



BACKGROUND

At the end of 2023, Sister District, in partnership with Data for Progress (DFP), set out to conduct research to better understand the phenomenon of down-ballot roll-off. “Roll-off” is the term used to describe the behavior when a voter ticks the top, but not the bottom, of their ballot. In our prior work, we discovered that the difference in state legislative roll-off between the two parties is stark: across 10 battleground states over 8 years, down-ballot Democrats in contested races experienced ballot roll-off [80% of the time, compared to only 37% for their Republican counterparts](#). Those lost votes can make all the difference in state legislative races, which are often decided by only a few hundred or thousand votes. As one example of many, in 2022, just 63 votes in a single district flipped the entire Pennsylvania House blue.

METHODOLOGY

To better understand roll-off, Sister District worked with DFP to design and field a survey to **5,101** likely voters in Arizona, Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. In particular, this work aimed to elucidate *voter-level* factors—such as demographics, perceptions of state power, and individual-level political knowledge—that may influence roll-off behavior. The survey was fielded from November 27 to December 14, 2023. The sample was weighted to be representative of likely voters by age, gender, education, race, geography, and voting history.

For analysis, survey respondents are divided into 3 categories: down-ballot voters, sometimes down-ballot voters, and roll-off voters. Specifically, voters who say they **always** or **usually** vote in state legislative races are labeled “down-ballot voters,” those who say they **sometimes** vote in those races are labeled “sometimes down-ballot voters,” and voters who say they **rarely** or **never** do are labeled “roll-off voters.” Unless otherwise noted, the comparisons in this summary are between down-ballot and roll-off voters (with sometimes down-ballot voters excluded).¹

¹ The survey was designed with a split sample: Half of the respondents were asked the roll-off behavior questions first, followed by the knowledge questions (Split A); the other half were asked the knowledge questions first, then the roll-off behavior questions (Split B). This gives us two groups of roll-off voters (A and B) within the sample. For most of the questions, the topline do not differ substantially between the two splits, so rather than listing the percentages from each split separately, we report the *average* of the percentages in this memorandum.



MAIN TAKEAWAYS

Compared to down-ballot voters, roll-off voters are more likely to be: women; those who identify with a racial/ethnic category other than white; under the age of 45; those without a college degree, and ideologically moderate. In terms of knowledge and attitudes, we find that, in general, knowledge about what state legislators do is low, but roll-off voters are even less likely than down-ballot voters to identify the role of state legislators correctly. They are also less confident that they know enough to decide between state legislative candidates, and more likely to say that concern about potentially voting for the “wrong” candidate has prevented them from voting in state legislative races. Comparing *liberal* roll-off voters with *conservative* roll-off voters, we find that far fewer liberal roll-off voters agree that state governments (not the federal government) should have the most authority over important decisions. More liberal roll-off voters than conservative roll-off voters agree that it is their civic duty to vote **ONLY** in races where they are familiar with the candidates. Throughout the survey, we find that women, voters under 45, those without a college degree, and voters of color are more likely than their counterparts to misidentify the role and influence of state governments, to feel like their votes don’t matter in state elections, say they don’t know enough to vote, and say they follow political news less. These same groups of voters are also more likely to roll off in state legislative races.

WHO ARE ROLL-OFF VOTERS?

1. DEMOGRAPHICS

More women report that they roll off in state legislative elections than men:

- 12% of respondents who are women say they **rarely or never** vote in state legislative elections, compared to 7% of respondents who are men.
- 81% of men are **down-ballot** voters, compared to just 68% of women.

More respondents who are Black or Latino report that they roll off, compared to white respondents:

- 14% of Black respondents and 12% of Latino respondents say that they roll off, compared to 8% of white respondents.
- 77% of white respondents are **down-ballot** voters, compared to 63% of Black respondents and 63% of Latinos.

More respondents under the age of 45 report that they roll off, compared to those 45 and older:

- 17% of respondents younger than 45 say that they roll off, compared to only 6% of respondents 45 or older.
- 83% of respondents 45 and older are **down-ballot** voters, compared to only 59% of respondents under 45.

More respondents who do not have a college degree report that they roll off, compared to those with a college degree:

- 12% of respondents without a college degree report that they roll off, compared to only 5% of those with a college degree.
- Notably, 85% of college-educated respondents are **down-ballot** voters, compared to only 68% of respondents without a college degree.

More respondents who self-identify as moderates report that they roll off in state legislative races, compared to ideological respondents:

- Roll off voters:
 - **15% of moderate respondents are roll-off voters**
 - 6% of conservatives and 7% of liberals are roll-off voters
- Down ballot voters:
 - **64% of moderate respondents are down-ballot voters**
 - 81% of both liberals and conservatives are down-ballot voters

However, using a more general measure of roll-off behavior, we do see a larger difference between liberals and conservatives. The survey included a question about roll-off that does not refer to voting in state legislative races specifically: **“How often do you vote in every race listed on your ballot?”**

- **46%** of very liberal respondents say they *always vote in every race* on the ballot, compared to **52%** of very conservative respondents.

2. KEY DEMOGRAPHIC COMBINATIONS

Gender × race

- Among white voters, the percentage of women who roll off is roughly twice as high as the percentage of men. But among Latino voters, the gender pattern is **reversed**: A higher percentage of Latino **men** roll off, compared to Latino women. Among Black voters, the percentages of women and men who roll off are the same.

- 11% of white women are roll-off voters, compared to just 5% of white men.
- **17%** of Latino **men** are roll-off voters, compared to just **9%** of Latino **women**.
- 13% of Black women **and** 13% of Black men are roll-off voters.

Education × race

- Racial differences in roll-off are larger among voters *without* college degrees:
 - Only 11% of white respondents without college are roll-off voters. 16% of Black respondents without college and 16% of Latino respondents without college are roll-off voters.
 - 4% of college-educated white respondents are roll-off voters, similar to the percentage of college-educated Black respondents (6%).

Ideology × age

- Among voters under 45, there are differences in roll-off between moderates and ideologues:
 - 24% of moderates under 45 roll off, compared to 9% of ideologues (very liberals and very conservatives) under 45.
 - 15% of “somewhat liberals” and 14% of “somewhat conservatives” under 45 roll off.
 - Ideology appears to be more strongly associated with rolling off among younger respondents than it is among older respondents.

3. KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES, AND BEHAVIORS

Knowledge

- **In general, knowledge about what state legislators do is low;** only 50% of the overall sample answered correctly that legislators’ main role is to write and pass the state’s laws. **But it is much lower for roll-off voters.**
 - Only 32% of roll-off voters answered correctly that state legislators’ main role is to write and pass the state’s laws, compared to 56% of down-ballot voters.
 - 16% of roll-off voters responded “Don’t Know” to this question, compared to just 3% of down-ballot voters.
- In general, knowledge about state authority over abortion is low—40% of the overall sample answered correctly that state governments have more influence over abortion policy than the federal government. But this knowledge is lower among roll-off voters:

- Fewer roll-off voters are correctly able to identify that state governments have more influence over abortion policy than the federal government. 33% of roll-off voters answered correctly, versus 43% of down-ballot voters.

Confidence in knowledge

- **79% of roll-off voters agree** that they feel like they don't know enough to decide between state legislative candidates, compared with 41% of down-ballot voters.

Voting the “wrong” way

- 23% of roll-off voters say concern about potentially voting for the “wrong” candidate has “very often” or “often” has prevented them from voting in a state legislative race, compared with just 9% of down-ballot voters.

Power of the states vs. federal govt.

- 55% of roll-off voters believe that state governments (not the federal government) *should* have the most authority to make decisions about important issues, compared to 64% of down-ballot voters.
- This difference aligns with the ideological split in the overall sample: only 43% of liberal respondents believe that state governments should have the most authority, compared to 76% of conservatives.

Civic duty

- Only 22% of roll-off voters agree that it is their civic duty to vote in every race on the ballot, even if they are unfamiliar with the candidates—compared to the 54% of down-ballot voters who agree with this statement.

Agency / how much your vote matters

- 56% of roll-off voters agree that their vote for a state legislative candidate doesn't matter and will not affect the outcome, compared with only 25% of down-ballot voters who say the same.
- 36% of roll-off voters say their vote does not matter in ANY election, compared to only 9% of down-ballot voters who say the same.

Importance of different levels of government elections

Roll-off voters and down-ballot voters are very **similar** in their rankings of which elections feel most important to them—federal elections first, local elections second, and state elections last.

- A majority of roll-off voters and down-ballot voters alike rank **federal** elections as most important (60%).

- 18% of roll-off voters and 19% of down-ballot voters rank **state elections** first in importance.
- 22% of roll-off voters and 21% of down-ballot voters rank **local elections** first in importance.

Follow political news

- Only 20% of roll-off voters say they “very often” or “often” pay attention to political news overall, compared to 73% of down-ballot voters.
- Only 21% of roll-off voters say they “very often” or “often” see/hear news stories about **state politics** specifically, compared with 59% of down-ballot voters.

News sources

- Down-ballot voters tend to get their news from “traditional” media sources.
 - Local television news: 49% of down-ballot voters, 30% of roll-off voters
 - Broadcast news: 47% of down-ballot voters, 24% of roll-off voters
- Roll-off voters tend to get their news from online platforms.
 - Facebook: 28% of down-ballot voters, 35% of roll-off voters
 - YouTube: 21% of down-ballot voters, 29% of roll-off voters
 - TikTok: 11% of down-ballot voters, 22% of roll-off voters
- These differences in media habits tend to align with age differences in the sample: older respondents more frequently report getting their news from local or broadcast TV outlets, while younger respondents typically get their news from social media or online sources.

Voting method

- Roll-off voters are less likely to vote by mail or absentee, and less likely to remember how they vote, than down-ballot voters.
 - 23% of roll-off voters said they **voted by mail**, compared to 32% of down-ballot voters.
 - **21% of roll-off voters said that they don’t know/cannot recall** whether they voted in-person or by mail the last time they voted; only 1% of down-ballot voters said the same.

4. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN LIBERAL ROLL-OFF VOTERS & CONSERVATIVE ROLL-OFF VOTERS

Demographics

- Liberal roll-off voters are more likely to be women, while conservative roll-off voters are more likely to be men.
- Liberal roll-off voters are slightly more likely to identify as a race other than white.
- Liberal roll-off voters are more likely to skew younger than conservative roll-off voters.

- Liberal roll-off voters are more likely to be employed or be students. Conservative roll-off voters, in contrast, are at least twice as likely to say they are retired.
- Liberal roll-off voters are slightly more likely to have a college degree compared to their conservative counterparts.

Attitudes & Knowledge

- Only 44% of liberal roll-off voters agree that **state** governments, not the federal government, should have the most authority, compared to 66% of conservative roll-off voters.
- **More** liberal roll-off voters (68%) than conservative roll-off voters (57%) agree that it is their civic duty to vote **ONLY** in races where they are familiar with the candidates.
- **Fewer** liberal roll-off voters are able to *correctly* identify the role of state legislators: 31% of liberal roll-off voters give the correct answer, compared to 39% of conservative roll-off voters.
- **More** liberal roll-off voters say that concern about potentially voting for the “wrong” candidate has prevented them from voting in state legislative elections: 25% of liberal roll-off voters, compared to 18% of conservatives, say this concern has prevented them from voting “very often” or “often.”

KEY DEMOGRAPHIC PATTERNS

Below are general demographic patterns in the survey, not patterns associated with roll-off behavior specifically.

1. GENDER

Knowledge

- **40% of women, compared to 61% of men**, were able to correctly answer that state legislators write and pass the state’s laws.
- 9% of women, compared to 5% of men, say that they don’t know.

Confidence in knowledge

- **53% of women, compared to only 43% of men**, agree that they don’t know enough information to decide between the candidates running in state legislative races.

2. RACE/ETHNICITY

Knowledge

- **52% of white respondents, compared to 37% of Black respondents and 38% of Latino respondents**, were able to correctly answer that state legislators write and pass the state's laws.
- 8% of Black respondents and 9% of Latino respondents vs. 5% of white respondents say they don't know.

Confidence in knowledge

- **57% of Black respondents and 59% of Latino respondents, compared to 47% of white respondents**, agree that they don't know enough information to decide between the candidates running in state legislative races.

Voting the wrong way

- **22% of Black respondents and 18% of Latino respondents, compared to only 9% of white respondents**, say that concern about voting for the "wrong" candidate has "very often" or "often" stopped them from voting in state legislative races.

3. AGE

Elections that feel most important

- 66% of older respondents rank federal elections first in importance, compared to just 49% of younger respondents.
- Only 16% of older respondents rank state elections first, compared to 25% of younger respondents.
- 18% of older respondents rank local elections first, **compared to 27% of younger respondents**.

Where does your vote matter

Among those who said their vote matters more in certain elections than in others:

- Only 26% of younger respondents, compared to 41% of older respondents, said their vote matters most in **federal elections**.
- **53% of younger respondents**, compared to 43% of older respondents, said their vote matters most in **local elections**.

Voting in a state legislative election matters

- 40% of younger respondents, compared to only 25% of older respondents, **agreed** with the statement that their vote in a state legislative election doesn't matter and won't affect the outcome.

Knowledge

- **56% of older respondents, compared to 37% of younger respondents**, were able to answer correctly that state legislators write and pass the state's laws.

Voting the wrong way

- **21% of younger respondents, compared to just 6% of older respondents**, say that concern about voting for the "wrong" candidate has "very often" or "often" stopped them from voting in state legislative races.

4. IDEOLOGY

State government authority

- Only 43% of liberal respondents, compared to 76% of conservative respondents, agree that state governments, not the federal government, should have the most authority to make decisions about important issues.

Knowledge

- 55% of liberals and 52% of conservatives are able to answer correctly that state legislators write and pass the state's laws, compared to only 43% of moderates.
- 35% of liberals said that the federal government has more influence than state governments over abortion policy, compared to 28% of conservatives.