

## Why Primaries Matter and What to Do About It

The Impact of Primary Elections on Everyday Issues



**January 2024** Sixty-five percent of Arizonans are not voting in the primary elections. Increased participation would significantly impact issues important to all Arizonans.

# Introduction

In 2022, Arizona Town Hall received a Spark Grant from Vitalyst Health Foundation to explore collaborative efforts with diverse partners on the topic of Arizona’s primary elections and how they impact social determinants of health and positive systems change. The background information supporting the effort and the conclusions reached because of this effort have been widely requested and will likely continue to be of interest. For this reason, we have combined various resources relating to this effort into this combined report.



FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE ELEMENTS OF A HEALTHY COMMUNITY, SEE THE ARIZONA TOWN HALL “CREATING VIBRANT COMMUNITIES” FINAL REPORT, AT [WWW.AZTOWNHALL.ORG](http://WWW.AZTOWNHALL.ORG).

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE INTERSECTION OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND HEALTH, VISIT [VITALYSTHEALTH.ORG/STRENGTHENING-CIVIC-HEALTH-IN-ARIZONA](http://VITALYSTHEALTH.ORG/STRENGTHENING-CIVIC-HEALTH-IN-ARIZONA).

## Setting the Stage

Sixty-five percent of Arizonans are not voting in the primary elections while primary elections essentially determine the make-up of Arizona’s legislature. As demonstrated below in more detail, increased participation in primary elections would allow for a more inclusive and equitable representation of voter voices and create a systemic change in how candidates run for and are elected to office. Specifically, those running for and holding office will be incentivized to create more equitable and inclusive laws that will positively transform policies, systems, and environments resulting in a positive impact on all the Elements of a Healthy Community in a more comprehensive manner.

## Why it Matters

Election experts have pointed to primary elections as the driver behind equitable systems change at both the state and local levels. According to Chuck Coughlin, CEO and President of HighGround, Inc., 80% of Arizona’s election candidates are elected in the primary elections.<sup>1</sup>

Most voters who currently engage in primary elections are of more extreme political ideologies,<sup>2</sup> therefore primary election candidates are not incentivized to run on policy-based platforms based on what most Arizonans want or even what is best for positive and equitable systems change.

To win, primary election candidates know that they must campaign on partisan issues and special interests that appeal to the small number of generally more narrowly focused voters who vote in the primary elections.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the voters they must appeal to in the primaries do not represent the demographics of Arizona.<sup>4</sup> Increased voting in primary elections will bring more equity and inclusiveness to all aspects of the political process and allow policymakers to move away from narrow special interests and towards a more comprehensive approach to policy that impacts and considers all the Elements of a Healthy Community.

Primary elections are one of the most direct forms of democracy with which registered voters can engage, since primary elections allow constituents to choose from a variety of candidates and platforms to best address their own community’s needs and interests.<sup>5</sup>

Catalyzing both the knowledge of candidates and their platforms alongside the propensity to vote in primary elections would ensure increased equity in terms of:

- legislative input (representation), and
- legislative output (policy and programs).

Similarly, those elected to office make important decisions and laws that impact every aspect of the Elements of a Healthy Community. If those running for and holding office were better incentivized through an election process that encouraged them to consider the needs beyond a small, more narrowly focused electorate, there would be a significant and sustainable impact to all Arizonans in the nature of the laws and programs being considered and adopted.

“SYSTEMS MATTER AND THE CURRENT SYSTEM ENCOURAGES PARTISAN POLITICS.”<sup>6</sup>

*Ted Maxwell, President of Southern Arizona Leadership Council (SALC)*

## Who Selects Our Elected Leaders?<sup>7</sup> 2022



In 2022, approximately 7.37 million people lived in Arizona.



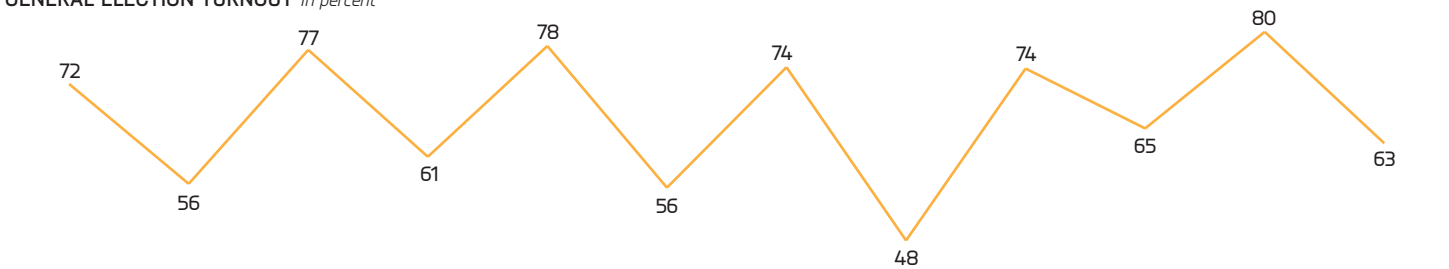
Of those, approximately 57% were eligible to vote.



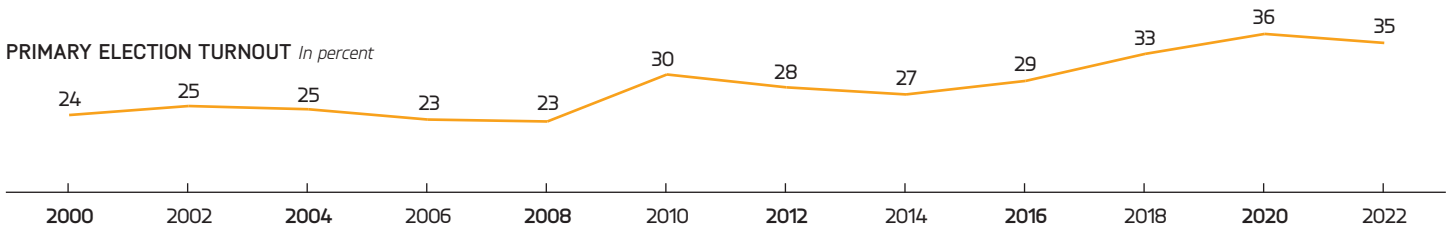
Of those, 35% voted in the 2022 primary election. Since primary elections generally determine who will hold state legislative offices, this means that in 2022 only 20% of those living in Arizona selected most of the elected office holders.

## Voter Turnout through the Years<sup>8</sup> 2000-2022

GENERAL ELECTION TURNOUT *In percent*



PRIMARY ELECTION TURNOUT *In percent*



# Where We Are and How to Create Positive Change

Beginning in June 2022 and throughout the 2022 summer, past-Arizona Town Hall Board Chairs, James R. Condo and Patricia K. Norris, who identify with different political parties, researched the current Arizona primary election system and how it operates—in theory and practice. To do this, they reviewed summary information publicly available about the system. They also interviewed community leaders, current or former election officials, and educators. They discussed the system, its operation, voter participation in primary elections, and impediments to primary election voting with special focus on challenges faced by independent and younger voters. Their observations and conclusions are as follows.



## RECOGNIZED POLITICAL PARTIES

As of 2024, Arizona has five recognized political parties:

Republican Party

Democratic Party

Libertarian Party

No Labels Party

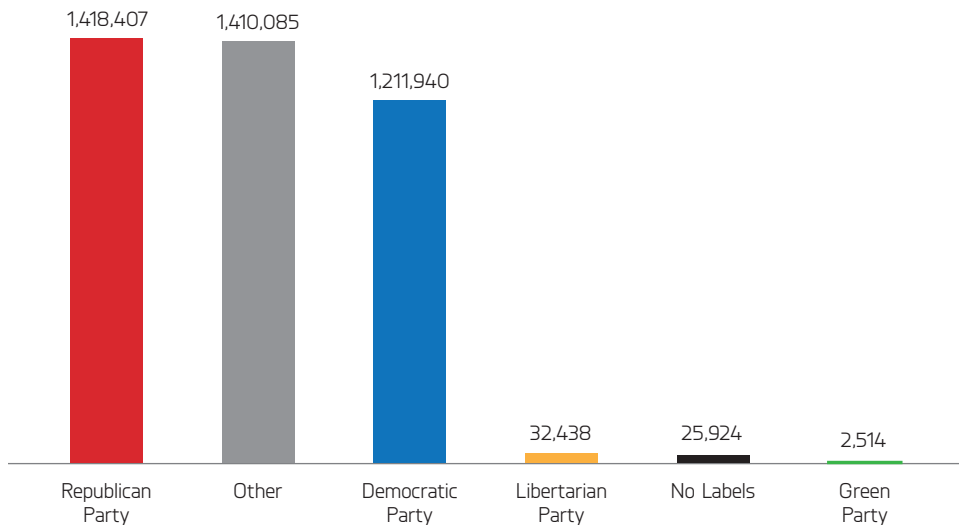
Arizona Green Party

Arizona’s open primary law allows any voter who is registered as “independent” or “party not designated” to cast a ballot for one of the officially recognized political parties in State Primary Elections. See AZ. Const. Art. 7 § 10.<sup>9</sup>

## The Arizona Primary System

- Election experts have pointed to primary elections as the driver behind equitable systems change at both the state and local levels. According to Chuck Coughlin, CEO and President of HighGround, Inc., 80% of Arizona’s election candidates are elected in the primary elections.<sup>1</sup> Yet, voter turnout in Arizona’s primary elections is low. For example, in the 2020 primary election, 36.44% of registered voters voted compared to 79.90% of registered voters who voted in the 2020 general election. In 2022, it was even lower with only 34.9% of registered voters participating in the primary.
- The percentage of Arizonans who are “independent” voters continues to rise. As of January 2024, approximately 34% of voters did not designate a political party. Approximately 34% registered as Republicans, approximately 30% registered as Democrats, and less than 2% registered as either Libertarian, No Labels, or Green Party.

## Who Are Arizona’s Registered Voters? 2024



- Arizona has an open primary system. Under that system, independent voters may vote in Democratic or Republican primary elections.\* Voters who have designated a political party automatically receive a ballot for their designated political party by mail if on the Active Early Voting List (AEVL).\*\* Independent voters, on the other hand, must choose a partisan ballot. If an independent voter is on the AEVL, and wishes to vote by mail, the voter must request a partisan ballot from the county recorder several weeks before the primary election.
- Although the process for requesting a partisan ballot is not complicated, many independent voters fail to make this selection especially if on the AEVL.
- According to the Alberto Olivas, the Founding Executive Director of Arizona State University’s Pastor Center for Politics & Public Service and the Executive Director of ASU’s Watt’s College of Public Service & Community Solutions, a high percentage of younger voters are registering as independent voters. Director Olivas has also noted that younger voters often fail to vote (especially in primary elections) for a variety of reasons, including: They are not convinced their vote will matter, they are uninformed about the candidates or issues on the ballot, or they are not targeted by get-out-the-vote campaigns or other similar efforts that use their preferred manner of obtaining and receiving information—from social media and social media influencers.

process and count ballots, the ballots become anonymous and cannot be linked to any particular voter.

- A number of election officials believe independent voter participation rates in primary elections are low because independent voters must take additional steps to request a partisan ballot, as outlined above. Given that a substantial number of registered Arizona voters vote by mail, this is a significant obstacle.
- Further, many independent voters are under the impression they cannot vote in state primary elections because they are not allowed to vote in state presidential preference elections. Presidential preference elections are open only to registered members of a recognized political party. Thus, only registered Republicans may vote for a Republican nominee for president and only registered Democrats may vote for a Democratic nominee for president.
- Confusing matters further, many local jurisdictions, specifically, cities and towns, frequently schedule their nonpartisan elections, such as city council elections, to coincide with the state primary election. Thus, independent voters who wish to vote in their nonpartisan local election may request a partisan ballot that contains the nonpartisan local election candidates or a nonpartisan local only ballot. Either way, independent voters have to select their preferred ballot.
- Independent voters may also choose not to participate in primary elections because they become confused about whether they can do so when they register to vote. The voter registration forms used in Arizona require the voter to complete a section titled “Party Preference.” That section allows the voter to designate a preference for the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, and depending on the form, “other party,” or “none or no party.” Many voters who designate “other party,” or “none or no party” believe that by making such a designation they are not entitled to vote a partisan ballot in the primary.

## Impediments to Voter Participation in State Primary Elections

- The public as a whole does not understand how the election process works, and this is especially true given the disinformation about elections that has and continues to circulate. For example, some registered voters have demanded to see their general or primary ballots after they have voted, not realizing that after officials

\* Independent voters are not allowed to vote in the Libertarian Primary which is a “closed” primary.

\*\* The Active Early Voting List (AEVL) was formerly known as the Permanent Early Voting List (PEVL). In 2021, the Arizona Legislature substantially amended the PEVL statute. As amended, the AEVL, as did the PEVL, allows a voter to sign up to receive a ballot by mail for each election the voter is eligible to vote in. But unlike the PEVL, a voter’s request to be on the AEVL is no longer permanent. Beginning in 2025, a voter’s County Recorder must mail a notice to each voter who is on the AEVL and who did not vote an early ballot in any of the elections in the previous two election cycles. If the voter fails to confirm he or she wishes to remain on the AEVL within 90 days of receiving the notice, the County Recorder will automatically remove the voter from the AEVL. The voter remains registered to vote, however, but must do so either in person or by separately requesting an early ballot. A voter automatically removed from the AEVL may sign up again for the AEVL. A citizen supported referendum to refer the amended statute to the voters for repeal failed to qualify for the 2022 general election ballot. Supporters of the referendum argued the amended statute was designed to suppress voter turnout, especially by infrequent voters or independent voters who may vote sporadically.

## Efforts to Increase Voter Primary Election Participation

- Public and other institutions have worked to educate all voters, including independent and younger voters, regarding the Arizona primary system, and to encourage them to vote in primary elections. See, for example, education materials and resources available from the Arizona Citizens Clean Elections Commission (the Commission).<sup>10</sup> The Commission spends a significant percentage of its revenues on voter education. Much of this funding is dedicated to sponsoring candidate debates, publishing and distributing voter education guides that provide background information about the candidates and issues on the ballot, and maintaining a website that provides voter information. But given the high cost of broadcast and media advertising, the Commission is generally unable to make significant media buys that directly encourage voters, including independent voters and younger voters, to participate in primary elections.

Furthermore, independent and younger voter turnout is not generally encouraged by organized political parties. Independent voters, like younger voters, are not usually targeted by get-out-the-vote campaigns.

- Various Arizona organizations, such as the Arizona League of Women Voters, have developed teaching materials highlighting the importance of voting that can be used in Arizona schools. And, in some counties, election officials have worked with schools and civic groups to educate the public about Arizona’s voting system.

- These and other efforts and initiatives to increase voter participation, including independent and younger voter participation, are usually undertaken on an ad hoc, sporadic basis, most often in election years, with limited coordination between or

among the sponsoring organizations, especially on a statewide basis. And, as noted above, neither independent nor younger voters are targeted by get-out-the-vote campaigns.

## Conclusion

- Voter education is important, but election education efforts need to be consistent, year-round, and targeted at all voters and future voters. But these efforts appear uncoordinated. Further, voter education efforts, without more, will not substantially increase primary voter participation, especially by independent and younger voters.
- Current efforts by various state organizations to increase independent and younger voter participation in primary elections are well meaning but have not been particularly effective. The efforts are ad hoc and uncoordinated. The only way to increase voter participation by these groups (or even overall) in primary elections is for these organizations to work together. These groups need to create and adequately fund a sustainable statewide central organization that will lead, coordinate, develop, and promote primary voter participation among all registered voters including, independent and younger voters, through voter outreach and get-out-the-vote efforts. “One for all and all for one” should be the goal.
- Significant structural impediments exist that discourage primary participation by independent voters. These impediments can only be removed by changing the Arizona election system. This will require legislative action. Various organizations have proposed such changes. These proposals include ranked choice voting\* and a top two open primary system in which all candidates for a particular office are on one ballot and the two top “vote-getters” regardless of party affiliation advance to the general election.

\* Rank choice voting allows a voter to rank candidates in a preferred order (1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc.). If the voter’s first choice candidate receives a majority (more than 50%) of first choice votes that candidate wins outright. If no candidate receives a majority, the candidate who received the fewest votes is identified and that candidate’s ballots are redistributed to the voter’s second choice selection. That process continues until there is a candidate who has received a majority of votes cast.



# Moving Forward

The information gleaned from these efforts and shared with interested parties is already resulting in increased awareness of the importance of empowering registered voters to vote in the primary elections. It is also raising awareness about the need to reach out to and engage unaffiliated or independent voters.\* System changes to our primary elections process will be challenged by political parties and existing power structures. In the interim, education about why primaries matter and how to make your vote count will help to inform and engage Arizona voters.

At the 2022 Arizona Town Hall Annual Meeting to select topics for 2024, something unprecedented occurred. The speakers on the competing topics being considered all concluded that we must address the security, reliability, and integrity of Arizona's democratic systems if we want to solve any other important policy issues facing our state. For this reason, they urged attendees to not vote for their topic and to instead focus our collective efforts on our important democratic institutions. Special attention to Arizona's primary elections system will have a significant impact on ensuring that our democracy reflects the best interests of all Arizonans.

\* Candidate Debates Work Group Members. Candidate Debates Work Group Official Report, 2023. [https://aztownhall.org/resources/Documents/Debate%20Work%20Group%20Official%20Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://aztownhall.org/resources/Documents/Debate%20Work%20Group%20Official%20Report_FINAL.pdf).

## Tips for Making Your Vote Count



### VOTE IN THE PRIMARY

Most legislative districts are predominantly Republican or Democrat, which means that most elections in Arizona are decided in the primary. Because so few people vote in the primary, those who do get the biggest bang for their buck.



### FOR INDEPENDENTS, CHOOSE THE PRIMARY WITH THE GREATEST IMPACT ON THE ELECTIONS

If you are one of the growing number of Independents, select the party that dominates in your area. Independents can choose which primary they want to vote in at the polls or request an early ballot for the primary of choice by contacting the Secretary of State's office. For more information go to <https://my.arizona.vote/PortalList.aspx>.



### MAKE IT EASY TO VOTE

Sign up to be on the Active Early Voting List (AEVL) to receive a mail-in ballot (which you can drop off at any polling place on election day). You can register to vote or change voting preferences at <https://servicearizona.com/VoterRegistration/selectLanguage>.



### VOTE FOR THE BEST CANDIDATE

Ignore all TV and mail ads. Instead, research candidates using nonpartisan national websites like <http://www.votesmart.org> and analysis by reputable news sources which allow you to compare and choose candidates.



### DON'T FORGET THE JUDGES

Most Arizona judges are subject to an intense evaluation process by a nonpartisan, independent group called The Arizona Commission on Judicial Performance Review. Use their analysis in selecting whether to vote to retain judges subject to Arizona's Merit Selection System <http://azjudges.info>. For other judges in smaller counties and Justices of the Peace, check to make sure that they have not been subject to discipline at <http://www.azcourts.gov/azcjc/ArizonaCommissiononJudicialConduct.aspx>.

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# Resources

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*For over sixty years, Arizona Town Hall has stood the test of time as the premiere organization in Arizona to convene diverse people to address challenging political and social issues from a non-partisan (or multi-partisan) perspective. Arizona Town Hall's mission is to educate, engage, connect, and empower people to resolve important issues through consensus, not division, using a process based on respectful dialogue that values diverse perspectives, builds relationships, and fosters leadership development.*



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