

Early voters hold most power in primaries, say Brown economists

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Two Brown University economists have, for the first time, quantified the substantial effects of winning early in the race for the presidential nomination. In a National Bureau of Economic Research working paper, Brian Knight and graduate student Nathan Schiff demonstrate that voters in early primary states such as Iowa and New Hampshire have up to 20 times the influence of voters in later states in the selection of candidates.

Knight and Schiff developed a statistical model that examines how daily polling data responds to returns from presidential primaries. In the model, candidates can benefit from momentum effects when their performance in early states exceeds expectations.

For example, Knight and Schiff found that in 2004, John Kerry benefited from surprising wins in early states and took votes away from Howard Dean, who held a strong lead prior to the beginning of the primary season. According to their research, Schiff and Knight predict that if states other than Iowa and New Hampshire had voted first in 2004, the Democratic nominee may have been John Edwards, rather than John Kerry.

“Clearly, the primary calendar plays a key role in the selection of the nominee,” said Knight, associate professor of economics and public policy. “Evidence that early voters have a disproportionate influence over the selection of candidates violates “one person-one vote” – a democratic ideal on which our nation is based. The implications go even further, since populations of states such as Iowa and New Hampshire are

not exactly representative of the nation in terms of diversity.”

Knight and Schiff also simulate the 2004 primary as a simultaneous national primary, which they predict would have been much tighter than Kerry’s landslide victory, due to the absence of momentum effects. “While Kerry would have won a plurality of delegates, he would not have won a majority and thus the eventual nominee may have been decided at the convention,” they theorize.

With 23 states voting on Feb. 5, 2008, the primary calendar is starting to resemble a simultaneous primary, and the researchers thus predict that the race for the 2008 nomination will be much tighter than Kerry’s 2004 victory.

They also say that current polls may be of limited value in predicting the 2008 nominee – that is, a candidate emerging from Iowa or New Hampshire with a surprising victory may ultimately win the nomination. Schiff attributes that possibility to “social learning.”

“Our research suggests that voters in states that vote toward the end of the primary season place more weight on returns from the earliest states than on the states voting right before their own,” said Schiff, a graduate student in economics at Brown and co-author of the paper. “This further increases the influence early states like Iowa and New Hampshire have over the entire primary process.”

Source: Brown University

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