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# *Divisive Nominating Mechanisms and Democratic Party Electoral Prospects*

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The purpose of this article is to explore the effect of divisive nominating campaigns within the Democratic party on the party's success in presidential elections. Divisiveness is defined as a function of the nominating method and the margin of victory. The individual and combined effects of each variable on Democratic party success is measured through bivariate, multivariate, and probit analyses. The results show that divisiveness hurts the Democratic party's prospects for winning the general election after controlling for state party orientation and incumbency. Democrats are more likely to lose states that use a divisive nominating mechanism (presidential primary) and win states that use a nondivisive mechanism (caucus). Moreover, among presidential primary states, divisiveness predicated upon margin of victory is strongly related to outcomes. Democrats are more likely to win primary states decided by wide margins and lose those states decided by narrow margins. The analysis covers every presidential primary, caucus, and general election outcome in individual states from 1932 to 1992.

## INTRODUCTION

For more than 30 years, political analysts and practitioners have debated the question of whether divisive primary campaigns—where the margin of victory between the winner and loser is narrow—are detrimental to a political party's chances of winning in general elections (Hacker 1965; Lingle 1980, 1981; Stone 1984, 1986; Buell 1986; Southwell 1986; Kenney and Rice 1984, 1987; Stone, Atkinson, and Rapoport 1992; Johnson and Gibson 1974; Comer 1976; Bernstein 1977; Born 1981; Abramowitz 1988; Kenney 1988; Piereson and Smith 1975; Miller, Jewell, and Sigelman 1988).

While inconsistent findings abound in the general research on primaries, the conclusion that divisive *presidential* primaries hurt Democratic contenders' chances of winning *presidential* elections has been consistently supported using both aggregate (Lingle 1980, 1981; Kenney and Rice 1987) and individual (Lingle 1980; Southwell 1986; Stone 1986) level data. These studies employ a variety of measures of divisiveness, control variables, and statistical methodologies to reach simi-

lar conclusions. With this study we join the debate by presenting the most comprehensive investigation to date of the effects of nominating mechanisms on presidential election outcomes.

#### DIVISIVE PRIMARIES REVISITED

Our study differs from, and builds upon, previous research in several notable ways. First, we employ the most expansive data set ever used in this kind of analysis—the entire population of state-level election data from 1932 to 1992.

Next, we restrict our analysis to the Democratic party only. The existing literature suggests that primary divisiveness is more consequential for Democratic candidates than Republican candidates. The pluralistic base, cross-cutting cleavages, and wide ideological range that have been characteristic of the Democratic party since its transformation from minority to majority party status in the 1930s sow the seeds of conflict among the party elite as well as between the elite and the mass membership over the rules, role, priorities, and direction of the party. The minority status, homogeneous membership, and philosophical coherence of the GOP inoculate it to some degree from the effects of divisiveness. We begin our own study with the 1932 presidential election to test for the effects of divisiveness during this entire period of Democratic ascendancy.

Third, we have expanded the scope of the inquiry by comparing the effects of two types of presidential nominating mechanisms—presidential primaries and caucuses—on party success rates in general elections. Previous research focused on primaries exclusively.

To remain consistent with the literature, we have borrowed the dichotomous indicator of divisiveness initially devised by Bernstein (1977) to study congressional elections and used by Lengle (1980, 1981) to study presidential elections. Under this classification scheme, a primary is considered divisive if the margin of victory between the winner and runner-up is 20% or less. Just as in previous studies at the aggregate level, our work includes controls for the effects of incumbency and state party orientation.

Finally, we have extended earlier research in another major respect. The original studies employed multivariate contingency table analysis. We follow up this research by using probit to estimate the probability of a state voting Republican as a function of divisiveness, incumbency, and party orientation.

#### NOMINATING MECHANISMS, DIVISIVENESS, AND ELECTORAL OUTCOMES

One major limitation of the current literature is that the relationship between divisiveness and election outcomes is tested for one type of nominating mechanism only—the direct primary. The exclusive focus on primaries in the literature is understandable. Primaries are the nominating method of choice at the congressional, state, and local level. We believe, however, that divisiveness varies reliably by

nominating mechanism. Different nominating systems, by virtue of their inherent characteristics, are susceptible to greater or lesser degrees of divisiveness. A nominating process that is quick, less visible, party-centered, and elite controlled, for instance, is likely to be less polarizing, and hence, less divisive, than a method which is protracted, more visible, candidate-centered, and mass controlled. Direct primaries fit the latter type. The focus on presidential elections allows us to compare the effects of two types of nominating mechanisms—presidential primary and caucus—on general election outcomes.

Caucuses by their very nature are likely to be less divisive than primaries for a number of reasons. Campaigns in caucus states are less visible to the party membership than those in primary states. With the exception of the Iowa caucuses, fewer candidates participate, less money is spent, fewer ads are run, and less media coverage is generated. As a result, the party membership in caucus states compared with primary states tends to be less interested, less attentive, less actively involved, and less likely to develop strong emotional and political attachments to candidates. In sum, they are less willing to participate in the process at all. On this last point, the historical record is quite clear: turnout in caucuses is much lower than in primaries. Only 1%–3% of the voting-age population participate in caucuses, whereas 20%–25% vote in primaries (Ranney 1972, 1977; Lingle 1992).

More importantly, however, there is a fundamental difference in the function of primaries and caucuses. For most of the twentieth century, caucuses were responsible, primarily, for conducting party business and, secondarily, for selecting delegates. Party members who attended caucuses may have preferred different candidates for president, but the caucus was a forum to set party rules, plot campaign strategy, disseminate information, choose party officeholders, and select party leaders to the next round of caucuses—not to decide upon a presidential nominee.

The responsibility for choosing the nominee in a caucus-based nominating process rested with the national convention. Thus, if divisiveness arose during the nominating campaign, it arose at the national convention where avenues existed to resolve the conflict and unite the party. Losing factions were offered patronage, pork barrel, policy concessions, or the vice presidency by the winning faction in return for their support in the general election. Divisiveness was reduced through the bargaining and negotiating inherent in a deliberative nominating mechanism.

The purpose of primaries, however, is to measure popular support for presidential contenders. By their very nature, therefore, primaries invite internal party dissension if not civil war. They compel candidates to criticize and malign one another before a statewide and national audience and encourage party members to divide themselves into opposing camps. Negative and deceptive advertising blankets the airwaves and reinforces voter loyalty and antipathy toward candidates. In a presidential primary, the price of victory for the winner is a tarnished image and a split party, and there is no consolation prize for losers. Our argument is not that divisiveness is absent in caucuses and present in primaries, but that the magnitude of

the problem is less and the number of party members affected is fewer in caucuses than in primaries.

The effect of different nominating mechanisms on party (dis)harmony and electoral outcomes is an especially interesting question given the recent changes in the presidential nominating process over the last 20 years. Before 1972, an overwhelming majority of states used caucuses to select delegates to the Democratic National Convention, and a small minority used primaries. Since 1972, the ratio of caucuses to primaries has been reversed. In 1992, 38 states used primaries and only 12 states used caucuses. The proliferation of primaries and demise of caucuses was one of the unintended consequences of the McGovern-Fraser Commission reforms adopted by the Democratic party in 1971 (Shafer 1983, 1988; Polsby 1983; Lingle 1987). See figure 1.

One simple test of our hypothesis that nominating mechanisms matter is to compare Democratic party success during the prereform and postreform eras. From 1932 to 1968, when delegates were selected by caucuses and nominees were chosen by national conventions, the Democratic party won seven of 10 presidential elections. Since the inception of the primary-based system, Democrats have lost four

FIGURE 1

NUMBER OF DEMOCRATIC PRIMARIES AND CAUCUSES, 1932–1992

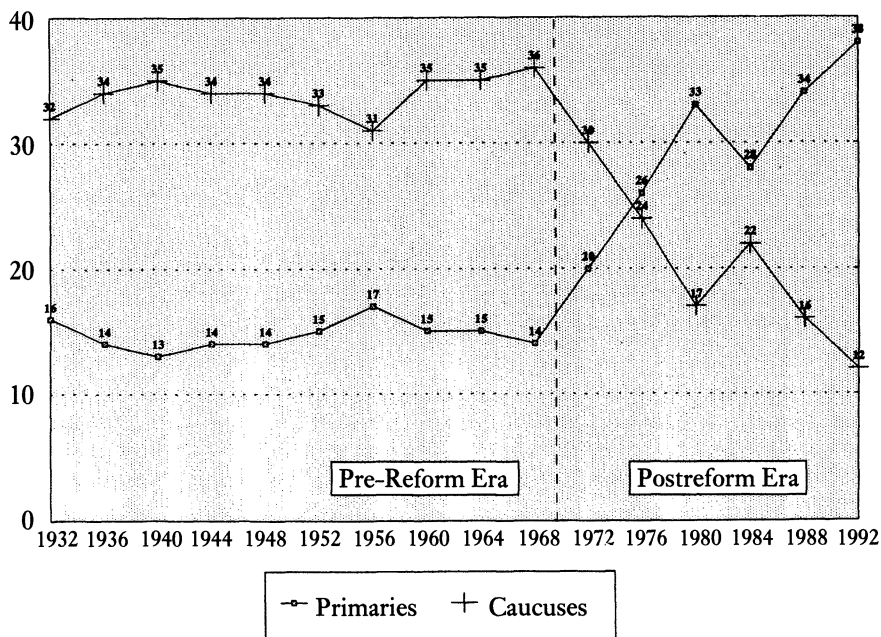


TABLE 1  
CANDIDATE CHOICE BY DIVISIVENESS OF  
DEMOCRATIC DELEGATE SELECTION MECHANISM  
1932–1992\*

	Divisive Democratic Primaries	Nondivisive Democratic Primaries	Caucuses
Democrat	23%	49%	51%
Republican	77%	51%	49%
	100%	100%	100%
	(105)	(220)	(451)

Chi-square  $p \leq .00$ ; Phi = .19.

\*The total number of caucuses in these tables is 451 due to inclusion of Alaska and Hawaii for their first three election cycles.

of six elections. Obviously, other factors contributed to Democratic party successes and failures from 1932–1992. We believe, however, that it is more than coincidental that victories and defeats are so strongly tied to structural changes in leadership recruitment.

Although a direct test of the hypothesis that primaries are more divisive than caucuses is impossible using aggregate data, an indirect test is available. If divisiveness hurts, and if primaries are more divisive than caucuses, then the Democratic party should lose more primary states than caucus states in presidential elections. Moreover, if divisiveness matters, then states with divisive Democratic primaries should be more likely to vote Republican, and states with nondivisive primaries should be more likely to vote Democratic. Consequently, if our inference about the less divisive nature of caucuses is correct, then caucus states should be more supportive of Democratic nominees than either divisive or nondivisive primary states.

Table 1 crosstabulates party choice of states in general elections by type of delegate selection mechanism employed by states and, if states used a presidential primary, by whether the primary was divisive or not.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The dependent variable throughout the study is candidate choice in general election campaigns. States carried by the Democratic party nominee are coded "Democratic." States carried by the Republican nominee are coded "Republican." From 1932 to 1992, 10 states were carried by a third party or independent candidate for president. They were eliminated from the analysis because they voted for a nonmajor party candidate.

Our data set consists of 776 Democratic primaries and caucuses. The nominating mechanism used by the Democrats differed from that used by the Republicans only 31 times. Out of a total of 325 primaries, there were 22 cases where the Democrats held a primary and the Republicans held a caucus. Of these 22 cases, 12 were carried by the Democrats in the general election, 9 voted for the Republican nominee, and in one case a third-party candidate prevailed. Fourteen of the 22 primaries were nondivisive; 8 were

Outcomes are related to both nominating mechanisms and to divisiveness. From 1932 to 1992, Democrats *lost* 60% of those states that held a presidential primary but *won* 51% of those states that held a caucus. However, when divisiveness is taken into account, the dynamics of this relationship change substantially. As table 1 indicates, Democrats lost 77% of those states that experienced divisive primaries. The party is almost equally successful among those states with nondivisive primaries, losing only 51% of the time, and caucuses, losing 49%. Thus, the evidence points to divisiveness as being a more important determinant of Democratic success than nominating mechanism alone.

The relationship uncovered in table 1 may be a function of state party orientation rather than divisiveness. If traditionally Republican states use primaries and traditionally Democratic states use caucuses, then the relationship found in table 1 between nominating mechanism and success is spurious, a product of the relationship between nominating method and state party orientation.

There is some reason to believe that nominating mechanisms might be tied to state party orientation. States with strong state and local Democratic parties might opt for caucuses because caucuses give state and local party leaders greater control over delegate selection and greater influence at national conventions. States with weak Democratic parties, on the other hand, would be more likely to succumb to populist or progressive pressure for more mass democracy in the form of presidential primaries. In fact, direct primaries sprouted first in those states with weak party organizations. If strength of Democratic party organization is related to nominating method, we would find a tendency for caucus states to vote Democratic, not because caucuses are less divisive, but because the Democratic party in caucus states tends to be stronger. We also would find a tendency for primary states to vote Republican, not because primaries are more divisive, but because the Democratic party in primary states tends to be weaker.

In addition, we also must control for the effects of state party orientation when examining the relationship between divisiveness and success. Since most caucus/convention systems of delegate selection in the past were tightly controlled by state and local party organizations, candidates needed strong party ties to win the nomination. Candidates without these ties had only one strategy—to compete for Democratic delegates in states where their own party's organization was weakest. Such strategic considerations by candidates would produce divisive Democratic primaries in traditionally Republican states. Thus, state party orientation, not divisiveness, would explain the poor performance of Democratic nominees in divisive primary states.

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divisive. The Republican candidate won the general election in 6 out of the 8 states that experienced divisive primaries.

Of the 451 caucuses in the data set, there were only nine cases in which the GOP held a primary and the Democrats held a caucus. All of the primaries were nondivisive. The Democrats captured the four states before 1972; the Republicans won the five states since 1972.

TABLE 2

CANDIDATE CHOICE BY DIVISIVENESS OF DEMOCRATIC DELEGATE  
SELECTION MECHANISM CONTROLLING FOR STATE PARTY ORIENTATION,  
1932–1992\*

	Traditionally Democratic		
	Divisive Primary	Nondivisive Primary	Caucus
Democrat	47%	78%	78%
Republican	53%	22%	22%
	100%	100%	100%
	(17)	(32)	(120)

Chi-square:  $p \leq .01$ ; Phi = .22.

	Traditionally Competitive		
	Divisive Primary	Nondivisive Primary	Caucus
Democrat	21%	51%	52%
Republican	79%	49%	48%
	100%	100%	100%
	(66)	(113)	(193)

Chi-square:  $p \leq .00$ ; Phi = .23.

	Traditionally Republican		
	Divisive Primary	Nondivisive Primary	Caucus
Democrat	9%	32%	24%
Republican	91%	68%	77%
	100%	100%	101%**
	(22)	(75)	(132)

Chi-square:  $p \leq .07$ ; Phi = .15.

\*The total number of caucuses in these tables is 445 instead of 451 because the state party orientation for Alaska and Hawaii could not be determined for their first three election cycles.

\*\*Due to rounding

To test for these possible sources of spuriousness, table 2 presents the relationship between nominating mechanism, divisiveness, and party success controlling for traditional state party orientation.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup>States whose Democratic percentage in each of three presidential elections immediately prior to the year of the primary exceeded the national Democratic average were categorized "traditionally Democratic." States whose Republican percentage in those three elections exceeded the national average were categorized as "traditionally Republican." States which split their partisan loyalties or failed to exceed



As table 2 shows, the effects of divisiveness remain regardless of state political culture, while the effect of nominating mechanism is somewhat muted. In traditionally Democratic states, the Democratic party *loses* 53% of the divisive primary states but *wins* 78% of the nondivisive primary and caucus states.

The effect in traditionally two-party competitive states is equally dramatic. Democrats *lose* 79% of the two-party competitive states that underwent a divisive primary but *capture* 51% of the nondivisive primary states and 52% of the caucus states.

Among traditionally Republican states, the relationship still exists although in a weakened form. Democrats lose traditionally Republican states generally but do far worse among divisive primary states, losing 91%, and significantly better among nondivisive primary or caucus states, losing 68% and 77% respectively.

Our findings in table 1 could be spurious for another reason. The current era of the presidential primary parallels the recent string of Republican presidents. We argue that party success and failure is related to the type of nominating method employed and the degree of divisiveness experienced by the party during these periods. Others, however, could argue just as easily that incumbency accounts for the relationship between nominating mechanism and success. Caucus states voted Democratic because caucuses coincided with Democratic incumbents. Primary states voted Republican for the same reason—primaries proliferated during an extended period of Republican presidents.

Incumbency also might explain the relationship between divisiveness and electoral success. The party out of office is likely to experience divisive primaries because its nomination is open and also more likely to lose the general election because it does not control the resources of the Oval Office. The incumbent party, on the other hand, would have fewer contested nominations and more general election success. Over time the result would be the same for the Democratic party: more nondivisive primaries and more victories when competing as the incumbent party, and more divisive primaries and losses when competing as the out-party. The explanation for failure and success would be incumbency, not divisiveness.

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the national average for either party (e.g., in presidential elections with major third party or independent candidates) were categorized as “two-party competitive.” Alaska and Hawaii could not be classified until each had experienced three election cycles in 1972.

This measure of traditional party orientation is identical to the one used by Lingle (1980). The purpose of the measure is to capture party orientation at the presidential level only. Including state and local voting history in the measure is inappropriate since states have different political orientations at different electoral levels. The South, for instance, is traditionally Republican at the presidential level but Democratic at the state and local levels.

Also, since “tradition” does not preclude the possibility of change, and since state party traditions have changed over time (e.g., South), we kept the number of past elections low to capture change across time without stacking the deck to our advantage.

The validity of the measure is supported by the strength of the relationship between state party orientation and candidate choice.  $\text{Tau}_c = .38$ .

TABLE 3

CANDIDATE CHOICE BY DIVISIVENESS OF DELEGATE SELECTION MECHANISM  
CONTROLLING FOR INCUMBENCY, 1932–1992\*

	Democratic Incumbent		
	Divisive Primary	Nondivisive Primary	Caucus
Democrat	12%	69%	74%
Republican	88%	31%	26%
	100%	100%	100%
	(17)	(85)	(186)

Chi-square:  $p \leq .00$ ; Phi = .31.

	No Incumbent		
	Divisive Primary	Nondivisive Primary	Caucus
Democrat	15%	25%	34%
Republican	85%	75%	66%
	100%	100%	100%
	(26)	(52)	(114)

Chi-square:  $p \leq .25$ ; Phi = .10.

	Republican Incumbent		
	Divisive Primary	Nondivisive Primary	Caucus
Democrat	29%	42%	35%
Republican	71%	58%	65%
	100%	100%	100%
	(62)	(83)	(151)

Chi-square:  $p \leq .12$ ; Phi = .12.

\*See note for table 1.

To test for this possibility, table 3 controls our findings for the effects of incumbency.<sup>3</sup> As table 3 shows, divisiveness takes its toll regardless of incumbency, while caucuses benefit the party in two of three instances. In election years with Democratic incumbents, divisiveness severely handicaps the party. Democrats *lose* 88% of the divisive primary states, but *win* 69% of the nondivisive primary and

<sup>3</sup>If the Democratic incumbent sought renomination, the election year was coded "Democratic incumbent." If the Republican incumbent sought renomination, the election year was coded "Republican incumbent." If the incumbent president either could not run or chose not to run, the election year was coded "no incumbent."

74% of the caucus states. In years with no incumbents, Democrats lose 85% of the divisive primary states, but only 75% of nondivisive states and 66% of caucus states. During election years with Republican incumbent, Democrats lose 71% of the divisive primary states but fare far better in the nondivisive primary and caucus states.

#### PROBIT ANALYSIS OF STATE VOTE CHOICE

We now take an additional step in our analysis by estimating a probit model<sup>4</sup> to determine the influence of type of nominating mechanism/divisiveness, state party orientation, and incumbency on presidential vote choice.<sup>5</sup>

Table 4 presents the results of the analysis. The probit coefficients demonstrate that all of the variables we employ in the analysis, with the exception of a state having a Republican incumbent, are statistically significant, and the signs are in the expected direction. Democratic state party orientation and party of the incumbent are negatively related to voting Republican.<sup>6</sup> The goodness of fit statistics indicate that the model fits the data reasonably well. Seventy-one percent of the cases were correctly classified, the pseudo  $R^2 = .26$ , and the asymptotic  $F$ -statistic is significant.

The results of the probit analysis further support our contention that divisive Democratic primaries help elect Republicans, and caucuses help elect Democrats even after controlling for state party orientation and incumbency. As table 4 demonstrates, the probability of voting Republican is highest for divisive primary states and lowest for caucus states for every combination of state party orientation and incumbency. Again, we find that divisiveness is the factor that renders primaries damaging to the Democrats, as the differences in the probability of losing nondivisive primaries and caucuses are small.

Although Democrats do best in "friendly" states in elections with Democratic incumbents, the effect of nominating mechanism on performance is nonetheless dramatic. A Democratic incumbent has a 29% chance of *losing* a "friendly" state after a divisive primary, and only an 8% chance of *losing* a "friendly state" which employs a caucus system.

The worst scenario for Democrats occurs in "hostile" states with a predominantly Republican culture. Democrats *lose* "hostile" states 97% of the time when a divisive primary has occurred, compared with 87% when a caucus has been held.

<sup>4</sup>LIMDEP 6.0 was used for the analysis.

<sup>5</sup>The dependent variable, *vote choice*, was coded 0 for the Democratic candidate and 1 for the Republican candidate. The predictor variables were entered into the equation as sets of dichotomous variables. Type of nominating mechanism was represented by two indicators—*divisive primaries/all other contests* and *caucuses/all other contests*. State party orientation and party of the incumbent were coded into categories of *Republican/all others* and *Democrat/all others*.

<sup>6</sup>The probit coefficients themselves cannot be compared directly (see Hanushek and Jackson 1977, 206).

TABLE 4  
PROBIT ANALYSIS

State Party Orientation	Party Incumbency	Probability of Voting Republican		
		Divisive Primary	Nondivisive Primary	Caucus
Democratic	Democratic	.29	.11	.08
Democratic	Republican	.63	.40	.38
Democratic	Open	.58	.32	.29
Republican	Democratic	.83	.59	.55
Republican	Republican	.97	.89	.87
Republican	Open	.95	.83	.81
Competitive	Democratic	.51	.26	.24
Competitive	Republican	.95	.62	.60
Competitive	Open	.78	.52	.49

MODEL STATISTICS				
	coeff	se	coeff/se	sign <i>t</i>
Div. primary	.88	.15	5.84	.00
Nondiv. prim.	.31	.10	3.00	.00
Caucus	.20	.09	2.13	.03
Dem. SPO	-.72	.13	5.50	.00
Rep. SPO	.79	.12	6.58	.00
Competitive	.55	.12	4.61	.00
Dem. incumb.	-.87	.11	7.42	.00
Rep. incumb.	.29	.09	3.19	.00
Open seat	.17	.12	1.30	.19
Constant	.51			

$N = 780$ ; correctly classified = 71%; cases in modal category = 53% ( $n = 414$ ); chi-square = 224.33;  $df = 5$ ; pseudo  $R^2 = .26$ ; asymptotic  $F = 44.87$ ; significance = .00;  $PRE = .45$ .

The Democratic party does not fare well when a divisive primary has taken place in a competitive state holding an election for an open seat. Democrats *lose* 78% of the time under these conditions. However, they face a 51% chance of *winning* if a caucus is held.

#### CONCLUSION

The relationships uncovered in this study should not be surprising to students of political parties, generally, and of party reform, specifically. Historically, party success has been intricately tied to formal institutional mechanisms and procedures for selecting party nominees (Ranney 1975; Ceasar 1979; Heale 1982; McCormick 1982; Cavala 1974; Lingle and Shafer 1976; Polsby 1983; Lingle 1987). Consequently, any changes in these rules and mechanisms affect the legitimacy of the de-

cision, the quality of the nominees, the attitudes and loyalty of party members, the power of groups and states within the party coalition, and, ultimately, the competitiveness of the party in the electoral arena.

From a more technical perspective, our findings lay a foundation for future theoretical and empirical investigations using both aggregate and individual-level data. One way to test the "divisive primary hypothesis" further is to refine the core concept of "divisiveness." The use of a 20% margin leaves many unanswered questions which can be addressed by using the "actual margin of victory" in the analysis.<sup>7</sup> For example, is the relationship between candidate choice and margin of victory strictly linear? Do Democratic party prospects improve as the margin of victory increases? Are primaries decided by 40% one-half as divisive and, therefore, one-half as detrimental to Democratic party success as primaries decided by 20%?

Aside from specific measurement issues, the concept of divisiveness also can be more carefully specified by taking into account the dynamics of nominating campaigns. Undoubtedly, some primaries decided by less than 20% can be less divisive than other primaries decided by more than 20%. Contextual factors, including the size of the field of candidates running in a state and the stage of the campaign at which a primary takes place, can influence levels of divisiveness in a state.

While our study answers conclusively one important question using aggregate-level data, it also raises many other related ones at the individual level. Obviously, our findings suggest that political loyalties, attitudes, and perceptions of voters in nominating campaigns are influenced enormously by the structure and intensity of the competition fostered by nominating mechanisms. The voters' psychological and political reaction to bitterly fought nominating campaigns does not disappear after the national convention. Instead, it remains with the voters and becomes part of the mind set that influences their behavior in general elections. Issues concerning the relationship of divisive primaries to the development of voters' short- and long-term attitudes toward candidates, political parties, and the political process, their willingness to work for the presidential nominee, and their propensity to turn out in the general election need to be explored. Only when such studies have been conducted can we hope to understand more fully the divisive primary phenomenon.

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