

# *Divisive Primaries and General Election Outcomes: Another Look at Presidential Campaigns\**

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*Theory:* The divisive primary hypothesis asserts that the more divisive the presidential primary contest compared to that of the other party the fewer votes received in the general election. Thus the party candidate with the most divisive primary will have a more difficult general election fight. However, studies at the presidential level have failed to consider candidate quality, prior vulnerability of the incumbent president or his party, the national nature of the presidential race, and the unique context of each presidential election campaign. Once these factors are taken into account presidential primaries should have a more marginal or even nonexistent effect in understanding general election outcomes.

*Hypothesis:* Including appropriate controls for election year context in a state-by-state model and creating a national model that controls for election year context, candidate quality, and the nature of the times should diminish the effect of nomination divisiveness on general election outcomes.

*Methods:* Regression analysis is used to examine the effect of presidential divisive nomination campaigns on general election outcomes.

*Results:* Once election year context in the state-by-state model is controlled for, divisiveness has a much more modest effect. This modest effect does not appear to change general election outcomes. In addition, the election year model, which posits that presidential elections are national elections and not state-by-state elections, indicated that divisiveness was not significantly different from zero.

Even before the presidential nominating reforms of the 1970s political scientists were examining the effects of nomination campaign activity on general election behavior. Concern over the potential harm of an open primary campaign, which divides the party among individual candidates, was not restricted to any particular type of election. Analysis of the divisive primary hypothesis has covered all of the major political offices.

Aggregate studies on the divisive nomination hypothesis generally have used primary returns to explain general election outcomes. The conclusions are mixed. At the gubernatorial level Pierson and Smith (1975) and Hacker (1965) found little evidence that nomination divisiveness affects general

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election outcomes. Bernstein (1977), in a re-examination of the Hacker data, however, found that divisive primaries in Senate races do reduce a candidate's chances in the fall election. Kenney and Rice (1984) assess Senate and gubernatorial elections and come to a similar conclusion: the party with the most divisive primary has a more difficult general election fight. In a reconsideration of his earlier analysis Kenney (1988), however, found that nomination divisiveness had no effect on general election outcomes once he controlled for candidate quality. Westlye (1991, 1995) in his study of divisive Senate contests concluded that primaries had only a modest effect on general election outcomes and "that the prior vulnerability of incumbents is a more important influence on general election outcomes than is incumbent primary divisiveness." At the congressional level the results are also mixed with Born (1981) finding that divisive primaries generally hurt incumbents, but only marginally. Overall, studies of divisive primaries at levels lower than the president have found only marginal effects of divisive primaries on general election outcomes.

At the presidential level, however, the aggregate results have not been mixed. All studies point toward divisive nomination campaigns contributing a negative effect to general election outcomes (Kenney and Rice 1984; Lingle 1980; Lingle, Owen, and Sonner 1995). The more divisive the primary contest is compared to that of the other party, the fewer votes received in the general election. Studies at the presidential level, however, have failed to consider candidate quality, prior vulnerability of the incumbent president or his party, and the unique context of each presidential election campaign.

### **Reevaluating the Presidential Divisive Nomination Hypothesis: The Issue of Measurement**

One general problem with aggregate-level studies on the divisive nomination hypothesis is determining what constitutes a divisive primary. In some presidential studies, the margin of victory between the winner of a primary and the runner-up is used to identify divisive primary states. For example, Lingle (1980) and Lingle, Owen, and Sonner (1995) defined a divisive primary as a race in which the top two contenders are within 20 percentage points of one another.<sup>1</sup> In another study (Lewis-Beck and Rice 1992), although not directly interested in divisive primaries, used the cutoff of 60% of the primary vote for the incumbent party's nomination winner to determine candidate quality.

<sup>1</sup>The 20% margin is based on the winner of the primary and the runner-up, neither of these individuals needs to be the eventual party nominee, and either of these could be a slate of unpledged delegates. This measure implies that divisiveness in and of itself is more important than the underlying electoral support for the eventual party nominee.

The problem with these definitions of divisiveness is their arbitrary nature. In a presidential race, any significant number of primary voters who support a losing candidate seem to indicate a possible problem for the eventual party nominee in the fall general election campaign. This is especially true for incumbent presidential candidates facing a nomination challenge. Unlike state and local elections where candidates may face token opposition or primary candidates may combine their resources in order to attack the incumbent, contested presidential primaries are highly competitive. The fact that the eventual nominee is not having an easy nomination victory indicates factionalization of the party. Because nomination campaigns are an intra-party process, candidates must carve out a personal base of support within the party and attempt to narrow the field by focusing on their strengths and opposing candidates' weaknesses. Throughout the nomination process candidates have incentives to attract media attention, to muster momentum, to maximize delegates, and to defeat opponents thereby winnowing the field (Gurian 1993).

This behavior means nomination divisiveness may lead to general election problems. Most studies have focused on the supporters of losing candidates as possible bolters in the fall. These voters may have witnessed disagreement or felt hostility between candidates that possibly could limit their fall campaign activity (for a similar argument see Born 1981). At the very least these primary voters and candidate loyalists will have to be wooed back to the party fold. However, this may not be the only source of problems for a party nominee that engaged in a competitive nomination battle. Passive observers may also be influenced by the in-fighting and decide that a party with visible internal problems may not be worthy of support. Divisiveness may also play an indirect role in shaping general election outcomes through the use of the media and political advertisements. Early messages that nomination competitors used against the eventual party nominee may then be adopted by the opposition party candidate in the fall making these charges appear more credible. Whichever mechanism explains how divisive primaries affect general election outcomes, using an arbitrary measure that does not consider contextual effects of the election itself is too simplistic.

One way to overcome the problem of an arbitrary measure is to use a relative divisive measure (e.g., Kenney and Rice 1987). The relative divisiveness measure subtracts the eventual Republican party nominee's share of the state primary vote from the eventual Democratic party nominee's share. The relative divisive measure is better because it uses all the information available on state primary outcomes. Instead of truncating the divisive measure at an arbitrary level and into a divisive/non-divisive dichotomous variable, the actual state support levels of both eventual party nominees are used. This is necessary because theoretically it is not the divisive primary of one party, but the relative divisiveness across parties that creates an advan-

tage for one party or the other. If both parties have equally divisive races, the expectation is that both parties are on equal footing heading into the general election campaign. Only when one party has a much more divisive primary than the other party would an effect be expected.

Adding three additional presidential election years (1988, 1992, and 1996), I replicated the Kenney and Rice model and found that the relative divisiveness effect had increased to .096%.<sup>2</sup> This finding is consistent with their original finding of .07 and supports the divisive nomination hypothesis. This result implies that if the Democratic party candidate received 100% of the primary vote while his Republican opponent received 20% of the primary vote, the Democratic nominee would receive an additional 7.68%  $((100-20)*.096)$  of the state general election vote. Therefore, in some cases, divisive primaries may actually prevent candidates from gaining the general election plurality necessary to win a state.

### **Reevaluating the Presidential Divisive Nomination Hypothesis: The Issue of Specification**

The Kenney and Rice model looks convincing on the surface, but several empirical problems may reduce the effects of primary outcomes on general election outcomes. The basic problem is that the Kenney and Rice model as well as the Lingle (1980) and Lingle, Owen, and Sonner (1995) analyses do not control for election year context. The primary data were aggregated across both time and space. In this case the unit of analysis is not really states, but states across time. They are what Stimson calls "cross sections of time series" (Stimson 1985, 918).

The experience and character party nominees bring to the election contest are constant within any given election year but may vary dramatically from one election year to the next. Other election year constants include the popularity of the incumbent president, the state of the national economy, the issues that are central to the campaign, and the general feeling of public satisfaction or dissatisfaction with how things are going. These factors lead to some years favoring the Republican candidate, and others favoring the Democratic candidate. A year that favors one party over another party is not factored in when election years are stacked on top of one another with no controls for election year context. The result is that the variation in the independent variable is between states both within and across presidential election years. Thus, the specific attributes (of the candidates, the issues, or the nature of the times) that push voters toward one party candidate or the

<sup>2</sup>The full model parameters with unstandardized regression coefficients and standard errors in parentheses are: intercept 30.07\*\*\*\* (3.61), divisiveness .096\*\*\*\* (.010), minor party vote -.208\*\*\*\* (.046), normal vote .326\*\*\*\* (.060), south -.534 (1.17), incumbency .139 (.550), time series 1912-28 -1.74\*\* (.690), time series 1932 13.70\*\*\*\* (1.95), time series 1936-96 1.59\*\* (.701). Model N equals 415 and adjusted R<sup>2</sup> equals .502. Note that \*\*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ .

other during a particular election year are lost. These factors are crucial to understanding general election outcomes regardless of what happened in the nomination stage of the campaign. Simply stated, by not controlling for election year context the divisive nomination hypothesis model is misspecified.<sup>3</sup>

To examine this problem more carefully Table 1 shows the relationship between divisiveness and general election outcomes for each year. Relative divisiveness was created by subtracting the out-party nominee's percentage share of the state primary vote from the in-party nominee's share.<sup>4</sup> A positive relative divisiveness coefficient indicates that for every unit increase in relative divisiveness (that is, the out-party primary is more divisive) the in-party increases its share of the general election vote. If the divisive primary hypothesis were accurate and election year context had no bearing on general election outcomes, then we would see positive coefficients largely similar to one another. Obviously, the N in any particular year is sometimes small, but the results should be suggestive.

The analysis indicates that the effect of state divisiveness on state general election outcomes varies dramatically from a low of  $-.23$  in 1924 to a high of  $.31$  in 1920. In several years, there is even support for a counter hypothesis: the party with more divisive primaries actually increases its general election votes. For example, in 1992 the model shows that Bill Clinton was advantaged by the more divisive nomination race in his party compared to the GOP. For every unit (1%) increase in relative divisiveness between Bush and Clinton, Bush's general election vote *decreased* by  $.15\%$ . The general finding that divisiveness differs across years is important because it suggests that election year context matters. Furthermore, the 1992 race highlights the possibility that it was not the divisiveness of the GOP primary contest that led to Bush's defeat (since the GOP race was much less divisive than the Democratic primary contest), but rather something external to the primary contest, like the economy, that decreased support for the sitting president.

One way of handling this variance problem across states and years is to include dummy variables in the model that will capture election year context (Stimson 1985). This procedure is also known as Least Square Dummy Variables (LSDV), and the results are presented in Table 2.<sup>5</sup> The model is very

<sup>3</sup>An additional problem is created because different years have different numbers of cases. The problem arises because each state contributes independently and equally to the model. Thus, when there is no control for the election year context, some years are contributing more toward the independent variables than other years.

<sup>4</sup>I use the incumbent party's share of the two party vote mainly for ease of interpretation across the models I examine. I ran this same analysis using the Democratic party's share of the two party vote as the dependent variable and found results similar to those presented here.

<sup>5</sup>It is important to note that the error term is heteroskedastic. Therefore, I used robust regression standard errors, instead of OLS standard errors, that are heteroskedastic consistent (White 1980).

**Table 1. Impact of Relative Nomination Divisiveness on Incumbent Two Party General Election Vote Outcomes , by Year**

Year	Unstandardized	Standard Error	N
1912	-.064	.194	12
1916	.081	.057	19
1920	.310	.466	16
1924	-.225**	.088	14
1928	.058*	.031	14
1932	.054	.046	13
1936	.032	.031	12
1940	-.006	.033	12
1944	.002	.035	12
1948	-.043	.029	12
1952	.025	.120	13
1956	.053	.020	17
1960	.013	.032	14
1964	.043	.036	15
1968	.084*	.047	14
1972	.072	.053	20
1976	.078	.050	26
1980	.127 *	.063	31
1984	.173*	.097	23
1988	.067	.043	34
1992	-.151**	.062	36
1996	.046	.066	35

Note: \* $p < .10$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ .

similar to the Kenney and Rice model with controls for the normal party vote and the percent of the vote that went to minor parties, with the addition of election year context controls.<sup>6</sup> Relative divisiveness is measured the same way as it was in Table 1.

<sup>6</sup>The normal party vote variable is the state general election vote received by the incumbent party in the last election cycle. I used the last election cycle because it is acceptable theoretically. Most likely, voting decisions are based on whether to stay the course with the policies of the sitting president or change the course to a new president and new party controlling the White House. How a president or his party did in the last election therefore is probably the best indicator of how he or his party will do in the next election. Empirically this also has validity as shown by the Pearson correlations. The bivariate correlation between a state's general election outcome in the previous election cycle and the current election cycle is .2512. If I average state election outcomes over the past three, four, and five election cycles the bivariate correlation is .1510, .1522, and .1781 respectively. The measure of relative divisiveness under the Kenney and Rice model would be .039 instead of the .031 I report here.

I have not included any controls for Southern states because they are insignificant and have no influence on the coefficients in the model. This is consistent with the replicated Kenney and Rice model.

The results buttress my earlier contention that election year context is an important aspect to consider. In fact, election year dummies improved the model considerably as shown by the joint F-test ( $F\ 145.72, p < .001$ ). Notice that 13 of 20 years show a significant contextual effect. More importantly, notice that the divisiveness coefficient has been reduced by over 60%, although it is still significant. According to the results, for every unit increase (1%) in relative divisiveness the incumbent party gets an additional .031% of the state general election vote compared to the .096% I found when replicating the Kenney and Rice model.<sup>7</sup>

To test what the consequence of this modest effect is on general election outcomes, I recomputed, using the divisiveness coefficient in Table 2, the general election outcome as if there had been no divisive primary for either the Republican or Democratic candidate. I found only one election year in which the outcome of the race would have changed. Under the assumptions of this analysis, in 1916 North Dakota and California would have switched from Democratic to Republican states in the general election and Charles Hughes would have received a majority of electoral college votes.

The evidence presented so far suggests that divisive primaries have a much more marginal effect than previously thought. This research places presidential elections in a context similar to other electoral arenas like Senate and House seats, which also show a marginal, modest effect. However, another way to examine the presidential election process is to control for the context of the election campaign while testing competing theories about incumbency and national mood.

### **An Alternative Look at the Divisive Primary Hypothesis**

I argue that it may be inappropriate to think of the presidential elections as a state-by-state campaign, but instead may be more appropriate to think of them as national campaigns.<sup>8</sup> The presidency is, after all, the only national office. The issues that frame presidential campaigns are national in scope, often focusing on the national economy and the nature of the times. Although states contribute individually to the outcomes of presidential elections via the electoral college, the election context is national. All states are included in the nominee selection process through state primaries and caucuses that select the delegates to attend the party convention. The party con-

<sup>7</sup>I also tested the model using the Kenney and Rice dependent variable of percent general election outcome for the Democratic party and found a slightly lower relative divisiveness effect of .030%.

<sup>8</sup>This is supported by the fact that primaries and caucus states across election years rarely show a significant difference in their general election outcomes. In 22 election cycles (from 1912 to 1996) only six showed a significant difference and removing Southern states decreases the difference to one election cycle.

**Table 2. State Model: Regression of Incumbent Party General Election Vote on Relative Nomination Divisiveness and Election Year Context**

	b	Standard Error	Beta
Relative Divisiveness	.031****	.008	.117
Normal Party Vote	.521****	.054	.415
Percent Minor Party Candidates	-.595****	.070	-.496
1916	10.38****	2.81	.187
1920	-7.07 **	3.01	-.117
1924	17.22****	2.17	.268
1928	15.48****	2.73	.240
1932	-3.58	2.94	-.054
1936	13.35****	2.70	.193
1940	3.46	2.82	.050
1944	6.23**	2.52	.090
1948	6.44**	2.58	.093
1952	1.15	2.77	.017
1956	11.47****	2.57	.196
1960	3.41	2.74	.053
1964	19.52****	2.68	.314
1968	2.27	2.10	.035
1972	19.52****	2.82	.360
1976	.302	2.69	.006
1980	3.04	2.26	.069
1984	14.77****	2.55	.291
1988	6.87***	2.43	.162
1992	4.78***	1.64	.117
1996	15.61****	2.23	.374
Constant	16.34****	3.90	
R <sup>2</sup> adjusted	.796		
F	68.10****		
N	415		

Note: \* $p < .10$ ; \*\* $p < .05$ ; \*\*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*\* $p < .001$ .

vention is a national convention held for the purpose of selecting a party nominee. Also the mass media take the presidential campaign to the entire nation. If a prospective nominee makes a gaffe in Michigan or gives an impressive new speech with new themes in California, not only Michiganders and Californians hear about it, but the rest of the nation will hear about it as well. The qualities the candidates bring to office are also equal across the states. For example, Jimmy Carter as an incumbent candidate in 1980, brought the same qualities to Iowans as he did to New Mexicans and arguably in both states he was a rather weak candidate.

Even during the nomination season, the process is national in scope. Bartels (1988), for example, shows that momentum gained through winning

one primary or caucus state aids a presidential candidate in the next cycle of nomination contests. Voters may respond to this dynamic quality of the campaign by changing candidate preferences as candidates' fortunes wax and wane. In fact, later races may even have a reciprocal effect on voters in earlier states as candidates lose momentum or drop out and voters are forced to update their preferences. If the context of the race is national, a state-by-state analysis may be inappropriate, and instead a national-level analysis may be more appropriate. By changing the unit of analysis to election years, a national context can be examined and can provide us with the added capability of including additional election year controls in the model that capture candidate quality.<sup>9</sup>

Candidate quality has been found to be an important control in understanding the influence of divisive primaries in U.S. Senate races (Kenney 1988; Westlye 1991) and House races (Born 1981). Candidate quality has also been found to be important to challenger quality in House general election contests (McCurley and Mondak 1995). In presidential elections, however, candidate quality has been ignored as a necessary control in understanding the impact of divisiveness on general election outcomes. Kenney (1988) speculates that candidate quality is not relevant to models testing the presidential divisive nomination hypothesis due to the high visibility and high salience of presidential nomination campaigns. Implicit in his argument is the belief that such characteristics promote higher attentiveness within the public, making the events of the nomination period more memorable and more significant to voters in presidential election races than in lower-level races. Consequently, supporters of losing candidates have a harder time returning to the party fold in a presidential race.

I argue, however, that politicians contemplating running for the presidency would consider their chances in the primary and general election race before jumping in. The financial costs, for example, of running a presidential nomination campaign are enormous (Sorauf 1988; Wilcox 1991). The high costs, in addition to the personal sacrifices and intense media scrutiny, might deter potential in-party candidates from mounting a nomination campaign against a strong incumbent or even a strong front-runner in a campaign that is perceived as unwinnable.

Another argument against inclusion of a control for candidate quality is that candidate quality has no effect on candidates entering the presidential nomination race (Kenney and Rice 1987). They note that in presidential elections the out-party generally has competitive nomination campaigns despite in-party popularity. They believe this indicates that general election

<sup>9</sup>These controls could not be included in the previous models because they are confounded with the election year dummies.

outcomes are not considered by out-party candidates and hence are not important. However, this reasoning has two problems. First they link candidate quality with how many nomination challengers are running in the out-party, and second they ignore what takes place in the in-party.

The number of candidates in the out-party is unrelated to the candidate quality of the in-party. For example, in 1992 the raw number indicates up to six opposition party candidates. But the six candidates seeking the Democratic presidential nomination are all weak candidates (see Baker 1993). The stronger candidates looking at their chances of success against what appeared to be overwhelming public support for President George Bush decided to stay out of the 1992 race and not risk the likelihood of a general election defeat. Furthermore, the out-party must front a candidate in a presidential election, and the competition during the nomination could arguably be over ideology or future party leadership and direction. Out-party potential candidates also may be vying for a position in the next presidential election cycle and may be using one election to establish legitimacy and viability for the next presidential election year.

Secondly, by focusing on the cross-party dynamic, they ignore the most important assessment of candidate quality which is in-party challenges. The in-party does not always have a competitive nomination campaign. On the other hand, the out-party always has a competitive nomination campaign. Incumbent candidates, unless they show signs of weakness, are not challenged by members of their own party. As Brody (1991, 21) surmised in his book on presidential popularity, "If the president's reelection looks risky, opposition within his own party is likely to grow. This opposition will be emboldened by the president's growing weakness and will be fed by and will feed the ambition of those who feel that four years is too long to wait, after all."

Despite the potential importance of candidate quality much of the literature has failed to recognize that not all presidential incumbents possess the same advantages. Some incumbents are weaker, while others are much stronger. Some incumbents or incumbent parties enter the primary race with enormous public popularity, approval, and support. For others the primary contest is an uphill battle and a telling experience of the fortunes to come. Incumbents and even their heirs are evaluated by the public based upon their records and not simply by the events of a nomination campaign. Therefore in any model predicting general election outcomes, it is necessary to include external measures of incumbent support like presidential approval. Because of the relationship between divisive primaries and presidential incumbent evaluation, leaving candidate evaluation out of the model overestimates the effect of divisive primaries on general election outcomes.

Evaluating candidate quality is an important step in understanding divisive nomination campaigns and in understanding presidential general

election outcomes. Indeed, primary campaigns are another arena of evaluation, especially for incumbent candidates. In these cases, nomination campaigns are not the cause of divisive primaries, but are the symptoms of an already divided party. The nomination campaign is just the place where those feelings are observed.

In any model predicting general election outcomes, it is necessary to include external measures of incumbent support, which may be the real culprit in understanding general election defeat. I have chosen two measures of incumbent party support. They are presidential approval and the change in unemployment rate. In the years prior to 1936 I have no adequate measure assessing the public's perception of the state of the union and/or evaluations of the president. During the 1930s Gallup began polling Americans and asking them about whether they approve or disapprove of the president. This is an excellent measure of presidential evaluation or presidential incumbent party strength because it indicates the underlying popular support for the president and his administration's job performance. The data for this measure were collected from Gallup surveys in January, prior to the nomination campaign.<sup>10</sup> I have also included a measure of relative national unemployment to tap into the general health of the economy.<sup>11</sup> Increasing unemployment rates indicate bad economic times and leave the president vulnerable to criticism. Macroeconomic conditions have long been considered the responsibility of the president and macroeconomic indicators, like the unemployment rate, affect general election outcomes (Erikson 1989; Fair 1988; Hibbs 1982; Tufte 1978).

The dependent variable is the percentage share of the national general election vote for the incumbent party. The independent variable capturing

<sup>10</sup>All of the presidential approval measures are based upon Gallup survey data and when possible were taken at the end of January, just prior to the beginning of the primary season. The variable that Gallup used went through some evolutionary changes during the early years of the Gallup poll (Edwards and Gallup 1990). In 1945, Gallup chose the following question format, "Do you approve or disapprove of the way President (insert name) is handling his job as President." In 1936 and 1944 it was necessary to use the presidential trial heat survey data because Gallup had not made the complete transition to the use of the presidential approval variable.

<sup>11</sup>Relative national unemployment is created by taking the year previous to the election year's unemployment rate and subtracting it from the unemployment rate in the election year.

I also tried two alternative economic indicators. They included the percentage change in unemployment and the percentage change (nonannualized) in GNP from the fourth quarter of the year before the election to the second quarter of the election year. The latter measure was used by Lewis-Beck and Rice (1992) to predict general election outcomes. In both instances, I found that the divisiveness coefficient remained insignificant. In the model using percentage change in unemployment the coefficients were .049 ( $p < .30$ ) for divisiveness, .17.02 ( $p < .10$ ) for unemployment, and .292 ( $p < .05$ ) for presidential approval. In the model using GNP ( $N = 13$ ), the coefficients were .023 ( $p < .64$ ) for divisiveness, 2.64 ( $p < .05$ ) for GNP, and .313 ( $p < .05$ ) for presidential approval.

**Table 3. National Model: Regression of Incumbent Party General Election Vote on National Economic Conditions, Presidential Evaluations, and Relative Divisiveness, From 1936**

Independent Variables	Model 1		Model 2	
	Unstandardized (Standard Error)	Standardized	Unstandardized (Standard Error)	Standardized
Divisiveness	.107** (.048)	.515	.023 (.043)	.110
Unemployment			3.42** (1.29)	.533
Presidential Evaluation			.281** (.108)	.462
Constant	48.18**** (2.17)		33.49**** (5.76)	
R <sup>2</sup>	.265		.652	
R <sup>2</sup> (adjusted)	.213		.565	
F	5.06**		7.50***	
N	16		16	

Note: \*\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*\*  $p < .001$

relative divisiveness was created by subtracting the out-party's eventual nominee's share of the primary vote from the incumbent party's eventual nominee's share.

Table 3 presents the results.<sup>12</sup> Divisiveness without any control for candidate quality is highly significant and has a positive slope. For every unit (1%) increase in relative divisiveness the incumbent party receives an additional .11% of the general election vote. This value is in line with the Kenney and Rice model. However, once we include the other independent variables in the equation that take into account the quality of the incumbent president and his administration (presidential approval) as well as the state of the economy (relative unemployment) the divisiveness coefficient drops from .11 to .02. Divisiveness has been reduced to a very marginal and insignificant effect. Evaluation of the incumbent president, however, is clearly an

<sup>12</sup>I tested for possible serial correlation. The Durbin Watson was 2.58 and in the indeterminate range for negative serial correlation. The Box-Ljung coefficient was 1.65 with a  $p < .20$  for the first lag and indicated that further order serial correlation was unlikely. Because of the mixed conclusions from these tests I corrected for first order serial correlation using both the Cochrane-Orcutt and Prais-Winsten methods. The results were similar across both correction models. In the Cochrane Orcutt correction I found that divisiveness was .003 ( $p < .94$ ), unemployment was 3.35 ( $p < .05$ ), and presidential approval was .227 ( $p < .05$ ). These results are consistent with the OLS results reported in Table 3.

important predictor in general election outcomes. For every unit increase in the evaluation of the incumbent president, the incumbent party receives an additional .28% of the general election vote. The change in unemployment rate also significantly affects general election outcomes. These results suggest that divisiveness does not have the highly negative impact on general election outcomes that many researchers originally thought. The general perception of the incumbent party candidate and the economic state of the country is much more important in determining general election outcomes than the division in the party due to the nomination contest.

### Conclusion

These results fit in well with models at the individual level, particularly Stone (1986), that showed that nomination candidate preference has no direct effect on vote choice, but possibly has an indirect effect through candidate evaluations. This last point is also consistent with the 1987 Kenney and Rice finding that prenominations preferences affected general election comparative candidate evaluations in the 1980 presidential race. In both cases, the indirect effects on vote choice and direct effects on candidate evaluations may be the result of an already divided electorate, unhappy with the current administration. In addition, Stone, Atkeson, and Rapoport (1992) found that activity for a nomination loser actually increased activity for the party nominee during the general election campaign. Lastly, Atkeson (1993) found that favorable attitudes towards the party nominee increased by supporters of losing candidates during the general election stage of the campaign. These findings are consistent with a reformulation of the divisive nomination hypothesis. The underlying assumption of the divisive primary hypothesis that the nomination process divides and factionalizes the party, inherently harming the eventual winner's chances of building a unified coalition in the fall campaign (see Polsby 1983; Polsby and Wildavsky 1980; Ranney 1978; Wattenberg 1991) may be overstated (see Atkeson 1993, 1994, 1995; Mayer 1996). This process oriented argument ignores the role of each stage of the presidential campaign and its ability to create incentives for factionalization during the primary season and party unity during the general election campaign (Atkeson 1993, 1994, 1995).

This study also helps to bring in line the presidential divisive nomination literature with other revisionist work on this topic. In Senate and House races divisiveness has been reexamined and found to have a much more marginal effect than initially thought. Presidential divisiveness has also been overstated. Once election year context in the state-by-state model is controlled for, divisiveness has a much more modest effect. This modest effect does not appear to change general election outcomes. In addition, the election year model, which posits that presidential elections are national elec-

tions and not state-by-state elections, indicated that the impact of divisiveness was not significantly different from zero.

Incumbency is not the same advantage for all presidents. The quality of the candidate matters. Strong incumbents face little challenge during the primaries and have an easier time during the general election campaign. However, a weak incumbent may face a strong challenge in the nomination campaign, which is an omen of things to come during the general election. This suggests that in order to understand the impact of divisive races on general election outcomes, we need to look more closely at why divisive primary races occur in the first place. In open races, divisive races are a natural part of the open and democratic nomination selection mechanism. In incumbent races, however, divisiveness, whether caused by close primary races such as Ford's 1976 reelection bid or not so close races such as Buchanan's 1992 nomination challenge of George Bush, indicates a weak incumbent. A weak incumbent most likely attracts a divisive nomination fight and often results in a general election defeat.<sup>13</sup> This suggests a future line of research that focuses on what causes divisive primaries. One hypothesis from this paper is that incumbent weakness is a major cause.

This study suggests that one possible consequence of changing the nomination rules to an open and democratic process was not on how voters view the process, but perhaps on how elites view the process. In 1952 Truman had a low approval rating, in fact much lower than in 1948, at 29%. Truman, in 1952, initially decided to run again; but after a poor showing in the New Hampshire primary, where he came in second with 44% of the vote, he changed his mind. A similar incident occurred in 1968 with President Johnson. The war in Vietnam, student protests, and racial problems all weakened the president's public image giving Johnson well below a 50% approval margin. His first primary showing in New Hampshire, although a win, was very poor for an incumbent president. He received only 50% of the vote while his opponent, Eugene McCarthy, received 42%. These factors may have been crucial to his withdrawal from the 1968 presidential nomination contest. More importantly, however, these cases suggest that both Johnson and Truman were weak candidates and that challenges to their candidacies were made by strategic politicians wading into a potentially successful contest for themselves. Truman and Johnson, realizing their weakness after their poor primary showings, dropped out of the race. Ford and Carter, on the other hand, are good examples of candidates who stayed in the nomination race

<sup>13</sup>When I ran three separate state models (challenged incumbents, non-challenged incumbents, and open races) I found that in open races and challenged incumbent races the divisive coefficient was roughly what it is in Table 2 (.033) and significant at the .10 level. However, in years where the incumbent was not challenged I found no evidence that divisiveness affects general election outcomes.

despite their weak approval scores and difficulties in the primaries.<sup>14</sup> In the end they were able to win the nomination, but their weak records were unable to keep them from losing the general election. Perhaps the open nomination process has allowed elites to stay in the campaign when they should not because of their weaknesses, while in the pre-reform era these weak incumbents got the message from the party players and withdrew.

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<sup>14</sup>In 1980 Carter received 51.2% of the primary vote. In 1976 Ford received 53.3% of the primary vote.

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