POLITICAL REFORM

New Jersey Voters on Political Extremism, Political Parties, and Reforming the State's Electoral System

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→ Executive Summary

This report describes the results of a recent survey that asked New Jersey voters for their views on two sets of issues. First, how do they regard the current two-party system and the resulting political environment? Second, do they support or oppose reform of the state's election code in order to soften today's rigid two-party system by letting more parties be serious electoral players?

The survey reveals widespread political dissatisfaction, particularly dissatisfaction with today's rigid two-party system. It also reveals that voters across the political spectrum are open to rules changes that would give them more options in the voting booth; respondents understand how having more than two electorally competitive political parties could provide a path toward a more representative and less divisive democracy.

More specifically, the survey shows widespread support for a particular measure to increase the viability of third parties called "fusion" voting. Also known as "fusion balloting," "cross-endorsement" or "cross-nomination," fusion voting allows a political candidate to be nominated by more than one party. In practice, this allows smaller parties to nominate competitive candidates who also earn the nomination of a major party. As a result, voters choose not just their preferred candidate, but also their preferred party. Votes count the same no matter which party banner they are cast under, with votes tallied by party before being added together to produce a final outcome.

Key findings include:

Voters understand that a rigid and polarized two-party system is undermining our democracy—and that it will not self-correct.

- The survey provides clear evidence of an overwhelming sentiment among New Jerseyans that the country's two-party system is broken. Specifically, 81 percent agree that "The two-party system in the United States is not working because of all the fighting and gridlock, with both sides unable to solve important public problems."
- Similarly, 76 percent of respondents agree that "political polarization" between the two parties is a "big problem" affecting the nation's ability to solve collective problems.
- Respondents are not hopeful about the future of partisan polarization. Only 9 percent of respondents believe that the divide between the two parties is likely to narrow in the future, whereas 57 percent believe the divide is likely to widen.

Voters are unhappy with the two parties and want to be able to vote for alternatives. Yet, their reported voting behavior reflects a widespread and clear-eyed understanding of the costs of voting for a third party under the current electoral rules.

- Overwhelmingly, voters agree that more parties are needed. Less than a fifth (18 percent) of respondents think that "the two major parties do a good enough job when it comes to representing the range of values." By contrast, more than two thirds (70 percent) say more parties are needed.
- By a margin of 64 percent to 13 percent, respondents believe that the two major parties are doing a bad job of "representing the values, beliefs, and policy preferences of voters in the United States."
- Many voters (42 percent) have voted for a third-party candidate at some point in their lifetime, and a similar share (44 percent) have wanted to vote for a third-party candidate at some point but didn't.
- Almost three quarters (72 percent) of those surveyed indicated that a major reason they have not voted for a third-party candidate is because they feel it would be a waste of their vote because only two candidates can be competitive in a given election.

Voters broadly support the reinstatement of fusion voting.

- By a margin of 58 percent to 27 percent, respondents support New Jersey reinstating fusion voting.
- By a margin of 68 percent to 23 percent, respondents agree that "By allowing voters to choose both the candidate they prefer and the party label closest to their values, a fusion system can better express the citizenry's views."
- By a margin of 57 percent to 28 percent, voters believe that fusion will "help reduce extreme partisanship and polarization."

Voters would utilize fusion, especially in support of a politically moderate or centrist party.
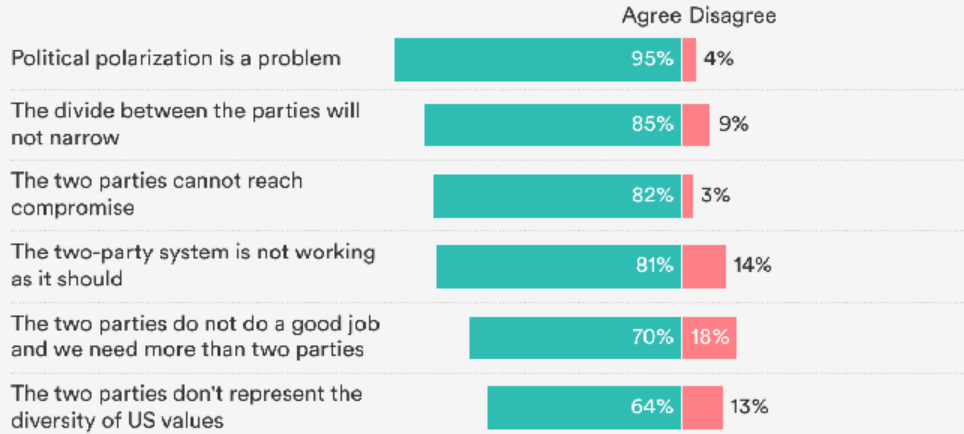
- More than half (57 percent) of respondents said they would likely vote on a third party's line cross-nominating a competitive candidate, if one were available.
- More than half (53 percent) of respondents said they found the idea of "a new middle-of-the-road, centrist political party" that utilizes fusion appealing.

New Jerseyans think the two-party system is too polarized, unrepresentative, unlikely to self-correct, and in need of reform
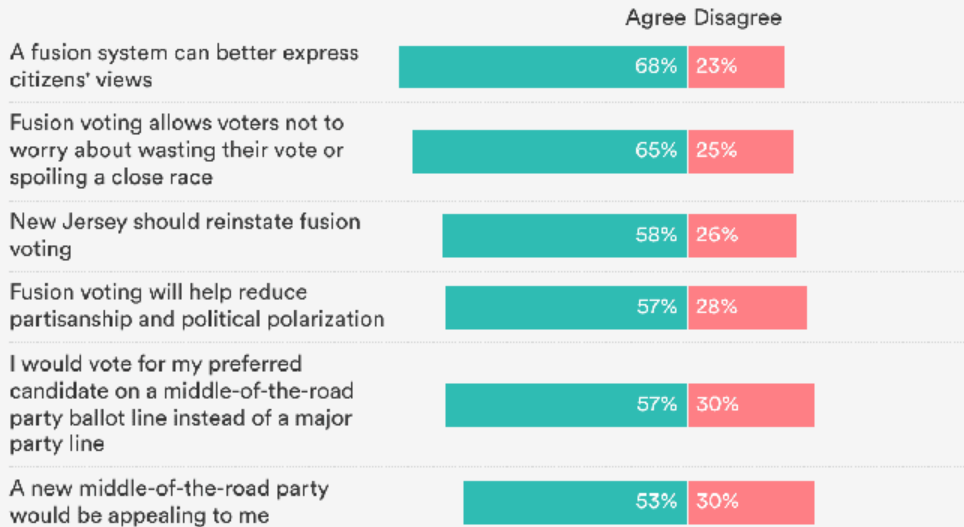
■ Agree ■ Disagree

	Agree	Disagree
Political polarization is a problem	95%	4%
The divide between the parties will not narrow	85%	9%
The two parties cannot reach compromise	82%	3%
The two-party system is not working as it should	81%	14%
The two parties do not do a good job and we need more than two parties	70%	18%
The two parties don't represent the diversity of US values	64%	13%

Source: *Braun Research survey of 800 New Jersey adults conducted August 3 – August 17, 2022*

NEW AMERICA

New Jerseyans support reinstating fusion, see the benefits, and would use fusion to support a new moderate party

■ Agree ■ Disagree

	Agree	Disagree
A fusion system can better express citizens' views	68%	23%
Fusion voting allows voters not to worry about wasting their vote or spoiling a close race	65%	25%
New Jersey should reinstate fusion voting	58%	26%
Fusion voting will help reduce partisanship and political polarization	57%	28%
I would vote for my preferred candidate on a middle-of-the-road party ballot line instead of a major party line	57%	30%
A new middle-of-the-road party would be appealing to me	53%	30%

Source: *Braun Research survey of 800 New Jersey adults conducted August 3 – August 17, 2022*

NEW AMERICA

I. Introduction

The contours of our contemporary democratic crisis are well known and well documented. Leaders and supporters of our two major political parties have come to see each other as more than mere political opponents, but rather as *mortal enemies*. Given this extreme hyper-partisan polarization, the basic legitimacy of elections is now under direct threat. Under such conditions, democratic norms become mere niceties. If winning is everything, winning becomes the only thing. But democracy loses when parties, leaders, and strong partisans cannot accept losing. Democracy depends on the legitimacy of elections, a legitimacy that must exist regardless of the outcome.

Even as citizens are pulled into these existential struggles by virtue of being asked to vote for one of the two major parties in every U.S. election, most citizens resist a totalizing all-or-nothing zero-sum understanding of politics. They express deep fears about the future of our democracy, and constantly ask for less fighting and more problem-solving. But lacking the opportunity to vote for a third party without wasting one's vote fuels political frustration and disaffection.

Against the backdrop of this rising tide of political frustration, reformers have for years been exploring alternatives to existing voting rules and the potential benefits of moving beyond our two-party system. One such reform is fusion balloting.

Once legal in all states, fusion allows and even encourages cross-party coalitions and alliances. Fusion voting refers to a system in which a candidate wins the support of more than one party—usually one major party and one "minor" party—in an electoral coalition that is both principled and practical. Each party nominates the same candidate, and the candidate appears twice on the ballot under two distinct party labels. The votes for the candidates are tallied separately by party, and then added together to produce the final outcome.

Fusion has come to the attention of reformers because it has the potential to do a few important things at the same time: (1) It eliminates the "wasted vote" or "spoiler" dilemma that plagues third parties in our plurality-voting, single-member-district system; (2) It allows a new third party the chance to develop an identity with voters because it is not pretending it can win elections by running standalone candidates on its own; it needs an alliance with a major party; (3) It signals voter preference more clearly, by showing the degree to which votes cast for a competitive candidate reflect support for the cross-nominating third party, as opposed to the current dynamic which presumes universal support for the cross-nominating major party; and (4) It encourages principled, positive-sum coalition-building amongst the parties which are fusing on the same candidate.

In the spring of 2022, a small group of citizens in New Jersey, unhappy with the rise of hyper-partisanship across the political spectrum, formed the Moderate Party and chose as their inaugural candidate for national office Rep. Tom Malinowski. He was the incumbent Congressman in New Jersey's 7th Congressional District, and while he accepted the nomination of this new party, he had already won the nomination of the Democratic Party. In the November 2022 general election, he lost to Republican former state Sen. Thomas Kean Jr. by a margin of 4.6 percentage points.

Under current New Jersey law, this sort of electoral fusion—two parties "fusing" on the same candidate as a way to build a coalition behind a given candidate—is illegal. When the Moderate Party submitted its petition to put Malinowski on the ballot under a second label (with a second meaning), this fusion, or cross-nomination, was ruled illegal by the Secretary of State.

After the Moderate Party suit was filed, New America commissioned a poll to explore the views of New Jerseyans on fusion balloting and the broader crisis of U.S. democracy and the two-party system. The poll was conducted by Braun Research August 3 – August 17, 2022, and surveyed 800 New Jersey residents.

II. Attitudes Toward the Two-Party System

The survey paints a clear picture of widespread dissatisfaction with the state of the U.S. in general and with two-party politics more specifically. New Jerseyans' general outlook is gloomy. Only 19 percent of those surveyed believe the United States is going in the right direction, with almost two thirds (64 percent) believing that the nation has gone off on the wrong track. Barely one in 10 New Jersey adults (13 percent) think that the government is run for the benefit of all, with 80 percent of people saying that the government is run by a few big interests looking out for themselves.

New Jerseyans, of course, are hardly alone. Nationwide, only about 22 percent of Americans think we are "headed in the right direction." Indeed, pessimism, dissatisfaction, and distrust in institutions are everywhere.

The vast majority of New Jerseyans think the country's two-party system is broken. Though most New Jerseyans primarily vote for Democrats and Republicans, they are deeply frustrated with the two major parties. Only 13 percent of New Jersey adults said the Democratic and Republican parties were doing a good job. Democrats (just 18 percent) and Republicans (16 percent) offer similarly low assessments, along with just 6 percent of Independents.

In the survey, 36 percent of respondents identified themselves as Democrats, 26 percent identified themselves as Independents, and 21 percent said they considered themselves Republicans. The remaining share of respondents either identified themselves as having a different partisan affiliation, didn't know their affiliation, or simply refused to answer that question.

New Jerseyans understand the problem of hyper-partisan polarization. Four-in-five respondents (81 percent) say the two-party system is failing to solve important public problems because of fighting and gridlock between the two major parties. A similar percentage (82 percent) believe the Democratic and Republican parties are rarely or never able to compromise or find middle ground with one another.

Likewise, three quarters (76 percent) view political polarization between the two major parties as a "big problem" when it comes to the nation's ability to solve collective issues. In short, voters are keenly aware that divisive partisan fighting is bad for the country.

New Jerseyans see the problem of polarization getting worse in the future. A clear majority (57 percent) of New Jerseyans believe the divide between the Republican and Democratic parties will widen in the coming years. Only 9 percent think it will narrow. The remainder believe it will stay the same—a status quo that four-in-five New Jerseyans already see as destructive and harmful.

Democrats and Republicans agree that today's rigid two-party system is not working. Large majorities of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents consider the divide between the two major parties as a major obstacle in solving the nation's public problems and collective issues. Democrats and Independents are, however, somewhat more pessimistic. Eighty-five percent of Democrats and 88 percent of Independents say the two-party system is not working because of fighting and gridlock, compared to 71 percent of Republicans. As for polarization, 79 percent of Democrats and 84 percent of Independents see it as a "big problem," compared to 61 percent of Republicans.

III. Support for More Parties

New Jerseyans report widespread support for more parties. More than two thirds (70 percent) of New Jerseyans think more than two parties are "needed to better represent the values, beliefs, and policy preferences of U.S. voters." Across the current partisan spectrum, voters want more than two choices.

Seventy percent of Democrats think more than two parties are needed, as do 75 percent of liberals. Slightly more than half of Republicans (52 percent) and conservatives (56 percent) hold this view, and less than a third of each of these voter groups (29 percent of Republicans, 27 percent of conservatives) agree that the

two-party system "does a good enough job when it comes to representing the range of values, beliefs, and policy preferences of voters in the United States."

The clearest support for more parties comes from Independents and Moderates. Among Independents, 80 percent think more than two parties are needed, as do 74 percent of moderates.

The oldest age cohort (those over 65) is the least likely to support more parties: only a bare majority, 52 percent want more than two parties , with 31 percent opposed and 14 percent uncertain. These older voters are the group most likely to say the two parties do a good job (though even in this cohort, only 31 percent say the two parties are doing a good job). By contrast, the youngest cohorts (age 18-24 and 25-34) are most supportive of more parties (80 percent in both groups say they want more parties). Unsurprisingly, age is inversely correlated with support for new parties and other changes referenced during the survey.

A sizable minority of New Jerseyans say they have voted for a third-party candidate, but only rarely. In New Jersey, 42 percent of people say they have voted for a third-party candidate in a local, statewide, or federal election in their lifetime. A similar share (44 percent) say they have wanted to vote for a third-party candidate but decided not to in at least one election. Slightly more than half (54 percent) report never having cast a vote for a third-party candidate.

Roughly the same proportion of Democrats (33 percent) and Republicans (30 percent) report having voted for a third-party candidate. Not surprisingly, this rate is higher among Independents (58 percent).

However, even for voters who have supported a third-party candidate in the past, these votes are a rare exception to the general rule of voting for major party candidates. Only 3 percent of voters say they always vote third party, while 16 percent say they support third-party candidates "some of the time."

This is consistent with election results in New Jersey, where third-party candidates have rarely garnered more than a few percentage points at the polls, and major party candidates have won every single state and federal election over the past 50 years.

More people would vote for third parties if it weren't for the fear of wasting their vote and/or spoiling a close election. Though many voters may express both frustration with the two major parties and sometimes flirt with voting for a third party, they almost always wind up voting for one of the two major parties. It is well known among political scientists that single-winner plurality elections, such as those used in almost all U.S. and New Jersey elections, render votes for third-party candidates either inconsequential (since a third party is very unlikely to win) or counterproductive (by taking votes away from the "lesser of two evils," they may get the greater one).

New Jerseyans clearly understand these dynamics as reasons to hold back from voting for a third-party candidate. Almost three-in-four respondents (72 percent) believe that a major reason third-party candidates almost never win elections is because supporting them is seen as a wasted vote. A clear majority (56 percent) understand the spoiler dynamic as a reason why third-party candidates receive so little support. A similar majority (56 percent) also see existing electoral rules as a major reason for why third-party candidates have such a hard time at the ballot box. Notably, only one-in-five respondents (18 percent) think third-party candidates have a hard time getting elected because they are extremists.

IV. Attitudes Toward Fusion Voting

Few people have heard of fusion voting. Fusion voting was banned in New Jersey a century ago, though it is legal in neighboring New York and nearby Connecticut.[1]

Unsurprisingly, since it is unlikely that most New Jerseyans have participated in an election with fusion voting, most respondents (83 percent) were not familiar with this practice prior to the survey. (The survey included a brief, neutral explanation of how fusion voting differs from the current system where candidates

may not receive more than one party's nomination.) This lack of familiarity is consistent across all demographic and partisan groups. We also do not see any major differences in knowledge of fusion voting among people who are frustrated or dissatisfied with the direction of the country or the ability of the two major parties to represent U.S. voters.

A majority of New Jersey voters would support restoring the fusion option in voting. While many respondents were not initially familiar with fusion voting, a clear majority support restoring that option to New Jersey law. In fact, more than twice as many people support its reintroduction (58 percent) as oppose it (27 percent), and 14 percent were unsure. Given widespread unfamiliarity with the practice, majority support for the practice is notable.

As might be expected, support for the restoration of the option for fusion voting is highest among the 70 percent of people who think the country's two-party system is not working (61 percent in this group support fusion voting). But even among the substantially smaller share (14 percent) of New Jereseyans who think the two-party system is working well, nearly half (43 percent) nevertheless support restoring the coalition oriented, multi-party democracy that fusion makes possible.

Support varies with age and education, but is substantial across all groups. Support for fusion voting differs across demographic and partisan groups, declining with age. Seventy-two percent of 25–34-year-olds are in favor of its reintroduction compared to 47 percent of people aged 65 and older.

The most significant difference relates to education. Respondents with an education level of high school or less are less positively oriented toward fusion voting, with only 39 percent of them believing it should be restored. However, across all other education categories, solid majorities (60-61 percent) support fusion voting.

A majority of both Democrats (57 percent) and Republicans (51 percent) support fusion's restoration, and nearly two-in-three Independents (65 percent) think it should be restored. Conservatives (48 percent)

show least support, while liberals (62 percent) and Moderates (64 percent) are equally supportive.

Respondents see fusion voting as addressing problems with the current two-party system. Respondents widely agree that fusion voting would offer substantial benefits to New Jersey's elections and politics writ large. More than two thirds (68 percent) of people believe it would allow citizens to better express their views to elected representatives, and a majority (57 percent) believes it would reduce political polarization and extreme partisanship. Additionally, two thirds (65 percent) see fusion voting as a way of allaying voters' fears of wasting their votes or spoiling a close race.

Optimism about the impact of a moderate, centrist party. If fusion voting were to be restored in New Jersey, the newly-formed Moderate Party could leverage its cross-nomination in support of moderate, competitive candidates. Under fusion voting, this party would likely not run its own candidates but would instead evaluate each of the Democratic and Republican Party candidates and nominate the candidate it preferred. The survey presented respondents with this exact scenario, specifying that this new moderate, centrist party would evaluate Democratic and Republican candidates based on their commitment to the values of bipartisan cooperation, respect for the rule of law, and opposition to illiberal extremism.

When asked whether this moderate centrist party would be "appealing to you personally," 53 percent said it would be, with 15 percent describing it as "very appealing." This is a strong foundation of support for a political party, especially given the current levels of unpopularity for the Democratic and Republican parties. Not surprisingly, support was highest among the youngest voters (61 percent of 18-24 year olds said such a party would be appealing, compared to 45 percent of those over 65). Moderates (64 percent) and Independents (59 percent) found such a party to be most appealing. Conservatives (38 percent) and Republicans (42 percent) found it to be least appealing.

An even higher percentage of respondents—57 percent—said that they would be likely to vote on this ballot line, with 24 percent saying they would be very

likely. Only 30 percent said they would not be likely, and another 12 percent said they were unsure. Consistent with other questions, Moderates (69 percent) and Independents (65 percent) were most likely to say they would be likely to vote on this line. While Conservatives (46 percent) and Republicans (50 percent) were least likely, it is notable that approximately half of respondents in each group nonetheless expected to vote in this manner.

To be sure, this is support for a party in the abstract. It is highly unlikely that the party would secure this level of majority support in the context of an actual election with actual candidates. However, given low levels of support for and high levels of dissatisfaction with the two major parties, this demonstrates a clear desire for an alternative. The numbers in this poll suggest that a moderate party with a ballot line for cross-nominating competitive candidates would start off with a high degree of interest.

However, when asked directly what impact they thought the formation of this moderate, centrist party would have on political representation, many voters were unsure. Overall, 39 percent of people thought it would be positive, while 25 percent thought it would be negative. Almost one-in-five (18 percent) thought the formation of a moderate, centrist party operating under fusion voting rules would have no impact at all on how well voters' values, beliefs, and preferences would be represented. Another 13 percent were unsure about what its effects would be. Such a party was viewed most positively by Moderates (49 percent) and Independents (43 percent) and least positively by Conservatives (28 percent) and Republicans (34 percent).

V. Conclusion

New Jerseyans understand that our two-party system is in a crisis of hyper-polarization and that the system will not self-correct. New Jerseyans also understand that our country is far more diverse in its values and interests than just two parties can represent. Accordingly, overwhelming majorities of respondents in this survey—across partisan lines—believe that there

ought to be more than two parties. A significant percentage have either voted for a third party at some point, and/or wanted to vote third party but feared wasting their vote.

Fusion voting, were it re-legalized in the state of New Jersey, would give state voters the expanded partisan choice they clearly desire. Most importantly in this political moment, it would create space for a new moderate party to emerge, filling an obvious and critical void in the political center. In this survey, majorities of New Jerseyans—across partisan lines—have demonstrated clear interest in such a political party, and an intuitive understanding of how fusion balloting could empower the political center and thus turn the destructive tide of hyper-partisan polarization.

Given how divided American politics is in 2022, it is rare to discover such cross-partisan agreement across any survey. But while Democrats and Republicans may disagree across a wide range of issues, they do seem to agree on a few big things: American democracy is in a bad place, the two-party system is a key part of the problem, and reforms that allow for more viable parties make sense. Deep frustration and dissatisfaction with a political system alongside high levels of binary partisan polarization are a proven formula for democratic breakdown. Whether or not New Jersey leaders and policymakers respond to this frustration with reform, however, is ultimately up to them.

Notes

[1] Fusion voting was legal and common in New Jersey throughout the 19th century and the opening decades of the 20th. It was banned by acts of the state legislature starting in the early 1920s, making New Jersey one of the last states to outlaw the practice. Only two states continue to allow fusion: in nearby New York State it endures due to a 1911 NYS Court of Appeals decision that ruled the ban unconstitutional, and in Connecticut it was never banned. In all other states, the two major parties have been unable to resist the temptation to write rules that favor their own interests.