# 9 CANDIDATES, DONORS, AND VOTERS IN CALIFORNIA'S FIRST BLANKET-PRIMARY ELECTIONS

Wendy K. Tam Cho
Brian J. Gaines*

In March of 1996, by a 59.5% to 40.5% vote, California voters approved Proposition 198, thereby changing the state's primary election law from closed to open. A large majority of citizens undoubtedly consider electoral law to be exceptionally esoteric, even less worthy of attention than normal party politics. By contrast, professional politicians quite sensibly take great interest in electoral mechanisms, as is evident from the heated arguments at the elite level that preceded and, especially, followed Proposition 198's passage. In this chapter, we do not directly take sides on the merits and demerits of the "blanket" primary. Nor do we thoroughly dissect the logic of arguments advanced by Proposition 198's friends and foes. Instead, we proceed by addressing their claims empirically: has opening the primaries had any of its anticipated consequences thus far? We compare California's 1998 elections with those of 1992, 1994, and 1996 in search of significant, systematic changes in the behavior of candidates, voters, and campaign contributors. Our main conclusion is that these actors have been slow to react to new strategic opportunities. Changes in political behavior may yet manifest themselves, but people require time and practice to understand a new electoral system.

The chapter proceeds as follows. We begin by reviewing the debate that surrounded Proposition 198. Our goal is to extract hypotheses about the anticipated effects of a blanket primary law from arguments made by proponents and opponents in the 198 campaign. We then examine data from recent elections (both primary and general) to assess how accurate were these predictions. Specifically, we compare the 1998 election to its immediate predecessors. In examining the hypotheses, we focus on issues related to

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participation and campaign contributions. Finally, we conclude with some general discussion about when changes in electoral law should or should not be expected to affect outcomes.

In trying to identify what effects the change in California's primary rules (or, indeed, any change in electoral law) ought to have, a natural way to start is by reviewing who promoted the change and who opposed it. In the next section, then, we consider what effects the pro- and anti-Proposition 198 forces highlighted in the spring 1996 campaign. We then turn attention to 1998's legislative races, especially the contests for the U.S. House, to evaluate these hypotheses against the first run of the blanket primary system in California.

## HYPOTHESES ABOUT BLANKET PRIMARIES

Prior to its debut in June of 1998, the blanket primary was regarded as something of a wild card by disinterested observers. In a preview of the election, *CQ Weekly Report* summarized "most pollsters and political consultants have been unable to predict how the new system will affect election results" (Birtel 1998, 1373). In the absence of expert consensus, a natural place to find hypotheses about the likely effects of Proposition 198 is the "official" debate provided to voters by the Secretary of State in the voters' handbook. In this official state publication, opponents and proponents of each initiative present short statements in support of their positions. The state then circulates these pamphlets with ballots.[1] Each side can also rebut the other side's claims, so this exchange provides the interested voter with a four-part debate on the merits of the policy at hand. The debate on Proposition 198 was not atypical, in that the arguments made on both sides were a blend of specific claims with a somewhat clear logic, vague and probably untestable points, and plentiful rhetoric. Again, in this chapter we will not dwell on the task of elucidating the logic behind the various positive and negative claims made about blanket primaries. Instead, we will regard these propositions as worthy of investigation and proceed directly to evaluating their empirical veracity.

Supporters of Proposition 198 broached three direct and two indirect arguments. Their direct arguments were that the switch to a blanket primary would "give voters a choice," "increase voter participation," and "restore healthy competition." One of their indirect arguments was that the blanket primary was not an untried experiment: other states had already adopted such laws (and, implicitly, had thereby succeeded in improving something about their politics). California's "closed" primary system was said to be broadly incompatible with Californians' tastes for independence. Further, Proposition 198's opponents were described as "hard liners" in both major

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[1] The relevant provisions of the Elections Code date from the Political Reform Act of 1974.

political parties who opposed the blanket primary because it would weaken their own powers and the powers of the "special interests" that support them.

In the rebuttal to the anti-198 claims, the proponents stressed the value of having a choice. The ability to choose from all candidates was said to have a number of beneficial results: it makes elected officials more responsive to voters and not to party chairmen; it encourages candidates to address the issues rather than simply to make partisan appeals; it gives control to the voters and takes it away from special interest groups; and it strengthens the parties by increasing participation and by allowing candidates from both parties to be elected with broader bases of voter support.

The opponents of Proposition 198 adopted a not atypical style of rhetoric and repetition in their argument. The word "No" occurs 7 times in the initial one-page brief, four times in capital letters and three times with exclamation points. They stressed that only voters who are registered with a political party *should* be able to take part in picking that party's flag bearers, but were light on justifications for this position. Their most explicit argument was that "self-serving politicians," "special interests and political consultants" would abuse the blanket system. Mention of "massive checkbooks" implied that the blanket primary might ultimately prove to be far more expensive than its closed counterpart. And, somewhat prophetically, they raised the specter of the "badly drafted" initiative "clogging up" the courts.

In their rebuttal to pro-198 arguments, the opponents raised one other issue, that the blanket primary would exacerbate convergence of the parties. In this claim, they seem to have been agreeing with those proponents who contended that the blanket primary offers advantages to moderate candidates, while, of course, disagreeing on the normative status of this feature.

In all, we extracted the following testable hypotheses about the blanket primary from the voter's handbook.

- Turnout could be higher, both because of direct expansion of voting opportunities for a significant portion of the eligible electorate, and because…

- races—both primary and general—could, on average, be morecompetitive.

- Non-partisan registration could soar, as voters are freed from artificial attractions to party registration.

- Moderate candidates could enjoy better results, leading to (more) convergence of parties.

- Primary campaigns could become more substantive and issue-based.

- Spending could increase, and special-interest spending could increase dramatically.

We will not examine all of these hypotheses in this chapter. Some are examined in other chapters of this volume (see, e.g., Gerber's chapter on candidate moderation). Others, such as those concerning the amount of substance in campaigns, would require extremely time-consuming content analysis of speeches, TV advertisements, newspaper coverage, and so on.

Instead, we focus on the hypotheses related to voter participation and campaign finance. First, did voter turnout increase in 1998? Second, were the races in the primary or the general systematically more competitive? Third, is there evidence that financial contributions and campaign spending were different under the new regime? Did candidates spend more, on average? Did their expenditures become more front-loaded? Did contributors give more to campaigns? Did the timing of contributions shift to the primary election?

These are not, of course, unrelated questions. High turnout, high spending, and close races are frequent companions (e.g. Cox and Munger 1989). It is generally true that close elections are marked by higher turnout and by higher spending than are landslides. What is not obvious is what is cause and what effect. The closeness of the final election is undoubtedly affected by candidates' campaign choices, donors' decisions, and citizens' selections, in a complicated, interactive multi-stage process. Fortunately, to answer our central query—did the introduction of the blanket primary change political behavior?—we need not grapple with the many facets of strategy in elections all at once. Instead, we will examine various electoral issues in sequence, without attempting to delineate a precise causal logic.

## VOTER PARTICIPATION

Figure 9.1 shows rates of registration and turnout trends for California for all election years since 1944, when the legislative and presidential primaries were first synchronized.[2] For all four series, the denominator is voting-age population. Figures for registration include nonpartisan registrants, and turnout is measured by the total number of ballots cast. Not surprisingly, citizens are more likely to register and to vote in general elections than in primaries, year in and year out. The gap is especially pronounced in voting. The general-election turnout figure displays a familiar saw-tooth pattern also evident in national data: presidential-election years always draw larger shares of the electorate to the polls than do midterms. That effect is much less obvious or regular in primary elections. Finally, both turnout series exhibit (familiar) negative trends over the post-war era, while the registration series are fairly flat since about 1960, and even display a small upturn in the 1990s.

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[2] The data plotted in Figure 9.1 are taken from Jones 1998a (page vi) and Jones 1998b (page v).
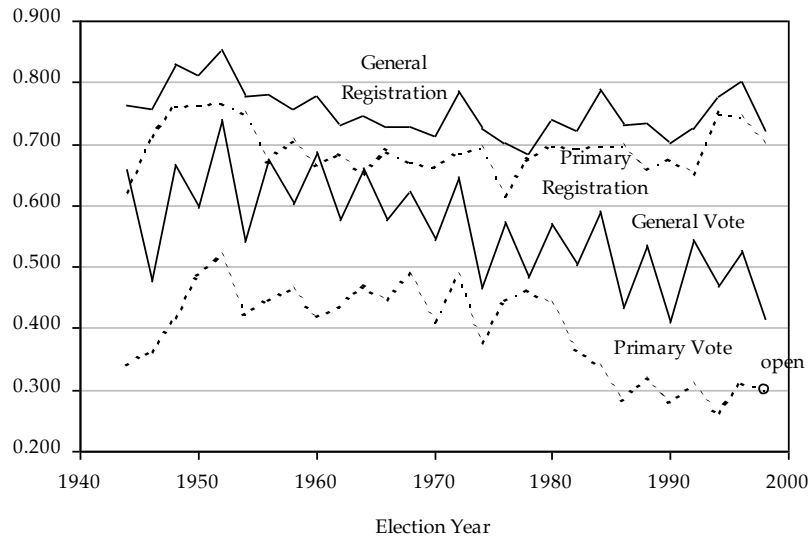
**Figure 9.1: Turnout and Registration in Primary and General Elections, California 1944–1998**

What is of immediate interest is whether the blanket primary delivered on the promise of increasing voter participation. Primary turnout in 1998 was 29.8%, just slightly lower than the 31.1% in 1996. If one compares to prior midterms, though, 1998 represents a positive swing. The years 1986, 1990, and 1994 saw primary election turnout rates of 28.1%, 28.0%, and 26.2%, for an average of 27.4%. Hence, one can interpret 1998 as having shown a roughly 2.4% surge in primary turnout. Note, however, that this surge did not carry over to the general. Also note that the blanket primary almost automatically guaranteed some rise in turnout, since it expanded voting opportunities for about 1.8 million voters who were registered, but not affiliated with any party. These voters could have made the trip to the polls under a closed system, but they were not permitted to participate in partisan primary races, so only ballot initiatives and local elections beckoned. Without a breakdown of participation by registration status, we cannot say definitively if the new primary law increased participation rates in any partisan subgroup, or simply expanded the reasons to show up for a new bloc of voters, who then participated in about the same numbers as did others. Quick calculations show that the numbers are, at least, consistent with this latter interpretation. If about 27.4% of registered partisans turned out to vote in the 1998 primaries, that would account for roughly 5.7 million votes, leaving about 500,000 votes unaccounted for. If those 500,000 were nonpartisan registrants, that would

imply a 27.2% nonpartisan turnout at the primary.  It is possible, of course, that the effects of the new openness in the primary were more complicated. But the aggregate data are consistent with a simple account, that turnout increased only in a mechanical sense, by fully admitting another set of citizens into the primary electorate.  There is no obvious sign in the aggregate data that the blanket primary energized party registrants.

Did the change in primary law increase registration?  Figure 9.1 shows that primary registration rose dramatically in 1994, and then slipped downwards in 1996 and 1998.  But the main effect of letting independents participate more fully in primaries could be a rise in nonpartisan registration. Voters with fairly weak attachments to parties might, in the past, have opted to register with parties all the same, in order to maintain access to primary ballots for partisan offices.  At 1.86 million, nonpartisan registration was at its highest ever total in 1998.  As a share of the voting age population, this is about 9%.  But while the trend is upwards, 1998 does not exhibit a sharp or dramatic rise.  Nonpartisan registration has been increasing slowly since 1988, and the 1998 value is consistent with a mildly positive slope over these 6 elections, suggesting that it did not increase by an unexpectedly large amount.

Survey data, comparisons with other states, and investigation of turnout and registration values at the county and congressional-district level with controls for such factors as closeness of the races, might flesh out this picture. However, without this more elaborate analysis, it does not appear that Proposition 198's immediate impact on participation rates was very dramatic, and so we will turn our attention to other forms of (possibly strategic) behavior.  The next section turns to another of the previously delineated claims about the impact of the blanket primary by discussing candidate entry and competitiveness.

## CANDIDATES AND COMPETITIVENESS IN THE SPRING AND FALL

Evaluating the competitiveness of a race is a deceptively complicated task.  After the fact, one can easily observe how close a given election turned out to be.  Under plurality rule, the margin of victory is an adequate measure of competitiveness in two-candidate races, and multi-candidate contests are only a little more difficult to characterize.  But a larger issue is that all after-the-fact measures ignore campaign dynamics completely.   Implicitly or explicitly, one invokes some variety of rational expectations assumption when taking the final observed closeness as an indicator of how competitive was a race at the outset and over the course of the campaign.[3]  If one's interest lies in, say, voter expectations, subjective *ex ante* closeness is much more

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[3] Even professional election observers sometimes forget that landslides such as the 1980 American presidential election or the 1987 British general election were regarded by journalists and academics alike as close calls right up to election night.

important than objective, *ex post* closeness.  The obvious difficulty in developing a more nuanced measure of closeness is that it requires very fine data: multiple opinion polls, pre-election surveys, real-time expert surveys, etc.  Fortunately, our concern here is with the election outcome per se.  Claims about competition made in the Proposition-198 debate were advanced about outcomes.  So one can simply compare the final tallies in 1998 with those from closed primary elections to see whether or not the expected increase in competition transpired.

Tables 9.1 and 9.2 show descriptive statistics on California's primary and general elections in the 1990s.  The tables contain a large amount of information, and do not instantly convey a simple story.  But the trends

**Table 9.1. Competitiveness of Primary Elections for US House Seats in California**

| Year | Status | n | Republican Primary * uncontested races — no candidates | one candidate | contested races — $\overline{N}$ | $\overline{N}_e$ | average margin | Democratic Primary * uncontested races — no candidates | one candidate | contested races — $\overline{N}$ | $\overline{N}_e$ | average margin |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1992 | Republican incumbent | 16 | 0 | 2 | 2.7 | 2.1 | 38 % | 1 | 7 | 3.6 | 2.9 | 21 % |
| | Democratic incumbent | 21 | 3 | 9 | 3.2 | 2.6 | 16 % | 0 | 14 | 2.4 | 1.6 | 60 % |
| | open | 15 | 1 | 3 | 6.1 | 4.1 | 11 % | 0 | 2 | 5.7 | 3.6 | 20 % |
| 1994 | Republican incumbent | 20 | 0 | 9 | 2.5 | 1.8 | 49 % | 0 | 8 | 2.5 | 2.2 | 26 % |
| | Democratic incumbent | 29 | 2 | 9 | 2.8 | 2.2 | 27 % | 0 | 15 | 2.3 | 1.5 | 60 % |
| | open | 3 | 0 | 1 | 4.5 | 2.5 | 22 % | 0 | 0 | 4.0 | 2.5 | 12 % |
| 1996 | Republican incumbent | 25 | 0 | 16 | 2.1 | 1.6 | 54 % | 0 | 17 | 2.8 | 2.2 | 28 % |
| | Democratic incumbent | 24 | 0 | 9 | 2.7 | 2.3 | 28 % | 0 | 18 | 2.2 | 1.5 | 57 % |
| | open | 3 | 1 | 0 | 2.0 | 1.5 | 58 % | 0 | 0 | 6.0 | 3.8 | 15 % |
| 1998 | Republican incumbent | 22 | 0 | 13 | 2.8 | 1.6 | 64 % | 5 | 13 | 2.0 | 1.6 | 46 % |
| | Democratic incumbent | 26 | 4 | 11 | 2.6 | 2.1 | 28 % | 0 | 20 | 2.2 | 1.5 | 61 % |
| | open | 4 | 0 | 1 | 3.9 | 2.7 | 20 % | 0 | 0 | 2.6 | 1.7 | 50 % |

* for 1998, Republican field of candidates and Democratic field of candidates, in open primary

**Table 9.2. Competitiveness of General Elections for US House Seats in California**

| Year | Status | n | uncontested races | | contested races | | |
| | | | no Republican | no Democrat | $\overline{N}$ | $\overline{N}_e$ | average margin |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1992 | Republican incumbent | 15 | 0 | 0 | 3.5 | 2.2 | 19 % |
| | Democratic incumbent | 21 | 2 | 0 | 3.4 | 1.9 | 38 % |
| | open | 16 | 0 | 0 | 3.9 | 2.2 | 20 % |
| 1994 | Republican incumbent | 20 | 0 | 0 | 3.4 | 1.9 | 32 % |
| | Democratic incumbent | 29 | 2 | 0 | 1.9 | 1.9 | 28 % |
| | open | 3 | 0 | 0 | 2.7 | 2.0 | 16 % |
| 1996 | Republican incumbent | 25 | 0 | 0 | 4.3 | 2.1 | 24 % |
| | Democratic incumbent | 25 | 0 | 0 | 3.3 | 1.8 | 41 % |
| | open | 2 | 0 | 0 | 5.0 | 2.3 | 6 % |
| 1998 | Republican incumbent | 21 | 0 | 5 | 3.3 | 1.9 | 30 % |
| | Democratic incumbent | 26 | 4 | 0 | 3.2 | 1.7 | 50 % |
| | open | 5 | 0 | 0 | 4.2 | 2.1 | 18 % |

apparent on inspection run counter to the suggestion that 1998 might have been a year of close races. The ultimate in noncompetitive elections is the uncontested race. In all four 1990s elections, some seats have been completely abandoned by one of the major parties, and others have seen one or both major party nominations won without any challenge. Considering the two major parties' contingents separately, 1998 saw more, rather than fewer, uncontested races than its predecessors. More than half the districts had no more than one Republican candidate, and nearly three-fourths saw no competition for the Democratic nomination. In a blanket primary, there is a clear incentive for voters to participate in a race in which there is actual competition, since, despite the appearance of competition in a multi-candidate ballot, any candidate unchallenged within his or her party is guaranteed to advance to the general election (provided he or she secures at least one vote). Strategic-minded Californians, though, were thwarted by a paucity of genuine races. In only one district did more than one candidate seek any of the minor parties' nominations: there were two Libertarians running in the 1st district. In 29 of the 52 districts, at least one of the major parties' nominations was contested, but only 8 seats saw races on both sides.[4]

Were those races that did involve competition closer than usual? On the Republican side, the election that stands out as most competitive in this set is 1992. The average number of candidates, the average "effective" number of candidate, and the victors' margins over second-place finishers are generally similar for 1994, 1996, and 1998.[5] By contrast, 1992 is an unusually close election in all these respects. The Democratic picture is more striking still: 1998 is the odd election out, but it is less, not more, competitive than the others. Fewer total candidates competed in open and Republican-held seats, the vote was more concentrated in those seats, and margins of victory were abnormally high (in open and Republican-held seats), or else unchanged (in Democratic-held seats). In short, by a variety of measures, to the extent that the 1998 primaries stand out, it is for their reduced competition. Neither

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[4] An interesting fact about voter behavior—but an unimportant fact with regard to final outcomes—is that minor party support soared in 1998. Since independents decline to register not only with major parties, but also with minor parties, there is no reason to expect them to favor small parties disproportionately. Yet, the minor party primary vote went from about 0.9% in 1996 to about 5.3% in 1998. It fell in only 8 districts, and rose in the other 44, despite the almost complete lack of actual competition for these nominations in the U.S. House districts (most statewide-office races did feature two Peace and Freedom candidates.)

[5] The "effective" number of candidates is an index that weights the number of actual candidates according to their vote shares, so that strong candidates count far more than do very weak ones. We used the most common such measure in the voting literature, the Laakso-Taagepera index (1979), computed district by district. The averages shown in Tables 1 and 2 are computed as: $\overline{N}_e = 1/n \, \Sigma_i \, [(\Sigma_j \, V_{ij})^2/(\Sigma_j \, V_{ij}^2)]$, where $V_{ij}$ is the number of votes won by candidate $j$ in district $i$, and there are a total of $n$ districts in the state (or, as applicable, $n$ districts in which there is some competition).

friends nor foes of Proposition 198 predicted that the blanket primary would make the primaries less close, but where they seem to have changed at all, this was the nature of the change.

The general election results are not as clear. Again, 1998 saw unparalleled numbers of uncontested races, which runs directly contrary to the prediction of closer competition. Where there were contested races, on the other hand, there is no general trend in either the number of candidates or the victors' vote margins. These data, in short, do not suggest that 1998 was an unusually competitive year in California's general election races for the U.S. House.

Of course, the change in primary election law is not the only feature that sets 1998 apart from prior election years. The national environment has varied over the four 1990s elections, and such factors as the number of incumbents retiring, how parties qua parties were faring in popularity, and so on may be important explanations of the results described in Tables 9.1 and 9.2. We separated seats according to their incumbency status for that very reason, but it might also be useful to set California into national context to evaluate whether or not its U.S. House races were, in any sense, more competitive in 1998. Accordingly, we reconsidered the general election data for the U.S. House using a fixed-effects panel data model designed to decompose election returns into normal district vote, incumbency advantage, candidate quality effects, and national partisan swings.[6] The virtue of this model is that it separates all of the major forces that shape election returns, allowing one to distinguish between such phenomena as rising incumbency advantage, gerrymandering, secular change in normal vote, and so forth. We estimated the model shown below for 1992 through 1996, and then again for 1992 through 1998, and compared the estimated de-trended district normal vote parameters for California. Did the 1998 returns, once purged of candidate effects and national trends, render California's district normal votes more or less competitive, on average? Our basic model is:

$$y_{it} = \mu_i + \eta_t + \boldsymbol{\beta'}\mathbf{x}_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}$$

where $y_{it}$ is the Democratic share of the two-party vote in congressional district $i$ and election $t$, $\mathbf{x}_{it}$ is a matrix of incumbency and candidate-quality indicator variables, with the corresponding $\boldsymbol{\beta}$ coefficients estimating various

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[6] The normal vote is rooted in a conception of elections being subject to short-term and long-term forces. The former include regional swings to and from given parties on the basis of timely issues as well as district-level forces particular to given elections. Prominent in this latter category are any candidate effects, such as an incumbency advantage or a friends-and-neighbors advantage a candidates enjoys in his hometown or region. The major long-term determinant of election returns is the normal vote, the expected breakdown of vote shares when the parties field comparable candidates and there are no election-specific tides favoring one party or the other.

forms of incumbency and quality-challenger advantage, and $\eta_t$ and $\mu_i$ are parameters to be estimated, capturing national swings and district normal votes (respectively).[7]

Consider California's 1st district, a marginal seat that has twice changed party hands in the 1990s. When applied to the 1992–1996 returns, our model estimates a (de-trended) normal Democratic vote of 50.4% there, implying that the seat is almost exactly a toss-up in expectation. Adding the 1998 returns revises this estimate upward to 54.4%, suggesting substantially less competitiveness. By contrast, the same figures for the 2nd district (a Republican stronghold continuously held by Wally Herger in the 1990s) are 38.0% and 40.0%, respectively. Hence, incorporating 1998 returns increases our measure of expected competitiveness for that district, which is, by either value, a fairly safe Republican seat. Both of these changes were exceptional in their magnitudes: no district saw a larger gap in the two normal vote estimates than did the 1st, and the median change in California was just under 1 percent. Our interest here is in whether the normal votes shifted to being more or less competitive across the state. Averaging over all 52 California districts, the net change brought about by characterizing the present California electoral map on the basis of 1992–1998 general election returns rather than 1992–1996 general election returns is a small increase in competition. The mean absolute value of (50% – estimated-normal-vote) using 1992–1996 is 10.0%. Adding 1998 lowers this value to 9.7%. The medians are, respectively, 9.5% and 9.1%.

These numbers suggest a very small aggregate movement towards greater competition. However, two final points merit mention. The comparable values for the remainder of the country are similarly signed, but higher: the average change across all other states was from 9.5% to 9.1% (means) or 8.3% to 7.8% (medians). Second, differences in estimated incumbency- and experience- advantage parameters were far more striking. The specification that fits the data best resulted in incumbency advantages of 6.5% (92–96) or 7.5% (92–98) and experience bonuses of 1.7% (92–96) or 2.1% (92–98) for challengers and open-seat candidates. These estimates are based on national data, and so they resist any interpretation as being induced by primary law changes. They do, however, begin to explain how descriptive data in Table 9.1 can be reconciled with the apparent increase in closeness as

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[7] See Gaines and Rivers (1994) for technical details on this model and its derivation. Gaines (1998) uses a similar model to analyze British elections, while Levitt and Wolfram (1997) adopt the same basic approach in their analysis of incumbency advantage in the U.S. House. In this application, we omitted Louisiana data completely (because of its odd electoral law and paucity of general elections); dropped all uncontested races; excluded two districts—South Carolina's 2nd and Florida's 21st—from the first run because they had no contested elections in those 3 general elections; and dropped Vermont's at-large district, where a non-major-party Representative (Bernie Sanders) was both the incumbent and the winner in all four 1990s elections.

measured in normal vote.  The 1998 election was a good one for incumbents, and so some of the decline in competition detectable in the 1998 results reflects an increase in estimated incumbency advantage once the 1998 returns are added to the 1990s data set (see, also, the chapters in this volume by Baldassare and Salvanto and by Wattenberg).  Beneath the incumbency effects, normal party competition tightened just slightly in California, but not by quite as much as it did in the rest of the country.  On balance, it seems fair to conclude that the blanket primary probably did not itself immediately cause closer or more competitive contests in either the primary or the following general election.  This non-result seems to hold even when one controls for candidate effects and the national political climate in 1998.

## CAMPAIGN FINANCE

In examining competitiveness, we focused on the ultimate result of the electoral process.  It is possible, of course, for various aspects of electoral behavior to change without substantially altering the outcome.  A change in electoral law might, for example, induce various alterations in strategy or behavior that offset one another.  We have already examined mass participation, candidate entry, and vote dispersion, and 1998 did not distinguish itself from years past on these fronts.  However, we have yet to consider a set of actors especially likely to be sensitive to changes in the institutional environment: campaign contributors.  These actors are especially likely to react quickly to electoral law change because they are generally elite figures who pay more attention than most to politics and the electoral process.  Moreover, the contributors are not the only players in campaign finance.  Instead, campaign finance involves three kinds of actors: candidates for offices, individual members of the public who make financial contributions, and elite contributors, such as PACs and parties.  The distinction between the latter two, at least implicitly, underlies much of the rhetoric about "special interests" so popular in the debate on Proposition 198.  When the primary system changes, all of these actors may have incentives to change their behavior in order to capitalize on the new rules.  Hence, this political venue seems particularly prone to exhibiting immediate change following the opening of the primary.

For candidates, the blanket primary seems most likely to affect this first stage (primary) strategy.  Under closed rules, candidates craft appeals to their own partisans, perhaps with one eye to the general election and the potential for primary election pronouncements and stands to recur as issues.  Open rules allow candidates to court a larger and presumably more diverse electorate.  If nothing else, the change ensures that there are more potential supporters to woo.  This form of expanding the electorate is clearly different from enlarging geographic districts.  For example, television markets do not grow simply because more voters in a fixed area become potential supporters.

But some of the costs of basic campaign communication, such as sending direct mailers, ought to be related to the size of the electorate. In California, most races for U.S. House seats are, in fact, mail-oriented. For this reason alone, opening primaries could increase the amount of money raised and spent.

We might expect the consequences of the larger potential electorate base to vary for candidates in different types of strategic situations. Since the results of the blanket primary remain the same—i.e., the leading voter-getters from each party advance to the general—the change in the primary law is not necessarily great. Candidates in marginal seats face virtually the same situation. The more competitive the general election is expected to be, the more alluring the primary is for ambitious candidates. Hence, one expects competitive, expensive races in both major party nomination battles, ceteris paribus. It is not evident that admitting independents or permitting cross-party voting should alter this situation.

By contrast, in seats in which one party is not usually competitive in the general election, there are incentives for voters to increase their influence by voting in the other party's more consequential election.[8] Hence, candidates in safe districts could face new uncertainty under the blanket primary system because of the expanded electorate. This uncertainty does not translate to the general election, which remains a foregone conclusion. But the larger and more diverse electorate might come into play in the primary races in a way that sometimes increases the competition. So, while a candidate such as Maxine Waters, a liberal Democrat with a very safe seat, will win any election over a Republican, she must contend with other Democrats for the nomination. To the extent that independent and Republican primary voters are disinclined to vote for her and are more inclined to vote for any candidate who is more moderate, her re-election chances (and the chances of candidates like her) should fall under the blanket system. Adding non-Democrats to the potential Democratic nomination electorate should only make relatively extreme, safe-seat Democrats vulnerable, assuming that many will prefer to participate on the Democratic side in the primary when the Republican is basically non-electable in the general. And, of course, parallel logic would apply to safe Republican seats.

Our first look at the data on California campaign finance in the 1990s is an overall picture of campaign receipts and disbursements. Figure 9.2 displays total receipts and disbursements over the last 4 election years. Figure 9.2 is perhaps most striking for its lack of strikingness. The blanket-primary

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[8] We have in mind a voter's subjective sense of influence rather than the miniscule objective probability of one's vote actually counting by making or breaking a tie.
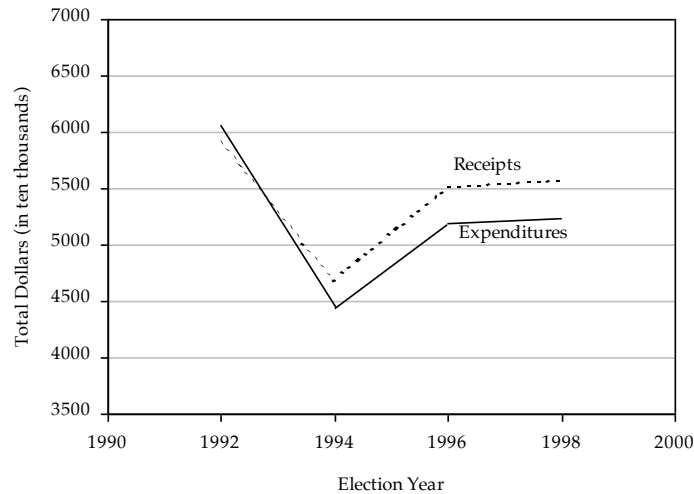
**Figure 9.2: Total Receipts and Expenditures in U.S. House Races from 1992–1998**

year, 1998, seems to fall well in line with our expectations of a year without any significant changes in electoral law. Though 1992 seems to be a high outlier, the rise in expenditures that year was due largely to Michael Huffington, who spent $5.4 million in personal funds on his campaign for a House seat. Without that one extreme value, 1992 expenditures fall well within the expected pattern. Candidates, apparently, did not spend much more money in 1998 than they had in previous years. If Figure 9.2 suggests any puzzle, it is why spending was abnormally low in 1994.

Figure 9.3 displays total PAC contributions in California's US House races between 1978 and 1998. Much like the receipts and expenditures plot, this graph is not very striking. PAC funding seems to be on the rise, and 1998 value fits comfortably within the general pattern. If we anchor the dollar at its 1988 valuation and adjust the other years for inflation, the pattern is the same, and the trend is even less spectacular. This time, the only plausible candidate for outlier status is 1992: PAC funding increased by over 50% between 1990 and 1992. The 1.2% rise from 1992 to 1994 paled in comparison. Even the 10.7% rise from 1994 to 1996 was not as striking. Most importantly for present purposes, the 8.1% increase in 1998 is well in line with previous trends.
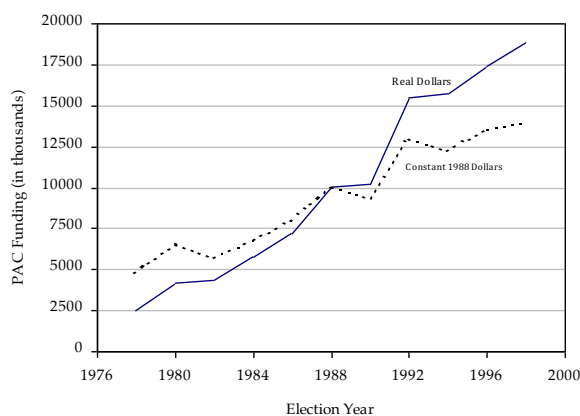
**Figure 9.3: Total PAC Funding of U.S. House Races in California, 1978–1998**

Hence, while PAC funding did increase following the change in primary law, the change was neither unusually large nor outside the expected pattern. The Proposition 198 campaign rhetoric about special interests, then, seems to be unfounded. PAC funding has increased slowly over recent elections, and 1998 was not an unusual year in this regard.

Special interest money is, of course, only one component of campaign finance. Individual contributors also have incentives to change their behavior and contribution patterns. Initially, determining whether individual contributors have changed their behavior may seem to be an easy task, but the rules underlying campaign contributions are surprisingly complicated. It is thus not trivial to determine how individual contributors have reacted to the new primary. At the outset, a simple hypothesis to test is that the new primary system has resulted in contributions being shifted to the earlier part of the election cycle. After all, in order to see one's favored candidate in the general election, one needs to ensure that this candidate emerges from the primary election, now with a potentially larger electoral base. One way to make this more probable is to pile money into a candidate's war chest early.

There are three ways in which one might observe individual contributors shifting their activities toward primary elections. Because of FECA limitations, contributors are limited to giving a total of $2,000 during an election cycle, $1,000 in the primary and $1,000 in the general election, where each contribution is earmarked for a specific election. However, many contributors simply want to contribute the maximum amount to a certain candidate. Hence, while these contributors earmark $1,000 of their total $2,000 donation for the primary election, they do not necessarily want the candidate to spend $1,000 in the primary and $1,000 in the general. If the candidate were Maxine Waters, for instance, she could use her money most

effectively by spending the maximum amount in the more competitive primary election and none in the less competitive general election. Hence, one way to gauge increased primary contributions is to separate money that is earmarked for the primary from the money that is earmarked for the general. This method has obvious problems and will almost certainly result in flawed estimates.

Since each contribution is accompanied by the date of the contribution, a method that bypasses these problems is to separate the data by the primary date. Those contributions given before the primary can be counted as contributions that were intended for use in the primary, while contributions given after the primary obviously were not meant to be primary donations, even if they were thus earmarked. It is, in fact, not unusual for candidates to receive money *after the general election* that is earmarked for the primary election. This money is clearly not meant to be spent directly in a primary bid, and candidates are free to use this money to pay off campaign debts.

A final option for the researcher is to combine the first two approaches, placing the contributions into four categories: given before the primary and earmarked for the primary; given after the primary but earmarked for the primary; given before the primary but earmarked for the general; and given after the primary and earmarked for the general. This last option, while not flawless, provides a good compromise between the other options.

We present the results of our analysis in Table 9.3. The dependent variable in these models is the proportion of all individual contributions that was both earmarked for and given before the primary election.[9] The only exception is the column labeled "1996 (June)" where the dependent variable is the proportion of funds that were contributed before June 2, 1996. In 1996, the primary date was moved forward to March in what turned out to be a futile bid to increase California's influence in the races for presidential nominations. The primary in all of the other years occurred in June. We used this modified dependent variable for 1996 to simulate an unchanged primary environment for that year. The data in column 1 are comprised of all contributions from the period 1992–1998. For subsequent columns, the data are year specific.

The independent variables in the models are the number of candidates in the primary, a dummy variable indicating if there was at least one quality opponent in both the primary and general, a dummy variable indicating whether the seat was open in the general, a measure of district partisan advantage, and a dummy variable indicating whether the election involved a

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[9] The primary dates were June 2, 1992, June 7, 1994, March 26, 1996, and June 2, 1998. Analysis shows that models with this version of the dependent variable yield coefficients that lie between the coefficients obtained by the other two methods (i.e. using only the earmarking information, or using only the timing information to identify those contributions intended for the primary).

blanket primary. Candidate quality is operationalized simply: any individual who has ever held any electoral office is a quality candidate (Jacobson 1987). The variable labeled "advantage" is a signed difference between our estimate generally favors the party of the candidate in question and negative if that

**Table 9.3. Timing of Individual Campaign Donations, 1992–98, US House, California Delegation OLS Regression Estimates. Dependent variable is proportion of primary contributions.**

|  | 1992–98 | 1992 | 1994 | 1996 | 1996 (June) | 1998 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intercept | 0.491** (0.025) | 0.545** (0.046) | 0.463** (0.044) | 0.479** (0.054) | 0.616** (0.053) | 0.550** (0.057) |
| Number of Candidates in Primary | -0.008 (0.008) | -0.022 (0.012) | 0.018 (0.018) | -0.015 (0.024) | -0.023 (0.23) | -0.034 (0.026) |
| Quality Opponents in Primary | 0.040 (0.053) | 0.002 (0.070) | 0.016 (0.108) | 0.135 (0.164) | 0.114 (0.163) | 0.035 (0.171) |
| Quality Opponents in General | -0.098** (0.030) | -0.080 (0.056) | -0.164** (0.054) | -0.089 (0.071) | -0.070 (0.070) | -0.094 (0.064) |
| Blanket Primary | 0.008 (0.027) |  |  |  |  |  |
| Open Seat in General | -0.018 (0.039) | 0.056 (0.059) | -0.022 (0.111) | -0.141 (0.126) | -0.144 (0.125) | -0.112 (0.079) |
| District Partisan Advantage | 0.882** (0.135) | 1.160** (0.252) | 0.872** (0.227) | 0.413 (0.308) | 0.578* (0.307) | 0.943** (0.306) |
| $N$ | 412 | 91 | 95 | 92 | 92 | 81 |
| $R^2$ | 0.32 | 0.39 | 0.49 | 0.16 | 0.19 | 0.38 |

Standard errors in parentheses.
** $p < 0.05$  * $p < 0.10$

candidate's party's normal vote falls below 50%. Our observations are all major party candidates who competed in the general elections.

The model that pools the data for 1992 through 1998 indicates that the change to a blanket primary system did not significantly alter what proportion of individual contributions were given for the primary election, since the blanket primary dummy variable is not significant. Contrary to the arguments of both the proponents and the opponents of Proposition 198, the new primary system does not seem to have changed much in terms of the timing of contributions. This is a striking result that runs counter to initial expectations and pre-election rhetoric. It is also striking in that the results indicate that the 1996 election, *not* the 1998 election, is the outlier. As we can see from Table 9.3, the differing proportion of contributions intended for the primary can be explained by the same variables for each year except 1996. For 1996, none of the independent variables explains the variation in contribution timing. Moreover, the $R^2$ value is significantly lower for both 1996 models than it is for any of the other years.

As noted previously, the most obvious difference between the 1996 election and the others is that 1996 saw a much earlier primary date. So, while the change in primary type did not have a significant impact, the timing of the primary apparently does. Timing, then, trumps institutional design in its ability to alter the proportion of funds available for use in the primary. This claim is further bolstered when we note that the results in the column labeled "1996" are less similar to the other years' results than the results in the column labeled "1996 (June)." In the latter column, we artificially "moved" the 1996 primary date to June to coincide with the other years. That is, we counted all donations prior to June 2, 1996 as primary donations. Further analysis is warranted, but this preliminary inspection suggests that timing is at least as significant as the details of the electoral formula.

Lastly, one might expect individual contributors to behave differently in different types of races. In other words, the funding dynamic may be dissimilar between races for safe seats and competitive races. Certainly, it is true that candidates running in safe seats generally receive less funding than candidates running in competitive districts. Their constituents and supporters understand that they simply do not need the money. However, the change to the blanket primary may have altered this strategic situation in the aforementioned manner.

In order to test this hypothesis, we separated the data in two sets: safe seats and competitive seats. We defined a competitive seat as one in which the normal Democratic vote was either above 60% or below 40%. We then ran regressions with the same independent variables that were reported in Table 9.3. Again, the 1998 elections did not distinguish themselves from the other

years. Hence, safe district or not, 1998 was not a banner year for change in campaign donations.

## CONCLUSION

As a general matter, identifying the precise effects of various features of electoral law proves difficult. Neither the formal, deductive nor the empirical, inductive literatures on the effects of election law is particularly rich with consensus findings. Debating the veracity, logic, and applicability of Duverger's law, a fairly simple and high-level claim, has kept scholars occupied for decades. Not coincidentally, politicians do not often introduce self-interested reforms in electoral procedures, even when they unambiguously have the power to do so. They may fear a public backlash from too obviously loading the dice. Or, they may regard electoral institutions as too unpredictable to be manipulated easily. Certainly, examples of changes in electoral law that either failed to produce the predicted outcomes, or even backfired by producing unanticipated consequences, are not hard to find. In recent years, Italy, New Zealand, and Israel have all made major changes to their national election rules without achieving their respective goals. New Zealand's politics have become, less, not more stable; Italy managed to accentuate its already exceptional partisan fragmentation; and Israel perversely increased the influence of very small parties.

Compared to those efforts, California's alteration of primary election rules is minor. The laws governing general elections are unchanged and the primary is still based on plurality rule. Should the introduction of fully open (blanket) primary rules have been expected radically to alter the elections, directly at the primary stage or indirectly at the general stage? We regard this "open" question as an open question. Here, we have not dwelt on the logics of optimal behavior under the old and new rules. Instead, we have shown that the most publicized predictions about how the new rules would play out in terms of voter turnout, competitiveness, and campaign finance do not seem to have been realized in the first trial. There does not seem to have been much change in turnout, so, conditional on the behavior of elites (that is, decisions to run, and campaign styles), the masses do not seem to have changed behavior in this regard. The primary elections were not especially close—they may even have been a little less close than normal. They also did not feed into newly competitive general elections.

Campaign finance is a complicated world, and inferences about changed behavior are, again, perilous, given that one can provide supply- or demand-side explanations for any trend. Moreover, the supply side includes sophisticated elite actors like PACs as well as ordinary citizens, acting on

small scales and in (relative) isolation. Again, though, our preliminary analysis revealed little change, rendering moot the question of whose actions should be regarded as most probable to have caused the (non-existent) change. Campaign expenditure and campaign contributions, in total, do not seem to have been off-trend for the blanket primary year. Nor was there any detectable shift in the timing of the donations. Based on one run, we see no sign that the blanket primary encourages front-loading one's spending, not even in seats dominated by one party. PACs seem to have been important in 1998, but not much more important than they already were in 1996, 1994, or 1992.

Our conclusion from this analysis, then, is that the blanket primary was a barely noticed and largely irrelevant innovation in its first application in California. We should close, though, by hedging our bets in two ways. First, there may be some respects in which the opportunities to crossover or otherwise support another party that a blanket primary presents did make a difference. For example, we eschewed analysis of the ideologies of candidates here, and so we cannot rule out that the potential broadening of the primary electorates did encourage moderation by some of the candidates. Second, election law, it is worth reiterating, is arcane. There is good reason to believe that equilibria should not be quickly discovered. It may take several elections for even elite actors to catch on to the subtle features of a change in rules. It has, after all, taken scholars many decades to formalize properties of election rules—200 years elapsed between Condorcet's paradox and the Gibbard-Satterthwaite Theorem! So it may be premature to declare the rules on primary type irrelevant. One must observe a series of runs under the new rules to know how behavior settles. The open rules will not obtain in presidential elections hereafter, but the complicated double-counting formula eventually established after Proposition 3's defeat should provide political analysts with yet another form of data on how the (non-binding, but now observable) blanket results compare to the closed results. California's experiment in electoral law change is ongoing, and so will remain of interest to political scientists, journalists, and other political junkies, who can celebrate this variance in election law even while carefully qualifying any conclusions they draw about its consequences.

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