

# CROSS-PARTY VOTING IN 21ST CENTURY PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES: A SOCIAL AND EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

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## **Introduction**

Hillary versus Barack. Romney and Santorum. The past two presidential primary seasons have both included drawn-out battles for the nomination of one of the major parties. Is this because the candidate fields have been especially strong? Or is it perhaps because partisan voters have been torn between selecting the candidate who they feel can win and the individual who best represents them? While either of these explanations may certainly be true, there is a much more sinister possibility that has been promulgated by political pundits and the media in recent years. They would suggest that these drawn out nomination fights are the direct result of strategic cross-party voting in primaries by voters of the opposing party.

As primary processes varying from state to state, the waters are already muddied. With campaigns looking to explain their less than desired performances, opposing party figures eager to add to the chaos of a prolonged primary contest, and the media ever ready to grab a headline that will sell more papers or result in more online traffic, it is no wonder that cross-party voting is such a popular phenomenon. But is it real?

In this paper, I will attempt to cut through the clutter in order to examine the effects of cross-party voting on presidential primary results. I will look specifically at states in the Midwest, as these are states that are critical in both the primary season and the general election. Furthermore, it is in this region that much of the hype over cross-party voting has occurred in recent years. Ultimately, this research will seek to demonstrate that while the media places great emphasis on cross-

party voting and its potential to make or break candidates, the amount of cross-party voting that actually occurs is rarely significant enough to cause any considerable change in the outcome of the primary.

In order to prove this hypothesis, I have identified four cases, one from each of the last four presidential elections, that best exemplify the cross-party voting that occurred during these respective primary seasons. These cases are the Michigan Republican Primary in 2000, the Wisconsin Democratic Primary in 2004, the Indiana Democratic Primary in 2008, and the Michigan Republican Primary in 2012. While each of these cases is different, there are similarities among them that allow for simple comparison and analysis. The most important of these similarities is that they are all open primaries that allow for any registered voter, regardless of party affiliation or previous voting history, to vote in the primary of their choosing.

In comparing these four cases, I will first look at the media coverage surrounding the primary and the degree to which it focused on the implications of cross-party voting. I will then turn to an empirical examination of the election data itself, seeking to understand the extent to which cross-party voting actually occurred and whether or not it had a significant impact on the outcome of the primary. The two-fold nature of this analysis will serve to point out the discrepancies that exist between the media hype over cross-party voting and its actual influence in the past four primary seasons, leading to a much clearer and well-reasoned understanding of this phenomenon and its presence in presidential primary elections.

### **Primaries: Historically Speaking**

Before examining the four cases outlined as prime examples of cross-party voting, it is important to understand the landscape by which these events unfolded. For this, it is necessary to look momentarily at the history of the presidential primary process, its origins, and its idiosyncrasies. Understanding this history and the complexities of various states' nomination processes will give background to the story of the last 12 years and serve as a necessary and beneficial springboard for the analysis to come.

The presidential primary sprang out of the Progressive era in the first decade of the 20th century. The Midwest was important from the start with Wisconsin joining Florida, Pennsylvania, and Oregon as a leader in introducing the primary election as a means for delegate

selection.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, even the first presidential primaries in 1912 were hotly contested with President Taft and former President Theodore Roosevelt competing in twelve primaries, half of which were in the Midwest.<sup>2</sup> By 1916 there were 20 primaries, but this was the highpoint of the primary until 1968.<sup>3</sup> It was during this year that the Democratic Party enacted a number of reforms to make the delegate selection more open, and ever since, primaries have again been on the rise, with 42 states and the District of Columbia holding presidential primaries in 2000.<sup>4,5</sup>

While the number of states electing to have presidential primaries has increased steadily since the 1970s, not all primaries are the same. There are four basic categories of primaries, and it is extremely helpful to understand their differences. Cherry and Kroll offer a detailed explanation of these differences.<sup>6</sup> The first type of primary is a closed primary. In these primaries, party members can vote only in the primaries of their own party. Independents cannot vote in these primaries, and party affiliation must be chosen prior to the primary. The second format is a semi-closed primary, which is the same as a closed primary with the exception that Independents can declare party affiliation just before the election and vote in that party's primary races. An open primary is the third format, and in open primaries, all voters are able to choose which party's primary they would like to vote in on Election Day. Finally, a blanket primary is a primary in which all voters get a single ballot with all candidates of all parties on it. Voters then cast a single vote for each office but do not have to vote along party lines. In each of these primary formats, the candidate with the most votes within each party is the winner of that party's delegates.

While understanding these different forms of primaries is certainly interesting, the focus of this paper is on those in which cross-party voting is most likely. Thus, one can logically assume that more cross-party voting occurs in states with open primaries where any voter, regardless of party affiliation, can vote in either party's primary. Conveniently, each of the cases that will be examined—Michigan 2000, Wisconsin 2004, Indiana 2008, and Michigan 2012—was an open primary. This is not to say that cross-party voting does not occur in the other types of primaries, however. In his analysis, John Geer indicates that “even in closed primaries, in which only party members are supposed to participate, self-identified Independents and partisans of the opposition party still constitute a sizable segment of the electorate.”<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, the focus here remains on open primaries.

## Appealing to Independents: Michigan 2000

John McCain has always been a maverick. Bucking the Republican establishment throughout his career in the Senate, McCain was not likely to gain much staunch Republican support in his 2000 run for the White House. Nonetheless, he quickly proved a formidable challenge to the presumptive Republican nominee, Texas Governor George W. Bush.

After not entering the Iowa caucuses, McCain scored a resounding victory in New Hampshire gathering 49 percent of the vote compared to Bush’s 30 percent.<sup>8</sup> Following this victory, the press immediately began to analyze McCain’s appeal amongst Independents and predict his success in future open primaries such as the Michigan contest. R.W. Apple Jr. wrote in the *New York Times* that McCain was even winning in support amongst Independents 38 percent to 21 percent for Democratic candidate, Bill Bradley.<sup>9</sup>

As the Michigan Primary approached, the calls for cross-party voting became more explicit. The *Dayton Daily News* reported that Michigan Democratic State Representative LaMar Lemmons was calling on Democrats to vote for McCain as a punishment for Republican Governor John Engler, the head of Bush’s Michigan campaign. Even the McCain campaign itself urged Democrats and Independents to cross party lines and vote for him in the Republican Primary.<sup>10</sup>

The results of this primary election are telling, indicating that Democrats and Independents did, in fact, mobilize for McCain. McCain garnered 51% of the vote to Bush’s 49%, handily beating Bush in this important primary.<sup>11</sup> *Wsws.org* noted that McCain surpassed Bush in his delegate count with the win in Michigan and the win in his home state—Arizona. The website indicated that voter turnout was a record high and that Democrats and Independents made up 51% of those who voted while Republicans only constituted 49% of their own primary.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, William Mayer found that while Republicans went for Bush 64% to McCain 31%, Independents went for McCain 60% to Bush 33%.<sup>13</sup>

Looking at these statistics, it is clear that McCain’s early success was largely due to the participation of Democrats and Independents in the Michigan Primary. Indeed, if the Michigan Primary had been a closed primary, limited to only Republicans, McCain would have lost by a nearly two-to-one margin. This surely would have forced him to exit

the presidential race much earlier than he did. Looking back at the 2000 Michigan Primary, it is clear that Kaufmann, et al. correctly surmised, “Open and modified-open primaries may have the potential to wreak havoc on political parties and their tentative control over nominations.”<sup>14</sup> In this case, they most certainly did.

### **The Year of the Incumbent: Wisconsin 2004**

While the primary elections of 2000 saw a great deal of publicity for cross-party voting in the Republican primaries, the primaries of 2004 proved a time for testing whether or not Republicans would also cross party lines to vote in the Democratic primaries. Surprisingly, in a year with an incumbent president—thus no primaries of their own—cross-party voting was not widely publicized or promoted by any of the Democratic candidates or Republican Party leaders.

Still there was some mention of rather disorganized but nonetheless existent cross-party voting. Matthew Quinn reported in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution that 16% of those likely to vote in the South Carolina Democratic Primary were Republican, and 17% of likely voters were Independents.<sup>15</sup> Even so, this appeared to be unorganized and haphazard as even the state Republican Party was urging its members to avoid the voting. While John Kerry was the frontrunner, John Edwards, his main challenger, did end up winning in South Carolina by 15 percentage points 45% to 30%.<sup>16</sup> This allowed Edwards to stay in the race, and it caused the Wisconsin Primary two weeks later to be even more crucial to preventing Kerry from securing the nomination.

Looking at the results of the Wisconsin Primary, while Kerry won with 40%, he faced his most serious challenge from Edwards (34%) since losing to him in South Carolina. This challenge was largely due to the higher than average turnout amongst Republicans and Independents who supported Edwards over Kerry.

**Table 1: Wisconsin Primary Results Edwards and Kerry 2004<sup>17</sup>**

	<b>Total Votes</b>	<b>Edwards Votes</b>	<b>Edwards Pct</b>	<b>Kerry Votes</b>	<b>Kerry Pct</b>
<b>Democrat (62%)</b>	303,644	94,130	31%	145,749	48%
<b>Republican (9%)</b>	44,077	19,394	44%	7,934	18%
<b>Independent (29%)</b>	142,027	56,811	40%	39,768	28%

Table 1 clearly shows that while Edwards may have ultimately lost to Kerry, he was able to compellingly challenge him based on the support of nearly twice as many Independents and 26% more of the Republican vote. In fact, had Republicans and Independents not made up 38% of the overall vote, it is unlikely that the contest would have even been close, as a closed primary consisting only of Democrats would have led Kerry to win by nearly 20 percentage points.

### **“Operation Chaos”: Indiana 2008**

By now it is clear that some cross-party voting does occur in the battleground states of the Midwest. However, the amount that it occurred and the attention that it was given during the 2000 and 2004 primary seasons was nothing compared to the 2008 Democratic primaries. Senator Hillary Clinton, the expected nominee practically since George W. Bush's reelection in 2004, was swiftly and significantly challenged by Barack Obama, the junior Senator from Illinois and a rising star within the Democratic Party.

On the Republican side, it quickly became clear that John McCain would be the nominee. The Democrats, however, faced a long and bloody battle for their party's nomination. Drawing out through January and February, trading primary wins and swapping super delegates, it was unclear whether Hillary or Obama would come out on top. Obama's support remained high, however, and many observers believed that Clinton had to win Texas and Ohio on March 4, 2008 in order to stay in the race.<sup>18</sup>

On March 3, 2008, conservative talk radio host Rush Limbaugh called on his listeners to cross party lines and vote in the Democratic primaries for Clinton, in a move he dubbed “Operation Chaos,” thus prolonging the race and the fight between the Clinton and Obama camps.<sup>19</sup> When Clinton won the primaries in both Texas and Ohio, Limbaugh was quick to claim credit, Obama was quick to blame Limbaugh, and the media began to buzz with the possibility of cross-party votes influencing the result of even more Democratic primaries.

From Marinucci in the San Francisco Chronicle to Hylton/Austin in Time Magazine, journalists were crying of “chaos” and

“spoiled races.”<sup>20,21</sup> At the same time, however, they were looking more closely at Limbaugh’s claim that he was responsible for the outcomes of these primaries and coming to mixed conclusions. Even academia began to take notice of this phenomenon, with Donovan and Stephenson both examining the effects of Limbaugh’s call to action in “Operation Chaos” as opposed to historical trends and other explanatory data such as the increasing inevitability of McCain as the Republican nominee.<sup>22,23</sup>

Rush Limbaugh brought great attention to cross-party voting in presidential primaries, but it did not stop with the primaries that were held in March. Indeed, the Midwest once again provided valuable evidence of this trend with the Indiana Democratic Primary being held on May 6, 2008. In the Hoosier State, Clinton won by a mere 14,000 votes, and with ten percent of Indiana Primary voters identifying as Republican and with those voters swinging for Clinton by eight percentage points, it is easy to see why some cried foul while Limbaugh boasted success once again of “Operation Chaos.”<sup>24</sup>

	Total Votes	Clinton Votes	Clinton Pct	Obama Votes	Obama Pct
Democrat (67%)	856,470	445,365	52%	411,106	48%
Republican (10%)	127,831	69,029	54%	58,802	46%
Independent (23%)	294,012	135,246	46%	158,767	54%

While it is easy to place the results of the Indiana Primary on cross-party voting, a closer look at Table 2 shows that Obama performed best among Independents. In fact, with a completely closed primary, Indiana Democrats would have chosen Clinton by four percentage points, two points more than the 51/49 split that actually occurred. In this light, Republicans merely prevented non-partisan Independents from swinging the election away from the majority of Democrats’ preferred candidate, Clinton.

### **Democrats Take Their Turn: Michigan 2012**

In 2012, it was the Democrats who held the incumbency and had little to do during the presidential primary season. But would they behave as Republicans did in 2004, with fairly minimal cross-party voting? Or would Democrats, still recalling the meddling of the Republicans in the

Clinton/Obama race, exact revenge in the Republican primaries?

As the presumed frontrunner in the 2012 Republican primaries, Mitt Romney was the candidate to beat. While a number of contenders had risen and fallen throughout the campaign, Rick Santorum proved to be Romney's most challenging competitor once the primaries began. However, he faced an uphill battle. As February came to a close, Michigan, the "home state" of Mitt Romney appeared to be a serious bellwether for the remainder of the primary season. If Santorum could win in Michigan, he would simultaneously prove that Romney was not the inevitable nominee and remain in the running to amass the delegates needed for the nomination himself. As Santorum and Romney focused on Michigan, the Democrats had their own end in mind.

Once again, many media outlets were covering the possibility of cross-party voting in the Michigan Primary. Catalina Camia reported in USA Today that the Democratic Party sent an email to voters encouraging them to take part in the Republican Primary.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, as Rush Limbaugh promoted "Operation Chaos" in 2008, the liberal blog The Daily Kos launched "Operation Hilarity" in 2012, encouraging Democrats to cross parties and vote for Rick Santorum to "keep the clown show going."<sup>27</sup> In an attempt to repeat McCain's success in attracting Michigan's cross-party voters in 2000, the Santorum campaign even embraced this evident ill will by the Democrats claiming it "broadened their base."<sup>28</sup> Michael Falcone reported for ABC News that the Santorum campaign sought any way that it could to beat Mitt Romney, going so far as to send a robo-call to Michigan Democrats the day before the election asking for their votes in the primary.<sup>29</sup>

While Santorum would have liked for the Michigan Primary to unfold as it did in 2000 for John McCain, this primary was very different from the one that occurred there 12 years earlier. Table 3 shows that Democrats did turn out to some extent and those that did overwhelmingly supported Santorum in their strategic voting. Additionally, Santorum held his own with Independents, only losing by one percentage point to Romney among this group. However, whereas in 2000 Republicans represented 49% of the voters in the Republican Primary, in 2012 they were 60% of the electorate. This, combined with the fact that Republicans favored Romney over Santorum by 11 percentage points, led to disappointment for Santorum in his unsuccessful quest to beat Romney in Michigan.



Table 3: Michigan Primary Results Santorum and Romney 2012<sup>30</sup>

	Total Votes	Santorum Votes	Santorum Pct	Romney Votes	Romney Pct
Democrat (9%)	87,105	46,166	53%	15,679	18%
Republican (60%)	580,699	214,859	37%	278,736	48%
Independent (31%)	300,028	102,009	34%	105,010	35%

In fact, while initially it was thought that the 2012 Michigan Republican Primary would look like the Michigan contest of 2000, the data more closely resembles the Wisconsin Democratic Primary of 2004. With the primary challenger falling short of an upset yet gaining a significant majority of the cross-party votes, Rick Santorum in effect reprised the role of John Edwards eight years prior. Santorum, too, would soon learn that regardless of how his campaign spun this contest, he was unsuccessful in displacing the frontrunner, and this loss would prove indicative of the challenges yet to come.

### Patterns, Projections and Primaries: What does it all mean?

While each of these four cases shows that cross-party voting is real, what are the implications? Can it actually change elections? The answer is clear. While it is possible to change the outcomes of primary elections through cross-party voting, it is very difficult to do so. Indeed, in only one of the four cases examined, Michigan 2000, did cross-party voting appear to tilt the outcome of the primary against the projected outcome had the primary been closed to only partisan members of the party. In each of the other primaries examined, cross-party voting was highlighted by the media, and in some cases promoted by party figures of the opposing party. However, while the data clearly show evidence of cross-party voting, it has generally not proven significant enough to shift elections.

What is even more interesting to consider is the changing motivation behind cross-party voting even during the short timespan of these four elections. In attempting to understand the motivation of cross-party voters John Geer offers the following:

It is unlikely that independents would “raid” a party’s primary to vote for their least favorite candidate to undermine that party’s chances in the general election. A more likely reason

for independents (or even partisans of the other party) to vote in a partisan primary is that they found a candidate they would be willing to support in November.<sup>31</sup>

This analysis explains John McCain's primary success among Independents and Democrats during the 2000 campaign, as he was perceived as a candidate who many non-Republicans would, and did, vote for. However, following the rancor of the 2008 and 2012 primaries, it is clear that there has been a shift in the primary motivation for cross-party voting. While the effect of Limbaugh's "Operation Chaos" is debatable, Republicans could have legitimately preferred Clinton to Obama in 2008, the 2012 Michigan Primary clearly refutes Geer's claim. With Santorum, a staunch conservative, being supported by Democrats by a margin of 35% over Romney, it is highly unlikely that these Democrats were crossing party lines because "they found a candidate they would be willing to support in November."<sup>32</sup>

While cross-party voting is here to stay, it may not always be for the same reasons. The 2008 and 2012 primaries indicate that cross-party voting is now a political strategy. Motivating the partisan base of the non-competitive party to cross over and strategically vote in the opposing party's primary, weakening that party's eventual nominee and prolonging the nomination process is the current trend, and this trend is likely to continue in the foreseeable future.

As cross-party voting continues to change, it is evident that the Midwest will remain a critical testing ground for its proliferation and its effects on presidential primaries. It is fitting that this region should be so indicative of the evolution of the primary system, as primaries were present in the Midwest from the beginning. Furthermore, as this region continues to play an important role in the Electoral College, it is certain to play a vital role in the nominating process as well.

While cross-party voting may not easily change the outcomes of this presidential nominating process, it is nonetheless an interesting and worthwhile study. Elections will continue to evolve, and cross-party voting will surely play an important part in understanding campaign strategy and voter psychology. It is this understanding that is vitally important, an understanding that ultimately leads to the more perfect explanation of elections.

## END NOTES

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