

Research Brief: Primary Voters Elect Most of Congress. They're Not Like Most Americans.

Key Takeaways

- In 2024, 87% of Congressional races were decided in primary elections – meaning the 7% of voters who participated in these elections effectively chose the vast majority of the U.S. House. New analysis of Catalist voter file data illustrates just how unrepresentative these voters are compared to the general voting age population.
- While a plurality of Americans identified as independent or nonaffiliated, they were significantly underrepresented among these decisive primary voters; independents made up 39% of the voting age population but just 11% of the electorate in decisive primaries.
- While 47% of the voting age population identified as moderate, just 11% of decisive primary voters did so. By contrast, self-identified liberals made up 20% of the population but 29% of decisive primary voters, and conservatives comprised 33% of the population but 60% of the decisive primary electorate.
- Decisive primary voters were also demographically unrepresentative, being significantly older, whiter, wealthier, and more educated than the population at large.

Introduction

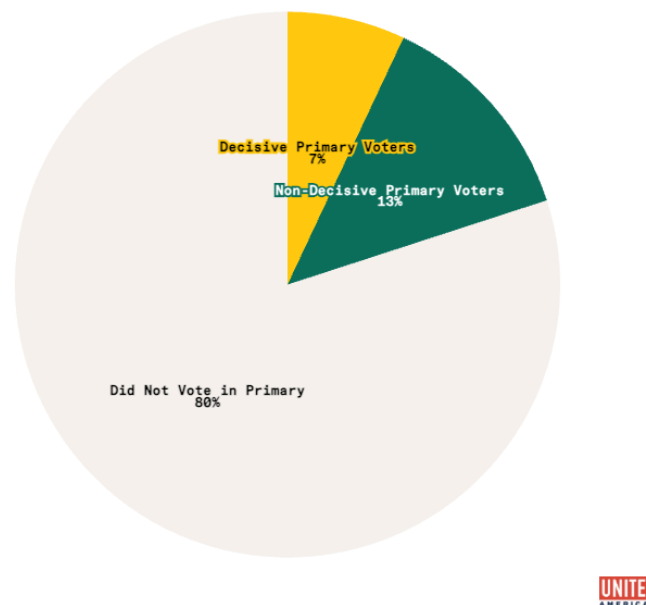
America has a primary problem, and it's getting worse. **In 2024, just 7% of voters effectively elected 87% of Congress.** According to the [Cook Political Report](#), just 43 out of 435 U.S. House races were rated “lean” or “tossup” on election day — meaning 392 winners had essentially been chosen in the primary. These results were slightly worse than the 8% of voters who elected 83% of Congress in 2022. Amid a wave of unprecedented mid-decade redistricting, a startling [90% of races](#) are expected to be decided before the general election in 2026.

The almost complete absence of competitive general elections for Congress begs a question: **who are the sliver of primary voters who effectively choose the winners?** Analyzing the

ideological and demographic makeup of this electorate is critical in understanding their impact on election outcomes and the representativeness of American democracy. If these voters mirror the population at-large, primaries should still produce representative outcomes. By contrast, if they overrepresent some constituencies while underrepresenting others, primaries should lead to outcomes that diverge from the population’s preferences and distort the lines of democratic accountability.

To characterize the 7% of voters who elected 87% of Congress, we used Catalist voter file data to analyze voters who participated in the dominant party primary in uncompetitive districts, comparing them to the general voting age population. We focused just on voters who voted in the dominant party primary — who we label “decisive primary voters” — since those who voted in the non-dominant party primary had effectively no say over who represents them.¹ Compared to the population, we found that these **decisive primary voters were older, whiter, wealthier, more educated, less moderate, and more likely to affiliate with a political party.**

Figure 1: Only 7% of Voting Age Americans Were Decisive Primary Voters



These findings are a sobering reminder of the work that needs to be done to achieve the [Founders’ vision](#) of a Congress that is “an exact portrait of the people at large.”

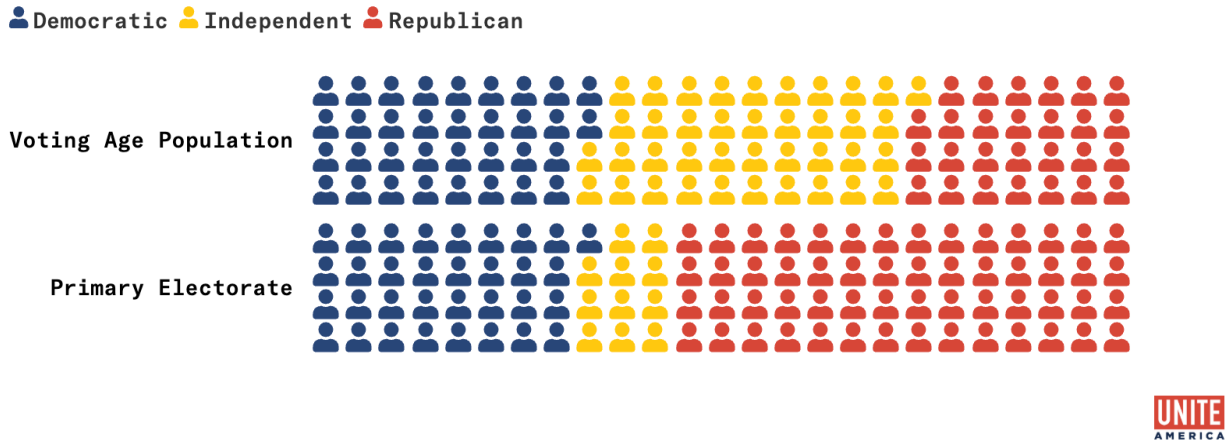
Partisan and Ideological Unrepresentativeness

At a time when record high numbers of Americans identify as [independent or unaffiliated](#), this group remains the least represented in primaries. While independents comprised 39% of the

¹ This figure also includes voters who participated in an open, all-candidate primary in uncompetitive districts in California, Louisiana, and Washington.

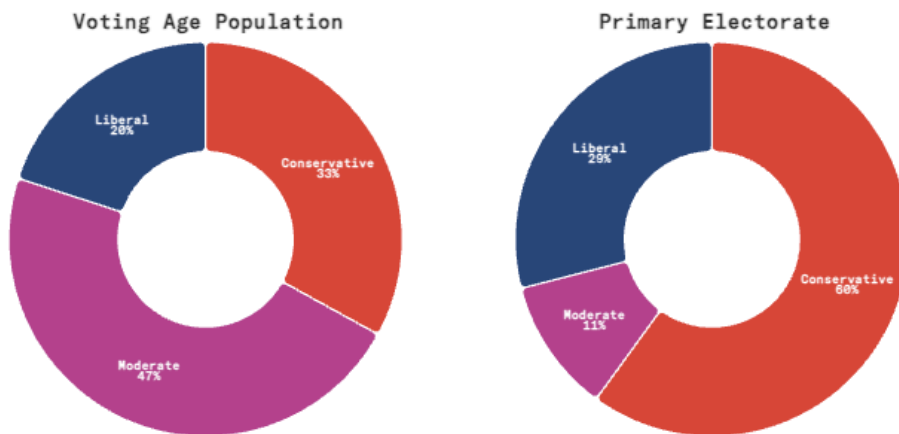
voting age population in 2024, they made up just 11% of decisive primary voters. In other words, independents had almost four times less representation than they should have had, based on their share of the population. The substantial underrepresentation of independents is strongly tied to the types of [primary systems](#) used across the country — particularly closed primaries, which legally bar almost 17 million independents from primary participation in 16 states.

Figure 2: Independents Were Significantly Underrepresented in Decisive Primaries



The underrepresentation of independents is further reflected in the ideological profile of the decisive primary electorate. While 47% of the voting age population identified as moderate, just 11% of decisive primary voters did so, **meaning the decisive primary electorate was four times less moderate than the population (see Figure 2)**. By contrast, self-identified liberals made up 20% of the population but 29% of decisive primary voters — resulting in approximately 1.5 times more representation than parity would suggest. Conservatives had almost twice their fair share of representation, as they comprised 33% of the population but 60% of the decisive primary electorate.

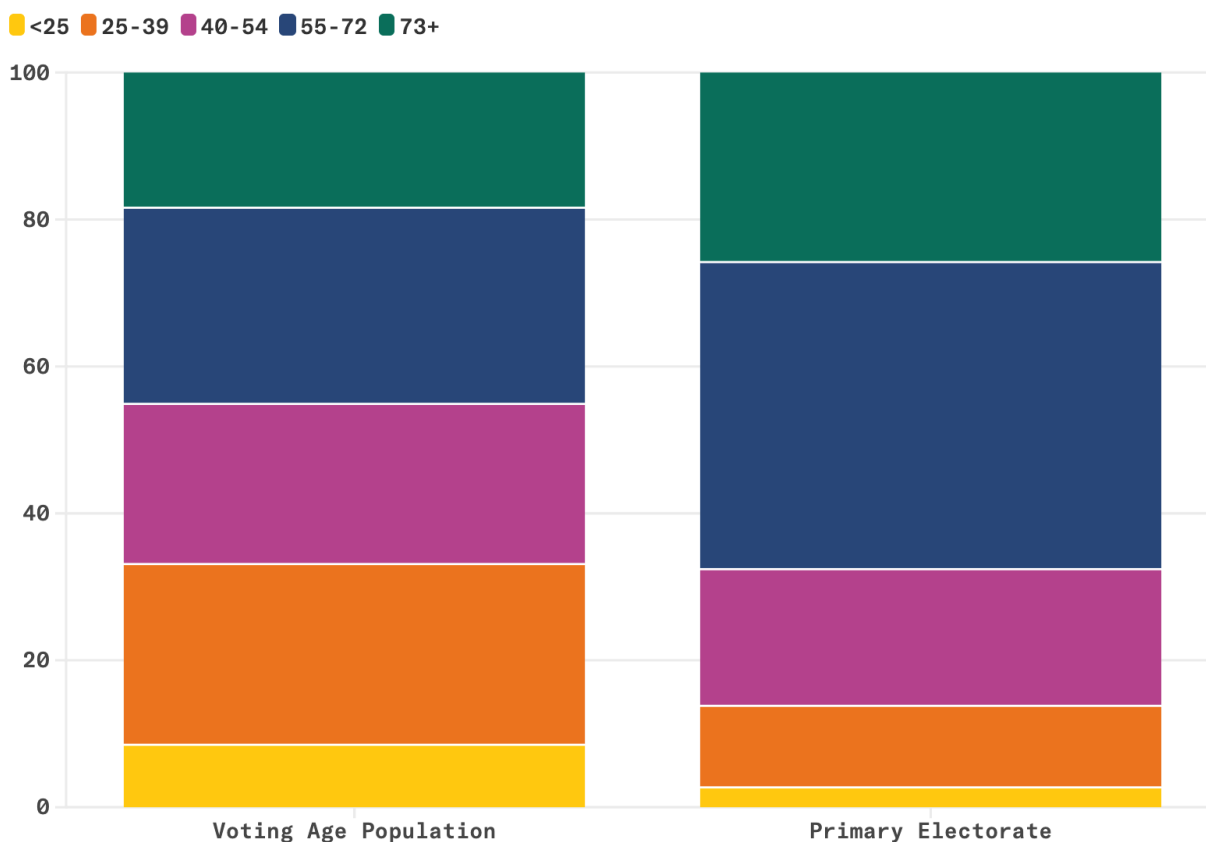
Figure 3: Decisive Primary Electorates Were Four Times Less Moderate than the Population



Demographic Unrepresentativeness

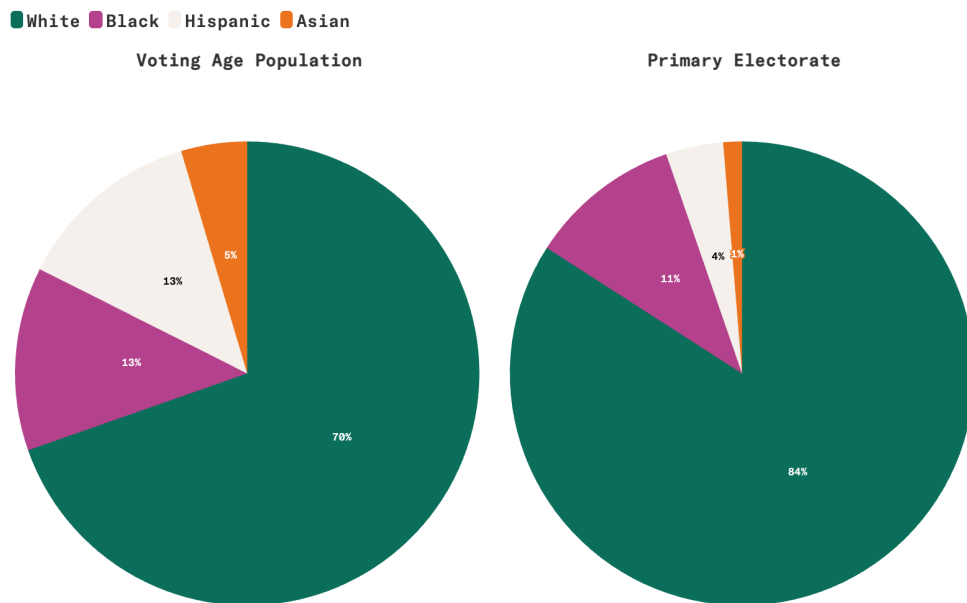
The primary electorate that chose 87% of Congress in 2024 was also highly unrepresentative across a range of demographic characteristics. In terms of age, Millennial and Gen Z voters were notably absent. Voters under the age of 25 made up 9% of the population but just 3% of decisive primary voters, while those 25–39 comprised 25% of the population but only 11% of the decisive primary electorate. Older voters fared much better — those over the age of 55 accounted for 68% of the decisive primary electorate but just 46% of the population.

Figure 4: Decisive Primary Electorates Were Much Older than the Population



In the majority of uncompetitive congressional districts, decisive primary voters were also racially unrepresentative. While white voters made up 70% of the population, they constituted 84% of the decisive primary electorate. By contrast, Black voters accounted for 13% of the population but a slightly lower 11% of the decisive primary electorate. Underrepresentation was even larger for Hispanic and Asian American voters, who were three to four times less represented than their shares of the population would suggest.

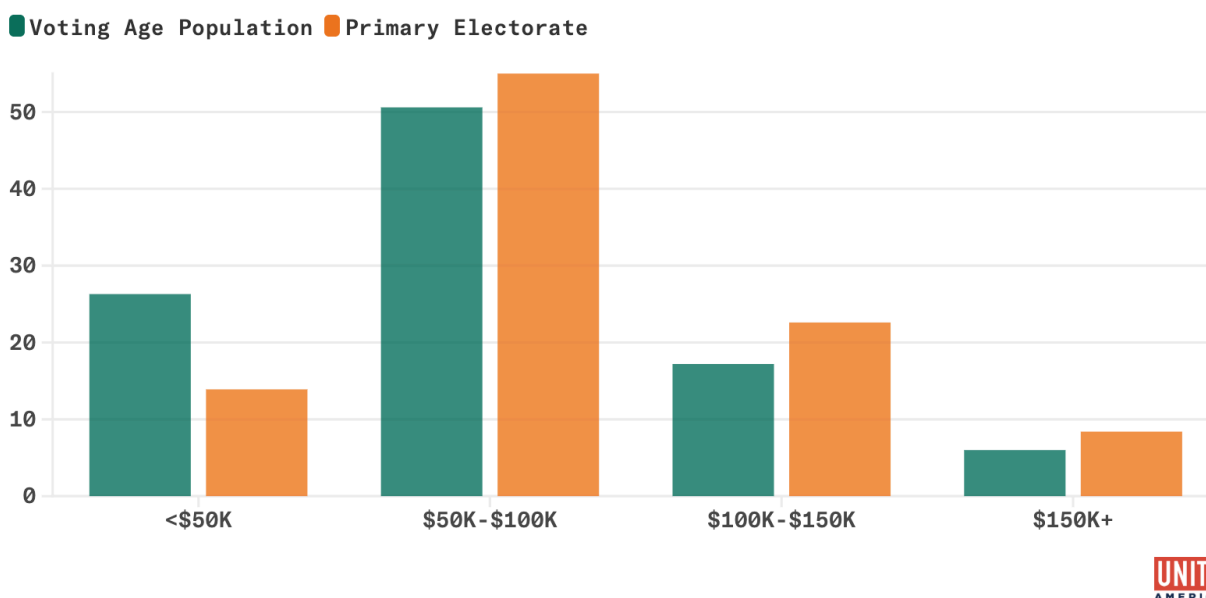
Figure 5: Nonwhite Voters Were Underrepresented in Decisive Primaries



Although the importance of voters without a college degree has been a topic of great interest over the past decade, this large and influential constituency was also underrepresented. While 80% of the population held less than a bachelor's degree, only 72% of decisive primary voters did so.

Wealthier voters were also substantially more influential in primaries than their share of the population would suggest. Those earning more than \$150,000 per year constituted 6% of the population and 8% of the decisive primary electorate, and those making between \$100,000 and \$150,000 comprised 17% of the population and 23% of decisive primary voters. By contrast, voters who made less than \$50,000 per year had half the representation they should have had, accounting for 26% of the population but just 14% of voters in decisive primaries.

Figure 6: Decisive Primary Voters Were More Likely to Have Higher Incomes



Of the individual characteristics analyzed, only gender evinced no significant level of underrepresentation — women made up 54% of the decisive primary electorate and 53% of the population, with the figures for men being 46% and 47%, respectively. Yet a gap reappeared when turning to marital status. Married voters were overrepresented compared to their share of the population — accounting for 70% of decisive primary voters but just 46% of the population.

Conclusion

These findings underline the consequences of America’s deep and growing Primary Problem. **Not only does a small share of the electorate effectively choose who represents all Americans, but this group is unrepresentative across almost all major ideological and demographic characteristics.** Decisive primary voters who are older, whiter, wealthier, and more educated are likely to have different life experiences, concerns, and policy preferences than the more diverse population at large. Likewise, a decisive primary electorate that leaves out independent voters is unlikely to elevate representatives whose priorities and politics meet the demands of the moment.

Americans deserve a government that truly represents the country “in miniature,” reflecting back its tremendous political and demographic diversity. This vision dates back to the country’s founding 250 years ago — while it has never been fully realized, our modern primary system is a significant barrier to making this enduring aspiration a reality.