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More Democracy

"The cure for the evils of democracy is more democracy."

~ H.L. Mencken

"If the people can only choose among rascals, they are certain to choose a rascal."

~ V.O. Key, Jr.

To win a political office in the US – virtually any office, from US senator to state treasurer to county sheriff – candidates must win two elections. First, they must win in a primary election, and then they must win in a general election. Do these first elections, the primaries, matter? How? Do they help the US electoral system select more qualified individuals? Do voters use them to reward good behavior in office and punish poor performance? Do primaries need to be reformed and if so in what ways?

We argue that the answers are *yes, read the book to find out, yes, yes, and perhaps*.

Primary elections do three things. First, in many states and even more legislative districts and localities, primaries constitute the only "real" elections for most offices. Consider the following examples: (1) in Kansas, no Democrat has won a US Senate general election since 1932; (2) of the 442 general elections for governor or US senator held in the ten states of the "Solid South" between 1878 and 1960, the Republicans won just once; (3) there are more than 400 counties in the US in which the same party has won a majority of the two-party vote in every presidential election for the past 50 years. A list of the one-party bastions today would include many of the most populous cities and suburban areas

in the country – New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore, Detroit, Milwaukee, St. Louis, San Francisco, Oakland, Phoenix, and Tulsa.

Since state and local governments in the US have enormous power, we care about the quality of democracy at the state and local level. One minimal requirement of a democracy is that there is enough electoral competition that incumbents face a real possibility of being defeated at the polls. If the general elections in a state or locality dominated by one party are rarely in doubt, then these elections fail to contribute meaningfully to democratic accountability.

This is where primaries come in. As we show below, competition in primary elections is quite lively in the cases that matter most. In particular, competition is often spirited in the primaries of the dominant party, in states and districts dominated by one party. Primary competition is especially vigorous when the incumbent is not running. In these cases, two or more candidates run 84 percent of the time, and many of the contenders appear highly qualified for the office sought.

The second thing primaries do is provide an electoral arena that encourages voters to weigh the relative qualifications of the candidates running, rather than partisan or ideological divisions, when deciding how to vote. The contenders in Democratic primaries are (almost) always all Democrats, so party identification cannot govern voting. The situation is analogous in Republican primaries. Also, compared to the large ideological cleavages between parties, the ideological or issues differences between candidates within a party tend to be small. This makes it more likely that voters will base their decisions on other possible attributes, such as prior experience, energy, intelligence, and qualification for office. A loyal Democratic voter who would never cross party lines to vote for a Republican in the general election – even a Republican who is more qualified than the Democrat on many key dimensions – might pay close attention to qualifications when choosing among Democrats in the primary. In fact, a loyal Democratic voter living in a competitive constituency has an additional incentive to focus on qualifications in the primary, since a more qualified Democratic nominee should have a better chance of winning in the general election.

As we show below, primaries help the overall electoral system select and retain more-qualified office holders due to three factors. First, when voters in a primary are presented with a choice between one candidate with clear qualifications for the office sought and another who lacks such qualifications, they nominate the more-qualified candidate about 80 percent of the time. Second, this leads potential entrants to respond

strategically, as one might expect – candidates with the qualifications that voters reward often run, especially in areas that are safe for their party. Third, the "pool" of potential candidates also varies systematically with voter partisanship, and, in particular, in areas where a party is electorally strong that party will tend to have a larger number of qualified candidates.

The resulting bottom line – combining voters' decisions, the strategic behavior of potential candidates and other political elites, and variation in the parties' pools of talent – is that the politicians elected in areas that are safe for one party and those elected in areas with robust two-party competition are approximately equally qualified. During the first half of the twentieth century, in fact, in states with primaries the winners in safe areas were even more likely to be qualified. If primaries were adding little to the electoral system compared to general elections, then we would have expected to find that politicians in safe areas were systematically less qualified than those in competitive areas. We do not.

The third thing primaries do is give a party's rank-and-file the opportunity to help resolve, in a democratic fashion, issue conflicts within the party. This is especially important for issues that cut across partisan lines, but on which there is significant variation in preferences within the party. Prominent examples include the contests between progressives and stalwarts in the early 1900s through the 1920s, especially among Republicans; battles over prohibition in both parties from the 1900s through the 1930s; conflicts between proponents and opponents of the New Deal, especially among Democrats; and abortion politics in the 1970s and 1980s.

We study several of these cases below, and show that a significant share of voters appears to vote on the basis of these issues in primaries, when the issues are salient and the candidates competing espouse different positions.

This points to a tension between the second and third things that primaries can do. When deep factional or issue cleavages exist within a party and drive primary election voting, then candidate qualifications almost by definition will have less influence on nominations. However, as V.O. Key, Jr. showed for the "Solid South," and as we will show more broadly below, stable intra-party factions are rare in the US, and persistent issue cleavages also tend to be more the exception than the rule.

Skeptical readers may be shaking their heads at this point. What about the fact that incumbents are almost never seriously challenged in the

primaries? That turnout in primaries is often dismally low and skewed toward ideological extremists, exacerbating today's dysfunctional polarized politics? How can primaries possibly function well given that they demand so much of citizens – the same citizens who, by many accounts, lack adequate information even when deciding how to vote in general elections?

Regarding the first question, it is true that incumbents rarely face serious primary challenges. But is this a problem? As we show below, in terms of qualifications we can measure, the typical incumbent is much better than a "random draw" from the pool of candidates who typically run for open seats. This is because in open-seat races the winning candidates tend to be more qualified than the losers, and, as in most professions, there is on-the-job learning in political offices. Open-seat winners become the incumbents who draw little opposition in subsequent races. Why should we want to replace them, when we know that (i) the potential replacements are on average less qualified than the incumbent was when he or she was first elected, and (ii) the potential replacements lack the on-the-job learning that incumbents have acquired in their current positions?

There is another consideration as well. Do we want incumbents to fear for their jobs even when they are performing as expected? We already complain about the lack of talent in our political classes. How many talented people would choose a career in politics if there was a substantial chance of being kicked out of office every few years – by ones' co-partisans in a primary election – even while doing a good job?

Finally, we also find that incumbents are opposed in primaries much more often when they are performing especially poorly, and in these cases they often lose. This is especially true for incumbents in states or districts where their party is dominant.

Regarding the third question above, it is true that only a small percentage of the electorate is attentive and well-informed. This is especially true when we consider down-ballot races. The question is, how many voters must be informed – or act "as if" they are informed – in order for the outcome of an election to be the same as it would be if all voters were actually informed? If the uninformed voters generally cancel one another out – voting randomly or based on idiosyncratic factors and therefore splitting their votes roughly equally across the candidates – then those who are informed will usually be pivotal and determine the outcome, even if they constitute a small fraction of the electorate.

As noted above, when more- and less-qualified candidates compete in primaries, the more qualified candidates win about 80 percent of the time. It is extremely unlikely that this happens because 80 percent of the voters know each candidates' qualifications at the time of the election. Rather, it probably happens because a much smaller percentage of voters know the candidates' qualifications, or behave as if they did, and the remaining voters tend to spread their votes across candidates in ways that cancel one another out. Another indication that information makes its way into the electorate is that when primary candidates clearly have distinct ideological positions (or different positions on prominent issues), large numbers of voters cast ballots as if they knew these positions.

Regarding the second question above, as we show below, primary election turnout actually tends to be quite high in the primaries that matter – that is, in open-seat primaries in the dominant party, in constituencies where a dominant party exists. Moreover, as others have shown, those who vote in primaries are ideologically representative of party identifiers as a whole. In particular, primary election voters are not significantly more ideologically extreme than party identifiers.

Much of the current debate surrounding primary elections is focused on the problem of polarization and gridlock in government. Many observers argue that primaries "cause" polarization. But they do not state the counterfactual. Primaries compared to what? If we removed the current system of direct primary elections, we would still have to nominate candidates somehow. Would polarization and gridlock decrease under the alternative system? While the evidence is sparse – because caucuses and conventions are rare these days – when we analyze the data that exists we find that caucuses and conventions do not produce nominees who are any more moderate than those elected in primaries. The evidence also suggests that the differences between open and closed primaries are quite small, and that a shift to open primaries – which has been happening in any case – would not significantly increase the number of moderate nominees.

Other reforms are possible. One is the top-two system, in which all candidates run together in a first-round election (the primary) and the top two vote-getters go on to the second-round election (the general) regardless of party. A variant of this system has been used in Louisiana since 1975, and it was adopted more recently in Washington state and California. There is not yet enough data to assess with confidence how the system performs. The existing evidence suggests that top-two systems might reduce polarization, but only modestly.

Another option is to move entirely to non-partisan elections. While this might reduce polarization, the costs might also be substantial. All offices under this system would tax voters with two informationally demanding elections – a non-partisan first-round election followed by a non-partisan second-round election – rather than just one. Under this system even the second-round (general) elections are likely to be low-information contests with relatively low voter participation, except perhaps for offices at the top of the ticket.

Where does this leave us? Imperfect as they are, primaries on balance enhance the US electoral system. They bring an essential element of democracy – competitive elections from time to time that offer the voters of at least one party a real choice – to the vast areas of the US where the general elections do not. Thus far, our limited imaginations have not come up with anything obviously better.