



## **Independent voters show recent surge in numbers Republicans still outnumber Democrats in state by 2 to 1 margin**

*Steve Metzger, June 25, 2024 - OKLAHOMA CITY* — In terms of percentage growth, new independent voter registrations have outpaced new Republican registrations in Oklahoma in recent years.

However, independents haven't demonstrated much influence on elections in a state that has grown increasingly conservative.

Since June 2014, independent voter registrations in the Sooner State have swelled by 84.15%, according to statistics kept by the Oklahoma State Election Board. By comparison, Republican registrations have increased over the past decade by 42.52%.

The Democratic Party, once the clearly dominant party in Oklahoma, has declined in terms of voter registrations by 26.39% over the past 10 years. The Libertarian Party, comparatively much smaller, wasn't reflected in voter registration stats in 2014. Since June 2019, it has increased in registrations by 177.77%.

According to the Gallup organization, numbers of people who self-identify as independent have increased even more impressively across the rest of the country. In a May survey, 42% of respondents said they considered themselves independent, while 30% considered themselves Democrats and 28% considered themselves Republicans.

However, Gallup noted that many who register as independents actually "lean" either to the left or right. According to a report from the Pew Research Center, about two-thirds of registered voters identify as partisan, almost evenly split between those who say they are Republican (32% of voters) and those who say they are Democrat (33%). Roughly a third identify as independents or something else (35%), with most of those voters leaning toward one of the two major parties.

While some might see the rise in independent voter registration as a positive sign that people will be more likely to research candidates and their stances on issues before making voting decisions, that may not be the case. In fact, Seth McKee, a political science professor at Oklahoma State University, said research has shown that independent voters may actually be less engaged.

"They're swayable, but they're also much less participatory, so that's the double-edged sword there. You can go after them as voters that might come over to one side or another, but they're also much less likely to vote in the end," he said.

McKee said the increase in independent voter registration in Oklahoma and nationwide may be more reflective of people being fed up with the current partisan rancor of politics than anything else.

Matt Hindman, who chairs the Political Science Department at the University of Tulsa, said that even if independents are as likely as Republicans or Democrats to vote, they may also be as partisan.

“The number of partisan leaners far outweigh the ‘true independents,’” Hindman wrote in an email. “So ... no, we don’t actually have more people who are willing to learn about or vote for the ‘other side.’ In fact, relative to previous eras, we see more people voting for Democrats or Republicans up and down the ballot, and fewer people splitting their votes across parties.”

Oklahoma Election Board Secretary Paul Ziriach said the increase in independent registrations in Oklahoma has been part of a broad shift that has played out for more than a decade. He noted that once people have registered to vote in one party or another or as an independent, they’re not very likely to make a switch. So, despite Oklahoma voting strongly conservative for decades, it wasn’t until 2015 that Republican voter registrations surpassed Democratic registrations in the state.

“We have seen pretty rapid growth in the number of registered independents in the last decade or so, so couple that with the growth of Republicans and the decline in registered Democrats, and there has been a remarkable shift,” Ziriach said.

In June 2014, 1,994,336 total voters were registered in the state, including 856,000 Republicans, 883,000 Democrats and 246,000 independents.

Five years later, in June 2019, there were 2,050,450 registered voters in the state, including roughly 986,000 Republicans, 736,000 Democrats, 318,000 independents and 10,100 Libertarians.

As of June of this year, there are 2,343,736 registered voters statewide, including roughly 1,220,000 Republicans, 650,000 Democrats, 453,000 independents and 22,500 Libertarians.

Ziriach said registration trends have tracked fairly evenly across most counties.

“It’s not perfectly even, but I think generally speaking the statewide trend in growth of Republicans and independents and corresponding decline in Democrats has occurred in virtually every county,” he said. “When you look at growth in independent voters in Oklahoma, Tulsa and Cleveland counties, you might see the percentage of independents in those counties is greater than in rural counties.”

In June 2014, out of 327,876 registered voters in Tulsa County, there were 166,543 registered Republicans, 119,564 Democrats and 41,769 independents.

In Tulsa County five years ago, there were 340,140 total registered voters, including 71,389 Republicans, 112,406 Democrats, 54,632 independents and 1,713 Libertarians.

Currently in Tulsa County, there are 386,242 total registered voters, including 185,683 Republicans, 115,068 Democrats, 81,518 independents and 3,973 Libertarians.

The data show that the number of registered Republicans in Tulsa County has increased by 19,140 over the past 10 years, or by 11.49%. The number Democrats recorded in the county has decreased 4,496, or by 3.76%.

The number of Tulsa County registered independent voters has increased by 39,749, or by 95.16%. The number of Libertarians has increased by 2,260, or 131.93%.