Primary Election Laws, State by State

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Our goal was to construct a dataset characterizing many of the key features of primary-election enfranchisement rules/laws for the whole history of American primaries. Briefly, we wished to compile a definitive coding of which states employ "open", "closed", etc. primaries, and when these occurred. Multiple extant datasets cover some of the relevant history with some such classification, but we could not find a comprehensive dataset, and we noted discrepancies and gaps in a few publicly available datasets. Moreover, close attention to rules makes clear that a moderately large number of variables are necessary to capture all of the distinctions in participation rules. The open-closed-or-hybrid distinction obscuring a large number of choices, including variations between parties.

We sought to cover not only presidential primaries but also other important primaries, our clumsy shorthand for which is, alas, "other (non-presidential) primaries". Generally, states have either synchronized all primary (candidate-selecting) elections or have separated the presidential event (during which delegates to a nominating convention are chosen) from all others (statewide offices, state legislative offices, federal legislative offices, local offices, sometimes ballot questions, etc.) In some cases, there are more than two events per cycle, as when states use more than one presidential event (e.g. some variety of caucus plus a primary) or elect some officials (e.g. the governor and/or other statewide office holders and/or state legislators) on a different calendar than the federal one (every two years, in even years, culminating in a general election on the Tuesday after the first Monday in November).

This first release is much less comprehensive than we had hoped, with nearly complete coding from 2000 through 2016, but only select variables and select states coded back to 1900. Further releases will be forthcoming as we continue to work on the project.

We hope that the data prove useful for constructing both independent variables, for studies on primary-rule effects, and dependent variables, for studies of electoral-institution design/logic. A codebook explains all of the variables and a lengthy, somewhat chaotic Appendix, provides detailed sources for many of the variables.