Both Sides Now

An age-old argument among political operatives is the relative importance of persuasion versus turnout. One group makes the case that scarce campaign resources should go toward targeting the malleable voters in the middle, those with loose if any partisan ties, and driving them in the desired direction. The other group argues that truly swing voters are very few, and so it’s a better use of time and money to excite voters who can be counted on for support, if only they’ll go to the polls.

Which candidate Republicans decide to nominate for president next year could well turn on that basic question. As suming the GOP, through its primaries and caucuses, doesn’t roll the dice on a pure outsider like Donald Trump, they’ll choose either a candidate whose appeal reaches into the middle, such as (in alphabetical order, lest anyone be offended) Jeb Bush, Chris Christie, John Kasich, or Marco Rubio, or one designed to maximize support in the party’s conservative base, like Ted Cruz, Mike Huckabee, or Rick Santorum. I suppose you could count both neurosurgeon Ben Carson and businesswoman Carly Fiorina as outsiders and, on most issues, as conservatives.

Exit polls in 2012 showed that 92 percent of self-described Democrats voted for President Obama; the same percent age voted for the Democratic candidate for the House. On the other side, 93 percent of self-identified Republicans cast their ballots for Mitt Romney and 94 percent for their district’s GOP House candidate.

This makes sense when you consider that the Democrats most likely to vote for a Republican were conservatives and moderates—virtually extinct and increasingly rare, respectively. So, too, among Republican voters. The ones most likely to defect to a Democratic candidate were liberals, who are just about gone, and the ever-fewer moder ates.

We now see more party cohesion; each party is pretty much sorted out—liberals to one side, conservatives to the other. That translates into more straight-party voting, up and down the ballot, and less ticket-splitting than ever before. It also leaves the moderates in both parties increasingly outnumbered and disenfranchised, without much say in selecting nominees.

This is a process that has accelerated steadily since President Johnson’s mid-1960s victories on civil rights laws ushered in Richard Nixon’s Southern strategy in 1968. Party lines held firm even in 1992, with its extraordinary three-way contest between President George H.W. Bush, Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton, and businessman H. Ross Perot, when 73 percent of Republicans voted for Bush and 77 percent of Democrats went for Clinton. Four years later, Clinton drew 84 percent of the Democratic vote, while Bob Dole took 80 percent of the Republicans.

And so on. In the 2000 election, that cliffhanger, Al Gore carried 86 percent of the vote from Democrats, and George W. Bush took a remarkable 90 percent of the votes cast by self-described Republicans. Four years later, Bush fared even better in his reelection bid, pulling 93 percent of the Republican vote, while John Kerry racked up
89 percent among Democrats. In 2008, Barack Obama and John McCain carried 89 percent and 90 percent, respectively, of their partisans. Partisan voters are predictable.

So, where are the storied independents, who seem to hold the nation’s political balance in their grasp? According to exit polls in the past six presidential elections, the proportion of voters calling themselves independents ranged between 26 percent (in 1996 and 2004) and 29 percent (in 2008 and 2012).

But, even most of these professed independents don’t actually behave, well, independently. The American National Election Studies are a series of national surveys immediately before and after presidential elections, led by political scientists at the University of Michigan and Stanford University. In 2012, it found that 87 percent of independents who, when pushed, conceded they feel closer to the Democratic Party wound up voting for Obama. The same percentage of independents who admitted a soft spot for Republicans went for Romney. In 2008, Obama’s hope-and-change campaign drew a whopping 91 percent of Democratic-leaning independents, while McCain won 82 percent of independents who leaned Republican. Simply put, many of the people who self-identify as political independents are, for electoral purposes, partisans. They vote almost as predictably as Americans who simply label themselves as a Democrat or a Republican.

True independents, who don’t lean toward either party, made up only 5 percent of the 2012 electorate, according to the ANES survey. (They preferred Romney over Obama, 54 percent to 46 percent.) In 2008, these hard independents accounted for 6.5 percent of the electorate (breaking for Obama, 55 percent to 45 percent), and for 5.5 percent in 2004 (siding with Kerry, 56 percent to 44 percent). Note that in all three elections, more independents voted against the party that held the White House—and in two of the three, in favor of the candidate who lost.

All of which serves to remind us that precisely who goes to the polls—the turnout of partisans and of partisan-leaning independents—can decide an election. Here’s the truth: In most political circumstances, neither side of the argument is completely correct. Political parties must walk and chew gum at the same time. They need to hold and motivate their base while trying to persuade those few voters in the middle who are truly up for grabs. Partisans matter, and swing voters do, too.