

No Seat at the Table: Unaffiliated Voters in NYC’s Primaries

Kathryn Agnas, Data Scientist and Demiana Rizkalla, Policy Analyst from the NYC Campaign Finance Board

Abstract

New York is one of ten states in the U.S. that holds **closed primaries**—the most restrictive primary election policy in the country.¹ This policy affects the over **three million** unaffiliated voters across New York State and the almost **one million** unaffiliated voters in New York City, disproportionately impacting **voters ages 18-29** who make up **nearly a quarter** of unaffiliated voters. This research creates a profile of New York City’s unaffiliated voters, and explores the impact of the “closed” primary system, the second largest voting bloc in the state, behind registered Democrats. Almost a million unaffiliated voters are not eligible to participate in primary elections at the **municipal, state, and federal** levels in New York City, while the city consistently has one of the lowest primary turnouts from a major municipality across the country. By utilizing voter file data from the New York City Board of Elections (BOE) for a demographic study of unaffiliated voters in New York City as well as a meta-analysis of the national trends in “closed” vs. “open” primary systems, this research imagines the impact of more inclusive election policies on unaffiliated voters.

Background and Analysis

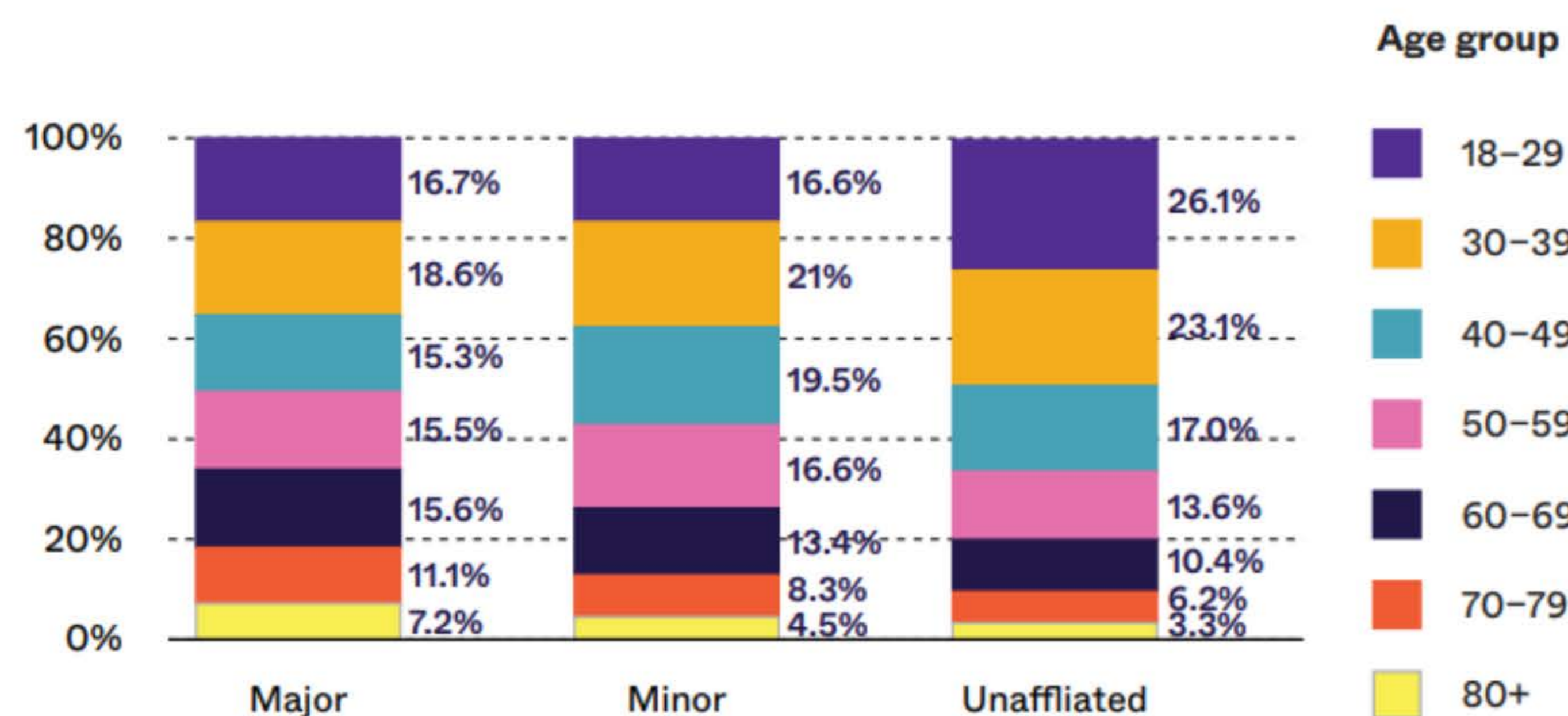
New York excludes unaffiliated voters from the candidate nomination process by holding closed primary elections. **Closed party primaries restrict voting to those registered to the specific party.**

Restricted voter participation and low voter turnout in primaries means that the candidates in the general election are less likely to be representative of the electorate. Conversely, this has allowed national party organizations and political leaders to maintain positions of power and challenge incumbents when necessary.²

At the municipal level, **42 of America’s 50 largest cities practice some form of nonpartisan primaries** which tend to result in higher voter turnout and more representative electorates.

In Colorado, Idaho, and Oklahoma, researchers found there was an **average five-percentage point increase in voter participation across these states.**³ Common Cause New York’s qualitative research on unaffiliated voters suggests that, if given the opportunity, they are more likely to engage more actively in the political process—particularly in primary elections.⁴

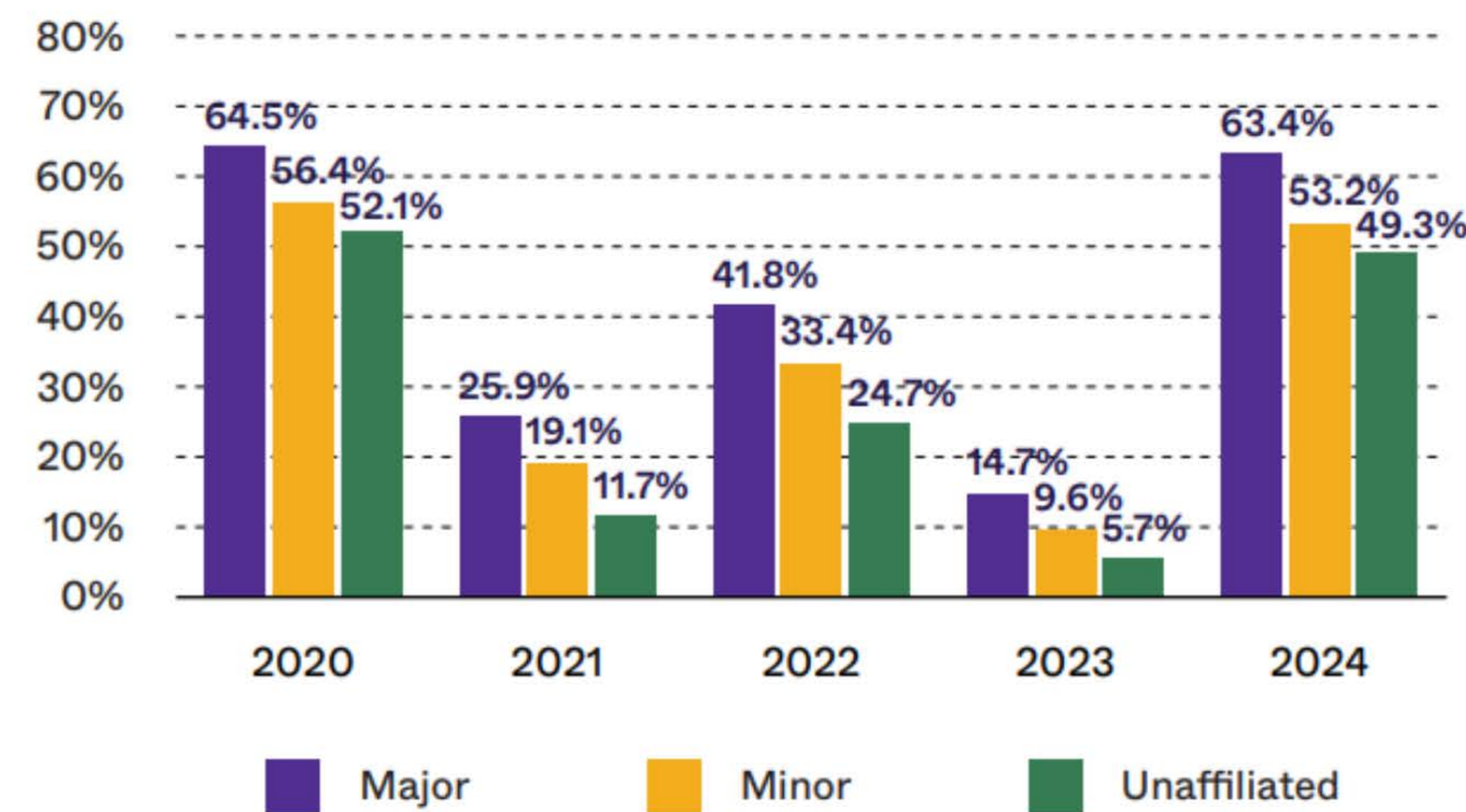
Percent of Voters by Political Party by Age Group, 2024*



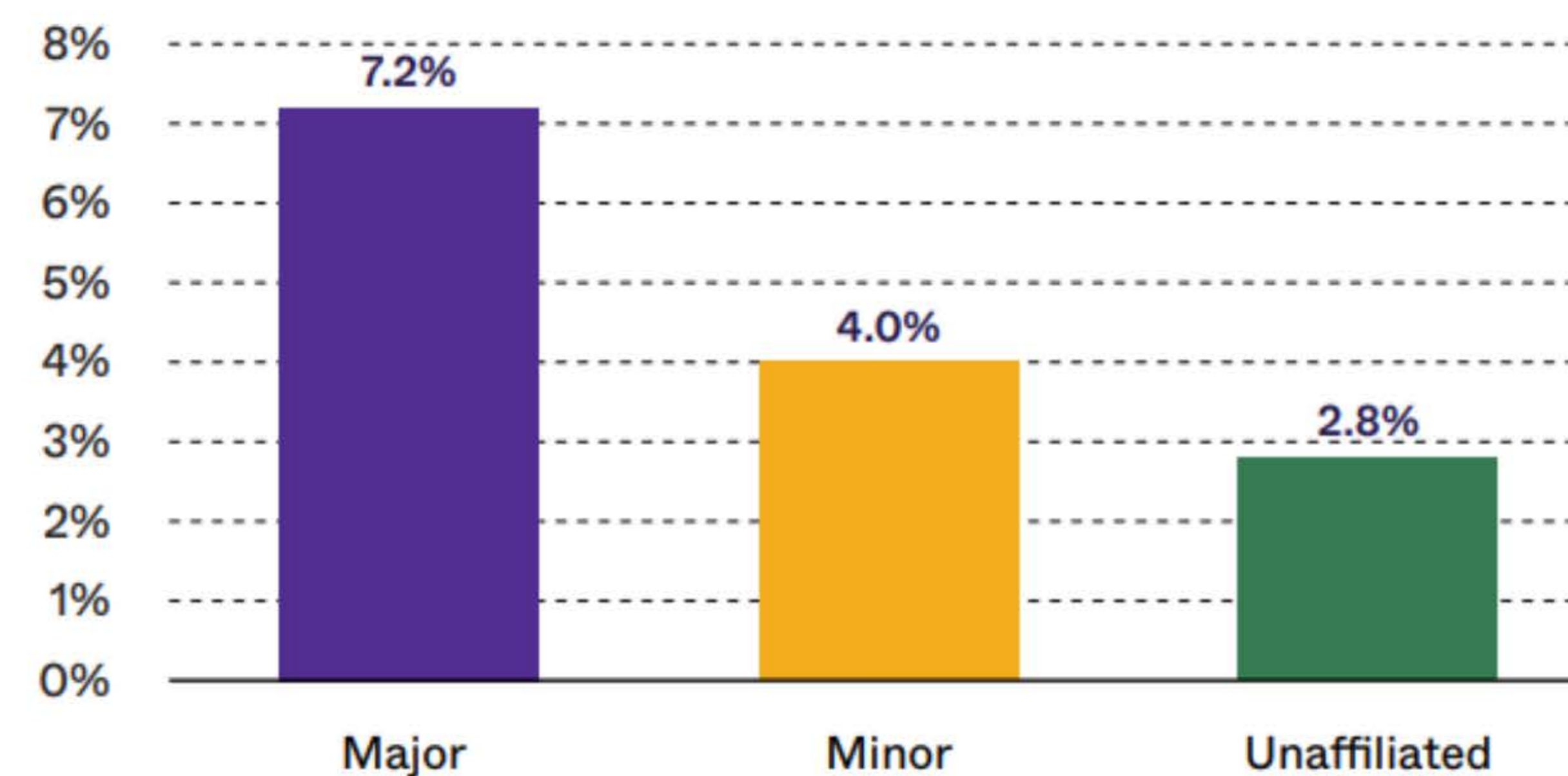
In 2024, voters registered to the Democratic Party made up almost two-thirds of the New York City electorate. **Unaffiliated voters formed the second-largest bloc at 21.1%.**

Unaffiliated voters skew younger, with more than a quarter under 30 and another 23.1% aged 30-39. In contrast, those registered to both major and minor parties skewed slightly older.

General Election Turnout by Political Party, 2020 to 2024



Average Special Election Turnout by Political Party, 2020 to 2024⁵



Much like those registered to major and minor parties, unaffiliated voters in New York City have turned out at different rates depending on what races are on the ballot.

- In general elections, unaffiliated voters in New York City **vote more in national contests than in local contests.**
- Unaffiliated voters in New York City have consistently recorded the **lowest general election turnout.**
- Much like general elections, special elections in New York are open to all voters. **Low average special election turnout among the three party groups aligns with historical trends,** as special election participation has consistently been lower in New York City.⁶

Limitations and Conclusion

Our analyses examine voter behavior and characteristics of the unaffiliated electorate in New York City. However, these analyses are constrained by data limitations.

- These datasets provide only limited demographic details and do not capture voter intent or attitudes—key dimensions that, as a result, are absent from our analyses.
- While existing research suggests that unaffiliated voters in New York City may be more likely to participate in primaries if given the opportunity, their low average turnout among in special elections remains a pressing question in our analysis.⁷
- Several factors contribute to low unaffiliated turnout in special elections, including last-minute scheduling that shortens voter outreach, limited engagement with less active “unaffiliated” voters,⁸ and voter fatigue from frequent election cycles.

Overall, this analysis underscores the growing importance of understanding unaffiliated voters in New York City, who consistently make up the second-largest segment of the electorate yet exhibit the lowest turnout.

References

1. Troiano, Nick. *The Primary Solution: Rescuing Our Democracy from the Fringes*. New York, Simon & Schuster, 27 Feb 2024.
2. Ibid.
3. Ferrer, Joshua, Michael Thorning, and J.D. Rackey. “The Effect of Open Primaries on Turnout and Representation.” *Bipartisan Policy Center*. 30 Oct 2024.
4. Goff, Sara. “Independent State of Mind: The Rise of New York’s Unaffiliated Voters.” *Common Cause New York*. 30 Nov 2023.
5. The November 2, 2021, special election was excluded from the analysis because the City BOE voter file and the voter history data do not distinguish between the general election and the special election, which was held on the same day.
6. 2022-23 Voter Analysis Report. “2022 Special Elections Analysis.”
7. Goff, Sara. “Independent State of Mind: The Rise of New York’s Unaffiliated Voters.” *Common Cause New York*. 30 Nov 2023.
8. Cohn, Nate. “Turnout Data Reveals the Core of Democrats’ Success in Special Elections.” *The New York Times*, 02 Feb 2024.

*** Our analyses categorize political parties into three groups: major political parties (includes the Democratic and Republican parties), minor political parties (includes the Conservative Party, the Working Families Party, and other minor parties), and unaffiliated voters (voters not registered to a political party).**

For a comprehensive analysis of unaffiliated voters, refer to our 2024 Voter Analysis Report on www.nyccfb.info/voter-analysis-report