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A Qualitative Study of County Political Party Response to the Top-two Primary in Washington State

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Walden University

College of Health Sciences and Public Policy

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Lori L. Larsen

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

A Qualitative Study of County Political Party Response to the Top-two Primary in

Washington State

by

Lori L. Larsen

MA, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1999

BS, Creighton University, 1994

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Public Administration

Walden University

March 2024

Abstract

The top-two primary election system, used on a limited basis in the United States, allows all voters (regardless of party preference) to vote for any candidate on the ballot for the primary election; the top-two vote earners advance to the general election, regardless of candidate party preference. Two candidates with the same party preference may advance. Additionally, political parties have no formal ability to affirm or disavow a candidate's party preference. The effects of this system include uncertainty among county political parties and voters. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand Washington State county political party response to the top-two primary system. Using a policy feedback theory framework, this multiple case study included interviews and content analysis to assess and describe Washington's county-level political party response to the top-two primary. Transitional coding and second round coding resulted in useful process codes that, when applied to participant counties and the documents available for content analysis, illuminated three types of counties: facilitators, recruiters, and enforcers. Researchers, policymakers, and voters all have an interest in the question explored by this study. Clarity and accessibility of voting processes are at the heart of the United States system of representative democracy. The positive social change influence of this study includes informing future public policy development surrounding elections processes, thus ensuring access, transparency, and clarity to all individuals involved in voting in the United States.

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Dedication

I first dedicate this dissertation to my greatest sources of inspiration and pride — my five beloved children, Michael, Rachael, Emma, Nathan, and Zachary. May the flame of curiosity and the pursuit of knowledge continue to illuminate your paths as you grow in your own rights as lifelong learners. I also dedicate this dissertation to the remarkable partners who stand beside each of my children—Andras, Bruce, Harrison, Alexis, and Kenzie--your encouragement and support in their academic and professional pursuits have not gone unnoticed. Thank you for supporting them. I cannot wait to see how you each bring positive change to this world.

Most importantly, this dissertation is dedicated to my dearest husband, Paul. Your steadfast support throughout these many years on my doctoral journey has been nothing short of extraordinary. Your unwavering belief in my abilities, your patience during the challenging moments, and your shared passion for learning have been the pillars that sustained me. It is my privilege to join you under the moniker *doctor*, a title that signifies not only academic achievement but the collaborative spirit that has always defined our journey together.

In dedicating this work to all of you, I express my deepest gratitude for the joy you bring to my life. Thank you for being the driving force behind my aspirations. May this dissertation stand as a small token of my love and appreciation.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The top-two primary is a relatively new election system currently used in only four U.S. states: Washington, California, and, on a limited basis in Nebraska (Jackson, 2012; Ballotpedia, n.d.-c). This system allows all voters, regardless of party preference, to vote for their candidate among all candidates on a primary election ballot. The top-two vote earners in each race advance to the general election, regardless of their party affiliation. The result of this top-two advancement is that in some jurisdictions, two Republicans or two Democrats may be featured on the general election ballot. Proponents of the top-two primary system assert that it brings a corrective balance to the tension among three competing interests in the American electoral system: voters, candidates, and political parties (Open Primaries, n.d.). Proponents have also asserted that the top-two primary system results in more moderately aligned elected officials and less party polarization (Alvarez & Sinclair, 2015).

Although there is extensive and varied literature on elections in general, the body of research on the top-two primary is relatively sparse. For example, Dancey and Sheagley (2013) studied the heuristic value of political party labels for voters. Neiheisel and Niebler (2013) researched the strategic value of political party identification for candidates. There is research suggesting that the type of primary has an impact on voter turnout as well as on the ideologies expressed by candidates once in office (Calcagno & Westley, 2008; Levendusky, 2010). There is also research suggesting that, under the top-two primary system, political parties have less control over candidate party identification going into the primary, and thus, parties may be incentivized to discourage some

candidates from running under this system to avoid diluting the vote (Beck & Henrickson, 2013).

Despite this varied research, no literature was found that provided a perspective on how political parties respond to the top-two primary, leaving the public policy development process in a disadvantaged state. Literature is lacking on whether or how the top-two primary has an impact on party strategy or engagement with candidates or voters. There has been increasing recent interest in adopting the top-two primary by members of Congress and several states' legislators and initiative writers. Thus, the system may be on the rise (Ballotpedia, n.d.-d).

The subsequent sections of this chapter include a review of the background of the study, a statement of the problem and the purpose of the study. Additionally, I will review key features of the study, including theoretical foundation. Finally, assumptions limitations, and considerations of the significance of this inquiry are also included in this chapter.

Background of the Study

As a highly unique form of primary election, a working understanding of the differences of this system—as compared to other primary election systems—is key to understanding the nuances and background of this study. First, I present the context in which the top-two primary operates. Next, I discuss the sampling and summary of a selection of journal articles that informed the conception of this study. More on the context of the top-two primary and the relevant literature is found in Chapter 2.

Context

There are several forms of primary election system in the United States. In their study of how the form of primary election system impacts voter turnout, Calcagno and Westley (2008) provided a concise run-down of the types and features of primary systems in the United States. Open primary systems are those in which all registered voters may vote for any candidate, and the candidate with the most votes in each party advances to the general election (Calcagno & Westley, 2008). Fifteen U.S. states hold open primaries (National Conference of State Legislatures, n.d.). Closed primary systems are those in which only voters registered as members of the party may vote for candidates running in that party (Calcagno & Westley, 2008). Nine U.S. states hold closed primaries (National Conference of State Legislatures, n.d.). Twenty-one states fall somewhere between open and closed primaries, with considerable state-level variability. Yet all advance one candidate (the highest vote earner) per political party to the general election (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2011).

Top-two primaries are held in just four U.S. states: Washington, California, and for a limited number of races, in Nebraska. In top-two primary states, all filed candidates (candidates who have officially registered with their county auditor or clerk or local equivalent) to appear on the ballot are listed on ballots accessible to all registered voters, and the top-two vote earners progress to the general election, regardless of party affiliation (National Conference of State Legislatures, n.d.). In some jurisdictions, this results in two Republicans or two Democrats advancing to the general election. In an interesting observation, Zhang (n.d.) noted that a top-two primary “converts a traditional

primary into a general election, and a traditional general election into a runoff election” (p. 617).

Approach

This topic can be addressed from three angles. One angle of inquiry is the impact of the top-two primary on voters in terms of both turnout and voting behaviors. Based on literature about the heuristics used by voters to make decisions on their ballots, it is possible that a particular top-two primary result (i.e., two Republicans or two Democrats advancing to the general election ballot) might disrupt the mental short-cut voters use to choose whom to vote for (Dancey & Sheagley, 2013; Levendusky, 2010). Additionally, there is research that suggests that the type of primary, as well as the degree of difference between candidates, have an impact on voter turnout (Calcagno & Westley, 2008; Hortala-Vallve & Esteve-Volart, 2011).

Another angle of inquiry is the impact on candidates. Research about candidates’ use of political party labels when advantageous to a campaign (McGhee et al., 2014; Neiheisel & Niebler, 2013), coupled with the statistics that certain jurisdictions are consistent in supporting one party’s candidates over the other raise a concern about candidate motivation. In a top-two primary environment, it is possible that a candidate might align with a party in order to win, and not necessarily because the candidate embraces the values, positions or ideologies of that party.

A third angle of inquiry is the impact on political parties. In the top-two primary, political parties have lost the straightforward ability to limit who bears the party name. Pre-primary candidate vetting and party endorsement processes are party responses to the

top-two primary. Research suggests that political parties are incentivized to discourage excess candidates from running (Beck & Henrickson, 2013) and that the minority party officials elected under the top-two primary tend to be more centrally aligned (Alvarez & Sinclair, 2012). This may or may not please the political parties. There may be other ways political parties are working to maintain their influence over election outcomes or at least candidates. Of these three approaches, I focused on the political parties at the county level in Washington State.

Resources

In reviewing the background for this inquiry, I used several studies from the literature for the context of this study. Alvarez and Sinclair (2012) build on the understanding that a variety of legislative institutions “constrain the space of possible outcomes” of legislative activity, meaning that the institutional context in which a legislative body operates sets boundaries and parameters around the laws that will actually be passed (p. 544). Alvarez and Sinclair studied the nonpartisan blanket primary (known in the present study as the top-two primary) and reviewed for potential impacts of that electoral institution on legislative behavior. They found that first-year legislators are more likely to agree with other legislators in their party if elected under the top-two primary.

Following their first study of how the institution of the top-two primary impacts legislative behavior, Alvarez and Sinclair (2013) turned their attention to so-called decline to state (DTS) voters, those who choose not to declare a party preference in order to vote a primary election ballot. Prior to the establishment of the top-two primary in

California, these unaffiliated voters were not permitted to vote in the primary. At the outset, they caution against assuming DTS voters are a uniform group of independents and essentially nonpartisan, and their study bears this out. Only a third of DTS voters able to vote in the top-two primary identified as independents, while the other two-thirds acknowledged they lean Democrat or Republican, sometimes (10% for Democrats and 5% for Republicans) strongly so.

Beck and Henrickson (2013) reviewed the legislative primaries for 2004, 2006, 2008, and 2010, with a view for the number of candidates in each primary. The top-two primary was first used in 2008. Their results were mixed, with the observation that the top-two primary system was affiliated with fewer Democrats per primary, while there was no change to the number of Republicans.

Hortala-Vallve and Esteve-Volart (2011), like many others, focused their investigation on voter turnout. They focused on the policy differences between candidates and the impact those differences might have on turnout. Although their study does not directly address the top-two primary, their conclusion that the more that voters perceive policy differences between candidates, the more likely a voter is to vote. Conversely, when candidates are perceived as having highly similar policies, voter turnout is decreased. Their study's relevance to the present one hinges on the premise held by top-two primary advocates that this election system incentivizes more moderate candidates into the field, rewards them with public office, and results in more moderate politicians.

McGhee et al. (2014), addressing nominating systems and legislator ideology, reviewed whether differences in primary system in a state is predictive of the degree of

polarization of its legislators. They found that polarization is essentially the same across all systems. The type of primary system does not seem to follow a pattern and that primary election systems “have little consistent effect on legislator ideology” (McGhee et al., 2014, p. 347).

Calcagno and Westley (2008) conducted their study before the adoption of the top-two primary in California and Washington but focused on how the primary type influences voter turnout. Calcagno and Westley (2008) noted that the literature they drew upon suggests that “voter turnout will be greater in the general election when the state has a more open primary” (p. 97). The top-two primary is more open even than the open primary of before, as it allows the top-two vote earners, regardless of party, to advance to the general election. In this study of gubernatorial races, they conclude that indeed a more open primary leads to greater general election turnout.

Dancey and Sheagley (2013) opened their article with a discussion of the importance of candidate party affiliation as a shortcut or heuristic for voters. For the present study, this article is beneficial because under a top-two primary in Washington State, candidates choose their own party affiliation without approval or endorsement from the party. Dancey and Sheagley determined that heuristics such as party affiliation are useful when correct but may be destructive or detrimental if they do not convey accurate information.

Proponents of the top-two primary state that this primary system will result in more moderate elected officials. McGhee and Shor (2017) concluded that the moderating effect is modest and inconsistent, and they point out that concurrent with the policy

change was a legislative redistricting in Washington State. They determined that the top-two has mixed results when it comes to mitigating political polarization.

Although there has been a fair amount of research that is topically relevant to the top-two primary, there remains a noteworthy gap in knowledge surrounding the response of political party organizations to this system. As political parties are an historic and current influence on all aspects of elections, I conducted this study to address this gap.

Problem Statement

The problem I examined is that the top-two primary has created uncertainty and confusion among county political parties. Currently, political parties have no uniform method of identifying their chosen candidates nor a way to consistently share that information with the voting public. In some jurisdictions in Washington State, some primary races are effectively races between several Democrats or multiple Republicans, without the opposite party represented on the ballot (B. Galarza, personal communication, October 19, 2019). One county party with which I am familiar attempted to clarify its choice for voters through vetting surveys and interviews grounded in the grassroots-adopted party platform and a rigorous endorsement process, but prior to this study it was unknown whether this was a unique response or whether other county party organizations have developed their own responses. There has not been a systematic or scientific documentation of county party response to the top-two primary, creating a vacuum of knowledge with implications for future public policy development as well as the research surrounding electoral systems. Well-intentioned but poorly informed legislation does not serve the goals of free and fair elections.

The Washington State Republican Party, the Washington State Democratic Party, and the state Libertarian Party were co-plaintiffs in the case *Washington State Grange v. Washington State Republican Party*, opposing the top-two primary at its inception (*Washington State Grange v. Washington State Republican Party*, 552 U.S. 442, 2008). The plaintiffs lost, with the Supreme Court upholding the top-two system, and for political parties in Washington, the historical ability to choose which candidates bear the party's name was stripped away. Although the top-two primary has been in effect for fifteen years, the scholarly literature is silent on how or whether political parties have found a workaround for the perceived hit to their First Amendment rights of association. This study contributes to the body of knowledge needed to address this problem by documenting, summarizing, and evaluating county political party response to the top-two primary in Washington State.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gather the perspectives of political party leadership in order to explore and understand Washington State county political party response to the top-two primary election system. Accessibility and equality in elections are of central social importance in any representative democracy. Political parties and voters have the right to full and unimpeded participation in the elections system. Candidates have the right to choose their own party identification. By their nature, political parties are associations protected by the First Amendment in the United States Bill of Rights (U.S. Const., amend I, n.d.). Opponents of the top-two primary cite infringement on this right of association, and this study considered whether and how

political parties may be responding to their decreased ability to determine who bears the party name. The results of this study may be used by all those involved in the public policy development process, determining whether participants view this system as better, worse, or neutral compared to other primary election systems, thus leading to positive social—and societal—change.

Research Question

The central research question of this study was: What has been the response by county-level political party leadership in Washington State to the top-two primary?

Theoretical Foundation

Policy feedback theory conceives of public policy development in the complex context of already existing public policy, evolving as a result of interaction with multiple streams, in turn influencing future policy innovations or decisions (Mettler & SoRelle, 2014). Public policy at Time A may influence the meaning of citizenship (such as voter turnout and voter behavior), the form of governance (the behavior of candidates and elected officials), the power of groups (such as political parties), and the definition of policy problems or political agendas (expansion or elimination of the top-two primary into other jurisdictions), all of which interact to impact public policy decisions or innovations at Time B (Mettler & SoRelle, 2014). By evaluating one of these streams, that of the power of groups—namely county political parties—this policy can be evaluated at Time A to influence public policy development towards Time B (Mettler & SoRelle, 2014). Policy feedback theory has its roots in earlier research, adding depth and dimension to the widely recognized phenomenon in which “policy, once enacted,

restructures subsequent political processes” (Skocpol, 1991, p. 58). Additional attention to policy feedback theory is given in Chapter 2.

I addressed both policy and political party response to policy; as a result, it was important to identify a theoretical framework that could account for both the political nature and the policy nature of the questions being raised. I chose policy feedback theory, as articulated by Mettler and SoRelle (2014), because this theory, above other considered theoretical frameworks, acknowledges the status of political organizations within the policy development process.

Policy feedback theory was also selected because it is in its relatively early developmental stages. In their recommendations for future research, Mettler and SoRelle (2014) stated, “Policy Feedback Theory is indispensable for scholars trying to understand how policies, once developed, reshape politics” (p. 175). In this study, I stretched the application of the theory beyond its previous status to new concepts. Additionally, given the scarcity of qualitative studies using policy feedback theory as a framework, I also expanded the application methodologically.

Washington State, the focus of this study, has been characterized as having “many elements of populism, political independence, and indeed, overt anti-partyism” (Appleton & Grosse, 2004, p. 28). Additionally, the framers of the Washington State Constitution, like other states joining the union in the Progressive Era, were “strong advocates of popular sovereignty and more direct forms of democracy” (Cornell & Meyer, 2004, p. 96). These characteristics resonate with the tenets of policy feedback theory that suggests that political climate influences policy, which in turn influences political climate, thusly

influencing policy. Washington's current top-two primary is an understandable outgrowth of the state's beginnings and history, another reason policy feedback theory was an appropriate option.

Attributing early work in this area to Schattschneider (1935), Mettler and SoRelle (2014) quoted him as saying, "new policies create new politics" (p. 152). Lowi (1972) is also credited with pioneering work in this area. Mettler and SoRelle (2014) stated that most studies have been single-policy case studies, and the focus seems to be on either policy disbursement beneficiaries or the dispersing agencies. As a result, the degree to which the current study fits within the previous body of policy feedback theory's historical application was somewhat limited. I expanded that applicability.

Within policy feedback theory, two types of effects are identified: resource effects and interpretive effects. Mettler and SoRelle (2014) described resource effects as those effects that are attributable to a group receiving some monetary or resource benefit. Resources are tangible and quantifiable. Resource effects are not particularly relevant to the present study, as there are no beneficiaries of concrete resources (as in the case of welfare or public housing). Interpretive effects, however, are at play.

According to Mettler and SoRelle, interpretive effects "may be fostered...through features of policy design and implementation...these may convey messages to people about government or their relationship to it...[which] may shape people's subsequent participation" (2014, p. 168). In the top-two primary, voters are not required to state a party affiliation at the time of registration, nor are candidates chosen by a political party. The top-two policy is less concrete than Social Security, business-sector dominance, or

even suffrage. It is about voters and candidates not having to be locked into a party affiliation, a long-standing value held in the political culture in Washington State.

Nature of the Study

I used a qualitative multiple case-study approach, using standard open-ended interviews as well as available documents to determine and define the response by county-level political party leadership in Washington State to the top-two primary system. Given the newness of the system and the need to define party experience from the ground up, a qualitative approach was best suited. There are 39 counties in Washington State, each with a statutorily defined *central committee* for each major political party, Republican and Democratic, and defined leadership roles in each committee. The top-two primary system is a real-life, contemporary phenomenon that formal groups (county political central committees) have had to contend with; as a result, a multiple case study approach was the approach best suited. According to Creswell (2013), a case study is a “qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system...through detailed, in-depth data collections” (p. 97). The current top-two primary system and the impact on how a subset of the 39 Washington counties are reacting to this system was certainly appropriate for a case-study approach.

I also considered a phenomenological approach but rejected it in favor of the multiple case-study approach for the central reason that the research questions focus not just on the shared, lived experiences of political party leadership but also on more concrete outgrowths of their experiences, such as strategies, rubrics, policies, etc.

developed in response to the top-two primary. A multiple case-study approach incorporates both types of data to benefit the larger body of scientific literature on the subject. Themes were drawn from participants' thoughts, reactions, answers, and contributions.

Definitions

County political party: Roughly synonymous with *county central committee* defined under Washington State statute RCW 29A.80 (Political Parties, 1973). Under statute, elected precinct committee officers constitute the central committee. The RCW does acknowledge that party organizations may adopt rules governing the organization, which may include expanding party membership to additional appointed and/or dues-paying individuals who are not elected precinct committee officers. This expanded participation was assumed in this study. Not included in this definition are voting members of the general public who identify with a particular political party; formal engagement with a defined party organization was required (Political Parties, 1973; *Stevens County Republican Central Committee 2021-2022 Bylaws*, 2021).

Primary election: An election held prior to a general election where candidates are winnowed down to two candidates that will appear on the general election ballot (McDonald, 2014).

Top-two primary election: Also known as the *nonpartisan blanket primary*, an election using a common ballot, listing all candidates on the ballot, resulting in the top-two vote-getters advancing to the general election, regardless of candidate party identification (National Conference of State Legislatures, n.d.).

Assumptions

I made a few assumptions in this study. Some of my assumptions were developed as a result of my own historical experience both as a voter in Washington State, as a political party member, and as an election official.

My first assumption was that with political parties, the qualifications, expectations, and values of a party and its preferred candidate are fairly homogenous, party organization to party organization. I assumed that what makes a candidate running as a Democrat a favored, viable candidate in one county is substantially similar to that which is favored and valued in another county. There may be some minor differences, but the similarities are assumed to outweigh the differences.

My second assumption was that electing candidates who espouse the values of the party with which they say they identify is a crucial motivator for political party organizations. An example found in one county lists as the first item in the purpose section of their bylaws “to elect Republicans to public office” (*Stevens County Republican Central Committee 2021-2022 Bylaws, 2021, Article 2.1*). I assumed that this is a consistent priority across different party organizations.

My third assumption pertained to the length of time that the top-two primary has been in place. I assumed that it has been in effect long enough to evaluate political party response. Specifically, I assumed that party organizations have had the chance to consider its ramifications, develop a response, and perhaps even evaluate and adjust that response based on several election cycles worth of information.

Scope and Delimitations

The research question focusing on political party response was broad. Because there is no literature on this specific topic, I purposefully chose a broadly stated research question. In this case, any response identified by participants was considered relevant.

The populations impacted by the top-two primary include anyone living within a jurisdiction using the top-two primary and anyone living within a location considering this election reform. For this study, it was not feasible to include participants who might live in a jurisdiction actively considering the top-two primary, but that would be a worthy group for consideration in a future study. Transferability may also apply to other election reform efforts, such as ranked choice voting—also not taken up in this study.

Limitations

Access to and rapport with participants was not an issue, as I have established bona fides within the Republican community. Particular care was taken to ensure proper separation of roles between researcher and elections official, given that I am the Republican elected county auditor in my county. Acknowledging potential bias, both explicitly with participants and within the collection and evaluation of participant responses, required special attention. One anticipated challenge was gaining the full participation of the number of participants targeted. Political party leaders are predominantly unpaid volunteers; persuading them to participate, given the demands on their time or interest in the study, was somewhat problematic. While the desired number of participants was ultimately received, there was no excess of volunteer participants.

The primary limitation of this multiple case study approach is that of the 39 Washington counties, only a handful were selected for participation in the study. Whereas all 39 county party organizations were approached, a limited number of volunteering respondents were selected. A target group of five to eight participant organizations constituted the cases considered. A second limitation of this study was that only Republican organizations were approached. This, of course, leaves a well-defined area for future research, namely other political organizations. A third limitation of this study is that only Washington—to the exclusion of other states utilizing the top-two primary—was considered. These limitations are limiting factors but should not be construed as weaknesses, as the limits were placed intentionally for reasons of feasibility, transparency, and in recognition of potential bias on both the part of myself as the researcher and participants.

Significance

In pursuit of positive social change, this study was significant for two distinct reasons. There are both immediate, proximate concerns that may have very real local impacts, and then there are more distant, large-scale possible impacts on public policy development outside of Washington. For the immediate, this study evaluated whether county-level political parties have developed reasoned, philosophical criteria by which they vet and endorse candidates or whether party response is more about popularity, connections, or other considerations. In this way, the study is significant because it tells the story of what is happening in select Washington counties at present.

Additionally, by filling a significant gap in the literature on the top-two primary in general, the impacts of this study may reach far beyond the borders of Washington. The current use of this system in just four states is an example of what Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis once called the states acting as laboratories of democracy of public policy development (*New State Ice Co. v. Liebmann*, 1932). In the 2023 “Alternative Voting Methods in the United States” report published by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (U.S. Election Assistance Commission, 2023), more than 20 states have seen legislation introduced related to the top-two primary, including Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Florida, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, Texas, Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. Alaska used the top-four primary variation in its 2022 election cycle (Anderson et al., 2023). It remains essential that the laboratory of the top-two primary publish its findings so policymakers, voters, parties, and candidates can more fairly and rationally decide whether this system is worth replicating elsewhere.

Summary and Transition

The top-two primary, a relatively new innovation in elections in the United States, presents a number of issues worthy of study. Given the ongoing and evolutionary nature of public policy surrounding elections in the United States, this multiple case study—applying the framework of policy feedback theory--fills a gap in the literature, contemplates and reports current practice, and is contributing to positive social change by evaluating the political party response to the top-two primary. In the next chapter, the comprehensive review of the literature will include the following: the development and

application of policy feedback theory from its inception, the past and present political context of Washington State elections, and the historic, legal, and political context of the top-two primary in particular.

Chapter 2 features the literature review strategy used and the results of that review. In addition, the theoretical foundation of the current study is covered. Chapter 3 focuses on research methods, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical considerations for this study. Chapter 4 features results including data analysis, and Chapter 5 centers on discussions, conclusions, and recommendations for future study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Washington State's top-two primary has created uncertainty and confusion among county political parties and the voters that rely on heuristic cues from the parties. The top-two primary leaves parties with no uniform method of identifying their chosen candidates, nor a way to consistently share that information with the voting public. Although the literature on elections, in general, is extensive, and the literature on the larger category of primary elections is substantive, the literature specific to this relatively new and geographically limited expression of the primary election—the top-two primary—is scarce. In this chapter, I will place the existing literature relevant to the top-two primary in the larger context of elections and primaries within the United States, the implications of public policy on the behaviors of citizens and groups, and the role of political party identification and the parties themselves in that same context.

The following sections include a discussion of the literature search strategy, including database review and listing of search terms. I review and contextualize the theoretical foundations relevant to political party response to the top-two primary in Washington State. Finally, I present a thorough review of the applicable literature on the topic.

Literature Search Strategy

Library databases that I accessed included Political Science and Business Source Complete (combined search available through Walden University Library), Dissertations and Theses @ Walden University, EBSCO eBooks, Public Administrations Abstracts, Theoreau @ Walden University Library, and Google Scholar. I used the Find @Walden

tool extensively to optimize the time spent in searching and to acquire full-text versions of the relevant journal articles. Additionally, I also used the reference sections of particularly relevant journal articles to refine the search and locate articles of particular benefit.

Literature review searches in the initial stages of this dissertation (2017-2018) were attempted on the highly specific terms *top-two primary* and *nonpartisan blanket primary*, but given the relative newness and lack of literature on the topic, additional search terms were used, particularly to establish context for this particular election reform. The following terms and combinations thereof were used: *primary*, *open primary*, *closed primary*, *U.S. primary elections*, *elections*, *California primary*, *Washington Primary*, *United States elections*, *blanket primary*, and *direct primary*. Later literature searches (conducted primarily in 2019-2023) demonstrated an increasing interest in this particular primary election form. As a result, *top-two primary* and *nonpartisan blanket primary* did reveal additional contemporary literature. Nevertheless, literature specific to political party response to the top-two primary remains lacking.

I searched for an additional area of literature specifically on the search terms of *policy feedback theory*, *policy feedback*, and *policy feedbacks* combined with terms such as *civic engagement*, *voting*, and *elections*. There was a lack of results for these terms, representing a gap in the literature and an opportunity to expand the applicability of policy feedback theory, as explored further below.

Theoretical Foundation: Policy Feedback Theory

The theoretical foundation of the present study is policy feedback theory. Policy feedback theory represents the maturation of early observations of the public policy development process that has solidified into a concrete and well-defined theory over time. As will be shown, as time passed and scholars engaged with questions of public policy development with this lens, increased specificity was introduced into the framework.

Oft quoted Schattschneider (1935) may be considered a progenitor of modern policy feedback theory. He is credited with the observation, “new policies create new politics” (Schattschneider, 1935, p. 288). With that comment, he noted a cause-and-effect relationship between policy and politics that has become a foundational concept of policy feedback theory.

Skocpol (1996) brought significant detail and specificity to the concept introduced by Schattschneider. Skocpol’s seminal work on the development of social policies in the United States, such as mothers’ pensions, Civil War pensions, and minimum wage and child labor laws, fleshed out how “previously established...policies effect subsequent politics” (1996, p. 41), which in turn becomes the context in which new policy is developed. Such politics referred to is often expressed through groups that form, organize, or reorganize in response to incentives or resources to pursue. This phenomenon has been seen across multiple public policy sectors, resulting in Skocpol’s work being cited in a broad range of literature.

Much of the policy feedback theory literature centers around concrete social policies where tangible or even monetary gains to citizens are in play. As the body of literature has expanded and policy feedback premises have been adopted, this approach “reimagines the classic unidirectional model of democracy in which politics (public opinion, elections) is the cause and policy is the effect or outcome” (Haselswerdt, 2017, p. 4). Studies focusing on Medicaid (Clinton & Sances, 2018), the Affordable Care Act (Chattopadhyay, 2018; Haselswerdt, 2017), and the GI Bill (Mettler & Welch, 2004) are a few examples where the cost or benefit of the policy has been more evident to the citizen. Other studies have reviewed policies that are more philosophical than monetary, such as school choice laws (Fleming, 2014), public sector collective bargaining laws (Flavin & Hartney, 2015), or laws pertaining to the legalization of same-sex marriage (Kreitzer et al., 2014), education accountability policies (McDonnell, 2013), prostitution (Kotsadam & Jakobsson, 2011) or smoking (Pacheco, 2013).

Clearly, there has been a demonstrated applicability of policy feedback theory to a variety of policy implementations. Campbell (2012) summarized much of the work done up until that point in her piece on the impact of policies on mass politics, where she stated, “public policies are not merely products of politics but also shape the political arena and the possibilities for further policy-making” (p. 334). In a similar vein, Mettler (2019) wrote:

Policy feedback research examines how policies, in addition to producing first-order or intended effects, may also influence politics itself by altering citizens’ political behavior. For example, policies may affect citizens’ political attitudes,

including their support for policies, and they may also shape citizens' rates of political participation, including their likelihood of taking action to advocate for the policies they utilize (p. 32).

Thus, policy feedback theory is highly applicable to the current study.

Mettler and Soss (2004) issued a call for expanding research using policy feedback theory and more sophisticated application of the theory, noting "political science stops short of exploring public policies' influence on what citizens want, how strongly they want it, and whether they engage the political processes that hold the power to supply or deny it to them" (p. 56) and later noting that this field of study "should be able to explain why some policies draw citizens into public life and others induce passivity" (p. 56). It is worth noting that studying public policy development through the policy feedback lens does require a long view of history. Pierson (1993) wrote "political processes can best be understood if they are studied over time" (p. 596).

Goss (2010) answered that call for research and studied citizen organizations with a policy feedback lens. As a note meant to tie this research to the present study, political parties can be understood as citizen organizations. Goss called attention to the particular American tendencies to form associations, a protected right under the First Amendment, and one that political parties in Washington State have asserted is damaged by the top-two primary. Goss and others recognized that policies could cause the growth of some organizations and discourage the growth of other types of organizations. As an example, "federal state and local social policy... favors charitable organizations" by making grant

funding available, while on the other hand, federal laws limit lobbying and the strategies that charities may utilize for social, economic, and political change (Goss, 2010, p. 126).

I chose policy feedback theory for this study because political behavior and attitudes are very much in play when it comes to elections. Social scientists have studied voter turnout, mobilization of voters, civility in campaigns, campaign spending, moderation of elected officials, and so on. All such areas of study are meritorious, and Mettler and Soss (2004) agreed these areas could be effectively studied using a policy feedback lens.

For many citizens, voting is the core of their political behavior, although group participation—such as active political party membership—may also be an expression of political behavior. Political attitudes such as Washington State’s decidedly independent nature, springing from populist beginnings, are also both an outgrowth and an input to the ongoing policy development surrounding elections in Washington. The literature review below sets this study within the scientific context, but within an historical and political context as well.

Literature Review

The following sections ground this study in the cultural norms inherent in Washington state’s election systems over time. It is important to first examine the historic, legal, and political context of the top-two primary. Subsequent to the review of the context is an exhaustive review of the existing literature on this topic.

Historic, Legal, and Political Context of the Top-two Primary

Washington State's top-two primary must be placed within a very specific historic, legal, and political context. While by no means comprehensive, the following attempts to give a sense of this context. From statehood in 1889 until 1907, Washington (like most other states) had its candidates nominated by political party membership, in this case through party conventions. Washington State's relationship with primary elections started with a direct primary, or what would be called a closed primary today. Political party nominees were selected through a balloting process wherein separate ballots were printed for each party, and a voter could only cast a ballot specific to the party to which that voter was a member or stated allegiance (*History of Washington State Primary Systems*, n.d.). This form of primary election persisted from 1907 through 1934.

From 1935 through 2003, Washington State voters had a much more open primary system dubbed a blanket primary, under which they could vote for "any candidate for each office, regardless of political affiliation and without a declaration of political faith or adherence on the part of the voter" (*History of Washington State Primary Systems*, n.d., 1935-2003). It is not difficult to intuit that the stability over more than two generations of voters had an impact on the political identification of Washingtonians as independently minded. As Spitzer (2019) stated, "political culture can be path dependent, meaning that practices remain stable over time" (p. 847). He stated that "[Washington's] open government attitude can be traced to its populist constitution, later accelerated by progressivism" (Spitzer, 2019, p. 848). Incidentally, the initial

blanket primary was brought about through an initiative to the legislature process (Spitzer, 2019), another populist and progressive governance method (Barth et al., 2020).

The early 2000s brought legal challenges, first to California's blanket primary, then to Washington State's version. In 2000, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *California Democratic Party v. Jones* (California Democratic Party v. Jones, 530 U.S. 567, 2000). Between 2000 and 2003, Washington State's top elections officials—Secretaries of State Ralph Munro and Sam Reed—held hearings and published a report that clearly showed that most Washington State voters “are independent and want to continue to participate in the primary without having to affiliate with a political party and without being restricted to the candidates of only one party in the primary” (Washington Secretary of State, 2001, para 7). Despite this sentiment among Washington voters, Washington's blanket primary was deemed unconstitutional in 2003, just as California's had been (*Washington State Grange v. Washington State Republican Party*, 552 U.S. 442, 2008).

Consistent with Washington State's populist and progressive past, voters turned to direct democracy for their remedy by passing Initiative 872, which passed in 2004, creating the nonpartisan blanket primary, a term synonymous with top-two primary. (*History of Washington State Primary Systems*, n.d.). Though it passed, its implementation was held up by additional court challenges that were ultimately resolved by the United States Supreme Court in 2008. I-872 was deemed constitutional as it does not “impose a severe burden on the political parties' associational rights, and that the parties' arguments that voters will be confused can only be evaluated once the primary is implemented” (*History of Washington State Primary Systems*, n.d., March 18, 2008).

The apparent success of the top-two primary in 2008 and 2010 led the U.S. District Court to grant summary judgment in favor of the State. In 2012, the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court additionally upheld the top-two primary. Thus, the relative permanence of the top-two primary seemed to have been established.

Candidates under the top-two primary are free to identify a party preference, such as prefer Republican Party, but they are not required to do so. Further, they may also identify a party preference for a political party that may or may not formally exist—or identify no party preference at all. An example from one county’s published Sample Ballot is found in Appendix A (*Sample Ballot, Primary Election, August 4, 2020, Stevens County, Washington, n.d.*). Note the variety of party identifications, particularly in the governor’s race.

Pondering that chronology, Spitzer’s comments seem quite apropos:

In Washington State, there is an observable interplay between the First Amendment’s protection for freedom of association, the late nineteenth-century populist constitutional ban on public assistance to private entities, and the twentieth-century progressive goal of forcing private political parties to open their processes to the voting public. (Spitzer, 2019, p. 825)

This succinctly describes the context in which the top-two primary sits.

In many regards, Washington and California have similar histories—at least, both states have arrived at the top-two primary, on a fairly similar implementation date (2008 for Washington, 2012 for California). Both states had a blanket primary just prior to adopting the top-two primary. However, California’s blanket primary came online in

1996 (Spitzer, 2019), whereas Washington's had existed since 1935. Additionally, after losing a constitutional challenge to the blanket primary, California's legislature instituted the top-two primary as a bipartisan deal to secure a key vote on a budget (Caen, 2015), whereas Washington's direct democracy process wrested the top-two from the legislature's hands through an initiative to the people. Although these differences are not the focus of this proposed study, they do suggest a lens through which to view perhaps subtle and not-so-subtle differences between these states.

Research Specific to the Top-two Primary

As stated above, the top-two primary is a relatively new electoral innovation. The research specific to the top-two primary is bounded to just the last several years. Therefore, the literature in this section is presented chronologically.

Legal court decisions and scientific inquiry are different and do not necessarily come to the same conclusions. Though the courts were not convinced that the top-two primary resulted in voter confusion, at least one researcher concluded that confusion is very much in evidence. Manweller (2011) approached the research problem from the perspective of voter confusion. Recall that a central objection to the blanket primary (the historic version, as well as the newer nonpartisan version) was the claim that it impeded the right of political parties to choose their membership and their standard-bearers—specifically, their candidates. With this in mind, Manweller measured how often voters mistook a candidate under the top-two primary who declared a preference for a major political party as that party's official nominee. Using sample ballots which included just those instructions that were printed on official 2010 top-two primary ballots, Manweller

found that “80%-90% of respondents expressed a belief that candidates were affiliated or associated with a political party, despite clear disclaimer language on the ballot informing voters no such relationship exists” (p. 267). While these early conclusions are certainly noteworthy, it is also worth noting that participants were limited to 183 university students who were relatively new voters. Whether Manweller’s results can be duplicated with more experienced voters or a larger subject group is worth further investigation.

Working in 2013, Beck and Henrickson (2013) studied whether the shift to the top-two primary had an impact on the number of primary candidates filing for office. Given that in the top-two primary, any candidate can state any party preference, candidates representing the official choice of a political party may find themselves competing against outsiders who may not have the blessing of the party organization to which they say they identify. They found that there seemed to be a modest “incentive for the major political parties to limit the number of primary candidates representing their party” (Beck and Henrickson, 2013, p. 791) for the Democrats, and no statistically significant impact was found for the Republicans. The research conducted by Beck and Henrickson is particularly similar to the present study, insofar as it examined party response to the top-two primary and the incentive or disincentive to advance official nominees for the ballot.

Writing somewhat contemporaneously with Beck and Henrickson, William Jackson (2012) wrote a legislative note specific to the California nonpartisan blanket primary, which passed as Proposition 14 in that state in 2011. As stated above, the top-two primary is best understood in its historic, political, and legal context. Jackson’s

(2012) work was not necessarily research in nature but did present a number of predictions regarding the first use of the top-two primary in 2012. His work is presented here as context, even though it did not assert empirical conclusions. Jackson predicted that the top-two primary would entrench incumbents, raise the costs to administer elections as well as increase campaign spending, and would harm minor political parties.

Writing in 2016, Hill and Kousser's research demonstrated one of the many nexuses between topics within this literature review. Specifically, they looked at the top-two primary and voter turnout, focusing on the unlikely primary voter. Beginning with the assertion that primary voter turnout is a small and arguably unrepresentative subset of the voting population, Hill and Kousser (2016) acknowledged that proponents of the top-two primary and other primary election reforms do hope to change this dynamic. However, they believed that another institutional hurdle exists for engaging unlikely primary voters. Specifically, they hypothesized a lack of mobilization activity on the part of candidates. Many candidates reach out (through mailers, calls, etc.) in the primary election period only to those voters who have routinely voted in primary elections in the past, ignoring voters who only engage for the general election. Their research looked first at whether the "institutional shift to a top-two primary alone leads to an immediate boost in [primary] participation" (Hill & Kousser, 2016, p. 415) and then secondarily whether Get Out the Vote (GOTV) efforts additionally mobilized voters within California's 2014 primary. They found that the institutional change of switching to a top-two primary did not appear to have an appreciable effect on primary voter turnout (despite proponents'

hopes), but they did have results that suggested mobilization efforts of unlikely primary voters in a top-two primary environment might be quite effective.

Patterson, Jr. (2020) also looked at the effect of the top-two primary on voter turnout. Responding specifically to proponents' claims that the top-two primary would increase voter turnout by injecting “competition and thus participation” (Patterson, Jr., 2020, p. 2) into the election process, he found the opposite. He identified a phenomenon he called *voter roll-off*, which occurs when a voter votes in those races on their ballot that included partisan competition, but then they abstain from voting in races that were single-party races. Another way to describe this is selective undervoting. If the voter did not like their choices (because their party was not competing in that race), they opted out at a rate of 4-10%.

Fisk (2020) similarly looked at undervoting relative to the top-two primary. He focused on *orphaned voters*, those voters who are being asked to vote in a race that lacks a candidate that shares the voter's own party affiliation. Looking at same party congressional races, Fisk (2020) found that “orphaned voters exhibit higher levels of undervoting than non-orphaned voters in same-party contests” (p. 302).

Given the uniqueness of the top-two primary to just a handful of U.S. States, it was unusual to encounter research by researchers in other countries, but according to Amorós and colleagues (2016), primary election reform is of interest outside of the United States. Their research, grounded in game theory, concluded that like many U.S. advocates of the top-two primary assert, this form of election resulted in more moderately aligned elected officials. In addition, it increased the number of districts and/or states that

can be considered *swing*, and was a threat to the dominant political parties in so-called *safe states*.

In researching a very similar set of questions to those raised by Amorós et al., regarding the impact of a top-two primary on the degree of moderateness espoused by officials elected under that system, McGhee and Shor (2017) wrote “the recent experiments with primary reform in Washington and especially California have attracted international attention. Yet, there has been little quantitative evidence of the effects” (p. 1063). Recognizing that primary reform has been one of the most-used measures to “bring the parties back together” (p. 1063) and combat polarization, McGhee and Shor (2017) analyzed the top-two primary in Washington and California in search of any effect. They found virtually no such moderating impact in Washington and only a slight moderating effect on Democrats in California (with no impact on Republicans in that state).

Steven Sparks presented the next several studies, all looking at the top-two primary through slightly different lenses. In his 2018 piece, Sparks (2018) looked at the impact of campaign spending and converting those dollars to votes in two-party and one-party races. Focusing on state legislative races since the adoption in Washington (2008) and California (2012) of the top-two primary, and specifically in light of challenger versus incumbent dynamics, he found that campaign dollars for challengers went twice as far in converting those dollars to votes in one-party races as compared to two-party races. Sparks framed this within the larger context of voter information and the voter cues often offered by party labels. In one-party races, party label is not helpful to heuristically guide

the voter—something else is needed. In state legislative and other down-ballot races, free media coverage is scarce, so campaign expenditures, particularly in direct communication with voters, are required. Patterson, Jr. (2020) likewise referenced the difficulty in low information races when he stated “while voters have the opportunity to select the ‘lesser of two evils,’ they lack the ability to do so” (p. 6) if they do not have access to information enough to make an informed choice when partisan cues are not informative.

In Sparks’s next study, he revisited the concept of candidate moderation under the top-two primary (2019). Given that this has been a talking point of proponents, it was not surprising to encounter the question in a variety of studies. Sparks stated, “While prior research finds no evidence that voters impose moderation in one-party contests, there is reason to expect that new electoral conditions may encourage any number of changes in candidate behavior” (2019, p. 567). One of those electoral conditions is moderated rhetoric from the candidates. In this study, Sparks found that candidates in single-party state legislative races in California did demonstrate more moderated rhetoric on their campaign websites, demonstrating “the potential for the top-two primary to soften the tone of hyperpolarization” (Sparks, 2019, p. 581). Having elsewhere in his article referred to state legislative races as *low information races*, the moderating effect was likely only possible if campaign rhetoric information from websites (likely the only source voters will encounter) actually reached those voters.

Publishing two studies in 2020, Sparks again highlighted that advocates of the top-two primary system “hoped that the reform would increase electoral competition while mitigating polarization and legislative gridlock” (Sparks, 2020b, p. 1). In the first

study focusing on quality challengers (as defined as challengers who have previously held elected office), Sparks noted that quality challengers are more likely to emerge against a same-party incumbent than against someone from the opposite party.

In his second study in 2020, Sparks focused on candidates' campaign dynamics and behaviors (Sparks, 2020a). In this case, he compared responses to various interview questions by ten state legislative candidates in one-party general election races in Washington State, with ten state legislative candidates in North Carolina who, lacking the top-two primary, necessarily ran against a candidate from another party. All subjects were 2016 candidates. He found that the risk and uncertainty present in single-party races in Washington (an outcome of the top-two primary in a safe district) produced very different campaign behaviors in comparison to their North Carolina counterparts. Specifically, in North Carolina, candidates in safe districts believed that the outcome of their general election races was nearly guaranteed, and as a result, there was no electoral advantage to appeal to a broader range of voters. By contrast, all ten of the Washington candidates expressed uncertainty about their races during the campaign, even if they ultimately won by 10-30 points. This uncertainty impacted messaging, moderating rhetoric, and impacted voter outreach such as doorbelling and direct mailings.

Henrickson and Johnson (2019) take up two questions regarding voter turnout somewhat simultaneously, through the lens of *cost of voting*, in a study with similarities to the work of other researchers already mentioned herein (Hortala-Vallve & Esteve-Volart, 2011). They looked at both the effect of Washington State's decision to become a fully vote-by-mail state and the effect of the top-two primary on turnout. They did not

appear to drill down to the granular level of undervoting behavior, but only the binary question of whether the voter voted at all. They did find that the top-two primary seemed to correlate with increased voter turnout, however.

Summary and Conclusions

Under consideration in this chapter have been the historical, legal, and political context that led to the development of the top-two primary in Washington State. This state's decidedly populist underpinnings can be seen in this election innovation. Current scholarly literature has given the top-two primary its due, especially recently, but has not yet provided information on the county political party response to the top-two primary. This study filled that gap and extended the academic knowledge surrounding the top-two primary and offered important data to the public policy development process. Additionally, the applicability of policy feedback theory to that public policy development process was explored, and its appropriateness for use with this study was confirmed. This study expanded the use of policy feedback theory into the qualitative realm, further extending the knowledge of the use of this theoretical approach.

In Chapter 3, the specific methodological details of this multiple case study approach will be explored, including participant selection, instrumentation, and the details of the five-participant pilot study, which helped refine procedures for the final study. Final study participation, data collection and data analysis plan will also be reviewed. Finally, the following chapter will also address issues of trustworthiness, including credibility and ethical considerations.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this multiple case study was to gather the perspectives of political party leadership, in order to explore and understand Washington State county political party response to the top-two primary election system. I filled a substantive gap in the literature, informed future public policy development, and effected positive social change in the process. The following section includes discussion of the specific research question, concepts, research tradition, and methodology.

I engaged with Republican central committee leadership in five of Washington State's 39 counties. This population was bounded by having to operate in a top-two primary state. For participant selection, I considered eastern and western counties, large and small population counties, and urban and rural counties. A directory of party leaders was made available from the partner organization, the Washington State Republican Party. I maintained a sensitivity to the ethical issues inherent with case study research, particularly when achieving informed consent, respecting participant desire for confidentiality, and acknowledging the potential impact of sharing my own experience with the top-two primary.

I used recorded web conferencing interviews and participant-supplied and publicly available documents in data collection. Recorded interactions (in the case of web conference interviews) or primary-source documents constituted the data. I used transcripts for manual coding methods and the identification of predominant themes (see Creswell, 2013). Where appropriate, document review (aka content analysis) was also included.

Research Design and Rationale

The central research question of this study was: What has been the response by county-level political party leadership in Washington State to the top-two primary? Expanding on that central question, I also evaluated the foci of any response taken by party leadership. This included any stated goals held by party leadership in their response, and the degree to which party leadership believed their response is effective in achieving their goals.

Central concepts and phenomena of this study were reliant on the responses from party leadership. As stated above, I focused on documenting, summarizing, and evaluating those responses. I gave special attention to any instances of candidate recruitment, candidate vetting, candidate endorsement, or other voter communication.

I chose a qualitative approach for this study for a couple of reasons. First, the relative newness and limited application in just four U.S. states of the top-two primary suggested the open-ended exploratory approach inherent in qualitative research. Secondly, there are few qualitative studies in which policy feedback theory was used as the theoretical framework; expanding its applicability to qualitative research seemed appropriate. Finally, the fact that the political party response to this primary election format is a contemporary, currently occurring process, happening in the natural setting of Washington State party politics made a qualitative approach most appropriate (see Creswell, 2009).

I chose the multiple case study approach because of the distinct and somewhat siloed nature of county political party organizations. Each of Washington's counties has a

statutorily defined central committee (Political Parties, 1973) for each of the two major political parties, and each of those central committees elects representatives (one state committeeman and one state committeewoman) to represent the county party organization at the state party level. Yet despite the grassroots-up representation and the degree of communal thought that might arise from working together in support of a statewide organization, there is no statutorily formalized means for the state party organization to inform or enforce consistency of operations county-by-county, except in very specific circumstances (convention rules or the nomination of presidential candidates being some examples). As a result, for this study, I approached each county party organization as its own organization, distinct from other organizations, and treated individually as its own case study.

I considered using a phenomenological approach. I rejected this approach because I wanted a more pragmatic and practical understanding of the top-two primary, beyond the shared experiences of individuals existing within the top-two primary experience in Washington State (see Creswell, 2013). Other qualitative approaches were similarly rejected for their inability to provide the type or depth of data and thereby understanding needed to respond to the research questions at hand.

Role of the Researcher

Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (2008) drew distinctions between the complete participant and the participant-as-observer in their reflection on field research within the qualitative approach. The former was defined as a member of a group under observation, wherein the “observer role is wholly concealed; the research objectives are

unknown to the observed, and the research attempts to become a member of the group under observation” (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008, p. 258). The latter, by contrast (the most oft-used approach, according to these authors) is an approach in which the group understands that the participant-observer has a research goal that is explicitly identified. In this present study, I used the participant-as-observer approach for several reasons.

First, as mentioned in Chapter 1, I have well-established Republican party bona fides. I served as an executive board officer for my county political central committee for more than 8 years (in secretary, vicechair, chair, and at-large roles) and won election as a Republican to county political office in 2018 as the county auditor, the de facto elections official for the county. As a result, it was impossible to conceal these bona fides, making the complete observer as described by Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (2008) impossible. Incidentally, this same fact influenced participant selection, as discussed below.

Secondly, as the data collected might speak to party strategy and a certain trust was required in order to extract that information, full acknowledgment of a participant-observer status was important. Finally, the research questions had both academic and implementation value to me. Acknowledging the participant dynamic in the participant-observer model was a way to guard against bias by explicitly acknowledging such potential.

Although the community of involved partisans is small, any familiarity between participants in the main study and myself as the researcher was deemed to be at the

acquaintance level (at the closest) or merely by reputation (in most cases). The participants and I have traveled in the same political circles, but no currently established relationship existed beyond that described here. In no case were any power differentials anticipated. The siloed nature of both county parties (which reorganize with new leadership every 2 years) and the isolation since my election to county office proved to be a good insulation against any real or perceived difference in power between myself and the participants.

No specific ethical issues were apparent with the participant-as-observer model. Transparency about my background and goals at the recruitment stage were explicitly addressed. This eliminated possible ethical concerns with this approach.

Methodology

This multiple case study qualitative study had a bounded and discreet population and a phenomenon with limited scope. Replication or reapplication of this methodology to a similar population should be straightforward. For instance, I recommend that Washington county Democratic central committees be included in a future iteration of this research. Similarly, applying the present methodology to one or more of the other handful of states using a top-two primary could follow very similar selection criteria and data gathering and analysis approaches.

Participant Selection Logic

The population for this study was the leadership of the 39 county Republican central committees in Washington State. I defined leadership primarily as the individuals elected within each central committee as either chair or vicechair or their designee. I

further defined leadership as anyone holding the chair or vicechair position, or state committeeman/committeewoman position, in the current organization (spanning the 2023-2024 biennium) or any previous organization from 2011 to present, or their designees. Such designees included subcommittee chairs pertaining to candidate recruitment, vetting, or endorsement, or committee chairs involved in voter communication, campaign strategy, or GOTV efforts. The population size was therefore estimated according to the following calculations: 39 counties, multiplied by six organizational biennia, multiplied by four individuals who may consent to participate in this study per biennium, or approximately 400 individuals (if it is assumed that some individuals fulfill the same or similar leadership role over multiple biennia).

Sampling for this study was purposeful (see Creswell, 2013) with the following considerations in mind. First, it was acknowledged that insofar as Republican central committee leadership was targeted for inclusion in this study, both criterion and convenience sampling approaches were involved. The Washington State Republican Party, with which I had some familiarity, was able to provide contact information for current and historic county central committee leadership.

Secondarily, a maximum variation approach within and between potential participants was considered. After an initial outreach to all potential participants, I chose the study sample to allow for representation from eastern and western counties, large and small population counties, and urban and rural counties to the maximum degree possible. I selected five counties for final inclusion in the study, representing feasibility,

representativeness, and saturation. Such a sample size (representing between 10 to 20% of counties) allowed a representation of a broad range of political party response.

Procedures for Recruitment

The Washington State Republican Party was both able and willing to assist in the identification of individuals who met the criteria of currently or historically serving as either the elected statecommitteeman or statecommitteewoman or as the county party chairperson or vice chair. Had this method of developing a potential pool of participants proved insufficient, the roster of elected precinct committee officers (the same individuals who constitute the county central committee membership, according to state statute) is a matter of public record. Public record requests directed to each of the 39 elections officials could have filled in most if not all gaps left in the initial approach. Fortunately, that was not necessary.

I identified participants by the above-described process. Participants were initially contacted by email. Some follow up phone calls occurred, in which I answered any questions about the study that participants had prior to committing to participate. Recruitment included a commitment to share the broad findings of this study with participants and their organizations.

Instrumentation

The anchor of instrumentation in this study was a semistructured interview. Additionally, I also used document review, as such documents were either made available by participant organizations, or readily available on participant organization websites. I

developed both the interview protocols and the document analysis rubric, drawing from the literature on qualitative interviewing and augmented by a pilot study.

Interviews

According to Rubin and Rubin (2005), good qualitative research design includes anticipating the analysis, from the time of choosing a topic through the development of the research question and beyond. For this study, the analysis included identifying themes and describing both the current response by county political parties to the top-two primary, but also eliciting the stories of how the current response came to be, and any goals that the participants might identify that are not yet met. As a result, the interview was structured to capture what is, how it came to be, and possible future developments.

Rubin and Rubin (2005), in their guidance on determining if interviewing is an appropriate instrument for a study, listed a few relevant questions that are considered below. These questions were helpful in choosing an interview method. They also provided a guide regarding the types of questions that might best serve the current study.

- Are you looking for nuance and subtlety? (p. 47).
- Does answering the research question require you to trace how present situations resulted from prior events? (p. 47).
- Does puzzling out the research question necessitate layers of discovering in which initial questions are asked to discover alternatives that are then explored in turn? (p. 48).

A quick reaction to each of these questions follows. In this study, I looked for the nuances, similarities, and differences in county political party response to the top-two

primary and the evolutionary process that has occurred. I used open-ended questions and encouragement to participants to tell stories, relay events, and offer opinions.

I used the theoretical lens of policy feedback theory, and in response to the question above about the present situation resulting from prior events, I used a conversational and organic direction for the interviews. I asked follow-up and clarifying questions as they came up, and the participants were encouraged to give opinions and express hopes for the future. Of course, at all times, such follow-up was done to ensure fidelity to the approval granted by the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

The last question posed by Rubin and Rubin (2005), addressing layers of discovery, influenced the emphasis on open-ended questions. The original nature of this research required that I had the ability to ask follow-up and clarifying questions. Doing so encouraged more extended narrative reflections from the participants.

The tone and expectations for the interviews were addressed at the outset of each interview. A scripted introductory paragraph reminded the participant of the purpose of the interview and encouraged the participant to feel free to go beyond the structured questions with additional thoughts, reflections, or relevant stories or events. Additionally, this introductory script reassured the participant of the confidential nature of the conversation and the recorded interview status and ensured consent. Appendix B includes the introductory script and interview questions.

Content Analysis

In addition to the interview, participants were asked to share any documents relevant to the topic. Websites for participant organizations were also searched for relevant documents. Documents such as organizational bylaws, policies or procedures, platforms, candidate questionnaires, etc. were included in this category. Coding for themes found in the documents followed those that emerged from the interviews.

Procedures for Pilot Study

The pilot study was very simple; the intent was that the pilot study would draw on documents already in my possession and interviews with participants already known to me. Specifically, historic vetting committee documents and procedures, as well as interviews with current and past members of the Stevens County Republican Central Committee, were approached and included in this pilot study. Five individuals who have historically participated in that organization's candidate vetting and endorsement process were included in the pilot study. This is the local organization that I had served as a member for 8 years. The purpose of the pilot study was to serve as a trial for the interview questions, as well as a rehearsal of interview techniques with a comfortable pool of subjects. This was particularly helpful in refining my delivery and approach and establishing content validity. Each interview lasted between 55 minutes and 1 hour 25 minutes. Due to the familiarity between myself and pilot participants, these interviews were slightly longer than what would be expected of a participant in the main study, mostly due to informal conversation between acquaintances.

The pilot study almost immediately revealed a need for an update to the introductory script and interview questions. I had assumed that each pilot study participant would have the same depth of knowledge on the top-two primary, its history, and its implications as I. It was determined that this was not the case. It was evident that the introductory script required additional context and definition, so the participants and I could operate from a shared vocabulary. As a result, text taken from the Abstract was integrated into an introductory statement that I read to the participant. This established a context, shared terminology, and punctuated the start of the interview with a degree of formality that proved beneficial when interacting with participants in the main study.

Transcripts of the five pilot interviews were used for practice, to begin using the coding tools in the Delve software (www.delvetool.com) selected for data analysis. This practice centered on gaining facility with the Delve tool. However, pilot interviews were not used in the data analysis in Chapter 4.

Procedures for Participation and Data Collection

Interviews were conducted using a paid version of the web conference software Zoom that has recording capabilities (*Video Conferencing, Web Conferencing, Webinars, Screen Sharing*, n.d.), associated with a login personally owned by me, a safeguard for participant privacy. Additionally, a Zoom-compatible transcription app was utilized for live transcription and backup audio recording. Participants were informed that the initial interview would last approximately one hour. I was the sole individual involved in both data collection and analysis.

Upon completion of the interview phase of the study, participants were explicitly informed that their participation had ended, but they would be given the option to stay up to date on the ongoing research efforts. Participants were invited to contact me again with questions. No ongoing follow-up interviews were required, but participant interest in the ongoing project was honored.

Regarding the content analysis portion of the study, relevant documents were requested from participants/participant organizations in electronic format. Email receipt was to my university email address. If documents were available online, I retrieved those directly.

Data Analysis Plan

By way of reminder, the research question was “What has been the response by county-level political party leadership in Washington State to the top-two primary?” Insofar as the question is broad by design, almost any possible verbalized response was connected to the question, and no discrepant cases were noted. It was originally anticipated that three main categories of response might appear, though it was my intent to follow the data, even if it led to fewer or more categories. This is consistent with the advice given by Miles, et al. who wrote that they “strongly advise analysis concurrent with data collection” (2014 p. 70).

The first anticipated response category could be described as a response reflected in the values and beliefs of the party organization, absent specific associated action. This was expected to take the form of participant opining on whether they prefer the top-two

primary to other election forms. Alternately, the values and beliefs might be found reflected in organization bylaws or platform documents without associated action items.

The second anticipated response category could be described as action taken that reflects a response, where the audience for those actions is limited to party members and candidates. This is considered an internally focused action. An example of this would include candidate vetting interviews for the benefit and edification of the party.

The third anticipated response category could be described as action taken that had as its intention a focus outside the organization. Public candidate endorsement and mass communication efforts with the voting public on behalf of the party organization would be an example of such anticipated responses in this third category. Action taken in the form of direct or indirect candidate monetary support would also be in this category.

The interview and document data therefore connected to the research question by allowing for a broad range of types of responses. These response categories represented a schema for the initial conceptualization of the coding. However, consistent with Miles and colleagues' assertion, "coding is analysis" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 72) these anticipated responses categories were just the start; the coding itself took the research in its own direction.

Because of the recorded and transcribed nature of the data, it was less necessary for me to take extensive written notes while the data collection was underway. This benefited the quality of the interaction and encouraged depth and free response. In keeping with the analysis presented by Miles and colleagues (2014), more than one coding cycle occurred.

Because minimal notes were taken at the time of the interview, a preliminary pre-coding effort included simply exposing myself to a playback of each of the interviews. This took place relatively quickly after the conclusion of each interview so that broad impressions were not lost. Some notes were taken at this stage, but mainly as an informal test to determine if the categories described above held true in any general sense. Following this review, coding moved into what Miles et al. refer to as “first cycle coding” (2014, p. 74). This included (but was not limited to) the following types of coding: descriptive coding, in vivo coding (particularly appropriate because, as expected, the specialized organization of the political party demonstrated having their own phrasing and vernacular for certain phenomena), and values coding.

A transitional phase ensued, in which I coded the codes. Following this transition, the first round coding efforts were reorganized into patterns. Stated another way, “pattern coding...a way of grouping...summaries into a smaller number of categories, themes or constructs” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 86). This was most illuminating.

Delve software was utilized to assist with hand coding for each interview. This tool was more than adequate due to the relatively modest number of participants. The interface was intuitive, and the exports easily used for manual grouping/regrouping of codes.

Issues of Trustworthiness

According to Creswell (2013), the nuances of qualitative research require a new take on the concepts of reliability and validity. Various scholars have attempted to adapt those quantitative concepts to the qualitative environment. Creswell notes that Lincoln

and Gupa (1985) use the words credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability; those terms are adopted and addressed here.

Credibility

Understood as the qualitative expression of internal validity (“Credibility,” 2010; Miles et al., 2014), credibility was achieved by persuasively and compellingly telling the story of the participants. As expected, much of the data gathered and analyzed was descriptive and evaluative, and, to a lesser degree, interpretive or theoretical, though the results may suggest additional directions for further research. Checking my understanding with participants by allowing the interviews to be free-flowing and allowing for follow-up questions and reflection aided in this manner. Opting to capture to a high degree of detail or providing thick description, confirmed that credibility.

Transferability

Each of Washington’s 39 counties has statutorily defined Republican and Democratic county central committees, with largely similar leadership structures. Although this study focused only on Republican organizations, a ready structure for transferring this research to a new sample already exists. As is known from the legal history of the top-two primary, both Republican and Democratic organizations initially opposed the policy in court. Additionally, transferability was supported by the inclusion of participants from eastern and western counties, urban and rural, large and small.

Dependability

Dependability, which can be understood as whether the “process of the study is consistent, and reasonably stable over time” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 312), was upheld by

the use of an introductory script used with each participant. Additionally, inclusion of not just the semistructured interviews but also documents supported this goal. Extensive time spent in hand coding with the Delve tool added to dependability.

Confirmability

Miles and colleagues (2014) state, regarding confirmability, “the basic issue here can be framed as one of relative neutrality and reasonable freedom from unacknowledged researcher biases” (p. 311). Being reflexive, focusing on being self-aware and transparent with participants during all phases of the research proved to be central requirements of confirmability. Retention of recordings and transcripts, as well as coding results further support this study’s confirmability.

Ethical Procedures

I followed all university steps outlined in the research ethics review process by the IRB (Harris, n.d.). This study was assigned IRB approval number 03-04-22-024673. Participants were asked to electronically sign the IRB approved consent form, prior to scheduling their interview.

Accessing Participants and Data

As mentioned above, a variety of approaches were contemplated to identify possible participants. Participants were first sought through the partner organization, the Washington State Republican Party (WSRP). Formal approval for this partner organization relationship was granted by the Chairman. Following a briefing on the proposed research, delivered to the Chairman, the organization voluntarily shared member rosters. Partnership with the WSRP and its membership was sufficient to

produce the needed participants for this study. Whereas utilizing public records requests was initially considered, doing so was deemed unnecessary.

Regarding document review, when requesting data in the form of documents, participants were encouraged to gain the permission of the organization's responsible party (chair) before sending documents for evaluation. An exception to the need for this explicit permission was assumed when relevant documents were publicly available online. In this case, permission was deemed to be unnecessary.

Participants were briefed on the nature and purpose of the study at the time of invitation, at the time an interview appointment was set, and as a part of the introductory script that was used. Written informed consent was checked verbally at the start of the interview. Participants wishing to withdraw from the study would have been immediately allowed to do so, though no one requested to do so.

While the participants were known and identifiable to me, participants were assured recorded web conference events would remain protected from release. It was anticipated that some of the data offered by participants would be considered sensitive. Every effort was made to protect the privacy of that data and the participants who offered it. Personal logins for accessing recordings, transcripts, and coding software aided in securing that privacy, and efforts to mask the origin of documents included in content analysis were employed.

Summary

In this chapter, specific consideration was given to the qualitative methodology and the multiple case study design. The beneficial contribution made as a result of the

pilot study process was reviewed. Additionally, specifics to the final study, including participant selection, recruitment, and participation were addressed. Finally, concepts central to trustworthiness and ethics in qualitative research were contemplated. Data collection and analysis form the basis of Chapter 4. An exploration of the findings and conclusions are found in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the political party response to the top-two primary election system in Washington State. The top-two primary occurs within a system that allows states to behave as laboratories of public policy innovation. Constitutionally protected rights—including the right of association for groups such as political parties, and the right of the electorate to a free, full, and unimpeded franchise—were significant to this study. The overarching research question framing this study was: What has been the response by county-level political party leadership in Washington State to the top-two primary?

The population for this study was current or recent leadership within the Republican county central committees in Washington State counties. Participants included five individuals with history and knowledge of their individual counties' response to the top-two primary. This chapter includes discussion of the pilot study I conducted, the research setting, and participant demographics. This chapter also includes a description and summary of the data collection and analysis, including first- and second-round coding efforts, a review of issues pertaining to trustworthiness and a final summary of results.

Research Setting

In some cases, several months elapsed between my initial invitations to participants and my final study, due to personal impediments. The majority of participants who initially agreed to participate completed the interview, so the length of time between invitation and interview did not negatively impact the study.

Demographics

Study participants were drawn from a roster of past and current members of the WSRP. Membership in the WSRP is determined by its bylaws (*WSRP By-Laws*, n.d.), which allow for the elected party chair, and the elected statecommitteeman and statecommitteewoman from each of the 39 counties in Washington State. The membership in the WSRP is renewed on a 2-year cycle of reorganization, outlined in statute (Political Parties, 1973). As a result of leadership stability and/or changes at the county party level, the longevity of participation or involvement of study participants in their county parties varied. Some had been involved for only a few years, whereas others had been active in party membership and/or leadership for 30 years or more. Invitation to participate was sent to the membership rosters for the previous two organization cycles.

Lovrich, Jr., et al. (2018), in their writings on political culture in Washington State, grouped Washington voters into two main categories: Puget Sound Policy Cluster and the Other Washington Policy Cluster. These categories were identified in studying the election outcomes in four statewide contests in 2010. Most voters in Washington would find those categories intuitive. Two participants in this study were from the Puget Sound Cluster counties, and the remaining three participants from the Other Washington Policy Cluster. These categories could be simplified along an urban vs. rural spectrum. However, there is also a sentiment among Washington voters that there are political-cultural differences east vs. west with the Cascade Mountain range serving as the dividing line. The demographics of participants in this study included three from eastern counties and two from western counties.

Registered voter counts were drawn from the Washington Secretary of State website (*November 7, 2023 General Election - Voter Turnout*, n.d.). The county voter population for the participants varied from the smallest county represented at approximately 23,000 voters, to the state's largest county at nearly 1.4 million. Three smaller (100,000 or fewer registered voters), one medium-sized county (360,000 registered voters), and the state's largest county were all represented among the participants. Finally, participants included two men and three women.

Data Collection

I collected data for this study primarily through semistructured interviews, which I first refined through a pilot study. Participant interviews occurred much as expected during the initial design phases of this study. This study included five participant-interviewees. After receiving and signing the consent form, participants were invited to self-select a convenient time for their interviews using the online software Calendly. This cut down on the back-and-forth emails required to schedule each interview successfully. I spent between 60 and 75 minutes with each participant in a Zoom teleconferencing environment. Video was optional, at the participant's choice, a decision made presumably due to bandwidth issues, particularly in rural areas. In addition, each Zoom environment included an auto-transcription tool known as Otter.ai, that captured both an audio and a transcribed representation of the interview. The ability to easily click back to the actual audio, directly from the Otter.ai transcription during coding and analysis, saved considerable time in transcript verification. Finally, the Zoom environment was also set to record (both audio and, where applicable, video) as a failsafe for capturing the raw

data. Each participant was asked for their approval to record prior to starting the Zoom recording.

A peripheral secondary data source was document review. In addition to completing their interviews, two participants shared documents related to their county party's response to the top-two primary. Additionally, if there were any relevant documents (platforms, bylaws, endorsement/vetting questionnaires, etc.) available on the county party websites with which study participants were affiliated, those were included in the document review and content analysis. In the interest of protecting the anonymity of participants, source documents are not explicitly cited herein. In lieu of full citation, see Table 4 below under Data Analysis that shows a selection of certain codes and the frequency with which those codes were applied. Counties are masked by letters A through E. For counties for which more than one document was available for analysis, that county's letter is repeated.

Data Analysis

Data analysis started with a thorough review of coding options; the primary resource for the scope and variety of coding approaches was drawn from the work of Saldaña (2016). In his text, several categories of coding were considered. I ultimately selected six methods from three categories as most appropriate for this study. Precise methods were selected based on the goodness-of-fit to the research question, content of raw data, and an interest in capturing not just relevant concepts, but also the voice of participants. Table 1 represents the coding categories and methods that ultimately informed the data analysis during the first-round coding.

In Chapter 3, three response categories were anticipated. Although these categories did emerge, they were not the most relevant or interesting concepts once initial coding efforts got underway. Neither was a set list of codes developed in advance of analysis.

Table 1

First Cycle Coding Methods Used in Current Analysis

Grammatical Methods	Elemental Methods	Affective Methods
Attribute Coding (5)	Concept Coding (79) In Vivo Coding (37)	Emotion Coding (13) Values Coding (12) Versus Coding (15)

Note. Adapted from Saldaña (2016), p. 68.

Taking the advice of Saldaña (2016) as well as the recommendations of Miles, et al., (2014), a code list and some early analysis developed concurrently, during the first pass through the interview transcripts. At the conclusion of the first pass through the transcripts, a coherence around the methods included in Table 1 emerged. A second review of each transcript further confirmed these categories and methods, and some subcategories arose as well. For instance, I applied the elemental method of concept coding to several discrete concepts such as campaign plan benchmark, grassroots benchmark, and money benchmark, all of which logically grouped under a concept code labeled endorsement criteria.

I used the Delve tool to manually highlight text within a transcript and apply an extant or new code label to that highlighted snippet of text. Upon export, I was able to identify how many individual times each code was applied to a snippet of text. The range

was from one snippet to nine snippets across the five interview transcripts. The frequency of snippet coding was informative and somewhat indicative of themes common across participants, but it was not sufficient to draw out the level of meaning that I sought. This was better achieved in the second round of coding.

First round coding is known for the proliferation of a multitude of codes. To address this proliferation, each individual code was printed on a separate adhesive mailing label, then each label was affixed to an individual post-it note. In this initial attempt at organization, the broad categories of method (grammatical, elemental, affective) were used and spatially grouped together. Saldaña used the term “lumping” (2016, p. 79) for this kind of activity.

From this activity, snippets and their associated codes fell into two groups: those that lumped together logically and intuitively (which will be discussed more below), and those that did not. Those that did not were categorized as singularly unique occurrences, or one-offs. Although these one-off codes and their underlying concepts have been eliminated from inclusion in the body of this present study, they may indicate a focus or lens for a future study.

Following the first round coding and a transitional step to stem the code proliferation, I completed a second round of coding. In the second round, I focused on process coding. At this second stage, several relevant themes in answer to the research questions emerged.

First Round Coding

In the following section, a portion of the codes that emerged in the first-round coding—specifically the affective method coding outcomes—merited review and appreciation. These initial coding efforts did not tell deep stories of meaning, belief, or strategy regarding the top-two primary. However, these affective codes did set a tone and tenor that I used to understand the concepts illuminated during the second-round coding efforts.

Grammatical Methods – Attribute Coding

Codes assigned in this category were predictably dry and focused on the length of involvement in party politics (ranging from just a few years to several decades), as well as how and why the participants got involved in their county political party. A bit of cross-over with other coding forms was noted, such as emotion coding or in vivo coding (feeling a connection to and supporting a particular candidate or campaign, and wanting to make a difference), and values coding (supporting an issue). One example of this is that one respondent got involved as a result of running for office themselves.

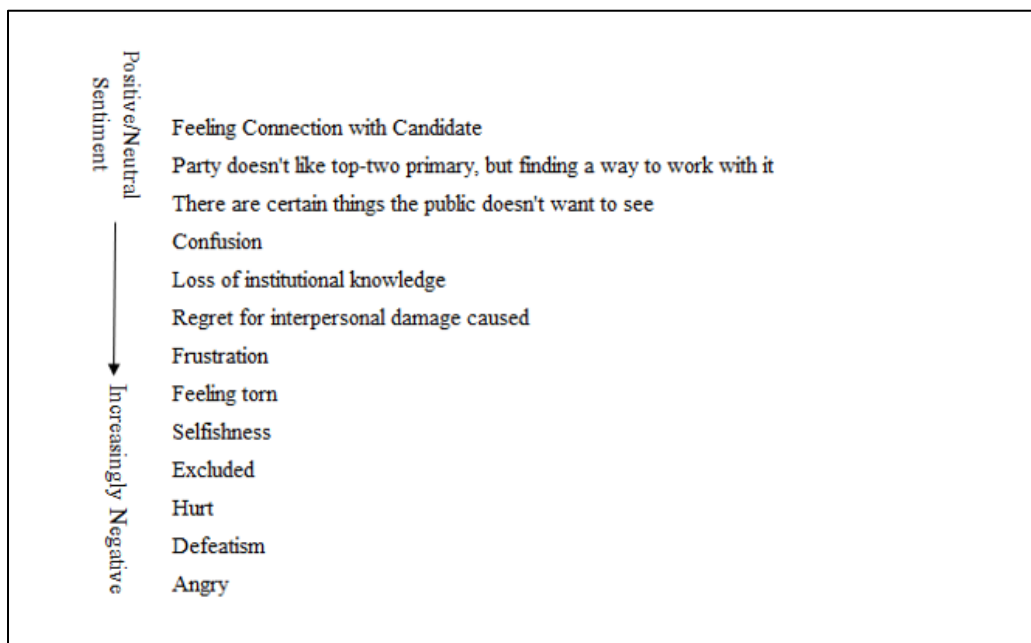
Affective Method – Emotion Coding

The most striking aspect of using emotion coding under the affective method category was that all but one of the emotion words, terms, or phrases could reasonably be interpreted as negative. Thirteen unique emotion codes were assigned, with the most frequent code summarized as “the party doesn’t like the top-two, but we are finding a way to deal with it,” with seven instances (obviously denoting a repeated comment by at least one participant). This one code is interpreted as just to the negative side of neutral.

The one positive code assigned referred to a feeling of connection with a candidate. The remaining codes are arranged in Figure 1 along a continuum that is increasingly negative.

Figure 1

Affective Method Emotions codes, Positive/Neutral to Increasingly Negative



The emotion coding information set the mood for the remainder of this section. The participants in this study seemed to associate a fair amount of struggle, strife, and conflict with their party responses to the top-two primary. This was seen not just in emotion coding but also in another affective coding method, versus coding.

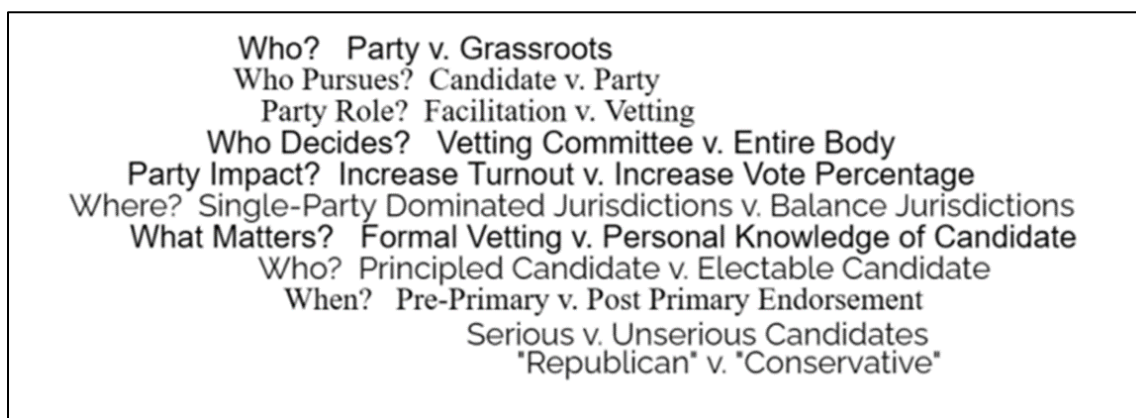
Affective Method – Versus Coding

If a majority of emotion codes trended towards negative emotion, then the following (Figure 2) representation of the tension built into and between political party responses to the top-two primary was not a surprise. There was an ongoing tug-of-war along multiple dimensions. According to Saldaña, versus codes “identify in dichotomous

or binary terms the...phenomena,...concepts...in direct conflict with each other” (2016, p. 137). Figure 2 is a compilation of such dichotomous ideas expressed by participants and captured when this form of affective method coding was employed.

Figure 2

Word Cloud of Affective Method – Versus Coding Outcomes



Affective Method – Values Coding

The final aspect of first-round coding that merited attention was the values coding outcome. Values coding was particularly rich, possibly because the topic of political engagement is itself values laden. People are driven to political participation, with their values at heart.

A value of fairness emerged. This included the idea that any person has a right to run for office. Fairness was also evident in the regret or criticism expressed by some participants that they believe the top-two primary leaves the other party or independents out. All this, while at the same time they are motivated and work to have Republicans elected.

A value of duty emerged. This included the idea that Republican party representatives (namely precinct committee officers and party leadership) have both a duty and desire to see Republican candidates elected. This duty included ensuring that a candidate seeking office is a good enough or real Republican.

The related values of credibility and pragmatism also emerged. Participants emphasized the significance of maintaining the trust of the voting public by minimizing the visibility of intra-party fighting. Simultaneously, participants emphasized supporting candidates that can both win and govern effectively.

Finally, and somewhat surprisingly, some conflicting values emerged on the concept of party identification. Among participants, the idea of party loyalty was generally framed as positive. However, so was having fidelity to one's individual values if that conflicted with party loyalty. In fact, one participant who has served as the chair of the county Republican party stated that they really identified as an independent, rather than as a Republican. These affective methods uniquely give a sense of the strains and often negative feelings that constitute the operational milieu of the Republican party leadership in a top-two primary environment.

Transitional Phase

In first round coding, the elemental methods of in vivo coding and concept coding resulted in the greatest number of individual codes (37 and 79, respectively). Drawing on the guidance of Saldaña, the transitional approach of "coding the codes" (2016, p. 229) was employed to reduce complexity. Coding the codes assisted in drawing out further and deeper meaning as well.

For the in vivo labels, coding of the codes resulted in a couple of categories. The first was just a capturing of terms and their explicit or implied definitions. In this way, this subset of in vivo codes can be understood as establishing some of the jargon specific to these participants, and possibly to a county Republican party vernacular in general. A portion of the in vivo codes were analyzed with a “part of speech” viewpoint in mind. Table 2 below represents the recoding of a portion of the in vivo codes to derive those nuances. It is noteworthy that the terms in this table are by no means neutral. For that reason, presenting these results in this way is intended to illustrate the good/bad or positive/negative tensions, even among members of the Republican community, even in the language they use, and the definitions buried within the terms they employ.

A second category that emerged when recoding in vivo codes is the category of phenomena experienced by participants. For example, Washington State is a fully vote-by-mail state. In the context of questions about how participants felt about the top-two primary, as well as other possible electoral innovations that participants are worried about such as ranked choice voting, in vivo coding revealed comments such as “I miss polling places,” and “Vote by mail changes how a candidate has to engage with the community.” Although these comments and the codes that were applied to them are not specifically related to the top-two primary, the presence of these comments is an indicator of how these two issues—vote-by-mail and the top-two primary—are closely related in participants’ minds.

Table 2*Recoding certain In Vivo Codes using Part of Speech/definition*

In Vivo Term	Part of Speech	Definition (implied by participant/interpreted by researcher)
Patriot	noun	Adherence to the Constitution, emphasizing individual liberties and specific rights contained therein
Conservative	noun	Possibly the same meaning as Republican but possibly implying more right-leaning than the average Republican
Christian Conservative	noun	A category within Conservative that draws definition from religion in addition to the Constitution
Moderates	noun	Possibly the same meaning as centrist Republican, implying more left leaning than the average Republican
Mainstreamers	noun	Moderate Republicans, weak on principles, particularly in comparison to the terms Conservative or Patriot
Establishment	noun or adjective	Similar to Mainstreamers, but more pragmatic, moderate in order to win, long in control of the party momentum
Blue	adjective	Referring to anyone or any group on the political left
Jungle Primary	noun	Synonymous with top-two primary; derogatory connotation
Popularity Contest	noun	Negative connotation: used to draw a contrast to candidates that are more principled, more qualified, more strategic, or better funded but who do not win
Bias	noun	Negative connotation: used to draw a contrast to the value of fairness, also related to the concept of credibility
Fly in the Ointment	noun	Similar to spoiler candidate and vote splitting codes, denotes a same-party candidate meant to disrupt, possibly with a focus on disrupting mainstreamers or establishment
Benchmark	noun	Minimum threshold(s) necessary for formal endorsement. Might apply to campaign finance resources, grassroots support, ground game plan adequacy, etc.

Additional recoded in vivo codes that are best understood under the heading of phenomena include (but are not limited to) the following: mudslinging, our brand is toxic, narrowing the field, mainstreamers have money, fracture in county party structure, individuals are always partisan, politics is full of egos, eating our own, and the list goes on. The variety presented by these phenomena in vivo codes did not paint a fully clear

picture at this transitional state. However, the relative intensity of some of the codes started to coalesce around certain processes and patterns once second round coding was concluded.

Second Round Coding

First round coding illuminated both a wide range of expressed emotions among participants, and a fair amount of conflict (as evidenced by the results of versus coding techniques). Utilizing the transitional method recommended by Saldaña (2016) of coding the codes, particularly the in vivo codes, a better sense of the emotional response to the top-two primary among participants is identified. For the purposes of this study, the emotional response to the top-two primary was certainly of interest, but emotional response alone is incomplete. In order for the results of this study to truly inform a view of the top-two phenomenon from a policy feedback theory perspective, more was required. It was essential to consider how these emotions and apparent conflicts influence action.

Process Coding

Process coding, also known as action coding according to Saldaña (2016), relies on a strict grammatical rule: codes must take the form of gerunds, words ending in *-ing*. Process coding was primarily applied to concept codes from first round coding. Particularly relevant in vivo, values or versus coded elements were also included in this round of coding.

The following process codes emerged: vetting, endorsing, benchmarking, supporting, recruiting, blocking, enforcing, facilitating, and communicating. Table 3 is

meant to give the reader a quick sense of the nuances that emerged in these process codes. Of note are where these codes overlapped and where they diverged.

It is noteworthy that not every process code was present in each party's response to the top-two primary. It is also noteworthy that the weightiness of a process code within a county varied. It is this phenomenon, specifically, that gave rise to important themes discussed below.

After second round coding had been completed on participant interview transcripts, attention was turned to available documents and content analysis. By this point, a robust system of coding was well developed. Documents were reviewed and the content was coded with the existing concept and process codes very much in mind. As mentioned above, county documents have been masked to protect the anonymity of the participants. Results of the content analysis on documents are shown below in the Results section under themes of action.

Table 3*Process Codes, Definitions and Related Codes from First Round Coding*

Process Code	Supporting Concept (First Round Coding) Codes/Definitions	Select Related Codes (quotations indicate in vivo codes)
Vetting	The process of reviewing a candidate's adherence to Republican ideals or platform, qualifications, preparation, etc. May or may not include assessment of electability.	Real Republican, RINO
Endorsing	A formal statement of approval or support	
Benchmarking	An assessment of the preparation for a campaign to be competitive and/or successful.	Money Benchmark, Campaign Plan Benchmark, Grassroots Benchmark
Supporting	May include access to party resources such as likely-voter databases, volunteer time (doorbelling, calling, parade entry), monetary support, inclusion in publications, etc. For counties engaged in supporting vs. facilitating, endorsement may be a prerequisite to receiving that support.	
Recruiting	Identification of possible candidates and encouragement to run	Filing week readiness
Blocking	Entry of a spoiler candidate, meant to disrupt the success of another candidate or party interest; May also include Party officials dissuading certain candidates from running or asking them to withdraw.	Fly in the Ointment, Iced Out
Enforcing	Adherence to formal rules or informal expectations. This may include a party's bylaws, vetting or endorsement rules, etc.	
Facilitating	A lighter version of endorsing	BBQ in Park for voters to meet candidates
Communicating	Expressing the party's pick to the public. May include party-financed campaign materials, press releases, letters to the editor, etc.	

Study Results

This study centered around the question “What has been the response by county-level political party leadership in Washington State to the top-two primary?” Creswell describes the relevance of themes within qualitative research in this way: “Themes are broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea” (2013, p. 186). This qualitative study is no different. Within this discussion of study results, several themes are identified, but a distinction will be drawn between emotional or attitudinal themes (themes of sentiment) that emerged, and externally focused or action-oriented themes (themes of action). There are three themes of sentiment, and three of action.

Themes of Sentiment

Dislike but Acquiescence

An early unanticipated theme was that while there was seemingly universal dislike for the top-two primary, no participant gave any indication that there was sufficient momentum or sentiment to seek a legislative change to the current system. This acquiescence seemed in conflict with a plank included in one participant party organization platform explicitly calling for a state primary system that would allow for partisan selection of candidates (note continued masking for the sake of participant anonymity). All participants reflected that their party organization disliked the system but was finding a way to work within or around it. Tangentially, when the interview conversations occasionally drifted towards other emergent electoral innovations such as ranked choice voting (RCV) or the new top-four primary/RCV general election hybrid in

Alaska (Alaska Division of Elections, n.d.), participants expressed a suspicion and a preference to maintain the status quo. Simply stated, the sentiment seemed to be that participants do not like it, but sure would not like it to change.

Fairness, Despite the Goal to Win

A second unanticipated theme emerged when values coding was used. One value expressed by participants, seemingly undermined by the top-two primary, was that equal competitive access be available to candidates of both major parties, but also third-party candidates, independents, or candidates otherwise unaffiliated. I interpreted this to be in some conflict with the purpose and goal of the party structure to elect Republicans; two documents, from two different party organizations included in the content analysis above, explicitly expressed this goal. Stated another way, this desire for an open competitive field, underscored by a value of fairness, seemed at odds with the goal of winning elections.

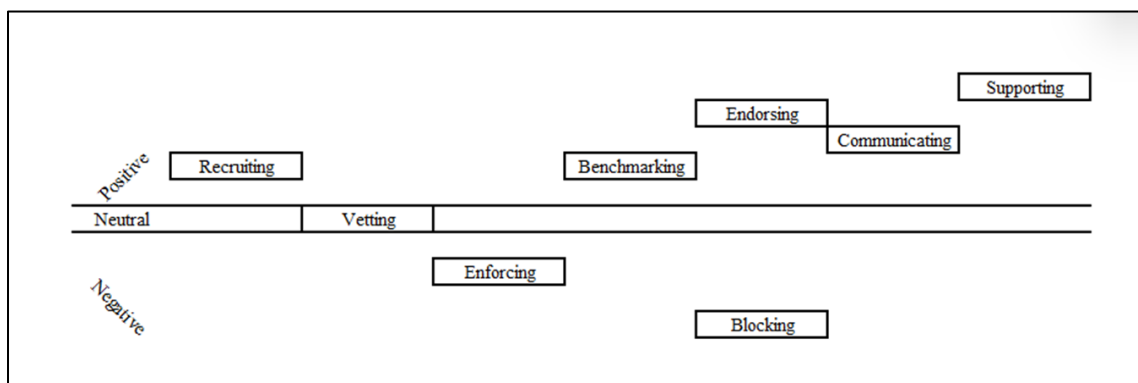
It's Fraught

A final unexpected theme was the degree of tension, strain, and conflict within and among Republican party organizations, at least in the view of the participants. This was most clearly seen in the versus coding efforts (see Figure 2, above), but also when considering certain in vivo codes that emerged. Certainly, a clash between Republican party organizations (or their preferred candidates) and their Democratic counterparts is so normal an expectation as to be a simple, central, and ubiquitous feature of American political life. What was surprising is the degree to which othering was expressed towards self-identifying Republicans. Whether that was seen in the in vivo coding (patriots,

mainstreamers, and the establishment) or in the emphasis on differentiating between RINO candidates (Republicans in name only) from candidates who are real Republicans, the lack of shared sentiment about how to feel and think about the top-two primary—and what to do about it—was unexpected.

Themes of Action

Figure 3 below presents the process codes that emerged during data analysis and situates each code on two axes. The vertical axis signifies the valence of the behaviors associated with each process code, ranging from positive to neutral to negative, with the distance from the neutral line indicating the degree of positivity or negativity. The horizontal axis represents a somewhat chronological flow, aligning with the sequence of events that candidates may experience and ways in which parties may respond. During the data analysis section above, it was noted that not every process code was present in every party's response to the top-two primary. What emerged is that county political party response is not uniform, but rather the degree to which different process codes are present or preeminent in a particular party, said party can be described as predominantly expressing one of three strongest roles or positions, vis a vis candidates: facilitators, recruiters, and enforcers. These three roles are the themes of action in addition to the previous themes of sentiment. Each of these is defined further below.

Figure 3*Process Codes – Valence and Chronological Events****Facilitators – It’s All About Fairness***

Two county organizations emerged as primarily displaying the facilitator theme. Facilitators were most likely to express a desire for fairness and a disapproval of the cooling effect on third party or Democratic candidates under the top-two primary. Facilitators have the least intense vetting procedures. Their endorsement questionnaire (if it exists at all) is simple and straight forward, and it is up to the candidate to contact the party chair in advance of any regular meeting, in order to be considered for endorsement by the membership. The clearest expression of the facilitator within this study was the comment,

In the summer, we have a barbecue after filing period. We invite everyone that has filed...we invite everyone—we frequently have some of the city council candidates that are more liberal, they come and they address us and they’re honest about their viewpoints. And I think it’s interesting, I give them a lot of credit for coming.

This participant went on to describe how they publish candidate forums organized by other organizations on their website.

The participant from the second facilitator county identified themselves more “of an independent or libertarian than a Republican.” This resonates with the value of fairness and access to all candidates to the primary ballot. This participant, a former candidate, had the following to say about the top-two primary:

I just don't see a lot of independents and libertarians and third-party people on the ballot in Washington State. And I do say that some of that has to do with the top-two primary. The second thing I don't like about the top-two primary is that it kind of eliminates the political parties from participating or from nominating their candidates.

These two concepts are in some conflict, but the desire for fairness undergirds the comment.

This second facilitator participant did take a slightly stricter view of endorsement, stating their party organization does not seek out or pursue candidates but “would expect a candidate that wants our endorsement to come and ask for it.” This statement expressed that everyone is welcome to address the party and ask for endorsement, but it is up to the candidate to step up and ask. That being said, there was no intermediary between the candidate and the general membership, a distinction between facilitator counties and enforcer counties. Facilitators may or may not express the process code of enforcing, but focus their energies on endorsing, communicating, and supporting.

Recruiters – Principles Are Important

Two participants in this study can be described as coming from counties that represent the recruiter theme. Recruiters are party organizations that proactively seek out candidates. Ideas expressed by counties that are heavily recruiter in nature include looking to lower, nonpartisan office for future candidates for partisan office, and as a result, they have an interest in the outcome of nonpartisan races, and work in some ways to support certain nonpartisan candidates. One participant from a recruiter party noted that nonpartisan interest in party support—and party interest in nonpartisan candidates—is significantly increased compared to 15 years ago. This participant did not explicitly tie this shift to the top-two primary, but the timelines align.

Recruiters look to appointed positions as important gateway positions to identifying future candidates. They are well positioned to engage with excess candidates in a timely manner, to encourage withdrawal from filing if too many candidates filed. Additionally, they may intervene if excess candidates will unfavorably split the Republican vote. Recruiters are sensitive to the perception of outsiders and dislike it when intra-party fracture becomes evident.

Recruiters emphasize voter education and principals. Compared to facilitators, they seem to have a stronger candidate vetting process, and take formal action to endorse. They focus on authenticity (being a real Republican) and electability. Recruiter organizations are more likely to focus on fractures in the party, identify factions, and lament when these intra-party differences come to the attention of the public. Recruiters clearly express the process code of recruiting, but also are much stronger in their

procedures for vetting, benchmarking, endorsing, and supporting candidates than their facilitator counterparts.

Enforcers – Playing By the Book

Organizations that express the enforcer theme have the most stringent approach to candidates. Enforcers apply the heaviest requirements and have the highest expectations. One participant in this study can be described as coming from an enforcer county.

In enforcer counties, support from the party of any kind—access to voter databases, financial, volunteer time, inclusion in communications, etc.—is dependent on endorsement. Endorsement is only offered after a rigorous vetting process, and is a vote of the whole membership, following recommendation from a formal report from a candidate vetting committee. Content analysis corroborated the verbal responses given by this participant.

In the case of the enforcer county identified in this study, candidate vetting, endorsement and support rules are outlined in the bylaws. Every candidate running as a Republican for partisan office is proactively contacted by the party, immediately after candidate filing week. In order to be considered for the vetting process, the candidate is required to submit a resume, cover letter, and a two-part vetting questionnaire. Part 1 of the questionnaire requires essay-type responses to questions about qualifications (including education and experience), past involvement in civic or political organizations, knowledge of the office sought including references to the Constitution or state law, and an explicit question as to whether the candidate will refrain from endorsing any candidate other than a Republican during the current election.

Part 2 of the questionnaire prompts the respondent to answer *yes* or *no* to each of the 92 separate planks on the party platform. On any plank on which the candidate responds no or chooses not to answer, the candidate is encouraged to explain themselves. The answer may form the basis of further questioning at the vetting interview, described below.

If a candidate fulfills all the requirements above, they are eligible to sit for an interview with the formally constituted vetting committee. The vetting committee applies a scoring rubric and prepares a report of those scores. The committee then presents those scores along with a recommendation to the general membership for an endorsement vote.

The respondent from the enforcer county also expressed a desire to “make sure we don’t have any bias.” They stated being perceived as “not being fair...will ruin [our] credibility.” The enforcer county wants the influence but is also mindful of perceptions.

Enforcer counties may or may not express the process code of recruiting. They do heavily express the process codes of enforcing, blocking, and endorsing, depending on the candidate they are serious about supporting. In the words of the respondent from the enforcer county, “if the party isn’t willing to endorse someone prior to the primary, they’re really—by default—giving up what they were elected [as a precinct committee officer] to do.”

Closing Reflection

As quoted above, “Policy Feedback Theory is indispensable for scholars trying to understand how policies, once developed, reshape politics” (Mettler & SoRelle, 2014, p. 175). The policy of the top-two primary has impacted politics, particularly at the county

political party level. The results of this study suggest that although the policy impacts on politics are clearly in evidence, the nuanced nature of that impact differs somewhat county by county.

These themes, particularly the themes of action—facilitator (it’s all about fairness), recruiter (principals are important) and enforcer (playing by the book) —are drawn from the totality of the interviews and content analysis. It is important to note that individual codes and the themes of action they point to are not silos in nature. Whether a county predominantly expresses a facilitator versus an enforcer theme is not correlated to whether or not they have an interest (on a candidate endorsement questionnaire, for instance) in whether a candidate has a criminal history or past political involvement. As can be seen in Table 4 below that participants in each category inquire after that information. (Counties are masked in Table 4 as A, B, C, D, E to protect the anonymity of participants). In the cases of counties A, C and D, only one document was available for content analysis, whereas counties B and E had an additional document included.

Table 4*Document Review/Content Analysis – Select Codes arranged by County Theme*

	Facilitator		Recruiter				Enforcer
	A	C	B	B	E	E	D
Endorsing v. Recommending						1	
Questionnaires Confidential						1	
Electability						1	
Nonpartisan Candidates						1	
Money benchmark	2				1		
Grassroots benchmark	1				1		
Campaign Plan benchmark	2				1		
Past Political Involvement	2			1	1		1
Criminal/Civil Background	1			1	1		1
Fairness		1					
Republican on Republican		1					
Recruiting		1		1		1	
Enforcing		1				1	1
Vetting				2			
Blocking			1	1			
Endorsing		1				1	
Supporting		1		1		1	

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

As outlined in chapter 3, telling the story of participants with fidelity was executed according to plan. This was achieved in part through an emphasis on and preference for in vivo coding as one of the main coding approaches. This choice was driven by this coding method's ability to generate rich and meaningful descriptions. Additionally, the free-flowing aspect of the semistructured interview that allowed for

follow up and deeper exploration of a concept was beneficial and supported this study's credibility.

Transferability

One emergent thread, as discussed above in the Results section, was that even though all participant interviewees have served in leadership roles in their county Republican party, there are elements along which participants are closely aligned, while at the same time, there are some striking differences. Transferability is achieved by the emergence of both consistent themes county-to-county as well as identifying where strong local individuality exists. This dichotomy is a ready lens through which to view transferring this research to future research.

Dependability

Dependability was achieved by using a standard script for orienting each participant at the start of the interview. That script was refined over the course of the pilot study. As a result, final study participants experienced a consistent introduction to the study. Using a consistent list of questions over the arc of each interview also supported dependability.

Confirmability

My own history in political party participation and leadership required intentional reflection on possible bias. Where appropriate, I engaged in limited self-disclosure and mirroring in the context of the interviews. When this occurred, it was to encourage additional reflection from the participant, and to reassure the participant that they were heard and understood, based on similar or decidedly different experiences.

Summary

The data collection and results analysis portion of this qualitative study exploring political party response to the top-two primary election system in Washington State, has resulted in a rich data set. Through a first round of coding using grammatical (attribute coding), elemental (concept, in vivo and process coding) and affective (emotion, values and versus coding) coding methods, a deep and nuanced impression of the varied responses to this primary election system emerged. Transitional coding and second round coding resulted in useful process codes that, when applied to participant counties and the documents available for content analysis, illuminated three types of counties: facilitators, recruiters, and enforcers. The following chapter will place the findings of this study in their place within the larger body of scholarly literature on the top-two primary and elections in general. It will explore the limitations of this study, recommendations for future research, and finally explore the social change implications of this effort.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the Washington State county-level political party response to the top-two primary election system. States are where many policy innovations are tried and studied. Several state legislatures have considered implementing a system similar to Washington's top-two primary. An understanding of this system's impact on political parties gives information that may influence future public policy development and implementation. As has been previously stated, elections that are accessible and provide an equal and unimpeded franchise are essential to the representative democracy of the United States.

Interpretation of Findings

Shortly after the establishment of the top-two primary, both the Washington State Republican Party and the Washington State Democratic Party joined forces on a legal challenge that was ultimately heard and decided by the United States Supreme Court. The political parties objected to the burden placed by the top-two primary on their First Amendment association rights. Objections also included perceived voter confusion (*Washington State Grange v. Washington State Republican Party*, 552 U.S. 442, 2008).

The case was decided such that the top-two primary was upheld, but not without controversy. Justice Scalia wrote in his dissent, "There is no state interest behind this law except the Washington Legislature's dislike for bright-colors partisanship, and its desire to blunt the ability of political parties with noncentrist views to endorse and advocate their own candidates" (*Washington State Grange v. Washington State Republican Party*, 552 U.S. 442, (2008), sec. III, para 3). Scalia's remarks illustrate the setting in which the

top-two primary operates, and provides a lens through which to interpret the present study considering past research on the topic.

As discussed in Chapter 2, this study of the county political party response to the top-two primary occurred in a very particular setting, specifically within Washington State's long history of populism and progressivism, and a culture of political independence. Perhaps that independence is one reason a variety of party responses have emerged. In Chapter 4, themes pointing to recruiter (principals are important), facilitator (it's all about fairness) and enforcer (playing by the book) counties were identified. The lack of uniformity county-to-county may be, unto itself, an outgrowth of the historic, legal, and political context from which the top-two primary sprang into existence. In this way, this study has added another expression of Washington's political independence.

Early research by Manweller (2011) suggested that the top-two primary did generate some confusion. Voters assumed that party preference expressed by a candidate was indicative of being a party's nominee. Confirming Manweller's underlying concern about voter confusion, it is possible that counties that emerged in this study as enforcer parties have been driven to take the serious measures they have taken, in direct response to that possible confusion.

Beck and Hendrickson (2013) investigated whether there was incentive to political parties to attempt to limit the number of candidates appearing on the primary ballot. Although not discussed above in Chapter 4, it was noted that there was variability county to county whether endorsement action was taken pre-primary (as in the case of enforcer parties wanting heavier influence over the outcome) versus post-primary (as in

the case of facilitators, where the value of fairness and access to the ballot was strongest). This may be an area for future study.

McGhee and Shor (2017) suggested that the top-two primary did not, as hoped for, combat polarization between parties. In this study there are instances of intraparty disagreement and measuring whether or not both candidates and fellow party members are considered Republican enough. This seems to extend the conclusion of McGhee and Shor (2017) that there was no moderating effect on candidates and raises questions of whether the top-two primary has an influence on intra-party moderation or polarization.

Both Sparks (2019) and Patterson, Jr. (2020) raised questions about the challenge for voters in low-information races. Specifically, they were concerned about those races in which media deserts or competition with up-ballot candidates for voter attention hamper the voter's ability to choose. The process codes of supporting and communicating emerged in the study, suggesting that the facilitator and recruiter parties may be seeking to reach voters in low information races.

Advocates of the top-two primary had hoped for increased competition, according to Sparks (2020b). In the current study, several participants not only mentioned but lamented the perceived narrowing of the competition, stating their belief that the top-two primary disincentivized or blocked out-party, third-party or independent candidates from even filing to be on the ballot. This suggests another potential area of investigation.

Schattschneider (1935) was quoted as saying "new policies create new politics" (p. 288). Whether that is evidenced in this study as a new interest in nonpartisan candidates as reported by one of the recruiter counties, or an increase in purity tests for

Republican candidates and the much bandied-about term Republican in name only (RINO) in the enforcer counties, the relatively new top-two primary election system in use in Washington state, does in fact appear to have its place in a policy feedback system. When the separately formed Republican party organizations at the county level were confronted with the loss of associational rights—namely, being able to control which candidate's bear the party's designation—they were left to decide on their response, individually. As a result, it appears that different counties developed different approaches. Some emphasize fairness and facilitation. Some emphasize the long game, looking to identify and prepare future candidates from among those willing to serve at lower office. Some appear to have tightened both the pathway to approval to bear the name Republican, and also the resources available to good Republican candidates.

The current study adds to the body of knowledge on the top-two primary, in ways that confirm, disconfirm, and extend what has previously been illuminated in the scholarly literature, as stated above. Given that participants expressed a low motivation to change the top-two primary system, it is likely to remain in effect for the long term. The varied county political party responses found in this study suggest a number of possible future inquiries, as will be outlined below.

Limitations of the Study

In qualitative research, trustworthiness encompasses the concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. It is appropriate to take a retrospective look at the elements of trustworthiness of this study, and any limitations encountered.

On the whole, trustworthiness of the process and the results of this study remained solid. For each of the following concepts known broadly as trustworthiness, synonyms are offered by Miles and colleagues (2014). Credibility, also described as authenticity, was detected in the ready rapport and rich responses from participants. Dependability, aka auditability, was achieved through the use of multiple tools for coding, starting with use of the Delve tool, and reliance on manual organization and reorganization through multiple rounds of coding using post-it notes. Additionally, a consistent introductory script followed by a uniform list of questions was used in each semistructured interview. Confirmability, also described as objectivity, can be demonstrated through the recordings and text transcripts, as well as by the retained coding outputs from Delve.

The one area of possible limitation to trustworthiness may be detected in the area of transferability, also described by Miles, et al. (2014) as fittingness or external validity. This limitation is not due to the methods employed, but by the somewhat surprising range of attitudes and priorities amongst participants. Rather than identifying a single county political party response to the top-two primary, I concluded that several very different responses emerged. In some cases, the county political party response was to act as a facilitator, emphasizing a value of openness to the ballot and fairness for all candidates. Other counties responded by being more intentional, recruiting candidates for higher office from those who had served in lower nonpartisan office. Still others took a more directive enforcement role in screening and vetting candidates, gate-keeping party resources and limiting access to those resources, explicitly endorsing the candidates who are considered real Republicans and blocking candidates they do not favor. This

limitation of transferability could be remedied by additional participants. Additional insight may also be gleaned by adding points of information (perhaps through a mixed-method approach; see recommendations below) to see if quantitative data points can provide context. An example might be to compare and contrast the attitudinal and procedural responses of political parties based on whether the county is a swing county, or whether the county's voters consistently vote in favor of one party's candidates or the other.

Recommendations

One of the strengths of this study was the authenticity expressed in the context of the semistructured interviews. In no case did it seem that participants were holding back or censoring their remarks. One contributor to this authenticity may have been that I came to the interview with both a deep understanding of elections (as a current elections official) and a deep understanding of Republican party operations (as a former party leader myself). Another contributor to the authenticity may have been that the topic—the top-two primary and its implications for party decision making vis a vis a field of candidates that they cannot nominate, eliminate or otherwise control—is one that is deeply felt by individuals who have chosen to be active in party politics. For most party organizations, winning elections is a central priority. Some simple recommendations for future research include expanding the participant pool and running another round of interviews and content analysis with additional Washington state participants.

Expanding on the idea of running additional participants, a second recommendation is to expand the current study to reach deeper into the party

organizations represented by this study's participants. This study was limited to party leadership; a future study might target rank-and-file precinct committee officers for participation. The semistructured interview is likely to conceal some individual bias on the part of the participant. Reaching deeper to corroborate or find differences within individual party organizations, to thus create a more robust data set and stronger conclusions, would be beneficial.

Replicating this study with Republican party leadership in California is another possible area for future research. As stated above, whereas California has an essentially similar primary election system as Washington has now, they arrived at the idea of the extra openness of the top-two primary through a very different pathway. Whereas Washington's top-two precursor—the blanket primary—was in place for nearly 70 years, Californians voted in a closed primary system until 1998. Replicating this study with a California population and subject pool might illuminate whether the historic context of primary elections might contribute to different party responses to the top-two primary.

Another recommendation for future study is to expand participants to include county level Democratic party leadership. This study was limited to Republican organizations, a limit chosen based on my personal and professional qualities, as a means to ensure objectivity and an elimination of potential bias. Following the completion of this study, it is my belief that a partner researcher could be identified, either without the partisan history or current nexus with county elections as I brought to the project, or possibly someone with similar bona fides in the Democratic party. In the case of a study with a second researcher, additional sophistication could be brought to the activity of

coding participant responses as well as content analysis, and inter-coder reliability could be explored. Both an expansion to Democratic party leadership, and to a second coder could bring a degree of reliability and trustworthiness to a subsequent study that would surely benefit the body of scientific literature on this topic.

Any of the above efforts could be expanded to a longitudinal design. Checking back in with the same participant organizations over several election cycles might provide insight not gathered here in this study. Such an effort may also demonstrate change or evolution over time.

Although possibly premature but worth surveilling is the new system in Alaska which is a top-four primary followed by a ranked choice general election. This new hybrid system blends multiple electoral innovations. If it withstands the various efforts to repeal it (Ballotpedia, n.d.-a), this system is worthy of study as well.

One final recommendation for future study would be to integrate a quantitative component. The top-two primary created the environment in which two candidates who state the same party preference may advance from the primary election ballot to the general election. In these cases, the general election could very well be between two Democrats or two Republicans. Bringing a mixed methods component to the concepts in this study could reveal a correlation between enforcer counties and heavily Republican outcomes, or facilitator counties and the swing nature of a county, as an example. The quantitative data available in the form of historical partisan voting trends might bring a sense of why to the differences that exist between counties.

Implications

Research worth conducting is research that is oriented not just to expanding a dataset somewhere. Research worth conducting provides information and insight that can be used by academics and policy makers to contribute positively to social change. In a small way, this study on the county political party response to the top-two primary brings added knowledge that can influence future public policy development in a way that is informed by the voices and stories of individuals and groups impacted by the top-two primary, and by the data collected from those individuals. In addition, this study expands the application of policy feedback theory into qualitative research. Finally, the themes identified in this study provide a lens to be used by political parties, practitioners, and policy makers alike to evaluate the extent to which the response to the top-two primary conforms to the intent of this electoral system.

Public policy development does not occur in a vacuum. A key component of the representative form of government in the United States is the accessibility to the governance process. Whether that is access to the ballot as a voter—or as a candidate—or through sunshine laws that insist on transparency in government as in the case of public records laws or open public meeting requirements, the citizen in this form of government is invited to be involved and informed. This study gathers the voices and perspectives of one group of citizens—political party leadership—and gives an insight not previously available in the scientific literature.

Regarding theoretical implications, the current study brings policy feedback theory into the qualitative arena in a way not previously in evidence in the literature. This

study gives voice to the *power of groups* component within policy feedback theory and demonstrates how that power is wielded differently depending on local circumstances and group dynamics. This study might be used as a model for future research, whether that includes the use of similar semistructured interviews, content analysis, a synthesis of varied coding methods, or simply using a multiple case study approach for future research.

This study illuminates several themes of sentiment. The first theme of sentiment, dislike but acquiescence, suggests that the top-two primary is here to stay. There is no organized or energetic legislative advocacy underway to eliminate this primary election system. Each participant in this study is resigned to this form of primary election. The positive social impact of uncovering this phenomenon might include encouraging a pivot of attention for those involved in elections at all levels—including elections practitioners and political parties—from disagreement and discontent with the top-two primary election system--to voter education. In my professional work as an elections official, I often speak with voters who assert “I am a registered Republican,” or “I am a registered Democrat,” when in reality, a voter does not register with a party affiliation in a top-two primary environment. The lack of understanding on this precise topic creates frustration and fear in voters. For example, when a voter receives a robocall or a piece of campaign literature from one candidate or another, they might raise questions about how the source got their information, and how those persons know how a voter has voted in the past. By shifting energy from tolerating the top-two primary to engaging in a robust program of voter education, citizens may achieve a higher level of comfort with the electoral system

in general—a tremendous achievement in the current environment. The implications of such an effort could be felt at both the individual and community levels.

Another theme of sentiment, the value of fairness and access to the ballot for all candidates, has much needed implications for this space. In a time of intense political polarization, to demonstrate that the value of a fair fight is present and expressed within partisan groups may serve to cut that polarization. When interparty rhetoric is focused on demonizing one's opponent, a shift to more robust discussions about issues and solutions could have far-reaching implications, from the Thanksgiving table to peace among nations.

The final theme of sentiment, which highlights conflict, a negative view of fellow partisans, and the need for purity tests, deserves contemplation as well. This theme leaves a bad taste in the mouth. It weighs on the conscience. It divides. One positive implication of the current study is that by bringing this sentiment to light, it may engender some reflection—and possibly a more charitable view of one another in partisan environments.

In a similar way, the action-oriented themes that place county political parties into categories of facilitator, recruiter, or enforcer counties, reveal some opportunities for positive social change. County political parties are not monolithic. Even when the underlying identification or affiliation of Republican is held in common, the values, feelings, decisions, and actions may differ, party organization to party organization, county to county. Knowing that these differences and nuances exist establishes a shared understanding, a clearer vernacular, and an invitation to grow to counties in any of the above-mentioned categories.

The top-two primary has an impact on voters, candidates, political parties, and the public policy development process. These were the various angles of inquiry first introduced in Chapter 1. A final implication of this study is that it has started answering the larger question, “what has been the response to Washington’s top-two primary?” from one angle—the political parties. Participant responses, whether the meaningful and descriptive in vivo and versus codes, or the diverse action themes that describe how county parties have responded differently, have given much to build on current understanding and future study.

Conclusions

One online source catalogued 491 bills introduced throughout the United States related to election systems (of which primaries in general and the top-two in specific are included) in just one year—2023 (Ballotpedia, n.d.-b). Policy makers are most certainly paying attention to these issues. The scientific literature should be engaging with these essential ideas with equal focus. This study provides some small contribution to this body of knowledge, a methodology for future study and by doing so, has engaged in the very positive social change sought at this study’s outset. The work is on-going.

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Appendix A: Stevens County Sample Ballot, Primary Election, August 4, 2020, p. 1

Sample Ballot

Primary Election
August 4, 2020
Stevens County, Washington

Who donates to campaigns? View contributors for candidates and measures.
 Public Disclosure Commission
 www.pdc.wa.gov
 Toll Free (877) 601-2828

VOTE FOR ONLY ONE CANDIDATE IN EACH RACE.
 To vote for your choice in each contest, completely fill in the box provided to the left of your choice. To vote for a write-in candidate, fill in the box provided to the left of the words "Write-in" and write in the name of the candidate. If you make a mistake, draw a line through the entire candidate's name. You then have the option of making another choice if you wish.

READ: Each candidate for partisan office may state a political party that he or she prefers. A candidate's preference does not imply that the candidate is nominated or endorsed by the party, or that the party approves of or associates with that candidate.

State-Partisan Offices

Governor

Alex Tsimerman (Prefers StandupAmerica Party)

Phil Fortunato (Prefers Republican Party)

Ryan Ryals (Prefers Unaffiliated Party)

Leon Aaron Lawson (Prefers Trump Republican Party)

Henry Clay Dennison (Prefers Socialist Workers Party)

Tim Eyman (Prefers Republican Party)

Liz Hallock (Prefers Green Party)

Goodspaceguy (Prefers Trump Republican Party)

Omari Tahir Garrett (Prefers Democrat Party)

Don L. Rivers (Prefers Democratic Party)

Martin L. 'Iceman' Wheeler (Prefers Republican Party)

Raul Garcia (Prefers Republican Party)

Tylor Grow (Prefers Republican Party)

Winston Wilkes (Prefers Propertarianist Party)

Brian R. Weed (States No Party Preference)

Thor Amundson (Prefers Independent Party)

Gene Hart (Prefers Democratic Party)

William (Bill) Miller (Prefers American Patriot Party)

Matthew Murray (Prefers Republican Party)

Dylan B. Nails (Prefers Independent Party)

Cameron M. Vessey (States No Party Preference)

David W. Blomstrom (Prefers Fifth Republic Party)

Anton Sakharov (Prefers Trump Republican Party)

Craig Campbell (States No Party Preference)

Nate Herzog (Prefers Pre2016 Republican Party)

Cregan M. Newhouse (States No Party Preference)

Ian Gonzales (Prefers Republican Party)

Cairo D'Almeida (Prefers Democratic Party)

Elaina J. Gonzalez (Prefers Independent Party)

Jay Inslee (Prefers Democratic Party)

Joshua Freed (Prefers Republican Party)

David Voltz (Prefers Cascadia Labour Party)

Joshua Wolf (Prefers New-Liberty Party)

Loren Culp (Prefers Republican Party)

Richard L. Carpenter (Prefers Republican Party)

Bill Hirt (Prefers Republican Party)

Write-in

Precinct Sample Ballot
Page 1 of 2

Lt. Governor

Joseph Brumbles (Prefers Republican Party)

Jared Frerichs (Prefers Libertarian Party)

Ann Davison Sattler (Prefers Republican Party)

James R. Rafferty (Prefers Democratic Party)

Marko Lias (Prefers Democratic Party)

Matt Seymour (Prefers Libertarian Party)

Michelle Jasmer (Prefers Democratic Party)

Bill Penor (Prefers Republican Party)

Richard (Dick) Muri (Prefers Republican Party)

Denny Heck (Prefers Democratic Party)

Marty McClendon (Prefers Republican Party)

Write-in

Secretary of State

Ed Minger (Prefers Independent Party)

Gentry Lange (Prefers Progressive Party)

Kim Wyman (Prefers Republican Party)

Gael Tarleton (Prefers Democratic Party)

Write-in

State Treasurer

Duane A. Davidson (Prefers Republican Party)

Mike Pellicciotti (Prefers Democratic Party)

Write-in

State Auditor

Joshua Casey (Prefers Democratic Party)

Chris Leyba (Prefers Republican Party)

Pat (Patrice) McCarthy (Prefers Democratic Party)

Write-in

Attorney General

Matt Larkin (Prefers Republican Party)

Mike Vaska (Prefers GOP Party)

Brett Rogers (Prefers Republican Party)

Bob Ferguson (Prefers Democratic Party)

Write-in

Read Both Sides of the Ballot

Sample Ballot

Appendix B: Pilot Study Interview Introduction and Questions

Introductory Script

Good morning/afternoon/evening! Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today. As we discussed when we set this appointment, this interview is a part of my research into county political party response to the top-two primary here in Washington. While I do have some structured interview questions to guide us, my hope is that this will be an open and organic conversation. You are free to tell stories and relay specific events and what they meant to you or your organization, keeping in my that in my analysis I will be looking for broad themes. Additionally, any written summary or presentation based on your interview responses will be treated with anonymity, and sensitive information will be protected. I will be recording this session, to assist in my analysis at the conclusion of all my interviews and to help me focus on what you are saying now, rather than taking notes.

By way of establishing a shared understanding of the topic, I provide the following description of the Top-two primary. This description comes from the Abstract portion of my dissertation proposal: The top-two primary election system, used on a very limited basis in the United States, allows all voters (regardless of party preference) to vote for any candidate on the ballot for the primary election; the top-two vote earners advance to the general election, regardless of candidate party preference. Two candidates with the same party preference may advance to the general election. Additionally, political parties have no formal ability to affirm or disavow a candidate's party preference. The purpose of this qualitative study is to gather the perspectives of political

party leadership, in order to explore and understand Washington State county political party response to the top-two primary election system.

Do you have any questions for me before we begin the formal interview?

Do I have your consent to begin the interview?

Interview Questions

- Tell me a little about yourself, about your involvement in your local Republican Party including how you got involved and how long you have been involved.
- Tell me in general terms how your organization feels about the top-two primary.
- What should I know about the local dynamics in your county, particularly when it comes to partisan races on the primary ballot?
- Tell me about what efforts have been developed by your organization in response to the top-two primary.
- What challenges has the top-two primary presented to your organization? Tell me specifically about any challenges related to candidates, endorsements, or communicating with the voting public.
- What have been the goals or hoped-for outcomes of those efforts?
- Have you been influenced by what other county party organizations have implemented in the development of your efforts?
- Have your organization's efforts changed or evolved over time, and if so, how?
- What further evolution or upcoming changes to your efforts do you anticipate in the near future?
- How do you feel your efforts have met the goals as developed by your organization?

- What other comments would you like to make on this topic?
- Do you have any documents used by your organization that you would be willing to share?