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# Which political party dominates your town? Maybe not the one you'd think

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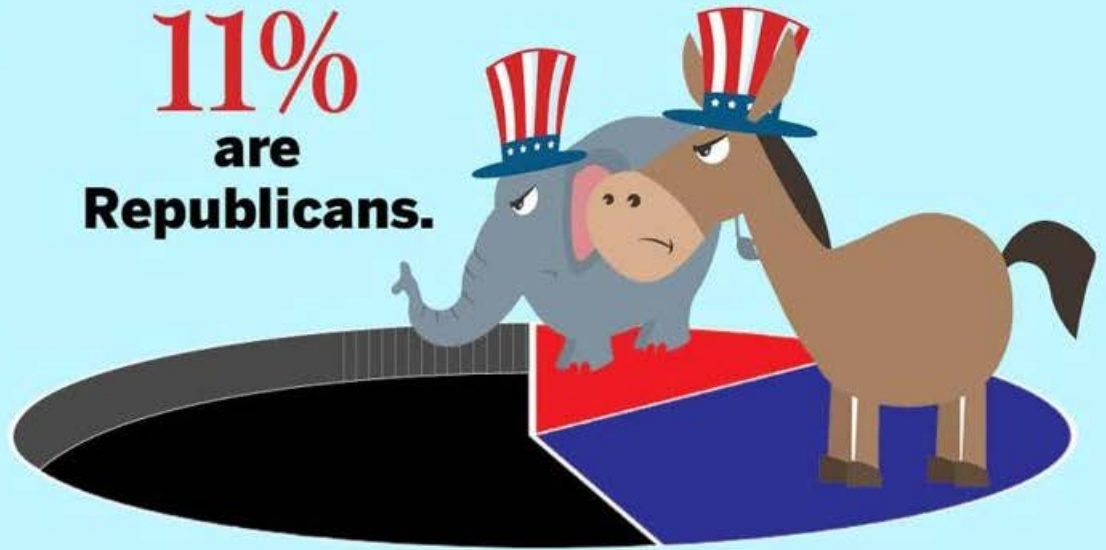
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**Statewide,  
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**11%  
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**35%  
are Democrats.**

By **Matt Rocheleau**

GLOBE STAFF OCTOBER 17, 2016

Massachusetts is widely known as a blue state that traditionally sides with Democratic political candidates.

But for the vast majority of communities, and for the state as a whole, Democrats do not account for the largest share of the electorate.



Instead, most voters, declaring their independence, have registered as “unenrolled.”

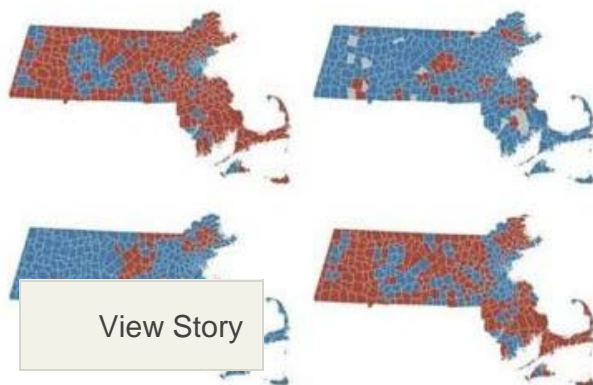
Unenrolled voters make up the largest share of the electorate in 332, or about 95 percent, of the state’s 351 cities and towns.

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In the other 19 communities — including Boston, Springfield, Cambridge, Somerville, Brookline, Fall River, New Bedford, and Amherst — registered Democrats are the biggest group.



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There is no municipality in the state where Republicans are the largest group.

Statewide, 54 percent of the nearly 4.4 million registered voters have placed themselves in the unenrolled category; 35 percent are Democrats; 11 percent are Republicans; and the rest, less than 1 percent, are registered either with the Green-Rainbow or United Independent parties.

Unenrolled voters eclipsed Democrats as the dominant group among registered voters in Massachusetts back in 1990 and have increased their lead steadily since.

The trend is also reflected nationwide.

Experts [have said](#) that allegiances to the two major political parties have weakened over the years as many voters have been turned off by either party for various reasons — because, for example, they disliked a particular candidate, were disappointed by a scandal, or just tired of increasing partisanship.

“There’s been some dissatisfaction at times with the Democratic party and at other times with the Republican party,” said Paul Watanabe, political science professor at the University of Massachusetts Boston. “Some people see parties as the establishment and turn away [or] see the candidates as

**Tweedledee and Tweedledum.”**

**“Generally speaking, after people move from a party status to unenrolled, they stay unenrolled,” he added. “So the effect has been cumulative.”**

**In the same way that, decades ago, new voters tended to, at least initially, register with the political parties their parents belonged to, “unenrolled also gets passed on to children,” Watanabe said.**

**There can also be a social advantage to being unenrolled.**

**“People who are not political activists, which is a big swath of people, they just don’t want to talk about which party they belong to,” said UMass Amherst political science professor Ray La Raja. “Especially today when politics can be so nasty, being unenrolled is a way of downplaying the kind of talk that might rile social relationships; it’s a way of avoiding those types of conversations about politics that can be uncomfortable.”**

**Yet another factor driving people to choose unenrolled when they register to vote in Massachusetts is the state’s open primary system, which allows unenrolled voters to vote in any party’s primary, rather than just their own.**

**“To have maximum political flexibility and maximum impact, unenrolled might be the best status,” said Watanabe. “If you’re locked into one party or the other, you can only get the ballot for that party.”**

**Still, many people who are unenrolled tend to vote consistently with one of the two major parties.**

**“As the parties get more extreme, people who are kind of in the middle don’t feel comfortable saying they belong to either party, but they still tend to vote with the same party. Research shows that doesn’t really change,” said La Raja.**

**Experts said the divisiveness of the ongoing election cycle is likely to further fuel the trend.**

**La Raja said he expects that, particularly at the national level, the Republican party may lose a higher share of its registered voters.**

**“The party’s in trouble — there’s no doubt about it,” he said.**

## Which party voters in Massachusetts are registered with

Each city and town is shaded based on which group accounts for the largest share of registered voters. Gray represents unenrolled voters, who are the largest group in the vast majority of Massachusetts' 351 municipalities. Blue represents the Democratic party. In 19 communities, Democrats are the largest group. Red represents the Republican party. There is no municipality in the state where Republicans are the largest group. Data are as of Aug. 19, 2016.



## 'Unenrolled' has become the most popular choice for Mass. voters

■ TOTAL VOTERS ■ DEMOCRATIC ■ REPUBLICAN ■ UNENROLLED ■ OTHER

Created with Highcharts 4.0.3  
1948 1950 1952 1954 1956 1958 1960 1962 1964 1966 1968 1970 Feb. 1972 Aug. 1972 Feb.  
1974 Aug. 1974 Feb. 1976 Aug. 1976 Feb. 1978 Aug. 1978 Feb. 1980 Aug. 1980 Feb. 1982 Aug. 1982 Feb. 1984 Aug. 1984 Aug.  
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2013 Aug. 2014 Oct. 2014 Feb. 2015 Feb. 2016 Aug. 2016 0M 1M 2M 3M 4M 5M

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