

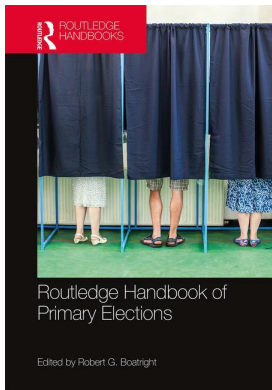
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.97.143

On: 23 Sep 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

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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Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315544182-15>

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Published online on: 26 Feb 2018

How to cite :- Robert G. Boatright, Vincent G. Moscardelli. 26 Feb 2018, *Is there a Link Between Primary Competition and General Election Results?* from: Routledge Handbook of Primary Elections
Routledge

Accessed on: 23 Sep 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315544182-15>

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IS THERE A LINK BETWEEN PRIMARY COMPETITION AND GENERAL ELECTION RESULTS?

Robert G. Boatright and Vincent G. Moscardelli

In recent years, discussion of primary elections, and in particular congressional primary elections, has frequently focused upon the potential for ideologically extreme factions within the parties to influence the selection of nominees. In particular, analyses of the 2010, 2012, and 2014 elections have alleged that the Republican backlash against President Obama's agenda was felt both in general election opposition to Democrats and in efforts to "primary" Republicans who had supported various aspects of this agenda. There is, then, the possibility that general election surges might be accompanied by increased unrest in the primaries as well, but there is no established theory of patterns in congressional primary election competition over time. Our understanding of congressional general election competition has for decades been shaped by theories regarding partisan seat swing. Indeed, one could argue that the decisions of candidates and party leaders themselves rest on a small set of regular patterns – presidential coattails, midterm backlashes against the incumbent president, "waves" of party support, and so forth. In this chapter we explore the relationship between such general election voting patterns and competition in congressional primaries.

At first glance, it would seem that congressional primary competition should be immune to such patterns. After all, there are no partisan cues within primary elections, and there is little evidence that attitudes about the president or about party performance in Congress should have an obvious influence on primaries. Literature on congressional primaries has thus emphasized factors such as regional differences between the parties, voter eligibility rules for primaries, or other factors that may change over time but have no obvious relationship to individual election years. Some studies have focused upon the role of primary voting or ballot access rules in structuring outcomes (for citations see below), while others have explored changes in the organizational strength of political parties across regions and over time.

Boatright (2013, 89–91), however, has documented the declining differences between regions of the country and party organizational strength in one type of primary – intraparty challenges to incumbents. Boatright contends that if ever parties had the ability to structure primary competition, they have lost that ability over the past forty years. He notes, however, that challenges to incumbents appear to be more common in years where there is a partisan surge. That is, Democratic incumbents were more likely to face challenges from the left in good Democratic years such as 1974 and 2006, and Republican incumbents were more likely to face challenges from the right in good Republican years such as 1994 and 2010. We can add to this

observation the common sense expectation, drawn from literature on candidate emergence, that challenger primaries (that is, primaries whose nominee expects to face a sitting incumbent in the general election) and open seat primaries should be more crowded in a party that expects to pick up seats in a given election year. There may be some cases where parties recruit strong candidates and/or take steps to stave off primary competition, but such efforts still seem unlikely to deter all interested candidates.¹ In short, we can develop an argument about partisan tides that speaks to competition in all different types of primaries.

We thus know more about the relationship between primaries and partisan tides than might seem apparent at first. In this chapter we seek to systematize these findings to develop a theory of patterns in primary competition across time. We conclude that challenger primary competition is highly sensitive to the expected competitiveness of the general election; open seat primary competition is somewhat less so, on account of the idiosyncratic nature of which seats are open in which years; and incumbent primaries are more competitive within the party that expects to gain seats. While some of these results are intuitive, the incumbent primary results are not at first glance intuitive. When put together, this set of observations provides a clear linkage between primary and general election competition that has thus far been lacking in the literature on congressional elections.

The Insulation of Primaries from National Trends

It has been slightly over a century since the introduction of primary elections in the United States. Not all states have consistently required parties to use primary elections to choose nominees over this time, and in the states which have used primaries the rules governing candidate and voter eligibility in the primaries have varied substantially. These variations make comparing primary elections across time difficult; it is not always clear that individual variables applied to one primary are necessarily comparable to what might appear to be similar variables for another primary. Political scientists have solved this problem in three different ways.

The Decline of Competitiveness: First, Ansolabehere, Hansen, Hirano, and Snyder (2006, 2007, 2010; hereafter Ansolabehere et al.) have sought to explain the decline in competition in primary elections from the 1930s to the 1970s. These articles show that competition in congressional elections was quite common in the 1920s but declined steadily thereafter, reaching a stable and low level by the 1980s. Variations in state primary rules are endogenous to the Ansolabehere et al. studies – if states change their primary laws in order to reduce competition, the precise nature of the rules is less consequential for their argument than is the outcome of the rule changes. In addition, the lengthy time period under consideration in these articles takes precedence over short-term variation. If primary competition is more common, for instance, in a high turnover year such as 1992, this increase may look impressive in relationship to competition levels in 1988 or 1990, but relatively insignificant in comparison to the level of competition in the 1930s. Overall, however, the explanation Ansolabehere et al. provide for declining competitiveness suggests that this decline had little to do with overall changes in *general* election competitiveness. General elections, too, became less competitive over this period, but at a different rate and for different reasons. The Ansolabehere et al. findings also suggest that any analysis of a connection between primary and general election competition must either account for an overall decline in competition or be limited to the past three to four decades.

Primary Rules: A major area of inquiry which precedes Ansolabehere et al.'s work is the study of the effects of different types of primary rules. Primary elections have generally been classified into types based on citizens' eligibility for voting. In a closed primary, only previously registered members of a party are eligible to vote. In an open primary, a voter can choose to vote in either

party's primary upon arriving at the polls. More "open" variants, such as the blanket, jungle, or top-two primaries allow voters to choose candidates of either party on the same ballot (though not for the same office). Variations on open and closed primaries also exist. Most studies of primary rules (Burden 2001; Gerber and Morton 1998; Kanthak and Morton 2001; Telford 1965) have sought to assess the degree of moderation of eventual nominees; evidence is mixed as to whether primary rules have any effect at all. One important factor that interacts with primary type, however, is the date of the primary: if candidates adopt positions in order to win the primary, they may shift their positions once they have won the nomination, but their ability to do so will be affected by how much time they have between the primary and the general election (Galderisi and Ezra 2001).

The adoption of a particular primary type, or a change in primary type, may be driven by partisan considerations and may be aimed at insulating the dominant party from partisan waves (see Boatright 2014a). It is thus not entirely exogenous to the state of national politics. Because primary rules are "sticky," however, it is arguably possible to separate open and closed primary states for analysis and to avoid here a detailed consideration of the timing of the adoption of primary voting rule changes.

Primary Divisiveness: A third approach to sorting out the relationship between primary and general election competition is to look at whether competitive primaries help or hurt nominees. Studies of the divisiveness of congressional primaries have had mixed results – Hacker (1965) argued that they have no effect on general election outcomes; in a study of Senate primaries, Bernstein (1977) argued that they hurt the stronger party but not the weaker party; and in their study of Senate and gubernatorial races, Kenney and Rice (1984) found that the impact of divisiveness varies by party and office, and that these differential effects are conditioned by the degree of primary divisiveness experienced by the other party in that same election (see also Kenney and Rice 1987). A 1975 study of House races by Piereson and Smith found that divisive primaries hurt in competitive districts but not in uncompetitive ones.² Alvarez, Canon, and Sellers (1995) find that general election challengers benefit from competitive primaries while incumbents' general election fortunes are harmed by competitive primaries; these effects are magnified when primary dates are close to the general election. Ware (1979), finally, questions the methodology behind such studies, arguing that close races are not ipso facto more competitive than lopsided ones. More recent studies of divisiveness have also criticized the methodology of these earlier studies. Jeffrey Lazarus (2005) summarizes the preponderant theme of the early literature – divisive primaries help challengers and hurt incumbents (or help "outsider candidates" and harm "insider candidates") in the general election – and then argues that this literature has matters backwards. Lazarus argues that more candidates will get into a race when their chance of winning the seat is higher, so the appropriate thing to look at is the number of candidates running, not necessarily the closeness of the race. The more candidates there are in a primary, and the more money is spent in the primary, the better the party does in the general election – not because multiple candidates have run or spent money, but because the emergence of multiple candidates and the high level of spending are a consequence of the likelihood that the primary nominee will win the general election. The effects here are stronger for the out party, or nonincumbent party, than for the incumbent party. Another recent study, by Johnson, Petersheim, and Wasson (2010) generally corroborates Lazarus's results but measures the effects of the primary date on general election outcomes; the authors contend that competitive late primaries yield better general election results for out parties. The excitement generated by non-incumbent primaries, in this accounting, dissipates quickly but can have an effect on general elections if the primary and general elections are close enough.

The literature on the link between primary and general election competition has proceeded largely on the individual level, whereas this chapter explores competition at the national level, or at least at the level of aggregations of races rather than at the individual level. Yet the literature reviewed here suggests first of all that there is a plausible reason for there to be a relationship, and second, that parties or candidates might act to encourage or discourage competition based on their expectations of what will happen in the general election. Individual-level analyses, however, tend to posit a relationship in a forward-looking manner, exploring the effects of primary divisiveness on candidates' and parties' fortunes come November.

In the case of the Ansolabehere et al. work, primary competitiveness is observed but explained in a long-term, institutional manner – why did primaries become less competitive across decades? In the other two types of literature, primaries serve as independent variables – what sorts of nominees are produced by different primary types, or what sorts of general election results are the consequences of a particular level of primary competition? As Lazarus (2005) has pointed out, primary competition may well be a function of the expected outcome rather than the cause of the actual outcome, and hence we should look at the factors that create competition. We diverge from Lazarus here, however, in seeking to analyze the effects of the larger political environment rather than the individual general election race, and we diverge from Ansolabehere et al.'s approach in looking more directly at the context of particular elections rather than seeking to identify secular trends that stand above such elections. All of these studies suggest that there are reasons that candidates or parties might have taken steps to insulate primaries from national fluctuations in partisan support, but that such a relationship might still be expected to exist absent deliberate efforts to counteract it.

The Connection between Primaries and Partisan Waves

From the inception of primary elections, political elites have had many expectations about how primaries might change American electoral politics. One of the early objections to primary elections was that they stripped political parties of their traditional balancing function. Such balancing was generally seen as a matter of ensuring that different geographic constituencies had representation, or that officers alternated among different constituency groups (Hormell 1923). There is nothing inherently democratic about ticket balancing, and, as Ware (2002) suggests, this may have been an activity that often brought grief to party leaders. For some progressives, balancing was a means of satisfying ethnic blocs at the expense of quality candidates – while in today's politics (in the United States and elsewhere) balancing a ticket to ensure representation by women or by minority racial groups is often a goal for liberals (Reynolds 2006, 187). There is also, however, a diminution of ideological conflict entailed in balancing. Primary elections can be sensitive to ideological unrest among voters – even in instances where the candidates do not win, the presence of candidates with a particular viewpoint may be a sign of turmoil in the electorate. Absent the ability to placate such groups, parties have no choice but to watch such conflict play out in the electorate.

In addition, many Progressive reformers worried that, given a potentially uninformed electorate, newspapers would play a dominant role in determining the winners of primary elections (Norris 1923; Boots 1922; Fanning 1905, 53; West 1923). The main concern here was that the media would have different priorities from political parties – most notably that newspapers, and, later, other media, would seek to emphasize differences among candidates, or to amplify critiques of governmental policy. While it is by no means clear that the media have done this consistently, this concern did presage the media-driven, candidate-centered campaigns that were to come.

These sorts of concerns indicated that from the beginning some saw the potential for primary elections to be influenced by national events. The party system, however, was not sufficiently nationalized for this to be the case. That is, most of the more systematic primary challenges (by which we mean, primary challenges that were not based solely on characteristics of individual candidates or officeholders) were decidedly regional in nature, as shown by unusual primary laws or results in states such as California, Minnesota, and North Dakota. In such instances, qualitative researchers have drawn a clear link between economic disarray and primary competition (see e.g. Morlan 1955). In each of these cases, however, the dominant party in the state (in these examples, the Republicans) was diverse enough that an intraparty challenge made more sense than a challenge from the opposition (Democratic) Party. By the late twentieth century, however, more states had competition between the two parties and the two major parties had become more ideologically consistent. Primary competition was not necessarily a substitute for general election competition; instead, primary competition could be linked to expectations about the general election in ways that it could not in the earlier years of the twentieth century. And yet, as we have seen most recently with the Tea Party, ideological factions that see themselves in opposition to the parties themselves still appear. Is there a way to discuss the appearance of these sorts of factions, not in terms of their consequences for the general election, but, following Lazarus, as consequences themselves of the dynamics of general election competition?

To assess the relevance of national levels of competition to primary competition, we turn to a consideration of the salient features of the literature on party surge and decline. Alan Abramowitz points out that

a House election is more than a collection of 435 local contests. . . . No matter how personally popular an incumbent may be, his or her fate depends in part on which way and how strongly the national political tide is running in a given election year.

1991, 38

Each election has its own partisan dynamic, and political scientists have developed several theories – some competing, some complementary – to understand these partisan rhythms.

Campbell (1997) identified an enduring presidential “pulse” to congressional elections, in which the party of the winning presidential nominee picks up seats in the House in presidential election years and then loses seats in the subsequent midterm election. In fact, just twice in the past 40 years and just three times since the turn of the twentieth century has the president’s party picked up seats in the midterm election.³ The earliest efforts to understand this relationship emphasized the concept of presidential coattails (Bean 1948), although analysts quickly expanded on this explanation by incorporating variation in turnout between presidential and midterm election years into their theories (see, e.g., Campbell 1960). Implicit in these arguments was the idea that the larger the margin by which a president is elected, the larger the number of fellow partisans swept into Congress, some representing districts that had historically been represented by members of the other party. As such, presidential year successes left the president’s party overexposed in subsequent midterm elections, in which they were forced to defend seats that would be held by the opposing party under more “normal” circumstances (Oppenheimer, Stimson, and Waterman 1986). The “exposure thesis” builds on this explanation and sits at the nexus of explanations of party surge and decline that hinge on structural forces and those that treat midterms as referenda on the president’s performance. In this account, the president’s party’s performance in the midterm is driven not only by the extent to which it is exposed in districts in which it has historically struggled, but also the extent to which it is exposed in districts in which vulnerable incumbents have chosen to retire (Gaddie 1997).

Kernell (1977) proposes an alternative causal process in which voters motivated and mobilized by disappointment in the president's performance explain much of the loss of seats experienced by the president's party in midterm elections. Often, this disappointment is operationalized in terms of economic growth and unemployment (Tufte 1975). More recently, Fiorina (1996) has argued that midterm voters who perceive the president's party as having moved too far to the right (in the case of Republicans) or left (in the case of Democrats) use midterm elections as an opportunity to "balance" or offset the presidential advantage by enlarging the ranks of his opponents in Congress. This work builds on Erikson's (1988) argument that the president's party is punished in midterm simply for holding the White House, what he dubbed the "presidential penalty" explanation of electoral decline in midterm elections.

Forecasting models represent another approach to understanding party fortunes in congressional elections. Economic voting models abound (see, e.g., Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2000; Campbell 2014). However, while the best models yield predictions of aggregate vote and seat changes that correlate very highly with actual vote and seat changes, the number of missed predictions in any given year is actually quite high, with the number of missed predictions often approaching or surpassing the total number of seats that changed hands in a given election, especially in what might be labeled as "party wave" elections after the fact (Brady, Fiorina, and Wilkins 2011). That said, the most accurate forecasting models regularly explain more than ninety percent of the variance in House election outcomes.

As we discuss below, forecasting models and other theories about partisan surges are less relevant here for their content than for the fact that they suggest the political class has reasonably accurate means of predicting what will happen, and that these beliefs could plausibly shape candidate entry and competitiveness in primaries.

Expectations

In this chapter, we consider the relationship between congressional primary competition, on the one hand, and general election competition between the parties on the other. We are not looking at the effect of the individual primary election on the nominee's general election performance; rather, we are concerned with the relationship between expectations about party advantage in an election year and the appearance of candidates of each party in primary elections. We know from literature on candidate emergence that serious congressional candidates will seek to run in years when they perceive the general election climate to be favorable – that is, when (assuming they win the primary) they will, to take two examples, appear on the same ballot as a popular presidential candidate of their party, or in a midterm year in which the opposition party's president is unpopular. Furthermore, we know from the literature on partisan surges that there are predictable regularities in congressional voting. When a president wins election or reelection, more often than not his party gains seats in Congress. Although there are some exceptions, the greater a presidential candidate's margin of victory, the larger the seat gain for that candidate's party in Congress. Similarly, with only two exceptions over the past forty years, the president's party can expect to lose seats in a midterm election year. Large party swings in midterm election years, such as 1974, 1994, 2006, and 2010, were somewhat predictable well in advance of the general election. Expectations about general election voting can influence candidates' decisions to run for office, thus increasing primary election competition.

Candidate expectations can be difficult to quantify. First, there is certainly variation in the expected degree of turnover in a particular election cycle – we cannot, for instance, simply assume that all midterm elections will be similarly disastrous for the incumbent president's party. Second, a candidate must file for the primary as early as ten months before the general election in some states

(Ansolabehere and Gerber 1996), and candidates who are capable of raising significant amounts of money must often begin preparing for the election much earlier than that. Expectations are, therefore, fallible, subjective, and difficult to quantify. We can, however, use estimates of competitiveness in the general election (at the national level, again to at least proxy for expectations). It may be too much to assume that candidates have perfect foresight about how elections will play at the national level, but it seems safe to say that candidates at least have a sense of which way the wind is blowing.

There are different ways to think about national patterns in elections, however. If we are keeping matters at the national level – that is, considering how prospective primary candidates are thinking about the election’s broader context than about the characteristics of the district or the incumbent – we can think about partisanship or generally about the public’s dissatisfaction with Congress. Some elections may be characterized by a hostility toward one party, as arguably was the case in 2010, while others may be characterized by a hostility toward incumbents and politicians more broadly, as may have been the case in 1992. It makes sense to look at partisan swing (the seat gain for one party) as well as overall turnover, as measured by the number of defeated incumbents of both parties. The national political context can also be assessed using other *ex post* measures, such as the number of seats which were decided by less than a ten-point margin.

It is also important to consider the consequences for different kinds of primaries. In this chapter we consider the effects of primary rules (for instance, open or closed primaries, or primaries with or without a pre-primary endorsement by the party), region of the country, party, and district partisanship. What is most consequential in our effort to describe different types of primaries, however, is the differences between open seat primaries, primaries for the nomination to challenge an incumbent (which we shall describe simply as challenger primaries), and primaries featuring an incumbent. The relationship between these races and the national partisan context should differ, and it is based on these differences that we develop our hypotheses here.

Open Seat Primaries occur for a variety of reasons, some of which are directly related to the departing incumbent’s assessment of his or her chances in the general election (and, in rare instances, the primary). The number of incumbents who retire increases in election years expected to be difficult for the departing incumbent’s party (Hibbing 1982a, b, c), but departures also occur because incumbents wish to seek higher office or simply because incumbents wish to leave politics. The number of open seats is somewhat correlated ($r = .38$) with partisan swing in the next general election – that is, there tend to be more retirements in the party that would go on to lose seats in the general election, although the differences are not as striking as one might expect at first glance. From 1970 to 2010, an average of 21 (20.9) members of the party that went on to lose seats in the general election retired per cycle. The comparable number for members of the party that eventually picked up seats in November was 17 (16.8). But that said, retirements, and the resulting open seats, have been shown to be a major factor in aggregate seat changes in the House (Gaddie 1997). In light of this, we hypothesize here that

- Because at least some retiring incumbents will have done so out of concern about the impending general election, open seat primaries will, on average, be less competitive within the party harmed by the national partisan swing than within the party advantaged by the swing; furthermore,
- Competition in open seat primaries will be higher in years marked by a higher overall level of turnover, irrespective of party.

Challenger primaries are perhaps the clearest case of primary elections whose competitiveness is dependent on the general election context. The more vulnerable incumbents of one party are, the more likely it is that candidates of the other party will line up to challenge them. Hence,

- Challenger primaries in the party expected to gain seats will be more competitive than primaries in the party expected to lose seats.

It is more difficult than in the open seat case to predict the effects of general election turnover without reference to partisanship, however. Since 1970, there have only been five elections (1976, 1988, 1990, 2000, and 2002) out of twenty-three where one party did not win more than seventy percent of the races where incumbents were defeated. These were all election years in which a very small number of seats changed hands at all. There are, then, no election years in recent memory where the defeat of a large number of incumbents was not a rebuke of one party. Hence, we expect that

- Heightened competition in challenger primaries in high turnover years will be limited to the party expected to gain seats in that year.

Finally, we have what might appear at first to be counterintuitive expectations about *incumbent primaries*. We expect competition in incumbent primaries to follow a different logic according to party. For one thing, it is relatively rare for incumbents to face primary opposition at all. Some incumbents certainly face primary opponents for reasons unrelated to the incumbent's partisanship or ideological stance – that is, a percentage of primary challenges will simply be waged by ambitious challengers or by challengers unhappy about nonpolicy matters such as ethical wrongdoing by the incumbent. We have no reason to expect such challenges to cluster in one party or to be more prevalent in particular types of election years.⁴

However, at least some primary challenges to incumbents will be ideological in nature, as signified by Tea Party challenges to sitting Republican incumbents in recent elections. How can we understand the relationship of such races to partisanship? Consider two different scenarios:

First, primary challenges may be indicative of a party's difficulty in holding together a diverse coalition. Following the logic of theoretical models such as Riker's (1982) "minimum winning coalition" model and Alfred Hirschman's (1970) distinction between "exit and voice," some primary challenges may be a product of the same intraparty disagreements that may cause some other party members to flee the party altogether. Hence, incumbent primary challenges may be more common in a party that expects to lose seats in the upcoming election.

Second, however, partisan surges are often related to an overall increase in enthusiasm among those who hold strong ideological views. In 2010, for instance, some Tea Party activists channeled their dissatisfaction into supporting challenges to sitting Democrats, while others channeled their dissatisfaction into supporting challenges to Republicans they deemed insufficiently hostile toward the Democratic Party's agenda. The same might be said about Democratic activists in 1974. Incumbent primary challenges may, according to this logic, be more common in parties expecting to gain seats than in parties expecting to lose seats.

As we shall see below, the two parties differ in the relationship between challenges to incumbents and overall partisan trends. The Democratic Party – arguably the party with the broader and more unwieldy coalition during much of the time period considered here (see Freeman 1986 for a discussion) – follows the first logic more closely, while Republicans follow the second. While our aim here is not necessarily to revise established theories of differences in party culture (as has been done in recent work on party networks), party differences do comprise part of the story.

Merely to find that there is a systematic relationship between primary and general election competition is, we would contend, an overdue contribution to the literature. However, we would argue that it is just as important to argue that there logically *should* be a connection – that if one believes voters’ views on the performance of the party in power has anything to do with general election turmoil, one should be sensitive to the effects that those same views have on voters’ choices in primaries.

Data and Methodology

In the analyses that follow, we consider all major party elections for the House of Representatives from 1970 through 2012, excluding special election primaries and primaries in which two incumbents faced each other. We have separated open seat primaries, challenger primaries, and incumbent primaries. We begin our analysis in 1970 for two reasons: first, for convenience – as we discuss below, this is the first election for which we have coding for incumbent primaries that distinguishes between ideological and nonideological challenges – and second, because as of 1970 congressional districts were required to be equal in size and primary elections had begun to adopt standardized rules in response to the McGovern Commission’s mandates regarding presidential convention delegates.⁵

For all of these races we consider competitiveness in relationship to the eventual general election outcomes – again, not as a determinant of general election outcomes but as a consequence of reasonably correct expectations about the national political context as it would be reflected in the general election results. While the partisan surge and decline literature suggests that there are a variety of complicated predictive variables we might use, for our purposes here we simply assume that the dimensions of the general election results are somewhat known in advance, and that for the sake of simplicity we can simply use the eventual results to reflect elite expectations about party fortunes in any given election. We thus use two general election measures here: the total partisan swing, measured both as a raw number (the absolute value of the change in party representation) and as a positive or negative number for each party; and the total number of defeated incumbents, again in the aggregate and for each party. These two measures capture both the effects of partisan swings and the overall unrest in the electorate.

We measure competitiveness, our dependent variable, differently for the three election types. In the case of open seat and challenger primaries, we follow several recent studies (Canon 1978; Herrnson and Gimpel 1995; Hogan 2003; Brogan and Mendilow 2012) in employing a fractionalization index which is operationalized as

$$F = 1 - \sum \left[(C_1)^2 + (C_2)^2 + (C_3)^2 + (C_4)^2 \dots \right]$$

where F is the fractionalization index, C_1 is the percentage of the total vote received by the first candidate, C_2 is the percentage of the total vote received by the second candidate, and so on. This yields an index where a one-candidate race has a fractionalization index of zero and a race where two candidates split the vote would have a fractionalization index of 0.5 (or $1 - (0.5^2 + 0.5^2)$). The larger the number of similarly competitive candidates, the closer the index is to 1 – that is, a race with ten candidates who received ten percent of the vote each would have an index of $1 - [(1)^2 \times 10]$, or 0.9. The intuition behind these indices, in other words, is that an election where one candidate gets most of the votes is not very fractionalized, even if there are multiple candidates; races with two candidates with similar vote share are split, and those with more than two equally competitive candidates are even more divided.

The fractionalization index is adept at capturing differences in competition in races where competition between multiple candidates is the norm. For incumbent primaries, however, we would contend that fractionalization is not necessarily the best indicator of competition. As noted above, the vast majority of incumbents run without serious primary opposition. Thus, following Boatright (2013) we distinguish here between incumbents who run without a serious opponent and incumbents who were held to 75 percent or less of the primary vote. We thus have a binary measure – either incumbents faced a credible challenge or they did not. Because challenges to incumbents are so few, it is also easy to categorize primary challenges as being related to ideology or not. Again, open seat and challenger primary competition is always about the partisanship of the incumbent or departing incumbent – in the challenger party case, all challengers disagree with that incumbent’s political views, while in open seat races the candidate of the party that does not hold the seat also disagrees. It is possible and, we would argue, necessary, to separate primary challenges to incumbents that have an ideological or policy component from those that do not.⁶ Boatright (2013, 65–72) uses descriptions in the *Almanac of American Politics* and *Politics in America* to identify such races, and we use his measurements here.

We thus have a set of main independent variables having to do with the partisan context of the election, and a set of main dependent variables, having to do with competition in the primary. We supplement this with a number of district-based measures, used to draw finer distinctions in competitiveness. At times we distinguish between districts according to primary rules (open, closed, and so forth), using data drawn from Kanthak and Morton (2001), McGhee, Masket, Shor, and McCarty (2010), and Boatright (2014a). We also discuss partisanship of the districts (as opposed to the partisanship of the candidates) using current or most recent party presidential vote share in the district. Finally, we take into account the distinctive history of Democratic Party primaries in the one-party South and the changes in Democratic Party strength in the South since the 1960s, and we discuss differences by region, distinguishing southern⁷ from nonsouthern states. While these various factors do not appear in our hypotheses themselves, their inclusion accounts for a variety of potential alternate accounts of changes in primary election competition over the period studied here.

Results

We begin here with a broad look at the relationship between primary competition and general election competition for our three different types of races. Table 11.1 shows bivariate correlations between, on the one hand, various indicators of primary competition, and on the other, two indicators of general election competitiveness, the number of incumbents defeated in the general election (columns 1–3) and the seat swing (columns 4–6). The table shows these correlation coefficients in the aggregate and by party. Coefficients that our hypotheses predict to be significant are shown in bold; for all, the predicted correlation should be positive.

Five of the six aggregate correlation coefficients (presented in columns 1 and 4) are significant, and all are positive. Correlations between challenger primary competition and general election turnover are the highest ($r = .814$), but open seat correlations are all still significant as well. Our hypotheses regarding incumbent primaries were somewhat more cautious, and perhaps justifiably so; incumbent primary challenges are highly and positively correlated with the number of incumbent defeats in the general election ($r = .662$), but the correlation with seat swing is small ($r = .248$) and not significant.

Correlations within both parties between challenger primary competition and general election turnover are also highly significant, but none of the predicted open seat or incumbent primary coefficients is significant. For Republicans, open seat competition is related to the total

Table 11.1 Correlations between Level of Primary Competition and General Election Results

	<i>Incumbents defeated in general (Total)</i>	<i>Dem Incumbents defeated in general</i>	<i>Rep Incumbents defeated in general</i>	<i>Seat Swing (Total)</i>	<i>Seat Swing (D to R)</i>	<i>Seat Swing (R to D)</i>
Open seat Fractionalization	.431*			.567**		
Dem Open seat Fractionalization		.300	.137		.299	.106
Rep Open seat Fractionalization		.347	-.178		.509*	-.238
Challenger Fractionalization	.814**			.632**		
Dem Challenger Fractionalization		.008	.509*		-.148	.479*
Rep Challenger Fractionalization		.731**	-.243		.783*	-.316
Incumbents challenged in primary	.662**			.248		
Dem Incumbents challenged in primary		.526*	.051		.320	-.015
Rep Incumbents challenged in primary		.336	.147		.313	.127

Note: Coefficients in bold are those predicted to be significant in hypotheses. All cases except fractionalization index are sums for each category in individual election years. Fractionalization is as defined in paper text. ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

number of seats changing from Democratic to Republican hands ($r = .509$) but not with the number of incumbent defeats – something that may say more about the nature of the open seats in play than about partisan competition. Competition in Republican incumbent primaries is positively correlated with both measures of Republican gain in the general election, but the correlations are not significant. As we note below, however, correlations for the period from 1970 through 2010 are significant, indicating, perhaps, that the nature of Republican primary challenges has changed in recent election cycles. And oddly, Democratic incumbent primary challenges are positively correlated with the number of *Democratic incumbents* defeated in the general election but not with the number of incumbent Republicans defeated in the general election, a result that clearly merits further investigation.

These correlations show that most of our expectations are borne out in the full-time series, but they highlight neither unusual elections nor changes in the relationship between primary and general election competition over time. To explore this, we turn to a series of visual depictions of the trends from 1970 through 2012.

Open Seat Primaries

Open seat primaries might appear to be the races that would most clearly show the influence of national trends, but as Table 11.1 showed, the results are decidedly mixed. Open seat primaries are more competitive in years when large numbers of incumbents lose and seat swings are high, but when we disaggregate by party, we find that only one of our hypotheses – that Republican open seat primaries will be more competitive in years when Republicans pick up seats – is supported in the bivariate analysis. A visual inspection of the time trend for the two parties,

however, suggests that open seat competition is at least somewhat sensitive to substantial surges even if the overall correlation matrix shows that it is not sensitive in the aggregate to smaller changes. Figure 11.1 shows fractionalization in Democratic and Republican open seat primaries, with lines inserted, for viewing convenience, in years generally considered to be surge years for one party.⁸ The time series here suggests three things: first, that three of the surges in the time series, 1974, 1994, and 2010, are associated with unusually high fractionalization within the party that benefitted from the surge; second, that in two of these surge years *both* parties exhibited unusually high levels of fractionalization; and third, that the Democratic Party generally had higher fractionalization than the Republican Party before 1992 but had uniformly lower fractionalization afterwards. The 1992 election, which was, as we shall see in other parts of this chapter, particularly tumultuous, does not exhibit an unusually high level of fractionalization in its open seat primaries.

Figure 11.2 shows variations in open seat competition over time according to the competitiveness of the general election, the region of the country, and whether the seat is newly created. As one might expect, there is more competition in races where the nominee stands a better chance of winning the general election, but there is no obvious pattern across time. With the exception of 1974, the surge years show heightened competition for open seat races regardless of the prospective nominees' general election prospects. These figures also show that the Democratic decline in fractionalization is somewhat driven by the party's decline in the South;

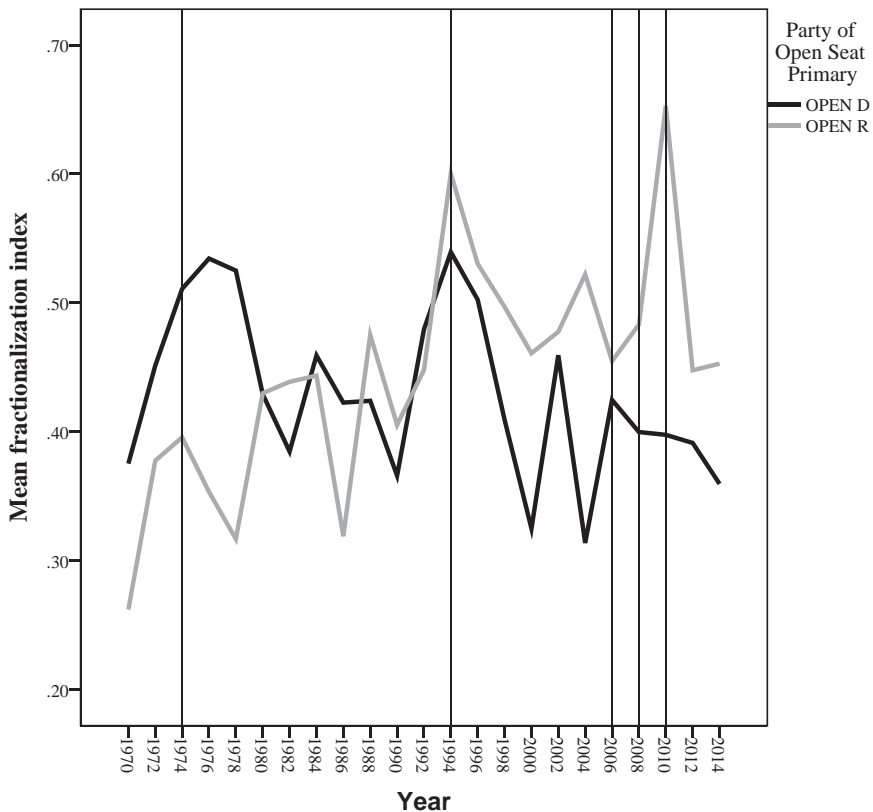


Figure 11.1 Open Seat Primary Fractionalization by Party, 1970–2014

southern primaries are more competitive than other Democratic races before 1992 but less so afterwards. Our ability to make inferences based on region, however, is limited because the number of open seat races in the South is quite small in many years in this time series. Finally, newly created seats are not noticeably more competitive than other open seats. Separate time series broken out by primary type (not shown) show no clear differences.

The time series here show that in most high turnover years, there is heightened primary competition. The low correlations overall between open seat primary fractionalization and seat swing suggest that the small number of open seat races, the trend toward greater competition in Republican primaries, and the changing role of the South in the Democratic coalition all interact to make this relationship more complicated than it might be in other types of races.

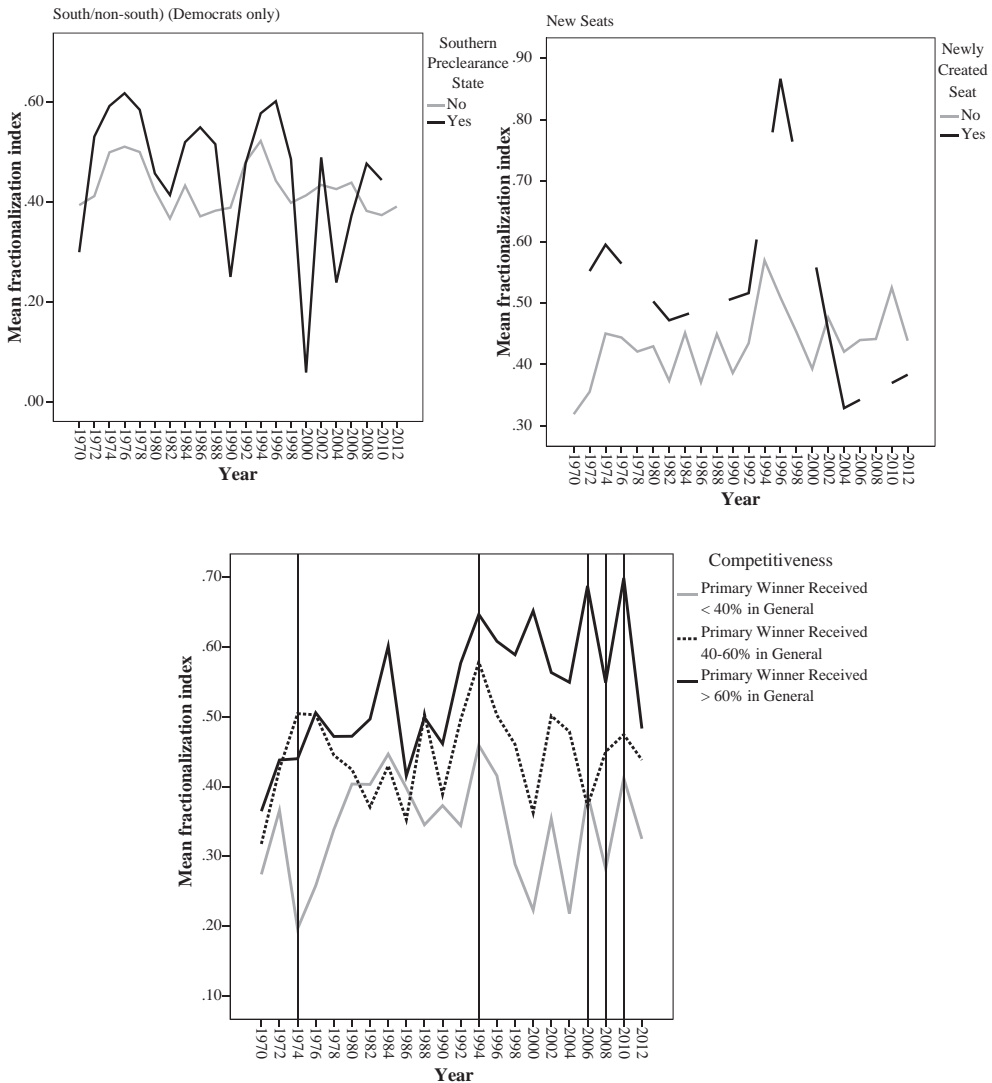


Figure 11.2 Open Seat Primary Fractionalization by Region, Competitiveness, and New Seats

Challenger Primaries

The relationship between primary and general election competition is much more straightforward for challenger primaries. There are more of them, so idiosyncrasies cause less variation when we look at patterns over time. As we saw in Table 11.1, the correlation coefficients are all significant and signed in the correct direction. Challenger primaries are most competitive when the party holding the primary expects to do well in the general election. Figure 11.3 shows this relationship across time, with lines again to mark surge years. Here, not only is there greater competition in surge years within the party that benefits from the surge, but there is also reduced competition within the party that is harmed by the surge. There are still some anomalies here, however; most notably, Democratic challenger primaries were unusually competitive in 1984 despite the party's lackluster showing in that year's general election. In contrast to the pattern for open seats, both parties saw heightened competition in challenger primaries in 1992, the lone high turnover year for both parties in this period.

Figure 11.4 shows two alternate breakdowns of the challenger primary time series. Most of the heightened competition in challenger primaries takes place within districts where the nominee goes on to receive at least 40 percent of the general election vote. That is, primary competition is clearly driven by the expectation that the nominee will have a chance of victory in November. Fractionalization in primaries for the challenger nomination in less competitive

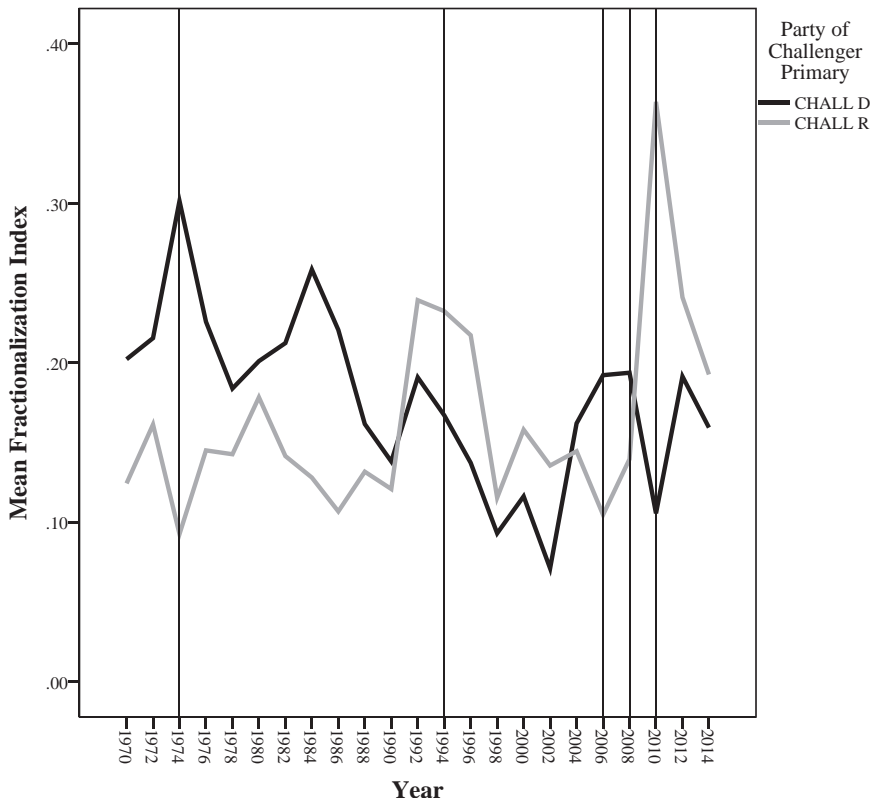


Figure 11.3 Challenger Primary Fractionalization by Party, 1970–2014

seats is relatively consistent through 2008 but grows noticeably in 2010 and 2012. This growth took place exclusively on the Republican side – perhaps a reflection of the growing role of the Tea Party even in safe Democratic districts. The growth in competitiveness in Republican primaries is also driven in part by the party’s growing support in the South; southern challenger primaries, which tended to take place in the Republican Party during the 1970s and 1980s, were less competitive than primaries in other parts of the country during this time but the regional difference disappeared after 1992. As is the case for open seats, there is no discernible pattern to the competitiveness of challenger primaries that relates to rules governing voter eligibility in primaries.

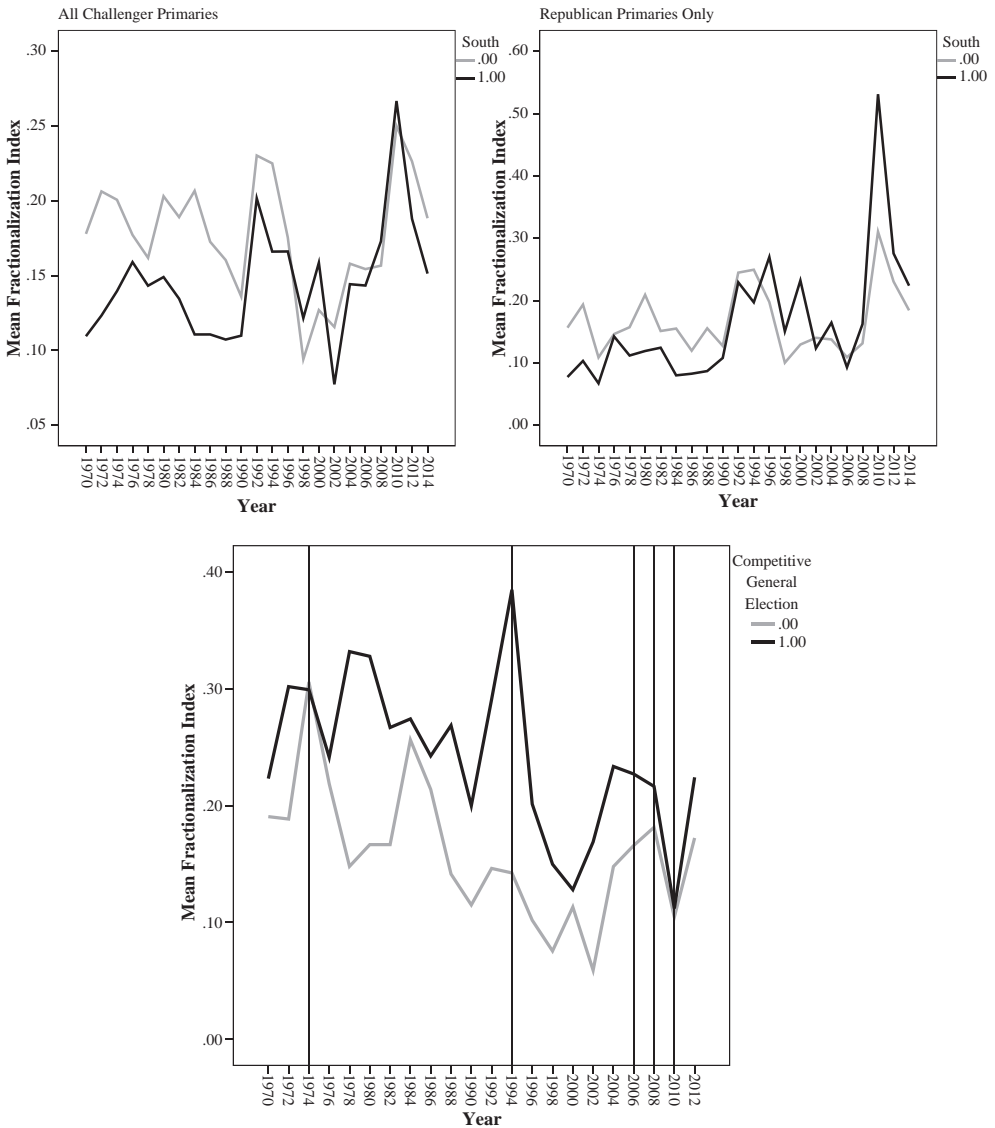


Figure 11.4 Challenger Primary Fractionalization by Region and Competitiveness

Both of the hypotheses regarding challenger primaries are clearly borne out; while party differences do shape the time series here somewhat, they do not obscure the fact that nominations worth having inspire greater competition.

Incumbent Primaries

As noted above, competition in incumbent primaries is not the norm; therefore, we use a different measurement of competitiveness in looking at primary challenges to incumbents. Figure 11.5 shows the relationship between general election defeats of incumbents and primary challenges in which the incumbent was held to less than 75 percent of the vote. For almost all years shown here, these numbers move in tandem. There are only two two-election periods in which this is not the case: 1976 and 1978, when the number of primary challenges stayed constant while the number of defeated incumbents fell; and 2012, when the number of primary challenges was also high despite low general election turnover. It is notable that these two periods each followed a surge election (1974 and 2010), perhaps indicating that a sort of lag effect was taking place.

Figure 11.6 shows breakdowns of this relationship by party. As we expected, the party benefiting from surges tends to see more primary challenges. As Table 11.1 showed, Republican primary challenges are more closely related to Republican support in the general election than is the case for Democrats. This relationship holds even when we separate challenges in the South, both in the aggregate and within the Democratic Party (Figure 11.7). This relationship is also not affected by voter eligibility rules (not shown) or by the competitiveness of the district in the general election, as measured by Democratic Party district presidential vote (Figure 11.8).

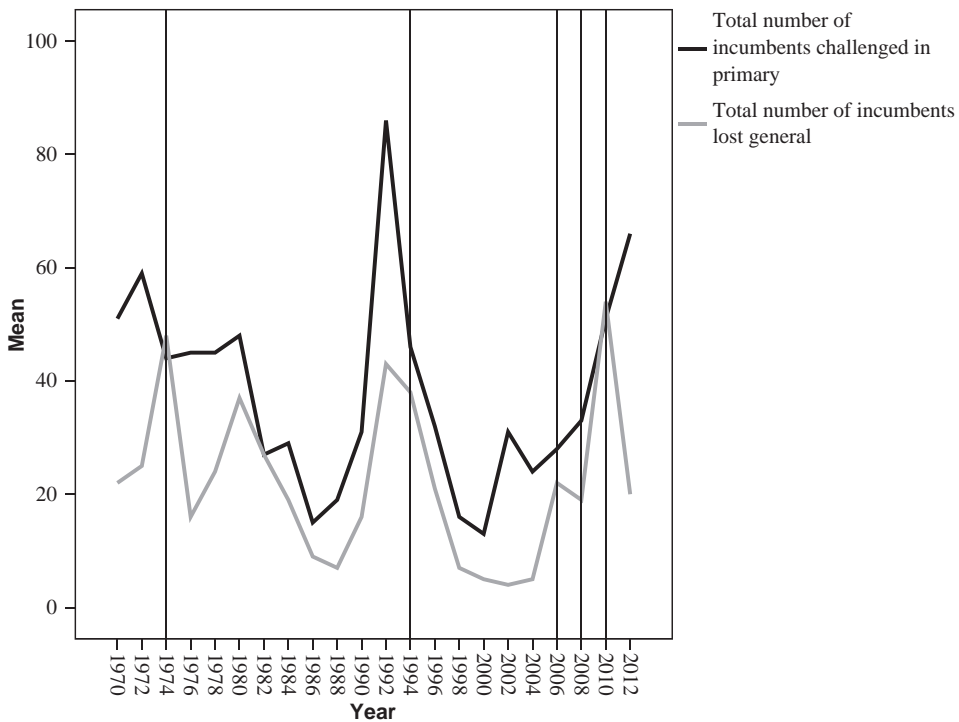


Figure 11.5 Primary Challenges to Incumbents and General Election Turnover, 1970–2012

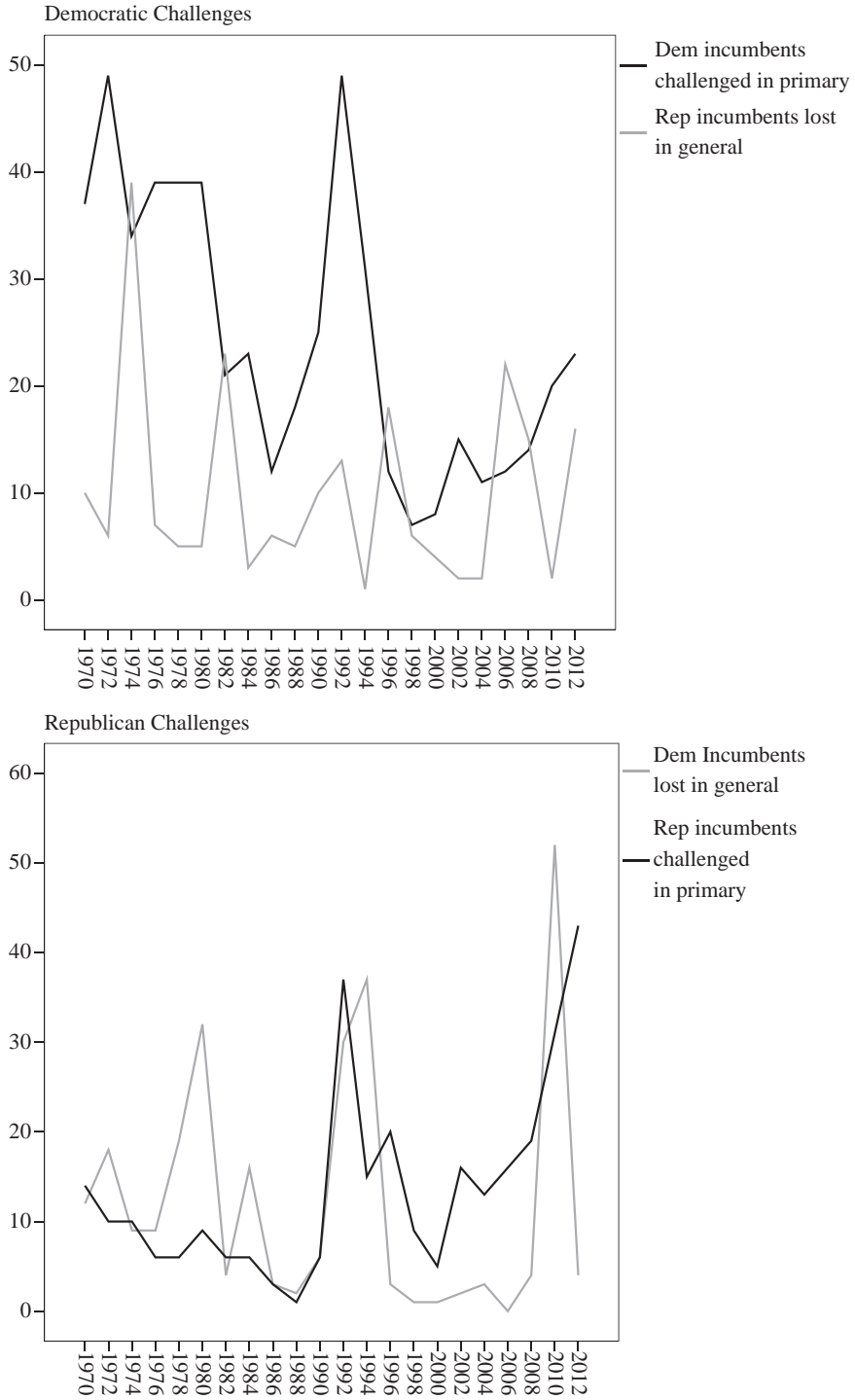


Figure 11.6 Primary Challenges to Incumbents by Party, 1970–2012

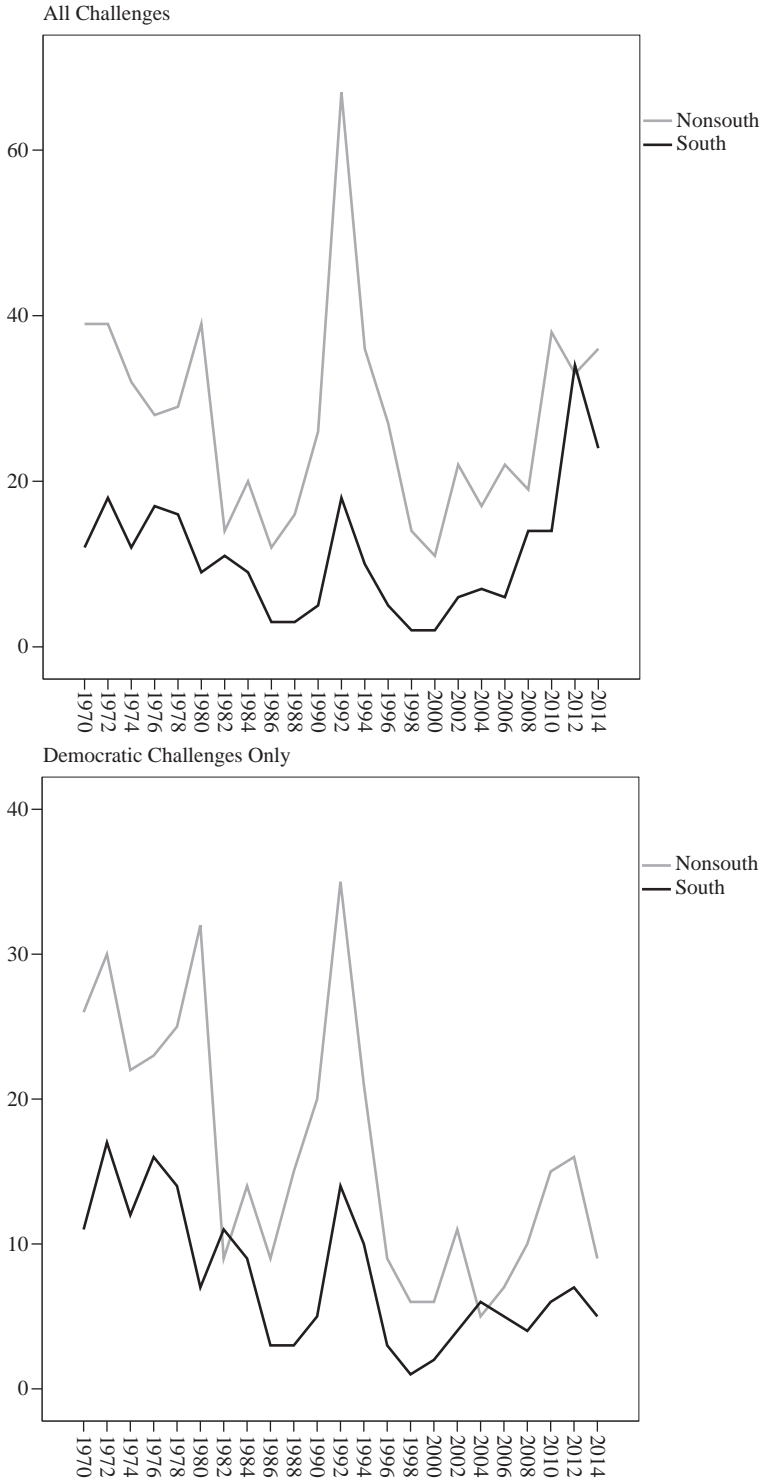


Figure 11.7 Primary Challenges to Incumbents by Region, 1970–2014

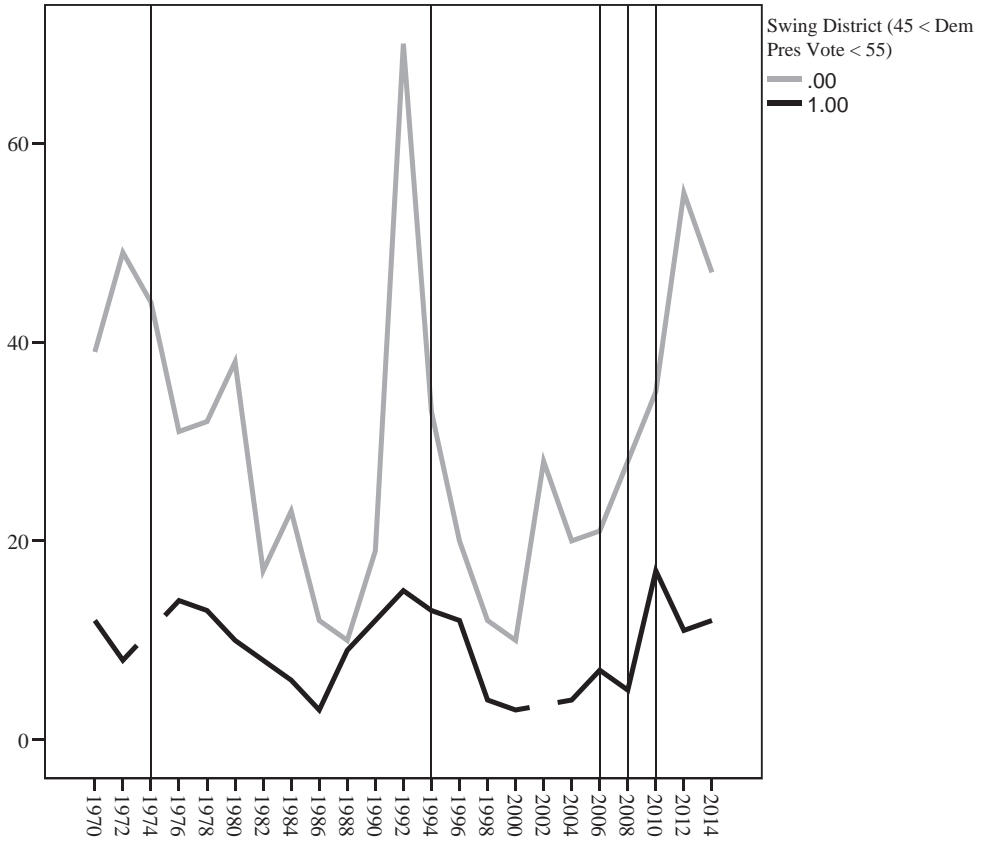


Figure 11.8 Primary Challenges to Incumbents by District Competitiveness, 1970–2014

Note: District Democratic Vote Percentages not calculated for all districts in 1974 and 2002 because of redistricting.

We have coded primary challenges to incumbents in order to isolate instances where incumbents were challenged by a candidate running farther from the political center – that is, Democratic incumbents facing primary opponents running from the left or Republican incumbents facing opponents running to their right. Figure 11.9 shows the incidence of such challenges; the upper panel shows the relationship from 1970 through 2014, and, given the anomalous surge in challenges beginning in 2010, the lower panel shows only ideological challenges before 2010. The lower panel shows that there is an increase in ideological primary challenges within the Democratic Party around the time of that party’s most successful general elections; similarly, ideological challenges in the Republican Party increase around 1994.

These patterns clearly show that primary challenges to incumbents are more common when a party expects to gain seats in the upcoming election. This is arguably a function of unrest among strong ideologues within the electorate, particularly on the Republican side. There are a few eras that do not quite accord with this logic: the period in the late 1970s, discussed above; 1992,

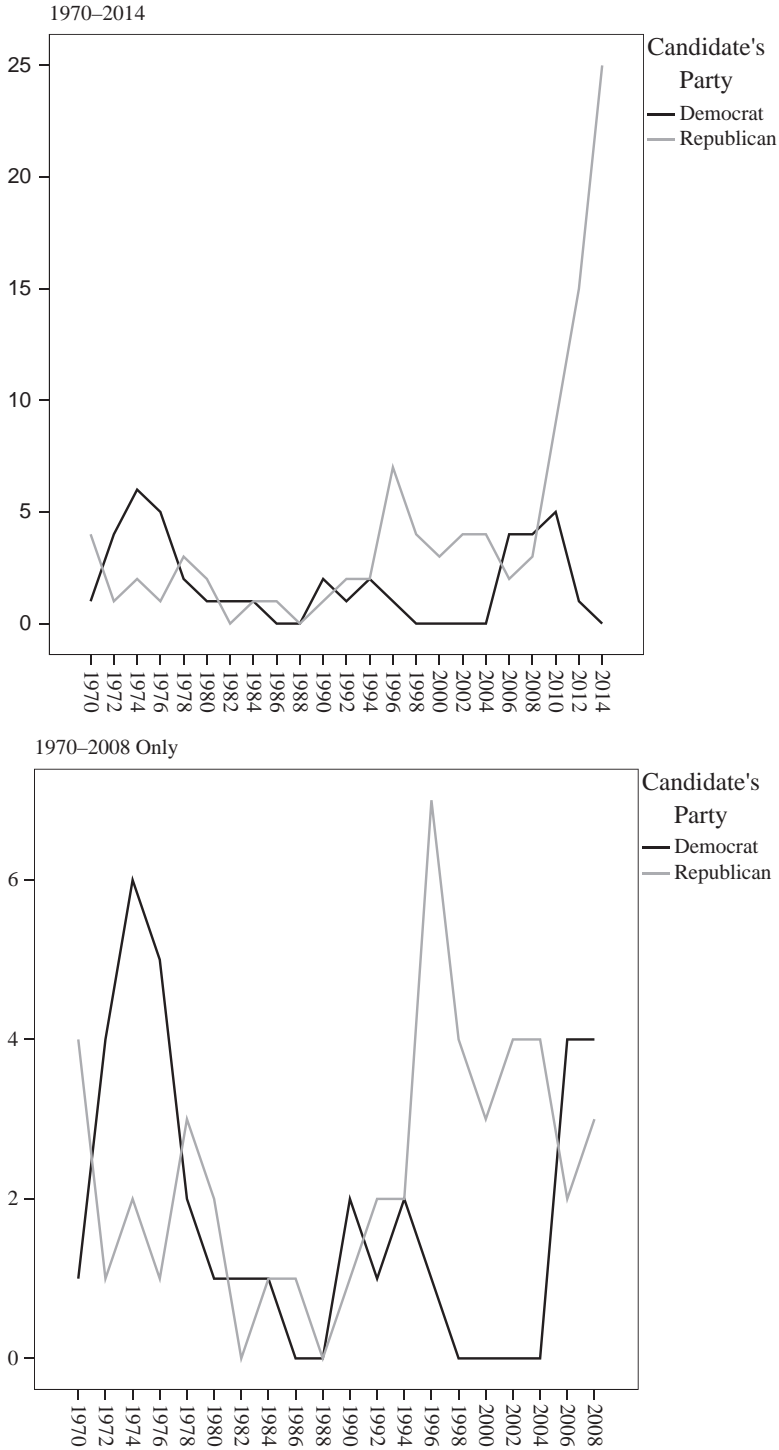


Figure 11.9 Ideological Primary Challenges to Incumbents

when there was high general election turnover in both parties and a substantial amount of unrest in both parties' primaries; and the most recent two elections, where primary challenges (and in particular ideological primary challenges) have climbed within the Republican Party despite relatively uneventful general elections.

Finally, to return to the particular circumstances of the Republican Party primary challenges. When we began this chapter, using data from 1970 through 2012, we were struck by the reasonably strong ($r = .521$, $p < .05$) correlation between Republican primary challenges to incumbents and general election defeats of Democratic incumbents. Given the circumstances of that election, we speculated that such challenges were a function of the enthusiasm of party ideologues, and that they correlated with partisan surges. Although there are definite "surges" in primary challenges – particularly ideological primary challenges – the 2010 election, an anomalous election in so many ways, appears to have been almost singlehandedly responsible for this apparent connection.

Conclusions

Our exploration of congressional primary competition here corroborates our assertion that reasonable expectations about general election results shape primaries. This in itself is unsurprising; as we noted above, this has been demonstrated in analyses of individual campaigns so it should be expected in the aggregate. What studies of competition in the aggregate provide, however, is an indication that what matters is not just the subjective calculations of individual candidates – that is, answers to the question of whether a primary victory is likely to yield a seat in Congress – but ideological unrest within the electorate that can inspire campaigns even in a losing cause. We suspect that this is what drives the relationship between incumbent primary competition and general election turnover, a relationship that is perhaps our least intuitive finding.

It is also striking that when there are party surges during this time period, competition takes an election cycle or two to decline to its prior levels. A stylized account of this phenomenon might take into account both ideological unrest and subjective expectations on the part of candidates. One can imagine, for instance, a conservative activist viewing 1994 as a promising time to run, whether he or she resides in a district represented by a Democrat or a Republican (or one that is open in 1994). Similarly, one can imagine a conservative activist looking at the results of the 1994 campaign, lamenting that he or she did not run in that year, and laying the groundwork for a 1996 campaign. Perhaps such considerations explain the sustained high level of competition in the Republican Party following the 2010 election, or Democratic primary challenges to incumbents in 2010 (an election year that, despite the blow it dealt to Democrats, followed on the heels of two good Democratic years).

Although differences between primary election rules and between regions of the country are often presented as explanations for competition in primaries, we find little evidence that either of these provides an explanation of changes in primary competition across time. There is likely some relationship between primary rules and voter turnout, and politicians have long assumed that primary rules can make a difference in individual close races (see Boatright 2014b). Similarly, Democratic primary elections were indisputably more competitive in the one-party South for much of the twentieth century. What the time series here show, however, is that both of these factors are swamped by aggregate trends in general election partisan competition. To the extent that there is a story to tell here about what determines primary competition, it is likely one about party and party culture. Competition in Republican primaries is both more sensitive to general election competition and more common than it once was. These two factors merit explanation, but they are also potentially in conflict with each other; the 2012 and 2014

elections have had unusually high levels of competition in Republican primaries of all types despite relatively low general election turnover in both years and modest overall performance in one of them.

This chapter relies largely on aggregate data. We experimented with a number of individual-level estimates of competitiveness and of district composition. There is certainly much room for more nuanced explorations of these data, particularly with regard to the types of districts where competition is more or less related to partisan trends. We have confined ourselves here to looking at region, rules, general election competition, and presidential vote share. Such factors could likely be combined into a multivariate model. We would hold, however, that breaking down districts too finely would miss the important point here: the national “mood,” as reflected by partisan competition, determines the nature of intraparty competition. There is a “pulse” to primaries just as there is a pulse to general elections, although this primary pulse may beat a little more erratically than its general election counterpart.

Finally, it is entirely possible that the partisan general election patterns might simply be a reflection of some other underlying variable. Many forecasting models take into account public support for Congress. Changes in public attitudes toward Congress, or toward the party that controls Congress, may drive both primary and general election results. In an election year marked by particularly low public approval of Congress, perhaps primary competition might be determined by a bipartisan desire to replace members of both parties. But then again, such a theory would assume that a public dissatisfied with Congress would still contain many people who find the prospect of serving in that body appealing.

Notes

- 1 In fact, in post-mortems of the 2014 midterms, several journalists have linked Republican successes to efforts by the Republican establishment – including party leaders in both chambers as well as outside groups like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce – to “avoid the kinds of disastrous candidates . . . whose extreme positions and outré comments hampered the GOP up and down the ballot in 2012 and 2010” (Altman 2014; see also Peters and Hulse 2014, and Jaffe and Kamisar 2014).
- 2 For other studies of divisiveness, see Berry and Canon 1993; Born 1981; Johnson and Gibson 1974; Kenney 1988; Kenney and Rice 1987; and Miller, Jewell, and Sigelman 1988.
- 3 These are the elections of 1926, 1998, and 2002, all of which were held under unusual circumstances. The 1926 election is unique in that the president’s party lost seats (as expected) but actually improved its share of the two-party vote over the previous election due to La Follette’s strong showing (16.6 percent) in the 1924 presidential election. The 1998 and 2002 elections took place on the heels of, respectively, the impeachment of President Clinton and the September 2001 attacks.
- 4 Or perhaps more accurately, we have no reason to expect such challenges to change across time, absent unusual external stimuli. Studies of the 1992 election have attributed the extremely high number of competitive primaries, of retirements, and of competitive general election races to a combination of partisan factors, changes in redistricting practices, the presence of a major scandal that affected many incumbents, and a change in House rules that affected the ability of retiring incumbents to convert their campaign treasuries to personal use (Grosseclose and Krehbiel 1994). This is, to say the least, an unusual set of circumstances.
- 5 The McGovern Commission rules pertained to delegate selection in Democratic presidential primaries and encouraged states to use primaries for the selection of delegates. In adopting these rules, many states also increased their use of primaries for the selection of nominees for other offices. For discussion, see Boatright 2014a, 62–64.
- 6 While we begin with the assumption that ideological/policy-based challenges and challenges on other grounds (e.g., scandals or allegations of incompetence) are driven by independent and distinct considerations, we acknowledge that one might condition the other in some cases. For example, a moderate incumbent who is embroiled in a scandal might draw a more ideologically extreme challenger who perceived the incumbent to be unbeatable, absent revelations or allegations of wrongdoing.

- 7 Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.
- 8 We are not particularly scientific in marking these; while 1974, 1994, and 2010 clearly constitute surges in terms of the change in party support, there is little consensus about what an appropriate threshold should be. We mark 2006 and 2008 here, but we note that these elections actually had lower turnover than other unmarked elections, including 1992 and 1980. The lines we use to mark these should thus be taken more as a way of helping the reader note patterns than as an integral part of our argument.

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