

"Primaries vs. Caucuses: A Handy Primer" *The Guardian*. March 2, 2012. By Harry J. Enten

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2012/mar/02/primaries-caucuses-handy-primer>

One of the more interesting facets of the American major party nomination processes is the difference between caucuses and primaries. On Super Tuesday, there will be three caucuses and seven primaries. The asymmetry between the two can make all the difference in the world. So how exactly do they differ?

1. State party v state election board. Caucuses are run by state parties, which give them great autonomy in the process. Primaries are run by the state itself, which potentially leads to a smoother vote count (see Iowa, Maine and Nevada).

2. Money. Caucuses are far cheaper than primaries to put together. All parties need to do is reserve time in local churches and homes, or rent out rooms at public facilities like gymnasiums. They are run by local volunteers. Primaries, by contrast, require a lot more work. The transportation of voting machines is expensive, as is the deployment of many paid poll workers.

3. Time of vote. Although the time a caucus is held may differ from precinct to precinct (or county to county), each person within a given precinct votes at the same time. The limited time certainly cuts costs, but it also limits participation. If you can't make it to your precinct caucus at a given time, too bad. Primaries have longer periods of voting. New York, for instance, allows voters to cast a ballot any time between 6am and 9pm.

4. Time to vote. Caucuses require voters to do more than just vote. Often, local party business is discussed, and supporters for each of the candidates are given the opportunity to speak on behalf of the candidates they are supporting. Altogether, a caucus can take up to several hours. If you don't feel like giving the time, or simply don't have the time to spend in a caucus, it's often too bad for you. Primaries require voters only to enter a voting booth and quickly make their selection, which is very time-efficient.

The main point to take away from this brief outline is that caucuses give greater authority to the state parties and clearly favor voters who are strongly committed to their candidate. You might even call these voters "activists": they will vote any time, any place. Primaries dilute these core voters. Primaries usually favor more moderate candidates and almost always feature higher turnout.

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(There are other rule differences, such as Democrats not using a secret ballot for its caucuses, and most Republican caucuses are non-binding, but these are the basics.)

In the 2012 cycle, there have been six caucuses and five primaries (that will actually have some impact on the delegate count).

Primary turnout, as calculated by the percentage of people voting in each contest v the number of people in each state who actually voted for the Republican party's presidential nominee in 2008, has averaged 52.8%. Turnout has ranged from a low 37.3% in the "closed" Arizona primary (in which only registered Republicans can vote), to a high of 78.5% in the semi-closed New Hampshire primary (in which registered Republicans and Independents may vote).

Turnout in caucuses, by the same measure, has averaged just 6.5%. Turnout has varied between a low of 1.3% in the Wyoming caucus, to a high of 17.9% in the much-anticipated Iowa caucus (where many Independents newly registered to become Republicans in order to vote for Ron Paul).

At this point, Mitt Romney, the candidate least likely to have truly enthusiastic supporters, but most likely attract more moderates, has seemingly benefited more from the primary format. He has won every primary but South Carolina. In caucuses, Romney's record stands at a less successful three for six. Two of those caucus wins were in the west, where he has benefited from enthusiastic Mormon backing. Rick Santorum, on the other hand, has taken all three of his true victories in caucus states (Missouri's primary awarded no delegates, indirectly or directly).

The 2008 cycle featured a similar trend. Turnout in the 29 primaries that took place before John McCain became the presumptive nominee was 38.3%; but it stood at only 5.8% in the ten caucuses held during the same period. And, as in 2012, the more moderate candidate, John McCain, did much better in primaries. McCain won 22 of the 29 primaries, but he only captured one of the ten caucuses.

Interestingly, one state, Washington (which holds its 2012 caucus Saturday), held both a caucus *and* a primary before McCain became the presumptive nominee. McCain's vote percentage in the Washington state primary was 49.4%, but it was only 25.9% in the Washington caucus.

The difference in caucus and primary vote percentage in Washington is no fluke. The Democratic side in 2008 featured four states with both caucuses and primaries. (Only Texas's primary awarded delegates, but all the primaries featured much higher turnout than the caucuses; Obama lost the Texas primary, but won the Texas caucus.) The candidate who elicited the most vocal and enthusiastic support, Barack Obama, did, on average, 16.8% better in the caucuses in these

states. Who knows what might have happened, in 2008, if all states voted by primary alone on the Democratic side, or solely by caucus on the Republican side?

So, caucuses and primaries can lead to very different results. Whether you prefer one over the other depends on what you hope for the nomination process to accomplish. In 2012, Mitt Romney would likely be a heavier favorite for the nomination if there were no caucuses. By the same token, he'd almost certainly have done worse if more states had decided to caucus, instead of holding a primary ballot.

Either way, the process is the process. But when parties contemplate changing their rules and behavior from one cycle to the next, they should know what they're getting into.