

**CLOSED PRIMARY, EXPOSED PREFERENCES:
IDAHO'S PRIMARY SYSTEM AND THE BUREAUCRATIC DILEMMA**

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The ability to elect representatives is one of the fundamental rights citizens of the United States of America possess, but the expression of that right looks very different from state to state. A state's primary election system determines not only who participates in an election, but under what circumstances. When a state shifts from one primary system to another, it produces a period of uncertainty, as the electorate must acclimate to new rules and their attendant consequences. Among those who must adjust to the new rules are state employees—the state bureaucracy. When a shift introduces a partisan registration system, requiring voters to declare a party affiliation in order to vote in the primary election, the relationship that exists between the bureaucracy and elected policymakers may be altered.

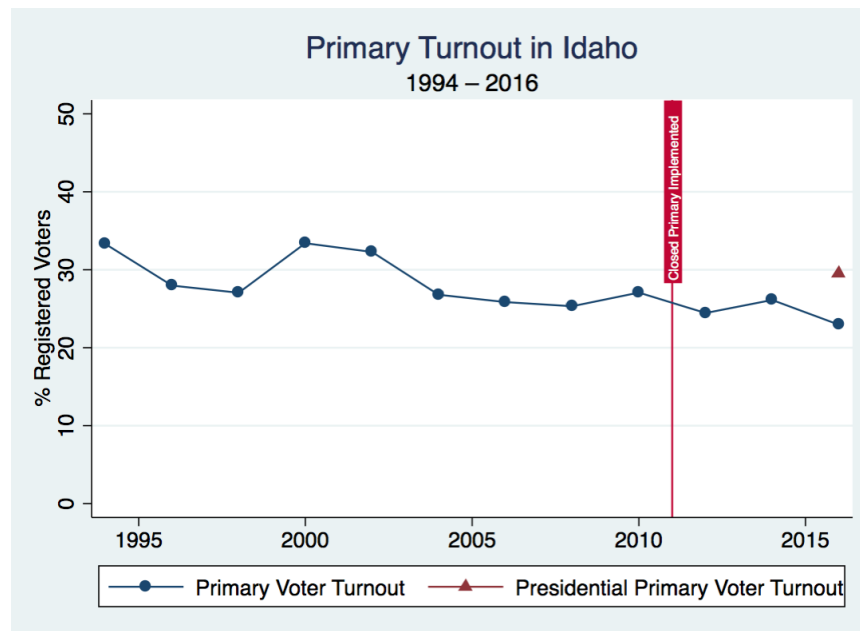
Following a 2011 federal court ruling, Idaho switched its primary from an open system (where no record of partisan affiliation is kept) to a closed system (where partisan affiliation is required). This has left bureaucrats with two alternatives: register with a political party (thus potentially violating the professional norm of impartiality) or self-disenfranchise from primary elections. There is anecdotal evidence that some public employees in Idaho, weighing the consequences of these two choices, have opted for self-disenfranchisement. This dissertation seeks to examine the extent to which this opt-out behavior is prevalent. It does so by developing and analyzing two original data sets.

The first data set involved drawing a random sample of 1,451 individuals from the Directory of State Employees, which lists almost 18,000 employees of the State of Idaho. Relying on public records available through the office of the Idaho Secretary of State, the registration and voting participation records for each of the 1,451 public employees in the sample were examined over time. The second data set is based on a unique survey of public employees in four state agencies/offices. Over 700 state employees responded anonymously. The survey contained a series of questions asking state employees about their election participation and what effect, if any, the move to a closed primary system had on their behavior. These original data sets were supplemented by summary statistics about the registration and participation rates of all

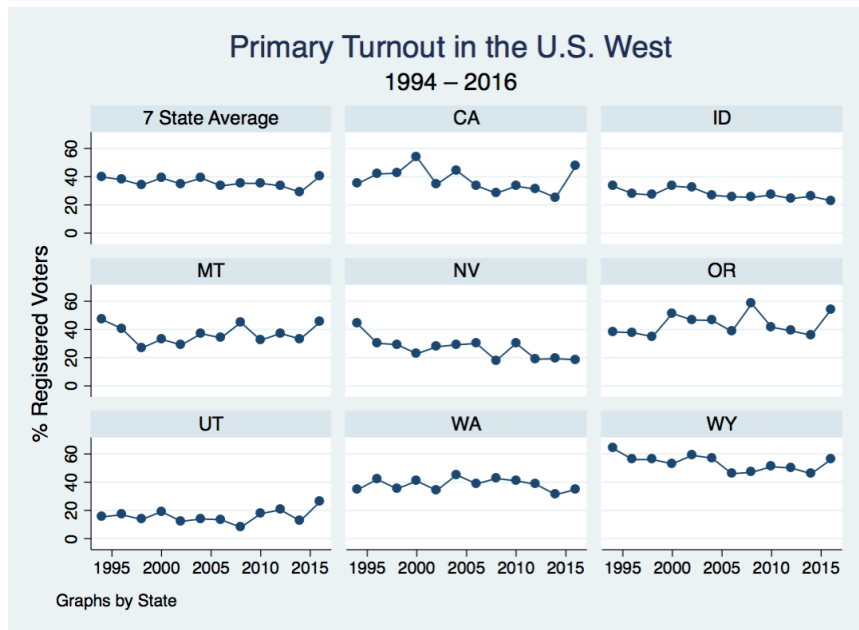
eligible voters in Idaho. Most of the analysis is based on a “pre-treatment, treatment, post-treatment” research design, wherein the “treatment” is the implementation of the closed primary system in Idaho. Some of the key findings of this study are reported below.

ELECTORAL FINDINGS

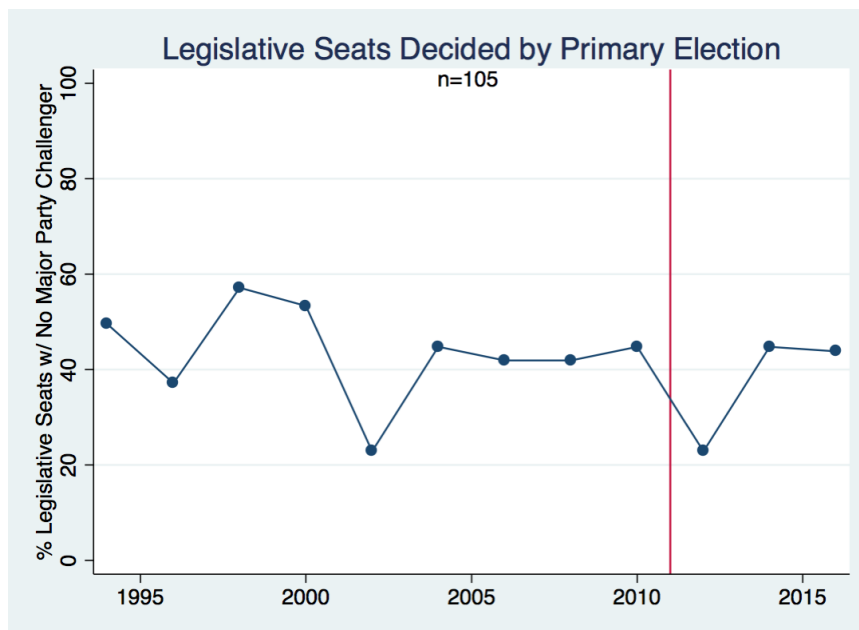
- *Overall, voter turnout in Idaho primary elections has declined from an open primary average of 28.78% to a closed primary average of 24.51%—a 4.27% decline.*



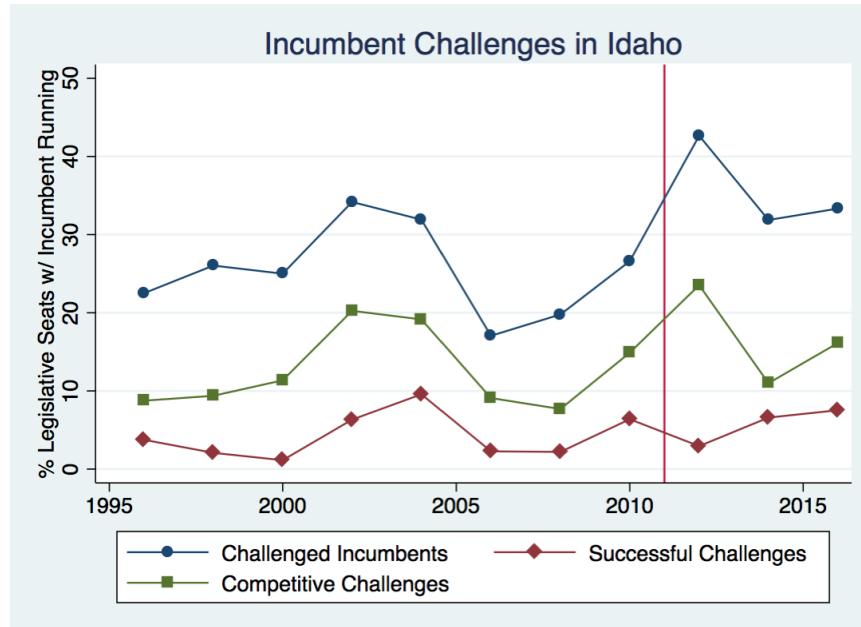
- However, voter turnout has been trending down in Idaho for the past 22 years. With only three electoral cycles complete since the change in primary system, we cannot conclusively attribute causality to the primary system shift alone.
- Moreover, continual tinkering with Idaho’s primary system by the Republican Party and Idaho Legislature (e.g., experimenting with a caucus nominating system in one presidential year, creating a separate presidential primary from the statewide primary in another presidential year) means that no two closed primary elections have occurred in exactly the same institutional environment, further complicating the investigation.
- Voter turnout in most other western states is also declining over time, so the trend is not limited strictly to Idaho. *Nonetheless, in regard to voter turnout in primary elections, Idaho has consistently performed below the average of these seven western states (CA, MT, NV, OR, UT, WA, and WY).*



- *Interparty* competition has not been substantially affected by the closed primary shift: the number of general election races that are contested remain low, with over 40% of seats in the Idaho Legislature not contested by a major party in the general election in 9 of the last 12 electoral cycles.



- *Intraparty* competition has seen a slight increase under the closed primary: a higher proportion of incumbents have faced challengers within their own party. Slightly more of these challenges have been successful under the closed primary.



BUREAUCRATIC FINDINGS

The voter registration and voting history of the random sample of 1,451 Idaho state employees was recorded and analyzed and compared to the total eligible electorate in Idaho. From this analysis, we can conclude the following:

- For the most part, state bureaucrats participated in primary elections at a lower rate than the statewide electorate. *This difference was statistically significant in four of the last six primary elections—one under the open primary, three under the closed primary.* In other words, while public employees were less likely than the full electorate to participate in primaries even before the shift, they are even more unlikely to do so after the creation of the closed primary. This trend is corroborated by survey data discussed below (table 2).
- Among all Idaho bureaucrats in the sample, over half (51%) opted to register as “Unaffiliated.” The statewide electorate unaffiliated rate is 39.96%. *The difference in the unaffiliated rate for state employees and the unaffiliated rate for the general public is statistically significant.*

Table 1: Statewide vs. Bureaucrat Partisan Affiliation (August 2016)

Party	Statewide (N=770,039)	Bureaucratic Sample (n=951)
Unaffiliated	307,727 (39.96%)	486 (51.10%)
Republican	378,404 (49.14%)	305 (32.07%)
Democrat	77,212 (10.03%)	156 (16.40%)

$\chi^2(2, N=764,290) = 123.7452, p = .000$

* The Constitution & Libertarian parties are not listed, but are reflected in percentages. Both parties have been excluded from the χ^2 test due to their low representation both statewide and in the sample. This did not affect the test's statistical significance.

- The bureaucratic sample can be broken into two sub-samples, higher education employees and other employees of state agencies (termed “pure bureaucrats”). There are some differences in the partisan affiliation and the turnout between these two sub-samples. For example, higher education employees were somewhat more likely to register as unaffiliated or as Democrats than were the “pure bureaucrats.”
- *There are indications that the primary system shift has produced a more substantial effect among pure bureaucrats than among higher education bureaucrats.* Among pure bureaucrats, a statistically significant difference in voter participation in primary elections, compared to all voters, occurs *only* in the post-treatment period and is present for *all* electoral cycles after the shift in type of primary. In other words, their participation is statistically different from the general public only in the period of the closed primary. (see Table 2)

Table 2: One-sample t-test of pure bureaucratic turnout vs. statewide voter turnout in primary elections

Primary Year	Pure Bureaucrat Turnout	Std. Dev.
2008	.2352 (.0182)	.4246
2010	.2647 (.0189)	.4416
2012	.1893** (.0168)	.3921
2014	.3162** (.0200)	.4654
2016 (Presidential)	.2408** (.0183)	.4280
2016 (Statewide)	.2794** (.0193)	.4491
Standard errors in parentheses.		
One-sample t-test (two-tailed), * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001		

BUREAUCRATIC SURVEY FINDINGS

Employees of four Idaho state agencies participated in an anonymous survey regarding their voting behavior—the Department of Agriculture, Department of Environmental Quality, Idaho Supreme Court/Judicial Branch, and the Idaho Transportation Department. A combined 735 responses were collected, for an overall response rate of 34%.

- Survey respondents indicate a decline in voter participation under the closed primary. Approximately 64% of survey respondents reported they had voted under the open primary (pre-treatment), while only 58% had done so under the closed primary (post-treatment)—a 6% decline.
- 46% of survey respondents indicated that they had affiliated with a political party in Idaho, a figure very similar to the affiliation rate of the earlier sample of pure bureaucrats drawn from the list of state employees (48%).

- *41% of survey respondents said the partisan affiliation requirement of the closed primary made them less likely to participate.*
- *Under the pre-treatment, open primary system, 16% of respondents said they felt some concern over being perceived as partisan in their professional capacity. Under the closed primary system, the number who felt this concern increased to 26%.*