

# PARTISAN POLITICS, POLARIZATION, AND PARTICIPATION

## HIGHLIGHTS

- In the 2012 Utah Priorities Survey, 52% of respondents reported that they were concerned or very concerned about partisan politics, making it a top-ten issue for Utahns in this year's elections.
- The current Congress shows the highest historical level of polarization since the end of Reconstruction.
- Since 1939, there has been a slow and steady decline in the number of moderates in the U.S. Congress to a historic low for both chambers in 2011.
- Utah's voter turnout rate has been declining throughout the past several decades. Whereas Utah's rate used to be well above the national average, it is now below average.
- Research shows that the perception that an individual's vote will make a difference is an important factor in voter turnout. Utah's number of uncompetitive political races is much higher now than when Utah voter turnout was high.
- Research has also found that when the costs to vote, such as time spent registering and voting, are high, people are less likely to vote. This is significant in Utah because its registration laws, closed primaries, and the caucus and convention system all pose barriers to voting.

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In the 2012 Utah Priorities Survey, respondents listed partisan politics as one of their top concerns for the upcoming elections. This is significant not only because it was the first time this issue had been listed as a top-ten concern in this series of surveys, but also the first time it was seen as a concern at all. There have been many reports about the rise in partisanship and party polarization in national politics, and on the implications of this increase.

Partisanship can have important influences on voter turnout rates. Research indicates that an increase in polarization “energizes the electorate” and increases voter turnout; high participation is indicative of a highly informed electorate where polarization is at its greatest.<sup>1</sup> However, Utah's voter participation rate has been declining for several decades. This report will outline the increase in partisanship in Utah and at the national level, and provide several explanations for why Utah's voter turnout has been decreasing over the last several decades.

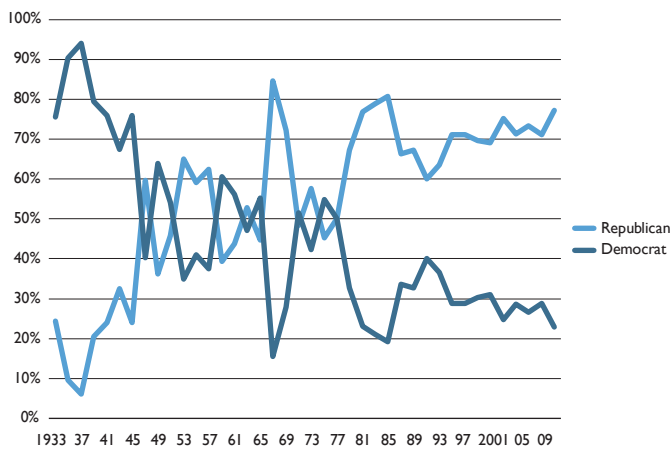
## PARTISANSHIP IN UTAH

In the 2012 Utah Priorities Survey, 52% of respondents reported that they were concerned or very concerned about partisan politics. This included 57% of Democrats, 52% of independent voters, and 39% of Republicans.<sup>2</sup> The difference of 18 percentage points between the two major parties reveals there is a level of partisanship even with the issue of partisanship itself.

Utah Republicans' lower level of concern about partisan politics may be due to their party's success nationally in the 2010 midterm election, as well as their party's enduring control of Utah's legislative and executive branches, and its congressional delegation. Utah Democrats' higher level of concern may be due in part to the state's recent redistricting process, as well as their party's lower level of representation within the Utah State Legislature and congressional delegation.

Partisanship can also be linked to party dominance in the Utah State Legislature. Currently, the Republican Party holds strong supermajorities (greater than 75% of legislative seats) in both houses, but that has not always been true. The Democratic Party had majority control of the Legislature throughout the first half of the 21st century, even controlling 90% of legislative seats in 1935. The two major parties then swapped majority status throughout the 1950s, '60s and '70s, with the Republicans reaching a

**Figure 1: Makeup of Utah State Legislature by Party, 1935-2012**



Source: Utah State Legislature Roster.

high point in 1967 by holding 85% of the legislature. However, since 1977, the Republican Party has held the majority. The high point of this Republican majority occurred in 1984, the same year President Reagan carried every state but Minnesota and the District of Columbia in that year's presidential election. The Republican majority then declined until 1992, but has been growing since that time and is once again at a near-record level.

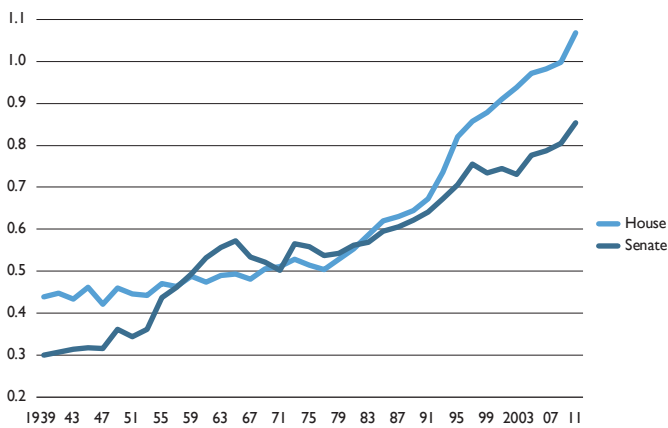
### NATIONAL PARTISANSHIP

The high level of concern by all respondents may also be related to the amount of partisan rhetoric in national politics. This was especially visible with the Republican presidential primaries and their media coverage. Another factor may have been the historic 2011 downgrade of the national credit rating by S&P. The downgrade was attributed in part to the level of partisanship in Washington, D.C. – or “political brinkmanship” – resulting in the inability of policymakers to substantively address the nation's fiscal issues.<sup>3</sup> The downgrade shows the real economic impacts of such levels of partisanship. Lastly, the increase in partisanship was displayed through widespread discontent embodied by the rise of the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements in the past several years. These movements seem to exhibit a desire a move away from the political center, and to the extent they succeed in influencing elections, the result could be greater partisan divides.

The level of partisanship has been increasing at the national level for several decades. Within political science, NOMINATE scores are used to assign ideology to members of Congress and Presidents.<sup>4</sup> The NOMINATE scaling method was developed by political scientists Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal in the early 1980s, and analyzes legislators' voting records to assign an ideology score. A score of -1.0 is the most liberal an elected official could be, and 1.0 is the most conservative. In addition, NOMINATE scores are also used to calculate polarization within Congress. An average NOMINATE score is calculated for each party, and polarization measures the difference between these two scores.

Figure 2 displays the growth in partisanship as the polarization between parties within the United States Congress. On the scale, 0 would represent no difference between the Republican and

**Figure 2: Party Polarization in the U.S. Congress, 1939-2011**



Source: Voteview.

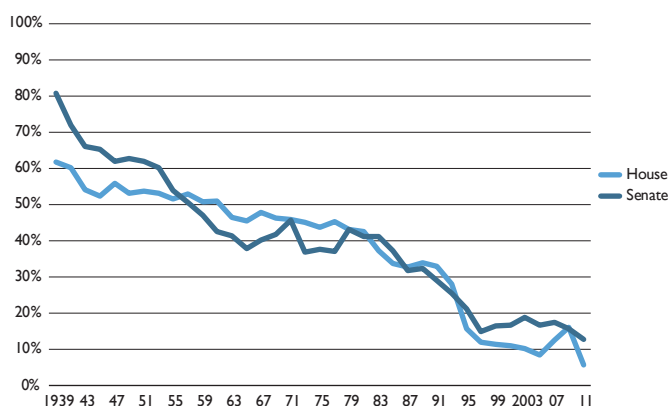
Note: Polarization measures the difference between the Republican and Democratic ideology scores.

Democratic parties, while 2.0 would represent a 100% difference. Beginning in 1939, partisanship nationally was at an all-time low. Thereafter partisanship began to grow, increasing dramatically since the late 1970s. The current Congress shows the highest historical level of partisanship since the end of Reconstruction.

There has also been a decrease in the number of moderates in the U.S. Congress. According to the NOMINATE scoring matrix, those with a score between -0.25 and 0.25 are considered moderate. Since 1939, there has been a slow and steady decline in the number of moderates in both houses of the U.S. Congress. In 2008, there was a slight increase in the percentage of moderates in the House of Representatives, but it once again decreased in the 2010 election to a historic low for both chambers. This represented a loss of about 45 moderates in the House and three in the Senate. This decline is also exemplified by the fact that 22 of the 46 “Blue Dogs” – or moderate Democrats – in Congress were voted out of office in 2010.<sup>5</sup>

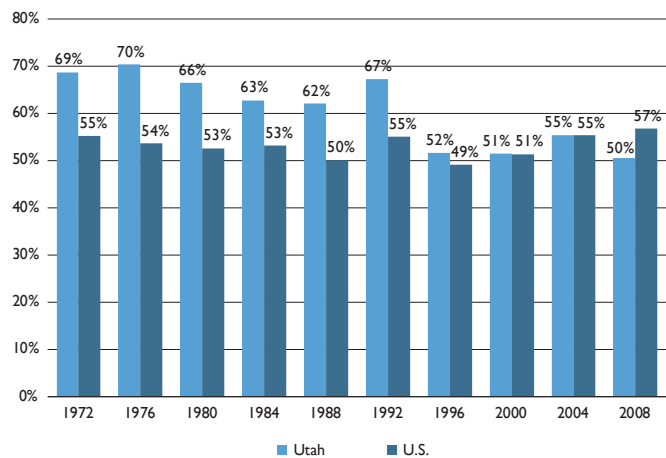
The percentage of Utah Priorities Survey respondents who identify themselves as moderate has also declined. In the 2004 and 2008 surveys, 37% of respondents identified themselves as moderate on political issues regardless of party. This declined to 33% in the 2010 survey and to 27% in the 2012 survey.

**Figure 3: Percentage of Moderates in the U.S. Congress, 1939-2011**



Source: Voteview.

**Figure 4: Major Election Turnout (Percent of Voting-Age Population)**



Source: George Mason University, United States Elections Project.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: VOTER TURNOUT

Utah historically had a higher voter turnout relative to the national average. However, as displayed in Figure 4, turnout in Utah has declined substantially over the past several decades.<sup>6</sup>

Utah's voter turnout increased from 69% in 1972 to 70% of the voting-age population in 1976. It then dropped steadily to 62% by 1988. While recovering to 67% in 1992, it dropped to 52% in 1996, remaining in the low- to mid-50% range until reaching a four-decade low of 50% in 2008. Utah voter turnout in 2008 also dropped below the national rate. Among the states and District of Columbia, this was the ninth-lowest voter turnout rate. While it has a higher turnout than other western states like California, Nevada, Arizona and Hawaii, it is below all other states in its region, and most of the other states in the country as well.

The United States has shown relatively consistent participation since 1972. During the 1970s and 1980s, the United States saw marginal declines from a high of 55% in 1972 to 50% in 1988. In 1992, the national turnout rate increase to the 1972 level during the presidential election in which incumbent President George H.W. Bush lost to Bill Clinton. This was also the first election since 1968 in which a third-party candidate – Ross Perot – garnered a significant portion of votes. The

turnout rate declined in 1996 to a four-decade low of 49% but has been steadily increasing over the past three election cycles to a four-decade high of 57% in 2008.

### THE CALCULUS OF VOTING: $R = P * B + L - C$

In 1957, Anthony Downs proposed a political science theory of voting that sought to create a mathematical formula for determining the likelihood that any given voter would participate in any given election.<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, the theory may also be useful in describing the potential effects of Utah's electoral process and electorate on voter turnout.

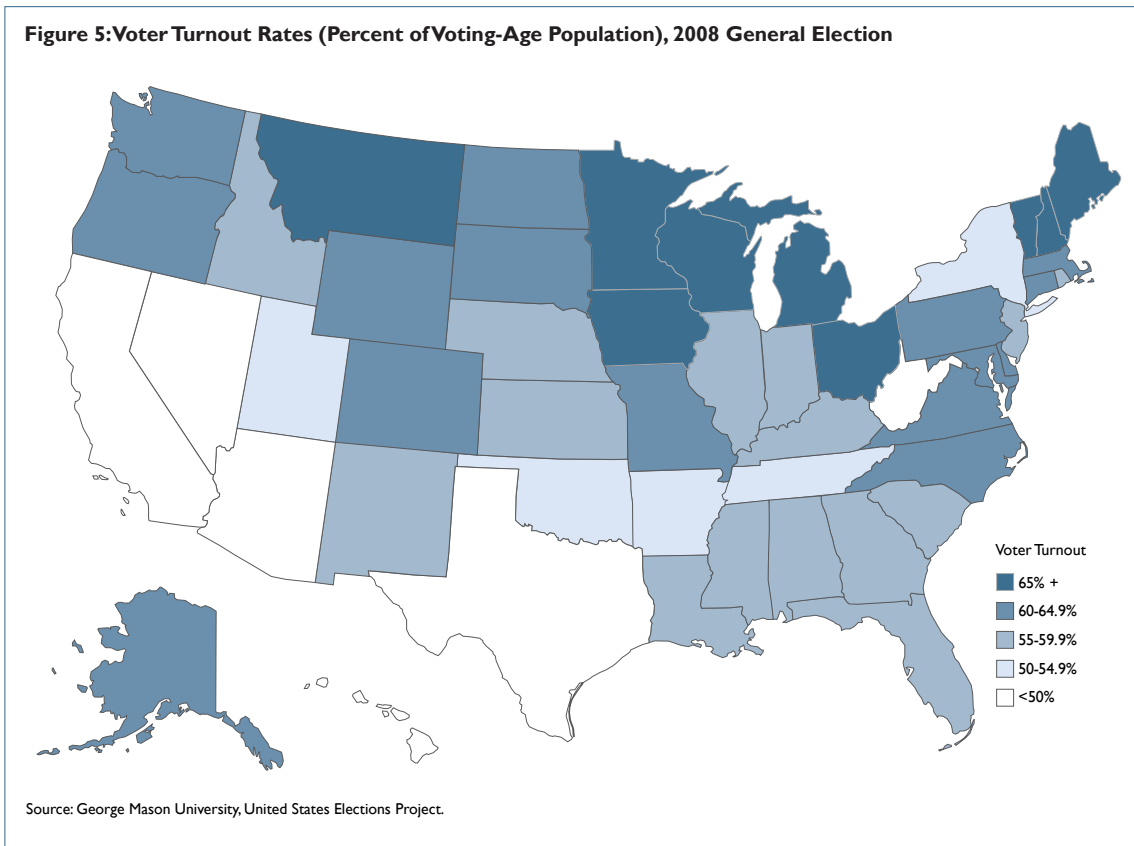
The formula states that a voter's participation (R) equals the voter's perception that their vote will make a difference (P), multiplied by the voter's perception of the closeness of the race (B), plus the voter's sense of duty or gratification from voting (L), minus the voter's perceived cost to voting (C). In other words, if the costs of voting exceed all other attributes of the equation, a voter will not participate in a given election. While researchers have made attempts to model the formula with varying results, it is used in this analysis only as an abstract concept upon which to base discussion.

### VOTER PERCEPTIONS AND CLOSE RACES (P\*B)

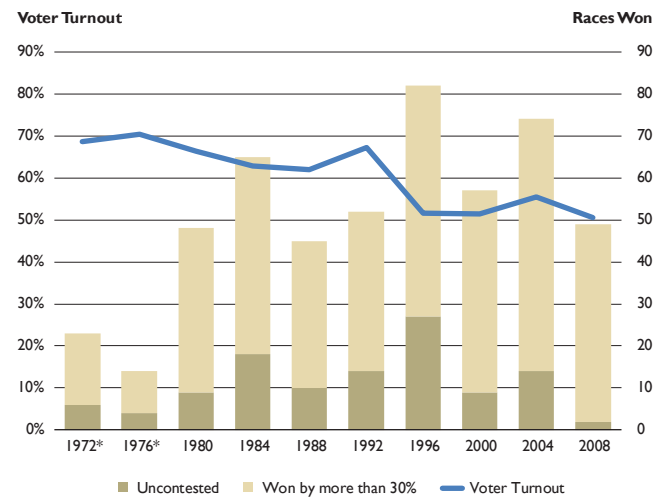
Whether a person perceives that their vote will make a difference is quite subjective, especially since cases in which a candidate wins by one or two votes are extremely rare. In this research, we analyzed the number of legislative, executive and congressional races in Utah from 1976 to 2010 that were either uncontested or were won by a large margin (30% or more).

As shown in Figure 6, Utah's voter turnout was high in the 1970s, when more political races seemed competitive. As more of these races

**Figure 5: Voter Turnout Rates (Percent of Voting-Age Population), 2008 General Election**



**Figure 6 : Uncompetitive Races and Voter Turnout in Utah**



Sources: George Mason University, United States Elections Project; Utah Lt. Governors Office. Calculations of margins of victory by Utah Foundation.

\*1972 and 1976 have incomplete elections data.

became uncontested or were won by very large margins of victory, the trend in voter turnout was falling. The level of uncompetitive races reached a peak in 1996, which also coincided with the largest drop in voter turnout during this period. Since 1996, voter turnout has leveled, while the number of uncompetitive races is not following a discernible trend.

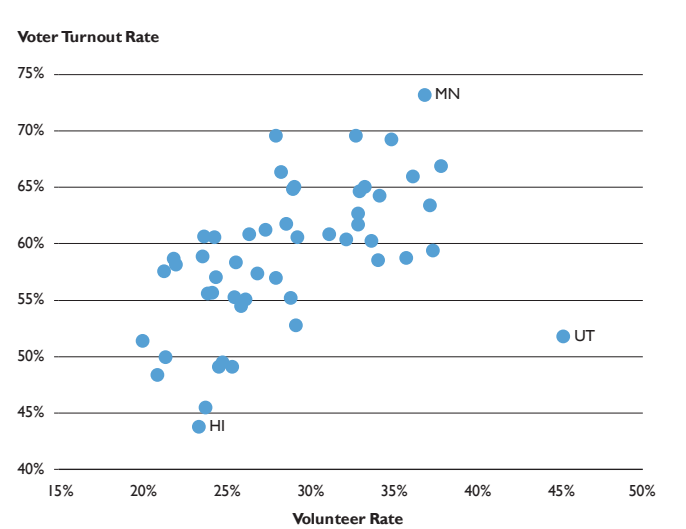
The exception to this pattern resulted in 2004 and 2008. In 2004, there was an increase in turnout with a large number of uncompetitive races. This may be an after effect of the 2000 Presidential election, which instilled a larger significance of each individuals' vote as images of election workers analyzing individual ballots and hanging chads were still fresh in voters' minds. In addition, the 2004 Presidential election was a war-time election which was hotly contested between President George W. Bush and Senator John Kerry. Finally, there was an open gubernatorial seat within Utah after a controversial Republican Party Convention in which incumbent Governor Olene Walker was unseated. In 2008, turnout decreased, but so did the number of uncompetitive races.

**GRATIFICATION AND DUTY (L)**

The amount of gratification and duty a voter receives or feels from the act of voting is also subjective. Gratification and duty are extremely difficult to measure, especially when applied to voter turnout. However, political science and behavioral research has shown that there is little distinction between volunteering and political participation.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, volunteerism provides a similar though equally subjective measure of gratification, and may also provide a baseline to understand how Utahns view civic duty.

From 2008-2010, Utah ranked as the top state for residents who volunteer and total hours volunteered. During this time, Utahns gave 177.1 million service hours to their communities.<sup>9</sup> Figure 7 shows the relationship between volunteerism and voter turnout for all states. The data shows a positive relationship, as states with higher rates of volunteerism also have higher voter turnout rates. Minnesota tops the list for voting rates and is also quite high in volunteerism. Hawaii,

**Figure 7: State Voter Turnout and Volunteer Rates in 2008**



Sources: Corporation for National And Community; George Mason University, United States Elections Project.

on the other hand, is at the bottom for voting and near bottom for volunteering. However, Utah's very high level of volunteerism does not translate to high voter turnout.<sup>10</sup>

Utah's high volunteer ranking is due in part to the fact that 63.8% of Utah's service hours were connected to a religious location. The prominence of volunteering through church "callings," church-organized service activities, and mentoring through youth programs by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints gives a significant boost to Utah's volunteer hours; nationally, the average proportion of volunteer hours connected to a religious location was 35%.

Utah's high rate of volunteering and its connection to a religious institution may indicate that religious affiliation promotes civic engagement and perhaps should encourage political engagement as well. Anecdotally, this has been seen, such as when members of the LDS Church were specifically encouraged to participate in the 2012 caucus meetings, which resulted in record attendance. Other factors were also involved in the increase in 2012 caucus attendance, including strong efforts to increase attendance by the Utah Republican Party and Senator Orrin Hatch's campaign, but the LDS Church effort certainly helped, as evidenced by a significant increase in the proportion of LDS-affiliated Republican delegates.<sup>11</sup>

**THE COST OF VOTING (C)**

The cost of voting is measured primarily by the amount of time it takes to register, prepare to vote (such as learning about candidates), and to vote. Utah voters' costs include these, but may also include becoming informed about the caucus-convention system and rules, party caucus dates, primary dates, and other voting rules. Each of these costs is significant, as research shows that a person's propensity to vote is directly related to the costs involved. There is a significant amount of research that supports the claim that higher costs deter voters. People vote more often when registration is easier, when more alternatives such as early voting or absentee voting are available, when

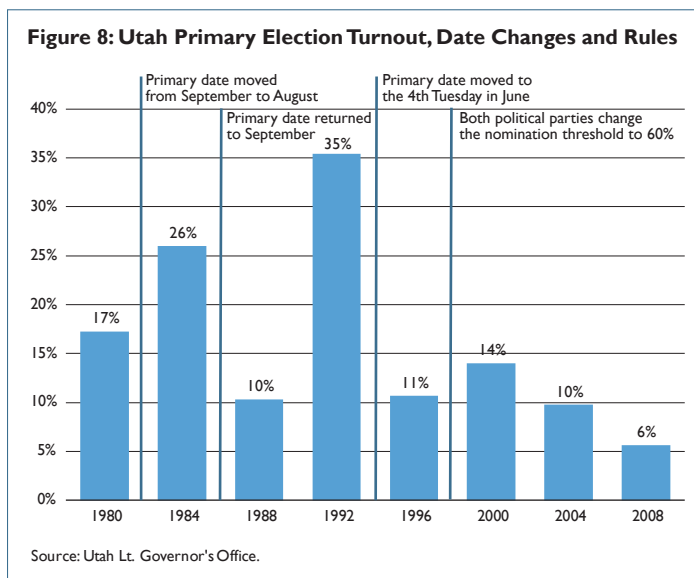


technology improvements lower barriers, and even when polls are closer to one's residence.<sup>12</sup>

The Utah caucus-convention system has had evolving practices and rules since it was re-established by the state legislature in 1947. The initial rules required that a candidate receive 80% of state party delegate votes in order to avoid a primary election. This threshold was lowered to 70% in 1969 by state law and then to 60% by the Democratic Party in 1996, followed by the Republican Party in 1999.<sup>13</sup>

Utah primary election dates have changed three times since 1965. This can affect turnout as costs to a voter are often associated not just with time, but in identifying when and where to vote. In 1983 the primary election date was moved from September to August, and then subsequently changed back to September in 1987. In 1993, the primary was moved to the fourth Tuesday of June, where it has remained. As shown in Figure 8, there seems to be no strong relationship between the first two primary date changes and voter turnout. However, the June primaries have been associated with low levels of turnout. This may be because they are five months before the general November elections and voters are not yet thinking about candidates or politics. In addition, one of the arguments for moving the primary earlier in the year was so that Utah could participate in the Western States Primary for presidential elections. However, this primary is comparatively late in the year compared to other states' presidential primaries and caucuses, and presidential candidates have usually been decided upon by this time, giving little incentive for voters to participate in Utah.<sup>14</sup>

Utah's voting rules and access to information may increase voting costs, also potentially affecting a voter's choice to participate in a given election. Political scientists have found that states with less restrictive voting rules have higher voter turnout rates.<sup>15</sup> For example, states that allow Election Day voter registration such as Maine, Idaho, Iowa, Montana, New Hampshire, Wisconsin and Wyoming, all have higher levels of voter turnout than Utah.<sup>16</sup> Utah requires voter registration forms be postmarked 30 days prior to an election, or to be completed in-person with a county clerk or online 15 days prior. Registering online requires a valid Utah driver's license or state identification number, but those without such identification may register by mail with their Social Security number.



Requiring a driver's license can impose a cost on voting, adding an additional barrier to those who have had their licenses revoked, or do not have a license for other reasons. Utah poll workers routinely ask to see a voter's driver's license, but state law allows alternative documentation to show that the voter lives in that precinct.

Utah's closed Republican primary presents yet another restriction to voter turnout, as it limits the participation of independent voters and Democrats. The caucus-convention system also adds another complication, requiring voters not just to understand an additional layer of the electoral process, but to be aware of changing caucus and convention dates and locations.

## CONCLUSION

The level of party polarization and partisan politics has risen to historic levels, and has become a top concern for Utah voters. However, the intensity of this partisanship in Utah may have peaked in 2010, as exemplified by the ousting of then Senator Bennett in the Republican convention by conservative forces, including the Tea Party. Recent opinion polls show that support for the Tea Party is waning, even among Republicans and Republican state delegates in Utah. The percentage of Republican and Democratic state delegates who identified as moderate also increased from 2010 to 2012.<sup>17</sup> However, in the overall voting population, those who identify as moderate declined in 2012.<sup>18</sup> Whether this trend continues is yet to be seen, but it will be interesting to see whether it has an effect on Utahns' perceptions of partisan politics and on their voter turnout rates as well.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Allen I. Abramowitz and Kyle L. Saunders, "Is Polarization a Myth?" *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 70, No. 2, April 2008, pp. 542-555.
- 2 Utah Foundation Report 706, "The 2012 Utah Priorities Survey: The Top Issues and Concerns of Utah Voters for the 2012 Election," March 2012.
- 3 Standard and Poors, "United States of America Long-Term Rating Lowered To 'AA+' Due To Political Risks, Rising Debt Burden; Outlook Negative," August 2011. Available at: <http://www.standardandpoors.com/ratings/articles/en/us/?assetID=1245316529563>
- 4 Nolan McCarthy, Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, [www.voteview.com](http://www.voteview.com)
- 5 Huffington Post "Blue Dog Coalition Crushed by GOP wave," November 3, 2010. Available at: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/11/03/blue-dog-coalition-gop-wave-elections\\_n\\_778087.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/11/03/blue-dog-coalition-gop-wave-elections_n_778087.html)
- 6 Analysis began in 1972 due to events during the 1960's and the 26th amendment, both of which changed the demographic landscape of America politics with an influx of voters and problematic state level election data for Utah prior to 1972.
- 7 Downs, Anthony "An Economic Theory of Democracy" New York, Harper & Row, 1957.
- 8 Gray, M., Ondaatje, E., Fricker, R., Geschwind, S., Goldman, C., Kaganoff, T., Robyn, A., Sundt, M., Vogelgesang, L., & Klein, S. "Combining service and learning in higher education: Evaluation of the Learn and Serve America, Higher Education Program." Santa Monica, CA: Rand Education, 1999.
- 9 Corporation for National and Community Service, "Volunteering in America Research Highlights," Available at: <http://www.volunteeringinamerica.gov/UT>
- 10 Statistical analysis shows that there is a significant correlation between volunteerism and voter turnout ( $R\text{-squared} = 0.27$ ), and this relationship is made stronger when Utah, the major outlier, is removed from the equation ( $R\text{-squared} = 0.44$ ).

11 Utah Foundation Report 708, “2012 Utah Priorities Survey of Party Delegates and Voters,” April 2012. p. 9.

12 People vote more often when registration is easier (Rosenstone & Wolfinger 1978, Wolfinger & Rosenstone 1980, Squire et al 1987), when more alternatives such as early voting or absentee voting are available (Stein and Vonnahme 2008, Stein 1998), when technology improvements lower barriers (Allers and Kooreman 2009), and even when polls are closer to one’s residence (Haspel and Knotts 2005, Brady and McNulty 2011).

13 Utah Foundation Report 704 “Nominating Candidates, The Politics and Process of Utah’s Unique Convention and Primary System,” November 2011.

14 Deseret News, “Measure Would Change Primary Election to June,” February 25th, 1993.

15 Powell, Bingham. “American Voter Turnout in Comparative Perspective” American Political Science Review, Vol. 80, No. 1, Mar., 1986.

16 George Mason University – United States Elections Project “2008 Presidential Nomination Contest Turnout Rates.” Available at: [http://elections.gmu.edu/voter\\_turnout.htm](http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm)

17 Utah Foundation Report 708, “2012 Utah Priorities Survey of Party Delegates and Voters,” April 2012.

18 Utah Foundation Report 706, “The 2012 Utah Priorities Survey: The Top Issues and Concerns of Utah Voters for the 2012 Election,” March 2012.

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