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Don't Blame Primary Voters for Polarization

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Abstract

In recent years, a number of media commentators and scholars have blamed primary voters for the rise of polarization in American politics. According to this argument, primary electorates are dominated by strong partisans whose views are more extreme than those of rank-and-file party supporters. This article uses data from recent exit polls of primary and general election voters as well as the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study to test the primary election polarization theory. The evidence does not support the theory. In fact there appears to be very little difference between the ideologies of each party's primary voters and the ideologies of its general election voters. These findings suggest that the polarized state of American politics today reflects the polarized state of the overall American electorate rather than any peculiar characteristics of primary voters. The findings also suggest that even after they secure their party's nomination, it may be risky for candidates to adopt more moderate policy positions in order to appeal to swing voters, because any such move toward the center would risk alienating a large proportion of their party's electoral base.

KEYWORDS: elections, political parties, partisan polarization, primary voters

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An observer following the 2008 presidential nominating campaigns might well conclude that the Democratic and Republican candidates are running for the presidencies of two different countries. On the Democratic side, the major contenders have emphasized the need to reduce U.S. military involvement in Iraq, increase diplomatic efforts to ease tensions with Iran, end tax breaks on the wealthiest Americans, and undertake major new federal programs to expand health insurance and reduce global warming. On the Republican side, the leading candidates have emphasized the need to continue the U.S. military effort in Iraq, attack Iran if it refuses to end its nuclear program, extend the Bush tax cuts, and oppose any major expansion of the federal role in providing health care or protecting the environment.

All of the major Democratic candidates have expressed strong support for abortion rights, civil unions for gay and lesbian couples, and federal funding of embryonic stem cell research. All of the major Republican candidates except former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani have expressed strong opposition to abortion rights, civil unions, and federal funding of embryonic stem cell research, and Giuliani has sought to reassure conservatives by emphasizing his conservative positions on other issues while promising to appoint “strict constructionist” judges.

The overall picture presented by the 2008 presidential campaign is thus one of intense partisan polarization: relatively minor policy differences among the candidates within each party along with sharp policy differences between the two parties. It is a picture that is very similar to that seen in the U.S. Congress in recent years, where moderates in both parties have been disappearing and the ideological distance between the parties has been growing (Smith and Gamm 2005). But what explains this trend? Why are the Democratic and Republican presidential candidates, like the Democrats and Republicans in Congress, moving away from the center when, according to some scholars, the American electorate has remained quite moderate (Fiorina 2006)?

In recent years, a number of media commentators (Baldassare 2004; Marlantes 2004; Milligan 2007) and scholars (Fiorina and Levendusky 2006; Maisel 2006) have argued that a good deal of the blame for rising polarization in American politics is attributable to the influence of primary elections. According to the *primary election polarization theory*, primary electorates tend to be dominated by strong partisans who hold more extreme views than rank-and-file party supporters. Candidates and office-holders are therefore forced to adopt extreme positions in order to appeal to their party’s primary voters and this limits their ability to adopt more centrist positions during general election campaigns (Fiorina and Levendusky 2006, pp. 70-71).

Despite the popularity and intuitive appeal of the primary election polarization theory, there has been little or no empirical research demonstrating that primary

voters have more extreme views than rank-and-file party supporters. The most comprehensive scholarly study of the attitudes of presidential primary voters found that they had very similar policy preferences to general election voters from the same party (Norrander 1989). These results were consistent with the findings of an earlier study of voters in Wisconsin's 1964 gubernatorial primary which found that "primary voters do not differ significantly from their non-voting fellow partisans in their attitudes toward issues" (Ranney and Epstein 1966, p. 616).

It is possible, of course, that the results of these earlier studies are no longer valid. In an era of partisan polarization, primary voters may in fact hold more extreme views than rank-and-file party supporters. In the remainder of this article I will test the primary election polarization theory with data from recent exit polls of voters in presidential primaries and general elections along with the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study. This evidence indicates that the ideologies and policy preferences of Democratic and Republican primary voters are very similar to those of Democratic and Republican general election voters. In fact, evidence from the 2004 exit polls indicates that Democratic general election voters held more liberal views on gay marriage and the war in Iraq than Democratic primary voters, although these differences may have reflected shifts in opinion between the time of the primaries and the general election.

The evidence presented in this article shows that Democratic and Republican general election voters hold divergent views on a wide range of issues including, in both 2004 and 2006, the war in Iraq. The sharply contrasting positions being taken by the 2008 Democratic and Republican presidential candidates on economic, cultural, and foreign policy issues appear to reflect the sharply contrasting views of Democratic and Republican general election and primary voters.

Findings

Table 1 presents data comparing the ideologies of Democratic and Republican primary and general election voters in 2000. This was the most recent election in which the presidential nominations in both parties were contested. The entries in this table represent the liberalism of the voters in each Democratic and Republican primary and in the general election, based on responses to the ideological identification question. In order to measure ideological liberalism, I combined the percentage of voters identifying themselves as liberal with one-half of the percentage of voters identifying themselves as moderate.¹

¹ The ideological identification questions used in exit polls for the primary and general election were slightly different. In all of the primary exit polls, the question had five response categories: very liberal, somewhat liberal, moderate, somewhat conservative, and very conservative. In all of the general election exit polls, the question had only three response categories: liberal, moderate,

According to the data in Table 1, based on ideological self-identification, Democratic primary voters were considerably more liberal than Republican primary voters in every one of these states. Democratic primary voters had an average liberalism score of 66, while Republican primary voters had an average liberalism score of 27. There was some variation in ideological identification within each party. Both Democratic and Republican primary voters in the South were somewhat more conservative than their counterparts in the rest of the country, and both Democratic and Republican primary voters in the Northeast were somewhat more liberal than their counterparts in the rest of the country. But the differences between the two parties' primary voters were fairly consistent across all states and regions.

Caucus participants in Iowa and primary voters in New Hampshire, two states whose early contests can have a disproportionate influence on the presidential nominations, were somewhat more polarized along ideological lines than primary voters in the rest of the country. The most dramatic difference involved Republican caucus participants in Iowa. They tied the Louisiana Republicans for the highest conservatism score of any Republican primary electorate. This may reflect the fact that, compared with primary elections, the caucuses are very low turnout affairs dominated by party and issue activists. Thus caucus participants may be less representative of a party's general election voters than primary voters would be. However, Iowa Democratic caucus participants in 2000 were not substantially more liberal than Democratic primary voters from similar states.

New Hampshire Democrats were quite liberal, although their views were similar to those of Democratic primary voters in other northeastern states. However, New Hampshire Republicans were actually somewhat less conservative than Republican primary voters in the rest of the country. This may reflect the fact that New Hampshire's primary rules allow registered independents to vote in either party's primary and in 2000, a large number of these independents turned out to vote for Arizona Senator John McCain in the Republican primary. According to the New Hampshire exit poll, registered independents comprised 32 percent of all Republican primary voters in 2000, and McCain received 61 percent of the vote among registered independents, compared with 44 percent of the vote among registered Republicans.

and conservative. Combining the percentage of respondents choosing one or both liberal categories with half the percentage of respondents choosing the moderate category should facilitate comparisons between the primary exit poll results and the general election exit poll results. However, some of the differences between the results from the two types of exit polls may reflect the differences between the two types of ideological identification questions.

**Table 1. Ideological Liberalism of Democratic and Republican Voters in 2000
Presidential Primaries**

State	Democrats	Republicans
IA	70	16
NH	73	31
CT	70	34
DE	64	23
MA	74	40
MD	70	28
ME	76	32
NY	72	32
RI	70	32
VT	82	38
AZ	---	23
CA	71	22
CO	66	22
MI	---	36
MO	70	28
OH	66	34
FL	64	25
GA	66	24
LA	56	16
MS	57	22
OK	52	19
TN	54	22
TX	60	22
VA	---	28
Primary Average	66	27
Gen Elect Average	62	28

Note: Ideological liberalism = liberal percentage + half of moderate percentage.

Source: VNS Exit Polls

What is most striking about the evidence presented in Table 1, however, is the fact that the differences in ideological identification between primary and general election voters were very small.² On average, Democratic primary voters were only four points more liberal than Democratic general election voters, and Republican primary voters were only one point more conservative than Republican general election voters. Based on these results, it appears that ideological polarization was almost as great among general election voters as it was among primary voters.

In fact, there are good reasons to believe that the findings presented in Table 1 understate the extent of partisan polarization in the American electorate. Although the moderate label was quite popular with both Democratic and Republican voters, moderate Democrats were actually a good deal more liberal than moderate Republicans when it came to specific policy issues. For example, according to data from the exit poll of November, 2000, 75 percent of moderate Democrats were pro-choice on abortion, compared with 52 percent of moderate Republicans; 62 percent of moderate Democrats opposed investing social security funds in the stock market, compared with 23 percent of moderate Republicans; 66 percent of moderate Democrats preferred targeted tax cuts to across-the-board tax cuts, compared with 31 percent of moderate Republicans; and 67 percent of moderate Democrats favored a more activist role for the federal government, compared with 24 percent of moderate Republicans.

Table 2 presents data from the 2000 general election exit poll comparing the policy preferences of Democratic and Republican voters on six issues: abortion, the role of government, prescription drug coverage, social security, tax cuts, and gun control. The results show that there were large differences between Democratic and Republican voters on all of these issues. On every issue, a majority of Gore voters took the liberal side, while a majority of Bush voters took the conservative side. The gap between the parties ranged from 30 percentage points on prescription drug coverage to 49 percentage points on the role of government. Overall, these data indicate that there was a high level of partisan polarization among voters in the 2000 general election.

Since President Bush had no serious opposition in the 2004 primaries, there were no exit polls of Republican primary voters in that year. However, we can use data from the 2004 Democratic primary exit polls and the 2004 general election exit poll to compare Democratic primary voters, Democratic general election voters, and Republican general election voters with regard to their ideological

² Results for general election are based on all Gore and Bush voters in the national exit poll. When the general election results were adjusted to include only those states for which primary exit polls were also available, the results were almost identical.

identification and their views on two major issues in the 2004 campaign: gay marriage and the war in Iraq. These comparisons are displayed in Table 3.³

Table 2. Policy Liberalism of Democratic and Republican Voters in 2000 Presidential Election

	Democrats	Republicans
Abortion	77	39
Role of Government	70	21
Prescription Coverage	76	46
Social Security	60	21
Tax Cuts	67	27
Gun Control	82	44
Average	72	33

Note: All entries are percentages.

Source: VNS Exit Poll

The data in Table 3 show that Democratic general election voters in 2004 were almost identical to Democratic primary voters in their ideological identification and were apparently somewhat more liberal than Democratic primary voters on the issues of gay marriage and the war in Iraq. However, the greater liberalism of Democratic general election voters on the issues of gay marriage and Iraq may simply reflect the fact that Democratic voters became more liberal on these issues between the time of the primaries and the general election in response to the presidential campaign. Whatever the explanation for the differences between Democratic primary and general election voters, it is clear

³ The data for the general election include all Kerry and Bush voters in the national exit poll. When the general election results were adjusted to include only states for which exit polls of Democratic primary voters were available, the results were almost identical.

that both sets of Democratic voters were much more liberal than Republican general election voters.

Table 3. Policy Liberalism of Democratic Primary and General Election Voters and Republican General Election Voters in 2004 Presidential Election

	Dem Primary Voters	Dem Gen Elect Voters	Rep Gen Elect Voters
Ideology	66	64	25
Gay Marriage	52	59	30
Iraq War	71	85	11

Note: All entries are percentages.

Source: State primary exit polls and national exit poll.

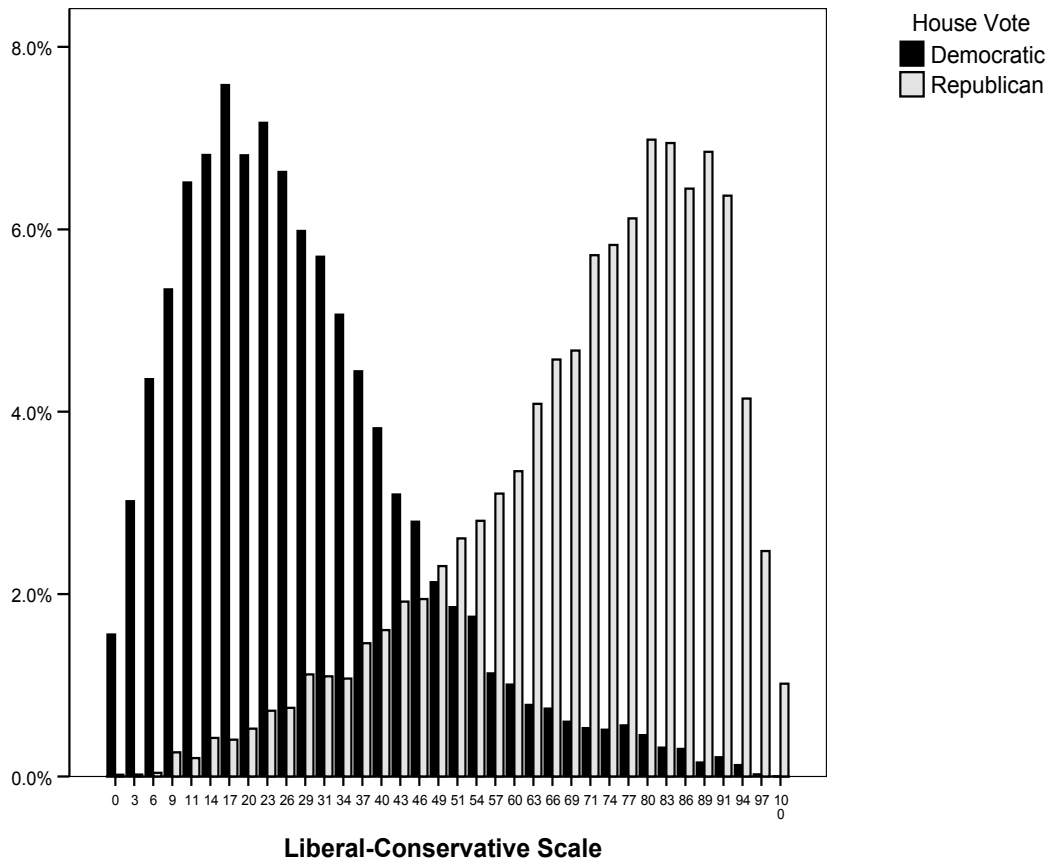
There is no reason to think that the high level of ideological polarization evident in the 2004 electorate has faded in the past three years. In fact, according to data from the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, there were dramatic differences between the policy preferences of Democratic and Republican voters in the 2006 midterm election.⁴ Figure 1 compares the distribution of opinion on a twelve-item liberal-conservative policy scale among Democratic and Republican House voters in 2006. The issues included in the scale ranged from abortion and stem cell research to the minimum wage, social security privatization, and the war in Iraq.

The data displayed in Figure 1 portray a deeply divided electorate. There is almost no overlap between the two distributions: 89 percent of Democratic House voters are located to the left of center while 84 percent of Republican House voters are located to the right of center. Democratic House voters had an average score of 28 percent conservative on the scale while Republican House voters had an average score of 70 percent conservative. The Senate pattern was even stronger: 91 percent of Democratic Senate voters were located to the left of center

⁴ The CCES involved an Internet-based survey of voting-age Americans conducted by Polimetrix, Inc. on behalf of a consortium of scholars at 37 colleges and universities. Polimetrix uses a sample-matching methodology to produce a sample that is representative of the overall U.S. electorate (Rivers n.d.). Registered voters were deliberately over-sampled in order to ensure adequate coverage of different types of House and Senate contests: the CCES surveyed over 36,000 eligible voters, including over 24,000 who reported voting in the 2006 midterm election.

while 88 percent of Republican Senate voters were located to the right of center. Democratic Senate voters had an average score of 27 percent conservative on the scale while Republican Senate voters had an average score of 72 percent conservative.

Figure 1. Policy Preferences of Democratic and Republican House Voters in 2006



Source: 2006 CCES

Table 4. Positions of Democratic and Republican House Voters on Policy Issues: Percentage Taking Liberal Position

Issue Position	Democratic Voters	Republican Voters	Difference
Abortion	69	21	48
Late-Term Abortion Ban	57	16	41
Affirmative Action	51	12	39
Capital Gains Tax Cuts	69	16	53
Environment vs. Jobs	70	26	44
Immigrant Citizenship	51	18	33
Iraq a Mistake	86	17	69
Iraq Troop Withdrawal	83	25	58
Minimum Wage	93	49	44
Social Security Accounts	64	11	53
Stem Cell Research	87	32	55
Average	71	22	49

Source: 2006 CCES

There were sharp differences between Democratic and Republican voters on every one of the issues included in the liberal-conservative scale. These differences are displayed in Table 4. The largest differences between Democratic and Republican voters in 2006 were over the war in Iraq. Eighty-six percent of Democratic House voters considered the war a mistake, compared with only 17 percent of Republican House voters, and 83 percent of Democratic House voters favored a proposal to immediately begin withdrawing American troops from Iraq, compared with only 25 percent of Republican House voters. There were also differences of over 50 percentage points on such issues as stem cell research, social security private accounts, and capital-gains tax-cuts. The smallest difference between Democratic and Republican voters was found on the issue of immigration. Even here, however, there was a difference of 38 percentage points between Democratic and Republican House voters on whether to allow illegal immigrants to obtain American citizenship.

The dramatic differences between the views of Democratic and Republican voters on a wide range of cultural, economic, and national security issues indicate that partisan polarization among political elites does not exist in a vacuum. In taking sharply opposing positions on a wide range of issues, Democratic and

Republican office-holders and candidates appear to be accurately reflecting the views of their supporters in the electorate.

Conclusions

Based on the evidence presented in this article, it is hardly surprising that the major candidates for the 2008 Democratic and Republican presidential nominations are taking sharply diverging positions on a wide range of domestic and foreign policy issues. These positions appear to reflect accurately the views of the large majority of Democratic and Republican general election as well as primary voters. Moreover, given the polarized views of the two parties' general election voters, we probably should not expect the eventual nominees to moderate their issue positions significantly during the general election campaign in order to appeal to swing voters. Any such move toward the center would clearly risk alienating a large proportion of the party's electoral base. Regardless of who wins the Democratic and Republican nominations, we can expect another bruising and divisive general election campaign in 2008.

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