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Two Maps of the Same District

How Campaigns and Voters See the Electorate Differently

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Campaigns tend to start from the top down, sorting the electorate into pools of likely voters. Voters tend to start from the bottom up, with themselves and the people they know. This explainer describes each view, drawing on published political science and Ohio election records, and identifies where the two produce different pictures of the same electorate.

I. The Puzzle

In Ohio's May 5, 2026 primary, 1,791,152 ballots were cast out of 7,896,681 registered voters, a turnout of 23 percent, according to the Secretary of State's certified results.¹ Voters who took a party ballot helped choose the major-party nominees on November ballots. Independent candidates reach the general-election ballot separately, by nominating petition.²

The remaining 77 percent of registered voters did not take part in those nominating decisions. Some will vote in November; others will not vote at all. In a district where one party dominates the general election, the nomination can be the most competitive stage of the race. Where a nomination is uncontested, the choice is made earlier still, when candidates decide whether to file.

That sequence points to a difference in how two groups see the same electorate. Campaigns commonly begin with electoral data, district lines, and estimates of who will vote. Individual voters often begin with personal experience and the people around them. Neither view is exclusive, and each emphasizes different information. Political science has studied both at length. This explainer sets them side by side.

¹Ohio Secretary of State, "Secretary LaRose Certifies 2026 Official Primary Election Results," press release, June 3, 2026, <https://www.ohiosos.gov/office/media-center/categories/press-releases/2026-06-03>.

²Ohio Rev. Code § 3513.257, <https://codes.ohio.gov/ohio-revised-code/section-3513.257>.



II. The View from the Campaign: Pools

The most cited study of how officeholders see their districts is Richard Fenno's *Home Style*. Fenno traveled with members of Congress through their districts in the 1970s. He found that they described their constituents as a set of nested circles, each smaller and more loyal than the last.³

- **Geographic constituency:** everyone who lives inside the district lines.
- **Reelection constituency:** the voters the member expects to support them.
- **Primary constituency:** the strongest supporters, who would back the member against a challenger from their own party.
- **Personal constituency:** a small inner circle of advisers and confidants.

Modern campaigns add a data layer. Eitan Hersh's *Hacking the Electorate* shows that campaigns know voters largely through public records, including the voter file, vote history, and party primary participation, supplemented by commercial data. Campaigns target the voter they can see in that data, whom Hersh calls the "perceived voter."⁴

Ohio voters do not declare a party when they register. State law determines party affiliation from a voter's primary ballot choices in the current year and the two preceding calendar years, and a voter whose affiliation is challenged at a primary may establish it by a signed statement.⁵ County boards publish voter lists showing each voter's participation history and primary ballot choice.⁶ Campaigns use that history, alongside other data, to estimate partisan leanings. A voter with no recent primary history is harder to classify but is not necessarily politically independent.

The pool also changes with the calendar. David Brady, Hahrie Han, and Jeremy Pope find that House incumbents who drift from their primary electorate face a higher risk of losing renomination, even when that drift moves them toward the general electorate.⁷ Shigeo Hirano and James Snyder's history of American primaries traces the same tension across more than a century of elections.⁸ A candidate courts one pool in spring and a larger, different pool in fall.

III. The View from the Kitchen Table: Networks

Voters often begin with their personal networks rather than with electoral data. Decades of research document the role of social relationships in how people form political judgments.

An influential early study is *The People's Choice*, a 1940 panel survey of voters in Erie County, Ohio. Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues found that voters' choices tended to track their social groups and that the campaign changed relatively few minds. They also found that ideas often traveled from

³Richard F. Fenno Jr., *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978).

⁴Eitan D. Hersh, *Hacking the Electorate: How Campaigns Perceive Voters* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

⁵Ohio Rev. Code §§ 3513.19, 3513.05, <https://codes.ohio.gov/ohio-revised-code/section-3513.19>.

⁶Hamilton County Board of Elections, "Voter Lists," <https://votehamiltoncountyohio.gov/campaign-media/voter-lists/>.

⁷David W. Brady, Hahrie Han, and Jeremy C. Pope, "Primary Elections and Candidate Ideology: Out of Step with the Primary Electorate?" *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2007): 79–105.

⁸Shigeo Hirano and James M. Snyder Jr., *Primary Elections in the United States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

media to local opinion leaders and then by word of mouth.⁹ A follow-up study developed this into the “two-step flow” model, which later research has refined and debated.¹⁰

Later work traced the pattern in finer detail. Robert Huckfeldt and John Sprague, studying South Bend, Indiana, found that a voter’s views reflect the political makeup of their neighborhood and their regular discussion partners.¹¹ Diana Mutz found that Americans’ political discussion networks lean toward like-minded partners and that exposure to disagreement through conversation is relatively limited.¹² In a journalistic synthesis of demographic and election data, Bill Bishop argued that Americans have increasingly clustered in like-minded communities, a pattern he called “the big sort.”¹³

Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels go further. In *Democracy for Realists* they argue that group identity and loyalty drive voting more than policy preferences do, and that voters often adopt the positions of their group rather than choosing a group based on positions.¹⁴

The result is a picture of the electorate built from the inside out: self, household, circle, town.

IV. Where the Maps Collide

Each view has characteristic blind spots. Published research points to four places where they diverge.

1. Two sources of misperception

David Broockman and Christopher Skovron analyzed original surveys of 3,765 state legislative politicians’ perceptions of constituency opinion on nine issues, conducted in 2012 and 2014. Politicians in both parties overestimated constituents’ support for conservative positions, and Republicans accounted for much of the overestimation.¹⁵

A separate line of research concerns individuals. Psychologists Lee Ross, David Greene, and Pamela House documented the “false consensus effect”: people tend to overestimate how many others share their own views and choices.¹⁶ The two findings come from different studies of different

⁹Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gaudet, *The People’s Choice: How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1944).

¹⁰Elihu Katz and Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1955).

¹¹Robert Huckfeldt and John Sprague, *Citizens, Politics, and Social Communication: Information and Influence in an Election Campaign* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹²Diana C. Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹³Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008).

¹⁴Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels, *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

¹⁵David E. Broockman and Christopher Skovron, “Bias in Perceptions of Public Opinion among Political Elites,” *American Political Science Review* 112, no. 3 (2018): 542–63.

¹⁶Lee Ross, David Greene, and Pamela House, “The ‘False Consensus Effect’: An Egocentric Bias in Social Perception and Attribution Processes,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 13, no. 3 (1977): 279–301.

populations. They describe two distinct sources of misperception, one among officeholders and one among individuals, not a measured mirror-image error within the same districts.

2. The invisibility loop

Steven Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen attributed much of the variation in American political participation to mobilization: whether people are asked to take part.¹⁷ Campaigns concentrate contact on people their data identifies as likely voters.¹⁸ Taken together, these findings suggest a reinforcing pattern. Voters with established participation histories draw more attention, and voters with thin histories draw less.

This is an inference from the literature, not a measured result for Ohio. Whether such a cycle operates in a given district depends on campaign practice and on the reach of outreach efforts.

3. The personal contact gap

In a field experiment with about 30,000 registered voters in New Haven, Connecticut, Alan Gerber and Donald Green found that door-to-door canvassing raised turnout substantially, direct mail raised it slightly, and telephone calls had no measurable effect.¹⁹ Later experiments compiled in their guide *Get Out the Vote* point in the same direction.²⁰

These studies measure turnout, not trust or persuasion. They show a practical tension: the contact that most raises turnout is personal, while the outreach campaigns can scale cheaply is impersonal.

4. Primaries set the menu

Many voters engage in the fall, through their own networks. By then the major-party choices have been narrowed by the primary electorate. Where one party dominates the general election, the November ballot may offer no competitive alternative to that party's nominee.

Not every primary is a contest. When a nomination is uncontested, the decisive stage moves earlier, to candidate recruitment, filing, and decisions about whether to challenge an incumbent.

V. What It Means for Representation

Different stages of the electoral process give different groups of voters different opportunities to influence outcomes.

A district is a map. A constituency is the part of that map an officeholder can see and answers to. Fenno's circles, Hersh's perceived voter, and the research on primaries point the same way: the

¹⁷Steven J. Rosenstone and John Mark Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America* (New York: Macmillan, 1993).

¹⁸Hersh, *Hacking the Electorate*.

¹⁹Alan S. Gerber and Donald P. Green, "The Effects of Canvassing, Telephone Calls, and Direct Mail on Voter Turnout: A Field Experiment," *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 3 (2000): 653–63, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2585837>.

²⁰Donald P. Green and Alan S. Gerber, *Get Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout*, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2019).

effective constituency is weighted toward the people who appear in the data and at the polls, especially in primaries.

Voters' constituencies work differently. They are built from personal ties, and they feel complete from the inside. A voter can be fully engaged within their own circle and still be hard for a campaign reading the voter file to see.

Primary elections are not inherently a failure of representation. Hirano and Snyder find that primaries, especially open-seat primaries for the advantaged party in safe constituencies, are often effective at selecting higher-quality candidates in exactly the settings where general elections offer little competition.²¹ Brady, Han, and Pope find that the primary electorate also exerts a measurable pull on incumbents.²² Whether a given nomination process offers real choices, and whether its participants reflect the broader constituency, are empirical questions to be examined district by district.

VI. Observations for Ohio Readers

- **The primary electorate is small.** Twenty-three percent of registered Ohioans voted in the May 2026 primary.²³ The other 77 percent did not take part in choosing major-party nominees.
- **The pool is defined partly by public records.** Party affiliation in Ohio's records comes from primary ballot history, and county boards publish that history.²⁴
- **Recorded affiliation is not political identity.** A voter with no recorded affiliation may still hold firm partisan views, and a recorded affiliation may no longer reflect a voter's current leanings.
- **Contact and turnout move together.** Field experiments link personal contact to higher turnout, and campaigns direct contact toward the voters their data identifies.²⁵
- **Officeholders' picture of the district can be off.** Measured opinion and legislators' estimates of it diverge in published research.²⁶

VII. Open Questions

The research summarized here raises questions this explainer does not answer:

- How different are the primary and general-election electorates within individual Ohio districts?

²¹Shigeo Hirano and James M. Snyder Jr., "Primary Elections and the Quality of Elected Officials," *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 9, no. 4 (2014): 473–500, <https://doi.org/10.1561/100.00013096>; Hirano and Snyder, *Primary Elections in the United States*.

²²Brady, Han, and Pope, "Primary Elections and Candidate Ideology."

²³Ohio Secretary of State, "Secretary LaRose Certifies 2026 Official Primary Election Results."

²⁴Ohio Rev. Code §§ 3513.19, 3513.05; Hamilton County Board of Elections, "Voter Lists."

²⁵Gerber and Green, "Effects of Canvassing, Telephone Calls, and Direct Mail"; Hersh, *Hacking the Electorate*.

²⁶Broockman and Skovron, "Bias in Perceptions of Public Opinion among Political Elites."

- Do primary voters' policy preferences differ systematically from those of other district residents?
- How often are Ohio major-party nominations contested? OCG's white paper *The Uncontested Majority* examines primary competition in Ohio.
- How accurately do Ohio officeholders perceive the views of all constituents, including nonvoters?

About This Explainer

OCG Explainers summarize published research and primary-source records on how Ohio’s civic institutions work. They are descriptive and take no position on policy, candidates, or parties. Ohio figures are drawn from the Secretary of State’s certified results and the Ohio Revised Code; research findings are attributed to their authors. Sources checked as of October 13, 2026.

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Revision History

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