

Growing and Distinct: The Unaffiliated Voter as Unmoored Voter¹

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Abstract:

Objective: We examine the size, characteristics and attitudes of Unaffiliated party registrants as they compare to registrants from the two major parties. **Methods:** Analysis of voter registration files, voter history files, and public opinion data from North Carolina. **Results:** Unaffiliated registrants are not simply shadow partisans, but on average are distinct from two major parties in terms of demographics, political behavior and political attitudes. **Conclusion:** Voters who eschew party labels are best understood as unmoored voters—often hovering close to their ideological docks, but with no institutional constraint to keep them from drifting when the political tides shift.

¹ Authors are listed alphabetically and each contributed equally to the paper. This is a working paper. All comments welcome. Please contact Chris Cooper (ccooper@email.wcu.edu) with questions.

Someone examining the partisan affiliation of elected officials in America would come away with the inescapable conclusion that the two major parties have a lock on the American political system. Independent and third-party politicians rarely make serious challenges for elected office, and win even less often. The near certainty that two and only two parties will dominate winner take all, first past the post elections is summarized by Duverger's law—one of the few iron-clad laws in Political Science (Duverger 1964).²

While the assumption that only Democrats and Republicans will serve in elected office has continued, there has been a rise in the number of independent voters in America who claim alignment with neither the Republican, nor the Democratic Party (Klar and Krupnikov 2016; Klar, Krupnikov and Ryan 2022). In states without party registration, these self-identified independents are free to float between parties with no institutional constraint. In closed primary states, these self-identified independent voters are likely to stay with the party they lean closest to, lest they render themselves unable to vote in partisan primaries. In 22 states, however, voters who register with no party at all are free to vote in any primary they choose and can switch from one party's primary in one election to the other party's in the next election with no institutional friction. Mass media accounts suggest that these citizens who are registered to vote, but not with a party, may be growing in size and influence in American politics (Bush 2018; Renata, Marcus, and Joffe-Block 2016).

Despite their importance, there has been little analysis of voters in these 22 states who are registered to vote but choose not to register with a party. As we demonstrate in this paper, these voters are rising in number and importance; they are not all true independents, nor should they be universally dismissed as shadow partisans. Instead, they are best understood as unmoored voters—

² This is not to say, of course, that Duverger's law is universally accepted. See, for example, Dunleavy and Diwaker (2013).

hovering close to their ideological docks, but with no institutional constraint to keep them from drifting with the political tides shift.

Political Independents and Political Unaffiliateds in American Politics

Scholars have long viewed the electoral impact and distinctiveness of self-proclaimed independent voters with circumspection. For example, the authors of *The American Voter* (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960) dismissed the idea that independent voters are somehow more discerning and attentive than avowed partisans and instead argued that Independents are almost the antithesis of the idealized voter. Later work came to similar conclusions—independent voters are less politically active and involved than partisans, and often do not hold attitudes that are truly “independent” (Lewis-Beck Jacoby, Norpoth and Weisberg 2008). This line of research has led many scholars to refer to the “myth of the independent voter” (Keith, Magelby, Nelson, Orr, and Westlye 1992 ; Petrocik, 2009).

Demographically, there is some evidence that independent voters may be distinct from their partisan cousins. On average, self-identified independents are younger, and more likely to classify themselves as moderates rather than liberals or conservatives (Pew Research Center 2019; Kane, Mason, and Wronski, 2021). Perhaps most significantly, many independents view the opposing parties unfavorably (Dennis 1988).

For many scholars, the rise in the numbers of Independents is emblematic of declining partisanship (Campbell et.al, 1960; Dennis 1988b; Nie, Verba and Petrocik, 1979) or even a possible dealignment (Crotty 1984; Dalton 2013). Thanks to a host of institutional structures that ensure the survival of a two-party cartel, however, the rise in independent voters has not, and likely will not lead to a large-scale change in our party system without massive structural change (Drutman 2020).

Recent work has taken it as a given there is unlikely to be large-scale institutional change to the two-party system and shifts the focus to why individuals choose to identify as an independent. In a groundbreaking work of political psychology, Klar and Krupnikov (2016) find that calling oneself an “independent” is often as much a function of impression management as issue independence. People often eschew party labels not because they have a well-articulated independent ideology, but rather to achieve a more positive social norm.

Despite disagreements as to whether to characterize independents as leaners or as true independents worthy of separate categorization, there is no doubt that more and more Americans are identifying as independents. Collapsing leaners and pure Independents, a 2019 survey revealed that thirty-eight percent of the public described themselves as Independents as compared to thirty-one percent as Democrats and twenty percent as Republicans (Pew 2019). According to a Gallup Report in April, 2021, forty-four percent of Americans identify themselves as Independents, a six percentage point increase since the first quarter of 2020 (Gallup 2021). These numbers are not increasing at the same rates everywhere. The strength of state level parties and the types of partisan primaries lead some states to have a larger number of self-proclaimed independents than others (Norrander 1989).

While extant work has brought us a long ways towards understanding the rise in political independents, the vast majority of this work relies on survey data that asks respondents to self-identify. Largely absent from the literature are studies examining voters who are registered to vote, but not with a political party. In some states, like Colorado and North Carolina, these voters are referred to as “Unaffiliated,” while in other states, like Arkansas, they are “Independent” and in a third group of states, like Florida, they register as “No Party Affiliation” or “NPA.”³ Regardless of

³ From this point on, we refer to all who are registered to vote but are not registered with a party as “Unaffiliated.” We also capitalize Unaffiliated because it refers to an official designation.

the terminology, examining this critical group of voters can allow us to understand the behaviors of voters who have made the traceable decision to register to vote, but not with a party.

The literature above suggests that the likely political leanings of this critical group of Unaffiliated voters are best understood as either shadows partisans who are using the Unaffiliated registration only to hide their true partisan feelings, or true independents who are understandable as something other than Democrats, or Republicans. We offer a third way to think about them: as unmoored voters. We posit that, much like a boat that is left unmoored near a dock, many of these voters will stay close to their partisan homes. Similar to an unmoored boat, however, an electoral disruption, or a change in the electoral tide can send the voters temporarily in search of another home. These voters, therefore, are to be contrasted with their moored partisan cousins who will not drift, no matter how heavy the electoral winds may blow.

To look for evidence of these unmoored voters, we examine the size, demographic composition, and political opinions of Unaffiliated voters. We expect to find that this group of voters is growing, is demographically distinct from the two major parties, and holds policy opinions that are not entirely consistent with either political party. In terms of voting patterns, we expect to find that the plurality consistently votes with one party, but that a sizeable, and electorally important group floats from party primary to party primary.

The Case

For this analysis, we rely on the case study of North Carolina. North Carolina is, of course, not generalizable to every state across the country, but single case studies can be valuable (Nicholson-Crotty and Meier 2002) and North Carolina has a number of attributes that make it an ideal case study to address questions of independent voters. First, North Carolina has semi-closed primaries, meaning that people registered with a party can only vote in their party's primary, but

Unaffiliated voters can choose to vote in either primary. Some evidence suggests that these Unaffiliated voters may have been key to recent electoral success in North Carolina (Hood and McKee 2010).

Second, North Carolina falls near the middle of the country on most demographic and political variables (Cooper and Knotts 2008), is the source of intense partisan competition (Bitzer and Prysby 2021; Bitzer 2021) and has been considered a swing state for a number of election cycles (Cooper and Knotts 2022). In other words, it is an “average” state in many ways, but simultaneously one with enough electoral competition that Unaffiliated voters can matter in electoral outcomes.

Third, North Carolina has party registration and voter behavior data that are publicly available and can provide a window into many aspects of electoral behavior (Cooper, Knotts and Haspel 2008). These data have been successfully used to answer a host of questions in Political Science (Clinton et al. 2020; Cooper, Knotts and Haspel 2009; Merikavi and Smith 2020).

The Data

The data for the remainder of this paper come from two sources. The first set of data (analyzed and presented in Results I) come from existing administrative data maintained by the North Carolina Board of Elections. While these data are cannot reveal voter intent or attitudes, they do provide behavioral data on party registration, demographics, and voter turnout. In contrast to some states which provide one file with both voter registration data and voter history (Cooper, Knotts and Haspel 2009), North Carolina provides two files—the voter registration database, and the voter history file, both of which include line-item information on over 7 million North Carolina’s voters.⁴ They can be combined by using a unique identifier (“ncid”) to provide a glimpse

⁴ The NC State Board of Elections updates both files weekly to posts them to their public FTP website. For each election, we used the voter registration data file immediately following the election, along with finalized voter history data file.

into who North Carolina's registered voters are, as well as how often and which election they participate in.

The second set of data (presented in Results II) come from three iterations of the Meredith Poll, an academic survey research organization located at Meredith College in Raleigh, NC. These questions provide an overview of public opinion on a variety of subjects and allow us to determine whether Unaffiliated voters, on average, hold distinct positions from the two major parties. More information about the polls can be found in the online Appendix.

Results I: Administrative Data

How has the pool of unaffiliated voters grown?

To better understand the timing of the increase in Unaffiliated party registration over time, Figure 1 shows the percent of the North Carolina electorate who were registered as a Democrat, a Republican, a member of a third party, or an Unaffiliated voter from 1977-2022. The dark vertical lines indicate the three eras of party registration in North Carolina: the closed primary era from 1977 to 1985 when Unaffiliated voters could not vote in either party's primary, the asymmetric semi-closed primary era from 1986-1995 when Unaffiliated voters could vote in the Republican, but not the Democratic primary, and semi-closed primary era from 1996-2022 where Unaffiliated voters can vote in either party's primary.

[Figure 1 About Here]

As Figure 1 demonstrates, whereas in 1977 Unaffiliated voters were barely more than a blip on the party registration radar, they became the second largest group of registered voters in the state in 2017 and surpassed Democratic registration to become the largest group of registered voters in the state in 2022.

The figure also makes clear the effects of policy choices on party registration. In the first era, where Unaffiliated voters were shut out of the primary process, their rise was almost imperceptible—averaging an increase of only 2 hundredths of a percentage point per year. The second era, however, when Unaffiliated voters were permitted to vote in the Republican primary, saw a rate of increase approximately 32 times the increase in the first era—from an average of .02 percentage points per year to an increase of .64 percentage points per year. Beginning in 1996, Unaffiliated voters could choose to vote in either both major party’s primaries and once again, the effects were clear. During this third era, Unaffiliated registration increased by .88 percentage points per year—the highest of the three eras. Clearly, party primary rules influence patterns in Unaffiliated registration.

Who Are Unaffiliated Voters?

Next, we use voter registration data to provide a demographic profile of Unaffiliated voters as they compare to traditional partisans across race, ethnicity, and age/generations. Table 1 presents data on the race and ethnicity of Democrats, Republicans and Unaffiliated voters from 2008 to 2022. As you can see, Unaffiliated voters lie somewhere in between the two major parties—they are more diverse than the Republican Party in terms of race and ethnicity, but less diverse than the Democratic Party. Between 2008 and 2016, Unaffiliated voters were seven percentage points more White/non-Hispanic/Latino, eleven points less Black/African American non-Hispanic/Latino, and one percentage point more Hispanic/Latino than the state as a whole. In 2018 and 2020, though, the difference between the Unaffiliated and the state-wide White non-Hispanic/Latino percentage points dropped to five and three percent, respectively, while the difference among Black percentages decreased to nine percentage points.

[Table 1 About Here]

Table 2 suggests that, similar to many other political attitudes (Manzo and McLennan 2022), the rise of North Carolina's unaffiliated registered voters has been driven by voters in two generational cohorts: Millennials (those born between 1981 and 1996) and Generation Z (born in 1997 and after).⁵ In 2008, nearly a quarter (23 percent) of registered Unaffiliated voters were Millennials, compared to 14 percent and 13 percent among registered Democrats and Republicans, respectively. By 2020, Millennials and Generation Z voters accounted for 46 percent of the Unaffiliated voters (33 percent Millennials and 13 percent Gen Z), compared to 34 percent of Democratic voters and 29 percent of Republican voters.

[Table 2 About Here]

The plurality of Millennial voters registered Democratic from the period 2008 through 2012: in each of those election years, 40 percent of Millennials registered as Democratic, while 32 to 34 percent registered Unaffiliated and 26 percent registered Republican. Since 2014, however, pluralities of the two cohorts have registered Unaffiliated, ranging from 40 percent of Millennials in 2014-2020, while 46 percent of Generation Z voters registered Unaffiliated in 2018 and 2020. Registered Republicans have the lowest registration percentages among these two cohorts: 24 percent among Millennials and 22-23 percent among Generation Z.

Which primaries do North Carolina Unaffiliated registered voters prefer?

As discussed previously, North Carolina has a semi-closed system for its primary elections, with both parties allowing Unaffiliated voters the opportunity to pick one party primary per year. In the 2008 to 2020 presidential primary elections, Unaffiliated voters tended to select the party that is having the most competitive presidential contest. In the May 2008 primary, 76 percent of

⁵ These generation cohort definitions are derived from the Pew Research Center. For the remaining generations, Generation X was born between 1965 and 1980, while Boomers were born between 1945 and 1964.

Unaffiliateds selected the Democratic primary, where Sen. Barack Obama was close to finalizing his nomination battle against then Sen. Hillary Clinton. In 2012 and 2016, 58 and 56 percent chose the GOP primary ballot. In 2020, Unaffiliated voters went 2-to-1 with the Democratic primary over the Republican primary.

Among the March 2020 Democratic primary voters who were registered Unaffiliated, 55 percent and 69 percent voted in 2012 and 2016 Democratic primaries, while 26 percent and 29 percent participated in the 2012/2016 Republican primary. Conversely, among the March 2020 Republican primary voters, 64 and 85 percent voted in the 2012 or 2016 Republican primaries, with 27 and 13 percent casting ballots in the Democratic primaries in 2012/2016.

One way to discover how closely Unaffiliated voters hew to one of the major political parties is to determine how many of these Unaffiliated primary voters are "shadow partisans" (always picking the same party primary) v. "floaters" (shifting from one party's primary to another based on the electoral environment or the choice of candidates). Table 3 presents the demographic analysis of N.C. Unaffiliated voters who cast ballots in the 2012, 2016, and 2020 party primaries, based on voter registration data for March 21, 2020. With over 207,000 registered Unaffiliated voters voting in all three presidential primaries, slightly over half (53 percent) voted consistently in one party's primary (evenly divided at 27 percent for each party), while 47 percent 'floated' between the parties. This indicates that some Unaffiliated voters perhaps deserve the "shadow partisan" label, but nearly half are unmoored from their party.

[Table 3 About Here]

Among the demographic groups, White non-Hispanic voters were 48 percent floaters, with 29 percent consistent Republican primary voters and 22 percent consistent Democratic voters; conversely, 70 percent of Black/African American non-Hispanic voters were consistent Democratic voters, to 28 percent floaters and only 3 percent Republican. Among Hispanic/Latino voters, 45

percent were floaters, with 41 percent consistent Democratic and 14 percent consistent Republican. More male voters were floaters (48 percent) than female (46 percent), and among the generation cohorts, Millennials held the largest percentage (51) of floaters of all group, while the least were the oldest voters (Greatest/Silent). Among the four regions of the state, a majority of rural voters and almost a majority of central city voters were floaters. While 45 percent of urban suburb voters were floaters, the consistent partisans were nearly equal among that group. The surrounding suburban county voters had the lowest amount of floaters, with 43 percent switching among party primaries.

Table 4 presents data regarding only the "consistent primary voters" (those who voted in all presidential primary elections for one exclusive party, half voted in all three Democratic primaries and half voted in all three Republican primaries. However, among the various demographic groups, patterns emerge that differentiate these consistent party primary Unaffiliated voters. Among White non-Hispanic Unaffiliated voters, 57 percent voted in GOP primaries, while 43 percent voted in Democratic primaries. Not surprisingly, Black/African American non-Hispanic Unaffiliated voters participated overwhelmingly in the Democratic primaries (96 percent), while Hispanic/Latino Unaffiliated voters were 75-25 percent Democratic primary voters over Republican primaries. This pattern of at least 70 percent consistent Democratic primary voters held for other voters of color (Asian, American Indian, multi-racial, and other races, all non-Hispanic).

[Table 4 About Here]

The gender gap that has been well documented in American politics was evident in the consistent primary voter data as well: 54 percent of Unaffiliated women consistently participated in the Democratic primaries, while 55 percent of Unaffiliated men consistently participated in GOP primaries. Among generational cohorts, Millennials and Generation X Unaffiliated voters were overwhelmingly consistent Democratic primary voters (69 and 58 percent, respectively), while Boomers and Greatest/Silent generation Unaffiliated voters flipped to being consistently Republican

primary voters (55 and 63 percent, respectively). Finally, in looking at the 'regions' of these consistent party primary Unaffiliated voters, it is not surprising that central city Unaffiliated voters were 3-1 consistent Democratic primary voters. What was somewhat surprising was that urban Unaffiliated voters had the most competitive divide, 51 percent Republican to 49 percent Democratic. Among surrounding suburban county Unaffiliated voters, the numbers flipped in partisan primary participation: 66 percent were consistent Republican primary voters. Finally, rural county Unaffiliated voters were also consistent GOP primary voters, at 65 percent.

In looking at the consistent party primary voters (based on presidential years), we also analyzed their behavior in mid-term primary elections for 2014, 2018, and 2022. Among consistent Democratic primary voters, they pulled the Democratic primary ballot in the three mid-terms between 71 to 87 percent.⁶ Consistent Republican primary voters had higher loyalty levels, picking the GOP primary ballot in mid-terms from 87 to 96 percent.⁷

Results II: Political Attitudes of Unaffiliated Voters in North Carolina

Next, we turn to analysis of a series of survey questions that attempt to understand whether Unaffiliated voters tend to resemble public opinion of Republican or Democratic registrants. These questions were selected to represent a cross section of political attitudes. We begin with four questions meant to tap into opinions on ideology and partisanship. The first asks whether the respondent is satisfied with the direction of the country, the second with President Joe Biden, the third is a standard ideology question. Each question is used as a dependent variable in an ordinal logistic regression model presented the online appendix. We include independent variables for partisanship (with unaffiliated as the base term). If Unaffiliated voters are truly more unmoored than

⁶ 85 percent in 2014's primary, 87 percent in 2018's primary, and 71 percent in 2022's primary.

⁷ 91 percent in 2014, 87 percent in 2018, and 96 percent in 2022.

partisans, we expect to see a statistically significant coefficient for each of the two major parties, suggesting that they each differ from their Unaffiliated counterparts. We also include other independent variables for age, race, and gender. Results from the Model are presented in Table 5.

[Table 5 About Here]

As you can see from the results presented in Table 5, Unaffiliated voters do hold distinct political opinions on all three questions. Unaffiliated registrants are less satisfied with the direction of the country than Democrats and more than Republicans. Similarly, they are less satisfied with Joe Biden's job performance than Democrats, but more so than Republicans. Finally, they are more conservative than the Democrats and more liberal than the Republicans. These results are substantively, as well as statistically significant. Holding all over variables at their sample means, a Democrat has a .55 probability of expressing the most positive assessment of the direction of the country, a .37 for the highest possible Biden approval and a .01 for political ideology (where Republican is coded higher). The probabilities for Republicans on the same questions are .12, .02, and .34, respectfully. Unaffiliateds fall in the middle on all three at .21, .06 and .07.⁸

The final question about the need for a third party once again shows that Unaffiliated voters are distinct, although the pattern differs, as one would expect. On average, Unaffiliated voters are more supportive of a third party than members of either major party. Here, the predicted probabilities show substantive significance as well. A registered Democrat's probability of saying we need a third party is .46 v. .59 for Republicans and .72 for Unaffiliated voters.

⁸ We expect to see members of the two major parties respond thermostatically to questions about the direction of the country. When Republicans are in charge, we expect to see Republicans assessing the direction of the country more positively than Democrats. And when Democrats are in charge, we expect to see the opposite relationship. But what about Unaffiliated registrants? In additional analysis of Meredith poll data over multiple years, we find exactly that. Unaffiliated voters fall in the middle, regardless of who holds the White House, while registrants from the two major parties respond based on who holds the Presidency.

Table 6 presents the final part of our analysis and presents predicted probabilities from two models predicting whether Unaffiliated registrants differ from members of the two major parties on two key policy questions—free community college and raising taxes on households with incomes over \$400,000. Similar to the previous models, we control for gender, race, and age, and the full model results are presented in the online Appendix.

[Table 6 About Here]

The results are once again clear. Unaffiliated voters are less likely than Democrats to support free community college, but more likely to support free community college than Republicans. An identical pattern exists for raising taxes on high earners. Both of these patterns are substantively significant. Holding all over variables at their sample means, Democrats have a .16 probability of believing that free community college is “not at all important” versus .45 for Republicans and .34 for Unaffiliated voters. Similarly, Republicans have a .34 probability of believing that raising taxes on high income earners is “not at all important” versus .98 for Democrats and .23 for Republicans.

Discussion

Based on the analysis of both administrative and survey data, we have developed a profile of the Unaffiliated electorate in North Carolina. In terms of its size, there are currently more Unaffiliated registrants than registered Republicans or Democrats in North Carolina and the group is the plurality in more than one-fifth of the counties in the state. Unaffiliated also remains the fastest growing group of party registrants in the state of North Carolina, with little sign of slowing down. Based on the timing of the increase, it is also clear that Unaffiliated voters rose in response to changes in the primary system. It stands to reason that if either major party wanted to arrest the rise of Unaffiliated voters, they could do so by changing their primary rules.

In terms of demographics, Unaffiliated registrants tend to represent a "bridge" between the two partisan registered voter groups of Democrats and Republicans. More racially and ethnically diverse than Republicans, but not as diverse as Democrats, Unaffiliated voters tend to more closely mirror the state's overall race and ethnicity of all registered voters. In terms of age, registered Unaffiliated voters skew younger than their partisan registered voters, due to the significant proportion of Unaffiliated voters being Millennials and now Generation Z.

We find an equally divided group of Unaffiliated voters splitting their party preferences, reflecting the intensely competitive nature of the state's overall political dynamics. At least when it comes to voter's choice of party primaries, Unaffiliated North Carolina voters contain both shadow partisans and partisan floaters.

A review of public opinion data reflects similar trends—Unaffiliated voters in North Carolina hold distinct political beliefs that fall somewhere between the two major parties on most issues. Indeed, the only example where they do not fall within the two major parties is on the question of the two-party system itself, where Unaffiliated voters are, perhaps not surprisingly, the least enthralled with the current system.

These results, are, of course, not necessarily generalizable to the rest of the country. Most obviously, only 22 states have North Carolina's primary system, which allows Unaffiliated voters to float unmoored from primary to primary. In addition, it is entirely possible that a less competitive state with less two-party competition might see very different patterns, particularly in terms of voting behavior of Unaffiliated voters. As a result, we hope that future work will follow through with investigations of other states, such as Colorado, that have a large and potentially influential number of Unaffiliated voters. Despite these limitations, we believe that analysis of this type—in-depth analysis of a single state—can uncover a great deal about how individual voters respond to party institutions and electoral rules.

Altogether, this exploration suggests that the number of Unaffiliated voters are increasing, particularly within the parts of the electorate that we expect to see grow in the coming years and decades. Further, although many of these Unaffiliated voters are certainly shadow partisans who are “covering,” not all fit this pattern. Given their relatively moderate ideological placement and willingness, at least among some Unaffiliated voters, to float from one party primary to the other in subsequent elections, we argue that Unaffiliated voters are best understood as unmoored voters. They may float near the party dock, but there are no formal constraints holding them there. The increasing size and influence of this critical group of American voters suggests that they will continue to have an important impact on the American party system over the coming decades.

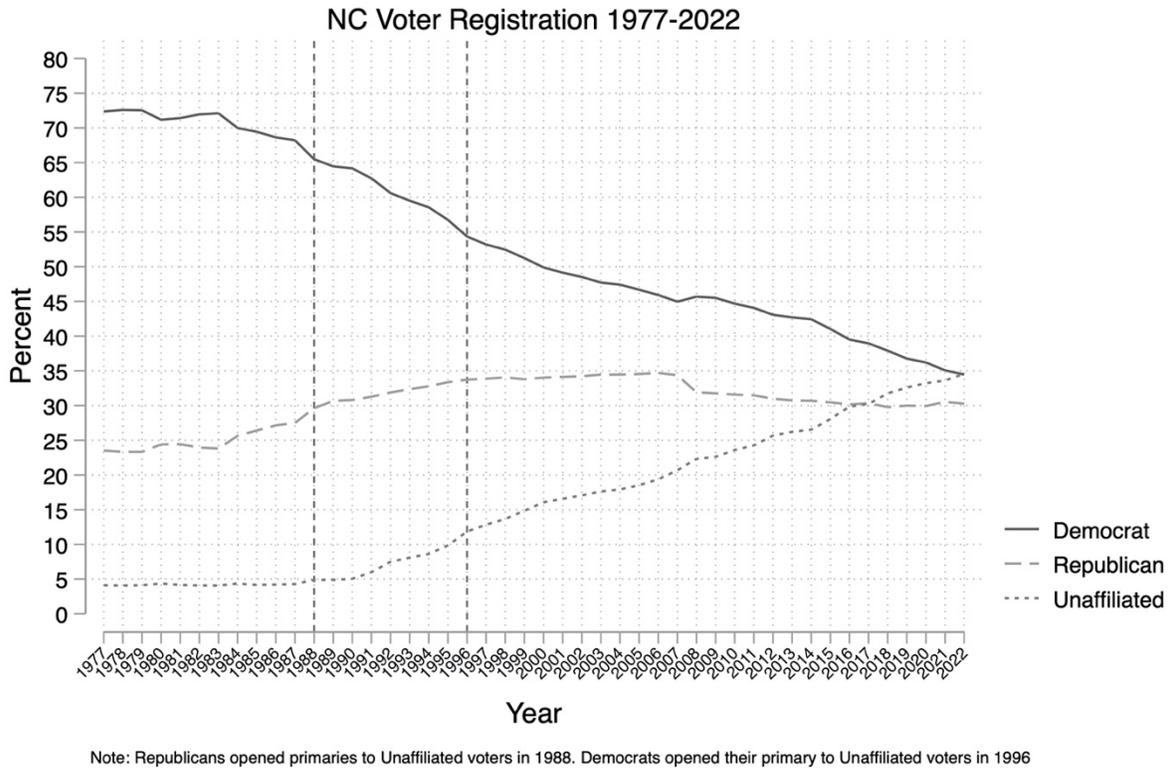
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Figure 1. North Carolina Party Registration 1977-2022



Source: Authors' analysis of NC State Board of Election data

Table 1: Race/Ethnicity by Party Registration, 2008-2022

	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022*
Unaffiliated								
White non-Hispanic	80%	80%	77%	77%	74%	72%	66%	67%
Black/African American non-Hispanic	11%	11%	11%	11%	11%	12%	11%	12%
Hispanic/Latino	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	4%	4%	4%
All other races/ethnicities	4%	4%	5%	5%	5%	6%	5%	6%
Unknown/Unreported	3%	3%	4%	4%	6%	7%	14%	11%
Democratic								
White non-Hispanic	54%	53%	49%	48%	45%	44%	40%	40%
Black/African American non-Hispanic	40%	41%	44%	45%	46%	46%	45%	46%
Hispanic/Latino	1%	1%	2%	2%	3%	3%	4%	4%
All other races/ethnicities	3%	3%	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%	5%
Unknown/Unreported	1%	1%	2%	1%	2%	2%	7%	5%
Republican								
White non-Hispanic	95%	95%	94%	94%	94%	93%	87%	89%
Black/African American non-Hispanic	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%
Hispanic/Latino	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	2%
All other races/ethnicities	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%
Unknown/Unreported	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%	2%	7%	6%

Note: Data from NC State Board of Elections and reflect registration through May 2022 primary election.

Table 2: Generational Cohort by Party Registration, 2008-2022

	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020	2022*
Unaffiliated								
Generation Z						8%	13%	17%
Millennial	23%	25%	31%	31%	39%	34%	33%	31%
Generation X	36%	34%	32%	32%	28%	27%	25%	25%
Boomer	30%	30%	28%	28%	26%	25%	23%	22%
Silent/Greatest Generation	11%	10%	9%	9%	7%	6%	5%	5%
Democratic								
Generation Z						4%	8%	11%
Millennial	14%	16%	20%	23%	26%	25%	26%	25%
Generation X	26%	26%	26%	26%	25%	25%	24%	24%
Boomer	37%	37%	36%	36%	34%	34%	32%	31%
Silent/Greatest Generation	23%	21%	18%	16%	14%	12%	10%	10%
Republican								
Generation Z						4%	7%	9%
Millennial	13%	15%	18%	21%	24%	22%	22%	21%
Generation X	30%	29%	29%	28%	27%	27%	27%	26%
Boomer	38%	38%	37%	37%	36%	36%	35%	33%
Silent/Greatest Generation	19%	18%	16%	15%	13%	12%	10%	10%

Note: Data from NC State Board of Elections and reflect registration through May 2022 primary election.

Table 3. NC Unaffiliated Registered Voters by Shadow Democrats, Shadow Republicans, and Floaters

	Shadow Democrats	Shadow Republicans	Floaters	N
State	27%	27%	47%	207,909
White non-Hispanic	22%	29%	49%	181,720
Black/African American non-Hispanic	70%	3%	28%	13,964
Hispanic/Latino any race	41%	14%	45%	1,499
Asian non-Hispanic	41%	13%	46%	1,046
American Indian non-Hispanic	28%	15%	57%	1,029
Multi-racial non-Hispanic	43%	14%	43%	614
Other races non-Hispanic	40%	16%	45%	1,840
Unknown/Unreported race and ethnicity	38%	22%	40%	6,197
Female	29%	25%	46%	103,344
Male	24%	29%	48%	100,528
Millennial	33%	15%	51%	22,956
Generation X	31%	22%	47%	54,526
Boomer	24%	29%	46%	95,671
Greatest/Silent	21%	34%	45%	34,744
Central City Voters	38%	13%	49%	64,032
Urban Suburb Voters	27%	28%	45%	49,457
Surrounding Suburban County Voters	19%	38%	43%	53,178
Rural County Voters	18%	32%	50%	41,243

Notes: Floaters are defined as voters who voted in 2012, 2016 and 2020 Primaries, but for different parties. Shadow Republicans voted in the 2012, 2016 and 2020 Republican primaries. Shadow Democrats voted in the 2012, 2016, and 2020 Democratic primaries. Some voter records do not have a field for gender, thus the total does not add up to the overall total. All analyses are from the authors' analysis of NC voter registration and voter history file data.

Table 4. NC Unaffiliated Registered Voters Who Consistently Cast Partisan Ballots in 2012, 2016, and 2020 Primaries (either Democratic or Republican)

	Shadow Democrats	Shadow Republicans	N
State	50%	50%	110,817
White non-Hispanic	43%	57%	93,804
Black/African American non-Hispanic	96%	4%	10,089
Hispanic/Latino any race	75%	25%	824
Asian non-Hispanic	76%	24%	567
American Indian non-Hispanic	66%	34%	439
Multi-racial non-Hispanic	75%	25%	352
Other races non-Hispanic	72%	28%	1,019
Unknown/Unreported race and ethnicity	63%	37%	3,722
Female	54%	46%	55,593
Male	45%	55%	52,776*
Millennial	69%	31%	11,166
Generation X	58%	42%	29,113
Boomer	45%	55%	51,485
Greatest/Silent	37%	63%	19,048
Central City Voters	74%	26%	32,834
Urban Suburb Voters	49%	51%	27,175
Surrounding Suburban County Voters	34%	66%	30,248
Rural County Voters	35%	65%	20,560

Notes: Shadow Republicans voted in the 2012, 2016 and 2020 Republican primaries. Shadow Democrats voted in the 2012, 2016, and 2020 Democratic primaries. Some voter records do not have a field for gender, thus the total does not add up to the overall total. All analyses are from the authors' analysis of NC voter registration and voter history file data.

Table 5: Unaffiliated Voters Have Distinct Views on Politics and Ideology

	Direction of the Country	Biden Approval	Political Ideology	Need a Third Party
Party ID (Unaffiliated is base term)				
Democrat	1.62*** (.21)	2.22*** (.22)	-1.78*** (.20)	-1.15*** (.212)
Republican	-.70*** (.26)	-1.51*** (.21)	1.94*** (.21)	-.605*** (.222)
Age	-.35*** (.09)	-.31*** (.07)	.33*** (.07)	.288*** (.077)
Race (White is base term)				
Black	-.02 (.24)	-.16 (.23)	.38 (.22)	-.299 (.406)
Hispanic/Latinx	-.59 (.48)	.48 (.37)	.11 (.36)	.221 (.331)
Other	-.59 (.35)	-.35 (.30)	-.06 (.30)	13.48 (519.61)
Prefer not to say	-13.23 (522.82)	-1.09 (.94)	.33 (.93)	
Gender (male is base term)				
Female	-.09 (.18)	-.7 (.16)	-.09 (.15)	-.107 (.162)
Third gender/non-binary	-.73 (1.48)	-2.21 (1.46)	2.45 (1.72)	.030 (1.50)
Prefer not to say	13.67 (1305.27)	13.25 (624.29)	-.38 (1.55)	14.19 (1040.81)
Chi2	185.24***	385.85***	361.99***	58.83
R2	.16	.21	.18	.05
N	653	655	655	653

Notes: Data are from 2021 Meredith Poll. Entries are ordinal logistic regression coefficients. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. ***p<.001; **p<.01

Table 6: Unaffiliated Voters Have Distinct Policy Views

	Free Community College	Raising Taxes on High Income
Party ID (Unaffiliated is base term)		
Democrat	-1.12*** (.19)	-1.124*** (.192)
Republican	.493*** (.201)	.572*** (.196)
Age	.567*** (.075)	-.037 (.072)
Race (White is base term)		
Black	-.223 (.219)	.412 (.215)
Hispanic/Latinx	-.293 (.401)	.173 (.376)
Other	.250 (.289)	.092 (.308)
Prefer not to say	-.385 (.867)	-.304 (.877)
Gender (male is base term)		
Female	-.279** (.150)	-.351** (.150)
Third gender/non-binary	-13.607 (82.285)	16.18 (1139.22)
Prefer not to say	-13.701 (827.2851)	-12.99 (576.348)
Chi2	198.10	101.21
R2	.111	.057
N	650	652

Notes: Data are from 2021 Meredith Poll. Entries are ordinal logistic regression coefficients. Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. ***p<.001; **p<.01

Online Appendix

2021 Meredith Poll

Administered October 15-18, 2021

Mode: Entirely online, with a sample recruited by Dynata.

N: 699

Margin of error: +/- 3.5

2019 Meredith Poll

Administered March 24-April 1, 2019

Mode: Mix of live telephone responses and online responses. Both samples were provided by Dynata; the live telephone sample was random and the online sample was recruited.

N: 680

Margin of error: +/- 4

2018 Meredith Poll

Administered March 25-April 30, 2018

Mode: Mix of live telephone responses and online responses. Both samples were provided by Dynata; the live telephone sample was random and the online sample was recruited.

N: 1003

Margin of error: +/- 3

On all three polls, the questions were worded exactly the same to enable comparison across time. The questions about approval of Joe Biden as president, free community college, and raising taxes on high-earning households were only asked on the 2021 poll. The questions are included here in the order in which a respondent encountered them.

All in all, are you satisfied with the direction of the United States today?

- a. Yes
- b. No
- c. Don't know

Do you approve or disapprove of the way Joe Biden is handling his job as president?

- a. Strongly approve
- b. Approve
- c. Disapprove
- d. Strongly disapprove
- e. Don't know

What is your view--do you think this country is more divided these days than in the past, or not?

- a. More politically divided
- b. Less politically divided
- c. About the same
- d. Don't know

In your view, do the Democratic and Republican parties do an adequate job of representing the American people, or do they do such a poor job that a third party is needed?

- a. The two parties do an adequate job of representing Americans
- b. The two parties do not do an adequate job of representing Americans and a third party is needed
- c. Don't know

Free community college

- a. This is critical for the future of the US.
- b. This is important for the future of the US, but not critical.
- c. This is somewhat important for the future of the US.
- d. This is not important for the future of the US.

Raising income taxes on households with incomes above \$400,000

- a. This is critical for the future of the US.
- b. This is important for the future of the US, but not critical.
- c. This is somewhat important for the future of the US.
- d. This is not important for the future of the US.

How would you describe yourself?

- a. Very liberal
- b. Somewhat liberal
- c. Somewhere in the middle
- d. Somewhat conservative
- e. Very conservative

What political party do you most identify with?

- a. Democratic Party
- b. Republican Party
- c. Unaffiliated
- d. Other
- e. Don't know