



5-2023

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Recommended Citation

Anderson, Amber () "Voting Behavior and Primary Elections," *Res Publica - Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 28

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/respublica/vol28/iss1/10>

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Abstract

The United States of America has become increasingly polarized, so elections are more important than ever. This research paper analyzes voting behavior in primary elections throughout the United States. The four most recent Presidential primary election cycles are used as case studies. The purpose of this research is to determine the extent to which voters are more concerned with issues and ideology over electability in primary elections and how changing polarization and the timing of primary elections affects these results. The hypothesis argues that in increasingly polarized eras, voters become less concerned with voting based on issues and ideology; instead, they prioritize electability. The results indicate no causal relationship between polarization and the importance of electability in primary elections. Nevertheless, further research is needed to better understand the relationship between the two.

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Abstract

The United States of America has become increasingly polarized, so elections are more important than ever. This research paper analyzes voting behavior in primary elections throughout the United States. The four most recent Presidential primary election cycles are used as case studies. The purpose of this research is to determine the extent to which voters are more concerned with issues and ideology over electability in primary elections and how changing polarization and the timing of primary elections affects these results. The hypothesis argues that in increasingly polarized eras, voters become less concerned with voting based on issues and ideology; instead, they prioritize electability. The results indicate no causal relationship between polarization and the importance of electability in primary elections. Nevertheless, further research is needed to better understand the relationship between the two.

Introduction

Have you ever brought up politics at a family gathering? My mother and I were volunteers for the Bernie Sanders campaign for the 2020 Democratic primary election. Our family had a conversation about the importance of this election and everyone's desire to get Trump out of office. As my mother and I talked to my aunts, we discussed some of Sanders' key policies, history, and support for African Americans. It was early in the election cycle when Sanders had momentum after his performance in Iowa and New Hampshire. However, we struggled to convince those closest to us of the benefit of his policies. They all seemed to express a lack of trust that he could deliver on his policies, and they did not believe he was electable. Instead, they supported Biden because they thought he was the most electable candidate. We share the same economic class as well. Is class a fair determinant of voting behavior in primary elections, if not, then what is? Throughout this paper, I will tackle the research question: To what extent do voters prioritize electability over issues and ideology in primary elections?

In this paper, I will explore and weigh the different causal factors that influence people to vote the way they do in primary elections. I will consider how identity, policy, and electability influence voting behavior. In addition to looking at these factors, I plan on analyzing how much they differ in highly polarized eras. I hypothesize that in increasingly polarized eras, voters become less concerned with voting based on issues and ideology; instead, they prioritize electability. I assume this to be the case because, in the 2020 presidential election, most of the voters I interacted with via canvassing and phone calls indicated that defeating Donald Trump in November was their biggest priority when selecting their candidate. Some scholars have argued that this was the voters' primary concern in the 2020 election (Johnson et al., 2021). Mainly due

in part to outgroup animosity, it influences voting behavior more than ingroup favoritism (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015).

Literature Review

This research paper focuses on voting behavior in primary elections in the United States. More specifically, its goal is to analyze if voters prioritize electability over issues and ideology in primary elections. Scholars have offered different explanations for why people vote the way they do. Whereas scholars Gaventa, Feldman, and Ingelhart focus on economic factors influencing voting behavior, while Abramson and Abramowitz examine the role of strategic voting.

Gaventa (1980) proposes that class consciousness is a significant determinant of political behavior in elections. He uses coal miners from Central Appalachia as a case study to discuss the impact of class consciousness in local elections. Throughout the book *Power and Powerlessness*, Gaventa discusses class consciousness as an underlying concept to explain voting behaviors. He examines the role it plays in national versus local elections. He finds that the miners in the Central Appalachian Valley vote based on class or "occupational" interests; however, they were blocked from doing so at the local level.

This book will be helpful for my topic because it explores how occupation and economic status can affect voting behavior. This source is unique because it uses a case study to test the hypothesis of its studies. Also, it explores how operating under a system of "powerlessness" may encourage acquiescence.

Feldman (1982) explores what roles economic interests play in elections. He looks at congressional elections to test the theory as to whether people actually "vote their pocketbooks", and vote based on their economic interests. Contrary to Gaventa's theory of class consciousness, Feldman argues that personal economic interests do not influence voting behavior.

Based on the results of his study, Feldman concludes that economic individualism is why people do not vote based on class interests. The author also relates this to America's unique individualistic political culture. Most Americans do not attribute their unstable or poor economic conditions as a problem that the government should fix, they view it as their problem to solve, so it eliminates any connection to their political evaluation and voting decisions. One caveat that Feldman mentions is that if people perceive the government or political policies to have affected their economic livelihood, they are more likely to use their economic status to vote to improve their livelihood.

The strength of this perspective is that it attempts to define voters' economic interests and explain why voters make the decisions they do. The limitation of Feldman's approach is that the evidence is not compiled or reported from primary elections, which makes it hard to apply to my topic. Additionally, the authors explored the impact economic status can have on voting behavior in congressional elections, and not presidential, which is the main focus of my paper.

I would like a transition here to show that there are more things to consider than material conditions, which the other authors have explored. Inglehart (1981) tests a hypothesis that examines whether post-war affluence led to a generational shift from materialist to post-materialist in Western republics. Inglehart argues that alignment with materialism or post-materialism affects political behavior. Materialists are more concerned about economics, and post-materialists are more concerned with creating social change in political movements such as the civil and women's rights movements. He argues that post-materialist values are influenced by the cultural settings individuals were raised in. Through his study, he questions how the shift affects political priorities. He challenges the role economics plays in voting

behavior as well. However, Inglehart offers two hypotheses on how identification with materialism and postmaterialism affects political behavior in Western republics.

This source is beneficial because it offers a different perspective on how economic interests versus cultural background affect political behavior. Additionally, it shows how voters have shifted from looking at material interests to utilizing strategic and identity approaches regarding voting behavior. However, this source is limited because its focus is not on primary elections, and the text rarely mentions its effect in the United States.

Abramowitz (1989) categorizes voting into similar categories to determine which method is most prevalent in primary elections. Abramowitz analyzes the 1988 primary election to determine what factors are most influential for voters in primary elections: preference, electability, and viability. He uses data from an exit poll to test the influence of the three models on voting behavior in presidential primary elections. The author also analyzes how momentum from early primaries and caucuses influences individuals that vote later in the election cycle. He concludes that voters weighed electability and their general evaluations of the candidates to determine best whom to vote for. Also, he concludes that momentum played an essential role in both the Democratic and Republican primaries, by establishing Dukakis and Bush as front-runners of their respective primaries after their victories in New Hampshire. However, he determines that it is not the main factor in primary success due to Dukakis' third-place finish in the nomination process (Abramowitz, 1989 p. 988).

The strength of this journal article is that it offers a thorough breakdown of voting behavior at the primary level. By dividing voting behavior into multiple categories, it helps to explore the numerous factors influencing voting behavior while analyzing which factor plays the largest role. One of this article's weaknesses is that the data was compiled from only one exit poll

from one county. This severely limits the possibility of whether the conclusions of this article can be applied in a larger setting. Similar to the previous article, this article categorizes vote behavior and examines which approach is most popular among voters. Abramson et al. (1992) research article discusses the concept of sophisticated versus sincere voting. These authors analyze how these factors influence voting behavior while looking at the 1988 presidential election as a case study. To dissect voter preferences, they use data from the NES Super Tuesday survey and examine patterns of voting types based on ordinal measures of preferences among candidates and assessments of their chances of winning their party's nomination. *Sophisticated voting* is an approach where voters weigh the electability of their preferred candidates. Whereas *sincere voting* is a contrasting approach where voters vote for their most preferred candidate, without considering electability. These scholars contend that in the 1988 primary elections, most voters' vote preferences were consistent with sincere sophisticated voting. They challenge the notion that throughout the primary cycles, voters hop onto bandwagons to vote for candidates most likely to win and, instead, argue they make rational choices based on their economic interests.

This article analyzes factors that influence voting behavior in primary elections. The strength of this source is that it offers an in-depth analysis of voting behavior in the 1988 primary elections. I can use much of the data the authors concluded for the 1988 election as a basis for my research study to show how sophisticated or strategic voting has changed over time. Based on the scholarly explanations offered, I am most interested in analyzing Abramson and Abramowitz's theories in their suggestion that voters make sincere and sophisticated decisions at the ballot box.

Research Design

To test my hypothesis, I will begin by analyzing exit poll data from four primary elections to determine how much electability and candidate issues have influenced voting behavior within polarized eras. I will utilize DW nominate scores that measure Congressmen's ideological positions. I will examine the average distances between the political parties' ideological scores for the congresses that reflect the election years I am examining in this study. This will help to show whether there is increasing polarization between political parties and elected officials, to help indicate the levels of polarization present throughout each election. I will begin by looking at the 2008 Democratic primary, then onto the 2012 Republican and Democratic primary, 2016 and 2020 Democratic primaries. I will mainly focus on the state of South Carolina for these elections because it had the most accessible data available for early primary races. The state also has tremendous significance within both parties' nomination process, especially in these elections.

This research paper aims to determine to what extent voters are more concerned with issues and ideology over electability in primary elections or how changing polarization and the timing of primary elections affect these results. These elections have a multi-candidate field, allowing for various ideologies to be represented. The 2016 and 2020 elections represent elections that have taken place in a highly polarized era, whereas 2008 and 2012 represent less polarized eras. I will compare my results to the data from the article "Sophisticated" Voting in the 1988 Presidential Primaries to determine how polarization affects voters' approaches in primary elections.

To analyze how voting behavior changes throughout the primary election cycle, I will analyze the first few primary elections up until South Carolina, then examine how the race for

nominees changed afterward. This will help me examine how voters' prioritization of issues or electability changes throughout the election cycle.

Analyzing primary elections from both parties will allow me to discover voting patterns in each party's primaries. I will utilize exit poll data from Roper Center, CNN, and NBC. Roper Center polls will be used for elections from 2008-2016, while CNN and NBC will be used for the 2020 election. Questions that discuss the importance of electability and ideology in selecting candidates will be an area of focus (for more information see Appendices A- E). Based on the data retrieved from each exit poll, I will compare the election results, see the impact of ideology and electability on vote behavior, and determine how they shaped the primary election.

While I will offer a brief overview of some early primaries and caucuses, this essay will more closely examine the results of the South Carolina primary election. On both the Republican and Democratic sides, South Carolina's primary election is usually a fair determinant of which candidate will win their party's nomination. For this reason, I will explore South Carolina's primary elections from 2008-2020, highlighting their significance in each year.

America is the most polarized it has been since the civil war (Paisley, 2016). Over the years, the Republican and Democratic parties have become increasingly divided. Republicans have made more dramatic shifts to the right, while Democrats are shifting to the left. Around 92% of Republicans are to the right of the median Democrat, and 94% of Democrats are to the left of the median Republican. Also, highly negative views of the opposing party have more than doubled since 1994 (Geiger, 2014). Ultimately resulting in ideological moderates disappearing from both parties (Paisley, 2016).

Based on the DW nominate scores from 2008-2020, they reveal that the ideological differences between congress representatives have continued to widen over the years. In the

110th Congress, representative of 2007-2009, the average ideological difference between Republicans and Democrats was 0.807 (Lewis et al., 2021). Compared to the 112th Congress, 2011-2013, the difference was 0.861 (Lewis et al., 2021). In that short span, there was a noticeable increase in the ideological difference between Republican and Democratic congress members. In the 114th Congress, 2015-2017, there was a leap to 0.876 (Lewis et al., 2021).

Although in the 116th Congress, 2019-2021, there was a slight decrease to 0.873, the most recent data shows the divide continued to increase in the next few years (Lewis et al., 2021). The 117th Congress, reflective of present-day Congress, shows the most significant difference between Republicans and Democrats ideologically, at 0.885 (Lewis et al., 2021). This data shows that the political parties became more polarized over time.

The Race for History

The 2008 presidential election had historical significance. On the Democratic side, two of the top candidates vying for the nomination were Barack Obama and Hilary Clinton. Either of their nominations and potential election in the general election would be historic, as Obama would be the first African American elected president, and Clinton would be the first female elected president in the United States. The Democratic presidential primary began with a multi-candidate field consisting of eight people. However, in the early stages of the election cycle, many dropped out, including John Edwards, Joe Biden, Bill Richardson, Mike Gravel, Christopher Dodd, and David Kucinich. The implications of this election made it a highly competitive race between Clinton and Obama throughout the primary election cycle. To be in an optimal position to win the Democratic nomination, the respective candidates needed to perform well in the early primaries and caucuses. Winning the first few races can garner tremendous momentum that can propel their campaign forward throughout the race (Abramowitz, 1982, p.

977). On the Republican side, except for 2012, the victor of South Carolina became the nominee (Fowler, 2016). For Democrats, the primary's victor has also ended up as the party's nominee except for the 2004 election (Fowler, 2016).

Additionally, after Super Tuesday a presumptive nominee arises, usually the candidate with the most delegates after the contest finishes. The 2008 Democratic primary election is one example of many that demonstrate early primary success importance to winning the nomination.

In Iowa, the first caucus, Obama received 37.6% of the vote, John Edwards received 29.7% of the vote, and Clinton finished in third place by receiving only 29.5% of the vote (NewYorkTimes [NYT], 2008). Even though Obama secured the first state, it did not indicate that he would have success in later elections. Next, there was the New Hampshire primary. Dramatically Clinton defeated Obama by 2.6% percent, however, Obama won the delegate count (NYT, 2008). Due to the first few primaries results, the remaining caucuses and primary elections were increasingly important.

Regardless of the Democratic National Convention rules, Michigan held its primary on January 15th before Nevada and South Carolina. As a result, two candidates, Barack Obama, and John Edwards withdrew from the ballot. Therefore, Clinton finished in first place. Clinton gained another primary victory in Nevada with a 5.7% win margin over Obama (NYT, 2008). After Clinton's success in New Hampshire and Michigan, she gained a lot of momentum heading into South Carolina's election. The following primary election state was South Carolina, an important race for candidates to win because it demonstrates the candidate's success among African American voters. African Americans make up a considerable part of the Democrats' electorate, and South Carolina's presidential primary was the first state where African Americans were 55% of a state's primary voters (LoBianco and Agiesta, 2016).

After Obama's strong performance in South Carolina (see Table 1 for results) he was poised for a good performance on Super Tuesday, however, Clinton's success in earlier races still left a question as to who would prevail. Although Clinton won bigger states on Super Tuesday, twenty-four contests took place on February 5th, and Obama was victorious in thirteen of them. After Super Tuesday, Obama established himself as the front-runner for the Democratic nomination as he amassed more delegates. However, Clinton was still in a fair position to compete throughout the rest of the race. Even though slightly more than half of the contest remained, after Obama's Super Tuesday performance he was expected to perform well throughout the remainder of the contest. Ultimately, he did and which led to his successful nomination, becoming the first African American President in the United States.

His pathway to the nomination, and eventual presidency, highlights the significance of the South Carolina race. Although the primary race was close throughout, before the South Carolina race Clinton amassed tremendous success in the early races, her defeat in South Carolina showed an area of weakness of failing to win over African American voters. The exit polls show that 48% of voters, the most any candidate received, viewed Obama with the most favorable chance to win in the general election (see Table 2 for results). However, the exit polls also reveal that voters stated that the candidate's ability to bring needed change was the most important factor in voter behavior, and the candidate's electability was least important (see Table 3 for results).

Republican Race For Nomination

The 2012 presidential primary was a highly competitive race as well. In contrast, Obama went unchallenged in the primary. The Republican primary had a multi-candidate field. Mitt Romney, Ron Paul, Rick Santorum, and Newt Gingrich vied for the Republican nomination. The

first few primary races and caucuses took place in this order: Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina. The Iowa caucus offered murky results. The night the election results reeled in, Mitt Romney was declared victorious in a close finish over Rick Santorum. However, two weeks later, Rick Santorum's campaign claimed victory by a 0.1% win margin (NYT, 2012). Iowa caucus officials declined to declare either candidate as the winner of their caucus (NYT, 2012). After Iowa, Mitt Romney won in New Hampshire, his neighboring state, and Rick Santorum was defeated by 12% points. Romney's victory in the first few races began to cement his standing as the front-runner (NYT, 2012).

South Carolina's primary election then took place, and a new candidate rose to the top of the ranks. Similarly to the 2008 election, South Carolina's primary had a huge significance. It was the first primary to take place in the South and has been considered a “firewall” state for Republicans (Zelizer, 2016). The change in the Republican primary electoral system made it much harder for a candidate to be a clear front-runner before Super Tuesday. Nonetheless, the early primary election races are still a fair determinant of who will become the eventual nominee. In earlier primary races Gingrich failed to finish higher than fourth place among six candidates. Needless to say, his victory in South Carolina had helped to reignite his campaign by beating Romney, with a strong coalition of voters such as evangelical Christians and tea party supporters (NYT, 2012). Gingrich's victory helped to keep his campaign afloat (see Table 4 for results). Based on the results of the exit poll (see Table 5 for results) voters claimed the candidate's ability to defeat Obama in the general election as the biggest deciding factor in their voting behavior. The candidate's experience ranked second most important. Romney and Gingrich received the most votes for being the most electable candidates.

Following the South Carolina race, several races remained before the start of Super Tuesday. Despite Gingrich's success in South Carolina, voters in Florida considered Romney to be the most electable candidate. Approximately 53% of voters selected Romney as the most electable while 29% argued Gingrich was (NYT, 2012). These candidates received the most support as the electable candidates. Compared to the 5% Gingrich received in New Hampshire's exit poll, clearly South Carolina helped to offer assurance and a case of electability for Gingrich's campaign. A constant theme emerged as the primary cycle progressed. The exit poll prompt that focused on which "candidate quality that matters most" began to see a shift in answers throughout the primary cycle. The categories "strong moral character" and "true conservative" received fewer votes throughout the cycle. An increase in votes trickled toward "can win in November" and "has the right experience" after South Carolina (NYT, 2012). These voters ultimately showed that electability and experience were more important than character and ideology as the primary cycle continued to progress. Despite Gingrich's success in South Carolina, he was not able to gain much momentum for the remaining races due to his campaign strategy, leaving Romney as the nominee after his performances throughout the election cycle (Blake, 2012).

The Emergence of Donald Trump

In 2016 Democrats only had a three-candidate race, whereas Republicans had more than quadruple of that amount vying for their party's nomination. In the Iowa caucus, Hilary Clinton had a small margin victory over Bernie Sanders. On the Republican side, Ted Cruz was victorious by a 3% margin over Donald Trump, and Marco Rubio finished 4% points behind (NYT, 2016). The results from the Iowa caucus show which candidates were best poised for the front-runner position throughout the rest of the cycle.

Throughout the Republican primary cycle, fifteen candidates launched their campaigns for the party's nomination. The number of candidates allowed various ideologies to be represented on the spectrum. One of the main candidates that began to stand out over time was Donald Trump. Although he lacked political experience, he came from a business background. Trump found a unique way to appeal to voters and excite the Republican base throughout the primary. At the beginning of the primary cycle, Trump was viewed as an unelectable candidate because of his lack of political experience. Despite that narrative, Donald Trump dominated in New Hampshire after finishing in a close second place in Iowa. Trump finished in first place by a comfortable 20% margin (NYT, 2016). Three more candidates dropped out of the race before the next primary in South Carolina.

In the meantime, the Democratic primary followed a different trajectory. After Clinton's victory over Sanders by a 0.3% margin, Sanders defeated Clinton in the next primary (NYT, 2016). In New Hampshire, Sanders won 60.4% of the vote while Clinton only had 38% (NYT, 2016). The lack of a close race after the Iowa caucus confused voters. As the primary cycle continued, similar to the 2008 Democratic primary race, there was a lack of certainty regarding who was the front-runner. Clinton defeated Sanders by 5% points in Nevada after the showing in New Hampshire. The next primary race was the most pivotal, as the South Carolina electorate has a high percentage of African Americans and it would test how Democrat candidates fare amongst this electorate.

The election results from South Carolina show that candidates on both the Republican and Democratic sides were able to carry tremendous momentum into the future primary races (see Table 6 and Table 8 for results). After Trump's victory in New Hampshire, and then his victory in South Carolina, he was in an optimal position to succeed in the upcoming Super

Tuesday elections. His performances there set the stage for his performance in the Super Tuesday elections. Trump amassed a total of 1,448 delegates on Super Tuesday alone (NYT, 2016).

Voters from the Republican exit poll show that the top two important issues for voters of South Carolina were “shares my values” and “can bring needed change.” Whereas “can win in November” was ranked as the least important. Marco Rubio was viewed as the most electable candidate, while Trump received the most votes in “tells it like it is” and “can bring needed change” (see Table 7 for results). How did these results compare to other states? In the first primary race, voters ranked “shares my values” as most important while “can bring needed change” and “can win in November” were tied for second place. Trump led in the category “can bring needed change”, Cruz led in “shares my values,” while Rubio led in “can win in November.” The first primary race shows that voters were not prioritizing electability, as much as they were prioritizing ideology and values. Similarly, as seen in Florida’s late election results. Donald Trump won the state convincingly, and voters urged that a candidate that “shares my values” and “can bring needed change” were most important. Whereas “can win in November” was one of the lower-ranked categories (NYT, 2016). This contradicts my hypothesis that voters begin to prioritize electability later in the election cycle, particularly in more polarized eras.

The exit polls from the Democratic side reveal similar results. In New Hampshire, Democratic voters cared most about candidates' personalities, 34% reported that they voted based on the candidate being “honest and trustworthy” while “can win in November” only received 12% of the vote (Roper Center, 2016). The results are very similar to South Carolina’s Democratic exit polls however, as voters in South Carolina ranked “cares about people like me” as the most important issue, and again “can win in November” received only 12% of the vote (see Table 9 for results). However, the exit polls also showed that South Carolina voters thought

Clinton was more electable than Sanders (see Table 10 for results). The results for voters prioritization were essentially similar in Illinois primary exit polls as well. This shows the consistency among voters throughout the primary calendar year. Illinois is historically one of the latest primary elections to take place. Further emphasizing electability was not the main indicator of vote behavior in this election, which undermines my hypothesis.

The Chaotic Twenties

For the 2020 race, the primary field reversed compared to the 2016 election. This time Democrats had twenty-one candidates competing for their nomination, and Republicans had only a few candidates competing. There was no South Carolina Republican primary in 2020. As Trump was the incumbent, many of the Republican leaders and party members supported his re-election. For democrats, with the variety in choices, there was no clear front-runner or any idea of who would separate from the pack. Bernie Sanders decided to run again on a similar progressive populist platform. New national politicians arose, such as Pete Buttigieg, and Andrew Yang. Most of the candidates campaigned on vastly different platforms. Some were viewed as centrist candidates as well. In the multi-candidate field, it was difficult for candidates to stand out amongst others that had similar ideologies and platforms. In the first caucus, there was some major confusion about which candidate was victorious. Sanders received more than two thousand votes than Buttigieg (Rodriguez, 2020). However, the final results indicated that Pete Buttigieg had 0.1% more delegates than Sanders (Rodriguez, 2020). Nonetheless, no winner was declared on the night of the election. There was a debate if it was a tie, or if Buttigieg was the sole victor.

As indicated earlier, many voters in future primary elections look at the first few contests to determine whom to vote for based on their viability. After the Iowa caucus, Sanders won the

New Hampshire primary by 1.3% over Buttigieg (NBC NEWS [NBC], 2020). In Nevada, where the electorate base is more diverse than in New Hampshire and Iowa Sanders was also victorious. Although Sanders won this state by 26%, Joe Biden began to emerge as a viable candidate (NBC, 2020). Buttigieg finished in third behind Biden. Nonetheless, Sanders' performance within the first three primary elections had him slated to win the party's nomination. The biggest challenge to Sanders would be his performance amongst African American voters in South Carolina (see Table 11 for results).

In the first few primaries Biden was not a top candidate. Before South Carolina's race took place, Biden received the endorsement of their long-serving Congressman James Clyburn. Exit polls recorded the significance of his endorsement on Biden's performance in the state's primary (see Table 12 for results). A survey conducted by YouGov before the South Carolina revealed that 65% of registered voters said they would pick the candidate with the best chance of defeating Donald Trump in November, compared to 35% of voters that said they would select a candidate that agrees with them on similar issues (The Economist/YouGov, 2020). From South Carolina's primary, the exit polls also reveal that voters were more concerned with selecting a candidate who could defeat Donald Trump in November than with a candidate who agreed with them on the major issues (see Table 13 for results). Of all the voters, 53% reported defeating Trump as the most important (NBC, 2020). Additionally, 81% of voters said they would vote Democrat in November regardless of the nominee (NBC, 2020). This data shows the urgency that Democratic voters had to remove Trump from office. Similarly, in Iowa, 61% of voters said "can beat Trump" was more important than a candidate that "agrees with you on the issues" (CNN, 2020). This was a common consensus from the exit polls. Similar results can also be examined in the later races (CNN, 2020).

After Biden's performance in South Carolina, his campaign gained momentum, and he began to perform better in more races. As a result, he started to be seen as the most electable candidate and the candidate that could unite the country. The remaining candidates began to coalesce around Biden and endorse his campaign after his strong showing on Super Tuesday. South Carolina's primary vastly altered the race for the nomination. Until South Carolina, Sanders was viewed as a strong front-runner until he failed to appeal to African American voters.

The data from the exit polls throughout the race reveal that electability was a primary determining factor in voting behavior in the Democratic primary. Why was this the case for this election? Democrats worked to ensure that the nominee would be a unifying candidate, one that would unite the country in the wake of polarization. Ultimately, it was a tactic to rid the White House of Donald Trump in hopes of saving American democracy. Despite these election results revealing the importance of electability in vote behavior, there was not a noticeable increase in its importance throughout the primary calendar cycle.

Conclusion

Results from the presidential primary election cycles were inconsistent with showing voters' prioritization of electability throughout this study. Although the data examined from South Carolina exit polls in the 2012 and 2020 elections revealed that candidate success in the general election was a primary concern for voters, this pattern was not present throughout each race. The hypothesis of voters prioritizing electability over issues due to polarization was proven incorrect because of exit poll data from the 2008 and 2016 elections in South Carolina. In 2008 voters were more concerned with selecting a candidate that could bring change, and in 2016 they prioritized the candidate's experience.

An essential part of the hypothesis was that voters become more concerned with electability over issues and ideology in increasingly polarized elections, with polarization increasing in each election. Although the hypothesis was disproved, the findings revealed that voters were more focused on candidates' electability in elections where they would challenge an incumbent president. Future research would require a more substantial study on this topic to determine how an incumbent president may affect opposing voters' prioritization of electability in primary elections. Additionally, throughout the election cycles, there was some consistency with candidates that gained momentum after success in the first few races, which led to them as the eventual party nominee. The importance of momentum in the elections was most notable in the 2008 Democrat and Republican, 2016 and 2020 Democrat elections. No consistent conclusions could be drawn on voters' prioritization of electability as the election cycle progressed. In the 2020 election, public opinion on the most electable candidate changed over time. However, there were no definitive results to show that later in the primary, voters cared more about electability. Once again, further research must be completed to determine how these factors change throughout the election cycle.

The original aim of this research topic was to tackle whether voters select candidates that align more with their interests or if they focus on more electability. Unfortunately, voter interests were difficult to define, which resulted in a shift in the topic to analyze electability versus issues and ideologies. There was a lack of data availability for exit polls that targeted similar questions on electability influencing vote behavior in the primary elections. For this reason, the study was narrowed to analyzing South Carolina.

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Table 1*2008 South Carolina Democratic Primary Election Results*

Candidate	Vote	%	Delegates
Barack Obama	295,091	55.40%	25
Hillary Rodham Clinton	141,128	26.5	12
John Edwards	93,552	17.6	8
Bill Richardson	725	0.1	0
Joseph R. Biden Jr.	693	0.1	0
Dennis J. Kucinich	551	0.1	0
Christopher J. Dodd	247	0.0	0
Mike Gravel	240	0.0	0

Table 2*2008 South Carolina Democratic Primary Exit Poll Answers*

Regardless of how you voted today, which one of these candidates do you think would be most likely to beat the Republican presidential nominee?

	Total in 100%	Clinton	Edwards	Obama
Clinton	36	88	20	14
Edwards	15	3	56	6
Obama	48	7	20	79

Table 3*2008 South Carolina Democratic Primary Exit Poll Answers pt 2*

Which ONE of these four candidate qualities mattered most in deciding how you voted today?

	Can bring needed change	Cares about people like me	Has the right experience	Has the best chance to win in November
Total in 100%	54	24	14	6
Clinton	30	15	45	7
Edwards	29	54	8	8
Obama	74	18	2	4

Table 4*2012 South Carolina Republican Primary Election Results*

Candidate	Vote	%	Delegates
Newt Gingrich	243,153	40.4%	20
Mitt Romney	167,279	27.8	5
Rick Santorum	102,055	17.0	0
Ron Paul	77,993	13.0	0
Others	10,686	1.8	0

Table 5*2012 South Carolina Republican Primary Exit Poll Answers**Which ONE of these four candidate qualities mattered most in deciding how you voted today?*

	Can defeat Barack Obama	Is a true conservative	Has strong moral character	Has the right experience
Total in 100%	45	14	18	21
Gingrich	57	13	3	25
Paul	14	27	41	17
Romney	61	1	12	26
Santorum	20	28	47	3

Table 6*2016 South Carolina Republican Primary Election Results*

Candidate	Vote	%	Delegates
Donald Trump	239,851	32.5%	50
Marco Rubio	165,881	22.5	0
Ted Cruz	164,790	22.3	0
Jeb Bush	57,863	7.8	0
John Kasich	56,205	7.6	0
Ben Carson	53,326	7.2	0

Table 7*2016 South Carolina Republican Primary Exit Poll Answers**Which ONE of these four candidate qualities mattered most in deciding how you voted today?*

	Can win in November	Shares my values	Tells it like it is	Can bring needed change
Total in 100%	15	37	16	31
Bush	11	47	9	32
Carson	4	58	9	26
Cruz	12	56	6	26
Kasich	13	50	9	26
Rubio	32	44	2	22
Trump	9	8	39	42

Table 8*2016 South Carolina Democratic Primary Election Results*

Candidate	Vote	%	Delegates
Hillary Clinton	271,514	73.5%	39
Bernie Sanders	95,977	26.0	14
Willie Wilson	1,321	0.4	0
Martin O'Malley	714	0.2	0

Table 9*2016 South Carolina Democratic Primary Exit Poll Answers*

Which ONE of these four candidate qualities mattered most in deciding how you voted today?

	Can win in November	Cares about people like me	Honest and trustworthy	Has the right experience
Total in 100%	12	25	26	34
Clinton	18	16	9	53
Sanders	5	36	49	7

Table 10*2016 South Carolina Democratic Primary Exit Poll Answers pt 2*

Who would have the better chance to defeat Donald Trump in November?

	Total in 100%	Clinton	Sanders
Total in 100%	100	58	42
Clinton	65	94	69
Sanders	31	3	26

Table 11*2020 South Carolina Democratic Primary Election Results*

Candidate	Vote	%	Delegates
Joe Biden	262,336	48.6%	39
Bernie Sanders	106,605	19.8	15
Tom Steyer	61,140	11.3	8
Pete Buttigieg	44,217	8.2	0
Elizabeth Warren	38,120	7.1	0
Amy Klobuchar	16,900	3.1	0
Tulsi Gabbard	6,813	1.3	0
Andrew Yang	1,069	0.2	0

Table 12*2020 South Carolina Democratic Primary Exit Poll Answers*

In your vote in today's presidential primary, how would you rate the importance of Rep. Clyburn's endorsement?

	Biden	Buttigieg	Sanders	Steyer	Warren
Important (49%)	57	-	16	13	-
Not important (38%)	33	13	26	12	10

Table 13*2020 South Carolina Democratic Primary Exit Poll Answers pt 2*

If you had to choose, would you rather see the Democratic Party nominate a candidate who:
Agreed with you on the major issues or Can defeat Donald Trump?

	Biden	Buttigieg	Sanders	Steyer	Warren
Agrees with you on major issues (43%)	43	7	24	12	6
Can beat Donald Trump (53%)	52	10	17	11	8

Appendix A**2008 South Carolina Exit Poll Questions**

1- Which ONE of these four candidate qualities mattered most in deciding how you voted today?

(Can bring needed change, cares about people like me, has the right experience, Can win in November)

2-Regardless of how you voted today, which one of these candidates do you think would be most likely to beat the Republican presidential nominee? (Clinton, Edwards, Kucinich, Obama)

Appendix B**2012 South Carolina Exit Poll Questions**

1- Which ONE of these four candidate qualities mattered most in deciding how you voted today?

(Can defeat Barack Obama, Is a true conservative, Has strong moral character, Has the right experience)

Appendix C

2016 Democrat South Carolina Exit Poll Questions

1- Which ONE of these four candidate qualities mattered most in deciding how you voted today?

(Can win in November, Cares about people like me, Honest and trustworthy, Has the right experience)

2-Who would have the better chance to defeat Donald Trump in November? (Clinton or Sanders)

Appendix D

2016 Republican South Carolina Exit Poll Questions

1- Which ONE of these four candidate qualities mattered most in deciding how you voted today?

(Can win in November, Shares my values, Tells it like it is, Can bring needed change)

Appendix E

2020 Republican South Carolina Exit Poll Questions

1- Which ONE of these four candidate qualities mattered most in deciding how you voted today?

(Can win in November, Shares my values, Tells it like it is, Can bring needed change)

2-In your vote in today's presidential primary, how would you rate the importance of Rep. Clyburn's endorsement?

3-If you had to choose, would you rather see the Democratic Party nominate a candidate who:

Agreed with you on the major issues or Can defeat Donald Trump?