

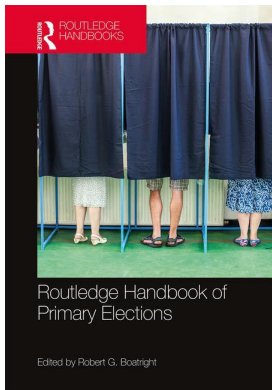
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Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



Routledge Handbook of Primary Elections

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Divisive Primaries

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315544182-14>

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Published online on: 26 Feb 2018

How to cite :- Jeffrey Lazarus. 26 Feb 2018, *Divisive Primaries from:* Routledge Handbook of Primary Elections Routledge

Accessed on: 23 Sep 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315544182-14>

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10

DIVISIVE PRIMARIES

When Do They Hurt in the General Election?

Jeffrey Lazarus

The divisive primary hypothesis predicts that when a primary election contest is hard-fought, or the eventual winner of the primary wins by a close margin, the party will do poorly in the general election. This relationship between primary and general election outcomes was first posited by Key (1953) and tested by Hacker (1965), and has been a venerable part of the elections literature ever since. However, despite the divisive primary hypothesis' very compelling theoretical underpinnings, it has a tepid empirical track record. For every study which finds that divisive primaries harm party nominees, there's another one which says they don't.

These studies reveal that which office a candidate is running for appears to determine whether divisive primaries are harmful. They clearly hurt party nominees in presidential elections (e.g., Gurian et al. 2016) and Senate elections (e.g., Kenney and Rice 1984). However, there is less evidence that they hurt candidates running for governor (e.g., Kenney and Rice 1984), and none whatsoever for the House of Representatives (e.g., Lazarus 2005) or state legislatures (Hogan 2003). Despite this checkered empirical record, though, the idea of the harmful divisive primary remains a popular one. It's essentially common wisdom – everybody “knows” that a closely fought primary election hurts you in the general election. Newspapers run stories with titles like “Wisconsin Republicans Worried about Crowded Senate Primary” (Bauer 2017), and which posit that “it's an open question whether [Kansas] Democrats could recover from a divisive [gubernatorial] primary battle in time for the general election” (Shorman and Lowry 2017). Such concerns are ubiquitous.

One reason for these concerns is that even though divisive primaries don't *cause* nominees to do poorly in down-ballot elections, there is nonetheless a strong correlation between primary and general election outcomes. This correlation is spurious, however (Lazarus 2005; Kenney 1988; Born 1981). Vulnerable incumbents draw strong challengers into primary elections, which creates divisive primaries in the same districts where the vulnerable incumbents do poorly in the general election. In other words, in House elections both primary and general election outcomes are endogenous to incumbent vulnerability, and this creates an apparent divisive primary effect where one does not actually exist. There's also some evidence of this pattern in gubernatorial (Partin 2002) and state legislative (Hogan 2003) races as well. Observers of politics who note this correlation may not be aware of its spurious nature, and attribute causality where it doesn't exist.

In this chapter, I first go over the logic underpinning the divisive primary hypothesis, discussing its causal mechanisms and providing an example for each. Next, I review the literature which has investigated the divisive primary effect at each electoral level. Third, I present an empirical test of the divisive primary effect in Senate and gubernatorial elections which controls for the type of endogeneity observed in House elections. Even with the controls I find strong evidence of a divisiveness effect in Senate elections; in gubernatorial elections the evidence is much weaker. Finally, in the conclusion I posit that the primary difference between races where divisive primaries hurt and the ones where they don't is voter attention. If voters aren't paying enough attention during the primary to know what happened during that stage of the election, it's not possible for them to factor primary election results into their general election decision-making.

The Logic of the Divisive Primary

As I just mentioned, one reason the idea of the harmful divisive primary remains firmly entrenched is because of how ubiquitous it appears to be. A second reason is because the logic underpinning the concept is simple and intuitive. There are three main reasons to think a divisive primary would hurt a party's nominee in the general election; it's also easy to find examples which illustrate all three.

First, divisive primaries can alienate supporters of the losing candidates in the primary election; these supporters might refuse to vote for the nominee in the subsequent general election. A closely fought primary produces a relatively large number of voters whose first-choice candidate does not appear on the general election ballot. Even though these voters share a party identification with someone on the November ballot, they may not want to vote for that candidate. This refusal might stem from policy differences. If the primary election candidates represent moderate and ideologically extreme factions of the party, voters for the losing candidate may find the winner simply too far from their ideological preferences to vote for. Additionally, more fundamental in-group/out-group dynamics are also at work here: voters, having chosen a candidate to support and identify with, may simply refuse to give up that identification to vote for a different candidate (Kenney and Rice 1987). For either reason, voters who supported a losing primary candidate may not vote for the party's nominee in the general election.

Both of these factors likely played a role among Democrats in the 2016 presidential election. In the primary election that year, liberal Bernie Sanders gave the relatively centrist Hillary Clinton a surprisingly tough primary election fight. Even though Clinton ultimately prevailed, a small but significant fraction of Sanders supporters refused to fall in line behind Hillary Clinton after the primary elections concluded. Many of them either did not vote for president at all, or rallied behind liberal third-party candidate Jill Stein. In a poll conducted in August of that year, 31 percent of Sanders voters reported that they would not be voting for Clinton in the general election (Walker 2016).

Second, divisive primaries may provide a party nominee's general election opponent with damaging ammunition. The loser of a closely contested primary election, even though he lost, must have found some campaign tactic which was effective against the eventual nominee – if he hadn't the primary would not have been close. It might be a scandal in the party nominee's past, a policy position the nominee holds which is not congruent with the electorate, a type of debate question the nominee doesn't answer well, or anything that represents an electoral weakness. This weakness would also serve a general election opponent well, even though that general election opponent might not have discovered it had the primary election not been fought so closely.

That was the case for the prison furlough issue which George Bush used against Michael Dukakis in the 1988 presidential election. In 1986, Willie Horton was a convicted murderer in Massachusetts who was temporarily released from prison for a weekend furlough. He was supposed to return to prison at the end of the weekend, but instead escaped. A short time later he assaulted a couple and raped the woman. Dukakis was governor of Massachusetts at the time, and had strongly supported the furlough program Horton used to escape prison. During the presidential election two years later, Democratic candidate Al Gore brought up the furlough program during a primary election debate (although he did not mention Horton by name). Dukakis went on to win the nomination, but in the general election the Bush campaign focused relentlessly on Horton, turning him into a central issue in the campaign in order to make Dukakis appear soft on crime. The issue played a significant role in Dukakis' defeat that year, and it may not have happened if Gore hadn't mentioned the furloughs – Bush's campaign chief Lee Atwater claimed to have learned about Horton from watching the Democratic primary election debate (Simon 1990).

The third reason a divisive primary election might hamper a nominee in the general election is that a hard-fought primary election is simply expensive. A bruising contest during the primary election can leave the winning campaign strapped for resources by the end. When the general election rolls around, the nominee has to start from scratch. This happened to Tommy Thompson, the Republican nominee in Wisconsin's 2012 Senate election. The Republican primary was a tight four-way battle between Thompson, a relative centrist, and three more conservative candidates. Thompson only won 34 percent of the vote, beating second-place finisher Eric Hovde by 3.2 percent. One of the reasons it was so close was that Hovde, a self-funded candidate, spent almost \$6 million of his own money in his attempt to win the primary, forcing Thompson to match him. Thompson did, and won the primary, but his campaign entered the general election essentially broke. His Democratic opponent in the general election, Tammy Baldwin, had no competition in the primary, and was able to focus her entire \$15 million war-chest on the general election. Baldwin won the general election by six points, in no small part because she was able to outspend Thompson almost five-to-one (Sullivan and Blake 2012).

These three factors – alienating the voters of the losing candidates, providing ammunition to the other party's nominee, and costing a lot of money – combine to make a divisive primary election a scary proposition for a candidate or party organization. In the next section, I discuss what the evidence says about when candidates should be scared and when they probably don't need to worry.

Do Divisive Primaries Hurt? Well, That Depends . . .

The logic underpinning the divisive primary hypothesis appears to be iron-clad, but appearances can be deceiving. Observers of American elections have been debating whether the hypothesis holds true since Key (1953) first proposed it, and at first glance the literature doesn't appear to offer a clear answer. Some studies provide strong evidence that divisive primaries hurt party nominees in the general election, and others clearly fail to provide such evidence. For this reason, a quick glance at the literature can be confusing. However, sorting the studies by political office reveals that whether divisive primaries hurt candidates depends in large part on what type of election you're looking at.

Before diving in I will note that I'm skipping over several methodological debates that have taken place within the literature; the most involved of these is over how scholars should measure divisiveness. Regardless of the details, however, every author in this literature measures divisiveness by observing in some way how close the results of a primary election are. Throughout this section, a "divisive" primary is one in which the winner won a relatively small amount of the vote in that election.

In presidential elections, study after study confirms that party nominees are indeed hamstrung in the general election when the primary election was divisive. These studies have looked at the issue from a variety of methodological perspectives, and they all reach the same conclusion. First and foremost, candidates coming out of divisive primaries receive fewer votes in the general election, just like the hypothesis predicts (Atkeson 1998; Gurian et al. 2016; Kenney and Rice 1987; Lengle et al. 1995).¹ In addition to this, scholars have also investigated the individual-level underpinnings of these vote totals. Surveys indicate that candidates coming out of divisive primaries receive lower levels of approval from survey respondents (Kenney and Rice 1987; Southwell 1986, 2010; Stone 1986). As well, party activists and volunteers are less likely to do work for these candidates in the general election (Stone 1984, 1986; Stone et al. 1992; Buell 1986). All told, candidates coming out of divisive primaries are at a significant disadvantage relative to candidates coming from easy primary contests.

Gurian et al. (2016) propose that the divisive primary effect is so strong at the presidential level because divisiveness can influence voters at both the state and the national level. At the state level, when one state's primary election is close, this causes the party's nominee to do relatively poorly *in that state* in the subsequent general election. But there's also a national-level effect: when a party's primary election is closely fought nationally – both in the aggregated state primaries and in the national media – this can hurt the party's presidential candidate in the general election in *all* states. Gurian et al. (*ibid.*) estimate the effect of divisiveness on general election outcomes in all post-WWII presidential elections; they conclude that divisiveness cost a general election candidate at least one state in most of these contests, and in some years the count exceeded 10 states.

The only other office for which there is consistent empirical support for a divisive primary effect is the Senate. In fact, the empirical investigation into divisive primaries began with Senate elections, when Hacker (1965) found no evidence that a divisive primary influenced whether a Senate candidate won or lost. Later, Bernstein (1977) corrected a number of methodological flaws in Hacker's original work, and found that divisive primaries do hurt Senate candidates – even when examining Hacker's original cases. Subsequent literature consistently shows that Senate candidates coming out of divisive primaries get a lower vote in the general election (Abramowitz 1988; Kenney and Rice 1984; Segura and Nicholson 1995). Only Kenney's (1988) findings are ambiguous; we shall return to this study shortly.

Contrary to the findings for Presidential and Senate races, there's very little substantial evidence of an effect in any other type of election. Four studies investigate gubernatorial races. Two find no effect whatsoever (Hacker 1965; Pierson and Smith 1975). Kenney and Rice (1984) find that divisive primaries do depress general election vote shares in gubernatorial elections, but the effect is much smaller than the corresponding effect in Senate elections, and not as robust. Partin (2002), however, finds something unusual. He analyzed challenger vote totals, and finds that an incumbent party challenge is associated with challengers doing better in the general election, consistent with the hypothesis. But he also finds that when the challenger's primary is contested there's a small but significant *increase* in the challengers' vote share – the opposite of what the divisive primary hypothesis predicts. What explains this unexpected result?

I believe the answer can be found in divisive primary studies on House races. Here, studies reveal a correlation between how close a primary election is and how well the candidate does in a general election, but the relationship isn't causal (Born 1981; Kenney 1988; Lazarus 2005). The confounding factor is how electorally vulnerable the incumbent is. Because people deciding to run for election are strategic, more of them run against weak incumbents, when the chance for a challenger to win is the highest. And the strongest challengers – the ones with the connections, expertise, and skill to win elections – are the most strategic. As a result, when

an incumbent is weak, both more challengers run against them, and stronger challengers run against them (Black 1972; Jacobson and Kernell 1981; Lazarus 2008). All of these challengers, by running against each other and the incumbent at the same time, create divisive primaries.

From there, what happens depends on whether the divisive primary is the incumbent's party or the challenger's party. In the incumbent's party, the party nominee is almost always the incumbent, even if he's weak. Only about one percent of House incumbents ever lose primary elections. But when the incumbent is weak he is going to do relatively poorly in the general election, at least compared to other incumbents. The fact that this happens after the incumbent survived a close primary creates the appearance of a divisive primary effect: incumbents who get a lower vote share in the primary also get a lower vote share in the general. But the poor primary election result doesn't *cause* the poor general election result. Rather, each is a consequence of the fact that the incumbent is weak.

Something different happens on the challenger's side, though, and this is where we can explain Partin's (2002) unusual result. When the challenger's party primary is close, it's once again usually because a weak incumbent draws several candidates into the race. These candidates split the vote, making the primary a "divisive" one, and the winner goes on to the general election. But here, the party nominee doesn't do worse than usual in the general election; she does *better* – because she's running against a weak incumbent. This flips the divisive primary hypothesis on its head: challengers coming out of a divisive primary tend to do better in the general election than challengers coming out of an easy primary.

This pattern of findings – that divisive primaries appear to "hurt" incumbents and "help" challengers – has been found for every office other than the Senate and President, including gubernatorial elections (Partin 2002), U.S. House elections (Herrnson 2000), and state legislative elections (Hogan 2003). Some scholars observing this pattern erroneously conclude that a divisive primary somehow helps challengers prepare for the general elections, perhaps by honing campaign skills or by providing connections to donors. However, more methodologically sophisticated studies show that both relationships – the negative relationship between primary divisiveness and general election outcomes on incumbents' side, and the positive one on challengers' side – are indeed endogenous to incumbent vulnerability. Born (1981) demonstrates this using two-staged least squares regression to account for the endogeneity, and Lazarus (2005) and Kenney (1988) estimate general election vote shares while controlling for incumbent vulnerability. All four studies find that once the endogeneity is accounted for, both divisive primary effects go.

Kenney (1988) investigates whether incumbent vulnerability is responsible for the divisive primary effect in Senate elections, and indeed he finds that they are. However, Kenney's measure of incumbent vulnerability is non-standard in today's literature. Looking at CQ weekly report accounts of Senate elections, he codes for factors which would seem to make an incumbent vulnerable (scandal, poor polling, and the like), and created a "vulnerable" dummy variable based on these findings. However, Kenney did no robustness checks on his coding, and subsequent literature has revealed more nuanced and reliable measures of vulnerability as well. Indeed, Lazarus (2005) uses these measures to demonstrate endogeneity in House elections. In the following section, I present a test similar to that performed by Lazarus (*ibid.*), but applied to Senate and gubernatorial races.

Divisive Primaries in Senate and Gubernatorial Elections

In this section I test whether incumbent vulnerability is responsible for any observed correlation between primary election divisiveness and general election outcomes in Senate and gubernatorial elections. To do this, I collected data on elections to both offices between 1998 and 2014. I use OLS regression to estimate the share of the two-party vote the incumbent party candidate received

in each type of election. Focusing on the two-party vote (to the exclusion of third-party candidates) ensures that the general election vote totals are zero-sum – if the incumbent’s vote share goes up, the challenger’s necessarily goes down. This way, the single dependent variable can estimate the effect divisiveness has on both incumbents’ and challengers’ general election vote share.

The key independent variables measure primary election divisiveness. I operationalize divisiveness by taking the share of the primary vote going to that election’s winning candidate – that is, the party’s nominee in the general election.² Each model has two divisiveness variables: *inc-party vote* is the share of the incumbent party primary vote won by that party’s party nominee, and *out-party vote* is the corresponding value for the challenger’s party. The main empirical prediction of the divisive primary hypothesis is that a nominee’s general election vote share is high when his or her primary election vote share is high, and vice versa. Once again, the dependent variable measures the incumbent party nominee’s vote share. Formally, then, the hypothesis predicts that the coefficient on *inc-party vote* is positive and significant, and the coefficient on *out-party vote* is negative and significant.

I measure incumbent vulnerability in two ways. First, I include the standard measure of vulnerability: *lagged vote* is the incumbent party’s share of the two-party vote in his or her most recent election. In those cases where the incumbent is running for reelection, *lagged vote* represents a direct measure of the incumbent’s electoral strength and likelihood of winning. In the cases where the incumbent has retired or otherwise moved on and the seat is open, it is a more indirect measure of the partisan legacy the incumbent leaves behind in the state. Second, I include variables which indicate the number of candidates running in each primary election. *Inc-party candidates* captures the number running in the incumbent party primary, and *out-party candidates* captures the number running in the challenger party primary. In using these variables, I follow Lazarus (2005), who used similar variables to capture the endogeneity of incumbent vulnerability in House elections, and found that when estimations of general election vote share controlled for incumbent vulnerability in this way, the independent effect of primary election vote share disappeared. If the divisive primary effect is endogenous to incumbent vulnerability in the present study as it is in House elections, then when the *candidate* variables are included in the model, the *inc-party vote* and *out-party vote* will not be significant.

The models also include a set of control variables which account for other factors which influence general election results. Foremost among these is *incumbent running*, a dummy variable coded 1 if the incumbent is seeking reelection and 0 if the incumbent is not. *Incumbent running* should be positive and significant in all models, reflecting the advantages incumbents enjoy when seeking reelection. *Presidential vote* is the share of the two-party popular vote won by the presidential candidate of the incumbent’s party in the state, and is included to capture the general partisan leaning of the state. *Presidential vote* should be positive and significant in the models, reflecting the fact that Republican candidates do better in Republican-leaning states, and Democrats do better in Democratic-leaning states. Next, I include *incumbent party spending* and *challenger party spending*, both operationalized as the logged number of dollars the respective candidate spent on the election. In gubernatorial elections, Partin (2002) finds that the relationship between spending and general election outcomes is straightforward: candidates get more votes when they spend more money. But Jacobson (1987) shows that this is not the case in congressional elections. Here, incumbents predominantly spend money to win reelection only if they are forced to by facing a strong challenger. This results in a couple of counterintuitive empirical results: that incumbents’ vote shares correlate more strongly with challenger spending levels than with incumbent spending levels, and that incumbents’ vote shares are negatively correlated with how much the incumbent spends on reelection. Finally, *Democratic incumbent* is a dummy variable coded 1 if the incumbent is a Democrat, and 0 otherwise.³

Empirical Results: Senate

Results for the Senate are presented in Table 10.1. Model 1 contains just the divisiveness variables, without the controls for the number of candidates in the primary election. In this model, *inc-party vote* is positive and significant, as predicted by the divisive primary hypothesis. According to the model, every additional percentage point of the vote the incumbent party nominee receives in the primary is associated with an additional .06 percentage point received in the general election. Thus, a nominee who wins a primary election with 65 percent of the vote receives, on average, 0.6 percent more of the vote in the general election than one who wins a primary with 55 percent. The standard deviation on *inc-party vote* is 19.1. We can use this to compare an incumbent party nominee who is one standard deviation above the mean in their primary vote share to a nominee who is one standard deviation below the mean. The nominee coming out of the less divisive primary wins, on average, 2.3 percentage points higher vote share in the general election than the nominee coming out of the more divisive primary. Measured this way, the effect is small but potentially enough to affect a close election. It is about on par with the size of the effect of divisiveness found in previous studies of Senate elections.

By contrast, *out-party vote* is not significant. According to this model, then, challenger party divisiveness does not appear to influence general election results. Nonetheless, it is worth noting

Table 10.1 Effect of Divisive Primary Elections in Senate Races

	Model 1	Model 2
Inc-party vote	.061* (.306)	.114*** (.037)
Inc-party candidates	—	.980** (.362)
Out-party vote	-.050 (.023)	-.098*** (.031)
Out-party candidates	—	-.878** (.338)
Lagged vote	.092* (.047)	.100* (.047)
Democratic incumbent	-.616 (1.09)	.118 (1.11)
Incumbent running	4.74*** (1.41)	5.19*** (1.40)
Presidential vote	.092 (.301)	.064 (.296)
Incumbent party spending (logged)	.185 (.427)	.161 (.422)
Challenger party spending (logged)	-1.81*** (.180)	-1.74*** (.179)
Constant	66.0*** (17.5)	65.2*** (17.6)
N	270	270
Adjusted R-squared	.398	.416

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$, one-tailed tests.

that this model does include one control for incumbent vulnerability in *lagged vote* and still the initial results indicate that divisiveness has at least some effect on Senate elections.

Model 2 includes the controls for the number of candidates running in the primary election. Once again, these variables account for how attractive the incumbent (if running) is to run against. If the divisiveness effect is endogenous, then these variables will be significantly related to incumbents' general election vote share, while *inc-party vote* and *out-party vote* will not be. However, results indicate that this is not the case – here, all four variables related to the primary election are significant. First, both *inc-party candidates* and *out-party candidates* are significantly related to the dependent variable. Second, not only is *inc-party vote* significant as in Model 1, but its coefficient has almost doubled in size. Finally, the coefficient on *out-party vote* has also doubled in size, and this variable is now significant as well. Thus it appears that in Senate elections, controlling for the number of candidates in the primary election reveals an even stronger divisiveness effect than is indicated by not controlling for them.

In Model 2 the coefficient on *inc-party vote* indicates that, controlling for the number of primary candidates, every additional point of vote the incumbent party nominee wins in the primary is associated with .114 percentage points in the general election. Here, the same two hypothetical incumbent party nominees discussed above – one a standard deviation below and the other a standard deviation above the mean on *inc-party vote* – are now separated by 4.4 percentage points in their general election vote share. Additionally, the coefficient on *out-party vote* is negative, as the divisive primary hypothesis predicts: the incumbent party nominee should do worse – and correspondingly, the challenger party nominee do better – in the general election, as the challenger party nominee gets more votes in the primary. The coefficient reveals that for every additional point the challenger party nominee gets in the primary, the incumbent party nominee gets .098 points less in the general. The standard deviation on *out-party vote share* is 23.1. Now we take our two hypothetical incumbent party nominees from above and this time vary *out-party vote* – in other words, vary how divisive the challenger party primary is – by one standard deviation above and below the mean on *challenger vote share*. Now our two hypothetical nominees are separated by 4.5 percentage points in the general election.

Note that the effects of *inc-party vote* and *out-party vote* are not mutually exclusive – the divisiveness of the two parties' primary election contests vary independently of one another. Taken together, the two effects can be quite sizeable. Once again let's envision two hypothetical incumbent party nominees. One – we'll call her Lucky – won a primary with a vote share one standard deviation above the mean for her party, and is also facing a challenger who won a primary with a vote share one standard deviation below the mean for the challenger's party. In other words, Lucky's primary was not divisive, but her general election opponent's was. The second incumbent party nominee – Unlucky – has the opposite circumstance. Unlucky won a primary with a vote share one standard deviation below the mean, and is facing a challenger party nominee who won a primary with a vote share one standard deviation above the mean. So Unlucky's primary was divisive, while her opponent's was not. To calculate the effect of primary divisiveness on Lucky's and Unlucky's general election performance, we simply add the two effects – 4.4 percentage points for *inc-party vote* and 4.5 points for *out-party vote*. Thus Lucky will do 8.9 percentage points better in the general election, on average, than Unlucky, just as a result of divisive primary elections. That is a very large effect, larger even than estimations of the effect of incumbency (including the crude one estimated here – the coefficient on *incumbent running* in Model 2 indicates that incumbents only outperform same-party non-incumbents by 5.19 percentage points). The effect of primary election divisiveness, then, has the potential to be huge.

With these results as our guide, we can point to a number of elections where a divisive primary played a key role in preventing a party nominee from winning a Senate race. For example,

in 1998 an open Kentucky Senate seat was being contested by House members Scotty Baesler and Jim Bunning. Baesler, the Democrat, ran in a bruising primary election contested by six candidates. He won 34 percent of the vote, only five points better than the second-place finisher. By contrast, Bunning sailed through his primary – he had just one opponent, and easily won by a count of 74 to 26. The general election was a tight contest throughout, but Bunning ultimately prevailed, winning 50.3 percent to Baesler's 49.7 percent. Like Tommy Thompson's Wisconsin Senate bid discussed above, Baesler's primary contest left him with virtually no funds to contest the general election; this cost him momentum heading into the contest and likely votes in November (Foerstel 1998). A similar story can be told about Senator Slade Gorton's (R-WA) 2000 unseating by Maria Cantwell. Gorton barely survived an eight-way primary, while Cantwell easily dispatched her two primary opponents. Gorton lost the contest by only 2,200 votes, or 0.09 percent. Mark Kirk (R-IL) at least in part owed his narrow 2010 win to the fact that his Democratic opponent, Alexi Giannoulias, had run in a five-way primary on which he spent \$2.2 million and still only won by five percentage points; Kirk won his primary by 37 points. Just in 2010, divisive primaries on the Democratic side likely helped Republicans win Senate seats in Indiana, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania.

Turning to the candidate variables themselves, both are significant but in the opposite direction from what we might expect. The coefficient on *inc-party candidates* is positive, meaning that for each additional candidate running in the incumbent party primary election the incumbent party nominee receives .98 percentage points *more* in the general election. Correspondingly, the coefficient on *out-party candidates* is negative, meaning that for each additional candidate running on the challenger side the incumbent loses .878 percent of the vote. This cuts against the effect of the vote share variables somewhat, as the number of candidates running in a primary is, itself, a measure of the level of competition in the primary. But here the effect is opposite to what the divisive primary thesis predicts: measured this way, competition in the primary election is associated with a party nominee doing better in the general election, not worse.

The apparent contradiction between the two sets of variables is likely explained by how they interact with one another in real-life scenarios. Once again, consider two hypothetical incumbent party nominees, both of whom won 52 percent of the vote in their primary elections. But this time, imagine that one of them had just a single primary opponent, and the other had six. A 52 percent vote share in an election against a single opponent is a weaker showing, and is a symptom of much greater overall electoral vulnerability, than a 52 percent showing in an election with six opponents. This is likely why *inc-party candidates* is negative: the more opponents you have in an election the more impressive a given vote share is. And this electoral strength likely carries over into the general election. A similar, corresponding effect may also be going on among challenger party candidates to create the negative coefficient on *out-party candidates*.⁴ However, there might also be a second, distinct causal mechanism at work here. It might be that, as per the discussion in the literature review above, weak incumbents draw more challenger party candidates into the race, and subsequently, the weak incumbent does poorly in the general election.⁵

Empirical Results: Governor

Results for gubernatorial races are presented in Table 10.2. Consistent with prior analyses of divisive primary effects in gubernatorial races, the evidence points to a much weaker effect here than in Senate races. Models 1 and 2 in this analysis correspond to the same models in the Senate analysis. For governors, Model 1 provides no evidence that primary election vote share on either side influences the general election vote share: neither *inc-party vote* nor *out-party vote* is significantly related to the dependent variable.

Table 10.2 Effect of Divisive Primary Elections in Gubernatorial Races

	Model 1	Model 2
Inc-party vote	.015 (.028)	.072* (.037)
Inc-party candidates	—	1.07** (.439)
Out-party vote	.028 (.023)	.003 (.034)
Out-party candidates	—	-.422 (.421)
Lagged vote	-.008 (.055)	-.0002 (.055)
Democratic Incumbent	-2.08* (1.15)	-1.80 (1.15)
Incumbent Running	7.48*** (1.30)	7.56*** (1.29)
Presidential Vote	-.207 (.297)	-.218 (.294)
Incumbent spending (logged)	.922*** (.280)	.892*** (.278)
Challenger spending (logged)	-1.28*** (.250)	-1.23*** (.248)
Constant	63.4*** (15.5)	58.95*** (15.8)
N	227	227
Adjusted R-squared	.323	.336

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$, one-tailed tests.

Model 2, which controls for the number of candidates running in each primary election, tells a somewhat different story. Here, *inc-party vote* is positive and significant as predicted by the divisive primary hypothesis. However, *out-party vote* is still not significant. Even after controlling for the number of candidates in the primary election, then, only incumbent party divisiveness appears to be significantly related to general election vote outcomes. The coefficient is smaller here – .072, compared to .114 in Model 2 for Senate races – indicating that the size of the effect is smaller as well. For each additional percent of the vote the incumbent party nominee wins in the primary election, his or her vote share goes up by .072 percentage points. Hypothetical gubernatorial incumbent party nominees who won primary elections with vote shares one standard deviation above and below the mean, respectively, should be separated by 3.1 percentage points in the general election. This is not a trivial amount, but it falls far short of the 8.9 percentage points in general election vote share that divisiveness is potentially responsible for in Senate elections.

Model 2 also reveals that *inc-party candidates* is positive and significant in much the same way as it is in Model 2 looking at the Senate above: each additional candidate the incumbent party nominee defeats in the primary election is associated with just over a percentage point of vote share in the general. Once again this indicates that, holding primary election vote share constant, a victory over a large number of primary election candidates reveals a stronger electoral position than a victory over a small number of candidates. *Out-party candidates* is not significantly related to the dependent variable.⁶

Conclusion

This chapter's primary empirical contribution is to confirm that the divisive primary effect in Senate, and to a lesser extent gubernatorial, elections is not endogenous. Prior studies establish that the effect is endogenous in U.S. House races. In elections to that office, observed correlations between primary and general election outcomes are not causal, but are themselves both a result of how electorally strong or weak the incumbent is (Born 1981; Kenney 1988; Lazarus 2005). Indirect evidence also suggests that the same phenomenon exists in gubernatorial (Partin 2002) and state legislative (Hogan 2003) elections. To assess whether this is the case, I followed Kenney (1988) and especially Lazarus (2005) in directly controlling for incumbent vulnerability, and also the number of candidates running in the primary election (as an on-the-ground measure of how vulnerable the incumbent is), when testing for a divisive primary effect. In both Senate and gubernatorial races, the divisive primary effect is robust to those controls. Indeed, controlling for the number of candidates in each race increases the effect in both cases. Thus for both offices the evidence indicates that primary election divisiveness is not endogenous.

The empirical analysis presented here also confirms some prior findings regarding divisive primary elections. As with previous studies, I find that divisive primaries have a substantively larger effect on general election outcomes in Senate races than in gubernatorial races. However, the size of the effect found here is substantively larger than that found by Abramowitz (1988) and Kenney and Rice (1984). It is possible that, the prior studies being 30 years old as of this writing, the divisive primary effect has grown over time. Or, it is possible that controlling for the number of candidates in the primary election reveals that divisiveness is more harmful than was previously appreciated. Either way the results presented here suggest that in Senate elections, divisiveness has a consistent and potentially very large negative effect on vote shares for party nominees. A second and related difference between the two offices is that in Senate elections, both incumbent party and challenger party divisiveness influence general election outcomes, whereas only incumbent party divisiveness influences gubernatorial general elections.

One issue that future studies should address is the state of primary election divisiveness in gubernatorial elections. With conflicting findings from a number of different studies it is difficult to state conclusively whether or not divisive primaries hurt gubernatorial candidates. Perhaps they do so only under some as-yet-unspecified condition, which is represented in some studies' data more than it is in others. This is one area where there is still a gap in our knowledge.

Another pressing question raised by this study and the literature as a whole, is why there is such a stark difference between offices. In other words, why does primary election divisiveness have such a strong influence on Presidential and Senate elections, a small and inconsistent one on gubernatorial elections, and none at all on House and state legislative elections? One possible explanation is the extreme difference in salience between the different types of elections. Presidential elections capture the attention and interests of voters much more consistently and thoroughly than any other type of election, and the next-most salient types of elections after that are Senate and gubernatorial elections. It could be that voters' attention during primary elections is a necessary condition for the primary to influence general election outcomes. This makes some sense on the surface: in down-ballot races, a majority of general election voters simply don't pay attention to who is running in the primary election, and may not even know when it took place or that it took place at all. When this is the case, there's no reason to expect the primary election to influence voters' general election vote choices. More work is needed to establish the cause of the variation in when primary election divisiveness is harmful, whether it's this cause or something different.

Notes

- 1 Wichowsky and Niebler (2010) find that in the 2008 general elections Obama actually did better in areas where Clinton was most competitive in the previous primary election, contrary to the predictions of the divisive primary hypothesis. However, this study measures divisiveness in a non-standard fashion – by measuring Obama’s and Clinton’s ad-buys in various media markets.
- 2 Empirical results are virtually identical if I operationalize divisiveness by observing the margin by which the party nominee won the primary election. Indeed, the two variables – primary election vote share and primary election vote margin – correlate at .97 on the incumbent’s side, and .96 on the challenger’s side.
- 3 The results presented in this section are robust to a number of alternative specifications and modeling choices. Limiting the analysis to only races in which the incumbent ran does not substantively alter results, nor does including the interaction of *incumbent running* and *lagged vote*.
- 4 In fact, when I re-run model 2 without the primary vote variables, neither candidate variable is significant.
- 5 I also ran a model similar to Model 2, but one which included *logged inc-party candidates* and *logged out-party candidates*. Both variables have severe skews, with a disproportionate number of races having a low number of candidates but a small number having 10 or more. Logging the skewed variable gives it a more normal distribution, and ensures that a small number of outlying observations are not responsible for the observed relationship. However, the results of this lin-log model are substantively similar to those of Model 2. In fact, the effects of primary election divisiveness appear to be stronger in this analysis: the coefficient on *inc-primary vote* and *chal-primary vote* are both larger in the lin-log model than in Model 2.
- 6 I ran the same lin-log model for governors as I did for Senators. In this case though, there is one significant difference between Model 2 and the lin-log model: *out-party candidates* is significant. Thus accounting for the variable’s skewed distribution reveals a relationship with the dependent variable. The coefficient on *out-party candidates* is negative, indicating that the more challenger party candidates there are in the primary, the worse the incumbent does in the general election. Once again, this controls for *out-party vote*, so this may demonstrate that if a challenger party nominee defeats a large number of challengers in a primary, this demonstrates electoral strength. Or it might be that, as per the discussion in the literature review above, weak incumbents draw more challenger-party candidates into the race, and subsequently, the weak incumbent does poorly in the general election.

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