

Are Caucuses Bad for Democracy?

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On 4 March 2008, Texas held both primary elections and caucuses statewide to select delegates to the Democratic National Convention. This unique, hybrid procedure, dubbed the “Texas Two-Step,” took place on the same day and was open to the same universe of voters, but the similarities did not extend much further. Participation in the primary, in which nearly 2.9 million ballots were cast, vastly exceeded turnout in the caucuses, which attracted an estimated 1.1 million voters across the state. This is not atypical for caucuses, which tend to attract fewer participants than primaries. More crucially, the two elections yielded different outcomes. With 50.9 percent of the vote, Hillary Clinton bested Barack Obama’s 47.4 percent in the primary, but Obama won the caucuses with support from 56.2 percent of participants, compared to Clinton’s 43.7 percent. The results in Texas mirrored a more general pattern in the 2008 contest for the Democratic nomination, in which caucus participants favored Obama while primary voters were more favorable to Clinton. In the end, Obama won in 14 out of 16 caucus states, while Clinton was victorious in 22 out of 39 primaries.¹ Are such differential outcomes byproducts of systematic differences between primary elections and caucuses? If so, is one system of preference expression superior to the other?

These questions and the results observed in the 2008 cycle highlight the impact of institutional variation on voter preferences and election outcomes. Put more bluntly, the rules of the game matter. Scholars and practitioners alike have acknowledged this reality, and have grappled consistently with evaluating the effects of electoral institutions and implementing reforms accordingly.² In

¹ David Epstein, Massimo Morelli, and Sharyn O’Halloran. “Caucuses and Primaries under Proportional Representation” (paper presented at the Workshop on the Political Economy of Democracy, Barcelona, Spain (5–7 June 2008).

² Bruce Cain, Todd Donovan, and Caroline J. Tolbert, eds., *Democracy in the States: Experiments in Election Reform* (Washington, DC: Brookings, 2008).

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terms of presidential selection, few aspects of the electoral process have been as consistently controversial as presidential nominations. Lacking clear guidance from the U.S. Constitution about how to structure presidential nominations, parties have experimented with various options for over two centuries. Reform measures are considered after almost every presidential election cycle, and major overhauls have been implemented by both parties over the past three decades.³ The changes, operating in an environment of broader sociopolitical shifts, have led to a wide range of intended and unintended consequences.

Analysts have monitored these developments closely, and their observations have raised important questions about the rationality of nominating procedures. Contemporary presidential nominations are routinely characterized as chaotic and unstable,⁴ and some critics go so far as to claim that current practices are fundamentally unfair and that they exert perverse effects that distort public preferences. These are serious allegations that accentuate concerns about the representative nature of American democracy. Citizens in privileged states that vote early on in the process, for example, may be more influential than subsequent voters.⁵ There is also evidence that nominations are unduly influenced by political elites—primary voters and convention delegates—who are unrepresentative of the electorate overall and who reflect higher socioeconomic status and more extreme political views.⁶

For their part, parties have adopted a number of reforms to address some of these concerns in recent years. The growing number of direct primaries aims to broaden participation in nominations, for example. Democrats established delegate quotas to ensure that specific demographic groups—women, minorities, young voters—would be represented at conventions. Both parties have also attempted to address severe frontloading in presidential nominations, but incentives for states to leapfrog to the front of the nomination election calendar in pursuit of greater influence are too powerful and parties typically lack the mechanisms to impose such demands.⁷ As the 2008 nomination cycle

³ John Jackson and William Crotty, *The Politics of Presidential Selection*. 2d ed. (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 2001).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵ William G. Mayer and Andrew E. Busch, *The Front-Loading Problem in Presidential Nominations* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institute Press, 2004).

⁶ Barbara Norrander, “Democratic Marathon, Republican Sprint: The 2008 Presidential Nominations,” in Janet Box-Steffensmeier and Steven Schier, eds., *The American Elections of 2008* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2009); John Green and John Jackson, “Party Profiles: National Convention Delegates,” in Costas Panagopoulos, ed., *Rewiring Politics: Presidential Nominating Conventions in the Media Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007); V.O. Key, *American State Politics: An Introduction* (New York: Knopf, 1956); John Geer, “Assessing the Representativeness of Electorates in Presidential Primaries,” *American Journal of Political Science* 32 (December 1988): 929–945.

⁷ Mayer and Busch, *The Front-Loading Problem in Presidential Nominations*; Lonna Atkeson and Cherie Maestas, “Meaningful Participation and the Evolution of the Reformed Presidential Nominating System,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 42 (January 2009): 59–64.

showed, even the threat of losing all influence at the presidential conventions—perhaps the most serious sanction retained by the national parties—was ineffective in preventing states from violating party rules about the nomination calendar.⁸

One reform option that has, until recently, eluded serious debate is the abolition of caucuses. Despite steady growth over the past few decades in the number of states that rely on primary elections to choose delegates to the presidential nominating conventions, about one in seven voters in 2008 was required to declare presidential preferences in caucuses. Scholars routinely lament anemic participation in caucuses,⁹ even compared to primary elections, and the participation inequalities between these two types of nomination contests ignite concerns about the potential for introducing bias and misrepresentation in the electoral process. There is evidence that caucuses attract ideologically extreme participants¹⁰ and that substantive differences between primaries and caucuses will lead to systematic differences in candidate choice.¹¹ But serious discussion about the relative merits of caucuses, compared to primaries, has been rare, and there has been no dedicated effort to reform—or abolish—caucuses if primaries are determined, based on a set of criteria, to be superior.

Rumblings of such proposals surfaced against the backdrop of the 2008 election cycle.¹² An issue brief drafted by Tova Wang of the Century Foundation called outright for caucuses to be replaced with primaries. Wang weighed the “salutary aspects” of caucuses—most notably, collective deliberation of candidate options and issues—against numerous drawbacks and concluded that caucuses are “a deeply flawed method for selecting a nominee.”¹³ Wang argued that voters, especially new voters, will have difficulty navigating caucuses’ arcane rules and procedures and that participation will be discouraged by the strenuous and time-consuming demands (one time, location) caucuses place on voters. She added that caucuses discourage voters who do not want to speak or vote publicly, that campaigns have incentives to prioritize only the most avid partisans and consistent voters, and that caucuses neglect eligible voters who are out of state on caucus day (including members of the armed services serving overseas or away from home, workers for government agencies or nonprofits who are on assignment out of the country, and students who

⁸ Norrander, “Democratic Marathon, Republican Sprint.”

⁹ Walter Stone, Alan I. Abramowitz, and Ronald B. Rapoport, “How Representative Are the Iowa Caucuses?” in Peverill Squire ed., *The Iowa Caucuses and the Presidential Nominating Process* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1989).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Epstein, Morelli, and O’Halloran, “Caucuses and Primaries”; see also David Redlawsk, Daniel Bowen, and Caroline J. Tolbert, “Comparing Caucus and Registered Voter Support for the 2008 Presidential Candidates in Iowa,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 41 (January 2008): 129–138.

¹² Tova Wang, “Has America Outgrown the Caucus? Some Thoughts on Reshaping the Nomination Contest” (New York: The Century Foundation, 2007), accessed at www.tcf.org/publications/electionform/caucusbrief.pdf, 4 October 2009.

¹³ Wang, “Has America Outgrown the Caucus,” 6.

are attending out-of-state schools), who are disabled, or who have limited English proficiency. These sentiments were echoed frequently in the media in 2008 and were featured prominently at the Democratic National Convention, where Clinton supporters unsuccessfully pushed to amend the party platform to officially ban caucuses in future presidential nominating contests.¹⁴ From the perspective of public opinion, survey data about public preferences about caucuses, compared to primaries, is lacking. Despite evidence that public support for a wide-range of reforms to the presidential nomination process is widespread,¹⁵ Americans have rarely been probed specifically about their attitudes toward caucuses.

In this paper, I compare caucuses and primaries directly and seek to determine whether one system advances democratic principles more effectively than the other. The standards one could use to evaluate how well these two nomination institutions advance notions of democracy can vary, but in this paper, I focus primarily on representation. A fundamental premise that underlies the current study is that electoral institutions that minimize bias (in terms of representativeness) are preferable. Even as evidence that nominating electorates are generally “unrepresentative” is abundant,¹⁶ the question of whether caucuses are more (or less) unrepresentative compared to primaries remains unsettled. Systematic imbalances in participation rooted in electoral institutions, like nomination mechanisms, can compromise the essence of representative democracy in America by skewing outcomes and injecting bias into the electoral process. Specifically, I look for evidence of such effects by comparing patterns of participation in nomination contests in 2008 and assessing whether caucus electorates differed meaningfully from primary electorates in terms of demographic and attitudinal traits as well as candidate choice. The examinations that follow compare primary and caucus voters, as well as the voting population overall, in terms of the distributions of demographic and attitudinal attributes in order to assess the degree to which congruence with the public at-large may be achieved more successfully by one process versus the alternative.

DATA AND METHODS

I rely on two main sources of data for the analyses that follow. I analyze aggregate voter turnout data¹⁷ for the 2008 nominating contests to assess

¹⁴ Peter Nicholas, “Clinton Supporters at Democratic Meeting Fail in Bid to End Caucus System,” *Los Angeles Times* (10 August 2008), accessed at <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/aug/10/nation/na-campaign10>, 20 September 2009.

¹⁵ Costas Panagopoulos, “The Polls—Electoral Reform,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 68 (Winter 2004): 623–641.

¹⁶ Key, *American State Politics*; Geer, “Assessing the Representativeness of Electorates in Presidential Primaries.”

¹⁷ Michael McDonald, “United States Election Project: 2008 Presidential Primary Turnout Rates, 2008,” accessed at http://elections.gmu.edu/Voter_Turnout_2004_Primary.html, 4 October 2009.

the degree to which rates of participation differed between primary and caucus contests.

To compare the demographic characteristics and policy preferences of caucus and primary electorates, I analyze individual-level survey data collected by the 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). The 2008 CCES survey was conducted over the Internet by YouGov/Polimetrix and interviewed 32,800 adults in three waves. The study constructed a very large sample capable of capturing variation across a wide variety of legislative constituencies, and the state-level samples are sufficiently large as to measure with a reasonable degree of precision the distribution of voters' preferences within most states. Analyses along these lines using survey data were previously quite difficult, given limited sample sizes and the fact that many surveys fail to probe respondents about detailed voting behavior during the nomination phases of campaigns. Exit polls data, which provide details about the characteristics and views of primary election voters, are typically unavailable for caucuses.

PARTICIPATION IN 2008 CAUCUSES AND PRIMARIES

2008 was a watershed year in terms of voter participation in nomination contests. Open contests for both parties' nominations that attracted diverse fields of candidates, along with an especially protracted battle for the Democratic nomination, fueled interest in the presidential nominations. Voter turnout in the 2008 primaries and caucuses shattered previous records. Michael McDonald estimates that over 61 million ballots were cast in these contests,¹⁸ reflecting sizable increases over previous cycles.¹⁹ Democrats set turnout records in 23 states, and Republicans in 10 states.²⁰ To what extent did turnout in 2008 differ by nomination election type in 2008 however?

Numerous studies have established that rates of participation in caucuses tend to be substantially lower than those in primary elections.²¹ A leading explanation for lower participation in caucuses is that the costs associated with participation (see discussion above) are considerably higher compared to primary elections. Other structural features may also account for lower turnout rates in caucuses. A recent field experimental study finds that citizens'

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Bruce Altschuler, "Selecting Presidential Nominees by National Primary: An Idea Whose Time Has Come?" *The Forum* 5 (December 2008): Article 5, accessed at: <http://www.bepress.com/forum/vol5/iss4/art5>, 4 October 2009.

²⁰ Caroline J. Tolbert, Amanda Keller, and Todd Donovan, "A Modified National Primary: State Losers and Support for Changing the Presidential Nominating Process" (paper presented at the Academy of Political Science Symposium on Presidential Nomination Reform, New York, NY, 23 October 2009).

²¹ Key, *American State Politics*; Norrander, "Democratic Marathon, Republican Sprint; Tolbert and Donovan, "A Modified National Primary."

aversion to publicly revealing political preferences and to the prospect of social pressure discourages participation.²² Concerns about the implications of low rates of political participation have been voiced by political scientists since V.O. Key's (1956) landmark study. Scholars argue that low turnout produces biases between the general population and the voting public,²³ a concern that is conceivably exacerbated by caucuses, which attract fewer participants to the events.

My analysis of voter turnout data for the 2008 nomination contests reveals that participation was, in fact, lower in caucus states compared to primary states. For the most direct comparison, I compare overall statewide turnout rates among eligible voters in states in which both parties held either a primary or caucuses on the same day in 2008. In these states, 31.1 percent of eligible voters participated in primary contests on average, while 8.2 percent participated in caucuses (difference significant at $p < .01$ level). For a more rigorous test, I estimate a multivariate linear regression model (ordinary least squares) that presents eligible voter turnout in these states as a function of whether the parties held caucuses or a primary, controlling for the date of the contests (the number of days following the start of the process on 3 January) and whether contests occurred after John McCain had clinched the GOP nomination on 5 March 2008. The results suggest that the level of participation in caucus states was 22.1 percentage points lower on average ($SE = 3.4$, $p < .01$; $N = 40$; $R^2 = .58$),²⁴ than in states in which both parties held primary elections, even after controls are in place.

I turn next to examining the implications of the participation inequities I observe between primary and caucus states by comparing the demographic composition and political attitudes of these electorates.

DEMOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION

Early studies demonstrated that voters in primary elections were demographically dissimilar from the general public, raising concerns about democratic representation. Several studies examined primary voters' traits²⁵ and generally found evidence of misrepresentation. Primary voters tended to reflect higher socioeconomic status and more-extreme political views.²⁶ One early study of

²² Christian Grose and Carrie Russell, "Social Desirability and Voting in Public: A Field Experiment of Voter Turnout in the 2008 Iowa Caucus (paper presented at the State Politics and Policy Conference, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA, 30–31 May 2008).

²³ Key, *American State Politics*; E.E. Schattschneider, *The Semi-Sovereign People* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1960).

²⁴ Complete estimates available from the author upon request.

²⁵ Austin Ranney, "Turnout and Representation in Presidential Primary Elections," *American Political Science Review* 66 (March 1972): 21–37; Geer, "Assessing the Representativeness of Electorates in Presidential Primaries."

²⁶ Geer, "Assessing the Representativeness of Electorates in Presidential Primaries."

the 1972 contests in Minnesota concluded that “caucuses may appear to perform marginally worse than primaries ... [but that neither] institution consistently represents party identifiers particularly well in this area.”²⁷ Studies that compare the demographic characteristics of caucus participants to those of primary voters are surprisingly rare, however, partly due to the limitations in data availability discussed above. For the most part, studies that do advance such comparisons²⁸ are often restricted to one or to a small number of states; moreover, over the past few decades, the lion’s share of scholarly attention to caucuses has been devoted to the Iowa caucuses,²⁹ but these contests are not necessarily representative of caucuses nationwide.

I use data from the 2008 CCES to compare caucus and primary voters in terms of demographic characteristics. I rely on respondents’ self-reported participation in a primary or caucus in 2008.³⁰ One key advantage of this approach is that these data enable me to examine caucuses at large, cross-nationally, rather than to focus on one or a handful of states. Below, I present a series of comparisons between key groups of voters. Table 1 presents the composition of the primary and caucus electorates in 2008 across a range of attributes as well as the distribution of these traits in the U.S. adult population as a whole.³¹ Overall, the evidence I present indicates that caucus participants were significantly different from primary voters across most demographic dimensions I examine. Caucus voters in 2008 were more male, more educated, and less religious (in terms of regular church attendance) compared to primary voters. Caucuses attracted a larger share of Hispanic voters, compared to primary elections, perhaps because many states with high concentrations of Latinos hold caucuses, while primaries attracted higher percentages of African Americans. Overall, across the six demographic characteristics (age excluded) I evaluate, the distributions of traits among both caucus participants and primary voters are substantively similar to those in the population as a whole, although there are indications that caucus participants are more dissimilar from the population, compared to primary voters. The mean absolute difference in the distributions between the U.S. population and caucus participants is 5.6 percentage points, while it is 4.0 percentage points for primary voters.

I proceed by exploring the relationship between key demographic characteristics and voting in nomination contests in 2008 more systematically, using a multinomial regression model. The dependent variable in the analysis

²⁷ Thomas Marshall, “Turnout and Representation: Caucuses Versus Primaries,” *American Journal of Political Science* 22 (February 1978): 169–182.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Christopher Hull, *Grassroots Rules: How the Iowa Caucus Helps Elect American Presidents* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

³⁰ See Appendix for question wording.

³¹ Estimates for the U.S. population I report throughout are derived from the CCES survey using survey weights to adjust for U.S. Census estimates.

TABLE 1

Comparing Demographic Characteristics and Political Attitudes of Primary Voters, Caucus Participants, and U.S. Adults (2008)

| | United States | Caucus Voters | Primary Voters |
|--|---------------|---------------|----------------|
| Demographic characteristics | | | |
| Age (years) | 44.7 | 44.6 | 48.5*** |
| Female | 51.8 | 43.5 | 46.9** |
| White | 74.2 | 74.6 | 76.0 |
| Black | 11.8 | 7.8 | 12.3*** |
| Hispanic | 8.6 | 10.0 | 6.8*** |
| Education (some college) | 56.4 | 74.0 | 66.6*** |
| Church attendance (at least once a week) | 29.7 | 31.3 | 34.4** |
| Political attitudes | | | |
| Ideology (conservatism 0–100) | 54.1 | 47.2 | 54.9*** |
| Ideology (extremism 0–50) | 22.5 | 23.6 | 23.9 |
| Issue preferences | | | |
| Iraq (mistake) | 55.6 | 70.8 | 55.7*** |
| Health care (require) | 59.7 | 70.9 | 56.8*** |
| Abortion (always allow) | 42.1 | 51.1 | 43.2*** |
| Social Security (privatize) | 55.6 | 45.3 | 52.9*** |
| Affirmative action (support) | 44.5 | 52.2 | 41.1*** |

Source: 2008 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) (weighted).

Note: Statistical tests use one-way ANOVA to examine differences between caucus and primary voters.

Figures represent mean percentages unless noted otherwise.

** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$ level.

is coded 1 if the respondent voted in a caucus in 2008, 2 if the respondent voted in a primary, and 0 if the respondent did not vote in either a primary or a caucus (voting in a primary election is the base category). The results of the estimations are presented in Table 2. Column 1 explains voting in a caucus in 2008, compared to voting in a primary, while column 2 explains abstention from both nomination contest types, compared to voting in a primary. In many cases, the results of the analysis in column 2 are consistent with the bivariate analyses described above; for instance, women were, all else equal, less likely than men to participate in caucuses than to vote in primaries in 2008, as were older and more conservative voters. But the regression results also reveal that Hispanics and voters of other races were, on average and all else equal, more likely than white voters to vote in caucuses than in primaries, but blacks were as likely as white voters to do so. The results presented in column 1 indicate that education and church attendance levels exerted no discernible effect on voting in a caucus in 2008, relative to voting in a primary. Expanding further on the bivariate analyses presented in Table 1 to consider nonvoting in the 2008 nomination contests, the coefficients reported in column 2 suggest that women were more likely than men not to vote rather than to vote in a primary; younger, more-educated and more-religious voters were more likely to vote in a primary than to abstain, while the reverse was true for more-conservative voters. Hispanic voters and members of other races were more likely than

TABLE 2

Nomination Contest Participation and Demographic Characteristics (2008)

| | <i>Voted in Caucus</i> | <i>Did Not Vote in Primary or Caucus</i> |
|--|------------------------|--|
| Independent variables | (1) | (2) |
| Female | -.190** (.083) | .438*** (.026) |
| Age (years) | -.019*** (.002) | -.034*** (.001) |
| Black | -.191 (.177) | -.111*** (.042) |
| Hispanic | .415*** (.159) | .271*** (.048) |
| Other race | .439*** (.157) | .156*** (.057) |
| Education (some college) | -.059 (.089) | -.929*** (.026) |
| Church attendance (at least once a week) | .069 (.094) | -.401*** (.030) |
| Conservatism (0–100) | -.012*** (.001) | .002*** (.001) |
| Constant | -26.423*** (1.406) | 1.309*** (.121) |
| N | 30,799 | |
| Pseudo R^2 | .146 | |

Note: Multinomial logit regression (weighted) coefficients reported. Dependent variables coded 1 if respondent voted in a caucus, 2 if the respondent voted in a primary (base outcome), and 0 if the respondent did not vote in either a primary or a caucus in 2008. Standard errors in parentheses. Models include state-level fixed effects.

** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$.

white voters to abstain rather than vote in a primary, while black voters were significantly more likely to vote in a primary rather than not vote in 2008.

The next set of analyses focuses on demographic differences between caucus and primary voters within parties. I consider respondents who reported voting for a Democratic candidate in a 2008 caucus or primary as Democratic voters and vice versa for Republican voters. The comparisons are reported in Table 3. These data reveal that among supporters of Democratic candidates in the nomination phase of the 2008 election, caucus participants were younger, more male, more white, more Hispanic, and more religious (in terms of church attendance) than primary voters. Supporters of Republican candidates were younger, more male, better educated and more religious in caucuses compared to primaries. As a whole, GOP caucus attendees also comprised fewer minorities, but attracted a substantially larger share of Hispanics, compared to Republican primary voters. On average, mean levels of absolute differences in terms of the distributions of the six key demographics between caucus participants and primary voters are only slightly greater among Democratic voters in 2008 (5.3 vs. 5.1 percentage points respectively).

Table 4 compares caucus participants to the overall public in caucus states as well as primary voters to the overall public in primary states. These analyses are restricted to states in which both parties held either primaries or caucuses in 2008. The evidence I report suggests that caucus participants in 2008 were generally older, less female, less African American, and better educated than the public overall in caucus states. In primary states, voters were similarly older, less female, and better educated than the overall populations in these states. Primary voters were also more white, less Hispanic, and more religious.

TABLE 3

Comparing Demographic Characteristics and Political Attitudes of Primary Voters and Caucus Participants by Party (2008)

| | <i>Democratic Voters</i> | | <i>Republican Voters</i> | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|----------------|
| | <i>Caucus</i> | <i>Primary</i> | <i>Caucus</i> | <i>Primary</i> |
| Demographic characteristics | | | | |
| Age (years) | 44.1 | 46.7*** | 45.3 | 50.9*** |
| Female | 48.5 | 53.2*** | 32.9 | 39.7*** |
| White | 71.8 | 67.1*** | 81.1 | 87.6*** |
| Black | 10.9 | 20.4*** | 1.1 | 1.8 |
| Hispanic | 10.5 | 8.2** | 8.2 | 5.2*** |
| Education (some college) | 75.2 | 67.5*** | 73.0 | 65.2*** |
| Church attendance (once a week) | 22.6 | 25.4** | 52.4 | 46.7** |
| Political attitudes | | | | |
| Ideology (conservatism 0–100) | 34.5 | 37.9*** | 75.4 | 76.7 |
| Ideology (extremism 0–50) | 20.7 | 20.3 | 28.9 | 28.2 |
| Issue preferences | | | | |
| Iraq (mistake) | 89.5 | 82.7*** | 29.3 | 20.1*** |
| Health care (require) | 93.9 | 86.9*** | 20.2 | 18.2 |
| Abortion (always allow) | 66.1 | 62.1** | 16.5 | 18.1 |
| Social Security (privatize) | 28.2 | 33.8*** | 82.7 | 78.1** |
| Affirmative action (support) | 68.2 | 62.8*** | 15.6 | 12.4** |

Source: 2008 CCES (weighted).

Note: Figures represent mean percentages unless noted otherwise. Statistical tests use one-way ANOVA to examine differences between caucus and primary voters within-party.

** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$.

Analysis of these distributions reveals that the absolute differences in the overall distributions of these six traits (excluding age) between voters and the public in caucus states are larger on average than in primary states (5.6 to 4.1 percentage points, respectively.)

I find that caucus and primary voter demographics differ significantly across several dimensions. Overall, however, I conclude that these differences are not as substantively meaningful as critics of caucuses would lead us to believe. The key question, however, is whether these differences contribute to creating disparities or imbalances in terms of political attitudes or policy preferences that compromise democratic representation. I proceed with a series of analyses to address this question.

COMPARING PRIMARY AND CAUCUS VOTERS' POLITICAL ATTITUDES, ISSUE PREFERENCES, AND CANDIDATE CHOICE

Do caucus participants and primary voters have different political views and policy preferences? I assess attitudes about five policy areas on which CCES respondents were probed in 2008. I also compare respondents based on overall, self-reported ideology on a 0 to 100 scale (on which 100 represents the most conservative position and 0 the most liberal) as well as ideological extremism,

TABLE 4

Comparing Demographic Characteristics and Political Attitudes of Voters and the Public in Caucus and Primary States (2008)

| | Caucus States | | Primary States | |
|---------------------------------|---------------|--------|----------------|--------|
| | Public | Voters | Public | Voters |
| Demographic characteristics | | | | |
| Age (years) | 44.6 | 46.4* | 44.6 | 48.1** |
| Female | 48.6 | 36.9** | 52.0 | 47.0** |
| White | 86.1 | 87.1 | 72.6 | 75.0** |
| Black | 3.9 | 2.6** | 13.0 | 13.0 |
| Hispanic | 5.1 | 5.3 | 9.1 | 7.2** |
| Education (some college) | 60.1 | 76.6** | 56.1 | 67.0** |
| Church attendance (once a week) | 27.9 | 30.7 | 29.8 | 34.1** |
| Political attitudes | | | | |
| Ideology (conservatism 0–100) | 54.1 | 49.1** | 53.8 | 54.1 |
| Ideology (extremism 0–50) | 22.2 | 25.5** | 22.4 | 23.7** |
| Issue preferences | | | | |
| Iraq (mistake) | 55.4 | 68.3** | 55.9 | 57.0* |
| Health care (require) | 58.5 | 63.5* | 60.3 | 58.1** |
| Abortion (always allow) | 41.5 | 49.6** | 42.1 | 44.1** |
| Social Security (privatize) | 53.8 | 48.2** | 55.8 | 52.4** |
| Affirmative action (support) | 41.2 | 45.6 | 45.0 | 41.8** |

Source: 2008 CCES (weighted).

Note: Figures represent mean percentages unless noted otherwise. Statistical tests use one-way ANOVA to examine differences between voters and the public overall.

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$.

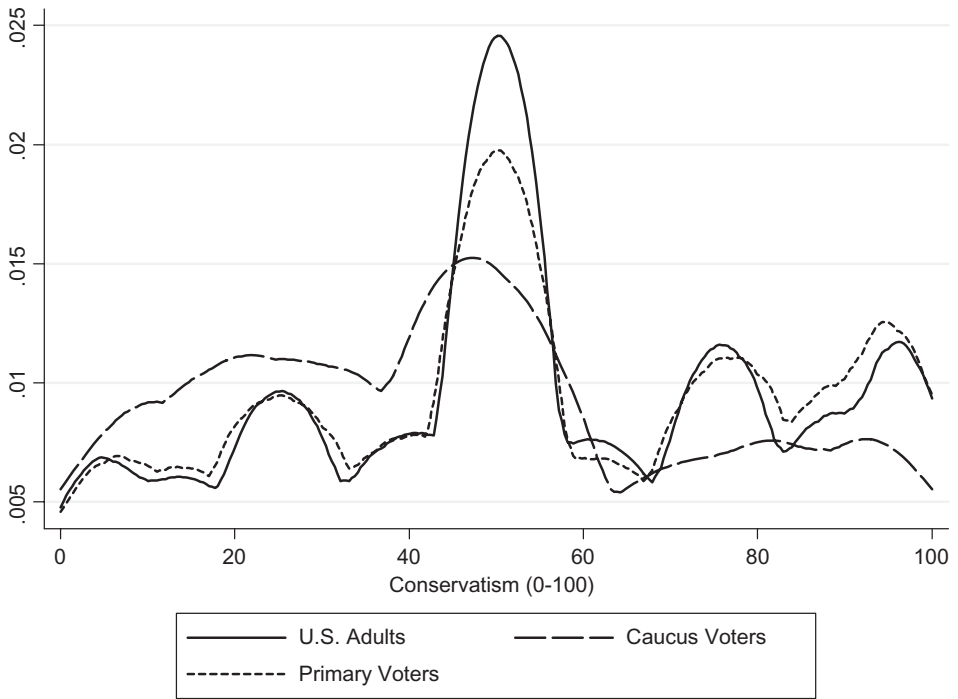
represented by the absolute distance between the respondent's self-placement on the conservatism scale and the midpoint (50).

We revisit Table 1 to compare caucus participants and primary voters to each other as well as to the U.S. public in 2008. The results indicate that primary voters were, overall, substantially more conservative (as indicated by ideological self-placement) on average, compared to caucus participants in 2008, but there is greater alignment between the ideological distribution of primary voters and the public than there is between caucus participants and the public. This result can be confirmed visually in Figure 1, which presents Kernell density distributions of conservatism separately for U.S. adults, caucus participants, and primary voters in 2008. A Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for equality of distribution functions confirms that the distribution of ideology differed significantly between caucus and primary voters (combined K-S = .17, $p = .01$).

In terms of ideological extremism, however, the initial, bivariate results suggest that primary voters were no more extreme than caucus attendees on average in 2008. On average, respondents who voted in a primary placed themselves 23.9 percentage points from the midpoint of the ideological self-placement scale, while caucus participants placed themselves 23.6 percentage points from the midpoint. On the whole, Americans situate themselves 22.5 percentage

FIGURE 1

Distribution of Ideology (Conservatism) among U.S. Adults, Caucus Voters, and Primary Voters in 2008 (Kernel Density Plot)



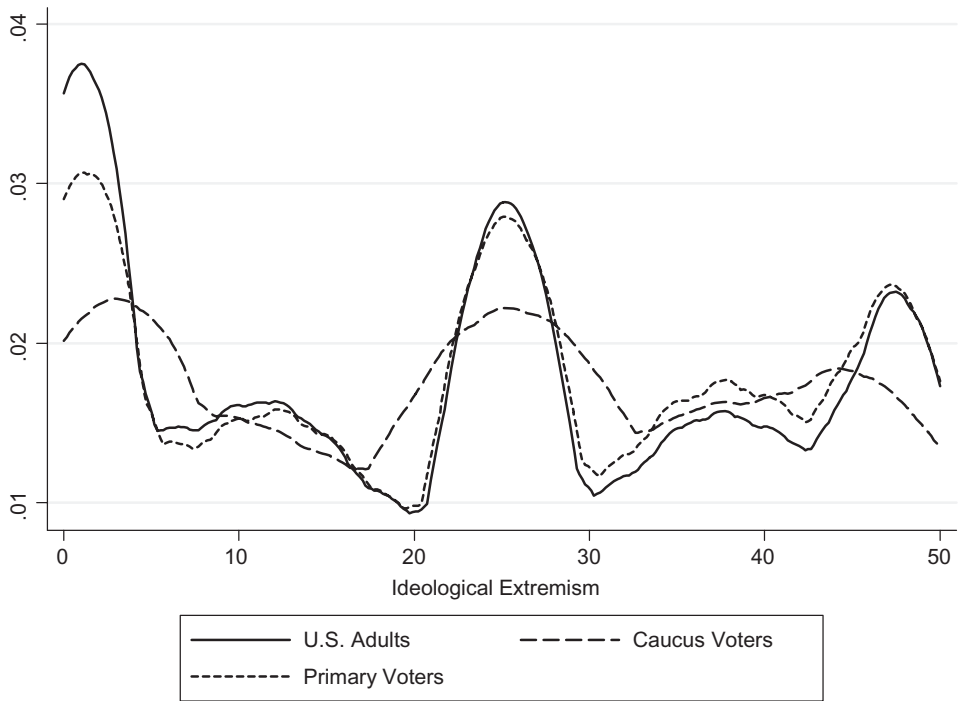
Source: 2008 CCES.

points from the midpoint, suggesting that both caucus and primary voters closely reflected the public overall in terms of ideological extremism. Visual inspection of the overall distributions of ideological extremism depicted in Figure 2 separately for these three sets of voters may suggest greater correspondence between primary voters and the public, compared to the overall distribution of ideological extremism of caucus participants, but a Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicates that ideological extremism was distributed similarly for caucus and primary voters alike in 2008 (combined K-S = .03, $p = .38$).

Primary voters' views across the range of issues I examined also differed significantly from the views of caucus voters. Generally speaking, there is clear evidence that caucus voters held more-extreme views on these issues, compared to both primary voters and to the population at large. Moreover, these estimates suggest that the public's policy preferences overall were more congruent with those of primary voters than with those of caucus voters. The mean absolute difference in levels of support for the issues I examine between the public and primary voters is 2.0 percentage points, while it is more than five times greater (10.7 percentage points) for caucus voters. This evidence supports

FIGURE 2

Distribution of Ideological Extremism among U.S. Adult, Caucus Voters and Primary Voters in 2008 (Kernel Density Plot)



Source: 2008 CCES.

the contention that primary voters' issue preferences reflect the overall distribution of preferences in the general population more closely than do caucus participants' views.

A more rigorous test of the impact of caucus voting on issue preferences can be conducted using multivariate regression analysis that incorporates simultaneous controls for key respondent characteristics. I estimate a series of such models (using Probit regression) separately for each of the five policy areas I examine. The dependent variables in the analyses are coded 1 if respondents indicated support for the policy position described, and 0 if opposed to the position. The main explanatory variable of interest is voting in a caucus, as opposed to voting in a primary. The samples are restricted to respondents who indicated that they voted in either a primary or a caucus in 2008. I include age, race, gender, education, ideology (conservatism), and whether respondents voted for a Democratic or Republican candidate in the primary or caucus, as well as state-level fixed effects, as controls in the models. The marginal impact of each attribute on the likelihood of expressing support for the designated policy position is reported in Table 5. The main variable of interest

TABLE 5

*Comparing Issue Preferences between Primary Voters and Caucus Participants in 2008
(Marginal Effects)*

| | <i>Iraq Mistake</i> | <i>Always Allow Abortion</i> | <i>Privatize Social Security</i> | <i>Require Health Care</i> | <i>Support Affirmative Action</i> |
|---|---------------------|------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Independent variables | | | | | |
| Caucus voter | .107*** (.023) | .006 (.022) | -.059*** (.023) | .093*** (.022) | .059*** (.023) |
| Female | -.057*** (.011) | .039*** (.010) | .014 (.010) | .019* (.011) | .091*** (.010) |
| Age (years) | .001** (.0004) | .002*** (.0004) | -.009*** (.0004) | .0004 (.0004) | .001*** (.0004) |
| Black | .100*** (.023) | -.056*** (.019) | .077*** (.020) | .175*** (.023) | .505*** (.018) |
| Hispanic | -.007 (.026) | -.102*** (.022) | -.010 (.026) | .053** (.026) | .269*** (.022) |
| Other race | -.012 (.024) | -.082*** (.021) | .041* (.022) | .006 (.023) | .114*** (.023) |
| Education (some college) | .035*** (.013) | .087*** (.012) | .025** (.012) | -.044*** (.013) | .012 (.012) |
| Voted for Democratic candidate in primary or caucus | .425*** (.013) | .215*** (.013) | -.352*** (.012) | .466*** (.012) | .301*** (.012) |
| Conservatism (0–100) | -.008*** (.0002) | -.009*** (.0003) | .006*** (.0003) | -.010*** (.0003) | -.006*** (.0003) |
| Constant | .143*** (.143) | .143 (.141) | .705*** (.151) | 1.043*** (.164) | -.456*** (.155) |
| N | 19,553 | 19,566 | 19,593 | 18,987 | 19,591 |
| Log pseudolikelihood | -8,164.595 | -9,843.421 | -10,339.824 | -6,640.774 | -9,245.542 |
| Pseudo R^2 | .389 | .267 | .234 | .485 | .306 |

Source: 2008 CCES.

Note: Figures represent marginal effects for designated attributes generated from probit regressions (weighted) with robust standard errors in parentheses. Dependent variables coded 1 if respondent expressed support for the policy, 0 otherwise. Models include state-level fixed effects. Sample restricted to voters who indicated that they participated in a caucus or voted in a primary election in 2008.

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$.

for the purposes of the current study is the indicator for caucus voting. Overall, caucus participants had significantly different views on four out of five of the issues I examine (the exception is abortion), even after controlling for key demographic and political characteristics. Caucus voters were more likely to believe Iraq was a mistake, more supportive of affirmative action and mandatory health care, and less supportive of privatizing social security, compared to primary voters in 2008, all else equal. This evidence implies that there were significant differences in terms of issue preferences between caucus attendees and primary voters in 2008.

The distribution of political attitudes between primary and caucus participants within parties is presented in Table 3. Among respondents who reported voting for a Democratic candidate in the primary election or caucus, caucus voters were significantly more liberal than primary voters. By contrast, among primary and caucus participants who indicated that they supported a Republican candidate in the nomination contests, I find no statistically significant

TABLE 6

Comparing Candidate Choices between Primary and Caucus Voters (2008)

| <i>Candidate</i> | <i>Primary Voters</i> | <i>Caucus Voters</i> |
|------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Democrats | | |
| Clinton | 38.8 | 32.2 |
| Obama | 56.6 | 60.9 |
| Edwards | 4.1 | 5.5 |
| Richardson | 0.9 | 1.4 |
| Republicans | | |
| McCain | 35.1 | 21.6 |
| Romney | 29.5 | 37.1 |
| Huckabee | 20.0 | 18.8 |
| Paul | 9.8 | 16.3 |
| Giuliani | 5.6 | 6.2 |

Source: 2008 CCES (weighted).

Note: Figures represent share of support among voters for candidates in each party, respectively.

difference in self-reported conservatism between caucus and primary voters. Interestingly, no statistically discernible differences emerge between primary and caucus voters in terms of ideological extremism for supporters of either party's candidates. Among Democratic supporters, caucus attendees held more-extreme views than did primary voters on four out of five policy areas (Social Security privatization attracted a higher level of support among Democratic primary voters). This was similarly the case among supporters of Republican candidates on three of the five issue areas I examine. I find no statistically reliable differences in levels of support for abortion or for requiring health care between Republican caucus attendees and primary voters.

Comparisons in terms of ideology and issue preferences between the public and voters in primary and caucus states are presented in Table 4. I remind readers that I restrict these analyses to states in which both parties held either a primary or caucuses in 2008. In caucus states, I find that caucus participants were significantly more liberal than the public overall, whereas I detect no discernible difference in overall ideology between voters and the public in primary states. In both primary and caucus states, voters were ideologically more extreme than the electorate overall, but the difference was more pronounced in caucus states than in primary states. In terms of public policies, analysis of the evidence I report in Table 4 suggests that there was greater congruence between the distributions of policy preferences in primary states compared to caucus states. The mean absolute difference in levels of support for the five issues I examine between voters and the public is three times as large in caucus states compared to primary states (7.2 to 2.4 percentage points, respectively).

Finally, in Table 6, I present an analysis of self-reported candidate choice among voters in primary elections and caucuses by party in 2008. Among caucus voters who supported a Democratic candidate, Obama bested Clinton by a margin of nearly 2:1, confirming the anecdotal evidence discussed above. By

contrast, Obama's margin over Clinton among primary voters was substantially lower (about 18 percentage points). Among voters who supported a Republican candidate, McCain secured support from 35.1 percent who voted in primaries, while Mitt Romney, his closest rival, captured 29.5 percent support from these voters. Romney actually bested McCain in caucuses, earning 37.1 percent of GOP caucus ballots compared to McCain's 21.6 percent. The results reinforce the notion that candidate support can differ considerably between primary and caucus contests.

The analyses I present above suggest that the differences in terms of ideology, issue preferences and even candidate choice between caucus participants and primary voters are more pronounced—and potentially more serious and consequential—than the demographic differences described in the previous section. Concerns about the impact of ideological bias are amplified, given that caucuses, especially the first-in-the-nation Iowa caucuses, have the capacity to influence election outcomes and candidate selection.³² I consider the implications in the following section.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Concerns about bias and misrepresentation in the electoral arena understandably preoccupy analysts and policymakers alike in democratic polities. In this article, I have compared the characteristics of primary and caucus participants to determine whether one system of expressing preferences is superior to the other. Overall, the evidence I describe presents a somewhat mixed picture. Not unlike previous election cycles, turnout data from 2008 confirm that caucuses attracted substantially lower levels of participation, compared to primaries. Moreover, the demographic composition of these two electorates differed across the range of traits I investigated, and, to some extent, primary voters reflected the overall demographic distribution more closely than did caucus voters. Still, the differences I observe were, in my assessment, not always very large, and the data show that caucuses in 2008 were able to attract participation from traditionally disenfranchised voter groups. Caucuses were composed of more young voters and Latinos in 2008, for example, relative to primaries.

I find stronger evidence of substantively significant differences between primary and caucus constituencies in terms of issue preferences and ideology. In this domain, caucus voters tended to be less representative of the electorate at large in 2008, but clear evidence that caucus voters are more ideologically extreme, compared to primary voters, is scant. That said, the differences in terms of policy preferences I report can produce bias with respect to candidate choice, manifesting themselves through differential levels of support for each of the parties' contenders. In some cases, and perhaps in 2008, such bias can

³² Hull, *Grassroots Rules*; see also William Mayer, *The Making of the Presidential Candidates 2004*, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004).

exert considerable influence over the ultimate outcomes of the nomination contests. I suspect that some of the disparities I detect are a function of differences in the demographic composition of these two electorates, but this explanation may be incomplete. Key differences persist even after controlling for respondents' demographic traits. It is also likely that institutional arrangements, such as the constraints on participation by unaffiliated or independent voters in nomination contests across caucus and primary states, account partly for the differences observed.

I acknowledge that my analyses comparing primary and caucus voters are limited to the 2008 nomination cycle. The idiosyncratic nature of this election cycle, including contested nomination races in both parties, the lack of an incumbent candidate, and the protracted battle for the Democratic nomination, is likely to have influenced some of the results I observe, and it is unclear how the findings will generalize to other election cycles. That said, many of the patterns I detect in 2008 are consistent with previous research, suggesting that the implications are applicable more broadly.

Overall, I conclude that caucuses are not especially undemocratic, although I echo concerns about participation inequalities. Thus, I do not believe that caucuses are especially "bad" for democracy; that said, I do not believe that caucuses are any better for democracy than primary elections. While the evidence suggests that alarmist claims about the nature of caucuses, compared to primaries, are generally exaggerated, my view is that caucuses can be abolished without much damage to the electoral process. In fact, replacing caucuses with primaries may result in some marginal improvements in terms of demographic and attitudinal representation.

Even if consensus could be reached on the question of the benefits of banning caucuses, I acknowledge that the practical impediments to implementation would be considerable. States, and especially Iowa, can be quite attached to their nomination rituals. Previous experience suggests that the parties would have much difficulty compelling states to ban caucuses against their will, even if such a plank were to be adopted by the national conventions. Election and party officials may also be reluctant to abandon caucuses in favor of primaries, given that the former are generally less onerous to execute and finance. Of course, if other reforms, such as a national primary that requires states to hold primaries, are adopted, banning caucuses may be a moot point. Most proposals currently under consideration enable states to retain the option of holding caucuses on the national primary day, however. Despite these challenges, banning caucuses is a plausible and legitimate presidential nomination reform proposal worthy of further scrutiny, consideration and public debate.*

*I am indebted to participants in the Symposium on Presidential Nomination Reform organized by the American Academy of Political Science in New York, NY, on 23 October 2009 for helpful comments. I am especially grateful to Robert Y. Shapiro and to the editor.

APPENDIX

CCES Question Wording

Nomination Contest Vote (CC324): Did you vote in the Presidential primary or attend a caucus between January and June of this year?

Health Care (CC417): Do you favor or oppose the U. S. government guaranteeing health insurance for all citizens, even if it means raising taxes? (Recoded as dichotomous indicator: strongly support and somewhat support coded as “support”, somewhat oppose and strongly oppose coded as “oppose.”) Refusals excluded.

Iraq Mistake (CC304): Which comes closest to your opinion on U.S. decisions regarding Iraq? (Recoded as dichotomous indicator: Mistake from beginning, mistake worth the cost coded as support for “Iraq Mistake” option; right thing, mistakes made too costly, right thing, worth despite mistakes, right thing, no mistakes responses coded 0.) Refusals excluded.

Affirmative Action (CC313): Affirmative action programs give preference to racial minorities and to women in employment and college admissions in order to correct for discrimination. Do you support or oppose affirmative action? (Recoded as dichotomous indicator: strongly support and somewhat support coded as “support,” somewhat oppose and strongly oppose coded as “oppose.”). Refusals excluded.

Abortion (CC310): Which one of the opinions on this page best agrees with your view on abortion? (Recoded as dichotomous indicator: “By law, always allow abortion coded as 1, all other responses coded 0. These included: by law, never permit abortion; abortion only if rape, incest, life in danger; abortion only if need established; by law, always allow abortion.) Refusals excluded.

Social Security (CC312): A proposal has been made that would allow people to put a portion of their Social Security payroll taxes into personal retirement accounts that would be invested in private stocks and bonds. Do you favor or oppose this idea? (Recoded as dichotomous indicator: strongly support and somewhat support coded as “support,” somewhat oppose and strongly oppose coded as “oppose.”) Refusals excluded.