

# Arizona Primary Elections: Primarily Forgotten



**AUGUST 2018**



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August 2018

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## Introduction

For many Arizona voters – and particularly, many non-voters – summertime primary elections appear to be viewed as something less than a “real election.” An analogous comparison could be made to preseason football games that don’t really count in the standings, or an opening act worthy of skipping until the “real show” takes the stage. In this case the “real show” is November’s general election.

Such an aloof view would be understandable if it were not so short-sighted, not to mention simply wrong. Although Arizona primary elections are primarily forgotten or ignored by casual and potential voters, their impact cannot be overstated since they frequently serve as the de facto general election due to Arizona’s numerous non-competitive congressional and legislative districts.

In other words, in many races the primary election *is* the election.

Perhaps there is extremely low voter turnout in primary elections because people view them only in the traditional and narrow sense: An intra-party ballot that allows Democrats and Republicans to separately select their candidates to advance to the general election for the big showdown in November. But even with such a limited scope it would be difficult to boast of Arizona’s voter engagement in primary elections in terms of citizen participation in a representative democracy. In the 2016 primary election, less than 1 million of Arizona’s 4.7 million potential voters (eligible voters of both the registered and non-registered variety) cast a ballot.

Just 21 percent of all potential voters – only about one in five eligible Arizona voters – helped select the candidates for the 2016 general election. And, since primary voters are restricted to voting for candidates in their designated political party, only about 10 percent of those eligible to vote (or about 470,000 people) selected candidates for the general election in each political party.

For a state with 7 million residents, that’s not much representation via participation.

The July 2018 report, *Arizona's Voter Crisis*, by Morrison Institute for Public Policy, noted that nearly half (45 percent) of otherwise eligible voters sat out the 2016 general election, elevating Arizona's low citizen participation to a crisis level. Consider the Merriam-Webster dictionary definition of crisis: *an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending, especially one with a distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome; a situation that has reached a critical phase*. This report examines the voter crisis in primary elections. (It should be noted that Arizona is not unique in its overall low voter turnout, although it is ranked 43rd nationally.)

This is not to say that Arizona's most engaged and politically savvy voters are ignoring primary elections. They are not. In fact, they pay close attention because they understand the importance of primary elections. The low level of interest among most voters, however, is clearly out of proportion to the importance of primary elections in helping to select the state's representatives in both the federal and state legislative bodies. While most voters ignore primary elections, the outcomes of these elections are determining the nature and character of life in Arizona without substantial input from the masses – especially young people, Latinos and those without a college education.

"America's voter turnout is far below that of most democracies. Worse, it's uneven: Older, wealthier and more educated people turn out in large numbers. Last year, for example, 70 percent of those over 70 years old voted. By contrast, only 43 percent of those under 25 did. Even in presidential elections, when turnout is highest, the electorate does not reflect America. In primaries and local elections, turnout can dip into single digits. This has proved catastrophic for both major parties in our political system, often favoring extreme candidates and ensuring that most incumbents have no real contest."

– Tina Rosenberg  
editorial writer,  
*The New York Times*

## Primary Election Pressing Issues

There are numerous pressing issues regarding Arizona primaries, including:

- Voter turnout is so low – particularly among independent voters (those not affiliated with any political party) – that those who actually vote don't represent an accurate sample of the adult population or the demographic makeup of each political party in the state. Primary voters are wealthier, better educated, older and underrepresented by ethnic minorities compared with the voter pool as a whole and compared with Arizona's adult population in general.
- Low voter turnout over-represents the highly politically engaged and those who favor candidates from either the far right or far left on the political spectrum since they are the perennial voters who are most passionate about their beliefs and their candidates and, consequently, most likely to vote in primaries. As a result, candidates with far-right or far-left points of view, relative to the positions of most citizens and registered party members, have disproportionate likelihood of winning their respective party's nomination.
- State legislators, those best positioned to improve Arizona's primary system and, consequently, increase voter turnout have little incentive to change the system. That's because primary

elections greatly favor incumbents and provide little opportunity for those not affiliated with a political party to gain general election ballot access. Those in elected office and those of the two major parties have little inducement to change a system in which they have fared well.

As the United States becomes more politically polarized, primary elections take on increased importance in the democratic process as a way for moderate candidates to advance to the general election. Low voter turnout, however, largely negates that opportunity. General elections attract far more voters and news media interest – primaries are simply overlooked.

A strong argument could be made that for many Arizona political races, the primary assumes more importance than the general election – particularly those races in districts dominated by one of the two major political parties. The decision about who officially will be elected in November often had been made months prior to the general election, during the primary, by a handful of voters.

Consequently, it can be difficult for a so-called moderate candidate to survive a partisan primary. In many of the nation's districts and states, including many of Arizona's congressional and legislative districts, the party preference among registered voters is so unequal that the candidate selected by the dominant political party in the primary election is almost assured of being elected to office in the general election. Such districts are deemed "safe districts" for the dominant political party in that district.

Many of Arizona's congressional and legislative districts show a proclivity to lean toward either the political right (Republican) or political left (Democratic). From a statewide perspective, Arizona is deemed a "red state" because its voter registration/turnout leans to the political right, toward a conservative/Republican political philosophy.

## Who's Voting in Arizona Primary Elections

In 2016, 35 percent of registered Arizona voters were Republicans, 34 percent were not affiliated with any political party (sometimes referred to as independents), and 30 percent were registered Democrats. A handful – less than 1 percent – were registered with either the Green or Libertarian Party.

Primaries often attract more party loyalists or voters driven by core partisan beliefs than general elections, according to findings by Nelson W. Polsby, Aaron Wildavsky and other political researchers. As a result, candidates who reflect those core partisan values (that is, the very conservative or the very liberal) tend to advance out of their respective primaries and move onto the general election. Many subsequently get elected to political office, especially when facing little to no challenge on the November ballot.



The end result of this pattern is two-fold:

- Candidates of, or beholden to, the two major parties' fringes are often elected, allowing little room later for bipartisan compromise due to the political polarization between the far right and far left. There is gridlock or, oftentimes, the dominant party shuts down the minority party in the legislative body, ignoring the multiple and varied views of the citizenry.
- Districts are being governed by representatives selected by a small plurality of the citizens eligible to vote (i.e., the primary voters do not reflect the demographic distribution of the population). Elected officials are largely white, male, older and wealthier in a highly disproportionate manner compared to the general population.

## Arizona's Non-competitive Congressional Districts

Like many states, Arizona is rife with "safe districts" – those districts dominated by either the Democratic Party or the Republican Party to the extent that whoever wins the nomination of that dominant party in the general election is almost automatically elected to office in that district. Essentially, the decision about who would be elected to office was made during the primary election, when the dominant party selected its nominees.

The Cook Partisan Voting Index (CPVI) is a method to determine which party, if either, dominates each district and indicates the relative strength of each congressional district's dominant political party. A brief explanation of the methodology follows, but in the simplest terms, it shows the strength of the dominant party relative to the strength of that party nationally:

*Cook Partisan Voting Indexes (CPVI) are calculated by comparing a congressional district's average Democratic or Republican Party share of the two-party presidential vote in the past two presidential elections to the national average share for those elections. For example, the national average for 2004 and 2008 was 51.2 percent Democratic to 48.8 percent Republican. For example, in Alaska's single at-large congressional district, the Republican candidate won 63 percent and 61 percent of the two-party share in the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections, respectively. Comparing the average of these two district results (62 percent) against the average national share (49 percent), this district voted 13 percentage points more Republican than the country as a whole, or R +13.*

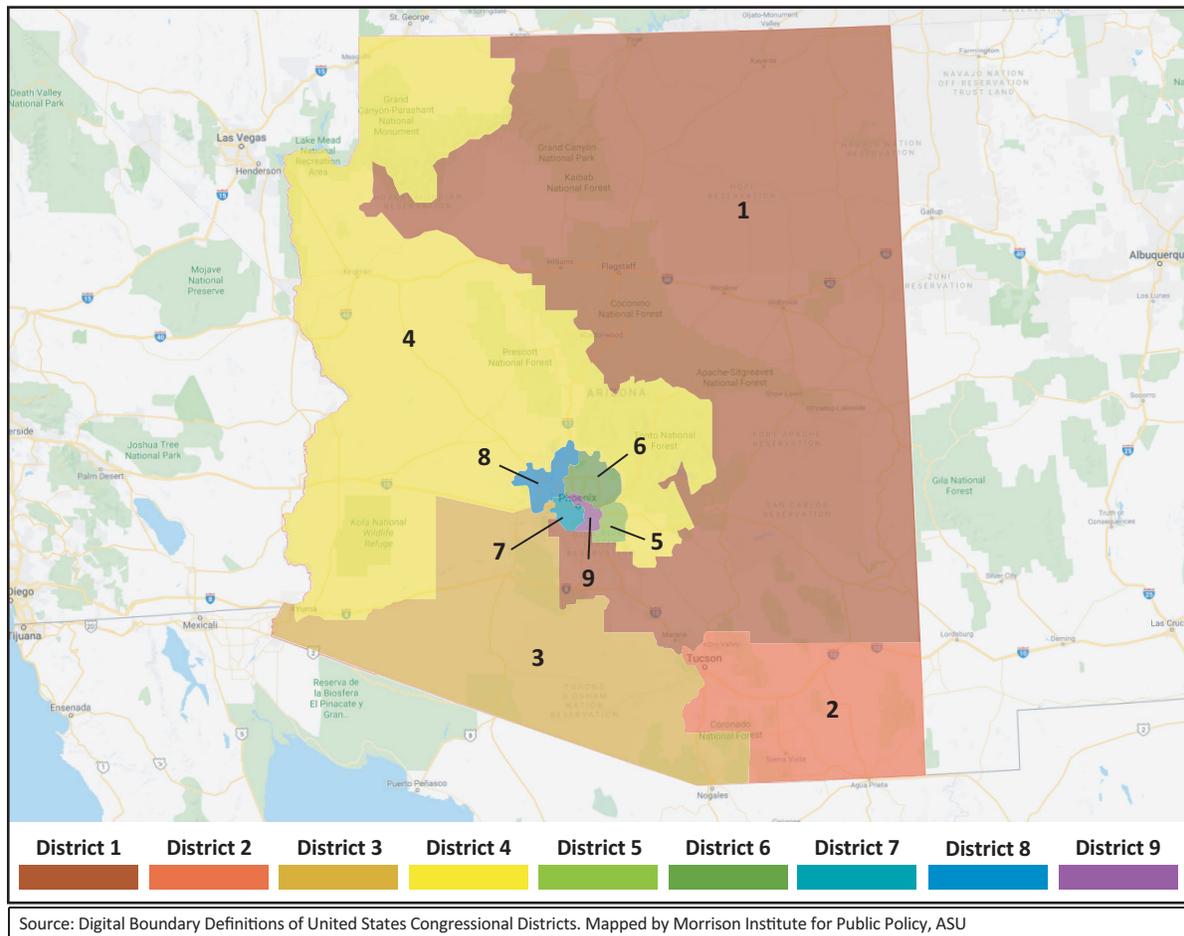
Arizona's Congressional Districts are drawn in a somewhat abstract fashion, with legs of the districts sometimes including just a portion of a large municipality along with sweeping swaths of rural areas so that each district represents relatively the same number of residents. On the following page are the state's nine congressional districts, with general descriptions of areas represented and the present officeholder's political party:

**Voter Info:** For specific information about voting, including details about your district, candidates, elected offices, key deadlines and polling places, go to Arizona Clean Elections Voter Dashboard:

<https://www.azcleelections.gov/en/voter-dashboard>

**District 1** (Democrat) is North/Northeastern Arizona, including Maricopa, Sedona, Flagstaff, Window Rock, Show Low and Safford, **District 2** (Republican) is Southeastern Arizona, including Tucson east, Benson, Sierra Vista and Douglas, **District 3** (Democrat) is Southwestern Arizona, including Tucson west, Nogales, Gila Bend, San Luis and Yuma south, **District 4** (Republican) is West/Northwest Arizona, including Yuma north, Lake Havasu City and Prescott, **District 5** (Republican) is Mesa/Chandler/Gilbert area, **District 6** (Republican) is Scottsdale/Paradise Valley/Fountain Hills/Cave Creek area, **District 7** (Democrat) is Phoenix/Tolleson/Glendale area, **District 8** (Republican) is Peoria/Sun City West/New River area, **District 9** (Democrat) is Mesa/Chandler/Tempe/Phoenix area.

**Graph 1. Arizona's 9 Congressional Districts**



Using CPVI data from the 2016 election, six of Arizona's nine congressional districts can be considered "safe districts" for the dominant political party. That is, the candidate who wins the primary election for his/her party (the dominant party in the district) is almost assured of being elected to Congress in the general election due to party registration disparities.

These six Arizona districts are: **District 3**, D +13, (Democratic dominated, voted 13 percentage points higher Democratic than the country as a whole); **District 4**, R +21; **District 5**, R +15; **District 6**, R +9; **District 7**, D +23; and **District 8**, R +13.

In short, two of Arizona’s nine congressional districts are safe Democratic districts and four are safe Republican districts. According to the CPVI definitions, those districts with a CPVI score between D +5 and R +5 (**Districts 1, 2 and 9** in Arizona) are deemed “swing seats.” That is to say, either party’s candidate has a legitimate chance to win the seat in the general election.

The following table lists Arizona’s congressional districts, their CPVI rating, and the final vote tally for the 2016 general election:

**Table 1. CPVI Ratings: Arizona Congressional Districts**

District	CPVI	Voted for Democratic Candidate	Voted for Republican Candidate
1	R+2	142,219	121,745
2	R+1	135,873	179,806
3	D+13	149,256	No candidate
4	R+21	61,296	203,487
5	R+15	114,940	205,184
6	R+9	122,866	201,578
7	D+23	119,465	39,286
8	R+13	No candidate	205,017
9	D+4	169,055	108,350

Source: Cook Political Report’s 2016 analysis for the CPVIs calculated based upon the 2012 and 2016 districts of the 115th United States Congress, calculated according to the presidential elections

The consequences of this pattern are clear. For six of Arizona’s nine congressional districts, the winner of the primary election for the dominant party is virtually assured of being elected to Congress. The primary election, rather than the general election, all but determines the congressional representatives in two-thirds of Arizona’s congressional districts. Yet, voter turnout for the primary elections remains very low, as illustrated earlier in this report.

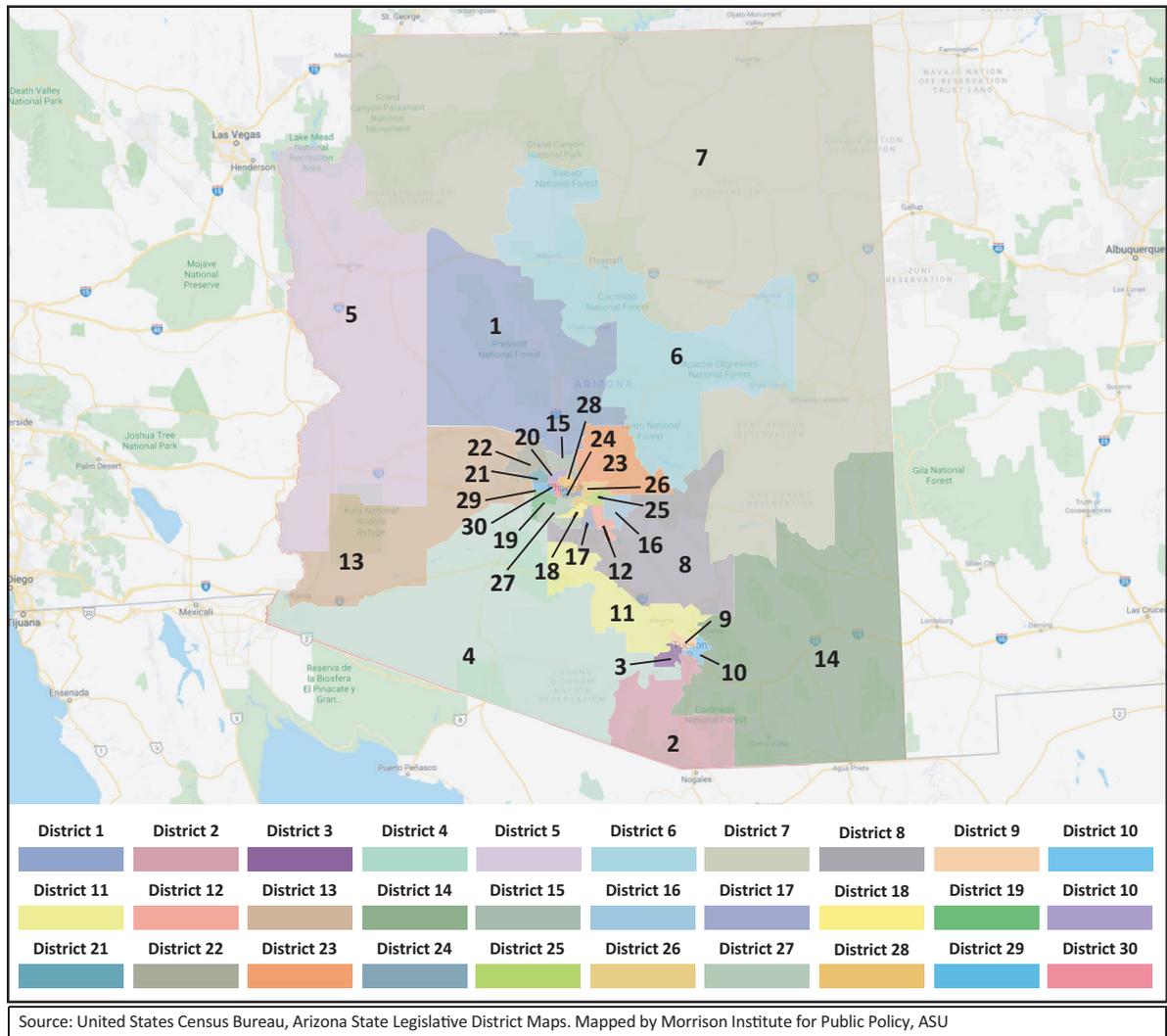
## Arizona Statewide Races – Non-competitive Legislative Districts

Non-competitive districts – or “safe districts” – also appear among Arizona’s 30 legislative districts (different boundaries from the nine congressional districts). Twenty of Arizona’s legislative districts could be defined as non-competitive, with one of the two major political parties dominating voter registration to the degree that both state representatives in each of these districts come from the same political party and both won by overwhelming majorities.

Eleven of those districts are dominated by the Republican Party: **Districts 1, 5, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 21, 22, 23 and 25**. Nine are dominated by the Democratic Party: **Districts 3, 4, 7, 19, 24, 26, 27, 29 and 30**. (Note: It could be argued that **District 9** also is a “safe” Democratic district and **District 11** is a “safe” Republican

district, bringing the total “safe districts” to 22. Regardless of whether there are 20 or 22 safe districts, in each primary election the dominant party is almost assured of being elected in the general election.)

**Graph 2. Arizona’s 30 Legislative Districts**



It’s noteworthy that in seven of Arizona’s “safe” legislative districts – **3, 4, 7, 12, 19, 24** and **27** – the non-dominant party did not field a candidate for the state House of Representatives in the 2016 election, and in nearly half of these districts, or 13 districts, the non-dominant party chose not to field a state Senate candidate. Therefore, in those seven House races and 13 Senate races the winning candidate was, essentially, elected in the primary election.

The 2018 election may prove different. The Democratic Party this year has changed tactics and is fielding 114 legislative candidates in the 2018 election – a 41 percent increase from 2016, as noted by *The Arizona Capitol Times*. Still, eight of the 30 races for state Senate and four districts for the 60 House seats have no opposition from the non-dominant major party (not including write-ins) in 2018.

Simply put, the primary election determines which individual candidates will be elected in two-thirds of Arizona’s congressional races (six of nine districts) and two-thirds of the legislative races (20 or 22 of 30 districts). Voters registered with the dominant party in those districts make the critical decision about who will be their congressional and legislative representatives in the primary election, not the general election.

## Arizona Voter Turnout

While Arizona’s largest political faction is Republican, those who are not registered with any specific political party, sometimes referred to as independents, nearly match the number of registered Republicans and outnumber registered Democrats.

In Arizona, the demographics of Republicans, Democrats and independents differ. For example, only 19 percent of registered Republicans are 40 or younger, compared with 29 percent of Democrats and 33 percent of independents. Further, 86 percent of Republicans are non-Latino White, compared with 64 percent of Democrats and 76 percent of independents.

Meanwhile, the Latino population is increasing dramatically compared to the non-Latino White population and soon will have an increased effect on elections just because of sheer number. A 2012 report by the Morrison Institute Latino Public Policy Center, titled *Arizona’s Emerging Latino Voter*, used population projections to show changes in Arizona’s electorate by 2030, due to the large number of young Latinos who will be 18 or older by that time. This projection factors in traditionally low voter registration and low voter turnout among Latinos – but also the fact that Latinos are a rapidly growing, young population. Because virtually all young Latinos in Arizona are U.S. citizens who become eligible to vote at age 18, Arizona can expect a sea change to its political landscape in the near future. By 2030, Arizona will become a minority majority state.

This growing young, Latino population, however, is far less likely to vote than their older, White counterparts. Latinos are overrepresented in the three categories that predetermine low voter turnout: less well-educated, less affluent and younger than their non-Hispanic counterparts. Historically, Latinos have been more likely to be registered as Democrats (19 percent of Arizona Democrats are Latino, compared with 11 percent of independents and 4 percent of registered Republicans).

**Table 2. Arizona Voter Turnout by Year**

<b>(Among Registered Voters)</b>		
<b>Year</b>	<b>General Election</b>	<b>Primary Election</b>
2016	74.17%	29.10%
2014	47.52%	27.02%
2012	74.36%	28.09%
2010	55.65%	30.09%
2008	77.69%	22.80%
2006	60.47%	23.07%
2004	77.10%	24.71%
2002	56.33%	25.25%
2000	71.76%	23.84%
1998	45.82%	19.66%

Source: Arizona Secretary of State's office, table compiled by Morrison Institute for Public Policy, ASU

## Low Voter Turnout

A telling example of low voter turnout can be seen in the 2016 Arizona general election, where Republican U.S. Sen. John McCain handily won his sixth term by beating Democratic challenger Ann Kirkpatrick. McCain garnered 1,359,267 votes, while Kirkpatrick, vacating her congressional seat to run for the Senate, collected 1,031,245 votes for a respective 53.75 percent to 40.8 percent finish – among those who voted.

In the 2016 election, 927,000 registered voters did not vote. McCain was reelected by just 37.4 percent of all registered voters and by only 28.9 percent of all otherwise eligible voters (both registered and unregistered potential voters). Comparable figures for Kirkpatrick are 28.8 percent and 21.9 percent, respectively.

These figures show that only about one-half of those who qualified to vote (including unregistered qualified citizens) actually voted in Arizona's U.S. Senate race. This corroborates findings in the Morrison Institute *Arizona's Voter Crisis* report, which noted that "close to half (45 percent) of otherwise eligible voters sat out the election."

The aforementioned example is not to single out the McCain-Kirkpatrick race, since some version of this calculation can be made for all elected candidates; it simply points out that many U.S. citizens age 18 and older neglect their civic duty to register and/or to vote. The result is a flawed democracy, with millions of potential voters nationwide and 2.1 million in Arizona failing to exercise their right to vote, resulting in officials being elected to office by a relatively small proportion of citizens.

## The Arizona Independent Redistricting Commission

Arizona's political landscape is changing and those who manage the electoral system have been slow, if not intentionally resistant, to respond and adjust. It is worth noting, however, that Arizona voters in 2011 took the pencil out of the hands of lawmakers for drawing districts, thereby avoiding the extensive gerrymandering many states experience.

The Arizona Independent Redistricting Commission (IRC) – consisting of two Republicans, two Democrats and an independent chairwoman – draws map lines based on several factors:

"The concept of one-person, one-vote dictates that districts should be roughly equal in population. Other factors to be considered are the federal Voting Rights Act, district shape, geographical features, respect for communities of interest and potential competitiveness," according to its website.



“Potential competitiveness” and “actual competitiveness” are two different things, obviously, with the IRC not having as big an impact as many had hoped. But as Bill Bishop argues in his 2008 book, *The Big Sort*, Americans tend to “self-gerrymander” in a micro way by living near politically like-minded neighbors, whether that be Democrats in cities or Republicans in rural areas. There also are economic pockets – wealthy, middle class and poor – and demographic similarities – age, family status, ethnicity, religion, education levels – that come into play in communities and neighborhoods. All this makes it difficult to draw competitive districts by using simple boundaries in political geography.

A new IRC will be appointed in 2021 to adopt new congressional and legislative districts for Arizona following the 2020 census.

## Independent Voters and Primaries

More than any voter category, independents are the most underrepresented in primary elections, perhaps because there is no independent ballot and they must choose between voting on a Republican or Democratic ballot. As the table below illustrates, only 10 percent of independents voted in the 2016 primary election, compared with 31 percent of registered Democrats and 43 percent of Republicans.

Numerous reasons have been offered to explain the low primary turnout among independents.



First, independents have lower participation in all elections, including general elections, than do either Democrats or Republicans. Again, as the table illustrates, only 62 percent of independents who are registered to vote cast a ballot in the 2016 general election compared with 78 percent of registered Democrats and 84 percent of registered Republicans. Independents are simply infrequent voters in any type of election, compared with Republicans and Democrats.

Second, many independents are unaware they are allowed to vote in primary elections. As a result, they stay away from the polls during the primary election, mistakenly believing they are reserved for Republicans and Democrats. The truth is, independents in Arizona are allowed to vote in the primary by requesting the ballot for one party or the other at the time they vote. So, an independent can go to the polls on primary election day, decide which party’s ballot he or she would like, and simply request that ballot and vote in that party’s primary without changing his or her independent status. (The party presidential preference primary is the exception, where independents must first register with a major party before being allowed to vote.)

Would more independents vote in primary elections if they were aware they are allowed to vote? Certainly a few more might, although, as the data indicates, independents are significantly less likely to vote in either primary or general elections than registered Democrats and Republicans. Primary elections often are overlooked by most voters. They are simply less well publicized, receive less news coverage and take place

**Table 3. Number of People Who Voted in the 2016 Elections**

2016 Elections	Independent /PND	Democrat	Republican	Total
Voted in 2016 Primary Election ONLY	2,357	6,096	7,157	<b>15,610</b>
Voted in 2016 General Election ONLY	620,773	501,677	499,301	<b>1,621,751</b>
Voted in BOTH Primary and General	115,303	323,714	511,951	<b>950,968</b>
Did not vote in either Primary or General	457,592	229,021	191,417	<b>878,030</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>1,196,025</b>	<b>1,060,508</b>	<b>1,209,826</b>	<b>3,466,359</b>

Source: Arizona Secretary of State's office, table compiled by Morrison Institute for Public Policy, ASU

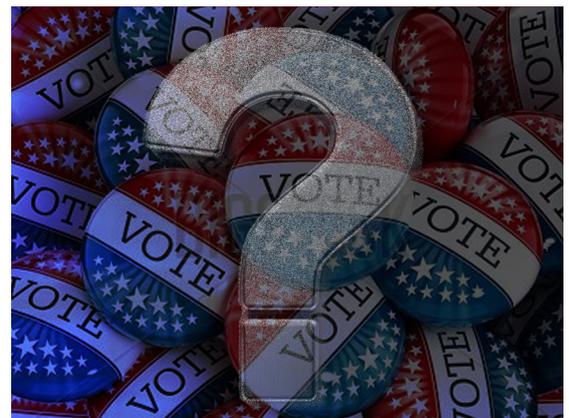
during the summertime, when, for the most part, vacations and not elections are on many people's mind. Consequently, fewer voters are aware of, and fewer still engaged in, the primary elections and as a result, are less likely to vote.

For independent candidates, the challenges are even more daunting. Ballot access is one hurdle for independents. In Arizona, independent candidates must collect nominating petition signatures equal to at least 3 percent of all registered voters who are not affiliated with a recognized political party in the district the candidate seeks to represent. A political party affiliated candidate for a state legislative office is required to gather "at least one-half of 1 percent of the total number of qualified signers in the district the candidate seeks to represent," as noted by Ballotpedia.

To the extent that independent voters might be motivated to vote by the inclusion of more independent candidates, there remains little incentive among Democratic or Republican lawmakers to make that choice more available.

### Truly Independent?

Academic researchers point to data showing the nation is in a partisan era, with many independent voters leaning toward one party or another while maintaining their independent status. At the Open Primaries National Forum & Roundtable, held at Arizona State University in December 2017, at least one scholar suggested more research is needed to identify which "independents," and how many, are truly "independent minded" or open to new ideas, rather than simply Democrats or Republicans claiming independent status.





A 2015 Morrison Institute report, *Who is Arizona's Independent Voter?*, found that while independent voters run the gamut of the political spectrum – from very liberal to liberal to moderate to conservative to very conservative – they do not consider themselves aligned with any one party. At the same time, they do not vote with a cohesive voice or as a voting bloc.

As the report noted: “Perhaps one independent voter said it best: ‘We’re not a party. We’re a mindset.’” The report concluded, however, that because of low voter turnout by independents in the general election and even more so in the primary, independents have failed to be “a bona fide game-changer in Arizona politics” and won’t be until their voter turnout numbers greatly improve. Even then, there is no way to predict the type of impact their votes would produce.

That is not to say independent voters don’t or can’t have an impact on elections, including primaries. The potential impact of independents was on full display in the 2016 presidential primary election season, mostly in states such as Arizona that allowed unaffiliated voters to participate in some way in party primaries for president. In Arizona, that meant independents had to register as either a Democrat or Republican.

The result was many independents who lean toward the conservative Republican political philosophy changed their independent voter registration to Republican in order to be allowed to cast ballots for Donald Trump, the non-traditional Republican candidate. Meanwhile, Democratic Socialist Bernie Sanders actively cultivated independents to do likewise for his Democratic challenge from the progressive left to the Democratic Party’s establishment and centrist candidate, eventual nominee Hillary Clinton.

## Primary Types

There are several types of primaries that states can employ – including open primaries, which allow any registered voter to vote in any party’s primary, regardless of party affiliation; top-two primaries, where the two candidates (regardless of party) who receive the most votes advance to the general election; and closed and semi-open primaries, which are limited to registered party members only for that particular party’s ballot. Different states adopt different election formats.

Arizona and 11 other states hold semi-open primaries which, like closed primaries, allow registered party members to vote in their respective party’s primary. However, semi-open primaries also allow unaffiliated voters (independents) to participate. In Arizona, a registered independent can choose either the Democratic or Republican primary ballot without having to change his or her status as an independent.

The party presidential preference primary in Arizona is the exception, as noted earlier. Independents are shut out altogether then because these every-four-year primaries are strictly a political party function, even though taxpayers underwrite the expense. The presidential primaries are held earlier than the regular primaries. For example, the 2016 presidential primary was held on March 22 in Arizona, with the regular primary held on Aug. 30. Independents could still vote in the presidential preference primary but only if they changed their party registration to one of the parties on the ballot, which in 2016 included candidates from the Republican, Democratic and Green parties.

## Findings from *Arizona's Voter Crisis*

As the earlier *Arizona's Voter Crisis* report illustrated, there is a key disconnect between voters and non-voters. For example, voters and non-voters may say they are more interested in state and local issues than national ones, yet too few actually vote in such elections – even though these races usually have the most direct effect on state and local issues. Causes could be in media coverage and available information.

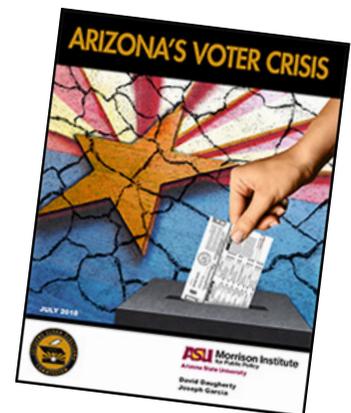
For a healthy democracy, voters need to better prepare themselves before casting a ballot. They need to better understand the positions candidates take on issues. They need to better understand the propositions and initiatives that appear on the ballot and they need to better understand which candidates best represent their own ideals and values. That all takes time, work and effort. At this time, too few voters are willing to make that effort and thus far too few institutions have been willing to commit resources to address that challenge full force.

Additionally, too many potential voters today feel ignored or forgotten. Many also feel inadequate, ignorant, overwhelmed and embarrassed by their lack of knowledge on election matters, so they outwardly dismiss elections as something unworthy or unnecessary. The truth is, many potential voters don't know where to look for credible and nonpartisan voter information. In fact, many don't know how or where to even start. Voter education is the key.

Many don't thoroughly understand political issues related to education, family care, taxation, transportation, workplace and social policies. Too few understand the different levels of jurisdiction: national, state and local. For example: What's the difference between the U.S. Senate and Arizona Senate? What is the difference between the House and the Senate? What does the state Treasurer do?

To help answer those questions, Morrison Institute is offering three interrelated briefing papers, including this one, between now and the general election:

1. *Arizona's Voter Crisis*, which examines voting participation and lack thereof over the years, also delves into reasons many non-voters cite as justifications for their non-participation.
2. *Arizona Primary Elections: Primarily Forgotten*, a look at often-ignored primary elections in terms of elections being decided de facto before the general election.
3. *Arizona Voter Engagement*, which will list various groups' efforts to get more people to become engaged politically and vote, along with contact information for greater involvement.



Arizona Citizens Clean Elections Commission and Morrison Institute also will hold three town hall-style meetings around the state to examine and discuss regional challenges and solutions in improving voter turnout. Local elected officials, voters and "potential voters" will be invited to participate in this effort. The first one was held in Phoenix on July 17, 2018.



As part of the statewide voter education project, Morrison Institute also provided Arizona Citizens Clean Elections Commission with digestible and easy-to-read information regarding responsibilities and qualifications of each elected office. This digital information supplements the information the Clean Elections Commission provides to every voter in the state in its Voter Education Guide, which includes statements from candidates for state and legislative office.

The digital “How Government Works” platform (<https://www.azcleaselections.gov/en/how-government-works>) is presented on three levels: basic, mid and advanced. Such neutral, nonpartisan information will help frequent, infrequent and “potential” voters make the connection between how government works and why it’s important to help shape that government and, at the same time, perhaps offer frequent voters additional knowledge. After all, it’s important not only that more people vote but also that more people know for what and for whom they’re voting.

Morrison Institute for Public Policy and Arizona State University in 2016 launched a first-in-the-nation instructional program for new lawmakers. The award-winning Arizona Legislative Academy, under its director and former Arizona House Speaker Andy Tobin, provides nonpartisan data, expert analysis and insightful information on issues ranging from changing demographics to economic development; future water supplies to education; and the state constitution to health care and human services.

More detailed than the three levels of general voter information provided to Arizona Citizens Clean Elections, the Legislative Academy program presented to new lawmakers in January 2017 is available to the public at [MorrisonInstitute.asu.edu](http://MorrisonInstitute.asu.edu). Even the most-engaged voter will find new information here that underscores the integral connection between government and citizens in terms of roles, responsibilities, challenges, opportunities and impact.

Morrison Institute again will offer its *Understanding Arizona’s Propositions* series, non-partisan briefing papers on key ballot propositions. The briefings are written in a straight-forward way so complex propositions – both the pros and cons – are more easily understandable to the voter.

## **Primaries: Looking Forward**

Some have called for more open and inclusive election’s structures as a way to attract the largest number of citizens to express their preferences in a democratic republic. Arizonans, however, recently rejected by a 2-to-1 margin, a proposal that would have advanced the “top two” primary candidates to the general election, regardless of their party.

The current type of primary, and the limitations it places on voters and potential voters, has been raised by some as an argument to remove control of the election structure and framing from the political parties. In fact, up until 1998, Arizona had a closed party primary system, limiting participation to only those registered with a particular party. Arizona voters mandated a change to semi-open primaries, largely on the call for publicly funded primaries to be open to all taxpayers, regardless of political party affiliation.

David Berman, Senior Research Fellow at Morrison Institute, noted in a speech:

“In recent years there has been a movement to scrap the party primary system and replace it with one friendlier to independents. The principle argument for change is the low voter turnout and that the relatively few who do show up tend to be from the opposite ends of the ideological scale. Because of this, critics contend, nominees tend to be far more ideological than those who generally identify with either of the major parties or the voters in the general electorate. The end result, as far as the state Legislature is concerned, is to encourage both gridlock and extremism and to contribute to the failure of lawmakers to produce to the satisfaction of the majority of Arizonans.”

As noted earlier in this report, Arizona independents can vote in one of the party primaries. A Morrison Institute study, however, found that many independents remain unaware they can vote in either the Democratic or Republican primaries so they don't cast a vote, while others simply appear to have no desire nor interest in participating in the primary for various reasons.

Berman noted in his speech:

“Some have proposed instituting a top-two primary system (non-partisan blanket primary) – as described above. Theoretically, this system would lead to the selection of more moderate/less extreme candidates because it encourages candidates to appeal to a broader constituency, not simply those members of their own party most likely to vote in the primary – the more extreme members of each party. Taking the partisanship out of the primary system could also do much to encourage participation among moderate independent voters.”

## Conclusion

It is not difficult to declare a crisis when only about one in five Arizona eligible voters – those citizens who are 18 or older – cast a ballot in primary elections, especially when primaries so often determine the winners either due to “safe districts” or uncontested races, essentially relegating the general election to a mere formality in many cases. There are perhaps other primary election models that could be better suited to attracting more voters than Arizona's present semi-open primaries. More research would be needed to determine both pros and cons of potentially switching primary models.

Regardless of primary election system, Arizona voters must do their part in registering and actually casting a ballot. The onus falls on voters – or, more accurately, the occasional and non-voter – to fulfill their privilege and duty of self-government. As noted earlier, voter education must accompany voter engagement.

“If you listen to any conversation, everybody has an opinion (about politics), and everybody's talking about what's going on. That's not apathy. People are not apathetic; they're disengaged.”

– Carolyn Jefferson-Jenkins  
former president,  
*League of Women Voters  
of the United States*

But it's important to note that the responsibility for the voter crisis also lies with the government, which should be seeking ways to better engage and educate substantially more voters in a representative democracy. The voter crisis is not new, but could worsen dramatically if millennials – those born between 1981 and 1996 – do not replace older voters at the ballot box (an archaic term in these days of smartphone technology) as older voters die out. For example, the Arizona Citizens Clean Election Commission has developed numerous online tools to better connect voters to candidates, including a voter dashboard that brings voters all the information they need to connect with their candidates and cast their ballots.

“Safe” districts overwhelmingly favor one political party over another due to voter registration disparities within their boundaries and will continue to play a major role and represent a major hurdle to government reflecting its constituents. Considering that the primary election, rather than the general election, all but determines two-thirds of Arizona's nine congressional districts and two-thirds of the legislative races (up to 22 of 30 districts), increased voter participation in primaries remains a critical need. Yet primaries in Arizona too often are forgotten or ignored by Arizona voters, with some focus group participants citing “our vote doesn't count” as justification for sitting it out.

Voting must become a two-part action in order to make a difference: The primaries should be Part A, followed by the general election as Part B. As the *Arizona's Voter Crisis* report concluded:

“Of course Arizona's voting crisis cannot be solved in a single election cycle – or even a couple of election cycles. But it can be changed one potential or infrequent voter at a time in terms of registration, education, engagement and execution. The solution to Arizona's voter crisis is literally in our hands. It's called the ballot.”



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Project funded by:



[AZCleanElections.gov](http://AZCleanElections.gov)



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