

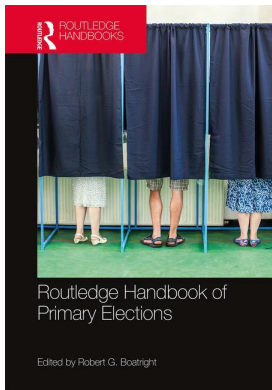
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WHEN MIGHT MODERATES WIN THE PRIMARY?

Danielle M. Thomsen

The sharp rise in partisan polarization in Congress has been one of the most prominent topics of academic debate for the past decade. In the 115th Congress, there is no ideological overlap between the two parties, and the distance between the Republican and Democratic parties is at a record high (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). One of the most commonly cited explanations for polarization is the primary election system. Senator Charles Schumer summarized this view in an editorial in the *New York Times*: “The partisan primary system, which favors ideologically pure candidates, has contributed to the election of more extreme officeholders and increased political polarization. It has become a menace to governing.” As Schumer and many others have suggested, primary voters are believed to pull candidates away from the center and warp the national balance of the electoral system. This argument has been so powerful that almost all who seek congressional reform advocate for changes to the primary system (i.e., Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006; Mann and Ornstein 2012).

Despite the logical appeal of the party primary argument, the relationship between primary elections and congressional polarization is far from clear. On the one hand, a large body of research shows that party activists have become increasingly extreme over the past few decades (e.g., Fiorina et al. 2006; Layman and Carsey 2002; Layman et al. 2010; Theriault 2008). Abramowitz (2010) provides one of the most comprehensive accounts of how the politically engaged subset of Americans is deeply divided along ideological lines. And of course, it is these individuals who are the most likely to participate in primary elections. Indeed, the Pew Research Center (2014) released a comprehensive report on mass polarization showing that Americans with more consistently conservative and liberal views are much more likely to vote in the primary than those with a mix of conservative and liberal views.

At the same time, political scientists have struggled to find linkages between partisan primaries and polarization. For one, the evidence that ideologues fare better in primaries is mixed (Brady, Han, and Pope 2007; Hall and Snyder 2015; Hirano et al. 2010), and across studies, the magnitude of the effect of candidate ideology on primary outcomes is small (Hall and Snyder 2015). Furthermore, Hirano et al. (2010) show that the introduction of primary elections, the level of primary turnout, and the threat of primary competition are not associated with partisan polarization in roll call voting. Differences in primary rules also seem to provide few answers. Closed primaries, or those in which only party members can vote, do not produce more extreme candidates than open primaries (McGhee et al. 2014; Rogowski and Langella

2015; but see Gerber and Morton 1998). Sides and Vavreck (2013) attribute these collective dead ends to the fact that primary voters look similar on many measures to other voters within their party (see also Geer 1988; Norrander 1989). They conclude, “Polarization does not seem to emanate from voters at any stage of the electoral process” (Sides and Vavreck 2013, 11).

Additional evidence on the limited impact of primaries comes from recent reforms. Most notably, the implementation of the top-two primary in 2012 in California was predicted to increase turnout and thereby diminish the effect of extreme voters on candidate selection. The top-two primary was widely expected to help moderate candidates, although subsequent studies suggest that this goal was perhaps too optimistic. Moderate candidates fared no better under the top-two primary than they would have in closed primaries (Ahler, Citrin, and Lenz 2016), and if anything, California lawmakers took more extreme positions after the adoption of the top-two primary (Kousser, Phillips, and Shor, forthcoming). Ahler et al. (2016) attribute the failure of the reform to the fact that voters are largely unaware of the ideological orientation of candidates. Hirano et al. (2015) show that voters do learn about candidate ideology in gubernatorial and senate races, but there is little indication that they do so in races with limited media coverage and resources.

It is difficult to examine how much primary voters favor extremists over moderates because moderates are much less likely to run for Congress than those at the extremes (Thomsen 2014, 2017). We can nevertheless look at the various conditions under which moderates are more likely to win. This chapter draws on primary election results to explore the relationship between candidate ideology and primary election outcomes from 1980 to 2010. Like previous scholars, I find that moderates are less likely to win the primary and receive a lower percentage of the primary vote than those at the extremes. Yet I also show that the effect of Republican liberalism and Democratic conservatism diminishes as the number of primary candidates increases, particularly in open seats. I do not sort through the various mechanisms here, but it is possible that the ideological signal is too muddled or the information is too costly to obtain in these cases. Thus, although primary voters may prefer extremists to moderates, moderate candidates may have more hope in some primary elections than in others.

When Might Moderates Win?

With respect to how central ideology is to candidate evaluations and vote choice, the conventional wisdom is certainly that primary voters today prefer ideological extremists over moderates and that they are a propelling force behind the increase in partisan polarization. And indeed, scholars have shown that party activists and the most politically engaged public have become more ideologically extreme over time (Abramowitz 2010; Fiorina et al. 2006; Layman and Carsey 2002; Layman et al. 2010; Theriault 2008). In addition, a greater proportion of consistently conservative Republicans and consistently liberal Democrats participate in party primaries than those who hold a mix of liberal and conservative positions (Pew Research Center 2014). Studies of election results also suggest that moderates are less likely to win the primary than conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats, although the size of the effect of ideology on election outcomes is surprisingly small across studies (Hall and Snyder 2015).

Yet the relationship between candidate ideology and primary election outcomes is not likely to be the same across contexts, and the fact that primary voters have a hard time distinguishing between same-party candidates makes it difficult to see how they can always reward or punish based on ideology (Ahler et al. 2016). We can think of a variety of scenarios in which moderate candidates, or at least relatively moderate candidates, could gain support from primary voters. In particular, it may be an especially tall order to reward ideological extremity in a primary when

there are more candidates on the ballot. Voters have to invest different amounts of energy into learning about candidate ideology depending on the configuration of candidates, and additional candidates on the ballot will require more effort from voters to learn about their various positions. Thus, it is possible that Republican liberalism and Democratic conservatism has a diminishing effect on primary outcomes as the number of candidates in the race increases. Even if primary voters prefer ideologues to moderates, the effect of being a moderate may diminish when there are more candidates on the ballot. In these cases, the ideological signal may be too muddled or the information may be too costly to obtain.

It is also the case that primary victories are dramatically unequal in how much they contribute to party change in Congress. Incumbents rarely face primary challenges, and even when they do, members of Congress do not alter their behavior much as a result (Boatright 2013; see also Poole 1998). Increases in partisan polarization are thus mainly occurring through member replacement processes (Theriault 2006). In short, it is the election of the new guard not the reelection of the old guard that is spurring party change in Congress. Furthermore, as Gaddie and Bullock (2000, 1) write, “Open seats, not the defeat of incumbents, are the portal through which most legislators enter Congress.” Compared to the relatively few candidates who defeat incumbents, open seat winners have the largest influence on the party’s ideological course. As a share of incoming replacements, open seat victors are a key factor in whether and how much the gulf between the parties widens or diminishes.

The goal here is not to identify the specific mechanism for why liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats are more or less likely to gain support from primary voters, but rather to learn more about the conditions under which moderates are more likely to win the primary than we would otherwise expect. The main contribution of this chapter is thus largely empirical, but the broader theoretical point is that candidates are not chosen in isolation. They are embedded among many others, and it is the array of choices that matters for electoral outcomes and the persistence of polarization in Congress. To be sure, it is often the case that candidates, particularly incumbents, are unopposed in a primary, but it is rarely the case that open seat races do not attract an ample field of primary candidates. And it is primarily through replacement processes that the ideological gulf between the two parties has continued to widen. In sum, the composition of candidates has an important impact on which individuals are ultimately elected, but research on polarization has for the most part overlooked how the makeup of choices affects the electoral fortunes of congressional candidates.

Primary Elections Data

The main concern here is how the relationship between moderate ideology and primary election outcomes changes as the number of primary candidates increases. The analyses are based on primary election results for the U.S. House of Representatives from 1980 to 2012. Primary election results were obtained from the Federal Election Commission (2008–2012) and the *America Votes* series (Scammon, McGillivray, and Cook 1980–2006). These data were merged with Bonica’s (2014) ideology estimates of candidates who ran for congressional office during this time (CFscores). Bonica (2014) uses campaign finance data to place the vast majority of congressional candidates on a common ideological scale.¹ The CFscores are calculated based on the mix of donations that candidates receive, and they range from approximately –1.5 to 1.5, with positive values indicating more conservative candidates while negative values denote more liberal candidates. What is particularly advantageous about these data is that they allow us to make comparisons among candidates who won as well as lost the primary. The dataset includes a total

of 24,153 Republican and Democratic primary candidates; of the more than 24,000 candidates who appeared on the primary ballot, 17,656 (73 percent) have ideology scores.²

There is no precise way to define “ideological moderates.” Two American politicians during this time period who were widely considered to be moderates, however, were Senator Olympia Snowe (R–ME) and Representative Bart Gordon (D–TN). Snowe was a veteran moderate Republican from Maine who served for more than three decades in both the U.S. House and Senate, and she deviated from her party on many occasions and on the most controversial issues, including abortion, gay rights, and health care. Gordon was a Blue Dog Democrat who represented Tennessee for more than 25 years, and he voted against the Democrats on various issues during his tenure in office as well. By way of illustration, I use the positions of these two politicians to provide one estimate of moderation. As Figure 13.1 shows, the percentage of Republican and Democratic primary winners who were as moderate, or more so, than Snowe or Gordon has declined over time. In 1980, nearly 19 percent of Republican and Democratic primary winners were at least as liberal as Snowe and at least as conservative as Gordon, respectively, but this figure dropped to just 4 percent by 2012.

However, we can also see that candidates who are not quite as moderate as Snowe and Gordon but nevertheless more moderate than the party mean in Congress still make up a sizeable proportion of primary winners. Furthermore, these numbers have remained relatively stable over time, with candidates on the moderate side of the party in Congress constituting 32 percent of primary winners in 1980 and 36 percent of winners in 2012. The higher values in part reflect the victories of incumbents who are on the moderate side of the party mean, but we can also see similar rates among non-incumbent candidates in open seat races. To be sure, the

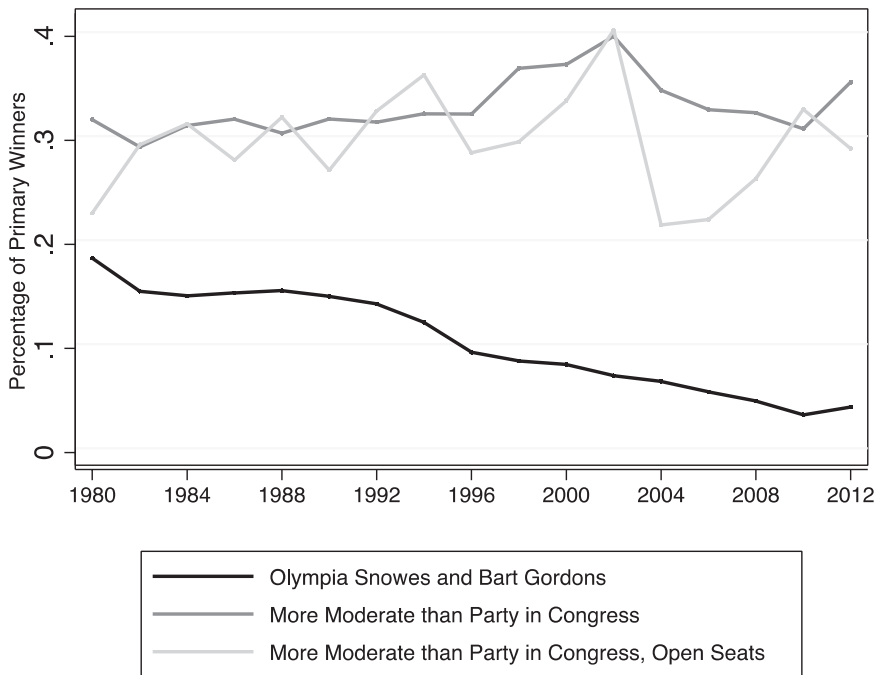


Figure 13.1 Ideological Moderates as a Proportion of Primary Winners, 1980–2012

Source: America Votes; Federal Election Commission; Bonica (2014).

party mean has changed in important ways over time – with both parties moving away from the center and toward the extremes – but it does not seem to be the case that candidates who are on the moderate side of the party in Congress comprised a much larger share of non-incumbent winners 30 years ago than they do today.

Thus, while ideological moderates have consistently made up a minority of primary winners, these data provide us with ample opportunity for an analysis of electoral outcomes across relatively moderate U.S. House candidates. Of the 12,927 candidates who won their primary from 1980 to 2012, 4,280, or 33 percent, were on the moderate side of the party in Congress. Only 1,335 primary winners (10 percent) were as moderate as Snowe and Gordon during this time period, but this is still a sizeable number of candidates. Lastly, there were 1,528 non-incumbent candidates who won in open seats during this time period, and 455 (30 percent) were more moderate than the party in Congress.

I use a series of regressions to analyze the relationship between candidate ideology and primary election outcomes. The dependent variables are primary election victory and primary vote share.³ The main independent variable is the candidate's CFscore, coded as Republican liberalism and Democratic conservatism.⁴ We are interested in the relationship between moderate ideology and primary outcomes, but we are particularly interested in the conditions under which that relationship differs. I include an interaction between moderate ideology and the total number of candidates in the primary, as the effect of Republican liberalism and Democratic conservatism is expected to diminish as the number of candidates increases. Primary voters may have a harder time distinguishing among candidates, or the information may be too costly to obtain in these cases, but again, I do not sort through the various mechanisms here.

Several control variables are included in the models as well. First, sitting members of Congress generally sail to primary election victory, and I include a dummy variable for incumbents. House candidates who raise more money are also expected to be more successful at the ballot box, and contributions are obtained from Bonica's (2014) dataset and measured as logged values of total campaign receipts. In addition, the number of primary candidates is expected to be negatively associated with primary vote share and primary victory. I account for candidates' own party presidential vote share in the congressional district, as candidates are expected to be less likely to win the primary in more favorable partisan districts (Stone and Maisel 2003). Lastly, I include a dummy variable for Republican candidates. All of the models include state and year fixed effects.

Candidate Configurations and Primary Election Outcomes

This section analyzes the conditions under which moderate candidates are more likely to attract support from primary voters. The results are presented in Tables 13.1 and 13.2 below. The dependent variable in Table 13.1 is primary election victory, and the dependent variable in Table 13.2 is primary vote share. The full model is provided in Column 1. In terms of the main variables of interest, liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats are less likely to win the primary and receive a smaller percentage of the primary vote than conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats, which is consistent with the conventional wisdom that moderates have a harder time in the primary than ideologues. However, the magnitude of the effect of ideology is small (see also Hall and Snyder 2015). A one-unit increase in Republican liberalism or Democratic conservatism, which is comparable to a shift from Michele Bachmann to Olympia Snowe on the Republican side or a shift from Keith Ellison to Bart Gordon on the Democratic side, results in a 6.4 percentage point decrease in the likelihood of primary victory (from 44.3 to 37.9 percent) and a 2.0 percentage point decrease in primary vote share (from 37.3 to 35.3 percent).⁵

Table 13.1 The Relationship Between Moderate Ideology and Primary Victory, 1980–2012

| | (1) <i>All</i> | (2) <i>Interaction</i> | (3) <i>Open Seats</i> |
|--|-------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| Moderate Ideology (Republican liberalism; Democratic conservatism) | −0.06** (0.01) | −0.07** (0.01) | −0.15** (0.03) |
| Number of Primary Candidates | −0.04** (0.00) | −0.04** (0.00) | −0.02** (0.00) |
| Moderate Ideology x Number of Primary Candidates | — | 0.00 (0.00) | 0.01* (0.00) |
| Incumbent | 0.37** (0.01) | 0.37** (0.01) | — |
| Log of Mean Receipts Raised | 0.08** (0.00) | 0.08** (0.00) | 0.15** (0.00) |
| Own Party Presidential Vote Share | −0.01** (0.00) | −0.01** (0.00) | −0.01** (0.00) |
| Republican | −0.03** (0.01) | −0.03** (0.01) | −0.05** (0.01) |
| Constant | −0.12 (0.08) | −0.13 (0.08) | −1.29** (0.15) |
| Number of Observations | 9,994 | 9,994 | 3,269 |
| R^2 | 0.35 | 0.35 | 0.32 |

Note: Entries are OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. All models include state and year fixed effects. ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Table 13.2 The Relationship Between Moderate Ideology and Primary Vote Share, 1980–2012

| | (1) <i>All</i> | (2) <i>Interaction</i> | (3) <i>Open Seats</i> |
|--|-------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| Moderate Ideology (Republican liberalism; Democratic conservatism) | −0.02** (0.00) | −0.03** (0.01) | −0.05** (0.01) |
| Number of Primary Candidates | −0.04** (0.00) | −0.04** (0.00) | −0.03** (0.00) |
| Moderate Ideology x Number of Primary Candidates | — | 0.00* (0.00) | 0.01** (0.00) |
| Incumbent | 0.28** (0.00) | 0.28** (0.00) | — |
| Log of Mean Receipts Raised | 0.03** (0.00) | 0.03** (0.00) | 0.06** (0.00) |
| Own Party Presidential Vote Share | −0.00** (0.00) | −0.00** (0.00) | −0.00** (0.00) |
| Republican | −0.01** (0.00) | −0.01** (0.00) | −0.01** (0.01) |
| Constant | 0.24** (0.03) | 0.23** (0.03) | −0.17** (0.05) |
| Number of Observations | 9,994 | 9,994 | 3,269 |
| R^2 | 0.63 | 0.63 | 0.55 |

Note: Entries are OLS regression coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. All models include state and year fixed effects. ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

Our additional concern here is whether the relationship between ideology and election outcomes changes as the number of primary candidates increases. Column 2 presents the results with the interaction between moderate ideology and the number of primary candidates. The interaction is positive and significant in Table 13.2, indicating that moderates receive a larger percentage of the primary vote as the number of primary candidates increases, but the size of the effect is small. The relationship is positive in Column 2 of Table 13.1 but does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance.

Yet as noted above, all primary victories do not contribute equally to party polarization in Congress, and open seat victors are a key factor in whether and how much the ideological gulf between the parties widens or diminishes. Thus, I also restrict the analyses to open seats to examine the relationship between candidate ideology and primary outcomes in these electoral contexts as well. The rest of the section focuses on the results in Column 3 in Tables 1 and 2 given the disproportionate impact of open seat victors on party change in Congress. The relationship between moderate ideology and primary election victory and primary vote share is again negative, but the positive and significant interaction term in both models is of greater concern here.

The left and right panels of Figure 13.2 present the marginal effect of moderate ideology on primary election victory and primary vote share as the number of primary candidates increases. Again, these values are for open congressional seats. Moderates are less likely to win the primary than those at the extremes, but as the number of candidates increases, the negative effect of Republican liberalism and Democratic conservatism diminishes. When there are four and eight primary candidates, the same one-unit increase as above in Republican liberalism and Democratic conservatism decreases the likelihood of winning by 10.9 and 6.6 percentage points, respectively, and reduces the primary vote share by 3.2 and 1.2 percentage points, respectively. In fact, candidate ideology does not matter much at all for primary vote share when there are a large number of candidates in the primary, though this is certainly a minority of races in terms of frequency. (There are 584 non-incumbent candidates who ran in open seat races with at least 8 candidates, or 18 percent of the total.) However, the main point is that although Republican liberalism and Democratic conservatism is for the most part a barrier – albeit a relatively small one – to electoral success in contemporary party primaries, it appears to be less of a barrier as the number of primary competitors increases.

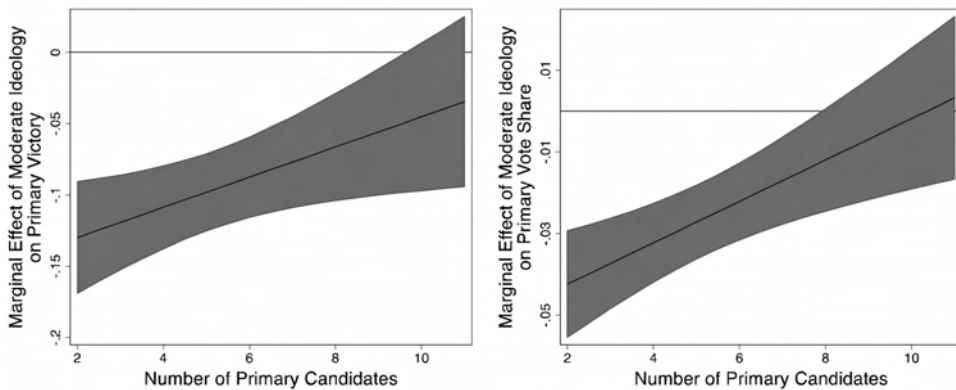


Figure 13.2 Marginal Effect of Moderate Ideology on Primary Victory and Vote Share Across Number of Primary Candidates, 1980–2012

Note: Values are estimated from the model in Column 3 in Tables 13.1 and 13.2.

With respect to the control variables, the results are largely consistent with expectations. Incumbency has a huge effect on primary election outcomes, as it is very rare for incumbents to lose in the primary. The primary vote share for incumbents is 28 percentage points higher than it is for non-incumbents, and the effect of incumbency dwarfs that of all the other variables. As the number of primary candidates increases and as the district becomes more favorable to a candidate's party, her likelihood of primary victory and her percentage of the primary vote is expected to decrease. In addition, candidates who raise more money are expected to be more successful in the primary.

In sum, the findings suggest that it is more difficult for liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats to attract support in primary elections than those at the extremes, but the magnitude of the effect of candidate ideology on primary vote share is not as large as the conventional wisdom would suggest. And more importantly here, the relationship between ideological moderate and primary outcomes also depends on the particular configuration of candidates on the ballot, and the negative effect of Republican liberalism and Democratic conservatism diminishes as the number of candidates increases. I do not sort through the various mechanisms here for why this is the case, but perhaps it is too costly for primary voters to obtain information on the various competitors or the ideological signal is too muddled. Indeed, previous research has shown that voters have a difficult time distinguishing between same-party candidates (Ahler et al. 2016), particularly in races with limited media coverage and resources (Hirano et al. 2015).

Conclusion

The data conform to the conventional wisdom that primary voters are more likely to favor ideologues over moderates. Indeed, very liberal Republicans and very conservative Democrats are unlikely to prevail in the current polarized environment, and the findings support the general narrative about the attitudes and beliefs of primary voters. Nevertheless, we can leverage newly available ideology data to examine the conditions under which candidate ideology may matter more or less for electoral outcomes and gain insight into when moderates might be more likely to win than they would otherwise. This chapter is a first step toward that goal.

The broader message is that although primary voters may prefer ideologues to moderates, conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats may not always have the upper hand in primary contests. Candidate ideology does not outweigh all other variables, and again, the magnitude of the relationship between moderate ideology and primary vote share is surprisingly small (see also Hall and Snyder 2015). Moreover, candidates are not chosen in isolation, and the collective arrangement of candidates matters for who is ultimately elected to office. Polarization scholars have paid less attention to the configuration of choices that voters face and the implications of these various configurations for the electoral fortunes of moderate candidates. For those who bemoan the rise of polarization in Congress, these findings should be seen as good news. Primary voters may be more likely to select moderates or ideologues depending on the choices that are presented to them. Perhaps instead of focusing on changing primary laws, the first step for reformers who wish to diminish the ideological gulf between the two parties should be to encourage more moderates to run for office. Regardless of the configuration of choices on the ballot, in order for a moderate candidate to get elected, there must be a moderate for voters to choose.

Notes

- 1 See Bonica (2014) for a full description of the data and validation.
- 2 The Bonica dataset includes candidates who filed with the Federal Election Commission. Candidates who do not exceed the \$5,000 threshold of campaign fundraising are not required to file. Those who are excluded are thus more likely to be long-shot candidates, but it is not clear that they are more likely

- to be extremists. Even so, these excluded candidates comprised only 8 percent of primary winners and 0.04 percent of general election winners, so they have virtually no effect on polarization in Congress. Furthermore, the Bonica data provide the best publicly available measures of the ideological positions of primary winners and losers over time.
- 3 Like most studies of primary election outcomes, I exclude primary candidates who are unopposed (e.g., Lawless and Pearson 2008). Of the 17,656 primary candidates with CFscores, 8,420 (43 percent) were unopposed.
 - 4 Ideological centrism can be measured in a variety of ways. I use the left–right positions of candidates (e.g., Rogowski and Langella 2015) on the CFscore scale, but the findings are the same if ideology is measured as the distance from the most extreme candidate in the primary (e.g., Hall and Snyder 2015).
 - 5 Olympia Snowe and Bart Gordon are the moderates referenced above. Michele Bachmann retired from Congress in 2014, but she was at the conservative end of the GOP during her time in office and she was an outspoken leader of the Tea Party movement. Keith Ellison is one of the most liberal members in Congress, and he was co-founder of the Congressional Progressive Caucus. All other variables are set at their mean or mode so these values are for non-incumbents. The values of course vary significantly by candidate type.

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