

Subject: Utah House Bill 197
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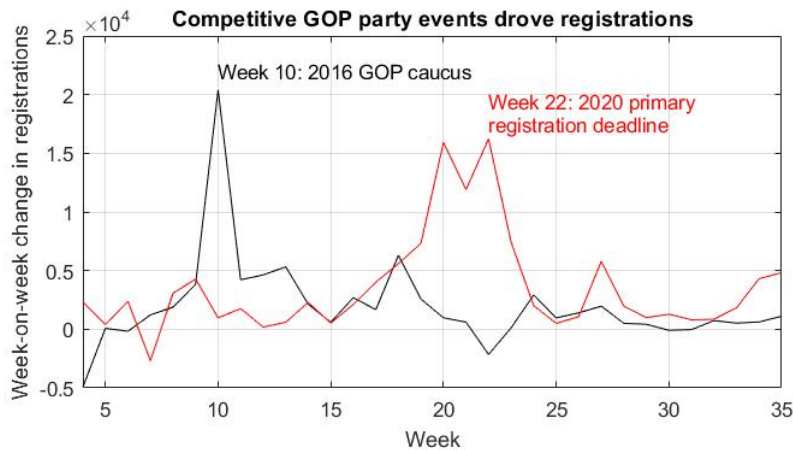


Summary: Analysis of voter registration data suggests that growth in Republican registration in the 2020 primary was driven by new registrations and re-registration by unaffiliated voters, with little crossover registration from Democrats into the Republican party.

Background: H.B. 197 proposes to amend Utah’s Election Code by mandating that in even-numbered years, voter registration forms submitted after March 31 by Utah voters seeking to designate or change their party affiliation will not go into effect until after that year’s primary election. As detailed in the Utah press, support for the bill is based on the belief that in 2020, a significant number of Democratic party voters attempted to game the system by switching parties in order to sway the results of the Republican primary.

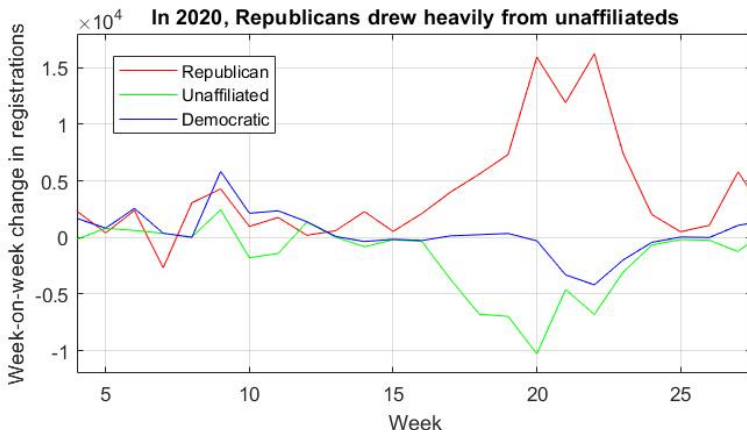
Methods and findings: The Electoral Innovation Lab obtained records from the Utah Statewide Voter Registration Database. Analysis of these records led to the following findings:

1. Republican party growth occurred at a high rate before competitive races in 2016 and 2020.



The rate of re-registration observed before the 2020 Utah primary is similar to what occurred in the 2016 Utah GOP caucus. In both cases, these competitive events were preceded by a surge in the registration of Republican voters. The graph at left is based on total registration numbers.

2. Republican registrations grew by 14.3% between January-June 2020, driven by a decrease in unaffiliated voters. Democratic registrations into the GOP could not account for this Republican surge.



Between January 2020 and the June primary, Republican registrations grew by 97,382, a 14.3% increase. Unaffiliated voters decreased by almost two-thirds this number (60,878). Democratic registrations increased for most of the year, decreasing modestly in the three weeks preceding the primary by just 7,796.

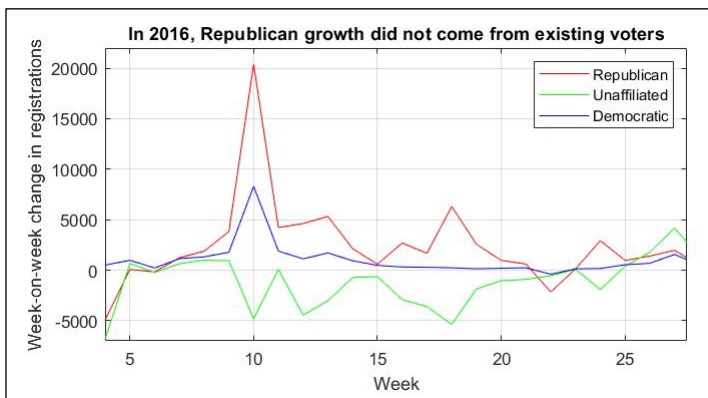
3. Voter rolls indicate that the vast majority of voters who registered with the Republican party before the primary have remained in the party after the primary.

Voter rolls add more detail on the behavior of voters. Of 1,219,903 registered Utah voters, 277,424 (22.7%) re-registered in 2020. Re-registration can happen for a variety of reasons, including a change of address or a change in partisan affiliation. We therefore focused on those voters who participated in the 2020 primary.

On primary day, 427,739 people voted. Most are now registered Republicans (391,422, or 91.5% of the total). The rest are now Democrats (24,202), unaffiliated (11,234), or minor-party (881). Of these participants, 43,536 (10.2% of those who voted) re-registered as Republicans before the primary. This means at most, 43,536 voters gained access to the Republican primary via re-registration, again a minority (44.7%) of the growth in overall Republican registration listed previously in point 2.

To search for evidence about voters' true intentions, we examined re-registrations after the primary. After the primary, 2,509 people who voted that day later re-registered as Democrats, 1,495 re-registered as unaffiliated, and 305 re-registered with a third party. This means a maximum of 4,309 voters (2,509+1,495+305) potentially went back to a non-Republican affiliation after the primary, with at most 2,509 of them being Democrats (0.2% of all registered Utah voters).

4. Re-registrations of Democrats as Republicans did not occur to any meaningful extent in 2016.



As little as Democrats contributed to the outcome of the 2020 Republican governor's nomination race, their contribution in 2016 was even smaller. Total voter registration numbers show that Republican growth that year drew from neither unaffiliated nor Democratic voters.

Conclusion: The contention that Democratic voters tried to “game” the system by switching parties to vote in the 2020 Republican primary is not supported by the data from the Utah Election Board. Any pre-primary growth in the Republican party was driven by newly registered Republicans and formerly unaffiliated voters, not by party-switching Democrats. Therefore, the data suggest that the principal driver of new Republican registrations was interest in competitive political races. Current law provides a route to attract new voters to the Republican Party, especially in interesting election years.