

THE RED STATE BLUES: EXPLORING THE CONTEXT OF COMPETITIVE STATES IN THE 2012 DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY

CHAD KINSELLA
Lander University

The 2012 Democratic primary was expected to be uneventful. However, seven states saw Democratic primary voters in large numbers not vote for the incumbent, President Barack Obama, who had no well-known primary challenger. Although protest votes against the establishment are not uncommon, this primary vote went beyond simple protest, with four states voting over forty percent against an incumbent president. This research will explore the continued expansion of support for the Republican Party in several states using an unlikely source: the 2012 Democratic primary. Using quantitative analyses, this research will examine the broader context of this vote and assert that the primary was indicative of general movement of partisan change.

INTRODUCTION

The 2012 Democratic primary was expected to be a non-event and was widely ignored in favor of a strongly contested Republican Primary. The incumbent president, Barack Obama, was running largely unopposed and was expected to easily win each state. However, midway through the primary season, several primary elections briefly brought the Democratic primary back into the national headlines (MacGillis 2012; Trende 2012) which, up to that point, were dominated by discussion of the Republican primary. An incumbent President, still immensely popular within his own party, and the eventual winner of the 2012 presidential election, faced a substantial challenge in seven states in his own party primary. The challenge came from a motley group of relatively unknown, perennial candidates, including a Texas prison inmate, and, in some cases, no one at all.

In early March, the Oklahoma Democratic primary saw various candidates in that state's presidential primary obtain 43 percent of vote against President Obama. Shortly thereafter, 19 percent of the vote went to "uncommitted" in Alabama's Democratic primary while various candidates in Louisiana's Democratic primary obtained 24 percent of the vote. Finally, in May 2012, the Democratic primaries in North Carolina, West Virginia, Arkansas, and Kentucky saw opposition to the President in the form of various unknown candidates (including a Texas prison inmate in West Virginia) and "uncommitted" obtain 21 percent, 41 percent, 41 percent, and 42 percent, respectively, in each of those states. There are several instances where "challengers" were victorious in several counties.

Typically, a sitting president who endures a primary challenge or a challenge at the convention is thought to face long odds when it comes to winning reelection (Crotty and Jackson 1985; Mayer 1996). Most recently, Presidents Ford and Carter both faced primary challenges and lost their reelection bids. While it is not unusual for incumbent presidents to face some challenge in their party's primary (Steger 2003), it is generally assumed that incumbent presidents will receive their party's nomination (David *et al.* 1960; Keech and Matthews 1976; Epstein 1978; Abramson *et al.* 1987). In 2012, President Obama endured an unprecedented primary challenge in several states where he eked out unimpressive victories against relatively unknown opposition or, in some cases, no opposition at all. Yet, despite these close calls in

the primaries, President Obama was able to win reelection convincingly in November.

The primaries that Obama faced were in states which have the highest proportions of registered Democrats in the country (see Table 1). Furthermore, several of these states had late primaries when it was already clear that President Obama would easily obtain the Democratic Party's nomination for president and opponents who relatively unknown or non-existent. The research will examine this phenomenon and, through examining the context of the election, explain the causes of this protest vote, where it occurred, and the broader implications of this unusually primary challenge. Ultimately, the research will show that Republican ascendancy in many of these states is still continuing, that race may be a leading factor for voters to feel disaffected with the Democratic Party, and that primaries may be fertile ground for analysis in not only examining inter-party splits but partisan change, as well.

PRIMARY ELECTIONS

A rich literature on presidential primaries has developed over the years. Typically, general election voters use candidate qualities, ideology, issue preference, and (most importantly) party identification to make the candidate selection (Stone *et al.* 1992). Unlike the general election, primary voters lack party identification and, in most cases, ideology to help in making a decision of which candidate to support (Collingwood *et al.* 2012). Despite these deficiencies, research has shown that primary voters have developed an abundance of cues to help them make a decision of which candidate to vote support, especially in presidential primaries.

Early studies suggest that candidate qualities, or traits, affect the voting behavior of primary voters (Gopoian 1982; Marshall 1984; Norrander 1986). Other early studies suggest that ideology is an important explanatory variable in understanding primary vote (Wattier 1983). More recent research suggests that candidate policy positions are rarely accessible to voters and that voters rely on name recognition and personal characteristic traits (Polsby and Wildavsky 2008) giving an advantage to frontrunners, especially in the modern front-loaded primary (Cohen *et al.* 2008; Mayer 2003).

TABLE 1
2012 Democratic Primary Dates, Results, and Demographics

State	Primary Date	Type of Primary	Number of Registered Democrats (2012)	Total Votes Cast in the 2012 Primary	Number not Voting for Obama in the 2012 Primary	Percent of Total Possible Primary Voters not Voting for Obama	Percent of State Population White
Oklahoma	March 6, 2012	Closed	943,283 (47.15%)	112,771	48,832 (43.30%)	5.13%	75.5%
Alabama	March 13, 2012	Open	--	205,767	39,276 (19.08%)	--	70.0%
Louisiana	March 24, 2012	Closed	1,401,850 (48.91%)	150,601	35,451 (23.54%)	2.53%	63.7%
North Carolina	May 8, 2012	Semi-Closed	2,739,299 (43.46%)	966,857	200,810 (20.77%)	4.66%	71.9%
West Virginia	May 8, 2012	Semi-Closed	637,893 (51.67%)	175,411	71,296 (40.65%)	8.33%	94.0%
Arkansas	May 22, 2012	Open	--	162,647	67,711 (41.60%)	--	80.0%
Kentucky	May 22, 2012	Closed	1,665,853 (54.85%)	206,218	86,925 (42.10%)	5.22%	88.6%

Furthermore, primary voters tend to support candidates whom voters believe will win the nomination as well as win in the November general election (Abramowitz 1989; Abramson *et al.* 1992) and will defect to another candidate if their first choice has little chance of winning (Blais and Nadeau 1996). Perhaps the most accepted explanation of primary vote is momentum and the bandwagon effect that comes with early primary victories (Bartels 1988; Collingwood 2012).

Given the literature on primary voting in presidential elections, it is clear that the case of Democratic primaries in these states defy much of what we know and would expect to happen in a presidential primary. The seven states used in this analysis all have primaries late in the season (see Table 1), with three states holding presidential primaries in March and the rest in May, after Obama easily carried every other state with token or no opposition. It also seems unlikely, given the divergent dates, that the votes were a reaction to any one occurrence or a sudden downturn in the Obama's overall or party approval. There was no doubt that Obama would win the nomination, and given that he is a sitting president, his policy positions, character, and other traits were well known. Although there were indications that the 2012 presidential election may be hard fought, it could not be suggested that Obama had little chance of winning, leading to defection (Stone *et al.* 1992).

Ultimately, it can be surmised that Democratic voters in these states used the primary as a form of protest vote among members of the president's own party. Although, protest voting in primaries against incumbent presidents is not new, with recent protest votes against Reagan, H.W. Bush, and Clinton, in several states including some of those included in this study. The magnitude of the protest vote that occurred in several of these states goes beyond the typical ten to no more than twenty percent protest vote made by those bucking the establishment and is indicative of a larger trend among Democratic voters in these states.

DATA AND METHODS

Context is “a geographically bounded social unit,” (Books and Prysby 1991, 2) including an array of geographic areas. In this case, the analysis will focus on counties exclusively. Contextual effects occur

when some aspect of the community in which a person resides alters the flow and meaning of the information that the individual receives. This altered flow and interpretation may lead the individual to behave differently in this specific context than another. Ultimately, people in one context have access to different informational cues than people in other contexts. The goal of contextual theory is to advance social science theory and understanding by finding the extent of contextual effects and discovering the mechanisms by which environments influence individuals (Books and Prysby 1991). Within the context of this study, the question is: What influenced Democratic primary voters to vote against the leader of their party?

Several types of data were obtained in order to perform this analysis. Election data, including not only results from the 2012 Democratic primary, but also the 2008 Democratic primary, presidential election results since 1996, and voter registration data since 1996 (except for Arkansas and Alabama, which use open primaries and do not register voters by party) were gathered for the analysis. Given that each state has a somewhat unique system for conducting their primary, turnout data was gathered by dividing the total number of participants by the total possible participants, which fluctuated from all registered voters in states with an open primary system to only registered Democrats in a closed primary. Turnout for states such as North Carolina and West Virginia that have semi-closed primaries, were calculated by taking the number of voters in the Democratic primary and dividing that number by the total number of registered Democrats and unaffiliated voters, who are also allowed to participate in the Democratic Party primary. Also, the number of races in each county was counted to determine the effect on turnout. This was operationalized by counting the number of primary races for an elected office or any form of ballot initiative. In several counties, there were multiple races for state, local, and even some Congressional races. Given that each voter only has one representative, these races were counted only once despite the possibility of multiple races occurring at the same time in the same county.

As part of the contextual analysis, Census data was retrieved for each county in all of the states used in this analysis. This data will be analyzed to determine the type of demographics in the county that are most associated with voting for other candidates (or uncommitted) other than Obama. Overall, the data will allow for the exploration of

whether demographic or electoral factors are the main drivers of the primary vote and to what degree they can explain the primary vote.

FINDINGS

The 2012 Democratic primary provides an excellent opportunity to understand the ongoing partisan change in several states, particularly in many states that had retained a measure of allegiance to the Democratic Party, especially in state and local politics. As the overall results show in Table 1, none of the “challengers” beat Obama but, in several cases, managed a good showing given the context of the overall primary election. By far, Obama performed the worst in the in Kentucky, West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arkansas where he lost over 40 percent of the vote.

Overall, the maps provided in Figures 1 and 2 show that in most states there was a distinct regional variation in the vote against Obama. In all of the states except Louisiana, which had a random pattern of voting across its parishes, there is a significant degree of clustering of the vote. In Alabama, counties in the northern portion of the state were the least likely to support Obama. In Arkansas, the vote against Obama is more widespread throughout the state than the other states that voted over 40 percent against Obama with some counties in the western and northeastern part of the state more likely to not vote for the President. The extreme western and eastern counties in Kentucky saw large volumes of voters in those counties vote “uncommitted.” In North Carolina, the vote for “uncommitted” is evenly apportioned throughout the state with areas in the central part of the state, such as the research triangle, having the lowest proportion of voters vote “uncommitted.” Oklahoma was unique in that there were several different contenders in the Democratic primary along with President Obama and these various candidates performed best in the periphery of the state. Finally, in West Virginia the central and southern counties in the state had higher proportions of primary voters who chose to support a Texas prison inmate in the Democratic primary rather than Obama. Again, with the exception of Louisiana, there are some clear concentrations in each state where Democratic primary voters voted against their own party’s sitting President.

FIGURE 1
Results of the 2012 Democratic Primary by County, Alabama, Kentucky, West Virginia, and North Carolina

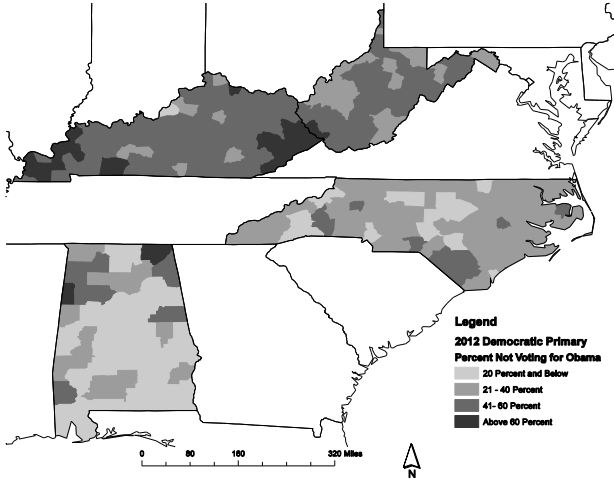
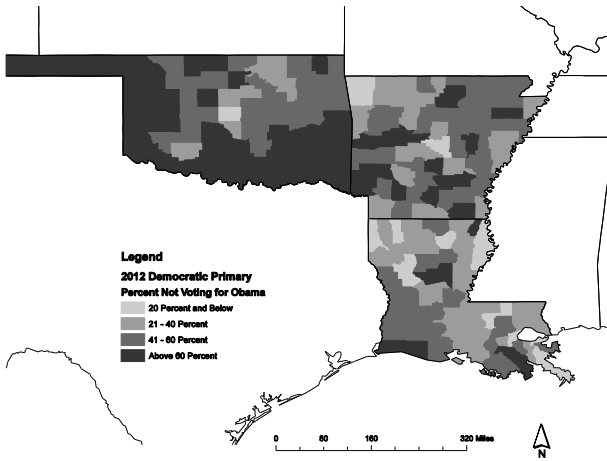


FIGURE 2
Results of the 2012 Democratic Primary by County, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana



There are several characteristics associated with voting against Obama in the 2012 Democratic primary. The Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) analysis in Table 2 shows the Census and election characteristics associated with voting against Obama. This analysis helps to better understand the context of the vote. The model, using demographic characteristics as well as turnout, primary type, and the number of other races on the primary ticket along with the presidential race, explains 55 percent of the variance.

TABLE 2
County Demographics Associated with Vote for “Other”

Variable	Unstandardized (Standardized Coefficient)
Percentage Black	-.351 *** (-.345)
Percentage High School Degree Only	.565*** (.185)
Percentage College Degree	-.1.165 *** (-.287)
Percentage Married	.550*** (.204)
Percentage Employed by Government	.659 *** (.172)
Percentage Self Employed	.841*** (.121)
Percentage Turnout	.290*** (.192)
Number of Races in the Primary	-.518 ** (-.116)
Primary Type	4.992*** (.231)
Percentage Urban	.085 ** (.133)
Constant	-24.393* R ² = .550 N = 558

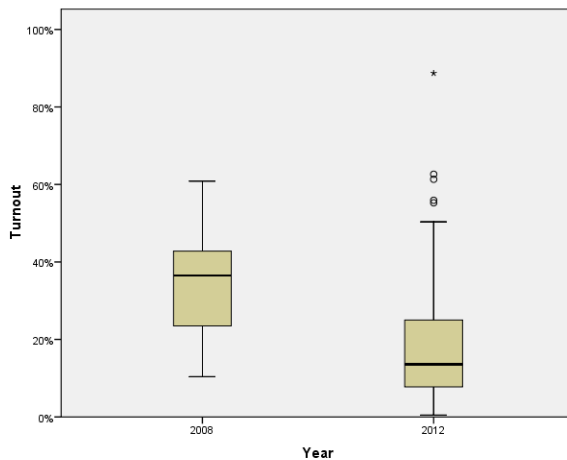
The population characteristics most associated with a county with a high percent of support for a candidate other than Obama are percent with only a high school diploma, percent married, percent employed by government as well as self-employed, and percent urban. Percent black and percent with a college degree are negatively and significantly related to percent not voting for Obama. Turnout was positively and significantly associated with votes against Obama as was primary type. The number of other races in the primary was negatively and significantly associated with voting against Obama, indicating that as the number of races in a county increased, the more likely voters in the county were to vote for Obama. Although several other demographics were tested in the model, there was a significant amount of covariance between race variables, especially percent white and black, and other demographic variables.

Although the maps in Figures 1 and 2 indicate that voters in more rural, white populations were more likely to vote against Obama, percent urban was positively and significantly associated with voting against him. Again, this is likely due to the covariance with percent urban and percent black and the number of other races in the county (the larger, more populated, and more diverse counties were likely to have more elections). When age demographics, percent native to the state, and percent white were added to the model, they were either not statistically significant or were significant in ways contrary to expectations unless the variable percent black was removed. Ultimately, the model contains fewer variables because of the large amount of covariance between several demographic variables and race variables. This also communicates to the importance of race as a key variable to understanding the causes behind this protest vote.

It is important to note that this analysis is looking at the overall political culture in each county and the analysis has been conducted accordingly. There are several, more heavily populated, urban counties that -- although have a much smaller percentage of voters that voted for candidates other than Obama than other counties -- still contributed a significant proportion of votes to the total vote (Voss 1996; Gimpel and Schuknecht 2002) due to their large populations. Like the findings of Voss (1996) in his study of Louisiana voters that supported David Duke's gubernatorial run, the likely culprit in voting against Obama in these counties are white suburbanites.

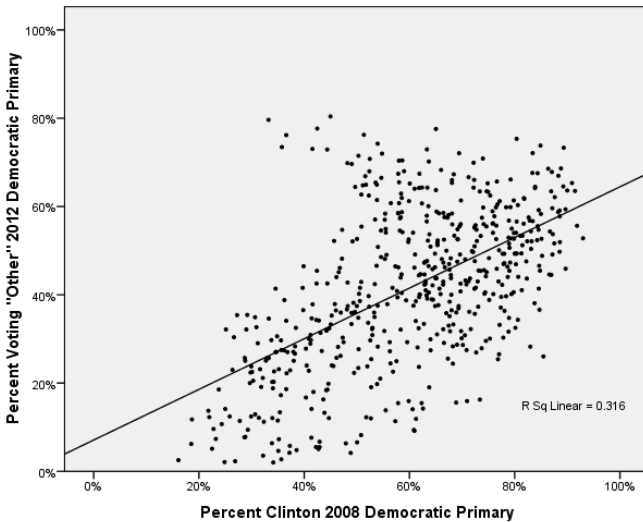
There are several electoral variables that were tested in an attempt to explain the primary vote in these seven states and corresponding counties. First, the comparison that is likely to draw the most attention is how did the 2012 Democratic primary in these states stack up to the 2008 Democratic primary? Unlike the 2012 primary, the 2008 primary was a strongly contested election between Obama and Hillary Clinton where even the late primaries were critically important. Turnout in the 2012 Democratic primary was significantly lower than that of the 2008 Democratic primary. The box plot shown in Figure 3 shows that, with the exception of few outliers, the turnout in each county in the seven states was lower in the 2012 primary than the 2008 primary. A simple T-test shows that there is a statistically significant difference in turnout between the two primaries with a T score of 24.135. It can be surmised that, not surprisingly, the 2012 Democratic primary generated less interest and a lower turnout, overall. It is also possible that the Republican Primary was a contributing factor in the lower turnout, especially for earlier, open primary states such as Alabama. However, by April, Romney was largely accepted as the Republican nominee and likely was a small or non-factor by the May open and semi-closed primaries.

FIGURE 3
 Turnout Comparison of the 2008 and 2012 Democratic Primaries



A scatterplot shown in Figure 4 illustrates that the vote for Hillary Clinton in 2008 explains nearly 32 percent of the variance of the vote in the 2012 primary. Given the strong predictive power of the 2008 Clinton vote, it can be surmised that many of the 2012 primary voters who did not vote for Obama may have been expressing their disappointment that their chosen candidate was not the ultimate nominee and eventual president or outright disdain for President Obama. This demonstrates that even among registered Democrats in the study area, support for President Obama has been tepid at best. The findings in the scatterplot also suggest that many of these voters, while comfortable with a white women as the party nominee, were and continue to be opposed to an African-American male as the Democratic Party nominee, again making race a key variable to understanding the protest vote during the 2012 primary.

FIGURE 4
County Vote in 2008 and 2012 Democratic Primaries



The 2012 Democratic primary also demonstrates that there are areas in several of these “Red” states that are still transitioning from Democratic Party dominance to Republican Party dominance. In 1996, the Republican presidential nominee, Sen. Robert Dole, was only able to get over 50 percent of the vote in one of these seven states – Alabama. The other six states in this analysis were, to varying degrees, more competitive with Oklahoma being the least competitive state that voted for Dole and Kentucky being the most competitive state to vote for Clinton. It is worth mentioning that four of the seven states were “blue” states in 1996 with Arkansas, Louisiana, and West Virginia being safely Democratic. In examining the party registration change in the counties in each state (with the exception of Arkansas and Alabama, since voters there do not register with a party), Figure 5 shows that Republican voter registration change explains over 26 percent of the variance of the 2012 Democratic primary vote. Finally, the lone variable that offers the most explanatory power of the 2012 primary vote is the change in presidential vote between 1996 and 2012, explaining nearly 51 percent of the variance (see Figure 6).

FIGURE 5
Republican Voter Registration Change by County, 1996-2012 and the
2012 Democratic Primary Vote

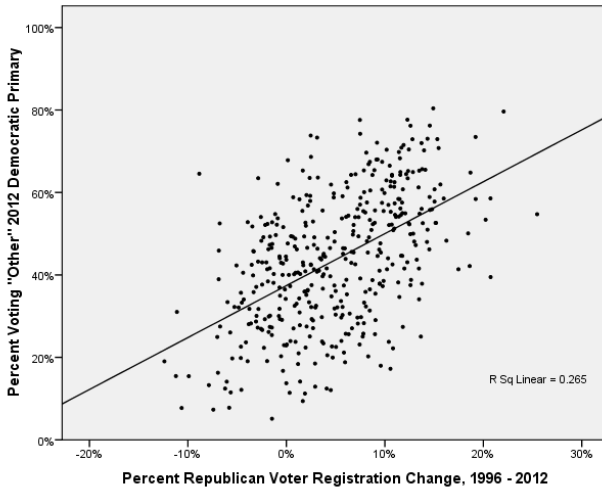
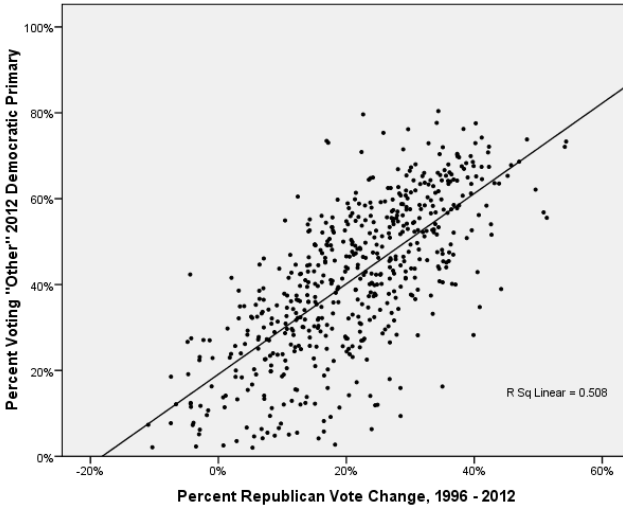


FIGURE 6
 Change in Vote for Republican Presidential Candidates by County,
 1996-2012 and the 2012 Democratic Primary Vote



DISCUSSION

The findings offer several key points to consider. First, the results suggest that partisan change continues to be an uneven, top-down affair as some of the literature suggests (Bullock 1988; Aistrup 1996; Lublin 2004) and that partisan change occurs slowly (Myers 2013). In many of these states, especially West Virginia, Kentucky, and Arkansas, it had been difficult for Republicans to win in Congressional, state, or local races. Even in Eastern Oklahoma, despite having a two-to-one advantage for Democrats in party registration, Republicans for federal office significantly over perform while Republicans running for state legislative positions are unable to duplicate the same success (Savage *et al.* 2013). Furthermore, Democrats substantial advantage in party registration demonstrates that voter registration data, despite arguments that it is the best measure of partisanship (McGhee and Krimm 2009), may not be the best measure of partisan loyalty given it seems to lag behind other electoral predictors, especially the presidential vote. The spatial pattern of the vote also suggests different patterns of change in

each state. Kentucky, Oklahoma, West Virginia, and Alabama have patterns that suggest a regional pattern of vote change. Other states exhibit a more random vote. Arkansas and North Carolina have a more even, across the state vote against Obama whereas in Louisiana, there seem to be some isolated parishes that drive the vote.

The motivation of the primary voters in these seven states seems mixed. Given that the 2012 Democratic primary was not competitive in most of the country and was going on at the same time as a very competitive Republican primary, the bulk of attention and exit polling were focused on the Republican primaries, hampering the ability to more deeply understand the motivations of these primary voters. There are, however, conclusions that can be drawn from the data provided. Arguably, race is a key factor. The presence of Barack Obama, the nation's first African-American president and de facto head and face of the Democratic Party, may have affected the primary vote. The literature suggests that race is still a factor considered by many voters, particularly those in states in the "South." (Ford *et al.* 2010; Knuckey 2011; Tien 2012). Americans who are "un-hyphenated" or claim American ancestry as opposed to European or any other ancestry were significantly less likely to vote for President Obama (Arbour and Teigen 2011). It is also important to note that many of these voters approved of Hillary Clinton in 2008 but refused to vote for Obama when given (the easy) choice of doing so in 2012. Finally, Obama's policies may be the cause of the protest vote, especially in West Virginia, Kentucky, and north Alabama, due to the president's "war on coal."

CONCLUSION

The findings here suggest that Republican ascendancy in many of these states is still underway. To be sure, turnout and the total number of Democrats and unaffiliated voters (see Table 1) that voted against Obama in the 2012 Democratic primary do not point to a mass movement of voters in these areas to protest vote against the President. In the case of Arkansas, participation levels in the Democratic primary are at the lowest levels in decades (Parry and Barth 2014), which may be more telling about the partisan change than the fact that 40 percent

of those Democratic voters did not vote for Obama. However, the context of the vote cannot be ignored. It is clear that clusters of white Democrats in these states are beginning to align with the Republican Party. Although it cannot be suggested that all of the primary voters who did not vote for Obama in the 2012 primary all voted for Mitt Romney, it does illustrate a continuous trend of discontent with the Democratic Party among voters in these states and counties. Support for Democrats has dwindled and continued in these areas not only in presidential elections but in other federal, state, and local races as well, as evidenced by the results in several of these states' 2014 midterm elections.

The number of people who turned out suggests that this was not a handful of alienated, fringe voters and that the results show an overall trend in specific areas and populations. Although changes in partisan vote and party registration do not explain everything, it can also be surmised that there are voters who simply protest vote against the incumbent, regardless of the officeholder. However, the overall spatial pattern points to a clustering or regional vote pattern and the explanatory power of presidential vote change over the last couple of decades indicate that there is partisan change occurring. The research presented here also suggests that, overall, partisan change is a slow moving process. Furthermore, the research here suggests that primaries may be an important measure in finding partisan change.

Finally, the data suggest that race still matters in American politics. Key (1949) noted that not only was the "South" distinctive because of its support of the Democratic Party but also that southern politics "revolves around the position of the Negro" (5). Arguably, race was a key factor in the 2012 primary election within these states and perhaps is indicative of a modern manifestation of Key's analysis. Despite the lack of a substantial black population in many of these counties, the presence of Barack Obama, the nation's first African-American president and de facto head and face of the Democratic Party, may have affected the primary vote. Perhaps the new idea of racial threat (Giles 1977; Giles and Buckner 1993) may not be in the fact that African-Americans live in the same community as these voters but that an African-American as president poses a threat.

In a broader sense, the results here may shed light on political trends to come. Several states included in the analysis either have or are showing

signs of electing Republicans in national, state, and local races. This may be a small boon to the GOP in Congressional elections, as experienced in Arkansas and West Virginia in 2014, and a boost to state and local Republicans in these areas which, in many instances, has already occurred. For Republicans, in the broader electoral sense, the trends found here may either lead to a dead end or the coming of more success. If this trend is confined to the states examined here, especially to Kentucky, West Virginia, Arkansas, and Oklahoma, the addition or solidification of these states as Republican bastions do nothing to help Republicans win the presidency given the small number of electoral votes and the loss of other states like Virginia and Colorado. Also, given the advantage in party registration, the support for Bill Clinton in the 1990s, and the support for Hillary Clinton in the 2008 Democratic primary, a certain kind of Democratic candidate may still be able to perform reasonably well in these areas. However, if this trend spills over into the crucial, nearby Midwest or Mountain West, where many of these states have cultural ties and are close in geographic proximity, the primary results may indicate a continued movement of white voters in key battlegrounds, amounting to a reshuffling of state allegiances in future presidential elections.

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