



How Challenges in Primaries Shift the Policy Agendas of Political Parties

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American political parties are notoriously polarized in the current period and partisan conflict has furthered governmental gridlock and dysfunction. Although measuring overall extremism is difficult, both parties have certainly moved further apart on a number of issues. What explains this? On important issues ranging from global warming and immigration to abortion and the role of government in the economy, why would parties cater to the “extreme” groups in their orbits, rather than reach out to the more moderate groups and voters in center?

My research on these questions finds that legislators are highly responsive to interest groups and movement activists that threaten their chances of reelection during party nomination processes. For example, when elected officials believe that they may face challenges from within their own party – challenges mounted in primary elections or caucuses – they are likely to adjust their behavior to secure their seats. If legislators fail to shift their policy stances to address the preferences of advocates or interest groups that do (or could) support challengers, they risk losing the primary or caucus. In aggregate, as such adjustments play out again and again, we see shifts in the agendas and policy positions of both parties.

Uncertainty, Control, and Primaries

In general, legislators want to remain in office, and this desire informs their policy choices and activities. To remain in office, legislators must win the party's nomination in the primary and then prevail in the general election. While competitive primaries often push legislators away from the political center and towards the extremes, general election competition is thought to be a countervailing force that draws candidates back towards the center. However, in practice, general election exert only a weak pull back to the center, because partisan voting and national factors such as economic conditions and presidential approval increasingly influence general election outcomes. In primaries, by contrast, partisanship is irrelevant and national trends matter very little. Furthermore, primary voters represent narrow slices of the public and are much more likely to be attentive and hold legislators accountable for their policymaking. Given relatively low turnouts in primaries, the interest groups and movement activists who pay close attention to the policymaking process often have considerable influence on outcomes. Accordingly, when it comes to taking policy stances, legislators pay far closer attention to potential primary threats than to competition from the other party. Policy “missteps” during or in the lead up to the primary are more important to legislators’ reelection prospects than general election forces, which are largely beyond their control.

Complicating this picture is the fact that party leaders may, at times, pull legislators towards the center, toward legislative compromises. Indeed, legislators operate in an environment of tremendous uncertainty, and it is not immediately obvious how they should behave when demands from party leaders diverge with the preferences of their primary constituents. Pleasing party leadership brings rewards that can benefit an incumbent in the primaries. Moreover, while primary voters are disproportionately attentive to policymaking, it is often unclear how much they will respond to particular votes or issue positions. Despite all these considerations, primary challenges featuring a specific high-profile issue can still counteract forces urging legislators toward the center.

Federated Primary Threats and Party Position Change

This analysis of individual legislators has important implications for trends in party agendas. Social movements and interest groups that launch attacks on incumbents across local, state, and national levels can have significant influence on party positions. Prominent examples of the use of nomination processes to pull a

party in a particular direction include the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the anti-busing and anti-war movements of the late 1970s, the anti-tax and pro-life movements from the 1970s to the present, and the Tea Party movement since 2009.

In each instance, attacks leveled within parties at incumbent legislators at all levels eventually led that party to move towards the positions of movement activists and primary challengers they supported. To be sure, only a few such challengers actually defeated incumbents. Nevertheless, the threat of losing a primary motivated legislators to appease – and sometimes even embrace – the demands of activists and primary challengers. Parties elevated movement issues to the top of their agendas and leaned toward movement positions even without widespread official turnover.

Implications for Political and Policy Change

This research shows that interest groups and activists can force a party to shift policy stands if they can coordinate amongst themselves to launch challenges on incumbents at multiple levels of government. For example, the Tea Party and Trump supporters pulled the Republican Party in a nativist direction, despite the fact that, following Mitt Romney's failed campaign in 2012, Republican Party's leaders hoped to use moderate immigration stances to attract Hispanic voters, an effort also supported by top presidential contenders and influential interest groups like Chamber of Commerce and the Koch network. But grassroots Republicans had other ideas. Rather than going along with national elites, activists pushed the party into hardline stands.

Another implication is that citizens opposed to polarized positions may be more successful with the party leaning away from their views. For example, Americans who thought the country was moving too fast on civil rights during the 1970s achieved some impact by supporting centrist challengers in the Democratic Party. Of course, launching pressures from the center requires conditions often beyond the immediate control of activists. But favorable openings do sometimes arise – as exemplified by the horrific 2018 school shooting in Parkland, Florida, which created openings for a group of eloquent and sympathetic gun rights activists who seem to have pulled some Republican officeholders and candidates toward more moderate policy positions.

Most basically, my research suggests that policy focused challengers do not need to defeat incumbents to have a significant impact. They can achieve success by simply altering the electoral calculations of legislators who worry about primary challenges – or who worry about facing newly motivated attentive voters in primaries or general elections. What is more, interest groups and social movements can have clout beyond sheer numbers when they can shift the balance of uncertainties legislators face about their own continuance in office.

Read more in Richard Barton, "The Party Reacts: How Primaries Exacerbate Polarization" working paper presented at the Midwestern Political Science Association Meeting, April, 2018.