Political participation under the unit rule: A research note

WILLIAM P. COLLINS
Drake University

Introduction

The use of a unit rule in the election of the president has been the object of a large number of scholarly analyses. Much of this effort can be categorized in terms of three fundamental approaches. There has been a concern for whether the use of a unit voting rule acts to favor one voting group over another (Eldersveld, 1949; Longley and Braun, 1972; Sayre and Parris, 1970; Sterling, 1974; Zeidenstein, 1973). Other studies have approached the unit rule from the standpoint of its structural characteristics. Making use of the intellectual tools found in the spatial modelling of voting literature, these studies examine the formal character of unit voting rules. The objective of such studies is to determine deductively the relation of such structures to the relevant political behaviors (Hinich and Ordeshook, 1974; Hinich, Michelson and Ordeshook, 1975; Uslaner, 1976). A final line of research has examined the unit rule from the standpoint of its direct impact upon political behavior (Banzhaff, 1965, 1966, 1968; Kau and Rubin, 1976). This line of inquiry has proceeded by asking to what extent the unit rule impacts upon the probability that a single voter will be able to affect the outcome. Previous studies have generally established that political participation varies as linear function of this probability (Barzel and Silberbeg, 1973; Downs, 1957; Riker and Ordeshook, 1968; Tullock, 1967). This then means that if it can be shown that a unit rule impacts upon the probability of affecting the electoral outcome, then there will be an important connection between the rate of participation and the use of a unit voting rule.

Kau and Rubin have recently established that the probability of affecting an electoral outcome is higher under a direct vote than under a unit rule (Kau and Rubin, 1976; and, for a subsequent correction, Kau and Rubin, 1977). This higher probability of being decisive then leads to the prediction that levels of participation will be higher under a direct election than under a unit rule. The authors were only able to test their idea indirectly. Making use of the Banzhaff Index which measures a state’s voting power in the electoral college, a multiple regression equation was estimated to determine
the effects of voting power upon levels of participation in a presidential election. The voting index was shown to be the critical variable in accounting for the level of participation. The authors then conclude on the basis of this indirect test that abolition of the electoral college will lead to higher levels of participation in presidential elections. The purpose of this vote is to provide a more direct test of this prediction using Georgia’s County Unit System as an appropriate empirical setting.

The setting

Georgia’s unit rule applied to the nominations of candidates for statewide office. The eight largest Georgia counties received six unit votes, the next thirty largest counties received four unit votes and the remaining 121 counties received two unit votes. A majority of the unit vote was required to nominate candidates. A candidate received the unit vote upon gaining a plurality of the county’s popular vote (Key, 1949: 119). The unit rule in Georgia was patterned in a manner similar to the federal electoral college. It can thus be taken as an appropriate setting in which to analyze the impact of alternative institutional arrangements.

The unit rule in Georgia primaries was first adopted in 1898; and, with the exception of the 1908 gubernatorial primary, continued to operate until 1963 (Holland, 1949). Gubernatorial primaries were held at two-year intervals until 1948. In addition, the generally restrictive suffrage requirements, and the basic demographic homogeneity of Georgia’s voters imparted an overall stability to the political environment. These conditions provide an excellent opportunity to examine the behavioral implications of the unit rule.

The analysis

Data for the analysis were drawn from county poll tax rolls, and from the Alexander Heard voting data on southern primaries. The use of the whole poll taxpayers will provide an accurate base upon which to compare the respective rates of participation for each primary election.¹

The analysis will proceed in two stages. A direct test of the Kau-Rubin hypothesis is made by comparing the mean participation rates over the three election periods. As a second part of the analysis a series of three regression equations are estimated in which the primary participation rates for each election are regressed against the candidates winning percentage and the inverse of the voting population of the county. These equations reflect the expectation that a county’s level of participation is linearly related to measures reflecting the probability of affecting the outcome.

Comparison of these results given a setting in which the unit rule was