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A new political action committee wants to make county races nonpartisan. File photo

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT NON-PARTISAN COUNTY ELECTIONS

By Cooper Levey-Baker
Associate Editor

The campaign to make all countywide races nonpartisan **became official** this week, with the launch of Open Our Elections, a new PAC dedicated to promoting the cause and placing the issue on the ballot. Intended to beat back some of “the recent manipulations, abuses and dirty tricks” employed by local political parties, the effort has already found “broad support,” according to Open Our Elections chairwoman and former Venice City Councilwoman Sue Long.

But how would it work? And how would it affect the political process? That’s what we’re

going to explore in this comprehensive guide to the movement. Strap on your seatbelts ... it’s “explainer” time!

What is Open Our Elections?

Open Our Elections is a newly formed political action committee (PAC) dedicated to putting the issue of nonpartisan county elections in front of voters. An outgrowth of the Public Interest Coalition, which is made up of groups such as the Sarasota County Council of Neighborhood Associations, the Audubon Society and the Sierra Club, Open Our Elections is led by Long. Its treasurer is Bill Zoller,

the president of Citizens for Sensible Growth in Sarasota County.

What is it trying to do?

Open Our Elections wants to make all county-wide races nonpartisan. That includes campaigns for seats such as tax collector, supervisor of elections and even the board of county commissioners.

OK, OK, but what does “nonpartisan” actually mean?

Good question! If approved by Sarasota County voters, the ballot measure would bar candidates from identifying themselves as members of a particular party. So when you went to vote, you would not see that little “D” or “R” next to a candidate’s name.

Sure, but would that really stop the parties from being involved?

No. As City of Sarasota voters have learned over the last couple months, just because a race is nonpartisan doesn’t mean the parties aren’t involved. They can still run get-out-the-vote operations on behalf of candidates, and campaign fundraising would remain unchanged.

So what’s the big deal, then?

The major goal is to empower all voters to be able to vote for *someone* in every race. Florida has what is known as a limited open primary system, which means that primary elections are closed to members of a particular party (e.g., only Democrats can vote in a Democratic primary), *unless* all the candidates in a given race belong to the same party. The basic concept is that all voters should have the right



Supervisor of Elections Kathy Dent. Photo by Norman Schimmel

to have a say in who their elected officials are at some point in the process — whether that’s in the general election or in the primary.

But a loophole in state election rules (written under the leadership of former Secretary of State Katherine Harris) currently allows write-in candidates to close primaries that would otherwise be open. Write-in candidates are not required to pay a filing fee or gather signatures, and their names do not appear on the ballot.

Both Democratic and Republican parties exploit this loophole by encouraging fake write-in candidacies. Last year, Vickie Brill, the daughter of a GOP fundraiser, filed as a write-in candidate for supervisor of elections. Even though she immediately acknowledged she wasn’t actually running for office, the move closed the supervisor of elections primary

between Republicans Jon Thaxton and Kathy Dent. Since only Republicans could vote in that race, more than 150,000 registered voters were prevented from having a say in who their supervisor of elections is. Dent won that campaign by earning the support of just 7.8 percent of county voters.

This angered many, and it was an inspiration for the launch of Open Our Elections. Nonpartisan elections would eliminate the loophole exploited by Brill and the Republican Party last year.

If independents and Democrats want a say, why don't they just run candidates of their own?

Another good question! Has anyone told you how smart you are? And handsome!

Open Our Elections argues that all voters should have a voice in every race and that that right shouldn't be subject to the whims of the parties.

Why don't area independents and Democrats just register as Republicans?

Some did! Last year, Sarasota County Supervisor of Elections Office records showed that [288](#) Democrats flipped their party registration to Republican between June 1 (the day Brill filed her paperwork) and July 16 (the deadline to register for the primary). Of course there's no way of knowing how many did so just to vote in the Thaxton-Dent race, but a decent-sized chunk of that number probably did. But then they couldn't vote in any Democratic primaries!

Republican Party of Sarasota County Chairman Joe Gruters [told the News Leader last](#)



Jon Thaxton. Photo by Norman Schimmel

[month](#) that independents “take themselves out of the primary” and are then “stuck with the results.” His advice? “Don't register as independent.”

“We'd be happy to register people over,” he said.

So how would nonpartisan elections function?

The calendar would remain the same, with a first round of voting in August. Every registered voter could participate. If no one wins a majority, then a runoff is held between the top two vote-getters in November.

Who else has nonpartisan elections?

According to Open Our Elections, Leon, Orange, Columbia, Volusia and Miami-Dade

counties all have nonpartisan elections. The group modeled its proposal on the systems in those areas. Sarasota attorney Dan Lobeck, a supporter of the movement, says state statutes dictate how nonpartisan elections are carried out.

Would this actually improve local government?

Maybe. Maybe not. Just because more people could vote, that doesn't mean the candidates will automatically get better.

When will I get to vote on this?

Open Our Elections has started collecting petitions (click [here](#) to read or download one). It needs to sign up almost 14,000 folks. Assuming that happens, a special election will then be held. Open Our Elections is hoping to have


the new process in place for the 2014 election cycle.

Who is opposed to this?

Since the campaign is fairly young, it's tough to say. But certainly Gruters is a foe. He argued that, if approved, the measure would just lead to parties making decisions "in secret and behind closed doors. ... Anybody that votes for nonpartisan races is a fool," he said.

Zoller presented the campaign to the Sarasota County Council of Neighborhood Associations at its Monday meeting, and he mentioned that quote. "We're going to count up how many fools there are," he said.

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