



INSTITUTE OF  
PUBLIC OPINION  

---

MUHLENBERG COLLEGE

**Republican to Democrat:**  
**A Survey of Pennsylvania Voters who Have Changed**  
**Registration Status**

**February 2009**

## **Overview:**

In recent years there has been a major shift in party registration among voters of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. In May of 2006, Democratic voters outnumbered their Republican counterparts by 550,000 registered voters statewide. Two and half years later the gap between Democrats and Republicans had more than doubled, with over 1,200,000 more Democrats than Republicans registered to vote in November of 2008. This dramatic shift in party registration in Pennsylvania has led to considerable discussion regarding the causes of the increased Democratic advantage in the Keystone State. Among the factors commonly cited for the widening registration gap were the unpopular standing of the Bush Administration, the desire of voters to participate in the Democratic Presidential Primary and the excitement generated by the campaign of Barack Obama. However, there has been little empirical evidence to establish the primary reasons why Republican voters in the Commonwealth would decide to leave their political party and become Democrats. In this study The Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion examines the decisions of Pennsylvania Voters who have shifted party affiliation from Republican to Democrat. In particular the study focuses on:

- The reasons why Pennsylvania Republicans have left the party.
- A demographic profile of the voters leaving the GOP in Pennsylvania.
- The likelihood that voters leaving the Republican Party will return to the GOP.

## **Methodology:**

The findings in this study are drawn from a telephone survey of 400 Pennsylvania voters who switched their party registration status from Republican to democrat during the years 2007 and 2008. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania's voter registration lists were examined to produce a list of all registered Republicans who had changed their party registration status from Republican to Democrat. From this list a random sample of voters was selected for interviews. Telephone interviews were conducted between November 19 and 26, 2008. The sample size of 400 completed interviews produces a margin of error of +/- 4.5% at a 95% level of confidence. Margins of error are larger for sub-groups (e.g. women, senior citizens) and total percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding. The survey instrument was designed by Dr. Christopher P. Borick, Director of the Muhlenberg Institute of Public Opinion. The report was written by Dr. Borick and Elisa Zaehreinger, Assistant Director of The Institute of Public Opinion.

## **Key Findings:**

1. An overwhelming number of Pennsylvania Republicans who switched their voter registration status to Democrat had been in the Republican Party for 20 years or more.
2. Almost two out of three voters that have abandoned the GOP for the Democratic Party identified themselves as politically moderate or liberal.



3. The presidency of George W. Bush and the War in Iraq were identified as the largest contributing factors to the abandonment of the Republican Party in the Commonwealth.
4. Pennsylvania voters leaving the GOP to become Democrats were more likely to claim that their decision was the result of changes in the party rather than changes in their personal beliefs.
5. A solid majority of individuals who have switched from Republican to Democratic registration status indicated that they are not likely to change party registration again in the next five years.

### Section One: Profiling the Changers

While the overall registration numbers in Pennsylvania indicate the departure of many Republicans to the Democratic Party, the characteristics of those defecting from the GOP is not clear. Thus one of the first goals of this research is to provide a profile of those leaving the Republican Party to become Democrats.

One interesting characteristic of the group of Pennsylvania voters who have left the GOP is their ideological beliefs. The findings from the survey suggest that the voters leaving the Republican Party tend to be fairly well dispersed among various ideological positions. As can be seen in Table One below, over one in three Republicans who became Democrats during 2007 and 2008 identified themselves as moderate, with about a quarter describing themselves as conservative and another quarter calling themselves liberal. This equal distribution of party defectors is notable given the broader conservatism that is usually found among Republican voters in Pennsylvania. In most statewide polls that have asked Republicans to identify their ideological beliefs, a majority of GOP voters claim to be conservative. But among those leaving the party most are either moderate (37%) or liberal (27%) voters.

**TABLE ONE**

#### **Ideological Beliefs of Pennsylvania Voters Changing from Republican to Democratic Registration Status**

<b>Very Conservative</b>	<b>6%</b>
<b>Somewhat Conservative</b>	<b>20%</b>
<b>Moderate</b>	<b>37%</b>
<b>Somewhat Liberal</b>	<b>22%</b>
<b>Very Liberal</b>	<b>5%</b>
<b>Not Sure</b>	<b>8%</b>

Another notable characteristic of individuals leaving the Republican Party is that a large majority have been life long Republicans. Over 3 out of 4 GOP defectors indicated that they had

never changed their party registration before their recent leap to the Democratic Party. Conversely, just over 1 in 5 Republican Party defectors had switched party registration status at least once before. The results also indicate that a majority (53%) of individuals leaving the party have been in the GOP for at least twenty years. The results in Table Two below suggest that a large majority of Republicans are long term party members who have never been outside the party before. In particular, among Republican Party defectors who had been in the GOP at least 20 years, only 12% had ever changed their registration before.

**TABLE TWO**

**Length of Time in the Republican Party in Relation to Previous Change of Party Status**

Years in the Republican Party	Changed Party Status in the Past	
	YES	NO
1 to 5 Years	44%	56%
6 to 10 Years	46%	51%
11 to 20 Years	23%	74%
Over 20 Years	12%	88%

The survey findings also suggest that voters leaving the Republican Party tend to hold pro-choice positions. In particular, over 2 out of 3 (67%) of GOP defectors identified themselves as pro-choice in terms of the issue of abortion, compared to only 1 in 5 (19%) who held pro-life positions on this matter. The loss of pro-choice Republicans is consistent with the earlier findings that demonstrated greater losses among moderate and liberal voters in the party.

**TABLE THREE**

**Position on Abortion Issue among Voters Switching Party Registration From Republican to Democrat**

Position on Abortion	Percent Responding
Pro-Choice	67%
Pro-Life	19%
Neither-Other	6%
Not Sure/Refused	6%

The results from the study indicate that a large percentage of those departing from the Republican Party tend to be fairly well educated and from middle to upper income categories. Almost half (49%) of GOP voters that have left to become Democrats indicated that they have at least an undergraduate college degree. Similarly, over 1 out of 3 (37%) of individuals who have changed their political affiliation from Republican to Democrat report household incomes over \$80,000 per year.

**TABLE FOUR**

**Income and Educational Attainment for Pennsylvanians Changing Party Registration From Republican to Democrat**

<b>Income</b>	<b>Educational Attainment</b>
Under \$20,000 (9.%)	Less Than High School Graduate (<1%)
\$20,000 To \$40,000 (17%)	High School Graduate (21%)
\$40,000 To \$60,000 (19%)	Some College or Technical School (29%)
\$60,000 To \$80,000 (14%)	College Graduate (25%)
\$80,000 To \$100,000 (12%)	Graduate or Professional Degree (24%)
Over \$100,000 (25%)	

**SECTION TWO: THE REASONS BEHIND THE REGISTRATION SHIFT**

The migration of many Republicans to the Democratic Party has been a defining characteristic of contemporary politics in the Keystone State and the focus of much speculation. What factors may have caused thousand of long term GOP loyalists to break with their party and become Democrats? As noted earlier there have been numerous reasons suggested for the abandonment of the Republican Party in Pennsylvania. One of the most prominent reasons suggested for the shift in party affiliation in the Commonwealth is the high level of dissatisfaction with the presidency of George W. Bush. With the 43<sup>rd</sup> President’s job approval numbers hovering below 30% in Pennsylvania, it has been argued that he himself was responsible for many Republicans shifting their party allegiance. The results of the survey confirm the damaging effect of the Bush Administration on Republican registration. Over 2 out of 3 (68%) of Pennsylvanians which have left the GOP to become Democrats indicated that President Bush was a “very important” reason for their decision to abandon the Republican Party (See Table Five).

Along with the general impact of President Bush’s unpopularity on Republican registration, the issue that helped cripple his administration also had a significant impact on pushing Pennsylvanians away from the GOP. A majority (54%) of voters leaving the Republican Party to become Democrats stated that the War in Iraq was a “very important” reason for their choice to pick a new party.

In addition to the impact of President Bush and the War in Iraq, the Republican Party’s positions on numerous policies also contributed to the decisions of voters to abandon the GOP. For nearly half (49%) of the survey respondents the Republican Party’s position on foreign policy proved important in terms of their choice to change party affiliation, with more than 4 out of 10 former Republicans identifying GOP positions on the environment and taxing and spending as a key reason for their departure from their party.

**TABLE FIVE**

**Factors Leading Individuals to Leave the Republican Party**

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Percent Indicating the Factor was a Very Important Reason for Leaving the GOP</b>
President Bush	68%
The War in Iraq	54%
The GOP's Position on Foreign Policy	49%
The GOP's Position on Environmental Issues	45%
The GOP's Position on Taxing and Spending	44%

The survey also asked respondents to state their level of agreement with a number of statements regarding the contemporary Republican Party. Among the statements that most resonated with individuals leaving the GOP were those that dealt with President Bush and the extreme positions of the GOP. Over half (53%) of the individuals surveyed strongly agreed that the Republican Party has become too extreme in its positions, with about the same number (52%) strongly agreeing that George Bush's presidency led them to leave the GOP.

A smaller portion of voters leaving the GOP were in strong agreement about the impact of social and religious factors on their decision to change party registration. Just over 1 in 3 (38%) strongly agreed that the Democratic Party's position on issues like gay marriage and abortion were closer to theirs than the Republican party's stance on these topics. About 1 in 3 (34%) of GOP refugees in Pennsylvania strongly agreed that the religious right's influence on the Republican Party led them to leave the party.

**TABLE SIX**

**Strong Agreement with Statements Regarding the Republican Party**

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Percent Strongly Agreeing With the Statement</b>
The Republican Party has become too extreme in its positions.	53%
The Presidency of George W. Bush led me to leave the Republican Party.	52%
The Democratic Party's positions on taxes are closer to mine than the Republican Party's positions on taxes.	46%
The Democratic Party's positions on issues like gay marriage and abortion are closer to mine than the Republican Party's positions on these issues	38%
The influence of the religious right on Republican Party social positions led me to leave the party.	34%

One final perspective on the decisions of Pennsylvania Republicans to leave the party involves their perception of the root causes of their choice. Survey participants were asked if changes in the party were primarily responsible for their choice to leave, or if changes in their own beliefs led them to leave the GOP. A plurality (37%) of Republicans that have left the party to become Democrats indicated that it was the party's policies that led them to change their party registration status, compared to only 21% who attributed the switch to changes in their personal beliefs.

**TABLE SEVEN**

**Primary Reason for Changing Party Registration  
From Republican to Democrat**

<b>Reason</b>	<b>Percent Responding</b>
The Republican Party's Policies Led Me to Leave the Party	37%
Changes In My Personal Beliefs Led Me To Leave The Republican Party	21%
Both Factors Played Equal Roles	22%
Not Sure/Refused	20%

**SECTION THREE: LOOKING AHEAD**

As discussed earlier in the report, since the beginning of 2006 there has been a significant number of Republicans abandoning the GOP in favor of the Democratic Party. While the results of this exodus have contributed to the strong Democratic victories in the Keystone State during the elections of 2006 and 2008, there has been much speculation regarding the future of the former members of the Republican rank and file. It has been argued that the recent GOP converts to the Democratic Party will switch back to the Republican Party now that the 2008 election has passed, the Bush Administration has ended and the War in Iraq winds down. Conversely, others have argued that the defection of Republicans to the Democratic Party marks a more long term realignment of the Keystone State's electorate.

In this study we sought to provide insight into this issue by asking the respondents the likelihood that they will be switching party registration again during the next five years. The results indicate that about 6 out of 10 (59%) of GOP defectors to the Democratic Party do not believe it likely that they will change parties again over the next half decade. Comparatively, only about 1 in 5 (22%) of the former Republicans expressed the belief that they will make another registration change during the upcoming five years.

**TABLE EIGHT**

**The Likelihood of Former Republican Registrants Changing Political Parties Again in the Next Five Years**

<b>Likelihood</b>	<b>Percent Responding</b>
Very Likely	9%
Somewhat Likely	13%
Not to Likely	22%
Not Likely at All	37%
Not Sure/Refused	19%

Looking closer at the effect of political beliefs on the likelihood of the former Republicans changing party registration again, we find that ideology has a significant impact on the decision. While conservatives were about evenly split regarding their likelihood of either leaving the Democratic Party (40%) or staying put (44%), moderates and liberals were significantly less likely to indicate that they would be making another switch of registration status. More specifically, only about 2 out of 10 (19%) of moderates and 1 out of 10 (12%) liberals believe it likely that they will be changing their party affiliation before 2013.

**TABLE NINE**

**The Likelihood of Former Republican Registrants Changing Political Parties Again in the Next Five Years by Political Ideology**

	<b>Very Likely</b>	<b>Somewhat Likely</b>	<b>Not Too Likely</b>	<b>Not Likely at All</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>
<b>Overall</b>	9%	13%	22%	37%	18%
<b>Conservative</b>	20%	20%	18%	26%	15%
<b>Moderate</b>	7%	12%	24%	36%	21%
<b>Liberal</b>	4%	8%	24%	48%	14%

**CONCLUSIONS**

The recent shift of party registration in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has reshaped the landscape of politics in the state. As thousands of former Republican voters have migrated to the Democratic Party the competitive balance in Keystone State Politics has shifted away from the GOP. The results of this research indicate that the Republican Party's losses have been largely among more moderate middle to upper income voters who have been life long Republicans. These voters, who are abundant in places like suburban Philadelphia and the Lehigh Valley, have diminished the capabilities of the GOP to win statewide elections in



Pennsylvania. The loss of these voters has been caused by numerous factors, but the Administration of George W. Bush and the Iraq War stand out as the leading reasons behind the exodus of many Republican voters in the Commonwealth.

While the overall picture for the Republican Party seems fairly dark according to the results of this study, there are some glimmers of hope for the GOP as it moves forward. With President Bush now out of the White House and the War in Iraq moving into new stages, the largest causes of GOP registration losses are being removed from the table. To be sure, the survey's results provide evidence that other factors such as Republican positions on policy issues have contributed to the party's poor fortunes, but the biggest catalysts for individuals to bolt from the GOP are fading from their prominent place on the public's radar is diminished.