

On the Representativeness of Primary Electorates

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Primary voters are frequently characterized as an ideologically extreme subset of their party, and thus partially responsible for party polarization in government. This study uses a combination of administrative records on primary turnout and five recent surveys from 2008–14 to show that primary voters have similar demographic attributes and policy attitudes as rank-and-file voters in their party. These similarities do not vary according to the openness of the primary. These results suggest that the composition of primary electorates does not exert a polarizing effect above what might arise from voters in the party as a whole.

Keywords: primary elections; public opinion; representation; polarization

William ‘Boss’ Tweed captured the importance of nominating candidates when he said he did not care who ‘did the electing’ as long as he ‘got to do the nominating’. In contemporary American elections, voters – not party bosses – do the nominating. This raises a host of questions about the virtues and vices of primary elections. Critics of primary elections have long questioned whether primary voters are representative of the broader party.¹ Polsby argues that ‘a lack of demographic representativeness in a primary electorate may produce significantly different results in the types of candidates chosen to lead the party’.²

Two particular concerns among commentators and some scholars are that primary voters are ideologically extreme, and that their influence over the nominating process produces ideologically extreme candidates and more polarization between the parties in Congress and state legislatures. For this reason, some advocates argue that the primary process should be reformed in order to reduce polarization.

However, despite consistent skepticism about the representativeness of primary electorates, early research challenges this view. Drawing on data from the 1976 and 1980 elections, Geer and Norrander³ found that a party’s primary voters were not more ideological or partisan than general election voters who identified with that party or voted for its presidential candidate – what Geer called the ‘party following’ – or than general election voters in the party who did not vote in the primary. Norrander concludes: ‘Fears about extremist primary voters selecting

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¹ Key 1956; Polsby 1983.

² Polsby 1983, 160.

³ Geer 1988; Norrander 1989.

extremist candidates unpalatable to the more moderate general election voters are unsupported. Primary voters just are not more ideologically extreme.⁴

Since this research was conducted, however, primary turnout has declined⁵ and the parties have become more ideologically sorted.⁶ These changes in the composition of the parties raise the possibility that the primary electorate is no longer representative of rank-and-file partisans, and a new scholarly debate has emerged. Prominent scholars have argued that differences between the primary electorate and the party rank and file are large and important. For example, Mann argues that ‘Since primary electorates are skewed toward each party’s ideological pole, the appearance of a credible threat in the primary election will push the incumbent in the same direction.’⁷ And Fiorina and Abrams argue that these differences are particularly large in congressional primaries, saying ‘Some studies of presidential primary voters have concluded that the primary voters are not as unrepresentative as popular commentary assumes, but when we are talking about a sixth to a tenth of the electorate voting in a subpresidential primary – often split between the two parties – the likelihood is that we are talking about a primary electorate composed disproportionately of hard-core wing-nuts in the two parties.’⁸

Some recent evidence is mixed, however. Based on an analysis of state exit polls from the 2000 presidential primaries and the 2004 Democratic presidential primary, Abramowitz⁹ sides with the earlier research, arguing that ‘the differences in ideological identification between primary and general election voters were very small’. But two more recent studies argue the opposite. Drawing on the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES), Jacobson finds that self-reported Republican primary voters in that election year were more ideologically extreme than self-reported general election voters who said they did not vote in those primaries. He writes of ‘primary electorates in which ideological extremists are overrepresented’.¹⁰ Hill draws on the 2010 and 2012 CCES, but uses validated rather than self-reported turnout data. His findings are mixed: raw estimates show few differences between primary voters and the broader party, but estimates from a hierarchical model of policy attitudes suggest larger differences. He argues that ‘primary voters and primary electorates are less centrist [...] than party voters in the general electorate’.¹¹

We are able to improve on these recent studies. First, our evidence is broader. We study more elections (four, compared to one or two), which means that we have multiple observations for each party primary and both presidential and congressional primaries. Our results are not the fluke of a single election cycle. We examine a broader set of indicators than existing work, ensuring that our results are not due to the idiosyncratic nature of a particular political issue or measure. The five surveys we analyze have large enough samples to encompass more states than are typically present in the state exit polls. Our focus on the national level combined with very large samples in every election gives us enough power to detect differences across groups without the assumptions needed in a hierarchical model, as in Hill.¹² Finally, we can rely on validated turnout rather than self-reported turnout, as in Jacobson,¹³ which has been shown to be an unreliable measure of turnout (Ansolabehere and Hersh, 2012; Vavreck, 2007).

⁴ Norrander 1989, 584.

⁵ Hirano et al. 2010.

⁶ Fiorina and Levendusky 2006; Hill and Tausanovitch 2015.

⁷ Mann 2007, 279.

⁸ Fiorina and Abrams 2012, 165.

⁹ Abramowitz 2008.

¹⁰ Jacobson 2012, 1624–25.

¹¹ Hill 2015, 482.

¹² Hill 2015.

¹³ Jacobson 2012.

We show that primary voters are not demographically distinct or ideologically extreme compared to those who identify with the party or who voted for its presidential candidate in the general election, or than those who identify with the party and voted in the general election but not in the primary. The only substantial difference is that primary voters report more interest in politics. These patterns emerge in both presidential and midterm years.

In contrast to other recent studies,¹⁴ our findings suggest that the ideological extremity of primary voters has not changed in the three decades since the early studies by Geer and Norrander.¹⁵ Of course, our findings cannot speak to the impact of simply having a party nomination process prior to the general election. Nor can we compare primary elections to other types of nomination processes – such as conventions, caucuses or smoke-filled backrooms. Nonetheless, we provide considerable evidence that primary electorates are not ideologically unrepresentative of the broader party. This implies that reforms to the primary process are unlikely to influence polarization.

RESEARCH DESIGN

We use data from five large surveys of the American public: the 2008 Cooperative Campaign Analysis Project (CCAP)¹⁶ and the 2008–14 CCES. After weighting, CCAP respondents are representative of registered voters and CCES respondents are representative of the American public.¹⁷ For each dataset, the survey provider matched respondents to voter file data that contain validated primary and general election turnout.¹⁸

These data offer four main advantages. First, they encompass two presidential and two midterm elections and allow us to separate presidential and congressional primary voters in states that hold presidential and congressional primaries on different dates in presidential election years. Secondly, they contain large enough samples to estimate the impact of primary rules, which vary across states. Thirdly, they feature many measures of political attitudes. Finally, these data allow us to rely on validated turnout rather than potentially biased self-reports. The validated turnout data reveal substantial overlap in the primary and general electorates. In the 2008 CCAP, 68 per cent of validated general election voters also voted in their state's primary.¹⁹ The overlap between the two electorates means that roughly a third of 2008 general election voters voted 'only' in the general election and not in the primary. Any differences between the primary and general electorates must therefore manifest themselves in this relatively small group of voters.

¹⁴ Hill 2015; Jacobson 2012.

¹⁵ Geer 1988; Norrander 1989.

¹⁶ Jackman and Vavreck 2009.

¹⁷ A potential concern is that the opt-in online samples used by the CCAP and CCES contain more politically knowledgeable people than the general population, which could attenuate differences between primary and general election voters. In order to evaluate this issue, we compared the differences between Republican presidential primary and general election voters in the 2012 CCES and the 2012 American National Election Study (ANES). The ANES contains a high-quality, face-to-face sample, and it was validated against voter files. However, it has a very limited sample size: there are only about 100 validated voters in the 2012 Republican presidential primary. Nonetheless, we observe no statistically significant differences in the differences between primary and general election voters for any quantity across these surveys. Thus the results we obtain from the large, online sample on the CCAP and CCES are consistent with the noisier results from the ANES face-to-face sample.

¹⁸ For details, see the online appendix. Sides et al. 2017.

¹⁹ This rate of overlap is not unusual. A random sample of 1,600 cases from the nationwide voter file as of March 2013 (and not attached to any survey data) shows that 56 per cent of general election voters also voted in the primary in 2008. We thank Eitan Hersh for this calculation.

TABLE 1 *The Characteristics of Primary and General Electorates in Recent Presidential Elections*

	Democratic voters			Republican voters		
	Voted in primary	Voted only in general	Party following	Voted in primary	Voted only in general	Party following
2008 (CCAP)						
Median age	50	43	48	51	48	51
College Degree or more	36%	29%	35%	29%	24%	27%
White	70%	68%	70%	89%	90%	90%
Discussed a candidate	63%	52%	59%	62%	53%	58%
Very interested in politics	63%	44%	57%	70%	49%	61%
Symbolic Ideology	2.50	2.49	2.45	4.13	3.96	4.06
Support Civil Unions	68%	69%	70%	29%	25%	27%
Raise taxes on wealthy	90%	91%	92%	39%	54%	46%
Ideal point	-0.57	-0.57	-0.62	0.78	0.65	0.72
2012 (CCES)						
Median age				59	52	54
College Degree or more				33%	27%	29%
White				93%	90%	90%
Very interested in politics				72%	58%	62%
Donated money				35%	22%	27%
Symbolic Ideology				4.06	3.83	3.89
Support ban most abortions				66%	60%	62%
Support Healthcare Reform				13%	20%	20%
Ideal point				1.04	0.81	0.85

We compare primary voters to two definitions of ‘the party’ found in previous literature: (1) general election voters who self-identify with a party or voted for that party’s candidate in the general election; and (2) a smaller subset of those voters who only voted in the general election but not in the primary. Following Geer,²⁰ we call the former the ‘party following’²¹ and the latter ‘general-only voters’.

COMPARING PRIMARY AND GENERAL ELECTION VOTERS

Tables 1 and 2 show the results of our analysis. They compare the demographic and ideological profiles of primary voters with voters in the party following and general-only voters in presidential and congressional elections, respectively. We omit tests of statistical significance, given that each survey contains tens of thousands of respondents and so the quantities presented here are very precisely estimated.

Because primary voters are frequently characterized as political activists, we might expect them to be older, better educated and more interested in politics. But although primary voters were about 6–8 years older than those who voted only in the general election, they were only 1–4 years older than the average in the broader party. Primary voters were also only a few points more likely to have a college degree than those who voted only in the general election or than the party following. Larger differences emerge with regard to campaign interest and campaign donations. For example, 63 per cent of Democratic presidential primary voters in the 2008 election said they were very

²⁰ Geer 1988.

²¹ Voters could be counted in both parties’ followings if they identified with one party but voted for another. Geer (1988, 933) notes that this is intentional, since these voters are potentially coveted by both parties.

TABLE 2 *The Characteristics of Primary and General Electorates in Recent Congressional Elections*

	Democratic voters			Republican voters		
	Voted in primary	Voted only in general	Party following	Voted in primary	Voted only in general	Party following
2008 (CCES)						
Median age	49	37	46	52	46	49
College Degree or more	35%	24%	30%	31%	22%	27%
White	70%	65%	67%	89%	90%	88%
Very interested in politics	66%	43%	56%	73%	51%	63%
Symbolic Ideology	2.45	2.50	2.45	4.10	3.93	3.99
Support ban on most abortions	21%	23%	22%	71%	67%	68%
Raise Minimum Wage	95%	97%	97%	51%	67%	59%
Ideal point	-0.75	-0.72	-0.76	0.89	0.69	0.77
2010 (CCES)						
Median age	55	47	52	57	50	54
College Degree or more	40%	34%	36%	30%	28%	29%
White	78%	72%	75%	90%	89%	89%
Very interested in politics	74%	54%	63%	82%	66%	75%
Donated money	38%	21%	29%	38%	20%	31%
Symbolic Ideology	2.38	2.45	2.45	4.05	3.88	3.98
Support ban on most abortions	17%	21%	20%	61%	54%	58%
Support Healthcare Reform	89%	87%	86%	9%	16%	13%
Ideal point	-0.89	-0.78	-0.80	0.89	0.64	0.77
2012 (CCES)						
Median age	57	46	50	60	50	54
College Degree or more	41%	30%	32%	32%	27%	29%
White	72%	70%	69%	91%	91%	90%
Very interested in politics	69%	50%	55%	74%	53%	62%
Donated money	46%	26%	31%	36%	19%	27%
Symbolic Ideology	2.46	2.56	2.56	4.01	3.82	3.89
Support ban on most abortions	14%	18%	19%	65%	60%	62%
Support Healthcare Reform	93%	90%	89%	13%	22%	20%
Ideal point	-0.86	-0.72	-0.71	1.05	0.76	0.85
2014 (CCES)						
Median age	60	53	57	61	56	58
College Degree or more	43%	37%	39%	33%	30%	32%
White	75%	73%	74%	91%	91%	90%
Very interested in politics	76%	61%	67%	81%	69%	74%
Symbolic Ideology	2.45	2.56	2.54	3.97	3.79	3.87
Support ban on all abortions	20%	24%	23%	71%	65%	67%
Support Healthcare Reform	85%	81%	81%	7%	11%	10%
Ideal point	-0.86	-0.74	-0.76	1.07	0.86	0.94

interested in the campaign, compared to 44 per cent of those who voted in the general election but not the primary. This gap appears among Republicans and in other elections as well.

But differences in campaign or political interest do not translate into large differences in three different measures of political attitudes. In these elections, the average Democratic primary voter’s self-reported *symbolic ideology* on a five-point scale from very liberal to very conservative was only slightly to the left of Democrats who voted in the general election but not in the primary. Indeed, in the 2008 elections, Democratic presidential primary voters actually identified as more conservative than the party following, on average (top left panel of Table 1).

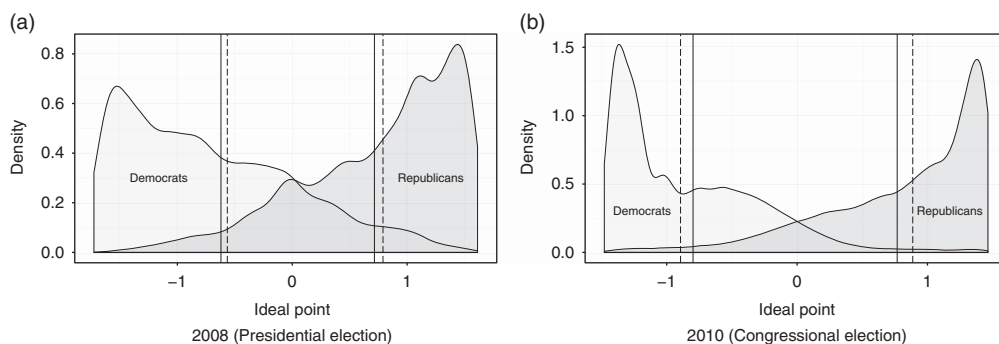


Fig. 1. Ideal points of primary voters and the party following in 2008 and 2010.

Note: the dashed lines are the mean ideal points of primary voters in each party and the solid lines are the mean ideal points of the party following in the general election. Sources: 2008 CCAP and 2010 CCES.

The differences among Republicans were slightly larger but still small in absolute terms. On average, Republican primary voters in the 2008 election were 0.17 points more conservative than Republicans who voted in the general election but not the primary (4.13 vs. 3.96). But this difference only represents 2.5 per cent of the five-point scale and 11 per cent of the gap between the followers of each party. The difference between Republican primary voters and the Republican party following was even smaller. There were similarly modest differences in congressional elections (Table 2).

There are also small differences in *issue positions* among these groups, and not always in the direction that the conventional wisdom would presume. For instance, Democratic primary voters in 2008 were slightly less supportive of civil unions than the broader party following, and the differences on other issues were generally in the single digits. The lone exception was that 2008 Republican primary voters were fifteen points less likely than general-only voters to favor raising taxes on the wealthy. However, this difference was dwarfed by the forty-six-point difference between the parties.

Finally, there are few notable differences in the one-dimensional *ideal points* of these different groups based on their responses to a larger set of issue questions.²² For example, Figure 1 shows that primary voters were only a bit more ideologically extreme than party followers in the 2008 presidential and 2010 congressional elections. In 2008, Democratic primary voters were slightly less extreme than the party following.

To illustrate the very modest magnitude of these differences, it is useful to compare them to ideological differences among US senators using DW-Nominate scores. For example, the difference between Democratic primary voters and the party following in the 2012 congressional primary election – 0.15 standard deviations – is the largest one among Democrats in these elections. This is almost exactly the difference between Senators Jeff Merkeley and Ron Wyden, both Democrats from Oregon; Senator Merkeley is the more liberal of the two. The difference between California Senators Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein is more than two and a half times as large. Among Republican voters, the greatest difference (0.2 standard deviations) also occurs in the 2012 congressional election. This is essentially the difference between Senator John McCain of Arizona and Senator Kelly Ayotte of

²² Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2013. See online appendix for more information about the construction of the ideal point scale. The ideal points for CCES respondents from 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2014 are jointly scaled, and thus directly comparable to one another. However, the CCES and CCAP ideal points are not jointly scaled due to the lack of common policy questions across the surveys. Thus we report the CCES and CCAP ideal points separately.

TABLE 3 Association between Primary Type and Ideal Points

	Democratic voters			Republican voters		
	Voted in primary	Party following	Difference	Voted in primary	Party following	Difference
Closed	-0.87	-0.77	-0.11	0.93	0.78	0.15
Semi-Closed	-0.88	-0.77	-0.11	0.93	0.81	0.12
Open	-0.78	-0.73	-0.05	1.00	0.88	0.12

New Hampshire, where McCain is the more conservative. The difference between Senators Mitch McConnell and Rand Paul, both of Kentucky, is more than five times as big.²³

In general, the 2008–14 data show that primary electorates in recent congressional elections are not substantially more ideologically extreme, relative to the party following, than the primary electorates in presidential elections. Similarly, primary electorates in congressional elections do not appear to be more extreme in midterm election years than in presidential election years. This runs contrary to fears that a smaller turnout in midterm elections enhances the power of the ideological extremes.

Why do these results differ from those of Jacobson and Hill,²⁴ even though we are analyzing some of the same surveys? In contrast to Jacobson, we use validated turnout data. As we describe in the online appendix, self-reported turnout produces larger differences between primary voters and the party following. And unlike Hill, we rely on simple disaggregated means and very large sample sizes, rather than a hierarchical model.²⁵

Even though there were few substantive differences between primary voters and the party following, larger differences might emerge in particular types of primaries. Table 3 compares the mean ideal points of people who voted in the congressional primary to those of the party following in closed, semi-closed and open primaries – pooling observations from the 2008–14 CCES (four elections) across states and years. The differences between primary voters and the party following are not much greater in closed primaries than in open primaries, even though closed primaries are thought to create larger differences by limiting the primary electorate to registered partisans. This null effect of primary rules confirms previous research.²⁶ As Kaufman and colleagues conclude: ‘[...] the key to greater ideological representativeness is not the rules alone’.²⁷

CONCLUSIONS

In 1956, V.O. Key wrote skeptically about the primary system:

The elevation of such minorities to power within the nominating process through the smallness of total participation and bias may [...] throw into office the most improbable sorts of characters who have won nominations through the vagaries of primaries.²⁸

²³ DW-Nominate scores are from www.voteview.com, accessed in July 2016. Standard deviations are calculated using the common-space scores for the 113th Congress only excluding the president.

²⁴ Hill 2015; Jacobson 2012.

²⁵ Hill (2015) uses a hierarchical model in order to achieve greater precision in his estimates of opinion in congressional districts. This approach, however, may trade off lower variance for higher bias, as suggested by the divergence between the modeled results and national-level results using larger samples. The other results in Hill (2015) line up closely with our results here.

²⁶ Geer 1988; Hill 2015; Kaufmann, Gimpel, and Hoffman 2003.

²⁷ Kaufmann, Gimpel, and Hoffman 2003, 472.

²⁸ Key 1956, 166.

That skepticism has persisted for many years. After the 1984 presidential election, a supporter of Jack Kemp said ‘The Republican presidential primary process remains a right-wing orgy.’²⁹ After the 2012 election Republicans worried that primaries ‘push their presidential nominees far to the right’ and ‘produce lackluster Senate candidates’.³⁰ In 2016, the success of Donald Trump led conservative columnist George Will to blame open primaries for including less faithful, and presumably more moderate, Republicans.³¹ Similar debates about primary rules took place among Democrats.³² Meanwhile, reformers concerned about polarization advocate reforms to primary elections. Phil Keisling, formerly Oregon’s Secretary of State, writes: ‘Want to get serious about reducing the toxic levels of hyper-partisanship and legislative dysfunction now gripping American politics? Here’s a direct, simple fix: abolish party primary elections.’³³

Clearly there is a recurring debate among political scientists and commentators about whether primary electorates are representative of their parties. Our evidence does not confirm repeated claims that the primary electorate is ideologically extreme or otherwise distinctive – even in the context of today’s polarized politics. In 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2014, primary voters were ideologically representative subsets of the broader party following. Moreover, the ideological composition of primary electorates did not depend very much on primary rules or the type of office. Our findings confirm Norrander’s review of past work that ‘rather than being a more ideologically extreme proportion of the electorate, presidential primary voters are more aptly described as the slightly more interested and knowledgeable segment of the electorate’.³⁴ To be sure, our claim is not that primaries have no consequences for the candidates who run or the candidates who win. Moreover, primaries might be problematic for other reasons, such as that they do not provide sufficient deliberation within the party or a thorough enough review of each candidate’s qualifications.³⁵ Nevertheless, our findings should serve to allay one concern about primary elections: that they empower ideological extremists within the parties.

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²⁹ Baker 1985.

³⁰ Martin 2013.

³¹ Will 2016.

³² Putnam 2016.

³³ Keisling 2010.

³⁴ Norrander 2015, 57. See also Hirano et al. 2010; McGhee et al. 2013.

³⁵ Polsby 1983.

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