

More a Molehill than a Mountain: The Effects of the Blanket Primary on Elected Officials' Behavior from California

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Scholars, politicians, parties, and the U.S. Supreme Court argue that restricting the set of eligible voters for a primary election affects the nature of representation voters receive from elected officials. Evidence supporting this argument is elusive because the same elected officials are often responsible for determining the type of primary election used. Using a quasi-natural experiment resulting from a 1996 constitutional referendum in California, we examine whether expanding the eligible primary electorate from only registered partisans to any registered voter affects who is elected and the positions elected representatives take. We show that the blanket primary appears to favor the election of more moderate representatives and that incumbents take more moderate positions in the U.S. House of Representatives and California Assembly. This is true only in less partisan districts, and there are no effects in districts dominated by a single party. These differential effects suggest that concerns about representatives becoming increasingly polarized in legislatures are not likely remedied by simply expanding the set of voters eligible to participate in primary elections.¹

In the United States, elections are the key mechanism by which constituents hold their representatives accountable. By forcing elected officials to anticipate the moment when they will be reviewed, elections incentivize representatives to be mindful of their constituents during their time in office. While scholars have shown that the existence of primary elections affects legislators' behavior (e.g., Ansolabehere, Hirano, and Snyder 2007), we examine whether changing who is eligible to vote in a primary influences election outcomes and the positions legislators take in office. If altering voter eligibility affects the identity and behavior of representatives, variation in the type of primary election used in the United States likely produces important differences in how elected officials relate to their constituents.

A related question of interest is whether exclusive primaries possibly contribute to the polarization of elected officials in state and national legislatures. Motivated by concerns similar to those expressed in a robust debate over the effects of direct primaries on

the presidential nominating process (e.g., Geer 1988; Norrander 1989; Ranney 1972), contemporary reformers have spent considerable resources trying to change the primary process for legislative elections. California, for example, has had public referenda on the question of which primary process to use in 1996 (Proposition 198), 2004 (Propositions 60 and 62), and 2010 (Proposition 14). Reformers explicitly offer open primaries as a solution to the polarization that is observed in contemporary legislatures; as the former Oregon secretary of state Phil Keisling asserts: "Want to get serious about reducing the toxic levels of hyper-partisanship and legislative dysfunction now gripping American politics? Here's a direct, simple fix: abolish party primary elections" (Keisling 2010).

We investigate how changing from the most exclusive type of primary used in the United States to the most inclusive primary affects the behavior of elected officials. Whereas prior efforts to identify the causal effects of different primary types have been hindered by the fact that elected officials themselves

¹All results can be reproduced with files available at the authors' webpages. Online appendix is available at <http://journals.cambridge.org./jop>.

are often partially responsible for deciding which type of primary election to use, we overcome this hurdle by examining a series of events in California that provide a unique opportunity for identifying the effect of changing who is eligible to vote in primary elections on legislators' behavior.

Through 1996, California restricted participation in a party's primary election to voters registered with the political party prior to election day (a closed primary). In the primary election of March 1996, however, California voters passed a public referendum (Proposition 198) that allowed registered voters to vote for any candidate in any primary election. The so-called "blanket primary" allowed voters to cast one vote in any party primary (but only one vote in each race—e.g., voters could vote in either the Democrat or Republican primary for the House race in their district, but not both), and the candidate receiving the most votes in each party primary proceeded to the general election. Voters could also cast votes in different party primaries in different races. The blanket primary was immediately implemented, but both political parties in California opposed the change. Even so, the blanket primary was used until June 2000, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *California Democratic Party v. Jones* that the blanket primary was unconstitutional because it infringed upon the parties' freedom to associate. In response, California adopted a modified-closed primary and parties restricted participation to voters registered with the party or as independents.²

We use the adoption and elimination of the blanket primary in California by nonelected officials to explore how changing which registered voters are eligible to participate in primary elections affects the identify and behavior of elected officials in the U.S. House of Representatives and the California Assembly.³ While prior research explores the many possible consequences of California's experience with the blanket primary (see, for example, the collection of

²California voters changed the type of primaries they use yet again in June 2010 after voters passed Proposition 14. The state now has a "jungle primary" similar to that used by Louisiana in state and local elections.

³Alaska and Washington state have also used blanket primaries and experienced similar changes because of the Supreme Court decision, but there are complications with analyzing each state. We omit Alaska because it has only one Representative in the U.S. House and the state is unique in many respects (e.g., the state legislature is the smallest bicameral legislature and its members are not typically full-time legislators). Analyzing legislators in Washington is difficult because the blanket primary was adopted in 1935. Moreover, because of protracted legal and political battles due to their long-standing use of the blanket primary, it is difficult to assume that politicians knew what type of primary they would face.

papers in Cain and Gerber 2002), we focus on the effect of the blanket primary on policy consequential behavior of elected officials using a difference-in-differences design. Focusing on how changing the eligible primary electorate affects how elected officials behave in office illuminates the consequences of potential electoral reforms and the extent to which the variation in primaries used in the United States might affect how elected officials relate to their constituents and contribute to levels of observed polarization.

We show that elected officials in the U.S. House do indeed change their behavior in response to the adoption of the blanket primary. Consistent with the need to appeal to new potential crossover voters consisting of registered independents and opposition party voters, newly elected representatives are more moderate than the same party representatives they replace. Incumbents also move away from the ideological extremists in their own party after the adoption of the blanket primary. The moderation we detect, however, only occurs in the districts that contain the most newly added eligible crossover voters; elected officials from districts that strongly favor a single party do not change their behavior in response. Given these differential effects, simply allowing more registered voters to participate in primaries is unlikely to be the panacea for elite polarization in legislatures that many believe. Only legislators from the most moderate districts—of which there are increasingly fewer—moderate in response to adding potential crossover voters to the primary electorate.

We make our argument as follows. The first section describes the hypothesized effects of moving from a closed primary to a blanket primary, and the next section describes how we identify the effect of the blanket primary using a difference-in-differences design. The third section examines whether the blanket primary affects who is elected to the U.S. House and the California Assembly, and the next section examines whether elected officials in these two institutions behave as the first section predicts. Finally, we offer concluding remarks and speculate on possible implications.

The Predicted Effects of the Blanket Primary

The U.S. Supreme Court's decision to strike down California's blanket primary in June 2000 was partially based on the assertion that the blanket primary

affected the positions and policies that winning candidates could pursue (*California Democratic Party v. Jones*, 530 U.S. 567). As Scalia writes in the majority opinion:

In no area is the political association's right to exclude more important than in the process of selecting its nominee. That process often determines the party's positions on significant public policy issues of the day . . . California's blanket primary violates the principles set forth in these cases. Proposition 198 forces political parties to associate with—to have their nominees, and hence their positions, determined by—those who, at best, have refused to affiliate with the party, and, at worst, have expressly affiliated with a rival.

The belief that primary elections significantly affect the positions taken by candidates is pervasive among politicians, consultants, and commentators. Results of a mail questionnaire distributed to every candidate for statewide office and the U.S. Congress in California immediately before the state's first blanket primary revealed 54% of surveyed Republican candidates and 64% of surveyed Democratic candidates agreed with the statement that: "It [a blanket primary] produces nominees that are more moderate in their political ideology" (Collet 2000). When discussing the difficulties of running for a seat under the new rule, Assembly Member Richard Katz (D) opined "Essentially, you are running two general election campaigns, one in June and, hopefully, one in November" (Ingram and Vanzi 1998). Columnist David Broder worried that the incentives for moderation created by the blanket primary "could easily become the shroud in which the party system is buried" (Broder 2000). Such sentiments are consistent with research suggesting that candidates in open primaries adopt more moderate positions than candidates in closed primaries (e.g., Burden 2001; Butler 2009; Fiorina 1974; Gerber 2001, 2002; Gerber and Morton 1998; Grofman and Brunell 2001; Kanthak and Morton 2001; Kaufmann, Gimpel, and Hoffman 2003).

Many spatial models of electoral competition with sincere issue voters and election focused candidates predict that more inclusive primaries produce more moderate candidates (Gerber and Morton 1998). The most prevalent models assume: candidates are focused on announcing a winning platform, voters vote sincerely for the candidate most similar to themselves on the issues, the probability of voting is fixed (e.g., no abstention), and the median voter in a closed primary is more extreme than the median voter in an open primary and the general election. If so, as the distance between the primary median and

general election median increases, candidates diverge from the median voter and become more extreme. In a closed primary, the median primary voter is more ideologically extreme than the median voter in the general election because moderates and opposition party voters cannot participate. The addition of possible crossover voters—voters who register as independents or with another party and who might choose to vote in the incumbent's primary—because of the blanket primary decreases the distance between the primary and general election medians because all registered voters can vote in both elections. Consistent with this prediction, Kaufmann, Gimpel, and Hoffman (2003) provide evidence that more inclusive primaries result in more moderate primary electorates, and Gerber (2002) and Petrocik (2002) argue that moving from a closed primary to a blanket primary should result in more moderate candidates being elected and more moderate positions being taken if voters are sincere.

There are two possible complications to the predicted moderation. First, because voters are free to vote in any primary, it is possible that the blanket primary could result in voters voting strategically to undermine the opposition party by "raiding" the other primary and voting for the most unelectable candidate. Work by Sides, Cohen, and Citrin (2002), Alvarez and Nagler (2002), and Petrocik (2002), however, reveals that most crossover voters in the June 1998 blanket primary voted did so to vote for their most preferred candidate. (There was only some evidence of "hedging"—voters who would vote to support the most-preferred candidate from the opposition party to provide a hedge on the general election outcome—and almost no evidence of "raiding.")

Second, the effect of the blanket primary may depend on characteristics of the race itself. Alvarez and Nagler (2002) find that crossover voting is more likely in primaries involving an incumbent than in primaries involving a challenger, and Salvanto and Wattenberg (2002) find more crossover voting in open-seat contests. Because we look at incumbent behavior when looking for evidence of conversion and we examine open-seat contests when looking for replacement effects, our investigation likely reveals the maximal effect of crossover voting.

We expect that the incentive to moderate depends on how dramatically the composition of the potential primary electorate changes. The most moderation should occur in districts with the largest number of potential crossover voters (i.e., voters who register as independents or with another party). To elucidate the logic for differential moderation,

consider that candidates in a spatial election model confront a primary election with median voter x_P and a general election with median voter x_D . With sincere voting and re-election focused candidates, the optimal position for candidate i is some convex combination of the two medians: $x_i = \alpha x_P + (1 - \alpha)x_D$ (where α reflects possible differences in how important issues are to the two electorates and the particulars of the assumed model). Candidate i chooses position x_i to maximize the joint probability of winning the primary and general elections: $Pr(\text{Win Office}) = Pr(\text{Win General Election} | \text{Win Primary Election}) * Pr(\text{Win Primary Election})$.

The effect of increasing the eligible primary electorate—which is equivalent to changing the location of the median primary voter x_P —on the optimal choice of x_i depends on the magnitude of the change of x_P relative to x_D . By allowing registered independents and members registered with other political parties to participate, the blanket primary shifts the location of the new median primary voter $x_{P'}$ away from extremists in the party and towards the preferences of crossover voters. The question therefore arises: do some districts create more incentive to moderate in response to expanding the eligible primary electorate than others? Put differently, does $x_{P'}$ change more in some districts than others?

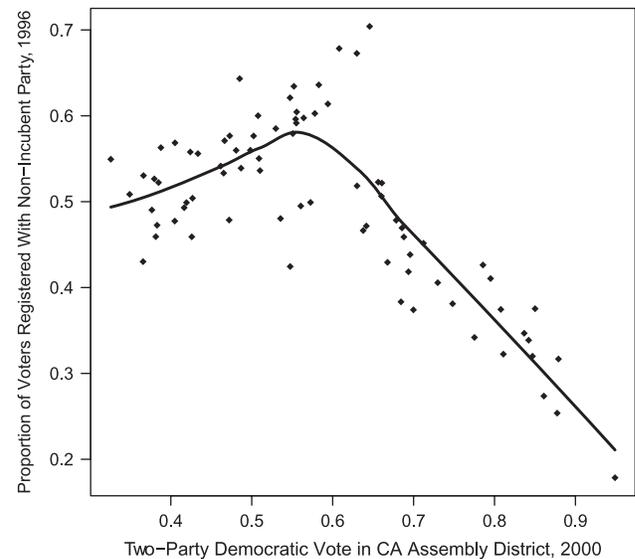
One possibility is that we should expect the most moderation in the most partisan districts because the primary election is effectively the only election of interest. If it is likely that whichever candidate wins the primary of the dominant party is likely to also win the general election because of partisan imbalance in the district, newly eligible primary voters may decide to participate in the primary that is likely to determine the outcome of the general election. If so, the number of independents and voters registered with other parties who vote in the primary may create an incentive for incumbents to appeal to the crossover voters by moderating. Consistent with this possibility, Alvarez and Nagler (2002) find that the highest percentage of crossover voting by partisans occurs in safe districts.

A second possibility is that candidates in safe districts may discount the sincerity of crossover voters from the opposite party. Kousser (2002), for example, finds that that crossover primary voters in safe districts are more unlikely to stick with the candidate in the general election than crossover voters in more contested districts. If the crossover primary voters are likely to abandon the candidate in the general election, candidates may not be inclined to accommodate their preferences when taking positions.

There is some preliminary support for expecting larger effects in more centrist districts. Registration data for the 80 districts in the California Assembly reveals considerable variation in the proportion of voters registering as an independent or a member of an opposition party. Figure 1 plots the percentage of voters in a California Assembly District who register as an independent or a party different than the Assembly incumbent in 1996 (before the blanket primary went into effect)—i.e., the percentage of possible crossover voters—against the two-party vote for the Democrat Presidential Candidate Al Gore in 2000.

Figure 1 reveals that candidates from the least partisan districts are perhaps the most susceptible to the expansion of the eligible primary electorate because they contain the most newly eligible primary voters. (Given the empirical relationship between partisanship and ideology, we describe districts as being “less partisan” and “centrist” interchangeably.) The highest percentage of voters who are not registered with the incumbent party—i.e., *potential* crossover votes—reside in districts near the average two-party vote share for the Democratic presidential candidate (which averaged 51% nationwide and 58% in California). To illustrate the implications using an extreme example, in a district where every voter is registered with the

FIGURE 1 Composition and Moderation in CA Assembly Districts



Note: The figure depicts the relationship between voter registration status in 1996 prior to the adoption of the blanket primary and the relative ideological extremity of the 80 Assembly districts using the two-party presidential vote for the Democrat Al Gore in the 2000 election. The loess regression line is plotted.

incumbent party, the blanket primary has no effect because there are no crossover voters. In contrast, in a district evenly split among Democrats, Republicans, and Independents, the blanket primary could dramatically change the median primary voter because two-thirds of the district are newly eligible to participate.

Additional evidence comes from National Election Studies conducted between 1992 and 2002. Comparing districts that voted within 5% of the national vote share in either the 1992, 1996, or 2000 presidential elections to those that did not reveals two relevant comparisons. First, self-identified “strong partisans” are not more ideologically extreme in more partisan districts. Using the standard 7-point self-reported ideology scale, the average ideological extremity of strong partisans in more and less partisan districts are statistically indistinguishable. (Strong partisans from more partisan districts are .04 more extreme on the [0,3] folded scale, but the associated standard error is .04.) The similarity suggests that the average closed primary median voters for more and less partisan districts are likely similar. Second, less partisan districts have fewer strong partisans and more potential crossover voters.⁴ Together, these findings suggest that the closed primary median voter is likely further from the district median voter in less partisan districts and the blanket primary also adds more eligible voters to the primary electorate in less partisan districts.

A third and final possibility is that the adoption of the blanket primary may have no effect (e.g., King 2000; McGhee 2010). There are multiple reasons why changing which voters are eligible to participate in a primary election may not affect the actual behavior of elected officials. Candidates may not moderate because they expect the party lawsuits challenging the blanket primary to quickly overturn the blanket primary, or they may not expect the newly eligible primary voters to actually participate in the primary election. Additionally, the positions incumbents take may be determined by the preferences of their core primary supporters (Fenno 1978) which is unaffected by expanding the primary electorate.

The two hypothesized non-zero effects have very different implications for whether more open primaries are likely to represent a possible solution to the level of ideological polarization in legislatures that

some lament. If, for example, the most ideologically extreme members have the most incentive to moderate because they are from the most partisan districts, a more open primary system would reduce the amount of ideological extremists in the legislature. In contrast, if the incentives to moderate are largest for representatives from only the most centrist districts, the overall effects on polarization are likely to be limited because such representatives are both rare and already relatively proximate to members from the opposite party.

Identifying the Effects of the Blanket Primary

At issue is whether expanding the eligible primary electorate from registered partisans to any registered voter results in elected officials taking more moderate positions, and, if so, are elected officials from some districts more affected by the change. We look for possible effects of the blanket primary in two places. First, the change may affect *who* is likely to win a seat. Incumbents successfully elected in a closed primary may be less successful when voters unaffiliated with the party can vote in primary elections. If so, a “replacement effect” may result in the election of more moderate representatives. Second, even if the blanket primary does not remove an incumbent from office, it may alter how the incumbent relates to the district. Incumbents may be “converted” and adopt more moderate positions in response to the addition of potential crossover voters.

We use the unique circumstances surrounding the change in primary elections in California to look at these two possible effects in the U.S. House of Representatives and the California Assembly. The cleanest effects are revealed by investigating the behavior of Representatives in the U.S. House of Representatives because we can compare the average change in the positions and policies supported by representatives who do and do not experience a change in the type of primary election used. Additional support may be found in the behavioral changes observed in members of the California Assembly, but the inferences are weaker because every member of the Assembly experiences a change. With no control group, at best, we can compare the response of Assembly members from more and less partisan districts.

Looking at how representatives from districts adopting the blanket primary change their behavior relative to the behavioral changes of representatives from districts that do not is important for two

⁴A folded strength of partisanship scale ranging from 0 (independents who do not lean) to 3 (strong partisans) reveals an average partisan strength of 1.88 for respondents living in districts that were not within 5% of the national two party presidential vote in the years 1992, 1996, or 2000 and an average strength of 1.83 for those districts that did. This difference of .05 is statistically significant (with a standard error of .02 for the difference).

reasons. First, districts that do and do not adopt the blanket primary are likely different. Differencing before and after behavior isolates the change that cannot be attributed to time-invariant differences (e.g., the political culture of California); because systematic differences are present both before and after the change, differences in behavior cannot be a consequence of a preexisting (constant) condition.

Second, time-varying effects may affect the pre and post measures—perhaps due to differences in the congressional agenda or the political and economic climate—but the presence of a control group minimizes the confounding effects. Comparing the change over time of representatives from districts that do and do not adopt the blanket primary—i.e., differencing the difference—eliminates the impact of systematic temporal effects that would otherwise confound the identification of the effects of the change. For example, even though the agenda being voted on differs across time, comparing the difference in voting behavior among California representatives to the behavioral change observed in members from outside of California reveals the change that cannot be due to temporal variation in the agenda because everyone is affected by the changing conditions.

The potential outcomes framework of Rubin (2005) provides a more precise statement of our identification strategy. Our “treatment” T is the adoption of the blanket primary in California, and we are interested in how the adoption of the blanket primary affects the moderation M of legislator i . To remove the aforementioned confounding effects, we consider the average difference in moderation for periods before and after the voters’ adoption of the blanket primary in California for elected officials who do and do not experience a change:

$$\Delta M_i(T_i = 1) = M_{i,post}(T_i = 1) - M_{i,pre}(T_i = 1) \quad (1)$$

$$\Delta M_i(T_i = 0) = M_{i,post}(T_i = 0) - M_{i,pre}(T_i = 0) \quad (2)$$

where (1) is calculated using California representatives who serve before and after the change and (2) uses representatives serving in both periods who are not from California. The average effect of the adoption of the blanket primary on moderation is the difference of the differences given by (1) and (2): $\tau = E[\Delta M_i(T_i = 1) - \Delta M_i(T_i = 0)]$.

As Rosenbaum and Rubin (1983) show, we can identify τ if two conditions hold. First, the assignment of the treatment is strongly ignorable—which is to say that the adoption of the blanket primary in California is unrelated to moderating behavior. Simply put, conditional on covariates, legislators receiv-

ing the treatment T are not systematically different in terms of their potential to moderate than those who do not receive the treatment.⁵ This assumption is reasonable for our investigation because the decision to use the blanket primary in California was not decided by the politicians and political parties themselves. Although some elected officials were involved, most notably Republican representative Tom Campbell, the adoption of the blanket primary was not a choice of the elected officials themselves and presumably unrelated to the nature of the relationship of representatives to their constituents.⁶ Moreover, there is no evidence that the agenda in the U.S. House was disproportionately determined by California representatives either before or after the adoption of the blanket primary.

Second, the legislators who experience a change in primary elections must be sufficiently similar to those who do not in terms of the covariates related to moderation. If California representatives are too distinctive, it is difficult, if not impossible, to assess the counterfactual of how California representatives would have behaved had they not experienced a change in primary elections.⁷ In the appendix we compare the samples and find only slight differences.

A Replacement Effect?

Given the theoretical expectations of the first section, we examine whether the adoption of the blanket primary plausibly affects who is elected. Changing the composition of the eligible primary electorate can produce a replacement effect in two ways. First, it may alter an incumbent’s decision of whether to seek another term—those who fear the expanded primary electorate may decide to retire early. Second, it may result in more moderate representatives being elected to replace outgoing representatives due to the decreased need to appeal to partisans in the district. Only the latter effect is likely; it is doubtful an incumbent would be scared off by possible crossover voters.

As expected, there is no qualitative evidence from the 105th Congress that the adoption of the blanket

⁵The assumption of strong ignorability implies that the treatment is unconfounded with moderation: $(\Delta M_i(T_i = 1), \Delta M_i(T_i = 0)) \perp T_i | X_i$ where X_i denotes covariates of i .

⁶Rep. Campbell’s motivation for pushing for the blanket primary was arguably his desire to secure the Republican nomination for the 2000 U.S. Senate seat. He successfully won the Republican nomination, but he lost to Democratic incumbent Diane Feinstein.

⁷Technically, the overlap assumption requires $0 < \Pr(T_i = 1 | X_i) < 1$.

primary was responsible for altering the decisions of whether to retire among members of California's delegation to the U.S. House. Prior to the first use of the blanket primary in the 1998 election, three members of California's House delegation were replaced, but the replacements were not plausibly related to the adoption of the blanket primary.

Even if the blanket primary did not directly affect incumbents' retirement decisions, it may affect who is selected to replace outgoing representatives. To identify whether the adoption of the blanket primary results in the replacement of incumbents with more moderate candidates, we assess how the average change in the positions of incoming and outgoing elected officials from the same party for an unchanged district in California compares to the average change outside of California. Comparing the positions taken by outgoing and incoming representatives from the same party in the same district reveals whether expected differences in the composition of the primary electorate caused by the blanket primary plausibly affects the positions taken by representatives holding district characteristics constant. We are obviously limited by the fact that only California adopts the blanket primary. We therefore also compare the change occurring in more and less partisan districts of the California Assembly. Interpreting change in the California Assembly is more difficult because all districts change from a closed primary to a blanket primary. Without a control group, the difference calculated by the difference-in-differences estimate τ is, at best, the difference in the behavioral changes of members of the Assembly from more and less partisan districts.

To measure moderation we use the positions representatives take on roll-call votes because, barring abstention, all legislators take positions on the same set of issues. We use a summary measure of positions taken on all votes because constituent accountability may occur over a string of votes. In particular, we assume legislators have an ideal point in the policy space that reflects personal and district preferences and that legislators vote for the outcome that is closest to their ideal point. The resulting ideal point is presumably aimed at ensuring their reelection (see, for example, Ansolabehere and Jones 2010).

Several estimators incorporate the basic behavioral voting model, and all give near-identical answers. We use the estimator proposed by Clinton, Jackman, and Rivers (2004b) and jointly analyze the 105th and 106th Congresses holding the ideal point of non-California members serving before and after the blanket primary's adoption in California fixed to

“bridge” comparisons across time.⁸ To avoid arbitrary scale effects resulting from the various methods of estimating ideal points (see, for example, the discussion in Poole 2005), we use the estimated rank order of members from the most liberal (denoted by a rank of 1) to the most conservative (rank of 435) in each House and compare the change in rank orders for the incoming and outgoing representatives. Focusing on changes in rank orders is sensible if what matters for elected officials is how liberal they are relative to other members in the chamber rather than their location on an abstract ideological scale. Given the focus in the press and on the campaign trail paid to which senator is the most liberal (for example) (e.g., Clinton, Jackman, and Rivers 2004a), or how similar a member is to prominent members and leaders in the House, we believe that focusing on rank orders is warranted.⁹

To examine whether incoming representatives are more moderate than outgoing representatives we examine whether new members are further from the ideologues within their own party. Let $r_{i,old}$ and $r_{i,new}$ denote the estimated rank orders of the outgoing and incoming representatives from district i who were elected before and after the use of the blanket primary in California, respectively. Given that low rank orders denote more liberal members, $M_i = r_{i,new} - r_{i,old}$ in Democratic districts and $M_i = r_{i,old} - r_{i,new}$ in Republican districts. Positive differences for M_i indicate that replacements are further from the closed primary median voter than the outgoing representative (i.e., more moderate). To isolate the effect of changing the primary rather than possible general election effects, we only consider cases where the outgoing incumbent's party retains control of the seat.

Not many incumbents elected prior to the adoption of the blanket primary in 1998 were replaced following the adoption of the blanket primary, but the changes that do occur suggest the possibility of moderation. Table 1 presents the six cases where a California

⁸It is possible that the agenda changes and every legislator is more moderate after the change, but this is unlikely for two reasons. First, prior research demonstrates that legislators are becoming more extreme—not more moderate as the blanket primary would predict—over this period (Poole and Rosenthal 1997). Second, because only California representatives presumably face pressures to moderate and they do not control the agenda it is unclear why the issues coming to a vote would be uniformly more moderate after the adoption of the blanket primary in California.

⁹Using differences in ideal points does not change substantive conclusions.

representative was replaced by a member of the same party after the adoption of the blanket primary.¹⁰

Four out of the six replacements in Table 1 moderate—the obvious outlier is the Republican primary defeat of Representative Kim by Representative Gary Miller after Kim pled guilty to violating campaign finance laws a few months before the 1998 primary. Ignoring this outlier reveals an average change of 50 ranks towards the opposition party (with a standard error of 50.6). To identify the extent to which the adoption of the blanket primary is potentially responsible for this change we compare the average change in the five same-party California replacements to the average change in the 29 same-party replacements occurring outside of California. (Including the outlier produces more imprecise estimates of moderation.) With only five replacements in California, we obviously cannot compare whether moderation by replacements varies in more or less partisan districts.

Figure 2 compares the rank order of outgoing representatives to the rank order of representatives elected after the blanket primary was adopted in California. If the blanket primary produces a replacement effect, same-party replacements occurring outside of California (open circles) should be located near the 45-degree line, while the solid points indicating same-party replacements in California should be located off the 45-degree line and away from the ideological extreme of the party controlling the district. Although the sample is clearly limited, the average change for the 29 replacements is only 3.6 ranks (with a standard error of 70.1)—far less than the change in California.

To estimate the effect of the blanket primary controlling for aspects that may affect the amount of moderation in district i we estimate: $M_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 CA_i + \beta X_i + \epsilon_i$ where the California indicator variable CA_i measures the effect of changing the primary from a closed to a blanket primary, and X_i are a matrix of covariates potentially related to the magnitude of the observed change.¹¹ β_1 is the estimate of primary

¹⁰Four other California representatives were defeated by members of the opposition party in 1998, but these defeats cannot be easily traced to the adoption of the blanket primary because the blanket primary would presumably make successful primary candidates more moderate. The blanket primary would produce more extreme (and therefore electorally vulnerable) candidates only if opposition party voters “cross-over” to force the incumbent to adopt a more extreme position. Petrocik (2002) finds little evidence of strategic crossover voting.

¹¹To ensure that the results are not adversely affected by the linear regression assumptions used to compare the samples, we also estimate the average treatment effect and the average treatment effect for the treated using matching estimators implemented by `nnmatch` (Abadie et al., 2004) in STATA or `GenMatch` in R (Sekhon, 2011). The substantive estimates are similar.

importance—the effect of moving from a closed to a blanket primary—and β_0 accommodates any systematic time trend in the difference between the outgoing and incoming representatives.

Potential confounding variables that we control for include: whether the district’s two-party presidential vote is within 5% of the average two-party Democratic vote in the 1992, 1996 or 2000 presidential elections (*Centrist District Indicator*); the ideological extremity of the outgoing representative in the 105th Congress, as assessed by the absolute value of their ideal point estimate (*Ideological Extremity*); the extremity of district preferences using the absolute value of the difference between the district’s 1996 Democratic two-party presidential vote centered around 50% (*District Extremity*); and whether the outgoing representative is a Democrat (*Democrat Indicator*).

Table 2 reports the results. The coefficient for *CA District Indicator* in Model 1 is the average difference in the rank order differences of same-party replacements occurring within and outside of California. The average change in rank orders between incoming and outgoing representatives in California is 47 ranks more moderate than the change in districts outside of California. Model 2 reveals that this difference persists even after controlling for possible confounding effects. Matching estimators also produce similar estimates.¹²

Given the limited sample in Table 2, we also examine the pattern of replacements in the California Assembly. As with members of the U.S. House, the qualitative evidence suggests that Assembly members did not alter their pursuit for elected office due to the adoption of the blanket primary.¹³ It is difficult to determine replacement effects within the California Assembly with no control group; the best we can do is to see if there is more or less moderation among replacements in less partisan districts—an examination that we could not conduct in the U.S. House given the limited number of replacements from California. The evidence for moderation suggests there may be more moderation in less partisan districts, but

¹²Matching on the covariates included in Model 2 of Table 2 using `nnmatch` reveals an average treatment effect of 82.74 (with a bias-corrected standard error of 24.46), and an average treatment effect on the treated of 37.48 (with a standard error of 26.23).

¹³All incumbents seeking reelection won their primary in 1998 and of the 10 incumbents who did not seek reelection and were not term-limited, eight had won their previous general election by at least 10 percentage points. The other two were elected to the U.S. Congress.

TABLE 1 Same-Party Turnover in California House Delegation, 1997-2000

District	Outgoing Rep.	Incoming Rep.	Change
CA-9	Dellums (Retired)	Lee	-9
CA-44	Bono (Died)	Bono	52
CA-42	Brown (Died)	Baca	126
CA-41	Kim (Primary defeat)	Miller	-156
CA-34	Torres (Retired)	Napolitano	62
CA-22	Capps (Died)	Capps	21

the estimate is imprecise and we are wary of reading too much into it without a control group.¹⁴

Evidence from the U.S. House suggests that while the adoption of the blanket primary does not appear to affect the decision of whether or not incumbents retire, the adoption of the blanket primary does appear to result in the election of slightly more moderate representatives. Our best estimate is that replacements elected using a blanket primary are roughly 10% of the chamber more moderate than the outgoing representatives.

Conversion Effects?

Blanket primaries may also affect how elected officials in the U.S. House of Representatives and the California Assembly behave in office while anticipating the next election. To identify the change that is potentially attributable to the adoption of the blanket primary, we compare how the behavioral changes of members representing the same district (i.e., excluding court-ordered redistricting) serving both before and after the adoption of the blanket primary in California compares to similar changes in members from outside of California.

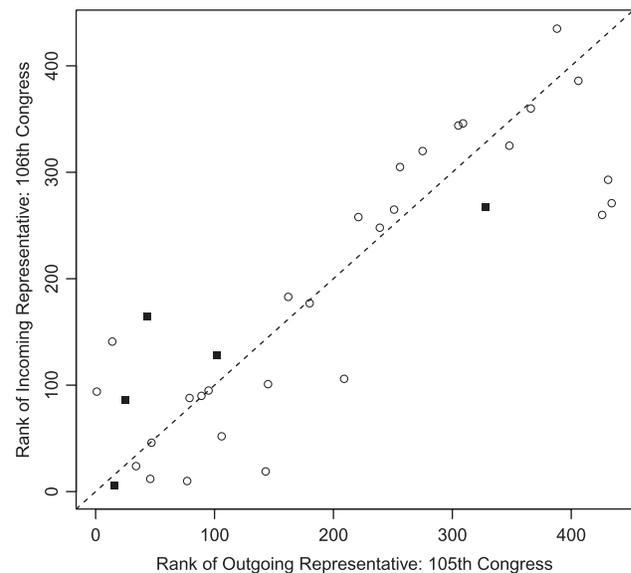
We look for evidence of conversion using differences in roll-call voting behavior because every elected official votes on the same roll calls and the votes are directly related to policy outcomes. A slight complication is that we obviously cannot impose the assumption that ideal points are fixed across time to “bridge” estimates as we did in the prior section because we are interested in the temporal change. We therefore assume instead that the ideal points of the

¹⁴For districts where more than 45% of the registered voters are not associated with the party of the incumbent, the effect of the blanket primary is to moderate by 8.56 ranks (with a 95% confidence interval of [-4.75 to 21.87]). The magnitude of the point estimate (8.56 ranks in a chamber of 80) is similar to the magnitude detected in the U.S. House controlling for chamber size (45 ranks in a chamber of 435).

two most extreme legislators outside of California are unchanged. Comparing whether rank orders change over time assumes that the substantive meaning of being the most liberal and most conservative member remains constant—a reasonable assumption given that: (1) the Republicans controlled the House of Representatives (and the Democrats controlled the California Assembly) for the entire period we examine, and (2) prior work suggests that legislator ideal points are stable (see, for example, Poole and Rosenthal 2007).

The extent to which conversion occurs is evident by comparing the rank orders for several groups of legislators in the U.S. House. Figure 3 plots the relationship of several “before and after”

FIGURE 2 Same Party Replacements



Note: For districts represented by members of the same party, the figure depicts the relationship between the rank orders of the outgoing representative (who last faced a closed primary if they were from California) and the incoming representative (elected using the blanket primary in California). California districts are plotted using solid points; the dashed line denotes the 45-degree line of no change.

TABLE 2 Replacement Effects of the Blanket Primary in the U.S. House, 1997-2000

Variable	Model 1	Model 2
Constant (Robust Std Err.)	3.62 (13.19)	-135.08 (27.25)
CA District Indicator	46.78* (24.68)	47.98* (22.23)
Centrist District Indicator		57.29* (25.11)
Ideological Extremity		103.66* (27.09)
District Extremity		2.57* (1.10)
Democrat Indicator		-39.80* (18.57)
R ²	.06	.55
N	34	34

*indicates two-sided significance at .10.

comparisons of rank orders to determine if there is *prima facie* evidence of moderation.

The upper-left graph compares the rank order of members serving just prior to the adoption of the blanket primary in California (104th House, 1995–96) and just after the change (105th House, 1997–98). Consistent with prior findings of ideological stability, the before and after rank orders for members outside of California are nearly identical—the small points indicating this relationship closely cluster around the dashed 45-degree line indicating “no change.” More notable is the fact that California representatives from partisan districts—plotted using open circles—are also clustered around the 45-degree line. Only California representatives from less partisan districts (plotted using solid circles) appear to moderate (i.e., the regression line of the relationship between the pre- and postrank orders is “flatter” than the 45-degree line). In terms of the hypotheses discussed in the first section, it appears that moderation occurs in less partisan districts rather than more partisan districts.

Examining the relationship between rank orders in the 104th House and the 106th House (1999–2000) in the upper-right of Figure 3 reveals a similar relationship—representatives from less partisan districts in California move away from the extremists in their own party following the adoption of the blanket primary. The regression line of this relationship is noticeably flatter than the 45-degree line.

Reassuringly, the other two comparisons reveal different relationships. Comparing the rank orders in the 103rd House (1993–94) and the 104th House (1995–96) in the lower-right plot of Figure 3 reveals no obvious change in behavior. Consistent with the claim that the moderation observed in the top two plots is due to the adoption of the blanket primary,

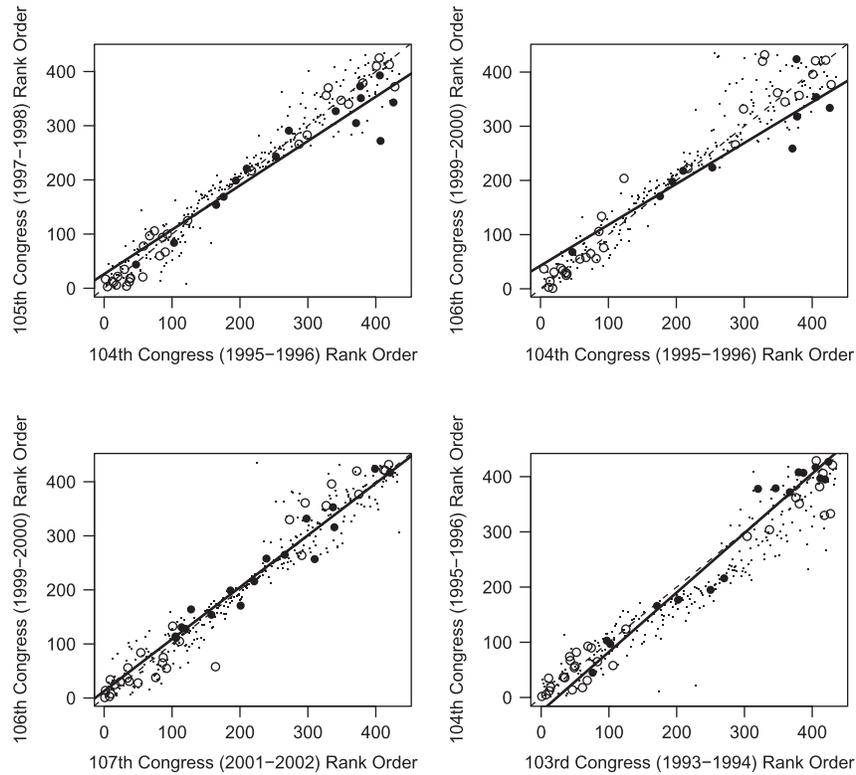
representatives from less partisan districts in California have nearly identical rank orders in the two Houses and the estimated regression line is indistinguishable from the 45-degree line. The moderation we observe when comparing behavior before and after the adoption of the blanket primary cannot therefore be attributable to a preexisting tendency by Californian representatives from less partisan districts to moderate in the absence of the blanket primary.

Moving from a blanket primary to a modified open primary that allowed the continued participation of registered independents also had no apparent effect. Although confounded by possible redistricting effects, the lower-left plot in Figure 3 shows that the rank orders of members serving in both the 106th House (1999–2000) and the 107th House (2001–2002) are unchanged. The lack of change suggests that the change observed in the comparisons plotted in the top two plots of Figure 3 may be due to the addition of registered independents to the eligible primary electorate. When voters registered with the party opposite of the incumbent in primary elections can no longer participate, elected officials’ positions do not change—suggesting that their views were likely unimportant for determining the incumbents’ positions under the blanket primary. This interpretation is necessarily tentative, however, because redistricting also likely affects the relationship.

To make the comparisons more precise and control for possible confounding effects, we use a linear regression to estimate the behavioral change for representative i . The quantity of interest is identical to the measure used to assess replacement effects in the third section with the important difference that we are holding individuals, not just districts fixed. For elected official i , letting $r_{i,pre}$ and $r_{i,post}$ denote the rank order of legislator i based on a unidimensional voting model applied to the set of roll calls occurring before and after the adoption of the blanket primary in California, our measure of moderation is: $M_i = r_{i,post} - r_{i,pre}$ for Democrats, $M_i = r_{i,pre} - r_{i,post}$ for Republicans and $\Delta\bar{M}(T=1) = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i:i \in CA} M_i$. A positive value for $\Delta\bar{M}(T=1)$ indicates that members’ rank orders are closer to the opposite-party following the adoption of the blanket primary as would be expected if moderation occurs.

As discussed in the first section, representatives from districts with voters who overwhelmingly favor one party may have less incentive to moderate than representatives in districts where the partisan composition is evenly divided. Representatives from less partisan districts may also be more likely to change their positions than extreme legislators, perhaps

FIGURE 3 The Relationship of Rank Orders in the U.S. House Before and After the Adoption of the Blanket Primary, 1993-2002



Note: California representatives from more and less partisan districts are denoted by open and solid points respectively. Representatives from outside of California are denoted by dots. Less-partisan districts are districts within 5% of the average two-party Democratic vote in the 1992, 1996, or 2000 presidential elections. The 45-degree line of no change is dashed, and the solid line plots the regression line for less-partisan districts in California.

because they have to be more responsive to changes in the political environment because the partisan composition of their district means that they have a smaller margin of error. To account for either possibility we examine whether representatives from districts with a two-party presidential vote split within 5% of the national average in the 1992, 1996, or 2000 elections (*Centrist District*) behave differently than representatives from districts that deviated more than 5% from the national average in each of those elections. Alternative definitions of “centrist” district reveal similar substantive conclusions.¹⁵

The estimating equation for the behavioral change of representative i is: $\Delta M_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 CA +$

¹⁵The third section of the online appendix shows the substantive conclusions are robust to other measures (e.g., using the range of $50\% \pm 5\%$ to define “centrist” districts instead of $\pm 5\%$ of the national average, or by using $50\% \pm 5\%$ of the Democratic presidential vote in the prior presidential election). The third section also evaluates if the effects differ for representatives from “extreme” districts and finds no evidence of moderation.

$\beta_2 \text{CentristDistrict} + \beta_3 CA \times \text{CentristDistrict} + \beta X_i + \epsilon_i$ where the coefficient for the California indicator variable, β_1 , measures the effect of changing the primary from a closed to a blanket primary (i.e., ΔT_i) for more partisan districts, $\beta_1 + \beta_3$ is the estimated net effect of the change in primary election type on representatives from less partisan districts, and X_i are a matrix of covariates for i that are potentially related to the magnitude of the observed change. $\beta_1 > 0$ implies that the blanket primary results in members taking more moderate positions (i.e., $\Delta \bar{M}(T=1) > \Delta \bar{M}(T=0)$). $\beta_3 > 0$ indicates that members from less partisan districts moderate more in response to the blanket primary than members from more partisan districts. The constant (β_0) accounts for systematic time trends in the behavior of representatives serving in both periods.

The effects evident in Figure 3 persist after controlling for the party and ideological extremity of the incumbent. Table 3 reports the estimated

effects for four different pre/post comparisons. Several findings of interest are evident.

First, there is evidence of moderation when comparing behavior immediately prior to the adoption of the blanket primary to behavior in either of the two Congresses following the adoption of the blanket primary, but only for representatives from less partisan districts. The statistical and substantive insignificance of the main effect *CA District Indicator* reveals that California representatives from partisan districts do not change their behavior in response to the adoption of the blanket primary. California representatives from less partisan districts, however, are estimated to move either 23 ranks (Model 3) or 40 ranks (Model 4) away from the ideological extremists in their own party depending on which House is used to measure postadoption behavior. The difference in the estimates for Models 3 and 4—i.e., the larger coefficient for the interaction of *CA × Centrist District* in Model 4—suggests that representatives who served the entire period of 1995–2000 (i.e., the sample analyzed in Model 4) moderated more than the representatives who either retired or were defeated following the 105th Congress; more moderation is observed among representatives who served longer.

Second, one possible interpretation of the effect detected in Models 3 and 4 is that the moderation on the part of California representatives is due to the addition of registered independents to the eligible primary electorate. Model 5 shows there is no

change in legislator behavior when voters who register with the party opposite of the incumbent are no longer eligible to participate in the primary election; the coefficient for *CA × Centrist District* in Model 5 is both substantively and statistically insignificant. Whereas any registered voter could participate in the California primary election to the 106th House, only voters who register as independents or with the party of the incumbent could vote in the incumbents' primary election following the 107th House because of the ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court. The fact that removing the eligibility of voters registered with the opposition party does not change the incumbent's behavior suggests that it was the addition of registered independents to the primary electorate that created the incentive to moderate in less partisan districts. This interpretation is obviously only suggestive given possible redistricting effects.

Finally, Model 6 shows no evidence of moderation occurring prior to the adoption of the blanket primary among the representatives who moderate after the adoption of the blanket primary. The fact that moderation only occurs after the use of the blanket primary suggests that the detected effects in Models 1 and 2 are not attributable to a preexisting propensity to moderate in these districts. If California representatives were moderating more than representatives from other states over this time period even without the adoption of the blanket primary, we would obviously be unable to disentangle the effect of

TABLE 3 Conversion Effects of the Blanket Primary in the U.S. House

	Model 3 Pre: 104 Post: 105	Model 4 Pre: 104 Post: 106	Model 5 Pre: 106 Post: 107	Model 6 Pre: 103 Post: 104
Constant (Robust Std Err.)	−11.16* (4.22)	−12.83* (4.33)	−7.57 (4.83)	−1.17 (7.37)
CA District Indicator	−7.05 (4.98)	−1.76 (7.75)	3.27 (7.01)	3.89 (6.16)
CA × Centrist District	23.15* (11.67)	39.62* (15.50)	−4.58 (9.20)	−34.68* (10.73)
Centrist District Indicator	3.12 (3.76)	1.58 (4.48)	−4.13 (3.73)	10.41 (4.74)
Ideological Extremity	12.27* (3.75)	13.85* (3.48)	15.92* (3.58)	25.72* (4.89)
Democrat Indicator	.69 (3.59)	2.57 (4.35)	−3.96 (3.48)	−39.77* (4.39)
R ²	.05	.09	.06	.35
N	301	262	331	292

The sample consists of all members voting in both the pre and post Houses who represent the same district and affiliate with the same party. * indicates two-sided significance at .10

adopting the blanket primary from the other moderating effects.¹⁶

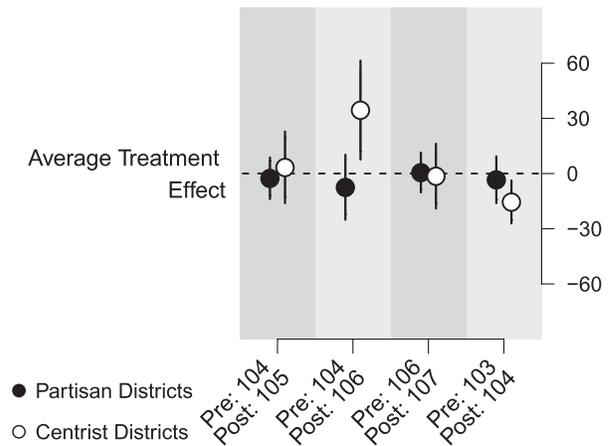
The effects reported in Table 3 are not due to the particular regression analysis assumptions we employ to compare representative behavior. Fig. 4 confirms the basic substantive conclusions of Table 3 using matching techniques. Relative to behavior when facing a closed primary in the 104th Congress, representatives from centrist districts moderate prior to primaries in both 1996 (i.e., in the 105th House) and 2000 (i.e., in the 106th House) (although the former effect is imprecisely estimated). Confirming the regression results, there is also no evidence of behavioral change after removing the primary eligibility of voters registered with an opposition party (i.e., the third column of Figure 4) or in the elections prior to the adoption of a blanket primary (fourth column).

The moderation detected in Table 3 and Figure 4 is not due to analyzing behavior on electorally insignificant votes or due to changes in the proportion of such votes in the before and after periods. Estimating the amount of moderation using only those votes that the nonpartisan *National Journal* identifies as being particularly noteworthy reveals similar substantive effects (see appendix).

Investigating possible conversion effects in the California Assembly is near impossible not only because of the lack of a control group, but also because the six year term limits reduces the number of possible comparisons by removing the incentives for term limited legislators to be responsive. Term limits affect the comparison of the 1995–96 session to the 1997–98 session—the equivalent to the comparison in Model 3 in Table 3—and the analogous comparison to Model 4 in Table 3 is impossible because every member serving in both the 1995–96 session and the 1999–2000 session is term limited in 2000.¹⁷

The pattern of results in the U.S. House evident in both the raw data and after controlling for possible confounding effects suggests that modest conversion effects likely result from the adoption of the blanket

FIGURE 4 Average Treatment Effect of Blanket Primary



Note: Replicating Table 3 using a matching estimator, the points and lines indicate the estimated average treatment effect and 95% confidence intervals using Abadie-Imbens bias corrected robust standard errors for the adoption of the blanket primary conditional on whether the district is partisan (solid) or not (open) for several pre/post comparisons.

primary, but only for representatives from the least partisan districts.

Concluding Remarks

In a contentious battle over the 2009–2010 California state budget, Republican State Senator Abel Maldonado was able to parlay his pivotal vote in exchange for yet another public referendum on the type of primary election used in California. It was to be the third vote on the primary system used in California since 1996, and, in June 2010, California voters once again decided to change the primary elections they would use when they approved using a top-two system akin to the primary used by Louisiana for state and local races.

While Maldonado's motivations for reform were likely self-serving given the nature of his legislative district, many believe that the choice of primary system affects the type of candidates who are elected to office and how they act while in office. Similar to the direct primary movement which sought to take presidential nominations out of the hand of party elites and provide more control to presumably more moderate voters, many argue that more inclusive primary elections will produce noticeable differences in the behavior of legislators by creating the need to appeal to moderate voters in primary elections (e.g., Fiorina and Levendusky 2006). In the presence of increasingly polarized legislatures at the national and state level

¹⁶The Republican party gained control of the U.S. House in the 1994 elections and the chamber median shifted considerably between the 103rd and the 104th Houses, but this is accounted for by the *Democrat Indicator* that reveals that Democrats who survived the 1994 elections were 39.77 ranks more extreme in the 104th relative to the 103rd.

¹⁷The results reported in the appendix are substantively and statistically unremarkable and do not provide compelling evidence of moderation by members from less partisan districts. Whether the lack of an effect is due to the inability to determine an effect in the absence of a control group or possible peculiarities of the California Assembly is unclear.

(Shor and McCarty 2010), considerable resources have been spent arguing for inclusive primaries as a solution to polarized legislatures (e.g., Keisling 2010).

We take advantage of unique circumstances in California to identify the effects of primary elections on the behavior of elected officials in the U.S. House of Representative and the California Assembly. We show that expanding the eligible primary electorate does produce more moderate representatives and the taking of more moderate positions by elected officials. However, the effects are contingent on the number of possible sincere crossover voters. In more partisan districts, the blanket primary has no effect on the behavior of elected officials. In less partisan districts, the effects of expanding the eligible primary electorate are of modest substantive significance. Replacements following the adoption of the blanket primary are roughly 10% of the chamber further from the ideological extremes of their own party than the outgoing representatives. Continuing representatives from California in the U.S. House from less partisan districts moderate either 23 or 40 ranks (in a chamber of 435) in response to the change depending on the pre/post comparison used.

The effects we document are important for highlighting the responsiveness of representatives to their constituents, but they are contrary to the extreme claims made on either side of the larger public policy debate about the impact of electoral institutions on legislator behavior. There is no evidence that the blanket primary “buried” the party system and prevented the parties from distinguishing themselves or that it greatly decreased the level of elite polarization in the legislature. Representatives from the most partisan districts did not change their behavior in response to the adoption of the blanket primary and only elected officials from the least partisan districts were affected by the change in primary election used.

Focusing on California’s experience with moving from an exclusive closed primary to the much more inclusive blanket primary is both a blessing and a curse. While it provides a unique opportunity to investigate the effects of changing electoral rules in circumstances where the change is not a consequence of strategic choices made by elected officials, our investigation is obviously limited to the modest sample that experiences the change. Moreover, we only examine one facet of the relationship between constituents and their elected officials and we cannot exclude the possibility that the blanket primary affected other aspects of the relationship.

Even with such limitations, our results have important implications for the extent to which primary elections can present a solution to the lamented level of polarization in contemporary legislatures. Speculating beyond the article’s findings, the magnitude of the changes we detect in response to the adoption of the blanket primary suggests that while changing the type of primary election used to elect candidates does indeed appear to affect legislators’ behavior, the consequences are likely insufficient to noticeably decrease the amount of polarization in contemporary legislatures. If only elected officials from less partisan districts are responsive because only those districts contain enough potential sincere crossover voters to create an incentive to moderate, the increasing rarity of such districts due to gerrymandering and residential sorting implies that widespread effects are unlikely. Moreover, if moving from a very exclusive primary in which only preregistered partisans can vote for candidates of their own party to a very inclusive blanket primary where any registered voter can vote for any candidate has only a qualified effect, subtler alterations in primary proceedings are unlikely to produce dramatic changes. We ultimately agree with McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006) that a solution to elite polarization is unlikely to be found in simply changing who is eligible to vote in primary elections.

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