

Getting Primaried: The Growth and Consequences of Ideological Primaries

Prepared for the “State of the Parties” Conference, the Ray C. Bliss Center, the University of Akron, October 14-16, 2009.

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Abstract

There has been much discussion in the past few years of congressional incumbents being “primaried” – that is, of aggressive challenges being mounted from the left (for Democrats) or from the right (for Republicans) on the grounds that the incumbent has not been sufficiently partisan. In this paper I categorize the reasons behind primary challenges to incumbents from 1970 through 2008. Analysis of these reasons shows that there has been little change in the number of such primary challenges over this time period. Primary challenges are usually waged on the basis of scandal or the perceived ineptitude of the incumbent, or are a result of redistricting or racial divisions. There is some relationship between ideological primary challenges and changes in party support in the electorate. For the most part, however, the rhetoric behind “primaried” may be an effective tool for ideological groups to threaten moderate incumbents, but this rhetoric bears little resemblance to the reality of congressional primary competition. This rhetoric by itself, however, may be effective, particularly within the Republican Party, in heightening partisan divisions.

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During the 2004 and 2006 elections, a new word entered the American political lexicon: the verb “to primary,” meaning to mount an aggressive primary campaign against an incumbent. Conservative and liberal bloggers spent much time discussing incumbent members of Congress who, in their opinion, needed to be primaried. Calls for primarying reached a fever pitch during the 2008 election cycle; a quick search of blogs such as DailyKos, Democratic Underground, and Free Republic turns up numerous calls for politicians to be primaried, based on their general record or on one or two high-profile votes. In a few cases, these bloggers took aim at incumbents who were ineffective or had been accused of corruption. More often, however, these incumbents were criticized for being insufficiently partisan.

One could be forgiven for assuming that primarying has become widespread. In 2008, a new labor-sponsored PAC, the Working for Us PAC, was formed to support primary challengers; the group announced on its website that “we will encourage Democrats to act like Democrats - and if they don't - they better get out of the way for Democrats who will.” And the media took note; after organized labor and progressive groups combined to back primary challenger Donna Edwards in her defeat of Maryland incumbent Al Wynn, the *Baltimore Sun* quoted a spokesperson for one liberal think tank speculating that “it is possible that this is part of a larger, anti-incumbent trend” (Olson and Brown 2008). Likewise, an article in *The Politico* noted that Wynn’s defeat “had nothing to do with the more customary reasons why incumbents fail to win nomination” (Kraushaar 2008) – that is, he was not done in by redistricting or scandal, but by being insufficiently partisan. The *Politico* article went on to predict that 2008 would be “a rough election cycle for incumbents facing serious intraparty challenges.”

This clamor is one reflection of the prominence of the Club for Growth’s strategy for funding primary challengers to “RINOs,” or Republicans in Name Only. Since 2000, the Club for Growth, a conservative advocacy group, has bundled contributions for and run television advertisements on behalf of several prominent primary challengers to

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moderate Republican incumbents, including challengers to New Jersey Representative Marge Roukema, New York Representative Sherwood Boehlert, Pennsylvania Senator Arlen Specter, and Rhode Island Senator Lincoln Chafee. The Club for Growth did not succeed in defeating an incumbent until 2006, however, when a conservative challenger ousted moderate first-term Republican Joe Schwarz in Michigan, and it did not succeed in ousting an established Republican until Maryland Representative Wayne Gilchrest was defeated in his 2008 primary.

Despite the fact that the Club has, by its own admission, been most successful in helping candidates in open seat primaries (Noah 2004), its campaigns against incumbent Republicans have clearly attracted more attention than its open seat campaigns. In a well-publicized interview with *The New York Times* in 2003, Club founder Stephen Moore was quoted claiming that incumbents “start wetting their pants” when the Club threatens to run a candidate against them, and that it planned to “scalp” Arlen Specter (Bai 2003). By 2006, the Club’s strategy had led to efforts on the left to mount primary challenges. *The Nation* called for challenges to pro-war Democrats (Nichols 2006), and MoveOn.org singled out prominent Democrats who it claimed were insufficiently liberal or were enabling President Bush’s policies, particularly in Iraq. Among the most celebrated such challenges on the left was Ned Lamont’s victory in the Connecticut Senate primary over Joe Lieberman.

Despite the rhetoric surrounding the “primarying” of incumbents, however, there is reason to be dubious about whether ideological primary challenges are truly anything new, or whether they are more common, or more successful, than they ever were. After all, Franklin Delano Roosevelt famously sought to unseat many New Deal opponents in the 1938 Democratic primaries. Such challenges make little sense in many districts, where an ideological challenger may, if successful, wind up losing the seat in the general election. Even an unsuccessful challenger can so damage the incumbent that the incumbent will go on to lose the general election. As one such challenger, Rhode Island Republican Senate candidate Steve Laffey (2007, 11-33) recounts, the party committees make substantial efforts to ward off divisive primaries; one would expect that, although they were unsuccessful in Laffey’s case, they frequently do succeed. The consensus in literature on the party committees is that they almost always support incumbents facing primary opponents. There are some congressional districts that are so overwhelmingly partisan that the incumbent’s party will hold it no matter who it nominates; in such districts, however, the incumbent is rarely a moderate.

In this paper, I look at primary competition from 1970 through 2008; I categorize all primary challengers who receive more than 25 percent of the vote in these elections as being serious enough to warrant study, even though very few of them were actually victorious. Drawing upon descriptions of these races and my categorization of the motives behind these challenges, I ask two sets of questions. First, are ideological primary challenges in fact on the rise, or have they always been a feature of congressional elections? There is little evidence that they have increased. And second, do these challenges, irrespective of their results, make sense? That is, are the candidates who get primaried for ideological reasons in fact out of step with their districts? On the

Democratic side, they tend to be, but on the Republican side the evidence is more mixed. All of this means that incumbents are no more likely to be primaried today than they were in the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s. Yet the nature of these types of primaries has changed somewhat; there are several signs that point to an increased amount of orchestration of these challenges at the national level, including an absence of strong ideological sentiment on the part of the electorate and an increased nationalization of the financing of ideological primary challenges.

In this paper I am primarily interested in evaluating the reasons for ideological primary challenges, and only secondarily in investigating their results. One might investigate some immediate consequences of these races; clearly few primary challengers win, and clearly moderates of both parties are still with us, albeit in reduced numbers. It is difficult to operationalize Moore's claim about the effects of ideological primary challenges. They may deter moderates from voting against the party, as the Club has repeatedly claimed (see Cillizza 2006; Hacker and Pierson 2005, 54), or they may inspire some incumbents to retire early (as allegedly was the case for Roukema). These consequences are not, however, particularly amenable to testing. The intent here, then, is to measure the extent of the danger for moderates of both parties, and for the overall health of the parties. One might assume from the rhetoric surrounding them that they are ubiquitous, novel, and well-deserved, but the evidence suggests that they are not necessarily any of these things.

Primary Competition in Context

There has been little exploration of the dynamics of congressional primaries in the political science literature, in large part because congressional primaries, House primaries in particular, have had such low visibility. For the purposes of this paper, what we know about congressional primaries can be loosely grouped into three categories: changes in the frequency or competitiveness of primaries over time, the effects of ballot access laws on primary competition, and the effects of primary contests on the general election fortunes of the winning candidates.

Most American states have held congressional primaries since the early 20th century (Galderisi and Ezra 2001). During the early 20th century, as many as 25 percent of Democratic House incumbents and 46 percent of Republican House incumbents ran in contested primaries (Schantz 1980). Approximately 30 percent of incumbents were renominated with less than sixty percent of the vote (Ansolabehere, Hansen, Hirano, and Snyder 2006). Primaries tended to be most competitive in the South, the border South, and the Midwest, and to be least competitive in the Northeast (Turner 1953). Over the course of the 20th century, primaries became fewer and less competitive; during the period from 1960 to 2000, well under ten percent of House incumbents' primaries were competitive (Ansolabehere, Hansen, Hirano, and Snyder 2006). Regional differences in

competition have declined as well, to the point that there is no difference between the South and the North in the frequency of competitive primaries.

There are few analyses of the causes of this decline. The standard account of the development of primaries identifies two different rationales: in the North, primaries were introduced to limit the power of party machines, and in the South, they were introduced in order to increase competition while retaining Democratic Party hegemony. Galderisi and Ezra (2001) note, however, that the parties adapted quickly to primaries; one adaptation was the creation of ballot access rules that can make it difficult for candidates to run (see also Ansolabehere and Gerber 1996). The dramatic increase in incumbent fundraising has been shown to have discouraged general election competition; the same may hold for primary competition as well. Goodliffe and Magleby (2001) have shown that primary challengers to incumbents raise virtually no PAC money, and tend to rely primarily upon their own funds (see also Steen 2006, 24). Just as incumbents tend to develop large war chests to deter strong general election opponents, so, one can conclude, they also seek to deter primary challengers.

It seems obvious that incumbents would not want primary opposition. The parties, as well, have sought to ward off primary competition. It is conventional wisdom that incumbents' general election vote shares are hurt by primary competition. The evidence on this is mixed – some early articles (Hacker 1965) contended that primaries had little effect on incumbents' general election totals, while others (Kenney and Rice 1984, 1987; Kenney 1988; Born 1981; Piereson and Smith 1975; Bernstein 1977; Johnson and Gibson 1974) have found some effects. Most of these studies conclude that candidates are hurt slightly in competitive districts or states, but are relatively unscathed in districts or states where one party is dominant (Piereson and Smith 1975). As Kenney (1988) notes, a primary challenge is often more a symptom of a weak incumbent than a cause of weakness; Kenney finds that challenges tend to occur when incumbents are implicated in a scandal, switch parties, are drawn into new districts, or show other signs of weakness.

All of these studies of primary competition, however, look at its frequency or its effects; few look at the characteristics of the competition itself. If, as Kenney argues, primary competition is principally about incumbent weakness, how can one characterize these incumbent problems? And how can one reconcile this contention with the challenges to Senators Lieberman and Chafee, or Representatives Roukema and Wynn?

Apart from analysis of vote totals, there are two studies that address features of incumbent challenges. Herrnson and Gimpel (1995) note that district characteristics can make primary challenges more likely; a diverse district population can increase the likelihood of a primary, and region also can influence primary competitiveness, even though the basic North-South division no longer holds. Some states simply have more competitive primaries than others; Ansolabehere, Hansen, Hirano, and Snyder (2006) note, for instance, that Oklahoma has always had contentious primaries, while other studies have noted the frequency of primary competition in Indiana and several other states. Second, Burden (2001) argues that primaries tend to increase polarization. Just as

in presidential elections, congressional candidates have to move away from the center to attract primary votes, and then must run toward the center in the general election. Burden makes this argument without respect to the nature of the challenge; that is, simply having to appeal to primary voters for support leads a candidate away from the center, even if one's opponent is emphasizing nonideological issues such as ethics, competence, or a political scandal.

It is established, then, that primary competition has declined, and that it has declined in part because of efforts by incumbents and the parties to ward off competition, and that this effort has been driven by a perception that primary competition is harmful to the party holding the seat. This decline seems at odds with the increasing calls, on left wing and right wing blogs, for errant lawmakers to be "primaried." It is possible, of course, that overall competition has declined but that the nature of the competition, where it does exist, has changed. At a minimum, the way in which politicians and pundits think about primary competition has changed.

Methodology

In order to measure changes in the rationale for primary challenges, I compiled the primary election results for all US House and Senate races from 1970 to 2008, using each year's edition of *America Votes*. I then identified all of the primaries in which the incumbent received less than 75 percent of the vote. Using the descriptions of members of Congress provided in each year's edition of *Politics in America* and the *Almanac of American Politics*, I coded the reason for each primary challenge into one of eleven categories: scandal, competence or age of the incumbent, local issues, national issues, ideological challenges from the center, ideological challenges from the extremes (the category of interest in this paper), race, party factionalism, redistricting, ambitious challenger, other reasons, and no reason given.

During this period, there were 7,828 races in the House of Representatives where an incumbent was seeking re-election, and 524 Senate races with an incumbent running. Approximately one out of ten House incumbents (723, or 9.2 percent) running for re-election during this period faced a primary challenger, or multiple primary challengers, who garnered more than 25 percent of the vote. Only 4.0 percent of incumbents received less than sixty percent of the vote in their primaries. Senate races were similar; 59 incumbents, or 11.3 percent received less than 75 percent of the vote in their primaries, and 31 incumbents, or 5.9 percent, were held to less than sixty percent.

[Table 1 about here]

Table 1 lists the frequency of the different types of primary challenges, according to my coding, with an explanation of each. In several instances, challenges could be placed into more than one category. Most notably, many challenges that likely were

inspired in part by race drew upon other themes as well; few challengers explicitly argued that the district should be represented by any particular racial or ethnic group. In other cases, arguments about a particular incumbent gradually change; for instance, if one reads the summaries of challenges to Rep. Gus Savage, who represented part of the South Side of Chicago from 1980 to 1992, arguments that begin with reference to Chicago political factions gradually shade into arguments based on Savage's competence, and then his ethics. In the following discussion, I prioritize the reason given the most attention in the *Almanac* description, with the awareness that multiple rationales may in fact be driving the campaign.

The challenges of the most interest here – the challenges that are generally referred to when one talks about incumbents being “primaried” – are those where a Democratic is challenged on the grounds that he or she is too conservative, or where a Republican is challenged for being too liberal. For the most part, these are fairly easy to categorize. However, I have created a separate category for challenges based primarily upon one issue. I further separate national issues and local issues. It is possible that some of the issue-based challenges are in fact part of a more general ideological critique. For instance, I categorize Ned Lamont's challenge to Connecticut Senator Joe Lieberman in 2006 as an ideological challenge, but Lamont may well have been motivated by one dominant issue, and might well have limited his campaign to criticizing Lieberman's stance on the Iraq War. However, issue-based challenges are not necessarily always made from a similar ideological direction; for instance, both Democrats and Republicans in the data set were subject to challenges based on abortion. In order to ensure that I am not looking too narrowly at the sorts of challenges of interest here, I refer below to a restrictive definition of being “primaried,” in which only off-center ideological challenges are included, and a broader definition, which includes centrist challenges and challenges based on national or local issues.

The *Almanac* and *Politics in America* have their own limitations in descriptions of races, as well. Approximately thirty percent of challenges to incumbents are not mentioned at all or are not described in enough detail to discern a motive, so the number of challengers' themes presented here is not complete. Surely many of the challenges classified as “missing” here did fall into one of the categories, but it would be difficult to argue that there is any bias, in terms of the codings, in determining which races are discussed in these sources and which are not. A more serious problem is that some of these descriptions carry over from year to year; a description of one incumbent's primary challenge in one year may appear in subsequent years while descriptions of subsequent primary challenges are not discussed or are cast in the same terms. Absent an exhaustive survey of local media, however, these two compendia are probably the most authoritative source for discussion of all members' campaigns.

The 75 percent threshold was chosen partially with the source for codings in mind. There are only two primary challenges where the incumbents were not held to under 75 percent that are discussed in the *Almanac* and *Politics in America*; both are attempts by former representatives (Robert Dornan and Mel Reynolds) to return to Congress. This threshold is also useful for campaign finance purposes; virtually no

challengers who received less than 25 percent of the vote raised enough money to file with the FEC. This threshold is much more generous to challengers than are the criteria for “competitive” campaigns used in other sources (see, e.g., Ansolabehere, Hansen, Hirano, and Snyder 2006), but this ensures that I err on the side of being too inclusive in measuring serious campaigns rather than excluding some legitimate challenges.

Finally, a few notes on some of the technicalities in coding primary challenges are in order. I exclude races in which two incumbents are forced by redistricting to challenge each other. I count as “incumbents” anyone who currently holds a seat in Congress, although in several cases the incumbents had won special elections only weeks before the primary. In instances where runoff elections were held, I consider the primary that preceded the runoff. In states that held “blanket” or “jungle” primaries for at least some years in the period covered (Louisiana, California, and Washington) I take the percentage of the vote received by the incumbent and any other same-party candidate, and then divide that by the total vote received by all candidates of the incumbent’s party to determine whether the challenge reached the threshold here. And I leave in the data set states such as Virginia, Delaware, and Connecticut, which all, for at least some of the period covered by this study, used a convention system instead of a primary system for selecting candidates. The result of including these states may influence arguments about the total number of primary challenges mounted but does not influence the general trend in the rationales for primary challenges.

The Reasons for Primary Challenges in the House of Representatives

Changes in the Reasons for House Primaries

Figure 1 shows the overall distribution of primary challenges by year; as this figure indicates, there is not necessarily a consistent trend in the number of primary challenges. The past three election years have seen an increase in primary competition compared with the 1998 and 2000 elections, but there are far fewer incumbents facing primaries in the 2000s than there were during the 1970s. With the exception of the 1992 election, which featured a combination of a scandal which affected many incumbents (the House bank check bouncing scandal) and redistricting, the number of competitive primaries has been remarkably consistent since 1982, with a range of fifteen to thirty competitive primaries per year.

[Figure 1 about here]

If one turns back to Table 1 (in the previous section), it is worth noting the relationship between ideological challenges and other types of challenges. The table shows that ideology does play a major role in primary challenges, but the most important precipitators of primary challenges are failures of the incumbent – either scandals or perceived ineptitude. This pattern corresponds with more general research on

congressional elections – an incumbent who faces a serious challenge is generally an incumbent who has done something wrong. These types of challenges are also more successful; while 27.2 percent of the incumbents who received less than 75 percent of the primary vote were criticized for scandals or for their competence, 50.0 percent of the incumbents who received less than fifty percent of the vote fell into these two categories.² All of these factors might be expected to be immune to trends over time; scandals break out, incumbents age or demonstrate ineffectiveness, but there is no reason to expect one decade to be different from another in these regards.

The four types of ideological or issue-based challenges, as Table 1 shows, tend to be less frequent and less successful than those based on real or perceived misdeeds or failures on the part of the incumbent. Local issues are often rather idiosyncratic, and changes based on these types of issues exhibit no particular trend. However, challenges based on national issues show a distinct clustering, as I discuss in further detail below, and ideological challenges might be more likely to show a trend over time; at least, that is the argument that has been made of late.

Figure 2 groups all four of these types of challenges together, in order to ensure that all challenges based on issues or ideology can be considered together. If one compares this figure with Figure 1, it is clear that issue-based and ideological challenges have become a slightly larger proportion of primary challenges since 1992, but there has been no dramatic rise, and, again, there are fewer of these races than there were during the 1970s. 1996, 2006, and 2008 feature the largest number of ideological challenges since the 1970s, but the increased number of such races (eight in 1996, six in 2006, and seven in 2008) – is not so large as to support a claim that there is an entirely different dynamic. 1996, in addition, would seem outside the range of races in which incumbents were targeted to be primaried – it comes before the formation of the Club for Growth and MoveOn.org, and before the Internet-based calls for primarying noted above. In short, there is no strong evidence in this table that there has been an increase in the number of incumbents facing ideological challenges, no matter how elastic one's definition of ideology is. These challenges are striking only because the overall amount of primary competition was so low in 1998 and 2000.

[Figure 2 about here]

Comparing Different Years' Primary Challenges

If one is struck by the increase in ideological primary challenges from the 1998 and 2000 cycles to more recent elections, however, it helps to put the last three elections in the context of other elections in which the number of ideological challenges increased. The overall amount of turnover in Congress during 2006 has two parallels in the past thirty years; the early 1990s, in which widespread dissatisfaction with the Democratic Party, and with incumbents in general, produced an unusually competitive set of elections

² The reader should note that incumbents who received less than fifty percent of the vote were not necessarily defeated; many such incumbents ran against multiple challengers and won the primary with less than a majority of the vote.

in 1992 and 1994, and then perhaps in 1996, as Democrats waged a serious battle to regain Congress and, as Figures 1 and 2 show, there were several very competitive primaries. And, although in general competition in primaries was higher in the 1970s, one might reach back to the 1974 and 1976 elections, where, again, there was substantial turnover in Congress and the Democratic Party gained 49 seats, and won one additional seat in 1976.

[Table 2 about here]

Table 2 compares the incumbents who faced ideological and issue-oriented challenges over each of these three time periods. The time period from 2004 to 2008 featured seventeen races in which an incumbent faced an ideological challenge and eleven cases where an incumbent faced a challenge centered on an issue of national policy. Of the issue-based challenges, seven were against Republican incumbents, and five of these seven were motivated by the incumbent's perceived leniency on immigration. Of the ideological challenges, nine were waged against Republicans and eight were waged against Democrats. As one moves through these three years, however, the tables turn – there were no ideological challenges to Democrats in 2004, but there were more ideological challenges to Democrats in 2006 and 2008 than there were to Republicans. This pattern is similar to that of the 1992 to 1996 period, in which there were twelve issue-based challenges and fifteen ideological challenges. In each case, the party that benefited from the landslide election in the middle year of this sequence saw an increased number of ideological challenges in that year and in the next election cycle.

It is also notable that many of the same incumbents who faced challenges in the 2000s appear on the list of those challenged in the 1990s. Some incumbents, simply put, attract repeated primary challengers, while other incumbents with similar ideological profiles do not. If one considers the table as a whole, the issues vary from one cycle to the next, even in cases where the primaried incumbents remain the same. Issue-based challenges are more prevalent on the Democratic side, with busing serving as the catalyst for several 1970s challenges and abortion appearing on both parties' lists. In many of these races, conservative Southern Democrats were targeted by liberal insurgents not dissimilar from those who defeated Republicans in 1974.

If one views this comparison with reference to the overall shifts in the parties' seat share in Congress, the 1970s and 1990s both show that the partisan trends that brought about turnover in Congress also brought about ideological challenges to moderates in Congress. That is, the same liberal frustration that brought about changes in Congress after the 1974 elections is reflected in the primary challenges of the time, while the conservative frustrations with the Democratic Party in the 1990s also brought about conservative challenges to moderate Republicans. One might read the eight Democratic challenges in 2006 and 2008 as an example of a similar trend.

This is ironic, insofar as Republicans are the party most associated with primarying, and are arguably the party which fears it the most. There is some reason for this, insofar as there have been some noteworthy Republican primary challenges – and, if

early prognostications about 2010 are to be believed, the threat continues to be wielded against several Republican moderates (and not-so-moderates), particularly in the Senate. The 2000s are not atypical in the number of incumbents who are primaried, but they are atypical, at least on the Republican side, in the sense that they were not waged amidst a strong surge in conservative support within the electorate. As these data show, actual instances of primarying pose little threat to either party – the number remains small – but one could argue that it remains a bigger problem for Republicans in the 2000s, controlling for the effects of party surges, than for Democrats. Or, to put matters numerically, only one Republican was primaried in the 1976 post-surge election, only one Democrat was primaried in the 1996 post-surge election, but three Republicans were challenged in the 2008 post-surge election (Reps. Gilchrest, Inglis, and Cannon), and two of these three (Gilchrest and Cannon) lost their primaries. The numbers are not large, but the pattern is there.³

Do Some Incumbents Deserve to be Primaried?

Given the story line often told about the primarying of incumbents in the past three election cycles, in which conservative groups singled out moderate Republicans, and liberal groups responded by singling out moderate Democrats, one might ask whether the targeted candidates deserved to be primaried. Yet matters are not quite that simple. Republican critics of the Club for Growth have at times criticized the group for attacking moderate Republicans who represent relatively moderate districts (Cillizza 2005). Indeed, the Club has at times backed more moderate candidates, arguing that these candidates would fare better in Democratic-leaning districts than would conservatives. Several moderate House Republicans, most notably those in the New England area, have escaped ideological challenges. And on the left, in 2008 MoveOn.org emphasized in its campaigns against Maryland Democrat Al Wynn and Illinois Democrat Dan Lipinski that these representatives were not just out of step with their party, but with their district. As is the case for Republicans, conservative Democrats in conservative districts have often escaped ideological primary challenges. In instances where the representative is a poor fit for the district, a primary challenger would thus, if successful, be as likely or more likely to win in the general election than would the incumbent.

Are claims made about the poor “fit” of primaried incumbents accurate? If so, simply comparing the primaried incumbents to their parties would (and does) show that they are more moderate than others in their party, but this by itself is unrevealing. There are, then, two ways to answer this question. Figures 3 and 4 show scatterplots of the first dimension DW-NOMINATE scores (on the Y-Axis) and district Democratic presidential vote on the X-Axis for all incumbents seeking renomination from 1972 through 2008, with markers for primaried incumbents. Separate graphs are provided for Democrats and

³ Another qualification: this may also have something to do with the coding method. Cannon had been challenged in the two previous elections, but the coverage of these elections had focused on immigration issues. Inglis’s categorization as the subject of an ideological challenge must also be considered in the context of three other primary challenges in the Carolinas (Republican Reps. Walter Jones and Patrick McHenry and Sen. Lindsay Graham, all of whose opponents ran single-issue campaigns).

Republicans. If candidates do moderate their positions to reflect their districts, there should be a downward slope for both scatterplots. Furthermore, Democratic incumbents who are more conservative than might be optimal for their districts should appear in upper right-hand quadrant, while Republicans who are more liberal than would be optimal should appear in the lower left-hand quadrant.

[Figures 3 and 4 about here]

One should first note that Democrats (Figure 3) exhibit more sensitivity to district voting trends than do Republicans; the Republican scatterplot does not fit what would be the regression line nearly as tightly as would the Democratic scatterplot. In addition, the primaried Democrats are, as one would predict, almost all to the right of what would be the predicted line; they are arguably too conservative for their districts. And all four of the most extreme outliers on the conservative side were primaried. Most primaried Republicans are below the regression line, again as one would predict, but a substantial minority of them are not. Primaried Republicans, then, deserve to be primaried less than do primaried Democrats.

[Figure 5 about here]

Figure 5 compares incumbents of both parties primaried in the 2002, 2004, 2006, and 2008 elections with all incumbents seeking renomination in those years.⁴ Here, as in the full dataset, the primaried Democrats are to the right of their party and their district, while slightly less than half (seven of fifteen) of the primaried Republicans are to the left of their party and district. Of the nine primaried Republicans, the three who clearly were more liberal than their districts were Gilchrest (twice), Boehlert, and Schwarz, all of whom were targeted by the Club for Growth; the five who were not too liberal for their districts were Roscoe Bartlett, Brian Bilbray, Bob Franks, Cannon, and Inglis, none of whom were Club targets. So advocacy groups have indeed chosen candidates who are not just moderates, but perhaps overly moderate for their districts; conservative challengers have, however, run against incumbents who were not out of step with their districts.

Why do House Primaries Happen?

The above discussion suggests that incumbents are no more likely to “get primaried” today than they were in previous years, that the number who get primaried is relatively consistent across time, and that when it does increase slightly, it seems to correspond with surges in one party’s power within Congress. Figure 1, however, does show significant volatility in the number of incumbents facing primary opposition since 1970. If ideological challenges do not account for these changes, what does?

⁴ Although above I consider the 2004-2008 cycles as a unit, here I include 2002 to show the consistency of the pattern in Republican challenges over this period. Removing 2002 from the sequence does not dramatically change results.

[Table 3 about here]

As Table 3 shows, many of the sources of primary challenges seem somewhat random. Scandals and allegations of incompetence are the major reasons for primary challenges in the majority of election years; challenges based on race or following a redistricting are also frequent. One must keep in mind in reading these data that reasons for challenges may be somewhat subjective. That is, an incumbent may be incompetent or too old according to the challenger, or the incumbent may, in fact, be unproductive or old by objective measures. Surely both factors are relevant here. Allegations of incompetence may also be made by candidates who are critical of the incumbent on ideological grounds. If so, this may provide some explanation for the increased number of challenges in the 1970s. Over the course of the decade, there is a rather tumultuous redistricting, one which increased the number of majority/minority districts; this election is followed by a period of heightened partisanship and ideological fervor, which may explain some of the competence-based challenges in 1972 and 1976. The late 1970s feature a larger-than-average number of incumbents involved in scandals. If the claims to scandal here are at least somewhat valid, these events prolong the unusually high amount of primary competition through the 1980 election. This is just speculation, but absent data on the reasons for primary challenges before 1970, it would cast the 1970s as an aberration, a string of circumstances that brought about heightened competition, rather than as the tail end of a period of greater competition.

Table 3 also provides a rather simple explanation of why 1992 is such a clear outlier. This election also featured a redistricting that drew many incumbents into somewhat different districts – more so than was the case in 1982 or 2002 (see Jacobson 2004, 172) – and it increased the number of majority/minority districts. Like the 1972 election, this election also immediately preceded a major change in partisan power within Congress, but it also featured a major scandal (the House bank scandal) which was different from other scandals in that a large number of incumbents were involved. In short, 1992 represented a confluence of several factors that make it unique in the data.

If one accepts this account, then there is no gradual trend in primary competitiveness; at most, there is a cyclical trend that corresponds with redistricting, at least in decades such as the 1970s or the 1990s where districts are substantially redrawn. And if an incumbent's ideology is not a particularly good predictor or whether a primary challenger will emerge, what sort of predictors are there?

First, some states or districts are simply more competitive than others. In some smaller states, if we go simply by the percentage of incumbents challenged, a single incumbent who draws frequent primary opponents over a few elections can lead to high percentage. Yet in some cases, the nature of competition within the state seems to be an issue. Over sixteen percent of the races in Arizona, Georgia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania were competitive. These are states that are large enough that a single incumbent could not explain these differences, and there is no obvious geographic story. Meanwhile, not a single Connecticut House candidate faced a primary challenge, and fewer than five percent of incumbents in Iowa, Kansas, New Mexico, the Dakotas,

Virginia, or Washington faced opposition. There may be some characteristics of state political culture here, and in the case of the states with less competition, selection procedures play a role; Connecticut and Virginia selected their nominees at conventions for much of this period, thus eliminating primary challenges. Washington, on the other hand, used a jungle primary to choose candidates for much of this time period, and there were frequent primary challenges – there simply were none that were competitive. Idiosyncrasies of the states themselves, or even of individual districts, may play a role here.

As Table 4 shows, political parties also play a role, but not necessarily in the manner one might expect. It might be argued that stronger, more organized state parties can discourage primary opposition to incumbents. In fact, the reverse appears to be the case. In this table I use David Mayhew’s (1986) five-point scale of state party organization to compare the percentage of incumbents facing primary opposition according to their state’s level of organization. I use two measures of primary competition – the left-hand three columns show the percentage of incumbents who faced a primary opponent and whose opponent received more than 25 percent of the primary vote. The right-hand three columns show the percentage of incumbents primaried (under the restrictive definition) – that is, challenged on ideological grounds from the left (for Democrats) or from the right (for Republicans). Mayhew’s party organization categories also include a separate measurement of factionalism (PF, or persistent factionalism) within some of the different levels; I have listed these in parentheses in the table. I also provide percentages for the full 1970 to 2008 dataset, and for two decades, the 1970s and 2000s. The separate decade estimates are provided here first because one might expect the importance of party organization to vary over time, and second, because one might object to using these scores for the full time period on the grounds that Mayhew’s book, published in 1986, might be a better depiction of parties of the decade prior to his book’s publication than of subsequent decades.

[Table 4 about here]

If one reads down the columns in this table (ignoring party organization level “3” because there is only one state Mayhew places in that category, Louisiana), a clear pattern emerges in five of the six columns – incumbents in more organized states are actually more likely to face primary opposition, and to be primaried, than incumbents in states where the parties are weaker. The only category where this is not true is for contested primaries in the 1970s. This pattern is largely driven by the states with highly organized parties but “persistent factionalism” as defined by Mayhew – states such as Indiana and Maryland – but the pattern remains even when the persistent factionalism states are removed. There may well be explanations for this pattern, but it seems at odds with the presumption that parties seek to ward off primary challenges. At a minimum, the data indicate that parties at the state or local level have little ability to do this.

Some other determinants of primary competition are more predictable. Majority minority districts also feature greater primary competition; 16.0 percent of incumbents in these districts faced primary competition, while only 8.4 percent of the representatives of

other districts faced a competitive primary opponent. The reasons for such competition are well documented; these districts tend to be lopsidedly Democratic, and as a result ambitious candidates are far more likely to appear in the primary than in the general election. Another unsurprising characteristic is that redrawn districts are more likely to yield primary competition; 13.2 percent of redrawn districts have primary competition, while only 8.0 percent of districts that stayed the same as in the prior election cycle were competitive.⁵ One might expect first-term incumbents to be more vulnerable to challenges, not only because they tend to be more vulnerable to general election challenges than more experienced incumbents, but also because they may have recently faced primary opposition in winning the seat or have yet to build up name recognition. Contrary to expectations, however, freshman representatives were not more likely to face primary opponents than more senior representatives. Overall, seniority exerts a slight but significant (.070) correlation with having primary competition (perhaps indicating that older representatives are vulnerable to challenges on the basis of their age).

A final potential cause for primary challenges is the pursuit of higher office; while it is difficult to develop a coding for all representatives who have run unsuccessfully in the primary for governor, senator, or president, several of the representatives who faced primary challenges fell into one of these categories, indicating that a bid for higher office leaves one vulnerable to the claim that one has been insufficiently attentive to one's district, or that the scars of a failed race for higher office can be used against a candidate seeking renomination to a House seat.

Several of these factors can be expected to bring about differences in the number of primary challenges in each party. In particular, because most representatives of majority/minority districts are Democrats, this factor alone might indicate that Democrats are more likely to face primary opposition than Republicans. Overall, 11.1 percent of Democrats faced primary opposition, as compared with 6.7 percent of Republicans. If one excludes majority/minority districts, the percentage of Democrats facing opposition declines to 10.0 percent, still a much larger percentage than that of Republicans. However, Republicans are more likely than Democrats to be primaried, according to both the restrictive definition (ideological challenges from off-center) and the less restrictive definition (including issue-based challenges and centrist challenges). While the percentages here are not large (1.4 percent of Republicans versus 0.8 percent of Democrats by the restrictive definition, and 2.0 percent versus 1.5 percent according to the less restrictive definition), the differences are significant.

It would be convenient if it were possible to present results of a probit analysis of factors determining primary challenges. However, the most important determinants of primary challenges – the presence of a scandal or ethical transgression, competence or

⁵ The percentages here are taken from the number of all districts in multi-district states in redistricting years – generally, years ending in “2” but also including districts redrawn outside the normal redistricting cycle, as in Texas in 2004 or by court order in other states. Not all of these districts were substantially redrawn, but they are at least districts that were our could have been adjusted slightly. The percentage of districts not redrawn is taken from races in non-redistricting years and from single-district states in all election years. One might develop measures of the degree to which districts are redrawn and use those for analysis, but I do not do that here.

age, being ideologically out of step with the district, or being in the wrong on a particular issue – are subjective enough that it is not possible to include measures of these in any analysis.⁶ I experimented with a number of analyses using some of the above indicators, but all of them left out enough of the apparent rationale for challenges that they are not particularly revealing.

Senate Primaries

Primary challenges in Senate races are only slightly more frequent than are challenges in House races. This is somewhat surprising given that Senate general election races tend to be more competitive than House races and that Senate incumbents are defeated in the general election more often than House incumbents (Jacobson 2004, 99). However, two major causes of House primary contests – majority/minority districts and redrawn districts – are not relevant for Senate races. The numbers are far too small to present a meaningful analysis of reasons in each year, and the time series of contests over the entire time period is idiosyncratic enough that no real trends are apparent. On average, there are two to four cases of primary challenges in each election cycle, with a high of eight (1980) and a low of zero (1984, 1988, and 2000). In 1992, a year of unusually high primary competition in House races, there were six Senate incumbents who faced primary opposition, and in 2006 there were five incumbents who faced primary challengers.

Ideology plays a somewhat larger role in Senate primaries than it does in House primaries. Only five of the 59 Senate incumbents in the dataset who faced primary competition were challenged on the basis of scandal or ethical problems and, despite the presence of well-known octogenarian Senators throughout much of this time, only seven Senate incumbents were challenged on the basis of competence or age. Thirteen of the 59 were “primaried,” however, and five of these thirteen were primaried in the past three election cycles – Republican Arlen Specter in 2004, Republicans Lincoln Chafee and Mike DeWine (R-OH) and Democrat Joseph Lieberman in 2006, and Democrat John Kerry in 2008. Other noteworthy cases of primarying in earlier years include Illinois Democratic Senator Alan Dixon, defeated in the 1992 primary by Carol Moseley Braun; noted liberal Republicans Jacob Javits (R-NY), Charles Mathias (R-MD), and Robert Stafford (R-VT); and Arlen Specter again, in 1998. It does seem plausible that liberal Republican Senators face a higher risk of being primaried, even when they do represent relatively liberal states.

While ideology may play a larger role in Senate challenges, there are fewer single-issue challenges than in House races. There are five issue-based challenges, three

⁶ To do this, one would have to identify all scandals, ethical transgressions, instances of incompetence, older incumbents, and so on – for the most part, an impossibly subjective task. Some studies have sought to code House scandals – see, e.g., Brown 2006 – and might be of use in this regard, but beyond that, for the most part the measurement is at the discretion of the challenger. A perceived scandal or ethical failure can be grounds for a challenge, regardless of whether outside observers see it that way.

of which were about abortion, including a vigorous challenge to George McGovern in 1980. Several Senators face challengers every election cycle, although the reasons vary – Oregon Senator Bob Packwood faced primary opposition in three of his four re-election bids, alternately based on his perceived liberalism and his competence; Specter has faced ideological opposition in three of his four bids; and Alaska Senator Mike Gravel was held below 55 percent in both of his renomination campaigns by challengers who criticized Gravel on the grounds of incompetence. Finally, ambition seems to be a more frequent source of primary competition in the House than in the Senate; the rationale behind challenges such as those to Hawaii’s Daniel Akaka in 2006 (by House member Ed Case), South Dakotan James Abdnor in 1986 (by Governor William Janklow), and Arkansas’ William Fulbright (successfully challenged by Governor Dale Bumpers) seems to have been simply that the challenger was more qualified, not that there was anything in particular wrong with the incumbent.

Primarying in 2008 and Beyond

As noted above, the 2008 primaries fulfilled a predictable trend. The number of primaries, and ideological primary challenges, shows a slight but steady increase from 2004 through 2008. A small number of primary challenges received the bulk of the media’s attention, but these were notable in part because three of the ideological challengers were successful. The two Maryland races, in which Democratic incumbent Al Wynn and Republican incumbent Wayne Gilchrest were defeated, have received the most attention, and are among the purest cases of ideological challenges. In the Wynn race, challenger Donna Edwards, who had narrowly lost to Wynn in 2004, received support from MoveOn, and maintained an active presence on ActBlue, the online portal for campaign contributions. Although this is a majority/minority district, race appears to have played little role in the election, save perhaps for the fact that Edwards likely did better among white voters than among African-American voters. Wynn’s former district included sections of one almost entirely black county, Prince George’s County, and parts of a more racially mixed neighboring county, Montgomery County. According to one analysis, Edwards received 67 percent of the vote in Montgomery County and 55 percent of the vote in Prince George’s County (Fisher 2008). Gilchrest faced two credible opponents, State Senator Andy Harris, who was backed by the Club for Growth, and former Senate candidate and self-financer E. J. Pipken. Gilchrest had faced ideological challengers in the past, including one who had been backed by the Club for Growth in 2002. Gilchrest had been the recipient of support in past races from the Republican Main Street Partnership, a group that had been formed to support moderate Republicans. Wynn subsequently resigned his seat before the general election, and Edwards won easily in this overwhelmingly Democratic district. Harris won a three-way primary with 43 percent of the vote to Gilchrest’s 33 percent and Pipken’s 20 percent showing. Despite the Republican tilt of Gilchrest’s former district, Harris was narrowly defeated in the general election by Democrat Frank Kratovil. As of this writing, Harris is allegedly planning to run again in 2010.

The sheer volume of money that went into these races – and particularly into the Edwards race – is somewhat unusual. Shortly before the election, a *Washington Post* analysis noted that Edwards had raised \$441,000 as of the last filing date before the primary, and that 85 percent of her individual contributions had come from outside Maryland. \$1.2 million was spent on independent expenditures favoring Edwards; this amount included mailings and television advertisements by MoveOn.org, the SEIU, and the League of Conservation Voters (Helderman 2008). A MoveOn solicitation for donations to Edwards listed the Sierra Club, EMILY’s List, the UFCW, ACORN, Democracy for America, and Women’s Voices, Women’s Votes as Edwards supporters (Ruben 2008). This was indeed a large coalition for a primary challenger. Post-election commentary on the race speculated that the Edwards victory may have in part stemmed from the aggressive campaign waged by Barack Obama in Maryland (Maryland is one of the few states where the presidential and congressional primaries are held on the same day) and that Edwards may have received support from newer voters organized by the Obama campaign (Fisher 2008). In the Gilchrest race, the Club for Growth spent an estimated \$600,000 on advertising; it had few other groups as allies, and Gilchrest had only a small independent campaign by the Main Street Partnership and the League of Conservation Voters (Kraushaar 2008).

The other defeated incumbent, Utah Republican Chris Cannon, poses a more difficult case. Cannon had faced strong primary opponents in 2004 and 2006 who had attacked him for his allegedly lenient views on immigration. His opponent, Jason Chaffetz, thus inherited an issue agenda that, while it was not the sole focus of Chaffetz’s campaign, was undoubtedly on the minds of some anti-immigration activists. I categorize Chaffetz here as an ideological challenger, insofar as his campaign material listed immigration as only one of several issues on which he felt Cannon to be too liberal. Conservative bloggers such as Michelle Malkin made note of the full package of positions Chaffetz presented,⁷ but Chaffetz’s underfunded primary campaign received far less national attention than those of Edwards and Harris. Chaffetz’s bid does not necessarily seem symptomatic of a national movement.

There were signs in 2008 that, despite the success of Edwards and Harris, the push for ideological challenges to wayward incumbents was limited. Another high profile race was the renomination bid of first-term Illinois Democrat Dan Lipinski, who was criticized by liberal challenger Mark Pera for being too frequent a supporter of Bush. Lipinski was likely seen as vulnerable in part because of his inexperience and his lack of political ties within the district – he is the son of the previous representative, William Lipinski, but had not resided in the district prior to winning the seat when his father unexpectedly withdrew shortly before the 2004 filing deadline. Although Pera’s campaign was also supported by MoveOn, Pera did rather poorly, finishing with 25 percent of the vote in a four-candidate race, while Lipinski received 54 percent. Although some of the other incumbents primaryed had long been discussed on liberal or conservative blogs – incumbents such as Iowa’s Leonard Boswell and Georgia’s David Scott and John Barrow, none of these candidates’ opponents were the beneficiaries of

⁷ See <http://michellemalkin.com/2008/06/25/shamnesty-republican-chris-cannon-defeated-in-utah-primary/>.

national fundraising campaigns. This pattern held true in the Senate as well – of the four Senate incumbents with primary competition (Lindsay Graham, John Kerry, Frank Lautenberg, and Ted Stevens), only one (Kerry) faced an ideological challenger. Kerry’s challenger ran poorly compared to the other three, Kerry paid little attention to him, and although the focus of the challenge was ideology, Kerry’s unsuccessful presidential bid likely played a role in the challenge as well.⁸

Kerry’s experience was not unique. Among the unsuccessful primary challenges, two presidential candidates, Dennis Kucinich and Ron Paul, faced strong challengers who argued that the presidential bids of these two indicated a lack of concern for their districts. Kucinich’s strongest challenger, Cleveland City Councilman Joseph Cimperman, garnered substantial support from the Cleveland business community, and raised a total of \$620,000. Both Kucinich and Paul allegedly discontinued their presidential bids in part to ward off their primary challengers. Although both Kucinich and Paul stand at the fringes of their parties, their challengers both chose not to emphasize their views, but to argue that their presidential ambitions had caused them to neglect their districts.

Another interesting pattern in 2008 was the increasing number of challenges from the center, particularly to candidates who had tied themselves to the Club for Growth. Three Republicans who had long been favorites of the Club – Rick Keller (R-FL), Paul Broun (R-GA), and Doug Lamborn (R-CO) – were challenged from the center

Of course, very few of the primary challenges over the past forty years have been successful, so the fact that this was the case in 2008 does not indicate that primarying will become less frequent in subsequent elections. At this early stage, threats are already being made against House and Senate incumbents. Most prominent among the targets of conservatives as of this writing is Iowa Senator Charles Grassley. Several news articles have mentioned potential primary opposition to Grassley, who has served as part of Senator Max Baucus’s bipartisan working group on health care reform (Brownstein 2009, Calmes 2009). Whether or not such a challenge emerges, the threat of primarying has been held by some pundits to be a cause of Grassley’s reluctance to seek a bipartisan compromise with Baucus. And the most noteworthy primarying threat going into the 2010 election has undoubtedly been to Pennsylvania Republican-turned-Democrat Arlen Specter. Facing a rematch with his 2004 primary opponent, former House Member and, subsequent to the challenge, Club for Growth President Pat Toomey, Specter joined the Democratic Party, where he faces being primaried from the left by Representative Joe Sestak. More general threats abound – the Club for Growth has distributed lists of the biggest spending Republicans, and RedState has posted a list, replete with general references to primary challenges, of Republicans who voted in favor of reprimanding Rep. Joe Wilson following his outburst during President Obama’s health care address. And on the left, although the Working for Us PAC appears to be defunct, a new PAC, Accountability Now, was launched in early 2009 by prominent left-leaning bloggers,

⁸ Statewide polling in Massachusetts showed a substantial decrease in Kerry’s popularity in Massachusetts following his presidential bid – see the 2005 Bay State Poll results, available at <http://kahuna.merrimack.edu/polling/data.html>.

with the same purpose in mind (see Rutenberg 2009). Just as some Republicans have been threatened regarding the health care bill, so speculation abounds on the left that “Blue Dog” Democrats will be challenged should they not support the public option.⁹ From such threats, surely some primary challenges do emerge – the primarying threats of today carry with them the promise of financial support for primary opponents. As the Edwards and Harris races suggest, groups can now come close to recruiting candidates, a function that has rarely been within the power of anyone but the parties.

Is There Anything Different About Today’s Primaries?

In this paper, I have sought to show that primary competition today is little different than it was in past decades; the differences that appear in the level of primary competition over the period from 1970 to 2008 tend to arise from partisan surges, from redistricting, from scandals, or from galvanizing issues such as busing or the Iraq War. Pundits are, then, a bit too hasty in proclaiming open season on moderate incumbents. There may be a wave of primary challenges to incumbents in future years, yet the wave has not yet appeared. The major unusual feature of the recent bout of primarying is that at least at its inception – the spate of challenges to Republican moderates in 2000 and 2002 – it began absent a strong partisan wave on the part of the party in which the primarying takes place.

If there is anything different about the phenomenon of incumbents being “primaried” in recent years, it lies in the nature of the support for primary challengers. I have not considered the finances of primary challengers at length here – that is a subject for another paper – yet the twin Maryland races of 2008 are instructive in that a substantial percentage of the funds raised by these challengers were raised at the instigation of interest groups, were raised from out-of-state donors, and were raised through aggressive Internet solicitations. Ideology and partisanship are effective means for raising money, and the call to oust “RINOs” or Democrats who do not “act like Democrats” can be a compelling fundraising pitch. It is instructive to compare two of the more prominent 2008 primary bids: In the Maryland race, some reports claimed that ideological challenger Donna Edwards raised as much as ninety percent of her money from outside of her district; in contrast, Dennis Kucinich’s major primary opponent, Joseph Cimperman, raised only three percent of his money outside of Ohio in his more traditional, competence-based challenge. It may well be that the primarying of incumbents is the result of national fundraising campaigns, while historically primary challenges have arisen at the local level, with little national attention. Furthermore, insofar as the Club for Growth and MoveOn have singled out numerous incumbents for criticism, it may well be that recent primary challenges have been instigated by such groups, and would not have arisen otherwise.

⁹ See, e.g. the National Journal (2009) Congressional insiders’ poll.

In a way, recent reports of primarying play into a well-established paradigm in the political polarization literature. Many studies have concluded that the American electorate is not polarized, but that elites consistently say that it is, and act as if it is. Likewise, incumbents do not seem unduly threatened by primary challengers, but elites say that they are, and incumbents may well act as if they are. Following David Mayhew's (1974) characterization of incumbents as individuals who are highly risk-averse or Thomas Mann's (1978) characterization of them as "unsafe at any margin," incumbents may well live in fear of a primary challenge. The seeming randomness of the ones that do emerge may reinforce this fear. If representatives such as Wynn and Gilchrest, who rarely had to worry about general election competition, can be unseated, perhaps other safe incumbents ought to worry. Again, there is nothing beyond anecdotal evidence to support the claim that incumbents modify their voting based on their awareness of what has happened to Wynn, Gilchrest, or Joseph Lieberman, but it is certainly possible that they do. And it is certainly possible that unsuccessful ideological challenges hastened the retirements of incumbents such as Boehlert and Roukema.

The media focus on primarying, and the threats made by groups about primarying, arguably play a useful role in encouraging party discipline, but actual primary challenges do not. In at least two recent races – the challenges to Gilchrest and Chafee – primary challenges arguably resulted in the loss of a seat for the Republican Party. The national party organizations have clearly gone all out to protect incumbents facing primary opponents, as President Bush's stumping for Chafee and the NRSC's support for Specter before his party switch show (see Boyer 2009). The mission of the party campaign committees is to support all incumbents, but there has been little support from any members of Congress for primary challengers. The parties clearly have an interest in discouraging these challenges from actually happening. Even if primary opponents do not come close to defeating incumbents, they are a nuisance, draining money that could be better used, from the party's perspective, for the general election or (in uncompetitive districts) redistributed to the party or to needier candidates.

Threats alone, however, can serve as an external whip system – should Grassley emerge from the 2010 campaign without an opponent, it is hard to see how threats have done anything but helped the Republican Party's opposition to major pieces of Democratic legislation. Such threats are likely more valuable in closely divided Congresses, or, in the case of current Senate, is a Senate where the Republican Party must hold all of its members in line in order to pose a credible filibuster threat. It may well be an exaggeration to propose that party leaders are Machiavellian enough to encourage such talk, insofar as primary threats were low in the closely divided Congresses of the 1998 and 2000 elections, but the logic makes sense. Such threats may also hasten the retirement of some moderates, and the parties of these retirees have generally held these seats in open seat races in the past decade.

Finally, one must also consider primarying from the perspective of the groups that have led the charge. On the surface, many of these challenges make little sense. They are rarely successful, and they run the risk of throwing the race to the opposition party. However, mounting these campaigns can be an effective marketing tool. The Club for

Growth is perhaps best known for its support for primary challengers; alternately, other claims to fame for the group are its ads criticizing the “tax-hiking, government expanding, latte-drinking, Volvo-driving” Howard Dean and its attacks on Senators George Voinovich and Olympia Snowe for being “Franco-Americans.” None of these campaigns seem particularly productive in terms of bringing about electoral change or even in changing the behavior of the ads’ targets, but they have been productive in promoting the Club for Growth. One might argue that liberal groups have sought to follow this example simply because it is an effective way to achieve visibility, raise money, and develop a perception that the group is important. In the case of Accountability Now, for instance, the Firedoglake blog’s Jane Hamsher has likely called valuable media attention to her blog because of her primarying threats.

These conclusions may be cold comfort for the handful of incumbents who are successfully primaryed. For anyone else, though, the rhetoric behind primarying may be either frightening or invigorating, depending on one’s point of view. There may even be some value to political partisans of both sides in having a convenient name for this weapon. The reality, however, is that the level of primary competition today is little different from what it has been in primaries in years past.

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Table 1: Types of Primary Challenges, 1970-2008

Category	N	Examples
Scandal	92	Most of these challenges involve allegations of corruption, bribery, or campaign finance violations. Several involve sexual misdeeds. Some years feature a specific scandal, e.g. Abscam (two challenges in 1980) or the House Bank scandal (fourteen challenges in 1992).
Competence, Age	105	Most are straightforward criticisms of the incumbent's abilities, either involving their achievements as a legislator or the effects of age. Also included are criticisms of the incumbent's knowledge of the district (some are criticized for living outside the district or spending too much time in Washington). Some challenges also are based on criticism of the amount of time the representative has spent running for higher office.
Local Issue	14	Six of these concern the effects of busing on the district; other issues include power plant siting, timber harvesting policies, crime rates within the district, and policies related to local airports.
National Issue	40	These are discussed in detail below; frequently mentioned issues include the Vietnam War (eight challenges), abortion (thirteen challenges), NAFTA and trade policy (three challenges), and immigration (five challenges).
Ideological Challenge from Center	32	Incumbent criticized for being too extreme or too partisan for district.
Ideological Challenge from Left (Democrats) or Right (Republicans)	87	Incumbent criticized for being too moderate or insufficiently partisan. Discussed in further detail below.
Race	57	Challenges in this category are only those that specifically mention race; that is, they are not instances where a white candidate challenges a nonwhite candidate, but only those where the race of the representative is at issue. Many involve claims that only a minority should represent a minority district; others involve challenges among minority groups (e.g. a Latino challenging an African-American in a mixed district).
Local Party Factionalism	21	Most of these challenges take place in urban districts (e.g. Chicago, Boston, New York) where competition tends to be between the local machine and anti-machine politicians.
Ambitious Challenger	22	Challenges made by prominent local officeholders, focused primarily on the challenger, not any defects of the incumbent. Several of these include challenges made by former representatives of the district who had left the seat to unsuccessfully seek higher office.
Redistricting	36	Challenges waged by local politicians who represent areas newly incorporated into a House district following redistricting.
Other	7	Includes cases where incumbents retired, then changed their minds and ran again (3), where incumbents switched parties (2), and Lyndon LaRouche supporters (2).
No Reason Given	215	No explanation given for the motivation of challengers in these races. These races had the highest mean primary vote percentage for incumbents (67 percent) and no successful challenges. Because incumbents were considered to have been challenged if their vote percentage was below 75 percent, there are many cases here where two or more challengers collectively held the incumbent below that amount while failing to receive more than ten or fifteen percent of the vote themselves.
Total	723	

Table 2: Comparison of Primary Challenges, Three Different Time Periods

Year	Incumbent	Reason	Year	Incumbent	Reason	Year	Incumbent	Reason
1972	Miller (D-CA)	Issue (Vietnam)	1992	Riggs (R-CA)	Issue (Pay Raise)	2004	Franks (R-AZ)	Ideology
	Rarick (D-LA)	Ideology		Thomas (R-CA)	Ideology		Flake (R-AZ)	Issue (Immigration)
	Hicks (D-MA)	Issue (Busing)		Porter (R-IL)	Issue (Abortion)		Kolbe (R-AZ)	Issue (Immigration)
	Nedzi (D-MI)	Issue (Busing)		Meyers (R-KS)	Ideology		Lantos (D-CA)	Issue (Iraq)
	W. Ford (D-MI)	Issue (Busing)		Sikorski (D-MN)	Issue (Abortion)		Gilchrest (R-MD)	Ideology
	Delaney (D-MI)	Ideology		Wheat (D-MO)	Ideology (Centrist)		Bartlett (R-MD)	Ideology
	Rooney (D-MI)	Ideology		Swett (D-NH)	Issue (Abortion)		Boehlert (R-NY)	Ideology
	Saylor (R-PA)	Ideology		Synar (D-OK)	Ideology (Centrist)		Cannon (R-UT)	Issue (Immigration)
	Dent (D-PA)	Ideology (Centrist)		R. Hall (D-TX)	Ideology			
	J. Young (D-TX)	Issue (Busing)						
R. Casey (D-TX)	Ideology							
1974	McCloskey (R-CA)	Ideology	1994	Thomas (R-CA)	Ideology	2006	Woolsey (D-CA)	Ideology (Centrist)
	Hinshaw (R-CA)	Watergate		Calvert (R-CA)	Issue (Abortion)		Dreier (R-CA)	Issue (Immigration)
	Evans (D-CO)	Ideology		Reynolds (D-IL)	Issue (NAFTA)		Harman (D-CA)	Ideology
	Lehman (D-FL)	Ideology (Centrist)		Porter (R-IL)	Issue (Abortion)		Bilbray (R-CA)	Ideology
	McClory (R-IL)	Ideology		McCloskey (D-IN)	Ideology (Centrist)		Keller (R-FL)	Issue (Term Limits)
	Kyros (D-ME)	Ideology		Meyers (R-KS)	Ideology		Wynn (D-MD)	Ideology
Nedzi (D-MI)	Issue	Barlow (D-KY)	Ideology	Schwarz (R-MI)	Ideology			

	Murphy (D-NY)	(Busing) Ideology		N. Smith (R-MI)	(Centrist) Issue (Abortion)		Knollenberg (R-MI)	Ideology (Centrist)
	R. Casey (D-TX)	Ideology		Parker (D-MS)	Ideology		Towns (D-NY)	Issue (Tobacco)
	Milford (D-TX)	Ideology		Clay (D-MO)	Issue (Abortion)		Langevin (D-RI)	Ideology
	Slack (D-WV)	Ideology		Mann (D-OH)	Ideology		Cuellar (D-TX) Cannon (R-UT)	Ideology Issue (Immigration)
1976	Flowers (D-AL)	Ideology	1996	Chenoweth (R-ID)	Ideology (Centrist)	2008	Lamborn (R-CO)	Ideology (Centrist)
	McDonald (D-GA)	Ideology		Porter (R-IL)	Ideology		Keller (R-FL)	Issue (Term Limits)
	Mazzoli (D-KY)	Issue (Busing)		Morella (R-MD)	Ideology		Broun (R-GA)	Ideology (Centrist)
	Byron (D-MD)	Ideology		Bass (R-NH)	Issue (Abortion)		Scott (D-GA)	Ideology
	Fountain (D-NC)	Ideology		Kelly (R-NY)	Ideology		Lipinski (D-IL)	Ideology
	Whalen (R-OH)	Ideology		McNulty (D-NY)	Ideology		Boswell (D-IA)	Ideology
	E. Jones (D-TN)	Ideology (Centrist)		Boehlert (R-NY)	Issue (Abortion)		Gilchrest (R-MD)	Ideology
	White (D-TX)	Ideology		Greenwood (R-PA)	Ideology		Wynn (D-MD)	Ideology
				McDade (R-PA)	Ideology		Jones (R-NC)	Issue (Iraq War)
				Goodling (R-PA)	Ideology		McHenry (R-NC)	Issue (Iraq War)
				Laughlin (R-TX)	Ideology		Inglis (R-SC)	Ideological
				Bentsen (D-TX)	Issue (Abortion)		Cannon (R-UT)	Ideological

Table 3: Most Frequent Reasons for Primary Challenges, by Year

Year	Total Number of Challenges	Most Frequent Reason for Challenges (N)	Other Common Reasons (N)
1970	51	National Issue (8)	
1972	59	Competence/Age (13)	Race (10); Redistricting (7)
1974	44	Competence/Age (8)	Ideology (8); Race (7)
1976	45	Competence/Age (10)	Scandal (8); Ideology (6)
1978	45	Scandal (11)	
1980	48	Scandal (12)	Competence/Age (7)
1982	27	Redistricting (7)	
1984	29	Scandal (4)	
1986	15	Competence/Age (4)	
1988	19	Scandal (6)	
1990	31	Scandal (7)	Competence/Age (5)
1992	87	Scandal (19)	Competence/Age (10); Redistricting (10)
1994	46	Race (7)	National Issue (5)
1996	32	Ideology (8)	Race (5)
1998	16	Ideology (4)	
2000	13	No reason present in more than 3 races	
2002	31	Redistricting (7)	Ideology (4)
2004	24	National issue (4); Ideology (4)	
2006	28	Competence/Age (7)	Ideology (6)
2008	33	Ideology (7); Competence/Age (7)	Scandal (4)
Total	723	Competence/Age (105)	Scandal (92); Ideology (87)

Table 4: Primary Competition and Primarying by Party Organization Level

TPO	Contested Primary			Ideological Primary		
	1970-2008	1970s	2000s	1970-2008	1970s	2000s
1	8.0	11.9	5.8	0.6	1.1	0.7
2 (PF)	9.1 (8.9)	15.8 (10.5)	5.6 (5.0)	1.0 (0.0)	2.3 (0.0)	0.6 (0.0)
3	14.3	22.9	13.3	0.8	2.9	0.0
4 (PF)	9.7 (11.9)	13.2 (16.7)	6.6 (2.5)	0.5 (0.6)	1.5 (2.1)	0.0 (0.0)
5 (PF)	10.7 (14.7)	11.8 (15.9)	7.9 (20.8)	1.8 (3.0)	1.6 (1.1)	2.8 (7.3)
Total (PF)	9.2 (12.7)	12.6 (16.0)	6.5 (10.7)	1.0 (1.3)	1.5 (1.6)	1.2 (2.6)
N	7828	1931	1991	7828	1931	1991

TPO (Total Party Organization) scores taken from Mayhew (1986).

States in each category with persistent factionalism (PF) as defined by Mayhew are in parentheses. Ns are for total number of incumbents seeking reelection.

Figure One: Number of House Primary Challenges, by Year

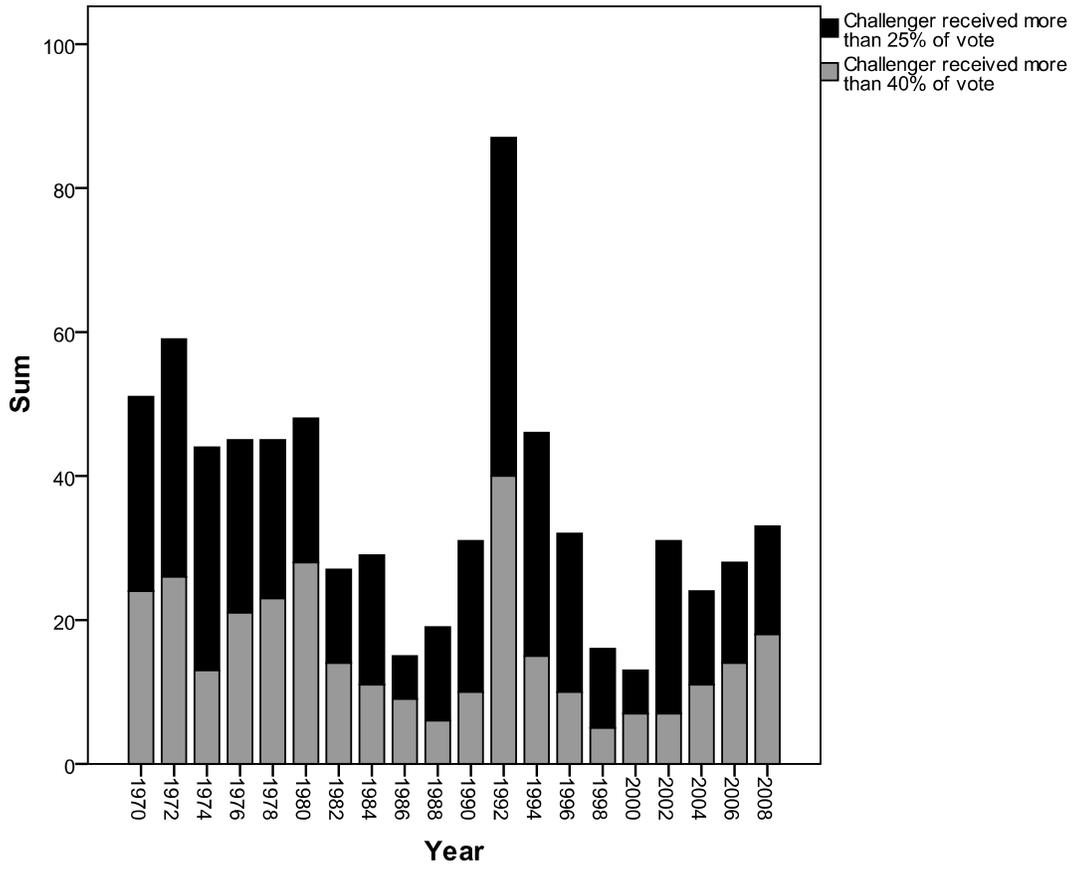


Figure Two: Issue-Based and Ideological Primary Challenges, by Year

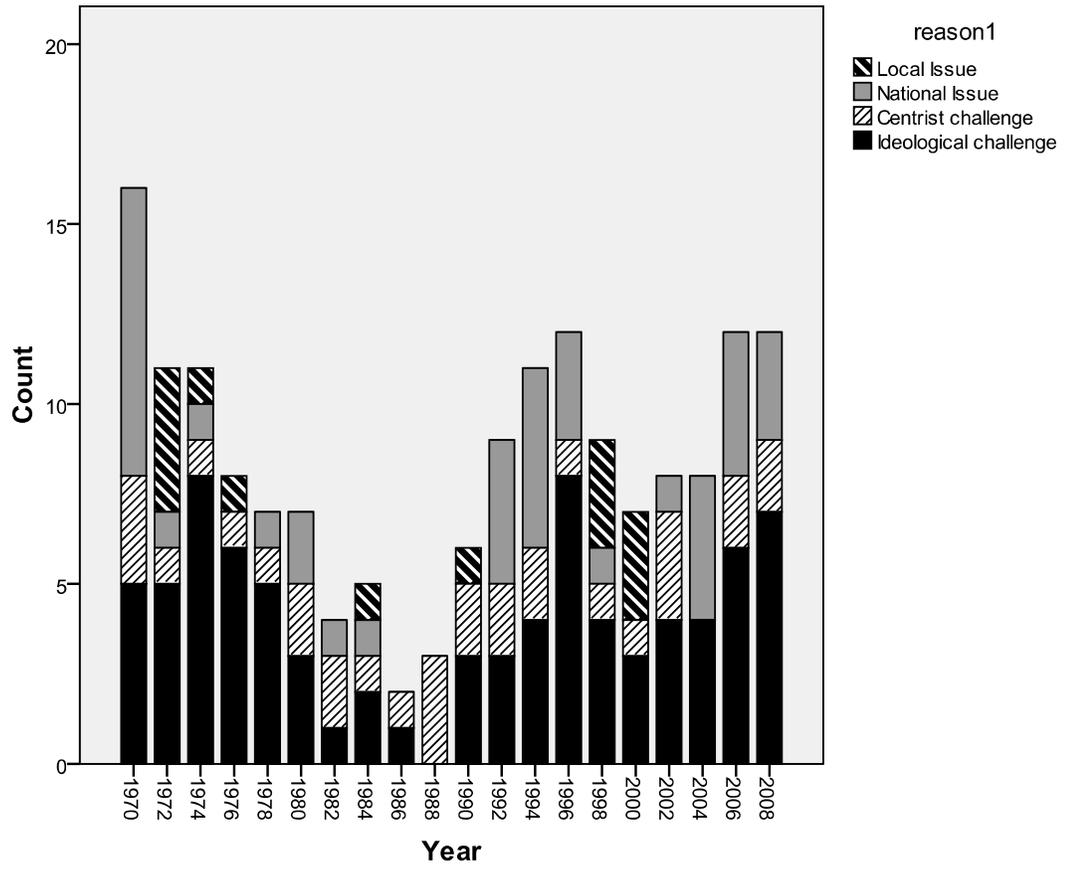


Figure 3: Ideological Placement of Primaried Democratic Incumbents, 1972 - 2008

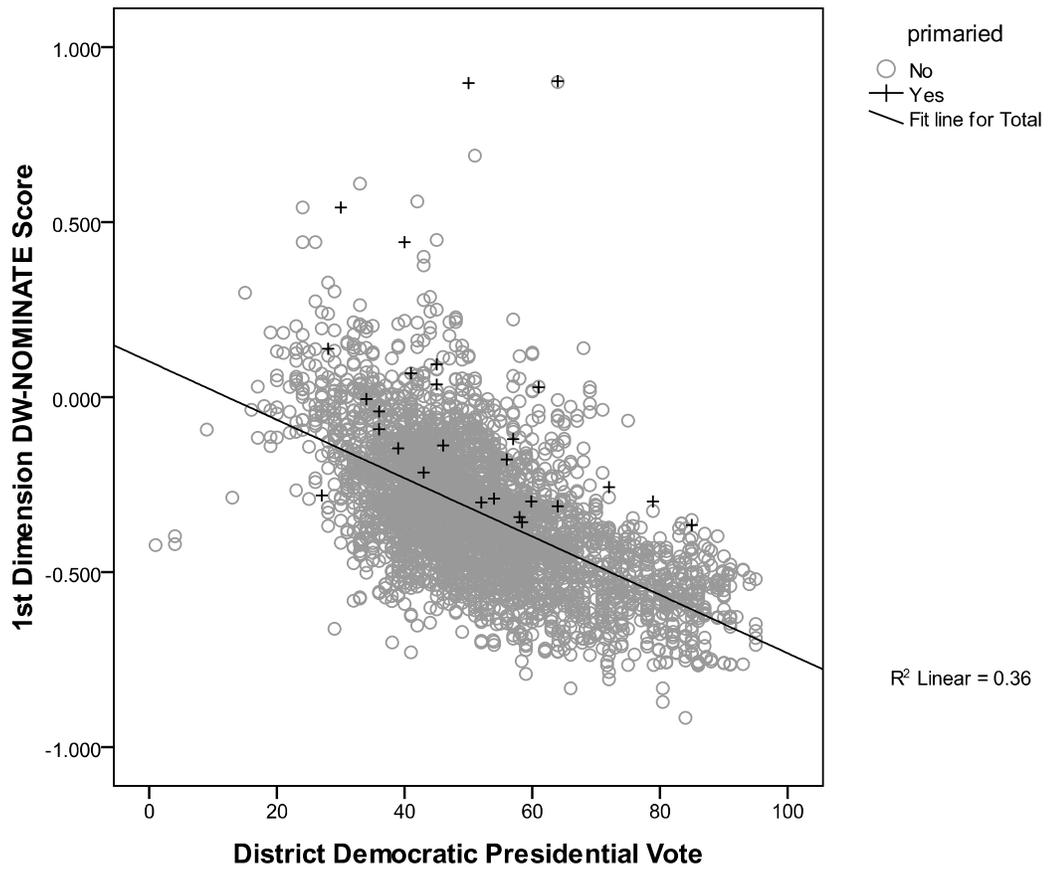


Figure 4: Ideological Placement of Primaried Republican Incumbents, 1972 - 2008

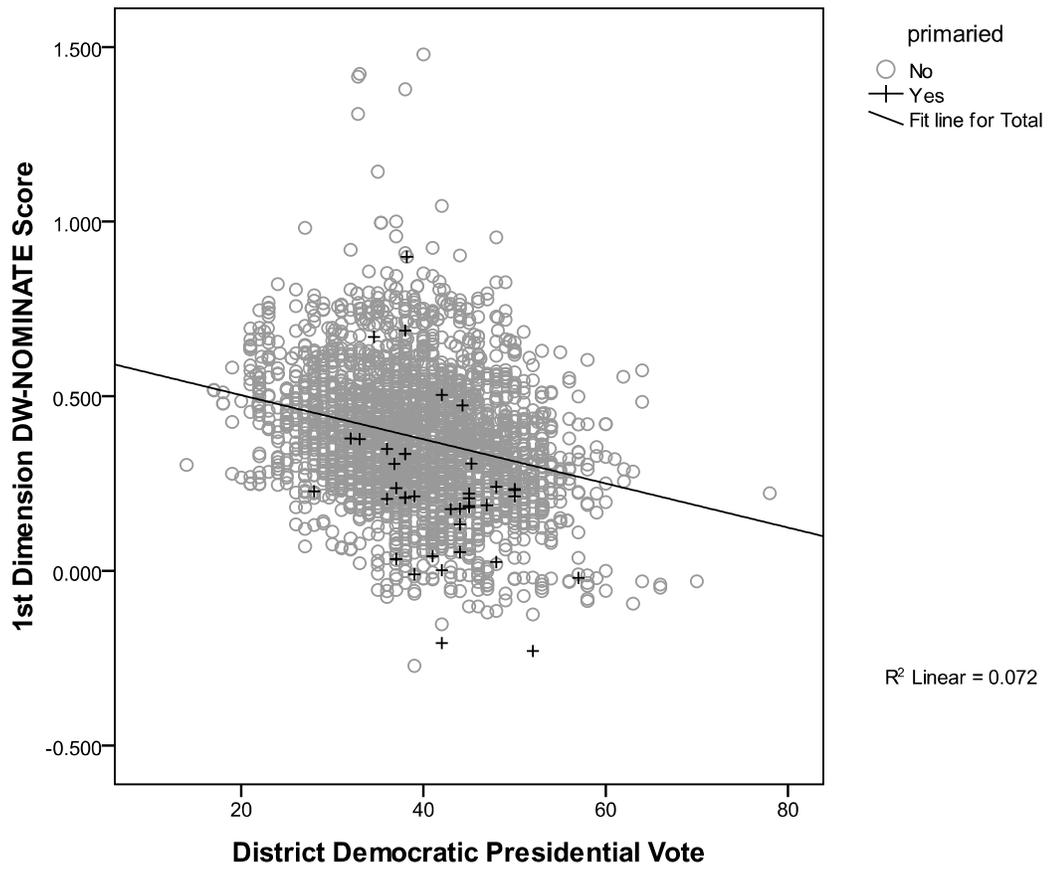


Figure 5: Ideological placement of Primaried Incumbents, 2002 - 2008

