

Polls and Elections

Support for Nationalizing Presidential Elections

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Despite very different historical and constitutional bases for how we nominate presidential candidates and elect presidents to office, as well as very different political processes (sequential versus simultaneous voting), both the presidential nominating process and the Electoral College are rooted in state elections, not a national election, and both create state winners and losers. Previous research has not explored the role of state influence or state self-interest in presidential elections. States that vote early in the nomination process benefit, as do battleground states in the general election, especially small-population states. Given the fundamentally different types of elections examined in this paper, it is surprising that very similar forces shape efforts to nationalize presidential elections. Popular reform options of both the nomination process (national primary) and the general election (national popular vote) focus on a single national election in which the nation's interests, rather than state interests, are paramount. This analysis of 2008 panel survey data shows that citizen opinions on nationalizing presidential elections through a national primary or national popular vote for president are based on strategic decisions defined by short-term electoral politics and long-term self-interest rooted in an individual's state.

Despite very different historical and constitutional bases for how we nominate presidential candidates and elect presidents to office, as well as very different political processes (sequential versus simultaneous voting), both the presidential nominating process and the Electoral College are rooted in state elections, not a national election, and both create state winners and losers. States that vote early in the nomination process benefit, as do battleground or “swing” states in the general election, especially small-

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population states. There are widespread concerns that too much attention is paid to Iowa and New Hampshire, which vote first in the presidential nomination process (Squire 1989; Winebrenner 1998), and to Ohio and Florida, which often play a pivotal role in the general election.

Today, there are repeated calls to reform both the presidential nomination process and the Electoral College. Undergirding calls for reform of both processes is a desire for fairness and consistency. One solution that appears to have broad appeal is to *nationalize elections* by adopting a national primary and a national popular vote, circumventing the Electoral College. In this paper, we consider how the public may evaluate such proposals against competing factors that may reduce support.

We use a 2008 national panel survey to test the importance of state-based self-interest in support for reform of the Electoral College and nomination process. We expect that people will *support* reform of presidential elections based on the interest of their state (long-term factors) and will *change* their opinions about reform based on electoral outcomes (short-term factors). Our analysis shows that citizen opinions on nationalizing presidential elections through a national primary or national popular vote for president are based on strategic decisions defined by short-term electoral politics and long-term self-interest rooted in an individual's state. We find that citizens voting for winning candidates and those who reside in states that have a great deal of influence in the current system are far less supportive of reform than either partisan losers or those living in states that have less influence under the current rules. We argue that a combination of these short and long-term influences shapes support for nationalizing U.S. presidential elections, reforms that an increasing number of citizens and political elites are taking seriously.

Reform Efforts to Nationalize Presidential Elections

Support for changing election rules in the United States has been gaining momentum since the contested 2000 presidential election, which was followed by a lengthy legal battle in Florida that ultimately ended with the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Bush v. Gore*. The decision resolved the dispute in Florida, which handed George W. Bush the presidency even though the Democratic candidate, Vice President Al Gore, had won some 500,000 more votes nationwide. Only on rare occasions in American history has the popular vote winner been defeated, but the controversial election created ripple effects in motivating efforts to reform American elections.

But in other ways, the events of 2000 were not new. Since the Civil War, one-third of all presidential candidates and winners of the Electoral College have been elected with a plurality rather than a majority of the national popular vote (Donovan and Bowler 2004). When one considers those voting for the losing presidential candidate and a losing third-party candidate (Perot, Nader, etc.), a majority of Americans who cast a vote for president are on the losing side about a third of the time in recent presidential elections. Some suggest that the failure to secure a majority may continue in the future with the rise of independents and dissatisfaction with the two major political parties (Blais 2008).

No other country uses an Electoral College to mediate between a national or direct/popular vote for presidential candidates and the winner. And few democracies in the world elect a president who does not win a majority of the popular vote. To win, a U.S. presidential candidate must receive a majority of the votes in the Electoral College, which are awarded to states based on the size of their congressional delegation. In doing so, the system protects the interests of rural and small-population states. Thus, the advantages that small states have in the U.S. Senate are preserved in the presidential election process, which some consider to be unequal and fundamentally undemocratic (Dahl 2003).

The system also was devised to thwart the popular will by allowing states to choose the method of selecting presidential electors, which initially resulted in the appointment of party loyalists by many state legislatures. Pressure to democratize the process eventually led states to adopt a system of direct election. Plurality or “winner take all” rules were seen as a way to enhance a state’s influence by concentrating all of the state’s electoral votes in a single slate (Dahl 2003, 82). All but two states now award all of a state’s electoral votes to the statewide plurality winner.¹ This has had a profound effect on shaping electoral outcomes by helping to facilitate disproportional results that tend to disadvantage small- or third-party candidates and promote a two-party system.

The Electoral College system forces presidential campaigns to allocate resources disproportionately to competitive states. Shaw argues that presidential campaigns “see the world in terms of amassing 270 electoral votes, which requires identifying, persuading, and/or mobilizing a requisite number of voters in battleground states” (2006, 4). Campaigns do not seek to talk to voters in all states, and they avoid wasting effort (Patterson 2002). In presidential races, residents of battleground states get smothered with attention from the candidates and media, while citizens in states that vote later in the process barely get noticed (Panagopoulos 2009).

Building on Shaw, Panagopoulos argues that “lopsided communications that relegate voters in uncompetitive states to bystander status in presidential campaigns are potentially significant and merit greater scrutiny.” His analysis of the 2000 National Annenberg Election Survey finds that the preferences of voters in battleground states are more variable, but they are more stable over time than their counterparts in nonbattleground states. Scholars have also found that turnout is higher and less biased in terms of participation by the poor and young in battleground states (Gimpel, Kaufmann, and Pearson-Merkowitz 2007; Lipsitz 2009; Pacheco 2008). Political interest has also been found to be higher in battleground states (Gimpel, Kaufmann, and Pearson-Merkowitz 2007), leading to higher participation in the election. Competition in battleground states is so intense it can even moderate class bias. The Electoral College thus makes battleground states winners and nonbattleground states losers in terms of campaign communication, exposure, and participation.

A 2008 national telephone survey found that 58% of Americans support the direct election of the president and the elimination of the Electoral College (Cain, Donovan, and

1. The exceptions are Nebraska and Maine, which still use plurality rules, but at the congressional district level, allowing the state, in principle, to divide its electoral votes among candidates.

Tolbert 2008, 15). High support for reform is consistent with the findings of Panagopoulos (2004), who demonstrates that a majority of the public has consistently and increasingly supported abolishing the Electoral College and allowing for a direct popular vote for president over the past half century (1967-2000). The lowest support for reform found by Panagopoulos was 57%, and at times it reached 80%. Replacing the Electoral College with another system would require a constitutional amendment, which most agree would be extremely difficult to pass. However, reform is still possible because the U.S. Constitution allows states to choose the method of selecting presidential electors.

One example of a recent attempt to reform the Electoral College is the National Popular Vote Plan, which has been introduced as a bill in a number of state legislatures.² Under the proposed rule change, a state's electoral votes would go to the candidate winning the national popular vote, not the candidate winning a plurality of votes in that specific state. States would enter an interstate compact with other states that make the same change, going into effect when a majority of the states representing the Electoral College approve it. The reform effectively bypasses the Electoral College without the need for an amendment to the Constitution. To date, roughly a dozen states have enacted the bill into law. Replacing the Electoral College with a national popular vote would dramatically alter the influence of states and change the nature of presidential campaigns. Competition would no longer be confined to battleground states, but likely to urban areas and places where the most votes are likely to be found.

While the Electoral College is grounded in the Constitution and carefully designed, the founding fathers and the Constitution are silent on how presidential candidates should be nominated. In terms of the presidential nomination process, once parties developed and began nominating candidates, processes were needed to determine the nominees. What developed over more than 200 years was a hodgepodge of rules and processes guided largely by the self-interest of individual state legislatures, secretaries of state, or state parties, which determined when to hold caucuses or primary elections and whether independents could participate in these party events. Institutionally, the presidential nominating process was never rationally designed. Instead, a number of reform efforts were made, each determined to make the nomination process more democratic. This has expanded participation through national party conventions, direct primary elections, and Super Tuesday, while simultaneously enhancing the influence of a few states with the earliest nominating events, such as Iowa and New Hampshire, in 1972 (Tolbert, Redlawsk, and Bowen 2009).

Presidential elections under the Electoral College system are simultaneous elections, fiercely fought in large battleground or swing states, such as Florida, Ohio, and Pennsylvania. In contrast, presidential nominations involve a sequential voting process that is fought in a handful of small-population states that vote early in the process, such as Iowa and New Hampshire. The privileged position of Iowa and New Hampshire, the nation's first caucus and primary, respectively, increasingly has been called into question (Hull 2007; Redlawsk, Tolbert, and Donovan 2010; Squire 1989; Winebrenner 1998). Frequently, the contest is over almost before it starts, leaving many citizens (sometimes

2. See <http://www.nationalpopularvote.com> for details.

the majority of Americans) with no role in selecting their party's nominee. Turnout in these later states naturally plummets. In 2008, the Republican nomination was decided soon after Super Tuesday, held in early February, leaving Republicans voting in later states with no meaningful choice, while the choice for Democrats was limited to Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton. It is an iterative process whereby events in early-voting states shape outcomes in later-voting states and the nominating process overall (Aldrich 1980a, 1980b; Bartels 1987, 1988; Morton and Williams 2001; Polsby 1983).

While many would agree that the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary are important, new research argues that they are important in a more systematic way than has often been recognized by pundits and scholars (Redlawsk, Tolbert, and Donovan 2010). Hull, in *Grassroots Rules* (2007), shows that since 2000 (and especially in 2004), Iowa has grown in importance in the nomination process, arguing that this has happened in tandem with the rise of online politics. Hull notes there are few clear effects of Iowa in the 1980s and 1990s, but finds this changed in 2000 and 2004. The elusive Iowa momentum, or "e-mentum," appears to be connected to the rise of electronic communications, as early successes or losses in Iowa are projected to future voters nationwide (i.e., the media blowout that now characterizes the Iowa caucuses). Hull highlights the increasing capacity of candidates to use online methods to bolster the effectiveness of their campaigns. Drawing on the 2004 election, Hull finds that Internet campaigns (online fund-raising, candidate websites, e-mail mobilization), caused Iowa to have a "wired and wild" influence on election contests in other states.

The increasing importance of Iowa is bolstered by research focusing on mass media coverage. Donovan and Hunsaker (2009) show that the change in media coverage (measured by *New York Times* articles) of candidates before and after the Iowa caucuses predicts vote share in New Hampshire. In turn, changes in media coverage of candidates before and after Iowa and New Hampshire predict the overall vote share in the presidential nomination over a 40-year period (see also Redlawsk, Tolbert, and Donovan 2010 for an argument about the growing importance of Iowa in the presidential nomination process). Candidates exceeding expectations or failing to meet media expectations coming out of Iowa is a primary predictor of which candidates will win their party's nomination. The authors are careful to point out that a candidate can come in second in the Iowa caucuses and still be labeled a "winner" by the media, or the second-place finisher can be labeled a "loser." It depends on initial media expectations going into the caucuses. Redlawsk, Bowen, and Tolbert (2008) refer to Iowa as the "starting gun" of a race. With a condensed schedule of state nominating events in which the race often ends one month after it begins, the candidates first off the starting block (i.e., the Iowa caucuses) have an advantage. Clearly, early-voting states are favored in the nomination process, similar to battleground states in the general election.

Reform of the presidential nomination process has received less attention than the Electoral College until recently (Donovan and Bowler 2004; Kamarck 2009; Mayer and Busch 2004; Smith and Springer 2009; Tolbert, Redlawsk, and Bowen 2009; Tolbert and Squire 2009). This renewed attention may be attributed to the chaotic race to the front in 2008, in which 70% of all delegates were chosen in only two months (by the beginning of March), or the fact that two large-population states (Florida and Michigan)

violated national party rules by holding their primaries before the official start state and were sanctioned by initially losing all of their delegates.

Frontloading occurs when states schedule their primaries and caucuses near the beginning of the delegate selection calendar in order to have a greater voice in the process (Mayer and Busch 2004). Events in 2008 reinforced the sense among policy makers, elected officials, the media, scholars, and the general public that the system for nominating presidential candidates in the United States no longer seems rational (Aldrich 2009; Mayer 2009; Tolbert and Squire 2009).

A single national primary has long been a popular reform option in which all states would vote on the same day, similar to simultaneous midterm and presidential elections. A 2008 national telephone survey of respondents in 41 states voting on Super Tuesday or later found that 73% of Americans are in favor of a national primary (Tolbert, Redlawsk, and Bowen 2009). Panagopoulos (2004) reports that Gallup polls conducted between 1952 and 1988 found support for a nationwide primary instead of party conventions usually exceeded 60% and frequently climbed above 70%. Proponents argue that a national primary would eliminate many of the serious flaws of the current system, including frontloading, and might increase turnout and representation (Altschuler 2008). There is some evidence of higher turnout with the onset of Super Tuesday (Norrander 1992), and citizens believe a national primary would be fair (Tolbert, Redlawsk, and Bowen 2009). By 2008, Super Tuesday had reached a zenith, approaching a national primary with primaries or caucuses in 24 states on the first officially sanctioned primary date, February 5.

While proponents of a national primary contend that it would be simple and make all votes equally meaningful, opponents argue that a national primary would restrict the presidential nomination to candidates who are already well known or well financed (Mayer and Busch 2004) and might eliminate the possibility of dark horse candidates building momentum on early successes in small states. A national primary could increase the influence of money needed to purchase mass media. Campaigning in small-state environments, such as Iowa or New Hampshire, is thought to foster grassroots or retail politics, improving learning about the candidates (Hull 2007; Redlawsk, Tolbert, and Donovan 2010).

State Self-Interest

Do respondents from large- versus small-population states reason differently about election reform, such as a national primary or a national popular vote for the president? Such reforms presumably would help large-state residents and hurt those from small states, as candidates would focus their campaigns on large-population states and urban areas. What about sequence in the presidential nominating process? Do respondents from states voting early in the process (including many small-population states) wish to retain the status quo and those from states voting later in the process to change election rules? Do residents of battleground states prefer to retain the Electoral College system, especially those from small-population, competitive states?

An explanation that may motivate opinions about reform focuses on group- or state-based self-interest (Tolbert, Smith, and Green 2009). While short-term concerns about which candidates win or lose may be important, citizens may also want to support rules that ensure they are able to influence the political process. Those who believe that their state exercises little influence under the current arrangements should be more likely to support reform compared to those who believe that their state exercises a great deal of influence. Similarly, those who live in small states or in rural areas may want to ensure that their interests are represented and oppose nationalizing elections, whereas those from large-population states or urban areas may prefer a national primary and national popular vote. Minorities may also respond to reform proposals in terms of how they might affect their interests and influence. Self-interest defined by one's state may be a long-term factor shaping opinions on election reform.

Tolbert, Redlawsk, and Bowen (2009) draw on national and state opinion data from 2008 to assess support for reforming the presidential nomination process. The survey data reveal that nearly three-quarters of Americans favor reforming the nomination process, implementing either rotating state primaries or a national primary. However, there is significant variation in support for reform based on an individual's state context and whether his or her state wins or loses in the current process. Individuals residing in small-population states who believe that their state is not important in the current system are significantly more likely to support reform. Similarly, individuals from large states voting late in the nominating process are also highly supportive of reform. Individuals from Iowa are strongly opposed to losing their "first in the nation" status. But because it uses cross-sectional survey data, it is not clear whether opinions on reform are stable or change because of electoral politics.

We take as our starting point the assumption that individuals base their attitudes about potential reforms in rational self-interest; in other words, *ceteris paribus*, individuals prefer reforms that maximize their own power in determining the major party nominees or the president. Building on previous research, we believe that voter self-interest is defined in part by state interest. Voters residing in states with "influence," as determined by the relative timing of the primary compared to other states and the importance of the state to the party's ability to win in the general election (battleground state, state population), we predict, should be less likely to support changing the process than those residing in states with little influence.

Evidence of using state-based self-interest would show sophisticated reasoning about election reform. Here, we move beyond published research by disentangling the short-term (partisan winners and losers) and long-term (state context) dynamics that shape public opinion on changing election rules by drawing on a national panel survey of respondents who were asked identical questions both before and after the 2008 presidential election.

2008 Panel Survey Data

We rely on data from the 2008 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP) survey (Jackman and Vavreck 2009). The CCAP was a collaborative effort that

brought together more than 60 political scientists from 25 institutions to produce a six-wave panel study during the 2008 presidential campaign.³ The national survey sample includes 20,000 respondents (14,000 of which completed all six waves) stratified by battleground and nonbattleground states. Nine states that make up both battleground and early primaries (Florida, Iowa, Minnesota, Nevada, Wisconsin, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Ohio, and Pennsylvania) were oversampled such that they are equal in population with the nonbattleground states. An initial baseline survey was conducted in December 2007, followed by four other preelection waves conducted in January, March, September, and October 2008. Each team of researchers designed a module of questions for a sample of approximately 1,000 respondents. Our module, which was approximately 20 minutes long, was administered in the final preelection wave on October 22 through November 3. The postelection wave, which consisted of a shorter 10-minute module, was conducted November 5 through December 1.

These panel data, conducted two months apart, are ideally suited to measure short-term forces and opinion change before and after the 2008 presidential election. The panel data represent a within-group experiment/treatment in which the individual at wave 1 is the control group compared to the same individual at wave 2. While we have less information on the stability of opinions over a longer time period (but see Panagopoulos 2004), opinions derived from state-based self-interest have been shown to be relatively consistent over a series of opinion polls showing that respondents from early-voting states are more likely to oppose reform of the presidential nomination process (Squire 1989; Tolbert, Redlawsk, and Bowen 2009).

Is Public Opinion Rational? Perceptions of State Influence in Presidential Elections

We first sought to determine whether individuals understood their state's role in the current nomination process and general election. To measure perceptions of state influence, we asked two questions, one focused on the presidential nominations and one on the general election in the October and November waves: "Please think about the role that your state played in determining the selection of the presidential nominees. Compared to other states, do you think your state is very important, somewhat important, not

3. The Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (Jackman and Vavreck 2009) was a collaborative effort to produce a six-wave panel study conducted on the Internet. This sample was constructed using a technique called sample matching (Vavreck and Rivers 2008). The researchers created a list of all U.S. citizens from the U.S. Census to generate a set of demographic, political, and behavioral characteristics that should be mirrored in the survey sample. Then, using a matching algorithm, the researchers selected respondents who most closely resembled the census data from a pool of opt-in participants. The sample was stratified to ensure large samples within states. See Jackman and Vavreck (2010) for a description of the sample. More information regarding sample matching is available at http://web.mit.edu/polisci/portl/cces/material/sample_matching.pdf. The models were estimated using survey weights. Using this same technique, the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey produced more precise estimates than more conventional probability designs such as random digit dialing phone surveys (Vavreck and Rivers 2008; see also Malhotra and Krosnick 2007).

important or not at all important?" We also asked, "Please think about the role that your state played in determining the president in the general election. Compared to other states, do you think your state is very important, somewhat important, not important or not at all important?" These unique survey questions tie individual level perceptions to state contextual factors.⁴

Frequencies of responses to these questions by state characteristics indicate that citizens from early-voting states recognize their importance in the nomination process, with late-voting states much more likely to indicate "only somewhat important" or "not very important." Similarly, in the general election, citizens residing in battleground states are much more likely to indicate that their state is "very important," compared to the other response categories. For example, more than 80% of respondents from Florida and Ohio thought their state was "very important" in the general election. However, respondents from large-population states were also considerably more likely to say that their state has influence, even if they were not from a battleground state or not from an early voting state. Roughly half of California respondents (a solid blue state, with little play in recent presidential elections) said "very important," and the remaining half said "somewhat important" in general elections. Thus, respondents from large states are more likely to believe that their state has influence in presidential elections, regardless of their favored position. Respondents with influence in the primary process clearly may want to retain their privileged position.

Figures 1 and 2 largely confirm these expectations by presenting the relationship between perceptions of state influence in the primaries (Figure 1) and general election (Figure 2), broken down by small-, medium-, and large-population states.⁵ For the nomination process, results compare early-voting states (those voting before Super Tuesday, February 5, 2008) and later-voting states (Super Tuesday states or later). For the general election, results are presented for battleground compared to nonbattleground states.

Figures 1 and 2 show that citizens in large states are much more likely than those in small states to perceive influence in both primaries and general elections. In contrast, respondents from small-population states are much less likely (almost by half) to note their state has influence in the primaries (overall only 48% believe their state has influence in the nomination process). These differences are statistically significant with a 95% confidence interval.

As expected, respondents from early voting states are significantly more likely to believe their state has influence in selecting presidential candidates than individuals from later-voting states across state population size (Figure 1). In all, 80% of small-state respondents in early-voting states believe they have influence ("very important" or "somewhat important") in selecting presidential candidates. This is a 32-percentage increase over the baseline for small states, and it is a statistically significant difference. Clearly, voting early helps all states, but especially small states. Late-voting small states

4. Individuals with no opinion were omitted from the analysis.

5. The size of the state is classified in terms of electoral votes: small states (3-10 electoral votes), medium states (11-20 electoral votes), and large states (21-55 electoral votes).

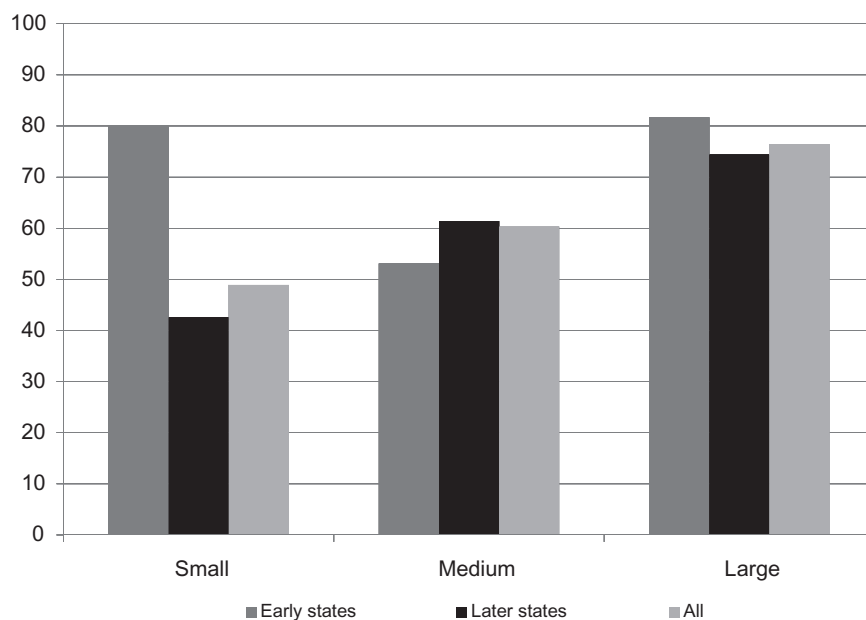


FIGURE 1. Perceptions of State Influence in Primary Elections.

Note: State influence is measured with the following survey question: “Please think about the role that your state played in determining the selection of the presidential nominees. Compared to other states, do you think your state is very important, somewhat important, not important or not at all important?” Respondents indicating “very or somewhat important” are measured here. Individuals residing in early-voting states held primaries or caucuses before February 5, 2008 (Super Tuesday), and later-voting states on February 5 or later. The size of the respondent’s state is classified by electoral votes: small states (3-10 electoral votes), medium states (11-20 electoral votes), and large states (21-55 electoral votes). See note 5 herein.

believe they have the least influence in the presidential nomination (only 42% thought their state has influence). In all, 76% of respondents in large states believe they have influence (“very important” or “somewhat important”) in the primaries, regardless of whether they vote late or early in the sequential election process. However, 82% of large-state respondents believe they have influence if their state votes early in the process, an 8-point difference.

As for the general election (see Figure 2), more than 95% of those in large-population battleground states believe their state has some or a lot of influence in the general election. The proportion is reduced somewhat for small battleground states (74%), but exceeds those in large states that are not competitive. However, even individuals from uncompetitive large states believe they have influence. Nearly 70% of individuals from large states believe their state is somewhat or very important in the general election, even if they are not a battleground state (25 percentage points less than large battleground states). Perceptions of state influence clearly reflect a large number of Electoral College votes, even if the votes are not pivotal.

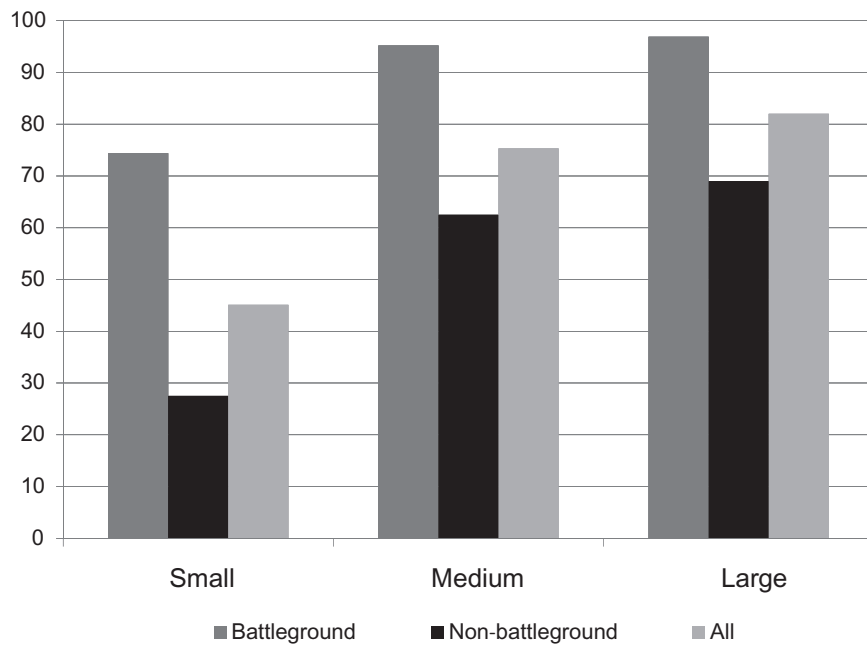


FIGURE 2. Perceptions of State Influence in General Elections.

Note: State influence is measured with the following survey question: "Please think about the role that your state played in determining the president in the general election. Compared to other states, do you think your state is very important, somewhat important, not important or not at all important?" Respondents indicating "very or somewhat important" are measured here. Individuals residing in nine battleground states are represented with light grey bars and nonbattleground state with black bars. The size of the respondent's state is classified by electoral votes: small states (3-10 electoral votes), medium states (11-20 electoral votes), and large states (21-55 electoral votes). See note 5 herein.

These state influence questions tap into knowledge of the political process, as well as an awareness of a state's role in the process. Responses are generally as expected and show that individuals have the potential to think strategically about their state's interest in presidential elections. They also suggest that respondents can recognize how their state would gain or lose influence under a new system of election rules. Next, we analyze public support for adopting either a national primary or, in the general election, a national popular vote.

Support for Nationalizing Presidential Elections

We rely on survey questions in the 2008 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project survey that proposed reforming the nominating process and the Electoral College by nationalizing the process. For the nominating process, we measured support for a national primary in the following way: "Others have proposed a national primary, similar to Super Tuesday, where every state would hold their caucuses or primaries on the same day. Would

you (strongly) favor or (strongly) oppose such a plan?" For the general election, we asked whether the Electoral College should be replaced with a system that relies instead on the national popular vote. The question was phrased in the following way: "Some suggest we get rid of the Electoral College and elect the candidate who wins the most votes nationwide." Both questions had been tested in a nationwide survey in February 2008.

Simple frequencies reveal that 66% of Americans favor (or strongly favor) a national primary and 57% favor (or strongly favor) a national popular vote to elect the presidency, eliminating the Electoral College, consistent with previous polls (Panagopoulos 2004).⁶ As an additional robust test, a risk-framing experiment was included in which half of the respondents were prompted that small and/or rural states might lose influence under the plan to nationalize presidential elections, following Bowler and Donovan (2007). While support for reform drops, a majority of Americans remain in favor of reform. The multivariate models presented here include a binary variable for whether the individual was given the risk-framing question wording or the previous wording.

Long-Term Forces: State Self-Interest

We make use of several state contextual variables to measure self-interest, which should shape opinions on election reform both before and after the 2008 general election. We use a simple dummy variable to identify whether respondents reside in a small-population state, defined by whether the state has 10 electoral votes or fewer. We expect that citizens from small states will oppose proposals to nationalize elections, as discussed earlier. We also use the rural population percentage in a state to capture population density (2007 U.S. Census), as rural states may oppose nationalizing elections. Under a national primary or a national popular vote for president, competition would no longer be confined to battleground states, but likely would focus on urban areas and places where the most votes are likely to be found. Thus, both state population size and density may be meaningful measures.

Battleground states in the 2008 general election are measured by a survey question asking how close the presidential election will be in the respondent's state in the October wave. Those indicating "too close to call" are coded 1, and those saying safe for the Democratic or Republican candidate are coded 0. Because so many nontraditional battleground states became highly competitive in the 2008 general election (Indiana, a traditional red state, had the closest vote margin in the nation), we prefer this subjective measure of battleground state for the survey analysis.

It is widely assumed that states that hold their primaries early have more influence in selecting presidential nominees. Indeed, this was the motivation for frontloading that led

6. The multivariate models in Tables 1 and 2 provide a conservative test, as those responding with no opinion on the two proposed election reforms were coded 0, opposing reform, in order to retain a sufficient number of cases. When the models were reestimated, omitting respondents with no opinion/don't know, the primary findings remained. Additionally, when an ordered logistic regression model specification was estimated with those favoring (strongly) reform coded 1, those with no opinion/don't know coded 0, and those opposing (strongly) reform coded -1, the basic results remained. The models are fairly robust to changes in model specification. This analysis is available from the authors upon request.

states to move their primaries and caucuses forward. We use a simple dummy variable for those states that conducted their primaries before Super Tuesday on February 5, 2008.⁷

Finally, we use the variable perceptions of state influence shown in Figures 1 and 2 as an explanatory variable to predict opinions on election reform. We assume that individuals who believe their state has influence in existing presidential elections will be less favorable toward reform.

Short-Term Forces: Partisan Winners and Losers

Beyond state self-interest, there are counterexplanations for support for nationalizing presidential elections. One explanation focuses on partisanship, which can be characterized as a short-term force. This theory assumes that citizens form opinions about reform proposals on the basis of whether their preferred party or candidate wins or loses under the existing rules. For example, voters who expect to lose are significantly more likely to support doing away with the Electoral College to elect the president (Anderson et al. 2005, 172). As with recent cross-national research examining the relationship between party winners and losers and their attitudes toward political institutions at the elite level (Andrews and Jackman 2005; Bowler, Donovan, and Karp 2002, 2006), we are interested in whether winners and losers at the mass level are more or less likely to support changing institutions. Scholars have found that those who lose under the existing rules will favor change, while the winners will favor the status quo (Anderson and LoTempio 2002; Banducci and Karp 2003; Bowler and Donovan 2007; Karp 2007; Tolbert, Smith, and Green 2009). This theory would predict that support for reform will be volatile and change with electoral outcomes. While a robust literature in this area has developed, a limitation is a failure to disentangle short- and long-term forces shaping public opinion about institutional change.

Although it is difficult to generalize from opinion data collected from a single year, we suggest that the 2008 contests featured the same key structure as previous nominating and general election contests in creating a series of electoral losers and winners (Clinton voters in the Democratic primaries, for example, and John McCain voters in the general election). Few existing studies are designed so as to isolate the factors shaping opinion about election reform that can control for endogeneity concerns. Few published studies on reform have used survey questions asking the same individuals about support for reforming presidential elections before and after the election using panel survey data. We make use of the 2008 CCAP panel waves in October (preelection) and November (postelection) to determine whether losing in the primaries and general election effects support for changing election rules.

Table 1 shows individual-level change before and after the election in support for directly electing the president and eliminating the Electoral College. While Obama voters are far more supportive of a national popular vote than McCain voters, support for

7. In 2008, nearly half of the states held primaries or caucuses on Super Tuesday, so the four states voting before February 5 had a privileged position. When an additional binary variable for Super Tuesday voting state was included in the analysis, it was not a statistically significant predictor of support for a national primary (see Tolbert, Keller, and Donovan, forthcoming).

TABLE 1
Changes in Support for a National Popular Vote by Candidate Winners and Losers (percent, pre- and postelection 2008 panel waves)

	<i>Change</i>		<i>Stability</i>		
	<i>Increase</i>	<i>Decrease</i>	<i>Support</i>	<i>Opposition</i>	<i>Don't Know</i>
Obama (strong choice)	2.5	13.1	52.6	12.8	9.2
McCain (strong choice)	11.4	7.9	29.9	37.4	5.9
Obama (weak choice)	6.5	6.5	54.3	6.5	17.4
McCain (weak choice)	4.5	6	24.8	55.6	3
Obama (all voters)	3.4	13	52.6	12.7	
McCain (all voters)	9.2	7.2	28.2	44.1	5.4

Source: CCAP 2008 (October and post-election waves)

Note: Rows do not sum to 100 as those moving from don't know to either support or opposition are not shown.

a national popular vote increases for McCain voters (partisan losers) after the election and decreases for Obama voters (partisan winners). The most substantial changes occur for those who indicated a strong preference for their preferred candidate. Those with a strong preference for McCain increase support by 11% for a national popular vote, while those with a strong preference for Obama decrease by 13%. While those with a weak choice move in the same way, the proportions are about half the size. This is striking evidence that attitudes about election reform can move over a very short time period and in response to losing in the general election.

This is ever more important, as before the election, Obama supporters were much more likely to favor a national popular vote (68%) than to oppose it (16%). While McCain voters generally opposed eliminating the Electoral College (which had secured a win for the Republican presidential candidate Bush in 2000), of McCain voters before the election, 54% opposed eliminating the Electoral College with a national popular vote and 34% favored it prior to the election; their overall percentage increases to 36% after the election. Thus, the movement of Obama voters to oppose a national popular vote and McCain voters become more favorable after the election goes in the opposite direction of their preelection preferences. Because this is a panel of the same respondents, and nothing changed except the election, even with these simple statistics, we can see the effect of an electoral/partisan loser in moving opinion on election reform. In the multivariate analysis to follow, we include a binary variable for voters with a strong preference for McCain, and binary variables for Republican partisans and independents using the September wave, with Democratic partisans as the reference group (three-point party identification question).

Results

National Primary: Multivariate Models

In order to test the importance of state self-interest relative to other factors that may influence public opinion on a national primary, we estimate a series of ordered logistic

regression models in Table 2. We report the results of models for both the pre- and postelection waves. In addition, we estimate a third model that includes a lagged term that allows an examination of the factors associated with changes in opinion before and after the election. These lagged endogenous variable specifications are well suited for examining change in panel data and offer a conservative test for opinion change because they can be biased against rejecting the null hypotheses. Our models also control for demographic factors, including age (measured in years), gender (females coded 1, males 0), education (measured on a six-point scale from less than a high school degree to postgraduate education), and a binary variable for racial/ethnic minorities (coded 1, white non-Hispanics coded 0). In all of the model specifications, we see that the question-wording experiment (risk treatment) reduces support for a national primary, as expected. This suggests that arguments used by opponents could significantly decrease public approval for such a reform, consistent with previous work on risk and support for changing electoral institutions (Bowler and Donovan 2007).

Across the pre- and postelection models in Table 2, and consistent with our expectations of long-term self-interest, those living in early-voting states (before Super Tuesday) are more likely to oppose a national primary than those holding their primaries or caucuses at a later date. Early voting states are 6% less likely to favor a national primary in the preelection survey (column 1) and 6% less likely to favor a national primary using the postelection wave (column 2), with other variables in the model held constant at mean/modal values.⁸ Respondents from these states recognize their privileged position under the current rules and desire to maintain the status quo.

Population density also appears to be a factor. Citizens in rural areas are more likely to oppose a national primary than those living in states with dense urban areas using the preelection data. A national primary would likely focus campaigning in urban areas. The effects are substantial. Those in urban states have a probability of strongly favoring a national primary of .26 compared to .14 for those living in rural states, a .12 difference. This strong effect for rural respondents, however, disappears in the postelection models when other factors become more important, such as partisanship. These state-level factors may be cumulative, so that a respondent from a late-voting urban state who believes that his or her state does not have influence may be much more likely to support reform.

The results also suggest that short-term electoral forces structure support. Those who reported voting for a Democratic candidate in the primaries other than the eventual nominee are more likely to favor a national primary than Obama or McCain primary voters (reference category). In comparison, the nonsignificant sign for losers in the Republican primaries/caucuses indicates that there is no difference. These results strongly suggest that Clinton voters (who make up the largest group of losers on the Democratic side) perceive an advantage for their candidate had there been a national primary. This is consistent with expectations about Clinton's candidacy and that fact that she was the clear nationwide front-runner before the Iowa caucuses. Clinton supporters are 7% more

8. Predicted probabilities for each statistically significant covariate were calculated by holding all other variables in the model constant at mean/modal values and varying the explanatory variable from minimum to maximum values.

TABLE 2
Support for a National Primary: Pre-election (October), Post-election (November) and Opinion Change Pre and Post-Election, 2008
(Ordered Logit Coefficients)

	Pre-election			Post-election			Post-election (Lagged Model)		
	Coef.	Robust SE	Min Max	Coef.	Robust SE	Min Max	Coef.	Robust SE	Min Max
Treatment	-0.99***	(0.14)	0.32 0.15	-0.78***	(0.13)	0.34 0.19	-0.21*	(0.11)	0.19 0.16
Early state	-0.35***	(0.13)	0.24 0.18	-0.33***	(0.13)	0.28 0.22	-0.27**	(0.10)	0.19 0.15
Small state	0.08	(0.15)		-0.23	(0.20)		-0.42**	(0.20)	0.20 0.14
Population density	-0.01**	(0.01)	0.26 0.14	-0.01	(0.01)		0.00	(0.01)	
State influence in primaries (Oct. wave)	-0.03	(0.04)		-0.05	(0.04)		-0.05	(0.04)	
Democratic primary loser (Oct. wave)	0.34**	(0.15)	0.18 0.23	0.18	(0.17)		-0.09	(0.15)	
Republican primary loser (Oct. wave)	-0.10	(0.24)		0.20	(0.30)		0.40	(0.31)	
Primary nonvoter (Oct. wave)	0.13	(0.16)		0.13	(0.18)		-0.03	(0.15)	
Republican (Sep. wave)	-0.10	(0.18)		0.20	(0.19)		0.61***	(0.20)	0.15 0.25
Independent (Sep. wave)	0.06	(0.17)		0.22	(0.17)		0.39**	(0.16)	0.16 0.22
Age	0.01***	(0.00)	0.15 0.32	0.01*	(0.00)	0.21 0.32	0.00	(0.00)	
Education	-0.02	(0.05)		-0.06	(0.05)		-0.06	(0.05)	
Female	0.09	(0.14)		0.31*	(0.16)	0.24 0.30	0.29	(0.18)	
Minority	-0.69***	(0.15)	0.24 0.14	-0.62**	(0.19)	0.28 0.17	-0.08	(0.23)	
Lagged term (National primary Oct. wave)							1.32***	(0.07)	0.01 0.62
/cut1	-2.37	(0.39)		-2.39	(0.48)		-2.49	(0.58)	
/cut2	-1.40	(0.39)		-1.25	(0.45)		-0.91	(0.55)	
/cut3	-0.41	(0.41)		-0.21	(0.45)		0.58	(0.55)	
/cut4	1.18	(0.40)		1.05	(0.46)		2.39	(0.57)	
Pseudo R ²	0.04			0.03			0.19		
n	959			955			951		

*** p < .01; ** p < .05; * p < .10.

Min and max indicate the probability of strong support for the lowest and highest values of the independent variable holding all other variables constant at their mean values. Standard errors are clustered by state.

Source: CCAP (October and Post-election waves).

Note: Dependent variable is measured with the following survey question: "Others have proposed a national primary, similar to Super Tuesday, where every state would hold their caucuses or primaries on the same day. Would you (strongly) favor or (strongly) oppose such a plan?"

likely to favor a national primary, all other variables held constant at mean/modal values, than Democrats who supported Obama. However, after the election (postelection data, column 2), Democratic primary losers are no longer significantly more likely to favor a national primary, suggesting that winning in the general election modifies support for reform. The sign on the coefficient in the change model is consistent with this interpretation, although the coefficient is not significant.

Republican identifiers are more likely to favor a national primary after the election, when the Republican presidential candidate (McCain) had lost in the general election, suggesting that Republicans were disappointed in their party's candidate and may blame the nomination process. Some scholars suggest that Obama was an underdog candidate in the election and would not have won the nomination without a win in the Iowa caucuses and the sequential election process (cf. Redlawsk, Tolbert, and Donovan 2010). Republicans appear to have become more favorable toward the idea of a national primary than Democratic partisans after the general election. Democrat opposition to a national primary grew during the same time that Republican support for a national primary increased (see Table 1).

Even in the lagged postelection model (column 3), in which we include a covariate for support for a national primary in the October wave to model those who *changed* their opinions on a national primary in the month before the election, we see that Republicans and independents become more favorable toward a national primary than Democrats. Republicans increase their support for a national primary 10 percentage point, holding all else constant, comparing October to November. Independents increase their support for a national primary by 6 percentage points, all else being equal, during this two-month period. The importance of partisanship in the lagged model predicting opinion change on reform is evidence of short-term electoral forces. The panel data allow us to parse out short-term movement in public opinion consistent with winners and losers in partisan elections. This is evidence that electoral losers (Anderson et al. 2005) are an important force in election reform.

We also see that racial and ethnic minorities (Latinos and blacks) are strongly opposed to a national primary using either the pre- or postelection data. In some states, Latinos and African Americans hold considerable sway in the national election, especially in key early-voting and battleground states (see Barreto et al. 2008). Latinos are the majority in a number of important states in the primaries (including New Mexico) and make up more than 30% of the population in other battleground states (Colorado, Florida). A national primary could dilute the growing power of racial and ethnic minorities in presidential elections, as their proportions of the national electorate remain small compared to the white population. In the postelection model (column 2), racial minorities are 10% less likely to favor a national primary than white non-Hispanics, all else being equal. Again, we see strategic reasoning about electoral rule changes of the primaries.

National Popular Vote for President: Multivariate Models

Table 3 reports the results for parallel models estimating support for the national popular vote and eliminating the Electoral College. We rely on a question that asked

TABLE 3
Support for National Popular Vote for President: Pre-election (October), Post-election (November) and Opinion Change Pre and Post-Election, 2008
 (Ordered Logit Coefficients)

	Pre-election			Post-election			Post-election (Lagged Model)			
	Coef.	Robust SE	Min Max	Coef.	Robust SE	Min Max	Coef.	Robust SE	Min Max	
Treatment	-0.39***	(0.15)	0.26 0.19	-0.34**	(0.15)	0.25 0.19	-0.06	(0.15)		
Too close to call battleground (Oct. wave)	-0.03	(0.04)		-0.04	(0.04)		-0.04	(0.03)		
Small state	-0.41**	(0.19)	0.24 0.17	-0.21	(0.27)		0.07	(0.30)		
Population density	0.00	(0.01)		-0.01	(0.01)		0.00	(0.01)		
State influence in pres. elections	-0.04	(0.05)		0.00	(0.07)		0.01	(0.07)		
Republican (Sep. wave)	-0.99***	(0.29)	0.28 0.13	-0.62**	(0.27)	0.25 0.15	0.11	(0.30)		
Independent (Sep. wave)	-0.34*	(0.20)	0.24 0.18	-0.14	(0.19)		0.22	(0.16)		
Strong choice	0.17	(0.28)		-0.19	(0.21)		-0.50*	(0.29)	0.13	0.08
McCain voter (weak choice)	-0.87**	(0.40)	0.30 0.15	-1.05***	(0.32)	0.31 0.14	-0.61	(0.38)		
McCain voter × Strong choice	0.13	(0.35)		0.90***	(0.33)	0.18 0.35	1.31***	(0.34)	0.07	0.22
Nonvoter/other	-0.61	(0.45)		-0.54	(0.45)		-0.19	(0.28)		
Age	0.00	(0.00)		0.00	(0.01)		0.00	(0.01)		
Education	-0.14***	(0.05)	0.30 0.17	-0.15***	(0.05)	0.30 0.17	-0.06	(0.05)		
Female	0.45**	(0.21)	0.14 0.27	0.30	(0.21)		0.00	(0.19)		
Minority	-0.40**	(0.19)	0.23 0.17	-0.42*	(0.23)	0.23 0.17	-0.12	(0.27)		
Lagged term (Nat. popular vote Oct. wave)				—	—		1.60***	(0.11)	0.00	0.65
/cut1	-3.07	(0.51)		-3.02	(0.72)		-2.83	(0.64)		
/cut2	-2.10	(0.49)		-2.09	(0.70)		-1.16	(0.63)		
/cut3	-1.36	(0.51)		-1.44	(0.69)		0.10	(0.64)		
/cut4	-0.20	(0.51)		-0.43	(0.69)		1.84	(0.71)		
Pseudo R ²	0.07			0.04			0.28			
n	955			959			952			

*** p < .01; ** p < .05; * p < .10.

Min and max indicate the probability of strong support for the lowest and highest values of the independent variable holding all other variables constant at their mean values. Standard errors are clustered by state.

Source: CCAP (October and Post-election waves).

Note: Dependent variable is measured with the following survey question: "Some suggested we get rid of the Electoral College and elect the candidate who wins the most votes nationwide. Would you (strongly) favor or (strongly) oppose such a plan?"

respondents to gauge how close the election for president was in their state. We use a dummy variable derived for that question to capture those who said the race was “too close to call.” We also include a dummy variable for small states as it is those states that would lose significant influence under a national popular vote for president. In the preelection model, respondents from small states are likely to oppose a national popular vote than those from larger states. This effect based on state self-interest is a long-term factor that shapes opinions on election reform as opposed to the battleground status, which is not significant in any of the models.

Given the 2000 and 2004 elections, one would expect Republicans to be opposed to a national popular vote and supportive of maintaining the Electoral College system. We see evidence of this in the models in columns 1 (preelection) and column 2 (postelection). Republicans are less supportive of eliminating the Electoral College than Democrats, and the substantive effect is large. Preelection Republicans are 6 percentage points less likely to favor a national popular vote than Democrats, and postelection, they are 10% less likely to favor reform. Independents are also less likely than Democrats to support a national popular vote. However, among those who changed their support for a national popular vote from October to November (column 3), there are no differences based on partisanship.

Similarly, McCain voters with a weak preference for their candidate are less likely to support a national popular vote than Obama voters. While McCain voters who ranked their preference as a “strong choice” are no different than Obama voters in the preelection wave, they become significantly more likely to favor a national popular vote after the election (see columns 2 and 3), when their candidate had lost. In column 2 (postelection data), strong McCain voters are twice as likely to support a national popular vote than Obama voters. The substantive effect is large as well, increasing the probability of supporting reform by 17 percentage points when varying from minimum to maximum values (column 2).

When we include a lagged term for preelection preferences for a national popular vote (column 3) to model those who changed their opinions, the positive effect of strong McCain voters in supporting reform increases even more, resulting in a threefold increase in favoring reform, holding all other variables constant at their mean values. Most respondents who favored reform before the election also did so after the election, as evidenced by the positive term for the lagged term coefficient. Similar to the effect of Clinton voters in the presidential nomination who favored a national primary, here we see McCain voters in the general election favoring reform of the general election process. The empirical analysis provides strong support for the assumption that losers are more willing to change the rules than winners and that opinions can over a short-term period.

Discussion

Presidential nominations and the general election are fundamentally different political processes. The former is a sequential election process beginning in a few early states, followed by caucuses and primaries in states nationwide. Presidential candidates in

the nomination focus on early-voting states in the hope of winning their party's nomination. In contrast, the general election yearns to be a simultaneous national election, yet it is indirect, mediated by the Electoral College. The general election is also fought on a state-by-state basis, where voters in all states vote on one day (the dramatic rise in early voting in 2008 modifies this somewhat). The winner of the Electoral College is elected president, not the candidate winning the majority (or even plurality) of votes nationwide. Presidential candidates focus on battleground or swing states in the hope of winning a majority of Electoral College votes. The American states are critical players in the status quo system of nominating presidential candidates and electing presidents to office. The process creates state winners and losers.

These two processes have evolved from different historical trajectories: one is rooted in the U.S. Constitution (Electoral College), and one is not (presidential nominations). Given the fundamentally different types of elections examined in this paper, it is surprising that very similar forces shape efforts to nationalize presidential elections. Popular reform options for both the nomination process (national primary) and general election (national popular vote) focus on a single national election, in which the nation's interests, rather than state interests are paramount. We find evidence using recent panel survey data that Americans favor these reforms.

Our analysis suggests that support for reforming presidential elections is shaped by both long- and short-term forces. Losers, particularly those with a strong preference for a candidate, are more likely to change their opinions about reform and favor a change in the status quo. Clinton supporters in the 2008 Democratic primaries were more supportive of a national primary than other Democrats. Similarly, McCain voters who strongly preferred their candidate were significantly more likely to support a national popular vote for the president, eliminating the Electoral College, after the 2008 general election, but not before. We can see opinions shift over a relatively short time period.

There is evidence that citizens form opinions about reform on the basis of what they consider to be in their state's interest. Citizens in states holding primaries early are likely to oppose a national primary, which strongly suggests that they recognize their influence would diminish if all states held their primaries or caucuses on the same day. Similarly, those in small states are likely to oppose a national popular vote. Thus, long-term forces play a role in public opinion on election reform. State context matters, and citizens living in states that would lose by nationalizing presidential elections are more likely to oppose reform.

Just as the founding fathers compromised to design the Constitution to balance the interests of small and large states by creating a bicameral Congress, with representation based on states in one house and population in the other, reform of presidential elections must balance the interests of small- and large-population states. Our survey data show that a majority of Americans prefer both a national primary and a national popular vote, even when the reforms are presented in terms of risk or loss.

Until now, we have had little systematic evidence that opinions on election reform can shift quite dramatically in a relatively short time period (before and after an election). However, it is also apparent that public opinion on election reform is structured by long-term forces, including state context and attitudes about equality. Because election

reform is about changing institutions, this research contributes to our understanding of institutional change showing that complexity (both long- and short-term forces) are at work.

Together these results suggest that citizens are capable of reasoning about election reform proposals and react to them in rather predictable ways. Opinions about presidential elections may appear on the surface to be short-lived, to the extent that such opinions are driven by electoral outcomes. The fact that such attitudes are also strongly related to longer-term forces suggests that demands for reforming presidential primaries and the Electoral College may continue to receive support for some time regardless of who wins or loses.

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