

Registered but Absent: Civic Participation in Hunterdon County's 2026 Primary Election

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1. Executive Summary

On June 2, 2026, the County of Hunterdon administered a primary election for 106,357 registered voters; approximately 21,016 cast a ballot, a participation rate of 19.76%.¹ Four in five registered voters did not participate. This brief documents the gap, maps precinct-level variation, examines the structural and demographic factors associated with it, and presents findings and questions for the County Clerk and Board of Elections.

2. Civic Issue Statement

The 2026 primary turnout gap raises the possibility that low primary participation reflects weaknesses in electoral incentive and civic information, rather than simply voter apathy or access barriers. Primary elections ought to be distinguished from general elections: though primaries select nominees, they often decide local contests in municipalities where a single party dominates. When primaries function as de facto general elections, consequential decisions are made by small electorates who do not represent municipal goals.

Primary elections carry an additional structural disadvantage. When local races are uncontested or predetermined, the ballot offers no meaningful local choice for many voters. State-level contested races exist but remain disconnected from daily life for most residents. The compound effect of a closed primary system locking out unaffiliated voters,² combined with uncontested local races removing the primary incentive for partisan voters, is associated with structural conditions that may suppress measured primary participation.

3. Why This Issue Matters in Hunterdon County

Hunterdon County ranks among the nation's wealthiest and most educated counties.^{3,4} Yet the turnout gap is less readily attributable, at the county level, to commonly cited factors such as income instability or logistical barriers. This makes informational and motivational explanations hypotheses worth examining, and the persistence of low turnout despite comparatively high income, education, and registration makes Hunterdon an interesting case study for primary participation.

The 2026 primary was not without consequence. It decided a contested Township Committee race in Readington Township^{1, 5} and produced results across the county that will shape local governance for years. Those decisions were made by a small fraction of the registered electorate.

4. Key Data Points

In the primary election, Hunterdon County recorded an overall voter participation rate of 19.76%, with 21,016 ballots cast out of 106,357 registered voters.¹ Geographic analysis reveals significant turnout variance across voting precincts. The highest participation occurred in Lambertville City District 4 (40.4% turnout) and Readington Township District 9 (40.0% turnout). The lowest was recorded in Alexandria Township District 2 at 10.2%, followed closely by Raritan Township District 21 at 10.31%.¹

Statewide, the weighted voter turnout was 14.49%, representing 904,966 total ballots cast out of 6,245,786 registered voters. The arithmetic average across New Jersey's 21 counties was 15.13%. Hunterdon County's 19.76% outpaced both statewide measures. See Appendix D for county-level source documentation.

Nationally, the 2022 midterm primary cycle yielded an average turnout of 21.3%, up from 19.9% in 2018.⁶ Both figures represent primary-specific participation, not general election rates. State-level variation within that range is sharp: Kansas, Wyoming, and Alaska recorded primary turnout near 40%, while many states clustered closer to New Jersey's 2026 figures.⁶

5. Source Analysis

The primary data source for all precinct-level and municipal-level turnout figures in this brief is the Hunterdon County Board of Elections 2026 Primary Election Official Results, published June 11, 2026.¹ This is a Tier 1 government source. Registered voter totals, ballots cast by party, and precinct-level turnout rates are drawn directly from this document. The Readington Township portion of the SOV was subject to a court-ordered recount following the election. The recount has since been certified, and results remain unchanged. All figures are final.

Mail-in ballot data was obtained via a formal public records request submitted to the Hunterdon County Board of Elections, fulfilled June 17, 2026. The dataset contains individual ballot-level records for all VBM voters in the 2026 primary, including municipality, district, party, delivery method, and counted status. All VBM rates cited in this brief are author-calculated figures derived by dividing the VBM record count for a given precinct or municipality by the total ballots cast in that unit as reported in the SOV. This methodology is documented in Appendix C.

Demographic data for Lambertville City and Raritan Township draws from Census Reporter profiles sourced from the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey and 2020 Decennial Census.^{7, 8} Alexandria Township's community profile draws on Niche's compiled rankings and reviews.⁹ One limitation applies: all Census figures reflect 2020 data or multi-year ACS estimates. Demographic patterns may have shifted, particularly in communities that have developed in the intervening years.

Hunterdon County's standing among the nation's highest-income counties is supported directly by Census Bureau income data for the county.³ This is a Tier 1 government source consistent with the county-level Census Reporter profile cited above.

The description of Mountain View at Hunterdon as an affluent commuter community reflects publicly available developer and listing platform marketing language.¹⁰ This is a Tier 3 characterization used to illustrate how the community presents itself, not as verified demographic data.

National primary turnout figures for the 2022 and 2018 midterm cycles are sourced from the Bipartisan Policy Center's 2022 Primary Turnout report.⁶ These figures represent the most recent available national primary data; 2026 national totals are unavailable at time of publication, as primaries continue through August 2026.

Statewide New Jersey turnout data was compiled by the author from official election results published by all 21 New Jersey county Boards of Elections following the June 2, 2026 primary. No single source publishes statewide NJ primary turnout in aggregated form; the 14.49% weighted average and 15.13% arithmetic average cited in this brief represent original data compilation. Source records are documented in Appendix D.

6. Stakeholder Map

The Hunterdon County Clerk, the Hunterdon County Board of Elections, and individual municipal clerks have the authority to act on the findings in this brief. It is addressed primarily to the County Clerk and Board of Elections, and secondarily to civic organizations, local media, and residents.

7. Findings

Lambertville City District 4's high participation rate is consistent with several overlapping factors. The most direct is registration composition: District 4 contains Lambertville's smallest share of unaffiliated voters at 18.19%.¹ New Jersey's closed primary system bars unaffiliated

voters from receiving a party ballot without a declaration,¹¹ so low unaffiliated concentrations mechanically elevate precinct-level turnout rates, despite voters' autonomy to declare a party on or up to Election Day. A contested election would provide a second plausible explanatory factor, though not here. The SOV confirms that Lambertville held no contested municipal race.¹ The high Democratic turnout occurred despite the absence of a contested race, suggesting that motivations beyond a local contest may have mattered. The SOV coincides with this: Lambertville's countywide Democratic turnout reached 52.68%, and District 4's Democratic turnout reached 53.95%.¹

A third factor is physical infrastructure. Lambertville covers 1.1 square miles with a population of 4,140, producing one of the highest population densities in the county.⁷ Districts 3 and 4 voted at the American Legion, situated in the center of town.¹² In a municipality where commercial, residential, and civic activity overlap in the same geography, the act of voting may require less deliberate effort. Reduced logistical friction is one plausible contributor to the observed higher turnout. High turnout may also reflect sociodemographics: a high concentration of older homeowners,⁷ making deeply ingrained civic habits a plausible explanation. However, precinct-level demographic data are unavailable. Prior research often associates habitual participation with future turnout, but this brief cannot measure that mechanism in District 4.¹³

Readington Township District 9 combined unusually high Republican participation with a contested local race, suggesting a correlation. Unlike Lambertville, Readington held a consequential Township Committee election on the Republican side, with four candidates: Trevor Izzo, Eric Rhoades, Lisa Routel, and Jon Kowal, running as two paired tickets.⁵

The race created a competitive electoral context. District 9's electorate skews Republican at 52.65%, among the most partisan compositions in the municipality,¹ which is consistent with closed primary dynamics: unaffiliated voters receive no ballot, concentrating participation among the most partisan residents.² Districts 15, 4, 3, and 12 also had low unaffiliated rates, but their voter bases split more evenly across the two tickets. District 9 aligned more strongly behind one ticket, producing a more concentrated vote pattern.

Social-pressure research suggests that participation can be reinforced within politically aligned networks.¹⁴ District 9's concentrated partisan composition makes that mechanism worth considering, although this brief cannot observe those networks directly. The VBM data provides additional contrast. Every other focal precinct showed VBM rates above 40%. Readington Township overall sat at 27.2%, and District 9 at 19.2%. Four in five District 9 voters cast their ballots in person. The district's turnout was unusually in-person-heavy during a contested race. Together, these conditions are consistent with unusually high mobilization of District 9's electorate.

Alexandria Township District 2's low participation is consistent with weak electoral incentives, although access and motivation cannot be separately identified from these data. This highly rural precinct⁹ saw its dominant bloc of voters almost sit out the primary, with a record-low 8.21% turnout among its Republican electorate.¹ The absence of competitive local races may have reduced the perceived incentive to participate. A further 26.4% of District 2's registered voters are unaffiliated, functionally limited from participation under the closed primary system before a single ballot is printed, even when they are able to declare a party.^{1, 2, 11} The polling location, the Township Park Barn Meeting Room, sits within the township.¹² For a voter with no competitive local race on the ballot and no partisan enrollment enabling participation, the combination of perceived low electoral stakes and even modest logistical costs may have discouraged participation.

The VBM data is consistent with this interpretation, though it does not establish it. Alexandria Township's overall VBM rate is 48.3%, and District 2's is 51.9%. High VBM use among voters coexisted with low overall turnout. The patterns suggest that the existing primary system may provide limited incentives to those in the electorate who are unaffiliated, unregistered, or indifferent to primary-level elections. The voter base that participated is strongly partisan; broader civic engagement is consistent with observed patterns, yet cannot be measured.

Raritan Township District 21's lower participation rate, like Lambertville City District 4, correlates with the district's underlying voter registration composition. District 21 contains the municipality's largest concentration of unaffiliated voters at 35.8%, the highest share among the municipality's 22 districts.¹ Under New Jersey's closed primary rules, that share is structurally locked out of participation.² Although unaffiliated voters may declare a party through Election Day, some research suggests that voters may remain unaffiliated in part to preserve partisan flexibility¹⁵ in changing political environments. Much of District 21 consists of Mountain View at Hunterdon, a development that markets itself as an affluent commuter community,¹⁰ providing valuable insight into the district's environment and resident profile. The concentration of a commuter-oriented residential development makes work and commuting patterns a plausible dimension for further study, although the available data do not establish whether those patterns contributed to District 21's turnout. Township-level Census data provide broader context: Raritan Township has an average commute time of 33.5 minutes and a median household income of \$165,174.⁸ However, these figures are not available at the precinct level and therefore cannot establish that District 21 itself has the same demographic or commuting profile. The stronger observable feature of District 21 is its unusually high unaffiliated registration share, which directly affects eligibility in New Jersey's closed primary system. Raritan Township's VBM rate stands at 41.9%, and District 21's is 44.5%. Nearly half of those who participated did so by mail, a pattern consistent with a small electoral base making substantial use of VBM, with a much larger group disengaging by any method.

The countywide partisan figures reveal a gap larger than the precinct-level analysis alone suggests. Democrats turned out at 37.39%, with 11,859 ballots cast among 31,717 registered Democrats. Republicans turned out at 20.78%, with 9,157 ballots cast among 44,059 registered Republicans.¹ Despite holding a larger registration base, Republicans participated at nearly half the Democratic rate. Democrats cast 2,702 more ballots countywide despite having 12,342 fewer registered voters. At the precinct level, the two highest-performing districts each achieved their results by maximizing one party's base. Readington District 9 recorded the highest single-party turnout in the county at 57.47% of its Republicans voting, while Lambertville District 4 followed at 53.95% of its Democrats voting.¹ In both lowest-performing districts, Alexandria District 2 and Raritan District 21, the dominant registration bloc is Republican. Low overall turnout coincided with especially low turnout among their largest registration blocs and uncontested local elections, dropping to 8.21% and 10.18%, respectively.¹

8. Policy and Civic Implications

Five implications emerge from the data.

The focal precincts show a stronger association between ballot competitiveness and turnout than between VBM use and overall turnout. Readington D9's 80.8% in-person rate and Alexandria D2's 51.9% VBM rate illustrate the contrast: Readington D9 combined high turnout with relatively low VBM use, while Alexandria D2 combined low turnout with relatively high VBM use. In these focal precincts, access to VBM alone therefore does not track overall participation particularly closely.

The closed primary system creates a structural exclusion floor,^{2,11} even though voters are able to declare a party on or up to Election Day. In precincts where unaffiliated registration runs above 25%, that floor constitutes a large portion of the participation gap.¹ This is a state-level policy question, not one the county can resolve administratively, but the Board can document and surface the data.

VBM outreach should focus on new permanent enrollment, not reminders to existing users. Ninety-six percent of VBM voters in the 2026 primary were permanent requesters. The channel is heavily used by permanent VBM requesters. Expanding participation through VBM means enrolling voters who are not yet in the permanent mail system.

Ballot content awareness may matter more than process awareness. Knowing how to vote is not the same as knowing why a given election is worth voting in. Pre-primary communications that explain voting mechanics without surfacing what is on a specific ballot, what local races are contested, and what offices are at stake may miss the more consequential message.

Precinct-level variation within a single county rules out uniform outreach strategies.¹ A strategy effective in Lambertville, urban, walkable, and with high Democratic density, may be irrelevant in Alexandria, rural, Republican-dominant, and defined by uncontested local races. Targeted precinct-level outreach, if the Board attempts it, would need to account for registration composition and local ballot contestedness.

9. Nonpartisan Options for Officials

Four options emerge from the findings.

Option A is a targeted pre-primary communications effort that moves beyond logistics. Rather than notifying voters of polling locations and dates alone, communications would include what specific races appear on a voter's ballot, whether those races are contested, and what offices are at stake. This would test whether more ballot-specific information is associated with greater participation in precincts with no competitive local race.

Option B is to expand permanent VBM enrollment rather than send reminders to existing users. Given that 96% of existing VBM participants are already permanent requesters, outreach should target voters not yet enrolled in the permanent mail program, particularly in lower-turnout municipalities.

Option C is a youth voter registration effort in coordination with Hunterdon County high schools, targeting students approaching eligibility. First-time voters who participate in their first eligible election are more likely to become habitual participants.¹³

Option D is to publish post-election precinct-level turnout data in a publicly accessible, machine-readable format following each election. The SOV is technically public but practically inaccessible to most residents.¹ Making this data available supports civic research, local journalism, and informed public discussion of participation patterns.

10. Limitations

SOV data for Readington Township was subject to two court-ordered recounts. Total ballots cast and turnout rates are unaffected. Candidate-level figures in the Readington analysis reflect the certified recount.¹

All precinct-level VBM rates cited in this brief are author-calculated, not published by the Board of Elections. Methodology is documented in Appendix C.

No precinct-level demographic data is publicly available from the Census Bureau. Community characterizations for Raritan Township's Mountain View district and Alexandria Township rely on township-level Census estimates and publicly available marketing materials.^{8,9,10} These are inferences from township-level figures, not verified precinct-specific demographics.

The brief identifies correlations between registration composition, ballot contestedness, and turnout patterns. It does not establish causation, and no single-factor causal claim should be drawn from its findings.

National comparison figures draw from 2022 midterm primary data.⁶ The two cycles share a structural format but differ in political context. The comparison provides directional benchmarking, not a precise standard.

One election cycle produces a snapshot, not a trend. Multi-year comparison across multiple Hunterdon County primaries would be needed to distinguish structural patterns from cycle-specific conditions.

Per feedback from the Hunterdon County Clerk's Office, this brief clarifies its position on data privacy: all precinct-level figures cited are aggregate turnout counts and rates. No individual voter identity or ballot choice is published or inferable from any data in this brief.

11. Questions for Local Officials

Does the Board of Elections differentiate pre-election outreach by precinct or municipality based on historical participation rates, or does outreach follow a uniform countywide approach regardless of local turnout patterns?

Given that 96% of mail-in voters in the 2026 primary were permanent requesters, what mechanisms currently exist to expand permanent VBM enrollment among voters not yet in the program?

Does the presence or absence of competitive local races factor into the Board's pre-election communications planning?

Has the Board considered publishing post-election precinct-level turnout data in a machine-readable format to support public transparency and civic research access?

What institutional channels exist for civic researchers or community organizations to formally present findings from public election data to the Board of Elections or County Clerk's Office?

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13. Appendix

Full data tables for Appendices A through D are available at: [this Google Sheet](#)

Appendix A: Precinct-Level Turnout, 2026 Hunterdon County Primary

Appendix B: Municipality-Level Turnout, 2026 Hunterdon County Primary

Appendix C: VBM Rate Calculation Methodology

Appendix D: NJ Statewide Turnout Compilation, 2026 Primary

Appendix E: Polling Locations for Cited Precincts