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Introduction

It's an open secret that the more conservative members of the party quietly support primary challengers to certain progressives as well ... so the way I think about it is might as well be honest about it.

Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez

When Republican Jim Nussle retired from Congress in 2006, Democrat Bruce Braley decided to run for the resulting open seat in Iowa's 1st District. Braley had deep roots in the local community, having been born in the state and attended Iowa State and the University of Iowa. For the past twenty years, he had been a prominent lawyer in the district, serving as president of the Iowa Trial Lawyers Association. Before Braley could compete in the November election, he first had to defeat fellow Democrat Rick Dickinson in a primary election.¹ Dickinson had several decades of experience in state politics, serving initially as a city council member, then for fourteen years as the mayor of Sabula, and, most recently, as a representative in the Iowa House of Representatives. In addition to his lengthy career as a public servant, Dickinson was a respected figure in the state party, having previously served as the chair of the Jackson County Democratic Party and as a delegate at the Democratic National Convention.

Both men argued that they were the best choice for the party faithful to elect as a Democrat in a seat that, though represented by a Republican for the previous sixteen years, had been trending Democratic at the

¹ Two other minor candidates also ran in the district.

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presidential level.² In their primary campaigns, both candidates focused on their long records of service and deep personal connections with the district, touting their competence in both the private and public sectors as evidence that they understood the district's needs, which would enable them to defeat a Republican opponent in November. Both claimed that their experience would help them deliver valuable federal resources from Washington, DC to northeastern Iowa and that their expertise would be an asset in producing good legislation once in Congress. Though policy differences between the candidates existed, little discussion of national policy positions featured in either campaign, and no comparison of relative positions was made by either candidate. Dickinson had a history of public service going back to the late 1970s and had taken positions – such as a belief that life begins at conception – that were potentially misaligned with a Democratic primary electorate, but Braley refrained from attacking Dickinson on the grounds of positional incongruence or policy “fit” with Democratic primary voters or the district.

Though the district appeared winnable for the Democratic Party, evidence of state or national party involvement or support for either candidate during the primary was scarce. Media attention consisted of coverage in the local *Telegraph Herald* and *Quad-City Times* in May and June 2006.³ Beyond northeastern Iowa, the election went largely unnoticed. The two campaigns spent less than \$400,000 between them,⁴ and, perhaps as a result, fewer than 30,000 Iowans – less than 7 percent of the district's voting-age population – cast a Democratic primary ballot on June 6, 2006. Braley narrowly won the nomination and was elected to Congress five months later, defeating Republican Michael Whalen in the November general election.

On March 17, 2020, Representative Dan Lipinski lost his reelection campaign in Illinois' 3rd District to a fellow Democrat. Two years previously, he had narrowly survived a primary challenge to his left from Marie Newman, scraping by with 51 percent of the vote. The second time around, Newman was successful in ousting Lipinski. Newman had a long history of activism including running a national anti-bullying organization and campaigning for gun control measures. Initially drawn into

² Partisan Voter Index (PVI) of D+2 in 2006.

³ A particularly thorough interview with each candidate featured in the May 21 *Quad-City Times* (Bruce Braley, Iowa 1st Congressional District Democrat Candidate Survey 2006; Rick Dickinson, Iowa 1st Congressional District Democrat Candidate Survey 2006).

⁴ Braley spent \$171,798 and Dickinson \$128,702 during the primary, as reported in their 12P Federal Election Commission (FEC) pre-primary reports.

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Democratic Party politics by Bernie Sanders' 2016 presidential campaign, Newman decided to become a full-time politician after Hillary Clinton's presidential defeat. Lipinski was a relative moderate in Congress and was notable for some of his more conservative positions,⁵ especially on abortion and stem cell research.⁶ Though specific issues motivated Newman's campaign, she attacked Lipinski's voting record from the left more broadly, arguing that he was "out of step with the Democratic platform" (Herndon 2020) and that her positions were more congruent with the preferences of the district in explicitly *ideological* terms.⁷ In addition, she argued that a new type of politics and politician was needed, and that Lipinski was the product of an outdated form of machine-era politics rife with nepotism – Lipinski's father had represented the district before him – that needed to be upended. Lipinski's personal shortcomings as a representative were framed as systemic issues and connected to questions of economic inequality and redistribution. Newman's policy positions, including her support for the Green New Deal and Bernie Sanders' Medicare for All legislation, featured prominently in her campaign material and informed the way she referred to Lipinski.

In her 2018 campaign, Newman had earned the endorsement of multiple national groups, including MoveOn, Our Revolution, Justice Democrats, and the Progressive Change Campaign Committee. By 2020, she had added the support of multiple presidential candidates, including Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders, and was endorsed by Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. These groups and individuals are commonly conceived as being aligned with the Democratic Party's progressive *faction*.⁸ Following her narrow loss in 2018, in which she spent \$401,480, activist groups and individuals in her network increased their support, enabling her to spend \$641,073 in her successful 2020 challenge. Indeed, Newman's narrow 2018 loss, rather than signaling to supporters that she was not a viable candidate, served to indicate her strength and Lipinski's vulnerability. Newman's primary campaigns attracted national (Peters 2020; Stolberg 2020) and international (Sugarman 2017) media coverage, including a lengthy interview in the

⁵ NOMINATE score of -0.227 .

⁶ Lipinski's position on the issue was not dissimilar to that of Rick Dickinson in the previous example, though he had aired his views in the national rather than state legislature.

⁷ The district had a PVI of D+6 in 2018 and 2020.

⁸ Though the Iowa Trial Lawyers Association in the previous example could be viewed as a local faction, their support was connected to Braley's personal history as a member rather than his policy positions.

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New York Times (Herndon 2020) where the contest was interpreted as having wider significance for the future direction and identity of the Democratic Party. The 2018 primary brought 95,205 voters (just under 18 percent) to the polls and the 2020 contest exceeded six figures, with 103,859 voters (over 19 percent) turning out.⁹ Newman, like Braley before her, then won the November general election, taking her seat in Congress in January 2021.

These primary contests illustrate a narrative of low-interest, candidate-centered nominations focused on personal competence and connection to the district becoming infused with factional intra-party conflict in ideological terms. These examples are far from unique, where a plethora of alternatives from either major party could have been used to document a similar story of the changing landscape of primary competition in the twenty-first century. In Part I of this book, I make the case that a fundamental transformation of the dynamics of competition in congressional primary elections has taken place in both parties in the twenty-first century.

As congressional primaries have transformed, criticism of them for exacerbating party change and partisan polarization in Congress has grown ever louder (Alvarez and Sinclair 2015; Foley 2022; Schumer 2014). Part II of this book attempts to understand the relationship between these contemporary trends, to identify both *whether* and *how* the changing primary environment has contributed to partisan trends in Congress. In other words, (how) has recent *primary transformation* contributed to *party transformation*? To date, much of the academic literature considers the evolution and impact of primary elections since their inception (see e.g., Hirano and Snyder 2019) or across several decades (Boatright 2014). To date, limited research explores the diverse mechanisms through which primaries may contribute to polarization. By focusing explicitly on the twenty-first century – the period in which primaries have transformed and criticisms of the nomination have emerged – I examine the different ways that contemporary primary competitions may influence the positions of nominees who emerge from them to represent the party in November. In Part II, I show that the new dynamics of primary competition identified in Part I do matter for partisan polarization in Congress, but that the ways they do so are nuanced, conditional, and disconnected from the preferences of primary voters.

⁹ The 2020 Democratic presidential primary was held on the same day and likely boosted turnout, hence the inclusion of the 2018 figures.

IDEOLOGICAL AND FACTIONAL COMPETITION IN PRIMARIES

Congressional primaries have existed for over a century, and their introduction was followed by a sustained period of *depolarization* (Lewis et al. 2021), meaning any claims about their polarizing effect must first demonstrate that something about congressional nominations has changed in the modern era. Part I of this book is therefore dedicated to determining the extent to which the examples of Braley, Dickinson, Lipinski, and Newman are generalizable. How often did competence and experience-based nominations transform into contests motivated by the distinct policy platforms of the leading candidates? Why did partisan groups and individuals, the media, and primary voters care so little about Braley or Dickinson and so much about Newman and Lipinski? Have the reasons for primary elections changed, particularly in terms of *ideological* campaign framing and candidates receiving support from distinct *factions* in the party? And are these trends consistent across incumbent, challenger, and open-seat primaries in both the Republican and Democratic parties?¹⁰

To quantify the changing dynamics of congressional nominations, I develop the concepts of ideological and factional primaries. I define *factional primaries* as contested nominations where the leading candidates are aligned with and receive support from distinct groups and individuals in their party. *Ideological primaries* are contests that are framed in ideological terms by the leading candidates competing in them, where a candidate's reason for running for Congress invokes positional difference from their intra-party opponent(s). Factional primaries therefore serve as a measure of candidates' intra-party *support*, with distinct actors within the party expressing preferences for different candidates. Ideological primaries are an indicator of *framing* (Entman 1993), with candidates' campaigns and media interviews referencing intra-party differences in terms of distinct policy preferences or citing opposition to their opponent(s) on positional grounds as their motivation for running for Congress.¹¹

Using the concepts of ideological and factional primaries, I demonstrate that in 2006 most contests looked like the competition between

¹⁰ The terms incumbent primary, challenger primary, and open-seat primary are used to denote a nomination contest where the current office holder is running for the party, for the alternative party, or not standing, respectively.

¹¹ Though the two concepts are conceived and identified independently, there is, unsurprisingly, significant overlap between them.

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Braley and Dickinson: nonfactional in terms of support and nonideological in terms of framing. By 2020, most primaries in both parties had transformed into ideologically framed contests where candidates received support from different factions in the party network, as in the example of Newman and Lipinski. This proliferation of ideological and factional primaries should therefore be understood as a transformation in the *dynamics* of congressional primary competition. The descriptive identification of these dynamics of primary competition – including a higher frequency of contested nominations, factional intra-party support, ideological reasons for contests, increased campaign spending, and higher voter turnout – between 2006 and 2020 is the first major contribution of this book. These changing dynamics give us a clearer sense of the shifted landscape of intra-party conflict in congressional nominations.

Why did the dynamics of congressional nominations shift so fundamentally? Several important structural changes in US politics and society took place between 2006 and 2020, with ramifications for the behavior of key actors in primaries. Throughout the period, partisan competition increased in intensity and animosity, with growing ideological distance between party elites and closely fought elections for national institutions (Fiorina 2017; Lee 2016). Though nationally elected seats of power became more competitive, individual states and districts became safer for a given party (Wasserman and Flinn 2021). Beyond Congress, voters' identification with and loyalty to a preferred party increased (Mason 2018), and impressions of the alternative party also declined (Abramowitz and Webster 2018).

These changing electoral conditions offered new incentives and constraints to parties, candidates, and voters in primary elections. Regulatory reforms further changed the way primary campaigns were financed, altering the profile of donors and avenues through which candidates were able to raise money. Changes to campaign finance were particularly important for altering the balance of power between the formal and informal parts of party organizations (Masket 2009). Meanwhile, an array of technological developments, including an evolution of the media ecology and the transformative effects of internet access, have reconfigured the avenues available for candidates and other partisan groups to communicate in primaries (Karpf 2016; Kreiss 2016).

Throughout Part I of this book, I offer empirical support for the descriptive argument for *primary transformation*. Yet the importance of these changes is contingent on their effect on general election nominees and with it the position of the parties in Congress, defined as *party*

transformation. If there has been no noticeable change in the identity of successful candidates emerging from primaries, then interest in the dynamics of congressional nomination appears little more than a curiosity for those among us deeply interested in the internal machinations and workings of the two major parties. Yet primaries now garner attention from a far broader audience, chiefly as the alleged driver of partisan polarization in Congress, a topic that has come to dominate multiple subfields of political science and is the focus of Part II of this book.

WHY STUDY PARTISAN POLARIZATION IN CONGRESS?

Both parties in Congress are said to have been fundamentally transformed in the partisan era by a process of elite polarization. Whereas both parties were once ideologically broad, containing liberal and conservative members of Congress, they are now ideologically cohesive, with ever fewer moderates and growing ranks of committed partisans. Elite polarization in Congress has been growing since the late 1970s and reached unprecedented levels in recent years (Lewis et al. 2021; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). Primaries are frequently positioned as the main contributor to the growing ideological distance between members of Congress (Kamarck, Podkul, and Zeppos 2016; Schumer 2014), meaning it is this definition of party transformation as elite ideological change – rather than alternative forms of polarization such as mass partisan affect, or the growing salience of partisan identity among the public (e.g., Mason 2018) – that is the object of interest in this book.

Throughout this book, I argue that though the two major parties are not so broadly divided as in the mid-twentieth century, they instead contain close but deeply divided ideological factions which exert a centrifugal force on the parties in Congress. For the forty years between the start of the partisan era in the 1970s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, growing elite partisan polarization and intra-party homogeneity aligned. Starting from a broad base in which both parties contained liberal and conservative factions and were ideologically incongruent in the mid-twentieth century (American Political Science Association 1950), partisanship and ideology converged such that Republican and conservative, and Democratic and liberal, have almost become synonymous. As the numbers of conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans in Congress dwindled, both parties became more internally consistent and less like their partisan opponents in the early twenty-first century (Theriault 2008). Yet, in the period since, scholarly attention on

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the subject of intra-party factionalism has been resurgent (Blum 2020; Clarke 2020), likely connected to growing intra-party strife on both sides of the aisle (Hilton 2021; Lee 2018), and a broad public understanding of both parties as containing wings, lanes, or factions has emerged. If partisan polarization and intra-party homogeneity are one and the same, then we should expect that growing ideological factionalism reduced partisan animosity, but this period has instead been notable for an acceleration of the growing ideological distance between the parties in Congress (Lewis et al. 2021). In the modern era, internal party conflict has instead disincentivized cross-party cooperation and served to reorient the parties in Congress toward their ideological poles. Nowhere has this trend been more visible than in congressional primary elections.

The radicalization of the Republican Party has perhaps been one of the most studied phenomena in recent years. In Congress, Republican roll-call voting scores have been moving rightward for several decades (Lewis et al. 2021). More recently, Republican legislators have adopted authoritarian rhetoric (Cowburn and Oswald 2020), and racialized anti-democratic sentiment has become prevalent in the party (Bartels 2020). The rightward movement of the Republican Party has driven asymmetric partisan polarization (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016; Hacker and Pierson 2006; Theriault 2013). Indeed, media and scholarly criticism of the framing of partisan trends as “polarization” – rather than Republican radicalization – has focused on the stark positional movement and nonadherence to democratic norms in the modern Republican Party (Kreiss and McGregor 2023; Rubin 2021; Zimmer 2019) and the relative lack of equivalent on the ideological left. By analyzing the intra-party dynamics of each party separately, this book explicitly centers the features of the congressional nomination process which have pulled Republican elites asymmetrically rightward and transformed the party to a greater extent.

Though roll-call scores of Democrats in Congress have not moved leftward to the same extent, the party has, over the long term, transformed in its positions on foundational subjects such as race and identity, where “the party of Jim Crow has become the party of Barack Obama” (Hilton 2021, 7). The party’s economic worldview has also changed in recent decades, where a self-identified socialist garnered more than 40 percent of the vote in the 2016 presidential nomination contest, carrying twenty-three states in the process. Comparisons of “establishment” Democratic presidents such as Bill Clinton and Joe Biden also reveal leftward movement on a variety of issues including minority

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rights, crime, and fiscal policy (Dionne 2023). In Congress, the ranks of progressives and further-left members, including those with connections to democratic socialism, have swelled in recent years (Thomsen 2017a). Though Republican transformation is almost entirely responsible for the emerging distance between partisan elites in Congress, the leftward movement of the Democratic Party through a combination of positional adaptation and generational replacement has been identified by scholars (see e.g., Wehner 2019) and recognized by representatives in Congress (Zengerle 2022).

The consequences of this increase in congressional polarization range from declining legislative productivity (Jones 2001) due to gridlock (Binder 2003), a greater disconnect between the positions of citizens and those who represent them (Bafumi and Herron 2010), the adoption of increasingly “unorthodox” procedures outside of formal institutional rules (Sinclair 2011), a decline in the power of Congress relative to other branches of government (Carmines and Fowler 2017), and detrimental effects on policy implementation (Epstein and O’Halloran 1999). Committee procedures including bill mark-ups now receive input from a narrower range of experts, with lower levels of congressional oversight (Hetherington 2009). Perhaps of most concern, a polarized Congress is delivering worse policy outcomes, with evidence that polarization has increased income inequality (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006) and prevented action in areas such as criminal justice reform (Thomsen 2017b). Set against this backdrop, it should perhaps be unsurprising that congressional job approval has declined dramatically in recent years (Gallup 2022). Though the phenomenon has been credited with some positive consequences, such as greater political awareness among the public (Zaller 1992), translating to higher levels of political engagement (Abramowitz 2010; Hetherington 2008), polarization of the national legislature is broadly understood as a hindrance to the functioning of US politics by academics, media, and the general public alike.

In short, these changes to the parties matter, with partisan polarization described as “the most serious problem facing the U.S. today” (Hall and Snyder 2015). Explaining this trend has been a central focus of political scientists studying US party competition in the twenty-first century (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Sinclair 2006; Theriault 2008). Primary elections have frequently been attributed as exacerbating polarization, where the porousness of party organizations and inclusive candidate selection processes have been said to pull elites in Congress toward their ideological poles (Jacobson 2000).

MECHANISMS OF PARTY CHANGE IN PRIMARIES

This book seeks to clarify both *whether* and *how* the modern dynamics of primary competition may have altered the composition of the two parties through the nomination of more “extreme” candidates for Congress.¹² To do so, I examine the different mechanisms through which primaries may influence candidate positioning.

Primary election polarization theory contends that voters in primaries are more ideologically extreme than general election voters and so reward ideological candidates at the expense of comparatively moderate alternatives (Brady, Han, and Pope 2007; Burden 2001), with entire books written on the need to abolish partisan primaries to “mitigate mischief” (Alvarez and Sinclair 2015). Primary voters have not only been lamented by scholars, with leading politicians arguing for the need to “end partisan primaries [to] save America” (Schumer 2014) and national media commentators warning that the current process of candidate selection may “destroy democracy” (Foley 2022). Though this narrative about primary voters appears intuitive – and is now widely assumed to be true by many scholars, journalists, and politicians – empirical evidence on the subject is, at best, mixed and tends toward no polarizing effect (Hirano et al. 2010; Sides et al. 2020). Despite these findings, positional difference between primary and general electorates is the most commonly advocated way that the institution of congressional nomination is said to exacerbate ideological divisions in Congress. Oftentimes, this is the only mechanism of primary polarization considered.

If primary voters hold noncentrist positions, we may expect that they systematically prefer comparatively “extreme” candidates when they compete against relative moderates in an election. In such a scenario, primary voters’ preferences would produce nominees further from the political center than would be selected under alternative methods of nomination. I label this mechanism the *selective effect* of primary elections, directly emanating from voters’ decisions on election day. I find that, even when primary elections are explicitly fought on ideological and factional grounds, voters do not systematically express preferences for candidates further from the center, and nominees selected via contested primaries are not positionally distinct from other nominees. These results

¹² I use the term “extreme” in line with the established use in the primary election literature (see e.g., Hall 2015). “Extremism” may result from positions far from the “center,” greater consistency, or some combination of these.