

Encouraging the Use of Primaries Instead of Caucuses in Local & Statewide Elections

Background:

The Democratic Party is built upon the fundamental principles of inclusion, transparency, openness, and equal access to the ballot for all voters. Under the Democratic Party plan each jurisdiction has the discretion to select its candidates by either a primary, an assembled caucus or an unassembled caucus. As a limitation on this choice, if an incumbent office holder was selected by a primary, the officer holder can demand a primary when running for re-election.

In several jurisdictions across the Commonwealth of Virginia, local Democratic organizations opted to use a caucus instead of a primary in a local election to determine the Democratic candidate for a general election. Although the government funds primaries, local Democratic organizations bear the cost and volunteer resources necessary to conduct caucuses. In addition, the decision to opt for a caucus over a primary has been viewed as being conducted in a less than transparent manner, and inevitably draws criticism as favoring party insiders.

A caucus frequently results in substantially lower turnout among eligible voters than is the case with primaries. Unlike a primary which has extensive opportunities for in-person and mail-in absentee voting, virtually all caucuses require in-person voting during designated hours at one or a few locations. In contrast, primaries are held at the regular polling place in each precinct. As a result, a caucus disproportionately excludes young people, minorities, working people, party outsiders, and independent-leaning voters by imposing stricter limits than a primary as to the time and location in which eligible voters may exercise their franchise.

Because a primary will have a higher voter turnout than a caucus, it is more valuable in party building. Following a caucus, the party will receive fewer participant names than from a primary, so there are fewer voters identified as Democrats to target in the general election get out the vote efforts.

Therefore, be it resolved that: the 2017 Eighth District Democratic Convention recommends the Virginia State Democratic party and the local Democratic committees conduct primaries whenever possible.