Representativeness of Presidential Primary Voters in an Era of Polarized Parties

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Presidential primary voters are frequently faulted for contributing to the polarization of American politics as these voters are viewed as a small, unrepresentative subset of voters who hold ideologically extreme views. For example, Jennifer Rubin (2016) in a *Washington Post* editorial writes that “the presidential primary system is precisely the sort of arrangement that gives advantages to extreme, passionate elements that can be dominated by special interests ...” Some political scientists also agree that presidential primary voters are ideologically out-of-step with the American electorate (Walker 1988; Crotty and Jackson 1985; Lengle 1981; McDonald and Merivaki 2015; Polsby 1983). Other scholars, however, find fewer differences between presidential primary and general election voters (Abramowitz 2008; Geer 1988; Keeter and Zukin 1983; Kritzer 1980; Norrander 1989b).

Compounding the debate over the representativeness of presidential primary voters is a broader debate on whether the American public is polarized. Some political scientists attribute the public source of elite polarization to the entire electorate, finding the American public as a whole is polarized (Abramowitz 2010a) or at least, well sorted (Levendusky 2009). Another group blames activists, rather than the typical voter, for pushing candidates and legislators to the extremes (Fiorina, Abrams and Pope 2011; Carmines and Woods 2002). Thus, whether presidential primary voters are a representative sample of general election voters or dominated by the influence of activists, they too could be polarized.

Polarization is a word with many meanings. To some polarization is the stronger linkage between party identification and ideology or issue positions (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Abramowitz 2010a, 2010b). Thus, Abramowitz (2010a: 35) defines polarization as consistency across issues, where “the larger portion of leaders or citizens taking consistently liberal or conservative positions on issues.” Others describe this matching of partisanship with ideology or issues as a process of sorting, where voters are matching their party identification to the correct ideology and issue positions (Bafumi and Shapiro 2009; Hetherington and Weiler 2009). For other scholars, polarization means a movement toward extreme positions on issues (DiMaggio, Evans and Bryson 1996). Meanwhile, Gelman (2010) delineates three components of polarization: “partisan polarization” which includes a match (or sort) between party identification and ideology, “opinion radicalization” (i.e., extremism) and “issue alignment” (i.e., issue constraint).

Polarization could be manifested within primary electorates in a number of ways, in part, depending on which definition of polarization is employed. Primary electorates could be “polarized” because the party’s supporters are well sorted. Democratic primary voters match a well-sorted Democratic electorate and Republican primary voters match a well-sorted Republican electorate. Alternatively, primary voters could be polarized because they take extreme positions, whether it be on ideology or specific issues. This latter might occur because low turnout in primaries allows activists or only those most interested in politics to shape the positions of the primary electorate (Lau 2013; McDonald and Merivaki 2015). In our analysis, we will use the term “sorting” to refer to greater consistency on ideology within each party and “polarization” to refer to greater differences between the positions of Democrats versus Republicans.
In this paper, we will explore how reflective primary voters are of general election voters. The first step in this comparison is to demonstrate the amount of overlap in numbers between the two. Nearly every presidential primary voter is also a general election voter (Norrander 1986), but what proportion of general election voters also are primary voters? Similarly, are activists significant in numbers to sway the positions of primary or general election voters? The second focus of this paper is on the representativeness of presidential primary voters in face of an increasingly polarized or sorted electorate. To analyze primary voter representativeness we compare their ideology to the ideological position of the median general election voter in their state. We include presidential primary voters as part of the general election comparison group because ultimately the concern over the representativeness of primary voters is whether they can select candidates that can win the support of a plurality of the general election voters.

Overlapping Patterns of Participations

Slightly more than half of the U.S. eligible electorate participates in presidential elections. Slicing in half the U.S. population into voters and nonvoters brings about its own distortion in the voice of the American electorate (e.g., Leighley and Nagler 2013). However, beyond this distortion, a common assumption is that those who participate in primary elections or campaign activities comprise a smaller unrepresentative slice of the voting electorate. Of course, a subset of voters does not have to be unrepresentative if it were more akin to a random sample. On the other hand, a subset of voters could be unrepresentative because this subset is more ideologically extreme. A subset of more active voters also could be unrepresentative for less nefarious reasons if this subset is simply the better-informed and more interested component of the electorate. Such traits are consistently found to characterize primary voters (Norrander 1996; Nownes 1992).

To examine the amount of overlap in participation, we use the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (2016 CCES). Among the advantages of this survey is that it contains validated vote information for the 2016 general election, the presidential primaries and separately held statewide primaries. A validated vote for primary elections seems especially important because election surveys are often administered close to the fall general election, while many of these primaries are held in the spring. Thus, survey respondents must recall whether they participated in these prior elections.

Depending on the state in which a person resides, the number of voting opportunities varied in 2016. In 16 states, the presidential primary and primaries for statewide offices and Congress were held at the same time. (To ease the discussion, we will refer to these latter primaries as “congressional primaries.”) Thus, residents of these states with jointly held presidential and congressional primaries have two validated votes in the 2016 CCES. Residents of 11 states that use a caucus, instead of a presidential primary, to select their delegates to the national conventions also had two recorded votes: the general election and a primary for statewide and congressional primaries. Residents of 20 states comprise a third set of states with three opportunities to vote in elections: a presidential primary, a congressional primary held on another date, and the general election. Five states had mixed methods for presidential nominations (i.e., one party held a caucus and the other a primary). We exclude
residents of these five states from this part of the analysis.\footnote{In this part of the analysis, we exclude the four states (Idaho, Kentucky, Nebraska, and Washington) and Washington, D.C. where the two parties used a different format for selecting delegates to the national conventions.} We counted as nonvoters all respondents for which a voting record was not found.

In addition to measuring voting in elections, we calculated a measure of political activism by combining self-reported participation by attending a local political meeting, putting up a lawn sign or bumper sticker, working for a political candidate or donating money to a political candidate or cause.\footnote{The proportion of activists in this measure, at 20 percent, is higher than in other studies. This higher number is mostly due to the responses to the question on political donation. Other surveys find lower levels for political donations. For example, Pew reports that 12 percent of the public donated to a candidate or party in 2016 (Hughes 2017) and the level for donations in American National Election Studies between 2000 and 2012 averaged across years at 12 percent. We suspect that the higher proportions in the 2016 CCES is due to it being an internet survey, and their respondents may be more comfortable in making campaign donations through candidate websites.} The internal reliability of this combined measure of activism for these four forms of participation was measured by a Cronbach’s alpha score of .62. While this value is slightly low, removing any of the four activities did not improve the reliability of the scale. Since the questions on political participation were from the post-election portion of the 2016 CCES, we used the post-election weights in our analysis.

Figures 1 to 3 examine the participation patterns of residents of the three types of state. Figure 1 looks at states that held a joint presidential primary and congressional primary on the same date. In these states, 48 percent of the adult residents did not vote in any elections, and most of these nonvoters also were not registered to vote. This left 53 percent of residents as general election voters, but most of these voters either also voted in a primary (20 percent) or did at least one of the activism activities (20 percent). Thirty-seven percent of the adults voted in the primary. Almost everyone who voted in the primary also voted in the general election, and slightly less than half of the primary voters were also an activist. One-in-five residents engaged in at least one activity, with donating to a candidate being the most frequent one, and essentially every activist was a voter.

Figure 2 looks at the presidential caucus states where residents’ primary participation was for statewide and congressional offices. Notable about these states’ residents was a higher level of general election voting and fewer nonvoters. One reason is that these caucus states include traditionally high-turnout states such as Minnesota and Maine. As primaries for statewide office have less “hoopla” than presidential primaries, turnout in the congressional primaries averaged 22 percent, with half of these voters also being activists.

Figure 3 looks at the states with three election opportunities: general election, presidential primary and a separately held congressional primary. The general election turnout rate matches that in Figure 1. Also similar to the values in Figure 1, most general election voters either participated in a primary or engaged in another form of political activism. Presidential primary participation is higher at 32 percent than is congressional primary participation at 17 percent. About half of primary voters are also activists. In general, across all three types of states, one-half of the public does not vote, most general election voters also participate in a primary or some other political activity, one-third vote in a presidential primary and one-in-five vote in a congressional primary and one-in-five participates in a political activity beyond voting. Given the substantial overlap between general election voters, primary
voters and activists, the presumed unrepresentativeness of the latter two groups may be overstated. We next turn to the investigation of the representativeness of presidential primary voters.

Factors Influencing the Representativeness of Presidential Primary Voters

The representativeness of presidential primary voters may depend on the nature of the party holding the primary, the characteristics of the primary, and traits of the voter.  

The polarization debate focuses on the characteristics of the two parties holding presidential primaries. If supporters of the two parties are polarized or well sorted, then even if primary voters are reflective of other party members they may not be close to the position of the average general election voter. Thus, as the two parties’ supporters become more distinctive, either because they take more extreme positions or because each party become more homogeneous in their positions, the distance between a primary voter and the general election voter should increase. The polarizing traits of primary elections would be a reflection of the polarization or sorting of the two parties.

Another, often overlooked factor, related to the political parties and their primary electorates is the important role of majority party status. The average general election voter is not necessarily a moderate nor someone halfway between the positions of the two parties. State politics scholars have long noted that state populations vary in their overall ideology and partisanship (Berry, Ringquist, Fording and Hanson 2007; Wright, Erikson, and McIver 1985). As one party grows larger, gaining in majority party status, this party will encompasses more of the general election electorate. In other words, the typical general election voter will be closer to the majority party position than to the minority party position.  Everything else being equal, a voter in the majority party’s primary should be closer to the typical general election voter than a voter in the minority party’s primary. We next turn to factors related to characteristics of the primary. 

A major reason that presidential primary voters are presumed to be unrepresentative is because turnout levels are lower. Thus, factors that lead to higher primary turnout may ameliorate any differences between primary voters and general election voters. Primary contests that are more interesting should draw out more voters. Two such factors would be the competitiveness of the primary contest and the closeness of the national race. We expect that more closely contested races, either nationally or in an individual state, should increase turnout and produce a more representative electorate. Other races on a ballot may make a presidential primary election more interesting. Thus, we expect that jointly holding presidential and congressional primaries on the same day may increase turnout and produce a more representative electorate. This factor might be especially important for presidential primaries held on later dates, such as in May or June, when the national contest for the presidential nomination may be nearly over.

Participation rules for primary elections could influence who participate. Closed primaries, where only registered partisans can participate, are widely believed to produce a more biased electorate (Gerber and Morton 1998; Kaufman et al. 2003) One explanation would be that partisans are more extreme than independents. Another explanation would be that closed primaries have lower turnout than open primaries, where any voter may participate. Both factors would contribute to less representativeness in closed primaries. Others, however, disagree that open versus closed primaries would have significantly different electorates. McDonald and Merivaki (2015) propose few differences between open and closed primaries because all primaries have low turnouts that produced biased
electede. Norrander and Wendland (2016) focus on the combined connections between primary participation rules and partisanship, and the ideological nature of independents voting in primaries. In addition, primary participation rules are more complicated than an open versus closed dichotomy.

Political scientists generally recognize four formats of primary participation rules (i.e., Holbrook and La Raja 2008). Open primaries have two forms. In one, voters must ask the election official for a specific party’s ballot. This is the semi-open primary, and the public declaration of party preference and historical circumstances surrounding this format produces effects closer to closed primaries. In pure open primary states, voter receives both party’s ballots and decides to vote on one in the privacy of the voting booth. In semi-closed primaries, registered partisans are restricted to their own party’s primary but registered independents may choose either party’s primary. Closed primaries restrict participation to previously registered partisans.

Primary participation rules are connected to party identification, as demonstrated by five decades of political science research (Burden and Greene 2000; Campbell et al. 1960; Finkel and Scarrow 1985; Gerber et al 2010; Norrander 1989a). The requirement to register as a partisan in order to vote in a closed primary is associated with a higher level of partisan identity in the state and fewer independents. Open primaries are associated with a higher level of independent identification and fewer partisans. However, with no legal attachment to the party, partisans in open primary states are issue-oriented, policy demanders who may be more extreme in their issue positions than the more traditional partisans in closed primary states. Semi-closed primary states resemble the open primary states, as registering as an independent is encourage by these rules. Semi-open primary states are found mainly in the South and a few Midwestern states, and have patterns of partisanship similar to closed primary states. Further diminishing the effects of primary participation rules on the composition of primary electorates is that the independents who do participate in primaries are mostly leaning independents. These leaning independents have issue positions closely tied to that of partisans.

Factors that generally affect turnout rates in a state also may influence the composition of the presidential primary electorate. States with Election Day registration allow citizens to vote even if they only decide to participate on Election Day. This may be one factor with a direct influence on primary participation rates. Other state factors produce higher or lower turnout rates for general elections, which then indirectly affect the level of primary participation. Some of these factors are other registration requirements, education levels in a state, and less residential mobility. States with higher turnout rates in general elections may have a participatory culture that extends to primary elections, as well. Alternatively, states with higher turnout rates in general elections may have a general electorate that is more difficult to match with the lower turnout primary electorate.

Finally, characteristics of individual voters have been linked to polarization and sorting as well as primary participation. Primary voters are more likely to be highly educated, and education is linked to greater awareness of party differences and sorting into the correct party (Hetherington 2001). Americans also appear to be sorting themselves by age, race and religion in recent elections (Abramowitz 2010b). Minority voters are most likely to support the Democratic Party, but they may do so out of group identity. Meanwhile, the support of white voters for the party may be based more on issues, leading them to be more polarized. Highly religious individuals may lend a conservative voice to the Republican primary electorate. Finally, a gender gap occurs both across and within the two parties.
In the Democratic Party, women are more liberal than men and in the Republican Party, women are more moderate than men (Barnes and Cassese 2017; Norrander 2003).

**Models, Data and Measurement**

Our model to investigate the representativeness of presidential primary voters focuses on the ideological positioning of primary voters vis-à-vis the mean general election voter. Given the overlap between primary participation and general election participation, primary voters do play a role in the ideological position of the general election voter. Yet, the concern over how primaries may be biased and select less electable candidates is focused on the preferences of all general election voters, not just those who did not vote in the primaries. Thus, we argue the most appropriate measure of the dependent variable is the difference in ideological position of the mean general election voter in a state and the ideological position of each voter in that state’s presidential primary. Given the concern over extreme primary electorates, we use the absolute value of this ideological difference to measure the potential for unrepresentativeness. Our analysis is limited to those with a validated presidential primary vote.

Our measure of ideology is from the 2016 CCES five-point scale: very liberal, liberal, moderate, conservative and very liberal. Each state’s general election mean ideology is based on the response by those with a validated general election vote in the state. An ideological deviation score is calculated for each presidential primary voter by using the absolute value of the subtraction of the voter’s ideology from their state’s mean voter ideology. For both parties’ primary voters the range of ideological deviation scores varies between .01 to 2.6. The most liberal state holding a presidential primary is Vermont, with a score of 2.8 for its mean general election voter. Thus, the typical voter in Vermont’s Democratic presidential primary has an ideological deviation score of .6 while the typical voter in Vermont’s Republican presidential primary is 1.07. The most conservative state holding a presidential primary is West Virginia with a mean score of 3.6. Its Republican presidential primary voters falls closer to its general election voter with an ideological deviation score of .78, while voters in West Virginia’s Democratic primary fall 1.03 points away from the general election median voter.

These descriptions of the ideological deviation scores highlight the importance of the nature of the party holding the primary as explanatory variables. The first of these variables is majority party status. We calculate the size of a party in each state by combining respondents who identify as Democrats or independents leaning toward the Democratic Party versus the percent of a state’s voters who identify as Republicans or independents leaning toward the Republican Party. The Democratic Party has the largest advantage in Washington, D.C. and Massachusetts. The Republican Party’s greatest strength is in Idaho. We measure political polarization across the two parties by subtracting the mean ideology of a state’s general election voters who identify as Democrats from the mean ideology of those who identify Republican. We measure sorting by using the standard deviation on ideology for each party’s general election voters. A smaller standard deviation is seen as a well-sorted party.

The next set of independent variables are characteristics of the primary. The competitiveness of each presidential primary is measured as the edge the winner of the primary had over the second-place candidate, based on their percentage of the primary vote. The competitiveness of the national nomination race is measured by the number of delegates held by the first-place candidate as a percentage of the number of delegates needed for the nomination. Participation rules are coded with dummy variables for closed primaries, semi-closed primaries, semi-open primaries and open primaries.
In the multivariate analyses, closed primaries is the excluded category leading to comparisons to each of the other three formats. A dummy variables also was created to indicate which presidential primaries were scheduled on the same calendar date as a state’s primaries for statewide and congressional offices.

We also used measures of turnout in the general election and presidential primaries. General election turnout was measured with McDonald’s voting eligible electorate (United States Elections Project 2017). Because not all states reported a total votes cast, we use the measure based on votes for the highest office. We use Atkeson and Maestas’s (2016) measure of presidential primary turnout. Finally, we include a dummy measure for states that allow voters to register to vote on Election Day. Voter registration was available on Election Day in 15 states in 2016. Nine of these states held a presidential primary in at least one party (National Conference of State Legislatures 2017).3

The third set of independent variables are traits of individuals. Partisanship is divided into a number of dummy variables: strong partisans, weak partisans, independents leaning toward the party and pure independents. A final category combines opposite party partisans and independents leaning toward that party into a crossover measure. In the multivariate analyses, strong partisans is the excluded category. We reuse the measure of activism, but this time, keep a count variable that runs from 0 activities to 4 activities. We include five demographic traits. Gender is include because a gender gap exists within the parties with Republican women being more moderate than Republican men and Democratic women being more liberal than Democratic men (Barnes and Cassese 2017; Norrander 2003). We use the CCES measures of education and the importance of religion, though we change the direction of the latter such that a high score indicates greater importance. We used the CCES measure of date of birth to create an age variable. Finally, we created a series of racial and ethnic categories for the following groups: white, black, Hispanic, Asian and other races. In the multivariate analysis, white is the excluded category. Our models are run with OLS regression with clustering by state.

Results

Results of the OLS regressions are presented in Table 1. A negative coefficient indicates that the predictor is associated with a respondent closer to the median voter while a positive coefficient indicates the predictor is related to a respondent to move farther away from the state’s median voter. Among Republicans, the variables that move a respondent closer to a state’s median general-election voter are that state having a larger Republican majority, female, partisan groups other than strong partisans, and education levels. The larger the Republican majority in a state, the closer the average Republican primary voter is to the state’s median voter. As we pointed to earlier, a state’s median voter is not always a moderate nor equal distance between the two parties. Here we are able to provide support for this idea. When the Republican Party has a larger presence in a state, the general-election median voter is likely to be more conservative, which actually allows Republican primary voters to be ideologically closer to the state’s median voter.

3 Presidential primary states with Election Day registration include California, Connecticut, Idaho, Illinois, Montana, New Hampshire, Vermont, Wisconsin and Washington, DC. Utah’s Election Day registration was a pilot program for 2016 that has since expired, but Utah holds a caucus. Other caucus states with Election Day registration include Colorado, Iowa, Maine, Minnesota and Wyoming. Maryland and North Carolina allow same-day registration only during the early voting period.
In addition, women voting in the Republican primaries are closer to the state’s median voter than are men, highlighting the fact that female Republicans are less extreme in their political beliefs than men. Specifically in this context, we find support for the idea that women tend to be more moderate members of the Republican Party (Barnes and Cassese 2017; Norrander 2003), bringing them more in line with the state’s median voter. Weak partisans, leaning partisans, independent voters, and Democratic partisans who crossed over to vote Republican also tend to be closer to the median voter of a state. These voters, compared to strong partisans, are more moderate in their political views and better aligned with the state’s median voter. However, the number of pure independents (10 percent) and crossover Democratic voters (5 percent) in Republican primaries is small, leaving 84 percent of the Republican primary electorate to be strong or weak Republicans or independents leaning toward the Republican Party. (See Appendix A for complete numbers.) Finally, Republican primary voters with more education also appear to have a moderating force. Increased education brings with it increased ideological sophistication (Converse 1964, 2006), but recent research suggests that it is these highly educated voters who are well sorted, matching their issue positions with party identification. As far as the 2016 Republican presidential primaries, it appears while they may be well sorted, they are not ideologically extreme. Thus, political sophistication comes with a moderating effect, as it brings Republican primary voters closer to the general-election median voter.

[Table 1 about here]

Republican primary voters fall further away from general-election median voter if they are activists, religion is more important to them, they reside in states in which there is more polarization between Republicans and Democrats, and if they identify with a racial group outside of whites, African Americans, Hispanics or Asians. States that see higher polarization rates between Democrats and Republicans (in this case the increased difference between the mean ideological position of Democrats and Republicans in a state) tend to produce primary voters that are more extreme in their ideologies. Because the state has a higher level of polarization, it makes sense that primary voters will differ from the state’s median voter more so than in states with less polarization.

Political activists also are more likely to differ from the state’s median voter in presidential primaries (significance level = .051). Because of their activism, they are more involved and engaged (see Birkhead and Hershey 2017), likely making them more extreme in their ideology. The other races variable also helps explain more extreme vote choices. These racial groups (those that identify as Native American, Middle Eastern, mixed race, or other) are more likely to fall further away from the state’s median voter, when compared with white voters. Minority voters participating in Republican primaries most likely do so because of specific issue positions that lead them to identify as more ideologically conservative. Finally, the increased importance of religion to a voter’s life is associated with greater conservatism and places a primary voter further away from the state’s median voter.

Turning to the Democratic results, several variables explain when presidential primary voters are closer to their state’s median general-election voter. Similar to the Republican results, when Democrats have a larger majority in a state, their primary voters are closer to the general-election median voter. In these states with larger Democratic majorities, the median general election voter is likely more liberal than moderate, even if just slightly. This increases the likelihood that general election and primary voters will be closer ideologically than when the median voter is more moderate (or especially when the median voter is more conservative).
Same day voter registration also creates a population of primary voters that is closer to the state’s median voter. Given the context of the 2016 Democratic presidential primaries, one might think that these last-minute registrants were Bernie Sanders supporters who would be more liberal. However, it seems that those registering to vote on Election Day were previously less engaged in the political process than those who register earlier. Because they are less engaged, they are likely less extreme in their ideological preferences, bringing them closer to the median voter. Further, states with higher turnout rates in the 2016 general election produced Democratic primary voters more closely aligned with the state’s median voter. A higher general election turnout may have included more Democratic voters affecting the placement of the general-election median voter, since this variable was not significant in the Republican primary model.

Among the individual-level predictors, partisan groups other than strong partisans were more likely to keep primary voters closer to the median voter. Strong partisans tend to deviate more from the general-election median voter than weak partisans, leaning partisans, independents, or cross-party voters. However, the weaker coefficient for Democratic leaners than weak Democrats means that it is the independent leaner who is closest to the strong Democrat in their ideological position. Leaning independents are the most likely type of independent to participate in a primary, and they are not necessarily a moderating force. In the Republican model, weak Republicans and independent-leaning Republicans were equal distance from the strong Republicans. More so than for Republican primaries, the number of crossover voters in Democratic primaries (pure independents and Republicans) is small in number, constituting only 9 percent of the Democratic primary voters. Strong or weak Democrats or independents leaning toward the Democratic Party constituted 92 percent of the voters in the 2016 Democratic presidential primaries.

In terms of demographics, African American, Asian, older voters, and those voters for whom religion is important are all primary voters closer to the general-election median voter. When compared to white voters, African American and Asian voters tend to be less extreme in their ideological positions. Minorities may align with the Democratic Party out of group solidarity, whereas white voters’ allegiance may be more issue-based and thus associated with more extreme ideological positions. Older voters had this same effect. Older voters tend to hold less extreme positions, keeping primary voters and the median state voter closer together. Finally, religion’s importance to a voter has an impact among Democratic voters. Religion tends to have a conservatizing effect and in this case, keeps Democratic voters more moderate. Thus, the more importance religion plays in a Democratic voter’s life, the more likely this voter’s ideology will align with the state’s general-election median voter rather than deviate from it.

Two factors place Democratic voters further away from the median voter. Open primaries rather than closed primaries are associated with more extreme primary voters. Closed primaries require voters to register with a party if they want to participate in primary elections, increasing the number of partisans and producing a more moderate partisans. Without any legal attachment to a political party in an open primary state, people’s identities with a party are more likely to be issued based, resulting in a more extreme primary electorate. Thus, open primaries with more independent voters (mostly leaning independents) can have more extreme primary electorates. Finally, activists also tend to deviate more from the median voter than non-activists do.
Conclusions

Primary voters are frequently faulted for contributing to the polarization of the two parties, their candidates and elected officials. This characterization is based on the assumption that primary voters are a small, unrepresentative subset of voters. Overlooked in this characterization is the overlap between primary and general election voters, and factors that shape the composition of primary electorates and the positioning of the typical general-election voters.

Substantial overlap exists between general-election voters and primary voters. Almost every presidential primary voter is also a general-election voter. Even in the other direction, overlap occurs. Almost half (45 percent) of general election voters also voted in a presidential primary in 2016 (if their state held a primary). Even activists are more than an insignificant portion of general election voters, as nearly one-third (32 percent) of general election voters engaged in a political activity such as putting up a yard sign or bumper sticker, donating to a campaign, volunteering for a campaign or attending a community event/meeting.

The typical general-election voter is not necessarily a moderate nor equal distanced between the two parties. The ideological positions and partisan compositions of voters varies across the 50 states (Berry, Rinquist, Fording and Hanson 1998; Wright, Erikson and McIver 1985). Some states are more liberal while others are more conservative. Likewise, in some states the Democratic Party is the majority party while in other states, the Republican Party holds the majority. When a party has a strong position as the majority party in a state, the general-election median voter is closer to the position of this majority party. Thus, we found majority-party status to be a consistent factor in shaping the representativeness of a party’s presidential primary electorate. As a party holds a stronger position as the majority party, voters in its presidential primary more closely resemble the ideology of the state’s general-election median voter.

The argument that closed primaries lead to more extreme electorates also was not supported by our analyses. On the Democratic side, open primaries had a more ideologically extreme electorate and on the Republican side, none of the primary formats (semi-closed, semi-open, pure open) affected the ideological composition of the primary electorates. Based on past research, we argue that primary participation rules are reflected in partisanship, with more partisans in closed and semi-open primaries and more independents in semi-closed and pure open primaries. These participation rules, in turn, shape the reasons that individuals identify as partisans or independents. Primary participation rules that encourage partisan identifications produce a larger, less ideologically based partisan. Primary participation rules that discourage partisanship leave only those most ideologically connected to a party to adopt a partisan identity. Further, as most independents voting under any primary participation rule are leaning independents, these voters do not contributed their supposed moderating influence. Indeed, in Democratic presidential primaries, independents leaning toward the Democratic Party are more closely aligned ideologically with strong partisans than are weak partisans. On the Republican side, leaning independents and weak partisans seem to hold the same ideological positions vis-à-vis strong partisans. Crossover voters (partisans from the other party and independents leaning toward that party) are a moderating force in presidential primaries, but their numbers are few: 3 percent of Democratic primary voters and 5 percent of Republican primary voters.
The conversation over the meaning of “polarization” also shapes the answer to whether presidential primary voters contributed to this polarization. We measured both the difference in ideological positions of Democratic and Republican general election voters (which we deemed as a measure of polarization) and the homogeneity of Democratic (or Republican) general election voters (which we deemed as a measure of partisan sorting). The sorting measure was not related to the ideological representativeness of voters in either the Democratic or Republican presidential primaries. However, when there was greater ideological distance between Democratic and Republican general election voters, Republican presidential primary voters fell farther from their state’s general-election median voter. This ideological distance measure of polarization, however, was not related to the ideological positioning of Democratic presidential primary voters. Political sophistication also may not play out as expected. Voters who are more politically sophisticated are deemed to be better aware of the positions of the two parties and better able to sort themselves into the correct party. However, our surrogate measure of political sophistication (education status) produced a moderating effect on Republican primary electorates while having no effect on the composition of Democratic presidential primary voters’ ideology. The relationship between primaries and political polarization or sorting is more nuanced than often presumed.
References


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Table 1: Predictors of Ideological Distance between Primary Voters and State Median Voters in the 2016 Presidential Primaries

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Republicans</th>
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<th>Democrats</th>
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<td>Standard Error</td>
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<td>Standard Error</td>
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<td>(0.042)</td>
<td>-0.604**</td>
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<td>Joint Pres. &amp; Cong. Primary Date</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>(0.010)</td>
<td>0.009</td>
<td>(0.027)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within Party Ideological Sorting</td>
<td>0.176</td>
<td>(0.184)</td>
<td>0.467</td>
<td>(0.349)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Distance Between Republicans &amp; Democrats in state</td>
<td>0.231**</td>
<td>(0.050)</td>
<td>0.030</td>
<td>(0.066)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-Closed Primary</td>
<td>-0.003</td>
<td>(0.014)</td>
<td>0.029</td>
<td>(0.030)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Semi-Open Primary</td>
<td>0.026</td>
<td>(0.021)</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>(0.030)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Primary</td>
<td>0.031</td>
<td>(0.028)</td>
<td>0.067*</td>
<td>(0.033)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turnout Rate in 2016 Primary</td>
<td>0.000</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-0.055**</td>
<td>(0.015)</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>(0.016)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activists</td>
<td>0.021</td>
<td>(0.010)</td>
<td>0.067**</td>
<td>(0.009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak Partisan</td>
<td>-0.314**</td>
<td>(0.025)</td>
<td>-0.403**</td>
<td>(0.022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaning Partisan</td>
<td>-0.314**</td>
<td>(0.031)</td>
<td>-0.315**</td>
<td>(0.029)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pure Independent</td>
<td>-0.395**</td>
<td>(0.044)</td>
<td>-0.550**</td>
<td>(0.055)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross-Party Voter</td>
<td>-0.413**</td>
<td>(0.060)</td>
<td>-0.418**</td>
<td>(0.055)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>0.024</td>
<td>(0.092)</td>
<td>-0.124**</td>
<td>(0.028)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>0.051</td>
<td>(0.089)</td>
<td>-0.119</td>
<td>(0.113)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>-0.028</td>
<td>(0.076)</td>
<td>-0.135*</td>
<td>(0.054)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Racial Group</td>
<td>0.105**</td>
<td>(0.040)</td>
<td>0.037</td>
<td>(0.046)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
<td>-0.009**</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>-0.026**</td>
<td>(0.005)</td>
<td>-0.006</td>
<td>(0.007)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Religious Importance</td>
<td>0.096**</td>
<td>(0.007)</td>
<td>-0.106**</td>
<td>(0.009)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.539**</td>
<td>(0.114)</td>
<td>2.151**</td>
<td>(0.152)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R2</td>
<td>.17**</td>
<td></td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>7950</td>
<td></td>
<td>8872</td>
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</table>

Notes: Results of OLS regression with clustering by state.

* = p ≤ .05;  ** = p ≤ .01
General Election Only = 14%
General & Any Primary = 19%
General & Activist = 19%
Total General Election = 52%

Presidential Primary Voter = 18%
Presidential Primary & Activist = 15%
Total Presidential Primary = 32%

Congressional Primary Voter = 9%
Congressional Primary & Activist = 8%
Total Congressional Primary = 17%

Activist only = 1%
Activist & Voter = 19%
Total Activist = 20%
### Appendix A: Partisanship and Ideology of Presidential Primary Voters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Democratic Primary Voters</th>
<th></th>
<th>Republican Primary Voters</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Percent of Voters</td>
<td>Ideological Deviation</td>
<td>Percent of Voters</td>
<td>Ideological Deviation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong Partisans</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak Partisans</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>.65</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaning Independents</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>.87</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pure Independents</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaning Independents</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>.43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposite Party</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak Partisans</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong Partisans</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>.95</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>