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Policy Paper



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American Primary Reform

INCREASING VOTER PARTICIPATION

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AUTHOR

Laurin Schwab

Policy Analyst

laurin@newcenter.org

ABOUT THE NEW CENTER

American politics is broken, with the far left and far right making it increasingly impossible to govern. This will not change until a vibrant center emerges with an agenda that appeals to the vast majority of the American people. This is the mission of The New Center, which aims to establish the ideas and the community to create a powerful political center in today's America.

THE NEW CENTER

1808 I Street NW, Fl. 5

Washington, D.C. 20006

www.newcenter.org

Executive Summary

NEW CENTER SOLUTION:

Increasing Voter Participation

**This is part three of a three-part series on fixing America's dysfunctional primary election system.*

America's democracy is dysfunctional, and our primary election system is a major contributor to the problem. Across every level of government and nearly every U.S. state, primary rules punish small parties and independents, contribute to low voter turnout, and enable the election of unqualified or extreme candidates. Presidential primaries stand up against these issues and more, with the Democratic National Committee in particular struggling to balance party and popular control in 2020.

In an age of intensifying political antipathy, primaries could be the most urgent of electoral issues. With more and more areas of the country reliably Democratic or Republican, primary elections were the only races that mattered in 40% of state House and Assembly races in 2016, with 4,700 seats up for election but 998 Democrats and 963 Republicans running without contest from the opposing party.¹

Primaries will also be the only races that matter for 78% of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives in the 2020 elections, with The Cook Political report pegging 343 of 435 seats as safe for one party.²

With such a powerful impact, primaries amplify the voices of the few who turn out. In the 2016 presidential primaries, only 57.6 million people in a country of 200 million registered voters went to the voting booths, effectively making the choice for everyone to nominate Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump—the two most unpopular presidential candidates in recent U.S. history.³



Reforming American primaries will be difficult. It will require significant efforts on behalf of parties, state governments, and the American people alike, and will demand counterintuitive solutions. Reducing political polarization, for example, might require party vetting that lends more control of the primary process to leaders in the Democratic and Republican Parties.

Despite these challenges, now is the time to act.

And while there’s no silver bullet, The New Center suggests three avenues for reform that are likely to make our elections more representative and responsive to the needs of voters:



1. LETTING THE PARTIES DECIDE WHO REPRESENTS THEM

- Bring back superdelegate influence to Democratic presidential primaries
- Consider different methods for balancing superdelegate and delegate power



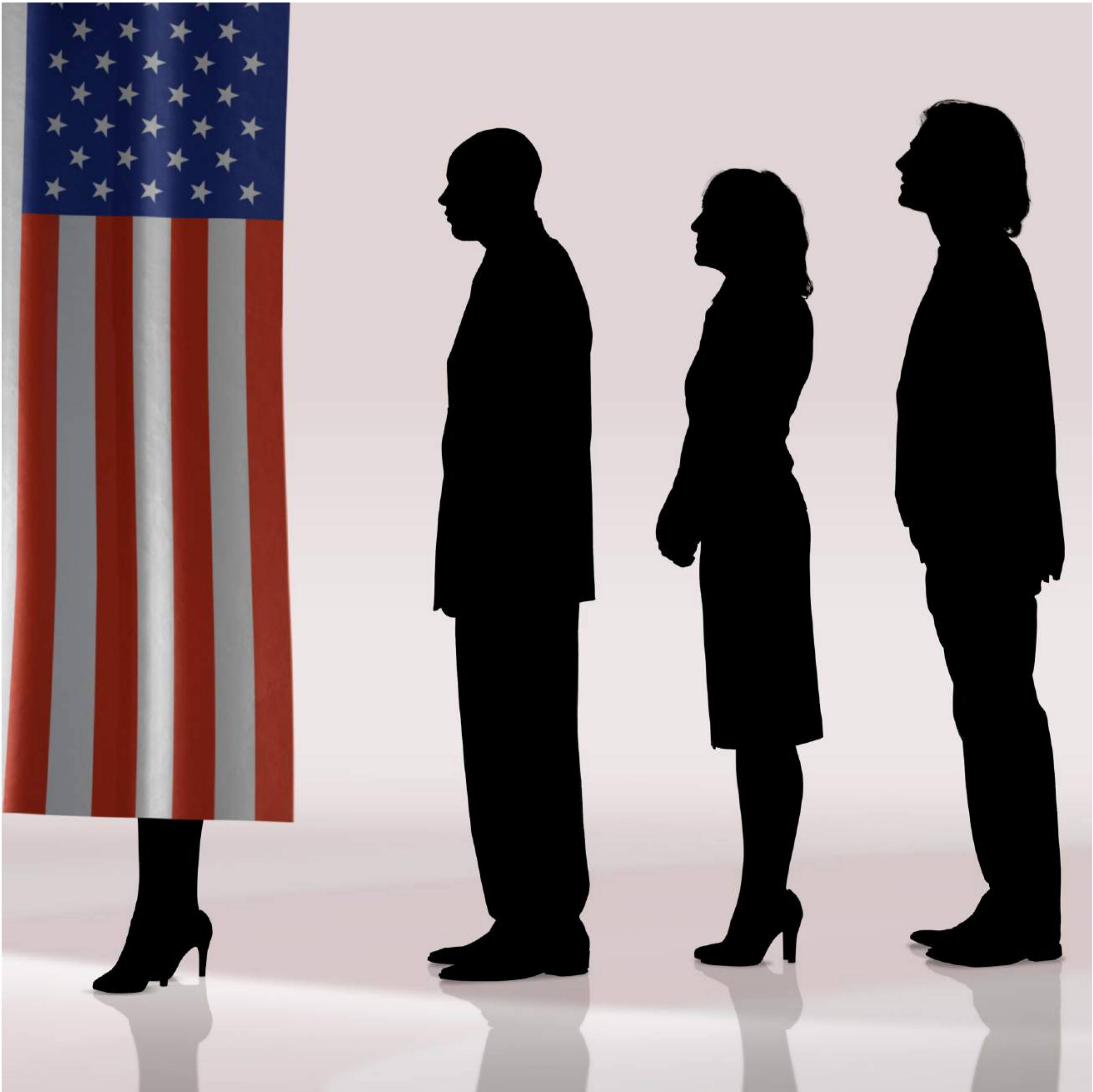
2. CLEARING THE PATH FOR NEW PARTIES

- Remove ballot red tape for new parties, minor parties, and independents
- Bring back "fusion" candidacies



3. INCREASING VOTER PARTICIPATION

- Eliminate caucuses
- Establish a national primary day for congressional primaries
- Create a rotating system for first primary states
- Establish a Bipartisan Board for Voter Registration
- Establish universal early voting, same-day registration, and accessible absentee voting



Introduction

Increasing Voter Participation

Compared to turnout for the presidential elections in November, very few Americans turn out for primaries. Turnout is typically lower for presidential, congressional, gubernatorial, and state and local primaries.

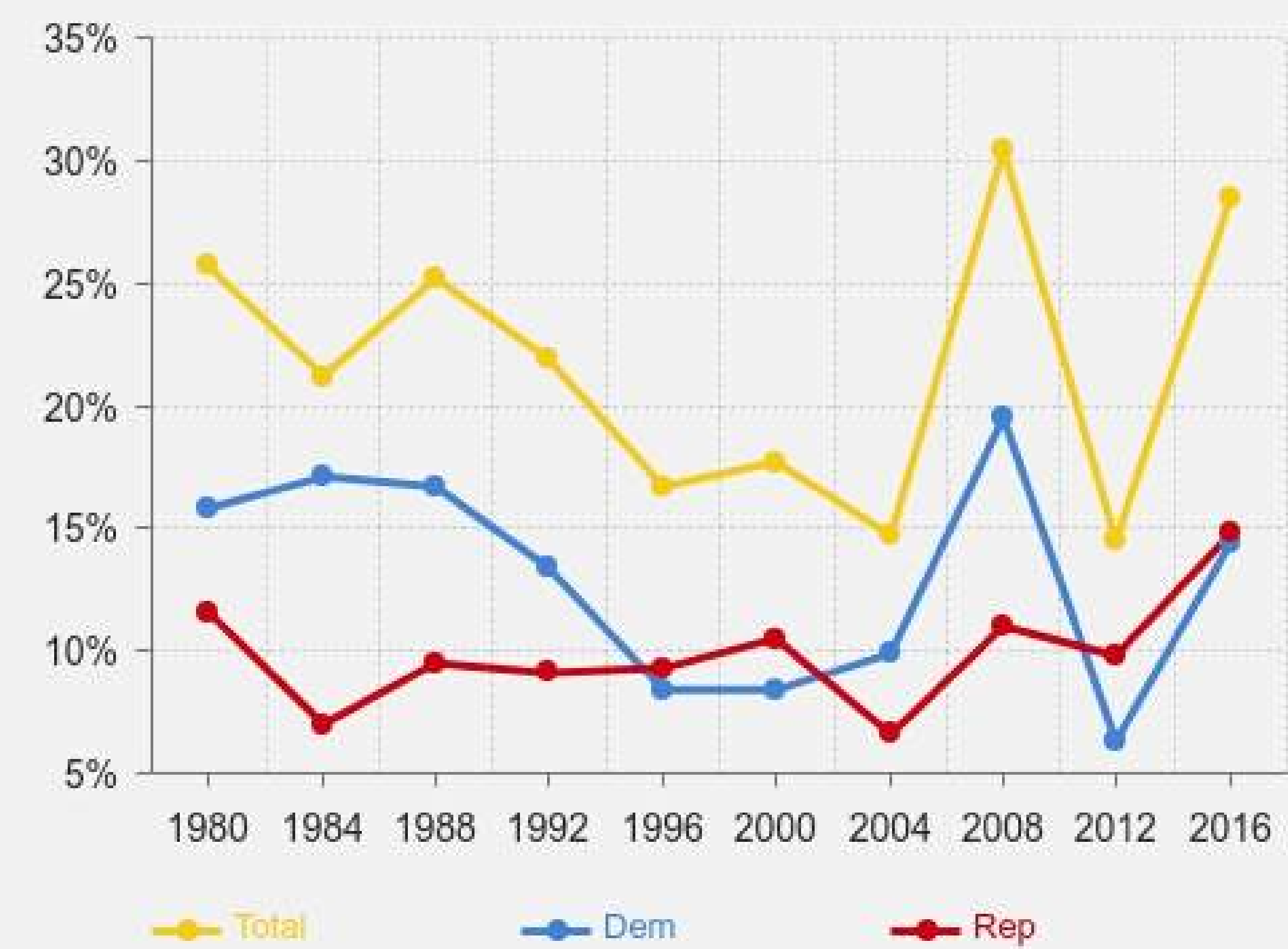
While presidential election turnout has hovered between 48% and 62% from the early 1900s until today, presidential primary turnout is a fraction of this range.⁴

Typically, up to 30% of eligible Americans vote in presidential primaries—but this figure is misleading. Because there are two presidential primaries, one for the Democratic candidate and one for the Republican candidate, an even tinier sliver turns up for each. The size of this sliver ranges from around 6% to 15% of the voting-eligible population.

In the lowest turnout years from 1980 to now, for example, only about 6.6% of all eligible primary voters voted on the Republican nominee in 2004 and only about 6.3% of all eligible primary voters voted on the Democratic nominee in 2012.⁵ (These estimates are imperfect because they don't account for caucuses or crossover voting in open primary states.)

After a long decline, primary turnout rebounds

Votes cast in Democratic and Republican primaries as a share of eligible voters in primary states



Note: Total turnout does not equal the sum of turnout in Democratic and Republican primaries because some states only held primaries for one or the other party. Data from U.S. territories not included. 2016 figures exclude D.C. Democratic party, to be held June 14. Eligible voters are defined as U.S. citizens ages 18 and older.

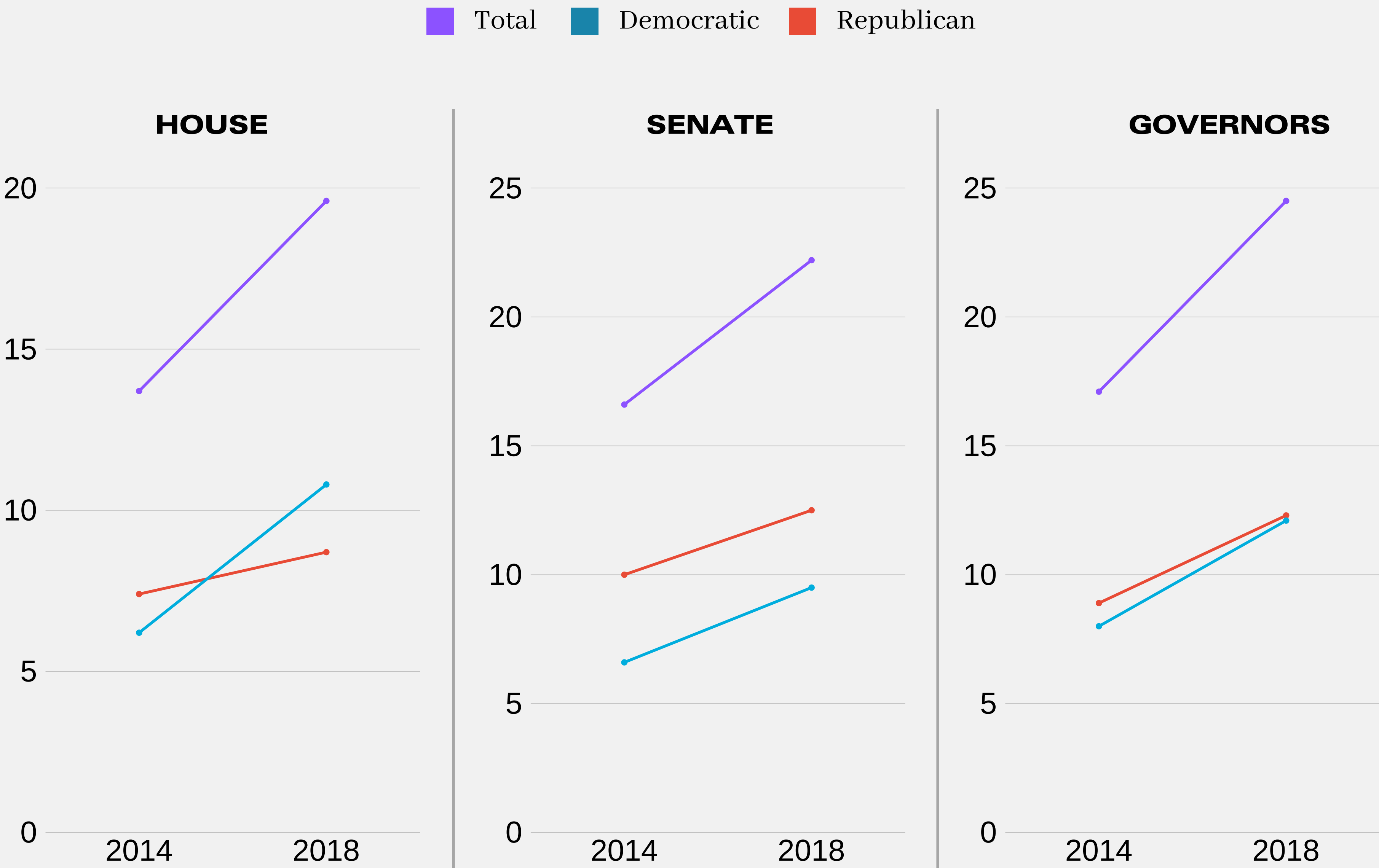
Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 1980-2012 November and January 2016 Current Population Survey data for the share of eligible voters. 1980-2004 and 2013 voting data from "America Votes" (CQ Press); 2008 Data from "Vital Statistics on American Politics, 2011-2012" (CQ Press). 2016 data are from state election offices, when available, or as reported by The New York Times.

Extremely low primary turnout poses a challenge for American democracy; how can general election voters choose the right candidate when their choice menu is selected by others, and when this narrow sliver can be different—demographically and ideologically—from the population at large? By delving into the data, the Primaries Project at Brookings demonstrates that population characteristics of midterm primary voters and overall voting age population (VAP) vary considerably.

Congressional primary voters are wealthier, more educated, and older than their non-primary-voting peers. Republican primary voters, for example, are 12% more likely to earn over \$150,000 per year than the VAP. (Democrats are 6%.) Both Democrat and Republican primary voters are far more likely to have completed a college degree or higher, and the 18- to 39-year-old bracket makes up about 37% of the U.S. population but only 19% of the Republican primary electorate and 30% of the Democratic one.⁷

TURNOUT WAS UP SHARPLY IN 2018 PRIMARIES

Primary election turnout as % of registered voters



Note: For both years, data cover all regularly scheduled primaries; runoffs and special elections are excluded. Registered-voter figures are most recent reported by states before their respective primary dates, and include active voters only (when so reported). Undervotes, overvotes, blank ballots and other void or spoiled ballots excluded from vote totals. Third party shares not shown.

"I don't care who does the electing so long as I get to do the nominating."

-Boss Tweed, famous as the corrupt "boss" of New York Political organization Tammany Hall during the second half of the 19th century⁹

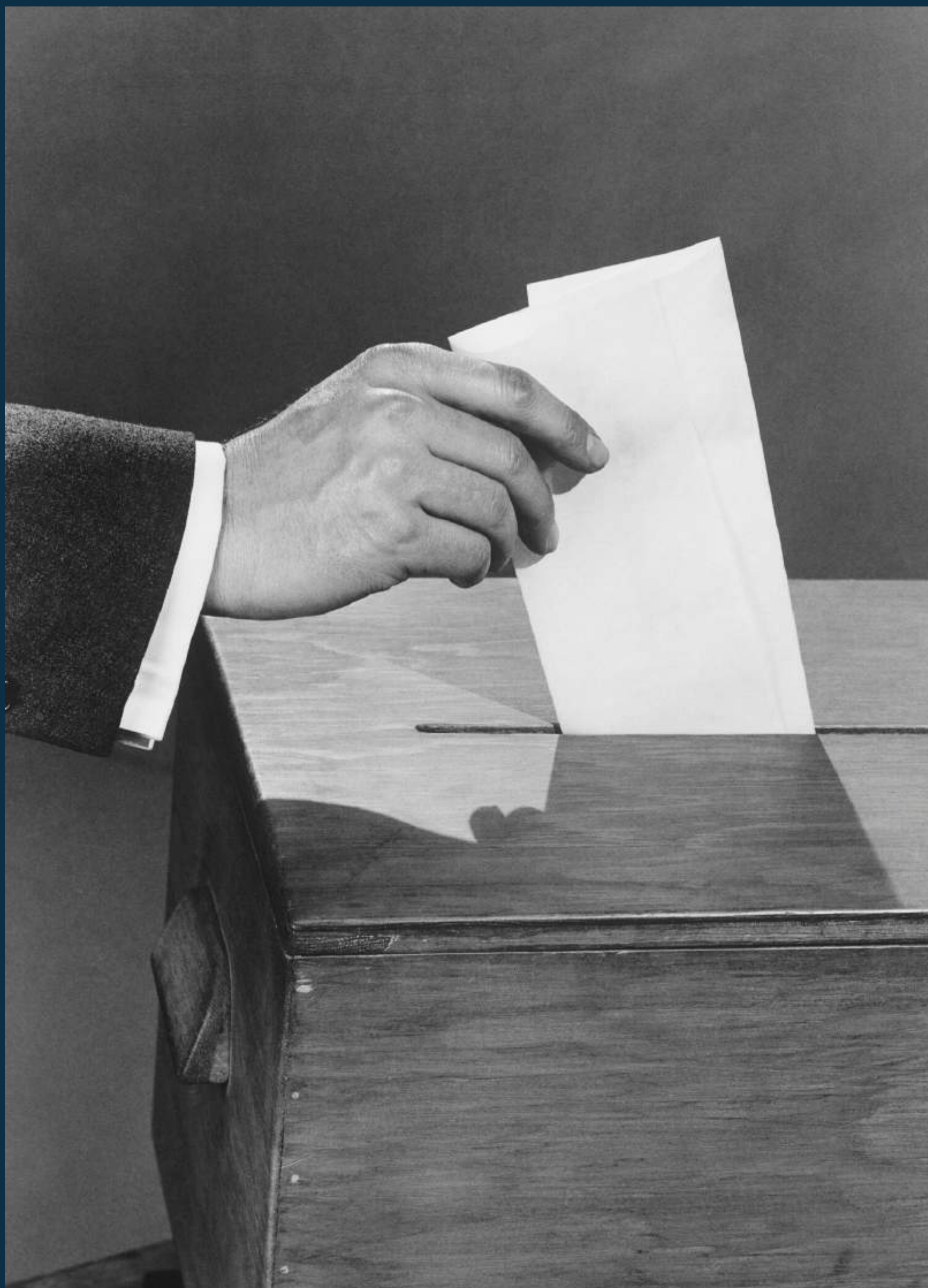
Selecting the menu is just as, if not more important, than choosing the final dish. If the primary voting bloc differs from the general population, it could produce candidates who don't represent the interests of Americans overall, advancing their frustrations. To improve the primaries and revive our civic health, the federal government and the states should bulldoze barriers that prevent more people from voting, particularly in primaries.

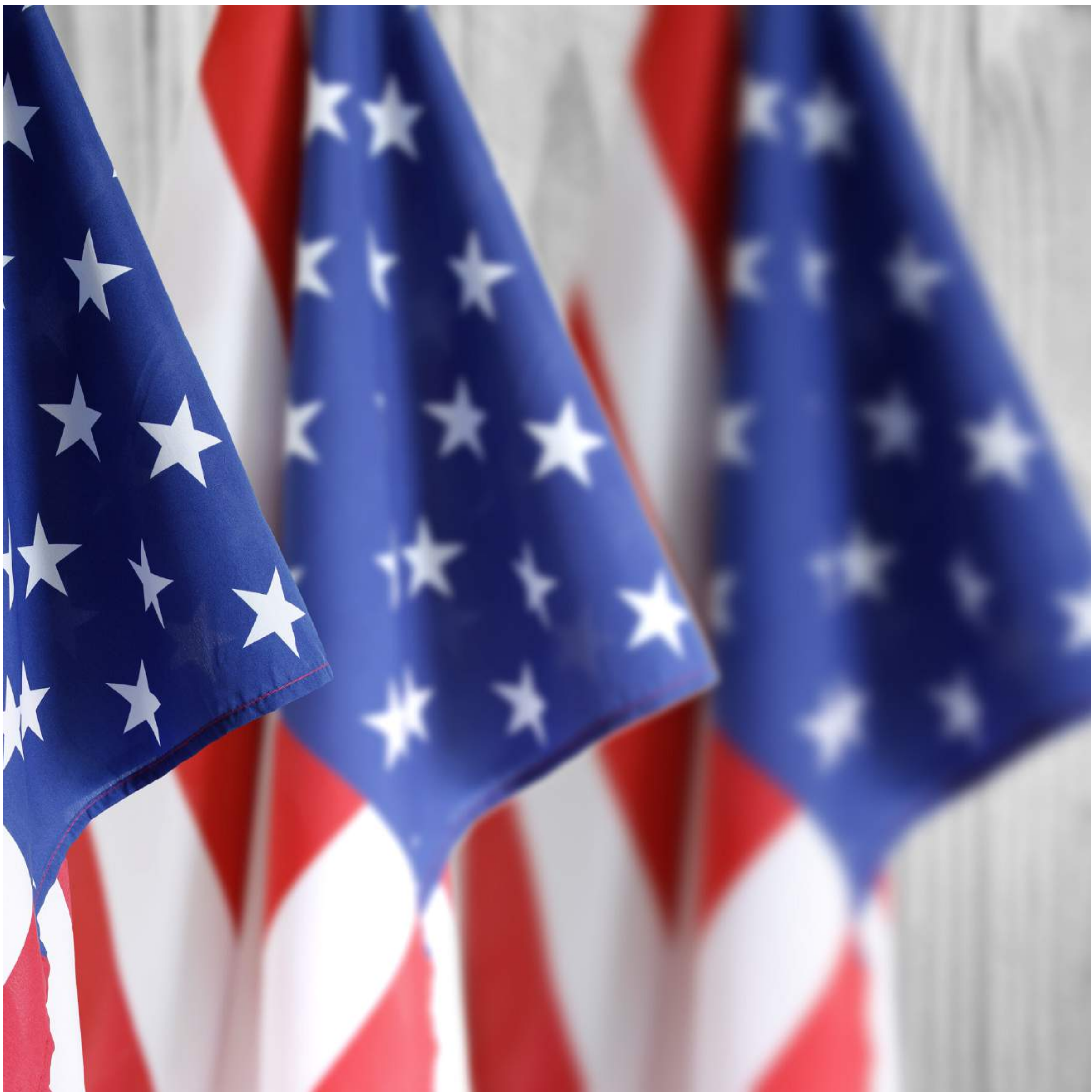


ARE PRIMARY VOTERS REALLY MORE IDEOLOGICALLY EXTREME?

While the research consensus here is muddy, primary voters might not be as extreme as popularly assumed. Data-driven research measuring extremity with sliding scale issue questions tends to find that while partisan primary voters are more politically engaged, they're scarcely more ideologically intense than their non-primary-voting, general-election-voting partisan peers.¹⁰

A group of researchers from UCLA, George Washington University, and MIT came to the same conclusion in their 2016 paper, "On the Representativeness of Primary Electorates." Examining primary turnout with five large ideological surveys between 2008 and 2014, they found little partisan difference between primary voters and party members overall—that is, besides a more rigorous passion for politics.¹¹





The Problems

Iowa and New Hampshire Distort Presidential Primaries

The first presidential primaries and caucuses of 2020 are set for February 3rd (Iowa caucuses), February 11th (New Hampshire primaries), February 22nd (Nevada Democratic caucuses), and February 29th (the South Carolina Democratic primary).¹² Both Iowa and New Hampshire have long histories of hosting the first presidential contests in the nation. While exact impacts are unknown, these contests appear to disproportionately influence voting in the primaries that succeed them. In the last 40 years, no Republican has won the party's primary without winning either Iowa or New Hampshire.

Since 1976, six out of eight eventual Republican nominees won New Hampshire, and seven out of nine eventual Democratic nominees won Iowa.¹³

In 2010, economists quantified this impact more precisely using daily polls from the 2004 primary season. According to Brian Knight of Brown and Nathan Schiff of the Sauder School of Business, Iowa and New Hampshire voters respectively had up to five and four times the influence of Super Tuesday voters during the 2004 Democratic presidential primaries. Knight and Schiff credit this influence to “momentum effects,” finding that candidates benefit when their results in early states outpace expectations.¹⁴

This influence is problematic when the populations of New Hampshire and Iowa don't match that of the nation overall.¹⁵
93.2% and 90.7% of people in New Hampshire and Iowa were white in 2010, compared to 69.1% of the population overall.¹⁶

And only 5.9% and 5% of the people of New Hampshire and Iowa were immigrants compared to 13.4% nationally.¹⁷ This means that a narrow slice of voters, demographically distinct from the nation overall, enjoy disproportionate influence over the nominee.

Not only does this privilege distort who wins, but it also distorts federal economic policy, most glaringly through subsidies of Iowan ethanol. As David Leonhardt opines in The New York Times, ethanol subsidies “drive up food prices and do little to solve the climate problem” but exist because candidates “pander to the Iowa corn industry.”¹⁸ In 2011 alone, the ethanol blender's credit subsidy reached \$5.7 billion—or just \$1.4 billion short of the sum the federal government gave to the entire state of Wyoming in 2017.¹⁹ But the early-voting states benefit in other ways, too.

In a 2009 study from North Carolina State University, a researcher analyzed federal funding from 1984 to 2004 and came to a stark conclusion. During competitive elections, voting order mattered for early-voting states that picked the winning candidate. For every spot upward in the order of primaries and caucuses, they received between 84 and 95 cents more per capita in federal procurement spending.²⁰





Not Everyone Can Vote on Weekdays (or Weekends, for That Matter)

While low primary turnout can stem from general political disinterest, logistical factors can make voting more difficult. Traditionally, voting for the president, the House, and the Senate is held on the Tuesday after the first Monday of November—a day that, for many, conflicts with professional obligations. The date was first adopted for the presidential election in 1845, then generally expanded to House and Senate votes over the years. Its establishment helped 19th-century farmers travel long distances to polling locations after the harvest, and allowed Christians to enjoy All Saints Day on November 1st.²¹

This made sense when farmers made up 64% of the American workforce in 1850.²² But agricultural employees made up only 11% of the 2017 U.S. workforce, which is dominated by time-crunched white- and blue-collar workers of the five-day work week.²³ In a survey of 181 registered voters who didn't vote in 2014, 35% told the Pew Research Center that they didn't vote due to scheduling conflicts with school or work.²⁴

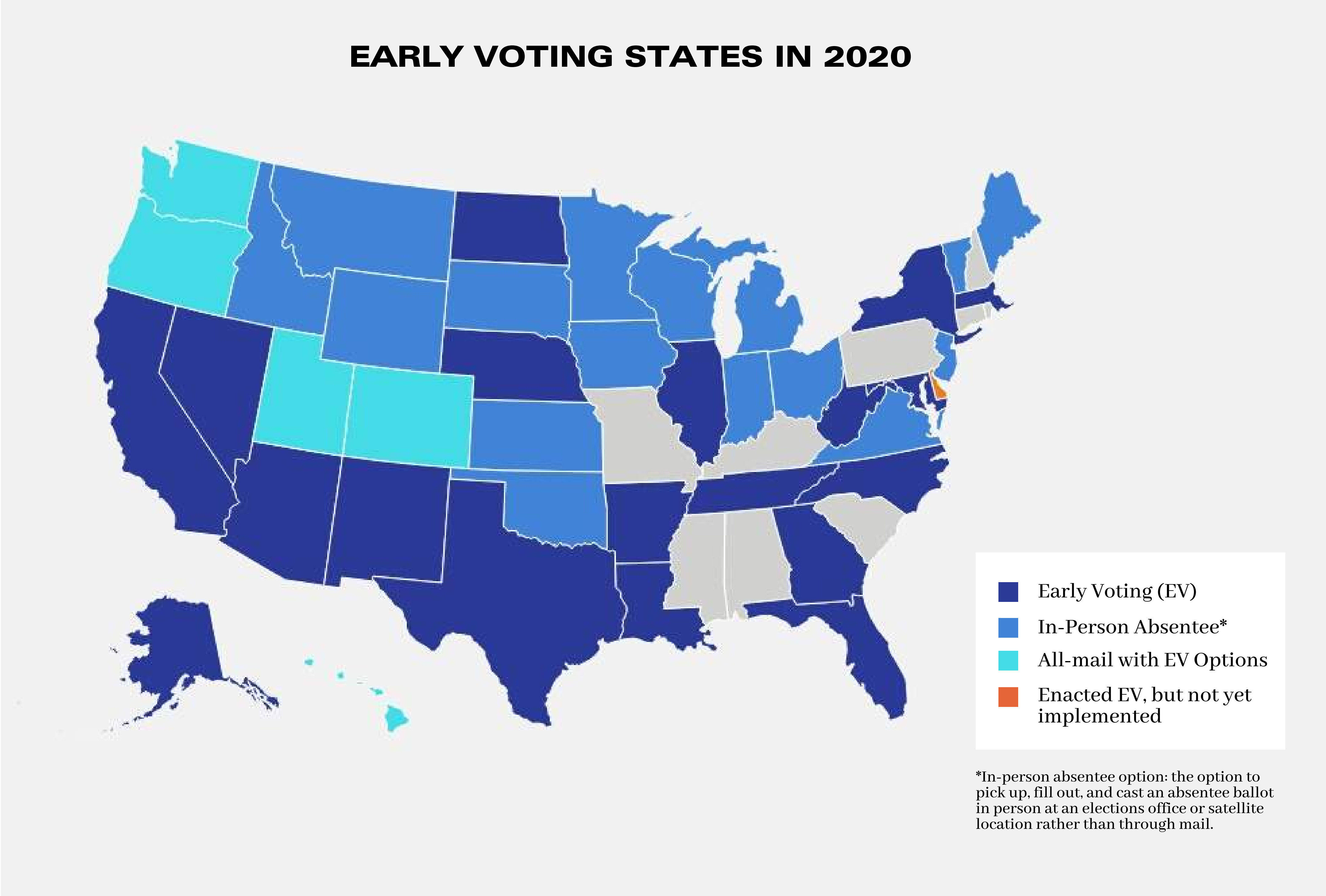
In France, voters vote on Sundays, but proposals to move the U.S. election day to a more accessible day have repeatedly died in the House. Former Representative Steve Israel (D-NY) and Representative John Larson (D-CT) periodically introduced the Weekend Voting Act, which would move voting from Tuesday to Saturday and Sunday, but Republicans perceived it as a mechanism for boosting Democratic turnout.²⁵

Even if this bill succeeded, weekend voting would still fail sweeping segments of the U.S. population. In 2016, a Bureau of Labor Statistics study found that almost half of America's 14 million workers in sales and sales-related industries worked on weekends that year.²⁶ Approximately 40% of service industry workers and 32% of workers in management, business, and financial operations also worked weekends. In Canada, the government has solved this conundrum by regulating businesses, not voting times; Canadian employers must give their employees at least three hours off to vote.²⁷ While there's no such federal law in the U.S., many American states have worked to resolve this problem independently, with 20 states compelling employers to guarantee their employees between one hour and unlimited hours of paid voter leave in 2018. That same year, however, a total of 18 states still didn't compel employers to offer even unpaid voter leave.²⁸

Ballot Access Red Tape Ties up Voters

Only 39 states and D.C. allow in-person early voting with no questions asked, with non-participating states including Alabama, Connecticut, and New Hampshire, among others.²⁹ 21 states and D.C. offer same-day registration, which allows eligible voters to register and cast ballots on the same day, and 23 states and D.C. allow a qualified voter to vote absentee without an excuse.³⁰

Each year, states are slowly stripping away these ballot access restrictions. In Pennsylvania, for example, Democratic Governor Tom Wolf reached a deal with Republican lawmakers to allow absentee ballot voting with no questions asked.³¹ In other cases, federal courts have had to step in to force progress. In 2018, a federal court overturned the Florida secretary of state’s ban on early-voting sites at state universities, a win for proponents of student voting.³² Although non-participating states are catching on to these reforms, ballot barriers continue to create obstacles for millions of voters.





The Solutions

Solutions

To improve our primaries nationwide, it's critical for lawmakers on both sides of the aisle to come together and revitalize voter access. Policymakers on the state and federal level should:



1. RE-ORDER THE PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES

While the RNC and DNC have entertained a number of creative voting plans meant to better represent the nation, all have involved preserving Iowa and New Hampshire's coveted frontline positions. The RNC and the DNC should nix this tradition and implement a true rotating regional primary, lumping all states into four categories: East, Midwest, South, and West. States within each region would vote at the same time, creating a presidential primaries calendar with only four major dates. Voting order would change with every election.³⁴



2. ESTABLISH A NATIONAL CONGRESSIONAL PRIMARY DAY

To boost low turnout in congressional primaries, states should collaborate to establish a national primary day. If this day is consistent across geography and time, like the date for the election for president, voters might be more likely to remember it and turn out.



IS THE ROTATING REGIONAL PRIMARY THE BEST SYSTEM?

Every system has drawbacks, and the rotating regional primary is no exception. If states vote in blocks, this incentivizes candidates to campaign via large scale digital advertising rather than to meet voters one-on-one. (Our current system does this in many states.) Having only four primary dates could also disadvantage lesser-known candidates by shortening the primary season, allowing less time to build name recognition and raise funds. Going last in a rotating regional primary could leave the last bloc feeling that its votes were meaningless. And finally, just as the early-voting states of New Hampshire and Iowa have influence, the first voter in a regional system would likely advantage some candidates over others. Bernie Sanders and Ted Cruz, for example, could have benefited from an early East bloc and South bloc primary, respectively, in 2016.

Some reformers have also suggested a national presidential primary, which would seriously disadvantage lesser-known candidates, and various strains of plans that let small states go first and progressively larger, more random blocks of states go later.³⁵



3. KILL THE CAUCUSES

Today, only six states (Iowa, Nevada, Kansas, North Dakota, Wyoming, and Maine) still have caucuses, which states have slowly been exchanging for popular primaries over time.³⁶ While primaries involve showing up, waiting in line, and casting a quick, private vote, caucuses involve hours of debate, can be held in a location other than the voter's precinct, and can force participants to disclose their votes.³⁷ According to a 2009 study from the Harvard Kennedy School, this probably damages caucus turnout. "Although caucus turnout in 2008 reached record heights," notes author Thomas E. Patterson, "the average caucus attracted fewer than a fourth as many participants as did the average primary election."³⁸ Although caucuses are dying, they should go more quickly; caucus states trying to buck the trend should give in, replacing these events with more accessible contests.



4. CREATE A NATIONAL BIPARTISAN VOTER REGISTRATION BOARD

The U.S. Census Bureau estimated that 21.4% of eligible U.S. voters weren't registered in 2014.³⁹ While a number of different organizations work to register voters, and while community-based voter access drives bloom during competitive races, state legislatures tend to construct roadblocks that hinder them. Squabbles between Democrats and Republicans over voter registration often ensue because each side assumes the other will only seek to register areas friendly to their own party.⁴⁰ The parties could fix this by establishing a cooperative National Bipartisan Voter Registration Board, in which both Democrat and Republican leadership work cooperatively to register Americans in both liberal- and conservative-leaning areas in a bipartisan way.



5. TEAR DOWN BALLOT ACCESS RED TAPE

States should allow voters to vote early, register, vote on the same day, and vote absentee with no questions asked. Several states have already implemented absentee-voting with no excuses required, including deep red states such as Georgia, Wyoming, Arizona, and Idaho.⁴¹ To verify that absentee ballots come from the right person, election officials conduct comparisons of the voter's signature in the state's database and their signature on the ballot.⁴²

To enhance turnout, states could also revise their policies to make it easier for voters to obtain identification providing proof of residence. (For more information, check The New Center's website for our upcoming analysis of election security.) As for voter-leave laws, the federal government could offer a tax break to non-participating states that enact them.

Summary

All across the nation, primaries on every level—even for the president—suffer incredibly low voter turnout. By encouraging only a sliver of Americans to vote and by empowering voters in some states over others, election rules contribute to the epidemic. It’s time to tear down the last of these outdated strictures, re-fuel our democracy, and restore common sense.



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