

Primary Election Reform and Congressional Elections

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ABSTRACT

Primary elections in the United States have undergone enormous change in recent decades and reformers have continued to push for further changes. In this dissertation I seek to investigate how the differences among these primary elections affect both candidates and voters, with a particular focus on the top-two primary, which has been largely excluded from the previous literature. I evaluate the effect of primary elections systems on candidate ideology, electoral competition, and voter participation to determine what differences, if any, exist among these primary election systems. I find that significant differences in candidate ideology, electoral competition, and voter participation do exist among these primary election systems.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Primary elections are fundamentally important to any political system. They winnow down the field of candidates to a digestible number and reduce the probability of vote splitting among likeminded voters in the subsequent general elections (Alvarez and Sinclair 2015). Yet, the means by which each primary election system achieves these goals are changing as reformers have increasingly sought to alter state laws to produce novel primary election systems. While most states employ primary elections where each party nominates one candidate, thus limiting the general election ballot to no more than one candidate from each party, other states have removed parties as the central purpose of the primary election. Washington State and California use a top-two primary where candidates of all parties and no party compete simultaneously for two positions on the general election ballot. Whichever two candidates receive the most votes will be the choices voters are presented with in the November general election regardless of the candidates' party affiliation (California Secretary of State, Washington Secretary of State). More recently in the 2022 primaries, Alaska used its recently adopted top-four primary in which four candidates are chosen to proceed to the general election regardless of their party affiliations and voters then use ranked-choice voting to select the winner in the general election (Bohrer 2020; Bradner 2022).

The study of primary election systems are hardly a new endeavor (Merriam and Overacker 1928). Nor is the study of how candidates and voters are affected by various primary election systems (Kazee 1983; Gerber and Morton 1998; Galderisi et al. 2001; Brady et al. 2007; Alvarez and Sinclair 2015). However, the removal of parties as the central purpose of

Washington State and California's primary elections are more than a minor deviation from the traditional primary election systems and beg the question: *how do primary elections, particularly the top-two primary, affect candidates and voters?* Previous studies have focused on how primary elections have produced varying results as a consequence of the inclusion of different voters. The transformation of primary elections from elections to choose party nominees to elections to choose candidates regardless of their party affiliation, present opportunities for better understanding the effects of primary election systems on candidates and voters.

I argue that the significant changes established by the top-two primary provide the opportunity for far greater moderation than previous primary election systems have allowed. The inclusion of independent voters in semi-closed and open primaries are often cited as the causal mechanism for reducing the ideological polarization of candidates chosen from these primary election systems. The barriers to voting in a top-two primary are significantly lower and should allow for a far more diverse electorate than an open primary since there are no requirements to either register with a party or choose between parties when voting in the primary. Consequently, the outcomes of these elections should be the election of more moderate candidates than those chosen in other primary election systems.

Similarly, I argue that the more diverse electorates participating in the top-two primary should create greater opportunities for electoral competition. Traditional primaries divide the electorate among the various parties' primary elections. Therefore if a single candidate is seeking the nomination of their party in a closed, semi-closed, or open primary then such elections are uncontested and give voters no choices. Whereas the top-two primary incorporates all candidates into a single election and the same scenario would produce a multi-candidate election that would determine which two candidates proceed to the general election. This reality ensures that voters

must participate, rather than skipping the election, to ensure that their preferred candidate or party has a place on the general election ballot. Furthermore, this dynamic encourages greater voter participation. If there is an actual decision to be made rather than a ballot filled with uncontested elections then voters should be more likely to participate in the election because their vote will actually matter.

Plan for this Dissertation

To investigate the effects of primary elections on candidates and voters throughout this dissertation I use an original dataset covering the 1996 to 2022 elections compiled from the volumes of the Almanac of American Politics published between 1995 and 2021 (Barone and Ujifusa 1995; 1997; 1999; Barone et al. 2001; 2003; 2005; Barone and Cohen 2007; 2009; Barone and McCutcheon 2011; 2013; Cohen et al. 2015; Cohen and Barnes 2017; Cohen and Cook 2019; Cohen et al. 2021), election results and statistics published by the Federal Election Commission (Canavan 1997; Canavan 1999; Canavan and Whitener 2001; Canavan and Kania 2003; Canavan and Bucelato 2005; 2007; 2009; Leamon and Bucelato 2011; 2013; 2015; 2017; 2019; and 2022), DW-NOMINATE scores (Lewis et al. 2023), and 2022 data is compiled from each election agency in the state, typically the state's secretary of state (Alabama Secretary of State n.d.; Alaska Division of Elections n.d.; Arizona Secretary of State n.d.; Arkansas Secretary of State n.d.; California Secretary of State 2022; Colorado Secretary of State n.d.; Connecticut Secretary of State n.d.; Delaware Department of Elections n.d.; Florida Secretary of State n.d.; Georgia Secretary of State 2022; Hawaii Office of Elections 2022; Idaho Secretary of State 2022; Illinois State Board of Elections 2022; Indiana Secretary of State n.d.; Iowa Secretary of State 2022; Kansas Secretary of State 2022; Kentucky State Board of Elections 2022; Louisiana Secretary of State 2022; Maine Secretary of State 2022; Maryland State Board of Election 2022;

Massachusetts Secretary of the Commonwealth n.d.; Michigan Secretary of State 2022; Minnesota Secretary of State 2022; Mississippi Secretary of State 2022; Missouri Secretary of State 2022; Montana Secretary of State 2022; Nebraska Secretary of State 2022; Nevada Secretary of State 2022; New Hampshire Secretary of State 2022; New Jersey Secretary of State 2022; New Mexico Secretary of State 2022; New York State Board of Elections 2022; North Carolina State Board of Elections 2022; North Dakota Secretary of State n.d.; Ohio Secretary of State n.d.; Oklahoma State Election Board n.d.; Oregon Secretary of State 2022; Pennsylvania Department of State 2022; Rhode Island Board of Elections 2022; South Carolina Election Commission 2022; South Dakota Secretary of State 2022; TN Secretary of State n.d.; Texas Secretary of State n.d.; Office of the Lieutenant Governor of Utah n.d.; Vermont Secretary of State n.d.; Virginia Department of Elections n.d.; Washington Secretary of State 2022; West Virginia Secretary of State 2022; Wisconsin Elections Commission n.d.; Wyoming Secretary of State n.d.). The extensive time period covered by this dataset allows the study to include various eras that encompass the widest variety of primary election systems used in the United States. This includes the ultimately doomed blanket primary to one of the most recent iterations of primary election reforms in the top-two primary.

In Chapter 2 I investigate how primary elections affect candidate ideology using DW-NOMINATE scores. Previous research has demonstrated that candidates nominated in closed primary elections are more likely to be ideologically extreme than candidates selected in open primaries (Gerber and Morton 1998). In these studies the differences between closed primaries and open primaries are relatively minor. In both cases voters are participating in an election to choose one candidate to represent their party on the general election ballot. The significant difference are which voters are permitted to participate, one only allows party members to

participate in the election and the other permits all registered voters. The observed differences between these primaries have been credited to independent voters serving as a moderating force for the open primaries. I hypothesize that the top-two primary should encourage far more voters to participate since there are no partisan barriers to voting and voters of all partisan identities are permitted to participate. The findings of this chapter however demonstrate the opposite of expectations. Instead of the top-two primary encouraging moderation I find little support for the hypotheses. Furthermore, I find the closed primary actually produces the most moderate candidates during the study period.

In Chapter 3 I investigate how primary election systems affect electoral competition. Primary elections are often highly uncompetitive with a majority of primaries being uncontested. I evaluate how each primary election system provides opportunities for political competition among candidates. I use several measures of competitiveness including whether the election is uncompetitive, the margin of victory earned by the winning candidate, and whether the incumbents are more likely to be defeated in a particular primary election system. These measures will help to evaluate whether the more open systems permitting a wider array of voters allow for a greater degree of competitiveness and perhaps electoral volatility. I hypothesize that the greater accessibility of voters and the lack of partisan boundaries produced by the top-two primary provide more opportunities for competitive elections compared with the more traditional primaries and especially more than the closed primary. The results of this chapter largely support my expectations with the top-two primary creating a more competitive environment across multiple measures. However, the competitiveness of top-two primaries is not absolute and one significant measure, whether the primary produces more defeated incumbents, does not

demonstrate significance. I argue that that while primary elections are largely producing more competitive primaries, they are not necessarily fulfilling the promise competition suggests.

In Chapter 4 I investigate how primary elections affect voter participation. Voter participation is a fundamental element of any election. I hypothesize that the lack of partisan barriers in the top-two primary encourages greater participation in the primary election process than the traditional primary election systems. Voters are not forced to register a party affiliation or choose between a particular party's ballot to participate in the selection of candidates for the general election. The results of this chapter support my expectations with modest increases in voter participation compared with traditional primary systems. Finally, in Chapter 5 I present my concluding remarks. I draw upon the analyses in the previous chapters to discuss the various ways primary election systems have affected candidates and voters in congressional elections. But before I proceed to the next chapter, the remainder of this chapter will focus on a brief history of primary elections. I will also define the varying forms of primary elections currently in use across the United States and the primaries formerly in use.

A Brief History of Primary Election Systems and Reforms

The landscape of American primary election systems have been a dynamic array of institutions since their first use in the late Nineteenth Century. The first primary elections were fully closed primaries where only registered party members were permitted to participate in the selection of the party's nominees (Merriam and Overacker 1928). In states with closed primaries the state typically registers a formal party affiliation for each voter when they register to vote to determine which voters are eligible to participate in a particular party's primary (Bott 1990). This initial form of a primary election as intended to democratize the process of choosing a party's candidate, while also emulating the party conventions that has previously been responsible for

choosing candidates by limiting the electorate to the party's members (Merriam and Overacker 1928; Ware 2002). The use of primary elections for candidate nomination also ensured that political parties, at least for the time being, were institutionalized into the electoral process. Formalizing candidate selection into a state-sponsored step in the electoral process helped to ensure that parties would have a legally guaranteed place in the electoral process which the previous convention system could not as an entirely private affair of the party (Ware 2002). In the early Twentieth Century several states began to broaden the electorate available to participate in their primary elections by allowing independent voters or all voters the opportunity to participate in the party's primary (Merriam and Overacker 1928; Bott 1990). Primaries in which any voter is permitted to participate in an election to choose a party's nominee is considered an open primary. Whereas semi-closed primaries are any primary elections in which registered party members and voters unaffiliated with a party are permitted to vote in the election (Bott 1990).

Nearly all states in the United States use either a closed, semi-closed, or open primary; but a few states have used alternative primary election systems. In 1934 the Washington State Legislature adopted a blanket primary which it continued to use until 2004. California voters followed Washington State's lead by passing the Open Primary Act in 1996, a ballot proposition to use the blanket primary in lieu of the closed primary. The blanket primary is an interesting primary election system. The blanket primary looks fairly similar to the traditional primary election systems used throughout the United States, except that voters in the blanket primary do not have to choose between the ballots of different political parties. In closed primaries voters are limited to the ballot of the party in which they are registered and even though voters have

Table 1.1 Primary Election Systems by State ¹		
Closed Primary 1. Colorado 2. Delaware 3. Florida 4. Iowa 5. Idaho ² 6. Kansas 7. Kentucky 8. Maryland 9. Maine 10. New Hampshire 11. New Jersey 12. New York 13. Oklahoma 14. Oregon 15. Pennsylvania 16. South Dakota 17. Utah 18. Wyoming Semi-Closed Primary 1. Arizona 2. Massachusetts 3. North Carolina 4. Nebraska 5. Oklahoma 6. Rhode Island 7. West Virginia	Open Primary 1. Alabama 2. Arkansas 3. Georgia 4. Hawaii 5. Illinois 6. Indiana 7. Michigan 8. Minnesota 9. Missouri 10. Mississippi 11. Montana 12. North Dakota 13. Ohio 14. South Carolina 15. Tennessee 16. Texas 17. Virginia 18. Vermont 19. Wisconsin	Convention Nomination with Primary Runoff 1. Utah Convention Endorsement with Primary Runoff 1. Connecticut Top-Two Primary 1. California ³ 2. Washington ⁴ Top-Four Primary 1. Alaska ⁵ Jungle Primary 1. Louisiana ⁶

significant flexibility in an open primary, they are still forced to make a choice between the ballot of one of the parties. Whereas the blanket primary gives every voter the same ballot with the same candidates from every political party. Voters are free to choose to vote for any person,

¹ Data for this table compiled from McNitt 1980, Bott 1990, National Conference of State Legislatures 2011

² Idaho used an open primary prior to 2014 but Democrats continue use the open primary.

³ California used the blanket primary from 1998 to 2000; the closed primary prior to 1998 and after 2000 until the top-two primary came into effect in the 2012 election

⁴ Washington used the Blanket Primary, then the open primary, and finally the top-two primary.

⁵ Alaska used a blanket primary and semi-closed primary prior to using the Top-Four primary in 2022.

⁶ Louisiana used a closed primary in the 2008 and 2010 election cycle.

regardless of their party affiliation, but voters can only cast one vote for one candidate seeking election to each office (California Secretary of State 1996). Therefore, a voter could cast one for the Republican candidate for U.S. Senate and then cast a vote for the Democratic candidate for U.S. House of Representatives. The votes from each ballot are then counted and the candidate receiving the most votes from each party then proceeds to the general election as the nominee of their respective parties. Effectively this means each voter is choosing to participate in a party’s primary from one office to the next. In the previous example, the voter is choosing to participate in the Republican Party’s primary while they vote for U.S. Senate but they are choosing to participate in the Democratic Party’s primary when they vote for U.S. House of Representatives.

Table 1.2 Blanket Primary Process

Candidate	Percent of Vote		General Election Ballot
Green Party Candidate	3%	→	Green Party Candidate
Libertarian Candidate	5%	→	Libertarian Candidate
Democrat A	24%		
Democrat B	27%	→	Democrat B
Republican A	23%	→	Republican A
Republican B	18%		

The blanket primary creates simultaneous interparty and intraparty competition among candidates since they cannot know which voters will cast votes for them. The idea behind this system is to encourage candidates to moderate their policy positions and actions so they receive votes from a broad swath of the electorate. The proponents of Proposition 198, the successful ballot initiative that changed California’s election laws, argued in the State’s official voter guide that the blanket primary would moderate the candidates “by forcing candidates to focus on issues, not just partisanship. It will also give independent voters-currently excluded in the primaries-a chance to participate” and further argued that the blanket primary would “make

elected officials more responsive to the voters, not the party chairmen” and finally “by selecting candidates from both parties with broader bases of voters” (California Secretary of State 1996).

While the use of the blanket primary in Washington State occurred with little opposition, the same was not true in California. California’s political parties quickly sued the State for violating their right to freedom of association. The parties argued that their ability to represent the values of their members were destroyed by the blanket primary since all voters could switch between voting for one party’s candidate to voting for another party’s candidate as they travelled down their ballots. Consequently, the voters of the party’s opponents would be able to dilute and possibly deny the party’s nomination to the candidate the actual members of the party preferred. Of course the same type of strategic voting has often served as a criticism of the traditional open primary system, but in an open primary system a voter must commit to only voting in the primary of one party and having official records record them as voting in a particular primary’s election which may dissuade some individuals.

Ultimately the U.S. Supreme Court agreed with the arguments of California’s political parties and declared the blanket primary an unconstitutional violation of the parties’ right to freedom of association (California Democratic Party et al. v. Jones 2000) and resulted in California, Washington, and Alaska adopting new primary laws to conform to the Supreme Court’s decision (Washington Secretary of State n.d., Alaska Division of Elections 2013). California chose to return to a closed primary system which the state has used prior to the adoption of the blanket primary and Washington chose to adopt an open primary system (California Secretary of State n.d., Washington Secretary of State n.d.). Whereas Alaska opted for a semi-closed primary election system for the Republican Party, although the Democratic

Party, the Libertarian Party, and the Alaskan Independence Party continued to participate in a voluntary blanket primary system (Alaska Division of Elections 2013).

The return to a more traditional primary systems in these states would however, be short lived. Washington State voters chose to create a new primary election system that would emulate the principles they believed the blanket primary encouraged. In 2004 voters in Washington State adopted Initiative 872 to create the top-two primary. Under this novel system voters would again receive a ballot with candidates from all political parties as well as independents. However, this system would avoid the constitutional pitfalls that doomed the blanket primary system. In the top-two primary voters would not select candidates to represent the political parties, the crucial problem with blanket primary according to the U.S. Supreme Court. Instead, voters would cast one vote for a candidate running for each office. The state would then tabulate the votes and whichever two candidates won the most votes would proceed to the general election ballot. The main difference between the blanket primary and top-two primary are that voters are not selecting party nominees. Instead voters are simply winnowing the field of candidates to two individuals. One of the main consequences of using a top-two primary is the probability that two candidates from the same political party could advance to the general election, the top-two primary makes this a real possibility.

Table 1.3. Top-Two Primary Process

Top-Two Primary Ballot	Percent of Vote	General Election Ballot
Green Party Candidate	3%	
Libertarian Candidate	5%	
Democrat A	24% →	Democrat A
Democrat B	27% →	Democrat B
Republican A	23%	
Republican B	18%	

The implementation of the top-two primary was delayed several years by federal litigation initiated by Washington's political parties. However, Initiative 872 was eventually upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court as constitutional. The justices reasoned that the lack of a party nomination in the top-two primary means that parties are not denied the ability to clearly advocate their policy preferences. No person is selected to represent a party on the general election ballot under the top-two primary and therefore no constitutional violation occurs (*Washington State Grange v. Washington State Republican Party* 2008). In 2010 California voters once again followed the lead of Washington State and passed Proposition 14 to establish a top-two primary with the intent to encourage greater moderation among candidates than traditional primary elections presumably permitted (McGreevy 2010). California and Washington are the only states to adopt the top-two primary, but they are not the only states to consider the adoption of this primary. Numerous states, including Arizona, Florida, Oregon, and Montana have considered, but ultimately rejected the adoption of the top-two primary in favor of retaining their existing party primaries out of fear that the top-two primary would not produce the ideal results promised by reformers (Penrose 2012; Wilson 2014; Mapes 2014; *New York Times* 2020).

The top-two primary creates a truly novel approach to primary elections in the United States as political parties are removed from the center of the system. The top-two primary is distinct from a nonpartisan primary that is used by many states in the selection of judges, local offices, and notably the members of Nebraska's unicameral legislature because the top-two primary does allow candidates to list their party affiliation on the ballot. Therefore, the partisan heuristic is activated for voters but the party is procedurally irrelevant to who will win one of the two places on the general election ballot. Under a truly nonpartisan primary voters would only

see a list of candidates without any indication of their partisan affiliation. The top-two primary is also fundamentally different from the blanket primary. Under a blanket primary every party would have a guaranteed place on the general election ballot, whereas under the top-two primary only two candidates are guaranteed a place on the general ballot regardless of the number of parties competing in the primary. Proponents of the top two primary argued that “no party [should be] guaranteed a spot on the general election ballot” and that “parties will have to recruit candidates with broad public support and run campaigns that appeal to all voters” thus benefiting voters with more moderate and potentially bipartisan officeholders (Washington Secretary of State n.d).

Louisiana’s “jungle” primary is comparable but significantly different from the top-two primary used in California and Washington State. First, the Louisiana primary is not entirely a primary election. Instead, the November general election is the first time Louisiana voters cast a ballot during the election cycle. Functionally this election appears identical to a top-two primary election as there can be, and often are, multiple candidates from each party competing for office. Louisiana’s primary is also distinct from the top-two primary since state law also allows this election to be the only election Louisiana needs to conduct. If one candidate earns a majority vote, then the candidate is elected to office and no other elections are needed; but if no candidate wins a majority vote then there must be a runoff between the two candidates with the highest number of votes. The use of the runoff election would make Louisiana’s primary identical to the top-two primary except that the runoff can be avoided with a majority vote, thus ensuring that this type of election system is fundamentally distinct (Kazee 1983).

The terminology for primary election systems can be incredibly inconsistent within the literature and popular culture. Confusingly many primary election systems are often described as

open primaries when any voter can participate in the primary election. This means that the open primary, blanket primary, top-two primary, and Louisiana's jungle primary are all simultaneously described as an open primary (Kazee 1983; Gerber and Morton 1998; Cavanaugh et al 2012). This identification as an open primary is inherently problematic as there are significant institutional differences between these various primary election systems. Furthermore, the the top-two primary and jungle primary are often described as nonpartisan primaries. This too is an inadequate description of the primary system. As I noted earlier in this chapter the top-two primary and jungle primary allow candidates to list their partisan affiliations which is explicitly prohibited in a nonpartisan primary. Therefore partisan heuristics can be activated in the top-two and jungle primaries whereas they are unlikely in a nonpartisan primary unless voter knowledge of the candidates is high and candidates openly express their partisan leaning, regardless the primary ballot will be devoid of any mention of a partisan label.

Recent Reforms: Alaska and Probably Nevada

Reforming primary election laws continue to be a major theme across the United States since the adoption of the top-two primary in the 2010s. However, some states have considered different alternatives to the traditional primary election systems and the top-two primary. In Alaska, voters adopted Measure 2 in the 2020 election to establish a top-four primary. The top-four primary is an interesting evolution from the top-two primary. The top-four primary is nearly identical to the top-two primary, with all candidates competing on the same ballot for four positions on the general election ballot, rather than two positions. Furthermore, partisan labels are present on the ballot but they are irrelevant to which four candidates will proceed to the general election. Of course, the increased number of candidates proceeding to the general election does mean the possibility of vote splitting would be higher which is why the ballot

measure also changed the general election to introduce ranked choice voting. Ranked choice voting ensures that vote splitting will be reduced and that no one wins office without a majority of the votes cast in the election. The use of ranked choice voting means that Alaska will join Maine in the adoption of this electoral system in lieu of the traditional first past the post election commonly used throughout the United States (Kitchenman 2022; Clyde 2022). In 2022 Nevada voters passed a constitutional amendment to create a top-five primary. The top-five primary is identical to the top-four primary, except that the top-five primary allows for five candidates to be selected for the general election ballot (Clyde 2022). In the same manner as the top-four primary, voters in the general election will select the winning candidate using ranked choice voting thereby ensuring that the winning candidate will earn a majority vote and voters will not have to worry about splitting their votes.

Unfortunately for this dissertation a study including the Top-Four Primary and the Top-Five Primary will not be possible. Alaska's top-four primary was first used in the 2022 primary elections and therefore there is only a single case representing Alaska's lone seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. Furthermore, Nevada's state constitution requires amendments to be adopted twice by voters before they can become part of the constitution. The passage of the ballot initiative in 2022 was an important first step but the state's voters must pass the initiative again in 2024 before the change in primary election system can take effect (Clyde 2022). Nevertheless, the adoption of the top-four primary in Alaska and the likely adoption of the top-five primary in Nevada along with the adoption of the top-two primary in California and Washington indicate significant pressure in the American political system to reform primary election systems. Voters are clearly interested in creating political systems which encourage greater moderation, great voter participation, and greater choice than they are currently receiving

from their political leaders and they believe that the primary election system is a ripe target for achieving those goals. In the following chapters I examine how primary elections fare on each of these categories and help to illuminate what each primary election system does and does not encourage.

CHAPTER TWO

THE EFFECTS OF PRIMARY ELECTION SYSTEMS ON CANDIDATE IDEOLOGY

California and Washington are not the only states to attempt, or succeed in, changing their state's primary election system. Numerous other states have sought to change their primary election systems in an attempt to control the ideologies of candidates produced by their state's primary election system. In 2011 the Idaho Republican Party successfully sued their state in federal court to limit the types of voters eligible to participate in their party's primary. Idaho law established an open primary election, which meant that any registered voter in Idaho could choose to vote in any party's primary on election day without having to declare a party affiliation. The Idaho Republican Party fought against this provision of state law out of fear that allowing all Idaho voters the opportunity to participate in their primary would result in their party nominating candidates that opposed issues central to the party's identity.

The Executive Director of the Idaho Republican Party made their party's point clear by stating that the party's executive committee voted to close their primary because "our members believe that Democrats were openly crossing over and voting in the Republican Party, picking our candidates, and essentially just tampering with the process" and that "we do believe that it [a closed primary] will make the system a little more pure" (Wright 2012). Indeed Idaho Republicans sought to change their party's primary system to encourage greater conformity with conservative values out of fear that a broader swath of the electorate participating in their primaries would dilute the party's message.

Ultimately, a federal District Court judge agreed with the Idaho Republican Party and ruled that "Idaho's current primary system violates their First Amendment rights" and forced the

state to close their primary elections unless the party voluntarily agreed to open their primary election to all voters (*Idaho Republican Party v. Ysasura* 2011). Of course, the fears of the Idaho Republican Party are hardly unique. The reason the blanket primary was successfully challenged in federal court and declared unconstitutional was because California's Democratic Party and Republican Party feared the system would moderate their candidates and strip them of their ideological identities (*California Democratic Party v. Jones* 2000).

Whether the reforms in California and Washington or the lawsuits filed in Idaho, voters and parties clearly believe that candidate ideology is affected by the type of primary election system used in their respective states. These cases bring forth an important question. How do primary election systems affect candidate ideology? If candidate ideology is unaffected by primary election systems then these often expensive changes are rather pointless. However, voters and parties clearly believe that primary elections are fundamental to the type of candidates that will be produced to represent their parties. In this Chapter I examine the effects of each primary election system on candidate ideology with a particular emphasis on how the novel top-two primary affects candidate ideology.

Ideological Polarization and Moderation

Outside of popular opinion and politics numerous studies have sought to better understand the relationship between primary elections and candidate ideology. The empirical record for these studies indicates clear differences among officeholders and candidates based on which primary election system the candidate emerged (*Gerber and Morton* 1998, *Westley et al.* 2004, *Alvarez and Sinclair* 2012, *McGhee et al.* 2013, *Alvarez and Sinclair* 2015). *Gerber and Morton* (1998) broadly find that the any primary election system allowing more voters to participate will encourage greater moderation of candidates. However, their analysis does

indicate that “nonpartisan and blanket primaries produce the most moderate general election winners from both parties” (Gerber and Morton 1998) a finding that reformers in Washington and California would likely readily embrace. Nonetheless, less-open systems such as open primaries and semi-closed primaries still showed moderation compared with the closed primary systems. Similarly, Westley et al. (2004) found that blanket primaries and open primaries were more likely to produce moderate candidates because there were more moderate voters participating in the primary election. Whereas closed primary elections will be more likely to produce ideologically extreme candidates because of their smaller and more ideologically extreme electorates (Westley et al. 2004, Kaufmann et al. 2003).

The link between the top-two primaries and the more open primary systems appears, at least on its surface, to stand on logical footing. In the top-two primary there is a single primary election ballot for all candidates regardless of their partisan affiliation or lack of partisan affiliation. Therefore, all voters will choose which two candidates will proceed to the general election from among the same pool of candidates. It would be easy to assume that the same forces that moderate candidates in open primaries, semi-closed primaries, and blanket primaries would moderate candidates in a top-two primary. The presence of less partisan voters and independent voters in the primary electorate would mean that less extreme candidates will have a larger and more diverse set of voters to give them votes so they can attain the plurality or majority necessary to surpass their more extreme counterparts.

The results of the blanket primary election system are particularly illuminating to the likelihood that the top-two primary should produce more moderate candidates. On the surface, the blanket primary election would appear to be nearly identical structurally to the top-two primary. All voters receive the same primary ballot and cast one vote under each office

regardless of the party of the candidate. However, the main difference is that under the blanket primary election there will be a Republican candidate, a Democratic candidate, and third party candidates on the general election ballot regardless of how many votes they receive in the primary because the purpose of the blanket primary is still to nominate one candidate to represent each party. Whereas the top-two primary exists to eliminate all candidates except the two candidates with the most support, regardless of party affiliation. Nonetheless voters will be able to cross the partisan barrier within the primary by casting a vote for a Democrat for one office and then a Republican for another based on their feelings toward individual candidates despite whichever partisanship they possess.

Despite the general consensus on the effects of primary elections on ideology, the literature is not unanimous in finding more open systems producing moderate candidates. McGhee et al. (2014) found limited support for open primaries moderating candidates to state legislatures compared with closed primaries, however they do not find support for other primary election systems moderating candidate ideologies (McGhee et al. 2014). McGhee et al. offer a few ideas for these findings including that the number of moderate independents may be lower than previously thought and that fewer voters are willing to crossover and vote in a different party's primary. Additionally they suggest that the reason for the lack of moderation may be a result of the increasing polarization found not only among Members of Congress but also state legislators (McGhee et al. 2014). These findings may be outliers since they contradict much of the previous research but are nonetheless an important reminder of the need for replication of previous studies in addition to exploring new areas of research.

Much of the previous research indicates that primary elections should produce more ideologically extreme candidates when independent voters and voters of the opposition party are

not permitted to participate in the primary. This would suggest that closed Democratic primaries should produce more liberal candidates and closed Republican primaries should produce more conservative candidates than other primary election systems. Furthermore, the more open a primary election system is the more moderate candidates should become as they are influenced by independent voters and opposition party voters participating in the primary. Based on these expectations I make the following hypotheses about the relationship between primary election systems and candidate ideology.

Hypothesis 1: the top-two primary will produce the most moderate candidates among primary election systems

Hypothesis 2: the closed primary will produce the most liberal candidates among Democratic primaries and the most conservative candidates among Republican primaries.

Data and Methods

In this Chapter I use four models to evaluate the effect of primary election systems on candidate ideology. The dependent variable in both models is candidate ideology. To measure candidate ideology I use the first dimension NOMINATE scores from 1996 to 2022 (Lewis et al. 2023). Ideally any researcher would want to use NOMINATE scores for every candidate competing in the primary election in order to evaluate the effect of the primary election system. Unfortunately data on candidate ideology for individual candidates are not available. Instead I use the NOMINATE scores of Members of Congress to approximate the effects of primary election systems on candidates produced by each primary election system. While this approach is not ideal it is nevertheless the best opportunity to understand candidate ideology and is the

approach used in previous studies of candidate ideology (Gerber and Morton 1998; Westley et al. 2004; Brady et al. 2007; McGhee et al 2014).

To measure the main independent variables I utilize five dichotomous variables to capture the effects of each primary election system. A value of one indicates that the primary is either closed, semi-closed, open, blanket, or a jungle primary and a value of zero indicates that the case is not one of the aforementioned primary types. In this analysis the top-two primary is used as the reference category. The use of the top-two primary as the omitted category best captures what this study is attempting to understand. The proponents of the adoption of the top-two primary have made strong claims that the top-two primary will produce more moderate candidates and therefore using the top-two primary as the reference category will allow for a clear comparison between the top-two primary and all other primary systems to see if such claims bear any validity. However, I do use the closed primary as the omitted category for third and fourth models.

In addition to the main independent variables I include several independent variables to control for various affects. I measure district partisanship using the presidential vote in each congressional district. In the analysis of Democratic Members of Congress I calculate this measure by subtracting the percentage of vote for the Democratic presidential candidate in the congressional district by the percentage of vote for the Republican presidential candidate in the same district. Similarly, in the analysis of Republican Members of Congress I reverse this measure so that the district partisanship variable measures the percentage of vote for the Republican presidential candidate in their congressional district minus the percentage of vote for the Democratic presidential candidate in the same district. I also include a variable measuring whether the election occurs within the same years as a presidential election. A measure of

southern states is also included in the model. The South is measured by coding a value of one for each state which formed part of the confederacy. The inclusion of this variable is important because the analysis extends from the present into the 1990s when southern conservative voters remained a prominent constituency within the Democratic Party. Therefore, the ideologies of Democratic candidates will be skewed further to the right in this time period. To capture how competitive elections may impact the ideology of candidates I include a measure of primary margin of victory which measures the percentage of vote earned by the winning candidate over the closest losing candidate. Finally, I include a measure of the number of candidates competing in the election. This is a continuous measure of the number of candidates.

The results presented in Table 2.1 demonstrate that Model 1 provides some support for hypothesis 1 and no support for hypothesis 2. The semi-closed primary and blanket primary both indicated significant results and with negative coefficients. These results indicate that the semi-closed primary and blanket primary both produced more liberal Members of Congress than the top-two primary. This finding does support the proposition that the top-two primary produces more moderate candidates. However, the results for the closed primary and open primary are statistically insignificant. This means that the most closed primary election systems which only allows registered party members to participate in their elections is not producing any more, or less, ideological candidates than the top-two primary and the same is true for the open primary.

Results and Discussion

Table 2.1 OLS Regression

DV: Candidate Ideology (NOMINATE)	Model 1: Democratic Members of Congress
Closed	0.004 (0.009)
Semi-Closed	-0.037* (0.011)
Open	-0.007 (0.009)
Blanket	-0.035* (0.016)
Jungle	-0.018 (0.025)
Number of Candidates	-0.002 (0.002)
Primary Margin of Victory	-0.030** (0.011)
District Partisanship	-0.339*** (0.008)
South	0.034*** (0.005)
Presidential Election Year	0.035** (0.011)
Constant	-0.264*** (0.017)
N	2,514
Prob > F	0.0000
R ²	0.4175
Adjusted R ²	0.4123

p<.1#, p<.05*, p<.01**, p<.001***

The jungle primary also does not indicate any statistical relationship between candidate ideology and primary system compared with the top-two primary. There results make sense given the strong similarities between the top-two primary and the jungle primary. The multiparty and multi-candidate environment should produce very similar results to the top-two primary. The control variables in this analysis largely fall into expectations. Only the number of candidates was insignificant. District partisanship was negatively correlated with candidate ideology indicating that more strongly Democratic congressional districts produce more liberal Members

of Congress. This finding is consistent with expectations. If a congressional district heavily leans toward a particular party then the district will be more likely to support more ideological candidates, in this case more liberal candidates. However, Democratic congressional districts are more likely to produce more conservative candidates when they are located in the southern states.

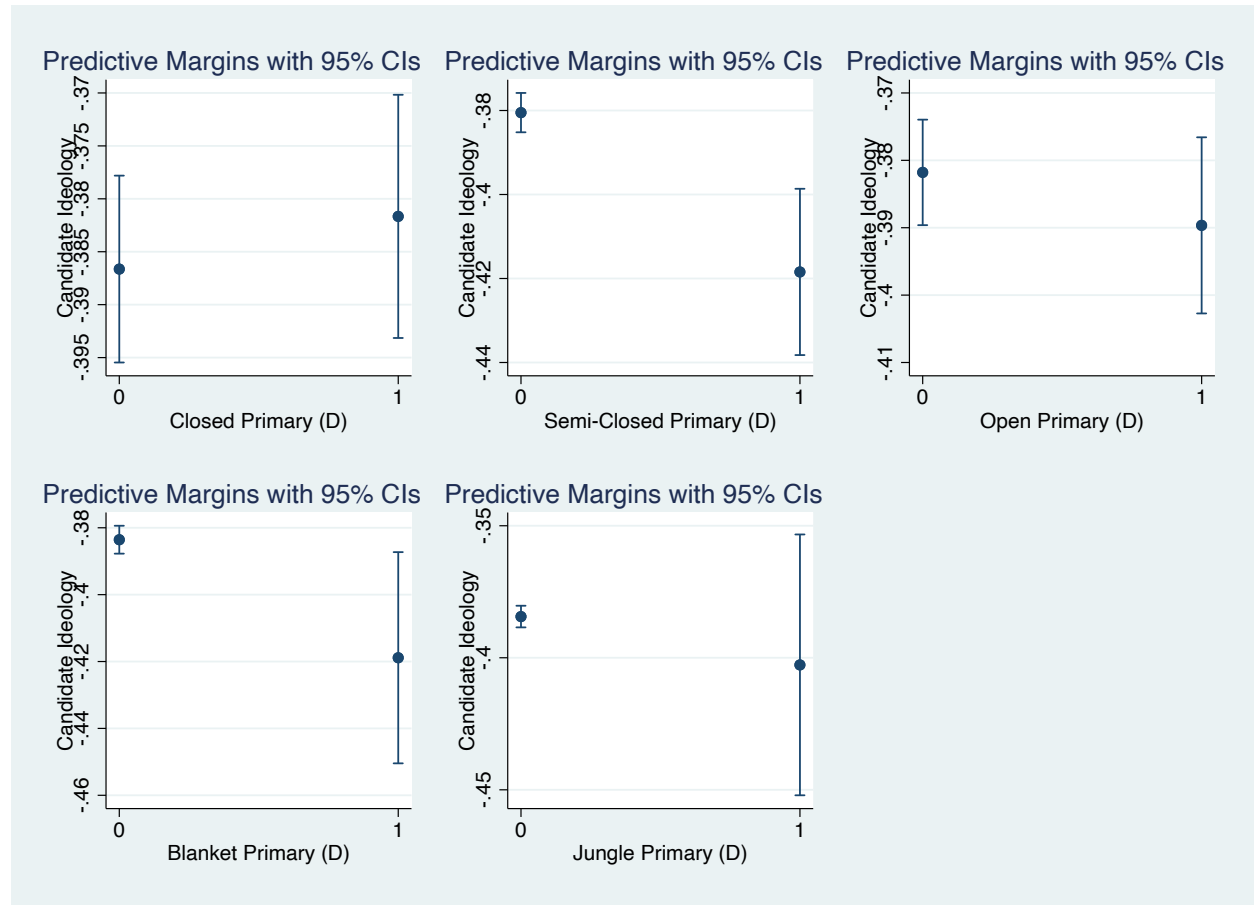


Figure 2.1 Predictive Margins for Democratic Candidate Ideology by Primary Election System

Figure 2.1 identifies the predictive margins for candidate ideology among Democratic Members of Congress by each primary election system. The results in this figure identify similar patterns to the results of Table 2.1. The semi-closed primary and blanket primary are both predicted to produce more liberal Democratic candidates. However, the results also indicate that the closed primary, the open primary, and the jungle primary could produce more liberal

candidates but that the range of possibilities indicated by the 95 percent confidence intervals is quite substantial and therefore those primaries will very likely produce candidates on a similar ideological point.

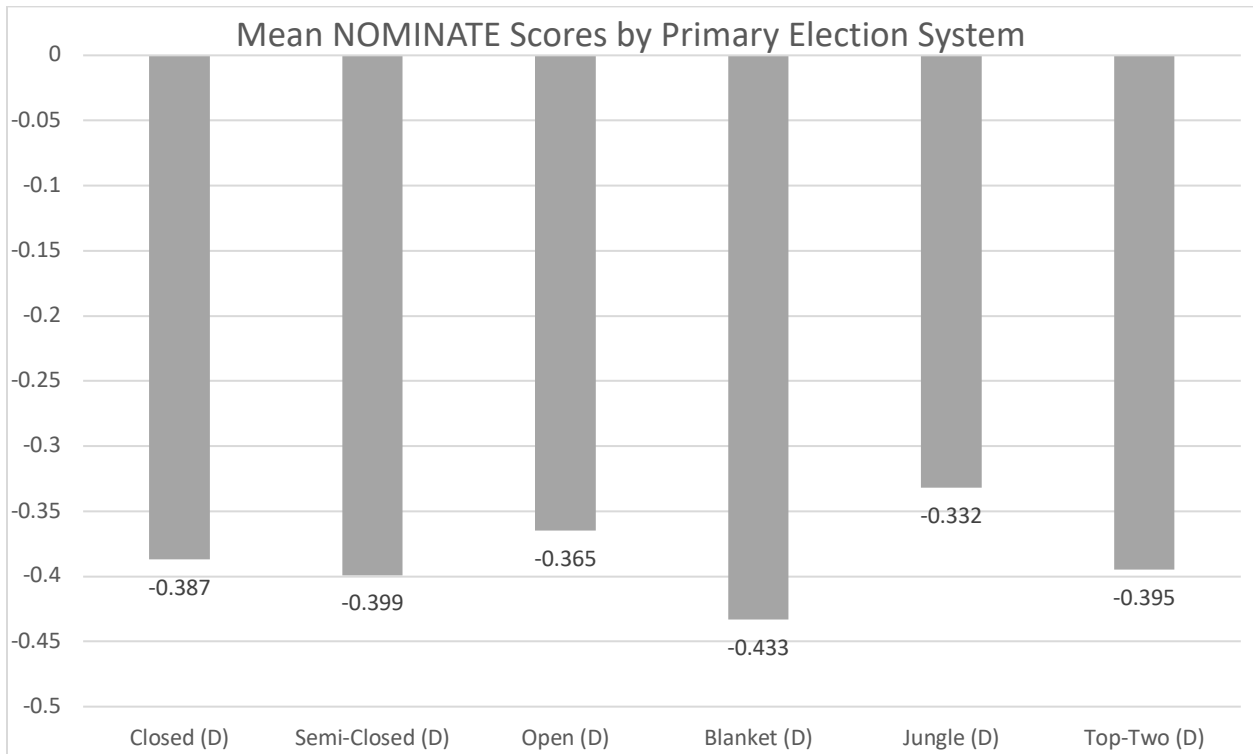


Figure 2.2 Mean Ideology of Democratic Members of Congress by Primary Election System

Figure 2.2 identifies the mean ideological scores of Democratic Members of Congress from 1996 to 2022. The summary statistics presented in this figure show that the blanket primary has the most extreme average ideological score of -0.433 indicating that Democratic Members of Congress chosen through this primary type are on average more liberal than other candidates. The jungle primary produces the most moderate ideological score among Democrats with a score of -0.332. The average scores for the blanket primary producing the most liberal officeholders while the jungle primary produces the least liberal officeholders are perhaps not that surprising when we consider the geographical orientation of these primary election systems. The blanket

primary was only used in Alaska, California and Washington. California and Washington account for the vast majority of these cases as their representation in Congress far outweighs Alaska's single House seat. California and Washington are also heavily Democratic states and undoubtedly produce more liberal candidates as a consequence. The jungle primary is only used in Louisiana and therefore the candidates produced in this state are usurpingly more moderate than Democrats in other regions of the country.

Table 2.2 OLS Regression

DV: Candidate Ideology (NOMINATE)	Model 2: Republican Members of Congress
Closed	-0.072* (0.022)
Semi-Closed	0.000 (0.025)
Open	-0.014 (0.002)
Blanket	-0.002 (0.032)
Jungle	-0.033 (0.032)
Number of Candidates	0.006 (0.004)
Primary Margin of Victory	0.057** (0.018)
District Partisanship	0.014*** (0.003)
South	0.059*** (0.007)
Presidential Election Year	-0.089 (0.102)
Constant	0.291* (0.104)
N	2,435
Prob > F	0.0000
R ²	0.1689
Adjusted R ²	0.1614

p<.1#, p<.05*, p<.01**, p<.001***

Table 2.2 presents the results for Model 2, the effect of primary election systems on candidate ideology among Republican Members of Congress. The results from Model 2 indicate

a starkly different outcome. While Democratic closed primaries showed no significance, the same is not true for Republican closed primaries. This model indicates that Republicans elected in closed primaries are more likely to be moderated by their primary than the top-two primary. This finding is particularly surprising given that previous research has indicated that the closed primary often produces the most ideological candidates. Instead, this indicates that the Republican closed primaries are producing more moderate candidates compared with the top-two primary.

The remaining primary election systems all indicate no significant relationship in contrast to the previous model which indicated that semi-closed primaries and blanket primaries were significant. Among Republicans the top-two primary seems to have no effect or produces more ideological candidates than alternative primary election systems. However the control variables were more in line with expectations. Republican Members of Congress elected from more strongly Republican congressional districts were more likely to be conservative than those elected from more evenly split districts. This finding aligns with the findings for Democrats in Model 1. The southern states similarly produce more conservative Members of Congress among Republican than Members of Congress from other regions of the United States.

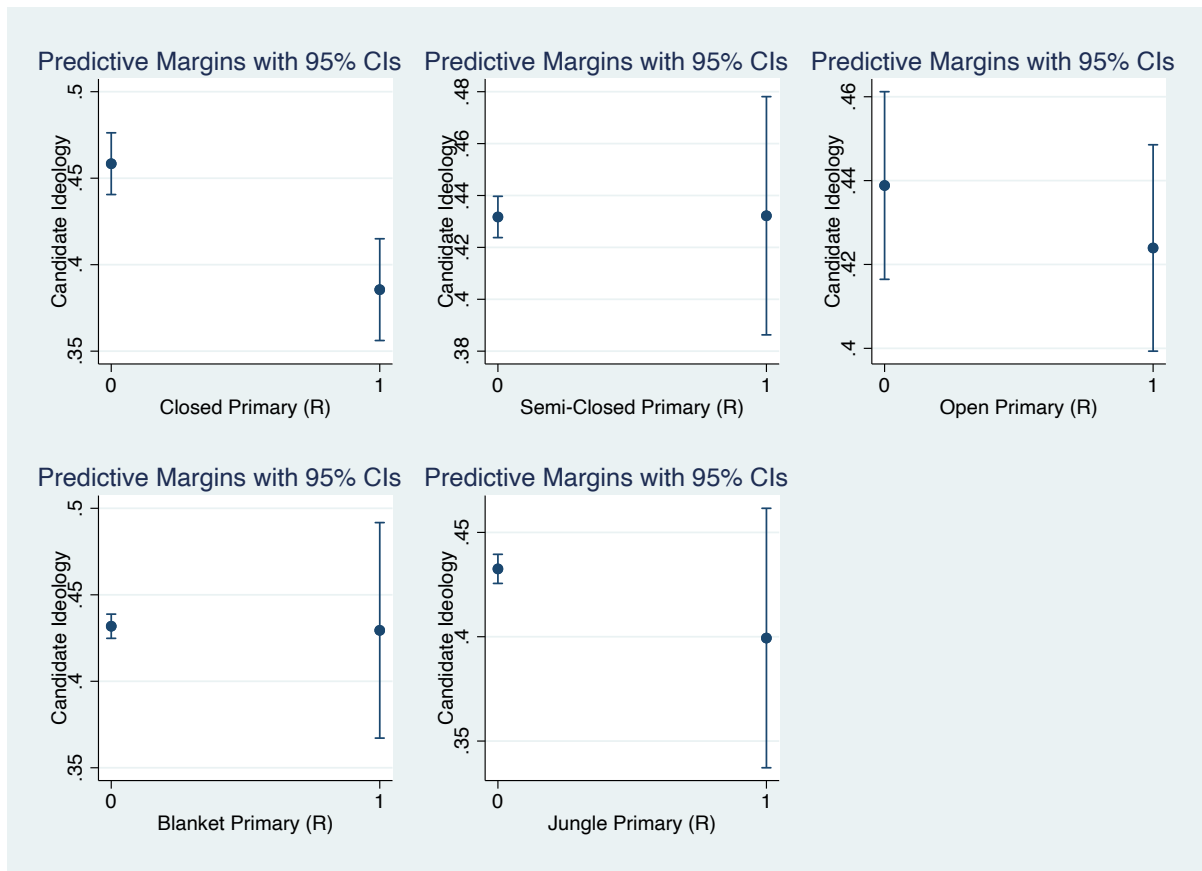


Figure 2.3 Predictive Margins for Republican Candidate Ideology by Primary Election System

The predictive margins in Figure 2.3 show similar results to those found in Table 2.2. The predicted relationship among primary elections and candidate ideology similarly find that the closed primary is likely to result in more moderate candidates than the top-two primary. Whereas the other primary election systems do not have a strong relationship in any direction. Although the several primaries do produce results that are slightly more moderate these results are banded within large error bars which render the results insignificant. These findings further support the proposition that only the closed primary has a statistically significant difference from the top-two primary.

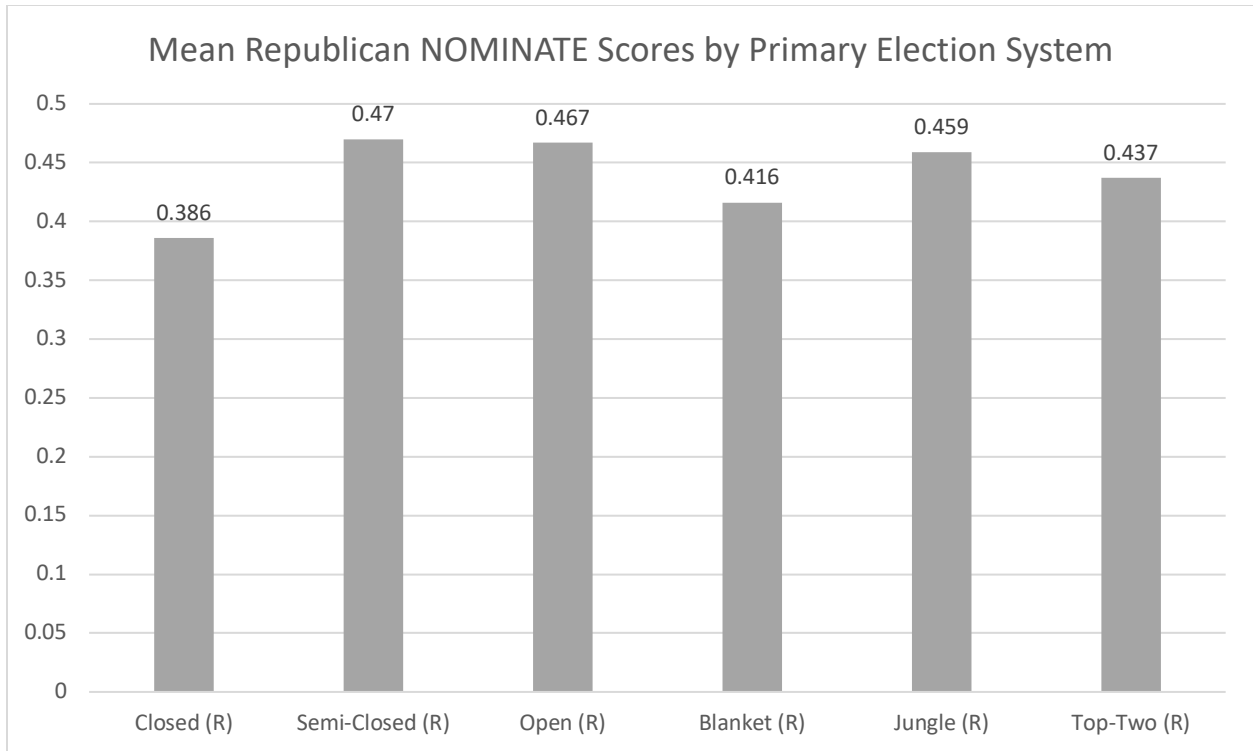


Figure 2.4 Mean Ideology of Republican Members of Congress by Primary Election System

Figure 2.4 presents the mean ideological scores of Republican Members of Congress from each primary elections system. In this figure the closed primary produces an average ideological score of 0.386. While this score is conservative it is visibly more moderate than the average ideological score for the other primaries which all range from 0.416 to 0.47. These summary statistics provide further evidence to support the findings in the Model 2 and Figure 2.3 that closed primaries are producing more moderate candidates relative to other primary election systems. The top-two primary in particular has an average ideological score of 0.437 well above the ideological score for the closed primary.

Table 2.3 OLS Regression

DV: Candidate Ideology	Model 3: Democratic Members of Congress
Semi-Closed	-0.042*** (0.007)
Open	-0.012* (0.005)
Blanket	-0.040** (0.013)
Jungle	-0.023 (0.024)
Top-Two	-0.004 (0.009)
Number of Candidates	-0.002 (0.002)
Primary Margin of Victory	-0.030** (0.011)
District Partisanship	-0.339*** (0.008)
South	0.034*** (0.005)
Presidential Election Year	0.035** (0.011)
Constant	-0.259*** (0.015)
N	2,514
Prob > F	0.0000
R ²	0.4175
Adjusted R ²	0.4175

p<.1#, p<.05*, p<.01**, p<.001***

The results in Models 1 and 2 were rather surprising. In Models 3 and 4 I seek to better understand the relationship between ideology and primary election type by changing the omitted variable from the top-two primary to the closed primary. Clearly the top-two primary does not produce uniformly moderate candidates compared with the other primary election systems. In Table 2.3 I rerun the analysis from Table 2.1 to see the differences between the closed primary and other primary election systems. The results from Table 2.3 make a clear case that the closed primary produces candidates with significant ideological differences. The semi-closed, open, and blanket primaries all demonstrate negative and statistically significant results. This demonstrates

that the closed primary is more producing more moderate candidates than these primaries.

Whereas the semi-closed, open, and blanket primaries are producing more liberal candidates.

The control variables produce similar results once again. Primary margin of victory and district partisanship are both negative and statistically significant. These results indicate that the Democratic Members of Congress elected from more heavily Democratic congressional districts are likely to be more liberal than those elected from more competitive districts. Once again the Democrats elected from southern states are more moderate than those elected from other regions of the United States.



Figure 2.5 Predictive Margins for Democratic Candidate Ideology by Primary Election System

The predictive margins for the ideologies of Democratic Members of Congress chosen by each primary election system provide further evidence to support the findings in Table 2.3. In

each case the predictive margins suggest that the ideology of Democrats elected in each primary election system would be more liberal than candidates elected in the closed primary. Although, in most of the primaries these predictions are within the margin of error. Nevertheless, this does demonstrate that the typical finding of closed primaries producing more ideological candidates does not appear to hold among recent Democratic Members of Congress.

Table 2.4 OLS Regression (Model 4)

DV: Candidate Ideology (NOMINATE)	Model X: Republican Members of Congress
Semi-Closed	0.073*** (0.013)
Open	0.057*** (0.008)
Blanket	0.070** (0.024)
Jungle	0.039 (0.025)
Top-Two	0.072** (0.022)
Number of Candidates	0.006 (0.004)
Primary Margin of Victory	0.057** (0.018)
District Partisanship	0.014*** (0.003)
South	0.059*** (0.007)
Presidential Election Year	-0.089 (0.102)
Constant	0.218* (0.105)
N	2,435
Prob > F	0.0000
R ²	0.1689
Adjusted R ²	0.1614

p<.1#, p<.05*, p<.01**, p<.001***

The findings in Table 2.4 present the results of the analysis of Republican Members of Congress using the closed primary as the omitted category. Similar to the results presented in Table 2.3, the results of Table 2.4 once again demonstrated that the closed primary does not

produce the most ideological candidates. Among Republican Members of Congress, the semi-closed, open, blanket, and top-two primaries all produces more conservative candidates than those elected in the closed primary and confirm the results from the previous analysis.

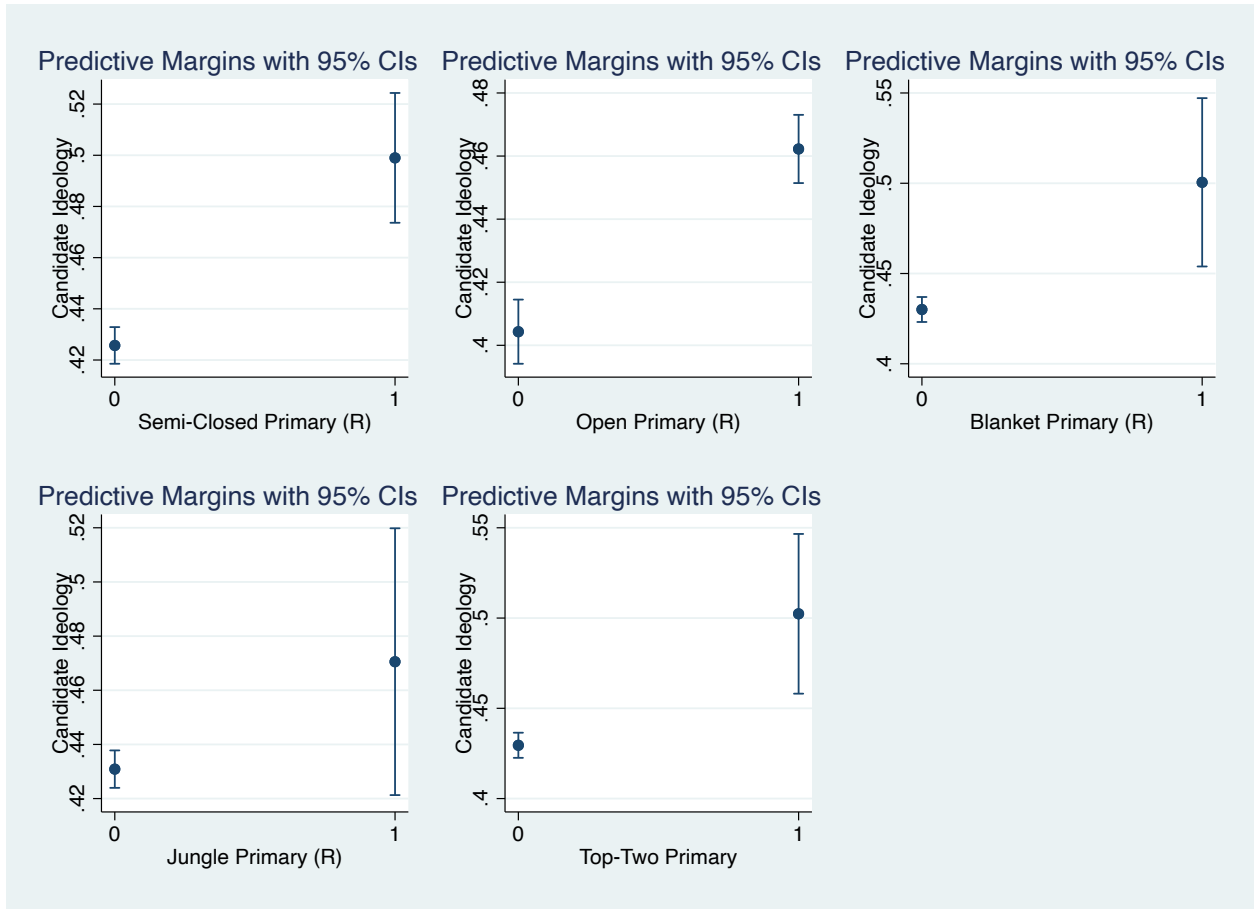


Figure 2.6 Predictive Margins for Republican Candidate Ideology by Primary Election Systems

Figure 2.6 presents the predictive margins for the Republican Members of Congress elected from each primary election systems provide further evidence to support the findings in Table 2.4. In this figure each primary election system is predicted to produce more conservative candidates than the closed primary. Only the jungle primary does fails to produce statistically significant results, a result found in Table 2.4.

Conclusions

The findings in this chapter address one of the main concerns among parties and voters seeking to alter their primary election laws; how do primary election systems affect candidate ideology? As I stated earlier one of the main concerns among voters have been whether primary election systems are producing more ideological candidates and officeholders. Voters have placed a premium on producing more moderate officeholders who are willing to work in a bipartisan manner to accomplish the work of governance. Whereas parties have been focused on whether primary election systems produce candidates adhering to their party's ideals. In either case, voters and parties are concerned about the possibility of primary election systems encouraging outcomes they can support and fear other primary election systems can produce outcomes that undermine their goals.

The findings of this chapter confirm that primary election systems do impact candidate ideology but not in the way many people would think. Perhaps the most striking finding in this chapter are the results of Models 3 and 4 which find that the closed primary actually produces the most moderate candidates relative to other primary election systems in both Democratic and Republican primaries. This result flies in the face of previous research which had found that closed primary to be the most ideological of the primaries. Those results made sense on numerous levels. Only allowing voters who have chosen to register with the party to participate in the primary would seem to ensure only the most ideological voters are participating in the primary election. However, the results in this chapter suggest the opposite. The other primaries which allow independent voters, the semi-closed, open, and blanket primaries, actually produce more ideologically liberal candidates in Democratic primaries and more ideologically conservative candidates in Republican primaries.

While partisanship and ideology are highly correlated they are not the same. Certainly congressional districts with strong partisan leans toward the Democratic Party often produce more ideologically liberal candidates and congressional districts with strong partisan leans toward the Republican Party often produce more ideologically conservative candidates. However, this does not mean that all people willing to register as Democrats are the most ideologically liberal voters within their district, nor does it mean that people registered as Republicans are the most ideologically conservative voters within their district. While people often associate independent voters with moderation this not necessarily the case. Undoubtedly many people who are ideologically moderate refuse to strongly identify with a party out of disgust with ideological extremes but the same can also be true for those more ideologically extreme in their beliefs. If a voter believes that the party is too moderate or unwilling to fight the good fight and take strong stances in an extremely conservative direction or an extremely liberal direction then those voters might identify as independents and refuse to register with a party, even if they typically support the Democratic candidate or the Republican candidate in the general election or would be willing to vote in a primary if they don't have to register a party affiliation.

With these considerations the results from Models 1 and 2, using the top-two primary as the omitted category, begin to make more sense. The top-two primary allows for far more people to participate in the primary than the other primary election systems since all voters receive the same ballot regardless of their partisan affiliation and voters are not required to register with a party in order to participate in the election. Perhaps the more independent voters participating in the primary are on balance more ideologically extreme than moderate. This would account for the top-two primary producing more ideologically conservative Republicans than other primary

systems. However, the question does still remain as to why the Democratic Party's semi-closed and blanket primaries do produce more liberal candidates than the top-two primary whereas the closed primary and open primary do not. An answer is not readily apparent. The blanket primary in particular should have many of the same forces as the top-two primary since all voters would receive the same ballot. However, there appears to be a different impact than the top-two primary.

Overall the findings of this chapter demonstrate strong evidence that primary systems do produce differences in candidate ideology. Which is undoubtedly the reason that parties and voters continue to invest resources in changing or attempting to maintain their current primary election systems. However, the effects of primary election systems may not be what parties and voters expect.

CHAPTER THREE

THE EFFECTS OF PRIMARY ELECTION SYSTEMS ON COMPETITIVENESS

Competitive elections are a fundamental component of democracy. Yet, Americans rarely have the opportunity to vote in a competitive election for the U.S. House of Representatives. The vast majority of congressional districts are highly uncompetitive, and therefore the outcome of the general election is largely a foregone conclusion (Mayhew 1974, Ansolabehere et al. 1992, Abramowitz et al. 2006, Quarshie 2023). While the partisan lean of congressional districts often precludes the possibility of a competitive general election, the same would not necessarily be true in primaries where voters have more latitude to support different candidates without sacrificing their partisan preferences. Yet, most primary elections are similarly uncompetitive. In Oregon’s First Congressional District, which stretches from eastern Portland and its suburbs to the Pacific Ocean, incumbent Democratic Congresswoman Suzanne Bonamici easily defeated her two opponents with 88 percent of the vote for the Democratic nomination in 2022. The Congresswoman’s future general election opponent, Republican Christopher Mann, similarly routed his single opponent with over two-thirds of the vote (Oregon Secretary of State 2022).

TABLE 3.1 Candidates Winning with 60% or More in Contested Primaries (1996 to 2022)

Primary Type	% of Democratic Candidates Winning with 60% or More in Primary	% of Republican Candidates Winning with 60% or More in Primary
Closed Primary	71%	62%
Semi-Closed Primary	62%	65%
Open Primary	69%	63%
Blanket Primary	77%	62%
Reformed Primaries		
Top 2 Primary		44%
Louisiana “Jungle” Primary		74%

The ease of the Congresswoman’s re-nomination, and the easy victory of her future general election opponent in his primary, are not particularly shocking. In fact, easy primary election wins are the norm in the vast majority of primaries across the United States. From 1996 to 2022 the vast majority of contested primary elections resulted in the winning candidate earning at least 60 percent of the vote. Closed Republican primaries resulted in the lowest number of winning candidates earning 60 percent of the vote or more, with only 62 percent of such primaries; and blanket Democratic primaries resulted in the highest percent of winning candidates earning 60 percent of the vote with more than 71 percent of such primaries. However, most primaries are not even contested. From 1996 to 2022 60 percent of Republican closed primaries were uncontested and 63 percent of Democratic closed primaries were uncontested. Consequently, most voters are given no options and must simply accept the nomination of the only candidate that chose to run for office from their party.

Table 3.2. Uncontested Primary Elections (1996 to 2022)

Primary Type	Uncontested Democratic Primaries	Uncontested Republican Primaries
Closed Primary	63%	60%
Semi-Open Primary	57%	51%
Open Primary	58%	53%
Blanket Primary	71%	59%
	Uncontested Reformed Primaries	
Top 2 Primary		1%
Louisiana “Jungle” Primary		11%

Nevertheless, the selection of candidates in primary elections offer the potential for a truly competitive election and can even grant voters the ability to remove incumbents, a feat that would be highly unlikely during the general election in the vast majority of congressional districts. Wyoming’s single congressional district illustrates this reality well. In the 2020 general

election Wyoming voted for then-President Donald Trump and re-elected Congresswoman Liz Cheney by more than 40 points over their respective challengers (Wyoming Secretary of State 2020). Nevertheless, the 2022 House Republican primary was highly contentious after the Congresswoman's support for impeaching and investigating the former President in the aftermath of the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol. Despite Congresswoman Cheney's staunch conservative voting record and strong foothold in Republican politics as the daughter of a former Republican vice president, the Congresswoman became one of the few incumbents to lose re-election in the 2022 cycle, something that would likely not have happened had she survived the primary and made it to the general election, given Wyoming's heavy Republican orientation (Beavers and Montellaro 2022). On the opposite end of the political spectrum, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's surprise defeat of incumbent Democratic Congressman Joseph Crowley shook the political universe in the 2018 Democratic primary (Goldmacher and Martin 2018). The New York Congressman had not faced a primary challenger in 14 years and he was often rumored to be among the likely successors to then-House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi in the House Democratic leadership (Wang 2018). Much like Wyoming, the 14th Congressional District's heavy partisan lean all but guaranteed that Joseph Crowley would have won re-election in the 2018 midterms had he survived the primary challenge, but the primary permitted an interparty challenge that was more palatable to voters in the New York City-based district than the general election would have permitted.

While competitive primary elections such as those in Wyoming and New York are always interesting and encourage significant media attention, they are nonetheless incredibly rare. Instead most Americans can expect a primary election that looks more like the 2022 primary in Oregon's first congressional district. This reality begs the question. If primary elections are

normally uncompetitive and often result in an uncontested election, is there a primary election system that could encourage greater competition? The reformers responsible for the creation of the top-two primary explicitly argued for the adoption of their system on the basis that the top-two primary would force more competitive elections. In this chapter I examine how primary elections systems affect the competitiveness of primary elections with a particular focus on how the top-two primary compares with the more common party primaries found across the United States.

Competitive Elections a Virtue or a Problem?

The lack of competitiveness within primary elections is among the chief concerns that have motivated reformers to push for changes in their electoral systems. Proponents of the successful ballot initiatives to reform California and Washington's primary elections as well as the unsuccessful ballot initiatives in Arizona, Florida, Oregon, and Montana have invoked the notion that the top-two primary would encourage greater competition in primary elections compared with more traditional primary election systems (Penrose 2012; Wilson 2014; Mapes 2014; New York Times 2020). The public's concern about lack of competitiveness within primary elections is undoubtedly a response to the lack of competitiveness in general elections. The number of competitive congressional districts in U.S. general elections have declined precipitously for decades (Mayhew 1974, Ansolabhere et al. 1992, Abramowitz et al. 2006). Therefore primary elections are a natural place to exert influence when the district leans heavily toward one party and the general election outcome is largely a foregone conclusion.

While popular opinion seems to lean heavily toward the idea that competitive elections are a public good, the literature paints a less favorable picture. Instead of serving as a public good, research has demonstrated that divisive primary elections create serious problems for the

winning candidate's general election prospects. When candidates, particularly incumbents, face competitive elections they are more likely to be harmed in the forthcoming general election. This effect is understood to come from two sources. First, the losing candidates' supporters may be turned off by the experience and upset that their preferred candidate lost the primary. This causes the losing candidate's supporters to either abstain from participation in the general election or defect to the opposition party (Kenney and Rice 1987, Southwell 2010). Secondly, the divisive primary could reveal previously unknown information that can be used against the candidate in the general election (Snyder and Ting 2011, Agranov 2016).

While there is evidence that divisive primary elections have harmed the chances of presidential candidates there is less evidence to suggest this effect is present among House and Senate elections. This more muted effect may be a result of voters having less of a psychological attachment to House and Senate candidates resulting from less press coverage and popular interest (Kenney 1988). Furthermore, the effects of divisive primaries are not evenly distributed. Incumbents tend to be more negatively affected by divisive primaries whereas the winning candidate of the challenging party is either unaffected or even helped by the divisive primary election (Born 1981). Born's findings seem to confirm the assertion that much of the effect of primary election divisiveness' negative effects are a result of voter awareness and salience. In a relatively under-covered congressional election the campaigns of the competing candidates may be fierce, but if most voters are tuned out and focused on a simultaneous presidential primary or if they are ignoring the primary altogether, then the detrimental effects of divisiveness are likely to have little effect.

However, the literature is not monolithic in its assessment that divisive primaries are inherently negative for a candidate's chances in the general election. Lazarus argues that a

competitive primary election is a symptom of a candidates perceived or actual weakness (2005). Therefore, competitive elections are not inherently bad for any candidate or party. The competitive environment may instead be a signal that challengers can sense an incumbent's weak prospects in either the primary or general election and take advantage of the opportunity to challenge the weak candidate in the primary election or as the opposition party's candidate in the general election.

While the analysis of divisiveness in primary elections has been the subject of significant studies, there is a clear lack of studies on how primary election systems have impacted the competitive environment. Primary elections systems have been shown to impact various aspects of candidate outcomes including political ideology. The inclusion of independent voters in open primaries, blanket primaries, and the jungle primary used in Louisiana have, to varying degrees, been shown to produce ideological moderation (Gerber and Morton 1998, Galderesi et al. 2001). The prospect of primary election systems affecting competition does not seem to be a great stretch either. Primary election systems in which only registered party members may participate would likely encourage greater ideological agreement and a greater affinity for the party's incumbent candidates. Whereas the inclusion of independents will likely encourage more heterogeneity. Even though these voters may lean toward a particular party, they still choose to disaffiliate with the party for some reason, which could mean they are far more extreme or that they are far more moderate than the average party affiliated voter. In either case, it is not difficult to imagine fewer voters would line up behind a single choice in a contested primary. Furthermore, the inclusion of voters affiliated with all political parties, as the top-two primary does, creates even greater incentives to support a diverse set of candidates. This is particularly

likely given that multiple candidates from each party are possible and can encourage even greater vote-splitting than the normal partisan divisions of the electorate in a general election contest.

Hypothesis 1: top-two primaries will produce more competitive elections than traditional primary election systems.

Hypothesis 2: closed primaries will produce the least competitive elections among all primary election systems.

For these reasons I expect that the top-two primaries and Louisiana's similar jungle primary will produce more competitive elections than the traditional party primaries. However, I also expect that even among traditional party primaries there should be far more competitiveness observed in primary elections where independents are permitted. Therefore open primaries, semi-closed primaries, and blanket primaries should also produce more competitive primary elections than closed primaries.

Data and Methods

In this chapter I use four measures of competition across eight models to evaluate the effects of primary election systems on electoral competitiveness in House elections between 1996 and 2022. Models 1, 3, 5, and 7 contain data from Democratic primary elections as well as the top-two primary and Louisiana's primary whereas Models 2, 4, 6, and 8 contain data from Republican primary elections as well as top-two primaries and Louisiana's jungle primary. In Models 1 and 2 I use a multivariate OLS regression to analyze the effects of primary election systems on the margin of victory earned by the winning candidate in each primary. The margin of victory is calculated by subtracting the winning candidate's percentage of vote by the highest losing candidate's percentage of vote. In Models 3 and 4 I use a multivariate OLS regression and I replace the dependent variable with the first-place candidate's percentage of vote to provide a

similar indicator of the success of the winning candidate compared with the losing candidates in their primary. The first-place candidate's percentage of vote may be a more useful measure of the success of the winning candidate than the margin of victory given the unique nature of the top-two primary and Louisiana's jungle primary. In both the top-two primary and Louisiana's jungle primary the second place candidate proceeds to the general election and therefore wins the primary along with the first place candidate. In Models 5 and 6 the dependent variable is changed to a dichotomous variable measuring whether the primary is contested and I use a probit regression analysis for these models along with Models 7 and 8. Similarly Models 7 and 8 use a dichotomous dependent variable measuring whether the incumbent candidate has been defeated in their primary.

Continuing from the previous chapter I utilize five dichotomous variables to capture the effects of each primary election system. A value of one indicates the primary is either open, semi-closed, closed, blanket, or Louisiana's jungle primary and a value of zero indicates that the case is not one of the aforementioned primary types. In this analysis the top-two primary is used as the omitted category. In addition to the main independent variables I include several control variables. I use a dichotomous measure of incumbency to capture whether there is an incumbent seeking election in the primary. This variable is omitted from models 7 and 8 which are inherently only composed of incumbent Members of Congress. The number of terms variable measure the total number of terms the representative has served in Congress through their current election. I measure district partisanship using the two-party vote for president in each congressional district (Ansolabehere et al. 2001). In the models containing Democratic primaries I use the percentage of vote for the Democratic presidential candidate in the district, whereas in models containing Republican primaries I use vote for the Republican presidential candidate in

the district. In models 1 through 4, 7, and 8 I only include contested primary elections in the dataset whereas uncontested races are necessarily included in Models 5 and 6.

Results and Discussion

Table 3.3 presents the findings from first two models. Using an OLS regression these models assessed how each primary election system affects the margin of victory of the winning candidate. The results from Models 1 and 2 demonstrate a strong and positive relationship between the margin of victory earned by the winning candidate and the primary election system used in the election. In both models there is a clear difference between the top-two primary, which is serving as the omitted category for the analyses in this chapter, and the listed primary election systems. This indicates that candidates competing in the top-two primary win with a smaller margin of victory than the candidates winning in all other primary election systems. The smaller margins of victory provide clear evidence that the top-two primary is more competitive than other primary election systems. The most notable difference between models 1 and 2 are the degree to which the margins of victory are higher than the top-two primary. Republican primaries of all categories have a smaller increase of margin of victory compared with Democratic primaries.

The only exception to the findings discussed earlier are that semi-closed Republican primaries are not significant, but the semi-closed Democratic primaries are significant. The reasons for this difference is not readily apparent. There are far fewer semi-closed primaries, under both the Democratic Party and Republican Party, than any other type of primary election system. Nevertheless, the Democratic semi-closed primaries are significant so this result to present an oddity without a clear explanation.

Table 3.3 OLS Regression⁷

	Dependent Variable: Margin of Victory	
	Democratic Primaries (Model 3)	Republican Primaries (Model 4)
Closed	0.085*** (0.011)	0.030** (0.010)
Semi-Closed	0.066*** (0.013)	0.009 (0.012)
Open	0.084*** (0.011)	0.047*** (0.010)
Blanket	0.123*** (0.023)	0.060** (0.019)
Jungle	0.085*** (0.018)	0.060** (0.017)
Incumbent	0.165*** (0.006)	0.137*** (0.007)
Terms in Office	-0.000 (0.000)	0.002* (0.001)
Number of Candidates	-0.041*** (0.001)	-0.043*** (0.001)
District Partisanship	0.005# (0.002)	-0.003 (0.002)
South	-0.021** (0.006)	-0.009 (0.006)
Constant	0.620*** (0.041)	0.653*** (0.041)
N	2,012	2,194
Prob > F	0.0000	0.000
R ²	0.4905	0.5303
Adjusted R ²	0.4849	0.5256

p<.1#, p<.05*, p<.01*, p<.001***

Furthermore, the blanket primary appears to create the largest margins of victory relative to the top-two primary. This finding is contrary to expectations. Given the ability of all voters to cross the ballot lines and vote for candidates of any party, regardless of the voter's partisan affiliation, the effects of the blanket primary should be similar to those of the top-two primary. However, the summary statistics provided in Table 3.1 did demonstrate an early indication that

⁷ Ideally, I would have included candidate quality and campaign funds as independent variables in all of the analyses conducted in this chapter. However, due to time and resource constraints I was unable to include these variables in this project.

blanket primaries may not have created as much competition as I expected. Table 3.1 indicated that 77 percent of Democratic candidates won with 60 percent of the vote or more in a blanket Democratic primary, far more than any other primary system between 1996 and 2022.

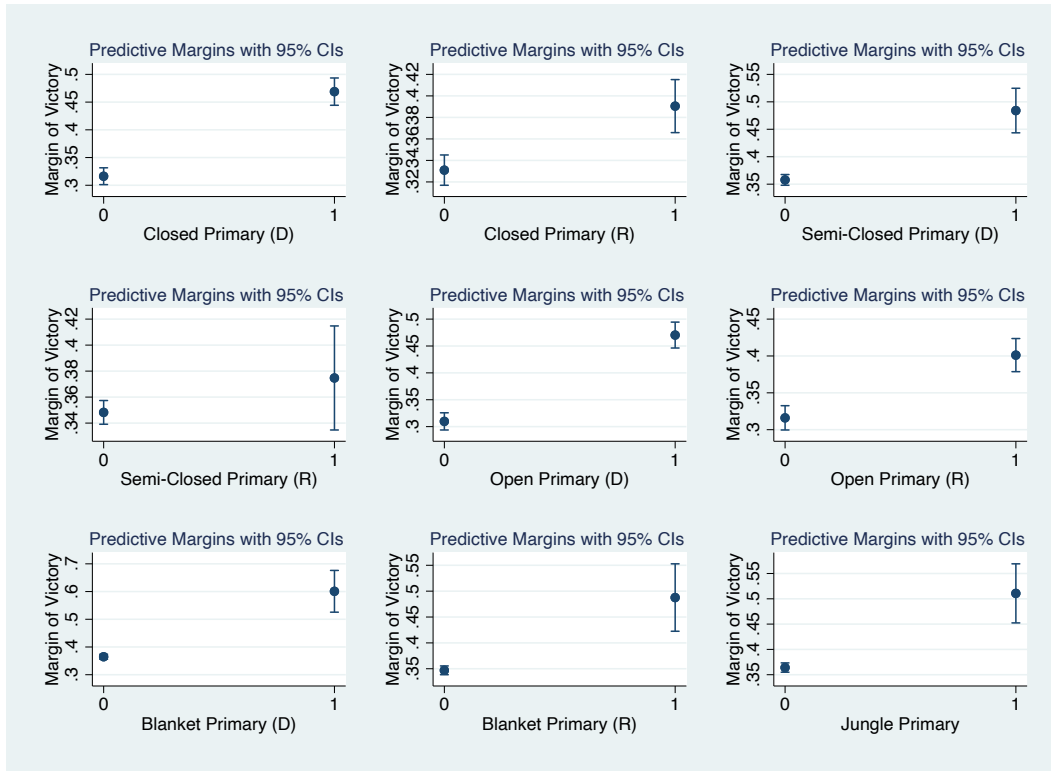


Figure 3.1 Predictive Margins for Margin of Victory by Primary Election System

Figure 3.1 presents the results of the predictive margins for each primary election system. This figure indicates results consistent with the regression analysis. In almost all of the primary election systems the predicted margin of victory is higher for the indicated primary election system. However, closed Democratic primaries, semi-closed Democratic primaries, and open Democratic primaries do predict a negative relationship albeit within the error margin.

Table 3.4 OLS Regression – First Place Candidate’s Percent of Vote

	Dependent Variable: Winning Candidate’s Percent of Vote	
	Democratic Primaries (3)	Republican Primaries (4)
Closed	0.087*** (0.009)	0.036*** (0.009)
Semi-Closed	0.068*** (0.010)	0.013 (0.012)
Open	0.086*** (0.010)	0.052*** (0.010)
Blanket	0.133*** (0.021)	0.073*** (0.018)
Jungle	0.089*** (0.017)	0.072*** (0.016)
Incumbent	0.165*** (0.006)	0.134*** (0.007)
Terms in Office	-0.000 (0.000)	0.002* (0.000)
Number of Candidates	-0.041*** (0.001)	-0.043*** (0.001)
District Partisanship	0.005# (0.002)	-0.003 (0.002)
South (0,1)	-0.021** (0.006)	-0.010 (0.006)
Constant	0.623*** (0.012)	0.659*** (0.011)
N	2,012	2,194
Prob > F	0.0000	0.0000
R-Squared	0.4879	0.5266
Adjusted R-Squared	0.4853	0.5245

p<.1#, p<.05*, p<.01**, p<.001***

Table 3.4 presents the results for the OLS regression using the winning candidate’s percent of vote as the dependent variable. This dependent variable is closely related to the dependent variable in the first two models and it is therefore of no great surprise that the results are consistent with the findings of Models 1 and 2. Models 3 and 4 similarly show a strong a positive relationship between each primary election system and the percent of vote earned by the

winning candidate from each election. The only exception to these findings are the results of the Republican semi-closed primaries which are again presenting null findings.



Figure 3.2 Predictive Margins for First Place Candidate's Percent of Vote by Primary Election System

Figure 3.2 presents the predictive margins for the winning candidate's percent of vote consistent with the results of the regression analysis. In each of the primary election systems the indicated primary is predicted to have a positive relationship indicating that the winning candidate will have a higher percent of the vote. Whereas there was room for more ambiguity in the predicted results from Figure 3.1, Figure 3.2 provides a more consistent picture with far greater confidence as the error bars are more tightly bound to the predicted plot point.

Table 3.5 Probit Regression

	Dependent Variable: Uncontested Primaries	
	Democratic Primaries (5)	Republican Primaries (6)
Closed	2.482*** (0.193)	2.422*** (0.189)
Semi-Closed	2.312*** (0.200)	2.209*** (0.198)
Open	2.390*** (0.194)	2.227*** (0.189)
Blanket	2.500*** (0.228)	1.994*** (0.221)
Jungle	0.593* (0.268)	0.583* (0.267)
Incumbent	0.474*** (0.041)	0.566*** (0.041)
Terms in Office	-0.001 (0.001)	0.000 (0.000)
District Partisanship	-0.036# (0.021)	0.112*** (0.022)
South	0.110* (0.045)	-0.422 (0.046)
Constant	-5.262 (79.317)	-5.420 (86.991)
N	4,783	4,808
LR Chi ²	857.93	946.52
Prob > Chi ²	0.0000	0.0000
Pseudo R ²	0.1317	0.1428

p<.1#, p<.05*, p<.01**, p<.001***

The results for Models 5 and 6 are presented in Table 3.5. Models 5 and 6 demonstrate similarly strong results supporting the top-two primary as a more competitive election system. In models 5 and 6 I use a probit regression analysis to evaluate whether a primary election system affects the probability of an uncontested primary election. The findings of this analysis demonstrate that all primary election systems have a greater likelihood of an uncontested primary than the top-two primary. These findings are largely intuitive given the nature of the top-two primary. Under the traditional primaries, such as a closed primary, if only one Democratic candidate, one Republican candidate, and one third party candidate file to run for office in the

same congressional district, then each candidate will enjoy an uncontested primary election.

However, in a state with a top-two primary the same would not be true. The candidates would all be placed in a single primary with only two candidates proceeding to the general election.

Nonetheless the top-two primary, does ensure that voters have a choice when they receive their ballot. Something that is often not the case with closed, semi-closed, and open primaries because of the structure of these systems.

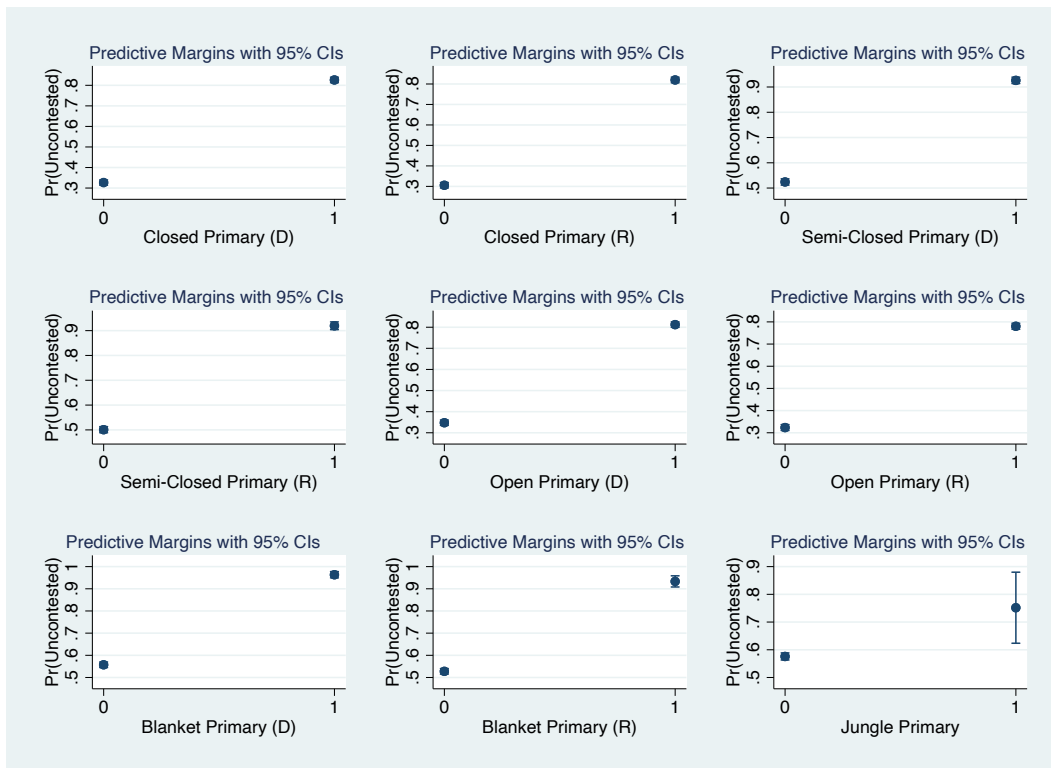


Figure 3.3 Predictive Margins for Uncontested Elections by Primary Election System

Figure 3.3 provides the predictive margins for the probability of an uncontested election by each primary election system. This figure provides strong support for the probit regression in Models 5 and 6. In each primary election system the predicted probability of an uncontested primary is higher for the indicated primary system. These results again demonstrate the

significantly lower occurrence of uncontested primaries in the top-two primary relative to the closed, semi-closed, open, blanket, and jungle primaries.

Table 3.6 Probit Regression for Models 7 and 8

	Dependent Variable: Incumbents Defeated in Primary	
	Democratic Primaries (7)	Republican Primaries (8)
Closed	4.302 (169.412)	3.490 (151.846)
Semi-Closed	4.558 (169.412)	3.612 (151.846)
Open	4.462 (169.412)	3.618 (151.846)
Blanket	5.343 (169.413)	4.189 (151.847)
Jungle	4.899 (169.412)	3.710 (151.846)
Number of Terms	-0.027 (0.020)	-0.022 (0.024)
Number of Candidates	0.058 (0.042)	-0.001 (0.041)
South	0.013 (0.207)	0.360 (0.182)
District Partisanship	1.368*** (0.305)	0.032 (0.042)
Constant	-6.702 (1016.448)	-5.691 (821.670)
N	1,904	2,069
LR Chi ²	73.14	24.14
Prob > Chi ²	0.0000	0.2363
Pseudo R ²	0.2157	0.0864

p<.1#, p<.05*, p<.01**, p<.001***

In sharp contrast with the previous models, Models 7 and 8 presented in Table 3.6, which measure the effects of each primary election system on the probability of an incumbent's defeat, do not demonstrate any statistical significance. The results of these analyses are not entirely shocking given the low rate of incumbent defeats in American elections. Furthermore, the

complex political environment created by the top-two primary election may well encourage greater support for the incumbent candidate. In a traditional party primary voters know that if the incumbent loses the election, a member of their party will still be nominated by the party, after all that is the point of the election. However, that is not true in a top-two primary. If enough voters throw their support to different candidates and significantly split their votes then unexpected outcomes could occur that deny voters any partisan competition in the general election. Therefore, voters may be more likely to support the incumbent to ensure their party has a greater chance of continuing on to the general election. Or the low-level of information voters likely possess about the candidates cause them to flock to a familiar name when faced with a multitude of candidates from the same party and opposition parties.

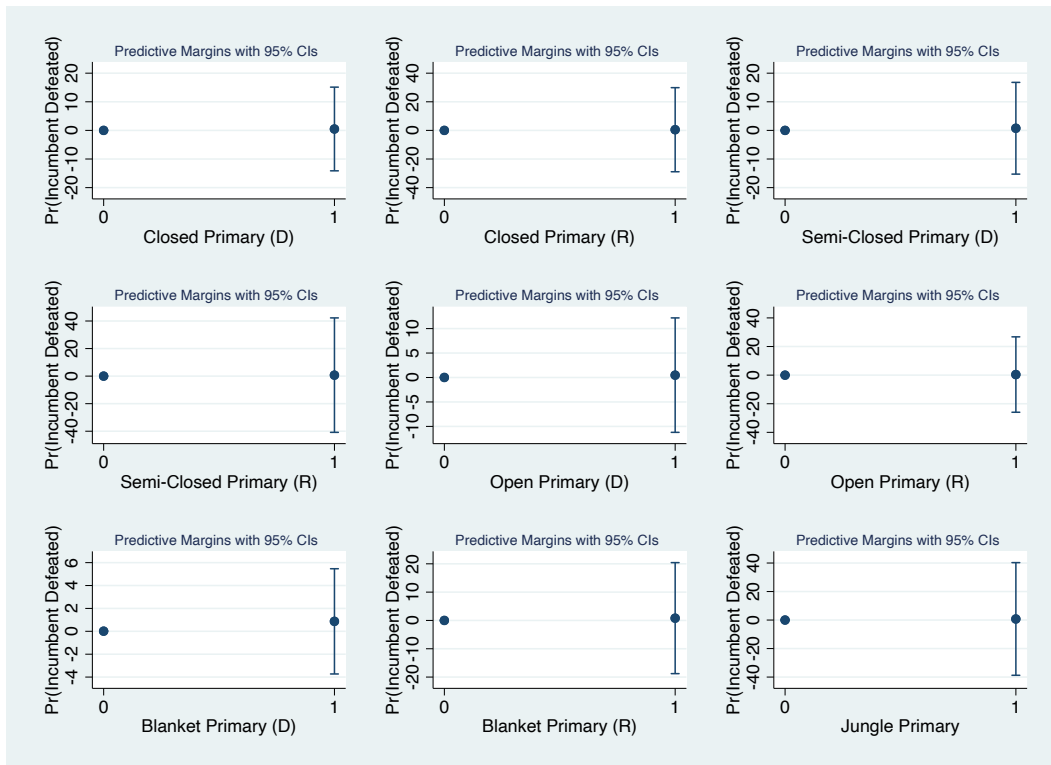


Figure 3.4 Predictive Margins for Incumbents Defeated for Renomination by Primary Election System

Figure 3.4 presents the predictive margins for the probability of a defeated incumbent in the primary election. Unsurprisingly the predictive margins back the results from the probit regression analysis. There is no clear effect of primary election system on the probability of an incumbent losing their election.

The unique nature of the top-two primary presents additional issues in competitiveness that warrant consideration. Whereas the traditional primary election systems all guarantee the winner of each party's primary will have a place on the general election ballot, the top-two primary, along with the jungle primary used in Louisiana, make no guarantees to a place on the general election ballot for any party. Consequently it is possible that voters will only have the choice of two Democratic candidates, or two Republican candidates, or even one third party candidate and one Democratic or Republican candidate, in the general election. In 2022 the voters of the 30th Congressional District of California faced this very reality. In a crowded primary with 3 Democratic candidates, 4 Republican candidates, and 2 third party candidates the vote was significantly split among the challengers to incumbent Democratic Congressman Adam Schiff. Consequently, none of the Republican candidates were able to secure a place on the general election ballot and the second place candidate was another Democrat. The scenario faced by the people of the 30th Congressional District is not entirely unique. In fact, from 2008 to 2020, one-third of House elections and 14 percent of Senate elections using either the top-two primary or the jungle primary resulted in one of the major parties failing to earn a place on the general election ballot despite having at least one candidate from both major parties contest the primary. Indeed Table 3.7 demonstrates that during the same time period most top-two primaries have had at least one Democratic candidate and one Republican candidate participate in the primary while

only 1 percent of top-two primaries lacked a Democratic candidate and 7 percent of top-two primaries have lacked a Republican candidate.

Table 3.7. Number of Candidates from each Party Competing in Top-Two Primaries

Top-Two Primary N = 395	0	1	2 or more
Democratic Candidates	3 (1%)	158 (40%)	234 (59%)
Republican Candidates	29 (7%)	167 (42%)	199 (50%)

One of the stated goals of the reformers responsible for the adoption of the Top-Two primary in California and Washington State was to increase the competitiveness of primary elections. If voters are in fact interested in creating competition in all elections, they certainly succeed in doing so through the top-two primary across a host of measures identified in this study. However, there does appear to be significant risk in eliminating partisan competition in the general election.

Reform in Alaska and Nevada

In 2022 Alaska administered its first Top-Four primary and Nevada voters adopted a similar primary which will be used for the first time in the 2026 elections. The Top-Four primary is an adaptation of the top-two primary. Like the top-two primary, the top-four primary uses a single election for candidates of all parties and no party. The main difference between the two primaries is that the top-four primary will result in four candidates advancing to the general election rather than two candidates. The idea behind the top-four primary is to encourage partisan competition in the general election. One of the strongest criticism against the top-two primary, which has been rejected by several states since its adoption in California and Washington, is the possibility of a single party advancing to the general election (Penrose 2012). This possibility is not abstract, 33 percent of House elections between 2008 and 2022 resulted in one of the major

parties being shut out of the general election ballot despite running at least one candidate. This caused voters to choose between two Democrats, or two Republicans, or some other combination of candidates that excluded one of the major parties.

The top-four primary decreases the likelihood of this occurring by increasing the number of candidates that will proceed to the general election. Indeed no general election for the U.S. House of Representatives between 2008 and 2022 would have resulted in a major party being denied a place on the ballot if the states using the top-two primaries had instead used a top-four primary. In each of these races both major parties were represented within the top-four choices in the primary. Unfortunately for this dissertation a further evaluation of the top-four primary is not possible as Alaska only has one seat in the U.S. House of Representatives and it has only used this primary for a single election cycle. However, further evaluation of this primary and its affects on both primary and general election competitiveness will undoubtedly be a subject of inquiry in future research once enough elections have occurred to permit a more comprehensive quantitative analysis.

Table 3.8. Top-Two Primary and Inter-Party Competition 2008-2022

	House Elections	Senate Elections
One major party denied a place on the General Election ballot	33%	14%
Both major parties present on the General Election ballot	64%	86%

Conclusions

Primary elections systems do appear to have an important influence of the competitiveness of the electoral environment. This study employed multiple measures of competition to capture competitive elections and each measure, excepting one, produced clear

and convincing evidence that the top-two primary system produces a more competitive political environment than closed, semi-closed, open, blanket, and jungle primaries. The top-two primary produces closer margins of victory and the winning candidate is more likely to have a smaller percentage of the vote, indicating that the losing candidates earn more votes in the top-two primary than they do in other systems. The top-two primary system also has a significantly greater chance of producing a contested primary, whereas all other primary election systems produce significant numbers of uncontested primaries where voters are inherently denied the ability to choose their preferred candidate.

Nevertheless the top-two primary system does not perfectly embody a competitive election system. In this study I included a measure of whether the primary resulted in a defeated incumbent and no primary election systems indicated a significant relationship with the number of defeated incumbents. Undoubtedly the null findings in Models 7 and 8 are a result of the incredibly low number of incumbents that lose in primary elections. However, the null findings do hit at a key element of competitiveness. Electoral competitiveness is meaningless if it cannot produce change. If voters have a greater capacity to vote for a challenger that possess a significant threat to an incumbent candidate, then that only matters if the challenger has a realistic opportunity to unseat the incumbent. Nothing in the analyses presented here demonstrate that the top-two primary increases the ability of voters to accomplish this goal. Consequently, while the top-two primary does appear to encourage competition in many ways, this doesn't seem to translate into meaningful victories.

Furthermore, the propensity of the top-two primary to produce single-party general elections fly in the face of the stated goals of the reformers responsible for the adoption of the top-two primary. If voters are denied the ability to have a meaningful choice between candidates

of significantly different worldviews, then the general election will become far less important to voters. Although the increase in single-party general elections could have the perverse effect of increasing the importance of the primary if voters are acquainted with the serious possibility of losing the right to vote for a candidate from the preferred party. It is therefore not surprising that the most recently adopted reforms of primary elections considered by multiple states have sought to employ the novel top-four primary rather than follow the long-established systems employed by Washington State and California.

The results of the analyses in this chapter provide a nuanced picture of competitiveness in primary elections. While the top-two primary does provide greater competition across multiple measures there are some crucial ways in which the top-two primary provides no greater amount of competition than the other primaries currently utilized across the United States. The results of this chapter certainly do nothing to dispel the claims of the top-two primaries goals but there are clearly limitations to the effectiveness of the top-two primary in creating the competitive environment that many voters would like to see in their elections.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE EFFECTS OF PRIMARY ELECTION SYSTEMS ON VOTER PARTICIPATION

The United States has long been recognized as a country with low voter participation relative to other industrialized democracies (Powell 1987). While other democracies regularly achieve 70 to 90 percent voter participation in national elections, the United States typically averages 50 to 60 percent voter participation in presidential elections (Powell 1987; Lijphart 1999; Blais 2000; McDonald 2002). The relatively low voter participation rate in national elections are however far greater than the voter participation rates in most other elections across the United States. Voter participation in primary elections is astonishingly low compared with most elections. In 2014 Texans participating in the selection of candidates to represent their parties amounted to a paltry 10.14 percent of voting age adults, with just 7 percent participating in the Republican Primary and only 3 percent participating in the Democratic Primary (Texas Secretary of State n.d.). While Texas has been known for its anemic voter participation relative to other states, this low voter participation rate is largely what American election officials and the public have come to expect in primary election voter participation (DelReal 2014; Ura and Murphy 2018).

In this chapter I seek to analyze how primary elections may affect voter participation. In Chapters 2 and 3 I have identified a few ways the top-two primary has encouraged differences in ideology and competitiveness compared with other primary election systems commonly used in the United States. In this chapter I seek to better understand the relationship between voter turnout and primary election systems.

Does Voter Participation Matter?

Why does voter participation matter? Ideally any democracy would want all eligible voters to participate in their elections so that the people elected to office accurately reflect the will of their constituents. However, no political system enjoys full participation of the eligible electorate. Instead all democratically elected governments are represented by the subset of citizens that chose to participate in the election. These lower participation rates could provide benefits given that the people who participate are more likely to care about the outcomes of the elections and are therefore, hopefully, more informed about the candidates and issues presented in the election than the people choosing to abstain. However, there are systematic differences among the people that choose to participate and those who choose to abstain from participation. The people who participate in elections tend to be wealthier and more educated than the population of people choosing to abstain, which undoubtedly results in policy choices that better reflect the desires of the participatory population and disadvantage the abstentionist.

Aside from the obvious policy consequences of low voter participation, democracy as an institution is harmed by the low participation. Democracy rests on the idea that it is a political system in which the people hold the power of government. The entire legitimacy of democratic governance is rendered void if small proportions of the population are participating in elections as the people in power are likely not a reflection of the people they purport to represent. Furthermore, abstaining from elections could be a sign that citizens do not believe their vote holds any efficacy. If government does not reflect the people they serve or the people do not believe that their votes can affect the change they need then how can democracy claim the moral high ground over the various forms of authoritarianism that govern many peoples around the world?

Low participation in primary elections is of course quite different than low voter participation in the general election. Primary elections are inherently, in 46 states, elections to assist the party in choosing their candidates. Consequently, the import of these elections are lower than general elections where voters are making the final selection for which candidate will serve in public office. Nevertheless, primary elections, of whichever variety, are choosing the options voters will have in the general election. The decisions made in these primaries will determine if voters have moderate candidates that generally reflect the opinions of large swaths of voters or if voters have to choose between two extreme candidates outside the mainstream of either party's voters and the broader electorate.

Why do people abstain from voting?

The phenomenon of eligible voters refusing to participate in elections has long been observed and discussed in the literature. Among the most notable works to address this topic has been Anthony Downs' seminal book *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957) which brought forward the proposition that voting is an irrational act. Downs' rational choice theory argued that the costs associated with voting far outweighed the benefits of having voted, particularly because the probability of being the deciding vote in an election is low and impossible to predict (Downs 1957). Consequently, no one should be surprised that large numbers of otherwise eligible voters choose to abstain from participation in elections. While rational choice theory does seem to provide some reasonable explanation for why people abstain, it does not explain why so many people choose to participate in this exercise of democracy. Additions to the rational choice theory have suggested that while Downs is largely correct, his formula is missing a key element, that people consider voting a duty of their citizenship in a democratic political system or simply want to participate (Riker and Ordeshook 1968; Aldrich 1993; Blais 2000).

The proposition that voting is an important duty of citizenship can be further upheld by several studies evaluating the effects of mobilization efforts. Several studies in the 2000s sought to determine if social pressure could encourage voter participation. In these studies voters were informed via postcards of their past voting record and the voting records of their neighbors. These individuals were further informed that a similar postcard would be circulated after the upcoming election. The results of these studies determined that people were induced into voting in otherwise low salience elections (Gerber et al. 2010; Hill and Kousser 2016). The idea being that voters were embarrassed by their lack of voting and did not want to be identified as a non-voter when the next postcard was mailed to their neighbors. The only way not voting could be embarrassing is if these individuals believed voting was the right thing to do.

Primary elections are inherently far more difficult for voters to navigate than a general election. In the general election voters are faced with one Democrat, one Republican, one candidate from any other party active in their community and perhaps some independent candidates. The voter can easily use these partisan heuristics to quickly determine which candidate they most prefer, or perhaps which candidate they least detest. Primary elections however present a far different calculus of voting. In a traditional party primaries the voter is faced with only the choices of candidates from a single party. Therefore voters cannot rely on their partisanship to easily make a choice. Instead voters must know more information about the candidates going into the voting booth than they will be required to know in the general election. Consequently, primary elections have lower voter turnout because the cost of voting is higher (Matsusaka 1995; Schaffner and Streb 2002). Voters must possess more information and spend more time learning about candidates than they will in the general election. Voters sometimes attempt to overcome the lack of partisan heuristics by seeking out other sources of information

such as gender with many voters embracing stereotypes to gain insight into the policy positions of candidates (McDermott 1997). Even with these attempts at developing new heuristics voters are faced with unfamiliar candidates and no easy method of determining whether they would prefer the candidate without researching each candidate.

Institutional Reforms and Voter Participation

At an institutional level there are numerous factors which have been identified as encouraging voter participation. Some election reforms have simply made it easier to vote for those who are already likely to participate in the election and don't necessarily encourage greater participation by people who are less inclined to vote (Stein and Vonnahme 2008; Larocca and Klemanski 2011). Other reforms such as the use of vote centers have been identified as useful for encouraging less inclined people to participate in elections (Stein and Vonnahme 2008). Vote centers are polling places that are not based in an electoral precinct. Consequently, any voter can vote in any of the vote centers located within their jurisdiction, which is typically the county where the voter resides. This type of polling place is helpful to voters since they allow flexibility in voting. Most people will not be near a precinct-based polling place during the day when lines will be shortest and instead they will be located at their workplace and far from home. Therefore voters will likely be forced to wait until the end of the day to vote when they travel home or will need to risk waiting in line to vote in the morning before work. The vote centers can help to alleviate this calculus by allowing voters to pop into a polling place that doesn't have a line, even if it isn't the closest polling place to their home.

Voting by mail has also been shown to significantly encourage voter participation (Southwell and Burchett 2000; Kousser and Mullin 2007; Richey 2008). Although Kousser and Mullin find that the effect of this increase depends significantly on the type of election (2007).

They found that high salience elections are far less likely to benefit from voting by mail, but people who typically vote in high salience elections were much more likely to vote in low salience elections when they received a ballot by mail. In either case the causal link between voting by mail and voter participation is clear. Voting by mail encourages greater voter participation by eliminating one of the more significant burdens on voters, choosing to go to a polling place. When the ballot arrives in the mail the voter simply needs to fill out their ballot and mail the ballot back. Whereas traditional voting systems require voters to consciously make the choice to go to the polling place and wait in line to cast their ballot. Therefore voting by mail saves the voter time and removes the need to consciously make the choice to go to the polling place.

Convenience and ease are at the heart of voting behavior motivated by institutional reforms. If people find it difficult to vote then many people will avoid voting but since most people are already primed to believe voting is an important duty then they will vote if it is a low cost action. Primary election systems embody many of these same characteristics by making it easier to vote or making participation more cumbersome. Certain primary election systems, such as the closed primary, place higher burdens on voters by requiring individuals to register a party affiliation or to change their party affiliation well in advance of the election in order to participate in the primary (Bott 1990). Primary election systems also typically force voters to make an active choice between voting in the primary of a particular party and thereby sacrificing their ability to vote in the other party's primary. Whereas other primary election systems such as the top-two primary or the jungle primary remove all of these choices and therefore remove obstacles, albeit relatively minor obstacles, that could discourage voter participation. By giving voters the same ballot regardless of their partisan affiliation or lack of partisan affiliation the top-

two primary and jungle primary simplify the voting process and permit voters to make voting choices which may be far different from one ballot line to the next.

Hypothesis 1: Voter Participation will be higher in the top-two primaries compared with all other primary election systems

Hypothesis 2: Voter participation will be lowest in closed primaries.

Data and Methods

In this chapter I use an OLS regression to investigate the impact of each primary election system on voter participation. The dependent variable for this chapter is voter participation. Voter participation is measured as the percentage of the vote cast by voting age adults in each congressional district. The measurement of voting participation has been the subject of discussion within the field for numerous decades (McDonald and Popkin 2001; McDonald 2002). I concur with previous findings that there exist fundamental problems with Voting Age Population as the denominator for calculating voter participation. In particular, Voting Age Population includes populations of individuals who are inherently unable to participate in an election such as non-citizens, people convicted of felonies, and people incarcerated in a penal facility. Therefore the Voting Age Population statistic does artificially lower the rate of voter participation since the denominator includes populations ineligible to participate in the election. I agree that the use of the Voting Eligible Population statistic would be a more preferable denominator that would inherently only include individuals legally permitted to participate in the election (McDonald 2002).

Unfortunately the data for Voting Eligible Population is not readily available by congressional district whereas the Voting Age Population data are readily available⁸. Consequently, while I agree that the use of Voting Eligible Population would be preferable, it is not feasible and I therefore use Voting Age Population in this chapter. Despite the notable problems associated with Voting Age Population, its use in this dissertation should not present too many issues. I am using the Voting Age Population for all states and congressional districts and any comparisons will inherently possess the biases of ineligible populations.

The main independent variables for Model 1 continue to be five dichotomous variables to capture the effects of each primary election system. A value of one indicates the primary is either closed, semi-closed, open, blanket, or a jungle primary and a value of zero indicates that the case is not one of the aforementioned primary election systems. As with the previous chapters the top-two primary will serve as the omitted category. The second model diverges from the previous models throughout this dissertation by investigating the top-two primary alone. The main independent variable for Model 2 is a dichotomous variable measuring the period before and after the adoption of the top-two primary.

In addition to the main explanatory variables I include several control variables including several dichotomous variables to measure whether the election takes place in a presidential election year, whether the election is uncontested, whether an incumbent is competing in the primary, whether the incumbent retired in advance of the primary, and whether the state uses an all-mail voting system to conduct elections. I also include two continuous variables measuring the margin of victory earned by the winning candidate and a variable

⁸ Voting Age Population data were collected from the volumes of *The Almanac of American Politics* published from 2010 to 2022 which covers the elections from 2008 to 2020. The data for Voting Age Population for the 2022 election cycle were collected from the U.S. Census Bureau's "My Congressional District" database.

measuring the number of candidates competing in the primary election. Finally, I include a dichotomous measure of whether the state uses all-mail voting rather than allowing traditional polling locations to cast votes.

Results and Discussion

Table 4.1 OLS Regression

Dependent Variable	Voter Participation (Model 1)
Closed Primary	-0.050*** (0.003)
Semi-Closed Primary	-0.040*** (0.004)
Open Primary	-0.037*** (0.003)
Blanket Primary	-0.026 (0.054)
Jungle Primary	0.175*** (0.010)
Primary Margin of Victory	-0.006 (0.004)
Number of Candidates	0.001** (0.000)
Presidential Election Year	0.035*** (0.003)
Uncontested	-0.004 (0.035)
Incumbent	-0.003 (0.001)
Incumbent Retirement	-0.003 (0.004)
All-Mail Voting	0.043*** (0.004)
Constant	0.170*** (0.006)
N	4,190
Prob > F	0.0000
R-Squared	0.3080
Adjusted R-Squared	0.3052

p<.1#, p<.05*, p<.01**, p<.001***

The results presented in Table 4.1 demonstrate a strong support for Hypotheses 1 and 2. For each primary type, except the blanket primary and jungle primary, there is a negative relationship between the primary election system and voter participation. Furthermore, these relationships are significant at the highest level. The negative coefficients for closed, semi-closed, and open primaries indicate that each of these primaries have a lower voter participation rate than the top-two primary and the closed primary has the lowest voter participation rate compared with the top-two primary which comports with the expectations of Hypothesis 2. In the top-two primary all voters are permitted to participate in the primary election regardless of their partisan affiliation or lack of partisan affiliation. Since the party registration barrier does not exist and voters are not forced to select a particular party's primary to vote in, more voters are willing and able to participate in the election within the burdens of partisanship placed on the voter.

The results of the blanket primary in Table 4.1 were not expected. The null finding indicates that there is no statistically significant difference between the voter participation rates in the top-two primary and the blanket primary, however upon reflection these findings to actually make sense. Effectively the blanket primary appears to voters to be nearly identical to the top-two primary. All voters are given the same ballot with the same candidates and they can freely choose any candidate from any party they want, albeit they are restricted to choosing one candidate per office. Therefore the same mechanism that encourages participation in the top-two primary should be true for the blanket primary. Voters do not need to register a party affiliation nor are they officially recorded as participating in the primary of any particular party. So the barrier of party registration does not exist as it would in a closed or semi-closed primary, nor

does the guilt by association of choosing the ballot of a particular party that would exist in the open and semi-closed primaries.

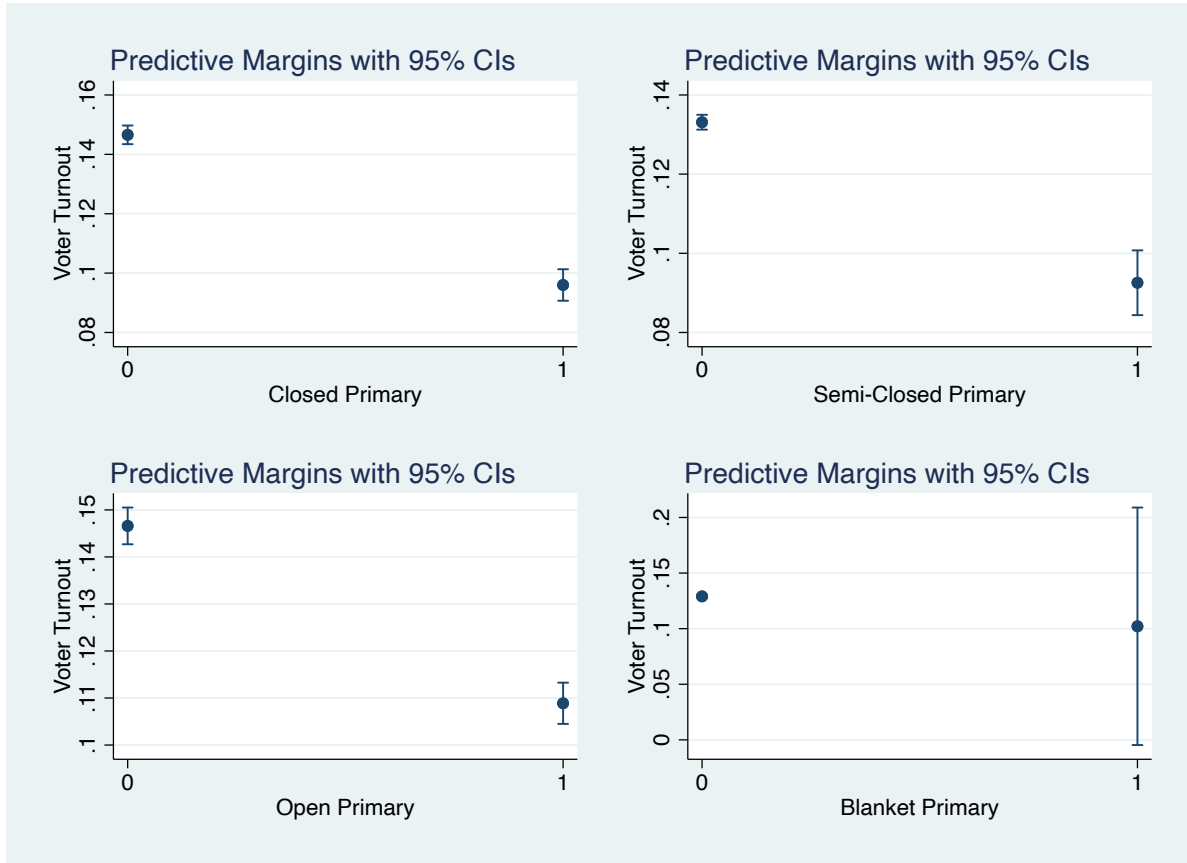


Figure 4.1 Predictive Margins for Closed, Semi-Closed, Open and Blanket Primaries

The predictive margins for voter participation by primary election further uphold the findings in Table 4.1. In each of the predictive margins found in Figure 4.1 the model predicts a significant decrease in voter participation for each primary type. The only exception to these findings are the predictive margins for the blanket primary which does demonstrate a decrease but within a large error bar indicating far less certainty in the prediction. The slope of the predictive margins for the blanket primary are also far less dramatic than the slopes for the other primaries. This indicates that the difference between the predicted voter participation in the blanket primary and the predicted voter participation in the top-two primary are not very

different. This finding comports with the regression analysis which similarly does indicate a negative relationship but failed to demonstrate any statistically significant relationship.



Figure 4.2 Predictive Margins for the Jungle Primary

Louisiana’s jungle primary has been treated as distinct throughout this project for multiple reasons. As stated previously the jungle primary does not necessarily require a second election and therefore a candidate can win a majority vote in the “primary” and win election to office in this election. Consequently, the jungle primary is not a true primary and instead it is the general election even though it is the first and sometimes only election in the cycle. Furthermore, the jungle primary in Louisiana occurs on the day of the general election something that no other primary, by necessity and design, does. Holding this election on the day of the general election

presents some important problems, particularly with respect to the analysis of voter participation. As described earlier in this chapter voter participation is extremely susceptible to numerous factors including the timing of the election. Voters are far more likely to participate in the general election, which the jungle primary is in reality. I am unsurprised that Louisiana’s primary has the highest voter participation rate of any primary type or that the predictive margins indicate that the jungle primary would have the highest participation rate. The fact that the other primaries take place months in advance of the general election and voters know that these elections are not the final election, causes some voters to skip participation based on their perception that the primary is relatively unimportant. Voters in Louisiana however know that the “primary” is potentially the only election they will have the opportunity to participate in and therefore participation should be significantly higher than they would be in other primary types.

Table 4.2 Voter Participation in Louisiana’s Primary and Runoff

Year	Congressional District	Primary Vote	Runoff Vote
2012	3	54.7%	17.0%
2014	5	31.7%	36.8%
2014	6	33.4%	38.0%
2016	3	41.5%	24.0%
2016	4	37.%	23.3%
2020	5	42.1%	14.0%

Indeed Louisiana’s unique primary election system actually contradicts the normal flow of voter participation. In all other states voter participation is significantly lower in the primary election with the highest participation levels achieved during the general election. Of course, this makes sense as voters are going to be most interested in voting in the election that will actually choose which candidate is elected to office. However, Louisiana’s unique election system causes the “primary” to be the election with the highest voter participation and the runoff has

significantly less participation. Few elections result in runoffs as one candidate typically wins a majority vote in the primary and is therefore elected to office under Louisiana law. In fact, from 2012 to 2022 only 6 House elections in Louisiana, 16 percent of the 36 congressional elections conducted during this time period, required a runoff election. This data does not include the elections of 2008 and 2010 due to a change in primary election system. Louisiana briefly abandoned the jungle primary in favor of the more traditional closed primary election system. Louisiana later returned to the jungle primary for the 2012 election cycle (Louisiana Secretary of State n.d.).

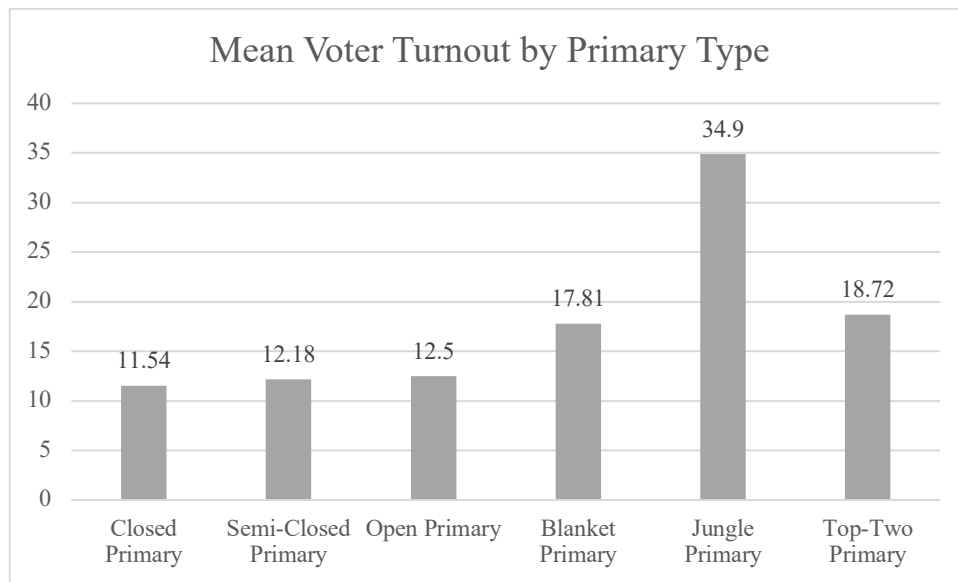


Figure 4.3 Mean Voter Participation by Primary System

Figure 4.3 provides a simple demonstration of the mean voter participation in each primary election system. The results of these summary statistics provide further evidence to support the regression analysis in Table 4.1. The Top-Two Primary has an average voter participation rate of 18.72 percent. Whereas the other primary types, excluding the jungle primary, are far below this threshold. The Blanket primary does come fairly close. However, there remains an almost full percentage point difference between the top-two primary and the

blanket primary. The closed primary indicates the lowest voter participation rate which is within expectations. Requiring voters to register with a party in order to participate in the primary election unsurprisingly results in fewer people participating in the election. If voters do not register with a party or forget to change their party registration but decide they want to participate in the primary, then they will be legally prohibited from participating in the primary. Whereas the other primary types allow, at some level, non-party members the right to participate in the primary election and consequently they have greater voter participation rates. The semi-closed primary which allows unaffiliated voters to vote in any party's primary has a slightly higher voter participation rate. The open primary which does not register party affiliation and thus allows any voter to choose the primary they want to participate in on election day has an even higher participation rate than closed primaries.

The results from Table 4.3 present the findings of Model 2. Model 2 uses a new dependent variable, a dichotomous measure of before and after the adoption of the top-two primary. This Model evaluates only voter participation in California's congressional primaries rather than looking at the country as a whole. This analysis does not include data from Washington State even though Washington is the first state to use this type of primary election system. Washington State would have been included if the data limitations had not made this impossible. The more limited time period used in this chapter means that Washington's data all occurs after the top-two primary was instituted in the state and therefore no comparison would be possible from this state. Nevertheless, the evaluation of California's experience with the top-two primary provides interesting findings that further bolster the findings from Model 1 in Table 4.1.

Table 4.3 OLS Regression

Dependent Variable	Voter Participation (Model 2)
Top-Two Primary Reform	0.038*** (0.009)
Primary Margin of Victory	0.003 (0.015)
Number of Candidates	0.006*** (0.001)
Presidential Election Year	0.302*** (0.005)
Uncontested	-0.019 (0.012)
Incumbent	0.004 (0.007)
Incumbent Retirement	-0.020 (0.015)
All Mail Voting ⁹	0.010 (0.009)
Constant	0.104*** (0.010)
N	405
Prob > F	0.0000
R ²	0.3193
Adjust R ²	0.3055

p<.1#, p<.05*, p<.01**, p<.001***

The results presented in Table 4.3 demonstrate that the top-two primary in California did have a significant and positive affect on voter participation rates in the state. The transformation of the state from a closed primary in the 2000s to the top-two primary in 2012 resulted in a 4 percent increase in voter participation. These results support the findings in the 4.1 and further support the proposition in Hypothesis 1.

⁹ California has extensively used voting by mail for decades. Since 2008 a majority of Californians have cast their vote by marking and returning the ballot mailed to them by election officials (Secretary of State n.d). Beginning in the 2022 election cycle all registered voters in California will automatically receive a ballot in the mail rather than needing to opt into mail voting (Myers 2021).



Figure 4.4 Predictive Margins for Top-Two Primary Reforms

The predictive margins illustrated in Figure 4.4 support the findings in Table 4.3. The model predicts that voter participation rates will rise after the adoption of the top-two primary based on the experience in California. This predictive model indicates one again that other primary election systems, particularly the closed primary which was in use in California prior to the adoption of the top-two primary, discouraged voter participation relative to the top-two primary.

Conclusions

In this chapter I evaluated the role of primary election systems on voter participation rates and founds strong evidence that the top-two primary does produce higher voter participation rates than traditional party primaries. Closed primaries produced the lowest voter participation,

with semi-closed primaries and open primaries producing slightly higher participation rates. The only exception to the top-two primary producing greater vote participation rates lies with the jungle primary in Louisiana. However, the timing of Louisiana's primary election make the comparison inherently problematic. Therefore, among the primary elections that occur in advance of the general election, the top-two primary clearly produces the highest rates of voter participation.

While there is strong evidence to support the proposition that the top-two primary does produce greater voter participation than traditional party primaries, there is one important caveat that is worth repeating. As I noted earlier, this study does utilize Voting Age Population rather than Voting Eligible Population to determine the voter participation rate in each congressional district. Consequently, there are people ineligible to vote included in the voter participation statistic that are driving down the participation rates. Future analyses of this topic would benefit from a similar analysis completed with the Voting Eligible Population to determine if substantial differences result. Nevertheless, this analysis furthers our understanding of how primary elections affect voter participation and help to illuminate the important differences produced by reforming primary election systems.

Nevertheless, the top-two primary does appear to produce significantly higher voter participation relative to the traditional primary systems. This finding is an important result for the institution of democracy. As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, general election participation is undoubtedly far more significant than participation in a primary election, however the primary election remains a crucial element of the electoral process. Primary elections determine which choices voters will have in the general election and therefore who will ultimately serve in office. If voters are constantly facing choices they dislike then dissatisfaction

with democracy will undoubtedly increase. Whereas if more voters are participating in primaries then the candidates selected for the general election may be more likely to reflect the will of voters and encourage support for the democratic project.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout this dissertation I have sought to answer several questions concerning the effect of primary election systems on candidates and voters. I have placed a particular focus on the top-two primary election systems in California and Washington because of the relatively recent adoption of this primary and their absence from previous studies. The results of the analyses in this dissertation have demonstrated that the top-two primary is not a panacea for all the ills in primary election systems and the broader political environment in the United States. While there is some evidence to the claim that the top-two primary produces normatively better outcomes compared to traditional primaries such as encouraging greater voter participation and there is some evidence of greater electoral competition, there remains little support for the prospect of encouraging greater moderation among candidates. Nevertheless, the results from this dissertation do show that there remain significant and important distinctions between primary election systems. Undoubtedly these differences are what motivates efforts to change primary election systems across the United States, in addition to simply hoping that those changes will benefit their political goals.

Summary of Findings and Discussion

In Chapter 2 I sought to understand the relationship between candidate ideology and the primary election system from which each candidate was chosen. The results of the analyses conducted in this chapter demonstrated interesting findings. In particular, the top-two primary demonstrated no level of moderation compared with other primary election systems among Republican Members of Congress but there was moderation among Democratic Members of

Congress compared with the semi-closed primary and blanket primary. These results remain perplexing without a clear answer.

The results from these analyses pointed in the opposite direction I hypothesized. I hypothesized that the top-two primary election system would create an environment that was more moderate than other primary election systems. However, the candidates produced from the top-two primary tended to be more liberal, among Democratic Members of Congress, compared to most primaries and more conservative among Republican Members of Congress compared to all other primaries. Clearly providing the opportunity for moderate voters to participate in the primary and forcing candidates to compete in a more complex multicandidate environment with opposition party candidates and co-partisan candidates does not provide incentives for moderation. Instead the results seem to indicate that the complexity of the environment may force candidates to try and differentiate themselves from their fellow candidates and perhaps take more ideological political stances in order to stand out from among the crowd. Furthermore, regardless of ideology, the incumbent candidate is perhaps more likely to be successful in the primary because of voter familiarity. Voters are faced with numerous candidates from across parties and within parties. If voters are faced with too many choices and are unwilling to research individual candidates, or perhaps voters fear vote splitting will lead to their opposition party candidates receiving the most votes, they may be more likely to stick with their incumbent Member of Congress. This may seem a safer bet than risking the defeat of their party in the primary and being locked out of the general election with only members of the opposition party as their two choices.

Perhaps the most interesting results found in this chapter were the results from the analyses of the closed primary as the comparison group. In these findings the closed primary

actually demonstrated more moderation than other primary election systems. This was an incredibly unexpected result and contrary to the previous findings of other studies. The nature of the closed primary ensures that only registered party members participate in the primary and the type of person most likely to register with a party, rather than choose to be unaffiliated, is likely to be more partisan than other voters. However, these findings seem to indicate that while more partisan individual may register with a party, they are not necessarily more ideological than other voters. Instead, they are more likely to choose candidates that are more moderate than those chosen in other primary election systems including the top-two primary.

In Chapter 3 I investigate how primary election systems affect electoral competitiveness. Throughout this chapter I use several measures of competition to better understand how each primary election system affects the chances of a candidate flying to victory with ease or facing a more difficult challenge to become their party's nominee or, in the case of the top-two primary and jungle primary, one of the candidates proceeding to the general election. The findings of this chapter appear at first to provide strong evidence supporting the top-two primary providing a more competitive electoral environment. The top-two primary demonstrates significantly greater competitiveness across several measures including the margin of victory won by the winning candidate, to the percentage of vote won by the first-place candidate, and the prevalence of uncontested elections.

The primary margin of victory and first place percentage of vote measures both demonstrate strong relationships with the top-two primary. In each case the top-two primary encouraged smaller margins of victory and lower percentages of vote won by the winning candidate. This indicates that the losing candidates are earning higher percentages of the vote and therefore had better opportunities to win the election than they would have in other primary

election systems. This creates an environment ripe for upset victories that would perhaps cause incumbents to win less often or at least be more responsive to voters.

Further evidence of this effect can be seen in measuring the rate of uncontested elections. As stated in Chapter 3, the number of uncontested elections in primaries are quite high and therefore most voters have no real choices. They are literally forced to live with the one candidate that chose to run for office. Undoubtedly the rate of uncontested elections could mean that voters are quite happy with their representation, or with their party's challenger to the incumbent, but this could also mean that there is little belief that other candidates will have a chance in the election, particularly when the candidate is seeking to unseat an incumbent. The top-two primary inherently creates competition by forcing all candidates onto a single ballot. Even if only one Democrat and one Republican run for office then they will be in a multicandidate primary. Whereas they would be uncontested in traditional primary election systems. Nevertheless, this system may encourage other candidates because the percent of vote necessary to win a place on the general election will be lower. No longer do any candidates need to win a majority of the vote, because inherently at least one of the candidates proceeding to the general election will not. Consequently candidates will be able to secure a general election placement with a lower threshold of vote and it is likely that this dynamic is responsible for the findings in Chapter 2. More ideological candidates may not have a chance in a traditional primary that would require they win a majority of the vote, but in a top-two primary you only need to achieve the second most votes in the primary regardless of how low this number of votes may be.

The 2022 primary in Washington's Third Congressional District seems to be an apt example of this possibility. Incumbent Republican Congresswoman Jamie Herrera Beutler was a

somewhat moderate member of the Republican Party with an ideological score of 0.336 which places her more conservative than most members of the U.S. of Representatives but more moderate than a majority of the House Republican Conference (Lewis et al. 2023). The Congresswoman's ideological placement is not particularly surprising given that Donald Trump won her district with 50 percent of the vote in 2020 (Cohen et al. 2021). Nevertheless, the Congresswoman faced several challenges to her reelection in 2022 including four Republicans, two Democrats, and two candidates from other political parties. (Washington Secretary of State). The Congresswoman's chief rivals in this election were Marie Gluskamp-Perez, a car mechanic and small businesses owner, and an ideologically moderate Democrat along with the far more conservative Republican candidate Joe Kent who was a strong supporter of former President Trump and his policies (Ward and Mutnick 2022). Ultimately, the Congresswoman was one of the few incumbents to lose re-election in her primary as Marie Gluskamp-Perez and Joe Kent won first and second place respectively whereas the Congresswoman fell a mere 1,096 votes behind Kent to earn third place. The difference in vote totals between each candidate were relatively small. Gluskamp-Perez won 31 percent of the vote, Joe Kent won 22.7 percent and Congresswoman Herrera Beutler won 22.2 percent (Washington Secretary of State 2022). These low thresholds clearly indicate strong competition among these candidates as no candidate was a clear favorite, but these vote totals also indicate that voter approval of one candidate over another was not significantly different. Consequently, instead of voters in Washington's third congressional district having a contest between a moderate Democrat and a moderate Republican, they were given a general election between a moderate Democrat and a very conservative Republican.

While much of the results from Chapter 3 do point toward the top-two primary creating more competitive elections, the results are not unanimous. There was no statistical significance for any relationship between primary system and the probability of an incumbent losing re-election in the primary. Incumbents losing re-election is uncommon, particularly in a primary election, and the top-two primary provide no advantages to challengers that are not present in other primary election systems. This finding does seem to present an important caveat to each of the earlier findings. If an election system creates closer margins and provides greater opportunity for candidates to succeed, but those opportunities do not translate into electoral victories, then the results are definitely questionable. If incumbents are losing in no greater numbers then there may be greater competitiveness on a superficial level, but substantively the political environment remains unchanged as incumbents continue to cruise to victory. If people are hoping to foster a more competitive political environment to encourage greater responsiveness from their political leaders then this primary does provide some hope but falls short of the most consequential effect of true competitiveness.

In Chapter 4 I analyzed the effects of each primary election systems on voter participation. In this chapter I found strong evidence to suggest that primary election systems do encourage greater participation among voters. As I stated in this chapter, voters participation is strongly influenced by voter ease. The traditional primary election systems place small barriers to voter participation that do not exist in the top-two primary. In closed primaries and semi-closed primaries voters must register with a political party and voters are only allowed to participate in the primary election of the party in which they have a registered party affiliation, although independents are permitted to vote in any party's primary when it is semi-closed. Even though open primaries do not require voters to register their party affiliation, thus locking the

voter into a registered relationship with a party, the voter must still choose to participate in one party's election which may be uncomfortable or undesirable for less partisan voters. The top-two primary eliminates these distinctions as voters of all political orientations are given the same ballots with the same candidates. Consequently, voters are simply making a selection of candidates and they don't have to formally affiliate with any particular party or make the choice to only have candidates of one party on their ballot, even though the vast majority of voters will probably vote for one party's candidates down their ballot.

Additionally, the nature of the top-two primary effectively encourages greater participation than traditional primaries. Traditional primaries are often uncontested because only one Republican or one Democrat filed to run for office. However, this same situation would cause a contested primary in the top-two primary system as there would be multiple candidates including independents and third party candidates that are normally excluded from primaries. Consequently, voters are given a reason to show up and participate in the election as their votes will be necessary to determine which candidates will proceed to the general election. Although the outcome of the election is probably still a largely foregone conclusion if there is only one Democrat, one Republican, and one or more third party candidates.

Future Research

The establishment of the top-four primary in Alaska and likely introduction of the top-five primary in Nevada ensure that the need for evaluating the effects of primary elections systems will continue into the near future. Alaska and Nevada are relatively small states and so there will be a significant lag between when these primaries first take place and when enough observations occur to evaluate their effects on U.S. House of Representatives candidates. However, the opportunity to study the election of other offices, particularly state legislatures will

be numerous within a few years. As I described in Chapter 3, one of the problems voters have with the top-two primary is the possibility of having a general election with only candidate from a single party. The competitiveness provided by the primary often results in single party competition in the general election against the desires of many voters. The top-four primary would solve this problem. Indeed no primary during the study period of this dissertation would have resulted in a major party candidate being denied a general election placement if California and Washington had used the top-four primary instead of the top-two primary.

Furthermore, the results of the sole top-four primary election for Alaska's single House seat offer tantalizing suggestions for the future which will need to be addressed once more observations are available. The top-four primary with significant engagement among candidates and voters. 23 candidates participated in the primary to become the state's next Member of Congress and voters selected a variety of candidates to proceed to the general election including a Democrat, two Republicans, and a Libertarian. Thus providing voters in the general election a wide array of choices. Furthermore, the allowance for more candidates to proceed to the general election will mean that voters and candidates have more room to make choices they might otherwise be uncomfortable making. Certainly this primary might encourage more ideological candidates arriving at the general election ballot because the threshold for advancing will be so much lower than even the top-two primary allows. Voters were also significantly engaged in this election with near record breaking voter participation for a primary (Kitchenman 2022). Consequently, there is much to be learned about how this primary election system will affect candidates and voters within these states and how these primaries compare with their counterparts in other states.

Final Thoughts

The results of the preceding chapters indicate clear evidence that primary election systems affect both candidates and voters. The focus on primary election systems by parties and voters are well considered, however the results of this dissertation indicate that the fears and hopes of various stakeholders may not necessarily be what they have expected. Nevertheless, primary election systems do encourage clear differences in ideology, in competitiveness, and voter participation. Consequently, the adjustment of primary election systems to produce the outcomes preferred by various groups in society will undoubtedly continue to be a policy debate in American politics for the foreseeable future. Whether the ultimate shape of primary elections continue to be the traditional party primaries most Americans are accustomed to or variations of the top-two or four primaries which have more recently been enacted, remains to be seen. Regardless, the continued changes in primary election systems will undoubtedly encourage interest in investigating the effects of these systems as further variation continues.

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