

# **Turnout and Delegate Allocation in the 2008 Presidential Primaries**

## **By Laura Kirschner with Rob Richie, FairVote**

### **Introduction**

The 2008 presidential nomination process had the most frontloaded schedule in history—both in the date of the first caucus and primary and the degree of compression in contests. The Iowa caucuses took place on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, and the conventional wisdom was that nominations would be effectively decided once the “Super Duper Tuesday” primaries and caucuses took place on February 5<sup>th</sup>, the first day most states were able to hold a primary or caucus without incurring a penalty. Seeking to ensure that their voters had a chance to participate in a meaningful contest, 24 states rushed to hold their contests on February 5<sup>th</sup>, nine months before the general election.

This prediction of an early knockout held true for the Republican Party, with John McCain all but clinching the nomination on Super Tuesday, after which his leading challenger Mitt Romney dropped out of the race. Voter turnout plunged in subsequent Republican contests.

The Democratic nomination, however, was contested all the way to its final primaries in June. There were two key reasons for this difference. First, the Democratic field narrowed more quickly to two frontrunners with roughly comparable support—neither Barack Obama nor Hillary Clinton would have won a clear victory on February 5<sup>th</sup> under any set of rules. On the Republic side, Senator McCain benefited from a fractured opposition, with his main rivals battling over the same, more conservative constituencies, and won a string of key victories with less than half the vote. If Republican candidates had split more key states, as easily could have happened, their nomination also would have kept moving forward well after February 5<sup>th</sup>.

Second, the parties in most states use different rules to allocate delegates. Democrats require all states to allocate delegates proportionally, typically within congressional districts, which meant that a series of narrow wins would be far less likely to quickly produce a nominee. On the Republican side, most states used “winner-take-all” rules, by which a narrow win—even one in which the winner was opposed by more than 60% of voters—gave that candidate all available delegates, thereby shutting out their opposition. McCain earned his frontrunner status going into February 5<sup>th</sup> without ever having won more than 37% of the vote in any contest. With proportional allocation in all of those states and in the big states voting on February 5<sup>th</sup>, he would not have so suddenly advanced to the status of presumptive nominee.

This report analyzes voter turnout data by state for each party for the 2008 presidential nomination season. Key findings include:

- Voter turnout was lower overall for Republican voters compared to Democratic voters.
- Republican winner-take-all rules had a major impact voter turnout. Republican turnout decreased following February 5<sup>th</sup> contests, once McCain had secured the nomination, while turnout remained high for Democrats throughout the nomination season.
- Voter turnout was somewhat higher for Republicans in states that used proportional allocation methods for delegates rather than winner-take-all rules.

## Methodology

The Democratic and Republican Parties in each state have different rules for their nomination contests. Contests vary based on type (primary or caucus), voter eligibility (open, closed, modified, “loophole”, or limited to party officials), and delegate allocation (advisory, proportional, winner-take-all, etc.). State rules vary within these categories as well. For example, proportional allocation methods include: at-large or district-based proportionality; proportional allocation with a threshold; and proportional allocation when a candidate does not receive a certain plurality. In addition, some contests are purely advisory (often referred to as “beauty contests”), meaning that they have no impact on how delegates are allocated to candidates. To accommodate these differences, careful discretion was used to categorize the nomination contests for each state. This report’s information was collected from TheGreenPapers.com, which cites official party sources for election data. Data for the number of popular votes cast in each primary was collected from this source as well. Data on the Voting-Eligible Population (VEP) in each state is from George Mason University professor Michael McDonald’s United States Elections Project at <http://elections.gmu.edu/>.

Voter turnout percentages are based on the number of popular votes cast in each primary as a proportion of the VEP in that state. This method of calculating voter turnout works best to account for the differences in voter eligibility for each state’s nomination contests. As a result, voter turnout percentages may appear lower than other data sources that calculate votes cast as a proportion of voters registered in each party. Alternative methods of calculating voter turnout make the percentages appear artificially high in states with closed primaries compared to open primaries because fewer people are eligible to vote in closed primaries. The method used in this report—i.e. (number votes cast in each primary)/(VEP)—makes it possible to compare voter turnout data for different types of nomination contests.

Importantly, this analysis looks at voter turnout data only for presidential primaries and disregards data from caucuses. Caucuses have stricter standards of voter eligibility and many nuances in their rules that make fair and accurate comparison close to impossible. We also analyze state primaries separately for each party, so a Democratic primary and a Republican primary held on the same state are analyzed as two separate primaries. Primaries are then “ranked” by date, indicated by Schedule Rank. Primaries that share the same date are ranked alphabetically. Thus, New Hampshire, which held the first primary in the country on January 8<sup>th</sup>, is ranked first for each party. South Carolina is second, and so on. All of the primaries that share dates, including those on February 5<sup>th</sup>, are ranked alphabetically, with Alabama ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> for both Democrats and Republicans, Arizona 4<sup>th</sup>, and so on. Florida and Michigan are excluded from this analysis due to their contentious status as states that were penalized for jumping ahead in the primary schedule, drawing no or uneven amounts of attention from major candidates with a corresponding influence on voter turnout.

The chronology of primaries reveals significant trends in voter turnout. “Schedule Rank” is treated as an independent variable and “Voter Turnout” as a dependent variable. The data is controlled for contest type, so only nomination contests categorized as “primaries” are used. In an additional analysis, the data is further controlled to isolate the data from open primaries.

**Table 1. Schedule Rank and Voter Turnout for Democratic Party Primaries**

State	Primary Date	Schedule Rank	Voter Turnout
New Hampshire	Jan 8, 2008	1	28.62%
South Carolina	Jan 26, 2008	2	16.53%
Alabama	Feb 5, 2008	3	15.60%
Arizona	Feb 5, 2008	4	11.14%
Arkansas	Feb 5, 2008	5	15.18%
California	Feb 5, 2008	6	23.32%
Connecticut	Feb 5, 2008	7	14.49%
Delaware	Feb 5, 2008	8	15.86%
Georgia	Feb 5, 2008	9	16.62%
Illinois	Feb 5, 2008	10	23.05%
Massachusetts	Feb 5, 2008	11	28.11%
Missouri	Feb 5, 2008	12	19.01%
New Jersey	Feb 5, 2008	13	20.67%
New York	Feb 5, 2008	14	14.66%
Oklahoma	Feb 5, 2008	15	15.94%
Tennessee	Feb 5, 2008	16	14.04%
Utah	Feb 5, 2008	17	7.60%
Louisiana	Feb 9, 2008	18	13.56%
Wash. D.C.	Feb 12, 2008	19	29.32%
Maryland	Feb 12, 2008	20	22.86%
Virginia	Feb 12, 2008	21	18.31%
Wisconsin	Feb 19, 2008	22	27.07%
Ohio	Mar 4, 2008	23	27.64%
Rhode Island	Mar 4, 2008	24	24.97%
Texas	Mar 4, 2008	25	19.15%
Vermont	Mar 4, 2008	26	32.26%
Mississippi	Mar 11, 2008	27	21.01%
Pennsylvania	Apr 22, 2008	28	24.77%
Indiana	May 6, 2008	39	27.39%
North Carolina	May 6, 2008	30	24.69%
Kentucky	May 13, 2008	31	25.08%
Oregon	May 20, 2008	32	22.22%
Idaho	May 20, 2008	33	23.34%
New Mexico	Jun 3, 2008	34	24.83%
South Dakota	Jun 3, 2008	35	16.78%

**Table 2. Schedule Rank and Voter Turnout for Republican Party Primaries**

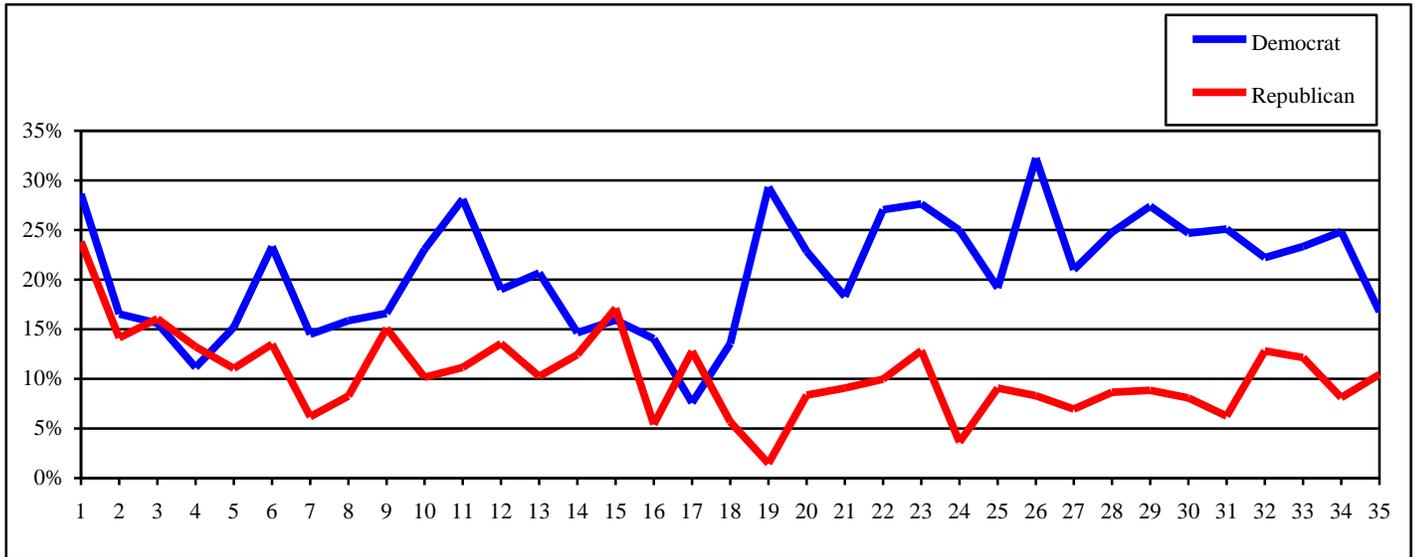
State	Primary Date	Schedule Rank	Voter Turnout
New Hampshire	Jan 8, 2008	1	23.82%
South Carolina	Jan 19, 2008	2	14.15%
Alabama	Feb 5, 2008	3	16.05%
Arizona	Feb 5, 2008	4	13.23%
Arkansas	Feb 5, 2008	5	11.07%
California	Feb 5, 2008	6	13.50%
Connecticut	Feb 5, 2008	7	6.20%
Delaware	Feb 5, 2008	8	8.27%
Georgia	Feb 5, 2008	9	15.09%
Illinois	Feb 5, 2008	10	10.17%
Massachusetts	Feb 5, 2008	11	11.16%
Missouri	Feb 5, 2008	12	13.57%
New Jersey	Feb 5, 2008	13	10.26%
New York	Feb 5, 2008	14	5.42%
Oklahoma	Feb 5, 2008	15	12.80%
Tennessee	Feb 5, 2008	16	12.45%
Utah	Feb 5, 2008	17	17.13%
Louisiana	Feb 9, 2008	18	5.69%
Wash. D.C.	Feb 12, 2008	19	1.47%
Maryland	Feb 12, 2008	20	8.35%
Virginia	Feb 12, 2008	21	9.08%
Wisconsin	Feb 19, 2008	22	9.98%
Ohio	Mar 4, 2008	23	12.84%
Rhode Island	Mar 4, 2008	24	3.61%
Texas	Mar 4, 2008	25	9.08%
Vermont	Mar 4, 2008	26	8.29%
Mississippi	Mar 11, 2008	27	6.96%
Pennsylvania	Apr 22, 2008	28	8.66%
Indiana	May 6, 2008	39	8.84%
North Carolina	May 6, 2008	30	8.08%
Kentucky	May 20, 2008	31	6.26%
Oregon	May 20, 2008	32	12.82%
Idaho	May 27, 2008	33	12.14%
New Mexico	Jun 3, 2008	34	8.12%
South Dakota	Jun 3, 2008	35	10.46%

## Key Findings

**Voter turnout was lower overall for Republican voters compared to Democratic voters.**

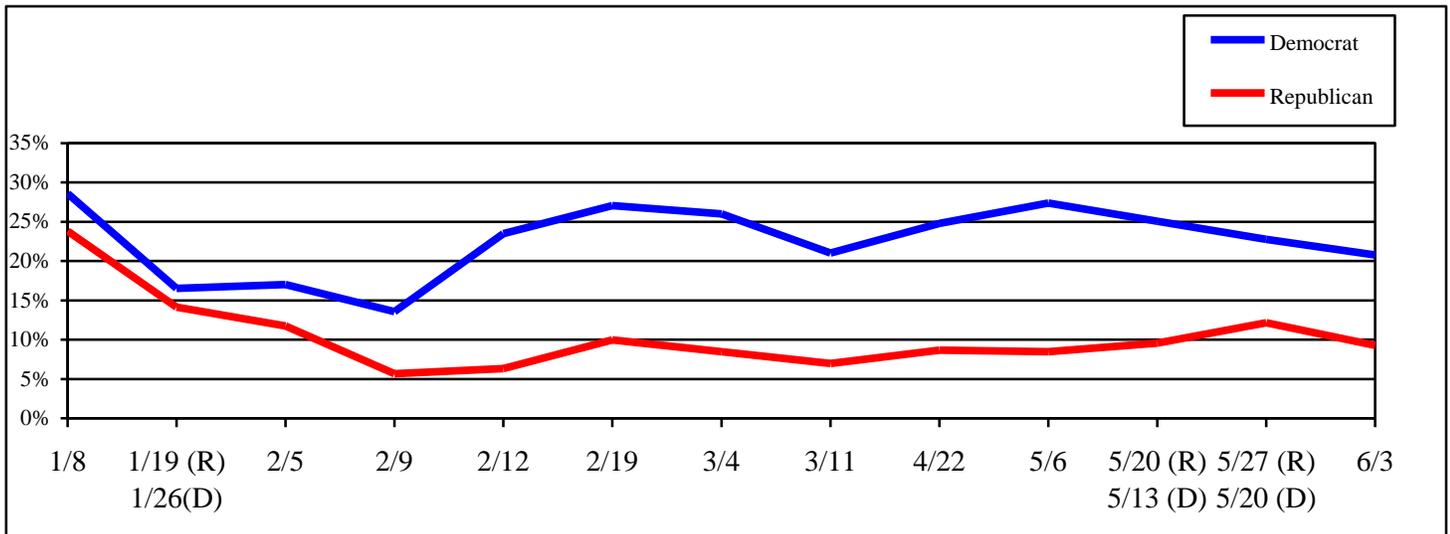
Table 1 and Table 2 indicate the percentage of the Voting-Eligible Population (VEP) that cast a primary ballot in each state. Voter turnout among Democrats was nearly double that of Republicans. The average level of voter turnout for Democratic primaries was 20.73%, while the average level for Republican primaries was only 10.43%.

**Chart 1. Schedule Rank vs. Voter Turnout for Democratic and Republican Primaries**



As Chart 1 illustrates, Democratic primaries had consistently higher voter turnout throughout the primary season. Voter turnout is more or less the same for both parties during the beginning of the primary season, as indicated by Chart 1's Points 1 to 3. Points 4 to 17 indicate drastic variances in voter turnout levels. This segment of the primary schedule corresponds to Super Tuesday on February 5<sup>th</sup>, during which time average voter turnout for Democratic primaries was 17.02% while the average for Republican primaries on February 5<sup>th</sup> was 11.76%. The gap between Democratic and Republican turnout from Point 18 to Point 35 indicates that after Super Tuesday on February 5<sup>th</sup>, voter turnout for Republican primaries drops significantly while Democratic voter turnout remains high.

**Chart 2. Average Primary Turnout for Each Party by Primary Date**



**Finding: Voter turnout decreased in Republican primaries following Feb. 5<sup>th</sup> contests, once McCain had effectively secured the nomination, while voter turnout remained high for Democrats throughout the nomination season.**

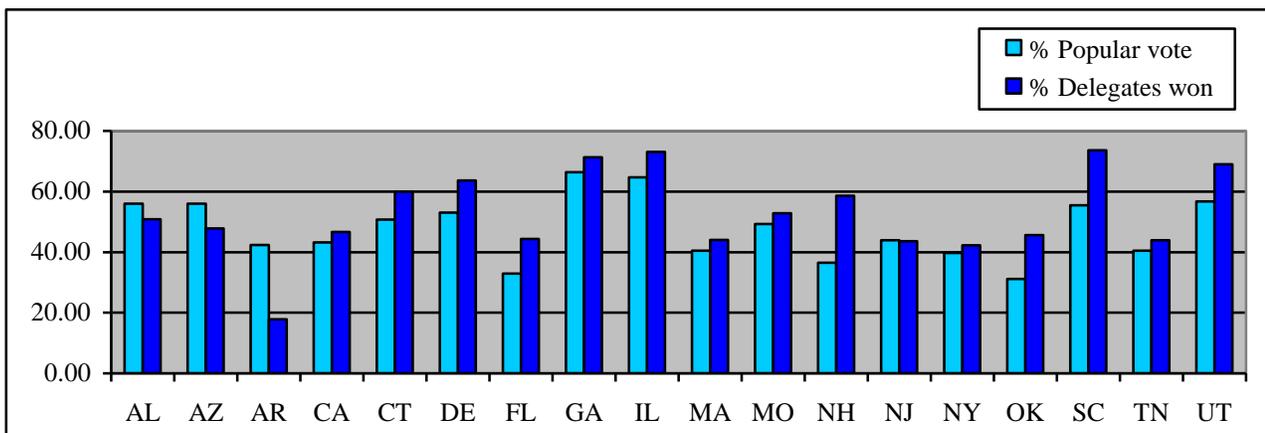
Chart 2 summarizes the primary calendar by date. The trend among Democratic and Republican primaries is clear: Democratic turnout is higher throughout the primary schedule, and this gap increases dramatically after February 5<sup>th</sup>. Despite voters in nearly half of the states casting their ballots on February 5<sup>th</sup>, Democrats continued to turn out in primaries in record numbers for the remainder of the schedule.

The single biggest reason for this difference is that the winner-take-all method of allocating delegates results in a quick accumulation of pledged delegates for frontrunning candidates compared to proportional allocation methods. Most Republican contests use the winner-take-all method; consequently, John McCain secured the Republican nomination early in the schedule. As a result, Republican backers in states holding their contests after February 5<sup>th</sup> had little incentive to come out for the presidential race. With proportional rules, McCain would have had far fewer delegates after February 5<sup>th</sup> and, very likely, an ongoing contest.

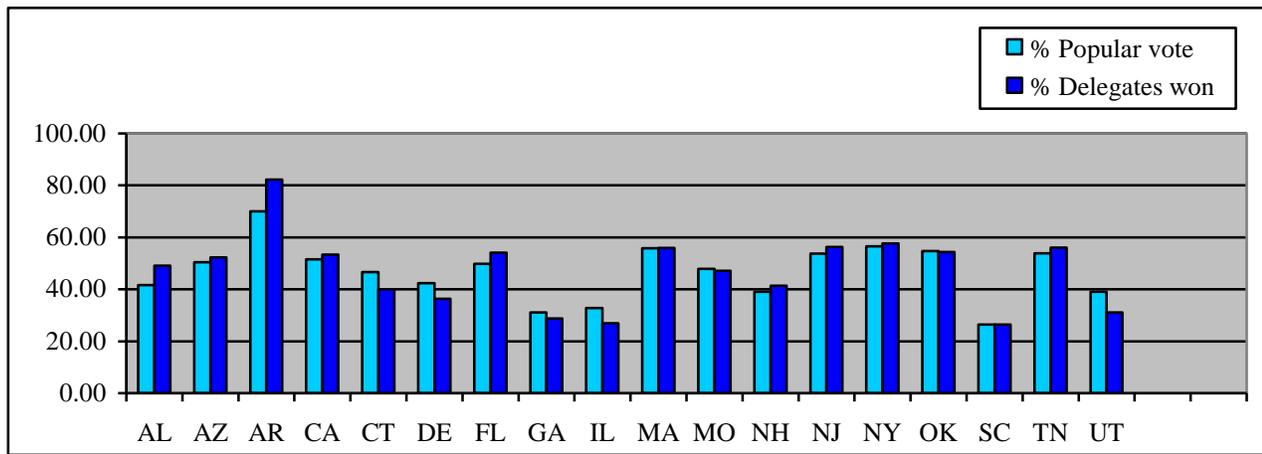
Charts 3, 4, and 5 below illustrate how the winner-take-all rule can distort the presidential nomination process. Each chart compares the percentage of the popular vote won by each candidate during primaries held on or before February 5<sup>th</sup>.

Charts 3 and 4 indicate that the allocation of delegates roughly paralleled the distribution of the popular vote in each Democratic primary state. Chart 5 indicates how the use of the winner-take-all rule results in large disparities between the popular vote and the delegate total. The cumulative effect of this rule is staggering. (Note: The term “soft delegate total” is another way of saying the delegate count before the official nominating conventions, where delegate numbers can change based on activity on the floor.)

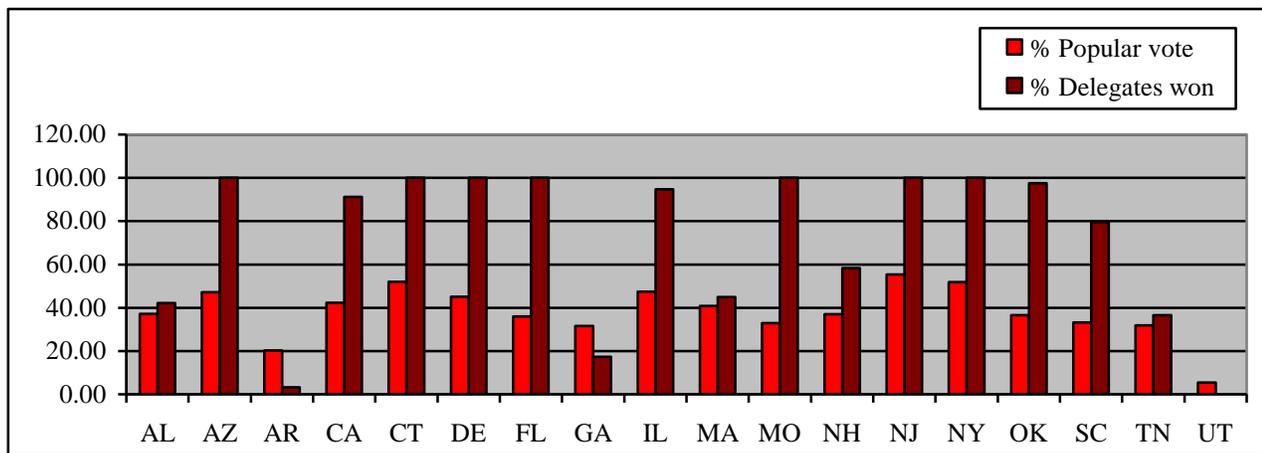
**Chart 3. Percentage of the popular vote and of the soft delegate total won by Barack Obama (D)**



**Chart 4. Percentage of the popular vote and soft delegate total won by Hillary Clinton (D)**



**Chart 5. Percentage of the popular vote and of the soft delegate total won by John McCain (R)**



**Table 3. Percentage of popular vote and soft delegate total won by each candidate through Feb. 5th**

	Obama	Clinton	McCain
<b>% Popular vote</b>	45.88%	47.95%	39.26%
<b>% Soft delegate total</b>	50.52%	49.33%	74.95%

Despite winning only 39.26% of the popular votes cast in primaries held through February 5<sup>th</sup>, John McCain had secured 74.95% of the soft delegate total. Obama and Clinton, on the other hand, both won comparable percentages of the popular vote and of the soft delegate total. The proportional allocation method used in all Democratic primaries prolonged the nomination process. No clear winner emerged following February 5<sup>th</sup>, so voters later in the primary schedule were able to have influence over the nomination. This had a positive impact on voter turnout among Democratic voters.

**Table 4. Average Voter Turnout for Democratic and Republican Primaries by Month**

	January	February	March	April	May	June
<b>Democratic</b>	16.8%	18.3%	25.0%	24.8%	24.6%	20.8%
<b>Republican</b>	16.3%	10.6%	8.2%	8.7%	9.7%	9.3%

Table 4 shows that Democratic primary turnout rates increased throughout most of the primary season, while Republican primary turnout rates fell dramatically and remained low. Democratic turnout rates were more than double Republican turnout rates for March, April, May, and June, and nearly triple the Republican turnout rate for April.

**Finding: Voter turnout was slightly higher on average for Republicans in states that used proportional allocation methods for delegates**

Average Republican turnout rates increased slightly after April. A closer look at the individual contests in this period reveals that these higher turnout rates could be associated with primaries that used a proportional allocation method for delegates. Table 5 and Table 6 below list the Democratic and Republican primaries that were open to all voters. This data allows us to isolate the impact of proportional allocation methods on voter turnout.

**Table 5. Schedule Rank and Voter Turnout for Democratic Party Open Primaries**

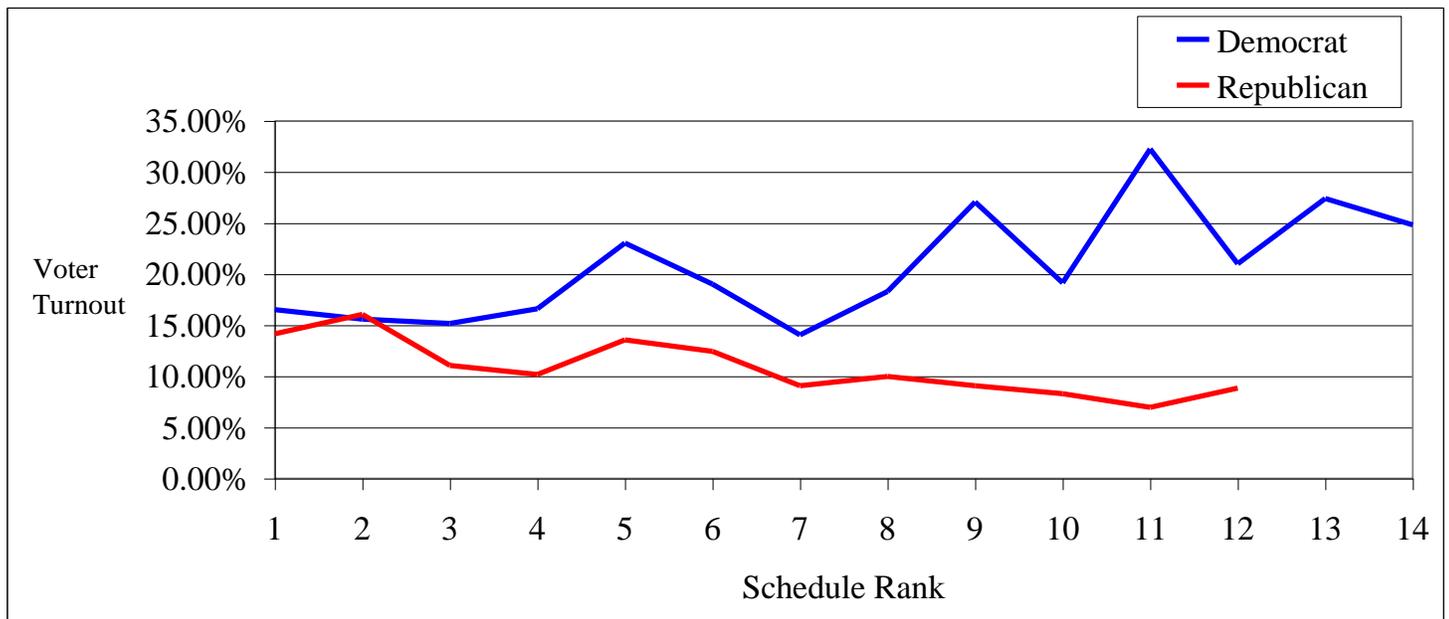
State	Primary Date	Schedule Rank	Voter Turnout
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<b>Georgia</b>	Feb 5, 2008	4	16.62%
<b>Illinois</b>	Feb 5, 2008	5	23.05%
<b>Missouri</b>	Feb 5, 2008	6	19.01%
<b>Tennessee</b>	Feb 5, 2008	7	14.04%
<b>Virginia</b>	Feb 12, 2008	8	18.31%
<b>Wisconsin</b>	Feb 19, 2008	9	27.07%
<b>Texas</b>	Mar 4, 2008	10	19.15%
<b>Vermont</b>	Mar 4, 2008	11	32.26%
<b>Mississippi</b>	Mar 11, 2008	12	21.01%
<b>Indiana</b>	May 6, 2008	13	27.39%
<b>Montana</b>	Jun 3, 2008	14	24.83%

**Table 6. Schedule Rank and Voter Turnout for Republican Party Open Primaries**

State	Primary Date	Schedule Rank	Voter Turnout
<b>South Carolina</b>	Jan 19, 2008	1	14.15%
<b>Alabama*</b>	Feb 5, 2008	2	16.05%
<b>Arkansas*</b>	Feb 5, 2008	3	11.07%
<b>Illinois</b>	Feb 5, 2008	4	10.17%
<b>Missouri</b>	Feb 5, 2008	5	13.57%
<b>Tennessee*</b>	Feb 5, 2008	6	12.45%
<b>Virginia</b>	Feb 12, 2008	7	9.08%
<b>Wisconsin</b>	Feb 19, 2008	8	9.98%
<b>Texas*</b>	Mar 4, 2008	9	9.08%
<b>Vermont</b>	Mar 4, 2008	10	8.29%
<b>Mississippi</b>	Mar 11, 2008	11	6.96%
<b>Indiana</b>	May 6, 2008	12	8.84%

The average level of voter turnout among Republican open primaries that use proportional allocation (indicated with an asterisk\*) was 12.16% compared to 10.13% for winner-take-all primaries—small in actual terms, but large in relative terms. Although there were other factors, this difference may in part have been due to the fact that the winner-take-all method of allocation discourages many citizens from voting, and can deter candidates from seeking votes. Republican presidential hopefuls Duncan Hunter and Fred Thompson both dropped out of the race before February. Soon after, Mitt Romney suspended his campaign and Mike Huckabee withdrew from the contest. By mid-March, there was no one left to vote for besides McCain and Ron Paul, and the primaries were merely a formality. Voters in late primary winner-take-all states who supported a candidate other than McCain had no incentive to vote; it was sure not to affect delegates at the convention. If a state used proportional allocation, however, at the very least there was an incentive to show support for another candidate and to try to contribute to his delegate total.

**Chart 6. Schedule Rank vs. Voter Turnout for Democratic and Republican Open Primaries.**



**Conclusion**

The problem with winner-take-all delegate allocation is that voters can rightly believe that their vote does not matter, since their choice candidate will receive zero delegates unless he or she is the frontrunner in the state. Voters in these states tend to vote strategically for a candidate who has a chance to carry the state, instead of voting for the candidate that they feel is the best. Voters who know that their state will widely support a particular candidate have no incentive to vote at all. This can in many cases translate to less enthusiasm for a candidate going into the general election, as people may feel less invested in a candidate they had little or no say in nominating, or who they may have felt compelled to half-heartedly support due to winner-take-all rules.

Proportional allocation, on the other hand, allows voters to vote for their favorite candidate, rather than voting strategically for a candidate that they know will win. With a tight race like the one between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, even voters late in the primary schedule felt that their vote had an impact. Even if their choice candidate did not win a plurality in their state, that candidate still accumulated delegates and continued to be competitive in the nomination contest. The higher levels of voter turnout in Democratic primaries reflect this increase in voter efficacy, which is a result of the Democrats' method of allocating delegates proportionally.

In addition, proportional allocation does not distort the primary election results to the extent that winner-take-all allocation does. As a result of the winner-take-all method, McCain effectively secured the Republican nomination barely one month into the process. With well under half of the popular vote cast through February 5<sup>th</sup> contests, McCain had three-fourths of the necessary delegates to win the nomination, far ahead of his rivals. On the Democratic side, however, the delegate counts for Obama and Clinton paralleled their shares of the popular vote, with both candidates receiving close to half of the popular vote and half of the delegate total. Consequently, the Democratic contests were still highly competitive following Super Tuesday on February 5<sup>th</sup>, and remained so until the final contests on June 3. After February 5<sup>th</sup>, Republicans largely lost interest in the primaries, while Democrats keenly watched the race continue and turned out in record numbers—a situation that likely translated to greater enthusiasm for the Democratic ticket in November, since so many more people were personally invested in the nomination, helping Barack Obama to establish a ground presence in more states and raise more campaign funds.

Finally, Republican turnout was at least somewhat higher on average for primaries held after February 5<sup>th</sup> that allocated delegates proportionally. This indicates that citizens may have felt a higher sense of voter efficacy in these contests. Even if a voter's favorite candidate were unlikely to win that state, the backer of candidate other than McCain nonetheless were able to contribute to their candidate's nationwide delegate total and have an impact on their party's direction.

The 2008 Democratic primaries gave voters an unprecedented opportunity to choose their presidential candidate, and a record number of citizens took advantage of that opportunity. This success in boosting voter engagement could be shared by the Republican Party if it adjusted its rules to require the proportional allocation of delegates in each state. The result would be a renewed sense of voter efficacy throughout the United States in the next election cycle.

*(Laura Kirschner was a democracy fellow with FairVote in 2008. Rob Richie is FairVote's executive director.)*