What do Party Elites Think about Election Reform?

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Abstract: 2024 was a consequential year for election reform, as voters in nine states considered ballot questions proposing changes to their states' primary laws. Although we know that Americans are generally supportive of a range of different types of election reforms, we know less about the attitudes of political elites toward reforms. In this paper we discuss the results of a survey of Democratic and Republican Convention delegates on their attitudes toward primary election reforms such as ranked-choice voting, open primaries, and nonpartisan primaries. We compare results from the 2024 Collaborative Convention Delegate Survey to questions asked on prior surveys on primary election reform. This method enables not only to compare delegates from the two party conventions to each other, but also to compare convention delegates to the public. Our results show that partisanship is the strongest predictor of attitudes toward reform among delegates. Democratic delegates are more supportive of reforms than Republicans, delegates are more polarized than the general public on most reform questions, and Democratic delegates are slightly closer to Democratic partisans in their views than Republican delegates are to Republican partisans. We find some evidence that overall, delegates are more skeptical of some reforms than the public, and that elite status within the party also may make delegates less supportive of reform.

2024 was a consequential year for election reform. Voters in nine states considered ballot questions proposing changes to their states' primary laws. For the first time since 1968, the Democratic Party chose a presidential nominee who did not compete in the party's primaries. Republicans nominated a presidential candidate who did not participate in the party's primary debates, and who proposed canceling the party's presidential primaries. Given these circumstances, there was reason to expect that voters would be thinking about how our candidate selection rules might be changed.

Although we know that Americans are generally supportive of a range of different types of election reforms, we know less about the attitudes of political elites toward reforms. These 2024 developments raise the possibility that party elites may harbor very different attitudes from regular voters. To address this possibility, in this paper we discuss the results of a survey of Democratic and Republican convention delegates on their attitudes toward primary election reforms such as ranked-choice voting, open primaries, nonpartisan primaries, and a single-day national primary. We developed a question module for the 2024 Collaborative Convention Delegate Survey that replicates questions asked on prior surveys on primary election reform

(Boatright, Tolbert, and Micatka 2024; Coll, Tolbert, and Ritter 2022). The responses to these questions enable us not only to compare delegates from the two party conventions to each other, but also to compare convention delegates to the public. These responses help us to understand, among other things, whether attitudes toward election reform have become more polarized in recent years, whether there are areas of agreement across party lines, and whether other predictors of reform support, such as age or education, mirror patterns among the general population.

These are important topics for several reasons. It is well-known that the public supports many types of changes to American elections, but surveys consistently show that governmental reforms are not a high priority for voters. If America is to see changes in the conduct of elections, much of the impetus for those changes would need to come from politicians and other political elites; at the least, political leaders would need to be open to reforms. Yet elites should be expected to be more supportive of the status quo than voters – after all, they accrued whatever power they have through playing by the current rules. Any rule change, in addition, requires some level of bipartisan support. In the case of primary election reforms, there is little evidence that the most commonly discussed reforms favor one party over the other, but, as we shall see, reforms often get framed in a partisan manner. It is quite possible that in 2024 primary election reforms were particularly salient to politicians and voters, and that the attitudes expressed by voters may have been different from prior years. Nonetheless, a comparison of the attitudes of the public and of elites toward primary elections can help us the prospects for change. We can also use the comparison of attitudes toward elections to help us understand how party elites themselves have changed and how well they represent the public.

Public Attitudes toward Primary Election Reforms

In 2023 Boatright Tolbert, and Micatka conducted a 3,000 respondent YouGov survey which included twelve questions on a range of primary election reforms, including ranked-choice voting, open primaries, primary run-offs, and nonpartisan primaries. The purpose of this survey was to gain an understanding of which reforms were most popular among the public, which types of voters were most supportive of reforms, and whether experience with particular types of primary election rules influenced support for them. As a means of measuring the representativeness of the sample, they included two questions about presidential primaries that had appeared on a previous study of voter attitudes toward electoral reform (Coll, Tolbert, and Ritter 2022). The results of this study are included in a standalone article and a book (Boatright, Tolbert, and Micatka 2023, 2026), and they also played a role in framing a set of reform recommendations in a task force report on electoral reform and political extremism (Boatright 2024).

The Boatright, Tolbert, and Micatka (2023) survey covered many reform proposals that have either been implemented in one or more states or have been proposed at the state or national level. For instance, respondents were asked about their views on open primaries – the practice in some states of allowing all registered voters to choose the primary ballot of either party, instead

of limiting participation to people who had previously registered as members of that party. Respondents were asked about their views on consolidating all primaries on a single day, as opposed to the current primary schedule which consists of as many as eighteen different dates for primary elections across the country. Respondents were asked whether they supported nonpartisan primaries or the use of ranked-choice voting in primaries. Respondents were also asked if they would support abandoning primaries altogether, allowing party conventions to choose nominees. The survey also included questions on the use of runoff elections, on establishing thresholds for voter participation or the winner's vote share, and using preprimary conventions to limit ballot access.

There are few extant surveys of attitudes toward primary election reform; as Boatright and colleagues note in the 2023 paper, much of what we know is drawn from four types of sources. There are several state-specific surveys in states such as California and Alaska that have adopted major reforms; in such instances surveys have been used to measure responses to reforms that are of particular salience to voters (e.g. Kimball and Anthony 2021, Tolbert and Donovan 2025). There have been many studies conducted on voter attitudes toward the presidential primary system over the past five decades (Jewitt 2019, Norrander 2009, Springer and Gibson 2009). We can also consider ballot question results – it is evident that voters support having primary elections and that they are receptive to changes that can be framed as being more democratic, such as establishing open primaries, lowering barriers to candidate entry, or requiring parties to hold primaries (Ware 2002). Finally, we can consider whether attitudes toward primaries resemble attitudes toward other types of electoral reform issues such as campaign finance laws or direct democracy. In their lengthy consideration of public attitudes toward campaign finance laws, Primo and Milyo (2020) contend that voters know little about campaign finance laws and do not see them as a major issue of concern, but large majorities do favor a wide range of reforms, particularly those that strike them as being more democratic. They find that socioeconomic elites are particularly supportive of reforms.

In line with the Primo and Milyo (2020) findings, Boatright and colleagues drew three major conclusions from their study. First, voters do not know very much about primary election reforms; between one-fifth and one-third of the respondents did not offer an opinion. This ranged from a low of 18.6 percent for open primaries (perhaps the most prevalent reform) to 35.2 percent on their question of whether parties might set convention thresholds for ballot access (a reform present in only one state).

Second, most respondents did support primary election reforms – and they were particularly supportive of reforms that sounded more democratic. A majority responded affirmatively to thirteen of the fourteen questions – all but the question about whether state parties should choose nominees at conventions. Support ranged from a high of over eighty percent for open primaries and having a national single day primary to slightly over fifty percent for ranked-choice voting and allowing party endorsements in primaries. Although we cannot prove which reforms sound more democratic to voters, the range of responses seemed to the authors to confirm that more "democratic" sounding reforms like open primaries are more popular than reforms that appear to give more power to parties at the expense of voters.

And third, while the average gap between Democratic, Republican, and independent respondents was not huge, the issues that saw the greatest disparity included ranked choice voting (RCV) and nonpartisan primaries. RCV would go on to appear on the ballot in nine states in the 2024 election, and post-election surveys indicate that it was perceived as being a reform that would aid the Democratic Party (Ballotpedia n.d.). Similarly, nonpartisan primaries have been adopted in two left-leaning states (California and Washington) and were recently repealed by Republican legislators in a more conservative state (Louisiana). These differences suggest to us that when given partisan cues voters will evaluate reforms accordingly. Boatright and colleagues used this research in a forthcoming book to make the case for establishing a single-day national primary; as they note there, this is the lone reform in the survey that draws overwhelming (greater than 70 percent) support from Democratic, independent, and Republican respondents.

The 2023 article also included a regression analysis that included number of demographic variables. Rather than construct an index of reform support, the authors measured the effects of different respondent characteristics on the propensity to support each of these reforms. Although some of the fourteen questions thus yielded slightly significant results for some demographic characteristics, for the most part factors such as interest, education, gender, age, and race had minimal effects on responses when controlling for partisanship. Boatright and colleagues did find that ideology (controlling for partisanship) influences support for the status quo, and they found that younger respondents tended to be more supportive of nearly all types of reforms than older respondents. Yet overall these effects were quite small.

Knowledge of public opinion on reform can be important for those who would advocate for it, who would choose among a palette of reforms, or who are interested in how reform proposals might fare among legislators. Yet as the Primo and Milyo study shows, public opinion on process issues can be shaped by politicians, can safely be disregarded by politicians, and may ultimately serve more as a barometer of public trust in the political system and its leaders rather than as a predictor of change. On issues such as these, the perceptions of political elites may be more consequential, and there may be systematic reasons why elites disagree with the public. One could consider political interest or knowledge to be a proxy for elite status, but an alternate approach, which we pursue here, is to develop a separate study aimed at one set of elites, the delegates to the quadrennial party conventions.

Why Might Convention Delegates be Different from the Public?

Convention delegate studies have been conducted since 1972. The architects of the delegate studies have generally sought to explore changes within the parties through mail surveys conducted after the convention (Miller and Jennings 1986). There is a standard battery of policy questions that have been asked of delegates. Recent analyses of delegates have noted the increasing polarization between the two parties' delegates on issues such as abortion, social policy, and civil rights (Jackson, Bigelow, and Green 2007). Many of these policy questions were designed to replicate questions asked on the American National Election Study. In their

authoritative consideration of delegate surveys from 1992 to 2004, Jackson et al conclude that delegates are more polarized than the public, that delegates tend to be more ideologically extreme than their copartisans in the general public, and that Republican delegates were particularly unrepresentative of their party's rank and file.

Some recent delegate studies have injected a note of caution into such conclusions. Many of the analyses of delegate survey results have sought to identify factions among the delegates – to distinguish, for instance, between progressives and moderates, populists and traditional conservatives, liberals and centrists, and so forth. This is usually done with reference to policy views, although some other delegate studies have done this by exploring the network ties of different ethnic groups (Heaney et al 2012).

However, Conger et al (2019) and Cooperman, Schufeldt, and Conger (2022) have both proposed that we should not draw broad conclusions about change in the parties over time from such studies because the characteristics of the delegates are dependent on the nature of the primary itself. A contested primary will yield different delegates than an uncontested one, and a particularly competitive one featuring one or more insurgent candidates will yield delegates that look quite different from the party mainstream. In other words, the Democratic delegates in 2016 should have looked quite different from the 2012 delegates because they were split between Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton while the 2012 delegates all arrived committed to the incumbent; the same can be said for the split nature of the 2016 Republican delegates compared to prior years.

Is it meaningful to call party delegates "elites"? Many of the delegate surveys use this term, insofar as delegates are by definition more committed to the presidential campaign than is the general public. Jackson, Bigelow, and Green (2007) refer to the delegates as the "presidential elite." Although delegates tend to be wealthier and better educated than the public – that is, they are socioeconomic elites – this investment may make them more supportive of the political system itself than is the general public or the socioeconomic elite subset of the general public. Many of the delegate surveys make distinctions about what one might call "eliteness" within the delegate pool – by, for instance, distinguishing between pledged vs. state-level or at large delegates, between elected officials and other delegates, by asking delegates how many times they have attended a convention, or asking about whether respondents serve on the platform committee or in any other convention leadership role (Green, Jackson, and Layman 2024; Heaney et al 2012). Table 1 shows some of the characteristic of the 2024 convention delegates, drawn from the 2024 Collaborative Convention Delegate Survey (CCDS; more detail on the method for this below) and benchmarked, as appropriate, against census data for the public or the characteristics of the public survey respondents. This table shows that delegates are indeed better educated, wealthier, and older than the public; they also are, of course, more politically engaged than the public. This table also shows some of the "eliteness" distinctions.

[Table 1 about here]

The description of elites matters in a conceptual way – insofar as we might want to know what "elites" think, and delegate surveys offer us a way to identify this group before undertaking the survey. Yet we also might posit that elites should know and care more about process issues

such as election rules, and that there might be a reason for political elites to view election rules differently than they view other types of policy issues. These delegates were chosen using a particular state-level set of selection rules, so one would expect them to support those rules. Supporters of the presumptive nominee, in particular, should be expected to favor the rules by which that candidate received the nomination. Many delegate studies have used the "pragmatists vs. purists" or "professionals vs. amateurs" distinction to measure change within the parties, just as the original "amateurs" literature (e.g. Wilson 1962) sought to explore whether the political backgrounds of delegates had changed or whether categorizing delegates in this way helped to understand responses to questions about policy or political norms (Carsey et al 2006, Herrera 1993). In some instances, these categories have come close to those we explore here; for instance, Carsey et al (2006), Cooperman, Schufeldt, and Conger (2021), and Jewitt and Schufeldt (2021) all use primary rules (open, closed, nonpartisan) as an independent variable but conclude that primary system does not influence delegates' views on policy or political norms.

Process issues, therefore, matter in terms of predicting delegate responses but delegates have rarely been asked about their views on them. The major exception to this pattern is the question on support for term limits, which was included in the policy question battery from 1992 to 2004. In Jackson, Bigelow, and Green's (2007) study of change over time, the term limits question stands out because respondents had polarized less on this question. Although Republicans tended to be more supportive of term limits than Democrats, Republicans actually became less supportive of them over this time period while Democrats remained opposed but not overwhelmingly so – Democratic support over this time period declined from 25 to 17 percent while it fell from 72 to 39 percent among Republicans. One can read this in two ways: first, as a matter where elite sentiment involved more skepticism of this process reform, or second, as a matter of partisan advantage given that the decrease in Republican support coincided with an era in which Republicans held a majority in the House of Representatives.

Collectively, the delegate survey literature yields the following questions about the differences between delegates and the public:

Are delegates more supportive of reforms than the public? Boatright, Tolbert, and Micatka noted in their public surveys that the public tends to be supportive of many types of reform, and in particular to be supportive of reforms that, following Primo and Milyo (2020) we might frame as being more small-d democratic. We expect that elites may be less supportive of reform than the public, although their tendency to be more politically knowledgeable and well-educated may predispose them to support reform on matters where education and interest predispose the public to support reform.

Are delegates more polarized on reform issues than the public? We suspect they will be for two reasons – first, because it has been established that delegates are more polarized on most issues (except, notably, for the lone process issue of term limits), and second, because delegates may be more likely to view reforms as a means toward partisan advantage than the public. Differences should be particularly pronounced on issues that have been framed in a partisan matter.

Are delegates more likely to state an opinion than the public? We suspect so – delegates should have more political knowledge and interest than the public. On the other hand (as we discuss

more below), comparing the surveys is problematic here – the public survey was a short survey that was exclusively about attitudes toward primary reform, while our delegate survey included many questions and respondents did not opt into it for the purpose of offering opinions on primary elections.

With these questions in mind, we turn now to our delegate survey.

Comparing Delegate Attitudes toward Primary Reform to Public Attitudes

We included a module replicating seven of the primary election reform questions in the CCDS. We asked respondents their views on ranked-choice voting, a single-day national (nonpresidential) primary, open primaries, nonpartisan primaries, and using conventions to choose nominees. We also included the same two questions on presidential primaries from an earlier survey – rotating the dates of different states' primaries and holding a national presidential primary – that were replicated in the Boatright, Tolbert, and Micatka survey of the public. The text of our module is included in the appendix.

Our module was included in a version of the CCDS that included many of the same demographic questions that had been included in prior years' delegate surveys, including demographic questions, ideological self-placement, policy positions, and delegate roles or past experience. The survey also included modules developed to explore the pragmatist/purist distinction, to assess trust in government, to solicit opinions on unique features of the 2024 nominations, and to replicate some of the network analysis work in the Heaney et al studies discussed above. Research by some of the other participants in the survey is forthcoming; we limit our analysis here to exploring the effect of the demographic questions and the prior experience questions on our dependent variables of interest. All delegates for whom the CCDS developers could obtain an address received a postcard inviting them to participate and a series of subsequent reminders by mail. The CCDS questions were administered through Qualtrics.

The 2024 CCDS was sent to 6,707 delegates from the 2024 Democratic and Republican Party Conventions. There were a total of 4,698 delegates at the Democratic Convention and 2,429 delegates at the Republican Convention. There were 911 respondents to the survey, a response rate of approximately 13.6 percent (excluding undeliverable letters or delegates for whom the CCDS could find no address). However, only 656 of these respondents answered the question on which party's convention they attended, and for each of the primary election reform questions approximately 225-240 did not respond. Among the respondents, there were 443 Democratic delegates and 213 Republican delegates, yielding a rate of useable responses of approximately 9.8 percent; the percentage of Democratic delegates who responded was slightly higher than the percentage of Republican delegates who responded. Although the response rate is lower than some prior years' delegate surveys, the number of respondents is similar, largely due to the fact that the 2024 CCDS was sent to all delegates instead of a sample (Burden 2025a, b; Carsey et al 2006; Conger et al 2019).

Because of the difference in the number of delegates and the difference in response rate, it makes little sense to combine the Democrats and Republicans; there ultimately were approximately twice as many Democratic respondents as Republicans. We therefore present all of our results broken down by the party of the respondent, and the relevant comparison to our public survey is to respondents who identified themselves as Democratic or Republican partisans. We are able to offer a relatively straightforward comparison between delegates to the two party conventions; we can also compare Democratic delegates to Democratic partisans (from the 2023 public opinion survey) and Republican delegates to Republican partisans.

Table 2 shows the responses to each of our questions by party; percentages are taken from the number of respondents who offered an opinion – that is, don't know responses are excluded. This table provides evidence of respondent's views but also of the intensity of their views. In Table 3 we will collapse categories to provide a direct comparison of support and opposition between delegates and the public. Here, we focus only on the differences between Democratic and Republican delegates. It is evident here that Democrats are supportive of most reforms, with the exception of replacing conventions with convention nominations. Democratic delegates are also relatively evenly split over nonpartisan primaries. Republicans, on the other hand, oppose most reforms.

[Table 2 about here]

One important difference, however, is in the intensity of views. Although they are in favor of many reforms, Democrats are relatively split between the "somewhat support" and "strongly support" categories, perhaps indicating the support among Democratic delegates for primary reforms is somewhat tepid. There is no issue on which a majority of Democrats are in strongly support and there is only one (convention nominations) where a majority of Democrats fall in the "strongly oppose" camp. Republican delegates, in contrast, are not just opposed to many reforms, they are strongly opposed. 80.7 percent of Republicans strongly oppose RCV, 67.0 percent strongly oppose open primaries, and 77.7 percent strongly oppose nonpartisan primaries. To put matters in other words, it seems to us that there is no receptivity among Republican delegates for the three reforms that are actually in place in the American states. In contrast, there seems to be some potential for bipartisan agreement on presidential primary reform and on the lone reform here that has not yet been tried, the establishment of a single day national primary.

The questions we can address by comparing the two surveys are whether attitudes toward primary election reforms differ by party, whether party elites are representative of their voters, and, correspondingly, whether party elites are more polarized on the question of primary reform than are non-elite partisans. In order to do this in a meaningful way, in Table 3 we combine all respondents who said the "strongly" or "somewhat" favored the reform in question. As in Table 1 the percentages are taken from all respondents who answered the question – that is, "don't know" response or nonresponses are excluded from consideration. In Table 3 one can see the difference between Democratic and Republican delegates by comparing columns 1 and 2; one can see the difference between delegates and partisans by comparing columns 1 and 3 (Democrats) and columns 2 and 4 (Republicans). And one could compare the difference between columns 1 and 2 to the difference between columns 3 and 4 in order to see whether

delegates are more polarized than nonelite partisans. Column 5 shows the percentage among all respondents in the public survey who favored each reform; for six of the seven questions (all but the question on using conventions to choose nominees) independents fell in between Democrats and Republicans; in four of these six questions independents were slightly closer to Democrats.

[Table 3 about here]

Let us first consider differences between the delegates. A majority of the Democratic delegates supports all but one of the "democratic" reforms – all but the nonpartisan primary. Using conventions rather than primaries is unpopular among Democrats and Republicans – something which merits mentioning since Democratic delegates were at the convention to ratify the first presidential nomination of someone who had not actually run in the primaries in over fifty years. Republicans, on the other hand, oppose all of the reforms except for having a single day national (nonpresidential) primary. Although a majority still supports having primaries, they are twice as likely as Democrats to support using conventions rather than primaries. And Republicans are close to evenly split on whether to have a single-day national presidential primary.

Democratic delegates are also quite similar to Democratic partisans in their views. They are in agreement on six of the seven issues – all but the nonpartisan primaries. The average difference between Democratic delegates and partisans is 13 percentage points. Republican delegates, on the other hand, are much more skeptical about reform than are Republican partisans. The disagree about open primaries, rotating primaries, and having a national presidential primary. On some issues, the gap is enormous – Republican delegates are over thirty percentage points less supportive of RCV, nonpartisan primaries, and the national presidential primary, and over 50 percentage points less supportive of open primaries. The average gap between Republican delegates and partisans is 27.4 percentage points. In this regard, our findings resemble Jackson, Bigelow, and Green's (2007) findings on policy issues – Republican delegates are more extreme, compared to Republican partisans, than Democratic delegates are compared to Democratic partisans.

This means, in turn, that delegates are substantially more polarized on reform issues than the public. The average gap between Democratic and Republican delegates is 26.3 percentage points, while the gap between Democratic and Republican partisans is only 10.4 percentage points. The public is polarized on reforms that one could argue have been championed by left-leaning reformers – issues like nonpartisan primaries, RCV, open primaries, or (to a lesser extent) reorganizing the presidential primary calendar. Yet even here, there is no issue where fewer than a third of Republican partisans are supportive. Republican delegates are most opposed to what are arguably the most prominent primary reform ideas, such as RCV and open or nonpartisan primaries.

The low Democratic delegate support for nonpartisan primaries is interesting. This is a reform that is much more popular among Democrats than among Republicans, yet the level of Democratic support in the public opinion survey does not appear wildly different than the level of Democratic support for other "democratic" reforms. Here it is important to note that the Democratic elites in our survey may be more interested in strengthening the parties than

members of the general public might be; the perception here could be that nonpartisan primaries weaken the ability of the party to win elections or choose nominees, while delegates may not perceive RCV or open primaries as having a similar effect.

Finally, we note not only that delegates should be expected to care more about the strength of the parties than is the case for members of the public (even those who are demographically similar in other ways), but that they are at the convention in support of a particular presidential nominee. It is beyond our means here to determine what might have influenced someone to choose to attend the Democratic convention to cast a vote for Joe Biden (as many of these delegates had) or to explore the difference, among Democrats, between pledged Democrats and superdelegates. All we can do here is to note that it is not clear that ties to a particular candidate might have mattered for Democrats. Perhaps had Bernie Sanders run, Sanders delegates might have thought about primaries differently than other Democrats.

In the case of Republicans, however, it is important to note that many of these delegates may have viewed reforms not just in terms of whether they were the right thing to do or whether they helped their party, but in terms of whether they would have influenced Donald Trump's nomination. Trump had, throughout the election (and in 2020) encouraged states to cancel their primaries, he had not participated in primary debates, and he had made public statements questioning the integrity of RCV and other reform ideas. It could be that Republican delegate support for some of these ideas was affected by Trump, could rebound in post-Trump elections, or could differ from sentiment among other Republican elites. The Cooperman, Schufeldt, and Conger (2022) findings suggest that this could be the case.

As noted above, the public opinion survey and our delegate survey included two questions specific to presidential elections. The initial reason for including these questions on the public opinion survey was to compare that survey to a prior survey on election reforms conducted by Coll, Tolbert, and Ritter (2022). In the initial Coll study, 63.95 percent of respondents supported a national presidential primary and 59.55 percent supported rotating primaries. The gap between Democrats and Republicans was approximately seven percent on the same day primary question and 17 percent for the question on rotating primaries. Slightly less than a majority (48.92 percent) of Republicans supported rotating primaries. In other words, the responses in the initial Coll survey look somewhat more like the delegate survey than do the 2023 Boatright, Tolbert, and Micatka results. This may speak to instability in public attitudes over time, or it might suggest that respondents in the 2023 survey had, by the time they reached the two presidential questions at the end of the survey, been primed to support whatever reforms they were offered. We have no strong reason to suspect that the idea of rotating primaries should be something Democrats like more than Republicans, but these surveys do suggest that there might be something about that proposal that bothers Republican voters and Republican elites.

Determinants of Responses within the Parties

It is clear from the above discussion that party affiliation is the dominant force in shaping delegates' views of reform. Yet what matters besides party? And if we are to sustain the characterization of delegates as elites, what distinctions might we make among delegates than

enriches our understanding of elites? To answer these questions, we present in Table 4 an ordered logistic regression model showing the predictors of support for each of the primary reforms in our survey. As in Table 3, we collapsed our two support categories in order to create a binary variable. We show one model for each question, with party affiliation shown at the top. Republicans are the reference category. There were 27 convention delegates who refused to provide any information on demographics but did share opinions on primary reform; accordingly, we created a binary variable for missing demographics and were able to include them in the full sample. We have no expectations that this variable would serve as a predictor of any reform attitudes.

[Table 4 about here]

For the most part, the results of these models mirror the findings in the public opinion survey, insofar as education and income are not significant factors. Unsurprisingly, delegates are on average wealthier and better educated than the public, so we do not believe the range of respondents enables us to make broad claims about these relationships. Partisanship remains the dominant factor when controls are inserted.

There is no single theory that can easily capture all of the variation shown in the table, but there are two variables that might be consistent with an argument about elite status. First, one might argue that older delegates are more invested in the party, or in the status quo, than are younger delegates. And second, one might argue that commitment to the party might be shown by the responses to the three questions on convention participation and roles: whether one has previously served as a delegate, whether one is a district delegate or a statewide or at large delegate, and whether one serves on the platform committee or in any other convention role. There are several significant variables here. Younger delegates are more likely to support RCV and the nonpartisan primary, the two reforms that exhibit the strongest partisan division and which seem ostensibly most anti-party. First-time delegate are also more supportive of RCV than more experienced ones.

There are several other significant findings for which we do not have a clear explanation. Women are more supportive of open primaries and a single-day presidential primary than are men, for instance, and congressional district delegates are much more opposed to open primaries than other delegate types. The two significant differences on the gender question are shown in Figure 1. Boatright and colleagues had found in the public opinion survey that Republican women are more supportive of reform than men; the same dynamic seems to be in play here, albeit only on these questions.

[Figure 1 about here]

Our multivariate analysis largely seconds what we were able to establish in the basic crosstabs of party delegates. Partisanship is a much stronger and more consistent determinant of support for reform for convention delegates than it is for the public. There is some evidence within the parties that investment or status in the party might make some delegates further invested in the status quo, and correspondingly more skeptical of reform, but this evidence is

fragmentary and if it does apply at all it applies only to reforms that have received more attention and have already been perceived by many elites in a partisan manner.

There is some further work that could be done on this point. Several of the other CCDS modules include questions that measure attitudes toward compromise, pragmatism, or the competence of party leaders. These questions may reveal interesting patterns in responses that allow us to get a more nuanced view of respondents' commitment toward the party than we can get from the demographic questions included in the analysis. And it may also be the case that there are clusters or correlations among the responses – for instance, that the same Democratic delegates who are skeptical of RCV are also skeptical of nonpartisan primaries or other reforms. As noted above, a major goal of prior delegate survey papers was the definition of factions among each party's convention delegates. There may be factions revealed in the election reform attitude questions as well.

Comparing Don't Know Responses in the Two Surveys

Table 5 shows the percentage of "don't know" responses in the two surveys – again, for respondents to the public opinion survey, and for Democratic and Republican delegates. As is usually the case with "don't know" responses, there are some challenges in interpreting the reasons why some survey respondents did not offer an opinion. In the case of the public survey, Boatright and colleagues expected that, even though they provided brief descriptions of some proposed reforms, some respondents would not be familiar enough with the subject to venture an opinion. Some uninformed participants may well have taken a position anyway, but the number of don't know responses seems to us to track with public knowledge. Open primaries, which are relatively easy to explain and are used in fifteen states, yield the lowest nonresponse rate while some relatively untested reforms had the highest. Some "don't know" respondents might have been familiar with the topic but simply not have an opinion on it. This could be the reason why the question on rotating the order of presidential primaries – in our judgment, a relatively easy topic to explain – also had a high nonresponse rate. The public survey was an opt-in survey that was exclusively about primary election reforms, so we anticipate that few participants would have chosen to take the survey yet subsequently failed to answer any of the questions.

[Table 5 about here]

In contrast, a very large number of respondents in our delegate answered none of the primary reform questions, and 27 percent of respondents did not even describe which party they wee a delegate for. The "all delegates" category, then, largely reflects the number of people who were uninterested in answering more than a handful of all of the survey questions, even though we suspect these respondents did in fact have knowledge and opinions about these matters. The "all delegates" and "all public" categories are thus different enough that we do not think comparison of them is meaningful.

The important comparisons to make, then, are to measure responses by question among the delegates and the public, and compare (as in Table 3) Democratic and Republican delegates. In regards to the question responses, we see, again, that the reform with what we judge to be the

highest salience in public debate (RCV) and the most commonly used reform (open primaries) have the lowest percentage of "don't know" responses, while the reform with which respondents might be the least familiar (a national primary day) has a much higher level of don't know responses. As with the public survey, we are intrigued by the large number of don't know responses for the idea of rotating presidential primary states.

Discussion and Conclusions

This comparison provides relatively straightforward answers to our initial questions:

Are delegates more supportive of reforms than the public? Delegates are less supportive of reform overall, controlling for party. The gaps between delegates and the public vary by question, but there is a clear pattern. Respondents with a greater commitment to the party – either because of their prior history as delegates, their age, or their role at the convention – also appear slightly less supportive.

Are delegates more polarized on reform issues than the public? Delegates are much more polarized than the public. Party is a major determinant of responses in the public opinion survey, but the gaps between the party delegates are consistently much greater than the gaps between partisans. It seems evident to us that the delegates are more polarized on the reforms which have been associated with partisanship already, such as RCV or nonpartisan primaries.

Are delegates more likely to state an opinion than the public? It is difficult to compare the "don't know responses in the two surveys, but overall it seems that delegates are (unsurprisingly) more likely to state an opinion than is the public. Most delegates have formed opinions on most of the reforms that have been implemented at the state level, while a slightly smaller percentage of delegates ventured opinions on reform ideas that have yet to be implemented.

One might interpret these results as showing that delegates are thinking about the best interests of their party, or that delegates are following cues from party leaders. There is little that matters besides party, although our multivariate analysis shows that age and gender may have an influence on some questions.

There are three major conclusions we draw from this study that might guide future research.

First, we admit the limitations of this study. We have a small number of reform questions, probably too few to draw grand conclusions about delegates' broader views on reform. We have limited ability to compare delegates across years, in part because of the small sample size and in part because these questions do not resemble those asked in prior years. We also are limited in our ability to draw broad conclusions because of the distinctive characteristics of the 2024 convention – there may be less diversity in delegates' views because neither party had a particularly competitive set of nomination primaries. We cannot know about what the

effects of the presidential candidates and their paths to the nomination were on delegates views about primaries. In this regard, we see our study as a marker for doing further research on delegates.

Second, however, we are reassured by the similarities between our findings and those of prior convention studies focused on issue polarization. Our results provide more evidence that the party delegates are highly polarized, and they show that delegate polarization extends beyond the major social and economic issues that have divided partisans over the past few decades to process issues, some of which have significant support among voters of both parties. Although this year's CCDS questions are different from those of prior years, they do suggest a story about more gradual change over time in the characteristics of delegates. They provide is with a means, as well, to talk about the ways in which delegates and party elites do and do not represent the public and the party rank and file.

Finally, the results here tell a story about the prospects for party reform – a story which is consistent with the arguments in prior work. For the most part, advocates for primary election reforms have focused their efforts on reforms such as RCV, open primaries, and nonpartisan primaries, and they have focused their efforts at the state level, not the national level. The results of our delegate study, like the results of the public opinion survey, suggest major obstacles to these efforts. They risk being branded as partisan – and it may be too late to avoid this fate for some reforms. The focus on the state level may make this inevitable. If a reform succeeds in a "blue" state like California, it may come to be perceived as a Democratic reform even if, as in the case of California, the proponents of the original reform were in fact Republicans and even if many of the beneficiaries were Republicans. If a reform succeeds in a red state but is perceived to have helped Democrats, as could be the case for RCV in Alaska, again, it becomes perceived as a Democratic proposal. This may be an artifact of the rhetoric of Trump-era Republicans or of the fact that Trump's success has certainly been abetted by some of the more reform-worthy components of the American electoral system, yet it is an obstacle for reformers.

Here, as in the public opinion survey, the lone reform issue that has not (yet) polarized is the idea of a single national primary day. Republican delegates do not support this reform as strongly as Republican partisans, but it is still the only reform with bipartisan support. Perhaps if it became more of a focus of reform efforts, elites and the public would polarize on this issue too. Yet for now, this proposal seems to us the most promising avenue for reform. Some of us have discussed in our other work the reasons why we think a national primary day might reduce polarization – it likely would increase turnout, reduce the role of special interest money in primaries, and make primary electorates more representative of the public (Boatright, Tolbert, and Micatka 2026; Boatright and Tolbert 2026). Our delegate survey results support our claim that this is a reform that should be taken more seriously.

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Table 1: Comparing Delegates to the Public, Selected Traits

Trait	Democratic Delegates	Republican Delegates	US Population
District Delegates	65.2%	59.2%	N/A
Holds Party or Elected Position	61.4%	62.0%	N/A
Previous Delegate	32.7%	36.1%	N/A
B.A. or Higher	82.9%	63.3%	35.7%
White	72.9%	81.3%	72.3%
Male	54.9%	57.3%	49.2%
Protestant	19.6%	47.9%	40% (Pew)
Retired	26.6%	30.0%	16.3%
Income > $125,000	49.9%	43.2%	30% (approximately)
Median Age	53	55	38
N	443	213	

Note: Population estimates are from the Census except where otherwise noted.

Table 2: Support for Primary Reforms among Delegates, by Party, Among Those Offering an Opinion

	Strongly Oppose	Somewhat Oppose	Somewhat Support	Strongly Support	N
Democrats					
Ranked Choice Voting	15.8	10.4	33.0	40.8	424
National Primary Day	10.0	13.0	38.6	38.3	399
Open Primary	19.9	16.2	28.8	35.1	427
Nonpartisan Primary	36.2	20.9	25.9	17.0	417
Convention Nominations	59.6	26.4	10.5	3.6	421
Rotate Presidential Primaries	11.0	13.9	46.1	29.1	382
National Presidential Primary	15.2	18.1	38.4	28.3	414
Republicans					
Ranked Choice Voting	80.7	8.2	5.8	5.3	207
National Primary Day	23.1	14.0	31.7	31.2	186
Open Primary	67.0	11.0	12.0	10.0	209
Nonpartisan Primary	77.7	9.4	7.4	5.4	202
Convention Nominations	46.3	22.7	18.2	12.8	203
Rotate Presidential Primaries	34.8	24.2	30.3	10.7	178
National Presidential Primary	38.0	13.5	28.1	20.3	192

Table 3: Support for Primary Reforms among Delegates and the Public, Among Those Offering an Opinion

Question	Democratic Delegates	Republican Delegates	Democratic Partisans	Republican Partisans	Independents	All Public
Ranked Choice Voting	73.8	11.1	68.2	42.4	58.6	57.8
National Primary Day	76.9	62.9	77.1	72.6	72.0	74.1
Open Primary	63.9	22.0	83.6	73.0	84.0	81.0
Nonpartisan Primary	42.9	12.8	66.9	48.3	60.7	59.5
Convention Nominations	14.1	31.0	36.8	38.5	35.3	36.7
Rotate Presidential Primaries	75.2	41.0	77.7	66.7	72.2	72.8
National Presidential Primary	66.7	48.4	83.7	79.6	78.6	80.8

Note: Delegate totals taken from the CCDS; Partisans and "all public" totals from Boatright, Tolbert, and Micatka 2024.

Table 4: Predictors of 2024 Delegate Support for Reforms of Primary Elections

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
	RCV	One Day Primary--Congress	Open Primary	Non-Partisan Primary	Party Conventions	Rotating First Primary	One Day Primary-President
Republican	*Reference category*						
Democrat	2.97***	.57***	1.84***	1.48***	-1.07***	1.30***	.70***
	(.260)	(.184)	(.205)	(.234)	(.221)	(.188)	(.182)
Age (years)	-.01**	-.01	-.01	-.02**	-.01	.00	-.01*
	(.006)	(.006)	(.006)	(.006)	(.007)	(.006)	(.006)
Education	.14	-.11	-.04	.04	-.10	.08	-.09
Level	(.128)	(.109)	(.121)	(.124)	(.127)	(.107)	(.106)
White Non-	.21	-.40**	.27	-.19	-.21	.22	-.11
Hispanic	(.226)	(.205)	(.204)	(.201)	(.241)	(.192)	(.193)
Woman	-.25	.11	.64***	-.04	.03	-.30*	.34**
	(.201)	(.177)	(.187)	(.192)	(.222)	(.175)	(.173)
Income	-.13	.12*	-.03	.02	-.05	.06	.12*
	(.081)	(.073)	(.076)	(.077)	(.081)	(.069)	(.071)
Missing	.63	-.28	-.25	-.25	-.59	.38	-.99**
Income	(.565)	(.437)	(.441)	(.499)	(.639)	(.443)	(.472)
Congressional	.15	.06	-.51***	.04	-.06	.01	.17
District Delegate	(.202)	(.179)	(.190)	(.195)	(.217)	(.179)	(.176)
No other Roles	-.01	-.04	.10	-.18	-.18	-.05	.09
than delegate	(.206)	(.181)	(.190)	(.193)	(.231)	(.177)	(.176)
Never a	.40*	.16	.23	-.01	.23	-.15	.34*
Delegate before	(.211)	(.184)	(.192)	(.198)	(.228)	(.182)	(.179)
Missing on	-1.28	-.41	-.59	-1.11	-.17	-.62	.27
Demographics	(.917)	(.753)	(.762)	(.809)	(.921)	(.739)	(.751)
Constant	-1.60**	.71	-.90	-1.05*	.29	-1.18**	-.19
	(.624)	(.530)	(.554)	(.553)	(.587)	(.499)	(.514)
Observations	656	656	656	656	656	656	656
Log-likelihood	-330.87	-413.58	-393.40	-372.17	-298.76	-418.98	-427.47
Pseudo R2	.27	.03	.13	.09	.05	.07	.05
BIC	739.58	905.00	864.63	822.17	675.36	915.79	932.77

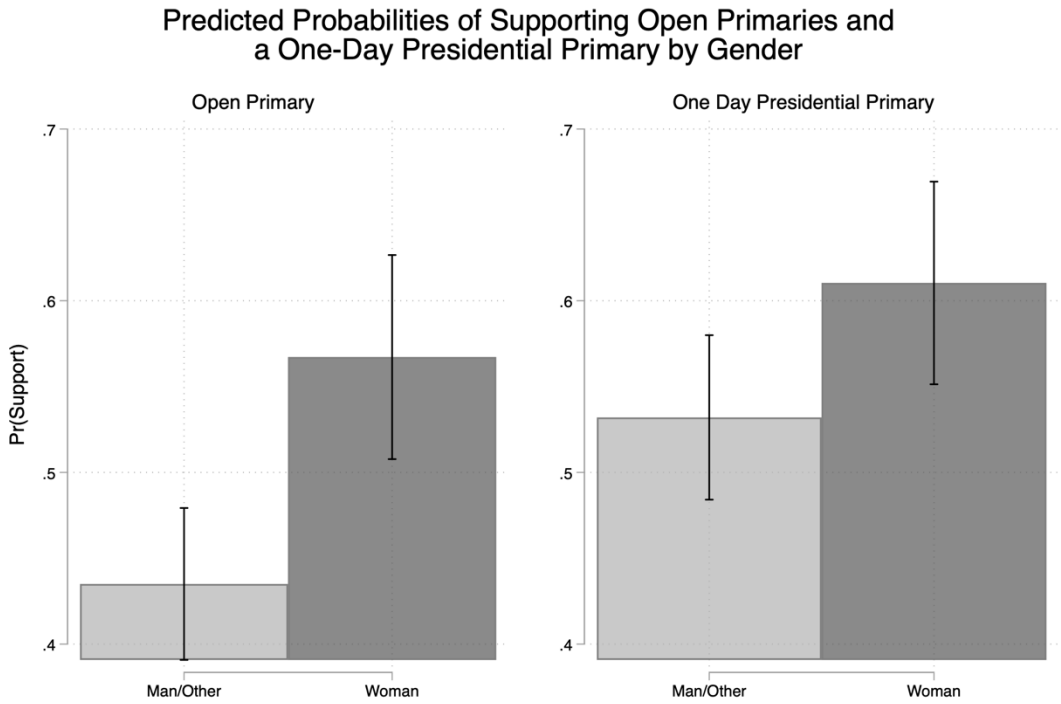
Unstandardized logistic regression coefficients. Robust standard errors in parentheses.
* $p < .1$, ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .001$

Table 5: Don't Know Responses among Delegates and the Public:

	Dem Delegates	Rep Delegates	All Delegates*	All Public
RCV	4.3	2.8	28.8	27.6
National Primary Day	9.9	12.7	34.0	31.3
Open Primary	3.6	1.9	28.1	18.6
Nonpartisan Primary	5.9	5.2	29.9	26.5
Conventions	5.0	4.7	29.4	26.5
Rotate Pres Primaries	13.8	16.4	36.6	32.7
National Pres Primary	6.5	9.9	31.8	23.1

* includes respondents who didn't answer any of the questions.

Figure 1



Probability of Supporting Primary Reforms by Gender

	Men/Other	**Women**
Open Primary	44%	57%
One Day Presidential Primary	53%	61%

Appendix: Survey Module: <u>Attitudes Toward Election Reform Issues</u>

I would like to ask you some questions about potential changes to the way in which primary elections for congress, governor, and state offices are conducted. Primary elections decide which candidates appear on the ballot in general elections in November of even number years.

1. In some places in the United States, voters use a form of instant runoff called ranked choice voting (RCV). Voters rank candidates in order of preference. If a candidate wins a majority of first choices that candidate wins. If not, the last place finisher is removed from consideration, and votes for that candidate go to each voters' next choice. This process repeats until the winner gets a majority of votes. Do you
    a) Strongly favor this
    b) Somewhat favor this
    c) Somewhat oppose this
    d) Strongly oppose this
    e) Don't know

2. National congressional same-day primaries

Some people support a law that would require states to hold congressional primaries on the same day in every state. They have argued that this could increase voter turnout in primaries. Would you

    a) Strongly Favor this
    b) Somewhat Favor this
    c) Somewhat Oppose this
    d) Strongly Oppose this
    e) Don’t know, not sure

3. Open primaries

It has been estimated that over 40 percent of Americans are independents, not registered with the Democratic or Republican parties. Some states hold what are known as “open primaries,” where any registered voter could vote in the election, regardless of party affiliation. Would you

    a) Strongly Favor this
    b) Favor this
    c) Oppose this
    d) Strongly Oppose this
    e) Don’t know, not sure

4. Nonpartisan primary

Some states use a nonpartisan primary in which all candidates for congress run in a single primary; the two candidates winning the most votes, regardless of party labels advanced to the general election in November. This can mean that some general elections will feature two Democrats running against each other, or two Republicans, or one Republican and one Democrat. Do you?

a) Strongly Favor this
b) Favor this
c) Oppose this
d) Strongly Oppose this
e) Don't know, not sure

5. State party conventions

Some states don't require parties to hold primaries at all, and rely on state party conventions to pick which candidates run for office. This would avoid very low turnout elections. Would you

a) Strongly Favor this
b) Favor this
c) Oppose this
d) Strongly Oppose this
e) Don't know, not sure

Now we would like to talk to you about primaries for other offices, including US presidents.

6. Rotate primaries

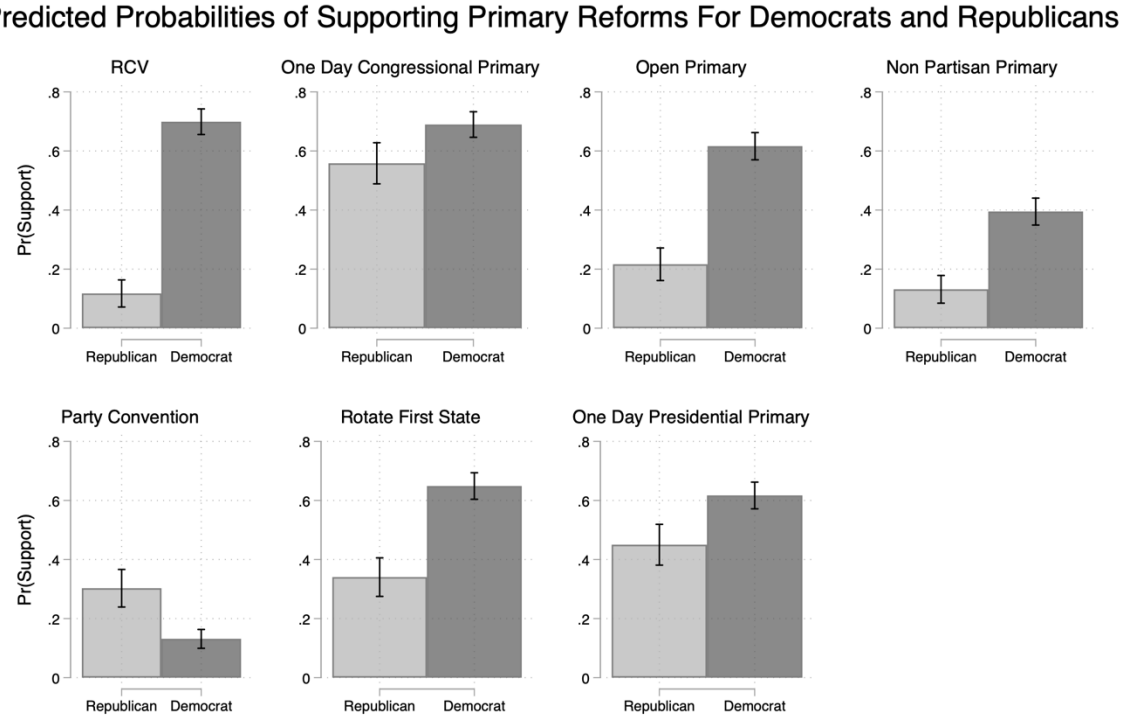
There are proposals to change the presidential nomination process and the order of the caucuses and primaries. One would rotate states so a different state goes first each time. Would you

a) Strongly Favor this
b) Favor this
c) Oppose this
d) Strongly Oppose this
e) Don't know, not sure

7. National primary

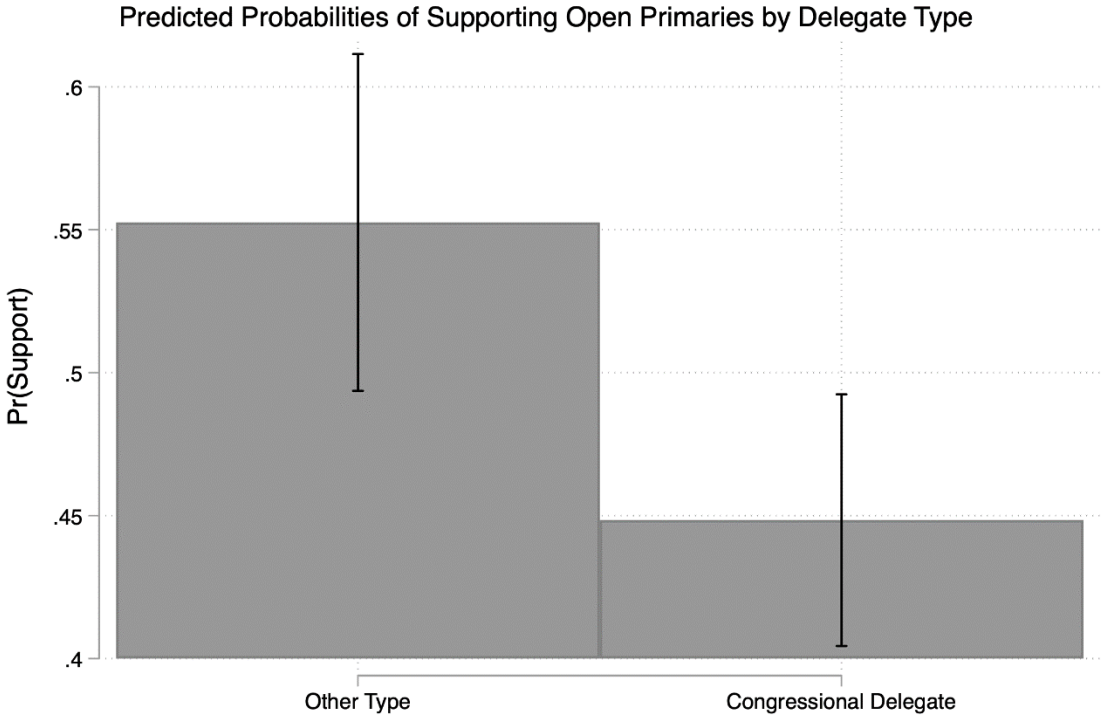
Others have proposed a national primary, similar to Super Tuesday, where every state would hold their caucuses or primaries on the same day. Would you strongly favor, favor, oppose or strongly oppose such a plan?

a) Strongly Favor this
b) Favor this
c) Oppose this
d) Strongly Oppose this
e) Don't know, not sure



Probability of Supporting Each Primary Reform by Party ID

	Republicans	**Democrats**
Ranked Choice Voting	12%	70%
One Day Congressional Primary	56%	69%
Open Primary	22%	62%
Non-Partisan Primary	13%	39%
Party Conventions	30%	13%
Rotate First State	34%	65%
One Day Presidential Primary	45%	62%


Predicted Probabilities of Supporting Open Primaries by Delegate Type
Pr(Support)
.6
.55
.5
.45
.4
Other Type
Congressional Delegate