

## NEITHER RED NOR BLUE

### *The Influence of Independent Voters in Massachusetts*

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IN A TIME WHEN CANDIDATES FEEL PRESSURE TO TOUT THEIR INDEPENDENT ATTITUDE AND BIPARTISAN SPIRIT IN ORDER TO WIN ELECTIONS, THE GROWING PRESENCE OF THE INDEPENDENT POLITICAL MINDSET AMONG VOTERS CANNOT BE IGNORED. MASSACHUSETTS IS A PERFECT MICROCOSM THROUGH WHICH TO EXPLORE THE INFLUENCE OF INDEPENDENT VOTERS. THE PERCEPTION OF MASSACHUSETTS AS A PREDOMINANTLY BLUE STATE IN WHICH DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATES DOMINATE IS MISLEADING. WHILE THIS IS TRUE OF THE LEGISLATURE, THE ELECTORATE OF THE BAY STATE IS OVER ONE-HALF INDEPENDENT, GIVING MASSACHUSETTS THE LARGEST PROPORTION OF INDEPENDENT VOTERS IN THE UNITED STATES. THIS PIECE EXPLORES HOW A PREDOMINANTLY INDEPENDENT CONSTITUENCY ELECTS A PREDOMINANTLY SINGLE-PARTY LEGISLATURE. USING REGISTRATION AND ELECTION DATA AS WELL AS FIRST-HAND ACCOUNTS FROM MASSACHUSETTS LEGISLATORS, THIS ARTICLE SEEKS TO UNCOVER HOW THE INDEPENDENT VOTER FITS INTO AMERICA'S DOMINANT TWO-PARTY SYSTEM. IN THIS PROCESS, IT CONFRONTS QUESTIONS ON THE MERIT OF THE TWO-PARTY SYSTEM AS WELL AS THE IDENTITY OF THE AMERICAN VOTER.

Independent voters are relevant in today's political world. They are constantly being analyzed in polls, sought after in political campaigns, and heavily scrutinized by the two-party system. Figure 1 shows just a few of the many recent articles and studies written about Independent voters and their influence on politics.<sup>1,2,3</sup> Their growing popularity raises two important questions: are the numbers of Independent voters increasing, and if so, what is their influence on the Commonwealth?

Massachusetts is the frontrunner for Independent voters in America, with over 53% of its registered voters being Independent.<sup>4</sup> Figure 2 shows how Massachusetts leads the top five states in which Independents exceed party membership. According to the most recent Gallup Poll, 42% of Americans nationwide identify themselves as In-

**“For Independents, a Tough Road to November”**  
 Explores the political and financial challenges faced by the three independent candidates for governor in MA in 2014

**“Charlie Baker Pushes for Independent Voters”**  
 Baker appeals to Independent voters for support and cites the large number of people who crossed party lines to support him.

**“Percentage of Independent Voters Climbs in Mass”**  
 Details the latest jump in Massachusetts Independent Voters to over 52%

**“Independents Exceed Party Registration in Key States”**  
 Massachusetts leads Top 5 states in proportion to Independent voter registration, including Alaska, Rhode Island, New Jersey, and Connecticut

FIGURE 1: RECENT HEADLINES ABOUT INDEPENDENT VOTERS IN MASSACHUSETTS.

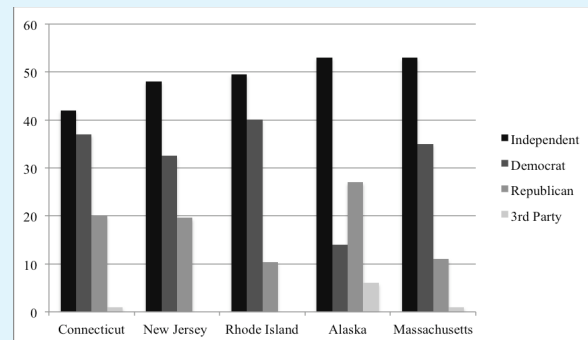


FIGURE 2: STATES WHERE INDEPENDENTS EXCEED PARTY MEMBERSHIP<sup>4</sup>

dependent voters, the highest proportion in history. The rate hovered between 20% and 32% in the years since 1988, and has started increasing steadily following 2004.<sup>5</sup>

What constitutes an Independent voter, according to the state of Massachusetts? *The Encyclopedia of Third Parties in America* defines Independent voters as “[t]hose who have registered to vote, but are not affiliated with a political party.”<sup>6</sup> For example, Independent voters in Massachusetts are those who have registered to vote in the state, and have access to the benefits of being a registered voter; however, they have elected to remain free of a party designation.

What are the objectives of Independent voters? As Unenrollment is not an organized party, there is no singular answer to this question. The Massachusetts Coalition of Independent Voters believes in “making the political process more open and fair, and less partisan.”<sup>7</sup> Independentvoting.org, along the same strand of ideology, states that Independent voters seek to “diminish the regressive influence of parties and partisanship by opening up the democratic process,” “support new models of nonpartisan governance,” and “strive for the broadest terms of ‘bottom-up’ participation”<sup>8</sup>

When a person registers to vote in Massachusetts, he or she has six party identification options. There are the two main parties, Democrat and Republican, as well as Massachusetts’ two major third parties, the Green Rainbow Party and United Independent Party. If these do not suit the voter, he or she can elect to be Unenrolled (Independent) or choose from Massachusetts’ 26 third parties, listed in Table 1.

Massachusetts has open primaries, so Independents can vote in primaries and pull whichever of the two main party

America First Party	Green Party USA	Natural Law Party	Prohibition Party	<b>United Independent Party</b>
American Independent Party	<b>Green-Rainbow</b>	New Alliance Party	Rainbow Coalition	Veterans Party America
American Term Limits	Interdependent 3 <sup>rd</sup> Party	New World Council	Reform Party Socialist	We the People
Conservative Party	<b>Libertarian</b>	Pirate	Twelve Visions Party	Working Families
Constitution Party	Massachusetts Independent Party	Pizza Party	Timesizing Not Downsizing	World Citizens Party

TABLE 1: ALTERNATE LEGAL POLITICAL DESIGNATIONS IN MASSACHUSETTS <sup>9</sup>

ballots they want. Voters enrolled in any of the alternate political designations, however, cannot vote in primaries. Primaries in Massachusetts are restricted to registered Democrat, Republican, and Unenrolled voters. Democrats and Republicans must pull their respective party's ballot, but Independents can pull either.

In bold are the most popular parties by enrollment. The Green Rainbow Party, for example, is one of the more common third parties. It has over 6,500 registrants in Massachusetts, or about 0.1% of the Commonwealth's registered voters. The Pizza Party, though it sounds fictitious, garnered enough signatures to be recognized as a legal third party in the state of Massachusetts, but only has one member.

### THE PREVALENCE OF INDEPENDENT VOTERS IN MASSACHUSETTS

The percentage of Independent voters in Massachusetts has increased during every presidential administration since that of Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1953-1961. The only exception is Ronald Reagan's presidency, which saw a 0.056% decrease in Independent registration, though the general number of total registered voters decreased during this time.<sup>10</sup>

Figure 3 shows registered voter enrollment in Massachusetts from 1948-2012.<sup>11</sup> Unenrolled voters have always been larger in number than Republicans since 1948, and they surpassed even Democratic enrollment in 1990. 50 years ago, Unenrollment was 35.72% in Massachusetts, and it has since increased steadily to over 53% today.<sup>12</sup>

Independent voter registration has shown a strongly consistent linear increase over the past ten years. As Figure 4

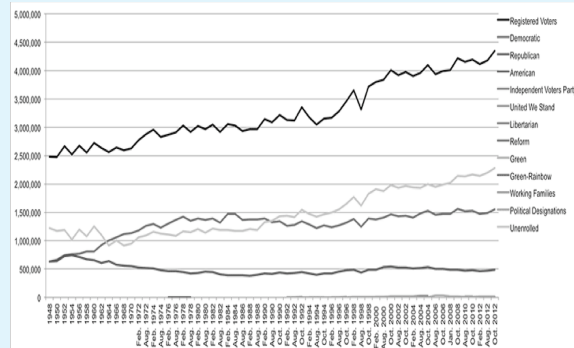


FIGURE 3: MASSACHUSETTS REGISTERED VOTER ENROLLMENT, 1948-2012

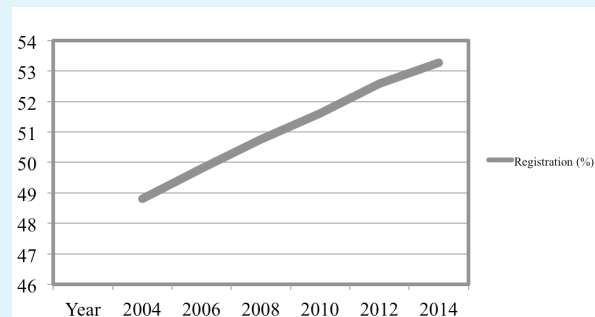


FIGURE 4: INDEPENDENT VOTER REGISTRATION AS A PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL ENROLLMENT, 2004-2014

shows, Unenrollment has increased every single year of this past decade, from 48.80% in 2004 to 53.27% today. This 4.47% increase is a significant political trend.

Today, Massachusetts boasts over 2.2 million Independent voters, an increase of almost 300,000 in the past decade alone.<sup>13</sup> This is akin to half the population of Boston becoming Independent. Both in Massachusetts and the United States as a whole, the shift has come at more of a cost to Republicans. Massachusetts Democrats lost about 3% of their supporters, while Republicans lost almost 15%.<sup>14</sup>

### HOW DEMOCRATIC OR REPUBLICAN IS MY TOWN?

Massachusetts may seem like a one-dimensional state in the realm of party affiliation, but the individual affiliation of each municipality tells a different story. Of the 351 towns in Massachusetts, 186 lean Democrat, and 165 lean Republican.<sup>15</sup> Massachusetts is not strictly a "blue" state. It is worth noting, however, that the range of Democrat-leaning

and Republican-leaning towns is skewed. Massachusetts's uniquely Democratic identity is maintained by the large gap between the most heavily leaning Democrat and Republican towns. In the most Democratic town, Provincetown, Democratic candidates receive 73% more votes on average, whereas Republican candidates in the most Republican town, Lynnfield, receive only 28% more of the vote on average. It is significant to note that these statistics come from election returns, not registration data. Even

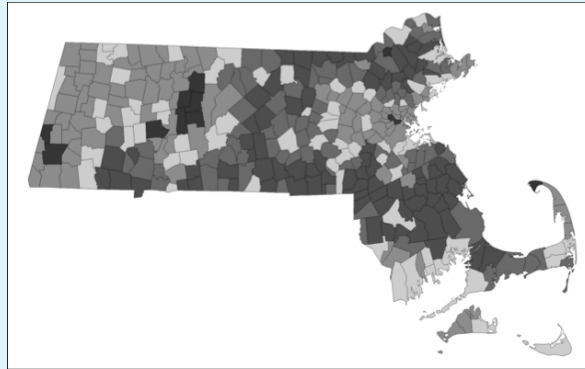


FIGURE 5: THE MOST DEMOCRATIC TOWNS, BY ELECTION RESULTS, IN MASSACHUSETTS ARE PROVINCETOWN, CAMBRIDGE, AND AMHERST. THE MOST REPUBLICAN ARE LYNNFIELD, BOXFORD, AND HANOVER.

though certain towns consistently vote for Republican candidates, there are no municipalities in Massachusetts with a majority of Republican voters.<sup>16</sup>

Municipalities with the most evenly balanced votes (less than 0.15% gap between votes for the Democratic candidate and Republican candidate) are: Ayer, Shrewsbury, Groton, and Southamptn.<sup>17</sup> It is also interesting to note the regional trends of party support. The Greater Boston Area, as well as Western Massachusetts, is largely Democratic, surrounded by large areas of Republican support in Central and Southeastern Massachusetts.

When it comes to electing the Massachusetts legislature, the political identity of the Commonwealth remains stubbornly one-sided. The current composition of Massachusetts legislators elected to the United States Congress is 100% Democrat US Senators Ed Markey and Elizabeth Warren are both Democrats, as is each representative from Massachusetts' nine congressional districts. Massachusetts' state-level government has slightly more Republican representation: the Senate is 85% Democrat (34 Demo-

crats to 6 Republicans), and the House of Representatives is 78.5% Democrat (125 Democrats to 35 Republicans).<sup>18</sup>

The Massachusetts legislature has a history of Democratic predominance. The 85% Democrat's presence in the Senate is a decrease from previous years, when Democrats traditionally held an even larger portion of the Senate. Massachusetts Republicans, on the other hand, have not won a seat in the US House since 1994. There are currently no Independent legislators representing Massachusetts in the state-level House and Senate or in the US Congress.<sup>19</sup>

## REASONS FOR BEING INDEPENDENT

A 2007 study examined the ideologies of Independent voters and characterized them into five categories. Their titles and respective distributions are shown in Table 2. Disguised Partisans are voters whose ideologies align with a single party, but elect to remain free of a partisan designation. Along with Disengaged Independents, who characterize themselves as more apathetic voters, Disguised Partisans account for 48% of Independent voters. Dislocated Independents, who make up 16% of the Independent population, are those whose ideologies straddle the two-party divide. The remaining 36% of Independent voters are comprised of the Disillusioned, or "angry" voters, and the Deliberators—voters who like to begin from square one when determining for whom to cast their vote.<sup>20</sup>

Independent voters have the lowest rate of election participation. They continually underperform registered Democrats and Republicans at the voting booth by 20%.<sup>21</sup> This supports the categorization of a large portion of Independent voters as disillusioned or disengaged. Such voters have little incentive to make their voice heard at the

<b>1. Disguised Partisans</b>	<b>48%</b>
<b>2. Disengaged</b>	
<b>3. Dislocated</b>	<b>16%</b>
<b>4. Deliberators</b>	<b>36%</b>
<b>5. Disillusioned</b>	

TABLE 2: IDEOLOGIES OF INDEPENDENT VOTERS<sup>20</sup>

ballot box.

## INDEPENDENTS IN THE 2014 MASSACHUSETTS GENERAL ELECTION AND NOTEWORTHY INDEPENDENT CAMPAIGNS

In the most recent general election in Massachusetts, there were five candidates in the race for governor. Now-Governor Charlie Baker, a Republican, and Martha Coakley, a Democrat, led the race. They were joined by three Independent candidates, Evan Falchuk, Scott Lively, and Jeff McCormick, who together garnered over 100,000 votes, or almost 5% of total votes cast.<sup>22</sup>

Figure 6 shows all Independent and third party candidates who ran in the 2014 Massachusetts general election.<sup>23</sup> It may be easy to think of an Independent candidacy as a rare occurrence, but the vast number of such political hopefuls in 2014 proves otherwise. The names in bold are those candidates who garnered more than 20% of the vote in their race. Suzanne T. Seguin, whose name is italicized, won her race for Register of Probate of Hampden County as an Independent.

Analyzing these candidates and their corresponding offices shows evidence that Independent and third party bids for political office are more successful on two spectrums. One is in less politicized positions, like the Executive Councilor and Register of Probate. These are positions that function within the political sphere, but do not include overt party alliances or voting that could prove ideologically divisive. Second, Independents have a greater opportunity to flourish by running for smaller, more local titles. Because of the smaller constituency, Independents, who often have limited funds and rely instead on personal connections and name recognition, can more easily appeal directly and personally to their constituents about why they should be elected. As stated in the goals set out by independentvoting.org, the concept of “bottom-up” politics is instrumental to Independent voters and candidates.<sup>24</sup> Major-party candidates enjoy more support from the party structure and can therefore launch more traditional, successful campaigns across a larger cross-section of Massachusetts.

However, there have been several successful Independent candidates in higher offices throughout the history of the Commonwealth. In 1972, John Joseph Moakley, for whom the district courthouse is named, won his seat

in Congress representing the 9<sup>th</sup> Congressional District, and later declared himself a Democrat. In 1988 David Hudson won a seat in the US House representing the 5<sup>th</sup> Congressional District. In the Massachusetts State House,

### Governor and Lieutenant Governor

**Falchuk and Jennings (UIP)**

**Lively and Saunders (Ind)**

**McCormick and Post (Ind)**

### Secretary of State

**Daniel L. Factor (GR)**

### Treasurer

**Ian T. Jackson (GR)**

### Auditor

**MK Merelice (GR)**

### Representative in Congress

**Christopher J. Stockwell (Ind)**

### Executive Councillors

**Thomas Sheff (Ind)**

**Joseph M. Crosby (Ind)**

**Joe Ureneck (WFP)**

### MA Senator

**Mike Franco (Am. 1<sup>st</sup>)**

**Heather M. Mullins (Lib)**

**Robert E. Powers**

### MA Representative

**Ari B. Herzog (Ind)**

**Steven J. Stanganelli (Ind)**

**Joseph L. Valianti (Ind)**

**Daniel J. Morris (Lib)**

**William Lantigua (Unen.)**

**Robert J. Underwood (Unen.)**

**Arleen M. Martino (Unen.)**

**Kristine E. Coffey-Donahue (Ind)**

**Michael John-Coombes (Liberty)**

**Sharon K. Antia (Ind)**

**Kenneth William Van Tassel (Lib)**

**Fred W. Bahou (Unen.)**

**Thomas Michael Vasconcelos (Ind)**

**Noelani Kamelamela (Pir)**

**John P. Matheson (Ind)**

**Tyler Jay Prescott (Unen.)**

**Celeste B. Ribeiro Myers (Unen.)**

**Joseph F. Guertin (Pir)**

### Register of Probate- Hampden County

***Suzanne T. Seguin (Ind)***

### Sheriff of Suffolk County

**Hassan A. Smith (Ind)**

FIGURE 6: INDEPENDENT AND THIRD PARTY CANDIDATES IN THE 2014 ELECTION

*“Independent candidates face many barriers to election, one being the lack of party support and financing during campaigns, and another being the disadvantageous redistricting that puts one party clearly in the majority.”*

there have been 22 Independents who won election to the House of Representatives, many of whom declared party affiliation soon after. In the 2012 race for representative for the 24<sup>th</sup> Middlesex District, Independent Candidate James Gammill received more of the popular vote than the Republican challenger. Lastly, in the 2010 race for the Massachusetts House, all candidates for the 8th Bristol district were Independent.<sup>25</sup>

One of the most notable nation-wide Independent campaigns was led by Ross Perot in the 1992 Presidential Election. Perot waged an aggressive campaign and won 18.91% of the general election votes.<sup>26</sup> Some political analysts herald Perot’s run as proof that Independents are viable candidates who can successfully challenge the two-party system and appeal to a significant amount of voters. Others say that Perot’s success is not a success for the Independent name. Perot, a successful businessman from Texas, contributed 90% of his own campaign funds.<sup>27</sup> He did not need the financial support of a major party because he could supply it on his own. To these people, Perot was more of the same—a wealthy politician whose success stemmed not from the quality of his ideals, but from his ability to buy publicity.

#### LEGISLATIVE OUTLOOK

When asked about how they approach and engage their Independent constituents, Massachusetts legislators share varied responses.<sup>28</sup> One Republican representative espouses benevolent indifference toward Independent voters in his district. This legislator believes that Independent voters are not significant to him specifically, because his duty as a public servant is to represent all of his constituents. He acknowledges that a vast majority of his district is Independent, and he feels that they vote “person, not party” and that they value bipartisanship.

The same representative also believes that Independent candidates will not find success in the Massachusetts State

House. He notes that both Independent candidates who have won in the recent past, Representatives Paul McMurry and Tom Sannicandro, declared party affiliation (Democrat) soon after coming to office. Many legislators shared in this profound doubt that the rise in Independent voters would allow Independent politicians to become more successful in the future. Independent candidates face many barriers to election, one being the lack of party support and financing during campaigns, and another being the disadvantageous redistricting that puts one party clearly in the majority. Partisan candidates have access to a large and well-funded support base; they can more easily fund publicity and get-out-the-vote media, as well as count on the support of their party’s leadership. Legislators noted that Independent candidates do best in local elections where they can more easily rely on grassroots campaign tactics and face-to-face publicity.

One representative conjectures that a possible solution to the barriers faced by Independent candidates is an election reform law providing Independent candidates with proper funding. Other legislators acknowledge that they believe the presence of Independent officials in the legislature would be beneficial to the policy process, but again cite redistricting and financial deficits as obstacles. One Democratic senator is adamant that voters do not have time to invest their support in non-party candidates, and one Democratic congressman notes the rise of “hyperpartisanship.” Interestingly, both of these legislators say they take moderate policy stances and do not always vote with their party leadership.

Furthermore, it can be difficult for politicians to target Independent voters because there is not a single set of issues with which all Independent voters identify. The Congressman notes that the House Ethics Committee prohibits members of Congress from reaching out to voters based on party identity.

In the aggregate, all legislators who were interviewed

expressed the sentiment that Independent politicians would not become more successful in the future because they face too many barriers, namely lack of financing, partisan control of redistricting, and their status as newcomers. These often prove to be insurmountable during campaigns.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that the prevalence of Independent voters is growing. Massachusetts is at the national forefront of Independent voter enrollment, and its Independent voters have been increasing steadily over the past 50 years. There are many reasons for registering Unenrolled, and there continue to be diverse regions of party affiliation throughout the Commonwealth. Though legislators remain skeptical about the viability of Independent politicians winning office, there have been several Independent victors throughout Massachusetts history, and there was a strong showing of Independent candidates in the 2014 Massachusetts General Election.

An increasingly Independent electorate, however, is not a harbinger of an increasingly Independent legislature, and Massachusetts remains a rigidly “blue” state. The overwhelmingly Democratic composition of the Massachusetts legislature at the state and national level cannot be ignored. It is also important to reiterate that the influx of Independent voters is coming primarily from those who would have otherwise registered Republican.

The success of Independent candidates remains dim and ambiguous at best. Whereas Independence provides ideological freedom for voters, it imposes restrictions on legislators. It is less consequential to remain free of party affiliation as a voter than as a legislator, where the latter can impede a politician’s ability to promote policy, engage in negotiation, and garner electoral support. Reasons for being an Independent voter vary, and the nature of Unenrollment is not conducive to producing a united coalition of Independent voters that can rally behind a political campaign.

It is undeniable that the composition of the Massachusetts electorate is shifting, and Independents contribute to a significant part of this trend. It remains to be seen how this affects the Commonwealth as a whole. Optimistically, this shift proves the resiliency of the American political system. Though many voters are disillusioned or feel unrepresented by the party system, the increase in Independent

voters shows that citizens take seriously their civic duty. Instead of not registering to vote, Independent voters channel their ideologies into participation that transcends partisan affiliation.

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