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Crashing the party: strategic candidate entry in partisan primaries for the U.S. House

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Thesis

**CRASHING THE PARTY: STRATEGIC CANDIDATE ENTRY IN PARTISAN
PRIMARIES FOR THE U.S. HOUSE**

by

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DEDICATION

Mom and Dad.

Even though you are often absurd and embarrassing, I wouldn't have it any other way. Thank you so much for everything you've done for me. Without the value of education that you've taught me, I doubt I would have even begun this project. Without all of your support (even if unappreciated at the time), I would not have become the person that I am.

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CRASHING THE PARTY: STRATEGIC CANDIDATE ENTRY IN PARTISAN

PRIMARIES FOR THE U.S. HOUSE

ROBERT PRESSEL

ABSTRACT

By selecting the pool of candidates that voters can choose from in the general election, party nominating contests play a fundamental role in determining the outcome of elections at all levels of government. However, past research has indicated that, due largely to the incumbency advantage, primary competition has declined dramatically since the institution's origins. Strategic entry theory suggests that skilled candidates, often those holding prior political office, wait for the most opportune chance to run for higher office. To test this hypothesis, I collected data on all congressional districts and candidates from the 2014 midterm elections. Using candidate information gathered from the Federal Election Commission and other candidate databases, district level demographic and political data, and incumbent statistics, I developed a model using the individual and structural factors to predict when an experienced politician will challenge an incumbent within their own party. The data show that strong intraparty challenges are rare compared to cross-party challenges, and that the most ideologically centrist incumbents, of either party, are the most likely to be "primaried" by an experienced and ambitious challenger.

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INTRODUCTION

In the June 2014 Virginia Republican Party primary election, incumbent Congressman and House Majority Leader Eric Cantor was soundly defeated by political novice and Tea Party challenger David Brat, in what has been described as “one of the greatest political upsets of modern times”¹. Despite a substantial lead in the polls, enormous fundraising and name recognition advantages, and the power of his office, Cantor lost his renomination battle to an inexperienced and little-known candidate. Cantor’s defeat, however unexpected, was not unique for this era in American political history. Since the 2010 midterm elections, the conventional wisdom holds that many strong incumbent members of Congress, particularly moderate Republicans, have been defeated by more ideologically extremist challengers from within their own party. This trend of intra-party competition can be seen in Congressional elections, the ongoing 2016 Republican nomination, as well as disputes within Congress itself. Though the national media tends to focus on high-profile cases – such as Cantor – of incumbent defeat, how prevalent is this trend in the modern electoral system? In 2010 itself, only four incumbents, two Democrats and two Republicans, lost renomination, and in 2012 thirteen, though many of these were largely due to redistricting. In studying the Congressional primary process, this paper seeks to answer two questions: under what circumstances are incumbents “primaried” and face intra-party challenges,

¹ Barabak, Mark. "The Earthquake That Toppled Eric Cantor: How Did It Happen?" *Los Angeles Times*, June 11, 2014.

particularly from strong opponents, and what individual factors determine challenger success?

Any meaningful understanding of the electoral process requires study of all of its stages, from candidate entry to the general election. While most of the literature on elections and voting revolves around the final decision made by voters in November, those decisions themselves are heavily shaped by what comes before them: voter choice in the general election is shaped by ballot access laws, candidate and campaign resources, and, perhaps most importantly, party nominations in the preceding primary election. Due to the general weakness of third party and independent candidates for public positions, the nomination of one of the two major parties is all but necessary for a candidate who wishes to enter elected office at any level. Primary election victory and nomination not only grants the prospective office-holder ballot access under the party label – a major boon in and of itself – but gives the candidate party fundraising and campaign structures, elite backing, and other perks of working within the two party system. In order to truly understand American elections, it is crucial to study the party nominating system.

The primary contest itself however is not the first step in the candidate selection process. First, before any votes are cast or campaigning is done, potential candidates must make a decision whether or not to run in any given election. This further structures the choices available to the electorate, as an election can only have a meaningful choice should more than one candidate be on the ballot. A contest with only one candidate – in the primary or general election – is not truly

competitive, and provides no opportunity for the electorate's voice to be heard. Studying the individual level decision whether to run for public office is key to our understanding of the electoral process, and must be undertaken to construct a complete picture of the process of nomination and election. In particular, under Jacobson's (1980) theory of strategic candidate entry, we must give additional attention to the candidacy decisions of experienced "strong" candidates, those who have held prior political office, and have the connections, abilities, and strategic knowledge necessary to determine the best moment to seek advancement, keeping in mind the challenges of running for the party nomination as well as general victory. This paper will discuss further the importance of strategic decision-making.

Within the frameworks of strategic candidate entry and primary selection models, there are two increasingly important aspects of American electoral history that make the study of primary challenges more crucial than ever. As repeated studies have shown (Cox and Katz 1996, Ansolabehere and Snyder 2002, Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006), the incumbency advantage has increased substantially over time. Whether in the general election or in party nominating contests incumbents are now ever more likely to be reelected, particularly since the introduction of the direct primary system on the Congressional level near the beginning of the 20th century (Ferejohn 1977; Ansolabehere, Hansen, et al. 2010, Carson, Engstrom, and Roberts 2007). The growth in the incumbency advantage is demonstrated not only through increases in reelection rates, but can be measured indirectly in the number of challengers an

incumbent faces in subsequent races. As I will expand upon further in this paper, we can expect incumbents in safe seats to face fewer challengers, particularly experienced opponents looking for a strategic entry. While most studies of anti-incumbent challengers have focused on the general election, I seek to understand when a strong copartisan challenger is more likely to run.

In addition to a greater incumbency advantage, a rising number of Congressional districts are effectively “single-party” (Mayhew 1974; Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2006). Within these districts, inter-party competition is minimal, and incumbents of the dominant party can confidently expect reelection without needing to run a robust campaign, and in many elections will not even face a major party opponent. Democrat Mike Capuano, representing the Massachusetts 7th district, is one example. He has not faced a Republican opponent since his initial run for Congress in 1998, and often receives a near unanimous reelection². Within these districts, the only realistic mechanism for political change, as well as electoral competition, lies within the primary process. However, despite the importance of intra-party challenges under these circumstances, the literature is largely lacking on the means by which incumbents are challenged, and defeated, from within their own party. This is a question I seek to answer using a unique survey of the 2014 midterm elections.

Although the major focus of this paper will be primary challenges to copartisan incumbents, I will also study the primary contests of cross-partisans who

² "Lexington: How to Win 99.6% of the Vote." *The Economist*, October 25, 2014.

seek to oust incumbents, as well as key factors in open primaries with no incumbent on the ballot. While extensive literature exists on cross party challenges for Congress, much of that focuses on the general election, centering on the candidates who ultimately receive the nomination as the field of study. While this is of clear import to our understanding of the electoral selection process, the role of the primary remains key even when challenging incumbents of the other party: how do institutional and individual factors affect these elections differently than we would see challenging a copartisan incumbent? Open primaries, those where an incumbent is not on the ballot in either party's primary, remain another key aspect of study. Consistent with strategic entry theory, we should expect to see the greatest level of competition in these races (Gaddie and Bullock 2000), as an open seat represents the greatest chance for an aspiring candidate to achieve higher office. With that framework in mind, a drastically different primary dynamic can be anticipated, as viable candidates on both sides of the partisan aisle may strive for a contested seat.

THEORY

The current state of the literature on primary challenges is fairly limited and while attempts have been made to construct a picture of intra-party competition, much of the existing research focuses on either non-Congressional primaries, particularly the presidential races, or on lower level offices with significantly different dynamics and levels voter interest. While study of the presidential primary process is certainly important, that area of research represents only one uniquely high-profile and salient contest, while ignoring the theoretically hundreds of congressional primaries every two years, not to mention thousands of state legislative contests, all of which play a major role in determining the direction and state of government at all levels. While many studies of the presidential race focus on the role of fundraising (Brown, Powell, and Wilcox 1995), endorsements (Bartels 1996), prior office (Peabody, Ornstein, and Rohde 1976; Burden 2002), character (Glass 1985), and countless other aspects, these contests remain distinct from congressional races due to increased media attention (Ansolabehere, Behr, and Iyengar 1991), their individualistically driven nature and shifting institutions. To a much larger extent, with some small exceptions, such as the growth of non-partisan “blanket” or “jungle” primaries (Kanthak and Morton 2001), the congressional system has remained relatively consistent since its inception, in contrast to the presidential nominating contest, and changes through the McGovern-Fraser Reforms, frontloading, and many other electoral shifts. Due to a much larger sample

size, we can construct a far more complete picture of congressional rather than presidential primaries.

In one of the earliest studies of legislative nominating contests, Turner (1953) studies the role that primary elections can play in promoting competition in districts dominated by one party during the primary election, hypothesizing that although incumbent turnover is unlikely in the general election, the primary can provide a means for ambitious challengers to seek higher office. By examining the number of candidates in all primary races in “safe” districts (60% of the general election vote), he finds that only about half of “safe” seats have contested primary elections, with of course a major incumbency advantage even in contested races. While later studies of primaries have accounted for district partisanship, none have sought to reconsider this basic question.

Herrnson and Gimpel (1995) attempt to look at the effect that district conditions can have on party primary divisiveness. They first introduce a new metric to determine the level of competition in a multi-candidate race. In contrast to typical general elections, in which only the two major party candidates often receive significant vote totals, many candidates can, receive significant shares of the vote in a party primary. They measure divisiveness as $1 - \sum p_i^2$, wherein a race where one candidate receives 100% of the vote will score 0, and a more contested race will receive a higher value. Using data from the 1984 election, they analyze the affect of five variables on this measure of competition: the socio-economic makeup, diversity of a district, level of urbanization, party organization, and state-level political

opportunity structures, with controls for party, region, and prior election results. While they do not focus much on candidate level factors or consider strategic entry, their research provides important insight into key factors of primary competition. They find that to a large extent Democrats tend to have more competitive primary races, which they attribute to differences among the parties' pools of state legislators. Moreover, they note that diversity seems to increase competition as well, while urbanization has little to no effect. Finally, region seems to matter, with the northeast the most competitive and the south the least. Their findings on diversity however seem to be challenged by Bond (1983), who argues that there is little relationship between diversity and competition, using a subjective measure of competition deriving from analysis rather than results of a race.

A similar study by Schantz (1980) examines similar institutional structures affecting primary competition, though with some distinctly different results. Unlike Herrnson and Gimpel, Schantz examines primaries not through their level of divisiveness should they be contested, but on the basis of whether or not a contest exists. He creates four models, uncontested and contested primaries, for each party, in order to understand structural district effects under each condition. Using all House primaries from 1956-1974, he finds that while Democrats tend to have more competitive races, Republicans are more likely to be affected by yearly events, such as presidential races. In contrast to Turner's findings, Schantz does detect an effect on primary competition from the likelihood of winning the general election: open seat primaries are significantly more competitive in safe seats, while incumbents

largely tend to avoid contests, regardless of general election margins. This latter finding is consistent with later research (Jewell and Breaux 1991; Ansolabehere, Hansen, et al. 2007) the incumbency advantage remains equally strong, if not stronger, in primary elections, where not only do incumbents tend to perform well in the vote count, but generate a “scare-off” effect, where candidates face fewer challengers in attempting renomination than in their initial run. Schantz also finds that amongst Democrats urbanization tends to increase competition, and that unsurprisingly, recent redistricting draws challengers.

A more contemporary study of congressional primaries focuses on individual, rather than institutional, traits and their affect on the level of competition. Pyeatt (2013) studies the role the incumbent plays in encouraging or discouraging strong challengers, as well as a few district factors. Using two models, one including all challengers from 1980-2008, and the other excluding non-competitive ones (any race where the incumbent receives more than 75% of the primary vote), Pyeatt examines incumbent ideology and influence in Congress. He finds that while an incumbent’s ideological extremism relative to the party plays little role in deterring all challengers, a more ideologically extreme candidate can successfully deter strong challengers who could threaten his or her renomination. Additionally, he finds that while committee membership and House leadership do little to reduce challenges, high margins of victory in the preceding election as well as institutional party support both protect incumbents from strong challengers.

Hirano and Snyder (2014) find that while competition has long been greater for seats with no incumbent and in strongly partisan districts, levels have dropped in recent times. Unsurprisingly, while incumbents have always faced low levels of competition, it has declined precipitously in recent years. In non-safe districts, levels of competition tend to be lower regardless of the presence of an incumbent, though they do find that in the event of a low-quality incumbent, primaries provide a strong mechanism to replace him or her with a quality challenger. Moreover, their finding that open-primaries tend to be more competitive in safe districts than marginal districts is consistent with previous research, which suggests that a divisive primary process hurts party chances in the general election (Bernstein 1977; Born 1981). Given this framework, we can expect that strategic challengers, those who's entry would likely lead to a divisive primary (Squire, 1992), but who we can also expect to have stronger attachments to their party (Leyden and Borrelli 1990) will be less likely to challenge an incumbent in a marginal seat than a safe one, as they do not wish to jeopardize their party's chances in the general election.

These findings regarding congressional primaries have also been upheld in studies of state legislative nominating contests. While on a much lower political level than House races, and exhibiting significantly decreased public attention (Jacobson 1978), we can generalize findings from state legislative primaries to those of Congress, particularly when considering the candidate entry portion of the selection model. Though the decision to run for Congress requires more strategic thinking, increased resources, and stronger campaigns than the state house, the

dynamics of entering the race, and of voter attention, remain similar, albeit on a smaller scale. Two studies of these primaries suggest that the same factors that increase congressional competition affect state races. Grau (1981) adopts a binary model of competition similar to early studies of House races: asking if there is more than one candidate on the ballot. In his sample of primaries in 15 states from 1972-1978, he finds that like congressional contests, in House races Democrats tend to be more competitive, and that urbanization and partisan safety increase competition, while incumbency suppresses candidate entry. Using Herrnson and Gimpel's (1995) measure of competition, Hogan (2003), performs a similar study, with a sample of 25 states from 1994-1996, but includes additional variables to measure for state primary rules – open vs. closed, single-ballot vs. runoff – as well as legislative professionalism. He finds that while there is little difference in competition between open and closed races, the addition of a runoff vote seems to increase competition, perhaps due to the potential for strategic benefits for a candidate who loses. Additionally, legislative professionalism strongly increases the level of competition, as states with higher legislator salaries, larger staffs, and other measures of professionalism tend to have more competitive races.

Since this paper will in part focus on the individual candidate entry aspect of the primary process, it is imperative to spend some time on strategic candidate theory. Jacobson (1980) proposes that much of an elections outcome is shaped by the political strengths of the challenger, rather than being solely focused on the incumbent. Stronger challengers, which he defines as those with prior experience in

elected office, tend to raise more money (Maestas and Rugely 2008), have higher name recognition and approval (Squire 1992), and consequently tend to perform better in the polls than their non-experienced counterparts, both when contesting open seats and challenging incumbents. Further development of strategic entry and candidate quality theories suggest that not only do experienced candidates tend to perform better in electoral contests, but that, when choosing to run for higher office, they wait for the best strategic election year to do so (Jacobson 1989; Lublin 1994; Maestas, Fulton, et al. 2006).

The strategic decision to run derives from a number of factors. First, and perhaps foremost, is the presence or lack of an incumbent. Due to the significant advantage that incumbents face in all of the factors that aid renomination or reelection – fundraising, institutional support, name recognition, experience, etc. – an open seat will almost always be the most strategically viable time for an ambitious politician to seek higher office (Epstein and Zemsky 1995; Bond, Fleischer, and Talbert 1997, Ansolabehere, Hansen, et al. 2007) for challengers in either primary or general elections. Additionally, strategic candidates tend to wait for favorable national conditions, such as presidential approval (Jacobson 1989), economic indicators (Jacobson 1989; Lublin 1994; Ashworth and de Mesquita 2008), and anti-incumbency sentiment (Thorson and Stambough 1995). These same economic and partisan indicators also play a major role in promoting competition at the local level, perhaps to a greater extent than national trends (Bond, Covington, and Fleischer 1985).

When deciding which election is best to attempt a run for higher office, strategic politicians must not only weigh the probability of winning, but additionally must consider the benefits of securing the office that they seek, the costs of running, and the costs of the office they will be giving up (Maestas, Fulton, et al. 2006). For this paper, the potential benefits of winning will be largely comparable, if not in fact equal, for all candidates: I focus exclusively on challenges for House seats.

Furthermore, the costs of running, though not fully equal, will remain fairly comparable for most House races. However, the other factors under consideration will differ significantly by individual and seat. Carson, Crespín, et al. (2012), address the question of district congruency when running for higher office, finding that sitting state legislators are more likely to choose to run, including in primary elections, when there is significant population overlap between the district they currently represent and the district they seek to represent. Presumably, they argue, this increased congruency bolsters the effects of incumbency as compared to a less overlapping district. However, they find that while this appears to affect the individual decision to run, it has little effect on overall vote totals.

Two other factors play a significant role in shaping the individual decision to run, one related to the incumbent and the other to state and district level effects on perceived rewards. Boatright (2013) looks at all congressional primaries from 1970-2010 with an incumbent on the ballot, and classifies as competitive any challenger who receives at least 25% of the vote. Rather than focusing on the challenger however, Boatright studies the incumbents using several electoral

almanacs, and attempts to classify the major reasons for any primary challenge based on incumbent characteristics rather than political or economic conditions and partisan trends. He argues that to a significant extent, strong primary challenges tend to arise in response to perceived incumbent inability to continue to hold the office, be it through some sort of scandal, incompetence, or advanced age. In addition, though this may be correlated with perceived incompetency, candidates that appear to become more ideologically moderate than the median party voter, either through changes in their own voting behavior or from a shifting electorate, tend to face strong competition from the extremes of their party, especially Republicans. Boatright's ideological findings conflict with many others (Ranney 1968; Schantz 1980; Grau 1981; Bond, Fleischer, and Talbert 1997), which find that Democrats have more contested primaries. However, Boatright focuses on incumbent traits while past studies have tended to look at structural factors, indicating that Democrats and Republicans may be responsive to differing changes.

In a study of gubernatorial primary entry, Berry and Canon (1993) examine the candidate cost-benefit analysis of entering a state-level nominating contest, focusing on the potential for rewards from winning, or losing, the primary, as well as party selection structures that can reduce the cost. Similar to previously outlined studies, decreased opposition-party strength substantially incentivizes competition by increasing the ability to win in the general election, diminishing risks of the two-stage electoral process. They diverge from other studies however by controlling for party electoral structures, such as official state-party candidate endorsements prior

to nomination, conventions, and run-off votes in the event that no candidate achieves a necessary level of support in the initial balloting. On the cost side of the entry equation, they find that party endorsements and conventions encourage candidate entry, which they argue is mainly due to lessened campaign costs and increased access to party elites necessary to succeed in either model. When considering rewards, they contend that run-off elections further incentivize strong challengers to run by providing a potential mechanism for perks even when losing. By bargaining with the candidates included in the run-off, a popular third or fourth place candidate can in theory exchange their endorsement, and presumably votes of their supporters, for some sort of perk or recognition of office, while also providing an extra potential for victory for second place candidates.

Once candidates choose to enter a primary race, whether for an open nomination or a challenge to an incumbent, what determines their success or failure? While partisanship acts as a very strong predictor of vote choice in general elections (Bartels 2000), this is self-evidently unavailable as a metric for primary voters. Of course, we can expect a significant incumbency advantage (Erikson 1971; Gelman and King 1990), with an even larger effect during a nominating contest than in a general election (Ansolabehere, Hansen, et al. 2007). But what quantifiable factors are likely to increase the vote share of a non-incumbent candidate, either a copartisan challenge to an incumbent, or a candidate seeking an unclaimed nomination. Much of the previously addressed literature (Jacobson 1989; Hogan 2003; Carson et al. 2007), suggests that the mere fact of candidate political

experience should bolster their vote share, as voters will be more aware of the candidate, and responsive to their experience. Berkman and Eisenstein (1999) examine the experience bonus for different elected officials in Congressional races, finding that state legislators are more risk averse when regarding a potential Congressional campaign than more local officials. Additionally, their findings suggest that when legislators do run, they tend to receive greater interest group and PAC support.

In addition to political experience, the literature is consistent on the affect of increased fundraising on candidate vote shares (Herrnson 1992; Krasno, Green, and Cowden 1994; Levitt 1994). For the most part, we should expect candidates that successfully raise more money to perform better in any election. Maestas and Rugely (2008) argue that while experienced candidates do tend to raise more money than inexperienced candidates, in part this is a function of strategic entry. By seeking races where they will be more viable, they can in turn increase campaign contributions. In a study of urban elections, however, Krebs (2002) shows that experience and elite endorsements, can play a major role in helping candidates raise money, particularly those candidates not challenging an incumbent. However, these studies all focus on either non-partisan or general elections, and due to differing incentives in primaries, we may see different results.

METHODS

I gathered data primarily from a comprehensive survey of candidates in the 2014 midterm elections for the House of Representatives. As a recent midterm election, 2014 creates a strong picture of the modern American political climate, while finding a balance between the massive anti-incumbent sentiment that we saw in 2010 and more hopeful climates of other elections. 2014 is also more reflective of typical midterms by avoiding the problems of redistricting. Unsurprisingly, by redrawing congressional districts, electoral support can shift rapidly, as well as force incumbents into more precarious positions, as evidenced by the multitude of incumbents defeated by their peers in 2012. Moreover, with a modestly growing economy, but one that has expanded at different rates across the country, I can extrapolate findings from these different regions to other elections with similar economic climates. Additionally, 2014 is superior to previous elections by encompassing ever growing numbers of minority voters, which may play a significant role in electoral competitiveness in primaries. Finally, as this election has only recently passed, and due to increased online activity by campaigns and media outlets, it is possible to construct a much more comprehensive picture of this election cycle than many prior years, as most data can be found online. This allows me to gather superior and greater amounts of quantitative data, as well as attempt to create a qualitative analysis of selected key campaigns.

My sample, comprising 2272 individuals was drawn initially from the Federal Election Commission's filing records for all candidates for this election cycle.

Because this paper is intended to study primary campaigns for the two major parties, 494 independent and third party candidates were eliminated. However, certain state major parties allow third parties candidates to appear on the same primary ballot, and receive the nomination for all represented parties, for example the Alaska Democratic-Libertarian-Independence Primary. In these states I retain non-major party candidates, but classify them with whichever party's ballot they appear on. Regional affiliates of the two major parties, such as the Minnesota Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party are also retained in the sample. In addition to financial details for each individual in the sample, the FEC filings include a three-category classification of the candidate's status within the race: incumbent, challenger, or open. Unlike previous studies, many of which do not differentiate between challengers based on the incumbent's party, I do, classifying those who are challenging an incumbent outside of their party as "challengers", and those who challenge an incumbent from within their own party as "copartisans".

Even within the major parties, I do not include all congressional districts within my sample. While I incorporate all typical partisan primaries – open, closed, or mixed – into my sample, a significant number of districts are eliminated. Excluded are three states, California, Louisiana, and Washington, which use variations of the non-partisan "blanket" or "jungle" primary systems, where all candidates regardless of party are present on a single ballot, as well as Utah, Connecticut, and several districts of Virginia where candidates are nominated via party convention rather than primary ballot.

Finally, to narrow my sample of challengers, through a survey of state Secretary of State's offices and election records, I determined which of the remaining candidates successfully secured ballot access. Within the FEC's records 218 candidates initially filed to run for office, yet for various reasons did not end up on the final ballot. In most cases this is likely due to failure to qualify for the ballot e.g., a lack of signatures, inability to pay ballot fees, etc. In other cases, this may be due to a lack of initial support, unforeseen opposition – either within the primary or general election – or personal reasons. While data for these candidates is limited, in many cases a few filings were made with the FEC before the candidate chose to withdraw from the race. Consequently, while these individuals will not be the major subject of this paper, they provide an intriguing, and understudied, perspective on candidate entry, and could be a strong direction for future research.

After eliminating all candidates from excluded states, those not from major parties, and any not on the ballot, I am left with a sample of 1,149 individuals: 323 incumbents, 439 cross-party challengers, 176 copartisan challengers, and 212 candidates for open seats. For all races I first collected information regarding the 2014 elections: vote totals, any runoff vote totals, and who ultimately was the nominee. In a few cases, such as the GOP primary for Iowa's 3rd district, the candidate with the plurality of the vote did not ultimately become the nominee, and another was chosen at convention (special cases like this will be noted in the final analysis). Then, for each candidate, using a comprehensive survey of local news articles, candidate websites, and, party profiles, I gathered demographic information

as well as data on prior political experience. In many cases information on careers prior to running for office was unavailable for candidates and, though I could find no conclusive information that these individuals did not serve in any political office, I label them as lacking experience. Given the relative ease of finding experience, even for local officials, it is reasonable to assume these individuals were lacking in political service. Moreover, in addition to connections and knowledge, political experience acts as a signal of competency to voters; it can be expected that any information would similarly be unavailable to voters, and consequently many potential benefits lost. In addition, I utilize Bond, Covington, and Fleischer's (1985) classification of experience, including not just previously elected officials, but all candidates with party or legislative experience. Other than name recognition, the perks of previous elected office – connections, fundraising ability, strategic thinking – will also likely apply to these individuals.

I cross-reference these data with district characteristics. To begin, for each district I gathered the incumbent's margin of victory in the 2012 general election, the Cook Partisan Index Rating, and the state-level primary system: open, closed, semi-closed, or mixed. Additionally I gathered economic, social, racial, and other demographic information on each district from the 2014 American Community Survey. Although the ACS was performed across the whole of 2014, and each state primary may take place at a different period in the year, the ACS will generally, if not perfectly, represent district conditions at the time of the election.

ANALYSIS

When Experienced Candidates Run

While my total sample contains the previously mentioned 1,149 individuals who successfully secured a place on the ballot, before I can begin any sort of analysis it is inherently necessary to determine which primary races are competitive and which are not. For this task I use the simple dichotomous definition of primary competition used by Ansolabehere, et al. (2010): any race with more than one candidate on the ballot is competitive, while any race with only a single candidate is uncontested. Table 1 describes the breakdown of competitive primaries, and Table 2 that of uncontested races.

Table 1: Candidates in Competitive Primaries By Challenger Type and Party

Party	Incumbents	Copartisans	Challengers	Open	Total
Democratic	38	57	147	75	317
Republican	80	119	140	120	459
Total	118	176	287	195	776

Perhaps most striking, of the 323 incumbents in my sample, only 36% face any sort of challenge from within their own party, most of those from inexperienced candidates. Before examining intraparty competition, I will briefly address cross-party challenges, where we see that about two-thirds seek the nomination in a contested primary, with the remaining one-third unopposed. An examination of district partisanship confirms in this case that higher numbers of candidates will challenge an incumbent of the opposite party in less partisan districts, with an average Cook Rating of 12.6 in uncontested primaries, and 9.5 in districts with contested races. Within these contested primaries, an average of 2.97 candidates

appear on each primary ballot across 108 congressional districts, suggesting at least a modest degree of intra-party competition for seats held by the opposing party.

Table 2: Candidates in Uncontested Primaries By Challenger Type and Party

Party	Incumbents	Challengers	Open	Total
Democratic	98	96	13	207
Republican	107	55	4	166
Total	205	151	17	373

Turning to copartisan challenges to incumbents from within their party, we see an unusually low number of candidates seeking office against incumbents within their party. Because copartisan challengers are by definition participating in a contested election, it is impossible in this case to make a comparison with uncontested copartisan candidates, though the number of unchallenged incumbents provides evidence enough. Of the 118 primary races of this type, an average of 3.06 candidates, *including incumbents*, appear on each ballot. However, when compared to cross-party challenges we see more heavily contested outlier races, such as Tennessee district 4, represented by Republican Scott DesJarlais, who faced six opponents (one experienced), Texas district 4, represented by Republican Ralph Hall, who faced five opponents (two experienced), and Massachusetts district 6, represented by Democrat John Tierney, who faced four opponents (none experienced). These three races were all characterized by personal attributes of the incumbent, which may have contributed to their perceived chances of defeat.

Finally, examining open races, we can expect to observe the highest relative number of candidates, as this represents the most auspicious chance for most

potential office seekers. Despite this however, we observe a strikingly high number of unopposed candidates in these races, with seventeen receiving their party's nomination uncontested. Despite this, across the 33 contested primaries for these seats, an average of 5.42 candidates file for each ballot, a number significantly higher than that observed for held seats.

Table 3: Experience By Challenger Type, All Candidates

Type of Challenge	Inexperienced	Experienced	Total
Open	95 (148)	100 (47)	195
Challenger	246 (218)	41 (69)	287
Copartisan	159 (134)	17 (42)	176
Total	500	158	658

Expected values reported in parentheses.

$X^2=114.226, p=0.00$

I begin my analysis with a simple chi-squared test of independence (Table 3), which confirms past research in strategic entry theory: when breaking down all primary candidates by prior political experience and the partisan status of the incumbent, we see a clear correlation between candidate strength and the presence of incumbents on the ballot. Inexperienced candidates tend to challenge incumbents at a higher than expected rate, while those with experience either wait for an open seat or a more ideal time to seek office. When further breaking down these results by party affiliation (Tables 4 and 5), we see similar trends. While these results do not differentiate between challengers and copartisans, perhaps the strongest indicator of incumbent checks against challengers can be seen in the raw numbers: in 2014, of the 323 incumbents within my sample, 205 did not face any sort of primary challenge, compared with only 30 unopposed candidates in the

general election. Though this may be due to party loyalty, there is certainly a strategic element as well.

Table 4: Experience By Challenger Type, Democrats

Type of Challenge	Inexperienced	Experienced	Total
Open	29 (57)	46 (18)	75
Challenger	132 (112)	15 (35)	147
Copartisan	51 (43)	6 (17)	57
Total	212	67	279

Expected Values Reported in Parentheses.

$$X^2=78.290, p=0.00$$

Table 5: Experience By Challenger Type, Republicans

Type of Challenge	Inexperienced	Experienced	Total
Open	66 (91)	54 (29)	120
Challenger	114 (106)	26 (34)	140
Copartisan	108 (91)	11 (28)	119
Total	288	91	379

Expected Values Reported in Parentheses.

$$X^2=45.468, p=0.00$$

Though some scholars (Bond, Covington, and Fleisher 1985; Krasno and Green 1988; Stewart 1989) scale the value of prior political experience based on the level of the office held and the proportion of the district population represented by that office, I use the same binary as other scholars (Jacobson and Kernell 1981; Born 1986; Squire 1992, Lublin 1994) when classifying candidates as strong or weak. In those studies using a scaled variable, the contested office is typically higher, generally either a gubernatorial or Senate seat, and candidates tend to come from all levels of political life. Additionally, when a race takes place on the statewide level, it is relatively simple to determine the portion of the population represented by the

candidate in question. When studying House primaries however, these factors are less impactful. In terms of the level of the seat held, almost all experienced candidates in this data set come from either the state legislature or local office, with the exception of thirteen former members of congress who were seeking to regain their old seats. With the exception of the former members, who only make up a very small subsample of my data – and who are all challenging an incumbent of the opposing party – there is little large-scale distinction amongst the challengers offices, and for the purposes of a congressional race they fit within Jacobson’s binary classification scheme. Unlike statewide races, it is a complex process to measure the proportion of the district population represented, as congressional and state legislative districts do not always completely overlap, and some of the perceived benefits from name recognition may be lost. However, the more tangible benefits from connections and resources should still be present.

Table 6: Effect of Challenger Type on Experienced Candidates, All Candidates

	(1)
Challenger	-1.843*** (0.221)
Copartisan	-2.287*** (0.293)
Constant	0.0513 (0.143)
Observations	658

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Using this experience as a binary variable allows me to estimate the chances of an experienced candidate running in a given congressional race, and thus I use prior political as my dependent variable. In Table 6, I display the results of a logit

regression of an independent set of dummy variables using open seat primaries as a baseline, with a significant negative coefficient. For all candidates, it is difficult to predict the likelihood of an ambitious politician seeking an open seat, especially taking into account other factors in the race, such as competing candidates, potential donors, and personal reasons. However, the presence of an incumbent, of either party, significantly reduces the chances of an experienced challenger arising. Interestingly, the “scare-off” factor does not differ substantially for co and anti-partisan challengers, with strategic challengers from within an incumbent’s party only marginally less likely to run than those opposing the incumbent’s party. These results have little to say about the likelihood of inexperienced challengers.

Table 7: Effect of Challenger Type on Experienced Candidates, Democrats

	(1)
Challenger	-2.636*** (0.361)
Copartisan	-2.601*** (0.492)
Constant	0.461* (0.237)
Observations	279

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Furthermore, when breaking down the results by party in Tables 7 and 8, we see interesting differences in the likelihood of an experienced candidacy. According to this analysis, experienced Democrats are more likely to run in an open race than experienced Republicans. Conversely, experienced Republicans are more likely to challenge an incumbent Democrat than vice versa, though perhaps this is related to the anti-Democratic mood observed during the later general election. Most

interestingly, based on these data it appears that strong Republican potential candidates are more inclined to enter the race against incumbents of their own party than their Democratic counterparts. This is due to higher levels of anti-incumbent and anti-establishment sentiment within the Republican electorate, along the lines of the Tea Party.

Table 8: Effect of Challenger Type on Experienced Candidates, Republicans

	(1)
1.seat_held	-1.277*** (0.284)
2.seat_held	-2.084*** (0.366)
Constant	-0.201 (0.183)
Observations	379

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Here, I expand my search beyond the type of challenge being put forward to look at specific district level variables, as well as incumbent characteristics. Needless to say, I exclude incumbent characteristics from my analysis of open seat primaries. My first consideration is incumbent popularity. While that may be a stronger predictor of an experienced cross-party general election challenger, or those who I classify as “challengers”, in theory an unpopular incumbent could attract challengers from either party. Given the difficulty of defeating an incumbent in a primary challenge, attempting to oust them during a period of district discontent, even within the same party and at risk of losing the general election, could be an ambitious politicians’ best chance to seek advancement. However, because approval ratings of typical members of Congress are not tracked to

anywhere near the same extent as the president's, a pre-election measure is unavailable for most incumbents. Instead of approval rating, I attempt to measure incumbent popularity through their margin of victory in the past election. Though in some cases incumbent popularity may have changed between elections, this is a good proxy, and one that would be available to strategic challengers, because it represents an objective measure of voter intention. Moreover, because the decision to run for office must be made well in advance of the election itself due to fundraising needs, the time required to build a campaign, and filing deadlines, experienced candidates may use electoral margins as an early signal in making their decision.

In addition to popularity as a metric for individual incumbents, I am also interested in the incumbent ideology, particularly as it is compared to that of the party structure and base. I hypothesize that more ideologically extreme incumbents are significantly less likely to face a strong interparty challenge as for the most part, I expect primary electorates to be more receptive to candidates farther from the center, allowing an opening for a contested nomination. For primaries opposing the incumbent's party, I expect to see a much weaker relationship between ideological extremism and strategic challenges: while it may be the case that ambitious cross-party challengers will seek to challenge an extremist opponent – giving them room to appeal to the centrist vote – I expect these individuals to remain much more sensitive to indicators of incumbent strength, as even the most extreme incumbents have for the most part already been elected at least once. To measure incumbent

ideological extremism I use the same modified DW-NOMINATE scale as Pyeatt (2013). Rather than the standard negative-positive scale, I utilize the absolute value of each incumbent's score to measure their distance from the center, so that moderates are low values close the zero, and more extreme candidates close to one. Using the standard scale from liberal to conservative, I would expect to achieve null results, as the most liberal Democrats (-1 on a traditional DW-NOMINATE scale), and the most conservative Republicans (1 on that scale), would effectively cancel each other out. By using an absolute scale, I can account for intra-party ideological differences without inter-party divisions. Moreover, since I do not expect to see party differences in ambition, this metric should not miss key results.

Besides individual level incumbent characteristics, I also use several district-based variables, ones that any potential candidate would certainly be aware of. First, I imagine that ambitious candidates are mindful of district partisanship. Both to facilitate their own ambition, as well as protect party prospects, I hypothesize a higher probability of seeing a strong copartisan challenge in highly partisan "safe" districts, and more copartisan challenges in centrist "swing" districts. For ambitious politicians, a safe seat reduces the degree of competition, requiring individual candidates to only contest a primary, rather than a general election as well. Moreover, because they can count on victory in a highly partisan seat, ambitious challengers can devote more resources to the primary, and are likely to have greater resources and connections from within the established party. Additionally, we can expect experienced candidates, those who have worked within the party structure

in the past, to have a greater degree of party-loyalty as compared to amateur candidates. As such, more of these candidates may be incentivized to run for safe seats, as there is a reduced chance of jeopardizing their party's hold on the seat in the general election. In order to measure district partisanship, I use the 2014 Cook Political Report Partisan Index. Similar to my measurement of incumbent ideology, I rescale the index to its absolute values, as a metric of district distance from the national center.

Finally, I measure district unemployment, as another potential indicator of incumbent unhappiness available to challengers. Consistent with previous research indicating that voters are responsive to poor economic factors, and consequently punish incumbents (Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, 2000) I expect that strategic and ambitious candidates will be aware of this relationship, and be more likely to seek office during times of high unemployment. Additionally, while I expect this effect to occur for both challengers and copartisans, it will likely be stronger for cross-party challengers. I gather data on district-level unemployment from the American Community Survey.

In order to measure differential effects on candidate incentives based on the presence of an incumbent on a ballot, I create three dichotomous dummy variables, "Challenger", "Copartisan", and "Open", each coded 1 for candidates on those ballots, and 0 for all others, including incumbents. I begin with an "all" model, using each of my independent variables without any interactive effects. For each subgroup of

candidates, in addition to the individual independent variables, I interact all four with the dummy variable of the selected model.

Based on a multivariate logit regression, for all incumbents, the factors determining a strong candidate run for office are largely significant, and displayed in Table 9. Unsurprisingly, incumbent margin of victory in the previous election plays a role in de-incentivizing strong challengers. Incumbent ideological distance from the center also strongly reduces that likelihood. Contrary to expectations, a higher unemployment rate appears to reduce, rather than attract, strong challengers. While this finding may be due to a small sample size, this could reflect a tendency among candidates to focus on the general, rather than primary election. A low unemployment rate could bolster the incumbent party's chances in November, and act as a sign of potential general election strength, rather than incumbent weakness. For cross-party challenges, district partisanship and incumbent ideology are key, as we are more likely to see a strong challenge in a centrist district, while incumbent ideological extremity reduces the likelihood of a strong challenge.³ Open races exhibit predictable findings, indicating that potential candidates do not significantly take district partisanship into account, suggesting that despite its statistical significance, potential candidates for open seats are non-responsive to district partisanship. Unemployment also acts as predicted in this

³ It is very likely that an interaction exists between these two variables, which I could test for in a future model.

Table 9: Likelihood of Experienced Challenger, All Candidates

	(1) All	(2) Challenger	(3) Copartisan	(4) Open
Challenger		-0.0230 (1.104)		
Incumbent Margin	-0.0122* (0.00639)	-0.0126* (0.00730)	-0.0140* (0.00751)	
Margin*Challenger		-0.00368 (0.0193)		
District Partisanship	0.0245 (0.0171)	0.0222 (0.0186)	0.0299 (0.0196)	-0.0529** (0.0207)
Partisanship*Challenger		-0.168*** (0.0617)		
Ideological Extremism	-1.379*** (0.426)	-1.404*** (0.538)	-1.117** (0.452)	
Extremism*Challenger		0.316 (0.963)		
Unemployment Rate	-0.134** (0.0537)	-0.0857 (0.0633)	-0.166*** (0.0615)	0.0392 (0.0784)
Unemployment*Challenger		-0.0117 (0.136)		
Copartisan			-4.597*** (1.727)	
Margin*Copartisan			0.0142 (0.0162)	
Partisanship*Copartisan			0.0118 (0.0468)	
Extremism*Copartisan			1.071 (1.590)	
Unemployment*Copartisan			0.257* (0.147)	
Open				2.169*** (0.752)
Partisanship*Open				0.0517* (0.0285)
Unemployment*Open				-0.105 (0.111)
Constant	0.623 (0.458)	0.774 (0.561)	0.918* (0.496)	-1.657*** (0.555)
Observations	658	658	658	658

Standard errors in parentheses

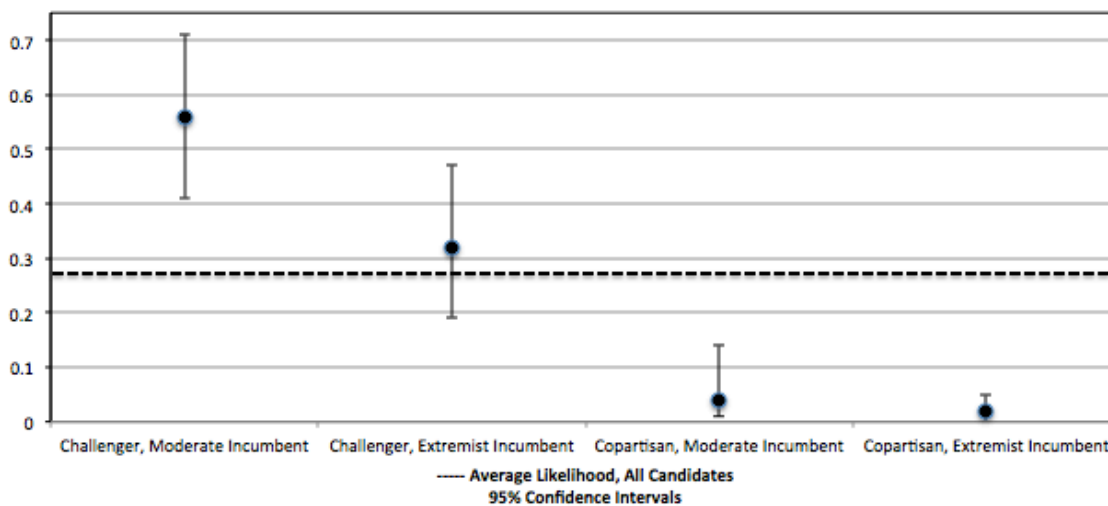
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

situation, providing a small incentive to potential experienced candidates, as well perhaps as being an initial cause of the incumbent decision not to run in the first place.

Examining intra-party challenges reveals interesting results (Tables 10 and 11). While I would expect a higher incumbent margin of victory to play some role in incentivizing copartisan challenges, as it could indicate a safer general election contest should the challenger win, the data appears to indicate otherwise. In theory, district partisanship could act as a stronger indicator in this regard as well, particularly for a more ideological extreme candidate seeking office in a highly partisan district. However, since there is no consistent ideological measure available for Congressional candidates who have not yet been elected – the vast majority of my sample – this measure is impossible. As such, I observe very little predictive effect from this measure either. I do, however, see a large and significant impact stemming from incumbent ideological extremism. Though this measure seems to affect the likelihood of an experienced challenger seeking office across all races, it appears to be a particularly powerful predictor when looking at challenges from within the incumbent's party. As I will demonstrate later, this effect is in fact likely mitigated when analyzing both parties together, and should be more powerful when considering Democrats and Republicans separately. Considering recent trends in increasing ideological polarization and the decline of centrist legislators, this finding is particularly unsurprising. Finally, though unemployment provides a non-ideological metric that voters and ambitious politicians could use as an

indicator of incumbent success, higher levels of unemployment appear to provide only a very meager incentive for strong candidates to run, and a smaller incentive than I observe for cross-party challenges.

Fig 1. Predicted Probabilities of Experienced Challengers, by Primary and Incumbent Ideological Extremism



Using CLARIFY (Tomz, Wittenberg, and King 2003), I perform a predicted probabilities analysis to estimate the likelihood of an experienced challenger in any given race, regardless of party. The results are displayed in Figure 1. Using mean values for all variables, I generate a baseline probability of 21% that an experienced candidate will seek office in any given race, regardless of their party affiliation relative to the incumbent. By controlling for the cross-party vs. intra-party challenges, I can estimate the probability of strong and ambitious candidates running for the House. By setting incumbent ideological extremism to its lowest value (.042) in my transformed DW-NOMINATE scale, I estimate a 56% chance of an experienced candidate seeking their party's nomination to challenge the incumbent

in a general election, compared with a 4% chance of an experienced candidate seeking to oust a moderate incumbent of their own party. By contrast, when using the highest extremism value (1.234) I estimate a 32% chance of observing a strong challenge across party lines, though this finding lacks the same statistical significance as my others. I only find a 2% probability of an extreme partisan facing a strong challenge from within his or her own party. In addition to confirming my hypothesis that ideology plays a major role in encouraging intra-party primary challenges, I observe that it has a substantial affect on cross party challenges as well. Despite the low magnitude of my interparty findings, it is important to note that the most extreme incumbents are only half as likely to face primary challenges.

By breaking down my results by party affiliation, I can attempt to eliminate any lingering effects on my pre-interaction coefficients from challengers on copartisan races, and vice versa. In my dual party model, many incumbents are included twice: Democrats facing challenges from within their party as well as from Republicans, and Republicans facing the same, which may have some small impact on findings before taking into account my challenger type interaction. Using party subsets, I can ensure that incumbents and district characteristics are only relevant for one of my models, challenger, copartisan, or open, rather than all three, likely producing stronger results.

Table 10: Likelihood of Experienced Challenger, Democrats

	(1) All	(2) Challenger	(3) Copartisan	(4) Open
Challenger		-2.940 (2.660)		
Incumbent Margin	-0.00192 (0.00936)	-0.00264 (0.0135)	-0.00510 (0.0109)	
Margin*Challenger		0.0109 (0.0221)		
District Partisanship	0.0240 (0.0260)	0.0396 (0.0312)	0.00535 (0.0317)	0.00936 (0.0324)
Partisanship*Challenger		-0.198** (0.0805)		
Ideological Extremism	-3.642*** (0.801)	-2.211 (1.446)	-5.213*** (0.923)	
Extremism*Challenger		4.926* (2.627)		
Unemployment Rate	-0.144* (0.0777)	-0.196** (0.0954)	-0.0491 (0.0905)	-0.0137 (0.135)
Unemployment*Challenger		-0.0683 (0.268)		
Copartisan			-11.63*** (4.026)	
Margin*Copartisan			0.0365 (0.0361)	
Partisanship*Copartisan			0.00617 (0.0910)	
Extremism*Copartisan			16.62** (8.246)	
Unemployment* Copartisan			0.0229 (0.265)	
Open				2.623** (1.106)
Partisanship*Open				0.0360 (0.0494)
Unemployment*Open				-0.0673 (0.174)
Constant	1.657** (0.708)	1.551* (0.848)	2.508*** (0.838)	-2.183** (0.849)
Observations	279	279	279	279

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 11: Likelihood of Experienced Challenger, Republicans

	(1) All	(2) Challenger	(3) Copartisan	(4) Open
Challenger		1.338 (1.603)		
Incumbent Margin	-0.0280*** (0.0101)	-0.0190** (0.00965)	-0.0578*** (0.0159)	
Margin*Challenger		-0.00632 (0.0333)		
District Partisanship	-0.0117 (0.0254)	-0.00859 (0.0252)	-0.0235 (0.0319)	-0.0974*** (0.0295)
Partisanship*Challenger		-0.160 (0.111)		
Ideological Extremism	0.644 (0.600)	0.154 (0.784)	3.475*** (0.825)	
Extremism*Challenger		-5.941* (3.344)		
Unemployment Rate	-0.145* (0.0828)	-0.105 (0.109)	-0.112 (0.100)	0.00463 (0.102)
Unemployment*Challenger		0.0903 (0.190)		
Copartisan			-2.457 (2.484)	
Margin*Copartisan			0.0539** (0.0234)	
Partisanship*Copartisan			0.0668 (0.0638)	
Extremism*Copartisan			-5.198*** (1.950)	
Unemployment*Copartisan			0.266 (0.240)	
Open				2.814** (1.194)
Partisanship*Open				0.0736* (0.0380)
Unemployment*Open				-0.290 (0.178)
Constant	0.336 (0.674)	0.268 (0.898)	-0.173 (0.792)	-0.902 (0.735)
Observations	379	379	379	379

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

My first consequential finding based on party subsets within my sample is the constant coefficient, suggesting that, all other things being equal, experienced Democrats are more likely to present challenges than their Republican counterparts, particularly towards incumbents of their own party. Cross-party challengers appear to behave fairly similarly across parties, though Republicans may be slightly more sensitive to incumbent margins. This finding is possibly due to low margins acting as a slightly stronger signal of incumbent Democrat strength in 2012, following the largely Republican led redistricting plan and President Obama's reelection. Additionally, ambitious Democrats appear to be more likely to challenge more conservative Republicans than vice versa, perhaps due to a perception that recently elected Tea Party Republicans may be vulnerable. Alternatively, potential Republican challengers may be more risk averse towards challenging the most liberal Democrats, also due in part to the Tea Party: it is not inconceivable that the incumbent liberal Democrats who survived the Tea Party wave in 2010 are possibly the most secure in their seats, and consequently deter ambitious Republican candidates.

As I am primarily interested in primary challenges to incumbents from within their own party, I now turn to differences in copartisan contests between Democrats and Republicans. For both parties, the incumbent's margin of victory appears to have very little impact on any potential experienced candidate's decision to run, as does the level of district partisanship, both characteristics of incumbent safety and party prospects. In itself, this does tell us something about intra-party

ambitions for higher office: contrary to expectations, a null result suggests in fact that strategically ambitious and experienced politicians may not have a huge sense of party loyalty, willing to defeat an incumbent they disagree with regardless of the potential to jeopardize the party's hold over that seat in the general election.

Similarly, unemployment also lacks much predictive power. In the case of both parties however, as predicted when using party subsets, the impact of incumbent ideology increases remarkably. For Republicans in particular, the most ideologically moderate incumbents are the most likely to face primary challenges from experienced candidates. My findings suggest that this effect is similar for Democrats, however the low number of Democratic incumbents facing primary challenges creates problems attaining statistical significance. While the conventional wisdom says that these ideological challenges, such as from the Tea Party, tend to come from non-political "insurgent" candidates, my findings suggest that strong and ambitious officials are also ideological conscious, and work within these same anti-moderate and anti-establishment structures.

How Experienced Candidates Perform

From here, I turn to the question of candidate selection within primary contests. Many of the indicators that may be used to decide in a general election, such as party identification, are not relevant to a primary voter, and others, such as ideological differences, may not be readily obvious. In the case of non-incumbents, no meaningful metric exists to measure ideological difference for all candidates, and even if one was in common use, such differentiation may not be apparent to the average voter. There are, however, three readily available factors that I can expect to make a difference in vote share. First, and consistent with decades of literature, is the incumbency advantage. Due to their name recognition, voting records, congressional privileges, and other benefits, incumbents are likely to have a major electoral advantage, which should be particularly evident in primary elections without a partisan opponent. Secondly, even for non-incumbents, we can expect prior political experience to give challengers an advantage over inexperienced candidates. These candidates should have some of the same name recognition, district connections, and fundraising abilities that help incumbents increase their vote share. Finally, we can expect that higher fundraising ability should help candidates, independent of other factors.

Based on the data (Table 12), incumbency seems to provide an enormous advantage for primary candidates seeking reelection, perhaps even more so than during the general election, with a 33% boost to vote share because of the incumbency advantage. Given this massive boost, it is not surprising that we see so

Table 12. Candidate Vote Share

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
prior_office		7.241*** (1.751)	13.04*** (1.984)	2.104 (1.908)
incumbent		39.31*** (2.334)		33.37*** (2.460)
fundraising	0.138*** (0.0102)		0.106*** (0.0110)	0.0578*** (0.0102)
Constant	31.87*** (1.101)	26.49*** (0.858)	27.79*** (1.231)	28.91*** (1.076)
Observations	582	776	582	582
R-squared	0.240	0.421	0.293	0.464

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

few experienced challengers, particularly in primaries with more than two viable candidates. Fundraising also gives candidates significant electoral support, and on average every \$10,000 raised appears to give a candidate an additional .5 percent of the vote. But, since changes in candidate vote share are not independent within a primary, this effect is mitigated when accounting for the effect of increasing one candidate's vote share over their competitor's vote share. Perhaps most intriguing is the finding that, controlling for both incumbency and fundraising, prior political experience does not seem to provide any substantial boost to the chances of winning a primary. This suggests that the theorized benefits stemming from previous political experience are less relevant than previously suspected or, more likely, are mitigated by the same advantages held by congressional incumbents on a greater scale. However, as model II shows, when I do not account for candidate fundraising, experienced challengers have a seven point advantage over other,

inexperienced candidates. This effect disappears when controlling for the effects of fundraising, shown in model 4. This in turn suggests that while experience may not act as a direct indicator to voters, it does provide these candidates with a substantial fundraising advantage.

Table 13. Candidate Fundraising by \$10,000

	(1)	(2)
prior_office	79.57*** (6.750)	42.03*** (7.572)
incumbent		84.63*** (9.382)
Constant	23.00*** (4.563)	23.00*** (4.276)
Observations	582	582
R-squared	0.193	0.293

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

In order to test the effects of electoral experience on candidate fundraising ability, I run a simple multivariate regression using data on candidate financial reports from the Federal Elections Commission, analyzing the effects of experience on total campaign contributions. As the model shows (Table 13), even controlling for a significant incumbency advantage in fundraising, experienced politicians can leverage their office, connections, and skills to raise on average over \$400,000 more than their inexperienced competitors. Though only about half of the fundraising advantage enjoyed by incumbent members of Congress, this can provide substantial and needed aid to an ambitious and skilled challenger, particularly in the most competitive races.

DISCUSSION

A candidate's decision to run for public office is an essential step in the democratic process. While the ultimate candidate selection decision is made by voters in the general election, that choice itself is generally limited to the candidates nominated by the two major parties in their primaries, a choice which itself is restricted to candidates who make the choice to run. With an enormous incumbency advantage and increasing levels of partisan polarization diminishing levels of congressional electoral competition, the incentive to seek federal office may be lower than ever before. This is particularly true for those candidates who are conscious of the difficult road to victory, often those with prior political experience and knowledge. These candidates tend to only challenge incumbents when they see their chances of success as high, a prospect that is diminished further when attempting to "primary" an incumbent of their own party.

This paper highlights the conditions under which one of these strong candidates is likely to throw their hat into the political ring. As I show, the incumbent officeholder's ideological extremity appears to be the most powerful indicator of a strong challenge. This is consistent with previous scholarship studying the number, if not strength, of primary candidates. Under this framework, moderate Republicans and Democrats are significantly more likely than their most conservative and liberal peers to have closely contested races with ambitious politicians from within their own party. This tendency certainly plays a major role in increasing partisan and ideological polarization within Congress. What this paper

does not show however, is the rationale for these challenges. On the one hand, considering the ideological biases of party primary electorates in relation to the general electorate, moderate incumbents are almost certainly more vulnerable to these challenges. More extreme wings of the party base are more likely to participate in primaries than moderate partisan voters, giving extremist challengers to moderate incumbents a modest boost to make up for powerful advantages held by current office holders. On the other hand, although this paper makes no claim as to the ideological preferences of copartisan candidates, moderate incumbents may face tough primaries not only because they appear more vulnerable, but also because ideologically extreme lower-level politicians and their supporters seek to oust moderates and replace them with more ideologically “pure” representatives, a claim often made by the Tea Party.

Of course, the choice to run for Congress is a very personal decision. Candidates will have to put many aspects of their life on hold for much of a de facto two-year election period. They will be scrutinized in the public eye, have to raise thousands of dollars, and travel across the district away from their families, not to mention moving to Washington and repeating the process in the next cycle should they win. While structural factors can attempt to indicate when ambitious politicians may run for office, by nature this study cannot tell the full story. In addition to personal factors, the invisible primary can also structure candidate decisions, among many other unquantifiable considerations, all of which

experienced politicians must take into account. To fully evaluate strategic primary entry, further research into these individual decision-making structures is needed.

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