Policy Voting in U.S. House Primaries

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U. S. House primaries have lately emerged as cockpits of intra-party struggle. The Republican Party has fallen into a “civil war” in which establishment and anti-establishment factions compete for dominance in party primaries. Labor, feminist, LBGT, and progressive candidates contest one another on the Democratic side. The winners of these factional struggles define what the two parties stand for in Congress. “Wide-open primaries will plunge both parties into historic battles over their identities” is how a *Washington Post* headline made this point ahead of the primary season in 2018.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Primary elections were adopted early in the 20th century in the hope of empowering voters to control parties (Boatright, 2014). The question we ask in this paper is how well, in the current period of party turmoil, voters are able to use House primaries for the purpose of giving policy direction to their parties.

We attempt to answer this question from analysis of voter attitudes and behavior in four winnable open seat primaries (WOSPs). These are primaries for seats that have no incumbent running and that are either safe for one party or competitive between the two parties. Sixty percent of new House members launch their congressional careers in a WOSP primary.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The four WOSPs we study are Democratic contests in the Iowa 1st (Cedar Rapids and environs) and the Pennsylvania 13th (half urban Philadelphia and half suburban Montgomery County), and Republican races in the Arkansas 2nd District (Little Rock and environs) and the Texas 36th (suburban Houston and rural east Texas).

The four races, which took place in spring, 2014, were chosen to have candidates representing factional differences within their parties. In the two Republican contests, the candidates were establishment conservatives and Tea Party dissidents; in the two Democrat primaries, they were conventional union candidates, a business Democrat, and an abortion moderate.

House primaries pose stiff challenges to policy-motivated voting. Most obvious is that party labels are unavailable as guides to candidate positions. Compounding this, most WOSPs have multiple candidates, many initially little known or unknown to voters. In order to give direction to their parties in a multicandidate primary, voters must choose strategically from the set of viable candidates rather than vote sincerely for their first choice.

Scholars have produced little research on policy motivated voting in House primaries. One reason is no doubt the difficulty of obtaining appropriate survey data. House primaries take place at different times under different rules in different oddly shaped districts, which makes them poor fits to standard survey designs.

The present study has overcome this logistical challenge by conducting exit surveys of voters leaving their polling places. Among the advantages of such surveys is that they measure voter attitudes before much forgetting can occur. Our exit surveys disclosed major deficiencies in voter information. Nearly half of poll respondents were unable to recall the name of any House candidate and 11 percent were not sure for whom they had voted even after prompting with the candidate names. In response to standard likes and dislikes questions, about 60 percent of all voters did not offer any comment about any candidate having political content; in races having three or four candidates, fewer than 10 percent offered politically material likes or dislikes about more than a single candidate.

As noted, each race had a candidate who stood out from the party mainstream. But in only one of these four cases did voter attitudes correlate with support for the appropriate standout candidate, and in the fourth case, a heavily pro-choice Democratic electorate split its vote among three different pro-choice candidates, thereby allowing the abortion moderate to win nomination. In this and one other primary in which strategic voting could have resulted in better outcomes for most voters, we found no trace of it.

These findings cannot be entirely blamed on lack of voter engagement. News coverage of the races was limited, candidates did not always show their true colors, and campaign resources were unevenly distributed. But whatever combination of factors explain them, our survey findings indicate sharp limitations in voters’ use of House primaries to give policy direction to their parties.

The paper has five main sections. The first describes basic features of House primaries and existing research on them. The second describes our exit surveys. The third examines voter information about candidates. The fourth presents some simple tests of policy voting. The fifth section summarizes and concludes.

**Background**

Because most House seats are safe for one party, winning the majority party’s primary for an open seat is often tantamount to election to Congress. Yet research on House primaries has been so limited that, as Robert Boatright commented in his 2014 study, *Congressional Primary Elections*, “many of our ideas about primaries are in fact inferences drawn from other types of elections or from theoretical literature” (104). Scholars have paid more attention to House primaries in recent years, but the literature is still thin, especially as regards the focus of this paper, policy-motivated voting.

A critical feature of House primaries is that they are plurality elections with low barriers to candidate entry. In most states, candidates need only pay a moderate fee or gather a few hundred signatures to get their name on the primary ballot. The result is that most WOSPs attract more than two candidates, often many more. In the 2013-14 electoral cycle, there were 53 WOSPs, 39 of which had three or more candidates (AUTHORS, 2014).

Multicandidate primaries create an incentive for voters to vote strategically rather than sincerely.  By sincere voting, we mean voting for the candidate one most prefers; by strategic voting, we mean voting for the candidate who represents the best outcome feasible, given what other voters are expected to do.  To appreciate this difference, suppose that a primary has three candidates, two extreme and the other moderate, and that a majority of voters prefers an extremist.  If the extreme voters vote sincerely for the extreme candidate they most prefer, they risk dividing their strength and opening the way for the moderate to win.  To get the best outcome feasible, they must strategically coordinate on whichever of the extreme candidates has more support.

To add a bit of jargon that will be useful in the analysis that follows, we will refer to the weaker of the similar (in this case, extreme) candidates as a spoiler. That is, a spoiler is as candidate who draws support from a politically similar competitor, causing both to lose where one alone might have won.

Because candidates in House primaries lack differentiating party labels, voters arguably need more candidate information than in general elections. When multiple candidates compete, still more is needed. Voters need not be familiar with all candidates, but they do need to identify the top two candidates and, if seeking to give policy direction to their party, to make political evaluations of the top candidates.

These observations raise the two questions that organize our analysis. The first is whether House primary voters possess the information necessary for policy voting, whether sincere or strategic. The second is whether many voters actually cast policy motivated votes.

To our knowledge, the only study to assess voter information about candidates in House primaries is Ahler, Citrin, and Lenz (2016), who conducted an Internet survey assessing the accuracy of voter ratings of the liberal-conservative positions of House candidates in California’s 2012 all-party primary election. This study is based on 20 of the state’s 53 districts in which viable candidates took significantly different ideological positions, as determined by the authors’ investigation of candidate websites and other public sources. As Ahler et al. found,

Voters… know little about primary candidates’ ideologies beyond what they can infer from party labels … voters often perceive Tea Party candidates, “Occupy” candidates, and genuine moderates as equally centrist. (p. 242, 240)

In addition to incorrect ideology ratings, Ahler et al. found that 30 percent of respondents could not rate incumbent candidates and 54 percent could not rate viable challengers.

Research on policy-motivated voting in House primaries is also limited. The most heavily researched question is perhaps whether the extreme preferences of House primary voters explain the polarization of voting in Congress. A common design uses aggregate data to test the effects of open versus closed primaries – i.e., primaries in which all voters versus only party voters can participate. The expectation is that open primary electorates will be more likely to nominate moderate candidates because of cross-over and independent voting. Results are mixed but tend toward no effect (Gerber and Morton 1998; Hirano et al. 2010; McGhee, 2010; McGhee et al. 2014; Brady et al., 2007; Hirano and Snyder, forthcoming).

In what is perhaps the strongest extant study of policy voting in House primaries, Ahler et al. test whether, as reformers expected, voters select more moderate candidates in California’s all-party primary than they would in a traditional one-party primary. To do this, they ask half of their Internet subjects to choose between candidates of their own party and the other half to choose between the candidates of all parties. The study found that subjects in the all-party condition were not more likely to prefer moderate candidates and, worse, that they often wound up selecting candidates more ideologically distant from themselves. Ahler et al do not report the baseline level of policy voting, but the finding that policy voting worsens when voters are offered more ideologically diverse candidate options suggests that voter capacity for it is not high.

As noted earlier, voters in multicandidate elections have an incentive to vote strategically, scholars of House primaries have rarely engaged this issue.[[3]](#footnote-3) Even Ahler et al. test only for sincere voting. Yet if sincere policy voting in multicandidate fields is too much for House primary voters, one must wonder whether they can manage strategic voting.

We nonetheless see three reasons to believe they might. The first is that Ahler et al. test voting in a set of mainly incumbent primaries. But incumbents typically win in low key races, so it is possible that WOSPs, which are far more consequential than most incumbent primaries, attract more voter attention. The second is that Ahler et al. test voter information and policy voting from measurements made with seven-point ideology scales. It is possible that many voters lack understanding of ideology as a spatial concept but nonetheless engage in policy-motivated voting on the basis of particular issues or other politically meaningful assessments.

The third reason for taking seriously the possibility of strategic voting in House primaries is that studies outside the United States have found that some voters engage in it. These studies involve choice between party-backed candidates rather than same-party primary candidates, but the results are still worth noting. They find that between 2 and 10 percent of all voters strategically pass on their top choice in order to choose among more viable contenders (Blais et al, 2002; Alvarez and Nagler, 2007; Kawai and Watanabe, 2005). Rates of this magnitude, should they occur in House primaries, would be large enough to swing some outcomes.

To summarize: The little research that has been done on policy voting in House primaries finds little evidence of it. But more concrete measurement of voter dispositions in more politically consequential primaries might produce different results.

**Survey Method**

A team centered at the University of XXXX conducted exit polls of voters in four WOSPs in May and June, 2014. The races were chosen because they offered voters a choice of candidates from different wings of their parties and because they were feasible for study.

The Iowa and Pennsylvania contests were multi-candidate primaries with potential for spoiler effects and hence an incentive for voters to behave strategically. The Arkansas primary had three candidates, but the second and third contenders were virtually tied, so there was little incentive for strategic voting. The Texas case was a two-person runoff following a 12-candidate primary and had no incentive for strategic voting.

The surveys were administered to voters as they left the polls, took five to seven minutes, and had an average response rate of 42 percent. Interviews were done at about eight polling locations per race, with locations chosen to be roughly representative of local political divisions and to have histories of high voter volume. Sample sizes varied between 102 cases in PA-13D to 214 in Iowa-1D, with the difference due mainly to the density of polling stations (more stations mean fewer voters per station). Total number of respondents was 655. Interviews were done by members of the study team and college students recruited at local universities and paid $150 for attendance at a three-hour training session and a day of interviewing.

Although our sample was a convenience sample, it obtained results that closely reflect the actual voting. The exit surveys correctly identified the winner in all races and, except for one pairing, identified the correct candidate orderings. The mean absolute difference between actual and survey votes was 3 percentage points; the correlation between actual and survey votes across 15 candidates was .978.

The survey contained questions about voter positions on three issues: Government Services, “Obamacare,” and abortion. The first two were measured on 7-point scales and the last on a 4-point scale. The Services question had only the endpoints labeled (“more spending” or “less spending”); the other questions had labels for all points on the scales (e.g., abortion “should never be permitted”). In addition, the questions were printed onto Show Cards with labeled scale points and given to respondents to hold as interviewers read the questions. We mention these details to show the effort made to obtain reliable measurement of voter attitudes.

The questionnaire is available in an Online Appendix.

**Voter information**

One of the survey’s first questions asked respondents to recall the names of candidates in their House primary and, in the three cases having statewide nominations, the candidates in these primaries. The top panel of Table 1 gives the distribution of the number of House names respondents could recall. As the total row shows, 47 percent of exit poll respondents could not recall the name of a single House primary candidate, *despite having cast ballots only minutes before*. Only 18% were able to list all of the candidates. In three of the four states, it was more

**** common for voters to be unable to recall any candidate names than to be able to recall more than one. Overall, Iowa voters did the best job of naming candidates in the election in which they had just voted, but even here, more than a quarter could not recall even one candidate’s name.

Why such low levels of name recall? One might suspect if the districts we studied happened to be below the national average in terms of voters’ general political information. But this is not the case. Sixty-three percent of exit poll respondents correctly answered a standard question about which party has more members in the U.S. Senate; the comparable figure from voters in the 2012 survey of the American National Election Studies (ANES) is 60 percent.

Further evidence concerning the political awareness of exit poll respondents may be found in the lower panel of Table 1, which shows recall of candidate names in statewide primaries occurring at the same time as the House primaries. Only 16 percent of exit poll respondents were unable to recall any candidate names in primaries for governor or lieutenant governor and 58 percent were able to recall two or more – a far better showing than these voters made in House primaries.

These results make clear that the House primary voters in our study are not in any general way below the national average for political information; they are simply very badly informed about candidates in House primaries.

With so many voters unable to recall the names of House candidates, we provided respondents with candidate names before asking them their vote choice. Even so, 4 percent of House primary voters said they could not remember whom they had voted for (and were therefore unavailable for analysis of vote choice) and an additional 7 percent admitted, in response to our follow-up query, that they were only “somewhat sure” whom they had voted for. The comparable figures for poor vote recall in statewide primaries were one percent and three percent.

Notwithstanding these results, it is possible that some voters formed political impressions about candidates whose names they could not remember. We devoted a substantial part of our short survey to questions that address this possibility, namely, open-ended queries about what voters liked and disliked about the candidates. These questions asked about candidates by name, so voters unable to recall names were at no disadvantage. We recorded up to 6 likes and dislikes per candidate. Out of 644 total respondents,[[4]](#footnote-4) 519 reported at least one like or dislike for at least one House candidate.

The willingness of a large majority of voters to express feelings about at least one primary candidate suggests more potential for informed voting than the data on name recall. So this data merits a close look. Indeed, we might think that reported likes and dislikes are more directly tied to coherent preferences than the ability to recall names. On the other hand, we might worry that respondents express likes and dislikes mainly because of the social desirability of appearing to be thoughtful and informed voters.

To systematically investigate the quality of the open-ended like and dislike responses, we coded them using categories inspired by Converse’s (1964) seminal analysis of voter belief systems, as follows:

**Level A**: Ideology, e.g. “good conservative,” “true progressive,” “too extreme”.

**Level B**: Policy position: e.g. “won’t increase taxes,” “supports abortion rights.” Includes non-specific references to policy (“I like his positions on the issues”)

**Level C**: Group membership: “Christian,” “stands up for working people” “woman.” Includes many references to local area (“from around here”) and anything related to the candidate’s profession (“physician,” “business owner.”)

**Level D**: Personal qualities: “good family man,” “honest,” “too much of a politician.” This category was reserved for personal qualities having no clear link to political positions or politically relevant group membership.

**Level E**: Campaign features (“liked her ads,” “didn’t campaign in my area”)

Table 2 presents basic results from this coding scheme. Our 644 poll respondents produced a total of 1400 likes and dislikes, or about 2.1 per respondent. About 62 percent of these comments (880/1400) lacked manifest political content (Levels D and E), but a substantial minority (520/1400) indicated some sort of political evaluation (Level A, B or C).

The large number of political comments suggests some voter propensity for politically motivated choice. But how widely was this propensity distributed? That is, how many voters actually compared candidates in political terms?



We cannot answer these questions for Iowa because, due to time pressure, we asked voters about only two candidates. But the other three cases show limited evidence of voters comparing candidates politically. As shown in Table 3, 38.5 percent of voters offered no political comment about any candidate, and an additional 38.2 percent of voters made only one political comment about one candidate. That leaves only 23.3 percent who evaluated more than one candidate.

But is comparative political assessment of just two candidates sufficient for informed choice? It clearly is in the two-candidate Texas runoff. But in the multicandidate primaries of Arkansas and Pennsylvania, the answer is less straightforward. As explained, a strategic voter in a multicandidate race must identify the top two candidates, form evaluations, and choose the better fit to their dispositions. Table 3 shows that nearly 23 percent of Pennsylvania voters evaluated two or more candidates, but this includes evaluations of trailers. As a separate calculation shows, only 7 percent of voters offered evaluations of the two leading candidates.

In the three-candidate Arkansas race, the choice problem was complicated by the fact that the second and third candidate were in a virtual tie. In this situation, a voter’s best move is to evaluate all three candidates and vote for the most preferred. According to Table 3, fewer than one percent of voters evaluated all three candidates in this race.

We saw in Table 1 that 47 percent of voters could not recall the names of any candidates and that only 36 percent could recall two or more names. The likes/dislikes data in Table 3 bring us closer to actual voting but are even more dismal. Large majorities of voters articulated no political basis for comparison of candidates, and in the two races in which strategic voting could have been advantageous, fewer than 10 percent made the assessments necessary for it. Yet these findings concern information and evaluation rather than behavior. The most important test of voter use of primaries for the purpose of giving policy direction to their parties is whether they can connect their political dispositions to the most appropriate candidate, which is the test to which we now turn.



**Policy Voting**

This section aims to assess the incidence of policy-motivated voting. This is straightforward to do in the two-candidate Texas race but tricky in the three contests having multicandidate fields. Suppose that a primary has three mainstream candidates and one extreme candidate. Suppose also that a survey has measured each voter’s disposition toward mainstream or extreme policies. In this situation, we could not predict which candidate the mainstream voters would prefer, but we could expect, all else equal, the extreme voters to prefer the extreme candidate. This expectation will guide analysis of the three multicandidate contests.

Before proceeding to these tests, we must explain the classifications of candidates as belonging to mainstream or dissident factions. The classifications are based on newspaper accounts, candidates’ TV ads, and, most importantly, interviews with elite participants and observers in the districts (see AUTHORS, 2014.)

* In AR-2R, the leading candidate, French Hill, was a Treasury official in the first Bush presidency, the founder of a regional bank, president of the Little Rock Chamber of Commerce, and the subject of speculation as a future Republican candidate for governor. Hill and Ann Clemmer, a state legislator with a record as a party solider, were the two mainstream candidates in the race. The third candidate, Colonel Conrad Reynolds, was the leader of a local Tea Party group and an outspoken critic of the other two candidates from that perspective. Reynolds’s flamboyant campaign featured events such an AK-47 raffle.
* In IA-1D, three of the five candidates in this race had been liberal members of the state legislator, including Patrick Murphy, who as Speaker of the state Assembly advanced an ambitious agenda of labor and welfare legislation. A fourth candidate never held elective office but presented himself as a mainstream liberal. The fifth candidate, Swati Dandekar, stood apart from the others. As a member of the state Assembly, she had led a group of six pro-business Democrats called “the Iowa six-pack” in frequent and sometimes successful opposition to the liberal program of Speaker Murphy.
* All four candidates in PA-13D were solid liberals on economic issues, but one, Brendan Boyle, took a prominent vote in the state legislature that made abortions more difficult to obtain, while the other three contenders were unreservedly pro-choice.
* The Texas 36R runoff was between Brian Babin, a longtime party activist with strong connections to business and Ben Streusand, a Tea Party activist and president of the Texas branch of Americans for Prosperity, a Koch brothers political group.

In all four contests, then, the standout candidates took positions to the right of their party mainstream, two Tea Party candidates in the Republican contests and a business Democrat and an abortion moderate on the Democratic side.

To measure voter attitudes in the Arkansas, Iowa, and Texas contests, we combined the Government Services and Obamacare items into a short scale having an alpha reliability of 0.83. In the PA-13D primary, we use a one item abortion scale.

Results of these tests are shown in Figure 1. The lines are plots of logit models of the relationship between conservative voter attitudes and voter support for



conservative standout candidates. Hence the expected slopes of the lines are positive. Plots show separate trends for the candidate’s home county and other county. Rug plots on the horizontal axis show the distribution (after jittering) of voter attitudes.

The main finding in Figure 1 is that the expected positive relationship between voter attitudes and support for the standout candidate materializes in only one of the four contests, namely, the Pennsylvania case. In the other three, there is either no relationship or, in the Texas case, a possible negative (or wrongly signed) one.

The coefficients underlying the plots in Figure 1 are in Table 4.[[5]](#footnote-5) The key finding here is that only one of the policy measures has a relationship with vote choice, but indicator variables for the home counties of the candidates have significant impacts in all four cases.

This pattern is notable: In contests selected because they involved party-defining factional struggles, relevant voter attitudes matter in only one of the four cases, but hometown effects having no relevance to these struggles show up in all four.

Let us look more carefully at the Pennsylvania contest, the one case having evidence of policy-motivated voting. As mentioned, PA-13 has two major



sections, suburban Montgomery County and urban Philadelphia County, with the former turning out slightly more primary voters. This might have advantaged a candidate from Montgomery County, but there were three candidates from that section and only one from Philadelphia County, namely, the abortion moderate, Boyle. Boyle’s moderate position on abortion did not go unnoticed in the race. One of the Montgomery County candidates and a feminist PAC took out TV ads attacking him and local newspapers covered the controversy.

A naïve observer might have expected Boyle’s well publicized position on abortion to have been fatal because voters in this Democratic primary were heavily pro-choice. In our survey, 77 percent took the pro-choice side of a standard abortion question. But by the logic of spoilers, three candidates on the popular side of an issue against one on the other side may well hold the weaker hand. Add to this the fact that the three pro-choice candidates were from Montgomery County and Boyle was the only candidate from urban Philadelphia, and Boyle’s situation begins to look rather favorable. And, indeed, he scored a comfortable plurality win – 41 percent to 27 percent for the first runner-up – even though the three suburban candidates together outspent Boyle by about $5 million to $1 million.

The lower left panel of Figure 1 summarizes Boyle’s vote share by voters’ attitudes on abortion and their county of residence. The figure shows that both abortion and voters’ county of residence affected vote for Boyle, but that, critically for Boyle, many voters in urban Philadelphia put more weight on place of residence than on abortion, voting for the him despite their pro-choice views.

Boyle status as the sole candidate from the Philadelphia section of the district may therefore have been the key to his victory, and it was no accident. The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers led more than a dozen local unions in coordinated support for Boyle, and in blue collar and union dense Philadelphia, this left little space for other candidates, two of whom entered but then dropped out when union support for Boyle became clear (Patterson, 2018).

If the large majority of PA-13D voters who were pro-choice had voted strategically, they could still have prevailed in this contest. This would have meant pro-choice voters coordinating on Marjorie Margolies, whom polls showed to be the strongest of the pro-choice candidates.

If any pro-choice voters were behaving strategically, it would likely have been better informed ones. We therefore investigated the effect of political information on vote for Margolies among pro-choice voters, with information measured by knowing which party controls the Senate and knowing the names of at least two House candidates. The result was that better informed pro-choice voters were slightly less likely to vote for Margolies than for one of the other pro-choice candidates.[[6]](#footnote-6) There was, thus, no hint of strategic voting.

While policy voting did not sway the outcome even in the one contest in which it occurred, voters’ preference for home county candidates was a major and possibly determinative factor in two other races.  In the Texas race, Streusand lived in the Houston suburbs and was the strong favorite of voters in that part of the district, while Babin lived in the exurban area and was the strong favorite of that section.  Given that the outlying area constituted more than 60 percent of the Texas district, voters’ tendency to vote for the candidate of their section was, in the absence of any apparent policy voting, sufficient to throw the race to Babin.

Home county voting may have been almost as important in the Iowa primary.  Cedar Rapids is the largest city in the district, but three of the contest’s five candidates came from there.  Dubuque is the district’s second city, with half the population of Cedar Rapids, but Murphy was its only candidate.  With all five candidates getting the bulk of their votes from their home counties, these demographics explain a significant part of Murphy’s primary win.

A final if somewhat mechanical test is worth reporting.  By the logic of strategic voting, voters in multicandidate races ought to make their choice between the top two candidates.  This simple expectation can be tested in the multicandidate Iowa and Pennsylvania primaries if, as previously, we assume that if anyone votes strategically, it will be the better informed.  Our finding is that in neither primary did the best informed voters show any tendency to coordinate their votes on the top two candidates.  If anything, they showed a slight preference for trailing candidates – perhaps, we speculate, because only better informed candidates followed campaigns closely enough to lean about them.

**Conclusion**

Ahler et al. covered the same basic ground as our study, but it is based on more voters in more contests and is in these ways a stronger study. But our smaller exit surveys have advantages as well:

* Ahler et al surveyed registered voters beginning 10 days before a primary in which turnout of registered voters was 31 percent.  Our study surveyed actual voters only minutes after they had cast their ballots.
* Ahler et al. measured both respondent information and policy voting using seven-point ideology scales that some or perhaps many respondents did not fully understand.  Our measurement strategy was based on more accessible concepts – candidate names, likes and dislikes of candidates, and voter positions on concrete issues – likely leading to more reliable measurements.
* Ahler et al included many incumbent primaries, whereas we examined a more consequential set of contests – those for winnable open seats, the primaries in which voters have the best opportunities to weigh in on the policy direction of their parties.

The two studies thus have complementary strengths and weaknesses. That they reach the same conclusion about the limited propensities of House primary voters for policy voting should therefore increase confidence in both.

An important feature of our analysis has been its attention to how characteristics of multicandidate candidate fields can, independent of voter attitudes, affect primary outcomes. In one case, three pro-choice candidates and an abortion moderate ran against one another, which helped nominate the latter even though most voters were pro-choice. In another case, three candidates from a district’s largest city opposed a solo candidate from the second largest city, which created a possibly decisive advantage for the candidate from the smaller city.

Because we examined only three multicandidate contests, we cannot specify how often spoiler effects like these occur, but we suspect they are a fairly widespread impediment to voter control of primary outcomes.

This paper’s findings may seem unflattering to House primary electorates, but they by no means suggest that voters are behaving irrationally or that they lack political competence.  To the extent that blame needs to be apportioned, much of it should go to limitations in the information environment of House primaries.  As we found in a survey of newspaper coverage of the four contests, most papers provide little reporting on House primaries and even less that meaningfully distinguishes the political positions of the candidates from one another (AUTHORS, 2019).  In the absence of this information, simple cues like the home counties of candidates – as well as others such as gender (McDermott, 1998,), ethnic surnames (Matson and Fine, 2006), occupations (McDermott, 2005) – can be the basis of rational if poorly informed voting.

But if the question is whether voters use the information readily available to them to givepolicy direction to their parties in House primaries, it is hard to answer in the affirmative.  Most likely there are primaries in which clear candidate differences and high quality media coverage come together to enable effective voter control of outcomes.  But whether these conditions arise often, or perhaps at all in multicandidate races, is doubtful.

If the policy preferences of voters have a limited role in determining outcomes of party defining primary elections, who or what does determine them? The extant literature offers several possibilities: candidate decisions to run for office (Hall, 2019); national party leaders (Hassell, 2016); local party leaders (Dominguez, 2009; Masket, 2010); and organized groups and activists (AUTHORS, 2014; Cohen, 2019). The challenge for understanding party-defining House primaries is to explain how these various groups interact in a process in which voters play a limited but still quite likely significant role.

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1. Internet edition, January 7, 2018, 10:40 a.m. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Based on new members to the 113th to 116th Congresses. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Hall and Snyder (2015) is an important exception. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Eleven of the original 655 dropped out before reaching these questions. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The total number of cases in Table 4, 582, reflects 11 percent attrition from the original survey size. The most important cause was refusal of respondents to say for whom they voted, but uncertainty about whom they voted and early exit from the survey also played roles. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The t-ratio on the coefficient was -1.26. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)