

**Racing To the Front: The Effect of Frontloading on Presidential  
Primary Turnout\***

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## **Racing To the Front: The Effect of Frontloading on Presidential Primary Turnout**

**Abstract:** Since 1988, states have increasingly scheduled their presidential nominating events earlier in the campaign, a procedure known as frontloading. We explore the implications of frontloading for voter participation by examining how the nomination context has changed due to frontloading and how associated factors (including: delegate accumulation, the effective number of candidates, election compression, campaign spending, separation of presidential primary from state and local primaries, and earlier effective endings of the campaign) affect primary election turnout. We draw on a micro level theory of participation in sequential elections to identify how a state's position in the process shapes incentives for citizens to vote and to identify the precise mechanism through which frontloading might discourage voter participation. Using data from all state primary elections from 1972-2004, we find that frontloading substantially disenfranchises voters in many states, leading to lower overall and meaningful participation for many voters in presidential nominations.

The presidential nomination system was transformed in 1972 when new rules transferred the selection process from the hands of elites to the party rank-and-file. This change stemmed, in part, from reformers goals to increase rank-and-file participation and to allow for greater internal party democracy in selecting the party nominee. From one perspective, their goals were met when many states shifted from a caucus to a primary election because primaries promote broader participation. Since 1988, however, state parties and legislatures have increasingly scheduled their nominating events earlier in the campaign, a procedure known as frontloading. On the part of the states, this strategic move is designed to reap political and economic benefits that come with increased influence over the selection of the nominee. But, the process of frontloading also influences the strategic campaign choices of candidates and especially voter turnout.

Previous research indicates that frontloading has serious consequences across a variety of dimensions, including an increased importance for the events of the invisible primary (Flowers, Haynes and Crespin 2003; Stegar 2000, Haynes and Murray 1998; Mayer and Hagan 2000), the changing nature of candidate competition (Stegar 2000), the advantage given to the frontrunner (Busch 2000), and the problem of information for the voter (Norrander 1992; Morton and Williams 2001). Although scholars have examined primary turnout since the reforms, previous studies were done in the early 1980s prior to the advent of frontloading (Norrander 1986c, 1992; Moran and Fenster 1982; Ranney 1977; Norrander and Smith 1985). While scholars more recently have noted a decline in primary turnout (Patterson 2003; Mayer and Busch 2004), they have not systematically examined the problem. Our study seeks to remedy this by offering a well-developed theoretical framework for understanding how the dynamics of a sequential and frontloaded process influences party rank-and-file turnout.

## **Reforms and Consequences**

Between 1924 and 1968 state and national party elites controlled the delegate selection mechanism during the presidential nomination campaign, thereby limiting participation by the party rank-and-file. Caucuses dominated the nomination process, and afforded state level party elites strong control over the selection of the nominee. Frustration with the closed nature of the nomination process led to reforms in 1972 that were meant to establish broad participation by the party rank-and-file in the selection of the party nominee (see Caesar 1982).

The reforms created profound and often unanticipated changes to the nomination process at the state, candidate, and voter level. Most importantly, the reforms gave state leaders and candidates new means to manipulate the nomination process in pursuit of their own goals. Frontloading, a direct effect from these activities, places more pressure on the early phase of the nomination contest, which has direct consequences on how candidates and voters respond to the dynamics of a sequential system. We trace the effects of frontloading on states, candidates, and voters, as a way of developing a theoretical model of primary election turnout.

At the state level, the first unanticipated consequence of the reforms was a shift from caucuses to primaries because it was the easiest way to assure that state delegates were selected in a way consistent with the new rules (DeClerico and Uslaner 1984). As a result, primaries became the modal way to determine the outcome of state nominating events, averaging over 33 primaries in any presidential election year. The increased number of primaries enhanced participation among the party rank-and-file because the costs of participating in a primary election are much lower than for the more time-intensive caucuses.

In addition, it quickly became apparent to state leaders and potential candidates that the timing of their state's nominating event mattered both politically and economically. Politically, early states have greater influence over who wins the nomination by sending signals to later

voters about the viability and electability of the contenders and by helping to winnow candidates. In addition, because of the increase in candidate activity and media attention early states see increased candidate spending and thus greater economic advantages (Bartels 1988; Mayer and Busch 2004).

Southern states were the first to express concern over their “late” position. An earlier spot, they argued, brought more attention to their region and increased their ability to encourage the nomination of a more conservative presidential candidate (Norrander 1992). This resulted in the first-ever regional Super Tuesday primary event in 1988 whose purpose was “to encourage greater participation by Southern voters,” (Norrander 1992:108).<sup>1</sup> Turnout increased 5%, suggesting that sequence position matters to voters (Norrander 1992:193). Leaders in other states quickly jumped on the frontloading bandwagon, thereby further changing the race dynamics each successive election year. The 2008 race, for example, will be the most frontloaded in history with the Iowa caucus held first on January 14, followed by a Nevada Caucus on January 19, the New Hampshire primary on January 22, and the South Carolina and Florida primaries on January 29. The window for all other states begins February 5 and 19 states have already committed to holding their nomination event on what is being called “Tsunami Tuesday.”

The first important consequence of the reforms to candidate behavior is their choice to concentrate their mobilization and advertising efforts in the earliest states (Ridout 2006).<sup>2</sup> This reflects candidates’ needs to perform better than expected in the first few primaries to stimulate momentum for future races (Gurian and Haynes 1993). Not surprisingly, the media responds to the intense campaigning early in the process with almost constant coverage in early races, but a drop off in coverage quickly occurs as the campaign events become less important (indeed, in some cases wholly unimportant) to the nomination outcome (Robinson and Sheehan 1983).

Prior to frontloading, candidates stayed in the race longer and often more than one viable candidate continued running up to the time of the convention. With the advent of frontloading, however, candidates withdrew more quickly when their campaigns failed to meet expectations or when they could not raise funds to continue a vigorous campaign (Mayer and Hagen 2000; Mayer and Busch 2004). Thus, early contests like Iowa and New Hampshire play an increasingly important role, often eliminating candidates that perform poorly while providing others with momentum. In addition, the frontloaded system allows less time for long shot candidates to capitalize on the momentum from earlier races to boost fundraising and mobilize voters in advance of the next set of primaries, further exacerbating the winnowing process. As a result, in a frontloaded system the nominee is determined much earlier, due to both candidate attrition and delegate accumulation (Mayer and Busch 2004).

We contend that states' efforts to frontload the system and candidate behavior wrought by frontloading alter the participation calculus for primary voters and, as a result, state level turnout. Although our interest is in aggregate primary turnout, we must draw from micro-foundations to consider how changes associated with frontloading shape the voter's calculus.

Standard rational choice vote models do not take into account the presidential nominations' unique sequential feature and therefore are not appropriate for generating predictions of individual or aggregate turnout in presidential nomination contests. Instead, since frontloading is the choice of states to manipulate their place in the series of events, we need to know how sequence shapes voter calculus. In sequential elections the individual-level decision to vote or abstain depends on the expected utility of her vote at the time at which the vote is cast. The expected value of a vote depends heavily on whether the vote is likely to be pivotal. In a sequential election, that likelihood differs for voters in different positions in the electoral

sequence because the probability that a candidate will win changes as the election sequence unfolds. Therefore, the value of votes cast later in the sequence depends on the outcomes earlier in the sequence.<sup>3</sup> Like the standard rational choice vote models, we expect that as the “expected utility value” of the vote increases, relative to the costs of participation, the likelihood a voter will cast a vote also increases.

Two features of this micro-level conceptualization are especially relevant for understanding turnout under frontloading. First, mobilization by active candidate organizations reduces the costs of voting but the incentives for candidates to engage in active mobilization change across the sequence of elections. Second, the degree to which candidates other than the frontrunner still have a reasonable chance of winning affects the chances that a vote cast at various points in the sequence might be pivotal. In a frontloaded and sequential race both costs and expected vote value can change quickly, thereby altering the calculus of individual voters as they decide whether or not to cast a ballot. However, it is the uniform exposure of voters in each state to the sequential position of their race in the overall nomination process that allows us to link the micro-level effects frontloading to aggregate differences in turnout across states.

The importance of competition and mobilization efforts in stimulating turnout, the first feature, is well understood by scholars and political actors (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993). But, because frontloading quickens the winnowing process, the scope of candidate mobilization efforts across the nomination phase is reduced, which leads to concentrated mobilization efforts in a few early states, but a decline in or even absence of efforts in middle and late nomination states (Bartels 1988; Mayer and Busch 2004). As fewer candidates actively campaign and the winner becomes clearer, the stimulus to voters decreases increasing their participation costs. While for some voters, fewer candidates may help clarify the choices, the lack of active

campaigns reduces the overall mobilization efforts resulting in greater costs for the voter to obtain information about the election and candidates.

Our second argument rests on how the sequence of voting shapes the probability the vote might be pivotal. In presidential nomination contests, the probability of a vote being pivotal depends upon (1) the contribution of that vote to a decisive win for the nominee and (2) the value of the vote as a strategic “cue” to later voters about the viability of a candidate.

Early voter decisions are the harbinger of the campaign. When the race is new, every candidate has, at least in theory, a chance to win the nomination. However, the outcome in early states provides important cues to future voters that can breathe life and momentum into the campaigns of some and deflate the campaigns of others. Momentum is an elevated chance of winning the nomination that happens because early vote outcomes translates into resources, visibility, and, ultimately, later vote outcomes (Aldrich 1980). Candidates who do better than expected in the earliest contests tend to fare better in later contests because they can convert early vote shares into new resources (Gurian 1990; Jackson and Crotty 1996; Mutz 1995) and gain support from voters in subsequent nomination contests (Bartels 1988; Popkin 1991; Kenney and Rice 1994; Mutz 1997). Research shows that momentum and bandwagon effects play an important role in keeping candidates actively campaigning in the process (Bartels 1988; Damore 1997; Gurian 1986).

The perception that momentum “matters” serves to invest early voters with an additional source of voting value; they have the opportunity to help shape public perception of their preferred candidate. Since a candidate “wins” whenever he outperforms media expectations, a primary vote has value even when cast for the loser (Aldrich 1980). Voters need not believe that their vote will create a decisive victory for the preferred candidate. Instead, they must only



believe that more votes will enhance their preferred candidates' overall chances to win the nomination. Voters in early states are more likely to harbor such beliefs because candidates who perform especially well may attract new support in subsequent races. However, the degree to which the vote for a losing candidate can enhance the subsequent chances of that candidate declines as the process progresses. This happens because the viability of the eventual also-rans decreases as they withdraw from the race and as delegates accumulate for the frontrunner.

In a frontloaded system, these factors are exacerbated. The sheer number of delegates selected early reduces the ability of early state voters to send a meaningful signal to later state voters since the value of the signal deteriorates as the number of remaining delegates dwindles and as candidates winnow. Consequently, as each subsequent election takes place the dynamics of the campaign change: the field is winnowed, candidates cease campaigning one-by-one, the signals from any one state outcome become less important to future state voters, and media attention wanes (Norrander 2000; Haynes and Murray 1998). All this offers an increasing disincentive for voter participation and, consequently, turnout declines. Once the winner of the nomination has been declared, voters in any remaining states no longer have a meaningful choice at the polls. Their votes can only validate or protest an already known outcome.

By drawing together the strands of our arguments about state, candidate and voter behavior, Figure 1 identifies six mechanisms through which frontloading alters the incentives for aggregate voter turnout. Each feature can be measured at the state level and helps to create the primary election context to which all voters in each state are exposed. These factors form the core of our hypotheses and posit an indirect, but very real effect of frontloading on turnout.

(Figure 1 about here)

Most importantly, frontloading leads to a faster accumulation of delegates for the

eventual party nominee. As delegates are accumulated, the probability that a vote will be pivotal decreases and thus reduces incentives for voter turnout. Second, frontloading leads to earlier candidate withdrawals, thus the effective number of candidates in the race declines as each contest passes. Without the stimulus provided by active campaigns, voters have fewer incentives to go to the polls.

Third, frontloading increases the number of primaries on any given day in the nomination cycle as more states place their event as close to the beginning as possible. This compression reduces voter turnout because candidates must strategically apportion their limited campaign resources across numerous nominating events. Different candidates make different strategic decisions, thereby reducing the overall amount of campaign activity in any particular state. Fourth, because candidates must perform well in early states to continue, candidates invest more heavily in mobilization efforts in early states while reserving no resources for later campaigns.

Fifth, frontloading often results in the separation of state primary and the presidential nomination contests (Norrander 1986a; Norrander and Smith 1985). Prior to the advent of frontloading more states held their presidential preference primary on the same day as their state primary event, but after frontloading fewer states do so. Having both types of events on the same day stimulates voter turnout because of the campaign associated with other ballot races, while separating them decreases voter turnout. Sixth, earlier primaries lead to earlier effective endings. In part, this is due to the strategic activities of candidates, the winnowing of candidates and the accumulation of delegates. Once media and voters recognize that one candidate has an insurmountable lead, incentives for participation decrease greatly. Voters do not see value in casting a vote and candidates see little value in continued mobilization efforts.

Of course, these factors are not the only influence on primary turnout. Past studies on

primary turnout have relied on both aggregate and survey data to understand how the rules (Geer 1989, Moran and Fenster 1982; Norrander 1986a, 1992; Norrander and Smith 1985; Ranney 1977), candidate strategies (Moran and Fenster 1982; Norrander 1986a Norrander and Smith 1985), and the demographic characteristics of the electorate (Kenney and Rice 1985) influence turnout. We control for these important factors as we examine systematic evidence on how the timing of a state's primary affects turnout.

### **Data and Methods**

We use aggregate state level primary voting data from 1972, the first election under the new nominating rules, to 2004 to test our hypothesis that frontloading reduces turnout. Our unit of analysis is state party elections, providing up to two cases per state per election year.<sup>4</sup>

*Dependent Variable.* One of the most complex issues in modeling turnout in presidential primaries is determining how to measure the dependent variable (Norrander 1986b, 1992). The definition of turnout is the number of ballots cast divided by the number of eligible voters. For a general election the eligible electorate—the denominator-- is measured by the number of registered voters, the voting age population, or the voting eligible population (McDonald and Popkin 2001; Teixeira 1992), but in state primary elections, where the race is most often intraparty, each party has its own subset of eligible voters.

Norrander (1986b) tested 4 different measures of the eligible electorate and determined that a “normal vote” measure is the best theoretical and empirical measure. She found that the “normal vote” measure was the only one that passed the following five theoretical criteria of a valid vote measure: it provides a separate measures for each party's primary; it maximizes the number of primaries available for study to eliminate selection bias; it avoids denominators that are interrelated with the independent variables; it provides a consistent measure of party strength

across and within states; and, it distinguishes between the potential and legal electorate.

We define normal vote as the state party vote for the governor and the president averaged over the last three state presidential elections and anywhere from three to six gubernatorial elections. We measure the proportion for each office, average it over the twelve-year period and combine these averages to make one overall proportion for each state. We multiply this by the voting age population in the state to create the denominator in our measure of party turnout.<sup>5</sup> The numerator, of course, is the number of votes cast in each party primary. Our intraparty turnout measure ranges from .75% to 77.24%.

*Independent Variables.* Our key independent variables represent the contextual changes due to frontloading that are identified in Figure 1. The first variable, the percent of delegates accumulated by the eventual nominee prior to each state nomination contest, represents the sequential nature of the system, which devalues votes as delegates accumulate for the eventual nominee. It ranges from 0% to 100%, where 100% equals the point at which an eventual nominee has enough delegates to win the party's nomination. For years in which there was an incumbent president running essentially unchallenged (1972, 1984 and 2004 Republican, 1996 Democrat) we code this variable 100% throughout.<sup>6</sup> We expect the rate of delegate accumulation to be greater in frontloaded years and delegate accumulation to have a negative effect on state-party primary turnout.

To capture the effects of winnowing, we need a measure that reflects the number of *active* candidates in a race. Because candidates gain ballot access long before the nominating event, by the time of many primaries several candidates will have already withdrawn and endorsed other contenders. Thus, a simple count of the number of names on a ballot would not accurately address the state's primary competitiveness, or get at the changing nature of each

successive contest as the race winnows. We use, instead, a measure of the effective number of candidates (ENC) (Steger, Hickman and Yohn 2002). This measure represents a concentration index that estimates the number of effective candidates based on their relative vote share. The ENC is calculated by dividing one by the summed squares of each candidate's share of the vote in a primary ( $ENC = 1/\sum(\text{candidate}_1\%^2, \text{candidate}_2\%^2 \dots \text{candidate}_n\%^2)$ ).

When votes are shared more evenly across a field of candidates the value of this measure increases.<sup>7</sup> Our measure gets at the heart of candidate activity and competition within a state primary by taking into account the actual flavor of each contest by assessing each candidate's vote share.<sup>8</sup> We expect that as the effective number of candidates decreases so should turnout.

Our third variable captures the compression of nominating events as states move their contests earlier in the process by measuring the number of primary events that occur during the same week. When many primaries are held simultaneously, candidates and the media must choose to focus their resources strategically leaving some states with less attention than they might have received had their primary occurred independently. Thus, we expect the number of primaries held during the week to have a negative effect on turnout. Of course, when states shift their primaries to the front of the sequential process, they often become separated from other state nomination contests. We control for this with a dummy variable coded one if states hold their state primaries on the same date and zero otherwise. We expect this to have a positive relationship with turnout.

The best measure of strategic candidate behavior is the amount of money spent by candidates as they campaign in each state. To calculate this measure we take constant dollars spent by all candidates per state party divided by the normal state party vote.<sup>9</sup> This measure of campaign spending provides a proxy of candidate mobilization efforts, which we expect to

decline as the field of candidate narrows.

Although this provides a very direct measure of strategic resource deployment, the measure contains known errors that stem from Federal Election Campaign (FEC) reporting rules.<sup>10</sup> First, reporting rules only apply to candidates who choose to take federal matching funds. As a result, spending data for John Connally in 1980, Steve Forbes in 1996 and 2000, George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004, and John Kerry and Howard Dean in 2004 are unavailable. To make up for this we substitute each candidate's total nomination spending divided by the number of states he competed in before he dropped out or if he was the nominee by 50. Second, for those candidates who accept funding FEC rules cap spending in states based upon an Electoral College formula. As candidates approach spending limits in a target state, they often purchase services in other states even though the *effect* of those services is felt in the target states, thus, our measure is biased somewhat downward. Third, reporting requirements began in 1976, so races in 1972 must be dropped from the analysis when spending data are included in the model. Because of these data limitations, we provide results for our model with and without this variable.

Finally, we identify whether or not the primary election occurred after the date a party nominee is known. This variable differs from our delegate accumulation measure because it recognizes that candidates need not have over 50% of the delegates for the race to be called by the media or other elite actors. Drawing upon multiple sources, we identify the earliest date at which a single candidate was considered the party nominee due to delegate selection, momentum, and/or lack of challengers.<sup>11</sup> We use a dummy variable that is 0 before and a 1 after the nominee is known. For years in which there was an incumbent president running essentially unchallenged we code this variable one throughout.

Notably the "effective end" variable is highly correlated with our delegate accumulation

variable (.85,  $p < .01$ ) and the effective number of candidates (-.65,  $p < .01$ ). Including them in our model, then, is a stiff test of whether each of these factors has an independent effect on turnout. At the same time, we note that our interest is in predicting turnout and testing the precise effect of each pathway, so we are also interested in how these variables perform as a set. Thus, although independent effects are important, and we have specific hypotheses about each, we are more interested in the overall effects of the frontloading variables. In this way, we believe that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, so we need to examine both the independent as well as cumulative effects for these variables.

In terms of controls, we first consider the rules or structural factors. Perhaps most important is the degree to which the process is open to participants. In a closed primary, only registered partisans can participate. In an open and a modified-open primary, registered partisans and independents can choose to participate, although modified open primaries require voters to register with one of the parties at the time they select a ballot. We include dummy variables in our model for modified-open and open primaries and expect both to be positive. If participation rules matter, states with the more open primary rules should have greater voter turnout.

The degree to which voters can directly connect their vote to the nomination of candidates should enhance turnout. But some state primaries are “beauty contests” in which the vote outcome is advisory, making the primary less meaningful to voters. Therefore we expect a negative relationship (see Norrander 1986a, 1992; Norrander and Smith 1985; Ranney 1977). Likewise, we control for delegate primaries, which are contests where voters choose delegates to the convention and do not necessarily vote for a candidate preference. Given that voters have less incentive to invest in such a primary, we expect a negative relationship.

We also control for the number of delegates at stake in each state primary. Theoretically

states with more delegates should be more valued by candidates leading to greater mobilization efforts in those states and, therefore greater turnout. However, we maintain that it is the states position in the sequence of events rather than its delegate size that stimulates candidates' attention.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, we expect this control to have no effect. We include it in our analysis to demonstrate that other strategic incentives for candidates do not appear important once frontloading is taken into account.

Previous research indicates that states that have a tradition of holding primary elections, independent of and prior to the party reforms of the 1970's, tend to have greater turnout than those who developed primaries as a result of reforms (Ranney 1977; Kenney and Rice 1985). We code traditional states as 1 and all others 0.<sup>13</sup> State voting law dictates how long before an election a voter must be registered to participate. Research on general election campaigns shows that the further out the requirement from the election the lower the turnout (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). We hypothesize a similar effect here. We also include a dummy variable if the state had a favorite son in the race (coded 1 if yes, 0 if no). We expect favorite sons to increase turnout and therefore expect a positive coefficient.

At the individual level, demographic characteristics (e.g. race, socio-economic status, and age) are associated with participation (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). To control for such factors at the aggregate level we include the state level demographics of percent black, percent college educated, percent over the age of 65 and state median family income.<sup>14</sup>

Because our unit of analysis is party elections in primary states we also control for party (0 Democrats/1 Republicans). In addition, we control for years when there is an "heir apparent" Vice Presidential candidate running for the nomination. In this case, the frontrunner's position, having both money and name recognition, gives him a considerable lead, likely reducing voter



incentive to go to the polls. Finally, to capture idiosyncrasies associated with presidential campaigns, we control for the election year.<sup>15</sup>

## **Results**

We contend that frontloading increases the momentum for the frontrunner, quickens the winnowing process, compresses contests, and encourages targeted and strategic mobilization (see Figure 1). Because frontloading began in 1988, we can compare the contests from 1972-1984 with those in 1988-2004 to determine, empirically, whether frontloading has significantly altered the context of presidential primaries.

In Table 1, the difference between pre and post frontloading contexts is most clearly seen by the earlier ending of the nominating process. Before 1988, an average of 83% of primaries took place prior to the effective end of the campaign. Once frontloading became common, this dropped to 50%, leaving many more states without a meaningful role in selecting the party nominee. Prior to frontloading, primaries held before the effective end of the nomination contest were scheduled much later in the process. This allowed underdog candidates more time to reap the benefits from earlier successes and voters more time to learn about and deliberate their choices. For example, the number of days between the Iowa Caucuses and the average primary was 88 before frontloading, compared to 30 days after it. Likewise, prior to frontloading, the average primary after the effective end was held 119 days after Iowa, compared to only 92 days.

(Table 1 about here)

Table 1 also shows that the average spending per voter drops precipitously after the nominee is known creating a very different state election environment for voters later in the campaign sequence. Finally, we also note that prior to the effective end of the campaign the

percentage of states that hold their presidential preference primary on the same day as their state office primaries has decreased.

Figures 2a, 2b, and 2c show how the other 3 factors are associated with frontloading. By graphing the mean accumulation of delegates for the party nominee, the effective number of candidates, and primary compression by its event or primary sequence, we demonstrate the dramatic changes in the pace of the campaign season with the advent of frontloading. Figure 2a shows that prior to frontloading, contests midway through the nomination season show a relatively slow, but steady delegate accumulation. This slower and more deliberative pace leaves voters with ample doubt about who would win the nomination, and more voters have the opportunity to “signal” later voters through casting a ballot. The slower pace also permits candidates to collect and deploy new resources that result from their performance in earlier races. In a frontloaded system the pace unfolds more quickly. By week 7, the eventual nominee has accumulated 20% more delegates than his counter-part in the pre-frontloaded era. By week 8, the eventual nominee has accumulated fully half of the delegates necessary to clinch the nomination. Frontloading, then, enhances the bandwagon effect for the frontrunner and leads to a quicker effective and mathematical victory in the nomination contest.<sup>16</sup> This is also supported by Table 1 that shows that more primaries were held and more days past before the effective end of the nomination season in the pre-frontloading period.

(Figures 2a, 2b and 2c about here)

Likewise, the effective number of candidates drops more quickly in a frontloaded system, leaving citizens with fewer options over the course of the campaign (See Figure 2b). Although the number of effective candidates is slightly higher in frontloaded years, the winnowing process occurs much more quickly so that by the fifth event there are fewer effective candidates in the

race in a frontloaded system compared to a non-frontloaded one. Both types of races show a general decline of effective candidates, but the ENC drops to 1.75 in frontloaded years while the number hovers between 2.25 and 2.5 prior to frontloading.

Figure 2c shows how races have become more compressed, especially at the early stages of the nomination campaign, leading to more presidential nomination events being held on the same day during the frontloading era. The large number of primaries held between events 4 through 8 leave little time for candidates, other than the frontrunner, to gain advantages from momentum that they might have received from previous contests. Perhaps more importantly, high compression encourages strategic targeting of resources. Candidates must heavily target one or two early states as part of their overall strategy and ignore others, or spread resources thin across many states. This results in very different campaigns across states at identical positions in the process, resulting in state voters being exposed to different candidates' campaigns and essentially different choices.

Overall, our analyses paint a fairly clear picture of how frontloading has changed the character of the nomination campaign. In a frontloaded system, candidates leave the race sooner, more primaries are clustered together, the delegate accumulation for the eventual nominee happens more rapidly and the race ends sooner. This leaves voters with little time to adequately deliberate about their choices and reduces their incentives to cast a ballot. In addition, voters later in the sequence often have little chance to influence the selection of the nominee, rendering their participation nearly meaningless. All these factors are consistent with our perspective that frontloading creates a dynamic that reduces incentives for voters to turnout in all but the earliest contests.

Table 2 presents the results for two regression models, one with the campaign spending measure and one without. Both models support our hypotheses that as context shifts, more states are faced with conditions that inhibit, rather than enhance, turnout.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, even though there is relatively high correlation among the frontloading variables, we still see independent effects of each.

(Table 2 about here)

As we expect, delegate accumulation has a negative effect on state party primary turnout. States that fall later in the sequences after the frontrunner has accumulated many delegates have much lower turnout than states early in the sequence when all delegates are up for grabs. Indeed, each one percent increase in delegate accumulation leads to .042% decrease in turnout. This leads to a decrease of 4.2% in state party turnout once the nominee accumulates enough delegates to win the party's nomination. As frontloading has increased more events are scheduled after this "win" resulting in lower turnout levels across numerous state electorates.

Moreover, this variable operates in conjunction with the other factors related to frontloading. Turnout drops by 2.6% ( $p=.109$ ) when the race is called, independent of the sequence of the race. Similarly, the effective number of candidates declines as momentum for the frontrunner builds. For each effective candidate lost, state party primary turnout declines by 3%. Compression also plays a role in reducing turnout by .23% for each additional state contest.

Finally, both models show that state parties that combine the presidential primary with primary elections for other state and local races have higher turnout. This highlights the detrimental effects on turnout of state level decisions to separate the presidential nomination from other state and local primaries. When voters can cast ballots in presidential primaries on the same day as other state party races, turnout increases by 5.5%.

Model 2 shows that candidate spending per state shapes turnout as well. Like the number of primaries, this variable captures the strategic targeting of resources. States that enjoy higher spending per voter have higher turnout. For each dollar of spending per voter lost, turnout declines by .4%. We note that this variable captures some of the same features of the frontloading context as our measures of candidate winnowing and compression. Both coefficients drop some when this variable is included, and compression becomes insignificant. Given the high multicollinearity among the measures of frontloading context, however, this type of result is not surprising. Nevertheless, both models strongly support the idea that changes to the context of nominations associated with frontloading has a depressive effect on turnout

Before exploring the combined effects that result from a frontloaded context, we note that most of the control variables have the predicted effects. Rules that increase the value of the vote or decrease the costs of voting, generally serve to increase turnout. If the primary is a beauty contest the primary contest has a decline of about 6%. Open contests, as expected have a higher turnout rate, but modified open primaries have lower turnout by 5%. Theoretically, the latter finding is unexpected, but has appeared consistently in other studies (Kenny and Rice 1985, Ranney 1977). Perhaps modified open primaries do not result in higher turnout because many independents are unaware that they can participate or do not want to declare a party allegiance and change their voter registration.

Other aspects of the nomination race context that are unrelated to frontloading are also important in shaping turnout. States that have higher institutional barriers to participation, as measured by the number of days registration must precede an election, have lower turnout. A state with a “favorite son” running has greater turnout, but a vice presidential “heir apparent” running in the presidential nomination reduces turnout. Most likely, the latter is due to his

success in the invisible primary raising funds and because other strong challengers are deterred from entering. Voters in states that have “always” participated in primary contests are much more likely (about 7.3%) to turnout than voters in state’s who have more recently joined the primary bandwagon. Party also shows a negative effect indicating that Republican primary voters are less likely to turnout than Democrats by about 6.2%. This is likely due to the different state party rules regarding delegate distribution.

Surprisingly, the number of delegates at stake is significant, but in the opposite direction of what we would expect if candidates were strategic and focused more attention on delegate rich states. We accept this as support for argument that strategic considerations are not related positively to delegate accumulation.<sup>18</sup>

#### *Combined Effects of Frontloading Context on Turnout*

The models in Table 2 show the independent effect of each of the variables associated with the context of frontloading. However, equally, if not more, important is how the variables work in concert to shape the incentives and costs for citizens’ participation. Therefore, we compare the predicted value of turnout before and after frontloading for primaries held during the same sequence of the race. Since our argument rests on identifying indirect effects, we must look at how the “average” context changed after frontloading, holding constant a states position in the sequence. Through this, we can see whether state party primaries that occur at the beginning, middle, and end of the typical nomination campaign differ because of contextual changes associated with frontloading.

We generate a predicted value of state turnout using the coefficients from the first model in Table 2. We set all control variables not associated with frontloading to their sample mean or mode while varying the value of the five variables associated with frontloading by context and

sequence.<sup>19</sup> For the frontloaded context, we use the means from state primaries held 1988 and after. For the non-frontloaded context we use the means from before 1988. Figure 3 graphs predicted turnout by the sequence of primaries over the fifteen-week campaign period, with one line representing the predicted turnout prior to frontloading and the other representing predicted turnout after frontloading.

(Figure 3 about here)

Figure 3 shows that although states at the very beginning and very end of the process look quite similar in their predicted turnout, states through the middle of the process are affected greatly by the context of frontloading. This is not surprising since Table 1 and Figure 2 show that middle states have the greatest change in context after frontloading. The first two weeks of the primary season look remarkably similar between the two contexts, but by week 3 the two contexts begin to diverge. Turnout in post frontloading states increases at week 3, compared to pre-frontloading states and then predicted turnout in the “average” frontloaded race drops below the “average” non-frontloaded race by about 4% and rising to 7.5% at its peak.

The divergence continues through the season until the last few weeks, when the average race is nearly completed. The divergence in predicted turnout across contexts highlights how changes in the set of campaign context variables together depress meaningful participation among rank-and-file party voters. Notice that in pre-frontloading years primary turnout stays relatively constant across races until week 13 when the turnout begins to drop as the nominee becomes clearer. But, in post-frontloading years there is a quick drop in turnout after only the 4<sup>th</sup> event sequence. The voter disenfranchisement seen in the post frontloading years is potentially a large number of voters. Since 1984, well over a majority (57%) of competitive primaries were held between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> contests in the sequence, thus the changes to the calendar due to

frontloading influence turnout in most states.

How large is the substantive impact of frontloading on participation? We argue quite large because the “average” state party during this period records turnout of around 20% and a population of 2,375,131. According to our models turnout could drop by 3% to 7.5% depending on where the average state falls in the sequence. If the contest falls toward the earlier part of the sequence the 3% disenfranchisement affects on average 71,255 voters in a state but if it falls at the latter end of the sequence it suppresses turnout on average by 178,134 votes. Thus, if we consider the number of states that hold primaries during this sequence of the campaign the overall vote loss is tremendous reflecting likely millions of potential voters.

Both the multivariate results and our predictions of turnout by sequence show that the features of nomination campaigns associated with frontloading reduce participation. The sequential nomination process that was intended to provide an extended, deliberative opportunity for citizens to evaluate candidates has shifted to a compressed and targeted nomination process that disadvantages voters who cast ballots midway and late in the nomination season. These results are troubling given the intentions of reformers to enhance internal party democracy and increase meaningful participation.

### **Discussion**

Recent discussions by political elites, party leaders, and political pundits question the effectiveness of the nomination process as it has evolved, particularly as it relates to frontloading and its consequences. While many assert that frontloading is harmful to participation, none identifies the mechanisms through which that harm occurs or identifies the degree to which frontloading is harmful. By understanding micro level incentives of the voters and the behavior of states and candidates, we identify six mechanisms that influence turnout, all of which have



changed substantially in the wake of frontloading. We show how each influences turnout overall, and how they combine to influence turnout at different points in a sequential nomination process.

Our findings bring into sharp focus the tension between reformers goals to increase participation and state level goals to have a disproportionate influence over nomination outcomes. States select nomination dates through balancing the costs of holding an election early against the benefits they anticipate from attracting campaign attention early in the process. More and more states find that the benefits outweigh the costs and move their events forward. But, the increased compression leads to faster delegate accumulation, quicker winnowing, and earlier endings all of which reduce turnout for most other states. States have incentives to move forward in the process, but in doing so create a system that is less meaningful to voters and harmful to reformer goals. This suggests that parties cannot simultaneously optimize participation in nomination contests and state autonomy in selecting primary election dates.

We identified substantial consequences for turnout because of frontloading, but how much of a concern should this raise? We suggest quite a lot. Research has shown that nomination campaigns are an environment in which the party has the opportunity to expand its base of support and increase the number of new political participants. Those involved in the nomination, even for a losing candidate, often work for the party or party nominee in the general election campaign (Stone, Atkeson and Rapoport 1992). Thus, presidential nomination campaigns are a unique opportunity for new entrants to come into the party and to become involved in politics more generally. Since participation in one election also tends to predict participation in future elections, the boon from drawing in new participants can be substantial when considered over multiple election periods. With a shorter campaign, as is common after frontloading, party expansion and recruitment is less likely. Fewer voters are inclined to become involved in a

candidate's campaign because for most citizens the race is over before it ever reaches them.

Many pundits and party officials have strongly argued against the compressed and frontloaded schedule because its speed reduces the ability of voters to make deliberative decisions (Germond and Witcover 2000). For example, in 1996 RNC Chair Haley Barbour's said, "There is some concern that our nominating process may have become so compressed that it does not serve the party or the voters very well. Voters don't have much time to reflect as some candidates drop out and others emerge," (from Busch 2000).

Our results speak to this policy debate by identifying the features that decrease or increase turnout. To make the process more deliberative and more democratic, proper spacing of primaries needs to be considered (also see Mayer and Busch 2004). Delegate accumulation and candidate winnowing go hand in hand. Slower delegate accumulation encourages candidates to stay in the race longer and consequently mobilize voters in more states. Candidates also need time for momentum to unfold at a slower pace so that its positive consequences such as news attention and campaign contributions have time to kick in. Thus, spreading out the process increases the chance for greater participation among the rank-and-file and encourages a more deliberative process, allowing voters to make better choices about both the electability and ideological appropriateness of the candidates. Without such changes, the nomination campaign is a mythical agent of choice, favoring the frontrunner and leaving many potential participants, voters and candidates, without the opportunity for meaningful participation.

One alternative to the lengthy and meaningless process for many would be an actual national party primary. Although this type of a system would likely reduce or eliminate the momentum experienced in a sequential process, it may be preferable for meeting an array of party, candidate and voter goals. These include promoting broader participation, a different set of

benefits to underdog candidates, party building and expansion of its base, a test of a candidate's appeal and the quick and decisive determination of the party nominee.

A national primary for each party in the late spring of a presidential year would create a different context for candidates and for voters as the national media followed the campaign. While voters in some states would no doubt still get a different local campaign than voters in other states, as candidates strategically deploy resources as they do in a general election context, all voters would reap the benefits of learning about the campaign from the national media and hold the belief that their vote might in some way make a difference. As it is now, voters in Iowa and New Hampshire face campaign saturation, while most voters in other states tune in to the election only when and if the local election environment heats up. In a national primary, however, voters would tune in to national debates held in different states and media coverage would be more evenhanded, allowing voters the time to contemplate their choices.

A national primary, of course, would have some downsides, but overall even weak candidates would get to make their case to a larger audience than they do in the current environment. Moreover, party building efforts would be strengthened as activists across the nation join campaigns during the excitement of the campaign and knowing that their efforts can make a difference on the outcome. After the election and the party nominee is known, party division would begin to heal as the race turns to the general election campaign and the real contest between the two parties begins (Atkeson 1993). Thus, this alternative scenario may offer many advantages to the eventual nominee, also-rans, the party and, especially, to voters.

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<sup>1</sup> We note, however, that states who frontload in one year do not always front-load in other years.

<sup>2</sup> This is true whether or not frontloading exists. However, frontloading increases the value of the frontloading factors that influence turnout.

<sup>3</sup> For a formal discussion of the problem see Battaglini (2005).

<sup>4</sup> Because of the small number of time points for any given party primary, and because states may choose to frontload one year but not in others, there is no clear way to examine frontloading in the context of single state time series analyses. Instead, we pool the data and use a fixed-effects regression analysis with election year dummies.

<sup>5</sup> We chose to use the VAP instead of state registration data because the VAP is measured identically across states. Using state registration data does not change our conclusions.

<sup>6</sup> To capture baseline voter turnout we code unchallenged incumbents 100% throughout.

<sup>7</sup> We followed Steger, Hickman and Yohn (2002) and included the vote shares of candidates who received at least one tenth of 1% of the total number of votes cast to ensure inclusiveness and excluded votes for unidentified others and unpledged.

<sup>8</sup> For example, in 2004 the following vote proportions for the top contenders in the Democratic New Hampshire primary were Kerry .384, Dean .263, Clark .124, Edwards .121, Lieberman .086 and Kucinich .014. This would give a ENC score of 4.17.

<sup>9</sup> Candidate spending data come from FEC reports. We used constant 2000 dollars. The formula for constant dollars was obtained from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

<sup>10</sup> Spending levels make sense with expectations about primary sequence. Most of the money is placed in the early primaries with the latest primaries often indicating no money spent.

<sup>11</sup> We determine when the race ends using newspaper reports and academic articles.

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<sup>12</sup> Several studies, however, have found that the more state delegates at stake the greater the candidate campaign spending (Aldrich 1980, Gurian 1990, 1993). This work, however, was mostly done prior to the advent of frontloading.

<sup>13</sup> Traditional states are: Alabama, California, Massachusetts, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, West Virginia and Wisconsin.

<sup>14</sup> These data are from the census bureau.

<sup>15</sup> An F test indicates that the dummies provide an increase in predictive power (F 5.5,  $p < .05$ ).

<sup>16</sup> Difference of means tests show that the mean delegate accumulation for the front-runner is statistically higher from week 4 forward in races in frontloaded years ( $p < .01$ ). We also regressed the delegate accumulation variable on the primary sequence and an interaction of primary sequence and a dummy variable for races in 1988 and after. The results show that the rate at which delegates accumulate across the sequence of elections is statistically higher since 1988.

<sup>17</sup> The models largely remain the same if we drop incumbents from our model or limit the data to 1980 onward. The t value decreases somewhat in some models for “effective end,” but always remains significant at  $p < .10$  one-tail test. Given the high collinearity in our frontloading measures, such a result is not surprising when we reduce the number of cases in the model.

<sup>18</sup> It may be that smaller delegate states have traditionally tended to go earlier than larger delegate states. This finding supports that trend and our notion that the dynamics of the process promote specific candidate behavior.

<sup>19</sup> Since we know that the spending measure has error and, therefore, likely has a biased coefficient, we use the model without spending to explore predicted turnout. Using Model 2 does not change our substantive conclusions shown in Figure 3.

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Table 1. Average Percentage of Primaries, Campaign Spending and Percentage of Presidential Primaries Held the Same Day as State Primary Contests by Pre and Post Frontloading and by the Effective End of the Campaign

	Overall		Before Effective End		After Effective End	
	1972-1984	1988-2004	1972-1984	1988-2004	1972-1984	1988-2004
N	179	311	136	158	43	153
Earlier Endings:						
Average Percent of Primaries Held			83.33 <sup>a</sup>	50.25	16.67 <sup>a</sup>	49.75
Average Number of Days	95.74 <sup>a</sup>	60.63	88.35 <sup>a</sup>	29.91	119.14 <sup>a</sup>	92.35
Strategic campaigning: average campaign spending per voter per primary	.91 <sup>a</sup>	.42	1.15 <sup>a</sup>	.66	.27	.16
Presidential Preference Primary Held the Same Day as State Primary Contests	.56 <sup>b</sup>	.48	.51 <sup>a</sup>	.20	.70	.78

Note: No-contest races (1972, 1984, 2004 GOP, 1996 Democrats) dropped from analysis.

<sup>a</sup> Difference between Pre and Post Frontloading periods is significant at  $p < .05$ , two tailed test

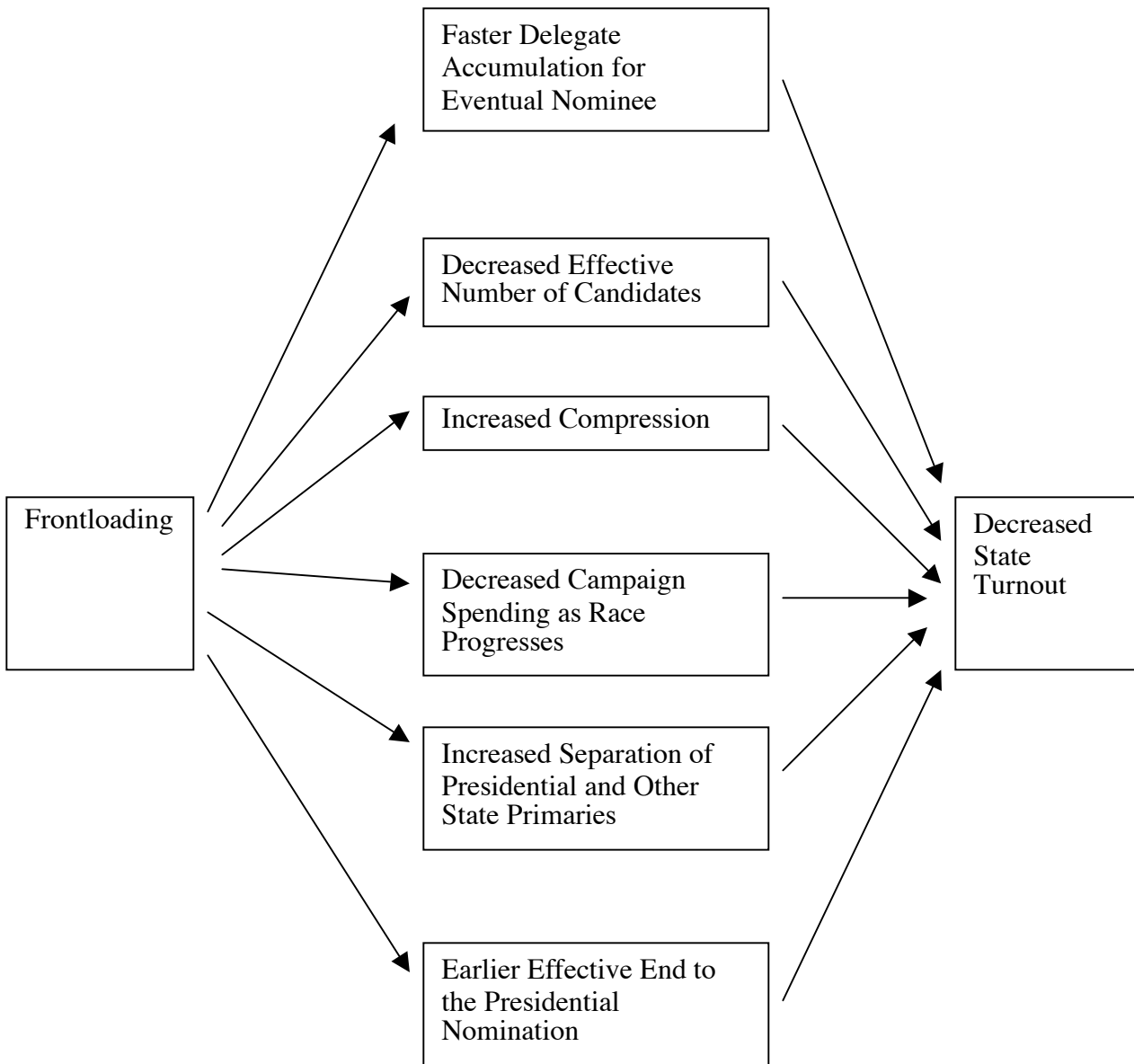
<sup>b</sup> Difference between Pre and Post Frontloading periods is significant at  $p = .10$ , two-tailed test.

Table 2. OLS Regression of Primary Turnout, 1972-2004

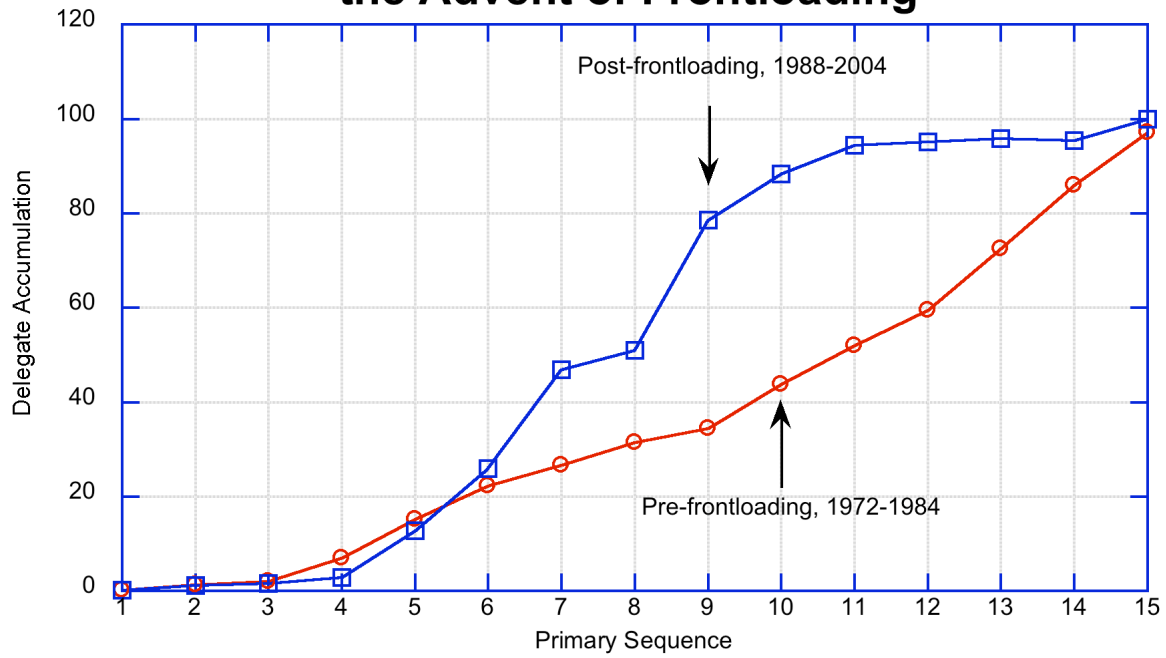
	b	Standard Error	b	Standard Error
	Model 1: (Without Campaign Spending)		Model 2: (With Campaign Spending)	
<b>Frontloading Effects:</b>				
Delegate Accumulation	-.042*	.023	-.048**	.022
Race Declared	-2.637	1.643	-2.882*	1.569
Effective No. of Candidates	3.184****	.625	2.370****	.616
Compression	-.236**	.112	-.159	.107
Combined State Party Primaries	5.547****	.912	6.761****	.911
Campaign Spending			.410**	.184
<b>Structural Features:</b>				
Beauty Contest	-6.044****	1.836	-6.104****	1.731
Delegate Primary	2.476	4.559	3.188	4.287
Open	2.924****	.860	2.318***	.840
Modified Open	-4.823****	1.124	-4.377****	1.090
<b>Party, State and Candidate Controls:</b>				
Vice Presidential Run	-7.334****	1.420	-7.659****	1.335
State Primary Tradition	7.177****	.910	6.545****	.895
Number of State Delegates	-.013**	.006	-.010	.006
Number of Days Registration	-.028	.020	-.108***	.039
Favorite Son	2.765*	1.553	3.676**	1.547
Party (Republican)	-6.079***	.834	-6.241****	.811
<b>State Demographics:</b>				
Percent Black	-.269****	.033	-.241****	.033
Median Family Income	-.0003****	.000	-.0003****	.000
Percent over age 65	-.368*	.209	-.297	.205
Percent college or More	.366***	.133	.330*	.201
<b>Electoral Dummies:</b>				
1972	-1.733	2.426	----	---
1976	-4.181**	2.094	-4.434**	1.985
1980	-3.026*	1.792	-3.101*	1.689
1984	-6.583****	1.916	-6.500****	1.806
1992	-6.082****	1.700	-5.742****	1.606
1996	-8.021****	1.777	-7.379****	1.687
2000	-1.466	1.633	-1.007	1.554
2004	-10.017****	2.086	-10.172****	1.987
Constant	46.809****	5.486	49.55****	5.363
R <sup>2</sup>	.539		.548	
F	24.121****		23.195****	
N	586		545	

Note: \* p < .10, \*\*p<.05, \*\*\* p < .01, \*\*\*\* p < .001, two-tailed test.

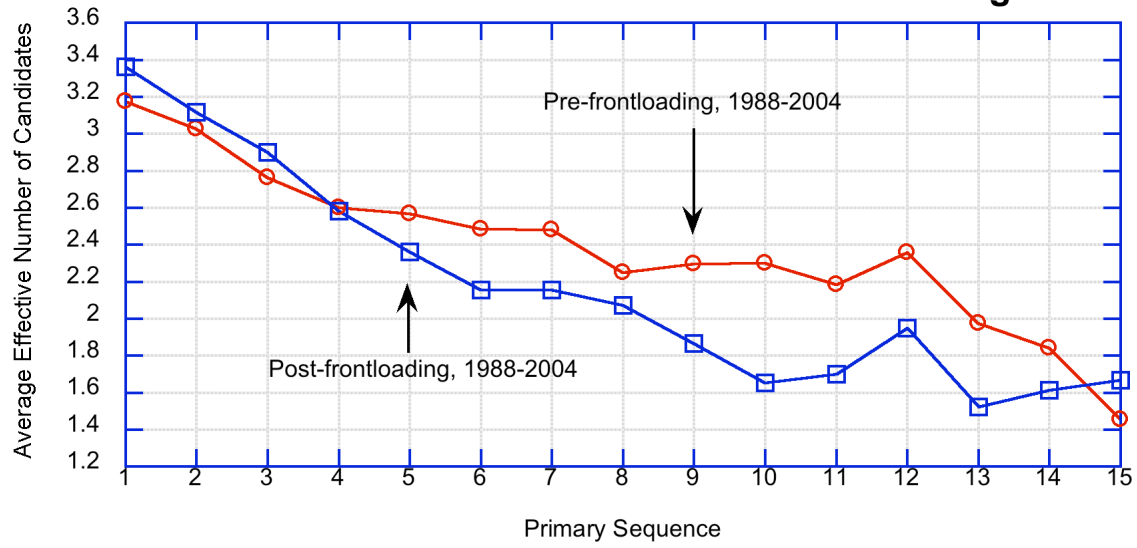
Figure 1. Hypothesized Relationship between Frontloading Context & Turnout



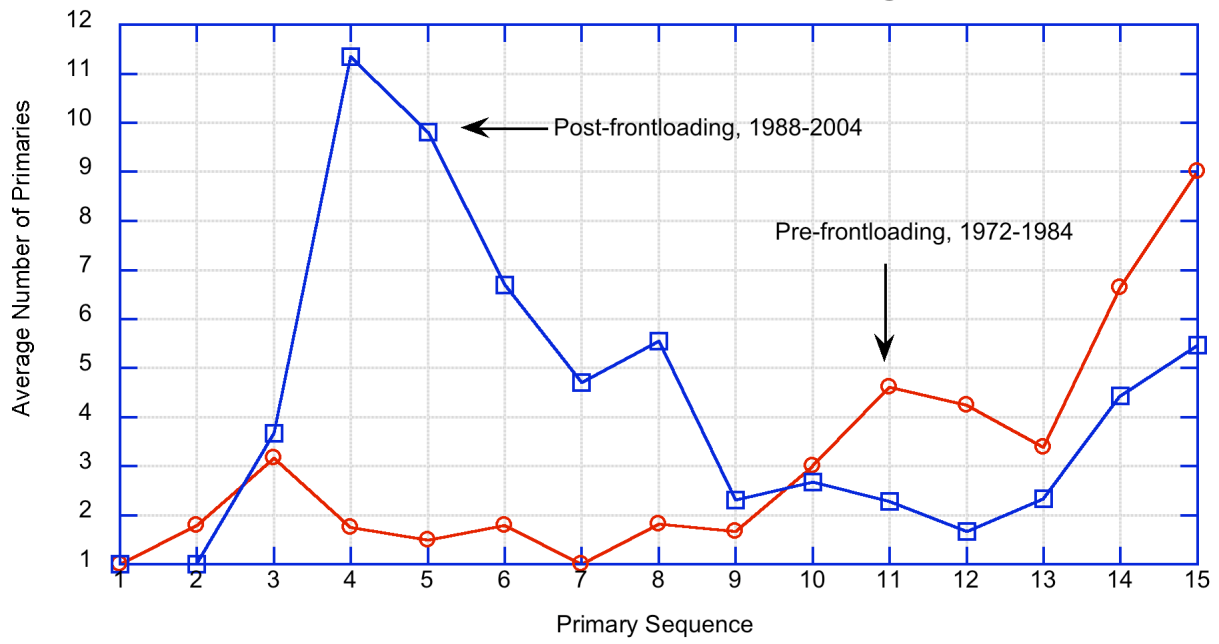
**Figure 2a. Average Delegate Accumulation by Primary Sequence Before and After the Advent of Frontloading**



**Figure 2b. Mean Effective Number of Candidates by Primary Sequence Before and After the Advent of Frontloading**



**Figure 2c. Average Number of Primaries by Primary Sequence Before and After the Advent of Frontloading**



**Figure 3. Predicted Turnout for State Primaries by Primary Sequence Before and After the Advent of Frontloading**

