The Effects of the Nonpartisan Blanket Primary on Electoral Change in Louisiana, 1964-2003

Mark R. Dudley

Follow this and additional works at: http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/vol6_iss1

Recommended Citation
http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/vol6_iss1/149

This publication is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Undergraduate Research through Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu
The Effects of the Nonpartisan Blanket Primary on Electoral Change in Louisiana, 1964-2003

Author:
Mark R. Dudley
Mark is a May 2010 cum laude graduate of Washington University in St. Louis with a major in Political Science. His interest in the study of how the behavior of voters responds to electoral institutions led him to conduct this study for his thesis research. He is currently enrolled in a Ph.D. program in Political Science at Duke University.

Abstract
Do the institutional differences of state election laws help to explain the uneven process of electoral change in the Deep South during the last quarter of the 20th Century? Previous research on Southern electoral change has studied the effects of numerous variables within an assumed context of similar electoral institutions. This research examines the unique institution of Louisiana’s nonpartisan blanket primary through a comparative study of Deep South state legislative elections between 1964 (the first election following the passage of the Civil Rights Act) and 2003 (the last election before Hurricane Katrina in 2005). Employing statistical and spatial analysis, regression, and elite interviews, the work finds three initial effects of the nonpartisan blanket primary on electoral change that have faded with the increase in two-party competition: impact on candidate number, impact on party performance, and an impact as a direct result of the set of unique electoral situations created, such as single party run-off elections and candidate election through a single electoral primary.

Faculty Mentor: Gary J. Miller Ph.D., Professor of Political Science.
Professor Miller’s primary substantive interest has been decision-making in bureaucracies, committees, and small groups. His research includes a number of laboratory experiments testing hypotheses about group decision-making, derived from game theory and organizational economics.

Acknowledgements
For every part of this project – from its initial stages to its final draft – I owe immeasurable thanks to my faculty mentor and friend, Gary Miller. Without his constant willingness to put aside all other work to help me on this project, there would be no text of mine in this publication. In addition, I owe deep thanks to Dean Ewan Harrison for his role as the thesis coordinator, constantly offering his support and advice throughout the entire process. Finally, I owe great thanks to my mother, Dr. Joan L. H. Dudley, whose work to complete her doctoral dissertation served as my true inspiration.

Key Terms
- Electoral Institutions
- Political Primaries
- Voting Behavior
- Louisiana

Peer Editors:
Daniel Woznica, a senior majoring in Women and Gender Studies and English.
INTRODUCTION

Electoral competition for a U.S. Senate seat and all seven of the state’s U.S. House seats occurred in the Louisiana congressional elections primary in October of 1992. Following the first round of the election, one of the candidates in the Senate race and candidates in four of the seven House races received a simple majority of the vote, thus winning the election outright. In the other three House races, no candidate received a simple majority, so a second round runoff election was necessary. The candidates in the November runoff were two Democrats running in the Fourth District, one Democrat and one Republican running in the Fifth District, and two Republicans running in the Sixth District. While runoff elections are frequent in electoral institutions in the United States, there is nothing like Louisiana’s nonpartisan blanket primary and the types of electoral situations that it creates: single-party two-candidate general elections, candidate election in the first round primary, and the possibility that a party with the majority of first round primary votes may not earn either of the two positions in the runoff election.¹

At the insistence of Governor Edwards, the Louisiana legislature passed open election reforms in 1975 that eliminated separate closed party nomination primaries and runoff elections. Under this system, all candidates for an office, regardless of party, appear on the same primary ballot. Should any candidate receive a simple majority in the first round, he or she is declared the winner. All elections that do not have an outright winner advance the top two vote-earning candidates, regardless of party, to a second round runoff primary often considered to be Louisiana’s equivalent to the general election. This primary system was to be used for all elections in the state with the exception of federally-mandated presidential elections.

Before 1975, all state legislative elections in Louisiana were scheduled for presidential election years (e.g. 1968, 1972, etc.) to elect candidates to four-year terms. Reforms did not change the year for Congressional elections, but moved state-level and multi-parish elections back by one year (e.g. to 1975, 1979, etc.). As a result of the reforms, all first round primary dates were set for September and October, and any necessary runoff elections for November and December. Because this date timetable for first round primaries enabled the election of Congressional representatives before the national election date, the Supreme Court held the primary in violation of federal law in Foster v. Love.² Following Foster, the date for Congressional primaries was moved to November and any runoffs to December. State-level and multi-parish primary and runoff election dates remained unchanged.³

“When America’s Founding Fathers decided that elections were properly the domain of states rather than the national government, they might have hesitated a bit more if they had thought that states would be as willing as Louisiana to experiment with the rules of democracy.”⁴ In contrast to the electoral systems by which every other state selects its party nominees, Louisiana’s nonpartisan blanket primary stands as a unique exception.
A STUDY OF ELECTORAL SYSTEMS IN THE UNITED STATES

Extensive research has shown that institutional changes to electoral laws have direct consequences for political systems.5-9 In particular, studies have shown that differences in electoral institutions impact the effective number of parties in a polity10-12 the number of effective candidates13-14 voter turnout and participation rates,15-18 and that changes to registration laws affect voter turnout.19-20

Research on electoral institutions has shown that significant differences exist between voting behavior in primary and general elections. With the exception of strongly one-party areas and high profile races, primary elections tend to draw smaller levels of voter turnout with higher percentages of strong party identifiers than general elections.21 Research on the differences between the effects of primaries that do not require party affiliation by voters (open primaries) and those that do (closed primaries) has shown that open primaries result in the election of more moderate candidates22-23 and lead to higher levels of voter participation and turnout.24-26 Furthermore, research on primaries that allow voters to pick candidates regardless of party identifications (blanket-style primaries) has found that these systems encourage considerable crossover voting in first round and primary elections, but that this level of strategic voting evaporates in second round elections and runoff primaries.27

Studies of electoral institutions with majority runoff requirements, which were used widely in the South due to high competition in the one-party system, have shown that such systems were established out of necessity for electoral management.28-30 With this strong regional reliance on the use of majority runoff elections, questions about whether or not these systems produce substantially different results than the first round of the election have arisen.31 Research addressing these concerns with Deep South electoral results found that runoff elections largely preserve the results of the first round of voting.32

Of the corpus of research focusing on the development of Southern politics over the past half century, no text has been as influential as V.O. Key’s 1949 Southern Politics in State and Nation.33 Key’s work presents a complete analysis of the South both internally and externally, producing a portrait of a region that highlighted its differences and accounted for its similarities. While Key’s work finds inconclusive the effects of electoral laws, he was correct that the region did not follow the typical Duvergerian logic of dual-party competition in single-member districts:34 the one-party South was internally a collection of factional groups with no genuine party organization. Written well before the start of regional electoral change, Key’s prediction that the factional disunity of the Democratic Party in the South would leave a situation ripe for the rise of an opposition party has proven a usable framework for current research.35 Countless research studies since, Key’s hypotheses have formed the backbone of the study of Southern politics and have been able to explain the development of Southern political transformations.36-38

Of all the elements that have shaped the politics of the Solid South, Key recognized that nothing has been as far reaching as the effects of race:

“Whatever phase of the southern political process one seeks to understand, sooner or later the trail of inquiry leads to the Negro.” (Key 1949, pg. 5)

Research since and to this day cites the overwhelming influence that race continues to play in shaping the political transformations of the South,36,39-40 but there is evidence
that this influence is starting to wane. In a study of ex-Klansman David Duke’s 1990 race for the U.S. Senate in Louisiana, Michael Giles and Melanie Buckner find that while race continues to influence white voting behavior, “the dynamic of racial threat is no longer capable of playing the central role in Southern politics that it once did.” Also, blacks are enjoying electoral and legislative successes in Southern state legislatures; nowhere as strong as in Louisiana. But despite the increasing electoral successes of blacks in Southern state legislatures, race maintains its hold on the political transformations of the South. Most notably, race is hindering any chances for total Republican dominance in the South. Overshadowing this entire process of party reversals, it is ironic that the Democratic Party in the South, once “a party created and used by conservative southern whites to defend and enhance their perceived interests... has become the political home of African Americans, liberal and moderate whites”.

As the study of Southern politics over the past half century has been a study of the transformation of a region shifting from a one-party to a two-party system, research has shown that this transformation has been anything but uniform. Republican electoral successes “have not been continuous but have come at different paces in various locales and for different offices”. Appropriate studies of this transformation in Southern politics have taken this uneven process into account, making considerations for the differences between the five states of the “Deep South” (Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina) and the states of the “Periphery South” (Arkansas, Florida, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia).

“The South remains a region that is ripe for comparative study. The dozen or so states are limited enough in number to make comparisons more feasible than in the whole nation, but are varied enough in many respects to make comparison fruitful.”

Since the primary’s adoption, the transformation of Southern politics has continued to advance, not only with numerous region-wide trends, but also with many transformations that have occurred within the individual states. A comparative study examining the effects of the nonpartisan blanket primary on electoral change in Louisiana relative to its region is both necessary and long overdue.

THE STUDY: METHODOLOGY

In order to examine the effects of the nonpartisan blanket primary from both an internal and a comparative focus, this study proceeds in three steps:

The first step examines whether or not a period of electoral change within Louisiana followed the adoption of election reforms. It may very well be that electoral changes in Louisiana mirror changes in other states that do not employ the same primary system – thus, it is important to first isolate electoral change to Louisiana relative to other units of analysis with the difference between the two being the primary. While this is not a sufficient approach to show that the primary system itself provides any causal mechanism, the further parts of this study cannot proceed without this critical step.
Second, the study examines a comparative state analysis between Louisiana and the states of the Deep South (as the Deep South is a region in which the states have strong levels of similarities on many racial, demographic, and political levels). Comparing the rates and directions of electoral change among the states of the Deep South will show whether or not the changes in Louisiana are an isolated event or if they are a subset of region-wide phenomena.

Next, as Louisiana often “bears more resemblance to a foreign nation than to her Southern sisters” (Theodoulou 1985 pg. 9), the final step of this study compares aggregated substate regions of Louisiana to aggregated substate regions of Alabama and Mississippi. Based on a host of demographic, historic, cultural, economic, industrial, growth, and political factors, three districts are produced: Black Belt, Central, and Coastal (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Substate Districts in Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi

(a) Black Belt Districts                               (b) Central Districts

(c) Coastal Districts
The method used to derive the substate districts examined all 213 parishes and counties in Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi, to aggregate districts of similar population size that are based on the regional districts recognized by the U.S. Census Bureau. Based on the importance of race in the South, the main factor equalized was racial composition and how this has changed over the years. Each district preserves parish/county boundaries (as election returns are based on parish/county divisions) and does not divide urban populations. As this is a large set of parishes and counties to match, some cross-state differences could not be equalized – and due to the smaller population in Mississippi, only two comparable substate districts are formed (Table 1).

**Table 1: Substate Districts in Alabama, Louisiana, and Mississippi**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Black Belt</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>487,953</td>
<td>523,345</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
<td>$2,525</td>
<td>$27,719</td>
<td>46.30%</td>
<td>42.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>459,957</td>
<td>660,640</td>
<td>43.6%</td>
<td>$3,165</td>
<td>$31,667</td>
<td>42.33%</td>
<td>41.68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>523,040</td>
<td>539,992</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>$3,072</td>
<td>$27,340</td>
<td>45.32%</td>
<td>45.09%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Central</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>533,403</td>
<td>696,294</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
<td>$4,071</td>
<td>$38,377</td>
<td>33.74%</td>
<td>34.12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>527,819</td>
<td>667,480</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
<td>$4,001</td>
<td>$34,562</td>
<td>35.01%</td>
<td>34.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippi</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>497,129</td>
<td>741,525</td>
<td>49.2%</td>
<td>$3,598</td>
<td>$33,876</td>
<td>35.99%</td>
<td>38.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coastal</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alabama</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>487,975</td>
<td>674,121</td>
<td>38.1%</td>
<td>$4,440</td>
<td>$36,049</td>
<td>29.71%</td>
<td>26.43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>447,862</td>
<td>605,151</td>
<td>35.1%</td>
<td>$4,509</td>
<td>$32,164</td>
<td>28.55%</td>
<td>27.24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Census Figures, compiled by author

**DATA**

The data for this study comes from state legislative elections and registration figures. As the institution this paper examines is a primary election system, all the data used for these three states will be from primary elections and primary runoffs for both parties between 1964 and 2003. In addition, two elite interviews will provide vignettes and accounts from the chief elections officers of Louisiana. The interviews are with two Louisiana Secretaries of State: Jim Brown (Democrat, 1980-1988) and Jay Dardenne (Republican, 2006-Present).4

As a way to measure electoral change, this study employs a modified party competition index (PCI) model based on the Ranney Index. The Ranney Index is a measure that seeks to classify the strength of state party systems and considers three factors: (1) the popular vote for the gubernatorial candidate, (2) the percentage of state legislative seats won by a given party, and (3) the percentage of time the party that controlled the governorship controlled the state legislature (Ranney). Although this is a good measure for the overall competitiveness of a party in a state, a problem with the Ranney Index measure is that it aggregates support for gubernatorial and state legislative candidates.
into the same index, when these contests often draw different sets of the electorate and different voter responses. In addition, the Ranney index does nothing to speak of candidate competition for elected seats, which is particularly important when studying the transformation out of a one-party system over time. Thus, it is necessary to redesign an index that will measure political competition in state legislative elections.

\[
PCI = \frac{a + b + c}{3}
\]

WHERE:

\begin{align*}
    a &= \% \text{ of state legislative seats won by Democrats} \\
    b &= \% \text{ of total vote in state legislative won by Democrats} \\
    c &= \% \text{ of races with Democratic candidates running}
\end{align*}

This PCI measures the strength of the Democratic Party: indices near 1.0 present a one-party system in favor of the Democrats, indices near 0.0 present a one-party system in favor of the Republicans, and indices near .500 present a system of perfect competition. The three input variables used to calculate the aggregated index are the individual state legislative elections, averaged by year. This produces a set of data that is capable of measuring changes over time among these states. The benefits of this modified index is that \(b\) will take into account vote changes in support of a given party and \(c\) will take into account fluctuations in levels of electoral competition: where the single variable \(a\) is largely uniform among the state legislatures in the earliest years under this study, an aggregated index allows for better discerning the overall strengths of the Democratic Party in these states. In other words, this index is more capable of resisting unrelated trends and fluctuations than any of the three variables independently.

**THE CHANGE WITHIN LOUISIANA**

This first section of the study examines the nature, direction, and composition of state legislative elections in Louisiana in the elections prior to 1975 through the present day.

Before the electoral reforms, an average of two candidates ran for each state legislative district in Louisiana, increasing in the years following 1964 with the emergence of Republican candidates. In the 1975 elections − the first elections under the new primary system − a visible change to this trend emerged (Figure 2).

As shown in *Figure 2a*, the average number of candidates running in each district increased by nearly 50% in a single election: an increase maintained throughout subsequent elections. Also, the adoption of the election reforms coincided with a sharp change in the party affiliations of the candidates who ran in state legislative elections. *Figure 2b* shows that the average number of races in which a Republican candidate ran steadily increased after 1964, reaching 39% by 1972. With the primary’s adoption, the 1975 election saw the percentage of state legislative elections in which Republican candidates ran drop to 10%: one-fourth the level of the previous election. It was not be until 1987 that this level of electoral competition from Republican candidates in state legislative elections returned to its pre-1975 level.

The main reasons for this shift in favor of the Democratic Party hinge on the fact that the 1975 open election reforms took place during a time when Louisiana was moving away from a solidly one-party system. For nearly a century in Louisiana, the
candidate who won the Democratic primary went on to win the general election, with a success rate of over 99%. Once the closed primary system was removed in 1975, potential Democratic candidates were no longer constrained by this separate party primary and they ran in record numbers (Figure 2a): “by and large, [the primary] has made it easier for candidates because they did not have to survive a party primary and face a formidable opponent from the other party.” Republican candidates, no longer able to easily slide into a general election campaign, receded from running for office in the immediate period of time following the primary’s adoption (Figure 2b).

While it naturally follows that changes in the number and party affiliations of candidates contributed to an increase in both the Democratic vote (Figure 2c) and the overall strength of the Democratic Party (Figure 2e) following the adoption of the primary, it is not to say that the Republican Party’s hopes for electoral success were weakened. Figure 2d shows that the percentage of state legislative seats won by Democratic candidates did not change in 1975, nor was the trend of expanding Republican electoral success reversed for any period between 1968 and 2003. Despite a decline in their electoral presence, the average vote total received by Republican candidates increased in 1975 to 27.9% (up 1.4% over 1972). It is also interesting to note that the 1975 election was the first state legislative election since the end of Reconstruction in which a single race was not challenged by a Democratic candidate (in the race for the open fifth House district, Republican Benjamin O’Neal ran unopposed).
Beyond the electoral performance of Republican candidates following the adoption of the primary, election reforms opened up electoral participation to voters regardless of registered party affiliation. Under the previous closed primary rules, voters needed to be registered with a political party in order to participate in that party’s primary election. As all electoral competition remained within the Democratic Party, over 99% of registered voters belonged to the Democratic Party prior to 1964; hereafter, this began to change (as shown in Table 2).

Unlike the previous measures of electoral competition, 1975 does not mark a period of dramatic change in voter registration one way or the other. The problem with this is that even though state-wide and multi-parish elections opened up to all voters, a presidential preference primary is used in Louisiana. Thus, it is hard to correlate any changes in voter registration due to the effects of open election reforms. The one possible exception is the increase in Independent/No Party registration, which did experience a strong period of growth following 1975. Before the enactment of the open primary system, there was no incentive for non-party registration (let alone Republican registration). Following the reforms, Independent registration no longer precluded a voter from participation in state elections: “Independents became the fastest growing party in the state because of this reason.”

COMPARATIVE STATE ANALYSIS
As part one of this project has shown, 1975 marked a period of electoral change in Louisiana. The second step of this study is to examine whether or not Alabama or Mississippi experienced similar levels of electoral change at this time.

Figure 3 presents the average number of state legislative districts with electoral competition by Democratic and Republican candidates. As seen in Louisiana (a), the number of districts in which a Republican candidate was running dropped significantly in the 1975 election and did not return to its pre-1975 level until the elections of 1987. Neither Alabama (b) nor Mississippi (c) saw a decrease in the number of Republican-contested elections at this time.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Democrat</th>
<th>Republican</th>
<th>Independent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>98.1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>97.4</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>96.0</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>95.2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>89.5</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>83.5</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>77.5</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Figures compiled by Wayne Parent
To look at the overall strength of the Democratic Party over the years, Figure 4 presents the PCI data for Louisiana (a), Alabama (b), and Mississippi (c) as an aggregated average of state legislative elections. In presenting this data, Figure 4 shows an important point: it is clear that only the Democratic Party in Louisiana experienced a positive increase in its PCI following 1975, causing Louisiana to surpass Alabama as the state with the strongest Democratic Party. This distinction does not fade as Louisiana consistently had the strongest Democratic Party throughout the remainder of the elections included in this study.

The one major area of electoral performance not yet discussed in this comparative state analysis is the electoral performance of Democratic candidates in Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi. As this is one of the elements included when computing the PCI, presenting the change in vote for parties over time will not add any new information. But is the average vote share for a given party necessarily correlated to the eventual number of candidates elected? Under a true democratic system, the number of votes a party receives should have a strong correlation to the number of seats won by that party. Figure 5, which presents the correlation between the vote received by Republican candidates (the independent variable) and the number of seats won by Republicans (dependent variable) in every state’s legislative elections between 1964-2003, shows a strong correlation between party vote share and electoral outcome.
However, beyond the strong correlation shown in Figure 5, there are some points that show a difference in the electoral success rate of Republican candidates relative to their vote share that are unique to Louisiana. All but three of the points for Louisiana lie completely above the simple correlation line. Two of the three Louisiana points that lie below the line are for elections before the adoption of the primary system (1968 and 1972) and the third election was 1991.59

By looking at the remaining elections in Louisiana from Figure 5, three in particular stand out from the entire set: 1975, 1979, and 1983 (designated by filled in points). In these elections, Republicans candidates were able to win seats with relatively low portions of the total vote share compared to all other elections in Alabama and Mississippi at the time. To take a closer view of these three elections in Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi, Table 3 shows the percentage of the vote received by Republican candidates and how this translated into seats won for the three states. The “Rate” for each election in each state is the percentage of seats won by Republicans given a share of the vote.

**Table 3: Legislative Elections in the States: Votes for and Seats Won by Republicans**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Louisiana</th>
<th></th>
<th>Alabama</th>
<th></th>
<th>Missippi</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% Vote</td>
<td>% Seats Won</td>
<td>Rate</td>
<td>% Vote</td>
<td>% Seats Won</td>
<td>Rate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>13.66%</td>
<td>3.47%</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>17.25%</td>
<td>2.19%</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>3.25%</td>
<td>3.47%</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>11.35%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>7.12%</td>
<td>6.94%</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>13.72%</td>
<td>3.01%</td>
<td>.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>8.32%</td>
<td>10.42%</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>16.54%</td>
<td>8.25%</td>
<td>.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Offices of the Secretaries of State, compiled by author
As presented in Table 3, 1975 marked a strong shift towards the Republican Party in Louisiana, but not in Alabama or Mississippi. While Louisiana did start out with a higher rate than the two other states, it was still low for Republicans candidates (winning one seat for every four votes received). In 1975, Louisiana Republican candidates won a higher percentage of the seats than the share of the vote they received in the election. This “efficiency” for Republican candidates would continue in 1979 and increase yet again in 1983: the year when Republican candidates saw the greatest percent of electoral successes based on vote share of any election in any Southern state. While both Alabama and Mississippi were inching towards higher efficiencies for Republicans, translating votes into electoral success, nothing can compare to the success that Louisiana Republicans found immediately following the adoption of the primary system.

**COMPARATIVE DISTRICT ANALYSIS**

The final step of this study tests the substate districts of Louisiana against the substate districts of Alabama and Mississippi that were derived by the same method (for data see Table 1 and for maps see Figure 1). Figure 6 shows the differences among the PCI averages for each of the three substate regions (b, c, and d) compared to the aggregate state averages (a):

*Figure 6: PCI for the Substate Districts of Each State*
Just as was the case for the previous steps in this study, the first aspect examined is the changes that took place in 1975: Alabama’s PCI decreased by .017, Mississippi’s PCI remained steady, and Louisiana’s PCI increased by .035. As shown, the state average for Louisiana remained higher than both Alabama and Mississippi in 7 of the 8 elections following 1975 (with the sole exception being the 1987 Mississippi state legislative elections). As a trend, these figures on the state averages are strongly correlated and move towards convergence in the most recent years.

Taking into account the comparisons among the three disaggregated substate districts, a clear pattern emerges. First, the figure for the Black Belt Districts ($b$) are heavily intertwined throughout every election included in this study: between 1968 and 2003, there are a total of nine times when the average for the Black Belt District of Louisiana crosses the averages for the Black Belt Districts of Alabama and Mississippi. Second, the figure for the Central Districts ($c$) shows that the substate district in Louisiana remained highly correlated with those of Alabama and Mississippi, but had a higher PCI during the first 7 of 8 elections. Third, the Coastal Districts figure ($d$) shows a very strong divergence between the averages for Louisiana and Alabama that only began to converge in the late 1990s.

Looking at each of these three substate figures, 1975 did not mark a period of change in either Alabama or Mississippi and only really had an impact on Central and Coastal Louisiana (mainly Coastal). As the main difference among these three substate districts is the percentage of the African-American population, these plots confirm the earlier finding regarding the role of the primary system on Louisiana – that the non-partisan blanket primary had its strongest impact on areas with the lowest percentages of minority populations (the Coastal District). In taking this plot of the similar Coastal District in Alabama, it is clear that a strong divergence occurred that started in 1975. While the district in Alabama continued to trend away from being strongly Democratic, the district in Louisiana held onto this distinction longer than any other district in this study. Looking at the second least minority-populated district (the Central District), it is clear that a divergence also occurred that began in 1975, but this divergence was not nearly as strong as the one in the Coastal District. Finally, in the district with the highest percentage of minority populations (the Black Belt District), there is no divergence among the three states whatsoever.

It is clear that the strong changes that affected the most homogeneously populated regions of Louisiana are truly unique to the state. This confirms the earlier finding that the effects of the nonpartisan blanket primary are disproportionately centered in the least African-American populated District.

**DISCUSSION**

Electoral laws can be created by individual lawmakers and party leaders as an attempt to secure electoral success in the midst of perceived threats. Based on the electoral change transformation underway in Louisiana, there is evidence that the 1975 adoption of the nonpartisan blanket primary was rooted in this same effort. While previous studies are inconclusive as to whether or not these measures were successful, the answer to this question is both yes and no. What is clear is that the variety of electoral situations created by the primary helped to sustain the burgeoning Republican Party
This study has shown that at both the state and substate levels that the increase in Democratic strength and vote share in 1975 was unique to Louisiana. By many measures, 1975 marked a year in which the Democratic Party in Louisiana reached a level of support it had not seen since before the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. But while this may lead to the conclusion that the nonpartisan blanket primary prolonged the solid Democratic majority in Louisiana, a more careful break-down of the many features within the state shows that the Republican Party also benefited from the passage of the electoral reforms of 1975. Electoral success has been shown to be highly correlated with overall electoral support, but the introduction of the primary system enabled sustained Republican victories despite the overwhelming decrease in Republican electoral support.

The institution of the nonpartisan blanket primary is built upon the creation of truly unique strategic voting situations. Set in the midst of a state moving away from a one-party system, this primary benefited Republican candidates in ways their counterparts in other Southern states could only dream of. While Republican candidates in Alabama and Mississippi had to reach out and draw in votes, the primary system in Louisiana did this for them: “the primary allowed people to become used to voting Republican where they never had before.” Louisiana voters could vote for Republican, Independent, or Democratic candidates and not sacrifice their contributions to the electoral outcome. No longer were choices limited exclusively to the Democratic Primary.

But at the same time, this primary system brought about changes that enabled the Democratic Party in Louisiana to become stronger than those in Alabama and Mississippi in every election since the primary’s passage. By all measures of PCI, vote share, and total electoral success, Louisiana remained a one-party system for the Democratic Party longer than other Southern states. Also, by measuring the effects of the primary system in relation to the goals of Governor Edwin Edwards, it is clear that the primary achieved his desired results: “it played well to him personally as there was one less election he had to face.” Edwards won reelection as governor throughout the late 1970s, mid-1980s, and mid-1990s, becoming the longest-serving governor in state history.

The primary may have served Edwards, but did it serve the state? From the time of the primary’s introduction, Louisiana has experienced an electoral institution that is frequently alleged to serve extreme, less moderate candidates. “What we are finding is that the open primary system allows the two extreme candidates to get to the runoff... any moderate candidate who could win in a runoff was never able to get into the runoff.” Even among Republican elected officials, this is a commonly assumed impact of the open election reforms: “under the primary, there have been lost opportunities for ‘moderate candidates’, particularly moderate Democrats.” While there are certainly incidents where this situation has been true and publicized on the national stage, is this universally the case?

To begin to explore the answer to this question, Figure 7 displays a dimensional gradient of party unity scores (data compiled by Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal) mapped onto the gradient of political ideology for the individual Representatives and Senators from Louisiana (based on a model devised by John Aldrich and Richard
Figure 7a shows these scores for the individuals during the first Congressional term of each decade (1970s, 1980s, and 1990s); encompassing the time before, shortly after, and well after the primary’s 1975 adoption.66 This plot (7a) shows that the party unity scores of the Representatives and Senators dropped as their ideological scores came closest to the median point at 0: the more ideologically extreme an individual’s score, the less his or her party unity score fluctuated following the primary reforms (when compared to those closest to the median score).

To take a more focused look at this data around the 1975 adoption, Figure 7b shows the same dimensional gradients as Figure 7a for the years of 1976, 1978, and 1980. While this plot shows strong correlation and relatively stable party ideology among the individual members of Congress at this time, party unity is much more fluid. In particular, it is clear that 1978 marks a time when the party unity of the Democratic members was substantially higher than those of 1976 or 1980 (in the same year, however, the party unity of the Republican members was between the 1976 and 1980 levels). In this case, it is likely that the reason for this increase in party unity for the Democratic members was due to the presidency and policies of Jimmy Carter: the first Democrat and Southerner to occupy the White House since January of 1969. Either way, the time of the primary’s adoption does not stand out as a time at which strong change drove either Democrats or Republicans to elect the more extreme candidates over the moderates.

While Figure 7 takes an initial exploration of the issues addressed by those most familiar with the nonpartisan blanket primary in Louisiana, it leaves open the question to future research. As state legislator data on ideology and party unity scores are not available in as complete and thorough form as is available for Congressional delegations, there may be a disjoint in the two sets of data. Whether or not this is universally true is left open to future research on candidate policy and ideological
spaces in single and multidimensionality studies. Additionally, these further studies could apply similar tests of exploration using bill co-sponsorship data from state legislators. This would seek to answer the same set of questions but use the same state legislators whose electoral profiles form the basis for this paper.

CONCLUSION

In 2008, by a 2006 Act of the state legislature, Congressional elections in Louisiana returned to a closed-primary system; the nonpartisan blanket primary remains in use for state-level and multi-parish races within the state. In the same year, the United States Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of a Washington State public initiative to use a Louisiana-style primary for state elections. Beyond this system’s use in both Louisiana and now Washington State, current initiatives and legislative efforts are pending in California and Oregon to adopt the use of the primary system within each state: whether or not this system will shape the political operations of these states in the same way that it has in Louisiana is yet to be seen.

What began as a highly unusual electoral system, created within what is arguably one of the most unusual states for electoral politics, has expanded beyond the Bayou State as an increasingly popular electoral system. While the use of the nonpartisan blanket primary in Louisiana has become the accepted norm, the final chapter of Mr. Edward’s primary is anything but written.

Notes

1 This last situation, while entirely possible under the institutional rules of this system, has yet to occur in any Louisiana state legislative, statewide, or Congressional elections.
2 522 U.S. 67, 1997
3 While the Congressional election timetable was shifted to comply with the ruling in Foster all non-Congressional elections (including state legislative elections) remained fixed on the timetable enacted by the 1975 reforms. As Congressional and non-Congressional elections occur in different years, this did not create three electoral cycles within a given year.
25

Due to strong competition within a party primary, electoral institutions found it necessary to draw further lines of distinction among the electoral results through the implementation of multiple levels within a party primary.

29


30


31


32


33

54 For this study, all requests to interview former Gov. Edwin Edwards were denied by the warden of the Federal Correctional Facility in Oakdale, Louisiana, where Edwards is currently serving a ten-year prison sentence on federal racketeering charges.
55 While the number of candidates running in a given election does not necessarily impact electoral outcomes, presenting the change that occurred from pre-1972 elections to post-1975 elections shows a time of change with the state’s electoral processes.
Interview with Secretary Dardenne, 27 July 2009.

This system in Louisiana requires that a voter be registered to either the Democratic or the Republican Party and limits participation to that party’s nomination process. Registration as an independent allows for participation in all local office/proposition elections on the ballot but not the actual presidential primary.

Interview with Former Secretary Brown, 18 July 2009.

The election of 1991 marks a truly unusual election for state government in Louisiana because of David Duke, a former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, running for governor as a Republican. In order to balance this most radical candidacy, many other candidates ran as Republicans and the party as a whole received nearly 70% of the vote in the first round of the gubernatorial election: this invariably elevated the percentage of votes received by Republican state legislative candidates.

Interview with Secretary Dardenne, 27 July 2009.

Interview with Former Secretary Brown, 18 July 2009.

Interview with Former Secretary Brown, 18 July 2009.

Interview with Secretary Dardenne, 27 July 2009.

Particularly with the 1991 gubernatorial runoff election between convicted felon Edwin Edwards, Democrat, and ex-Klansman David Duke, Republican. The slogan that embodied the richness of choice presented to Louisiana voters, “Vote for the crook. It’s important,” says it all.

Data collected by Poole-Rosenthal has become the most widely-used measure for political ideology of elected members of Congress (data: voteview.com/dwnl.htm).

Note: while the primary system was adopted in 1975, the first Congressional elections under the primary system were not until 1978. Thus, the scores for 1980 are for the second full-term following the primary's first use in Congressional elections.