District Conditions and Primary Divisiveness in Congressional Elections

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Divisive primaries have traditionally been considered indicators of party organizational weakness and they can have a negative effect on a candidate's prospects for winning the general election. Yet, their causes remain virtually unexplored. This study examines a number of factors that are believed to encourage the development of divisive nomination contests. The results demonstrate that demographic and geographic factors, the status of the seat, its partisan bias, state-level political opportunity structures, and party recruitment efforts influence the divisiveness of primaries for the U.S. House of Representatives. Some of these variables affect the two parties differently. Population diversity is found to be a major cause of divisive primaries in the Democratic party and to have no effect on Republican contests, while political opportunity structures have an effect on Republican primaries but not Democratic contests. The findings demonstrate that at least part of the explanation for the divisiveness of congressional nomination contests lies in the characteristics of congressional districts themselves.

Most states use primary elections to select their congressional candidates. The competitiveness of these contests can vary greatly. At one extreme are nearly-invisible, single-candidate affairs that conclude with primary voters awarding their party' s nomination on the basis of a widely shared consensus. At the other extreme are highly publicized, divisive fights that include over a dozen candidates who battle one another for the party label. Divisive nomination contests are an indicator of a party' s seeming inability to contain conflict among its constituent groups. Divisive primaries may result from tensions that exist among factions within a party, but these contests can also lead to the creation of new tensions. Divisive primaries are believed to harm a candidate's prospects in the general election because the hard feelings that supporters of losing

NOTE: We thank Greg Caldeira, Patrick Kenney, David R. Mayhew, Pat Patterson, Walter Stone, Eric Uslaner, and J. Mark Wrighton for helpful comments and suggestions. Thanks also to our skilled research assistants: Kirsten Andersen, Steve Boyenger, David Cantor, and Kathryn Doherty.

candidates develop harm the party's ability to unify behind their standard-bearer (Hacker 1965; Bernstein 1977; Jewell and Olson 1978: ch.4; Lengle 1980; Comer 1976; Born 1981; Stone 1984; Kenney and Rice 1987; but see Piereson and Smith 1975).[1]

Divisive primaries have usually been considered an indicator of party weakness (Key 1964; Epstein 1986; Mayhew 1986). Strong political parties have historically exercised substantial control over the nomination process and enjoyed stable foundations of electoral support. The ability to rely on a predictably supportive electorate frees party leaders of the "intolerable burden" of having to mobilize a full majority of voters to support their party' s candidates in every campaign (Sorauf 1968: 131). It allows party leaders to focus on other activities, including the selection of their party's nominee for Congress.

Although many studies have examined the impact that divisive primaries have on general elections, the issue of what causes divisive primaries in the first place has been virtually unexplored. At the individual level, the decision to run for public office is affected by personal considerations, political experience, career aspirations, and a variety of idiosyncratic factors. Whether or not an incumbent intends to run for reelection, the competitiveness of the district, the likely field of primary candidates, and the intervention of a party leader have also been found to be important (Rohde 1979; Kazee 1980; Maisel 1982; Herrnson 1988; Fowler and McClure 1989; Banks and Kiewiet 1989; Canon 1990; Maisel et al. 1990).

Once one looks beyond the factors that influence individual decisions, and examines patterns of primary competition over time, it becomes apparent that some congressional districts consistently host more divisive primaries than others. This suggests that at least part of the explanation for the divisiveness of congressional nomination contests lies in the characteristics of congressional districts. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact that district-level factors have on the structure of competition in nomination contests for the U.S. House of Representatives.

Data and Methods

Primary competition is believed to be the product of forces similar to those that lead to competition in general elections. Patterson and Caldeira (1984) classify these forces into four broad categories: socio-demographic influences, urbanization, diversity, and party organizational strength. They find a number of these factors to be systematically related to competition in statewide general elections. We add a fifth category to this framework: state-level political oppor-

[1] Born (1981), it should be noted, finds that divisive primaries are generally harmful to incumbents, but not to challengers.

tunity structures. Our analysis uses party, population diversity, urbanization, population stability, region, the status of the seat, the partisan bias of the district, the type of nomination system employed (primary or caucus), the ratio of seats in the state legislature to U.S. House seats, the timing of state elections (presidential or nonpresidential election year), and party recruitment efforts to predict primary divisiveness in congressional elections.[2] Ordinary least squares regression is used to assess the influence that these factors have on congressional primaries.

We utilize four sources of data to predict the divisiveness of congressional primaries: records for the number of candidates seeking their party's congressional nomination in the 1984 election cycle and the winner's share of the primary vote, election results for the 1982 and 1984 elections, population data collected by the U.S. Bureau of the Census in 1980, and data from a campaign survey that records party recruitment efforts in the 1984 congressional elections. (More information about the data is presented in the Appendix.)

Crowded Primaries and Primary Divisiveness

We use two measures to evaluate contested primaries. The first is based simply on the number of contestants in a congressional primary. The question—Do certain types of districts field more candidates than others? —makes for a very straightforward choice of a dependent variable. However, because the data are highly skewed the number of candidates is logged (see Tufte 1974). The second measure more accurately measures primary divisiveness because it discounts the effects of frivolous candidates who win trivial shares of the vote (Rae and Taylor 1970; Mayhew 1986; see also Ware 1979). It is defined as follows:

$$1-\Sigma p_i^2$$

where:

P_i = proportion of the primary vote won by the i^{th} candidate.

It is important to note that the two dependent variables are not perfectly related. Primaries can have many candidates and score low on the measure of divisiveness if they are lopsided affairs that pit two or more inconsequential candidates against a highly qualified candidate who wins the vast majority of the vote. A primary that features several candidates who divide the vote roughly equally will score highly on the divisiveness measure. These primaries usually have several experienced or well-known candidates competing for the nomination.

[2] Following the suggestion of one of the reviewers, we tested the impact of seniority which turned out to have no significant impact on either the number of candidates or the divisiveness of congressional primaries. We suspect this lack of significance is the result of the strong correlation between incumbency and seniority ($r = .62$, $p < .01$ for Democrats) ($r = .70$, $p < .01$ for Republicans).

Party

Democratic party primaries are expected to be more divisive than those held by the Republican party. The Democratic party is the more inclusive of the United States' two major parties. It represents a broader array of racial, ethnic, religious, and economic groups than does the GOP. It also has a larger, more diverse candidate pool from which to draw congressional nominees. Moreover, the Democratic party' s diversity has historically made it difficult for the party to contain conflicts that arise among its many constituent groups. Although factions and their leaders vie for power within both parties, the greater diversity of the Democratic party leads to the prediction that its congressional primaries will have more contestants and be more divisive than GOP nominating contests.

Demography, Geography, and Population Mobility

Individuals residing in districts that are heterogeneous are, by definition, likely to have less in common with one another than individuals who live in homogeneous districts. Persons who do not share racial or ethnic characteristics, and have disparate amounts of wealth, different occupations, and unequal levels of educational attainment are unlikely to possess the same values and aspirations. They probably also possess dissimilar views about politics. As James Madison argues in Federalist No. 10, a population that has many interests is likely to break into many disparate factions, each with its own political leadership. A population of individuals who possess many shared background characteristics, on the other hand, should more easily unite behind one political cause. Their common experiences lead to consensus on most political matters, including who should be their party's candidate for Congress (Dahl 1956; Davidson 1969; Rae and Taylor 1970; Sullivan 1973; Fiorina 1974; Fenno 1978; Bond 1983). For this reason, we expect primary contests held in homogeneous districts to be less crowded than those held in districts in which people share few politically relevant traits.

District population diversity is measured using an index developed by Lieberson (1969) and applied to the study of electoral politics by Sullivan (1973) and Bond (1983). The formula for the index is:

$$A_w = 1 - \sum_{j=1}^{v} \sum_{k=1}^{Pj} \frac{Y_{kj}^2}{P_j}$$

where:

$$\sum_{k=1}^{Pj} Y_{kj} = 1$$

A_w = index of heterogeneity within the district,
V = number of variables,

P_j = number of categories of the j^{th} variable,
Y_{kj} = proportion of the population within a given demographic category for the j^{th} variable.

The index can be conceptualized as an expression of probability: "If an infinite number of pairs were selected randomly from a finite population, the average proportion of unshared characteristics would be A_w" (Sullivan 1973). Lower values indicate the presence of more shared traits (less diversity) and higher values indicate fewer shared traits (more diversity). The diversity index is constructed using four variables thought to play an important role in partisan electoral politics: education, income, occupation, and race.[3]

The composition of congressional districts ranges from very homogeneous to extremely diverse. The most heterogeneous districts tend to be located in the largest, most urban states. Seventy-two percent of California's districts, for example, ranked among the most diverse one-third of all congressional districts in 1984. The most heterogeneous district, California's 31st, which was represented by Rep. Mervyn Dymally, included parts of south-central Los Angeles and contained a mixture of racial groups, including blacks, Mexicans, Asians, and whites (see e.g. , Barone and Ujifusa 1986). Former California Rep. Barbara Boxer's 6th district is the runner-up. At the time, it included Marin County, the southern part of Sonoma County, the working class port of Vallejo, and parts of San Francisco. The most homogeneous congressional districts, in contrast, were located mostly in rural states. All of Iowa's congressional districts, for example, are classified among the most homogeneous one-third.

Of course, exceptions to these generalizations exist. A few mostly rural states have heterogeneous congressional districts. All three of New Mexico's districts rank in the top third. Rural districts with diverse populations typically have significant Mexican-American populations; several are located in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and southern California.

Urbanization, measured as the percentage of the district living in an urban area, is expected to contribute to primary divisiveness because population density and the variety of metropolitan life, are believed to provide candidates with many electoral bases from which to launch bids for Congress. The daily interaction candidates have with their fellow citizens offers social and economic

[3] The categories for the variables included in the diversity index are: Race = black, white, Native American, Asian, and Hispanic; Education = less than high school, high school, some college, and college graduate; Income = under $10,000, $10–20,000, $20–45,000, and above $45,000; Occupation = executive/administrative, professional specialty, technician, sales, administrative support, private household, protective service, other service, farming precision craft, machine operator, transportation, handler and laborer.

leaders opportunities to organize support for their political aspirations at relatively low cost. Their counterparts in rural communities lack these opportunities (Key 1964; Black 1974; Dahl and Tufte 1973; but see Patterson and Caldeira 1984). This suggests that the number of individuals who contest congressional primaries in urban areas should be greater than in rural ones.

Districts that experience significant change due to population shifts are likely to have more divisive primaries. The migration of new voters, who do not share the political loyalties and experiences of those who preceded them, can result in greater political uncertainty for politicians and party elites. Incumbents must increase their efforts to identify new pockets of electoral support and assemble new electoral coalitions. Challengers, and other less-established politicians, on the other hand, are presented with greater opportunities in districts experiencing demographic change. This suggests that districts that have experienced the greatest population change should host the most divisive primaries. Migration is quantified as the percentage of the population not born in the congressional district in which they currently reside.

While politics in the United States have become more nationalized with time (Lunch 1987), cultural variations persist across regions. Southern political culture is especially noteworthy. For decades, Democratic party dominance ensured that Democratic primaries would be marked by fierce competition (Key 1949; Sindler 1955). More recently, increased support for Republican candidates has been unmatched by a corresponding strengthening of local Republican party organizations. This has resulted in a measure of Republican primary divisiveness. It is doubtful that southern Democrats will continue to have the same abundance of contested primaries that Key (1949) observed in the mid-twentieth century. It is also unlikely that southern Republicans will hold primaries that are as divisive as those held by their Democratic counterparts. Nevertheless, we believe that primary divisiveness will continue to vary systematically by region. The traditional party organization (Mayhew 1986) states of the Northeast, for example, are expected to have fewer divisive primaries than those in other regions.[4]

Primary Type and District Voting History

The status of the seat being sought plays a major role in the strategic calculations of potential congressional candidates. Perhaps the most obvious disincentive

[4] The regional divisions are those used by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. The northeastern states are ME, NH, MA, CT, VT, NY, PA, RI, NJ; the southern states are TX, OK, LA, AR, MS, AL, GA, FL, SC, NC, TN, KY, WV, VA, MD, DE; the western states are AK, HI, WA, OR, CA, NV, ID, UT, AZ, NM, CO, WY, MT; and the Midwestern states are ND, SD, NE, KS, MN, IA, MO, WI, IL, IN, OH, MI. The Midwest serves as the baseline in the regression equation.

to entering a primary is the presence of an incumbent seeking reelection (Grau 1981; Rice 1985). Incumbents have high reelection rates in both primaries and general elections. The advantages of incumbency easily discourage potential challengers, especially those who have previous political experience (Banks and Kiewiet 1989). Challenge primaries, which require a nonincumbent to wrest the nomination away from an incumbent, should have the fewest contestants and be the least divisive. They offer the lowest probability for success and have the potential to harm a challenger's political career because that person risks alienating party activists who support the incumbent. Opposing-incumbent primaries, which occur when an incumbent of the opposite party is pursuing reelection, should have an intermediate number of contestants and a moderate level of divisiveness. These primaries are less likely to alienate party activists, offer more reasonable odds of winning the nomination, and occasionally result in the nominee winning the general election. So the open-seat primaries should act like magnets, drawing large numbers of candidates, including experienced politicians who have harbored congressional aspirations for many years as well as political novices.[5] The presence of several experienced politicians should result in these contests being the most divisive. The logic behind these predictions is straightforward: politicians, particularly those who are strategic, calculate the opportunities and costs of running for office under particular circumstances; they run when the opportunities for political advancement are high and costs of failure are low.

District voting history is another factor that should influence the calculations of prospective candidates, particularly those who think strategically. Individuals should be discouraged from running for seats that have histories of lopsided elections, particularly when a popular incumbent is running for reelection. We hypothesize that primaries for both parties held in districts that strongly favor one party will be less heavily contested than others. Partisan bias is operationalized as the percentage of the vote the Democratic party received in the previous congressional election.[6]

[5] Opposing incumbent primaries serve as the baseline in the regression equation.

[6] Scholars have advocated a variety of measures of competitiveness and partisanship, including the percent of the vote carried by the party's presidential candidate in the previous election and an index that averages the percentage of the vote received in several congressional elections. Although the index is the most desirable measure, we are limited to the congressional vote cast in the preceding election because redistricting changed the shape of most House districts after the 1980 election. The changes in the districts make it impossible accurately to average (or compare) congressional and presidential votes that were cast in 1980 with those that were cast in 1984 or 1982.

State-Level Political Opportunity Structures

State-level political opportunity structures are expected to influence the decisions of prospective congressional candidates. Foremost among these are factors that influence the size of the pool of potential candidates and the number of outlets available for the pursuit of congressional aspirations. State legislatures have traditionally been the source of most congressional candidates. Opportunities for a candidate to advance to the House are directly limited by the number of congressional seats. Thus, the ratio of seats in a state's legislature to U.S. House seats in that state is expected to be positively related to primary divisiveness. States that have large state legislatures and few House seats should host more divisive primaries because their institutional structure combines to produce an abundance of potential candidates and an extremely limited number of outlets for their ambitions. States with relatively small legislatures and larger House delegations, on the other hand, should have less divisive primaries.

Given that most politicians strategically weigh the costs and benefits associated with a bid for higher office, we expect the timing of state legislative elections to affect the number of candidates who run for Congress. States that hold their state Senate elections quadrennially and during presidential election years are expected to host less divisive primaries than those that hold them in off years because state legislators in the former group of states risk losing their statehouse seats when they run for Congress, while those in the latter group do not.[7]

Party Influence

Finally, party organizations can influence the structure of competition in congressional primaries. Political reforms have deprived party organizations of the ability to handpick their nominees, but they do not prohibit party leaders from influencing congressional nominations. Party leaders can influence the decisions of prospective candidates, and the divisiveness of congressional nominations, through the rules that govern the candidate-selection process or through undertaking efforts to recruit candidates.

The type of selection method used and the laws governing pre-primary endorsements can influence the divisiveness of congressional nominations (Jewell 1984; Jewell and Olson 1978). Primary and caucus selection methods make different demands on candidates. Primaries require candidates to amass the resources needed to communicate to party registrants, and in some cases independents, in order to get out the vote. Caucuses, on the other hand, tend

[7] States that hold elections for their upper chamber in presidential years are coded 1 and all others are coded 0.

to be dominated by party activists. Caucuses place more emphasis on candidates' abilities to persuade groups of political elites, often in private meetings, to support their candidacy and encourage their political allies to do likewise. The former method requires that candidates for the nomination focus on voter outreach tactics like those used in the general election, while the latter requires a greater focus on building elite coalitions. We expect that caucuses will prove to be less divisive than primaries because primaries are the more open and participatory of the two selection methods, and they do not require as much coalition-building among party elites.[8]

Candidate recruitment, which includes undertaking efforts to persuade some candidates to run while working to dissuade others, is an activity traditionally associated with strong party organizations. Local party committees have historically played the largest role in candidate recruitment for local office, but in some states they devoted little effort to recruiting congressional candidates. State and national party committees historically played an even lesser role, leading political scientists to conclude that congressional candidates are primarily self-starters (see, e.g., American Political Science Association 1950).

During the 1980s, national party organizations, particularly the Democratic and Republican congressional campaign committees, began to play a highly visible and somewhat controversial role in candidate recruitment. Some of this activity is designed to encourage candidates to run for Congress, but some of it—labeled "negative recruitment"—was aimed at discouraging them from running (Herrnson 1988). Most party recruitment efforts, both "positive" and "negative," occur in competitive districts. We predict that party recruitment activity in a district will be negatively related to primary divisiveness.

The effects of congressional campaign committee, state committee, and local committee recruitment activities were measured using survey questions that asked congressional candidates and their campaign staffs to evaluate the importance that party activities had on the candidate's decision to run for Congress. Their answers were recorded on a five-point scale (1 = not important, 5 = extremely important). The recruitment variables directly measure the positive efforts that party organizations undertake to encourage prospective candidates to run for Congress and indirectly measure the efforts of party committees to prevent the occurrence of contested primaries. This is because party committees practice both positive and negative recruitment in the same set of districts—those which are expected to be closely contested during the general election.[9]

[8] States that hold caucuses are coded 1 and states that hold primaries are coded 0.

[9] The recruitment variables enable us directly to assess the positive effects of party activity on the candidacy decisions of the parties' nominees and to estimate the negative effects of party activity on other politicians. While these measures are not perfect, they are more

Findings

Not surprisingly, party affiliation has a major impact on the number of candidates entering primaries. The crosstabulation in Table 1 demonstrates that the Democratic party hosts significantly more contested primaries than does the GOP. Moreover, Democratic contested primaries attract greater numbers of candidates than do contested Republican primaries. This finding reflects the different challenges the two parties face in the area of candidate recruitment. For the Republicans, who have fewer individuals serving in state legislatures and are generally considered to have a thinner farm team (see, e.g., Ehrenhalt 1991), the major challenge is to persuade talented individuals to sacrifice their professional careers and personal lives to run for Congress. For the Democrats, who have no shortage of individuals with congressional aspirations, the major challenge is to select one candidate from among many whom party identifiers will support in the general election.

The multivariate models in Table 2 further support the contention that different dynamics are at work in Democratic and Republican congressional primaries. The first pair of equations predicts the number of candidates who

Table 1

Party Affiliation and the Number of Candidates Contesting Congressional Primaries

Number of Candidates	Party of Candidate	
	Democrat	Republican
One	41.1% (79)	62.0% (114)
Two	30.2% (58)	22.8% (42)
Three or More	28.6% (55)	15.2% (28)
$X^2 = 17.5$		
$p < .0002$		
$df = 2$		
$N = 376$		

appropriate than measures recording local or state party leaders, assessments of their organization's strength (see, e.g., Cotter et al. 1988) for a number of reasons, two of which deserve mention. First, the data used here match the year and unit of analysis under study—the congressional district in 1984. Data collected from party leaders are inappropriate because the organizations they head compete in jurisdictions that rarely match congressional districts. Second, the data used here focus directly on the activity of particular interest, are not contaminated by the over-reporting of party officials, and enable us to examine the recruitment efforts of different party organizations separately.

Table 2

DISTRICT LEVEL INFLUENCES ON THE COMPETITIVENESS OF CONGRESSIONAL PRIMARIES

	Number of Candidates		Divisiveness	
	DEMOCRATS	REPUBLICANS	DEMOCRATS	REPUBLICANS
DEMOGRAPHY AND GEOGRAPHY				
Population Diversity	3.14**	−.51	1.40**	.08
	(1.29)	(1.12)	(.56)	(.52)
% Urban	−.0004	.003**	.0001	.0005
	(.001)	(.001)	(.0006)	(.0006)
% Migrants	.005	−.003	.0002	.001
	(.004)	(.003)	(.001)	(.002)
South	−.30***	−.14	−.04	−.03
	(.11)	(.09)	(.05)	(.04)
Northeast	.04	−.10	.06	.03
	(.11)	(.10)	(.05)	(.05)
West	−.33***	.16	−.08	.009
	(.13)	(.12)	(.06)	(.05)
PRIMARY TYPE AND DISTRICT VOTING HISTORY				
Challenge Primary	−.11	−.42****	−.22****	−.16****
	(.10)	(.09)	(.04)	(.04)
Open Primary	.61****	.92****	.13**	.30****
	(.14)	(.13)	(.06)	(.06)
Partisan Bias	−.002	−.005**	.0009	−.002*
	(.0025)	(.002)	(.001)	(.001)
STATE POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY				
Candidate Pool	.0005	.004**	.0003	.0006
	(.002)	(.0015)	(.0007)	(.0007)
On Year Elections	.12	−.17*	.06	−.03
	(.10)	(.09)	(.05)	(.04)
PARTY INFLUENCE				
Pre-primary				
Endorsements	−.36***	−.26***	−.20****	−.16****
	(.11)	(.10)	(.05)	(.05)
Caucus State	−.34**	.07	−.27****	−.18**
	(.17)	(.16)	(.08)	(.08)
Local Recruitment	.03	−.01	.009	.001
	(.03)	(.02)	(.01)	(.01)
Cong. Camp. Committee	−.08**	−.03	−.03**	−.02**
Recruitment	(.03)	(.02)	(.02)	(.01)
Constant	−.60	1.10	−.46	.22
R^2	.30	.48	.36	.36
N	186	178	186	178

* $p < .10$ ** $p < .05$ *** $p < .01$ **** $p < .001$

choose to enter a congressional primary. The second pair predicts the level of primary divisiveness. Most of the coefficients in both equations are in their expected directions. Differences in the sizes and levels of significance indicate that district conditions affect the two parties differently.

Demographic and geographic factors clearly play a bigger role in Democratic than Republican districts. Population diversity, for example, increases both the number of candidates in Democratic primaries and the divisiveness of those contests. Yet, it has no impact on the Republicans. These differences reflect the Democratic party's more diverse candidate pool and broader base of electoral support. The Democrats are apt to field more viable minority candidates and are more likely to win heterogeneous congressional districts, especially those comprised of the aged, the poor, African-Americans, or Hispanics. The Democrats are as successful as the Republicans in winning homogeneous, rural districts, and suburban seats (Pitney 1992).

Region has a significant impact on the number of candidates running in Democratic but not Republican nominating contests. Democratic primaries held in southern and western states attract fewer candidates than those in other parts of the country. Nevertheless, these contests are no less divisive than those held elsewhere. This indicates that the crowded Democratic nominating contests that occur in nonsouthern and nonwestern states tend to feature several weak candidates and one candidate who wins by a large majority. The overall absence of regional effects on primary divisiveness is somewhat surprising. These findings suggest a uniformity in the incapacity of local party organizations to influence the number of candidates who run for Congress.

Although cities are politically more diverse, the effect of urbanization on contested primaries is negligible. The percentage of the district that resides in an urban area has no significant impact on the number of candidates who run in Democratic primaries and only a small impact on the number who run in Republican contests.[10] Moreover, urbanization has no impact on the divisiveness of either party's nominating contests. This result, coupled with the finding for population diversity, provides an important explanation for the high incidence of divisive primaries in cities: district heterogeneity rather than population density is the major geodemographic cause of contested primaries in urban areas.

[10] The percentage of the district that resides in urban areas is related to the number of congressional candidates (for Democrats $r = .14$; for Republicans $r = .15$), however, the modest effects of this variable disappear once the other variables are included in the model. Multicollinearity between population diversity and urbanization accounts for some of the diminished effects of urbanization (for Democrats $r = .41$, $p < .01$; for Republicans $r = .49$, $p < .01$). Similarly, population diversity and population migration are related (for Democrats $r = .23$, $p < .01$; for Republicans $r = .24$, $p < .01$).

The status of the seat has a substantial impact on the number of contestants in both Democratic and Republican primaries. Open seats attract the most candidates and host the most divisive nominating contests. Generally, this evidence supports the generalization that experienced "strategic" politicians usually wait for a seat to become open before running for Congress. Interestingly, Republican open seats attract slightly more candidates than Democratic open seats. The results for the number of candidates who enter challenge primaries demonstrate that many Democrats are unintimidated by the presence of a Democratic incumbent. In fact, they are as likely to challenge a member of their party for the nomination as they are to run in a primary for a seat that is being defended by a Republican. Republican politicians, by contrast, shy away from challenging GOP incumbents. Nevertheless, both parties' challenge primaries are significantly less divisive than their open and incumbent-opposing nomination contests, suggesting that most of the nonincumbents in challenge primaries are weak contestants.

The partisan bias of the district has a significant impact only on Republican primaries. For potential Republican challengers, a lopsided Democratic victory in the previous election signals that the opposing party has firm control of the district and the odds of winning the seat are slim. This discourages Republicans from running for the seat and, in turn, depresses the divisiveness of Republican primary contests. A large Democratic margin in the previous election, however, does little to discourage Democrats from running for the nomination. Lopsided Democratic margins in past races do not reduce the divisiveness of Democratic primary contests either. Democrats do not hesitate to run in districts that favor their party, including those in which a Democratic incumbent is seeking reelection. Apparently, they recognize that should they capture the nomination they have excellent chances of winning the general election.

State-level political opportunity structures also have an uneven effect on the parties. The ratio of state legislative seats to House seats has a positive impact on the number of Republicans running for Congress. Similarly, Republican primaries in states holding their major statewide elections in presidential election years attract fewer candidates and are slightly less divisive than are primaries in states that hold their legislative elections in off years. The fact that Republican politicians are more likely than Democrats to respond to state-level political opportunity structures suggest that members of the GOP, particularly those who are likely to garner a significant portion of the primary vote, are more cautious than Democrats when deciding whether or not run for Congress.

Despite reforms deliberately designed to weaken party organizations, and systemic changes that have led to the erosion of their electoral coalitions, political parties continue to have some impact on candidate selection. The method of selection has a significant impact on Democratic but not GOP nominating

contests. Democratic primaries are more heavily contested than caucuses, but there is no difference for the Republicans. Pre-primary endorsements serve as a significant deterrent to would-be congressional candidates of both parties. They provide a signal to those pondering a bid for Congress that they will meet organized opposition should they decide to cast their hats into the ring. Endorsements do appear to be a slightly stronger deterrent to Democratic entrance into primaries than to Republican.

The effects of candidate recruitment activities vary by party and the level of party organization involved. Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) efforts serve to discourage would-be congressional candidates. The results show that the more involved the DCCC is in candidate recruitment in a particular district, the fewer candidates are likely to run in its congressional primary. While National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) activity does not discourage candidates from contesting the nomination, the candidate recruitment activity of both parties, congressional campaign committees depresses the divisiveness of House primaries. One of the most important effects of campaign committee recruitment activity is that it winnows the field of qualified candidates so that primaries are won decisively. A landslide victory enables party members to unify behind the winner of the primary. Local party recruitment efforts, however, have no discernible influence on the number of candidates who enter the congressional primaries of either party. Their influence in the candidate recruitment process has clearly declined since their heyday at the turn of the twentieth century.

Finally, it should be noted that the models fit extremely well considering the impossibility of including many of the factors that influence individual candidates' decisions to run for office. Over one-third of the variation in primary divisiveness can be explained by district-level variables. Family, friends, and career concerns all have an impact on these decisions, but it is impossible to include these individual-level variables in models that use the congressional district as the unit of analysis. Rather, the results show the importance of district-level and institutional variables, which are more persistent than the idiosyncratic decisions of individual candidates.

Conclusion

Nomination contests reflect the underlying strength of electoral alignments and the strength and cohesiveness of party organizations. They also play a critical role in determining who wins a seat in Congress. They determine who the general election candidates will be and they affect a party's ability to unite behind its candidates and campaign for them in the general election. The most important determinant of a congressional nomination contest is who decides to run. This study demonstrates that both the number of candidates who run for a party's

nomination for Congress and the divisiveness of those contests are influenced by a variety of factors. Demography, geography, the partisan bias of the district, and the structure of political opportunities that exist in the state comprise a relatively stable set of forces that are beyond the control of individual political elites. The status of a congressional seat and party recruitment efforts, however, are less enduring and more subject to elite influence. When candidates decide whether or not to run for Congress they consider both sets of forces. Generally, the most divisive primaries take place for open-seat races, in caucus states, and in districts in which parties do not actively winnow the field of candidates.

The findings also show that Democratic and Republican primaries have different dynamics. The one-sided effects of geography and demography, for example, reflect the fundamental dissimilarities in the constituencies of the two parties. Democrats rely on a more diverse collection of groups than do Republicans. Blacks, Jews, Catholics, members of ethnic groups, the aged, the poor, urban residents, liberals, and trade union members form the core of the Democratic coalition. These groups provide the foundation for Democratic election victories, but tensions among them result in a larger and more diverse group of candidates running for Democratic than for Republican congressional nominations.

State-level political opportunity structures, on the other hand, have a significant impact on the divisiveness of Republican but not Democratic primary contests. Republicans, who occupy fewer positions of power in state governments and have a shallower congressional farm team, appear to be more risk-averse. This results in the Republican party hosting fewer divisive primaries in those states.

This study does not address whether district conditions or primary divisiveness affect party success in the general election, but it suggests that there is a link between these phenomena. Population diversity, for instance, may be an important foundation for Democratic victories in congressional elections. A candidate emerging victorious from a party primary in which many voices were heard may be a more attractive candidate to the general electorate than a candidate who wins a majority from a more homogeneous primary electorate. If further research demonstrates that district conditions do indeed contribute to Democratic congressional victories, then divisive primaries may actually be more an indicator of party strength than weakness. While this is only speculation, the findings of this study demonstrate that district conditions have an important effect on congressional primaries.

Appendix

The variables used to measure population diversity were created using information from data files prepared by the U.S. Bureau of the Census in accordance with its 1980 census. These individual-level data were aggregated within

the boundaries that define the 1984 congressional districts so that the population diversity of each district could be determined. The resulting data were merged with data files that record information about the number of candidates seeking their party's nomination in each congressional district during the 1984 elections, survey data that measure party candidate recruitment efforts in those elections, and general election results for the 1982 and 1984 elections. The sample consists of a total of 376 observations; one observation for every congressional primary for which survey data are available.

The survey data were collected using a questionnaire that was mailed to the campaign headquarters of every major House candidate facing major party opposition in the 1984 general election. Candidates and their political aides were asked, among other things, about the candidate recruitment activities of party organizations, unions, and other interest groups. The questionnaire design and the timing of its mailing were carefully planned to insure a large and representative sample, producing a response rate of 52 percent. The sample mirrored the underlying population of House candidates on such key variables as party affiliation, candidate status, and election outcome. For more information about the questionnaire and the sample see the appendixes in Herrnson (1988).

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Received: June 2, 1993
Accepted for Publication: February 7, 1994
Political Research Quarterly, Vol. 48, No. 1 (March 1995), pp. 117–134