

September 2024



Research Brief: Growing Cohort of Independent Voters Becomes Critical Segment of Electorate

Excluding independents from primaries leaves out 23 million ideologically diverse voters and pragmatic voters.

Key Takeaways

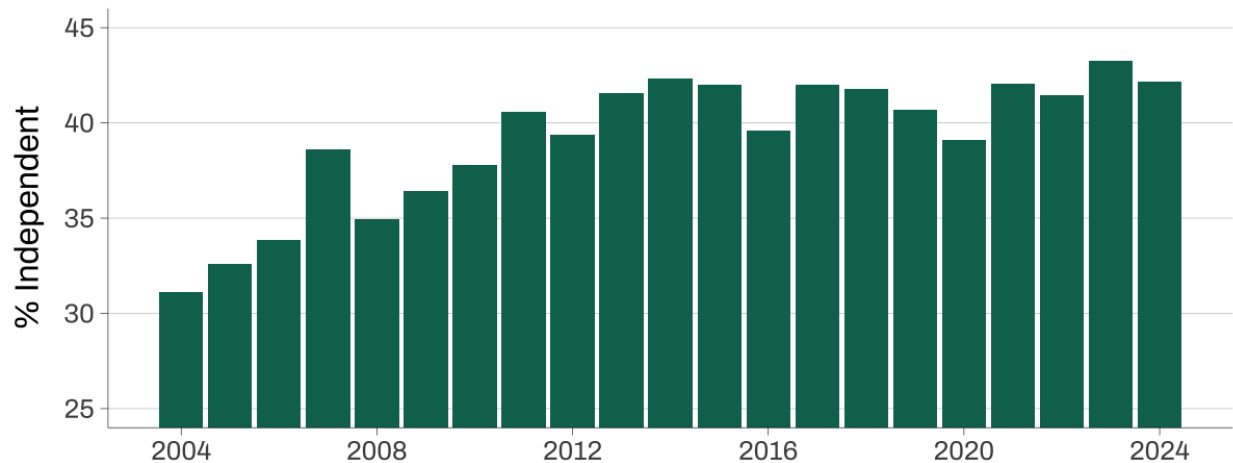
- Independents are a growing cohort of voters—according to Gallup, more Americans identify as independents (40%) than as Democrats (29%) or Republicans (30%).
- Independents overwhelmingly identify as “moderate” and state they agree with both major parties on certain issues. For example, independents tend to trust Democrats more on abortion, healthcare, and climate change, while they prefer Republicans on the economy, gun rights, and immigration.
- Despite their numbers, millions of independents are excluded from primary elections across the 15 states with closed congressional primaries and the 22 with closed presidential primaries.

Introduction

Americans are increasingly dissatisfied with the choices offered by the two-party system. Large majorities [hold an unfavorable view](#) of both the Democratic and Republican parties and the past three presidential elections have witnessed the [highest unfavorability ratings](#) for both major party candidates in more than 40 years.

Dissatisfaction with the red-blue binary has also been evident in voters' increasing proclivity to eschew formal party affiliation and instead identify as independents. The number of registered independents has skyrocketed more than 40% over the past two decades — rising from an average of 31% of voters in 2004 to 42% during the first nine months of 2024 (see Figure 1). In fact, the [June 2024 Gallup poll](#) found that 51% of respondents identified as Independents — the highest figure ever recorded in the survey.

Figure 1: Independents Represent Almost Half of All US Voters



Source: Gallup.

Despite constituting the single largest cohort of US voters, in large swaths of the country independents have less access to the political process than Democrats and Republicans. Across the US, 15 states hold [closed primaries](#) for congressional elections, while 22 do so for [presidential primaries](#). These rules exclude more than 23.5 million Independent voters from primary elections. This exclusion is particularly consequential in “safe” districts that are uncompetitive in the general election because independent voters have no say in the dominant party’s primary in which their representatives are effectively chosen. In 2024, just 7% of voters effectively decided [87% of the US House in primaries held in “safe” districts](#).

To better understand the political attitudes and experiences of independent voters, Unite America conducted a survey of registered independents across 20 states that hold closed primaries for congressional or presidential elections.¹ This survey revealed that independents represent an ideologically diverse segment of the electorate, which largely identifies as “moderate” and supports both major parties' positions depending on the issue. Nevertheless, independents are critical of the party system and political process, suggesting an inherent openness to new ideas,

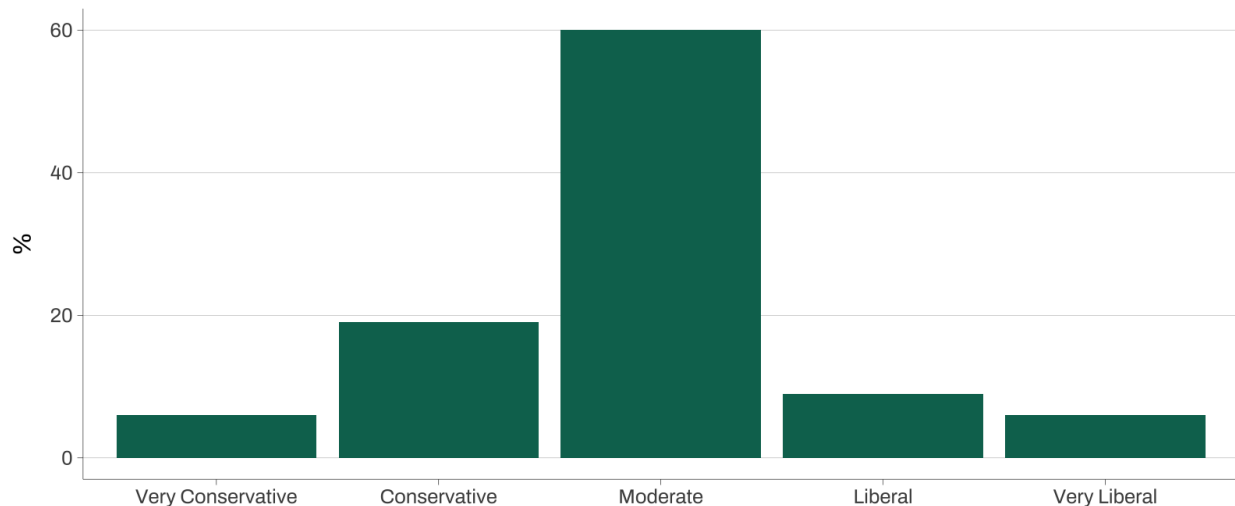
¹ The [Independent Voters Poll](#) was conducted by Change Research from January 10–20, 2024. The states included are: Arizona, California, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Utah, Wyoming.

institutions, and political opportunities. This openness is key to successfully promoting primary reform to improve the inclusivity and representativeness of our elections.

Independent Self-Identification

For the majority of independent voters, the “independent” label represents not just a rejection of alternative party affiliations, but an embrace of moderation. Overall, 60% of independents in our survey described themselves as “moderate”— by contrast, 25% considered themselves “conservative” or “very conservative,” with only 15% identifying as “liberal” or “very liberal” (see Figure 2). While majorities across demographic groups also placed themselves at the midpoint of the ideological scale, the “moderate” label was embraced more heavily by women (64%) compared to men (56%), those aged 18-49 (64%) compared to those 50+ (55%), and those with a college degree (66%) compared to those without one (55%).

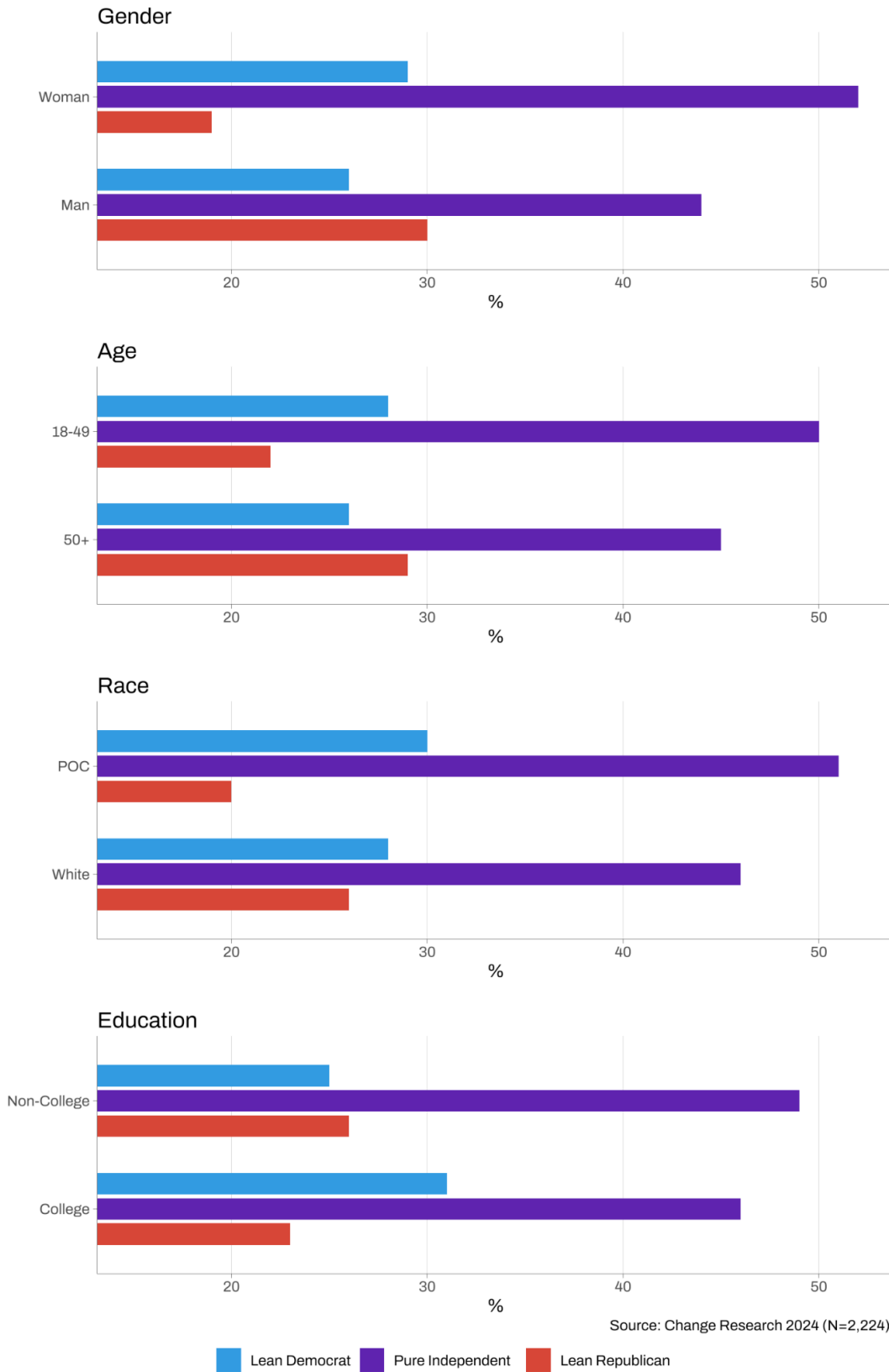
Figure 2: Independents Overwhelmingly Identify as “Moderate”



Source: Change Research 2024 (N=2,224).

While they embrace ideological moderation, a majority of independents acknowledge leaning slightly more toward one major party or the other. An almost equal share of respondents stated they lean toward the Democrats (27%) or the Republicans (25%), with the remainder (48%) associating as “pure independents.” However, partisan lean varies considerably across demographic subgroups (see Figure 3). Women are 10 percentage points more likely to lean toward Democrats than Republicans, whereas men favor Republicans by a 4 percentage point margin. A similar difference emerges regarding age — those aged 18-49 lean Democratic by 7 points, while those 50+ favor Republicans by 3 points. Democrats are favored over Republicans across racial and ethnic categories, although people of color favor Democrats by a larger margin (+10%) than white Independents (+2%). Breakdowns by education follow a similar pattern — independents without a college education favor Republicans by 1 point, while those with a college degree favor Democrats by 8 points.

Figure 3: Independents' Partisan Lean Varies Across Demographic Profiles

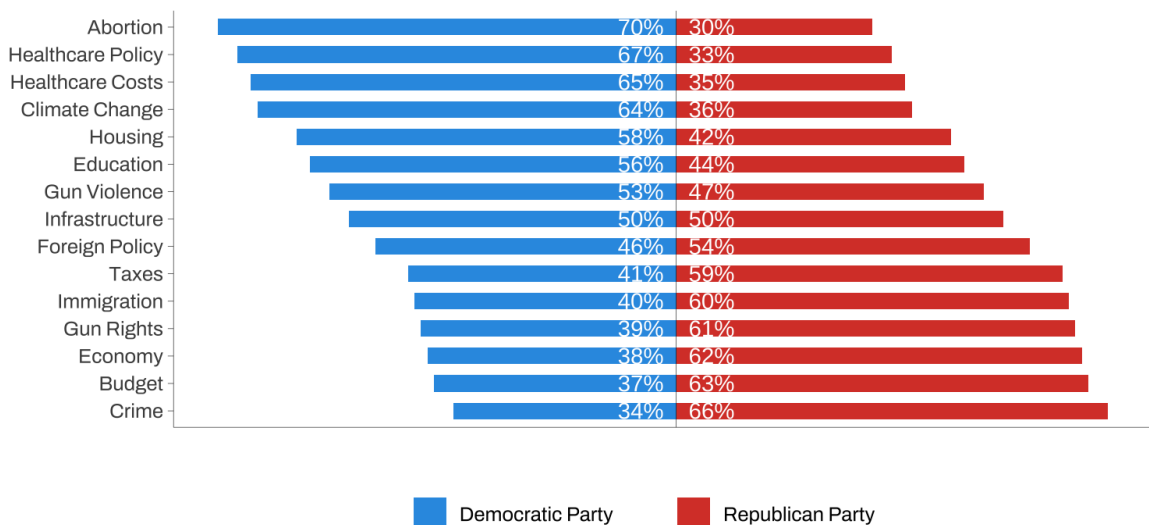


These trends are largely consistent with independents' self-reported voting history. Overall, independents recall “sometimes” voting for Democratic (64%), Republican (63%), independent (72%), and third-party (54%) candidates. Importantly, these patterns suggest that independent voters are drawn from across the ideological spectrum and express an openness to supporting a wide variety of parties and candidates, rather than consistently favoring one “side” over the other.

Orientation toward Major Parties

While independents appear to regularly support both parties at the ballot box, they do scrutinize each parties’ positions and trust Democrats and Republicans on different sets of issues. A strong majority of independents prefer Democrats when it comes to abortion (70%), healthcare (67%), and climate change (64%). On the other hand, Republicans are favored when it comes to crime (66%), the economy (62%), gun rights (61%), and immigration (60%). Importantly, there were very few issues where independents appeared split between both major parties — infrastructure (50% Democrats, 50% Republicans), gun violence (53% Democrats, 47% Republicans), and foreign policy (46% Democrats, 54% Republicans).

Figure 4: Independents Favor Both Major Parties on Key Issues



Source: Change Research 2024 (N=2,224).

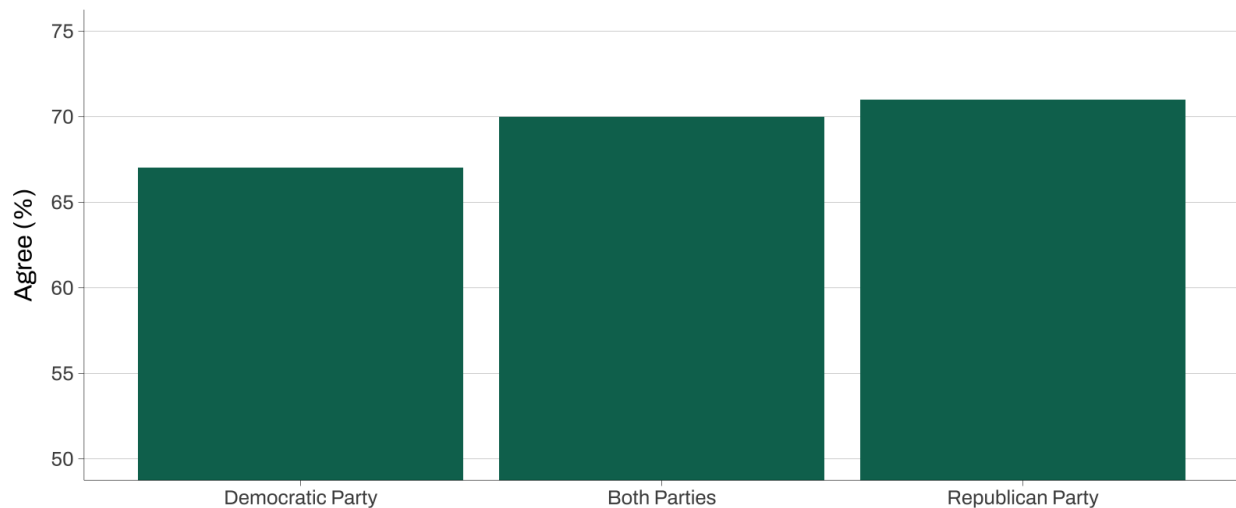
These general patterns of issue-based trust were consistently evident across most demographic subgroups. Among the few exceptions was gun violence — which divided women (61% favor Democrats) and men (53% favor Republicans), and those aged 18-49 (56% preferred Democrats) and those 50+ (51% favored Republicans). Yet, even when majorities of subgroups followed the overall trend, important differences in magnitude arose. For example, majorities across the board trusted Democrats when it came to healthcare policy, but the difference was particularly stark between people of color (78%) and white Independents (65%). Likewise, support for Democrats on climate change was much stronger among the 18-49 age bracket (71%) than those 50+ (55%), and the Republican advantage on crime and public safety was

stronger among men (72%) than women (58%). Despite these differences in magnitude, it is significant that across most demographic lines independents consistently prefer Democrats on some issues and Republicans on others. This supports independents' claim to be moderates who find areas of agreement with both major parties but feel that neither offers them a home that reflects their full ideological profile.

Appraisals of the Political System

Despite their general willingness to vote for the major parties and agreement with them on some issues, independents strongly believe that traditional parties are too extreme (see Figure 5). A 67% characterized the Democratic Party as too extreme, while an even larger 71% said the same about Republicans. When directly asked if both parties are too extreme, 70% agreed.

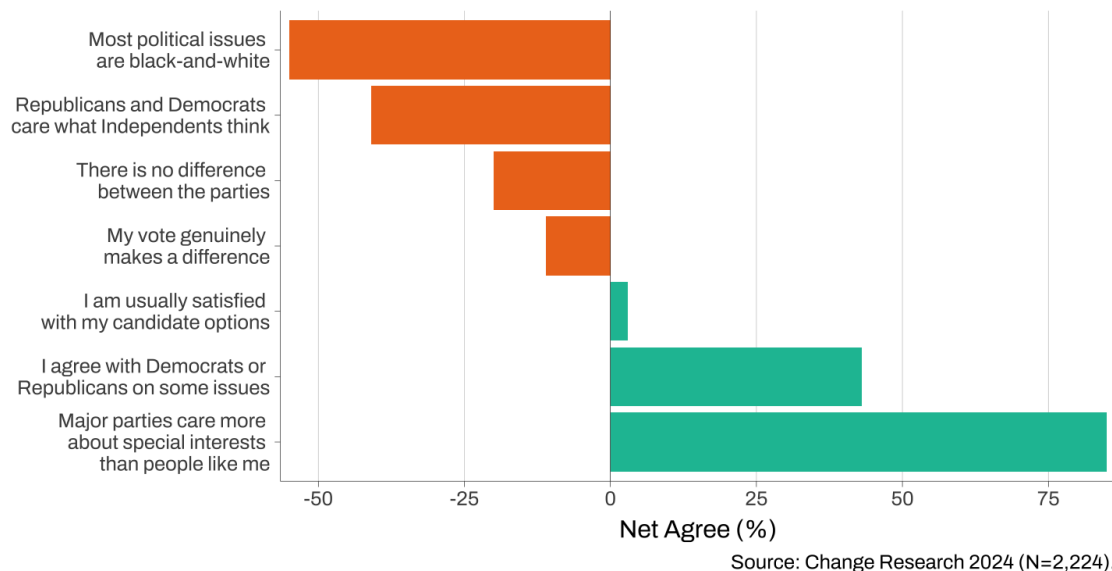
Figure 5: Independents View Both Major Parties as Too Extreme



Source: Change Research 2024 (N=2,224).

Independent voters' critical appraisal of the major parties extends to their view of the political system writ large (see Figure 6). 67% disagreed with the statement that "Republican and Democratic candidates care what independent voters think," while an even larger share (91%) agreed that the major parties care more about special interests than ordinary citizens. Furthermore, a paltry 46% indicated they were usually satisfied with the candidate options in general elections, while only 42% agreed "my vote genuinely makes a difference in election outcomes."

Figure 6: Independents Largely Critical of Current Political System



In other areas, independents’ perspectives reinforced their general tendency toward centrism and moderation. For example, 75% disagreed that “most political issues are black-and-white,” while 69% reported regularly agreeing with both Republicans and Democrats on some issues. Thus, independents’ criticism of the major parties appears tempered by an acknowledgement of the inherent complexity of political debates and a willingness to consider opposing viewpoints before settling on a position.

Conclusion

Independent voters are a crucial segment of the electorate whose influence will very likely increase in the coming years. While broadly identifying as “moderates,” half of all independents acknowledge that they lean toward one of the major parties and independents regularly support a variety of candidates from across the ideological spectrum. Rather than maintaining uniform ideological profiles or basing political opinions on partisan identity, it appears that independents adopt a mix of positions — with many favoring Democrats on issues such as abortion, healthcare, and climate change, while preferring Republicans when it comes to crime, the economy, and immigration.

For many independents, this ideological diversity motivates the decision to eschew party membership—31% of respondents felt that none of the major parties represents their views, while 68% stated their independent status is driven by a desire to “think for myself, independent of what parties and candidates tell me to think.” Yet, this refusal to reshape their views to fit the red-blue binary leads to exclusion from the primary process for many independents across the country. Across the 17 states with closed congressional primaries (and 22 states with closed presidential primaries), more than 23 million independents have no opportunity to participate in the candidate selection process. Were such independents to have a say, their influence could

elevate the voices of more representative candidates who might reduce polarization, reject partisan brinkmanship, and offer voters different options, both within and beyond the two major parties.

While the roots of polarization and political dysfunction are myriad and run deep, both open primaries and all-candidate primaries promise to ameliorate these pathologies of contemporary American democracy by ensuring that all voters have a say in the primary process and allowing a wider and more ideologically diverse electorate to participate in the entire election process—from start to finish.