



## MEMORANDUM

FROM: Walter Whetsell  
RE: Key Findings: S.C. Statewide Survey  
RE: February 7, 2026

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### INTRODUCTION

On behalf of Unite America, Starboard Communications has completed a statewide survey of likely Republican Primary voters in South Carolina. We primarily sought to gather public opinion to determine attitudes and opinions regarding the issue of open vs. closed party primary elections.

### METHODOLOGY

The survey included responses from 400 registered voters in South Carolina who are deemed likely to vote in the June 2026 Republican Primary and was conducted February 3-5, 2026. Individual respondents were randomly selected from voter rolls and were contacted by telephone using a combination of valid landline and cell phone listings. Each respondent was part of a representative sample based on current voter registration statistics for race, age, gender, and geography. In addition, care was taken to representatively survey voters based on income, education, and political persuasion. The margin of error for a survey of this type is  $\pm 4.9\%$  in 19 out of 20 cases.

### BOTTOM LINE TAKEAWAY

A clear majority of South Carolina Republican primary voters favor maintaining the state's current primary system. Support for the current system is broad, coalition-based, and durable, while support for closing primaries is more concentrated within specific ideological factions of the Republican electorate. In short, the status quo aligns with where most GOP primary voters currently are, even as the issue remains emotionally salient for a vocal minority.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Clear Majority of GOP Primary Voters Support Current Open Primary System

- When asked directly whether South Carolina should keep its current open primary system or move to a closed primary system:
  - Keep the current system: 54.46%
  - Move to a closed primary: 38.94%
  - Unsure: 6.60%
- The margin indicates that keeping the current system is not merely a default position, but the preferred option for a majority of Republican primary voters.

### Support for the Current System Is Broad-Based Across Key GOP Constituencies

- Crosstabs show that support for keeping primaries open extends across multiple core Republican constituencies, including **Traditional Republicans, Economic/Fiscal Republicans, Women, and Younger Republican** voters – groups that collectively represent a large share of the Republican primary electorate. This suggests that the current system reflects the preferences of the party's governing and coalition-building wing.
- By contrast, support for closing primaries is more narrowly concentrated, drawing primarily from the **populist faction of the party and evangelical voters**. Meanwhile, support for keeping the current system spans Traditional Republicans, Economic/Fiscal Republicans, women, and younger voters – suggesting that the open primary coalition more closely reflects the Republican primary electorate as a whole.

### Even When Framed as a Values Question, Voters Lean Toward the Current System

- When presented with competing arguments – one emphasizing open participation without forced party registration, and the other emphasizing party control through registration – voters again favor the current approach:
  - Current system better: 53.14%
  - Participation should require party registration: 41.58%
- This finding reinforces that Republican voters value participation and flexibility, even while recognizing concerns about party identity.

### Calls for Change Lack a Unified End Point

- Among voters who favor changing the system, there is no consensus on what “closing” primaries should look like and “calls for change” lack a unified end point:
  - 59% prefer a fully closed system
  - 35% prefer a semi-closed system

- Importantly, this internal division suggests that moving away from the current system introduces new complexity rather than clarity, even among reform-minded voters.

## TOPLINES

Q. 1 “For more than a century, South Carolina has allowed any registered voter to vote in any political party’s primary election. The General Assembly is considering two proposals that would impose new restrictions on who would be allowed to participate in primary elections. Do you think South Carolina should keep its current quote open end quote primary system or switch to a more restrictive quote closed end quote primary system?”

	Open	Closed	Unsure
Overall	54%	39%	7%
POPULIST REPUBLICAN	39%	52%	8%
TRADITIONAL REPUBLICAN	58%	35%	8%
EVANG. REPUBLICAN	47%	50%	3%
FISCAL REPUBLICAN	63%	31%	6%
AGE-18-34	71%	29%	0%
AGE-35-54	54%	39%	7%
AGE-55-64	53%	40%	7%
AGE-65+	55%	39%	7%
MALE	49%	44%	7%
FEMALE	60%	34%	7%
CD1-CHS/BEAUFORT	60%	30%	10%
CD-2-COLUMBIA	64%	29%	7%
CD-3-OCONEE-PICKENS	58%	38%	4%
CD-4-GREENVILLE/SPART	40%	56%	4%
CD5-YORK	51%	41%	8%
CD-6-PEEDEE	62%	38%	0%
CD-7- MB/FLORENCE	50%	40%	10%

Q. 1b. (Asked only of respondents who say the system should impose additional restrictions). Which proposal would you be most likely to support? Closed primaries that allow only voters who are registered members of a political party to vote in that party's primary election. Voters who are not registered with a party at least 60 days before the primary election would not be permitted to vote in primaries....or....

semi-closed primaries that allow voters who are not registered with a political party to vote in one party's primary election, but doing so would automatically register them with that party. Voters who wish to remain unaffiliated or vote in a different party's primary in a future election would be required to change their registration at least 45 days before the primary election.

	Closed	Semi-Closed	Neither	Unsure
<b>Overall</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>3%</b>
POPULIST REPUBLICAN	72%	26%	3%	0%
TRADITIONAL REPUBLICAN	48%	48%	0%	4%
EVANG. REPUBLICAN	52%	41%	0%	7%
FISCAL REPUBLICAN	65%	25%	10%	0%
AGE-18-34	100%	0%	0%	0%
AGE-35-54	50%	43%	4%	4%
AGE-55-64	55%	38%	3%	3%
AGE-65+	65%	30%	2%	4%
MALE	60%	36%	1%	3%
FEMALE	59%	33%	4%	4%
CD1-CHS/BEAUFORT	73%	27%	0%	0%
CD-2-COLUMBIA	17%	67%	8%	8%
CD-3-OCONEE-PICKENS	45%	45%	5%	5%
CD-4-GREENVILLE/SPART	74%	22%	0%	4%
CD5-YORK	56%	31%	6%	6%
CD-6-PEEDEE	50%	50%	0%	0%
CD-7- MB/FLORENCE	75%	25%	0%	0%

Q. 2 Some people say South Carolina's current primary system is better than either closed or semi-closed primaries because it allows all registered voters to participate without being forced to identify with a political party. Others say participation in a political party primary should require party registration. Which comes closer to your view?

	Current System	Party Registration	Unsure
<b>Overall</b>	<b>53%</b>	<b>42%</b>	<b>5%</b>
POPULIST REPUBLICAN	41%	57%	2%
TRADITIONAL REPUBLICAN	55%	33%	12%
EVANG. REPUBLICAN	40%	55%	5%
FISCAL REPUBLICAN	66%	32%	2%
AGE-18-34	71%	29%	0%
AGE-35-54	56%	40%	4%
AGE-55-64	51%	43%	6%
AGE-65+	51%	43%	6%
MALE	48%	46%	7%
FEMALE	59%	38%	4%
CD1-CHS/BEAUFORT	58%	36%	6%
CD-2-COLUMBIA	67%	31%	2%
CD-3-OCONEE-PICKENS	49%	45%	0%
CD-4-GREENVILLE/SPART	40%	52%	8%
CD5-YORK	59%	36%	5%
CD-6-PEEDEE	57%	43%	0%
CD-7- MB/FLORENCE	48%	46%	6%

## CONCLUSION

- A majority of Republican primary voters prefer keeping South Carolina's current primary system.
- Support for the current system is broader and more coalition-based than support for closing primaries.
- Voters who favor closing primaries are more ideologically concentrated, while support for openness spans multiple GOP constituencies.
- When framed as a choice between participation and forced registration, voters continue to lean toward the current system.
- There is no unified alternative model among voters who want change.

## WHAT THIS MEANS FOR LAWMAKERS

- Maintaining the current system aligns with the majority view of Republican primary voters statewide.
- The status quo reflects a coalition approach favored by Traditional, Economic/Fiscal, female, and younger GOP voters.
- Changing the primary system risks elevating one faction's priorities at the expense of **the majority of GOP voters**.
- Any move toward closing primaries would require lawmakers to actively choose sides in an internal GOP debate.
- From a political-risk perspective, keeping the current system avoids unnecessary intraparty conflict.