

How Would Primaries Have Changed the Results in Caucus States?

Summary

During the current Democratic nominating contest, the popular vote has been named as one of the criteria that should help determine the winner in the eyes of the public and the super delegates. A major problem with using the popular vote as a measure of democratic will is that some states have held primaries while others have used caucuses, which have far lower turnout. According to our analysis, an additional 4.1 million voters likely would have participated in the Democratic nominating process had every caucus state instead held a primary – people who are left out of current popular vote tabulations. Additionally, it is likely that the candidates' share of the popular vote would be different. When we forecast the likely outcome of hypothetical primaries in caucus states by using their demographic profiles to project vote outcomes based on national demographic voting patterns, we find that Barack Obama's lead in the popular vote would increase from about 2.5 percentage points to about 3.5 percentage points. This translates into a lead of more than 1.3 million votes, up notably from the current number of about 717,000 votes.³

Turnout in Hypothetical Primaries

The following chart displays the relative influence of three broad constituencies – primary states, caucus states, and super delegates – according to their eligible voter populations, the current delegate count, and the current popular vote.⁴ The most striking result is that the 13 states that have held caucuses account for 15 percent of the eligible voter population and 14

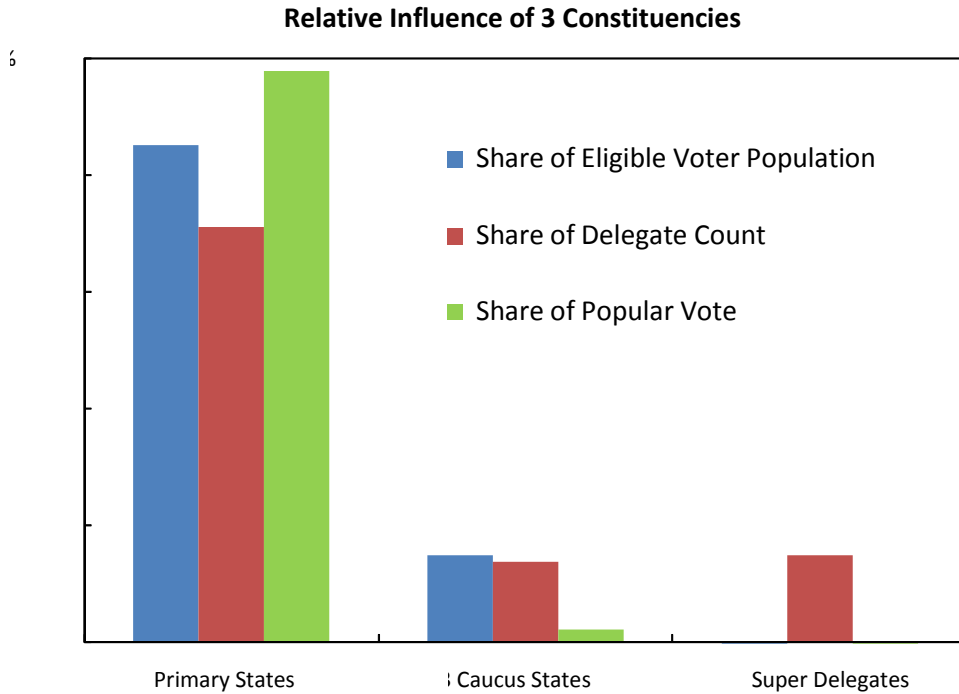
¹ Gregory P. Nini is an assistant professor at The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.

² Glenn Hurowitz is the president of Democratic Courage PAC, the author of *Fear and Courage in the Democratic Party*, and a frequent contributor to major magazines and newspapers.

³ This study does not include results from Florida or Michigan

⁴ Delegate counts and popular vote totals are taken from Real Clear Politics, <http://www.realclearpolitics.com>, as of April 3, 2008. Eligible voter populations have been compiled by George Mason University's United States Election Project, http://elections.gmu.edu/Voter_Turnout_2008_Primaries.htm

percent of the delegate count but only two percent of the popular vote.⁵ Caucus states contribute so little to the popular vote because voter turnout is much lower in caucuses than in primaries.



To figure out what turnout would have been had the caucus states held primaries, we begin by computing voter turnout percentages in the Democratic primaries and caucuses that have already occurred, based on the eligible voter population in each state. In primary states, turnout has averaged nearly 20 percent; in the nine caucus states where we know the popular vote, turnout has been only four percent. In order to estimate what turnout would have been in caucus states, we project turnout in those states based on turnout in primary states that closely match caucus states in terms of partisan affiliation.⁶ We estimate that turnout in hypothetical primaries in caucus states would have averaged 18 percent of the eligible voting population, about two percentage points below the average turnout in actual primary states because caucus states have tended to be slightly more Republican (meaning there was a smaller pool of Democratic voters to

⁵ These numbers exclude the Virgin Islands, American Samoa, and Democrats abroad, which collectively contribute an additional 13 delegates. Four caucus states – IA, NV, ME, and WA – do not report the popular vote from their caucuses and do not contribute to the popular vote. However, the other 9 states where we have a popular vote for the caucus still see their importance drop from 9 percent of the delegate count to 2 percent of the popular vote.

⁶ We use the results of the 2004 general Presidential election to calibrate partisan affiliation.

participate). This increase from the four percent of the population who actually participated in caucuses to the 18 percent who would have voted in a primary represents an additional 4.1 million voters who likely would have voted in a primary if given the chance. Primaries would have increased caucus states' representation in the popular vote from two percent to 15 percent, much closer to their influence in delegates (and their share of the eligible voter population).

The Candidates' Share of the Hypothetical Primary Vote

A more difficult problem is to estimate how these additional voters would have voted, which is necessary to understand their potential impact on the popular vote. In the nine caucus states where popular vote tallies are available, Obama leads Clinton by a margin of 63 percent to 36 percent among caucus attendees. According to the pledged delegates from all 13 caucus states, Obama leads Clinton 64 percent to 35 percent, tracking the popular vote very closely. However, in the states where there was an actual primary, Obama's lead is only 49 percent to 47 percent in the popular vote and 50 percent to 49 percent according to pledged delegates.

One option is to split the popular vote in the hypothetical primaries according to the popular vote from the actual caucuses.⁷ Under this assumption, Obama would have won 62 percent of the popular vote in the 13 caucus states, and Clinton would have won 33 percent. With a total of 4.7 million voters in these states (616,000 from the caucuses plus the 4.1 million additional derived above), the 29 percentage point advantage would give Obama an additional 1.1 million votes in the popular vote count.

However, using the caucus vote to split the hypothetical primary vote is extreme, since there is evidence that caucus voters are fundamentally different from primary voters.⁸ Two states actually have had both a primary and a caucus: Texas, which uses the results from both to assign delegates, and Washington, which uses only the caucus to assign their delegates but still holds a primary. In both states, Clinton won a higher share of the primary votes than she won in the

⁷ For IA, NV, ME, and WA, we use the split of county or state delegates, taken from the Washington Post, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/politics/elections/>.

⁸ There are several plausible explanations for this phenomenon, including demographic differences and motivational differences.

caucus, suggesting that Obama’s share of primary votes would be much smaller than his share of the actual caucus votes.

Another option is to split the popular vote in the hypothetical primaries according to the popular vote from existing primary states, where Obama currently leads by two percentage points. Because this greatly reduces Obama’s margin of victory, it would reduce his lead to a mere 71,000 votes. This approach is also unsatisfactory since it ignores fundamental differences between the voters in the caucus states and those in the primary states. These differences suggest that the results of primaries in caucus states would likely differ from the results of primaries in primary states. For example, the following table shows that, compared with the primary states, caucus states tend to be much smaller, have a smaller fraction of females, blacks, and Hispanics, but a larger fraction of college graduates and elderly.⁹

	Avg. state population (millions)	Median Income	Kerry’s '04 Share	Percentage of Population that is:				
				Female	Black	Hispanic	College Grad	Over 65
28 Primary States	7	45,997	49%	50.8	14.3	17.3	25.1	11.9
13 Caucus States	2.5	46,164	47%	50.1	3.9	11.9	25.7	12.0

To help control for these demographic differences, we analyze how the factors of gender, race, and education have influenced the primaries so far and extrapolate the likely outcome for primaries in the caucus states based on their demographics.¹⁰ For instance, decreasing the share of the black population from 14 percent to 4 percent generates a predicted 11 percentage point decrease in Obama’s share of the vote.¹¹ The percentage of the population that is female has a sizeable impact on the estimated split of the vote, favoring Clinton. The effects of the Hispanic population and college graduate population are smaller but still significant, with Obama’s share

⁹ The table displays population weighted means according to the 2006 census.

¹⁰ Specifically, we regress the $\log((\text{Obama's Share of 2 person vote}) / (1 - \text{Obama's Share}))$ on the percentage of the state that is: female, black, Hispanic, and holding a bachelors degree or higher. The regression explains roughly two-thirds of the variation in the dependent variable, and all right-hand side variables are statistically significant at the 5% level. Median income in the state, Kerry’s share in 2004, and the percentage of the state over 65 add very little explanatory power and are not statistically significant.

¹¹ The model is non-linear, so the effect of a 10 percentage point decrease in the black share depends on the other demographic characteristics of the state. To calculate the 11 percentage point effect, we use the averages in the primary states reported in the table.

being negatively correlated with the size of the Hispanic population and positively correlated with the fraction of the population with a college degree.

Overall, the demographic model does an adequate job of forecasting primary results. In 26 of the 29 states with a primary, the model correctly predicts the winner. More importantly, in 10 of the 13 caucus states, the model predicts that the winner of a primary would be the same as the winner of the caucus, with exceptions including Iowa and Maine, where Obama's victories run contrary to the demographic predictions. The margin of victory from the caucuses is highly correlated with the estimated margin of victory in hypothetical primaries, suggesting that caucus results follow a similar demographic pattern as other primary states. The important difference between the model results and the actual caucus results is the size of the margin of victory. Whereas Obama beats Clinton by 35 percentage points in the votes of the caucuses, our model predicts only a 16 percentage point margin in hypothetical primaries. The following table provides a state-by-state comparison of caucus results and estimated hypothetical primary results.

State	Caucus Date	Actual Caucus Results		Estimated Primary Results	
		Winner	Obama's Margin	Winner	Obama's Margin
Iowa	Jan 5	Obama		Clinton	-6%
Nevada	Jan 19	Clinton		Obama	20%
Alaska	Feb 5	Obama	51%	Obama	73%
Colorado	Feb 5	Obama	34%	Obama	40%
Idaho	Feb 5	Obama	62%	Obama	20%
Kansas	Feb 5	Obama	48%	Obama	14%
Minnesota	Feb 5	Obama	34%	Obama	25%
New Mexico	Feb 5	Clinton	-1%	Clinton	-50%
North Dakota	Feb 5	Obama	25%	Obama	24%
Washington	Feb 9	Obama		Obama	25%
Nebraska	Feb 9	Obama	35%	Obama	6%
Maine	Feb 10	Obama		Clinton	-22%
Wyoming	Mar 8	Obama	24%	Obama	35%
13 Caucus State Average			35%		16%

The Combined Effect on the Popular Vote

Armed with our state-by-state estimates of primary voters and Obama's margin of victory, we combine the estimates to predict that Obama would have won these 13 caucus states by 778,000 votes.¹² Since the caucuses actually gave Obama a boost of just 169,000 votes, our calculations suggest that Obama's lead in the current national popular vote tally would be roughly 600,000 votes larger had all the caucus states held primaries.

Conclusion

As with all statistical analysis, all of our calculations come with a certain degree of imprecision. However, our goal is more modest than to forecast the exact results of hypothetical primaries. Rather, we wish to make three broad points. First, because voter turnout is lower in caucuses, the popular vote dramatically devalues the popular will of citizens of caucus states. Second, the size of the devaluation is large, given that about one-third of states have used caucuses and caucus turnout is only one-fifth of primary turnout. Finally, both the actual caucus results and the results of our hypothetical primaries suggest that were every state to have held primaries, Obama would have a larger lead in the current tally of the popular vote.

¹² 778,000 is not exactly $.16 * 4,700,000 = 752,000$ because the 16 percent number is a straight average and states are of different sizes. Weighting by the estimated turnout gives an average Obama margin of almost 17 percent, since Obama's estimated margin is larger than average in big states such as Minnesota, Washington, and Colorado.