

Independent Nation: The Rise of "None of the Above"



Michelle Diggles,
Ph.D.

Former Senior Political
Analyst

Political common wisdom says that in this Presidential election, many voters aren't satisfied with the two major party candidates and will cast their ballot in opposition to, rather than support of, one of the options on the table. But to the extent that this statement is true, it is indicative of a larger trend rather than simply a one-time phenomenon: changes in voter registration since 2008 reveal that Americans are less attached to the two parties and more likely to select "none of the above."¹ This trend is even more pronounced in the current Presidential and Senate battleground states. Across the country, the number of voters who are registered as Independents has skyrocketed over President Obama's two terms, meaning that Hillary Clinton faces a different electorate—as do the candidates whose races will determine control of the Senate. In fact:

- Independent registration has increased 22% since 2008 in the 26 states that keep voter registration data by party.

- In three of the seven battleground states where data is available (Colorado, Iowa, and New Hampshire), Independents outnumber both Democrats and Republicans, and in three others (Florida, Nevada, and North Carolina), the rolls of Independent voters have grown by at least 40% since 2008.
- Republicans don't hold an advantage in any of these seven Presidential battleground states—which are also home to the key Senate races this cycle.

#1) Independent registration is up 22% since 2008.

Voter registration increased by upwards of 4.5 million Independents since the last time two non-incumbent candidates ran for president. All told, since 2008:

- The number of Independents has increased by 4,590,668 or 22.3% and now stands at 25,218,148; and,
- The number of Democrats has increased by 1,111,641 or 2.7%, and now stands at 41,733,714; and,
- The number of Republicans has increased by 1,040,820 or 3.6%, and now stands at 29,595,862.

If this uptick in Independent registration continues apace over the next two Presidential terms, there could be more Independents in the states that keep partisan voter registration data than Republicans by 2024. As it stands, the gulf between Independent and Republican registration has been halved during the course of the Obama Administration.

There are now more Independents than Democrats or Republicans in seven states—Alaska, Colorado, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and New Jersey.

Independents now outnumber Democrats in Arizona, with Republicans just slightly edging out Independents on the voter rolls in that state. And Republicans are at risk of being overtaken by Independent enrollment in California, New

York, and North Carolina (the latter separated by only about 58,000 votes).

September 2016 Voter Registration Totals

	Democrat	Republican	Independent
Alaska	77,126	140,287	271,679
California	8,155,831	4,898,389	4,212,484
Colorado	1,160,214	1,140,173	1,318,043
Iowa	614,477	648,866	669,186
Maine	319,679	264,673	359,047
Massachusetts	1,509,113	473,220	2,339,565
New Hampshire	269,263	293,307	354,082
New Jersey	2,026,282	1,189,478	2,414,866
New York	5,268,431	2,554,996	2,252,424
North Carolina	2,673,587	2,029,084	1,971,396

Since the 2008 Presidential election, Independent enrollment grew by more than 50% in Arizona, Nevada, North Carolina, and West Virginia, by more than 40% in Florida, Maryland, and Oregon, and by more than 30% in California and South Dakota. It's clear that for many voters, the desire to associate with "none of the above" goes beyond the current Presidential race.

2) The rolls of Independents have swelled in the states that will decide control of the Senate and the White House.

In the seven Presidential battleground states with partisan voter registration, which nearly perfectly overlap with Senate battlegrounds this cycle, the increase in Independent voter registration is even more pronounced. Since 2008 in these seven states:

- Independent registration increased by 30.6% or 2,014,555, and now stands at 8,608,247;
- Democratic registration declined by 1.2% or 170,468, and now stands at 14,029,447; and,
- Republican registration increased by 5.7% or 659,822, and now stands at 12,174,228

In three of the seven battleground states—Colorado, Iowa, and New Hampshire—Independents make up the biggest

slice of registered voters, outpacing both Democrats and Republicans. And Independent registration has increased by double digits since 2008 in three others—Florida, Nevada, and North Carolina. If Democrats pick up Senate seats in Wisconsin and Illinois, as currently expected, the outcomes of the Senate races in these states with Independent pluralities and surges could determine which party controls the Senate in the 115th Congress.

Voter Enrollment in Presidential Battleground States, September 2016

	Democrat	Republican	Independent
Colorado	1,160,214	1,140,173	1,318,043
Florida	4,686,677	4,428,029	2,910,126
Iowa	614,477	648,866	669,186
Nevada	531,104	459,467	261,750
New Hampshire	269,263	293,307	354,082
North Carolina	2,673,587	2,029,084	1,971,396
Pennsylvania	4,094,125	3,175,302	1,123,664
Total	14,029,447	12,174,228	8,608,247

There are only two battleground states with partisan voter registration where Independents are not the fastest growing group of voters. In New Hampshire, Independent enrollment has increased 6.4% but Republicans have done a tick better, with registration increasing by 8.2%. Only in Iowa has Independent enrollment fallen. There, both Democratic and Independent registration decreased while Republican registration increased. In Pennsylvania, both Democratic and Republican enrollment fell, while Independent registration simultaneously increased.

Change in Voter Enrollment, September 2008 - September 2016

	Democrat		Republican		Independent	
Colorado	204,786	21.4%	111,111	10.8%	295,468	28.9%
Florida	47,015	1.0%	398,591	9.9%	854,980	41.6%
Iowa	-64,265	-9.5%	64,379	11.0%	-15,462	-2.3%
Nevada	32,961	6.6%	41,990	10.1%	93,144	55.2%
New Hampshire	4,237	1.6%	22,349	8.2%	21,398	6.4%
North Carolina	-9,814	-0.4%	89,146	4.6%	674,392	52.0%
Pennsylvania	-385,388	-8.6%	-67,744	-2.1%	90,635	8.8%
Total	-170,468	-1.2%	659,822	5.7%	2,014,555	30.6%

In these swing states where most of the campaign resources will be expended for both the Presidential and Senate races in 2016, the increase in Independents is dramatic. Already, there are two million more Independents than there were in 2008.

In Florida alone, more than 1.3 million voters joined the voter rolls—and two-thirds of them registered as Independents.

#3) Republicans have a bigger hill to climb than Democrats on the path to victory.

Republicans have long had to win more Independent voters than Democrats to put together a winning coalition, as Democrats have enjoyed a voter registration advantage nationally as well as in key states. Now, as noted above, Independents are on pace to overtake Republican registration overall in the states that report their data by partisan identification. Republicans currently do not make up the biggest proportion of registered voters in a single one of the seven battleground states with available data. Democrats outnumber Republicans and Independents in four of the seven states—Florida, Nevada, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania. If Democratic Senate candidates won in those four states plus Wisconsin and Illinois, where they are currently projected to win, the party would take back the Senate. If Hillary Clinton won those four states along with the states that are safely in her column, she would hit exactly the 270 electoral votes needed to head to the White House.

Voter Enrollment in Presidential Battleground States, September 2016

	Democrat	Republican	Independent
Colorado	1,160,214	1,140,173	1,318,043
Florida	4,686,677	4,428,029	2,910,126
Iowa	614,477	648,866	669,186
Nevada	531,104	459,467	261,750
New Hampshire	269,263	293,307	354,082
North Carolina	2,673,587	2,029,084	1,971,396
Pennsylvania	4,094,125	3,175,302	1,123,664
Total	14,029,447	12,174,228	8,608,247

In these seven states combined, the Democratic advantage over Republicans is nearly two million votes. While the Senate map will look very different in 2018, there is no doubt that this year's crop of Republican Senate candidates need to win big among Independent voters in order to claim victory and maintain control of the chamber.

Current Democratic Advantage over Republicans

Colorado	20,041
Florida	258,648
Iowa	-34,389
Nevada	71,637
New Hampshire	-24,044
North Carolina	644,503
Pennsylvania	918,823
Total	1,855,219

Conclusion

In the eight years since President Obama was elected, public opinion surveys have found increasing shares of citizens calling themselves a political Independent rather than aligning with either of the parties. Independent voter registration has increased the most in the very states that will occupy the majority of the Presidential candidates' time between now and November 8—and the states whose Senate races will decide which party controls that chamber in the next Congress. More than ever, it seems that Independents will be key to victory in 2016.

Appendix A: September 2016 Voter Registration Data

Voter Enrollment Statistics, September 2016

	Democrat	Republican	Independent
Alaska	77,126	140,287	271,679
Arizona	1,019,050	1,185,023	1,164,373
California	8,155,831	4,898,389	4,212,484
Colorado	1,160,214	1,140,173	1,318,043
Delaware	318,674	188,417	163,380
DC	343,647	27,964	71,725
Florida	4,686,677	4,428,029	2,910,126
Iowa	614,477	648,866	669,186
Kentucky	1,689,104	1,309,580	179,751
Louisiana	1,329,233	871,102	756,575
Maine	319,679	264,673	359,047
Maryland	2,126,456	1,009,767	673,456
Massachusetts	1,509,113	473,220	2,339,565
Nebraska	361,362	568,764	239,305
Nevada	531,104	459,467	261,750
New Hampshire	269,263	293,307	354,082
New Jersey	2,026,282	1,189,478	2,414,866
New Mexico	586,190	388,668	229,543
New York	5,268,431	2,554,996	2,252,424
North Carolina	2,673,587	2,029,084	1,971,396
Oklahoma	832,059	880,130	266,605
Oregon	955,769	691,645	621,195
Pennsylvania	4,094,125	3,175,302	1,123,664
South Dakota	169,004	246,712	113,156
West Virginia	573,829	380,527	258,853
Wyoming	43,428	152,292	21,919
Total	41,733,714	29,595,862	25,218,148

Appendix B: Definitions

State	2008 Report Date	2016 Report Date	Independent Definition	Status
Alaska	9/4/2008	8/3/2016	Nonpartisan + Undeclared	Do not specify
Arizona	9/2/2008	8/30/2016	Other	Active
California	9/5/2008	7/7/2016	Declined to State (2008), No Party Preference (2016)	Do not specify
Colorado	9/2/2008	9/6/2016	Unaffiliated	Active + Inactive
Delaware	General Election	Sep-16	All Others (2008), Others (2016)	Do not specify
DC	9/9/2008	8/31/2016	Nonpartisan	Do not specify
Florida	9/1/2008	Jul-16	None	Do not specify
Iowa	9/2/2008	9/1/2016	Nonpartisan	Active

State	2008 Report Date	2016 Report Date	Independent Definition	Status
Kentucky	Nov-08	8/11/2016	Other	Do not specify
Louisiana	9/14/2008	9/1/2016	Other Parties	Active + Inactive
Maine	11/4/2008	4/13/2016	Unenrolled (U)	Active
Maryland	8/31/2008	August 2016	Unaffiliated	Active
Massachusetts	10/15/2008	8/19/2016	Unenrolled (U)	Do not specify
Nebraska	10/28/2008	9/16/2016	Nonpartisan	Do not specify
Nevada	September 2008	August 2016	Nonpartisan	Active
New Hampshire	9/9/2008	8/23/2016	Undeclared	Do not specify
New Jersey	10/1/2008	8/31/2016	Unaffiliated	Do not specify
New Mexico	10/23/2008	8/31/2016	DTS	Do not specify
New York	11/1/2008	4/1/2016	Blank	Active
North Carolina	8/30/2008	9/10/2016	Unaffiliated	Do not specify
Oklahoma	1/15/2008	1/15/2016	Independent	Do not specify
Oregon	September 2008	July 2016	Non-Affiliated	Do not specify
Pennsylvania	11/4/2008	9/5/2016	Other Parties	Do not specify
South Dakota	General Election	9/1/2016	NPA/Independent	Active
West Virginia	September 2008	7/31/2016	No Party Preference	Do not specify
Wyoming	9/2/2008	9/1/2016	Unaffiliated	Active

Appendix C: Sources

California	Link	Link
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Colorado	Link	Link
Delaware	Link	Link
DC	Link	Link
Florida	Link	Link
Iowa	Link	Link
Kentucky	Link	Link
Louisiana	Link	Link
Maine	Link	Link
Maryland	Link	Link
Massachusetts	Link	Link
Nebraska	Link	Link
Nevada	Link	Link
New Hampshire	Link	Link
New Jersey	Link	Link
New Mexico	Link	Link
New York	Link	Link
North Carolina	Link	Link
Oklahoma	Link	Link
Oregon	Link	Link
Pennsylvania	Link	Link
South Dakota	Link	Link
West Virginia	Link	Link
Wyoming	Link	Link

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END NOTES

1. There are 29 states, including the District of Columbia, that keep voter registration statistics by party identification. For this study, which looks at trends since 2008, comparable data was only available for twenty-six states—Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Delaware, Washington, D.C., Florida, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, West Virginia, and Wyoming. Data for 3 states—Connecticut, Kansas, and Rhode Island—was incomplete