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The Representatives of the Direct Primary: A Further Test of V.O. Key's Thesis

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The authors question the general rule argued by V. O. Key that the primary participants differ significantly from the general election participants. Testing this principle, they interviewed samples of voters in Amsterdam, New York primary and general elections in 1970, and found the two samples surprisingly alike. Are their findings valid? If so, what accounts for the ordinariness of the primary participants? And how generally are primary participants essentially like general election participants?

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MOST OF WHAT WE KNOW about voters in primary elections, we owe to V. O. Key.¹ Valuable as his work is, however, it is based totally on aggregate analysis and, thus, does not benefit from the most important research tool developed by political science in recent years—the sample survey. As usual, Key was well aware of the limitations of his technique and pointed out that his generalizations based on aggregate data analysis may keep important variations hidden.²

Key's major thesis evolved around the inherent potential of direct primaries to misrepresent party opinion. Thus he argues, that, with the possible exception of one-party states, where there is "a modicum of inter-party competition, primary participants are often by no means representative of the party,"³ and thus, "the effective primary constituency may often be a caricature of the entire party following."⁴

In light of the development of the sample survey technique and the insatiable desire of political scientists to empirically test standard and accepted hypotheses, it is surprising that Key's thesis has remained relatively untested.

We are aware of only two published works which used the sample survey technique to test the representativeness of the primary turnout. Both of these studies, conducted under the direction of Austin Ranney and Leon D. Epstein, seriously question, at least in Wisconsin, the validity of Key's main hypothesis that the primary voters are unrepresentative of the party following. Their findings conclude that although there are some differences between the primary voters and their nonvoting fellow partisans on the level of involvement, these differences become minimal on policy preferences. Their conclusion, therefore, is that the differences between the two electorates are not as great as Key suggested.⁵

The conclusions of Epstein and Ranney are criticized on the grounds that "the demonstration of issue similarity between voters and nonvoters was either very indirect or in a primary lacking a strong issue stimulus."⁶

Consequently, in the best tradition of the discipline, both Ranney and Epstein and their critics call for further testing of Key's hypothesis.

¹ V. O. Key, Jr., *American State Politics: An Introduction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), pp. 85–168.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 151–52.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

⁵ Austin Ranney and Leon D. Epstein, "The Two Electorates: Voters and Nonvoters in a Wisconsin Primary," *Journal of Politics* (August, 1966), pp. 598–616; and Austin Ranney, "The Representativeness of Primary Electorates," *Midwest Journal of Political Science* (May, 1968), pp. 224–238.

⁶ Judson L. James, *American Political Parties: Potential and Performance* (New York: Pegasus, 1969), p. 187 n.

In an effort to do so, this paper reports on the findings of a survey study of the Democratic gubernatorial, senatorial, and congressional primary and general elections held in New York State in June and November of 1970. It was our intention to study the primaries of both parties, but the fact that the entire statewide Republican slate was unopposed obviously prevented us from doing so.

The survey was conducted in the City of Amsterdam, which is in the same Congressional District as Albany and Schenectady. Its population of 36,000 represents a mixture of urbanity and ruralism. The city is relatively well industrialized and it has its own pockets of poverty. Many of its inhabitants work in Albany and Schenectady and all are exposed to the mass media of New York State's Capital District. Its surrounding area is rural and a substantial part of its inhabitants show typically rural attitudes. Though we do not claim that the findings in Amsterdam were necessarily applicable to the entire state in this election or apply in all elections, we do feel that some important conclusions can be drawn from them.

To avoid the ever present methodological problem of survey analysis of a voter's recollecting the "hows" and "whys" of his decision,⁷ the questionnaires were administered on the election days to those who had voted.

But before we present our findings, we should describe the setting.

I. The Setting

In New York State there are three basic ways that a candidate can appear on the primary ballot: 1) nomination by the party's state committee; 2) the petition route, or 3) receiving at least 25 percent of the votes cast at the nominating convention of the state committee.

The 1970 New York State Democratic primary was a lively affair. There were two candidates seeking the nomination for the governorship: Howard Samuels, an upstate millionaire-industrialist with a liberal background, and Arthur Goldberg, former Secretary of Labor, Supreme Court Justice, and Ambassador to the United Nations. Both had outlasted several other contenders. Goldberg was the official candidate of the party; Samuels had the endorsement of the liberal faction of the Democratic party, the New Democratic Coalition (NDC), and had gained the right to appear on the ballot by virtue of a petition drive.

There were four contenders for the nomination for United States

⁷ For a discussion of this problem see, James A. Reidel and James R. Dunne, "When the Voter Decides," *Public Opinion Quarterly* (Winter, 1969-70), pp. 619-21.

senator: Theodore Sorensen, a former Kennedy aide who was the official candidate of the Democratic party; Paul O'Dwyer who had the endorsement of the NDC and was on the ballot by virtue of the percentage of votes he received at the nominating convention of the party's state committee; Richard McCarthy, a liberal congressman from Buffalo; and Richard Ottinger, a wealthy and liberal congressman from Westchester County. The last two had utilized the petition route. There was relatively little difference among these candidates regarding policy issues.

Unlike the gubernatorial and senatorial races, the House race in the area under study provided the voters with two candidates with sharply different views on foreign policy and military spending. Edward Fox, a professor at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, the candidate of the NDC, was strongly opposed to the American involvement in Indochina. Samuel Stratton, the "semi-incumbent,"⁸ was generally identified as "hawkish" on VietNam and military spending. Congressman Stratton's home was in Amsterdam and he was (and continues to be) an extremely popular political figure in the area. But, in spite of Stratton's popularity, the issues of VietNam, and military spending were hotly debated through the mass media and personal appearances.

In the general election, Arthur Goldberg was pitted against Republican Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller, who was seeking his fourth term of office; Democrat Richard Ottinger ran against incumbent Republican Charles Goodell and Conservative James Buckley; and, Samuel Stratton faced incumbent Republican Daniel Button.

In the City of Amsterdam the primary election attracted 27 percent of the eligible Democratic voters; while the general election saw 85 percent of the voters come to the polls. This percentage of voter turnout in Amsterdam was very similar to the turnout for the entire state.

Using a clustered area probability sample survey, approximately 190 and 205⁹ voters who had cast their ballots and identified themselves as Democrats were interviewed on the days of the primary and general elections respectively.

In order to determine the overall representativeness of the primary turnout *vis-à-vis* the general election, we will divide our results into four general sets of categories: 1) socioeconomic characteristics; 2) party loyalty and activism; 3) political attitudes; and 4) political knowledge.

⁸ Samuel Stratton was actually an incumbent congressman. However, in 1970, as he had been before, he was the victim of a reappointment plan designed by a Republican legislature. The plan was designed in such a way that Congressman Stratton, at election time, was an incumbent without his own district.

⁹ There was a 10 percent attrition of these interviews in terms of final tabulation due to mechanical error and interview error. The figure used in final tabulation was 167 and 185 respectively.

II. Socioeconomic Characteristics

As Table 1 shows, we found no significant differences in the socioeconomic characteristics between those Democrats who voted in the primary and in the general election. Using a *t* Score comparison of means (95 percent confidence intervals) we found no significant differences between primary voters and general election voters in age, sex, education level, political participation, and occupation.

In both elections we found that the overwhelming majority of voters were between the ages of 31 and 65. The level of education was slightly higher among the voters in the general election, but in both elections the great majority had received either a grade school or a high school education. When we looked at occupation we found that the bulk of both sets of voters were either wage earners or housewives. In short, we found that those who voted in the primary possessed the same general characteristics as those who voted in the general election.

TABLE 1

Socioeconomic Characteristics of the Voters in the Primary and the General Election

	PRIMARY	GENERAL ELECTION	T SCORE
Sex			
Male	54%	51%	
Female	46	49	1.70
	<hr/> 100%	<hr/> 100%	
Age			
21-25	5%	4%	
26-30	6	6	
31-40	18	15	.009
41-65	49	57	
66 & over	22	17	
	<hr/> 100%	<hr/> 100%	
Education			
Grade School	35%	25%	
High School	44	49	
Some College	13	11	
College Degree	2	9	1.72
Graduate Work	4	3	
No Answer	2	3	
	<hr/> 100%	<hr/> 100%	

TABLE I (*continued*)

Occupation			
Self-employed	10%	5%	
Professional	10	10	
Salaried	12	17	
Wage Earner	29	26	1.038
Housewife	24	18	
Unemployed	10	16	
No Answer	5	8	
	<hr/> 100%	<hr/> 100%	
Race			
White	100%	99%	
Black	0	.05	
Other	0	.05	
	<hr/> 100%	<hr/> 100%	

III. Party Loyalty and Activism

In this particular segment of the study we were seeking to test the hypothesis that "The voters most apt to vote [in the primaries] are those most loyal to the party and its choices,"¹⁰ and its corollary that "persons who strongly identify with or intensely prefer a given party are more likely to participate actively in the political process."¹¹ Therefore, we were expecting to find a significant difference in the political behavior and party loyalty between the two electorates. But our data did not confirm our expectations.

As Tables II and III indicate, we found almost no difference at all between the two sets of voters as far as party identification and loyalty are concerned. Exactly the same percentage of voters identified themselves as strong Democrats (48%) and independent Democrats (48%) in both elections. And, when we asked the voters how they had voted in pre-

¹⁰ Frank J. Sorauf, *Political Parties in the American System* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1966), p. 102.

¹¹ Lester W. Milbrath, *Political Participation* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1965), p. 52.

vious elections (Table III), once again, the responses were strikingly similar.

To test party activism we asked what have now become the generally accepted questions for this purpose.¹² Our findings show the same kind of low participation generally expected from the American voter. However, as Table IV indicates, our expectation that the primary voters would be more politically active than the voters in the general election, was statistically not confirmed. Our sample indicates a slightly higher level of political activity on the part of those who voted in June than those who voted in November. However, the differences are statistically insignificant.

TABLE II

*Party Identification and Participation in the Primary
and General Elections*

PARTY IDENTITY	PARTICIPATION IN	
	PRIMARY	GENERAL ELECTION
Strong Democrat	48%	48%
Weak Democrat	4	9
Independent Democrat	42	42
No Answer	6	1
	<hr/> 100%	<hr/> 100%

TABLE III

*Party Loyalty and Participation in the Primary
and General Elections*

PARTY LOYALTY	PARTICIPATION IN	
	PRIMARY	GENERAL ELECTION
Always voted for the same party	33%	35%
Voted for different parties	65	62
No answer	2	3
	<hr/> 100%	<hr/> 100%

¹² The ones developed by the Survey Research Center of the University of Michigan.

TABLE IV

*Differences in Political Participation of the Voters
in the Primary and General Elections*

POLITICAL BEHAVIOR	PRIMARY	GENERAL ELECTION	T SCORE
Belong to political club or organization			
Yes	14%	12%	.481
No	86	88	
	<hr/> 100%	<hr/> 100%	
Give money to buy tickets to help the campaign			
Yes	28%	26%	.759
No	72	74	
	<hr/> 100%	<hr/> 100%	
Go to political meetings, rallies, dinners, etc.			
Yes	20%	21%	0
No	80	79	
	<hr/> 100%	<hr/> 100%	
Do any other campaign work			
Yes	20%	17%	1.073
No	80	83	
	<hr/> 100%	<hr/> 100%	
	N = 167	N = 185	

IV. Political Attitudes

Although the factors tested above are important variables of political behavior, of greater concern for democratic theory is whether that relatively small number who vote in the primary reflect the political attitudes of those who vote in the general election. In terms of statistically measurable characteristics we conclude that there were no differences between the primary voter and the general election voter. However, to better determine the representativeness of the primary turnout, we asked our respondents to state their opinions on what we considered to have been two

of the most salient issues of both campaigns: American involvement in Indochina and student unrest on the campuses.

As Table v shows, the responses on the student unrest issue were, once again, strikingly similar among the two electorates. The bulk of both sets of respondents would allow peaceful protest but dismiss radicals. The majority of the remainder would favor "tougher" policies with regard to student unrest.

TABLE V

*Differences on Policy Preferences Between the Voters
in the Primary and General Elections**

ON STUDENT UNREST		
<i>Preference</i>	<i>Primary</i>	<i>General Election</i>
Government and police should get tougher with them	28%	30%
Dismiss radicals, but allow peaceful protest	49	42
Student protestors are sincere in their concern for the country	16	22
Other	7	6
	<hr/> 100%	<hr/> 100%
ON VIETNAM		
<i>Preference</i>	<i>Primary</i>	<i>General Election</i>
Total Support of President Nixon's policies	34%	45%
Generally skeptical about President Nixon's policies	29	21
Pull all troops out, now	31	29
Other	6	5
	<hr/> 100%	<hr/> 100%

* No statistical comparison of these responses would be useful, for significant changes in the stimulus environment would be more plausible explanations of change than differing groups.

The question on America's Indochina policy provided us with one of the two most differentiated sets of responses. As Table v shows, the voters in the general election were, on the whole, more supportive of the President's actions than their counterparts in the primary election. We can speculate that the differences in responses were a result of time more than anything else. The first questionnaire was administered less than two months after United States' troops had entered Cambodia; the second, after troops had been withdrawn from that country and President Nixon had continued to withdraw troops from VietNam.

The findings reported in Table vi confirm this speculation.

TABLE VI

Question: Which of the Following Would You Say is the Most Important Issue in this Election?

ISSUE	PRIMARY	GENERAL ELECTION
VietNam	50%	35%
Inflation	10	26
Student Unrest	11	22
Black Situation	3	7
Other	5	2
Don't Know	21	8
	<hr/> 100%	<hr/> 100%

Whereas in June 50 percent of the respondents identified VietNam as the most important issue of the day, in November, this percentage dropped to 35. The inflation, which had ranked third in June, in November moved up to second. Considering the other data presented in this study, we feel that this difference is primarily a function of the times at which the two elections were held.

V. Political Knowledge

At the conclusion of his study, Austin Ranney presented a list of unanswered questions concerning the primary voters. At this time, our purpose is a limited one and, thus, we will only be dealing with some of his questions: How much do primary voters know about the candidates and issues? How do they get their knowledge? How, in the absence of the

cue-giving services of party labels do they make up their minds whether and for whom to vote?¹³

The following findings will attempt to make a modest beginning in answering these questions. Moreover, these findings will be compared with those in the general election.

In an attempt to determine the political knowledge of the voters, we first asked them to name for us the candidates who were running for the nomination for the United States Senate. (We chose the Senate race because it was the only race with multiple [4] candidates and because we thought this would be more indicative of political awareness than the two-man races. As Table VII shows, only 23 percent of the respondents of the primary voters could correctly identify all four, and 37 percent could not identify any of the candidates. This was especially surprising because the questions were asked immediately after the voters had voted. In the general election the respondents fared somewhat better. Forty-eight percent could name all three candidates (for the Senate, while "only" 22 percent could name none. But despite the lack of even this kind of minimal information, 75 percent in the primary and 85 percent in the general election stated that they actually knew for whom they were going to vote before they entered the election booth.¹⁴

When we asked both sets of voters to identify "any" issue in the three races under study, the results showed the following pattern: Low levels of knowledge for both electorates but with the voters in the general election somewhat better informed. (Table VII).

¹³ Ranney, "The Representativeness of Primary Electorates," p. 235.

¹⁴ The high percentage of voters who reported having made up their minds before they voted confirms other findings and hypotheses in this area; see for example, Riedel and Dunn, op. cit.; Paul F. Lazarsfeld et al., *The People's Choice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), p. 53; Angus Campbell et al., *The Voter Decides* (Evanston: Row, Peterson & Co., 1956), p. 18; Peter H. Rossi, "Four Landmarks in Voting Research," in Eugene Burdick and Arthur J. Brodbeck, eds., *American Voting Behavior* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1959), pp. 5-54. Nevertheless, we are left with the interesting phenomenon of accounting for 12 percent and 8 percent of the primary and general election voters respectively who, though they said that they had made up their minds, minutes after they voted could not name the candidates for whom they had voted.

There are at least three possible and not mutually exclusive answers to this problem. First, some voters may have wished to convey to the interviewers the impression of being citizens who had given their decisions some serious thoughts. (This question was asked before they were asked to name the candidates.) Second, in the primary, some of these voters may have simply pulled the first lever, and in the general election, they may have voted a straight party line.

A third possible explanation of this phenomenon is linguistic in nature. "Know who you were going to vote for" may have been interpreted to mean "Know some of

TABLE VII

*Differences in Political Information Between the Voters
in the Primary and the General Election**

IDENTIFICATION OF CANDIDATES		
<i>Number of Candidates Able to Identify</i>	<i>Primary</i>	<i>General Election</i>
All	23%	—
Three (All)**	12	48%
Two	10	13
One	16	8
None	37	22
Refused to answer	2	9
	<hr/> 100%	<hr/> 100%
IDENTIFICATION OF ISSUES		
<i>Ability to Identify An Issue</i>	<i>Primary</i>	<i>General Election</i>
Gubernatorial race		
Yes	45%	47%
No	55	53
	<hr/> 100%	<hr/> 100%
Senatorial race		
Yes	26%	33%
No	74	67
	<hr/> 100%	<hr/> 100%
Congressional race		
Yes	31%	43%
No	69	57
	<hr/> 100%	<hr/> 100%

* The question was: "Can you name the senatorial candidates?"

** In the Primary there were four candidates: In the General election there were three.

whom you were going to vote for" or "One whom you are going to vote for." Developing this thought the voter could have known one or more candidate(s) which would have justified his statement that he knew whom he was going to vote for before he entered the voting booth. This could have referred to candidates other than senatorial. One possible evidence of this would be the frequency of the name Sam Stratton mentioned for offices other than the one he was seeking.

Because of the clearness of the issues (at least as we perceived them) we were particularly interested in the congressional primary and general election. As mentioned above, the primary was a clear contest between a "dove" (Fox) and a "hawk" (Stratton). Indeed, Edward Fox often stated that this was a one-issue campaign. Both candidates appeared, alone and together, on several television news programs and did some personal campaigning in Amsterdam. But despite the clearness of the issue between Mr. Fox and Congressman Samuel Stratton, when the primary voters were asked to identify what the most important issue was between them, only 31 percent could do so correctly.¹⁵

In the November election, though VietNam was still a prominent issue between Republican Button and Democrat Stratton, there were other issues which were discussed during the campaign. Nevertheless, 57 percent of our respondents could not identify "any issue" between the two candidates. But despite this low level of issue familiarity¹⁶ the findings reported on Table VII provided us with the most meaningful differentiation between the two sets of voters. We found that the Democratic voters in the general election were consistently better informed about the issues and the candidates.

Although this discrepancy at first may seem puzzling in that both electorates appear to have been from the same population in both elections, in fact these findings are consistent with theories of political participation. As has been pointed out many times, the amount of political awareness is directly correlated with the amount of political stimuli in the environment.¹⁷ Thus, the fact that the Republican party had no primary would almost double the amount of political stimuli in the environment in November for the entire electorate.

VI. Sources of Information

Finally we were interested to know what were the sources of information for the two electorates. The findings left us a bit puzzled. For both elec-

¹⁵ Although this was an open-ended question, we decided on the basis of the candidates' statements to accept "The VietNam issue" as the correct answer.

¹⁶ Again, although it is not our major purpose to explain the issue familiarity of the two electorates, we feel compelled to point out that the "issues" we consider important may have been arbitrarily decided. This is not different from the practices of other academicians and pollsters. However, there is a growing awareness among social scientists that this arbitrary limitation on "correct issues" and similar practice, may be misleading in the final analysis of the mind of the voter citizen. See, for example, David E. Re Pass, "Issue Salience and Party Choice," *The American Political Science Review* (June, 1971), pp. 389-400.

¹⁷ For a discussion of this see Milbrath, op. cit., pp. 39-47.

tions the respondents claimed that television and newspapers were their greatest source of information. Television was the first pick of 50 percent of those Democrats who voted in the primary, but only 35 percent in the general election. For newspapers, the opposite was true: more people picked it as their chief source of information for the general election than any other medium. (Table VIII) The reason for this switch of information sources may lie in the fact that there may have been less interest in

TABLE VIII

Differences in the Sources of Information Between the Voters in the Primary and the General Election

PRIMARY SOURCES OF INFORMATION	PRIMARY	GENERAL ELECTION	T SCORE
Television	50%	35%	8.073
Radio	6	16	
Newspapers	36	41	
Friends or acquaintances	6	2	
Had no information	2	6	
	<hr/> 100%	<hr/> 100%	

the primary. This may have induced fewer people to follow the various campaigns in the press, leaving the majority satisfied with whatever information was provided by television. Another possibility is that newspapers may not have given as much "news" space to the primary as the general election. This is especially true in an area where newspapers are Republican controlled and the Republicans had little or no interest in the primary.

VII. Conclusions

Although our findings have shed some light on a small part of the voting population only, they seem to support the increasing skepticism about the universality of Key's thesis. We have found that despite the great variation in voting turnout between the two elections, the two electorates did not differ greatly on any of the tested variables. The only significant differences between the two sets of voters appears to have been the generally higher level of information of those who voted in the general election.

The argument can be made that in the Wisconsin of Ranney and Epstein and in the Amsterdam of this study, there were some special

forces at work which were not part of the conditions upon which Key had based his theories. We may speculate on some of these special forces. In view of the fact that our findings are not what we would have anticipated in view of Key's hypothesis (or what common sense would tell us), we should look at alternative explanations. The first alternative explanation is that the questions asked led to a spurious uniformity of responses. In view of the fact, however, that most of the information was either factual, that is, "did you contribute money . . . ," "did you campaign . . . ," or a standard demographic question (as opposed to attitudinal questions) we reject this alternative. A second alternative explanation is chance, that is, that the one in a million occurred and by accident a 27 percent nonrandom population just happened to represent the total universe. This is always a possibility, and can only be determined by further research, but we would have to discount the probability of this occurring. The third alternative, however, is much more persuasive. Amsterdam Democrats may be a much more homogeneous population than we presumed. If this were the case we would simply be proving that one homogenous unit is like all homogenous units. Again, this alternative can only be accepted or rejected on the basis of further research. A fourth alternative explanation must be considered and that is that in Amsterdam, due to multiple factors (issues, personalities, events, etc.) in this election the primary served the democratic function it was designed to serve, to allow the popular will to determine the November slate of candidates.

Regardless of the above speculations we must conclude that some doubt be cast on the tendency to treat Key's thesis as being applicable in all cases.¹⁸

Both the Ranney and Epstein and, in a limited and modest way, our findings challenge Key's conclusions. We simply did not find those Democrats who voted in the primary were a "caricature" of those who voted in the general election. Though we note that in the original statement Key softened his hypothesis with the word "often"; what is relevant is that his hypothesis tends to take on the quality of a universal explanation.

¹⁸ For example, the authors of a leading textbook on American politics make the definitive statement that "the small number who do vote in primaries do not accurately represent the entire party following." Marian D. Irish and James W. Prothro, *The Politics of American Democracy* (Englewood Cliff: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 311; see also Judson L. James, *op. cit.*; James argues, for example, that, "The turnout at a primary does not represent a cross section of party support; those voters who are less partisan are less likely to vote in the primary than the deeply committed. This means that the groups whose support is least certain and most necessary in the general election are almost unrepresented in the primary electorate," p. 69.

Certainly we are the first to admit that our study does not provide enough evidence to refute Key's thesis. However, our findings, along with those of Ranney and Epstein, do support caution in using his general rule about primary and general election participants as if it were applicable in all cases and at all times. In the best tradition of the discipline, we feel compelled, therefore, to call for further research on this question.