

# **Iowa Voting Series, Paper 12: An Examination of Party Changes Among Iowa Registered Voters Since 2018**

© Timothy M. Hagle  
Department of Political Science  
The University of Iowa

## **Abstract**

This is the twelfth paper in a series examining aspects of voting in Iowa. In this paper I examine party switching. Under what could be considered normal circumstances there are usually a small number of voters who switch their party registration each week. Certain events can, however, result in large increases (spikes) in the number of voters who switch. Among the main events identified here, three are related to general elections, three to primaries, one to the Iowa Caucuses, and two to the loss then gain of official party status for the Libertarian Party. A smaller bump in party changes may have been related to the fallout from the Capitol riot. Demographically, women are more often party changers than men. Younger voters are also more likely to change parties than older voters. No Party voters are likely to switch to Democrat or Republican to participate in a primary or the Iowa Caucuses, but some of these voters change back to No Party over time.

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## **Updates**

Unlike most academic papers I plan to update the data for this paper as elections occur. Data updates lead to changes in the text as well. Below is a list of the updates as they occurred.

- September, 2021: Initial release
- May, 2023: Update to include data through 2022 election and related text changes

# Iowa Voting Series, Paper 12: An Examination of Party Changes Among Iowa Registered Voters Since 2018

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This is the twelfth paper in a series examining aspects of voting in Iowa. In prior papers in this series<sup>1</sup> I examined Iowa's turnout statistics in midterm and presidential elections in a variety of ways using basic demographic characteristics (political party, sex, and age). In this paper I turn to another aspect of voter registrations in Iowa: party changes.

The first paper in the series examined Iowa voter registration data. It is well known that many voters registered as No Party (what Iowa calls its independents) change their party registration to participate in the Iowa Caucuses. Some party changing also occurs for Iowa's closed primaries. This was most noticeable for the June 2020 primary when a very large number of No Party voters switched to Democrat or Republican such that the number of No Party voters became less than that of either Democrats or Republicans for the first time in over 20 years. The purpose of this paper is to examine party changing among Iowa voters by taking a closer look at these and other events.

## Data

Data for most of the prior papers in this series were gathered from the Election Results & Statistics page of the Iowa Secretary of State's website.<sup>2</sup> That page provides links to election results for a variety of primary and general election contests in Iowa, including those for presidential and midterm elections. In particular, prior papers usually made use of the turnout statistics obtained from the Statewide Statistical Reports links.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The most recent versions of all papers in the series are currently available at <http://www.profhagle.com/papers/iowa-voting-series>. (This and other links were valid as of the date this paper was posted.) Although I make references to prior papers in the series, I would like each to stand on its own. Thus, some explanatory material will be repeated from one paper to the next to provide background or context.

<sup>2</sup> Election results and statistics from 2000 to the present can be found at <http://sos.iowa.gov/elections/results/index.html>. Results for earlier elections can be found at <https://sos.iowa.gov/elections/results/archive.html>.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the turnout statistics for the 2000 presidential election can be found at <http://sos.iowa.gov/elections/pdf/2000StateWithLinnDemo.pdf>.

The Statewide Statistical Reports only indicate the status of Iowa voters on particular election days. Although one can get a general sense of how the numbers for each party change from one election to the next, those numbers do not separate new registrations, removals, inactivations, or party changes. The same is true when one looks at the monthly voter registration numbers posted by the Iowa Secretary of State.<sup>4</sup> To get a sense of the extent to which voters change their registration from one party to another we need more specific data.

Fortunately, the data gathered by the Iowa Secretary of State does include the number of voters who changed their party registration. Although this information is not included in the publicly posted reports, it is part the information transmitted to VoteShield. To paraphrase information from their website, VoteShield is a program that provides state and local election officials with advanced data analysis to detect unauthorized or improper changes to voter databases.<sup>5</sup>

The first Iowa data posted on the VoteShield website were dated 5/24/18 and covered changes occurring in the prior 10 days. The next posting—I will call them “reports”—occurred on 6/12/18. Eventually the reports became more regular and occurred once a week. Even so, there have been times when the reports were a day or two late or when the reports came twice a week. To deal with the differences in the timing of the reports I primarily use per day values in the discussion and figures below.

There are also some differences in how the data is presented in the figures and I will mention specifics in the discussion for each.

## Iowa Registered Voters

Figure 1 shows the number of registered voters in Iowa starting from May 24, 2018.<sup>6</sup> This figure is very similar to Figure 1 from the first paper in the series. The single line here represents the total number of registered voters, both active and inactive. This line corresponds to the top line in Figure 1 from the first paper. One minor difference to note is that the line in the prior figure was based on monthly data posted on the Iowa Secretary of State’s website whereas the line here is based primarily on weekly data. The line in the prior figure is also more compressed given that it covers a much larger time period. Even so, it is clear the two lines show the same basic variations in Iowa’s

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<sup>4</sup> Monthly voter registration numbers for Iowa can be found here:

<https://sos.iowa.gov/elections/voterreg/regstat.html>. Data from the monthly reports was used for the first paper in the series.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://voteshield.us>. I should note that I have been an advisor to both the Iowa Secretary of State and VoteShield regarding the use of the program. I examine the Iowa data when it is posted on VoteShield’s website, usually on a weekly basis, which includes information on party changes.

<sup>6</sup> It is a bit inconvenient for readers, but to make the figures larger I will put them at the end of the paper rather than within the text.

voter registration numbers. Both show increases prior to general elections and sharp declines due to list maintenance at the start of the year following the general election.

As noted in prior papers, except for slight declines in the late 1980s when Iowa was losing population, and a few more for midterm elections after voter list maintenance (2002, 2014, and 2018), the number of registered voters in Iowa has slowly increased since the early 1980s.<sup>7</sup> The number of registered voters following the 2020 election was an all-time high. Even after a decrease due to voter list maintenance in early 2021, the number of voters seems to have reached a new plateau near 2,200,000.

## **Party Changes Among Registered Iowa Voters**

As noted above, one interesting aspect of voters in Iowa that is not captured in the Statewide Statistical Reports is the extent to which voters change their party registration. Fortunately, the data provided to VoteShield and posted on its website includes the number of voters who changed their party since the prior report, the parties the voters changed to and from, and some demographics about the changers.

There are a variety of reasons why a voter may change his or her party registration. These can include changes in the voter's ideological orientation or concerns about particular issues. It can also include the voter's feelings about the political parties or even specific candidates. To some extent, it might also include the ability to register for a particular political party. Along these lines, voters in Iowa can currently (as of May 2023) register as Democrat, Republican, Libertarian, No Party, or for a Non-Party Political Organization (currently only Green). At different times in the past, both the Green and Libertarian parties were official or NPPOs and voters could register for them either way.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to such personal or ideological reasons for changing parties, certain events also trigger larger numbers of party changes. One fairly common reason for a party change is to participate in a "closed" primary. In Iowa, and many other states, to vote in a party's primary a voter must be registered for that party. Thus, for example, if a Democrat wants to vote in the Republican primary he or she must reregister as a Republican. Of course, voters who change just to vote in a primary often change back again after the primary.

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<sup>7</sup> See the first paper in the series for more details.

<sup>8</sup> In Iowa a political party can be recognized as official, thus allowing voters to register for it, if its candidate at the top of the ballot (governor or president) receives at least 2% of the vote. To maintain official status, the party must continue to receive at least 2% in following general elections. The Green Party gained official status following the 2000 election but lost it following the 2002 election. Similarly, the Libertarian Party gained official status following the 2016 election, lost it following the 2018 election, and regained it following the 2022 election.

The Iowa Caucuses is another event that tends to cause a large number of party changes. Like party primaries, the caucuses are party events and one must be a registered voter of the party in whose caucus he or she wishes to participate. Because Iowa has same day voter registration, those interested in participating in a particular party's caucus can change their voter registration anytime up to the night of the caucuses.

Although the number of party changes is usually quite low, Figure 2 shows there to be several times when there were large increases (spikes) in the numbers.

## Spikes in Party Changes

Figure 2 shows the per day number of party changes since 5/24/18. For much of the period examined the number of party changes was fairly low, often fewer than 100 on a per day basis. Through January 2023 the average number of party changes is 512.01, but that figure is inflated because of the spikes. The median figure of 149.14 is also inflated somewhat, but is much closer to what might be considered a normal number when not increased by particular events.

The spikes we see in party changes are usually related to particular events. I will discuss them based on the type event rather than in chronological order.

The three smallest of the six spikes were those that occurred prior to the general elections of 2018, 2020, and 2022. For the 2018 election, there was an increase in party changes from about the beginning of October through mid-November. The average per day party change was 422.59 with a high of 705.33.

Because 2020 was a presidential election year we could expect turnout to be higher, people to be more engaged, and more party changes to have occurred. We can see from Figure 2 that this proved to be the case. The increase in party changes started in late August, a little earlier than in 2018, but still subsided by mid-November. During this period the average was 677.26 with a high of 1,455.33.

For 2022, the increase again began in late October and lasted through mid-November. The average per day party change was 382.68 with a high of 1,048.67. These numbers are in line with those for the prior midterm election. That they are a bit lower is consistent with the lower turnout in 2022 compared to 2018.<sup>9</sup>

Although these spikes around general elections did not reach the same high numbers as the other spikes, they are more sustained in that the increases seemed occur over a longer period of time than the others. This makes sense because early voting in Iowa

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<sup>9</sup> See Figure 1b of the second paper in the series.

allows voters to request ballots and make party changes several weeks before Election Day.<sup>10</sup>

These increases in party changes around general elections are, however, a bit puzzling. Unlike for a closed primary, voters do not have to specify a party ballot when voting early or on Election Day. That explains why the per day numbers are lower than the other spikes. It also suggests that the changes must be fueled by the voters' feelings or impressions of the candidates and campaigns. This includes changes in the voters' ideological preferences that may have been a reaction to those candidates and campaigns.

The next two spikes to discuss are those that occurred for the data reported on 5/20/19 and on 1/9/23. For the 5/20/19 spike the per day number of party changes for the week before was 66.86 and for the week after was 64.50, but for this one week it was 2,091.71. Although such a large change in such a short period may seem odd, there is an easy explanation. For the 2016 election the Libertarian Party gained official status in Iowa. For the 2018 election the Libertarians failed to get the required 2% of the vote to maintain official party status. Once the required administrative processes were completed voters registered as Libertarian had their voter registration changed to Other. Conversely, the Libertarian Party gained official status in the 2022 election and the registrations of those registered for the Libertarian Non-Party Political Organization had their status changed to an official party. This resulted in 16,483 changes for the week.

The next spike to mention is the one that occurred from about the end of January through February of 2020. The increased number of party changes during this period was related to the Iowa Caucuses. The Iowa Caucuses are party events, which means those wishing to participate in a particular caucus must be registered for that party. Like closed primaries, this means, for example, that Republicans or No Party voters wishing to participate in the Democrats' caucuses must change their party registration. For the most part, we often see No Party voters switching their voter registration during caucus time. Many then switch back later. Depending on the situation, we will also see some voters registered as Democrat or Republican who switch parties. This is more likely to occur when one party has an incumbent running. Using 2020 as the example, Republicans had an incumbent in President Trump while the Democrats' nomination was open. That meant it was more likely for Republicans to switch their registration to Democrat than the reverse.

One interesting aspect of this is that we can see an increase in the number of party changes in the few weeks before the caucuses and then a huge spike shortly thereafter. This is understandable because as much as the parties work hard to get people properly

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<sup>10</sup> See the sixth paper in the series for more information on early and absentee voting in Iowa.

registered before Caucus Night there is often a large number of people who wait until that night to change their voter registration. That results in a huge spike in party changes that are processed in the week or two after the caucuses. For 2020, the average in the few weeks before the caucuses was 336.24. In the first reported data after the caucuses the per day number of party changes was 2,167.14 and the week after it was 1,909.43.

The next set of spikes occurred around June in 2018, 2020, and 2022. These are the result of voters casting ballots in the closed Iowa primaries. If there is an open seat and both parties have competitive primary contenders then we might not see many voters change from Democrat to Republican and the reverse. If there is an incumbent in the office, there may be some voters of that party who switch to vote in the other party's primary. Regardless of whether there is an incumbent for an office, No Party voters may wish to participate in one of the primaries and could change their registration accordingly.

The spike in June, 2018, is the smaller of the two. There was a mix of Democrats and Republicans in statewide offices running for reelection, which seemed to keep party switching (Democrat to Republican and the reverse) to a relative minimum.<sup>11</sup> The first data reported was for 5/24/18 and the per day number of changes was 266.90. That figure was already slightly elevated given that the data already included part of the early voting period. The next data were not reported until 6/12/18, but the per day figure was 1,543.84. The next reporting date was 7/2/18 which had a per day figure of 928.20. By that time the number of party changes related to the primary had been processed and the number dropped off to normal levels for later data points.

The spike in June, 2020, is the largest of the primary spikes. It is also easily explained. Because of the pandemic there were significant concerns about voting in person. To minimize in-person voting, every voter in Iowa was mailed an absentee ballot request form. This resulted in far more Democrats and Republicans choosing to vote, and to do so via mailed absentee ballot. Although we might ordinarily expect some No Party voters to change their party registration to vote in a party primary, because they were all sent an absentee ballot request form far more than usual requested a primary ballot. Whether they knew it or not, that meant that their party registration would automatically be changed to the party whose ballot they requested.

As you can see from Figure 2, the spike for the 2020 primary was about four times larger than any of the others. The high was 8,596.67 per day for the three days of the 5/7/20 report. The number remained high for the next several reports until it dropped off to normal levels for the week just before the primary. The number surged again

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<sup>11</sup> See the ninth paper in the series for more information on primary turnout.



right after the primary to 2,407.00 and then dropped off to normal levels over the next several reporting periods.

The spike for the 2022 primary was between the other two in terms of per day changes for the periods reported. Several of the primaries at the statewide and Congressional level were not contested so it was not surprising that the number of changes was not as large as we might have expected.

A small spike prior to the 2022 primary occurred in March. The bulk of the changes were Democrats and Republicans switching to No Party. It is possible that many of these voters had been No Party, switched to Democrat or Republican for the 2020 primary, and finally decided to switch back.

The final two spikes are a relatively small one that occurred in April 2022 and another in mid-July of that year. The April 2022 spike actually occurred in two reports on 4/25/22 and 4/28/22. In both there was an abnormally large number of party changes compared to the reports before and after those two. The shifts to and from all three parties were elevated, but the movement was generally to Democrats and Republicans from No Party on 4/25/23 and then the reverse on 4/28/23. Thus, this seems to just have been a data error and correction.

The last spike to mention is by far the largest. It is also the easiest to explain because it was simply a coding error. Like the April 2022 spike, the mid-July 2022 spike occurred in two stages. The first was on July 11 when over 55 thousand voters were reported to have switched parties. The bulk was from Democrat or Republican to No Party. The next report was on July 14 and a nearly identical number were switched again and in the opposite direction. This also seemed to be a data error and correction.

## **Which Parties Benefit?**

Having touched on reasons why voters registered for one party might switch to another in the discussion above we can now take a closer look at what parties gained from those changes. Figure 3 breaks down by party the changes shown in Figure 2.<sup>12</sup>

Under normal circumstances, meaning other than when there are event-driven increases, No Party tends to benefit the most from party changes. In these normal periods, Republicans also tend to do a bit better than Democrats. For example, in the two months after the 11/28/22 report when total party changes dropped to near 200 per day after the increase during the 2022 election, Republicans gained 1,736 registrants due

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<sup>12</sup> I have limited the vertical axis to 4,500. That truncates the erroneous spike and correction that occurred in July 2022, but keeps the rest of the graph a bit more readable.

to party changes while Democrats gained 974. In contrast, No Party voters increased by 4,209 (which does not include the 16,021 voters recategorized as Libertarian).

Turning to the spikes in party changes, I will discuss them in the same order as above.

Beginning with the 2018, 2020, and 2022 general elections, we see that there is not much separation between the parties, but it appears that No Party voters gained the most. This seemed to be more the case for 2018 and 2022 where the No Party line occasionally shows some separation from the other two. Even so, the total number of changes for these general elections was relatively small compared with some of the other events.

The changes related to the 2020 general election were larger than those of 2018 or 2022, but we do not see much separation among the parties. The chart appears to show the green line for No Party dominating, but the red and blue lines for Republicans and Democrats are mostly just behind the No Party line which makes them less visible. Even so, a close look at the chart shows the red line slightly above the green line for many points and the blue line slightly below. When looking at the number of party changes from the beginning of August through the 11/19/20 report we see that Republicans actually gained the most at 25,140. No Party voters were a close second at 22,423. Democrats were further behind at 17,543. To a certain extent, this reflects the fact that Republicans did well in Iowa in the 2020 elections. Aside from President Trump again winning Iowa by a comfortable margin, Republicans picked up US House seats in IA01 and IA02.

For the most part, the spikes for the 5/20/19 and 1/9/23 reports were explained above. To repeat, because the Libertarian Party lost official status following the 2018 election, the registration for all Libertarian voters was changed to Other (which is included in the No Party line for this figure). When Libertarians regained official party status following the 2022 election all voters registered for the Libertarian Non-Political Party Organization were switched to the official Libertarian Party, which is included on the NP+O line in the chart.

The fourth spike was for the 2020 Iowa Caucuses. Here is where we see a definite difference based on party dynamics. Republicans had their candidate in President Trump. That meant the bulk of caucus activities and attention was on the Democrats seeking their party's nomination.<sup>13</sup> Increases in party changes on behalf of Democrats occurred in the weeks prior to the caucuses and then we see the large spike immediately following Caucus Night. For the 2/10/20 report Democrats gained a total of 12,922 in party changes. For the next report on 2/17/20 the number was a bit lower

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<sup>13</sup> I detailed these activities in my book *Riding the Caucus Rollercoaster 2020*, which is available at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

at 11,509. Most of the changes were processed at that point, but the next report on 2/24/20 still showed total changes favoring Democrats of 3,949.

Despite the relative lack of attention on the Republican side, they still gained from party changes by a total of 1,458 and 1,151 for the first two reports mentioned above. Interestingly, No Party voters also showed above normal gains on these two reports of 705 and 652.

The next three events involve the June primaries of 2018, 2020, and 2022. The 2018 primary shows a substantial difference between the parties. From Figure 1 in the ninth paper in the series we saw that turnout for the 2018 primary was up substantially for Democrats but lower than usual for a midterm election for Republicans. Figure 11 of that same paper showed that turnout for Democrats was substantially above that of Republicans in all four of Iowa's congressional districts. It appeared that the 2018 elections would be good ones for Democrats and that helped fuel competitive primary races in IA01 and IA03 as well as for governor. This interest drove up party changes for Democrats to a high of 973 per day for the 6/12/18 report. The Republican spike was a little less than half that at 450 and was driven in part by a primary challenge to incumbent Representative Steve King in IA04.

As noted above, the huge spike for the 2020 primary was largely the result of No Party voters having received absentee ballot request forms for the primary. The red line for Republicans seems to dominate the spike, but the blue line for Democrats is just behind. In terms of numbers, from the 4/23/20 report to the 6/22/20 report, Republicans gained 62,712 voters from party changes. Democrats were a close second with 58,695 additions. No Party voters were a far distant third with only 2,896 additions for the two month period. Figure 1 of the ninth paper also showed that turnout was up substantially for the 2020 primary for both parties, but the unusual circumstances largely obscured any party dynamics in play.

As shown in Figure 1 of the ninth paper in the series, turnout was down in 2022 from 2020. When compared to 2018, however, it was mixed for the parties: Democrats were down about three points but Republicans were up nearly 13 points. When looking at the period from 5/19/22 to 6/23/22, which captures the bulk of the changes around that primary, we see that Democrats gained 14,935, No Party only gained 2,219, and Republicans gained 29,209. This result is interesting because at the state level Republicans had only one office contested in the primary (Auditor of State) which was a fairly sleepy affair, and only one contested Congressional race (IA03). There was a perception by the time of the primary that 2022 would be a wave year for Republicans. Perhaps that was enough to encourage the larger number of voters to switch to Republican.

The spike in March 2022 was mainly changes from Democrat and Republican to No Party. Thus, No Party was the big gainer for both events.

Finally, each of the error and correction spikes in April and July 2022 was basically a wash as the parties that gained due to the error lost due to the correction.

## Which Parties Lost?

Thus far the discussion has been about gains the parties made due to party changes. Of course, given that we are talking about a party change of an already registered voter, for every voter who changes to a new party he or she must have left one of the other parties. Figure 4 shows the per day number of voters who changed from the three parties.<sup>14</sup>

The first thing to notice about Figure 4 is how the green line for No Party dominates the graph. This was certainly true for the periods when there was a spike in party changes. At other times when the number of party changes was relatively low there was more variation. This was particularly so when some who switched their registration to participate in a primary or the caucuses decided to switch back.

Once again taking the events in the order as above, we see for the three general elections that No Party lost more voters than either Democrats or Republicans. As noted above, No Party voters are certainly not required to switch their party registration for a general election, but as Figure 4 shows, many do.

The spikes that occurred related to Libertarians losing and then gaining official party status in May 2019 and January 2023 do not show in Figure 4. This just a matter of how Libertarians were handled for the figures. The gains for No Party shown in Figure 3 were the result of the Libertarian Party changing official status and voters being moved to the Other category.

The spike in early 2020 for the Iowa Caucuses is as expected. The bulk of the changes were by No Party voters. We also see that a fair number of Republicans also changed their party registration.

No Party also lost by far the most voters for the June 2018 primary. This is as we would expect. Both Democrats and Republicans had contested primaries for state-wide offices. That would tend to keep changes from the two major parties down. Nevertheless, the Democrats' primaries were more vigorous and they also had contested primaries in

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<sup>14</sup> I have limited the vertical axis to 7,000 to help show the variations in the smaller numbers even though it truncates the error and correction of July 2022.

three of the Congressional Districts which likely contributed to even fewer Democrats switching.

As previously noted, the 2020 primary was unusual due to the pandemic and the increase in absentee voting. Also as noted above, given that all voters were sent an absentee ballot request form, many No Party voters who would not otherwise consider switching parties to vote did so by requesting a primary ballot. That created the huge spike in changes away from No Party. There was also a spike away from Democrats and Republicans, but far smaller than the No Party spike. I suspect it was likely that many Democrats and Republicans also may not have been aware requesting a primary ballot for the opposite party automatically changed their voter registration. Even if they were aware of that, the fact that the absentee ballots went to so many voters meant that more who might have been inclined to switch but still not have bothered to vote did so.

The primaries for 2018 and 2022 also primarily saw voters change from No Party to Democrat or Republican, but the numbers were much smaller.

It is a little hard to see on the figure, but for the March 2022 event Democrats lost the most and Republicans lost more than No Party voters. Even so, No Party voters lost a fairly large number of voters as well.

As noted above, the two error and correction events mostly proved to be a wash as far as parties gaining and losing voters was concerned.

## Gains and Losses

Having looked at which of the three parties gained and lost voters due to party switching the next step is to dig a bit deeper and examine more specifically where those who switched parties went. For example, did the No Party voters become Democrats or Republicans and to what extent?

Figures 5 and 6 show the six possibilities of voters from the three parties switching to one of the other two parties.<sup>15</sup> The colors of the lines were chosen to emphasize the original party of the voter who switched. The light and dark of each color then represents the voters' new party. For example, green represents No Party voters who switched. The lighter green indicates those who switched to Democrat and the darker green those who switched to Republican. For Democrats (blue) and Republicans (red), the lighter lines represent a switch to the other major party and the darker line to No Party

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<sup>15</sup> The Iowa data includes an Other category, but switches to and from it are minimal and not included in Figures 5 and 6. Also, note that the vertical axis for Figure 5 is limited to 3,500 to better show the lower lines.

Figure 5 shows the per day changes based on each report and we see the same basic shape that we have seen in prior figures. The dark blue line which represents changes from Democrat to No Party seems to dominate in areas other than the events noted previously. Looking at some of the events, for the 2018 general election the change from No Party to Democrats had the largest numbers. On the other hand, for the 2020 general election the most numerous changes were from No Party to Republican. As in Figure 4, the Libertarian change to Other does not appear because the data are not included here. The spike for the Iowa Caucuses in early 2020 is as expected. The Democrats' contested caucuses led to the most changes being from No Party to Democrat. It was also not surprising that the next highest change was from Republican to Democrat given that Republicans had their candidate in the incumbent President Trump. The June 2018 primary shows that the highest number of changes were from No Party to Democrat. Interestingly, it appears that the changes from Republican to Democrat and No Party to Republican were about equal. This may reflect some of the differences in the races occurring in the Congressional Districts or even at the county and city level. As suggested above, the bulk of the changes for the June 2020 primary were by No Party voters. Although the darker green line seems to dominate (No Party to Republican), we can see that the largest per day number was actually for No Party to Democrat. For the June 2022 primary the dark green line dominates, which means No Party voters who switched to Republican. There were also a larger than usual number of voters who switched from No Party to Democrat, but for the 6/9/22 and 6/13/22 reports the number of voters who switched from Democrat to Republican was actually greater than those who switched from No Party to Democrat. The changes around the 2022 general election were mainly from Democrat and Republican to No Party.

There is one additional bump appearing in Figure 5 that is worth mentioning. For the January 18, 2021, report there was a bump in the line for changes from Republican. This bump is somewhat visible in Figures 3 and 4, but was only slightly above the median value so not worth being considered a spike. The bump stands out a bit more in Figure 5 because it occurs during a period when we would not expect one. The argument by some who noticed a drop in the Republican voter registrations for the February numbers was that the events of January 6, 2021, at the US Capitol and the publicity afterward caused some voters to leave the Republican party. This may be the case, but we cannot say from the data available whether these voters were Republicans who left the party or No Party voters who had switched for the general election and had not yet switched back. Either way, the bump certainly stands out.

Even with the vertical axis limited somewhat, the large number of changes for the June 2020 primary forces the scale of Figure 5 to be so large that the lines are squished together for most of the period.<sup>16</sup> To get a better sense of where the changes are from

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<sup>16</sup> "Squish" is an official term and should only be used by experts.

and to, Figure 6 uses the percentage of each change for a given report as the vertical scale. As a result, differences in the raw number of changes for each report do not affect the lines, but differences in the distribution of those changes do.

The lines in Figure 6 are quite different from those in the prior figure. The first thing to notice is that the lines are very mixed. This is not surprising given the descriptions of the events that caused spikes in the number of party changes. Despite the mixing of the lines we can see a few general trends. The first is that the dark blue and dark red lines tend to be above those of lighter colors. That means Democrats and Republicans were more likely to switch to No Party than to the other party. This is not surprising. Unless Democrats or Republicans were switching to participate in a primary or caucus, it would seem more likely they would take a smaller ideological step by moving to No Party. Of course, another reason the darker lines are higher is that many No Party voters who switch to Democrat or Republican to participate in a primary will later switch back to No Party.

Another trend in the lines is that for the most part, the dark blue line is also above the dark red line. This means for most of the reports there were more Democrats switching to No Party than Republicans doing so. Along somewhat similar lines, there was also a tendency for there to be more Democrats switching to Republican (light blue line) than the reverse (light red line). This was more the case in the normal periods rather than around the events.

I have noted above that there are reasons why No Party voters are likely to switch, such as to vote in a primary or participate in a caucus. On the whole, the green lines in Figure 6, which represent changes from No Party to either Democrat (light) or Republican (dark) tend to be in the middle of the group of lines, above the light red and blue and below the dark red and blue. Exceptions seem to correspond to the events discussed previously.

Turning to those events, we can still see some aspects of them in the percentage lines. Taking the events in the order discussed previously, in Figure 5 the general election of 2018 seemed to have a bump for No Party voters switching to Democrat and this is reflected in the percentage line in Figure 6 where the light green line rises above the rest. The increase in No Party voters switching for the 2020 general election shown in Figure 5 is also reflected in the percentage increase in the percentages for both the light and dark green lines in Figure 6.

The spikes that occurred due to the Libertarian Party losing and gaining official status was shown in Figure 3 because the Other and No Party categories were combined. It did not appear in Figures 4 and 5, however, because the Other category was not included there. Even so, we can see the effect of the first change in Figure 6. It was the 5/20/19 and 1/9/23 reports that made this change. Although the Other category is not

shown among the lines in Figures 5 and 6, it is included in the percentages calculated in the data used. Thus, the huge spike in the changes to Other accounted for over 97% of the changes for those reports. In Figure 6 you can see this from the deep V formed by the other lines that represent less than 3% of the changes for those reports.

As expected, the bulk of the changes related to the 2020 Iowa Caucuses were No Party voters switching to Democrat. As noted previously, given that Republicans had their candidate in incumbent President Trump the action was primarily on the Democrats' side.<sup>17</sup> Along similar lines, the second most changes were by Republicans switching to participate in the Democrats' caucuses.

For the June 2018 primary nearly half the changes were No Party to Democrat. The changes from No Party to Republican were a bit larger than Republican to Democrat, but that the changes to Democrats accounted for about 67% of the changes suggests voters were more interested in the Democrats' primaries.

No line for the 2020 June primary dominates as some do for other events, but the combination of the two No Party lines accounts for over 75% of the changes. The bulk of the remaining changes were from Democrat to Republican and the reverse. For obvious reasons, those receiving the absentee ballot request form would have no reason to send it back if they wished to switch to No Party.

As expected, for the June 2022 primary we see the green lines rise above the others, with the darker line (No Party to Republican) well above the light green line (No Party to Democrat). The movement for the 2022 general election is a bit more mixed, but the dark blue line (Democrat to No Party) is above the others

Finally, the bump we saw in Figure 5 that seems to be related to the Capitol riot is reflected in Figure 6 by the spike in the dark red line. For the 1/18/21 report changes from Republican to No Party accounted for just shy of 63% of the changes. Although the raw number of changes did not constitute a huge increase, it was sufficiently large to stand out when one looks at the percentage distribution.

## Women as Party Changers

Figure 7 shows the percentage of party changers who were women for each of the reports. Overall, the average percentage of women who changed parties was 53.85%. To put that in context, from Figure 2 in the third paper in the series we know that there are more women voters in Iowa than men. For the general elections included here, women voters made up about 52% of the voters. Thus, women were slightly more likely to be the ones who changed parties than men.

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<sup>17</sup> Did I mention that I wrote a [book](#) about this?



The line in Figure 7 shows that it is relatively rare for the percentage of women party changers to be less than 50% for any given report. Some of the times when the percentage of women was the lowest were related to events that caused spikes in party changes. The smallest percentages of women among the party changers (40.3% and 38.9%) were related to the two changes in Libertarian voters, which occurred for the 5/20/19 and 1/9/23 reports. This just tells us that women were a much smaller percentage of those registered as Libertarian than men.

The group of reports right after 1/6/21 had the next lowest percentages of women party changers at 47.5%, 47.7%, and 47.8%. This might seem to suggest the fallout from the Capitol riot had a greater effect on men as far as party changes were concerned, but as of the 2020 election women were 47.2% of registered Republicans, so there was not much difference in that regard.

Another group of reports in early 2020 also had several percentages with women below 50% of the party changers. The lowest of these was 47.8% and the group was spread over a few months, so it may only be loosely related to events leading up to the 2020 caucuses and afterward.

## **Age Groups and Party Changes**

The last demographic characteristic to examine is the age of the party changers. The data here is grouped a bit differently from that in prior papers. In particular, rather than five age groups based on data from the Statewide Statistical Reports, the data here combines the two youngest age groups. Thus, we can see in Figure 8 that the youngest age group is 18-34.

In looking at the lines in Figure 8 it is clear that the youngest age group is responsible for most of the party changes. The line for the 18-34 group is usually above 40% of the changers and is rarely below any of the other lines.

There are four times when some other age group had a larger portion of the party changes. Three of these were related to the June primaries. In all three instances the 65+ and 50-64 groups had a larger percentage. This is understandable as older voters are usually more likely to use absentee or early voting. Not surprisingly, the oldest group had its highest percentage around the June 2020 primary when all voters were sent an absentee ballot request form (46.58%). Given the particular concerns that older voters had regarding the pandemic at the time it is understandable that they would be even more likely to request an absentee ballot. Interestingly, the percentage for this group was only slightly lower for the 2022 primary (45.68%).

The fourth time when another age group had more party changes was after the Capitol riot in January 2020. Here we see that the 50-64 age group had the most changers with the 35-49 group just below them.

Aside from the youngest group, a trend we see for the other groups is that they are usually in the same order with the 35-49 group having the second highest percentage of changers followed by the 50-64 group and then the 65+ group. There are two possible reasons for this. First, given that No Party voters are more likely to be those changing parties, there are simply fewer No Party voters among the oldest age group. We saw this in Figures 3a to 3e of the fourth paper in the series. For the youngest group, which was 18-24 in that paper, No Party made up about half of the voters. For the oldest group, No Party voters made up less than 25%.

Second, older voters are generally more confident of their ideological choices. Most younger voters may not be clear on their ideological preference when they first register, which is why more than half of them initially register as No Party. Over time they eventually pick a party and stay with it. An exception may occur when older voters wish to participate in a primary and it is for the June primaries when we see the largest percentages of those in the oldest age group.

## **Concluding Comments**

Changing one's party registration is an interesting phenomenon. In looking at Iowa's data it appears that changes in party registration are related to several factors. One factor relates directly to electoral politics. Along these lines, one would expect that increases in party changes would occur for closed primaries and party events such as the Iowa Caucuses. Voters who may not be of a particular party may nevertheless want to vote or participate in that party's primary or caucus and would need to change their party registration to do so. The nature and extent of changes for such events would depend on specific races and candidates.

Another important factor are process related events. Of the events examined here, the Libertarian Party losing official status and then gaining it again resulted in party changes given how the changes were handled administratively. Another process event was when every voter was sent an absentee ballot prior to the June 2020 primary. Although we would expect an increase in party changes due to the primary itself, the exceedingly large number that occurred was the result of the ballot request forms sent to every voter.

Outside factors can constitute a third factor. For example, as much as party changes related to the June 2020 primary were largely driven by the absentee request forms sent to every voter, voters would not have been sent those forms had it not been for the

pandemic and the desire to reduce in-person voting. It may have also been possible that the fallout from the Capitol riot resulted in an increase in party changes.

Demographically, women seem to be a bit more likely to change parties than men. Younger voters are also more likely to change than older voters. The main exception is when older voters wish to participate in another party's primary.

Concerning the specific changes, it is no surprise that a large number of the changes were by No Party voters who wished to participate in a primary or the caucuses. Some of those who changed for such events changed back, though over a longer period of time. Some of the changes were undoubtedly due to changes in the voters' ideological orientation. Along these lines, given that about half of newly registered young voters register as No Party it is not surprising that many eventually change to one of the two major parties.

One question left unanswered by the data is the extent to which certain voters are frequent switchers. I have noted that some No Party voters will switch to Democrat or Republican for a primary or caucus and then switch back afterward, but it would be interesting to know how often this happens. It would also be interesting to know the reasons why some voters do this. For example, is it because they just want to participate in a particular primary or caucus or do they prefer to switch back to No Party to hide their true party preference? As to the latter possibility, there have been some indications that some business owners and others may choose No Party as a way to stay "neutral" in a community dominated by one particular party. Regardless of the reasons for it, examining the reasons behind frequent party switching would be quite interesting.

Figure 1: Number of Iowa Registered Voters

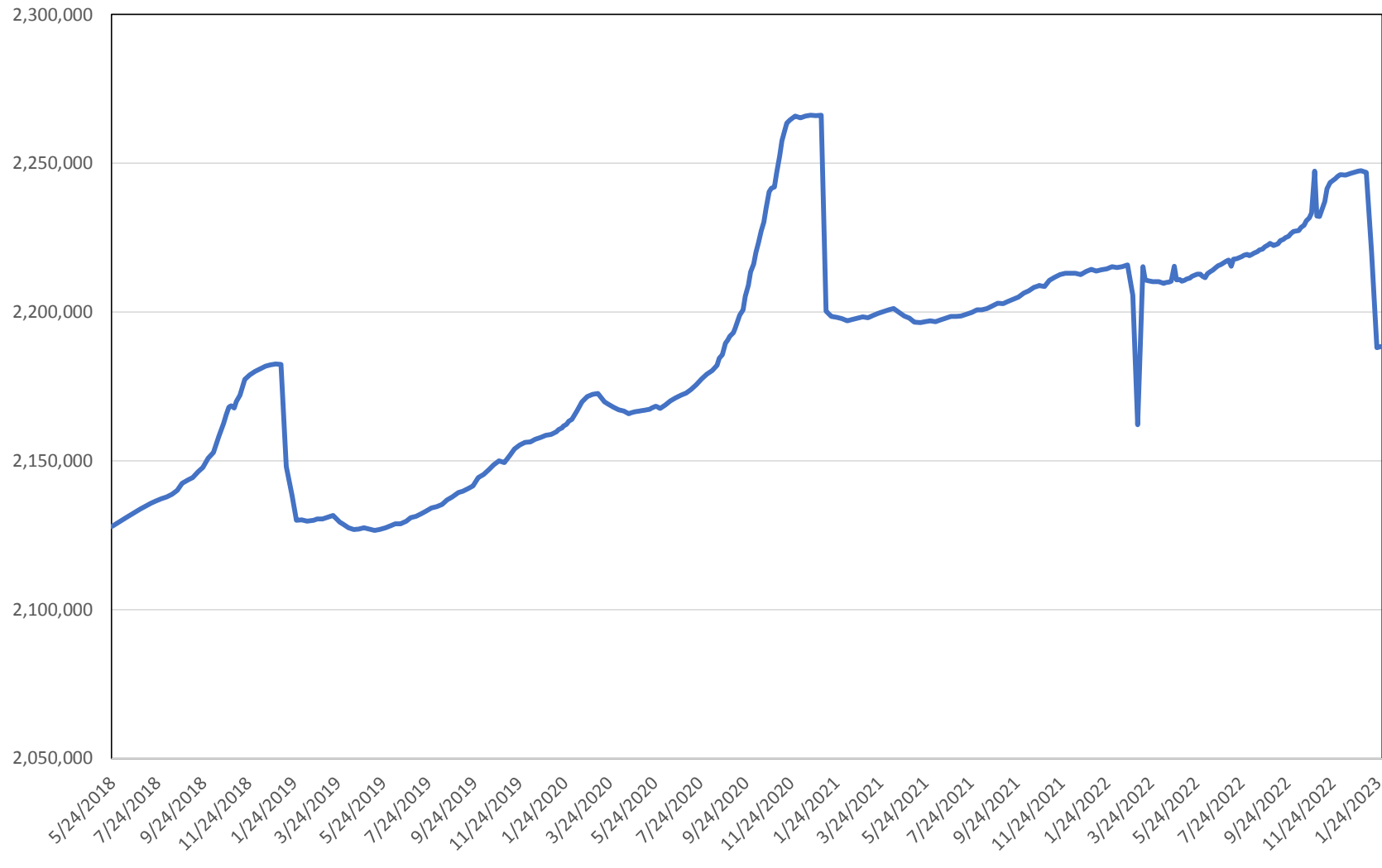
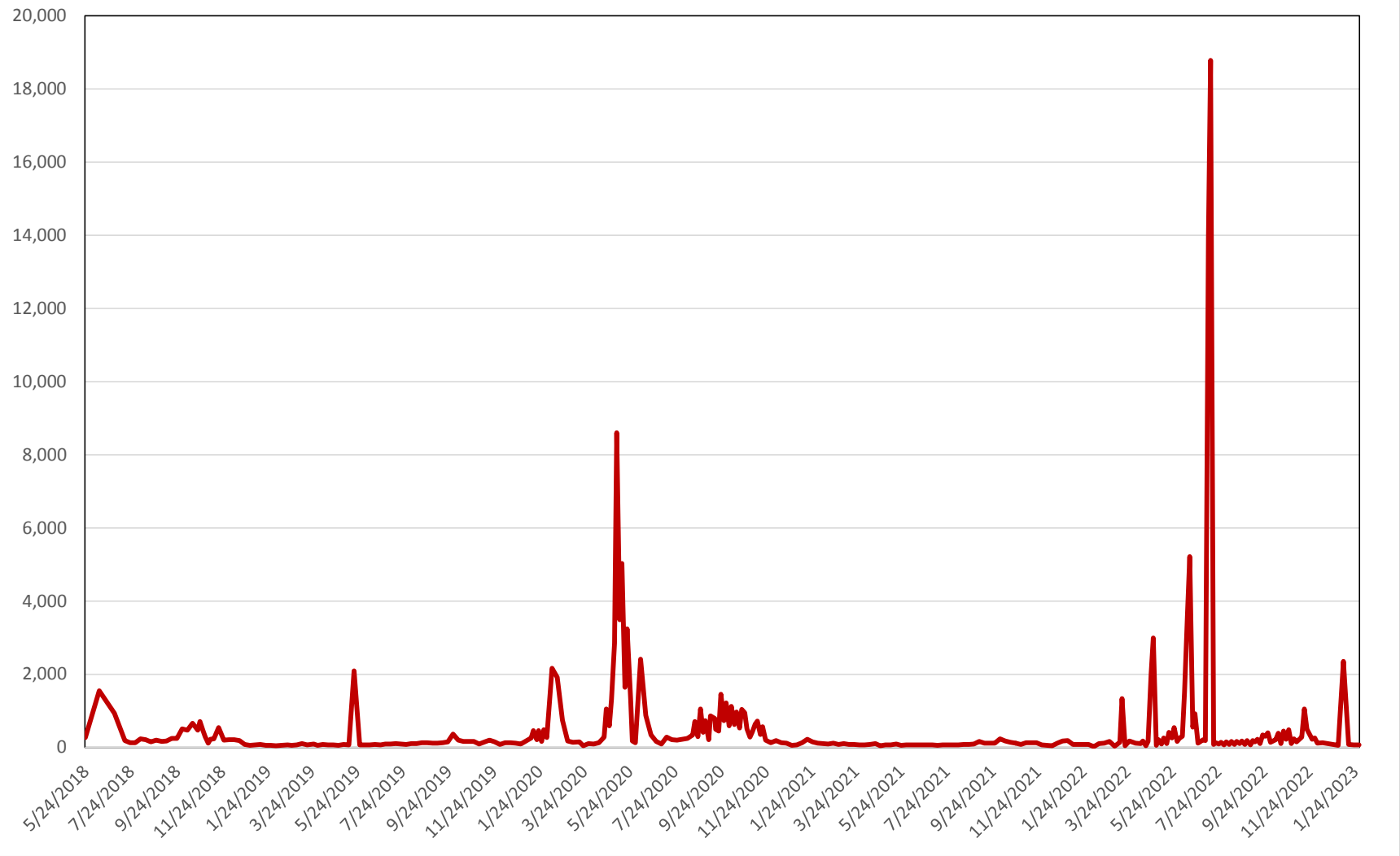
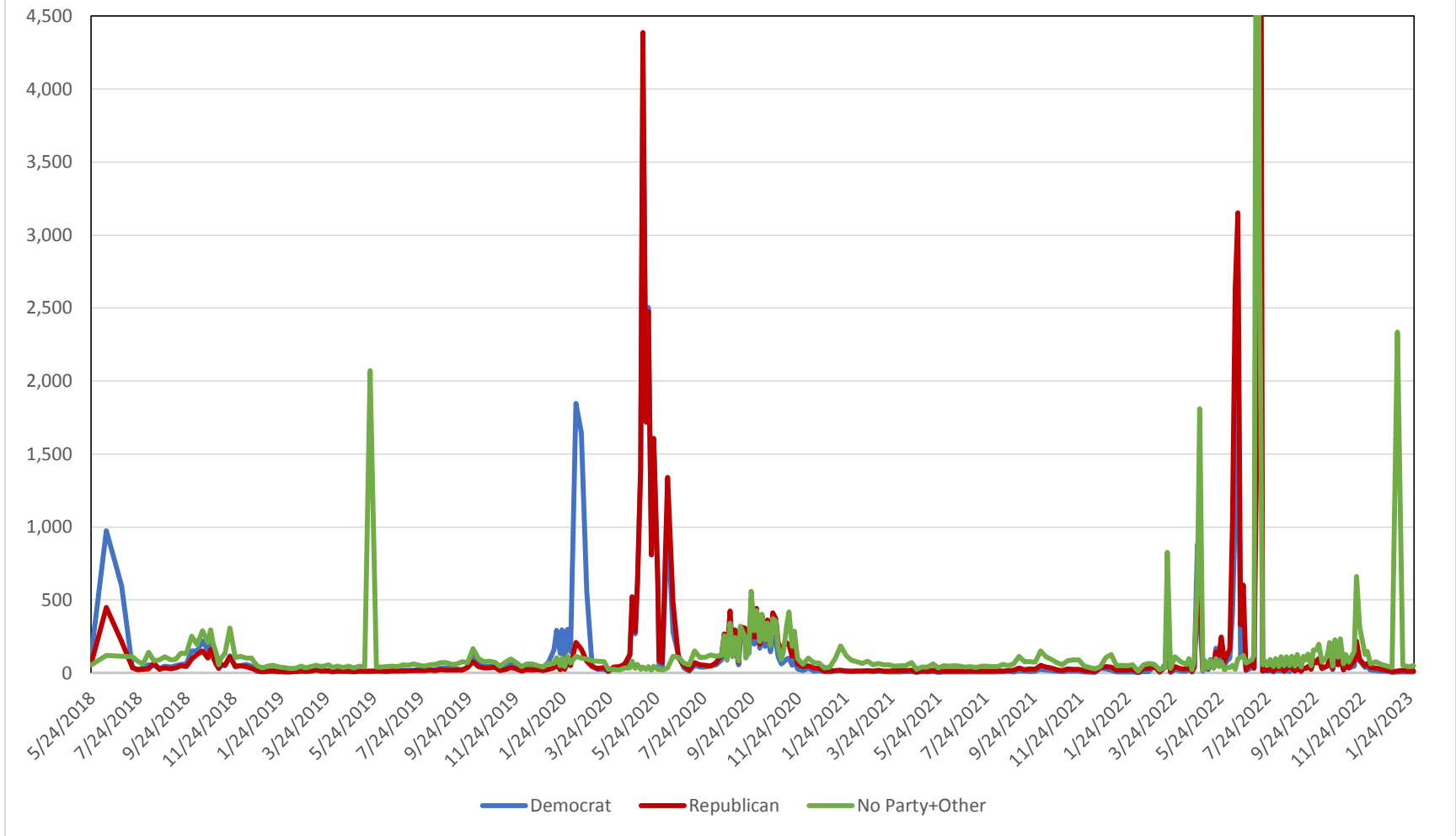


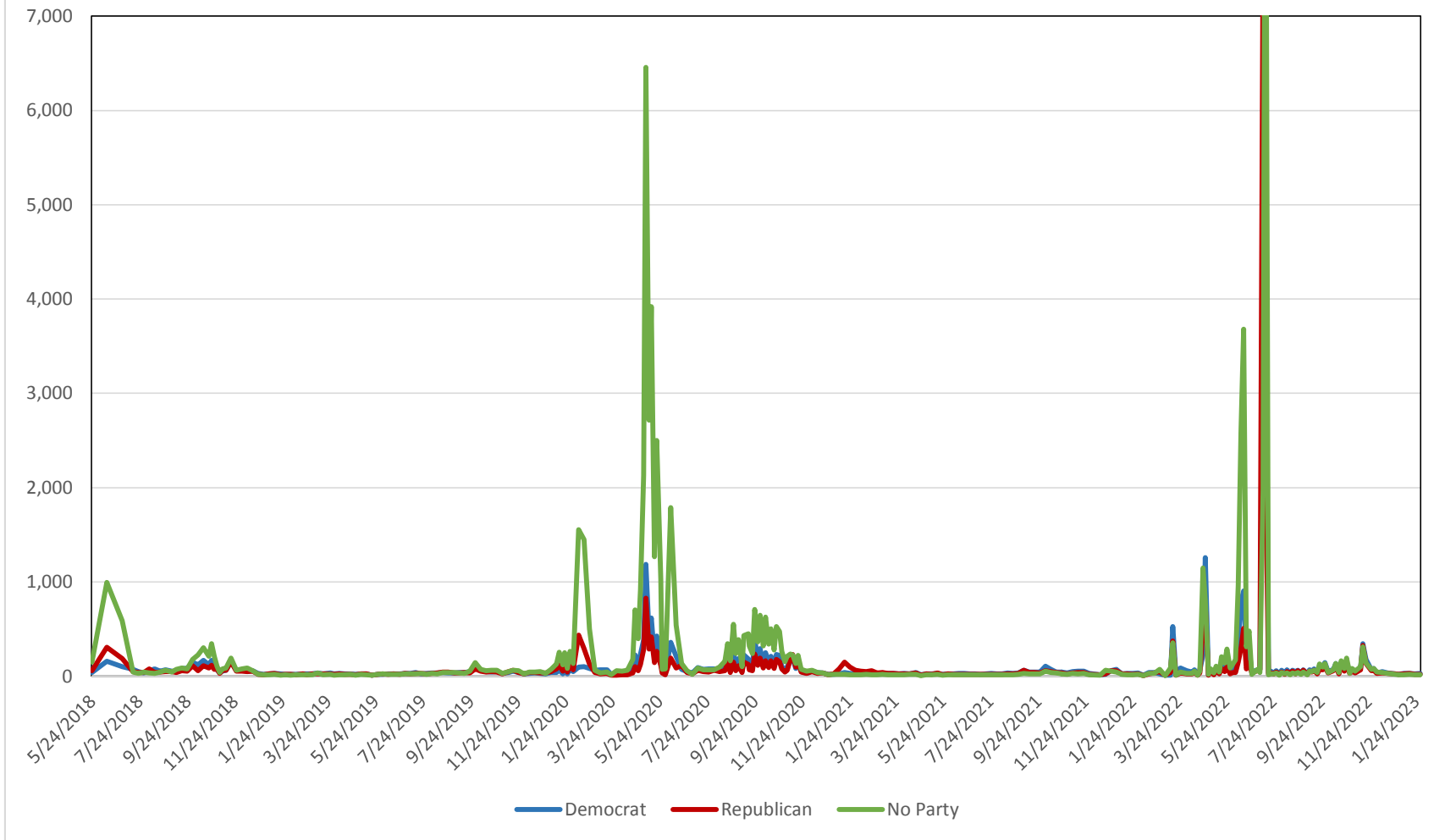
Figure 2: Iowa Registered Voter Party Changes Per Day



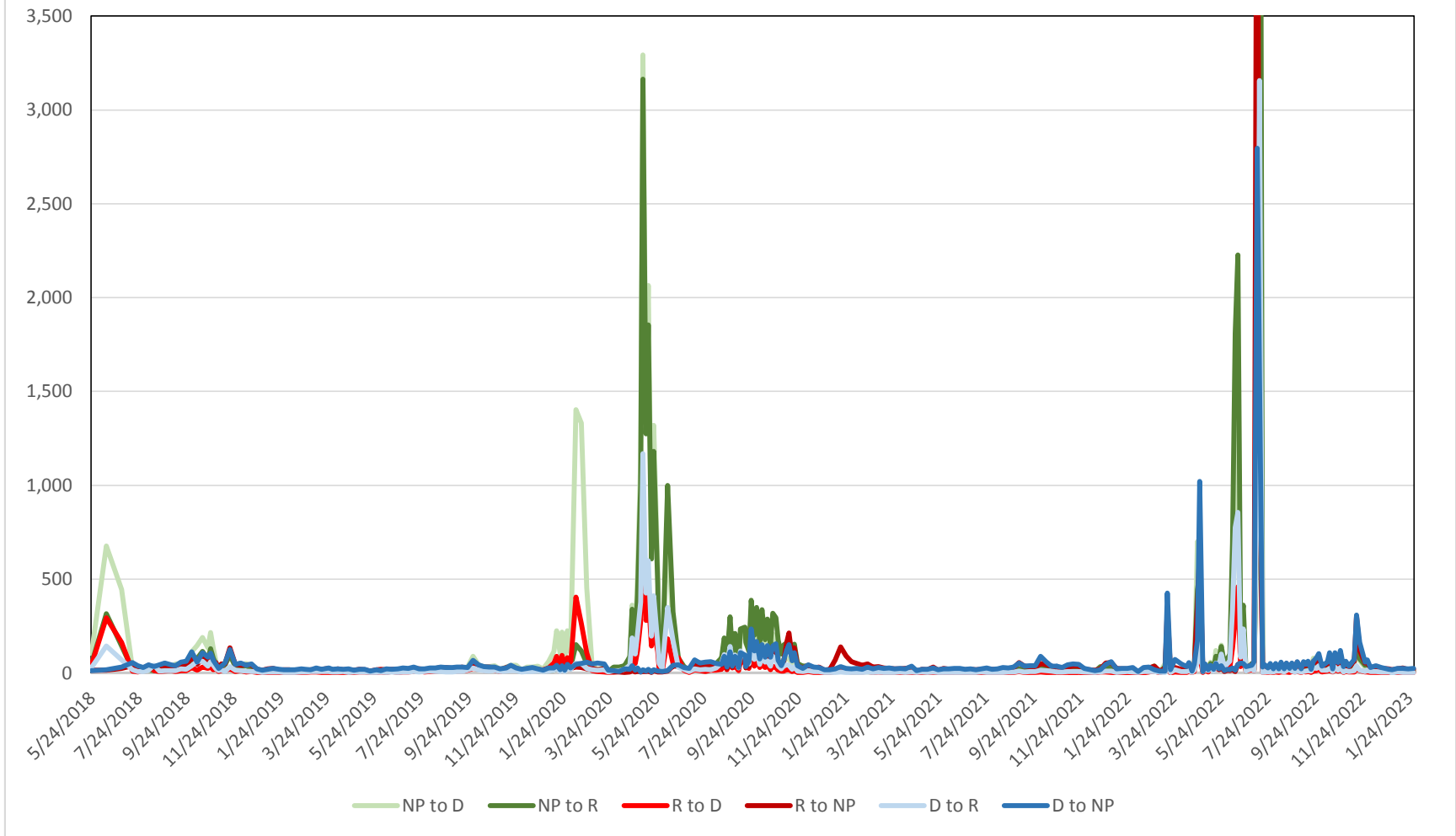
**Figure 3: Iowa Registered Voter Per Day Party Changes to Three Major Parties**



**Figure 4: Iowa Registered Voter Per Day Party Changes from Three Major Parties**

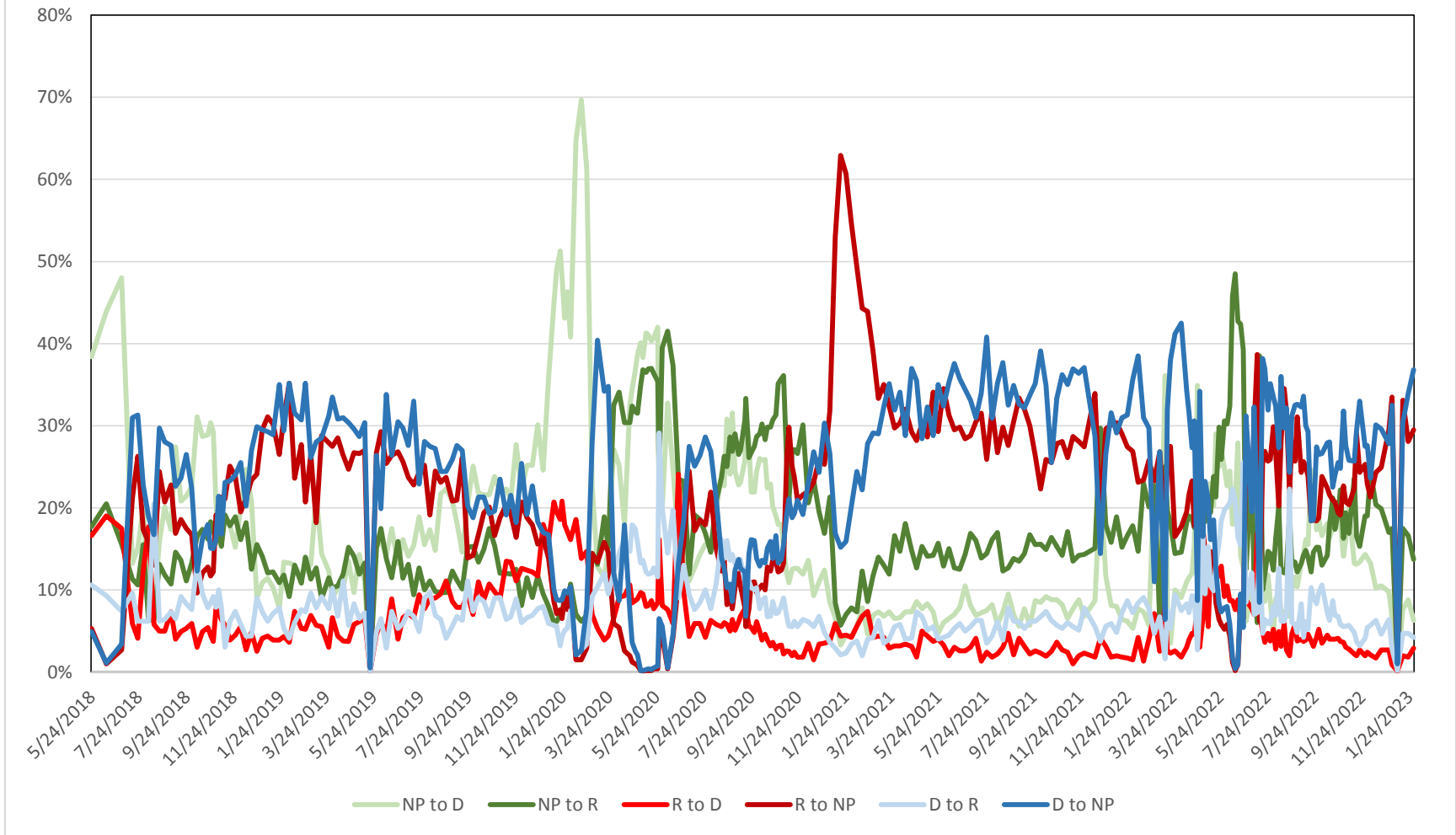


**Figure 5: Number of Iowa Registered Voter Per Day Party Changes to and from Three Major Parties**

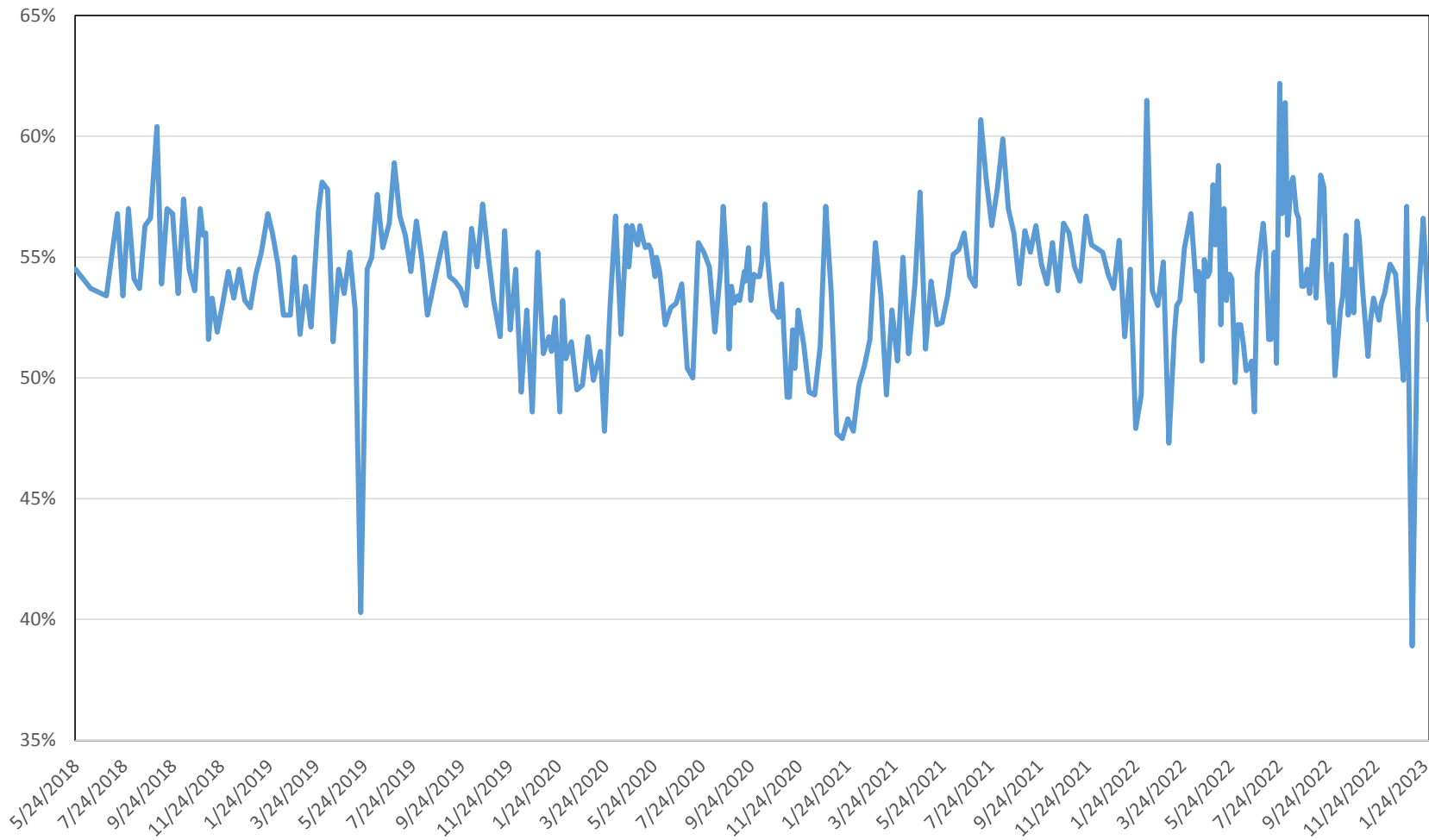




**Figure 6: Percentage of Iowa Registered Voter Party Changes per Report to and from Three Major Parties**



**Figure 7: Percentage of Iowa Registered Voter Party Changers per Report Who Were Women**



**Figure 8: Percentage of Iowa Registered Voter Party Changers per Report by Age Group**

