

Former Sen. Rob Portman: Ranked-choice voting, other primary election reforms could reduce political polarization

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COLUMBUS, Ohio – Former Republican Sen. Rob Portman said Friday that ranked-choice voting and California-style primary election reform are two subjects his new academic center will tackle as it studies how to promote bipartisanship.

Speaking at an Ohio State University conference in Columbus, Portman said two major factors – the advent of online political fundraising, which encourages candidates to continuously throw out “red meat” to their parties’ most ideological supporters as a way to raise money, and the media’s tendency to elevate controversial voices – contribute to a system that caters to both major parties’ most extreme voices.

But a third main factor, Portman said, is the primary election system, in which each party picks their candidate who then face off in the November election. He said the current system has resulted in a small minority of voters choosing their most extreme candidate, while sidelining the large number of voters who fall closer to the political center.

So, Portman said his new Portman Center for Policy Solutions, an academic partnership with the University of Cincinnati, will study whether recent voting reforms, including ranked-choice voting, could help turn down the political temperature in the country.

“How do you work on ensuring that more people vote in primaries? That’s one of my biggest concerns,” Portman told reporters afterward. “And then, how do you get candidates coming out of the primaries who are more representative of the state as a whole?”

Portman left office at the end of 2022, retiring rather than seek reelection. One of his major post-Senate initiatives is the Portman Center, which Portman and UC officials announced in February and which officially opened last Monday.

In his remarks on Friday, delivered at a conference by OSU's John Glenn College of Public Affairs, Portman said the sheer length of his 30 years in elected office was factor in his decision to leave politics.

But as he's said before, another big reason was what Portman viewed as an increasing inability to get things done in Washington. Contributing to that environment, he said, is a dysfunctional political system that contributes toward Americans' general dissatisfaction with their elected representatives.

Portman said his new academic enter will study what reforms could help fix the system. A couple potential solutions, he said, are ranked-choice voting, which Alaska and Maine recently adopted, as well as California's style of primary elections, which the state began using in 2011.

In ranked-choice voting, [voters rank their preferred candidates in order](#). That means that if no candidate gets a majority of first-place votes, the candidate with the fewest first-choice ballots drops out, and ballots for the eliminated candidate are reallocated to each voter's second-choice candidate. Advocates say the system helps advance candidates with broad support, rather than those who cater to the political extremes. And in California's voting system, all candidates appear on the primary election ballot together, regardless of party affiliation. The top-two vote getters – which in deep blue California typically is two Democrats – advance to the November election.

"The theory is you'll have a more middle-of-the road candidate in the end, because Republicans may help choose the more moderate of the two Democrats and help put that person over the top," Portman said.

Noting that ranked-choice voting has gotten "mixed reviews," Portman said further study will determine if there's evidence that either system actually promotes more moderate candidates. He told reporters afterward that academics at the Portman Center will decide what it will focus on, but made clear the subject is of personal interest to him.

"I think it's important that we look at it," Portman said.

Meanwhile, Republican lawmakers in Columbus have [proposed banning ranked-choice voting in Ohio and blocking state funding for any local governments who use the system](#), saying it delays election results and promotes voter confusion. There are ranked-choice voting advocates in Ohio, but adopting the system would require a state constitutional amendment, a costly process that involves collecting hundreds of

thousands of voter signatures and winning support from a majority in a statewide vote. So no serious proposal has yet to take hold.

Republican lawmakers also pushing a bill, with backing from Secretary of State Frank LaRose, [that would make it harder for voters to participate in primary elections](#) by requiring that they declare party affiliation in advance in order to participate. Ohio's current system is an "open" primary, which means voters can pick whichever party's ballot they want at their polling place.

Portman brought up his interest in voting reform in response to an audience question about gerrymandering, which Portman agreed is a contributing factor toward political polarization.

But he told reporters afterward he hadn't studied [a proposal to overhaul Ohio's redistricting system by replacing the Republican elected officials who oversee it with a citizen's commission](#), which could come before voters in November 2024.

He declined to share his thoughts even in general about whether citizen's redistricting commissions might help reduce partisan gerrymandering.

"Under the [U.S.] Constitution, it's pretty clear that state legislatures have a big role to play, and that courts have a big role to play," Portman said. "So, you've got to work within that system."