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*Primary Divisiveness  
and  
General Election Success:  
A Re-examination*

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IS A CANDIDATE for elective office helped or harmed by a divisive primary election experience? The usual assumption is, of course, that the candidate's prospects are harmed because hotly contested primaries intensify the conflicts between different elements within the party. Such intraparty conflicts contribute to the loss of votes in the general election, for supporters of the loser either vote for the opposition or abstain from participating altogether. An abundant literature, both scholarly and journalistic, testifies to the destructiveness of divisive primary campaigns. The mood is well expressed by Theodore H. White:

Primaries suck up and waste large sums of money from contributors who might better be tapped for the November finals; the charges and countercharges of primary civil war provide the enemy party with ammunition it can later use with blast effect against whichever primary contender emerges victorious; primary campaigns exhaust the candidate, use up his speech material, drain his vital energy, leave him limp before he clashes with the major enemy.<sup>1</sup>

However, as it turns out, the main empirical studies on the subject have yielded mixed conclusions. Hacker, in an investigation

\* The authors wish to thank Michael Coveyou and anonymous reviewers for the *Journal of Politics* for their helpful comments.

<sup>1</sup> *The Making of the President, 1960* (New York: Atheneum, 1961), 78.

of gubernatorial and senatorial elections between 1956 and 1964, found that 70 percent of the senators and governors who were nominated in a "divisive" primary (one in which the winning candidate received less than 65 percent of the total votes cast) were defeated in the subsequent general election.<sup>2</sup> But when controls were introduced for incumbency, the level of interparty competition, and the primary experience of the opposition, the relationship disappeared. Hacker thus concluded that "a divisive primary, in and of itself, bears little relation to a candidate's prospects at the general election."<sup>3</sup>

Other writers have suggested different conclusions. Johnson and Gibson, for example, examined the impact of divisive primaries upon organizational activists and found that a significant proportion of the supporters of the primary loser wound up voting for the opposition in the fall.<sup>4</sup> More important, though, was their discovery that few of these activists could be remobilized to work for the party in the general election campaign. The implication of the study, then, was that divisive primaries are harmful to a candidate's chances in the general election because they weaken the organizational base of the party by discouraging potential activists.

Significant as these studies are, they do not answer one important question: What is the impact of a divisive primary upon a candidate's share of the general election vote? Hacker's strategy was to confine his attention to winning and losing. But under this strategy, the impacts of divisive primaries are unnoticed unless they are sufficient to alter the actual outcome of the general election. Since a disproportionate share of divisive primaries are fought over the right to carry the standard of the majority party in uncompetitive constituencies, it is probably often the case that divisiveness has impacts upon candidates' shares of the vote but not upon their chances of winning or losing. Johnson and Gibson, on the other hand, attempted to measure the impact of divisiveness upon the behavior of organizational activists associated with the primary loser. It is not clear, however, what consequences for the primary winner follow from the defections of such activists. Be-

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Hacker, "Does a Divisive Primary Harm a Candidate's Election Chances?" *American Political Science Review*, 59 (March 1965), 106.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>4</sup> Donald Johnson and James Gibson, "The Divisive Primary Revisited," *American Political Science Review*, 68 (March 1974), 67-77.

cause the number of such activists in relation to the electorate is usually small, their defection may not have a large impact upon the general election vote.

The point we wish to make is that it is premature to judge with any security the consequences of divisiveness until we attempt to measure its impact upon candidate shares of the vote in the general election. Briefly, this measurement is what we will attempt to accomplish in the present paper. Our hope, of course, is that by approaching the problem in this manner we will be able to nail down the nature of the relationship between primary divisiveness and general election success.

#### RESEARCH DESIGN: DATA, VARIABLES, AND METHODOLOGY

The data for this study were derived from an examination of some 1,386 major party gubernatorial primaries in all but the 11 southern states from 1903 to 1968. Elections in these southern states were not considered because the party systems in those states were highly uncompetitive in state-wide elections for the entire period under study.<sup>5</sup> Aside from these, the elections examined here represent virtually all gubernatorial primaries held in the United States up until 1968. Given the data base, the conclusions that emerge should be highly reliable.

For each of these primaries, we calculated a measure of divisiveness according to the following formula: take the first two finishers in a particular primary, calculate the difference in their proportions of the vote, and subtract this figure from 100. For example, in a primary in which the voting split was, say, 60 percent to 40 percent, the divisiveness index would be 80.0 (that is,  $100 - (60 - 40)$ ).<sup>6</sup> The assumption underlying the measure is obviously that the closer the primary, the more divisive it is for the party. In addition, we also calculated a nominal or categorical measure of divisiveness.

<sup>5</sup> The states not considered are: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. All other existing states were examined.

<sup>6</sup> The difference was subtracted from 100 so that the measure would make sense intuitively. Thus, the closer the score to 100, the more divisive the primary. The measure was first suggested by Joseph Schlesinger, *How They Became Governor* (East Lansing: The Michigan State University Press, 1957), 27.

According to this criterion, a primary was divisive if the difference between the winner and runner-up was less than 30 percentage points. For each primary winner, we also calculated the proportion of the total vote received in the general election, this total being, of course, our dependent variable.<sup>7</sup> In addition, we also recorded whether or not the candidate actually won the election. Thus, we have two measures of both primary divisiveness and general election success.

The strength of this relationship was measured in two different ways. First, like Hacker, we measured the relationship in terms of the categorical variables. Thus, we classified each primary as divisive or nondivisive and then calculated the proportion of candidates in each group who succeeded in winning the general election. Second, the strength of the relationship between the continuous measures was estimated through the use of regression analysis. This technique is useful for our purposes because a regression coefficient measures the average change in a dependent variable that is associated with a single unit change in a particular independent variable. In our analysis, then, regression coefficients will allow us to measure the impact of divisiveness upon candidates' shares of the vote in general elections. Finally, the relationships between the two variables were controlled for the effects of party, incumbency, and the level of interparty competition.

### RESULTS

Our findings support Hacker's conclusion that primary divisiveness has no systematic impact upon general election success. Table 1 shows the mean general election vote received by candidates with divisive and nondivisive primaries. Our definition of a divisive primary was one in which the difference between the winner and the runner-up was less than 30 percentage points. The figures suggest that candidates can expect just about the same general election vote regardless of the kind of primary campaign they experience. Thus, among Republicans, candidates who had divisive primaries received 50.7 percent of the vote in the general

<sup>7</sup> These data were taken from the compilations in Paul David, *Party Strength in the United States, 1872-1970* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1972).

election and candidates who had nondivisive primaries received 50.8 percent of the vote. Among Democrats, the corresponding figures were 45.0 and 44.9 percent of the general election vote. The Democratic averages were somewhat lower than those of the Republicans because we eliminated 11 southern states from our study, and these states have long been sources of Democratic strength and Republican weakness.

TABLE 1  
MEAN GENERAL ELECTION VOTE

	Type of Primary	
	Divisive	Nondivisive
Republicans	50.7	50.8
Democrats	45.0	44.9
	<i>N</i> = 652	<i>N</i> = 734

The above conclusions are reinforced when we regress the general election vote upon primary divisiveness. The results of this analysis are summarized in Table 2. We observe that the impact of primary divisiveness upon general election voting is almost nonexistent. The regression coefficients for Republican and Democratic candidates were .005 and .01 respectively. In each case, divisiveness accounts for less than one percent of the variation in candidate shares of the general election vote. Moreover, the signs of the coefficients are positive, whereas, given the hypothesis, we should have expected them to be negative. The relationship between the categorical measures is also insignificant. Thus, among Republicans, 60 percent of the candidates with divisive primaries won the general election while the corresponding figure for those with nondivisive primaries was 58 percent. Among Democrats, the figures were 38 percent and 39 percent respectively.

Does this weak relationship persist when we separate incumbent and nonincumbent gubernatorial candidates? Incumbents, of course, tend to have a number of electoral advantages over nonincumbents, and these may override any disadvantages they might suffer in the form of divisive primaries. Thus, the impact of divisiveness may be greater among nonincumbents. The figures in Table 3, however, suggest a different effect. Though the regression and correlation coefficients increase in size when we control for incumbency, they are still too small to warrant the conclusion that

TABLE 2

CONTINUOUS AND NOMINAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN PRIMARY  
DIVISIVENESS AND ELECTION SUCCESS

Party	$b^*$	$r$	$N$	Type of Primary	
				Divisive (Percentage Winning General Election)	Nondivisive General Election)
Republicans	.005 (.009)	.02	693	60 (339)	58 (354)
Democrats	.010 (.010)	.05	693	38 (313)	39 (380)

\* The  $b$ 's are regression coefficients and  $r$ 's are simple correlations. The figures in parentheses under the regression coefficients are standard errors. The figures in parentheses under the percentages are the  $N$ 's upon which percentages are based.

divisiveness has an impact upon general election success. In addition, it should be noted that the coefficients are negative for incumbents and positive for nonincumbents, a finding which suggests that nonincumbents actually benefit slightly from a divisive primary experience. This result is also reflected in the nominal relationships where it appears that nonincumbents' chances of winning the general election increase after a divisive primary while the chances of incumbents tend either to decline (in the case of Democrats) or to remain the same (in the case of Republicans). A possible explanation is that a divisive primary campaign may increase the visibility of nonincumbents vis-à-vis their opponents.

Finally, it is frequently suggested that divisiveness in primary campaigns has a greater impact upon general election races in competitive areas where voters have a viable option to the candidate they opposed in the primary. Attempting to test this proposition, we divided the states by levels of interparty competition and examined the relationships between divisiveness and general election success within each competitive grouping. For each election considered, states were classified as competitive, Republican dominant, or Democratic dominant according to the performances of the parties in the five gubernatorial elections prior to the one under consideration. A competitive setting was one in which both parties averaged between 45 and 55 percent of the vote in the previous five elections and each party had at least one victory. A dominant setting was one in which the dominant party either aver-

TABLE 3  
PRIMARY DIVISIVENESS AND GENERAL ELECTION SUCCESS  
CONTROLLED FOR INCUMBENCY

Incumbency Status	<i>b</i> <sup>a</sup>	<i>r</i>	<i>N</i>	Type of Primary	
				Divisive (Percentage Winning General Election)	Nondivisive
Incumbents					
Republicans	-.03 (.011)	-.11	209	75 (63)	74 (146)
Democrats	-.03 (.017)	-.15	153	54 (35)	67 (118)
Nonincumbents					
Republicans	.04 (.011)	.15	484	57 (276)	47 (208)
Democrats	.05 (.012)	.17	540	37 (278)	27 (262)

<sup>a</sup> The *b*'s are regression coefficients and *r*'s are simple correlations. The figures in parentheses under the regression coefficients are standard errors. The figures in parentheses under the percentages are the *N*'s upon which the percentages are based.

aged more than 55 percent of the vote or (if it averaged less than that) won all of the previous five contests. When the data was broken down into these categories, the regression and correlation coefficients remain quite small though they are for the most part negative. The largest correlations occur in competitive settings, a finding that reinforces the above hypothesis (see Table 4). In addition, candidates with divisive primaries are less likely to win in competitive states than are those candidates with nondivisive primaries. However, the regression coefficients here are sufficiently small ( $-.01$  for both Republicans and Democrats) to conclude that even in competitive settings, primary divisiveness has little impact upon voting in general elections.

#### SUMMARY

In this note, we attempted, by using both continuous and nominal measures of the variables, to assess the relationship between primary divisiveness and general election success. After examining nearly 1,400 gubernatorial primary elections, we were able to establish that primary divisiveness has no systematic impact upon



TABLE 4

PRIMARY DIVISIVENESS AND GENERAL ELECTION SUCCESS  
CONTROLLED FOR LEVEL OF PARTY COMPETITION

Party	Type of Primary					
	Competition	$b^a$	$r$	$N$	Divisive (Percentage Winning)	Nondivisive General Election)
Competitive States						
Republicans	-.01 (.003)	-.24	351		47 (166)	55 (185)
Democrats	-.01 (.003)	-.23	351		43 (161)	54 (190)
Republican States						
Republicans	.06 (.023)	.15	266		83 (143)	79 (123)
Democrats	-.09 (.025)	-.21	266		26 (100)	19 (166)
Democratic States						
Republicans	-.07 (.066)	-.12	76		39 (30)	27 (46)
Democrats	.04 (.068)	.07	76		67 (52)	70 (24)

\* The  $b$ 's are regression coefficients and  $r$ 's are simple correlations. The figures in parentheses under the regression coefficients are standard errors. The figures in parentheses under the percentages are the  $N$ 's upon which the percentages are based.

general election outcomes. Thus, a candidate's primary election experience bears little relationship to his success in the general election. This finding holds true regardless of the candidate's party, his incumbency status, or the level of party competition in his state.