

Primary Type and Polarization of State Electorates

Barbara Norrander (norrande@email.arizona.edu)

Kerri Stephens (kstephen@email.arizona.edu)

School of Government and Public Policy

University of Arizona

Abstract

Primary voters, described as highly partisan and ideologically extreme, are frequently blamed for the increasing polarization of American parties. Closed primaries, in particular, are faulted by commentators and state reformers as a source of ideologically biased electorates. However, very little survey data exist to confirm the ideological orientation of primary voters under any system. Further, the influence of primary type on party identification is ignored by those lamenting the influence of primary types on election outcome. Closed primaries produce the largest number of partisans and semi-closed primaries, which allow independents to choose, create the largest number of independents. Primary type moves voters with weak partisan preferences in and out of partisan versus independent identifications. As such, primary type should also influence the ideological composition of these partisan groups.

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Primary voters, described as highly partisan and ideologically extreme, are frequently blamed for the increasing polarization of elected officials. Closed primaries, in particular, are faulted by commentators and state reformers as a source of ideologically biased electorates. For example, Gerber and Morton (1998: 309) note that a key assumption in this argument “is that the position of the median voter in a closed primary is likely to diverge substantially from the position of the median voter in the general election.” Likewise, political reformers often advocate a switch away from closed primaries in hopes of obtaining more moderate nominees. California reformers first enacted a blanket primary, and when that was invalidated by the U.S. Supreme Court, they pushed successfully for the adoption of the top-two format. However, very little data exist to confirm the ideological orientation of primary voters under any system. Further, the influence of primary type on party identification is ignored by those lamenting the influence of primary types on election outcome. Closed primaries produce the largest number of partisans and semi-closed primaries, which allow independents to choose, create the largest number of independents (Norrande 1989a). Primary type moves voters with weak partisan preferences in and out of partisan versus independent identifications. As such, primary type should also influence the ideological composition of these partisan groups.

Primaries, of any format, are frequently characterized as having small, ideologically extreme electorates that select candidates far from the state’s median voter. Such charges are not new. For example, V. O. Key (1956) tested concerns about geographic bias to primary turnout, such that parts of the state where a party was stronger would dominate in the nominating process. In a more modern take on this debate, Fiorina and Levendusky (2006) argue that the low turnout in primaries means that the electorate is composed more of the highly active electorate who are more likely to be “sorted” by their issue positions into the “correct” party. This produces more ideologically distinctive primary electorates. Further, the composition of the primary electorate encourages incumbent representatives to preemptively move to the extremes to ward off primary challengers. Other scholars, however, disagree. Abramowitz (2011) asserts that there is currently too little empirical evidence to conclude that primary elections are the driving force behind elite polarization.

Indirect Evidence of Primaries and Primary Types on Polarization

Empirical data on primary voters is indeed scarce, with few public opinion polls or exit polls taken of primary voters. Thus, indirect measures are often tested. Burden (2001) tests whether representatives adjust their congressional voting patterns between the primary election and general election phases. He finds representatives do move from more extreme positions during the primary phase to more moderate voting patterns during the general election phase, but this movement is slight, greater for those facing primary challengers, and greater for Republicans than Democrats. Brady, Han and Pope (2007) test for the influence of ideologically extreme primary voters by first creating a measure of distance between general election constituencies (based on presidential votes) and House members’ voting records (DW-Nominate scores). Second, they employ these distance measures in a regression equation predicting incumbents’ votes in the primary election, when applying a variety of additional control variables. They find that Democrats more liberal than their districts and Republicans

who are more conservative win proportionally more votes in the primary elections. Secondly, Brady, Han and Pope analyze primary losses by incumbents and find while such losses are rare that they occur more among moderate legislators.

In contrast, Hirano, Snyder, Ansolabehere and Hasen (2010) uncover little evidence that primary elections are associated with polarization in Congress. They find no evidence that members of Congress took more extreme positions after the introduction of primary laws in their states. In general, they find little evidence that primary elections have any influence on the ideological voting patterns of members of Congress, even when the composition of the primary electorate might be extreme or the member faces a threat of a primary challenge. Part of the explanation for these findings may lay in Ansolabehere, Snyder and Stewart's (2001) evidence that members of Congress are responding more to the national party positions than to their local party constituencies. Primary elections have been in use for 100 years, during times of high polarization between the parties and times of low polarization. As such, the institutional structure itself is hard to blame for today's party polarization.

While some point fingers at primaries in general, a more nuanced argument is made that primary type, whether open, closed or somewhere in between, shapes the political orientations and behavior of primary voters. Closed primaries are characterized as the most likely to produce unrepresentative primary electorates. Two factors could influence the unrepresentativeness of closed primary. First would be a lower turnout rate in closed primaries. Second, would be the moderating effect of crossover voters in semi-closed and open primaries. Gerber and Morton (1998) argue that open primaries will have higher turnout rates. Indeed, more open primary formats appear to increase turnout for senate and gubernatorial contests (Jewell 1984; Kenney 1983, 1986.) However, the level of representativeness of voters may not be directly tied to the size of the electorate. For example, King (1998) argues that increased participation in open primaries may not be a moderating effect. A candidate in an open primary might be able to mobilize single-issue voters, whether on abortion or union rights, in a manner that makes the open primary electorate more extreme than a closed primary electorate. Further, there is little empirical evidence on whether voters in open primary states are switching back and forth between the parties' primaries in a way to influence the level of turnout or the composition of the electorate (Jewell and Olson 1988).

The second part of the argument on the relationship between primary type and polarization focuses on the voting preferences of crossover voters. Gerber and Morton (1998) argue that it is the crossover voter in the semi-closed and open primaries that leads to more moderation of the primary electorate and the election of more moderate candidates. Crossover voters can engage in several types of voting. Crossover voting may be sincere, for a preferred candidate, or strategic, including "raiding" behavior by opposing party members. Gerber and Morton argue that in semi-closed they expect more sincere crossover voting and increasing support for more moderate candidates. In blanket and open primaries, the costs of crossover voting are the lowest so Gerber and Morton expect both sincere and strategic crossover voting, with the later negating moderation.

A common strategy to demonstrate the ideological bias in closed primaries is to compare the voting patterns of legislators selected from the different types of primary elections. Gerber and Morton

(1998) empirically argue that primary type matters for the ideological positioning of members of the U.S. House. They measure district ideology with presidential vote and House member's ideology with ADA scores for 1982-1990. Gerber and Morton consider district ideology, party, run-off primaries, open seats and regional dummies (South, Northeast) in their models. In their basic model, they find that MC from semi-closed, open, nonpartisan and blanket primaries to be more moderate compared to closed primaries. However, the patterns are not as clear for Republican legislators as it is for Democratic members of Congress. For Republican legislators, open primaries produce more extreme voting records. In a subsequent analysis with finer tuning of primary type, Kanthak and Morton (2001) find that semi-closed and semi-open primaries produce more moderate voting records among House members than those chosen under closed primary rules. However, those selected under pure open primaries produce more extreme voting records. Grofman and Brunell (2001) find that senators from the same state, but from opposite parties have greater ideological differences in their ADA scores if they were selected from closed rather than open primaries. Grofman and Brunell use only a dichotomy of open versus closed, missing important distinctions between other primary types. Nor do they consider any other factors that may shape the voting patterns of senators. Other researchers, however, find evidence in the opposite direction. McGhee *et al.* (2011) conduct a similar type of analysis for state legislatures. Using Shor and McCarty's (2011) ideal points for state legislators, McGhee *et al.* find little evidence that state legislators are more polarized in any of five primary types (closed, semi-closed, semi-open, open, and nonpartisan).

A second strategy is to look at the primary vote totals of House incumbents under different primary types. Thus, Brady, Han and Pope (2007) included primary type as one of their additional independent variables in predicting primary vote totals for incumbent members of the House. Comparing closed primaries and open primaries to the excluded category of semi-closed primaries, Brady, Han and Pope find that open primaries have no effect on the incumbent's primary vote percentage while closed primaries results in lower vote totals, controlling for incumbent's ideological distance and primary competitiveness. Thus, indirect evidence provides both confirming and disconfirming evidence for the notion that closed primaries produce more politically biased electorates and select more ideologically extreme candidates.

Factors Affecting Primary Outcomes Beyond Median Voters

Primary type is not an exogenous variable. Political traditions, histories and cultures in a state influence which type of primary law is adopted, and these antecedent causes also may influence turnout rates and candidate positioning. The selection of primary type reflected the strength of parties and levels of interparty competition at the time primaries were first instituted and during periods of reform afterwards. Closed primaries were more typical chosen by northeastern states that had strong party organizations. States dominated by a single party also were more likely to select closed primaries. Meanwhile, open primaries predominate in Midwestern and Western where the Progressive movement was strong. Most of the southern states adopted open primaries that require voters to declare to election officials which party's ballot they desire (Galderisi and Ezra 2001; Jewell and Olson 1988).

Considerable variations exist across primaries in a number of areas beyond primary type. Legal variations include the dates of state-level primaries (from March through September), other elections on the ballot (e.g., held in conjunction with presidential primaries, presence of ballot propositions), and the requirements for run-off primaries. Beyond variations in legal structures, the number of candidates and the competitiveness of those candidates also will influence the outcome of primary elections. Numerous primary candidates can lead to ideological crowding, splitting the vote of specific faction of primary voters. The level of competition in the primaries has been documented to be influenced by whether an incumbent is running which leads to fewer candidates, pre-primary endorsements which also lead to fewer candidates, and majority party status with more candidates in the majority party's primary (Jewell and Olson). Survey evidence confirms that potential candidates see less chance of success if an incumbent is running or if their party is the dominant party in the area (Maisel and Stone 2001). On the other hand, primary elections benefit winning candidates by allowing them to increase their public presence during the early campaign, to build a campaign organization and practice their political message (Ezra 2001). Finally, turnout levels in primaries are influenced by a variety of factors in the state, including the rate of participation in general elections.

The Effects of Primary Type on Party Identification

Primary type influences the number of partisans and independents in a state. Campbell *et al.* (1960: 267) in *The American Voter* found a set of election rules, including aspects of primary type, to shape the strength of partisanship and independent identification. Finkel and Scarrow (1985) demonstrate that party enrollment procedures influence perceptions of partisanship. Burden and Greene (2000) used the Senate National Election Study to confirm that party registration laws, which are related to primary type, affect the adoption of independent identification among those who actually registered to vote. In the most direct test of primary type, Norrander (1989a) used Erikson, Wright and McIver's (1987) survey data aggregated to the state level to demonstrate the relationship between primary type and partisanship proportions across the states. She found that closed primaries, with preprimary enrollment requirements, produced fewer independents, while semi-closed primaries, which allow independents to move between the two parties' primaries, produced the highest number of independents.

As primary type influences the number of partisans in a state, it is highly likely that primary type also shapes the ideological orientation of these partisans. Thus, we hypothesize that closed primaries, by increasing the number of partisans, will produce more moderate and less polarized state electorates. We test our hypothesis with data drawn from the 2004 and 2008 general election exit polls which provide sufficiently large state samples to measure the ideological positions of each state's partisan electorate. In addition, we will consider other factors that might contribute to the polarization of state party electorates, including demographic and political variables. We also will look at the mean ideology of primary and general election voters in California, the only state with a large number of exit polls conducted during primary elections. These two types of data analyses will help to clarify the composition of state primary electorates and whether they are a contributing cause to party polarization in the United States. In addition, our research will expand our understanding of state public opinion and its causes, and add to our knowledge about the consequences of state election laws.

Existing Evidence from Survey Data on Primary Voters

Very few surveys exist of actual primary voters, particularly for congressional or state-level offices. Summaries of this evidence by Jewell and Olson (1984) suggest that primary voters are better educated, older, hold higher status jobs, and are more knowledgeable and interested in politics. They also are more likely to be partisans than independents, and partisans from the dominant party are more likely to participate. Finally, no consistent patterns are found for ideological unrepresentativeness, and the actual candidates running may influence the composition of the electorate more than a general pattern of ideological voting.

More surveys are available for presidential primaries, where the turnout is greater. From these surveys, the evidence is that presidential primary voters overall do not deviate much from general election voters (Geer, 1988; Kritzer 1977; Norrander 1989b). Presidential primary voters are a fairly representative subset of general election voters from the same party. Kaufman, Gimpel and Hoffman (2003) question whether primary type influences the ideological composition of presidential primary electorates. They compare the mean ideology of general election voters supporting a party's presidential candidate to the mean ideology of presidential primary voters in the state (based on exit polls) and find a statistically significant effect only in the Republican Party, where open primaries produce a more moderate electorate than closed primaries. However, election year, dates of primaries and region have more frequent relationships with the ideological orientation of presidential primary electorates than does primary format.

Evidence from presidential primaries also reveals that the presence of crossover voters rarely changes primary election outcome (Alvarez and Nagler 2002; Southwell 1991). In an examination of crossover preferences in the 2008 Democratic presidential primaries after the Republican presidential contest was over, Norrander (2010) found that primary type did influence turnout patterns but had little influence on candidate vote totals. After Super Tuesday, turnout in closed Democratic primaries exceeded participation in Republican primaries by 18 percentage points, but in late open primaries, Democratic primary turnout exceeded Republican turnout by 30 percentage points. Still, the effects on Clinton and Obama's vote totals were minimally, Hillary Clinton would have gain 1.8 percent in the votes if only Democrats had voted in the last 17 primaries while Barack Obama would have lost on average 1.2 percent of the vote totals. The effects also could vary dramatically by state, where Obama would have done 5.8 percentage points better if only Democrats had voted in Mississippi's Democratic primary while Clinton would have gained 5.2 percent of the vote if only Democrats had voted in the Wisconsin open primary. Among three types of primaries, Clinton actually would have gained the most vote (on average 2.5 percent) if independent identifiers (registered as Democrats) had not voted in the closed primaries held after Super Tuesday, while Obama would have lost equal shares (1.4 percent) in both closed and open primaries.

Primary Types and the Polarization of Partisans in State Electorates

To test the influence of primary types on the polarization of state parties, we pool the state exit polls from the 2004 and 2008 general elections and aggregate results to the state level. We recode the

ideology variable to be centered on zero: -1 is used for liberal, 0 for moderate and 1 for conservative. From this coding, we obtain mean ideology scores for Democratic and Republican Party identifiers in each state. We measure party polarization as the difference between the state-level mean ideologies for Democrats versus Republicans. We also calculate the percent of exit polls respondents in each state who identify themselves as Democrats, Republicans or independents.

We classify state primary types in 2007 based on the listing by Holbrook and La Raja (2008). This produces four categories. Closed primaries require voters to be registered with the state as partisans in order to participate. This format was used in 13 states. Semi-closed primary states also require party registration, but registered independents may vote in either party's primary. This format was used in 15 states in 2007, including California after the Supreme Court overturned the blanket primary format. Semi-open primary states do not have partisan registration but do require voters to ask poll workers for a specific party's primary ballot. This format was used by 11 states. Pure open primaries allow voters to select a party's primary ballot in secret, and were used by 10 states including Washington State. We also collapsed Louisiana's nonpartisan primary in with the open primary states.

Table 1 reveals the results for percent independent identifiers and party polarization by the four primary types. Confirming previous research, the percent of independent identifies varies across primary type with the fewer independents in closed primary and semi-open primary states and more independents in semi-closed and pure open primary states. The new data reveal that the ideological polarization of state electorates also varies by primary type. Republican and Democratic voters are more ideologically polarized in the semi-closed and open primary states and less polarized in the closed and semi-open primary states. As the proportion of independent voters increases, the size of the partisan electorate decreases and the level of interparty polarization increases. This is confirmed by a Pearson's r correlation of .59 (significance = .00) between the proportion of independents and party polarization.

Factors other than primary type will influence the level of party polarization across the 50 states. The ideological sorting that underlies party polarization requires voters to recognize the ideological differences across the two parties. The ability to recognize these differences varies across individuals based on political interests and cognitive abilities. At the state level, we expect that states with a higher proportion of college educated citizens should have more polarized partisan electorates. As previously mention, the selection of primary type varies by region and political culture. We include a dummy variable for the 10 southern states, because seven of these states have semi-open primaries. We distinguish moralistic political culture states, because states with more of a moralistic political culture are more likely to hold open primaries ($r = .48$, sign. = .00) or semi-closed primaries ($r = .23$, sign. = .10). We use a four-point scale for moralistic political culture: (0) no elements of moralistic culture, (.3) minor elements, (.6) significant elements and (1) fully moralistic states. We use dummy variables to represent the four types of primary formats, with closed primaries as the excluded comparison category.

Table 2 presents four ordinary least square regression equations, with each one adding additional independent variables. Model 1 contains only the three dummy variables for primary type and replicates the bivariate patterns in Table 1. Semi-closed and open primary states have more highly

polarized partisans. Model 2 adds in the variable for education. The addition of this variable does not change the pattern for the types of primary states, but it does increase the amount of explain variance substantially. This suggests that education levels are as important, or more important than, primary type in explaining party polarization in the states. The third model adds the dummy variable for South to account for the regional pattern in usage of semi-open primaries. Because party polarization is actually lower in southern states and because southern states are more likely to employ semi-open primaries, the inclusion of the South dummy variable reveals a new pattern for this type of primary. Once the influence of southern primaries is included, semi-open primary formats increase partisan polarization in comparison to closed primaries. The final model adds in the measure of political culture. Recall that moralistic political culture states are more likely to adopt the open and semi-closed primary formats. The coefficient in Table 2 shows that these moralistic political culture states also are more likely to have polarized partisans. Once this factor is taken into account, the distinctiveness of semi-closed and open primaries is diminished. The final column in Table 2 presents standardized regression coefficients for the Model 4. More important than primary type in shaping the level of polarization across the two parties is the education level of a state's electorate and a moralistic political culture.

The Ideology of Primary Voters: Evidence from California

Most of the existing evidence presented about the influence of primaries and primary types on political polarization is indirect because little survey data is available for voters in nonpresidential primaries. California is an exception, because the *Los Angeles Times* conducted exit polls of primary voters in 2002 and 2006. Results from these exit polls can be compared to the findings from the California state files from the VNS/NEP exit polls taken at the time of the 2000, 2004, 2006 and 2008 general elections. The national exit polls from 2002 posed methodological problems and were not used by the media. We substitute a general election exit poll conducted by the Los Angeles Times, instead. Finally, VNS/NEP exit polls are available for the California presidential primaries in 2004 and 2008. The 2000 California primary was a joint state-level office and presidential primary conducted under the blanket primary format and we use a VNS exit poll for this primary.

Comparing results across different polling firms can be precarious due to differences in sampling procedures and question wording. Of most concern for our comparisons is that the *Los Angeles Times* polls ask about party registration rather than party identification. The number of options for ideological identification also varies. The VNS/NEP general election exit polls contain only a three-point ideology scale. The VNS/NEP primary exit polls and the Los Angeles Times exit polls contain five-point ideology scales, which we collapse to three categories for comparison sake.

Table 3 presents the mean ideological positions of Democratic and Republican identifiers in the general election polls and the mean ideological position of all voters in the Democratic and Republican primaries in the same years. For the 2000 blanket primary, we present the mean position of Democratic and Republican identifiers. Despite inherent differences in polling firms, the resulting mean ideological positions are quite uniform. Voters in the Democratic primaries have an almost identical mean ideology to the ideology of Democratic partisans in the general elections. The same is true on the Republican side. In California, Democrats and Republicans are polarized but the primary elections do not

exaggerate this polarization. The primary electorate participants exactly match the general election partisanship in average ideological positions.

Conclusions

Primary elections and closed primaries have been faulted in both the theoretical literature and by political reforms as a source of partisan polarization in the U.S. Both aspects of primary elections are viewed as leading to the nomination of candidates pulled away from the general election median voter. To date, most of the empirical evidence has been indirect. Various researchers have examined differences in legislative voting patterns or success in primaries as indirect evidence of the polarizing effects of primary elections. We present more direct evidence on the composition of partisan electorates across four types of primary election formats. In contrast to theoretical models and reformers' concerns, we find that closed primary formats moderate the level of partisan polarization in a state. It does so because closed primaries cause more state residents to view themselves as partisan, enlarging this group and moderating their mean ideological orientation. In contrast, open primaries and semi-close primaries encourage more state voters to view themselves as independents, leaving a smaller more polarized partisan electorate.

The failure to recognize how primary type influences both the number of independents and partisans and the ideological composition of those two groups can lead to faulty conclusions. For example, McGhee and Krimm (2009) conclude that the rising number of registered independents in recent years has made closed primary electorates more extreme. Missing from their argument is the fact that attitudinal independents register as partisans in closed primary states and these attitudinal independents make the registered partisan groups more moderate. Additionally overlooked is that the rising number of registered independents is caused by a number of states switching from closed primaries to semi-closed primaries in recent decades. Finally, other aspects of state electorates, such as educational levels, and antecedent causes of primary types have more to do with state party polarization than primary types.

Table 1: Percent Independents and Level of Partisan Polarization Across Primary Types.

	All 50 states	Closed Primary	Semi-Closed Primary	Semi-Open Primary	Open Primary	Significance Level
Percent Independents	24.6	22.3	27.9	21.6	25.8	.08
Mean Partisan Polarization	.83	.77	.86	.78	.89	.02

Notes:

Mean partisan polarization is difference between mean ideological position of Democratic and Republican identifiers in each state as measured in the 2004 and 2008 NEP state exit polls.

Significance level is based on ANOVA results.

Table 2: Explaining Party Polarization in the States.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Beta Coefficients for Model 4
Semi-closed primary	.09 (.04)	.06 (.10)	.06 (.08)	.02 (.47)	.10
Semi-open primary	.00 (.95)	.04 (.34)	.08 (.08)	.08 (.04)	.30
Open primary	.11 (.01)	.11 (.01)	.11 (.00)	.06 (.12)	.23
College %		.01 (.00)	.01 (.00)	.01 (.00)	.45
South			-.07 (.06)	-.06 (.12)	.20
Moralistic political culture				.11 (.02)	.37
Adj. R2	.13 (.02)	.38 (.00)	.42 (.00)	.50 (.00)	
Number	50	50	50	48	

Notes:

Entries in columns one through four are unstandardized coefficients from ordinary least square regression. Values inside parentheses are the significance level of the t-ratios. Values in the final column are the standardized coefficients from Model 4.

Data are from 2004 and 2008 NEP state exit poll files.

Table 3: Mean Ideology of Partisan Groups in California General Elections and Mean Ideology of Voters in California Partisan Primaries.

	Democrats		Republicans	
	General Election	Primary Election	General Election	Primary Election
2000	-.30	-.37	.51	.56
2002	-.48	-.34	.58	.56
2004	-.34	-.35	.52	
2006	-.34	-.31	.59	.64
2008	-.31	-.37	.56	.49

Data sources: VNS/NEP California state exit polls and *Los Angeles Times* exit polls.

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