

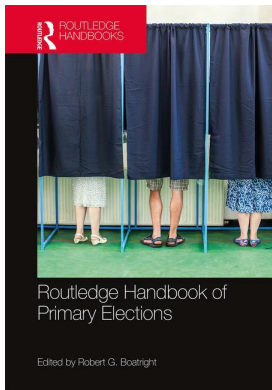
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STRATEGIC CANDIDATE ENTRY

Primary Type and Candidate Divergence

Kristin Kanthak and Eric Loepp

A central debate in our understanding of primaries is simple: does primary type matter? Most of the discussion around this debate has centered on the question of whether or not different primary types lead to different kinds of candidates, with some evidence that there is a correlation between primary type and the kinds of representatives that emerge (Gerber and Morton 1998; Kanthak and Morton 2001) but a good deal more suggesting that primary type matters little in the subsequent behavior of legislators (Bullock and Clinton 2011; Hirano, Snyder, Ansolabere and Hansen 2010; McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2006; McGhee 2010; McGhee, Masket, Shor, Rogers and McCarty 2014; Pearson and Lawless 2008; Rogowski and Langella 2015).¹ Yet this creates something of a puzzle, because the evidence is clear that primary voters are more extreme than general election voters (Brady, Han, and Pope 2007; Carey and Polga-Hecimovich 2006; Jacobson 2012; Kaufmann, Gimpel and Hoffman 2003; Sinclair 2006).² Why don't more ideologically extreme voters nominate similarly extreme candidates in a manner consistent with the Downsian (Downs 1957) spatial logic that undergirds much of the literature on legislative behavior? We attempt to answer that question by taking a step back in the electoral process to before the election, at the stage of candidate emergence. Voters obviously can select only from those candidates who have chosen to run. In order, for example, for open primaries to result in more moderate legislators, open primaries must attract more moderate candidates. Otherwise, these relatively more moderate voters have no relatively more moderate candidate to select. In the current project, then, we explore the question of how ambitious candidates respond to primary type to determine whether or not those candidate emergence patterns are compatible with the patterns we would need to see for primary type to have an effect on candidate selection and subsequent legislative behavior.

The question of whether or not primary type has an effect on candidate emergence is important. This is a particularly pressing issue today, as recent work finds that increasingly polarized legislatures are discouraging ideological moderates from running for office (Thomsen 2014). This is especially true when the state party is more proximate to the legislator than is the congressional party (Aldrich and Thomsen 2016). Furthermore, the types of candidates that emerge (either in the primary or the general election) can affect who a legislator chooses to work with in the legislature (Alvarez and Sinclair 2012; Olivella, Kanthak and Crisp 2017) and primary type can have an effect on a legislator's level of particularism once elected to office (Bagashka and Clark 2016). But at the same time, we also know that potential candidates respond to the

world around them when they are making decisions about running (Fox and Lawless 2011; Maisel and Stone 1997; Rohde 1979), taking into account realities of the primary electoral environment (Hassell 2016). Most important, we know that state-level institutions can affect the decision calculus of potential candidates when they decide whether or not to enter a particular race (Maestas, Fultton, Maisel and Stone 2006). As an electoral institution, then, primary type may affect which types of candidates emerge.

According to the theory laid out by Gerber and Morton (1998), more open primaries translate to more moderate primary electorates, as those voters who are more moderate and less partisan can participate. For example, a moderate Republican or independent may choose to vote in the Democratic primary if she has a preferred candidate running in that primary. Because closed primaries allow only party regulars to vote, the theory explains, resultant general election candidates will reflect the more partisan nature of these primary electorates. And indeed, these different electorates will select different candidates: Changing the primary type, the theory goes, will change the electorate and thereby the types of candidates who end up winning the election and representing the district in the legislature. But because voters can select only the candidates who have chosen to run, the theory can operate as expected only when the ideological composition of candidates running in a primary aligns with the ideological makeup of the voters participating in it. Yet we know little about how *candidates* respond to different primary types. This question of candidate emergence is our focus here. We offer a direct measure of the distance between the two general election candidates to determine whether or not primary type affects polarization within a particular legislature. If closed primaries, for example, yield more polarized candidates, the best way to measure this is to take account directly of the level of polarization between the two candidates, and this is exactly what we do.

We find that candidates do, indeed, respond differentially to different primary types. In open and nonpartisan primaries, candidates tend to be more moderate, meaning that these theoretically more moderate electorates have moderate candidates from which to choose. Despite this, semi-open primaries actually produce more *extreme* candidates, which is the opposite of what we would expect, given our theoretical expectations. Further exploration reveals that these results are based largely on the strategies of Republican candidates: Democratic candidates do not respond differently to nonpartisan and open primaries, and respond contrary to expectation in semi-open primaries. Despite these statistically significant results, the effects are substantively small, accounting for only very tiny differences in the amount of polarization of the candidates. We argue that the fact that these differences are so tiny explains the effect of primary type on the ideology of the resultant winning candidates: primary type matters in terms of polarization of emerging candidates, but not very much. We outline our theoretical expectations in more detail in the section below.

Theoretical Expectations

In the extant literature, the theory of polarization via primary type is largely a story about voters: more ideological voters produce more ideological general election candidates. But this is possible only if potential candidates are responding appropriately to the expected effects of primary type. Do more ideologically polarized candidates anticipate that they will do well in closed primary elections, and thereby choose to run? Do more moderate candidates know they will have an advantage in open primary systems, and thereby enter the race? Choosing whether or not to run, however, is complicated, and primary type is only one of many considerations. How might that consideration affect the types of candidates that emerge from each type of primary?

In this section, we outline the candidate selection process in more detail, highlighting the effect of strategic candidates' entry decisions on the theory itself.

We can think of the process from primary type to general election winners as divided into three stages. If primary type is to affect general election winners as the theory anticipates, all three stages must align to make that happen. First, voters must not only be different based on primary type, but that difference must be large enough to result in a difference in the candidates that result from different types of primaries.³ Second, and largely ignored in the literature,⁴ different primary types must attract different types of candidates. More open primaries should attract more moderate candidates and more closed primaries must attract more polarized candidates. Without a sufficient supply of (non)polarized candidates, (non)polarized voters cannot vote for them, even if they prefer to do so. And third, primary outcomes must have a strong effect on general election outcomes. Hall (2015), for instance, demonstrates that more extreme primary winners are in fact less likely to win general elections. If more closed primaries tend to result in more extreme candidates for one party than they do for another, for example, these extreme candidates would lose general elections and we would see little effect of primary voting as we would expect from the theory. In other words, being able to detect an effect of primary type on legislator ideology requires a number of specific criteria to be met. This means that slight differences caused by primary type may easily be washed out by other factors, making evidence of them difficult to find. Yet even these slight, easily hidden differences might matter, however. If the effect of a different pool of primary voters is being washed out by decisions potential candidates are making, we may not be able to discern the actual effect of primary type, one that more strategic candidates might be able to exploit.

Because of this, understanding how primary type affects candidate emergence – and candidate polarization – can tell us much about how policy is made even if the effect is not so dramatic as changing the actual ideology of the winning candidates. If these candidates emerge but do not win, they may determine legislative behavior in ways that may be difficult to assess. We know, for example, that the identity of the challenger can often affect winners' subsequent legislative behavior as winners seek to emulate those who have recently challenged them (Sulkin 2005) and can affect how legislators think about how they will win the next election (Olivella, Kanthak and Crisp 2017).

Note that we do not mean to imply that potential candidates think strategically about which states to run in based on the state's primary type. Although some candidates surely think about relocating to run for office,⁵ we expect that this is the exception rather than the rule. We intend to argue, rather, that primary type *plays a role* in the decision calculus that faces potential candidates as they choose whether or not to run. If the theory operates as expected, for example, we might expect moderate candidates to be more willing to run when open primary rules mean the candidate can appeal to non-party regulars. In this sense, the primary type renders the proposition of running more attractive to particular types of candidates. This makes running somewhat more likely to yield greater expected utility than whichever other options that potential candidate can pursue if she decides to forego running. In turn, this effect on the decision calculus makes those candidates the primary rules favor somewhat more likely to run. When we take all these individual personal decisions together, then, we can observe an effect of the primary type on the types of candidates who choose to run. And indeed, the question of who runs is intricately linked to questions of policy throughout the legislative process. Primary voters can select only from among those candidates who have chosen to run, and general election voters can select only from among those candidates who have both chosen to run and have won their primaries. If voting is the key to representation, then, voting rules are the key to the nature of that representation. In the next section, we turn to the question of how to assess the types of candidates that emerge from different primary types.

The Data

Scholars have made considerable progress in quantifying the ideologies of elected politicians in recent decades. The most well-known scaling method – the Poole and Rosenthal (1985) NOMINATE system – estimates the ideal points of legislators from roll-call voting records. While the method is well accepted, it is unsuitable for our purposes because our principle theoretical interest lies in analyzing *candidates* rather than elected officials. Ideological mapping systems that rely on voting records cannot capture the ideology of individuals who campaign for office but do not win. Yet non-winning candidates must make the same strategic decisions about when and where to run. Indeed, to the extent that primary systems affect candidates’ calculations about whether or not to run, they should affect incumbents and challengers in similar ways, since both groups of politicians target the same (potential) voters. Thus we need a standardized measure of ideology that includes both winners and losers.

Until recently, such measures were not available. However, Bonica (2014) presents an alternative method to NOMINATE that chronicles the ideological space not only of political candidates at various levels of government, but of interest groups and individual donors. The method relies on campaign contributions, which, because they are extensively documented and publicly available, serve as “vast repositories of observational data on revealed preferences” (Bonica 2014, 367). Common-space campaign finance scores (or CFscores) assume that donors will make contributions to candidates that are ideologically proximate to themselves (i.e., candidates that share donors’ political views) but will be less likely to give to candidates who are more ideologically distant.⁶ Bonica uses these contribution records to estimate the ideological preferences of over 50,000 state and federal candidates during the period 1979–2012. These map extremely well onto the same liberal-conservative space as other methods used to estimate politicians’ preferences (e.g., DW-NOMINATE scores). Like NOMINATE, negative CFscores reflect a more liberal ideology and positive values indicate a more conservative ideology.

In order to conduct our analysis, we first integrate into the Bonica dataset indicators for the five basic types of primary systems in each state in each year; they represent our key independent variables. *Closed* primary systems are the most restrictive for voters – only registered partisans within a party can participate in the party’s primary. No crossover voting is allowed, nor are independent voters allowed to participate. *Semi-closed* systems are somewhat less restrictive; they allow independent voters to participate but not members of other political parties. *Semi-open* systems allow voters to vote in whatever primary they wish but they must do so publicly. *Pure open* systems allow registered voters to participate privately in any primary they wish. In *nonpartisan* primaries all voters can vote for all candidates and the top two candidates in the primary election – regardless of partisan status – advance to a run-off general election. Table 8.1 replicates a table summarizing these differences from McGhee et al. (2014).

Our analysis addresses two related but distinct questions. First, is candidate polarization (that is, the ideological distance between candidates) more pronounced in more closed primary

Table 8.1 Primary Types

	<i>Crossover Allowed?</i>	<i>Independents Only?</i>	<i>Public Decision?</i>	<i>Registration?</i>	<i>Choose Parties?</i>
<i>Pure Closed</i>	No	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
<i>Semi-closed</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Sometimes	Yes
<i>Semi-open</i>	Yes	No	Yes	Sometimes	Yes
<i>Pure Open</i>	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
<i>Nonpartisan</i>	Yes	No	No	No	No

systems? Second, do different primary systems attract ideologically distinct candidates in general? Data for the latter question are straightforward – we simply use the estimated CFscore in the Bonica dataset as our dependent variable. However, the first question requires some manipulation of the data. Since here we are concerned with general elections, we eliminate all candidates in the dataset who did not succeed in their primary election bids – that is, candidates that were active in the primaries but were not active in the general election. We also eliminated all third-party general election candidates. We thus ensured that for every congressional race featuring multiple candidates there were exactly two candidates in the general election.⁷ In some nonpartisan elections these two candidates were members of the same party, but in nearly all instances races featured one Republican and one Democrat. For example, the 2010 House race for the Alaska at-large congressional seat includes six candidates in the Bonica dataset. Only the two that ran in the general election – incumbent Don Young (R) and challenger Harry Crawford (D) were retained for this initial analysis. To create our dependent variable, we calculated the absolute value of the difference in CFscore⁸ between the two principal general election candidates within congressional districts in particular states in each year of the analysis. Following the example above, in 2010 the polarization factor in the Alaska at-large race was 1.359, or the difference between Young’s CFscore of 0.361 and Crawford’s CFscore of –0.998. Note that races featuring an unchallenged incumbent are not included in our first analysis, as no measure of candidate polarization is possible without two candidates. Table 8.2 presents summary information on our polarization measure more generally.

The ideological distance (polarization) between general election candidates, our dependent variable, is regressed on the primary typology discussed above, with closed primaries serving as the reference (omitted) category. Primary type coefficients, then, represent differences in polarization relative to closed primaries, and we therefore expect all primary indicators to be negative. In keeping with previous work on the subject (McGhee 2010; Rogowski and Langella 2015), we also include fixed effects for states and election cycles to capture variance between states and over time. Since primary types are established at the state-level, we cluster errors on states. Finally, we include as a control variable a measure of political preferences at the Congressional district-level, measured as the percentage of the two-party vote share won by the Democratic presidential nominee in the most recent presidential election. We collect data on all primary elections from 2000 to 2010.

In this way, we have a direct measure of polarization of the general election candidates for each district in our dataset. This provides a better measure of the effect of primaries for a number of reasons. First, we need not rely solely on winners. Rather, we can assess directly the effect of the primary itself by directly comparing both parties’ candidates. If closed primaries cause the selection of more extreme candidates, but differentially for both parties, it may be the case that the general election selects the more moderate candidate, thus mitigating the effect of primary type. Second, we have a measure of polarization that is specific to each district. If primary type is affecting polarization, it will do so vis-à-vis the median voter of that particular district, not

Table 8.2 Summary Statistics of Polarization Data

	<i>CFscore (Republicans)</i>	<i>CFscore (Democrats)</i>	<i>CFscore (Overall)</i>	<i>Polarization Measure</i>
<i>Lowest Value</i>	–2.83	–4.82	–4.82	0.02
<i>Highest Value</i>	4.36	1.28	4.36	5.79
<i>Mean Value</i>	0.93	–0.89	0.00093	1.88
<i>Standard Deviation</i>	0.39	0.47	1.01	–0.58

vis-à-vis the legislature writ large. In other words, a primary may select candidates that are polarized *for that district*, but that effect would not be clear if the district itself is polarized with respect to the rest of the legislature. Third, we have a measure of ideological polarization that is based not on partisan activities (like floor voting) within the legislature, but rather on outside forces, thus mitigating the effect of partisan agenda control on polarization.

In the next section, we draw on these data to assess the types of candidates who run in each type of primary.

Results

We call on the data described in the previous section to assess the types of candidates who enter different types of primary elections. In order, as the theory states, for open primary voters to select more moderate candidates, more moderate candidates must run when primaries are more open. In that sense, we would expect to see less polarization as primary type becomes more open.

To assess the effect of primary type on district-level candidate polarization, we regress the polarization of the general election candidates within a district (i.e. the difference between the Democratic candidate’s CFscore and the Republican candidate’s CFscore in each district). The regressions include state-level fixed effects and election cycle dummies, the coefficients of which we omit here for space. We omit from the model “closed primaries,” which therefore serve as the reference category. Thus all coefficients indicate the marginal difference in candidate polarization relative to closed primary elections. Since we expect more open primaries to generate more moderate candidates, we anticipate negative coefficients on all primary types in the model. We present these results in Table 8.3.

As is clear from these results, primary type *does* have an effect on the kinds of candidates that emerge from primary elections. More specifically, candidates that emerge from nonpartisan and open primaries are significantly *less* polarized than candidates that come from closed primary elections. Notably, and contrary to the expectation of the theory, semi-open primaries have significantly *more* polarized general election candidates than do closed primaries. This is an unexpected outlier result similar to one found in previous work on the subject (Kanthak and Morton 2001). Remember that semi-open primaries allow voters unaffiliated with the party

Table 8.3 Ideological Difference Between General Election Candidates

	<i>Polarization</i>
Semi-closed	−0.2878 (−1.46)
Semi-open	0.563* (2.52)
Open	−0.493* (−2.20)
Nonpartisan	−0.483* (−2.30)
District Ideology	−0.617*** (−5.27)
<i>Dummies omitted for space</i>	**
Constant	1.703*** (7.30)
Observations	1864

Note: *t* statistics in parentheses; **p* < 0.05, ***p* < 0.01, ****p* < 0.001.

to participate, but they must do so publicly. Potentially, this structure of primary may attract candidates who are attempting to re-make the party by making it more extreme. Perhaps they enter because they are expecting to attract new voters to the party who will publicly declare their allegiance and thereby change the party's ideal point, thus explaining why ideologically extreme candidates appear to be more attracted to semi-open contests. This is a question for potential future research.

If primaries are producing significantly different levels of polarization, that means that parties must be producing different types of candidates under different primary types. Notably, however, that effect need not be symmetric. The decisions of one party are enough to drive the polarization effect. This is because if one party ignores primary type, but the other is sensitive to it, the sensitive party's movements can change polarization by themselves.

For this reason, we now consider the effects of primary type on the ideology of primary candidates. To do this, we regress CFscores directly on primary types (with the same control variables included) to assess the impact of primary type on individual candidate ideology across parties. These results are presented in Table 8.4.

These analyses, then, indicate that primary type has a statistically significant effect on both the types of candidates who *win* primaries and the types of candidates who *enter* primaries. Both open and nonpartisan primaries produce less polarized candidates than do closed primaries, as one would expect given the theory. Furthermore, the effect is driven almost entirely by the Republican Party, a result that is paralleled in Nielson and Visalvanich (2017). Republicans tend to run significantly more moderate candidates in these types of primaries than they do in closed primaries. Democrats tend to show a similar pattern, although it does not even approach statistical significance.

Notably, however, semi-open primaries produce candidates that are *more* polarized than in closed primaries. This is counter to expectation, and is also based on differences in both parties. Specifically, Democrats produce more liberal candidates under semi-open primaries than they do under closed primaries, whereas Republicans produce significantly more conservative candidates under the same circumstances. Indeed, semi-open primaries represent the only primary type in which Democrats produce candidates that are ideologically different from those they produce in closed primary elections.

Table 8.4 Effects of Primary Type on Candidate Ideology

	Democrats	Republicans
Semi-closed	-0.0169 (-0.14)	-0.267* (-2.50)
Semi-open	-0.478** (-3.25)	0.230* (1.99)
Nonpartisan	0.0354 (0.26)	-0.330** (-2.66)
Open	0.154 (0.95)	-0.266* (-1.98)
District Ideology	1.014*** (15.20)	0.561*** (7.37)
<i>Dummies omitted for space</i>	**	**
Constant	-0.816*** (-5.43)	0.708*** (5.75)
Observations	2280	2175
R2	0.292	0.276

Note: *t* statistics in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Exactly how much polarization is correlated with primary type? Figure 8.1 attempts to shed light on that question. In order to assess the substantive effects we have uncovered, we need to dig a bit deeper into the nature of our district-level candidate polarization measure. The polarization variable cannot take on values lower than 0 or higher than 8, because the Bonica ideology scores are bounded at -4 and 4. In reality, however, the greatest ideological distance in the data set is 5.8. As is clear from Figure 8.1, the effect of primary type on the amount of polarization in a particular district is rather muted. Indeed, for any particular Congressional district, changing from one primary type to another constitutes a change of, at most, a few tenths of a point on an 8-point scale. These differences, although statistically significant, are not large enough to drive a dramatic effect on partisan polarization, nor would we expect that even knowledgeable primary voters would draw substantially different conclusions about candidates who differ by such small margins. For context, the difference between the extremism we would expect from the least-polarizing system (nonpartisan) to the most polarizing (open) is about the same as the difference in CFscores between Nancy Pelosi and Charles Rangel, both known as relatively liberal legislators, ideologically indistinguishable from one another on most issues.

In other words, slight differences in polarization of candidates are not great enough to create large differences in the level of polarization within general election candidates in a particular district, as measured by CFscores. Although the result is statistically significant in some cases, the substantive effect is washed out by the many, many other factors that go into determining which candidates choose to run in primaries and ultimately end up winning those primaries to go on to compete in the general election.

This result highlights the complexity of the relationship between political institutions and the actors they can affect. Our model indicates that primary type does, in fact, affect the choices candidates make. Candidates seem to consider their own ideology and the primary type they face when they are making the decision of whether or not to run. But this is only one of several considerations candidates must take into account. They are looking for the right time to run, the right personal situation, their own level of political ambition, and more when they are making

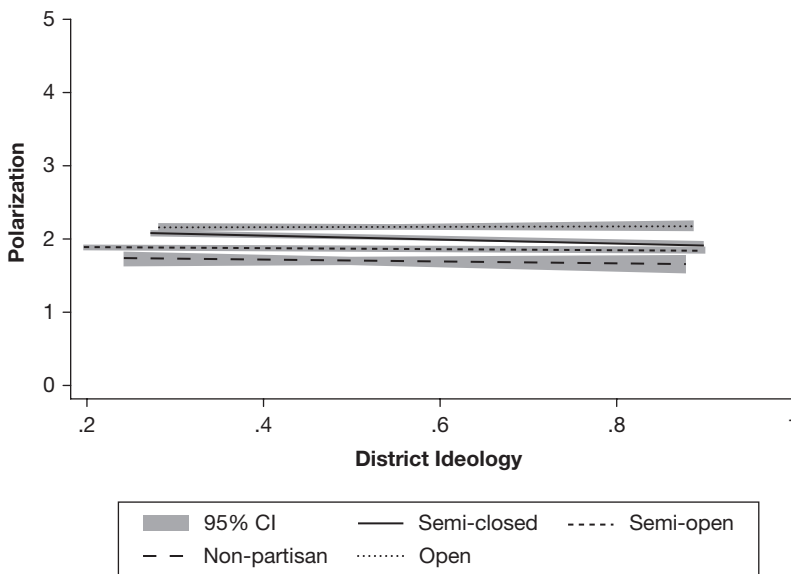


Figure 8.1 Level of Polarization by Primary Type

the complex decision of whether or not to run. Our results indicate that primary type plays a role in that decision calculus, but it is not dramatically central to the decision. Furthermore, without a strong effect on the supply of candidates, primary type has a difficult time explaining the results of those elections. The types of choices voters need to behave in the way the theory expects do not appear to be available to them.

Concluding Thoughts

The question of whether or not primary type affects the kind of representation voters can expect to receive is an important one. Furthermore, the theory explaining how primary type affects election outcomes is attractive, parsimonious, and sound: affecting the pool of eligible voters affects the ideology of that pool, which then affects the kinds of candidates which are chosen. But more often than not, the evidence fails to support that theory. Why?

We argue in the current chapter that the reason this theory achieves support only part of the time is because the theory assumes that voters have the choices available to them in the form of candidates for the primary election. If this is not true, then voters cannot make the kinds of choices the theory relies on them to make. Because of this, the theory does not appear to have its expected effect on legislator ideology, results that are consistent with those of McGhee et al. (2014) and others.

This finding plays up the difficulty in pinpointing the effects of political institutions on the choices political actors make. Do potential candidates consider primary type when deciding whether or not to run? Yes, but not very much. Having this information allows us to ask a more nuanced question about why primary type affects legislator ideology only sometimes, and even then, not very much, because candidates are likely prioritizing other considerations. The reason for this is that elections are complex processes, made up of a series of actors making a series of complex decisions. For institutions to matter, they may need to matter in several key places and for several different actors. Additional work is necessary to tease out more precisely how these institutions interact with actors to shape voters' choice sets and, ultimately, legislative behavior in office. For now, we contribute additional empirical evidence that primary types do not appear to singularly affect the likelihood that different types of candidates choose to run for office. Nor do ideological disparities between general election candidates appear to result from the primary system a state chooses for its nomination contests. While many popular accounts of legislative polarization blame primaries for encouraging the emergence of extreme candidates, the evidence does not bear this out.

Notes

- 1 But see Norrander and Wendland (2016) and Hill (2015).
- 2 But they may not have sufficient information to bring their ideological extremity to bear when choosing a candidate (Hirano, Lenz, Pinkovskiy and Snyder 2015).
- 3 Although this assumption itself may be flawed. See Ahler, Citrin and Lenz (2016).
- 4 But see Rogowski and Langella (2015) for an exception.
- 5 Hillary Clinton, for example, reportedly selected New York as her home after she left the White House, based at least partly on the electoral climate there, which she deemed favorable to her efforts.
- 6 The assumption that donors are more likely to contribute to like-minded politicians is well-supported (see, e.g., Ensley, Tofias and De Marchi 2009; McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2006).
- 7 A handful of miscoded cases resulted in the inclusion of some third-party candidates in the general election. These cases were discarded. In some nonpartisan races, the two general election candidates were members of the same political party.
- 8 Here, we diverge from Rogowski and Langella (2015), which uses only the raw CFscores.

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PART III

Candidates and Parties in Primary Elections

While the chapters in the previous section all addressed some aspect of voting behavior in primary elections, the chapters in Part III all concern the behavior of candidates. As long as primary elections have existed, there have been questions raised about the types of candidates who would benefit from them. During the early years of the twentieth century, some people speculated that candidates with no firm ties to the party would be advantaged. The successes of some wealthy individuals or media barons reinforced these arguments. In studies of southern primaries, it was often argued that demagoguery was rewarded in the primary system. Yet such claims are difficult to measure. In more recent years, analyses of congressional polarization have argued that ideologically extreme candidates often have an advantage in primaries. Many studies of primary competition have also asked whether the sorts of candidates who are advantaged in primary elections are necessarily the strongest general election nominees. If candidates must stray from the ideological center, or make appeals to a small minority of voters, what are the consequences for their parties, and indeed for the health of democratic politics?

The six chapters in this section present three different ways of considering this topic. The section begins with three considerations of the relationship between primary election outcomes and general election outcomes. Shigeo Hirano and James Snyder consider statewide election data across the entire history of the U.S. direct primary; they show that areas of the state that provide candidates' strongest primary support tend also to provide them with their strongest general election support. This suggests that the strategies candidates use in their primary campaigns do tend to spill over into the general election. Jeffrey Lazarus explores the hypothesis that divisive primaries harm candidates in the general election, arguing that primary divisiveness is a consequence of weak candidates – it is correlated with general election divisiveness, but it does not cause it. And Robert Boatright and Vincent Moscardelli explore the relationship between party surges in the general election, contending that large partisan swings in the general election are often preceded by greater-than-usual turmoil in the primaries.

A second theme in this section is the relationship between primary elections and candidate extremism or moderation. Caitlin Jewitt and Sarah Treul consider the effects of primary challenges to congressional incumbents, distinguishing between competitive primary challenges and ideological primary challenges. They conclude that these challenges tend to push candidates away from the positions of the majority party in Congress, whether they are of that party or of the minority party. Danielle Thomsen considers the fate of moderate candidates in primaries, exploring the conditions under which moderates might be advantaged in primaries.

Third, Casey Dominguez explores the relationship between political parties and primary election candidates. Given the effects of primaries on party success and party coherence, it makes sense that political party organizations and interest groups would seek to shape the outcomes of primaries to their advantage. Dominguez discusses how this occurs and notes differences between Democratic and Republican candidates in the composition of their primary election campaign contributions.

The chapters all address, in one way or another, the question of what we believe should be the purpose of primaries. Is primary competition healthy for our political system? It is easy to argue that competitive elections yield better politicians, but as these chapters show, this is not always the case. Competition can harm the ability of parties to choose strong candidates, and primary competition can prevent us from being given meaningful choices in general elections. As we shall see in other sections of the book, democratic candidate selection processes do not always yield democratic outcomes.