

# Political polarization and candidates in the 2016 congressional primaries

By: Elaine Kamarck and Alexander R. Podkul with Nick Zeppos

## INTRODUCTION



**Elaine C. Kamarck** is a Senior Fellow in the Governance Studies program as well as the Director of the Center for Effective Public Management at the Brookings Institution.



**Alexander Podkul** is a PhD student studying political science at Georgetown University.

**Nick Zeppos** is a Research Assistant in Governance Studies at the Brookings Institution.

**T**he 2010 midterm elections will be remembered for the emergence of the Tea Party, a faction within the Republican Party that won enough Republican primaries and congressional seats to have a profound and far reaching impact on the GOP and on American politics. Ever since then, American politics has been characterized by even greater levels of political polarization. Initially, the hostile and polarized politics ushered in by the 2010 midterms seemed to affect only congressional Republicans. But with the 2016 presidential primaries, it became clear that presidential level races were affected as well.

By taking the party establishment and the rest of the country by surprise, the Tea Party victories brought attention to congressional primaries, though historically they have been the stepchild of election studies and of journalistic interest. Congressional primaries take place over the course of eight-to-nine months every two years. Most are barely covered by the press unless a long-term or scandal-ridden incumbent is defeated. Since that rarely happens, they tend to be ignored by the press. In recent years, the situation has gotten worse as the number of reporters who cover state and local politics has declined.<sup>1</sup>

With scant coverage of these primaries, it is no wonder that voter turnout is very low. In 2016, turnout in congressional primaries (as a proportion of the voting age population) averaged 18 percent in the 80 districts where there was a contested primary in each party, and just 10 percent in the 141 districts where there was a contested primary in only one party.<sup>2</sup> In 41 percent of the districts with contested primaries, turnout was in the single digits (less than 10 percent). Of the 435 total congressional districts, 145 had no contested congressional primaries. 2016 was not an unusual year, rather it was consistent with historical turnout trends in congressional primaries.<sup>3</sup>

Low voter turnout in congressional primaries means that small numbers of ideologically motivated voters can easily sway the outcome of a primary. This fact, paired with the reality that the vast majority of congressional districts in this day and age are “safe” for one party or the other, illustrates

why the study of primaries is so important. They set up the choices Americans are asked to make in the fall elections every two years.

Thus, it is necessary for analysts to understand the dynamics within primaries across the country. While the actual number of primary challenges has been and remains small, there is some evidence that such challenges have become increasingly ideologically motivated over the past couple of decades.<sup>4</sup> In addition, as congressional scholars have known for many years, beginning with the ground-breaking book “Homestyle” by Richard Fenno, individual members of Congress pay particular attention to their primary electorates and primary electorates often shape and limit a Congressperson’s actions—even absent the threat of an actual primary challenge.<sup>5</sup> The phrase “getting primaried,” also the title of a recent book on this topic, is a form of psychological terror for members of Congress that has serious consequences for their choices in government and for voters’ choices at the polls.<sup>6</sup> The threat of a primary keeps members always “looking over his or her shoulder for the next challenger from the left or right.”<sup>7</sup>

## THE PRIMARIES PROJECT

We started the Primaries Project in 2014 with the goal of trying to understand the dynamics within each political party and how those dynamics contribute to the polarized atmosphere of modern American politics and government. To do this, we viewed and coded the website of each candidate running in a major party congressional primary who had filed to run with his or her state secretary of state. This wide scope guaranteed inclusion of many more primary contestants than had ever been studied before, while ruling out those who were so marginal that they could not even accomplish the basics of ballot access and FEC filing. This process allowed us to look at both incumbents as well as non-incumbents.

In 2014, this system recorded 1,662 candidates for House and Senate seats across the country: 719 Democrats, 896 Republicans, and 47 minor party candidates who competed on the same ballot as major party candidates (such as those competing in California or Washington’s top-two primary). In the 2016 primary cycle, our sample grew to 1,781 total House and Senate Candidates: 796 Democrats, 924 Republicans, and 61 minor party candidates.

As in 2014, we used a system of coding (described in the Appendix) to analyze each candidate. By examining every candidate’s campaign website, we identified and coded each candidate according to basic demographic information, their self-identified factional placement *within* their political party, their positions on various political issues, and their performance on election day. Candidates were coded up to one month before their state’s primary election, and codes were confirmed within one week of the election to capture any final endorsements, press releases, or candidate positioning that may have happened. In 2014, this study was the first of its kind to take a comprehensive look at candidates in congressional primaries. In 2016, we repeated the study, adding a handful of new issues to the database. Unlike the previous cycle, 2016 provides a new angle for looking at the data: some states held their congressional primaries on the same day as their presidential nominating contests and others did not.

Although coding is an inherently difficult process, we did our best to establish objective standards that could be replicated. While a candidate’s website does not always tell the full story of his or her political positioning, most candidates have them and we have to assume that they reflect what the candidate wants known about him or herself. In other words, the codes we present below should be interpreted as the information and positions on which these primary candidates campaigned.

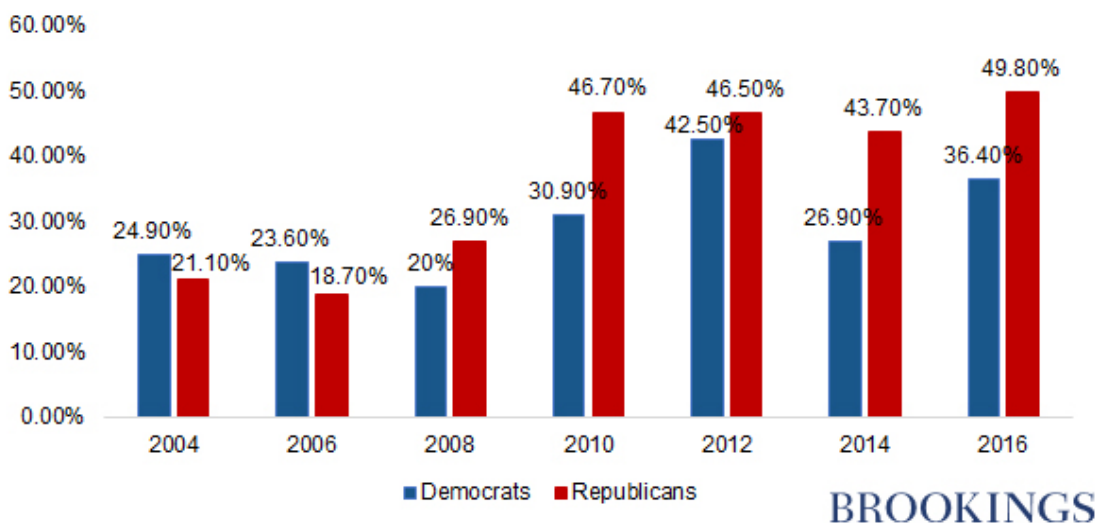
Following the outline from our 2014 project, we have again decided to divide our data into the following categories.

1. Who runs in congressional primaries?
2. What are the internal divisions within each party?
3. What are the candidates talking about? What are they not talking about?
4. What has happened to the margins of victory for this year's winners compared to margins in the past?

## WHO RUNS IN CONGRESSIONAL PRIMARIES?

The straightforward answer to this question is that while many people run in congressional primaries—for both the House and the Senate—there could be many more. Although the total number of candidates has increased from 2014 to 2016, still less than half of all House incumbents (45 percent) faced any challengers at all. As Chart 1 indicates, this is also true for the past seven primary election cycles. Breaking that out by party, the 2016 cycle continued the trend that Republican incumbents yet again faced more primary challengers than their Democratic counterparts, largely due to sustained conservative and Tea Party challenges which began in the 2010 primary cycle.

**Chart 1: House Incumbents Facing Primary Challenges**



The second observation about congressional primaries is that in spite of the new attention paid to them (mostly because of Tea Party challengers in recent years), the primary incumbency advantage is and remains an established fact in American politics. By and large, incumbents do not lose primaries just as they do not lose general elections. As Table 1 indicates, only a handful of incumbents have lost primaries in recent cycles.<sup>8</sup> In spite of the total turmoil in the presidential primaries in 2016, the congressional primaries were, in keeping with tradition, pretty staid affairs; only five incumbents, two Democrats and three Republicans, lost their seats. The two Democrats were involved in serious corruption scandals; both were indicted. Two of the Republicans lost due to the political effects of court-ordered redistricting. Only one incumbent, Congressman Tim Huelskamp, from the first district of Kansas, lost his

race in a contest that involved policy and ideology. He was a Tea Party favorite who lost to a more middle of the road, Chamber of Commerce-endorsed Republican.

**Table 1: House incumbents who lost their primary**

	2004	2006	2008	2010	2012	2014	2016
<b>TOTAL</b>	2	2	4	4	13	4	5
<b>DEMOCRATS</b>	2	1	1	2	4	1	2
<b>REPUBLICANS</b>	0	1	3	2	5	3	3

There are many reasons for this incumbency advantage, most of which have been explored in the political science literature.<sup>9</sup> From the resource advantages that incumbents manage to accrue, to the many favors (big and small) they can do for constituents during their tenure in office, to the ability to scare-off challengers, incumbents have inherent advantages in both primaries and in general elections. In addition, they are also able to develop a personal relationship with their districts, remaining both visible as well as in touch with the district's needs. For example, despite primary threats to some of the most well-known members of Congress—such as Speaker Ryan, Senator McCain, and former Democratic Party Chairwoman Wasserman Schultz—incumbents continued their dominance at the polls, even against well-funded, fairly well-known challengers. The sole candidate who did lose his primary for political reasons was, as mentioned above, Congressman Huelskamp. His combativeness cost him a spot on the House Agriculture Committee; a signal of just how out of step with his Kansas voters his priorities had gotten.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, over a thousand candidates entered the fray of the 2016 primary cycle. As Table 2 demonstrates, Democratic entrants (i.e. non-incumbents) outnumbered Republican ones across both houses of Congress, at least in terms of the ratio of non-incumbents to incumbents.

**Table 2: Incumbents and non-Incumbents by party and office**

	INCUMBENTS	NON-INCUMBENTS	RATIO NI:I
<b>HOUSE REPUBLICANS</b>	219	593	2.7:1
<b>HOUSE DEMOCRATS</b>	169	531	3.1:1
<b>SENATE REPUBLICANS</b>	22	90	4.1:1
<b>SENATE DEMOCRATS</b>	7	89	12.7:1

What else do we know about the 2016 candidates? As in 2014, most of the candidates were men. However, the number of Democratic women increased from 165 in 2014 to 203 in 2016—perhaps a result of the Hillary effect? Consistent with the overall gender gap between the parties, women composed 26 percent of all Democratic candidates in 2016 while women composed 12 percent of Republican candidates—numbers in line with those from 2014 (Since there were more Democrats contesting primaries in 2016, the increase in the number of women didn't change the overall proportions very much).

In spite of the small number of women running, those that were on the ballot tended to do quite well (just as they did in 2014). More than sixty-four percent of Democratic women won their primaries for House and Senate, as did 48.1 percent of Republican women, most of whom were incumbents.

Other demographic variables were a bit more difficult to come by, since not all candidates included extensive biographical information on their campaign websites; however, we did record a few commonly mentioned characteristics.

When it comes to education, we found that people who run for Congress are a fairly well-educated group, and there is not much difference between the two major parties. Looking at education levels of all congressional primary candidates in Table 3, we see that of those who mentioned their education level, 94 percent of candidates in 2014 had a college degree or higher, and in 2016 that number rose to 98 percent. In both cycles, approximately one-in-five candidates mentioned having a law degree.

**Table 3: Highest education level of all congressional primary candidates**

HIGHEST EDUCATIONAL LEVEL	FREQUENCY	PERCENT
ASSOCIATE'S DEGREE	11	1%
COLLEGE	447	25%
HIGH SCHOOL	29	2%
J.D.	329	18%
M.D./D.M.D./D.D.S./D.V.M/ PHARM.D	61	3%
MASTER'S DEGREE (INCLUDES MBA)	255	14%
NO EDUCATION INFORMATION LISTED	547	31%
OTHER	10	1%
PHD/ED.D	68	4%
SOME COLLEGE	23	1%
SOME HIGH SCHOOL	1	0%

The vast majority of candidates who list their marital status on their campaign website are married, however, many candidates make no reference to marital status on their sites.

As for military service, on the Republican side, 25 percent of candidates had served, and on the Democratic side, 14 percent had served. Both figures are comparable to what we found in 2014.

Unsurprisingly—as we discovered last cycle—the candidates who decided to run in the 2016 congressional primaries reflected the overall makeup of our political elites: largely male, well-educated, and married. The one exception is that they are more likely to have served in the U.S. military than the average citizen.

## WHAT ARE THE INTERNAL DIVISIONS WITHIN EACH PARTY?

Congressional primaries allow us to view the various factions that compose each political party. Focusing on the major factions that make up both parties, we can focus on the divisions *within* parties and see how they might shed light on the divisions *between* parties.

Intra-party strife is not new to the political stage. As we mentioned in our 2014 report:

In 1997 President Bill Clinton found himself unable to overcome the anti-trade faction within his party when he lost his bid to enact fast-track legislation, in spite of the fact that he was wholly supportive of it and had won past trade battles, most notably NAFTA, earlier in his presidency. And in 2007, Republican President George W. Bush found that he was unable to overcome the anti-immigration reform sentiment within his own party, in spite of his own commitment to the issue.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, these internal divisions are certainly more noticeable and pose a more powerful primary threat today than they did even just a few decades ago.

Writing in “Engines of Change: Party Factions in American Politics, 1868-2010,” Daneil DiSalvo states: “Given the public’s limited political knowledge, factions retain a good deal of room to maneuver in order to shape their party’s brand and convert their views into public policy, even if factions’ views are well to the left or right of centrist voters.... It is factions that often undertake synchronized action to refine the party, forcing the more dispersed and amorphous elements to respond.”<sup>12</sup>

Congressional primaries occur over the span of eight months and go largely unreported. In a year like this one, congressional primaries gasp for air in a political environment dominated by presidential races. Compounding the lack of attention with relatively low voter turnout, one can imagine that factions can be very effective in the primary process and even do so without much public scrutiny. This obscurity makes primaries, “the ideal place for factions within a party to try to move the larger entity.”<sup>13</sup>

The 2016 presidential primaries in both parties were powerful reminders of just how important factions are in defining political parties. The Bernie Sanders campaign demonstrated that the progressive wing is an important faction in the Democratic party. And the Donald Trump campaign caused so many divisions among Republicans that, at this writing, the party appears to be on the verge of a civil war. Understanding factions is also important for breaking gridlock in Congress, since it is always possible (although not common recently) for one faction to break away from its party and create a majority with the opposition.

To try to get a better understanding of the various factions that arise in congressional primaries, we looked at how congressional candidates described themselves in terms of the most common intraparty groups. Looking at candidate campaign websites, we assigned Republicans to one of four categories: Business/Establishment, Conservative, Tea Party, or Libertarian. Democrats were coded to one of three categories: Progressive, Establishment, or Moderate. For candidates who did not provide enough information for us to categorize them (or for candidates who had confusing or complicated factional identities), we simply coded them as “Other.”

To assign the major party candidates to these categories, there was a four-step assignment logic (i.e. the process would only move to step two if step one did not render a party category classification, etc.). First, the candidate websites were examined for any personal identification to one of these categories. Examples of self-identification

were sometimes explicit (e.g., “conservative” might have been in the candidate’s slogan) but also sometimes implicit (e.g., a candidate mentioning how her business experience led her to politics). Whenever there were competing party categories (e.g., one can imagine a candidate who might be placed in either the Conservative Republican or Tea Party Republican categories), the following party category ranking system was in place: Tea Party, Libertarian, Conservative, and then Business/Establishment; Progressive, Moderate, and then Establishment. This ranking system allowed the coding scheme to prioritize assignment to more narrow groups.

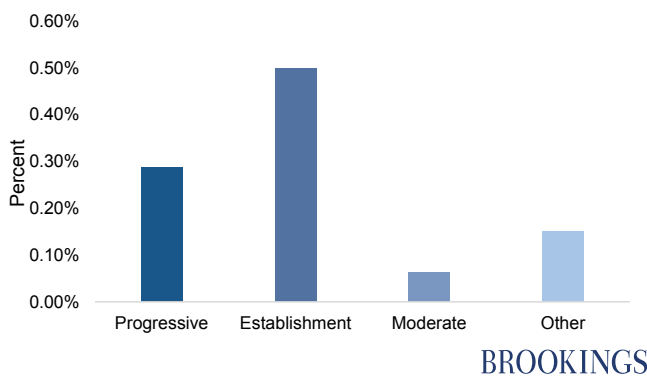
Second, after personal identification, incumbent candidates were placed in a category according to caucus memberships. Incumbent Democrats were coded if they belonged to the Progressive Caucus, the (former) Populist Caucus, and the (former) Moderate Democrats Working Group. Republican incumbents were coded if they were members of the (former) Tea Party caucus. Additionally, information about minor party affiliations of major party candidates in New York’s system of *fusion voting* was also used for coding party categories. For further information on caucuses or fusion voting coding decisions, please consult the Appendix.

Third, endorsements listed on campaign websites also informed party categories. If a candidate listed an endorsement from Tea Party Express, that candidate was counted as a Tea Party Republican. If a different candidate listed an endorsement by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, then that candidate was categorized as a Business/Establishment Republican. In the case of multiple endorsements across party categories, endorsements placement on the website and other contextual factors were taken into consideration. However, endorsements not listed on a candidate’s website were *not* considered.

Fourth, in the cases of candidates failing to meet any of the above party category criteria, candidates were coded according to their issue positions. If, however, there was still confusion (or not enough information conveyed by a candidate’s issue positions), the candidate was simply coded as Other.

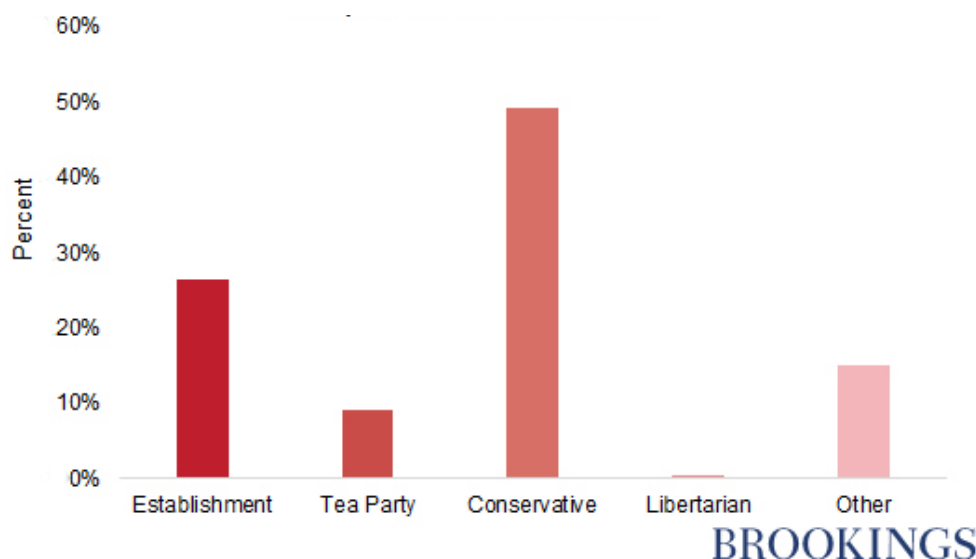
Charts 2 and 3 show the breakdown of factions within each party’s candidates for the House of Representatives. Compared to 2014, there are slightly more progressive candidates and slightly fewer moderates on the Democratic side in 2016. Just as the increase in women candidates on the Democratic side could be a function of Hillary’s candidacy, the increase in self-style progressive candidates might reflect the power of Bernie Sanders’s candidacy.

**Chart 2: Primary Candidate Breakdown - House Democratic Candidates**



The story on the Republican side, however, is much more interesting. Chart 3 shows that the number of candidates who identify with the Tea Party dropped dramatically between 2014 and 2016—falling from 26.6 percent to 9.11 percent of all Republicans running for the House of Representatives. While the number of Business/Establishment Republican candidates remained about the same as in 2014, as did the number of Libertarians, the number of self-identified Conservatives nearly doubled. It seems as if, between 2014 and 2016, the bloom went off the rose of the Tea Party label. In fact, among the candidates we coded in 2014 as Tea Party Republicans who ran again in 2016 (including mostly incumbents but also some non-incumbents), only 30 percent of them held on to the Tea Party label, while half of them now identified as “Conservative Republicans.” Yet, while the Tea Party label is no longer in vogue, our look at the issue positions held by both Conservative and Tea Party Republicans suggests that future roll call votes cast by Conservatives are hardly going to be distinguishable from Tea Partiers.

**Chart 3: Party Category Breakdown - House Republican Candidates**



Of course, the big question is how did these factions perform in their races? Progressives did somewhat worse in 2016 than they did in 2014 in spite of, or perhaps because of, the fact that more self-identified Progressives ran in 2016. Establishment Democrats performed about the same in 2016 as they did in 2014 and Moderates (which are small in number,) did worse in 2016 than they did in 2014. To our surprise, there were no differences in progressive candidate win rates between those congressional primaries that were held with a presidential primary and those primaries that were held separately. Progressives running on the same date as the presidential primary won at a rate of 48.9 percent and progressives running on other dates won at a rate of 51.2 percent. Their poorer performance overall may be the result of more but less able candidates entering primaries but it is impossible to tell from our data. Nonetheless, the progressive resurgence at the presidential level did not appear to be mirrored at the congressional level.



**Table 4: Outcomes across party categories for House candidates**

	<b>LOSERS</b>	<b>WINNERS</b>
<b>ESTABLISHMENT DEMOCRAT</b>	<b>109 (31%)</b>	<b>239 (69%)</b>
<b>MODERATE DEMOCRATE</b>	<b>21 (48%)</b>	<b>23 (52%)</b>
<b>PROGRESSIVE DEMOCRAT</b>	<b>97 (48%)</b>	<b>104 (52%)</b>

On the Republican side, Business/Establishment candidates performed about the same as they did in 2014, outperforming both Tea Party and Conservative candidates. This is an interesting finding and it makes one wonder whether the Republican Party has been unduly spooked by the Tea Party surprise in 2010.

## **WHAT ARE THE CANDIDATES TALKING ABOUT AND WHAT ARE THEY NOT TALKING ABOUT?**

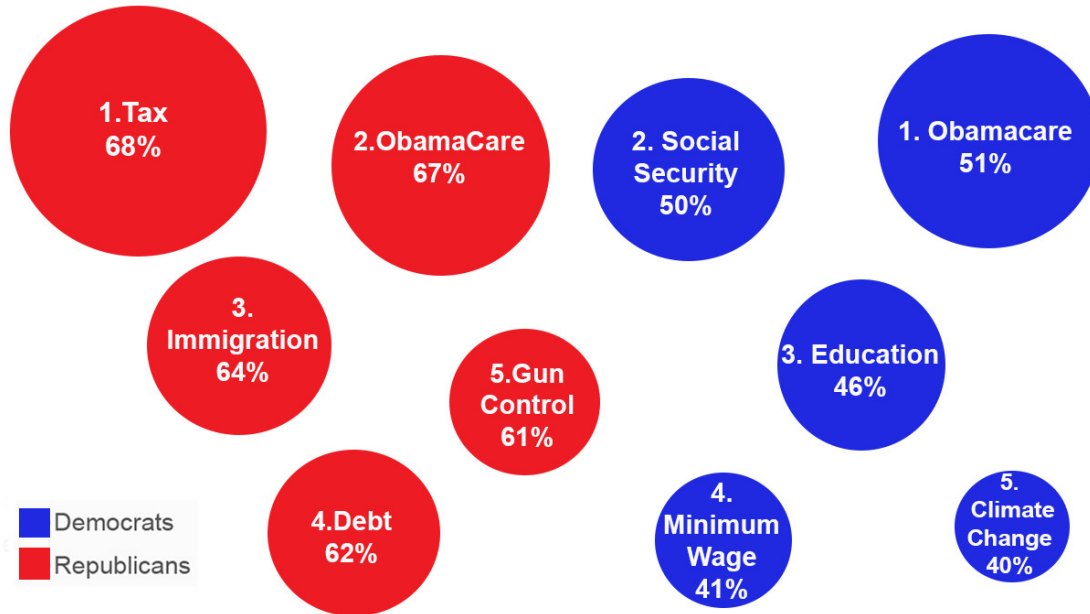
One reason to study primaries is to get a sense of the factional divisions within each party, and what they may mean as individual issues play out. In this section, we begin by looking at what the candidates talked about in 2016 with some comparison to the conversation in 2014. In 2014, the dominant issue for both parties was President Obama’s health care reform. Nearly 80 percent of Republicans and 62.5 percent of Democrats took positions on the Affordable Care Act—and, as we saw, they took diametrically opposed positions. Following the Affordable Care Act, taxes and immigration were mentioned by the most candidates across the two parties. Issues priorities diverged, however, when Democrats campaigned on minimum wage and climate change, while Republicans spoke about the national debt and business regulations.

By 2016, the parties had gotten so far apart, that there was only one issue that appeared in the list of the top five most-discussed issues by both Democrats and Republicans. Of the 19 different issue positions tracked by our project, only the Affordable Care Act was in the top five for candidates from both parties.<sup>14</sup>

Among 924 Republicans and 796 Democrats, there was very little in common regarding what issues the candidates mentioned.<sup>15</sup> Apart from “Obamacare,” Republicans and Democrats campaigned on very different issues during the 2016 primaries. As Figure 1 demonstrates, the five most-mentioned issues for Democrats were the Affordable Care Act, social security, education, the minimum wage, and climate change. For Republicans, however, these issues were taxes, the Affordable Care Act, immigration, the national debt, and guns. These differing issue priorities across Republican and Democratic congressional primary candidates reveal Democrats and Republicans were engaging in very different conversations on the 2016 campaign trail.

Figure 1

## Top 5 Issues Mentioned by Party for House Candidates



Further, we also examined the *least* discussed issues by both parties. Republicans' least-mentioned issues included minimum wage and campaign finance reform (both mentioned by fewer than five percent of Republican candidates). Democrats' least-mentioned issues included the Syrian refugee crisis and Benghazi investigation (both mentioned by fewer than six percent of Democratic candidates).

Minimum wage is particularly noteworthy as it is among the top five issues for Democrats yet among the lowest two issues for Republicans. There is a 36-point differential between the percentage of Democrats mentioning the issue and the percentage of Republicans mentioning the issue. However, two issues have even greater differentials than minimum wage; Republicans mentioned national debt and business regulations far more often than Democrats.

Another noticeable difference across the two major political parties is their relative levels of intra-party issue consensus. On the one hand, Republicans are in striking lockstep with regard to the issues they choose to mention. Seven different issues are mentioned by over half of all of the primary candidates (the top five issues noted above, plus business regulations and abortion). On the other hand, Democrats in congressional primaries were in comparative disarray, despite there being over a hundred more Republicans running in congressional primaries. For Democrats, only one issue (the Affordable Care Act) garnered responses from over half of the candidates. This degree of conformity within the Republican Party and the lack thereof in the Democratic Party was present in 2014 as well as in 2016.

Figure 1 is important because of which issues are on it and which are not. First of all, we can predict from it that the members of Congress who come to Washington in January of 2017 will have strong and divergent opinions on health care. The fact that it was discussed so thoroughly during the primary season may constrain members' ability to compromise on that issue, which will be unfortunate given that adjustments will need to be made in the program. Beyond health care, there are no issues of overlap; signaling perhaps that gridlock is already baked into the next

Congress. There may, however, be more room for maneuver on other issues that did not have such high saliency in the election season.

In both 2014 and in 2016, when deciding which issues to analyze in our database, we turned to the most discussed issues at that point in time. In 2014, we were surprised to find that despite a lot of ink coming out of Washington on the issues of NSA data collection, the Benghazi tragedy, and the Keystone XL Pipeline, most primary candidates stayed away from those topics.

We found similar results in 2016. In spite of the fact that Hillary Clinton was running for president and that the Republican presidential candidates spent a great deal of time making an issue of her handling of the Benghazi incident, virtually none of the congressional candidates mentioned that issue. The candidates in both parties also ignored privacy concerns around data collection by the National Security Agency. And, for the most part, they ignored terrorism and defense spending issues—although Republican candidates were more likely than Democratic candidates to take positions. These results may reflect the fact that these issues are complex and often outside the comfort zone of congressional challengers. It may also reflect the fact that candidates felt these were part of the presidential debate and not likely to influence or mobilize voters at the congressional level.

There were also a series of domestic policy issues that were absent from these campaigns. In spite of all the discussion in both parties of a “rigged” system and accusations that various billionaires had undue influence on the electoral process, campaign finance reform was largely ignored, especially by the Republicans. And even among Democratic candidates, proposals for campaign finance reform or “overturning Citizens United” were mentioned by only 30 percent of the candidates. And in spite of all the attention paid to race and to police shootings of young black men, issues related to criminal justice, such as support for or opposition to criminal justice reform, were largely ignored in both parties. Even among Democrats, barely 20 percent of the candidates explicitly supported criminal justice reform—the vast majority ignored it. Finally, that old standby—abortion—was also largely ignored by candidates, a surprising finding considering how firmly it divides the two parties. Only about half of Republicans identified themselves as pro-life, while less than 40 percent of the Democrats identified themselves as pro-choice.

We now turn our attention to the top ten issues that were mentioned most frequently on the campaign websites.

## POSITIONS ON HEALTH CARE

As in 2014, health care is the main issue discussed by candidates in both parties. We coded candidates as supporting the Affordable Care Act if they lauded the bill or its effects. We coded candidates advocating to repeal or fully replace the Affordable Care Act (also known as “Obamacare”) as opposing it. Candidates with “complicated positions” included those that forwarded moderated positions (i.e. the Act needs to be fixed or simply delayed), as well as those with positions outside the scope of the question (e.g., advocating for single-payer health care but failing to weigh in on the Affordable Care Act). Finally, if the candidate did not mention President Obama’s health reforms they were coded as “no information.”

What is noteworthy about 2016 compared to 2014 is that although this issue remained number one, it was mentioned less frequently by candidates in both political parties than it was in 2014. As Table 5-1 illustrates, Democrats still support ACA in large numbers and Republicans still oppose it in large numbers, but many candidates said nothing at all about it. This may reflect a decrease in the intensity around the issue now that it is the status quo or it may reflect

the fact that the battle lines have hardened within the two parties meaning there is less need to talk about it. Very few candidates in either party offered a more nuanced position on health care (20 percent among the Democrats and six percent among the Republicans); indicating that necessary reforms to the Act may be as difficult to come by in the next Congress as they have been in past congresses.

**Table 5-1: Obamacare positions (House Republicans)**

REPUBLICANS	WIN	LOSS	ADVANCE TO RUN OFF
CANDIDATE EXPLICITLY SUPPORTS ACA	0 (0%)	2 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)
CANDIDATE OPPOSES ACA (E.G. WISHES TO REPEAL)	248 (63.4%)	235 (56.6%)	5 (83.3%)
CANDIDATE PROVIDES COMPLICATED/ COMPLEX/UNCLEAR POSITION	29 (7.4%)	21 (5.1%)	1 (16.7%)
CANDIDATE PROVIDES NO INFORMATION	114 (29.2%)	157 (37.8%)	0 (0.0%)

Table 5-2 shows that, among the Democratic candidates who won their primaries, 38 percent stated they support the Affordable Care Act outright. Those who lost in Democratic primaries were far more likely to provide no information on the topic than winners. Among Republicans, there was little difference across primary winners and losers—with around 60 percent of both categories opposing Obamacare, calling for its repeal or defunding.

**Table 5-2: Obamacare positions (House Democrats)**

DEMOCRATS	WIN	LOSS	ADVANCE TO RUN OFF
CANDIDATE EXPLICITLY SUPPORTS ACA	152 (38.4%)	47 (15.6%)	47 (15.6%)
CANDIDATE OPPOSES ACA (E.G. WISHES TO REPEAL)	0 (0%)	9 (3%)	9 (3%)
CANDIDATE PROVIDES COMPLICATED/ COMPLEX/UNCLEAR POSITION	74 (18.7%)	72 (23.8%)	72 (23.8%)
CANDIDATE PROVIDES NO INFORMATION	170 (42.9%)	174 (57.6%)	174 (57.6%)

## POSITIONS ON IMMIGRATION

The second hot button issue we examined was immigration reform. We coded candidates as supporting immigration reform if they indicated favoring “comprehensive immigration reform,” including those candidates advocating for a pathway to citizenship. We labeled as “opposes comprehensive immigration reform” those candidates who argued for “no amnesty,” exclusively for securing the border, or for those who called for “enforcing the laws on the

books.” The third category included individuals with more “complicated” positions (e.g. one candidate was in favor of a pathway to citizenship but argued against “amnesty” without providing many details), and the final group were candidates who offered no position we could discern.

In 2016, as in 2014, the candidates were divided by party, as illustrated in Table 6. In contrast to 2014, however, Democrats tended to be somewhat less enthusiastic about the issue. In 2014, 46 percent of Democrats favored comprehensive reform; in 2016 that number dropped to 31 percent. Democratic candidates were not necessarily turning away from their support, they were simply not mentioning it. In 2014, 46 percent of Democrats said nothing on the topic while in 2016, 62 percent said nothing.

On the Republican side, opposition to immigration reform increases by 10 percent compared to 2014. And within the Republican party, opposition to immigration reform is concentrated among the Tea Party and the Conservative factions as it was in 2014. These slight differences most likely reflect the enormous boost Donald Trump got from the issue in the primaries—a boost that emboldened Republicans and caused some Democrats to ignore the issue.

**Table 6: Positions on immigration reform by party**

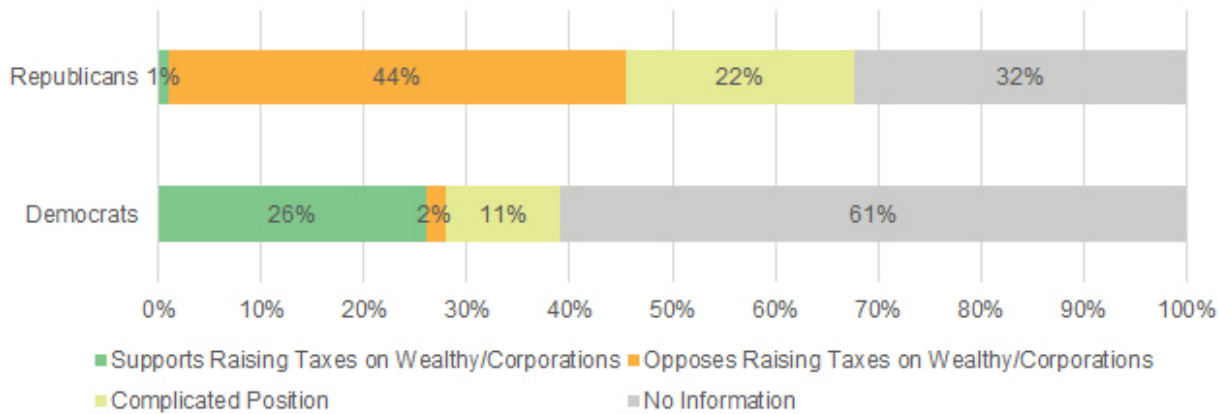
	DEMOCRATS	REPUBLICANS
<b>SUPPORTS COMPREHENSIVE IMMIGRATION REFORM</b>	31%	1%
<b>OPPOSES COMPREHENSIVE IMMIGRATION REFORM</b>	2%	53%
<b>COMPLICATED POSITION</b>	5%	9%
<b>NO INFORMATION</b>	62%	36%

Looking at winners and losers among these candidates, Democratic winners are somewhat more in favor of comprehensive immigration reform than losers. On the Republican side, a majority of both winners and losers oppose efforts toward “comprehensive immigration reform,” with losers opposing it slightly more than winners. The absence of many nuanced positions on either side contribute to our overall conclusion. Absent a radical change in party strength in the general election, progress on immigration reform, like progress on ACA reforms, is likely to be extremely difficult and perhaps impossible. The factional differences within each party are strong and polarized and the options for compromise rare.

## POSITIONS ON TAXES

The next issue is taxes, which was the number one issue for Republican candidates and which didn’t even make it into the list of top five for the Democrats. To no one’s surprise, and similar to our findings in 2014, Democratic candidates were in favor of raising taxes on the wealthy and on corporations, while Republicans were opposed to raising taxes; progressive Democrats were most in favor of raising taxes, while Tea Party Republicans and Conservatives were most in favor of lowering taxes. What makes this issue different from the first two we looked at, however, is the fact that in both parties, there are somewhat larger numbers of candidates who have complicated positions on the issue, as indicated in Chart 4. Complicated positions included those who failed to weigh in on increasing or decreasing the tax rate but did advocate for positions like “tax reform,” “FairTax”, or a “flat tax.”

**Chart 4: Tax Positions by Party (Major House Party Candidates)**

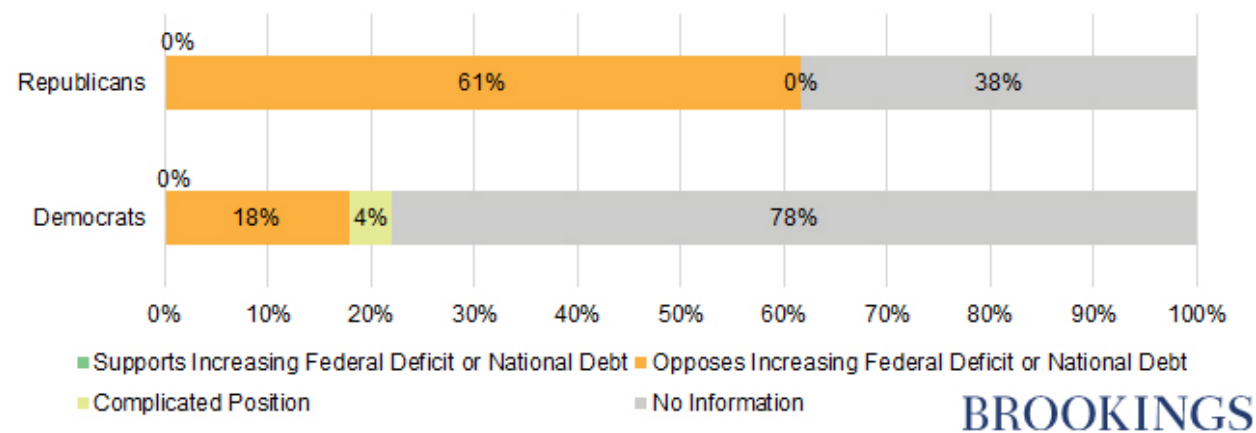


Among Democratic House winners, nearly 30 percent called for raising taxes on the wealthy or on corporations. On the other side of the aisle, 55 percent of Republican House winners stated they opposed raising taxes. While a majority of both Democratic primary winners and losers stayed silent on the issue of taxes, Republicans, on the contrary, were not shy about wanting to oppose tax increases or calling for other forms of tax reform.

## POSITIONS ON NATIONAL DEBT

The next issue we looked at was the national debt. Like taxes, this issue ranked in the top five for Republicans but did not make the top five for Democrats. As in 2014, almost no one was in favor of raising the national debt. However, only a small number of Democrats, mostly moderates, even raised the issue, while over 60 percent of Republican candidates think enough of it to put it on their websites.

**Chart 5: Debt/Deficit Positions by Party (Major Party House Candidates)**

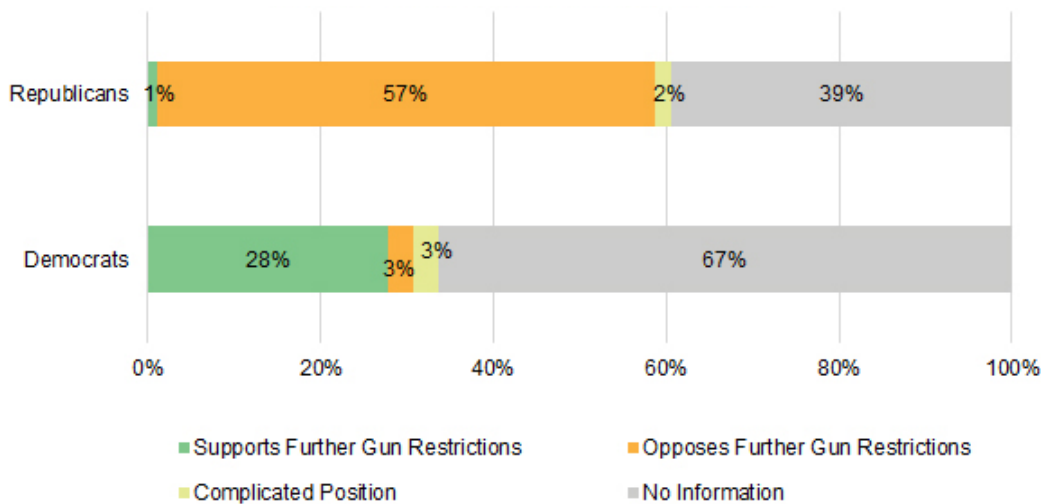


**BROOKINGS**

## POSITIONS ON GUN CONTROL

Finally, gun control makes it into the Republican top five list but not into the Democrats' list. In 2014, it did not make the list top five issues for either part. Virtually no Republican candidates are campaigning on supporting gun control, while about 60 percent of Republicans oppose it. While some Democrats support gun control, mostly, they relatively ignore the issue, as Chart 6 illustrates.

**Chart 6: Gun Control Positions by Party (Major Party House Candidates)**

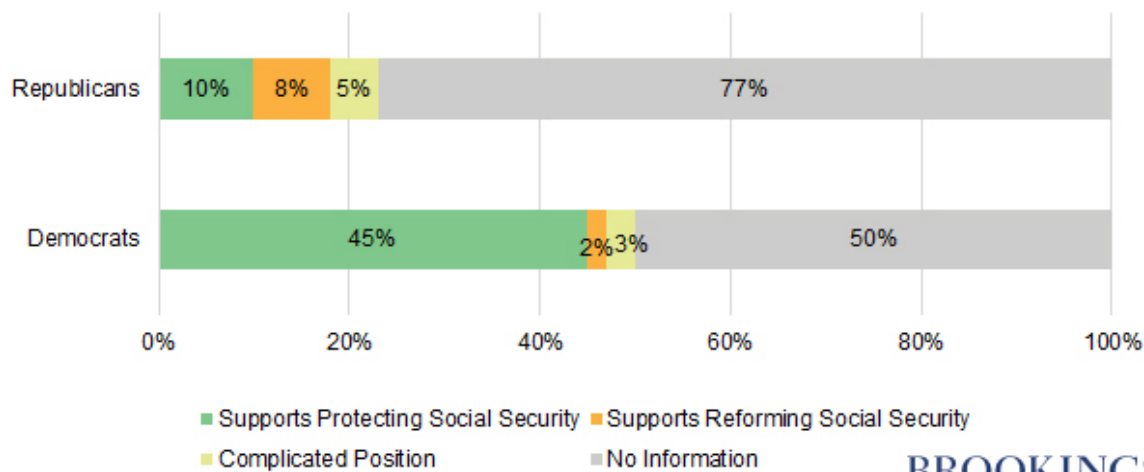


BROOKINGS

## POSITIONS ON SOCIAL SECURITY

We now turn to the other top issues for Democratic candidates. The second most popular issue mentioned was Social Security. About half of the Democratic candidates expressed support for the status quo in Social Security and very few Democrats (two percent) supported reshaping it along the lines of increasing the retirement age, means-testing, privatization, or other reform options. But, in keeping with its reputation as the “third rail” of American politics, neither did many Republicans. Nearly as many Republicans supported the status quo as supported reform options, as indicated by Chart 7.

**Chart 7: Social Security Positions by Party (Major House Candidates)**

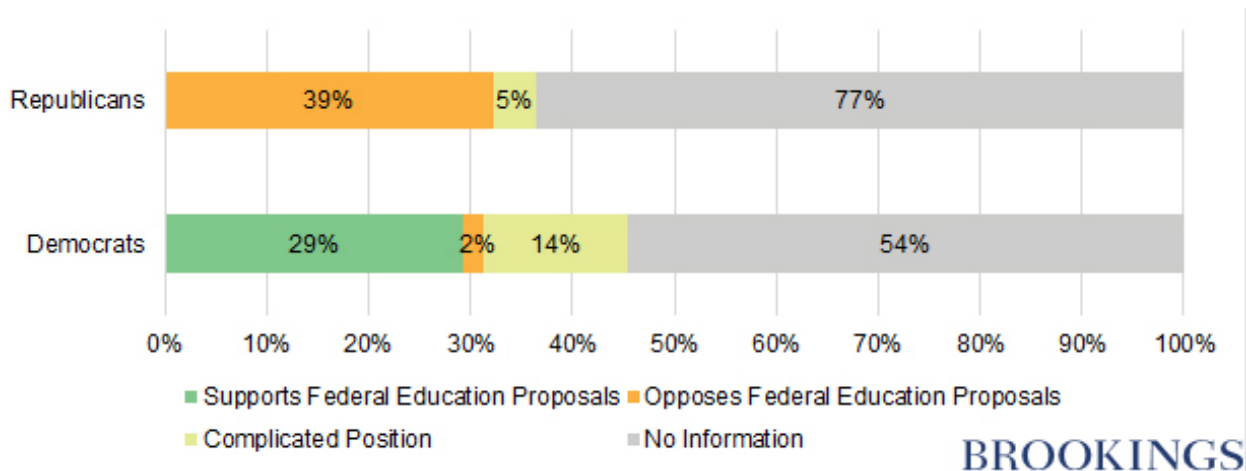


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## POSITIONS ON EDUCATION

On K-12 education reform, Democrats tended to support federal proposals (such as Common Core or increased federal education funding) with self-identified Progressives supporting it somewhat more than the other Democrats. Republicans tended to call for local solutions and to oppose Common Core. Nonetheless, more than 50 percent of the candidates in *both* parties ignored the issue, as is evident in Chart 8.

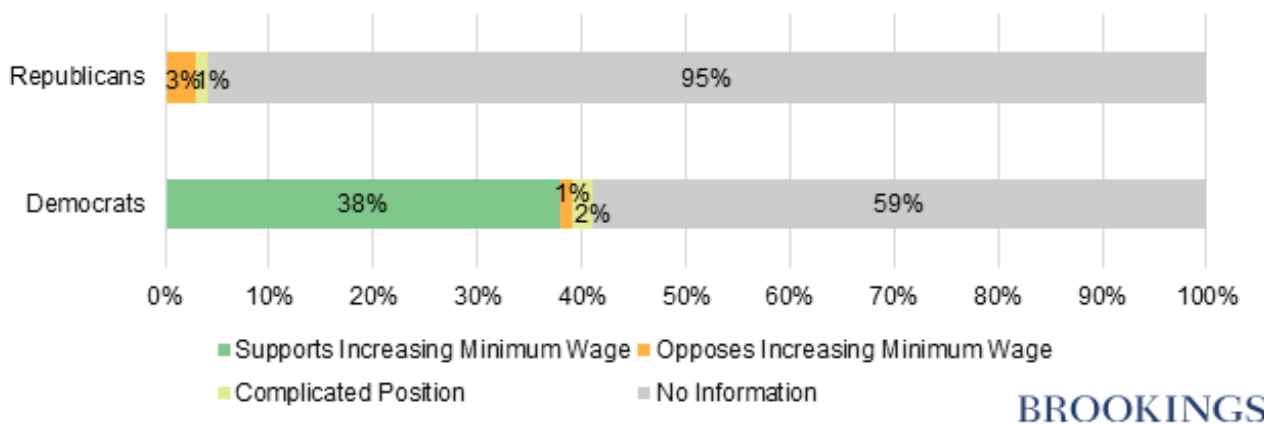
**Chart 8: K-12 Education Positions by Party (Major House Candidates)**



## POSITIONS ON MINIMUM WAGE

The minimum wage was a predominant Democratic issue but not a Republican issue. The vast majority of Republicans ignored the issue, with only five percent taking any position on it at all. Among Democrats who took a position, there was near unanimity in support of raising the minimum wage, as illustrated in Chart 9.

**Chart 9: Minimum Wage Positions by Party (Major House Candidates)**

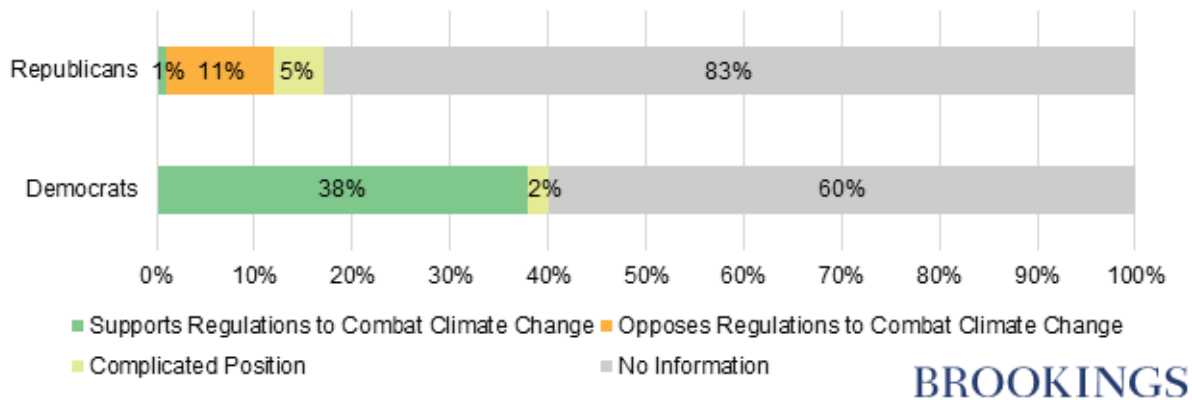


## POSITIONS ON CLIMATE CHANGE

And last but not least, climate change regulations. In spite of their reputation as climate deniers, only a minority of Republican candidates were on the record as opposed to climate change regulations or as climate deniers. As Chart 10 illustrates, most Republican candidates ignored the issue. In contrast, Democrats who took a position were strongly in favor of actions to combat climate change, though more than 50 percent included no opinion at all.



**Chart 10: Climate Change Regulations Positions by Party (Major Party House Candidates)**



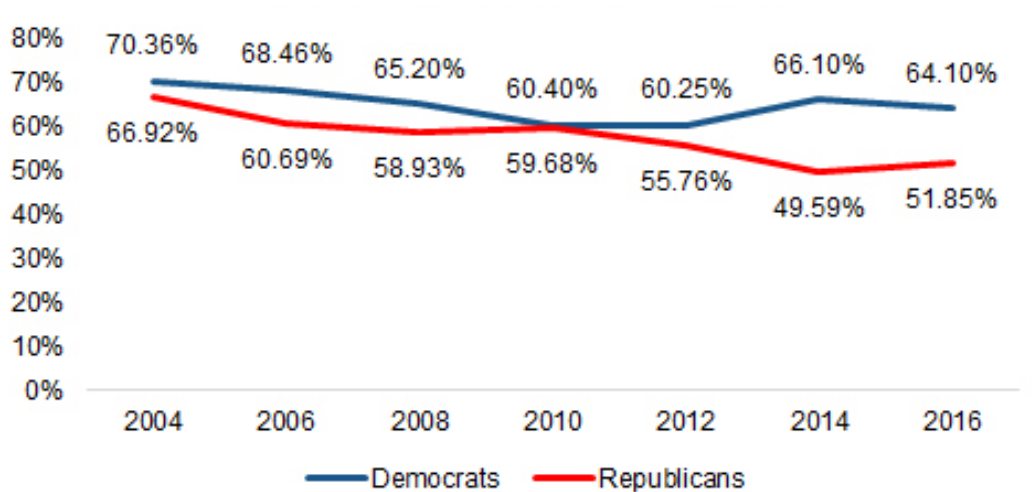
## WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THE MARGINS OF VICTORY FOR THIS YEAR'S WINNERS COMPARED TO MARGINS IN THE PAST?

In his influential 1974 article “Congressional Elections: The Case of the Vanishing Marginals,” David Mayhew draws attention to congressional incumbents increasingly running up the score in general elections. Like Mayhew, we seek to draw attention to incumbents’ margins—but this time, looking at incumbent candidates’ primary election performances. Analyzing the past six primary election cycles, we find that few marginals exist here, too. Overall, our findings indicate that incumbents of both parties continue to dominate their primary challengers; however, we do note a slightly asymmetric finding across the parties.

Chart 11 illustrates a number of different facts about how this immediate past primary cycle relates to previous cycles. Turning first to Republican incumbents, despite a slight uptick of about two percent this cycle, the margins between these candidates and their highest performing challengers have steadily declined over the past decade. These declining margins—which are measured as the incumbent’s primary percent of the vote subtracted by the best performing challenger’s primary percent of the vote—suggest that Republican incumbents are actually performing worse at the polls than they were a decade ago. This finding is consistent with the turmoil inside the Republican Party.

On the other side of the aisle, Democrat incumbents in 2016 are performing just slightly under the average of the previous ten years (2004-2014). While there remains a slight downward trend for Democratic incumbents, the trend is certainly not as steep as it is for Republicans. Nevertheless, these trends should not be overstated, especially considering the median margin for Republicans in 2016 to beat their challengers is over 50 points and for Democrats it is over 60 points. In a two-person race, this median margin for Democrats is interpreted as that incumbent beating her opponent 82 percent to 18 percent.

**Chart 11: Median Margin of Victory for House Primary Incumbents, 2004-2016**



The bottom half of Chart 11 similarly shows a curious trend, particularly when it comes to the percentage of unopposed incumbents in each primary. Over the past twelve years, Democratic incumbents have remained unopposed at higher rates than Republican incumbents. In 2016, for example, we found 61 percent of Democratic incumbents were unopposed in their primary compared to 49 percent of Republican incumbents. Taking both parts of the Figure together, we conclude that Republican incumbents are not only challenged more often but—when they are—they also perform worse against their challengers when compared to their Democratic counterparts.

Building on the evidence from Robert Boatright’s “Getting Primaried” (2013), the newest margins data adds to the evidence that Republicans are slightly more likely to be victims of “primaried;” however, this cycle once again failed to bring about any shocks to the electoral system, despite the hype of “outsiders” and “anti-establishment” sentiment in our politics.

## CONCLUSION

In 2016, the presidential primaries unearthed extensive divisions within each political party. The Democrats saw a resurgence of the left wing of their party under Senator Bernie Sanders and many pundits began to identify it as the Sanders/Warren wing of the party—referring to Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren.

On the Republican side, Donald Trump managed to surprise the establishment, win the nomination, and then fail to unify the party behind his definition of Republicanism. In fact, Trump’s candidacy opened up a full scale war within the GOP.

The drama in the presidential primaries, however, has not been mirrored in the congressional primaries. While we see more divisiveness at the congressional level among Republicans than among Democrats, the levels are small.

But, for two reasons, we should be wary of concluding that the lack of divisiveness spells a less polarized future for Congress. First of all, it is possible that, given the strength of the Sanders and the Trump insurgencies, the next few

congressional cycles will find more candidates recruited to represent those wings of their respective parties. Better candidates and better support could in fact increase the performance of congressional challengers in primaries. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the internal divisions which appeared powerfully in the presidential primaries and less powerfully in the congressional primaries may well have the effect of causing incumbents to govern with one eye over their right (or left) shoulder as the case may be. Given the overwhelming one-party nature of the vast majority of congressional districts, primaries remain one powerful entrance point for ideological challenges. Getting “primaried” will remain a worry and a cause of polarization no matter what.

## ENDNOTES

1 In 2014, the Pew Research Center conducted a study on statehouse reporting manpower. Building off of findings from a series of biennial reports from the *American Journalism Review* between 1998 and 2009, Pew found an overall decline in full-time statehouse reporters of 35% between 2003 and 2014, with the sharpest decline occurring between 2003 and 2009. [“Who Covers the Statehouse,” by Jodi Enda, Katerina Eva Matsa, and Jan Lauren Boyles, July 10, 2014, accessed at <http://www.journalism.org/2014/07/10/who-covers-the-statehouse/>.] Further, the Bureau of Labor Statistics expects the number of people employed as reporters, correspondents and broadcast news analysts to decline by 9% between 2014 and 2024. [Bureau of Labor Statistics, accessed at <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/media-and-communication/reporters-correspondents-and-broadcast-news-analysts.htm>]

2 A contested primary is defined as any major party primary where two or more candidates filed and eventually appeared on the ballot. The voting age population statistic in use is the 2015 American Community Survey’s “Over 18” 2016 population projection. All vote totals were gathered from state-specific secretary of state and board of elections websites. This count excludes congressional races in states that use a “top-two” primary system—California and Washington—and Louisiana. See appendix for detailed data.

3 William Galston and Elaine C. Kamarck, “The Still-Vital Center: Moderates, Democrats and the Renewal of American Politics,” *Third Way*, February 2011. (<http://www.thirdway.org/report/the-still-vital-center-moderates-democrats-and-the-renewal-of-american-politics>)

4 Robert G. Boatright, *Getting Primaried: The Changing Politics of Congressional Primary Challenges* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press), 2013, pp. 73-74, and Robert G. Boatright, *Congressional Primary Elections* (New York, NY: Routledge), 2014, pp. 189-190.

5 Richard F. Fenno Jr., *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown & Co.), 1978.

6 Boatright, *Getting Primaried*.

7 Podkul and Kamarck. “Congressional Primaries ramp up in the shadow of Clinton and Trump.” *Brookings FixGov*, March 24, 2016. (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2016/03/24/congressional-primaries-ramp-up-in-the-shadow-of-clinton-and-trump/>)

8 2012 is an aberration because it was the first election following the 2010 census and redistricting inevitably puts incumbents into new districts.

9 See for example: Jay Goodliffe and David Magleby. “Campaign Finance in U.S. House Primary and General Elections” and L. Sandy Maisel and Walter J. Stone. “Primary Elections as a Deterrence to Candidacy for the U.S. House of Representatives” in *Congressional Primaries and the Politics of Representation* ed. Peter F. Galderisi,, Marni Ezra, and Michael Lyons (Rowman and Littlefield, 2001). Ansolabehere, Stephen, John Mark Hansen, Shigeo Hirano, and James M. Snyder. “The Incumbency Advantage in U.S. primary elections.” *Electoral Studies*. 26:3 (2007): 660-668.

10 Niraj Chokshi and Christopher Mele. “Tim Huelskamp, Anti-Establishment House Republican, Loses Primary in Kansas.” *The New York Times*. August 3, 2016. (<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/03/us/politics/tim-huelskamp-roger-marshall-kansas-primary.html>)

11 See Elaine C. Kamarck, *How Change Happens – Or Doesn’t: The Politics of American Public Policy*, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner), 2013.

12 Daniel DiSalvo, *Engines of Change: Party Factions in American Politics, 1868-2010* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press), 2012, pp. 7 and 22.

13 See Elaine C. Kamarck, “Increasing Turnout in Congressional Primaries,” (Washington, DC: Brookings), July 16, 2014. (<https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/KamarckIncreasing-Turnout-in-Congressional-Primaries72614.pdf>)

14 Those issues include the Affordable Care Act, Minimum Wage, Taxes, Business Regulations, the National Debt/Deficit, Social Security, Criminal Justice Reform, Immigration, Gun Control, Abortion, Same-sex Marriage, Climate Change, K-12 Edu-

cation Reform, Campaign Finance Reform, Terrorism Abroad, NSA Reform, further investigation into Benghazi, and Defense Spending.

15 A mention would be a 1,2, or 3 according to 18 of the issues or a 1 according to the Syrian refugee question.

16 <https://cpc-grijalva.house.gov/caucus-members/>

17 <https://web.archive.org/web/20141228120124/http://braley.house.gov/press-release/23-members-congress-across-america-join-establish-populist-caucus/>

18 <http://politicalticker.blogs.cnn.com/2009/03/18/moderate-dems-working-group-organized-in-senate/>

19 <https://web.archive.org/web/20121212040121/https://teapartycaucus-bachmann.house.gov/membership>

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The Brookings Institution  
1775 Massachusetts Ave., NW  
Washington, DC 20036  
Tel: 202.797.6090  
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### EDITING

Liz Sablich

### PRODUCTION & LAYOUT

Cathy Howell

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