

# Sheep in Wolves' Clothing: Undeclared Voters in New Hampshire's Open Primary

One of the notable features of the current presidential nominating process is its volatility. Frontrunners stumble unexpectedly, relative unknowns enjoy sudden success, and seemingly strong contenders fail to gain traction during the campaign. Such twists and turns in candidate fortunes are inevitable given voters' lack of information at the start of the primary season (Bartels 1988; Geer 1989; Popkin 1991), and they consequently offer scholars an excellent opportunity to study campaign effects. Recently, we have begun to use the New Hampshire primary as a laboratory to study the impact campaigns have on voters (Vavreck et al. 2002; Fowler et al. forthcoming). Our current work focuses on changes in voter attitudes over the course of a campaign using a four-wave panel survey

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of voters in the 2000 primary election. For this paper, we examine the impact of New Hampshire's open primary rules to compare the behavior of registered partisans and undeclared voters. Despite conventional wisdom that undeclared voters make primaries more

volatile, we find few differences in the way the two groups of voters responded to campaign stimuli. In New Hampshire, at least, undeclared voters were merely sheep in wolves' clothing.

## The Trend Toward Open Primaries

In recent years, states have changed electoral rules to admit voters who do not register with a party. Among the 44 states with some sort of primary in at least one party, 29 now have either open or modified open contests.<sup>1</sup> More important is the fact that the primary schedule has shifted to concentrate more open and modified open primaries in the early weeks of the campaign. In 2000, two-thirds of the open primaries and five-sixths of the modified open primaries took place in weeks 1–7, while half of the closed primaries occurred in weeks 9–20.

Many political observers disagree about the merits of allowing undeclared voters into party primaries. Critics of open primaries con-

tend that they prevent parties from framing a coherent message and invite meddling from the opposition. They argue further that voters who lack a long-term attachment to a party will be less knowledgeable about its potential nominees and less committed to its viability. In contrast, proponents of open primaries cite democratic norms that all voters should participate in the selection of presidential nominees. Some advocates further contend that open primaries enable parties to expand their base by bringing new voters into the fold.

This debate gained significance in the 2000 primary as John McCain posted early successes against George Bush in the Republican primaries, seemingly with the aid of undeclared voters. In addition, New Hampshire's contest was often described as a battle between McCain and Democrat Bill Bradley for the undeclared vote. Paolino and Shaw (2001) have demonstrated that McCain's campaign could not succeed over the long run, but the question remains whether the introduction of undeclared voters added a new element of uncertainty to an already unpredictable process.

## Do Undeclared Voters Make Primaries More Volatile?

At the heart of the debate over open primaries is a presumption among political observers that partisan registrants and undeclared voters have different attitudes and information about politics and behave differently with respect to elections. Findings from early research on voting behavior support this view (c.f. Campbell et al. 1960). Yet, subsequent research indicates that primary voters and general election voters are quite similar (Geer 1989; Norrander 1992), and that independent voters behave very much like weak partisans (Dennis 2002; Keith et al. 1992). There is little systematic evidence about the differences between registered partisans and undeclared voters in primaries, however. Instead, studies of primary elections have used party identification rather than registration to analyze voters (Bartels 1988; Geer 1989; Norrander 1992). This approach typically omits pure independents and assumes that weak partisans and independent leaners vote in the party with which they identify.

Table 1 indicates that 20% of undeclared New Hampshire voters self-identified as pure independents. In addition, more than 50% identified as partisan leaners. These voters may

**Table 1**  
**Party Identification by Registration**

Party Identification	Partisan Registrant	Undeclared Registrant
Strong Democrat	27.4% (248)	5.3% (24)
Weak Democrat	13.5% (122)	8.8% (40)
Lean Democrat	11.1% (100)	24.5% (111)
Pure Independent	6.1% (55)	20.0% (91)
Lean Republican	10.5% (95)	27.1% (123)
Weak Republican	9.2% (83)	8.8% (40)
Strong Republican	22.3% (202)	5.5% (25)
Total	100% (905)	100% (454)

feel the pull of partisanship less keenly at the beginning of the election season, during the New Hampshire primary, for example, than at its ending. Furthermore, undeclared voters may differ in their receptivity to campaign stimuli. If they pay less attention to politics or have less information about candidates, they may be more sensitive to campaign effects when exposed to them, or may ignore the campaign altogether and show no effects.

Most important, unlike registered partisans, undeclared voters must select a primary before casting their ballot. To vote for John McCain, they must first request a Republican ballot. The order of these decisions has an important methodological implication because it ultimately truncates the vote choice. Conventional regression techniques consequently overestimate the likelihood that any voter chooses Bush when Republican primary voters are the sole basis for calculating the probabilities. Yet, the political science literature reveals very little about how the sequencing of voter decisions works. Do voters first pick the primary of the party to which they most closely identify and then select their preferred candidate? Does their candidate preference determine the choice of primary? Does this ordering of choices affect the outcome of the election? To answer these questions, we employ a selection model using data from our four-wave panel survey from the 2000 New Hampshire presidential primary.<sup>2</sup> In this model, voters first decide in which primary to vote and then for whom to vote.<sup>3</sup>

## Measures and Methods

New Hampshire is a good setting for investigating the influence of undeclared voters in the primary process because citi-

zens who registered as “undeclared” for the 2000 election cycle slightly outnumbered registered partisans in either party. In addition, the New Hampshire primary is unusual in its high salience among voters. Turnout is consistently high; well over 50% in 2000. Finally, the information environment is extremely rich as candidates, groups, and media lavish resources on the contest (Vavreck et al. 2002; Fowler et al. forthcoming). In short, undeclared voters have exceptional opportunities to learn about the candidates in *both* parties as the primary contest unfolds.

Drawing from the work of Patterson (1980), Bartels (1988), Geer (1989), Popkin (1991), Abramson et al. (1992), Norrander (1992), and Vavreck et al. (2002), we focus on the key variables that appear to influence voters’ decisions in primary elections.<sup>4</sup> These include: demographic characteristics, such as age, sex, education and income; party identification using the National Election Study (NES) standard seven-point scale; respondents’ self-reported party registration; contact with specific candidates;<sup>5</sup> and expectations about candidates’ viability and electability.<sup>6</sup> In order to measure information levels during the primary campaign, we use a respondent’s self-declared level of attention to the campaign, including four categories from “a lot of attention” to “no attention.” We measure party identification with a branching format of the traditional seven-point NES self-placement question. We also rely on respondents to indicate their party registration (Democratic, Republican, Libertarian, or Undeclared). For voters’ expectations about election outcomes, we use measures of candidate viability and electability. In the model, substantively interesting variables are interacted with whether the respondent is an undeclared voter.<sup>7</sup>

## Results<sup>8</sup>

The results of the sample selection model suggest that registering as an undeclared voter had no direct effect on either the choice of primary election or the candidate, controlling for many factors.<sup>9</sup> As Table 2 indicates, there do not appear to be systematic differences between partisan registrants and unde-

clared registrants in terms of their probability of voting in a party primary or of voting for a particular candidate.<sup>10</sup> Among undeclared voters, 60% chose to vote in the Republican primary, but among all registered partisans, a very similar 62% chose the Republican primary. In sum, the Republican primary was a popular choice for all types of voters.

Direct candidate contact had an effect solely on the vote, as it did in the 1996 New Hampshire primary (Vavreck et al. 2002).<sup>11</sup> However, there

were no differences between undeclared and registered voters in their response to candidates. Meeting McCain at a rally or in person increased voters’ chances of voting for him by 9%, while meeting Bush increased voters’ chances of voting for him by 29%. Despite the favorable influence of contact with Bush, the overall probability of voting for McCain was still higher because more people supported him overall.

Results from the Democratic choice model were similar. Meeting Gore raised the probability of voting for him by 27%, and meeting Bradley raised chances of voting for him by 18%. Interestingly, Bradley did not make as many visits to New

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**Table 2**  
**Results of Primary and Vote Choice Selection Model**

	Partisan Registrants		Undeclared Registrants	
	Primary Choice	Vote Choice	Primary Choice	Vote Choice
Undeclared	*	*	No difference	No difference
Party Identification (from strong Democrat to strong Republican)	More likely to vote in primary with which voters self-identify	No effect	Mitigating: Effect of party identification is dampened	No difference
Female	19% more likely to vote in Democratic primary than men	No effect	Mitigating: 10% less likely to vote in Democratic primary than registered women	New Effect: 19% more likely to vote for Bush than registered Republican women
Bush Contact	No effect	29% more likely to vote for Bush	No difference	No difference
McCain Contact	No effect	9% more likely to vote for McCain	No difference	No difference
Gore Contact	No effect	27% more likely to vote for Gore	No difference	No difference
Bradley Contact	No effect	18% more likely to vote for Bradley	No difference	No difference
Republican Call	16% more likely to vote in Republican primary	*	Reversal: 9% more likely to vote in Democratic primary	*
Democratic Call	19% more likely to vote in Democratic primary	*	No difference	*
Republican Mail	22% more likely to vote in Republican primary	*	No difference	*
Democratic Mail	16% more likely to vote in Democratic primary	*	No difference	*

\*Indicates the variable was not included in that model

Hampshire as McCain, especially in the late weeks of the campaign. This may explain why McCain was able to leverage the increasing probability of voting for him among people who met him while Bradley was not.

Candidate contact in the form of telephone calls did have a differential effect on the choice of primary among undeclared voters, however, at least among Republicans. Registered partisans were 16% more likely to choose the Republican primary after receiving a call, but undeclared voters were 9% less likely to select that primary after receiving a call from a GOP candidate. The ineffectiveness of telephone calls in mobilizing voters is consistent with our earlier work on the 1996 primary (Vavreck et al. 2002) and Gerber and Green's (2000) study of turnout in New Haven. Direct mail did produce mobilization effects that were similar for partisans and undeclared registrants.

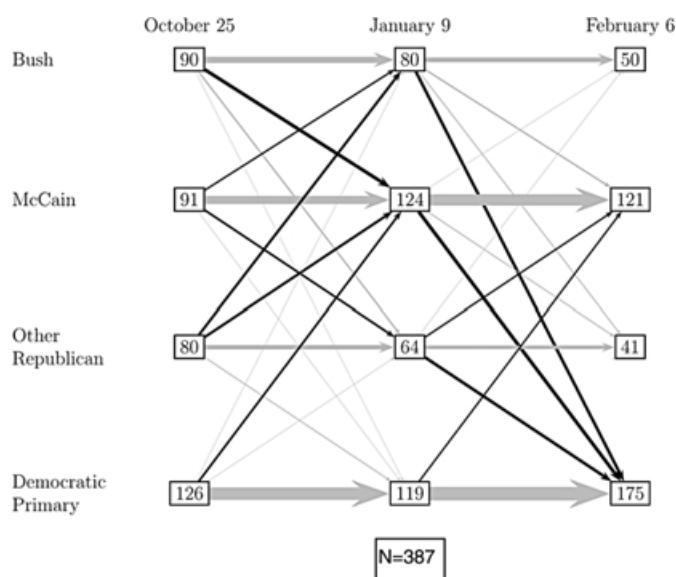
Being an undeclared voter, however, did condition the effects of other important variables. For example, party identification clearly motivated self-declared partisans to select their party's primary, although it had no effect over their candidate choice. For registered partisans, shifting self-identification from Independent to Weak Democrat increased the probability of voting

in the Democratic primary by 24%, holding all else equal with other variables at their means. In contrast, a similar shift in party identification among undeclared voters was about 5% less.

Status as an undeclared voter also conditioned the effect of gender on the choice of both party primary and candidate. Although women generally had a higher probability of voting in the Democratic primary, undeclared women were 10% less likely to vote in the Democratic primary than their partisan counterparts, all else equal and holding all other variables at their mean. Undeclared women were not only less likely to choose the Democratic primary, but were also 19% more likely to select Bush than their registered counterparts. Whatever mechanism drew undeclared women away from the Democratic primary in greater numbers than registered women also seems to have induced them to vote for Bush instead of McCain.

Although undeclared voters were less constrained by party identification, our results indicate that McCain would have won the primary if it had been restricted to Republicans. Among people who self-identified as Republicans, whether registered or undeclared, McCain won 66% of the vote.<sup>12</sup> Overall, McCain derived 31% percent of his support from people who described themselves as either Independent or

**Figure 1**  
**Dynamics of 2000 New Hampshire Primary**



some type of Democrat, while only 10% of Bush's support came from this group. Finally, McCain attracted 52% of the undeclared voters, while Bush drew only 19%. The basic story of the 2000 New Hampshire primary was McCain's high popularity among many types of voters.<sup>13</sup>

The most intriguing aspect of the New Hampshire primary, and one that we intend to explore more fully in subsequent work, is the high degree of volatility among all likely voters in terms of their choice of primary and candidate. As Figure 1 demonstrates, between October and January, both Bush and McCain gained voters who previously thought they might vote for someone else.<sup>14</sup> What was unusual is that Bush lost heavily

to McCain in this period and that the defections were mainly from registered Republicans rather than undeclared voters.<sup>15</sup> McCain also gained votes from people who initially thought they were going to vote in the Democratic primary or were unsure about which primary they would choose.

Then, between January and the election in February, both Bush and McCain surprisingly lost votes as people decided to vote in the Democratic primary. All of the voters who moved from Bush to the Democratic primary were undeclared voters; while 83% of those voters who abandoned McCain also were undeclared. By examining Figure 1 with an eye toward the heavy dark lines, a pattern emerges of arrows moving away from Bush and McCain. This is exactly the opposite of what political observers argued happened in New Hampshire. From January to February, McCain did pick up votes from people who thought they were going to vote in the Democratic primary, but 72% were registered Democrats and only 18% were undeclared voters. Again, the conventional wisdom had McCain and Bradley locked in a battle for undeclared voters, when it appears that partisans were also receptive targets.

## Conclusion

Taken as a whole, there is very little evidence that undeclared voters in New Hampshire behaved much differently than registered party voters—both groups gave a victory to John McCain. Although the open primary system did allow for a lot of movement across candidates and parties, in the end, most sub-groups of the electorate favored McCain over Bush. In sum, both critics and advocates of open primaries appear to have exaggerated the impact of admitting undeclared voters to the primary process. Primaries are volatile because voters and candidates are operating in a low information environment in which new facts and new impressions count heavily. Undeclared voters are subject to all of these uncertainties, to be sure, but so are registered partisans. Allowing undeclared voters to vote in nominating elections expands the size of the primary electorate, but does not seem to make an already unstable situation decidedly worse.

## Notes

1. This paper is a condensed version of a paper presented at the Midwest Political Science Association annual meeting in April 2002. The authors would like to thank Tami Buhr for her role in designing and administering the surveys on which this study is based. They would also like to thank Jeffrey B. Lewis for advice on organizing the dataset. Dartmouth students Jason Rubenstein, James Pfadenhauer, Timothy Waligore, Robert Gienko, Christopher Smith, Alice Gomstyn, Joshua Lozman, Kathleen Reeder, and Rohin Dhar provided valuable research assistance.

2. Compiled from Ragsdale (1998, 41–43); Federal Election Commission (2002). Closed primaries limit voting to registered partisans. Modified open primaries restrict registered partisans to voting in their party's primary, but permit undeclared voters to choose a party ballot or register for a party immediately prior to entering the voting booth. Open primaries involve a public declaration of party affiliation on election day or allow voters to choose a party ballot in the voting booth.

3. These data are uniquely suited to explore such questions because they track changes in voters' attitudes during the campaign and enable us to link voters' preferences about the candidates to their eventual decisions. The dataset consists of a four-wave panel survey conducted via telephone, with new respondents added in each wave but the last, which was a post-election wave. The data were collected by the Nelson A. Rockefeller Center at Dartmouth College, in collaboration with the Associated Press, and include 2,540 likely New Hampshire voters. Of these respondents, 952 are in the first wave (October 31–November 3, 1999), 1,055 are in the second wave (January 9–12, 2000), 985 are in the third wave (January 23–26, 2000), and 1,589 are in the fourth wave (February 6–9, 2000). Thus, 1,589 respondents have at least one pre-election wave

interview and post-election interview. We use this pre-post data set in the analysis that follows. The survey contained a screen for likely voters that included all Republicans, Democrats, Libertarians, or undeclared citizens that stated their intention of voting in any primary. The data set contains roughly a three-way split among registered Democrats, Republicans, and undeclared likely voters.

4. Since both stages of this system are dichotomous, we use full-information maximum likelihood to estimate the correlation between the errors in both equations. We run the full-information probit selection model once for each party primary and interact substantively important variables with whether the respondent was an undeclared registrant.

5. Questions about issue positions and ideological placements were not included in the third wave of the survey, so we do not test for the effect of issues on the choice of primary and candidate.

6. We employ two dichotomous measures of candidate contact: 1) whether respondents met a candidate either at a rally or at another type of event; 2) whether respondents received telephone calls or mail from a candidate. We have these data broken out specifically by candidate.

7. Viability represents a respondent's dichotomous judgment about whether a candidate will win the primary election, and electability is that same judgment for the general election.

8. We initially employed several other variables in the models. We eliminated variables measuring uncertainty, the timing of vote decisions, and general political attention due to very small effects and lack of significance. We removed our measures of affinity for candidates, such as candidate traits and thermometer ratings, for other reasons. The traits questions, which tapped voter opinions about trustworthiness and leadership

characteristics, were all uniformly high (70 degrees) and showed little variation across candidates or over time. The thermometer variables appeared to serve as voters' summary judgments about the candidates and the voters' intention to support them, rather than as exogenously determined dispositions toward the candidates. Although both types of measures proved useful in assessing the overall levels of support for the candidates, they masked the impact of other important causes of the vote choice.

9. We present the results in abbreviated form in Table 2. Given the fully interactive form of this model, the large number of coefficients, and the difficulty with substantive interpretation of probit selection coefficients, this is the simplest way of conveying the results. Variables for which declared and undeclared registrants have different effects are highlighted. A complete table of results is available from the authors upon request.

10. The results indicate that although sample selection effects are present, there is no bias in the estimation.

11. The vote choice analysis is limited to choices over Bush or McCain in the Republican primary, and Gore or Bradley in the Democratic primary.

12. Previous work on the 1996 primary indicates that contact and vote intention may be endogenous, but we have controlled for that here. See Vavreck et al. (2002).

13. We are sensitive to issues of endogeneity here.

14. The numbers in boxes are raw numbers of voters. The first two rows represent people who said they were going to vote for Bush or McCain. The third row contains people who were undecided about which Republican they would vote for or who knew they would vote for a Republican other than Bush or McCain. The final row contains people who said they would vote in the Democratic primary or were unsure in which primary they would vote. The sizes of the arrows are in direct proportion to the magnitude of the changes in voter support from wave to wave. A dark arrow represents a change across candidates or primaries of more than 10 people. Thus, arrows should be read with attention both to width and color.

15. Seventy-five percent of the people who move from Bush to McCain between October and January were registered as Republicans in October. Twenty-five percent were undeclared.

16. Some results not presented in Table 2 warrant a passing mention. For example, paying attention to the campaign had no effect on primary choice, but did increase the chances of voting for Gore among people who selected the Democratic contest for both registered partisans and undeclared voters. Candidate viability also showed no effect on primary election or vote choice, but our measure of electability in November did increase the chances of voting for that particular candidate in the party primary by a substantial amount. As in the case of candidate contact, endogeneity may be at work here.

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