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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Public opinion on reforming U.S. primaries

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Abstract

Objective: Few studies have measured public attitudes about reform proposals for changing direct primaries. Despite strong public support over the past century for holding primaries, does the public want to change the direct primary, given its very low voter turnout and its potential role in fostering political polarization?

Method: Using a unique nationally representative survey of 3000 U.S. adults conducted in March 2023 by YouGov, this study shows that a majority of Americans support reform of primary elections.

Results: The reforms which receive the greatest support are those that seem more “democratic” such as establishing national congressional primary and holding open primaries. There is lower support for reforms that give political parties more control over selecting candidates, such as state party conventions. There are significant differences between Republicans, Democrats, and independents, while factors such as interest, education, gender, and race have a minimal impact. Individuals living in states with nonpartisan primaries are more favorable toward this specific reform, ranked-choice voting, and open primaries, but primary type was not significant in regression models.

Conclusions: The public is opposed to reforms that give parties more say in choosing candidates, consistent with public sentiment a century earlier when the direct primary was adopted.

KEYWORDS

direct primary, election reform, non-partisan primary, primary elections, public opinion

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Over four-fifths of Americans believe that U.S. democracy is not working well, and two-thirds agree that “significant changes” are needed in the design and structure of U.S. democracy (Pew Research Center 2018). A growing number of scholars have explored the factors shaping public attitudes about changing election rules. Primary elections are at the heart of democracy, and yet they are understudied. Despite their historic popularity, does the public want to change the direct primary, and if so, how?

Many analyses of political extremism and polarization in the contemporary United States refer to the role of primary elections, especially the rise of the Tea Party faction within the GOP (Blum 2020). For critics, primary elections are a problem because of low rates of voter participation, because primaries at times result in the nomination of candidates who are far from the preferences of the district’s median voter, because primaries can yield nominees who win with a plurality of the vote, or because candidates seeking to draw attention in a primary often resort to demagogic or incendiary appeals (Ferrer and Thorning 2023; FiveThirtyEight 2021). While the American public is likely to be familiar with some of these dynamics, we know little about how Americans think about primary elections or about the various options for changing the direct primary that has been discussed in recent years. Most existing research studies individual types of reform, such as the nonpartisan primary or ranked-choice voting (RCV), in isolation. This study examines a range of reforms to primaries.

Changes to primary elections are just one of several reform ideas that one might group under the rubric of process issues or governance policies—as opposed to substantive issues of public policy (Bowler, Donovan, and Tolbert 1998). Historically, majorities of Americans have tended to favor a wide range of reforms regarding the electoral college, campaign finance, and voting access, and to favor ideas that, in the abstract, appear to be more democratic and to grant more power to citizens, at the expense of political parties, elected officials, or other institutional or elite forces. At the same time, because election laws are procedural and not substantive, they tend to be less salient to voters and a lower priority than other types of policies. Partisan voters often evaluate reforms in terms of how the reform might benefit their preferred political party (Bowler and Donovan 2013).

Public opinion surveys on election reform issues tend to be most common at moments when a particular type of reform idea is in the news or up for a vote on a statewide ballot or being considered by the legislature for adoption. For instance, surveys about public attitudes toward the Electoral College have been conducted in months immediately before or after tight presidential elections, and polling on campaign finance reform was most common during the months and years preceding the passage of the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act or in the months following the Supreme Court’s *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* decision. Such surveys may be useful in capturing public responses to policy decisions, but they give little insight into what citizen attitudes are like at moments of greater stability.

There have been few moments of this sort in the case of primary elections, except times when primary reforms are on statewide ballots—and even in those cases, these are not national moments of attention to primary election mechanics. In most cases, primaries are largely invisible to the large majority (on average 80 percent) of the public that does not vote in congressional primaries (Ferrer and Thorning 2023). Histories of the direct primary (i.e., primaries other than the presidential, delegate selection model) have contended that the direct primary itself has been a popular institution, as evidenced by the direct primary’s rapid, widespread adoption, and its resilience in the face of efforts by state legislators to repeal it (Ware 2002; Boatright 2024; Lawrence, Donovan, and Bowler 2013). However, there is little survey research to document public attitudes toward the direct primary or primary reform today.

Contemporary reform discussions tend to focus not on whether there should be primaries but on whether primaries should be open or closed or partisan or nonpartisan, when they should be, or whether parties should play a role in structuring primaries. These are subjects that are certainly more difficult for the average citizen to understand than the question of whether primaries should exist at all. While we suspect that citizens do not spend very much time considering the nuances of primaries, it is important to understand how citizens react to informed proposals for changes to primaries given growing attempts to change primaries, especially in the absence of an event that could polarize public opinion. Therefore, in this article, we present the results of a 2023 national survey on voter attitudes toward 13 different potential primary reforms (eleven related to congressional primaries and two related to presidential primaries). We

see these results as a baseline for reform—a snapshot of how Americans understand primary elections outside of campaigns for and against primary reforms.

Our results show that a majority of the public supports many reforms of primary elections and that the public exhibits the greatest support for reforms that seem more “democratic,” such as creating a national congressional primary or holding nonpartisan or open primaries. There is generally low support for reforms that give political parties more control over selecting candidates, such as state party conventions, although party endorsements gain approval. There are also significant differences in reform attitudes among Republicans, Democrats, and independents, while factors such as political interest, education, gender, and race play a minimal role. Individuals living in states with the nonpartisan (top-2 or top-4 primaries) are more favorable toward nonpartisan primaries, RCV, and open primaries, but when one controls for partisanship and other factors, respondents’ experience with particular state-level reforms does not affect support for these reforms.

PUBLIC OPINION ABOUT PRIMARY ELECTIONS AND ELECTION REFORM

Since the establishment of the direct primary, advocates, and foes of primary elections have agreed that the public supports the idea of primary elections rather than having party elites choose candidates for the general election in state conventions. One exploration of the effects of the direct primary begins by noting that “the establishment of the direct primary system was in part a response to the demand of the voter for a more direct hand in public affairs, a reflection of the growing individualism of the times” (McKee 1931). In his 1908 study of primary elections, Charles Merriam (1908, 47) described the conflict over whether to establish primaries as a battle between the public and the political establishment, concluding that “the opposition of certain interested politicians only served to inflame public opinion to a higher degree, and ensured the victory of the regulative idea.” In the 1928 revision of the same book, Merriam reviewed the rapid spread of primaries, arguing that this was an instance where public opinion had triumphed over the preferences of party leaders (Merriam & Overacker 1928, 96–107). Although at the time there were no public opinion polls to demonstrate that this was in fact the case, a survey of “public men” of the time contrasted the views of governors, political scientists, party leaders, and newspaper editors on the direct primary. Those respondents who cited public views all agreed that the public favored the direct primary, although many party leaders questioned whether the public was wise to do so (Hannan 1923). In subsequent decades, the success of voter referendums establishing primaries, often in states where the legislature had repealed the primary, cemented the idea that the public supports the concept of primaries (Lawrence, Donovan, and Bowler 2013). Scholars have, to our knowledge, never given serious consideration to arguments that the public is not supportive.

As Alan Ware (2002, 23) notes, however, the public has never been knowledgeable about or interested enough in the mechanics of elections to gauge whether primaries “work,” what their consequences are, or what the differences are between types of primaries. Ware concedes that the public supported primaries at the moment of their establishment. Ware’s theory of primaries is that reformers framed primary elections as a “democratic” innovation when speaking to the public, and the public responded in similarly blunt terms, by affirming a broad support for democracy and a skepticism of political parties. In this study, we test Ware’s notion about “democratic” sounding reforms.

Ware’s more contemporary framing of the problem places primaries in the company of many other “process reforms” or governance policies. A comprehensive study of a related issue is Primo and Milyo’s (2020) analysis of public attitudes about campaign finance. Primo and Milyo conclude that survey respondents know little about campaign finance law, but support reform in the abstract. Primo and Milyo asked respondents a series of questions about contemporary campaign finance law and showed that most people do not have a clear understanding of the status quo or of what reform would actually involve; they become less supportive of reform proposals once they are given details on what the current law is. The authors conclude that absent this information, people will respond affirmatively to most reform proposals, partic-

ularly those that can be framed as giving voters more say. There is little ideological differentiation among respondents when questions are framed without partisan cues, but respondents sort along party lines once partisan cues are provided.

Although Primo and Milyo's study is limited to campaign finance, they present their work as a continuation of larger theoretical arguments about democracy such as those made by Cain (2015). Cain identifies similar patterns in public attitudes toward direct democracy, legislative term limits, and other election changes—for each, the public supports reform and individual reforms in the abstract, becomes somewhat less supportive once given more information, and responds to partisan cues when they are offered.

Recent research using survey experiments seeks to address this concern by varying the informational context when people answer questions about election reform proposals (Donovan, Tolbert, and Harper 2023). The authors use experiments to prompt people to consider whether they are satisfied with how democracy works and to think about the structure of the American government. Respondents were then asked if they felt that they were generally on the winning or losing side of politics. The results showed that people who were prompted were more likely to report that they were on the losing side; approval for a range of proposed election rule changes was higher among people who felt like they regularly lost in politics, even controlling for partisanship and other factors. The Donovan et al. study suggests that asking Americans to think about their government and democracy makes them more likely to support changing how it works.

Other studies find roughly two-thirds of Americans desire a wide range of reforms to U.S. elections and that support varies predictably by partisanship, satisfaction with democracy, and feelings of often losing in politics (Coll, Tolbert, and Ritter 2022; see Bowler and Donovan 2018 on convenience voting reform).

Survey research specific to primaries, however, is scarce. The surveys that exist tend to focus either on the potential for reforms to address a recent political event, presidential primaries not congressional primaries, or on voters' experience with recently implemented primary reforms. In the former category, Jewett (2019, 14) reviews a series of *Associated Press* polls conducted during the 2016 presidential election, noting that voters responded enthusiastically to the idea of mandating direct primaries. While a majority of respondents were in favor of open primaries, those who were unhappy with the parties' presidential nominees were more supportive of the idea than other respondents (see Donovan et al. 2023 above). Using panel data, Karp and Tolbert (2010) find that support for proposals for a national primary is colored by partisanship and by whether the respondent's favored party won or lost in the most recent election but also by state self-interest; residents from small states are more opposed to a national primary (see Atkeson and Maestas 2009). Using national survey data consisting of three questions on semiopen, open, and nonpartisan primary (top two), Sinclair and Sinclair (2021) find that supporters of left-populist candidates tend to support primary reforms while supporters of right-populist candidates do not. The authors also find support for primary reforms is more common among voters with a low sense of political efficacy and voters who reside in states that have already implemented such reforms. It is, they argue, ironic that left-populist voters tend to be the strongest supporters of reforms that are often framed as a way of helping to elect more moderate candidates.

In the latter category (i.e., surveys taken after a recent political event), several studies of primary reform in California have noted consistent patterns in voter attitudes before and after changes in election laws. Contributors to the Cain and Gerber (2002) edited volume on California's brief experience in 1998 with a nonpartisan "blanket" primary conclude that voters dissatisfied with politics and the economy overall tended to be most supportive of the nonpartisan primary before it was introduced, that voters ignored the opposition of party leaders to the reform and that less knowledgeable voters tended to be most enthusiastic about the nonpartisan primary (Bowler and Donovan 2002).

Surveys conducted after the election, however, found that although voters remained supportive of the change, they did not perceive major differences in the election (Tam Cho and Gaines 2002). Alvarez and Sinclair (2014, ch. 8) surveyed voters about the state's establishment of the nonpartisan (i.e., top 2) primary in 2012, with similar results. In a postelection survey, they find that voters were uncertain about whether the reform had changed election results, that there were no noticeable differences in attitudes according to party or degree of partisanship, but that the most informed voters tended to be the most skeptical

about the reform. They also conclude that the voters with the most antiparty attitudes were most likely to assume that this ostensible antiparty reform was in fact established to benefit parties or incumbents. Despite this, nonpartisan (or top 2) primaries have been shown to reduce legislative polarization by leading to the election of more moderate legislators (Grose 2020).

California is one of the few states where one can identify a research stream related to a consequential change in primary election laws. However, generalizing from the California case is problematic because survey respondents are certainly more knowledgeable about primary reforms (given their recent experience with major changes to their primary laws) than respondents from other states, and because it is hard to separate the particularities of California politics from more generalized responses to reform. Emerging research on Alaska's recent establishment of a nonpartisan (top 4) primary combined with a ranked-choice general election, however, does appear to be following a similar pattern in that residents tend to be supportive of the reform before and after the election, but information affects responses.¹ Alaska's first election using this system may have had the unintended effect of heightening the role of partisanship about the reform; the victory of a Democrat in the state's House race, and the vocal opposition to the law from some Republicans, may well result in more partisan responses to the law than has been the case in California (McBeath 2023).

More generally, we might expect that elite cues could shape public opinion and that Republicans are conservative about party processes. In the wake of the Alaska legislation, five states with Republican governors and state legislatures have passed laws prohibiting the use of RCV. This could be a result of perceptions of partisan advantage or part of a broader conservative preference for a more restricted nomination process that has been evident in conflicts over open primaries or beliefs that opposition party voters might wish to interfere in primaries (for discussion, see Boatright 2014, ch. 8). Although much of this debate is confined to elites, some citizens may also be influenced by it.

HYPOTHESES

The literature on attitudes toward election reforms offers five basic testable claims about primary elections. This study seeks answers to the following research questions—something which has yet to be done to the extent that we do here.

1. *We expect that many Americans do not know very much about primary election rules or reform options.* Turnout in primaries tends to be low, on average 20 percent of the eligible electorate (Ferrer and Thorning 2023), and even those who do vote may not understand the differences between various types of primary election rules.
2. *We expect that many Americans will be supportive of primary election reforms.* The discussion above shows that many Americans are supportive of a wide range of voter access and election reforms. We expect primary election laws to follow this pattern.
3. *We hypothesize that Americans will tend to favor reforms that can be framed as pro-democracy or antiparty.* As we note in the discussion of results, we have no way to prove that any reform is actually pro- or antiparty in practice. Nonetheless, it seems evident that brief descriptions of reforms—such as a description of a nonpartisan primary or a reform that would enable parties to determine whether candidates can be placed on the ballot—provide cues about the role of parties.
4. *Citizens should respond to partisan cues about particular election laws based on elite signaling and perceived partisan self-interest* (Biggers 2019). We expect Democrats to be more supportive of reforms than Republicans, while Republicans will be more supportive of the status quo or those that favor parties. Following Sinclair and Sinclair (2021), we also expect Democrats to be more supportive of reforms that can be framed

¹ To date most of the research on the Alaska reforms has been conducted by advocacy groups, however; see, e.g., https://alaskansforbetterelections.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/20220830_AK_Polling_Data-combined.pdf.

as being more democratic. We expect independents will favor reforms such as open primaries and the nonpartisan primary to increase their participation in candidate selection.

5. *Public knowledge and political experience may shape attitudes about primary elections.* While our survey does not contain a political efficacy question, we have information about respondents' education and political interest. Following Sinclair and Sinclair, we expect that voter experience with reforms will influence support for them; residents of open primary states may be more supportive of open primaries than residents of closed primary states, residents of states that use nonpartisan primaries may be more supportive of them than residents of other states, and residents of states that use RCV may be more supportive of it than residents of other states. (We note that the latter is more difficult to test, since only two low-population states with fewer respondents in the sample fall into this category.)

DATA, ANALYSIS, AND RESULTS

In order to measure public sentiment on the reform ideas of direct primaries, we conducted a representative national survey of 3000 U.S. adults through YouGov in March 2023 that included 15 questions on frequently discussed reform proposals (see online [Appendix](#) for question wording). These reforms ranged from open primaries to RCV to nonpartisan primaries (i.e., top 2 or top 4).

Question wording was designed to be comparable to similar questions placed on Pew Research Center surveys and previous Cooperative Election Study (CES/CCES) surveys. The questions succinctly explained the reform (i.e., provided information) but avoided partisan cues or mention of states that had adopted the reform (another form of partisan cue). Response options included strongly agree, agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree. We included two questions related to presidential primaries—one on whether there should be a national same-day presidential primary and one on whether the order of primary states should be rotated. These replicated questions were used in previous research as a means of validating the representativeness of the survey sample (Coll et al. 2022). The 2023 survey reported similar levels of support as the earlier 2022 survey, showing that the validation worked.

In regard to our first hypothesis, although the survey responses indicate that there is high support for many different types of reforms a substantial number of respondents—roughly one-fourth to one-third per question—had no opinion on these reforms (see Figure 1). We argue that “don’t know” responses have different meanings, depending on the question. Thirty-two percent of respondents had no opinion on whether they support the status quo, perhaps suggesting that they have not voted in primary elections and have little experience with the process. The status quo question was presented first in our questionnaire, in order to avoid priming responses by offering potential reforms; we expect opinions on the status quo would have been different had the question been placed later in the survey. Question ordering for the other primary reforms was randomized.

In contrast, “don’t know” responses to the various reform questions may suggest something about the experience with the proposed reform or the complexity of the proposed reform. For instance, over 35 percent of respondents had no opinion on the reform proposal to allow parties to set a convention threshold of 15 percent of delegate votes for ballot access; this is a complex procedure, that is, currently only used for statewide offices in one state (Massachusetts).² In contrast, open primaries are used in 16 states, including large states such as Texas, Georgia, and Michigan. Open primaries are arguably simpler to understand, and respondents are more likely to have experience with them. Overall, however, the large percentages of “don’t know” responses suggest a lack of familiarity with primary reform proposals or a lack of concern with them.

Moving to the second hypothesis, the results indicate a majority of respondents who offered an opinion support most of the primary reforms. Figure 2 shows the percentage of respondents who stated that they favor or strongly favor each of the reforms (combined). Our survey questions were not framed as choices between reforms; hence, it is clear that some people who favored the status quo also subsequently

² Connecticut, Virginia, and Utah also use preprimary conventions to determine ballot access, but they do not use the same threshold.

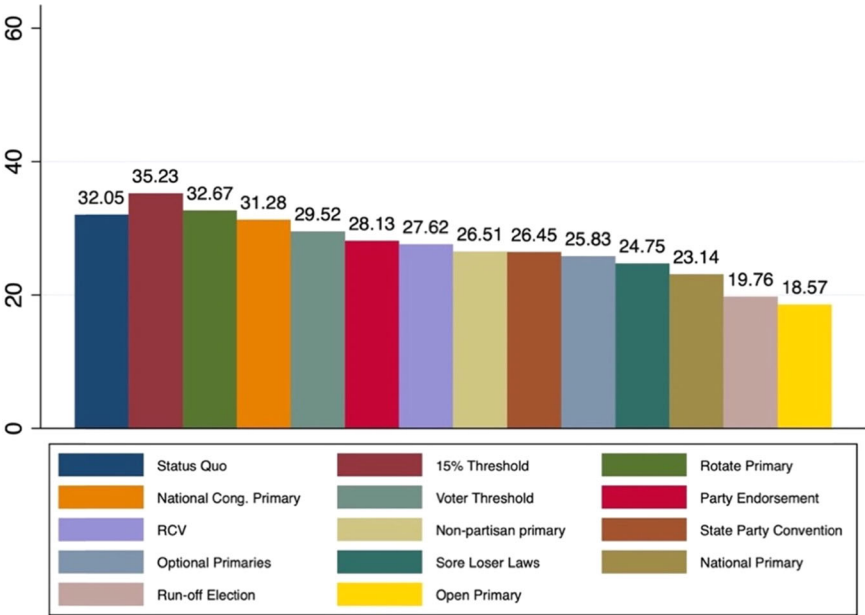


FIGURE 1 Percent don't know for each primary election reform, 2023. *Source:* 2023 YouGov nationally representative sample of 3000 respondents. Calculated using survey weights.

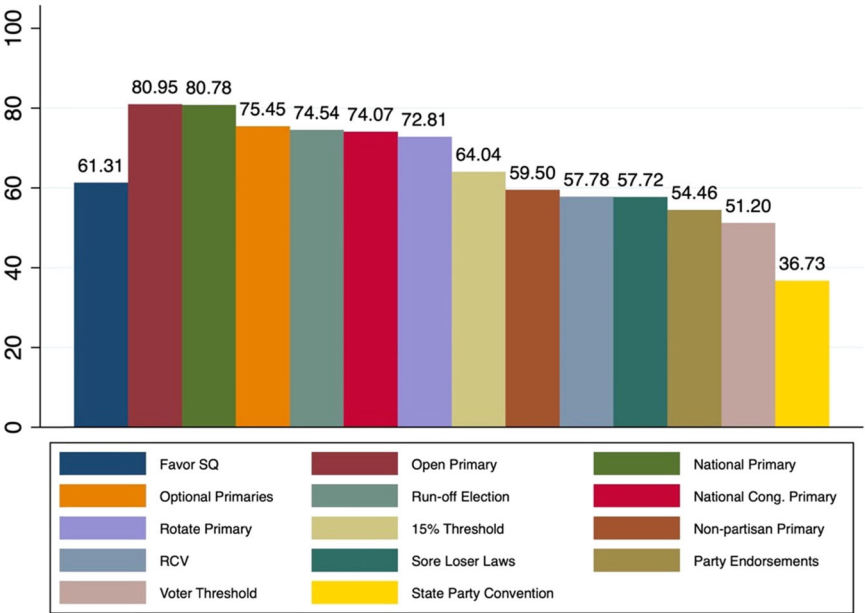


FIGURE 2 Support for primary reforms among those who express an opinion, 2023. *Source:* 2023 YouGov nationally representative sample of 3000 respondents. Calculated using survey weights. People who say don't know code are omitted. Bars combine strongly agree and agree. National primaries and rotate primaries are reported for comparison only (related to presidential primaries).

stated that they supported one or more reforms to the status quo. The lone survey question posed which is clearly an alternative to using primaries—our question on whether states should use conventions to choose nominees—was the only question that did not receive majority support. Consistent with existing literature, it seems evident that voters support primaries in the abstract, and that they support a range of reforms that would keep the basic institution of the direct primary intact.

Our third hypothesis was that “antiparty” reforms would receive more support than “pro-party” reforms. Overall, respondents were most favorable toward reforms that could be framed as more democratic or “open” and were least favorable toward reforms that would enhance the power of political party organizations. This finding has been reported in surveys on other political reforms like campaign finance (Primo & Milyo 2020), and it corresponds with early public attitudes about primaries as well. For instance, Figure 2 shows that eight in ten people who expressed an opinion were in favor of a national primary (for presidential or congressional elections) and open primaries. Seventy-five percent approved of a national congressional primary where primary elections in every state would be held on the same day. An equally high number (75 percent) favor runoff elections for primaries currently used in a number of Southern states as well as making primaries optional if there are no contested seats. Two-thirds of respondents approved of a 15 percent threshold for a candidate to win a primary election. Roughly six in ten Americans favored the nonpartisan (top 2 or 4) primary system currently used in Alaska, California, and Washington (and possibly heading to the ballot in Arizona). Support for RCV for primary elections was nearly as high, with 58 percent of respondents in support. Even a majority of respondents approved of the parties’ endorsing candidates in primary elections, providing party cues to voters.

The ordering of popularity among these questions suggests that the questions that did not offer a role to parties had the highest support, while the three questions phrased with reference to parties—allowing parties to endorse, establishing a threshold for support after which parties would decide and allowing parties to choose nominees—received the least support.

Fourth, we noted above that previous research has emphasized the role of partisan cues and partisan self-interest in attitudes about changing election laws (e.g., Alvarez et al. 2011; Bowler and Donovan 2018; Coll et al. 2022; Biggers 2019; Biggers and Hanmer 2017; McCarthy 2019; Mann, Gronke, and Adona 2020). Attitudes about primary reforms often (although not always) exhibit significant differences between Republicans and Democrats. Table 1 shows percent support for primary reforms among those expressing an opinion broken down by party identification (Republican, Democratic, independent). RCV and even the nonpartisan primary appear to have a partisan aspect; Democrats support it while Republicans often oppose it. Some high-profile RCV elections have resulted in Democratic victories, including Democrat Mary Peltola’s victory over Republican Sarah Palin in Alaska’s 2022 special House election and Democrat Jared Golden’s come-from-behind victory in Maine’s Second District in 2018. As mentioned above, state legislatures in five Republican states have enacted laws prohibiting local use of RCV while Democratic legislators in many states have proposed legislation to allow it.³

A majority of Republicans in our survey favor maintaining the status quo while independents—excluded from voting in closed primary states—are the least likely to approve of the current system. As would be expected, independents are the most in favor of open primaries and the most opposed to state party conventions. They also favor the nonpartisan primary.

While there are partisan gaps and differences, however, usually Democrats and Republicans are not on opposing sides. Apart from our presidential primary validation questions, the lone reform that shows substantial and relatively consistent support among Democrats, Republicans, and independents is a national congressional primary day. This reform is also highlighted by the Bipartisan Policy Commission in their report on the 2022 primary turnout (Ferrer and Thorning 2023).

Finally, let us consider the effects of political knowledge and experience on attitudes. Some existing research finds that people who are more interested in politics (Gronke et al. 2019) often favor changing election laws, but other studies find that interest in politics has no direct influence on reform attitudes (Coll et al. 2022). Interestingly, people with the highest political interest are not the most favorable toward

³ See [https://ballotpedia.org/Ranked-choice_voting_\(RCV\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Ranked-choice_voting_(RCV)) for a summary.

TABLE 1 Percent support for congressional primary reform of those expressing an opinion, by party identification (Percent) 2023.

Electoral reform	Full sample	Democrats	Independents	Republicans
Favor status quo primaries	61.31	59.82	53.86	72.60
Open primary	80.95	83.56	83.98	73.00
Optional primaries	75.45	75.88	75.90	74.29
Runoff elections	74.54	79.21	72.42	71.02
National Congressional Primary Day	74.07	77.08	72.01	72.60
15% Candidate threshold	64.04	65.92	60.82	65.43
Nonpartisan primary	59.50	66.87	60.69	48.26
Ranked choice voting	57.78	68.15	58.59	42.35
Sore loser laws	57.72	67.53	48.37	56.45
Party endorsements	54.46	62.49	42.94	58.02
Voter threshold	51.20	54.94	51.62	45.78
State party conventions	36.73	36.78	35.29	38.51
National Primary	80.78	83.7	78.60	79.57
Rotate Primary	72.81	77.66	72.18	66.65
Approximate percent of sample	100.00	36.63	37.43	25.93

Source: 2023 YouGov nationally representative sample of 3000 respondents. Calculated using survey weights.

primary reform. Of people who follow the news most of time, Table 2 indicates that approval of RCV is only 52.5 percent compared to 58 percent for the population overall. Similarly, approval of open primaries drops from 81 percent overall to 74 among the most politically interested, while approval of party endorsements drops from 54 percent to 47 percent. Even for the nonpartisan or blanket primary approval is 10 percentage points lower among the most interested. State party conventions, unpopular to begin with, are favored by just one in four of those who are the most interested in politics.

The results suggest individuals who already have greater political information are not the most likely to favor reform. At the same time, they are less likely to favor state party conventions and voter turnout threshold proposals.

Education is traditionally associated with higher public support for many reform proposals. In another divergence from the literature on attitudes about election reform, more educated people do not show higher approval for reform of primaries (see online Appendix Table A1). It is also noteworthy that there are very few differences in responses that can be attributed to race or gender (see online Appendix Tables A3 and A4).⁴ Consistent with prior literature, for most reforms younger respondents are more supportive of changing primary election rules than are older respondents (see online Appendix, Table A2).

In most cases, experience with particular types of primary laws also has little effect on attitudes, but there are some noticeable differences in the attitudes of residents of states with nonpartisan (top 2) primaries (see Table 3). Support for open primaries is high across all primary types, but residents of open primary states show no greater support than those of other states. Residents of states with nonpartisan primaries (Alaska, California, Louisiana, and Washington) exhibit greater support for nonpartisan primaries than do other respondents; they also are more supportive of RCV. While other factors may be at play, these states include Democratic and Republican states. The small number of respondents from the two RCV states (Alaska and Maine) made it impossible to draw inferences about RCV experience and attitudes about primary reform.

⁴ Since there are not significant differences by race, we do not include a table but we do include race of respondent in the multivariate models.

TABLE 2 Percent support for primary election reforms of those expressing an opinion, by political interest (percent) 2023.

Electoral reform	Full sample	Hardly at all	Only now and then	Some of the time	Most of the time
Favor status quo	61.31	50.72	62.18	62.83	61.71
Ranked choice voting	57.78	60.35	63.20	62.16	52.46
National Congressional Primary	74.07	69.24	71.19	76.94	73.94
Open primary	80.95	88.60	86.19	85.28	74.19
15% Candidate threshold	64.04	50.87	71.24	67.80	61.60
Party endorsements	54.46	49.98	63.23	61.46	47.37
Runoff elections	74.54	74.01	74.03	76.96	73.16
Nonpartisan primary	59.50	67.45	71.91	66.45	48.73
State party conventions	36.73	47.37	46.77	43.78	26.39
Optional primaries	75.45	72.29	82.56	76.47	73.07
Sore loser laws	57.72	52.26	60.30	58.66	57.34
Voter threshold	51.20	65.55	60.78	55.91	41.86
<i>Rotate primary</i>	72.81	64.87	75.40	76.42	71.32
<i>National Primary</i>	80.78	80.33	79.08	81.87	80.69
Approximate percent of sample	100.00	13.50	14.27	29.83	42.40

Source: 2023 YouGov nationally representative sample of 3000 respondents. Calculated using survey weights.

TABLE 3 Percent support for congressional primary reform of those expressing an opinion, by state primary type, 2023.

Electoral reform	Full sample	Closed primary	Partially open primary	Open to unaffiliated primary	Open primary	Top two primary
Favor status quo	61.31	62.28	56.05	64.29	60.35	63.16
Ranked choice voting	57.78	57.86	54.51	53.88	55.60	67.48
National Congressional Primary	74.07	74.45	70.55	77.68	72.75	76.50
Open primary	80.95	79.43	83.27	84.30	81.02	80.79
15% Candidate threshold	64.04	63.67	50.61	71.61	65.37	69.24
Party endorsements	54.46	53.85	49.83	51.84	51.93	66.95
Runoff elections	74.54	73.99	67.73	77.43	76.81	76.12
Nonpartisan primary	59.50	56.08	51.61	56.31	62.24	70.90
State party conventions	36.73	31.90	29.45	37.65	40.90	45.70
Optional primaries	75.45	75.75	73.41	79.32	74.84	75.06
Sore loser laws	57.72	57.91	53.86	60.14	56.68	60.99
Voter threshold	51.20	52.30	45.99	56.07	49.63	53.56
<i>Rotate primary</i>	72.81	72.83	71.75	70.00	74.37	72.75
<i>National primary</i>	80.78	82.07	78.43	83.61	80.89	78.21
Approximate percent of sample	100.00	31.87	12.63	10.57	28.87	15.80

Note: The percentage in each cell shows the percent of the sample living in a state with that primary law that supports the reform. For example, 57.86 percent of people living in a state with closed primaries are supportive of ranked-choice voting.

Controlling for confounding factors

In order to control for possible confounding factors, Tables 4 and 5 report multivariate logistic regression models (strongly agree and agree coded 1, neutral and disagree coded 0) for each of the primary reforms. Ordered logistic regression models predicting support for the reforms are reported in the online Appendix (Tables A3 and A4) with similar results, but the logit models provide easier interpretation.⁵ The coefficients are reported as odds ratios, interpreted by a positive relationship for coefficients greater than 1 and a negative relationship less than 1. The advantage of odds ratios is that they allow a way to measure the substantive impact of the variable on the probability of the outcome variable, holding other factors constant.

Table 4 shows that people who are very liberal in terms of ideology, for example, are 46 percent less likely to approve of the status quo than the reference group (moderates), while they are 56 percent more likely to favor RCV, and 23 percent more likely to favor a national congressional primary, all else equal. People who are very liberal oppose party endorsements on primary election ballots as well as congressional primary thresholds or the idea of optional primaries.

In contrast, people who say they are very conservative are 87 percent more likely to favor the status quo than moderates, and conservatives are 66% more likely to favor the status quo. Very conservative people are roughly 50 percent less likely to favor open primaries and 39 percent less likely to approve of nonpartisan primaries compared to moderates. But it is notable that people with a liberal ideology are not different than moderates on most policies, nor are conservatives. Thus, a large section of the population does not have strong, varying opinions on primary reforms. However, very conservative and very liberal individuals diverge significantly over the reform of primaries.

Consistent with the descriptive statistics in Table 1, the multivariate regression results continue to provide evidence of partisan divisions in attitudes about how to change primary rules. Strong Democrats do not object to the current system; they are nearly twice as likely as pure independents to approve of the status quo. They are more than twice as likely as independents to support party endorsements on election ballots and runoff elections. Yet they also support many reform proposals. They are 78 percent more likely than pure independents to favor RCV, nearly 50 percent more likely to want the nonpartisan primary and open primaries, and 85 percent more likely to favor a national congressional primary.

Independents who lean Democrat (a category that includes a younger and more racially diverse population than is the case for self-identified Democrats) have different views in that they are strongly opposed to the status quo, but like other Democrats they favor RCV, the nonpartisan primary, a national congressional primary, optional primaries, and even runoff elections. Independents leaning Democratic are five times more likely to favor open primaries, which makes sense since this form of primary election allows them to easily participate. They are no different than pure independents in opposing party endorsements on primary election ballots, which strong Democrats favor. They are truly independents and partisans at the same time.

When controlling for other demographic factors, what stands out for strong Republicans is not only that they exhibit high (twice that of independents) support for the status quo, but that they are three times more likely to favor party endorsements and 67 percent more likely to favor a national congressional primary than are pure independents. They also favor national primaries and voter turnout thresholds. Strong Republicans are alone among the partisan groups in being relatively more supportive of state party conventions. They are not opposed to reform, but they favor different reforms than Democrats. Independents leaning GOP are not statistically different than pure independents on these issues. Again, a national congressional primary is a reform that cuts across party lines.

As reported in the above tables, among the 14 logistic regression models reported in Tables 4 and 5 there are few significant differences for gender (except that women are more likely than men to oppose the status quo and state party conventions), race, income, or education. These are common findings in

⁵ The models were also estimated using multinomial logistic regression with support, do not know, and oppose categories. Since similar results were found, the logit models are reported which are easier to interpret.

TABLE 4 Predictors of support for primary election reforms (odds ratios—greater than 1 positive relationship and below 1 negative).

	Status quo <i>b/se</i>	Ranked- choice voting <i>b/se</i>	National primary <i>b/se</i>	Open primaries <i>b/se</i>	Congress Primary thresholds <i>b/se</i>	Party endorsements <i>b/se</i>	Runoff election <i>b/se</i>
Very liberal	0.54** (0.10)	1.56* (0.27)	1.23 (0.17)	1.04 (0.21)	0.50*** (0.08)	0.57** (0.11)	1.00 (0.13)
Liberal	1.10 (0.19)	1.29 (0.18)	1.19 (0.15)	1.08 (0.14)	1.17 (0.18)	0.96 (0.17)	1.02 (0.14)
<i>Moderate (Reference)</i>							
Conservative	1.66** (0.25)	0.92 (0.11)	1.15 (0.17)	1.01 (0.13)	1.19 (0.21)	0.95 (0.14)	1.14 (0.16)
Very conservative	1.87*** (0.29)	0.76 (0.16)	0.95 (0.19)	0.53*** (0.09)	0.93 (0.13)	0.78 (0.13)	0.92 (0.13)
Strong Democrat	1.65** (0.29)	1.78*** (0.20)	1.83*** (0.24)	1.60*** (0.19)	1.71** (0.34)	2.59*** (0.39)	1.94*** (0.25)
Not very strong Democrat	1.31 (0.26)	1.59** (0.21)	1.38* (0.18)	1.73*** (0.19)	1.57** (0.22)	2.38*** (0.35)	2.02*** (0.28)
Lean democrat	0.70 (0.20)	2.16*** (0.33)	1.79** (0.31)	4.98*** (1.30)	1.15 (0.21)	0.85 (0.18)	2.20*** (0.44)
<i>Independent (Reference)</i>							
Lean Republican	1.69* (0.43)	0.89 (0.16)	1.39 (0.24)	1.32 (0.30)	1.01 (0.25)	1.33 (0.22)	1.31 (0.35)
Not very strong Republican	1.41 (0.30)	1.10 (0.21)	1.63** (0.23)	1.30 (0.19)	1.50* (0.23)	1.80** (0.33)	1.61* (0.32)
Strong Republican	2.07** (0.47)	0.88 (0.13)	1.67*** (0.24)	1.02 (0.18)	1.35 (0.24)	2.95*** (0.46)	1.33 (0.26)
Age	0.99*** (0.003)	0.97*** (0.003)	1.00 (0.003)	0.99 (0.003)	0.99** (0.003)	0.98*** (0.004)	1.00 (0.004)
Female	0.72*** (0.06)	0.75** (0.07)	1.07 (0.07)	1.08 (0.10)	0.79* (0.07)	0.87 (0.07)	0.97 (0.08)
Black	1.22 (0.17)	0.83 (0.16)	1.15 (0.15)	0.91 (0.16)	1.11 (0.21)	1.31 (0.18)	1.04 (0.15)
Latino	0.85 (0.07)	0.71* (0.10)	0.88 (0.10)	0.64*** (0.07)	0.78 (0.12)	0.92 (0.18)	0.74 (0.13)
Other Race	0.94 (0.15)	0.80 (0.12)	0.94 (0.15)	0.62*** (0.08)	0.83 (0.15)	0.68 (0.15)	0.90 (0.16)
Income	1.00 (0.02)	1.02 (0.02)	0.99 (0.02)	1.00 (0.01)	1.03 (0.02)	0.99 (0.02)	1.02 (0.02)
Political	1.49*** (0.07)	1.31*** (0.07)	1.37*** (0.07)	1.27*** (0.05)	1.35*** (0.06)	1.22*** (0.07)	1.31*** (0.07)
Interest							
Education	1.13* (0.06)	1.17*** (0.05)	1.01 (0.05)	0.96 (0.06)	1.05 (0.05)	0.97 (0.04)	1.04 (0.04)

(Continues)

TABLE 4 (Continued)

	Status quo <i>b/se</i>	Ranked-choice voting <i>b/se</i>	National primary <i>b/se</i>	Open primaries <i>b/se</i>	Congress Primary thresholds <i>b/se</i>	Party endorsements <i>b/se</i>	Runoff election <i>b/se</i>
Married	0.83 (0.08)	1.06 (0.11)	0.81 (0.10)	0.80* (0.08)	0.89 (0.07)	0.92 (0.09)	0.87 (0.09)
Working	1.18 (0.12)	1.21* (0.11)	1.25* (0.12)	1.22* (0.11)	1.10 (0.12)	1.23** (0.09)	0.99 (0.11)
Constant	0.29*** (0.09)	0.55 (0.19)	0.35** (0.13)	1.55 (0.54)	0.37** (0.11)	0.67 (0.23)	0.52 (0.17)
Observations	3000	3000	3000	2999	3000	3000	3000

Note. Logistic regressions with standard errors clustered by state and using survey weights. Exponentiated coefficients (odds ratios) are displayed in the table. The base party identification category is independent, and the base ideology category is moderate. **p* = 0.05 ***p* = 0.01 ****p* = 0.001.

models of public opinion on many policies; for instance, they are consistent with research about the lack of demographic differences in understanding election laws (Donovan, Tolbert, and Harper 2023). Across the board, younger people are more favorable toward reforms to primary elections, except for optional primaries. In sum, most demographic factors do not matter, but partisanship and ideology do, with partisanship more important than ideology. The national congressional primary is the lone issue (again, apart from our presidential primary validation questions) that has cross-cutting partisan support.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The survey results generally confirm our hypotheses (see summary Table 6). The high number of “don’t know” responses suggests that most Americans have not given very much thought to primary election laws. However, a large majority of Americans express support for many reforms when the reforms are described to them (including details about the benefits). They are particularly supportive of reforms that appear to increase citizen choice (i.e., to be broadly democratic), and they are more skeptical of reforms that would restrict choice or enhance the role of parties as gatekeepers. There are also noticeable partisan differences in responses, particularly in regard to reforms such as RCV which have become a source of partisan conflict in recent years. While experience with particular primary reforms has little measurable effect on public attitudes, there are exceptions, especially in regard to the nonpartisan primary. In multivariate models (not shown due to space constraints), the coefficients for state primary laws are not statistically significant. As shown in summary Table 6, people with more political interest were actually less supportive of changing primary rules.

Implications for political scientists

Although we do not analyze public attitudes in prior years toward primary elections or primary reforms, our results suggest that the accounts of American political history offered by, among others, Merriam and Overacker (1928), Ware (2002), Jacobs (2022), and Boatright (2024) accurately describe citizens’ affect toward primaries. These studies indicate that voters are attracted to primaries because they appear to be democratic and that voters prefer using primaries rather than other means of candidate selection. There are, to be sure, many democratic nations that do not use primary elections, and it has long been noted that democracy within parties is not related to democracy between parties (see Schattschneider 1960). Arguments about openness and voter choice still resonate with large majorities of the

TABLE 5 Predictors of support for primary election reforms (odds ratios—greater than 1 positive relationship and below 1 negative).

	Nonpartisan primary <i>b/se</i>	State party conventions <i>b/se</i>	Optional primaries <i>b/se</i>	Sore loser laws <i>b/se</i>	Voter turnout threshold <i>b/se</i>	Rotate Primaries <i>b/se</i>	National primary <i>b/se</i>
Very liberal	0.95 (0.15)	0.79 (0.18)	0.63** (0.11)	0.88 (0.12)	0.87 (0.16)	0.91 (0.16)	1.06 (0.16)
Liberal	1.08 (0.13)	1.38 (0.27)	1.17 (0.17)	1.49** (0.18)	1.08 (0.16)	1.29* (0.16)	1.15 (0.14)
<i>Moderate (Reference)</i>							
conservative	0.97 (0.13)	0.91 (0.17)	1.09 (0.15)	1.14 (0.15)	0.93 (0.16)	0.97 (0.16)	1.15 (0.16)
Very conservative	0.61** (0.11)	0.83 (0.15)	1.08 (0.18)	1.07 (0.18)	0.73* (0.09)	0.65* (0.12)	0.68* (0.11)
Strong democrat	1.45** (0.20)	1.28 (0.29)	1.55** (0.24)	2.32*** (0.35)	1.39 (0.25)	1.63*** (0.23)	1.99*** (0.27)
Not very strong Democrat	1.98*** (0.37)	1.52 (0.34)	1.52* (0.24)	2.58*** (0.47)	1.66** (0.27)	1.46* (0.21)	1.68*** (0.22)
Lean democrat	2.15*** (0.40)	0.98 (0.31)	1.75*** (0.28)	1.59* (0.29)	1.40 (0.31)	2.35*** (0.41)	1.86*** (0.31)
<i>Independent (Reference)</i>							
Lean Republican	0.86 (0.20)	1.34 (0.37)	1.21 (0.26)	1.29 (0.27)	1.14 (0.20)	0.91 (0.16)	1.47 (0.28)
Not very strong Republican	1.18 (0.25)	1.25 (0.30)	1.35 (0.28)	1.50** (0.23)	1.11 (0.16)	1.21 (0.24)	1.59*** (0.21)
Strong republican	1.13 (0.16)	2.32*** (0.54)	1.15 (0.18)	1.62** (0.26)	1.50** (0.20)	1.07 (0.16)	1.83*** (0.28)
Age	0.98*** (0.003)	0.98*** (0.004)	1.01** (0.004)	0.99*** (0.003)	0.98*** (0.003)	0.99** (0.003)	1.00 (0.003)
Female	0.97 (0.06)	0.63*** (0.06)	0.80* (0.08)	0.93 (0.08)	0.90 (0.08)	0.89 (0.11)	1.13 (0.13)
Black	1.20 (0.17)	1.56** (0.25)	0.86 (0.13)	1.15 (0.15)	1.13 (0.12)	0.86 (0.13)	1.18 (0.18)
Latino	0.76 (0.11)	0.94 (0.14)	0.73* (0.09)	0.88 (0.10)	0.88 (0.14)	0.66** (0.10)	0.77* (0.08)
Other race	0.94 (0.11)	0.81 (0.14)	0.81 (0.10)	0.68* (0.13)	0.78 (0.15)	0.73* (0.10)	0.74* (0.10)
Income	1.00 (0.02)	0.98 (0.02)	1.01 (0.02)	1.02 (0.02)	0.98 (0.02)	1.00 (0.01)	0.99 (0.01)
Political interest	1.17** (0.06)	1.04 (0.06)	1.23*** (0.06)	1.28*** (0.08)	1.12* (0.06)	1.30*** (0.07)	1.39*** (0.07)
Education	0.95 (0.05)	0.94 (0.06)	1.09 (0.06)	0.95 (0.05)	0.95 (0.05)	1.07 (0.06)	0.95 (0.05)
Married	0.86 (0.08)	0.72** (0.07)	0.83* (0.07)	0.77* (0.08)	0.77** (0.07)	0.73*** (0.05)	0.78* (0.08)

(Continues)

TABLE 5 (Continued)

	Nonpartisan primary <i>b/se</i>	State party conventions <i>b/se</i>	Optional primaries <i>b/se</i>	Sore loser laws <i>b/se</i>	Voter turnout threshold <i>b/se</i>	Rotate Primaries <i>b/se</i>	National primary <i>b/se</i>
Working	1.28** (0.11)	1.35** (0.15)	1.18 (0.12)	1.16 (0.13)	1.22* (0.11)	1.36** (0.12)	1.27* (0.15)
Constant	1.33 (0.36)	1.78 (0.58)	0.36* (0.14)	0.57 (0.17)	1.40 (0.46)	0.78 (0.21)	0.64 (0.23)
Observations	3000	3000	3000	3000	2999	3000	2999

Note: Logistic regressions with standard errors clustered by state and using survey weights. Exponentiated coefficients (odds ratios) are displayed in the table. The base party identification category is independent, and the base ideology category is moderate. *0.05, **0.01, ***0.001.

TABLE 6 Summary of results.

Hypotheses	Confirmed
1. We expect that many Americans do not know very much about primary election rules or reform options.	✓
2. We expect that many Americans will be supportive of primary election reforms.	✓
3. We hypothesize that Americans will tend to favor reforms that can be framed as pro-democracy or antiparty.	✓
4. Citizens should respond to partisan cues about particular election laws based on elite signaling and perceived partisan self-interest	✓
5. Public knowledge and political experience may shape attitudes about primary elections.	X

public, however. Whatever problems one might identify with the primary, there appears to be no going back.

One might describe the preference for antiparty reforms as a sort of populist tendency. Cain (2015) observes this with reference to many other types of electoral reforms, although the meaning of the term “populism” is contested and has become more so since the publication of Cain’s book. Our findings by no means indicate that the most popular reforms are the “right” ones to adopt; many recent considerations by political scientists of problems with contemporary primary elections take a decidedly pluralist approach, arguing that strengthening political parties will in fact improve democracy (see, e.g., APSA Presidential Task Force on Political Parties 2023). There is, therefore, a gap between what political scientists believe will improve elections and what the public wants.

In constructing this survey, we have offered succinct descriptions of each reform (see online Appendix for question wording) but we have not sought to educate our respondents about the effects of particular reforms or to otherwise complicate their responses. In this regard, we have emulated the work on campaign finance done by Primo and Milyo (2020). We suspect that were we to fill in details about the outcomes of particular primary elections (as Sinclair and Sinclair 2021 do) or offer partisan cues some respondents would change their views. There is little evidence here that the respondents’ views are the result of careful deliberation about elections. The fact that partisanship does influence responses about many reforms suggests to us that some respondents are already associating particular election reforms with partisan advantage.

Implications for reform

While this study was not undertaken for the purpose of advocating for any particular reforms, we believe it does offer lessons for those who would do so. One clear lesson is that reformers should be cautious

about discussing any partisan tilt in the results. There is, for instance, nothing intrinsic about RCV that should provide an advantage to one party over another. While our data show that Democratic partisans are more favorable of many types of primary reforms than Republicans, many reforms have substantial support among Republicans as well.

Reformers who advocate for pro-party reforms should also be cautious about how these reforms are framed. Some of the reforms we analyze may appear in the abstract to provide advantages to party organizations, yet they may offer other benefits that voters would find appealing or would work to counteract what voters see as the worst aspects of party control.

And finally, we note that there are some reforms here that have robust support among voters of both parties. The establishment of a same-day national congressional primary, for instance, has strong support among Democrats and Republicans, yet despite some elite support (Kamarck 2014; Ferrer and Thorning 2023) it has not played as prominent a role in discussions of reform as have other reforms that have less public support. It is of course possible that this reform (like any other here) may lose support among voters the more it is discussed, or that it may become associated with one party or the other and thus lose support among partisans. But this is a reform that has yet to suffer this fate.

Limitations of our study

This study is intended as a benchmark for studies of attitudes toward primary election reforms. It is the most comprehensive study of primary reform attitudes that we are aware of. In order to cover a large number of topics, we had to limit our ability to explore some descriptive characteristics of the respondents that may be of interest to those who undertake future work. We do not explore the relationship between perceptions of political efficacy among respondents (see Sinclair and Sinclair 2021; Wolak 2018). We also recognize that the status quo will vary from one respondent to the next, depending on where they live. Although Sinclair and Sinclair (2021) take this into account in establishing a branching question based on where the respondent resides, we have chosen not to do this because we are skeptical that most respondents will know very much about their state's primary laws. We take the "status quo" question to be an assertion of whether people think primaries, as an institution, are okay, and we then consider each of the individual reforms separately. In Table 3, we have noted variation according to the primary rules used in respondents' home states. Likewise, some studies of attitudes about election reforms have developed additive indices to measure respondents' overall receptivity to reforms; the logic here is that someone who is willing to consider five or six different reform ideas is different from someone who is only interested in one or two reforms. We have chosen not to do this because support for the reform proposals is variable and not suitable for scaling. Developing an index is further complicated by the fact that the reforms would move primaries in different directions—more "democratic" or more open versus enhanced party control. Although some scholars have tried to scale degrees of primary openness, there is no one agreed-upon measure of this (Kurlowski 2014; Sinclair and O'Grady 2018). We also leave for other researchers the question of whether different means of framing reforms might lead to different results.

Voters do not appear to have changed their minds very much about primaries over the past century. Perhaps they will, in some states, in upcoming years, but voters' basic commitment to the direct primary and their interest in a wide range of reform represents an opportunity for reformers and a cautionary tale for those who would move forward without considering the structure of public attitudes.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY

Data used in this analysis and statistical code will be available on Harvard's Dataverse.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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