

Early Voting and Presidential Nominations: A New Advantage for Front-Runners?

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Early voting has become an important feature of presidential elections. While research has generally focused on whether programs increase turnout, few have considered whether early voting alters the information environment in campaigns. Those who vote early may do so before important information becomes available in the final weeks of a campaign. I speculate that early voting should benefit early front-runners in presidential nomination contests, as voters may cast early votes for these candidates before fully considering their less-known opponents. Examining exit-poll data from the 2008 Democratic primaries between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, I find that Clinton indeed benefited from early voting in several early primary states.

As of 2015, 36 states and the District of Columbia allow any registered citizen to cast a vote before Election Day through the mail or at designated locations (National Conference of State Legislatures 2015). Early voting programs have become a significant feature of American elections. In both 2008 and 2012, more than 30% of the electorate cast ballots before Election Day, including a *majority* of voters in at least nine states in 2012 (Demos 2014; McDonald 2012). Numerous surveys indicate that voters appreciate the convenience offered by early voting (Kasler 2014; Martens 2014; Warner 2013). Some voters also recognize that voting before Election Day means an early end to the barrage of mailings, phone calls, and canvassing visits directed by parties and candidates (Benac 2010).

States offering early voting do so not only in general elections, but in primary contests as well. While national figures are difficult to obtain, a substantial number of voters cast early ballots during both the 2008 and 2012 presidential nomination cycles. In fact, a majority of primary voters participated early in California and Texas in both 2008 and 2012 (Austin Community College 2010, 6; California Secretary of State 2012; Reynolds 2014).¹ Early voting has become significant enough in presidential primaries that exit

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1. In California, 59% of ballots were cast early in 2008, while the figure jumped to 65% in 2012. In Texas, 54% voted early in 2008, while 50% did so in 2012.

pollsters now routinely conduct telephone surveys of early voters to supplement their primary day surveys (Roper Center 2008).²

Most scholarly attention devoted to early voting has focused on the degree to which programs increase voter turnout. While many have argued that early voting fails to bring new voters to the polls (Burden et al. 2014; Fitzgerald 2005; Gronke, Galanes-Rosenbaum, and Miller 2007; Larocca and Klemanski 2011; Primo, Jacobsmeier, and Milyo 2007; Wolfinger, Highton, and Mullin 2005), others have reported that programs with abundant sites (Fullmer forthcoming; Losco, Scheele, and Hall 2010; Neeley and Richardson 1996) or sites in convenient areas (Stein and Garcia-Monet 1997) can improve turnout by several percentage points or more.

Research has largely ignored the question of whether early voting alters the information environment in campaigns. Those who vote early may do so before important information becomes available in the final days and weeks of a campaign. Many have speculated that early voting may particularly affect presidential nomination contests, as support for candidates tends to be more unstable and the process often commences before candidates fully launch campaigns in respective states. I speculate that early voting should benefit early front-runners in these contests, as voters may cast early votes for these candidates before fully considering their less-known opponents. Examining exit-poll data from the 2008 Democratic primaries between Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, I find that Clinton indeed benefitted from early voting in several early primary states.

Information Asymmetries

When voters submit ballots early, they complete their civic duties ahead of schedule. With votes already cast, political campaigns essentially conclude weeks early for these citizens. There is no mechanism by which one can change a submitted vote; early voters can only wait and observe whether election outcomes (reported on Election Night or primary day) match their preferences. Of course, campaigns themselves *do not* end early. Candidates continue to fund television ads, participate in debates, and grant interviews and news conferences. The news media investigate voting records and past associations. Parties and outside groups remain active as well. Lacking any knowledge of late campaign developments, those who choose to vote early ultimately do so without the same information as Election Day voters.

Late information comes in many forms during political campaigns. The term *October Surprise* has become synonymous with a news event holding the potential to influence an election's outcome. Examples can be found throughout American political history. In the days leading up to the 1968 presidential election, the Johnson administration (for whom Hubert Humphrey, the Democratic candidate, was vice president) announced a halt of the bombing campaign in North Vietnam; Humphrey quickly gained in the polls, though Republican Richard Nixon ultimately prevailed (Tucker 2011). In late

2. The pollsters began this practice in 2004 and increased their sample of early voters in 2008.

September 2008, as Americans were beginning to vote early in the presidential campaign, the country watched closely as Obama and John McCain navigated the collapse of Lehman Brothers and an ensuing financial panic. Obama was widely credited for his response, even by Republican President George W. Bush (2010). McCain, however, was criticized for seeming erratic and reactionary (Henninger 2008).

More generally, debates have long been considered an important factor in vote selection and a major conveyor of candidate differences in presidential campaigns (Schroeder 2001; Shenkman 2004). In 2012, the four debates did not commence until October 3. By this point, seven states had already begun accepting early ballots through the mail and at designated sites.³ By the final debate on October 22, the only one devoted to foreign affairs, 26 states had begun early voting (National Association of Secretaries of State 2012).

Late information is also prevalent during presidential nominating campaigns. Modern nomination races feature over 50 state primaries and caucuses held sequentially between January and June of presidential election years. Candidate fields are typically large in the early stages of a contest, though poor performances and insufficient fundraising often cause candidates to withdraw from the race before all state contests have concluded (Aldrich 1980; Bartels 1988; Brams 1978; Matthews 1978; Norrander 1996; Shafer 1988). As a result, early voters may cast votes for candidates who ultimately quit before the state's respective primary day even occurs. Analyzing the 2008 California presidential primary, Meredith and Malhotra (2011) find that precincts with more early voters gave a significantly greater share of their vote to John Edwards, Rudy Giuliani, and Fred Thompson, three candidates who were actively seeking the nomination when the early voting period began (on January 7) but dropped out before the primary date (February 5).

Further, important information can emerge about nomination candidates who remain in the race. In 1992, Bill Clinton was accused of having a 12-year extramarital affair in the weeks before the New Hampshire primary (Sabato 1998). In 2008, Obama was forced to address controversial comments made by his pastor, Jeremiah Wright, during his campaign against Clinton (Ross and El-Buri 2008). More generally, presidential nominations are fluid contests, as candidates are often relatively unknown to large chunks of voters until the final days and weeks before a state's primary or caucus. With the exception of Iowa and New Hampshire, where campaigning begins as much as one year before the contests, most states see high levels of campaign activity only in the week or so before their respective primary or caucus. Candidates can only be in one place at a time, while other campaign resources (i.e., money, staffers) are also limited. Traditionally, winning (or exceeding expectations) in *the next* primary or caucus produces momentum in the form of positive media coverage and, perhaps most importantly, financial contributions (Abramowitz 1989; Aldrich 1980; Bartels 1985, 1988; Geer 1989; Lichter, Amundson, and Noyes 1988). The ability to win a state contest and slowly generate momentum and resources is seen to benefit poorly funded, low-name-recognition candidates, as they are able to slowly build credible campaigns via retail politics in a single state. However, if a

3. The seven states were Idaho, Iowa, Nebraska, Ohio, South Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming.

voter has already cast an early ballot, then new information about candidates cannot be incorporated into one's vote choice.

Researchers have found that early voters tend to be more politically astute and partisan (Baretto et al. 2006; Dubin and Kalsow 1996; Patterson and Caldeira 1985; Stein 1998; Stein et al. 2004), leading some to suggest that additional information may not alter their preference. But a deep literature also shows that people tend to be overconfident in decision making (Barber and Odean 2001; Camerer and Lovallo 1999; Svenson 1981). More specifically, voters routinely underestimate the likelihood that their preferences will shift (Meredith and Malhotra 2011) and do become more likely to support a candidate once the media determines that they are viable (Abramowitz 1989; Polsby and Vildavsky 2008).

Many political operatives, journalists, and academics have suggested that early voting produces information asymmetries that may affect primary outcomes. Political analyst Craig Wilson believes early voting can easily produce voter regret, stating, "One downside to early voting is that once you cast that vote, there's still two weeks or a month to go and what happens if something eventful happens with a campaign or a candidate during that period and you change your mind" (quoted in Domurat 2008). Patt Morrison of the *Oakland Tribune* agreed, stating "Casting an absentee ballot so far ahead of Election Day is like picking a Super Bowl winner based on who's ahead at halftime. It's like recommending a book you've only halfway read. It's like getting married on the first date" (quoted in PBS 2008). Paul Gronke, director of the Early Voting Information Center at Reed College, has argued that early voters may miss information that could affect their votes (NPR 2008). Robert Stein, a longtime early voting researcher, offered a similar perspective, suggesting that Clinton did better among early voters in some 2008 primaries because "her polling numbers were higher" when early voting began (quoted in Hylton-Austin 2008).

I posit that early voting produces information asymmetries that can affect voting behavior in presidential primaries as well as the strategies campaigns pursue in their quest to win these contests. In particular, I believe that early voters should be more likely than primary day voters to support early front-runners and those with high levels of name recognition. Those who wait until primary day will have more exposure to less well-known candidates, thereby increasing the odds that their preferences will shift away from an established party figure(s). Further, I suggest that front-running candidates (and their campaigns) may view early voting as an opportunity to target and accumulate votes in favorable states while their popularity is high, thereby blunting the effects of negative momentum that may develop later in the nomination season.

This analysis contributes to a long literature on how the nominating process affects the types of candidates that ultimately succeed and compete to serve as president. Studies have previously reported that early front-runners already enjoy numerous advantages throughout the process, including disproportionate media coverage (King 1990; Redlawsk, Tolbert, and Donovan 2010), the matching funds program (Wilcox 1991),⁴

4. The matching funds program has become increasingly obsolete since the early 2000s, as fewer candidates have found the spending caps worth the benefit of federal funds.

and the increased front loading of primaries and caucuses (Mayer and Busch 2004). Given that early voting now plays a prominent role in presidential nominating contests, it is essential that we examine its potential effects as well.

Case Selection

I anticipate that the effects of early voting on candidate support should be greatest when a presidential nomination contest features a clear front-runner and a challenger(s) with less exposure to the electorate. This type of dynamic has been relatively common over the past several decades. The 1984 Democratic nomination contest featured a close competition between former Vice President Walter Mondale and Senator Gary Hart, who was not well known until his surprise victory in the New Hampshire primary (Gallup 2004). In 2000, Vice President Al Gore was the clear favorite for the Democratic nomination, while his principal challenger, Senator Bill Bradley, remained unknown to 57% of the electorate two months before the Iowa Caucus (CBS News 1999). In the Republican contest that same year, surveys showed that John McCain was considerably less well known than his front-running opponent, George W. Bush (ABC News 1999). In 2012, Mitt Romney was the clear front-runner for the Republican nomination, though several candidates—Rick Santorum and Newt Gingrich, in particular—peaked at various points in the months preceding and during the primaries. While both Santorum and Gingrich were known to many Americans in early 2012, the media did not treat them as serious threats in the weeks surrounding their early victories (Pew Research Center 2012). In fact, a Pew study found that even after Santorum and Gingrich won contests in Iowa and South Carolina, respectively, Romney was still discussed in news coverage by more than a 2:1 margin.⁵

The 2008 Democratic campaign provides perhaps the best case for testing the effect of early voting on candidate choice. First, Clinton was a clear, early front-runner who was principally challenged by Obama, a less well-known challenger who hoped to generate momentum through success in early primary and caucus states. After victories in the Iowa Caucus and South Carolina Primary, Obama was widely considered a credible challenger to Clinton, though many states had commenced early voting by this point.⁶ Second, unlike the 2000 contests, early voting had become a significant feature of nominating campaigns by 2008, evidenced by the resources devoted by the candidates to mobilizing supporters during this time. Third, the race between Obama and Clinton was decided by only 127 pledged delegates, meaning that small advantages for one candidate were particularly important. Finally, exit pollsters surveyed a considerable number of early voters across several states in 2008, allowing us to compare the behavior of early and

5. In the study, 50% of respondents claimed that they “heard the most” about Romney on the news, while only 19% and 13% said the same of Santorum and Gingrich, respectively.

6. By the time Obama defeated Clinton in the South Carolina primary on January 26, 2008, early voting had commenced in at least 10 primary states—Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Utah (Benac 2008).

primary day voters. This raw data was released to researchers in 2012, making 2008 the most recent nomination contest for which data is available.⁷

The Clinton Early Vote Strategy

The Clinton campaign was acutely aware of its advantage and actively sought to benefit from early voting programs. As a former First Lady and sitting two-term senator from New York, few Americans (let alone politicians) rivaled her name recognition in the years preceding the campaign. Anticipation about a presidential run was present for years, even before her 2006 reelection to the Senate. Clinton announced her candidacy in January 2007, declaring “I’m in it to win it” (quoted in Roberts 2007). She led a field of eight challengers, including Obama, by double digits throughout 2007 and at times looked like the inevitable nominee.

Despite her strong position, Clinton never felt confident about the Iowa Caucus and even considered withdrawing her campaign from the state in May 2007. Unlike many other states, her husband (former President Clinton) had never run a caucus campaign in Iowa. Further, Edwards, the 2004 Democratic vice presidential nominee, had an established base in the state from his 32% vote share in the 2004 caucuses. Lastly, Obama, at the time a first-term senator from Illinois, polled better in the state than in some later primary and caucus states. Numerous November 2007 polls showed Obama trailing Clinton by only a handful of points in Iowa, a sharp contrast from the nearly 18 lead she held in national polls. By skipping the caucus, she could delegitimize it and force New Hampshire (a state where she appeared stronger) to be the first true Democratic battlefield.

In May 2007, Clinton’s deputy campaign manager, Mike Henry, issued a memo urging the campaign to ignore Iowa and instead focus the candidate’s limited time and resources to contests in larger states such as Florida, Arizona, California, Georgia, and Texas. Henry noted that all of those states, along with several others whose primaries were to be held in early February, would be allowing early voting in the weeks before Iowans gathered for their caucuses, potentially diminishing Iowa’s importance. Henry wrote, “Iowans will not be the first to vote . . . Hundreds of thousands of voters will be voting in California, Florida and Texas. We must fund an expensive paid communications and vote by mail/early vote program in these mega-states” (quoted in Broder 2007).

While Henry’s memo did not convince Clinton to ignore Iowa, the campaign did launch an aggressive early voting campaign. The strategy mirrored the conventional approach to mobilizing early voters, using data to target Clinton’s strongest supporters in the weeks before each state’s primary day (Stein 2008). Aware that Iowa may produce negative momentum for Clinton, the campaign hoped to secure tens of thousands of votes before that event occurred. It targeted voters in early voting states with direct mail, radio advertisements, and door-to-door canvassing. Figuring that Iowa “would come out, at

7. As of late 2014, Edison Media Research/Mitofsky International had not yet released data from the 2012 primaries.

best, a muddle,” Clinton’s New Hampshire state director, Nick Clemons, planned for this contingency, actively mobilizing her supporters to vote via absentee ballots beginning in December. The idea was “to get their votes in before Iowa even happened” (quoted in Tumulty 2008). Clemons sought to mitigate the effects of Obama’s post-Iowa momentum by securing Clinton votes before people could change their minds. As New Hampshire is not a no-excuse early voting state, the pool of individuals for which this was possible was limited, but nonetheless potentially decisive. Clemons focused his absentee mobilization efforts on both college students committed to Clinton and Boston commuters (Tumulty 2008). Both were sizable groups that had legitimate excuses to receive absentee ballots in New Hampshire. Both, the campaign believed, could conceivably shift from Clinton to Obama supporters after the Iowa Caucus. In the end, Clinton defeated Obama 39-36%, a margin of only 7,500 votes. It is unclear whether Clemons’s early voting strategy made the difference between winning and losing, but the campaign believed it helped.

Clinton employed this strategy in other states during the 2008 campaign. In the weeks before Super Tuesday (February 5), her campaign worked to secure early votes before the South Carolina primary, where they knew Obama could perform well (Balz, Kornblut, and Murray 2008).⁸ “Absentee and early voting are votes in the bank. The more votes we can get in the bank before Election Day, the better off we are,” said campaign spokeswoman Ana Cruz (quoted in CBS News 2008).

In California, more than one million of the nearly five million votes cast occurred before Obama gained new momentum after winning in South Carolina (on January 26) by almost 30 percentage points. By then, Clinton had successfully mobilized many of her supporters, particularly women and Hispanics, to vote early. Ace Smith, director of Clinton’s California campaign, spent months acting as though there was “an election every day here for 29 days” (Benac 2008). Those deemed most likely to support Clinton were sent three mailings over the course of the early voting period. In addition, when early voting commenced in early January, Clinton campaigned throughout the state and spent time with campaign workers in San Diego calling potential early participants.

Obama also had the campaign funds to mobilize early voters in the weeks before Super Tuesday. His campaign placed over 500,000 calls in an attempt to secure early voters in California and Arizona. Further, his canvassers also knocked on doors in these states, as well as in Georgia, Tennessee, and Utah, to mobilize supporters to cast early ballots. Obama spokesman Ben LaBolt was confident that these efforts would yield dividends, stating, “All Obama supporters have been reminded about early voting and been given the tools to do so” (Benac 2008).

But while Obama could mobilize his early supporters, polls suggested that he simply had fewer of them than Clinton in the weeks leading up to the Super Tuesday contests. Perhaps both Clinton and Obama were simply securing votes from those whose minds could never be changed. But if voters do indeed underestimate the likelihood that their preferences will shift (Barber and Odean 2001; Camerer and Lovallo 1999; Malhotra

8. While Clinton eventually anticipated a loss to Obama in South Carolina, the 28 percentage point margin was larger than her campaign or preelection polls predicted.

and Meredith 2011; Svenson 1981), then perhaps Clinton's early advantage translated into votes that may have shifted to Obama if early voting was not an option. Anecdotally, Clinton's effort to "take advantage of her name recognition" seemingly worked. In Long Beach, California, where Clinton had mobilized many elderly Latinas, some Clinton voters later admitted to reporters that they would have voted for Obama if they had waited until primary day (Newton-Small 2008). Further, in California, exit polls indicated that Clinton had a narrow advantage over Obama, 49% to 46%, among those who made up their minds in the campaign's final three days. Among those who had decided earlier, she held a 17-point advantage.

Clinton ultimately lost the Democratic nomination contest to Obama in a historic battle that lasted until June 2008. Obama's campaign employed a strategy focused on mobilizing new voters, winning large delegate victories in low-turnout caucus states, and financially planning for a long race (Kenski, Hardy, and Jamieson 2010; McDonald and Schaller 2011). Nevertheless, Clinton's efforts during the early months of the primaries serve as an example of how early voting has encouraged campaigns (particularly those of early front-runners) to seek protection from negative momentum. Candidates, sensing an early advantage over less well-known challengers, can actively mobilize voters in later states where they are popular, thus securing votes before an opponents' momentum allows citizens to reconsider their preferences.

Measuring Clinton's Early Voting Advantage

While Clinton clearly sought to exploit early voting in early 2008, measuring her effectiveness requires greater scrutiny. In conducting my analysis, I seek to build on the only academic piece to address the possibility of early voting and information asymmetries in presidential nomination contests. Meredith and Malhotra (2011) analyze the 2008 California presidential primaries, taking advantage of a natural experiment. In California, counties with precincts consisting of less than 250 people can choose to *only* offer the vote-by-mail (VBM) option to voters. In these counties, essentially all voters therefore become early voters. The authors assess whether voters in these counties were more likely to support candidates who ultimately dropped out of the 2008 presidential race before the state's primary date (February 5). Ultimately, they find that the all-VBM precincts gave a greater share of their vote to Edwards, Giuliani, and Thompson, three candidates who were actively seeking the nomination when the early voting period began (on January 7), but dropped out before February 5. Further, they find that candidates who polled better during the early voting period, such as Clinton on the Democratic side, performed better before primary day than on it.

I seek to both confirm and extend Meredith and Malhotra's findings through newly released individual-level data from the 2008 Democratic primaries. While the authors' findings are useful, they examine only a very small population in a single state that is essentially forced to vote early via the mail. More interesting perhaps is the possibility that voters may *choose* to vote early, believing that their minds are set, when in reality

they could be altered with new information. While such a phenomenon is difficult to prove, I build a model that attempts to do so with some confidence.

I seek to determine whether Clinton's early support in Florida and three Super Tuesday states—Arizona, California, and Tennessee—provided her with an advantage in the final vote tallies. I choose these four primary states because each held an early contest in 2008 that featured a large number of early voters. Owing to the significance of early ballots, exit pollsters supplemented their polling place surveys with telephone calls to early voters in these states before the respective state's primary day (see Table 1).⁹

Further, as Table 2 demonstrates, Clinton enjoyed strong, early support in each of these states. In each case, as the primary date drew closer and Obama became better known and campaigned in the states, his relative position in public polls improved.

Of the four states in my analysis, only Arizona (8 of 15 counties) provides some actual data regarding Obama's and Clinton's performance among early and primary day voters.¹⁰ Table 3 notes the margin of victory that Clinton had over Obama among early and nonearly voters in these eight Arizona counties. In seven of eight instances, Clinton enjoyed a greater advantage over Obama among early voters than those who waited until

TABLE 1
Early Voters in National Election Pool Exit Polls (Democratic Party Primaries), 2008

<i>State</i>	<i>Early Voters in Sample</i>	<i>Total Voters in Sample</i>
Florida	294	1525
Arizona	308	1226
California	363	1919
Tennessee	344	1351

Source: Edison Media Research/Mitofsky International (2012).

TABLE 2
Hillary Clinton's Declining Advantage as Primary Dates Drew Nearer, 2008

<i>State</i>	<i>Primary Date</i>	<i>Early Voting Start Date</i>	<i>Average Clinton Advantage until One Week before Primary</i>	<i>Average Clinton Advantage One Week or Less before Primary</i>
Florida	1/29/2008	12/25/2007	23.10%	18.90%
Arizona	2/5/2008	1/3/2008	15.50%	4.00%
California	2/5/2008	1/7/2008	12.55%	0.00%
Tennessee	2/5/2008	1/16/2008	14.00%	5.00%

Source: RealClearPolitics (2008).

These averages include all polls recorded by RealClearPolitics in the month before the respective primaries.

9. Super Tuesday was held on February 5, 2008, and featured 23 Democratic contests. The Florida primary was held on January 29. Edison Media Research/Mitofsky International also polled early voters in Montana, North Carolina, South Dakota, and Texas. Each of these contests was held in March 2008 or later, after Obama had become much better known nationally. I therefore focus my attention on the four earlier contests.

10. Each of the four states was contacted, though officials in California, Florida, and Tennessee explained that their final results do not denote which ballots were cast early and which were cast on their respective primary day. Arizona does not collect the data statewide, but many counties do. I therefore collected data from the eight counties that provided it.

TABLE 3
Hillary Clinton's Margin of Victory over Barack Obama in Arizona Counties (Early v. Primary Day Voters), 2008

<i>County</i>	<i>Clinton Margin over Obama among Early Voters (in Percentage Points)</i>	<i>Clinton Margin over Obama among Primary Day Voters (in Percentage Points)</i>	<i>Drop in Clinton Margin on Primary Day (in Percentage Points)</i>
Graham	14.75	4.15	10.6
Conchise	21.64	10.60	11.04
Maricopa	16.93	-2.81	19.74
Mohave	49.53	29.84	19.69
Navajo	13.33	14.77	-1.44
Pima	11.21	4.26	6.95
Yuma	46.17	35.93	10.24
Yavapai	2.10	-3.67	5.77

Source: Arizona Department of State (2012).

February 5 to cast a ballot. In five cases, Clinton's margin dropped more than 10 percentage points on primary day, while the largest drop (19.73 points) was in Maricopa County, the state's largest county. Only in Navajo County did Obama perform better with early voters than primary day voters, though only by a modest 1.44 percentage points.

But simply noting that early voters preferred Clinton more than primary day voters is inadequate. It may be that more voters inclined toward Clinton chose to vote early for other reasons such as work requirements, convenience, or age. It could also be the case that the Clinton campaign identified its supporters more effectively during the early voting period and better mobilized them.

In order to gain more insight into the behavior of individual primary voters, I use the National Election Pool's official 2008 exit polls. As I noted, exit pollsters supplemented their polling place surveys with telephone calls to early voters in select states during the weeks before their respective primaries. Specifically, pollsters selected households using random-digit dialing, and a respondent was then randomly selected within each household. Callers then directly asked respondents whether they voted early. All early voters were asked the same questions asked at the polling place on the state's primary day. Before the telephone survey results were combined with the exit-poll data from precincts, they were weighted to reflect the actual number of early voters in the state.¹¹

In addition to identifying whether respondents voted early, pollsters asked a series of personal and demographic questions. I use this data to control for the independent effect of voting early on supporting Clinton. While the 2008 primary was tightly contested, both Obama and Clinton had clear demographic coalitions behind them. By controlling for these and other demographic traits in my model, I can estimate whether early voting itself, independent of these other characteristics, helped bring voters into the Clinton column that otherwise may have chosen Obama had early voting not been an option.

11. Edison Media Research/Mitofsky International was unwilling to provide specific dates regarding their calls to early voters.

I develop two principal probit models, each with various specifications representing different states. In each model, the dependent variable is a dichotomous measure signifying a Clinton vote in the relevant contest. Voters who support Obama are coded as 0s.¹² The principle independent variable is a dichotomous measure for voting early, as signified by having confirmed this fact via phone with an exit pollster in the weeks before the respective state's primary. In primaries that excluded Republicans from voting (closed or semiclosed primary states), I exclude self-identified Republicans due to the distinct possibility that they participated in the contest as *raiders*.¹³

The first model simply measures the effect of voting early on Clinton support without any other explanatory variables included. The second model includes controls for numerous demographic and political characteristics, each of which is expected to have a positive relationship with Clinton support. These characteristics account for several vital Clinton constituencies. Gender is an important consideration in the model, as women favored Clinton's bid to become the first female president in 2008 (though only by a slight majority) (Sullivan 2008). I also expect voters self-identifying as Democrats, rather than independents (or even Republicans in Tennessee, an open primary state), to be more likely to support Clinton, as she was more popular with the party's base. Obama, conversely, was stronger with independents and disgruntled Republicans. In fact, self-identified Democrats gave Clinton over 800,000 more votes than Obama during the nomination fight (Beam 2008).

Race played a very important role in the 2008 Democratic primaries, as black voters supported Obama overwhelmingly (typically with 80-90% support), while whites and Hispanics backed Clinton by solid margins. In fact, on Super Tuesday, Clinton won the support of over 60% of Hispanic voters (CBS News 2009). With regards to income and education, Clinton tended to be stronger among the working class and those without a college education, while Obama performed well with high earners and the well educated. Finally, Clinton earned more support from the elderly, or those aged 65 and older (Harwood 2008). Finally, I suspect that married voters may support Clinton in greater numbers given that Obama's base consisted of younger, urban voters. With these considerations in mind, I generated the following model:

$$\text{Clinton Vote } (y) = b_0 + b_1\text{EarlyVoter} + b_2\text{Woman} + b_3\text{Democrat} + b_4\text{Married} + b_5\text{White} + b_6\text{Hispanic} + b_4\text{LowIncome} + b_5\text{NoCollege} + b_6\text{65andOlder}$$

12. By the time these four contests occurred, only Clinton and Obama remained as active, campaigning candidates for the Democratic nomination. John Edwards, who dropped out during the early voting period, did receive a notable number of early votes in many states, as Malhotra and Meredith (2011) report. My analysis, however, is interested in how voters evaluated the candidacies of Clinton and Obama. The inclusion of Edwards's voters would skew the findings by suggesting that both Obama and Clinton performed much better among primary date voters than early voters. This is the case only because each faced only one major opponent on primary day rather than two during the early voting period. In order to best assess the performance of Clinton and Obama across the electorates, I include only voters in my analysis that chose one of them, regardless of when they voted.

13. Raiding occurs when members of a political party vote in another party's primary or caucus for the purpose of selecting a candidate they interpret to be a weak general election candidate. In doing so, raiders hope to increase the likelihood that their party's nominee will prevail in the forthcoming general election.

The various controls are each expected to have positive effects on the dependent variable and (in most cases) demonstrate statistical significance at conventional levels. If the effect of simply voting early survives the inclusion of these covariates, then I can be confident in my hypothesis that Clinton benefitted from her front-runner status during the early voting period.

For each of the two models, I include five specifications—one that includes respondents from *all* four states examined and one for *each* of the four states. This allows me to assess not only the overall effect of voting early on Clinton support, but to what extent the relationship varies across states.

Findings

With no controls included, all five specifications suggest that Clinton performed significantly better among early voters in the Florida, Arizona, California, and Tennessee primaries. The results are universally significant at the 99% confidence level. This finding is not surprising, as Clinton led an aforementioned early mobilization effort urging voters to participate early. Figure 1 showcases the marginal effects of voting early on supporting Clinton across each of the five specifications (see Table 4).

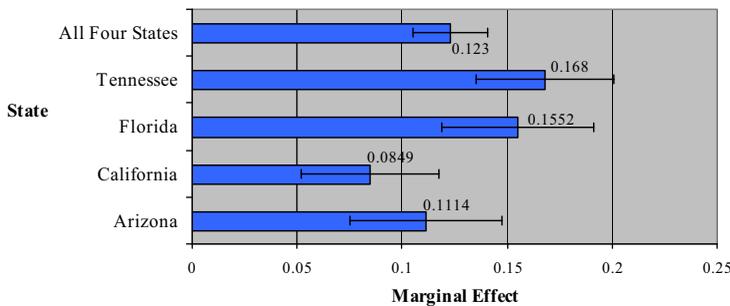


FIGURE 1. Marginal Effects of Voting Early on Clinton Support.

TABLE 4
 Probit Analysis—The Effect of Voting Early on Support for Hillary Clinton during the 2008 Presidential Primaries (Florida, Arizona, California, and Tennessee)

	(1) <i>All</i>	(2) <i>California</i>	(3) <i>Tennessee</i>	(4) <i>Arizona</i>	(5) <i>Florida</i>
Early voter	0.316*** (0.044)	0.215*** (0.080)	0.442*** (0.092)	0.280*** (0.090)	0.427*** (0.097)
Constant	0.0408** (0.020)	0.0218 (0.035)	0.0685 (0.042)	-0.164*** (0.044)	0.201*** (0.041)
Observations	4,993	1,663	1,156	1,065	1,186

Notes: *** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .10$.

Cell entries are probit regression estimates with standard errors in parentheses.

As Figure 1 demonstrates, voting early significantly raised the likelihood of a primary participant choosing Clinton over Obama. Across all four examined states, a voter was 12.3 percentage points more likely to support Clinton if he or she chose to vote during the early voting period. The effect was largest in Tennessee, where early voters were 16.8 points more likely to back Clinton. Tennessee was followed by Florida (15.5), Arizona (11.1), and California (8.5).

These figures meet the criteria for substantive significance, as they represent a considerable shift in preferences on the basis of when one chooses to vote. However, the models do not account for the makeup of the early electorate. It is quite possible that Clinton's extensive early voting mobilization efforts led groups that typically supported her (women, the elderly, Latinos) to participate early. These voters may have swelled Clinton's margin among the early electorate but in fact may have voted for her had they chosen to wait until primary day.

The second model accounts for the many characteristics predictive of Clinton support in 2008. If voting early remains a positive and significant force when pooled with these known predictors, then I can be more confident that Clinton performed better during the early voting period *even when controlling for the makeup of the voters*. This raises the possibility that some early-voting Clinton supporters may have shifted their allegiance to Obama had they waited until primary day to vote.

Table 5 reports the findings of my five multivariate probit specifications. Across all five tests, the expected predictors of Clinton support mostly behave as expected. Women, self-identified Democrats, whites, Hispanics, those without a college education, and the elderly are consistently associated with higher levels of Clinton support. Married voters and those with low incomes are significantly more likely to vote for Clinton in some, but not all, cases. With the inclusion of these highly significant and powerful covariates, the effect of a voter simply casting a ballot before the primary date has a positive and significant relationship with Clinton support in four of five specifications. The effect meets these criteria with all four states considered as well as in the individual analyses of Arizona, Florida, and Tennessee. Only in California is the effect insignificant, though it remains positive. I can therefore report with confidence that Clinton experienced an advantage with early voters beyond that associated with the characteristics of the voters choosing to participate before their respective primary day.

Figure 2 presents the marginal effects of Clinton support in the primary specification, which has a sample of over 4,000 respondents and includes all four states. Each covariate in this model was statistically significant at either the 95% or 99% level. The marginal effects of being Hispanic (0.332) or white (0.332) are easily the best predictors of Clinton support. Each, holding the effects of the other factors constant, raises the likelihood that a voter will support Clinton over Obama by a whopping 33 percentage points. The next highest predictors are voters without a college degree (0.144) and self-identified Democrats (0.141), followed by women (0.114) and the elderly (0.101). One's identification as an early voter is the next predictive characteristic, as it makes a voter over seven percentage points (0.0726) more likely to support Clinton over Obama, independent of all other covariates in the model. The lower bound of the confidence interval is over five percentage points, suggesting that a meaningful effect exists even when considering the model's standard error.

TABLE 5
Probit Analysis—The Effect of Voting Early on Support for Hillary Clinton during the 2008 Presidential Primaries (controls included)

	(1) <i>All</i>	(2) <i>California</i>	(3) <i>Tennessee</i>	(4) <i>Arizona</i>	(5) <i>Florida</i>
Early voter	0.184*** (0.053)	0.158 (0.096)	0.286** (0.115)	0.112* (0.103)	0.328*** (0.121)
Woman	0.286*** (0.040)	0.235*** (0.069)	0.340*** (0.092)	0.248*** (0.088)	0.405*** (0.086)
Democrat	0.354*** (0.054)	0.567*** (0.096)	0.607*** (0.109)	0.202* (0.115)	0.119 (0.122)
Married	0.0961** (0.042)	-0.00978 (0.072)	0.157 (0.097)	0.165* (0.090)	0.0467 (0.089)
White	0.859*** (0.053)	0.232** (0.095)	1.541*** (0.106)	0.632*** (0.138)	1.196*** (0.107)
Hispanic	0.928*** (0.066)	0.611*** (0.106)	1.416*** (0.308)	0.788*** (0.164)	1.020*** (0.140)
No college degree	0.371*** (0.052)	0.240** (0.098)	0.431*** (0.103)	0.510*** (0.113)	0.310*** (0.112)
Income below \$50,000/yr.	0.112** (0.044)	0.107 (0.079)	0.161* (0.098)	-0.0198 (0.096)	0.115 (0.096)
Aged 65 or older	0.256*** (0.053)	0.222** (0.105)	0.234* (0.130)	0.423*** (0.108)	0.104 (0.100)
Constant	-1.344*** (0.079)	-1.013*** (0.132)	-2.055*** (0.173)	-1.321*** (0.190)	-1.182*** (0.168)
Observations	4,434	1,440	1,024	961	1,050

Notes: *** $p < .01$; ** $p < .05$; * $p < .10$.

Cell entries are probit regression estimates with standard errors in parentheses.

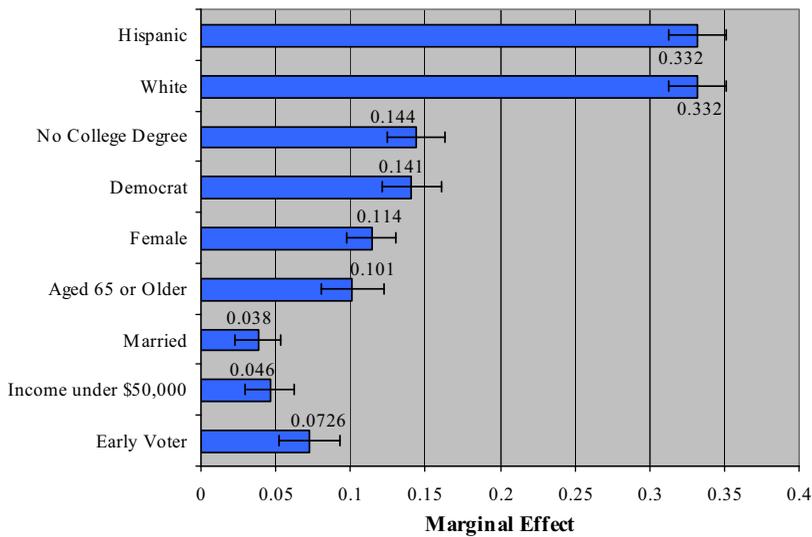


FIGURE 2. Marginal Effects of Clinton Support across Four Primary States.

This finding suggests with strong credibility that Clinton benefited from early voting during the 2008 presidential primaries; this edge was likely a result of her early front-runner status, early voting mobilization program, and name-recognition advantage. Had voters waited until their respective primary dates to vote, some may have converted to Obama supporters by this time, increasing his overall vote share and delegate haul. More broadly, these findings represent an important potential unintended consequence of early voting. During nomination campaigns, programs may serve to further assist certain types of candidates, namely, early front-runners and those with high levels of name recognition.

Conclusions

Research has long focused on how institutions affect the types of candidates that ultimately ascend to the presidency. More specifically, changes in rule structures have been known to affect presidential nomination campaigns. The adoption of major reforms in the early 1970s led to less party influence, more divisive contests, and the proliferation of more ideological candidates (Lengle 1987). Front-runners have long benefited from numerous structural aspects of nomination systems, including the matching funds program (Wilcox 1991) and the increased front-loading of primaries and caucuses (Mayer and Busch 2004). Given that early voting now plays a prominent role in presidential nominating contests, it is useful to explore its potential effects as well.

Using raw exit-poll data from 2008, the most recent nomination cycle for which it is available, I report evidence that early voting may make it more likely that some voters will support front-running candidates. Aware of this possibility, Clinton effectively exploited her early name recognition and lead in the polls in 2008, actively mobilizing Democrats to vote early in states where the option existed. By securing votes before Obama gained momentum by winning the Iowa Caucus and South Carolina primary, she may have won the support of some who would have backed Obama had they been forced to wait until their state's respective primary date. My findings suggest that early voters were over seven percentage points more likely to support Clinton, even when a series of highly predictive demographic variables were included in the model. Ultimately, Clinton was unable to win her party's presidential nomination. Nevertheless, she built (and seemingly benefited from) a strategy considering the new realities of early voting. As these programs continue to expand in the coming years, campaigns may better harness their efforts and enjoy more success.

My findings suggest that early voting could assist other types of candidates during presidential primaries, namely, *flash-in-the-pan* candidates who are able to peak while early ballots are being cast. In late 2011, several Republican hopefuls—Congresswoman Michele Bachmann, Governor Rick Perry, and Herman Cain—briefly surged in the polls (DiGuido 2011). Had any of these candidates peaked a bit later—once early voting had begun—they may have secured considerable votes despite having anemic support by the start of the primaries and caucuses.

I focus exclusively on 2008 in this study, but given that early voting appears to be a permanent feature of presidential campaigns, research can eventually be expanded. While the 2012 Republican nomination fight was not nearly as competitive as the 2008 Democratic race, it appears that Mitt Romney sought to benefit from early voting. Romney, an early front-runner with both ample resources and high name recognition, launched an aggressive operation to secure votes during the early period before the first contests (i.e., Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina) could alter his momentum. Once early voting for the Florida primary (whose primary date was January 31) began in late December, Romney's staff employed conventional mobilization tactics. His campaign acquired a daily list from Florida election officials and compared names of those who had requested early ballots against those that the campaign's microtargeting models had identified as probable supporters. Those who matched up were called frequently and had campaign mail delivered to their doors. Campaign officials then compiled daily updates of voters who submitted their ballots early, allowing Romney to focus exclusively on those yet to vote (Issenberg 2012). Once official exit-poll data is released from the 2012 contests, scholars can more carefully examine whether Romney's early voting efforts were indeed successful.

If my central findings are confirmed, then officials may wish to consider the normative implications of early voting during nomination contests, as many believe that early front-runners and those with deep campaign coffers need no additional advantage in their quest to secure presidential nominations. Rather, many argue that the process is healthier when voting occurs in fewer locales at once, allowing lesser-known candidates to compete and generate momentum for later contests. Indeed, it has been said that the sequencing of state contests *embraces the little guy* (Delahayeal 2009).

I contend that information asymmetries in the electorate are potentially important for an additional reason. The widespread notion of equal rights with regard to voting is potentially challenged when some citizens are able to weigh more information before making a vote choice than others. Much like the right to vote, we assert that the ability to speak one's mind through democratic participation is vital, regardless of whether all citizens actually exercise it. Similarly, while not all voters will weigh the same information when voting, there is value in providing all citizens the opportunity to learn as much about candidates as a campaign can offer, especially given that research suggests that additional information can sway the minds of voters who believe their views are set in stone (Barber and Odean 2001; Camerer and Lovallo 1999; Malhotra and Meredith 2011; Svenson 1981).

Whether early voting's implications for candidate choice is troubling is a matter of debate; some may suggest that front-runners with ample cash gain their advantage through meaningful experience and strong managerial skills, attributes we tend to seek in presidents. Nevertheless, it is important to comprehend the effects—*both intended and unintended*—of early voting in order to properly assess its full role in American democracy.

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