



**Common Cause New York  
Unaffiliated Voter Focus Groups**  
*October 2023*

# Focus Groups Methodology

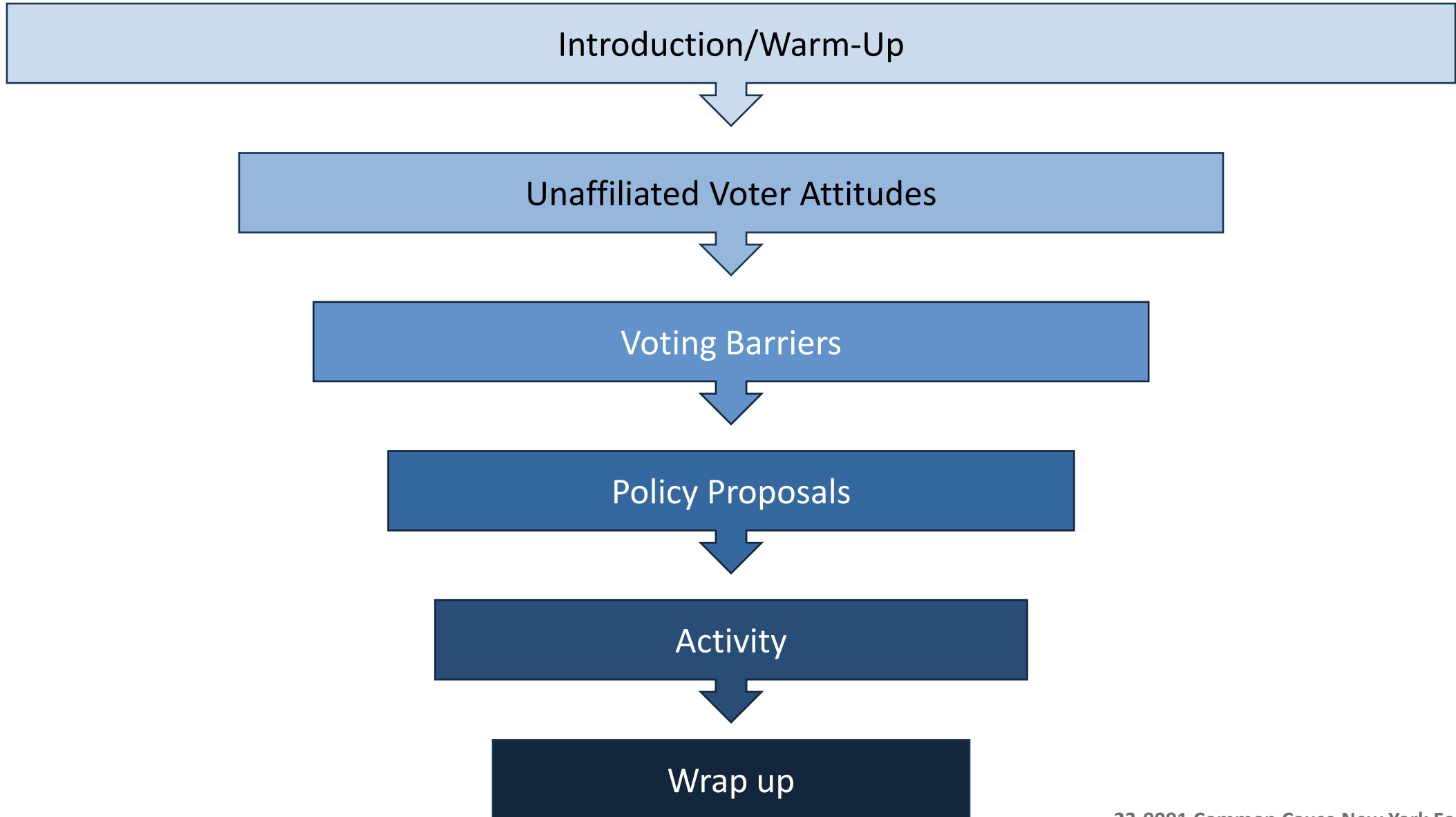
- ▶ Four focus groups were conducted October 17-18, 2023 among unaffiliated New York voters:

Online	Oct. 17	Group 1 – 5:30 pm	Upstate New York - Men	4 participants
		Group 2 – 7:30 pm	Upstate New York - Women	6 participants
In Person	Oct. 18	Group 3 – 5:30 pm	New York City – 45+	6 participants
		Group 4 – 7:30 pm	New York City – 18-44	9 participants

- Note that quotations shown through out are color coded to correspond to the group from which each quote was taken.

**Please note that focus groups are qualitative research and, by design, are not meant to be representative of any larger population.**

# Focus Group Design: Discussion Progression



# Key Findings

- ▶ Disdain toward political parties emerged as a theme in each group. These voters lean more conservative in their ideology, but with some populist tendencies.
- ▶ Most participants are politically aware and highly engaged, although this was not always reflected in their voting habits.
  - Younger people in the groups tended to be less engaged and more disenchanted with the political system as a whole.
- ▶ A majority were aware that they are unable to vote in primaries. Interest in voting in primaries varied greatly; some felt that it is a party's responsibility to choose who best represents them, while others wanted unaffiliated voters to have a more of a voice in primary elections.
- ▶ Of all the primary policy proposals discussed, semi-closed primaries were received most positively.



# Unaffiliated Voter Attitudes

# Initial Registration Motivations

- ▶ Participants had a wide variety of reasons for initially registering as independent, although many stated that they have remained independent because they prefer to vote based on candidates rather than parties.
- ▶ A few were initially registered with parties and changed their affiliations for various reasons. Most view themselves as independent, moderate thinkers.

*"I actually had changed my affiliation. I was registered under the **conservative party**, but then I realized **they're not even a factor here** and then I was like, 'Okay, let me just be independent.'"*

*- Black man, 35*

*"We registered as part of a high school curriculum in a government class when we were freshly 18. I did register as moderate back then... because my parents were split [politically]...And I've stuck with that my entire voting history. So I feel like **I have a very moderate stance on pretty much every topic and that's what leads me.**"*

*- Hispanic woman, 35*

*"My whole career, I was involved in public school administration. And so, I basically **kept a neutral stance**, I did not want to be on either side of an argument between school board members who were either Democrats or Republican."*

*- White man, 60*

*"I also registered as an Independent because I believe in **common sense.**"*

*- White man, 48*

# Decision Factors

- ▶ Not aligning with either party and voting based on candidates or issues was the most common reason why participants remained unaffiliated.
- ▶ Others mentioned avoiding political divisions between parties or not wanting to participate in a political system that they viewed as oppressive.

*"For me, it was the actual watching the people literally **knock down drag-out arguments over their party**. Growing up, I seen it a lot and they would be so dedicated to the party it **wasn't even about the issues** that they were discussing."  
- White man, 56*

*"I prefer Independent because **I don't plan to vote ever again...** the system is a fiduciary system. It's built on getting money, protecting property. It **doesn't look out for BIPOC individuals**. So I don't see myself voting."  
- Black man, 27*

*"Sometimes I **didn't agree with either side**. So it kind of leaves you choosing which one is the lesser evil and **Independent allowed me that**."  
- Hispanic woman, 48*

*"I just agree with different things in different parties. I want to **pick and choose what I like about each one**. And it's too bad that there isn't someone really in the middle very often."  
- White woman, 39*

# Unaffiliated Voter Associations

- ▶ When asked what being an unaffiliated voter meant to them, many said that it means choosing who to vote for based on a candidate or issue rather than supporting a single party. Words like “freedom” and “choice” were commonly used.
- ▶ Others did not have strong associations or feelings about being unaffiliated but rather viewed it as where they happened to fall politically.

*“It means that I'm **not giving my go ahead to either side.**”*

*- White woman, 58*

*“It **doesn't give me much identity.** It's not as if I'm proud to be independent, it's **just where I have landed.**”*

*- White man, 64*

*“For me it's **freedom.**”*

*- White man, 56*

*“Being Independent, I tend to **vote by candidate, not by party.**”*

*- Black man, 35*

*“Independent allowed me to be **freethinking...** versus sticking to a dogma might be a left dogma, a right dogma... There's **a lot more than a binary choice.**”*

*- White man, 52*



# Role Within Political System

- ▶ Views on the role of unaffiliated voters varied by region.
  - In New York City, participants felt that unaffiliated voters serve a more symbolic role in the political system as Democrats typically win no matter what.
  - The upstate groups, however, believed that unaffiliated voters can push candidates to be more moderate and provide some balance within an overwhelmingly Democratic system.

*“No unaffiliated voter is the same... but I do think that we are able to **look at things from beyond a lens of party**... That is a major part of our role in elections, to be able to make decisions that are not clouded by that party loyalty.”*  
- Black man, 35

*“There won't ever be an Independent candidate that will win as mayor of New York City... So when you're an Independent, you are **making a stand that's philosophical**. But as far as your effectiveness as a voter, it's nullified.”*  
- Black man, 48

*“I think it keeps **people wanting to work for us to get our votes** because they don't always know they can count on it.”*  
- White woman, 39

*“Certainly in the state, the **independents sometimes can swing** what would normally be a vote for a Democratic candidate. If there's not a good Democratic candidate **independents can elect a good Republican candidate** and vice versa.”*  
- White man, 60



# **Voting Attitudes & Barriers to Voting**

# Vote Frequency

- ▶ There was a wide range of voting behavior across and within groups, from those who vote in every election to a few who plan to never vote again. Among those who vote occasionally, some prioritized local elections while others felt their vote matters more in statewide or national elections.

*"I vote for **Mayor, Governor and President...** I know who my city councilman is, but those races... it's always going to be the Democrat where I live, so that's fine. So I just **don't pay attention to that.**"*

*- Black man, 48*

*"I do **local stuff** because I'm only concerned with my home because I can change that... I'm **more involved with stuff like that that's influencing my hometown.**"*

*- Black woman, 34*

*"I've only really voted **once.**"*

*- Hispanic man, 24*

*"I [vote in] **all the locals** because I feel I can make a difference and I've seen a **difference of three or four votes.**"*

*- White woman, 58*

*"**Every election.**"*

*- White man, 64*

*"I voted the first year I registered and I **have not voted again.**"*

*- White woman, 70*

*"I vote **every time.**"*

*- Hispanic woman, 67*

# Barriers to Voting - General

- ▶ In terms of general barriers to voting, many felt it is easy to vote in their areas and several mentioned that their voting locations are near where they live.
  - Some recognized that others may not have the same privilege, either due to inflexible work schedules or criminal records.
  - The belief that one's vote doesn't matter was also posed as a reason why people may not vote.

*"Weather." - White woman, 58*

*"The school voting is literally across the street from my home... I would be almost embarrassed if I said I didn't vote because **for me it couldn't be easier**. I guess that's a fortunate situation for me, just geographically it's very close, but **I don't experience any barriers**, to be honest."  
- White man, 64*

*"I know a lot of people who are **justice impacted** that can't vote and that's a big issue."  
- Black man, 27*

*"If I'm aware of a vote happening and I've got an opinion, I live a couple blocks from the polling place site, **there's no reason for me not to show up and do it**."  
- White man, 52*

*"They **don't think it's going to make a difference**. Both of my children have said, '**What does it matter if I vote? It doesn't do anything.**' Especially [in] presidential elections... people don't think it does anything."  
- White woman, 63*

# Barriers to Voting – Unaffiliated Voters

- ▶ When prompted about whether unaffiliated voters faced any specific barriers to voting, a few mentioned not being allowed to vote in primaries.
- ▶ One participant felt that unaffiliated voters had fewer barriers to voting since they do not feel obligated to choose candidates from a single party. Conversely, not liking either candidate was named as potential barrier for unaffiliated voters.

*“I think there's **less barriers** when you're independent than if you are choosing one party. I think you have less barriers.”*  
- White woman, 50

*“Being unaffiliated, one of the biggest disadvantages is that you **can't vote to primaries.**”*  
- Black man, 35

*“Other than convenience... You might just **dislike the both main candidates...** And **why vote for them?**”*  
- White man, 58

*“Not being able to vote in the Democratic or Republican **primaries is a drawback for independents,** at least to get the candidates that you'd want in the end.”*  
- White woman, 39



# Election Attitudes

# Primary Election Attitudes

- ▶ Respondents had a wide variety of attitudes toward primary elections; some felt that it was unfair that they couldn't vote while others were unbothered.
- ▶ Having a stronger voice in determining which candidates appear in the general election and the principle of unaffiliated voter representation were top motivations among those who said they would hypothetically vote in a primary.
  - The idea that election outcomes in New York are determined in the primary election because the general election is a forgone conclusion also came up in a few of the groups.

*"If there's only two choices, **are they really choices?**"*

*- Asian woman, 28*

*"I feel **pretty bummed** about it because I feel like it **skews the perspective of the votes**. And now that we know that the number of independent registered voters is like 28%, there's **28% of opinions that we're missing out.**"*

*- Hispanic woman, 35*

*"I don't have a voice in the **elections that actually matter.**"*

*- White man, 28*

*"Well, it seems like we should be able to vote in primary. Even if you're independent, maybe you vote wherever you want to. **Why should the independents be excluded?**"*

*- Hispanic woman, 67*

# Primary Election Attitudes, Continued

- ▶ On the other hand, some in each group said they would not be interested in the primary because they view it as the party members' responsibility to choose the candidate who represents them.
- ▶ Avoiding targeted campaign materials was another reason why one participant was happy to stay out of the primaries.

*"I've **never really felt left out**... It seems to me most of the time the primary candidates are **peas in a pod**, and the differences between them and what their stances are in their own party are very small."*  
- White man, 60

*"If you're **not a member of the party**, why would you have a hand in **choosing the party's candidate**?"*  
- Asian man, 36

*"Why does the public incur a cost for the Democrats to figure out who they're going to run for president? **Shouldn't they figure that out on their own**?"*  
- White man, 64

*"It makes me feel glad. They'll leave me alone, they won't make me come and make decisions I don't know how to make or don't want to make."*  
- White woman, 70

*"I don't get involved in politics on the primary level. So for me, I figure these [voters registered with a party] will figure it out and then I **make my choice at that point**."*  
- White man, 52



# General Election Attitudes

- ▶ Several participants said that not being able to vote in the primary election did not impact their likelihood of voting in the general election.
- ▶ Others said they are more motivated because it's their only opportunity to make their voices heard, while some were less motivated because they did not have a say in which candidates appear on the general election ballot.

*"It makes me want to [vote in the general election] more because I haven't been able to yet."*

*- White woman, 39*

*"I think maybe [I am] more committed because, like you said, it's a choice between two awfuls and you have to now decide because otherwise it's Trump."*

*- Black man, 48*

*"I had **no say** in it in the beginning. So now it's not motivating to just choose what **someone else chose for me.**"*

*- White woman, 42*

*"Doesn't affect it. At that point, it's a binary decision."*

*- White man, 52*



**Policy Proposals**

# Policy Proposals: Open Primaries

- ▶ Few participants were aware of what an open primary means. Once given the definition, responses were varied.
- ▶ All groups were concerned that voters from one party could infiltrate the other party's primary so that a weaker candidate advances to the general.

*"Yeah, **that'd be great**. Because I want to **vote on the person**. I don't want to vote on the party."  
- White woman, 63*

*"I'd have to know more about **how they actually function** and what the **legalities** of it is."  
- White man, 56*

*"I could see some, let's say Republicans, being very **strategic** about how they vote in Democratic primary to **influence a general election**."  
- White man, 28*

*"**Bad idea**."  
- Hispanic woman, 67*

*"Personally, I **don't [see]... what its objective is**. The objective I assume from the primary is for a party to identify who's going to be their strongest candidate. I don't think that an open one where anyone can vote for them, particularly the opposing party can participate in that process would be effective in meeting that objective."  
- White man, 64*

# Policy Proposals: Temporary Registration

- ▶ Of all the policies discussed, temporary registration was the least popular. It was viewed as a hassle and unnecessary. There was also little desire to affiliate with a party.

*"If someone wants to at the last minute change and want to vote for the person, **let them do it.**"*  
- Black man, 27

*"I feel like that would be **a lot of work and would still be discouraging** to people to get out there and do it."*  
- Hispanic woman, 35

*"I **don't understand the point of that,** that you would jump into a primary and then jump out."*  
- Black man, 48

*"I'm not planning on registering in any party **for any reason.** So, if I had to even temporarily register, I **probably wouldn't do it.**"*  
- White man, 60

# Policy Proposals: Allowing Unaffiliateds in Primaries

- ▶ A semi-closed primary was better received than other primary policies. Participants felt it was a good balance of allowing unaffiliated voters to be better represented without the burden of having to temporarily register. Additionally, it was viewed as potentially more secure than a fully open primary.

*“It just **allows everybody to be involved** without having to go through the whole switching everything temporarily, which I think isn’t realistic.”*

*- Black man, 35*

*“That might give more people the **feeling of freedom to vote** because they don't have to be affiliated either way.”*

*- White woman, 50*

*“I think I'd like that because that would be the way to get a **choice** because then there's a viable another party that you believe in that you want to support that has a **chance of winning**. So I think that that would be smart.”*

*- Black man, 48*



# Interactive Policy Activity & Wrap-Up

# Activity – Upstate New York

Policy	Group 1 – Upstate Men			Group 2 – Upstate Women		
	Total More Likely	Total Less Likely	Net More Likely	Total More Likely	Total Less Likely	Net More Likely
Implementing open primaries, or allowing everyone to vote in primary elections regardless of their party registration	4	-	+4	5	1	+4
Allowing unaffiliated voters to temporarily register with a party to participate in primary elections	1	3	-2	5	1	+4
Allowing unaffiliated voters to participate in primary elections without registering with a party	4	-	+4	5	1	+4

# Activity – New York City

Policy	Group 3 - NYC 45+			Group 4 – NYC 18-44		
	Total More Likely	Total Less Likely	Net More Likely	Total More Likely	Total Less Likely	Net More Likely
Implementing open primaries, or allowing everyone to vote in primary elections regardless of their party registration	4	2	+2	9	-	+9
Allowing unaffiliated voters to temporarily register with a party to participate in primary elections	3	3	0	3	5	-2
Allowing unaffiliated voters to participate in primary elections without registering with a party	4	2	+2	8	-	+8



# Closing Activity

We're going to wrap up our time together with a hypothetical activity. Pretend you had a magic wand and could change any one policy that has to do with voting in the state of New York. Which policy would you choose to change and why?

*"I've always wanted to vote in a primary, but I don't want to register with a party. So I would change, **make it an open [primary]** that I don't have to be affiliated with a party. I can **vote for the candidate that I want.**"*

*- White woman, 63*

*"The thing I would change the most would be **proportional representation**. That would be the one I would think would **make the most difference.**"*

*- White man, 58*

*"[I would] **put less importance on political parties.**"*

*- Hispanic man, 24*

*"I'd have to go with making **all election days holidays.**"*

*- Black man, 48*

*"Poof, **goodbye electoral college.**"*

*- Hispanic woman, 35*

*"I don't know that I have any ideas. Certainly, I think a lot of attention is already paid to **making it accessible** for people who have handicaps or who are temporarily unavailable."*

*- White man, 60*

- ▶ Many participants showed some interest in politics and current affairs, though overall they lacked an understanding of civics and the mechanics of voting. Any effort to change the voting system in New York will require some level of education.
- ▶ However, a strong majority of these unaffiliated participants see themselves as engaged, intentional, and anti-party. Democracy access efforts moving forward are not likely to be successful if they require party affiliation or are perceived by these voters as treating them as uneducated or as a secondary target.
  - Many of these voters were proud of their unaffiliated or "independent" status and indicated it gave them a sense of freedom in voting.
- ▶ The semi-closed “Massachusetts style” primary change was the most palatable to voters, but participants expressed little meaningful appetite for the change.
  - Participants were not able to reach a consensus on what change they would want to see; however, election security seemed to be a common concern.



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