

**Split Primaries and State Legislatures:  
A More Fully Developed Explanation of Frontloading**

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**Abstract:** The extant campaigns and elections literature has done much to point out the presence of frontloading across presidential nomination cycles, but has ultimately failed to sufficiently explain why it is that states have decided to move their primaries to earlier dates. Mayer and Busch (2004) tackle frontloading indirectly by examining the relationship between media coverage/candidate spending and the date on which a presidential nominating event is held. Carman and Barker (2005) on the other hand shift the focus in the direction of the states themselves; looking at the influence of political culture on the decision to frontload. I, too, keep the focus on the states by observing the actual decision makers, the state legislatures. Those bodies' decisions from 1976-1996 to move their presidential nominating events to earlier dates or keep them in place are the dependent variable. Results from a time series cross-sectional logit model indicate that the date on which a nominating event was held previously greatly affects the probability of a move in a subsequent cycle. More importantly, the introduction here of a split primaries variable adds significantly to our understanding of the frontloading of delegate selection events. Whether a presidential nomination event was previously held on a separate date than state and local primaries seems to affect the ability of the state legislature to move an event.

## **Split Primaries and State Legislatures: A More Fully Developed Explanation of Frontloading**

Over the last thirty years, the playing field on which presidential nominations are contested has changed dramatically. The movement of individual state primaries and caucuses to earlier dates on the nomination calendar has not only altered where and how many states in which candidates have to campaign, but also the time period in which they are required to compete. The candidates have been forced to cast their nets farther much quicker than ever before. The window of time in which primaries are contested has inched ever closer to the beginning of the election year during this period, while still officially ending during the first week of June. As the beginning of the nomination process has expanded from late February in 1976 to the latter weeks of January in 2004 for instance, the number of states clustering their primaries and caucuses at the beginning of the process has increased as well in a phenomenon known as frontloading. Why is it that some states move their selection processes forward and others do not? This is the question that obviously underlies frontloading, but has yet to be completely examined.

Mayer and Busch (*M&B hereafter*) (2004) suggests that the dates on which presidential primaries and caucuses are held is highly correlated with the money spent by candidates in those states during the 1980, 1984 and 1988 primary seasons—controlling for the number of delegates, the presence of Iowa and New Hampshire, and the mode of delegate selection (primary or caucus). The resulting model shows that moving the date of a primary or caucus translates into an increase of \$4000 to \$12,000 for every day the selection event is moved up the calendar.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the argument is that candidate spending—or media coverage—is dependent on where a primary is placed on the calendar. This, however, only implies something similar to an endless cycle of repositioning going on between the candidates/media and the states from cycle to cycle. All the while, by not accounting for either the state legislatures making the decisions to move or the subsequent movement between elections, the model fails to directly explain why

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<sup>1</sup> Mayer and Busch (2004). Table 3-4 *Effects of Primary or Caucus Date on Total Campaign Spending per State, 1980-1988*, pp. 32-3.

frontloading is occurring. The result is an underspecified model.

While a governor may propose moving a state's primary to an earlier date, the ultimate decision-makers in this process are the state legislatures operating under the guidelines the national parties set for primary sequencing. Given these party guidelines, the state legislatures then decide whether to move their state's delegate selection event based upon something akin to a costs/benefits analysis. In this study I will attempt to determine that state legislatures opt to move when the benefits of moving outweigh the costs of moving, or hold the state's primary in place when the costs of moving are greater than the benefits of moving. The decisions of the various state legislatures are paramount when considering when primaries are held during the presidential primary season; something dealt with only tangentially in previous literature. The remainder of this study will proceed as follows: In the next section I will review the relevant literature that serves as the basis of my theory and then incorporate a series of variables not considered to this point (eg: split primaries). The third section describes the data used and the time series cross-sectional logit model employed. The paper will then conclude with a discussion of the findings and their implications.

## **Research Question & Theory**

Why is it that states are moving their various delegate selection events to earlier dates on the nomination calendar? The consensus is that states move in order to subsequently influence the nomination outcome and to gain the attention of both the candidates and the media.<sup>2</sup> If a state votes after all but one candidate has been winnowed from the process, then the voters of that state have, in effect, no

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<sup>2</sup> It is instructive at this point to make one distinction in this paper. M&B (2004) use the candidate and his staff as the decision makers in their model because candidate spending is dependent upon the date of a state's delegate selection event. In this paper, I treat the state legislatures as the ultimate decision makers. However, the argument can be made that the candidates move first in the game by spending more time and money in earlier rather than later primaries and that those states not already positioned early then move their primaries to earlier dates in response. In that scenario however, it is the states movement that is dependent on the candidate's spending. This implies that the state legislatures are the real decision makers in the frontloading process and that their motivation should be more closely examined.

influence on the outcome of the parties' nominations. Furthermore, states apparently seek the economic and intangible benefits that candidates and the media bring to an earlier and/or competitive primary.<sup>3</sup> Both delegate-rich and delegate-poor, have moved to earlier dates since the reforms. However, not all states have moved up. Why is this?

I argue that the various state legislatures go through a costs/benefits analysis in order to decide whether to move a primary to an earlier date.<sup>4</sup> However, the state legislature is only part of a much more complex environment in which the nomination campaign is played. As Aldrich (1980) states, "the institution of party nominations—the rules, laws, procedures and norms that describe how presidential hopefuls become presidential nominees—plays a major role in structuring the politics of nominations and, consequently, in the behavior of candidates and the outcome of their campaigns." Thus a state legislature both helps shape these rules and makes decisions based on the rules outside their realm. The norms of the nomination campaign give the states a window in which to hold delegate selection events for the parties' national conventions and that typically means between the end of February and the beginning of June. The nomination calendars of the two elections during the 1970s set the stage for the back and forth between the candidates/media and the states because these two elections proved to be the acclimation period for all sides as they learned how the nomination game was played in the post-reform era. Iowa and New Hampshire established that being first was decidedly advantageous. They traditionally served as the first states to filter the pool of candidates for the nomination and thus have the first opportunity to shape the outcome. Obviously those states with the last opportunity in this filtration process stand a good chance of having very little to filter. In other words, the voters of those states have

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<sup>3</sup> In the frontloaded system, early and competitive primaries are virtually the same. Whereas in the 1972-1984 period nominations contests were competitive into May and June, those contests of the frontloaded era are only competitive early. However, the compression of frontloading causes only those delegate-rich and niche/gateway states to be attractive to the candidates/media, and thus competitive.

<sup>4</sup> Only primaries are being examined in this paper because, as the literature has shown, they take precedence over caucuses and state convention methods of delegate selection in the eyes of both the candidates and the media with the exception of Iowa's caucuses.

little or no choice in the nomination as it has been decided in the primaries and caucuses near the beginning of the calendar. For example the last time that a nomination battle stayed competitive into May was the Democratic nomination struggle of 1984 between Mondale and Hart.

None of this was lost on the candidates or the media. The strategy of the candidates was to succeed early on and, if not win, avoid being winnowed out. If a candidate was not the frontrunner—and thus most at risk of being winnowed—it was imperative to finish at or above the level of expectations set prior to the event in order to survive to the next round. If the frontrunner continued winning, he could coast to the nomination. Not many candidates did coast to the nomination, but as the system became more frontloaded, it became clear that frontrunners could more quickly and easily wrap up the nomination.<sup>5</sup> The momentum of successive early victories overwhelmed not only the competition but the voters as well. In the compressed environment frontloading created, the voters got little more information from the media than the horse race coverage (Geer 1986, Brady & Johnston 1987). As a result, voters had little opportunity to learn about the candidates and make informed decisions. Frontloading not only progressively limits voters' choices by more quickly winnowing the challengers, but also has the potential to limit their decision to a choice between the candidate who is the seemingly

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<sup>5</sup> I should, at this stage, mention the contrast between the nomination battles of 1976-1984 and those of 1988-present. The 1976-1984, non-frontloaded period, witnessed intense nomination fights that lasted deep into May if not into June. Carter outlasted the first wave of Harris, Udall and Jackson in the 1976 campaign and Brown (once he entered) in a second wave that lasted into June. Likewise, in that same year Ford and Reagan went all the way to the Republican convention before that nomination was settled. 1980 saw a prolonged and bitter battle between incumbent Carter and challenger Ted Kennedy on the Democratic side and a multi-candidate race on the Republican side that ended up being a battle lasting into May between Reagan and Bush. Similarly, in 1984 Mondale and Hart waged a battle for the Democratic nomination that like the one in 1980 lasted into May before being resolved. The picture here is of a system that nurtures at least a two man race into the waning weeks of the nomination season.

In 1988 and beyond however, the picture begins to change. The dramatic frontloading that the southern Super Tuesday created, began to distort what had been established in the election years since reform. Vice President Bush effectively solidified his claim to the 1988 Republican nomination in March after sweeping Super Tuesday, while Dukakis pulled away from the Democratic field in April. In 1992, like 1984, only the Democratic nomination was at stake. Clinton like his predecessor became the presumptive nominee in April. 1996 was more frontloaded than 1992 and, with California offering so many delegates so early in one event, Dole finished off his competition and took the nomination at the end of March. California moved up again in 2000, placing its primary on the first Tuesday in March alongside a host of other events. The nominations of both parties were wrapped up after this broadside of contests. 2004 was only slightly different from 2000 in that it had more contests in February, leading up to a less crowded Super Tuesday during the first week in March. What we learn from this is that once the massive frontloading of 1988 was introduced, the nomination game was altered significantly. Nominations battles were shorter, but also more intense.

inevitable nominee and the challengers who increasingly seem to have no chance. The electorate also has less opportunity to vet the frontrunner prior to the nomination. Anything that failed to come to light during the increasingly quick nomination campaign that then surfaced in the lead up to the general election could also harm the candidate and the party's chances in the general election. These scenarios place unbelievable pressure on the candidates to win early, but also, by limiting the voters' choices, run contrary to the intentions of the McGovern-Fraser reforms.

Both the candidates and the media knew early in the post-reform period that the early contests were where the real battle was being waged. In the years after reform, more and more states also came to recognize the fact that being earlier was better than later in the nomination process. The Democratic-dominated state legislatures of the south had talked about coordinating an effort to hold a simultaneous southern primary since the mid-1970s. The legislatures of Georgia and Alabama moved their primaries up to align them with Florida's second Tuesday in March primary for the 1980 season—a move intended to potentially aid incumbent president Carter by counteracting any advantage his challenger, Ted Kennedy, would have in the early contests in the northeast. While this move created a slightly more frontloaded calendar in 1980 than in 1976, it only served to alleviate some of the crowding during May. However, it did send a message to the rest of the southern states: moving primaries can be done and can have some influence on the nomination. After watching 1984 pass, ending in another crushing presidential defeat for the Democrats, the Southern Legislative Conference (still dominated by Democratic state legislators) decided to go through with the plan to coordinate their states' primaries in 1988. The goals were to influence the Democratic nomination—hopefully resulting in a more moderate to conservative nominee who could appeal to the voters of the South, bringing more attention to regionally specific issues through increased media coverage and increasing the economic benefits of holding a primary. Though most of this plan backfired, instead helping the Republican Party, it changed the landscape of nomination politics through increased frontloading (Hadley and Stanley 1989).

Perception is everything and the southern states' synchronized move in 1988 signaled to the rest of the state legislatures that states could coordinate their efforts by moving their primary dates in an attempt to have more influence in the process—even, if in fact, Super Tuesday 1988 did not live up to its purpose. As Gurian (1992) has shown, media coverage actually decreased for many of the southern states between 1984 and 1988.

If it was apparent after 1988 that frontloading was to be a future component of nomination campaigns, what were the factors that influenced the decision makers to actually move their states' presidential primaries? The five election cycles from 1988 to the present offer an opportunity to observe the period when the frontloading trend greatly expanded, and further allows for an examination of the variables that figured into the state legislatures' decisions to move or not move presidential primaries. The three elections prior to 1988 will serve as the baseline of what the calendar was like prior to the full scale introduction of frontloading. Again, the state legislatures are the ultimate decision makers in this process and if one is trying to find out why frontloading has occurred, no study can be complete without taking into account the conditions under which they make this decision. To this point however, legislatures have not been considered in the literature, and without contemplating their decision making processes, political science can only claim that it knows part of the motivating force behind the frontloading trend. Again, I argue that the state legislatures in the United States go through a costs/benefits analysis to determine whether the presidential primary in that state should be moved. Is it beneficial to the state to move its primary or are the costs too high?

To answer this, the legislatures must look at several things, first among which, is where the state primary was on the calendar—early or late—in the previous cycle. If the state primary is already early, should it be earlier, or if it is in the middle or later, is it worth it to move into competition with all the other early states and risk being ignored by the candidates and the media? Are the state's presidential primaries and the primaries for other state and local offices held on the same date or at different times,

and does that affect movement? Is a state moving away from being the only event on a date or is it moving from being bundled with other states' primaries during a late date to being bundled with other states' primaries on an early date? Finally, how much media attention and candidate spending did a state receive in the previous election and could that be improved by moving to an earlier date? If the improvement is markedly greater, the move may be appropriate, but if it is only moderately altered for the better, the change may not be worth it.

### *Splitting Presidential and State/Local Primaries*

Much of what guides the decision making—before even the monetary costs and benefits are considered—is whether the state's presidential primary and the primaries for state and local offices are held simultaneously. This is another important distinction to make and one that has not been dealt with at any great length in the extant literature. Whether these state/local and presidential primaries are divided has significant implications on the state legislature's ability to move its primary forward. A separate election for the presidential primary requires the state to finance another election altogether. Those start-up costs affect the motivation and preferences of the members of the legislature. The act of splitting the two has some ramifications as well. Those states that have split presidential and state/local primaries have a greater ability to move this separate presidential primary to an earlier date than those states that hold the two simultaneously and face the task of either having to move both to an earlier date or having to break with tradition and split the two.

The monetary aspects begin to have some impact on the legislature's decision making at this point. If a state falls in the category of having separate primaries, the costs of moving the presidential primary to an earlier date is minimal. Georgia, for example, fits this description. Since 1980, Georgia has held an early March presidential primary while typically having a July primary for state and local offices. The legislature in Georgia moved the state's presidential primary from May in to March in 1980

and for 1992 moved it from the second week in March to the first week in March. Having separate primaries grants states a greater ability to move without incurring much of a financial cost. Contrast that with states like New Jersey and California. These two states hold both types of primaries together and until 1996 actually held these primaries on the first week in June—the final week of the primary season. In 1996, California’s legislature had had enough of being used as a center of fundraising for the candidates and not seeing much of the money when the state’s presidential primary finally rolled around (Busch 2000). The solution was to move all the state’s primaries to the final Tuesday in March. New Jersey, meanwhile, has stayed with its early June primary date, opting to avoid the substantial start-up costs associated with either splitting their presidential and state/local primaries or moving them all to an earlier date and thus away from the traditional June date. In New Jersey the costs of moving/splitting their primaries have outweighed the benefits, whereas the opposite holds true for California.

**[Insert Table 1 about here]**

This creates four categories of states (as shown in the **Table 1**): 1) those with split primaries and have moved their presidential primaries to earlier dates; 2) those that are split and have not moved; 3) those that hold simultaneous primaries and have moved them; and 4) those that are not split yet moved earlier on the calendar. The expectation is that the all the states would fall into the split/move or no split/no move categories and only six of the twenty-eight states in the sample run counter to that expectation. It is interesting that three of the four most delegate-rich states—California, Texas and Florida—fall outside of this expectation. Florida has been in the same second week in March position since the 1972 election, but California and Texas both opted to move all their primaries into their current first and second week in March dates respectively. The laws in both states prevented them from splitting the tradition of holding these primaries simultaneously.

### *Only Event on a Date*

Another factor the state legislatures have to consider is whether, by moving the state's primary, they are abandoning the luxury of being the only event on a particular date during the previous election cycle. To have the only event on a certain date generally translates into being the only game in town during a particular week and, thus, the only recipient of all the media and candidate attention for that week.<sup>6</sup> However, the further back this date is, the less significant being the only event on that date is. Then again, the earlier a state holds its delegate selection event, the less likely it is to have that date all to itself. Pennsylvania, for example, has in every election year of this sample but one been the only event on its traditional fourth Tuesday in April date. However, primaries late in the month of April were typically outside of this realm after 1988 or 1992. In other words, though Pennsylvania had the only event on that date throughout the post-1976 elections, over time, it began to fall out of the realm of competition. Even in 2000 when the Pennsylvania legislature moved the presidential primary to the first Tuesday in April, it was still a month outside of being part of the competitive aspect of either nomination. One would expect to see the value of having the only event on a date decrease over the course of the 1976 to 1996 elections. In Pennsylvania the value was low enough heading into the 2004 primary season that Governor Ed Rendell made known his intention to propose moving the state's 2008 presidential primary, aligning it with New Hampshire in late January or early February (Barnes, 18 Jan. 2004). This implies an interaction between when the primary was held and whether said primary was the only event on the date it was held. Also an important consideration in this discussion is the delegate-richness of a state. The less delegate-rich a state is, the more valuable it is to be the only event on a particular date. Again, this implies an interaction between these two variables.

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<sup>6</sup> There are occasional weekend caucuses, but those often fail to win much attention unless they are early and are not subsequently followed by a big state(s) the next Tuesday. This is a rare combination. During the primary campaign, weeks begin and end on Tuesday with weekend events serving as an afterthought.

### *Candidate Spending and Media Attention*

Finally, state legislatures have to consider past candidate spending and media coverage in their state when determining whether moving the state's presidential primary is prudent. I discuss both in the same section because they are both so closely linked in the nomination campaign. As I stated earlier, there is a natural tendency for the media to follow the candidates and, similarly, for the candidates to appear where the media will be. Whether one or the other is the way the relationship actually occurs is not as important as the fact that spending and coverage work hand in hand to shape not only the nomination outcomes, but the sequencing of presidential primaries in subsequent election years.

First, as for candidate spending, I argue that the legislatures look at how much candidates have spent in the state's primary in the past and try to ascertain if, by moving the state's primary to an earlier date, they can get the candidates to spend more money in that primary. Further, I would speculate that the legislators are not concerned with the number of candidates or the number of parties with contested nominations in future campaigns. These are factors that are out of the control of the legislatures and change from election to election. What they are interested in is the total amount of spending in their state, and more precisely, the percentage of total nationwide candidate spending in their state. Can moving the state's primary to an earlier date net the state more money or a lot more money? If it means a lot more money then the decision might already be made. Legislators are also interested in getting the candidates to address issues important to the state that, in turn, could help them in their own electoral pursuits; riding on the coattails of successful primary contestants. This is a byproduct of candidate spending, but one that figures into the legislature's costs/benefits analysis all the same.

Some of the same above factors are applicable to the discussion of media coverage as well. State legislatures want not just more coverage, but a lot more coverage to make moving the state's primary worthwhile. In order to get the desired effect several things have to fall into place. The primary obviously has to be early enough that the nomination is still competitive and the outcome does not appear

inevitable. Early though may not be enough. The media will only cover what is perceived to be a big prize on any early date. Most of the time, but not always, the winning combination is being both early and delegate-rich. This is why California's decision to move in time for the 1996 primary season seemed like a no-brainer. The most delegate-rich state would obviously want to be early in order to get the attention the legislature felt it deserved. New Hampshire and Iowa are not delegate-rich but they have an advantage because they are the first delegate selection events.<sup>7</sup> Even if a state is not delegate-rich, it may be able to find a niche in the calendar to exploit. Being delegate-rich is important for media coverage but often not unique. South Carolina, as mentioned in a previous section, has, for the last several nomination cycles, held the first delegate selection event in the South. It is a unique story because it indicates how the rest of the region may vote and further whether the winning candidate may have enough appeal to win a region that, for the most part, votes as a bloc in the general election.

Again, frontloading has altered the way that information is filtered through the media. When the primaries were more dispersed across the calendar, the competition lasted longer, but so too did the media's interest. Thus the media was able to provide more valuable information over a much greater time span. As the calendars became more compressed in subsequent elections though media interest in the primaries waned in correspondence to the progressively, more quickly resolved nomination battle. To state legislatures, increasing frontloading meant that holding late presidential primaries resulted in decreasing media coverage over the five election cycles between 1976 and 1992.

### *Other Factors to Consider*

While the above are factors that figure into the state legislatures' costs/benefits analysis and can

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<sup>7</sup> New Hampshire has a law on the books that protects its first primary in the nation status. In addition, both parties have, for the most part, protected New Hampshire and Iowa as the first primary and caucus states respectively. The Republicans, for example, allowed early caucuses in Louisiana and Alaska prior to Iowa and New Hampshire during the 1996 campaign. During the time period examined here though (and up to the present), no primary has been held before New Hampshire's.

be manipulated by moving a state's presidential primary, there are other factors that have important implications for the decision, yet are not as easily manipulated by the movement of a primary. For instance, I, like M&B (2004), will examine the effects of a state's delegation size on the state legislature's decision to move the state's primary. Delegate-rich states would have the most incentive to move forward, but delegate-poor states are motivated to move forward as well. Though, the chance of affecting the process is less for these delegate-poor states.

Secondly, and more important to my consideration of state legislatures in this study, the majority control in those legislatures is another important factor to bear in mind.<sup>8</sup> If the party in control of the state legislature is Democratic then it would find no use in moving a primary to an earlier date if there is only a Republican primary that year. The Democratic-dominated legislatures of the South sought to influence the Democratic nomination in 1988 by moving up and coordinating the states' presidential primaries. The plan backfired however, due in part to the fact that the Republican nomination was at stake as well. The result was that the increasingly Republican electorate in the south opted to participate in the Republican primaries instead of the Democratic ones. This maneuvering is easier if one party is in control of both houses of the state legislature, but what if control is split between the parties? Split control between the houses makes moving primaries forward difficult because the party of the incumbent would not want to help the challenging party if victory in the state's primary gave momentum to a candidate who could threaten that incumbent. In that scenario, compromise could only be reached when both parties' nominations are at stake and thus there is no incumbent involved. The separate parties in control of the houses of the legislature could agree to move up to the potential benefit of both parties.

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<sup>8</sup> Again, it should be noted that despite the facts that a governor can propose the idea of moving a primary and that a strong governor can actually usher it through the state legislature, it is the state legislature that has the ultimate decision making power. The example of Governor Zell Miller of Georgia pushing through the state legislature the plan to move the state's primary from the second Tuesday in March—as it was in 1988—to the first Tuesday in March for the 1992 cycle—and thus one week ahead of that year's Super Tuesday—is the exception rather than the rule. This was a variable that was considered at the outset of this project, but was dropped once the states' Boards/Divisions of Elections acknowledged that it was the state legislature which had the final say.

Finally, there are two somewhat related factors at which I will look. The first, alluded to above, is presidential incumbency. The presence of an incumbent changes the outlook of a nomination campaign, and may have an effect on what certain legislatures decide to do about moving their state's primary. The underlying principle is the same: Republican legislatures seek to help Republican challengers and Democratic-controlled legislatures attempt to give their party's presidential aspirants an advantage against a Republican incumbent. Secondly, if, as I argue, state legislatures figure incumbency into their presidential primary movement analysis, then the party in control of the White House becomes another aspect which they must consider. As became clear in discussing the control of state legislatures, the party in control of the presidency is important. Only the party out of power in the White House would seek to tweak the rules and sequencing of the nomination process to bring about a change in power (Klinkner 1994). Thus state legislatures controlled by the party outside of the White House would seek to alter the sequencing of primaries more often than those legislatures dominated by the incumbent president's party.

## **Data & Methods<sup>9</sup>**

As I detailed in the sections above, many factors figure into a state legislature's decision on whether to move the state's presidential primary forward. Outside of this however, there are other considerations. States obviously have to meet several criteria to be considered for this analysis. For instance, states had to have held at least two consecutive primaries during the 1976-1996 election periods. Change could not be ascertained otherwise. In addition, only those states with state-run—state-financed—primaries appear. States like South Carolina and Utah are excluded because the presidential primaries in those states are party-run. Thus the parties and not the state legislatures are making the decision as to whether to move the primary. This is out of line with what I am trying to examine.

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<sup>9</sup> See Appendix for operationalizations of the variables included in this analysis.

Similarly, Nebraska is withheld from the analysis because a nonpartisan, unicameral legislature makes the presidential primary decisions. The dynamic between the controlling party (or parties) in the state legislature and presidential incumbency/party-in-control of the White House is absent, warranting the state's exclusion.

Having set those parameters, 28 states remain.<sup>10</sup> The state legislatures in these 28 states, as I hypothesized previously, act in a manner consistent with a cost/benefit analysis in order to determine the prudence of moving the state's presidential primary. In doing so, these legislatures are required to look at the state's statistics from previous elections and, most importantly, at the election directly prior to the future primary they are trying to set. In other words, if the state legislature of North Carolina, for example, is looking at potentially moving the state's presidential primary forward in 1988, they will look at the 1984 numbers for the date on which the primary was held, candidate spending, media coverage, percentage of delegates and whether the state's primary was the only event on its particular date. Based on that data, the state legislature will determine whether the state can improve by moving its primary.

For the purposes of this analysis, I am examining the motivation of state legislatures to move their presidential primaries to earlier dates in subsequent nomination cycles. As such, this decision—whether to move the presidential primary—is the dependent variable. It is operationalized as a dummy variable, coded 1 for moving forward, and 0 otherwise. The primary movement decisions of the 28 state legislatures in this sample are dependent upon the cost/benefits analysis they use as well as the aforementioned factors outside their control. The first of the main independent variables they look at are the dates on which the primaries were held in the previous election. Here that is defined by the week in which the primary occurred. First, the number of weeks in the previous election's nomination season was determined. Each state's primary was then assigned a number depending upon when in the season it

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<sup>10</sup> Texas, Arkansas, Kentucky and Wisconsin all held caucuses in 1984. The data that correspond with those states in that year are included to fill in the gaps in the time series. The states that started holding primaries instead of caucuses during this period are also included. The retrospective data for Mississippi and Oklahoma in 1988 and Colorado in 1992 reflect the caucus numbers from four years prior.

occurred. Those states with primaries at the end of the process were assigned low values and as the state's primaries get progressively earlier, they receive increasingly higher values.<sup>11</sup> New Jersey, for example, a state whose primary has traditionally been held during the last week of the season (the first week in June) consistently receives a value of one, while the Super Tuesday states of 1988 (primaries held on the second week in March), have a value of fourteen.

The candidate spending variable is derived from Federal Elections Commission reports either directly for the 1980-1988 cycles or indirectly through Aldrich (1980) for the 1976 Republicans and Gurian for the 1976 Democrats and the 1992 cycle.<sup>12</sup> The totals were adjusted to 2004 values to control for inflation, and the spending discrepancies between the parties were accounted for as well by weighting the party with less spending to bring its value in line with the party with more spending.<sup>13</sup> With the candidate spending variable operationalized as the percentage of adjusted total candidate spending in each of these 28 states during this time span, this analysis avoids findings that may simply be the result of the effects of either inflation or the spending differences between the parties. By using the percentage of these totals, I also avoid questions concerning the number of candidates contesting the nominations and the possible effect that has on the results. Obviously, if there are more candidates in the race, there is a potential for greater spending. However, utilizing the percentage in this case allows for a glimpse at candidate spending regardless of the number of candidates. State legislatures, when looking at a state's

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<sup>11</sup> These values were assigned in reverse order in order to show a positive relationship between this variable and dependent variable.

<sup>12</sup> This data was provided by Paul-Henri Gurian, associate professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Georgia.

<sup>13</sup> The Republican Party is typically the big spender in all the elections in which its nomination was seriously contested. However, in 1976 the Republican spending total was exceeded by the Democrats. In that case the Republican total was weighted by a factor of 1.145. For 1980 and 1988 the Democratic totals were weighted by factors of 1.8583 and 1.1066 respectively to align them with the Republican totals. There are no adjustments for the 1984 and 1992 primaries because the Democrats were the only ones spending for the nominations in those years. Reagan ran uncontested for the Republican nomination in 1984 and though Bush had opponents running against him for the Republican nomination in 1992, he had no serious competition overall because he did not lose a primary or caucus that year. The above adjustments were adopted to adjust the spending figures so that they are nearly even between the two parties in the 1976, 1980 and 1988 elections. An alternative would have been to make an overall adjustment based on the parties' spending differences over the entire period. However, because the Democrats spent contrary to the expectation—spending more in 1976 than Republicans—the data for Democrats during that year would have been over-inflated, potentially skewing the results.

past performance in this area, are looking not at how much was spent and by how many candidates, but at what their state's share of the nation's total was. Total national spending and the number of candidates may vary from election to election, but are out of the control of the state legislatures. Both are, nonetheless, important factors that can be controlled for by using the percentage of total candidate spending.

One issue relevant to candidate spending that has been addressed elsewhere—and should be addressed within this context—is the change the FEC made prior to the 1992 election. Essentially, the FEC exempted several categories of spending from the state expenditure limits, including advertising (Corrado and Gouvea 2004). While Corrado and Gouvea contend that this made the candidate spending per state figure less reliable for 1992 and thereafter, I argue that those spending categories not exempted, while obviously less than the totals from previous elections, still reflect the same basic spending differences between early and late primaries as the previous figures that include advertising.

The media coverage variable is operationalized as the percentage of total national media coverage in each state during the elections between 1976 and 1992. The data for 1984-1992 are based on the number of square inches of *New York Times* and *Washington Post* front page news coverage multiplied by the number of times the state was mentioned in any campaign-related stories (1 January through 15 June) (Gurian 1993, Gurian and Haynes 1993).<sup>14</sup>

For 1976 nomination campaign, Aldrich's (1980) media coverage numbers were utilized. Aldrich arrives at his operationalization by separately dividing the number of stories in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* by the number of active candidates. In transforming this data for my use, I totaled all the states' numbers of stories for both papers to come up with a total number of stories from each paper. I

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<sup>14</sup> As Gurian and Haynes note: “[This] figure...represents the magnitude of coverage across states in each newspaper. Giving equal value to the Post and the *Times*, these figures were aggregated. To avoid local bias, values were assigned to New York, New Jersey and Connecticut based solely on coverage in the Post, and to Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia based solely on the coverage in the Times (see Aldrich 1980). ...to make these data more consistent across campaigns, each state was expressed as a percentage of the total coverage devoted to that campaign.”

then took the proportions of this total in each state for both papers and averaged them to get the percentage of total news coverage per state in the 1976 nomination campaign. The data for 1980 primary season are derived from Robinson and Sheehan's (1983) data concerning the relative number of UPI wire service column inches devoted to each state. The number of inches in each state was divided by the total number of inches nationally to get the percentage of total national news coverage in each state for 1980.

There are problems associated with the use of different data sources, but they are offset somewhat by the fact that national newspapers are being used in all these cases. While this is helpful to some degree, the different operationalizations the authors develop give rise to some concerns about the comparability. Graber (1984) and Patterson (1980) established that campaign coverage is uniform across types of media and over time. This, coupled with the fact that the media data are somewhat standardized through the transformation into percentages of total national coverage, minimizes the concerns expressed above.

Other factors that directly influence the cost/benefit analyses of state legislatures are whether the states' presidential primaries and primaries for state and local offices are held simultaneously and whether a state is moving away from being the only delegate selection event on a particular date. In this analysis the former will be operationalized as a binary variable, coded one for split primaries and zero for those states that hold all their primaries at once. The latter is also a dummy variable. Those states that moved their delegate selection events up on the calendar from one election cycle to the next and, in the process, moved away from being the only delegate selection event on a particular date are assigned a value of one. On the other hand, those states that already shared their primary date with other states or moved away from a crowded date in one election cycle to another crowded date in the next are assigned a value of zero. Described differently, those states that determined a late, stand alone primary to be less of an "attention-getter" than one on an earlier, yet more crowded, date are coded one. Everything else is

coded zero.<sup>15</sup>

Whereas the above five variables can be manipulated by the state legislatures, the following four variables are important but cannot be controlled by the legislatures. First, I will argue that the intersection of three factors weighs heavily on any state legislature's ability and/or willingness to move the state's presidential primary to an earlier date. Obviously, which party or parties control/s the houses of the legislature has some bearing on what the legislature is able or willing to do. That is dependent upon whether there is an incumbent president running for re-election and which party that incumbent represents.

As I argued in an earlier section, if a party controls the both houses of a legislature, that legislature will aid its party's challengers to the presidency if it can by changing its primary date. If the legislature has split control between its houses, the ideal time to move a primary is when there is no incumbent running. In that case, moving the state's primary does not necessarily help just one party's candidates. These three variables create twelve possible combinations that can be divided into three categories ranging from "ideal for a move" to "not ideal".<sup>16</sup> The combinations in the *ideal* category are dominated by situations where, regardless of incumbency, the party in the White House and the party in the state legislature are in direct contrast. It also contains situations where there is no incumbent and a state has split control in the legislature. The next category, *complacency*, is represented by situations where one party controls both the White House and the state legislature when there is no incumbent

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<sup>15</sup> There are only two cases out of 129 in this sample and during this time period where a state moved its primary from being bundled with other primaries on one date to being the only event on a date. In 1988 New York moved back two weeks from its first week in April position in 1984, and South Dakota moved from its traditional first week in June position in 1984 to the week after New Hampshire in late February of 1988. In other words, most of the movement in this sample is from one crowded week in one cycle to another in the next or from being the only event during one week during one cycle to a crowded date in the following one. In any event, the two cases described here are considered part of the zero category in this analysis because this movement from being bundled to being a stand alone primary has occurred so infrequently during the time period examined.

<sup>16</sup> The three categories of this variable are *ideal* (NDS, NRS, IDR, IRD, NDR and NRD), *complacency* (NRR and NDD) and *not ideal* (IDS, IRS, IDD and IRR). The breakdown of the abbreviations is the following: incumbency (N = no incumbent, I = incumbent), party in the White House (D = Democrat, R = Republican) and party in the state legislature (D = Democrat, R = Republican and S = split control).

running. These situations occur mostly after a party has held the presidency for two terms and a combination of incumbency fatigue and overconfidence on the part of the party/state legislature may have prevented the legislature from moving its primary to an earlier date to help a frontrunner who may not have needed it. Finally, the *not ideal* category is a step further down from *complacency*. Combinations here include those where incumbents face legislatures of the same party or face split legislatures. The four combinations in this category present the legislatures with the least ideal situations for moving their states' primaries. Operationalized as trichotomous, this variable is coded 0 for *not ideal*, 1 for *complacency* and 2 for *ideal*.

Secondly, the legislatures cannot control how many delegates the parties distribute to their states. The operationalization for a state's delegation size is seemingly straightforward, but to get a true measure of the delegate-richness of any state in a given election year, an adjustment has to be made to account for the discrepancy in the numbers of delegates each party grants the states. The importance lies not in the equation the parties use to determine the numbers, but that there is an almost two to one difference between the delegate totals of Democrats and Republicans. This problem was overcome in much the same fashion as the problems associated with the candidate spending and media coverage variables: I simply took the percentage of the total number of delegates in each state for each party. I then took the two percentages (Democratic and Republican) and averaged them to create an average percentage of delegate-richness in each state. This pseudo-standardization controls for the differences in the parties' totals and allows for a proper examination of the effects of this variable on the state legislatures' decisions to move their states' presidential primaries.

## **Findings**

Given that the dependent variable in this analysis—whether a state's primary has moved to an earlier date—is binary, and that I am attempting to explain why the state legislatures in the 28 sample

states decided in the way they did concerning primary movement during this period, the appropriate model is a time series cross-sectional logit analysis. The results (see **Table 2**) are revealing as to the relationship these variables have with state legislatures' decisions to move their state's primaries to earlier dates. Of the variables that are a part of the hypothesized costs/benefits analysis, both the *when* and *split* variables are significant and in the expected directions in relation to the dependent variable. If a state holds its presidential primaries and the primaries for state and local offices on separate days, the odds of that state's legislature moving its presidential primary to an earlier date increase by a factor of nearly five and half. Likewise, the odds of a state frontloading its primary increase by a factor of 0.81 for every one week decrease. In other words, in a situation in which two states hold their presidential primaries one week apart, the odds of the state with the later primary moving increase by the above factor.

**[Insert Table 2 about here]**

Of the other variables that are a part of the state legislatures' hypothesized costs/benefits analysis—*spending*, *media*, and *only event*—none are statistically significant, though *spending* and *media* approach statistical significance. Furthermore, *media* and *only event* have relationships to the dependent variable that run contrary to those hypothesized. The control variables—*delegates* and *ideal*—were, as was the case with *media* and *only event*, neither statistically significant nor in the right direction.<sup>17</sup> The significance of these latter two variables is not as important as it is for the main independent variables within the costs/benefits analysis. Among those variables only the *only event* variable is of any great concern. The value of a stand alone primary to the state legislatures attempting to determine whether to move their presidential primaries is one that is fixed to the week in which it is held. This implies an interaction between the *when* and *only event* variables. However, as you can see below (**Table 3**), the

<sup>17</sup> The lack of significance in the case of *delegates* and *only event* does not appear to be attributable to multicollinearity with media coverage. The correlations are 0.5856 and 0.2425 respectively.

introduction of this interactive variable into the equation has no effect on the model other than to bring the relationship between the interaction and the dependent variable in line with the original hypothesis. This interaction however does not approach significance.

**[Insert Table 3 about here]**

Introducing an interaction to account for the relationship between the combined effect of delegate-richness of a state and whether that state's presidential primary was the only delegate selection event on a particular date in the previous cycle and the dependent variable is also important. It is more important for smaller, delegate-poor states to have stand alone primaries than larger, delegate-rich states because the latter would gain the attention of the candidates and media regardless. Again though, the differences are minimal (see **Table 4**). Even though the *delegate/only event* interaction is in the right direction relative to the dependent variable, it is far from significant (just as the above interaction in Table 3 was).

**[Insert Table 4 about here]**

## **Conclusions**

The contributions added to the literature from this study have been twofold. First of all, I was able to look more closely at the motivating factors behind the frontloaded presidential nomination system. To this end, I observed the actual decision makers in this process—the state legislatures—and what motivated them. Past studies have made this connection indirectly by arguing that the candidates' spending decisions in a state's primary is driven by where the state's primary is on the calendar (M&B 2004). This highlights the importance an early primary date and indirectly points out the motivation to move, but fails to make a solid case. State legislatures are motivated not only by candidate spending but several other things. Secondly, by looking at the state legislatures I have been required to account for other relevant variables and, in the process, developed a better specified model. This better specified

model included the variable for split primaries, which is another valuable contribution to this literature. Within this sample of states and over the course of this time period, the presence of split primaries has had a major impact on these states' abilities to shift their primaries to earlier dates. This is a factor that had, to this point, not been considered within this context. It is an important indicator of why some states have moved and others have not.

This is just the tip of the iceberg for the study of state legislatures within this context though. Future research is warranted in several areas concerning state legislatures' effects on several aspects of presidential primaries. The decisions on whether a state's presidential primary is open or closed to independents and members of the other party, the system of delegate allocation in Republican primaries, and the mode of delegate selection—primary or caucus—are all areas in which more attention should be paid.

## Appendix A--Operationalizations

### Dependent Variable

*Movement of primaries*: a dummy variable (1 = the state's presidential primary was moved to an earlier date; 0 = no forward move)

### Main Independent Variables

*Costs & Benefits of Moving*:

**splitting primaries**—a dummy variable (1 = a state holds presidential primaries separately from those primaries for other offices; 0 = those primaries are not split)

**only event on date**—a dummy variable (1 = the state's presidential primary was the only event on a date in the previous election; 0 = the state held its presidential primary on the same date as the presidential primaries in other states)

**candidate spending**—the percentage of total candidate spending in a state during the previous nomination cycle (adjusted for both inflation and the difference in spending between the two parties).

**media coverage**—the percentage of total national media coverage a state garners in the previous primary season.

**when an event is**—This is a variable that has been coded according to the week in which the primary has held. The number of weeks within the nomination season will be coded in reverse order (from June to February) so that the relationship will be positive. In other words, those primary weeks during the first week in June will be assigned a value of 1. The earlier the week is in the process, the more these assigned values grow.

### Control Variables

*Delegate-richness*: This variable is operationalized as the percentage of total delegates a state has in the previous election year. This percentage is arrived at by determining first the percentage of total delegates for both parties and then averaging the two party percentages.

*Ideal*: a trichotomous variable (2 = the ideal combinations of party in the White House, party control of state legislatures and whether there is an incumbent president running for re-election; 1 = complacency; 0 = not ideal). To clarify more, the three categories of this variable are *ideal* (NDS, NRS, IDR, IRD, NDR and NRD), *complacency* (NRR and NDD) and *not ideal* (IDS, IRS, IDD and IRR). The breakdown of the abbreviations is the following: incumbency (N = no incumbent, I = incumbent), party in the White House (D = Democrat, R = Republican) and party in the state legislature (D = Democrat, R = Republican and S = split control).

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Tables

**Table 1**  
**Split Primaries vs. Moving to Earlier Dates**

	No Split	Split
Move	CA MD TX OH WV	MA GA RI CT WI OK MS TN NY SD CO LA
No Move	PA IL IN NJ NM AR NC OR AL KY	FL

Source: thegreenpapers.com and Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report

**Table 2**  
**Model 1: Impact on Legislatures' Movement Decisions (1976-1996)**

	Coefficient	Standard Error	Odds Ratio	Z	Significance
When	-0.2072	0.0682	0.8128	-3.04	0.002
Split	1.6553	0.6384	5.2346	2.59	0.010
Spending	-0.2300	0.1593	0.7945	-1.44	0.149
Media	0.2919	0.1706	1.3390	1.71	0.087
Only Event	0.0907	0.6175	1.0949	0.15	0.883
Delegates	-0.0170	0.1945	0.9832	-0.09	0.930
Ideal	-0.1732	0.2303	0.8410	-0.75	0.452

Log likelihood = -61.576993; Wald chi square = 16.19; significant at 0.0234 level; N = 129

**Table 3**  
**Model 2: Impact on Legislatures' Movement Decisions (1976-1996)**  
**Including *Only Event* and *When* Interaction**

	Coefficient	Standard Error	Odds Ratio	Z	Significance
When	-0.2019	0.0696	0.8172	-2.90	0.004
Split	1.6439	0.6384	5.1755	2.58	0.010
Spending	-0.2267	0.1615	0.7972	-1.40	0.160
Media	0.2952	0.1707	1.3434	1.73	0.084
Only Event	0.6192	1.6197	1.8574	0.38	0.702
Delegates	-0.0247	0.1966	0.9756	-0.13	0.900
Ideal	-0.1741	0.2305	0.8402	-0.76	0.450
Interaction	-0.0624	0.1783	0.9395	-0.35	0.727

Log likelihood = -61.513898; Wald chi squared = 16.15; significant at 0.0402 level; N = 129

**Table 4**  
**Model 3: Impact on Legislatures' Movement Decisions**  
**(1976-1996)**  
**Including *Only Event* and *Delegates* Interaction**

	Coefficient	Standard Error	Odds Ratio	Z	Significance
When	-0.2060	0.0692	0.8138	-2.98	0.003
Split	1.6318	0.6804	5.1133	2.40	0.016
Spending	-0.2291	0.1597	0.7952	-1.43	0.151
Media	0.2936	0.1716	1.3413	1.71	0.087
Only Event	0.1827	1.1248	1.2004	0.16	0.871
Delegates	-0.0157	0.1948	0.9844	-0.08	0.936
Ideal	-0.1732	0.2303	0.8409	-0.75	0.452
Interaction	-0.0396	0.4064	0.9612	-0.10	0.922

Log likelihood = -61.572223; Wald chi squared = 16.21; significant at 0.0395 level; N = 129