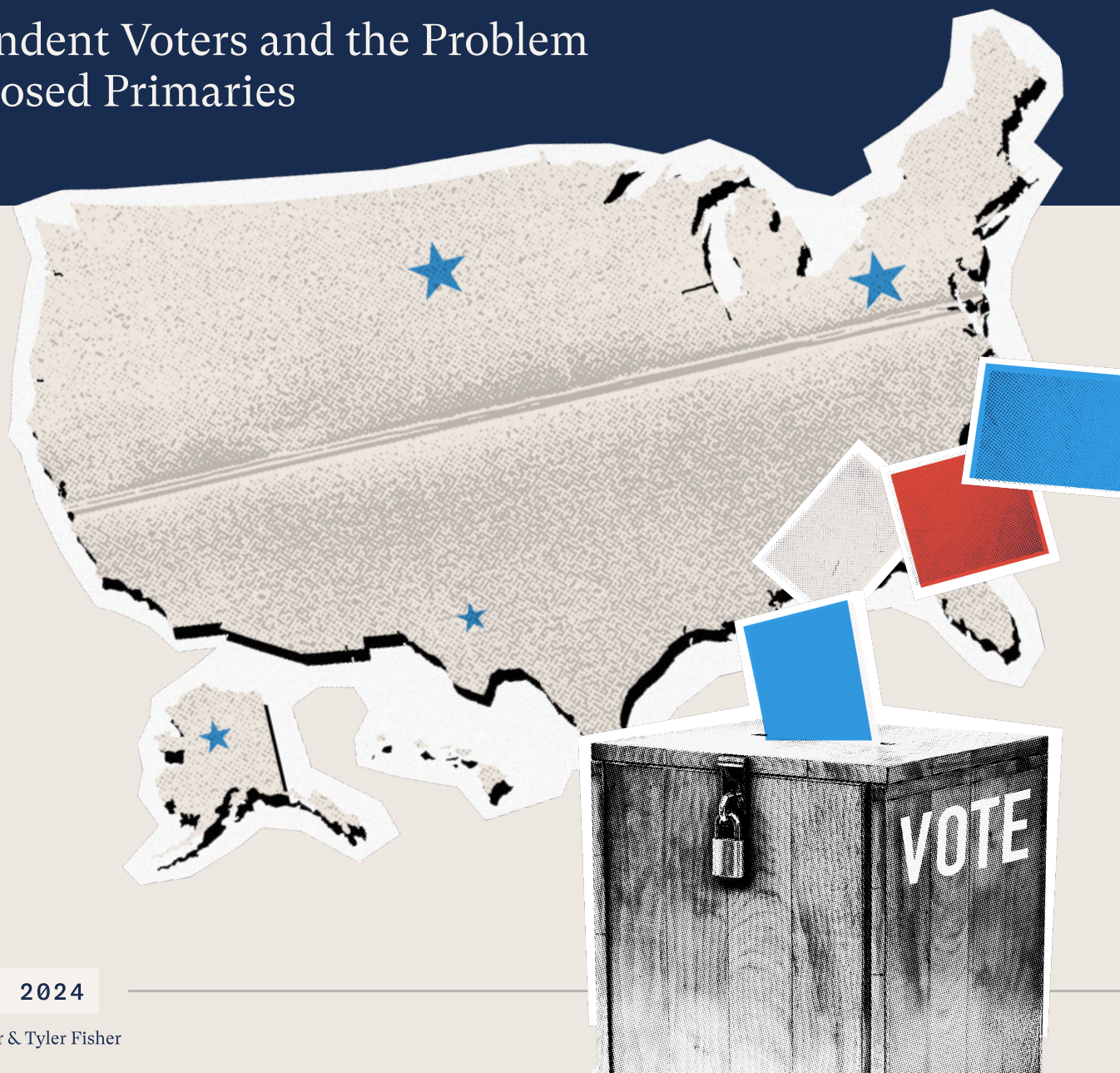


# NOT INVITED TO THE PARTY PRIMARY

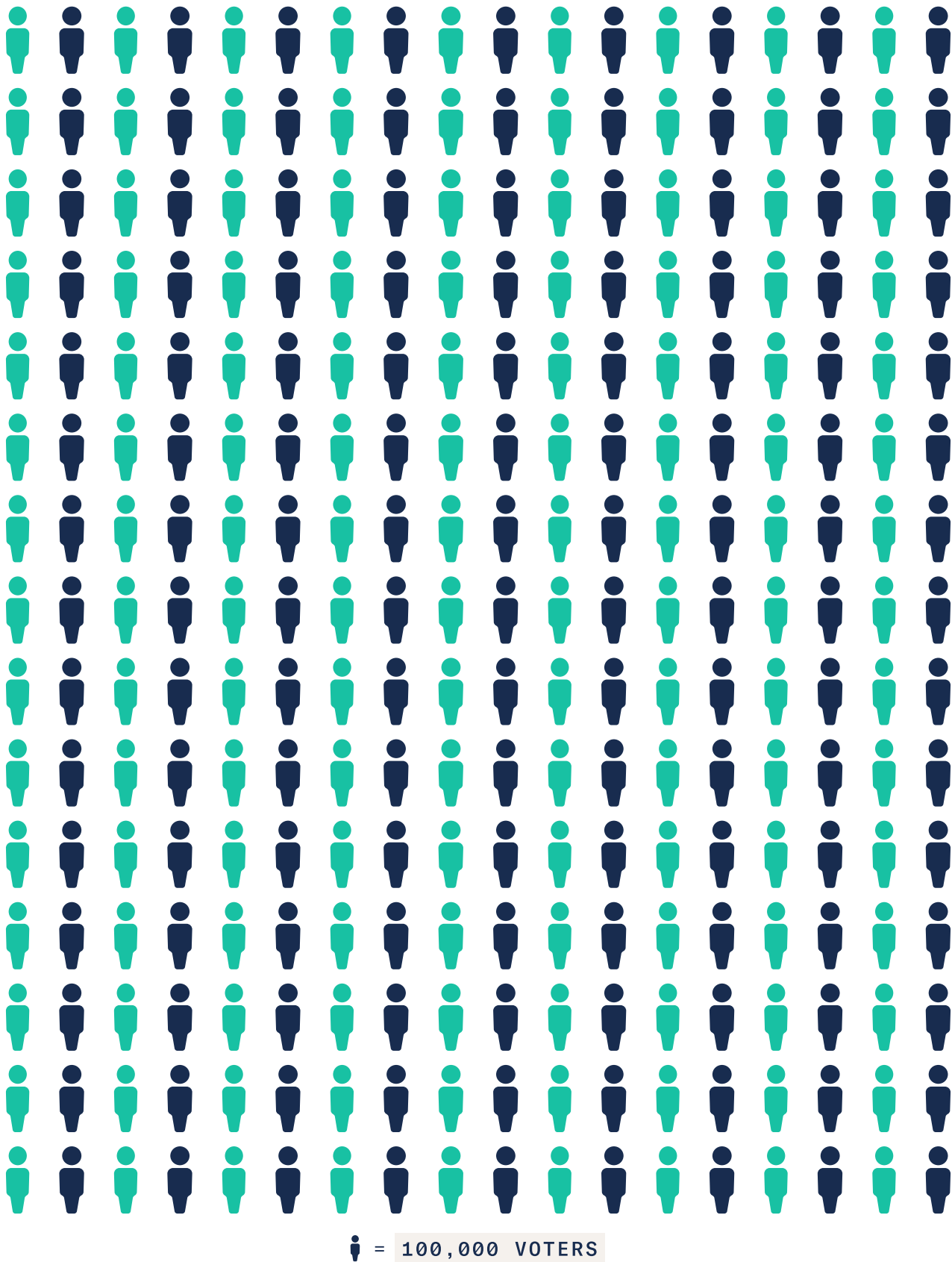
Independent Voters and the Problem  
with Closed Primaries



FEBRUARY 2024

Carlo Macomber & Tyler Fisher

27 Million Americans Can't Vote in Taxpayer Funded Primaries



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

More Americans than ever before — 43% — identify as independent voters. Meanwhile, only 27% each identify as Republicans and Democrats.

**In 2024, over 23.5 million registered independent voters across 22 states are disenfranchised by closed presidential primaries or caucuses.**

- Another 3.5M voters registered with a minor party are also unable to participate in consequential partisan primaries — for a total of 27 million disenfranchised voters;
- This problem is accelerating: In the states with closed presidential primaries, the share of voters not registered with a major party has increased by nearly 20% since 2010;
- These voters are disproportionately younger and more likely to be veterans than the broader voting population;
- The latest estimate, from 2016, found that closed presidential primaries cost taxpayers \$287,806,312.

**Independent voters excluded from primaries (“Excluded Independents”) hold a diversity of political beliefs from across the ideological spectrum. Their perspectives call into question long-held beliefs that most independents are merely “weak partisans.”**

- 48% of Excluded Independents say they do not lean toward one party;
- 46% of Excluded Independents have always been registered as such; 26% were previously Democrats, and 27% were previously Republicans;
- 70% of Excluded Independents believe both parties are too extreme;
- 60% of Excluded Independents think of

themselves as moderates, while 6% identify as very conservative, 19% as conservative, 9% as liberal, and 6% as very liberal;

- Excluded Independents are much more likely to trust Democrats on healthcare, abortion, and climate policy and Republicans on immigration, the economy, crime, and gun rights.

**Independents believe their exclusion from primaries is unfair, support reforming the primary system, and would participate in primaries if allowed to do so.**

- 77% of Excluded Independents consider the fact they are not allowed to vote in partisan primaries to be unfair, and 74% say it is a violation of voting rights;
- 87% of Excluded Independents support opening primaries to independent voters, while 81% support nonpartisan primaries in which all candidates compete on the same primary election ballot;
- 82% of Excluded Independents want the ability to vote in Democratic or Republican primaries for president in 2024;
- 58% of Excluded Independents said they would be more likely to vote for a party if that party supported allowing them to participate in partisan primaries.

**Excluded Independents hold very unfavorable views of both major parties’ presidential candidates but are slightly more inclined to support former President Trump. However, they remain swing voters open to being persuaded.**

- Excluded Independents have very unfavorable views of President Biden (21% favorable, 70% unfavorable) and former President Trump (33% favorable, 60% unfavorable);
- If the election were held today, 30% of Excluded Independents would support Trump and 23% would support Biden, while 27% would vote for an Independent or third-party candidate

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and 19% wouldn't vote for any of the current choices;

- Just 55% of Excluded Independents are “very confident” in who they will vote for.

**To solve the problem of closed primaries, states and parties can pursue one of three paths to ensure that all eligible voters can participate in every taxpayer-funded election:**

1. Amend party rules to permit independent voter participation;
2. Adopt open partisan primaries to allow independents to choose to participate in either major party's primary;
3. Adopt nonpartisan primaries to allow all voters to vote for any candidate, regardless of party, for all offices.



# INTRODUCTION

American voters are increasingly declaring their independence. Surveys consistently find that a growing share of Americans do not identify politically as Democrats or Republicans.

At least once per month for over 20 years, Gallup has asked 1,000 American adults to identify their political affiliation. In 2004, they found that an average of 31% of Americans identified as independents, while roughly one-third identified with each of the major parties. In 2023, Gallup found that an average of 43% of Americans are independents, while just 27% identify with each party.<sup>1</sup> In March 2023, their survey found that 49% of Americans were independents — an all-time high.<sup>2</sup>

Further, younger voters are disproportionately identifying as independents. In early 2023, Gallup found that 52% of Gen Z and Millennial voters are independents, compared to just one-third of Baby Boomers.<sup>3</sup> Historically, younger voters have been

less likely to identify with a party than older voters. What is unusual about contemporary politics, however, is that younger voters are sticking with the independent label as they age. As Millennials (and even members Generation X) get older, they are less likely to eventually affiliate with a party than older generations.<sup>4</sup> This trend among young voters is a leading indicator that voter rejection of the major political parties may continue to accelerate.

Objectively, there is nothing inherently positive or negative about these trends. All voters should have the freedom to associate or disassociate with a party at will. However, “closed” partisan primaries pose a problem, because they do not allow registered independents to participate in taxpayer-funded elections. Fifteen states have closed primaries for state and congressional offices, while 22 states have closed presidential primaries or caucuses. This problem is cross-partisan: Ten red states, nine blue states, and three swing states deny independent voters the right to vote in presidential primaries.

Making matters worse, independent voters are footing

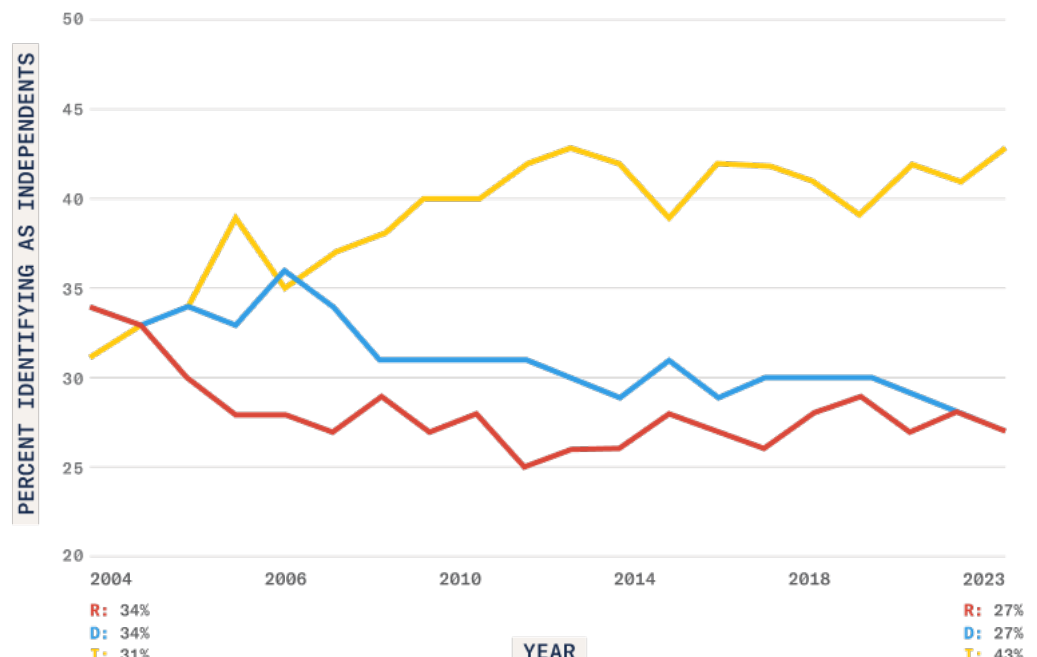
FIGURE 1

## U.S. POLITICAL PARTY IDENTIFICATION, 2004 – 2023

→ Based on annual averages of Gallup telephone survey interview data.

■ % Republican  
■ % Democrat  
■ % Independent

Source: Gallup



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the bill for elections they cannot participate in: In 2016, it is estimated that closed presidential primaries cost taxpayers over \$287 million.<sup>5</sup> Unsurprisingly, 79% of excluded independent voters believe it's unfair that they cannot participate in taxpayer-funded elections.<sup>6</sup>

The problem is bigger than just one group of voters, however. There is a broader and growing “Primary Problem” nationally, which disenfranchises voters and leads to unrepresentative and dysfunctional government.<sup>7</sup> Because of partisan gerrymandering and the geographic self-sorting of the electorate over the last few decades, the vast majority of U.S. House seats are now “safe” for one party or the other in the general election.<sup>8, i</sup> As of this writing, Cook Political Report estimates that nearly 90% of seats will be safe in the 2024 elections.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, the dominant party's primary is the only election that matters in the vast majority of congressional districts — and only the voters who participate in those primaries have any say in who represents them. As a result, in 2022, just 8% of the U.S. voting age population effectively elected 83% of the U.S. House in partisan primaries. The result is that elected officials are not accountable to the vast majority of voters, which rewards extremism, fuels division, and distorts representation.<sup>10</sup>

This report investigates the problems with closed primaries and their impact on independent voters, and it is divided into five sections:

- First, through an analysis of voter registration data, we clearly define the extent of the problem with closed primaries by highlighting the number of registered voters who are unable to participate in primaries. We also show that this problem has accelerated over time.
- Second, armed with data from a first-of-its-kind poll of registered independent voters who reside in closed primary states (“Excluded Independents”), we define who is impacted by the problem across demographic lines. We also

analyze why voters register as independents and share some voters' responses to the question “Why are you an independent?”

- Third, through an analysis of the polling data, we examine the beliefs of Excluded Independents to illustrate the perspectives that are shut out of the electoral process because of closed primaries. We find evidence that challenges predominant beliefs that independents are disengaged from politics, we report on their attitudes towards the current primary system, and we share fresh data on who Excluded Independents are inclined to support in the 2024 presidential general election.
- Fourth, we review the existing literature surrounding the debate about independent voters' tendency to “lean” to one party or the other, and we find data that challenges the conventional wisdom that independents who lean toward a party are really just “weak partisans.”
- To conclude, we offer a menu of policy solutions — already in use in dozens of states — that would allow independents to participate in all elections, while giving all voters more voice and more choice.

Included in this report are analyses of the sentiments of Excluded Independents. They have clear and compelling reasons for why they have declared their political independence, and they are frustrated that they are left out of the process. Below are illustrative responses to two key poll questions that provide a preview of what is to come in the report.

**What's the main reason you're not registered with a party and consider yourself politically independent today?**

- “My opinions are more centered, and neither party fully represents my interests.”  
—20-year-old Hispanic man from Louisiana

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i We use the Cook Political Report's Election Day race ratings to determine which districts are safe. Districts that are rated “Solid” or “Likely” for one party are considered safe, while districts rated “Tossup” and “Lean” are competitive.

- “I share many beliefs with both parties and [have] many beliefs that neither party holds.”  
–34-year-old white woman from Idaho
- “Fiscally Republican, socially Democrat. [The political parties] make it impossible to be reasonable.”  
–42-year-old white woman from Idaho
- “Why would I affiliate myself with any organization/party that at its core doesn’t care about me?”  
–31-year-old Black man from Pennsylvania
- “Too many issues go unresolved because politicians are more interested in maintaining party allegiance than representing the people.”  
–41-year-old Hispanic woman and veteran from Arizona
- “Neither party has the mindset nor the ability to effectively govern the country. They play politics at the peoples’ expense. Shameful all around with rare exceptions.”  
–68-year-old white man from Alaska

**How does it make you feel that independent voters cannot participate in taxpayer-funded presidential primaries in your state?**

- “I feel like a second-class citizen.”  
–81-year-old white man and veteran from Arizona
- “Left out, my voice as an American has been shut down”  
–54-year-old Native American from South Dakota

- “[P]rimaries should be voted on by every citizen regardless of party to show who is more palatable to the other side.”  
–43-year-old Black man from Louisiana
- “Betrayed by the government. Independents are still taxpaying US citizens.”  
–45-year-old white woman from Connecticut
- “I feel like my voice isn’t heard and that within this current system independent voters will never be.”  
–43-year-old white woman from Maryland
- “I feel that is a violation of rights.”  
–20-year-old Asian American from Pennsylvania
- “It makes me question how they can call the US a democracy.”  
–61-year-old white woman and veteran from Pennsylvania
- “My hard-earned money is forcibly taken from my paycheck, but I get no say just because I’m independent? I’m not any less capable of voting because I don’t align with either of the major parties.”  
–25-year-old white woman from Florida

“

A total of 27 million registered voters do not have the right to participate in major party presidential primaries or caucuses.



## SECTION 1

# THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

## How Many Independents are Disenfranchised?

### Congressional and State Primaries

Across 15 closed primary states (see Figure 2), registered independents lack the right to vote in congressional and state primary elections. State parties can establish rules to permit independents to

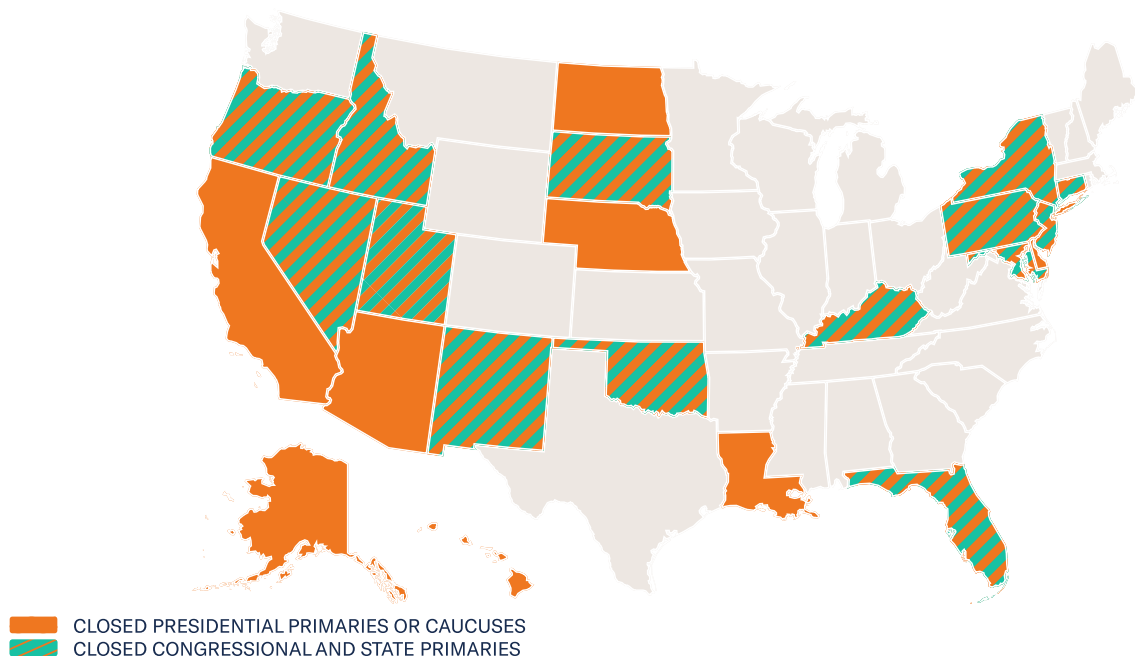
vote in their primaries, but this is rare.<sup>i</sup>

According to publicly-available voter registration statistics,<sup>ii</sup> there are just over 15.7 million registered independents who lack the right to vote in primary elections in these 15 states.<sup>iii</sup> (See Figure 5 below for a state-by-state breakdown). Further, there are more than 1.8 million voters in closed primary states who are registered with a minor party and are also barred from participating in the major parties' primaries.<sup>iv</sup>

Further, there are more than 1.8 million voters in closed primary states who are registered with a minor party and are also barred from participating in the major parties' primaries.<sup>v</sup> **A total of 17.6 million**

FIGURE 2

## STATES WITH CLOSED PRIMARIES



i Among the 15 states with closed primaries for state and congressional offices, just four state Democratic parties (and zero Republican parties) have allowed independents to participate in their primaries in recent election cycles. All four of these states — Idaho, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Utah — are solidly Republican states. The vast majority of contests in these four states are effectively determined in Republican primaries, meaning that independents are still locked out of a very large percentage of consequential elections.

ii All voter registration statistics cited throughout this report are available on the website of each state's election administration agency. If a state differentiates between "active" and "inactive" registered voters, we only count active voters.

iii Just 1.3 million (8%) of these voters live in one of the four states where the Democratic Party permits independent participation in their primaries. In total, about 14.4 million independent voters in 11 states cannot participate in any state or congressional primary elections, while all 15.7 million independent voters in the 15 states are barred from Republican primaries.

iv These voters can participate in their own parties' primaries, but it is rare for minor parties to have competitive primaries.

v These voters can participate in their own parties' primaries, but it is rare for minor parties to have competitive primaries.

## registered voters lack a right to participate in taxpayer-funded major party primary elections for congressional and state offices.

The vast majority of these 17.6 million voters are not just shut out of primaries. Because 85% of congressional districts in closed primary states were “safe” in 2022, most of these voters were effectively left without any voice at the ballot box. The primary election was the consequential contest, and given they couldn’t participate, they were denied both fair representation and a mechanism to hold elected officials accountable.

### Presidential Primaries and Caucuses

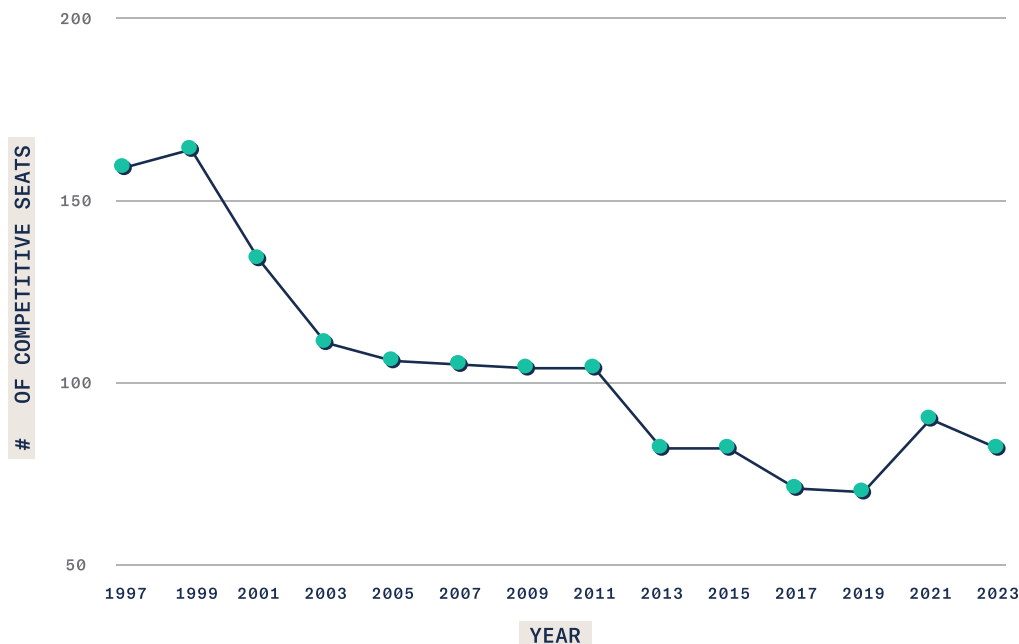
The problem with closed primaries is even worse at the presidential level. While 15 states have closed

congressional and state primaries, an additional seven states — for a total of 22 — hold closed presidential primaries or caucuses (see Figure 2). The same rules apply as described above: Independents do not have a legal right to participate in these contests, and their ability to do so is based on the whims of political parties.<sup>i</sup>

In these 22 states, there are over 23.5 million registered independent voters.<sup>ii,iii</sup> There are also about 3.5 million voters registered with minor parties who cannot vote in the major party nominating contests. **Combined, a total of 27 million registered voters do not have the right to participate in major party presidential primaries or caucuses.**

FIGURE 3

## DECLINE IN COMPETITIVE U.S. HOUSE SEATS NATIONALLY



Source: Cook Political Report

i In six of these states — California, Idaho, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Utah — the state Democratic Party permitted independent participation in their presidential primaries during the last presidential election cycle, and they plan to do so again in 2024.

ii Hawaii and North Dakota have closed, party-run presidential primaries, but the states do not register voters by party affiliation. Therefore, it is difficult for the state parties to exclude voters based on their partisanship, and they are not included in the count (as the necessary data does not exist).

iii About 6.3 million voters (27% of all independent voters from closed primary states) are permitted to vote in their state’s Democratic presidential nominating contest, nearly five million of whom live in California. In total, over 17.3 million independents in 16 states are completely barred from participating in presidential primaries/caucuses, while all 23.5 million independents in 22 states are disenfranchised from Republican presidential nominating contests.

## How has the Problem Accelerated?

The problem with closed primaries has worsened in recent years as more voters register as independents. Without policy intervention, this problem will continue to accelerate, given national trends in party identification.

Consider the following: The 27 million voters who are not registered with a major party represent 28.8% of all registered voters in the 20 states that hold closed presidential primaries or caucuses (and report partisan voter registration data). In 2010,<sup>i</sup> there were just over 18.5 million non-major party voters in these 20 states who represented 24.1% of all registered voters. **In a little over a decade, the share of voters who cannot vote in presidential primaries or caucuses without a party's blessing has increased by nearly 20%.** The

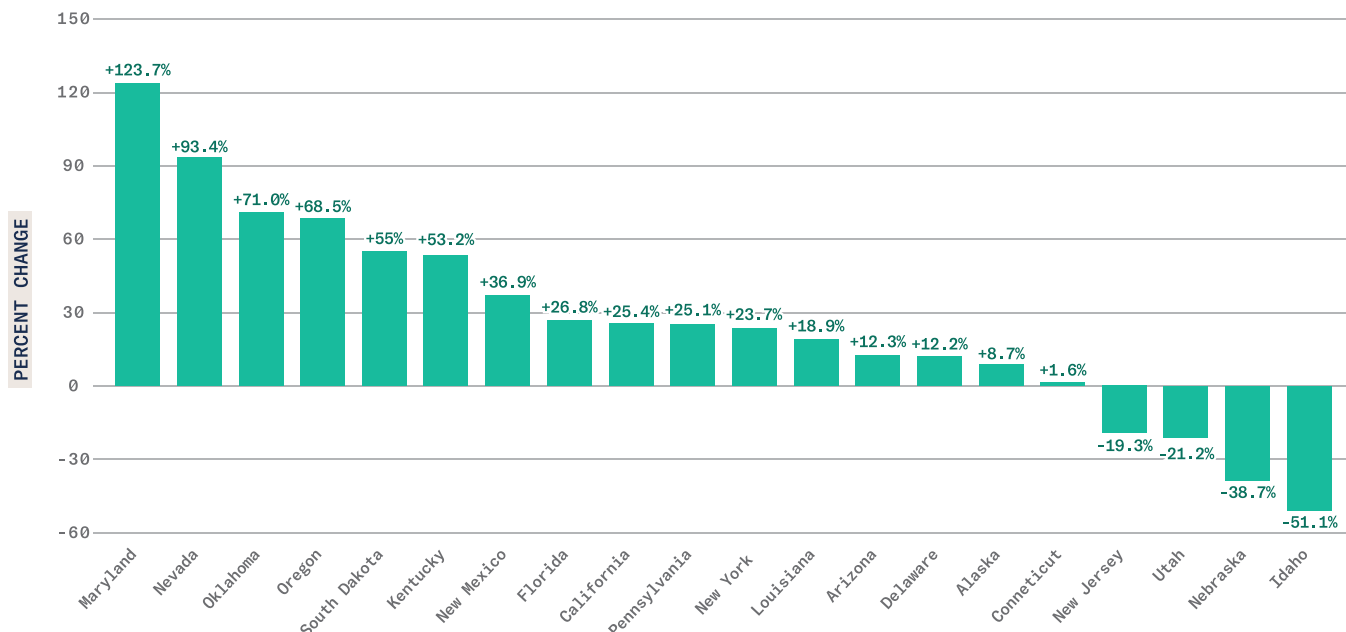
raw number of eligible voters barred from participating in taxpayer-funded primaries increased by nearly 8.5 million people.

These aggregate numbers are notable, but they fail to tell the full story. Of the 20 states that are part of this analysis, 16 have experienced an increase in their share of independent and minor party voters since 2010, while four have seen a decrease. In each of the four states with decreases, it appears that a recent change in law or party rules incentivized independent voters to affiliate with a major party in order to participate in primaries.<sup>ii</sup>

Among the states that saw an increase in non-major party voters, the average percent increase between 2010 and 2023 was 41%. Four states — Maryland, Nevada, Oklahoma, and Oregon — stand out in particular, all with increases over 60% (see Figure 6).

FIGURE 5

## CHANGE IN SHARE OF INDEPENDENT AND MINOR PARTY VOTERS IN CLOSED PRIMARY STATES



i In two of these states — Idaho and Utah — the oldest partisan voter registration data available online is from 2014. In order to conduct the analysis, we used voter registration data from the month of each state's primary in 2010 for 18 states and from 2014 for Idaho and Utah.

ii In Idaho, a U.S. district court ruled in 2011 that independent voters could not participate in partisan primaries, thus encouraging such voters to register with a party in order to participate. In Nebraska, both major parties instituted binding closed presidential primaries to replace caucuses in either 2016 or 2020, which also encouraged registration with a party. In Utah, legislation passed in 2014 increased the number of competitive closed primaries. In New Jersey, competitive 2016 and 2020 presidential primaries may have encouraged independent voters to take advantage of a policy that allows them to affiliate with a party on the day of a primary election.

FIGURE 5

## Closed Primary States — Change in Non-Major Party Voters (2023 v. 2010)

State	2023 # of non-major Party Voters	2023 % of non-major Party Voters	2010 # of non-major Party Voters	2010 % of non-major Party Voters	Percent Change	Offices with Closed Primaries
Alaska	383,424	63.8%	286,287	58.7%	+8.7%	President
Arizona	1,492,940	35.6%	982,231	31.7%	+12.3%	President
California	6,437,915	29.3%	3,964,148	25.4%	+25.4%	President (Republican Only)
Connecticut	960,231	42.9%	856,161	1.6%	+1.6%	All
Delaware	201,892	26.4%	146,212	12.2%	+12.2%	All
Florida	3,925,923	29.0%	2,256,010	26.8%	+26.8%	All
Idaho	287,510	29.1%	441,119*	51.1%	-51.1%	All (Republican Only)
Kentucky	353,596	10.2%	189,113	53.2%	+53.2%	All
Louisiana	815,582	27.5%	676,208	18.9%	+18.9%	President
Maryland	895,991	21.7%	307,720	123.7%	+123.7%	All
Nebraska	291,281	23.8%	212,821	38.7%	-38.7%	President and Statewide
Nevada	763,832	39.8%	221,800	93.4%	+93.4%	All
New Jersey	2,432,400	37.6%	2,445,143	46.5%	-19.3%	All
New Mexico	331,032	25.1%	207,112	18.3%	+36.9%	All
New York	3,731,137	31.1%	2,666,426	25.1%	+23.7%	All
Oklahoma	445,469	19.5%	237,953	11.4%	+71.0%	All (Republican Only)
Oregon	1,279,961	42.7%	515,931	25.3%	+68.5%	All
Pennsylvania	1,200,227	15.0%	1,013,923	12.0%	+25.1%	All
South Dakota	155,489	25.5%	85,395	16.4%	+55.0%	All (Republican Only)
Utah	561,692	33.6%	526,698*	42.7%*	-21.2%	All (Republican Only)
Total	27,029,524	28.8%	18,543,411	24.1%	+19.5%	

\*These percentages are from 2014

The large increase in Nevada (nearly double) is especially notable given its status as an “early state” in the presidential nominating process. In 2008 and 2012, about one-fifth of Nevada voters were left out of the process entirely. But now, in 2024, nearly 40% cannot participate. Like all early states in the presidential primary calendar, Nevada has outsized influence in determining which candidates are viable in the long run. Put differently: An increasing share of voters in a crucial early state are barred from participating in the process that decides the two most viable candidates for the presidency.

This rise in non-major party voters is important. This group of voters are evidently so disaffected by the two major parties that they either left their party or refused to join one upon registration, despite the fact that being unaffiliated locks them out of primaries. It is fair to wonder how many more voters in closed primary states would prefer to disassociate from their party but feel coerced to remain a party member in order to be fully enfranchised. There is a clear *disincentive* to being an independent voter in these states — and, yet, the share of voters registered as independents continues to rise.

## Why are Independent Voters on the Rise?

There are a variety of reasons that the share of independent voters is on the rise nationwide. While we cannot determine with certainty the causal mechanism behind the increase, this section presents two hypotheses and supporting evidence based on recent trends.

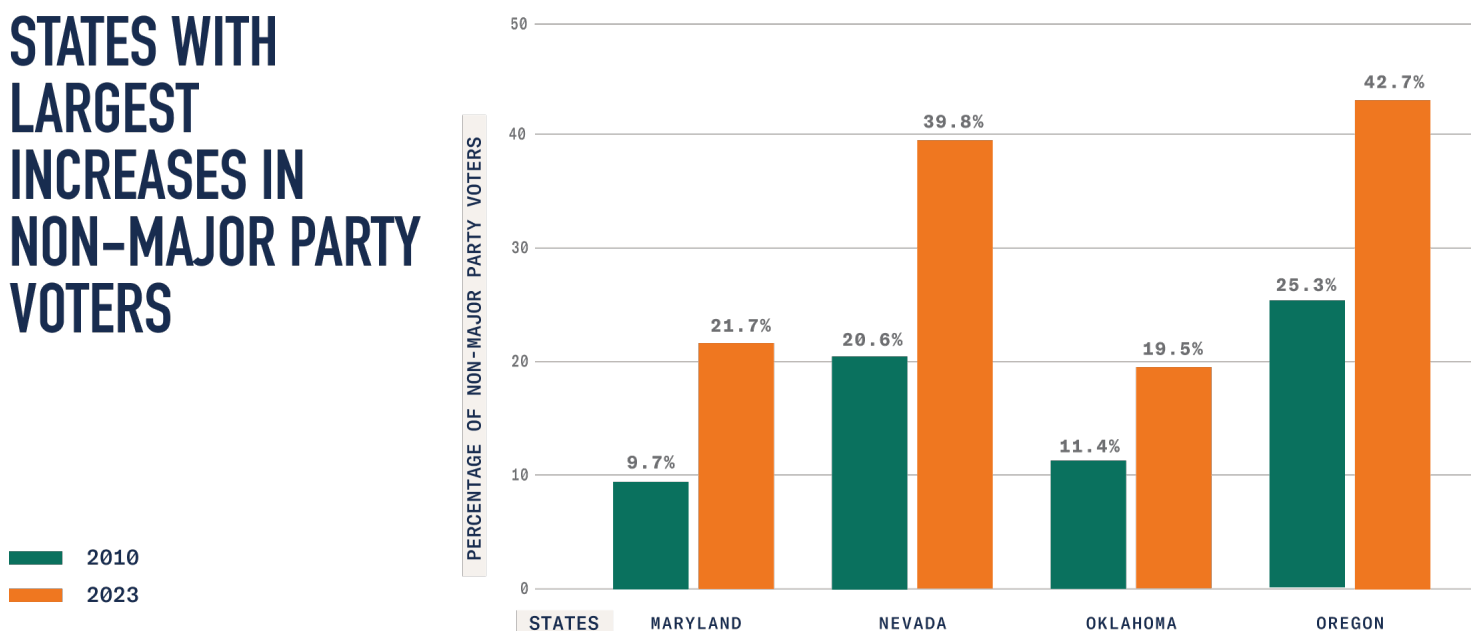
### First, Americans have expressed growing dissatisfaction with government performance and the major political parties over the last two decades

— the same timeframe during which Gallup found the share of self-identified independents increased from 31% to 43%. Consider the following polling data from Gallup:

- In September 2004, 61% of Americans had at least “a fair amount” of confidence in the federal government’s ability to handle domestic problems. In September 2023, just 37% felt the same way.<sup>11</sup>
- In January 2004, 48% of Americans approved of the way Congress handled its job, compared to 45% who disapproved. In January 2024,

FIGURE 6

## STATES WITH LARGEST INCREASES IN NON-MAJOR PARTY VOTERS





just 15% approved compared to 79% who disapproved.<sup>12</sup>

- In 2004, an average of 40% of Americans had an unfavorable view of the Democratic Party and 42% had an unfavorable view of the Republican Party. In 2023, these numbers were 58% and 56%, respectively.<sup>13</sup>

Correlation does not automatically equal causation, of course, but there is powerful alignment between the twin trends of decreasing satisfaction with government and parties and an increasing share of voters identifying as independents.

Second, and not unrelated, partisan polarization in Congress and state legislatures has increased considerably during the same timeframe. A 2022 Pew Research Center analysis of the roll-call voting of members of Congress found that Republicans and Democrats have consistently moved to the right and left, respectively, over the past 50 years, with congressional Republicans polarizing more.<sup>14</sup> Another study that analyzes state legislative polarization through roll-call votes found similar trends across the country; that study also found that state legislative Democrats polarized more rapidly than their Republican counterparts.<sup>15</sup>

Democratic elected officials in Congress and state legislatures are more liberal, while Republicans are more conservative. Voters, however, have been far steadier in their ideological preferences. In 2004, Gallup's polling on political ideology found that 38% of Americans considered themselves to be moderate, while 40% were conservative and 19% liberal. In 2022, a similar share of Americans (35%) still identified as moderate, with 36% conservative and 26% liberal.<sup>16</sup>

This disconnect bears repeating: The share of Americans who self-identify as moderate now is similar to the share who did so two decades ago. And yet, our elected officials are more polarized. The implication of the increase in independent identification is that **a rising share of Americans do not feel well represented by either major political party.** Those two facts could help credibly explain

why more Americans are leaving the major parties and identifying as independents.

“

Americans have expressed growing dissatisfaction with government performance and the major political parties over the last two decades.

### A Different Species of DINO and RINO

The acronyms “DINO” and “RINO” have become parts of the American political lexicon. They stand for “Democrat in Name Only” and “Republican in Name Only,” and strong partisans typically use them as pejorative terms to describe fellow party members who they believe are insufficiently committed to the party line.

Yet the data suggest that there may be different types — or species, if you will — of DINOs and RINOs among registered voters in closed primary states. These are voters who would likely prefer not to be associated with either party. But, given that voters must register with a party to participate in closed primaries, self-identified independents are incentivized to do so (particularly by registering with their state's dominant party) in order to have a voice. In other words, there is reason to believe that some voters in closed primary states self-identify as independents but are registered as Democrats or Republicans.

While we cannot definitively determine this by analyzing registration data alone, a comparison of such data from states with closed primaries and states with open primaries (which permit independent participation) lends some credence to this theory and warrants future research.

About 25.1% of all registered voters in closed presidential primary or caucus states are registered

independents.<sup>i</sup> To better gauge if this percentage represents an accurate share of voters who truly do not identify with a major party, we compare the 22 closed presidential primary states with the 11 states that register voters by party affiliation and allow independent participation in all primaries. These 11 states range from strongly Democratic states (Massachusetts, Rhode Island) to strongly Republican (Wyoming, Arkansas, Kansas) to more politically balanced states.<sup>ii</sup> According to these 11 states' most recent voter registration reports, 44.8% of their combined 25.1 million registered voters are independents (See Figure 7 below). This number is very close to Gallup's findings that, throughout 2023, 43% of American adults self-identified as independents.

The data seems to suggest that the presence of closed primaries — which encourage registration with a party — limits the share of voters who are registered independents (even if this share has still been increasing for the past decade). It is likely that some self-identified independents in closed

primary states feel coerced to join a party in order to participate in consequential primary elections. Admittedly, we do not have the necessary data to make definitive conclusions. We do not know, for instance, the degree to which registered voters in those 11 states are representative of all American adults. Yet the correlation here merits further exploration and research.

Section Takeaways

We can say two things for certain: First, over 27 million registered voters in closed primary states are barred from fully participating in our democracy because they do not wish to register with a major political party. Second, the problem is getting worse; the share of registered independent voters is increasing in closed primary states.

It is important not to simply see these voters as data points on a voter registration report. They represent millions of people whose perspectives ought to be included in our democracy. In the next sections, we unpack who these voters are and what they believe.

FIGURE 7

Share of Registered Independent Voters Across Primary Types vs. National Survey

Category	% Independents in 2023
Closed Primary States	25.1%
Semi-Open Primary States	44.8%
Self-Identification Nationally (Gallup Polling Average)	43%

i Note that the 28.8% figure cited previously refers to the share of voters who are registered independent or with a minor party.  
ii The 11 states: Arkansas, Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, North Carolina, Rhode Island, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

## SECTION 2

# WHO DOES THE PROBLEM IMPACT?

To better understand the voices silenced by closed primaries, we commissioned a poll of independent voters who live in closed presidential primary states as well as an analysis of the same states' voter files. Both the poll and the voter file analysis were conducted by Change Research. The poll surveyed registered independent voters from the states with closed presidential primaries or caucuses.<sup>i,ii</sup> Between January 10-20, 2024, 2,224 respondents completed the poll, providing us with a sufficiently large and representative sample.<sup>iii</sup>

To be clear, our poll findings are not representative of all independent voters nationally; the poll is solely focused on those who reside in closed primary states. Although our respondents are likely similar to all independents in many ways, our data should not be used to make definitive inferences about all independents across the country. Throughout Sections II and III, we frequently refer to our poll respondents as "Excluded Independents" in order to differentiate them from all independents and provide clarity about which voters' perspectives we are analyzing.

### Who are the Excluded Independents?

Through voter file analysis conducted by Change Research, we can describe the demographics of Excluded Independents.<sup>iv</sup>

First, men and women comprise nearly equal shares of this group of voters. Analysis of the voter files in closed

primary states found 49.2% of Excluded Independents are women, and 50.8% are men.

Overall, independents in closed primary states are more white than Democratic voters and more diverse than Republican voters. Across all closed primary states, 49% of Democrats are white, 82% of Republicans are white, and 60% of Independents are white. Six percent of independent voters in these states are Black, 22% are Hispanic, 8% Asian American or Pacific Islander, and 4% are another race.<sup>17</sup>

In many closed primary states, Hispanics make up a significant portion of registered independents. Further, younger Hispanics (under 40) are considerably more likely to register as independents than older Hispanics.<sup>18</sup> Among all Hispanic voters under 40, 69% register as independents in Oregon, 52% do so in Connecticut, 51% in Nevada, and 48% in New Jersey. When asked why they are independents, several young Hispanics who participated in our poll expressed a dislike for political parties:

- "A 2-party system is detrimental to democracy."  
–25-year-old Hispanic man from Pennsylvania
- "I don't care about the party or what they represent. I care about the person who will make the best decisions for the people and the world overall."  
–28-year-old Hispanic man from Florida
- "Short term politicians rarely make good sound long term policy. I vote for the best ideas."  
–28-year-old Hispanic man from New York
- "I've been disappointed by both [parties], and I hate team sports. I see a lot of hypocrisy and

i While 22 states have closed presidential nominating contests, voters from only 20 states were polled because Hawaii and North Dakota do not register voters by party.

ii Registered independents who self-identify as Republicans or Democrats were not surveyed.

iii The modeled margin of error is 2.4%.

iv In each closed primary state, Change Research analyzed the demographics of registered voters. For age and sex, voter-provided data was used. Race and ethnicity was used when states report it, and when it was not, an internal modeled race and ethnicity was used, which assigns a probability that each voter belongs to a given racial/ethnic group based on a combination of census data and self-reported race/ethnicity by hundreds of thousands of survey respondents.

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greed in both major parties, and neither have earned blind loyalty.”

–30-year-old Hispanic woman from Alaska

In line with national trends, Excluded Independents tend to skew young. In every closed primary state we analyzed, 18-to-34-year-olds comprise a larger share of registered independents than they do registered Republicans or Democrats. Further, in nearly every closed primary state, a majority of independent voters are under 50. There are no closed primary states in which a majority of registered Republicans are under 50, while registered Democrats meet this threshold in just two states. In total, 59% of all Excluded Independents are under 50, and just 18% are over 65.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, in our survey of Excluded Independents, 16% reported that they served in the U.S. Military. This is notable as veterans comprise just 6% of the country’s adult population,<sup>20</sup> meaning **veterans are significantly overrepresented among those who lack a right to vote in primary elections.** Veterans had this to say about not being able to vote in primaries:

- “It is absolutely unfair.”  
–72-year-old female veteran from Pennsylvania
- “I feel that I am being discriminated against, and my views do not matter!”  
–81-year-old male veteran from New York
- “Like I am not fully able to be represented.”  
–41-year-old male veteran from Oregon
- “It makes me resent the party system.”  
–59-year-old male veteran from New Jersey
- “Sometimes I feel if they counted independent voters in primaries, more of the candidates I support could have won the nomination.”  
–64-year-old female veteran from New York

Importantly, closed primaries do not just exclude independent voters, they also prevent voters from the non-dominant party from participating in primaries that often decide election outcomes. Across the nine red states with closed primaries and available data,<sup>i</sup> 95% of Black voters, 72% of Hispanics, 61% of women, and 66% of voters under 34 register as Democrats or Independents and cannot vote in the frequently decisive Republican primaries. Across the eight blue states with closed primaries and available data,<sup>ii</sup> 61% of white voters and 59% of men register as Republicans or Independents and cannot vote in the frequently decisive Democratic primaries. These data suggest that closed primaries do not just disenfranchise independent voters; they radically distort representation across demographic lines.

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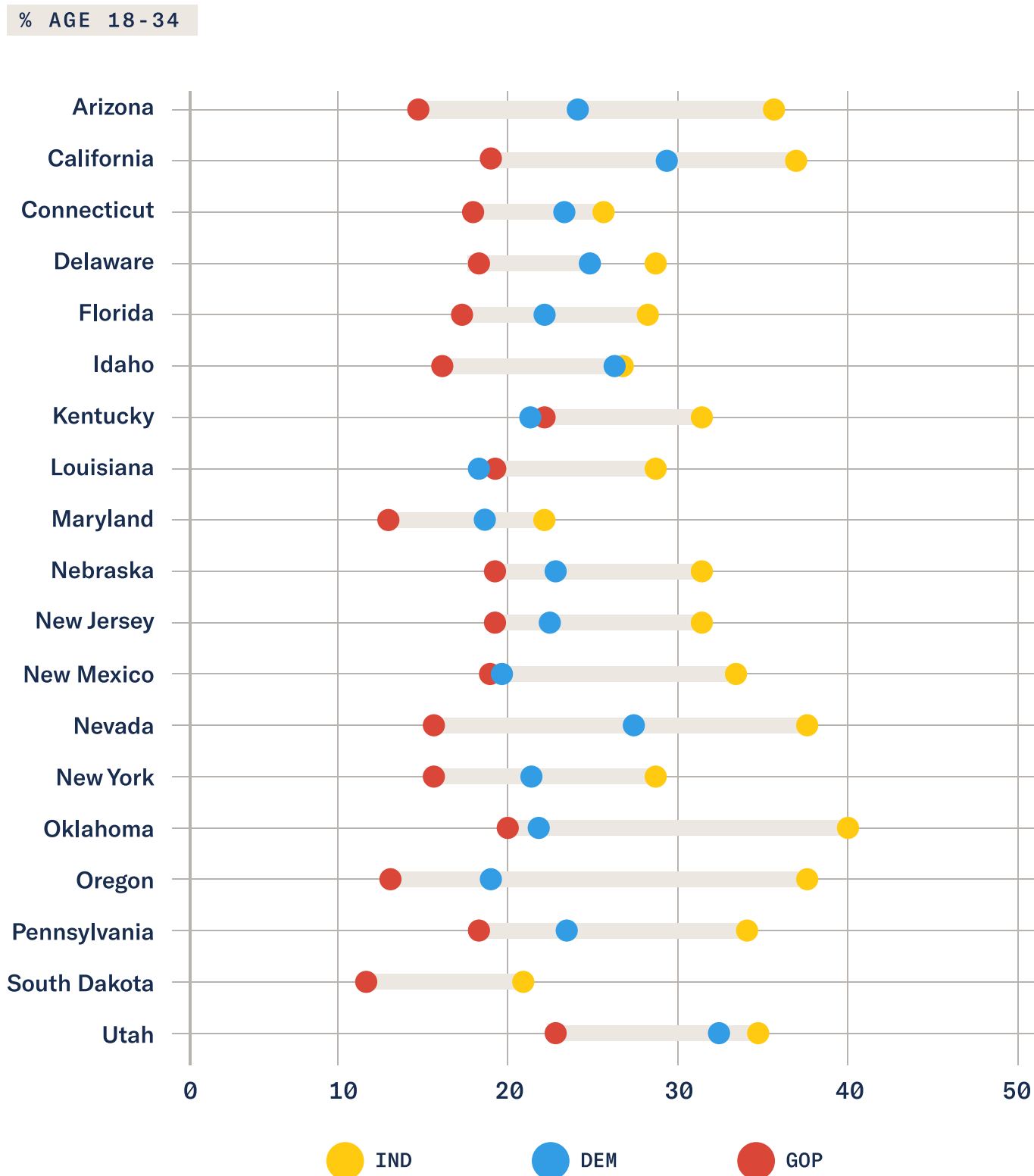
i Alaska, Florida, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Utah

ii California, Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon

FIGURE 8

## POLITICAL INDEPENDENTS ARE OVERWHELMINGLY YOUNG

Plots represent the share of each party between the ages of 18-34.





Why Do Voters Identify as Political Independents?

No single reason explains why Excluded Independents register as independents. Many individuals have more than one reason and have undertaken a political journey that crossed paths with one or more parties but ultimately ended at political independence. Nevertheless, in both our closed- and open-ended questions that asked why respondents registered as independent, several key themes emerged. Below, we describe the findings from our poll and highlight some individual responses as supporting evidence.

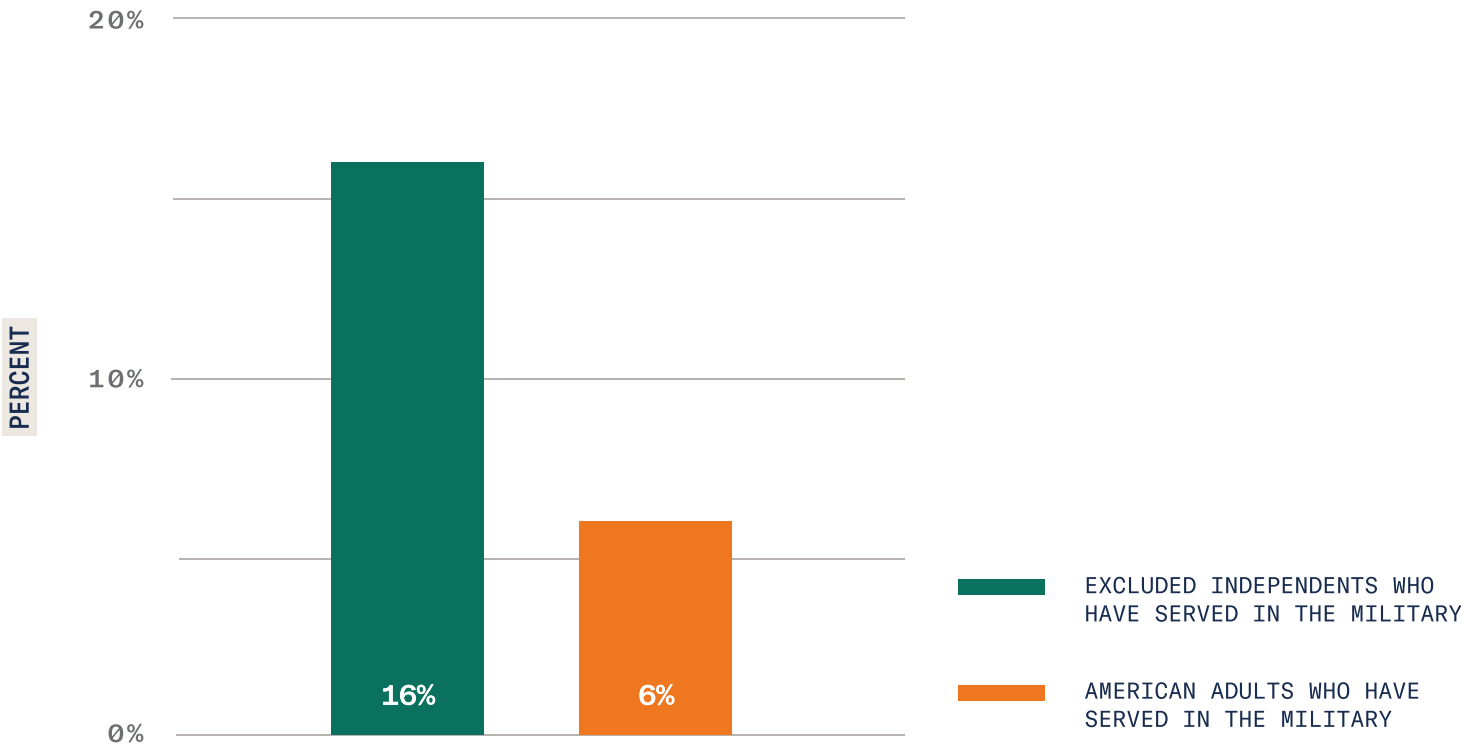
**Finding: Excluded Independents are independent thinkers.** They prefer to choose candidates based on their policy positions, qualifications, and campaigns — not merely their party affiliation.

“  
Veterans are significantly overrepresented among those who lack a right to vote in primary elections.

FIGURE 9

VETERANS DISENFRANCHISED

Among Excluded Independents, veterans are overrepresented by nearly three times.



Seventy percent of Excluded Independents say they register as such because they “prefer to assess each candidate individually, rather than by their party affiliation.” Sixty-eight percent said they “think for myself, independent of what parties and candidates

tell me to think.” Sixty-one percent said “I value political flexibility and the freedom to choose without party constraints.” Further, nearly half (46%) of Excluded Independents reported having never been registered with a party.

FIGURE 10

## WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING ARE REASONS WHY YOU ARE AN INDEPENDENT VOTER? CHECK ALL THAT APPLY.



When asked how they typically vote in general elections, only 4% of Excluded Independents said they always vote for Democratic candidates, and only 3% said they always vote for Republican candidates (See Figure 11).

In response to our open-ended questions, several responses touched on this theme:

- “[The parties] are both too extreme and I prefer to be a free thinker. I don’t want partisan agendas crammed down my throat.”  
–41-year-old man from Idaho
- “I’m an independent thinker and willing to vote for anyone who reflects my beliefs.”  
–68-year-old man from Nevada
- “Both major parties have embraced extreme views, and [they] constantly fight with each other and do very little real governing. I’m looking for people who are first and foremost looking for solutions to our problems by collaborating and compromising across party lines.”  
–67-year-old man from Utah
- “All parties have issues I both agree and disagree with. Aligning myself with one party shifts the focus from the issues to a popularity contest.”  
–41-year-old woman from Oregon

**Finding: Excluded Independents’ policy preferences do not align with the Democratic or Republican platforms.** Perhaps unsurprisingly, Excluded Independents agree with Republicans on some issues and Democrats on others.

When asked which party they trust more on the most pressing problems facing our country, Excluded Independents did not fall squarely into one camp or the other. At least 60 percent of Excluded Independents trust Republicans on immigration, gun rights, the economy, and public safety, compared to less than 40 percent support for Democrats on those issues. Meanwhile, more than 60% of Excluded Independents trust Democrats on healthcare, abortion, and climate issues, compared to less than 40% support for Republicans. Excluded Independents are evenly split on which party they trust more on infrastructure.

Excluded Independents vary both as a group and individually. Of our 2,224 poll respondents, only 23% said they trusted the same party on all 15 issues. Further, **69% of respondents agree with Democrats on some issues and Republicans on others.**

“ 69% of respondents agree with Democrats on some issues and Republicans on others.

FIGURE 11

In general elections, how often do you vote for the following types of candidates?

	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Democratic candidates	4	64	21	11
Republican candidates	3	63	21	13
Independent candidates	3	72	18	7
Third-party candidates	2	54	28	16

Others expressed that same sentiment in their responses to our open-ended question:

- “I vote based on the strength of the candidate. I’m moderate. Leaning more right on economic issues and more left on social ones. I don’t agree enough with either party to register that way.”  
–52-year-old woman from Idaho
- “I agree with Democrats on education, which is my top issue, but I agree with Republicans generally on fiscal and defense issues, which are also pretty important to me.”  
–44-year-old woman from Oklahoma
- “Two main issues motivate me — 1. gun rights. 2. reproductive freedom. Neither party promotes both.”  
–79-year-old woman from Idaho
- “I prefer to maintain my independent voter status, as I do not fully support everything in either party’s philosophy/platform.”  
–38-year-old man from Arizona

FIGURE 12

## Who do you trust more on each of the following issues?

	The Republican Party	The Democratic Party
Immigration policy	60	40
Foreign affairs	54	46
Education policy	44	56
The budget and national debt	63	37
Healthcare policy	33	67
Gun violence	47	53
Gun rights	61	39
The economy and jobs	62	38
Taxes	59	41
Healthcare costs	35	65
Rent and housing costs	42	58
Infrastructure	50	50
Abortion laws	30	70
Climate change and green energy	36	64
Crime and public safety	66	34

**Finding: Excluded Independents believe the political system is broken.** Excluded Independents believe that the country is on the wrong track. They are worried about corruption and the power of special interests, and they believe candidates do not care about voters like themselves.

While 52% of Excluded Independents say things are on the wrong track in their city and town, and 65% say so about their state, a startling 85% say the country is on the wrong track. Our findings echo a December 2023 national poll conducted by Gallup, in which 77% of respondents said they were “dissatisfied with the way things are going in the United States.” This indicates that Excluded Independents may hold slightly more negative feelings than the nation as a whole.<sup>21</sup>

Sixty-nine percent of respondents said they are independents because, “I feel that political parties are too influenced by corporate interests or lobbyists,” while another 65% said, “I believe the political system is corrupt and needs significant reform.” Ninety-one percent of those polled agreed with the statement, “Both major parties care more about serving their special interests than people like me.”

When asked about candidates and elections, only 26% of Excluded Independents agreed that “Republican and Democratic candidates care about what independent voters think.” Only 42% agreed that “I feel that my vote genuinely makes a difference in

election outcomes,” while just under half agreed that “For the November general elections, I usually have candidate options for the U.S. House and Senate that represent my interests.”

Respondents expressed similar feelings in their own words:

- “Politicians are too afraid to work together on important issues because if they deviate from their party lines, they may not get re-elected. It’s hurting the country.”  
–44-year-old woman from Alaska
- “Politics are poison. My trust for the political system has soured with[in] the last 8 years. The voice of the people is very rarely heard and politicians are in the pockets of other businesses or affiliations. I want decisions that are best for the majority of citizens and that hasn’t been happening.”  
–39-year-old man from Utah
- “[The] two party system is in direct conflict with how our government is supposed to work. It eliminates choice and trie[s] to strong-arm voters into voting for someone they don’t agree with or who doesn’t truly represent their wishes based solely on whether they list themselves as D or R.”  
–53-year-old woman from Idaho

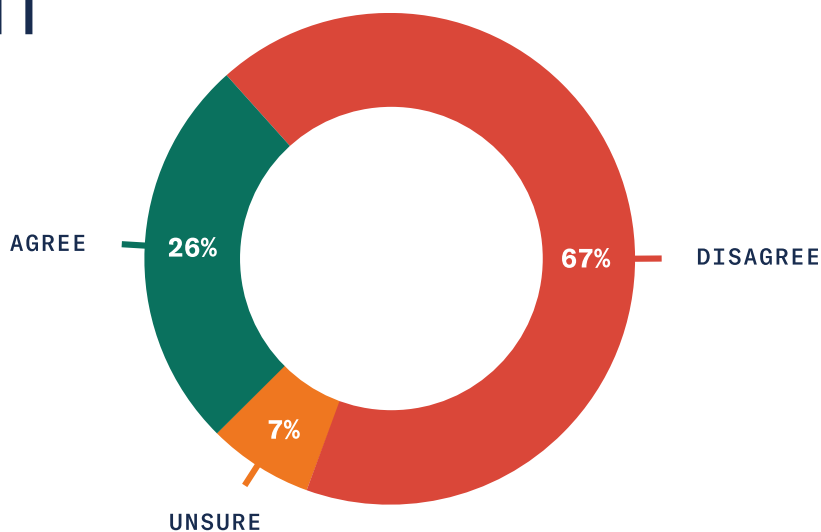
FIGURE 13

## EXCLUDED INDEPENDENTS DON'T THINK PARTISAN CANDIDATES CARE WHAT THEY THINK

### Agree or Disagree:

Republican and Democratic candidates care about what independent voters think.

Agree Disagree Unsure





**Finding: Excluded Independents are disillusioned with the two major parties.** Negative attitudes towards both the Republican and Democratic parties are driving political independence in the United States.

Only 22% of Excluded Independents have a favorable view of the Republican Party, and 21% have a favorable opinion of the Democratic Party. Favorable opinions of the progressive movement (19%) and MAGA movement (21%) are low, too. Further, respondents are not enthusiastic supporters of either leader of the two major party leaders: only 7% have a very favorable view of President Biden (21% total favorable), and only 16% strongly favor former President Trump (33% total favorable).

Excluded Independents also believe that the two major parties are too far to the left or right. Seventy percent agree with the statement that “both political parties are too ideologically extreme,” and 67% agree that the Democratic Party is too extreme, while 71% agree that the Republican Party is too extreme. Only 3% of respondents believe neither party is too extreme.

Perhaps most importantly, Excluded Independents do not feel well represented by either major political party. Thirty-one percent cited the fact that “None of the political parties represent my views” as one of the

reasons they did not register with either major party. Ninety percent agree that “Both major parties care more about winning elections than getting things done,” and 91% agree that “Both major parties care more about serving their special interests than people like me.”

Respondents also echoed these frustrations in their comments:

- “I have zero trust or respect for either party.”  
–64-year-old man from Kentucky
- “I don’t believe either party is truly focused on change for the better. Both are more focused on beating the other and that isn’t something I can subscribe to or get behind. Party politics forgets that we all have to live with the consequences of those types of battles.”  
–39-year-old woman from Alaska
- “I consider both parties off [track]. We need to get back to the middle ground. I am sick and tired of being whiplashed around by the extremists of both parties.”  
–67-year-old woman from Idaho
- “It is my belief that the parties have done nothing but divide this nation.”  
–Male Utah voter

FIGURE 14

## HOW WOULD YOU SAY THINGS IN THE FOLLOWING AREAS ARE GOING?

Are they going in the right direction, or are they off on the wrong track?

Right Direction  
Wrong Track

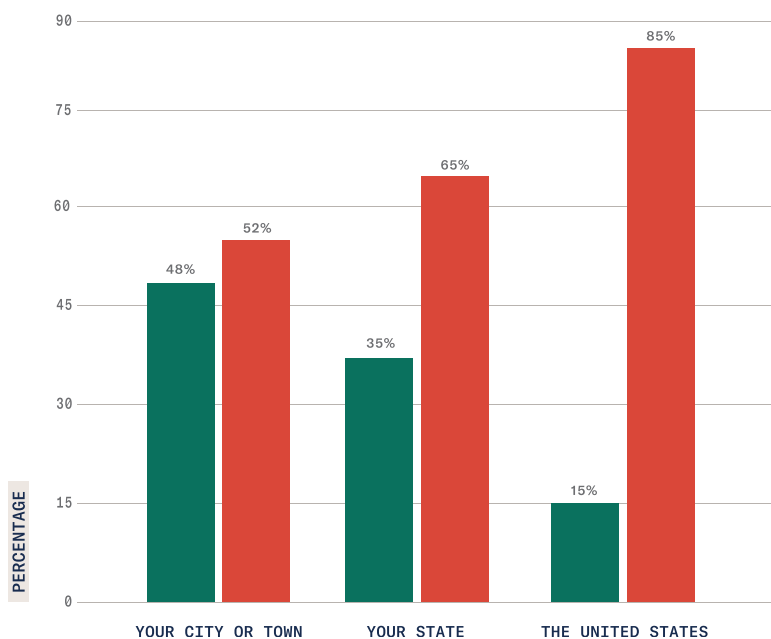


FIGURE 15

## Excluded Independents Perceptions of Candidates, Parties, and Movements

	Total Favorable	Total Unfavorable
Donald Trump (R)	33	60
Joe Biden (D)	21	70
Nikki Haley (R)	23	45
Kamala Harris (D)	15	68
Robert Kennedy, Jr. (I)	32	35
Cornel West (I)	6	22
Jill Stein (G)	8	29
The Republican Party	22	56
The Democratic Party	21	59
The Libertarian Party	23	28
The MAGA movement	21	58
The progressive movement	19	43

# WHAT DO EXCLUDED INDEPENDENTS BELIEVE?

So, what do independent voters actually believe? As the 2024 presidential election gets underway, this section presents new and groundbreaking data on the independent voters disenfranchised from upcoming primaries.

**Finding: Excluded Independents are concerned about our democracy and support structural reform.** Excluded Independents are on alert about the health and security of our democracy and are amenable to reforms that would change incentives for public officials.

Eighty-six percent of respondents believe that “Our democracy is under threat and at risk for future generations.” Excluded Independents support democratic processes and norms, with 89% agreeing that “Maintaining a fair, democratic process is more important than my preferred candidate or policies winning.”

When asked about reforms focused on ending corruption and gridlock, Excluded Independents were overwhelmingly supportive of independent redistricting commissions, term limits, stronger campaign finance rules, making mailed ballots an option for voters, and eliminating the practice of registering voters by party (see Figure 16).

**Finding: Excluded Independents believe closed primaries are unfair and support alternatives.** Independent voters from closed primary states believe it is unfair that they cannot participate in all elections, and these voters support alternative primary systems that would permit their participation.

Before considering specific reforms, we asked Excluded Independent voters’ principles-based questions to better understand their values. The data is compelling:

- 95% believe all eligible voters, regardless of party, should have the freedom to vote for any candidate they desire in every taxpayer-funded election;
- 87% believe every eligible U.S. citizen should be allowed to vote in taxpayer-funded primary elections, without needing to register as a Republican or Democrat;
- 77% believe it is unfair that only Democrats and Republicans can participate in presidential primaries in their state.

Excluded Independents view the current primary rules in their states as an issue that needs to be addressed. Seventy-two percent believe their exclusion from presidential primaries is a form of voter suppression, while 74% say it is a voting rights issue. Sixty-two percent said they would be more likely to vote for candidates who support allowing all voters to participate in taxpayer-funded primaries; 27% said they would be “much more likely” to do so.

Respondents were asked about a broad set of potential reforms to the primary process. The most important findings include:

- 87% of Excluded Independents support opening partisan primaries to allow independent voters to participate;
- 81% support nonpartisan primaries — elections open to all voters and with all candidates competing on the same ballot, with the top finishers advancing to the general election;
- 72% of respondents in the five states (AK, CA, AZ, NE, and LA) with open or nonpartisan primaries for state or federal office, but closed primaries for president, support opening the presidential primaries to include independent voters;
- 75% support creating a national primary day on which all primary elections nationwide occur;

- 64% support eliminating the process of using delegates and superdelegates to nominate presidential candidates.

- “I am being held back by Republicans and Democrats.”  
–71-year-old man from New Jersey

When asked how being left out of primaries makes them feel, Excluded Independents responded:

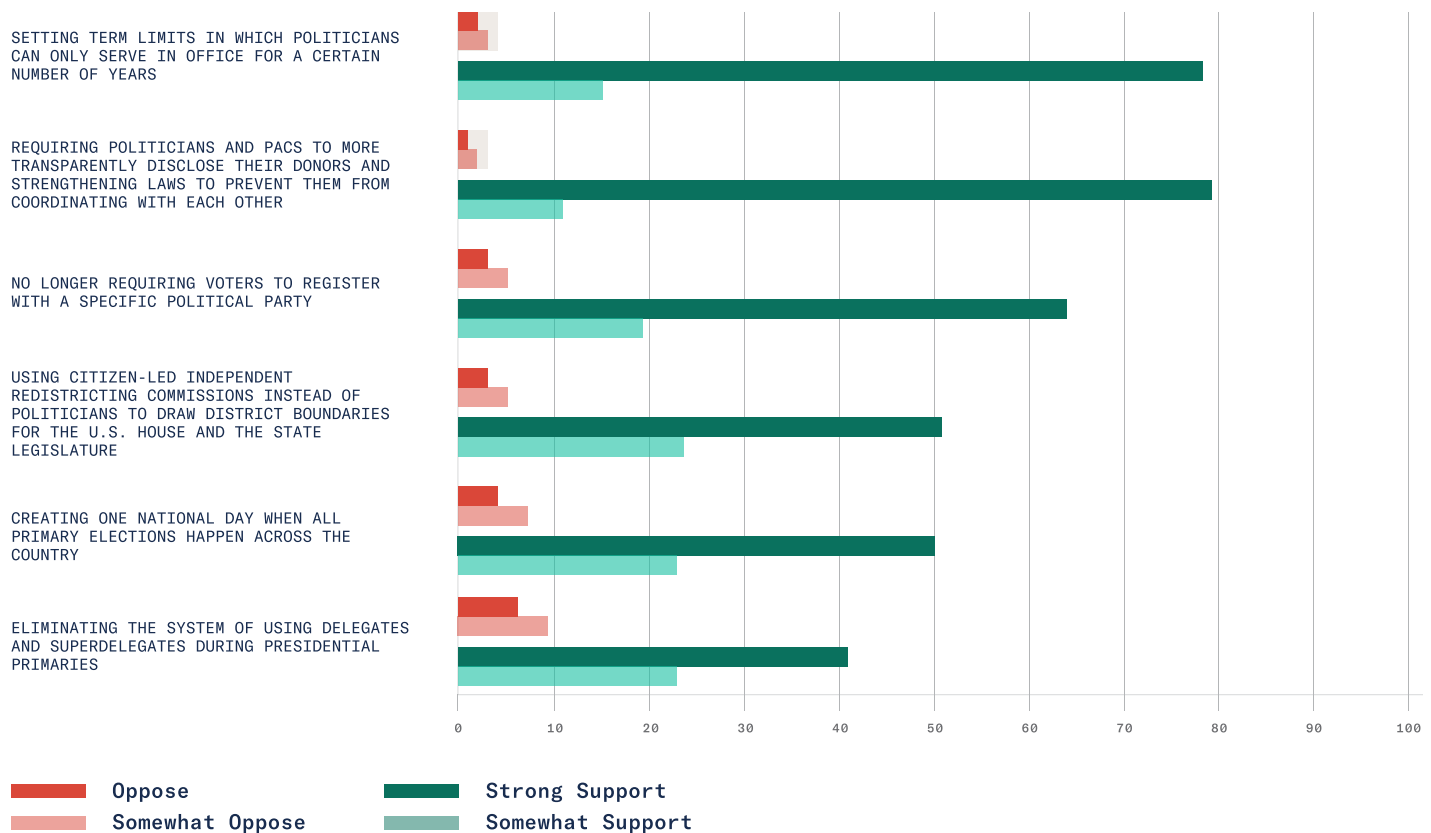
- “Angry. I don’t have a say who makes it to the general election.”  
–40-year-old man from Pennsylvania
- “Like I’m not a citizen.”  
–70-year-old man from South Dakota
- “I feel that is a violation of rights.”  
–20-year-old woman from Pennsylvania

- “I don’t see a reason for this to be the case. Our primary system is broken. It amplifies the impact of mobilized minorities. It leads to and promotes extremism. Including independents in primaries would be one step to curbing this.”  
–39-year-old man from Maryland

**Finding: Excluded Independents are split on who they will support for President in 2024.** The 2024 presidential election will likely be decided in a handful of battleground states. Every vote will matter in those states — including those cast by independent voters.

FIGURE 16

## DO YOU SUPPORT OR OPPOSE THE FOLLOWING?



As of this writing, most pundits believe there are seven swing states that will determine the 2024 presidential election: Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin; three of these states exclude independent voters from presidential primaries.

The Arizona presidential outcome was decided by just 10,457 votes in 2020, and there are 1,450,697 independents in the state. In Nevada, just 33,596 votes decided the 2020 race, and there are now 622,260 independents. In Pennsylvania, just 81,660 voters separated the two candidates in 2020, and there are 1,258,371 independent voters. The political independents in these three states will have outsized influence on who becomes the next president, and their votes are up for grabs.

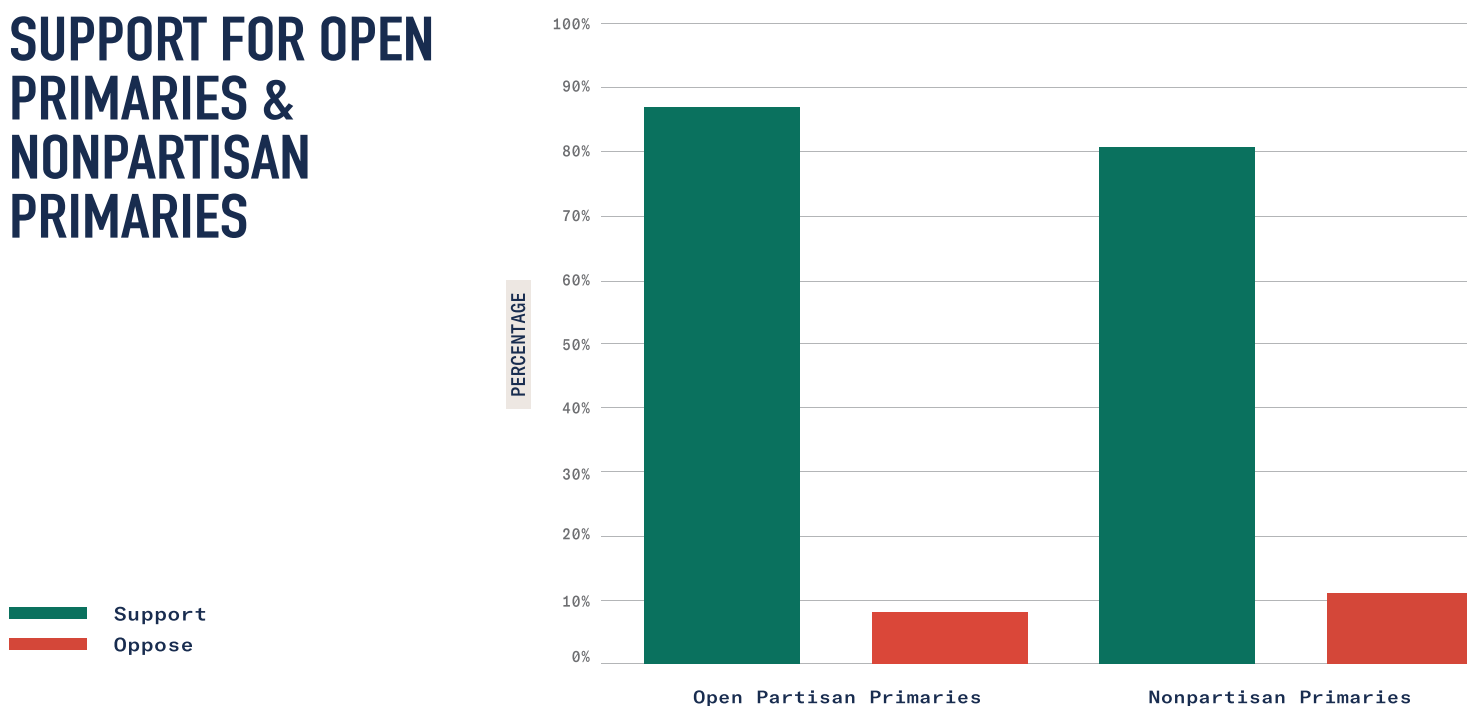
Currently, Excluded Independents do not have a favorable view of either major party's presidential nominee and they are split on who they will support this year.<sup>22</sup>

- Only 33% of all Excluded Independents have a favorable view of Donald Trump and only 21% said they have a favorable view of Joe Biden;
- In 2024, 30% of Excluded Independents said they will vote for Former President Donald Trump (R), 23% said President Joe Biden (D), and 17% said Robert Kennedy (I);<sup>i</sup>
- That differs from 2020: 39% of surveyed respondents reported voting for President Biden, and 38% reported voting for President Trump in the last election.

While some independent voters have made up their minds, many have not yet. Just 55% of Excluded Independents are “very confident” they know who they will vote for, while nineteen percent said they would not vote for any of the current candidates for president.

FIGURE 17

## SUPPORT FOR OPEN PRIMARIES & NONPARTISAN PRIMARIES



i Each of Jill Stein (Green Party), Cornel West (Independent), and a No Labels Unity Ticket had 3% support from independents in closed primary states.



# ARE INDEPENDENT VOTERS "LEANERS"?

## Background

For decades, political scientists have conducted survey research on the party identification, attitudes, and behavior of voters, including independents. Analysis of survey data over time led political scientists to reach a conclusion about independent voters that many still believe holds true today: Most independents lean toward one of the two major parties. In part, this belief is based on the fact that most independents report that they lean toward a major party when asked in surveys.

From the first American National Election Studies (ANES) survey conducted in the 1950s to the most recent in 2020, researchers have consistently found that “pure independents” (those who do not lean toward either party) make up no more than 15% of the entire national electorate, and about one-third of all self-identified independents.<sup>23</sup> In 1952, a large majority of independent voters (78%) said they leaned towards one of the major two parties. The same is true in recent surveys: in 2020, 34% of independents leaned towards the Democrats, 31% to the Republicans, and 35% did not lean to one party.<sup>24</sup>

Historically, political scientists also found that “leaners,” as these independents are known, tend to hold similar views to, and behave like, members of the party they lean toward. Because of this, some researchers have gone one step further to argue that independent leaners are truly just weak partisans (or “closet partisans”).<sup>25</sup> If this is true, then opening primaries to independent voters would likely have little impact on who wins elections.

However, as the share of self-identified independents has grown throughout the 2010s and early 2020s,

some researchers have revisited this topic. While independent leaners and partisans may vote similarly in a two-party system, new evidence suggests independent leaners identify as independent to hide their partisan preference: They have become embarrassed to identify with a party in this current era of heightened polarization. Further, self-identified partisans are distinct from independent leaners in part because they are less likely to be embarrassed by their party, are far more likely to display public support for their party, and are more likely to try to persuade family and friends to support their party.<sup>26</sup> One interpretation of these findings is that partisans display more prominent and active support for their party, while independent leaners display more passive support for the party they lean toward, and their support rarely extends beyond typically supporting the party at the ballot box.

Others have gone further in their challenge to the “leaners as weak partisans” framework. They find that independent leaners’ voting patterns are more fluid — and closer to those of pure independents — when the same voters are tracked across multiple elections.<sup>27</sup> Additional evidence suggests that independents move in and out of independent status over time, depending on who the candidates are, which issues are most salient, and what their short-term interests are.<sup>28</sup> Most recently, a 2023 study that analyzed nearly 50 years of ANES data found that, as a group, independents are distinct from partisans as measured by the level of volatility in their voting behavior from election to election.<sup>29</sup>

The validity of viewing independent leaners as weak partisans is an ongoing debate, and one that we will certainly not settle in this report. We did, however, ask several questions in our poll of Excluded Independents that address this debate and allow us to offer new insight.

## Analysis

This section of the report weaves together earlier themes and survey data to analyze what share of independents from closed primary states truly “lean” to one party or the other.

When asked directly, our poll found that nearly half (48%) of Excluded Independents do not lean toward a party; we call these voters “pure independents” throughout this section, in line with commonly accepted political science terminology. Twenty-five percent of respondents said they lean towards the Republican Party, and 27% said they lean towards the Democratic Party.

Respondents were also asked about their history of partisan affiliation. Forty-six percent stated that they have always been political independents, while 17% said they have previously registered as Democrats, and 18% said they’ve previously registered as Republicans. We also found that 60% of Excluded Independents think of themselves as moderates, while 6% identify as very conservative, 19% as conservative, 9% as liberal, and 6% as very liberal.

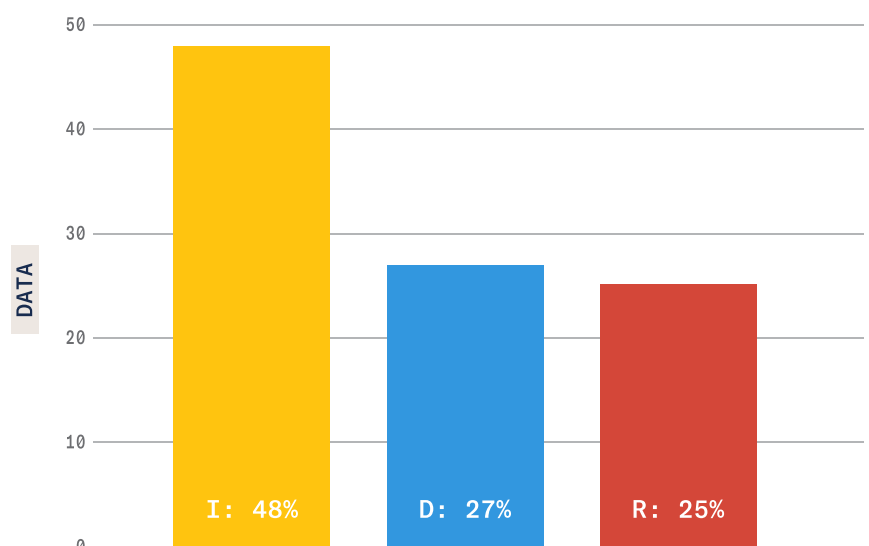
Pure independents’ attitudes towards the major parties and who they support also differed considerably from those who identified as leaners.

- Pure independents are more discerning in who they vote for. Thirteen percent of Democratic leaners said they always voted for Democrats and 24% said they never vote for Republicans. Ten percent of Republicans leaners said they always voted for Republicans while 34% said they never vote for Democrats. In contrast, only a sliver of pure independents say they always vote for Democrats (2%) or Republicans (1%), and much smaller shares say they never vote for Democrats (11%) or Republicans (12%).
- Only 38% of pure independents reported usually having candidate options that represent their interests, much lower than Democratic leaners (51%) or Republican leaners (57%). Pure independents were more likely to agree that higher quality candidates in the November 2024 presidential election would increase their likelihood of voting (41%), compared to those who leaned Democrat (29%) or Republican (11%).
- Leaners are less likely to believe that the party they favor is ideologically extreme. Pure independents agree that both the Democratic and Republican parties are too extreme, with 70% and 71% responding as such, respectively. Meanwhile only 36% of those who lean towards the Democratic Party believe it is too extreme,

FIGURE 18

## HALF OF EXCLUDED INDEPENDENTS DO NOT LEAN TOWARD A PARTY

■ % Independent  
■ % Democrat  
■ % Republican



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and only 46% of Republican leaners believe the GOP is too extreme.

- Leaners were also more likely to have a favorable view of their preferred party's presidential nominee. Fifty-eight percent of Democratic leaners had a favorable view of Joe Biden, and 65% said they were likely to vote for the president. Sixty-three percent of Republican leaners had a favorable view of Donald Trump, and 68% said they were likely to vote for the former president. Pure independents were much less enthusiastic about the leading candidates, with only 11% favoring President Biden and 31% favoring Trump.

These data suggest there is a clear difference between the attitudes of pure independents and leaners. These pure independents were asked the question: What do you think about the media and pundits who say “there is no such thing as an independent voter” and that “everyone is a partisan whether they want to admit it or not”? On this subject, pure independents remarked:

- “Americans have more in common with one another than they have with the vast majority of the world, regardless of their individual politics. Party lines should not be impregnable. Deliberately spreading the narrative that we have fundamentally incompatible differences is dangerous to democracy.”  
*–26-year-old woman from Utah*
- “I think the media and pundits don't like people they can't categorize easily so they want to disparage people who they can't pander to.”  
*–48-year-old woman from Oregon*
- “I think the utter failure of the fourth estate is why so many politicians think they are doing the right thing.”  
*–61-year-old woman from Arizona*
- “I think that is not true at all, and an insult to free thinking. The world is not as morally and

politically binary as the media portrays.”  
*–22-year-old man from Idaho*

- “It's insulting to claim that everyone fits in an easily identifiable file.”  
*–43-year-old woman from Alaska*

Importantly, the expressed attitudes and behaviors of all independent voters must be placed in the context of our current political system. The United States has a two-party system, contrasted with a majority of countries that have more than two parties. In general, this means only two candidates are viable in most U.S. general elections. While supporting independent and third-party candidates remains an option, most voters recognize that they have to vote for either the Democrat or the Republican to have a real impact on the outcome.

Thus, voters who lean toward a party, but do not register with it, support candidates who represent that party more often than not. One excluded independent, a 51-year-old man from Oregon, summed up this phenomenon well: **“We have little choice but to be partisan with only two choices.”**

Perhaps a more precise way of describing “leaners,” “weak partisans,” or “closest partisans” would be as “reluctant partisans.” This would better acknowledge their begrudging attitudes towards the parties, including the one they tend to favor. These voters have made an explicit choice not to identify as a member of a party. It is entirely possible, if not likely, that they may not vote for the party they lean toward if there were more viable or representative options on their ballot. Partisans, however, naturally have a stronger attachment to the party and may be less willing to abandon it even with more viable options.

Reluctant partisans who are registered as independents are still critical of the political system. They believe it is broken, do not feel well represented by our elected officials, do not hold strongly favorable views of major party leaders or polarizing movements.

We asked independents from closed primary states who lean to one party to explain why they do not register with that party. Many of their answers were

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illuminating and highlight the difference between typically voting for a party and joining a party:

- “Leaning is a lot different than joining an established agenda.”  
–68-year-old woman from Alaska who leans Democrat
- “To let the Democrats know my vote for them is not automatic. Some issues I disagree with them on, and I feel if I registered as a Democrat it would send the message that I agree with everything they stand for.”  
–38-year-old man from Pennsylvania who leans Democrat
- “Republicans usually have my support, but never my allegiance. I vote for those who are closest to my values. That’s often the Republican candidate.”  
–49-year-old man from Nebraska who leans Republican
- “I disagree with many Republican candidates and extreme right rhetoric. Lean does not mean fully adopt.”  
–41-year-old man from Arizona who leans Republican
- “I think the Democrats also suffer from corruption, greed, and tribalism. I just happen to agree with a few more of their policy positions.”  
–33-year-old woman from Utah who leans Democrat
- “I do not support the Republican Party. I just think Democrats have gotten too extreme.”  
–24-year-old man from New Mexico who leans Republican
- “I’m not comfortable with aligning myself to a political party even though I agree with them on some important issues.”  
–74-year-old woman from Arizona who leans Democrat

## Section Takeaways

While some Excluded Independents may behave similar to partisans, evidence suggests these two groups are still distinct. The themes represented in the above quotations came up frequently in our discussions: Just because leaners tend to agree with a party on some issues does not mean they wish to fully embrace the party in the way registered partisans do.

Many excluded leaners still have significant issues with the party they lean toward: About two-thirds agreed that both parties are too ideologically extreme, for example. While the debate about whether independent leaners are “closet partisans” will surely continue, we believe that such claims are far too broad, misinterpret leaners’ true feelings toward parties, and ignore their desire to think beyond the two major parties.



We have little choice but to be partisan with only two choices.

## SECTION 5

# SOLUTIONS TO CLOSED PRIMARIES

In this report, we have defined the scale of the problem with closed primaries and described both the demographic backgrounds and perspectives of independent voters who are locked out of primary elections. Closed primaries create a clear injustice; our democracy is strongest when the perspectives of *all* voters can be heard in *every* election. This begs the question: What can be done to solve the problem with closed primaries?

To conclude this report, we offer several policy solutions that ensure all voters have a right to vote in primary elections. These include solutions that are already in place in dozens of states.

Currently, 35 states guarantee all voters the right to vote in state and congressional primary elections,<sup>i</sup> but they do not all follow the same primary rules. For presidential primaries and caucuses, 28 states provide this right to all voters.

### Options for Ending Closed Primaries

There are three main ways that states can ensure that all voters can vote in every taxpayer-funded election. These policies vary in impact, viability, and permanence, but all ensure independents can participate:

1. Amend party rules to permit independent voter participation in partisan primaries;
2. Adopt open partisan primaries to grant

independent voters the right to participate in either major party's primary;

3. Adopt nonpartisan primaries to allow all voters to vote for any candidate, regardless of party, for all offices.

### Amend Party Rules

State political parties regularly establish rules and bylaws that govern their internal practices. In closed primary states, parties can establish rules either permitting or prohibiting independent voter participation in primaries.<sup>ii</sup> For instance, six state Democratic parties — California, Idaho, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Utah — established rules to permit independent participation in their upcoming 2024 presidential primaries or caucuses.<sup>iii</sup>

There are several reasons to believe that parties would benefit from allowing independents to vote in their primaries:

In the short run, if independents are allowed to vote for a party's candidates in the primary, these voters may be more likely to vote for that party's candidates in the general election.

1. A party may nominate more broadly popular candidates with a better chance of winning general elections if independent voters — who are often swing voters — have a say in who advances to the November general election.
2. A party that allows independent participation may become more popular among independent voters over the long run, boosting the party's future fortunes. Sixty percent of Excluded Independents

i Nebraska has several different primary rules. Independent voters have the legal right to vote in congressional and state legislative primaries. However, for statewide state-level offices, the parties get to decide if independents can take part, and the Republican Party has not permitted their participation in recent cycles. Technically, for statewide state-level offices specifically, just 34 states grant all voters the right to participate in primaries.

ii While some state laws specifically note that parties can permit independent participation in their primaries, other closed primary states do not have such language in their statutes about primaries. However, the Supreme Court ruled in *Tashjian v. Republican Party* (1986) that the Connecticut Republican Party could permit independents to vote in their primary despite the state's closed primary law that prohibited independents' participation. As such, there is precedent in favor of parties' ability to allow independent participation in their own primaries.

iii Four state Democratic parties permitted independent participation in their recent state and congressional primary elections — Idaho, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Utah.



in our poll said they would be more likely to vote for a party that allows independent voters to participate in its primaries.

Opening primaries to independent voters can be good for parties. While convincing parties to allow independents to participate in their primaries is not an easy task, it may prove to be easier in some circumstances than convincing a state government to enact a new law.

### Open Partisan Primaries

To establish stronger protections for independents' right to vote in primary elections, states can implement open partisan primary elections. In an open partisan primary, independent voters can

participate in one of the major parties' primaries without registering with a party or giving up their "status" as an independent. Currently, 31 states have adopted open partisan primaries in various forms for state and congressional elections, while 28 do for their presidential primaries or caucuses.

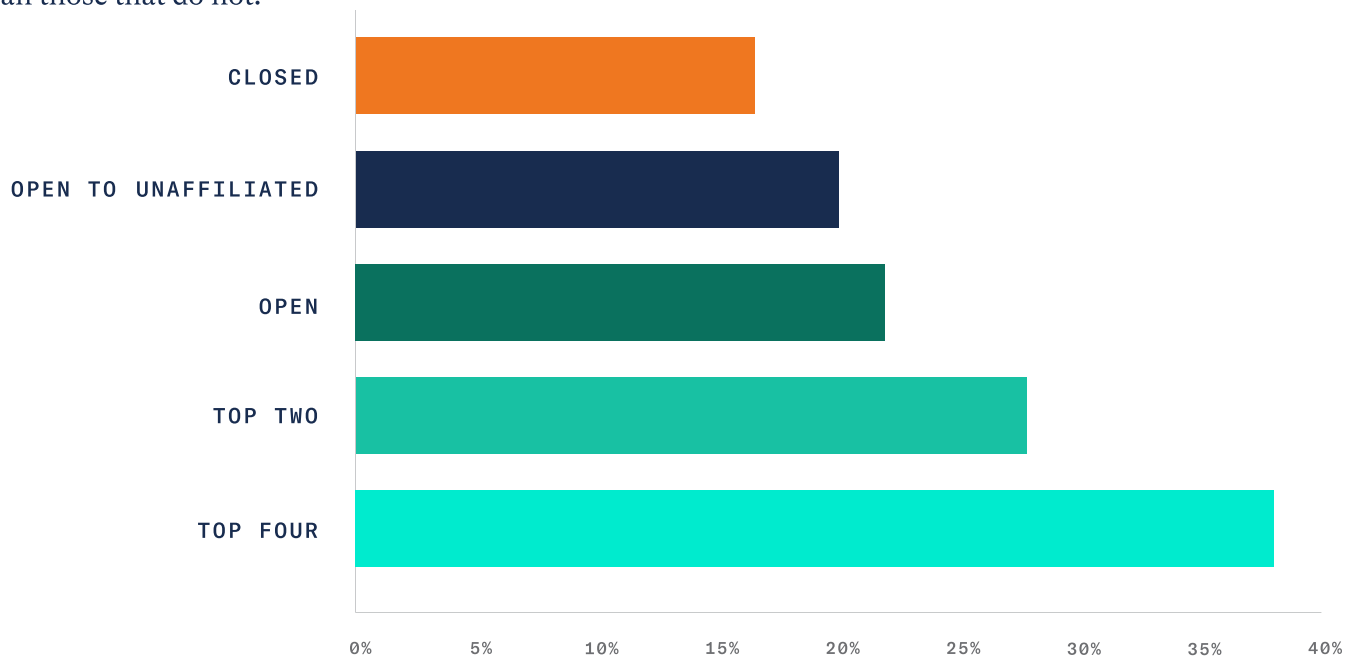
There is a positive association between the openness of a primary system and increased participation in primary elections. Research from the Bipartisan Policy Center found that states that allow all voters to participate in primaries have higher primary turnout, on average, than those that do not.<sup>i</sup>

Further, closed primary states could stop registering voters by party, thereby allowing all voters to vote

FIGURE 19

## MIDTERM PRIMARY TURNOUT BY ELECTION TYPE

2022 primaries showed that states with open primaries have higher turnout than those that do not.



Source: Bipartisan Policy Center Analysis Of State Collection Data.

i Ferrer, Joshua and Michael Thorning. "2022 Primary Turnout: Trends and Lessons for Boosting Participation," *Bipartisan Policy Center* (March 2023).



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in the primary of their choice.<sup>i</sup> Fifteen states do not require voters to register by party, a practice supported by 83% of Excluded Independents surveyed in our poll.

## Nonpartisan Primaries

The most impactful reform that ensures all voters are eligible to vote in primaries is to eliminate partisan primaries entirely and replace them with nonpartisan primaries. In a nonpartisan primary, all candidates for a given office compete on a single ballot. Candidates still run with their party affiliation (if any) listed on the ballot. Nonpartisan primaries are open to all voters, and each voter chooses their preferred candidate for each office, regardless of their party. The top finishers advance to the general election, and whoever earns majority support wins.

Four states hold nonpartisan primaries for congressional and state offices: Alaska, California, Louisiana, and Washington.<sup>ii</sup>

- **Alaska** has a top-four nonpartisan primary. The four candidates who receive the most votes in the primary advance to the general election, regardless of their party affiliation. In the general election, voters rank the candidates. If necessary, instant runoffs are conducted to ensure the winning candidate wins a majority (50%+1) of the votes.
- **California and Washington** hold top-two nonpartisan primaries. In this system, just the top two finishers in the primary advance to the general election. Since there are only two candidates on the general election ballot, a majority winner is guaranteed.
- **Louisiana** does not technically hold primary elections. All candidates who qualify for the ballot run together in the general election, in what some have called a “Cajun Primary.” If one candidate wins a majority of the vote, they win. If no candidate does, the top two finishers advance to a runoff election held approximately five weeks after the general

election. However, in January 2024, Louisiana passed legislation to establish open partisan primaries for congressional offices beginning in 2026. The Cajun Primary system will remain in effect for local, statewide and state legislative offices.

Nonpartisan primaries offer even more benefits than open partisan primaries:

- **Increased Participation:** Primary turnout is highest in states with nonpartisan primaries, and considerably higher than both closed primary and more open partisan primary states.<sup>30</sup> Past research has concluded that states can increase primary turnout by up to six percentage points by switching to nonpartisan primaries.<sup>31</sup>
- **More Choice:** In nonpartisan primaries, voters can more easily express their true views because they can vote for candidates from different parties for different offices. For example, a primary voter can support a Democrat for the U.S. Senate, an independent for U.S. House, and a Republican for governor.
- **New Competition:** Nonpartisan primaries lead to more competitive general elections, especially in districts that are “safe” for one party or the other. In these districts, nonpartisan primaries often advance more than one candidate from the dominant party to a competitive general election.
- **Better Representation:** Candidates running in nonpartisan primaries are incentivized to appeal to independent voters and voters from the other party. Multiple academic studies have concluded that the presence of same-party general elections contributes to less extreme and more representative candidates winning elections.<sup>32</sup>

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i There are still separate Democratic and Republican primaries, and voters are only permitted to vote for candidates from one party for all offices on the ballot. This system is sometimes referred to as “fully open” partisan primaries.

ii Nebraska also uses a nonpartisan primary system for its unicameral state legislature.

# ALASKA ADOPTS NONPARTISAN PRIMARIES

In 2020, Alaska voters narrowly approved Ballot Measure 2, a referendum that established the country's first top-four nonpartisan primary. The proposal was a solution designed to address Alaska specific problems: low voter turnout in primaries, uncompetitive elections, viable independent candidates causing non-majority winners, and increased success of insurgent candidates "primarying" consensus-oriented legislative leaders.

Because all candidates compete on a single primary ballot under the new system, all voters — including independents — can vote for their preferred candidate for each race, regardless of party. The top four finishers advance to the general elections where voters are able to rank candidates and, if required, an instant runoff is conducted to ensure majority winners. This is a significant departure from how most of the country conducts elections.

The new election system was implemented for the first time in 2022, and was overwhelmingly seen as successful in improving participation, representation, and competition.<sup>33</sup> Consider:

- The share of uncontested state legislative seats was cut in half from 2020;
- Primary election turnout (37%) was the third highest in the country;
- Candidates from across the ideological spectrum facing the same electorate all won elections — including the state's conservative Republican Governor Mike Dunleavy, moderate Republican U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski (R), and moderate Democrat U.S. Representative Mary Peltola (D). Meanwhile, neither party gained an advantage at the state legislative level;

- Voters overwhelmingly approved of the use of top-four primaries on their first use, with 62% supporting the system and only 33% opposing it.<sup>34</sup>

## Open Partisan Primaries: A Strong First Step

While nonpartisan primaries offer the greatest impact, they also represent a significant change to the current election system and may not necessarily be viable in all states. Closed primary states can first focus on addressing the injustice of locking certain voters out of taxpayer-funded elections through more incremental changes. This can be accomplished by implementing open partisan primaries, which maintain the partisan primary structure but open the door to independent voter participation.

Open partisan primaries are fairer, because no voters are barred from participating in taxpayer-funded elections. Given that so many elections are effectively decided in primaries, this also means that independent voters are eligible to participate in all consequential elections.

There is momentum toward states replacing closed primaries with open partisan primaries in order to fully enfranchise independent voters. Two states, Colorado and Maine, have made this switch since 2016, and there are ongoing advocacy campaigns in states like Pennsylvania and New Mexico to make a similar change.

## The Impact of Open Partisan Primaries in Colorado

In November 2016, two ballot primary reform initiatives passed in Colorado. Proposition 107, which passed with 64% of the vote, reinstated presidential primaries (as opposed to caucuses) and made them open to independent voters.<sup>35</sup> Proposition 108, which passed with 53% of the vote, established open partisan primaries for all other offices. Both propositions garnered bipartisan support when passed, including from former chairs and elected officials of both major parties and a diverse array of business organizations.<sup>36</sup>

Open partisan primaries took effect in Colorado in 2018. **The immediate impact was that Colorado's 1.2 million registered independents were able to participate in primary elections for the first time.** Between 2018 and 2022, independents cast 1,196,644 ballots in primary elections.<sup>37</sup> None of these ballots could have been cast under the closed system.

Independents who participate in primaries appear willing to swing back and forth between the parties. While we do not know how many of the same independents participated in all three contests, we do know that large majorities of ballots returned by

independents in 2018 and 2020 were Democratic ballots, while a significant majority were Republican ballots in 2022 (see Figure 20 below).<sup>38</sup>

Crucially, open partisan primaries afford independent voters the flexibility to choose to vote in the primary that is more competitive. One independent voter explained to Colorado Public Radio why he voted in the Republican primary in 2022:

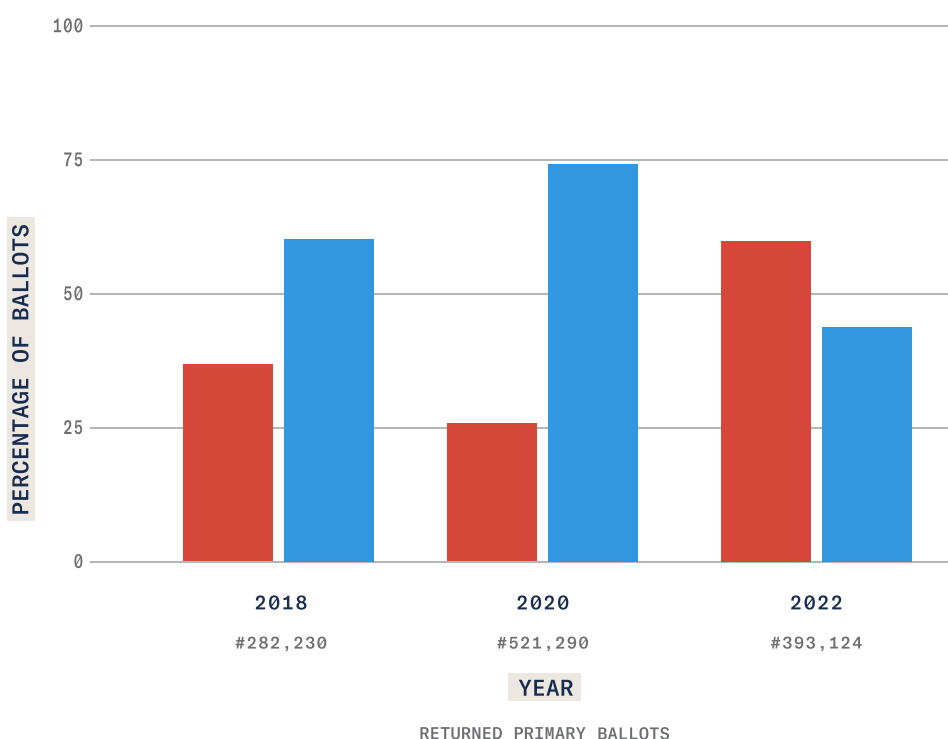
"The Democrats ... have mostly single options on most of their [races], whereas Republicans have several multiple-choice [races] ... So, I studied a little bit of the Republican side, and that's what I decided to do."<sup>39</sup>

Overall, primary turnout in Colorado midterms increased after the primaries were opened: In the last two midterm primaries that excluded independent voters (2010, 2014), turnout in Colorado averaged just 18.5% of the voting eligible population. In the two midterm primaries that permitted independent participation (2018 and 2022), voter participation averaged 28% (see Figure 21). On average, Colorado's primary turnout was just 2.2 points above the national average in 2010 and 2014, but it was 7.4 points above

FIGURE 20

## PARTY BALLOT CHOICE OF COLORADO INDEPENDENT VOTERS

■ % Republican  
■ % Democrat



in 2018 and 2022.<sup>40</sup>

Further, over time, voters in the state have been better able to express their true party affiliation — or lack thereof — without losing the ability to vote in primaries. In 2016, prior to reform, roughly 35% of active Colorado voters were registered independents. Currently, over 47% are independents. This suggests that changing rules about whether independent voters can participate in primaries can encourage frustrated partisan voters to declare their political independence.

Maine's Long and Twisting Path to Open Partisan Primaries

The March 2024 presidential primary and June 2024 state primary will be the first two primaries that Maine independents can vote in, following the passage of legislation to open the state's primaries in 2021. Just under 30% of active registered voters in Maine — 265,692 people — are independents and are now fully enfranchised in all Maine elections.

The path to passage for the open partisan primaries bill was not straightforward. In 2017, two independent members of the Maine state house — Rep. Kent Ackley and Rep. Owen Casas — sponsored a bill to open the state's primaries. While it received some

support, it was voted down in the state house — 99-42 — and did not receive a vote in the state senate.<sup>41</sup> The bill's supporters included 35 Democrats, five independent and minor party representatives, and two Republicans.<sup>42</sup>

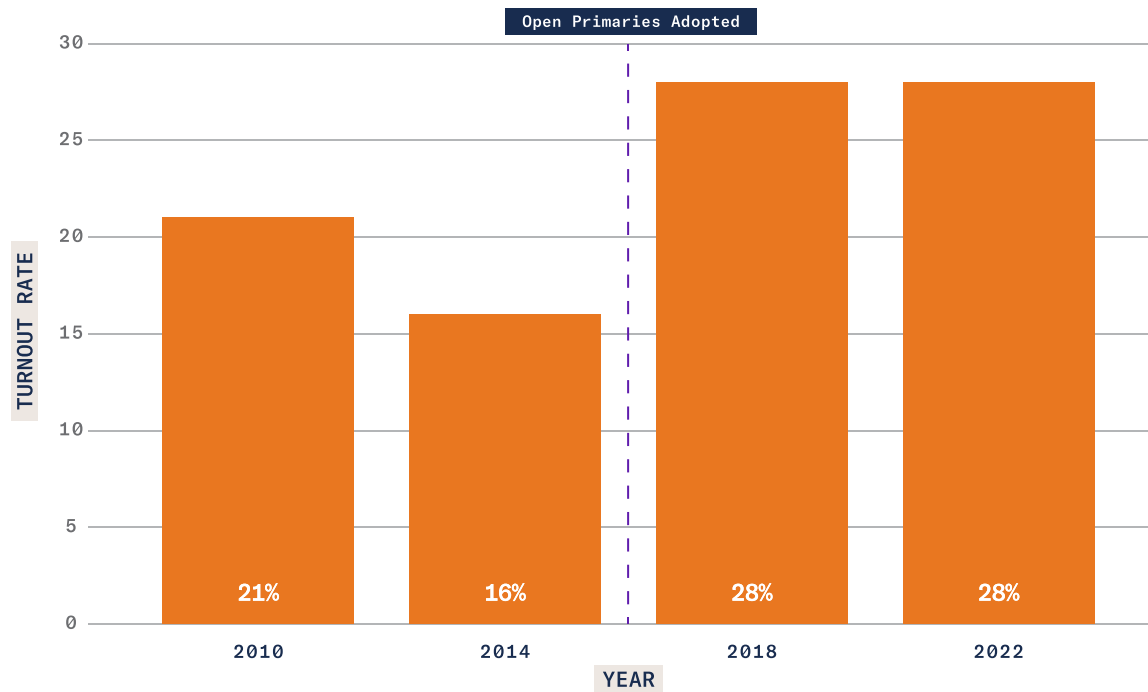
In 2019, Rep. Ackley (I) once again sponsored an open partisan primaries bill after working with advocates in hopes of gaining more support from the Democratic Party, which held the majority. The bill was voted down in the state house by a similar margin — 89-45 — but it did gain the support of Speaker of the House Sara Gideon (D).<sup>43,44</sup>

When the bill was finally successful in 2021, it was co-sponsored by a Democrat, Sen. Chloe Maxmin, and a Republican, Sen. Matthew Pouliot, who each played crucial roles in building support within their parties.<sup>45</sup> Maxmin's and Pouliot's bill, L.D. 231, passed first in the state senate, 27-7, and then in the state house, 92-52. All senate Democrats supported the bill, but six of the 13 senate Republicans did so, too, indicating bipartisan support.<sup>46</sup> The story was similar on the house side: All but five house Democrats supported the bill, but so did 14 Republicans.<sup>47</sup> After years of work, Maine Democrats and Republicans worked together to ensure that Maine independents would have the right to vote in primaries starting in 2024.

FIGURE 21

COLORADO  
MIDTERM  
PRIMARY  
TURNOUT  
(2010-2022)

Source: Bipartisan Policy Center



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# CONCLUSION

Partisan primaries in the United States are neither popular nor required. **The U.S. Constitution does not mention political parties, no less does it require partisan primaries**, and 91% of Americans believe that all voters should be able to vote for any candidate in every taxpayer-funded election.<sup>48</sup>

Absent changes by parties and states, the current partisan primary system will only disenfranchise a growing constituency of American voters: political independents. Given the current political climate, 82% of respondents to our poll agree that the independent ranks are likely to increase. And as the current electorate's youngest voters — who overwhelmingly register as political independents — grow older, demographics will accelerate the issue.

The political leaders and political parties that most quickly embrace this growing constituency of independent voters stand to gain the most — including for the high-stakes presidential election in 2024. By bringing independents into the fold, the two political parties can benefit from increased membership, loyalty, and diversity of opinion. Independent voters are persuadable and eager to participate in our democracy.

Twenty-seven million independent voters are disenfranchised from primaries and the right to full democratic participation. Voting is a cherished civic right, and today, millions of Americans cannot exercise the franchise. By remedying this injustice, the United States will have a better functioning government that broadly represents the country's views, including those who, for a variety of reasons, have declared their political independence.

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# ABOUT

The [Unite America Institute](#) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that conducts research and provides analysis on the root causes, effects, and potential solutions to political polarization and partisanship.

The Institute is particularly focused on exploring how election reforms — including nonpartisan primaries, independent redistricting commissions, and instant runoffs — increase participation, competition, representation, and accountability in the political system.

This report was written by Research Manager Carlo Macomber and Sr. Director of Policy & Partnerships Tyler Fisher. It was edited by Director of Research & Outreach Beth Hladick and Press Director Ross Sherman. The report was designed by Alana Persson. The report benefited tremendously from the input of Ron Fournier, John Opdycke, and Jeremy Gruber.

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For press inquiries, more data from this report, or to get involved, please contact [hello@uniteamericainstitute.org](mailto:hello@uniteamericainstitute.org). Or visit our website at [www.uniteamericainstitute.org/](http://www.uniteamericainstitute.org/).



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