

Voters Drift From Both Parties in Off-Year Voter Registration



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Since 2008, we have seen five very consequential years in politics, where the electoral fortunes of both parties have swung back and forth. Now we find ourselves at a moment with historically low Congressional approval ratings, and with the favorability of both parties at an unprecedented ebb. But despite what some may argue, the two-party system is not likely to change. So how are voters reacting to this political moment?

To answer this question, we looked at voter registration trends over the past five years in every state that keeps this data by party. * Over that time period, there has been an explosion of Independents, and the trend has continued in 2013. Meanwhile, the number of registered voters of both parties has been stagnant (in some cases decreasing) in many states since 2008. And in eight states Independents are a plurality of registered voters. These figures are bolstered by recent polling, in which 46% of Americans now identify as an Independent. ¹ This memo lays out the data and shows how this trend has affected the electorate in key states.

Partisan voter registration data is available in 27 states and the District of Columbia. The states included in the analysis are Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, and Wyoming. Kansas, Rhode Island, and West Virginia—states that also have partisan voter registration—have been excluded from this analysis since they did not have complete data through 2013.

#1: Independent voter registration has increased since 2012.

After the 2012 election, pundits hailed the new Democratic era, bolstered by President Obama’s four point victory and gains in the Senate. Republicans licked their wounds, conducted an internal audit, and prepared to make-over the party to attract new voters and appeal to the mainstream. But both sides appear to have fallen short. Over the past year:

- Democratic registration has *decreased* by 418,388, or 1%, and now stands at 41,103,668;
- Republican registration has *decreased* by 320,751, or 1.1%, and now stands at 28,391,584; and,
- Independent registration has *increased* by 268,097, or 1.1%, and now stands at 24,676,002. ²

Voter Registration Changes 2012–2013

State	Democrats	Republicans	Independents
Alaska	-2,821	-2,881	-6,275
Arizona	11,157	8,853	75,443
California	-34,049	-130,933	-54,088
Colorado	95,356	81,082	233,854
Connecticut	-26,836	-15,853	-30,116
Delaware	2,488	-2,043	2,185
District of Columbia	-7,644	-1,777	-3,774
Florida	-151,240	-96,945	7,735
Iowa	-11,748	-12,525	19,904
Kentucky	3,683	24,166	10,020
Louisiana	-43,559	-7,378	2,768
Maine	-4,287	-4,269	-2,051
Maryland	-7,165	-9,522	27,506

Massachusetts	-28,457	-12,633	-38,974
Nevada	3,774	-3,077	4,408
New Hampshire	-10,399	-8,327	-9,584
New Jersey	38,114	8,131	-33,093
New Mexico	1,142	1,715	11,521
New York	38,308	-32,896	22,165
North Carolina	-106,903	-62,081	-7,749
Oklahoma	18,789	69,406	27,380
Oregon	-25,468	-19,478	14,580
Pennsylvania	-170,533	-98,188	-18,705
South Dakota	-2,156	612	6,095
Wyoming	2,066	6,090	6,942
Total	-418,388	-320,751	268,097

In some states, we see declines across the board—likely the result of cleaning up voter registration lists after the election (e.g., Alaska or California). In other states, voter registration has increased across the board, including fast-growing states such as Arizona and Colorado. But in places like Florida, Iowa, and Louisiana, Democratic and Republican registration is down while Independent registration has increased. This suggests that voters are actively leaving the parties, or that new voters are declining to align with either party.

Percentage Change in Voter Registration, 2012–2013, by Growth in Independents

State	Democrats	Republicans	Independents
Colorado	11.01%	8.94%	28.05%
Wyoming	4.04%	3.80%	25.07%
Oklahoma	1.99%	8.38%	11.95%
Arizona	1.17%	0.79%	7.37%
South Dakota	-1.14%	0.25%	6.45%
New Mexico	0.19%	0.43%	5.11%
Kentucky	0.22%	2.10%	4.56%
Maryland	-0.35%	-0.99%	4.47%
Iowa	-1.87%	-1.99%	2.87%
Oregon	-2.92%	-2.84%	2.27%
Nevada	0.72%	-0.70%	2.01%
Delaware	0.83%	-1.12%	1.45%
New York	0.71%	-1.23%	0.99%
Louisiana	-3.05%	-0.90%	0.39%
Florida	-3.14%	-2.27%	0.26%
North Carolina	-3.72%	-3.03%	-0.45%
Maine	-1.36%	-1.58%	-0.57%
New Jersey	2.13%	0.75%	-1.26%
California	-0.43%	-2.44%	-1.42%

Pennsylvania	-4.00%	-3.14%	-1.68%
Massachusetts	-1.83%	-2.61%	-1.71%
Alaska	-3.85%	-2.10%	-2.33%
New Hampshire	-4.15%	-3.04%	-2.51%
Connecticut	-3.49%	-3.68%	-3.45%
District of Columbia	-2.10%	-5.75%	-4.52%
Total	-1.01%	-1.12%	1.10%

Above, we have organized the percentage change in Independents from greatest to smallest. The cumulative percentage change for all states in the number of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents is quite minimal overall—about one percent fewer Democrats and Republicans, with a one percent increase in Independents. But the picture in the states is radically different. Independent voter registration has increased by double digits in Colorado (28%), Wyoming (25%), and Oklahoma (12%), even as the numbers of Democrats and Republicans has continued to rise. Rather than voter apathy, this suggests that citizens are spurning both parties but not disengaging from the political process entirely.

#2: Independent voter registration has soared since 2008.

Voter turnout in the 2008 election hit a high point not seen in 50 years.³ That year's presidential election was the culmination of two pro-Democratic waves—and registration for Democrats soared. Indeed, 2008 is viewed as a high water mark in modern American politics for Democratic electoral participation. Thus, Democrats started from a position of strength.

But since then, Democratic registration has fallen by nearly half-a-million voters while Independent registration has increased by nearly 2.5 million. This means that people either affirmatively switched their registration or new enrollees opted not to align with one of the two major parties. All told, between 2008 and 2013:

- Democratic registration fell by 428,687, or 1%;
- Republican registration fell by 12,714, or 0.04%; and,
- Independent registration rose by 2,484,104, or 11.19%.

Voter Registration Changes 2008–2013

State	Democrats	Republicans	Independents
Alaska	-6,213	7,904	-156
Arizona	-58,164	11,258	274,596
California	248,878	-202,377	321,534
Colorado	118,902	130,044	341,545
Connecticut	-38,998	-12,399	-41,300
Delaware	22,963	-2,152	11,919
District of Columbia	34,747	-1,334	10,458
Florida	-130,271	59,899	456,570
Iowa	-82,544	24,521	2,757
Kentucky	7,443	121,626	39,144
Louisiana	-158,326	65,024	67,147
Maine	-11,737	1,388	-3,566
Maryland	108,324	23,133	157,099

Massachusetts	-36,228	-18,793	102,421
Nevada	-557	3,128	40,118
New Hampshire	-42,462	-15,159	-23,260
New Jersey	43,038	37,485	76,737
New Mexico	4,453	22,435	54,739
New York	197,584	-140,805	39,805
North Carolina	-102,879	-12,247	307,164
Oklahoma	-50,522	106,950	37,220
Oregon	-82,848	-30,297	128,225
Pennsylvania	-383,729	-210,090	58,820
South Dakota	-17,076	2,197	17,488
Wyoming	-12,465	15,947	6,880
Total	-428,687	-12,714	2,484,104

Independent voter registration rose faster than both parties in Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and South Dakota—14 of the 24 states under review. Democrats have shed voters while Republicans have gained in Iowa, Maine, Oklahoma, and Wyoming. Overall, there has been an 11.2% increase in Independent registration. But within some states that figure is as high as 47%.

Percentage Change in Voter Registration, 2008–2013, by Growth in Independents

State	Democrats	Republicans	Independents
Colorado	14.11%	15.16%	47.05%
Arizona	-5.69%	1.01%	33.31%
Maryland	5.56%	2.49%	32.35%
New Mexico	0.75%	5.98%	30.03%
Wyoming	-18.99%	10.60%	24.79%
Oregon	-8.91%	-4.36%	24.26%
North Carolina	-3.59%	-0.61%	22.07%
Nevada	-0.10%	0.73%	21.85%
South Dakota	-8.35%	0.91%	21.03%
Kentucky	0.45%	11.54%	20.51%
Florida	-2.71%	1.46%	18.23%
Oklahoma	-4.99%	13.53%	16.98%
District of Columbia	10.82%	-4.38%	15.08%
Louisiana	-10.26%	8.75%	10.27%
California	3.24%	-3.73%	9.33%
Delaware	8.20%	-1.18%	8.48%
Pennsylvania	-8.57%	-6.48%	5.69%
Massachusetts	-2.32%	-3.83%	4.78%
New Jersey	2.41%	3.55%	3.06%

New York	3.77%	-5.05%	1.78%
Iowa	-11.81%	4.14%	0.39%
Alaska	-8.10%	6.24%	-0.06%
Maine	-3.64%	0.53%	-0.98%
Connecticut	-5.00%	-2.90%	-4.67%
New Hampshire	-15.04%	-5.40%	-5.88%
Total	-1.03%	-0.04%	11.19%

Many of the most significant increases were in Mountain West states:

- Independent registration has increased by 28% in Colorado, and now stands at 1,067,516, or 35% of registered voters—outnumbering Democrats and Republicans.
- In New Mexico, registration has increased by less than a one-half of a percent for Democrats and Republicans, but it has increased by more than five percent for Independents.
- In Wyoming, Independent voter registration is up 25% in the past year.
- And in Arizona, partisan registration is up slightly, but Independent registration has risen 7.4%, with Independents now outnumbering Democrats.

Population increases may explain some of this change. But, this is also part of a larger national trend away from the parties and towards increasing numbers of Independents.

Conclusion

Approval ratings for Congress, the parties, and political leaders are all down sharply this year. The number of self-identified Independents in national polling continues to rise. Partisan voter registration data confirms these trends—Americans are increasingly voting with their feet and calling themselves “Independent.”

These changes could have a profound impact on the candidates nominated for office. Several states where Independent registration has increased over the past five years have closed primaries—think places like New Mexico, Nevada, Oregon, Kentucky, Wyoming, Florida, and Maryland. If the remaining partisans are ideologically pure liberals and conservatives, candidates will increasingly reflect those voters’ preferences. The result could be cyclical—ideologically homogenous electorates in closed primary states nominating ideologically pure candidates, further alienating moderates and Independents, turning off more voters, and pushing more people into the “unaffiliated” category.

Appendix A

2013 Voter Registration by Party

State	Democrats	Republicans	Independents
Alaska	70,516	134,487	262,658
Arizona	964,088	1,129,845	1,099,046
California	7,932,373	5,225,675	3,766,457
Colorado	961,386	987,797	1,067,516
Connecticut	741,340	414,711	842,723
Delaware	302,879	179,706	152,462
DC	355,774	29,131	79,798
Florida	4,670,619	4,166,642	2,960,860
Iowa	616,295	616,918	714,462

Kentucky	1,669,536	1,175,497	229,989
Louisiana	1,385,514	808,391	720,925
Maine	310,706	265,320	359,746
Maryland	2,055,147	950,931	642,753
Massachusetts	1,523,236	471,466	2,244,299
Nevada	530,760	433,722	223,707
New Hampshire	239,959	265,348	372,340
New Jersey	1,825,594	1,092,888	2,588,104
New Mexico	597,351	397,707	237,019
New York	5,441,544	2,649,058	2,271,671
North Carolina	2,763,790	1,990,169	1,699,175
Oklahoma	962,072	897,663	256,450
Oregon	846,893	665,380	656,721
Pennsylvania	4,095,784	3,032,956	1,091,849
South Dakota	187,337	243,725	100,635
Wyoming	53,175	166,451	34,637
Total	41,103,668	28,391,584	24,676,002

Appendix B

Voter Registration Data Sources

2008

	http://www.elections.alaska.gov/statistics/vi_vrs
	http://www.azsos.gov/election/voterreg/2008-10-
s.gov/election/voterreg/VRcounts2008.htm	
	http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/ror/ror-pages/15/
ca.gov/elections/ror/ror-pages/15day-presgen-08/ror-102008.htm	
	http://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elections/VoterRe
state.co.us/pubs/elections/VoterRegNumbers/2008/December/PartyAffiliation.pdf	
	http://www.sots.ct.gov/sots/cwp/view.asp?a=3179&
ct.gov/sots/lib/sots/electionservices/registration_and_enrollment_stats/2008_registration_and_enrollment_statistics.pdf	
	http://elections.delaware.gov/reports/agprpt_2008
	http://www.dchoee.org/voter_stats/voter_reg/2008
	http://election.dos.state.fl.us/nvra/history.asp
	http://sos.iowa.gov/elections/voterreg/county.htm
sow/elections/pdf/VRStatsArchive/2008/CoNov08.pdf	
	http://elect.ky.gov/SiteCollectionDocuments/Electi
	2009/2008/General%20Election/Voter%20Reg%20
	http://www.sos.la.gov/ElectionsAndVoting/Pages/I
statistics.sos.la.gov/Data/Registration_Statistics/Statewide/2008_1103_sta_comb.pdf	

	http://www.maine.gov/sos/cec/elec/prevreganden
ne.gov/sos/cec/elec/2010/20081104r-e-active.pdf	
ne.gov/sos/cec/elec/2010/20080610r-e-inactive.pdf	
	http://www.elections.state.md.us/voter_registration.state.md.us/pdf/vrar/2008_10.pdf
	http://www.sec.state.ma.us/ele/e08/e08idx.htm
state.ma.us/ele/elepdf/st_county_town_enroll_breakdown_08.pdf	
	http://nvsos.gov/SOSElectionPages/voter-reg/200
	http://sos.nh.gov/NamesHistory.aspx
	http://nj.gov/state/elections/election-information
te/elections/election-results/2008-voter-registration-summary102008.pdf	
	http://www.sos.state.nm.us/Elections_Data/2008
state.nm.us/uploads/FileLinks/09831ac556354351b60daic7e4f5b3f2/StatewideGen2008.pdf	
	http://www.elections.ny.gov/EnrollmentCounty.htm
tions.ny.gov/NYSBOE/enrollment/county/county_nov08.pdf	
	http://www.app.sboe.state.nc.us/webapps/voter_si
	http://www.ok.gov/elections/Voter_Registration/
ov/elections/documents/reg_0108.pdf	
	http://bluebook.state.or.us/state/elections/election
	http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt?oper
	http://sdsos.gov/content/viewcontent.aspx?cat=elections&pg=elections/upcomingelection_2
	http://soswy.state.wy.us/Elections/VRStats.aspx
te.wy.us/Elections/Docs/VRStats/2008VR_stats.pdf	
	2012
a	http://www.elections.alaska.gov/statistics/vi_vrs_stats_party_2012.1
na	http://www.azsos.gov/election/voterreg/2012-10-30.pdf
/www.azsos.gov/election/voterreg/VRcounts2012.htm	
mia	http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/ror/ror-pages/15day-general-12/con
/www.sos.ca.gov/elections/ror/ror-pages/15day-general-12/	
ado	http://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elections/VoterRegNumbers/2012Vot
/www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elections/VoterRegNumbers/2012/December/VotersByPartyStatus.pdf	
acticut	http://www.sots.ct.gov/sots/cwp/view.asp?a=3179&q=4014,92
/www.sots.ct.gov/sots/lib/sots/electionservices/registration_and_enrollment_stats/novi2re.pdf	
are	http://elections.delaware.gov/reports/agprpt_2012_new.shtml
	http://www.dcboe.org/voter_stats/voter_reg/2012.asp
la	http://election.dos.state.fl.us/nvra/history.asp
	http://sos.iowa.gov/elections/voterreg/county.html

/sos.iowa.gov/elections/pdf/VRStatsArchive/2012/CoNov12.pdf	
cky	http://elect.ky.gov/SiteCollectionDocuments/Election%20Results/2010/2019/2012/statcong.txt
iana	http://www.sos.la.gov/ElectionsAndVoting/Pages/RegistrationStatistics
/electionstatistics.sos.la.gov/Data/Registration_Statistics/Statewide/2012_1101_sta_comb.pdf	
3	http://www.maine.gov/sos/cec/elec/prevregandenroll.htm
/www.maine.gov/sos/cec/elec/2012/r-e-active.pdf	
/www.maine.gov/sos/cec/elec/2012/r-e-inactive.pdf	
and	http://www.elections.state.md.us/voter_registration/stats.html
/www.elections.state.md.us/pdf/vrar/2012_10.pdf	
achusetts	http://www.sec.state.ma.us/ele/e1e12/e1e12idx.htm
/www.sec.state.ma.us/ele/e1e12/06NOV2012_ST_Party_Enrollment_Stats_3.pdf	
la	http://www.nvsos.gov/index.aspx?page=1269
ampshire	http://sos.nh.gov/NamesHistory.aspx
ersey	http://nj.gov/state/elections/election-information-archive-2012.html
/nj.gov/state/elections/2012-results/2012-1025-statewide-voter-regs-summary-district.pdf	
exico	http://www.sos.state.nm.us/Elections_Data/2012_Voter_Registration
/www.sos.state.nm.us/uploads/FileLinks/2966cef727224c59b1abaf5b30a91116/STATEWIDE0CT312012.PDF	
ork	http://www.elections.ny.gov/EnrollmentCounty.html
/www.elections.ny.gov/NYSBOE/enrollment/county/county_nov12.pdf	
Carolina	http://www.app.sboe.state.nc.us/webapps/voter_stats/results.aspx?da
oma	http://www.ok.gov/elections/Voter_Registration/Voter_Registration
/www.ok.gov/elections/documents/reg_0112.pdf	
n	http://bluebook.state.or.us/state/elections/elections07.htm
sylvania	http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt?open=514&objID=57264
Dakota	http://sdsos.gov/content/viewcontent.aspx?cat=elections&pg=/elections/upcomingelection_2008PrimaryRegCom
ing	http://sos.wy.state.wy.us/Elections/VRStats.aspx
/sos.wy.state.wy.us/Elections/Docs/VRStats/2012VR_stats.pdf	
	2013
i	http://www.elections.alaska.gov/statistics/vi_vrs_stats_party_2013.11.03
ia	http://www.azsos.gov/election/voterreg/2013-10-01.pdf
/www.azsos.gov/election/voterreg/VRcounts2014.htm	
mia	http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/ror/ror-pages/ror-odd-year-2013/coun
/www.sos.ca.gov/elections/ror/ror-pages/ror-odd-year-2013/	
ido	http://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elections/VoterRegNumbers/VoterRegNi
/www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elections/VoterRegNumbers/2013/October/VotersByPartyStatus.pdf	
cticut	http://www.sots.ct.gov/sots/cwp/view.asp?a=3179&q=401492

www.sots.ct.gov/sots/lib/sots/releases/2013/11.6.13_merrill_pre-election_news_release.pdf	
are	http://elections.delaware.gov/reports/e70r2601sd_20131101.shtml
	http://www.dcboee.org/voter_stats/voter_reg/2013.asp
a	http://election.dos.state.fl.us/nvra/history.asp
	http://sos.iowa.gov/elections/voterreg/county.html
sos.iowa.gov/elections/pdf/VRStatsArchive/2013/CoNov13.pdf	
cky	http://elect.ky.gov/SiteCollectionDocuments/Election%20Statistics/statco
ana	http://www.sos.la.gov/ElectionsAndVoting/Pages/RegistrationStatisticsSt
electionstatistics.sos.la.gov/Data/Registration_Statistics/Statewide/2013_1101_sta_comb.pdf	
:	http://www.maine.gov/sos/cec/elec/data.htm
www.maine.gov/sos/cec/elec/2013/r-e-active8-13.pdf	
www.maine.gov/sos/cec/elec/2013/r-e-inact8-13.pdf	
and	http://www.elections.state.md.us/voter_registration/stats.html
www.elections.state.md.us/pdf/vrar/2013_10.pdf	
achusetts	—
a	http://www.nvsos.gov/Modules/ShowDocument.aspx?documentid=2976
ampshire	http://sos.nh.gov/NamesHistory.aspx
ersey	http://nj.gov/state/elections/election-information-archive-2013.html
nj.gov/state/elections/2013-results/2013-1029-statewide-voter-regs-summary-leg-district.pdf	
exico	http://www.sos.state.nm.us/Elections_Data/Voter_Registration_Statistic
www.sos.state.nm.us/uploads/FileLinks/2966cef424224c59b1abaf5b30a91116/STATEWIDE1152013.PDF	
ork	http://www.elections.ny.gov/EnrollmentCounty.html
www.elections.ny.gov/NYSBOE/enrollment/county/county_nov13.pdf	
Carolina	http://www.app.sboe.state.nc.us/webapps/voter_stats/results.aspx?date=1
oma	http://www.ok.gov/elections/Voter_Registration/Voter_Registration_Re
www.ok.gov/elections/documents/reg_0113.pdf	
n	http://www.oregonvotes.gov/pages/history/stats/13mvr.html
www.oregonvotes.gov/doc/voterresources/registration/oct13.pdf	
ylvania	http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/voter_registrat
Dakota	http://sdsos.gov/content/viewcontent.aspx?cat=elections&pg=/elections/upcomingelection_2008PrimaryRegComp.ht
ing	http://soswy.state.wy.us/Elections/VRStats.aspx
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END NOTES

- 1.** "Party Affiliation," Gallup, Accessed on November 22, 2013. Available at: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/15370/party-affiliation.aspx>.
- 2.** Please see Appendix A for voter registration data sources.
- 3.** Michael P. McDonald, "Turnout in the 2012 Presidential Election," Huffington Post, Published February 11, 2013, Accessed November 22, 2013. Available at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-p-mcdonald/turnout-in-the-2012-presidential-election/president_2012.html.