

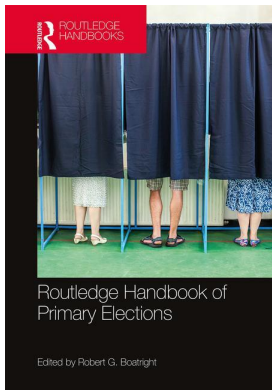
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CANDIDATE EMERGENCE IN THE ERA OF DIRECT PRIMARIES

Jamie L. Carson and Ryan D. Williamson

Scholars of congressional elections typically focus most of their attention on the general election that occurs in November (see, e.g., Jacobson and Carson 2016). Nevertheless, congressional candidates that choose to run for elective office in the modern era have to get past two distinct hurdles – the primary and general election. Although primaries are the first stage in the winning process for candidates, they have only been around for about 100 years, depending on the state. Prior to the adoption of direct primaries in the early twentieth century, local and state parties were largely responsible for deciding which candidates would appear on the ballot in U.S. House races. This method of candidate selection eventually fell out of favor during the Progressive Era as a result of high levels of corruption and declining levels of electoral competition. In conjunction with a variety of electoral reforms such as the Australian ballot and voter registration that took place in the late nineteenth century, the implementation of direct primaries gave voters greater input in which candidates would run in the general election.

In this chapter, we analyze the effect that adoption of the direct primaries had on electoral competition in the *general* election via the emergence of experienced House candidates to better illustrate whether this reform legislation ultimately produced “better” candidates. We begin with a brief discussion outlining how congressional elections operated prior to the adoption of direct primary reform that was designed to increase citizen participation in the candidate selection process. We then discuss direct primaries in conjunction with the Progressive movement before systematically analyzing the consequences of changing the method for selecting candidates for office. Our findings indicate that this reform effort – though not solely responsible for the gradual decline in electoral competition or experienced candidate emergence in House general elections during this time – had the unintended effect of enabling weak candidates to represent their party. This, in turn, increased the probability of incumbent success, which served to further reduce overall levels of electoral competition. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of the implications our results have for the current state of primary elections as well as for future research on the topic.

Congressional Elections in the 1800s

Congressional elections held during the nineteenth century were very different affairs from what we are accustomed to in the modern era. As Kernell (1977, 672) describes, “Our image of

congressional elections during this period is one of fiercely combative affairs which by modern standards produced intense voter interest, large turnout, and close elections.” Politics in this era were extremely volatile as well. The populace was ever shifting, and elections were “characterized by high levels of partisanship and electoral competitiveness, and slight shifts in voting or turnout could turn whole elections” (Argersinger 1985, 671). Unlike the relatively lengthy and stable careers that most representatives have today, very few legislators during this period viewed service in the U.S. House as a long-term career. Following the norm or practice of “rotation” in office throughout the early part of the nineteenth century, most legislators would serve one or two terms in the House before exiting the chamber (Kernell 1977). As a result of norms like rotation and the greater competitiveness of elections, there was considerably more turnover in the lower chamber of Congress than we typically see today (Polsby 1968).

In light of this increased turnover in the U.S. House, candidate recruitment practices in the late nineteenth century were starkly different as well. Prior to the early 1890s, candidates were selected for inclusion on party ballots by “whatever practices party leaders thought appropriate” (Boatright 2013). As such, it would be appropriate to characterize this era as the height of power for political parties and party machines. One of the key means of influencing elections for party bosses was through candidate recruitment. Unlike modern era elections, which are often candidate centered, these elections were much more likely to be oriented around partisan goals. Here, state and local machines selected the candidates that would run for U.S. House seats. In order to receive the support of these bosses, one would have to demonstrate loyalty to the party. Bosses also sought to recruit candidates who could in turn recruit supporters for the party more broadly. This ultimately resulted in U.S. House members who were beholden to party bosses and the local machines instead of constituencies, however.¹

Party machines were especially effective in recruiting candidates for office because they were also successful in funding candidates selected to run for House seats. Candidates in the modern era must assume certain risks – principally financial – when pursuing elective office. If they are not independently wealthy, they may be forced to take out a second mortgage on their home, drain their retirement account, or rely on the support of friends and family to fund their campaigns. However, political machines were able to largely negate these risks during this era by assuming the costs of campaigning, which they were willing to do in exchange for a loyal surrogate in Congress. If their preferred candidate was not as faithful as expected, the machine could simply offer its support to a more promising candidate during the next electoral season.

Candidates today must contend with another risk when pursuing a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives – opportunity costs in the form of losing whatever position they currently hold. A sitting member of the state legislature often must weigh the possibility of losing power and prestige against their probability of winning and therefore gaining a more prestigious position at the next level. However, during the nineteenth century, party bosses largely negated this cost as well. Candidates were essentially guaranteed some position in government regardless of how the election turned out. If they were successful in their bid for office, they received all of the benefits typically associated with being a member of Congress. However, if a candidate were to fail in his or her bid to win a seat, the party bosses could still offer that candidate a patronage position. Again, the party machines were willing to conduct their affairs in this manner because doing so provided them with a loyal surrogate within the U.S. House of Representatives (Carson and Roberts 2013).

The ability to not only underwrite congressional campaigns but also provide insurance to those who did not win the election provided parties with considerable power in recruiting candidates for office (Carson and Roberts 2013). This produced incredibly high levels of party support in Congress and led to significantly more competitive House elections. It simultaneously

resulted in regular allegations of corruption and calls for a more democratic process, however, since party machines engaged in a variety of corrupt practices in an effort to win these more competitive races (Bensel 2004; Summers 2004; Ware 2002). Progressive Era reforms, including the adoption of the direct primary, were one of a series of proposals to remedy the situation by reducing the power of party bosses and making representatives more responsive and accountable to voters.

Progressive Era Reforms

The Progressive Era was born of a desire to reduce the power of party machines. Ideally, by reducing their power, government would become less corrupt and the electoral system would become more democratic. As has been detailed in previous works, the direct primary was one of numerous reforms witnessed by the United States during this era (on this point, see Ansolabehere et al. 2010; Boatright 2013; Merriam 1908; Merriam and Overacker 1928; Ware 2002) with one of the main goals of the movement – providing for a more democratic process of electing federal officials – in mind. By making voters directly responsible for selecting candidates, this reform would also serve to cripple the power of political parties, particularly party bosses, which would serve to reduce corruption in the selection process and the government more broadly.

Direct primaries were first adopted in Oregon and Minnesota in 1901. The last states to adopt the direct primary during the Progressive Era were West Virginia, Vermont, and Indiana in 1915. States such as Utah, New Mexico, Rhode Island, and Connecticut ultimately would not adopt this system until after the 1930s (Lawrence, Donovan, and Bowler 2011). This stands in stark contrast to two other Progressive Era reforms passed during this era. For example, the first state to adopt the Australian ballot was Massachusetts in 1888. But by the 1892 elections, the rest of the country had implemented the change as well. Similarly, the Eighteenth Amendment, which prohibited the manufacture and sale of alcohol and was widely considered as a progressive initiative at the time, took less than 18 months to ratify. The Senate Resolution passed the chamber on August 1, 1917, and Nebraska would ratify the amendment on January 16, 1919, finally eclipsing the necessary threshold for adoption.

The adoption of both the Australian ballot and Eighteenth Amendment also stood to curb the power of political parties and bosses. Without having voters cast a party ballot out in the open, as had previously been the case throughout the nineteenth century, political elites no longer had a means of enforcing existing norms by insuring compliance from citizens. Additionally, and since the early days of the republic, politicians had a long-standing tradition of wooing voters with free alcohol in exchange for their support on the day of the election. However, by making the consumption of alcohol illegal and placing a social stigma on it, candidates and the political machines that supported them lost a valuable tool they could employ while campaigning. Despite this, both measures were adopted quickly and easily by the individual states relative to the time it took to fully implement the direct primary.

This has spurred some debate over the ease of passage of the direct primary within states. Some would point to the relatively rapid adoption of the Australian ballot as anomalous, given how rare changes to electoral institutions can be (North 1990). Merriam and Overacker (1928) contend that the direct primary was a result of external pressures on those within the political parties. Reformists lobbied hard and managed to slowly push the change throughout the country, which has a certain intuitive appeal given the motivations behind the reform. Additionally, some of the first states to adopt the measure (between 1901 and 1905) were those where populist sentiments were the highest – Oregon, North and South Dakota, Montana – or where

Progressive politicians such as Robert La Follette were most prominent (Wisconsin in 1903 and Minnesota in 1905, for example). Conversely, New York – home of arguably the most infamous political machines in Tammany Hall – was one of the last states to implement this reform. Voters in New York would not get to participate in a direct primary until 1913.

Ware (2002) offers an alternative perspective, however, in his discussion of the American direct primary. He suggests that internal party pressures brought about electoral change, and that party leaders found a way to make the direct primary process work to their benefit. This account certainly has a specific appeal, given previous research demonstrating that institutional rules are more likely to undergo some sort of evolution if political elites are somehow advantaged by the change (see, e.g., Benoit 2004; Boix 1999; Grofman 1990; Rokkan 1970). Additionally, and as Key (1954) demonstrated, the direct primary could have allowed the majority party in a state to weaken the minority party and therefore perpetuate their one-party dominance. This is bolstered by the fact that primary laws would eventually be used by Democrats in southern states to disenfranchise African-Americans (Alilunas 1940; Overacker 1945).² Furthermore, as Ware (2002) points out, favorable public opinion alone is not a sufficient condition for implementing changes to existing political institutions, which is likely to be especially true for something as prominent as the candidate selection process.

More recently, Lawrence, Donovan, and Bowler (2011) have attempted to reconcile these differences in the development of primary elections and ultimately conclude that there is support for both arguments in the literature. Nevertheless, they continue by arguing that “the weight of our evidence supports the idea that rules changed in response to anti-party reform pressures” (Lawrence, Donovan, and Bowler 2011, 4). In addition to weighing in on the development of direct primaries, their work is also indicative of a growing body of research that focuses less on general elections in favor of explaining primary election outcomes. This budding area of research has resulted in conclusions that not only challenge conventional wisdom or popular narratives, but they also challenge each other at times – as demonstrated by competing narratives offered by Merriam and Overacker (1928) and Ware (2002).

Primaries in the Modern Era

Boatright (2013) was among the first to systematically analyze primary elections for both the U.S. House and Senate in a book-length treatment. He provides an in-depth look at several factors related to primary campaigns and demonstrates that primary challenges are quite rare, and successful ones even more so. This stands in stark contrast to the common narrative found in the media that an increasing number of candidates are “getting primaried” in contemporary House elections. Rather, Boatright argues that several high-profile cases of incumbents losing their primary has led the news media to focus more attention on these cases despite the fact that the number of incumbents defeated in primaries has remained relatively stable since World War II. Boatright also challenges the assertion, often perpetuated by the media, that congressional primaries are leading members of Congress to be more ideological, which then increases political polarization in Congress.

If we focus on the number of departures from the U.S. House as displayed in Table 3.1, we see that between 2000 and 2016 no more than 13 incumbents were defeated in any one year’s primary elections. However, the election with the most defeated incumbents (2012) occurred immediately after a redistricting cycle, which resulted in eight incumbent defeats at the hands of other incumbents who had been drawn into the same district. General elections still provide consistently greater opportunities to unseat incumbents. Furthermore, and as the data in Table 3.1 clearly reveal, the most common means of incumbents leaving the House of Representatives is

Table 3.1 Number of U.S. House Incumbent Departures

Year	Primary Election Defeat	General Election Defeat	Retirement
2000	2	6	30
2002	6	8	36
2004	3	7	28
2006	2	22	27
2008	4	19	33
2010	4	54	37
2012	13	27	40
2014	4	13	38
2016	6	8	43

through retirement. Those most likely to face a serious challenger are incumbents who are vulnerable either through scandal or unfavorable national tides. But those same incumbents are generally politically savvy enough to recognize this, and therefore choose to pursue something else instead of taking the risk of losing an election. If they were forced to seek reelection, the numbers in the first two columns would likely be significantly greater.

Boatright (2013) was not the first scholar to explore candidate emergence in the context of congressional primary elections. In an earlier paper, Banks and Kiewiet (1989) examine the issue of why most incumbents are challenged in primary elections. As they note, experienced or high quality challengers are often deterred by the presence of incumbents and are more likely to run in open seat contests, but candidates that are considered “low” quality or political amateurs are not. In examining this unusual phenomenon, Banks and Kiewiet argue that low quality candidates often run against incumbents to maximize their chances of getting elected. Since high quality challengers are much more likely to win when there is no incumbent present, low quality candidates recognize that challenging an incumbent gives them the best probability, albeit small, of winning the election.

In terms of legislative behavior, Brady, Han, and Pope (2007) demonstrate that members of Congress face a dilemma when seeking reelection. They seek to better understand whether it is more advantageous to appeal to one’s primary constituency, or whether incumbents should be more concerned with positioning themselves with general election voters in mind. They argue that members will more commonly align themselves closer to the former than the latter for two main reasons. First, the low turnout rates commonly seen in primary elections foster an environment in which a small number of ideologically extreme voters can sway the outcome in favor of the candidate closest to them. As such, they conclude, it is in the best interest of the incumbent to try to be that candidate whenever possible. Second, they also conclude that ideologically moderate incumbents are more likely to draw a primary challenger (*ibid.*, 98–99).³

However, Hall (2015) offers a different conclusion in the context of his study of primary elections. He contends that general election voters “punish the nomination of extreme candidates from contested primaries, on average” (*ibid.*, 32). In fact, the extent of the punishment is so severe that there is an observable ideological shift in the subsequent roll-call behavior in the opposition party’s favor (i.e. “when a more extreme Democrat is nominated, the district’s roll-call voting in the next Congress becomes more conservative, and vice versa when a more extreme Republican is nominated”; Hall 2015, 19).⁴ This is due to the fact that voters seem to prefer *electable* candidates from within their own party to potentially more ideological ones. For example, having a more moderate Republican candidate in a highly competitive district is more

important to Republican voters than having a more extreme Republican because the Election Day result is more likely to favor the Democratic candidate. Furthermore, given the incumbency advantage already enjoyed by U.S. House members, in addition to the prospect of losing the seat in the immediate election, losing that seat could have long term negative consequences in future elections as well.

In a more institution-centric analysis, McGhee et al. (2013) examine the openness of state legislative primaries and conclude that the degree of openness in primaries is not related to the ideology of candidates that are elected. In fact, their data suggest that increased openness produces the exact opposite of the intended effect – more open primaries actually lead to more extreme candidates emerging from party primaries in state legislatures. However, they offer the following cautionary tale regarding their findings: “we believe our findings generally fail to reject the null hypothesis of no effect from primary systems” (*ibid.*, 347). Based on this brief summary of much of the work on primaries, it appears that previous literature does not provide a definitive answer on what effect the existence of the primary can have on election outcomes.

The Effect of Direct Primaries

To evaluate the effect of direct primaries on congressional elections, we first consider descriptive trends before and after adoption by individual states at the beginning of the twentieth century. If the implementation of direct primaries was successful in seeking to reduce corruption, increase electoral competition, and overcome coordination problems, we should witness greater levels of qualified or “high” quality candidate emergence as well as more competitive elections in light of the fact that more formidable and experienced candidates are seeking elective office following the adoption of this reform. By integrating voters into the candidate selection process, candidates with greater name recognition, a record of accomplishments to point to, and who are more closely aligned ideologically with the congressional district should prevail more often in primary elections. Experienced or quality challengers commonly possess these characteristics and therefore should face an easier path to the general election following the implementation of direct primaries.

Figure 3.1 depicts the proportion of quality challengers that emerged in U.S. House elections between 1840 and 2014.⁵ From this figure, we can see that this measure fluctuates greatly over time. During the first 30 years of this timespan, over 30 percent of all challengers previously held some elective office. There was a slight increase in this proportion over the remainder of the nineteenth century as over 35 percent of all challengers had previously been officeholders. By the turn of the century, the proportion of experienced candidates began to decline precipitously despite the fact that Progressive Era reforms – including the direct primary – spread rapidly during the first two decades of the twentieth century. By the end of the Progressive Era, all but four states had adopted the direct primary with the final adopters implementing a direct primary much later in the century. During this time, the proportion of quality challengers was halved with only 17 percent running in House races.

By the end of the Progressive Era in 1920, 44 of the 48 states had implemented a direct primary system, but only one-fifth of challengers were considered high quality. However, this upward trend was short-lived as only 15.5 percent of non-incumbent office-seekers had any previous elective experience between 1924 and 1944. During the next three decades, there was a substantial resurgence in the emergence of high quality candidates as nearly one in every four challengers served in an elective position prior to seeking a U.S. House seat. Since the mid-1970s, the proportion of quality challengers seeking a seat in the House of Representatives has fluctuated around 18.5 percent. More recently, the 2016 election tied with 1990 as the lowest

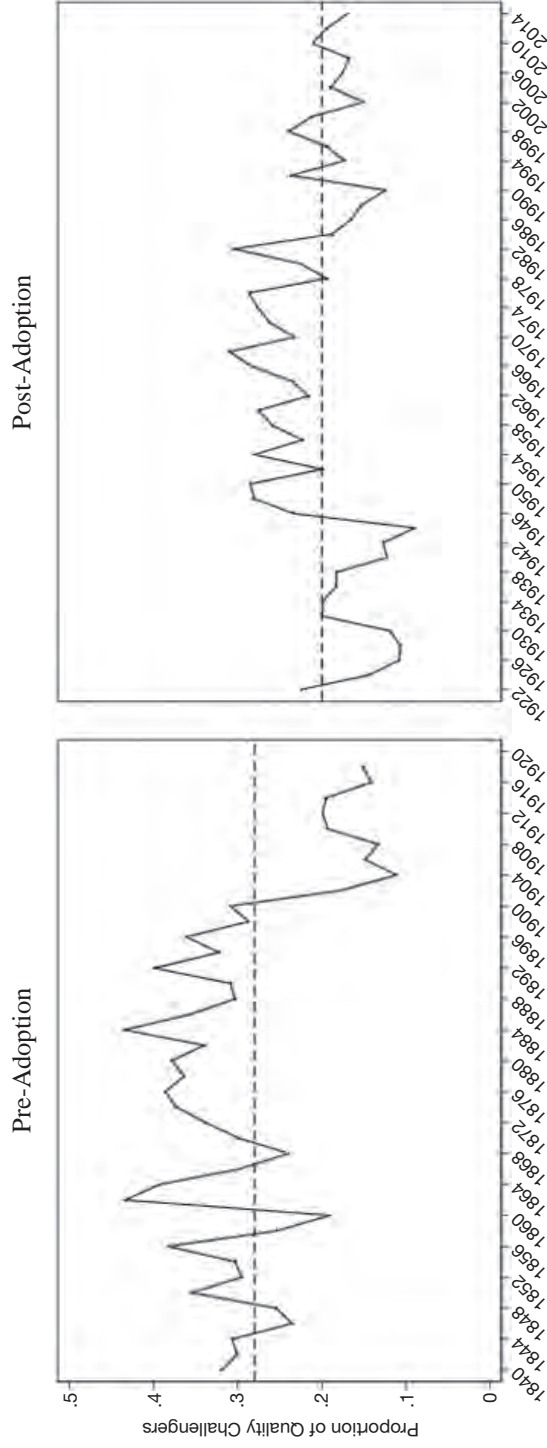


Figure 3.1 Proportion of Quality Challenger Emergence in U.S. House General Elections

percentage of quality challengers – 13 percent – running against incumbents in the post-World War II era.

Comparing levels of quality challenger participation before and after 1920 demonstrates that this reform did not encourage these candidates to run more often as many initially predicted. Prior to full implementation of direct primaries, over 27 percent of challengers previously held elective office. This number fell 7 points in the elections that have occurred since primaries began to be routinely used by the states.⁶ Indeed, limiting the comparison to the 20 years before and after implementation does not offer any substantively different results. Again, there was a 2 percent decrease in the proportion of quality challengers in the era immediately following adoption of the direct primary.

Similarly, the adoption of direct primaries should produce more competitive elections, all else equal. The political parties – namely their local leaders – previously selected candidates they believed would best serve their electoral and policy interests, but that candidate may not have the broadest appeal to constituents. However, it stands to reason that whichever candidate survives a round of voting in a direct primary system will indeed have broader appeal. Therefore, even if high quality challengers are not emerging at increased levels after adoption of direct primaries as Figure 3.1 demonstrates, the candidates that do emerge could still possibly yield more competitive outcomes.

Building upon the previous results, Figure 3.2 depicts the proportion of competitive U.S. House general elections races between 1840 and 2014.⁷ Earlier decades in this time span bore witness to historically high levels of electoral competition. Between 1840 and 1850, for instance, 43.4 percent of races were competitive, with over half of all elections classified as such in 1842. There was a brief downturn in the 1850s with 37.1 percent of races classified as competitive, but the trend increased quickly and enduringly with more than two out of every five elections generating a competitive outcome. The lone outlier during this period came in 1878 when almost three-quarters of elections were relatively one-sided. Though low for this period, it would still prove to be one of the more competitive election cycles in history. Between 1890 and 1920, 28.6 percent of races were classified as competitive with a new historic low of 16.5 percent in 1904.

An average of slightly more than one-third of House races were competitive prior to the 1922 election cycle. Though there was a modest decline in competitiveness over this same time span, the implementation of direct primaries did nothing to ultimately combat this trend. A mere 15.6 percent of House races have been competitive since the adoption of this reform – less than half of what was observed previously.⁸ Moreover, with the exception of a few wave elections (e.g., 1994, 2006 and 2010), only about 10 percent of elections have been competitive during the past few decades.

Furthermore, in the 40 years immediately following the adoption of direct primaries by the states, 20.5 percent of U.S. House elections were competitive. This noticeable decline would continue between 1962 and 2014 as the average proportion of competitive races dipped to 11.6 percent. Over the entire history of congressional elections for which we have data, only 11 election cycles resulted in more than 90 percent of candidates winning by greater than 10 percentage points. Six of these 11 such instances have occurred between 1998 and 2014, which further illustrates the declining levels of electoral competitiveness in recent years.

Numerous factors have contributed to the decline in electoral competitiveness over time. Most notably are the advantages stemming from incumbency (see, e.g., Erikson 1971; Mayhew 1974; Ferejohn 1977; Cover 1977). More specific explanations range from institutional features such as legislative casework (Fiorina 1977), legislative activism (Johannes and McAdams 1981), advertising (Cover and Brumberg 1982), and redistricting (Erikson 1972; Cover 1977; Carson,

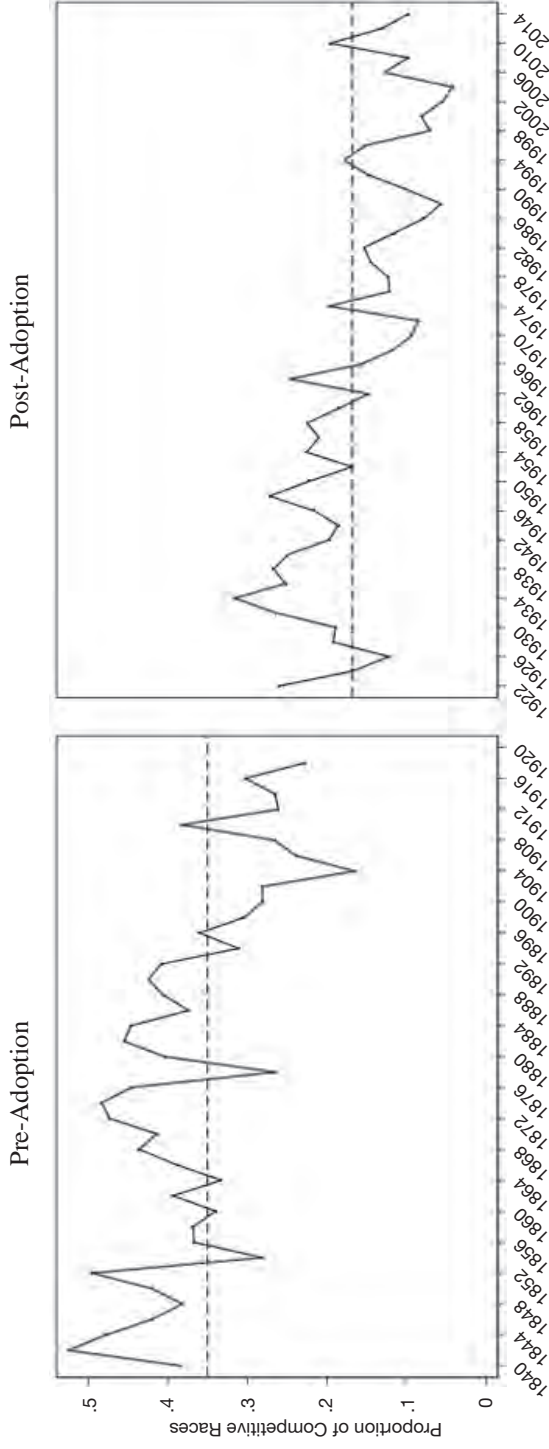


Figure 3.2 Proportion of Competitive U.S. House General Elections

Crespin, and Williamson 2014). Other scholars contend that the advantage can be explained by legislators' personal home styles in their congressional districts (Fenno 1978), rational entry and exit decisions by strategic candidates (Jacobson and Kernell 1981; Krasno 1994, Cox and Katz 1996), a growing "personal" vote (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987), and a greater emphasis on television appearances in a candidate-centered electoral era (Prior 2007). However, other works place a greater emphasis on the role of donations and money. Congressional campaigns have grown in cost over time (Abramowitz 1989, 1991) with a disproportionate amount of that money being raised and spent by incumbents (Jacobson and Kernell 1981; Herrnson 2012). Regardless, the evidence presented here illustrates that any effect direct primaries had on the vote distribution between competing candidates was minimal and short-lived.

Having focused on some descriptive trends in both challenger emergence and candidate competition across time, we now turn to a more sophisticated empirical analysis to evaluate additional factors that may be contributing to the patterns shown in Figures 3.1 and 3.2. As such, we estimate a logistic regression predicting the probability of a winning candidate for a U.S. House general election receiving 55 percent or less of the two-party vote for all elections between 1840 and 2014. Our main independent variable is an indicator variable denoting the end of the Progressive Era when 44 of the 48 states had adopted direct primaries. A negative and significant coefficient for this variable would reaffirm the conclusions drawn from the previous figures.

We also control for several factors known to contribute to the competitiveness of U.S. House elections. The first is whether a quality challenger decided to run in the election. Quality challengers are notably strategic in their decision to run and are experienced in winning elections, which generally results in races they participate in yielding closer outcomes. We also control for open seats. Given the relative ease with which incumbents are reelected to Congress, removing them from the contest produces two candidates who are at least theoretically more evenly matched. This then typically leads to more competitive elections. Next, we also include an exogenous measure of district preferences with the proportion of the two-party vote won by the Democratic presidential candidate within a district. This provides us with a measure of the homogeneity of a district. Increased homogeneity of voter preferences reduces the probability of a competitive election taking place as one candidate will lose votes for simply being a member of the "wrong" party.

Finally, we include three indicators denoting the partisanship of the winning candidate, whether a presidential election occurred at the same time, and whether a state was southern or not. The first is coded as 1 for Democratic winners and 0 for winners from another party. It allows us to capture any differences between the recruitment and campaign strategies employed by the parties. The second is coded 1 if a presidential election is occurring simultaneously and accounts for any effect increased turnout and presidential coattails might have on election outcomes. Consistent with prior literature, we treat southern states as unique in their political culture and environment. The 11 states that seceded from the Union during the Civil War are coded as southern while all other states are coded as non-southern. The results of this estimation are presented in Table 3.2 below.

As we expected, races featuring no incumbent, a quality challenger, weaker partisan preferences, and ones occurring outside of the South are consistently more competitive across time. Additionally, after controlling for these factors, elections occurring after implementation of direct primaries are significantly less likely to be competitive. Indeed, even limiting the analysis to the 30 years before and after adoption yields similar results. The predicted probabilities of competitiveness are depicted in Figure 3.3 to better illustrate the differences before and after the adoption of direct primaries by the states. Open seat races are more likely to be competitive

Table 3.2 Logistic Regression Estimates of Competitive Elections

	Coefficient (Rob. Std. Err.)
Post-Adoption	-0.974 (0.044)
Quality Challenger Presence	1.187 (0.041)
Open Seat	0.832 (0.069)
Democratic Presidential Vote	-0.084 (0.004)
Democratic Winners	0.038 (0.049)
Midterm Elections	-0.045 (0.030)
Southern States	-0.746 (0.82)
Intercept	-0.006 (0.065)
N	22160
Log-likelihood	-10259.65

Note: Bolded entries are significant at $p < 0.05$. Standard errors clustered by congressional district.

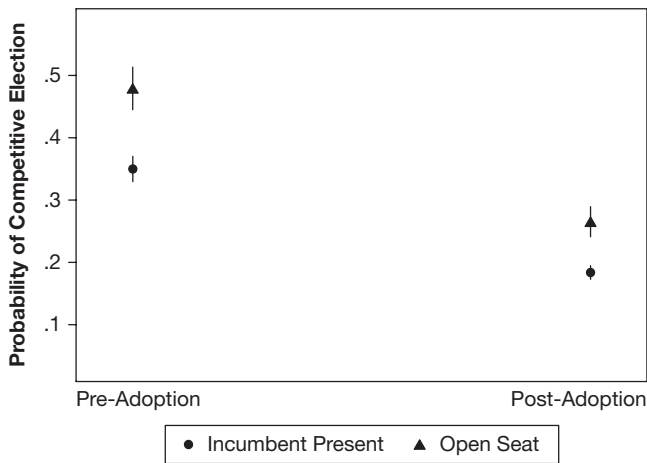


Figure 3.3 Predicted Probability of Competitive U.S. House Races

pre- and post-adoption. However, we also see that incumbent-contested elections prior to 1920 were more likely to be competitive than are open seat elections after 1920.

From these results, it appears that the direct primary resulted in the parties' nomination process leading to the emergence of candidates regarded as weaker by the party organization. This makes intuitive sense, as having stronger party machines allowed party elites to play a more centralized role in recruiting candidates for office. Amateur candidates had no proven record of support for the party's legislative agenda. Because of this, they were considerably less likely to be appealing to party bosses. The machine would therefore rely on those with a track record

of voting the “right” way, which required some sort of voting record, and a voting record could only be accrued through elective experience. However, by placing the responsibility of selecting each party’s candidate in the hands of voters, the disincentive for weaker candidates no longer existed. Indeed, the popular narrative of the time even created an incentive for candidates to tout their lack of any connection to party machines in order to win.

This reduction in the number of quality challengers running also resulted in the reduction in overall levels of competitiveness in House elections. Without challengers who had the experience of previously seeking office, name recognition, or a history of legislative accomplishments, incumbents faced fewer obstacles to winning reelection. Additionally, without parties to underwrite campaigns and offer job security to those who lost, candidates became much more risk averse with respect to seeking the party nomination. Therefore, candidates would only compete in races when their probability of winning was considerably high. This further allowed incumbents to retain their position when they otherwise may have been subject to a serious challenge as was common in the past.⁹ Over time, these trends have only increased as campaigns have become more costly and fewer high quality candidates are willing to take the risk to run given the greater opportunity costs that are involved.

Conclusion

The results presented here are largely consistent with prior research examining candidate emergence following adoption of direct primaries. Among others, Ansolabehere et al. (2010, 190) conclude that, “primaries were never broadly competitive, even at the outset” and that “the competitiveness of federal and statewide primaries decreased sharply starting in the 1940s.” However, we also see that adoption of the direct primary during the beginning of the twentieth century failed to elicit greater participation among quality challengers in general elections (and presumably in primary elections). As Maisel and Stone (2001) remind us, elections themselves are not sufficient for enhancing American democracy. *Competitive* elections are essential to a democratic system, and direct primaries did not offer much improvement in this way as those who pushed for their adoption originally believed they would.

To be clear, direct primaries are not solely responsible for the gradual decline in electoral competition or quality challenger emergence in House elections. However, taking control of the candidate recruitment process away from the party machines and granting that power to citizens did not help to reduce this decline either. In fact, it may have only hastened the decline that was already underway during the latter part of the nineteenth century as the party bosses were rapidly losing control of local factions of their party organizations. Despite these potentially worrisome trends, adoption of direct primaries has opened the door for other electoral reforms that could at least theoretically generate greater levels of competition and subsequently provide for enhanced representation between constituents and their elected representatives.

Because the Constitution allows individual states to determine the timing, place, and manner of elections, laws governing primaries vary considerably across the country. One of the more unique systems is the top-two, or jungle, primary utilized by California, Washington, and Louisiana. Under this system, all candidates for office – regardless of partisanship – appear on the ballot. After the votes are cast, the two candidates receiving the most support advance to the general election.¹⁰ This enables congressional districts that are overwhelmingly favorable towards either the Democratic or Republican parties to select between candidates with the same partisan identification. This, in turn, can lead to more competitive outcomes as one candidate is no longer immediately dismissed by voters for being a member of the “wrong” party.

In the brief timespan that these types of elections have been in place – 2010 marked the first year that all three states successfully implemented this system – co-partisans competing for the same U.S.

House seat have become a relatively common phenomenon. For example, the 2016 California general election featured seven House races pitting two Democrats against each other. Similarly, two of Washington's ten congressional races featured co-partisans competing for a seat in the House. As such, if increased competition across the parties is the ultimate goal, then more states may want to follow the model of these states in future elections.

There are numerous other sources of variation in rules governing primary elections that could influence quality challenger emergence and competitiveness that have yet to be explored. For instance, 15 states currently impose some form of term limits on their state legislators. What effect, if any, does this legislation have on their willingness to then compete for a U.S. House seat? Building on Rohde's (1979) work on progressive ambition, if a member has reached his or her maximum number of years in the state House or Senate, it is fair to assume that he or she has interest in maintaining elective office. The seemingly natural progression would be a seat in the U.S. House. Therefore, once a member has been term-limited out of state office, he or she will then have to enter a congressional primary election. It is theoretically possible, then, that states that impose term limits on state legislators witness greater levels of quality challenger emergence and competition.¹¹

More directly related to primary elections are the laws regulating the hurdles a candidate must clear in order to pursue office. These rules vary considerably across states with some being overtly cited as unduly strict. For example, an independent candidate in Georgia must obtain the signatures of five percent of registered voters in the district or jurisdiction the candidate seeks to represent – potentially thousands of signatures – in order to appear on the ballot for a U.S. House race. With such a high threshold, no independent candidate has successfully made it onto the ballot since 1964, and no minor party candidate has complied with the measure since it was first implemented in 1943 (Gray et al. 2012). In contrast, a candidate seeking a U.S. House seat in New Hampshire need only obtain 1,500 signatures to appear on the ballot. As these examples illustrate, implementing less burdensome ballot access laws could serve to noticeably alter who runs for, and ultimately wins, elections.

In conclusion, the direct primary – along with other Progressive Era reforms – aimed to reduce corruption, enhance citizen participation, and increase levels of competition in U.S. House elections. Control of the selection process by political parties was indeed reduced, but the adoption of direct primaries did not result in increased electoral competitiveness as originally conceived. Nonetheless, the candidate selection process still became more democratic, and without this important change other reforms would not be possible. Those seeking to further reform the electoral system should take heed of the lessons from history as they look for other institutional arrangements that might enhance electoral competition. The recent examples from California and Washington seem like a good place to start for other states looking to reform how their candidates are selected in direct primaries.

Notes

- 1 Summers (2004) offers a thoroughly engaging and descriptive account of party politics during this era of politics. See also Bensch (2004) for a rich history of voting in the nineteenth century.
- 2 Specifically, Texas passed legislation in 1923 banning participation of non-whites in primary elections. This legislation would be in place for more than 20 years, but was eventually ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Smith v. Allwright* (321 U.S. 649, 1944).
- 3 See also Pyeatt (2015) for a discussion of how ideological or partisan extremity can influence a candidate's likelihood of being punished or rewarded in primary elections.
- 4 It is important to point out that this effect likely does not apply to "safe" districts in which voters will likely support one party's candidate regardless of his or her ideological leanings.
- 5 Quality challengers are defined as those who have previously held elective office. As noted at the outset of the chapter, our measure focuses on those quality challengers that made it past the primary and into the general election.

- 6 This difference is statistically significant as a difference-of-means test yields a t -value of 84.44.
- 7 A competitive race is defined as one in which the winning candidate received 55 percent or less of the two-party vote share.
- 8 This difference is statistically significant as a difference-of-means test yields a t -value of 226.48.
- 9 For more evidence on these and related points concerning the adoption of electoral reforms in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Carson and Roberts (2013).
- 10 Louisiana does not have a primary election phase, per se. Instead, all candidates seeking a particular office appear on the general election ballot. If no candidate receives at least 50 percent plus one votes, the top two candidates proceed to a run-off in December of the election year.
- 11 At the same time, it is also possible that the number of quality challengers who emerge to run in U.S. House primaries may not be greater under these circumstances since they cannot strategically decide to emerge when conditions are ideal. Rather, they decide to run when they can no longer seek reelection in the state legislature. See Maestas, Fulton, Maisel, and Stone (2006) and Boatright (2013) for greater discussion of this phenomenon.

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