

The Demobilizing Effect of Primary Electoral Institutions on Voters of Color

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Abstract

Are electoral institutions – such as closed primaries – associated with reduced levels of participation by people of color? We theorize and find that primary electoral institutions that bar independent voters from participating in first-round elections mechanically reduce participation in primary elections; and also reduce turnout among registered independents in second-round general elections. Closed primaries have large demobilizing impacts on Asian American and Latinx voters, as these voters are registered as independents at higher rates than whites. We examine nationally representative and validated survey data from 2012 to 2018. Open and top-two primaries are associated with higher turnout from independent voters of color in both primary and general elections. Implications are that party registration status and formal institutions differentially demobilize voters of color and whites.

Word Count: 9058

Why do whites turn out to vote at higher rates than people of color? Are electoral institutions – such as closed primaries – associated with reduced levels of political participation for people of color? Political scientists studying race, ethnicity, and political behavior often point to attitudinal factors when explaining relatively lower turnout levels of people of color compared to whites. However, we theorize that one explanation for differential voter turnout by race and ethnicity is due to electoral institutions, and in particular, closed primary systems.

Closed primary systems are defined as those that do not permit registered independents to participate in first-round primary elections, and limit participation only to those registered in the same party. In contrast, non-closed primary systems allow participation by independents and other-party voters in primary first-round elections (e.g., see Fisk 2019; McGhee 2014; Sinclair and O’Grady 2018). Within this set of non-closed primary systems, open primaries are those that allow all voters to participate in the first-round primary election but there are separate primaries held for each party’s candidates. Also, in the set of non-closed systems, top-two primaries are those that allow all voters to participate in a first-round election featuring candidates of all parties competing against one another. The top-two vote getters – regardless of party – advance to the general election (Sadhvani and Mendez 2018).

We theorize that primary electoral institutions that bar independent voters from participating in first-round elections mechanically reduce participation in primary elections among independent voters. We also argue that closed primary electoral systems also reduce voter turnout among registered independents in general elections, as these voters have likely not developed habits of frequent participation (Aldrich, Montgomery, and Wood 2010). We also theorize that primary rules interact with race and ethnicity to influence voter turnout. Since people of color are already undermobilized, the closed primary institution exacerbates lower voter participation for independent voters of color even

more. Scholars of race and ethnicity have often ignored formal electoral institutions in explaining voter turnout (though see, e.g., Middlemass 2006; Sadhwani and Mendez 2018; Wong 2006). The importance of institutional rules and strategies in primary elections is well established (e.g., Aldrich 1980; Gerber and Morton 1998; Hassell 2018; Massicotte, Blais, and Yoshinaka 2004), but few have examined how these electoral institutions differentially shape decisions of voters by race and ethnicity.

Empirically, we examine voter turnout using a large-scale nationally-representative survey with validated voter registration and validated turnout records from 2012 to 2018. There are several key findings. First, we demonstrate that Asian American and Latinx voters are more likely than whites to be registered as independents in states with closed primary systems. This means that white voters have greater access to the polls in primary elections where only those registered with a major party can vote in the primary election.

Second, we examine voter turnout by race/ethnicity and party registration status in both primary and general elections in states with closed, open, and top-two primary systems. In primary elections, unsurprisingly, closed primaries are associated with independents and third-party voters of all racial and ethnic backgrounds not participating. Perhaps more surprisingly, we find that independent voters in closed primary states are also much less likely to participate in general elections than voters registered with a major party. This effect is greatest among voters of color who are registered as independents, with participation in the general election lower among people of color than whites in closed primary states' general election contests.

Third, open primary systems lead to increases in Black independent turnout on par with white independent turnout in both primary and general elections. However, among Latinx and Asian American voters, general election turnout is still lower in open primary systems relative to white independent voters. For voters registered with a major party, there are not large effect differences by primary electoral system. We conclude with a

discussion about the disparate impact of closed primary electoral institutions, noting that people of color are more frequently registered as independents so cannot participate in closed systems; yet we find that the open primary system mobilizes white and Black voters more than Latinx and Asian American voters.

1 Closed Primaries and Reduced Mobilization of People of Color

Primary election rules shape people's decisions to turn out to vote. Voters are more likely to participate in elections when formal barriers do not prohibit them. Institutional barriers to participation in one election may have downstream effects where voters barred from participation in a first-round election may also not participate in other elections in which they are eligible.

The mechanisms by which the primary system can influence turnout is twofold. First, we theorize that there is a formal, institutional barrier in primary elections. This formal barrier to participating is mechanical and straightforward. Voters registered with a major party in a closed-primary electoral system will be mobilized and are permitted to vote, and independent voters are not allowed to participate in closed primary elections. Anyone wishing to vote in a closed primary who is registered as an independent or with no party affiliation would have a significant cost to participation (Riker and Ordeshook 1968), as they would have to take efforts to re-register with a political party to participate in a primary. The closed primary system is likely to have a demobilizing effect on all voters registered as independents in voting during first-round primary elections. As we discuss below, Latinx and Asian American voters are registered as independents at higher rates than whites in states with closed primaries. As a result, this primary-election demobilization will be greatest among some people of color instead of white voters.

1.1 Lack of Mobilization in Primaries Lowers Downstream General Election Turnout

More intriguingly, we also theorize that closed primary electoral institutions will affect general election mobilization. In closed primary states, the lack of mobilization of registered independent voters in the primary has spillover effects to the general election. Voting is habitual (Aldrich, Montgomery, and Wood 2010), as voters who participate regularly are inclined to continue doing so. Voters who participate regularly in primary elections also have higher propensities to vote in general elections (Green and Shachar 2000; Norrander 1986; Tate 1991).

Voters participate in elections when the costs of voting are lower than the psychic benefits of civic duty (Riker and Ordeshook 1968). Information costs in general election contests are greater for registered independents in closed-primary systems who are not attentive during the primaries. Candidates have no incentive to communicate with registered independents in closed primary elections, increasing registered independents' information costs. These information costs may demobilize registered independents who perhaps would have been engaged during the primary if not for the closed system. Independent voters, including independent leaners, are generally less engaged with politics (Klar and Krupnikov 2016), but in open-primary elections, strategic candidates may try to mobilize high-party-identifying registered independents in both the primary and then the subsequent general election. However, in a closed primary system, there is no reason for a political campaign to mobilize registered independents who cannot vote in the first round; and this lack of engagement could thus continue to the general election. Party elites seek to shape primary outcomes by mobilizing their supporters and endorsing candidates in the first round (Hassell 2018). This would mean that registered independents – even those with higher partisan identifications, such as voters of color – may be undermobilized in general election campaigns in closed-primary states if efforts toward campaign

mobilization are heavily focused on the first-round primary stage. Because political campaigns target GOTV efforts at high-propensity voters, the lack of mobilization in the first-round primary feeds on itself with less mobilization in the second round.

There is emerging scholarly emphasis on the role of political campaigns in explaining gaps in general election voter turnout between whites and voters of color. Barreto (2018) points to the “cycle of undermobilization,” stating that for voter turnout of people of color to increase “there needs to be a marked increase in the outreach and contact with Black, Latino, and AAPI voters.” Fraga (2019) explains that political campaigns do not target voters of color with mobilization campaigns as frequently as white voters, thus leading to differential voter turnout by race and ethnicity (also see Ramírez, Solano, and Wilcox-Archuleta 2018).

Specifically, major parties typically focus their mobilization efforts on those deemed most likely to turn out, and Latinx and Asian American voters do not often make the cut (Stevens and Bishin 2010; Ramírez and Wong 2006; Wong 2005). When contacted, however, mobilization increases voter turnout among Latinx and Asian American citizens (Michelson and García-Bedolla 2014; Ramírez and Wong 2006). Further, Black voters’ levels of campaign enthusiasm, which could be shaped by campaign contacts, shapes mobilization patterns (Collins and Block 2018).

This lack of voter contact has downstream effects as voters of color participate less than whites. Others point to psychological, identity-based, and attitudinal factors explaining turnout among voters of color (Lien 2001; Tate 1991), noting that voters of color have lower political efficacy (Mangum 2003; Michelson 2000) and that individual, demographic, and contextual factors explain turnout variations (Leighley and Vedlitz 1999; Lien 2001).

For example, independent voters of color may not identify nor register with major parties because of perceived lack of fit with these parties. Hajnal and Lee (2011) theorize

that immigrant voters sometimes choose not to register with a major party because of informational uncertainty about candidates and elections; ideological ambivalence toward the American left-right ideological space; and identity formation in a new country. Immigrant communities, particularly Latinx and Asian American immigrants, may not view the two major parties as representing their views (Wong 2000, 2006).

1.2 Electoral Institutions Shape Voter Mobilization and Turnout

We argue this undermobilization is not simply a misguided campaign contact strategy or due to individual-level attitudinal factors, but that lack of mobilization is also shaped by formal primary electoral institutions. For example, states with large Latinx populations like Florida, New York, and Nevada have closed primary systems and also have larger percentages of Latinx registered independents than white independents.¹ Campaigns target white voters more and thus undermobilize voters of color, but the formal demobilization embedded in a primary system that trickles down into the lack of habitual voting in a general election also explains this undermobilization.

Some research on race and ethnicity has emphasized formal disfranchising institutions such as minority vote dilution due to redistricting (e.g., Davidson and Grofman 1994) and white primaries, literacy tests, and felon disfranchisement laws (e.g., Key 1949; Middlemass 2006), but most contemporary research emphasizes attitudinal, campaign-specific, or individual-level explanations for lack of participation by voters of color. In the contemporary United States, primary electoral institutions may also demobilize voters not registered with a political party and this interacts with voter race and ethnicity since voters of color are more likely to be registered as independents. We hypothesize that independent voters generally will be less likely to be mobilized in closed primary systems

¹In 2018 in Florida, 61.9% of the state's Latinx registered voters were registered as independents. In contrast, 40.5% of non-Hispanic white registered voters in the state were registered as independents. In New York, 59.3% of Latinx voters were registered independents, while only 45.6% of whites were. In Nevada, 55.0% of Latinx voters were registered independents, but just over one-third of whites were (38.7%). These and other data are from the 2018 CCES (weighted).

– obviously at the primary election first-round stage but even at the second-round stage. We further hypothesize that this lack of mobilization will be even higher in closed primary states among independent voters of color.

1.3 Open Primaries and Opportunities for Mobilization

In contrast to closed primary states, voters in open systems who are registered independents can participate in the first-round primary. The presence of open primaries is associated with increased aggregate turnout (Geras and Crespin 2018), yet others have also found relatively small or no turnout effects from the introduction of open or top-two primaries given that parties focus their mobilization efforts on core partisan identifiers (e.g., Burden and Ezra 1999; McGhee 2014). Others find that independent voters in the top-two system can be mobilized, but often are not (Hill and Kousser 2016). Still others have examined the representativeness of primary and general electorates, generally finding few differences between these electorates (Norrande and Wendland 2017; Sides et al. 2020). Since voters of color are high partisan identifiers, but frequently registered as independents (Hajnal and Lee 2011), open primary systems may mobilize voters of color. Research on primaries rarely disaggregates voters by race and ethnicity, and infrequently considers race at all.

In addition, the institution of top-two primaries – one form of open primaries – may encourage greater electoral competition (Ebner 2020; Sinclair 2015; Sinclair et al. 2018) and provide opportunities for candidates of color to run for office and mobilize voters of color. In California, for example, Democratic-leaning, majority-minority constituencies often have two Democratic candidates competing against one another in general elections, providing additional opportunities for mobilization in what otherwise would have been a low-turnout Democratic defeat of a Republican candidate in a closed primary system. Co-ethnic candidates running in the top-two primary general election system mobilize

Asian American voters (Sadhvani 2020), and open primary systems may mobilize voters of color more in general elections given the candidate choice set has changed (Sadhvani and Junn 2018; Sadhwani and Mendez 2018).

2 People of Color Are More Likely to Be Registered as Independents Than Whites

Most political scientists have noted that voters of color are more likely than white voters to have strong attachments to the Democratic party. African Americans are “steadfast Democrats” (White and Laird 2020) with high partisan identification with the Democratic party (Tate 1991). Latinx voters tend to identify with the Democratic party at high rates (Alvarez and Garcia Bedolla 2003; Barreto and Segura 2014; Uhlaner and Garcia 2006). In elections in the 2010s, Asian American voters have increasingly identified with the Democratic party and supported Democratic candidates (Masuoka, Han, Leung, and Zheng 2018; Sadhwani 2020). Conversely, a majority of white voters support Republicans (Grose 2018), though whites have historically had weaker partisan attachments than Black voters, for instance, with some whites supporting Republicans while weakly identifying with the Democrats (Black and Black 2003).

Partisan identification among all four of these racial and ethnic groups (Black, Latinx, Asian American, and white) is also high when examining only states that have closed primary systems. In closed primary states in 2018, about two-thirds of non-Hispanic white voters (66.3%) identified with one of the two major parties.² Similarly in these same states, among Latinx voters, 62.4% identified as a Democrat or Republican; and among Asian Americans, 62.6% identified with one of the two major parties. Black voters identified with one of the two major parties at higher rates, with 72.1% of Black

²These and other data are from the 2018 CCES (weighted).

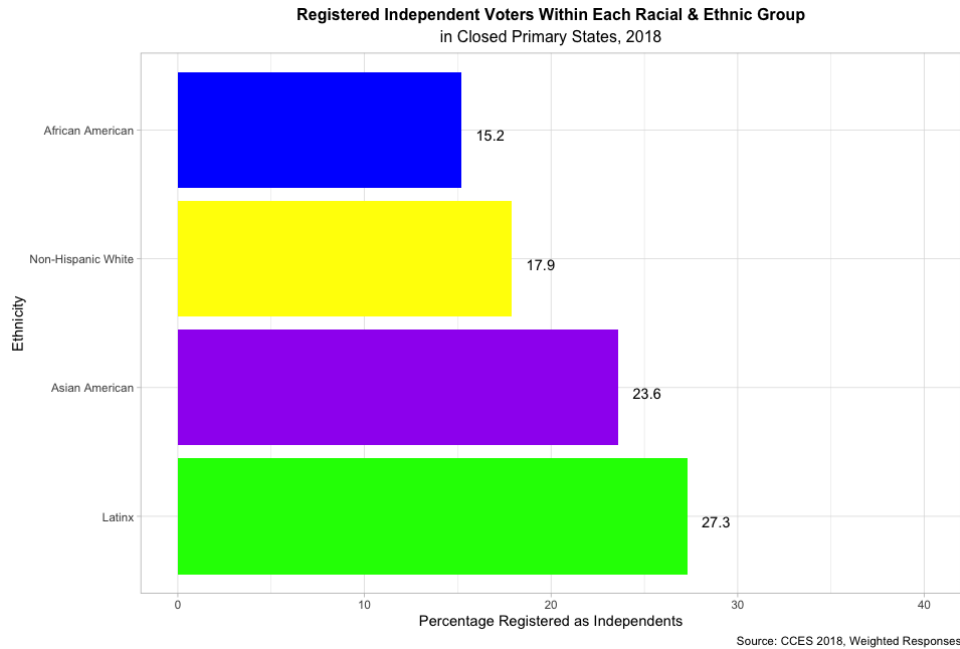
voters in closed-primary states identifying with a major party. When considering party *identification*, white voters, Latinx voters, and Asian American voters in closed primary states do not differ substantially in terms of their proportions who identify as a partisan or an independent – and Black voters have somewhat higher levels of identification with the major parties. Large majorities across all four of these racial and ethnic groups *identify* with a major political party.

Yet formal party registration and electoral institutions, and not just party identification, shape the behavior of voters too. This scholarly emphasis on partisan identification has obscured the fact that voters of color, while still identifying with one of the two major parties, are more frequently registered as independents than are white voters (in states where there is party registration). This choice in registration will by definition not have a demobilizing effect in the first round of open or top-two primary systems, but it will preclude participation in closed primaries. Voters registered as independents – whether they lean toward a particular party or whether they are true independents – are formally barred from participating in primary legislative elections in about one-third of U.S. states due to closed systems (Grose 2020; Sinclair et al. 2018). This lack of attention to formal institutional structures may help explain mobilization gaps previously identified in the literature as socio-psychological.

The party-registration gap between whites and Latinx and Asian American registrants is particularly stark in closed primary states. Figure 1 shows the percentage of registered independents by race and ethnic background of voters in closed primary states (the data presented above were for party identification, and Figure 1's data are for party registration).³ These data are based on validated registration statuses and racial and ethnic identification of registered voters in the 2018 CCES. Only 17.9% of non-Hispanic white voters in closed primary states are registered as independents. This means nearly 4 out

³The percentages of registered independents displayed in Figure 1 include those who are registered independent or with a non-major third party.

Figure 1: Registered Independent Voters Within Each Racial & Ethnic Group



of every 5 white voters in closed primary states can participate in the primary elections.

In contrast, both Latinx and Asian American voters in closed-primary states are more frequently registered as independents. As Figure 1 shows, 23.6% of Asian American voters are registered as independents and 27.3% of Latinx voters are registered as independents. About 1 out of every 4 Latinx and Asian American voters are unable to participate in primary elections in closed primary states.

Interestingly, Black voters are registered as independents at rates similar to white voters in these states. In states with closed primary systems, 15.2% of Black voters are registered as independents and thus cannot participate in the primary elections. Descriptively, there appears to be a deleterious impact on Latinx and Asian American voters in closed primary states relative to Black and white voters.

To summarize our argument, formal barriers to vote for registered independents are a key part of the story for understanding lower turnout for some voters of color in the United States. Because Latinx and Asian American voters are more likely to be registered as

independents in closed-primary states than whites, the demobilizing effect of the formal inability to participate in primary elections is one important and missing explanation in the voter turnout gap by race and ethnicity in the United States. Lack of campaign contact and voter mobilization, as well as attitudinal factors, may play a role in the relatively lower voter turnout among people of color compared to whites. However, the role of formal primary electoral institutions – given the differences in independent party registration statuses across groups – is one important explanation for the lack of voter mobilization.

3 Do Primary Rules Affect Voter Turnout? A Statistical Model of the Decision to Vote as a Function of Race, Party Registration, and Primary Electoral Institutions

To further examine the effect of primary electoral systems, party registration status, and race/ethnicity, we estimate a statistical model with the individual decision to turn out to vote as the dependent variable. We use CCES survey data from 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018. The CCES surveys Americans, including voters and non-voters, about their attitudes and political choices. While the CCES has been fielded in other years, we use these years as the CCES measures validated turnout and validated voter registration by political party for all respondents in 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018. These party registration validations are particularly important for our research design, and the CCES data are well-suited for our study.

Respondent samples are also diverse across these years because the CCES samples such a large group of registered voters, allowing us to compare turnout across ethnic and racial groups. Given the CCES sample size of over 200,000 individuals across 2012 to 2018, in contrast to studies such as the ANES, we are able to assess the differential impact of primary systems on voters by race/ethnicity and party registration status. For

instance, the CCES allows us to compare how primary type is associated with the decision to turn out among Latinx independents, Latinx Democrats, Latinx Republicans, white independents, white Democrats, and white Republicans. This comparison allows us to observe whether the ability to vote in open or top-two primaries has a greater impact on increasing turnout in contrast to closed primary states.

In our statistical models, the unit of analysis is a CCES survey respondent. As the dependent variable is dichotomous in all of our models, we estimate logits. These logit models are estimated using survey CCES cumulative survey weights. In the first set of statistical models, we examine turnout in the congressional primaries. The dependent variable, *Turnout in Primary Election*, is coded 1 if the respondent turned out to vote in the primary and 0 if not. This dependent variable is based on validated voting confirming that the respondent did in fact participate in the primary election. As detailed in our theoretical argument, the relationship between primary type and turnout in the primary election is fairly mechanical. When voters are formally barred from voting by electoral institutions, this will result in reduced turnout compared to those party-registered voters not formally barred. As party registration varies by race and ethnicity and primary system type, closed primaries could mechanically disfranchise voters of color or whites at greater rates.

In our second set of models, the dependent variable is *Turnout in the General Election*, which is coded 1 if the respondent voted in the general election and 0 if not. This general election dependent variable was also validated to confirm the person did in fact cast a ballot in the general election. If open and top-two systems lead to greater turnout in the primaries, the habitual act of voting in these systems may also lead to higher turnout in general elections as well. Furthermore, this turnout in the general election may also vary by party registration and race/ethnicity of the respondent, thus reinforcing the effects of the demobilization seen at the primary stage.

Our key independent variables measure the type of primary system, the party registration of the respondent, and the racial or ethnic identification of the respondent. Primary elections are divided into three different categories: closed primaries, open/semi-closed primaries, and top-two primaries. This measure is taken from previous studies of primary elections (Grose 2020; Sinclair 2013), and the data are from Grose (2020). We separate the primary types into these three categories as we are interested in the formal barriers to voting in the closed primary. We are also interested in distinguishing differences in open and top-two primary systems, given the possibility for greater competition between candidates of color in general elections in top-two systems (Sadhvani 2020); and other turnout effects in same-party elections (Fisk 2019).

The independent variable *Top-two primary* is coded 1 if the respondent lives in a state with a top-two primary system and 0 otherwise. As a reminder, the top-two primary system is a two-round system where all candidates, regardless of party, compete in the first-round primary, and the top-two vote-getting candidates advance to the second-round general election. In this primary system, no voter is formally barred from participating in the first-round primary election. Further, all voters cast ballots with all candidates of all parties on the same ballot in one primary, which means the general election in the top-two system may feature candidates who share the same party. The general election is a runoff where the top-two vote getters in the first-round primary advance.

Another independent variable is called *Open primary*, which is coded 1 if the respondent lives in a state with a primary system that is open (as defined below) and 0 otherwise. An open primary allows any voter to participate in the first round of the election regardless of their party registration, but the candidates of each party compete in separate primaries and the winner of each party primary advances to the second-round general election. Because we are interested in the ability of independents and those registered with major parties to vote in the primary, we code open primaries broadly as any system

where independents and party registrants can vote in the first round. This variable is thus coded 1 to include systems in which there are separate party primaries for candidates but there is no party registration; where voters are registered to vote with a party but all are allowed to participate in any primary election of their choosing; or where voters are required to be registered with a party but can change their party registration on the date of the election at the polling place (as all these reduce costs of participation). Also coded as 1 in the Open primary variable are what other scholars have termed semi-closed primaries. We include semi-closed primaries (where independents can vote in a partisan primary but those registered with another party cannot) as an open primary given our theoretical emphasis on the demobilization of registered independents. Consistent with Grose (2020), “the ease of access for independents and different-party voters in a primary of the other party is the key consideration in defining open primaries” (also see Sinclair 2013).

The reference category is *Closed primary system*, which is when the respondent lives in a state where only voters registered formally with a party are allowed to vote in the party’s primary; and 0 otherwise. In closed primary states, the primary is held separately with each party, and only voters registered with that party can vote in the primary. Independents cannot vote in a closed party primary, and different-party voters cannot cross over and vote in the other party’s primary.

The other independent variables are straightforward. We code voters based on their party registrations. The *Democrat* variable codes respondents as 1 if they are registered Democrats and 0 if not. The *Independent/third party* variable codes respondents as 1 if they are registered as independents, registered with a non-major third party (such as the “Independence” or “Libertarian” parties), or if they have no party registration; and 0 otherwise. In states where there is no party registration at all (like North Dakota), all registered voters are coded as a 1 on this *Independent/third party* variable. Because

we are interested in the impact of formal barriers to voting via each state's primary system, we code this variable based on party registration and not party identification. The reference category in the models on party registration is *Republican* respondent, where the respondent is a registered Republican (or not).

We also include indicator variables for racial and ethnic groups, coded 1 if the respondent identifies with the racial/ethnic group and 0 if not. These variables are *Black*, *Latinx*, *Asian American*, and *Native American/other*.⁴ The reference category is non-Hispanic white respondents.

Finally, we included interaction variables as we are most interested in the combined effect of primary system type, race/ethnicity of respondent, and party registration of the respondent. Double and triple interaction variables for all of the above independent variables (*Open primary*, *Top two primary*, *Democrat*, *Independent*, *Black*, *Latinx*, *Asian American*, *Native American/other*) were included in the statistical models.⁵ These allow us to test for differential impacts by race, party registration of respondent, and primary type. However, we focus much of our analysis of results on predicted probabilities from the models under different sets of conditions for these independent variables to ease interpretation of the results given the multiple interactive variables. Further, we do not examine predicted probabilities for Native American/other respondents due to small sample sizes.

⁴In the years we analyze, the CCES asks respondents their race in one question, and has an additional question asking if respondents identify as Hispanic or Latinx. The Latinx variable was coded 1 if the respondent said their race was Hispanic or Latinx and/or if the respondent answered the additional question about Hispanic ethnicity as yes; and 0 otherwise. The other race variables are coded 1 if the respondent answered they identified with that group in the question about respondent race.

⁵These independent variables are *Open primary x Democrat*, *Open primary x Independent*, *Open primary x Black*, *Open primary x Latinx*, *Open primary x Asian American*, *Open primary x Native American/other*, *Top-two primary x Democrat*, *Top-two primary x Independent*, *Top-two primary x Black*, *Top-two primary x Latinx*, *Top-two primary x Asian American*, *Top-two primary x Native American/other*, *Asian American x Democrat*, *Black x Democrat*, *Latinx x Democrat*, *Native American/other x Democrat*, *Asian American x Independent*, *Black x Independent*, *Latinx x Independent*, *Native American/other x Independent*, *Open primary x Democrat x Black*, *Open primary x Democrat x Latinx*, *Open primary x Democrat x Asian American*, *Open primary x Democrat x Native American/other*, *Open primary x Independent x Black*, *Open primary x Independent x Latinx*, *Open primary x Independent x Asian American*, *Open primary x Independent x Native American/other*.

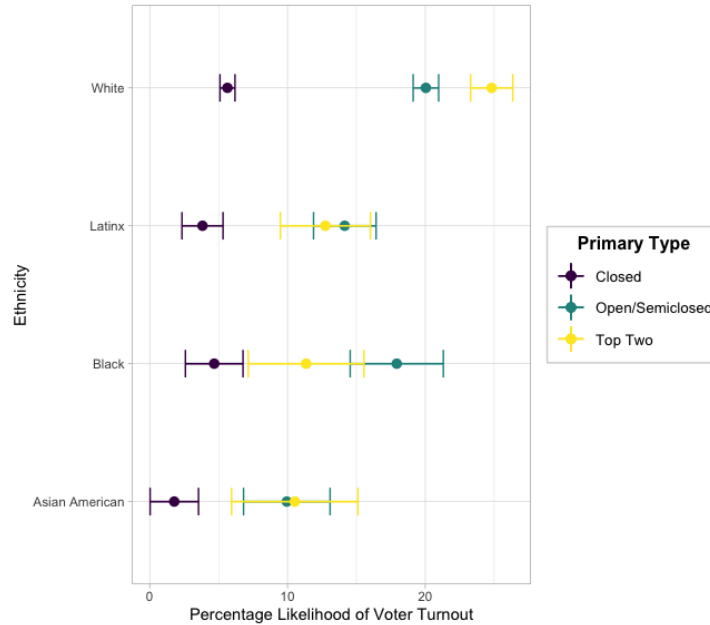
We also included several independent variables traditionally associated with voter turnout. These variables are *Age* of respondent (coded 1 if age 65 and up; and 0 if not); *Education* of respondent (1=no high school; 2=high school graduate; 3=some college; 4=two-year degree; 5=four-year degree; 6=advanced degree); household *Income* of respondent (a 12-point scale provided by CCES with higher values indicating larger income), if the respondent is *Married* (1=yes; 0=no); and the *Gender* of respondent (1=male; 0=otherwise). We also include dummy variables for years.

4 Results: Turning Out to Vote in Primary Elections

The results of the logit models of primary turnout and general election turnout are included in Online Appendix A in the Supplementary Materials. Because the statistical models include multiplicative interaction terms between primary type, race and ethnicity of the voter, and the party of the registrant, we simply report predicted probabilities of turning out to vote by race, party registration, and primary type in the text below. These predicted probabilities are calculated by varying the values of the independent variables related to race/ethnicity, party registration, and primary type while holding all other independent variables at their means. These predicted probabilities are presented with confidence intervals to ease the interpretation of primary system type, voter ethnicity, and the voter's party.

In addition to Appendix A, which displays the full logit models, we also present several additional analyses for robustness. In Online Appendix B, we conduct the same analyses on primary and general election turnout, but also control for the percent of the Asian-American population, the Black population, and the Latinx population in each respondent's congressional district. In Online Appendix C, we present the same statistical models but also include dummy variables for if the survey respondent is represented by an Asian-American U.S. House member, a Black U.S. House member, or a Latinx U.S. House

Figure 2: Primary Turnout from Independents by Race/Ethnicity & Primary Type



member as descriptive representation may be associated with greater turnout. Finally, in Online Appendix D, we also present the same statistical models, but include control variables for the absolute margin of victory between the first and second place finisher in the respondent's U.S. House election and the respondent's U.S. Senate elections as closer elections spur higher turnout. Results presented in these appendices are consistent with results presented in text.

Figure 2 displays the predicted probabilities of independents/third-party registrants of four racial groups in three different types of primary elections. The y-axis displays each ethnic or racial group and the figure is only for registered independents. The x-axis is the predicted probability from the model of turnout in primary elections displayed in the appendix. The center line in each category indicates the point estimate of the predicted probability, and the bars that extend on the sides are the 95-percent confidence intervals around the predicted probabilities.

Most notably, as seen in Figure 2 the predicted probability of an independent/third-

party registrant voting in a top-two or open primary is much higher than the predicted probability of voting in a closed primary. Independent and third-party voters across all four of the racial groups we study (Latinx, White, Black, and Asian American) are more likely to vote in an open or top-two primary rather than a closed primary (as a reminder, when we refer to “independent voters,” this includes both those not registered with a party and those registered with a third party). These are estimates based on survey reports subsequently validated that the voter did turn out.

These results for closed primaries are of course due to the formal barrier to independents from participating. Most registered voters coded as a 1 in the Independent/third party variable are barred from voting in closed primaries as they are registered independents. The relatively low frequency of participation found on this variable is driven by third-party registrants also coded as 1. However, this low baseline serves to compare to the relative turnout levels among voters of color and whites in open and top-two primaries, the main question of interest.

In terms of primary election turnout, the most sizable difference exists for white voters, who have a 5.64% probability of voting in a closed primary compared to a 24.82% probability of voting in a top-two primary. Asian American voters are also more likely to participate in the top-two primary – there is an 8.75 percentage point difference between likelihood of voting in a closed primary versus a top-two primary (based on predicted probabilities) for Asian Americans.

Black independent voters are much more likely to vote in an open primary. The predicted probability for Black independent voters is 17.93% in an open primary compared to 4.68% in a closed primary. Interestingly, in open primaries, Black and white voters have similar predicted probabilities of turning out to vote. Thus, the use of open primaries mobilizes about one-fifth of the Black electorate and about one-fifth of the white electorate, after controlling for other socioeconomic factors such as income, education,

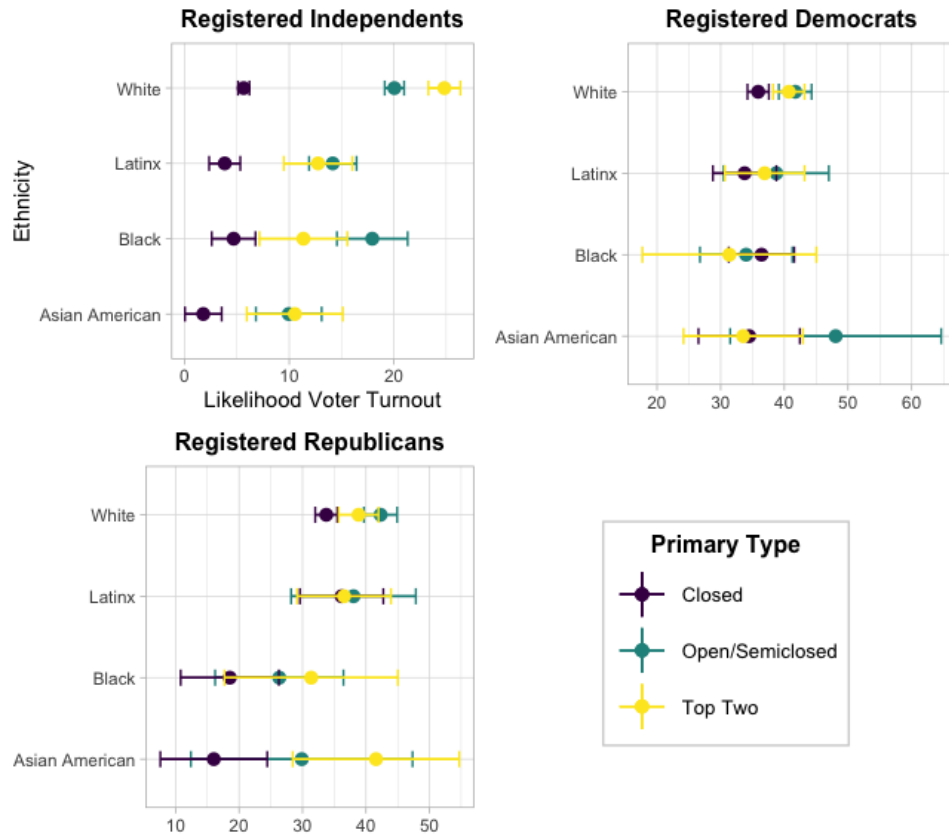
and gender.

Among Latinx voters, an open primary is associated with a 14.15% predicted probability of turning out compared to 3.83% in a closed primary. Both open and top-two primaries do not require a voter to be formally registered with a party, and the gap between predicted probabilities of turning out to vote in a top-two primary versus an open primary is much smaller and not statistically significant (with the exception of white independents) compared to the gap between either of these systems and a closed primary system. While Black voters' likelihood of voting in open primaries matched that of white voters, Latinx voters' likelihood of voting in open primaries is lower than Black and white voters.

Our evidence of greater turnout at the individual level across racial groups is important, as previous work on the top-two primary has not disaggregated by race and ethnicity, and this past work has often found small or no effects of the top-two primary on primary election turnout (McGhee 2014; though see Geras and Crespin 2018). As we have found for independents, top-two and open primaries are associated with higher turnout among all racial and ethnic groups relative to closed primaries – with the largest effects for Black and white voters. However, compared to open primaries, top-two primaries are associated with higher turnout only for white voters. For voters of color, the top-two primary and open primaries yield similar levels of voter turnout. An implication is that to understand the formal effect of an electoral institution on voter turnout, it is important to examine voters by race and ethnic group given different baseline propensities for these groups to participate in first-round primaries.

We also want to examine differences that may exist in voter turnout across voters who are registered as Democrats or Republicans. If the effects discovered in Figure 2 in regard to independents are driven not by independent registration status but instead by some other factor, then we may also observe similarly low levels of turnout among Democrats

Figure 3: Voter Turnout in Primary Elections by Independents, Democrats, and Republicans by Primary Type & Race/Ethnicity of Voter



and Republicans in closed primaries. As Figure 3 shows, this is not the case: Democratic and Republican registered voters of all racial and ethnic racial groups are much more likely to turn out in all primary elections when compared to independent voters.

Within each racial and ethnic group, there are few differences in primary election type and the likelihood of turning out to vote. For example, among registered Democrats, all voters – regardless of race/ethnicity and regardless of primary type – turn out at rates of approximately 40% or so (when looking at the confidence intervals around each primary type within each group). Similarly, for registered Republicans, Figure 3 shows that Latinx and white Republicans turn out at similar rates to one another and also at similar rates within each primary type. There are fewer Asian American and African American

Republicans in the data, so the confidence intervals are much larger in the Republican turnout part of Figure 3 for these two groups.

The results of Figures 2 and 3 show that the effect of primary institutions is felt entirely with registered independents. No major differences exist across voters of different racial and ethnic backgrounds nor across primary types for registered Democrats and Republicans. Lack of mobilization of voters of color in primaries, often of scholarly interest, is confined mostly to voters of color registered as independents. Confirming our theoretical expectations, the primary type mattered for predicting primary turnout. Open primaries, and to a lesser extent top-two primaries, are associated with higher turnout for independents across all groups. Interestingly, though, the open primary increases turnout for two groups the most and at similar rates – Black independent voters and white independent voters. For Latinx and Asian American independent voters, the open primary and the top-two primary also increases primary turnout quite a bit within these groups, but not at the same levels found with Black and white voters.

Given our earlier data showing that Latinx and Asian American voters are more likely than whites to be registered as independents in closed primary states, the results of Figures 2 and 3 suggest a significant demobilizing effect of closed primaries on primary turnout for these groups. Interestingly, open and top-two primaries increase turnout for people of color – and also increase turnout for whites (at higher rates than Latinx and Asian American voters).

5 Results: Turning Out to Vote in General Elections

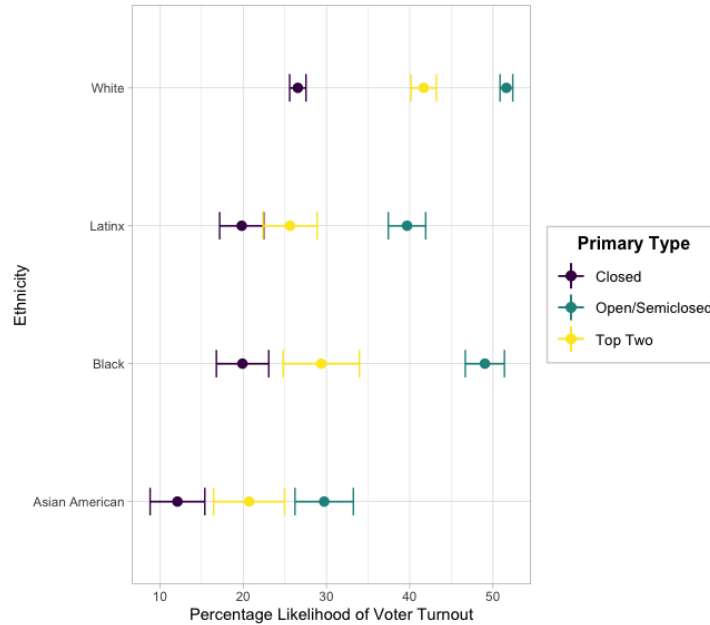
Figure 4 displays the predicted probabilities of independent voters turning out to vote in the general election by primary type and by race/ethnicity of the voter. Independent voters across all groups (white, Latinx, Black, and Asian American) are less likely to turn out to vote in the general election if their state holds a closed primary election.

Asian American independents hold the lowest predicted turnout of all the groups at 12.10 percent. Similarly, Black independent voters and Latinx independent voters are less likely to turn out to vote in a general election if their state holds a closed primary compared to other open or top-two primaries. The likelihood of turnout in the general election for Latinx independents in a closed primary state is 19.82%, while the predicted probability of turnout for Black independents is 19.91%. White independent voters are also less likely to turn out to vote, with a predicted probability of 26.56% turnout in a closed primary state.

When we compare the probability of turning out to vote for independents in all racial/ethnic groups in a general election in open and top-two primary states, it becomes clear that open and top-two primaries are generally associated with higher turnout. Latinx independent voters are less likely to turn out in a general election when residing in a closed primary state compared to a state that holds open primaries. Latinx independents in a closed primary state are 19.82% likely to turn out to vote in a general election; however, the probability for voters of the same group to turn out for a general election in an open primary state is 39.68%. Latinx independent voters double their likelihood of turning out in an open primary state general election compared to a closed primary state general election.

Figure 4 shows that the same can be said for the other groups in our analysis. Black independents in an open primary state are more likely to turn out to vote in a general election at 49.03% compared to those in a closed primary state (19.91%). Likewise, the probability of Asian American independents in an open primary state turning out for a general election is 29.73%, which is more than double the 12.10 percent likelihood of a closed primary state. The same applies to white independent voters in a closed primary state who are 26.56% likely to turn out to vote in a general election; however, they are 51.61% likely to turn out to vote in a general election when their state holds open

Figure 4: General Election Turnout from Independents by Race/Ethnicity & Primary Type

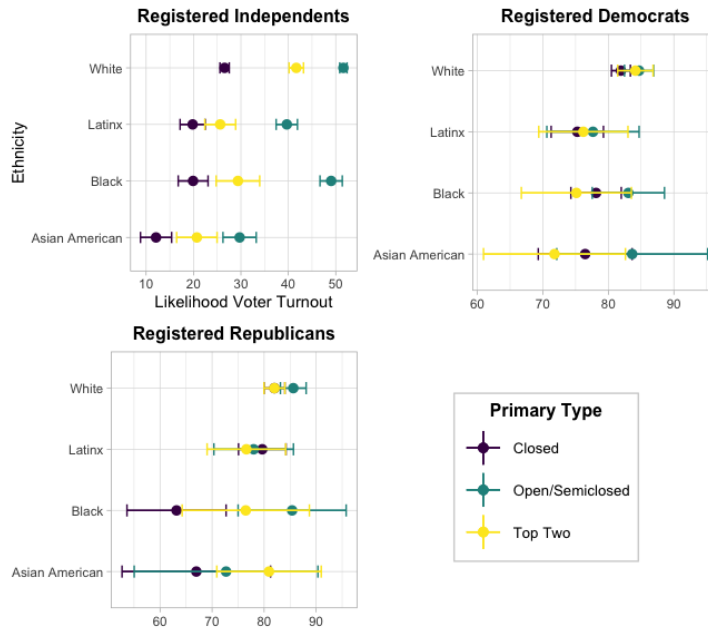


primaries.

An interesting takeaway exists in Figure 4, consistent with the results on primary turnout. The presence of open and top-two primaries leads to much higher turnout among people of color registered as independents than in states with closed primaries. Thus, these open primary systems are associated with greater general election turnout for independent voters of color.

However, the mobilizing effect for independent white voters is as large, or in most instances, larger than the mobilizing effect of open primaries for independent voters of color. This suggests that a policy solution – reforms encouraging open primaries – could increase voter turnout for voters of color who are independent. Reformers looking to increase voter turnout for people of color could read these results as evidence in support of adopting open primaries as a mechanism to increase turnout among voters of color. On the other hand, there are even larger levels of voter turnout among white voters in open primary states, which means that the racial turnout gap found in closed primaries between

Figure 5: Voter Turnout in General Elections by Independents, Democrats, and Republicans by Primary Type & Race/Ethnicity of Voter



white voters and voters of color persists in states that have adopted open primaries.

In Figure 5, we turn to the predicted probabilities for Democratic and Republican voters in general elections by race/ethnicity and by primary system type (alongside the results for independent general election voters). Figure 5’s results indicate that both Republican and Democratic voters of all ethnic and racial groups are predicted to turnout at similar rates regardless of primary type (consistent with the results from the primary election turnout analyses). However, independent voters in a closed primary system across all groups are less likely to turnout to vote in a general election compared to Republican and Democratic voters within those same closed primary states.

For instance, Latinx Republican voters in a closed primary system are 79.64% likely to turnout to vote in a general election, and Democratic Latinx voters are 75.26% likely to turnout to vote. Unlike the probability of turnout for Latinx independent voters (19.82%), Republican and Democratic Latinx voters have higher probabilities of turnout

in a general election. The probability of turnout in a general election for Asian American and Black independent voters in a closed primary system is also less than the probability of turnout for Republican and Democratic Asian American voters and Republican and Democratic Black voters. Asian American Republican voters are 66.97% likely to turn out in a general election in a closed system; while Asian American independents are only 12.10% likely to turn out under the same conditions. Similarly, Democratic Asian American voters are associated with a 76.46% likelihood of turnout in a general election when in a closed primary system. Moreover, in a closed primary system, Black Republican voters are 63.17% likely to turn out in a general election, and Black Democratic voters are 78.12% likely to turn out. This is in comparison to the low likelihood of turnout for Black Independent voters, which is 19.91%.

Though white independent voters are more likely to turn out than independents in the other racial groups, the probability of turnout is not higher among white major-party registrants relative to party-registered voters of color. White Republican voters in a closed primary system are 81.98 percent likely to vote in a general election, and the probability of turnout in a general election for white Democratic voters in a closed primary system is 81.91%. This is a stark contrast to white independents, who are only 26.56% likely to vote in a general election.

Thus, our findings indicate that while Democrats and Republicans across all ethnic and racial groups are associated with similar levels of general election turnout regardless of primary type, independents and particularly independent voters of color are much less likely to turn out to vote in a general election when they live in a closed-primary state. Figures 4 and 5 reveal that open and top-two primaries are associated with higher turnout among voters of color. Open and top-two primaries also lead to increased turnout among whites, which leads to a higher racial gap in voter turnout between, for instance, white voters and Latinx voters. But Black and white voters have no racial gap in voting,

among independents, in the open primary system. Latinx and Asian American voters are the two groups most likely to be registered as independents in closed primary states compared to Black voters and white voters, and the results suggests this matters for lack of participation in the general election for Latinx and Asian American voters.

6 Conclusion

We argue that all independent voters, but particularly voters of color, are less likely to vote in states with closed primary elections. Independent voters across the board are less likely to participate in primary and general elections in closed-primary states where party registration is required in order to vote in a primary. A state having a closed primary election most strongly demobilizes Asian American and Latinx voters, so a conversion from a closed primary system to an open primary system might result in significantly higher turnout among these groups. However, open and top-two primaries are associated with greater turnout across all ethnic and racial groups, so it is possible that white voters would benefit most from states switching to an open or top-two system due to the initially higher propensity for whites to turn out regardless of primary system. Advocates for increasing the civic engagement of voters of color should consider the effects of closed primary structures when they interact with other barriers to political participation faced by voters of color. Our findings suggest that a general move towards open and top-two primaries may expand the numbers of voters who participate.

The impact of formal electoral institutions on participation by Latinx and Asian Americans is particularly stark. Voters in these racial and ethnic groups are much more likely to be registered as independents, and their participation is formally barred in closed primary elections and drops in general elections in closed primary states. Closed primary systems deter Latinx and Asian American voters from participating with potential disparate impact given higher rates of independent registration compared to whites.

This research is foundational because we are the first to examine the differential impact of primary election institutions on voters across four racial and ethnic groups by voter party registration. Institutional impacts on voters across all four of these racial and ethnic groups is rarely studied, even though these differing levels of participation have significant implications for the representation of Black, Latinx, and Asian American voters (Gay 2001; Grose 2006). Nevertheless, there are some limitations and more avenues for future research. There are few surveys that have substantial numbers of voters of color in general and independent voters of color specifically, though we were fortunate to use the CCES with its very large sample size. Given differential in group sizes across party and race/ethnicity, we are more certain in our statistical claims about respondents from groups that were in larger numbers in the CCES, such as Latinx independents, Latinx Democrats, white independents, and white Democrats. We also conduct our study using observational data which limits us from making causal claims. Future researchers could conduct lab experiments to test the causal relationship between primary systems and turnout; or look for exogenous institutional changes.

In this article, we argue and find that independent voters of color are disproportionately negatively impacted by closed primary elections, but future research should explore why it is that voters of color, and in particular Latinx and Asian American voters, register as independent voters in the first place. While this article analyzes turnout for voters of color who are registered as independent or not registered with any major party, we do not consider what it means for these voters to identify as independent and what their views might mean. Because we were interested in the formal barriers for closed primary systems vis-à-vis open systems, we theorize about and measure independent registrants.

Few scholars simultaneously examine the party identification and party registration choices of independent voters of color. Latinx and Asian American voters tend to *identify* as partisans at similar rates as white voters, yet they *register* as independents more

frequently. There may be value in unpacking whether social factors such as the legacy of structural racism in party politics motivate voters of color to *register* as independent for consistently different reasons from white voters. In addition, some Asian American and Latinx voters are registered as independents even while maintaining fairly high partisan identifications and attachments. With growing numbers of immigrant voters of color in the U.S., this independent registration may have differential and demobilizing impacts due to the effects of formal barriers to participation.

Voters of color who register as independents are less likely to vote than white independents in general elections in closed-primary states. Thus, a solution to increase voter turnout among independent voters of color would be to expand the use of open and top-two primary systems across the U.S. states. However, our research shows that the adoption of such open primary systems would dramatically improve turnout among white independents but would increase turnout at more attenuated rates among independent voters of color. Thus, the closed system disfranchises independent voters of color, but the differential turnout among white independents relative to voters of color in open systems is vast and favoring whites.

It is essential to study voter turnout in response to electoral institutional differences because voting is central to democracy. Outcomes of policy conflicts are often determined by which side manages to mobilize more of its supporters (Schattschneider 1960). If voters of color are disproportionately demobilized by closed primary institutions, then the needs of voters of color are less likely to be represented at national and state levels. Such an outcome only intensifies the barriers faced by marginalized communities, and attitudinal factors that have previously been found to lower participation of voters of color may have their roots in institutional practices and restrictions. Our study demonstrates the effect that primary structures can have on turnout for both primary and general elections, and it points to potential policy measures that could increase turnout of voters of color.

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