California’s Top Two

Eric McGhee
Outline

- Primary election outcomes
- General election outcomes
- Crossover voting / Undervoting
- Moderation
- Conclusions
More incumbents challenged within party

Share of incumbents facing a challenge

- Average: 2002-2010: 18%
- 2012: 42%
- 2014: 28%

More primary races were close

Margins of Victory

- Margin: 1st vs. 2nd
  - Average: 2002-2010: 32%
  - Average: 2012-2014: 25%

- Margin: 2nd vs. 3rd
  - Average: 2002-2010: 17%
  - Average: 2012-2014: 11%
Establishment candidates have done well...
...and outsider candidates have not
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More races were close

Winners by less than 10 points, as share of total

- State Senate
- State Assembly
- U.S. House

Same party: 30% competitive
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Crossover voting

- U.S. House and state Senate (Ahler, et al. (2013))
  - 16% including NPP, 12% otherwise
- Bigelow-Oller Assembly race in 2012
  - 19% Democrats making a choice
- Brown-Kashkari-Donnelly
  - 17% R ➔ Brown; 9% D ➔ Donnelly/Kashkari (Field)
  - 13% R ➔ Brown; 3% D ➔ Donnelly/Kashkari (PPIC)
- ~90% of variation in outcomes predicted with district registration
Undervoting

FIGURE 4
Voters casting ballots often skipped same-party contests

Participation: general minus primary

Ballots Cast

Votes Cast

SOURCES: Political Data Incorporated (ballots cast); California Secretary of State (votes cast).
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Moderation...

- ...in voter behavior?
  - Not really (Ahler, Citrin, & Lenz 2013)
Voters couldn’t identify moderates
Moderation...

- ...in voter behavior?
  - Not really (Ahler, Citrin, & Lenz 2013)
- ...in campaign positions?
  - Not really (Kousser, Phillips, & Shor 2013)
House candidates weren’t more moderate

Figure 9: The Distance Between District Means and Candidate Positions
Moderation...

- ...in voter behavior?
  - Not really (Ahler, Citrin, & Lenz 2013)

- ...in campaign positions?
  - Not really (Kousser, Phillips, & Shor 2013)

- ...in office?
  - Possibly
    - Grose 2013
    - McGhee 2014
Signs of moderation in legislature...

Figure 2: California Assembly, Polarization between the Democratic and Republican Parties

Figure 4: California Senate, Polarization between the Democratic and Republican Parties
…but timing off for top two effect
...but timing off for top two effect
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Change notable but not dramatic

■ Elections
  – Closer outcomes
  – Establishment candidates did well
  – Biggest differences:
    ■ Same-party races, limited 3rd-party presence

■ Representation
  – Some signs of moderation
  – Not clear if top two is the cause
California’s Election Reforms

Eric McGhee
California’s polarized legislature
Top Two altered the strategic logic...

Semi-Closed

Primary

#1

D

#2

D

#3

R

General

#1

D

#2

D

#3

R

Top Two

#1

D

#2

D

#3

R
Voters didn’t pick moderates
Turnout has been very low

Turnout as Share of Total Registered

* 2008 is average of February and June primaries
Easy to predict party vote under old system
Most Top Two outcomes can be predicted with old assumptions

Districts in 2012

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

- AD13
- CD32
- AD69
- CD30
- CD2
- CD33

29 Districts in 2012