Test-driving California’s Election Reforms

Eric McGhee
June primary featured new reforms

- Top two vote getter (“Top two”)
- Districts drawn by independent redistricting commission
- Goals
  - More choices
  - Competitive elections
  - Shake-up status quo
June primary featured new reforms

- Top two vote getter (“Top two”)
- Districts drawn by independent redistricting commission
- Goals
  - More choices
  - Competitive elections
  - Shake-up status quo
- Change is visible, but limited so far
Outline

- Brief background on reform
- Competition
- Money
- Crossover voting
- Conclusions
Top Two removes party boundaries for candidates and voters

- Old: “Semi-closed” (2002-2010)
  - Primaries open only to voters registered with that party
  - Independents often allowed to participate

- New: “Top Two Vote Getter”
  - All candidates of all parties on one ballot
  - Voters choose any candidate
  - Two candidates with most votes advance
  - Always a fall run-off
  - Akin to “pre-general” election
New commission radically changed redistricting process

- **Old:** Legislature
  - Drew their own districts, plus BoE and Congress
  - No transparency

- **New:** Citizens Redistricting Commission (CRC)
  - Independent commission of citizens
  - Complex process to ensure independence
  - Detailed goals
  - Highly transparent
Reforms raise key questions

- Competition
  - Were races closer?
  - Did establishment candidates struggle?
  - How did third parties do?
- Money
  - Was there more money in politics?
- Crossover voting
  - How different were outcomes this time?
Outline

- Brief background on reform
- Competition
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- Conclusions
Redistricting created a few more competitive seats...

Competitive seats by registration, as share of total

State Senate
State Assembly
U.S. House

2010
2012
...prompted more open seats in most cases...

Open seats as share of total

- **State Senate**
  - Average: 2002-2010
  - 2012

- **State Assembly**
  - Average: 2002-2010
  - 2012

- **U.S. House**
Average incumbent: 45% of constituents are new

41% of incumbents running to represent more new constituents
Top Two altered the strategic logic...

Semi-Closed

1. D
2. D
3. R

Top Two

1. D
2. D
3. R
...and candidates responded

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Assembly (80 seats)</th>
<th>Senate (20 seats per election, 40 total)</th>
<th>U.S. House (53 Seats)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012</td>
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<td>Same-party competition</td>
<td>63%</td>
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<td></td>
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2012 Average

2002-2010
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<td>One major party absent</td>
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2002-2010 Average

- Same-party competition: 63%, 46%, 45%
- Same-party incumbent challenge: 33%, 8%, 27%
- One major party absent: 14%, 6%, 25%
Outcomes were closer, though not always close

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<td>77%</td>
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Winner > 50%
Outcomes were closer, though not always close

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Average: 1 vs. 2 gap
Outcomes were closer, though not always close

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<td>Avg gap: 2 vs. 3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
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Establishment candidates did well...

Percent of candidates advancing to the general

- Incumbents: 100%
- Endorsed Non-Incumbents: 80%
...and outsider candidates did not
Outline

- Brief background on reform
- Competition
- Money
- Crossover voting
- Conclusions
Money has increased mostly in House races.
More money in the fall? Maybe

Competitive Cross-Party (D vs. R) Races in the Fall

Number of Races

Total Cross-Party Races

125

More money in the fall? Maybe

Competitive Cross-Party (D vs. R) Races in the Fall

- Total Cross-Party Races: 125
- Candidates < 50%: 42
More money in the fall? Maybe

Competitive Cross-Party (D vs. R) Races in the Fall

- Total Cross-Party Races: 125
- Candidates < 50%: 42
- Candidates < 50% + Balanced Money: 10
More money in the fall? Maybe

Competitive Same-Party Races in the Fall

Number of Races

Total Same-Party Races

- 28

- 0

- 20

- 40

- 60

- 80

- 100

- 120

- 140
More money in the fall? Maybe

Competitive Same-Party Races in the Fall

Number of Races

Total Same-Party Races: 28
Candidates < 50%: 20
More money in the fall? Maybe

Competitive Same-Party Races in the Fall

- Total Same-Party Races: 28
- Candidates < 50%: 20
- Candidates < 50% + Balanced Money: 12
Outline

- Brief background on reform
- Competition
- Money
- Crossover voting
- Conclusions
How unexpected were the results?

- Semi-closed system allowed limited crossover voting
  - District party registration should accurately predict party vote
- Top Two allows voters to crossover race by race
  - If high crossover, registration should badly predict party vote
Easy to predict party vote under old system

Districts in 2010

Actual Vote for Democratic Candidates vs. Predicted Vote for Democratic Candidates

- Actual Vote for Democratic Candidates
- Predicted Vote for Democratic Candidates

0-100% range for both Actual and Predicted votes.
Most Top Two outcomes can be predicted with old assumptions
Outline

- Brief background on reform
- Competition
- Money
- Crossover voting
- Conclusions
No dramatic change...yet

- Competition higher, but not necessarily high
- Establishment candidates did well so far
- Money in politics up, but only notable for Congress
- Crossover voting made a difference, but not a huge one
Moving forward

- Limitations to work out
  - Third-party status
  - Write-ins

- Will moderates and/or non-establishment candidates be successful in the fall?

- Political reforms do not always have instant results
  - More change may be coming
Test-driving California’s Election Reforms

Eric McGhee
Notes on the use of these slides

These slides were created to accompany a presentation. They do not include full documentation of sources, data samples, methods, and interpretations. To avoid misinterpretations, please contact:

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Thank you for your interest in this work.