# A Primary Cause of Partisanship? Nomination Systems and Legislator Ideology

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*Many theoretical and empirical accounts of representation argue that primary elections are a polarizing influence. Likewise, many reformers advocate opening party nominations to nonmembers as a way of increasing the number of moderate elected officials. Data and measurement constraints, however, have limited the range of empirical tests of this argument. We marry a unique new data set of state legislator ideal points to a detailed accounting of primary systems in the United States to gauge the effect of primary systems on polarization. We find that the openness of a primary election has little, if any, effect on the extremism of the politicians it produces.*

"We have a system today where, with . . . a closed right primary and a closed left primary, which is Republican and Democrat, we have folks that come up there—and, frankly, they're concerned about the next election, their next position. They're concerned about party bosses. They don't worry about what's really important, and that's the state of California. We get this partisanship."

> —Abel Maldonado, California Lieutenant Governor, 2010–11 (Vocke 2010)

Few dispute that Congress is polarized at historic levels and continues to grow more so each year. Recent research (Shor and McCarty 2011) has shown that this is true of state legislatures as well. To many, this situation is a cause for concern: elected officials pander to partisan interests at the expense of the common good. The quotation above (Vocke 2010) is just one example of this perspective, coming from a state with one of the most polarized legislatures (Shor and McCarty 2011) coinciding with one of the worst budget crises (Wood 2010) in the country. To reformers, this combination of partisan rancor and fiscal meltdown implies that fixing the budget problem can only happen once the political parties are severely weakened or removed from the political process altogether (Kousser 2010).

Reforming the institution of primary elections is often mentioned as a mechanism to reduce polarization (e.g., Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005). The idea is a simple one: elected officials are pulled to the extremes in large part because they must appeal to the extreme voters who disproportionally influence party nominations. In the absence of the primary electoral pressures, politicians could adhere more to the political center in classic Downsian fashion (Downs 1957).

The presumed connection between primary electoral institutions and polarization is important in two respects. First, the idea has considerable intuitive appeal and has been popular among reformers for many years. California

voters recently adopted a radically open "top two" primary in an effort to weaken the influence of parties over the nomination process, and this change might stimulate further efforts to reform primary systems around the country.[1]

Second, a theoretical issue is at stake. The presumed link between primary systems and polarization assumes that parties are primarily aggregators of mass opinion. According to this approach, primary electorates define the parties and the positions of their elected representatives: change the electorates, and one changes the representatives' positions. Other recent models of parties, however, assign a more central role to party elites—interest groups and activists—who shape the party's position for both the general public and the party rank-and-file alike. In this alternative model, changing the primary electorate has a smaller effect on representatives' behavior because it is the most active and interested members of the party who determine nomination decisions. Thus, the connection between primary systems and polarization revolves around a fundamental debate about the nature of political parties.

To gauge the effect of primary election reform on polarization, we marry a unique new data set of state legislator ideal points to a detailed accounting of primary systems. The results of this analysis suggest that the openness of a primary election system has little to no effect on the ideological positions of the politicians it elects. Our estimates of effects are rarely robust, and when they are, they are generally the opposite of the ones that are expected—more open primaries electing legislators who are more extreme.

## Primary Systems and Polarization

Determining who should be allowed to participate in a primary election is a thorny normative issue that goes to the heart of what parties are and what role voters play in them. Are parties public organizations in the sense that all citizens have a right to participate in their decision-making processes? Behind this normative question is an empirical one: to what extent do voters shape the identity of a party's elected representatives? At one end of the debate are scholars like E. E. Schattschneider (1942), who understand parties as collections of elites involved in the

business of controlling elections and government and feel that mass involvement in party nominations is at best a polite ruse. Parties, after all, have no control over who their members are, and those members bear no obligations to the party, even if they assert a right to decide that party's stances and nominees. For Schattschneider, the party rank-and-file are no more members of the party than baseball fans at a stadium are members of the team for which they are rooting.

Rosenblum, however, takes issue with Schattschneider's baseball metaphor, arguing that partisan voters lend particular value to a political system. "This is not the sheer vicariousness of Red Sox fans 'high-fiveing' their team's victory. . . . A Republican victory really is Republicans' doing. Partisans sustain and affect the play" (2008, 354–55). Seen in this way, partisan voters are far from mere spectators; they shape partisan contests and ensure that parties stand for consistent ideals from election to election.

Advocates of open primaries emerge from this second intellectual tradition and assume the mass public is decisive to the nature of partisan representation. Although reformers and others speak of party bosses, the bosses they imagine have power over candidates only because they represent an overly homogeneous group of voters. According to this perspective, an open primary system undermines parties by diversifying the primary electorate, which in turn deprives party leaders of the power that comes from speaking for a unified community. Most theoretical literature on primaries takes a similar view, arguing that departures by elected officials from the Downsian centripetal prediction can be explained in part by the relatively extreme group of voters who select the candidates (Aldrich 1983; Aranson and Ordenshook 1972; Cadigan and Janeba 2002; Owen and Grofman 2006).

Ironically, early twentieth-century Progressive reformers originally touted the party primary as a way to thwart party bosses (Mowry 1951; Ranney 1975). The party's key decisions about stances to take and candidates to nominate would henceforth be made not by a group of convention attendees or a small clique of elites in a smoke-filled room but by the party's voters at large. Historically, however, party leaders have proven adept at convincing party voters to ratify their decisions at primaries, and party voters rarely nominate a candidate with whom party leaders are uncomfortable (Cohen et al. 2008; Masket 2009).

More recent theoretical and empirical work highlights the ways in which voters are at best a weak mechanism for enforcing party discipline. First, some evidence suggests primary electorates are not all that extreme (Geer 1988; Norrander 1989). Second, the logic linking open

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[1]California's "top two" primary allows voters to choose any candidate for any office, regardless of party. The two candidates receiving the most votes—again, regardless of party—advance to a fall run-off election. In essence, the "top two" system eliminates party nominations and replaces them with a first-stage general election.

primaries and moderation is more complicated than it might appear. Formal models of open primaries and multicandidate races do not produce consistent expectations about the winner's ideology, and extreme candidates may win even when the median voter in the primary electorate is moderate (Chen and Yang 2002; Cooper and Munger 2000; Cox 1987; Oak 2006). Moreover, opening up primaries to nonparty registrants may end up having the perverse effect of encouraging more moderate partisans to flee their parties, further polarizing the existing parties (Norrander, Stephens, and Wendland 2013). Third, arguments linking open primaries to moderation depend on crossover voting, where voters cast a ballot for a candidate with a party identification different from their own. But crossover voters rarely determine the outcome of an election (Alvarez and Nagler 2002; Southwell 1991). If crossover voters are not pivotal, they cannot force a candidate toward the center of the spectrum. In fact, crossover voters likely vote based on candidate saliency first and only then on ideological affinity (Alvarez and Nagler 2002; Salvanto and Wattenberg 2002). This plays into the hands of elites, who often play a critical role in deciding which candidates are salient in the first place. Moreover, Ahler, Citrin, and Lenz (2013) have conducted a large-scale survey experiment in the context of California's "top two" open primary in 2012 and found limited crossover voting, as well as general confusion among voters about the ideological positioning of the candidates.

All of these factors help explain why the bulk of recent empirical studies on primaries have found either little direct effect on polarization (Hirano et al. 2008; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; McGhee 2010) or no evidence of the supposed mechanisms underlying such a link (Brady, Han, and Pope 2007; Pearson and Lawless 2008; Rogowski 2012). The empirical literature on this question is far from settled, however. Several studies have argued for a significant effect from nomination procedures (Bullock and Clinton 2011; Gerber and Morton 1998; Kanthak and Morton 2001; Wright and Schaffner 2002). These studies rely on either purely cross-sectional data or data from a limited number of states. California has been an especially common case study for political scientists. Prior work has found that this state's history with "cross-filing" and more recent experiences with the radically open "blanket" primary resulted in less partisan representation (Alvarez and Sinclair 2012; Bullock and Clinton 2011; Masket 2007; McGhee 2010).

While these studies are important and valuable, their findings might be influenced by the specific states or years that are examined. The heavy reliance on California, in particular, reflects the rich range of data available for that state. Yet the state is an outlier in enough ways that the generalizability of California results should be tested where possible. Moreover, several studies use data from congressional elections, where estimates are often driven by a small number of districts in each state, and certain states cannot be robustly analyzed at all. For example, Alaska—which has experimented extensively with its primary system over the last two decades—has only a single representative in the U.S. House.

To extend our understanding of how electoral institutions affect representation, we examine the relationship between primary systems and polarization in every state over the last two decades. We do so by linking a unique data set of legislator ideal points to a detailed accounting of primary systems. The detailed accounting of primary systems allows us to explore potential nuance in the effects of nomination systems, while the use of legislator ideal points ensures that we have the statistical power necessary to identify a moderating effect if one exists. Moreover, the period we study has seen some of the most active experimentation with primary systems in American history. This longitudinal variation permits more robust estimation of causal effects than would be possible with a simple cross-sectional approach. The result is a more comprehensive understanding of the effect of primary systems on legislative extremism than has been possible.

## Primary Systems in the United States

Today the United States has a hodgepodge of different primary election rules, with some states sharply limiting participation to long-standing party registrants and others opening it to nearly any citizen. These systems differ on a number of dimensions that can create various obstacles for voters who want to cross party lines. Since the moderating effect is premised on crossover voting, a more onerous system should produce less moderation. Differing dimensions and potential implications include:

1) *Independents vs. all voters*: Is participation by nonmembers limited to independents, or is it extended to members of opposing parties as well? This restriction limits the number of crossover voters and potentially the ideological range of those voters as well.
2) *Public vs. private*: Is the decision to cross over into another party's primary one that must be made publicly, or is it left to the privacy of the voting booth? A public decision might discourage voters from crossing over because it would leave them open to solicitation by parties and candidates.

3) *Registration requirement*: If the decision to cross over is public, does it require registration with the party whose primary the voter chooses to join? Registration is always an option, of course, and some states allow it on Election Day. But switching registration involves a psychological commitment to the party that some voters might not be willing to make. It can also create a new default condition that needs to be changed if future crossover voting is to occur, since some states offer Election Day registration changes only for independents.

4) *Choosing parties vs. choosing candidates*: Can crossover voters choose candidates of different parties in different races, or must they commit to voting only for candidates of one party? A commitment to voting for one party likely limits crossover voting to cases when high-profile top-of-the-ticket races draw voters across party lines.

5) *Blanket vs. top-two vote getter*: Do systems that allow voters to choose candidates of any party in any race advance the winners within each party (blanket primary) or the top-two winners overall (top-two vote getter)? These two systems would likely have similar rates of crossover voting, though the freewheeling nature of the top-two system might discourage strategic crossover votes by making the likely consequences difficult to predict.

Despite the intuitive predictions offered above, the political science literature has provided little consistent guidance on what to expect from this variation. Theoretical approaches tend to assume that voters are either allowed to cross over or not—so they offer no predictions about the effects of variations 2 and 3. Moreover, this research typically assumes an election with only one race, which rules out the distinctions raised in variations 4 and 5 as well (Chen and Yang 2002; Kang 2007; Oak 2006). Empirical and experimental work has factored in more distinctions, but to varying degrees. Kanthak and Morton (2001) distinguish between both public and private crossover decisions and blanket and top-two vote-getter systems, but Gerber and Morton (1998) and Cherry and Kroll (2003) do not. We are not aware of any research that explores the effect of a registration requirement.

Previous research simplifies this variation to produce five primary types: pure closed, semiclosed, semiopen, pure open, and nonpartisan. Table 1 presents these categories of primary systems, along with the criteria by which they are categorized and the conventionally predicted effect from the literature. Despite the monotonic relationship between openness and moderation implied by these names, predictions from the literature are more complicated. Extant research generally finds pure closed primaries elect relatively extreme candidates, at least if one assumes that voters in each primary electorate are relatively extreme as well (Cherry and Kroll 2003; Gerber and Morton 1998; Kanthak and Morton 2001; Oak 2006). The research also agrees that semiclosed and nonpartisan systems produce relatively moderate candidates in most circumstances (Gerber and Morton 1998; Kanthak and Morton 2001), though some experimental evidence casts doubt on this prediction for nonpartisan systems (Cherry and Kroll 2003).

Pure open systems produce mixed predictions and results. Formal models sometimes predict relatively extreme representation from such systems, and some empirical research confirms this prediction (Gerber and Morton 1998; Oak 2006). This counterintuitive result depends on a fair amount of *raiding*: crossing over to strategically vote for the weakest candidate in the opposing party's primary. Kanthak and Morton (2001) contend that these predictions conflate semiopen and pure open systems, and only the latter consistently produce more extreme candidates. This claim hinges on the notion that the public nature of crossover voting in semiopen systems shames potential raiders into sticking with their party. Empirical studies, however, suggest that raiding is rare, perhaps because it requires complicated coordination among voters if it is to be successful (Alvarez and Nagler 2002; Sides, Citrin, and Cohen 2002). Overall, it is fair to say that the predictions of a heterogeneous effect are fragile and dependent on assumptions that may not be realistic in practice.[2] As a result, we treat the predictions for semiopen and pure open systems as "mixed" in Table 1, to reflect the uncertainty about the expected effect.

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[2]It is tempting to assume that an open primary will make representatives more responsive to the district median. But an open primary does not make candidates more aware of the district or the primary median in a way that would make them more responsive; it simply moves the primary median toward the opposing party. For example, Democratic candidates to the left of their primary median might move toward the center under an open primary system, as their primary median moves in the same direction. But Democratic candidates to the right of the Democratic median should not move at all—the median is already moving toward them. The same is true in the opposite direction for Republicans. In effect, relatively conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans have already escaped the centrifugal pressures of the closed primary, so an open primary should make little difference to their ideological positioning. Thus, responsiveness to the district median will only improve in an open primary with candidates who are too extreme, and changes in candidate positions should occur in a moderating direction.

TABLE 1  **System Types**

|  | Crossovers Allowed? | Independents Only? | Public Decision? | Registration Requirement? | Choose Parties? | Literature Prediction |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Pure closed | No | N/A | N/A | N/A | N/A | Partisan |
| Semiclosed | Yes | Yes | Yes | Sometimes | Yes | Moderate |
| Semiopen | Yes | No | Yes | Sometimes | Yes | Mixed |
| Pure open | Yes | No | No | No | Yes | Mixed |
| Nonpartisan | Yes | No | No | No | No | Moderate |

*Note:* The first column (Crossovers Allowed?) indicates whether the system allows crossover voters at all; the second column (Independents Only?) indicates whether independents alone are allowed to cross over; the third column (Public Decision?) indicates whether crossover voters must declare their crossover decision publicly; the fourth column (Registration Requirement?) indicates whether crossover voters must register formally with the party they cross to; the fifth column (Choose Parties?) indicates whether crossover voters must stick with the party they cross to or can cross back and forth from race to race; and the final column indicates the prediction from the literature on whether the given system produces moderation.

# Data

Our data cover most states for the years from 1992 through 2010, a period which has seen an extraordinary amount of experimentation with nomination systems. State parties have changed their systems a total of 22 times—including a few cases of the same party switching back and forth—and at least one state has adopted or abandoned every system we consider in our analysis. To code primary systems, we gathered information from the websites of each of the 50 states and followed up with phone calls to each one to confirm our information. In some cases, we also contacted state parties or directly examined the state's election code. Details of this process, as well as how we handled a variety of judgment calls, are in the appendix.

To assess the effect of primaries on the polarization of state legislatures, we need a measure summarizing the ideological or partisan behavior of individual legislators that is comparable across states. To this end, we use a data set of ideal points of state legislators originally developed in Shor and McCarty (2011), and updated since. These new data are based on state legislative roll-call votes from all state legislatures from at least 1997 until at least 2006 and include almost 18,000 state legislators. To establish comparability of ideal point estimates across chambers, states, and time, Shor and McCarty use Project Vote Smart's National Political Awareness Test (NPAT), a survey of state legislative candidates that uses largely identical questions across states and time. Roll-call-based ideal points are mapped into comparable NPAT common space, with predictions drawn from regressing each of the 50 states' roll-call-based scores on NPAT survey scores.

This mapping procedure generates a single ideal point for each state legislator for the entire study period. That means we cannot test the possibility of conversion effects, whereby incumbent legislators change their issue positions to reflect the changing incentive structure of a new primary system. However, evidence from both the U.S. Congress (Poole 2007) and state legislatures (Kousser, Lewis, and Masket 2007) suggests that incumbents rarely change their minds, and when they do, that change is limited. In fact, incumbents are so unlikely to change that including them in our analysis might actually bias our results against finding a primary system effect. Instead, we want to test for a selection effect, whereby primary systems encourage more moderate legislators to run and help the ones who do run win more often. Thus, we structure our data as a series of fresh cross-sections of legislators who were newly elected in each election year, pooling both upper and lower chambers together.[3] Since the selection effect is likely stronger than the conversion effect, this method weights the results toward finding an impact from primary systems.

Figure 1 summarizes one of Shor and McCarty's (2011) key findings. The level of polarization in the U.S. Congress—the subject of substantial scholarly attention (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Theriault 2008)—is not an outlier. There is considerable variation in the location of state Democratic and Republican legislative parties, producing a wide range of legislative polarization across the states. The majority of state legislatures are less polarized than the U.S. Congress, but 15 are more polarized. California has the most polarized state legislature by

[3]Legislators who held office in both chambers during our study period are included twice. Approximately 7% of Republicans and 6% of Democrats fit this description. When we removed the second observation for each of these legislators from the data, the results were substantively unchanged and, if anything, suggested an even weaker moderating effect. We also ran the models separately by chamber to test the idea of a stronger moderating effect in Senate elections, where the candidates might have a higher profile. The results were substantively the same.

### FIGURE 1  Legislative Polarization by State
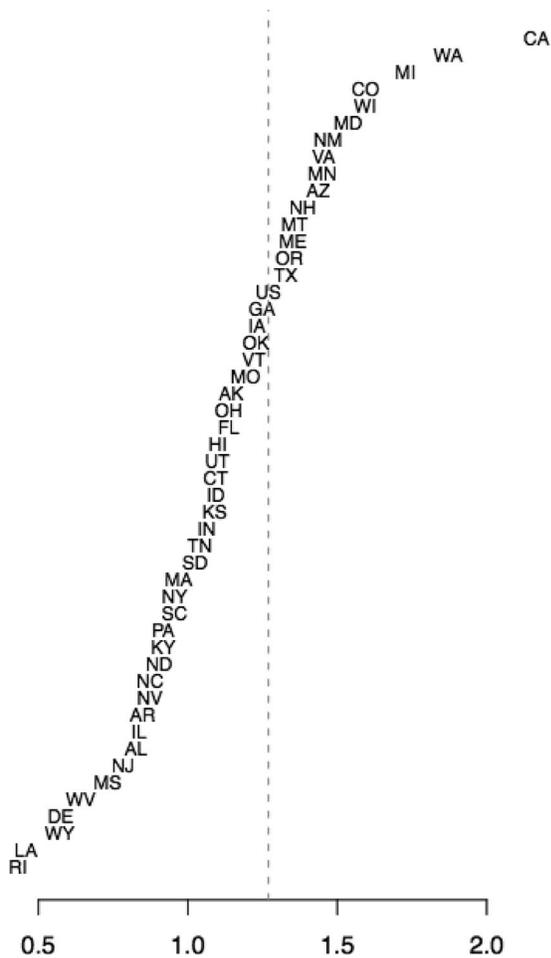


*Note:* Chart plots the mean levels of state legislative polarization (measured by ideological distance between party medians) over the full time period available for each state, averaged between both chambers. Dotted line represents average of U.S. Congress polarization for comparison.

far; Congress is bipartisan in comparison.[4] On the other end, Rhode Island and Louisiana are the least polarized. In the former, Democrats are liberal but so are the Republicans. In the latter, the converse is true. Shor and McCarty (2011) also find that the degree of polarization has increased in most states.

Finally, we need measures of district preferences for the sake of analytical control. For the U.S. House, such preferences are usually measured with some proxy, such as U.S. presidential vote, perhaps supplemented with other data (Levendusky, Pope, and Jackman 2008). Such data are generally not publicly available for state legislative districts and never with the temporal variation our analysis

requires. Fortunately, the National Committee for an Effective Congress generously provided the 2004 and 2008 presidential vote by post-2000 legislative district for 48 states, and Tausanovitch and Warshaw (2013) provide the Obama-McCain vote for Florida and Mississippi. For earlier legislative sessions, we compiled the 2000 presidential vote by pre-2000 legislative district for 45 states (with numbers for one of two chambers in one additional state). Data for this compilation came from the Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies, Secretaries' of States offices, and local boards of elections. Details of ideology and primary systems for each set of cases are available in Table A9 of the supporting information, and in Table A10 of the supporting information we compare our baseline model using all the data to the same model using just the cases for which we have presidential vote data. In both tables, the differences between the full and the presidential vote data are very small. To validate our use of the presidential vote as a measure of district preferences, we compared them to Tausanovitch and Warshaw's (2013) estimates of district constituent ideology for the years from 2002 through 2008.[5] The two measures have a Pearson correlation of −0.85, and model results are substantively identical regardless of which measure we employ. (These results are in Table A11 of the supporting information.)

## Results

Figure 2 shows the average ideal point in each year for the different categories of primary system.[6] There is some variation over time, but the levels of polarization—as measured by the distance between the ideal points for one party and the other—are mostly constant throughout. More to the point, the overall polarization is roughly the same across systems: while all legislators are more liberal or conservative in one system or another, the gap between them fails to fit any obvious pattern. In fact, in at least some years, nonpartisan primaries seem to have the largest gap.

[5]Tausanovitch and Warshaw make estimates available only for the districts drawn in 2002. Because the range of time is not long enough to estimate a reliable difference-in-difference model, we ran a simple ordinary least squares (OLS) with dummies for primary system types and year fixed effects.

[6]The data for 2008 are based on the 16 states for which we have data in that year; the results are robust to their exclusion. For 2010, the data are even more limited, consisting of only New York and Rhode Island. Including the state and year fixed effects in our regressions allows us to correct for this imbalance in our time-series cross-section and ensure that it is not driving our results.

[4]See Masket (2009) on the causes and consequences of polarization in California.

FIGURE 2  **Mean Ideology by Year, Party, and Primary System**
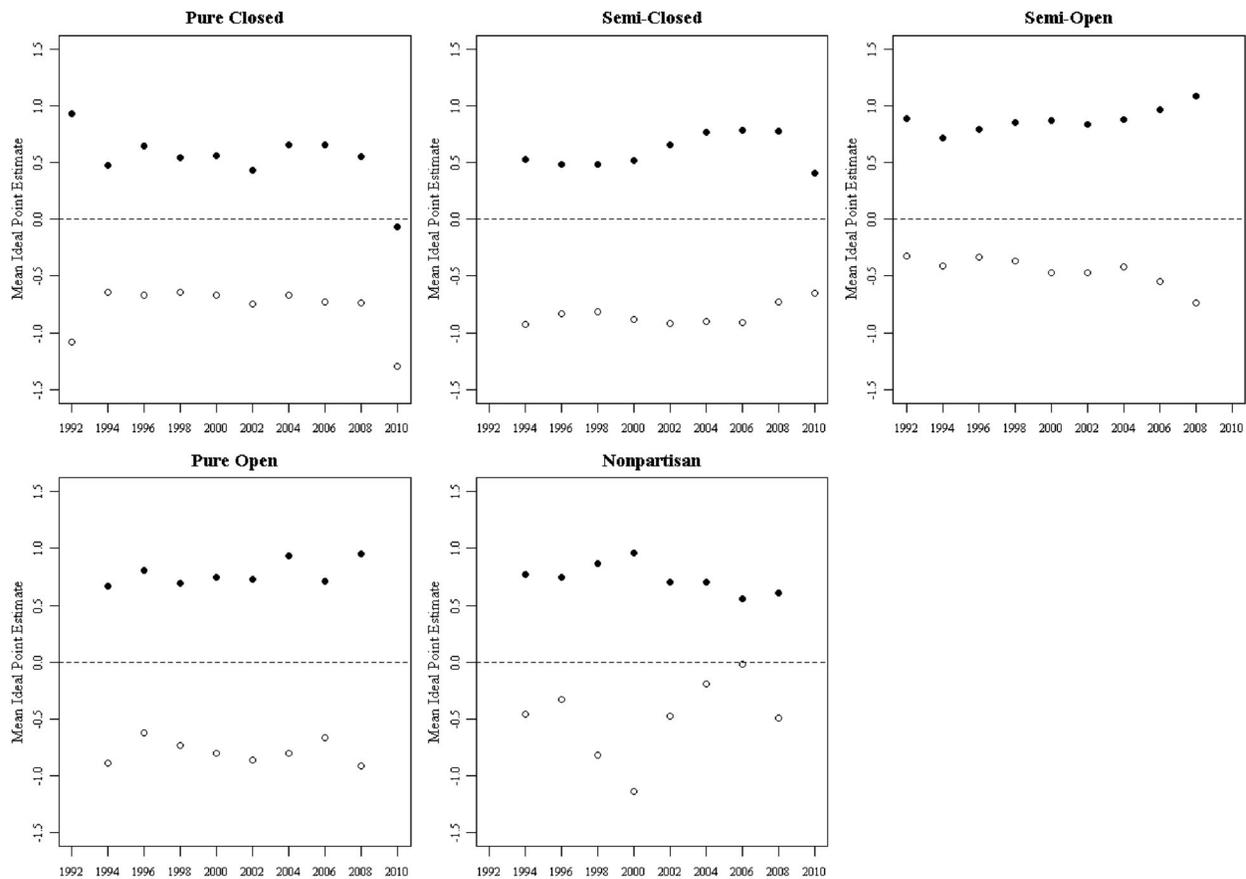


*Note:* Black points are Republicans; hollow points are Democrats. No obvious pattern of cross-system difference is seen.

The information in these graphs is limited because it does not account for relevant variation between states. Some states have changed their primary systems, and others are not present in early or late years of the data set, so the precise group of states in each category is not constant. For example, the Supreme Court's rejection of the blanket primary left only Louisiana with a nonpartisan primary after 2002, which might help explain the sudden convergence of the two parties in that category in recent years.

The most rigorous way of accounting for this state-level variation is with a fixed effects regression, where a dummy variable is included for each state and year. Estimates of the effects of primary systems are identified on changes in primary systems within a state. Consequently, the coefficient on each primary system is a difference-in-difference estimate that indicates the dissimilarity between the extremism of the legislators in states that make a particular change in primary systems and the extremism of those in states that do not. This is the most unbiased approach to the question—it controls for any fixed dif-

ferences between states due to political economy, culture, legislative rules, or other factors. However, it also relies on a certain amount of variation in primary systems over time to recover consistent estimates. While we have already noted the considerable variation during our study period, we might still be overtaxing the data with our difference-in-difference approach. Thus, we test the robustness of our findings with alternative methods that are not so dependent on temporal variance.

Our difference-in-difference model is presented separately by party in Table 2.[7] The baseline results can be found in the first column for each party. The dependent variable here is the legislator ideal points; because positive ideal point values are more conservative and negative ones are more liberal, moderation relative to the comparison category of pure closed systems implies the coefficients on primary-system indicators should be negative for Republicans and positive for Democrats.

[7]We ran separate models for each party, as opposed to one model with interactions for parties, to simplify presentation and interpretation.

**TABLE 2 Explaining Ideology, 1992–2010**

|  | Democrats | | Republicans | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **(1)** | **(2)** | **(1)** | **(2)** |
| Semiclosed | −0.12*** | −0.15*** | 0.10* | 0.07* |
|  | (0.03) | (0.03) | (0.04) | (0.04) |
| Semiopen | −0.04 | −0.04 | 0.04 | 0.00 |
|  | (0.08) | (0.07) | (0.06) | (0.06) |
| Pure Open | 0.22* | 0.16* | −0.04 | −0.05 |
|  | (0.09) | (0.08) | (0.05) | (0.07) |
| Nonpartisan | 0.05 | 0.01 | 0.04 | 0.03 |
|  | (0.06) | (0.05) | (0.05) | (0.05) |
| Presidential vote | – | −1.29*** | – | −1.02*** |
|  |  | (0.03) |  | (0.05) |
| Intercept | −0.88*** | −0.08# | −0.05 | 0.46*** |
|  | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.04) | (0.05) |
| State and year fixed effects | x | x | x | x |
| Adjusted $R^2$ | 0.44 | 0.54 | 0.42 | 0.45 |
| Root MSE | 0.38 | 0.35 | 0.34 | 0.33 |
| N | 8834 | | 8978 | |

*Note:* Models are ordinary least squares with state and year fixed effects, plus heteroskedastic and autocorrelation consistent standard errors, run in Zelig for R (Imai, King, and Lau 2007). The dependent variable is the first-dimension ideal point for each state legislator. The omitted reference category for primary systems is "pure closed."
#p < 0.10, *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, ***p < 0.001.

The results demonstrate little effect of differences in primary electoral systems. Few of the coefficients are significant, and of those that are, only the significant effect of pure open systems for Democrats suggests a moderating effect of open primaries. In fact, the coefficients for semiclosed systems suggest a *polarizing* effect for both parties relative to the comparison category of pure closed systems. Moreover, the substantive size of these effects is small by comparison with the gap between the parties. As predicted from our model, the difference between the average Republican and Democrat for the median state (North Carolina) is 0.96—over four times the largest moderating effect in either party.[8]

We conducted several robustness checks for these core results. First, we ran models controlling for Democratic presidential vote, with the state and year fixed ef-

fects included as before. For the years from 1992 to 2000, we used district presidential vote from 2000, whereas for the years from 2002 to 2008, we used the average of district presidential vote from 2004 and 2008. This helps account for cross-sectional variation within decades as well as any significant differences due only to the redistricting of 2001. The substantive results, presented in the remaining columns of Table 2, are virtually identical. We also confirmed these results by running a nearest-neighbor match on presidential vote for each of the four primary system dummies (semiclosed, semiopen, pure open, and nonpartisan) in turn. The results (in Tables A5 and A6 in the supporting information) confirmed all the effects in Table 2, though they did suggest a modest moderating effect for Republicans in nonpartisan systems.

Second, we tested whether the effects of open primaries interact with secular polarization trends over time. It might be that all politicians are subject to pressures toward polarization for a variety of reasons, but open primaries weaken those pressures. One way to explore this idea is to include a time trend in our equations that is interacted with the different primary systems. If a more open primary weakens an otherwise polarizing trend, the time trend should be negative for Democrats and positive for Republicans, whereas the interaction coefficients should have the opposite sign in each case. Figure 3 graphs estimated trend lines for each system based on the coefficients from this model. Contrary to any expectation of a moderating effect, the story in Figure 3 is one of overwhelming consistency—and consistent polarization—across primary types.[9] Only semiclosed systems offer the expected somewhat flatter line, and then only for Democrats.

The addition of presidential vote data allows us to test a different hypothesis. If open primaries induce moderation through crossover voting, then the impact of an open primary system might be conditional on the number of voters who are available to cross over. In a more open primary, districts with more Republican voters should induce greater moderation in Democratic candidates, whereas those with more Democratic voters should induce moderation in Republicans. Indeed, in a careful study, Bullock and Clinton (2011) examine moderation in California under the blanket primary and uncover just such a pattern of effects: the blanket primary pulled candidates in competitive districts toward the center while

[8]We calculated this difference by first predicting separate values for each state after setting both primary systems and year fixed effects to their means in the data set. We then subtracted each state Democratic prediction from the corresponding Republican prediction for the same state.

[9]The coefficients and model fit for these regressions are in Table A3 of the supporting information. We also ran these regressions as multilevel models. The results, in Table A1 of the supporting information, were even less supportive of a polarizing effect for open primaries.

**FIGURE 3  Estimated Time Trends by Primary System**
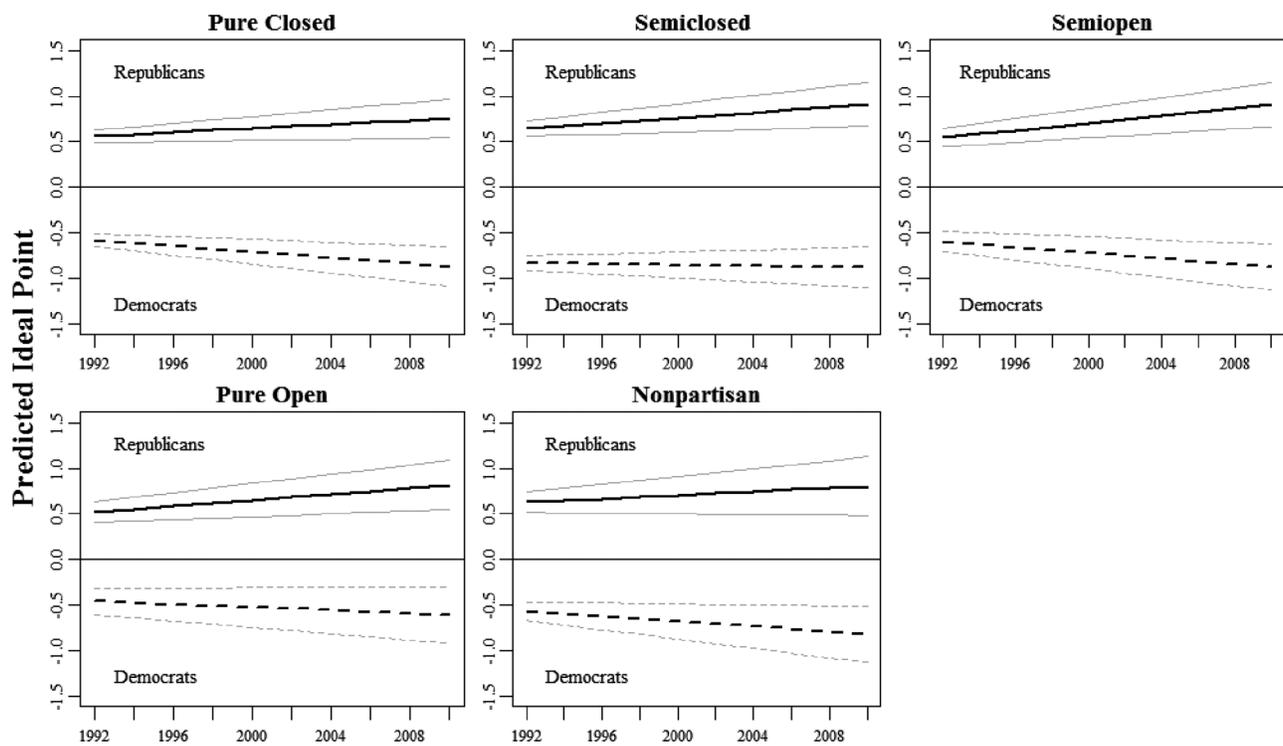


*Note:* Graphs show predicted values holding all other variables, including all fixed effects, at their sample means, as calculated in Zelig for R (Imai, King, and Lau 2007). The gray lines in each graph represent 95% error bounds around the trend estimate. All systems appear to show polarizing trends over time, with relatively little difference between them.

having no effect on those in more lopsidedly partisan constituencies.

We can test this notion with interactions between each primary system and the district presidential vote. We graph predictions from this model in Figure 4.[10] In each graph, the x-axis is the competitiveness of the district, so higher values indicate a seat that is more difficult for the party to hold. The converging lines for the two parties indicate that, as one might expect, competitive districts elect candidates with similar ideological profiles. Nonetheless, we should also expect to see relatively flat lines (i.e., less convergence) for closed primaries if candidate positions are insensitive to the composition of the electorate. Similarly, we should see steeper lines (i.e., more convergence) for the other systems if increasingly open primary systems draw more moderate candidates in competitive districts. Some of the differences between estimated trend lines in Figure 4 are statistically significant, and the ones for pure open and nonpartisan systems are in the expected direction. However, compared to closed systems, the effects are not substantively large, and the trend lines appear roughly

[10]Full results are available in Table A4 in the supporting information.

similar. It is difficult to conclude from this evidence that open primaries have an effect of any importance relative to closed ones.

Our second robustness check addresses potential endogeneity between primary-system type and polarization. A state might adopt a more open primary system as a response to polarization that has already occurred, with the change most likely imposed from outside the legislature through an initiative passed by voters. Likewise, a state might move to a more closed primary in order to slow a trend toward moderation, perhaps if parties or interest groups became concerned that they were losing control of legislators and believed a closed primary would offer more influence. Thus, the true effect of an open primary might well be moderation, but the very states that adopt it would also be the ones with the strongest polarizing forces at play.

Endogeneity is a difficult problem to address, since we cannot randomly assign primary systems by state and observe the result. In 2000, however, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the blanket primary in the three states that employed it at that time: Alaska, California, and Washington (see *California Democratic Party v. Jones*, 530 U.S. 567). We treat this court decision and its aftermath as an

**FIGURE 4  Estimated Relationship between Presidential Vote and Ideology, by Primary System**
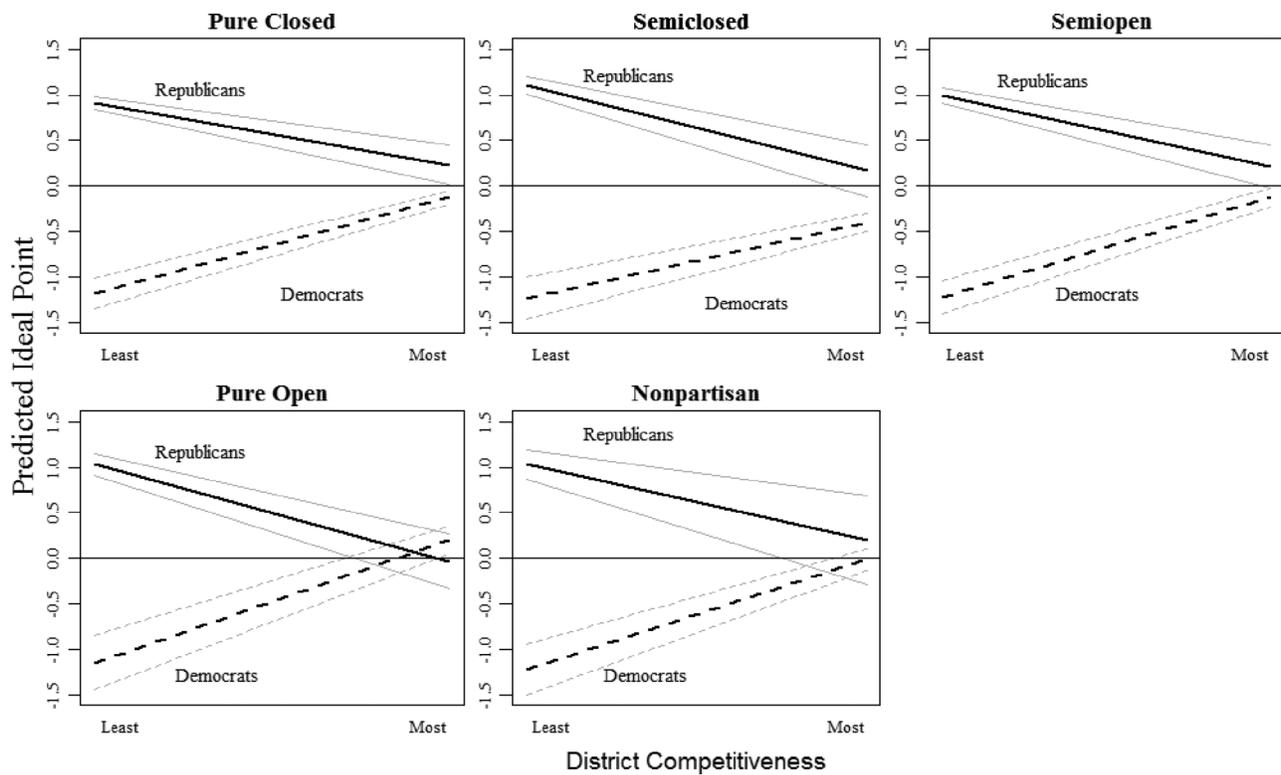


*Note:* Graphs show predicted values holding all other variables, including all fixed effects, at their sample means, as calculated in Zelig for R (Imai, King, and Lau 2007). The gray lines in each graph represent 95% error bounds around the estimate. All systems appear to elect more moderate legislators from more competitive districts, with little difference between them.

exogenous shock that led all three states to adopt a more closed system in response: Alaska switched to a semiopen system, California to a semiclosed, and Washington to a pure open.[11] Did these changes make legislators in each state more polarized?

To test this idea, we conducted separate analyses of the three blanket primary states. For each, we first subset data to the years when the state in question used either the blanket primary or the system it adopted immediately after abandoning the blanket. We also limited the set of comparison states to those that used the system ultimately adopted by the state in question. As an example, the California analysis was limited to the years 1998 and 2000 (when the state used the blanket) and 2002 through 2008 (when it used a semiclosed system and was present in our data set) and then further restricted to those states besides California that used the semiclosed system at any point in that period. We then conducted a nearest-neighbor

match on district presidential vote, purging any states or districts that fell outside the convex hull as before. Finally, we regressed ideology on state and year fixed effects, the district presidential vote, and a dummy for years following the court decision.[12] (The coefficient estimates and model fit can be found in Tables A7 and A8 of the supporting information.) The court's decision appears to have had an effect in the expected direction only for California Democrats, who were somewhat more extreme after the decision than before. All effects for Republicans were in the wrong direction but far from conventional levels of statistical significance, whereas for Democrats the effect in the other two states appears to have been to make the

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[11]Though none of these systems is completely closed, each is more restrictive than the far more open blanket primary, which placed essentially no constraints on a voter's ability to cross party lines. If open primaries are to have a moderating effect, then nonpartisan primaries are logically the most likely to produce that result.

[12]The first "post-*Jones*" election in Alaska and California was 2002; Washington did not abandon the blanket primary until 2004, so for that state only we treat 2004 as the first "post-*Jones*" election. We also tested simpler models without state and year fixed effects or the presidential vote, using instead a dummy for years after the decision, a dummy for the state in question (i.e., Alaska, California, or Washington), and an interaction between the two to test the effect of the new primary law. None of the interaction coefficients produced substantive results different from those reported in the appendix. These results are available from the authors upon request.

legislators slightly more moderate—the opposite of what would be expected given the change.

To ensure that our results are not an artifact of the precision of our estimates, we conduct three final robustness checks. First, we ran all our regressions as multilevel models, dropping the fixed effects and instead modeling states and years as Level 2 predictors with mean zero and variance estimated from the data (Gelman and Hill 2007). These models assume that the state and year effects are uncorrelated with primary system type, such that no unmeasured characteristics of states or election years have moved states to adopt the type of primary system they employ (Clark and Linzer 2012). This is a questionable assumption, but one that at least assigns a greater explanatory role to the primary systems and avoids overtaxing the variance we have. Running the models this way changes none of our substantive conclusions: open primaries elect legislators who are at least as partisan as those in closed systems (see Table A1 in the supporting information).

Second, we took this logic a step further and ran our OLS models without state fixed effects. This "complete pooling" approach allows the type of primary system to explain any differences between states that are not otherwise accounted for by presidential vote and uniform changes over time. This is a far weaker research design since the differences between states may be explained by other factors entirely. Nonetheless, the approach ensures that we have no complications with the precision of our estimates. The results of these models (in Table A2 of the supporting information) suggest stronger primary effects, but in almost every case, the effect is the *opposite* of the typical theoretical prediction: legislators in states with more open primaries are somewhat more extreme than those in states with closed primaries. Thus, even a naïve approach that gives open primaries as much credit as possible fails to confirm a simple moderating effect.

Third, we explored other classifications of primary systems besides the five-category method we have considered up to this point. Specifically, we tested simple dummies for the following combinations: open (in any way), open for independents only, open for all voters, open where the individual decision of which primary to join is private, open where the decision is public, open with a registration requirement, and open without any change in registration required.[13] For these different categorizations, we ran all the same models employed thus

far: state and year fixed effects, fixed effects with presidential vote controlled, multilevel, and matching. In virtually every case, the more open system produced politicians at least as polarized as in a closed primary. The registration requirement did have a moderating effect for Democrats in the matched data, but any other moderating effects were modest and statistically insignificant.

## Conclusion

This study has examined the link between the openness of a primary system and the ideology of the state legislators elected under it, using a unique data set of legislator ideal point estimates and the most thorough accounting of primary systems available. The results suggest that these systems have little consistent effect on legislator ideology. In fact, most of the effects we have found tend to be the opposite of those that are typically expected: the more open the primary system, the more liberal the Democrat and the more conservative the Republican.

What should we make of these results? Although there are some statistically significant effects, we believe our findings generally fail to reject the null hypothesis of no effect from primary systems. No result is robust across all the models and specifications we tested. The closest is the finding that semiclosed systems elect more conservative Republicans and more liberal Democrats than closed systems do, which holds for most of the regression models. But this pattern is not predicted by any of the theoretical or empirical literature, which if anything identifies semiclosed primaries as one of the only types certain to provide more *moderate* politicians relative to those produced by closed primaries.

Moreover, even the polarizing effects we find are dwarfed by the considerably larger average gap between the two parties in most states. In fact, the most robust finding is that unexplained differences between the states absorb a large share of the variance in legislator ideology—at least one-third regardless of the model or specification.[14] Whether this represents states' political economy, political culture, demographics, or other political institutions, it seems safe to say that primary elections are not among the most important factors.

Our findings differ from those of some studies in the literature, which have found at least a modest effect of

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[13]Some of these categories necessarily overlap. The most obvious example is the "open in any way" category, which subsumes all the others, but there are several other examples: "open for independents only" is a subset of "open for all voters," "open with a registration requirement" is a subset of "open where the decision is public," and so forth. Any two mutually exclusive categories were included

in the same model together. The results of all of these models are available from the authors upon request.

[14]For example, the difference in adjusted $R^2$ between a model with only primary system dummies and one with fixed effects for states is about 0.35 for both Democrats and Republicans.

nomination systems on polarization. But we believe the results of these studies likely stem from data and methodological limitations. Most important is the inability to compare polarization both pre- and posttreatment for a wide range of states. Earlier studies have either lacked the data to make the comparison, failed to make the comparison, or both.

More than one study has also found an effect of nomination systems on polarization in the state of California. But our analysis shows that concluding much from this relationship would be premature. Indeed, California is virtually the *only* state where a change in primary system has produced the expected moderating effect. While California may certainly be telling us something about the sort of political environment where primary systems can have an effect, it is also possible that effects we and others have found there have been due to chance alone. Since California has recently readopted an open primary system similar to the one it had in the late 1990s, there may soon be a better answer to this question. Some preliminary research has suggested no effect from the new system on moderation, and in fact some signs that newly elected candidates are slightly more extreme (Ahler, Citrin, and Lenz 2013; Kousser, Phillips, and Shor 2013). Thus, we must be cautious about concluding too much from California's earlier experience with a nonpartisan primary.

It is difficult to say precisely why the effect of open primaries is so weak. The logical basis for a moderating effect is simple and plausible: if voters closer to the middle of the ideological spectrum are allowed or encouraged to participate in a primary election, we would expect that they would vote for relatively moderate candidates and the winning nominee would be more moderate. But as plausible as the idea may be, we have tested it with the most comprehensive data on legislator ideology and primary systems available to date, and there is little evidence to support it.

Where might the logic of a moderating effect go awry? First, the level of crossover voting might not be large enough to produce moderating effects. The number of committed, politically active Independents may be smaller than expected. It is also possible, as formal models suggest, that the logic of an open primary is more complicated than it appears, since a moderating effect is dependent on a number of assumptions about the distribution of voter ideology and the pattern of candidate emergence in each race. Thus, the empirical finding of no effect may be merely the averaging out of these disparate paths from votes through institutions to final outcome, complicating the overly simplistic story of primary reform enthusiasts.

Another possible explanation for the null finding comes from recent theories of parties. These theories emphasize the critical role of donors and party activists, who have perspectives that may be more extreme than the average party registrant. Because these supporters can provide the critical resources necessary to wage competitive campaigns, they draw potential candidates to their more extreme positions while denying more consistently moderate candidates the ability to win. When one considers that voters must hear of a candidate before they vote for that person, it becomes clear how the absence of moderate sources of campaign funds and volunteer activity may hamper moderate candidates far more than the composition of the primary electorate. Open primaries give voters the option to cross party lines, but partisan actors give candidates the means to convince voters that they should do so. In the same vein, recent work on "subconstituency politics" has emphasized the important role of support from groups with intense preferences. In contrast to the work on parties, the value of groups in this work lies less in organization and money and more in the ease with which sets of intensely held preferences can be combined into coalitions (Bishin 2009). But both theories downplay the role of the median voter and potentially elevate the role of party actors instead.

If party actors truly play this critical role, it offers some validation of Schattschneider's (1942) view of parties as collections of elites. Moreover, it provides a mechanism by which their influence can be felt in an age of media politics and permanent campaigns. New communications technologies provide the means by which politicians might learn the preferences of voters, build their own electoral coalitions, and speak with voters directly. But parties and the standing coalition of interests that back them serve as gatekeepers to the resources that make such communication possible.

We are not prepared to say that more open nomination systems could never have a moderating effect. There are some approaches that we have not explicitly tested, such as elections where party signals are not even provided on the ballot or are difficult to divine. Examples include Nebraska's nonpartisan legislative elections, the nonpartisan local elections in many states, or the cross-filing system in California during the first half of the twentieth century, where party labels were excluded from the primary ballot and Republicans could run in Democratic primaries and vice versa.

Moreover, if external party activity is indeed important in explaining legislative behavior, then it may tell us something about when and where nomination systems can have a more important effect. Parties are a

powerful means of organizing a legislature because they draw together diverse interests under a common banner of controlling government. All other external interests, by themselves, have limited goals that severely constrain their power to influence politics on a wider array of topics. Thus, when party organizations—whether formal or informal—are already strong, the type of nominating system may be hard pressed to prevent them from wielding outsize influence on the legislative process. But when party organizations are weak, an open primary system might hamper their efforts to supplant other networks of interests and make themselves the dominant schism in the legislature.

Regardless of the mechanism, our analysis suggests we should expect little from open primary reform in the modern political age. The effect is inconsistent and weak, and where it is stronger and more robust, it is the opposite of the one that is generally intended.

# Appendix
## Coding Primary Systems

To code the primary systems, we visited the websites of the governmental agencies responsible for administering elections in each of the 50 states (usually the secretary of state). We then contacted these agencies to confirm the information from the web and fill in any gaps. We made certain in these interviews to identify the specifics of each system described above and did not code any information without first confirming its authenticity with our contact. If the contact seemed uncertain about the information, we verified it with a second source—either a contact in one of the state party organizations or a careful examination of the state's election code.

Although elections officials were effective informants about the current primary systems, there was sometimes no person in the relevant government agency who had served long enough to say for certain whether and when the primary system had changed over the course of our study period. For these cases, we compared the state's current primary system to its system as recorded by Kanthak and Morton (2001) for the late 1990s; if the two codings agreed, we assumed that no change had occurred. If they did not agree, we retrieved archived versions of the state's election code to determine the time of the change. Since many states allow parties themselves to decide whether to permit the participation of nonmembers, we often had to contact parties directly to determine their decision in each election.

Coding the primary systems required a few judgment calls for borderline cases. Two states—Colorado and Utah—have closed caucus systems that lead to pri-

maries which are open to at least some degree. This caucus stage can serve as a screening process for the primary candidates, so we treated these states as closed. Some states allow voters to change their registration status on Election Day and then disaffiliate from that party on their way out of the voting booth. Although this ease of disaffiliation might lower the psychological barriers to crossover voting, there were not enough of these systems for separate analysis. Instead, we treated these systems as either semiclosed or semiopen, depending on whether only Independents (semiclosed) or all voters (semiopen) were allowed to reregister. Finally, some states force the parties to open their primaries, whereas others explicitly allow the parties to decide for themselves.[15] For the latter, we treated each party's decision in each election as defining the type of primary system in place. For example, one party's primary might be semiclosed one year and pure closed the next, whereas the opposing party's primary was closed in both years. Other studies have failed to properly identify this sort of temporal and partisan variation and sometimes misclassified primary systems as permanently open or closed.

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[15]Technically speaking, the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Tashjian v. Republican Party of Connecticut* (479 U.S. 208 1986) prevented states from forcing parties to open their primaries under most circumstances. But many primary systems appear to simply ignore this ruling and compel the state parties to comply.

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# Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

**Table A1.** Explaining Ideology with Multilevel Models, 1992–2010

**Table A2.** Explaining Ideology with OLS without State Fixed Effects, 1992–2010

**Table A3.** Explaining Ideology with Time Trends, 1992–2010

**Table A4.** Explaining Ideology with Presidential Vote Interactions, 1992–2010

**Table A5.** Explaining Ideology among Democrats with Presidential Vote and Nearest-Neighbor Matching, 1992–2010

**Table A6.** Explaining Ideology among Republicans with Presidential Vote and Nearest-Neighbor Matching, 1992–2010

**Table A7.** Effect of the *Jones* Decision on Democratic Ideology in Blanket Primary States, 1992–2010

**Table A8.** Effect of the *Jones* Decision on Republican Ideology in Blanket Primary States, 1992–2010

**Table A9.** Comparison of Full Sample to Subset with District Presidential Vote

**Table A10.** Comparing Models Using Full Data to Those Using Subset with Presidential Vote, 1992–2010

**Table A11.** Presidential Vote vs. Tausanovitch and Warshaw Ideology, 2002–2010