The Rise of the Unaffiliated Voter in North Carolina

J. Michael Bitzer
Catawba College

Christopher A. Cooper
Western Carolina University

Whitney Ross Manzo
Meredith College

Susan Roberts
Davidson College

Abstract:

Objective: To examine the size, characteristics and attitudes of Unaffiliated party registrants as they compare to registrants from the two major parties. **Methods**: Analysis of publicly available voter registration files and voter history files, as well as analysis of Meredith Poll data from North Carolina. **Results**: Unaffiliated registrants are not simply shadow partisans, but rather vary from the two major parties in terms of demographics, political behavior and political attitudes. **Conclusion**: Scholars of American political parties as well as party activists should pay attention to the rise in Unaffiliated voters and consider them as a group of registered voters distinct from their counterparts in the two major political parties.

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September 12, 2017 was a historic day in North Carolina politics—a day that reflected an unprecedented shift in voter behavior, shifted how politicians run campaigns, and might have even signaled a new era in political parties. Despite the importance of what occurred that day, the Democratic and Republican Parties didn't send out a press release marking the occasion. The Governor didn't make a public proclamation and the state's major newspapers were mostly silent on the issue. Indeed, the only media coverage of the event was limited to four sentences in the third story in the aptly named "North Carolina Insider."

What transpired that day—the number of North Carolinians registered as "Unaffiliated" voters surpassed the number of North Carolinians who were registered as Republicans—might be dismissed by some as an administrative detail or simply data blip on a screen, but as we argue in this paper, we believe it represents much more than that. Of course, North Carolina is not alone in experiencing this trend away from two-party registration. According to Rhodes Cook (2018), by 2018, "Independents" made up the plurality of registered voters in 10 of the 31 states where voters register by party. Nationwide, Democratic and Republican partisan registration shrank from 2000 to 2018, with "Independent" registrants accounting for the positive uptick.

Political scientists have wrestled with the importance of political independents since at least the 1960 publication of *The American Voter*. More recently, Klar and Krupnikov's masterful *Independent Politics* (2016) explored how our hyperpolarized political environment leads to more and more Americans claiming independence. Despite the fact that we have learned a great deal about the political psychology of independence, we have comparatively less information about the size and political behavior of political independents in American politics. Basic questions such as: (1) how many political independents/unaffiliated registered voters are

there? (2) how do registered independents differ from their two party counterparts?, and (3) what might their rise mean for the future of the two party system? remain underexplored.

In this paper, we attempt to address these questions using the case of North Carolina to explore the size, shape and political behavior of Unaffiliated voters in a swing state. Although North Carolina is, of course, not generalizable to the rest of the country, single-state studies can be extremely valuable in state politics research (Nicholson-Crotty and Meier 2002). North Carolina is a representative and politically influential case. It 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 2018).

Previous Work on Political Independents

In perhaps the foundational treatments of voters, *The American Voter* (1960) provided a detailed discussion of voter behavior and partisan identification. In their analysis of voters labeled as Independents. Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes vigorously dispelled the idea of the Independent as a more discerning and attentive voter. Instead, they argue the Independent is almost the antithesis of the idealized voter (Campbell, et. al.,1960). Numerous scholars have argued that this classic is less relevant today due to significant changes in the composition of the electorate (Dennis, 1988; Petrocik, 2009; Dennis, 1988). Subsequent scholars contend that in addition to the changed contours of the electorate, communication by parties and candidates and theories of cognitive mobilization offer a better explanatory framework (Dalton, 2016; Klar and Krupnikov, 2016).

Central to any discussion of Independents is what this portends of partisanship itself (Campbell et.al, 1960; Dennis, 1988a; Dennis, 1988b). For many, the rise in the numbers of Independents is emblematic of declining partisanship (Nie, Verba, Petrocik, 1979; Dennis, 1988b; Dalton, 2013). Dennis admonished those who engaged in "handwringing over the decline of partisanship" without a closer examination of nuances in "political Independence." Scholars have even suggested this as evidence of a possible dealignment (Ladd, 1982; Abramson, 1983; Crotty, 1984; Dennis, 1988b; Dalton, 2013).

Given this obvious relationship of party to self-described independents, one of the most consequential works on partisanship argued that previous scholarship failed to clearly distinguish between "leaners" and "pure" Independents (Keith, Magleby, Nelson, Orr,& Westlye, 1992). For these scholars, this lack of differentiation was not so much an omission but a fundamental exaggeration of the significance of Independents as well as their threat to democratic stability. Indeed, the title of this work, "The Myth of the Independent Voter," has become perhaps the most common caveat for understanding Independents in general. The research on leaners versus pure Independents has been incorporated in most subsequent works on Independents (Petrocik, 2009; Magleby, Nelson & Westlye, 2011).

In addition to their classifications, attention to the attitudes and views of Independents is necessary. Calling oneself an "Independent" could be as much a function of "impression management" than issue disillusionment as individuals eschew a party label for a more positive social norm (Klar & Krupnikov, 2016). Pure Independents continue to be characterized as less civic minded and less informed than partisans (" Keith et.al. 1992; Klar & Krupnikov, 2016; Pew, 2019). Self-identified Independents tend to be younger, and more tend to classify themselves as moderates rather than liberals or conservatives (Pew 2019; Kane, Mason,

Wronski, 2021). Perhaps most significantly are the numbers of leaners and Independents who view the opposing unfavorably (Dennis, 1988b).

Despite disagreements as to how to characterize Independents as Leaners or a separate identity, there is no doubt as to their increasing numbers (Pew 2019, Gallup, 2021). Collapsing leaners and pure Independents, in a 2018 survey by Pew Research Center, thirty-eight percent of the public described themselves as Independents as compared to thirty-one percent as Democrats and twenty percent as Republicans. According to a Gallup Report in April of 2021, the forty-four percent of Americans identifying themselves as Independents represents a six percent jump since the first quarter of 2020. This increase in voters identifying as Independents has had a more pronounced effect on the Republican Party than the Democratic Party.

Decades of scholarship on Independents and Leaners continues to address significant shifts in the electorate and partisan affinities. The central question continues to be their significance in elections (Killian, 2012; Skelley, 2021). Scholars would be well advised to take a deeper look as to where the demographic changes in the electorate are taking place, namely in individual states. Writing in 1989, Barbara Norrander underscores the complexities in Independent voters in the states (Norrander, 1989). Scholars of Independent voters in the various states need to account for "interparty competition, organizational strength of state-level parties, type of primary and primary turnout."

While extant work has brought us a long ways towards understanding the rise in political independents , largely absent are studies examining registered Independent or "Unaffiliated" voters in specific states. Looking at unaffiliated voter in Colorado, Florida and Arizona, a recent NPR program reported that Millennials in Colorado and Puerto Ricans are eschewing party identifies. In Arizona, Independents are "like an oxymoron, but Arizona's unaffiliated,

independent voters are organizing themselves and banding together" (Renata, Marcus, and Joffee-Block, 2016; Roberts, 2021). Indeed, observers of Arizona politics emphasize the need for a "new playbook" to understand and sway their Independent voters (Bush, 2018). States such as Mississippi don't reflect states such as Georgia with its rapidly shifting demographics and population growth. With these fluidities, the political profile of Georgia may necessitate a closer at the electorate and voting patterns (Rayasan, 2021). In a similar pattern, a study of partisanship and unaffiliated voters in North Carolina may contribute to the greater scholarship on Independent voters and Leaners.

The North Carolina Party System: Where Independents are Unaffiliated

One peculiarity of the American electoral system is that our elections are decentralized. Instead of a federal government dictating how elections in the country runs, we instead have 50 state governments making 50 different decisions about how to run their respective elections. This system is the bane of many voters who have to become reacquainted with voting procedures in each state they move to, but a boon to political scientists who want to learn more about how electoral structures influence voter behavior. Nowhere is the importance of this system seen as clearly as in the case of independent voters.

In many states, Independents are excluded from primary elections. For example, in nine "closed primary" states, Independents cannot vote in either party's primary. As a result, many voters who may claim to be Independent on a survey may nonetheless register as a party so they can vote in one party's primary. In 15 states, voters do not register by party at all. Although they are limited to voting in just one party primary a year, any voter in these states may choose any primary in any given year—potentially even bouncing back and forth between parties from one

election to the next. While these states certainly give Independent voters a choice, there is no way to register as Independent in these states so it's difficult to understand the extent to which movement towards avowed independence is translated into electoral behavior.

By contrast, voters in North Carolina do register by party. And that party registration has consequences for which primaries voters can participate in; in North Carolina Democrats can only vote in the Democratic Primary, registered Republicans may only vote in the Republican Primary, registered Libertarians may only vote in the Libertarian Primary, registered Green Party members may only vote in the Green Party Primary, and registered Constitution Party members may only vote in the Constitution Party Primary. Unlike many other states, however, North Carolina voters may also choose to register as "Unaffiliated." Unaffiliated voters do not have the same constraints as voters who are registered with a party—they may vote in any party's primary they choose, albeit courtesy of the political parties and their choice to allow unaffiliateds to participate. Although they can only vote in one primary per election cycle, they can move from one party's primary in one election and another party's primary the next election.

What this means is that voters in North Carolina have a choice to make. They can choose to express their partisanship, receive the (mostly social) benefits of party membership, but be limited in which primary they may choose, or they can choose to register as an Unaffiliated voter, "cover" their political beliefs and maximize their choice in the primary. It's probably not surprising that an increasing number of North Carolinians have chosen the latter option.

A Brief History of North Carolina's Party System

While the description above summarizes the current state of political parties and party primaries in North Carolina, the party system in North Carolina has evolved over the past few

decades. Prior to 1977, there was no "Unaffiliated" option in North Carolina. Instead, voters who did not register with a party selected either "independent" or "no party" categories. People who selected either category were unable to vote in either party's primaries, unless they changed their affiliation on election day to one of the major parties. Not surprisingly, few voters (~4%) took advantage of these options.

In 1977, however, the North Carolina General Assembly began to open the door to changing the status of voters who did not register with party when they passed House Bill 48, a bill that read, "all persons who are recorded on the registration books as "Independent" or "No Party" designees, as of the date of ratification of this fact, shall be presumed to be recorded as "unaffiliated" unless and until such persons request, in the manner provided by law, that their registration record be changed." Under this initial arrangement, Unaffiliated voters were not permitted to vote in either party's primaries unless they changed their registration 21 days before the primary election. Previously, independent and no party voters were able to vote in a party's primary by changing their registration on election day—a provision that, according to the primary sponsor, Democrat Al Adams (Wake County), caused "a lot of confusion and difficulty for registrars" (*News and Observer*, March 16, 1977).

In the end, HB48 was a necessary, but not sufficient condition for opening up the party system in North Carolina. While North Carolinians could register as Unaffiliated, choosing that option rendered them unable to vote in either primary—essentially disenfranchising them from the nomination process and ensuring that few would take advantage of this new registration option.

The next major step towards the current North Carolina primary system occurred in 1986. After a US Supreme Court decision that affirmed the right of state parties to open up their

primaries to Unaffiliated voters, the North Carolina Republican Party began to consider the possibility of changing their party rules. According to Republican political operative Carter Wrenn, opening up the primary system would "strengthen the Republican Party because a lot of conservative Democrats would support a conservative candidate in the Republican primary." The idea, while popular among high-ranking Republicans, remained unpopular among the state's Democratic leadership, including North Carolina Democratic Party State Chair James Van Hecke, who argued "That's why we have political parties. If folks want to participate in primaries, they ought to register and be part of a party" (Christensen, 1986).

The General Assembly gave legal clearance to the idea of opening up primaries in June 1987 when they passed House Bill 559. HB559 gave political parties the right to allow voters from another party to vote in their primary if they chose, although the voter could not "vote in the primary of more than one party on the same day." Approximately one year after the idea surfaced, the state GOP voted on November 1, 1987 to allow Unaffiliated voters to vote in the Republican primary. Although the state Republican Party Chair remarked that he didn't think the decision would make "any appreciable difference," he did tip his hat to the politics of the decision, adding "we think it will help us register people." There was even a fleeting suggestion to allow Democrats to vote in the Republican primary, but that suggestion that was never brought to a party vote because of a "fear that some Democrats, particularly in local elections, might try to nominate the weakest Republican." The Democrats, for their part, held steadfast to the decision that their party primaries would include Democratic voters only. In the words of Democratic Executive Director Ken Eudy, "Democrats should continue to nominate Democrats" (Funk, 1987).

The Democratic commitment to excluding Unaffiliated voters from their primaries continued for eight years. Finally, as the 1986 elections approached, the North Carolina Democratic Party Executive Committee "rolled out the welcome mat to unaffiliated voters" by voting 187-64 in favor of opening the Democratic primary to Unaffiliated voters. Although the vote reflected clear support, that does not imply that there was no resistance. Democratic Party Executive Committee member Lavonia Allison cited fears that Unaffiliated voters, who were mostly white, might "dilute the influence of blacks." Others repeated the fears expressed by some Republicans eight years before, pointing out that voters from outside the party might commit "electioneering mischief" that would hurt the party. The Democratic majority position was perhaps best summarized by Democratic activist Herbert Hyde who put the decision in starkly political terms, admitting "we have been outmaneuvered by the other party…they have made it look like they are inviting people into their party." And with that, the current primary rules in North Carolina were set (Christensen, 1995).

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 unable to let us know about voter intent or attitudes, they do provide a relatively unbiased look at party registration and voter behavior. In contrast to some states which provide one file with both voter registration data and voter history (Cooper, Knotts and Haspel 2008), North Carolina provides two files—the voter registration database, and the voter history file, both of which include line-item information on North Carolina's voters. They can be combined by using a unique identifier ("ncid") to provide a

unique window into who North Carolina's registered voters are, 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. The 2018 and 2019 iterations were mixed mode, combining email responses with responses from live callers, while the 2021 iteration was conducted entirely online due to the Covid-19 pandemic. More information about each poll's margin of error and questions can be found in Appendix A.

Results I: Administrative Data

How has the pool of unaffiliated voters grown?

To provide a better sense of how these changes are reflected in 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[1], or an Unaffiliated voter from 1977-2020. The dark vertical lines indicate the three eras of party registration in North Carolina: the first era from 1977 to 1985 when Unaffiliated voters could not vote in either party's primary, the Second era from 1986-1995 when Unaffiliated voters could vote in the Republican, but not the Democratic primary, and the third era from 1996-2020 where Unaffiliated voters can vote in either party's primary.

[Figure 1 About Here]

[1] The specifics of third party registration vary over time. Today North Carolina has three registered third parties: The Libertarian Party, the Green Party, and the Constitution Party.

There are a number of important plot lines in this figure. The first story revealed by Figure 1 is that the Democratic Party has long dominated North Carolina politics—at least as it relates to voter registration. Much like the rest of the southern states, Republicans did not even approach competitiveness in North Carolina until the 1990s. And while the proportion of North Carolina's voters that are registered Democrats in 2018 is a long cry from where it was in 1977, the plurality of voters in North Carolina today are Democrats. The Republican share of the electorate has remained remarkably consistent over this period—rising from about 24% of the electorate in 1977 to just shy of 30% today.

From the vantage point of this chapter, the most important story from Figure 1 is the meteoric rise in Unaffiliated voters in the Tar Heel State. Whereas in 1977 Unaffiliated voters registered as barely more than a blip on the party registration radar, today they are the second largest group of registered voters in the state. If current trends continue, Unaffiliated voters should become the largest group in the state by 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. The same period also saw decreases in both Republican and Democratic membership (-.24 and -.67 percentage points, respectively).

These changes are not only evident by looking in the rear-view mirror but were apparent to the political observers of the time. As early as 1996, the *News and Observer* featured an article proclaiming, “Independents’ day is here” (Rawlins 1996). The same article quoted the Chair of the Wake County Democratic Party was quoted as saying, “We’ve gone from a traditionally one-party state to a two-party state with a bunch of people who don’t want to be in either one.”

Who are NC's unaffiliated voters?

The data allows for various demographic components to be analyzed for North Carolina registered voters. In this section, registered Unaffiliated voters will be compared to major party (registered Democrats and Republicans) voters by race-ethnicity, generational cohorts, and regions within the state (central cities/urban areas, urban suburbs, surrounding suburban counties, and rural counties).

As the voter registration data includes two separate fields for voter race and voter ethnicity, Table 1 presents a combined 'race-ethnicity' to look at key groups within each registration group. Since 2008, each of the major party registrations has seen distinctive trends in terms of race and ethnicity. Most recently, registered Unaffiliated voters have been closest to the state-wide dynamics when it comes to race-ethnicity. 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 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. However, the "unknown/unreported" race and ethnicity category was higher among Unaffiliated voters

compared to the state (four points higher) in 2020. This is likely due to the North Carolina State Board of Elections' online voter registration portal not asking for a voter's race or ethnicity in 2020.[2]

[Table 1 About Here]

Compared to Unaffiliated voters, registered Democrats became a majority-minority voter group in 2012, with White non-Hispanic/Latinos trending downward as a percentage to 40 percent in 2020. In 2008, Black/African Americans (non-Hispanic) were 40 percent of registered Democrats, and by 2020, they were 45 percent. Among registered Republicans, White non-Hispanic voters have been a significant majority of the voter group: from 2008-2018, they were 93 to 95 percent, while in 2020, with the rise of the 'unknowns/unreported,' that percentage slipped to 87 percent. Table 1 presents the yearly data for each of the three major party registrations.

As Table 2 suggests, 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).[3] 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]

[2] The portal was administered through the North Carolina Department of Motor Vehicle's website and began in early 2020 as a response to the COVID pandemic.
[3] 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.

As demonstrated in Table 2, a 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.

As the nation has become more urbanized, North Carolina has followed a similar trend in terms of voter locations within four distinct regions: the urban counties, divided into central cities and those areas outside the city limits but inside the county ('urban suburbs'); the surrounding suburban counties; and rural counties.[4] Each registered voter is coded into one of the four regions, with the state being 54 percent 'urban' voters (29-32 percent central city and 22-25 percent urban suburb), surrounding suburban county voters being between 21 and 26 percent, and rural counties being 19 to 25 percent of the state's voter pool between 2008 and 2020.

Registered Unaffiliated voters tend to mirror the state's trends most closely among the three major groups: 30-34 percent central city, 23 to 27 percent urban suburbs, 22 to 26 percent surrounding suburban counties, and 17 to 22 percent rural counties between 2008 and 2020. In comparison, the partisan registered voters in North Carolina tend to be more concentrated in a specific region. Among the state's registered Democrats, between one-third and 39 percent were in the central cities, with only 19 to 23 percent in the urban suburbs and surrounding suburban

[4] This designation is based on the 2020 Office of Management and Budget's Bulletin No. 20-01, which provides delineations of Metropolitan Statistical Areas based on the principal city in a county (urban), followed by the other counties in the MSA (designated as surrounding suburban counties). The remaining counties are classified as rural. See https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Bulletin-20-01.pdf, accessed October 15, 2021.

counties, while 21 to 26 percent were in rural counties. The majority of registered Republicans were in suburban North Carolina: 26 to 28 percent in urban suburbs and another 27 to 33 percent in surrounding suburban counties. Only 18 to 22 percent of GOP registered voters were in central cities, with the 19 to 25 percent in rural counties.

Which primaries do North Carolina Unaffiliated registered voters prefer?

North Carolina is considered a semi-closed system for its primary elections, with both parties allowing Unaffiliated voters the opportunity to pick one party to vote in a nomination contest. In the 2008 to 2020 presidential primary elections, Unaffiliated voters tend to pursue the party that is having the most 'spirited' presidential contest. In the May 2008 primary, 76 percent of Unaffiliateds selected the Democratic primary, where Sen. Barack Obama was close to finalizing his nomination battle against then Sen. Hillary Clinton. Only 16 percent of the Unaffiliated voters casting a ballot selected the Republican primary. In 2012 and 2016, 58 and 56 percent chose the GOP primary ballot, compared to 42 percent selecting the Democratic 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.

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 December 5, 2020.

Among these "consistent primary voters" (those who voted in each primary election within one exclusive party (N of over 113,000)), 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, 56 percent voted in GOP primaries, while 44 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 74-26 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 3 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 (68 and 59 percent, respectively), while Boomers and Greatest/Silent generation Unaffiliated voters flipped to being consistently Republican primary voters (54 and 62 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 among urban suburb Unaffiliated voters, 54 percent were consistent Democratic primary voters to 46 percent consistent Republican primary voters. Among

surrounding suburban county Unaffiliated voters, the numbers flipped in partisan primary participation: 65 percent were consistent Republican primary voters. Finally, rural county Unaffiliated voters were also consistent GOP primary voters, at 63 percent.

Is There A Sense of How Registered Unaffiliated Voters Tend To Vote in NC?

We now have a good sense of the size and demographics of the Unaffiliated electorate in North Carolina; we turn next the what the data can reveal about partisan leanings among this critical group of the North Carolina electorate. To address this question, we computed an electorate composition percentage for registered Democrats, Republicans, and Unaffiliated voters, along with the two-party precinct vote percentage Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election contest. To visually assess what, if any relationship, might be present, we analyzed the data through scatterplots of partisan voter composition for each presidential candidate.

Figure 2 presents the Registered Democratic Precinct Electorate Percentage to Biden's Two-Party Precinct Vote Percentage, and shows a clear upward slope (the adjusted r-squared value is 0.694). This signifies that as the percentage of the registered Democrats casting ballots increased in the precincts, so too did Biden's two-party vote percentage. The same dynamic was found in Figure 3 with the Registered Republican Precinct Electorate Percentage and Trump's Two-Party Precinct Vote Percentage, though the adjusted r-squared value was much higher (0.827).

[Figures 2 and 3 About Here]

Next, we estimated a scatterplot for the precinct-level electoral composition measure on the Trump vote in 2020 (Figure 4). The explanatory power of the Unaffiliated precinct electorate was close to zero, however the slopes of the line-of-fit indicated that as the Unaffiliated

percentage increased, the Two-Party Vote Percentages for Trump increased. This suggests that as the percentage of Unaffiliated voters (again, the fastest growing group of registered voters in the state) increases, they tended to lean more Republican in the 2020 Presidential election. Further analysis of this dynamic is needed on this question, and is a project for the future.

[Figure 4 About Here]

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 the nature of public opinion in this key group of partisan registrants. Among other things, we are interested in exploring to what degree their public opinion might resemble one party or another.

We begin with a question among whether the respondents are satisfied with the direction of the country. As Figure 5 indicates, partisans respond thermostatically—rising when their party is in power and falling when their party is out of power. Unaffiliated registrants, however, respond less thermostatically—falling in the middle of both parties, regardless of which party is in control of the White House.

[Figure 5 About Here]

Figure 6 shows similar patterns for approval of Joe Biden. Predictably, a majority of Democrats approve of Biden and a majority of Republicans disapprove of Biden. Unaffiliated voters are divided on this question, with slightly more disapproving than approving. Within the Unaffiliated voters who approve of Biden, 36% approve while only 6% strongly approve. On the opposite side, those Unaffiliated voters who disapprove of Biden were much more likely to strongly disapprove of the President (35% to 15%).

[Figure 6 About Here]

Next, Figure 7 compares each respondent's self-reported ideology to their self-reported party identification. As could be expected, Democrats were more likely to self-report as liberal, Republicans were more likely to self-report as conservative, and Unaffiliated voters were more likely to self-report as "somewhere in the middle." One-quarter of Republicans and Democrats also counted themselves as "somewhere in the middle." Notably, Unaffiliated voters were slightly more likely to identify as conservative than liberal (only 4%).

[Figure 7 About Here]

A majority of all partisans in three different polls reported believing that the current political parties do such a poor job that a third party is needed, with the exception of the Democrats in 2021 (but it's close at 47%). However, Unaffiliated voters have reported that they believe a third party is needed at higher levels than Republicans and Democrats. This is understandable given that Unaffiliated voters are, by definition, not tied to either of the two major political parties. Interestingly, since 2018, the number of Unaffiliated voters who feel this way has slowly but steadily increased. This is likely related to our other findings on the sharp increase in Unaffiliated voters in North Carolina, because those who would become so disenchanted with a party that they would deregister as a partisan and choose to become Unaffiliated would likely believe that a third party is necessary.

[Figure 8 About Here]

Lastly, we examined two policy questions (summarized in Figures 9 and 10) to see if the Unaffiliated voters would be better described as "leaners" or "light" partisans. The first question involved whether the respondent believed it was important for the United States to raise taxes on households making over $400,000, which is a Democratic proposal that might make it into the current infrastructure bill. As can be seen in Figure 9, Democrats understandably support this

measure more than Republicans or Unaffiliated voters. Republicans were divided, with a plurality believing the proposal was critical or important and nearly one-third believing the proposal to be not important. Unaffiliated voter support is between the levels found among Democrats and Republicans, lending support to their claims of being "somewhere in the middle," but among those who find the proposal critical or important and those who find the proposal not important, the Unaffiliated voters were closer to the Republican voters.

[Figure 9 About Here]

The second policy question was about the importance of community college, which is another Democratic proposal that has been floated for several years but was recently removed from the current infrastructure bill. Again, more Democrats find this issue critical or important than Republicans and Unaffiliated voters, and Republicans are more divided. This time, though, a plurality of Republicans believe free community college is not important, and only 29% find it critical or important. Unaffiliated voters hold views more similar to Republicans on this issue as well.

[Figure 10 About Here]

Discussion

Based on the results presented from two distinct sources of data, we can begin to develop a profile of the Unaffiliated electorate in North Carolina. In terms of its size, the group is the fastest growing group of party registrants in the state of North Carolina. There are currently more Unaffiliated registrants than registered Republicans in North Carolina and, if current trends continue, Unaffiliated should surpass Democrats sometime in 2022.

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.

A significant question in the state's politics is, where do these registered Unaffiliated voters tend to lie in their partisan identification? While additional research needs to be conducted, 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. Further research, perhaps utilizing the percentage of a precinct's electorate that is Unaffiliated and casting votes in general elections, would be another potential way to measure how Unaffiliated North Carolina voters are deciding their partisan support.

A review of public opinion data reflects similar trends—Unaffiliated voters in North Carolina are not simply closet partisans. They 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, less than enthralled with the current system.

Altogether, this exploration suggests that the rise in Unaffiliated voters is a trend that should not be ignored and Unaffiliated voters do hold distinct political views, on average. The two major parties should pay attention to this trend and attempt to arrest its development—not only because of what it means for profiling potential voters, but also for what it means for party organization and candidate recruitment, the lifeblood of political parties. With apologies to American Express, the two major parties need to explain why “membership has its privileges,” lest they, too, will be shut out of important markets.

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Appendix A

2021 Meredith Poll
Administered October 15-18, 2021
N: 699
Margin of error: +/- 3.5

2019 Meredith Poll
Administered March 24-April 1, 2019
N: 680
Margin of error: +/- 4

2018 Meredith Poll
Administered March 25-April 30, 2018
N: 1003
Margin of error: +/- 3

On all three polls, the questions were worded exactly the same to enable comparison across time. The question about approval of Joe Biden as president was 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

d. No answer/Refused

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

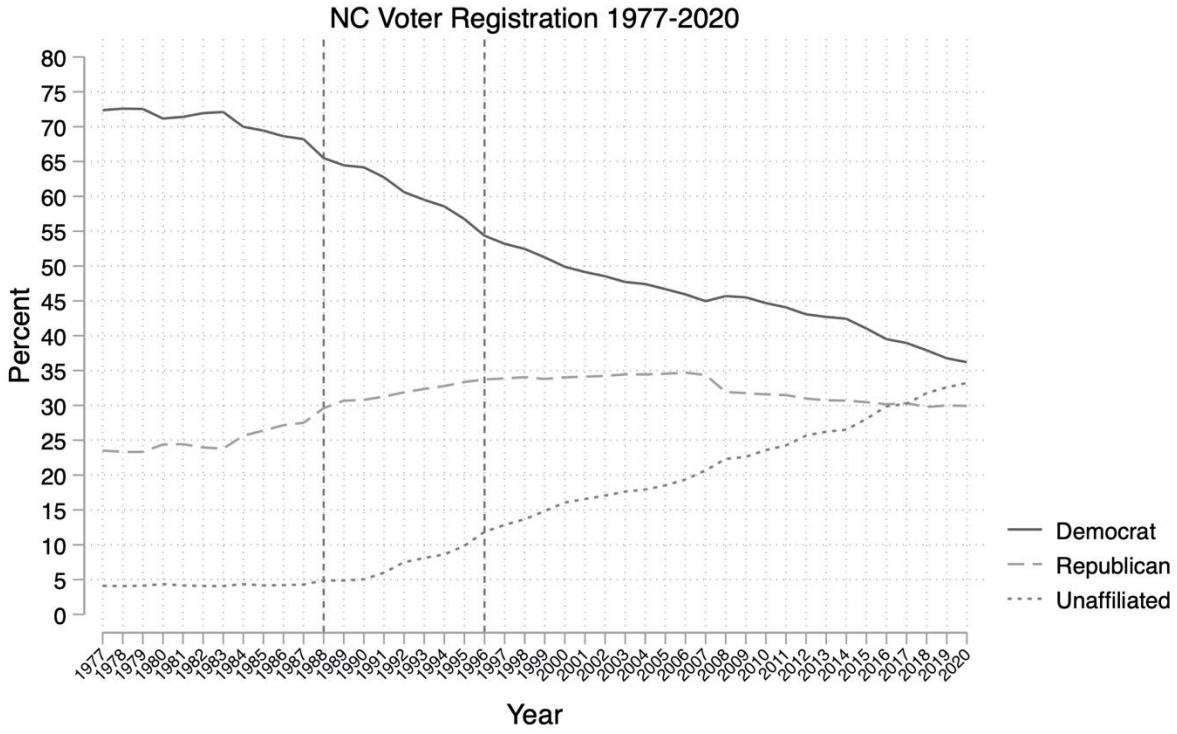
c. Somewhere in the middle

d. Somewhat conservative

e. Very conservative

Chart **: North Carolina Voter Registration by Party Registration,

Figure 1. North Carolina Party Registration 1977-2020



Note: Republicans opened primaries to Unaffiliated voters in 1988. Democrats opened thier primary to Unaffiliated voters in 1996

Figure 2: Scatter Plot of Biden Two-Party Precinct Percentage by Registered Democratic Precinct Electorate Percentage

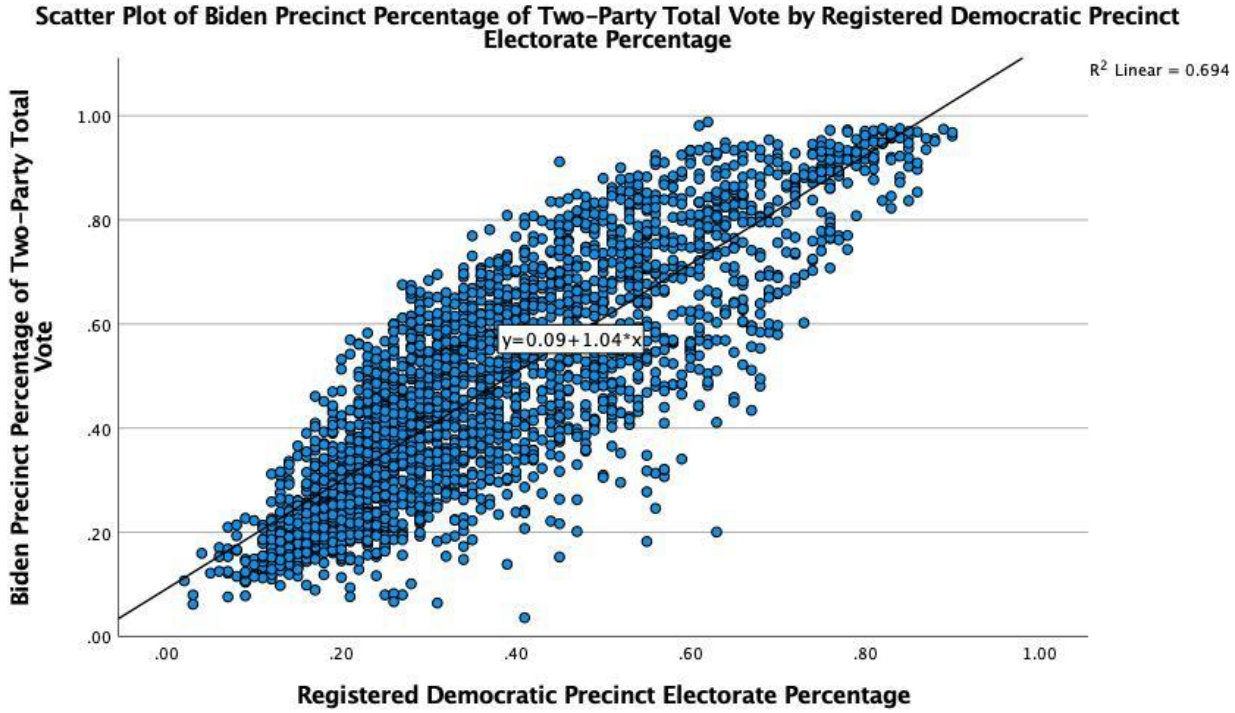


Figure 3: Scatter Plot of Trump Two-Party Precinct Percentage by Registered Republican Precinct Electorate Percentage

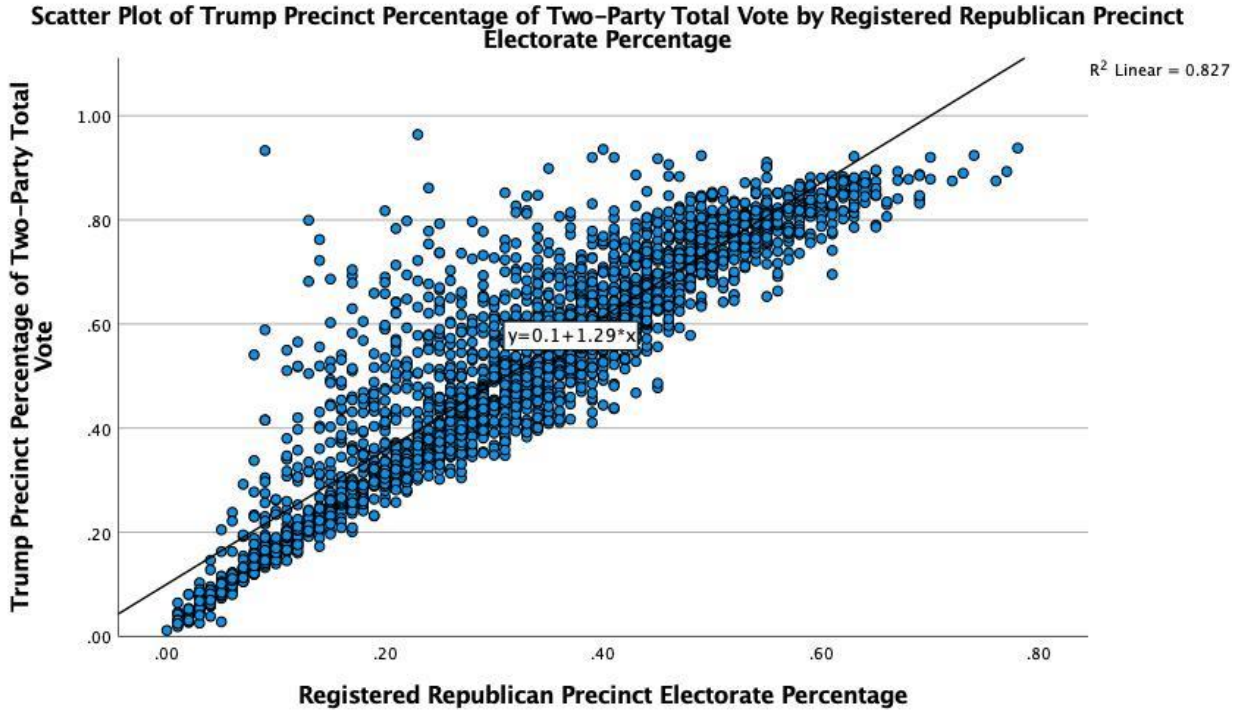


Figure 4. Scatter Plot of Trump Two-Party Precinct Percentage by Registered Unaffiliated Precinct Electorate Percentage

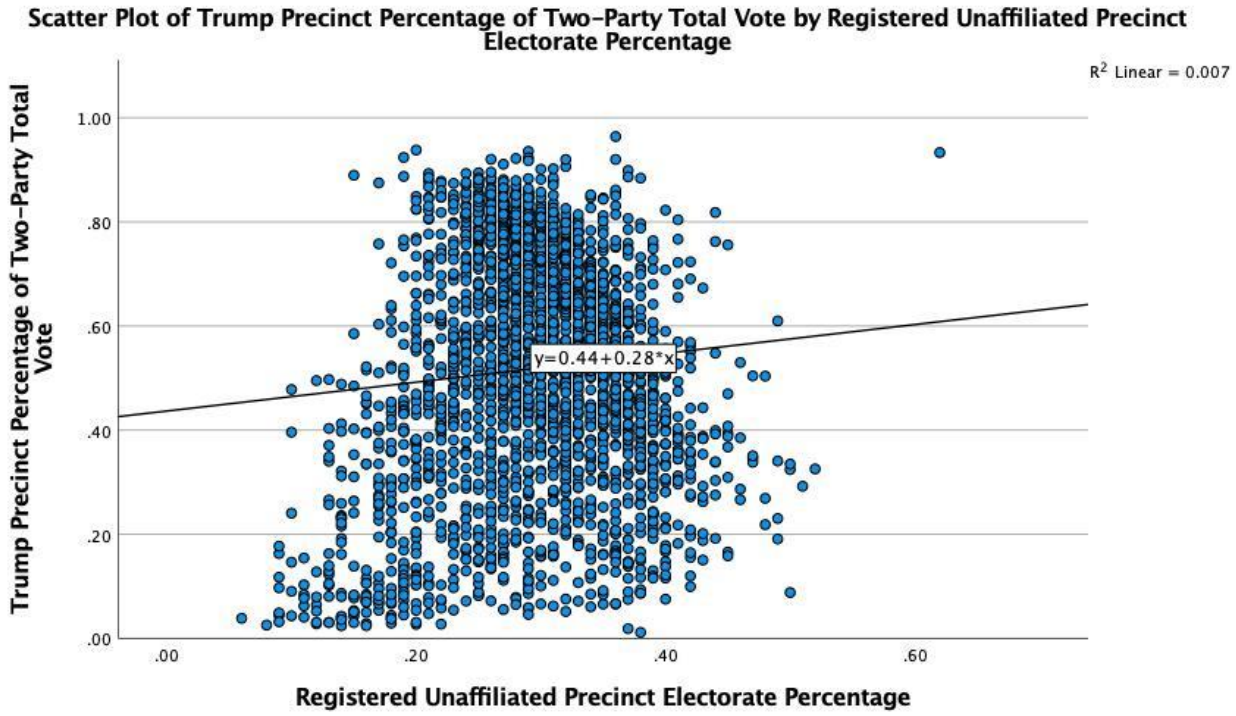


Figure 5.

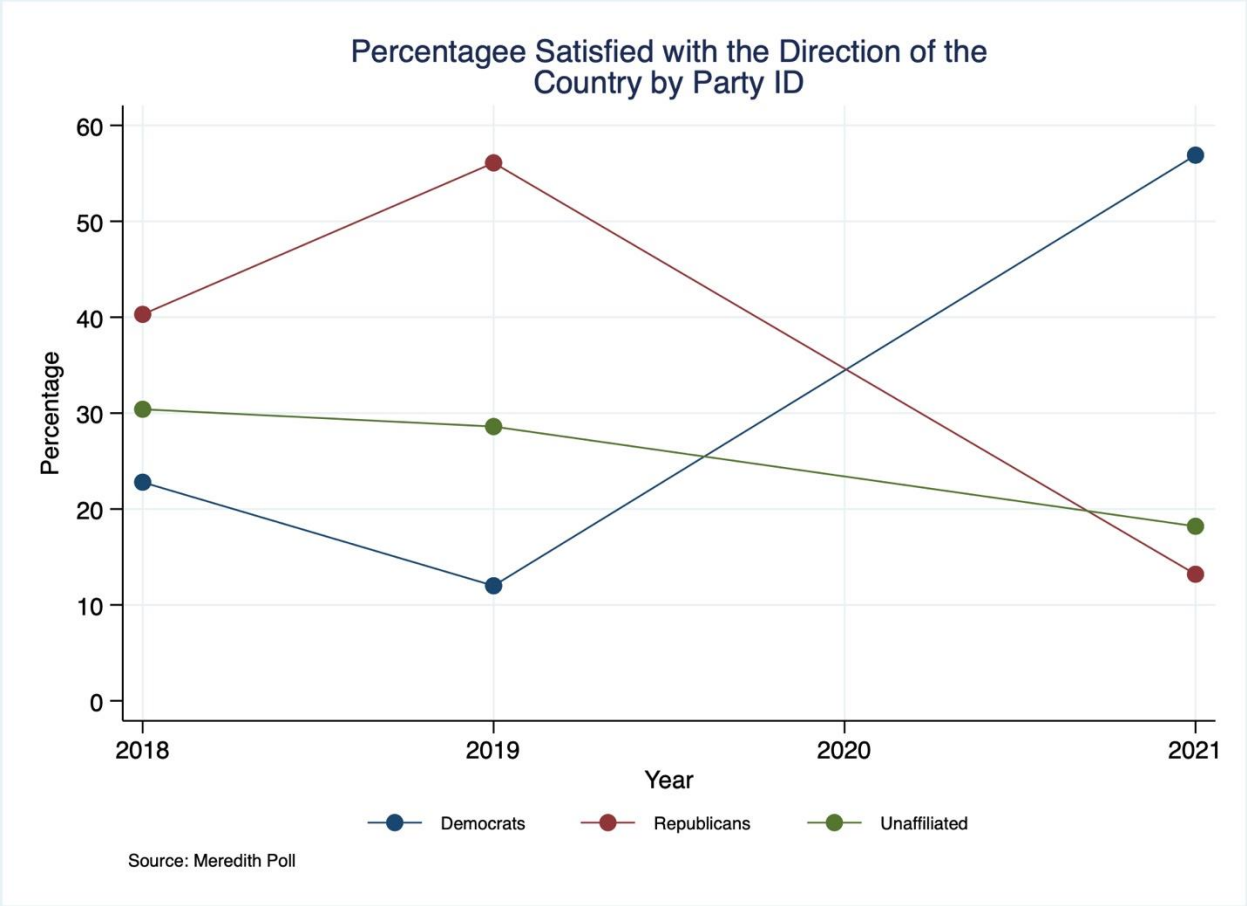

Percentagee Satisfied with the Direction of the Country by Party ID
Percentage
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
2018
2019
2020
2021
Year
Democrats
Republicans
Unaffiliated
Source: Meredith Poll

Figure 6.

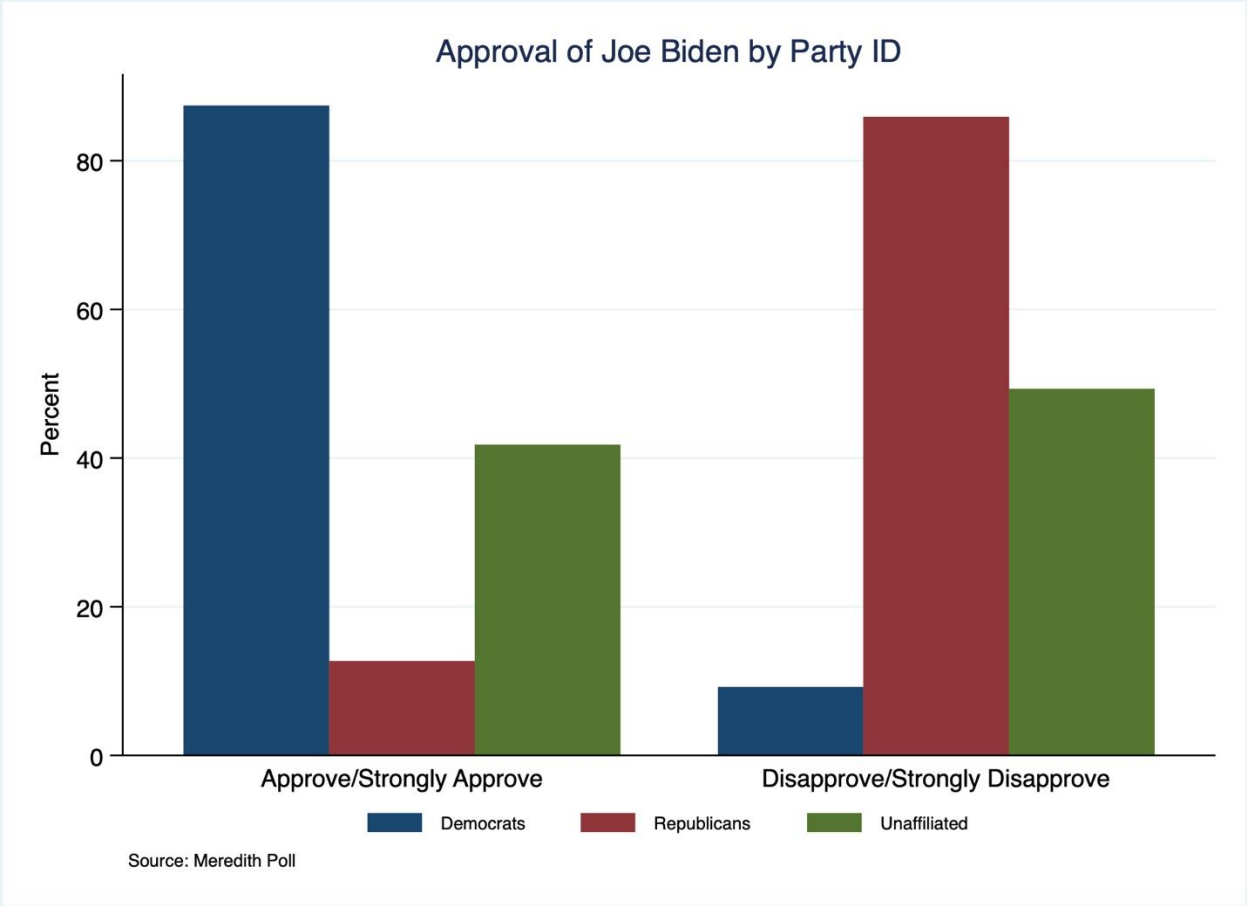

Approval of Joe Biden by Party ID
Percent
0
20
40
60
80
Approve/Strongly Approve
Disapprove/Strongly Disapprove
Democrats
Republicans
Unaffiliated
Source: Meredith Poll

Figure 7.

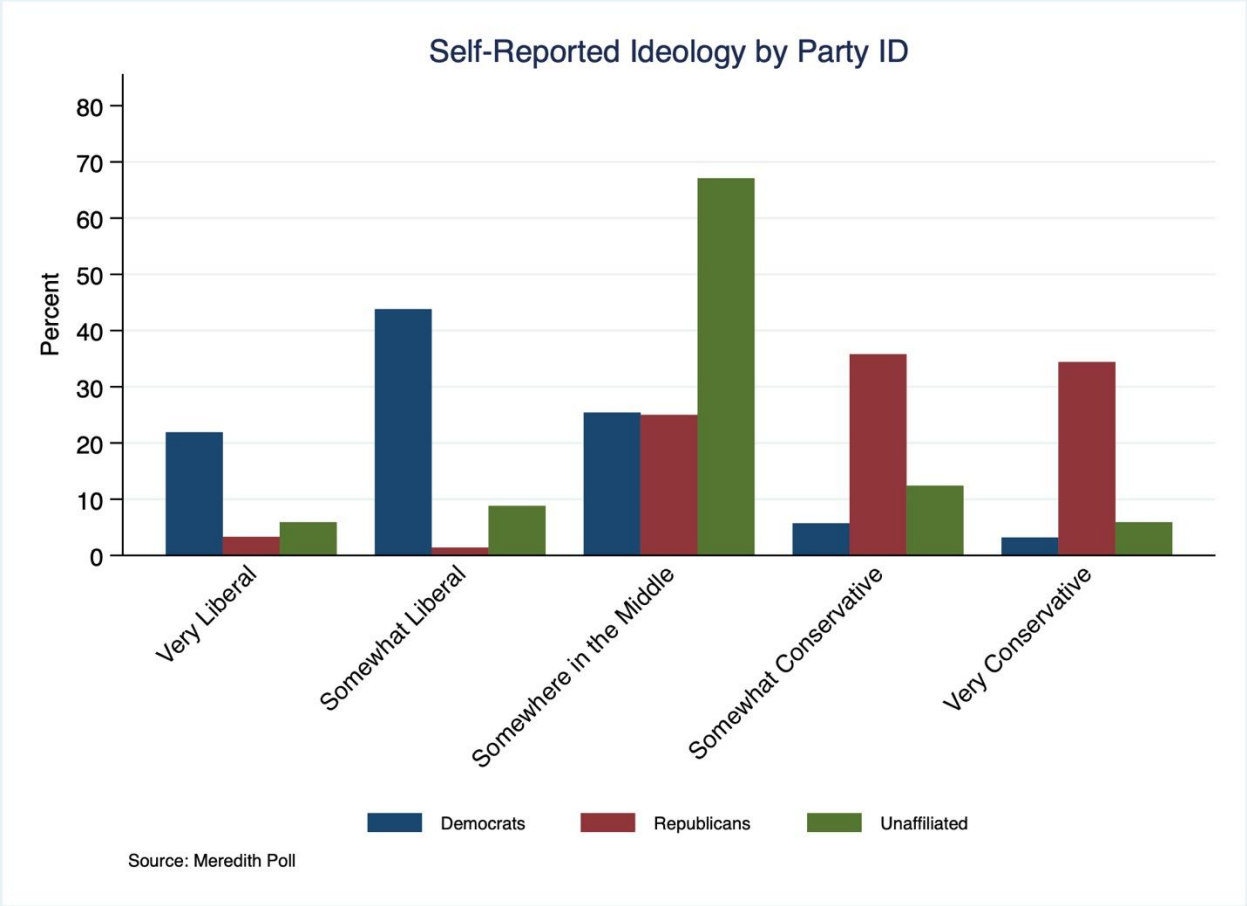

Self-Reported Ideology by Party ID
Percent
0
10
20
30
40
50
60
70
80
Very Liberal
Somewhat Liberal
Somewhere in the Middle
Somewhat Conservative
Very Conservative
Democrats
Republicans
Unaffiliated
Source: Meredith Poll

Figure 8.

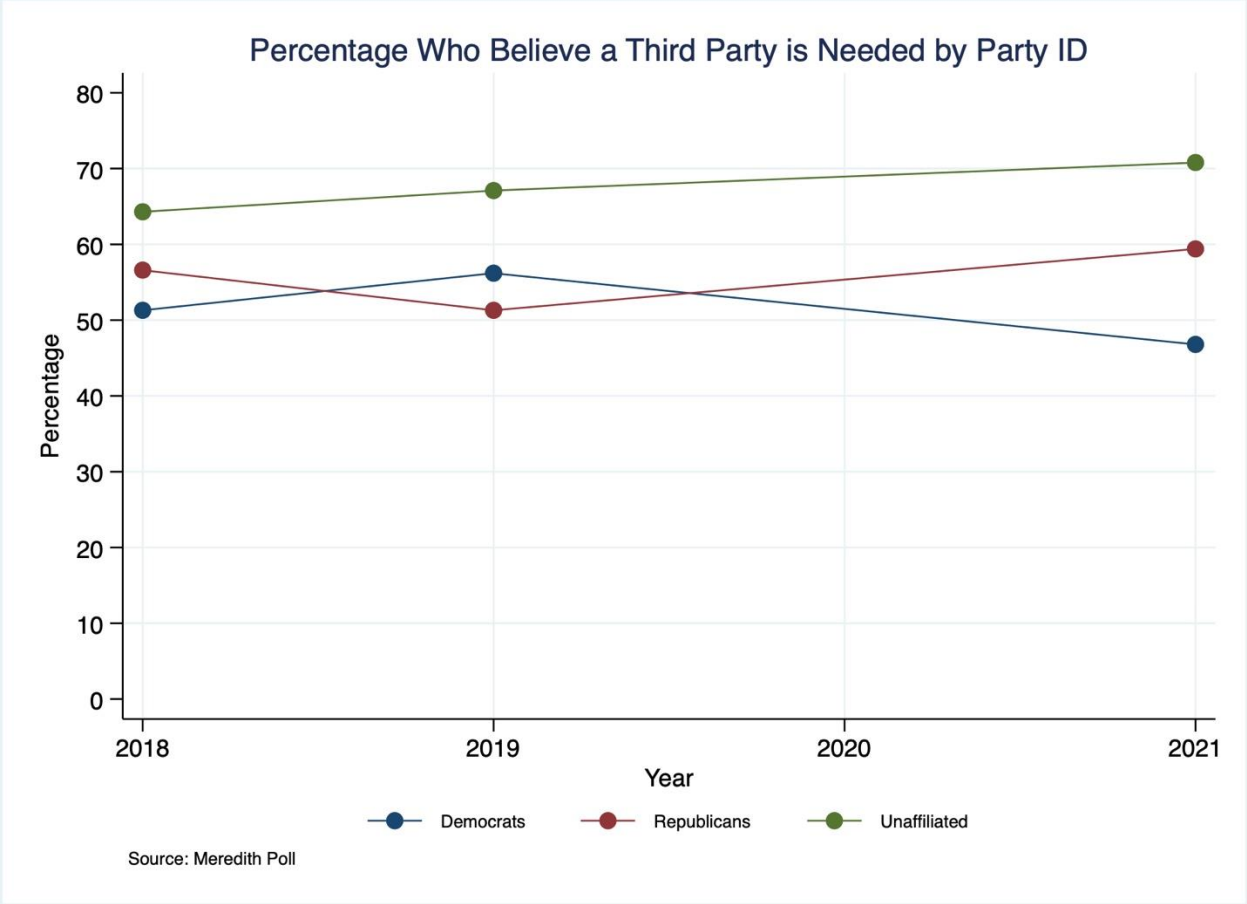

Percentage Who Believe a Third Party is Needed by Party ID
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
Percentage
2018
2019
2020
2021
Year
Democrats
Republicans
Unaffiliated
Source: Meredith Poll

Figure 9.

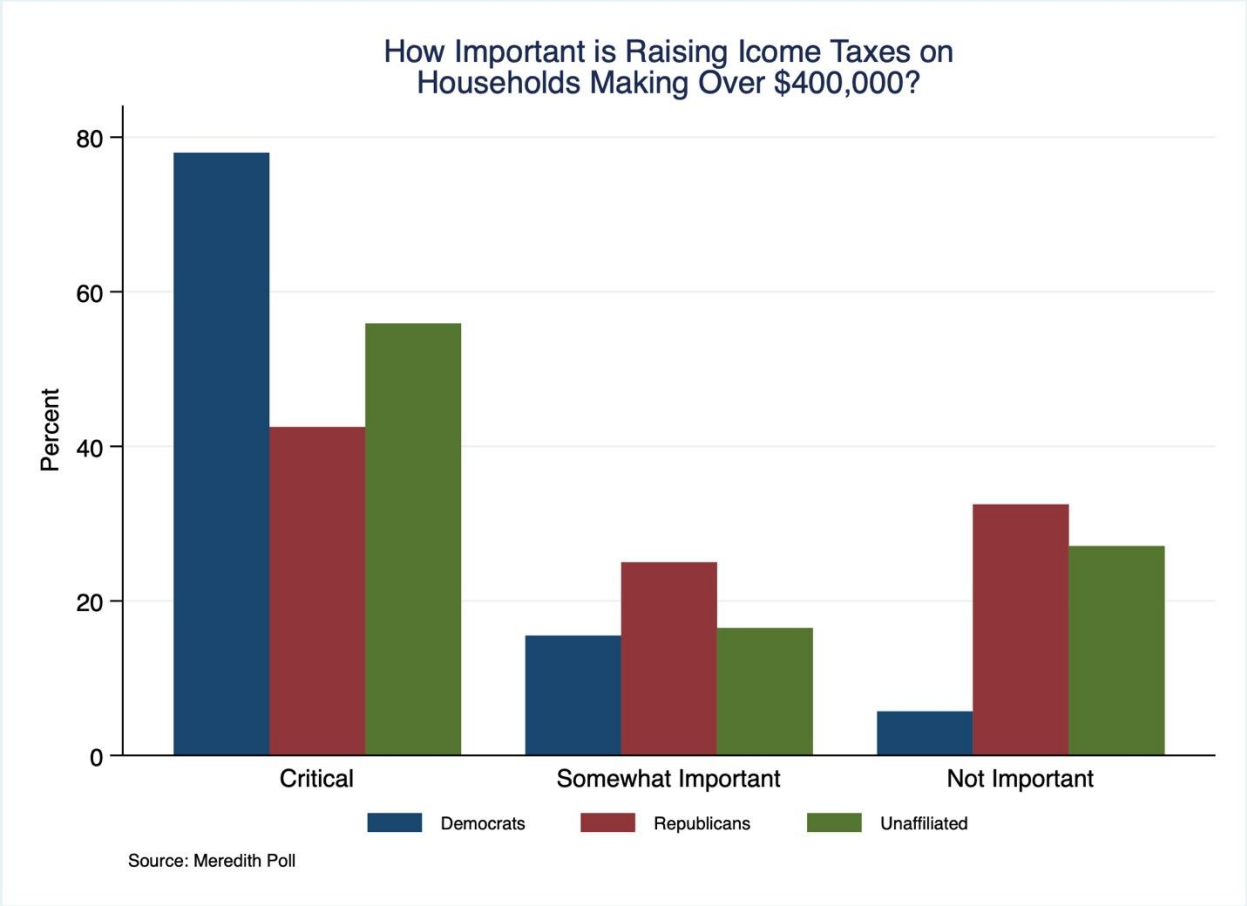

How Important is Raising Icome Taxes on Households Making Over $400,000?
Percent
80
60
40
20
0
Critical
Somewhat Important
Not Important
Democrats
Republicans
Unaffiliated
Source: Meredith Poll

Figure 10.

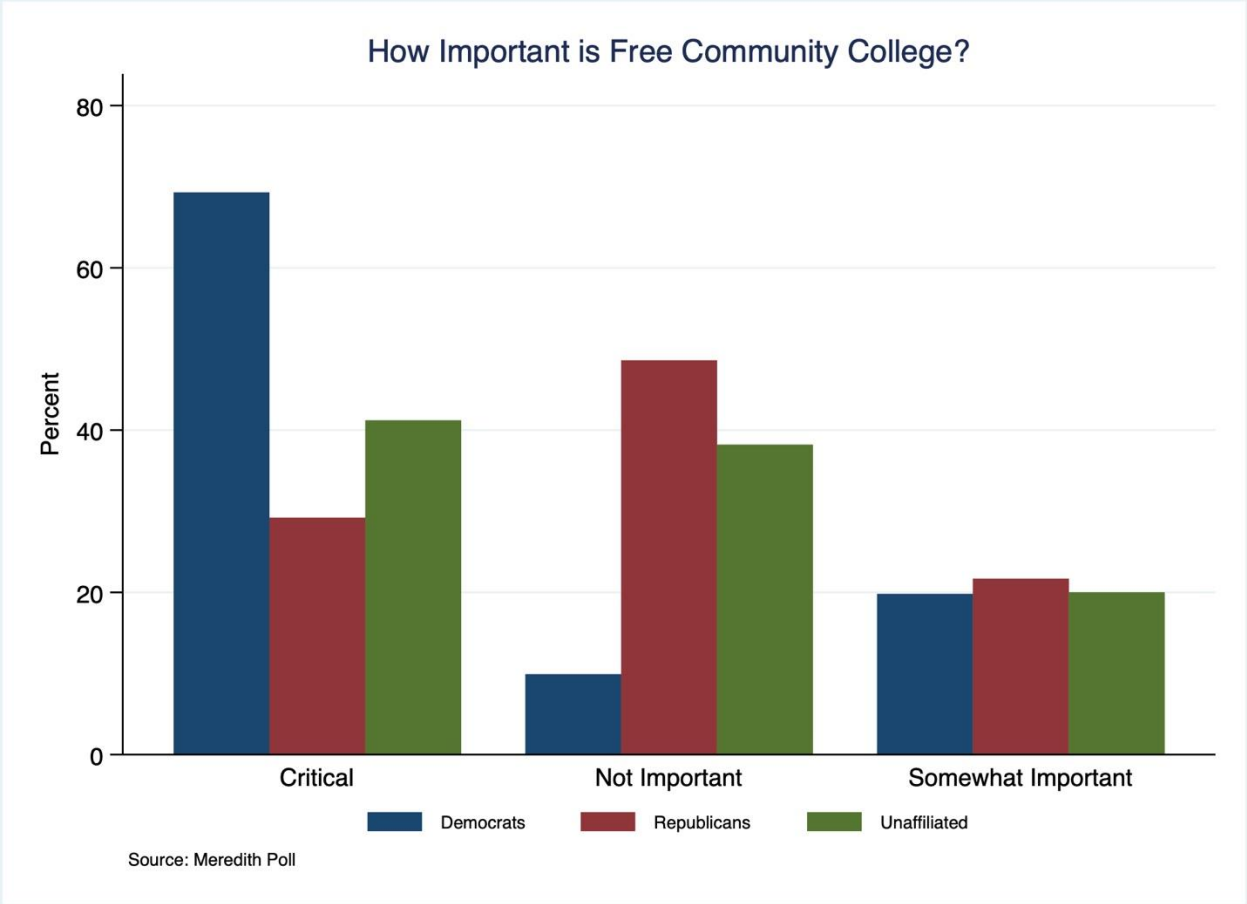

How Important is Free Community College?
Percent
80
60
40
20
0
Critical
Not Important
Somewhat Important
Democrats
Republicans
Unaffiliated
Source: Meredith Poll

Table 1: Race/Ethnicity by Party Registration, 2008-2020

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

Table 2: Generational Cohort by Party Registration, 2008-2020

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

Table 3. NC Unaffiliated Registered Voters Who Consistently Cast Ballots in 2012, 2016, and 2020 Primaries (either Democratic or Republican)

	Voted in 2012, 2016 and 2020 Democratic Primaries	Voted in 2012, 2016 and 2020 Republican Primaries	N
State	50%	50%	113,466
White non-Hispanic	44%	56%	95,506
Black/African American non-Hispanic	96%	4%	10,205
Hispanic/Latino any race	74%	26%	830
Asian non-Hispanic	75%	25%	568
American Indian non-Hispanic	71%	29%	536
Multi-racial non-Hispanic	74%	26%	364
Other races non-Hispanic	71%	29%	1,018
Unknown/Unreported race and ethnicity	63%	37%	4,438
Female	54%	46%	56,848
Male	45%	55%	53,458
Millennial	68%	32%	10,500
Generation X	59%	41%	29,433
Boomer	46%	54%	55,032
Greatest/Silent	38%	62%	18,499
Central City Voters	74%	26%	24,668
Urban Suburb Voters	54%	46%	36,467
Surrounding Suburban County Voters	35%	65%	29,420
Rural County Voters	37%	63%	22,912