

## Voters: Those unaffiliated are locked out of taking part in the May primaries

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"It did increase the amount of nonaffiliated voters, when they decided to opt in all the DMV records," County Clerk Tracie Krevanko said.

Before the Motor Voter Act, the county had fewer than 21,000 registered voters. The number swelled to nearly 29,000 as of October.

Unaffiliated voters accounted for nearly two-thirds of the growth, their numbers more than doubling from 5,120 in May 2015 to 10,335 in October. By comparison, the county has 9,757 registered Democrats and 6,780 Republicans.

Statewide, the 948,697 unaffiliated voters make up one-third of the state's 2.8 million registered voters.

"I think it's a major concern of how to engage these" unaffiliated voters, said Andy Davis, the chairman of the Clatsop County Democratic Central Committee. "Maybe you're helping them to get their foot in the door to become involved in politics."

Democrats send mailers out during the run-up to elections to let people know what's going on, Davis said, but Democrats and Republicans prioritize registered party members more likely to vote.

Brandon Williams, the vice chairman of the Clatsop County Republican Central Committee, said Republicans try to contact people any way they can, especially facing a Democratic supermajority in Salem.

"The issues hit everybody," he said. "I think (it's) just getting people to understand that if they're not involved, someone else is going to make the decision for you."

Indivisible North Coast Oregon, a progressive political group that started in 2016 in reaction to the election of Donald Trump as president, is one of the main organizations reaching out to the region's unaffiliated voters.

"I think we have an affinity for nonaffiliated voters, because as an organization we're nonaffiliated," said Deb Vanasse, who works

with the group's Vote the Future team. "We just promote representative democracy and values like freedom and the Constitution and such."

Vote the Future started reaching out to voters in September in advance of the 2020 election, Vanasse said, trying to combat both partisanship and voter apathy.

"It's really important that if you're nonaffiliated, it's a conscious choice, and you stay informed about the issues," she said.

The state's 948,000 unaffiliated voters are locked out of participating in May primaries where Republicans and Democrats choose candidates. They can vote in the nonpartisan elections on the May ballot, like for county sheriff or county commission.

Either major party can allow unaffiliated voters to participate in their primaries. Republicans did so in 2012 for the secretary of state, treasurer and attorney general races. Delegates from the Clatsop County Democrats unanimously supported allowing in unaffiliated voters, but the state Democratic Party of Oregon voted to keep the primary closed, Davis said.

"The Democrats that oppose having nonaffiliated voters involved think that being in the primary is a perk of registering as a Democrat and taking part in party issues," he said.

The Independent Party of Oregon recently decided to open its primary to unaffiliated voters.

"They're the largest group of voters and the most disenfranchised group of voters and they deserve to be heard," Sal Peralta, the party's secretary, told the Portland Tribune earlier this month.

The Independent Party's primary will be in March, with ballots delivered online. Oregon allows candidates to be nominated by multiple parties, giving more weight to the Independent primary. More than 60 Democratic and Republican legislators are backed by the Independent Party, Peralta said.

## In Umatilla County, the rise of the unaffiliated voter

By JADE McDOWELL  
East Oregonian

When it comes to voting, Umatilla County residents are a bit free spirited.

Going into the most recent election, 41.8% of them were not registered to any political party — the second-highest unaffiliated rate in the state.

Some of them were added to the voter rolls as unaffiliated by default after the Motor Voter Act used information from the Department of Motor Vehicles to automatically register people to vote. But others wear their unaffiliated label proudly, as a conscious choice.

Tammy Knight, of Mission, said she started out registered as a Democrat.

"When I was growing up, my dad told me that Democrats were the working party and Republicans were the rich people, so that's what I went with," she said.

Over time, however, she saw things she disliked happening in both major political parties and came to believe they were both corrupt. So, she eventually switched to having no political party, focusing on individual candidates' resumes and positions instead. She has voted for candidates on both sides of the aisle.

"I like being the wild card, I guess," she said.

Dwayne Brown, of Hermiston, has a similar story, except he started out as a Republican after being raised "very conservative." He said he still leans conservative, but got "tired of politics in general."

Overall, Brown said he likes feeling flexible about how he votes — he voted for Barack Obama for president in 2008, for example, but not 2012. He said the best way to spur change is to focus on the best candidates instead of automatically voting by party.

"People either want to vote for red or vote for blue or vote for the best guy out there," he said.

Half of Oregon's 36 counties now have more unaffiliated voters than voters with a single political party, according to data from the

Oregon Secretary of State's Office. Most of those counties are on the west side of the state, but the three that aren't have the highest rates of unaffiliated voters. Umatilla County comes in second at 41.8%, Morrow County comes in third at 40.8% and Malheur County has the highest unaffiliated rate in the state at 43.1%.

Wheeler County, which is majority Republican, has the lowest number at 25.5%.

The most obvious reason for the rise of the unaffiliated in Oregon is the 2016 law that automatically registers people to vote when they get or renew a driver's license or state ID. The newly registered voters get sent a postcard asking if they want to register as a member of a political party, but a majority never send it back.

The law helped increase Umatilla County's unaffiliated voters from 8,424 in October 2015 to 13,141 a year later, and in 2017 unaffiliated voters in the county officially passed the number of registered Republicans. There are now 18,510 unaffiliated voters in the county.

Unaffiliated voters had been on the rise at a slower pace for several years before that, however, matching a nationwide increase. In 2018, the Pew Research Center found that 37% of voters across the United States were not registered with a specific party, compared with 30% in 1994.

Jeffery Dense, a political science professor at Eastern Oregon University, said in an email many unaffiliated voters aren't right down the middle in their views. Pew Research Center found about 80% tend to lean toward one party or the other.

"While the rise of independent/unaffiliated voters is interesting, the real issue is the United States has the lowest voter turnout rate of any industrialized democracy in the world," Dense said. "If you don't vote, you don't count."

He said a state's primary system can have an effect on the number of unaffiliated voters. Some states, such as Washington and California, have a primary system where the

top two vote-getters from the primaries advance, regardless of party. In Oregon, unaffiliated voters are shut out of the primary process for partisan races, with Republicans and Democrats each holding their own contests open only to voters registered to their party.

Suni Danforth, chair of the Umatilla County Republicans, said getting to vote in the primaries should be an incentive for people to register to whatever party most closely aligns with their views, even if they don't agree 100% with everything that party does. That way, they can help a candidate they like move on to the general election.

"When you're an unaffiliated voter, that voice is mute," she said.

If people want to change their registration, she said, they can do it online, but the best way is to fill out a paper version by hand at the county elections office. That way the state can have the most current version of their signature on file to compare with their ballot signature, instead of one pulled from their drivers license or other older records.

Despite some of the benefits of choosing a party, some unaffiliated voters still see upsides to staying independent. They say they get hit up for donations to candidates and causes less often, and are bothered with fewer phone calls and mailers during an election. And some people just can't bring themselves to adopt a label when they have been disappointed by actions on both sides.

Delaney Clara switched to unaffiliated when she moved to Pendleton from Colorado. She said she feels not labeling herself with one party helps her be less biased when considering new information, and helps her keep in mind that "the truth lies somewhere in the middle of extremes."

"The extremeness of both political parties in Oregon was a huge turnoff," she said. "People seem to just vote for people because they identify as their party, even if (the candidate's) true values and intentions don't actually line up with their own morals."

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