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**ANTICIPATING TROUBLE:
CONGRESSIONAL PRIMARIES AND
INCUMBENT BEHAVIOR¹**

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INTRODUCTION

At present, it is widely held among observers of American politics that the federal government is broken and that polarization is to blame. For many, polarization explains why Democrats and Republicans in Congress are incapable of regularly resolving their disagreements over important issues like funding the government or raising the debt ceiling. Observers usually attribute this polarization-fueled dysfunction to so-called “extremist” elements in both parties. According to this perspective, liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans outside Congress make compromise hard, if not impossible, inside it. And the conventional wisdom on Capitol Hill and in the political

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class is that liberal and conservative activists increase gridlock in Congress because its members fear being primaried.

But contested primaries are rare. Since 1970, only 65 percent of the members who sought reelection have had a competitive primary.² And, during that same period, those members who faced primary opposition almost always won. In fact, only 2.8 percent of the members who sought reelection were defeated.³ Juxtaposing members’ fears about being primaried to the data on such intraparty contests presents us with a puzzle: If they win only rarely, how can liberal and conservative activists competing in Democratic and Republican primaries, respectively, be responsible for today’s polarized Congress?

1. This paper is the product of a collaboration between the R Street Institute and the Brookings Institution. The Brookings Institution is a nonprofit organization devoted to independent research and policy solutions. Its mission is to conduct high-quality, independent research and, based on that research, to provide innovative, practical recommendations for policymakers and the public. The conclusions and recommendations of any Brookings publication are solely those of its author(s), and do not reflect the views of the Institution, its management or its other scholars. Brookings recognizes that the value it provides is in its absolute commitment to quality, independence and impact. Activities supported by its donors reflect this commitment.

2. Robert G. Boatright et al., “The Consequences of Primary Election Timing,” Primary Timing Project, June 2017. <https://wordpress.clarku.edu/primarytiming/files/2017/06/Primary-Timing-Paper-Revisions-062617-Clean-Version.pdf>.

3. For data, see: “Congressional Elections” in *Vital Statistics on Congress* (Brookings Institution, 2018). https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/vital-stats_ch2_full.pdf.

The present study suggests that the fear of being primaried prompts members of Congress to change their behavior in ways that reduce the likelihood of it occurring and that increase the likelihood of prevailing in a contested primary, if a challenger actually emerges. The working theory is straightforward: the general phenomenon of contested primaries impacts individual members psychologically and causes them to continually adapt to the possibility of a primary challenge. Because the primary constituency is smaller than the general election constituency, individual incumbents have greater control over this electoral environment than they do over the general election environment. (In the larger electoral arena, a presidential candidate with substantial coattails or a nationalized, midterm election can overwhelm even an incumbent's best efforts to hold their seat.)

This line of inquiry has heretofore not received the attention in the literature on congressional primaries that it deserves. One reason for this is that today's dominant methodological approaches in political science prioritize top-down research designs that are centered on falsifiable hypotheses and thus are concerned exclusively with testing them empirically, using quantitative analysis to identify variance in large-*n* datasets. One of the leading scholars of congressional primaries, Robert Boatright, summarizes the challenge such approaches face when trying to explain the relationship between a contested primary and member behavior: "It is not possible to conclusively measure whether incumbents modify their behavior to ward off challenges."⁴

As Boatright concludes, it is true that it is practically impossible to construct a dataset sufficiently large to make causal inferences solely from observable behavior. Fortunately, however, this does not preclude us from developing a better understanding of how the contested primary shapes today's politics. To compensate for the limitations inherent in large-*n* quantitative analysis, this paper adopts a bottom-up research design to interpret qualitative data gleaned from interviews and other secondary sources. Such an approach allows descriptive inferences to be made about the relationship between primaries and member behavior. By identifying potential relationships and transmission mechanisms, such a methodological approach provides insight into how members of Congress perceive the world around them and the extent to which they adjust their behavior in response to perceived challenges that arise within it. By extension, identifying the psychological forces that shape member behavior highlights significant, second-order effects of primaries that shape legislative politics in important ways.

Accordingly, the paper first reviews the existing literature on congressional primaries, which results in four assump-

tions about the relationship between contested primaries and member behavior. Next, each of these assumptions is used to develop specific expectations about how members perceive primary threats and the ways in which they adjust their behavior in reaction to them. After doing so, the findings are considered in the context of these expectations. And finally, the paper concludes by suggesting additional avenues of research for scholars moving forward.

ASSUMPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

The theoretical building blocks for the expectation that members adapt their behavior in anticipation of a contested primary are implicit in the existing literature. For example, an early focus of this work concerned whether contested primaries were a realistic alternative to two-party competition in one-party states and districts.⁵ Given the ongoing partisan sorting of the electorate, this remains an important line of inquiry today. Such movement has led to more states and districts where Democrats or Republicans do not face meaningful competition from the other party in the general election.⁶ This decline in the competitiveness of general election contests places more emphasis on primaries as the location in electoral politics where Americans are given a choice between two realistic alternatives.

Another line of inquiry has centered on the "divisive primary hypothesis." Scholars working in this area have been concerned generally with the extent to which a contested primary impacts the outcome of the general election. Findings range from "no meaningful impact,"⁷ to "some negative impact,"⁸ to "some positive impact."⁹ The contested primary has also been one of the central elements in an ongoing debate over the competitive nature of American politics.

5. Julius Turner, "Primary Elections as the Alternative to Party Competition in 'Safe' Districts," *The Journal of Politics* 15:2 (1953), pp. 197-210. https://www.jstor-org.proxyau.wrlc.org/stable/2126056#metadata_info_tab_contents.

6. See, e.g., Bruce Oppenheimer, "Deep Red and Blue Congressional Districts: The Causes and Consequences of Declining Party Competitiveness," in *Congress Reconsidered*, Lawrence C. Dodd and Bruce I. Oppenheimer eds. (CQ Press, 2005), pp. 135-58; Matthew Levendusky, *The Partisan Sort: How Liberals Became Democrats and Conservatives Became Republicans* (University of Chicago Press, 2010).

7. Andrew Hacker, "Does a 'Divisive' Primary Harm a Candidate's Election Chances?," *The American Political Science Review* 59:1 (1965), pp. 105-10. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/does-a-divisive-primary-harm-a-candidates-election-chances/BD7347C50D6492AD1500CD18892BD0C2>; and James E. Piereson and Terry B. Smith, "Primary Divisiveness and General Election Success: A Re-Examination," *The Journal of Politics* 37:2 (1975), pp. 555-62.

8. See, e.g., Donald Bruce Johnson and James R. Gibson, "The Divisive Primary Revisited: Party Activists in Iowa," *The American Political Science Review* 68:1 (1974), pp. 67-77; Boatright; Robert A. Bernstein, "Divisive Primaries Do Hurt: U.S. Senate Races, 1956-1972," *The American Political Science Review* 71:2 (1977), pp. 540-45; Richard Born, "The Influence of House Primary Election Divisiveness on General Election Margins, 1962-76," *The Journal of Politics* 43:3 (1981), pp. 640-61; and Paul S. Herrnson and James G. Gimpel, "District Conditions and Primary Divisiveness in Congressional Elections," *Political Research Quarterly* 48:1 (1995), pp. 117-34.

9. Caitlin E. Jewitt and Sarah A. Treul, "Competitive Primaries and Party Division in Congressional Elections," *Electoral Studies* 35 (2014), pp. 140-49. <https://unccch.pure.elsevier.com/en/publications/competitive-primaries-and-party-division-in-congressional-election>.

4. Robert G. Boatright, *Getting Primaried: The Changing Politics of Congressional Primary Challenges* (The University of Michigan Press, 2013), p. 139.

Important, yet contradictory, work has been done to analyze the extent to which incumbent members of Congress are any safer today than they were in the past.¹⁰ Out of this debate emerged yet another line of inquiry, in which scholars consider the relationship between contested primaries and polarization.¹¹

A careful reading of the existing work points to four assumptions regarding the ways in which members change their behavior in anticipation of a contested primary. When taken together, these form the building blocks that provide the foundation for this study's explanation of how contested primaries influence American politics. They are as follows:

All Incumbents worry about a primary threat

The assumption that all members worry about a contested primary, not just those who represent marginal states or districts, is a logical extension of Julius Turner's (1953) finding that:

the habit of primary competition develops only with long experience under one-party rule, although former one-party states retain the competitive pattern after their change of status. Recent converted one-party states have not yet developed the competitive pattern in their primaries.¹²

In other words, regardless of whether they are being primaried specifically, members react to the general phenomenon of a contested primary based on their state. This suggests that primary competition can be socialized statewide. A second implication is that as one-party rule increases, we can expect primary competition to increase. In 2018, there was an increase in primary challenges in both parties, despite the fact that only four incumbents actually lost.¹³

Robert A. Bernstein presents evidence for why members who are otherwise considered safe should still worry about

10. See, e.g., Donald A. Gross and James C. Garand, "The Vanishing Marginals, 1824-1980," *The Journal of Politics* 46:1 (1984), pp. 224-37. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3337375>; and Gary C. Jacobson, "The Marginals Never Vanished: Incumbency and Competition in Elections to the U.S. House of Representatives, 1952-82," *American Journal of Political Science* 31:1 (1987), pp. 126-41.

11. See, e.g., Michael H. Murakami, "Divisive Primaries: Party Organizations, Ideological Groups, and the Battle Over Party Purity," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 41:4 (2008), pp. 918-23; David W. Brady et al., "Primary Elections and Candidate Ideology: Out of Step with the Primary Electorate?," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 32:1 (2007), pp. 79-105; Alan I. Abramowitz and Kyle L. Saunders, "Is Polarization a Myth?," *The Journal of Politics* 70:2 (2008), pp. 542-55. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/74e3/446d2db2c0aee833e5194d25ac112eb8e302.pdf>; and Andrew B. Hall, "What Happens When Extremists Win Primaries?," *American Political Science Review* 109:1 (2015), pp. 18-42. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/what-happens-when-extremists-win-primaries/ECA-C69648AE0DF91D93103E18342B9D2>.

12. Turner, p. 206.

13. Elaine C. Kamarck and Alexander Podkul, "Political polarization and congressional candidates in the 2018 primaries," Brookings Institution, October 2018. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-2018-primaries-project-introduction-to-the-candidates>.

a contested primary. He identifies a positive relationship between the probability of a party's victory in the general election and the level of competition in its primary. Examining the Senate, he concludes:

Where there is a difference in strength between state parties, divisive primaries are more frequent in the stronger than in the weaker party [...] a divisive primary in the stronger party significantly hurts its candidates' prospects of winning, while a divisive primary in the weaker party rarely affects its candidates' chances of winning.¹⁴

Based on the findings related to this assumption, all members—including those typically considered safe—are expected to anticipate a primary challenge, even though only some actually experience one.

Incumbents believe contested primaries hurt their chances in the general

Andrew Hacker analyzes three ways in which a contested primary may impact the outcome of a general election. First, it may reinforce existing or create new, intraparty divisions, thereby complicating efforts to unite in the general election. Second, if the supporters of his or her opponent decide not to vote in the general, a contested primary may undermine the winning candidate's electoral support. Third, a contested primary could harm the incumbent's image in the eyes of independent voters, who are generally concerned with a candidate's ability to rise above partisan politics to govern. Consequently, we can expect members to view contested primaries negatively because they make it harder for them to win reelection.¹⁵

Similarly, James Piereson and Terry Smith suggest that a contested primary impacts incumbents and non-incumbents (i.e. challengers) in different ways. Specifically, their findings demonstrate that challengers may benefit from a contested primary: "A possible explanation is that a divisive primary campaign may increase the visibility of [challengers...] vis-à-vis their opponents."¹⁶ Richard Born provides additional support for the claim that incumbents have more reason to view a contested primary more negatively than their intraparty rivals, arguing:

[that] divisive primaries should be more injurious for the incumbent perhaps stems from the fact that his intra-party rivals are likely to target their political fire

14. Bernstein, p. 544.

15. Hacker, pp. 105-10. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/does-a-divisive-primary-harm-a-candidates-election-chances/B7347C50D6492AD1500CD18892BDOC2>.

16. Piereson and Smith, p. 560.

directly against him, spotlighting putative shortcomings in his record.”¹⁷

Finally, Claire Jewitt and Sarah Treul suggest that a contested primary may benefit the party’s ticket in the general election. They identify a positive relationship between competitive primaries and turnout in the general election, with higher turnout boosting the party’s chances to win in November. When considered alongside existing work, their findings suggest that the advantage of a contested primary accrues to the party instead of the incumbent. And, by documenting the ways in which a contested primary helps the party ticket, their findings could exacerbate members’ feelings of insecurity by neutralizing an important argument for why ambitious politicians should not challenge their partisan colleagues in primaries.¹⁸

Incumbents exaggerate successful primary challenges

Incumbents have good reason to disregard the historical win/loss record in congressional primaries. Harvey Schantz offers a basic explanation of why members react negatively to intraparty challenges when he refers to the primary election as “an instrument of accountability.”¹⁹ By virtue of its role as an accountability mechanism, a contested primary generates uncertainty among members of Congress. The prospect of being held accountable for their actions in an uncertain environment is likely to generate feelings of insecurity. And that insecurity is what prompts members to change their behavior in anticipation of a contentious primary, as opposed to a rational analysis of the empirical data.²⁰

Exogenous developments can also exacerbate the general sense of insecurity that members feel. For example, despite evidence to the contrary, members’ fears of being defeated in a primary increase whenever they feel more threatened. And, as a result of developments, such as advances in campaign technology; the emergence of a decentralized media environment or unexpected developments during a presidential campaign, they may feel more threatened—even by second-tier challengers. Both perceived threats help create a more-level playing field for all candidates.²¹ Members believe that such developments may help their intraparty rivals narrow—if not neutralize entirely—the competitive advantage they previously enjoyed as a result of their incumbency.

17. Born, p. 660.

18. Jewitt and Treul, pp. 140-49. <https://uncch.pure.elsevier.com/en/publications/competitive-primaries-and-party-division-in-congressional-electio>.

19. Harvey L. Schantz, “Contested and Uncontested Primaries for the U. S. House,” *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 5:4 (1980), p. 545. https://www.jstor.org/stable/439573?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

20. For example, see: Boatright.

21. Gross and Garand, pp. 224-37. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i337375>.

Michael Murakami’s work on “party purity groups” similarly underscores how the emergence of advocacy groups threatens members who are not aligned with their primary constituency.²² In doing so, he quotes Stephen Moore, founder and then-president of the Club for Growth:

If we beat Specter, we won’t have any trouble with wayward Republicans anymore. It serves notice to Chafee [R-RI], Snowe [R-ME], Voinovich [R-OH] and others who have been problem children that they will be next.²³

In response to Moore, Murakami observes that, “by taking down an incumbent, they can hit two, three, even four birds with one stone.”²⁴ That is, defeating one member in a primary prompts other similarly situated members to change their behavior in an effort to avoid their colleague’s fate. Moreover, according to work by Michael Wagner and Mike Gruszczynski, they are likely to be rewarded for doing so, which suggests that, “ideological extremity is positively related to political news coverage for members of the House of Representatives.”²⁵ In recent research on the conservative movement in America, Theda Skocpol looks at the growth of organizations playing politics on the right between 2002 and 2014, and finds that issue advocates, non-party funders, constituency organizations and think tanks have all grown in resources while Republican Party committees have shrunk. These organizations provide resources, support and ideas for primaries.²⁶

These studies reflect and reinforce a broader shift toward a candidate-centered politics, in which parties play a secondary role in service to their candidates.²⁷ According to Gary Jacobson, it is easier for incumbents to lose the support of their constituents in this new environment.²⁸ The result is that there is no longer any guarantee that the next election will be as easy as the last one. This dynamic necessarily shapes how members see the world and reinforces the insecurity they feel about their place in it. It also makes them acutely sensitive to non-party actors in the political arena:

22. Murakami, p. 919.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Michael W. Wagner and Mike Gruszczynski, “Who Gets Covered? Ideological Extremity and News Coverage of Members of the U.S. Congress, 1993 to 2013,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 95:3 (2018), p. 670. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1077699017702836?journalCode=jmqc>.

26. Theda Skocpol and Alexander Hertel-Fernandez, “The Koch Network and Republican Party Extremism,” *Perspectives on Politics* 14:3 (September 2016), pp. 681-699. <http://terrain.gov.harvard.edu/files/terrain/files/the-koch-network-and-republican-party-extremism.ppp-sept2016.pdf>.

27. See, e.g., John H. Aldrich, *Why Parties? A Second Look* (The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

28. See, e.g., Jacobson.

Not only are House incumbents objectively no safer now than they were 30 years ago, they also bear much more personal responsibility for whatever level of safety they do enjoy. And recent changes in campaign politics have, if anything, made the personal task of holding a constituency more demanding and uncertain than ever.²⁹

In response to the claim that incumbents should not be worried about contested primaries because upsets are rare, David Brady et al. point out that, “many rare events – such as presidential vetoes – produce important effects in politics.”³⁰ However rare, primary upsets are important because of the psychological impact they have on incumbents. Upsets shape the expectations members have about the future. They have an outsized psychological influence on members precisely because they are so unexpected. Such events thus underscore the uncertainty and exacerbate the insecurity that members regularly face.

This is another reason why large-*n* studies have not demonstrated conclusively the link between contested primaries and polarization in Congress. Shigeo Hirano et al. attempt to do so by looking at the connection between the threat of a primary election, the polarization of the primary electorate and outcomes as measured by roll-call voting. Using roll-call votes, they find “little evidence that extreme roll call voting records are positively associated with primary election outcomes.”³¹ Still, it should be noted that the roll-call-vote record reflects simply the extent to which members of the majority party structure the legislative process to advantage issues upon which they are united. It does not, by itself, constitute evidence of a deeper substantive divide between the members. In recent years, a great deal of congressional business has been conducted through the creation of omnibus bills, which makes it difficult to identify extremes in issues. Consequently, analysis of the vote record must be supplemented with data gleaned from other sources to provide insight into member motivations.³²

Incumbents believe that behavior changes help deter or defeat challengers

Implicit in the previous assumption is the expectation that members believe that avoiding controversial issues also helps them avoid a contested primary. Underpinning this observa-

tion is a significant body of work on legislative parties that suggests legislators evaluate roll-call votes in the context of constituencies and sub-constituencies.³³ Some votes may be more challenging for members than others because they pit different sub-constituencies, or a member’s primary constituency and the general-election constituency against one another.³⁴ One way members respond to such votes is by structuring the legislative agenda to minimize those roll calls that antagonize their base and allied advocacy groups. This dynamic is evident in the extent to which rank-and-file members empower their party leaders to structure the agenda and the policy alternatives they consider, even though they disagree on the underlying issue.

More broadly, Jacobson asserts that for incumbents, “security comes from avoiding vigorous opposition and, if that fails, being fully prepared to cope with it.”³⁵ In offering reasons why fellow partisans decide to contest a primary, Born lists behavioral changes that members can make to lessen the risk of a challenge in the first place. Specifically, he notes that incumbents who have “neglected their constituencies, voted against important district issue preferences, or been implicated in scandal, are expected to be vulnerable in the general election.”³⁶ By contrast, members who attend to their constituency, support its policy preferences and avoid scandal can better inoculate themselves against a primary challenge.

According to Brady et al.: “It seems likely that candidates learned to respect the potential threat of primary defeat by observing their losing colleagues in the early 1970s.”³⁷ The result is that over time, incumbents have learned to “position themselves close enough to the primary constituency to ward off electoral defeat.”³⁸

What is clear from this existing work on congressional primaries is that there are several reasons to expect members of Congress to adjust their behavior in anticipation of a primary challenge. Specifically, it suggests that all members worry about one, and the reason for this is that members believe that a contested primary will harm their candidacy disproportionately relative to their general-election opponent.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

30. Brady et al., p. 100.

31. Shigeo Hirano et al., “Primary Elections and Partisan Polarization in the U.S. Congress,” *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 5:2 (2010), p. 171. https://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/9949294/Ansolabehere_Primary.pdf?sequence=1.

32. See Philip A. Wallach and James Wallner, “Polarization is an output of our process, not the cause of all our woes,” *Legbranch.com*, June 26, 2018. <http://www.legbranch.com/theblog/2018/6/26/polarization-is-an-output-of-our-process-not-the-cause-of-all-our-woes>.

33. See, e.g., Douglas R. Arnold, *The Logic of Congressional Action*, (Yale University Press, 1990); Benjamin Bishin, “Constituency Influence in Congress: Does Subconstituency Matter?”, *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 25:3 (2000), pp. 389-415. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1218483>; Gary W. Cox and Matthew D. McCubbins, *Setting the Agenda: Responsible Party Government in the U.S. House of Representatives* (Cambridge University Press, 2005); Frances E. Lee, *Insecure Majorities: Congress and the Perpetual Campaign* (The University of Chicago Press, 2016); Gregory Koger and Matthew J. Lebo, *Strategic Party Government: Why Winning Trumps Ideology* (The University of Chicago Press, 2017).

34. Koger and Lebo, pp. 179-80.

35. Jacobson, p. 138.

36. Born, p. 644.

37. Brady et al., p. 97.

38. *Ibid.*

Another reason for the primacy of primaries in members' thinking is that they exaggerate the frequency of successful primary challenges in those rare instances when one of their colleagues is actually defeated. Finally, and most importantly, members have reason to believe that adjusting their behavior in anticipation of an intraparty challenge increases the likelihood that they will win reelection.

Yet, the existing work does not demonstrate specifically *how* members adjust their behavior to win and thus, the members themselves are the best source from whom to gain insight into this critical part of the puzzle.³⁹

THE VIEW FROM CAPITOL HILL

In the late 1970s, the political scientist Richard F. Fenno Jr. accompanied a number of different congressmen from diverse backgrounds as they traveled around their constituencies. His goal was to better understand the world they lived in—from their point of view. In so doing, he found that members think about their constituencies in terms of four concentric circles.⁴⁰ The largest is their geographical constituency. The next largest is the reelection constituency. The primary constituency forms the next circle and the smallest circle is their personal constituency. When it comes to the primary constituency, with which we are concerned in this paper, Fenno observed that those people in it are among the most intense and motivated voters in a district. As one of Fenno's congressman said: "Everybody needs some group which is strongly for him – especially in a primary. You can win with 25,000 zealots"⁴¹

Following in these methodological footsteps, the authors turned to today's members of Congress to better understand how they perceive the modern primary threat (or in Fenno's terms, how they saw their primary constituency). The results affirm the working theory that members routinely adjust their behavior in anticipation of a contested primary. More importantly, organized by four imperatives corresponding to the expectations outlined in the previous section, the findings shed light on how specifically members adjust to deter a primary challenge and to prevail in a contested primary, if one emerges.

Stay close to the constituency

Just as winning a general election requires that members attend to their geographic and reelection constituencies, so

39. The following section includes information derived from informal interviews with various members of Congress, conducted by the authors.

40. Richard F. Fenno, Jr., *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts* (New York: Longman, 2003).

41. Richard F. Fenno, Jr., "U.S. House Members in Their Constituencies: An Exploration," *The American Political Science Review* 71:3 (1977), p. 887. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1306780>.

too does prevailing in a contested primary. One Democrat explained:

The message is important but the most important thing is to be *of* the district [...] I was born in the district, still live in the same town and represented the district in the State Senate. I come home every weekend and I'm out there every weekend.

A midwestern Republican similarly noted: "I win because I connect with my voters."

When it comes to avoiding defeat in a contested primary, staying close to the constituency has three advantages for members. First, it enables them to identify threats and co-opt critics before they emerge or become a problem. Democrats and Republicans alike stressed the relationship between staying close to their primary constituency and identifying potential rivals—or issues that could give rise to potential rivals—early in the process. According to a House Democrat, having one's ear to the ground helps to ensure that members don't get surprised: "I was aware of the currents stirring and felt the need to shore up my African-American base. I showed up at every event and carried every African-American precinct." Another House Democrat recalls monitoring the emergence of "Indivisible," a group that gained prominence as a result of Bernie Sanders' left-wing political campaign: "You could see it coming," he said, "and I reached out to them and did an event with them." The first thing one Member of Congress said about the surprising defeat of Congressman Joe Crowley (NY-14) was, "well, he moved out of the district."

Members rightly recognize that they do not have the luxury of delegating to their colleagues the job of staying close to their constituency. And, every constituency is unique. For example, a Republican observed: "We all have different imperatives based on the states we represent." And a Democrat in a 50-50 district (PVI: D+1) credited his absence of a primary to the fact that the opposition to him—especially the left-wing opposition—is not very experienced.⁴² Like many of the members we interviewed and like many of the members Fenno interviewed decades ago, this congressman felt that his deep roots in the district kept him safe from a primary. Although he was recently elected to Congress, he had held elected office in the district since 1994. In discussing the absence of a primary in 2016, he opined: "To get re-elected you'd think I'd have to go far to the left. But I don't. I get a lot of grief from the left. But I've been around a long time so I'm unusual."

42. "PVI" refers to the Partisan Voter Index, created by Charlie Cook as a means of measuring the general partisan leanings of a district.

Second, members believe that attending to their constituency helps them fend off primary threats better when they do appear. Long appreciated by political scientists and members alike, constituent services is one way members do so. It is one of the things that members can offer that challengers cannot. And it can be so powerful that, in one district, a white male has managed to be elected and re-elected in a majority-minority district since 1992. His secret is staying close and focusing on constituent services: “We do citizenship events, vaccinations [...] I love doing town hall meetings. We created events on Saturdays and we’d call FEMA [after flooding hit the district] and say ‘you need to be here.’” One northeastern congressman has a full-time economic development director on staff in the state, who is empowered to speak for the candidate and who keeps the candidate close to the business community. And according to a Republican senator, “helping your constituency is not only rewarding, it also helps inoculate you against attacks that you’ve gotten ‘Potomac Fever.’ It shows your constituents that you haven’t forgotten where you came from.”

Third, members believe that they can reduce their vulnerability in a contested primary by focusing on the issues about which their primary constituency cares. For example, both moderate and conservative Republicans regularly view the legislative agenda from the perspective of their base, especially after a wave of contested primaries that began in the 2010 election cycle. One Republican observed that members are vulnerable in a contested primary when they fail to draw contrasts with the Democrats: “Trying to act like a Democrat won’t win you the general. But it could cost you the primary.”

Members are especially attentive to their primary constituencies when controversial issues are on the congressional agenda. When upsets happen in such moments, it is usually because members have taken their base for granted or the district has changed. For example, Joe Crowley (D-N.Y.) was defeated recently in a primary by Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Crowley, the current head of the House Democratic Caucus, had moved his family to Virginia and was actively jockeying for a leadership post. In the primary, the 28-year-old Democratic Socialist ran powerful ads featuring her working-class roots and her fit with the district—implicitly accusing Crowley of not fitting. Similarly, in June 2014, Dave Brat’s (R-Va.) surprise victory over then-House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.) was made possible by Cantor’s focus on national issues rather than the issue about which his primary constituency cared most: immigration. In an earlier race, Cliff Stearns (R-Fla.) also attributes his 2012 primary loss to Ted Yoho (R-Fla.) to taking his eye off his district: “My absorption in Solyndra [the energy department scandal in the Obama Administration] took so much of my time [...] I was absorbed

with this day and night but if you don’t get back to the grass roots you can lose.”⁴³

Stearns’ situation is especially interesting in that he misjudged how much credit his grassroots voters would give him for leading the investigation into a scandal involving the other party.

Advocacy Groups Are Important

One way for members to connect more easily with their primary constituents back home is to secure the support of key outside-advocacy groups. If that is not possible, members at least try to avoid their direct opposition. Political parties help reduce information costs in elections and mobilize voters to go to the polls. Advocacy groups play a similar role in primaries, and in both parties, their power goes a long way toward explaining the source of anxiety members of Congress face about being primaried. Advocacy groups also define many of the issues we associate with today’s polarization. While they may get involved to help a like-minded candidate win or simply to develop better relationships with all members, the effect is the same. In short, such groups help educate citizens on their options in the voting booth. According to another midwestern Republican, “the groups help to amplify your message and provide cues to the voters back home that you are the real deal.”

Findings of this study indicate that members are acutely aware of the role played by advocacy groups in avoiding, as well as surviving, a contested primary. For example, Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) voted with his more conservative colleague Rand Paul (R-Ky.) more frequently in advance of his primary in 2014. During the 112th Congress (2011-2012), McConnell voted with Paul on 71 percent of all roll-call votes (excluding unanimous votes). McConnell and Paul voted on opposite sides of an issue on 29 percent of all roll-call votes (excluding unanimous ones). During the 113th Congress (2013-2014), McConnell aligned himself much more closely to Paul, voting with him on 85 percent of all roll-call votes (excluding unanimous ones). McConnell opposed Paul on just 15 percent of all roll-call votes during the same period (excluding unanimous votes). And after winning his primary, McConnell’s voting behavior returned to normal. During the 114th Congress (2015-2016), McConnell and Paul voted the same way on 67 percent of all roll calls and opposed each other on 33 percent (excluding unanimous votes).

In advance of his own primary, the same dynamic can also be observed in Orrin Hatch’s (R-Utah) voting behavior. As with

43. Cliff Stearns comments at an October 2017 panel discussion on current political discord, co-hosted by The George Washington University’s Graduate School of Public Management and the U.S. Association of Former Members of Congress (hereinafter “GWU Panel Discussion”). <https://blog.gspm.gwu.edu/2017/10/11/gspm-hosts-panel-on-current-political-discord>.

McConnell and Paul, Hatch aligned himself closely with the more-conservative Mike Lee (R-Utah), who had defeated incumbent Bob Bennett (R-Utah) in Utah's Republican Party nominating convention during the prior election cycle. During Lee's first two years in office in the 112th Congress, Hatch voted with him on 78 percent of all roll-call votes and opposed him on just 22 percent (excluding unanimous ones). After winning his primary, Hatch no longer aligned himself as closely to Lee. During the 113th Congress, he voted with Lee on 74 percent of all roll calls and opposed him on 26 percent (excluding unanimous votes). And during the 114th Congress, Hatch voted with Lee on 64 percent of all roll calls and opposed him on 36 percent (excluding unanimous votes). The extent to which Hatch adjusted his voting behavior to avoid losing in a primary is underscored by the considerable fluctuation in his Club For Growth (CFG) ratings. In 2007 and 2008, the Club rated him at 53 percent and 69 percent, respectively. Hatch's CFG rating jumped to 97 percent in 2010, after Lee defeated Bennett, and increased to 99 percent in 2011, right before his own primary. After his primary, Hatch's CFG rating dropped to 76 percent. It hit 44 percent in 2014.

A similar dynamic can also be observed in the voting behavior of House members. For example, in 2018, Luke Messer (R-Ind.) and Todd Rokita (R-Ind.) adjusted their voting behavior to secure the support of the Club ahead of the Indiana Republican Senate primary. In 2016, Messer's CFG rating was 84 percent. It rose to 98 percent in 2017. Rokita's 2016 CFG rating was 89 percent. In 2017, it rose to 96 percent.

In recent years, the role of advocacy groups on the Republican side has received much more attention than on the Democratic one, although that may be changing. Following the unexpected success of Bernie Sanders in the 2016 presidential election and the subsequent continued organizing across the country by his supporters, 16 Democratic senators signed on to Sanders' Medicare for All bill. This, in spite of the fact that no immediate action on the proposal was planned; with one senator calling it "aspirational," a nice way of saying "symbolic only."⁴⁴

Members also work to avoid acting in ways that could lead advocacy groups to oppose them in the future. According to one Republican, when controversial issues come up, members almost always consider the various pledges and scorecards of outside groups, even if they ultimately vote against them. In such instances, "leadership does its best to ensure that the groups don't score whatever it is that they want to pass." They are motivated to do so because of the role played

by such groups in affirming a candidate's conservative bone fides (or lack thereof). It is logical to assume that leaders would not try to reassure members if they expected their efforts to have little impact on how the rank-and-file behaved or voted.

According to another Senate Republican, leadership works hard to give the rank-and-file cover for any votes they cast that could create problems back home. In the context of recent debates over legislation that included funding for Planned Parenthood, a Republican observed: "leaders talk to the pro-life groups to get them to support or remain silent." According to another senator, leaders also regularly call groups to settle them down before a big vote. Another Republican remarked that leaders routinely "make announcements at lunch that someone supports a bill. They want to get members to yes." All of these efforts are designed to reassure the rank-and-file that their vote will not make a primary challenge more likely by provoking the opposition of various interest groups. According to one Republican, "that some of the life groups won't score funding Planned Parenthood speaks volumes. Members notice."

Structure the legislative agenda to win

The psychological impact that primaries have on members has second-order effects that shape congressional operations on a routine basis. This is because, sensitive to their members' needs, the fear of being primaried also causes congressional leaders to structure the legislative agenda to minimize problems back home. Member sensitivity to the primary threat drives their leaders to structure the legislative process in such a way that makes Democrats and Republicans appear more extreme than they really are and thus amplifies the appearance of polarization in our politics.

Consider the process by which the Senate first passed the Affordable Care Act in 2009, which suggested that Republicans were more unified in opposition to the law and were determined to repeal it. Specifically, then-Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) and Minority Leader McConnell negotiated unanimous consent agreements to control the Senate's deliberations each day. These agreements were used to schedule votes on Democrat- and Republican-sponsored amendments, and often required 60 votes to pass instead of 51. The higher vote thresholds ensured that any amendments that altered the bill substantially or otherwise jeopardized its passage would fail. In sum, the way in which Reid and McConnell managed the debate made it easier for them to keep their colleagues unified in support of—or opposition to—the bill.

However, after seven years of zero-sum rhetoric from members pledging to repeal it the first chance they got, Republican ambivalence toward the Affordable Care Act's basic

44. Haeyoun Park and Wilson Andrews, "One-Third of Democratic Senators Support Bernie Sanders' Single-Payer Plan," *The New York Times*, Sept. 13, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/09/13/us/sanders-medicare-for-all-plan-support.html>; Elana Schor, "Sanders' single-payer push splits Democrats," *Politico*, Sept. 13, 2017. <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/09/13/bernie-sanders-single-payer-democrats-medicare-242616>.

framework eventually became apparent. Their inability to honor their pledges to repeal the law in 2017 suggests that they are not as polarized in opposition to it as previously thought.

Specifically, they routinely try to avoid voting on controversial issues that could place them in opposition to their base. And when that is not possible, members try to consider the issue in the least damaging way possible. According to one Republican: “Sometimes members just want to punt issues until after the election.” Republicans also prefer to avoid tackling controversial issues in the context of appropriations bills: “Attaching controversial riders puts us in an unnecessarily tough spot. We need to find less-destructive ways to signal our purity.”

The relationship between the legislative agenda and member efforts to avoid a contested primary came up most frequently in the context of immigration. When asked about DACA, one Republican stressed the importance of the sequence: “Timing matters. We must secure the border first. Then the anger in our base will go down. Then we can deal with the issue.” According to another Republican: “Immigration is fraught with all sorts of challenges.”

Timing also matters to members in ways other than mere sequencing. One Republican was willing to take tough votes if doing so was for the good of the country *and* the issue wouldn’t be coming up again in the future. In the context of immigration, for example, he remarked: “I voted for the ‘86 bill. We were promised we wouldn’t have to do it again. And here we are. So, we need to make sure we don’t have to do this again.”

Yet, members also acknowledge that avoiding controversial issues like immigration is not always possible. Many felt that trying to do so causes more problems than not. According to one Republican, trying to avoid adjudicating issues about which the base cares has led directly to the party’s present predicament: “Our problem with our base is that they don’t trust us. They think that it’s only a handful of conservatives fighting the system. We need to change that.” In the context of immigration, another Republican acknowledged: “The problem is that we have made promises, passed laws but we never follow through.”

A number of Republicans stressed the importance of showing up to fight, even when they were going to lose. They believe that doing so signals to their base that they are trying to deliver on their promises and that the Democrats are the ones stopping them. Yet, one member acknowledged their leaders’ aversion to such fights:

They’ve been around for a long time. They know how it is going to end up. Even when leadership knows

where we are going to end up, it is still important to show the fight. That doesn’t mean that we have to fight for futile things. But it does mean that we have to fight—for some things.

But such sentiment is by no means universal. Other members were sensitive to the potential damage “fake fights” could cause. For example, according to one Republican:

We have too many fake fights on things when we don’t have the votes to win. Those are harmful. They force more of our members to take votes that could put them crosswise with their people back home.

Notwithstanding this concern, there was general agreement among Republicans that they need to do more for their primary constituency. One Republican remarked: “Our record matters because the people who sent us here did so because they want us to deliver on what we said on the campaign trail.” Another Republican was similarly concerned about the Senate’s present inability to function:

It’s going to be real hard asking my voters to send me back here when I don’t have a record of things to point to that justifies me being here in the first place. We are in charge. And we’ve done nothing. That is a problem.

According to another:

We ignore the environment at our own peril. First, it was our base. Now, even donors and the establishment wing of the party in my state are getting frustrated. The big explanation is that we overpromise and under deliver. We need to fight—fight smart. They will not come home if we don’t. If I don’t come back here, it is because I lost support among my base. I am onboard with governing, that we need to do a whole lot more. We need to do what we promised.

Perhaps because of the expectation that they need to deliver, a few Republicans stressed the importance of better managing the expectations of their base voters moving forward. According to one member: “We need to be much better at calibrating expectations and our base, especially when we are in a weak negotiating position.”

Unity Is Essential

Most members believe that delivering on their promises requires maintaining unity in the House and Senate. This is because, first and foremost, members increasingly see their reelection through a partisan lens. Put differently, they believe that divisions in Congress undermine the party’s reputation nationwide and make it harder for its members to prevail in their own contests. Along with their desire to avoid

taking votes on tough issues, members thus have incentive to remain loyal to the party and to resist efforts to rock the boat.

Members also believe that a unified party is an important part of avoiding—as well as surviving—a contested primary. They often touted their closeness to the party’s people as a reason why they were not challenged. For example, in his book on Congress, David Price (D-N.C.) writes:

I have attempted to keep my local party ties in good repair between elections – attending and speaking at meetings, helping organize and promote events, consulting with party leaders [...] Politicians who complain of the party’s weakness and irrelevance and treat the organization accordingly often are engaged in a self-fulfilling prophecy.⁴⁵

Party support back home can be helpful in warding off potential primary challenges because the challengers are running as a Democrat or Republican. Accordingly, a Republican senator stressed the importance of party unity to avoid a primary challenge, and to prevailing in the general election if one emerged: “In my state, we successfully marry the establishment and the Tea Party.”

A Democrat from a western swing district (with a PVI of 0) credits the party with recognizing that his district is a tough one and that the Democratic nominee has to be able to win some voters from the other side. He easily defeated a primary challenger who came at him from the left. In an interview, he noted: “The Democratic base is not just the far-left activists. Obama had a lot of moderate Democrats.” And another western Democrat credits her dominance in five primaries where she won by substantial margins—60 percent—to the following: “I’ve always been a leader in the party; raised money in the party. I’m kind of a darling of the Democrats out here [...] The challengers have been kind of outsiders, not part of the establishment.”

Unity is not only important among party officials back home, it also matters on Capitol Hill, as members desire to protect themselves with the attention-deflecting effects of unified action. This creates an opportunity for their colleagues to influence their behavior during intraparty debates over policy and strategy. For example, all members—not just the most liberal or conservative outliers—routinely work with outside groups to encourage their colleagues to vote a certain way. Leaders’ efforts to secure the support (or silence) of key advocacy groups before a controversial vote is one example of such behavior. Rank-and-file members also utilize the tactic to encourage their colleagues to vote with them on certain issues. According to a Senate Republican: “It can help

solidify the conference to stand firm on certain issues with outside support.”

Yet, working with outside advocacy groups to mobilize the Republican base as leverage in intraparty debates can be controversial, especially when it is rank-and-file members who do it, as opposed to party leaders. Such efforts almost always end up destroying the unity most members view as critical to winning reelection. Referring to some groups targeting a colleague, a frustrated Republican argued: “She is in a different state than I am. They don’t have the right to do that. It’s frustrating.” Another Republican observed: “Tough issues come and go. We all represent different states. We shouldn’t criticize each other for representing our constituencies.”

DISCUSSION

The findings presented herein support the working theory that members of Congress adapt their behavior to better defend against primary challengers. In testing this theory, assumptions were made that: 1) all members have reason to worry about a contested primary because they believe that it will harm their candidacy relative to their opponent in the general election; 2) in large part, member insecurity vis-à-vis a potential primary opponent is driven by the exaggerated frequency they attribute to successful challenges; and 3) most importantly, members believe that changing their behavior will help deter a primary challenger and better position themselves to win if one emerges. This is consistent with the existing work on congressional primaries.

Based on these assumptions, four ways members react to primary threats once they are in office were specified. Specifically: 1) they stay close to their primary constituency to help identify potential threats early, to create a shield to defend against them if necessary and to not lose sight of the issues about which their base cares the most; 2) they believe that outside advocacy groups are important especially in primary races and they either adapt their behavior accordingly or attempt to influence the position of the advocacy group; 3) leaders structure the legislative agenda to avoid issues that will upset their primary constituencies. When that is not possible, members try to consider must-pass issues in the least damaging way possible and 4) members believe that party unity—both back home and in D.C.—is an important element to prevail in a contested primary.

A number of other things have also become apparent. First, members do not agree on the role played by money in primary elections. For example, when asked how he avoided a primary, one relatively new member of Congress told us: “That’s where money matters.” Indeed, the ability to raise money has been one of the most common explanations for why incumbents win both primary and general elections. However, while incumbents raise money in order to ward

45. David E. Price, *The Congressional Experience: A View from the Hill* (Westview Press, 1992), p. 8.

off challengers, they are quite aware of its limits. According to one congressman who had spent many years in elected office before his congressional race: “I’d rather run against a millionaire than a state senator because the state senator knows what they’re doing.” A western congressman also downplayed the role of money. In response to a question about why he had not had a primary challenger after nearly a decade in Congress, he responded: “The standard answer here is—raise money. But it won’t give you help because the challenger can raise money from a super pac.” One Republican was particularly exercised about the role played by money and agreed that it was largely irrelevant: “The problem are the consultants in that they drive up the price of winning the campaign. They insist on fancy ads that do not connect with the people because they go negative.”

Second, gerrymandering may play a role in the House. As noted above, political scientists first became interested in primaries when they took place in one-party states or districts. In the middle of the twentieth century, this was mostly the solid-Democratic South. However, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, demographic “sorting” and more efficient, computer-assisted gerrymandering have created a political system where there are many more one-party states and districts. On this point, one southern Democrat remarked: “Ever since 2010 with the Tea Party and extreme gerrymandering, I’ve had a packed Democratic district and we’ve had the potential for a left-wing insurgency.” A northern Democrat from a safe district (PVI: D+15) said: “Like most members, I’m more concerned about a primary.” Supporting this view, a Republican recounted that he was told to worry about a primary from the center when he first came to Congress, “but it never happened. In general, I don’t think primary challenges from the center work.”

Third, in recent years, Democrats and Republicans have reacted to the primary threat differently but that may be changing. In contrast to Republicans, Democrats have only recently begun to see the sorts of ideological divisions that have played out in the Republican primaries during the past decade. For example, in 2008, Congressman Al Wynn (D-Md.) lost a primary race to Donna Edwards, who concentrated her election on opposition to Wynn’s vote to authorize the Iraq War. Edwards went on to hold the seat for the Democrats. Years later, Wynn looked back on the race “as a fight between ideology and pragmatism. I came into politics with the idea that you compromise.”⁴⁶ The only high-profile ideological primary on the Democratic side to take place in 2010 was Blanche Lincoln’s (D-Ark.) race against Lt. Governor Bill Halter, who ran as a liberal, in conservative Arkansas, with labor union and progressive support. Lincoln believes that the tough primary was largely responsible for her sub-

sequent defeat in November to John Boozman (R-Ark.), who was serving in the House at the time: “When somebody spends \$21 million of negative advertising against you, you’ve got to spend an awful lot of time and energy winning back people’s approval and people’s trust.”⁴⁷

For the most part, however, through most of this decade, Democrats have watched as the other side faced the threat of ideologically driven primaries. The Democrats interviewed as part of this study agreed that today, the primary problem has been worse on the other side of the aisle. One western congressman said: “I think the Republicans are more worried than we are. It’s the only explanation of why they act the way they do in the House.” A southern congressman reflected that: “Members are more conscious of it. But it’s an acute problem for the GOP—they live in mortal fear of being primaried.” But Democrats are also aware of the possibility. A western congressman put it this way:

The GOP has had an illness called ‘primaried.’ We have the ‘Indivisibles’ (a liberal political action group) and Bernie. So, it’s an infection that’s creeping into our side. Even during the [presidential] primary you could see it coming and I reached out to them.

In the 2018 congressional primaries, Democrats saw an enormous increase in the number of people running for office and, in particular, a large increase in the number of challengers who self-identified as progressives, many of whom were brought into politics by the presidential candidacy of Bernie Sanders.⁴⁸ One incumbent from the West was a super-delegate to the 2016 convention and voted for Hillary Clinton, while her district voted for Bernie Sanders. This got her an opponent who ran an aggressive campaign against her. Her reaction was to “take the race seriously and to target new voters; millennials and the unaffiliated.” The incumbent defeated the challenger 2 to 1. Another incumbent said: “Ideological challenges are more common than they used to be. The Tea Party—some of us predicted that it would happen in our party. Part of it was Bernie.”

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to shed some light on the following paradox: congressional primary challenges are rare and incumbent defeats in those challenges even more rare. And yet, members of Congress themselves are highly sensitive to primaries and to their effect on the work of Congress. Take,

46. “GWU Panel Discussion.” <https://blog.gspm.gwu.edu/2017/10/11/gspm-hosts-panel-on-current-political-discord>.

47. David Catanese, “Blanche Lincoln: Blame Bill Halter,” *Politico*, Oct. 26, 2010. <https://www.politico.com/story/2010/10/blanche-lincoln-blame-bill-halter-044187>.

48. See Kamarck and Podkul. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-2018-primaries-project-introduction-to-the-candidates>.

for instance, the observation by Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) that:

Primaries poison the health of that system and warp its natural balance, because the vast majority of Americans don't typically vote in primaries. Instead, it is the 'third of the third' most to the right or most to the left who come out to vote—the 10 percent at each of the two extremes of the political spectrum.⁴⁹

Such sentiment is common on Capitol Hill. This is because a lot of Democrats and Republicans in the House and Senate are worried about being primaried. Yet, the fact that intra-party challengers are rarely successful suggests that members anticipate such challenges and adjust their behavior proactively to better defend against them. They do so by staying close to their primary constituency and remaining sensitive to the positions and activities of advocacy groups associated with their parties' base nationwide. Members also use the information they glean from their primary constituency and advocacy-group activity to structure the legislative agenda to better position themselves to win in contested primaries. Finally, members believe that there is strength in numbers and work to maintain party unity, either at the state and district level or at the national level. For every member who is defeated in a primary, there are many more members who have been able to hold on to their seats, even in the face of ideological or identity challenges. In short, members are good at their jobs.

While the links between primaries and polarization cannot be established using big data, the interviews with members of Congress presented herein illustrate that their attention to advocacy groups, which play in the primary arena, is a major source of today's polarization.

It should also be noted that the preceding analysis is preliminary only, as the goal was to highlight areas in need of further examination. To that end, this paper should help to chart that course as more scholars examine the phenomenon of contested primaries in the future. The project also illustrates the limitations of large-scale, data-analysis projects in trying to explain something as complex as polarization in Congress. Hopefully, this will revive the kind of in-depth research on real political actors that Richard Fenno made popular some years ago.

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