

# [***Even voters in independent-minded Maine are taking sides in a polarized nation***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BBD-2W21-JC5B-G356-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

PORTLAND, Maine — The state of Maine's long-cherished reputation for political independence is being threatened by the [*nation's polarized* ***politics***](https://leads.ap.org/best-of-the-week/americans-divided-by-political-polarization), with more and more of its voters feeling pressured to take sides.

The shift, reflected in new voter registration numbers and an increasingly pugilistic political environment, has nudged an electorate with a well-earned reputation for pragmatic moderation further into the political fray. So-called independents, or unenrolled voters, have gone from the state's largest voting bloc to trailing both major parties in just four years.

Though smaller in number, independents nevertheless have the opportunity to shape the outcome of Maine's Super Tuesday primaries, casting votes for the first time after the state loosened its rules to allow independents to vote in presidential contests.

That could provide a boost for Republican [*Nikki Haley*](https://apnews.com/hub/nikki-haley), who was supported in the New Hampshire GOP primary by a majority of voters registered as unaffiliated, as well as the vast majority of those who self-identified as Democrats or Democratic leaners, [*according to AP VoteCast*](https://apnews.com/article/how-why-new-hampshire-voted-primary-election-6768e1ae04ce2b88d64773a9672d04d8), a survey of voters there. Trump won New Hampshire's GOP primary but complained repeatedly about the support Haley received from non-Republicans.

“That can be the dynamic in Maine,” said Zach Azem from the University of New Hampshire Survey Center.

The overall shift signals a striking departure for Maine, which for more than three decades had more independent voters — “unenrolled” in the parlance of state election rules — than either Democrats or Republicans.

The state's reputation for feisty independence played out in the embrace of candidates such as U.S. Sen. Angus King, one of only three members of the Senate without a declared allegiance to either major party. King and the other independent senators, Arizona’s Kyrsten Sinema and Vermont's Bernie Sanders, all caucus with the Democratic Party, preserving its razor-thin majority.

But times have changed, and so have ***politics***.

Jill Goldthwait, an independent from Bar Harbor, suspects unenrolled voters are compelled to take sides as the nation’s political divisions grow more strident, with fears the nation’s democracy is at risk in the November election.

“More people are so horrified by the behavior of the parties, so no one wants to be in one," she said. “But now we have this existential crisis in our country, and people are trying to decide if there’s anything they can do.”

According to numbers released last month by the secretary of state’s office after a cleanup of the state’s voter list, Democrats have the largest share of active voters with 36.2%, followed by Republican voters (29.5%), and unenrolled voters (28.8%).

The political shift — and a shift in voter registrations — had its origins around the time Republican Paul LePage was elected governor in 2010, bringing a bare-fisted style of leadership that provided Maine voters with a taste of what was to come on a national stage under President Donald Trump, said Mark Brewer, a political science professor at the University of Maine.

By 2020, with Trump battling for reelection, the shift had begun and Democrats emerged as the biggest voting bloc, according to the secretary of state. Republicans, too, overtook unenrolled voters two years later. As of last month, a tally of active voters indicated there were 343,488 Democratic voters, 279,936 Republican voters and 273,298 unenrolled voters.

That coincides with hardening geographic lines that contribute to the growing divide. The coastal 1st Congressional District has become bluer, and the sprawling, rural 2nd District has grown redder, awarding Trump an electoral vote in 2016 and 2020.

“It’s a symptom of the ever-increasing political polarization,” said Brewer. ” Just when you think partisan differences can’t get any sharper, they do.”

In another partisan split, Republicans say they won't recognize the ranked-choice voting used in the election. The voting system allows candidates to be ranked on the ballot. If no candidate wins a majority, then the last-place candidates will be eliminated and votes reallocated.

Republicans say they'll only recognize the first-round votes.

It's possible some unenrolled voters decided to join a party to vote in presidential primaries in 2020, and that some of them could choose to return to their unenrolled status now that they're allowed to cast primary votes, said Secretary of State Shenna Bellows.

But she acknowledged that changes caused by corrosive ***politics*** might be here to stay.

The good news is that Maine’s voter participation remains high, with the potential for even more voters in coming years thanks to online registration and automatic voter registration when people apply for a driver’s license at the Bureau of Motor Vehicles.

Independents, meanwhile, continue to ponder their place.

Richard Woodbury, an independent from Yarmouth, is one of those who’ve considered whether the time has come to take sides and join a party. The economist served in the Maine Senate as an independent, and remains active on political issues.

He views maintaining his unaffiliated status as a way to avoid partisan dysfunction.

“I’m always thinking about where I fit,” Woodbury said. “Where I land is that I still prefer to approach ***politics*** in the collaborative way that parties are really bad at doing.”

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