

**Primary Election Competitiveness in State Legislative Elections, 2012-2020**

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## Abstract

Election competitiveness is a significant measure of electoral health in a democracy. Competitive elections suggest an engaged public and the perc

## Introduction

Electoral competitiveness is one of the significant measures of a healthy democracy. Not only must elections be free and fair, there must be a robust base of willing and able competitors to enter the electoral arena. When few seek to run for office or candidates who run are not competitive, the result is a weaker democratic accountability mechanism. Competitive elections are the products of having engaged publics, and they highlight the public's perception of there being value in seeking office.

The corollary is also salient for the health of a

Throughout the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup>

Research highlights four main markers that are characteristic of competitive elections: 1) Margin of victory in contested races, 2) Number of contested seats, 3) number of pre-election retirements, and 4) entry of a high-profile candidate to the race.

### Number of Contested Seats

The number of contested seats in an election is also salient. Squire (1989) showed that in one-party dominated areas like the South and other largely Democratic districts, districts with a popular incumbent with a large margin of victory in a previous election, U.S. House races saw an increase over time in the number of seats that went uncontested. When Squire shifted the work to state legislative elections (2000), a different result emerged. Uncontested elections were growing in number, but state characteristics such as legislative professionalism, member pay, and overall statewide partisan competition saw greater numbers of contested elections. Contrary to the U.S. House findings, Southern states saw more contested primaries for their state legislatures.

### Retirements

Not only are contested seats and margin of victory important factors, but the number of candidates contesting the primary are as well. While they are rare in the United States, multicandidate elections have shown to be much more competitive, especially in states with plurality winning margins. (Merrill 1984)

### High-Profile Candidates

Not all candidates are created equally. For independently wealthy candidates, their ability to forego fundraising may empower them to enter a contest that others would shirk. Similarly, being a celebrity can bolster the likelihood a candidate will enter a race. Candidates who are deemed high-profile may have non-political acclaim, or are a celebrity. These candidates tend to come from outside the traditional political field, draw more attention and have greater likelihoods to enter races and make them competitive. (see Squire 1992a, 1992b; Ladam et al 2018)

### Victory Margin

The debate regarding competitiveness of general elections can help elucidate some potential measures of competitiveness in primaries. Mayhew (1974) and Jacobson (1987) began the debate over the margin of victory as ‘vanishing marginals’, or a decreasing number of

McGovern-Fraser Commission functionally forced all states to choose their presidential nominees by primary or caucus. Since Presidential primaries are detached from state legislative primaries in many states, those states with separate primaries have lower turnout rates than their counterparts that combine presidential and state nomination contests.

If primaries at the state level track generally with the Presidential contests, then we have strong reason to believe that primaries are becoming more competitive. Both the 2016 and 2020 presidential primaries saw significant spikes in turnout rates nationwide, with the 2020 presidential primary voting rate exceeding thirty percent for only the second time in the McGovern-Fraser era. (McDonald 2021)

History suggests that those two elections are more ephemeral. Occasional spikes in turnout punctuate what is typically very low primary turnout. That low turnout is caused by a number of reasons that also suggest why primaries have been mostly uncompetitive throughout the history of the process.

Since turnout is low in primaries, their results are susceptible to small shifts in the composition of the electorate that make the likelihood of victory much smaller. The normal partisan cues that help inform and mobilize voters in general elections are mostly non-existent in primaries. (Schaffner and Streb 2002) Low-information voters thus have little to help define their choices and do not vote. Primaries are also much earlier in the calendar, which accelerates a campaign's needs for planning. A first-time candidate may need months to a year to assemble a campaign organization, and those primaries are usually seven to ten months before the general election. The ramp-up process for a campaign discourages potential candidates from entering the race. Since the partisan cues are difficult to discern, fundraising for a primary campaign is also more complicated and suppressive on potentially strong candidates entering a race. Combined together, these barriers constitute a significant disincentive to enter a primary. Strategic candidates will likely take the highest-probability path to victory, which is to wait for the seat to open. (Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita 2008; Kanthak and Loep 2018)

Considering the strategy of candidate entry, the presence of a primary contest is itself a measure of competitiveness. If more potential candidates see the challenges as ones they can overcome, then the number of contested primaries will increase. Once candidates have entered a race, three more conditions may arise that exemplify increased competition in primary elections. While Presidential primaries have consistently featured multiple candidates throughout the McGovern-Fraser era, state legislative

want to hold, they will try to 'climb the ladder' and try to advance from the state house to the state senate. State senate seats are a typical precursor to Congressional runs, so the candidates should be more risk-acceptant and thus more likely to enter a contest. We should then expect to see more competition for state senate seats than state house seats.

## Analysis

Despite the emergence of the TEA Party as a presence in Republican primary politics, the number of contested primaries generally, and among Republicans, did not consistently increase over the course of the 2012 to 2020 time period. In both 2014 and 2020, fewer contested primary elections occurred than in the prior election cycle. As shown in Figure 1, not only did the number of contested primaries not significantly increase, but no pattern of difference emerged between the parties in state House contests. [Figure 1 About Here]

State Senate primaries exhibited a different pattern than their state House counterparts. Despite a downward trend from 2012 to 2014, throughout the rest of the decade Senate contested primaries did increase, but the growth was primarily concentrated in Democratic contests. Overall, the TEA Party appears to have very little influence on the number of primary elections contested over the course of the 2010's. Thus we can reject  $H^1$  [Figure 2 About Here]

Since state legislative contests are different from their federal counterparts, there are mitigating structural factors that may explain the lack of appreciable increase in primary contests. Five factors influence primary candidate entry: total number of legislative seats, term-limited legislators, legislative professionalism, retirements or resignations, and party control of the chamber. Term limits can artificially increase the aggregate number of contested primaries by automatically making the incumbent officeholder ineligible to run again. Legislative professionalism, with longer sessions and higher pay, should be more appealing and draw a larger pool of primary candidates. Retirements, which are separate from term-limited forced ineligibility, also will draw larger pools of candidates. Finally, in states with one-party control of a legislature, primaries will be the main locus of competition and thus should lead to more candidates emerging.

Tables 1 and 2 regresses the number of contested primaries during a given election year against those four factors for state House and state Senate races. The count of chamber seats and term-limited seats serve as two variables. To measure legislative professionalism, we used the National Conference of State Legislatures' three tiers of professionalism (green for the most amateur, grey for legislatures with some elements of professionalism, and gold for the most professional legislatures) to create an index of professionalism scaling from one to three. The aggregate number of retirements per year is the third variable, and finally a dummy variable for which party controlled the majority of the chamber.

Table 1 reports the regression coefficients for state House races from 2012 to 2020. While House contested primaries are significantly driven by retirements in the first three cycles,



Turning to H<sup>3</sup>, candidate entry may be a byproduct of the lack of general election competition. If a state does not feature competitive general elections because of one-party dominance, then primary candidate entry may be explained as compensatory for the lack of general election competitiveness.

To test the partisan element, we retain two factors: legislative professionalism and party chamber control. We add the s

Tables 11 through 14 provide regressions related to Hypothesis Five, focusing on the margin of victory in state legislative races. Using the same variables as in the incumbent loss models, we regress margin of victory for each party in each chamber.

Tables 11 and 12 show no significant causal relationships between the expected competitiveness factors and race margin of victory. Table 13, reporting Democratic state Senate race margins of victory, saw legislative professionalism emerge as significant, but only in 2014. [Table 13 About Here]

Senate Republican margins of victory were significantly related to aggregate chamber seats, uncontested elections, and legislative professionalism in 2012, but in no subsequent races did any of the variables achieve statistical significance. [Table 14 About Here]

## Discussion

The political shifts of 2010 suggested that a new era of competitive primary elections was possible and imminent. Here we see states with strong Republican bases tended to have more contested House primaries, but not to a significant degree and certainly not appreciably different from Ansolabehere and colleagues' earlier findings (2006).

Exploring the partisan and chamber differences further, we see that while some marginal increases in contested races may have emerged among Democrats in state Senate chambers, the expected Republican surge in contested primaries did not appear. The most significant area of

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recruitment at the federal level. (Matthew and Kunz 2017) Instead, Gingrich founded the GOPAC organization in the early 1980s, and focused its efforts on recruiting state and local candidates for office, who then in turn developed experience and were trained candidates when GOPAC recruited those candidates to seek Congressional seats in the 1994 cycle. (Corkery 2011)

Even if future ambitious political leaders attempt to shift their party ideologically, they will face massive challenges. The inertia of low turnout and low attention races that characterize state primary elections work strongly against efforts to recruit effective challengers. Not only do we see ambitious candidates foregoing primary challenges to incumbent representatives at the state level, the candidates that do run have shown little success in bringing margins of victory down in the races they do run.

## Caveats and Future Directions

The data presented here are part of a larger project on state legislative elections, and as such they are limited. While none of the expected structural or electioneering variables showed consistent statistical significance, we do know that the TEA Party had begun efforts, albeit piecemeal ones in only a few states, to recruit primary candidates. The implications of those efforts appear, at least in the confined period of study in which the data is available, that primary races continue to be of little import. But other variables may be significant, notably funding. As such, future presentations of this data will include state legislative campaign finance data in its analysis.

Furthermore, an opportunity to compare primary competitiveness with general election competitiveness emerges here. Primary challenges, when they occur, may be a sign of weakness and draw stronger general election challenger candidates. Future presentations of the data will compare primary competition with general election candidates and outcomes as well.



Kayser, Mark Andreas, and René Lindstädt. "A cross-national measure of electoral competitiveness." *Political Analysis* (2015): 242-253.

Klumpp, Tilman, Hugo M. Mialon, and Michael Williams. *Money talks: The impact of Citizens United on state elections*

## Tables and Figures

Table 1: Emergence of State House Candidates Regression, 2012-2020

**2012      2014      2016      2018      2020**





