

The Effects of Fear and Unity Messages on Republican Preferences for Closed Primaries in Tennessee

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Abstract:

Currently Tennessee holds open primary elections whereby voters of any affiliation may vote for the slate of any party. This paper investigates Tennessee Republicans' willingness to move to a closed primary from the open primary they currently hold. The research employs a survey experiment to test if fear and/or solidarity cues increase support for closed primaries. All participants read a brief explanation of the difference between open and closed primaries. Those participants receiving the fear treatment then read about how open primaries can damage the Republican Party because the Democrats who opt into the Republican primary may vote for an unpopular and unqualified choice for President. Those receiving the solidarity treatment read about how closed primaries foster unity among Republicans and increase the party's base of support. The results of the experiment showed that those given the fear treatment favor closed primaries significantly more than those given the solidarity treatment, although overall support for closed primaries was modest.

Keywords: framing, primary election, fear, open primary, closed primary, partisanship

1. Introduction

Open primaries- those in which voters can vote for a candidate of either party- have become the subject of much debate in recent years. Almost half (22) of the fifty states have open or semi-open primaries, and yet party leaders in some of those states are actively championing a change to closed primaries. By virtue of their requirement that allows only registered partisans to vote in party primaries, closed primaries give parties greater control of election outcomes. At the state level, political parties on both the Republican and Democrat side have expressed a desire to change from open to closed primaries.

In 2013, the Democratic Party of Hawaii attempted to alter Hawaii's open primary system to make it closed to only registered Democrats. After failing to convince Hawaii's election commissioner to allow a change to closed primaries, the DPH resorted to filing a claim in federal district court that the open primary system violated the First Amendment.

Previous court cases regarding the First Amendment right of association concluded that an association has the ability to “limit its association to people who share its views.” By allowing Republicans to vote in open primaries, the DPH argued its rights were violated.

However, in November 2013, Judge Michael Seabright deemed otherwise, ruling that “the DPH would likely not be ‘severely’ burdened by not being able to reject persons who fully embrace its values. The possibility of crossover voters might make no difference (DPH v. Nago 2013).” With no legal ground to stand on to force states to embrace closed primaries, political parties must instead find other ways to move to closed primary systems if they wish to maintain control. An alternative method of moving to closed primaries is to increase popular support for primary election system change among voting members of the party.

Can political parties influence their members to prefer closed primaries over existing open primaries? This paper is a preliminary step to examining the feasibility of the party’s ability to convince its membership of the merits of closed primaries. The research study was conducted in consultation with the Republican Party of Putnam County, Tennessee, to investigate their membership’s willingness to consider a change in primary election laws. Tennessee currently has an open primary system, but leadership within the Republican Party is eager to change the system to allow only closed primaries. However, they seek to do so if and only if a shift to closed primaries will not anger the Republican base. In this paper, we seek to answer two practical questions that pertain to this issue. First, do Tennessee Republicans prefer open or closed primaries? Second, can framing the issue with either fear cues or solidarity cues bolster existing support for closed primaries? While we find lackluster support for a change to closed primaries, there is evidence that fear-based framing of the issue significantly increases Republican support compared to framing with an emphasis on Republican solidarity.

The paper proceeds as follows. We begin with an examination of the importance of primary election systems, including how open and closed primaries produce different political outcomes. We then draw from literature in political psychology and communication to ground a discussion of how individuals may express different opinions on preference for primary election system depending on how the issue is framed. We hypothesize that fear will motivate individuals to shift their preference toward closed primaries more than solidarity. Finally, we test our hypothesis through a survey experiment and present the results.

2. The Impact of Primary Election Systems

From the Tennessee Republican Party’s prospective, a move to closed primaries is desirable for two reasons. First, closed primaries provide an incentive for people to register with the party. If party registration is a requirement for voting in a primary election, more individuals are likely to register than if the requirement does not exist. Once individuals are registered party members, the party may leverage the resources of the members to increase a number of goals, from electoral turnout to heightened fundraising to grassroots campaigning. Second, closed primaries eliminate the possibility of crossover voting, whereby members of the other party may cast a disingenuous vote for a candidate they feel is less likely to win in the general election. Thus, the Republican Party retains control over the selection of its candidates.

The 2012 Republican primary process is a useful example of the controversy that often surrounds primary elections. A handful of Republican hopefuls sought after the party’s nomination for President. After candidates participated in heated debates and toured different states to explain their platforms, citizens voted in state primaries. Mitt Romney ultimately won the nomination, but his victory sparked some debate. Was he conservative enough? Did he have the requisite charisma to face off with incumbent Barak Obama and prevail in his quest to win the hearts and minds of the American people? While political pundits argued over whether he was the best fit for the Republican Party to win the general election, another discussion’s popularity grew as well: the effectiveness of the primaries. Given that states have different primary systems for nominating candidates, is it possible that the system itself influences which candidate is nominated? If so, what role do primary systems play exactly? Are they harmful or helpful? To whom? A closer look into the primary system reveals some flaws and benefits, as well as highlighting some possible reasons for changing the system.

3. Review of Relevant Literature

The open primary system is a popular choice for many states, but it comes with potential disadvantages. Some believe that the open primary system allows for moderate candidates to be chosen; this was arguably the case for Mitt Romney. Open primaries allow for crossover voting, meaning, for example, the Democrats can vote in the Republican primary with the intent of choosing the most moderate of the candidates.

Crossover voting is most common in early primaries and more often happens with Democrats voting in Republican primaries rather than the other way around (Kaufmann et al 2003). However, research suggests that crossover voting rarely affects who wins the election because most voters still vote for their most preferred candidate, not out of strategy (McGee 2010).

Even if crossover voting in an open primary system is limited, independents- who are not true crossover voters- often prefer more moderate candidates than party members. Further research shows that open primaries have a damaging effect on the Republican Party in particular. A 2003 study demonstrated that voters in Republican primaries had a 10.4% increase in liberalism in states with open primaries compared to states with closed primaries (Kaufmann et al 2003).

Additional evidence also supports the idea that certain types of primaries may benefit a particular political party. In a study conducted by Kristin Kanthak and Rebecca Morton (2003), Republicans benefitted more from strictly open primaries if they could capture independent votes, and the Democrat party benefits more from semi open primaries (Kanthak and Morton 2003). This research grounds the idea that certain political parties in a state might want to switch their primary system in order to benefit them. In addition, the research suggests a type of coattail effect. Voters who participate in a party's primary election are more likely to participate in general elections and support the party of the primary vote (Kanthak and Morton 2003, 21).

No matter what primary system is in place, independents are still sought and needed to win the overall election. Therefore, involving independents in the primary election could be considered necessary for the political parties; however, the number of independents participating could be limited depending on the primary type. A study shows that the states with the most registered independents tend to use a semi-closed primary system, meaning party affiliates are only allowed to vote once in their own party's primary and independents can choose either party's primary (Norrande 1989). Additionally, the states with the fewest number of independents have closed primaries that require a declaration of party preference prior to the primary election (Norrande 1989). While closed primaries are bad news for independents in those states given that they exclude independents in primary voting, this research shows states with high concentrations of independents tend to choose more inclusive options. Independent turn out in the primary election is important in the early stages of a national election, and as demonstrated, the primary system helps define whether they feel inclined to participate in subsequent general elections.

An added component of primary elections is they not only allow the voters to see the ideological stances of the candidates, but their personalities as well. With this in mind, a study conducted by James Snyder and Michael Ting shows that open primaries do not always help the political parties. Instead, sometimes the undecided voter chooses personality over ideology, whereas a voter affiliated with a particular party tends to choose ideology over personal characteristics (Snyder and Ting 2011). This research suggests that while it is beneficial to the voter it is not always beneficial to the political party when using the primary system. Nevertheless, the primary system is still beneficial to the voter in identifying the candidate they prefer the most in terms of the candidates ideological stances and their own personality attributes.

In sum, the consequences of primary election laws are meaningful. Research shows that states holding open primaries have fundamentally different political outcomes than states holding closed primaries. Open primaries facilitate the selection of more moderate political candidates, while candidates chosen from closed primaries tend to reflect the ideological extremity of partisan primary voters (Kaufmann et al 2003; Brady et al 2007).

The primary system has its flaws and strong points, and because of this, political parties like to try and use them to their advantage. The parties themselves are always looking for a way to win elections, and the primaries are the first step to victory. With research models being created and tested, evidence can sway the parties to choose which primary system they believe will work in their state. Of course, a process must be followed in order to change it, and the state's citizens must be persuaded that the switch is necessary. This leaves the door open for some states in the future to possibly change their primary system.

4. Framing the choice: Accepting closed primaries out of a desire for increased solidarity, or out of fear?

The Tennessee Republican Party reasonably could use two different framing strategies in their attempts to convince their members to prefer closed primaries over open primaries. Framing is a technique used to persuade voters whereby people's decisions are influenced by the way information is presented. Entman's classic definition of framing states that "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation (1993: 52)." Both strategies contain aspects of the truth regarding the primary election system, but they emphasize markedly different rationales for the change. Manipulation in the media occurs daily. The broadcasted information to which we are exposed is a by-product of the journalist's point of view and the producer's opinion. The art of manipulation in politics is well practiced, especially during an election year. Republican Party leaders must manipulate and frame their call for a closed election system if it is to be successful.

4.1 Solidarity

The first strategic framing option revolves around the promotion of increased solidarity for the Party. Here, the Republican Party would tell Party members that closed primaries are good for Tennessee Republicans. They would tell them that closed primaries will increase the number of registered Republicans, and that in turn those members will make the party stronger through increased contributions of money, time and participation. Overall, closed primaries would give the Republican Party a broader base of support throughout the state of Tennessee. Democrats need not be mentioned at all in this appeal. The tone of the appeal is strictly positive, showing closed primaries as a potential boon for Republicans.

This positive approach is likely to increase enthusiasm among the Republican base (Brader 2005). However, according to prospect theory, when problems involving risky choices are presented in terms of gains, individuals tend to act risk-averse (Druckman, McDermott 2008). If Republicans view the change of primary system as a risk, a positive approach may not be the best means of evoking the desire to switch.

4.2 Fear

The second choice of frame involves the heightening of Republican fear of Democrat control. In this strategy, the appeal would reiterate that Democrats are allowed to vote in Republican primaries and indeed do so. The Party would tell members that Democrats prefer to vote for, at best, more moderate candidates than Party members would prefer. At worst, Democrats infiltrate Republican primaries to vote for the most unqualified or unpopular candidates in the hope that they will be easily defeated in the general election. The resulting fear in Party members would involve a range of concerns including viability of chosen candidates, Party reputation and even the Party's survival.

The negativity of the fear-based strategy is not without controversy, as studies of the effects of negativity are widely published throughout psychology, communication and political science. Negative advertising in campaign ads have inspired much debate in the political world. "Proponents of the demobilization hypothesis claim that negative ads undermine political efficacy and depress voter turnout. Others have suggested a stimulation hypothesis, arguing that such advertising may have an invigorating effect on the electorate (Freedman, Goldstein, 1999)." Supporters of the stimulation hypothesis state that negative exposure provides a significant amount of information, the information may be valued more than positive information, and negative commercials may produce a heightened enthusiasm for candidates and increased motivation to learn more about the candidates. In the same way, negative information about the open primary system may give Republicans more motivation to learn about and/or incite change.

In regard to prospect theory, if a problem is presented in terms of losses, individuals show risk-seeking behavior and decisions (Druckman, McDermott, 2008). The negative frame assumes loss. As such, Republicans may be more willing to risk a change to a different type of primary election system.

The use of framing and manipulation of information is very likely to play a part in Tennessee Republicans' decision-making with regard to their support for closed primary elections. Framing is commonly used by the media to change the way the public views a topic. Republican officials must carefully craft how they appeal to the Republican base if they are to change successfully change Tennessee's type of primary system.

How information is presented to the public and how the public perceives that information can mean the difference between successfully changing the primary system or failing to do so.

5. Research Design

5.1 Hypothesis

Hypothesis: A fear-inducing narrative frame is more likely to cause Tennessee Republicans to support a move to closed primaries than a narrative framed by Republican solidarity.

5.2 Methodology

The study was conducted using a survey experiment, conducted in April 2012.

5.3 Participants

Participants were 318 adults from both a mid-sized public university in Tennessee and registered Republicans in Putnam County, Tennessee. In exchange for their participation, participants received either extra course credit or entry to a drawing to win a prize. The university students were recruited from classrooms and public locations throughout the campus. The Putnam County Republican Party provided a list of registered Republicans, and they were emailed the survey link to the online version of the study. The sample was a convenience sample, but participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. Because assignment to condition was random, the effects of the treatments should be reliable.

5.4 Instrumentation

We used two different treatment conditions that contained manipulations presented in a short paragraph before the participant filled out survey questions. The survey questions included a question measuring the dependent variable, support for change to a closed primary system. The two treatment manipulations- fear and solidarity- were the primary independent variables in the study. Both treatments explained the difference between a closed and open primary. In the first condition, participants received a frame of Republican solidarity. The solidarity manipulation's operationalization focused on the solidarity aspect of closed primaries, meaning that consistent candidates that represent the views of the Republican Party would be chosen. Furthermore, the Republican Party would gain a broader base of support throughout the state of Tennessee. The fear manipulation's operationalization consisted of the describing how allowing open primaries can damage the candidate chosen for President because the Democrats who vote are picking the unpopular and unqualified choice. As a result, the Republican candidate would be more likely to lose in the general election.

The text of the treatments is as follows:

Solidarity treatment:

Tennessee's open primary system means individuals do not have to be registered Republicans to vote in the Republican primary. If Tennessee switches to a closed primary system for nominating a President, only Republicans may vote in the Republican primary. This change could serve as an incentive for more individuals to register with the Republican Party. In turn, the Republican Party could have a broader base of support throughout the state of Tennessee.

Fear treatment:

Democrats are allowed to vote in the Republican primary due to Tennessee's open primary system. Democrats may vote in the Republican primary for unqualified or unpopular candidates for President. Strategically, these Democrats hope that a less viable Republican will win the nomination and in turn be less likely to win the general election against a Democrat. If Tennessee switches to a closed primary system, only Republicans may vote in the Republican primary.

5.5 Procedures

The survey experiment was conducted with pen and paper. Participants received the survey experiment and read the treatment paragraph (either solidarity or fear, randomly assigned). After reading, they answered a series of short questions regarding partisanship, age, gender, and lastly which primary they preferred: open or closed. Subjects then read a debriefing statement and were thanked. Since our experiment only focused on those who are Republican or Independents who lean Republican, all of those who reported themselves to be Democrat were not used in the results.

The intention of this study is to compare the effects of solidarity frames and fear frames. Because we anticipated a low number of participants, we did not include a control treatment. As such we are unable to speak to the absolute effects of fear and solidarity in moving opinions from a starting point.

6. Data Analyses and Findings

Data were analyzed through a comparison of means between treatment groups. The initial results of data analysis are presented below in Table 1. Data analysis shows that as a whole, the surveyed group of Tennessee Republicans favor open primaries. Just shy of sixty percent of individuals surveyed reported a preference for open primaries, compared to about forty percent of individuals who preferred closed primaries. However, those who received the fear treatment favored closed primaries significantly more than those given the solidarity treatment. Among those receiving the fear treatment, a majority (50.9%) preferred closed primaries. On the other hand, less than a third (30.2%) of those receiving the solidarity treatment opted for closed primaries. These results are statistically significant at $t < 0.05$, and they are unlikely to have occurred by chance alone. These results are as hypothesized based on previous work on fear being used to sway people in other means such as campaign ads. Fear does seem to be more effective than solidarity at persuading individuals to prefer closed primaries.

Table 1: Tennessee Republicans' Preference for Primary Election System, by Treatment

	Primary Election System Preference		N
	Prefer Open Primary	Prefer Closed Primary	
Solidarity Treatment	111 (69.8%)	48 (30.2%)	159
Fear Treatment	78 (49.1%)	81 (50.9%)	159
Total	189 (59.4%)	129 (40.6%)	318

An interesting and unanticipated result of this study involves the effects of gender on preference for primary election system type. When controlling for gender, we find that men prefer closed primaries more highly than women. These results are presented in Table 2 below. Across treatments, about 47% of men prefer closed primaries, compared to just 34% of women. The difference is most notable within the solidarity treatment, where just 21.2% of women exhibit a preference for closed primaries. In contrast, the percentage of men favoring closed primaries in the solidarity treatment almost doubles the percentage of women, at 40.5%. These results are statistically significant at $t < 0.1$. Because of the small n of this study, results do not meet typically accepted levels of statistical significance. However, if the percentages held with a larger sample size, the difference very well could be significant and noteworthy.

These results warrant further investigation about the role of gender, but one possible explanation is rooted in differences in authoritarianism between men and women. Males are more likely to exhibit authoritarian traits than females (McDermott 2001), and closed primaries, with their more stringent rules, are clearly the more authoritarian option.

Table 2: Effects of Gender on Preference for Primary Election System, by Treatment

Gender of Participant			Survey Type		Total
			Solidarity Tx	Fear Tx	
Female	Prefer Closed Primaries	No	Count 67	39	106
			% within survey 78.8%	51.3%	65.8%
	Yes	Count 18	37	55	
		% within survey 21.2%	48.7%	34.2%	
	Total	Count 85	76	161	
		% within survey 100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
Male	Prefer Closed Primaries	No	Count 44	39	83
			% within survey 59.5%	47.0%	52.9%
	Yes	Count 30	44	74	
		% within survey 40.5%	53.0%	47.1%	
	Total	Count 74	83	157	
		% within survey 100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	
Total	Prefer Closed Primaries	No	Count 111	78	189
			% within survey 69.8%	49.1%	59.4%
	Yes	Count 48	81	129	
		% within survey 30.2%	50.9%	40.6%	
	Total	Count 159	159	318	
		% within survey 100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of this study show that the participating Tennessee Republicans prefer open primaries. Since the sample was not random, we cannot generalize this result to all Tennessee Republicans. However, there was a significant difference in opinion depending on which treatment the participant was given. As the treatment given to each participant was randomized, we can make a claim about the effects of fear and solidarity on choice of open or closed primary. We discovered that the framing of information to participants made an impact on their choice of open or closed primaries. Fear influenced participants to prefer closed primaries significantly more than feelings of solidarity.

While future work with a random sample of Republicans in Tennessee might indicate otherwise, these first results suggest the Republican Party of Tennessee should think twice before moving forward with their plan to make Tennessee a closed primary system at this time. Too many individuals prefer open primaries. First, they should conduct further research in other counties and educate the registered and non-registered Republicans on this matter. If a move to closed primaries is the goal, the Republican Party should use the fear treatment to persuade their members. This study suggests doing so may indeed move individuals' opinions.

Future work on this project will seek funding to expand the number of participants and to achieve a random sample of Tennessee Republicans. After expanding the sample size, we also will be able to add a control group of participants who receive only a basic definition of open and closed primaries, without a frame.

This information will be useful as a reference point in determining how much solidarity and fear treatment move individuals from a known point. We will also include manipulation checks to ensure the treatments work as we suggest. By asking the participants open-ended questions after they met the qualifications and indicate a preference for either open or closed primaries, we will be able to learn the real reasoning behind their choices.

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