On the Representativeness of Primary Electorates

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Abstract

Many scholars and political observers attribute the increasing partisan polarization in American politics to primary electorates. Primary voters are thought to be ideological extremists who exert centrifugal pressure on candidates and legislators. Although extant political science research has not supported this characterization, the ideological sorting of the electorate, as well as the 2012 election, have renewed concerns about the unrepresentative quality of primary electorates. We undertake the first study of validated primary and general election turnout data in nearly 30 years. We find that on several demographic, participation, and policy measures primary voters look similar to other voters within their party.

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Are primary elections at the root of America's dysfunctional political system? Many people seem to think so. Phil Keisling (2010), formerly Oregon's Secretary of State, puts it bluntly:

> Want to get serious about reducing the toxic levels of hyper-partisanship and legislative dysfunction now gripping American politics? Here's a direct, simple fix: abolish party primary elections.

Abel Maldonado (2010), formerly California's Lieutenant Governor, elaborates the logic of this position:

> We have a system today where, with gerrymandered districts and a closed right primary and a closed left primary, which is Republican and Democrat, we have folks that come up there—and, frankly, they're concerned about the next election, their next position. They're concerned about party bosses. They don't worry about what's really important, and that's the state of California. We get this partisanship.

The 2012 election made this position even more salient. After Obama's victory, anguished Republicans sought to address their "primary problem." As Politico's Jonathan Martin (2012) wrote:

> The disastrous 2012 election and embarrassing fiscal cliff standoff has [*sic*] brought forth one principal conclusion from establishment Republicans: They have a primary problem. The intra-party contests, or threat thereof, have become the original sin that explains many of the party's woes in the minds of GOP leaders. It's the primaries that push their presidential nominees far to the right…produce lackluster Senate candidates…and, as seen most vividly in the last two weeks, dissuade scores of gerrymandered House members from face-saving compromise while politically emasculating their speaker.

This argument circulates not only among politicos and journalists but in scholarship as well. For example, Wright and Berkman (1986: 575) argue that Senate challengers are "purer ideologues" because they "are fresh from primary victories and hence still tightly tied to their primary electorates and core ideological supporters." Sinclair (2006: 29-30) writes:

> Average voters, while more polarized than they used to be, are not groups into two hostile and distant camps. But to a considerable extent, activists are, and activists are much more

> important than their numbers. They always vote, they vote in primaries, they give money or work for candidates. To win the primary, the candidate needs to be especially attentive and responsive to activists who are more polarized than less interested voters. The candidates who emerge from primaries are likely to be acceptable to the activists.

This is not a new concern for Republicans. After the 1984 presidential election, a supporter of Jack Kemp said "The Republican presidential primary process remains a right-wing orgy" (quoted in Baker 1985).

Underneath this perception of primaries is a concern about representation. Primaries, the argument proceeds, make politicians responsive to unrepresentative primary voters, who are believed to be far more partisan and ideological than the average American. Competitive primaries therefore encourage extremist candidates, or at least candidates willing to espouse extreme positions. If there is no competitive general election to tug candidates back to the "center," proponents of the theory argue that the winner will go off to Washington or Sacramento and become a loyal foot soldier for the party—unwilling to compromise and thereby contributing even more to the polarization of the parties and gridlock in the legislature. However plausible this argument, it has not fared well when examined empirically. As we will describe, there is little evidence that primaries contribute much to polarization.

Our goal is to explain why. To do so, we examine the representativeness of presidential primary electorates. Past research has reached divergent conclusions about how well these primary voters resemble the stereotypical political junkies and hard-bitten ideologues. We use a novel source of data to bring precision and nuance to the characterization of primary and general election voters. We find very few differences among presidential election primary and general election electorates, regardless of how each group is defined. In down-ballot races, where primary election turnout is not as high as it is in presidential elections, larger differences may exist, and almost surely do, but we find no support for the claim that the primary electorate demands that candidates move to ideological extremes in order to align with these voters' preferences.

Primaries and Polarization

That the Democratic and Republican elites have become more polarized is well-established (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2008, Layman et al. 2010). An unresolved question is why. Several trends seem to incriminate primary elections. The number of competitive House districts is declining (Abramowitz et al. 2006), which should make candidates and representatives less responsive to the views of general election voters (Mayhew 1974). Indeed, there is an increasingly tenuous link between the behavior of candidates and the views of their constituents (Ansolabehere et al. 2001). Even when general election voters wield their power most fully—by evicting an incumbent—the result is a new representative who is no less extreme, just on the other side of the aisle (Bafumi and Herron 2010). The implication is that representatives, no longer fearing a competitive general election, have instead focused on the constituency that could unseat them—primary election voters—and thereby become the sorts of ideologues primary voters are believed to be.

In actuality, it is difficult to find evidence linking polarization to primary elections. After primary elections were more widely adopted, there was no clear change in the responsiveness of candidates to district opinion (Ansolabehere et al. 2001) or the ideological extremity of members of Congress (Hirano et al. 2010). In fact, polarization has continued to increase even as primary elections have become less competitive (Hirano et al. 2006). In this era of primary elections, there is only mixed evidence that more extreme candidates do better in primary elections (Brady et al. 2007, Hirano et al. 2010), or that candidates who faced a competitive primary election are more extreme in the general election than candidates who did not face a primary (Ansolabehere et al. 2001; Burden 2001, 2004). The threat of a competitive primary also does not induce legislators to become more extreme (Hirano et al. 2010). In fact, the views of candidates are more strongly linked to the overall opinion in their district than to opinions of voters from their party in that district (Peress 2012). Similarly, extremity in roll call voting is more strongly associated with the ideological extremity of the general electorate than the primary electorate, though the primary electorate does appear to matter (Butler 2009).

Refining the measurement of primary elections does not change this picture. Although lower turnout in primary elections is also thought to induce polarization—since then the electorate will be even more skewed toward political activists and ideologues—there is no relationship between primary turnout and legislators' ideologies (Hirano et al. 2010). There is also little relationship between primary rules and polarization: closed primaries, in which only party members can vote, do not produce more ideologically extreme candidates than open primaries (McGhee et al. 2012).[1] Even the institution of the more radical "blanket" primary in California, though it did induce some moderation, did so only to a small extent and only in districts that were already fairly centrist (Bullock and Clinton 2011; but see Alvarez and Sinclair 2012). Early evidence on Washington State's "top two" primary suggests that it too does not produce more moderate legislators (Donovan 2012).

There are many potential explanations for these largely counterintuitive findings. For one, competitive primaries may not hurt candidates in the general election because primaries allow parties to pick candidates who are better on "valence" dimensions—like competence, charisma, or skill at campaigning—and who therefore do better in general elections even if the primary forces them further from the median voter (Adams and Merrill 2008). Another explanation, and the one we focus on, is that primary voters may not as ideologically extreme as they are often portrayed.

The Characteristics of Primary Voters

The conventional wisdom is that primary voters are more politically active, partisan, and ideologically extreme than general election voters. Within any political party, the conventional wisdom is that primary voters are more partisan and ideological than party members who vote in general elections.[2]

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[1] This research is more comprehensive than at least one other study (Gerber and Morton 1998) that did find some relationship between primary type and polarization. Kanthak and Morton (2001) actually find that open primary systems produce more extreme candidates than semi-open systems—suggesting a non-linear relationship between openness and ideological extremity that is not anticipated by the conventional wisdom.

[2] It is important to compare primary voters to general election voters or close analogues. As Norrander (1989) and Lengle (1981) point out, comparing primary voters to primary non-voters (as in Ranney 1972) risks conflating difference induced by the primary system with differences introduced by general asymmetries in political participation.

Two seminal studies from the 1980s cast doubt on that hypothesis. Drawing on several state exit polls from 1976 and 1980, Geer (1988) found that a party's primary voters were not more ideological or partisan than the broader "party following"—those general election voters who identified with the party or did not identify with it but still voted for it. In fact, the opposite was true. Geer argues that this is because older voters were over-represented in the primary electorate and brought what was, at least at that time, a more moderate orientation to politics. Drawing on a different dataset from the same time period, the 1980 American National Election Study, Norrander (1989) finds that primary voter are not more ideologically extreme than general election voters. She concludes: "Fears about extremist primary voters selecting extremist candidates unpalatable to the more moderate general election voters are unsupported. Primary voters just are not more ideologically extreme" (584).[3]

But since those studies were conducted, party polarization has proceeded apace, and some of that has trickled down to voters as well. Voters have become better "sorted" by party and ideology, as liberals migrated to the Democratic Party and conservatives to the Republican Party, and the resulting polarization is cited as a possible reason why primary electorates could have come more extreme and thereby exerted more pull on candidates (Butler 2009; Levendusky 2009). As Fiorina and Levendusky (2006: 71) write, "Because sorting produces a more homogeneous and more extreme primary electorate, the pressure increases for candidates to take consistently liberal or conservative positions on most issues, even when moderation would be more helpful in the general election." That polarization is most evident among the most politically engaged citizens (Abramowitz 2006)—those thought to be most likely to vote in primaries—only suggests that primary electorates could have become more polarized (although presumably so would general election voters as well).

A recent comparison of primary voters and general election voters suggests that some polarization has occurred. Using the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, Jacobson (2012) examines political attitudes among primary voters and general election voters who did not vote in the primary. He does find

[3] In a related study, Hersh (2012) studies primary and caucus voters in the 2008 election and finds few differences in their political activism, despite the conventional wisdom that participating in caucuses is more costly and therefore tends to attract more activist voters.

evidence that primary electorates, especially among Republicans, are more ideologically extreme. The differences are not necessarily large: for example, after combining respondents' positions on 9 different issues into a 2-point scale, Jacobson finds that Democratic primary voters and general election voters were nearly identical and Republican primary and general election voters were .09 points apart—only about 4.5% of the width of the scale.[4] Jacobson sees in these patterns "a common explanation for candidates' and parties' failure to adopt positions close to those of the median voter: the need to appeal to primary electorates in which ideological extremists are overrepresented" (1624-25).

But there is another potentially important difference between Jacobson's study and Geer's and Norrander's—one different than when their data were gathered. Geer and Norrander rely on data about verified voters—via exit polls and validated vote measures in the ANES, respectively. Jacobson has to rely on self-reported turnout.[5] Jacobson acknowledges that, as in many surveys in which turnout is assessed via self-reports, respondents to the 2010 CCES over-reported turnout. But he argues that "comparisons across participation categories remain informative" (1615). However, introducing validated voting data can indeed alter comparisons across categories of participation. As Ansolabehere and Hersh (2011) show in their study of general election voters and non-voters, using validated vote data reduces the (already small) ideological gaps between these groups. This study raises the possibility that biases in self-reports might complicate the study of primary electorates as well. Of course gathering data on validated registration and turnout can be expensive and complicated, especially on a national sample. We are fortunate to have a national sample of 20,000 registered voters for which vote validation was performed after a six-wave panel study in 2008.

Data

Our data come from the 2008 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP), which was a six-wave panel study fielded in December of 2007 and then January, March, September, October, and November of

[4] A more recent study of primary type and ideological representativeness (Kaufmann et al. 2003) generates a similar result. In exit polls conducted in the 1988-2000 elections, Democratic voters in open primaries were not ideologically different from Democratic voters in closed primaries (relative to Democratic general election voters. Republican vote in open primaries were less conservative than Republican voters in closed primaries, but only by a small amount (10%).
[5] The same is true of Peress (2012) and Butler (2009).

2008 (Jackman and Vavreck 2009). The CCAP data consist of 20,000 impaneled respondents who are representative of registered voters with respect to a number of demographic and political variables.[6] The 2008 CCAP design was stratified by battleground status such that each strata contained 10,000 cases. The 15 closely contested battleground states are: Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, North Carolina, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Nevada, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and West Virginia. The data are weighted here to reflect of the population of registered voters in the country.

To the 2008 CCAP we append an indicator for whether the Secretary of State in the respondent's state of residence validated, through state-based records of participation, that the respondent was registered to vote and cast a ballot in the respective election. These data are publicly available in most states. Our validated turnout data was gathered by the survey research firm YouGov/Polimetrix, Inc. from records maintained by the firm Catalist, Inc. We describe these data and how they were matched to the CCAP data in the appendix.

Catalist was able to match 16,792 CCAP respondents (84%) of CCAP respondents to one of their state voter files. Six-hundred of the respondents (3%) were confirmed as unregistered. The final set, 2,608 (13%), could not be matched by Catalist to any record on a voter file nor a record on a consumer file. These respondents may or may not be registered to vote. Catalist's inability to match them does not necessarily mean they are unregistered, only unverified.[7] The validated turnout rate in the general election of the CCAP registered voter sample, according to Catalist, was 75%. The primary turnout rate was 54%.[8]

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[6] See Jackman and Vavreck (2010) for a complete description of the sampling attributes of CCAP.

[7] None of the CCAP respondents living in Nevada were matched to the Nevada file. Catalist confirmed on followup that it does not have access to a Nevada voter file. Nevada aside, rates of matching the ostensibly registered voter sample display considerable variation across states. In Mississippi, just 67 of 100 CCAP panelists were found on voter files from that state, which is known to have one of the least advanced files in the country. Similarly low rates come from Wyoming (21 out of 31, or 67.7%), the District of Columbia (29 out of 40, 72.5%) and Alaska (38 out of 52, or 73.1%). States with high rates of matching include the Dakotas (SD: 46 out of 51 respondents, or 90.2%; ND, 40 out of 43 respondents, 93%) and Montana (53 out of 55 respondents, 96.4%). Most states' rates cluster around the 84% average, however, alleviating concerns that differences in match-rates across states are driving the congruence (or incongruence) of preferences across electorates.

[8] These percentages are calculated leaving the unmatched respondents in the denominator and classifying them as not having voted in the 2008 election. Lots of things, like the quality of the matching data (name, address, zip code, birthdate), can affect the ability to match a person to a voting record. CCAP is a registered voter sample, and thus every respondent told us they were registered. For the unmatched respondents, their registration remains unverified by Catalist, but we classify them as non-participants.

As expected, fewer people participated in the primaries than in the general election, but how many people participate in both? Table 1 describes the registration and turnout status of these respondents by election type (primary or general). Of people who were verified as registered and cast a ballot in the general election, 68% also cast a ballot in one of their state's primaries.[9] This rate of overlap is not unusual. A random sample of 1,600 cases drawn off of the raw Catalist file (not attached to any survey data) shows that 56% of general election voters also voted in the primary in 2008.[10] The overlap between the two electorates leaves roughly a third of the general election voters as those who vote "only" for the party in the general election and not also in its nominating process. If there are large differences between the primary and general electorates, they will be largest between the primary electorate and these "general election only" voters.[11]

Comparing Primary and General Election Voters

To gauge the representativeness of primary voters, we compare them to those who voted in the general election, but not the primary as described above (see Norrander 1989) and to the broader "party following," those who identified with the party or did not identify with it but supported it in the general election (Geer 1988). These comparisons illuminate whether primary voters are really more ideologically extreme than "the rest of the party" or "the party as a whole." Table 2 presents descriptive statistics on these 3 groups for a host of demographic and political measures.

[insert Table 2 about here]

One stereotype of primary electorates is that they are political activists. We might therefore expect them to be older, better educated, and more interested in politics. There is mixed evidence for this. The age differences among these groups are non-existent among Republicans and small among Democrats:

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[9] State parties that nominate candidates using a caucus instead of a primary may not report participation data for the caucus to Secretary of State's offices. In these data for 2008, it appears that many of the caucus states in 2008 did in fact return data to their state offices. We are not systematically missing caucus data.

[10] We thank Eitan Hersh for sharing this calculation with us.

[11] Among the 68% that voted in both the primary and general election are 1,714 respondents (19% of this group) for whom we have no way of knowing in which party primary they voted. Each state records participation differently and most states indicate which primary a person voted in, but some do not, instead just marking that the voter turned up on primary election day. In cases where the state voter files require party registration, we allocated people in states with no party primary indicator on the file to the primary for the party in which they were registered. Even after this allocation, we are left with 1,714 respondents who we cannot classify into one or the other of the primaries. See the appendix for the classification of primary voters into party primaries.

Democratic primary voters had a median age of 49, compared to 47 among the broader party following and 43 among those who voted in the general but not the primary. Differences in educational attainment were similarly muted. Primary voters were only a few points more likely to have a college degree than those who voted only in the general and the party following. Larger differences emerge with regard to campaign interest—particularly when comparing primary voters to those who voted in the general election but not in the primary. For example, 64% of Democratic primary voters said they were very interested in the campaign, compared to 42% of those who voted in the general election but not the primary. There was a similar gap—71% versus 49%—among Republicans.

But any differences in political activism do not appear to translate into large difference in political attitudes. Respondents placed themselves and each of the presidential candidates on 5-point scales ranging from "very liberal" to "very conservative." The average Democratic primary voter was only slightly to the left of Democrats who voted in the general election but not in the primary. The difference in means (2.53 vs. 2.63) is only .10 points, or just 2% of the 5-point scale. Democratic primary voters were actually identified as more conservative than the party following, on average. And there were similarly small differences in where various groups of Democrats placed Obama and McCain.

The differences among Republicans were slightly larger but still small in absolute terms. Republican primary voters were .31 points more conservative, on average, than Republicans who voted in the general election but not the primary (4.08 vs. 3.77). But this difference only represents 6% of the 5-point scale. The difference between Republican primary voters and the Republican party following was even smaller. Differences in placements of Obama and McCain were also very modest at best. Primary voters in both parties do not perceive the candidates as much more ideologically polarized than other voters do.

Finally, we compared these groups on 6 different issues. The descriptive statistics in Table 2 reveal very small differences among these groups, and not always in the direction that the conventional wisdom would presume. The largest difference, between Republican primary voters and general election-only voters on the question of raising taxes on the wealthy, was 16 points. Much more common were differences in the

low single digits. Averaging across these issues, the percentage point difference between Democratic primary voters and the two comparison groups was only 1 point. The same was true among Republicans.

We scaled these 6 questions into an index ranging from 0-1, where 1 was the most liberal response. Again, there are few differences of note. The various groups of Democrats are nearly identical. Among Republicans, primary voters are a bit more conservative than general election voters who did not vote in the primary, but the difference—.27 versus .33—is only 6% of the width of the scale. There is no yawning ideological chasm between these groups of voters.

We can also show the importance of using the validated vote in making these comparisons. In Table 3, we again focus on these 6 issues and present the difference in the views of primary voters and general election-only voters—calculated in percentage points. We present the differences separately for each party and, crucially, using both validated and self-reported turnout in the primary and general. This shows that, more often than not, using self-reported turnout exaggerates the difference between these two groups, much as it exaggerates the difference between general election voters and non-voters. For example, among Republicans validated primary voters are only 6 points more supportive of deporting illegal immigrants, compared to general-election only voters. Using self-reported turnout, that difference grows to 20 points. The same pattern obtains among Republicans with regard to support for gay marriage. It obtains among Democrats on several issues, including support for government health insurance, withdrawal from Iraq, and raising taxes on the wealthy. These differences between validated and self-reported turnout may be one reason for the differences in the findings of Geer (1988) and Norrander (1989) on the one hand, and Jacobson (2012) on the other.

Conclusion

The decades-long trend in party polarization continues to focus attention on primary electorates and how they may pull candidates toward the ideological poles. The recent general election defeats of several Republicans who emerged victorious in competitive primaries—Christine O'Donnell, Sharon Angle, Todd

Akin, Richard Mourdock, and even Mitt Romney—has created concern within the party that primaries are not suited for generating moderate candidates who are palatable to general election voters.

This preliminary investigation calls into question that concern. Much as did earlier studies, ours shows that, even in this more polarized era, primary voters are not much different than general election voters who did not vote in the primary or the broader "party following." They seem more interested in politics, to be sure, but this higher level of activism does not make them much more ideologically extreme. This finding buttresses much other evidence that finds little connection between primaries and political polarization, and, indeed, a weak connection between the views of legislators and their constituents. Polarization does not seem to emanate from voters at any stage of the electoral process.

Table 1. Validated Turnout in 2008 Primary and General Election, CCAP Registered Voters

Primary election	General Election			
	Registered and voted	Registered and did not vote	Not matched to a voter file	Verified unregistered
Registered and voted	10,379 (70%)	359 (19%)	0	0
Registered and did not vote	4,545 (30%)	1,509 (81%)	0	0
Not matched to a voter file	0	0	2,608 (100%)	0
Verified unregistered				600 (100%)
TOTAL	14,924	1,868	2,608	600

Cell entries are the number of respondents with column percentages in parentheses.

Table 2. The Characteristics of Primary and General Electorates

	Democrats			Republicans		
	Voted in primary	Voted only in general	"Party following"	Voted in primary	Voted only in general	"Party following"
Demographics						
Median age	49	43	47	52	51	52
Only H.S. degree	23%	26%	22%	28%	34%	30%
Only college degree	23%	19%	22%	20%	18%	19%
Female	54%	59%	56%	46%	55%	50%
White	69%	69%	69%	88%	91%	90%
Campaign interest						
Discussed a candidate (March)	56%	37%	50%	54%	44%	50%
Discussed a candidate (October)	58%	46%	56%	58%	49%	55%
Very interested in campaign	64%	42%	58%	71%	49%	62%
Mean ideological placement (1- lib, 5-cons)						
Self	2.53	2.63	2.45	4.08	3.77	3.98
McCain	3.92	3.87	3.96	3.25	3.37	3.28
Obama	2.31	2.42	2.39	1.49	1.69	1.54
Issue positions						
Arrest, deport illegal immigrants	25%	26%	23%	54%	48%	53%
Support gov't health insurance	43%	39%	45%	7%	14%	9%
Withdraw from Iraq immediately	34%	35%	37%	6%	9%	6%
Raise taxes on incomes $200K+	67%	67%	70%	27%	43%	32%
Abortion always legal	35%	29%	37%	7%	8%	7%
Abortion legal in special cases	20%	24%	18%	49%	46%	49%
Support gay marriage	71%	73%	76%	30%	28%	26%
Issue Scale	.65	.64	.68	.27	.33	.28

Note: The issue scale is an additive sum six issues. Higher values represent more liberal positions on issues. The scale ranges from 0 to 1 with a mean of .48.

Table 3. Differences between Primary and General Election-Only Voters, Comparing Validated and Self-Reported Vote

	Democrats		Republicans	
	Validated	Self-reported	Validated	Self-reported
Arrest, deport illegal immigrants	-1	2	6	20
Support gov't health insurance	4	13	-7	-2
Withdraw from Iraq immediately	-1	10	-3	0
Raise taxes on incomes $200K+	0	19	-16	-1
Abortion always legal	6	5	-1	-3
Abortion legal in special cases	-4	-1	3	4
Support gay marriage	-2	-1	2	-13

Cell entries are the percentage point differences subtracting the views of those who voted only in the general election from those who voted in the primary.

APPENDIX

Table A1. Validated Turnout in 2008 Primary and General Election, by Primary Party

	General Election	
Party of Primary Vote	Registered and voted	Registered and did not vote
Democrat	4,254 (47%)	238 (49%)
Republican	3,149 (34%)	180 (37%)
Unknown	1,714 (19%)	69 (14%)
TOTAL	9,118	2,912

Unknown party participation is result of caucus states and primary states that do not require party registration or record party of primary vote. Cell entries are weighted to represent nationwide electorate.

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