

# Divisive Primaries: Party Organizations, Ideological Groups, and the Battle over Party Purity

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Of the many vital functions that political parties serve in American democracy, selecting candidates for public office is near the top of the list. Giovanni Sartori (1976) cites this purpose as their chief defining element—claiming that, at a minimum, a party is a “political group that presents at elections, and is capable of placing through elections, candidates for public office” (64). Moreover, understanding how parties vet, groom, select, and promote candidates is central to empirically evaluating the strength of political party organizations, the quality of elected policymakers, and ultimately the effectiveness of government. For scholars of American politics, this has led to fruitful lines of research on the processes that the Democratic and Republican Parties use to select their candidates—namely the conventions, primaries, and caucuses that nominate individuals for various federal, state, and local offices. For example, many have investigated the effects of reforms to the presidential nomination process in the early 1970s (Aldrich 1993; Hagen and Mayer 2000; Reiter 1985; Wayne 2000), some arguing that it took power of choosing candidates away from the party organizations and towards other institutions like the press, interest groups, and small ideological factions (Polsby 1983) with potentially negative consequences for governance.

In this essay, I elaborate on this research line and others by highlighting a nascent, small, but potentially burgeoning and important trend affecting how the Democratic and Republican Parties select their candidates for Congress. In particular, I argue that recent developments have created an environment in which groups seeking to promote an ideological agenda

have newfound motivation, resources, and technology to launch primary challenges against incumbent lawmakers for lack of party purity. Because the Democratic and Republican Parties themselves are concerned not just with promoting unity, but also with maintaining the ideological “big tent” needed to secure legislative majorities, they tend to vigorously oppose these challenges, especially when the more ideologically extreme challenger is perceived as less likely to prevail in the general election. Some recent attempts to unseat incumbent mavericks have been successful, but the many unsuccessful ones are also consequential—they warn other incumbents of costly, potentially career-ending consequences of disloyalty. These organizations, operating quite at odds with party organizations and incumbent partisans in government, are contributing to the party polarization in Congress both by replacing some of the most moderate members with faithful partisans and by inducing greater party unity among the remaining who fear serious primary opposition.

## The Changing Political Landscape

Beating an incumbent member of Congress is incredibly difficult because they are prolific fundraisers, have the support of local and national party leaders, and successful campaign experience. If adept, they may also try to shepherd several perks of incumbency like their salary, travel, office, staff, and communication allowances, worth more than \$1 million (Jacobson 2000, 31); their ability to bring home pork to the district (Alvarez and Saving 1997; Bickers and Stein 1996; Feldman and Jondrow 1984); and constituent casework (Fiorina and Rivers 1989; Johannes and McAdams 1981; Serra 1994; Serra and Cover 1992) to increase their chances of reelection. As a result, attempts to oust incumbent lawmakers from within their own party have been exceedingly rare in the past

few decades,<sup>1</sup> and successful attempts even rarer. Since 1980, incumbent House members pursuing reelection have lost to primary challengers 1% of the time (61 out of 5,969 reelection attempts).<sup>2</sup> As a result, intra-party challenges have generally been reserved for incumbents tarred with scandal, when parties believe that the challenger may have a better chance of beating the opposing party in the general election, or launched by challengers with their own stores of personal wealth, independent from party prerogatives.<sup>3</sup>

However, some gradual but profound developments are changing this calculus. The first is the growing prevalence and influence of ideological interest groups. As the purview of government programs has expanded and created constituencies with an incentive to organize and protect such programs through collective action, the number of interest groups has exploded over the past few decades (Walker 1992).

Changes in technology and the rise of the Internet have dramatically and quickly affected grassroots organizing. Ideologically passionate activists, after all, are a tiny share of the population; finding others who share a similar zeal, mobilizing participation, and channeling resources were, in the past, activities reserved for the well moneyed and the socially connected. The now widespread use of the Internet has enabled those with even the most obscure political obsession to find individuals of like mind to chat, rant, and commiserate. For organizers, forming a large online community of individuals from across the country is cheap and easy; circulating news and messages to a vast, geographically dispersed memberships requires no paper, envelopes, or stamps, only the time it takes to type them; and recruiting new members is just a few clicks of a mouse away.<sup>4</sup>

A second development is party polarization, a process noted by many congressional scholars (Binder and Smith 1997; Fleisher and Bond 2000; Jacobson 2006; Jamieson and Falk 2000; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006a; Poole and Rosenthal 1997; Rohde 1991;

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Sinclair 1997; 2000; Stonecash, Brewer, and Mariani 2002; and others) that began decades ago as conservative Democratic members from the South began being replaced by conservative Republicans. Different scholars place varying degrees of emphasis on different causal mechanisms: Southern economic development and integration (Key 1949), technological innovation and interregional migration (Polsby 2004), Democratic Party elites' decisions to embrace liberal racial policies in the 1960s (Carmines and Stimson 1989), redistricting (Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2005),<sup>5</sup> and the changing stereotypes of party constituencies (Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002). But all agree on a common result: white Southern conservatives, once a key component of the New Deal coalition, began to vote in greater numbers for Republicans in presidential elections, to elect Republicans to their congressional delegations, and eventually to identify as Republicans. Both among voters and in the halls of Congress, initial movement of Southern conservatives from the Democratic to Republican parties had two reinforcing effects: it made the Republican Party more homogeneously conservative and the Democratic Party more uniformly liberal, encouraging further individual-level sorting as well as generational replacement that continues today.

The result is unprecedented disagreement between Democrats and Republicans on the major issues of the day. Polarization in Congress is at the highest level in 120 years, with virtually no ideological overlap between the two parties' memberships: practically every single Democrat is to the left of every single Republican (Poole 2008).

This polarization has had a profound effect on the way Americans view the parties: they see more meaningful differences between Democrats and Republicans (Hetherington 2001) and ideology is a more potent component of partisan stereotypes (Murakami 2008). Because ideologically atypical partisans, that is—liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats—are now so rare, they increasingly seem like the odd men out. To activists concerned with promoting an ideological agenda, they are at best antagonists who diminish the credibility of the party line, and at worst political traitors. Their growing exceptionalism makes their notable disunity all the more egregious, and also makes them more manageable, easily identifiable targets.

These developments have resulted in the increasing relevance of a particular kind of organization seeking to flex its political muscle: the *party purity group*. These organizations side ideologically with one the two major political parties, but are

frustrated with moderates, who seem to betray core party values by siding with the opposition, even if only on a narrow range of issues. Changes in communication technology enable these groups to act on these growing frustrations stoked by the polarized political milieu. With the ability to garner large memberships, raise hundreds of millions of dollars, air attack ads, and recruit candidates, party purity groups are able to heavily influence party primary processes. But unlike the parties themselves, they are unhindered by the responsibilities of governing (and any accompanying necessary compromise) or maintaining a "big tent" essential to increase its share beyond only the most reliably ideologically friendly districts and states. Thus, in seeking to enhance the ideological purity of their home party, their efforts pit them in grueling, costly proxy battles with the party establishment itself.

### Scalps on the Wall

The favorite electoral arena for party purity groups has been in open primaries, where less expensive airtime and a smaller pool of likely voters make them cheaper and easier opportunities to influence outcomes; where voters are much more ideologically driven than in general elections, making them especially receptive to messages advocating more conservative Republican candidates, or more liberal Democratic ones; and where the absence of incumbents makes running campaigns cheaper and less risky. Organizations like Emily's List (a group dedicated to funding and assisting pro-choice, women Democrats to Congress), MoveOn.org (a liberal, pro-Democratic group formed during the impeachment of President Clinton), and the Club for Growth (a conservative, anti-tax group) have become experts at identifying potentially competitive congressional primaries and promising political talent, recruiting large memberships to organize and contribute money, and assisting—sometimes independently—with messaging and campaign operations. Some of these organizations eventually found, however, that their influence in such open primaries was insufficient in producing the desired legislative results. As one reporter put it, they "began to see that candidates would say anything to get a pile of checks, only to ignore their promises . . . once they got elected" (Bai 2003). They needed a new approach: targeting incumbents.

One of the first races of national prominence in which a party purity group launched a campaign to unseat a member of Congress took place in 2004, when the Club for Growth targeted veteran lawmaker Senator Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania pri-

marily for his opposition to the full amount of President Bush's original tax cuts. The group's president, Stephen Moore, explains why the group decided to move beyond weighing in on open primaries, even though ousting an incumbent is much more difficult: "If we beat Specter, we won't have any trouble with wayward Republicans anymore. It serves notice to Chafee [R-RI], Snowe [R-ME], Voinovich [R-OH] and others who have been problem children that they will be next" (Dao 2004a).

By taking down an incumbent, they can hit two, three, even four birds with one stone. As Specter himself noted, "he wants 'my scalp on the wall'—so they can make other Republican Senators 'behave'" (Budoff 2004).

To garner the prize, the organization recruited Congressman Toomey—a conservative member of the House. Table 1, which displays the funds raised from all non-business, non-trade, and non-union PACs for this congressional primary (and other key races I will discuss shortly), shows that he was able leverage his House incumbency to raise some funds from politicians, especially former members of Congress<sup>6</sup> and his fellow congressmen.<sup>7</sup> In total, however, this amount was quite small: only 8% of his PAC funding from such Republican sources. This is by far the most a challenger recruited by a party purity group has raised from party insiders and was due in large part to his being a House incumbent and, in some respects, an insider himself. The lion's share of this type of campaign funding came from conservative organizations, including more than \$440,000 from the Club for Growth and \$20,000 from various right-to-life, pro-Israel, and anti-union interests.

The Republican establishment as a whole, in contrast, was not supportive of his bid. The National Republican Committee and the National Republican Senatorial Committee weighed in heavily in Specter's corner, citing the need for the moderate senator to maintain the Republican's narrow two-seat majority. Republican congressional strategists believed that Toomey would be more easily defeated in the general election and were depending on a Specter victory as part of their national calculus for retaining their two-seat majority in the Senate (Dao 2004b). Articulating the party's viewpoint, Specter noted that "virtually everybody except the Club for Growth and my primary opponent agree that a big tent is necessary to be the prevailing national party" (Dao 2004a). Republican strategists also believed that President Bush would be better served with moderate Specter downballot in this key battleground state. As a result, party stalwarts like Vice President Cheney, Karl

**Table 1. The Funding of Incumbents and Their Primary Challengers**

Party State, Year	Candidates	Liberal Groups	Conservative Groups	Big Tent Groups	Republicans	Democrats	Contributors from Party and Big Tent Sources (%)	Primary Outcome (%)
Republican PA, 2004	Arlen Specter (i)	24,000	59,550	39,749	634,290	0	88.4	50.8
	Pat Toomey	0	464,517	0	39,015	0	7.7	49.2
Republican RI, 2006	Lincoln Chafee (i)	161,972	15,000	42,960	1,096,248	0	85.3	54.2
	Steve Laffey	264	556,974	0	0	0	0	45.8
Democratic‡ CT, 2006	Joe Lieberman (i)	74,000	20,357	0	0	94,462	50.0	48.2
	Ned Lamont	267,645	0	0	0	0	0	51.8
Republican MD-1, 2008	Wayne Gilcrest (i)	223,776	0	72,000	35,348	1,000	32.3	33.1
	Andy Harris	0	615,892	0	500	0	0	43.4
Democratic MD-4, 2008	Albert Wynn (i)	17,500	13,500	0	2,300	81,465	71.0	36.9
	Donna Edwards	481,473	0	0	0	0	0	58.9

Source: The Federal Election Commission.

Note: Figures show the total amount of contributions from each category made to each candidate before the date of the relevant primary. (i) denotes incumbent running for reelection. ‡ Only donations made prior to the primary on August 8, 2006, are included, even though Senator Lieberman remained in the race to run (and ultimately prevail) as an Independent against Democratic nominee Ned Lamont in the general election, and include funds spent as independent expenditures on behalf of candidates. These figures do not include contributions from business or labor PACs.

Rove, and President Bush himself campaigned on behalf of Specter, who also received more than \$634,000 from the Republican Party and leadership PACs of GOP office holders, including \$550,000 from the National Republican Senatorial Committee. Moreover, the national party used the primary as an opportunity to test their get-out-the-vote operation in Pennsylvania.

Specter was also buoyed by a collection of organizations designed to support more moderate Republicans, which I dub *big tent groups*. Such groups like the Mainstreet Partnership, the Republican Majority for Choice, Republicans for Choice, and the Log Cabin Republicans were created to decrease party purity and added almost \$40,000 to his primary coffers, and several pro-Israel groups gave close to \$60,000 as well.

In the end, with all of the help of the Republican political machine, the Bush administration, and the perks of incumbency, as well as outspending Toomey by more than 4 to 1, Senator Specter

squeaked by his challenger by a razor-thin 50.8 to 49.2%. He went on to win the general election by more than 10%.

Two years later, motivated anew by the close margin—rather than deflated by the loss, the Club for Growth tried again, this time to unseat Republican senator Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island. This time they recruited Stephen Laffey, mayor of Cranston (the state's third-largest city). Like Toomey, his critical support came not from elements of the Republican Party organization or from Republican elected officials, but from a coalition of independent groups pushing for a more conservative Republican conference. The Club for Growth contributed more than \$531,000 to his campaign,<sup>8</sup> but groups promoting a strongly pro-Israel stance as well as other conservative ideological groups chipped in for a grand total of almost \$556,000. Unlike Congressman Toomey, however, Laffey was not able to earn a single dime from Republican leadership PACs. Senator Chafee, on the other hand, was able to gain over \$1 million from the

Republican Party and Republican politicians, including over \$850,000 from the National Republican Senatorial Committee. He was also propped up significantly by liberal interest groups like the Human Rights Campaign, the Sierra Club, and NARAL Pro-Choice America, which contributed over \$160,000; and a coalition of big tent groups similar to those who supported Senator Specter, which gave almost \$43,000. Overall, over 85% of Specter's support came from party sources and big tent groups, while virtually all of Mayor Laffey's support came from conservative party purity groups. Following in Toomey's footsteps, Laffey lost the primary to Chafee, who went on to lose the general election by seven percentage points to Sheldon Whitehouse, the state's Democratic attorney general.

In the other fierce primary battle for a Senate seat of 2006, Democratic senator Lieberman was challenged from the left for his continued support for the War in Iraq. This race shows a similar pattern. Challenger Ned Lamont, a millionaire

who largely self-funded his primary campaign, received PAC assistance only from liberal interests groups totaling about \$268,000, of which more than \$250,000 came from MoveOn.org. Senator Lieberman raised a smaller amount from liberal groups like the Human Rights Campaign and NARAL Pro-Choice America (\$74,000), but that total was augmented by about \$20,000 from conservative, pro-Israel groups, and over \$94,000 from PACs run by fellow Democratic politicians. In the end, however, the support from Democrats and the benefits of incumbency were not enough: Lamont won the primary by 3.6 percentage points. Party purity groups would have had their first scalp, but Senator Lieberman petitioned to run in the general election as an Independent and beat Lamont with the broader electorate by 10 points.

In 2008, however, party purity groups of both the right and the left would score victories—both in House primaries, and both in Maryland. In the Republican primary for Maryland's first House district, we see the pattern of party establishment support for the incumbent pitted against ideological interests continue. Incumbent Wayne Gilcrest gained almost \$224,000 from liberal group PACs—especially pro-environment organizations like the Humane Society, Council for a Livable World, Defenders of Wildlife Action, Friends of the Earth, and National Wildlife Action; as well as \$72,000 from big tent groups like the Republican Mainstreet Partnership PAC, Republican Majority for Choice, Republicans for Environmental Protection, and the Tuesday Group PAC. These sums are overwhelmed, however, by the roughly \$616,000 in support of challenger Andy Harris by conservative groups—again led by the Club for Growth, which spent in almost \$598,000 on his behalf. On Election Day, Gilcrest lost to Harris by 10 percentage points.

In Maryland's fourth district, the Democratic primary pitted incumbent Albert Wynn, whose voting record revealed a social-conservative streak, against second-time challenger Donna Edwards, whose campaign depended heavily on the support of liberal groups like the League of Conservation Voters, the Sierra Club, Emily's List, and, again, MoveOn.org. She gained no PAC support from Democratic officeholders. Wynn, in contrast, while garnering only modest support from liberal groups and some funds from pro-Israel organizations, received many more contributions from his fellow Democratic incumbents—especially from members of the Congressional Black Caucus. All told, 71% of these PAC donations came from sitting Democrats. Despite support from

his peers, he lost badly to Edwards by a margin of 22 points

## Political Consequences of Warning Shots and Sinkings

A few details emerge from these data. First, there is a partisan asymmetry: virtually no PACs are devoted to supporting conservative Democrats, while several organizations reliably coordinate to support moderate Republican incumbents. However, the importance of this asymmetry's impact can be overstated: in each of the three Republican races, these big tent PACs were easily outspent by the Club for Growth and other conservative organizations by 11 to 1 against Senator Specter, by almost 13 to 1 against Senator Chafee, and by more than 17 to 1 against Representative Gilcrest. Incumbents from *both* parties have depended on lopsided-to-unanimous support from party organizations and fellow office holders to match the dollars spent by these party purity groups.

Second, some ideological groups do display a willingness to give modest levels of support for incumbents of both parties—environmental groups do come to the aid of a pro-environment Republican like Gilcrest. Most ideological or issue groups are not striving solely for party purity. But while the Club for Growth and MoveOn.org may be rare, they are disproportionately influential. Even when combined with big tent groups, in no case have other ideological groups been able to come even close to matching the funds they provide to promote party purity (and these figures do not include their bundling of individual contributions, which easily outstrip the PAC sums discussed here).

And third, elements of party organizations and partisans in government have been almost unanimously supportive of their ideologically atypical colleagues running for reelection (at least in the primary). Competitive primaries, and even competitive primaries borne of intra-party ideological conflict, after all, are not new. In 1938, for example, President Roosevelt targeted conservative Democrats, mostly from Southern states, in an attempt to “purge” both chambers of lawmakers who had proven unsympathetic to his some of his later New Deal legislation. What does seem noteworthy about these recent races (and many more not included in the table for space considerations<sup>9</sup>) is that they illustrate the tension, and diverging interests, between the party establishment and party purity groups. Parties and elected officials are concerned with maintaining a big ideological tent, tend to grant individual members significant leeway in

responding to the ideological demands of their districts (Mayhew 1974, 99–100), seem more likely to recognize the need to compromise in a highly polarized system of checks and balances, and also perhaps fear that they too might one day become the target of an ideological purge sometimes unpredictably and arbitrarily applied (for a good discussion, see Bai 2003). Party purity groups, who believe that increasing party unity is strategically the best way to advancing their policy agenda, are unencumbered by such a panoply of concerns—especially when their home party is in the majority and they believe such a majority to be reasonably secure.<sup>10</sup> That a good portion of the partisan strife in Congress is occurring despite, rather than because of, the parties themselves is an underappreciated irony.

## Polarization in Congress

While polarization has been underway in the halls of Congress for decades (noted as early as 1991 by David Rohde), the ability of independent groups to launch credible challenges against incumbents deemed traitors to the ideological cause is fairly new. It would be a mistake to overstate their efforts in policing party loyalty as a longstanding cause of polarization in Congress. On the other hand, they do seem to be playing at least some role in *continuing* party polarization in recent years, though their impact is difficult to measure.

Identifying even secondary causes of polarization is important because its consequences appear profound and far-reaching. Some scholars, for example, argue that diverging parties have made the relationship between the executive and legislative branches highly contentious, especially under divided government, with a particularly deleterious effect on its capability to form timely and effective policy-based remedies (Sinclair 1997; 2000; Fleisher and Bond 2000). Others note that the minority party in the Senate, with the ability to stage filibusters and place holds to block majority initiatives, has become increasingly prone to utilize these techniques as their disagreement with majority party grows (Binder and Smith 1997; Sinclair 1997; 2000; Usulaner 2000). Former Republican National Committee chairman William E. Brock recently argued that party polarization is “dangerous, it's counterproductive and I think it represents an assault upon the constitutional premise of balance which has so graced the first two centuries of this republic . . . [It] can lead only to stalemate” (quoted as in Fiorina, Abrams,

and Pope 2005). Declaring Congress “the broken branch” of the federal government, Thomas Mann and Norm Ornstein (2006) believe the escalating partisan warfare, and members placing their party before the health of Congress as an institution, is weakening its place in the system of checks and balances.<sup>11</sup>

Party polarization appears to be changing not just the quality and quantity of legislative output in Congress, but the tone of political debate as well. Jamieson and Falk (2000) find a sharp recent increase in uncivil speech on the floor of the U.S. House requiring subsequent apology.

## Notes

\* The views expressed here are solely those of the author and do not represent the views of Senator Lieberman, any member of his staff, or the United States Senate.

1. The one exception to this is after redistricting, when incumbents are often pitted against each other.

2. This includes incumbent-versus-incumbent races common after redistricting. If these cases are dropped, the percentage of incumbents who lose in their primary falls to 0.6%. The corresponding statistics for senators are similar: of 392 reelection attempts, only four (or about 1%) have lost in their party primary.

3. Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s attempt to purge anti-New Deal senators and House Rules Committee in Democratic primaries is one notable historical exception to general trend.

4. There is also a possible fourth development, recent changes in the regime of campaign finance regulations encourages ideological groups to launch independent campaigns at election time, including their own radio and television commercials funded by their own base of donors. The Bi-

uslaner (2000) argues that while the Senate remains more civil than the House, it too has experienced a general decline in comity as the parties have polarized.

With these potential consequences of a polarized Congress in mind, the recent developments highlighted here are not cause for optimism. If successful, these types of campaigns take one of the most ostensibly moderate members of the targeted party’s caucus and replace them with a reliable ideologue; and whether their campaigns win or lose, they are sending a real, credible message that breaking with orthodoxy has very real, potentially costly

consequences. That groups like MoveOn.org and the Club for Growth can defeat the last vestiges of moderation in a polarized Congress, *despite* concerted efforts of party establishments is a demonstration of just how difficult it may be to slow the process of polarization once it begins.

And with victories in the Maryland House primaries, the Club for Growth and MoveOn.org each a scalp on the wall. Their hunger and ability to punish members for their perceived disloyalty seems only likely to grow for the near future.

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## Washington Insider

### Higher Education Act Reauthorization Enacted

After five years of discussions and extensions, Congress has passed and the president has signed the first reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) since 1998. Although most of the HEA deals with federal student aid, the legislation also includes many federal programs affecting colleges and universities, including support for international education and foreign language studies and graduate education. The new law also has a number of provisions reflecting some of the policy controversies affecting higher education.

### NARA to Open Personnel Files of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS)

The National Archives and Records Administration opened more than 35,000 official personnel files of men and women who served in the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), which was the U.S. wartime intelligence agency during World War II. The files cover civilian and military personnel who served and were later transferred, discharged, reassigned, or died while in service prior to 1947. These records are available for research in the textual research room at the National Archives II facility in College Park, Maryland.

### Smithsonian's American History Museum to Reopen Nov. 21

The Smithsonian's National Museum of American History will reopen its doors to the public on November 21, 2008. The reopening will mark the completion of a two-year, \$85 million renovation of the building's center core and internal infrastructure. The centerpiece of the renovation is a specially designed viewing gallery for the 200-year-old Star-Spangled Banner. The renovation was funded through a public-private partnership with \$46 million in federal funds and the remaining \$39 million from individuals, foundations and corporations.

Sources for the column include the Consortium of Social Science Associations' Washington Update and the National Coalition for History's Washington Update