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No Matter How You Build It, Most of Them Won't Come: Primary Type and Gen Z Turnout

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the causes of low levels of youth turnout in presidential primary elections. Generation Z, commonly referred to as Gen Z, is more diverse, and their voting power continues to expand as more of them reach voting eligibility. My study puts a spotlight on my own generation in order to comprehend what factors influence their turnout. I believe that partisanship weighs heavily on Gen Z voters. As a result, closed, more partisan primaries may witness lower turnout than open, less partisan primaries. The timing of the primary contests as well as competition level are also expected to affect turnout levels because of how they influence the salience of the primary. Through multivariate regression, I determine that, with one exception, there is no discernable relationship between youth turnout and the type of primary. Turnout is higher for young voters in open Republican primaries in 2016. This analysis proves that low turnout among young voters calls for further investigation as more questions emerge about what drives or deters Gen Z voters from going to the polls.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

When I voted for the first time in the presidential election in 2020 it was around noon. I saw a long line of older citizens at the ballot box. Even though it was the middle of the day, it was announced that I was the first new voter to vote at my polling location. How was this possible? This was my first exposure to the lack of enthusiasm and low turnout in elections from my peers.

The 2020 presidential election was a significant turning point for America, and there was a great deal of attention during the 2020 election cycle; the stakes were high. Youth turnout in 2020 was roughly fifty percent; this is an eleven-point increase from the 2016 presidential election, but it remains low (“Half of Youth Voted,” 2021). In some states, turnout among new voters ages eighteen to nineteen reached only twelve percent (“Half of Youth Voted,” 2021). Youth turnout in primary elections was even lower with most states witnessing between twenty and thirty percent of eligible youth voters going to the polls (“Youth Voting,” 2016). Primary participation affects general election participation as it helps build a habit of voting. Moreover, it is critical that young citizens build their voting habits as early as possible to sustain civic engagement over their lifetimes.

My thesis investigates how the openness of presidential primaries affects youth turnout in different states. Primary systems are built by states and operate according to their specific rules and procedures. Some states hold closed primaries in which only voters registered with the Democratic or Republican parties can participate. Some states hold semi-closed primaries in which voters registered as independents are able to vote in either the Democratic or Republican

primary. Other states hold open primaries in which all voters may vote in any primary contest, no matter their party affiliation or even if they don't have an affiliation at all.

My goal is to understand how systemic factors act as obstacles for youth voters. Voting is a critical operation of democracy. To gain the right to vote, citizens struggled and fought for years. Suffrage is universal for citizens eighteen and older, yet young people chose to be bystanders rather than to act. In 2016, less than half of eligible young citizens voted ("Youth Voting," 2016). There is a problem in America. If young citizens continue to produce the lowest turnout numbers, America is in danger. We need to understand how the systems in place may obstruct young voters' participation in an essential democratic function.

The literature about voter turnout is vast. From weather, to mobility, to education, to income, scholars have investigated the factors that influence and motivate citizens to vote. The literature on voting blocs by age is also extensive; historical and recent studies focus on comparing young and older voters because of the stark differences in turnout which persist in America. On the other hand, the literature on primary elections is limited. Much of the research on openness of primaries centers on the effects on candidates rather than the effects on voters. The information available on Gen Z voters is minimal because Gen Z was first eligible to vote recently in the 2016 election.

I depart from existing literature by focusing on whether there are specific factors affecting young citizens' tendencies to vote in primary elections. In order to reverse the trend of underrepresentation of young voters at the ballot box, we need an intense focus on youth voting.

I use data gathered by the Cooperative Election Study to study youth turnout in primaries. Specifically, I employ their 2016 and 2020 nationally representative surveys. I also employ

information from the National Conference of State Legislatures to develop additional variables related to primary type.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Research Question: Why does youth turnout vary in primary elections?

For decades, scholars have sought to explain the low turnout by the youngest voting group. Vast scholarship has been devoted to this question. Most research, however, focuses on general elections. Turnout in primary elections is an understudied field, and turnout by youth voters in primaries is especially overlooked. I seek to intervene at the intersection of youth turnout and primary turnout research with a focus on the distinctiveness of Gen Z voters. I begin by acknowledging the challenges that Gen Z, like other voters, faces in every election cycle. Next, I discuss how Gen Z citizens are at a unique time in their lives where they feel less engaged in politics. Additionally, I examine how young voters feel like the American political system does not work for them. Finally, I discuss how primaries provide a particular disadvantage to young voters.

What Affects All Voters

Research has well established the idea that partisanship is a significant motivator for voting; strong ties to a party positively influence turnout. Emotions, specifically anger, fear, and anxiety, ignite voters to head to the polls. Partisanship, civic duty, and emotions affect all voters, including young voters.

Stronger partisans are more likely to vote (Dassonneville, 2017). When citizens reach the voting eligible age, they face a binary choice in America's two-party system. Many young people default to registering with and voting for the party that their parents support. Some may take cues from their friends or other members of their social circle. Building connections to a

party, developing strong stances on issues, and engaging with fellow partisans causes higher turnout (Dassonneville, 2017). If young citizens build partisan connections and feel more engaged with politics, they are more likely to vote (Ulbig & Waggener, 2011). Connections with the democratic party in the 2008 presidential election led to higher turnout at various levels of government for young voters (Ardoin et al., 2015). Identifying with a party or aligning with a political ideology can be critical when a citizen begins their civic engagement through voting.

Partisanship becomes more critical in battleground states (Cebula et al., 2013). A more divided state leads to increases in participation by all voters including young voters (Cebula et al., 2013). The perception that an individual vote can possibly make a difference leads more citizens to the polls. Often, a collective action problem is created when individuals believe that the election outcome is already a foregone conclusion and therefore their vote will not matter. In battleground states, the belief that every vote counts is more salient. Voters feel they have more impact on election results, therefore voters in battleground states are more likely to show up on election day (Cebula et al., 2013). Specifically, college students in battleground states demonstrated higher voter turnout in the 2012 and 2016 presidential elections (McNaughton & Brown, 2020).

Emotions, whether a reaction to campaign rhetoric or the state of America, also motivate voters' decisions. Campaign rhetoric intended to stoke fear among the electorate, or a sense of identity with one party over another, helps candidates reach new audiences and certify support among co-partisans (Philips & Plutzer, 2023). Capitalizing on voters' fears increases their likelihood of voting; candidates present themselves as superheroes in situations where only they can save the day (Scheller, 2019). Voters' emotions, such as fear, worry, anger, or anxiety, affect their evaluations of candidates which contribute to vote choice (Ladd & Lenz, 2008). Candidates,

parties, and the media manipulate voters with current events and salient political issues which stokes the flames of anger and lead to increased turnout (Scheller, 2019). Young people are not immune to emotional appeal, and they can be reactive voters, especially as they have less exposure to polarized politics compared to older generations who may become desensitized to it over time.

Voters are highly responsive to fear-based rhetoric, but voters are also driven to the polls by anger and outrage regarding important changes in policy. Recently, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, a monumental decision legalizing abortion. Fear quickly spread about potential legislative choices made at the state level to regulate or outlaw abortion as well as anger about the outcome of the case. Worrying that their access to reproductive health care is under threat, young voters, and especially those capable of carrying a child, have turned out in large numbers in states such as Ohio and Kansas to defend abortion access (Burnett & Fernando, 2023). When issues important to younger citizens face threats, young voters turn out in record numbers.

Gen Z at a Crossroads

While partisanship and emotions drive citizens to vote, life challenges like mobile lifestyles disrupt young voters' ability to grow their civic habits. Because of the events of their childhood, they are a distinctive voting group and have different issue priorities. Gen Z citizens are a different voting group, and it is rarely acknowledged.

For young Americans, typical features of a young person's life impacts voting behaviors in significant ways (Niemi & Hanmer, 2010). The youngest voting block faces unique life circumstances unlike any other age group (Hout & Knoke, 1975). College students, for example, experience greater mobility when they move away from home for college or relocate for a job

after graduation (Jackson, 2000). The changes they experience during this portion of their life provide challenges to civic engagement. College students lack ties to one community that come from owning a home, membership in community groups, or having children in the neighborhood school or regular attendance at religious services. All of these things obstruct their ability to feel part of the community and thereby build habits of civic engagement (Goerres, 2007; Dassonneville, 2017; Strate et al., 1989).

Gen Z shares all of these characteristics. From their experiences to their political views, they are distinct compared to other generations, and this distinctiveness may help explain their consistently low turnout in primary elections, Gen Z is “the most racially and ethnically diverse” and “the most well-educated generation” (Guerrero, 2023; Graf et al., 2019). Compared to Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation, younger Americans are “more accepting” of societal changes such as growth of the LGBTQ+ community (Graf et al., 2019). They are also “digital natives” because of how technology and social media have been integrated into their upbringing (Guerrero, 2023). Stated in a study on leveraging the uniqueness of youth, “technology is a way of life for Gen Z” (Granitz, 2021).

The events of the childhood of Gen Z have also influenced their issue priorities. Because they “came of age during uncertain times, Gen Zers have a political perspective that is unique from prior cohorts” (McDonald & Deckman, 2019). Growing up in the age of school shootings, climate disasters, the decisions of *Obergefell v. Hodges* and *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*—all of these experiences inform their politics. A lack of action by government officials on these issues is causing “growing disillusion” with political parties among Gen Z voters (Abrams, 2023). Young voters stay home on election day because of “distress over the government’s inability to act” (Shea, 2015). Top issues for Gen Z are gun control, climate

change, reproductive rights, and LGBTQ+ rights, and the issues are so critical to vote choice (Potts, 2023). Young voters are more likely to support a candidate who aligns with their policy preferences (Lees & Priano, 2023). L

Gen Z Disconnected from Political System

The predominant feeling of young voters is that the American political system does not work for them. Discontent with the raging partisanship in America and disappointment with the two-party system exacerbates Gen Z's isolation from politics.

The issue of isolation for Gen Z was worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 led to “greater loneliness and a lack of social connectedness” for Americans ages eighteen to thirty-five; isolation during the pandemic increased instances of mental health issues as well (Schmidt et al., 2022). As discussed earlier, community ties are critical to political participation. Isolation from school, work, church, and other community involvements made it difficult for young voters to even have the opportunity to form stronger ties to their communities and thereby become engaged politically (Schmidt et al., 2022; Niemi & Hanmer, 2010).

Finally, Gen Z feels disconnected from and ignored by the existing American political system. Gen Z voters are dissatisfied with the candidates who run the parties; they are “uninspired by old white guys” who continue to dominate elected office (Deckman & McDonald, 2022). Because younger citizens are more diverse, they seek more diverse candidates to represent their interests in government. When candidates are more diverse, young voters are encouraged to engage, especially young women (Deckman & McDonald, 2022). Group identities influence political engagement with the largest impact happening with youth voters.

Beyond the candidates, Gen Z is also fed up with the two-party system. They are “exasperated over a system they see as mired in gridlock” (Shea, 2015). Since coming of age to

vote, young people are less likely to identify with the Democratic or Republican parties (Beadle et al., 2022). Roughly a quarter of young voters view both major parties in a negative light (Beadle et al., 2022). Almost forty percent of young adults identify as Independents or with another smaller party (Beadle et al., 2022). Although partisanship has risen, “young voters have not become more partisan” (Shea, 2015). According to Gallup Polls, “millennials and Gen Z” are leading a “rebellion against this age of extreme partisanship” (Kight, 2023). The number of voters registering as independent is on the rise; younger voters lead the charge with 52% of millennials and Gen Z identifying as independent (Kight, 2023). Partisanship frustrates young voters and may discourage them from participating in highly partisan primaries.

Primary Elections

Research on presidential primary elections is limited. Turnout is low, and historically, the contests have not been highly competitive (States United, 2022). Perhaps as parties move further from the center and primaries become more competitive, scholars will place more importance on the study of primaries. Primaries are an example of how important partisanship is for participation. For states with closed primaries, where only registered partisans can participate, strong partisan views are almost a prerequisite for primary voting.

Presidential primary elections are held over the course of many months from the start of the presidential election year into the spring. A group of states hold their primary elections on one day in March known as Super Tuesday. If candidates besides the frontrunner remain in the primary by Super Tuesday, they will often drop out shortly after. Thereafter, a presumptive nominee usually emerges and there is little to no chance of anyone else winning the nomination. Therefore, later contests are less competitive. As the months pass in the primary contest, turnout declines (Atkeson & Maestas, 2016). While turnout spikes on Super Tuesday, primary turnout

sharply declines thereafter. The primary is essentially decided after only a handful of contests, so voters with later primaries feel disenfranchised and uninterested (Atkeson & Maestas, 2016). Making the determination that their vote is meaningless, voters in states with later primaries are less likely to participate (Atkeson & Maestas, 2016).

Voting in primaries is dictated by the states; if a voter registers as an independent, they are often left out of primary competitions. Why would parties want to allow nonpartisans to have a voice in selecting their nominees? Although unaffiliated voters face disenfranchisement in some states, the number of independent voters may be “growing in size and influence in American politics” (Bitzer et al., 2022). The increase in independently registered voters suggests growing frustrations with the two major parties. Registering as independent is becoming a phenomenon of “younger” citizens; Gen Z voters are increasingly turning away from the two-party system (Bitzer et al., 2022).

Conclusion

Scholarship on youth voters is vast and wide, however, the research on primary elections is minimal. It is well-known that younger citizens are less civically engaged than older citizens because younger citizens lack strong community ties and partisan attachments. Younger citizens and their issue priorities lack representation in the American government. Gen Z is frustrated with American politics, so they are turning away from civic engagement. This overlap of primary elections and youth turnout lacks investigation. We understand multiple factors influencing low youth turnout in general elections, but the question of why turnout is low for youth in primary elections remains largely unexplored.

Chapter 3

Theory

Why

Why does turnout vary in primary elections for youth voters in different states? Youth voters, or citizens ages 18-24, consistently present the lowest turnout numbers in elections, both general and primary. The literature in the field of voter turnout decisively concludes that older citizens vote at higher rates than younger citizens. Because older citizens are more invested in their communities, build habits of civic engagement, and hold stronger partisan commitments, older voters turnout at higher rates. What has been ignored in the research is whether closed primaries act exacerbate low turnout for young voters. I want to uncover if certain sways of running primary elections effectively hinders youth participation.

Concepts

There are four major concepts involved in this project.

First, *youth turnout* refers to the eligible youth voters who participated in an election. The standard age group for youth is eighteen to twenty-nine. This project will also examine the age group eighteen to twenty-four. Some Millennials are included.

The second concept is *primary type*. Elections are controlled by state governments while parties control their respective primaries. I identify different types of primaries. *Open primaries* allow voters affiliated with a party as well as voters who are unaffiliated to vote with either party in a primary contest. *Closed primaries* are open only to those voters who have affirmed membership in that party's primary election. There are three additional categories between closed and open: *partially closed*, *partially open*, and *open to unaffiliated voters*. Partially open

primaries allow voters to cross party lines as long as they declare their ballot while partially closed primaries only open the door to unaffiliated voters (NCSL, 2023). Open to unaffiliated refers to primaries in which unaffiliated voters may select any primary to participate in (NCSL, 2023).

Primary date explains when the contest is held in the election cycle. As the primary season unfolds, candidates drop out due to poor performance in the polls or in previous primary elections and as a result the dynamics of future elections change. A significant event in the primary calendar is Super Tuesday where multiple states, eleven in 2016 and fourteen in 2020, hold their primaries on the same Tuesday in March.

Finally, *the level of competition* in the primary election will be an important concept in my study. A more crowded field provides voters with an important yet difficult decision to make. On the other hand, if a smaller number of candidates remain but the outcome of the primary season remains unknown, that also results in higher levels of competition, thereby also raising the stakes as well as the value of each individual vote.

Theory

I hypothesize that state election laws influence youth voter turnout. Specifically, I expect that the closed nature of many presidential primary contests negatively affects youth turnout. Existing research identifies why general elections witness low youth turnout and why overall turnout is lower in presidential primary elections. The literature, however, fails to uncover why youth turnout is lower in presidential *primary* elections. To find the answer, I must examine whether the type of primary alters the decision to vote for young voters, specifically Gen Z voters.

Gen Z is a unique generation that is increasingly turning away from partisan politics. From growing up in a post 9/11 world with the rise of social media to declining mental health and the COVID-19 pandemic, this generation of American youth are coming of age in a distinctive time. Each year federal institutions, Congress and the Executive, set records for getting older (Munger, 2022). Gen Z feels unrepresented by aging elected officials. Older representatives often fail to address young voters issue priorities which leads Gen Z to feel hopeless about their political futures (Munger, 2022).

Additionally, Gen Z demonstrates an aversion to binaries. From gay or straight to male or female, young people in the twenty-first century embrace individuality and new identities (Gurrero, 2023). The binary distinction between Democrats and Republicans presents itself as another obstacle to Gen Z involvement in politics. Partisanship rages at all levels of government which prevents legislation from being passed. Gen Z desires change and innovation in politics, but when they witness parties bickering and failing to act, they stay at home on election day (Munger, 2022).

Gen Z voters feel constrained by and disappointed with partisan politics. But primary elections are partisan operations in which voters must make selections among candidates in each party. Are young voters likely to participate in elections run by the very parties they dislike and distrust? I expect that closed primaries which force voters to identify themselves with one party and vote only with that party deter young voters from participating in primaries. Open primaries provide voters with choice and independence which in turn encourages youth to engage.

Additional Factors Affecting Turnout

The most significant additional factor to be considered is the date of the primary. In my analysis, I must account for when the primary is held in comparison to other primaries. As the

primary season goes on, turnout declines. A late open primary may experience lower turnout than an early closed primary. By the time the final states conduct their primaries, a winner may have been chosen or all but one candidate has dropped out. When voters feel that a choice has already been made by other states, voters see little point in casting a ballot.

Another variable of importance is the level of competition in the primary. More competitive primaries raise the value of each vote.

Factors Excluded from Analysis

A major factor in any election is the candidates, their ideologies, the diversity of the candidate pool, and the level of competition of the primary. I will not include specific candidates in my analysis. My focus is not how young voters respond to certain candidates or how candidates can win the support of young voters. The question of how young people respond to a given candidate is important, but I ignore this variable in order to concentrate of the effect associated with the type of primary.

Turnout is lower in presidential primaries than general elections for all age groups, however, my interest lies in the impact of primary systems on young voters. I am a young voter. I want to study young voters to understand how I can be a part of the solution that encourages my peers to get to the ballot box. The research question of this paper is about youth turnout therefore I will not be investigating the effects of primary systems on other age groups.

Hypotheses

H1: Youth turnout is likely to be higher in open primary states than it is in states with more restrictive primary rules.

Summary

My model will analyze youth turnout in both the Democratic and Republican presidential primary elections of 2016. The second piece of my analysis will compare youth turnout in the 2016 Democratic primary to the youth turnout rates in the 2020 Democratic primary. Because Donald Trump was the incumbent president, there was no Republican Primary Election for President.

Chapter 4

Research Design

To test my hypotheses about how youth turnout is affected by primary type, I use data collected about individuals' voting patterns in the 2016 and 2020 primary elections. These data are collected as part of the Cooperative Election Study (CES). The CES (formerly known as the Cooperative Congressional Election Study) is a "national survey administered by YouGov" (Schaffner & Ansolabehere, 2017). The two-wave survey is sent to over fifty-thousand respondents before and after the November elections. The first wave asks voters about "[their] general political attitudes, various demographic factors, assessment of [their representatives'] roll call voting choices, political information, and vote intentions" (Schaffner & Ansolabehere, 2017). The second wave of the survey asks respondents about their vote choices in the election. Voting information is validated after the survey is administered by Catalist, a database of voter information which compiles voter history from all fifty states. Catalist validates responses by comparing them with state-reported data.

I selected the 2016 election because it is the first election in which members of Gen Z are eligible to vote and because both parties held primary contests in that year. I compare the turnout rates for youth voters in the 2016 presidential primary with the turnout rates for youth voters in the 2020 presidential primary. Again, only the Democratic Party held primaries in 2020, but it is the most recent presidential election, and more members of Gen Z became eligible to vote after 2016.

My dependent variable is youth turnout. Youth turnout information is provided by the CES. I start by filtering the data based on respondents' self-reported birth year.

Once I control for age, I use the variable “vote primary 2016” which asks respondents “Did you vote in a Presidential primary election or caucus this year?” To separate the contests by party, I use the “Presidential Primary election party” variable. I construct a multivariate regression model to analyze the relationship between youth turnout and primary openness. First, I filter respondents ages eighteen to twenty-nine as this age group is the standard age group for young voters across existing research. Then I put a spotlight on college-age voters by filtering respondents ages eighteen to twenty-four.

I need to note that filtering the dataset by these selected age groups significantly reduced the number of observations. It is important to acknowledge the limitations posed by small sample sizes within this study. Due to constraints in data availability and other practical considerations, certain states involved in the survey exhibit a relatively low number of observations. While this limitation is acknowledged, my analysis seeks meaningful insights within the available datasets.

My main explanatory variable is the primary type. I measure this in two ways. I assign values to each of the five types of primaries to create a scale of openness. I designate each primary on a scale of one through five in the following order: closed, partially closed, open to unaffiliated, partially open, and open. Partially open is defined as more open than open to unaffiliated primaries. Open to unaffiliated only permits independent or unaffiliated voters to vote in a primary of their choosing. Partially open primaries allow any voter to change party for the purpose of voting in the primary election. Finally, to further illuminate the distinction between more and less partisan contests, I create a variable in which open primaries are coded as “1” and closed primaries are coded as “0.” All other types are left out. Information about primary type is taken from the National Conference of State Legislatures which tracks state laws on primary type and merged with CES data. I create a separate dataset with my added variables,

including primary type, competition, and timing, and merge that with my selected variables from the 2016 and 2020 CES.

Other explanatory variables include timing of the primary and level of competition. As noted, later primaries are less competitive than earlier primaries because the winner is often decided before the primary season concludes. Early primaries matter more in the process of nominating a candidate. To account for this, I assign each contest a number that corresponds to that state's position on the primary calendar. Democratic primaries in 2016 are assigned values between one and twenty. States holding primaries on the same day take identical values. For example, all states holding primaries on Super Tuesday take the same value. Republican primaries in 2016 are assigned values between one and eighteen. In 2020, Democratic primaries are assigned values between one and twenty-one. Higher numbers are expected to be associated with lower turnout. As an alternative, I group the primaries into two categories, early and late, to establish a dichotomous variable. Early primaries are primaries on or before Super Tuesday which take the value “1” while post-Super Tuesday primaries take the value “0.” The alternative variable aligns with my theory that turnout declines after Super Tuesday.

Additionally, more competitive primaries may be more important and drive turnout. Level of competition is measured as the difference in percentage points between the highest and lowest performing candidates in an individual contest. I only include candidates who met the requirements to qualify for Democratic debates. A smaller difference indicates a more competitive primary. Levels of competition in 2016 range from 0.2 to 66.1 for Democrats and 0.3 and 75.9 for Republicans. Competition levels in 2020 range from 10.6 to 83.3. I expect a lower turnout score to correlate with higher turnout.

Chapter 5

Quantitative Results

I begin my analysis by examining turnout for each age group in the 2016 and 2020 presidential primaries. In 2016, the mean voter turnout for the electorate is 1.95% in Republican presidential primaries for voters ages 18-29 and 3.75% in Democratic presidential primaries for voters ages 18-29. For the younger age group, mean turnout is 0.8% in Republican presidential primaries and 1.6% in Democratic presidential primaries. For both parties, turnout is lower for the 18-24 age group, and turnout is always higher in Democratic primaries with the exception of the state of Arizona. In the model for 18–29-year-olds, there are no statistically significant observations for voters in Republican presidential primaries in Florida, Oregon, and Vermont. Likewise, there are no observations for voters in Republican presidential primaries in Florida in the model for 18–24-year-olds. In both models, there are no observations for voters in Democratic presidential primaries for Idaho.

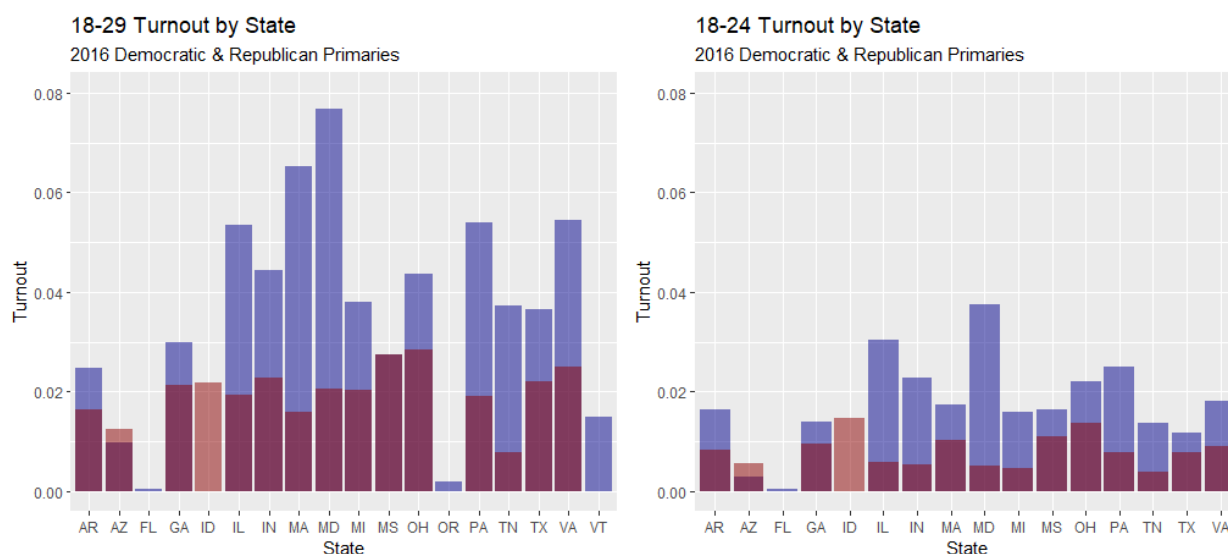


Figure 1 . Turnout in 2016 Democratic and Republican Primaries. (Democratic = Blue. Republican = Red)

The mean turnout for voters in the 2020 Democratic presidential primaries is 5.2% for 18–29-year-olds and 2.6% for 18-24-year-olds. The trend of lower turnout for younger voters matches the pattern established in the 2016 presidential primaries for both parties. There are 20 states with available data for the 2020 Democratic presidential primaries. Similarly, not all 50 states are present in Figure 1. The other states were excluded due to their lack of observations of the target age groups. Given that turnout is low for Gen Z voters, it is to be expected that there are states with insufficient data. The data available make it difficult to demonstrate statistical relevance.

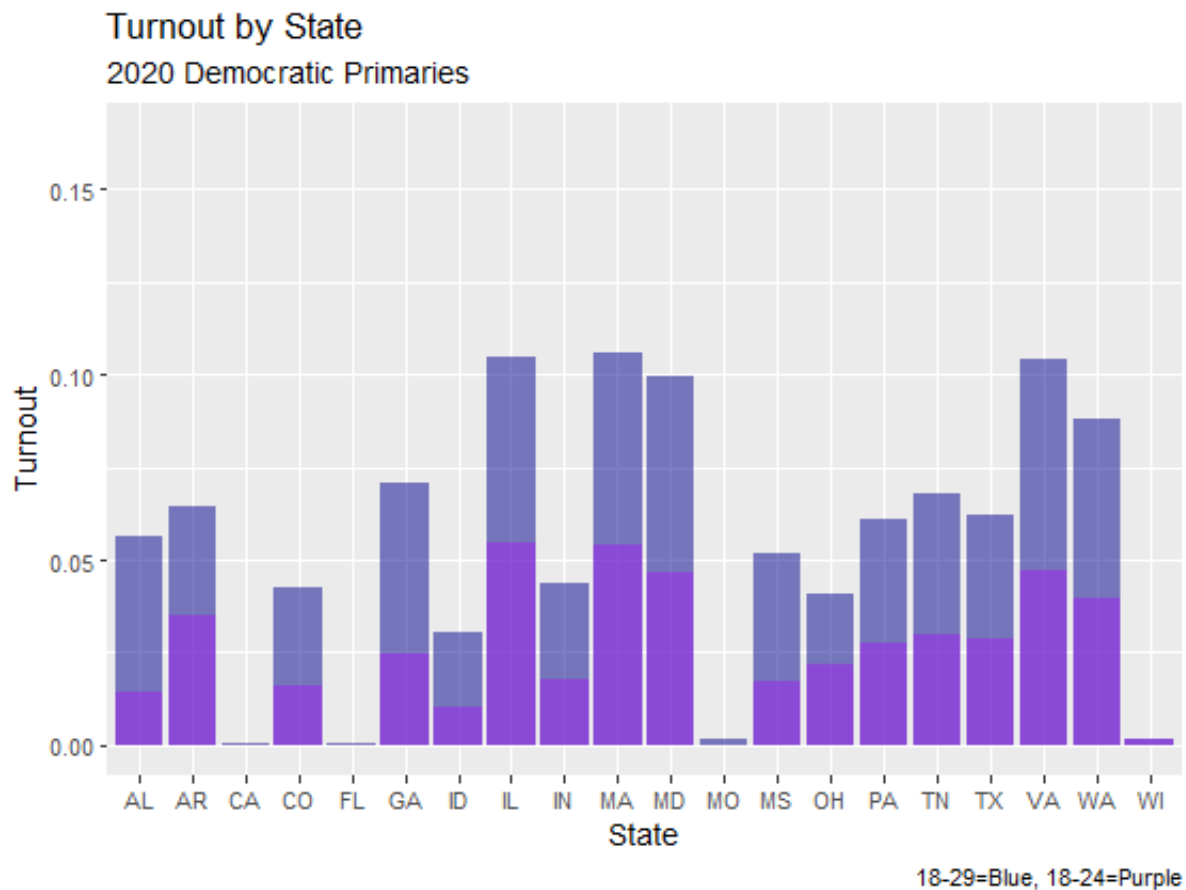


Figure 2 Turnout in 2020 Democratic Primaries.

Table 1 examines regression results for models run with the 18-29 age group. In the 2016 Democratic primaries, the results are positive for the open primaries variable indicating that turnout increases in more open primaries. The 2020 Democratic primaries produce contradictory results for variables regarding primary openness. The open primary variable reveals decreasing turnout in open primaries compared to closed primaries. Neither of these variables, however, carry statistical significance.

Timing variables also lacked statistically significant results. Early presidential primaries in 2016 and 2020 Democratic contests witness higher turnout than primaries held after Super Tuesday as indicated by both timing variables.

Competition level variables, although lacking significance, align with expectations in the 2016 Democratic presidential primaries in which turnout declines as primaries become less competitive. Turnout declines with lower competition in the 2020 primaries as well.

Two variables are statistically significant in the 2016 Republican presidential primaries. For voters ages 18-29, turnout increases in open primaries compared with closed primaries. Although it contradicts expectations, turnout increases when competition levels are lower. This may be explained by enthusiasm for the leading candidate, or more competitive down ballot races.

Table 1 Voters Ages 18-29 Turnout by Year and Party by Primary Openness, Timing, and Competition Level.

| | Turnout for 18-29 Age Group | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| | 2016 Dem Primary (1) | 2016 Rep Primary (2) | 2020 Dem Primary (3) |
| Open Primary | 0.008 (0.013) | 0.014*** (0.003) | |
| Order of Dem Primaries | -0.0004 (0.002) | | |
| Early Dem Primaries | 0.007 (0.015) | | |
| Democratic Competition Level | -0.0004 (0.0003) | | |
| Order of Rep Primaries | | -0.001 (0.001) | |
| Early Rep Primaries | | -0.002 (0.003) | |
| Republican Competition Level | | 0.001** (0.0002) | |
| Open Primary | | | -0.003 (0.008) |
| 2020 Order of Dem Primaries | | | -0.0003 (0.001) |
| 2020 Early Dem Primaries | | | 0.002 (0.011) |
| 2020 Democratic Competition Level | | | -0.0001 (0.0004) |
| Constant | 0.037 (0.031) | -0.009 (0.007) | 0.035 (0.020) |
| Observations | 13 | 11 | 22 |
| R2 | 0.238 | 0.852 | 0.076 |
| Adjusted R2 | -0.143 | 0.753 | -0.141 |
| Residual Std. Error | 0.016 (df = 8) | 0.003 (df = 6) | 0.016 (df = 17) |
| F Statistic | 0.624 (df = 4; 8) | 8.609** (df = 4; 6) | 0.350 (df = 4; 17) |

Note:

*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Table 1 demonstrates regression results for models run with the 18-24 age group. In the 2016 Democratic primaries, the results are once again positive for the open primaries variable. The result is insignificant, but the direction of the effect follows expectations of higher turnout in open primaries. Turnout decreases in open primaries in 2020, but this result is without statistical significance.

On the Democratic and Republican sides, none of the variables related to timing of the primaries hold statistical significance. In addition, the results are contradictory. All variables related to timing for the younger age group as positive. Turnout increases in later primaries while turnout increases in earlier primaries, according to Table 2.

Competition level is only significant in the 2016 Republican primaries. Similar to the older age group, turnout increases when competition level is lower which may indicate the importance of other contextual variables such as candidates or down-ballot races.

Table 2 finds, similarly to Table 1, that turnout is higher in open primaries for the 2016 Republican primaries. This finding is statistically significant.

Table 2 Voters Ages 18-24 Turnout by Year and Party by Primary Openness, Timing, and Competition.

| | Turnout for 18-24 Age Group | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| | 2016 Dem Primary (1) | 2016 Rep Primary (2) | 2020 Dem Primary (3) |
| Open Primary | 0.009 (0.006) | 0.006** (0.002) | |
| Order of Dem Primaries | 0.002 (0.001) | | |
| Early Dem Primaries | 0.008 (0.007) | | |
| Democratic Competition Level | -0.00001 (0.0001) | | |
| Order of Rep Primaries | | 0.0002 (0.0005) | |
| Early Rep Primaries | | 0.003 (0.002) | |
| Republican Competition Level | | 0.0003* (0.0001) | |
| Open Primary | | | -0.008 (0.016) |
| 2020 Order of Dem Primaries | | | 0.0003 (0.002) |
| 2020 Early Dem Primaries | | | 0.025 (0.023) |
| 2020 Democratic Competition Level | | | 0.0002 (0.001) |
| Constant | -0.009 (0.017) | -0.011* (0.005) | 0.032 (0.042) |
| Observations | 11 | 11 | 25 |
| R2 | 0.324 | 0.731 | 0.083 |
| Adjusted R2 | -0.127 | 0.551 | -0.100 |
| Residual Std. Error | 0.007 (df = 6) | 0.002 (df = 6) | 0.035 (df = 20) |
| F Statistic | 0.718 (df = 4; 6) | 4.066* (df = 4; 6) | 0.453 (df = 4; 20) |
| Note: | *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01 | | |

Figure 3 examines turnout and primary type as a scale with all five types of primaries. For both age groups in the Republican primaries and younger voters in the Democratic primaries, turnout is highest in open primaries. Open primaries have the second highest level of turnout for older voters in the 2016 Democratic primaries. Closed primaries are consistently among the lowest levels of turnout for both parties' primary elections.

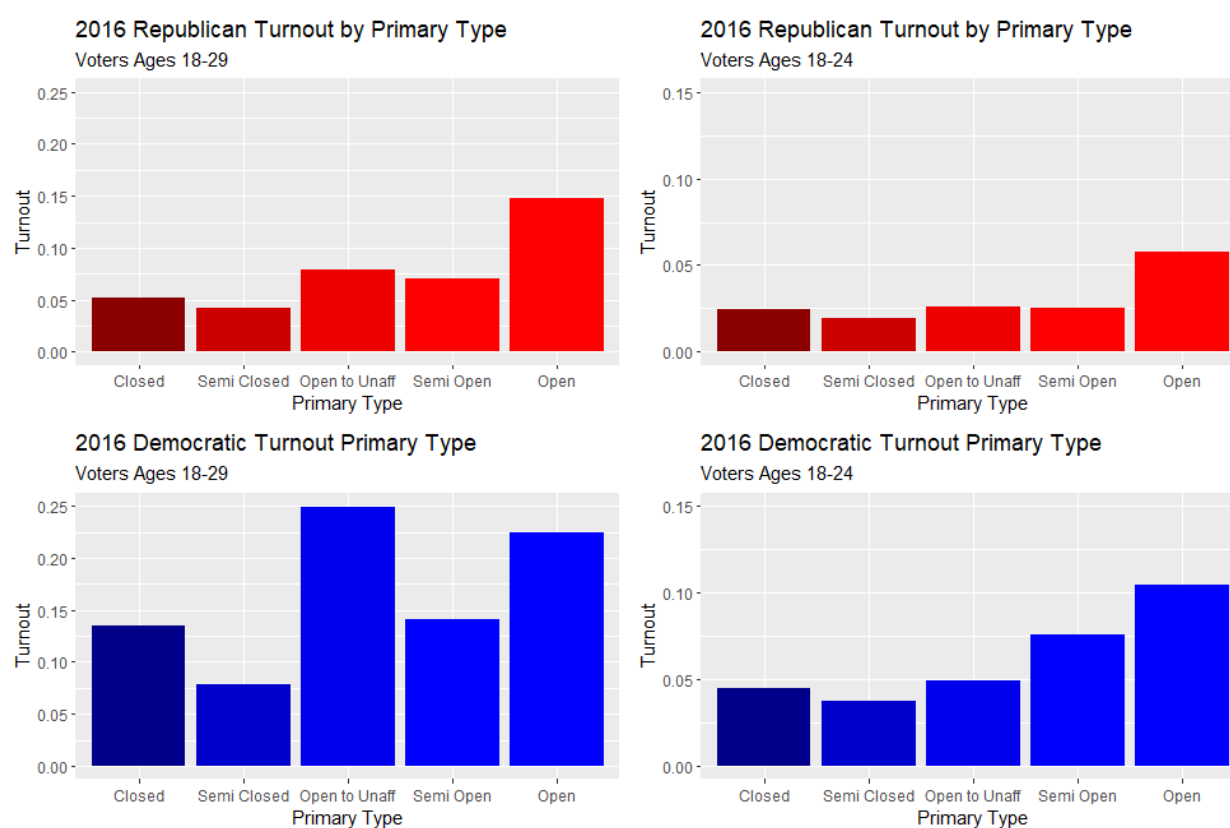


Figure 3 Turnout by Primary Type in 2016 Presidential Primaries.

The same variables are on display for the 2020 Democratic presidential primaries in Figure 4. Contrary to the results in Figure 3, turnout varies less among the five types of primaries in the 2020 Democratic primaries. For the younger age group, there is slightly more variation in turnout, with more open primaries witnessing higher levels of turnout than semi-closed and closed primaries.

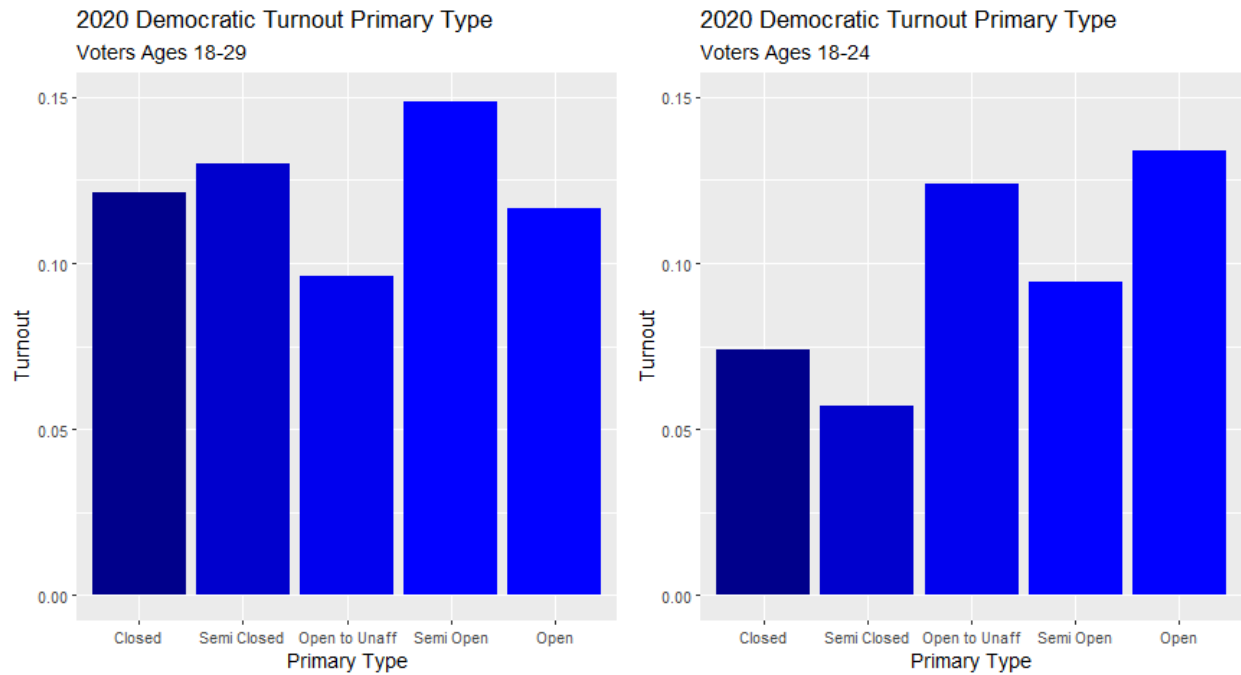


Figure 4 Turnout by Primary Type in 2020 Presidential Primaries.

Figure 5 further explores turnout and primary type but focuses on the distinction between closed and open primaries. For older voters, the distinction is clear; turnout is higher in open primaries. Younger voters produce higher turnout numbers in closed primaries compared to open primaries.

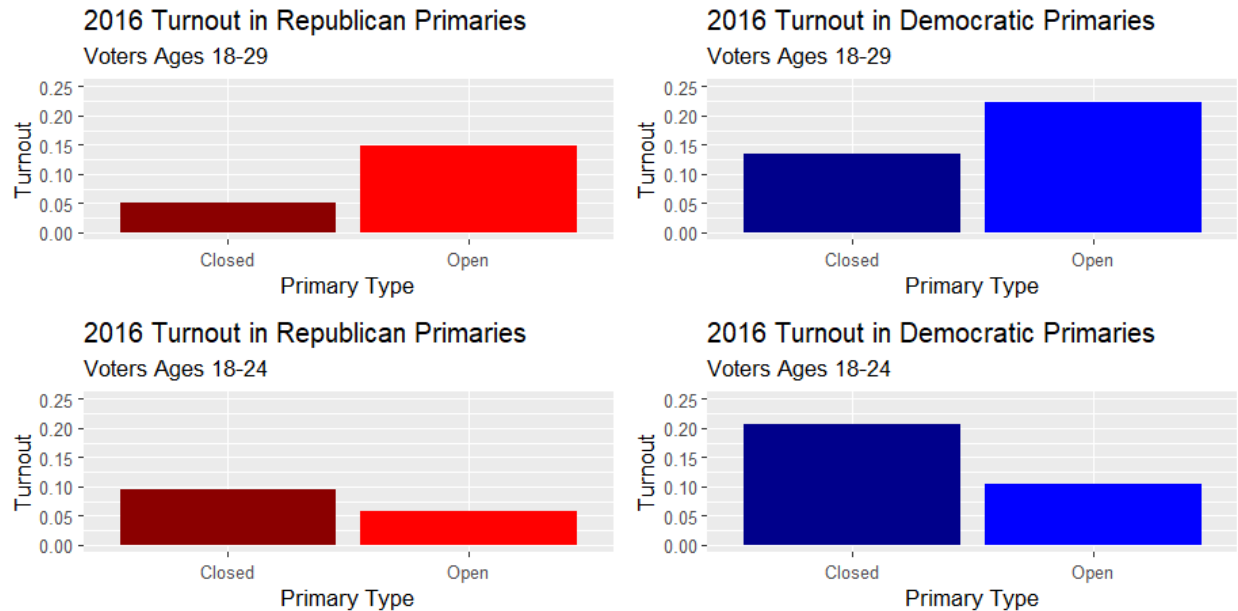


Figure 5 Turnout in Open v. Closed 2016 Presidential Primaries.

The phenomenon of Figure 5 is flipped in Figure 6 where turnout is higher in open primaries for the older age group, but turnout is slightly higher in closed primaries for the younger age group in 2020. A closer look at the specific contests may reveal the context that further determined turnout rates. For example, a contested down-ballot race or ballot initiative may lead more citizens to vote in a specific state.

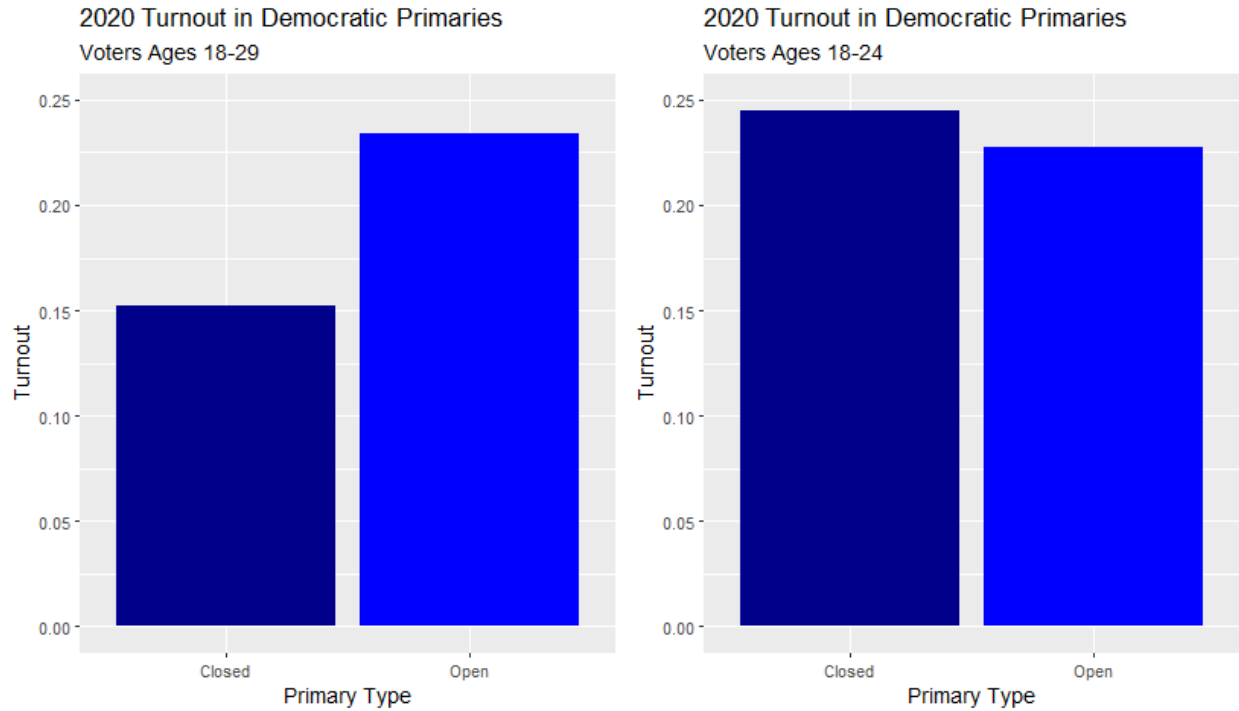


Figure 6 Turnout in Open v. Closed 2020 Presidential Primaries.

While my analysis yields some statistically significant findings, the results lead to many more questions than answers. What other factors influence turnout? How strong are the differences between the 18-29 and 18-24 age groups? Final conclusions and recommendations are explored in the following chapter.

Chapter 6

Conclusions

It has long been established that young voters turnout in general elections at the lowest rates, and a wide array of research exists on the topic. Less is known, however, about youth turnout in primary elections. This research paper ventures into the unknown to study how openness of primaries impacts youth turnout. It is important to note that small sample sizes limit my analysis. While some results are statistically significant, my work may only be suggestive of trends in voter behavior. Nonetheless, the following findings bring value to the discussion of youth turnout in primary elections.

The most significant finding of this research is that turnout increased in open primaries for young Republican voters in 2016. This finding validates the theory of this paper that turnout will be higher in open primaries for Gen Z voters who demonstrate frustration with the rampant partisanship plaguing American politics. But those conclusions were contradicted by results in the 2020 primary. Other notable insights are that turnout is higher overall for Democratic primaries than Republican primaries, and turnout is higher overall for 18–29-year-old voters than 18-24-year-old voters. My findings therefore do not offer evidence for the hypotheses that drove this work, but it does unlock new questions about partisan motivations for turnout as well as how college-age voters differ from other age groups.

Partisanship is at the heart of the theory of this research, and the findings indicate that parties should be at the center of future research. Questions emerge about why turnout differs between the Democratic and Republican primaries as well as why openness only had a significant impact on turnout in the latest competitive Republican primary. Additional research should examine

factors related to parties such as how candidates influence turnout. The 2016 Republican primary witnessed a crowded field of career politicians as well as a big-name businessman and celebrity. Donald Trump's impact on American politics cannot be understated; the difference his candidacy made on generational turnout should be considered in future studies and compared to those of future Republican primaries. Turnout may be higher in open Republican primaries because citizens, with the ability to vote across party lines, may wish to vote Republican in an effort to block Trump's nomination. How can candidates positively or negatively influence turnout? Examining partisan motivations from a different perspective could prove important in new research.

This research confirms my theory about lower turnout rates among college-age students. Figure 1 reveals the difference in turnout rates between 18-29- and 18-24-year-old voters. One potential question related to primary timing is how college semesters may interfere with primary turnout. Primaries occurring during the semester are more accessible for students registered to vote at the university, although academic priorities may take precedence over voting. Some primaries are held after the end of the traditional spring semester which provides a challenge for students who register to vote at their schools. Timing is a critical factor for college students and should be explored further.

Follow up research may also endeavor to explore how voter registration efforts impact youth turnout. Ulbig and Waggener conduct important research on how registration supports turnout rates in general elections, but a future study on how earlier registration supports primary turnout may be important as well (2011).

Finally, special attention is due to Gen Z's involvement in American politics. I believe my generation is distinct in their political views. Low turnout levels by young voters are not new as a

phenomenon, but the reasons behind why youth turnout is low generation after generation differ. What events in the upbringing of Gen Z impact their voting habits? What is different about Gen Z as voters? And will these effects linger over time?

Every election is different, and this undeniable fact creates difficulty for researchers seeking definitive answers to explain turnout levels. As a community, we can learn something from any and all research on the topic of youth turnout. Although few of my findings hold statistical significance, there remain important takeaways and new questions to be explored.

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