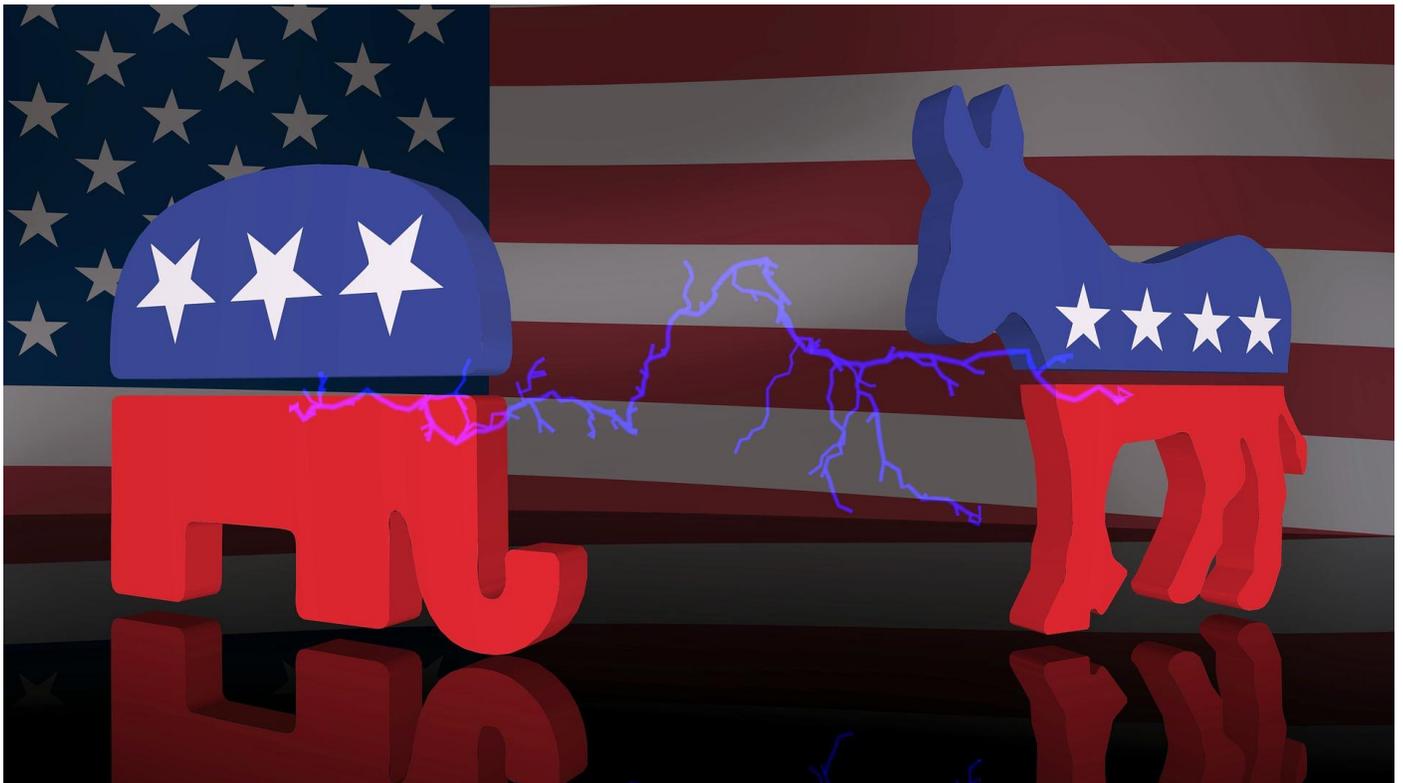


PRIMARY ELECTIONS TOOLKIT



HOW TO USE THIS TOOLKIT

The Constitution has no provisions for primary elections and so the way in which party nominees are chosen is largely up to individual states and parties, and has frequently changed over time. Until the early 20th century, candidates were chosen by party influencers and nominated to the party caucuses. In an attempt to give the voters more say in the candidates, reformers pushed for the primary process. Since the 1970s, we've used roughly the same system of primary elections to narrow the field of candidates or to determine the party nominees in a general election.

In NC, we have semi-closed or partisan primaries, which means you can only vote in the primary of your political party, or if unaffiliated, you can choose to vote in either the Republican or the Democratic primary (but not both). North Carolina primary candidates must win by at least 40 percent of the vote plus one or a runoff election is held.

Reformers have pushed for the primary process in an attempt to give the voters more say in the candidates, and for open primaries, which would allow voters to select from all candidates irrespective of party. At the same time, there have also been dozens of attempts to restrict both voters and the voters' choices of candidates through closed primaries, the cancellation of primaries, legislative and judicial proceedings.

Narrowing the pool of candidates and reducing the number of eligible voters can provide political advantages to some while disadvantaging others, which makes voting in primaries more important than most people think.

Source: [Ballotpedia](#)

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In this toolkit, you will find information and resources to help you better understand the primary process and why it is so important in our democracy.

We'll give you a breakdown of voter demographics, why your vote matters, an example of the potential harm coming from losing a primary vote, and some ideas and reading materials to continue your education on this topic.

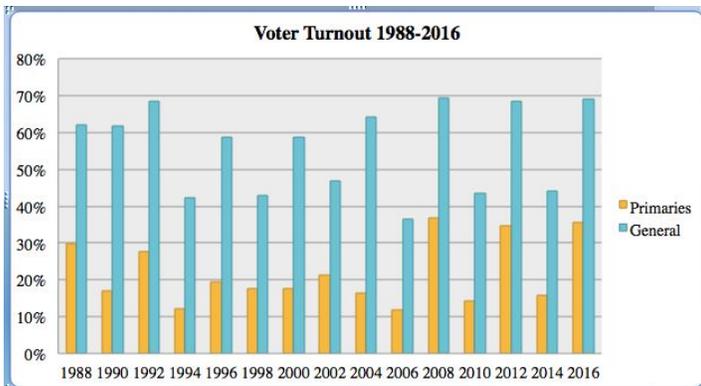
Change starts with you. Being willing to talk to your friends, neighbors and family about these issues is the most important action step you can make. Share this toolkit and its message broadly!

And follow us for more ways to engage:



WHO VOTES?

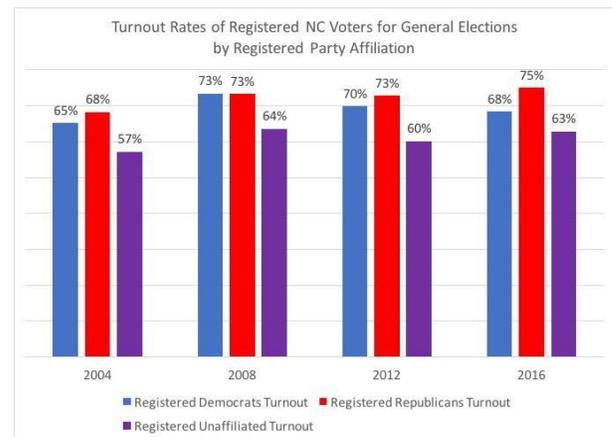
Voter turnout varies considerably between presidential and non-presidential election years, and between primary and general elections. In general elections, voter turnout for the last 30 years ranged between 40 and 70 percent, whereas in primary elections voter turnout is generally less than half of that. See the chart below. So who are the 12-37% of voters who show up to vote in primary elections?



By Affiliation

Democrats outnumber Republicans by about 600,000 registered voters in NC, and there were about a thousand more unaffiliated voters than registered Republicans last year. This means in a fair, non-gerrymandered election, the North Carolina Republican Party (NCGOP) is the third largest political group. Republican candidates need unaffiliated votes in order to win, and folks like [Dallas Woodhouse](#) believe they have them. Since 2010, unaffiliated voters chose the Republican primary ballot 14 to 28 percent more frequently

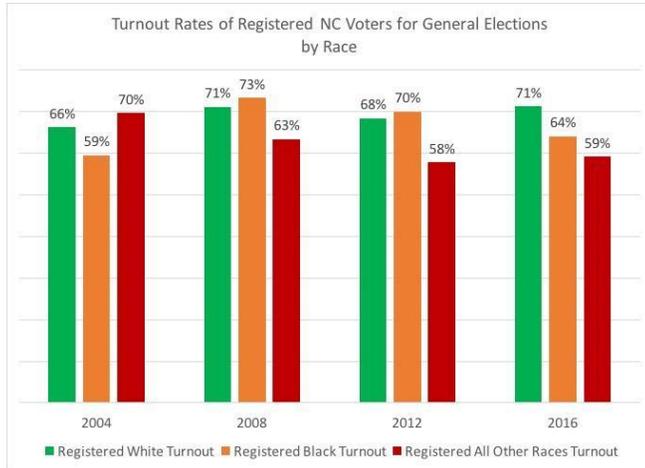
than the Democratic ballot. Conventional wisdom says many of them will also cast their votes for Republicans in the general election and they likely will, but there's no way to prove the correlation. We also know there is increasing interest from progressive voters to choose the Republican primary ballot in order to influence which Republican candidates advance to the general ticket. And even though Republicans are a minority in NC, they are turning out to vote at moderately higher rates than Democrats or unaffiliated voters.



By Demographics

Beyond party affiliation, there's a lot of demographic information available on voters. We know older folks vote more faithfully in primaries than the younger ones. About 75 percent of registered voters ages 41-65 and registered voters ages 66 and older vote in primaries. In contrast, about half of registered voters ages 18-24 and just a few percent more of registered voters ages 25-40 vote in primaries. Keep in mind

these are percentages of *registered* voters, not of the *total* population.



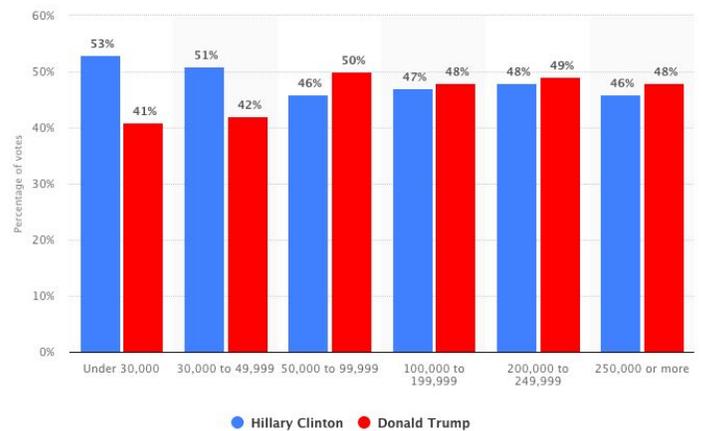
Black voter turnout has been higher or the same as white, with all other races being slightly less except in 2004

By Gender

Since women gained the right to vote in 1920, higher percentages of men voted than women until 1976. Since the 1970s, women have been steadily voting at higher rates than men. A generation or two ago, more men voted than women, but in recent decades women of all races are more likely to vote than men. For example, in 2004, 60.1 percent of women and 56.3 percent of men voted, resulting in [8.8M](#) more ballots cast by women. Since 1980, women are also more likely to vote Democratic and men are more likely to vote Republican. Bill Clinton captured more of the female vote (54 percent of women and 43 percent of men). In voter registration, women outnumber men and in non-presidential election years, women continue to turn out in greater proportion to men. In 2016, 54 percent of women voted for the Democratic presidential candidate and only 42 percent voted for the Republican presidential candidate.

By Income

Exit polls from the last presidential election negate the narrative that the poor and working classes voted for the Republican candidate. In fact, the Democrat/Republican disparity is nowhere more pronounced than at the lowest income levels; those making under \$50,000 per year voted overwhelmingly for the Democratic candidate, and at all income brackets above \$50,000 per year, there was a slight trend toward the Republican candidate. The median household income of Trump voters (\$72,000 per year) was significantly higher than the median household income of the country as a whole (\$56,000 per year) and the Clinton voters ([\\$61,000 per year](#)).



In summary, there are demographic trends that can help predict voting trends and these same identified trends are used by legislators to draw politically advantageous districts. We know that women, minorities, and people in lower income brackets are all more likely to vote for Democrats, just as men, Caucasians, and those making over \$50,000 per year are slightly more likely to vote Republican, and Republicans and older folks are turn out to vote at higher rates in primaries. We also know these trends can shift over time; often generationally, but sometimes faster.

WHY VOTE?

Simply put, voting in the primaries is all about choices. In a perfect world, the process of sifting through multiple primary candidates with similar beliefs and ideals produces the strongest representative for the general election. Ideally, this would be the candidate who best represents our platform and is most willing to fight for what we believe in.

Partisan primaries allow parties to unite behind one candidate and prevent "clone" candidates that split their constituencies' vote because of their similarities. However, in *non-partisan* primaries, members of the opposite party could [vote for the weaker candidate](#) in order to get the stronger candidate into an easier general election. Because NC has semi-closed (or partisan) primaries, this tactic can only be done by unaffiliated voters.

Primaries also function as internal competition, or a way to lessen the concentration of elites who would otherwise nominate from a small group. For this reason primary elections are a key attribute of stable democracies.

Taking Away Primary Votes: North Carolina Judiciary

One of the most controversial of the many NCGA bills recently passed was [canceling 2018 judicial primaries in NC](#). "Republicans injected chaos into our elections and took away North Carolina voters' right to vote in a primary election as part of an effort to rig our independent judiciary and elect more Republican judges," stated Democratic Party Chairman Wayne Goodwin. Not only could judges switch to any party affiliation on the last day of filing, but without primaries, there would be very little way of narrowing the candidates before the general election. Democrats sued on the basis of free speech and won, but were immediately waylaid by a stay in February 2018 - there will be no judicial primaries in 2018.

In appealing the Democrats' suit, lawmakers said it would give them time to consider changes proposed for Superior Court and District Court election districts across the state, despite four positions being statewide races that would not be affected by any redistricting plans. Republicans then stated they were considering abandoning judicial elections altogether in favor of a "merit-based" selection system. Merit-based selection is not a fundamentally bad idea; the problem in NC is that we have an exceptionally powerful legislature, a constrained executive and judiciary and now the legislature wants to appoint judges, too.

Changing the method by which judges are selected would require North Carolina voters to approve an amendment to the state constitution, which is still possible for the NCGA to add (at the time of this writing). It is likely there will be an attempt to eliminate judicial elections altogether and move to allow the NCGA to appoint their own judges. They have already passed H240 and H241 to do just this in certain cases.

CALLS TO ACTION

THINGS TO CONSIDER

Our main call to action is to continue to educate yourself on the primary process and vote. Progress is likely to be slow when it comes to making changes to the primary system.. There is a very entrenched mindset of “this is how we’ve always done it”.

That said, however, there are some definite benefits for reform. Here are a few things to think about:

1. **Open Primaries:** Again because there was no provision in the constitution, primaries are largely determined by each state and change as the legislature votes. Currently only 15 states have open primaries where any voter can vote for any candidate. But statistics have shown the states with the highest voter turnout rates all have open or at least [semi-open primaries](#). The field is opened up to unaffiliated, independent, middle of the road and further left or right leaning candidates, a greater diversity of voters can participate, and voter turnout increases, all of which serve to make our elections more representative.
2. **Eliminate superdelegates:** Superdelegates give party officials more control over candidates, not the people and it is not truly democratic. Proponents of superdelegates argue that they have never gone against the candidates with the most popular support. In the case of 2016, they quite clearly indicated much higher support from party insiders than was reflective or predictive of the popular vote in the general election.
3. **Public financing of judges/no fundraising.** The campaign funding laws for judicial elections have changed substantially in the last few years. As the laws have become increasingly partisan, judicial elections have seen record-breaking campaign spending and even an influx of “dark money” (donations funneled through other organizations). For a decade, NC enjoyed “Voter-Owned,” publicly financed judicial elections, until the NCGA and former governor Pat McCrory eliminated the program despite the objections of the legal community, civic leaders, and business leaders. In the following election (2014), candidates spent over [\\$8 million - 25 percent](#) of which came from special interests. A return to publicly financed elections would keep special interests out of courts, prevent conflicts of interest, and keep our judges working for the people instead of fundraising.

Articles to read:

[NC should restore public funding for judicial elections](#)

[Who Pays for Judicial Races?](#)

[How Much Can Primaries Predict the General Election?](#)

[How Changes to the Primary Process Can Improve Democratic Electoral Outcomes](#)