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2012 Republican Primary Voters: More Conservative Than GOP General Election Voters

A profile of the GOP primary electorate

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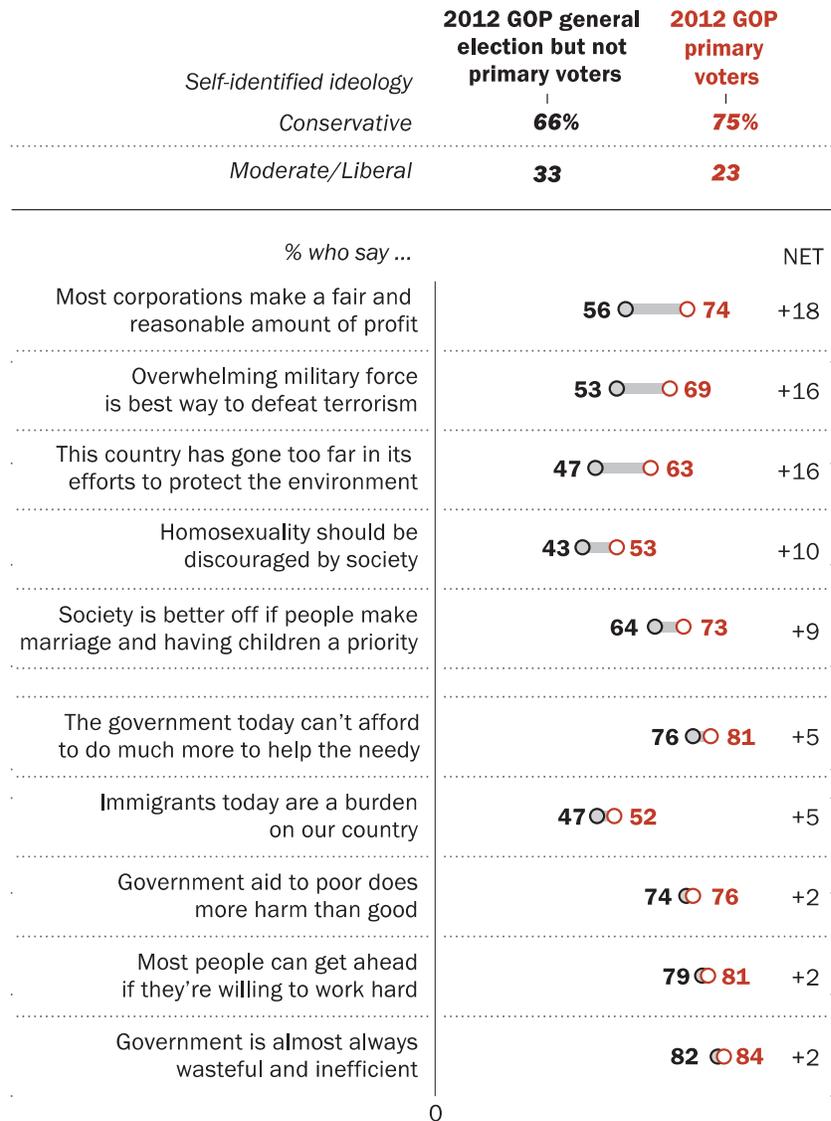
A profile of the GOP primary electorate

Next week, Republican voters will begin the process of selecting their party's 2016 presidential nominee. One of the major questions will be which GOP voters turn out, and which stay home.

[A person's past voting history](#) can be a powerful predictor of future turnout. A new analysis of the Republican electorate in 2012, using the national voter file, reveals substantial attitudinal and demographic differences between verified GOP primary voters and Republicans who voted in the general election, but not the primaries.

The study confirms the conventional wisdom that, in many ways, GOP primary voters were more conservative than those Republicans who did not participate in that year's primaries but would eventually vote in the general election, both

2012 Republican primary voters and general election voters differed on key issues



Source: Survey conducted January 23-March 16, 2014.

Based on self-reported Republican and Republican-leaning registered voters who are matched to the voter file. Statements are forced choice questions. More conservative responses shown here. For full question wording, see <http://www.people-press.org/files/2014/06/2014-Polarization-Topline-for-Release.pdf>.

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in their self-identification and in their political values.

GOP primary voters in 2012 were more skeptical of environmental protection, more supportive of the use of “overwhelming” force against terrorism and more likely to oppose societal acceptance of homosexuality.

At the same time, the analysis shows there also was common ground between GOP voters who voted in the primaries and those who did not in opinions about the government and the social safety net.

This analysis is based on 1,575 Republican and Republican-leaning registered voters who are part of Pew Research Center’s nationally-representative American Trends Panel, and who could be matched to the national voter file.¹

The GOP primary electorate represented a relatively small share of those who went on to vote in the general election. Of Republicans who were verified to have voted in the general election, only 25% are verified as having voted in Republican primaries or caucuses in 2012; while 75% do not have a record of having voted in the primaries or caucuses that year.²

The attitudes and demographics of Republican primary and general election voters were drawn from Pew Research Center’s 2014 study of [partisan polarization](#). This study is unique in that it is able to, at the individual level, pair rich public opinion data with voting history. [Past research](#) has compared the opinions of likely voters (who are identified based on self-reported data) to non-voters, but this report is a rare opportunity to link these views to actual voter turnout.

This analysis cannot provide state-level data on GOP primary voters, but the national differences between GOP primary voters and general election only voters are seen both in states that held early primaries in 2012 (Super Tuesday and earlier) and in states with later primaries. In addition, there is no analogous study of Democratic primary voters in 2012, when Barack Obama was unchallenged as his party’s nominee.

Terminology

General election only voters: Republican and Republican leaners who say they are registered to vote and only have a validated record of voting in the 2012 general election, not the 2012 Republican primary election.

Primary voters: Republican and Republican leaners who say they are registered to vote and who have a validated record of voting in the 2012 primary election.

¹ The Republican and Republican-leaning registered voters in this analysis represent a subset of all 4,402 adults from the American Trends Panel who were matched to the voter file. This group was weighted to be nationally representative.

² In order to allow for comparisons between primary and general election voters, this analysis is based on those who identified with the Republican Party or said they lean toward the Republican Party. These voters were 86% of the 2012 GOP primary and caucus electorate overall. Nearly all of those who are verified as having voted in the GOP primary also voted in the general election (98%).

What is the voter file and how do you match to it?

The voter file, gathered from publicly available individual voter lists from each state and standardized by a vendor, contains information on nearly every voter's turnout history along with a variety of demographic information. The voter file does not indicate the candidates for whom a person voted, only whether he or she has a record of having voted in that election.

Matching the voter file to our survey data allows us to incorporate past turnout history by validating whether panel respondents were recorded as having cast a ballot in the 2012 primary and general elections. However, a known error is introduced when using the voter file. While the presence of a record of voting almost certainly means that a person voted, the absence of a record does not necessarily mean that the person did not vote.

As part of the core American Trends Panel methodology, the names and addresses of most panelists were collected. This was then used to match respondents from the survey sample to their corresponding record in a national voter file. To preserve the privacy of the panelists, the names and addresses of the panelists are securely stored and kept separate from the survey data and voter file information.

GOP primary voters were significantly more likely than GOP voters who only voted in the general election to say the country's environmental protection efforts have "gone too far" (63% of GOP primary voters vs. 47% of general election only voters).

And while 69% of primary voters said military force was the best way to defeat terrorism around the world, that compared with a narrower majority (53%) of general election only GOP voters.

There were also substantial gaps in views of business: 74% of GOP primary voters thought corporations made a "fair and reasonable amount of profit," while just 56% of Republicans who only voted in the general election said the same.

And GOP primary voters also were more likely to take socially conservative positions on two measures: While 53% of GOP primary voters said homosexuality "should be discouraged," 43% of GOP general election only voters said this. Similarly, though 73% of primary voters said "society is better off if people make marriage and having children a priority," a narrower majority of GOP general election only voters said the same (64%).

However, Republican primary voters and non-primary general election voters did not differ substantially in their views of government and the social safety net. Large majorities of both groups said government was wasteful and inefficient (primary 84%; general only 82%) and viewed government aid to the poor as doing more harm than good (76% vs. 74%).

On the issue of immigration there is also little difference between the groups; about half of both primary (52%) and general election only (47%) viewed immigrants as a burden on the country.

Ideological consistency, self-identification and views of the other side

The 2012 GOP primary electorate included a greater share of voters who were across-the-board conservative in their political values than the GOP general electorate.

Using a scale composed of ten political values questions, (discussed in more detail in Pew Research Center's 2014 report [Political Polarization in the American Public](#)), fully three-quarters of GOP primary voters (75%) took more conservative than liberal positions across these ten questions, including 36% who were consistently conservative in their positions (taking a conservative position on all or nearly all of the ten items in the scale). Only 22% expressed a mix of conservative and liberal political values, while just 3% were more liberal than conservative in their values.

By comparison, GOP general election only voters were less likely to be down-the-line conservative in their political values and more likely to express a mix of conservative and liberal positions: just 21% were consistently conservative (58% were at least mostly conservative), while fully 35% were ideologically mixed. Only 7% took more liberal than conservative positions.

GOP primary voters were also more likely to self-identify as conservative than GOP voters in the general election (75% vs. 66%).

And, in keeping with [past research that finds a link between partisan antipathy and political engagement](#), dislike of the opposing party was more pronounced among 2012 GOP primary voters than among general election only voters. Nearly all GOP primary voters (97%) viewed the Democratic Party unfavorably in 2014, and fully 59% said their view was *very* unfavorable, while those opinions were somewhat less negative among GOP general election only voters (87%

GOP primary voters more conservative than Republican general election voters

	All 2012 GOP general election voters	Voted in general election but not primary	2012 GOP primary voters
<i>% of each who are ...</i>	%	%	%
<i>Ideological consistency</i>			
Consistently conserv	25	21	36
Mostly conservative	37	36	39
Mixed	32	35	22
Mostly liberal	5	6	3
Consistently liberal	1	1	*
<i>Self-identified ideology</i>			
Very conservative	17	16	21
Conservative	51	50	55
Moderate	26	28	21
Liberal/Very liberal	4	5	2
<i>% who view Dem Party as ...</i>			
NET Unfavorable	90	87	97
Very unfavorable	51	48	59

Source: Survey conducted January 23-March 16, 2014.
Figures read down. Based on self-reported Republican and Republican-leaning registered voters.

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unfavorable, 48% *very* unfavorable). The two groups did not differ significantly in views of their own party.

The GOP primary electorate in 2012: older, more religious than GOP general election voters

The 2012 GOP primary electorate was significantly older than general election only voters. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of Republicans who voted in the 2012 primaries were 50 or older, compared with 55% of general election only Republican voters.

Republican primary voters also were more likely to be white evangelical Protestants than general election only voters: 45% of GOP primary voters identified as such, compared with 34% of general election only voters. In addition, general election only voters were more likely to attend religious services at least weekly (55% of primary voters vs. 45% of general election voters).

Though the overwhelming majority of both Republican primary voters (91%) and general election only GOP voters (85%) were white, non-whites made up a larger share of Republican general election only voters than of the GOP primary electorate (14% vs. 6%).

Demographic profiles of GOP primary, general election voters

% of each who are ...

	All 2012 GOP general election voters	Voted in general election but not primary	2012 GOP primary voters
	%	%	%
Men	49	51	46
Women	51	49	54
18-29	10	12	4
30-49	29	32	21
50-64	31	30	36
65+	29	25	37
White	87	85	91
Black	2	2	*
Hispanic	7	8	2
Postgraduate	10	9	12
College degree	24	24	23
Some college	36	38	32
High school or less	30	29	33
White evang. Protestant	37	34	45
White mainline Prot.	19	18	19
Black Protestant	1	1	*
Catholic	22	23	20
Unaffiliated	9	10	6
<i>Attend religious services...</i>			
Weekly or more	47	45	55
Less than weekly	53	55	45

Source: Survey conducted January 23-March 16, 2014.
Figures read down. Based on self-reported Republican and Republican-leaning registered voters. Whites and blacks include only those who are not Hispanics; Hispanics are of any race.

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In addition to being more likely to vote, Republicans and Republican leaners who voted in the 2012 primary elections have higher levels of political engagement than those who voted in the general election but not the primaries. Primary voters were more likely than others to pay attention to, and talk about, politics than other GOP voters. About three-quarters (78%) of GOP primary voters reported following government and public affairs most of the time, while fewer (61%) general election only voters said the same.

And when asked in a late spring 2014 survey how often they discuss government and politics with others, a quarter (28%) of GOP primary voters said “nearly every day” compared with 16% of general election voters who did not participate in the primaries.

Republicans who voted in the 2012 primary were also much more likely to report having contributed money to a candidate, to have contacted a public official and to *have been* contacted by campaigns: In an early 2014 survey, 31% said they had contributed money to a candidate or campaign in the past two years, including 19% who had given \$100 or more. That compared with just 16% of Republican general election only voters who donated any money during this period, and only 10% who donated \$100+.

GOP primary voters were somewhat more likely to report having attended a campaign event than non-primary Republican general election voters (25% vs 16%); while few in either group said they had worked or volunteered for a political candidate in the prior two years.

Political engagement higher among GOP primary voters

	All 2012 GOP general election voters	Voted in general election but not primary	2012 GOP primary voters
<i>Contributed money to candidate...</i>			
Yes, ever	44	39	58
In last two years	20	16	31
\$100+	12	10	19
<\$100	8	7	11
Not in last two years	23	22	26
No, never	56	61	41
<i>In past two years, have...</i>			
Contacted elected official	40	38	46
Attended campaign event	18	16	25
Worked/volunteered for political candidate	8	7	10
Been contacted by party, candidate or organization about upcoming election	40	37	47
Follow govt and public affairs most of the time	65	61	78
<i>Discuss govt and politics...</i>			
Weekly or more	54	51	62
Nearly every day	19	16	28

Source: Survey conducted January 23-March 16, 2014. Question about discussion of government and politics from American Trends Panel (wave 1) survey conducted March 19-April 29, 2014. Question about contacts from a candidate, party or organization from American Trends Panel (wave 7) survey conducted September 9-October 3, 2014. Figures read down. Based on self-reported Republican and Republican-leaning registered voters.

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GOP primary voters were more likely to have reported having contacted an elected official than general election only voters (46% vs. 38%). And in a fall 2014 survey, GOP primary voters were more likely to report having been contacted by a party, candidate or organization about the upcoming election (47%) than general election only voters (37%).

Methodology

The analysis in this report is based on respondents to the Political Polarization and Typology Survey who agreed to join the American Trends Panel (ATP) and were able to be matched to the national voter file (N=4,402). These respondents were originally recruited from the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey, a large (N=10,013) national landline and cellphone random digit dial (RDD) survey conducted January 23rd to March 16th, in English and Spanish. At the end of that survey, respondents were invited to join the Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel (*For more information on the methodology of the American Trends Panel, see:*

[http://www.pewresearch.org/methodology/u-s-survey-research/american-trends-panel/.](http://www.pewresearch.org/methodology/u-s-survey-research/american-trends-panel/))

Most of the data in this report is based on the initial 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey, though some of the data in this report comes from two follow-up surveys: the [April 2014 wave](#) that was conducted March 19-April 29, 2014, and the [September 2014 wave](#) that was conducted Sept. 9-Oct. 3, 2014.

This subset of panelists was weighted in a multi-step process that begins with a base weight incorporating the respondents' original survey selection probability and the fact that some panelists were subsampled for invitation to the panel. Next, an adjustment was made for the fact that the propensity to join the panel varied across different groups in the sample. The final step in the weighting uses an iterative technique that matches gender, age, education, race, Hispanic origin, and region to parameters from the 2012 American Community Survey. Population density is weighted to match the 2010 Decennial Census. Telephone service is weighted to estimates of telephone coverage for 2014 that were projected from the January-June 2013 National Health Interview Survey. It also adjusts for party affiliation using an average of the three most recent Pew Research Center general public telephone surveys as of April, 2014, and for internet use using as a parameter a measure from the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey. Sampling errors and statistical tests of significance take into account the effect of weighting. Interviews are conducted in both English and Spanish, but the Hispanic sample in the American Trends Panel is predominantly native born and English speaking.

Of the ATP panel members, 82.5% were successfully matched to their record in the national voter file. Taking into account the response rate for the 2014 Political Polarization and Typology Survey (10.6%), the cumulative response rate for panelists who matched to the voter file is 4.8%.

All analysis in this report is based on Republican and Republican leaning registered voters who matched to the voter file.

The following table shows the unweighted sample sizes and the error attributable to sampling that would be expected at the 95% level of confidence for different groups in the survey:

Group	Unweighted sample size	Plus or minus ...
Total sample	4,402	1.8 percentage points
All registered voters	3,721	2.0 percentage points
All Republican/Republican leaning registered voters	1,575	3.0 percentage points
Rep/Rep lean 2012 GOP primary voters	364	6.3 percentage points
All Rep/Rep lean 2012 general election voters	1,311	3.3 percentage points
<i>Voted in the general election but not in the primary</i>	954	3.9 percentage points

Sample sizes and sampling errors for other subgroups are available upon request.

In addition to sampling error, one should bear in mind that question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of opinion polls.

For detailed information about our survey methodology, see

<http://www.pewresearch.org/methodology/u-s-survey-research/>

Voter file matching

The names and addresses of most panelists were gathered as part of the core American Trends Panel methodology and used to match respondents from the survey sample to their corresponding record in a national voter file. The voter file, gathered by TargetSmart from publicly available individual voter lists from each state, contains information on most voters' turnout history and selected demographic information (note that the voter file does not indicate for which candidate a person voted, only whether they turned out in that election). To match panelists to the voter file, TargetSmart first looked for exact matches using name, address, and demographic characteristics. A second attempt was made with proximity matching, where a radius is drawn around the given address to test slight variations on the match.

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