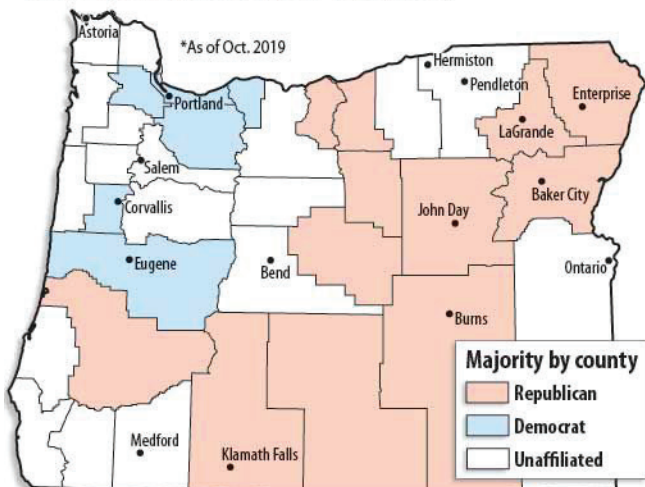


The rise of the unaffiliated voter

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
NEWS EDITOR

Unaffiliated voters

Eighteen of Oregon's 36 counties have more unaffiliated voters than any other type of registration.



Percentage of registered voters who are unaffiliated per county*:

County	Percent	(cont.)	Percent
Baker	31.3%	Lake	31.1
Benton	29.3	Lane	32
Clackamas	31.6	Lincoln	36.8
Clatsop	35.9	Linn	35.4
Columbia	35.3	Malheur	43.1
Coos	36.7	Marion	36
Crook	32.7	Morrow	40.8
Curry	36.8	Multnomah	32
Deschutes	33	Polk	33.2
Douglas	34.3	Sherman	27.8
Gilliam	31.5	Tillamook	34.6
Grant	29	Umatilla	41.8
Harney	29.3	Union	31
Hood River	34.5	Wallowa	27.6
Jackson	33.5	Wasco	37.5
Jefferson	38.7	Washington	35
Josephine	36.2	Wheeler	25.5
Klamath	36.9	Yamhill	34

Source: Oregon Secretary of State

Alan Kenaga/EO Media Group

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” bill 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 in 2008, for example, but not 2012. He said the best way to spur change is to focus on the best candidates instead of auto-

matically voting by party.

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

Exactly 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. Most of those 18 counties are on the west side

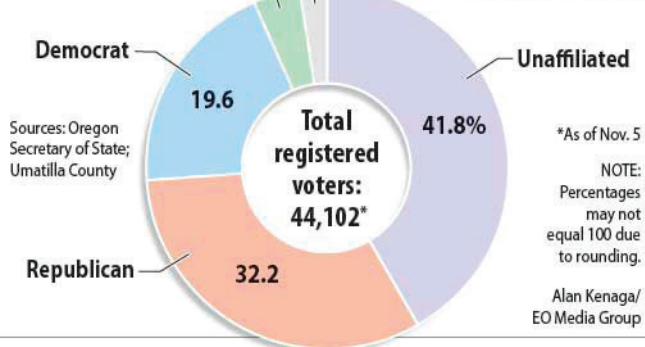
of the state, but the three that aren’t have the highest rates of unaffiliated voters. Umatilla County comes in second at 41.8%, Morrow County comes in third at 40.8% and Malheur County has the highest unaffiliated rate in the state at 43.1%.

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

The most obvious reason

Voter affiliation in Umatilla County

Of the Oregon counties with the highest number of unaffiliated voters, Umatilla is second highest at 41.8%. Malheur County is highest at 43.1%.



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. 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 contest 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.

Antone Minthorn, co-chair of the Umatilla County Democratic Party, said he has been involved in the Democratic Party since the 1970s and has attended many state and national Democratic conventions.

He said many times in his work with the party he has been the only Native American in the room, underscoring what he sees as an important benefit to belonging to a party. Having Native American voices directly involved in the political parties that control government helps them to understand Native American issues and place importance on tribal priorities, such as salmon.

“They begin to see who we are, to sponsor Native American issues,” he said.

Minthorn also said it takes “a whole lot of energy” at the local, state and national level to generate and support good candidates for government positions. When people lend their time and talents to a political party, they can help with that.

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.

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