



## Open versus closed primaries and the ideological composition of presidential primary electorates



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 2 February 2015

Received in revised form

7 March 2016

Accepted 7 March 2016

Available online 10 March 2016

#### Keywords:

Open primaries

Closed primaries

Ideology

Party identification

Presidential primaries

### ABSTRACT

Many journalists, political reformers and social scientists assume that electorates in open versus closed primaries are distinctive, especially in terms of their ideological orientations. Because voting in closed primaries is restricted to registered partisans, voters in this setting are assumed to be more ideologically extreme. Independents voting in open primaries are seen as moderating the ideological orientation of these primary electorates. However, our research demonstrates that the ideological orientations of voters in these two primary settings are quite similar. Prior research demonstrates the influence of primary laws on voters' self-identifications as partisans or independents. We expand upon this research to show how this influences the number and ideological positions of partisans and independents as they vote in presidential primaries held under differing participation rules.

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Conventional wisdom expects that voters in closed primaries will be more ideologically extreme than voters in open primaries. Because the electorate in closed primaries is restricted to partisans only, these partisans should be further removed from their state's general election electorate which includes independents and voters from the opposite party. Open primary electorates are viewed as more moderate, since both partisans and independents can participate. This conventional wisdom is found in the accounts of journalists and reformers. Siegel (2011) argues in *The Washington Post* that closed primaries contribute to the current polarization of politics by making candidates cater to the extreme views of partisans voting in closed primaries. Jacobson (2014) reports that political reformers advocate for more open primaries “to curb the influence of the parties' ideological extremes, which tend to dominate in closed primaries...” Likewise, the editorial board of *USA Today* (2014) advocating for open primaries asserts that open primaries will lead to the nomination of more moderate candidates.

Social science research has tested the conventional wisdom that closed primaries produce more extreme results than do open primaries (e.g., Chen and Yang, 2002; Cherry and Kroll, 2003; Gerber and Morton, 1998; Grofman and Brunell, 2001; Kaufman et al.,

2003; McGhee et al. 2014; Oak, 2006). A few studies find evidence that supports the premise of the conventional wisdom (Gerber and Morton, 1998; Grofman and Brunell, 2001; Heckelman, 2004). Other studies present contrary patterns (Kanthak and Morton, 2001) or suggest the effects are conditional on other factors, such as the level of strategic voting (Chen and Yang, 2002; Oak, 2006). Yet others find no evidence that primary participation rules are tied to the extremity of legislators' voting records (McCarty et al., 2006; McGhee et al., 2014). Conventional wisdom is based on a three-step link between primary participation rules and the extremity of elected officials. The first step is the restrictions that primary participation rules have on voter participation, the second link is how these restrictions affect the ideological orientation of the primary electorate, while the third step is the link to the ideological extremity of the nominated candidates (and subsequently the voting record of the elected officials). It is the middle link, that of the ideology of the primary electorate, which is rarely directly tested, mostly due to a lack of survey data. However, we will demonstrate that the assumptions about this central link are wrong by showing that the ideological orientation of voters in presidential primaries held under open, semi-open, semi-closed and closed primary do not differ.

Our explanation builds off of prior research that establishes a link between primary participation rules and party identification (Burden and Greene, 2000; Campbell et al., 1960; Finkel and

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Scarrow, 1985; Gerber et al., 2010). As a result, the numbers of self-identified independents and partisans vary across the 50 states based on primary participation rules: more partisans in closed primary states and more independents in open primary states (Norrander, 1989a). We expand upon this research to demonstrate how these primary participation rules influence the ideological positions of partisans and independents as they participate in presidential primary elections. Closed primary electorates are composed of a larger group of partisans whose ideology is closer to their state's median voter, while open primary electorates have a smaller, more ideologically extreme group of partisan voters offset by the presence of a larger group of ideologically moderate independents. As a result, the overall ideological composition of primary electorates does not vary much by participation rules. We will explore this ideological composition of primary electorates in the important presidential primaries which lead to the nomination of the Democratic and Republican candidates for president.

## 1. Theory and expectations

The link between primary participation laws and party identification has been confirmed by several studies. While *The American Voter* is most commonly associated with a definition of party identification as an individual's psychological attachment to a political party, the authors of this seminal work also explored how state laws "promote partisanship" (Campbell et al., 1960: 269). Campbell and his colleagues combined primary type with the format of the general election ballot and the use of a presidential primary to create a measure of laws that facilitated partisanship. Restricting their analysis to respondents from northern states, they found more partisans and fewer independents in states with laws facilitating partisan identities. Norrander (1989a) examined the percent of a state's population who call themselves independents, based on state partisanship values aggregated from the CBS News-New York Times polls by Wright et al. (1985). At that time (the survey data dates from the 1970s and 1980s), South Dakota had the fewest self-identified independents, at 20 percent, and Rhode Island had the most, at 60 percent. Norrander found that this variation in state-level independent identification was explained by primary participation laws, levels of general election competition and state party organizational strength. She found the highest proportions of a state population considered themselves to be independents if they lived in the semi-closed primary states, and the second highest totals occurred in the pure open primary states. The fewest independents existed in the closed primary states with the second lowest totals occurring in the semi-open primary states.<sup>1</sup>

Primary type also is connected to partisanship through the differential use of party registration between closed and open primary states. Party registration exists in almost two-thirds of the U.S. states, where voters designate on their state's voter registration form a party preference. Party registration is used for primary participation in closed and semi-closed primary states. Open primary states do not have party registration, and their voter registration forms do not ask for party preference. Finkel and Scarrow (1985) theorize that in states with party registration, voters' consciousness of their legal attachment to the party influences their party identification as well. Finkel and Scarrow find that the relationship between party registration and party identification is

strong, though not perfect. Burden and Greene (2000) also examined the relationship between party registration and party identification. Specifically, they found that among registered voters, those living in states without a party registration law were more likely to view themselves as independents even when controlling for personal traits such as age, education, gender, race and party evaluations.

The four studies listed above rely on cross-sectional survey data to establish a link between primary type, or party registration, and party identification. Such a link does not prove causality. However, a recent experiment by Gerber et al. (2010) provides some evidence for a causal link. These authors found that an experimental group of unaffiliated voters who were sent a reminder of the need to be a registered partisan in order to vote in the upcoming closed primary were more likely to identify as a partisan in a follow up survey than the control group. While a causal link between primary laws and self-described party identification seems plausible, and has some empirical support, such a causal link is not necessary to the core question of our research. Our research investigates the consequences of the established linkage between primary participation laws and party identification for the ideological composition of primary electorates.

Our research hypothesizes that as the number of partisans and independents varies across the states, the ideological orientation of these groups as they vote in primaries also will be affected. However, this effect will be such as to diminish any ideological variations in the composition of the primary electorates. We expect that voters in open primaries and closed primaries will have similar ideological profiles. In open primary states the lack of a legal connection to the party (i.e., no party registration) means voters adopt a partisan identity for purely personal reasons. These reasons may be due to social group identities (Green et al., 2004) or the ideological positions of the parties (Abramowitz and Saunders, 1998). A focus on the latter would lead to congruence between ideology and party identification, with conservatives in the Republican Party and liberals in the Democratic Party. Such ideological orientations would move partisans voting in the open primary further away from their state's general-election median voter. The ideological extremity of partisans voting in open primaries requires a more moderate group of independents to offset this ideological extremity. Similar logic applies to the semi-closed primary states where the incentives are to register as an independent to provide a wider choice as to which party's primary to participate in. The larger number of independent primary voters in semi-closed primary states will offset the more ideologically extreme orientations of the smaller group of partisan primary voters.

In closed primary states voters register as partisans in order to remain eligible to vote in a primary, and as past research has shown (Burden and Greene, 2000; Finkel and Scarrow, 1985), this leads them also to view themselves as a partisan. This legal incentive may lead people with less policy congruency with a party to nevertheless identify with the party. This will make the larger group of partisans voting in closed primaries to be less ideologically coherent and move the partisan primary voter's ideology closer to their state's general-election median voter. Even though the participation in closed primary states is restricted to registered partisans, the primary electorate is drawn from a larger more ideologically diverse group of partisans. A somewhat similar process will occur in the semi-open primary states, where the public declaration for a partisan primary ballot has been linked to larger numbers of partisan voters (Norrander, 1989a). Thus we expect that the overall ideological orientation of primary electorates will not vary much by primary type. Open and semi-closed primary electorates will be composed of smaller groups of partisan voters who are more ideologically extreme but offset by a larger group of

<sup>1</sup> A replication of this research based on the 2004 and 2008 exit polls confirms this pattern. In closed primary states 20.5% of the electorate calls themselves independents, in semi-open primary states this number is 21.8%, open primary states have 27.1% independent identifiers, and semi-closed primary states have the highest percentage of independents at 28.2 percent.

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