

Feeble Gatekeepers: Factional Insurgency and the Toppling of the Grand Old Party

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Abstract

This book argues that the American party system is failing at a critical democratic function: gatekeeping. Unlike in many other democracies where populist insurgents form new parties, the unique structure of U.S. politics—dominated by two weakly institutionalized parties—makes it possible for anti-establishment figures to capture one of the major parties from within. We develop a framework around three key institutional arenas—nominations, campaign finance, and the media environment—through which party elites historically exercised control and maintained pluralistic coalitions. The capacity of parties to manage these arenas have eroded in recent decades, rendering them “feeble gatekeepers.” They are vulnerable to populist takeover and norm erosion, which contributes to democratic backsliding in governance. Drawing on contemporary cases, comparative insights, and original analyses, we show how U.S. parties, particularly the Republican Party, have become conduits for ideological polarization, racialized partisanship, and personalistic politics. The result is a system in which the parties can neither contain extremism nor generate broad-based governing majorities. *Feeble Gatekeepers* offers an institutional diagnosis of democratic dysfunction and a call to rethink – and reform -- the architecture of party power in the 21st century.

INTRODUCTION

The Republican Party entered the Trump era already hollowed out as an institution. Its national and state organizations had lost control over nominations, messaging, and fundraising to outside groups—Super PACs, ideological media outlets, and donor networks like the Koch organizations. Party elites no longer mediated between factions or enforced discipline, leaving a vacuum easily filled by personalities who could command attention and mobilize grievances. The fragmentation and weakening of patronage networks and the decline of strong state party organizations further eroded collective leadership. By the time Trump appeared, the GOP was less a coherent political organization than a brand available for capture by whoever could dominate the news cycle and rally the base.

The Trump years put in full relief the debilitated state of American political parties. Democrats face their own troubles too. Consider, for example, the incapacity of party insiders to get Biden to step away from his reelection campaign well before the campaign season. And more critically, their failure to put together a coalition to defeat a twice-impeached Donald Trump in 2024.

Why have the parties become so weak? And why has this process been so much deeper within the Republican Party? Answering these questions can help us make sense of how a political outsider like Trump, who was initially opposed by most party elites, was able to so thoroughly consolidate the GOP behind his insurgent blend of conservative and populist politics. This is a story that is most visible at the presidential level. But it is also one that extends to Congress and the states, where party weakness and insurgent populism are similarly on the rise.

Since the 1970s several structural factors have weakened party institutions, undermining their capacity to broker coalitions and gatekeep against renegades. We argue that effective party gatekeeping depends on control across three institutional domains: candidate nomination, campaign finance, and political communication. Each of these domains has eroded in the U.S., making parties vulnerable to populist capture.

This erosion has been especially true in the Republican Party, which has not only failed to manage the cultural anxieties of its followers, but enabled a faction of insurgents to stoke such anxieties without much contestation. The congressional Republicans have also failed their role in the Madisonian system of checks-and-balances to hold Donald Trump accountable for policies and behaviors which depart from constitutional and political norms. The accumulating power of the president, as partisan leader, has diminished a pluralistic party system, in which the chief executive has historically been more responsible to party leaders in Congress and the states (Jacobs and Milkis 2022). Absent strong gatekeeping power, the pre-Trump GOP has been mostly powerless to push back against these trends.

Insurgencies are more likely to succeed when organizations suffer from weak institutional structures. In these circumstances parties lack the tools to manage contentious politics in ways that would support the kind of moderation and policy incrementalism that sustains healthy democracies over the long-term. We focus on three interrelated institutional vulnerabilities -- nominations, political finance, and media -- which often get separate treatment in scholarly analyses. The analysis builds on research devoted to each of these areas. While we feature several novel findings demonstrating these vulnerabilities, our central purpose is to illustrate the compound structural factors that collectively contributed to the hollowing of the American political parties, and especially the GOP, to the point at which they fail to perform the

mediating tasks of coalition-building and gatekeeping. These party-based tasks are vital to the health of democracies (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

Our argument builds on and moves beyond several influential accounts of party decay and populist insurgency in American politics. Frances Lee (2020) highlights how institutional openness—particularly via primaries—creates opportunities for populists to rise within the party system, but she treats these features as persistent rather than products of contemporary institutional breakdown. Rachel Blum’s *How the Tea Party Captured the GOP* (2020) offers a rich account of factional entrepreneurship within the Republican Party, showing how grassroots conservatives systematically built influence over nominations and party rules. Yet Blum focuses primarily on the factional logic of internal party organization, rather than on the broader systemic vulnerabilities that enable insurgents to override elite gatekeeping. Schlozman and Rosenfeld’s *Hollow Parties* (2024) provides a sweeping historical diagnosis of organizational decline and elite irresponsibility, emphasizing the erosion of parties’ integrative and representative functions. Our contribution is to isolate and analyze three institutional arenas—nominations, campaign finance, and the media environment—that together shape the capacity of political parties to perform their gatekeeping role. While existing work identifies symptoms of party weakness, we specify the mechanisms that have allowed populist figures to gain power without broad democratic legitimation.

Our institutional framework also complements the work of Byron Shafer and Regina Wagner (2019), who have documented the long-standing internal struggles within U.S. political parties over organizational structure and control. Their analysis emphasizes the recurring nature of these tensions—between elite party professionals and factional bases—throughout American history. In contrast, we argue that recent institutional reforms have qualitatively altered this balance. What was once a cyclical contest within organizational boundaries has become a structural vulnerability: today’s parties lack the institutional levers to contain internal insurgencies. While Shafer and Wagner chronicle a “long war” over party structure, we focus on how this war has been lost—how elite brokerage has been hollowed out through the weakening of nominations, campaign finance coordination, and media control. Our work thus extends their historical framework into the contemporary moment of crisis, offering a diagnosis of institutional decay rather than simply factional recurrence.

We believe a focus on *institutional vulnerabilities* provides a clear explanation for the growing success of insurgent politicians, particularly within the Republican Party. *We understand insurgency politics as one that pairs issue extremism with behavioral extremism.* Insurgencies are an attempt to purify the party through a take-no-prisoners approach, in which partisans are willing to break with institutional norms and risk electoral defeat to pursue their brand of the party (Blum 2020). Insurgent politicians and factions seek to remake a party’s commitments through confrontation rather than compromise.

Insurgencies are not a new phenomenon in either major party. They have been more or less present throughout their long histories. But none has succeeded as quickly and thoroughly as Trump and his MAGA faction. In the focus on Trump’s stunning electoral victory, we have underestimated the longstanding vulnerability of *both* major political parties to this kind of insurgency politics that is not beholden to traditional party commitments. The Tea Party activists were a precursor to Trump, pushing a confrontational politics that went beyond the usual

intraparty skirmishes.¹ They succeeded in capturing many local and state parties, laying the groundwork for a populist outsider like Trump to win the nomination and presidency. Our analysis pinpoints key institutional changes that allowed a radical faction of the Republican Party to gain so much power. Here is a summary of three sets of institutional mechanisms where we show parties have lost their ability to manage internal tensions.

Nominations: Despite arguments that party insiders still shape candidate selection through endorsements and behind-the-scenes efforts (e.g., Cohen et al. 2008), their influence has been sharply curtailed in both legislative and presidential primaries. Primaries have long been used in legislative elections and, since 1976, have become the dominant method for choosing presidential nominees. In both arenas, they provide openings for insurgent candidacies, especially when rank-and-file partisans—not party officials—control the process. Large presidential primary fields incentivize factional mobilization among partisan voters (Polsby 1983), while nationalized politics and heightened polarization make partisans more willing to back candidates who inspire loyalty despite serious flaws.

In congressional contests, party elites historically preferred less factional, more moderate nominees with strong general election prospects (Hassell 2023; La Raja and Schaffner 2015). But with most districts now safe for one party and ideological sorting reducing intraparty diversity, leaders play a diminished role, leaving primaries to organized interest groups and ideological factions (Manento 2021; La Raja and Rauch 2020). In such safe seats, the electoral penalty for nominating extremists is minimal, enabling them to win office and influence the party’s governing agenda.

Kathleen Bawn et al. (2012) emphasize that interest groups and activists exert their greatest influence in nominations, where low-turnout contests and limited media coverage make it relatively easy for organized actors to secure candidates already committed to their agendas. Because voters often cannot discern or punish extremism—the “electoral blind spot”—these coalitions can elevate nominees more ideologically aligned with group priorities than with the median voter (Colao et al. 2025).

Political Finance: US elections now rely heavily on non-party organizations, which spend money independently of candidates, as well as small donors who collectively send large sums of money through digital platforms to celebrity and norm-breaking candidates. Both these emergent dynamics give greater leverage to anti-establishment campaigns. Moreover, state political parties, which previously supported 50 heterogeneous party systems, have been reduced to appendages of national campaigns, in part because of campaign finance laws that limit their capacity to exercise influence. A system of independent state parties allows for greater representation of the varied interests under the umbrella of the national party. Instead, state parties today are easily overrun by national level activists, local insurgents and wealthy interests (La Raja 2008).

The political parties and their traditional donors enjoy a weaker role in financing preferred candidates compared to an emergent constellation of financiers who are less representative of citizen preferences than establishment party elites, and certainly less amenable to political compromise. Today, party organizations can turn off the financial tap for disfavored candidates, but these candidates can often easily find financial backing from a range of organized

¹ The movement emulated the confrontational politics of New Gingrich in the 1990s, who wielded it in Congress against the Democrats and deepened partisan divides.

interests and individual donors who support their anti-establishment brand. In combination with primary elections, the new financiers have increased the odds of insurgents winning party nominations for Congress, or gaining sufficient votes to instill fear among establishment incumbents so that they are reluctant to criticize the insurgency.

These campaign financing dynamics reflect broader patterns in politics, where party organizations have lost power and influence relative to the constellation of policy demanding groups that make up their extended coalitions (e.g., Bawn et al. 2012). While not our main focus, it is important to note that the financial and organizational power of party-aligned groups often constrains the party in government (Albert 2025). Elected officials frequently respond to their policy preferences, restricting the agenda to agreed-upon solutions and making it difficult for parties to address new issues, respond to changes in public opinion, and maneuver to expand their coalition. Factional candidates – especially ideological ones – benefit from this extended party support once in office.

News Media: The third vulnerability is a shifting media landscape in which partisan news outlets – cable television, talk radio and websites – have cultivated niche audiences that amplify insurgent messaging and undermine traditional media gatekeeping of facts and narratives. These new media outlets enable insurgents to gain national audiences to raise money and spread their message. In this new media ecosystem parties struggle to advance a policy agenda and more moderate messaging that might appeal to broader elements of the rank-and-file and beyond, many of whom no longer pay attention to news (Prior 2007). Instead, partisans tend to absorb unchecked the “culture war” messaging that organizes campaign issue agendas. The lack of cross-cutting information experienced by partisans is particularly apparent among Republican voters, which gives tremendous power to a media organization, like Fox News, with a captured audience of conservative partisans.

Social media has supercharged these dynamics. Candidates can now speak directly to their supporters, both in their districts or states and nationally, allowing them to spread messages that are unleavened by intermediaries like news anchors and party surrogates. The low-cost, wide-reach nature of social media contributes to informational fragmentation. Republicans in particular are distrustful of traditional news outlets and increasingly turn instead to prominent figures on social media. Online, many Republicans exist in a tightly integrated ecosystem where partisan messages are amplified and misinformation goes unchecked (Benkler, Farris, and Roberts 2018). Polarized and insurgent candidates thrive in this marketplace. They can use social media to build nationwide networks of supporters and employ negative partisan messages to gain attention and financial support (Costa 2025). This creates a feedback loop in which candidates are incentivized to engage in more extreme rhetoric online and rewarded for such behavior.

All three of these dynamics contribute to political fragmentation, which enables insurgencies to flourish. By fragmentation we mean the diffusion of political power away from traditional political institutions and leadership. Pildes (2015) describes, in particular, the fragmentation of power within political parties, which makes its leaders incapable of bringing along recalcitrant factions to broker deals that advance the public good.² We observe this phenomenon in our analysis. Historically, American political parties contributed to stitching

² Pildes makes a broader argument – and one we agree with – about the influence of widespread and excessively romantic conceptions of how democracy works, which leads to institutional designs and reforms that contribute to the decline of formal political institutions in the United States.

together a nation which is divided constitutionally by federalism and the separation of powers. Factions within the parties typically contended for influence within the organization, often pushing the parties in pragmatic directions to deal with challenging public problems (DiSalvo 2012). However, the capacity to have these healthy, if contentious, internal debates has much diminished, especially in the Republican Party. In both parties, the maintenance of broad coalitions is much more difficult, while accountability to the broader rank-and-file has diminished due to the structural changes we describe. Together these transformations have rendered party leaders less able to challenge insurgencies or tame their aggressions.

CHAPTER 2: POPULAR NOMINATIONS

Nominating candidates is a defining characteristic of what parties do. It is the principal gatekeeping mechanism giving political parties the capacity to decide who belongs to the organization, and for regulating the ambition of aspirant officeholders (Aldrich 1995). In the aggregate, nominations help define what a party stands for in elections and government. But parties have largely lost control over their own nomination processes. At the turn of the century the US began an experiment with no precedent in other democratic nations (Gardbaum and Pildes 2018). Progressive Era reformers, pushing against the transactional politics of party organizations, argued that voters rather than party leaders should be the ones to choose who appears on the general election ballot. Since the inception of primary elections, the arguments about methods of nominee selection have been part of a larger internal power struggle among partisan activists about the means and ends of party organizations, pitting the “professionals” against the “amateurs” (Wilson, 1962). Broadly conceived, the professionals pursued a pragmatic politics of picking consensus nominees, however bland, who could unite disparate party factions and win the general election. Amateurs, in contrast, sought policy goals and candidates who had a clear ideological agenda.

Progressive reforms, in part via the primary, sought to weaken the power of the professionals and make political parties more responsive to the rank-and-file. By 1918, all but eight states had replaced their previously elite-led “caucus and convention” system with direct primaries for congressional nominations. Presidential nominating rules lagged considerably behind: by that same year, only 18 states had used direct primaries to select convention delegates for presidential candidates at some point (not all states that adopted them used them continuously).³ This created a hybrid system in which presidential aspirants still needed to secure enough elite support to win the nomination, but candidates could also demonstrate their electoral viability by performing well with party voters in direct primaries. Perhaps the most well-known example is Senator John F. Kennedy’s surprisingly good performance in the West Virginia primaries, in a state with overwhelmingly Protestant voters. His victory appeared to demonstrate to party elites that his Catholicism would not make him unelectable. Conversely, poor primary performances from party-backed candidates could undermine their legitimacy. Famously, incumbent president Harry Truman withdrew from the Democratic field shortly after he finished second in the 1952 New Hampshire primary.

Partisan primary voters played a greater role in selecting nominees throughout the middle-20th century, though they still lacked dispositive power. Popular primaries did not become the definitive mechanisms for selecting presidential nominees until the 1970s, following the protests and chaos of the 1968 DNC Convention in Chicago. That year, Democratic insiders – who still controlled enough delegates to have the final say – chose Vice President Hubert Humphrey as their nominee. The decision seemed to be a slap in the face to the party base. Humphrey had not contested a single state primary, unlike his main competitors, Senators Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy (Cohen et al. 2008). Furthermore, although Humphrey was a favorite among party insiders, he turned off liberal and anti-war activists who now made up a greater share of the party base. These internal divisions manifest inside the conventional hall

³ <https://www.thegreenpapers.com/Hx/DirectPrimaryElectionYears.phtml>

and in the streets, where Mayor Richard Daley's heavy-handed suppression of protestors poured additional fuel on the fire (Nichter 2023). Heading into the general election, the Democratic Party faced a severe legitimacy crisis.

Humphrey's loss to Republican Richard Nixon spurred soul-searching within the Democratic Party. In 1969, the party created the Commission on Party Structure and Delegate Selection – better known as the McGovern-Fraser Commission – to rethink their delegate selection rules. The goal was to recommend procedures that would broaden participation in presidential nominations and increase representation of the party base, particularly minorities, women, and young voters. As a result, the Commission recommended more transparent delegate selection procedures and rules that would ensure delegates proportionally represented their states. To comply with these new national party rules, states began to move away from caucuses and toward primary elections as the means of selecting convention delegates. Quickly, direct primaries became the definitive means of selecting delegates for both the Democratic and Republican National Conventions (Shafer 1983). By 1976, 73% of Democratic delegates were chosen by voters in primary elections, a 35 percentage point increase over 1968.

These changes – at both the congressional and presidential level – have led to major gatekeeping challenges for both major political parties. Proponents would argue that the shift from elite-led party nominations to voter participation in direct primaries is more democratic. Indeed, the ultimate goal of Progressive reformers and the McGovern-Fraser Commission was to better represent the party rank-and-file. However, the voters who engage most intensely in primaries – by voting frequently, as well as giving money and canvassing – are not like the rank-and-file. They have strong partisan and policy preferences which have been empowered by primaries. Popular nomination contests also represent an important venue for organized interests seeking to move the party toward their policy demands. This biased participation can result in minoritarian outcomes despite the democratic nature of direct primaries.

To be sure, others have suggested that party professionals still wield sufficient influence to shape the outcome “invisibly” through endorsements and steering campaign funds to favored candidates (Cohen et al. 2008; Hassell 2017). We agree that party elites still wield power in other ways – though as we show, their control over key campaign resources is far less than it once was. Furthermore, it is a power that is often contingent on having a fairly strong consensus on who the nominee should be, and acting in concert to anoint this favored candidate.

While our focus is mostly on congressional elections, there is no better example of the decline of party gatekeeping in the face of direct primaries than the case of Donald Trump. Trump won the nomination in 2016 for two main reasons. First, party elites could not decide collectively whom to support. The candidate field was large because American parties have no capacity to filter out candidates who are inexperienced, incompetent or not ready for prime time. They cannot even keep out candidates who are not party members. Bernie Sanders, an independent who claims to be a democratic socialist, faced few hurdles when he chose to run in the Democratic presidential primaries in 2016 and 2020. Similarly, Donald Trump had no record of Republican Party activism when he launched his presidential bid in the 2016 Republican primaries. Not surprisingly, he had almost no support from Republican elites prior to his winning enough delegates to secure the nomination (Albert and Barney 2019). It is a remarkable and dangerous feat of American democracy that a complete outsider has the potential to take over the apparatus of a major party. Nonetheless, comparative research suggests that outsiders stand a much better chance when the main parties are highly polarized (Buisseret and Van Weeldon 2020), so perhaps the US case is not so unique.

A second reason for Trump’s success was his ability to circumvent party gatekeeping by appealing directly to disaffected partisans, gaining significant media attention, and mostly self-funding his primary run (Cohen et al. 2016). He was able to take advantage of long-term political and structural developments that weakened parties and created the conditions for a hostile takeover of the nomination process. Due to their growing lack of control over key campaign resources, GOP insiders were forced to begrudgingly accept Trump’s nomination and lend support to his insurgency in the name of party unity (Albert and Barney 2019). These are themes we return to throughout this and the next chapters.

The relative ease of access to nominations also afflicts the legislative party. Congressional candidates who can appeal to activist factions, raise early money from ideological donors, and attract national media attention for their candidacies are often able to win open primaries. This porousness, in tandem with a biased set of voters, many of whom have “purist” attitudes, make it more likely that insurgencies will gain traction despite the more measured preferences of the party rank-and-file. Even without having a majority in primaries, these intense factional voters communicate their passions through multiple forms of costly engagement – giving money, contacting officials, attending political meetings – all of which gives them substantial influence over candidates and officeholders (Hill 2022). It is for this reason that recent reform proposals have suggested a greater role for party officials in vetting candidates before the start of primary campaigns, as a bulwark against the intense passions of the most vocal partisans (Diamond et al. 2025).

Absent such vetting, factional and ideological candidates are increasingly common in the modern nominating system, particularly in the Republican Party and especially for candidates running under the Trump banner. At the congressional level, MAGA-aligned candidates now represent a plurality of the GOP primary field. Using data from Elaine Kamarck’s “Primaries Project”, Figure 1.1 groups congressional candidates in the 2022 and 2024 Republican primaries into three ideological categories: MAGA Conservatives, Mainstream Conservatives, and Moderate Republicans.⁴ As recently as 2022, Mainstream Conservatives – who are by no means moderates, but who also did not proactively identify with Trump’s MAGA movement in their campaigns – were the largest faction in the GOP. But by 2024, nearly half of all candidates were affiliated with MAGA, while only 35% were classified as Mainstream Conservatives – a 12 percentage point decline over the previous election cycle. In both years, Moderate Republicans had a weak showing, comprising just 6% of candidates in 2022 and 9% in 2024. Clearly, the GOP has become a party defined by Trump and a conservative ideological outlook. The opposite is true of the Democratic Party, where Mainstream Democrats made up 56% of candidates in 2022 and 60% in 2024, compared to 33% and 30% for Progressives and under 2% for Democratic Socialists.

⁴ Kamarck and her co-authors examine campaign websites to classify candidates. They consider a candidate to be a MAGA Conservative if they self-identify as one; included photos or mentions of Trump; used rhetoric like “America First” or “Make America Great Again”; professed sympathetic views of the January 6th insurrection or questioned the results of the 2020 election; or supported key policies that differentiate Trump from the traditional conservative positions (namely adopting hardline immigration stances, supporting an isolationist foreign policy, or advocating for the overhaul or abolition of government institutions like the FBI, DOJ, or Department of Education). <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/what-we-know-about-the-2024-democratic-and-republican-parties-an-analysis-of-congressional-candidates/>

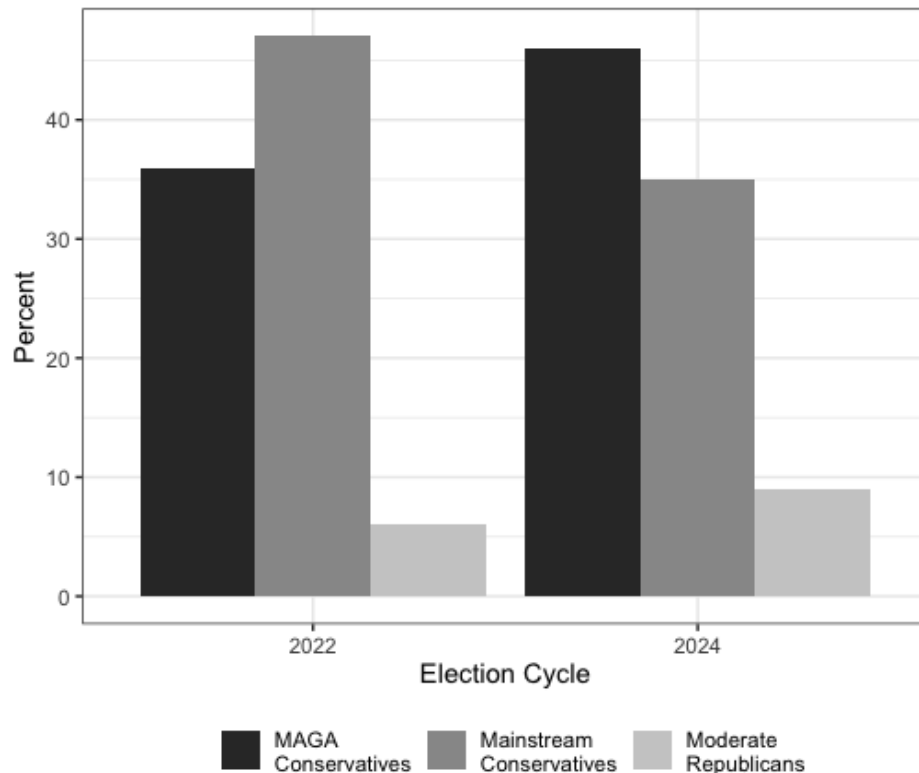


Figure 1.1. Candidate Factions in 2022 and 2024 GOP Primaries

What changed so that a Republican factional insurgency could work its way through primaries? As we suggested earlier, GOP voters have been restive for decades. The social and economic changes – wrought by NAFTA, technologies replacing labor, significant immigration, and changing gender and sexual mores – meant that any conservative party would face strong factionalism through this period (as we observe clearly in western European democracies). The Tea Party and emergence of Donald Trump turbo-charged emergent populism. The structure of primaries – allowing voters to choose nominees – gave full expression to grievance populism. Its force attracted inexperienced and performative candidates, while short-circuiting an elite deliberative process that might have filtered out the worst norm-breakers and enabled brokered compromises within the party.

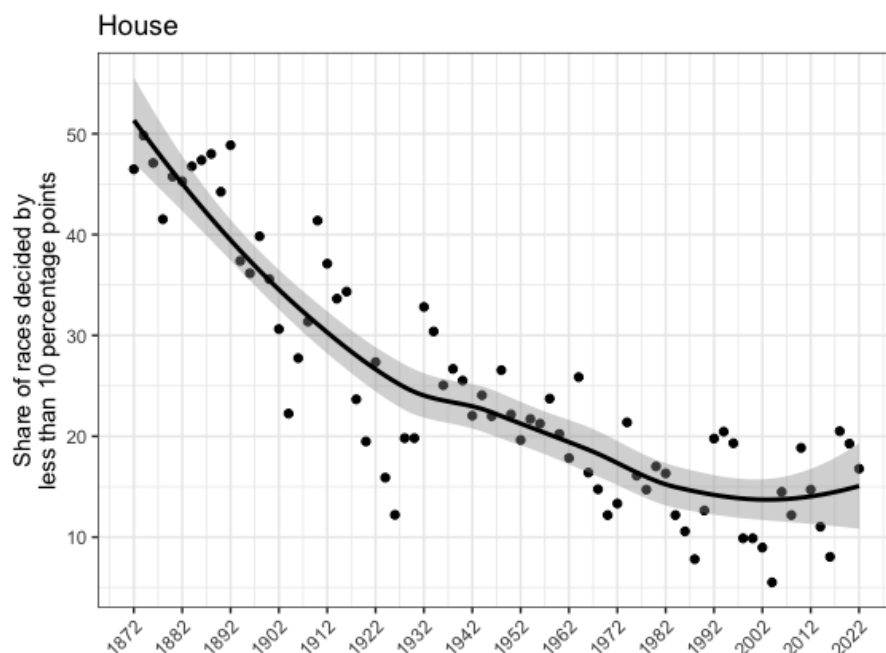
While it is true that party insiders can influence the nomination contest by recruiting candidates and discouraging others, these tools were insufficient to ward off insurgencies. Changes to the nomination process occurring over decades exposed the vulnerabilities inherent in primary elections. The Democrats have these same vulnerabilities, but as we show in the following sections, the party’s coalition contains more ideological pluralism and a cultural orientation toward compromise and reform, which dampens the populist impulse. Since the emergence of Trump as a robust political figure in 2016, Democrats also have a common enemy that, thus far, has united the party around the pragmatic goal of opposing the MAGA insurgency (Albert 2022).

The sum of our argument on nominations is this: 1) the partisan sorting of voters in congressional districts makes primaries supersede the general election in choosing members of Congress; 2) primary electorates are small, which makes insurgencies more likely to succeed; 3) Republican primary voters – especially ones who engage in other forms of party activism – differ

from rank-and-file in being more extreme, populist and disliking any compromise; and 4) ideological groups help advance extremist candidates in lopsided partisan districts. All of these factors contribute to a radicalization of the party, and limit the capacity of institutional Republicans to challenge insurgents.

Primaries Increasingly Choose Members of Congress

Primaries are now the *de facto* election for choosing members of Congress or state legislatures in most races. More than ever, candidates run in districts with a lopsided partisan balance. When general election outcomes are all but guaranteed to favor one party, that party's primary becomes the main means of selecting elected officials. Using data from the Constituency-Level Elections Archive (Kollman et al. 2024), Figure 2.1 documents a long-term decline in competition in congressional general elections. With few exceptions, competition in US House races, measured by the share of races decided by less than 10 percentage points, has been present in no more than one in five elections since the 1960s. Over the last six decades, the average rate of House races falling within a 10 point margin has been just 15 percent. In contrast, a far larger share of House races were competitive during the latter half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. Between 1872 and 1958, roughly a third of all general elections were competitive, on average.



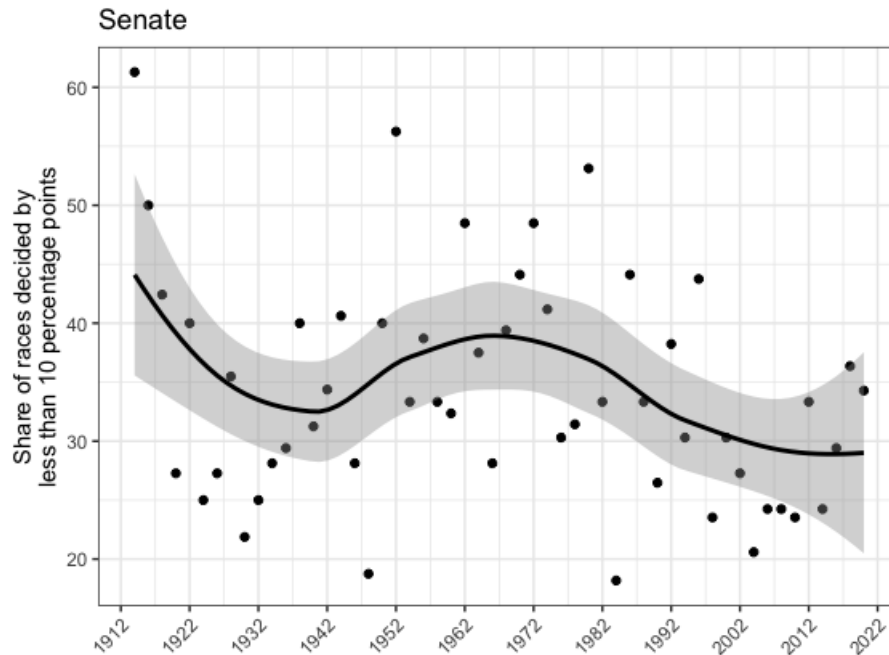


Figure 2.1. Electoral Competition in General Elections for House and Senate

The decline is less noticeable in the Senate, where the staggered nature of elections leads to more idiosyncratic outcomes and the smaller number of races produces higher quality candidates and greater media attention. Even still, Senate competition in recent decades has declined compared with most of the 20th century. From 1912 to 1992, an average of 36% of contests were decided by less than 10 percentage points. Since then, that number has declined to 29%. During the 21st century, the highest share of competitive races was 36% in 2020. During the prior century, 19 election cycles exceeded that threshold.

Because of the importance of electoral competition for democratic accountability and representation, scholars have been keenly interested in explaining its decline. Most accounts point to the advantages of incumbency, which can insulate officeholders from competitive challenges, and partisan polarization and geographic sorting, which have decreased the willingness for partisans to vote against their team and increased the number of one-party safe seats (Abramowitz, Alexander and Gunning 2006). There is also some evidence that gerrymandering reduces electoral competition and insulates Congress from changes in the national vote (Kenny et al. 2023). But regardless of its causes, the key implication of declining two-party competition, for our purposes, is that the electoral system relies increasingly on core partisans in primaries to pick Members of Congress.⁵

Primary Electorates are Small

Insurgent candidates benefit not only from having to appeal primarily to partisan voters, but also from the fact that this electorate is quite small. Figure 2.2 shows that primary election turnout in

⁵ It should be noted that many of these primaries are also uncompetitive, for some of the same reasons as general elections (Ansolabehere et al. 2010).

congressional midterms has declined considerably since the early 20th century.⁶ In the 1930s – roughly two decades after the widespread adoption of direct primaries⁷ – total turnout was comparatively high, with a maximum of 40% in 1938 (see also Boatright 2025). But starting in 1970, there began a long-term decline in turnout in primaries. This was true of both parties, though Democrats had a turnout advantage from 1934 until 2010, when this pattern reversed. Since the mid-1990s, total turnout has rarely exceeded 20% of the electorate. In 2018 – a high stakes election – just 9.3% of the voting age population turned out in Republican primaries and 8.9% in Democratic ones.

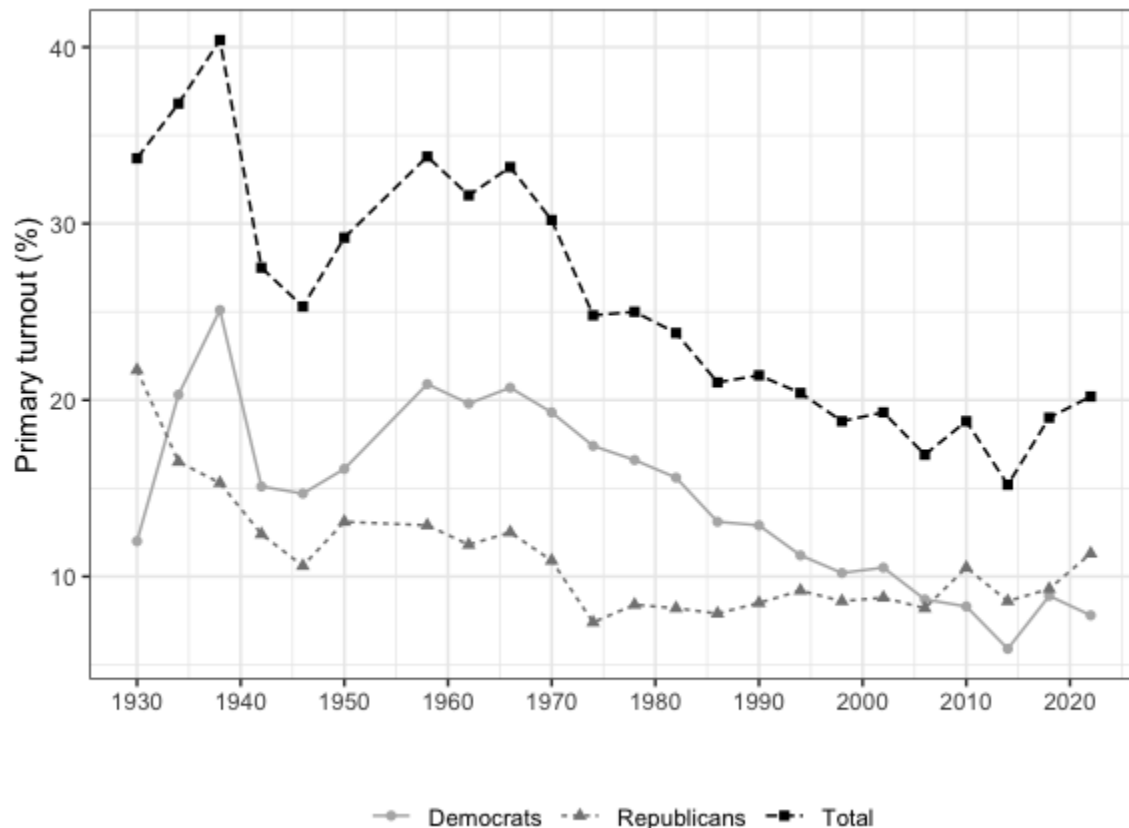


Figure 2.2. Voter Turnout in Congressional Primary Elections

The problem of small electorates is compounded by the first-past-the-post system. One does not need a majority to win, just a plurality. In a crowded field of candidates, one could win with 20-30% of the vote, often among a small set of voters. This problem has only grown as the number of primary contestants has increased. In just one decade, the average number of

⁶ We thank Rob Boatright for sharing this data, which he collected from Malcolm Jewell's *Political Parties and Elections in the American States* (for midterms between 1930 and 1962) and Curtis Gans' Center for the Study of the American Electorate. [CITE HIS AND KAMARCK'S BOOK IF OUT]

⁷ By the end of 1910, all but twelve states had introduced direct primaries. By 1915, every state except for Utah (introduced in 1937), New Mexico (1939), Rhode Island (1947), and Connecticut (1955) had them. The flurry of legislation establishing direct primaries between 1900 and 1915 mostly came in response to anti-party reform pressures that forced parties to allow for more popular input (Lawrence, Donovan, and Bowler 2011).

candidates in US House primaries has increased from 5.2 in 2010 to 7.3 in 2020 (Harris 2022). This situation creates significant opportunities for factional and outsider candidates to get elected with plurality support. And indeed, research shows that more inexperienced candidates are being elected to legislatures (Hansen and Treul 2021).

Primary Voters Are Not Like Rank-and-File Partisans

The nomination is not only porous to a wide range of candidates, but its outcomes reflect the biases of a smaller set of voters in the party (Jacobson 2012). Research shows that primary voters organize candidates along clear policy dimensions and favor those who align with party-consistent issue positions (Henderson et al. 2022). This suggests that ideologically pure candidates should have a better chance of winning in the increasing number of lopsided partisan districts. Even in districts that are not lopsided, candidates' incentives in primary elections are less about moving toward the median district voter than the median primary voter, which comprises mostly ideological partisans (Brady, Han and Pope 2007).

Although some studies suggest primary voters do not have divergent preferences on the issues (Sides et al. 2020), our analysis suggests important differences with respect to a range of characteristics. While demographic divides between primary voters and others are often muted, primary voters tend to be more extreme on issues and highly engaged in politics. Using weighted data from the 2008 to 2024 Cooperative Election Study, Figure 2.3 compares validated congressional primary voters to those who voted only in the general election and partisans who voted in neither.⁸ For simplicity, we aggregate the results across all election cycles, though we make note of interesting changes over time as well.

In many ways, primary voters look mostly like their general-only and non-voting copartisans. They are about as likely to be female, only a bit wealthier and, in the Democratic Party, attend church at similar rates. But on other dimensions there are critical gaps within both parties. For Democrats, the largest demographic differences are based on race, age, and education. Compared with Democratic non-voters, those who participate in primaries are 31 percentage points more likely to be older than 55 and 20 percentage points more likely to be white. Critically, 55% of Democratic primary voters have a college education compared to just 33% of non-primary voters. These educated voters have distinctive and more liberal positions than non-college educated Democrats (Cohn 2021). The gaps between primary voters and general-only voters are somewhat narrower but still noticeable.

In the Republican Party we observe gaps between primary and non-primary voters on many of the same dimensions, with the largest differences reflected in age, education and church attendance. Compared to the Democrats, the GOP differences do not appear as large, but they are important for our story about radicalization. Republican voters tend to be much older, more educated (although the gap for education is much larger for Democratic primary voters), and more likely to attend church weekly. They are also about 2 percentage points less likely to be female. All of these characteristics, except for education, reflect identities perceived to be threatened by a society becoming more secular and more equal for women and non-whites.

⁸ One major advantage of the CES data is that it uses public voter files to obtain *validated* voting records for respondents, reducing instances where respondents mistakenly or purposefully state they voted in an election when they did not. Across this time period, the weighted percentage of Democrats who had validated congressional primary voting records was 30% while the share of Republicans was 34%. Another 30% of Democrats and Republicans voted only in the general election.

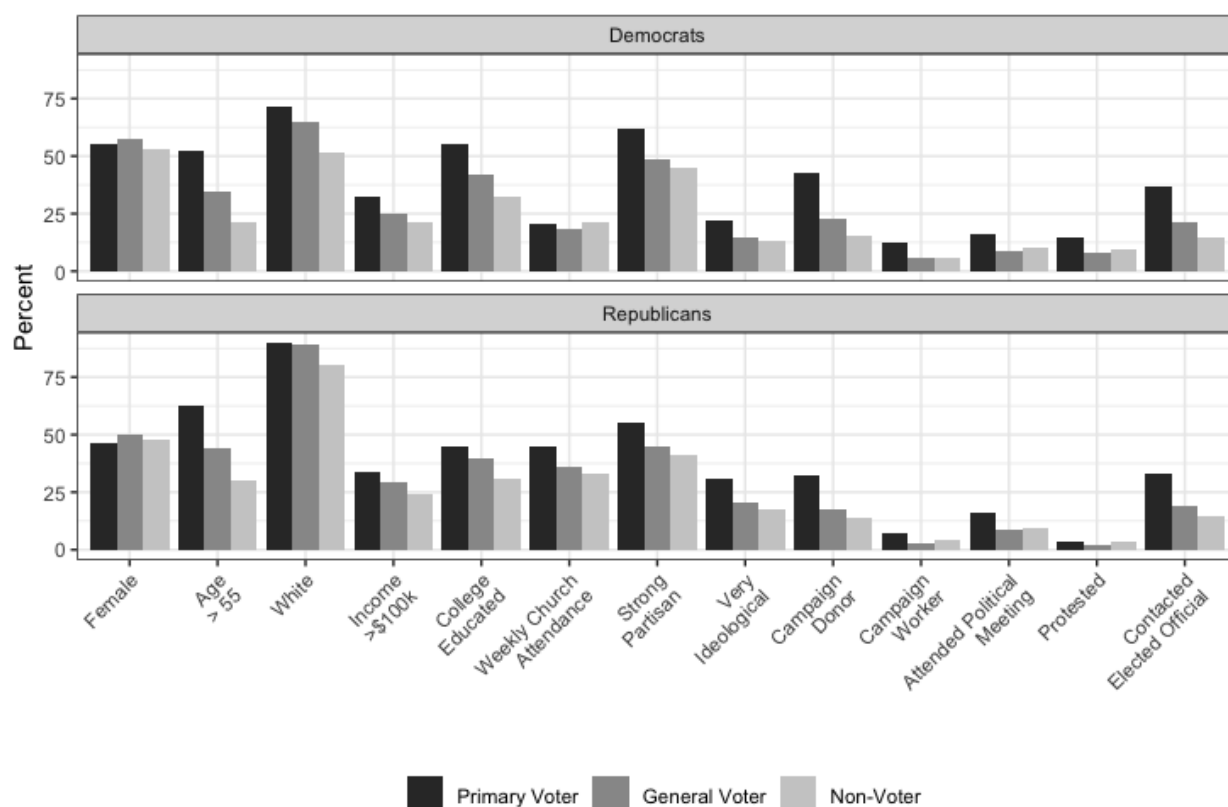


Figure 2.3. Characteristics of Primary Voters, General-Only Voters, and Non-Voting Partisans, 2008-2024.

It is important to note, moreover, that some primary voters amplify their influence in other ways. In both parties they do not simply vote in partisan nominations, but they engage more intensely in politics. Republican primary voters are much more likely than non-voters to give money (an 18 percentage point gap), contact public officials (19 percentage point gap), attend political meetings (8 percentage point gap), or work on a political campaign (4 percentage point gap). The engagement gaps between primary and general voters are narrower but still substantial. These forms of costly political engagement send strong signals to candidates and officeholders, making them more attentive to this activist constituency (Hill 2022). Due to their deep involvement in politics, these citizens are the ones that candidates are hearing from most often. Our contention here is that these *activist primary voters* carry even greater weight than those who just vote in nominating contests, and certainly matter more to candidates than those who do not participate in primaries at all.

This unrepresentative engagement might be less important if these activist primary voters shared the same preferences as other, less active primary voters or the rank-and-file who do not vote in primaries. But as we show below, they do not. To add more nuance to discussions of the primary electorate, we separate those who participate in party nominations *and* either give money or work on campaigns (the activist primary voters) from those who just vote in primaries. We focus on these two forms of electoral engagement because they are costly actions that matter to officeholders (e.g., Kalla and Broockman 2016). As Table 2.1 shows, between 2008 and 2024,

45% of validated Democratic primary voters and 34% of validated GOP primary voters said they donated to a candidate and/or worked on a campaign.

	Activist (Campaign Donor or Worker)	Campaign Donor	Campaign Worker
Democratic Primary Voters	45%	43%	12%
Republican Primary Voters	32%	32%	7%

Table 2.1. Electoral Activism in the Primary Electorate, 2008-2024.

These activist primaries are an especially vocal minority in each party. As we show, they pay more attention to politics and are more knowledgeable about it. They have more constrained ideologies and are better able to discern the ideologies of candidates and parties. They also tend to hold more populist beliefs about politics and oppose bipartisan compromise, especially within the Republican Party. Even if the average primary voter is not all that different from general-only voters, and therefore not playing a leading role in polarization, these activists are quite distinct across a range of dimensions and seem to use primaries (among other strategies) to advance their particular preferences. By virtue of their activism within and beyond primaries, they send stronger signals than others – signals that the parties seem to be responding to.

Figure 2.4 highlights the unique nature of these activists relative to other primary voters, general-only voters, and non-voters, using data from the 2024 CES. In both parties, activist primary voters are most likely to identify as strong partisans and very ideological, though the differences between activist and non-activist primary voters are not particularly large. Where the activists really stand out is in their attention to and knowledge of politics. More than 85% of activist primary voters in both parties say they follow the news most of the time, compared to 64% for Democratic primary voters and 68% for Republican primary voters who did not also donate or work on a campaign. Activist primary voters also know more about politics. Among Republicans, activists are 17 percentage points more likely than regular primary voters to know which party controls the US House, US Senate, and governor’s office in their state, and 9 percentage points more likely to know the partisan affiliations of their two US Senators and their Representative. The differences for Democrats are 13 and 19 percentage points, respectively. And when it comes to assessing the ideology of their Senators and congressperson, activist primary voters are a bit more likely to be correct, and all types of primary voters correctly gauge ideology at higher rates than general-only and non-voters.⁹

⁹ Respondents on the 2024 CES were asked to rate the ideology of their two US Senators and their Representative on a 7-point ideology scale. Using DW-Nominate scores, we clustered each of these members of Congress into 7 bins and assessed how accurate respondents were in placing members on the ideological spectrum. We considered an ideological placement “correct” if the respondent was no more than 1 ideological unit away from the DW-Nominate bins (e.g. saying a member in the most liberal bin was “very liberal” or “liberal”).

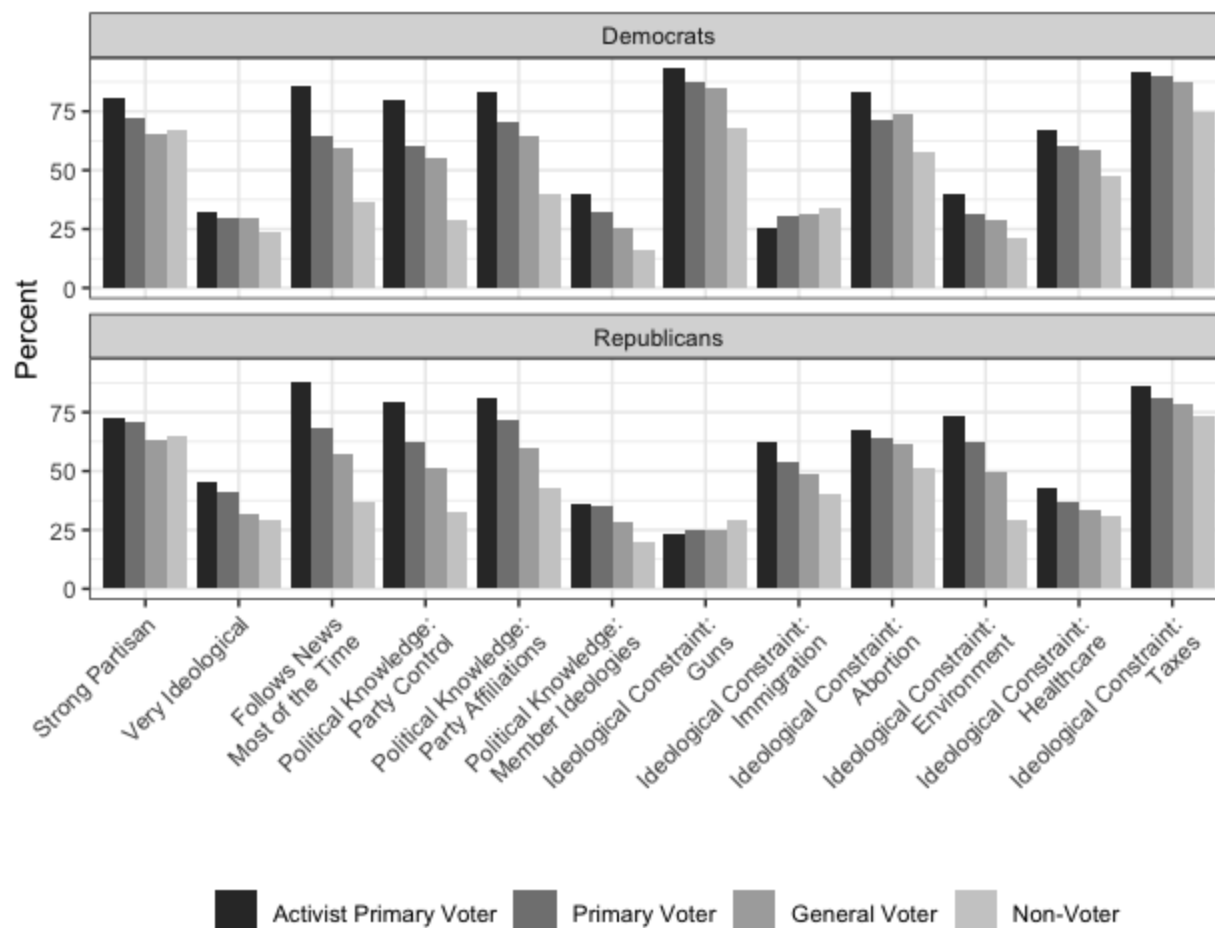


Figure 2.4. Political characteristics of activist primary voters, other primary voters, general voters, and non-voters, 2024.

These elevated levels of political knowledge and attention likely allow activist primary voters to use their political participation to select candidates who reflect their preferences. Importantly, these activist primary voters are more ideologically constrained – adopting consistently liberal or conservative perspectives – across a series of salient issue areas.¹⁰ Figure 2.4 shows that, for every issue except gun rights, Republican activist primary voters are more constrained than any other subgroup, including other primary voters. The largest gaps occur on the issues of the environment (73% constrained versus 61% of other primary voters, 50% of general voters, and just 29% of non-voters) and immigration (62% constrained versus 54% or less for all other groups). On all issues except for guns and healthcare, a majority of primary voters have constrained views. Interestingly, Democrats overall are more constrained than Republicans, except in the cases of immigration and the environment. On abortion, the environment, and healthcare, activist Democratic primary voters are between 6 and 11 percentage points more constrained than non-active primary voters.

¹⁰ We describe a respondent as ideologically constrained if they always adopt the more liberal (or more conservative) position across all issue questions within each category.

Activist primary voters differ in other important ways as well. This is particularly true in the GOP, where activist primary voters are most likely to identify as strong conservatives and tend to have warmer feelings for the Trump insurgency, hold stronger populist attitudes, and oppose compromise by their partisan officeholders. These characteristics combine to increase the odds of electing polarizing and insurgent candidates who are more likely to reject bipartisanship and even engage in aggressive and norm-breaking politics.

Beyond policy preferences, Republican activists are consistently more likely to identify as strong conservatives, as seen in Figure 2.5. After a party-wide decline in very conservative identification from 2008 to 2016, activist primary voters in particular have become much more conservative. From 2018 to 2024, 40% or more have identified this way. During this period, activist primary voters were between 3 and 8 percentage points more likely than other primary voters to say they are very conservative, and 12 to 16 percentage points more likely than general-only voters. Within the GOP, primary activists are consistently the most ideological part of the base.

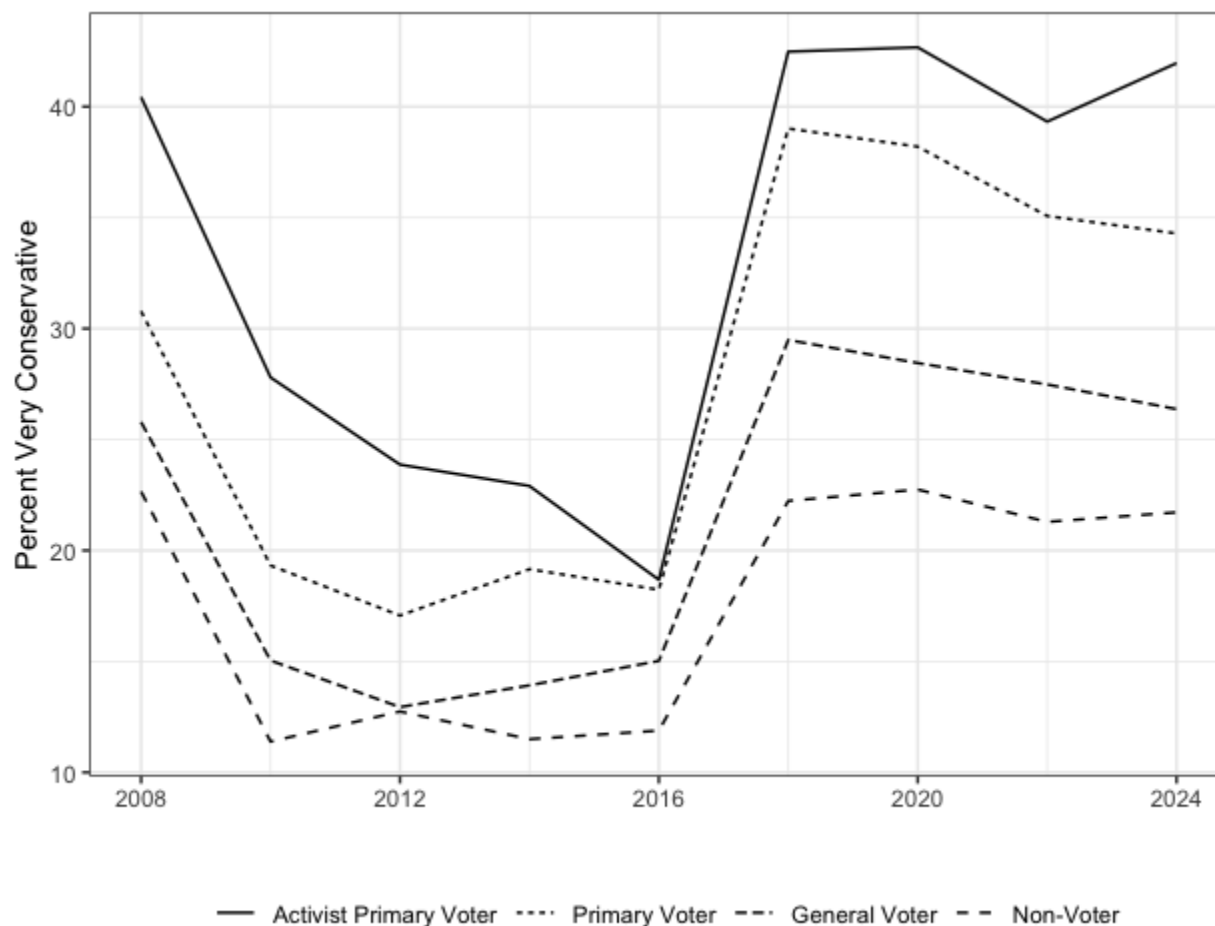


Figure 2.5. Very Conservative Ideologies among Republican Primary Voters (Activist and Not), General-Only Voters, and Non-Voters, 2008-2024.

To further our understanding of the differences between Republican primary activists, primary voters, and other rank-and-file members, we fielded several custom questions on a

subsample from the 2024 Cooperative Election Study.¹¹ Again using validated voter turnout data, we find that primaries appear to give greater weight to voters with strong populist attitudes, especially in the Republican Party. Figure 2.6 shows the share of each subgroup that agreed (either somewhat or strongly) with three different populist statements. Overall, Republicans are more populist in their beliefs than Democrats, but among Republicans, active primary voters stand out as the most anti-elite.

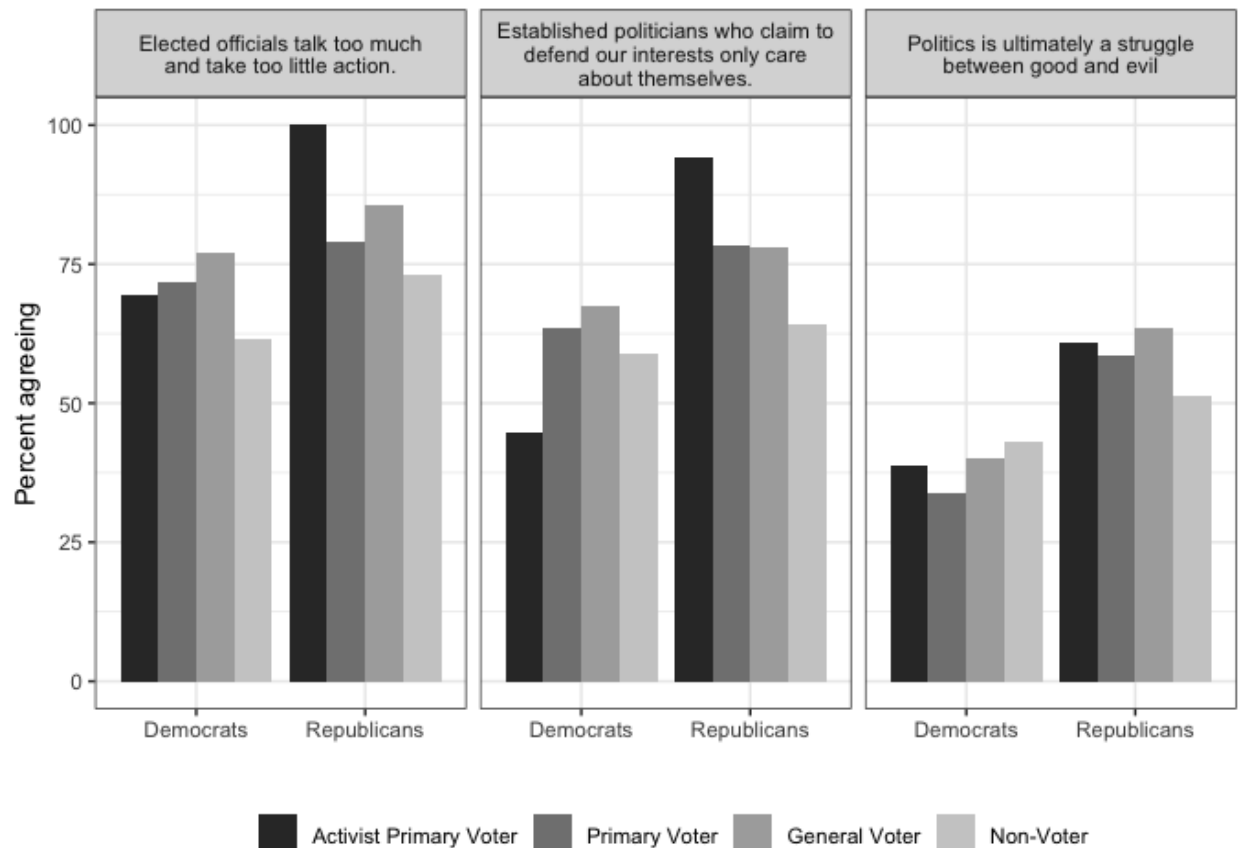


Figure 2.6. Support for populist beliefs, 2024.

For example, when asked if they think “elected officials talk too much and take too little action,” all activist Republican primary voters agree with the claim compared to 79% of non-activist primary voters, 85% percent of Republican general voters, and 73% of non-voters.¹² Among Democrats, general election voters are most likely to agree with this statement (77%), while activist Democratic primary voters are 30 percentage points less likely than activist Republican primary voters to agree. Similarly, activist Republican primary voters are by far the most likely to say that “established politicians who claim to defend our interests only take care of themselves,” with 94% agreeing with this statement. The only area where activist GOP primary voters were not the most populist is on the question of whether “politics is ultimately a struggle

¹¹ Our 1,000-person sample included 417 Democrats and 246 Republicans. The sample is weighted to represent the US population.

¹² Our sample of Republican activist primary voters is regrettably small, with just 18 respondents in this category. Among this group, 11 “strongly agreed” with this statement, while 7 “somewhat agreed”.

between good and evil.” Here, all types of Republicans are more likely than Democrats to view politics in highly moralistic terms. Taken together, the results highlight that the most active Republican primary voters are the most likely to hold populist attitudes, and much more likely than similar Democratic primary voters.

Additionally, we probed respondents’ attitudes about compromise, which is an important norm in democratic politics. News accounts of the Tea Party and MAGA insurgencies indicate a “take-no-prisoners” style of politics in which compromise is frowned upon. Republicans who compromise on positions are called RINOs (Republican in Name Only). This is an epithet used frequently by candidates and activists to describe Republican politicians in primary elections who are believed to compromise too much on conservative positions. Despite fairly widespread support for political compromises, candidates are often fearful of being punished by a small but dedicated core of primary voters for crossing the aisle (Anderson, Butler, and Harbridge-Yong 2020).

There are important differences in attitudes toward compromise both within and across the two parties. In our survey, we see much more resistance from Republican primary voters than for other groups. When asked to choose between two statements – “I like elected officials who stick to their positions” and “I like elected officials who make compromises with people they disagree with” – Republicans of all stripes were more than twice as likely as Democrats to reject compromise. Overall, 79% of Republicans said they want elected officials to stick to their positions, compared to just 37% of Democrats. Most importantly, primary voters hold asymmetric attitudes within each party. In the GOP, 84% of all primary voters (and 95% of activist primary voters) opposed compromise, while 75% of general-only voters non-voters expressed similar views. Among Democrats, the numbers are flipped: just 21% of all primary voters opposed compromise, compared with 32% of general-only voters and 53% of non-voters. Furthermore, the lowest level of opposition to compromise, at 15%, came from activist Democratic primary voters. In other words, while those who oppose compromise are *most* active within the GOP, they are the *least* active among Democratic partisans.

We were not just interested in abstract support for political compromise. We also asked respondents how likely they were to support a candidate who compromised on a number of prominent issues that cleave the two major parties: abortion, gun control, taxes, and immigration. Figure 2.7 shows, for each issue, the percentage of respondents in each category who said they were “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to support a compromising candidate. In other words, the bars are a measure of how supportive respondents were of compromise across the different issue areas.

Among Democrats, there appears to be an inconsistent relationship between activism and attitudes about compromise. On the issue of gun control, for example, activist primary voters are less likely than others to support compromising candidates. But on the issues of immigration and taxes, activist primary voters are most likely to support compromisers. And on the issue of abortion, all types of primary voters are just as likely to support compromise as non-voters. Importantly, on all four issues, Democrats overall are more supportive of compromise than Republicans. The lowest level of support for compromise among Democrats occurs on the issue of abortion – which is not surprising given the party’s support for issues important to women – but even here Republican voters are less supportive of compromise.

Indeed, on the Republican side the findings are entirely different. Overall, Republicans are much less likely to support compromise. There is not a single issue we asked about for which a majority of any GOP group supports compromising candidates. And on each of these issues,

primary voters – particularly those who also donate or work on campaigns – are much less likely than general or non-voters to support such candidates.

The biggest gaps between primary and general voter attitudes occur on abortion and taxes. For abortion, 24% of general-only voters would support compromise, compared to just 15% of primary voters and 9% of activist primary voters. On taxes, the rates of support are 32% for general voters, 23% for primary voters, and 10% for activist primary voters. And on immigration, nearly 4 in 5 primary and general voters would be unlikely to vote for a compromising candidate, which is unsurprising given the salience of the issue in Trump’s GOP. Notably, primary activists exhibit almost *no* support for compromising candidates across these four issues. Fewer than 1 in 10 support compromise on gun control, abortion, and taxes, and *none* support compromise on immigration.¹³

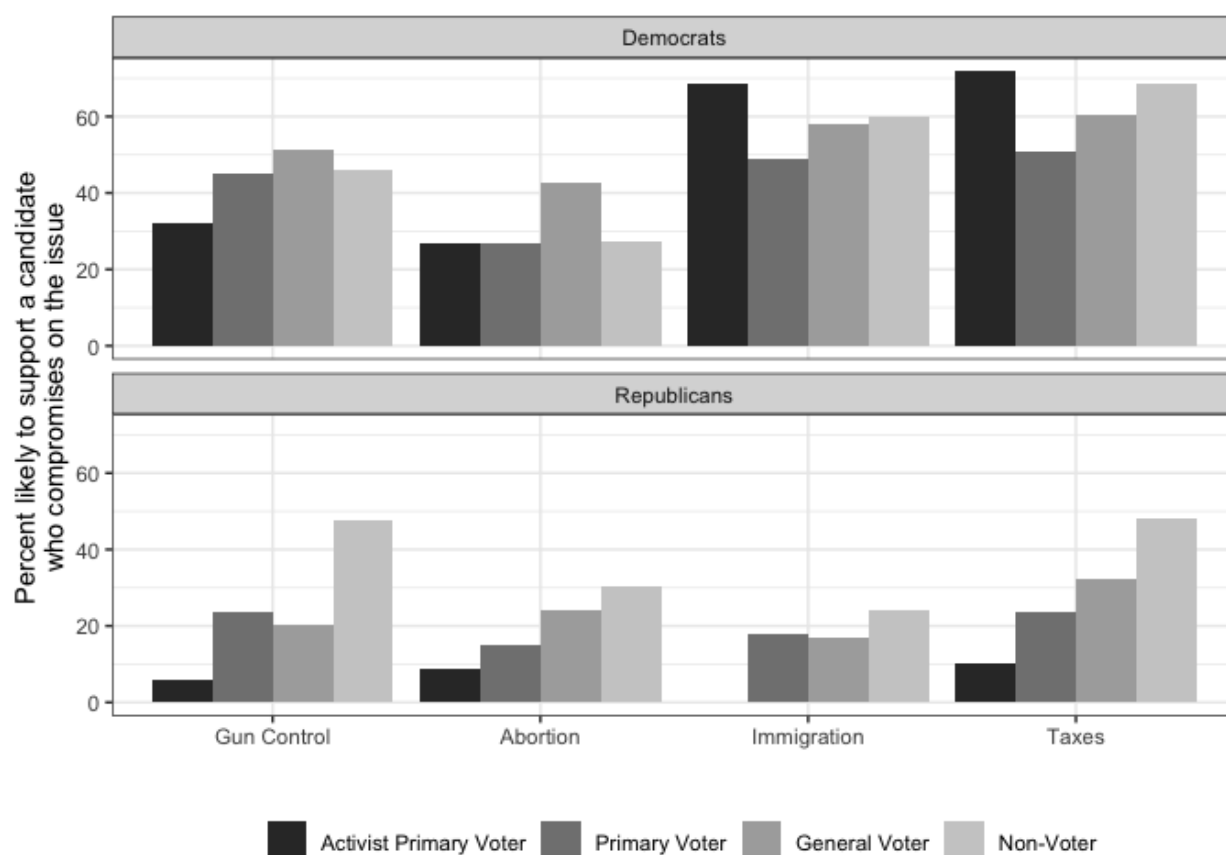


Figure 2.7. Support for candidates who compromise on the issues, 2024.

Other research has demonstrated that officeholders fear retribution from primary voters for compromising – a significant minority of primary voters are willing to penalize legislators who collaborate with the opposing party (Anderson et al. 2020). Our findings reaffirm this point. On these four issues, small minorities of Republicans – and especially primary voters – support political compromise. On issues like immigration, a supermajority of primary voters would

¹³ Recall that the sample of GOP activist primary voters is just 18 respondents. Among them, 13 said they’d be very unlikely to support a candidate who compromised on immigration, while 3 said they’d be somewhat unlikely and 2 said they’d be neither more nor less likely.

punish lawmakers for compromising. This opposition to compromise is even stronger among those who are particularly active in Republican electorate politics. The attitudes of Republican primary voters, especially the most active, might go a long way toward explaining why it has been so challenging to forge a bipartisan compromise on this issue. This has enabled the Trump Administration to pursue an incredibly aggressive immigration policy that is largely opposed by a majority of the public.¹⁴ Politicians appear highly attentive to intensive voters on particular issues, and are willing to vote against the preferences of a less engaged majority (Hill 2022).

One last point concerns the ideological positioning of primary voters. It is not just that primary voters tend to hold more extreme ideologies and more party-consistent issue positions. In both parties, primary voters are also much more likely to position themselves as more ideologically extreme relative to their perceptions of their political party. That is to say, they tend to view their own party as *too moderate* for their liking.

Using the time-series data from the 2010-2024 Cooperative Election Surveys, Figure 2.8 shows the percentage within each subgroup who view their own party as more moderate than themselves on a 7-point ideology scale. We can see clearly that in 2010 – the year of the Tea Party insurgency – a large number of Republicans saw the party as too moderate. This was especially true of activist primary voters – 71% placed the party as more moderate than themselves, compared to 56% of other primary voters and 49% of general election Republicans. This was the year, of course, that many Republican incumbents lost their primaries to Tea Party candidates. Since then, the share of activist primary voters viewing the party as more moderate has averaged 59%, exceeding the share of Democratic activists in every cycle except for 2020. In contrast, the average for non-active Republican primary voters is 46%, and it is less than 38% for Republicans who only vote in the general election. In every cycle we examine, a majority of GOP activists (but not other primary voters) has viewed the Republican Party as more moderate than themselves.

Outside of Democratic activists, Democrats of all stripes are much less likely to perceive the party as moderate relative to themselves, at least until recently. Additionally, the distance between regular primary voters and other Democrats is not as large as it is for Republicans. However, there is some evidence that Democrats may now face a similar internal tension. We observe an uptick in the share of Democratic voters who place the party as more moderate than they place themselves starting in 2018. This may have much to do with the polarizing impact of the Trump presidency. Regardless, the patterns suggest that there is room for potential insurgencies in the nomination process from the left, and that primary activists could play a leading role in driving these dynamics.

¹⁴ <https://www.gelliottmorris.com/p/data>

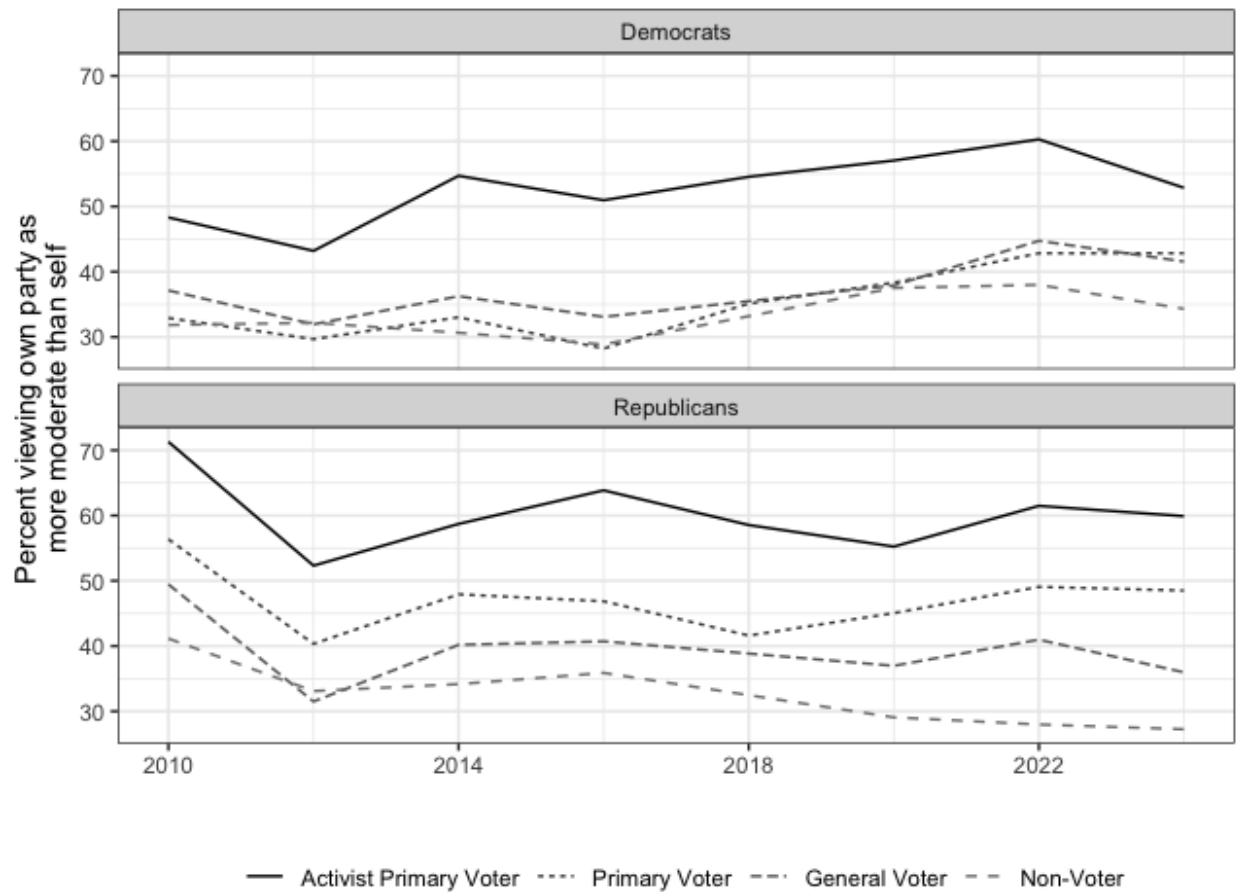


Figure 2.8. Percent of partisans who view their preferred party as more moderate than their own ideology, 2010-2024.

Given these differences between the parties, and especially within the Republican primary electorate, we find it is hard to agree with arguments that primaries are not necessarily affecting polarization and radicalization (see, for example, Hirano and Snyder 2020; Sides et al. 2020). Our analysis is hardly definitive, but it illustrates key differences between primary voters – especially those who augment their participation through other forms of electoral activism – and other rank-and-file party members. Activists and primary voters are “more so” than others on certain demographic dimensions and in terms of their ideological extremism, populist attitudes, and views of the issues and parties. These differences are logically connected to a higher potential for partisan insurgency within the Republican Party. The porousness of the nomination process, in tandem with the biased set of voters and their uncompromising attitudes, make it more likely that insurgencies will have power within the party despite the more measured preferences of the rank-and-file. Even as a minority faction within the party, these voters communicate their intensity through multiple forms of costly engagement – giving money, contacting officials, attending political meetings – all of which gives them substantial influence over candidates and officeholders (Hill 2022).

We do not doubt that, given rapid social and economic changes, the Republican Party would be facing strong factionalism during this period, with or without primary elections. However, the mechanism for winnowing and selecting nominees fuels a populism that draws in

inexperienced and performative candidates, while short-circuiting an elite deliberative process that might filter out some of the norm-breakers and enable a brokered compromise within the party. And, beyond the voters, elite gatekeeping is further challenged by the growing constellation of organized interests active in nominating contests.

Partisan Interest Groups Strategically Campaign in Primaries

We know from previous research that some interest groups strategically engage in primary elections to nominate a candidate who strongly favors their particular issues. Unlike the parties, outside ideological interests face fewer normative pressures to stay out of intra-party contests, and they are willing to risk general election defeat to advance their causes (Boatright 2022). But losing a party-held seat is not often a concern. Groups seek out the most lopsided partisan districts because they know primary electorates will be small and ideologically in their favor (Porter 2021). Lopsided districts are also precisely where extreme ideological groups tend to recruit their favored candidates and focus their resources because they only need to win one election to gain a seat (La Raja and Rauch 2020). They benefit from media coverage that amplifies the perception that these primary challenges are prevalent and impactful. This heightened attention can influence political narratives and the behavior of incumbents, even if the actual number of challenges remains relatively stable (Boatright 2013). Research shows that ideological challengers have accounted for a significant portion of the rise of extreme partisanship in Congress (Barton 2023).

Table 2.1 demonstrates these dynamics, listing the top non-party, multi-candidate committees active in partisan primaries in 2022 and 2024.¹⁵ The table states which party's primary the group was most active in, the total they spent in these races, and the contests where they spent more than \$1 million. On the Republican side, conservative groups like the Club for Growth, American Dream Federal Action, the Conservative Outsider PAC, Americans for Prosperity, and the Protect Freedom PAC are well-represented. Many of these groups engaged in primaries to determine the GOP nominee for competitive Senate seats in Arizona, Ohio, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, often entering on the side of a conservative, populist outsider. But there are sometimes electoral costs for this involvement in competitive races. In Arizona in 2022, for example, Defend American Jobs and Club for Growth Action spent heavily to support Blake Masters, an inexperienced and controversial candidate who went on to lose the general election.

The story is different in House races, where outside groups mainly spent in primaries for party safe seats. Here, their involvement is a way to move the party toward their preferences by supporting like-minded candidates in seats they are assured to win, so long as they can lock up the nomination. Many of these primary matchups, particularly in the GOP, represent broader factional conflicts within the party. In 2022, for example, Club for Growth Action spent more than \$2.6 million to support Mary Miller, a far-right incumbent endorsed by Donald Trump, who defeated a more moderate incumbent, Rodney Davis, in the redrawn IL-15 district. This same

¹⁵ We exclude expenditures from party committees and single-candidate Super PACs. When compared to the totals spent by other Super PACs, party committees like the NRCC, DCCC, and DSCC rank among the top spenders in primaries, but in the aggregate parties are vastly outspent by non-party committees (see Figure 3.1 in the next chapter). Furthermore, party committees tend to spend early (i.e. in primaries) to impact the general election rather than to enter into intraparty disputes. With regard to single-candidate super PACs, it is worth noting that two of the top spending groups in 2022 supported outsiders JD Vance and Blake Masters.

group spent \$1.3 million against Davis, who had voted to create a commission to investigate the January 6th insurrection. The outside groups that got involved in this race were able to accomplish two objectives: supporting a staunchly conservative ally while also purging the party of a more moderate renegade.

2022			
Committee	Party Primary	Total Spent (in millions)	Top Races (> \$1 million)
Club for Growth Action	Republican	\$47.5	NC Senate, OH Senate, AL Senate, PA Senate, IL-15, FL-13, AZ Senate, MO-7, NC-13, WV-2, NV Senate
Protect Our Future PAC	Democratic	\$22.7	OR-6, TX-30, GA-7, MI-13, OH-11, KY-3
Take Back the House 2022	Republican	\$22.2	CA-20
United Democracy Project	Democratic	\$13.6	NY-16, MD-4, MO-1, CA-47, MI-13, MI-11, MO Senate, MD-3, IN-8
American Dream Federal Action	Republican	\$11.6	IL-15, IN-9
Congressional Leadership Fund	Republican	\$9.0	NH-1
Conservative Outsider PAC	Republican	\$8.2	VA-5, IL-15, NC Senate, AL Senate, FL-13
Americans for Prosperity Action	Republican	\$9.4	MO Senate, WI Senate

2024			
Committee	Primary	Total Spent (in millions)	Top Races (> \$1 million)

United Democracy Project	Democratic	\$29.1	NY-16, MO-1, CA-47, MO Senate, MD-3, IN-8
Club for Growth Action	Republican	\$15.9	OH Senate, WV Senate, SC-1, MO-3, NC-6, IN-3
Fairshake	Democratic	\$14.3	CA Senate, NY-16, MO-1
Defend American Jobs	Republican	\$13.7	IN Senate, SC-4, UT Senate, WV Senate
Protect Progress	Democratic	\$13.3	VA-10, AL-2, WA-6, AZ-3, MI-13
Protect the House 2024	Republican	\$12.8	CA-20
America Leads Action	Republican	\$8.8	NC-8, IN-3, IN-8, CO-5, TX-26, MO-3
Protect Freedom PAC	Republican	\$8.5	VA-7, MI Senate, MN-1, OK Senate
House Victory Project 2024	Democratic	\$8.0	
Americans for Prosperity Action	Republican	\$7.9	MT Senate
WinSenate	Republican	\$6.8	WI Senate, AZ Senate
Conservative Outsider PAC	Republican	\$6.6	VA-5

Table 2.1. Top Committee Spenders in Primary Elections, 2022 and 2024.

Increasingly, the most expensive and contested GOP primaries revolve around questions of allegiance to Trump and the MAGA movement. This was also the case in the 2024 nomination for the staunchly Republican SC-4 district. This race was between Trump-backed incumbent William Timmons and state representative Adam Morgan, a member of the South Carolina Freedom Caucus who was supported by Matt Gaetz. During the primary, Defend American Jobs spent nearly \$2.3 million supporting Timmons, who won with 51.6% of the vote.

More broadly, since Trump's election in 2016 MAGA-aligned groups have increasingly spent in select primaries to punish candidates who break with Trump and to advance more MAGA-friendly candidates. Trump himself has been quite willing to threaten wayward

incumbents with a primary challenge.¹⁶ During his first term, he frequently confronted the conservative Freedom Caucus’ opposition to elements of his agenda by threatening to “fight them, & Dems, in 2018!”¹⁷ After losing the 2020 election and pushing to prevent Congress from certifying the results, Trump vowed to “primary the hell out of” members who went against his wishes.¹⁸ He similarly threatened Republicans who participated in the Congressional investigation into January 6th, with Liz Cheney seeing more than \$730,000 in oppositional independent spending in her reelection bid, much of that spent by Trump-aligned super PACs. And heading into the 2026 election, Senator Thomas Massie (R-KY), who backed Ron DeSantis’ challenge to Trump in the 2024 primaries and voted against his signature spending bill in 2025, has spurred the creation of a Trump-aligned super PAC, Kentucky MAGA, which intends to recruit a challenger and spend heavily against the incumbent.¹⁹

These primary threats matter, even if they do not come to fruition or fail to knock off disfavored candidates, because primary elections produce more polarized candidates not only via the *selection* of more extreme nominees, but also through the strategic *adaptation* of incumbent lawmakers who fear an ideological challenge (Boatright 2013; Cowburn 2024).

For this reason, interest groups which are dissatisfied with party positions see primaries as a low cost way to change the party (La Raja and Rauch 2020). They only have to mobilize a relatively small set of dissatisfied voters. Moreover, while we have demonstrated that primary voters are distinctive from general election voters, the choice to pick extreme or inexperienced candidates may have more to do with the information environment, which is heavily shaped by interest groups. Primary voters may struggle to identify candidates who align with their preferences due to the lack of party cues, which makes them more reliant on other signals, like endorsements from interest groups (Calao et al 2025).

Even if the candidate preferred by an interest group does not win they have instilled fear in the incumbent. The Tea Party movement especially sought to remake the Republican Party through primaries (Blum 2020). In one famous example, Tea Party upstart Dave Brat beat Eric Cantor (VA-7), the House Majority Leader, despite the incumbent outspending his campaign 40 to 1. More broadly, the dissatisfaction with the established party has brought forth more candidates who lack experience in politics (Porter and Steelman 2023; Porter and Treul, forthcoming). They are able to raise money more easily through fundraising platforms and groups that seek to disrupt the status quo.

This problem appears to be more acute on the right. Ideological and factional primary challenges arose earlier and have been more widespread in the GOP (Cowburn 2024). Even in the “wave” election cycle of 2018, when Democrats saw an incredibly large number of primary candidates and gained a significant number of seats in the House, outsider involvement in primary elections was fairly low, especially compared to the group-backed Tea Party insurgency in 2010. Furthermore, the groups that did get involved tended to have narrow issue concerns or back candidates with particular demographic characteristics, in contrast to the types of insurgent

¹⁶ Conversely, his endorsements increased candidate fundraising and polling performance in the 2022 GOP primaries (Blum, Cowburn and Masket 2024).

¹⁷ <https://www.cnn.com/2017/03/30/politics/freedom-caucus-trump-tweet>

¹⁸ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackbrewster/2021/01/06/they-will-get-primaried-trump-allies-threaten-republicans-who-wont-object-to-electoral-college/>

¹⁹ <https://www.axios.com/2025/06/22/trump-massie-congress-2026>

ideological concerns that motivated Tea Party groups as they sought to fundamentally remake the GOP (Boatright and Albert 2021).

Some of the difference also has to do with the willingness of the formal party organizations to get involved in primaries to help incumbents. While neither party wants to be seen as tinkering in popular nominations, the Democrats have been more willing to engage in congressional primaries and more successful at supporting establishment candidates in the face of progressive challengers (Cowburn 2024). The Democratic Party is also more likely than the Republican Party to coordinate with party-aligned interest groups to back consensus candidates in open seat primaries (Manento 2021). We suspect the GOP's reluctance to take such steps stems from the more populist attitudes of their voters. Republican primary voters in particular tend to oppose elite influence or pluralistic power sharing in nomination contests (Albert and La Raja 2021). The result has been a party more vulnerable to hostile assaults in nominations.

That said, the contemporary political environment potentially creates a more welcoming environment for inexperienced candidates in both parties. Comparative research suggests that outsiders are more likely to pursue primary challenges when the electorate is highly polarized (Buisseret and Van Weelden 2020). They expect to unite, rather than split, the party in the general election since the polarized voters are unlikely to vote for the other party. At the same time, elites are less likely to block an outsider because they fear the candidate will run as a third-party candidate, taking votes away from their party. The polarized system explains why parties might be less resistant to an outsider as a nominee. High polarization weakens elite control over nominations, explaining the paradox of “strong partisanship, weak parties.”

Summary

The shift to popular nominations, once hailed as a democratizing reform, has hollowed out the institutional capacity of parties to regulate who speaks for them. As primaries replaced elite-led selection processes, the electorate deciding nominees grew smaller, more ideologically intense, and more hostile to compromise. In tandem with demographic and geographic partisan sorting, this dynamic makes it more likely that candidates emerge not from broad consensus but from narrow, grievance-driven factions. In this context, party elites have fewer tools to filter out inexperienced, performative, or extreme candidates, especially in districts where the general election is a foregone conclusion. The Tea Party and MAGA movements seized this opportunity, pushing the GOP in a populist, anti-establishment direction that most party professionals could not—and did not—resist. In essence, the “long war” described by Shafer and Wagner (2020) over party structural conflict appears to have been won.

Crucially, this breakdown of gatekeeping does not affect both parties equally. The Republican coalition is less internally diverse, more culturally aggrieved, more opposed to elite influence, and more willing to punish compromise. That makes it particularly fertile ground for insurgent candidates backed by ideological groups and mobilized by partisan media. While Democrats face internal tensions too, their factional challenges have been more constrained by cross-pressures and elite intervention. The GOP's vulnerabilities in nominations reveal the broader fragility of party institutions in an era when democratic reforms have empowered mobilized minorities at the expense of institutional mediation.

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