

*Different Rules for Different Folks: The Effect of Primary Type on the 2000 Presidential Nomination Process*

Priscilla L. Southwell and Mathew Manweller

This research examines both aggregate and individual-level data from the 2000 presidential primaries in order to test: (1) the effect of primary type on the distribution of votes across candidates and the eventual outcome of the state's primary race; and (2) the extent of strategic voting in more open types of primaries. Multivariate analysis of aggregate primary results suggests that John McCain fared better in states with open or semi-closed primaries. A similar pattern is revealed in California's "beauty contest" primary. Using ANES data, we also project various primary outcomes under open, semi-closed, and closed scenarios. In both "sincere" and "strategic" models, McCain, but not Bradley, gained in semi-closed and open primaries, but Bush was still the projected Republican winner in all types of primaries. Our analysis of general election behavior shows that independents were the most likely group to switch parties when their preferred primary candidate did not gain the nomination.

The competitive nature of the presidential nomination process in 2000 has re-ignited the debate over the effect of primary type on candidate fortunes. This controversy was fostered, in part, by the exit polls in open primary states which showed a high number of crossover voters in Republican primaries. For example, McCain's unexpected win in Michigan was the result of an open Republican primary that included more than 40 percent crossover voters (as compared to the normal 30 percent), a majority of whom voted for McCain (Bradsher 2000). Several observers saw Senator John McCain as having had an "open primary strategy" for winning the Republican presidential nomination (Cain and Mullin 2002),<sup>1</sup> and his candidacy has raised the issue of whether favorable nomination rules can boost the prospects of certain candidates in future contests.<sup>2</sup>

As such, this topic falls into the broader discussion of the strategic environment of the presidential nomination process—how the "rules of the game" can have a direct impact in determining the winners and losers in this process. Much of the literature on the effect of nomination rules has centered on the reform of the selection of nomination delegates, especially in the post-1968 years,<sup>3</sup> but this research centers instead on the state-by-state participatory rules regarding primaries.

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PRISCILLA L. SOUTHWELL is Professor of Political Science at University of Oregon.  
MATHEW MANWELLER is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Central Washington University.

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We center on the various types of presidential primaries in the 2000 election in order to determine if primary type affected the strength of presidential contenders in both major parties, and also assesses whether strategic voting occurred among crossover voters. The competitive race within the Republican Party developed early in the nomination process in 2000, and therefore offers a suitable opportunity to examine the impact of primary type on the outcome of these primary contests.

### **Debate Over Participation Rules in Primaries**

Much of the controversy over primary type<sup>4</sup> centers on the question of the proper role of the nominating process (Ranney 1972). Should primaries and caucuses produce the candidate who is most likely to win in the general election, or it is preferable to choose a person who best reflects the party's ideology and platform? Ideally, a nominee emerges with both these qualities, but many party leaders argue that this latter goal is best attained in closed primaries where participation is confined to party members.

Another argument against open primaries is the prospect of strategic voting. If one loosely defines a "crossover" voter as one who votes for a candidate outside of his party, then such a voter can vote for the candidate he likes best within that party, even if he actually prefers a candidate in another party. This voter is merely "hedging" his bets in the general election—he does not vote in his own party due to incumbency or a sure winner but instead opts for his favored candidate in the more competitive race (Alvarez and Nagler 2002). However, he could also engage in "raiding," where an opposition party member selects the "weakest" candidate in order to help his own party's choice in the general election. Although Riker argues that this complicated strategy has "never been used by enough voters to make a difference" (1982, 145), party leaders are wary of any primary rules that would permit such behavior.

Even semi-closed primaries are relatively unpopular with those party adherents who wish to enhance rather than minimize the role of party regulars in the nomination process (Hedlund and Watts 1986). Similar to the debate over the use of "ex officio" delegates at the national convention, party elites have successfully pushed for more control over the nomination process by enhancing the role of experienced leaders who are, in their view, more likely to choose an electable leader who reflects the party's philosophy and outlook.

Supporters of more open rules argue, instead, that winning the general election requires a candidate who is supported by a wider range of voters, many of whom who are not affiliated with either political party (see Galderisi 1982; Geer 1986; Southwell 1988). As Geer states, "If one wants

primaries to nominate highly electable candidates, an argument can be made for allowing independents and partisans from the opposition's party to participate in primaries" (1986, 1020). Or, as one of this article's authors pondered "... why 'shoot the messenger' when the results of open primaries may merely indicate a competitive race for the nomination, as well as the nature of the support for various candidates" (Southwell 1988, 293).

These opposing arguments assume that the results of a primary are altered by allowing non-party members to participate in this election. Presumably, independents and opposition party members will vote in a different manner than party regulars, and therefore their votes will affect the outcome of each state's primary. Previous research on this topic has generally found the effects of such primary rules to have a more limited impact.

### **Research on Voting in Primaries**

A number of studies have assessed the degree of crossover voting in presidential primaries (Adamany 1976; Cohen and Sides 1998; Geer 1986; Gimbel, Hoffman, and Kaufman 2000; Hedlund, Watts, and Hedge 1982; Hedlund and Watts 1986; Lengle 1981; Ranney 1972; Southwell 1988; Wekkin 1988). In general, they have concluded that crossover voters do make up a considerable portion of the electorate in open and semi-closed primaries, but that these voters have rarely affected the outcome of the race in each state. However, Wekkin (1988) argues that an underestimation of crossover voting has led previous researchers into minimizing the extent and impact of such behavior.

More recent research on the motivation behind such crossover voting has found little evidence of strategic voting, of either the hedging or raiding type. Southwell's (1991) work concludes that the level of strategic voting is nearly identical across primary types. Similarly, Wekkin (1991), and Abramowitz, McGlennon and Rapoport (1981), found little evidence of hedging or raiding in primary elections. Cohen and Sides (1998) examined subnational primary contests—state senate races in the State of Washington—and concluded that crossover voting was extensive (one-third to one-half of all votes). However, they also found that such voting consisted of a more positive type of "hedging" for a preferred candidate in the most exciting contest rather than a "raiding" type of voting behavior.

The passage of California's blanket primary initiative in 1996 spawned additional research, as California moved dramatically from a closed primary state to a blanket primary and then back again with the *Jones* decision.<sup>5</sup> Sides, Cohen and Citrin (2002) analyzed primary voting in the 1998 blanket primary for the U.S. Senate and gubernatorial races. They found that crossover voting was largely sincere and did not affect the outcome of these

contests. Alvarez and Nagler (2002) studied five races for the California's General Assembly in 1998, and found that in only one of these races did crossover voting have an impact on the outcome of either party's primary nomination. Salvanto and Wattenberg (2002) analyzed absentee ballots from Los Angeles County in the 1998 primary, and concluded that split-ticket voting, as allowed only with a blanket primary, was extensive but found no evidence of deliberate strategic raiding. Kousser (2002) examined the "stickiness" of crossover voters, that is, how many of these voters actually voted for the same party in the general election as in the primary. He concluded that hedging is quite common, and the stickiness factor low, in a blanket primary where the race is close in one party or one party is overwhelmingly strong.

### **The 2000 Presidential Primaries**

As such, this body of research suggests that a close race in a particular party, or the existence of an incumbent President, are two factors that can intensify the impact of crossover voting in open or semi-closed primaries. This research is an expansion of one of Paolino and Shaw's (2001) explanations of the McCain phenomenon—that the structure of the initial contests in 2000 helped the McCain campaign. We also examine the nature of the Bradley-Gore contest as well as some hypothetical primary scenarios.

Table 1 provides an overview of the 2000 presidential primaries, as categorized by primary type. Al Gore appears to have fared better in open primary states than did fellow Democrat, Bill Bradley. This result may have occurred because of the perception that Bradley was the more liberal of these two men, with less appeal to more moderate independents or Republicans who were eligible to vote in the Democratic primary in these states. George Bush did equally well in closed and open primary states, while McCain fared best in states with semi-closed primaries.

### **Multivariate Analysis of Primary Results**

These results, however, may have been affected by the timing of certain primaries or the regional appeal of particular candidates. It is possible that George Bush could have done well in many of these open primary states because they were in the South or occurred later in the primary season when his delegate count had begun to solidify. After controlling for these factors in a multivariate analysis, a regression of Gore and Bush vote percentages shows a modest impact for primary type. The results (as presented in Table 2) for Republican primaries suggest that Bush did better in later

**Table 1. Summary of Percentage of Primary Vote and Type of Primary\***

Year	Closed	Semi-Closed	Open
Bush	68.1%	55.9%	64.4%
McCain	25.4	34.9	29.5
Gore	68.0	59.4	78.6
Bradley	26.9	26.1	19.3

\*Excludes those later primaries where John McCain and Bill Bradley were not on the ballot: Alabama, Arkansas, Idaho, Montana, New Jersey, and Oregon.

Source: Federal Election Commission, [www.fec.gov/votregis/primaryvoting.htm](http://www.fec.gov/votregis/primaryvoting.htm); [www.fec.gov/pubrec/fe2000/2000presprim.htm](http://www.fec.gov/pubrec/fe2000/2000presprim.htm).

**Table 2. Regression Analysis of Percentage of Vote for Bush and Gore in the 2000 Primaries\***

Republican Primaries		Democratic Primaries	
Constant	62.200** (8.497)	Constant	63.461** (7.090)
Date of Primary	.213** (.064)	Date of Primary	8.735E-02 (.063)
East	-20.016** (6.448)	East	-8.135 (5.488)
Border South	-5.378 (5.927)	Border South	-489 (5.804)
Solid South	11.048* (5.023)	Solid South	7.960* (4.153)
Pacific	-5.660 (8.608)	Pacific	9.050 (7.280)
Mountain	.437 (6.376)	Mountain	8.878 (6.288)
Open Primary	-9.592* (5.214)	Open Primary	8.323* (4.119)
Semi-Closed Primary	-8.531* (4.121)	Semi-Closed Primary	-1.319 (3.746)

Dependent Variable = % Vote for George Bush;  
Adjusted R-square= .714

Dependent Variable = % Vote for Al Gore;  
Adjusted R-square= .576

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01

\*Excludes those later primaries where John McCain and Bill Bradley were not on the ballot: Alabama, Arkansas, Idaho, Montana, New Jersey, and Oregon.

Source: Federal Election Commission, [www.fec.gov/votregis/primaryvoting.htm](http://www.fec.gov/votregis/primaryvoting.htm); [www.fec.gov/pubrec/fe2000/2000presprim.htm](http://www.fec.gov/pubrec/fe2000/2000presprim.htm).

primaries, and in the Solid South, and less well in states in the Northeast.<sup>6</sup> He received a smaller percentage of the votes than McCain in open and semi-closed primary states. This is consistent with Paolino and Shaw's (2001) analysis of the 2000 primaries.

The model for the Democrats has less explanatory power, as the date of the primary was not significant, and Gore had only a modest advantage over Bradley in Southern states. Gore, however, did do better in open primary states than Bradley, confirming the bivariate results of Table 1. These results suggest that the appeal of various presidential candidates in 2000 was affected by the type of primary electorate that was created by each state's participatory rules. McCain was able to capitalize on a broader appeal to independents and Democrats in more open primary states. In contrast, Bradley's more liberal image did not serve him well in states where more centrist voters were allowed to vote in the primary.

### **California's Closed Primary and "Beauty Contest"**

The above results are actual aggregate tallies, of course, and do not allow us to answer the question of how these results might have been altered if the "rules of the game" had been different. California's unique handling of the presidential primary, prior to the *Jones* decision, provides a glimpse of what might have happened had California voters been able to vote for President under more "open" primary rules. The California State Legislature in 1999 passed a bill allowing for a closed presidential primary, despite the voter-mandated blanket primary for the state.<sup>7</sup> The presidential ballots were coded such that voters could still choose any candidate they wanted, but only the votes of party registrants would count toward the selection of convention delegates (Cain and Mullin 2002). The actual vote tally of this election on March 7, 2000, as presented in Table 3, give a sense of the effect of differing primary rules on the fortunes of the various presidential candidates. Clearly, McCain fared much better among non-Republican voters than did George Bush, but Bush still won in both the closed race and the "beauty contest." The results for the Democrats simply reveal the overwhelming support for Gore among all voters in the Democratic primary, although Bradley did do slightly better among non-Democrats. However, it is not certain if these California votes would have been identical if the votes of independents and opposition party members had actually counted toward the process of delegate allocation. The extent of crossover voting could have been larger, and the results altered as well.

**Table 3. A Comparison of Candidate Preferences among Voter Types in California's Presidential Primary (Percent of the Vote)**

	Party Members	Non-Party Members	All Voters <sup>ab</sup>
Bush	60.6% (1,725,162)	34.0% (443,304)	52.2% (2,168,466)
McCain	34.7% (988,706)	60.6% (791,864)	42.9% (1,780,570)
Gore	81.2% (2,155,321)	73.6% (454,629)	79.8% (2,609,950)
Bradley	18.2% (482,882)	25.9% (159,772)	19.6% (642,654)

Note: Cells are column percentages and Ns.

<sup>a</sup>Total Votes Cast in Republican Primary = 4,153,702

<sup>b</sup>Total Votes Cast in Democratic Primary = 3,272,029

Source: Federal Election Commission, <http://www.fec.gov/pubrec/fe2000/2000presprim.htm>.

### A Hypothetical Look at Voting in Primaries

In order to fully investigate the impact of primary rules on the outcome of the nomination process, it becomes necessary to go beyond the analysis of vote tallies or the behavior of actual primary voters. Otherwise, one is merely describing what happened under existing primary rules rather than what might have happened if a different set of rules was in effect. In short, we need to look at *potential* primary voters. We begin by analyzing general election voters from the 2000 ANES study<sup>8</sup> and using the various candidate thermometer scales as an indirect measure of candidate preference.<sup>9</sup> We used these thermometer scales to project which candidate each individual in the sample would have voted for under various primary rules. We initially assume sincere voting—that each individual would vote for the candidate toward which he felt “warmest.” We use these projected votes to compare the outcomes under different primary systems. Table 4 shows the hypothetical vote totals under: (1) a closed primary in which only Democrat and Republican respondents could vote in their respective party's primary; (2) a semi-closed primary in which only independents were allowed to gravitate to their most preferred candidate while party members were constrained to their most preferred candidate within their own party; and (3) an open primary where all three types of voters were allowed to vote for their most preferred candidate in the appropriate party's primary. The results are quite similar to the actual state primaries described above in Table 1. John

**Table 4. “Sincere” Voting Model of Projected 2000 Primary Vote Across Primary Type (Percent of the Vote)**

	Closed	Semi-Closed	Open
Republican Primary			
George Bush	76.7%	68.9%	65.5%
John McCain	23.3	31.1	34.5
N	(258)	(396)	(426)
Democratic Primary			
Al Gore	80.0%	78.3%	77.4%
Bill Bradley	20.0	21.8	22.6
N	(280)	(368)	(381)

Source: *American National Election Pre- and Post-Election Survey*, University of Michigan, 2000.

McCain did much better among independents and Democrats, but George Bush still received a strong majority of the “votes” under the each primary scenario. Bradley gained only a very modest amount of support under the semi-closed and open primary scenarios. Clearly, these projections reflect the halo effect of the thermometer scale ratings done during the fall following the successful party nominations of Gore and Bush, but these results suggest that the impact of differing primary types does not alter the outcome drastically.

As indicated in our literature review, the degree and direction of cross-over voting is affected by the immediate context of the race for the nomination, and it may be inappropriate to assume sincere voting would prevailed throughout the 2000 race, particularly within the Republican Party. Early in the primary season, it was clear that John McCain had been successful in appealing to independents and moderate Democrats, and that this ability would help him in open and closed primary states. As Cain and Mullin state, “McCain’s candidacy was assisted by nomination rules that lowered the opportunity costs for independents and Democrats to participate in the Republican nomination process” (2002, 325-326). As such, the desire to hedge one’s vote in the 2000 primary election was more apparent than in other election years, especially as the Gore nomination became more certain.

Therefore, it seems appropriate to assume that a considerable number of independent voters would have decided to vote strategically by voting for their preferred choice within the **most competitive** race, and that this assessment can change as the primary season progresses (see Aldrich (1980) and Gurian (1993) for a fuller discussion of the various factors that can maximize the expected utility of voters). In Table 5, we compared the projected

**Table 5. Strategic Voting Model of Projected 2000 Primary Vote (Percent of the Vote) and Type of Primary**

	Closed	Semi-Closed
Republican Primary		
George Bush	76.7%	57.4%
John McCain	23.3	42.6
N	(258)	(559)
Democratic Primary		
Al Gore	80.0%	64.6%
Bill Bradley	20.0	35.4
N	(280)	(551)

Source: *American National Election Pre- and Post-Election Survey*, University of Michigan, 2000.

votes under a closed primary (these figures are identical to those in Table 4) with a semi-closed primary in which *all* independents are assumed to be voting in the Democratic or Republican Party, because one primary is the most exciting or competitive race. This scenario is extremely unlikely, especially for the Democrats. However, the results do not change dramatically, as shown below. Bush, and Gore’s support declines in the semi-closed primary scenario, but they still lead their opponents by a considerable margin.

### **General Election Voting Behavior**

As noted by Kousser (2002), the motivations of a crossover voter are often revealed in his subsequent voting behavior in the general election. If he continues to support the party in November, we can safely assume he was voting sincerely in the earlier primary contest. However, if he swings back to support his own party’s nominee, we can assume he was probably hedging or even raiding the other party’s primary. The following comparison of general election vote with projected primary vote, as presented in Table 6, reveals a considerable amount of party loyalty among party members, suggesting that party divisiveness did not hurt the party’s election chances among its own party members. The slippage among independents is most apparent for those who were projected to vote for John McCain. Nearly forty percent of those individuals who were projected to vote for McCain in the primary reported that they voted for the Democratic candidate, Al Gore, in November election. However, less than 15 percent of those who were projected to have voted for Bush, Gore, or Bradley switched party allegiance in the general election.

**Table 6. Comparison of General Election Voting Behavior and Projected Primary Votes (Percent of the Vote)**

General Election Vote	<b>Republican</b> Projected Primary Vote	
	George Bush	John McCain
George Bush	98.0%	92.1%
Al Gore	2.0	5.3
Ralph Nader	*	*
N	(147)	(38)

  

General Election Vote	<b>Independent</b> Projected Primary Vote			
	George Bush	John McCain	Al Gore	Bill Bradley
George Bush	91.9%	51.7%	7.8%	13.0%
Al Gore	6.8	36.7	84.4	73.9
Ralph Nader	*	11.7	7.8	13.8
N	(74)	(60)	(64)	(23)

  

General Election Vote	<b>Democrat</b> Projected Primary Vote	
	Al Gore	Bill Bradley
George Bush	*	*
Al Gore	99.4%	100.0%
Ralph Nader	*	*
N	(168)	(33)

\*Less than 2%.

Source: *American National Election Pre- and Post-Election Survey*, University of Michigan, 2000.

One must be cautious that these projected votes are not simply the result of “sour grapes”—the disgruntled feelings of a backer of a losing candidate, but clearly they do indicate that the attachments of independents to the McCain candidacy during the primaries had a long-lasting impact on the campaign.

So, did it matter in the end? The open and semi-closed primaries boosted McCain’s candidacy in the beginning of the nomination process, but by Super Tuesday on March 7, his candidacy was virtually finished. If there had been more states with such primaries, his candidacy would have survived longer, yet the results of our overall analysis suggest that Bush would have emerged victorious in the end.

## Conclusion

In general, these analyses suggest that the primary rules did have an impact on the candidate fortunes of the various candidates in the 2000 election. John McCain did better in states which held open or semi-closed primaries. It also appears that such voting behavior was reflective of the sincere preferences of independents and Democrats for his candidacy, although independent voters may have hedged their votes. For those independents who backed McCain in the primary, approximately a third of them bolted to the Democratic candidate in the general election. Indeed, it appears that a competitive nomination race may have less effect among party regulars than it does among independents that back a nomination loser. Open and semi-closed primaries allow a competitive race for the nomination to become more visible and apparent, perhaps undesirably so given the previous research on the effect of divisive primaries on defection (see Atkeson 1998; Bernstein 1977; Born 1981; Hernson and Gimbel 1995; Kenney and Rice 1984; Lengle 1995; McCann, Partin, Rapaport, and Stone 1996; McNitt 1978, 1981; Stone 1984).

Our results suggest that the candidate preferences of independents and opposition party members do differ considerably from that of party registrants, and could potentially affect the outcome of the nomination process in future contests. To party leaders, this finding would probably confirm their worst fears about more open types of primaries. Perhaps closed primaries serve the parties best by enhancing the nomination of an insider candidate who is firmly reflective of the party's philosophy. By opting for this type of primary, however, the parties must then be prepared to develop a winning electoral strategy in the November election, even after excluding the voice of nonpartisans in the primaries—not an easy task.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Bush may also have adjusted his strategy after McCain's initial successes in open and semi-closed primary states. He launched a massive media campaign in the state of Washington five weeks before its blanket primary on February 29 (see Mapes 2000).

<sup>2</sup>As one example, Senator John McCain attempted, unsuccessfully, to overturn the ballot rules for the New York State Republican primary as an unconstitutional burden on voting rights (Samuels 2000).

<sup>3</sup>See Cavala 1974; Lengle and Shafer 1976; Lengle 1981; Polsby and Wildavsky 1971; Weekin 1984.

<sup>4</sup>Geer (1986) describes primary type as a continuum, and we expand on his classification scheme as follows: (1) the "blanket" primary—any registered voter receives a ballot with the names of candidates from all parties, and he can choose one candidate per contest from any party; (2) the "open" primary—any registered voter can vote in

either party; (3) the “declare polls” primary—any registered voter can vote, provided he declares his partisanship at the polling place; (4) the “semi-closed” primary—registered independents may vote in either party’s primary, but voters registered with one of the parties are limited to their own party’s contest; (5) the “closed” primary—only voters registered as members of a party can participate in that party’s primary.

<sup>5</sup>*California Democratic Party v. Jones* (99-401) 169 F.3d 646, reversed.

<sup>6</sup>Regions were coded as follows: **East:** Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont; **Midwest:** Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, South Dakota, Wisconsin; **Border South:** Kentucky, Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia; **South:** Georgia, Mississippi, Louisiana, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas; **Mountain:** Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, Utah; **Pacific:** Washington, California.

<sup>7</sup>Otherwise the state would have been in violation of the national Democratic and Republican party rules that prohibit the seating of delegates chosen under a blanket primary system.

<sup>8</sup>The original collector of the data, ICPSR, and the relevant funding agency bear no responsibility for uses of this collection or for interpretations or inferences based upon such uses.

<sup>9</sup>In each of these scales, the respondent is asked to indicate how “warm” or “cold” he or she feels toward a particular candidate, using the range 0 to 100.

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