Nebraska 2022–2026 · A research paper

The independent premium

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What running as something other than a Democrat was worth, on a partisan ballot and a nonpartisan one

Summary

Nebraska Democrats have backed candidates who are not registered Democrats: Dan Osborn for the U.S. Senate in 2024 and 2026, and candidates registered with no party for the Legislature and the statewide boards. This paper asks whether that choice bought votes the party's own label could not. Every comparison sets a candidate against the top of the ticket on the same ballot, in the same precincts, so the year's national environment and each place's lean cancel.

- **On a partisan ballot the label was worth a great deal once, and little once the party stood behind it.** In 2024 Osborn ran +18.5 points ahead of the Democratic nominee for the other Senate seat on the same ballots, ahead in 91 of 93 counties. In 2026, with the party's backing, Osborn ran +1.9 against Lynne Walz, +2.9 from the typical state's Senate-less-governor gap, inside the range of the other states.
- **In the Legislature, no premium shows.** Across 46 contested races in 2022, 2024 and 2026, a party-side candidate who was not a registered Democrat ran −0.6 points against the top of the ticket compared with one who was, holding fixed the year, incumbency and the district's lean (90% interval −5.2 to +3.2). 4 of the 9 non-Democrats are on the party's side only because their opponent was a registered Republican; without them, +1.6: the sign turns, still well inside the range.
- **On the statewide boards, none shows either.** Across 12 Regents and State Board of Education races, the 4 non-Democrats ran +0.7 against the top of the ticket on average, the registered Democrats +5.8; with lean held fixed, −2.6 (−10.7 to +2.6).
- **What matters is the district.** Every ten points redder, the party's Legislature candidate ran +2.9 points further ahead of the ticket whatever the registration, which is why non-Democrats, run mostly in red districts, can look like overperformers when lean is ignored. Much of it is the voters: the same slope appears inside single races, where the candidates are fixed, and not at all in partisan races on the same ballots (section 7).
- **Nor is there a measurable premium for running as a Democrat.** Read the other way round, a registered Democrat ran +0.6 points better in the Legislature (−3.2 to +5.2) and +2.6 on the boards (−2.6 to +10.7). Every range runs from a cost to a gain: registration has not measurably mattered in either direction (section 6).

1 · The question

There are two premiums, and they are measured differently. On a **partisan ballot** the label is printed beside the name: an independent for the Senate is listed as one. On a **nonpartisan ballot** (the Legislature, the University's Regents, the State Board of Education) no party is printed, but a candidate's registration is public and is what opponents' mail names. The theory behind backing a nonpartisan is the same in both: some voters who will not vote for a Democrat will vote for someone who is not one. If the theory holds, those candidates should run ahead of the party's top of the ticket by more than registered Democrats do.

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2 · How it is measured

Each comparison is a **difference on the same ballot**. In every precinct the Legislature candidate and the governor's race (the president's in 2024) share the voters, the turnout and the national weather; how far the party's Legislature candidate ran ahead of or behind the top of the ticket there is what is particular to that race. A race's figure is its precincts' mean, weighted by the votes cast in it. Precincts with fewer than 20 votes in either race are left out.

The **party's side** in a Legislature race is a registered Democrat, or, for a candidate registered otherwise, the side the independent spending around them took, each spender's lean read from where the rest of its money went. Of the 46 races, 35 have a registered Democrat on the party's side, 7 are known from allied spending, and 4 only from the other side's registration or spending, with no allied money behind them. Those 4 are on the party's side by elimination, not because anyone backed them, so the fit is shown with and without them. On the boards the party's side in 2026 is the one candidate in the race on the party's own candidate list, which marks its independents; earlier years' sides come from registration.

The **fit** regresses each race's figure on whether the party's candidate was a registered Democrat, holding fixed the year, incumbency and the district's lean (the top of the ticket's own share there). Races count equally. The 90% intervals come from resampling races 2,000 times, so they reflect how few races there are. A range that crosses zero means the premium is not measurable, not that it is zero.

3 · On a partisan ballot: Osborn

2024, the same ballots. Osborn's margin against Deb Fischer was −6.7; Preston Love Jr., the Democratic nominee for the other seat, finished −25.2 against Pete Ricketts; Kamala Harris −20.8. Osborn ran +14.1 against Harris and Love −4.3: Osborn +18.5 ahead of Love, ahead in 91 of 93 counties (the median county +24.6, 90% of counties between +14.2 and +29.1). Both faced a Republican incumbent.

2024, against other states. Across 30 Senate races with both parties' nominees, the Democrat ran a median +2.9 against Harris (90% between −8.5 and +11.2). Osborn's +14.1 is +11.2 beyond that median, beyond every one of them; Love's is −7.3. For scale, Angus King, Maine's independent, ran +13.5 against Harris, and Bernie Sanders −0.1.

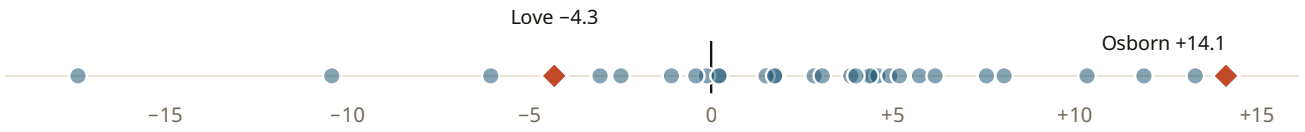


Figure 1. 2024: each Democratic Senate nominee's margin less Harris's in the same state (blue dots, 30 races), with Nebraska's two Senate races marked. Points, two-party.

2026, against other states. With the party's backing, Osborn ran +1.9 against Walz. Across 22 other states with both a Senate and a governor's race, the Senate candidate ran a median −1.0 against the governor's (90% between −12.4 and +11.7): Nebraska's is +2.9 from that median, an ordinary gap between two races on one ballot. The spread across states is wide, so this comparison can rule out only a very large 2026 premium. States where the party had no nominee in one of the two races are not compared.

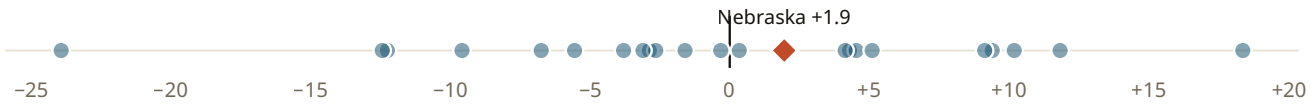


Figure 2. 2026: each state's Senate margin less its governor's margin, from the same counties (22 states), with Nebraska marked. Points, two-party.

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These measure the label and the candidate together. There is one Osborn, and no comparison here separates what "independent" was worth from what Osborn brought. The 2024 gap is large enough that something real was there; the 2026 gap is small enough that, measured this way, most of it was gone once Osborn ran alongside a Democratic ticket.

4 · In the Legislature: registration

Across 46 contested races in 2022, 2024 and 2026 with the party's candidate's registration known (9 of them not a registered Democrat), **a candidate who was not a registered Democrat ran −0.6 points against the top of the ticket compared with one who was (90%: −5.2 to +3.2)**. Incumbency counts for more: a Democratic incumbent ran +3.7 points better than a non-incumbent on the party's side. The district counts most: every ten points redder, +2.9.

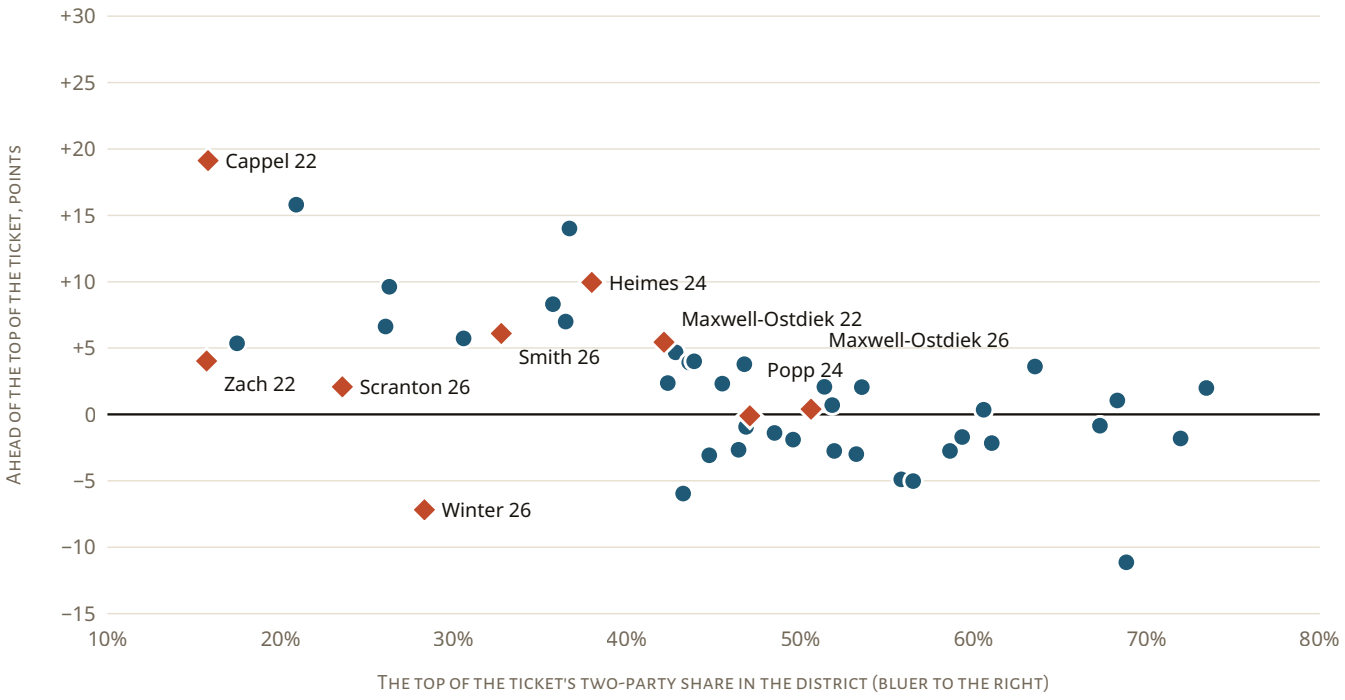


Figure 3. Legislature, 2022–2026: each contested race at the top of the ticket's share in the district (its lean) against how far the party's candidate ran ahead of the top of the ticket. Blue circles: registered Democrats. Red diamonds: party-side candidates who were not, labelled with the year. The redder the district, the further every party-side candidate runs ahead of the ticket; the diamonds sit among the circles at the same lean.

The answer holds however the edges are drawn:

- with each side's money added (its committee's receipts plus independent spending for it or against its opponent): +0.4 (90%: −3.2 to +3.5);
- counting the 1 candidate whose registration could not be found as not Democrats: +1.1 (−3.4 to +5.9): 2026 LD 38 Janell Anderson Ehrke;
- counting the 4 registered Republicans on the party's side of a race between two Republicans as not Democrats: +0.8 (−2.7 to +4.5). Only 1 of them had allied money behind them; the others are on the party's side by elimination. They are out of the main line because a race between two Republicans is not a candidate running outside the party;
- keeping only the 42 races with a registered Democrat or allied spending behind the party's side: +1.6 (−1.1 to +4.7).

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Year	LD	Party-side candidate	Registered	Opponent	Top of ticket, %	Ahead of the ticket
2022	4	Cindy Maxwell-Ostdiek	unaffiliated	R. Brad von Gillern	42.1	+5.5
2022	22	Roy M. Zach	unaffiliated	Mike Moser	15.7	+4.0
2022	38	Tyler R. Cappel	Libertarian	Dave Murman	15.8	+19.1
2024	25	Nicki Behmer Popp	unaffiliated	Carolyn Bosn	47.1	−0.1
2024	39	Allison Heimes	unaffiliated	Tony Sorrentino	38.0	+9.9
2026	4	Cindy Maxwell-Ostdiek	unaffiliated	R. Brad von Gillern	50.6	+0.4
2026	24	Dan Winter	unaffiliated	Jana Hughes	28.3	−7.2
2026	32	Shay Smith	unaffiliated	Mark Schoenrock	32.7	+6.1
2026	42	Shaylee S. Scranton	unaffiliated	Mike Jacobson	23.6	+2.1

Table 1. The 9 Legislature races with a party-side candidate who was not a registered Democrat.

5 · On the statewide boards

The University's Board of Regents and the State Board of Education are also elected district by district with no party on the ballot. For 2026 the party's candidate list names its candidates for both and marks three as independents: Brent Comstock and Elizabeth Butler for the Regents and Sherrye Hutcherson for the Board of Education, all three registered unaffiliated. Across 12 contested races, the 4 non-Democrats ran +0.7 against the top of the ticket on average and the registered Democrats +5.8. Holding the district's lean fixed, **not being a registered Democrat went with −2.6 points (90%: −10.7 to +2.6)**. With only 4 such candidates the year and incumbency cannot be held fixed as well, so the range is wide; it includes zero, as the Legislature's does.

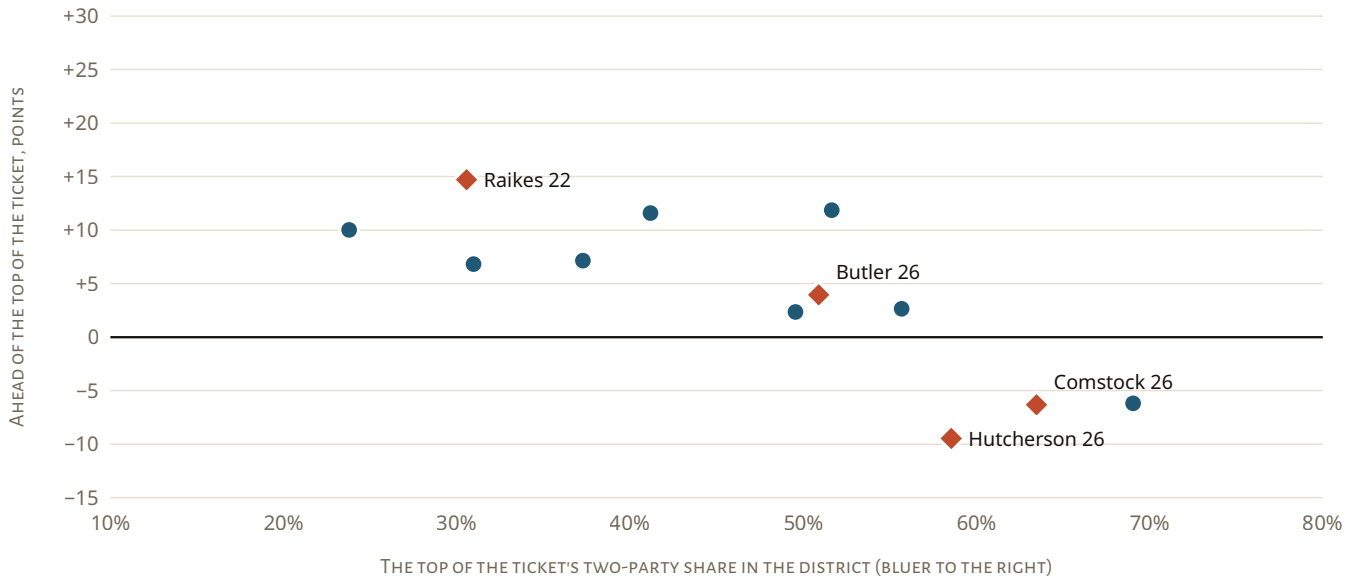


Figure 4. Regents and State Board of Education, 2022–2026, drawn as Figure 3.

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Year	Board	District	Party-side candidate	Registered	Opponent	Won	Top of ticket, %	Ahead
2022	Board of Education	5	Helen Raikes	unaffiliated	Kirk Penner (R)	no	30.6	+14.7
2022	Board of Education	6	Danielle Helzer	Democrat	Sherry Jones (R)	no	23.8	+10.0
2022	Board of Education	8	Deborah Neary	Democrat	Marni Hodgen (R)	yes	49.6	+2.3
2024	Board of Education	1	Kristin Christensen	Democrat	Liz Davids (R)	yes	55.7	+2.6
2024	Board of Education	2	Maggie Douglas	Democrat	Linda Vermooten (R)	yes	41.2	+11.6
2024	Board of Education	4	Liz Renner	Democrat	LeDonna White Griffin (I)	yes	69.0	−6.2
2024	Regents	8	Barbara Weitz	Democrat	Zachary Mellender (I)	yes	51.7	+11.9
2026	Board of Education	5	Michaela Conway	Democrat	Angie Eberspacher (R)	no	37.3	+7.2
2026	Board of Education	6	Grady Erickson	Democrat	Sherry Jones (R)	no	31.0	+6.8
2026	Board of Education	8	Sherrye Hutcherson	unaffiliated	Lou Ann Goding (R)	no	58.6	−9.5
2026	Regents	1	Brent Comstock	unaffiliated	Jeremy Hosein (R)	yes	63.5	−6.3
2026	Regents	2	Elizabeth Butler	unaffiliated	Jill Wolfe (R)	yes	50.9	+3.9

Table 2. Every contested board race with a party side. Left out: 2022 Board of Education 7 (no party side: Elizabeth Tegtmeier (R) v Robin Stevens (R)); 2022 Regents 6 (no party side: Julie Hehnke (R) v Paul R. Kenney (R)); 2022 Regents 7 (no party side: Kathy Wilmot (R) v Matt Williams (R)); 2024 Board of Education 3 (no party side: Bill McAllister (R) v Lisa Schonhoff (R)); 2024 Regents 3 (unopposed); 2024 Regents 4 (no party side: Elizabeth R. O'Connor (D) v Jim Rogers (?)); 2024 Regents 5 (no party side: Gary L. Rogge (?) v Rob Schafer (?)); 2026 Board of Education 7 (unopposed); 2026 Regents 4 (both on the party's list).

6 · The other way round: a premium for running as a Democrat?

The same measurements answer the opposite question. They do not find a premium for the Democratic label either; registration cannot be told apart from the rest in either direction.

	Registered Democrats against non-Democrats, points	90% range
Legislature, 46 races	+0.6	−3.2 to +5.2
Legislature, each side's money held equal	−0.4	−3.5 to +3.2
Statewide boards, 12 races	+2.6	−2.6 to +10.7

Table 3. The fits of sections 4 and 5, with the sign turned: positive means registered Democrats ran further ahead of the top of the ticket.

- **On the nonpartisan ballots** the best guesses lean slightly toward Democrats, but every range runs from a cost to a gain. In the Legislature the lean even turns the other way once each side's money is held equal: movement well inside the range, which is what noise looks like. This table is the same fits with the sign turned, not new evidence.
- **On the boards the raw gap looks bigger**: registered Democrats ran +5.8 against the top of the ticket on average, non-Democrats +0.7. Much of that is where they ran: the non-Democrats' districts gave the top of the ticket 51% on average, the Democrats' 45%, and the bluer the district, the less room any candidate on the party's side has to run ahead of the ticket.
- **On the partisan ballot** the Democratic label cost a great deal in 2024, when Love ran −18.5 points against Osborn on the same ballots, and about nothing in 2026, when Walz ran −1.9 against Osborn, an ordinary gap next to other states. Both comparisons carry the candidates with the labels.
- **What does move the numbers** is the district and incumbency: every ten points redder, the party's Legislature candidate runs about 2.9 points further ahead of the top of the ticket whatever the registration, and a Democrat already in the seat about 3.7 more.

7 · Why the party's candidates run further ahead in redder districts

Every ten points redder the district, the party's Legislature candidate runs about 2.4 points further ahead of the top of the ticket (2.9 once the year and incumbency are held fixed, as in the fit). That does not mean Democrats win more votes in red districts; it means the Legislature race moves less than the top of the ticket does. There are two ways that could happen. **Selection**: in red districts the party's side contests only where it has someone

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unusually strong, so the candidates who run there are better than the ones who run elsewhere. **The voters**: with no party printed, some of each side's voters judge the candidates on name, place and record, and a nonpartisan race ends nearer an even split than the governor's race on the same ballot.

The two can be told apart. Selection works race by race: it changes who the candidates are, not how one race's precincts differ. The voters' effect works precinct by precinct. So the slope is measured again **inside each race**, where the candidates are the same in every precinct, and again in **partisan races** on the same ballots, where the label is printed.

Races	Party printed	Same candidates throughout	Further ahead per ten points redder
Legislature, across 46 races	no	no	+2.4
Legislature, inside each race (1,098 precincts)	no	yes	+2.8
Statewide boards, inside each of 12 races	no	yes	+5.6
2026 Attorney General, Secretary of State and Treasurer (3,958 precincts)	yes	yes	+0.1
2026 U.S. House (1,319 precincts)	yes	yes	−0.1
2022 U.S. House (1,324 precincts)	yes	yes	+0.3
2024 U.S. House (1,325 precincts)	yes	yes	−0.1
2024 U.S. Senate, Love (1,324 precincts)	yes	yes	−0.1

Table 4. How far the party's candidate runs ahead of the top of the ticket for every ten points the precinct or district is redder. Inside a race, each race's own average is removed, so only differences between its precincts count.

- **Inside single races the slope is the same**: +2.8 against +2.4 across races, and it runs the same way in 42 of 45 races with precincts of differing lean. The same candidates do better against the ticket in a district's redder precincts and worse in its bluer ones. Selection cannot make that, so it is not the whole story; it may still add to the slope across races.
- **Partisan races on the same ballots show nothing of the kind**: within 0.3 of a point per ten points in every one. Where the party is printed, voters vote the party all the way down. The evening-out belongs to the nonpartisan ballot.
- **It shows on the boards too**, and more strongly, +5.6. Board candidates rarely have a Legislature candidate's local profile, which suggests the evening-out comes from the missing label more than from local names, though this paper has no measure of how well anyone was known.
- **Seats keep their gap when the candidate changes.** What lean leaves of a seat's gap in 2022 matches what it leaves in 2026 with a different candidate (correlation 0.71, 7 seats), so something about the place may persist. With so few seats the correlation's 95% range runs from -0.10 to +0.95, so treat it as a hint. Candidates who ran in both years, change in points: Maxwell-Ostdiek −3.0; Fredrickson +5.1 (as the incumbent); Dungan +10.3 (as the incumbent).

LD	2022	Gap less lean	2026	Gap less lean
2	Sarah J. Slattery	+2.8	Caitlin Knutson	+1.4
4	Cindy Maxwell-Ostdiek	+2.6	Cindy Maxwell-Ostdiek	−0.4
10	Wendy DeBoer	+1.4	Cindy Johnson	−0.5
12	Robin Richards	−3.0	Christy Knorr	−1.7
14	Cori Villegas	−8.5	SuAnn Witt	−3.3
18	Michael Young	−4.5	Jess Goldoni	−4.4
20	John A. Fredrickson	−3.2	John Fredrickson	+1.9
26	George C. Dungan III	−4.5	George Dungan	+5.8
28	Jane Raybould	+2.3	Patty Pansing Brooks	+6.6
36	Angie Lauritsen	+3.9	Darin Tompkins	+0.3

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Table 5. Seats contested by the party's side in both 2022 and 2026: each race's gap to the top of the ticket less what the district's lean predicts, in points.

The same arithmetic runs the other way: in blue districts the party's candidates run behind the top of the ticket. For the premium question it means lean has to be held fixed, which the fits do. For targeting it means a Legislature or board race is closer than the top of the ticket suggests in a red district and less safe in a blue one, by a few points, not more: where the governor took 30%, the curve puts the party's Legislature candidate at about 36%, still a loss by some 29 points.

8 · What this cannot say

- **That a label never helps.** The ranges are wide: in the Legislature the data allow anything from a few points' cost to a few points' gain. What they rule out is a large, regular premium of the kind Osborn showed in 2024.
- **What a given candidate would have done under the other label.** Who runs as what is chosen. The party backs a nonpartisan where it expects a Democrat to lose, often one with a local name. The fit compares candidates in districts of the same lean, not the same candidate twice.
- **Why Osborn's 2024 premium shrank.** The 2026 race differs from the 2024 one in more than the party's backing: the opponent, the year and the money all changed. The comparison shows the size of the gap each year, not its cause.
- **The final count.** 2026 figures are the state's unofficial election-week count, and will move a little with the canvass.

9 · Conclusion

The case for running as something other than a Democrat rests on a premium. On the partisan ballot, one candidate showed one, large, in a year that candidate ran apart from the party, and most of it did not reappear alongside it. On the nonpartisan ballots, across 46 Legislature races and 12 board races over three elections, registration made no difference that can be measured once the district is accounted for, in either direction. Candidates on the party's side run ahead of the ticket in red districts whatever their registration. A strategy built on the label should be judged against that baseline, not against the top of the ticket alone.

Data and methods

Results. Nebraska's precinct results from the Secretary of State (2022, 2024 final; 2026 unofficial). Other states' 2024 Senate and presidential results by state from the MIT Election Data and Science Lab; 2026 by county from each state's results site. Left out of the 2026 comparison, because a candidate the party did not back outpolled its own: Montana's U.S. Senate race (Seth Bodnar); Wyoming's governor's race (Rebecca Bextel).

Registration. From the state's record of each candidate as it stands now, which for an earlier year may differ from the registration the candidate held then. Where it could not settle a name, 2026 LD 10 Cindy Johnson is counted as a Democrat because the party's 2026 candidate list, which marks its independents, lists the candidate without the mark. Money: NADC filings, committee receipts from January of the year before each election to election day, plus independent spending.

Computation. `python -m sun_tzu.modeling.independent_premium run` writes every figure here to `INDEPENDENT_PREMIUM.json`; `tests/test_independent_premium.py` recomputes them from the warehouse and fails if they differ. Two-party shares throughout; points are percentage points.

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