

# Political polarization and voters in the 2016 congressional primaries

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

## INTRODUCTION: FROM VANISHING MARGINALS TO GETTING PRIMARIED

To those who worry about the increasing bitterness and hostility in American government and politics—a trend that seemed to reach new levels of rancor in the 2016 presidential election and that gave us an “improbable” President Donald Trump—a V.O. Key quote about primaries might seem prophetic.

“The elevation of such [electoral] minorities to power within the nominating process – through the smallness of total participation and its bias... may affect more than the capacity of the party to wage political war. At times the swings of partisan sentiment are enough to throw into office the most improbable sorts of characters who have won nominations through the vagaries of the primary.”<sup>1</sup>

The United States is one of the few countries in the world that uses political primaries to choose who will represent the political parties in their general elections. Decade after decade, turnout in all primaries lags well behind turnout in general elections. The small size of most primary electorates, the fact that some states limit participation to registered members of a political party thus decreasing the potential pool of voters even further, and the often low or near invisible press coverage of so many primaries means that, in contrast to other elections, primaries receive little attention from either press or scholars. They are the stepchild of election studies. And yet we harbor many assumptions about who votes in them and the impact those voters have on elected officials.

Among those who believe that primaries matter are the politicians themselves, who see primary voters as a unique subset of their overall electoral coalition. In Richard F. Fenno’s 1978 classic *Homestyle: House Members in their Districts*, he describes the world through the eyes of eighteen congressmen he got to know over years of interview and travel. The congressmen understood their world in terms of concentric circles including “The Reelection Constituency: The Supporters” and “The Primary Constituency: The Strongest Supporters.” In Fenno’s words, “A protected congressional seat is one protected as much from primary defeat as from general election defeat. And a primary



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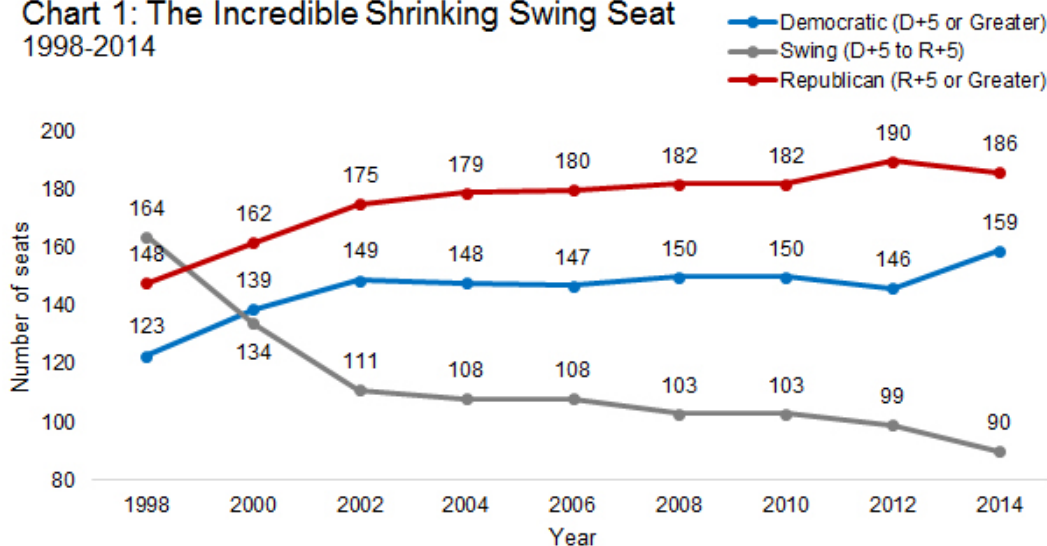
constituency is something every congressman must have one of.”<sup>2</sup> One of Fenno’s congressmen told him: “Everybody needs some group which is strongly for him—especially in a primary. You can win a primary with 25,000 zealots.”

In between the time that Fenno did his ground-breaking research and today, the importance of congressional primaries has only grown. There are two reasons for this:

- 1) The shrinking number of competitive congressional seats
- 2) The nationalization of primary races.

In 1974, the political scientist David Mayhew published a famous piece called “The Case of the Vanishing Marginals” in which he found that the number of competitive House seats dropped precipitously between 1956 and 1972. Because of this drop Mayhew argues that “the House swing seat is of fast declining amplitude and therefore of fast declining significance.”<sup>3</sup> The trend toward fewer and fewer competitive seats continued well into the new century. As the following chart from Cook Report illustrates, competitive House races dropped from 164 in the 1998 midterms to 90 in the 2014 midterms. Commenting on this drop, David Wasserman says, “As Robert Draper astutely observed in *The Atlantic*, the goal of partisan mapmakers is often to ‘design wombs’ for your team and ‘tombs for the other guys.’”<sup>4</sup>

**Chart 1: The Incredible Shrinking Swing Seat 1998-2014**



The declining number of competitive seats in recent decades has meant that very few members of Congress, once elected, have had to worry about the general election. This has opened up a new channel for partisans in both parties to influence their members of Congress. Nearly four decades after Mayhew wrote “The Case of the Vanishing Marginals,” another political scientist, Robert G. Boatright, wrote that in the mid-2000s bloggers, both liberal and conservative “spent much time discussing incumbent members of Congress who, in their opinion needed to be primaried.”<sup>5</sup> Boatright found that the overall number of primary challengers had not increased in recent years and that most primary challenges came about as the result of “scandals and allegations of incompetence,” something that has been true for some time. But he did pick up a new trend in the 2000s. Something had changed about political primaries. “If one is concerned,” wrote Boatright, “primarily with the past decade or so, the predominance of ideological challenges is unmistakable.”<sup>6</sup>

The practical effect of being “primaried” for being insufficiently liberal or conservative has the effect, according to Boatright, that “members of Congress must now pay more attention to partisanship than before.”<sup>7</sup> This is certainly conventional wisdom on Capitol Hill and, moreover, it is conventional wisdom that fear of “getting primaried” underlies much of the intense polarization seen in Congress in the twenty-first century. The assumption among political actors is the same today as it was for V.O. Key, primary voters are different from general election voters and can cause “improbable” outcomes. The twenty-first century scholar would replace the vague term “improbable” with “extreme.”

## ARE PRIMARY VOTERS DIFFERENT?

Over the years, a few intrepid scholars have tried to figure out just how similar or different primary voters are from general election voters. The answer is important to the issues of polarization and representation. If primary voters are demographically different and/or ideologically more extreme than general election voters, then the many incumbents in safe seats will calculate that their only electoral vulnerability is “getting primaried.” This will lead them to look farther to their left (or right) in their governing decisions than they might otherwise.

While many politicians these days profess to believe this conventional wisdom, the scholarship has not been conclusive regarding its accuracy. Much of what we think we know comes from studies of presidential primaries where turnout can vary a great deal from state to state because of the sequential nature of the primary process.<sup>8</sup> For instance, New Hampshire, because it is first, nearly always has very high primary turnout but states that fall later in the spring of a presidential election year often find that the race for the nomination is over and therefore there is little incentive to vote. But while presidential candidates and reporters interpret the race for the nomination as a race to appeal to the more extreme elements of each party, the scholarship differs substantially from the conventional wisdom. For instance, using NES data from 1980, Barbara Norrander concluded that presidential primary voters were no different than general election voters who did not vote in primaries.<sup>9</sup>

Studies of congressional primaries are more rare than studies of presidential primaries. In 1998, Christopher C. Blunt managed to study a large sample of verified primary voters in Nevada. He found that while they were older, and more interested in politics than general election voters, there were few ideological differences.<sup>10</sup> More recently, Ansolabehere et al. looked at primaries in light of congressional behavior as measured in roll call votes and concluded, “Our analysis of these three variables points to the conclusion that primary elections have little or no association with polarization in congressional roll call voting behavior.”<sup>11</sup> Sides et al. found that primary voters were more interested in politics but not more ideologically motivated than voters in the general election.<sup>12</sup>

However, Brady et al., showed that House members with more extreme roll call voting positions “have relatively higher primary election vote shares...[and] candidates who ideologically stray from their general-election constituency do worse in general elections.”<sup>13</sup> A finding that is in keeping with the conventional wisdom.

One of the reasons that there is such diversity of opinion is that there are no comprehensive exit polls of congressional primary elections and therefore no data on actual voters. To date, the best data has come from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). This study is a 50,000 plus person study, the result of a consortium of 39 universities. It conducts pre-election surveys between late September and October of each election year and in the fall after the election. Its size and methodological robustness makes it a very important addition to work on congressional elections, including primaries.

Additionally, the CCES matches registered voters to a Catalist voter file database to validate whether or not a voter actually turned out, rather than relying on self-reported turnout numbers. In the 2014 CCES, approximately 25 percent of the matched records turned out to vote in the primary election.<sup>14</sup>

However, while the CCES vote validation system provides a helpful starting point for identifying party primary voters, over one-third of the 2014 CCES sample could not be matched to the voter file. As the designers of the CCES indicate, this issue is driven in part by respondents who are not registered to vote but also in part by respondents who provided “incomplete or inaccurate information that prevented a match.” Our method, introduced below, has its own issues but provides a slightly different approach than the one used in the CCES.

## EXIT POLLS FROM THE 2016 CONGRESSIONAL PRIMARIES

Although political science has no magic bullets for studying who votes and why, exit polls, which have their own methodological problems, have some advantages over other kinds of surveys.<sup>15</sup> First and perhaps most important, we know that the respondent has voted since he or she has just come out of the polling place. In addition, the voter does not know the results of the election and cannot adjust opinions in order to be “on the winning side.”

Until now there has never been an exit poll conducted on a broad group of congressional primaries. For economic reasons driven by the need for news organizations to call elections, most exit polling is done to predict the outcome of elections. But in 2016, Edison Research, the company that conducts exit polls for all the major networks and newspapers, conducted exit polls on congressional primaries for the Brookings Institution. The sample included congressional primaries where there was a challenge. Many congressional districts, and 2016 was no exception, have no contested primary. Our sample included twenty congressional districts, split equally between those that held their presidential primary on the same day and those that did not. Regionally, we sampled four Southern districts, five Northeastern districts, six Midwestern districts and one Western district. We decided not to sample districts in California and Washington State where we felt the non-partisan form of primary would be difficult to compare to the other, more traditional primaries. All-in-all, we ended up with a total of 9,201 respondents— 4,694 interviews of those voting in a Democratic primary and 4,507 interviews of those voting in a Republican primary.<sup>16</sup>

While this methodology has its flaws, we believe that data on actual congressional primary voters, surveyed as they leave the polling place, will add greatly to our knowledge of who votes in congressional primaries and what impact their participation may have on the members of Congress they help select.

Here is what we found.

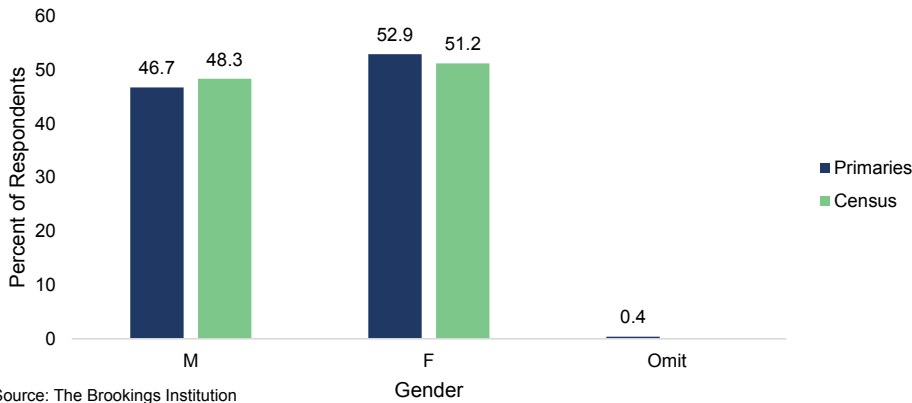
## CONGRESSIONAL PRIMARY VOTERS: THE DEMOGRAPHICS.<sup>17</sup>

Overall slightly more women vote in congressional primaries than do men—a finding that is not all that surprising given that, in recent elections women have had higher turnout rates than men.<sup>18</sup> However, as the following charts illustrate, that is largely due to the fact that the Democratic party in this day-and-age tends to attract more women than men. Fifteen percent more women than men voted in the Democratic congressional primaries, while the gap on the Republican side was not nearly as large. The high Democratic turnout could be a function of a coattail effect, with women coming out to vote for Hillary Clinton, the first woman nominee of a major party. However, when we

divided our sample into congressional primaries that were concurrent with the presidential primary and those that were not, the male-female gap practically disappears.

Chart 2: Gender

Competitive Congressional Primaries vs. ACS

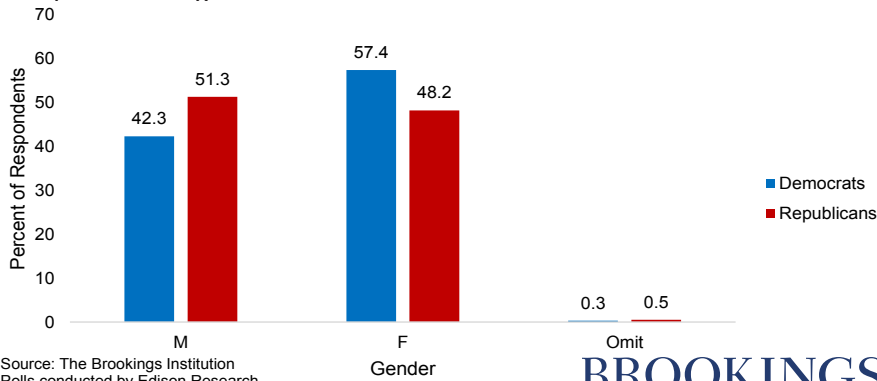


Source: The Brookings Institution  
Polls conducted by Edison Research  
2015 ACS 1-year projections

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Chart 3: Gender

Competitive Congressional Primaries

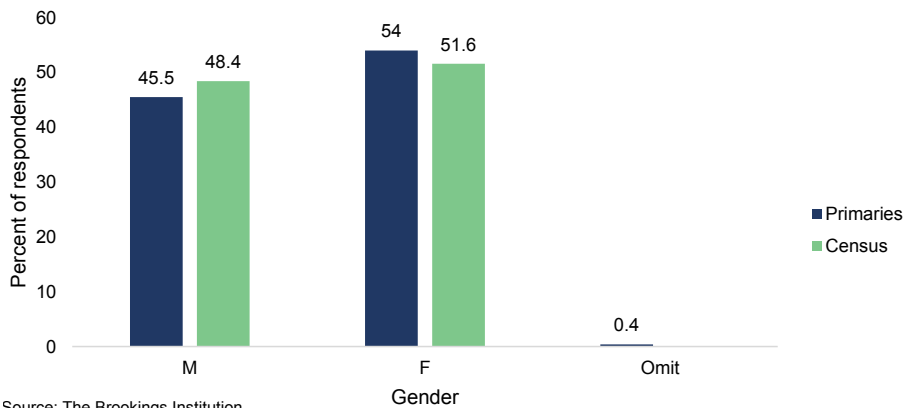


Source: The Brookings Institution  
Polls conducted by Edison Research

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Chart 4: Gender

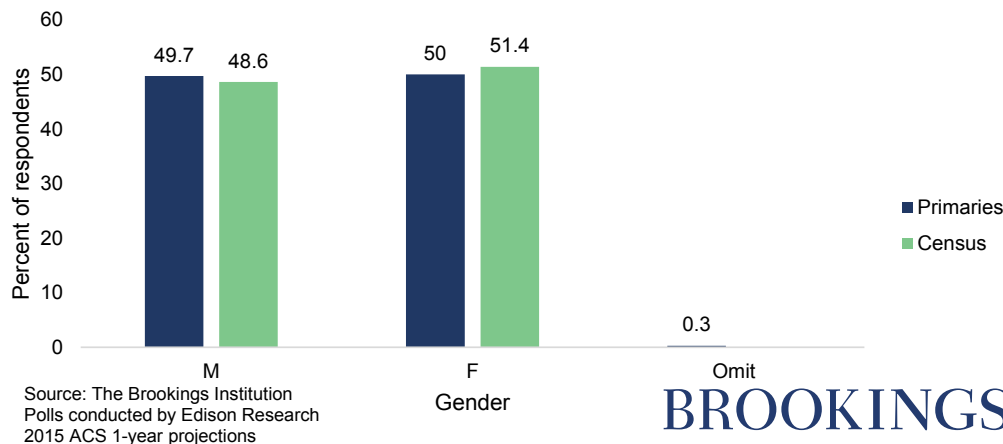
Competitive Congressional Primaries vs. ACS  
Concurrent with Presidential



Source: The Brookings Institution  
Polls conducted by Edison Research  
2015 ACS 1-year projections

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Chart 5: Gender  
Competitive Congressional Primaries vs. ACS  
Not Concurrent with Presidential

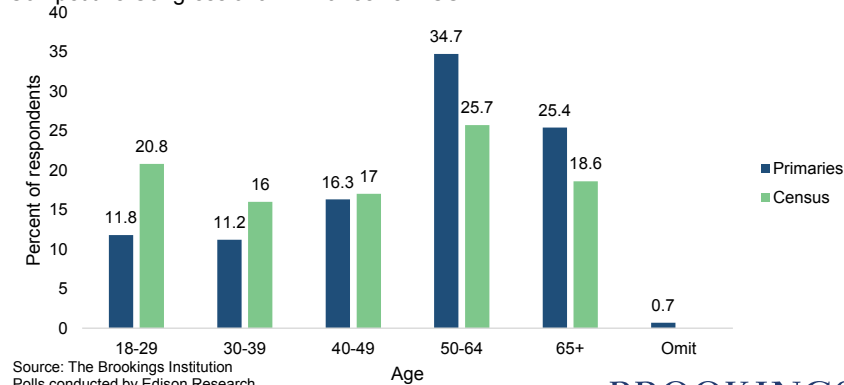


In the overall national exit polls, the electorate is more female than male by six percentage points. Thus, one intriguing question raised by our 2016 sample is whether or not congressional primaries are less divided by sex than the general election electorate.

Although we stated this concern above, it is worth highlighting again the major difference between our congressional primary exit poll and other types of exit polls. Since our exit poll sampled districts from only *competitive* congressional primaries, our findings are representative of only *competitive* congressional primaries (i.e., our sample is not nationally representative). However, with this caveat in mind, we can still say much about this electorate.

On another demographic dimension, congressional primary voters tend to be older than general election voters. As the following chart illustrates, sixty percent of congressional primary voters are over the age of fifty—a finding other scholars have seen as well. In the national exit polls, only forty-six percent of the voters are over age 50. There are only minor differences between the two parties, with the Republican primary voters being slightly older than Democratic primary voters. But there are interesting differences when we divide our sample between whether or not a presidential primary was held on the same day. In both parties, the presence of a presidential primary on the primary ballot caused the presence of the youngest voters (18 – 29) to increase. This is especially true in the Democratic primaries, with presidential primaries where the youngest voters constitute 17.8 percent of the electorate, while the youngest voters in congressional primaries without a presidential race constitute only 7.7 percent of the electorate. We can likely attribute this to the attraction of Bernie Sanders to young voters.

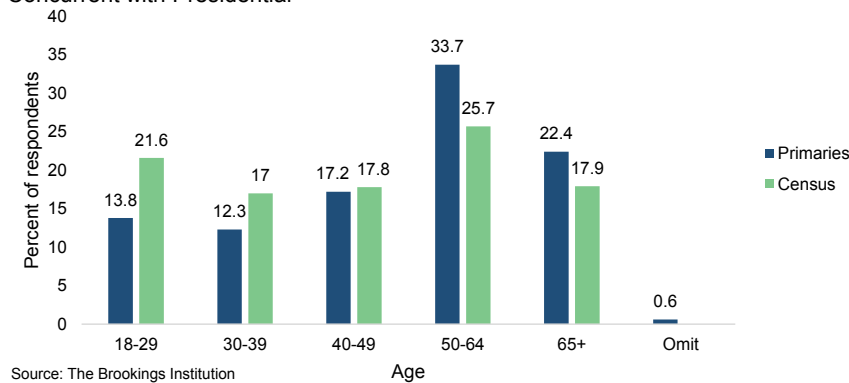
**Chart 6: Age**  
Competitive Congressional Primaries vs. ACS



Source: The Brookings Institution  
Polls conducted by Edison Research  
2015 ACS 1-year projections

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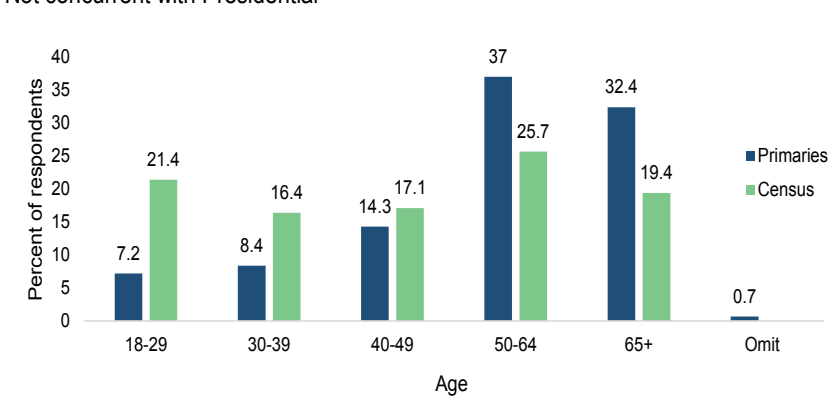
**Chart 7: Age**  
Competitive Congressional Primaries vs. ACS  
Concurrent with Presidential



Source: The Brookings Institution  
Polls conducted by Edison Research  
2015 ACS 1-year projections

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**Chart 8: Age**  
Competitive Congressional Primaries and ACS  
Not concurrent with Presidential



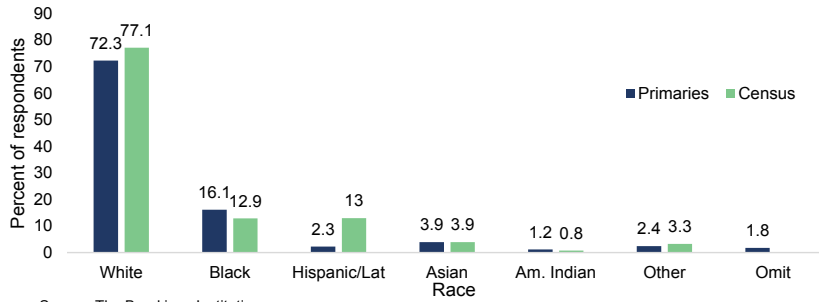
Source: The Brookings Institution  
Polls conducted by Edison Research  
2015 ACS 1-year projections

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The primary electorate is overwhelmingly white—72.3 percent of congressional primary voters. It will come as no surprise to any student of elections that there are large differences between the two political parties on this dimension; with the Democratic primary electorate at 30.9 percent African American and the Republican primary electorate almost entirely white. However, when there is no presidential candidate on the ballot, the white percentage of Democratic voters increases by 8.4 percent.



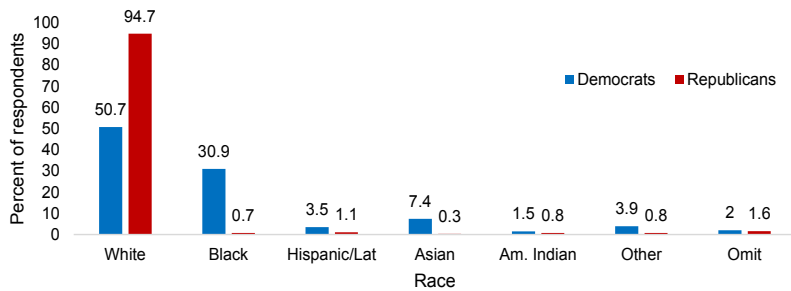
Chart 9: Race  
Competitive Congressional Primaries vs. ACS



Source: The Brookings Institution  
Polls conducted by Edison Research  
2015 ACS 1-year projections

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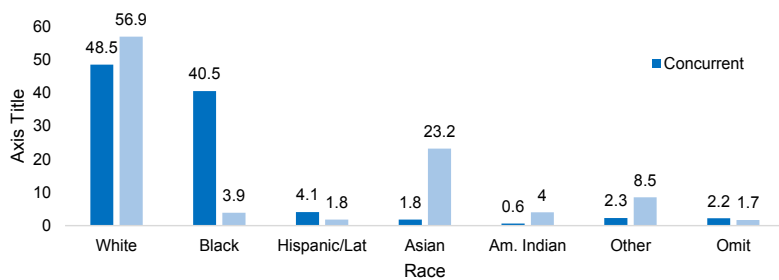
Chart 10: Race  
Competitive Congressional Primaries



Source: The Brookings Institution  
Polls conducted by Edison Research

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Chart 11: Race  
Competitive Congressional Primaries  
Democrats



Source: The Brookings Institution  
Polls conducted by Edison Research

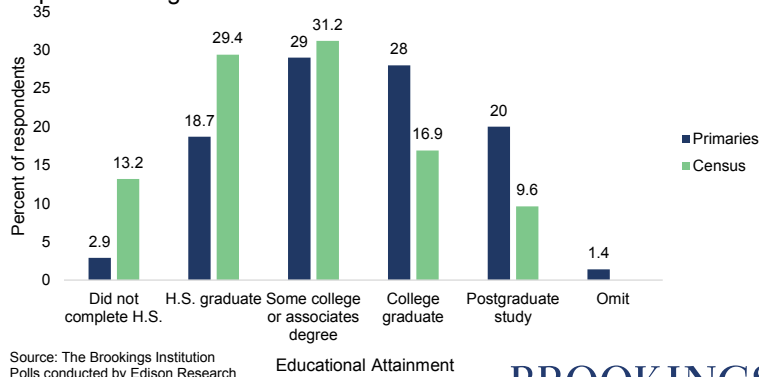
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African-Americans play an outsized role in the Democratic primaries, especially at the presidential level. But in our sample of congressional election primary voters, Latino Americans, who constituted eleven percent of the general election voters (just one percent less than the African Americans) barely register. This however, probably has to do with the fact that the Latino population is highly concentrated in the southwest and in California. In fact, of the twenty districts we conducted exit polls in, only three had Latino voting age populations greater than ten percent (TX-4, NJ-2, and IN-1) and in the Texas primary we polled, we only polled the Republican side, so one would expect fewer Latinos to participate in that primary. Nonetheless, an important future research study will be to figure out Latino voting turnout and behavior in congressional primaries.



Over the years it has been well established that formal education is highly correlated with voting; the more education a person has, the more likely they are to turn out to vote. Thus, it comes as no surprise that over fifty percent of the congressional primary voters in our sample attended college or did college plus post-graduate study, and that practically no one without a high school education votes in primaries. The general election electorate was similarly highly educated with fifty percent having attended college or having post graduate study.

Chart 12: Education  
Competitive Congressional Primaries vs. ACS

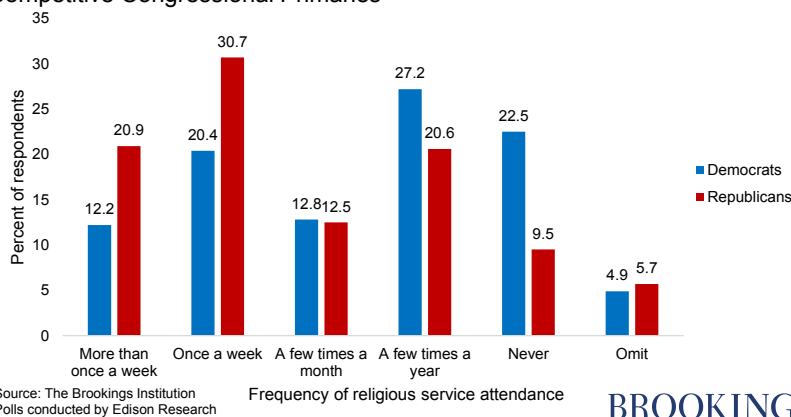


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We also asked congressional primary voters to state their income (on an anonymous questionnaire). Since education and income are highly correlated, it comes as no surprise that congressional primary voters, like voters in the general election, make more money than most Americans. Thirty-four percent of voters in our congressional primary sample and thirty-four percent of voters in the general election exit polls had family incomes over \$100,000. In contrast, only 24.9 percent of American families had income over \$100,000 according to the U.S. Census Bureau.<sup>19</sup> There are no big differences between the incomes of Democratic and Republican primary voters, nor are there big differences depending on whether there was a presidential primary on the ballot or not.

Finally, we asked voters about their church-going habits. Consistent with data from other surveys, Republican voters go to church much more often than Democrats. While 33 percent of voters in the national exit polls reported going to church once a week or more, fully 51.6 percent of Republican congressional primary voters go to church that often. This is a major difference between the two political parties and the heavy presence of frequent church-goers among the Republican primary electorate is in keeping with trends from the past several decades.

Chart 13: Religious Service Attendance  
Competitive Congressional Primaries



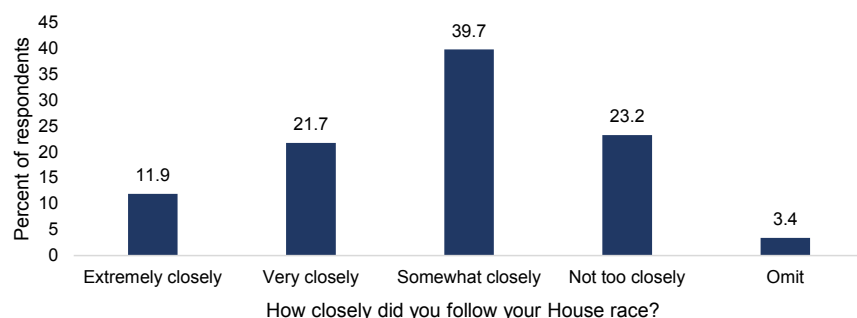
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## CONGRESSIONAL PRIMARY VOTERS: ATTITUDES

Demographically, congressional primary voters are like general election voters just *more so*. As would be expected from decades of studies on who votes; voters in congressional primaries tend to be older and more highly educated (thus with higher incomes) than both the general population and the general election electorate. These factors are slightly more exaggerated in the lowest visibility congressional primaries, those that happen without a presidential primary on the same ballot. In addition, it comes as no surprise that Democrats are the party of women and minorities and that the Republican Party is very, very white.

We also asked how closely these voters had followed their congressional race. The majority overall (and with practically no differences between voters in one party or the other) followed the race somewhat, very, or extremely closely. There were no significant differences between those who voted in primaries with a presidential election race and those without. Given that many of these primaries get little to no press attention, this indicates that these primary voters are very sophisticated and take their politics seriously.

Chart 14: Following Your House Race  
Competitive Congressional Primaries



Source: The Brookings Institution  
Polls conducted by Edison Research

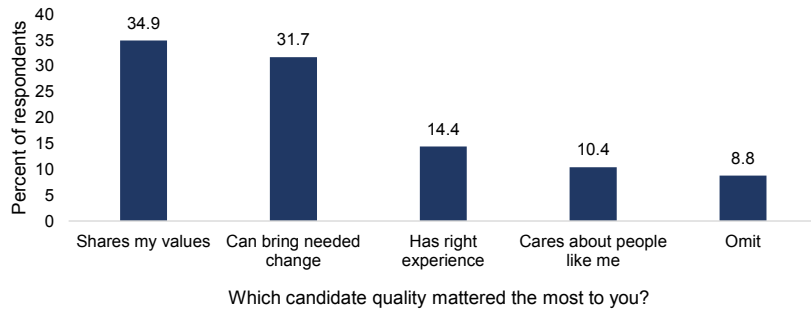
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So now we turn to attitudes. Are primary voters more intense in their partisanship and in their ideology and thus likely to shape the behavior of the congressmen and women who fear “getting primaried?” Exit polls need to be short in order to get voters who are leaving the polling place to take a minute or two to answer the questions. Because of that, we were only able to ask seven questions about the ideological predispositions of congressional election voters.

The first question was “Which of these four candidate qualities mattered most in deciding how you voted for U.S. House of Representatives?” What stands out among our respondents is a paradox. Very few people in either party—but especially in the Republican party—said experience was the most important quality: only 14 percent of the entire sample and only 9.7 percent of the Republican voters. And yet these voters re-nominated incumbents to office in enormous numbers. In the 2016 primaries, only five incumbents lost their seats, two Democrats and three Republicans. 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. Within the primaries included in our sample, only one incumbent lost: Rep. Chaka Fattah (D-PA-2), who was later convicted on corruption charges.

The largest number of primary voters in the Republican Party said that they voted for their candidate of choice because he or she “shares my values.” Second place went to voters who said that their choice “can bring needed change.” Among Democratic voters, the two responses were about equal. This finding simply reinforces one of the most stable tenants of public opinion polling: voters hate Congress but love their congressmen. There were no important differences between voters in primaries with and without the presidential contest on the ballot nor were there important differences between open, closed, and mixed primary systems.

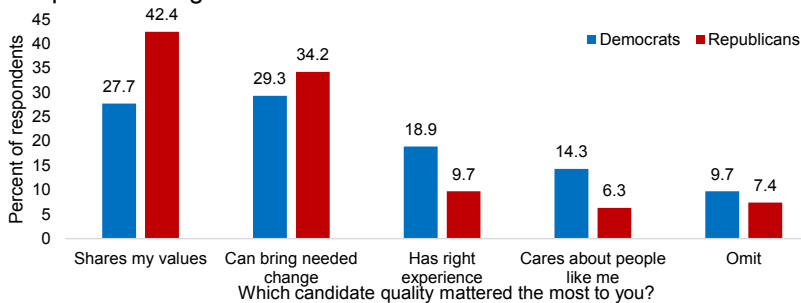
Chart 15: Candidate Qualities  
Competitive Congressional Primaries



Source: The Brookings Institution  
Polls conducted by Edison Research

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Chart 16: Candidate Qualities  
Competitive Congressional Primaries



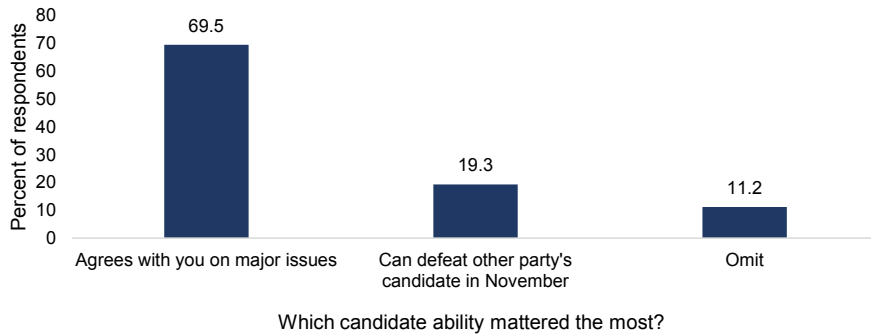
Source: The Brookings Institution  
Polls conducted by Edison Research

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We also asked our primary voters, “Did you vote for your candidate for U.S. House of Representatives today more because you think your candidate: ‘agrees with you on major issues’ or ‘Can defeat the other party’s candidate in November?’” The overwhelming number of voters in both parties chose “agrees with you on major issues.” Very few voters voted because they thought the candidate could defeat the other party’s candidate in November.

This is not at all surprising. As discussed, most congressional districts in the United States are safe districts. Since we were interested in the broad question of who votes in congressional primaries, we took our sample of districts from the 225 districts in which there was a primary challenge. We did not, however, attempt to take our sample from the smaller group of districts that were judged competitive by experts since our interest was in the hard core congressional voters. Thus, among our 20 congressional districts only four districts had scores of five or lower in Charles Cook’s Partisan Voter Index, a standard and frequently used measure of how Republican or how Democratic a congressional district is.<sup>20</sup> So for the vast majority of congressional primary voters, electability is not an issue, nor should it be.

Chart 17: Candidate Abilities  
Competitive Congressional Primaries



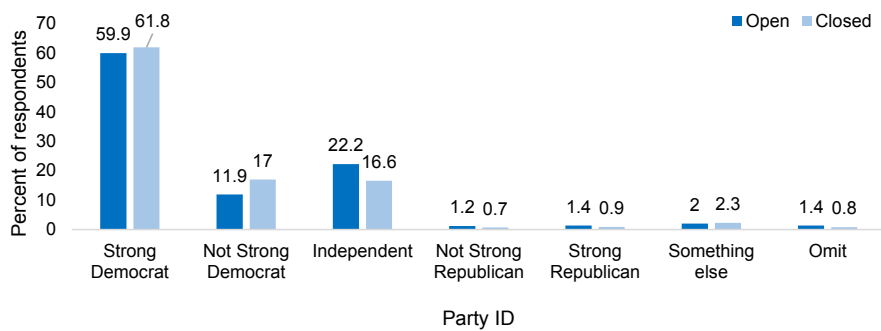
Source: The Brookings Institution  
Polls conducted by Edison Research

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We also polled congressional primary voters on the strength of their party identification. In keeping with conventional wisdom about strong partisans voting in primaries, we found that strong Democrats and strong Republicans were the most frequent type of voter in congressional primaries. In a year in which national exit polls show that 31 percent of the voters identified as independents, they are only 20 percent of the competitive congressional primary voters.

This, of course, could be due to the fact that many primaries are closed to those who don't register with a political party. However, when we broke out our sample by type of primary, the differences were not as great as would be expected. Roughly sixteen percent of voters in closed Democratic and Republican primaries call themselves independents. These are, most likely, voters who registered with a party in order to be able to participate in a primary but who feel they are actually independents. There were slightly more independents voting in open and in mixed primaries but the differences between these and closed primaries are not very big.

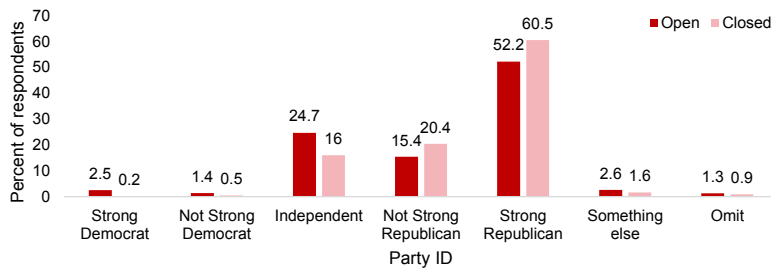
Chart 18: Party ID  
Competitive Congressional Primaries, by Primary Type  
Democrats



Source: The Brookings Institution  
Polls conducted by Edison Research

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Chart 19: Party ID  
Competitive Congressional Primaries, by Primary type  
Republicans



Source: The Brookings Institution  
Polls conducted by Edison Research

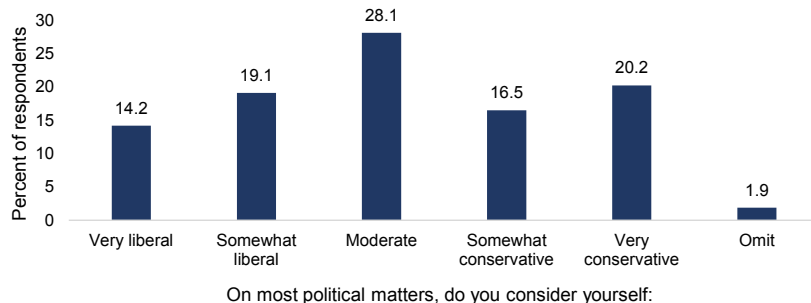
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Of course, party identification is only a part of the primary equation. The more important measure is how voters identify ideologically. The ideological makeup of our congressional primary sample was similar to the ideological makeup of the general election as seen through the national election exit polls. In the general election, 35 percent identified as conservative and in our poll of congressional voters 36.7 percent identified as somewhat or very conservative. On the Democratic side, 26 percent of the national sample identified themselves as liberal while 33.3 percent of our congressional primary sample identified themselves as very or somewhat liberal

When we break apart respondents by the two political parties, we see amongst congressional primary voters what Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein have documented amongst political elites: “asymmetric polarization.”<sup>21</sup> In keeping with what we have seen in recent years, the Republican party has many more “very conservative” primary voters than the Democratic party has “very liberal” voters. In fact, and in contrast to conventional wisdom, the Democratic party’s congressional voters are not primarily very liberal but they are mostly moderates, while the Republican party’s congressional voters are mostly very conservative. These findings hold regardless of the type of primary and regardless of whether or not there was a concurrent presidential primary. The exception here is that on the Democratic side, the number of moderates voting in primaries without a presidential candidate on the ballot increases by about six percentage points.

As a frame of reference, in the general election exit polls, 39 percent of the electorate consider themselves moderates. In our sample of congressional primary voters, the number of moderates is eleven points smaller as the chart below illustrates. While not definitive, this finding is in keeping with the hypothesis that primary voters are more ideological.

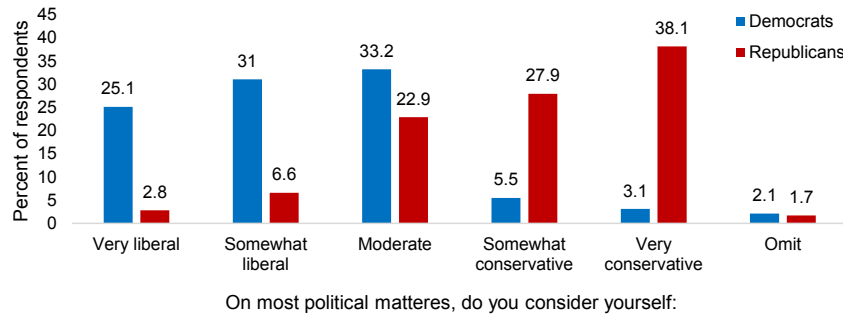
Chart 20: Political Self-Evaluation  
Competitive Congressional Primaries



Source: The Brookings Institution  
Polls conducted by Edison Research

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Chart 21: Political Self-Evaluation  
Competitive Congressional Primaries

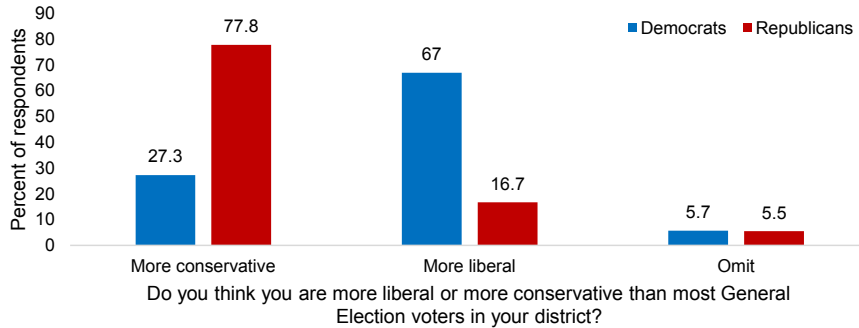


Source: The Brookings Institution  
Polls conducted by Edison Research

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When we ask our congressional primary voters how they feel they compare to general election voters in their district, we get yet another look at these voters. In spite of the fact that in very general terms, they seem to track national polls, voters in both parties think they are more liberal (among the Dems) and more conservative (among the GOP) than voters in their district. For Democrats, this is more pronounced in primaries that were concurrent with presidential primaries—perhaps a function of the Bernie Sanders vote in Democratic primaries. For Republicans, however, voters felt themselves to be more conservative in nearly identical numbers in both kinds of primaries.

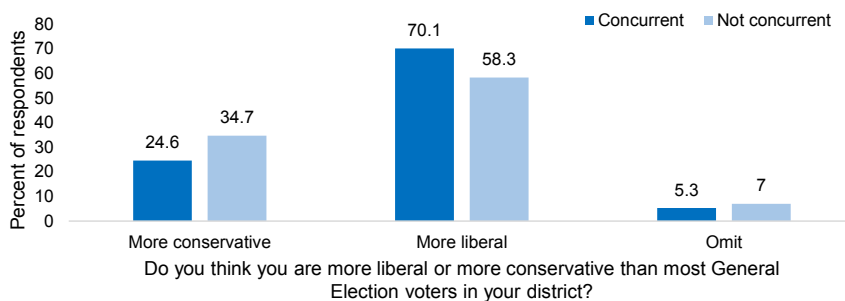
Chart 22: Relative Political Self-Evaluation  
Competitive Congressional Primaries



Source: The Brookings Institution  
Polls conducted by Edison Research

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Chart 23: Relative Political Self-Evaluation  
Competitive Congressional Primaries  
Democrats

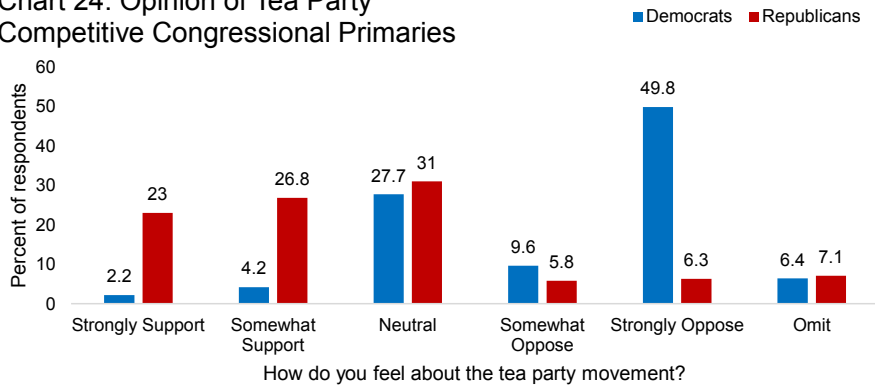


Source: The Brookings Institution  
Polls conducted by Edison Research

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In another test of ideology, voters were asked whether they supported the tea party or not. Not surprisingly more than fifty percent of Democrats were opposed to the tea party. However, nearly fifty percent (49.8 percent) of Republicans were supportive. This question was not asked on the 2016 national exit poll, but in a forthcoming Brookings survey of congressional primary candidates fewer Republicans identified themselves with the tea party in 2016 than in 2014. Nonetheless, support for the Tea Party seems alive and well among Republican primary voters, one more piece of evidence that polarization is asymmetric—resulting more from the Republican party than from the Democrats.

Chart 24: Opinion of Tea Party  
Competitive Congressional Primaries



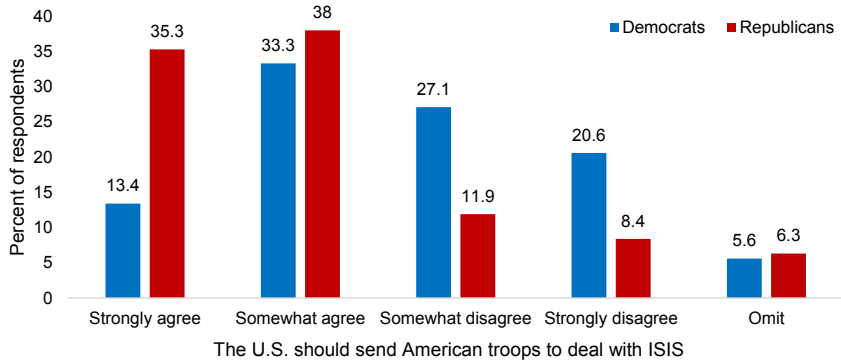
Source: The Brookings Institution  
Polls conducted by Edison Research

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## CONGRESSIONAL PRIMARY VOTERS: ISSUES

We asked our congressional primary voters how they felt on a set of issues that were prevalent in all the 2016 campaigns. On whether or not the United States should send in troops to deal with ISIS, findings were what could be expected given the rhetoric of the presidential campaign. Republican primary voters were considerably more hawkish than Democratic primary voters, as indicated in the following table. Although this exact question was not asked in the general election exit polls, most Trump voters thought the fight against ISIS was going badly and most Clinton voters thought it was going well.<sup>22</sup> There were no significant differences in opinion based on the type of primary or on whether there was a concurrent presidential primary.

Chart 25: ISIS troop use  
Competitive Congressional Primaries



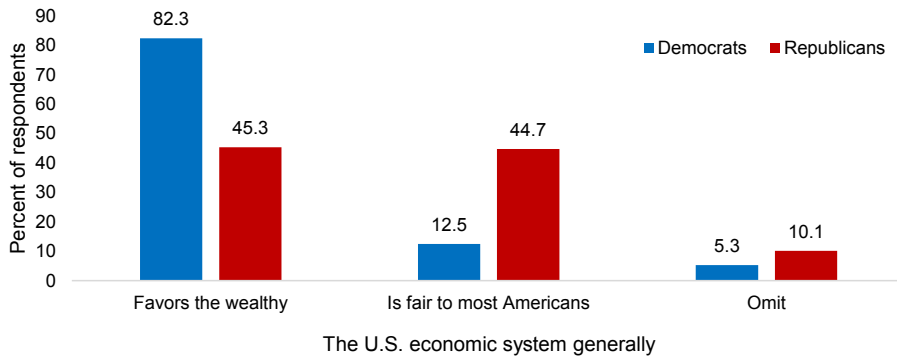
Source: The Brookings Institution  
Polls conducted by Edison Research

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When asked if the U.S. economic system “favors the wealthy” or is “fair to most Americans,” the overwhelming number of Democratic congressional primary voters said that it favors the wealthy, while Republican primary voters were split between the two responses almost evenly. This question was not asked in the general election exit polls but the differences between parties are not surprising. There were also no differences between types of primaries. Nor were there differences resulting from the existence of a presidential primary on the ballot.

**Chart 26: Economic System Fairness**  
Competitive Congressional Primaries

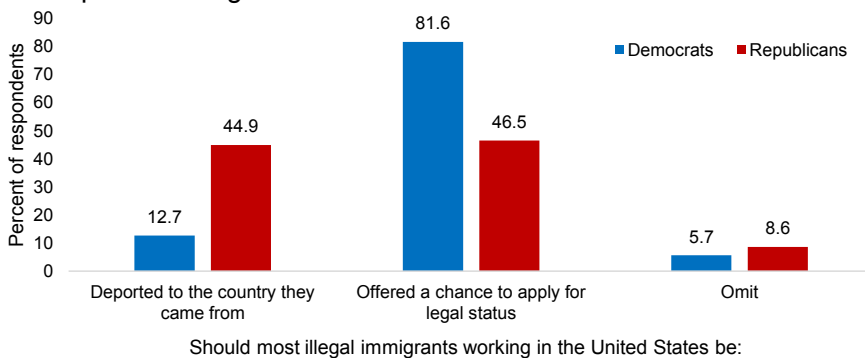


Source: The Brookings Institution  
Polls conducted by Edison Research

**BROOKINGS**

On the issue of illegal immigration, many more Republicans than Democrats thought illegal immigrants should be deported. However, what is surprising here— given the importance of this issue in the presidential campaign—is the large number of Republican congressional primary voters in our sample who also thought illegal immigrants should be offered a chance to apply for legal status. The hard line view was a minority view among general election voters—only 25 percent of those voters favored deportation. But of those 25 percent an overwhelming number—83 percent—favored Donald Trump. There were no differences between types of primaries nor in whether or not a presidential primary was also on the ballot.

**Chart 27: Illegal Immigration**  
Competitive Congressional Primaries

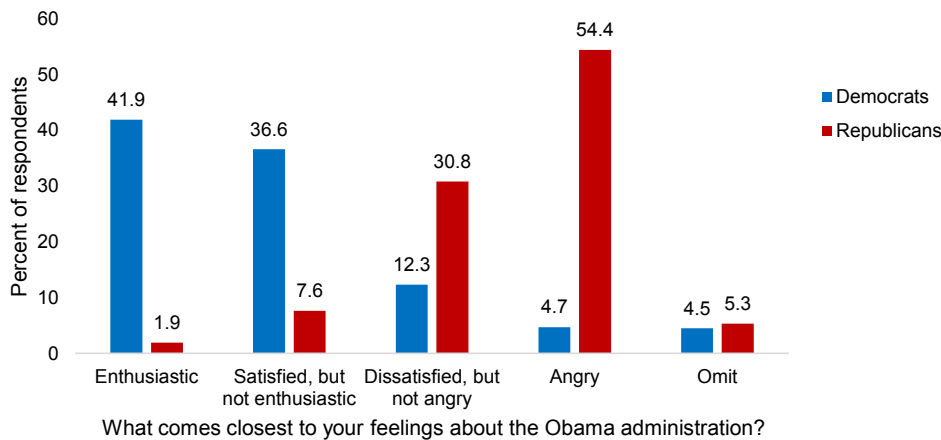


Source: The Brookings Institution  
Polls conducted by Edison Research

**BROOKINGS**

Finally, and again, not surprisingly, Democratic congressional primary voters were enthusiastic about Obama and Republican primary voters were dissatisfied or downright angry at Obama. Again, these findings are consistent with similar questions from the national exit polls. No major differences were found between type of primary and whether or not there was a presidential primary also on the ballot.

Chart 28: Anger at Obama Administration  
Competitive Congressional Primaries



Source: The Brookings Institution  
Polls conducted by Edison Research

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## CONCLUSIONS

Members of congress have long subscribed to the conventional wisdom that their primary electorates are more ideological (and more partisan) than their general electorates. Whether it’s a congressman confessing to Richard Fenno that you can win a primary with “25,000 zealots” (see above) or Sen. Chuck Schumer lamenting that “it is the ‘third of the third’ most to the right or most to left who come out to vote [in primaries],”<sup>23</sup> the political class believes that there is something unique about this narrow subset of the electorate. Members, particularly successful ones, understand this reality better than some of their competitors, particularly in an era when a majority of congressional seats are safe for one party.

Nevertheless, primary constituencies are not always demographically distinct from general election constituencies. While our findings suggest the primary electorate is older and more educated, we see much smaller differences across other demographic variables such as gender and race. Yet, the key indicators of partisanship and ideology suggest that the politician’s conventional wisdom is right: the primary electorate is unique.

It is hard to imagine that the uniqueness of the congressional primary electorate has no effect on the political calculations of the congressman or woman when they are in office. As our data illustrates, getting “primaried” is not a paranoid fiction of the congressional mind. Based on our sample, the primary electorate is attentive, motivated, and interested in values. The ideological slant of these voters is more pronounced on the Republican side than on the Democratic side—suggesting that the “asymmetric polarization” Mann and Ornstein attribute to political elites may have its roots in their primary electorates. While this paper does not weigh in on congressional behavior in Washington, continued skepticism of roll call votes as indicators of ideological behavior in the Congress is surely warranted.<sup>24</sup> The differences we’ve confirmed in the primary electorate suggest that the hypothesis that these differences shape incumbent behavior is plausible and worthy of more research.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 V.O. Key Jr., *American State Politics: An Introduction* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1956), p. 166. Note that Key is referring to numerical minorities, not racial or ethnic minorities.
- 2 Richard F. Fenno Jr., *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1978), 18.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 166.
- 4 Cook Political Report at: <http://cookpolitical.com/story/5604>.
- 5 Robert G. Boatright, *Getting Primaried: The Changing Politics of Congressional Primary Challenges* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 1.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 86.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 215.
- 8 See Elaine C. Kamarck, *Primary Politics: Everything You Need to Know About How American Nominates its Presidential Candidates*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Washington D.C., Brookings Press, 2016), Chapter 2.
- 9 Barbara Norrander, "Ideological Representativeness of Presidential Primary Voters," *American Journal of Political Science*, 33:3 (Aug., 1989), 570-575, doi: 10.2307/2111063.
- 10 Christopher C. Blunt, "The Representativeness of Primary Electorates," Paper presented at the 2000 Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association, San Jose, California, March 24-26, 2000.
- 11 Stephen Ansolabehere et al., "Primary Elections and Partisan Polarization in the U.S. Congress," *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, 5:2 (2010), pp. 169-191.
- 12 John Sides et al., "On the Representativeness of Primary Electorates," (working paper, June, 2016), accessed January 5, 2017, [http://cwarshaw.scripts.mit.edu/papers/primaries\\_160617.pdf](http://cwarshaw.scripts.mit.edu/papers/primaries_160617.pdf).
- 13 David W. Brady et al., "Primary Elections and Candidate Ideology: Out of Step with the Primary Electorate?" *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, 32:1 (Feb., 2007), 79-105, doi: 10.3162/036298007X201994.
- 14 Stephen Ansolabehere and Brian Scaffner, "Guide to the 2014 CCES Common Content," Harvard Dataverse, V3 (June 2015), doi: 10.7910/DVN/XFXJVY.
- 15 See for example:  
  
Michael P. McDonald and Matthew P. Thornburg, "Interview Mode Effects: The Case of Exit Polls and Early Voting," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 76: 2 (Summer 2012), 326-349, doi: 10.1093/pog/nfs025.  
  
Daniel Merkle and Murray Edelman, "Nonresponse in Exit Polls: A Comprehensive Analysis," *Survey Nonresponse*, ed. Robert M. Groves, Don A. Dillman, John L. Eltinge, and Roderick J.A. Little (New York, NY: Wiley), 2002, 243-256.
- 16 The overall response rate was 44%.
- 17 Charts in this section present comparative data from the ACS (American Community Survey) where applicable. The ACS is an ongoing survey administered by the Census Bureau, providing annual estimated updates to the most recent decennial census along a wide spectrum of geographic zones. The ACS provides contemporaneous data, and estimates of 1, 3, and 5-year periods. ACS values presented in this section represent the average 2015 ACS 1-year estimates of the competitive congressional districts we selected our sample from. For more information, see Appendix.
- 18 The proportion of eligible female voters who reported voting has exceeded its male counterpart in every presidential election since 1980. For short summary, see "Gender Differences in Voter Turnout Fact Sheet," provided by the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University, accessible at <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/resources/genderdiff.pdf>.

19 2015 American Community Survey 1-year estimates, Table S1901, "Household Income in the past 12 months (in 2015 inflation-adjusted dollars), accessible at [https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS\\_15\\_1YR\\_S1901&prodType=table](https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?pid=ACS_15_1YR_S1901&prodType=table).

20 These were, Ohio 14, Iowa 3, New Jersey 2, New York 19 and Tennessee 5. See Partisan Voting Index, Districts of the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress at: <http://cookpolitical.com/file/2013-04-47.pdf>

21 See Norm Ornstein, "Yes, Polarization Is Asymmetric—and Conservatives Are Worse," *The Atlantic*, June 19, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/06/yes-polarization-is-asymmetric-and-conservatives-are-worse/373044/>, and Thomas E. Mann, "Admit It, Political Scientists: Politics Really Is More Broken Than Ever," *The Atlantic*, May 26, 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/05/dysfunction/371544/>.

22 All national exit polls discussed in this section are taken from CNN, accessible at <http://edition.cnn.com/election/results/exit-polls/national/president>.

23 Charles E. Schumer, "End Partisan Primaries, Save America." July 21, 2014, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/22/opinion/charles-schumer-adopt-the-open-primary.html>.

24 For discussion of the impact of party-switching on roll call voting behavior, see Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole, and Howard Rosenthal, "The Hunt for Party Discipline in Congress," *The American Political Science Review*, 95:3 (Sep., 2001). 673-687, accessed January 5<sup>th</sup> 2017, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3118241.pdf>. For a discussion of the impacts of region and party on roll call voting behavior, see James J. Heckman and James M. Snyder, "Linear Probability Models of the Demand for Attributes with an Empirical Application to Estimating the Preferences of Legislators," *The RAND Journal of Economics*, 28:0 (1997), pp. S142-S189, accessed January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2017, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3087459.pdf>. For overview of more recent critiques, see generally *Studies in American Political Development* 30:2 (October 2016).

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