

SWING VOTE SAM EXPLAINS

The Dinner Party

SAM SAYS

"That's not an election. That's a dinner party."

In most districts the seat is safe, so the real election is the primary. Primary turnout is, let's say, intimate. In 2024, about 7 percent of eligible voters effectively decided 87 percent of House seats, according to Unite America.

Some states don't let independents in at all: 16 states, 16.5 million independents, per Unite America. And 70 congressional and statewide primaries in 2024 were won with under half the vote.

Other formats exist. California and Washington put every candidate on one primary ballot and advance the top two. If your state lets you in, go. That's where the choosing happens.

The facts

1. In 2024, 380 House seats, 87 percent of the House, were effectively decided in primaries by 18.1 million voters, about 7 percent of eligible voters (Unite America analysis).[1]
2. In 16 states, 16.5 million independents are barred from closed primaries (Unite America, March 2026).[2]
3. Unite America also counts 101 million voters, nearly 40 percent of the electorate, who lived in districts where the member ran unopposed in the primary for a safe general-election seat, leaving them no meaningful say in 2024.[1]
4. In 2024, 70 primaries for Congress and statewide office were won with less than 50 percent of the vote, 17 of them with a third or less (FairVote, end of the primary season).[3]
5. California and Washington use a top-two primary open to all candidates and voters.[4,5]

What you can do

1. Find your primary date and whether independents can vote in it. Ask your election office; rules differ by state. **usa.gov/state-election-office**
2. Register before your state's deadline. **vote.gov**
3. Vote in your primary. Show up early.
4. Bring a friend who has never voted in one.

Scan to watch Sam explain it
swingvotesam.com/issues/open-primaries

Sources

1. Unite America, "Analysis: 87% of U.S. House elections already determined in primaries by just 7% of Americans", October 8, 2024. https://www.uniteamerica.org/articles/analysis-87-of-u-s-house-elections-already-determined-in-primaries-by-just-7-of-americans
2. Unite America, "Primary season will decide Congress before most Americans vote", March 2, 2026. https://uniteamerica.org/articles/primary-season-will-decide-congress-before-most-americans-vote
3. FairVote, "Fewest Votes Wins: 70 Statewide and Congressional Primaries Won With Less Than 50% of the Vote", September 23, 2024. https://fairvote.org/press/fewest-votes-wins-2024/
4. California Secretary of State, "Primary Elections in California". https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/primary-elections-california
5. Washington Secretary of State, "Top Two Primary: FAQs for Voters". https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/voters/helpful-information/top-two-primary-faqs-voters

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