On the Representativeness of Primary Electorates*

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Abstract

Primary voters are frequently characterized as an ideologically extreme subset of their party, and thus partially responsible for increasing party polarization in government. We combine administrative records on primary turnout with five recent surveys from 2008-2014. We find that primary voters are similar to rank and file voters in their party in terms of demographic attributes and policy attitudes. These similarities do not vary depending on the openness of the primary. Our results suggest that the composition of primary electorates does not exert a polarizing effect above what might arise from voters in the party as a whole.

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William "Boss" Tweed captured the importance of nominating candidates when he said he did not care who "did the electing" as long as he "got to do the nominating." In contemporary American elections, voters, not party bosses, do the nominating. This raises a host of questions about the virtues and vices of primary elections. Critics of primary elections have long questioned whether primary voters are representative of the broader party (e.g., Key, 1956; Polsby, 1983). Polsby argues that "a lack of demographic representativeness in a primary electorate may produce significantly different results in the types of candidates chosen to lead the party" (160).

Two particular concerns among commentators and some scholars are that primary voters are ideologically extreme, and that their influence in the nominating process produces ideologically extreme candidates and more polarization between the parties in Congress and state legislatures. For this reason, some advocates argue that reducing polarization necessitates reform to the primary process.

In this paper, we examine whether primary voters are an ideologically extreme subset of their party. Drawing on validated turnout data married to five large surveys conducted between 2008 and 2014, we show that primary voters are not demographically distinct or ideologically extreme compared to those who identify with the party or voted for its presidential candidate in the general election, or than those who identify with the party and voted in the general election but not in the primary. The only substantial difference is that primary voters report more interest in politics. These patterns emerge in both presidential and midterm years. These patterns also emerge regardless of whether primaries allow independents and out-partisans to participate.

Of course, our findings cannot speak to the impact of simply having a party nomination process prior to the general election. Nor can we compare primary elections to other types of nomination processes—such as conventions, caucuses, or smoke-filled backrooms. Nonetheless, we provide considerable evidence that primary electorates are not ideologically unrepresentative of the broader party.

The Characteristics of Primary Voters

Despite consistent skepticism about the representativeness of primary electorates, early research challenged this view. Drawing on data from 1976 and 1980 elections, Geer (1988) and Norrander (1989) found that a party's primary voters were not more ideological or partisan than general election voters who identified with that party or voted for its presidential candidate—what Geer called the "party following"—or than general election voters in the party who did not vote in the primary. Norrander concludes: "Fears about extremist primary voters selecting extremist candidates unpalatable to the more moderate general election voters are unsupported. Primary voters just are not more ideologically extreme" (584).

Since this research was conducted, however, primary turnout has declined (Hirano et al., 2010) and the parties have become better ideologically sorted (Fiorina and Levendusky, 2006). These changes in the composition of the parties raise the possibility that the primary electorate is no longer representative of rank and file partisans. Two recent studies suggests this could be true. Drawing on the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), Jacobson (2012) finds that self-reported Republican primary voters in that election year were more ideologically extreme than self-reported general election voters who say they did not vote in those primaries. Hill (2015) draws on the 2010 and 2012 CCES, but uses validated rather than self-reported turnout data. His findings are mixed: raw estimates show little difference between primary voters and the broader party, but estimates from a hierarchical model of policy attitudes reveal larger differences. He argues "primary voters and primary electorates are less centrist...than party voters in the general electorate" (482).

Data

We use data from five large surveys of the American public: the 2008 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP) (Jackman and Vavreck, 2009) and the 2008-2014 CCES. After weighting, CCAP respondents are representative of registered voters and CCES respondents

are representative of the American public. For each dataset, the survey provider matched respondents to voter file data that contain validated primary and general election turnout.[1]

These data offer several advantages. First, they encompass two presidential and two midterm elections and also allow us to separate presidential and congressional primary voters in states that hold presidential and congressional primaries on different dates in presidential election years. Second, they contain large enough samples to generate state-level estimates of the composition of primary electorates, which illuminate any effect of primary rules. Third, they feature many measures of political attitudes. Finally, these data allow us to rely on validated turnout rather than potentially biased self-reports. The validated turnout data reveal substantial overlap in the primary and general electorates. In the 2008 CCAP, 68% of validated general election voters also voted in their state's primary.[2] The overlap between the two electorates means that roughly a third of 2008 general election voters voted "only" in the general election and not in the primary. Any differences between the primary and general electorates must therefore manifest themselves in this relatively small group of voters.

Comparing Primary and General Election Voters

We compare primary voters to two definitions of "the party" found in previous literature: (1) general election voters who self-identify with a party or voted for that party's candidate in the general election; and (2) a smaller subset of those voters who only voted in the general election but not in the primary. Following Geer (1988) we call the former the "party following."[3] The latter group we call "general only voters."

Tables 1 and 2 describe these three groups of voters in presidential and congressional elections, respectively. Because primary voters are frequently characterized as political ac-

[1] For details, see the online appendix.

[2] This rate of overlap is not unusual. A random sample of 1,600 cases from the nationwide voter file as of March 2013 (and not attached to any survey data) shows that 56% of general election voters also voted in the primary in 2008. We thank Eitan Hersh for this calculation.

[3] Voters could be counted in both parties' followings, if they identified with one party but voted for another. Geer (1988, 933) notes that this is intentional, since these are voters potentially coveted by both parties.

	Democratic Voters			Republican Voters		
2008 (CCAP)	Voted in primary	Voted only in general	Party following	Voted in primary	Voted only in general	Party following
Median age	50	43	48	51	48	51
College Degree or more	36%	29%	35%	29%	24%	27%
White	70%	68%	70%	89%	90%	90%
Discussed a candidate	63%	52%	59%	62%	53%	58%
Very interested in politics	63%	44%	57%	70%	49%	61%
Symbolic Ideology	2.50	2.49	2.45	4.13	3.96	4.06
Support Civil Unions	68%	69%	70%	29%	25%	27%
Raise taxes on wealthy	90%	91%	92%	39%	54%	46%
Ideal point	-0.57	-0.57	-0.62	0.78	0.65	0.72
2012 (CCES)						
Median age				59	52	54
College Degree or more				33%	27%	29%
White				93%	90%	90%
Very interested in politics				72%	58%	62%
Donated money				35%	22%	27%
Symbolic Ideology				4.06	3.83	3.89
Support ban on most abortions				66%	60%	62%
Support Healthcare Reform				13%	20%	20%
Ideal point				1.04	0.81	0.85

Table 1: The Characteristics of Primary and General Electorates in Recent Presidential Elections

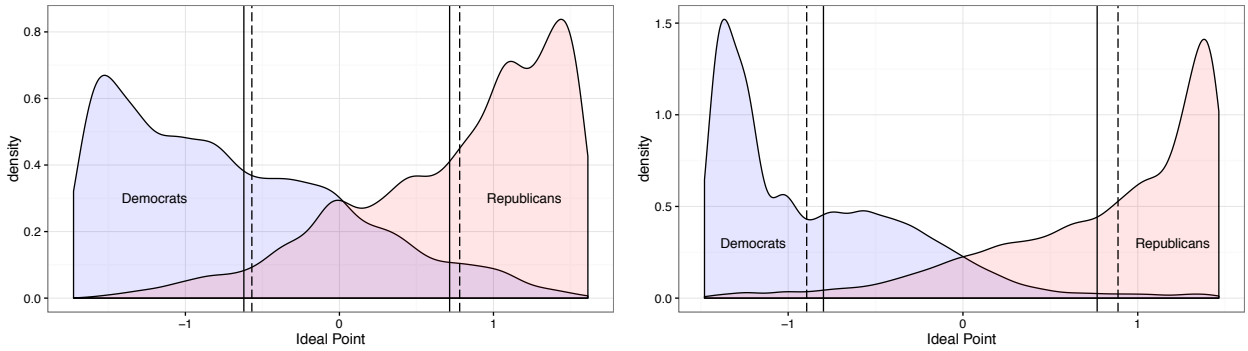
tivists, we might expect them to be older, better educated, and more interested in politics. But although primary voters were about 6-8 years older than those who voted only in the general election, they were only 1-4 years older than the broader party. Primary voters were also only a few points more likely to have a college degree than those who voted only in the general election or than the party following. Larger differences emerge with regard to campaign interest and campaign donations. For example, 63% of Democratic presidential primary voters in the 2008 election said they were very interested in the campaign, compared to 44% of those who voted in the general election but not the primary. This gap appears among Republicans and in other elections as well.

But any differences in campaign or political interest do not translate into large differences in three different measures of political attitudes. In these elections, the average Democratic primary voter's self-reported *symbolic ideology* on a five-point scale from very liberal to very conservative was only slightly to the left of Democrats who voted in the general election but

	Democratic Voters			Republican Voters		
2008 (CCES)	Voted in primary	Voted only in general	Party following	Voted in primary	Voted only in general	Party following
Median age	49	37	46	52	46	49
College Degree or more	35%	24%	30%	31%	22%	27%
White	70%	65%	67%	89%	90%	88%
Very interested in politics	66%	43%	56%	73%	51%	63%
Symbolic Ideology	2.45	2.50	2.45	4.10	3.93	3.99
Support ban on most abortions	21%	23%	22%	71%	67%	68%
Raise Minimum Wage	95%	97%	97%	51%	67%	59%
Ideal point	-0.75	-0.72	-0.76	0.89	0.69	0.77
2010 (CCES)						
Median age	55	47	52	57	50	54
College Degree or more	40%	34%	36%	30%	28%	29%
White	78%	72%	75%	90%	89%	89%
Very interested in politics	74%	54%	63%	82%	66%	75%
Donated money	38%	21%	29%	38%	20%	31%
Symbolic Ideology	2.38	2.45	2.45	4.05	3.88	3.98
Support ban on most abortions	17%	21%	20%	61%	54%	58%
Support Healthcare Reform	89%	87%	86%	9%	16%	13%
Ideal point	-0.89	-0.78	-0.80	0.89	0.64	0.77
2012 (CCES)						
Median age	57	46	50	60	50	54
College Degree or more	41%	30%	32%	32%	27%	29%
White	72%	70%	69%	91%	91%	90%
Very interested in politics	69%	50%	55%	74%	53%	62%
Donated money	46%	26%	31%	36%	19%	27%
Symbolic Ideology	2.46	2.56	2.56	4.01	3.82	3.89
Support ban on most abortions	14%	18%	19%	65%	60%	62%
Support Healthcare Reform	93%	90%	89%	13%	22%	20%
Ideal point	-0.86	-0.72	-0.71	1.05	0.76	0.85
2014 (CCES)						
Median age	60	53	57	61	56	58
College Degree or more	43%	37%	39%	33%	30%	32%
White	75%	73%	74%	91%	91%	90%
Very interested in politics	76%	61%	67%	81%	69%	74%
Symbolic Ideology	2.45	2.56	2.54	3.97	3.79	3.87
Support ban on all abortions	20%	24%	23%	71%	65%	67%
Support Healthcare Reform	85%	81%	81%	7%	11%	10%
Ideal point	-0.86	-0.74	-0.76	1.07	0.86	0.94

Table 2: The Characteristics of Primary and General Electorates in Recent Congressional Elections

not in the primary. Indeed, in the 2008 elections, Democratic presidential primary voters actually identified as more conservative than the party following, on average (top left panel of Table 1). The differences among Republicans were slightly larger but still small in absolute



(a) 2008 (Presidential Election) **(b)** 2010 (Congressional Election)

Figure 1: Ideal Points of Primary Voters and the Party Following in 2008 and 2010. The dashed lines are the mean ideal points of primary voters in each party and the solid lines are the mean ideal points of the party following in the general election. Data: 2008 CCAP and 2010 CCES.

terms. There were similarly modest differences in congressional elections (Table 2).

There are also small differences in *issue positions* among these groups, and not always in the direction that the conventional wisdom would presume. For instance, Democratic primary voters in 2008 were slightly less supportive of civil unions than the broader party following, and the differences on other issues were generally in the single digits. The lone exception was that 2008 Republican primary voters were 15 points less likely to favor raising taxes on the wealthy, compared to general-only voters.

Finally, there are few notable differences in the one-dimensional *ideal points* of these different groups based on their responses to a larger set of issue questions(Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2013).[4] For example, Figure 1 shows that primary voters were only a bit more ideologically extreme than party followers in the 2008 presidential and 2010 congressional elections. In 2008, Democratic primary voters were actually slightly less extreme than the party following. In general, the 2008-2014 data show that primary electorates in recent congressional elections are not substantially more ideologically extreme, relative to the party following, than the primary electorates in presidential elections. Similarly, primary elec-

[4] See Appendix A for more information about the construction of the ideal point scale. The ideal points for CCES respondents from 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014 are jointly scaled, and thus directly comparable to one another. However, the CCES and CCAP ideal points are not jointly scaled due to the lack of common policy questions across the surveys. Thus, we report the CCES and CCAP ideal points separately.

torates in congressional elections do not appear to be more extreme in midterm election years than in presidential election years. This runs contrary to fears that smaller turnout in midterm elections enhances the power of the ideological extremes.

Why do these results differ from those of Jacobson (2012) and Hill (2015), even though we are analyzing some of the same surveys? In contrast to Jacobson (2012) , we use validated turnout data. As we describe in the appendix, self-reported turnout produces larger differences between primary voters and the party following (see also Ansolabehere and Hersh, 2012). And unlike Hill (2015), we rely on simple disaggregated means and very large sample sizes, rather than a hierarchical model.[5]

	Democratic Voters			Republican Voters		
	Voted in Primary	Party Following	Difference	Voted in Primary	Party Following	Difference
Closed	-0.87	-0.77	-0.11	0.93	0.78	0.15
Semi-Closed	-0.88	-0.77	-0.11	0.93	0.81	0.12
Open	0.78	-0.73	-0.05	1.00	0.88	0.12

Table 3: Association between Primary Type and Ideal Points

Even though there were few substantive differences between primary voters and the party following, larger differences might emerge in particular types of primaries. Table 3 compares the mean ideal points of people that voted in the congressional primary to those of the party following in closed, semi-closed, and open primaries – pooling observations from the 2008-2014 CCES (four elections) across states and years. The differences between primary voters and the party following are not much greater in closed primaries than in open primaries, even though closed primaries are thought to create larger differences by limiting the primary electorate to registered partisans. This null effect of primary rules confirms previous research (Geer, 1988; Kaufmann, Gimpel, and Hoffman, 2003; Hill, 2015). As Kaufman and colleagues conclude: "...the key to greater ideological representativeness is not the rules alone" (472).

[5] Hill (2015) uses a hierarchical model in order to achieve greater precision in his estimates of opinion in congressional districts. This approach, however, may trade off lower variance for higher bias, as suggested by the divergence between the modeled results and national level results using larger samples. The other results in Hill (2015) line up closely with our results here.

Conclusions

In 1956, V.O. Key wrote skeptically about the primary system: "The elevation of such minorities to power within the nominating process through the smallness of total participation and bias may ... throw into office the most improbable sorts of characters who have won nominations through the vagaries of primaries" (166). That skepticism has persisted for many years. After the 1984 presidential election, a supporter of Jack Kemp said "The Republican presidential primary process remains a right-wing orgy" (Baker, 1985). After the 2012 election Republicans worried that primaries "push their presidential nominees far to the right" and "produce lackluster Senate candidates" (Martin, 2013). Meanwhile, reformers concerned about polarization advocate reforms to primary elections. Phil Keisling (2010), formerly Oregon's Secretary of State, writes: "Want to get serious about reducing the toxic levels of hyper-partisanship and legislative dysfunction now gripping American politics? Here's a direct, simple fix: abolish party primary elections."

Our evidence does not confirm these claims. In 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014, primary voters were ideologically representative subsets of the broader party following. Moreover, the ideological composition of primary electorates did not depend very much on primary rules or type of office. Our findings confirm Norrander's (2015, 57) review of prior work that "rather than being a more ideologically extreme proportion of the electorate, presidential primary voters are more aptly described as the slightly more interested and knowledgeable segment of the electorate." This helps explain why extant research has found little connection between either the existence or type of primaries and polarization (Hirano et al., 2010; McGhee et al., 2013). To be sure, our claim is not that primaries have no consequences for the candidates who run and the candidates who win. Moreover, primaries might be problematic for other reasons, such as that they do not provide sufficient deliberation within the party or a thorough enough review of each candidate's qualifications (Polsby, 1983). Nevertheless, our findings should serve to allay one concern about primary elections: that they empower ideological extremists within the parties.

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Supplementary Appendix: On the Representativeness of Primary Electorates

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Appendix A: Ideal Point Scale

In order to measure citizens' ideal points, we need surveys with information on voters' policy preferences. To this end, we pool the 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014 Cooperative Congressional Election Surveys.[1] Each of these surveys asked between 14 and 32 policy questions. This enables us to jointly scale each respondent's ideal point using an approach similar to that of Tausanovitch and Warshaw (2013). We measure the ideal points of the 2008 CCAP respondents separately due to the lack of overlap in their policy questions with the CCES.

To estimate voters' ideological positions, we assume that all survey respondents have a quadratic utility function with normal errors (Clinton, Jackman, and Rivers, 2004). Each item presents individuals with a choice between a "Yes" position and a "No" position.[2] We use the two-parameter IRT model introduced to political science by Clinton, Jackman, and Rivers (2004), which characterizes each response $y_{ij} \in \{0, 1\}$ as a function of subject i's latent *ability* (x_i), the *difficulty* (α_j) and *discrimination* (β_j) of item j, and an error term (e_{ij}), where

$$\Pr[y_{ij} = 1] = \Phi(\beta_j x_i - \alpha_j) \tag{1}$$

where Φ is the standard normal CDF. β_j is referred to as the "discrimination" parameter because it captures the degree to which the latent trait affects the probability of a yes answer. The "cut point" is the value of α_j / β_j at which the probabilities of answering yes or no to a question are 50-50. We assume a one-dimensional policy space because a two-dimensional model shows little improvement in terms of model fit. The ideal point, x, for individual i signifies the "liberalness" or "conservativeness" of that individual. We orient our values so that lower values are associated with more liberal preferences and higher values with more conservative preferences. We approximate the joint posterior density of the model

[1] The 2008 CCES has 32,800 respondents, the 2010 CCES has 55,400 respondents, the 2012 CCES has 54,535 respondents, and the 2014 CCES has 56,200 respondents.

[2] We dichotomize each of the survey questions for our scaling model. For example, if a question asks whether respondents "agree" or "strongly agree" to a statement, both responses would be coded simply as "Yes."

Table 1: Symbolic Ideology and Citizen Ideal Points

Symbolic Ideology	Mean Ideal Point
Very Liberal	-1.30
Liberal	-1.03
Moderate	-0.31
Conserative	.83
Very Conservative	1.34

parameters using a Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) method. Non-response is handled straightforwardly in MCMC: if a question is not answered, then that question is effectively dropped since it does not inform the respondent's ideal point. To validate our estimates, Table 1 shows the strong relationship between symbolic ideology and our scaled measure of citizens' ideal points.

Appendix B: Voter File Matching Process

We use data from five large-scale surveys of the American public: the 2008 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP) (Jackman and Vavreck, 2009) and the 2008-2014 CCES (Vavreck and Rivers, 2008; Ansolabehere and Rivers, 2013). Once sample weights are applied, CCAP respondents are representative of registered voters and CCES respondents are representative of the American public.

The matching of our surveys to voter files was conducted by the survey provider YouGov in conjunction with the voter file firm Catalist (see Ansolabehere and Hersh, 2012, for a detailed description of this process). Table 2 illustrates the results of the matching process, focusing on the 2008 CCAP data. Catalist was able to match 16,792 CCAP respondents (84%) to a state voter file.[3] Six hundred of the respondents (3%) were confirmed as unregistered. The remainder, 2,608 (13%), could not be matched by Catalist to any record on a voter file nor a record on a consumer file. These respondents may or may not be registered to vote. Catalist's inability to match them does not necessarily mean they are unregistered, only unverified.[4] The validated turnout rate in the general election of the CCAP registered voter sample was 68%. The primary turnout rate was 48%. (These percentages are calculated by leaving the unmatched respondents in the denominator and classifying them as not having voted in the 2008 election.)[5]

[3] State parties that nominate candidates using a caucus instead of a primary may not report participation data for the caucus to Secretary of State's offices. The matching process between YouGov and Catalist did return some validated data in some caucus states, but we believe that this data generally does not represent turnout in presidential caucuses. Rather, it may represent turnout in congressional primaries in those states.

[4] None of the CCAP respondents living in Nevada were matched to the voter file because Catalist did not have access to a Nevada voter file at that time. Virginia also does not make its voter file available except for a fee, and thus respondents living in Virginia were not matched to the file. Overall, the rate of successfully matching respondents to the voter file varied across states. In Mississippi, known to have one of the least advanced voter files, 67 of 100 CCAP panelists were found on the file. Similar rates obtained in Wyoming (21 out of 31, or 67.7%), the District of Columbia (29 out of 40, 72.5%) and Alaska (38 out of 52, or 73.1%). States with high rates of matching include the Dakotas (SD: 46 out of 51 respondents, or 90.2%; ND, 40 out of 43 respondents, 93%) and Montana (53 out of 55 respondents, 96.4%). That said, most states' rates clustered around the 84% average. We thus do not believe that differences in match rates across states affect our inferences about the characteristics of primary and general electorates.

[5] Similar results obtained when matching CCES respondents to the voter file. In 2008, Catalist was able to match 25,381 (77%) CCES respondents to one of their state voter files (Note that similarly to the CCAP,

Most states indicate which primary a person voted in, but some do not. Among the 68% that voted in both the primary and general election are 1,714 respondents (19% of this group) for whom we have no way of knowing in which party primary they voted. In cases where the state voter files require party registration, we allocated people in states with no party primary indicator on the file to the primary for the party in which they were registered. Even after this allocation, we are left with 1,714 respondents who we cannot classify into one or the other of the primaries.

	General Election			
Primary Election	Registered and voted	Registered and did not vote	Not matched to a voter file	Verified unregistered
Registered and voted	9,119 (68%)	488 (17%)	0	0
Registered and did not vote	4,389 (32%)	2,433 (83%)	0	0
Not matched to a voter file	0	0	2,833 (100%)	0
Verified unregistered				738 (100%)
TOTAL	13,508	2,921	2,833	738

Cell entries are the weighted number of respondents with column percentages in parentheses.

Table 2: Validated Turnout in 2008 Primary and General Election, CCAP Registered Voters

Unsurprisingly, the validated turnout rates for both the primary and general election in the CCAP survey are much lower than the corresponding self-reported turnout rates.[6] For instance, 57% of the respondents in the 2008 CCAP reported that they voted in a primary (either when asked just after their state's primary or when asked in September to recall whether they had voted in the primary). The validated vote data, however, indicate that of those who reported turning out in a primary, only 60% or so actually did, according to state

Virginia does not make its voter file available except for a fee, and thus respondents living in Virginia were not matched to the CCES file.) The validated turnout rate in the general election of the 2008 CCES sample, according to Catalist, was 62%. The primary turnout rate was 40%. The slightly higher turnout rates in the 2008 CCAP compared to the 2008 CCES likely reflects the fact that the CCAP had a registered voter sample.

[6] Self-reported turnout in primary is only inconsistently available for the CCES. For instance, self-reports on primary turnout are not available in 2012 or 2014. Therefore, the comparisons of self-reported and validated turnout in this section focus on the CCAP.

records. This raises an important question about previous literature. The earlier studies of the 1976 and 1980 elections (Geer, 1988; Norrander, 1989) rely on data about verified voters—via exit polls and validated vote measures in the ANES, respectively. Jacobson (2012) relies on self-reported turnout, as do some other studies (Butler, 2009; Peress, 2013). Jacobson acknowledges that, as in many surveys in which turnout is assessed via self-reports, respondents to the 2010 CCES over-reported turnout (Vavreck, 2007). But he argues that "comparisons across participation categories remain informative" (1615). However, introducing validated voting data can indeed alter comparisons across categories of participation. As Ansolabehere and Hersh (2011) show in their study of general election voters and non-voters, using validated turnout data reduces the (already small) ideological gaps between these groups.

We can also show the importance of using validated turnout in making these comparisons. In Table 3, we focus on the differences between the views of primary voters and general election-only voters on the six policy questions in the 2008 CCAP—calculated in percentage points. We present the differences separately for each party and using both validated and self-reported turnout in the primary and general.

	Democrats		Republicans	
	Validated	Self-reported	Validated	Self-reported
Arrest, deport illegal immigrants	-1	8	4	20
Support gov. health insurance	4	13	-7	-2
Withdraw from Iraq immediately	-1	10	-3	0
Raise taxes on incomes $200K+	0	19	-11	-1
Abortion always legal	6	5	-1	-3
Abortion legal in special cases	-4	-1	3	5
Support gay marriage	-2	-2	2	-4

Table 3: Differences in Support between Primary and General Election-Only Voters (Primary-General), Comparing Validated and Self-Reported Vote (2008 CCAP).

Using self-reported turnout usually exaggerates the difference between these two groups, much as it exaggerates the difference between general election voters and non-voters. For example, among Republicans validated primary voters are only 4 points more supportive

of deporting illegal immigrants, compared to those who voted only in the general election. Among self-reported voters, that difference balloons to 20 points. The same pattern obtains among Democrats on several issues, including support for government health insurance, withdrawal from Iraq, and raising taxes on the wealthy.

These differences between validated and self-reported turnout may be one reason for the differences in the findings of Geer (1988) and Norrander (1989) on the one hand, and Jacobson (2012) on the other. More generally, these differences suggest that self-reported turnout data are problematic for comparing primary and general electorates and artificially inflate the level of polarization.

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