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Could the same candidate run under separate parties? Wisconsin group wants to try it

Mitchell Schmidt | Wisconsin State Journal Apr 13, 2025 0

esident Trump has announced a 90-day pause on new U.S. tariffs for dozens of countries—just hours after sweeping import taxes took effect.

On the heels the most expensive state Supreme Court race in the county's history and rising partisan strife from Wisconsin to Washington, D.C., a new bipartisan group proposes a return to a once-popular electoral practice aimed at building coalitions and strengthening minor political parties.

Members of United Wisconsin say the process, called "fusion voting," provides an incentive for the two major political parties to cater more to voters' priorities and bring them closer to the middle of the political spectrum.

The goal is to "turn down the temperature, because right now it's boiling," United Wisconsin co-chair David Mahoney said.

"It's boiling over and we're not getting the peoples' work done, which is what government exists for," Mahoney, a former Democratic Dane County Sheriff, told the Wisconsin State Journal. "We're spending more time fighting with each other and throwing rocks at each other than we are solving the problems that really make a difference in people's lives."

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Fusion voting allows the same candidate to be nominated by more than one political party. Voters would still vote only once in each race, but they can choose their preferred candidate without supporting a party they may disagree with.

In practice, that means some candidates would appear more than once on a ballot. For example, "Jane Doe, Republican" could appear on the same ballot with "Jane Doe, Green Party."

All votes cast for an individual candidate — whether nominated by a major political party or a minor party — would then "fuse" together to create a final vote tally.

Organizers with United Wisconsin say the process would provide minor parties, who can oftentimes play spoiler in state and national elections, with more voice in the electoral system. In battleground Wisconsin, where roughly one-third of voters identify as independent and where statewide races are often decided by razor-thin margins, candidates would be forced to cater more to voters' issues as opposed to just the extremes of their political party, Mahoney said.

"I think oftentimes that's what we miss, that when any individual runs for office they're representing the citizens," Mahoney said. "It's not them, it's not that candidate's singular priorities, it's the priorities of the people they're going to represent."

Mahoney said the hope is fusion voting could help tone down the partisan rhetoric and force politicians to focus efforts on issues with broad public support like public education, conservation and water quality and public safety.

"There might be a difference of opinion in how we get there, and that's where the conversations and the compromises have to take place to achieve what our citizens need and deserve — and that's what we hope United Wisconsin will accomplish," he said.

System has roots in American history

Fusion voting was commonplace across the country in the 19th century and was used as an avenue for anti-slavery parties to force the issue of abolition in the 1840s and 1850s. Later, populist, workingmen, suffragist and temperance parties used the tool to advance their policy priorities.

In 1854, Free Soilers, anti-slavery groups and other fringe parties fused their efforts in Wisconsin to create the Republican Party.

However, anti-fusion laws to limit electoral competition passed at the turn of the 20th century have largely removed the practice.

As of May 2023, some form of fusion voting was allowed or in use in Connecticut, Mississippi, New York, Oregon and Vermont, according to election tracking organization Ballotpedia.

Under Wisconsin state law, election clerks "may accept nomination papers for the same person in the same election for more than one party." Candidates who file nomination papers under a recognized political party also may not run as an independent candidate for the same office in the same election.

State law also requires that candidates nominated to the same office by more than one party only appear on the ballot under the party that first nominated them.

In 1991, members of the Labor-Farm Party challenged the law, arguing it infringed on the party's right to free speech and association under the First and Fourteenth Amendments. A federal appeals court upheld the law. A petition for a rehearing was denied, but three circuit judges dissented, writing that "a more in depth examination of the associational rights at issue is required by established case law."

"When a minor party nominates a candidate also nominated by a major party, it does not necessarily 'leech onto,' the larger party for support," the judges wrote. "Rather, it may — and often does — offer the voters a very real and important choice and sends an important message to the candidate."

United Wisconsin executive director Kristine Andrews said the organization believes fusion voting is still permissible in Wisconsin because voters have a constitutional right to nominate any candidate they want.

"We believe the government doesn't have the right to tell us who we can associate with," Andrews said. "We're speaking with legal counsel about this. If they believe we should seek to clarify this right in court, before we form an official fusion-based political party, we're prepared to do that."

Group would support major-party candidates

If fusion voting were to return to Wisconsin, leaders of United Wisconsin say, the group would seek not to nominate independent candidates but rather interview and nominate a candidate from one of the two major parties. At that point, the candidate would appear on the ballot twice, once under their major party and again under United Wisconsin's banner.

The nonprofit group Protect Democracy notes that fusion voting "allows a minor party to elevate their policy agenda without the downside risk, offering their ballot line to the competitive candidate willing to advocate for their priorities."

"Because election results reveal the support a candidate earns from each nominating party's ballot line, a minor party that delivers a meaningful share of the vote total can encourage a candidate to support its policy goals," according to the group.

Former Republican state Senate Majority Leader and United Wisconsin co-chair Dale Schultz said he knows voters who are tired of the hyper-partisan nature of recent elections and he remains hopeful the effort can get bipartisan support in Wisconsin.

"We've got some green shoots," he said. "We just have to nurture them."

He also acknowledged such a change likely won't happen overnight.

After all, efforts by Schultz and former state Sen. Tim Cullen, who died in December, to toss out Wisconsin's previous legislative maps — considered some of the most gerrymandered in the nation — took more than a decade to achieve. With a newfound 4-3 liberal majority in 2023, the state Supreme Court court ruled the maps were unconstitutional and ordered them redrawn.

"I hope for the best and plan for the worst," Schultz said. "I hope this doesn't take 10 years."

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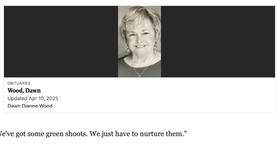

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>
> **Dale Schultz,** United Wisconsin co-chair

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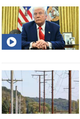

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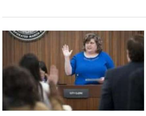

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