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Voter Turnout in Presidential Nominating Contests

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Abstract: Presidential elections are conducted in two stages. The November general election is preceded by a series of contests where delegates are selected to national party conventions, which is where the parties select their candidates for the fall election. These nominating contests' political environments vary: the rules regarding who can participate; the levels of electoral competition, which are related to when they are held; and that other offices present on the ballot, if any. We explore the effects of these conditions on voter participation in recent presidential contests and generally find turnout highest in competitive and inclusive contests where other offices are on the ballot. Examining the 2008 American National Election Panel Study, we find primary voters are more ideologically extreme than general election voters, but there is little difference between voters in closed and open primary states. We suggest primary type has little effect on the ideological composition of the electorate because modern nomination contests are low turnout elections that draw only the most politically interested.

Introduction

The most important elected office in the US is the president. As an indicator of the value the American electorate places upon the presidency, more Americans vote in the November of a presidential election year than at any other time. Yet, the general election is just the end of a long arduous road in the selection of the president. The modern presidential election begins with a series of party nomination contests sometimes starting in January and continuing through the summer, where the political parties' candidates for the general election are chosen.

Participation in the presidential nomination contests is generally lower than the general election. In November of 2008, a year when both parties had

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competitive contests attracting multiple viable candidates for the election without an incumbent, 131.3 million people voted in the general election for president; yet, less than half that number, 61.4 million, participated in the nomination contests scattered throughout the calendar earlier that year.¹ In 2012, Democrats re-nominated their sitting president and only Republicans had a truly contested nomination. As a consequence, participation was anemic, with only 26.7 million participating in the nomination contests compared to 129.1 million voting for president later that year.

Across states there is much variation in who participates in the nomination contests. In 2008 New Hampshire's general election saw 710,970 people vote for president while three-fourths (529,711) voted in the primary. There are good reasons why New Hampshire perennially experiences higher primary turnout relative to its peers. The state holds the first primary when many candidates are still in the hunt and the state effectively allows all voters to participate, regardless of party registration. This example illustrates the major themes we discuss: turnout in presidential nomination contests is affected by the nomination contest rules, level of competition, and timing of when the contests are held.

The lower turnout in presidential nomination contests means a subset of the electorate decides who the president will be.² This smaller group may be markedly different than the general election electorate on characteristics such as their ideological representativeness. In some cases this may be by design, by limiting participation to committed party faithful in caucuses or to persons who declare an allegiance to a party on their voter registration. We will see the tug-of-war by party extremists and moderates over nomination contest rules is therefore not without cause. In short, the design of electoral institutions affects who participates.

Types of Presidential Nomination Contests

The US Constitution does not provide a template for presidential nomination contests. The Supreme Court has generally held that by virtue of their First Amendment right to freely associate, the government cannot force parties to hold only

¹ Participation numbers for nomination contests are incomplete since not all state parties report caucus participation, however, as we discuss, the under-reporting due to incomplete caucus participation does not greatly affect these overall statistics.

² Barbara Norrander, "Measuring Primary Turnout in Aggregate Analysis," *Political Behavior* 8, no. 4 (1986), 356–73.

state-sponsored nomination contests.³ There is thus wide variation across states as state governments and the political parties have adopted various methods to select their presidential nominees. Voters in these nomination contests do not directly vote for candidates, instead they select delegates who represent the state at national party conventions and vote for the national parties' nominees. These delegates are generally selected by states in two ways: either party-run caucuses or state-run primary elections.⁴

A good example of how participation may affect the rules is in a dynamic known as "frontloading." State parties are more or less responsible for scheduling and organizing their nomination events. In the modern era, early contests tend to attract the most attention from the candidates, media, and – as we shall see – voters when the nomination battle is still competitive. Participation in later contests usually subsides as one candidate becomes the inevitable winner by securing enough delegates in prior contests to win the party nomination. States who previously held a later nomination contest, where participation is low, may want to hold their contest earlier when participation is likely to be higher. Beyond having a greater say in the nomination the parties' nominees, states may factor in the types of people more likely to participate when the nomination battle is still competitive. The national parties aim to maintain at least a minimal hold on the nomination calendar by sanctioning states that hold their contests too early by reducing their allotted delegates to the national convention. In 2012 for example, the national parties "allowed" Iowa, Nevada, New Hampshire and South Carolina to conduct their candidate selection events before March 6.⁵

3 In 1996, voters in California passed an initiative (Proposition 198) that substituted the state's primary from closed to a blanket primary system in an effort to minimize the state parties' control of nomination contests and encourage third-party candidates to run. In a blanket primary voters choose from a list of candidates from a single ballot, irrespective of the candidate's party. For details on the blanket primary, see Elisabeth R. Gerber, "California's Experience with the Blanket Primary," in *Congressional Primaries and the Politics of Representation*, eds. Michael Lyons, Peter F. Galderisi, and Marni Ezra, Lanham (MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2001), 143–60.

In 2000, however, the US Supreme Court, in *California Democratic Party v. Jones*, ruled that the blanket primary was unconstitutional because it violated the political parties' right of free association.; see John R. Labbe, "Louisiana's Blanket Primary after California Democratic Party v. Jones," *Northwestern University Law Review* (2001), 696–721. California still uses the blanket (or top-two) primary only for nonpartisan elections to Congress and the state legislature.

4 It should be noted in passing that these choices may be predicated on expected participation. For example, party officials who expect high participation in a state-run primary may choose to hold a party-run caucus with the intent to limit participation. Thus, while we assume in our discussion that nomination contest rules affect participation, we cannot fully discount the possibility that expected participation may affect the rules.

5 National Conference of State Legislatures, "Primaries, Caucuses, and Conventions... Oh My!" *The Canvass: States and Election Reform* 25(November/December 2011), 1–3.

Nomination contests can be expensive to run. States offer a carrot to entice parties to use primaries by bearing the costs of running the primary elections. However, Party extremists unhappy with the moderation of their nominees have pressed for exclusive institutions where only party faithful are allowed to participate, such as caucuses or closed primaries, to reduce participation to the ideologically pure. On the other hand, moderates concerned about the national relatively high levels of political polarization advocate for inclusive open primaries where all registered voters may participate with a hope to foster moderation.

Caucuses and Conventions

State parties' preferences about the type of nomination contests are reflected in the evolution of nomination contests. The "old system" of delegate selection, as Larry Bartels documents, was essentially a "boss-dominated, convention-centered process," where party elites would negotiate the terms for selecting delegates based on loyalty to the state party leadership.⁶ These negotiations would often result in a consensual decision of who the party supported for the presidency. Supporters of this closed process believed that nomination structure based on ideological coherence and consensus would reinforce party cohesion and reduce "convention stalemates." At the same time, it was thought that it would attract candidates with similar, if not identical, qualifications: "men of basically moderate political views, between 50 and 55 years of age, incumbent governors or cabinet members of proven executive ability and proven electoral appeal, from populous competitive states."⁷ As a nomination system, party-run conventions and caucuses, albeit restricted to elites, served as a candidate filtering mechanism, setting minimum standards of what the parties, or at least the party loyalists, expected from a viable presidential candidate.⁸

The current nomination contest for presidential candidates maintains some of the old system where state parties hold their delegate selection contests through caucuses. Many states follow a multi-step delegate selection process that starts with party caucuses or conventions at the local level (precinct, municipality,

⁶ Larry M. Bartels, *Presidential Primaries and the Dynamics of Public Choice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 14.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁸ Austin Ranney, *Participation in American Presidential Nominations 1976* (DC: AEI Press, 1977), 1–37.

county, or district).⁹ During these local caucuses, party members collectively select delegates for the caucus at the higher level, namely the state convention. State parties vary their methods of delegate selection to the state conventions, with states awarding delegates based on the proportion of the votes of the eligible caucus participants, or a winner-take-all system.¹⁰ Compared to the well-publicized primary elections, local caucuses are an “invisible component” in the presidential delegate selection process, yet very important.¹¹

Caucuses are not as convenient for voters to participate in as primaries, and as such tend to be low turnout affairs. Interested persons gather at a designated time and location to meet, debate, and vote for delegates. Unlike voting in an election, where persons can cast a ballot at a time of their choosing on election day – sometimes casting an absentee or early ballot – caucus participants must be physically present to deliberate and to cast what can be a series of votes over the course of the caucus meeting. Caucus participants must publicly state their allegiance to the party, which may be unpalatable to some. Not surprisingly, caucus turnout is exceedingly low.¹² As a percentage of all persons in a state eligible to vote in general elections, the seven states in 2008 where both parties held local caucuses and reported turnout, 1.1 million or 7.6% of eligible voters participated.¹³ This participation rate may be exaggerated as parties self-report, and there is an incentive for parties to inflate their numbers to cast an impression of interest in their party’s candidates, and states that do not report may conversely not wish to disclose poor caucus attendance. It is for these reasons we do not do an exhaustive analysis of caucus turnout.

With these caveats in mind, timing matters to caucus participation. Historically, the Iowa caucus draws most attention in the presidential nominating

⁹ State parties may choose to hold non-binding advisory primaries, as was the case for Oklahoma and Georgia in 2012. States may also hold non-binding caucuses, instead selecting delegates directly at their state conventions, which was the case for Nevada and Maine in 2012.

¹⁰ The delegate allocation “formula” is to some extent dictated by the National Parties; the National Democratic Party for instance historically as required the use of proportionality in the delegate selection process, while the National Republican Party allows states to choose between proportional or winner-take-all formulas; see William G. Mayer, “Caucuses: How They Work, What Difference They Make,” in Pursuit of the White House, ed. Mayer (New York: Chatham House Publishers, 1996), 105–57.

¹¹ Meyer 1996, p. 108.

¹² Elaine C. Karmack, *Primary Politics: How Presidential Candidates Have Shaped the Modern Nominating System* (DC: The Brookings Institution, 2009), 155.

¹³ Michael P. McDonald, “Voter Turnout: Eligibility has its Benefits,” in *Controversies in Voting Behavior*, eds. Richard G. Niemi, Herbert F. Weisberg, and David Kimball, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2011), 65–74.

process, because it is the first delegate selection contest in the nomination calendar. Candidates, particularly the dark horses, spend much time in the state courting participants, hoping to leverage a surprise result as a springboard for media attention and voter interest to build momentum for future contests. In 2008, 16.1% of eligible Iowan voters participated in the local caucuses, a participation rate rivaling some of the primary states' with the lowest turnout rates. However, Iowa's turnout appears less impressive when compared to New Hampshire's first-in-the-nation primary, which was 53.6% of those eligible to vote in 2008. After Iowa, caucus participation quickly evaporates. None of the four states that held caucuses on the 2008 February 3rd super-Tuesday contests had a turnout rate more than 10%, and had a combined 6.4% turnout rate.

In the modern era, low-turnout caucuses are generally believed to provide a greater voice to party activists outside the ideological mainstream. Little is known about caucus attendees. Studies of civic engagement, broadly defined to include activities such as donating and volunteering for a campaign, provide some clues that caucus attendees are more likely to be ideological extremists.¹⁴ Among the few polls of caucus-goers, the national media's entrance poll for the 2008 Iowa caucus reported that 40% of Democratic caucus attendees and 11% of Republican caucus attendees were moderate, compared to 44% of all 2008 November general election voters according to the national exit polls.¹⁵ The ideological character of caucus-goers provides some candidates an incentive to more vigorously contest caucuses, as did 2012 Republican candidate, and nominal libertarian, Ron Paul whose strategy focused on winning delegates through caucuses, ultimately garnering 177 delegates.¹⁶

In sum, caucuses are designed to distill the electorate to dedicated party members, and they appear to achieve this goal. Interested persons must dedicate hours to gather in local meeting places to discuss and vote for delegates to their states' conventions. Because deliberation is an important part of the caucus system, modes of convenience voting believed to increase voter turnout are not options for caucus attendees, such as mail balloting, in-person early voting, or jurisdiction-wide vote centers.¹⁷ As a consequence, even the Iowa caucuses,

¹⁴ Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

¹⁵ For details on profiles of caucus voters in the 2008 see <http://politics.nytimes.com/election-guide/2008/results/vote-polls/IA.html>; <http://abcnews.go.com/images/PollingUnit/IADemHorizontal.pdf>; http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/elections/how_groups_voted/voted_08.html (accessed 22 January 2015).

¹⁶ For details on the Republican Delegate Tally see <http://elections.nytimes.com/2012/primaries/delegates> (accessed 22 January 2015).

¹⁷ Jan Leighley, and Jonathan Nagler, "Individual and Systemic Influences on Turnout: Who Votes? 1984," *The Journal of Politics* 54, (1992), 718–40.

which garner considerable attention can only come close to the lowest turnout primaries, where as we shall see, the costs of voting are less onerous.

Primaries

The other dominant form of presidential nomination contest is the primary, a state-run election where voters express their candidate preferences. States' experiments with primaries began in the early 20th century and at the outset, participation was the rationale behind the primary reform movement. Primary elections, as opposed to "King Caucus," provided a means to wrest nomination power from party elites by allowing a larger number of people a voice in the selection of party nominees. Yet, party conventions and caucuses remained the dominant delegate selection method throughout the first half of the century. Between 1968 and 1976 many states adopted presidential primaries over caucuses for various reasons, participation again among them. Critics of the "old system," particularly within the Democratic Party, emphasized that allowing "ordinary partisans" to participate in primary elections was a matter of principle; delegates should be chosen through popular participation.¹⁸ The prospects of how a reformed system may favor certain candidates were not lost upon reformers. Unlike the machine era where party bosses would select candidates who could win general elections, modern caucuses had become to be perceived to be the realm of ideological stalwarts, some of the evidence for which we provide above. Moving away from caucuses raised hopes that the selected delegates would be more ideologically compatible with the broader party than those selected through caucuses. This dynamic was particularly acute among Democrats, as the party's emerging internal divisions over civil rights led to a movement to "segregate presidential politics from the state parties' many other activities."¹⁹ Between 1968 and 1970, the percentage of delegates selected by primary increased from 40% to 70%.²⁰

Even though moving away from a complete party-centered delegate selection system implied yielding electoral power to voters, state parties and legislatures could still impose qualifications of the types of voters who participate.²¹ A general distinction among primary election types is their inclusiveness of registered

¹⁸ Bartels, "Presidential Primaries and the Dynamics of Public Choice," 20–1.

¹⁹ Ranney, "Participation in American Presidential Nominations 1977," 6.

²⁰ Bartels, "Presidential Primaries and the Dynamics of Public Choice," 22.

²¹ John G. Geer, "Rules Governing Presidential Primaries," *The Journal of Politics* 48, (1986), 1006–25.

voters based on their partisan affiliation indicated when they register to vote. *Open primaries* are those that do not require voters register with a party in order participate while *closed primaries* restrict participation to certain voters based on their party registration. Within these systems are various flavors, and it is possible that delegates from the two political parties within a state are selected by different methods, be it caucuses or various types of primaries.

Open primary states generally do not ask party registration when a person registers to vote and a voter may cast a ballot in a primary of their choosing. Among open primary states, California, Louisiana, and Washington hold “top-two” primaries where all candidates seeking an office run simultaneously and the two candidates receiving the most votes continue to the general election. A somewhat similar hybrid used for Nebraska’s nonpartisan races and some statewide in other Southern state races is the runoff primary, where if a candidate does not receive a majority, a run-off between the top two candidates is held.²² Delegates to party conventions cannot be selected by this method, so it is most noteworthy as presidential delegates and other candidates for office must be selected by different methods in these states.

Closed primary states require voters to register with a political party, and only these voters can participate in the primary election. A variant known as the semi-closed primary allows voters unaffiliated with a political party to also participate in a party primary. Typically, these independent voters are allowed to change their party affiliation on election day to the party of the primary they would like to vote in, and must re-register afterwards as unaffiliated to preserve the right to do so in future elections. Tens of thousands of voters follow this convoluted procedure every election cycle.²³ When voters forget to re-register as independents at a deadline in advance of the next primary, as some inevitably do, they may discover they are still affiliated with a party. Unlike unaffiliated voters, persons registered with a party cannot re-register with the other party on election day and they thus may not be able to participate in the party primary they prefer to vote in. Sometimes these trapped voters cast a write-in vote for their favored candidate in the wrong party primary, which can lead to amusing results such as the leading

²² The run-off primary was initially used in Southern states “in an era where the Democratic primary victor would automatically win the general election” to ensure that the victor had majority support (among Whites); see Barbara Norrander, “Primary Elections,” in *Oxford Handbook of American Elections and Political Behavior*, ed. Jan E. Leighley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 519.

²³ Matthew Thornburg, *The Causes and Consequences of Registering with a Political Party* (George Mason University Dissertation, 2013).

Republican candidates receiving nearly six thousand write-in votes in the 2012 New Hampshire Democratic primary.²⁴ These write-in votes are tabulated well after the nomination battle has moved on to other states and are relegated to the dustbin of history. In theory, even voters in closed primary states could re-register by the appropriate deadline with the party whose primary they would like to vote in, but few voters appear to engage in this behavior.²⁵

Some states, such as Indiana, Mississippi and Ohio, do not have party registration but impose oaths upon voters to support the party's nominees in the general election.²⁶ In 2016 Virginia Republicans adopted a party loyalty oath for their state's open primary; the Donald Trump campaign, fearing it may deter his anti-establishment voters, unsuccessfully challenged the oath in court.²⁷ A Texas variation forbids a voter from voting in more than one party's primary.²⁸ Election officials in these states classify voters' "party registration" by the ballot they choose to vote in a primary. In practice, any qualified voter can participate in a party primary. This allowed conservative radio personality Rush Limbaugh to urge his listeners to vote for Hillary Clinton in Ohio's 2008 Democratic primary in order to draw out the Democratic nomination battle and thereby, he hoped, weaken the eventual nominee. There is no enforcement of party loyalty oaths, so we classify these states as open primaries.

While the presidential candidates appear on the primary ballot, voters in primaries, like caucuses, really vote for convention delegates. (It is by this distinction that the Attorney General of Arizona determined that Arizona's constitution requiring a semi-closed primary for selection of candidates could not be imposed upon parties for the selection of presidential delegates.)²⁹ The allocation of delegates is entirely determined by party rules. Overall, party rules often change

24 See <http://sos.nh.gov/2012RepPresPrim.aspx> (accessed 22 January 2015).

25 Thornburg, "The Causes and Consequences of Registering with a Political Party,"; Barry C. Burden and Seth Greene, "Party Attachments and State Election Laws," *Political Research Quarterly* 53, (2000), 63–76.

26 See Indiana Code 3-10-1-6; Mississippi Election Code, Section 23-15-575; and for Ohio <http://www.sos.state.oh.us/sos/elections/Voters/FAQ/genFAQs.aspx#declare> (accessed 29 January 2015).

27 https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-politics/federal-judge-rules-in-favor-of-republican-loyalty-oath-in-virginia/2016/01/14/b3a1e1f6-badf-11e5-b682-4bb4dd403c7d_story.html.

28 EX EL. CODE ANN. § 172.086 : Texas Statutes – Section 172.086: PLEDGE ON BALLOT – See more at: <http://codes.lp.findlaw.com/txstatutes/EL/10/B/172/D/172.086#sthash.FmVY1wB.dpuf> (accessed 29 January 2015).

29 See Attorney General Opinion No. 199-025 (R99-049) <https://www.azag.gov/sites/default/files/sites/all/docs/Opinions/1999/199-025.pdf> (accessed 29 January 2015).

election to election, which reflects the relative independence left to the parties to organize their delegate selection contests with limited restrictions from the national parties. State parties choose to allocate delegates proportionally to candidate votes, winner-take-all, and variations between the two.³⁰ Democrats were first to adopt proportionality following their contested 1968 convention, however the full evolution of the allocation of delegates is outside the scope of our inquiry.³¹ It is possible that turnout in primaries that award delegates proportional to their statewide vote have higher turnout than those that do not since intraparty competition is heightened when supporters of dark horse candidates may believe there is a greater chance their votes will translate into delegates for their favored candidate.³² More importantly, some primary contests play only an advisory role to later state caucuses or conventions, and have been referred to as “beauty contests.”³³ Without tangible effects on the selection of delegates, participation in these beauty contests is not surprisingly consistently low.³⁴ A recent example is the Missouri Republican primary in 2012; with merely 7.4% turnout in 2012, the primary results are non-binding, and delegates were selected in the state’s caucus.³⁵

As with the state party variation with respect to delegate allocation rules and primary inclusiveness, states’ respective major parties may not choose to hold nomination contests on the same date and may not use the same type of nominating contest. That was the case in 2012, with the Democratic Party holding open or semi-closed primaries and the Republican Party holding closed primaries in Alaska, Idaho, Kansas and South Dakota.³⁶ Nomination contests usually take place on the same date, yet in some states the parties can schedule their primaries days and even months apart. For example, during the 2008 primary season, the Idaho Democratic caucus was held on February 5th, while the Republican primary on May 27.³⁷

30 Geer, “Rules Governing Presidential Primaries,” 1008.

31 Bartels, “Presidential Primaries and The Dynamics of Public Choice,” 21.

32 Ranney, “Participation in American Presidential Nominations 1977,”; Barbara Norrander and Gregg W. Smith, “Type of Contest, Candidate Strategy and Turnout in Presidential Primaries,” *American Politics Research* 13, (1985), 28–50. See also Norrander, “Primary Elections,” 520; Geer, “Rules Governing Presidential Primaries.”

33 Barbara Norrander, “Selective Participation: Presidential Primary Voters as a Subset of General Election Voters,” *American Politics Quarterly* 14, (1986), 47.

34 Norrander, “Selective Participation: Presidential Primary Voters as a Subset of General Election Voters,” 4.

35 Michael P. McDonald, “2012 Presidential Nomination Contest Turnout Rates,” US Elections Project, <http://www.electproject.org/home/voter-turnout/voter-turnout-data> (accessed 30 January 2015).

36 McDonald, “2012 Presidential Nomination Contest Turnout Rates.”

37 Michael P. McDonald, “2008–2012 Presidential Nomination Contest Turnout Rates,” US Elections Project, <http://www.electproject.org/2008p> (accessed 30 January 2015).

Turnout in Presidential Nominating Contests

Primary turnout rates vary significantly across states and years. For example, consider the first two nominating contests, the Iowa caucus and the New Hampshire primary. Both of these small, racially homogeneous states receive considerable attention from all candidates since a surprise placing in these states can build momentum for future contests, and thus should be roughly comparable across states and time. Iowa's caucus had 354,355 attendees in 2008 compared to 147,255 in 2012. A similar pattern holds for New Hampshire's primary: in 2008, 529,711 voters, which declined to 311,311 in 2012. Of course, the electoral context explains the decline. In 2008, the Republican and Democratic parties held competitive nomination contests, while in 2012 with a sitting Democratic president only the Republican presidential nomination contest monopolized the primary season. It is for this reason we focus primarily on the 2008 election in our analysis.

The raw participation numbers beg the question as to how to measure participation rates. It may seem natural given our preceding discussion that fewer people participate in Iowa's caucus than in New Hampshire's primary. The caucus is a time-intensive affair, open only to party members, while all eligible voters in the primary can choose when they cast their ballot, or even vote absentee. New Hampshire even extends election day registration for unregistered voters, but has a deadline in advance of the election for existing registered voters to choose a party affiliation, which in the state's semi-closed primary determines which party's primary they will be eligible to participate in. The denominator for New Hampshire's turnout rates is clear: it is the same as the general election as all eligible voters can participate, where researchers have agreed an appropriate measure of turnout is the ratio of total votes cast to the voting-eligible population.³⁸ Iowa also has election day registration and both parties allow attendees to change their party affiliation at the caucus site, even voters registered with the other party. Thus, Iowa's caucus is more inclusive than New Hampshire as only unaffiliated registered voters have the right to choose which party's primary to participate in. The denominator for Iowa's turnout rate should thus reasonably also be the voting-eligible population. Where the turnout rate denominator becomes murky is in states that (1) do not have election day registration or (2) restrict participation to

38 Michael P. McDonald and Samuel Popkin, "The Myth of the Vanishing Voter," *American Political Science Review* 95, (2001), 963–74. In "Measuring Primary Turnout in Aggregate Analysis," Norrander explains that an appropriate denominator is the legally eligible electorate, which was to either narrowly mean the registered electorate or broadly the voting-age-population (VAP). As McDonald and Popkin demonstrate, a more appropriate denominator is the voter-eligible-population (VEP), which is now used almost exclusively by voter turnout scholars.

persons registered with certain political parties, as is the case in closed primary and semi-closed primary states.

In states that place party registration qualifications on who may participate, Norrander argues that turnout rates are most appropriately measured by party registration.³⁹ A virtue of this approach is that intraparty competition is not assumed to be the same, leading to assumed similar turnout effects. This is particularly an issue when a state's parties choose to hold their nomination contests on different dates, and can be further exacerbated by the parties' choosing different contest methods. While we recognize this virtue, a weakness is that voter registration is not a comparable denominator across states or time. The number of registrants may be affected by timing of deadlines, with election day registration being an extreme. Registration is further confounded by the existence of deadwood – people on the registration rolls who are no longer eligible for whatever reason, most often due to a move – and varied election officials' practices of purging deadwood. We thus prefer the voting-eligible population as a turnout rate denominator. With no means of identifying who among the voting-eligible population is a Democrat or Republican, we combine participation in both parties' nomination contests when constructing a state's primary turnout rate. We believe this is a feature, not a bug, as we can better quantify the depressing effects of the exclusivity of nominating contests, such as closed versus open primaries.

Our focus is on participation in primary elections. Unlike caucuses, where participation is haphazardly reported by the state parties, primaries are run by election officials and participation is a matter of public record. From the available data that we have on party caucuses, described above, we know that participation is uniformly low and thus analyses of what little information we have do not reveal appreciable discernable patterns beyond Iowa's higher participation due to being the first nomination contest. All states report primary turnout, and there is much variation across states, thus better lending itself to analysis.

Turnout in Presidential Primaries

The literature on turnout in presidential nominating contests relies on the premise that the introduction of the direct primary would increase electoral competition and popular participation.⁴⁰ Compared to the "old system" of caucuses and

³⁹ Norrander, "Measuring Primary Turnout in Aggregate Analysis," 360.

⁴⁰ Stephen Amsolabehere, John Mark Hansen, Shigeo Hirano, and James M. Snyder, Jr., "More Democracy: The Direct Primary and Competition in US Elections," *Studies in American Political Development* 24, (2010), 190–205.

conventions, voter turnout in presidential primaries indeed rose significantly. The 2008 nomination cycle recorded high turnout in many Democratic and Republican races across states, which indirectly demonstrates the role of competition in driving turnout.⁴¹ So whereas the Iowa caucuses in 2008 attracted 16.1% of the voters, the New Hampshire primaries attracted 53.6% of the voters. In 2012, however, turnout in Iowa and New Hampshire dropped to 6.50% and 31.1%, respectively.

Focusing solely on primaries, scholars have identified various factors that influence voter turnout in the presidential primaries: the electoral environment, rules, and voters. As with general elections, primaries involve campaigns, and often intense candidate competition. Whereas general elections are dominated by interparty competition, which is found to be a strong predictor of turnout,⁴² primary elections involve an abundance of intraparty competition: same-party candidates with limited resources and an uncertain electoral fate. Compared to general elections, turnout is expected to be lower in the primaries. Primary campaigns tend to have fewer resources at their disposal than general election campaigns and voters have more difficulty distinguishing between the policies offered by candidates, which also often span a narrower ideological range than general election candidates. Voters may thus rationally abstain from the presidential nomination contests since there is little benefit to learning about the policy stances of the candidates so as to cast an informed ballot.

Some state primaries may intend to have higher or lower turnout by design through the electoral rules governing the primary. Chief among these rules is the timing. The primary calendar officially begins early in the year before the November general election, typically the Iowa caucus is held in January or February, and ends with the national party conventions selecting the names of the presidential nominees. (Technically, early voting in primary contests may begin prior to the Iowa caucus; absentee voting in the 2016 New Hampshire primary began in late December of 2015.) Even before the first nomination contests, sometimes years in advance, pundits speculate who will be the party favorite during the “invisible primaries.”⁴³ It is during this period of time that interest builds among voters as the media report on the candidates’ campaigns and the state of the horserace revealed by primary polling.

⁴¹ Caroline J. Tolbert, David P. Redlawsk, and Daniel C. Bowen, “Reforming Presidential Nominations: Rotating State Primaries or a National Primary?” *PS: Political Science and Politics* 42, (2009), 71–9.

⁴² Michael D. Martinez, “Why is Turnout so Low and Why Should we Care?” ed. Jan E. Leighley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 107–24.

⁴³ The invisible primary starts after the midterm election. It does not involve casting a vote, but attracts media and occasional public attention when various presidential hopefuls are putting their names in the presidential race.

How primary elections' timing affects campaigns and voter participation has attracted much media and scholarly attention in the last decades. From a candidate perspective, early primaries offer an opportunity to candidates to test their electoral viability. Early primary wins, or surprising electoral performances that beat expectations, provide successful candidates momentum to survive into later contests. The role of the media is critical at the early stage of the primary season, since all attention is placed on who will win the first contests. As Bartels explains, candidates who win primaries – the earlier and oftener the better – find the news media magnify these victories and thereby generate more new support than their limited resources can buy. Jimmy Carter was among the first “quick learners” of this strategy.⁴⁴ Carter's victory in the 1976 Iowa Democratic caucuses and his subsequent victory of the Presidency made “the Iowa caucuses significant to campaigns and media.”⁴⁵ Eventually, a candidate will surpass the critical number of delegates necessary to win their party's nomination, or the expectation is that they will have enough based on the candidate's support in past contests. Leading up to this point, competition narrows as candidates are mathematically eliminated from winning the party nomination.

Candidates are not the only players who strategically invest in early primaries. State parties also expend effort in scheduling their primaries and caucuses early in the nomination calendar, what is known as “frontloading.”⁴⁶ Frontloading is a side-effect of presidential nomination system reforms in the early 1970s, rather than an intentional institutional intervention. States that conduct early primary elections when the winning candidate is uncertain are more influential, and wish to remain so, than states whose primaries take place later in the nomination stage.⁴⁷ The 1996 presidential election marked a significant increase in frontloading, with California, New York and Ohio moving their primaries early in the nomination calendar. The effect of this strategy on the delegate selection was stark: “77 percent of Republican delegates and 73 percent of Democratic delegates had been selected by the end of March 1996, compared with only 46 percent and 43 percent at a comparable point in 1992.”⁴⁸ It is interesting to note that the national parties

⁴⁴ Bartels “Presidential Primaries and The Dynamics of Public Choice,” 25.

⁴⁵ Tolbert, Redlawsk and Bowen “Reforming Presidential Nominations: Rotating State Primaries or a National Primary?” 72.

⁴⁶ William G. Mayer, “The Front-Loading Problem,” in *The Making of the Presidential Candidates*, ed. William G. Mayer (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2004), 1–43.

⁴⁷ Jeffrey A. Karp and Caroline J. Tolbert, “Polls and Elections: Support for Nationalizing Presidential Elections,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 40, (2010), 771–93.

⁴⁸ Andrew Busch, “New Features of the 2000 Presidential Nominating Process: Republican Reforms, Front-Loading's Second Wind, and Early Voting,” in *In Pursuit of the White House*, ed. Mayer (New York: Chatham House Publishers, 1996), 57–86.

did not wholeheartedly support frontloading. One of the main concerns was that it resembled too much of a national primary. Indeed, the National Republican Party described it as a “parody of participatory democracy”⁴⁹ and in post-1996 reforms offered carrots and sticks in the form of modified delegate bonuses or penalties to states that were willing to delay their contests or went too early, respectively.⁵⁰ Parties have also proposed to rotate primaries, but this requires bipartisan efforts and limiting the “traditional independence of state parties.”⁵¹

Some states responded to the national party organizations’ rules by adopting regional primaries held on the same day, an example of which was the Yankee primary consisting five New England states, and Great Lakes primary (Michigan, Illinois, Ohio, and Wisconsin). In 2016, a number of Southern states banded together to hold the so-called SEC primary. When California pushed its primary to March 7, 2000 the frontloading problem was exacerbated. States’ preference for greater influence of the nomination and, perhaps, higher turnout, won over a centralized party incentive structure.⁵² Michigan and Florida constitute prime examples of this state party behavior; both ignored the national party rules and scheduled their primaries before February 5 in 2008 (see Table 1). In 2012, Michigan scheduled its primary almost a month after its 2008 date, but Florida retained a similar January slot, only 2 days later.

Given that in the 2008 primary involved intense intraparty competition within the Democratic Party between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, turnout in primaries remained strong throughout the nomination battle. The irony was that while the “the calendar was more front-loaded than ever before,”⁵³ the stampede to frontload cost states influence, as their presence was diluted by competing nomination contests and the inability of candidates to campaign in them all. The moral could be drawn from the animated Disney movie “The Incredibles”: when everyone is a super, no one is a super.

49 Busch, “New Features of the 2000 Presidential Nominating Process,” 62.

50 Steven S. Smith and J. Melanie Springer, “Choosing Presidential Candidates,” in *Reforming the Presidential Nomination Process*, ed. Steven Smith and Melanie J. Springer (DC: The Brookings Institution, 2009), 1–22.

51 Busch “New Features of the 2000 Presidential Nominating Process,” 62.

52 Front-loading states adopted early voting primaries to counter front-loading, also in hopes for higher turnout and halting candidate momentum. Turnout across the states was inconsistent but a rough comparison of states with and without early voting in the 1996 primaries suggests that “early voting can distort the effects of momentum, either by inflating or deflating the votes of active candidates or by siphoning votes away from active candidates to inactive candidates or the “uncommitted” option; see Buch “New Features of the 2000 Presidential Nominating Process,” 78.

53 Norrander “Primary Elections,” 524.

Table 1: Turnout in the 2008 Presidential Primaries.

State	Date	Turnout	Inclusiveness	Concurrent
Both Parties Held Primaries				
New Hampshire	10-Jan	53.6%	SC	N
Michigan	15-Jan	20.0%	O	N
South Carolina	19-Jan (R)/26-Jan (D)	30.3%	O	N
Florida	29-Jan	34.0%	C	N
Alabama	5-Feb	32.2%	O	N
Arizona	5-Feb	24.2%	C	N
Arkansas	5-Feb	26.8%	O	N
California	5-Feb	40.0%	SC	N
Connecticut	5-Feb	20.5%	C	N
Delaware	5-Feb	23.8%	C	N
Georgia	5-Feb	32.0%	O	N
Illinois	5-Feb	33.8%	O	Y
Massachusetts	5-Feb	38.2%	SC	N
Missouri	5-Feb	33.0%	O	N
New Jersey	5-Feb	29.2%	C	N
New York	5-Feb	19.5%	C	N
Oklahoma	5-Feb	29.1%	C	N
Tennessee	5-Feb	26.1%	O	N
Louisiana	9-Feb	17.7%	C	N
DC	12-Feb	30.1%	C	N
Maryland	12-Feb	31.5%	C	Y
Virginia	12-Feb	26.9%	O	N
Washington	19-Feb	30.6%	O (NB)	N
Wisconsin	19-Feb	37.1%	O	N
Ohio	4-Mar	42.4%	O	Y
Rhode Island	4-Mar	28.4%	SC	N
Texas	4-Mar	28.4%	O	Y
Vermont	4-Mar	40.7%	O	N
Mississippi	11-Mar	27.5%	O	Y
Pennsylvania	22-Apr	34.0%	C	Y
Indiana	6-May	37.3%	O	Y
North Carolina	6-May	32.8%	SC	Y
Kentucky	20-May	29.2%	C	Y
Oregon	20-May	43.2%	C	Y
Montana	3-Jun	38.7%	O	Y
South Dakota	3-Jun	28.4%	(R) C/(D) SC	Y
One Party Held Primary				
Utah (R)	5-Feb	24.7%	C	N
Nebraska (R)	13-May	20.5%	SC	Y
West Virginia (D)	13-May	32.5%	SC	Y
Idaho (R)	27-May	17.7%	C	Y
New Mexico (R)	3-Jun	19.3%	C	Y

For inclusiveness: O, Open primary; C, closed primary; SC, semi-closed; NB, non-binding straw poll. For concurrent: N, Presidential primary only, Y, presidential and state offices primary.

The candidates lavished attention on later contests where they did not need to spread themselves so thin to cover the many frontloaded primaries. As reported in Table 1, the only primary contests with turnout <25% of voting-eligible voters were held on the not-too-Super Tuesday on February 5, or the Saturday that same week. (The candidates largely skipped the Michigan primary out of respect to the later South Carolina primary, which was sanctioned by the parties.) Still, there is some evidence that states who moved up their primaries in 2008 had higher turnout than in 2004. For example, when Illinois moved its primary from March 21, 2004 to join the Super-Tuesday states in 2008, turnout in its primary almost doubled from 18.6% to 33.8%. Similarly, when Alabama joined the Super-Tuesday states in 2008, its 2004 turnout of 15.3% in its June 6, 2004 primary also nearly doubled to 32.2%. Of course, comparisons to 2004 are suspect since George Bush did not have a serious challenge in the Republican nomination. (These two states also held their state elections concurrent with their presidential primaries in 2004, and decoupled these contests by holding separate primaries for these offices in 2008, a factor that may have increased turnout in 2004 and we discuss further.)

Because competition in the Democratic contest continued deep into the nomination calendar, the most obvious decline in primary turnout occurred between the first-in-the-nation New Hampshire primary, which has the highest turnout of all at 53.6%, and all the primaries that followed. A more typical pattern of decline is evidence in Table 2, which reports turnout rates in the 2012 nomination contest. Here, incumbent President Obama was unchallenged, and Mitt Romney eventually emerged as the inevitable Republican nominee. On April 24, primary turnout for three of the four states dwindled to low single digits.

Participation in the April 24, 2012 contests reveals a pattern heretofore underappreciated in the study of primary turnout: whether or not states held concurrent primaries for both presidential and state offices. Pennsylvania's April 24, 2012 turnout rate of 14.8% was about three times higher than the next highest state holding a primary on the same date, Delaware, with a turnout rate of 4.3%. While Pennsylvania's turnout may have been conditioned on the fact that native son Rick Santorum was on the Republican presidential ballot (although he suspended his campaign on April 10),⁵⁴ only Pennsylvania held a concurrent primary on April 24, and all states that followed did as well. Turnout rates in later contests were uniformly higher, too, with competition in state election contests shaping turnout in these later concurrent primaries once competition in the presidential

54 See: http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/OTUS/rick-santorum-suspends-presidential-campaign/story?id=16109635#.T4R9gNWk_yA (accessed 32 January 2015).

Table 2: Turnout in the 2012 Presidential Primaries.

State	Date	Turnout	Inclusiveness	Concurrent
Both Parties Held Primaries				
New Hampshire	10-Jan	31.1%	SC	N
Florida	31-Jan	12.8%	C	N
Missouri	7-Feb	7.4%	O (NB)	N
Michigan	28-Feb	16.5%	O	N
Arizona	28-Feb	11.9%	C	N
Vermont	6-Mar	21.1%	O	N
Georgia	6-Mar	15.8%	O	N
Ohio	6-Mar	14.0%	O	Y
Tennessee	6-Mar	13.4%	O	N
Massachusetts	6-Mar	11.2%	SC	N
Oklahoma	6-Mar	14.7%	C	N
Tennessee	6-Mar	13.4%	O	N
Vermont	6-Mar	21.1%	O	N
Alabama	13-Mar	24.8%	O	Y
Mississippi	13-Mar	18.2%	O	N
Illinois	20-Mar	17.9%	SC	Y
Louisiana	24-Mar	10.2%	C	N
DC	3-Apr	13.7%	C	Y
Maryland	3-Apr	14.7%	C	Y
Wisconsin	3-Apr	18.7%	O	N
Connecticut	24-Apr	2.3%	C	N
Delaware	24-Apr	4.3%	C	N
New York	24-Apr	1.4%	C	N
Pennsylvania	24-Apr	14.8%	C	Y
Rhode Island	24-Apr	3.0%	SC	N
Indiana	8-May	20.2%	O	Y
North Carolina	8-May	31.5%	SC	Y
West Virginia	8-May	20.2%	SC	Y
Nebraska	15-May	18.7%	SC	Y
Oregon	15-May	21.9%	C	Y
Arkansas	22-May	15.9%	O	Y
Kentucky	22-May	12.8%	C	Y
Texas	29-May	12.8%	O	Y
California	5-Jun	22.9%	(R)C/(D)SC	Y
Montana	5-Jun	31.1%	O	Y
New Jersey	5-Jun	8.8%	C	Y
New Mexico	5-Jun	16.6%	C	Y
South Dakota	5-Jun	15.0%	(R)C/(D)O	Y
One Party Held Primaries				
South Carolina (R)	21-Jan	17.6%	O	N
Virginia (R)	6-Mar	4.6%	O	N
Utah (R)	16-Jun	14.3%	C	Y

For inclusiveness: O, Open primary; C, closed primary; SC, semi-closed; NB, non-binding straw poll. For concurrent: N, Presidential primary only; Y, presidential and state offices primary.

primary had waned. North Carolina and Montana broke 30% turnout rates, and both states had open-seat governor races that attracted primary contenders for both parties' nominations. Among these later concurrent primaries, only New Jersey dipped into the single digits. New Jersey holds state elections in odd-numbered years so only federal elections were on the ballot. The only statewide office was the Senate, which likely was the marquee primary contest of most interest to New Jersey voters, but even this race likely failed to ignite interest. Incumbent Sen. Robert Menendez had an uncontested primary, while his eventual general election opponent Joe Kyrillos, won by a margin of 68 percentage points. The only other offices on the New Jersey ballot were congressional elections, where competition was uneven.⁵⁵

Competition thus appears to affect primary participation, with concurrent primaries offering the prospect that a lower ballot race can substitute for presidential primary turnout once the presidential nomination has wrapped up. When frontloading, state parties generally decide to decouple presidential and state office primaries since they prefer state primaries to be held closer to the general election to avoid early candidate filing deadlines in the year proceeding the general election, winter campaigning, and a long dead period between the primary and general election. The decision to decouple presidential and state office primaries can be expensive, as millions of dollars may need to be expended to conduct an additional statewide election. When Illinois decided to move their primary to the Super Tuesday in 2008 they kept state elections on the ballot, making the election the earliest concurrent primary in the country. Unhappy with the experience, the state moved the concurrent primary later in the calendar to March 20 in 2012.⁵⁶

Another electoral rule generally believed to affect primary turnout is inclusiveness. Closed primaries restrict participation to only persons who have registered with a political party, so they logically might have lower turnout since the number of persons eligible to vote in the primary is restricted. However, the effect of inclusiveness may be muted if non-party registered voters are uninterested in participating in a party primary; those truly interested in participating could register with a party even if they did not consider themselves a party affiliate. Given the preceding discussion, to most easily observe the effect of inclusiveness on turnout, we might look to primaries held on the same date to hold

⁵⁵ The most-contested 2012 New Jersey congressional races were for the paired-incumbents in the Ninth District (due to redistricting) and the open seat in the Tenth District.

⁵⁶ See: <http://www.governing.com/blogs/politics/states-weigh-later-dates-2012-presidential-primaries.html> (accessed 31 January 2015).

constant competition in the presidential primary and the presence of concurrent state elections. We thus turn to the Super Tuesday contests. In 2008, the closed primary February 5th Super Tuesday contests had an average turnout rate of 24.4%, while the open or semi-open primary states (both allow all voters to participate), had an average turnout of 32.8%. Teasing out these patterns in 2012 is more difficult since all of the March 6th Super Tuesday contests except Oklahoma had open or semi-open contests; Oklahoma had a slightly lower turnout rate of 14.7%, a point less than the 15.7% average of the seven other states. Thus, greater inclusiveness does appear to lead to higher turnout, but the effect is not overwhelming.

In summation, we observe that competition matters to presidential primary turnout, in two forms. First, when presidential primary competition is heightened near the beginning of the nomination calendar, voters are drawn to participate in the early contests. When the presidential nomination nears an end as a candidate emerges that will clearly win the party nomination, competition may arise from another source: competitive concurrent primaries for state offices. Since most states opt to decouple presidential primaries from state office primaries near the beginning of the presidential nomination calendar and may hold concurrent primaries near the end, a substitution effect may emerge as presidential nomination competition is substituted for state office primary competition. We also can observe a smaller effect from primary inclusiveness, whereby participation tends to be lower in closed primaries compared to open and semi-closed primaries, where all voters may participate.

Who Votes in Primaries?

Perhaps as important as voter turnout is who turns out to vote, since the composition of the electorate shapes the discourse around the nomination season and the selection of the eventual nominee. As the preceding discussion makes clear, primary voters compared to general election voters participate under different institutional conditions, vote on different dates, and are exposed to different campaign stimuli. Not only are there no partisan restrictions in the general election, the contest is also clearer: competition reaches its peak nationally, although similar to primary voters not all general election voters are exposed to the same levels of competition, and the electorate's interest in the election is heightened. Both structurally and contextually, we therefore expect primary and general election voters differ, and this is what scholars generally find. Most scholars agree that the primary electorate is unrepresentative of the general population in terms

of partisan strength, ideology, and demographics.⁵⁷ Research shows that primary voters are more partisan, more ideologically extreme, more educated, wealthier, and more “in tune” with politics.⁵⁸ Apart from being easily mobilized, this segment of the primary electorate is found to be more politically sophisticated, more actively engaged in campaigns and more capable of “picking up” cues from the ambiguous issue advocacy during primary campaigns.⁵⁹

We compare the demographic characteristics of the primary and general election electorates in the 2008 presidential election using the 2008 American National Election Study (ANES) Panel Study, which was fielded during the primaries, and the 2008 ANES post-election time-series. The demographic and attitudinal characteristics reported in Table 3 generally confirm the expectations based on prior research, with a notable exception. Primary voters differ from general election voters with respect to their demographic characteristics, such as gender and age; primary voters in 2008 were older and males, more affluent, and significantly more interested in politics than general election voters. Only 10% of the primary electorate were Independents, in contrast to approximately 33% of the general election electorate. Perhaps not surprisingly, the majority of voters who participated in the primaries were liberals and conservatives (79.2% cumulative). In the general election, liberals and conservatives comprised of 46.4% of the electorate, with moderates making up 53.6% of voters. Despite all these differences however, we found minimal differences with respect to race, although this may be due to the historic candidacy of Barack Obama, the first viable African-American presidential candidate.

Given the consistently lower turnout in primary elections compared to general elections, we confirm the conventional wisdom is that primary voters are more ideologically extreme than general election voters. Experimental research connects attitudinal stability in the primary season with high cognitive capacity, or more plainly, high educational levels as educated voters are “most likely to see

57 Austin Ranney, “The Representativeness of Primary Electorates,” *Midwest Journal of Political Science* 12, (1968), 224–38; Bartels “Presidential Primaries and The Dynamics of Public Choice,”; Elisabeth R. Gerber and Rebecca B. Morton, “Primary Election Systems and Representation,” *Journal of Law Economics and Organization* 14, (1988), 304–24; William A. Galston, and Elaine C. Karmack, “The Still-Vital Center: Moderates, Democrats, and the Renewal of American Politics,” Report, Third Way (2011), 1–41.

58 Bartels “Presidential Primaries and the Dynamics of Public Choice,” 140.

59 R. Richard Herrera, “The Crosswinds of Change: Sources of change in the Democratic and Republican Parties,” *Political Research Quarterly* 48, (1995): 291–312; James A. McCann, “Nomination Politics and Ideological Polarization: Assessing the Attitudinal Effects of Campaign Involvement,” *The Journal of Politics* 57, (1995), 101–20; David C. Barker, “Values, Frames, and Persuasion in Presidential Nomination Campaigns,” *Political Behavior* 27, (2005), 375–94.

Table 3: Characteristics of 2008 Primary and General Election Voters.

2008 Primary Voters (%)	Demographics		2008 GE Voters (%)
48.5	Sex	Men	43.0
51.5		Women	57.0
76.8	Race	Non-Hispanic Whites	76.2
12.3		Non-Hispanic Blacks	12.2
3.1		Non-Hispanic Others	4.3
7.8		Hispanics	7.4
12.8	Age	18–29	18.3
23.9		30–44	23.7
41.3		45–64	39.1
22.0		65+	18.9
35.6	Education	High School	36.1
28.7		Some College	28.8
22.7		College Graduate	18.6
13.0		Post-secondary	16.6
15.9	Income	<\$25,000	15.3
49.3		\$25,000–\$75,000	44.2
34.8		>\$75,000	40.4
65.0	Interest in Politics	High	30.6
27.4		Moderate	40.2
7.6		Low	29.2
48.9	Party	Democrat	36.8
10.0		Independent	32.8
41.1		Republican	30.4
30.9	Ideology	Liberal	18.1
20.8		Moderate	53.6
48.3		Conservative	28.3

Source: NES 2008 Panel Survey, 2008 Post-Election Time-Series Survey, weighted numbers.

the connections between value priorities, ideology, and partisanship,⁶⁰ thereby pulling their party's candidates to the left or the right during the primary season, which necessitates a step back to the middle in the general election.⁶¹ Supporters of reforms, therefore, often suggest that open primaries are a solution to produce a more moderate electorate.⁶²

⁶⁰ Barker "Values, Frames, and Persuasion in Presidential Nomination Campaigns," 388.

⁶¹ Bartels "Presidential Primaries and the Dynamics of Public Choice."

⁶² Galston and Karmarck "The Still-Vital Center: Moderates, Democrats, and the Renewal of American Politics."

Table 4: Characteristics of Open or Semi-Closed and Closed Primary Voters and General Election Voters.

Primary Inclusiveness	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative
Open, Semi-Closed	33.1%	21.7%	45.2%
Closed	32.4%	21.5%	46.1%
General	18.1%	53.6%	28.3%

Source: NES 2008 Panel Survey, ANES 2008 Time-Series Survey.

In Table 4, we report the ideological characteristics of 2008 presidential primary electorates in closed and open or semi-closed primary states. We see little evidence that the inclusiveness of the primary affects the ideological character of primary electorates across these states. This appears to comport with our turnout analysis, where we find inclusiveness is only weakly correlated with turnout. While we caution that the lack of findings may be due to heightened interest in the 2008 election, our analysis is most consistent with the notion that only the most highly politically engaged voters participate in nomination contests and the uninterested moderates are unlikely to be enticed to participate by more inclusive rules alone. We add that this analysis is only for presidential nomination contests and may not apply for other, lower profile, offices.

Discussion: Presidential Nomination Reform

The adoption of primaries arose from dissatisfaction with the 19th century caucus system dominated by party bosses. Presidential nomination contests continue to evolve even today, as reformers tweak the rules to address perceived flaws among primaries. Tolbert, Redlawsk and Bowen suggest that reform should be goal-oriented, such that the presidential nomination system promotes “candidate quality, voter information, participation, and voter equality.”⁶³ While we cannot fully address candidate quality and information, we can address participation and voter equality, as they relate to similar participation rates.

We have explored the timing as to when nomination contests are held. It is clear that the very first nomination contests attract the highest voter interest expressed by voter participation. Candidate competition driving voter interest is at its peak for the first nomination contests when a clear frontrunner has yet to break

⁶³ Tolbert, Redlawsk and Bowen “Reforming Presidential Nominations,” 72.

from the pack. Iowa's caucus and New Hampshire's primary routinely draw the highest participation levels of any caucus or primary, respectively. We infer from this that voters in Iowa and New Hampshire are treated differently than voters in other states. Once nonviable candidates stumble and drop out of the race, voters in later contests are faced with fewer choices and may never have the opportunity to cast a meaningful vote for their most-preferred candidate.

In addition to candidate competition, we find that concurrent presidential and state office primaries – particularly for contests later in the election calendar – tend to have higher participation levels. The urge for states to increase their relevance by frontloading their nomination contests near the beginning of the election season is understandable, as these states want the attention candidates' campaigns lavish on the early states. Yet, frontloading is not without costs. Primary states are faced with a decision as what to do with their state office primary. When state office primaries are held concurrently with frontloaded presidential primaries, campaigns for state offices may be extended for an undesirable period of time. An option is to decouple state office and presidential primaries; then states then bear the sometimes millions of dollars in costs to hold an additional election. Furthermore, a train wreck may occur when too many states collide with one another by frontloading, thereby ironically decreasing their influence, as was the case in 2008 when some of the lowest primary turnouts occurred on Super Tuesday.

One suggested reform to treat all voters equally is to move to a national primary. But this may adversely affect candidate quality, as only the most well-funded candidates have the resources to compete nationally. Dark horse candidates would be robbed of their opportunity to build momentum through early success. The 2008 Super Tuesday collision is further instructive of what may happen with a national primary, as turnout suffered when even the best-funded candidates were spread too thin. Adding more states in a national primary would most likely only exacerbate this problem.

One of the virtues of the extended nomination contests is that candidates can focus on voters in successive states. Campaigns evolve as mistakes are made and candidates work to improve their game for the general election. A reform that captures the virtue of the current system, but stops short of a national primary, is to group states and rotate the group order from election to election. Defining groups and sequence would mean greater involvement by the national party, and tread upon the "traditional independence of state parties."⁶⁴ Iowa has proven most resistant, writing into their state law that their caucus "shall be at least

⁶⁴ Busch "New Features of the 2000 Presidential Nominating Process," 62.

8 days earlier” than any other nomination contest.⁶⁵ As we have seen, some states hold concurrent presidential and state office primaries, and states may have a strong preference for their primary date. The national parties could use large sticks or carrots to force or entice states to fall in line for regional rotating primaries, but one might imagine tensions would rise between states and the national parties. Thus, while regional primaries are likely the most viable reform of the presidential nomination calendar, this reform is most likely to emerge as compacts between states, as it has in the past.

Another oft-mentioned reform is adoption of open primaries to increase participation and to change the shape of the primary electorates. We see evidence that closed primaries do indeed slightly depress turnout but they have an electorate ideologically similar open and semi-closed primary electorates (see Table 4). We are further mindful that the Supreme Court has determined that state parties control how they nominate delegates to their conventions, and they may resist external efforts to force open primaries. Meaningful reform of this nature must originate within state parties, but is unlikely to have a significant effect on participation or the ideological character of the electorate.

More ambitious reforms would have parties adopt alternative electoral systems for selecting candidates, such as using the single-transferrable vote to express preferences among candidates so voters will not feel a vote for a dark horse candidate is wasted. A close analogy is to award delegates proportional to votes for candidates, although we do not investigate the effects of such rules here. There may be other good reasons to adopt alternative systems, but we suspect given the narrow range of turnout that we observe among all but the first contests that alternative electoral systems would likely have a minimal effect on turnout.

We add to these suggestions our own, which is to move the nomination calendar to later in the year, as generally happened in 2012 compared to 2008 as states responded to national party threats of sanctions if nomination contests were held too early. Later nomination contests allow more presidential and state primaries to be held concurrently. This reform is compatible with state party preferences, as they often do not want a long campaign period for state office candidates, who do not share the same campaign resources as the presidential candidates do. We suspect that weary voters who find themselves trapped in perpetual campaigns would also welcome a shorter presidential campaign. While these are speculative virtues, the concrete benefits we take from our analyses are twofold. First, turnout will rise where voters are interested in participating in competitive presidential and state office primaries. Second, the costs of elections will be lowered

⁶⁵ Iowa Code 43.4.

when one less statewide election is held. Later primaries that facilitate more concurrent primaries would thus enhance the characteristic that correlates strongest with primary participation, electoral competition.

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