomery County, has a solution (<http://www.fairvote.org/reforms/instant-runoff-voting/>): "Instant Runoff Voting (IRV) for ... offices like mayor and governor

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would better represent the views of ... independent voters, as more candidates would be inclined to run. Therefore, voters who might not feel that their views are represented ... would turn out to the polls to support their preferred candidate."

Mr. Lee complains that Anthony Brown won only 11.7% of registered Democrats. One can only wonder what the turnout (and results) would have been if Democrats were allowed to vote for more than one candidate using IRV. After all, 48.6% of those voting wanted someone other than the winner, while 77.2% didn't even bother to vote.

George Gluck  
Green Party candidate for Congress from District 6

[pegasus4848](#)

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July 11, 2014 5:55 am

I'm all for electing politicians with new ideas, but a majority of MD's population is left of center on a lot of issues. You use the term "environmental extremists" loosely. Environmentalism is pretty popular in MD, so you should define and point to examples of extremism. The "gay lobby" is also pretty popular in MD, and MD voters approved of gay marriage a couple years ago (it has only increased in popularity since).

I agree that MD needs to redraw its districts; I voted against the redistricting when it was on the ballot for approval a couple years ago. Like a lot of other states, MD needs an independent panel to draw the lines.

"Well, all-black and predominantly-black Dem primaries in Maryland are just as wrong, Rev. Jackson, aren't they?" Blacks make up about 30% of MD's population, so they're going to have influence. You should bring some numbers on how prominent black candidates are in running for state-level positions. But on the local level, I wouldn't be surprised to find strong racial influence in local elections. This is the case in many states. PG County comes to mind for MD -- many of its neighborhoods have become more segregated by race (blacks have increased in black-majority neighborhoods and decreased in Hispanic or white-majority neighborhoods).

[DAK4Blizzard](#)

(Report Abuse)

July 9, 2014 8:04 pm

Democrats may have a lock on most of Maryland's future elections, they will win. It is the Maryland taxpayer who will always lose.

[RustysChaos](#)

(Report Abuse)

July 9, 2014 1:02 pm

Lee has excellent points and he identifies a real problem. However, the problem is even worse than Lee writes here. With Maryland's slates and sample ballot advertisements, the winners in most Maryland primary races (especially lower ballot races) are determined by a handful of incumbent politicians. These slates and sample ballots provide nearly bullet-proof incumbency protection, and enables incumbents to pick winners in pretty much all open lower ballot races. We have an illusion of competitive primary elections, but the reality is anything but. An open primary could alleviate this problem, but banning slates and somehow limiting sample ballot advertisements may be needed to really make our elections competitive. Sadly, our incumbent politicians are unlikely to tinker with a system that works to their benefit.

[RF](#)

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July 9, 2014 10:14 am

True - Maryland needs election reform. Maryland needs political reform - but it will not happen until the now 55% of Democrats falls to 40% or less. The current 'hacks' that

control Md politics (a.k.a. the Democrats) do not want to change the status quo. No bills will be introduced or voted upon in the Md General Assembly until the Republicans have the votes. That is why I moved to Pa. Lower taxes and better quality of life.

[Col now living in Pa.](#)

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