

# THE REPRESENTATIVENESS OF PRIMARY ELECTORATES

## Abstract

*This paper examines the degree to which primary election voters differ, demographically and politically, from the rest of the electorate. The analysis utilizes 5,004 interviews with registered Nevada voters, conducted in six cross-sectional surveys at various times in 1998, and matched with individual voter records from all 17 County Clerks' offices. Respondents are classified as having voted in the primary, having voted only in the general, or as having not voted at all.*

*Primary voters tend to be significantly older, more white, more interested in politics, stronger partisans (but only on the Republican side), and to have lived in the state for a longer period of time than those who only participate in the general election — but there are surprisingly few differences by education, income, or religion. There are also surprisingly few differences on the ideological issues raised in the election. The largest differences, both politically and demographically, tend to be between those who voted at least once in 1998 and those who did not vote at all.*

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## **Introduction**

The modern political wisdom, traceable at least to V.O. Key (1956), is that voters in primary elections are unrepresentative of the electorate as a whole. As Key put it in his classic *American State Politics*, “those who vote in the primaries do not make up miniatures of the party membership...[I]n states with a modicum of interparty competition, primary participants are often by no means representative of the party.” (p. 145). Key feared that if primary electorates were indeed mere caricatures of the entire party following, elected officials would pander to the primary constituency rather than serve the electorate as a whole (pp. 152-153). Many newspaper accounts of modern primary contests draw on such assumptions, pointing out the supposedly unrepresentative nature of those who take the time to participate in primary elections or party caucuses, and that candidates tend to highlight “extreme” issue positions in appeals to primary voters.

Many political consultants also believe that primary electorates are unrepresentative of their party followings. As one Republican put it, “If you look at the nature of people who vote in primaries, in both parties they are far more educated voters, far more loyal voters, and they know far more about their candidates.” (Purdum, 2000a). And, as one Democratic consultant explained, “In order for either one of them to grab the majority of the Republican vote here, they’re both [Bush and McCain] going to have to go to the right, and that poses problems for both [in the general election.] *The Republicans that you see showing up to vote in the fall don’t look a lot like the ones you see voting in the primary.*” (Purdum, 2000b. Emphasis added).

Some recent research suggests, however, that primary electorates may not differ much from the more general party followings. John Geer (1988) finds, for example, that the general party following is better educated, better paid, and more ideologically extreme than voters in primaries. The few biases of primary electorates, Geer argues, are so small as to have only minor consequences when selecting candidates. Similarly, Norrander (1989) compares presidential primary voters in each party to general election voters who do not

participate in primaries and finds little evidence that primary voters are ideologically extreme or otherwise unrepresentative of the party as a whole. Norrander also finds that primary voters are not more “ideological” than general election voters in their mix of professed issue positions, and this is true of both Republicans and Democrats.

Presidential primaries may not be the best place to look for these kinds of effects, however. Presidential races are inherently high-profile and may succeed in drawing a wider cross-section of the electorate than a typical state or local primary election. Surprisingly little research has investigated the composition of state primary electorates and the degree to which they are representative of the electorate as a whole.

Key’s original work relied on aggregate data, and he himself admitted that sample surveys (if available) would be a more effective means of investigating such questions. A number of published studies have used sample surveys to examine primary voters in state elections, but much of this research is now over thirty years old. Ranney and Epstein (1966) conducted a major study of Wisconsin voters, in the primary and general elections of 1964. They found that the same socioeconomic characteristics which generally drive higher turnout in general elections also drive higher turnout in primaries; the differences between primary voters and general election-only voters were generally the same as differences between voters and non-voters in general elections. They also found that primary electorates were not more ideologically extreme than each party’s general following. In a follow-up study, Ranney (1968) found few ideological differences between primary and general election voters in either party. Similarly, DiNitto and Smithers (1972) found little evidence that Democratic primary voters in New York were a “caricature” of those who voted in the general election.

Moore and Hofstetter (1973), in a study of the Ohio electorate, found some evidence of primary electorates differing from the general party followings. They found that Ohio Democrats who vote in the primary “may be a relatively small, hard-core group of party loyalists who maintain continual concern with party affairs.” Primary voters of both

parties were better able to form opinions of the candidates, and expressed several issue positions that were significantly different from general election only voters.

This paper takes a fresh look at the question, using contemporary survey data from 1998 elections in Nevada matched to validated voter records from each County Clerk's office. The data provide a detailed look at the demographic differences between primary and general election voters, in both parties, and some indication of the ideological representativeness of each party's primary electorate. I find that primary voters in both parties tend to be significantly older than general election only voters, and to have lived in the state significantly longer. Republican, but not Democratic, primary voters tend to be stronger partisans than those who only show up in November. Neither party's primary voters are significantly better educated than the general party followings, however. Also, confirming past research, I find little evidence of ideological extremism among primary voters — but do confirm that primary voters are significantly more attentive to politics and better able to form impressions of candidates than those who only vote in general elections.

### ***The 1998 Nevada Elections***

Nevada has a system of strict party registration and closed primaries; at registration time, voters declare a party preference (or list themselves as unaffiliated) and are only allowed to vote in their own party's primary. Those registered as unaffiliated, or affiliated with a minor party (which almost never has a contested primary for any office), get to choose only between candidates for nonpartisan offices such as county sheriff. The Nevada electorate was almost perfectly divided in 1998, with 42 percent registered as Republicans and 42 percent registered as Democrats. The additional 16 percent were largely unaffiliated, with very few registering with minor parties (for analysis purposes, I will lump all 16 percent together as “nonpartisans”).

Although Democrat Harry Reid and Republican John Ensign waged a spirited general election battle for the U.S. Senate, neither man faced primary election opposition<sup>1</sup>. In the 1998 Nevada primary election, the action was in the gubernatorial race — and mostly on

the Republican side. Retired businessman Kenny Guinn enjoyed the early backing of most of the state's Republican political establishment, but he was forced to beat back a million-dollar primary campaign challenge waged by former movie producer (and Nevada newcomer) Aaron Russo. Although Russo ended up losing by over 30 points in the September 1<sup>st</sup> primary, he surged enough over the summer to require Guinn to take him seriously. (The state's Lt. Governor, Lonnie Hammargren, also ran — but he jumped into the gubernatorial race very late and was not able to mount much of a campaign.) Guinn campaigned largely on his background (as a successful business leader and superintendent of the Clark County Schools) rather than on his issue positions. Russo talked more about issues, but not from an ideological perspective — and mainly federal issues over which a state governor would have little power.

On the Democratic side, Las Vegas Mayor Jan Jones won big with 59% of the primary vote; none of her eight opponents garnered more than 16% of the vote. Jones, like Guinn, ran more on resume than on issues in the primary. She stressed her seven years as Las Vegas mayor, and never debated her opponents.

In the general election campaign, the Senate race was quite ideological — but Guinn and Jones continued to emphasize background and experience more than ideology. Reid edged Ensign by just four hundred votes, in an election so close it required a recount. Guinn beat Jones by a somewhat more comfortable margin (52 percent to 42 percent), but the gubernatorial race was also competitive and hard-fought to the end.

### ***Data and Methodology***

The data include a total of 5,004 survey interviews, conducted in six waves over the course of 1998. The surveys were administered by Market Strategies, a national Republican polling firm, on behalf of multiple statewide Nevada campaigns<sup>2</sup>. With one small exception (half of the September survey was Random Digit Dial) survey samples were drawn from the complete statewide voter registration list; almost all of these records included a telephone number (Nevada's voter registration form asks for a phone number).

Three surveys were conducted before the primary and three after the primary. One of the pre-primary surveys was exclusively Republican, and another included a Republican oversample. The other was a pure general election sample. (For the survey with the Republican oversample, Market Strategies weighted the data separately, depending on whether Republicans or general

election voters were of interest.)

Table 1 summarizes the field dates, number of interviews, and proportion of Republicans and Democrats used in each survey.

<b>Table 1: Field Dates and Number of Interviews</b>				
	<b>Number of Interviews</b>			
<b>Field Dates (1998)</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>GOP</b>	<b>Dem</b>	<b>Else</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>5004</b>	<b>2899</b>	<b>1572</b>	<b>533</b>
May 27-31	1000	433	421	146
July 9-12	700	400	244	56
August 22-27	1051	1051	0	0
September 3-10	802	412	285	105
October 10-13	725	249	355	121
October 21-23	726	354	267	105

I applied different weights to these data, depending on the analysis to be used. For the initial investigation, all 5,004 interviews were weighted together, as one large survey, to reflect the known proportions of Republicans, Democrats, and others in each of the three major regions in the state: Clark County (Las Vegas area), Washoe County (Reno area), and the rural Cow Counties (balance of the state). I also applied a statewide age weight, based on the distribution of birth dates in the complete registered voter list.

I also computed party-specific weights, to use when investigating Republicans or Democrats. The 2,899 Republican interviews were weighted to match the known distribution of registered Republicans in each of the three major regions; the same was done with the 1,572 Democratic interviews and 533 non-affiliated interviews. The major-party interviews were also weighted by the known age distribution (from the registered voter list) for each party statewide. In these party-specific weights, voters not registered with the party of interest were given a weight of zero. Finally, for both the general electorate sample and the party-specific samples, I computed survey wave-specific weights; that is, a weight to be used for each set of field dates. These were used when focusing on questions asked in only one or two specific surveys.

Once the survey interviews were compiled, the next step was to check each voter's official record to determine whether the person voted in the 1998 primary election, general

election, both, or neither. In Nevada, all such records are kept at the county level. Clark County sent an extremely helpful CD-ROM with the primary and general election “voted” files. It was then a relatively simple matter to merge the files in a database and electronically match my 2,713 Clark County respondents against the official records. The rest of the state was an entirely different matter. Washoe County keeps voter records in an electronic database, but this database can be accessed only in the County Clerk’s office and records must be pulled up one at a time. The same is true in Douglas County. In most of the other counties, I had to search through roster books for each precinct for each election to see which voters actually signed in. This required that I actually visit almost every county seat, which I did in a ten-day driving tour of the state in December of 1998.<sup>3</sup>

It was possible to locate the records of all but a small handful (N=118, or 2.4 percent of the total) of voters.<sup>4</sup> Those for whom validated turnout data are not available are left missing in the analysis.

A problem with the data is that actual turnout among survey respondents was very high, and much higher than

	Primary		General	
	Official	Survey	Official	Survey
Statewide	29.3	47.9	49.0	70.6
Clark	25.9	44.2	45.8	68.0
Washoe	30.8	53.2	51.8	74.2
Cow Counties	40.0	55.2	57.7	75.4

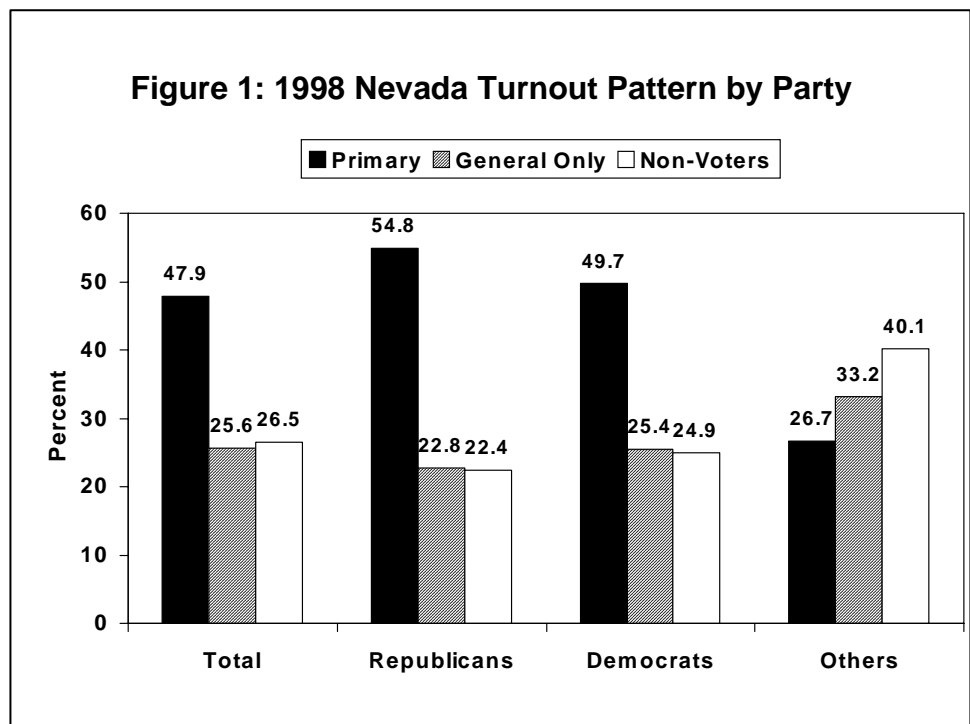
for the general population. As Table 2 shows, nearly half of the survey respondents voted in the primary and more than two-thirds voted in the general election. Less than one-third of the general public voted in the primary, and less than half voted in the general election.

At first, I thought that this was a canvassing effect; the survey respondents may have been spurred to turn out at higher rates because being interviewed increased their interest in the election. To test for this, I compared primary election turnout among those interviewed before the primary and after the primary. If there was a canvassing effect, those interviewed before the primary should have significantly higher turnout than those interviewed after. In fact, however, primary election turnout was virtually the same for those interviewed before (48.2 percent) and after (47.2 percent) the primary.

It seems most likely, therefore, that the kind of person who would stay on the telephone and complete a survey interview is inherently more interested in politics and more likely to vote than someone who would not consent to be interviewed. The best way to test this hypothesis directly would be to collect the registration records of those who refused to be interviewed and validate their votes. Unfortunately, this is impossible; the survey house did not keep detailed records on refusals. As an alternative test, I pulled an additional random sample of 5,000 people from the registered voter list and validated the votes of those living in Clark County. Turnout in both the general and primary elections was nearly identical to the official records. This adds weight to my hypothesis that “the kind of person who will stay on the phone for an interview” is inherently more interested in politics (and therefore voting) than the population as a whole.

Combining both of the validated vote measures, it was possible to build a composite measure of 1998 voting behavior. 47.9 percent of the sample voted in the primary election, 25.6 percent voted only

in the general election, and 26.5 percent did not vote at all<sup>5</sup>. Only 3% of the sample voted in the primary but not in the general; I have included these as “primary voters.”





## Demographics and Turnout

Table 3 takes a closer look at these different types of voters. Nevadans who voted in the 1998 primary differed in a number of significant ways from those who voted only in the general election: their median age was eight years older, their median number of years in the state was six years longer, and they were much more likely to be registered with one of the two major political parties. Under Nevada's closed primary system, those not affiliated with the Republicans or Democrats have little to draw them to the polls, except in the unlikely event of a contested local nonpartisan race. Interestingly, primary voters were plurality Republican and general election only voters were plurality Democrat — even though the general electorate is evenly divided between Republicans and

	<b>N=</b>	<b>Total Electorate</b>	<b>Primary Voters</b>	<b>General Only</b>	<b>Non Voters</b>
<b>Total N=</b>	<b>4865</b>	<b>4865</b>	<b>2330</b>	<b>1248</b>	<b>1288</b>
<b>Age (Median years)</b>	4811	46.0	52.0	44.0	38.0
<b>Years NV Resident</b>					
Median years residence	4811	14.0	18.0	12.0	10.0
<b>Region of Residence</b>					
Clark County	3030	62	57	64	69
Washoe County	1040	21	24	21	17
Balance of State	796	16	19	15	13
<b>Party Registration</b>					
Republican	2047	42	48	37	35
Democrat	1982	41	42	40	39
No Affiliation/Other	836	17	10	22	26
<b>Education</b>					
Less than diploma	239	5	4	4	7
H.S. Grad	1258	26	23	25	33
Some college/Vocational	1755	36	37	37	36
Undergraduate degree	1013	21	23	21	17
Post Graduate	561	12	13	12	8
<b>Income</b>					
<\$20K	321	11	11	10	12
\$20K-\$30K	438	15	14	13	19
\$30K-\$40K	381	13	14	12	14
\$40K-\$50K	415	15	13	17	15
\$50K-\$75K	670	23	23	26	21
\$75K+	628	22	24	22	18
<b>Gender</b>					
Men	2387	49	49	46	51
Women	2478	51	51	54	49
<b>Race</b>					
White	3420	83	87	84	77
Black	194	5	3	5	7
Latino	157	4	3	4	5
Other	330	8	7	7	10
<b>Religion</b>					
Protestant	1602	49	49	51	46
Mormon	333	10	11	10	9
Catholic	775	24	24	23	24
Jewish	93	3	2	4	3
Other/None	478	15	14	13	18
Note: All percentages add to 100% vertically.					
"Years NV Resident" has maximum value of 30+. "All my life" coded as 30+.					

Democrats. It is quite likely that these party differentials in primary turnout were due to the more contested nature of the Republican gubernatorial race.

Primary voters seem to have only slightly higher incomes than general election voters, are only slightly better educated, and slightly less minority. Primary voters are slightly more male than general only voters, but this is likely a result of there being more Republicans than Democrats voting in the primary. In many demographic categories, the truly distinctive group appears to be those who never voted at all in 1998. These people are much younger, had lived in the state for an even shorter time, are substantially less educated, have substantially lower incomes, are less white, and less likely to have a religious affiliation.

I built a logistic regression model to determine the demographic drivers of primary election participation. The dependent variable was coded 0 if the person voted only in the general election and 1 if the person voted in the primary; those not voting at all were excluded entirely. The resulting model reveals which traits, among voters, most clearly differentiate the primary electorate from those who show up only in November. As Table 4

details, age, years of Nevada residence, and affiliation with one of the major parties are the ways in which primary voters are most unique. Primary voters also tend to be significantly stronger partisans, less black, more male, more likely to live outside of Clark County (the most urban area of the state). Holding other

<b>Table 4</b>			
<b>Primary Election Turnout Bias by Subgroups: Full Electorate (Logistic Regression)</b>			
<b>Independent Variables</b>	<b>Coefficient</b>	<b>Standard Error</b>	<b>Probability Level</b>
Age	.019	.003	.000
Years NV Resident	.020	.004	.000
Nonpartisan Registrant	-.730	.118	.000
Black	-.625	.202	.002
Party ID Strength	.095	.045	.034
Woman	-.164	.081	.041
Clark County Resident	-.156	.084	.058
Education	.037	.022	.088
Latino	-.250	.218	.254
Constant	-.774	.242	.001
Overall Model	Chi-Sq=206.8, 9 df p<.0001 N=2877 65.8% correctly classified		
Note: Coefficients are from the logistic regression procedure in SPSS. Dependent variable coded 1 if voted in primary and 0 if only in general election. Party ID Strength a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (Independent) to 3 (Str. Partisan). "Years Nevada Resident" has a maximum value of 30+. "All my life" coded as 30+.			

variables constant at their means, major party registrants have a .175 greater probability of voting in the primary; non-blacks have a .15 greater probability of being primary voters. I did not include income in the model (or any subsequent models) because it was not asked in several of the survey waves; these missing data would greatly reduce the number of cases available for analysis.

### ***Parties and Turnout***

Primaries, and especially closed primaries, are necessarily partisan affairs --- and the two major parties differ markedly in their constituencies. From here on out, therefore, the analysis will discuss turnout patterns within the Democratic and Republican parties (rather than in the entire electorate). Table 5 gives a succinct look at the biases of primary voters within each party. For each party, the table profiles the primary electorate, the general election only voters, and computes the difference between them. Among Republicans, the primary electorate is a median 8 years older, has lived in the state a median 5 years longer, is 7 percent less likely to live in Clark County, and 4 percent more white. Also, as would be expected, strong Republicans tend to be disproportionately more represented in the primary; those identifying with the Democrats are less represented in the primary. But Republican primary voters are only slightly better educated and slightly more male than their general election counterparts, and are actually *less* likely to earn \$75,000 or more.

Some of these patterns are similar among Democrats. Democratic primary voters are a median 7 years older than those who only show up in November, have lived in the state a median 6 years longer, and are 8 percent less likely to live in Clark County. They are only slightly better educated. Interestingly, however, they tend to have lower incomes, be substantially more male, and substantially less minority than November-only Democrats. Also, curiously, Democratic primary voters are actually *weaker* partisans than those who show up only for the general — and actually somewhat *more* likely to identify with the Republican party. It could be that the non-competitive nature of the Democratic primary

racers led many strong Democrats to stay home, but it is not clear why weaker Democrats would then turn out in proportionately larger numbers. If anything, when election excitement is minimized, only the biggest “fans” (strong partisans) should show up at the

polls. For Nevada, the turnout rate for Republicans was 60% and for Democrats 51%.

**Table 5: Demographic Biases of Republican and Democratic Primary Electorates**

	Registered Republicans				Registered Democrats			
	N=	Primary Voters	General Only	Primary Bias	N=	Primary Voters	General Only	Primary Bias
<b>Total N=</b>	<b>2200</b>	<b>1553</b>	<b>647</b>		<b>1146</b>	<b>758</b>	<b>388</b>	
<b>Age (Median years)</b>	2178	51.0	43.0	<b>8.0</b>	1131	54.0	47.0	<b>7.0</b>
<b>Years NV Resident</b>								
Median	2187	18.0	13.0	<b>5.0</b>	1126	19.0	13.0	<b>6.0</b>
<b>Region of Residence</b>								
Clark County	1221	53.5	60.4	<b>-7.0</b>	735	61.3	69.8	<b>-8.4</b>
Washoe County	551	26.1	22.6	<b>3.5</b>	235	21.6	18.3	<b>3.3</b>
Balance of State	427	20.4	17.0	<b>3.4</b>	175	17.0	11.9	<b>5.1</b>
<b>Education</b>								
Less than H.S. Diploma	67	2.3	4.8	<b>-2.5</b>	59	6.0	3.6	<b>2.4</b>
H.S. Grad	488	22.9	20.9	<b>2.0</b>	291	23.8	29.3	<b>-5.5</b>
Some college/Vocational	824	37.2	39.0	<b>-1.8</b>	402	35.6	35.0	<b>.7</b>
Undergraduate degree	509	23.6	22.5	<b>1.2</b>	237	21.4	19.9	<b>1.4</b>
Post Graduate	297	13.9	12.8	<b>1.1</b>	146	13.2	12.2	<b>1.0</b>
<b>Income</b>								
<\$20K	116	6.2	8.4	<b>-2.2</b>	90	15.2	16.7	<b>-1.5</b>
\$20K-\$30K	181	11.2	12.5	<b>-1.3</b>	95	17.1	15.8	<b>1.4</b>
\$30K-\$40K	202	14.3	13.3	<b>1.0</b>	72	14.7	8.9	<b>5.8</b>
\$40K-\$50K	202	16.2	12.5	<b>3.6</b>	83	14.4	14.8	<b>-.4</b>
\$50K-\$75K	354	25.2	23.2	<b>2.0</b>	133	21.5	26.6	<b>-5.1</b>
\$75K+	437	27.1	30.2	<b>-3.1</b>	98	17.1	17.2	<b>-.1</b>
<b>Gender</b>								
Men	1085	49.5	48.8	<b>.7</b>	519	47.7	40.8	<b>6.9</b>
Women	1114	50.5	51.2	<b>-.7</b>	625	52.3	59.2	<b>-6.9</b>
<b>Race</b>								
White	1229	91.7	87.4	<b>4.3</b>	952	84.8	79.9	<b>4.9</b>
Black	18	1.3	1.4	<b>-.1</b>	74	5.0	9.3	<b>-4.3</b>
Latino	28	1.7	2.9	<b>-1.1</b>	45	3.6	4.6	<b>-1.1</b>
Other	85	5.3	8.3	<b>-3.0</b>	74	6.6	6.2	<b>.4</b>
<b>Religion</b>								
Protestant	897	52.5	50.0	<b>2.5</b>	299	44.3	48.3	<b>-4.0</b>
Mormon	232	12.7	15.3	<b>-2.5</b>	53	9.0	6.4	<b>2.6</b>
Catholic	368	21.8	19.9	<b>1.9</b>	181	27.6	27.8	<b>-.2</b>
Jewish	27	1.4	1.9	<b>-.5</b>	27	3.6	5.1	<b>-1.6</b>
Other/None	206	11.5	12.9	<b>-1.4</b>	94	15.5	12.4	<b>3.1</b>
<b>Party Identification</b>								
Strong Democrat	79	2.9	5.3	<b>-2.4</b>	370	31.1	34.5	<b>-3.5</b>
Weak Democrat	81	3.1	5.1	<b>-2.0</b>	256	21.4	24.0	<b>-2.5</b>
Independent Democrat	60	2.6	3.1	<b>-.5</b>	143	12.8	11.9	<b>.9</b>
Independent	87	3.6	4.8	<b>-1.2</b>	69	5.8	6.4	<b>-.7</b>
Independent Republican	267	12.8	10.7	<b>2.1</b>	70	5.8	6.7	<b>-.9</b>
Weak Republican	558	23.7	29.4	<b>-5.7</b>	101	9.7	7.0	<b>2.8</b>
Strong Republican	1066	51.4	41.6	<b>9.7</b>	138	13.4	9.5	<b>3.9</b>

Note: All percentages add to 100% vertically.  
 "Years NV Resident" has maximum value of 30+. "All my life" coded as 30+.

Table 6 puts these demographic characteristics together in logistic regression models for each party. Among Republicans, the primary electorate is significantly older, stronger partisans, been in the state longer, and more likely to live outside Clark County than Republicans who only vote in November. Interestingly, however, Republican primary voters are not significantly better educated and are not significantly more male than their November-only counterparts. (I did not include race in the Republican model because there are so few Republican minorities, and the race question was not even asked in most of the Republican primary surveys.) Among Republicans, holding other variables constant at their means, each additional ten years of age translates into a .05 greater probability of being a primary voter rather than just a general election voter. Each additional ten years of residence in the state increases this probability by .036. Each additional category of party identification strength (i.e. being a strong Republican rather than a weak Republican) increases the probability by .026.

<b>Table 6</b>						
<b>Primary Election Turnout Bias by Demographic Subgroups: By Party</b>						
<b>(Logistic Regression)</b>						
<b>Independent Variables</b>	<b>Republican Voters</b>			<b>Democratic Voters</b>		
	<b>Coefficient</b>	<b>Standard Error</b>	<b>Probability Level</b>	<b>Coefficient</b>	<b>Standard Error</b>	<b>Probability Level</b>
Age	.026	.003	.000	.020	.004	.000
Party Identification	.133	.030	.000	.052	.032	.108
Years NV Resident	.019	.005	.000	.021	.006	.001
Clark County Resident	-.274	.100	.006	-.217	.143	.128
Education	.041	.027	.130	.033	.036	.356
Woman	.013	.098	.897	-.270	.133	.043
Black				-.555	.259	.032
Latino				-.082	.326	.801
Constant	-1.001	.263	.000	-.503	.372	.177
Overall Models:	Chi-Sq=113.7, 6 df p<.0001 N=2228 71.3% correctly classified			Chi-Sq=60.5, 8 df p<.0001 N=1165 65% correctly classified		
Note: Coefficients are from the logistic regression procedure in SPSS. Dependent variable coded 1 if voted in primary and 0 if only in general election. Party identification is standard seven-point scale, coded from Strong Democrat (-3) to Strong Republican (+3). "Years Nevada Resident" has a maximum value of 30+. "All my life" coded as 30+.						

Things are somewhat different on the Democratic side. The Democratic primary electorate is also significantly older and has lived in the state significantly longer than

Democrats who only vote in the general election. Each additional ten years of age increases the probability of primary turnout (versus only voting in November) by .043; each additional ten years of residence increases this probability by .046. Democratic primary voters are also significantly more male and less black than their November-only co-partisans. Democratic men have a .06 greater probability than women of voting in the primary (as opposed to just the general election); black Democrats have a .13 lower probability of this than non-blacks. In other demographic characteristics, however, Democratic primary voters are not significantly unrepresentative of the party's general electorate: they are not better educated, not less likely to live in Clark County, and, curiously, not significantly stronger partisans.

### ***Attitudes and Turnout***

If the only differences between general and primary electorates were demographic, there would be little cause for concern. Most commentators stress the ideological bias of primary electorates, and the repercussions these biases can have for campaigns and the focus of public policy. Generally speaking, ideologically-biased primary electorates would be more likely to produce skewed and unrepresentative nominees than a primary electorate which is simply older and been in the state longer.

Unfortunately, given the largely non-ideological nature of the gubernatorial race, both in the Republican primary and in the general election, the polling firm from which I obtained these data included few (if any) direct measures of voter ideology in their surveys.<sup>6</sup>

One survey, in early September, tested some of the gubernatorial candidates' issue positions and asked if these positions made voters more likely or less likely to support the candidate in question. Four questions discussed taxes, two discussed education, one mentioned privatizing the delivery of state services, and another discussed gay marriage. I coded all questions to range from -2 (best for Jones) to +2 (best for Guinn). I then built a tax scale averaging scores across the four tax items, and an education scale averaging scores on the two education items. (The appendix gives the full wording and distribution of

all these items.) I was thus able to build these questions into rough summary measures of individual ideology. These scales, though far from ideal (because they are so bound up with voting behavior), give a relative sense of ideological polarization among different types of voters — or at least the degree to which their votes are influenced by ideological considerations.

Table 7 compares the distribution of these attitudes among primary and general election voters in each party. Among Republicans, primary voters are substantially *less* likely than general election only voters to fall into the extreme conservative categories; if any group is more extreme, it appears to be the general electorate! The same is true of Democrats for education and privatization of public services; primary voters are less likely to be extreme liberals than general election only voters. On taxes, however, Democratic primary voters are somewhat less likely to be extreme conservatives --- and considerably more likely to be liberal on gay marriage. Given the small cell sizes, however, and the way these ideological

Table 7: Attitude Biases of Republican and Democratic Primary Electorates								
	Republicans				Democrats			
	N=	Primary Voters	General Only	Primary Bias	N=	Primary Voters	General Only	Primary Bias
<b>Total N=</b>	<b>263</b>	<b>194</b>	<b>69</b>		<b>174</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>61</b>	
<b>Taxes</b>								
Most liberal	4	1.5	1.4	.1	24	14.2	13.1	1.0
Somewhat liberal	16	6.2	5.8	.4	32	18.6	18.0	.6
No difference	20	7.7	7.2	.5	16	9.7	8.2	1.5
Somewhat conservative	45	17.5	15.9	1.6	36	21.2	19.7	1.6
Most conservative	178	67.0	69.6	-2.6	66	36.3	41.0	-4.7
<b>Education</b>								
Most liberal	44	17.5	14.5	3.0	78	40.7	52.5	-11.8
Somewhat liberal	13	5.2	4.3	.8	13	8.8	4.9	3.9
No difference	20	7.2	8.7	-1.5	20	13.3	8.2	5.1
Somewhat conservative	30	11.3	11.6	-.3	19	12.4	8.2	4.2
Most conservative	156	58.8	60.9	-2.1	44	24.8	26.2	-1.5
<b>Privitization</b>								
Most liberal	7	2.6	2.9	-.3	30	15.9	19.7	-3.7
Somewhat liberal	12	3.6	7.2	-3.6	19	12.4	8.2	4.2
No difference	27	10.3	10.1	.2	26	15.9	13.1	2.8
Somewhat conservative	76	29.9	26.1	3.8	46	27.4	24.6	2.8
Most conservative	141	53.6	53.6	.0	53	28.3	34.4	-6.1
<b>Gay Marriage</b>								
Most liberal	10	4.1	2.9	1.2	23	15.0	9.8	5.2
Somewhat liberal	15	5.7	5.8	-.1	22	15.9	6.6	9.4
No difference	56	21.1	21.7	-.6	46	26.5	26.2	.3
Somewhat conservative	29	12.4	7.2	5.1	29	15.9	18.0	-2.1
Most conservative	153	56.7	62.3	-5.6	54	26.5	39.3	-12.8

Note: All percentages add to 100% vertically. See appendix for explanation of issue scales.

questions are tied up with voting behavior, it cannot be concluded with certainty that Democratic primary voters are more biased than Republican primary voters. These results provide some interesting hints, but would need to be replicated with cleaner measures of ideology.

I built a logistic regression model, detailed in Table 8, to determine the degree to which the primary electorate is biased on these issues. On the Democratic side, primary voters tend to use gay marriage as significantly more of a general election voting issue than November-only Democrats — but are otherwise indistinguishable from general election Democrats. Among Republicans, primary voters tend to be somewhat more inclined to use privatization as a voting issue, but are otherwise indistinguishable from general election-only Republicans.

Issue extremism is not the only measure of ideological bias. It is possible that primary voters are substantially more consistent in their issue positions than those who only turn

**Table 8**  
**Primary Election Turnout Bias by Ideology and Control Variables**  
**(Logistic Regression)**

Independent Variables	Republican Voters			Democratic Voters		
	Coefficient	Standard Error	Probability Level	Coefficient	Standard Error	Probability Level
Gay Rights	-0.067	0.154	0.664	-0.479	0.181	0.008
Education	-0.110	0.164	0.501	0.190	0.173	0.271
Privatization	0.211	0.154	0.169	0.030	0.140	0.832
Taxes	0.129	0.258	0.617	0.039	0.275	0.887
<b>Demographics and Partisanship</b>						
Black				-1.666	0.589	0.005
Woman	0.060	0.293	0.839	-0.570	0.362	0.115
Age	0.004	0.010	0.697	0.018	0.013	0.151
Party Identification	-0.023	0.138	0.866	0.123	0.134	0.358
Education	0.121	0.083	0.143	0.087	0.096	0.361
Years NV Resident	0.010	0.015	0.502	0.014	0.017	0.419
Clark County Resident	-0.433	0.305	0.156	0.198	0.385	0.607
Constant	0.107	0.833	0.898	-0.083	1.004	0.934
Overall Models:	Chi-Sq=6.9, 10 df p=.74 N=260 73.2% correctly classified			Chi-Sq=24.6, 11 df p<.01 N=174 67.9% correctly classified		

Note: Coefficients are from the logistic regression procedure in SPSS. See appendix for description of issue scales. Dependent var. coded 1 (voted in primary) or 0 (only in general). Party identification is standard seven-point scale, coded from Strong Democrat (-3) to Strong Republican (+3). "Years Nevada Resident" has a maximum value of 30+. "All my life" coded as 30+.



out for the general. To measure this, I computed gamma correlations between the various issue scales described above. Higher correlations would mean greater consistency between issue areas (i.e. those more liberal on education are also more liberal on privatization or gay rights); lower correlations would mean voters are holding issue positions largely independent of other issue positions.

In fact, as Table 9 details, the correlations among issue positions for general election voters tend to be as strong or stronger than for primary election voters --- and this is true of both Republicans and Democrats. In many cases, primary voters are actually substantially less consistent than general election only voters; they are never substantially more consistent. Again, this could be due to the particular mix of questions asked, and the

form of these questions (impact on voting). Still, it provides some confirmation to

<b>Total Sample</b>		<b>Education</b>	<b>Gay Marriage</b>	<b>Privitization</b>
Primary Voters (N=327)	Education	1.00		
	Gay Marriage	.47***	1.00	
	Privitization	.45***	.40***	1.00
	Taxes	.62***	.56***	.49***
General Election Only Voters (N=161)	Education	1.00		
	Gay Marriage	.61***	1.00	
	Privitization	.46***	.50***	1.00
	Taxes	.64***	.71***	.49***
Non-Voters (N=196)	Education	1.00		
	Gay Marriage	.55***	1.00	
	Privitization	.30***	.31***	1.00
	Taxes	.51***	.48***	.37***
<b>Republicans</b>		<b>Education</b>	<b>Gay Marriage</b>	<b>Privitization</b>
Primary Voters (N=194)	Education	1.00		
	Gay Marriage	.50***	1.00	
	Privitization	.45***	.41***	1.00
	Taxes	.62***	.54***	.39***
General Election Only Voters (N=69)	Education	1.00		
	Gay Marriage	.66***	1.00	
	Privitization	.41***	.38**	1.00
	Taxes	.61***	.69***	.40**
<b>Democrats</b>		<b>Education</b>	<b>Gay Marriage</b>	<b>Privitization</b>
Primary Voters (N=113)	Education	1.00		
	Gay Marriage	.34***	1.00	
	Privitization	.36***	.26**	1.00
	Taxes	.59***	.51***	.46***
General Election Only Voters (N=61)	Education	1.00		
	Gay Marriage	.52***	1.00	
	Privitization	.49***	.57***	1.00
	Taxes	.58***	.76***	.56***
All correlation coefficients are Gamma.				
Significance: *** = p<.001 ** = p<.01 * = p<.05				
See appendix for composition of issue measures.				

Norrander's research which found primary voters are not significantly more ideological than general election voters.

### ***Political Interest and Turnout***

Political "fans" should be more likely to turn out to vote than those who are less interested in politics. This should be especially evident in a lower stimulus election such as a primary. Therefore, primary voters should be significantly more interested in politics than those who only show up for the general election. The survey data include two measures of voter interest: (1) awareness and favorability of candidates and (2) a direct measure, asked in both October surveys, of interest in voting in November. ("How interested are you in voting in the elections this November - extremely interested, very interested, somewhat interested, or not very interested?")

Among Republicans who voted in the primary, 59 percent said (in October) that they were extremely interested in the November elections. This dropped to 39 percent among those who only voted in the general, and to 19 percent among Republicans who didn't vote at all. Similarly, among Democrats, these figures were 53 percent, 35 percent, and 23 percent.

A logistic regression model, detailed in Table 10, demonstrates that this relationship between interest and primary election voting remains extremely significant, in both parties, even when controlling for strength of partisanship and other demographics. Among Republicans, increasing interest by one unit increases by .13 the probability of being a primary voter as opposed to simply turning out in November. Among Democrats, the impact is similar (.11 greater probability).

Table 10 Primary Election Turnout Bias by General Election Interest and Control Variables (Logistic Regression)						
Independent Variables	Republican Voters			Democratic Voters		
	Coefficient	Standard Error	Probability Level	Coefficient	Standard Error	Probability Level
Interest in General Election	.550	.122	.000	.498	.121	.000
<b>Demographics and Partisanship</b>						
Age	.024	.007	.000	.028	.007	.000
Party Identification	.093	.046	.044	.036	.048	.452
Years NV Resident	.017	.010	.067	.019	.010	.055
Clark County Resident	-.272	.209	.192	-.409	.218	.060
Woman	.162	.208	.435	-.249	.215	.248
Education	-.033	.057	.568	.073	.059	.220
Black				-.242	.531	.648
Latino				.684	.668	.306
Constant	-2.495	.645	.000	-2.496	.672	.000
Overall Models:	Chi-Sq=51.6, 7 df p<.0001 N=482 68.0% correctly classified			Chi-Sq=61.0, 9 df p<.0001 N=517 72.2% correctly classified		

Note: Coefficients are from the logistic regression procedure in SPSS.  
 Dependent variable coded 1 (voted in primary) or 0 (voted only in general election).  
 "Interest in General Election" a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (no interest) to 4 (extremely interested).  
 Party identification is standard seven-point scale, coded from Strong Democrat (-3) to Strong Republican (+3).  
 "Years Nevada Resident" has a maximum value of 30+. "All my life" coded as 30+.

Another measure of interest is the ability to form impressions of the candidates. In every general electorate survey, respondents were asked if they were aware of Kenny Guinn and, if aware, how favorable or unfavorable their opinion was of him. They were asked the same thing about Jan Jones. As Table 11 shows, those who voted in the primary tended to have a more polarized opinion of the candidates; they were also generally more aware of both candidates than those who only showed up for the general election. But both

Table 11: Candidate Awareness and Favorability among Turnout Groups								
	Registered Republicans				Registered Democrats			
	N=	Primary Voters	General Only	Non Voters	N=	Primary Voters	General Only	Non Voters
<b>Gubernatorial Candidate (Guinn and Jones) Awareness and Favorability</b>								
Polarized opinions	625	38%	34%	26%	537	41%	33%	21%
Favorable both	376	22	22	18	373	25	20	24
Unfavorable both	127	7	6	8	63	4	4	3
Favorable toward one	309	16	14	24	325	17	24	26
Unfavorable toward one	126	6	9	8	69	4	5	6
Don't know either	224	11	15	16	199	9	14	20

groups were substantially different from co-partisans who did not vote at all in 1998. Non-voters, in both parties, were much less aware of the candidates.

A full logistic regression model shows that even controlling for demographic traits and strength of partisanship, those who are big enough political “fans” to form a polarized opinion of the nominees are significantly over-represented in the primary electorates of both parties. Among Republican voters, those with polarized view of the nominees have a .05 greater probability of voting in the primary rather than just in the general; among Democrats, the figure is .07. Among Democrats, those who develop a favorable opinion of both nominees are also significantly over-represented in the primary. On the Republican

<b>Table 12</b>						
<b>Primary Election Turnout Bias by Gubernatorial Candidate Favorability and Control Variables (Logistic Regression)</b>						
<b>Independent Variables</b>	<b>Republican Voters</b>			<b>Democratic Voters</b>		
	<b>Coefficient</b>	<b>Standard Error</b>	<b>Probability Level</b>	<b>Coefficient</b>	<b>Standard Error</b>	<b>Probability Level</b>
<b>Gubernatorial Candidates</b>						
Polarized favorability	.257	.113	.023	.315	.129	.014
Favorable Both	.103	.132	.436	.346	.147	.018
Unfavorable Both	.397	.213	.062	.134	.269	.618
Favorable one	-.003	.146	.986	-.143	.150	.340
Unfavorable one	-.373	.193	.053	-.311	.278	.263
<b>Demographics and Partisanship</b>						
Age	.024	.004	.000	.020	.004	.000
Party Identification	.149	.034	.000	.035	.033	.297
Clark County Resident	-.313	.132	.018	-.352	.151	.020
Years NV Resident	.013	.006	.022	.018	.006	.006
Education	.020	.034	.562	.007	.037	.848
Woman	.057	.125	.650	-.307	.136	.024
Black				-.535	.263	.041
Latino				-.082	.330	.805
Constant	-.845	.325	.009	-.357	.381	.350
Overall Models:	Chi-Sq=79.6, 11 df p<.0001 N=1387 69.9% correctly classified			Chi-Sq=75, 13 df p<.0001 N=1165 66.7% correctly classified		
Note: Coefficients are from the logistic regression procedure in SPSS. Favorable and unfavorable feelings about gubernatorial candidates Kenny Guinn (R) and Jan Jones (D). Dependent variable coded 1 (voted in primary) or 0 (voted only in general election). Party identification is standard seven-point scale, coded from Strong Democrat to Strong Republican "Years Nevada Resident" has a maximum value of 30+. "All my life" coded as 30+.						

side, it is those who take a sour view of both nominees which are over-represented in the primary. For both parties, those who only form an impression of one candidate are somewhat under-represented in the primary (but this relationship is not always significant).

## **Conclusions**

This paper, though far from providing the last word on primary electorates, gives a richer understanding of how primary election voters differ from those who show up only in November. Not surprisingly, they are bigger fans of politics, as evidenced by their stated interest and ability to form impressions of competing candidates. They also tend to be older, whiter, stronger partisans (but only on the Republican side), and to have lived in the state longer. Surprisingly, they are not significantly better educated. Also surprising is that on the Democratic side, primary voters tend to be significantly more male than Democrats who only vote in November — but there was no gender bias to the Republican primary electorate. It is possible that because the general election featured a Republican male against a Democratic woman, the general election inspired greater turnout among Democratic women than would be usual. These same women may have stayed home in September, when Jan Jones faced minimal competition for her party's nomination, thus making the Democratic primary electorate appear to be more male.

Unfortunately, as the foregoing example shows, this is the shortcoming of using data drawn from only one state and one year — and especially when few of the primary election contests were competitive. More seriously, the surveys do not include a full range of ideological measures — but the ideological measures available do not show much of a bias in the primary electorates of either party.

I do hope that this project gives inspiration to other researchers who could replicate my analysis in other states, under other competitive conditions, using a more complete set of ideological data. As it stands, primary voters do not appear to be the wild-eyed extremists

often portrayed in the media. Future research should be able to provide even more texture to these findings.

**Appendix**

The exact wording of the ideological measures, and results for the total sample, are summarized in the table below. Note that these questions were only asked in the September survey; all but the last question were framed as “If you learned this, would you be more likely or less likely to vote for the candidate in question.” The last question was framed as “which of these two approaches to education do you prefer?”

<b>Table A1: Summary of Ideological Scale Items</b>					
	<b>More likely</b>		<b>No Dif</b>	<b>Less Likely</b>	
	<b>Much</b>	<b>Somewhat</b>		<b>Somewhat</b>	<b>Much</b>
<b>Taxes:</b>					
Guinn is promising that, as governor, he will fight tax increases.	43%	26	19	6	6
Jones favors an additional state tax on televisions and VCRs to help pay for her education proposals.	8%	15	14	25	38
Jones favors increasing taxes on new homes to help pay for her education proposals.	14%	19	13	22	32
Jones is quoted as saying that Nevadans have an unrealistically LOW property tax.	5%	10	20	23	42
<b>Privitization:</b>					
Guinn favors using private contractors to provide government services whenever that will result in beter service at lower cost.	41%	29	13	8	9
<b>Gay Rights:</b>					
Jones favors legalizing marriage for homosexuals	10%	10	24	13	43
<b>Education</b>					
Jones is endorsed by the Nevada state teachers union	18%	26	22	12	22
<i>Here are Guinn's and Jones' proposals on education. After I read them, please tell me whose you think is best:</i>					
Guinn is stressing greater accountability of current education spending, putting more money into the classroom and less in the education bureaucracy, stronger policies to make the schools safe from violence, and expanding school choice for parents.			50%		
Jones favors more state money for the public schools to build new schools, reduce class size, raise teacher salaries, and adequately fund classroom technology, textbooks, and supplies.			37		
Both equal/Neither/DK/Refused			13		
All scales built to range from -2 (best for Jones) to +2 (best for Guinn). Tax scale an average of the four items listed above. Education scale an average of two items listed above. For computing the scale, the Guinn vs. Jones question was coded +2 (Gu					

This research could not have been completed without the generous assistance of many people. My wife, Alana, deserves a very special thanks for enduring ten days around Nevada by car, in the dead of winter, with a toddler and another baby on the way. Fred Steeper, of Market Strategies, also deserves very special thanks for making the survey data available to me when the 1998 elections had concluded.

A whole host of Nevadans were instrumental in validating these votes. Kathryn Ferguson, Clark County Registrar of Voters, generously made available, for just a nominal fee, her 1998 electronic “voted” files. The thousands of Clark County votes would have been nearly impossible to validate by hand; this file cut a week’s work to several hours. Bernie Matsko, Ms. Ferguson’s assistant, was a great help in teaching me to use this file.

Several County Clerks (or their assistants) completed all of the validation work for me in their rural counties. This usually involved a dozen to two dozen look-ups, but saved me hours of driving. These include Donna Giles, Susan Harrer, Corrine Hogan (assisted by Ann Keaton), Doreen Bacus, Lynn Scott (assisted by De Ann Siri), and Joan Shangle (assisted by Candi Castaneda).

Tammy Caldwell, in the Carson City clerk’s office, generously completed all the validation work for me in that office, even when I offered to do it myself. Her assistance saved many hours of work.

Numerous others also provided considerable assistance, both on my original trip and in helping to validate additional voter records I discovered after returning home: Deanna Klapper, Debbie Harvey, Tricia Umphries, Kelly Helton, Christina Davis, Gladys Burris, Mel Del Torto, Janet Rought, Karen Dredge, Lisa James, and Marika Schuft. I am grateful to all of these people, and any others I may have missed, for the enthusiastic interest they took in this project and their generous help in validating votes.

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## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Incumbent Democratic Senator Harry Reid was completely unopposed. Congressman John Ensign had only a token Republican opponent, who garnered just 10 percent of the vote.

<sup>2</sup> Market Strategies polled primarily in the gubernatorial race, but did include some questions for other statewide and local races in various surveys.

<sup>3</sup> This project would not have been possible without the generous and enthusiastic cooperation of the Nevada county clerks and their assistants. Clark County Registrar of Voters Kathryn Ferguson deserves a very special thanks for making their enormous electronic “voted” files for both 1998 elections available to me for just a nominal fee. It would have been nearly impossible to have validated those thousands of votes by hand. Also, the clerks (or their assistants) in Eureka, Lincoln, Carson City, Esmerelda, Pershing, Storey, and Humboldt Counties did almost all of the validation work for me. Some of these county seats are extremely isolated, and their assistance saved hours of driving. Even in the offices which I needed to visit personally, the staffs were extremely helpful in digging roster books out of storage and tracking down stray voters (such as those who changed precincts between elections). It was often moving to see the genuine interest and enthusiasm with which the people in all these county seats greeted this project. When I returned home and discovered I had forgotten to take the September data with me on the trip, nearly every rural office jumped to look up these additional names (saving me another trip around the state). The whole experience was a valuable education in the nuts and bolts of how elections are actually administered in this country, and I am grateful to everyone I met along the way.

<sup>4</sup> All but one of these was from the September survey. Half of the September survey was RDD; although I was able to identify most of the RDD respondents, some refused to give their names and some phone numbers were impossible to find in either the registered voter list or published reverse telephone directories. More than half of these were in Clark County. Roughly two dozen other missing cases are ones I could not validate on my first trip through the state, because I did not have the September data at the time. These two dozen are from a few rural counties to which I hope to return this year.

<sup>5</sup> In Clark County (the only county for which I have a total census of votes cast in both elections), 25.3 percent voted in the primary, 22.3 percent voted only in the general, and 52.4 percent did not vote at all. In my Clark County interviews, 46.3 percent voted in the primary, 26.3 percent voted only in the general, and 27.4 percent did not vote at all.

<sup>6</sup> Obtaining survey data from commercial campaign pollsters is clearly a two-edged sword. Academic researchers can have access to an astounding number of interviews, but have little (if any) control over the content of those interviews. Campaigns have extremely limited resources, and every survey question must have justification. In a non-ideological campaign, few ideological questions will be asked. I am grateful to have the data I have, but if I replicate this (or any similar) project in future elections I will raise the money to purchase some of my own questions.