

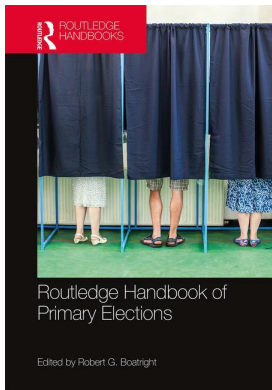
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Robert G. Boatright

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Shigeo Hirano, James M. Snyder

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9

THE DIRECT PRIMARY AND VOTING BEHAVIOR IN U.S. GENERAL ELECTIONS¹

Shigeo Hirano and James M. Snyder, Jr.

Conventional wisdom in the political science literature is that U.S. elections became much less party-centered around the 1960s. Aldrich and Niemi (1990) refer to the post-1960s era as the “sixth party system.”² In summarizing the studies on this transformation in voting behavior, Aldrich (1995, 253) writes:

Together these studies show that there was an important shift in elections to all national offices in or about 1960, demonstrating that voters respond to candidates far more than previously. Voting became candidate-centered, and so parties as mechanisms for understanding candidates, campaigns, and elections became less relevant.

Understanding why U.S. electoral politics became less party-centered during this period continues to be an active area of research.

The existing literature examining the changes in U.S. voting behavior tends to focus on the changes in the U.S. political environment in the 1960s that potentially increased the salience of individual politicians’ attributes and weakened traditional party organizations – e.g., changes in campaign advertising technologies such as the rise of television, the replacement of patronage with civil service employment, and an increase in the personal resources available to elected officials for constituency service. These factors led voters to see parties as less relevant, and party attachments weakened. Campbell (2007, 68) describes the process as follows:

Since the 1960s the role of the political parties in American politics has fundamentally changed. A series of technological, institutional, legal, and cultural shifts diminished their once central function as the organizers and inclusive mobilizers of American elections. They ceded control over nominations and were pushed aside by new candidate-centered campaigns. Technological advances allowed candidates to speak directly to the people, and the parties lost their monopoly.

The introduction of direct primary elections largely occurred several decades prior to this period of candidate-centered politics, and consequently the literature does not commonly connect primaries with the increasing salience of candidate attributes in U.S. elections.³

While the literature on primary elections, with a few exceptions, does not explicitly link primaries to changes in voting behavior, this relationship is often implied in the way primaries are connected to the weakening of political party organizations.⁴ The traditional view is that primaries provided incentives for candidates to cultivate their personal reputations in the electorate in order to win their party's nomination (e.g., Key 1964; Herrnsen 1988).⁵ For example, Jacobson (2004, 15–16) writes:

A fundamental factor [in the decline of parties] is clearly institutional: the rise and spread of primary elections as the method for choosing party nominees for the general election . . . Primary elections have largely deprived parties of their most important source of influence over elected officials. Parties no longer control access to the ballot and, therefore, to political office. They cannot determine who runs under their label and so cannot control what the label represents . . . parties typically have few sanctions and little influence [on nominations].

If political party organizations were significantly weakened by primaries, then they might not have been able to cultivate the party's reputation within the electorate, or directly influence voting, as strongly as when they controlled the nomination process.

With the party organizations weakened, candidates had stronger incentives to cultivate a personal vote. In addition, the efforts of candidates to cultivate personal reputations to secure their party's nomination and the attachments voters make with the nominee during the primaries could conceivably spill over into the general election. This spillover would dampen partisan voting and strengthen the correlation in the electoral outcomes between the primary and general elections.

Other factors might also reduce the amount of purely partisan voting under primaries. For example, under the convention system, party leaders often tried to balance their statewide tickets geographically or ethnically. Well-balanced tickets supposedly helped the party attract votes from all regions of the state. This became more difficult under primaries because of the difficulty in coordinating the choices of many thousands of voters. Thus, for example, the share of Democratic nominees for statewide offices in Massachusetts who came from the Boston area increased sharply after the introduction of primaries. This happened because a large share of the Democratic voters in Massachusetts lived in the Boston area, and these voters evidently preferred candidates from their home city and region to those from other areas. These candidates were also likely to be more attractive to independent voters from the Boston area, and possibly even some Boston-area Republicans – e.g., they would probably be perceived at a minimum as being more sympathetic to the problems facing Boston and Bostonians, and also maybe more willing to fight for policies and programs and spending that favored Boston. This “pro-Boston-area attribute” would then result in a correlation between votes in the primary and general elections.

In some elections, particular issues or bundles of issues – prohibition, Progressivism, the New Deal – arise, which, at least in some states or regions, cut across the usual party divisions at least to some degree. Candidates with strong positions on these issues – wets or dries, progressives or stalwarts, pro- or anti-New Dealers – might attract voters both in the primary and the general election on the basis of their positions, again producing a correlation between votes in the primary and general elections. In other work we find clear evidence that this occurs in the primary elections.

While the traditional literature suggests that primaries could weaken party-centered politics, more recent work argues that parties were becoming weaker even earlier. Reynolds (2006) argues that the emergence of “hustling” candidates who often had high political ambitions

and campaigned for their party nominations was part of a move towards candidate-centered politics in the early decades of the twentieth century, and contributed to the adoption of direct primaries. Thus, the introduction of direct primaries may have been a response to the rising candidate-centered focus of U.S. politics rather than the cause of candidate-centered politics.⁶ The potential endogeneity of the adoption of primary elections makes it difficult to disentangle the causal effect of primaries on declining partisan voting. However, both this line of reasoning and the traditional literature would predict a decline in partisan voting to coincide with the adoption of primaries.

While these literatures might predict the change in partisan voting, the extent to which general election outcomes are linked to voting behavior in primaries remains an open question. An empirical literature that examines the effect of divisive primaries on general election outcomes for non-presidential elections finds mixed results.⁷ The studies in this literature focus on the relationship between candidates' overall support in the primary and general elections. If candidates appeal to certain segments of the electorate, then this would not necessarily be captured by aggregating votes at the district or state level. Moreover, these studies also tend to focus on the second half of the twentieth century, so they provide little insight into candidate-centered voting prior to the sixth party system.

In this chapter, we begin by asking a simple question: Did the introduction of direct primary elections coincide with a decline in partisan voting in general elections? Such a relationship would suggest that candidate-centered politics became an increasing part of U.S. elections almost a half-century prior to the sixth party system in the 1960s.

To answer the first question, we employ a strategy that exploits the variation in the introduction of direct primaries across states to examine whether there is an association between personal voting and the use of primary elections. We employ a dataset on aggregate voting returns across all statewide elected officials from 1880 to 2006 to measure personal voting by the amount of "split ticket" voting across these offices within a particular state election. Using a differences-in-differences design, we separate the effect of direct primaries from variables that may affect personal voting within states and may also be trending over time. We also add a variable to capture the changes in ballot form that occurred before and around the time primaries were being introduced and were also perceived to influence split ticket voting.

With this first research design we find evidence that the introduction of primaries is associated with an increase in split ticket voting. More specifically we find evidence of a "transition period" in the first half of the twentieth century – from about 1890 to 1920 – during which the degree of split ticket voting rose sharply in those states that adopted a comprehensive, mandatory primary. The estimated rise in split ticket voting associated with the introduction of the direct primary is at least as large as the rise following the introduction of the straight party lever/circle.

We then turn to questions regarding the connection between voting behavior in the primary and general election. More specifically we ask: Do the candidate attributes that appeal to primary voters also affect general election voting behavior? Does this relationship exist even in the early decades of the twentieth century?

To address these questions we exploit a newly constructed dataset of county level primary and general election returns from 1906 to 2006. These data allow us to investigate whether the areas where candidates receive electoral support in the primary are also the areas where their general election vote shares are above what would be expected given the election-specific factors and the partisan normal vote in the areas. Such an association would suggest that the candidate attributes salient in the primary are also salient in the general elections. If this association exists even in the period prior to 1960, then this would provide further evidence of candidate-centered electoral politics earlier than is commonly discussed in the political science literature.

We find evidence that counties where a nominee does well in the primary election are also the counties where the nominee does well in the general election even in the early decades of the twentieth century. Thus, personal voting on the basis of candidate attributes appears to have existed in the general elections even prior to the rise in the sixth party system in the 1960s. However, the coefficient estimates are relatively modest. This suggests – not surprisingly – that the variation in general election outcomes across counties largely reflects other factors, such as partisanship or candidates’ general election appeals.

We also include a brief discussion regarding whether the appeal of candidate attributes may spill over across offices. In particular, we might expect personal voting for top-of-the-ticket offices to spill over to down-ballot offices. We find that the counties that support the top-of-the-ticket nominees in the primaries are also the counties where the down-ballot nominees from the same party receive higher than expected general election vote shares, even after the primary vote shares of the down-ballot nominees are taken into account. This apparent spillover effect is only significant in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Primaries and Split Ticket Voting

One indicator of candidate-centered voting is the degree to which the electorate engages in “split ticket” voting. In party-centered systems we would expect voters to vote for all of the candidates from the same party across offices within an election. A crude measure of split ticket voting is the variation in the two-party vote across offices in a given election.⁸ This is obviously a lower bound on the total amount of split ticket voting, since individual voters may split their tickets in different ways that cancel one another. However, the correlation between split ticket voting measured at the individual level and the aggregate-level proxies is quite high.⁹

We augmented the data in Ansolabehere and Snyder (2002), Ansolabehere et al. (2006), and Ansolabehere et al. (2010), to create a nearly complete dataset of election returns for all statewide races in all states for the period 1880–2006.¹⁰ For each state-year in which there are three or more statewide races, we construct the variable *Standard Deviation* as follows:

$$\text{Standard Deviation}_{kt} = \frac{1}{N_{kt} - 1} \left[\sum_{i=1}^{N_{kt}} (V_{jkt} - \bar{V}_{kt})^2 \right]^{1/2}$$

where N_{kt} is the number of statewide races in state k in year t , V_{jkt} is the Democratic share of the two-party vote in race j in state k in year t , and \bar{V}_{kt} is the average of the Democratic percentage of the two-party vote across all races in state k in year t . We only include races contested by both major parties, and we drop races in which a third-party candidate received more than 15 percent of the total vote.¹¹

Figure 9.1 shows a graph of the average value of *Standard Deviation* in each year. The black circles are for the set of states that adopted a comprehensive, mandatory primary election law during the period 1900–1915 and did not subsequently repeal the law, while the gray triangles are for the states that did not.¹²

The two curves are similar overall, showing a small but clear increase in *Standard Deviation* starting around 1900, and a larger increase between 1960 and 1980. One obvious difference between the curves is that the early increase is noticeably larger for the states that adopted a comprehensive mandatory primary, and that a large gap opens between these states and states without primaries starting around 1918. This is intriguing because, as noted above, the period 1900–1915 was the era in which most states adopted their primary laws.

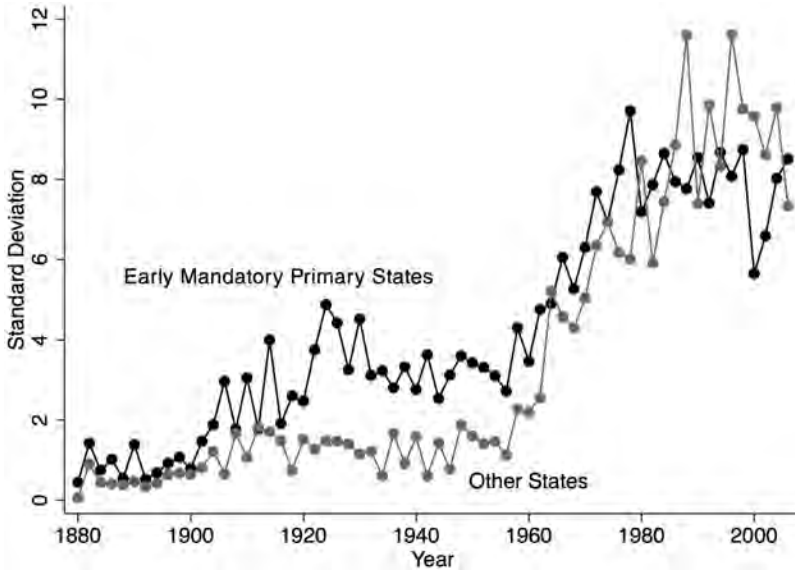


Figure 9.1 Standard Deviation of the Statewide Office Vote Shares for States that Introduced Mandatory Direct Primaries between 1900 and 1915 (in black) and States that Introduced Mandatory Direct Primaries after 1915 (in grey)

For the states adopting a comprehensive mandatory primary, there are three “plateaus,” one from about 1880 to 1900, another from about 1922 to 1958, and a third from about 1972 to 2006. The average value of *Standard Deviation* during the first plateau is 0.9, the average value in the second plateau is 3.5, and the average value in the third plateau is 7.9. Thus, for these states the shift from the first period to the middle period was about 37 percent of the total change between the first period and the third, clearly a non-trivial change.¹³

Regression analyses show that the difference in split ticket voting between those states that adopted primaries early on and those that did not is statistically significant and substantively important. In these analyses we can also compare the relative importance of primary elections and other institutional factors, such as ballot form, which scholars argue should also have influenced split ticket voting during the period prior to the 1960s. Several existing studies find some changes in split ticket voting associated with ballot form (e.g., Rusk 1970; Campbell and Miller 1957).¹⁴ Thus, the specification we use includes the following independent variables: $Direct\ Primary_{st} = 1$ if state s employed primary elections in year t ; $Straight\ Ticket_{st} = 1$ if state s had a straight party lever/circle on the ballot in year t ; $Office\ Block_{st} = 1$ if state s used the office block ballot form in year t ; $Party\ List_{st} = 1$ if state s used the party list ballot form in year t .¹⁵ Note that the coefficients on the two ballot form variables, i.e., *Office Block* and *Party List*, are relative to the excluded category, which is the pre-Australian ballot “party ballot.” For this analysis we focus on the period 1880 to 1960.

The results are shown in Table 9.1. In the first two columns we only include year fixed effects. In the middle two columns we include year and state fixed effects. In the last two columns we include year effects, state effects and state-year trends. In columns 2, 4 and 6 we include indicators for differences in ballot form, such as whether there is an easy option to vote a straight party ticket or whether candidates are grouped by office or party, that are often argued to affect split ticket voting.

Table 9.1 Primaries and Split Ticket Voting in Statewide Elections, 1880–1960

	<i>Dependent Variable = Standard Deviation</i>					
Direct Primary	1.87 (0.29)	1.52 (0.26)	1.01 (0.19)	0.87 (0.18)	0.59 (0.26)	0.53 (0.25)
Straight Ticket		-1.30 (0.33)		-0.58 (0.36)		-0.45 (0.32)
Office Block		1.27 (0.63)		0.27 (0.36)		0.25 (0.35)
Party List		1.10 (0.70)		-0.02 (0.53)		0.06 (0.53)
State FE	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
State-Year Trends	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes

Note: Year fixed effects included in all specifications. Standard errors are in parentheses. Standard errors are clustered by state in all specifications. The number of observations is 1128 in all specifications.

When fixed effects and time trends are not included, the direct primary is found to have a similar effect on split ticket voting as whether a straight party ticket option is included on the ballot.¹⁶ The coefficients on all of the variables are noticeably smaller in magnitude as state fixed effects and state-year trends are included. When state fixed effects and state trends are included in the regression, only the introduction of primary elections appears to be associated with a statistically significant change in split ticket voting.

This analysis does not necessarily identify the causal effect of adopting a mandatory primary law on *Standard Deviation*. For example, as noted above, trends in the power of party organizations might be the real cause of the increase in split ticket voting. Strong party organizations might have prevented the adoption of primary laws in their states and might also have reduced the amount of split ticket voting. Of course, because the analysis includes state and year fixed effects, it must be that party organizational strength *changed* within states over time and in different states at different times (i.e., not as the result of a nationwide shock such as a transformative presidential election or federal patronage laws). In addition, the analysis including state-year trends suggests that the rise in split ticket voting following the introduction of primaries was significantly larger than the linear trends in split ticket voting occurring within states during this period.

At a minimum, the analysis above clearly identifies two patterns in split ticket voting: (1) there was a significant increase in split ticket voting much earlier than the conventional wisdom in the political science literature would suggest; and (2) this increase was especially noticeable in states that adopted a comprehensive mandatory primary between 1900 and 1915.

Candidate Attributes in Primary and General Elections

In this section we examine the link between the electoral appeal of candidates in the primary and the support nominees receive in the general election. As we noted above, the existing literature provides mixed evidence that such a connection exists. We use a new dataset of county level primary election returns from 1906 to 2006 to provide evidence that the candidate attributes that affect primary election outcomes also affect general election outcomes. With this new dataset we can exploit the multiple county level primary and general election returns for party nominees within races and multiple primary and general election returns for the same county across races. This allows us to examine whether the areas where general election candidates had

higher than expected vote shares are also the areas where these candidates had relatively high vote shares in the primary election.

Data and Methods

We have assembled a new dataset of county level primary election returns for the period 1906 to 2006. We collected most of the historical data on official state primary electoral returns from official state reports, state yearbooks and statistical registers, and state legislative manuals. We also incorporated information for senatorial and gubernatorial elections in southern states between 1920 and 1972 from two ICPSR datasets (I00072 and I00071). Although the dataset does not cover every primary election for every state during the period under investigation, it includes most of the elections from 47 states.¹⁷ We merge this primary data with county level general election data. We have almost all county level senate and gubernatorial general election data for the period until 2006 from an updated version of ICPSR I0001.¹⁸ We have been able to collect most county level primary elections data for this same period.

We also gathered county level primary and general election returns for down-ballot statewide offices for the 43 states that had down-ballot elections.¹⁹ This dataset includes election returns for lieutenant governor, secretary of state, treasurer, auditor, comptroller, and attorney general. Part of these data comes from ICPSR 7861. For the period 1990 to 2006 we used the county level general election data for down-ballot offices from Meredith (2013). We gathered the remaining data from official state reports, state yearbooks and statistical registers, and state legislative manuals. This dataset is not as comprehensive as the dataset for governors and senators as we are still missing the county level primary or general election results for a number of the down-ballot elections.

Following the literature we assume that the county level election outcomes are determined by factors specific to local areas (e.g., partisanship), candidate attributes that appeal to constituents across counties (e.g., quality and incumbency), candidate attributes that appeal to voters in certain counties (e.g., specific policy positions) and contest-specific factors.²⁰ These candidate attributes and county- or race-specific factors are often difficult to measure. We exploit the structure of the data to help us identify the relationship between the electoral support of particular candidate attributes in the primaries and the general elections. For example, if we assume that county partisanship does not vary significantly across elections within decades, then we can account for this, as well as other county-specific features, with county fixed effects that vary by decade. Similarly, if we assume that candidate quality has the same appeal across counties within races, then we can account for candidate quality, as well as other race-specific factors, with race-specific fixed effects.

Although we cannot directly observe the candidate attributes that appeal to primary and general election voters, we can observe the variation in areas where the candidates received support in the primary election. Since primary voters presumably make decisions based upon candidate attributes separate from their partisan affiliation, we would expect a candidate's county level primary vote shares to be a proxy for the local support for the attributes of that candidate.

Thus, the basic specification we estimate is as follows:

$$V_{ij} = \alpha_i + \gamma_j + \theta P_{ij} + \varepsilon_{ij}$$

where the dependent variable, V_{ij} , is the general election vote share of the Democratic Party candidate in county i and race j .²¹ The term α_i denotes a fixed effect for county i , which

captures characteristics of county i such as partisanship. We allow α_i to vary by decade, which allows for characteristics such as county partisanship to change over time. The term γ_j is a fixed effect for contest j , which captures contest-specific factors such as the quality of the candidates running in contest j . The term P_{ij} is the difference between D_{ij} and R_{ij} , where D_{ij} (R_{ij}) is the Democratic (Republican) nominee's share of the top two candidates' vote in the Democratic (Republican) primary election preceding general election contest j .²² That is, for simplicity, we are assuming that primary vote shares of the Democratic nominee will have the same relationship with general election support as the primary vote share of the Republican nominee.²³

If candidate attributes that affect primary election outcomes are also salient in the general election, then we would expect θ to be positive. We examine whether this relationship exists for both top-of-the-ticket offices, i.e., governor and senator, as well as down-ballot offices. We might expect the relationship to be stronger for top-of-the-ticket races since the candidates in these races tend to receive more resources and media attention to cultivate their personal vote.

We allow θ to vary over time to examine whether the relationship between the candidate attributes salient in the primary and general election outcomes is mainly in the post-1960 era of candidate-centered politics. If candidate attributes are salient in elections in the pre-1960 period, then we would expect the coefficient on the primary vote share to be positive and statistically significant when we focus on races during the early period. A positive coefficient would provide further evidence that the political science literature focusing on the rise in candidate-centered politics in the post-1960 period may be understating the relevance of candidate attributes earlier in the century.

We should note that this research design does not identify the causal effect of primary competition on the general election voting. We do not know whether the attributes of the party nominees would have generated the same pattern of county level general election support even if the primary had not occurred. However, a positive estimate of θ would indicate that certain candidate attributes are salient in both the primary and general election.

Results

The results in Table 9.2 show that the candidate attributes which affect primary election outcomes also appear to influence general election outcomes. The top panel of Table 9.2 includes all offices. The results in column 1 in this panel, which includes all years, finds that on average, the areas where candidates do well in primary elections are also areas where the candidates do better than expected in the general election. If a party nominee's primary vote share is 40 percentage points higher in county A as compared to county B , then, on average, the nominee's general election vote share is about 2.8 percentage points higher in county A compared to B .²⁴

We also estimate θ separately for top-of-the-ticket and down-ballot offices. The results for the top-of-the-ticket (down-ballot) offices are in the second (third) panel of Table 9.2. The association between the county level primary and general election returns is stronger for governors and senators relative to down-ballot offices. If a party's senatorial or gubernatorial nominee's primary vote share is 40 percentage points higher in county A as compared to county B , then, on average, the nominee's general election vote share is about 3.6 percentage points higher in county A compared to B . For down-ballot office nominees this difference in primary election vote shares is associated with a 1.6 percentage point higher vote share in the general election.

While the larger estimates of θ for the top-of-the-ticket as compared to down-ballot offices may be determined by a number of alternative factors, one likely explanation for the difference is that voters have more exposure to information about candidates for top-of-the-ticket offices either through the media or the election campaigns. We know, at least in the recent period, that

Table 9.2 Primary Electoral Support and General Election Outcomes

	<i>All Years</i>	<i>Pre-1960</i>	<i>Post-1960</i>
	<i>All Offices</i>		
Primary Support	0.07 (0.01)	0.06 (0.01)	0.09 (0.01)
Observations	224145	114739	109406
	<i>Governor and Senator</i>		
Primary Support	0.09 (0.01)	0.08 (0.01)	0.10 (0.01)
Observations	127050	61498	65552
	<i>Down-ballot Offices</i>		
Primary Support	0.04 (0.01)	0.03 (0.01)	0.07 (0.01)
Observations	97095	53241	43854

Note: The dependent variable is the county level general election Democratic vote share of the Democratic and Republican vote. Primary support is the Democratic nominee’s vote share minus the Republican nominee’s vote share. State-county fixed effects that vary by decade and race fixed effects are included in all regressions. Standard errors clustered by state are in parentheses.

top-of-the-ticket primary candidates have significantly more newspaper mentions in the months prior to the primary election as compared to down-ballot candidates.²⁵

Did these candidate attributes affect primary and general election outcomes even in the pre-1960 period? Column 2 of Table 9.2 includes all elections prior to 1960. Column 3 includes all elections after and including 1960. The results in these two columns suggest that the candidate attributes salient in the primary elections were related to general election outcomes even prior to the 1960s. If a party nominee’s primary vote share is 40 percentage points higher in county *A* as compared to county *B*, then, on average, the nominee’s general election vote share is about 2.4 percentage points higher in county *A* compared to *B* in the period prior to 1960. This difference is 3.2 percentage points for senate and gubernatorial nominees and 1.2 percentage points for down-ballot nominees. Thus, even in this early period before the rise of the sixth party system, candidate attributes were affecting both primary and general elections.

As the existing literature and the analysis from the second section would suggest, the relationship between primary and general election vote shares is larger in the post-1960 period. Again, if a party nominee’s primary vote share is 40 percentage points higher in county *A* as compared to county *B*, then, on average, the nominee’s general election vote share is about 3.6 percentage points higher in county *A* compared to *B* in the period after 1960. This difference is 4.0 percentage points for top-of-the-ticket nominees and 2.8 percentage points for down-ballot nominees.

While these coefficient estimates suggest that candidate attributes affect both primary and general election outcomes, the effects are relatively modest. Even in the candidate-centered period between 1960 and 2006, a one percentage point difference in county level primary vote share for a top-of-the-ticket office is associated with only a tenth of a percentage point difference in county level general election vote share. This is perhaps not surprising. Partisanship is still the most important determinant of voting behavior. Moreover, candidates may adjust their appeals in their general elections by highlighting different attributes.

Spillover Effects

While the above evidence suggests that a candidate's attributes may affect their support in both the primary and general election, we do not know whether a candidate's attributes will have a spillover effect on other concurrent races. Coattail effects have long been discussed in the literature.²⁶ Meredith (2013) finds that in the recent period, a percentage increase in the governor's personal vote increases the secretary of state or attorney general's vote share by 0.1 to 0.2 percentage points. In this section we investigate whether the candidate attributes salient in the primary races for top-of-the-ticket statewide offices affect the general election support for nominees from the same party in races for down-ballot statewide offices. One potential mechanism by which this could occur is if the top-of-the-ticket nominees mobilize voters in particular areas to turn out and these voters also support the down-ballot candidates with the same partisan affiliations. We also examine whether the reverse relationship exists – i.e., areas where the down-ballot candidate does well in the primaries are also the areas where the top-of-the-ticket candidates do well in the general elections.

To estimate this spillover effect we employ a similar specification as the one used in the previous section. For the analysis of general election support in down-ballot races we include the primary vote share of the top-of-the-ticket nominees from the same party in addition to the down-ballot primary vote share, county fixed effects and race fixed effects. The top-of-the-ticket vote share is the higher of the party's gubernatorial or senatorial nominees' primary vote shares in that county and year. Similarly, for the analysis of general election support in top-of-the-ticket races, we include the highest primary vote share among the down-ballot offices in that county and year.

When we pool across all years, we find that the primary support for the top-of-the-ticket nominees is correlated with down-ballot general election outcomes. When we divide the results between races before and after 1960, we find that the spillover effect is strongest during the early part of the century. There is little evidence that the spillover effect from top-of-the-ticket to down-ballot races is present in the post-1960 period.

Consistent with other studies of reverse coattail effects in the U.S., we find no significant evidence that down-ballot primary support is correlated with the top-of-the-ticket general election outcomes. The coefficient estimates are not only small in magnitude and not statistically significant, but also of the opposite sign in some analyses. This result suggests that there is little reverse spillover of the personal attributes of down-ballot candidates on the top-of-the-ticket general elections. This result is not very surprising because, as we mentioned above, down-ballot candidates are often given less media attention and have access to fewer campaign resources.

Conclusion

The results above indicate that there are clear linkages between primary and general elections. First, although scholars often discuss the rise of candidate-centered politics in the 1960s, our state level analyses indicate that there was a rise in split ticket voting much earlier in the century, particularly in states that introduced mandatory direct primaries between 1900 and 1915. Second, our county level analyses suggest that candidate attributes salient in the primaries are also salient in the general elections, and this was true even in the decades prior to the 1960s. Finally, the electoral appeal of top-of-the-ticket candidates appears to have a modest effect on voting for down-ballot candidates, at least in the early part of the twentieth century.

The findings above establish a clear association, but do not identify the specific mechanisms. One possibility is that there are issues or attributes unique to the electoral circumstances that

influence voters in both the primaries and general elections in similar ways – e.g., one candidate has a pro-gun position, which both primary and general election voters use to guide their decisions. Another possibility is that the primary campaign “spills over” into the general election – e.g., issues or attributes emphasized by the primary election candidates become salient also in the general election. Hirano et al. (2015) use survey data from primary elections to show that primary voters can learn about the ideological positions of the candidates over the course of the primary campaign.

In our prior work we show that the introduction of primary elections appeared to weaken party loyalty among mid-western and western Republican congressmen (Ansolabehere et al. 2007). In subsequent work we show this holds especially for issues featured on the Progressive agenda. This might be an example of what we find here, both in the aggregate and the county level results. In the aggregate, split ticket voting might increase because some Republican candidates on the ballot are progressives and others are stalwarts, and voters distinguish between them. In addition, this attribute – “how much of a progressive or stalwart is candidate A or B?” – might affect voting in both the primary and the general election at the county level, depending on how much the voters in various counties support progressive policies and politicians.

If primaries do in fact affect general election voting behavior, then candidates must think strategically about the spillovers across the races. Primaries can provide information to nominees about how the candidates appeal to certain types of voters. Thus, primaries could potentially affect policy agendas and outcomes. For example, do primaries lead campaigns, even in the general election, to raise new issues? Do primaries raise the salience of particular candidate attributes, which would have otherwise been ignored? In addition, candidates’ strategies in the primary elections should incorporate expectations about how the primary campaign might affect the general election.²⁷ Further theoretical and empirical research is clearly necessary to fully assess the relationship between primary and general elections.

Notes

- 1 This chapter incorporates material from an earlier manuscript titled “The Direct Primary and Candidate Centered Voting in U.S. Elections.” We thank the numerous research assistants at Columbia, Yale and MIT who have helped assemble the county level primary election returns. We also thank Marc Meredith for the county level down-ballot general election data for 1990 to 2006. We gratefully acknowledge support from the National Science Foundation under grants SES-0617556 and SES-0959200. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.
- 2 Aldrich cites numerous articles and books, including Nie, Verba and Petrocik (1979), Alford and Brady (1989), Wattenberg (1990, 1991), Jacobson (1992), and Shively (1992). Some recent literature argues that personal voting, based on incumbency and quality, may have had a role in elections even in the strong party era prior to the 1890s (e.g., Carson et al. 2007; Reynolds, 2006).
- 3 Candidate attributes refer to attributes other than partisan affiliation – e.g., regional connections, ethnicity, factional affiliations, specific policy positions, etc.
- 4 Two notable exceptions are Harvey and Mukherjee (2006) and Ansolabehere et al. (2007). They find some evidence that partisan voting may have declined after the introduction of primaries.
- 5 Key (1964, p. 342), as cited in Miller, Jewell and Sigelman (1988, p. 4596), writes that “the adoption of the direct primary opened the road for disruptive forces that gradually fractionalized the party organization. [T]he primary system . . . facilitated the construction of factions and cliques attached to ambitions of individual leaders.” Herrnson (1988, p. 26) writes: “The introduction of the direct primary encouraged candidates to develop their own campaign organizations, or pseudo-parties, for contesting primary elections.” In the Carey and Shugart (1993) ranking of electoral systems in terms of their incentives to cultivate personal votes, the use of primaries is an important factor in identifying the United States as a relatively candidate-centered system.

- 6 Reynolds (2006, p. 102) cites several historical works that describe an “increasingly candidate-centered orientation of electoral campaigns” around the turn of the twentieth century.
- 7 For example, Born (1981), Kenney and Rice (1984), and Romero (2003) find some evidence that divisive primaries affect general election outcomes. Hacker (1965) and Kenney (1986) find little evidence that divisive primaries have an effect on general election voting. Ware (1979) discusses why primaries may not necessarily have a negative effect on candidates’ general election prospects.
- 8 Harvey and Mukherjee (2006) and Ansolabehere et al. (2007) also examine the relationship between split ticket voting and the introduction of primaries. However, unlike our study that examines the split ticket voting across races for multiple offices, they only focus on the relationship between gubernatorial and U.S. House votes. Also our study allows for within-state trending in split ticket voting that could reflect within-state changes in the strength of party organizations.
- 9 Using data from exit polls and the CCES we know that split ticket voting tends to be higher at the individual level than the aggregate level differences would suggest. However the measures of split ticket voting using state level data are highly correlated with measures using individual level data. Consider, for example, split ticket voting for senate and governor for the period 1982–2006. For each state-year with both a Senate and Governor race, let s_{ikt} be a dummy variable equal to 1 if respondent i in the exit poll voted for candidates from different parties in the Senate and Governor races (including third-party and independent candidates), and 0 otherwise; let N_{kt} be the number of respondents in the exit poll; and let $S_{kt}^I = (1 / N_{kt}) \sum_{i=1}^{N_{kt}} s_{ikt}$ be the overall amount of split ticket voting at the individual level. Let D_{kt}^G (D_{kt}^S) be the aggregate Democratic share of the two-party vote in the Governor (Senate) race; and let $S_{kt}^A = |D_{kt}^G - D_{kt}^S|$ be the aggregate measure of split ticket voting. The correlation between S^I and S^A is .72 ($N = 157$).
- 10 Statewide races include offices such as U.S. senator, governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general, secretary of state, treasurer, auditor/comptroller/controller, superintendent of education, commissioner of agriculture, public utility commissioner, corporation commissioner, and lands commissioner. We also include races for various statewide offices specific to certain states. See Ansolabehere and Snyder (2002), Ansolabehere et al. (2006), and Ansolabehere et al. (2010) for a complete list of sources and offices used in this analysis.
- 11 We dropped Alaska, Hawaii, Georgia, Louisiana, Maine, Mississippi, New Hampshire, New Jersey, and South Carolina. Alaska and Hawaii had not received statehood in the early decades of the 20th century. The other states had too few years with 3 or more contested general elections.
- 12 Each state is weighted equally in each year. We group the odd-numbered years together with the previous even-numbered year – e.g., 1881 with 1880, etc.
- 13 Calculated as follows: $100(3.5 - .9)/(7.9 - .9) = 37.1$ See Table 9.1
- 14 Rusk (1970) finds that the split ticket voting increased in states that adopted the Australian ballot, and the increase was especially large in states with office-bloc ballots and no party lever. Burnham (1965) also finds an increase in split ticket voting around this period but does not link the changes to any specific electoral institutions. Campbell and Miller (1957) also find that ballot form influences split ticket voting using survey data. As Campbell et al. (1960, p. 275) state in *The American Voter*, “Any attempt to explain why the voter marks a straight or split ballot must take account of the physical characteristics of the election ballot.”
- 15 We also ran specifications including a measure of party competition. This variable was never statistically significant and did not substantively change the coefficient estimates on our main variables of interest.
- 16 We find no statistically significant evidence that the introduction of the Australian ballot is associated with an increase in split ticket voting. The estimated coefficients on the ballot form variables are particularly sensitive to choice of time period and specification.
- 17 Alaska, Hawaii and Connecticut are not included in this analysis. Louisiana post-1975 is also dropped from the analysis since the state moved to a top-two primary.
- 18 Data for the 2002, 2004 and 2006 Senate election data were purchased from <http://uselectionatlas.org>.
- 19 Maine, New Hampshire, New Jersey and Tennessee do not have primary elections for the down-ballot offices included in this study.
- 20 The vote share in county i of electoral contest j can be written as follows: $V_{ij} = N_i + Q_j^D + Q_j^R + \theta_1 A_{ij}^D + \theta_2 A_{ij}^R + Z_j + \epsilon_{ij}$, where N^i is the partisanship of county i . The terms Q_j^D and Q_j^R are characteristics of candidates that affect their vote share evenly throughout the district. We might think of this as the overall quality of candidates or the incumbency advantage. The A_{ij}^D and A_{ij}^R terms denote non-partisan attributes of the Democratic and Republican candidates that affect their support in county i in the primary leading up to general election contest j . The Z_j term captures partisan tides, or other factors such as specific issues, that have the same effect across all counties in race j .

- 21 We excluded uncompetitive general election races – i.e., races where the Democratic or Republican candidate received more than 95 percent of the vote. The main results do not substantively change when these races are included.
- 22 In primaries with runoffs, we use the first round vote share of the nominee.
- 23 The specification we estimate captures the different variables in the equation described in note 18. In particular, α_i captures N_i , and γ_j captures Q_j^D , Q_j^R and Z_j . In the specification we estimate we constrain θ_1 to be equal to $-\theta_2$. Because we use the Democratic and Republican primary vote as proxies of A_{ij}^D and A_{ij}^R , P_{ij} is simply the primary vote share of the Democratic candidate minus the primary vote share of the Republican candidate. When we estimate separate θ_1 and θ_2 coefficients on the Democratic and Republican primary vote shares, the coefficient magnitudes are similar overall with minor differences within each time period. In particular, $|\theta_1|$ is slightly larger than $|\theta_2|$ in the early period and the reverse is true in the later period. This difference may reflect the factional divisions that existed in the Republican Party in the early period and the divisions within the Democratic Party in the later period.
- 24 The difference of 40 percentage points represents about two standard deviations.
- 25 We examined the number of times primary candidates were mentioned relative to the word “election” during the months prior to a primary election in the newspapers included in newslibrary.com during the period 1998 to 2006. The top-of-the-ticket candidates received significantly more newspaper mentions relative to the down-ballot candidates.
- 26 See Meredith (2013) for a review of this literature.
- 27 Existing literature discusses this point in terms of ideological competition – adopting extreme positions in the primaries may hurt candidates in the general election. Our findings suggest that such considerations hold more broadly.

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