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The Effect of Primary Divisiveness in Gubernatorial and Senatorial Elections

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This study examines the relationship between primary divisiveness and general election results in gubernatorial and senatorial elections. Previous work in this area has been unable to substantiate this relationship. However, these inconclusive results may be due in part to conceptual and methodological shortcomings. We attempt to avoid such pitfalls in an effort to test the divisive primary hypothesis more effectively. Our study, which analyzes separately gubernatorial and senatorial elections, reveals that a divisive primary adversely affects a party's chance for general election victory. Curiously, the analysis also demonstrates that divisive primaries disadvantage senatorial candidates more than gubernatorial candidates, and Democrats more than Republicans.

One of the most interesting, and certainly one of the most important debates surrounding the use of the direct primary has concerned the effect of a divisive primary on general election outcomes. There is a widespread belief among political observers that a hard fought primary battle is detrimental to a party's chances for victory in the fall election. Indeed, this reasoning has intuitive appeal. Supporters disillusioned by their candidate's defeat in the primary may abstain from voting for their party's nominee in the November contest. This reasoning, then, suggests a direct relationship between primary competitiveness and general election voting.

* The names of the authors appear in alphabetical order and imply that this paper is in every way a collaborative enterprise. We wish to thank Gregory A. Caldeira for his assistance in preparing this manuscript, and three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

Six scholarly studies have tested for this relationship using aggregate election data (Hacker, 1965; Piereson and Smith, 1975; Bernstein, 1977; Reiter, 1979; Lingle, 1980; and Born, 1981). The results are mixed, leaving it unclear whether a primary battle will adversely affect a candidate's fortunes in the fall election. Moreover, specific criticisms can be leveled at each of these studies, adding to the uncertainty of the divisive primary hypothesis.

The first of these criticisms stems from the dichotomous measurement of primary divisiveness and general election outcomes. Hacker (1965) specified a divisive primary as one in which the winner received less than 65 percent of the total vote, while Bernstein (1977) and Lingle (1980) call a divisive primary one where the winner bested the nearest opponent by less than 20 percent. All three of these studies measure general election outcomes simply according to winners and losers. The dichotomous coding of these variables makes it "unable to specify the severity of primary conflict and the margin of general election success or failure" (Born, 1981, p. 642). Also, because these studies use crosstabular analyses, when controls are added (e.g., incumbency) the number of cases in certain cells become disturbingly small, making firm conclusions dangerous.

The second shortcoming, found in the studies by Piereson and Smith (1975) and Reiter (1979), is the examination of only one candidate's primary. This method clearly fails to take into account any impact an opponent's primary, or lack of primary, might have on the November result. After all, the fall vote will not be influenced by just one candidate's primary.

The third criticism concerns the causal connection between primary divisiveness and the general election vote. All of the works cited above assume only one-way causation: primary results influence November outcomes. Yet as Born (1981) recognizes, the causal relationship may be somewhat reciprocal. That is, candidates' decisions to enter prenomination struggles might be influenced by their preconceived chances for general election victory. For example, if prospective Democratic candidates anticipate a Democratic landslide in the fall, a large number of them may enter the primary. If the landslide is forthcoming, the chance for the expected relationship between primary divisiveness and the general election vote to emerge is actually lessened. This is because numerous Democrats entered the primary, causing a high degree of divisiveness without a subsequent deleterious effect on the Democratic vote in the fall.¹ According to Born (1981), the earlier works which

¹ To be sure, this is not a pure reciprocal relationship, since prospective candidates' expectations regarding the forthcoming general election vote will vary from the actual general election outcome. That is, technically the divisiveness of a primary cannot be caused by the vote

failed to find that divisiveness influenced election outcomes might have found significant results if they had corrected for this problem. In his study of House elections, Born attempts to correct for any possible reciprocal effect by employing the two-stage least-squares technique.² Nevertheless, he was still unable to substantiate a strong relationship between divisiveness and general election vote percentages.

Born's (1981) piece addressed the three problems noted above. He wrestled with the difficult question of reciprocal causation; he measured divisiveness and general election outcomes in an interval fashion; and he took into account divisiveness in both parties' primaries. Regarding the measures, he considered divisiveness "the nominee's share of all votes cast in the . . . primary" (p. 645), and he tabbed the general election outcome as simply the proportion of the two-party vote received by the incumbent candidate. Herein lies perhaps the major shortcoming of Born's work: he examined only House elections involving incumbents. This is problematic because his findings are limited to generalizations only about incumbents. Moreover, scholars have found that incumbency is a strong explanatory variable in determining electoral outcomes (Cover, 1977; Hinckley, 1981; Jacobson, 1981). So, incumbency might be better used as an independent variable when trying to understand the effects of the divisive primary.

In this study we examine the effects of primary divisiveness in gubernatorial and senatorial elections from 1970 to 1980, using incumbency as an independent variable. Further, we avoid the pitfalls of dichotomous measurement of election outcomes and examining only one party's primary.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Our dependent variable is the percentage of the general election vote won by the Democratic candidate. This also taps the Republican showing, as it is normally the mirror image of the Democratic percent. (Third party efforts may alter this somewhat.) Consequently, estimates from the models also assess the impact of primary divisiveness on Republican vote percentages.

of a general election which has not yet taken place. However, if the perceived general election vote and actual vote are highly correlated, something of a reciprocal problem may exist.

² In brief, the two-stage least-squares technique attempts to create a surrogate variable to replace the independent variable which is thought to be in part caused by the dependent variable. Ideally, variables exogenous to the entire model are regressed on the troublesome independent variable, and the predicted values (\hat{Y}) are then substituted for the original values of the independent variable. This, in theory, creates an independent variable with the influence of the dependent variable removed. For a full discussion of two-stage least-squares see Robert S. Pindyck and Daniel L. Rubinfeld (1981).

There are two independent variables measuring primary divisiveness. Democratic divisiveness is operationalized as the percent of the vote the winning Democratic candidate received in the primary. (We agree with Born that this is the best measure of divisiveness, for it is those primary voters not casting ballots with the winner who would seem most likely to desert their party in the general election.) In the gubernatorial analysis, the percent the winning primary candidate won ranges from a low of 21, achieved by Dale Bumpers of Arkansas in 1970, to a high of 100 won by candidates in uncontested primaries. The mean Democratic divisiveness value is 64.3 percent, meaning the average Democratic gubernatorial candidate won almost two-thirds of the party's primary vote. The senatorial divisiveness figures are comparable, with a low of 23 percent achieved by Edward Conroy of Maryland in 1980, and a mean of 69.7 percent.

Republican divisiveness is coded as the percent of the vote the winning Republican candidate received in the primary. Republicans experienced slightly less competition in their gubernatorial and senatorial primaries, with the average gubernatorial candidate carrying 73.0 percent of the vote, and the senatorial candidate tallying 75.8 percent.

To estimate properly the effect of divisiveness we must control for several other forces known to influence the general election vote. Incumbency is considered first. In this study incumbency is an interval measure tapping the number of years the candidate has been in office. Because our dependent variable is the Democratic vote percentage, Republican incumbents are coded in negative terms. For instance, Republican Senator Robert Dole from Kansas was coded -12 in 1980, because he was elected to the Senate in 1968. The bivariate correlations between incumbency and gubernatorial and senatorial general election vote percentages are .38 and .39, respectively. This indicates strongly that incumbency should be included when developing a model to explain general election vote.³

A second control is the traditional voting patterns of each state. Because numerous states continually elect candidates from a single party, we need a variable incorporating these normal voting patterns. In the gubernatorial analysis, this was achieved by averaging each state's Democratic vote for governor over the previous four elections. For example, the normal Democratic vote for governor in New Hampshire was 48 percent over

³ Ideally, in addition to incumbency, other measures of candidate quality—like a candidate's previous political experience or ability to raise money—would be controlled for in our models. Such controls would be optimal since previous experience and financial resources may influence primary and general election vote percentages. Unfortunately, the effort needed to gather and quantify measures of candidate quality was beyond the scope of this research note.

the 1972, 1974, 1976, and 1978 elections. This 48 percent was then entered as the measure of normal gubernatorial vote in the 1980 New Hampshire gubernatorial election case. In the senatorial analysis, the previous four Senate elections were used to form the normal vote variable. We expect that in both the gubernatorial and senatorial analyses the normal vote will be positively correlated with the dependent variable.

The relationship between divisiveness and the southern vote is sufficiently unique to warrant the use of a third control variable. In the South, because the Democratic primary is tantamount to the election for governor or senator, numerous Democratic candidates usually enter the primary, making it quite divisive. However, this divisiveness is not obviously reflected in the Democratic general election, as Democrats routinely capture large majorities. For example, in the 1978 gubernatorial primary in Alabama, Democrat Forrest James won with just 28 percent of the vote, yet he went on to win 72 percent of the general election vote. To correct for these southern anomalies, we enter a dummy variable coded 1 for southern states (i.e., the eleven states in the Confederacy), and 0 for all others.

Finally, when examining general election outcomes we need to control for swings in party voting. For instance, in 1974 the Democrats benefited from the Watergate scandal and scored numerous unexpected victories in the House, the Senate, and many statehouses. Even though 1974 was an unusually large swing year, the party not of the president traditionally scores electoral gains in the off-year elections. In addition, presidential election years usually find the party of the winning candidate benefiting. In fact, if House elections are used as a gauge, then these two scenarios hold throughout our 1970–1980 period. Such swings are controlled by employing a dummy variable where 1 is equal to Democratic swing years (1970, 1974, 1976), and 0 represents Republican swing years (1972, 1978, 1980).

We hypothesize that the Democratic general election vote in the gubernatorial and senatorial contests is a function of the above six variables. To examine these variables simultaneously, ordinary least squares regression is utilized, producing the following models.⁴

⁴ This note addresses the question of adjusting the models for the possible problem of reciprocal causation. As mentioned earlier, Born (1981) hypothesized that primary divisiveness could be in part a function of candidates' perceptions of their party's fortunes in the fall. He utilized the two-stage least-squares technique in an attempt to correct for this potential reciprocal problem. We, however, have decided not to correct for this possible problem for two reasons. First, we believe there are serious mechanical shortcomings with using the two-stage technique on these data. In order accurately to specify a two-stage model the divisiveness variables must be predicted by a set of variables exogenous to the dependent variable. We were unable to find theoretically relevant exogenous variables which did not,

The gubernatorial model:

$$Y = a + b_1X_1 - b_2X_2 + b_3X_3 + b_4X_4 + b_5X_5 + b_6X_6 + u,$$

where Y = Democratic percentage of the gubernatorial general election vote; X_1 = Democratic gubernatorial primary divisiveness; X_2 = Republican gubernatorial primary divisiveness; X_3 = gubernatorial incumbency; X_4 = gubernatorial normal vote; X_5 = party swing; X_6 = South; and u = the error term.

The senatorial model:

$$Y' = a + b_7X'_1 - b_8X'_2 + b_{10}X'_4 + b_{11}X'_5 + b_{12}X'_6 + u,$$

where Y' = Democratic percentage of the senatorial general election vote; X'_1 = Democratic senatorial primary divisiveness; X'_2 = Republican senatorial primary divisiveness; X'_3 = senatorial incumbency; X'_4 = senatorial normal vote; X'_5 = party swing; X'_6 = South; and u = the error term.

FINDINGS

The gubernatorial findings are presented in table 1. Examination reveals that the more vote the winner of the Democratic primary receives, the higher the Democratic vote percentage will be in the fall. The coefficient states that, on average, as primary winners achieve an additional percent of the primary vote, they can each expect to pick up an additional .06 percent of the general election vote. Put differently, a candidate in

on their own merit, deserve entry into the full models (e.g., incumbency, South). Estimating divisiveness with these independent variables is less than ideal because the predicted divisiveness variables will be highly collinear with the independent variables.

Second, there is empirical evidence suggesting that the reciprocal problem does not exist in the gubernatorial and senatorial cases. There is no significant difference in the mean level of divisiveness across Democratic and Republican swing years, regardless of party or office. For example, in the Democratic senatorial case the mean divisiveness value average across the three Democratic swing years was 71 percent, compared to 68 percent in the three Republican swing years. Thus, there is actually less divisiveness in the Democratic swing years, exactly opposite of what the hypothesis flowing from the reciprocal causation argument would suggest. This procedure was repeated for the Republican senatorial case as well as both the Democratic and Republican gubernatorial cases. In all three, the hypothesis was again disconfirmed. The means tests indicated no statistically significant difference (at the .05 level) in divisiveness levels between Republican and Democratic swing years. This indicates that candidates probably do not determine whether to enter a primary on a perceived notion of their party's overall chances in November. In light of this evidence, it is doubtful that two-way causation exists.

TABLE 1
THE GUBERNATORIAL MODEL

| INDEPENDENT VARIABLES | REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS | | t-RATIOS | SIGNIFICANCE |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|----------|--------------|
| | UNSTANDARDIZED | STANDARDIZED | | |
| Intercept | 33.09 | | | |
| Democratic Divisiveness (X_1) | .06 | .13 | 1.77 | $p < .05$ |
| Republican Divisiveness (X_2) | .02 | .06 | .84 | n.s. |
| Incumbency (X_3) | 1.10 | .42 | 5.72 | $p < .001$ |
| Normal Vote (X_4) | .19 | .13 | 1.51 | $p < .10$ |
| Party Swing (X_5) | 3.33 | .17 | 2.51 | $p < .01$ |
| South (X_6) | 8.71 | .34 | 4.04 | $p < .001$ |
| $R^2 = .42$ | | $N = 135$ | | $df = 128$ |

an uncontested primary could expect to win 3 percent more of the November vote than if the primary had been won with just 50 percent of the vote.

The Republican divisiveness variable, however, does not perform as expected. The degree of divisiveness in the GOP primary does not affect significantly the general election outcome. This suggests that regardless of the divisiveness of the Republican primary the winner can expect to hold Republican loyalties in the fall election. Likewise, a Democrat cannot expect to be advantaged by a close Republican primary.

All of the control variables are statistically significant. As the bivariate correlations hint, incumbency has a strong influence on the general election. The coefficient says that, on average, an additional year of incumbency is worth approximately 1 percent more in the November contest. The normal voting patterns of a state are related to the fall election results as hypothesized. Also, southern Democrats garnered, on average, almost 9 percent more of the vote in the general election than their non-southern counterparts. Last, in swing years that favor Democrats, Democratic candidates captured, on average, over 3 percent more of the general election vote than they did in Republican swing years.

In conclusion, gubernatorial general election results are affected by Democratic primary outcomes.⁵ Democrats are disadvantaged by a primary battle, which obviously benefits the Republicans. Now let us extend the analysis to the Senate.

The Senate model is displayed in table 2. A perusal of the model indicates that both Democratic and Republican divisiveness significantly alters senatorial election results. Using the same example as in the Democratic gubernatorial case, we find that a Democratic senatorial candidate who is uncontested in the primary can expect to win 7.5 percent more of the general election vote than if he won the primary with 50 percent of the vote. Thus, the degree of divisiveness in Democratic senatorial primaries has a much stronger impact on general election outcomes than the degree of divisiveness in Democratic gubernatorial contests. This is also the case with Republican divisiveness. Specifically, for every 1 percent of additional primary vote the winning Republican achieves, the Democratic vote percentage in the fall drops .10 percent.

⁵ This model as well as the senatorial model could have easily been estimated by using the Republican share of the vote as the dependent variable. Except in rare third-party instances, the Republican share of the vote is simply the total vote minus the Democratic share. The results of the equations using the Republican share of the vote as the dependent variable can be determined using tables 1 and 2. This is achieved by reversing the signs of the coefficients. For example, as Democrats approach an uncontested primary, Republicans are disadvantaged (the sign of X_1 in table 1 and X'_1 in table 2 are reversed). Or, for table 1, southern Republican gubernatorial candidates win almost 9 percent less of the November vote than the nonsouthern Republican candidates (the sign of X_6 in table 1 is reversed).

TABLE 2
THE SENATORIAL MODEL

| INDEPENDENT VARIABLES | REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS | | t-RATIOS | SIGNIFICANCE |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|-----------|--------------|
| | UNSTANDARDIZED | STANDARDIZED | | |
| Intercept | 28.26 | | | |
| Democratic Divisiveness (X_1) | .15 | .31 | 4.02 | $p < .001$ |
| Republican Divisiveness (X_2) | -.10 | -.20 | -2.85 | $p < .01$ |
| Incumbency (X_3) | .07 | .07 | .79 | n.s. |
| Normal Vote (X_4) | .30 | .20 | 2.63 | $p < .01$ |
| Party Swing (X_5) | 7.14 | .32 | 4.83 | $p < .001$ |
| South (X_6) | 4.70 | .15 | 2.16 | $p < .05$ |
| $R^2 = .33$ | | | $N = 172$ | $df = 165$ |

The rest of the model performs largely as hypothesized. Normal senatorial voting patterns, southern elections, and party swings all have the expected effect on general election vote percentage. Surprisingly, however, incumbency fails to impact significantly the vote percentages. A clue to why this might be is uncovered when gubernatorial and senatorial incumbency patterns are compared. The standard deviations exhibit a wide disparity: four years for governors and eleven years for senators. This long tenure of senators creates a situation where incumbency is related to Democratic and Republican divisiveness. Long-term incumbents, because of high name recognition, party support, political experience, established campaign and fund-raising machinery, and the power inherent in the office, are perceived by potential challengers in their party as difficult to defeat. These forces contribute to weak and ineffective challengers. This is demonstrated by comparing the means of the divisiveness variable for all senators and for those who are seeking at least a third term. The mean divisiveness value for all Democratic senators is 70 percent, compared to 86 percent for primaries involving a Democratic senator running for a third term or more. Similarly, the mean divisiveness value for all Republican senatorial primaries is 76 percent, compared to 87 percent for primaries involving a Republican running for at least a third term. Clearly, long-term incumbents face less serious primary challenges. Therefore, incumbency and divisiveness are related. This correlation acts to negate the explanatory power of incumbency.

In summary, senatorial primary divisiveness in both parties has a direct impact on the general election vote percentages. The message to the parties is obvious. Hard fought senatorial primaries will disadvantage your party's chance for victory in the fall.

DISCUSSION

A couple of curiosities emerge from the above models. The first is the greater impact Democratic primary divisiveness has on general election outcomes when compared to Republican divisiveness, and the second is the stronger influence of primary divisiveness on senatorial elections than on gubernatorial contests. Unfortunately, an adequate explanation of these findings would require individual-level information about why voters defect from their party in gubernatorial and senatorial elections. An examination of such data lies outside the scope of this research. We will mention, though, that given the vastly different coalitions of individuals comprising the two major parties (Axelrod, 1972) and the somewhat different electorates casting ballots in gubernatorial and senatorial elections even in the same state on the same day (Jewell and Olsen, 1982), it might have been more surprising if primary divisiveness

had had the same influence across both parties and both elective offices.

In the final analysis, this paper brings to light a certain irony concerning the direct primary. One of the intentions of the reformers who instituted the direct primary was to take the power of nomination away from a small group of party elites. Reformers argued that a nominee who was hand picked by a few party delegates was quite possibly not the best potential candidate. A large scale competitive election, reformers reasoned, would allow numerous capable candidates a chance to capture the nomination. The direct primary, because of its broad appeal to all party members, should precipitate a more electable candidate for the general election while simultaneously encouraging participation by the party rank and file. Whether the direct primary has produced better and more electable candidates remains unclear. However, one fact appears certain. Competition in gubernatorial and senatorial primaries has had a deleterious effect on the parties' victory chances in the general election. If one party has three or four candidates pursuing the nomination while the other party has a relatively uncontested primary, the party with the uncontested primary can expect to be somewhat advantaged in the November election. Ironically, therefore, while primary competition may or may not produce stronger candidates, a competitive primary will almost certainly decrease a party's chances for victory in the fall.

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