Straight Party Voting is a voting method, used in a Partisan General Election, where a user can make a single party selection on a ballot and it will automatically result in selecting all candidates in each partisan office on the ballot that is running under that party label. This is a convenient method for a voter to select all candidates in his/her desired party without having to make selections in each and every office. However, in U.S governmental elections, it doesn’t force the voter to only select the candidates of one party. When the voter makes a straight party selection, the voter can still indicate exceptions to that party selection by directly making their desired selection(s) in any contest where they want to choose a candidate or candidates that are of a different party.

The impact of this voting method on tabulation is limited to how paper ballots that contain straight party votes are processed. This is due to the fact that the ballot voted with a straight party selection only contains the party selection and those candidate selections that the voter chooses to directly select, whether or not affiliated with the selected party. The tabulator, using specific rules and the defined election content, decides how these selections are processed to determine the candidates that receive votes as intended by the voter. These rules vary by state and fall into two general categorizes that may have situational variations. These are designated as “Inclusive” rules and “Exclusive” rules.

It should be noted that this requirement does not apply to electronic voting, even though the same convenience of straight party selection exists. With electronic vote, when a straight party selection is made, all candidates affiliated with the straight party selection appear as selected on the screens containing partisan contests. Candidate selections are available to be changed as the voter advances through the ballot and all resultant selections that will be tabulated when accepted by the voter are shown on the summary screen(s). Any rules and limitations in selection (such as number of allowed candidates) are imposed prior to acceptance of a selection and, if not allowed, the voter is notified of the reason. When the ballot is accepted, no processing of the selections is required as all accepted selections are valid. They are stored (or printed in the case of a Ballot Marking Device (BMD) just as displayed in the ballot summary.

The differences between “Inclusive” and “Exclusive” rules only come into play when they are applied to multiple vote for contests. The variation only affects the outcome when there is a straight party selection, a contest has one or more candidates from the selected party and one or more candidates in the contest are directly selected. There is no difference in outcome if a contest is overvoted from too many direct selections of candidates. In that case, the contest is overvoted independent of straight party rules or straight party selection.

Using “inclusive” rules, if the numbers of candidates directly selected in a contest when combined with any additional candidates selected by the straight party selection does not exceed the vote for, the straight party selections are included with the direct selection(s) in allotting votes. If the combined number of selected candidates exceeds the vote for, the candidates selected by the selected straight party are omitted. Obviously, when considering the total candidates selected, a selected candidate is only counted once whether directly selected, selected by the straight party selection or selected by both. Using “exclusive” rules, any directly selected candidate in a contest excludes consideration of any candidate selected by the straight party in that contest.

There are two explicit conditions where the vote outcome will vary when applying “Inclusive” vs “Exclusive” rules in a multiple vote for contest:

* A voter selects a given party and then selects one of the candidates in that party (and no other) where there are other candidates in the contest of the same party.
  + Using “Exclusive” rules, only that candidate will receive a vote in that contest. (any selection excludes straight party selections)
  + Using “Inclusive” rules, all candidates in the selected party will receive a vote. (since the combined selections do not result in an overvote, the straight party selected candidates are included with the directly selected candidate - one candidate happens to be selected two ways)
* A party does not have a full slate of candidates in a given contest and the voter selects that party and selects a candidate either of another party, an independent candidate or a write-in.
  + Using “Exclusive” rules, only that candidate will receive a vote in that contest. (any selection excludes straight party selections)
  + Using “Inclusive” rules, all candidates in the selected party will receive a vote as well as the directly selected candidate. (since the combined selections do not result in an overvote, the straight party selected candidates are included with the directly selected candidate)

In a vote for one contest, there is no difference in application of these rules since only one candidate can be selected. If there is a directly selected candidate in the contest, whether the same party, a different party, an independent candidate or a write-in selection, or even whether the selected party has a candidate in the contest or not, the outcome is the same independent of whether “Inclusive” or “Exclusive” rules are used.

Whether using “Inclusive” or “Exclusive” rules, in all states but one, if there is more than one straight party selection, it is considered overvoted and only direct selections will be tabulated. The one exception is in the State of Indiana, where even though “inclusive” rules are used, overvoting the straight party is specially handled. If the straight party selection is overvoted, it results in every partisan office on the ballot to be tabulated as overvoted. This applies even if there is no partisan candidates in the contest or if it is not possible for the contest to be overvoted due to there being fewer candidates than the vote for. It should also be noted that current statue in Indiana precludes straight party voting from being applied to partisan contests where multiple candidates are to be elected (At-Large contests). These must be voted by direct candidate selections.

Another exception to straight party overvote handling is the “Inclusive” rules variation once used in Illinois but longer applicable since they eliminated straight party voting in 1997. This is being described due to recently proposed legislation to reinstate straight party voting but didn’t pass. Using Illinois rules, if more than one straight party was selected, it is not considered an overvote. The number of candidates selected in each contest by the combination of party selected candidates along with any directly selected candidates is checked against the allowable number of selections. The straight party selections in the contest are only eliminated if that number was exceeded. So the combination of straight selections was treated as if it was a single party selection. The straight party itself could not be overvoted.

At one point there were 18 states that used straight party voting in a general election. As of this writing (2017) this is down to 9 states (See table below). West Virginia and Michigan recently abolished straight party voting. (2015 and 2016, respectively)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| State | Rule | Comment |
| Alabama | Inclusive |  |
| Indiana | Inclusive | (restricted to single vote for contests in 2016 – SB61) + SP overvote rules |
| Kentucky | Inclusive |  |
| Michigan | Inclusive |  |
| Oklahoma | Inclusive |  |
| Pennsylvania | Exclusive |  |
| South Carolina | Exclusive |  |
| Texas | Inclusive | Until 2020 |
| Utah | Inclusive |  |

There is another straight party rule that is not in use but has been proposed in one state legislature and interpreted to be required at one time by another. It still only impacts multiple vote for contests and is a cross between “Inclusive” and “Exclusive” rules. If any directly selected candidate is not of the party of the selected straight party (another party candidate, independent candidate or write-in selection), the straight party selections are excluded from consideration. If there is only a directly selected candidate of the same party as the straight party, the straight party selections are included and get votes.

There are several other straight party rules that have been used in other than governmental elections. They are normally used in union elections. There, they refer to the straight party selection as a slate selection where all candidates that support a specific union presidential candidate are considered part of that candidate’s slate. The rules for selection of the slate in combination with direct selection of candidates are totally different than the “Inclusive” or “Exclusive” rules used in current state elections. In state elections any direct candidate selection in a contest can override any party selections in the contest. Using Union rules, the slate/party selection overrides the direct selection. There are two variations of the Union version of these rules. One set of rules, which is referred to as the Union Slate rules, ignores direct candidate selections if there is a slate selection unless the slate is not full in a given contest and the directly selected candidates in the contest, when combined with the candidate selected by the slate selection, does not create an overvote. If it does, the direct selections are ignored. It is sort of the reciprocal of “Inclusive” straight rules. The other set of rules, referred to as the No Crossover rules, treats candidates selected in a contest by the slate selection as if they were directly selected.  If the set of selected candidates in a contest is less than or equal to the vote for, whether directly selected or selected by the slate selection, all candidates get a vote.  If the number exceeds the vote for, the contest is overvoted. In either of the above rules, if the slate selection is overvoted, only direct selections are counted if they do not cause the contest to be overvoted.