

The Increasing Importance of Congressional Primary Elections

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In 2024, 70% of elections for the U.S. House were won by more than 15 percentage points, while less than 9% were decided within five percentage points.¹ This reflects broader trends over the last quarter century: an increasing number of congressional districts are all but assured victories for either the Democratic Party or the Republican Party, and very few districts remain truly competitive at the general election stage (Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006; Jacobson 2015). Because most districts now lack robust two-party competition, many House elections are as good as over by the time that the primary stage ends. Accordingly, the popular press, scholars, and reformers have brought increased scrutiny to the role played by primaries in congressional elections.

The key difference between election stages is that most general elections feature one Republican and one Democrat, while most primary elections feature any number of candidates, all running under the same party banner. This typical intraparty structure flows downstream into nearly every aspect of mass and elite behavior associated with primaries. Unlike general elections, voters cannot rely on partisanship as a convenient heuristic — a mental shortcut used to quickly infer candidates' stances and values — nor can candidates simply rely on their party's label as a brand. While its dynamics remain far less understood, the primary stage of congressional elections has received increasing scholarly attention in the years since the publication of this volume's previous edition (e.g. Albarello and Komisarchik 2026; Anderson et al. 2025; Hassell 2023; Hopkins and Sigler 2026; Lockhart and Hill 2023; Meisels 2026a).

In light of high levels of extremism, partisan polarization, and unwillingness to compromise in Congress, primaries have become a frequent target of blame among reformers,

¹https://ballotpedia.org/Election_results,_2024:_Congressional_elections_decided_by_10_percentage_points_or_fewer

pundits, and the public. Fortunately, much effort has been devoted to investigating the different channels through which primary elections may incentivize legislative dysfunction. Throughout the chapter, I devote attention to the most recent evidence regarding the representativeness of primary electorates, the quality of representation enjoyed by primary versus general electorates, the relationship between candidate positioning and primary success, unique features of primary elections which facilitate special interest influence, and whether different primary institutions advantage extreme congressional candidates.

Placing Congressional Primaries in the Current Context

Primary elections in their modern form are roughly a century old, having spread across the states between the late nineteenth century and the 1920s as Progressive-era reformers sought to wrest nominations from party bosses (Olson 2020). They have always varied in form and consequence across states and offices, but for much of the twentieth century, congressional primaries operated as a relatively quiet first round in a largely two-party general election system. That description seems to fit today's politics poorly, as many newsworthy examples of intraparty primaries from recent elections come to mind.

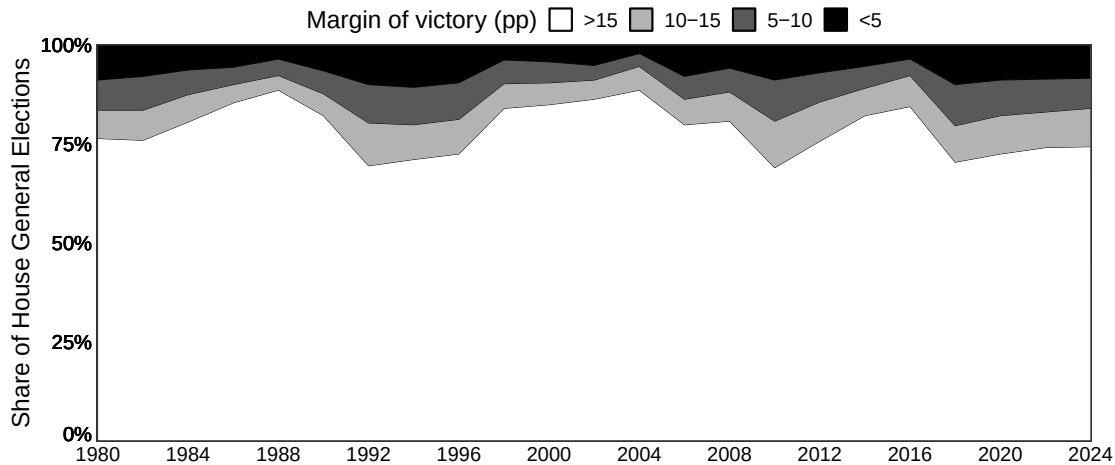
For example, both parties held contentious and nationally covered primaries for the 2026 U.S. Senate race in Texas. On the Democratic side, state representative James Talarico defeated U.S. House member Jasmine Crockett after a battle tinged with racial and gender overtones.² On the Republican side, incumbent John Cornyn finished a mere 1.5 percentage points ahead of Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton — short of the majority Texas requires for an outright primary victory — sending the two to a runoff that Paxton won decisively.

While the general election determines which candidate is ultimately elected to Congress, two-party competition is lacking in most congressional districts. As shown in Figure 1, over the last few decades the overwhelming majority of districts have been essentially safe for one party. Very few congressional races were decided by less than five percentage points, or even within ten percentage points. Across election cycles, at least 70% of general elections are decided by margins of over 15 percentage points.

This raises an important question about whether primaries inject a sufficient amount of competition into House races likely to be won easily by one party. In other words, even if the eventual primary winner is virtually guaranteed to be elected to Congress in November, does competition occur during the primary stage? A simple way to assess competition is to look at how often primaries are *contested* in that they featured two or

²<https://www.politico.com/news/2026/03/02/texas-primary-crockett-talarico-senate-race-00805194>

Figure 1. House General Election Competitiveness Over Time. Most House elections are not close: 70 to 85% of general elections have been decided by more than 15 percentage points in most years since 1980, while races decided within five points are consistently rare.



Sources: Federal Election Commission (1980–2022), Ballotpedia (2024)

more candidates. Reassuringly, Figure 2 shows that primaries held by parties dominant in a district have become more likely to be contested since 2000. Primaries held in swing districts are also contested more often now, while primaries held by parties disadvantaged in lopsided districts have a more inconsistent trend.

Beyond the mere presence of competition in primaries, scholars have also debated its level of strength. Primary electoral competition has been shown to be fiercest in congressional districts with an open seat — i.e. without an incumbent running for reelection (Hirano and Snyder 2019). These races are especially consequential as the vast majority of new members are elected to Congress via open seats. As an alternative to observing candidates’ eventual vote shares, political observers often rely on fundraising performance to gauge viability and competitiveness throughout the course of the election (Thomsen 2025b). Primary competition looks substantially weaker when measured using fundraising shares, particularly in the case of open seats, suggesting that many candidates in these contested primaries never had a real chance of winning (Thomsen 2023).

While most members of Congress are elected via open seats, the number of high-profile primary challenges to incumbents — some successful — seems to be climbing. In 2014, sitting House Majority Leader Eric Cantor lost his Republican primary to Tea Party challenger Dave Brat. Since then, there have been a number of additional primary defeats which have garnered substantial media attention. Joe Crowley’s 2018 loss to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, as well as the 2022 and 2024 losses of progressive incumbents Andy Levin

Figure 2. Primary Contestation by Congressional District Safety Over Time. While the general election is a foregone conclusion in districts safe for one party, the dominant party’s primaries regularly feature more than one candidate. Intraparty contestation has become more common in primaries for parties dominant in a district and for both parties in swing districts.

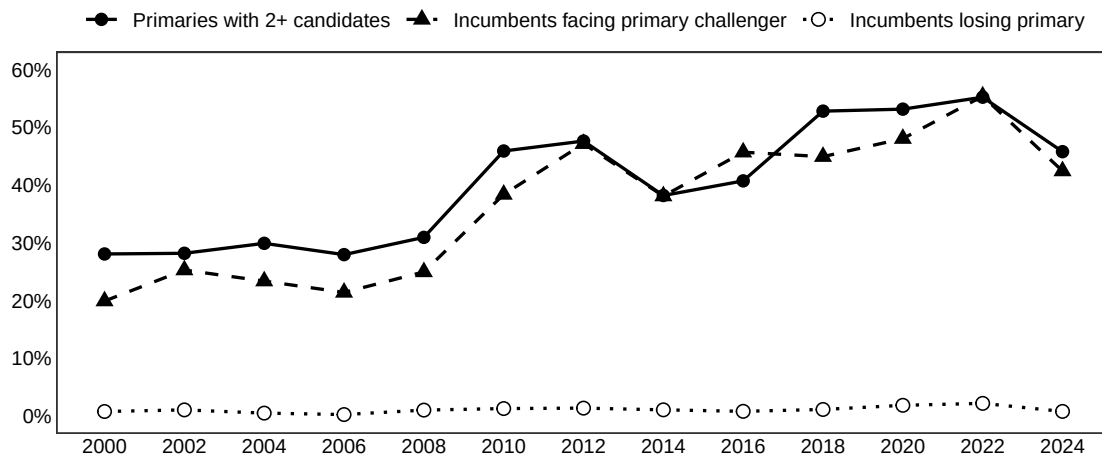


Note: Districts are classified based on presidential two-party vote share. Following Hirano and Snyder (2019), safe districts are those where the party received over 57.5%, unsafe if under 42.5%, and swing if between. Sources: Federal Election Commission (2000-2022), Ballotpedia (2024), Database on Ideology, Money, and Elections (2000-2010), Downballot (2012-2024)

and Jamaal Bowman — the latter two being some of the most expensive House primaries ever held — suggest that more national attention is being paid to the possibility of challenges within parties.

Despite the headlines, the structural “fundamentals” of primaries continue to favor incumbents. Sitting members enjoy huge advantages in name recognition, prior fundraising relationships, party endorsements, and the implicit deference of co-partisan elites. As Figure 3 shows, successful primary challenges to incumbents remain rare: in no cycle since 2000 have as many as 3% of House incumbents lost their primary. What has changed is the frequency with which incumbents are challenged at all. Roughly one in five incumbents faced any primary opponent in 2000, whereas now it is common for almost half of sitting incumbents to face a primary challenge. This follows the overall increase in primary contestation over the period, suggesting that the trends seen in Figure 2 are not solely driven by open seat primaries.

Figure 3. Primary Contestation, Challenges, and Defeats Over Time. Since 2000, House primaries have increasingly featured two or more candidates, and incumbents face primary challengers more often, even though successful primarying still occurs rarely.



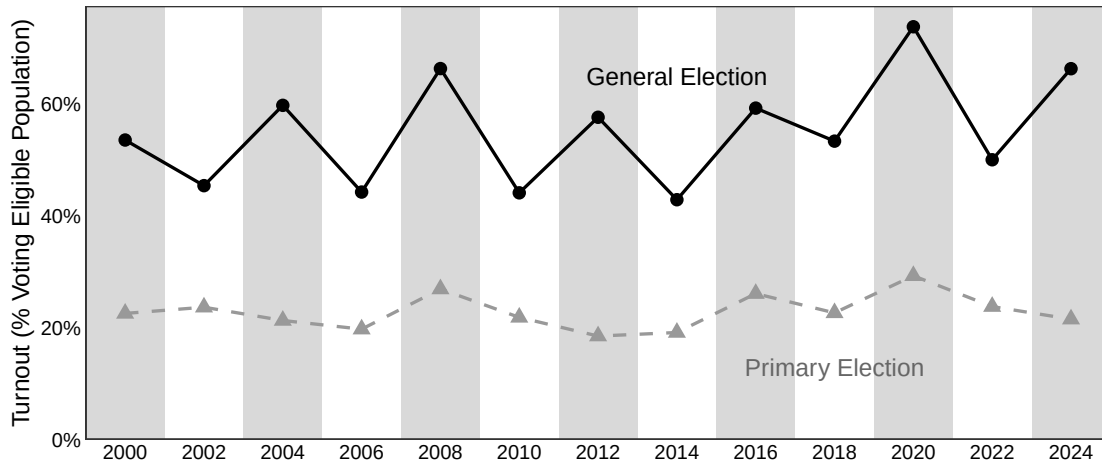
Sources: Federal Election Commission (2000–2022), Ballotpedia (2024)

The Primary Electorate

The intraparty nature of most primaries creates a qualitatively different task for voters. The single most powerful cue voters rely upon in November — partisanship — is unhelpful for distinguishing between two Democrats or two Republicans. Identifying differences between co-partisans is challenging because candidates often share the same broad coalitions which characterize major political parties today and hold overlapping issue stances (Colao et al. 2025). This challenge is reinforced by the poor information environment of most primaries, characterized by lower news coverage and lower voter attention than general elections (Bawn et al. 2019; Boatright 2014a). Voters in primaries must therefore work substantially harder to learn about the typically smaller differences between candidates. In practice, this opacity serves to bolster incumbents and other well-funded candidates who are able to cultivate stronger name recognition than their opponents (Ansolabehere et al. 2007; Burden 2002; Kalla and Broockman 2018).

Taken together with voters’ perception of far lower stakes, these factors contribute to low turnout in primary elections compared to general elections (Gerber et al. 2017). Figure 4 plots the share of the *voting eligible population* — all adults who are legally permitted to vote, including those who are unregistered — who turned out in primary versus general elections for the Senate. In every election year since 2000, primary turnout is consistently less than half that of general turnout. Of particular note is the fact that while general

Figure 4. Turnout in Primary and General Stage of Senate Elections. Primary turnout has hovered around 20% of the voting eligible population since 2000, while general turnout never dropped below 40% and has reached as high as 70%.



Note: Includes states holding Senate primaries that year. Presidential election years shaded. Source: States United Democracy Center.

election turnout in the last two midterms has been particularly elevated, primary turnout remained relatively stagnant over time.

The stakes of that low participation are easiest to see in a case where a small electorate produced a large outcome. In June 2018, Joe Crowley — a ten-term incumbent, chair of the House Democratic Caucus, and widely discussed as a potential successor to Nancy Pelosi — lost the Democratic nomination in New York’s 14th district to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a 28-year-old first-time candidate.³ Ocasio-Cortez won 57.5% to 42.5%. What makes the race instructive is not the margin but the denominator: roughly 27,800 votes were cast in total, out of some 236,000 registered Democrats in the district, for a turnout of about 12%.⁴ In a district so lopsidedly Democratic that the November result was never in doubt, the effective selection of a member of Congress was made by roughly one in eight registered co-partisans. Crowley had substantially outspent his challenger and enjoyed every structural advantage catalogued above. Low turnout does not automatically produce upsets — as Figure 3 shows, incumbents almost always survive — but it does mean that the electorate deciding most House races is small enough that an organized, motivated minority can occasionally overturn expectations.

³<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/26/nyregion/joseph-crowley-ocasio-cortez-democratic-primary.html>

⁴<https://www.gothamgazette.com/state/7774-a-closer-look-at-voter-turnout-in-2018-new-york-congressional-primaries/>

If primaries tend to be low participation affairs where most of the public perceives lower electoral stakes, then who *does* turn out to vote? According to conventional wisdom, they should constitute a highly unrepresentative share of voters. Because informational burdens are high and ideological stakes are low compared to general elections, primary voters should be those who are highly informed and civically engaged, and have strong and distinct policy preferences. In other words, the kinds of voters who actually care enough to show up for congressional primaries should be different than those who do not. Combined with the foregone conclusion of most general elections, a skewed primary electorate has the potential to distort legislative representation by helping out-of-step candidates secure a party's nomination.

While this logic is compelling, the most recent evidence is quite mixed. On the one hand, some studies suggest that primary voters are more ideologically extreme than the general electorate — even in cases where party registration is not required for primary participation — and they prefer to support more extreme primary candidates (Aranson and Ordeshook 1972; Hill 2015). In contrast, other work suggests that primary voters' demographics and policy preferences are more similar to those of general election voters', with the largest differences being primary voters' greater interest and involvement in politics (Sides et al. 2020).

Even if primary voters were uniformly more extreme than general election voters, this would not necessarily imply that they would choose to support more extreme primary candidates. Instrumental considerations about electability may also be salient in primaries, which are just the first stage in a sequential, two-stage election. This creates incentives for extreme primary voters to strategically support moderate primary candidates capable of winning the general election (Adams and Merrill 2014; Hirano et al. 2010; Lockhart and Hill 2023). However, recent experimental evidence suggests that individuals actually view congressional primary candidates as less electable if they are more moderate — as well as if they are weaker fundraisers, non-white, or women — which mirrors the mixed findings regarding extreme nominees' performance in general elections (Anderson et al. 2025; Hall 2015; Hassell and Visalvanich 2024; Utych 2020).

Congressional Candidate Strategy

While voters face a difficult task in primaries, candidates do as well. Running for Congress is costly in time, money, and personal exposure, and the pool of people willing to do so has shrunk in important ways as polarization has grown. Recent research documents a striking pattern: ideological moderates are increasingly opting not to run for Congress

at all (Hall 2019; Thomsen 2017). The drivers are partly institutional (the devaluation of legislative office relative to other careers) and partly social (a sense that Congress is a hostile environment for those uninterested in confrontation). The decision to run for Congress is itself a strategic calculation, and one that primary politics shapes substantially.

Candidates stay in congressional primaries longer and win the nomination more often when they enjoy greater party support (Hassell 2016). Hassell (2018) shows that this influence operates well before votes are cast: party elites shape the field through recruitment, endorsement, and the coordination of donors and staff, such that the “invisible primary” does much of the work that formal party organizations once did openly. Unsurprisingly, this creates apprehension to run for Congress among moderate state legislators who are less likely to believe that they can win their party’s primary (Thomsen 2014). The result is that the candidate pool itself, and therefore the menu of options presented to voters, is already polarized.

Candidates who do enter face a dilemma that is unique to two-stage elections: whether to make appeals that they believe will go over best with their primary electorate or their general electorate. The salience of each constituency likely differs by the district’s partisan makeup: in safe districts, the primary is the stage that matters and the general electorate is disproportionately composed of copartisans, whereas in competitive districts candidates are likely more cross-pressured (Lockhart and Hill 2023). In theory, candidates could maximize their vote share in both stages by adopting more extreme preferences in the primary election and then moderating for the general. However, this behavior can result in allegations of “flip-flopping”, leading to perceptions of untrustworthiness (Doherty, Dowling, and Miller 2016; Hummel 2010). In practice, candidates’ and legislators’ behavior tends to be highly stable across time, suggesting that the potential benefits of dynamic adaptation do not outweigh the reputational costs (Meisels 2026a; Poole 2007).

Legislators and candidates appear to resolve this dilemma by predominantly siding with their prospective primary constituency — that is, their co-partisan electorate — over their general constituency. Legislators’ *roll-call voting* — the recorded floor votes that make up a member’s public legislative record — better reflects the preferences of the constituents who share their partisan identification (Barber 2016; Brady, Han, and Pope 2007; Clinton 2006; Kujala 2020). This is consistent with a series of revealing surveys described in a recent book by Anderson, Butler, and Harbridge-Yong (2020). Despite the infrequency with which legislators face real threat of primarying — as well as the fact that most primary challenges are not ideological in nature (Boatright 2014b) — they fear incurring electoral costs for bipartisan compromise during their primary elections. That fear translates into observable behavior: legislators’ roll-call voting becomes more partisan and more ideo-

logically polarized in the run-up to their primary date, especially among members representing safe districts (Fowler and Fu 2025). Taken together, this suggests that legislators' primary constituencies receive stronger representation than their general constituencies.

Legislators behave as if they will face retribution for moderation in their primaries, but do they really? There is some evidence that extremism is beneficial in congressional primaries. Candidates who are more extreme have been found to fare modestly better in primary elections compared to those who are more moderate (King, Orlando, and Sparks 2016; Meisels 2026a). Looking beyond their overall left-right positioning, primary candidates must also consider which issues to campaign upon. In addition to issues of likely importance to their districts or to them personally, campaign agendas are shaped by major national political events and perceived popularity of their party's stances on salient issues. For example, after the negative response to the Supreme Court's 2022 decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* manifested via public opinion polling, media coverage, and electoral outcomes, Republican primary candidates in 2024 increasingly obfuscated on abortion while Democrats campaigned heavily on the issue (Clark et al. 2023; Gardner, McCrary, and Spencer 2025; Meisels 2025b).

Taken together, numerous aspects of primaries seem to incentivize and exacerbate polarized behavior in Congress. First, moderate would-be contenders stay out of the primary field due to perceived poor party fit (Hall 2019; Thomsen 2017, 2014). Legislators who are cross-pressured between two electorates tend to side with their primary constituency over their general constituency, as they fear the former (Anderson, Butler, and Harbridge-Yong 2020; Barber 2016). Finally, extreme candidates generally perform better in primaries (King, Orlando, and Sparks 2016; Meisels 2026a).

Money in Congressional Primaries

Campaigns, and especially successful campaigns, have become extraordinarily expensive to run. Nearly every election cycle makes headlines about the various financial records broken: fundraising, total money spent by candidates, and total outside spending. Without a sizable war chest, it is impossible to design and run campaign advertisements or to hire campaign staff who are critical for strategic advising, communications, and event coordination. However, the actual goods and services that money can buy are not the only reason that fundraising matters. Campaign funding signals strength, viability, and electability not only to voters, but also to journalists who report on the horse-race, and to would-be opponents on the fence about getting in the race themselves (Thomsen 2025b). As the best dynamic pre-election performance indicator, projecting strong financial sup-

port can deter quality competitors from entering and encourage existing competitors to drop out (Box-Steffensmeier 1996; Epstein and Zemsky 1995). Garnering substantial contributions is critical for any serious congressional candidate.

Group-centric theories of political parties posit that primaries are an advantageous stage for special interests to attempt to exert influence over election outcomes. The extended party network view of parties, associated with scholars at the University of California Los Angeles, argues that parties are best understood as coalitions of intense *policy demanders* — activists, interest groups, and donors who care intensely about a particular policy goal and try to secure nominations for candidates committed to it — rather than as formal party organizations led by candidates (Bawn et al. 2012; Karol 2009; Koger, Masket, and Noel 2009; Masket 2009). These policy demanders are thought to seek to control nominations by bolstering true champions of their cause, contrary to what most voters would prefer if they were fully informed during the primary election. Whereas most members of the public care little about the type of co-partisan who wins the primary as long as the co-partisan wins in November, policy-focused elites care intensely about the type of co-partisan who is nominated and ultimately makes it into office, allowing them to take advantage of voters' greater indifference at the primary stage.

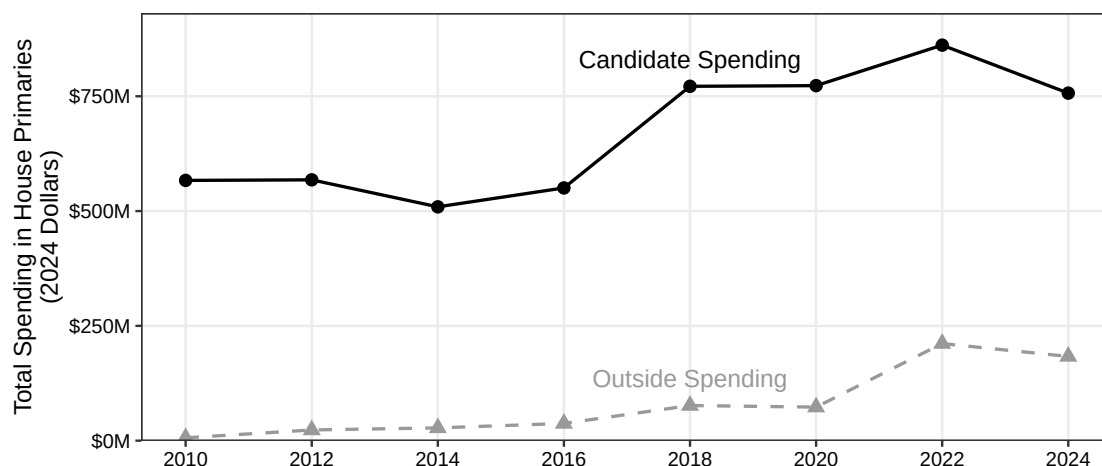
In which congressional primaries should financial contributors get involved? The answer depends upon the type of contributor. In general elections, members of extended party networks such as individual donors, ideological interest groups, and party-connected organizations tend to contribute in competitive races widely perceived to be important for determining control of congressional chambers (Barber, Canes-Wrone, and Thrower 2017; Barber and Eatough 2019; Gimpel, Lee, and Pearson-Merkowitz 2008; Herrnson 2009). Conversely, less polarized contributors such as corporate *political action committees* (PACs) — the legally separate committees through which corporations, unions, and interest groups make campaign contributions — are known to be access-seeking rather than partisan, leading them to contribute in safe races where the outcome is relatively certain *a priori* (Bonica 2013; Herndon 1982).

However, participation incentives are a bit less clear in primary elections. While corporate PACs can similarly pursue access to sitting legislators by contributing in safe districts where no serious primary challenger files to run, forecasting which primaries will be highly competitive poses a real challenge for more ideological contributors who do want to make an electoral impact. Furthermore, there is a question of whether partisan organizations should even demonstrate partiality toward some members of their party over others. For example, formal party organizations typically do not back primary challengers against their own party's incumbents. Even in the case of open seats, one can imagine why a party

would not want to back one primary candidate over another, as a non-backed candidate may become the nominee, win the election, and join the party’s caucus in Congress. In practice, these disparate goals manifest into party-connected donors getting involved in primaries in both safe and competitive districts, and individual donors are overall less enthusiastic about participating in House primaries than generals (Hassell 2023; Meisels, Clinton, and Huber 2024).

Beyond choosing in which congressional primaries to get involved, a critical question is which primary candidates receive funding from campaign contributors. Overall, more extreme candidates tend to exhibit slightly stronger fundraising performances in primaries, but this sets aside the substantial and interesting differences in giving behavior across contributors (Meisels 2026a). Individual donors are known to be ideologically extreme, and they prefer primary candidates at least as extreme as themselves, all else equal (Barber 2016; Meisels, Clinton, and Huber 2024). Single-issue interest groups — such as the National Rifle Association or Planned Parenthood — identify and support candidates who prioritize their issue during the primary campaign (Karol 2015; Meisels 2025a). Finally, corporations in unpoliticized industries seek to forge relationships with policymakers who are the most instrumental for achieving their business goals. This leads their PACs to target incumbents in safe districts, moderates, members of the majority party in a given Congress, and key standing committee members overseeing their industry (Barber and Eatough 2019; Fourirnaies and Hall 2014; Meisels 2026b; Powell and Grimmer 2016).

Figure 5. Campaign versus Outside Spending in House Primaries. While campaigns’ own expenditures have consistently dominated independent expenditures, outside spending rose to \$200 million in 2022 and remained elevated in 2024.



Note: Inflation-adjusted, primary-designated campaign operating expenditures and independent expenditures.

Source: Federal Election Commission.

Direct contributions are not the only way for policy demanders to financially support their preferred candidates. Over fifteen years have passed since the Supreme Court's decision in *Citizens United v. FEC*, which removed limitations on campaign expenditures made independently of candidates or political parties. This outside spending receives substantial attention in the popular press during each election cycle, and is done largely by two types of organizations. The first are *super PACs*, or political committees that solely make independent expenditures and are therefore not subject to limits on fundraising nor spending. The second are 501(c) nonprofit corporations for whom political and electoral activities cannot constitute their primary purpose, colloquially referred to as "dark money" groups because they are not required to disclose their donors. While scholars have studied the impact of the *Citizens United* decision on general election outcomes, overall spending, and enactment of legislation, little work has specifically focused on independent expenditures in primary elections (but see Boatright, Malbin, and Glavin 2016).

Figure 5 hints at why this might be the case. Until very recently, less than \$100 million in independent expenditures were made in a given House primary cycle, whereas spending directly by primary candidates was north of \$500 million. In effect, this meant that large quantities of outside spending were relatively uncommon in most congressional primaries. Heavily partisan "dark money" groups, super PACs, and political parties who are the predominant independent exenditors likely prioritized helping their party win competitive races, whereas much less is at stake in intraparty politics. However, the elevated levels of outside spending in 2022 and 2024 House primaries suggest that some policy demanders now see intraparty competition differently — i.e. important enough to devote hundreds of millions of dollars.

The 2024 Democratic primary in New York's 16th district illustrates what that shift looks like on the ground. Jamaal Bowman, a two-term incumbent and member of the progressive "Squad," was challenged by Westchester County Executive George Latimer. The race became the most expensive House primary in U.S. history, drawing roughly \$24.8 million in television and digital advertising alone. About \$14.8 million of that — roughly 60% of all advertising in the race — came from a single outside group, United Democracy Project, a super PAC affiliated with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.⁵ Latimer won by more than 17 points. Two features of the case are worth flagging. First, advertising by a single organization swamped advertising by the candidates themselves, as well as other outside organizations. Second, the group's advertising largely avoided the foreign policy dispute that motivated its involvement, focusing instead on Bowman's record on domestic issues and his relationship with the district. An updated assessment

⁵<https://adimpact.com/blogs/blog/ny-cd-16-primary-2024>

of independent expenditures during congressional primaries is an avenue ripe for future scholarship.

Senate Primaries and the Bicameral Difference

The U.S. Congress consists of two chambers, yet more of the evidence drawn on so far has come from the House context than from the Senate. The large number of congressional districts and synchronized two-year terms make systematic study of House elections especially tractable. However, elections for each chamber differ in ways that are substantial enough for some of the patterns outlined above to characterize House primaries better than Senate primaries.

The most basic difference is the electorate. Senate primaries are statewide contests, which means that the co-partisan electorate is typically far larger and considerably more heterogeneous than that of a House district. A House electorate is relatively geographically compact, with some districts contained entirely within one city or, conversely, spanning only rural areas. A Senate electorate generally spans urban, suburban, and rural areas. The fact that congressional districts are smaller and must be contiguous means that House electorates tend to be more politically homogeneous than Senate electorates. In the context of primaries, this likely makes it more difficult for insurgent primary candidates to win with a narrow coalition in Senate elections, as the threshold necessary to swing a statewide result is higher than the threshold necessary to swing a district-level result.

The second difference is money. Because Senate candidates must campaign for an entire state, often across multiple media markets, the fundraising required for viability is dramatically higher than in a House race. This matters for the arguments developed above about who (believes they) can launch a serious candidacy. If moderates are already disinclined to enter House primaries, the capital requirements of a Senate primary raise that bar further, and they raise it selectively: candidates with existing donor networks, statewide name recognition, or personal wealth clear it more easily than those without (Thomsen 2025a; Mundy and Thomsen N.d.). It also changes the calculus for outside groups. A super PAC seeking to influence House primaries can be decisive with a few million dollars, as the Bowman case suggests. However, groups and individuals hoping to make an impact in Senate primaries will need much deeper pockets and have incentives to concentrate their involvement in a very small number of races.

Third, Senate primaries attract more *national* money than House primaries. Senate races tend to be higher-profile than House races, making it more likely that individuals will learn about a given Senate race — which is a prerequisite to donating. As a result,

individual donors give across state lines at high rates in Senate races (Keena 2024; Sievert and Mathiasen 2023). Likewise, national interest groups may be more motivated to get involved in Senate races because a single Senate seat is a much larger share of its chamber than a House seat, and each senator enjoys procedural rights not extended to each House member. As a result, Senate candidates' financial constituency and electoral constituency may overlap less than House candidates'.

Finally, six-year terms change the rhythm of primary threat. In the leadup to their primary elections, both House and Senate members take more partisan roll-call votes (Fowler and Fu 2025). However, a House member facing reelection every two years is almost perpetually in the shadow of the next primary given how early modern campaigns tend to begin. A senator has considerably more room to take a politically costly vote early in a term and hope it has faded by the time the next primary arrives. Whether senators actually make use of that longer time horizon is an open question.

Race and Gender in Congressional Primaries

The 119th congress is the most racially diverse and gender-diverse in U.S. history. Nevertheless, its demographics remain highly unrepresentative of broader national demographics. Non-white members of the House and Senate make up about a quarter of Congress, and fewer than 30% of members are women. Given their increasing importance in shaping the outcomes of elections for Congress, and therefore the composition of Congress, how do race and gender operate in congressional primaries?

The first mechanism is candidate emergence. Long before voters cast a ballot, the pool of individuals who consider running has already been shaped by who is recruited, who believes they can win, and who can absorb the personal costs of a campaign. Historically, women remain less likely to be encouraged to run and more likely to weigh the demands of congressional service against family obligations (Silbermann 2015). Even as recruitment of women candidates has increased substantially over the past couple of decades, a large gender gap in interest in running for office remains (Fox and Lawless 2024). In a similar vein, racial minorities are significantly less likely to run for office than their white counterparts (Fraga, Gonzalez, and Shah 2020). Because entry decisions are made under uncertainty about the primary, beliefs about how a primary electorate will respond to a given candidate shape the field before a single vote is cast.

A related mechanism, then, is electability perception. As noted previously, experimental work finds that individuals perceive otherwise-identical primary candidates as less likely to win a general election when those candidates are racial minorities or women

(Anderson et al. 2025; Hassell and Visalvanich 2024). This is a distinctively two-stage problem that applies to primaries. In a general election, a voter who prefers her party's candidate has little reason to game out that candidate's appeal to others. In a primary, strategic voters may attempt to forecast the general electorate. If their forecasts embed assumptions about which candidates others will accept as nominees, then the primary outcome will be biased against racial and gender minorities even in the absence of genuine voter biases. Voters may support a candidate they believe others will reject less often, producing a self-fulfilling result.

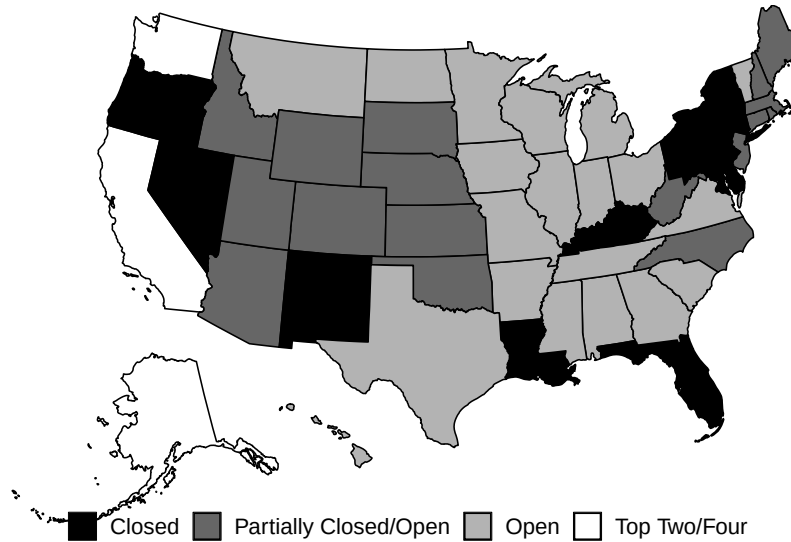
Finally, we can consider the role of gatekeeping by donors and party networks. If, as the extended party network account holds, nominations are substantially influenced by activists, donors, and party-connected elites, then any systematic bias in how those actors evaluate candidates will differentially shape which candidates receive support over the course of a campaign. Despite winning elections at similar rates to men, women face persistently stronger primary competition, suggesting that women must exert more campaigning effort to achieve the same election results as men (Lawless and Pearson 2008). Evidence regarding fundraising dynamics is somewhat more mixed, however. While white individuals and men are highly overrepresented in the donor pool and are more likely to give to candidates who share those characteristics, women and minority candidates do not receive less support from party-connected donors (Barber, Butler, and Preece 2016; Grumbach and Sahn 2020; Hassell and Visalvanich 2019).

Two cases already discussed in this chapter provide instructive examples of some of these dynamics. Ocasio-Cortez's 2018 win in the Democratic primary for NY-14 unseated a white incumbent in a majority-minority district. The 2026 Texas Democratic Senate primary points the other way. Jasmine Crockett, a Black woman and one of the most nationally visible members of the House Democratic caucus, lost the nomination to James Talarico, a white state legislator, in a state where Democratic primary voters are majority non-white.⁶ News coverage and advertising in that race turned heavily on electability — specifically, on which candidate could win a statewide general election in Texas — which is precisely the mechanism the experimental literature identifies as disadvantaging women and non-white candidates.⁷

⁶<https://www.uh.edu/hobby/primary2026/senate.pdf>

⁷<https://www.tpr.org/government-politics/2026-03-03/james-talarico-holds-slim-lead-against-jasmine-crockett-in-democratic-primary-for-u-s-senate>

Figure 6. Congressional Primary Institutions in 2024. Because parties in each state are free to adopt their own nomination procedures, primary openness varies substantially across the United States. While some states only allow voters to participate in a primary if they are registered with that party, other states hold a single primary in which all candidates and voters may participate.



Note: Partially closed and open to unaffiliated are classified as partially closed/open. Source: National Council of State Legislatures.

Primary Rules, Reform, and the Limits of Institutional Change

Because states and parties have broad leeway over the conduction of their own primaries, the rules governing primary elections vary substantially across the country. This also makes them a perennial target of reform efforts. Figure 6 visualizes just some of the geographic variation in primary systems which were used to nominate congressional candidates in 2024. One dimension which distinguishes primary institutions from one another is the degree of openness. *Closed* primaries, such as those used in Oregon, restrict participation to voters formally registered with the relevant party. *Open* primaries allow any voter to participate in either party's primary on Election Day, which includes some states like Texas which do not have party registration at all. Many other states have primary systems considered *semi-closed* or *semi-open*, allowing unaffiliated individuals — but not those registered with the other party — to vote in a primary.

More recently, a handful of states have further expanded their primaries to be fully nonpartisan. In contrast to open primaries, which allow voters to participate in whichever primary they choose, *top-N* primaries combine all candidates from all parties on a single ballot, with the leading vote-getters advancing to the general election regardless of

party. This allows for multiple candidates of the same party to advance to the general election, whereas traditional primary systems yield one nominee of each party. Washington and California have a top-two primary system which propels the top two primary vote-getters to the general election. Most recently, Alaska has adopted a top-four primary system which precedes a general election determined by *ranked choice voting*, in which voters rank the candidates and last-place finishers are eliminated in successive rounds until one candidate holds a majority.

Reformers have advanced a coherent theory of why these rules should matter: more permissive primaries should expand the effective electorate, dilute the influence of extreme partisans, and deliver more moderate nominees and a more functional Congress. The empirical record, however, has consistently disappointed reformers' expectations. Studies of state-level variation in primary restrictiveness generally find weak and inconsistent effects on legislator ideology, primary turnout, and the success of moderate candidates (Rogowski and Langella 2015; Hill 2015).

California and Washington offer the clearest test available, because both replaced conventional partisan primaries with top-two systems — Washington in 2008, California in 2012. Two decades later, the evidence delivers a mixed verdict at best. Studies of California find little to no effect on the ideology of the legislators elected under the nonpartisan primary relative to the partisan system that preceded it (McGhee et al. 2014; Ahler, Citrin, and Lenz 2016; Bullock and Clinton 2011).

What the reform did change is the shape of the general election ballot: in heavily one-sided districts, top-two regularly produces November contests between two candidates of the same party. That outcome was intended — it was meant to give the district's minority-party voters a say in a race that would otherwise be decided in the primary — but its observed effect runs partly the other way. Patterson (2020) shows that when no candidate of a voter's party reaches the general election, many of those voters simply skip the race, a phenomenon known as *roll-off*. The reform's central mechanism for empowering minority-party and independent voters instead unintentionally depressed their participation.

Why have primary institutional reformers' aspirations failed to survive contact with empirical evidence? Several mechanisms are likely at play. First, the ideological gap between the average primary voter and the average general election voter of the same party seems smaller than reformers assume, so opening up the primary changes the electorate's composition less than expected (Sides et al. 2020). Second, even if reforms lead candidates to anticipate a more moderate primary electorate, the underlying incentives to appeal to donors, activists, and party networks remain unchanged — especially if larger, all-party primary fields increase voters' cognitive load — leaving candidate and legislator behav-

ior unchanged in turn. Third, given that most congressional districts are heavily partisan, open primaries will continue to draw overwhelmingly on majority party voters as supporters of the minority party have little incentive to participate.

More broadly, primary systems vary along many dimensions at once, which may explain why reforms targeting a single feature accomplish little. Primary calendars are themselves rules: states vote anywhere from March to September, giving some electorates months more exposure to the campaign than others and — because the general election date is fixed — compressing the fall campaign in late-primary states. Ballot access requirements — petition signatures, filing fees, residency rules — tilt the candidate pool in ways primary type alone does not capture. And rules for managing intraparty conflict, such as runoff thresholds and pre-primary conventions, add further variation missed by standard measures of primary restrictiveness. Reforms that change one element while leaving the rest untouched may be too piecemeal to matter.

Broader Implications and Future Directions

Primary elections are now a key electoral mechanism in congressional politics. The primary stage shapes who initially enters Congress, who remains in office, how legislators represent their constituents, and how the institution functions. As few districts remain competitive for both parties in November, a primary challenge becomes the object of more legislators' fear — regardless of how realistic the threat is in reality. The aspects which distinguish intraparty primaries from typical general elections likely serve to enhance the ability of special interests to exert influence. Moreover, to date the evidence on the efficacy of primary system reforms suggests that opening the institution does little to alter participation or outcomes.

The shadow of primary elections may extend beyond who gets elected. Within Congress, the perceived threat of primary challenge may contribute to the reshaping of relationships between rank-and-file members and party leaders. Members increasingly view cooperation with leadership as a potential primary liability, and party leaders, in turn, have shifted toward forms of agenda control — restrictive rules, condensed legislative calendars, expanded use of suspension of the rules, and the avoidance of recorded votes on contentious issues — that protect members from being cast as defectors (Curry and Lee 2020; Binder 2015; Sinclair 2016). The decline of so-called “regular order” has certainly not been caused by primary elections, but the primary threat helps explain its utility: leaders who shield their members from politically dangerous votes may be responding in part to legislators' fear of retribution for engaging in bipartisanship. The result is a chamber that is more

disciplined on roll calls, engages in more party messaging, and is less publicly hospitable to the kinds of cross-party deals that would once have been routine (Lee 2016, 2018).

Beyond Congress, the Trump era has highlighted an interbranch dynamic. It is highly unusual for sitting presidents to become involved in congressional primaries, yet this has become a routine feature of Republican politics in recent years (Heseltine 2023). The 2026 Texas Senate runoff provides a clear illustration. Cornyn, a four-term incumbent and former Senate Republican whip, finished barely ahead of Paxton in the March first round — itself a striking result given the incumbency advantages catalogued earlier — and Texas law sent the race to a May runoff because no candidate won a majority. Cornyn's side substantially outspent Paxton's, by a margin reported at close to nine to one across the race as a whole.⁸ Nevertheless, President Trump backed Paxton a week before the runoff, and Cornyn lost by roughly 28 points. The use of (and threat of withholding) presidential endorsements as a tool to discipline co-partisans has potential implications for separation of powers. Members who fear losing their primaries to a presidentially backed challenger may have stronger incentives to support presidential priorities and weaker incentives to engage in independent oversight.

While the past decade of scholarship has provided much-needed insight into the dynamics of congressional primaries, a number of critical areas for future research remain. First, it is unclear whether low turnout in primaries due to voter perception of low stakes is due to an actual lack of policy differences between primary opponents, lack of information on differences, or apathy about policy differences in the absence of party heuristics. Second, in light of relatively modest differences between primary and general electorates, more studies are needed regarding whether legislators are preoccupied with their primary constituency because they anticipate the activation of a small but intense sub-constituency reaction to bipartisanship or moderation — for example, primary donors or activists. Third, the high volume of independent expenditures in the 2022 and 2024 congressional primaries raises the question of whether these years were anomalies, or whether outside spending will soon become as common in primary elections as it is in general elections.

Discussion Questions

1. Why have many legislators become preoccupied with appeasing their primary constituencies?

⁸<https://www.texastribune.org/2026/05/26/texas-john-cornyn-ken-paxton-us-senate-republican-primary-runoff/>

2. Voters in primary elections cannot rely on partisanship as a heuristic. What challenges does this create for voting behavior, and how does this affect the behavior of other actors?
3. Are primary voters different from general election voters? If so, how?
4. Which aspects of primaries create incentives for polarized behavior in Congress?
5. How does the behavior of different types of campaign contributors — formal party organizations, individuals, corporate PACs, and issue groups — differ across primary versus general congressional elections?
6. Reform proposals to “open up” primaries (top-two, top-four, ranked-choice voting, etc.) have generally produced smaller effects than advocates predicted. Why might institutional changes to primary rules have less impact on representation than reformers assume?
7. Senate primaries differ from House primaries in the size of the electorate, the cost of campaigning, the length of the term, and the visibility of the race. Which of these differences do you expect to matter most for the kinds of candidates who win Senate nominations, and why?

Figure Alt Text

Figure 1. Stacked area chart showing the share of U.S. House general elections in each margin-of-victory category from 1980 to 2024, shaded from white for the widest margins to black for the narrowest. The largest band throughout is races won by more than 15 points, covering roughly 70 to 85 percent of seats in most years. Races decided by fewer than five points make up only a thin band at the top, never exceeding about 11 percent. The overall pattern is that lopsided House races have been the norm for four decades, with only modest fluctuation.

Figure 2. Line chart showing the share of House primaries with two or more same-party candidates from 2000 to 2024, split by whether the district is safe, swing, or unsafe for the party, classified by the district’s two-party presidential vote share. Through 2008 the three lines sit close together, between the low 20s and the high 30s in percent. All three rise sharply starting in 2010. From 2016 onward, safe and swing districts both stay above 50 percent, with swing districts peaking near 65 percent in 2022 and safe districts near 58 percent; by 2024 the two are essentially tied at about 50 percent. Unsafe districts rise the

least and end the period around 37 percent. The takeaway is that contested primaries have become dramatically more common everywhere except where the nomination is worth the least, and the safe districts where the primary effectively decides the seat now see contested races at nearly the same rate as swing districts.

Figure 3. Line chart tracking three measures of House primary competition from 2000 to 2024. The share of primaries with two or more candidates rises from about 28 percent in 2000 to a peak of about 55 percent in 2022, then eases to about 46 percent in 2024. The share of incumbents facing a primary challenger rises even more steeply, from about 20 percent to a peak of about 55 percent in 2022, before falling back to about 42 percent in 2024. The share of incumbents who actually lose their primary is flat and near zero throughout, never exceeding about 2 percent. The takeaway is that incumbents are challenged far more often than they once were but are almost never defeated.

Figure 4. Line chart comparing turnout in primary and general elections, as a percentage of the voting eligible population, in states holding Senate races between 2000 and 2024, with gray vertical bands marking presidential election years. The general election line fluctuates between roughly 43 and 74 percent, peaking in the shaded presidential years. The primary line stays within a narrow band of roughly 18 to 29 percent across the entire period. The gap between the two lines never closes, and the primary line shows only a muted response to the recent surges in general election turnout.

Figure 5. Line chart of inflation-adjusted spending in U.S. House primaries by cycle, 2010 to 2024, in 2024 dollars. Spending by candidates' own campaigns runs between roughly 510 and 570 million dollars through 2016, then steps up to between about 755 and 860 million dollars from 2018 onward. Independent expenditures by outside groups grow slowly from about 10 million to about 80 million dollars per cycle through 2020, then jump to about 215 million dollars in 2022 and remain elevated at about 190 million dollars in 2024. The takeaway is that outside money in House primaries was a marginal factor until 2022.

Figure 6. Map of the United States shading each of the 50 states by the type of primary system it used to nominate congressional candidates in 2024: closed (10 states, shaded black), partially closed or open (17 states, dark gray), open (20 states, light gray), and top-two or top-four (3 states, white). Open primaries are common across the South and Midwest, closed primaries cluster in the Mid-Atlantic but appear in every region, and the top-two and top-four states are California, Washington, and Alaska. The takeaway is that primary rules are set state by state and vary widely, with neighboring states frequently using different systems.

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