

Consolidating Votes: The Lingering Effects of Same-day Primaries

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Abstract

This paper investigates the effect of primary voter turnout on candidate characteristics and general election success. Exploiting state-level changes in the timing of Presidential primary elections, I find that that holding U.S. House primary on the same day as a Presidential primary leads to a large, positive turnout shock, and the selection of more ideologically moderate challengers to incumbents. In the subsequent general election, these moderate challengers are twice as likely to unseat incumbents, and results from instrumental variable regressions suggest a causal effect. The results suggest that low-turnout primary elections are a source of political polarization, with smaller electorates choosing ideologically extreme candidates, albeit ones with lower probabilities of general-election success.

Keywords: Primary Elections, Candidate Ideology, Turnout

Introduction

Despite widespread concern about low primary-election turnout in American Congressional elections, most studies of the role of primaries in American political polarization have found little evidence of a causal link. This paper shows that uses a unique shock to primary-election turnout to show that smaller, less-representative electorates are more likely to nominate ideologically extreme candidates. I also find that when ideologically moderate challengers are chosen, they are twice as likely to unseat incumbents in primary elections. These results have wide ranging implications in the role of primary electorates in candidate ideology and the impact of low-turnout primaries on incumbent success.

To identify the causal effect of a turnout shock to primary electorates, I use state-level changes in the consolidation of primary elections during presidential election years. To illustrate this consolidation, consider April 26, 2016, when Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, Connecticut, and Rhode Island all held Presidential primaries. When voters in Rhode Island and Delaware went to the polls, they saw candidates for the President, cast their vote, and were finished. In Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Connecticut, in addition to the presidential race, voters could also vote for all other contested elections, including for the United States Senate, House of Representatives, and other down-ballot races. In order to vote in non-Presidential primary elections, Rhode Island and Delaware voters would have to return to the polls again in September. Across the country, millions of primary voters were able to simultaneously vote the President and for all other offices. Millions of other voters needed to cast two separate ballots, usually months apart, to vote in all their state's primaries.

I find that consolidated primaries¹ lead to a 35% increase in primary election turnout for House of Representatives elections, as voters who are there to vote in

¹To my knowledge, there is no widely-accepted term for holding Presidential and down-ballot primaries simultaneously, and the term “consolidated primary” comes from Illinois statutes.

presidential primaries see a drop in their opportunity costs to vote in down-ballot elections. These turnout effects are largest when the primary election is to choose the challenger to an incumbent, and lead to significantly more moderate challengers being selected (though it does not change the likelihood of an incumbent primary loss).

This result allows me to, in turn, test whether more moderate challengers are more successful in general elections. I find that they are. Challengers selected during consolidated primaries are twice as likely to win the general election, and IV regressions support the hypothesis that this general election success is driven by their ideologically moderate positioning.

The research design presented here exploits changes in primary consolidation brought on by changes in the timing or existence of presidential primary elections. While these changes are often caused by state legislators' actions, I show that the changes are not caused by state-specific economic or political shocks, and that state legislators are not attempting to gain a political advantage. In fact, these shocks usually affect both parties equally, and there is no evidence that lawmakers anticipate any effect on Congressional elections from changes in Presidential primaries. Instead, they appear to set the timing of the Presidential primary based on how they want to fit into the national Presidential primary and caucus calendar, with little consideration of the down-ballot primaries.

Literature Review

As more Congressional seats have become safe for one party or another,² primary elections become a central mechanism through which voters can shape policy. Hirano and Snyder Jr. (2014) argue that the existing literature has typically understated the importance of primary elections, and show that even in non-competitive

²The number of swing seats decreased by 45% between 1998 and 2014(Kamarck)

districts. The importance of primary elections is also suggested by research that finds that general elections candidates do not converge in policy to that of the median voter (Lee et al.). The large body of research showing that the decisions of elected officials is affected by their personal characteristics, including race (Rocca et al., 2009; Logan, 2018), gender (Gertzog, 1995), and military experience (Lupton, 2017), reinforce the notion that candidate selection is a crucial component representation in U.S. politics.

Despite the importance of candidate selection, primary elections feature significantly lower turnout than general elections. On average, only about one-fifth of the voting age population participates in Congressional primaries. Primary electorates are also a lightly-studied group. We know very little about the composition of Congressional primary voters, and even less about voters who only participate in some primary elections, such as Presidential or Congressional primaries. Many surveys that ask about primary election participation fail to even ask in which primary (Presidential or down-ballot) the respondent voted. To my knowledge, only one nationwide survey (the 2010-2012 Cooperative Congressional Election Study panel data) asked voters separately about their Congressional and Presidential primary voting behavior, allowing me to disentangle the two groups. To develop theories of how consolidated primaries could affect electorate composition, it helps to compare the self-stated ideology of Congressional primary voters to those who only participate in Presidential primaries. Given the lack of previous research on the specific groups of voters, I have no a priori theory on how the two groups differ.

Figure 1 shows the differences in self-stated ideology between Congressional primary voters those who participated in Presidential primaries or Caucuses but did not participate in Congressional primaries. In 2012, these voters were significantly more moderate than Congressional primary voters. 68% of voters in Congressional primaries considered themselves strong partisans; only 56% of those who participated in Presidential primaries but not in Congressional primaries said the same.

Voters in the Presidential primary group were 50% more likely to classify themselves as "Middle of the Road" (13% to 19.5%). If this sample is representative of the composition of voters drawn into Congressional consolidated primaries, consolidation should lead a more ideologically moderate electorate.

An extreme primary electorate does not necessarily lead to more extreme candidates. Since primary voters must weigh the electability of a candidate against their policies, the decisions of primary voters are complex, especially since nominating ideological extremists can have severe costs (Hall, 2015). Determining whether there is a link between the ideological composition of primary voters and the characteristics of primary winners is an important empirical step.

The quasi-experimental setting I exploit creates an opportunity to test whether primary electorates influence election outcomes. Compared to other settings studied in the literature (bad weather, open or closed primaries) the turnout shock is massive, creating more opportunity for variation in the identity of the winner. Therefore, this paper contributes to the ongoing academic debate regarding what effect, if any, primary voters have on influencing the ideology of elected officials.

Brady et al. (2007) show that candidates face a trade-off between appealing to more ideologically extreme primary electorates and moderate general election voters. They find that primary electorates provide sufficient pressure on candidates to move away from the district's median voter towards more extreme positions. A primary election shock that makes the primary electorate more moderate could decrease the pressure on candidates to deviate from the general election median voter or punish candidates who deviate too far to an ideological extreme.

But other empirical results push against the narrative that primaries are a cause of polarization. Hirano and Snyder Jr. (2019) provide evidence that candidates are unaffected by primaries, and primary election winners are no more extreme than primary election losers. Most studies that have looked at marginal changes to primary election turnout have found little effect. Open and closed primaries are

likely the most heavily-studied example. Gerber and Morton (1998) show that states with open primaries feature elected officials whose voting behavior better reflects the opinion of the median voter. However, their analysis fails to control for time or state effects, and several studies using well-defined identification strategies (Rogowski and Langella, 2015; McGhee et al., 2014) fail to support the claim that open, more inclusive primaries affect the ideology of candidates. Rogowski and Langella (2015), using a differences-in-differences framework, find that changes in the open or closed nature of primary systems do not have a consistent effect on the ideological moderation of candidates. This non-result highlights the persistence of primary election outcomes. Primary elections feature few high-quality challengers and large margins of victory, so small changes in the structure of primary elections may not lead to significant changes in general-election candidates.

Due to the nature of primaries as the first in a two-stage election process, spillover effects are likely, and many studies have shown the profound ways that primaries can impact elections.³ Ansolabehere and Snyder Jr. (2007) find that the introduction of direct primary elections led to general election winners who were more independent from their party. Hall (2015) shows that ideologically extreme primary election winners drag down their party’s general election fortunes. Many papers have tested the “divisive primary hypothesis” that divisive primaries hurt political parties, to inconclusive results (Kenny and Rice, 1987; Atkinson, 1998). Fournaies and Hall (2020) find that when primary elections were pushed into a second round runoff, candidates for United States Congress performed worse in the subsequent general election. Their results suggest that increasing the visibility of a primary election (such as a large turnout shock) does not necessarily help candidates.

While the setting examined here (consolidated primaries) is unique and, to my

³Null findings are just as fascinating. Anastasopoulos (2016) shows that nominating women has no impact on general election outcomes, while Hirano et al. (2010) find that the introduction of direct primaries did not result in increased polarization in Congress.

knowledge, previously unstudied, numerous papers on local elections help shape expectations for the effect of consolidated primary elections. Zoltan and Lewis (2003) show that municipal election turnout in on-cycle elections (those held the same year as Federal elections) are 25%-36% higher than off-cycle elections. Anzia (2012) looks that the effect of a 2006 Texas law that forced some school districts to move their elections to the same year as federal elections. She found that off-cycle elections saw lower turnout and higher raises for teachers, who were members of well-organized unions. The logic behind this result is that elected officials are more responsive to a dominant interest group when turnout is low. These results would suggest that as primary electorates get larger and more moderate, candidates will either cater less to extreme party factions, or more moderate candidates will win primary elections with greater frequency.

Consolidated Primary Elections

The identification strategy for this paper relies on changes in primary election consolidation stemming from changes in the timing of Presidential, not Congressional, primary elections. While the timing of Congressional primaries is relatively stable within states across time, the timing and nature of Presidential primaries and caucuses have varied significantly over the past 50 years. Most states did not hold presidential primaries before 1972, and since 1980 all but a dozen states have seen changes in the timing, consolidation, and even existence of their presidential primaries and caucuses. The average 2008 primary was held a full 2 months before the average 1972 primary, and then moved back more than 35 days in 2012. Over this same time, down-ballot primaries have changed little, with the average primary being held between the 175th and 198th day of the year. When states change the timing of presidential primaries, this often results in a change in the consolidation of primaries even though Congressional primaries are otherwise unchanged. On

average, more than 4 states change their consolidation in each Presidential election year (compared to the prior Presidential election year).

Since states actively choose to move the date of the Presidential primary, the decisions themselves must be unrelated to any other time and state-specific shocks that affect Congressional political outcomes for my estimates to be unbiased. If states change the timing of their Presidential primary in response to a state-specific shock that also affects political outcomes, or if they change other components of Congressional primaries at the same time, my results would be biased by the effects of these forces, which are not captured in regressions. In support of my identification strategy, I find no evidence that changes in the timing of presidential primaries were correlated with state-specific economic or political shocks, or that lawmakers were motivated by (or even aware of) potential impacts of the timing of Presidential primaries on down-ballot elections outcomes. Instead, the strongest trend regarding consolidation relates to how Presidential primaries fit into pre-existing primary schedules. When Presidential primaries became common, states with early down-ballot primaries (Feb or March) didn't consolidate their primaries when they added a presidential primary, while those states that held later primaries did.

As national dynamics change, states' lawmakers may be compelled to move, introduce, or cancel their Presidential primary. Most of the variation of primary consolidation comes from states that traditionally held consolidated primaries breaking up those primaries, and then typically resuming consolidation at a later date. Most occurrences can be described in one of two ways, and illustrate how the variation in consolidation can be both state-specific and plausibly exogenous: 1) states that traditionally held primaries on the same day moving presidential primaries earlier to try to have more influence in a heavily contested presidential primary; 2) States canceling their primary because only one person qualified for the ballot.

The first instance is called "front-loading" and can be illustrated by the 2008 primaries. Both the Republican and Democratic party had hotly contested pri-

maries. During this cycle a large group of states⁴ moved their Presidential primaries toward the beginning of the year to have more influence in the nomination process. This changed the consolidation for NJ, CA, AL, and AR, because these states traditionally hold consolidated primaries. CT, FL, and GA, though they also engaged in front-loading, did not change the consolidation status of their primaries, which were already held on different days. Likewise, many other states already held early Presidential primary elections, so they did not engage in front-loading at all, and their consolidation remained unchanged. Therefore, the “treatment” seen in the change in consolidation creates several useful control groups: states that did not change their consolidation status simply because long-standing Congressional election schedules either made front-loading unnecessary and states for which front-loading failed to change the consolidated nature of their primaries. This creates a quasi-random variation, as all states experienced the same time shock (a competitive 2008 primary which increased the benefit to front-loading), but saw differences responses due to forces that had nothing to do with the political or economic climate in those states. A similar phenomenon occurred in 1988, when a number of Southern states moved their primaries to March, hoping for a stronger influence in Presidential nominations. North Carolina and Kentucky previously had consolidated primaries in May, while other states either already had March primaries (Texas, Georgia) or didn’t have their consolidation affected when they moved their primaries up (Tennessee and Louisiana).

Another common occurrence of changes in consolidation is because some states (such as MS and SD) have rules that force them to cancel primaries when other states do not. In instances where only 1 candidate qualifies for the ballot, both of these states will cancel the presidential primary. For example, both states canceled the 1984 Republican and 2000 Democratic primary when only Ronald Reagan and Al Gore qualified for the ballot, respectively. The consolidation variable in other

⁴NJ, CA, AL, AR, CT, FL, GA.

states was unaffected, either because the states never held consolidated primaries (and the cancellation of the presidential primary had no effect) or because it customarily held a primary even if only 1 candidate qualified. In both instances, the state-specific variation in consolidation is the result of an interaction of each state's persistent customs with a common time shock, instead of states experiencing different time shocks.

Of course, a hotly contested Presidential primary, such as 2008 or 1988, takes place in a different political environment than primaries in 1984 or 1996. Congressional elections in 1996 can therefore not be a proper comparison to those in 1988, since they occur in the same political environment. Therefore, I employ a difference-in-differences estimation strategy, which will allow me to control for persistent differences across states as well as common time shocks. Therefore, I am only comparing the changes in over the same set of years for states, controlling both for any state-specific fixed effects (such as state-specific political traditions) and common year shocks (such as the anticipated competitiveness of a Presidential primary).

To test the validity of my estimation strategy, I attempt to predict whether a state holds consolidated primaries using a number of political and economic variables within a diff-in-diff framework. I use the following independent variables: the unemployment rate, the percentage of seats that are held by freshmen incumbents (who are the most vulnerable to lose re-election), and whether the presidential primary features a "favorite son" or "favorite daughter".⁵ If states are more or less likely to consolidate their primaries in periods of high or low unemployment or following a change in the political environment (such as whether a single party controls the state legislature, or if a favored son or daughter is running), my estimates of the causal effect of consolidated primaries would be biased if these shocks also affected the political outcomes I measure. The results, reported in Table 1, show that none

⁵This is measured as having a candidate from that state participate in the presidential primaries.

of these variables predict changes in the consolidation of primaries, giving credence to my identification strategy. The point estimates for each of the variables fail to be statistically or practically significant.

Finally, the nature of consolidated primaries themselves make it difficult for politicians to use consolidation to gain a political edge, even if they wanted to, and I find no evidence that law-makers hold any belief that the date of the Presidential Primary election will affect any down-ballot election. When states move the dates of Presidential primaries, they do so for all political parties. Therefore, if politicians believed that they would gain by having their own primaries held with (or without) Presidential primaries, they would likely believe that this same benefit would be realized by their cross-party opponents. In contemporaneous news stories regarding states' decisions to move Presidential primary dates, I find no mention of a desire by politicians to gain an electoral advantage, or from critics arguing that moving away from a consolidated primary would hurt or help any particular group of candidates.⁶ In most instances where states have moved away from consolidated primaries (such as the 2008 front-loading) states quickly re-consolidate their primaries, given the high costs of running an additional primary. If the purpose of moving a presidential primary was to change Congressional election outcomes, surely those same politicians would keep those rules in place if they believe that they had an effect. Instead, politicians seem focused on their state's role in the Presidential primary system. In the Appendix, I give an overview of reporting and statements regarding consolidated elections, providing evidence that lawmakers express no beliefs about political advantage from consolidated primaries.

Finally, when lawmakers change the consolidation of primaries, they do not change the date of Congressional primaries. I regressed a dummy equal to 1 of the consolidation changes on a dummy equal to 1 of the month of down-ballot primaries changed, and found that changes in one could not predict changes in the

⁶Talks with current campaign staff confirms that there is no belief that consolidated primaries have any particular effect on Congressional general election outcomes.

other. Nonetheless, I include the month of the Congressional primary election as a control in my regressions.

Data

House of Representatives primary election data is from Pettigrew et al. (2016), supplemented using data from the Federal Election Commission (FEC) for 2012 and 2016. General election data comes from CQ Press’s Voting and Elections Collection. The consolidation variable was constructed using a variety of sources, including thegreenpapers.com, the FEC, and Secretaries of State websites. Candidate policy scores are from Bonica (2014); candidate spending is from the FEC; district demographics are from Adler (2018). Voter survey data is from the American National Election Study (ANES) merged 1952-2012 data set and 2016 time series survey from the ANES.

Hypotheses and Results

I estimate the effect of primary election timing on primary election outcomes using the following difference-in-difference model:

$$Y_{dst} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Consolidated}_{dst} + \iota_{tp} + \gamma_s + \epsilon_{dst} \quad (1)$$

where Y is the outcome variable in a House of Representatives primary election in year t , state s , for party p . $\text{Consolidated}_{dst}$ is a binary variable equal to 1 if a primary was held the same day as a presidential primary, and 0 otherwise.⁷ γ_s

⁷Ansolabehere et. al. (2010) briefly looked at this same question, but concluded that the timing of presidential elections only affected turnout in Congressional elections if the Presidential primary was itself contested. The difference between the results presented here and theirs is the sample. They used data from 1980-2004. If I re-run my regressions from just this period, I find a smaller effect.

is a full set of state dummy variables and ι_{tp} is a full set of year dummy variables interacted with political party. State dummy variables capture any time-invariant differences between states, caused by history, political customs, or long-standing party strength, are fully controlled for by the state dummy variables. Likewise, all common time shocks, such as those caused by the turnout effect of heavily contested Presidential primaries, are captured by the year fixed effects. By interacting them with a party dummy, I am allowing year shocks to vary between parties.

The sample is all United States House of Representatives primary elections for the Republican or Democratic party during a Presidential election year from 1976 to 2016,⁸ including cases where the Presidential primary was uncontested, for which the number of votes cast is recorded. For some uncontested elections (especially those before 1996) the total number of votes is not available. The results are similar if I exclude all uncontested elections. I only analyze years 1976 onward because many states had no presidential primaries or caucuses before 1976. If I included previous years, variation in the *Consolidated* variable would be coming from the establishment of presidential primaries, and not variation in election timing. If the creation of Presidential primaries or caucuses affected other outcomes, such as rates of voter registration, my results could be driven by factors other than the consolidation of primaries.

Consolidated primaries dramatically decrease the marginal cost of voting in the Congressional election for Presidential primary voters. Since many of the opportunity costs of voting (such as registration and locating and travelling to a polling station) have already been paid by voters who intend to vote in Presidential primaries, I expect consolidated primaries to increase the number of voters in U.S. House of Representative elections:

Hypothesis 1: Consolidated primary elections will lead to an increase in the

⁸Since the primary election calendar was altered dramatically due to COVID-19 towards a heavily mail-in-ballot system, 2020 primary elections could not be included in my sample.

number of voters in U.S. House of Representatives primary elections.

These effects will likely be largest in elections that have lower levels of turnout, such as primaries preceding incumbent\challenger general elections. Primary elections for open seats have higher levels of turnout in my sample, leaving less opportunity for consolidated primaries to have a large marginal effect.

As seen in the sample of 2012 primary election voters, voters who are most likely to have their turnout affected by consolidated primaries (voters who participated *only* in presidential primaries) identify themselves as more ideologically moderate. If this trend holds for a large enough portion of my sample, and to the extent that the median voters theorem can explain the behavior of primary electorates, consolidated primaries could affect the ideology of primary election winners.

Hypothesis 2a: The influx of moderate voters in consolidated primaries will cause an ideological shift in primary election winners towards ideologically moderate positions. **Hypothesis 2b:** Consolidated primaries will not change the ideology of primary winners, either because the influx of moderate voters is not large enough to affect election outcomes or because moderate voters are not significantly more likely to vote for ideological moderates than the rest of the primary electorate.

As with turnout, this effect is likely to vary depending on context. In noncompetitive primary elections, turnout shocks are expected to lead to smaller changes in the characteristics of election winners. Consider primaries with incumbents, where incumbents rarely lose; incumbents in my sample won by an average of 77.1%. Turnout shocks will less likely affect the identity of the winner when an incumbent is running, or in any situation where the election is less likely to be competitive.

The results of the tests of Hypotheses 1 & 2 are presented in Tables 2 and 3. Column 1 of Table 2 shows the diff-in-diff estimate for the effect of consolidated

primaries on turnout for the full sample; columns 2-4 break up the sample into races with incumbents, races for general-election challengers to incumbents, and open-seat elections. The coefficient of 0.300 log points means that primaries held on the same day as a Presidential primary saw turnouts 35% higher than those held on other days. These results are consistent with other literature (Gomez et al., 2007; Hihgton and Wolfinger, 2007; Brady and McNulty, 2011) that have found a negative relationship between the opportunity cost of voting and turnout. Columns 2 and 3 show that the effect is similar in incumbent and challenger race, with increases of 42% and 36%, respectively. Open races see no such boost, as seen in Column 4. There are several reasons why open races could be less affected by consolidated primaries. They have high baseline turnout, with 70% more voters than challenger races. Open races may may attract voters who are likely to vote in primaries regardless of whether or not they are consolidated, and are therefore less likely to be affected by the source of variation used in this paper. These results confirm hypothesis 1 while also revealing significant variation in causal effect based on election type.

Table 3 shows the effect of consolidation on primary election winner characteristics. Since the turnout shock in realized exclusively in challenger or incumbent primaries, I focus my subsequent analysis on Challenger/Incumbent races. My outcome variables are measures of candidate quality or ideology. To measure challenger quality, I use two measures that are commonly used in the literature: candidate spending and whether or not a candidate previously held a political office. To measure the ideology of candidates, I rely on the DW-Dime score developed by Bonica (2014), which uses campaign contributions to estimate the policy positions of candidates. DW-Dime scores can be interpreted similarly to DW-Nominate scores, politicians are scored along a $[-1,1]$ range, scores closer to 0 indicating more ideological moderation. For races involving incumbents, I test whether incumbents are more or less likely to win a consolidated primary. If consolidation does not

affect the probability of an incumbent win, it of course will not change candidate characteristics.

Panel A shows regression results for the sample of challengers, and Panel B show the results for incumbents. The first three columns of Table 3 show how consolidated primaries change challenger characteristics. Columns 1 & 2 show that consolidated elections do not result in winners who are either are better able to spend money or are more likely to have held prior office. Estimates using “previous office” as the outcome variable are also precisely estimated; I can reject the hypothesis that consolidated primaries lead to even a moderate increase (6.5%) in the probability that a challenger has held prior office. By standard measures of candidate quality, consolidated elections do not lead to “better” challengers.

However, winners of consolidated primaries for general-election challengers are more ideologically moderate, as seen by the significant decrease in the absolute value of the DW-Dime score. Consolidated primaries decrease the absolute value of DW-Dime scores of challengers by 0.128, a result that is statistically significant at the 5% level and practically significant in size. Not only can I reject the hypothesis that consolidated primaries have no effect, but the size of the estimated effect is practically significant. A 0.128 change in the absolute value of DW-Dime scores represents about 27% of 1 within-party standard deviation. The influx of moderate voters in consolidated primaries is leading to the nomination of more ideologically moderate challengers.⁹

These results also support the findings seen on Figure 1, which only includes data for 2012. Consolidated primaries do appear to cause an influx of voters who are more moderate than the average House primary electorate. A body of empirical

⁹One concern of using DW-Dime to measure candidate ideology is that consolidated primaries could change the behavior of donors, or lead candidates to seek out different donors. In this case, the causal effect would not be because different kinds of candidates are being selected, but because of changes in who was donating to candidates. However, the correlation between DW-Dime scores and DW-Nominate scores of successful challengers is extremely high (0.9948). Therefore, DW-Dime scores are likely accurate reflections of the preferred policy positions of the candidates themselves, and not the result of changing donation patterns.

literature also supports the claim that low primary turnout is associated with less moderate voters. Brady et al. (2007) show that Congressional primary voters are more ideologically extreme than general election voters. Comparisons of voters in midterm elections to those in Presidential election years suggest that midterm voters are more ideologically extreme (Halberstam and Montagnes, 2015).

Panel B shows that consolidated primaries lead to no discernible change in either the identity or behavior of primary-election winners when an incumbent is running. Column 1 shows that consolidated primaries do not change the identity of primary election winners for the simple reason that incumbents are no more or less likely to win. The only question that remains is whether consolidated primaries can affect the ideological positioning of incumbents or their fundraising behavior. Since consolidated primaries lead to more moderate challengers, incumbents may, to the extent that they are able, try to position themselves as more ideologically moderate. However, the regression results fail to support such a hypothesis. In fact, my estimates are both close to 0 and precisely estimated. Using the estimates from Column 3, I can reject the hypothesis that consolidated primaries decrease the absolute value of incumbents' DW-Dime scores by a measure as small as 0.025 points, which is less than point estimates for the effect on challengers.

An alternative, and not at all mutually exclusive, way of viewing these results is that consolidated primaries lead to challengers who are more ideologically similar to the incumbents they are facing. Since in a two-party system challengers and incumbents are almost always on opposite sides of the political spectrum, they achieve this through more moderate views.

The results shown in Table 3 inform my general election hypothesis. Since both challengers and incumbents experience similar turnout boosts in consolidated primaries, there is no *ex ante* reason to expect that simple turnout spillovers (due to voter habituation or any other mechanism) will provide a greater boost to challengers or incumbents. However, since consolidated primaries result in ideologically

moderate challengers, it provides a setting where we see quasi-random variation in challenger ideology that holds incumbent ideology fixed. This allows me to test whether moderate challengers perform better than relatively extreme nominees.

If general election voters are more ideologically moderate than primary election voters, the Median Voter Theorem would predict that, all else equal, more moderate candidates will experience more success in general elections than more ideologically extreme candidates. This prediction is based on the plausible assumption that when a challenger to an incumbent moves towards the ideological middle, they are moving closer to a district's median voter. Since each race in my sample includes incumbents on the opposite side of the aisle, this simplifies to an assumption that a district with a Republican (Democratic) representative has a median voter that is not on the extreme ideological left (right).

Since consolidated primaries are an instance of plausibly exogenous variation in the ideology of a challenger, since the state-level variation in Presidential primary election timing has uncorrelated with any state-specific ideology shocks, and my regression results will provide an unbiased estimate of the effect of challenger ideology on general-election outcomes.

Hypothesis 3: Challengers selected in consolidated primaries will experience higher vote shares and be more likely to win in general elections than challengers selected in non-consolidated primaries.

To estimate the spillover effect of the primary election turnout shock to general elections, I use a similar difference-in-differences framework:

$$Y_{dt} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Consolidated}_{dt} + \alpha X_{dt} + \iota_t + \gamma_s + \epsilon_{dt} \quad (2)$$

Where Y_{dt} is the general election outcome variable in district d in year t . Consolidated_{dt}

is equal to 1 if the state held consolidated primary elections, and 0 otherwise.¹⁰ X_{dt} is a set of district characteristics: population, black population, median income, and the month of the primary election.

The regression results for the test of Hypotheses 3 are shown in Table 4. As seen in column 1, consolidated primaries lead to an average increase in the number of general elections votes by 0.104 log points, or about 11%. This suggests that turnout shocks in primary elections have some spillover into the general election. However, given that the primary turnout shock also changed the characteristics of the challenger, I cannot determine the mechanism of causal effect.

The final three columns measure challenger success in different ways, and all suggest that challengers selected in consolidated primaries are significantly more successful, as these races feature lower incumbent vote shares, smaller margins of victory, and an increased likelihood of a challenger win. Each of these estimates suggests both a statistically and practically significant. The effect on the margin of victory, 6.89 percentage points, represents a 17.3% decrease from a mean of 39.88. and a 22.2% decrease if I restrict the sample to contested elections (those where the margin is less than 100%). Most importantly, the odds of a challenger win more than doubles, from an admittedly low starting point (3.87%). Taken together, my results show that consolidated primaries boost turnout in both primary and general elections, and lead to the election of more moderate and successful challengers.

To test a causal effect between challenger ideology and success directly, I turn to an instrumental variable framework, where I use consolidation in a first stage regression to obtain exogenous variation in challenger ideology.¹¹

Given the identifying assumptions of instrumental variable regressions, claims of causal effect must clear another hurdle compared to the difference-in-difference

¹⁰In very few instances, one party held a consolidated primary and the other party did not. In these instances, the *Consolidated* variable is equal to 1 if the challenger's party had a consolidated primary.

¹¹The empirical results up to this point also help motivate the IV framework, as regressions reported in Table 3 are the first stage of the 2-stage OLS framework, while the those in Table 4 are the reduced-form regressions.

regressions. In order for estimates from my IV regression to be unbiased, consolidated elections can only affect challenger success in general elections *through* its effect on their ideological moderation. The null findings in Table 3 show that consolidated primaries do not affect other observable characteristics of challengers, which supports the identifying assumption of the IV regression.

Table 5 shows the IV regression results under several specifications. The Kleibergen-Paap rk Wald statistic is also reported, as the strength of my consolidation instrument shrinks as I add more fixed effects. Given that the point estimates instrument strength are greatly affected by the chosen specification, I present the results from several specifications.

Though the precision and value of my point estimates changes depending on the chosen specification, these results support the hypothesis that candidate ideology is a driving force behind challengers elected in consolidated primaries succeeding in general elections. Though the Kleibergen-Paap Wald statistic decreases as more fixed effects are added, the value for all regressions is above the rule of thumb value of 10 suggested by Staiger and Stock (1997). I find that a 1-unit decrease in the absolute value of the DW-Dime score of a challenger increases the probability of winning by between 10.5 to 40.4 percentage points. A 1 standard deviation decrease in the extremeness of a challenger increases the probability of challenger victory by between 4.25 and 16.36 percentage points. Compared to a mean value of 4.98% this represents a doubling and quadrupling, respectively. However, when both state and year fixed effects are included, weak-instrument concerns arise.

These findings compliment those of Hall (2015) and are different in a very important way. While Hall shows that a large swing in the ideology of a candidate has a lasting negative effect on general-election outcomes, the ideological shifts I observe are a fraction of the size of shift used in that paper¹² showing that even

¹²There are differences in the sample, but Hall states that the shift in DW-Nominate scores from nominating an extremist is “it is approximately two to three times as large as the average distance between representatives and their own party’s median.” The shift stemming from consolidated primaries is about one-fourth of the within-party standard deviation.

marginal shifts in candidate ideology has significant effects on their general election outcome.

Conclusion

Challengers to incumbents will probably lose their elections. They face uphill battles against candidates who are well-funded, well-known, and (usually) well-liked within their own district. This paper shows how a seemingly trivial attribute of a challenger's political environment, whether their primary was consolidated with a presidential primary, has lingering effects on the general election success of challengers. When down-ballot primaries are held at the same time as Presidential primaries, challengers in House of Representative races become twice as likely to unseat an incumbent.

The reasons for this increase in success advance our understanding of how primary electorates, and candidate ideology, translate to general-election outcomes. Consolidated primaries flood House primaries with voters who are likely ideologically moderate relative to other primary voters, which in turn results in significantly more moderate challengers being selected. General elections in the United States increasingly feature two politically polarized candidates (the absolute value of DW-Dime scores for challengers increased by 12% from 1980 to 2012; for incumbents it increased by 33%), and research has shown that general election voters fail to push candidates towards the political center. Therefore, primary elections are emerging as the main mechanism through which voters can influence the moderation of elected officials without voting for someone on the opposite end of the political spectrum than their own. This paper suggests that smaller, less-representative primary electorates are one of the causes of general-election voters being given two ideologically extreme choices and that the candidates offered to general election voters are not always the ones most preferred by the broader electorate.

Ironically, the low probability of challenger success likely helped the effect of consolidated primaries to go unnoticed for so long. Because challengers so rarely win elections, a doubling of challenger wins may only increase their chances of winning by 5%. Otherwise, it's infeasible to imagine that a characteristic of Congressional elections could have such a large effect on outcomes without being noticed before.

Within the context of the current political environment, these results show one way in which political parties could, if they chose to, wrest power back from the political fringes. Much had been written on the weakening of American political parties following the insurgency of the Tea Party and left-wing candidates, with some scholars have suggested that the fear of being "primaried" has driven candidates out of ideological middle. If parties of governing bodies believe that this is a trend they want to push against, increasing primary election turnout is one way of doing just that.

These results also give us a framework with which we could understand the potential changes in voting outcomes stemming from expanded voting-by-mail (VBM) in primary elections seen in 2020 following COVID-19 related precautions. Initial results indicate that VBM increased turnout overall, but did not cause increases in turnout that favored either party (Thompson et al., 2020). My results suggest that expanded VBM could lead to ideological shifts *within* parties, especially if the marginal voter who is drawn into primaries via VBM is more representative of the general election electorate. If expanded VBM becomes permanent, future research should investigate what, if any, moderating role it has on nominating members of Congress.

Appendix

Survey Data Results

The American National Election Study is the only nationwide survey with data available for the entirety of my sample, so I rely on this for my outcome variables. I find that the survey data confirms the election outcome data in that respondents increase reporting having voted for challengers following a consolidated primary, and also that voter opinions of challengers improve. I also find that only same-party respondents report higher favorable ratings on more moderate challengers.

Table 6 presents the results when survey data are used for the dependent variables in the difference-in-difference regressions described in equation 3. Column 1 uses a binary variable equal to 1 if a respondent reported voting for an election challenger, and 0 otherwise (including those who did not vote) I find that consolidated primaries lead to more respondents voting for general election challengers, consistent with the shift in vote shares shown in Table 4. Columns 2 and 3 use a “thermometer” rating of challengers and incumbents, respectively, where respondents are asked to rate candidates on a 0-100 scale.¹³ I find that consolidated elections increase respondents opinion of the challenger, while the incumbent receives no such boost. In fact, the boost that challengers experience closes the (52.83 to 56.47) that exists between challengers and incumbents, suggesting that consolidated primaries reduce the incumbent/challenger gap in respondent favorability.

Interestingly, the increase in respondent opinions of the challenger are clustered among members of the respondents’ political party. While same-party members see a large increase, non-party respondents show only a modest, statistically insignificant increase.

¹³I only included observations in which the respondents ranked both the challenger and the incumbent.

Reporting on Consolidated primaries

I claim that state lawmakers are not attempting to achieve any down-ballot political gains by changing the consolidation of primaries, or even aware that any political gains for non-Presidential races even exist. This is based on news stories covering the changes in Presidential primary elections and in academic research on the topic.

In 2008, extensive news coverage was paid to states' decision to move their primary elections earlier in the calendar year. Many states then moved their primaries back in 2012. In subsequent reporting, the focus was exclusively set on either the role a state played in the Presidential nominating process, or the cost of elections. One New Jersey Republican said that the 2008 front-loading didn't affect Republicans very much because John McCain already had the nomination secured by the time New Jersey voted. My findings suggest that the 7 Republican New Jersey challengers were in fact less likely to win because of front-loading. If Republican party members were aware of this, they would have certainly complained, as would any other group who believed themselves harmed. I have come across zero such complaints.

The 1988 primaries received extensive coverage, as numerous southern states moved their primaries early, to Super Tuesday. Politicians who supported the move repeatedly mentioned the desire for Democratic nominees to hew closer to the moderate views of Southern voters.

More tellingly, academic discussions of the debate around front-loading fail to mention any down-ballot effects. In the papers I reviewed, I found no mentions of theoretical or observed down-ballot effects of changes in the date of Presidential primaries. Discussions of the effect of Presidential primary elections are almost entirely based around the effect that such timing has on the Presidential nomination process. If state legislatures were systematically changing the timing of Presidential primaries to realize some benefit in Congressional elections, it is implausible that such motivation would have gone entirely unmentioned in both reporting and

academic discussions of front-loading.

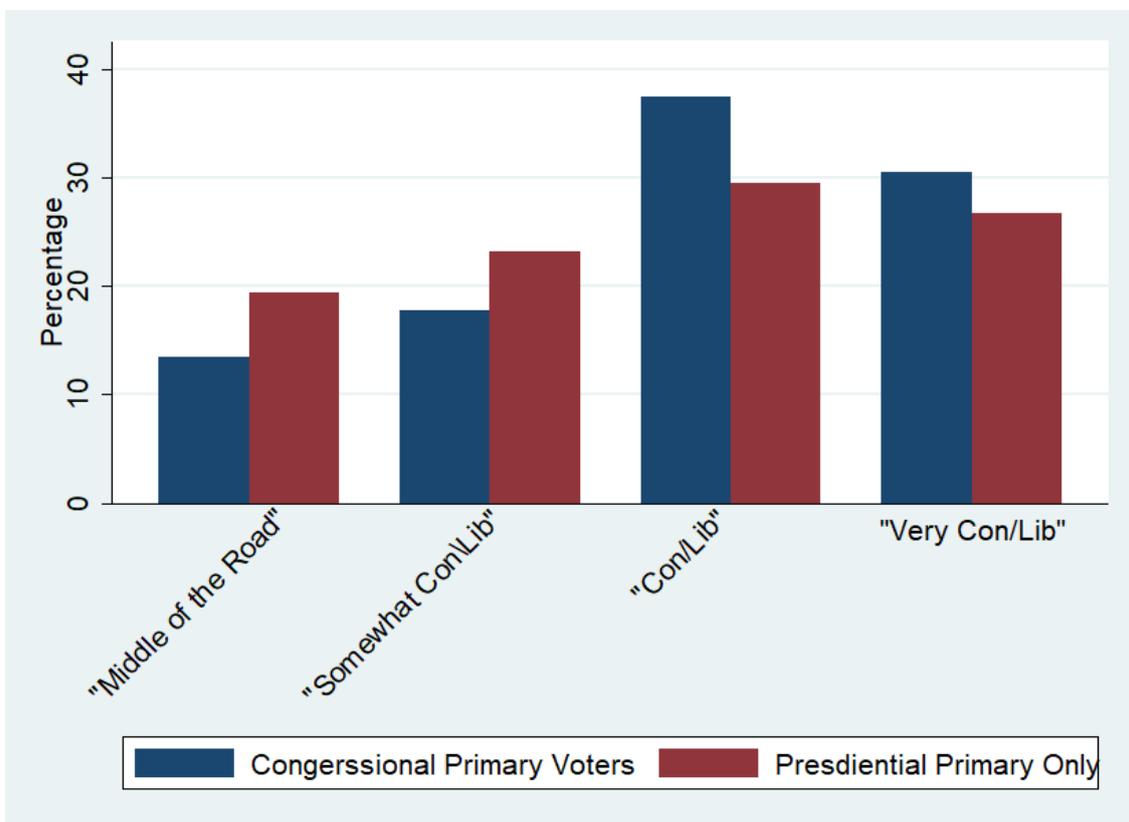
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Figure 1: Ideologies of Primary Electorates



Notes: The graph shows the distribution of voters by self-professed political ideology, using survey response data from 2012 American National Election Study. The blue bar shows the distribution for all voters in primary elections for the U.S. House of Representatives. The red bar is for all voters who participated in Presidential primaries, but did not vote in House primary elections.

Table 1: Determinants of Primary Election Timing

VARIABLES	(1)	(2)	(3)
Unemployment Rate	-0.000690 (0.00928)	-	-
% Incumbents	-	-0.00530 (0.0483)	-
Favorite Son	-	-	-0.0114 (0.0270)
Observations	550	550	550
R-squared	0.799	0.799	0.800

Notes: Coefficients are from a difference-in-difference regression, using a full set of state dummy variables and year dummies. The outcome variable is a binary variable equal to 1 if a state held a consolidated primary election for either party. The independent variables are, for each column, (1) The state's average unemployment rate over each year; (2) The percentage of U.S. House seat elections featuring an incumbent, and (3) Whether the Presidential primary featured a candidate from that state. Robust standard errors, clustered at the state/year level, in parentheses. *** $p < 0.001$. ** $p < 0.05$. * $p < 0.1$.

Table 2: Primary Election Turnout

Dependent Variable: Log of Primary Election Total Votes				
VARIABLES	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Consolidated(=1)	0.300*** (0.0898)	0.350*** (0.0962)	0.312*** (0.0891)	0.0410 (0.130)
Observations	5,316	2,308	2,279	729
R-squared	0.255	0.422	0.333	0.314
Sample	ALL	INC.	CHALL.	OPEN

Notes: Coefficients are from a difference-in-difference regression, using a full set of state dummy variables and year dummies (which are interacted with a party dummy variable). I also include a linear month variable to control for the month in which the election occurred. The sample is all primaries for the Democrat or Republican party from Presidential election years from 1976-2016. Louisiana is dropped, given the lack of party primaries in that state. Any uncontested election where the number of voters is not reported are dropped. Robust standard errors, clustered at the state/year level, in parentheses. *** $p < 0.001$. ** $p < 0.05$. * $p < 0.1$.

Table 3: Candidate Characteristics

Panel A: Challengers			
Dep. Variable	(1) Previous Office	(2) Log (Spending)	(3) DW-Dime Victory
Consolidated(=1)	-0.124 (0.353)	-0.00443 (0.0324)	-0.128** (0.0362)
Observations	2,781	3,757	2,437
R-squared	0.094	0.069	0.25
Sample	1980-2016	1976-2008	1980-2012

Notes: Coefficients are from a difference-in-difference regression, using a full set of state dummy variables and year dummies. I also include a linear month variable to control for the month in which the election occurred. Panel A shows the results for Challengers; Panel B show results for incumbents. The sample is all general election U.S. House of Representative candidates for the Democrat or Republican party from Presidential election years from 1976-2016. Louisiana is dropped, given the lack of party primaries in that state. Any uncontested election where the number of voters is not reported are dropped. Robust standard errors, clustered at the state/year level, in parentheses. *** p<0.001. ** p<0.05. * p<0.1.

Table 4: Effect of Primary Election Timing

VARIABLES	(1) Log(Votes)	(2) Incumbent Vote Share	(3) Margin	(4) Challenger Win (=1)
Consolidated (=1)	0.104*** (0.0337)	-3.593*** (1.271)	-6.890*** (2.337)	0.0437*** (0.0134)
Primary Month	-0.001 (0.00921)	0.540* (0.328)	0.998 (0.616)	0.00107 (0.00505)
Mean (D.V.)	12.29	69.93	39.88	0.0387
Observations	3,954	3,954	3,954	3,954
R-squared	0.49	0.122	0.119	0.022

Notes: Coefficients are from a difference-in-difference regression, using a full set of state dummy variables and year dummies. The sample is all general election U.S. House of Representative candidates for the Democrat or Republican party from Presidential election years from 1976-2016. The consolidated variable is equal to 1 if the challenger was elected in a contested primary, and 0 otherwise. Louisiana is dropped, given the lack of party primaries in that state. Any uncontested election where the number of voters is not reported are dropped. Robust standard errors, clustered at the state/year level, in parentheses. *** p<0.001. ** p<0.05. * p<0.1.

Table 5: Instrumental Variable Regressions
 Dependent Variable: Challenger Win (=1)

VARIABLES	(1)	(2)	(3)
Extreme	-0.105 (0.0639)	-0.178** (0.0807)	-0.404* (0.214)
KP Wald Stat	30.79	15.47	11.13
State F.E.	N	Y	Y
Year F.E.	N	N	Y
Mean (D.V.)	0.0498	0.0498	0.0498
Observations	2,370	2,370	2,370

Notes: Coefficients are from an instrumental variable regression, where a dummy variable for consolidated primaries is used as an instrument for the political moderation of a challenger, as measured by the absolute value of the DW-Dime score. The sample is all general election U.S. House of Representative candidates for the Democrat or Republican party from Presidential election years from 1980-2016, for elections in which the DW-Dime score of a challenger could be measured. The consolidated variable is equal to 1 if the challenger was elected in a contested primary, and 0 otherwise. Louisiana is dropped, given the lack of party primaries in that state. Robust standard errors, clustered at the state/year level, in parentheses. *** $p < 0.001$. ** $p < 0.05$. * $p < 0.05$.

Table 6: ANES Survey Data

Dependent Variable	Vote Chall (1)	Chal Therm (2)	Inc Therm (3)	Contact (4)	Contact (5)
Consolidated(=1)	0.0357*** (0.0123)	4.263** (2.04)	0.0476 (1.906)	0.107** (0.0474)	0.0570 (0.0627)
Observations	25,311	9,218	9,218	6,184	8,989
Mean	0.135	52.83	56.47	0.259	0.279
R-squared	0.024	0.142	0.069	0.078	0.075

Robust standard errors, clustered at the state/year level, in parentheses
 *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$