

**New Mexico's Electoral System is in Need of Reform:
Fusion Voting Can Improve Representation for the
State's Growing Population of Young and Independent
Voters**

Authors:

Brooke Abrams is a health policy doctoral fellow at the Center for Social Policy and a PhD candidate in the Department of Political Science at the University of New Mexico. Brooke's primary research initiatives largely exist under the purview of criminal justice and lie at the intersection of police brutality, race and ethnicity politics, and the social determinants of health among African American communities.

Gabriel R. Sanchez is the Executive Director of the UNM Center for Social Policy and a Professor of Political Science at the University of New Mexico. Professor Sanchez is a native New Mexican with a national reputation as the leading expert on New Mexico politics and policy and a nationally recognized scholar of survey research and methods both nationally and in New Mexico.

Introduction

Not only is the two-party policy system of the United States very rare among nations globally, but the American electorate has grown frustrated with the system. [National survey data reveals](#) that two-thirds of Americans want a third party, and 68% of Americans say that two parties do not do an adequate job of representing the American people. There has also been a steady movement among voters away from the dominant parties, with 34% of the electorate identifying as independents, the highest percentage on record ([Pew Research Center 2020](#)). There has been a trend of more new registrants in New Mexico being increasingly likely to register as independent. In fact, between 2017 and 2018 there were [more new registrants who either identified with minor parties or declined to state a party affiliation](#) than new Democratic and Republican registrants combined.

These trends suggest the need for major reform to help improve the public's confidence in our system to provide adequate representation and to ensure that all voters, regardless of their party affiliation, have a voice on the policies that impact their lives.

Here in New Mexico 22% of all voters identified as political independents who declined to state a party affiliation, roughly 293,151 New Mexicans ([NM SOS 2020](#)). Independent parties including the Green Party of New Mexico, and New Mexico Working Families Party, among others, have built solid followings across the state in this environment where just over one fourth of all adults in the state do not feel that either the Democratic or Republican Party represents their interests adequately. Given this context it is surprising that New Mexico's voting laws essentially disenfranchise independent voters during the primary process and minimize their influence during the general election.

As we discuss in more detail in this policy brief, we conclude that there should be serious consideration this legislative session for fusion voting which would allow minor parties to nominate a major party's nominee for the general election ballot. We introduce open primaries as a secondary avenue that would allow independent voters to participate in the state's primary elections without being forced to register with one of the dominant parties. These reforms could significantly improve civic engagement levels and voter turnout across the state, particularly among young residents who we find are disproportionately harmed by New Mexico's antiquated system.

Fusion Voting Can Increase Civic Engagement for Minor Parties

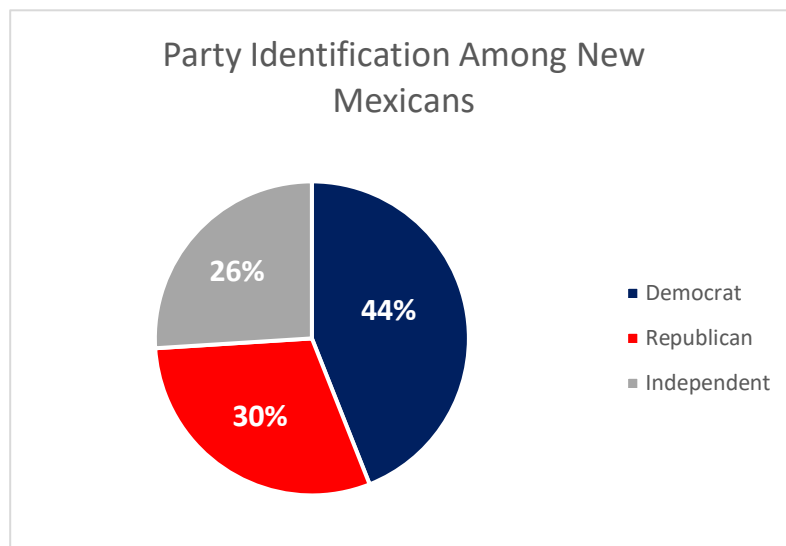
Fusion voting, also referred to as cross-endorsement or open ballot voting, is the practice of multiple political parties nominating the same candidate for office ([Morse & Gass 2006](#)). Fusion voting addresses concerns over "wasted" or "spoiler" vote dilemmas that force voters to either elect their least-preferred candidates (spoiling) or waste their vote on a candidate unlikely to win. Fusion voting is becoming more popular across the U.S., with eight states currently utilizing this approach: New York, Connecticut, Oregon, South Carolina, Delaware, Idaho, Vermont, and Mississippi. The push to legalize fusion stems from both voters who are able to signal particularized policy interests and third-party candidates who are able to influence some control over the Democratic and Republican parties through their perceived ability to deliver votes. Cross-endorsements allow voters to vote for a candidate they prefer among the two dominant options (Michelson & Susin 2004).

Implementing the fusion voting approach can improve political efficacy by enhancing a perception among voters not affiliated with the dominant parties that they can have a decisive effect on election outcomes. This voting innovation has also been found to increase political competition, a key driver to

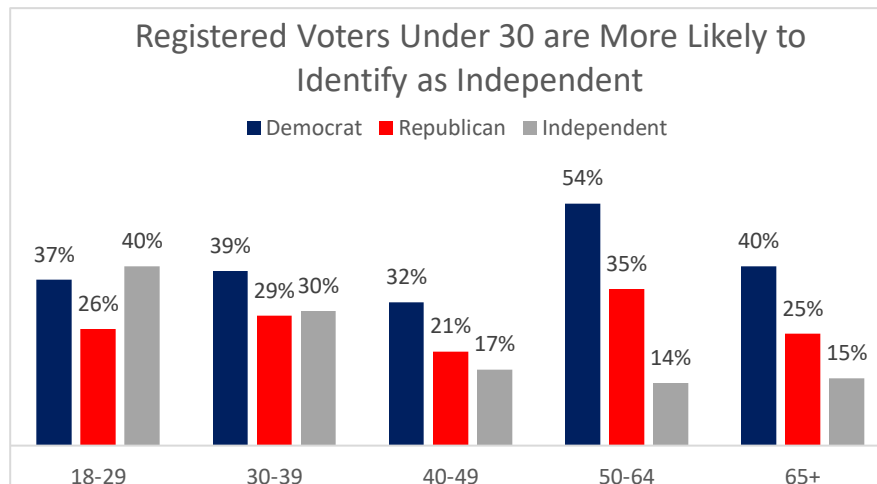
civic engagement across the full electorate, not just political independents. Generally, states that support fusion voting have stronger multi-party systems that expand political representation and responsiveness by centering issues-based politics, encouraging would-be eligible voters to turnout (Michelson & Susin 2004), and enhancing the legitimacy of elections.

Fusion Voting is Key For Young Voters

We draw from the most recent survey of New Mexico’s registered voters to assess partisan identification among different age groups in New Mexico. The survey of 500 registered and likely voters was implemented earlier this month by LD Insights. As reflected in the graph below, the survey identifies that 26% of New Mexicans identify as an Independent. This is nearly the same percentage as self-identified Republicans in the state. There is no meaningful difference between Hispanic and White New Mexicans in self-identification as an independent according to the survey.



The relationship between age and party identification is an important one to consider in New Mexico. As the figure below illustrates, registered voters in New Mexico under age 30 are more likely (40%) to identify as Independent relative to older New Mexicans – 17% among 40-49 years of age and 14% among New Mexicans 50-64 years of age. In fact, a higher percentage of registered voters under the age of 30 identify as independent than either Democrat (37%) or Republican (26%).



A person's experiences with representation within the two-party system shape his or her attitudes about not only the dominant parties, but also whether they will choose to engage in the political system through voting and other avenues of participation (Donovan, Parry, & Bowler 2005). The high percentage of young, registered voters who are not affiliated with either the Democratic or Republican Party might explain why younger Americans have consistently turned out to vote at lower rates than older Americans.

Many of these younger registered voters who do not see representation from either dominant party could be integrated in the political system if they were strengthened by fusion voting and would have more incentives to participate in the primaries if they were open to independent voters.

Primaries happen all across the United States, but states vary significantly in how they allow voters to participate in their primary elections. There are two major types of primaries – closed and open. [New Mexico is only one of 9 states in the nation that have a closed primary](#). In general, a voter seeking to vote in a closed primary must first be a registered party member. Independent or those that decline to state their party affiliation, by definition, are excluded from participating in the party nomination contests. This means that over one in four registered voters in New Mexico are left out of the first major stage of the election process.

Reforming our system to legalize fusion can improve political efficacy by enhancing citizen perceptions that they will have a decisive effect on election outcomes. Likewise, by increasing competitiveness, fusion politics has shown to spark greater interest in the electoral process. Scholars of political representation have demonstrated that both fusion and open primaries provide greater access to democratic institutions. In [an earlier brief](#), we demonstrated that there are relatively few competitive legislative races, and in the recent 2020 election political experts like myself were able to call two of the three congressional races well before Election Day due to their lack of competitiveness. Even New Mexico's CD-2 which was projected to be a competitive election turned out to be a comfortable victory for Republican Yvette Herrell in a district that has only elected a Democrat twice since 1980.

Strengthening Minor Parties Through Reform Leads to Positive Outcomes

Political parties are the central institutions of democracy because they provide opportunities to clarify and structure alternatives that make politics accessible to the masses (Drutman 2020). Institutional changes such as fusion voting can make democracy work for a wider segment of the population by acknowledging that diverse perspectives are a strength, not a weakness.

Under a multiparty system, third parties or minor parties can engage and organize members of the electorate who are not being represented by the dominant parties and advocate for their collective interest. Research has shown that multiparty democracies have consistently generated more stable, and compromise-oriented policymaking. This is much different than the highly polarized partisan politics we are currently experiencing in New Mexico.

Systems that have multiple parties also see higher voter turnout, more satisfied citizens, and better representation of political and racial/ethnic minorities (Drutman 2020). Fusion voting systems, in particular, are attractive in multiparty systems because it makes it easier for minor parties to gain representation in the state legislature and allows minor parties to hold elected officials accountable for particularized policy interests (Cantor & Mason 2003).

Existing studies illustrate that expanding minor party options to reflect more voices of all segments of the population increases mobilization (Powell 1981). For example, a shift to a system where multiple

parties flourish could make districts more competitive and force political candidates to campaign aggressively, appeal to a broader electorate, and encourage voter turnout.

Now is the Time for Reforming the System

A healthy functioning representative democracy should ensure that public policy outcomes reflect the good of all active citizens, not just those who are affiliated with the two dominant parties. A more engaged and active electorate should be an outcome supported by all elected officials. Even during the high turnout 2020 election which broke modern turnout records in the state, New Mexico still had over 694,000 potential eligible voters decide not to participate ([NM SOS 2020](#)). Reforming the voting system to incorporate fusion voting can increase interest in primary elections among eligible voters who are not being represented adequately and/or mobilized by the two dominant parties.

Integrating fusion voting and opening participation in the state's primary elections to all registered voters can help to improve the civic engagement across New Mexico and improve the health of our democracy. We are confident that these reforms will put added pressure on our elected officials to make necessary compromises and expand a political agenda that provides the electorate with the solutions to the many challenges facing the state.

References:

https://ssir.org/articles/entry/strengthening_democracy_by_embracing_a_multi_party_system#

Cantor, D., & Mason, J. W. (2003). Inside, Outside or Somewhere In-Between: Fusion Voting and the Working Families Party. *Social Policy, 34*(2/3), 53-57.

Donovan, T., Parry, J., & Bowler, S. (2005). O Other, Where Art Thou? Support for Multiparty Politics in the United States. *Social Science Quarterly, 86*(1), 147-159. Retrieved January 28, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42956054>

Drutman, L. (2020). *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop: The Case for Multiparty Democracy in America*. Oxford University Press, USA.

Hudson, W. E. (2012). *American democracy in peril: Eight challenges to America's future*. CQ Press.

Ickler, J. (2015). *Left out: Beyond the two-party horse race* (Doctoral dissertation, California State University, Northridge).

Kelley, S., Ayres, R. E., & Bowen, W. G. (1967). Registration and voting: Putting first things first. *The American Political Science Review, 61*(2), 359-379.

Powell Jr, G. B. (1981). Party systems and political system performance: Voting participation, government stability and mass violence in contemporary democracies. *The American Political Science Review, 861-879*.

Michelson, M. R., & Susin, S. J. (2004). What's in a Name: The Power of Fusion Politics in a Local Election. *Polity, 36*(2), 301-321.

Rosenstone, S. J., Behr, R. L., & Lazarus, E. H. (1996). *Third parties in America: Citizen response to major party failure*. Princeton University Press.