

**A Power Struggle: Do Contested Primaries Between  
Moderates and Extremists Harm the Party?**

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### **Abstract**

As intra-party disagreements rise, primary challenges between candidates with ideological differences occur. A deeper understanding of how these primary challenges affect party success will assist potential candidates, and the parties themselves, in making safer and more helpful decisions in their pursuit to change platforms and policies. This thesis attempts to study the effect of contested primary elections between ideologically distanced candidates on their party's general election success. Merging three existing datasets, I use a custom dataset with candidate-level data from 1980-2016. I employ several fixed-effect multivariate regression models measuring the effect of ideological difference in a primary race (utilizing CFscores as an ideological marker) and the closeness of the primary race itself on the general election vote percentage of the respective political party. I am unable to find a relationship between these variables measured in an interaction, nor am I able to find a relationship between ideological distance in a primary and any effect on general election vote percentage. I do measure a positive correlation between the closeness of a primary race, and the general election vote percentage for the respective primary winner; the less competitive the primary election is, the better the candidate performs in the general election. I conclude that the data utilized are robust in their ideological mapping, however, current ideological scores (CFscore and DW-NOMINATE) are insufficient in measuring extremism as a variable. Further research within this theoretical framework ought to attempt a measurement of political extremism, rather than ideological differences measured in relation to their respective party members.

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## **Chapter One**

“Through unity of action we can be a veritable colossus in support of peace. No one can defeat us unless we first defeat ourselves.”

-- Dwight D. Eisenhower

## Introduction

Whether it's a new generation of voters coming of age, a natural shift in political ideologies, or a schismatic disagreement in party direction, primary challenges serve as a function of change for American politics. There have been many historic surprises for both parties, replacing long-serving leaders with new faces like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez after her unforeseen victory over Joseph Crowley in 2018. In cases like these, primary challengers attempt to capture malcontent about the incumbent and use new policy ideas to help garner support in ousting the status quo. Thus, politicians try to keep a finger on the pulse of their constituents to avoid losing touch with the political zeitgeist. While these primary challenges present individual problems for lawmakers, they may also represent growing dissatisfaction with the party's direction as a whole. In either situation, a central disagreement exists within the party representing disunity amongst the voters and candidates. In today's hyper-partisan climate, unity is a powerful tool. Without it, the establishment power can be vulnerable to rivals within the party and outside of it. An incumbent successful in navigating the vulnerability keeps their power, while those caught flat-footed wind up like Joseph Crowley.

Disagreements beg for solutions; the longer they are left unsolved, the more ingrained they become. If primaries like the ones described are indicative of an intra-party disagreement, then we must ask whether the outcome of the primary brings us any solution at all. Does the issue between those two candidates, or between factions within the party itself, end with a concession speech? Or, does the public political fistfight of a closely contested primary challenge serve as a single battle in a war of party direction and policy? This research studies the larger effects of primary challenges between moderate and extremist candidates on the political party's success as it relates to the incumbent, and to her party writ large.

## **1.1 Motivation**

As ideological divides grow within a party, the divisions can manifest as primary challenges between moderate and extremist candidates. Despite intent, challenges to the party's establishment power may not be the most effective method in actualizing the candidates' preferred policy. If potential candidates disagree with the ideological status quo of their party and choose to challenge incumbents, it is worth studying the effects that those contentious primaries have on their party's general election success moving forward. Political parties continue to serve as the main vessels for the accumulation of political power which is necessary for controlling policy; if potential candidates wish to pass more extreme (or more moderate) policy, they must still rely on their identified party to do so. Understanding the real effects of their primary challenge is therefore an important step in the process of affecting their intended change.

Ideological differences have been, and always will be, a persistent issue in intra-party relations. Since the two-party system has shown itself to be a permanent fixture in American politics, potential candidates and aspiring politicians have no other vessel for power and influence as important as their respective political party. Although fundamental policy disagreements do arise within parties, these potential candidates harm their own chance of actualizing that policy when they harm the party they belong to. Thus, it is important to understand how one's actions affect their party if their ultimate motivation is to change the party landscape and alter platforms and policy. This research attempts to find that understanding while positing that the most influential effects come from closely decided primaries between ideologically distant candidates.

## **1.2 Literature Review**

This literature review will cover a historical overview of primary elections in the United States, beginning in the early 20th century and extending past the eventual widespread adoption of direct primaries after the assassination of Democratic Presidential nominee Bobby Kennedy. I will then review the modern function of primary elections, an analysis of primary voters and donors, and motivations behind various primary challengers. I will end with a specific review of Andrew Hall's relevant research surrounding extremists and primary elections.

### **Historical Overview**

Primary elections have not always held the same importance or utility in our electoral system as they do now. The advent of the primary began in the early 20th century, as voters in single-party districts expressed a desire to influence the choice for the nominee who would also be the presumptive election victor. Consequently, these new primary elections successfully increased competition generally by creating intra-party contests rather than allowing party officials to choose the candidate directly. Through 1950, districts featuring only one competitive political party witnessed 84.5% of their primary elections go contested (Hirano 36). Following 1950, where more states began to implement direct primaries, competitiveness continued to climb for inter-party general elections, with more than half of all US state-wide elections considered competitive. Rates of competitiveness fell after 1990, however, reaching all-time lows in the modern era. This 40-year increase in competitiveness can be attributed, in part, to candidate-centric primary races which highlight qualifications and ideology (Hirano 167-169). Americans saw these new mechanisms of electoral influence work as intended, and as such, they proliferated throughout the nation. While some state and local parties stopped short of

implementing consequential direct primaries and stayed married to the closed-door nomination technique, primary elections served as a method to collect voters' opinions on potential candidates that would help form the party's unilateral decision.

Direct primaries for the Presidential election would eventually become the norm following Bobby Kennedy's assassination prior to the 1968 convention, which threw the Democratic Party into chaos. Without the definitive system gained by a direct primary, the DNC faced a crisis of indecision as its leading candidate was killed prior to the final delegate count. As the party leaders faced politically charged riots and violence outside its closed doors, they opted to place the decision in the hands of the primary voters themselves. After 1968, all Democratic Presidential candidates would be chosen by a direct primary, and the Republicans would soon follow suit. Today, with the exception of caucuses, nearly all state and federal elected officials must first claim victory in a direct primary race.

### **The Modern Function of Primaries**

While the main effect of direct primaries in the 20th century was an increase in competitiveness generally, the majority of incumbents still cruised to victory largely unchallenged. Between 1950 and 1026, only 57.4% of statewide candidates and only 28.9% of US House of Representatives candidates "faced either a competitive primary or a [contested] general election" (Hirano 184). Incumbents face an even lesser threat of competition, with only 46.4% of statewide candidates and 23.3% of US House candidates in an incumbent-contested seat facing a competitive primary or contested general election (Hirano 185). Today, incumbents



enjoy an even deeper level of safety in their seats. Between 2002 and 2004, a mere 10 congressional incumbents of either chamber suffered defeat in their primaries, 7 of which were due to new redistricting regimes which flipped party control over the district (Boatright 34). During the rise of the Tea Party in 2010, which gave way to a spike in primary challenges, only a single GOP representative suffered a primary defeat as a result of a tea party challenge (Boatright 38). If direct primaries were originally intended to increase competitiveness and give voters more influence over the candidate selection process, the functionality of primaries has surely decreased over time. What function do they now serve, and what effects do they now have on our electoral system?

There is evidence to suggest that primary elections have led to an increase in well-qualified candidates entering office, as voters are able to select candidates who display their qualifications and signal that they would be effective legislators or executors. Research has found a positive correlation between a primary winner's relevant political experience and the "division of partisan loyalties" among voters (Hirano 199). Reading deeper, this means that in primaries labeled "advantaged-party," meaning that party has a high likelihood of winning the general election, the probability that the primary winner had significant relevant experience is greater than party-balanced primaries or disadvantaged-party primaries (Hirano 199-200). Reaching back to the original intention of direct primaries (to increase competition in single-party controlled districts), this correlation suggests they continue to improve elections in areas dominated by a single party by producing more qualified and more experienced candidates. This improvement, however, begins to dissipate as the partisan competitiveness of the constituency increases. Party-balanced primaries, where the general election is considered competitive for either party, have a lower probability (reduction of 0.05) to produce

well-qualified and experienced candidates from a direct primary, while the qualifications of the pool of candidates in the primary remain largely the same (Hirano 202). Why, then, would constituencies with a looming competitive general election select a less-qualified candidate when given the choice? Direct primaries in advantaged-party areas may help increase competition and produce more qualified politicians, while primary voters in competitive districts and states seem to evaluate a different set of criteria. While it may make intuitive sense that demographics could play a key role in determining candidacy, where parties move to support certain demographics to run in like areas, there appears to be no relationship; political parties do not tend to favor certain demographics or genders over another when searching for potential candidates (Hassell and Visalvanich, 2019). The same research posits that political parties continue to hold substantial power over candidates, with significant influence over who proves to be successful in budding primary races (Hassell and Visalvanich, 2019).

### **Who Cares About Primaries?**

Predictably, voter turnout in primary elections is considerably smaller than in general elections. From 1950 to 2016, measuring all primary races statewide and federal, the typical primary election voter turnout was 40.4% of the ensuing general election turnout (Hirano 213). Not only are the voter pools for primaries small, but they also draw a unique crowd of supporters both in their voters and in their donors. Participants in primary elections tend to be more ideologically extreme when compared with general election voters generally, or at least tend to support more ideologically extreme candidates (Brady, Han, and Pope 79). This phenomenon can be seen through successful primary challenges of incumbents, which we know to be an exceedingly rare occurrence. An increase of one standard deviation in conservatism (as measured

through DW Nominate scores) increases the chances of defeat for a Democratic incumbent by one-half of a percentage point (Brady, Han, and Pope 94). Holding this true, it would seem that primary elections tend to favor more extreme candidates, and primary challengers respond as such. In one study on primary elections from 1928 to 2000, 71% of primary challengers were more ideologically extreme than the incumbent they were challenging (Brady, Han, and Pope 90). Furthermore, support for primary candidates tends to follow ideological lines. As voters learn about candidates' ideological positioning, conservative voters lean towards more conservative candidates 10 percentage points more than liberal voters do in open-seat primaries (Hirano 229). This means that candidates' signaling of their ideological positions tends to attract like-minded voters, while candidates who appear more moderate have a higher probability of losing the primary. All in all, primary elections seem to be particularly advantageous for ideologically extreme candidates who can communicate well to voters. If this is any indication, primary voters seem to be more ideologically extreme themselves, or at the very least, respond well to ideologically extreme communications.

Since turnout for primaries is already low relative to general elections, these voters possess an oversized influence on who the general election candidate would be. These voters, as the studies above would suggest, tend to be political activists themselves who are tuned into the political theater, participate in lower-turnout events such as primaries, and respond well to more polarized candidates (Hirano 258-259). When this is considered alongside the negative implications for more moderate primary candidates, a clear picture emerges: primary elections contribute to political polarization. Primary candidates tend to be more extreme than the incumbent, candidates who are seen as ideologically different than the party they represent suffer a lower win probability, and the activist primary voters tend to support candidates who more

closely align with their own ideological stances. Not only do primary voters tend to be more ideologically extreme than general election voters, donors tend to be more polarized than them all. Across all congressional districts, donors to Democratic candidates are more liberal than the average Democrat, while the same fact is true for Republicans in 60% of districts (Jordan 592). For primary election victors, only 29% are more extreme than their own donor pool (Jordan 592). Not only are voters typically more polarized, the donors are as well.

### **Motivations Behind Primary Challenges**

As research has shown, successful challenges to incumbents are, in no uncertain terms, exceedingly rare. Nevertheless, the prevalence of primary challenges for incumbents has increased in recent years, peaking in 2010 during the rise of the Tea Party. While there are numerous potential reasons for a prospective candidate to levy a primary challenge against an incumbent, ideological differences remain one of the most common motivations (Boatright 40). If primaries are so rarely fruitful for the challenger, why then do they continue to occur? Robert Boatright cites three distinct categories of primary challengers in an attempt to understand the motivations behind them. The first is the “ambitious amateur,” who challenges an incumbent in an attempt to skip rungs on the political ladder (Boatright 42). This challenger enters a primary with the hope of defeating an incumbent and entering into politics at a high floor, without much of the arduous and unpublicized work necessitated at lower levels of politics. The second category of the primary challenger is the “policy amateur,” who runs against an incumbent to raise awareness for a specific policy issue they view as important (Boatright 42). Win or lose, this challenger is motivated by a single issue and uses her candidacy platform to raise awareness for the issue. Oftentimes, policy amateurs will challenge an incumbent in order to influence their

platform and move them towards the desired policy position. The third and final category of the primary challenger is the “hopeless amateur,” who simply “runs for the thrill of running” (Boatright 42). Much like the policy amateur, this challenger has no real commitment to winning her primary, but rather a desire for political thrill. They are often political activists themselves, and challenge an incumbent in an attempt to actualize their activism and gain a sense of what candidacy may look like. With these three challenger types in mind, Boatright argues that none of them have any real distinctive advantage over the other and that challengers specifically motivated by ideological differences provide no real advantage either (Boatright 41-43).

### **Effects of Primary Challenges**

The question that my research attempts to answer is rooted in the ideological disagreement between the incumbent and the challenger, and the effect of such a disagreement. With an understanding that primary challengers are often ideologically distant from the incumbent they run against (and rarely successful), it is important to question what the effects are of these primary challenges. Political Scientist Andrew Hall has published a great deal of works relating to the effects of ideological extremists on political parties, including the effects that their primary challenges have; this research is in great deal inspired by his three pieces of research on extremists and primary elections.

Shortly after the bruising 2016 presidential primaries concluded, Hall published research showing a 21-point reduction in general election success for US House and Senate candidates who were forced to take part in a run-off election, after failing to meet 50% in the initial primary

(Hall Runoff Paper). This is a clearly substantial drop in win probability stemming from one of the more divisive events in electoral politics: a run-off primary, which forces voters to come to the ballot box twice in one primary cycle to decide who will represent the party on the ballot. Hall's work here serves to highlight the divisive and destructive effects that a closely contested primary has on a party's chances of success. Similarly, Hall shows us that the nomination of an ideologically extreme candidate has a like effect on the general election outcome. If an ideologically extreme candidate wins a "coin-flip" primary over a moderate candidate, the general election success probability for that party shrinks 35-54% (Hall Extremist Primaries). Bringing both pieces together, Hall published a 2018 paper that searches for the mechanisms in which the parties lose such a sizable win probability through an extremist nomination. Many supporters of exciting extremist candidates point to a wave of high voter turnout as a net benefit of their nomination; Hall finds the opposite to be true. Extremist nominees end up being punished electorally through a decrease in their own party's turnout, while also increasing the opposing party's turnout. Moderate candidates obtain the largest advantage electorally as they do not motivate the opposing party's voter constituency, as opposed to an extremist nominee (Hall Punishing Extremists).

### **1.3 Theory**

When all three pieces of Hall's research are combined, he shows us a convincing narrative: primaries featuring a showdown between a moderate and an extremist produce harmful outcomes for the political party in question when an extremist claims victory. This research seeks to illuminate the effects of those primaries irrespective of the outcome. If Hall's indictment of run-off primaries is true alongside the turnout-based consequences of an extremist candidate,

closely contested primaries between moderates and extremists should grant us a similar outcome as far as a drop in general election probability goes. It is worth discussing why these ideologically distant primaries may carry such a profound effect on general election outcomes, and why the closeness of the race exacerbates the issues that Hall found in his research. Through this paper, I will show how this interaction between ideological differences and competitiveness leads to many of the same negative effects that Hall found through his research. While he shows how extremists nominees (those who win their primary race) negatively impact their party, as well as how run-offs do the same, Hall does not report an effect when these variables are combined. I theorize that the combination of an ideologically distant primary, coupled with competitiveness, harms the party in many of the same ways Hall has found.

#### **1.4 Hypothesis**

Closely contested primaries that feature ideologically distant candidates in US House races will lower the general election vote total for that party when compared to the previous cycle, holding financial expenditures and contributions constant.

**Chapter Two: Data, Design, and Results**



In this chapter, I operationalize dependent and independent variables, showcase the data and research design, and describe the regression models employed.

## **2.1 Data Description**

The data used for this thesis is a merged dataset composed of Stephen Pettigrew, Karen Owen, and Emily Wanless' US House Primary Election Results (Pettigrew, Owen, Wanless) and Adam Bonica's DIME Scores for Congressional Candidates (Bonica) supplemented with Michael Miller and Nikki Camberg's addendum for 2010-2018 (Miller and Camberg). The US House candidate data from Bonica were merged with the Pettigrew and Miller data by district, year, and party. The candidates were matched based on the first two letters of their last name, as well as incumbency status for each district to ensure a comprehensive dataset containing all incumbents. I excluded independents from the merge as they typically do not have primary elections to analyze. The merged dataset contains 25,687 observations (primary candidates) from 1980-2018. Due to discrepancies in the source data, 2,265 observations were missing matches and were excluded from the merge. Almost all discrepancies were missing candidates in the Bonica data, who received a very low level of voter support and were left off.

The merged data is organized horizontally with the candidate being the unit of analysis. The data include information regarding their electoral statistics, campaign finance, and ideology. Candidates are identified as an incumbent, challenger, or open-seat candidate through one variable, and the primary race itself is identified as an incumbent challenge or an open-seat primary through another. The candidate's gender is identified through the dummy variable (0 = female, 1 = male), as well as their qualifications for office through a label of 0 to 29, each representing various occupations typically seen for office-seekers. Regarding electoral

information, the data provide a few main variables utilized in this research. First, the data contain a variable which reports the percentage of the vote the candidate received in her respective primary, and another for her respective general election, from 0.0 to 1.0. Then, there are dummy variables to identify the winners of each primary election and general election, respectively (0 = Loss, 1 = Win). The data also contain a wide breadth of financial reporting for each candidate, detailing total expenditures, total contributions, total PAC contributions, and number of individual donors. Bonica uses this data to formulate ideological scores for each candidate, known as CFscores; these scores are a major variable for this research and are described in further detail in section 2.2.2.

## Data Trends

<b>Summary of Main Variables</b>							
<b>Statistic</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>St. Dev.</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Pctl(25)</b>	<b>Pctl(75)</b>	<b>Max</b>
General Election Vote %	13,670	0.513	0.209	0.001	0.348	0.659	1.000
Primary Election Vote %	22,356	0.563	0.374	0.000	0.200	1.000	1.000
Candidate CFscore	19,949	0.087	1.004	-4.335	-0.766	0.963	4.312

**Table 1: Summary of main variables**

Table 1 shows a summary of the significant variables utilized in this research. In all US House of Representatives general elections, the mean vote percentage total of all general election winners is 68.33%, with a median value of 66%. This shows that the average general election race for the lower chamber of Congress is largely uncompetitive, with the winning candidate claiming a 36 point victory.

The analysis on primary elections provides a similar result, with the mean vote percentage total of primary winners of 68.7%, with a median value of 67.7%, both in primaries

that feature at least one challenger. The mean vote percentage total for a primary race loser is 19.32%, with a median value of 17%. The data show the mean number of primary challengers for all US House races as 2.8, with a median value of 2.0.

## **2.2 Dependent Variables**

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Pctl(25)	Pctl(75)	Max
General Election Vote %	13,044	0.498	0.193	0.001	0.340	0.646	1.000
Gpct Delta	8,634	0.0003	0.107	-0.883	-0.050	0.050	0.804

**Table 2: Summary of Dependent Variables**

The dependent variable in this research is the general election vote percentage received by each respective candidate. Each congressional general election vote total by party as compared to the previous cycle to measure effect by the treatment group. The difference with respect to the previous election is recorded as a separate variable; this is the current general election vote percentage minus the previous cycle's. If there is no previous election to measure the delta, no value is recorded and the entry is ignored.

Analysis of the vote percentage difference produces a few observable trends. The interquartile range is 0.12 points (from -0.06 and 0.06), signifying that the majority of general election vote changes for each party are within 6 points of the mean. While either tail of the bell curve provides some substantial results, the data suggest congressional districts rarely experience a significant shift in party support in non-redistricting years.

### **2.2.1 Independent Variables**

#### **CFscore**

The primary independent variable at use in this thesis is Adam Bonica's campaign finance score, or CFscore. The CFscore is calculated through the evaluation of campaign financial disclosures, specifically the sources of financial contributions from donors and PACs who donate across state and federal campaigns. Under the assumption that donors contribute to candidates who are proximate to their own ideology, Bonica evaluates contributions to state and federal candidates to generate an ideological score for the contributor themselves. Candidates are given a CFscore based on the source of their campaign's contributions (Bonica 2-3). Bonica accounts for variations in contributor behavior that may not align with ideology, such as a candidate's incumbency status or committee assignments. He also excludes various trade, labor, and corporate PACs that pool money from employees and donors and often contribute to candidates for more strategic reasons (Bonica 4). Since nearly all campaigns necessitate fundraising, the CFscore presents me with a more complete measurement of candidate ideology as opposed to others that measure roll-call voting records and bureaucratic activities; these measurements can exclude candidates who do not reach public office and thus have no measurable actions to calculate an ideological score. Since primary elections often contain these types of candidates, the CFscore supplies me with a more accurate and more comprehensive measurement.

## Ideological Trends in the Data

CFscore Summary							
Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Pctl(25)	Pctl(75)	Max
CFscore All	19,949	0.087	1.004	-4.335	-0.766	0.963	4.312
CFscore Democrat	10,108	-0.720	0.611	-4.335	-1.028	-0.436	2.601
CFscore Republican	9,841	0.916	0.550	-2.322	0.685	1.179	4.312

**Table 3: CFscore Summary**

The CFscore is measured on a scale of -5 to +5, with negative numbers signifying the political left, positive numbers signifying the political right, and zero signifying the ideological center of American politics. The data utilized in this paper show several trends relating to the CFscore values for primary candidates. The mean CFscore for all US House candidates is 0.087, with a median value of 0.0143. With 1st quartile and 3rd quartile values within a range of 1.7, the majority of candidates are close to the political center; for a frame of reference, the standard deviation for CFscores writ large is 1.004. For Democrats, the mean CFscore for all candidates is -0.7199, with a median value of -0.7470; the standard deviation for Democrats' scores is 0.611. For Republicans, the mean CFscore is 0.9164, with a median value of 0.9580, with a standard deviation of 0.916. On balance, the average Republican congressional candidate is further to their ideological extreme by an absolute value of 0.2381 and has a wider spread considering their standard deviation is about 30% higher than the Democrats'. The quartile ranges for each party display a similar reality, with Republican candidates' scores being further from the ideological center.

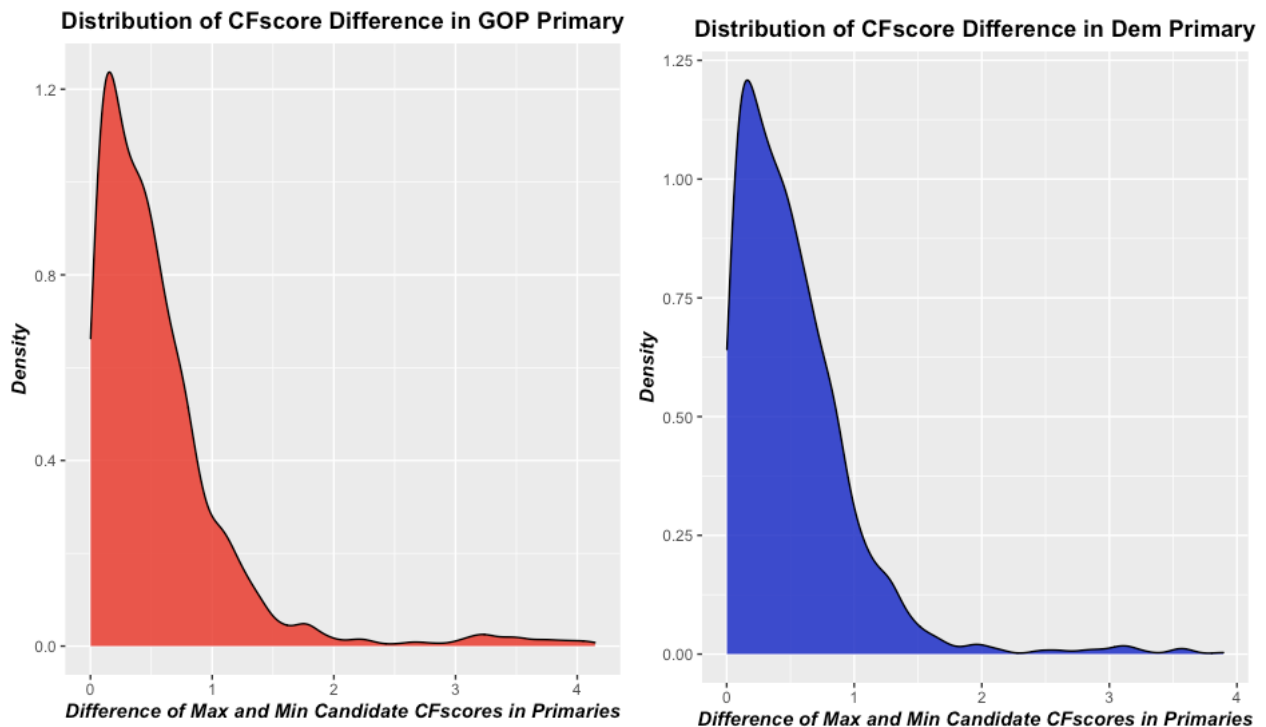
**CFscore Difference Summary**

Statistic	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Min	Pctl(25)	Pctl(75)	Max
CFscore Difference All	3,255	0.545	0.541	0.001	0.190	0.723	4.146
Democratic Primaries	1,535	0.526	0.478	0.002	0.193	0.717	3.894
Republican Primaries	1,720	0.562	0.592	0.001	0.186	0.731	4.146

**Table 4: Summary of CFscore Differences**

Since this research focuses on ideological differences between candidates in a primary election, rather than ideological differences party-wide, I created a new variable to depict this difference within each primary election. This variable presents the absolute value of the difference between the most ideologically distant candidates in each primary. The mean difference between the most ideologically distant candidates in a Democratic primary is 0.536, with a median value of 0.476. On the Republican side, the mean value is a similar 0.463 with a median value of 0.352. These statistics suggest that Democratic primaries display, on average, a greater ideological distance between candidates than Republican primaries. Evaluating the 3rd quartile values, Democratic primaries feature a greater number of significantly ideologically distant primaries than Republicans. The standard deviations for the CFscore differences reflect a similar reality to that of the CFscores themselves. The standard deviation for the Republicans is 0.592, which is 24% higher than the Democratic standard deviation. This suggests Republican primaries are, on average, more ideologically distant than Democrats'. However, considering the interquartile ranges for each, I conclude that the Republicans have a greater number of values in the right tail of the distribution graph, considering their higher max value difference compared to the third quartile difference. Considering the low number of observations greater than 1.5, and

means within 0.04, the data ultimately suggest that the parties' ideological distributions look similar within three standard deviations from the mean.



### Primary Election Independent Variables

The second independent variable utilized in this research is the percent of votes earned in the primary election for each candidate. I specifically measured the difference between the top two vote-earning candidates in each primary and recorded it as a separate independent variable. Although many primary elections contain more than two candidates, and the winning candidate often fails to achieve 50% of the vote, the closeness of each primary can be measured by

evaluating how close the second-place candidate came to victory. Despite instances where the losing candidates total a greater percentage of the vote than the primary victor, I argue the competitiveness of the election can be more accurately measured by the vote margin of the first and second place candidates as a low number signifies a near defeat. Alternatively, measuring the plurality of the field could display a small victory margin for the primary winner, while in reality, the race may have been uncompetitive. For states with primary run-offs, the initial primary election was excluded and the two candidate run-offs were instead analyzed; the final run-off primary is considered “close” inherently.

### **2.3 Model Overview**

Converting the data into a panel dataset, I use a fixed-effects model to measure the effects on the dependent variable (general election vote percentage) in two distinct models separated by party. The dependent variable is regressed against an interaction of continuous variables: CFscore difference in each primary race, and primary vote percentage difference in each primary race. An interaction is included between these two variables and is the major independent variable in each model. To accurately measure change over time, I include the previous general election vote percentage value as a control to the right side of the model.

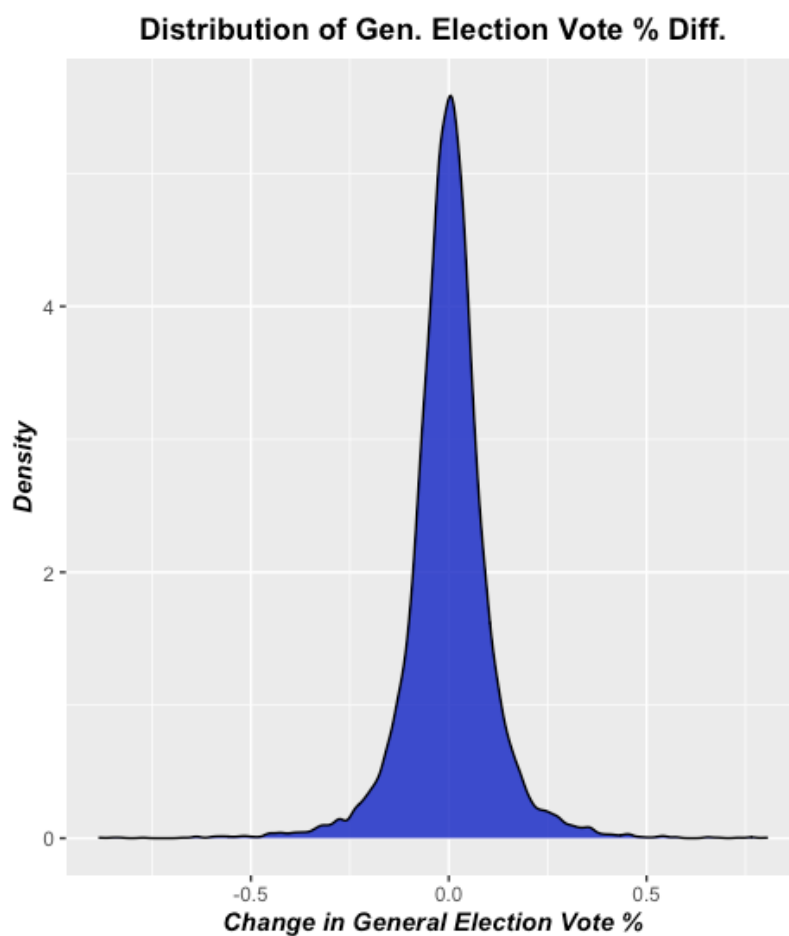
I also include two models of the same framework, however, the continuous independent variables are instead dummy variables to define treatment groups. Ideologically distant primaries are considered as such if the two most distant candidates are separated by a CFscore difference greater than the median (0.427), while primary races are considered closely contested if the top two primary candidates are separated by a vote margin of less than half of one standard deviation. The mean or median values for primary vote margin is not used due to the prevalence



of significantly uncompetitive primary races throughout the US which increases the mean value to 34.9%, well above what would be considered competitive, while the median value is 29.5%.

### **2.3.1 Panel Designation and Controls**

The fixed effects and pooled models utilize two indices within the panel data: a panel ID coded as an input of State/District/Party, and the election cycle year. To accurately account for redistricting, a suffix is added to the panel ID denoting each redistricting regime of each district, creating a new panel for each one. This controls for a sudden shift in partisan support due to redistricting, or any time-invariant district factors, and more accurately measures the effects of the independent variable over the course of two election cycles. With each redistricting regime coded as its own panel, the general election vote percentage of each party is compared to the previous cycle within the panel, with the delta recorded as a separate variable. This measurement allows me to measure the change in general election vote percentage cycle to cycle while controlling for redistricting effects.



The data return a distribution close to normal, which can be seen in figure 4. The data allow me to control for redistricting effects, which would account for some of the largest swings in general election vote percentage. Since the variables contained in these data do not reflect

impacts large enough to cause significant vote margin shifts upwards of 50 points, and small discrepancies and input errors in the data have been found, I removed all values greater than four standard deviations from the mean. This removed a total of 64 observations from the data out of 9,634. Each removed observation represents general election vote percentage deltas of greater than 42.9 points, which cannot be attributed to redistricting.

With these differences recorded and the interaction of the main independent variables coded, I run a linear regression panel model to measure the effects of a closely contested primary featuring ideologically distant candidates on the general election vote percentage of the party within each congressional district. With redistricting controlled through the panel coding, campaign financial controls are included within the model. Since the CFscores are measured through the analysis of financial contributors to each candidate, I control for the number of PAC contributions to each candidate as well as the total number of individual contributions to each candidate, as well as the total number of individual donors. Financial contributions from both PACs and individuals change substantially from candidate to candidate, and often have an effect on the general election outcome due to a candidate's increased ability to advertise and canvas. Additionally, the number of individual donors is a strong indicator of popularity within the district and beyond, as well as the candidate's ability to fundraise, which is a strong indicator of a talented and successful politician. All of these variables and traits impact a candidate's general election success and are thus controlled for in this model. Due to omissions in the data or collection errors, all zero values for financial variables are coded as NA. All US Dollar amounts were adjusted to 2018 inflation levels, and the control variables were included in the regression

model as their  $\log(x + 1)$  value to account for a heavy right skew in the data and for values of zero.

## **2.4 Results**

After performing the regression analysis, I report a null finding for my hypothesis. Model 1, which measures the interaction with continuous variables, fails to report significant results for both the interaction itself and separate independent variables. Model 2 uses dummy variables to define treatment groups, and also fails to be statistically significant. As such, I found no relation between the interaction of ideologically distant, and closely contested, primaries and general election vote percentage. Some financial variables included as controls are statistically significant with positive correlations, which adds credibility to the models' accuracy. Additionally, the margin by which candidates win their primary races proved positively correlated with the dependent variable and was statistically significant in both parties.

### **2.4.1 Model Results**

Models 1 and 2 test the hypothesis that candidates who undergo closely contested primary elections featuring ideological distant candidates earn less general election vote share than those who do not, separated by party. Model 1 measures the interaction using continuous variables, while Model 2 measures the interaction with dummy variables designating treatment. Models 3 and 4 measure with continuous and dummy variables, respectively, but without an interaction included.

<b>Fixed Effects Results, Continuous</b>		
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	General Election Vote %	
	Democrat	Republican
	(1)	(2)
CFscore Difference	0.004 (0.014)	0.010 (0.009)
Primary Vote Margin	0.065** (0.027)	0.077*** (0.021)
Total PAC Contribs	0.003 (0.002)	0.004** (0.002)
Total Individual Contribs	0.006 (0.007)	0.007 (0.006)
Total Disbursements	0.013 (0.009)	0.005 (0.007)
# of Distinct Donors	0.00001*** (0.00000)	0.00001*** (0.00000)
# of Primary Opponents	-0.004 (0.003)	-0.0003 (0.002)
Previous Gen. Election %	0.080** (0.037)	0.022 (0.029)
CFscore/Primary Interaction	-0.018 (0.036)	-0.014 (0.026)
Observations	1,278	1,441
R <sup>2</sup>	0.262	0.168
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	-1.574	-1.489
F Statistic	14.464*** (df = 9; 366)	10.828*** (df = 9; 481)
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

**Model 1: Continuous variables with Interaction**

Model 1 does not return significant results for the interaction utilizing continuous variables. The independent variable of primary election closeness is, however, statistically significant for both parties at the .05 level with a positive correlation of 0.065 for Democrats and 0.077 for Republicans. One out of four financial controls is significant for Democrats (number of distinct donors), while two out of four are significant for Republicans (total PAC contributions, and number of distinct donors).

<b>Fixed Effects Results, Dummy, Interaction</b>		
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	General Election Vote %	
	Democrat (1)	Republican (2)
CFscore/Primary Dummy Interaction	-0.021 (0.017)	0.008 (0.013)
Total PAC Contribs	0.003 (0.002)	0.004** (0.002)
Total Individual Contribs	0.007 (0.007)	0.006 (0.006)
Total Disbursements	0.013 (0.009)	0.006 (0.007)
# of Distinct Donors	0.00002*** (0.00000)	0.00001*** (0.00000)
# of Primary Opponents	-0.006** (0.003)	-0.002 (0.002)
Previous Gen. Election %	0.083** (0.037)	0.019 (0.030)
CFscore Difference > Median	0.006 (0.010)	0.011 (0.008)
Primary Vote Margin > 0.5 Std. Dev.	-0.001 (0.012)	-0.021** (0.009)
Observations	1,278	1,441
R <sup>2</sup>	0.253	0.155
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	-1.606	-1.528
F Statistic	13.786*** (df = 9; 366)	9.837*** (df = 9; 481)
<i>Note:</i>	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

### Model 2: Dummy Variables with Interaction

Model 2 does not return significant results for the interaction albeit with a negative correlation of -0.021 for Democrats and a positive correlation of 0.008 for Republicans when regressed against the dependent variable. Analyzing the residuals, the largest vote changes were +/- 28 points, with interquartile ranges grouping tightly around 0 (-0.0024 and 0.0004). One out of five financial controls are significant at the 95% level for the Democrat model, while two out of five are significant for the GOP model; both have positive correlations with the dependent variable.

<b>Fixed Effects Results, Continuous, No Interaction</b>		
	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	General Election Vote %	
	Democrat	Republican
	(1)	(2)
CFscore Difference	-0.001 (0.009)	0.006 (0.006)
Primary Vote Margin	0.056*** (0.021)	0.069*** (0.016)
Total PAC Contribs	0.003 (0.002)	0.004** (0.002)
Total Individual Contribs	0.006 (0.007)	0.007 (0.006)
Total Disbursements	0.013 (0.009)	0.005 (0.007)
# of Distinct Donors	0.00001*** (0.00000)	0.00001*** (0.00000)
# of Primary Opponents	-0.004 (0.003)	-0.00000 (0.002)
Previous Gen. Election %	0.080** (0.036)	0.023 (0.029)
Observations	1,278	1,441
R <sup>2</sup>	0.262	0.168
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	-1.569	-1.486
F Statistic	16.272*** (df = 8; 367)	12.162*** (df = 8; 482)

*Note:* \* p<0.1; \*\* p<0.05; \*\*\* p<0.01

### Model 3: Continuous Variables, No Interaction

Model 3 (continuous variables, no interaction) gives similar output to Model 1. The CFScore difference variable is not significant, while the primary vote margin variable is, with positive correlations of 0.056 and 0.069 for Democrats and Republicans respectively.

**Fixed Effects Results, Dummy, No Interaction**

	<i>Dependent variable:</i>	
	General Election Vote %	
	Democrat (1)	Republican (2)
CFscore Difference > Median	-0.0005 (0.009)	0.014** (0.007)
Primary Vote Margin > 0.5 Std. Dev.	-0.011 (0.009)	-0.018*** (0.007)
Total PAC Contribs	0.003 (0.002)	0.004** (0.002)
Total Individual Contribs	0.006 (0.007)	0.007 (0.006)
Total Disbursements	0.013 (0.009)	0.006 (0.007)
# of Distinct Donors	0.00002*** (0.00000)	0.00001*** (0.00000)
# of Primary Opponents	-0.006** (0.003)	-0.002 (0.002)
Previous Gen. Election %	0.082** (0.037)	0.020 (0.030)
Observations	1,278	1,441
R <sup>2</sup>	0.250	0.155
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	-1.610	-1.525
F Statistic	15.284*** (df = 8; 367) 11.035*** (df = 8; 482)	
<i>Note:</i>	* p<0.1; ** p<0.05; *** p<0.01	

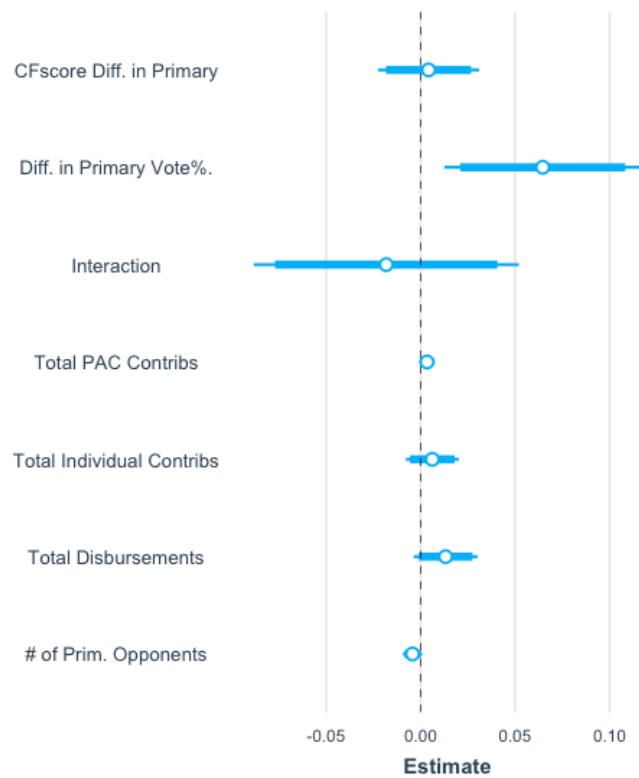
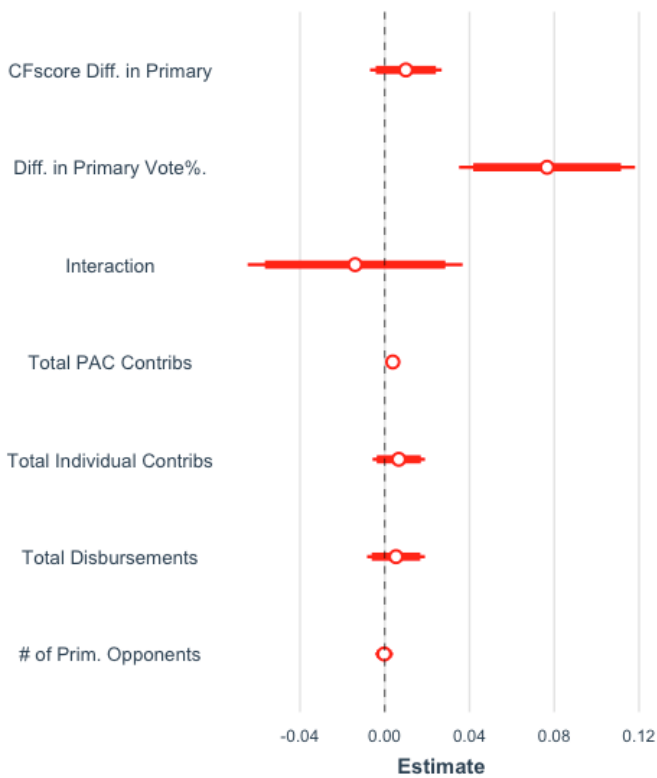
**Model 4: Dummy Variables, No Interaction**



Model 4 (dummy variables, no interaction) provides no further clarity on the relationship between the independent variables and dependent variables. In fact, the CFscore difference dummy variable (value of 1 if the CFscore difference in the primary election is greater than the median) is significant at the 0.05 level and reports a positive correlation of 0.014 for Republicans.

**Model 1 Coefficients, Republicans**

**Model 1 Coefficients, Democrats**



## **2.5 Conclusion**

From these results, I report null findings and cannot find a correlation between my measured interaction and the dependent variable. The fixed effects models do not return statistically significant results for the independent variables, and as such, I cannot determine whether closely contested primaries featuring ideologically distant candidates negatively or positively affect the political party's general election vote share. Although the limitations of the datasets used are detailed below, the models detailed in this thesis do not paint a sufficient enough picture to reject the null hypothesis.

### **2.5.1 Data Limitations**

Due to the nominal values of candidate names and the vastness of US House of Representatives elections, there are candidates and races missing from the final dataset utilized for this paper after merging several data frames; incumbents who were challenged in a primary may appear unchallenged in the final dataset, which would omit them from analysis in the regression models as their respective race does not possess a value in the CFscore-difference column; this is mostly due to data input discrepancies in the original datasets that have omitted challengers who received a low vote share and did not take part in an election again. Additionally, the CFscores are only obtainable for candidates who receive contributions from known entities with a definable ideological positioning. Candidates who only receive small-donor independent contributions did not receive a score, and thus are omitted from analysis. Lastly, the data do not possess information relating to confounding variables such as

political scandals, media coverage, or larger intra-state races such as senate or gubernatorial races that would affect down-ballot candidates.

**Chapter 3: Analysis**

### **3.1 Why a Lack of Findings?**

Despite a robust analysis of 38 years of comprehensive election data, I found no association between the interaction and the dependent variable in my original hypothesis. As many of the financial controls were statistically significant with positive correlations, and the margin of the primary race has a statistically significant positive correlation with general election performance, I assert that the models themselves accurately measure the independent variables' effects on the dependent variable. Both the financial variables and the closeness of the primary race exhibit a predicted outcome, which not only makes intuitive sense but also follows Andrew Hall's research detailed earlier in this thesis: contested primary races harm the political parties' general election success.

#### **3.1.1 Measuring Extremism**

Ideological scores and the differences them between primary candidates, however, fail to return significant results when measured as a single independent variable or as an interaction with primary race closeness. Given that the primary race closeness returns significant results and generally agrees with Hall's findings, the lack of significance regarding the CFscore-based variables suggests two possible explanations: there is no association between ideologically distant primary challenges and general election success, and, the CFscore values are better measurements of fundamental ideology than they are indications of extremist or moderate candidates. I will discuss the latter possibility in this section.

Hall's research on extremists in primary and general elections utilized DW-NOMINATE scores (Dynamic Weighted Nominal Three Step Estimation), which are typically measured

through roll-call voting records (Bonica 368). These scores, like CFScores, assign a numerical positioning to each candidate or politician on a plus/minus scale which can adjust over time depending on the individual's voting record. Theoretically, one can compare an individual's (or political group's) ideological changes over time and can thus compare ideological positioning (Thomson 6). These scores, however, have two significant limitations. First, they can only be generated for candidates and politicians who have sufficient roll-call voting data available to them. Thus, candidates who never reach office or have limited voting history while in office are either not given a score or possess a fairly inaccurate or poorly measured score. Second, measuring voting behavior leaves several confounding variables uncontrolled for. Voting behavior in legislative bodies is not always litmus tests of ideology and policy. For instance, they can be displays of party unity where a candidate feels obligated to vote along party lines, but would otherwise support such a piece of legislation ideologically.

While creating CFScores, Bonica cites the limitations of DW-NOMINATE as a motivator for his work. While I agree that his scores capture a more accurate and holistic measurement of a candidate's *ideology* when compared to the alternative, I argue that Bonica's scores fail to accurately measure *extremism*. The latter term is, admittedly, can be more difficult to define and measure. While an ideological score on a two-dimensional line necessitates comparison to others and thus can be measured once a requisite amount of data is collected, political extremism suffers from a lack of definition. One possible definition asserts that extremism is not only belief in and support of radical ideology, but rather having such a strong belonging to the ideological identity that one feels obligated and compelled to override the general consensus of others and apply that identity to them, irrespective of the defined political structure (Jackson, 2016). This definition, albeit free from the necessity of comparison to others, does require an association

with that defined political structure. Those that disrupt, destabilize, or otherwise harm the political system in place to actualize an ideological identity would be considered an extremist. With this definition in mind, it becomes clear that neither DWNOMINATE nor CFscores accurately measures political extremism, but rather an ideological positioning.

### **3.2 Case Study: The Republicans vs. The GOP**

Representative Don Young (R-AK) is the longest-serving Republican in Congressional history, having held his seat for 25 consecutive terms from 1973 to 2021. Young has represented Alaska's single at-large district for almost 50 straight years. He has survived 10 flips of party control, 10 different Presidential administrations, two separate federal investigations, a series of financial and ethical violations, and one incident of getting caught calling migrant Latinx farmworkers a racial slur; his extended tenure in Congress has earned him the title of "Alaska's Third Senator" (Dickinson, 2012). Few politicians, if any, have enjoyed such a long career representing the same constituents. Despite this unbroken electoral winning streak, Young has, at times, faced competition: he won reelection in 1990 by less than a four-point margin, and again in 1992 where he failed to reach 50%. Before these races, and after, Young's seat has been otherwise safe. In 2008, however, the political winds shifted abruptly.

Alaska Governor Sarah Palin had been picked as the Republican VP candidate, bringing a bright spotlight on the otherwise quiet state. Meanwhile, Young was embroiled in a federal investigation centered around bribery allegations that had already claimed two corporate CEOs and implicated a number of Alaska state legislators (Rosen, 2011). While the investigation would not end until 2010, when the FBI would stop short of charging Young, news of his possible

corruption circulated. As such, the incumbent Lieutenant Governor Sean Parnell announced a primary challenge against Young in 2008 and ran a campaign focused on highlighting Young's apparent improprieties, his long tenure, and challenging his commitment to conservative values (Toomey, 2008). Young would go on to keep his seat after winning the primary by 304 votes, just a 0.28 point margin. He would also win the general election by a more comfortable five points. Although this performance, when measured against the elections in 2006 and 2010, is much tighter. Young won his 2006 general election by 16 points and won the 2010 election by 39.

Neither of the 2006 and 2010 elections featured a competitive primary race for Young. They also failed to feature any (new) accusations of corruption and they were also fairweather election cycles for Congressional Republicans. Regardless, one of Young's closest brushes with defeat came after a close primary election that featured an ideologically distant candidate. In my data, Parnell owns a Cfscore of 0.911 which is nearly identical to the mean (0.8982) and slightly below the median (0.9210) for Republican candidates. Young, however, is more moderate comparatively with a CFscore of 0.383 which is just less than one standard deviation from the mean of Republican CFscores but much less than the 1st quartile score of 0.685. These scores suggest that while Parnell was about average in his conservative ideology within the GOP, Young was indeed a moderate candidate comparatively.

On the campaign trail, this difference in ideology became a sticking point for party leaders and voters alike. Sarah Palin would campaign heavily for Parnell and appear in multiple televised advertisements (Toeplitz, 2008), while the economically conservative (and financially influential) Club for Growth would also publicly back him. The primary election also received attention from Republican leaders outside the state. Pennsylvania Senator Pat Toomey would pen an opinion piece in the Wall Street Journal calling Parnell a "solid conservative," while accusing



Young of spending “taxpayer money so wastefully he could make a liberal Democrat blush” (Toomey, 2008). Like with Senator Toomey’s op-ed, Economic conservatism became the main point of contention between the two candidates. Young was repeatedly accused of excessive earmarking throughout the primary campaign, which contrasted with Palin’s platform of financial austerity.

Don Young went on to win his primary by an impossibly slim margin of 304 votes and would go on to win his general election as well. All in all, the Republican Party maintained its long-held congressional seat in Alaska despite a highly-publicized primary race featuring two candidates seemingly at odds about the future direction of the party. Although this case narrative fits well within the theoretical framework of this thesis, the CFscores of these candidates fails to reflect the reality of the situation. Young’s primary challenger had a CFscore approximately equal to the mean value for all Republican candidates; he, by party standards, is an average Republican. The data give Young a more moderate CFscore closer to the ideological center, and therefore the primary race exhibits the statistical characteristics of an ideologically distant primary. The disagreements, however, were more than ideological. Despite mudslinging advertisements accusing Young of spending like a Democrat, I argue that the primary challenge reflected a disagreement regarding party identity. Sarah Palin would go on to be a champion for the Tea Party movement two years later, which led to the formation of the GOP freedom caucus within Congress. This kind of disagreement, one that I believe is the primary motivation behind Young’s primary challenge, cannot be adequately captured solely by measuring ideological positioning. In future research, it may prove advantageous to measure other variables as they relate to candidate positioning within their own party.

### **3.3 Future Opportunities for Observance**

As of early 2021, the original publication date for this thesis, the Republican Party is staring down the prospect of widespread primary challenges across the ideological spectrum. With former President Trump remaining influential in the GOP after his loss to President Biden, the party appears to be at a crossroads in deciding its future direction (Hewitt, 2021). With several high-profile Republican Senators retiring, several Trump-aligned candidates have entered the primary fold early, preempting what many are predicting to be a bitter and divisive primary season (DeBonis, 2021). With many Republicans hoping to move on from the Trump era, and many Republicans hoping to double down, many open-seat races, as well as incumbents, will face challenges from the opposite side of the party. As of March 2021, 9 out of the 10 US House Republicans who voted to impeach President Trump have already received a primary challenger, which is much ahead of a typical midterm schedule (Skelley, 2021). What effects will these primary challenges have on GOP midterm success? Will this publicized party disagreement lead to negative consequences?

The 2022 midterm elections may provide a relevant case study into the effects of contested primaries between ideologically distanced candidates. With an abundance of open-seat primaries and many high-profile disagreements between party members, there will likely be several elections worthy of an in-depth case study utilizing a similar theoretical framework and hypothesis as this thesis. Although the data utilized in this thesis contains hundreds of elections that fall within the treatment group, no previous election cycle contained such a widespread and ubiquitous issue of party division quite like 2022, save for possibly the 2010 rise of the Tea Party. The media coverage of the GOP's divisional problems may prove to be an additional

variable to be measured, as news cycles will keep voters of both parties informed of the primary election progress and the state of the intra-party disagreement. It is becoming clear that Republican leaders are concerned about this very issue, as Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC) has publicly asked former President Trump to refrain from endorsing Senatorial primary candidates: “I think he should just let it play out, if I were him” (Phillips, 2021).

However, much like my own research for this thesis, including ideology in a research model offers a measurement issue centered around the differences between ideology and extremism. Those same measurement issues would remain relevant for the 2022 election, as CFscores would fail in capturing political sentiment regarding former President Trump. Although some Republican candidates have drawn distinctions in ideology leading up to the primaries by using immigration and migrant children detention on the US/Mexico border as a variable (Hughes, 2021), sentiment regarding the future direction of the party as it relates to leadership and adherence to democratic principles are more difficult to capture than ideological chances.

### **3.4 Final Thoughts**

At the end of this research, I am left with more questions regarding the differences between ideological radicals and political extremists than I am about elections of any kind. The theoretical framework that led to my hypothesis for this thesis, and ultimately fueled the research to answer this question, may have been better served by replacing the term “ideological extremists” with “political extremists.” Policy positions, and how they relate comparatively to fellow party members, can indeed form a robust and accurate depiction of the ideological landscape. Political extremism, however, is not necessarily rooted in radical policy. It is perhaps

more appropriate when attempting to study the effects of extremists, to measure variables relating to the adherence of their own native political structure. A candidate who operates with contempt for democratic norms and principles, for example, ought to be considered an extremist irrespective of their economic or social policy. Less severely, a candidate who pledges abrupt and fundamental changes to the political party they belong to may be considered one as well. I believe the effects of *these* party disagreements if they should surface during an election, should be studied further.

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