

# Candidate Positions, Responsiveness, and Returns to Extremism

Melissa Meisels, Yale University

The concept of candidate positioning is central to the study of US elections, representation, and political behavior. Existing work, however, overwhelmingly relies on indirect measures, which may not reflect candidates' stated positions. I analyze foundational relationships between candidate positions and district partisanship, primary electoral success, and primary fundraising performance with existing approaches versus text-scaling estimates based on an original collection of campaign platforms from House primary candidates' websites in 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022, and 2024. Directly measuring candidates' positions using campaign platforms leads to conclusions vastly different than those reached with existing measures. While platform-based measures suggest candidates are responsive to their districts, existing measures do not. Within district, however, existing measures show financial and electoral penalties to extremism in primaries, but platform-based measures show no such penalty. These findings have wide-ranging implications for a number of ongoing scholarly debates that involve congressional candidates' positions.

Candidate positioning is a ubiquitous concept in both theories of elections and ongoing empirical debates in electoral and representation studies.<sup>1</sup> Announced policy platforms are the cornerstone of Downsian formal models of electoral behavior and competition (Banks 1990; Baron 1994; Cameron and Enelow 1992; Downs 1957) and a focus of scholarly debates regarding extremist success, the role of nationalization versus district preferences, and other key topics within the field of legislative elections (Ansola-behere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Bonica and Cox 2018; Hall 2015; Hall and Snyder 2015; Hopkins 2018; Kujala 2020; Utych 2020; Woon 2018).

In the American politics context, empirical investigations involving both congressional incumbents and non-incumbents tend to use one of two sets of approaches when measuring candidates' positions along a left–right, unidimensional continuum. The first leverages information sourced

directly from candidates, such as surveys soliciting their stances on various issue and policy matters (e.g., Ansola-behere et al. 2001; Rogowski 2014) or simply asking them to place themselves on a left–right continuum (Burden 2004).<sup>2</sup> The second measurement approach scales candidates' positions using data on fundraising networks, relying on the assumption that donors contribute to those similar to themselves (e.g., Bonica 2013, 2014; Hall 2015; Hall and Snyder 2015).

On the one hand, information from candidates' own campaigns allows for a relatively unmediated and direct measure of their positioning. However, in recent decades, survey response rates have dropped too low to reliably estimate the majority of congressional candidates' positions.<sup>3</sup> As such, scholars have increasingly relied upon campaign finance (CF) scores (Bonica 2014, 2024)—which use readily available campaign contribution data—to capture candidates' positions in their work

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Melissa Meisels (mellissa.meisels@yale.edu) is an assistant professor of political science at Yale University, New Haven, CT 06511.

Replication files are available in the *JOP* Dataverse (<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/jop>). The empirical analysis has been successfully replicated by the *JOP* replication analyst. An online appendix with supplementary material is available at <https://doi.org/10.1086/738505>.

1. While terms like “ideology” or “ideal point” are used frequently in studies involving collections of political views, this article is interested solely in how candidates present themselves during elections and is agnostic about the “truthfulness” of these self-presentations. For this reason, I instead refer to positioning and positions, although I use descriptors, such as “liberal,” “conservative,” and “extreme,” that are commonly associated with ideology.

2. A related but less direct approach is surveying experts about candidate locations (e.g., Kujala 2020; Stone and Simas 2010).

3. Only one-quarter of nominees responded to Project Vote Smart's surveys by 2010 (Adams et al. 2017).

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(e.g., Bonica and Cox 2018; Carson and Williamson 2018; Kujala 2020). CF scores offer the invaluable benefit of wide coverage of the universe of congressional candidates, including even those who lost their primary election. Yet, contribution-based measures rely on the observed behavior of campaign donors, not candidates, and recent work casts doubt on the plausibility of such models' assumptions about donor behavior (Meisels, Clinton, and Huber 2024). Would we reach different conclusions about representation quality and incentives for extremism in the current era if measures were tied more directly to candidates' positions?

I reexamine evidence central to ongoing debates involving candidate positioning by comparing results reached using a measure based on candidates' publicly stated positions to results reached with existing measures. Combining a text-scaling approach with an original dataset of issue platforms from all available campaign websites, I estimate unidimensional positions of House primary candidates in 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022, and 2024. I then address three important and related questions in American politics for which theoretical expectations and empirical evidence are mixed. In each case, my findings suggest that the answers are critically dependent on how candidates' positions are measured.

First, are candidates still responsive to their districts? Although the constituency plays a central role in classic studies of elections and representation (e.g., Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002; Downs 1957; Miller and Stokes 1963), the nationalization of political behavior and media raises questions about whether candidate–district ties have been weakened or severed altogether (Bonica and Cox 2018; Gimpel, Lee, and Pearson-Merkowitz 2008; Hopkins 2018; Martin and McCrain 2019; Moskowitz 2021). Examining the relationship between district partisanship and candidate positions, I find that both Democrats' and Republicans' campaign platforms grow significantly more liberal in more Democratic districts. However, there is no evidence of responsiveness when relying upon existing donation-based measures.

Second, do primary voters reward extremism? As more congressional districts have become safe for one party, polarization and the influence of primaries on electoral outcomes have increased roughly in tandem, making the primary system a frequent target of blame among reformers.<sup>4</sup> While legislators disproportionately fear backlash over political compromise from their primary electorates (Anderson, Butler, and Harbridge-Yong 2020), evidence on the representativeness of

and preference for extremists among primary voters is decidedly mixed (Brady, Han, and Pope 2007; Hill 2015; Hirano and Snyder 2019; King, Orlando, and Sparks 2016; Lockhart and Hill 2023; Sides et al. 2020). Employing within-district-party analyses, I contextualize these discordant findings: Existing measures of extremism are related to decreased primary vote share, but candidates with more extreme campaign platforms are, if anything, rewarded with a larger share of the primary vote.

Third, do extreme candidates enjoy fundraising advantages in primaries? The lack of party heuristic available to voters within partisan primaries creates an opportunity for moneyed interests to exert disproportionate influence (Bawn et al. 2012). On the one hand, individual donors tend to be much more extreme than voters, legislators, and the affluent, and they prefer to fund extreme candidates, all else equal (Barber 2016a; Barber et al., n.d.; Kujala 2020; Meisels et al. 2024). On the other hand, political organizations have been shown to contribute to moderates and penalize extremism (Barber 2016b; Bonica 2013). In line with the electoral performance finding, extremism is related to weaker primary fundraising when using existing measures, yet extreme campaign platforms are not financially penalized whatsoever.

This article makes both substantive and methodological contributions to the study of congressional elections and representation. First, I provide novel evidence that candidates' platforms remain responsive to their prospective constituencies, and I contribute to a growing body of work on the nationalization of donor behavior (Rhodes, Schaffner, and La Raja 2018; Sievert and Mathiasen 2023). Moreover, my analyses help reconcile mixed and piecemeal findings on the advantages of extremism in primaries: While a more extreme donor base—the predominant measure of candidate positions—is associated with weaker electoral and fundraising performance in primaries, there are no such penalties for an extreme campaign platform. By hand-collecting the most comprehensive set of House primary campaign platforms to date, I am able to clarify which aspects of campaigns remain responsive to the district and how voters and donors, in turn, respond to extremism expressed in different campaign activities. More broadly, platform-based estimates facilitate the use of multiple high-coverage measures to interrogate questions related to candidate positioning in the current era. The starkly different results reached with platform-based and contribution-based estimates of candidates' positions have wide-ranging implications for previous studies relying solely on the latter.

#### **CANDIDATE POSITIONS, RESPONSIVENESS, AND PRIMARY SUCCESS**

The importance of (sub-)constituency is all but a given in classic theoretical and empirical studies of elections and

4. Unite America, the main funder of Alaska's 2022 nonpartisan primary reform, argues on their website that "the biggest solvable problem fueling political extremism and dysfunction is hiding in plain sight: party primaries" (<https://www.uniteamerica.org/book>).

representation (e.g., Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002; Downs 1957; Enelow and Hinich 1984; Meirowitz 2005; Miller and Stokes 1963). Whether represented by the median or a distribution, and consisting of voters, constituents, copartisans, or donors, the key population of interest in candidates' strategic positioning is thought to be district specific. However, recent evidence on the nationalization of political behavior, media, and donors calls into question whether candidate-district ties have been severed (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Ansolabehere et al. 2001; Gimpel et al. 2008; Hopkins 2018; Martin and McCrain 2019; Moskowitz 2021).

Because of existing studies' contradictory findings, it is unclear whether candidates are still incentivized to be responsive to their districts. Bonica and Cox (2018), for example, argue that political parties strategically nationalized congressional elections in response to increased competition for majority control since 1994 (Lee 2016). If elections are primarily fought over national party positions, national donor support, and national media attention, candidates no longer stand to benefit from tailoring their positions to the district and, instead, stand to benefit from adopting the party line and appealing to extreme donors and activists.<sup>5</sup> However, more recent evaluations have not found consistent support for this argument (Canes-Wrone and Kistner 2022; Lockhart and Hill 2023).

In addition to whether candidates are generally incentivized to tailor their positions to their districts, a related question is whether extremism is rewarded at the primary stage of elections. As more congressional districts become safe for one party, primaries have grown to have an outsized influence on electoral outcomes (Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006; Hirano and Snyder 2019; Jacobson 1990; Thomsen 2023).<sup>6</sup> Scholars have long argued that primaries contribute to or exacerbate polarization in legislatures because, in comparison to general election voters, partisan primary voters are more extreme and prefer more extreme candidates (Anderson et al. 2020; Aranson and Ordeshook 1972; Brady et al. 2007; Hill 2015; King et al. 2016). However, other work suggests that the primary electorate is relatively representative of the general electorate, or, even if primary voters are more extreme, they may nevertheless strategically support moderates (Adams and Merrill 2014; Hirano et al. 2010; Lockhart and Hill 2023; Sides et al. 2020).

5. Specifically, Bonica and Cox (2018) argue that voters have become more party centered and, therefore, no longer penalize candidates for extremism, whereas extremism can benefit candidates via activist and donor support.

6. The number of House races decided within 10% was 33 in 2016, 90 in 2018, 77 in 2020, and 75 in 2022 ([https://ballotpedia.org/Congressional\\_elections\\_decided\\_by\\_10\\_percent\\_or\\_less\\_2022](https://ballotpedia.org/Congressional_elections_decided_by_10_percent_or_less_2022)).

The nature of intraparty nominations is another reason that extreme candidates would potentially thrive in partisan primaries. Whereas general election voters can either vote for the candidate who shares their party identification or use partisanship as a convenient heuristic for candidates' positions and priorities, primary voters must select between candidates who share a party identification. Because voters are likely more persuadable as they "lack the anchoring cue of partisanship" (Bawn et al. 2012, 575), intense policy demanders, such as donors and interest groups, may exert a disproportionate influence in primaries (Cohen et al. 2008; Kalla and Broockman 2018; La Raja and Schaffner 2015). A natural question in light of congressional polarization, then, is whether these financial contributors disproportionately advantage extreme primary candidates. Individual donors are quite extreme compared with other segments of the population, and they prefer to fund extreme candidates, all else being equal (Barber 2016a; Kujala 2020; Meisels et al. 2024). On the other hand, political organizations appear to favor moderate candidates and financially penalize extremism (Barber 2016b; Bonica 2013). Despite the moneyed interests' greater potential influence in primaries, far less is known about the relationship between candidate positions and primary fundraising.<sup>7</sup>

In sum, existing work reaches conflicting conclusions about whether candidates still face incentives to tailor their positions to the district and whether extremism is related to stronger electoral and fundraising performance in primaries. Furthermore, the analyses that address these questions most directly tend to be limited in at least one of two ways. First, how well results import to the current era is an open question, as the time periods covered generally end well before 2016. Second, it is unclear whether patterns generalize to candidates' stated positions, as results rely primarily or, in many cases, solely on campaign contribution-based estimates of candidate positions.

### CAPTURING CANDIDATE POSITIONING

The introduction of roll-call-based ideological estimation transformed the study of legislative and electoral behavior. These methodologies allowed for systematic characterization of congress members' spatial ideal points based on an underlying behavioral model and, subsequently, testing theories of representation (Bafumi and Herron 2010; Brady et al. 2007; Canes-Wrone et al. 2002; Clinton, Jackman, and Rivers 2004; Poole 2005; Poole and Rosenthal 1991). Over time, however,

7. Meisels et al. (2024) show experimentally that individual donors respond similarly to candidate extremism in primaries and general elections.

increasing interest in polarization called for comparable measures of nonincumbents' positions.

As a result, scholars turned to various sources of data that include both incumbents and nonincumbents, each with its own benefits and drawbacks. Candidate surveys and television advertisements, which capture position information directly from campaigns, nevertheless cover only a small portion of the candidate universe because of low response rates and high costs, respectively (Adams et al. 2017; Herrnson, Panagopoulos, and Bailey 2020; McGhee et al. 2014). Currently, the most ubiquitous approach uses campaign contributions to measure candidates' positions less directly, relying on the assumption that contributors give to candidates with positions similar to their own (e.g., Bonica 2014; Hall 2015; Hall and Snyder 2015). These contribution-based estimates offer unprecedented coverage of the universe of candidates: common-space CF scores, the most widely used of these measures, include over two-thirds of all major-party primary candidates since 2016.

Because they "are free to consider the many ways in which candidates express their ideology" (Bonica 2014, 372), donors may in theory draw upon useful private information regarding candidates' positions when making their decisions (Austen-Smith 1995; Hall and Wayman 1990). However, recent work suggests that donations are driven by a myriad of considerations, casting doubt on the behavioral assumption that donors simply give expressively on the basis of ideological proximity. In addition to perceptions of their spatial proximity to candidates—which may or may not be based on candidates' stated positions—donors' giving is motivated by electoral competitiveness, opponent characteristics, and candidates' institutional positions (Barber, Canes-Wrone, and Thrower 2017; Gimpel et al. 2008; Meisels et al. 2024). Accordingly, candidates' contribution networks may reflect factors potentially orthogonal to their public positions. Distinguishing between which patterns do and do not hold across different campaign characteristics allows for more precise identification of the answers to questions for which evidence often appears mixed.

### SCALING CAMPAIGN WEBSITE PLATFORMS

I estimate the positions of candidates who ran in major-party House primaries from the five most recent election cycles—2016, 2018, 2020, 2022, and 2024—using the most comprehensive collection of campaign website policy platforms to date.<sup>8</sup> Scholars have long recognized campaign websites as a valuable medium for studying campaign strategy for a number of reasons (Druckman et al. 2010; Druckman, Kifer,

8. Past studies have included only primary winners and/or runners-up or candidates from fewer election cycles.

and Parkin 2009; Milita, Ryan, and Simas 2014; Nyhan and Montgomery 2015). Creating and maintaining a website is easy and far cheaper than fundraising, sending mailers, and running television advertisements, resulting in a relatively even playing field with regard to candidates' resources.<sup>9</sup> The vast majority of websites contain a page or section clearly delineated as a collection of issue stances, resembling a stated policy platform more closely than any other campaign materials. Moreover, the priorities and positions found on websites are selected and articulated by campaigns themselves, making them less mediated than media interviews, televised debates, or newspaper write-ups.

I collect all available campaign website policy platforms of the more than 7,000 candidates who appeared on a Democratic or Republican primary ballot from 2016 to 2024.<sup>10</sup> For each candidate, I first searched for their on-cycle campaign website with a combination of simple web engine search and cross-checking sources, such as Politics1.com and Ballotpedia.<sup>11</sup> I accessed candidates' websites within the week leading up to their primaries in 2022 and 2024 and used Wayback Machine to access websites as archived most immediately prior to candidates' primaries for earlier elections.<sup>12</sup> Finally, I captured an image and scraped the raw text of the issue content, which was typically on a clearly marked page or section with titles such as "Platform," "Issues," or "Priorities." Appendix A provides further information about the data collection.

All in all, 65% (4,703) of all 7,296 major-party primary candidates from 2016 to 2024 hosted campaign websites with issue content. Because the baseline costs involved in creating a website are so low, "missingness" in the data should be more plausibly related to candidates' decision not to publicly commit to a platform than to factors unrelated to positioning

9. While some candidates host highly professionalized websites clearly created by web designers, many candidates use free website creators, which offer easy-to-use interfaces that make website creation accessible to even the least technologically savvy candidate without the aid of campaign staff.

10. I exclude third-party candidates, candidates whose primaries were cancelled, candidates in multi-/nonpartisan primaries, and candidates in primaries that were preceded by a nominating convention. App. A provides the full list of and rationales for excluded races. However, as shown in app. C, main results based on CF scores remain highly similar when including all available primary candidates in California, Washington, Connecticut, and Utah.

11. I exclude official governmental websites (those ending in .gov), as sitting incumbents maintain separate online presences for their campaign. I also exclude social media pages, such as Facebook and Twitter.

12. The median was nine days before the primary, while the mean was 11 days. Overall, approximately 75% were captured within one month of the primary.

but related to the availability of existing measures (such as insufficient fundraising in the case of contribution-based measures or failure to win an election in the case of roll-call-based measures). I investigate the representativeness of candidates with campaign website platforms in appendix A, looking separately by incumbency status because nonincumbents' variation in missingness is mainly due to lacking a website altogether, whereas incumbents' is due to omitting a policy platform. Among both incumbents and nonincumbents, there is some evidence of a relationship between moderate CF scores and missingness. However, in appendix C, I show that results with all CF scores are qualitatively identical to those with only CF scores of candidates who also have platforms.

I combine the campaign platform texts with an unsupervised machine learning algorithm, Wordfish, to scale unidimensional campaign positions at the candidate-year level (Slapin and Proksch 2008). The statistical model is based on item response theory and bears strong resemblance to correspondence analysis, the methodology used to estimate campaign contribution-based CF scores (Bonica 2014).<sup>13</sup> I follow other scholars in assuming that the frequency and usage of words in political text are informative about authors' positions on what is thought to be a liberal-conservative dimension (Lauderdale and Herzog 2016; Laver, Benoit, and Garry 2003; Lowe et al. 2011; Rheault and Cochrane 2020). As demonstrated by Grimmer and Stewart (2013), however, the validity of this assumption rests crucially on the dominance of a liberal-conservative dimension within the relevant texts. As I show later, using both candidate- and word-level parameters to interrogate the underlying dimension structuring the rhetorical space provides strong evidence that this assumption is satisfied.

I prepare the text corpus by constructing an  $N \times M$  sparse document-feature matrix of  $M$  term columns and  $N$  candidate-year rows, with term frequencies as cell entries. I preprocess the data by removing punctuation, reducing terms to their stem, and removing both highly frequent stopwords and highly infrequent terms to reduce noise in estimation and improve computing performance.<sup>14</sup> To help ensure that the key liberal-conservative dimension is identified and minimize the risk of misspecifying the policy space, I drop terms primarily

associated with geographic or incumbency differences between candidates, such as state names and congressional procedure. In addition to all remaining unigrams that meet the above criteria, I also preserve frequently used  $n$ -grams (e.g., common core, freedom of speech, and right to bear arms).<sup>15</sup> Altogether, this results in nearly 3,000 unique terms across more than 4,700 separate primary campaigns. Further details of the text-processing flow and comparisons of estimates with and without scaling refinements are provided in appendix B.

The Wordfish model estimates candidates' year-specific positions as a function of how frequently they use terms associated with different areas of the political spectrum<sup>16</sup> while also accounting for the fact that some platforms are wordier than others and some terms are more prevalent than others. The rate  $y$  at which primary candidate  $i$  uses term  $j$  in election year  $t$  is assumed to be drawn from a Poisson distribution, which is characterized by a single parameter  $\lambda$  representing both the expected value and variance. This parameter logarithmically links the probability distribution generating the observed term rate to the systematic components of interest:

$$y_{ijt} \sim \text{Poisson}(\lambda_{ijt}) \quad \text{where } \lambda_{ijt} = \exp(\alpha_{it} + \psi_j + \beta_j \times \omega_{it}). \quad (1)$$

The key parameter  $\omega_{it}$  represents candidate  $i$ 's campaign platform position in primary  $t$ , which is scaled to have sample mean 0 and SD 1. As mentioned previously, no special assumption is placed on individuals' positions over time: for candidates who ran in more than one House election between 2016 and 2024, each primary campaign constitutes a separate observation. The term  $\beta_j$  represents word  $j$ 's weight in discriminating between different campaign positions.<sup>17</sup> A word fixed effect  $\psi_j$  captures the rate at which word  $j$  is used generally, and a candidate-year fixed effect  $\alpha_{it}$  corresponds to the verbosity of candidate  $i$ 's campaign position text in election  $t$ .<sup>18</sup>

13. Scatterplots in app. B demonstrate strong correlations between scaling estimates from Wordfish and one-dimensional correspondence analysis ( $r = 0.988$ ;  $\rho = 0.998$ ).

14. I drop terms that appear in fewer than 100 separate campaign texts. This is an extremely lenient requirement given that the corpus contains almost 5,000 campaign texts, yet this step substantially improves computing time. See app. B for further discussion of preprocessing choices.

15. Scatterplots in app. B demonstrate high correlations between scaling estimates with and without nonunigram, geographic, and procedural terms ( $r = 0.997$ ;  $\rho = 0.998$ ).

16. For example, the term "gun" is neutral and used by candidates all across the political spectrum, whereas the term "high-capacity" highlights the danger of large firearm magazines and is therefore predominantly associated with candidates on the left.

17. This is akin to an item response theory discrimination parameter or factor analysis loading score.

18. In the algorithm initialization, start values of  $\psi$  and  $\alpha$  are functions of word frequencies, while start values of  $\beta$  and  $\omega$  are obtained via singular value decomposition of the matrix of word frequency marginals—hence the strong relationship between estimates resulting from correspondence analysis vs. Wordfish in the appendix.

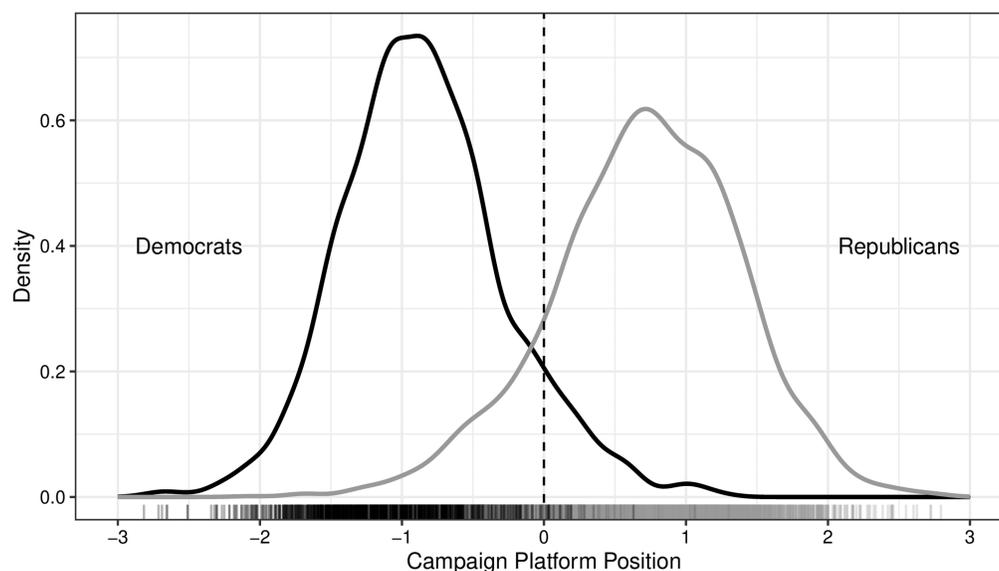


Figure 1. Distribution of campaign platform positions by party, 2016–2024. Kernel density plots of  $\omega$  estimates from equation 1, which are scaled to have mean 0 and SD 1. Democratic candidates shown in black and Republican candidates in gray. Negative values indicate more liberal/less conservative.

Appendix B provides technical details of the expectation maximization algorithm used for estimation as well as further discussion of text preprocessing decisions and alternative scalings using correspondence analysis and unrefined tokens.

### CONSTRUCT VALIDITY

The distribution of candidates'  $\omega$  parameters are presented in figure 1. Consistent with well-documented partisan polarization among political elites (Bafumi and Herron 2010; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016), platform-based positions are bimodally distributed, with most Republicans falling substantially to the right of most Democrats. However, a modest degree of overlap in Republican and Democratic candidates' positions is also consistent with the frequency with which candidates of both parties choose to campaign similarly on the same issues, such as job creation and veterans affairs.<sup>19</sup> This differs from roll-call estimates of House members' ideal points from recent congresses, which exhibit no partisan overlap partly because of the strategic selection of legislative floor votes that frequently exaggerates differences between parties (Bateman, Clinton, and Lapinski 2017; Clinton 2012; Cox and McCubbins 2005; Lee 2016). Likewise, contribution-based estimates, which assume donors contribute to candidates who share their positions, may exaggerate partisan polarization because

of individual donors' strong partisan loyalties (Li 2018; Meisels et al. 2024). Distributions appear highly similar when subsetting to viable or incumbent candidates in appendix B, demonstrating that serious candidates likewise span the range of the spectrum.<sup>20</sup>

Beyond general differences between parties, figure 2 demonstrates that there is substantial variation in the spread of candidates' positions even within a primary field. While the SD is 0.65 across Republicans and 0.60 across Democrats in these multiplatform contests, respective within-primary SDs are 0.53 and 0.44. Republican primaries tend to feature greater differentiation, as the average range of positions is 0.96 for Republicans and 0.77 for Democrats, and the SD of these within-primary ranges is likewise higher for Republican contests (0.65 vs. 0.58, respectively). While platform differences even within primary field are substantial, changes in candidates' platforms from election to election are far smaller. Scholars commonly validate the stability of candidates' positions given that, conceptually, there should be a large degree of consistency over time (e.g., Bonica 2014). I find a 0.88 correlation between candidates' most-liberal and most-conservative (i.e., most different) platforms across the entire five-election period, suggesting that even the lowest possible bound on within-candidate temporal stability remains exceptionally high. The third quartile of this maximum within-candidate distance

19. However, only 30 general elections over the entire period featured a Democratic nominee with a platform to the right of the Republican nominee.

20. Distributions of platforms and CF scores are further broken out by year and candidate type in app. D, which suggests some increase in polarization over the period.

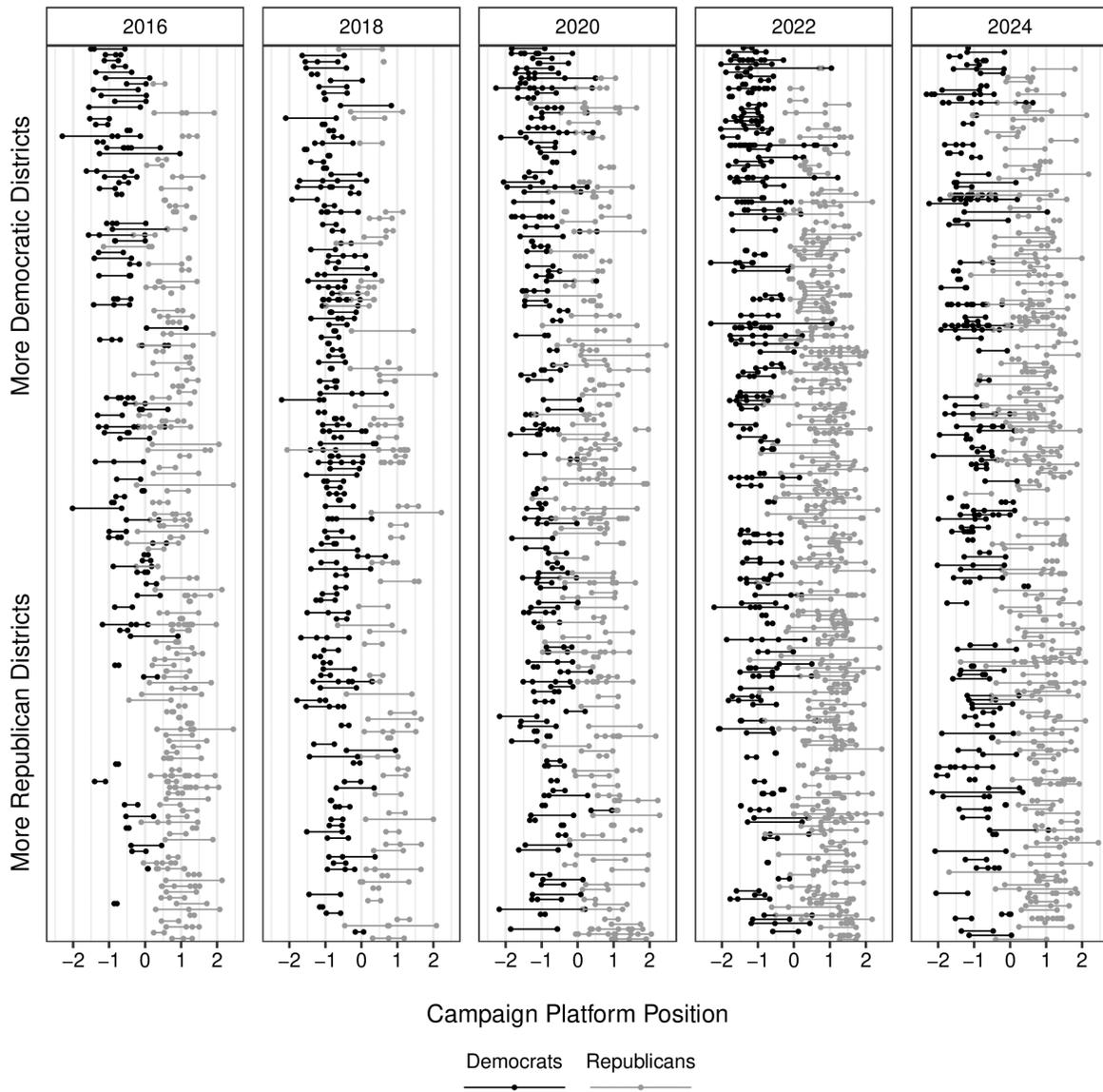


Figure 2. Campaign platform variation within and across primaries. Circles represent each campaign platform, with lines connecting those of candidates running in the same primary. Districts descending along horizontal axis from highest to lowest two-party Democratic presidential vote share. Primaries with at least two candidates with campaign platforms are included.

is under 0.60, far below the average range of positions taken by candidates running in the same primary field. Taken together, the bimodal distribution, meaningful variation even within primary fields, and individual level temporal stability all suggest the platform measure successfully captures candidates' positions.

**FACIAL VALIDITY**

A selection of well-known candidates from across the political spectrum in table 1 suggests that the intraparty variation in platform-based positions is, likewise, facially valid. The 2018 campaign of Elise Stefanik, a Republican representing a rural

district in New York's North Country since 2014, fell almost one SD to the left of the mean. Although she has since made headlines for her impassioned defense of President Trump during his first impeachment proceedings,<sup>21</sup> Stefanik campaigned on strengthening trade with Canada, expanding agricultural visa programs, veteran welfare, environmental protection, health care access, and affordable education. Because no special assumption is placed on the continuity of candidates' positions from one election to the next, platform changes such as Liz Cheney's well-documented shift from

21. See <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/loyalty-trump-catapults-elise-stefanik-into-republican-stardom-2021-05-11/>.

Table 1. Campaign Platform Positions of Notable Candidates

Party	Candidate	District-Year	Position
(R)	Elise Stefanik	NY-21-2018	-1.00
(R)	George Devolder-Santos	NY-3-2020	-.20
(R)	Liz Cheney	WY-2022	.21
(R)	Liz Cheney	WY-2016	.63
(R)	Andy Ogles	TN-5-2024	1.45
(R)	Marjorie Taylor Greene	GA-14-2020	1.93
(D)	Amy McGrath	KY-6-2018	.18
(D)	Jim Cooper	TN-5-2020	-.14
(D)	Seth Moulton	MA-6-2024	-.50
(D)	Andy Levin	MI-11-2022	-.83
(D)	Terri Sewell	AL-7-2024	-1.24
(D)	Ayanna Pressley	MA-7-2020	-1.79

Note. D, Democrat; R, Republican.

2016<sup>22</sup> to 2022<sup>23</sup> are also reflected in primary campaign position estimates. Tennessean Blue Dog Democrat Jim Cooper, the “man in the middle”<sup>24</sup> and “the last moderate . . . loathed by Republicans for being in the wrong party, and scorned by Democrats for his fiscal conservatism,”<sup>25</sup> fell just to the left of mean 0 during his 2020 primary campaign. Likewise, the campaigns of those widely regarded as the most progressive Democrats and conservative Republicans fall toward the endpoints of the campaign position range. In appendix B, I discuss examples of platforms estimated to fall on the other side of the scale than candidates’ partisanship would predict.

Nevertheless, we still must verify that the dimension of interest—here, a general left–right dimension—is the one structuring estimates of candidates’ platforms (Egerod and Klemmensen 2020; Grimmer and Stewart 2013). While this cannot be formally tested, interrogating the underlying substance is relatively straightforward and transparent in the case of text data, as terms included in the scaling likewise receive parameter estimates based upon their ability to discriminate between positions. Table 2 reports the 20 terms with the largest negative (left) and positive (right)  $\beta$  weights from equation 1, with the full table of corresponding  $\beta$  and  $\psi$  estimates included in appendix B. Terms related to critical race theory, Christianity, anti-abortionism, illegal immigra-

22. See [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/another-cheney-rises-in-a-republican-party-led-by-trump/2016/08/15/a2f817a0-6267-11e6-8b27-bb8ba39497a2\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/another-cheney-rises-in-a-republican-party-led-by-trump/2016/08/15/a2f817a0-6267-11e6-8b27-bb8ba39497a2_story.html).

23. See <https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/17/politics/why-liz-cheney-lost/index.html>.

24. See <https://washingtonmonthly.com/2022/12/13/man-in-the-middle/>.

25. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/06/opinion/the-last-moderate.html>.

Table 2. Terms with 20 Most Conservative and Liberal Weights, 2016–2024

Left	Right
{community-bas}	{crt} {woke} {tyrann}
{evict} {equit} {reproduct}	{indoctrin} {god} {god-given}
{lgbtqia} {rental} {matern}	{christian} {socialist} {tyranni}
{dispar} {underserv} {trauma}	{communist} {unborn}
{indigen} {lewi} {pell} {childcar}	{sanctiti} {pro-lif} {lawless}
{lgbtq} {high-capac} {preschool}	{swamp} {alien} {womb}
{low-incom} {pre-k}	{pelosi} {islam} {evil}

Note. Terms with the largest positive (right) and negative (left)  $\beta$  discrimination parameters from scaling. App. B reports corresponding  $\beta$  and  $\psi$  parameters.

tion, and socialism are strongly associated with conservative campaign platforms, and terms related to inequality, injustice, gender and sexuality, and affordable education are strongly associated with liberal platforms.<sup>26</sup> Importantly, heavily weighted terms related to identity groups and politicians are overwhelmingly used in ideological or policy contexts. For example, nearly every variant of “LGBTQ” included in a campaign platform is in the context of candidates advocating for non-discrimination protections. Overall, these results provide strong evidence that the rhetoric underlying the scaling estimates is structured by recognizable modern divisions along the liberal–conservative spectrum.

### PREDICTIVE VALIDITY

Finally, how do platform-based estimates compare with existing measures of candidates’ positions? As mentioned earlier, campaign platforms may reflect candidates’ true views, strategic appeals, or both but are ultimately under the purview of candidates themselves. In contrast, NOMINATE is based upon legislators’ voting behavior, which occurs in an institutional setting that is relatively opaque and influenced by a strategically selected roll-call agenda not determined by any one individual legislator (Arnold 1990; Clinton 2012; Lee 2016). On the other hand, CF scores are based on the observed behavior of donors who are assumed to contribute to candidates with positions similar to their own (Bonica 2014). In essence, campaign platforms capture something conceptually distinct from—yet potentially empirically related to—roll-call voting and fundraising networks.

26. Performing scaling separately by year in app. D suggests substantial continuity in even the most heavily weighted terms as well as correlations above 0.90 between candidates’ pooled and year-specific scalings.

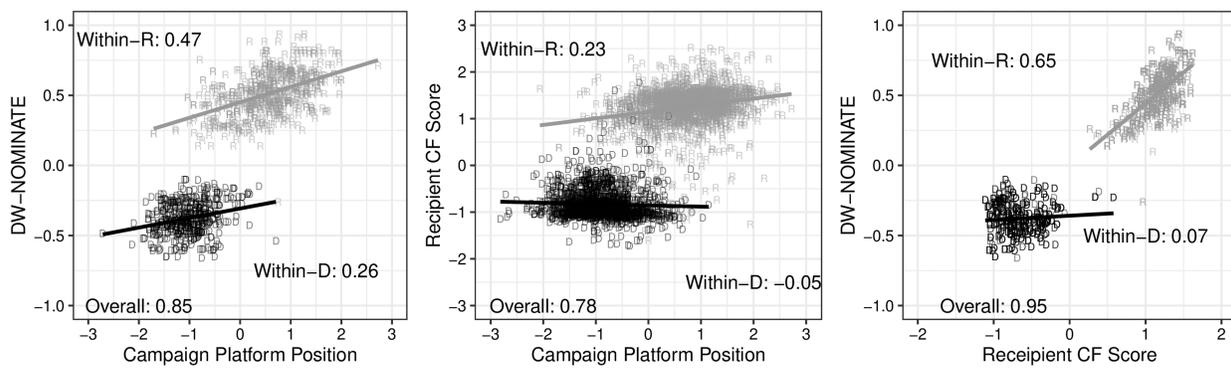


Figure 3. Relationship between campaign platform positions, CF scores, and DW-NOMINATE. Points are individual candidates, with Democrats in black, Republicans in gray, and lines fit separately by party. Pooled and intraparty Pearson's  $r$  correlations reported. CF, campaign finance.

Figure 3 presents bivariate relationships between each of the three measures. While pooled correlations are unsurprisingly strong given ideological sorting among partisans, intraparty correlations vary considerably. Consistent with Barber (2022), virtually no relationship is present between Democrats' CF and NOMINATE scores, whereas there is a modest relationship between Democrats' platform positions and NOMINATE scores. Intraparty correlations tend to be substantially greater among Republicans than Democrats, especially between CF and NOMINATE. Compared with each of their correlations with NOMINATE, correlations between campaign platforms and CF scores appear quite modest. However, this may be due to either the measures themselves or the inclusion of non-incumbents who do not have NOMINATE scores. I find that all CF-platform correlations are stronger among candidates captured by NOMINATE, but all campaign platforms' correlations remain larger with NOMINATE than with CF scores, whereas CF scores' intra-Democratic correlation is larger with campaign platforms than with NOMINATE.<sup>27</sup> These results highlight the opportunities for further investigation of relationships between candidates' rhetorical positions, donor networks, and legislative behavior facilitated by measuring campaign positions independently of campaign contribution and roll-call data.

### EMPIRICAL APPROACH

As shown in figure 3, there is a relatively weak relationship between candidates' rhetoric and their CF scores, the predominant, contribution-based measure of candidates' positions. This raises questions about whether evidence in ongoing debates over questions related to candidate positions is dependent upon the use of a more indirect measure. As discussed previously, there are mixed theoretical expectations

and empirical evidence regarding candidate responsiveness to the district and the relationship between extremism and electoral and fundraising success in primaries. Distinguishing between estimates of candidate positions based on platforms versus contributions can further clarify which features of campaigns are consistent with different conclusions about the current era of American politics.

First, we can examine basic bivariate relationships by platform-based versus contribution-based measures of candidate positions. Figure 4 plots districts' most recent two-party Democratic presidential vote share against candidates' positions in figure 4A, candidates' positions against their share of the primary vote in figure 4B, and candidates' positions against their share of direct itemized primary contributions in figure 4C. Scatterplots on the left side use platform-based estimates of candidate positions, while plots on the right use existing contribution-based estimates of candidates' positions. I include only candidate-year observations that are covered by both measures in order to maximize comparability, and the plots are further broken out by year in appendix D.

The trends in all three panels of figure 4 look quite different across measures of candidate positions. Figure 4A shows that both Republicans' and Democrats' campaign platforms become more liberal as their districts become more Democratic, consistent with candidate responsiveness. However, evidence of such responsiveness is not present among candidates' CF scores, which actually become weakly more conservative in more Democratic districts. The patterns in figure 4B and 4C look relatively similar, which is unsurprising given the strong relationship between electoral and fundraising success. Democrats' primary vote and fundraising shares decrease quadratically from a campaign platform vertex around  $-1$ , which is one SD more liberal than the sample average. Republicans' shares of primary vote and fundraising, however, decrease as their campaign platforms become more conservative, aside from the handful of Republicans with extremely liberal

27. Respective pooled, Republican, and Democratic correlations are 0.83, 0.40, and 0.16.

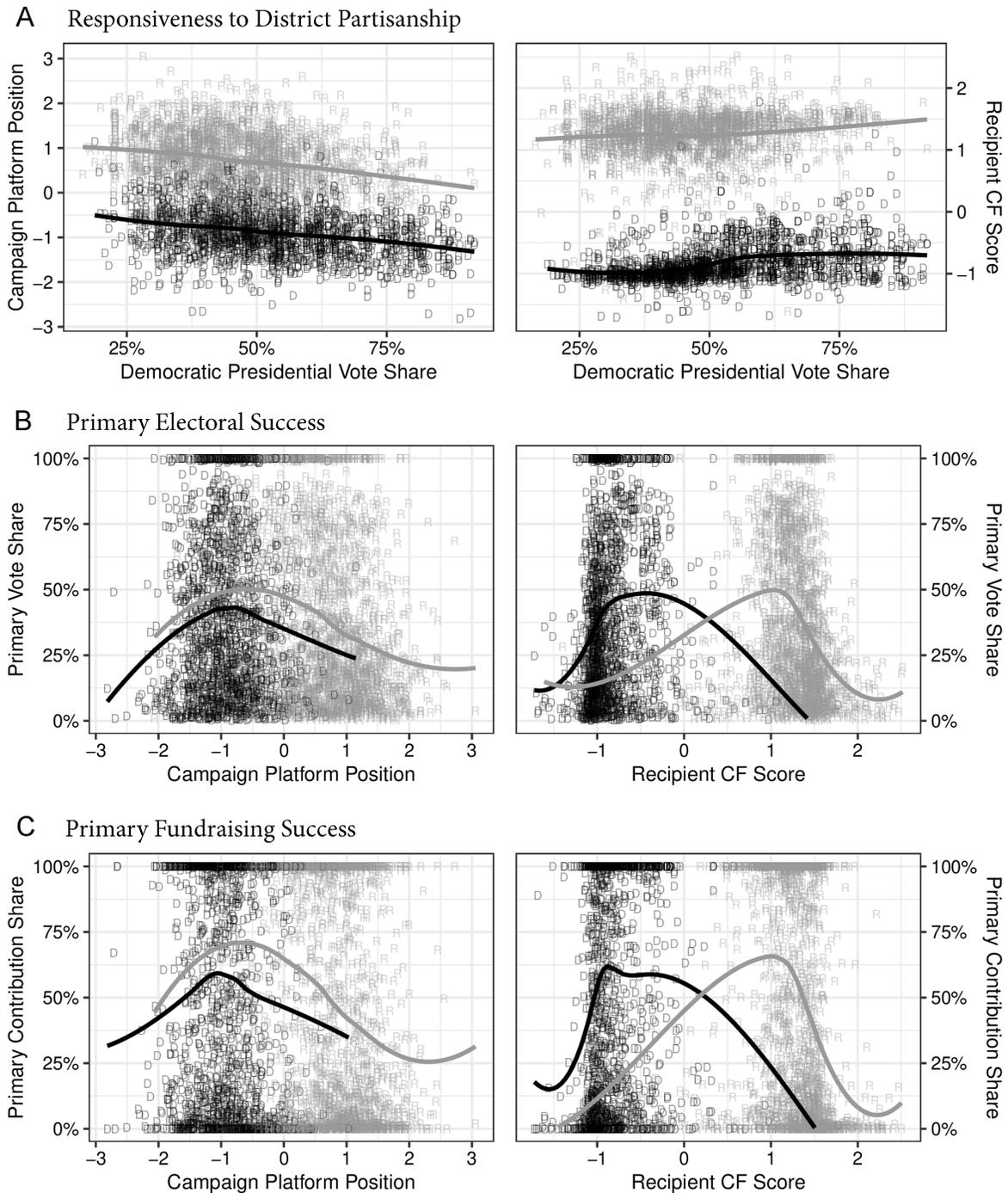


Figure 4. Comparing responsiveness, electoral performance, and fundraising strength across candidate position measures, 2016–2024. Loess curves fit separately by party, with Republicans in gray and Democrats in black. Includes candidates captured by both measures.

platforms. Finally, Democrats’ vote and fundraising shares peak at CF scores of  $-1$  and Republicans’ at  $1$ , but shares decrease more as CF scores become extreme compared to moderate.

Raw relationships suggest that measuring candidates’ positions with their campaign platforms versus contribution networks may lead to conflicting conclusions about responsiveness to the district and electoral and financial returns to extremism in primaries. However, a number of glaring con-

founders in these bivariate relationships may be driving observed patterns as well as some of the differences between candidates’ platforms and CF scores. In the case of candidate responsiveness to the district, there are rarely Republican incumbents in heavily Democratic districts and vice versa. This means that only nonincumbents, who are typically lower quality and less experienced than incumbents, are the only candidates running in districts very unsafe for their

party. To account for this while examining responsiveness, I estimate the following equation separately for Democrats and Republicans:

$$\text{Position}_{idt} = \tau \text{District}_{dt} + \nu \text{Open}_{idt} + \kappa \text{GenChall}_{idt} + \eta \text{PrimChall}_{idt} + \gamma_t + \epsilon_i \quad (2)$$

where  $\text{Position}_{idt}$  stands in for two dependent variables, both of which increase with conservatism and were originally scaled to have mean 0 and SD 1: candidate  $i$ 's campaign platform position  $\omega$  from equation 1 during the primary in district  $d$  in year  $t$ , and her static recipient CF score. The key independent variable,  $\text{District}_{dt}$ , represents district  $d$ 's Democratic two-party vote share from the presidential election held in or most immediately before year  $t$ . To account for differences in the average position across different types of candidates, indicator variables capture whether  $i$  was an open-seat candidate, a primary challenger, a prospective general election challenger, or an incumbent (omitted category) in primary  $dt$ . Year fixed effects are included to account for potential trends in extremism or progressivism over time, and standard errors are clustered at the candidate level.

Next, I investigate whether extremism is rewarded or punished by primary voters by analyzing the relationship between candidates' positions and primary vote share. In doing so, there are a couple of complicating factors. For one, figure 4B suggests that relationships are nonlinear. For another, the relationship between vote share and electoral success will depend entirely on the number of candidates in a primary field: 40% vote share is a loss in a two-candidate primary but potentially a blowout victory in a five-candidate primary.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, partisan primary voters across districts may have different preferences for extreme versus moderate candidates. I address factors such as these in the following equation, which I estimate separately for Democrats versus Republicans and using CF scores versus campaign platforms as the positioning measure:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{PrimVoteShare}_{ipt} &= \beta_1 \text{Position}_{ipt} + \beta_2 \text{Position}_{ipt}^2 \\ &+ \zeta \text{NumCands}_{pt} + \nu \text{CandType}_{ipt} \\ &+ \mu (\text{NumCands} \times \text{CandType})_{ipt} + \alpha_p \\ &+ \gamma_t + \epsilon_{pt}. \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

The outcome variable  $\text{PrimVoteShare}_{ipt}$  is candidate  $i$ 's share of the vote in primary  $p$  in year  $t$ . Given the appearance of nonmonotonic relationships in figure 4B, I include both first-

and second-order polynomial of the key explanatory variable  $\text{Position}_{ipt}$ , candidate  $i$ 's position in primary  $p$  in year  $t$ . For the sake of interpretability, positions are demeaned (likewise reducing multicollinearity between linear and quadratic terms) and coded to increase with extremism in all models. The quadratic coefficient  $\beta_2$  captures how the relationship between position and primary vote share depends upon candidates' general deviation—whether extreme or moderate—from their party average, while the linear coefficient  $\beta_1$  estimates the additional change in primary vote share associated with candidates' positions increasing in extremism by one unit. To illustrate, consider two candidates of the same party, where one candidate is one unit more moderate than the party average ( $-1$ ) and the other is one unit more extreme than the party average ( $1$ ). Because the candidates' mean-centered positions are equidistant from their party's average, the expected change to primary vote share represented by  $\beta_2$  will be the same for both candidates. However, if  $\beta_1$  is negative, the candidate who is more extreme than the party's average will be expected to receive an additional electoral penalty, while the candidate who is more moderate than the party's average will receive an advantage, and vice versa if  $\beta_1$  is positive.

By including district-party-census fixed effect  $\alpha_p$ , equation 3 estimates the effect of candidate positions on primary vote share based only on variation among copartisans who ran in the same district. This accounts for the time-invariant differences in voter preferences, supply of candidates, and political contexts across primary constituencies. However, I also include fixed effect  $\gamma_t$  to account for potential secular changes, such as nationalization and presidential versus midterm years. Additionally, I control for the number of candidates running in a primary and candidate type as well as their interaction. It is challenging to make apples-to-apples comparisons of primary elections because of their highly variable field sizes and contextual dynamics, but these controls help account for the typical valence differences, field sizes, and vote shares expected in incumbent-challenger versus open-seat contexts. Standard errors are clustered at the primary level.<sup>29</sup>

Investigating how candidates' positions relate to their share of primary fundraising is analogous to equation 3, with the only difference being the dependent variable:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{PrimContShare}_{ipt} &= \beta_1 \text{Position}_{ipt} + \beta_2 \text{Position}_{ipt}^2 \\ &+ \zeta \text{NumCands}_{pt} + \nu \text{CandType}_{ipt} \\ &+ \mu (\text{NumCands} \times \text{CandType})_{ipt} + \alpha_p \\ &+ \gamma_t + \epsilon_{pt}. \end{aligned} \quad (4)$$

28. Primary electoral and financial performance results are unchanged when excluding primaries wherein one candidate received at least 95% of the vote or contribution share (see app. C).

29. See app. C for primary electoral and fundraising performance results without fixed effects and controls.

Instead of her share of the primary vote, I calculate candidate  $i$ 's share of the total direct itemized contributions received by candidates in primary  $p$  in year  $t$ . Like electoral performance, comparing candidates' primary fundraising performances can be challenging, but this operationalization enhances comparability in a number of ways. Direct contributions are subject to similar limits across sources, which helps to avoid the appearance of candidates dominating fundraising simply by virtue of one super political action committee (PAC) independently expending millions on their behalf. However, direct contribution portfolios can still be quite diverse, ranging from maxed-out contributions from large organizations to many smaller contributions from individual donors. Moreover, focusing on contribution share rather than raw amount minimizes the influence of outliers and more directly captures the relevant aspect of candidates' primary fundraising performance.

### CONCLUSIONS DIFFER MARKEDLY BY MEASURE

The findings based on equation 2 and reported in table 3 suggest that across districts, candidates' platforms—but not their contribution networks—are responsive to the partisanship of their prospective constituencies. As a district's Democratic presidential vote share increases by 10 percentage points, candidates' platforms are expected to become 10% of

an SD more liberal for Democrats and 16% of an SD more liberal (or less conservative) for Republicans. In contrast, Democrats' CF scores actually become 4% of an SD less liberal as district Democratic vote share increases by 10 percentage points, and there is no meaningful relationship between district partisanship and Republicans' CF scores. Republican nonincumbents' campaign platforms appear much more conservative than those of Republican incumbents, while Democratic primary challengers' are more moderate than Democratic incumbents'—but the CF scores of nonincumbents are substantially more extreme than those of incumbents across both parties. In appendix D, I also show that there is little heterogeneity in platform and CF score responsiveness by year. Despite the fact that campaign platforms are highly responsive to district partisan lean, relying on existing measures would lead to the conclusion that candidates are entirely unresponsive. In reality, candidates' campaign platforms, but not their contribution networks, vary systematically by district partisanship.

Within district, moderation appears more electorally advantageous in primaries than extremism when measured using contribution networks but not campaign platforms. In table 4, the coefficient on the quadratic term suggests that Democrats' primary vote share decreases the further their platform deviates from that of the average Democrat. Returning to

Table 3. Relationship Between District Partisanship and Candidate Positions, 2016–2024

	Campaign Platform Position		Recipient CF Score	
	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans
District Democratic partisanship	−.010*** (.001)	−.016*** (.002)	.004*** (.001)	.000 (.001)
Open seat candidate	−.015 (.039)	.425*** (.045)	−.102*** (.029)	.084*** (.023)
Primary challenger	.154** (.048)	.503*** (.049)	−.105* (.045)	.187*** (.036)
Prospective general challenger	.014 (.043)	.396*** (.057)	−.215*** (.032)	.161*** (.032)
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,837	1,994	1,837	1,994
R <sup>2</sup>	.150	.179	.164	.043

Note. Parameters from equation 2 with candidate-clustered standard errors in parentheses. District partisanship is most recent Democratic two-party presidential vote share, ranging from 0 to 100. Dependent variables both increase with conservatism and were originally scaled to have mean 0 SD 1.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 4. Relationship Between Candidate Extremism and Primary Electoral Success, 2016–2024

	Campaign Platform Position		Recipient CF Score	
	Dependent Variable: Primary Vote Share			
	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans
Candidate position	.035*** (.011)	.008 (.008)	-.108*** (.026)	-.046*** (.012)
Candidate position <sup>2</sup>	-.046*** (.012)	-.008 (.007)	-.128*** (.038)	-.056*** (.009)
District-party-census fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,711	1,903	1,711	1,903
R <sup>2</sup>	.841	.874	.842	.878

Note. Parameters from equation 3 with primary-clustered standard errors in parentheses. Both candidate position measures were demeaned, increase with extremism, and originally scaled to have mean 0 and SD 1. Controls include candidate type, number of candidates in primary, and their interaction.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

an example from the previous section, two Democratic candidates with platforms one unit less liberal versus one unit more liberal than their party's average are each expected to receive a primary vote share reduction of 4.6 percentage points associated with their deviation from the average, all else being equal. However, the positive coefficient on the linear term also reveals that more extreme platforms are rewarded relative to more moderate platforms in Democratic primaries. In addition to their identical expected primary vote share penalties for deviating from the party average, the candidate with a platform one unit more liberal than the average Democrat is expected to receive an additional 3.5 percentage points of the primary vote share, while the candidate with a platform one unit less liberal than average will receive an additional 3.5-percentage-point penalty. Taken together, then, in Democratic primaries, the expected penalty for adopting a platform one unit more moderate than the party average is 8.1 percentage points compared with a penalty of just 1.1 for a platform one unit more extreme than the party average, all else equal. In Republican primaries, there appears to be little relationship between candidates' platforms and their vote share.

Conversely, table 4 suggests that candidates of both parties face much stronger primary electoral punishment for relatively extreme CF scores compared with relatively moderate CF scores. In addition to a penalty of 12.8 percentage points for deviating one unit from the average Democratic CF score

in either direction, a Democrat who is one unit more liberal than average is expected to receive an additional decrease of 10.8 percentage points, while the electoral penalty to a Democrat one unit less liberal than average will be reduced by 10.8 percentage points. Cumulatively, a Democrat with a CF score one unit less liberal than the party average is expected to receive a mere 2-percentage-point penalty compared with a 23.6-percentage-point penalty for a CF score one unit more liberal than average.<sup>30</sup> Penalties appear somewhat smaller yet analogous for Republicans, with coefficients on the linear and quadratic terms implying that a CF score one unit less conservative than the party average reduces Republicans' primary vote share by 1 percentage point compared with a 10.2-point reduction for a CF score one unit more conservative than average.

In addition to these primary electoral findings, table 5 demonstrates that the same patterns—greater penalties to relatively extreme CF scores than to relatively moderate CF scores but no such comparative advantage to adopting a moderate campaign platform—hold in the context of primary fundraising as well. Adding together the linear and quadratic estimates suggests that a CF score one unit more moderate

30. See app. C for a graphical representation of the Democratic CF score vs. platform results in table 4.

Table 5. Relationship Between Candidate Extremism and Primary Fundraising Success, 2016–2024

	Campaign Platform Position		Recipient CF Score	
	Dependent Variable: Share of Total Direct Primary Contributions			
	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans
Candidate position	.061* (.024)	-.002 (.017)	-.215*** (.052)	-.148*** (.030)
Candidate position <sup>2</sup>	-.087*** (.023)	.002 (.015)	-.179*** (.040)	-.134*** (.020)
District-party-census fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1,676	1,898	1,676	1,898
R <sup>2</sup>	.638	.704	.639	.716

Note. Parameters from equation 4 with primary-clustered standard errors in parentheses. Both candidate position measures were demeaned, increase with extremism, and originally scaled to have mean 0 and SD 1. Controls include candidate type, number of candidates in primary, and their interaction.

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

than the party average actually increases candidates' expected contribution share by 3.6 percentage points in Democratic primaries and 1.4 percentage points in Republican primaries. In contrast, a CF score one unit more extreme than average is associated with total decreases in expected contribution shares of nearly 40 percentage points in Democratic primaries and nearly 30 points in Republican primaries. Measuring positions instead based on candidates' platforms paints quite a different picture: there is no significant financial penalty to adopting a relatively extreme platform in Republican primaries, and, in Democratic primaries, a platform one unit more extreme than average incurs a total 2.6-percentage-point decrease in contribution share compared with a total 14.8-percentage-point reduction for a platform one unit more moderate than average.

These findings are relatively consistent across subgroups and alternative specifications of the independent and dependent variables, all of which can be found in appendix C. Consistent with table 3, I show that even incumbents' and primary winners' CF scores do not grow significantly more liberal in more Democratic districts, nor do the CF scores of candidates in winnable open-seat primaries. Additionally, using indicators for primary winners and top fundraisers—a measure more standardized across primaries—produces results qualitatively identical to those of the shares-based models

in tables 4 and 5.<sup>31</sup> I also find that the relationship between extremism and electoral and financial performance in primaries also does not differ substantially in districts safe versus unsafe for the party. Moreover, I reproduce tables 3, 4, and 5 using two variations of CF scores that are still reliant on campaign contributions yet may be more similar to the platform-based measure: dynamic CF, which fixes contributors' positions while reestimating recipients each cycle, and DW-DIME, which projects candidates into the DW-NOMINATE space by applying machine learning to contributions and roll-call records. While candidates' DW-DIME scores are more responsive to their districts than their CF scores, other results with DW-DIME and dynamic CF scores are qualitatively similar to those obtained with original CF scores. Finally, I show that the results in table 5 hold for both shares of contributions from individual donors and from PACs.

These results suggest that capturing candidates' positions with their campaign platforms versus contribution networks leads to starkly different conclusions about the current era of

31. Plotting the average positions of primary winners versus losers and top versus non-top primary fundraisers over time in Appendix D also suggests that the average positions of all have become somewhat more extreme in more recent elections.

American politics. However, jointly interpreting the seemingly disparate findings provides new substantive insights regarding nationalization and polarization. The fact that platforms are responsive to the district while contribution networks are unresponsive suggests that candidates' behavior has remained relatively district-tailored despite the nationalization of donor behavior. Within district, electoral and financial penalties to extreme contribution networks but not extreme campaign platforms are consistent with primary voters and donors supporting candidates who enjoy broad support from across the party despite their relatively extreme platforms. At the same time, it is relatively unsurprising to uncover large and significant relationships between candidates' CF scores and fundraising or electoral performances, as CF scores are themselves based on a subset of fundraising, and money is the best available predictor of electoral success (Thomsen 2023). This endogeneity is a formidable obstacle to using contribution-based measures to assess relationships between candidates' positions and aspects of their performance in elections, highlighting a key benefit of a measure based directly on stated campaign positions rather than fundraising.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Candidate positioning has long been a cornerstone of both normative and positive political theory. It is therefore unsurprising that many important debates in American politics continue to revolve around the concept. In our nationalized era, wherein a legislator's first successful election is typically her most difficult, whether the district still matters to candidates has critical implications for quality of dyadic responsiveness. And as primary elections have become increasingly consequential for election outcomes, understanding whether voters and donors reward extremism in primaries can shed light on how partisan primary systems may or may not contribute to congressional polarization. To date, evidence on these questions has been decidedly mixed and relies primarily on one aspect of candidates' activity to estimate their positions: campaign contributions. How responsive are candidates' stated positions to their prospective constituents, and how do candidates who articulate extreme positions fare in primaries?

Leveraging the most comprehensive collection of House campaign website platforms to date, I provide novel evidence that conclusions about the nature of polarization and nationalization in our current era may be highly dependent on how candidates' positions are measured. While the predominant approach of proxying positions with contribution networks suggests that candidates today are unresponsive to the partisan makeup of their districts, measuring positions based directly on campaign platforms shows that both Democrats

and Republicans become more liberal as their districts become more heavily Democratic. Moreover, there appear to be major electoral and financial penalties to extremism in primaries when relying upon the predominant measurement approach, whereas candidates' platforms suggest greater incentives for extremism than for moderation in primaries.

What exactly accounts for differences in platform-based and contribution-based estimates of candidates' positions and, consequently, the results obtained using each? In appendix E, I take the difference between candidates' platform rank ordering and CF score rank ordering to investigate how the extent of measure disagreement may relate to contextual factors of interest. First, I examine the relationship between candidates' rank difference and their logged contributions from out-of-state donors in federal elections over the course of their career, as nationalized attention from strategic partisan donors may pull candidates' contribution network away from their stated positions (Gimpel et al. 2008). Among those who raise up to around \$1 million from out of state, candidates' CF scores become less extreme compared with their platforms as their out of state contributions increase. Beyond \$1 million raised from out of state, however, the relationship reverses. One such case consistent with the latter is Democrat Amy McGrath, whose recent Senate and House challenges of well-known Republican incumbents allowed her to raise millions from outside of Kentucky. Despite adopting a platform in her 2018 run against Representative Andy Barr that was less liberal than 95% of Democrats' platforms, her CF score is more liberal than 70% of Democrats' CF scores.

In addition to financial support from out of state, I also examine whether the rank difference between candidates' platforms and CF scores relates to district partisanship and incumbency status in appendix E. On average, CF scores appear less conservative than campaign platforms in heavily Republican districts and less liberal than campaign platforms in heavily Democratic districts. This comports with the differential district responsiveness of CF scores and platforms reported in table 3: because platforms, but not CF scores, are systematically responsive to district partisanship, the difference between measures is largest in the most heavily partisan districts. Moreover, compared with nonincumbents, incumbents' CF scores appear overwhelmingly more moderate than their platforms, likely because of their higher profile and institutional position attracting broader and more diverse bases of financial support.

While the findings presented here contribute to ongoing debates regarding responsiveness and the role of primary elections in polarization, the disagreement between the positions of candidates' contribution networks and campaign platforms has broader implications for any questions whose

answers rely primarily or solely on the former. Estimating candidates' platform positions allows for not just an assessment of "robustness" of results to the use of multiple measures but also a more direct estimate of the concept of public platform announcement found in classic Downsian and Calvert–Wittman formal models of electoral competition. Future work should continue to investigate the factors shaping candidates' strategic platform positions as well as how other stakeholders respond to candidates' platforms.

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