Would Primary Voters Support Moderate Candidates?

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Abstract

This paper examines the conditions under which moderate candidates may gain support from, or at least not be penalized by, primary voters. I draw on survey and observational data to show how primary voters could elect moderate candidates. I find that both Republican and Democratic primary voters strongly prefer extremists to moderates, but this does not mean they will never support a moderate candidate. Primary voters are more likely to vote for the moderate if they are relatively more proximate to the moderate than the extremist. In addition, I use data on primary victory patterns from 1980 to 2012 to analyze how the configuration of candidates matters for election outcomes. I find that moderates are no less likely to win the primary when there are more candidates on the ballot, when there are minimal differences across candidates, and when there is an incumbent in the race. Even when there is no incumbent, the relationship between ideological centrism and victory rates is conditional on the number of primary candidates. Thus, although primary voters may prefer extremists to moderates, moderate candidates may, under certain circumstances, have hope in primary elections after all.

The dramatic rise in partisan polarization in Congress has been one of the most prominent topics of academic and political debate for the past decade. In the current 114th Congress, there is no ideological overlap between the two parties, and the distance between the Republican and Democratic parties is now at a post-Reconstruction high (e.g., McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). Perhaps the most commonly cited explanation for polarization is the primary election system. Primary voters are thought to favor ideologically pure candidates and thus pull candidates toward the extremes. As Jacobson (2004, 16) notes, primary electorates “are much more partisan and prone to ideological extremity and the need to please them is one force behind party polarization in Congress.” This argument has been so powerful that almost all who seek congressional reform advocate for changes in the party primary system (i.e., Fiorina et al. 2006; Mann and Ornstein 2012).

Yet the impact of primaries on polarization in Congress is far from clear. On the one hand, a large body of research shows that party activists have become increasingly extreme over the past few decades (e.g., Fiorina et al. 2006; Layman and Carsey 2002; Layman et al. 2010; Theriault 2008). Abramowitz (2010) provides one of the most comprehensive accounts of how the politically engaged subset of Americans is deeply divided along ideological lines. It is of course these individuals who are the most likely to participate in primary elections. Similarly, the Pew Research Center released a report in 2014 showing that Americans with more consistently conservative and liberal views are much more likely to vote in the primary than those with a mix of conservative and liberal views.

At the same time, political scientists have found surprisingly little support for the claim that primary elections cause polarization. For one, the evidence that extremists fare better in primaries is mixed (Brady et al. 2007; Hirano et al. 2010). Moreover, the introduction of
primary elections, the level of primary turnout, and the threat of primary competition are not associated with partisan polarization in roll call voting (Hirano et al. 2010). Differences in primary rules also seem to provide few answers. Closed primaries, or those in which only party members can vote, do not produce more extreme candidates than open primaries (McGhee et al. 2014; Rogowski and Langella 2014; but see Gerber and Morton 1998). Sides and Vavreck (2013) attribute these collective dead ends to the fact that primary voters look similar on many measures to other voters within their party (see also Geer 1988; Norrander 1989). They conclude, “Polarization does not seem to emanate from voters at any stage of the electoral process” (Sides and Vavreck 2013, 11).

Additional evidence on the limited effect of primaries comes from recent reforms. Most notably, the implementation of the top-two primary in 2012 in California was expected to increase turnout and thereby diminish the impact of extreme voters on candidate selection. Subsequent studies suggest that this was perhaps too optimistic. Moderate candidates fared no better under the top-two primary than they would have in closed primaries (Ahler, Citrin, and Lenz 2014), and if anything, California lawmakers took more extreme positions after 2012 (Kousser, Phillips, and Shor 2013). Ahler et al. (2014) suggest the reform’s failure is because voters were largely ignorant about the ideological orientation of candidates. Hirano et al. (2015) show that voters do learn about candidate ideology in gubernatorial and senate races, but there is little indication that they do so in races with limited media coverage and resources.

Thus, it is first not clear whether primary voters even favor extremists. It is also not clear whether primary voters learn about candidate ideology in U.S. House races and are able to make a choice based on proximity. These questions are difficult to examine with observational data for a few reasons. For one, it is difficult to measure the ideological distance between candidates
and voters. Second and perhaps more importantly, moderates are much less likely to seek congressional office than those at the extremes (Thomsen 2014). Thus, regardless of whether voters have complete information on candidate positions, a liberal Republican or conservative Democrat is unlikely to even be on the ballot. Research on partisan polarization has paid less attention to the makeup of choices that voters face. But political candidates are not selected in isolation, and they appear alongside many others. It is possible that voters can either deliberately or not so deliberately select moderates depending on the configuration of candidates that are available. It is certainly the case that in order for a moderate to win, there must be a moderate candidate from which voters can choose. But if we can learn about when moderates are more likely to win, we can better evaluate when moderates could and should run.

The main goal of this paper is to examine the conditions under which moderates may garner the support of, or at least not be penalized by, primary voters. I draw on both survey and observational data to show how primary voters could elect moderate candidates. First, I find that, on average, both Republican and Democratic primary voters strongly prefer extremists to moderates. This does not necessarily mean, however, that they will never support a moderate candidate. Primary voters are more likely to vote for the moderate if they are relatively more proximate to the moderate than the extremist. I build on these findings with observational data on primary victory patterns from 1980 to 2012. I find that moderates are no less likely to win the primary when there are more candidates on the ballot, when there are minimal differences across candidates, and when there is an incumbent in the race. It is possible that, in these circumstances, the signal is too muddled, the information is too costly to obtain, or there is different information that is of greater value. Thus, although primary voters may prefer extremists to moderates, they may not always support the extremist candidate. Primary voters
may be “tricked” into supporting a moderate if they have little information on candidate positions or even choose the moderate based on ideological proximity. The findings suggest that moderate candidates may, under certain circumstances, have hope in primary elections after all.

When Might Moderates Win?

The main goal of this paper is to examine whether and when moderate candidates could win the primary. There are several ways in which this might be possible. As a starting point, however, primary voters are expected to prefer the extremist candidate. It is clear that the most politically engaged public has become more extreme over time, and when given full information on candidate ideology, voters will prefer ideologically proximate candidates. The idea that voters favor ideological proximity is not new, and a vast literature on candidate behavior is rooted in the logic that candidates take positions based on the preferences of the electorate (e.g., Downs 1957). It would indeed be strange if voters preferred ideologically distant candidates but electorally driven candidates were not at least believed to adopt those positions. Yet in a world where candidates do not uniformly adopt the position of the median voter, the ideologically proximate candidate is not always the extremist. Primary voters are expected to favor the moderate candidate if he or she is relatively more proximate than the extremist. This relative proximity depends on the extremity or perceived extremity of the other candidate, but moderates are likely to gain electoral support as their competition becomes increasingly distant from voters.

Yet candidate ideology, and voter-candidate proximity more specifically, is not likely to influence vote choice in all circumstances. If voters do not have full information on candidate ideology, it is difficult to see how they can reward or punish based on ideology. The fact that primary voters have a hard time distinguishing between same-party candidates ideologically
supports this conclusion (Ahler et al. 2014). There are two cases in which voter-candidate congruence may be an especially tall order. First, the number of candidates on the ballot may affect congruence because voters have to invest different amounts of energy into learning about candidate ideology. Additional candidates on the ballot will require more effort from voters to learn which candidate is the most ideologically proximate. Second, the degree of ideological variation across candidates may affect the clarity of the signal that voters receive. If there are minimal ideological differences across candidates, voters might not have sufficient information to cast a ballot based on ideological proximity. In fact, recent findings from Hirano et al. (2015) show that voter-candidate congruence does not increase in races where there are few ideological differences between candidates.

Voter-candidate congruence may also be less relevant when voters have other information that is more important or valuable than candidate ideology. The presence of an incumbent in particular may override the preference of ideological congruence. It is possible that voters believe they are already aligned with the candidate, as Hirano et al. (2015) suggest, or that voters simply do not demand ideological congruence in these cases. A related literature on representation casts doubt on the extent of legislator responsiveness to the mean district voter or even the mean partisan voter (e.g., Clinton 2006; Bafumi and Herron 2010). If we consider this limited ideological congruence between voters and legislators in conjunction with the fact that incumbent re-election rates exceed 90%, it seems as if ideological congruence may not be the ultimate standard by which voters evaluate their representatives.

Thus, candidate ideology is not expected to influence electoral outcomes when there are more candidates on the ballot, when there are minimal ideological differences across candidates, and when there is an incumbent in the race. Primary voters are not predicted to favor either
extremist or moderate candidates in these cases because it is too costly to acquire the information that is needed to vote on ideological proximity. The stakes are also lower if all of the choices are ideologically similar, because the relative distance between the voter and the candidates is minimal. And because of the costs involved in learning about candidate ideology, if given the choice to rely on the incumbency cue, primary voters will almost always opt to do so. In short, proximity voting is likely when voters have full information about candidates and when there is no other competing information that might drive vote choice. But the reality is that voters do not always have full information about the ideological array of choices. At times voters face numerous options and muddled signals, and they are frequently presented with a safe and reliable incumbent. Candidate ideology is predicted to matter less in these cases.

To summarize, the first hypothesis is that moderates are more likely to gain support from primary voters as the relative distance from the extreme candidate increases. In this scenario, primary voters have full information and they would support the moderate candidate based on their ideological proximity. The second set of hypotheses is that moderates are no less likely to win when there are more candidates on the ballot, when there are minimal differences across candidates, and when there is an incumbent in the race. In this scenario, primary voters either do not have full information or have a different type of information, and ideological proximity is not a priority because the costs of learning about the candidates are too high, the stakes of choosing the less proximate candidate are too low, or the information they already have is sufficient. It should be emphasized that in both scenarios, candidates are not chosen in isolation. They are embedded among other candidates, and it is the array of choices that matters for electoral outcomes. The specific configuration and composition of candidates has an important impact on
which candidates ultimately win. In the sections below, I draw on survey and observational data to test these expectations.

Data I: Preferences of Primary Voters

This section examines how ideological proximity matters for candidate evaluations. I draw on data from an original survey of 1,000 Republican and Democratic primary voters. The survey was conducted by YouGov, who verified that the respondents had participated in the 2012 primary election. Each respondent received information about two U.S. House candidates who shared their party affiliation. One candidate was described as more moderate than most of his/her colleagues. The other candidate was described as more conservative and more liberal than most of his/her colleagues (for Republican and Democratic primary voters, respectively). The order of the candidates was randomized. Both candidates were portrayed as having previous political experience and being knowledgeable about the district. The candidate descriptions are provided in the Appendix. Respondents were asked to evaluate each candidate on their favorability, effectiveness as a U.S. representative, policy positions, and character traits, and they also rated the ideology of the candidates. Respondents were then asked which of the two candidates they would vote for in the party primary.

Figure 1 shows the mean favorability and effectiveness ratings of the moderate and extreme candidates, broken down by party. The favorability and effectiveness scales range from one to seven, with higher values indicating more positive evaluations. Both Democratic and Republican primary voters rate candidates who are more liberal and conservative than their

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1 The combination of candidates included two women, two men, or one woman and one man, but candidate gender is beyond the focus of this paper.

2 Primary voters rated the conservative and liberal candidates as significantly more extreme than the moderate candidate, so it is clear they were aware of the candidates’ ideological differences.
colleagues, respectively, higher than those who are more moderate than their colleagues in terms of favorability as well as expected job performance. Among Democrats, the mean favorability rating for a moderate candidate is 4.99, compared to 5.72 for a liberal candidate. Candidates’ perceived effectiveness as a U.S. representative is 4.93 for moderates and 5.36 for liberals. Similarly, among Republicans, the mean favorability rating for moderate and conservative candidates is 4.65 and 5.74, respectively. Moderate candidates receive an average effectiveness score of 4.54, and conservatives receive an average score of 5.46. All of these differences are statistically significant at p<0.01.

Figure 1: Favorability and Job Performance Ratings Among Democratic and Republican Primary Voters, For Extreme and Moderate Candidates

Primary voters were also asked which candidate they would vote for in the party primary. Figure 2 illustrates the expressed preference between the extreme and moderate candidate. The numbers look even worse for moderates when we examine expected vote choice. On the
Democratic side, 71% of primary voters favor the more liberal candidate, and on the Republican side, 82% of primary voters favor the more conservative candidate (p<0.01). On the one hand, these figures conform to the general narrative regarding the impact of primaries on polarization. Primary voters prefer ideologically extreme candidates who share their preferences, and candidates adopt extreme positions in order to gain their support (Aranson and Ordeshook 1972; Coleman 1971, 1972; Owen and Grofman 2006).

Figure 2: Expressed Vote Choice Between Extreme and Moderate Candidate, Among Democratic and Republican Primary Voters

More generally, though, we are interested in the conditions under which primary voters might prefer a moderate to an extremist. These data are thus particularly useful because they allow us to examine how ideological proximity matters for candidate evaluations and vote choice. The dependent variable is coded one if the primary voter preferred the moderate candidate and zero if she preferred the extremist. The main independent variables are
ideological distance from the moderate and the extremist. Primary voters placed themselves as well as both of the candidates on a 7-point scale; ideological distance is the absolute distance between the primary voter and each candidate. Increasing distance from the moderate and extremist candidate is expected to result in a decrease and increase, respectively, in support for the moderate candidate. Ideological proximity was also measured as relative distance from the extremist, which is the primary voter’s distance from the extremist minus her distance from the moderate. As the voter’s relative distance from the extremist increases, her probability of supporting the moderate is expected to increase. By examining relative distance in particular, we can better understand how the collection of choices can affect election outcomes.

I include several control variables in the models. YouGov collects demographic data on the respondents, and I account for their gender, race, income, education, and religiosity. I also control for the respondent’s desire for compromise, as we would expect voters who have a cooperative view of policymaking to support moderate candidates. Higher values correspond to agreement with the statement that it is important for political leaders to be pragmatic.

The results are presented in Table 1 below, broken down by party. For both Republican and Democratic primary voters, increasing distance from the moderate (extremist) candidate is negatively (positively) related to voting for the moderate candidate. On the Republican side, a one standard deviation increase in distance from the moderate leads to a 3.9 percentage point decrease in the probability of supporting the moderate candidate (from 6.1% to 2.2%), and a one standard deviation increase in distance from the conservative candidate leads to a 6.6 percentage point increase in the probability of supporting the moderate (from 6.1% to 12.7%). On the Democratic side, a one standard deviation increase in distance from the moderate decreases the probability of supporting the moderate candidate by 14.5 percentage points (from 27.5% to
13.0%), and a similar shift in distance from the liberal candidate leads to a 19.7 percentage point increase in the probability of supporting the moderate (from 27.6% to 47.3%).

Table 1: The Determinants of Supporting a Same-Party Moderate Candidate, Among Republican and Democratic Primary Voters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Republican Voters</th>
<th>Democratic Voters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance from Moderate Candidate</td>
<td>-0.91** (0.17)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance from Extreme Candidate</td>
<td>0.98** (0.19)</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative Distance from Extreme Candidate</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.94** (0.13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (Female)</td>
<td>0.58 (0.32)</td>
<td>0.58 (0.32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race (White)</td>
<td>-0.41 (0.45)</td>
<td>-0.41 (0.45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>0.29** (0.11)</td>
<td>0.29** (0.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>0.01 (0.01)</td>
<td>0.01 (0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity</td>
<td>0.23 (0.16)</td>
<td>0.23 (0.16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire for Compromise</td>
<td>0.55** (0.15)</td>
<td>0.55** (0.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-4.26** (0.90)</td>
<td>-4.18** (0.86)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Observations</td>
<td>471</td>
<td>471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log-Likelihood</td>
<td>-138.12</td>
<td>-138.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries are logistic regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. **=p<0.01, *=p<0.05.

More importantly here, as the primary voter’s relative distance from the extremist candidate increases, so does her likelihood of supporting the moderate candidate. Figure 3 shows the predicted probability of voting for the moderate candidate across different values of relative distance from the extremist. Republican primary voters are in the top panel, and Democratic primary voters are in the bottom panel. Among Republicans, a one standard
deviation increase in relative distance from the extremist candidate is expected to increase the probability of voting for the moderate from 6.0% to 21.1%. Among Democrats, a one standard deviation increase in relative distance from the extremist is expected to increase the probability of voting for the moderate from 27.6% to 57.0%. And for both Republicans and Democrats, a shift from the minimum relative distance from the extremist to the maximum relative distance has a dramatic effect on the probability of supporting the moderate (from 0.1% to 73.9% for Republicans; from 1.2% to 89.3% for Democrats). In short, it is clear that relative distance from the extremist clearly matters for the evaluation of moderates. With respect to the control variables, Republicans with higher levels of education and those who have a preference for compromise are also more inclined to favor the moderate candidate at the voting booth. None of these are significant for Democrats.
Figure 3: The Probability of Voting for a Moderate Candidate as Distance from the Extremist Increases, For Republican and Democratic Primary Voters

In sum, primary voters do favor ideologically extreme candidates. This is not a huge surprise in light of the findings that party activists and the politically engaged public have become more polarized over time (i.e., Layman and Carsey 2002; Layman et al. 2010; Theriault 2008; Abramowitz 2010). Yet primary voters are more likely to support moderate candidates as their relative distance from the extremist increases. In other words, moderates can benefit when liberal and conservative candidates are or are perceived to be too extreme.

Note: Predicted probabilities are estimated from the models in Columns 2 and 4 in Table 2.
Data II: Candidate Configurations and Election Outcomes

The data above are helpful for understanding the preferences of primary voters in the contemporary context. We know little about this small but influential subset of the population, and the findings demonstrate how proximity voting can affect support for extreme as well as moderate candidates. But it is never the case where the ideology of the candidates is printed on the ballot, and primary voters are unlikely to either be aware of candidate ideology or seek this information out in all circumstances. This section examines how candidate ideology matters for electoral outcomes when there are more candidates on the ballot, when there are minimal ideological differences across candidates, and when there is an incumbent in the race. I also supplement the previous findings by exploring how the ideological range across candidates has implications for the election of moderate candidates.

The analyses are based on primary election results for the U.S. House of Representatives from 1980 to 2012. I draw on a dataset that includes 23,653 Republican and Democratic primary candidates. Primary election results were obtained from the Federal Election Commission and the America Votes series (Scammon, McGillivray, and Cook 1990-2006). These data were merged with Bonica’s (2014) ideology estimates of candidates who ran for congressional office during this time. Bonica (2014) uses campaign finance data to place the vast majority of congressional candidates on a common ideological scale. What is particularly advantageous about these data is that they allow us to analyze the ideology of candidates who won as well as lost the primary. Of the full sample of those who appeared on the primary ballot, 17,405 (74%) have Bonica ideology scores. Candidates who were unopposed in the primary or were the only

3 See Bonica (2014) for a full description of the data and validation.
4 The Bonica dataset includes candidates who filed with the Federal Election Commission. Candidates who do not exceed the $5,000 threshold of campaign fundraising are not required to file. Those who are excluded are thus more likely to be long-shot candidates, but it is not clear that they are more likely to be
primary candidates who had an ideology score are excluded, and there are approximately 7,500 primary candidates that constitute the full pool here.

The dependent variable is coded one if the primary candidate won and zero if she lost. Our main concern is how ideological centrism is or is not related to electoral outcomes in various circumstances. I follow Hall and Snyder (2015) and measure ideological centrism as distance from the most extreme candidate in the primary. Higher values indicate more moderate positions. I use several models to test the hypotheses outlined above. First, I include an interaction between the number of candidates and ideological centrism to examine how ideology matters as more candidates appear on the ballot.

Second, I analyze primaries where the ideological gap between candidates is small. In the Hirano et al. (2015) article, primaries with a minimal ideological gap are defined as those with a gap of 0.5 or less (on a five-point scale); they are defined in this paper as races with gaps that are in the lowest quartile.

Third, I examine the relationship between ideology and electoral outcomes in races where there is an incumbent. In all of these cases, ideological centrism is not expected to be associated with victory rates. I also explore the impact of centrism when we would expect it to matter the most, namely when there is no incumbent and when the gap between candidates is not in the lowest quartile.

In addition, I supplement the findings in the previous section by examining how the ideological range across candidates influences outcomes. To be sure, this does not provide the

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5 I ran the models with both the number of total candidates in the primary as well as the number of primary candidates who have Bonica ideology scores. The results are similar, but I include the number of candidates with Bonica scores here because it is more taxing for voters to choose among numerous quality candidates than it is to choose among numerous long-shot candidates.

6 The mean ideological gap among candidates is 0.8, and the median is 0.6 (on a scale that ranges from 0 to 5.5). Those in the lowest quartile have a gap of 0.25 or less.
cleanest test of the relative proximity hypothesis, as we lack a measure of ideological distance from the candidates for even the median primary voter. This problem is familiar among those who study voter-candidate ideological congruence and political representation more generally. However, it is not a stretch to assume that as the ideological disparity across candidates increases, the median primary voter’s relative distance from the most extreme candidate also increases. I also use Bonica’s (2014) data to measure the relative distance of the average donor in the congressional district from the most extreme candidate. Relative distance is measured as the difference between the donor’s distance from the most extreme candidate and her distance from the most moderate candidate. I expect that moderates are more likely to win the primary as the ideological range between the candidates increases, and that they are more likely to win as the average donor’s relative distance from the most extreme candidate increases. Both of these tests are less than ideal, but they nevertheless attempt to address whether moderates can win under different configurations of candidates.

Several control variables are included in the models. The number of primary candidates is expected to be negatively associated with the probability of winning the primary, and those who raise more money are expected to be more likely to win. Contributions are obtained from Bonica’s (2014) dataset and measured as logged values of total campaign receipts. I account for the Democratic presidential vote share of the district, and I include a dummy variable for Republican candidates.

The results are presented in Tables 2 and 3 below; each will be discussed in turn. Again, ideological centrism is measured as increasing distance from the most extreme candidate in the primary. Column 1 shows the baseline model of the relationship between ideological centrism and election outcomes. Candidate ideology is not statistically significant, which highlights the
importance of analyzing the conditions under which ideology may or may not be associated with victory patterns. Columns 2-4 present the results for the various circumstances in which we would not expect the relationship to be significant. In Column 2, we can see that the interaction between the number of candidates and ideological centrism is insignificant, and ideological centrism is actually positively signed but also does not reach conventional levels of significance. Similarly in Column 3, increasing distance from the extreme candidate is insignificant in races with a small ideological gap between the candidates. Column 4 shows that candidate ideology is also not associated with electoral outcomes when there is an incumbent in the race.

The results for the cases in which we would expect the relationship between ideology and outcomes to be significant are displayed in Columns 5 and 6. In races where there is no incumbent and the ideological gap between the candidates is not in the lowest quartile, ideological centrists are less likely to win than those who are more extreme (Column 5). A one standard deviation increase in ideological centrism is expected to result in a 2.6 percentage point decrease in the probability of winning for GOP candidates (from 15.5% to 12.9%) and a 2.8 percentage point decrease for Democratic candidates (from 19.1% to 16.3%).
Table 2: The Impact of Ideological Centrism on Winning the Primary, 1980-2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(1) Baseline</th>
<th>(2) Number of Candidates</th>
<th>(3) Small Ideology Gap</th>
<th>(4) Incumbent in Primary</th>
<th>(5) Large Gap and No Incumbent</th>
<th>(6) Large Gap and No Incumbent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Centrism (Distance from Extreme Candidate)</td>
<td>0.01 (0.05)</td>
<td>0.19 (0.11)</td>
<td>-1.14 (0.71)</td>
<td>0.09 (0.06)</td>
<td>-0.35** (0.11)</td>
<td>-0.67* (0.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centrism x Number of Candidates</td>
<td>-0.06 (0.03)</td>
<td>-0.06 (0.03)</td>
<td>-0.06 (0.03)</td>
<td>-0.06 (0.03)</td>
<td>-0.06 (0.03)</td>
<td>-0.06 (0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Primary Candidates</td>
<td>-0.51** (0.02)</td>
<td>-0.48** (0.03)</td>
<td>-0.71** (0.13)</td>
<td>-0.58** (0.04)</td>
<td>-0.45** (0.04)</td>
<td>-0.49** (0.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log of Mean Receipts Raised</td>
<td>0.96** (0.02)</td>
<td>0.96** (0.02)</td>
<td>0.67** (0.04)</td>
<td>0.87** (0.03)</td>
<td>1.52** (0.07)</td>
<td>1.52** (0.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Presidential Vote Share</td>
<td>0.32 (0.26)</td>
<td>0.31 (0.26)</td>
<td>0.33 (0.46)</td>
<td>0.22 (0.31)</td>
<td>0.08 (0.62)</td>
<td>0.06 (0.62)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>-0.04 (0.06)</td>
<td>-0.04 (0.06)</td>
<td>-0.05 (0.12)</td>
<td>0.01 (0.08)</td>
<td>-0.26 (0.14)</td>
<td>-0.27 (0.14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-11.06** (0.62)</td>
<td>-11.16** (0.63)</td>
<td>-6.27** (1.25)</td>
<td>-9.25** (0.78)</td>
<td>-18.64** (1.28)</td>
<td>-18.41** (1.28)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of Observations</td>
<td>7,465</td>
<td>7,465</td>
<td>1,648</td>
<td>4,486</td>
<td>2,387</td>
<td>2,387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log-Likelihood</td>
<td>-3511.68</td>
<td>-3510.09</td>
<td>-941.55</td>
<td>-2228.74</td>
<td>-898.31</td>
<td>-895.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Entries are logistic regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses. All models include state fixed effects. **=p<0.01, *=p<0.05.
Column 6 is also restricted to cases where we would expect moderates to be less likely to win but it includes an interaction between ideological centrisim and the number of primary candidates. Moderates are again less likely to win than extremists, but the relationship is not significant when there are large numbers of primary candidates. Figure 4 shows the marginal effect of ideological centrisim on the probability of winning as the number of primary candidates in the race increases. Republican and Democratic candidates are displayed in the top and bottom panels, respectively. Ideological centrisim has a clear reductive impact on the probability of winning when there are fewer candidates in the primary, but once the number of candidates in the race exceeds 5.5, centrisim no longer has an impact on victory patterns. While this may seem like a large number of candidates, remember that this analysis is restricted to races in which we would expect ideology to matter most (i.e., the ideological gap is not in the lowest quartile and there is no incumbent). In these cases, the average number of primary candidates in a race is 4.4, and nearly half (1,056) of the candidates ran in primaries that had more than five candidates.
Figure 4: The Marginal Effect of Ideological Centrism on Primary Election Victory, Across Different Numbers of Primary Candidates

Note: Marginal effects are estimated from the model in Column 6 in Table 2.

This final section seeks to build on the earlier finding that primary voters are more likely to support the moderate candidate when she is more proximate than the extremist. The models in Table 3 include only races in which ideology is expected to matter the most, again when the ideological gap across candidates is not in the lowest quartile and when there is no incumbent in the race. Columns 1 and 2 include the measure of the ideological distance between the most extreme and most moderate candidates in the race, along with an interaction between this gap and relative centrism. Columns 3 and 4 include the measure of the average donor’s relative proximity from the most extreme candidate in the primary. There is a decrease in the number of observations in Columns 3 and 4 because average donor ideology scores are not available for all
districts. Again, the expectation is that moderates are more likely to win the primary as the gap across candidates increases and as the average donor’s relative distance from the most extreme candidate increases. The interaction terms are therefore of main concern here.

Across models, ideological centrists are less likely to win the primary than those at the extremes. But we can see in Columns 1 and 2 that they are more likely to win as the ideological disparity across candidates increases. In other words, as the gap between the most moderate and most extreme candidate in the primary increases, relative centrism is positively associated with the probability of winning. Still, this does not allow us to say whether voters are actually more proximate to the moderate candidate, and Columns 3 and 4 include the average donor’s relative distance from the most extreme candidate in the primary. While donor ideology is also an imperfect measure of the preferences of primary voters, it is likely that the average donor in the district bears similarities to the average primary voter. Columns 3 and 4 also show that centrists are more likely to win as the average donor’s relative distance from the most extreme candidate in the primary increases. These data are clearly less than ideal, but the results nevertheless shed light on how the success of moderate candidates depends in part on the broader electoral context. The results on the control variables are similar to those in Table 2, and the interaction between candidate ideology and number of primary candidates is again insignificant here.
In sum, the findings with the observational data suggest that ideology matters in different ways for electoral outcomes depending on the particular configuration of candidates. It is sometimes, but not always, the case that ideological moderates are penalized at the ballot box. If there is no incumbent and if there is ample variation across candidates, moderates are indeed less likely to win. This may be due to the additional information that primary voters receive, and greater ideological distinctions across candidates may foster voter-candidate congruence. But if there is a cue like incumbency, candidate ideology may be less important to even the most extreme of primary voters. Similarly, primary voters do not appear to make decisions based on
ideology when there is minimal variation across candidates or when there are more choices on
the ballot. What is perhaps most interesting is that even in open seat races with variation across
candidates, the relationship between ideological centrism and electoral outcomes is conditional
on the number of candidates in the primary. It is possible that, in these cases, the signal is too
muddled, the stakes of proximity voting are too low, or the information is too costly to obtain.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper examined the conditions under which moderate candidates could garner the
support of, or at least not be penalized by, primary voters. To be sure, primary voters are
dramatically more likely to favor ideologues when they have full information about candidate
positions. This conforms to the general narrative around the preferences of primary voters.
However, contrary to popular wisdom, the survey results show that primary voters are at times
willing to support moderate candidates. Specifically, as the primary voter’s distance from the
extremist candidate increases, her probability of voting for the moderate candidate increases.

Yet primary voters very rarely have full information about candidate ideology. They are
never presented with a ballot that describes the positions of various candidates, nor are
candidates ever placed on an ideological scale for comparison. The observational data allow us
to examine the various circumstances in which moderates are more and less likely to suffer at the
ballot box. I find that moderates are no less likely to win the primary when there are more
candidates on the ballot, when there are minimal differences across candidates, and when there is
an incumbent in the race. Even when there is no incumbent, the relationship between ideological
centrism and victory rates is conditional on the number of primary candidates. This may be a
reflection of the clarity, amount, and type of information that primary voters receive when there
are different configurations of candidates on the ballot. And even if primary voters have full information, they may choose to support the moderate candidate if the extremist in the race is perceived to be too extreme. Additional research is needed to understand how the presence of extreme ideologues in the race affects the selection of moderates.

The broader message is that although primary voters may prefer extremists to moderates, they may not always support the extreme candidate. This is because candidates are not chosen in isolation. They are presented to voters alongside many others, and the collective arrangement of candidates matters for who is ultimately elected to office. It is possible that voters can select moderates either on purpose or on accident depending on the options that are available to them.

Research on polarization has paid less attention to the makeup of choices that voters face, but the composition of candidates has clear implications for the composition of Congress.

For those who bemoan the rise of partisan polarization in Congress, these findings should be seen as good news. Candidate ideology does not outweigh all other variables, and ideological centrism does not influence electoral outcomes in all circumstances. We can also learn lessons for the future. One key takeaway from the findings is that moderate candidates may suffer less than many observers would expect, particularly when there are lots of candidates on the ballot. This was true even in races with no incumbent and ample ideological variation across candidates. Open seat races are especially important for diminishing the ideological gulf between the parties, because it is the newly elected members who steer their party’s ideological course. Perhaps moderates could be more likely to run under these circumstances. Because in order for moderates to get elected, there must be a moderate candidate for voters to choose.
References


Brady, David W., Hahrie Han, and Jeremy C. Pope. 2007. “Primary Elections and Candidate Ideology: Out of Step with the Primary Electorate?” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 32(1): 79-105.


Appendix A: Survey of Primary Voters

Liberal and Moderate Democrat

Democrat Robert Wilson is running for U.S. Congress. He has lived in the district for a number of years. He served on the city council for several terms and was later elected to the state legislature. While in the state legislature, Robert Wilson worked on legislation in a range of policy areas, such as health and veteran's affairs.

Robert Wilson is known for holding more liberal views than many of his Democratic colleagues. He is a supporter of progressive values, and believes we need to invest in our economy and strengthen vital social services.

Conservative and Moderate Republican

Democrat Michael Davis is running for U.S. Congress. He grew up in the district and has strong ties to the area. He first worked as a lawyer and then spent several years as a State Representative. During his time in the state legislature, Michael Davis served on a variety of committees and was active in a number of policy areas, such as education and taxes.

Michael Davis is known for holding more moderate views than many of his Democratic colleagues. He is a supporter of progressive values, but believes we need to balance our goals of protecting social services and maintaining a balanced budget.

Republican Robert Wilson is running for U.S. Congress. He has lived in the district for a number of years. He served on the city council for several terms and was later elected to the state legislature. While in the state legislature, Robert Wilson worked on legislation in a range of policy areas, such as health and veteran's affairs.

Robert Wilson is known for holding more conservative views than many of his Republican colleagues. He is a supporter of traditional values and believes in limited government, advocating deep cuts in current spending even in tough economic times.

Republican Michael Davis is running for U.S. Congress. He grew up in the district and has strong ties to the area. He first worked as a lawyer and then spent several years as a State Representative. During his time in the state legislature, Michael Davis served on a variety of committees and was active in a number of policy areas, such as education and taxes.

Michael Davis is known for holding more moderate views than many of his Republican colleagues. He is a supporter of traditional values and believes in limited government, but advocates caution in making deep spending cuts during tough economic times.
Appendix A: Survey of Primary Voters

Vote Choice Question

Note: When primary voters placed the mouse over the candidate names (highlighted in blue), they received the same information about the ideology of each candidate as in the earlier slides.

Again, both candidates share your same party affiliation, but if you had to vote for one of these candidates right now in the party primary, would you vote for Robert Wilson or Michael Davis?

- Robert Wilson
- Michael Davis