

**Party Asymmetry in Competition in Presidential Nominations:
Contestation, Closeness, Duration, and Participation**

Caitlin E. Jewitt

Associate Professor
Department of Political Science
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
522 Major Williams Hall
220 Stanger Street
Blacksburg, VA 24061
(540) 231-7544
cjewitt@vt.edu

&

Gregory Shufeldt

Associate Dean, Ron and Laura Strain Honors College
Associate Professor
Department of History and Political Science
203 B Good Hall
1400 E. Hanna Ave
University of Indianapolis
Indianapolis, IN 46227
shufeldtg@uindy.edu

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In a nomination open on both sides of the aisle, more than eight governors, senators, and representatives threw their hat in the ring to become the 2008 Democratic nominee. Just a few weeks after the Iowa caucuses opened the nomination season, it was quickly narrowed to a three-person race between former Senator and 2004 Vice-Presidential nominee John Edwards, New York Senator Hillary Clinton, and Illinois Senator Barack Obama. Just 26 days after the Iowa caucuses, Edwards withdrew after the January 29th Florida primary, leaving Clinton and Obama as the only viable options voters had to choose from.

Though the choice was only between these two candidates, there was no clear favorite, and the outcome was not a foregone conclusion. Voters in every state, spread across 152 days, were able to vote while the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination race was still competitive. Obama did not secure the necessary majority of delegates until June 3rd. Not only was the race contested for the entirety of the nomination season, it was close. The average delegate lead between Obama and Clinton was just 0.94 percentage points. Of every Democratic nomination since 1980, the 2008 contest was competitive for the longest duration, was the closest race between the first and second-place candidate, and ties the 1980 and 1984 Democratic nominations for all states holding contests before a *de facto* nominee emerged. Not surprisingly, voter turnout was exceptionally high during this close, contested, highly competitive nomination, with more than 31% of Democratic voters participating.

Contrasting the highly competitive 2008 Democratic presidential nomination and the 2024 Republican presidential nomination, which can be better understood as a coronation, illustrates how voters from each of the two major political parties can experience competition differently. In 2024, Donald Trump became the first former President to win his party's nomination after losing re-election since Grover Cleveland. Among Republican nominations,

Trump's 2024 nomination is the least close. Trump's average delegate lead over second-place finisher former Governor Nikki Haley is 49 percentage points—significantly less competitive than all other races in our analysis. Due to Haley's refusal to withdraw in the initial weeks of the nomination season, Trump could not become the *de facto* nominee until he secured a majority of delegates, which was not mathematically possible until March 12, 2024 – which is exactly when he secured the nomination. As one might expect, turnout in the 2024 Republican nomination was not nearly as high as it was for the 2008 Democratic race, with only 21% of Republican supporters participating.

The 2008 Democratic and 2024 Republican nominations illustrate several important features about the competitiveness of a presidential nomination that we explore in this paper; competitiveness is: 1) a matter of degrees; 2) dynamic; 3) difficult to measure; and 4) asymmetrical by party.

First, competitiveness is a matter of degrees. Though any given nomination can be discussed as to whether it is competitive or uncompetitive (uncontested nominations with an incumbent president running are obviously uncompetitive), nominations can be (and often should be considered as) more or less competitive.

Competitiveness is also dynamic. Given the invisible primary, where elites often coalesce around a candidate, and the sequential nature of presidential nominations, with primaries and caucuses scattered over the course of several months, the competitiveness of the nomination can vary across time. If a candidate racks up several big wins in key states or other competitors withdraw quickly from the race, the nomination might wrap up quickly or be less competitive than expected (e.g., 2004 Democrats). At a certain point in a nomination season, it may be known who the nominee will be, even before it is official (e.g., 2024 Republicans). At other

times (e.g., 2008 Democrats), candidates may be neck-in-neck, with heightened uncertainty about who will emerge victorious, for the duration of the nomination season.

Next, competitiveness is difficult to measure. Nate Silver echoed this sentiment by saying “[t]here’s no agreed-upon standard for determining whether a nomination campaign was close or lopsided” (Silver 2016). We wholeheartedly concur with this assertion, and we believe it is important to draw distinctions between different facets of competition and articulate how these different aspects of competition can be measured. For example, at the state level, there is a difference between electoral competition (the degree of closeness between candidates in individual races) and party competition (the degree of closeness in the division of power between political parties) (Shufeldt and Flavin 2012).

Finally, we believe it is important to ascertain differences in competition by party. As we demonstrate in this paper, Democrats routinely experience more competitive nominations than Republicans. As we show, voters in more states can cast a ballot during the contested portion of the race where two or more candidates are still vying for the nomination. Likewise, the nomination takes longer to conclude for Democrats. The margin separating the first and second-place candidate is regularly closer among Democrats than Republicans. This variation in competition by party is due in part to the electoral rules they utilize to structure their nominations. It is also partially attributable to difference in party structure and culture. These differences have important implications for voters and their participation in the selection of the presidential candidates.

We agree with Atkeson and Maestas (2016) that the “micro-foundation of aggregate nomination turnout is the individual-level decision to vote or abstain and depends on the expected utility of her vote *at the time at which the vote is cast*” (755, emphasis in original). As

such, it is necessary to walk through different possible conceptualizations and operationalizations of competition in presidential nominations, explore how competition varies across parties, and examine how this asymmetry is associated with voter turnout. We argue that the nature of competition works differently between the parties and is more associated with voter turnout for Democrats compared to Republicans.

In this paper, we distinguish between and operationalize three distinct facets of competition: contestation, closeness, and duration. First, we review the concept of contestation - whether voters have an opportunity to choose between candidates when they participate in their state's primary or caucus. Next, we review the concept of closeness—the extent to which the outcome of the race is undetermined in terms of the overall nomination. Finally, we conceptualize competition based on the duration of the race, or how long the overall nomination process lasts before a *de facto* nominee emerges. In the pages that follow, we discuss these measures in greater depth, exploring the competitiveness of each nomination between 1980 and 2024 based on these distinct measures.¹ Throughout this analysis, we pay particular attention to how these aspects of competitiveness are associated with voter turnout and vary across parties.

CONTESTATION

For intraparty presidential nominations, one way to conceptualize a facet of competition is contestation, or whether there are candidates for voters to choose from. Thus, one way to think about contestation in presidential nominations is whether voters have a choice, or an opportunity,

¹ In our analysis, we exclude years where an incumbent president was running for renomination and faced no significant challenges (1996 Democrats, 2004 Republicans, 2012 Democrats, 2020 Republicans, and 2024 Democrats). We do include the 1980 Democrats and 1992 Republicans as both Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush faced more than nominal opposition.

to affect the overall outcome, or whether the nominee has effectively already been chosen. For instance, Donald Trump emerged as the *de facto* nominee on March 12, 2024 (because he had secured the necessary majority of delegates), after only 28 nominating contests had been held. Prior to this date, we argue that the Republican nomination was contested; afterwards, voters had no meaningful say in who became the 2024 Republican nominee—the outcome was no longer uncertain. Thus, when assessing contestation, we ask: can voters cast a ballot while there is still a meaningful choice to be made? Are there significant differences in the number of contests that are contested across the Democratic and Republican nominations?

Here, we operationalize contestation as a dichotomous variable, indicating *whether the nomination race is contested or not*. All contests that occur after a *de facto* nominee emerges are in the uncontested phase of the nomination season and receive a value of 0 on the variable. A *de facto* nominee can emerge through one of the following two paths. First, since a candidate needs 50% + 1 delegate to become the party's nominee at the National Convention, he or she becomes the *de facto* nominee once surpassing that threshold. For instance, Barack Obama became the *de facto* 2008 Democratic nominee after securing a majority of delegates on June 3, 2008.

Alternatively, a candidate can become the presumptive nominee by all of his or her viable competitors withdrawing from the race (Jewitt 2019). Al Gore became the *de facto* Democratic nominee on March 9, 2000, because Bill Bradley withdrew from the race, leaving Gore as the only viable option, even though Gore was still more than nine hundred delegates shy of the necessary delegates. Thus, any Democratic contest happening on or before March 9th is coded as contested on this dichotomous measure, and any contest scheduled after March 9th is classified as uncontested. Table 1 examines each nomination, showing the date that a *de facto* nominee emerged, or when each nomination shifted from contested to uncontested, the number of contests

that occurred in the contested phase, and whether it was due to the nominee surpassing the threshold of a majority of delegates or because all of the major challengers withdrew. Figure 1 pools nomination contests across years and presents the number of contested and uncontested primaries and caucuses the Republican Party has held and the Democratic Party has held between 1980 and 2024.²

Table 1: Contestation, 1980 – 2024

	Democrats			Republicans		
	Contested Number of Contests	Date Nomination Secured	Path to Securing the Nomination	Contested Number of Contests	Date Nomination Secured	Path to Securing the Nomination
1980	51 (100%)	June 3	Nominee secured 50%	39 (76%)	May 20	Nominee secured 50%
1984	51 (100%)	July 16	Nominee secured 50%	.	.	.
1988	38 (75%)	April 21	Challengers withdraw	31 (61%)	March 29	Challengers withdraw
1992	27 (53%)	March 19	Challengers withdraw	38 (75%)	May 5	Nominee secured 50%
1996	.	.	.	30 (59%)	March 14	Challengers withdraw
2000	19 (37%)	March 9	Challengers withdraw	23 (45%)	March 9	Challengers withdraw
2004	30 (59%)	March 4	Challengers withdraw	.	.	.
2008	51 (100%)	June 3	Nominee secured 50%	39 (76%)	March 4	Nominee secured 50%
2012	.	.	.	32 (63%)	April 11	Challengers withdraw
2016	50 (98%)	June 7	Nominee secured 50%	41 (80%)	June 7	Challengers withdraw
2020	31 (60%)	April 8	Challengers withdraw	.	.	.
2024	.	.	.	28 (55%)	March 12	Nominee secured 50%

² Here the unit of analysis is the contest (the primary or caucus) for each state for each party, rather than the nomination.

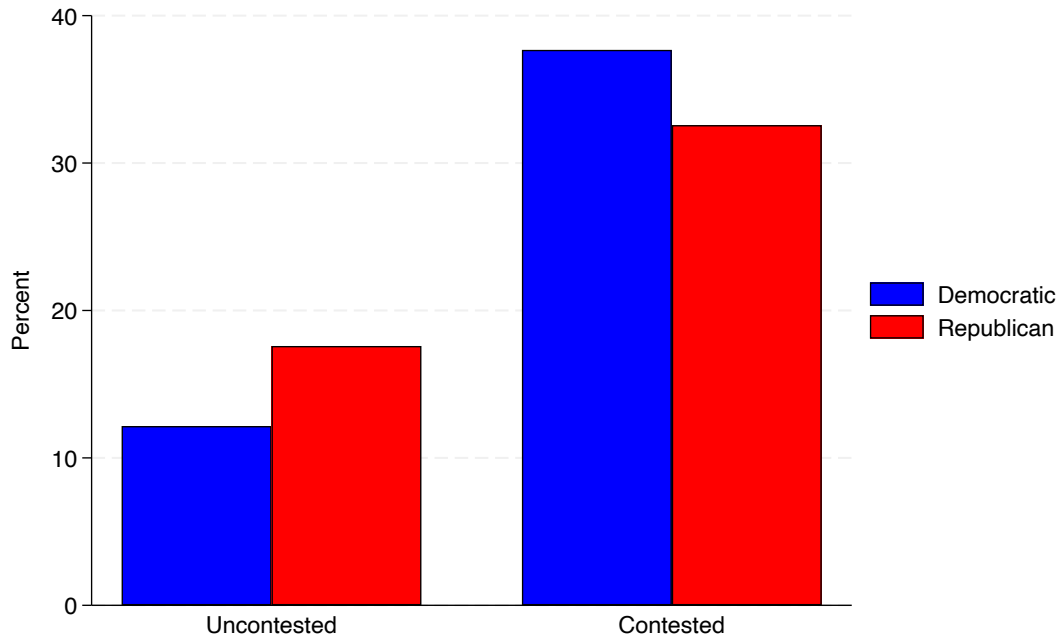


Figure 1: Contestation Across Party, 1980 – 2024

The data presented in Table 1 and Figure 1 reveals a few common themes about contestation in Democratic and Republican presidential nomination. First, the Democratic process generally lasts longer and is viewed as more contested than the Republican process; this is consistent with previous findings (Mayer 1996). In general, the Democratic Party holds more contested contests than the Republican Party. Thus, Democratic voters have more opportunities to weigh in on who becomes their party's presidential candidates before a presumptive nominee has emerged.

Generally, Republicans have more quickly coalesced around a frontrunner than their Democratic counterparts, wrapping up their nominations more rapidly and leaving contests held later in the nomination season uncontested (Mayer 1996; Cohen et al. 2008). By making early endorsements, party elites can help winnow the field and coordinate on a consensus nominee before many voters even get a chance to participate (Cohen et al. 2008). In general, Republicans have been able to coordinate on candidates easier and more rapidly than Democrats. Part of that

is surely a product of who Republicans have nominated. Dating back to 1980, Republicans have nominated either a sitting president, the outgoing vice-president, or a candidate that performed very strongly during the previous contested cycle in ten of the last twelve nominations (George W. Bush in 2000 and Donald Trump in 2016 are the two outliers).

The shorter period of contestation for Republicans can be attributed to differences in party culture and party loyalty but also to partisan differences in rules and delegate allocation. Democrats utilize proportional representation throughout their process whereas many state Republican contests award their delegates in a winner-take-all approach (a point we will return to later in this paper). Four of the last 9 contested Democratic races have seen the *de facto* nominee emerge only after securing the necessary 50% of the delegate to clinch the nomination. These four election cycles coincide with the only instances when nearly 100% of the states held their contests during the contested window (e.g., 1980, 1984, 2008, and 2016). Otherwise, a Democratic *de facto* nominee emerges because the rest of the remaining candidates withdraw from the race.

On the other side, 4 of the last 9 contested Republican nominees have emerged from earning the necessary 50% of the delegates, and none of the nominations have been contested for all fifty states. In terms of the number of state contests held and when the race shifted to the uncontested portion, the 2016 nomination of Donald Trump was the most contested Republican race. As front-loading has increased over the post-reform era, we have also seen candidates more likely to withdraw earlier in the nomination season (Norranders 2006), perhaps making it easier for the eventual nominee to secure the nomination through that pathway as opposed to having to wait to win a majority of delegates. Thus, voters casting ballots during the non-contested

window, whether on the Republican or Democratic side, were more likely denied the opportunity to meaningfully participate due to strategic candidates dropping out of the race.

Though this measure of contestation is a relatively clear-cut way to conceptualize competition, it can overshadow important nuances about how competitive each nomination is. When thinking of competition (broadly), sometimes a race might be labeled competitive by the dichotomous measure of contestation – but the writing is on the wall, and everyone knows that one candidate will emerge victorious eventually. For example, in 2024 Trump was (impatiently) waiting for Haley to either withdraw from the race or for enough delegates to be allocated for him to secure a majority. Similarly, there may also be nominations where multiple candidates remain in the race and for various reasons (e.g., position advocacy) have chosen not yet to withdraw, despite little to no chance of actually winning the nomination. For instance, in the 2012 Republican nomination, Ron Paul remained in the race, highlighting his views on foreign policy and monetary policy, long after it was clear he would not be the Republican nominee (Rudin 2012). In some cases, a nomination can be contested, but not close.

CLOSENESS

When thinking about competitiveness, we feel it is appropriate to distinguish between contestation and closeness. In some nominations, the competitiveness of the race changes over the course of the nomination season, with the closeness of the race tightening and subsiding as various events transpire. To capture this dimension of competition, we utilize a novel measure of the closeness of the race between the first- and second-place candidates.³ To do so, we calculate

³ Atkeson and Maestas (2016) utilize a similar measure, examining the percentage of delegates that the first-place candidate has captured. We contend that just capturing the percent of the delegates the first-place candidate wins masks (in some instances) the true closeness between the front runner and the rest of the field.

the *percentage point difference of delegates between the first-place candidate and second-place candidate*. Looking at the difference in the percentage of delegates allows us to account for the varying number of delegates across nominations and more easily make comparisons. In calculating this measure, we use whichever candidates are in first and second place, though which candidates those are may change over the course of the nomination season. This measure allows for a dynamic picture, where closeness ebbs and flows while also accounting for the sequential nature of the nomination season. To illustrate, the left panel of Figure 2 displays the percent of delegates captured by the first and second-place candidates across the course of the 2016 Republican nomination season. As the distance between the two lines grows, we consider the nomination to be less close because the first-place candidate is pulling ahead of the next-closest competitor (which following the New Hampshire primary was Donald Trump and Ted Cruz, respectively).

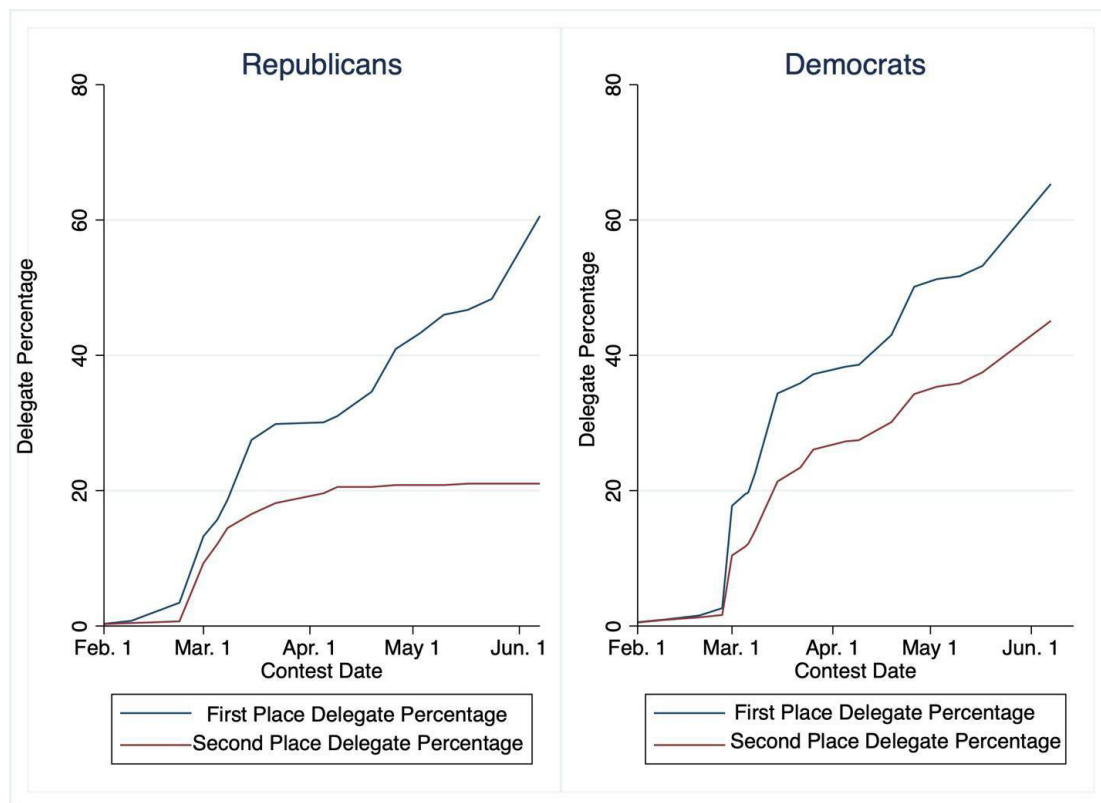


Figure 2: Percent of Delegates Won by First and Second Place Candidates in 2016 Nominations

This stands in contrast to the right panel of Figure 2, which shows the percent of delegates captured by the first and second-place candidates across the course of the 2016 Democratic nomination season. As can be seen by the lines that are much closer together, due in large part to the party's proportional representation delegate allocation rules, it was harder for Clinton to run away with the nomination. Instead, she slowly inched her way to capturing the nomination, as Sanders continued to win some delegates. To tie this back to our previous discussion, the 2016 Democratic nomination was contested for 50 out of 51 contests. While Sanders called requests from former President Obama and others for Sanders to withdraw "absurd," measures of closeness reveal that it was evident that Clinton was going to win the nomination and that the outcome between her and Sanders was never particularly in doubt, even if she couldn't finalize the outcome quickly (Byrnes 2016). The race was closer than some, but Clinton was steadily pulling ahead throughout the nomination season.

To further examine the closeness of each party's presidential nominations, Figure 3 presents histograms for closeness overall (both parties), and for the parties separately. Smaller values indicate that the nomination race is closer. All of the distributions are positively skewed, with the bulk of contests being held when the race is close, but a sizable number of contests being held when the race is not close. The modal value is contests that occur when the nomination races are very close, or there is a very small difference between the percent of delegates captured by the delegate leader and the second-place candidate. However, there is a high level of dispersion to each distribution, indicating that there are also many instances of contests being held when the race is not close at all.

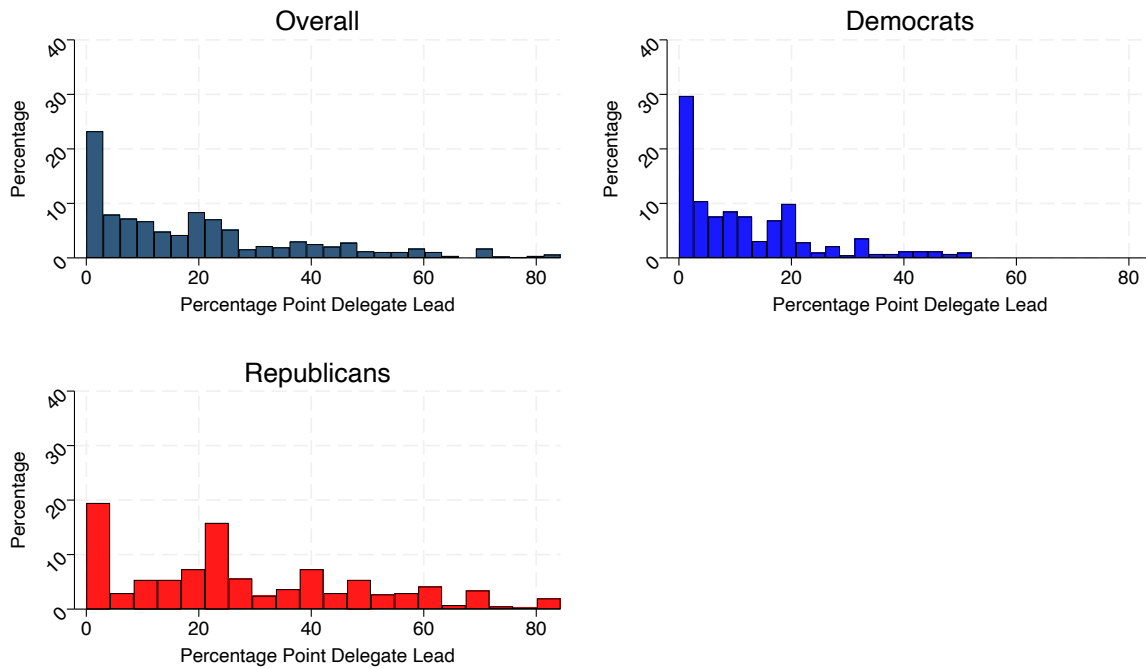


Figure 3: Closeness (Delegate Lead Percentage) Overall and By Party, 1980 - 2024

Once again, we see a pronounced difference between parties. An initial review suggests that Republican nominations are not as close as those that the Democrats experience. The mean percentage point delegate lead for Democrats is 11.98 compared to 27.93 for Republicans. In other words, on average, Democratic contests are much closer than Republican contests. There is also significantly more variation among the closeness of Republican contests than there is among Democratic contests (std. deviation of 12.07 for Democrats and 21.26 for Republicans).

This intuitively makes sense as Republicans reward party loyalty and wrap up their nominations more rapidly nominating the candidate that came in second the previous cycle. This party asymmetry may also be attributed in large part to the delegate allocation rules that the parties employ. The Democratic nominations have more (or all, depending on the year) contests that utilize proportional representation, meaning that candidates that remain in the race are more

likely to be rewarded with delegates than their Republican counterparts, where some contests employ winner-take-all delegate allocation rules.

To further distinguish partisan differences and which presidential nominations are close and which are not, below we present the closeness of each contested presidential nomination race for Democrats (Figure 4) and for Republicans (Figure 5).

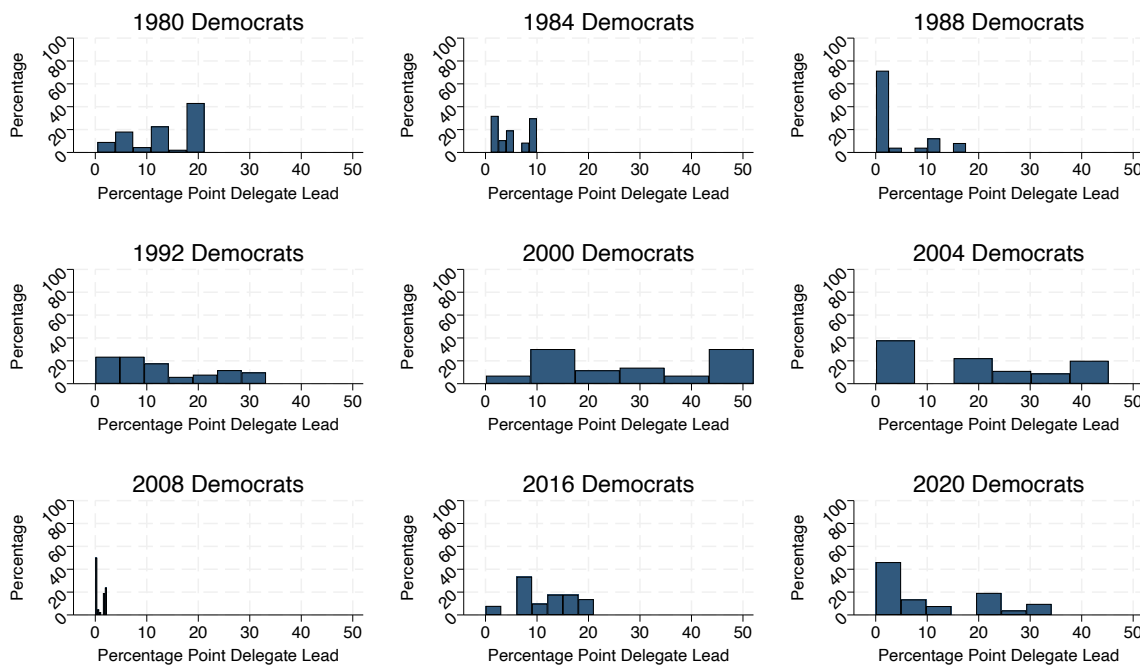


Figure 4: Closeness in Democratic Presidential Nomination Contests, By Year

Figure 4 shows that within Democratic Party nominations, there is considerable variation in closeness across years. Most starkly, Figure 4 shows how remarkably close the 2008 Democratic race, between Obama and Clinton, was throughout the entire nomination season. The mean percentage point difference in the percent of delegates captured by the 2008 delegate leader and the second-place candidate was 0.94 percentage points. At the least close point during the race, Obama (the delegate leader) was leading Clinton (the second-place candidate) by only

2.24 percentage points. No other nomination, on the Democratic or Republican side, is near as close as this race was.

The two other Democratic races that are the closest are 1984 and 1988; these races are quite different from the 2008 battle royale between Clinton and Obama. The 1984 and 1988 races experienced more initial candidates in the field, no apparent frontrunner, and diffuse support spread amongst a larger field. In contrast, the 2000 and 2004 Democratic races are clearly not close. On average, the difference in the percent of the delegates accumulated by the first- and second-place candidates was greater than twenty percentage points. The maximum difference was over fifty percentage points in 2000 and more than forty-five percentage points in 2004. These two less close races are very different races as Gore emerges over Bradley quite quickly while Kerry takes longer to emerge from a wider pack of candidates before all of his opponents withdraw after Super Tuesday. Yet, they are similar in that fairly early on, the races became not close. In sum, even among Democratic nominations, which are considerably closer than Republican nominations, there is significant variation – with some years being remarkably close and others being much less so.

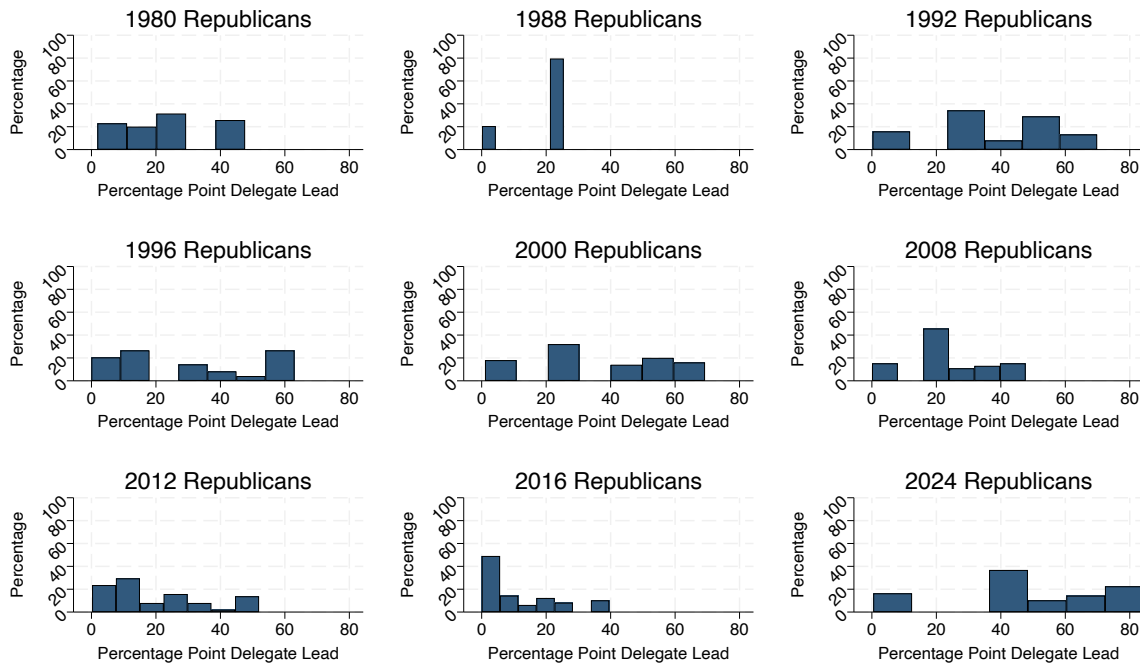


Figure 5: Closeness in Republican Presidential Nomination Contests, By Year

Looking at the Republican races between 1980 and 2024 (Figure 5), we see nominations that are much less close than their Democratic counterparts, but that also exhibit considerable variation across years. For instance, as the “Never Trump” movement was gaining ground, the 2016 Republican nomination, by this measure, was the closest nomination the party ever experienced (mean percentage point delegate lead of 12.69). In contrast, Trump’s nomination in 2024, where Nikki Haley stubbornly remained in the race slowing Trump’s path to securing the nomination, was the least close Republican nomination examined. Trump’s average lead in 2024 over the second-place finisher is 49 percentage points. In 1996, another uncompetitive cycle, closeness appears much more bimodal. The delegate leader (Bob Dole) took an early lead in the race, in terms of delegates accumulated, and became the *de facto* nominee in mid-March when his competitors withdrew from the race. When a candidate can more quickly distinguish himself or herself from the second-place candidate, in terms of the percent of delegates accumulated, we

would expect to see competitors withdraw from the race sooner. In contrast, in 2012, the Republican nomination was very close for the beginning of the nomination season, though Romney did separate himself from his competitors and widen his lead at around the two-month mark.

To take stock of party differences through our first two measures of contestation and closeness, it is clear that Democratic and Republican presidential nominations have different levels of competition—consequently, Democratic and Republican voters experience distinct levels of competition, even in the same election cycle. Voters in more states, on average, have the opportunity to participate in the Democratic nomination during the contested window than in the Republican nomination. Likewise, the Democratic race is usually closer between the first and second-place candidate when voters head the polls compared to their Republican counterparts.

DURATION

Every four years the nomination process looks slightly different, partially because presidential nominations are not controlled by a unitary actor. Ultimately, the decentralized, sequential nature of presidential nominations ensures that no two election cycles resemble each other too closely in terms of the structure and the dynamics, including the competitiveness, of the race. Our measure of contestation relies in large part upon the choices of strategic candidates (and the donors/supporters that keep their electoral prospects alive). Likewise, the measure of closeness is dependent upon the choices of voters—especially as the process becomes more democratic and allows for more voter input. Aspects of competition are also shaped by choices made by the national party and state parties (and the state governments they control), particularly those that govern the scheduling of state contests.

For example, the national parties prescribe or direct states on when they can hold their contests. The Herman-Price Commission created the modern “carve-out” states by giving South Carolina and Nevada favored early status to follow Iowa and New Hampshire (Price 2009). As a result of when the other states schedule (or are allowed to schedule) their contests, voters get more or less opportunities to participate. As states rush to front-load and hold their contests earlier during the contested window—the overall process may end prematurely (or sooner than the national party and/or voters may prefer). Frontloading may also be associated with lower levels of electoral competition in any given state by providing candidates more states to target to gain a strategic advantage (Atkeson and Maestas 2008; 2009; 2016). For example, candidates Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton engaged in a very close nomination struggle in 2008 by often targeting different states as Obama racked up victories in caucus states while Clinton targeted primary states. In other words, the schedule and sequence of contests and the level of front-loading present can affect how long the nomination lasts.

Thus, we conceptualize this aspect of competition as duration, focusing on how long the nomination process lasts before a *de facto* nominee emerges. While duration does not vary across states within a nomination, it does vary across parties and years. Table 2 presents summary statistics for our measure of duration, the number of days the nomination lasts without a *de facto* nominee, overall and by party. Between 1980 and 2024, the 18 presidential nominations we consider lasted, on average, just over 81 days. Democratic nominations, on average, last longer, with a mean of 92 days, whereas Republican nominations are only competitive for an average of 70.6 days. This reinforces that on this dimension, as well our previous measures of contestation and closeness, Democratic nominations are more competitive than Republican nominations.

Table 2: Duration Summary Statistics of Presidential Nomination 1980 - 2024, By Party

	Days Competitive			
	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Overall	81.3	39.9	31	152
Democrats	92.0	47.3	38	152
Republicans	70.6	29.7	31	120

Of course, depending on how the contests in each season are scheduled, clustered, and/or frontloaded, the length of time the nomination is competitive for does not necessarily indicate how many states held primaries or caucuses when the nomination was still competitive. Thus, Figure 6 examines the relationship between the duration of each nomination and the number of contests that are held in the contested portion of the nomination.

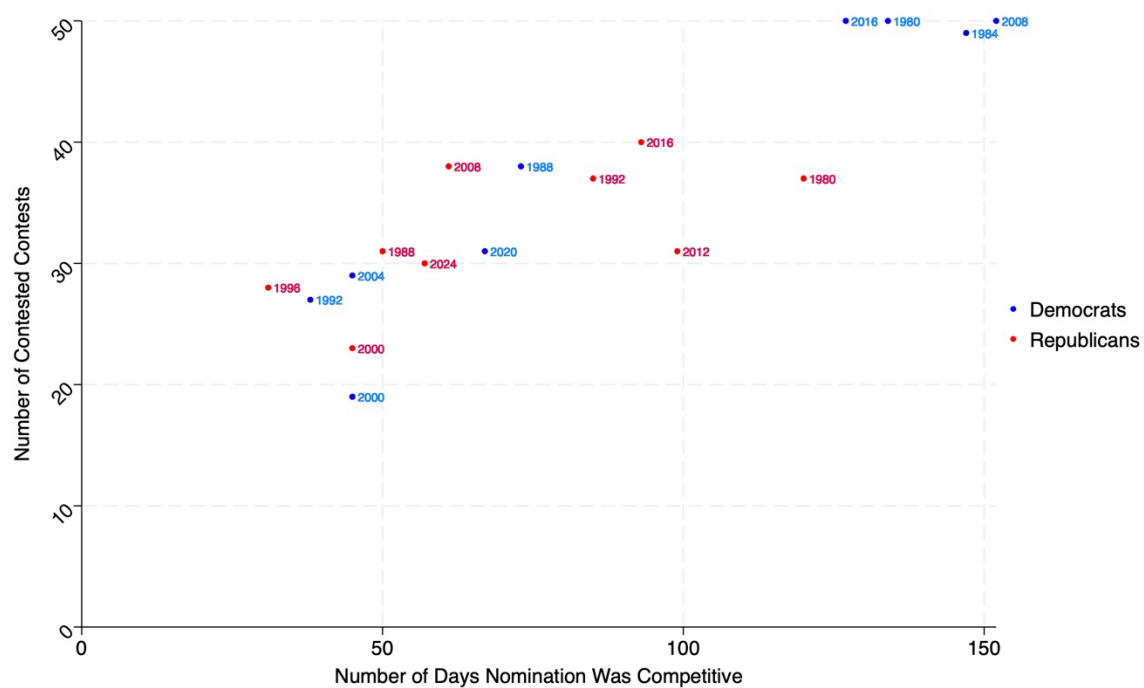


Figure 6: Duration of Nomination and Contested Contests, 1980 - 2024

It is clear from this graph that there are more Democratic nominations than Republican nominations where voters in all (or the vast majority) of states are able to weigh in when the nomination is still competitive. Four of the 9 Democratic nominations during this period lasted longer than 100 days (1980, 1984, 2008, and 2016). In these four Democratic nominations, every state (or nearly every state) was able to hold their contest during this contested phase. On the other end of the spectrum, the 1992, 2000 and 2004 Democratic nominations were relatively quick affairs. The shortest Democratic nomination, in 1992, lasted 38 days (with less than 20 states holding contests in that period), considerably shorter than the 2008 nomination, which stretched on without a *de facto* nominee for 152 days.

In stark contrast to the Democrats, since 1980, there has never been a Republican nomination that was competitive for the entirety of the nomination season, when voters in every state could participate. On the Republican side, in each year, anywhere from 20 to 55% of states held their primaries and caucuses when there was already a presumptive nominee, or when there was no ability for voters to impact the trajectory of the nomination. If we consider the number of days between the first contest and the day a *de facto* nominee emerges, the 1980 Republican nomination is the most competitive, in terms of duration, as it lasts the longest. Eventual winner Ronald Reagan required 120 days to defeat George H.W. Bush and John B. Anderson by achieving the delegates necessary to secure the nomination. Calendar-wise, that is almost an entire month longer than the next longest nomination, the 2012 nomination that was competitive for 99 days. Importantly, an additional seven states were able to hold contests during the competitive window in 1980 compared to 2012.

The 2008, 2012, and 2016 Republican nominations offer caution about using duration of the nomination as the sole measure of competition. When we look at the 2008 Republican

nomination, it lasted for 61 days, and 38 states were able to hold contests in the competitive window. In 2012, the Republican nomination was competitive longer—for 99 days, but only 31 states held their contests in that period. In other words, the 2012 nomination was longer than the 2008 nomination, but voters in fewer states were afforded the opportunity for meaningful participation. In contrast, in 2016, the Republican nomination was competitive for only 93 days (the duration was six days shorter than 2012), but 41 states were crowded into those three months.

This illustrates that duration, or the raw number of days the nomination is competitive (without a *de facto* nominee) is only so informative. The number of days the nomination is competitive is heavily dependent on the sequence, timing, and spacing of the contests—in a heavily frontloaded nomination, more states can participate in fewer days than in a nomination that is slower to ramp up, with contests spread throughout the course of many months. Thus, the number of days contested provides some useful information about one aspect of the competitiveness of the nomination, but without additional information (such as the number of contests that are held during that period of time), its value is limited. It also illustrates the need to consider carefully why and how we are measuring competitiveness. Are we interested in the how long the nomination lasts when there is still a choice to be made? Are we interested in the number of states (and voters) who are able to participate during that competitive period? Or are we interested in how close the nomination race is at any given point in time?

Comparing the 2012 and 2016 Republican nominations helps demonstrate how measures of duration are often related to choices the national party makes. Some Republicans felt that the length of the 2012 nomination put the party at a competitive disadvantage in November. Throughout the nomination season, eventual nominee Mitt Romney had to take many

conservative positions to assuage concerns from nervous party activists, moving farther to the right than the median general election voter. Yet, while Romney's campaign claimed that the general election would be like an "etch a sketch" and that he could campaign with a clean slate from a more moderate position—his primary promises and rhetoric continued to hurt him (Cohen 2012; Little 2012). Operating under the assumption that the long nomination season (stretching on without a *de facto* nominee for 99 days) led to more divisiveness and hurt Romney, Republicans revised their process in 2016 to better reward the frontrunner and ensure that the process did not become too long, chaotic, and unpredictable (Urmacher et al. 2016, Martin 2015). Referring to the potential number of candidates entering the race, Reince Priebus, Republican National Committee chairman, said, "On one hand it's exciting, and on the other hand it brings great risk. It means that there's even a greater responsibility on the national party to contain a process that could get out of control." One way the party sought to control the process was through the sequence of the events, hoping to affect the competitive duration of the nomination. "With the early states staggered throughout February, the idea is to 'have about a 60-day primary,' as Mr. Priebus put it" (Martin 2015).

With a different calendar and set of priorities, the 2016 Republican nomination lasted 93 days, six days shorter than the 2012 Republican nomination and more than a month longer than the desired "60-day primary." However, during that shorter competitive phase of the nomination, due to increased front-loading, 10 additional states held their contests, suggesting that a longer duration does not necessarily equate to an increase in meaningful participation. Though it may matter to the party how long the nomination lasts, it may make little difference to a voter whether the nomination stretches on without a *de facto* nominee for 45 days or 90 days, as long as his or her state holds a primary or caucus within this competitive window.

The Relationship Between Competition and Turnout

Theoretically, heightened competition between parties and between candidates in primary elections increases the probability that one feels like their vote is meaningful and might impact the outcome of the race, which in turn, should make it more likely that a voter participates (Downs 1957; Riker and Ordeshook 1968). More closely contested races also increase the probability that a voter will be contacted and mobilized by a candidate's campaign which is associated with higher levels of participation (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993). Yet, the earliest studies evaluating the reforms that marked the modern nomination system came to mixed conclusions as to whether there was a clear relationship between competition and voter turnout (Ranney 1977; Moran and Fenster 1982; Kenney and Rice 1985; Rothenberg and Brody 1988; Norrander 1991).

As we have previously demonstrated, Republican nominations are less competitive than those of the Democratic Party. Republican nominations last, on average, for a shorter period of time (duration), have a *de facto* nominee emerge more rapidly (contestation), and the delegate leader pulls away from the rest of the pack to a greater degree and more quickly (closeness). As a result, voters are presented with fewer opportunities for meaningful participation in Republican nomination than in Democratic nominations. Part of the reason that Republican nominations are wrapped up more rapidly than the Democrats is due to partisan difference in rules, such as delegate allocation. This patchwork system allows nominations to vary across years, states, and each political party—but overall, it is clear that rules matter and affect the competitiveness of the nominations (Jewitt 2019; Norrander 2020).

Given differences in the composition of the parties themselves, we might also expect competition and the different facets of competition might work differently for each party.

Democrats, for example, prioritize internal coalition maintenance and small-d democratic procedural reforms, while Republicans emphasize electoral and strategic tactics to increase their chances of winning (Freeman 1986; Klinkner 1994; Galvin 2010). The Republican Party is frequently considered a more homogeneous ideological movement which prioritizes party loyalty while the Democratic Party is a coalition of discrete social groups (Freeman 1986; Mayer 1996; Grossman and Hopkins 2016; Shufeldt 2018).

In general, Republican self-identifiers are more likely to turn out to vote compared to Democratic self-identifiers, even after controlling for relevant demographic and political characteristics (Mayer 1996; Shufeldt 2018). Thus, increased competition could exacerbate this turnout gap. On the other hand, competition might mobilize Democrats to participate more, narrowing the gap. Likewise, the typically shorter primary season for Republicans might heighten the impact of competition. A Republican voter in a state with a primary during the brief window of competition might be more likely to vote to take advantage of this opportunity. Inversely, the longer competitive window for Democrats might be associated with more opportunities to participate. Finally, given the differences in culture and composition between each party, the nature of competition (between ideological candidates or candidates representing discrete groups) might be associated with partisan differences in turnout. In the following section, we explore this broader relationship between competition and turnout and whether it works differently by party.

ANALYSIS

Thus far, we have put forth three broad categories of competition: contestation, closeness, and duration. We have presented measures to capture the various dimensions of competitiveness and have shown that competitiveness is distinct across parties, with Democratic nominations

generally more competitive than Republican nominations. We contend that it is critical to parse out competitiveness in presidential nomination races (and other races as well, though that is beyond our scope here) and think carefully about which dimension of competitiveness is the most reflective and useful for our purposes, as different measures can lead us to difference conclusions about how competitive a nomination race is. Likewise, we believe it is valuable to parse out the relationship between competition and turnout by party given party differences in the level of competition they experience as well as structural and cultural asymmetries.

Here, we are interested in exploring the impact of competition on turnout in presidential nomination contests. Our unit of analysis is the state contest for each party in each nomination year (from 1980 – 2024). However, duration simply measures the number of days the nomination stretches on for without a *de facto* nominee; in other words, it does not vary across states within a nomination. Theoretically, we also do not expect the length of the contested phase of the nomination to affect levels of participation. Thus, we do not utilize the measure of duration in our analysis presented below. We do, however, theoretically expect that whether a state holds its primary or caucus in the contested phase (when there is still a choice to be made between candidates) and how close the delegate race is to affect the number of voters that participate. Thus, in the models presented in Table 3, our key independent variables are the dichotomous variable for *contestation* (with a value of one indicating the state holds its primary/caucus in the contested phase) and a ratio-level variable for *closeness* (with smaller values indicating that the first-place candidate has a smaller percentage point lead in the delegate race over the second-place candidate). The models that follow are OLS regression models, with voter turnout as the

dependent variable. We calculate voter turnout as a percentage, using the number of votes cast as the numerator and the normal partisan support score as the denominator.⁴

In addition to our key independent variables, we also control for other factors known to affect voter turnout. We include several variables that account for the specifics of the nominating contest in the state: a dichotomous variable for *primary*, with a value of one for states holding a primary and a value of zero for states holding a caucus; a series of dummy variables representing the delegate allocation rule that the party uses in the state to award delegates (*proportional representation*, *other delegate allocation rule*), leaving winner-take-all as the base category; a series of dummy variables (*open* and *semi-open*, leaving *closed* as the base category) indicating whether the nominating contest is open to all voters, excludes opposite party members, or is closed to everyone who is not a party member; and, the number of *days after the Iowa caucuses* that the contest is held (higher values representing contests scheduled later in the nomination season). To consider other election administration factors that may influence turnout, we include the number of days before the election that a voter needs to register by and a dichotomous variable indicating whether or not the presidential primary is held on the *same date as the congressional and state primaries*. To account for the political culture and propensity to turnout in various states, we also control for the *average state turnout* in presidential elections, the *Gini coefficient*, the *percent of the state that is white*, and the *percent of the state that has completed high school*.

⁴ To calculate the normal partisan support score, we utilize the percent of the vote awarded to the party's candidate in the last two presidential, senatorial, and gubernatorial elections in each state and multiply that value by the voting eligible population (Jewitt 2019).

Table 3: The Impact of Contestation and Closeness on Voter Turnout in Presidential Nomination Contests, 1980 – 2024

	Both Parties		Democrats		Republicans	
	Coefficient	Robust Std. Error	Coefficient	Robust Std. Error	Coefficient	Robust Std. Error
Contestation	3.496*	1.354	-2.075	1.669	4.019*	1.915
Closeness	-0.238*	0.040	-0.659*	0.069	-0.071	0.044
Primary	19.339*	1.297	22.202*	1.302	15.244*	2.310
Proportional Representation	-0.561	1.035	-2.480	3.436	-3.089*	1.313
Other Delegate Alloc. Rule	-0.586	1.444	0.376	5.441	-1.917	1.444
Open Contest	4.370*	0.864	3.241*	1.040	5.221*	1.213
Semi-Open Contest	2.314*	1.111	0.184	1.427	2.986*	1.494
Average State Turnout	0.165*	0.061	0.205*	0.083	0.017	0.090
Gini Coefficient	-30.732*	9.938	-12.801	12.333	-45.224*	14.801
Percent White	0.087*	0.028	0.039	0.037	0.148*	0.041
Percent HS graduate or more	0.242*	0.057	0.089	0.075	0.476*	0.075
Closing Date for Registration	-0.135*	0.047	-0.225*	0.053	-0.069	0.073
Number of Days between Iowa Caucus and Contest	0.058*	0.016	0.075*	0.020	0.031	0.025
Congressional and Presidential Primaries Held on Same Date	4.349*	1.094	9.421*	1.334	1.290	1.433
Constant	-12.526	7.235	0.954	8.770	-20.098	10.706
Number of Cases	753		390		363	
R-Squared	0.4462		0.631		0.3526	

Notes: The dependent variable, voter turnout, is calculated as a percentage, with total votes cast as the numerator and the normal partisan support score. Cell entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients and robust standard errors. * $p < .05$.

When looking at presidential nomination contests for both parties pooled, there is a positive statistically significant coefficient for *contestation*. This indicates that, on average, presidential nomination contests that are contested (or occur before a *de facto* nominee emerges) have a turnout rate that is approximately 3.5 percentage points higher than uncontested contests, controlling for all other factors. The negative, statistically significant coefficient for *closeness* demonstrates that as the delegate lead between the first-place and second-place candidates grows (or the race becomes less close) turnout decreases. In other words, the results of the pooled model for both parties show that both contestation and closeness affect turnout in the ways we would expect. The results also show that most of the control variables affect turnout in the way we would expect (e.g. primaries have substantially higher turnout than caucuses, states with higher average turnout in presidential general elections have increased turnout in nominating contests, and states that hold their presidential primary on the same date as the congressional primaries have higher levels of turnout).

In order to continue our investigation of how competition may operate differently across parties, we also ran these models for Democratic contests and Republican contests separately. These findings illustrate interesting, compelling differences about how competition operates in presidential nominating contests and its impact on facilitating participation from voters. Notably, when looking at Democratic nominating contests, closeness is negative and statistically significant, as expected, but contestation is not statistically significant. In Republican nominating contests, contestation is positive and statistically significant, as expected, but closeness is not statistically significant. In other words, when Democratic nominations are close, more voters participate. The same does not appear to be true for Republicans. But having the race contested is

enough to motivate Republican, but not Democratic, voters to show up and weigh in on who will be the nominee.

To make sense of these findings, we rely on previous literature about party asymmetry (Freeman 1986; Mayer 1996; Grossman and Hopkins 2016; Shufeldt 2018). As a coalition of discrete social groups, closeness communicates to Democratic primary voters that there is likely a meaningful choice between different groups within the party. Contestation alone may not communicate enough information to potential voters that their participation may affect the outcome. For Republicans, on the other hand, contestation (not closeness) drives turnout. As an ideological movement, still having any sort of meaningful choice between two more candidates gives Republican primary voters the opportunity to shape the ideological direction of the party.

CONCLUSION

We began this paper by identifying that understanding the competitiveness of presidential nominations is 1) a matter of degrees; 2) dynamic; 3) difficult to measure; and 4) asymmetrical by party. In this examination, we have identified three broad types of ways of conceptualizing competition: contestation, closeness, and duration. We provided evidence, through our discussion of the measures and examples from presidential nominations that these measures represent different features of the concept of competitiveness.

Moreover, we provide clear evidence that the two parties have experienced different levels of competition since 1980, and that these different components of competition work differently by party. This is evident in the degree of contestation. Democrats take longer than Republicans to decide upon a *de facto* presidential nominee—whether that is through rules that make it harder for the frontrunner to win 50% + 1 of the required delegates or through all of the

other candidates withdrawing from the race. Likewise, we identified a clear partisan difference as it relates to the two other components of competition. On average, Democrats experience greater levels of competition if we conceptualize it as the closeness of the nomination—the distance between the first- and second-place candidate. Democrats also experience greater levels of competition when looking at the overall duration of the race—when we focus on the number of days the nomination remains contested.

We suspect that these various forms of competition may have important implications for voter participation and engagement. We find that when looking at all presidential nomination contests between 1980 and 2024, contestation and closeness both affect the voter turnout rate. However, when we look at the parties separately, additional intriguing findings emerge. Namely, closeness seems to influence participation in Democratic nominating contests, but contestation is what drives voters in Republican nominating contests to the polls.

These partisan differences are a product of a variety of factors that make being intentional in defining and measuring competition important. For example, strategic candidates and deep-pocketed donors play a role in shaping the extent of choice in front of voters. Likewise, state parties shape the nomination calendar every four years by their choice of when to hold their contest. Finally, each national party establishes rules (such as whether to utilize proportional delegate allocation or winner-take-all delegate allocation; or when states are allowed to hold their contest) that affects whether voters have a meaningful role to play.

These disparate findings may be because attributable in part because Republican Party is frequently considered a more homogeneous ideological movement which prioritizes party loyalty while the Democratic Party is a coalition of discrete social groups (Freeman 1986; Mayer 1996; Grossman and Hopkins 2016; Shufeldt 2018). Given these party differences, competition

between Republicans might be between ideological factions within the party while competition among Democratic candidates might be between different groups or social identities within the party. Our findings, in combination with this prior research, suggests that, fundamentally, competition might just work differently for Democrats and Republicans.

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