

Primary Elections and the Quality of Elected Officials*

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February, 2014

Abstract

In this paper we argue that the literature underestimates the value of primaries, because it focuses on overall average effects. We argue that primary elections are most needed in safe constituencies, where the advantaged party's candidate can usually win the general election – even if she is “low quality.” If the main role of elections is to select good candidates, then primaries in open seat races for advantaged parties are particularly consequential. We provide evidence that these primaries are especially effective at selecting “high quality” types. We also find that more high quality politicians competing in advantaged party primaries than other parties' primaries and that the primary electorates do vote for higher quality politicians when given a choice.

*We thank Jeff Frieden, Fernando Martel, Socorro Puy Segura, Pablo Querubin, Ken Shepsle, Enrico Spolaore, Matthew Stephenson, Dustin Tingley, and participants at the University of Virginia American Politics Seminar, Vanderbilt CSDI Seminar, LSE Political Economy Seminar, University of Malaga Department of Economics Seminar and the EPSA 2013 Meeting for their helpful comments. We thank Abuchi Agu, Stacey Hall, Kendall Hope Tucker, and Adam Zelizer for their excellent research assistance. This paper is part of ongoing projects supported by National Science Foundation grants SES-0617556 and SES-0959200. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this manuscript do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

1 Introduction

More than fifty years ago Julius Turner studied competition in congressional primaries and found that few incumbents faced serious challenges and almost none of them lost. He concludes pessimistically: “The comparative usefulness of the primary as a method for selecting successors for retiring incumbents does not offset the fact that the primary is not a successful alternative to two-party competition in most parts of the United States” (Turner, 1953, 210).

Many modern textbooks on U.S. elections summarize the situation in similar terms. For example, Bibby (2003, 171) writes, “It was the expectation of the [progressive] reformers that the direct primary would stimulate competition among candidates for party nominations. This hope has not been fulfilled, however. In a substantial percentage of the primaries, nominations either go uncontested or involve only nominal challengers to the front runner... Because incumbents tend to scare off competitors in the primaries, they of course win renomination in overwhelming proportion.” Like Turner, Bibby focuses on the low level of average primary competition for incumbent contested races and concludes that primaries are simply a “nuisance” in these cases.¹ Jacobson’s (2009) text on congressional elections scarcely mentions primaries at all.

In this paper, we argue that the absence of primary competition does not mean that primaries have only a marginal role in the electoral system. The existing literature underestimates the value of primaries, because it focuses on the average effect of primaries across different situations: open- and incumbent contested races as well as safe and competitive constituencies. Instead, to accurately assess the extent to which primaries contribute to the electoral system we must distinguish among the different situations.

If we are mainly interested in electing high-quality officials and assuming that the main role of elections is to select “good types” rather than to hold incumbents accountable (i.e., to reward and punish incumbents based on their performance), then primaries will make their biggest contribution in open-seat elections in safe districts (i.e., races without an incumbent

¹After describing the low level of primary competition in incumbent contested congressional and state legislative races, Bibby (2003, 172) writes, “Thus, for most members of Congress and state legislators, the primary is not unlike the common cold. It is a nuisance, but seldom fatal.”

and constituencies that consistently favor one party’s candidate in the general election).^{2,3} Open-seats are particularly relevant because if most open-seat winners are high-quality, then most *incumbents* will be high-quality as well; most incumbents were, at some point in the past, open-seat winners.⁴ Within open-seat races, we are particularly concerned about the quality of the candidates competing in the advantaged party’s primary in safe constituencies.⁵ This primary bears a larger burden for selecting the quality of elected officials compared to the disadvantaged party’s primary in safe constituencies, which is unlikely to produce the eventual winner, or either party’s primary in competitive constituencies, which presumably only need one party to nominate a high quality candidate for the general election.

If open-seat races result in high-quality winners, then perhaps we should not be too concerned with the relatively low level of primary competition (in either party) when an incumbent is running for re-election or when the general election is competitive. Rather, we should focus our attention on what happens in open seat elections for the advantaged party

²Two highly influential works – Fearon (1999) and Besley (2006) – provide strong strong theoretical justification for the assumption that elections are primarily about selection. See See Ashworth (2012) for a review of the literature.

³Parts of this argument have been made before. Banks and Kiewiet (1989) provide a theoretical model and some empirical evidence highlighting the differences in the quality of candidates entering in open seat versus incumbent contested primaries. A number of scholars have also noted the differences in the contestation between open seat and incumbent contested primaries (e.g. Turner (1953); Jacobson and Kernell (1983)). However, these studies do not distinguish between safe, competitive and unsafe constituencies. Several scholars have noted that the advantaged party primary tends to be more competitive (see footnote 16 below). However, these studies do not discuss the implications for candidate quality.

⁴This assumes that high-quality incumbents do not retire at much higher rates than low-quality incumbents. It is possible that high-quality incumbents retire at much higher rates than low-quality incumbents – e.g. if serving in an elective political office is a means of generating attractive job offers in the private sector (or bureaucracy), and if the private sector desires high-quality incumbents and can identify them. This does not seem likely, however, at least for most of the important elective offices in the U.S..

⁵It is interesting to note that some of the early progressive scholars and reformers made similar arguments. For example, in 1923 Charles Merriam (1923, 4) wrote, “[T]he significance of the vote under the direct primary varies in different sections of the country or of the state. About half the states are one-party states where the primary is of the very greatest importance, for here the election is practically decided. This list includes [list of states] and comprises more than half of the population of the United States. Many other states are preponderatingly Republican or Democratic. Of the 3,000 counties in the United States, it is safe to say that roughly half of them are one-party counties. Legislators, governors and United States senators are practically chosen in the primaries. In these instances ... the primary of the majority party is of the utmost consequence, for whatever the outcome, it is not likely to be overthrown in the subsequent [general] election.” Somewhat more indirectly (and colorfully), in 1924 Gifford Pinchot (1924, 9) noted, “Under the convention system the only power that can clean up a party is the other party. Under the primary it is possible to clean up from within.” And V.O. Key (1956, 88) stated, “The direct primary method of nomination apparently constituted at bottom an escape from one-partyism.”

in a safe districts and the minority of cases involving low-quality incumbents.

In this paper we evaluate the effectiveness of open seat primaries for the advantaged party in safe districts to nominate high quality politicians. We consider several different measures of candidate “quality” and incumbent performance and analyze the relationships between primary election circumstances and the probability that a party’s nominee is high-quality. The measures include previous experience in related public-sector positions (a proxy for task-specific human capital), evaluations by various experts (e.g., bar association evaluations of judicial candidates and incumbent judges), and newspaper endorsements. Each of these is relatively coarse and noisy; however, they all point in the same direction, which increases our confidence that they capture important aspects of quality.

We also examine some of the mechanisms by which open seat primaries may lead to the selection of high quality nominees for the advantaged party in a safe constituency. While voting behavior may account for some selection of high quality nominees in all constituencies, the incentives for candidate entry and the “pool” of potential primary candidates should in theory improve the likelihood that the advantaged party’s primary will produce a high quality nominee.

Our main finding is that the advantaged party’s primary in safe constituencies are more likely to select high-quality nominees than the primaries for other parties. We provide evidence that a higher proportion of the primary candidates in these races high quality candidates than other primaries. The overall quality of candidates competing in the primary is importance because even though primary voters do tend to choose higher quality candidates when there is variation in the quality of the candidates, their ability to do so declines as the number of primary candidates increases. Advantaged party primaries are so effective at selecting high-quality nominees that we observe little difference in the quality of the eventual winners in safe versus competitive constituencies, despite effectively having only one election with which to screen for quality. Thus, primaries contribute to the U.S. electoral system by facilitating the selection of high quality officials even when effective two-party competition is lacking in the general election.

2 Theoretical Considerations

While primaries provide one opportunity for voters to screen for politician quality, unless primaries in safe districts are particularly effective at screening for quality, we might expect the quality of elected officials to be higher in competitive districts where the general election provides a second opportunity to screen for quality.⁶ In this section we highlight several reasons why the primaries of parties with an advantage in the general election due to underlying partisan loyalties in the electorate may be more likely to select a high-quality nominee than other primaries. These reasons have to do with differences in the informational environments, the incentives for candidate entry, and the “pool” of potential primary election candidates. If primaries in safe districts function particularly well at nominating high quality candidates for the advantaged party, then we might expect that safe and competitive districts would elect officials of similar quality.

In terms of information, primary candidates for the party in safe districts tend to receive more media attention than the candidates competing in the other party’s primary in the same district.⁷ Moreover, these candidates also tend to spend more resources during the primary campaign, part of which is presumably used to advertise information about the candidates.⁸ Thus, to the extent that this additional exposure to information improves the ability of voters to choose among primary candidates, we should expect that the quality of nominees to be higher for the advantaged party in safe constituencies.

⁶For example if the quality of elected officials is determined simply by having voters learn who the higher quality candidates are and vote for them, then we might expect that districts with competitive general elections would elect higher quality officials compared to safe districts. The competitive general election would serve as an additional screen for quality of politicians. In contrast in safe districts the primary is often the only electoral screen for politician quality.

⁷First, to demonstrate that candidates in the primary election for a party with a partisan advantage receive more media attention, we can examine the number of times candidates’ names are mentioned in newspapers for the primary election for an advantaged party. Although we do not have access to a large historical database of newspapers throughout the country, we the database available through www.newslibrary.com which allows us to examine newspapers from different regions of the U.S. for the period 1998 to 2006. For each election during this period, we counted the number of times candidates’ names were mentioned for each party. We find that the advantaged party’s candidates receive about double the amount of newspaper coverage as the other party’s candidates.

⁸In the period 1992 to 2006, when no incumbent is competing in a Senate race, the losing primary candidate from the advantaged party spends substantially more than the losing primary candidate from the other party.

In addition to the informational advantage, we might also expect there to be a larger proportion of high quality candidates competing in the advantaged party primary in safe districts. There are two reasons why this might occur. The first has to do with incentives for candidate entry. If the probability that a candidate will enter is increasing in the likelihood that the candidate will be elected, then increasing the probability of winning the general election will have a positive effect on the likelihood that high-quality candidates will enter the primary. The probability of winning the general election is likely to have a multiplier effect on the incentive for high-quality candidates to enter an election.⁹

The intuition for this multiplier effect can be seen in the simple cross-partial derivative of the probability of winning office, W . Suppose W is equal to the probability of winning the primary, P , times the the probability of winning the general election, G . Suppose further that the probability that a candidate wins the primary is increasing in her quality, q , so $\partial P/\partial q > 0$. Finally, suppose that voting in the general election is driven entirely by voters' partisan attachments, a , so quality has no affect on the probability of winning in the general election; define a so that higher values mean more voter's are attached to the candidate's party, so $\partial G/\partial a > 0$. This assumption is for simplicity – the argument will hold as long as the effect of quality is “small” relative to the effect of partisanship. Then $W(q, a) = P(q)G(a)$, so $\partial^2 W/\partial q \partial a = (\partial P/\partial q)(\partial G/\partial a) > 0$. Thus, high-quality candidates will have a greater incentive to enter their party's primaries as their districts becomes safer for their party. As long as quality is not also correlated with some other attribute affecting voting behavior, increasing the proportion of high-quality candidates competing in a primary should naturally increase the likelihood that a high-quality candidate will win the nomination. The concern is that when quality is also correlated with some other attribute or dimension, the high-quality

⁹This positive relationship between the number of high-quality candidates competing in a district's primary and probability of winning the general election in that district should still exist even if candidates enter sequentially. Of course, the probability that later entrants will win the primary is lower when the preceding entrants are high-quality. This suggests that potential candidates will have weaker incentives to enter an election when the prior entrants are high-quality, leading to fewer high quality candidates in primaries with an initial high-quality entrant, e.g. when there is an incumbent. Nonetheless, among races where there is an initial high-quality entrant, the intuition outlined above should still hold, and we should expect more high-quality candidates competing in the primaries for parties with an electoral advantage in the general election as compared to the primaries for other parties.

candidates may divide the “high-quality” vote in a way that allows the low-quality candidate to win.

A second reason has to do with changes in the “pool” of potential primary election candidates. The proportion of candidates in this pool who are high-quality is likely to be larger for the advantage party in a safe district. This relationship will naturally arise from the multi-levels of elected office in U.S. government. For example, in a congressional district that is safe for the Democrats, we would expect that more of the state legislators elected from districts with boundaries that fall within that congressional district will be Democrats. If prior legislative experience is an indicator of quality, then there will be more high-quality types who could consider entering the Democratic primary in this congressional district – assuming that state legislators are more likely to run for congressional seats that overlap with their state legislative district. Thus, even if candidates are not necessarily strategic in their entry decisions and voters are not necessarily better able to identify high-quality candidates, we might still expect that this “mechanical” effect will lead parties favored in the general elections to nominate high-quality candidates.

This discussion suggests that the claims about the limited role of primaries (e.g. Turner, 1953) may understate their value especially for safe seats. In open seat primaries, the advantaged parties in safe districts are especially likely to produce high-quality nominees. Several scholars have noted that if most open-seat winners are high-quality, then most *incumbents* will be high-quality as well, since most incumbents were, at some point in the past, open-seat winners (e.g. Ashworth, 2005; Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita, 2008; Zaller, 1998). While the existing literature focuses on how the election of high-quality officials in open-seat general elections could produce an incumbency advantage in subsequent general elections, the same logic would suggest that the nomination of high-quality candidates in open-seat primaries could reduce competition in incumbent contested primaries even in safe districts.¹⁰ In this framework, the lack of primary or general election competition for incumbents is consistent with an electoral system that works particularly well on the initial selection of public

¹⁰Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita (2008) also note that selection on quality is likely to be highest when the ideological differences between the candidates are low, as is the case in primary elections.

officials.

3 Constituency Partisanship

Since we argue that primaries are particularly useful in safe constituencies, the value of primaries to an electoral system depends in part upon the extent to which public officials are elected in safe constituencies. In this section, we draw on several different datasets to calculate the proportion of statewide, congressional, and local constituencies we would consider having safe versus competitive general elections between 1950 and 2012. We also provide descriptive statistics regarding how primary competition varies between these safe and competitive constituencies.

To measure the partisan loyalties in a particular constituency we use a 9-year moving average of the two party vote shares across offices. We refer to this moving average as constituency partisanship. We then classify a constituency as competitive if the difference between the moving average of the Democratic and Republican vote shares is smaller than 15 percentage points.¹¹ More specifically a constituency is considered competitive if in year t if the average difference between the two major parties' vote shares during the years $t-4$ to $t+4$ was less than 15 percentage points.

In the period we are investigating, 1950 and 2012, two-party competition at the state level has been relatively robust in nearly 70% of the cases.¹² Statewide constituencies were much less competitive during the period when primaries were first introduced, only 45% of the state year cases could be classified as being competitive between 1900 and 1940.¹³ Although most statewide constituencies were competitive during the recent period, a sizable proportion of statewide races were in safe constituencies, meaning the winner was effectively decided by the primary elections.

¹¹The literature often uses a 10 or 20 percentage point difference when calculating safe and competitive districts. 10 percentage points seems close to competitive while 20 percentage points seems to safe. Thus, we use the midpoint of these two differences.

¹²At the state level we use data for all available elections for federal and statewide offices to calculate our measure of two party competition.

¹³Several scholars argue that this absence of general election competition contributed to the adoption of direct primary elections (e.g Key, 1956).

However, we expect two-party competition to be less robust at the level of the county, city or legislative districts, since the geographic units are smaller and often more politically homogeneous. In the case of legislative districts, gerrymandering could exacerbate the problem. The majority party might pack the minority party's districts in order to waste minority votes, or a bi-partisan, incumbent-protecting gerrymander might produce many safe districts for both parties. For counties, we construct the underlying measure of two-party competition as a 9-year moving average of the vote shares in all available elections for president, governor, and U.S. senator. For congressional districts we use presidential election data.

Between 1952 and 2010 only about 43% of the cases at the county level and 44% of the cases at the congressional district level were competitive.^{14,15} One-party dominance of state legislatures is likely to be even more prevalent, since state legislative districts are smaller than congressional districts, and often even more politically homogeneous. During the 1980s, for example, less than 40% of state legislative districts were competitive.¹⁶ If primaries are particularly useful in safe constituencies, then they are likely to make their biggest contributions for elections in county, city or legislative districts.

Several studies in the existing literature have identified a positive relationship between primary competition and constituency partisanship.¹⁷ When one party has an advantage in

¹⁴The analysis above treats large and small states, and large and small counties, equally. However, the situation does not look much different if we weight it by population. This is evident for congressional districts, since congressional districts have approximately equal populations at least since 1964. The fraction of the population living in a competitive county is about 7 percentage points higher than the fraction of counties that are competitive, and this has not changed much over time. During the period 1970-2006, the percentage of county-years classified as competitive is 47.4%, and the fraction of people living in competitive counties is 54.1%. Weighting by population does not dramatically change the picture at state level. For the period 1970-2006, the percentage of state-years classified as competitive is 73.9%, and the fraction of people living in competitive states is 81.8%.

¹⁵While the patterns in the data are clear, they raise important questions. Why is vigorous competition between the two major parties lacking in so many parts of the country? Why is there so little competition from third parties? In particular, why are there no strong regional parties, as there are in Canada and India? Answering these questions is beyond the scope of this paper. See Key (1956, 246) for one argument, "The electoral groupings that exist within individual states are profoundly affected by the impact of national issues and by the alternatives fixed by the competition of national political leadership. Current national issues – and the accumulative residual effects of past national conflicts – may push a state's local politics toward a Republican or Democratic one-partyism or they so divide the electorate of a state that it is closely competitive between the parties in both national and state affairs."

¹⁶Calculation by authors based on data from the King et al. (1997) Record of American Democracy project.

¹⁷Previous studies – e.g., Key (1956), Jewell (1967), Shantz (1980), Born (1981), Grau (1981), and Hogan

the general election due to the partisan attachments of their constituents, the primary for this advantaged party tends to be more competitive than the primaries for other parties. However, in all constituencies there is a noticeable drop in competition when an incumbent is present in the primary.

These patterns in primary competition are also present in our data for our period of investigation. Using the measure of constituency partisanship described above, in open seat primary races for statewide offices in safe states between 1952 to 2010, the advantaged party primary is contested 87% of the time and the disadvantaged party primary is contested only 30% of the time. In competitive states, the open seat primaries for statewide office are contested 59% of the time. When an incumbent is present the percentage of contested primaries for an advantaged party in safe states drops to 58% and for parties in competitive constituencies this percentage drops to 40%.

A similar pattern is present for U.S. House primaries. In open seat primary races for safe U.S. House districts, the advantaged (disadvantaged) party primary is contested 61% (33%) of the time. In competitive districts, open seat primaries for U.S. House are contested 47% of the time. When an incumbent is present the percentage of contested primaries for an advantaged party in safe states drops to 32% and for parties in competitive constituencies this percentage drops to 28%.¹⁸

The patterns in electoral competition described above highlight the potential for primaries to have a significant role in U.S. electoral system, due to the large number of officials elected in safe constituencies and the competitiveness of primaries for the advantaged party in these constituencies.

(2003) – document similar patterns for earlier time periods in a restricted sets of states.

¹⁸For both statewide and House races a similar pattern emerges if we examine the competitiveness of the primary, as measured by whether the difference in vote share among the top two candidates is greater or less than 15%, rather than contestation.

4 Candidate Quality and Constituency Partisanship in Open-Seat Races

Do primaries lead to the selection of high quality nominees in open-seat races where voter preferences favor one party in the general election? While the theoretical considerations in section 2 and the empirical evidence in section 3 suggest that primaries may have this role, we now turn to a more direct empirical examination of the relationship between candidate quality and constituency partisanship. One challenge in addressing this question is the difficulty measuring the quality of politicians. For incumbents, the task is somewhat easier, because there are various policy-related outcomes that are at least in part attributable to the incumbents' actions. However, since we are mainly interested in open-seat races, we need measures of future expected performance, which is more difficult to quantify.

In this section, we examine two measures of candidate quality.¹⁹ First, we employ the most commonly used measure of candidate quality – prior electoral experience. We then examine bar association evaluations of the quality of judicial candidates. With these two measures we can examine some of the predictions that arise out of the theoretical considerations in section 2. If primaries are contributing to the electoral system as discussed above, then we would expect the advantaged party's primary in safe districts to more likely to produce a high quality nominee as compared to other party primaries. Moreover, we would this primary to also have a relatively larger proportion of high quality politicians in the pool of candidates for the primary.

4.1 Prior Experience as Job Specific Human Capital

Previous office holder experience of the party nominees, which was developed in Jacobson (1980), is a widely used measure of candidate quality in the literature. A number of studies find that state legislators do especially well in U.S. congressional elections and interpret this

¹⁹In section 5 we introduce a third measure of candidate quality based on newspaper endorsements. Newspaper endorsements, which we show is highly correlated with the two measures discussed in this section, provides a relative measure which we use to further disentangle the mechanism by which primaries effect the quality of elected officials.

as evidence that political experience is an indicator of candidate quality.^{20,21} What is less well known is whether previous office holder experience reflects the politician’s general electoral appeal or something about the politician’s job specific human capital. Before describing the relationship between prior experience and constituency partisanship, we first provide some evidence that prior experience may reflect job-specific human capital.

Prior political experience comes in many forms. In terms of on-the-job human capital accumulation, certain types of experience is more likely to be more relevant for some offices compared to others. Broadly speaking, we may divide offices into executive, legislative, and judicial “tracks.” State legislators develop skills in writing bills and shepherding these bills through the committee system, compromising to build broader support for passing bills on the floor, trading favors with fellow legislators, working with party leaders, etc. These skills are especially relevant for serving in the U.S. Congress, and less relevant for serving as, say, state attorney general or governor. Statewide officials – secretary of state, treasurer, auditor or comptroller, attorney general – develop skills in running large bureaucracies, and expertise about specific areas of state policy-making. These skills are especially relevant for serving in other statewide offices, including governor (the “chief bureaucrat” of state government), and less relevant for serving in the U.S. congress.

We can investigate whether candidates with more relevant job-specific human capital are also more likely to win a primary election by comparing the backgrounds of candidates running for different offices. The cleanest comparison, perhaps, is between candidates running for U.S. senator and candidates running for governor, since these candidates have the same constituencies. More specifically, we can ask what is the probability the winning candidate for senate (governor) had previous legislative experience? We can then ask, what is the

²⁰A sample of the papers that use previous experience as a measure of quality includes Jacobson and Kernell (1983), Bond et al. (1985), Jacobson (1989, 2009), Lublin (1994), Bond et al. (1997), Cox and Katz (1996), Van Dunk (1997), Goodliffe (2001, 2007), Carson and Roberts (2005), and Carson et al. (2007).

²¹In section 5.2 we discuss newspaper endorsements as a measure of candidate quality. When there is a candidate with previous office holding experience facing a candidate without such experience in a primary, we find that overwhelming majority of these endorsements go to the experienced candidate. In open seat primary races where there are exactly two candidates and one has experience, the experienced candidate receives the endorsement(s) 85% of the time (54 U.S. House races). In cases with an incumbent, the experienced candidate (i.e. the incumbent) receives the endorsement(s) 95% of the time (233 U.S. House races).

probability the winning candidate for senate (governor) had previous executive experience? If primaries are selecting candidates with job-specific human capital then we should expect more candidate with previous legislative (executive) experience to be nominated in senate (gubernatorial) races.

Table 1: **Previous Experience of Primary Winners by Office Sought, 1952-2012**

Type of Experience	Office Sought		Difference
	U.S. Senate	Governor	
U.S. Congress	0.27% [976]	0.11% [971]	0.17 (0.02)
Statewide or Mayor	0.22% [976]	0.38% [971]	-0.16 (0.02)

Cell entries in columns 1 and 2 give the percentage of candidates who won primary with experience of the given type. Number of cases in brackets. Entries in column 3 give the difference between column 1 and column 2, and the standard error of this difference in parentheses.

Table 1 presents the results for open seat primaries for the period 1952-2012. The results show that the probability that the winning candidate has previous legislative experience is significantly higher for senate primary winners, 27%, than it is for gubernatorial primary winners, 11%. Conversely, the probability that the winning candidate has previous executive experience is significantly higher for gubernatorial primary winners, 38%, than it is for senate primary winners, 22%.

The differences in the primary winners' prior experiences likely reflects a combination of factors, including the pool of candidates, voter preferences, candidate preferences and strategic behavior among the elites. In section 5 below, we provide some evidence that the electorate does appear to vote for candidates with the more relevant prior experience.

4.1.1 **Prior Experience and Constituency Partisanship in Gubernatorial, Senate and U.S. House Races**

As discussed in the theoretical considerations, we might expect not only the likelihood that a party's primary will produce a high quality nominee to be positively related to constituency

partisanship, but also the proportion of high quality candidates competing in a given party’s primary should also be positively related to constituency partisanship. Thus, we focus on four different dependent variables: (i) the primary winner is experienced; (ii) the total number of candidates competing in the primary; (iii) the number of high-quality candidates competing in the primary; (iv) the fraction of candidates who are high-quality.

To test whether these dependent variables are related to constituency partisanship, we estimate the following simple linear model for all races without an incumbent:

$$Y_{ijt} = \alpha + \beta \textit{Constituency Partisanship}_{ijt} + \epsilon_{ijt} \tag{1}$$

where i indexes party, j indexes a particular constituency and t indexes election year. The independent variable *Constituency Partisanship* is preferences for party i in constituency j in year t . This variable is measured differently for each office studied. For gubernatorial and senate races, we average the Democratic vote share across the major statewide partisan offices over preceding eight years.²² For U.S. House races we used the presidential vote.

The first row of Table 2 provides the estimates of β for gubernatorial and senate races for the period 1952 to 2012. We define senate candidates as high quality if they had experience as a member of Congress. Gubernatorial candidates are high quality if they had experience in a statewide executive office or as mayor of a relatively large city. The results show that all four dependent variables, the probability the primary winner is experienced, the total number of candidates, the number of experienced candidates, and the fraction of experienced candidates, are positively related to the partisanship of the primary constituency.

We also estimate equation (1) examining primaries for U.S. House of Representatives for the period 1978 to 2010. We have assembled data on the previous office holder experience of all primary election candidates for the U.S. House for this period.²³ Here we define high

²²The offices used are governor, U.S. senator, U.S. House (aggregated to the state level), lieutenant governor, attorney general, secretary of state, state treasurer, auditor/controller/comptroller, state superintendent of public schools, public utility commissioner, corporation commissioner, land commissioner, and agricultural commissioner. Not all states elect of these offices – for each state we used all of the available races. In primaries held in year t we use the general election votes in years $t - 8$ to t .

²³See Hirano and Snyder (2012) for details regarding this dataset. We have also analyzed the Jacobson’s data for the period 1952 to 2000. These data cover previous office holder experience for all general election candidates. The data include information regarding whether candidates previously held offices other than in

Table 2: **Candidate Quality and Constituency Partisanship
in Open Seat Primaries**

Office Sought and Time Period	Winner is High Quality	Total Number of Candidates	Number of High Quality Candidates	Fraction High Quality Candidates
Governor & U.S. Senate 1952-2012	1.392 (0.121) [1914]	6.764 (0.485) [1917]	3.227 (0.197) [1917]	0.851 (0.075) [1896]
U.S. House 1978-2012	0.959 (0.034) [8263]	4.621 (0.173) [8320]	1.886 (0.066) [8320]	0.679 (0.026) [7406]
IL Judges 1986-2010	0.624 (0.136) [690]	4.857 (0.567) [763]	3.532 (0.395) [707]	0.241 (0.128) [707]

Each column presents OLS estimates for a linear regression in which the dependent variable listed at the top of the column is regressed on Primary Constituency Partisanship. The cell entries show the estimated coefficients on Primary Constituency Partisanship, robust standard errors in parenthesis, and the number of observations in brackets. High Quality is defined as follows. For Governor candidates, High Quality = 1 if candidate has previous experience as an elected statewide officer or mayor of a large city. For U.S. Senate candidates, High Quality = 1 if candidate has previous experience in the U.S. House or U.S. Senate. For U.S. House candidates, High Quality = 1 if candidate has previous experience in the state legislature, U.S. House, U.S. Senate. For IL Judge candidates, High Quality = 1 if candidate was rated favorably by state (or Chicago area) bar associations. IL Judge races are for state circuit courts.

quality as having had experience as a state legislator. The estimates of β for the U.S. House are presented in the second panel of Table 2. Just as for senate and gubernatorial elections, the coefficient on constituency partisanship is positive and statistically significant for U.S. House elections for all four dependent variables.

4.2 Judicial Evaluations in Illinois

In this subsection, we examine open-seat primaries for judicial elections in Illinois. We focus on circuit courts, which are the general jurisdiction trial courts in the state. Circuit court judges are initially elected in partisan elections. Afterwards, every six years their terms expire, and to keep their positions they must win a retention election. There are 22 circuits, and many vacancies are filled in elections where voting is restricted to a single county or sub-circuit. We again focus on the four dependent variables described above and estimate β from equation (1) for primary elections for Illinois Circuit Court Judges.

Illinois Circuit Court judicial elections are relatively unique in that we have evaluations of the quality of the judicial candidates competing in the partisan primaries. Prior to each election, the Illinois State Bar Association (ISBA) and various Chicago area (Cook county) bar associations evaluate judicial candidates. The ISBA Judicial Evaluations Committee gives ratings of Highly Qualified, Qualified, or Not Qualified based on questionnaires and interviews. The ISBA also gives ratings of Recommended or Not Recommended based on surveys of ISBA members. The largest bar association in the Chicago area is the Chicago Bar Association (CBA). Similar to the ISBA, the CBA's Judicial Evaluation Committee gives ratings of Highly Qualified, Qualified, or Not Recommended based on questionnaires and interviews. A number of other Chicago area bar associations also provided a similar rating of the qualifications of judicial candidates.²⁴ We call a candidate *High Quality* if she received

the state legislature. With these data we can examine the quality of the nominees elected through a primary. The results are substantively very similar to those we found for the 1978 to 2010 period.

²⁴The other Chicago area bar associations that rate candidates are: the Chicago Council of Lawyers, the Cook County Bar Association, the Women's Bar Association of Illinois, the Asian American Bar Association of the Greater Chicago Area, the Hellenic Bar Association, the Black Women's Lawyers Association of Greater Chicago, the Hispanic Lawyers Association of Illinois, the Lesbian and Gay Bar Association of Chicago, the Puerto Rican Bar Association of Illinois, the Decalogue Society of Lawyers, and the Northwest Suburban Bar Association. See Lim and Snyder (2012) for more details about the ratings data, including

a rating of Qualified or better from more than half of the bar associations that rated the candidate.²⁵ These evaluations arguably provide a more direct measure of candidate quality than prior experience.

We construct a measure of constituency partisanship using election data from the *Official Vote* booklets published by the Illinois State Board of Elections. For each judicial district we use the average vote for president, governor and senator. We have ratings, primary election information, and constituency partisanship data for over 1,460 judicial candidates from 1986 to 2010.²⁶

The results for open-seat Illinois judicial primary elections are presented in the third panel of Table 2. The coefficient in the first column shows that primary winners for a given party are more likely to be high quality as the constituency partisanship increasingly favors that party. The results in the next three columns show that not only does the number of candidates and high quality candidates competing in a party's primary increase as the constituency partisanship increasingly favors that party, but also the proportion of high quality candidates competing in the primary. These results for open-seat Illinois judicial primaries is very similar to the results for open-seat, senate, gubernatorial and U.S. House primaries. These results are consistent with the predictions from the theoretical discussion in section 2.

5 Mechanism: Do Voters Matter?

The positive relationship between the quality of primary winners and constituency partisanship identified above most likely reflect a variety of factors including: (i) the pool of available politicians; (ii) strategic entry decisions of these politicians; (iii) decisions by other elites (e.g. endorsements and the allocation of campaign donations and other resources); and (iv) the

information about the criteria used, and checks on the validity of using it as an indicator of candidate quality.

²⁵Note that the Chicago area bar associations only evaluate candidates running for Cook county judgeships, so outside Cook county we use only the ISBA ratings. We also conducted an analysis that relies exclusively on the ISBA evaluations even inside Cook county, and the results are quite similar to those reported here. We are missing ISBA evaluations for Cook county candidates before 1998.

²⁶We have ratings and primary election information for many other candidates running in sub-circuits inside Cook county, but we do not have the electoral data at the sub-circuit level.

choices made by voters. Some of the evidence above points to the importance of both (i) and (ii). In this section, we provide evidence that (iv) matters (and probably (iii) as well).

5.1 Variation in Candidate Quality

When faced with a choice between a high quality and not high quality candidate do voters choose the high quality candidate? To examine whether this is the case, we examine primaries where voters have a choice between between high and low quality candidates.

Table 3: **Candidate Quality and Winning in Open Seat Primaries with Variation in Quality**

Office Sought and Time Period	Races with 2 Candidates	Races with 3-5 Candidates
Governor & U.S. Senate 1952-2012	80.12% [171]	65.35% [404]
U.S. House 1978-2012	80.56% [324]	68.73% [614]
IL Judges 1986-2010	75.55% [274]	76.56% [209]

Cell entries show percentage of races in which the winning candidate is High Quality. See Table 2 or text for definition of High Quality for each office sought. Number of races in brackets.

The results in Table 3 suggest that primary electorates are voting for high quality candidates. The results in the first column of Table 3 shows the probability that voters select a high quality candidate when they are given a choice between two candidates with only one candidate being high quality. In this case, the high quality candidate wins 80% of the time in gubernatorial, senate and U.S. House primaries and 76% of the time for Illinois Circuit Court primaries. The results in the second column shows the probability of selecting a high quality candidate when there are three to five candidates in the race with at least one candidate that is high quality and one candidate that is not high quality. Again, in an overwhelming majority of cases the high quality candidate wins the election (over 65% of the gubernatorial, senate and U.S. House races and over 75% of the Illinois Circuit Court judicial races).

Exploring the relationship between candidate experience and outcomes further reveals that voters act “as if” they even care about the type of previous experience candidates have, distinguishing between experience that is likely to be more or less relevant to the office sought. Consider, for example all two-candidate primaries in which one candidate has previous experience in the U.S. House and the other does not. The candidate with U.S. House experience wins 83.3% of the time when running for the U.S. Senate, but only 65% of the time when running for the state governor (the difference is statistically significant at the .05 level). Similarly, next consider all two-candidate primaries in which one of the candidates has previous experience as a down-ballot statewide executive and the other does not. The candidate with executive experience wins 80.0% of the time when running for governor, but only 59% of the time when running for U.S. senator (the difference is statistically significant at the .01 level). Thus, in both cases, the candidates with experience win more often when they run for an office for which their previous experience is “more relevant,” compared to when they run for an office for which their previous experience is “less relevant.”

5.2 Newspaper Endorsements

An additional measure of candidate quality that has not been used previously in the literature is newspaper endorsements. Newspapers around the U.S. routinely endorse candidates running for office, both in primary and general elections.²⁷ We have collected thousands of primary election endorsements, mainly for the period 1990-2010 but in some cases for earlier years. These endorsements can be used to construct a measure of relative candidate quality. Thus, we can ask whether primary voters are selecting the candidate with the relatively higher level of quality.

Newspaper endorsements are likely to be particularly good indicators of relative quality in primary elections. Journalists and newspaper editors have much more information than others about the candidates, because they collect this information as a routine matter in the course of writing and publishing election news stories. In addition, most newspaper

²⁷Some newspapers, such as the Los Angeles Times, have a policy of endorsing candidates in the general election but not in the primary election, or of endorsing in the primary election mainly in one-party areas where the primary election is likely to determine the final winner.

staffs conduct interviews of candidates before making their endorsements. Moreover, even if a newspaper has a partisan or ideological bias, this bias is not likely to matter much for its primary election endorsements, since all of the candidates in a given party's primary are affiliated with same party, and since the ideological differences between candidates in a given party's primary tend to be small.²⁸

We have not attempted to construct a comprehensive catalogue of the criteria newspapers use to make their endorsements. After reading hundreds of endorsement editorials, however, our impression is that the dominant criteria are previous experience, accomplishments, and qualifications relevant for the office sought. Relevant experience would include prior state legislative experience for candidates running for congress or the other state legislative chamber; prior public sector or private sector auditing experience for candidates running for state auditor; and prior experience as a district attorney or prosecutor in the state attorney general's office when running for state attorney general. Newspapers often cite experience running a large bureaucratic organization – e.g., as mayor of a large city, statewide executive officer, or civic association leader – for candidates running for governor or other executive office. They also often cite the opinions of other experts – e.g., legislative colleagues who attest to how hardworking, responsible, and intelligent a candidate is.

For more direct evidence that endorsements are good indicators of quality, we can compare newspaper endorsements to other quality measures when other measures are available. Judges provide one excellent set of cases. We have both primary election endorsements and bar association evaluations for a large number of judicial candidates. In these cases, the newspaper endorsements are highly correlated with bar association evaluations.²⁹ There are 251 cases, and in 247 (98.4%) of them the highly-endorsed candidate received a bar association evaluation of Qualified or better. That is, in only 4 cases (1.6 %), did a highly endorsed candidate receive an Unqualified or Not Recommended evaluation. In these 4 cases *all* of the

²⁸It is possible that an extremely partisan newspaper might try to “sabotage” the nomination of the party it opposes, and endorse weak candidates in that party's primary. However, such behavior would be so outrageously unprofessional by today's journalistic standards that it must occur rarely if ever.

²⁹More precisely, consider the candidates who received at least 2 newspaper endorsements and for whom we have at least one bar association evaluation. Call these candidates “highly endorsed.” We include non-partisan general election races, in addition to primary races, to increase sample size.

candidates in these races received Unqualified or Not Recommended evaluations.³⁰ Thus, at least in the case of judges, highly endorsed candidates are virtually never among the “low-quality” candidates.

It is also the case that for candidates running for statewide office or the U.S. House, there is a strong and positive relationship between being “highly endorsed” and having previous political experience. More specifically, call a candidate “experienced” if he or she is has previously served as an elected statewide officer, U.S. senator or U.S. House representative, state legislator, or mayor. Consider all open-seat primaries for which we have 2 or more endorsements and in which at least one of the candidates is experienced and one is not experienced. In this sample, 73% of the highly endorsed candidates are experienced, while only 26% of the candidates who are not highly endorsed are experienced.

Now consider all open-seat primary elections for statewide office or the U.S. House held during the period 1990 to 2010 for which we have two or more endorsements. We ask: How often do “highly endorsed” candidates win in the primary, compared to other candidates?

Table 4: **Primary Outcomes and Endorsements, 1990-2012**

Definition of Highly Endorsed Candidate	2 Cands in Primary	3+ Cands in Primary
At Least 3 Endorsements and 75% of Total	86.3% [117]	67.3% [150]
At Least 2 Endorsements and 75% of Total	82.4% [216]	64.4% [264]
At Least 3 Endorsements and 67% of Total	84.6% [123]	65.5% [165]
At Least 2 Endorsements and 67% of Total	81.5% [233]	60.8% [316]

Cell entries give the percentage of endorsed candidates who won primary. Number of observations in brackets.

Table 4 shows the results. We vary the definition of a “highly endorsed” candidate (rows)

³⁰We also call candidates unqualified if they are rated as “lacking qualifications” or if they refused to participate in the review process. Even the candidates with just one newspaper endorsement were rated as Qualified or better in 97.2% of the cases (out of 1,111). By comparison, the candidates who received no newspaper endorsements were rated as Qualified or better in only 63.8% of the case (out of 2,013).

and consider primaries with different numbers of candidates (columns). For example, in the first row, a candidate is classified as highly endorsed if and only if he or she received at least three endorsements and also received at least three-quarters of the total number endorsements in our sample. The first column shows the results for races with exactly two candidates, and the second column covers the races with three or more candidates.

Consider first the two-candidate contests. In these races, the candidates with three or more endorsements win the primary 85-87% of the time, and the candidates with two or more endorsements win more than 80% of the time. This is much higher than the 50% we would expect if voters were simply flipping coins.

Next, consider the races with three or more candidates. In these races, the candidates with three or more endorsements win 65-67% of the time, and those with two or more endorsements win 60-64% of the time. Again, this is much larger than what we expect under random voting. In our sample, the multi-candidate races involve an average of slightly more than 4 candidates, so if voting was random then we would expect each candidate to win about 25% of the time.³¹

However, the bottom line from Table 4 is clear. Assuming that the highly endorsed candidates are relatively high quality – i.e., high quality compared to their competitors – the results show that open-seat primary elections are much more likely to produce high quality winners than a “random draw” from the pool. Since endorsements are a relative measure of quality, these results provide further evidence that voters are actively choosing high quality candidates. This suggests that the relationship between the quality of primary candidates nominees and constituency partisanship likely reflects voting behavior as well as differences in the pool of candidates.

6 The Quality of Open-Seat Winners

The discussion above suggests that open-seat primaries produce higher quality general election nominees for advantaged parties in safe districts as compared to parties in competitive

³¹The average of the inverse of the number of candidates is also about 1/4.

districts. In the introduction and theoretical considerations, we suggested that the lower quality of the party nominees in competitive districts is less of a concern since the general election will serve as an additional screening mechanism. We can now ask whether the quality of the eventual general election winners for open seats differs between competitive and uncompetitive districts.

Table 5: **Quality of General Election Winners vs. All Candidates for Open Seats**

	Uncompetitive District	Competitive District
Governor and U.S. Senate, 1952-2012		
Winners with High Quality	45.04%	48.37%
All Cands with High Quality	25.45%	20.41%
U.S. House Representatives, 1978-2012		
Winners with High Quality	53.64%	51.42%
All Cands with High Quality	26.21%	15.20%
Illinois Circuit Court Judges		
Winners with High Quality	91.15%	90.04%
All Cands with High Quality	66.17%	62.71%

Cell entries give the percentage races where a high quality candidate was elected to office.

In Table 5, we present the percentage of general election winners who are high quality in competitive and uncompetitive districts. We also present the percentage of all candidates competing in the primary elections who are high quality in the two types of districts, dropping token candidates who win less than 1% of the vote. If both primary and general election competition are effectively selecting high-quality candidates, then we should observe a similarly high percentage of general election winners being high-quality in both types of districts. These percentages should be higher for the general election winners as compared to the general pool of candidates.

There are two clear patterns in Table 5. First, for the previous office holder experience and the bar association recommendations measures of quality, the percentage of general elections winners who are high quality is very similar in both the competitive and uncompetitive

districts. This suggests that the primaries have an important role in selecting high-quality incumbents for uncompetitive districts.

Second, the politicians elected in primaries are more likely to be high quality than the average open-seat candidate. Those skeptical of the value of primary elections often point to the fact that few incumbents are even contested in their primary, let alone fiercely challenged. However, since incumbents appear to be of higher quality than the “pool” of candidates, it is not clear that the lack of competition is a major problem. In fact, given the costs associated with competitive primaries – borne by candidates, government and voters – it might be socially optimal for most incumbent to be unchallenged. Instead, it is probably more efficient to allocate scarce “primary election resources” to open-seat races and incumbent-contested races in the rare case where incumbents are low quality. In both cases, we should be especially focused on constituencies where one party has an electoral advantage.³²

7 Conclusion

Although primary elections are often uncompetitive, these analyses demonstrate that they maybe quite valuable for an important subset of situations. In particular, primary elections are especially competitive for the advantaged party in constituencies where voter loyalties clearly favor one party. In addition we find evidence that primary elections are especially good at selecting “high-quality” types in open-seat races in an advantaged party’s primary in a safe districts. Primaries, therefore, appear to be especially valuable when effective two-party competition is lacking. This is precisely where we expect them to be needed most. We also show that many voters live in states, counties or congressional districts that are dominated by one party – this is true for about 60% of all congressional districts.

While we have focused our attention on the importance of primaries in areas dominated by one party, primaries can potentially have an important role even in competitive areas. One reason is polarization. When the major parties are polarized, primaries might be valuable

³²These findings are consistent with models of electoral selection and the incumbency advantage – e.g. Zaller (1998) and Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita (2008). Other empirical work, e.g. Hirano and Snyder (2009), also finds evidence suggesting that incumbents are higher quality than the average general election open seat candidate.

even in constituencies with competitive general elections, because there might be too few “swing” voters to effectively punish parties that choose weak candidates. In fact, if the *American Voter* view of “independents” is correct, then independents tend to be the least well-informed citizens. Therefore, we might not be able to rely on independent voters to vote against low-quality candidates, since they will not learn which candidates are low-quality. Instead, we must hope that enough partisan voters vote against their party’s candidate when they learn that this candidate is of low-quality. In a highly polarized environment, however, partisan voters are probably less willing to vote against their party’s candidate, even knowing that the candidate is low-quality. Primaries can help in such an environment by giving partisan voters an opportunity to vote against a low-quality candidate in favor of a higher-quality candidate of the same party. Note also that in the primaries most voters tend to be partisans – and these are the people who also tend to be the most well informed. So, there is a good chance they will find out which candidates are of low-quality and which are not.

While our findings are encouraging, we do not want to overstate the case for direct primary elections. There are some important caveats. First, our argument focuses heavily, though not entirely, on the role of an election as a selection mechanism. As noted above, there are important theoretical justifications for this emphasis. However, elections may also play a role in controlling politicians’ behaviors. Second, we employ several different measures of politician quality, our measures are relatively coarse. There is still potentially much work to be done on developing alternative measures of quality and in particular developing measures with more fine grained assessments of politician quality that can be compared across politicians and elections. Third, even taking our measures at face-value, we cannot say that primaries are “extremely” effective. We find that safe and competitive districts elect high-quality officials more often than what we would expect if the primaries were a completely ineffective screen for candidate quality. However, the probability of high quality candidates losing primaries might still be much lower than the “desired” probability. Finally, there may be preferable alternatives to primaries that achieve similar or better outcomes –

e.g. non-partisan elections, third-party candidates, or even the old conventions or caucus system. However, we do not know if introducing these alternatives would also significantly change the quality of the candidates seeking office.

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