Primary Elections and the
Quality of Elected Officials[*]

Shigeo Hirano
Columbia University

James M. Snyder Jr.
Harvard University and NBER

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Abstract

In this paper we argue that the literature underestimates the value of primaries, because it focuses on overall average effects. We argue that primary elections are most needed in safe constituencies, where the advantaged party's candidate can usually win the general election – even if she is "low quality." If the main role of elections is to select good candidates, then advantaged party primaries in open seat races are particularly consequential. We provide evidence that these primaries are especially effective at selecting "high quality" types. This appears to be driven both by differences in the proportion of high-quality candidates competing in the primaries and also by voter behavior.

1 Introduction

More than fifty years ago Julius Turner studied competition in congressional primaries and found that few incumbents faced serious challenges and almost none of them lost. He concludes pessimistically: "The comparative usefulness of the primary as a method for selecting successors for retiring incumbents does not offset the fact that the primary is not a successful alternative to two-party competition in most parts of the United States" (Turner, 1953, 210).

Many modern textbooks on U.S. elections summarize the situation in similar terms. For example, Bibby (2003, 171) writes, "It was the expectation of the [progressive] reformers that the direct primary would stimulate competition among candidates for party nominations. This hope has not been fulfilled, however. In a substantial percentage of the primaries, nominations either go uncontested or involve only nominal challengers to the front runner... Because incumbents tend to scare off competitors in the primaries, they of course win renomination in overwhelming proportion." Like Turner, Bibby focuses on the low level of average primary competition for incumbent contested races and concludes that primaries are simply a "nuisance" in these cases.[1] Jacobson's (2009) text on congressional elections scarcely mentions primaries at all.[2]

In this paper, we argue that infrequent primary competition does not mean that primaries have only a marginal role in the electoral system. The existing literature underestimates the value of primaries, because it focuses on the average effect of primaries across different situations: open- and incumbent contested races as well as safe and competitive constituencies. Instead, to accurately assess the extent to which primaries contribute to the electoral system we must distinguish among the different situations.

If we are mainly interested in electing high-quality officials and assuming that the main role of elections is to select "good types" rather than to hold incumbents accountable for past performance, then primaries will make their biggest contribution in open seat elections in

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[1]After describing the low level of primary competition in incumbent contested congressional and state legislative races, Bibby (2003, 172) writes, "Thus, for most members of Congress and state legislators, the primary is not unlike the common cold. It is a nuisance, but seldom fatal."

[2]Few works focus on non-presidential primaries. One exception is Galderisi et al. (2001).

safe districts (i.e., races without an incumbent, in constituencies with partisan loyalties that favor one party's candidates in the general election).[3,4] open seats are particularly relevant because if most open seat winners are high-quality, then most *incumbents* will be high-quality as well. Most incumbents were, at some point in the past, open seat winners.[5] Within open seat races, primaries are particularly consequential in safe districts.[6] In these districts, the primary for the party whose nominee is expected to win the general election, which we refer to as the advantaged party primary, is largely responsible for selecting the quality of the elected officials. In contrast, in districts with competitive general elections, only one of the two parties needs to nominate a high quality candidate in order for the eventual winner to be high quality since the general election provides another opportunity for the electorate to screen for quality.

As long as open seat races produce high quality winners, then we should not be too concerned with the relatively low level of primary competition (in either party) when an

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[3]Two highly influential works – Fearon (1999) and Besley (2006) – provide strong theoretical justification for the assumption that elections are primarily about selection. See Ashworth (2012) for a review of the literature.

[4]Parts of this argument have been made before. Banks and Kiewiet (1989) provide a theoretical model and some empirical evidence highlighting the differences in the quality of candidates entering in open seat versus incumbent contested primaries. A number of scholars have also noted the differences in the contestation between open seat and incumbent contested primaries (e.g. Turner (1953); Jacobson and Kernell (1983)). However, these studies do not distinguish between safe, competitive and unsafe constituencies. Several scholars have noted that the advantaged party primary tends to be more competitive (see footnote 18 below). However, these studies do not discuss the implications for candidate quality.

[5]This assumes that high-quality incumbents do not retire at much higher rates than low-quality incumbents. It is possible that high-quality incumbents retire at much higher rates than low-quality incumbents – e.g. if serving in an elective political office is a means of generating attractive job offers in the private sector (or bureaucracy), and if the private sector desires high-quality incumbents and can identify them. This does not seem likely, however, at least for most of the important elective offices in the U.S..

[6]It is interesting to note that some of the early progressive scholars and reformers made similar arguments. For example, in 1923 Charles Merriam (1923, 4) wrote, "[T]he significance of the vote under the direct primary varies in different sections of the country or of the state. About half the states are one-party states where the primary is of the very greatest importance, for here the election is practically decided. This list includes [list of states] and comprises more than half of the population of the United States. Many other states are preponderatingly Republican or Democratic. Of the 3,000 counties in the United States, it is safe to say that roughly half of them are one-party counties. Legislators, governors and United States senators are practically chosen in the primaries. In these instances ... the primary of the majority party is of the utmost consequence, for whatever the outcome, it is not likely to be overthrown in the subsequent [general] election." Somewhat more indirectly (and colorfully), in 1924 Gifford Pinchot (1924, 9) noted, "Under the convention system the only power that can clean up a party is the other party. Under the primary it is possible to clean up from within." And V.O. Key (1956, 88) stated, "The direct primary method of nomination apparently constituted at bottom an escape from one-partyism."

incumbent is running for re-election or when the general election is expected to be competitive. Rather, we should focus our attention on what happens in advantaged party primaries in open seat races and the minority of cases involving low-quality incumbents.[7]

In this paper we evaluate the effectiveness of advantaged party primaries in nominating high quality politicians for open seat races. We consider three different measures of candidate "quality": previous experience in related public-sector positions (a proxy for task-specific human capital), bar association evaluations of judicial candidates, and newspaper endorsements. Each of these is relatively coarse and noisy. However, they all point in the same direction, which increases our confidence that they capture important aspects of quality.

We also examine why advantaged party primaries would be especially effective at nominating a high quality politician. We focus on two mechanisms. The first concerns how the number and quality of the candidates competing in primaries varies across situations. The second concerns whether primary voters are more likely to choose higher quality candidates when candidates vary in their quality.

Our main finding is that in open seat races, an advantaged party primary is more likely to select high-quality nominees than a disadvantaged party primary or either party's primary in competitive districts. Advantaged party primaries are so effective at selecting high-quality nominees that we observe little difference in the quality of the eventual winners of open seat races in safe versus competitive constituencies, despite the absence of effective two-party competition in safe districts. We also find evidence that the relative effectiveness of advantaged party primaries may be partially attributed to the differences in the composition of the candidates competing in primaries in different situations. The proportion of high quality candidates competing in advantaged party primaries is higher than it is in other primaries. Thus, even if primary voters were unable to identify the higher quality candidates in open seat races and voted randomly, they would be more likely to nominate a high quality candidate in an advantaged party primary compared to a disadvantaged party primary or

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[7]In this paper we do not examine the cases involving low-quality incumbents. Hirano and Snyder (2012) find that incumbents involved in scandals do face more primary competition when they are affiliated with an advantaged party.

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a primary in a competitive district. However, we also find evidence that primary voters are not simply voting at random. Rather, voters tend to choose the higher quality candidate when given a choice.

2 Theoretical Considerations

While primaries provide an opportunity for voters to screen for politician quality, unless advantaged party primaries are particularly effective at selecting good types, we might expect the quality of elected officials to be higher in competitive districts than in safe districts. In competitive districts, relatively small differences in candidate quality could have a significant impact on the outcome of both the primary and the general election, so there are two opportunities for voters to screen for candidate quality. In safe districts, where the general election outcome is largely determined by the partisan loyalties in the constituency, the primary is effectively the only opportunity for voters to screen for candidate quality. In this section we highlight several reasons why advantaged party primaries in open seat races may be more likely to nominate high-quality candidates than primaries in other situations. These reasons have to do with differences in the incentives for candidate entry, the "pool" of potential primary election candidates, and the informational environments. Of course, even if only one or two of these three factors is present, advantaged party primaries will still produce relatively high quality nominees. If advantaged party primaries in safe districts function particularly well at nominating high quality candidates, then safe and competitive districts would elect officials of similar quality.

In terms of the composition of candidates, we might expect there to be a larger proportion of high quality candidates in an advantaged party primary compared to a disadvantaged party primary or either party's primary in a competitive district. There are two reasons why this might occur. The first has to do with the incentives for candidate entry. If the probability that a candidate will enter is increasing in the likelihood that the candidate will win office, then increasing the probability of winning the general election will increase the likelihood that high-quality candidates will enter the primary. The probability of winning

the general election is likely to have a multiplier effect on the incentive for high-quality candidates to enter an election.[8]

The intuition for this multiplier effect can be seen in the simple cross-partial derivative of the probability of winning office, W. Suppose W is equal to the probability of winning the primary, P, times the probability of winning the general election, G. Suppose further that the probability that a candidate wins the primary is increasing in her quality, q, so $\partial P / \partial q > 0$. Finally, suppose that voting in the general election is driven entirely by voters' partisan attachments, a, so quality has no affect on the probability of winning in the general election; define a so that higher values mean more voters are attached to the candidate's party, so $\partial G / \partial a > 0$. This assumption is for simplicity – the argument will hold as long as the effect of quality is "small" relative to the effect of partisanship. Then $W(q, a) = P(q)G(a)$, so $\partial^2 W / \partial q \partial a = (\partial P / \partial q)(\partial G / \partial a) > 0$. Thus, high-quality candidates will have a greater incentive to enter their party's primaries as their districts becomes safer for their party. As long as quality is not also correlated with some other attribute affecting voting behavior, increasing the proportion of high-quality candidates competing in a primary should naturally increase the likelihood that a high-quality candidate will win the nomination. If quality is also correlated with some other attribute or dimension, the high-quality candidates may divide the "high-quality" vote in a way that allows the low-quality candidate to win.

A second reason has to do with changes in the "pool" of potential primary election candidates. The proportion of candidates in this pool who are high-quality is likely to be larger for an advantaged party. This relationship will naturally arise from the multi-levels of elected office in U.S. government. For example, in a congressional district that is safe for the Democrats, we would expect that more of the state legislators elected from

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[8]This positive relationship between the number of high-quality candidates competing in a district's primary and probability of winning the general election in that district should still exist even if candidates enter sequentially. Of course, the probability that later entrants will win the primary is lower when the preceding entrants are high-quality. This suggests that potential candidates will have weaker incentives to enter an election when the prior entrants are high-quality, leading to fewer high quality candidates in primaries with an initial high-quality entrant, e.g. when there is an incumbent. Nonetheless, among races where there is an initial high-quality entrant, the intuition outlined above should still hold, and we should expect more high-quality candidates competing in the primaries for parties with an electoral advantage in the general election as compared to the primaries for other parties.

districts with boundaries that fall within that congressional district will be Democrats. If prior legislative experience is an indicator of quality, then there will be more high-quality types who could consider entering the Democratic primary in this congressional district – assuming that state legislators are more likely to run for congressional seats that overlap with their state legislative district. Thus, even if candidates are not necessarily strategic in their entry decisions and voters are not necessarily better able to identify high-quality candidates, we might still expect that an advantaged party primary will produce a high-quality nominee due to this "mechanical" difference in the pool of potential primary candidates.

In addition to differences in the pool of candidates competing in primaries, we might also expect the information environment to vary across situations. Candidates in an advantaged party primary tend to receive more media attention than candidates competing in the disadvantaged party primary in the same district.[9] Moreover, these candidates also spend more resources on their primary campaigns, part of which presumably contributes to advertising information about the candidates.[10] Thus, to the extent that this additional exposure to information improves the ability of voters to identify characteristics of primary candidates and assuming voters prefer high quality candidates, we might expect that in open seat races advantaged party primaries will produce higher quality nominees than other primaries.

This discussion suggests that the claims about the limited role of primaries (e.g. Turner, 1953) may understate their value especially for safe seats. In open seat primaries, advantaged parties in safe districts are especially likely to produce high-quality nominees. Several scholars have noted that if most open seat winners are high-quality, then most *incumbents* will be high-quality as well, since most incumbents were, at some point in the past, open

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[9]First, to demonstrate that candidates in the primary election for a party with a partisan advantage receive more media attention, we can examine the number of times candidates' names are mentioned in newspapers for the primary election for an advantaged party. Although we do not have access to a large historical database of newspapers throughout the country, we the database available through www.newslibrary.com which allows us to examine newspapers from different regions of the U.S. for the period 1998 to 2006. For each election during this period, we counted the number of times candidates' names were mentioned for each party. We find that the advantaged party's candidates receive about double the amount of newspaper coverage as the other party's candidates.

[10]In the period 1992 to 2006, when no incumbent is competing in a Senate race, the losing primary candidate from the advantaged party spends substantially more than the losing primary candidate from the other party.

seat winners (e.g. Ashworth, 2005; Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita, 2008; Zaller, 1998). While the existing literature focuses on how the election of high-quality officials in open seat general elections could produce an incumbency advantage in subsequent general elections, the same logic would suggest that the nomination of high-quality candidates in open seat primaries could reduce competition in incumbent contested primaries even in safe districts.[11] In this framework, the lack of primary or general election competition for incumbents is consistent with an electoral system that works particularly well on the initial selection of public officials.

3   Inter-Party and Intra-Party Competition

If primaries are particularly useful in safe districts, then the value of primaries to an electoral system depends in part upon the geographic distribution of voter preferences. In this section, we draw on several different datasets to calculate the proportion of statewide, congressional, and local constituencies that can be considered "safe" – i.e., the candidates with a particular partisan affiliation are expected to win the general elections in that constituency. We classify a constituency as safe based upon partisan loyalties in that constituency. We also provide descriptive statistics regarding how primary competition varies between safe and competitive constituencies.

To measure the partisan loyalties in a particular constituency we use a 9-year moving average of the two party vote shares across offices. We then classify a constituency as competitive if the difference between the moving average of the Democratic and Republican vote shares is smaller than 15 percentage points and safe if this difference is greater than 15 percentage points.[12] More specifically a constituency is considered competitive if in year t the average difference between the two major parties' vote shares during the years $t-4$ to $t+4$ was less than 15 percentage points.

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[11]Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita (2008) also note that selection on quality is likely to be highest when the ideological differences between the candidates are low, as is the case in primary elections.

[12]The literature often uses a 10 or 20 percentage point difference when calculating safe and competitive districts. 10 percentage points seems close to competitive while 20 percentage points seems too safe. Thus, we use the midpoint of these two differences.

In the period we are investigating, 1952 to 2012, two-party competition at the state level has been relatively robust in nearly 70% of the state year cases.[13] Statewide constituencies were less competitive during the period when primaries were first introduced. Only 45% of the state year cases could be classified as being competitive between 1900 and 1940.[14] Although most statewide constituencies were competitive during the recent period, a sizable number of statewide races were still decided in safe constituencies where the winner was effectively decided by the primary elections.

However, we might expect two-party competition to be less robust at the level of the county, city or legislative districts, since the geographic units are smaller and often more politically homogeneous. In the case of legislative districts, gerrymandering could exacerbate the problem. The majority party might pack the minority party's districts in order to waste minority votes, or a bi-partisan, incumbent-protecting gerrymander might produce many safe districts for both parties. For counties, we construct the underlying measure of two-party competition as a 9-year moving average of the vote shares in all available elections for president, governor, and U.S. senator. For congressional districts we use presidential election data.[15]

Between 1952 and 2010 only about 43% of the cases at the county level and 44% of the cases at the congressional district level were competitive.[16,17] One-party dominance of

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[13]At the state level we use data for all available elections for federal and statewide offices to calculate our measure of two party competition.

[14]Several scholars argue that this absence of general election competition contributed to the adoption of direct primary elections (e.g. Key, 1956).

[15]More specifically we use the average for all available presidential elections. Sometimes these do not fall within the decade. For example for House elections in 1982 we use the presidential votes of 1976 and 1980, since these are available at the congressional district level for the 1982 boundaries. For the House elections between 1984 through 1990, we use the presidential votes of 1984 and 1988. We do not use the 1980 presidential vote because of the redistricting that occurred between 1982 and 1984.

[16]The analysis above treats large and small states, and large and small counties, equally. However, the situation does not look much different if we weight it by population. This is evident for congressional districts, since congressional districts have approximately equal populations at least since 1964. The fraction of the population living in a competitive county is about 7 percentage points higher than the fraction of counties that are competitive, and this has not changed much over time. During the period 1970-2006, the percentage of county-years classified as competitive is 47.4%, and the fraction of people living in competitive counties is 54.1%. Weighting by population does not dramatically change the picture at state level. For the period 1970-2006, the percentage of state-years classified as competitive is 73.9%, and the fraction of people living in competitive states is 81.8%.

[17]While the patterns in the data are clear, they raise important questions. Why is vigorous competition

state legislatures is likely to be even more prevalent, since state legislative districts are smaller than congressional districts, and often even more politically homogeneous. During the 1980s, for example, less than 40% of state legislative districts were competitive.[18] If primaries are particularly useful in safe constituencies, then they are likely to make their biggest contributions for elections in local or legislative districts.

Several studies in the existing literature have identified a positive relationship between primary competition and district safety.[19] Advantaged party primaries tend to be more competitive than disadvantaged party primaries or primaries in competitive districts. In all constituencies there is a noticeable drop in primary competition when an incumbent is in the race.

These patterns in primary competition are also present in our data for the period of our investigation. We use the above measure of two-party competition to identify the safe and competitive constituencies. Within the safe constituencies, we consider the Democratic (Republican) party to be advantaged if the average Democratic (Republican) vote share is more than 15 percentage points higher than the average Republican (Democratic) vote share. In open seat primary races for statewide offices between 1952 to 2010, the advantaged party primary is contested 87% of the time and the disadvantaged party primary is contested only 30% of the time. In competitive states, the open seat primaries for statewide office for either party are contested 59% of the time. When an incumbent is present the percentage of contested primaries for an advantaged party drops to 58% and for parties in competitive constituencies this percentage drops to 40%.

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between the two major parties lacking in so many parts of the country? Why is there so little competition from third parties? In particular, why are there no strong regional parties, as there are in Canada and India? Answering these questions is beyond the scope of this paper. See Key (1956, 246) for one argument, "The electoral groupings that exist within individual states are profoundly affected by the impact of national issues and by the alternatives fixed by the competition of national political leadership. Current national issues – and the accumulative residual effects of past national conflicts – may push a state's local politics toward a Republican or Democratic one-partyism or they so divide the electorate of a state that it is closely competitive between the parties in both national and state affairs."

[18]Calculation by authors based on data from the King et al. (1997) Record of American Democracy project.

[19]Previous studies – e.g., Key (1956), Jewell (1967), Schantz (1980), Born (1981), Grau (1981), and Hogan (2003) – document these patterns for earlier time periods in a restricted sets of states. Galderisi et al. (2001) note that this pattern also exists in U.S. House races.

A similar pattern is present for U.S. House primaries. In open seat primary races in safe U.S. House districts, the advantaged (disadvantaged) party primary is contested 61% (33%) of the time. In competitive U.S. House districts, open seat primaries are contested 47% of the time. When an incumbent is present the percentage of contested primaries for an advantaged party drops to 32% and for parties in competitive constituencies this percentage drops to 28%.[20]

4 Candidate Quality and Constituency Partisanship in Open Seat Races

Do primaries lead to the selection of high quality nominees in open seat races where voter preferences favor one party in the general election? While the theoretical considerations in section 2 and the empirical evidence in section 3 suggest that primaries may potentially have this role, we now turn to a more direct empirical examination of the relationship between the quality of candidates in primaries and constituency partisanship. One challenge in addressing this question is the difficulty measuring the quality of politicians. For incumbents, the task is somewhat easier, because there are various policy-related outcomes that are at least in part attributable to the incumbents' actions. However, since we are interested in open seat races, we need measures of future expected performance, which is more difficult to quantify.

In this section, we examine two measures of candidate quality.[21] First, we focus on gubernatorial, U.S. senate and U.S. House primaries and employ the most commonly used measure of candidate quality – prior electoral experience. We then examine Illinois Circuit and Appellate Court primaries and measure quality using bar association evaluations of judicial candidates. With these two measures we can examine two predictions regarding primaries in open seat races that follow from the theoretical considerations in section 2: (i)

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[20]For both statewide and House races a similar pattern emerges if we examine the competitiveness of the primary, as measured by whether the difference in vote share among the top two candidates is greater or less than 15%, rather than contestation. Also for both types of offices we do not present the percentage changes for incumbents competing in disadvantaged party primaries since so few of these cases exist.

[21]In section 5 we introduce a third measure of candidate quality based on newspaper endorsements. Newspaper endorsements, which we show is highly correlated with the two measures discussed in this section, provides a relative measure which we use to further disentangle the mechanism by which primaries effect the quality of elected officials.

an advantaged party primary is more likely to produce high quality nominee compared to primaries in other situations; (ii) an advantaged party primary will have a larger proportion of high quality candidates competing in them as compared to primaries in other situations.

4.1 Prior Experience as Job Specific Human Capital

Previous office holder experience of the party nominees, which was developed in Jacobson (1980), is a widely used measure of candidate quality in the literature. A number of studies find that state legislators do especially well in U.S. congressional elections and interpret this as evidence that political experience is an indicator of candidate quality.[22,23] What is less well known is whether previous office holder experience reflects the politician's electoral appeal that is not specific to a particular office or something about the politician's job specific human capital. Before describing the relationship between prior experience and constituency partisanship, we first provide some evidence that prior experience may reflect job-specific human capital.

Prior political experience comes in many forms. In terms of on-the-job human capital accumulation, certain types of experience are likely to be more relevant for certain offices. Broadly speaking, we may divide offices into executive, legislative, and judicial "tracks". State legislators develop skills in writing bills and shepherding these bills through the committee system, compromising to build broader support for passing bills on the floor, trading favors with fellow legislators, working with party leaders, etc. These skills are especially relevant for serving in the U.S. Congress, and less relevant for serving as, say, state attorney general or governor. Statewide officials – secretary of state, treasurer, auditor or comptroller, attorney general – develop skills in running large bureaucracies, and expertise about spe-

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[22]A sample of the papers that use previous experience as a measure of quality includes Jacobson and Kernell (1983), Bond et al. (1985), Jacobson (1989, 2009), Lublin (1994), Bond et al. (1997), Cox and Katz (1996), Van Dunk (1997), Goodliffe (2001, 2007), Carson and Roberts (2005), and Carson et al. (2007).

[23]In section 5.2 we discuss newspaper endorsements as a measure of candidate quality. When there is a candidate with previous office holding experience facing a candidate without such experience in a primary, we find that overwhelming majority of these endorsements go to the experienced candidate. In open seat primary races where there are exactly two candidates and one has experience, the experienced candidate receives the endorsement(s) 85% of the time (54 U.S. House races). In cases with an incumbent, the experienced candidate (i.e. the incumbent) receives the endorsement(s) 95% of the time (233 U.S. House races).

cific areas of state policy-making. These skills are especially relevant for serving in other statewide offices, including governor (the "chief bureaucrat" of state government), and less relevant for serving in the U.S. congress.

We can investigate whether candidates with more relevant job-specific human capital are also more likely to win a primary election by comparing the backgrounds of candidates running for different offices. The cleanest comparison, perhaps, is between candidates running for U.S. senator and candidates running for governor, since these candidates have the same constituencies. More specifically, we can ask what is the probability the winning candidate for senate (governor) had previous legislative experience? We can then ask, what is the probability the winning candidate for senate (governor) had previous executive experience?[24] If primaries are selecting candidates with job-specific human capital then we should expect more candidates with previous legislative (executive) experience to be nominated in senate (gubernatorial) races.

Table 1: **Previous Experience of Primary Winners by Office Sought, 1952-2012**

| | Office Sought | | |
Type of Experience	U.S. Senate	Governor	Difference
U.S. Congress	0.27%	0.11%	0.17
	[976]	[971]	(0.02)
Statewide or Mayor	0.22%	0.38%	-0.16
	[976]	[971]	(0.02)

Cell entries in columns 1 and 2 give the percentage of candidates who won primary with experience of the given type. Number of cases in brackets. Entries in column 3 give the difference between column 1 and column 2, and the standard error of this difference in parentheses.

Table 1 presents the results for open seat primaries for the period 1952-2012. The results show that the probability that the winning candidate has previous legislative experience is significantly higher for senate primary winners, 27%, than for gubernatorial primary win-

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[24]Our data includes information about elected statewide executives. Thus, we drop states where fewer than three of the down-ballot offices are elected (i.e. Alaska, Hawaii, Maine, New Hampshire, Tennessee, Maryland and Virginia). In these states most of the down-ballot offices are filled through appointments.

ners, 11%. Conversely, the probability that the winning candidate has previous executive experience is significantly higher for gubernatorial primary winners, 38%, than it is for senate primary winners, 22%. These differences are what we would expect if prior experience was measuring something related to job-specific human capital.

The differences in the primary winners' prior experiences likely reflects a combination of factors, including the pool of candidates, voter preferences, candidate preferences and strategic behavior among the elites. In section 5 below, we provide evidence that primary electorates vote for candidates with more relevant prior experience when given the choice.

4.1.1 Prior Experience and Constituency Partisanship in Gubernatorial, Senate and U.S. House Races

We now examine whether the quality of a party's primary nominee for an open seat is related to the degree to which the partisan loyalties in a constituency favors that party. If primaries contribute to the electoral system as discussed above, then we would expect there to be a positive relationship between these two variables. Moreover, the theoretical considerations in section 2 suggest that one mechanism by which this relationship may arise is due to the greater concentration of high quality candidates competing in an advantaged party primary than other primaries. The variation in the composition of primary candidates could be the result of the strategic behavior of politicians or the differences in the pool of potential primary candidates.

To examine these predictions we focus on four different dependent variables: (i) the primary winner is high-quality; (ii) the total number of candidates competing in the primary; (iii) the number of high-quality candidates competing in the primary; (iv) the fraction of candidates who are high-quality. (i) is the main outcome of interest. (ii) – (iv) will help provide insight into the mechanism by which advantaged party primary may be more likely to produce high quality nominees.

We estimate the following simple linear model for all races without an incumbent:

$$Y_{ijt} = \alpha + \beta \, Constituency \, Partisanship_{ijt} + \epsilon_{ijt} \tag{1}$$

where i indexes party, j indexes a particular constituency and t indexes election year. The

independent variable *Constituency Partisanship* is preferences for party i in constituency j in year t. Party i's advantage in the general election at time t in constituency j is increasing in *Constituency Partisanship*$_{ijt}$.[25] This variable is measured differently for each office studied. For Democratic (Republican) primaries for gubernatorial and senate races, we average the Democratic (Republican) vote share across the major statewide partisan offices over preceding eight years.[26] The mean and standard deviation of *Constituency Partisanship* for statewide races are 0.49 and 0.08, respectively. For U.S. House races we use the presidential vote as described in section 3. The mean and standard deviation of *Constituency Partisanship* for House races are 0.44 and 0.11, respectively. If advantaged party primaries are particularly effective at producing high quality nominees, then β should be positive when the dependent variable is whether the primary winner is high-quality. If at least part of the mechanism by which advantaged party primaries are effective at producing high quality nominees is the strategic behavior of politicians or the differences in the pool of potential primary candidates then we would expect β to be positive for the other three dependent variables as well.[27]

The first panel of Table 2 provides the estimates of β for gubernatorial and senate races for the period 1952 to 2012.[28] We define senate candidates as high quality if they had experience as a member of Congress. Gubernatorial candidates are high quality if they had experience in a statewide executive office or as mayor of a relatively large city.

The main result is in first column of Table 2. The probability that the primary winner is

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[25] We use a continuous measure. The substantiative findings are the same if we used a measure where *Constituency Partisanship*$_i$ = -1 if party i is a disadvantaged party, 0 if party i is in a competitive district, and 1 if party i is an advantaged party.

[26] The offices used are governor, U.S. senator, U.S. House (aggregated to the state level), lieutenant governor, attorney general, secretary of state, state treasurer, auditor/controller/comptroller, state superintendent of public schools, public utility commissioner, corporation commissioner, land commissioner, and agricultural commissioner. Not all states elect of these offices – for each state we used all of the available races. In primaries held in year t we use the general election votes in years $t-8$ to t.

[27] We also estimate this model for the South and non-South separately and there is no significant change in the substantive findings.

[28] The number of observations varies slightly across the columns for different dependent variables. For senate, governor and House elections we include races that are uncontested for (i)-(iii). However for (iv) this observation is missing. For judicial elections there are some cases where we do not have the judicial ratings for all of the candidates. If we have the ratings for the winner then they are included in (i). If any of the candidates' ratings are missing then we drop those races for (iii) and (iv).

high quality is increasing in *Constituency Partisanship*. This suggests that advantaged party primaries are particularly effective at nominating high quality candidates. A two standard deviation increase in *Constituency Partisanship* is associated with a 22% increase in the probability the primary winner is high quality. The next three columns provide evidence that the main result is at least partly due to the a relatively high proportion of high quality candidates competing in advantaged party primaries. However, we do not know the extent to which the results in columns (2) to (4) reflect the strategic behavior of politicians or differences in the pool of candidates.

Table 2: **Candidate Quality and Constituency Partisanship in Open Seat Primaries**

Office Sought and Time Period	Winner is High Quality	Total Number of Candidates	Number of High Quality Candidates	Fraction High Quality Candidates
Governor & U.S. Senate 1952-2012	1.401 (0.119) [1967]	6.759 (0.479) [1967]	3.200 (0.194) [1967]	0.846 (0.075) [1946]
U.S. House 1978-2012	0.961 (0.034) [8287]	4.650 (0.174) [8287]	1.893 (0.067) [8287]	0.681 (0.026) [7373]
IL Judges 1986-2010	0.559 (0.126) [804]	5.174 (0.517) [872]	3.718 (0.370) [786]	0.229 (0.122) [786]

Each column presents OLS estimates for a linear regression in which the dependent variable listed at the top of the column is regressed on Primary Constituency Partisanship. The cell entries show the estimated coefficients on Primary Constituency Partisanship, robust standard errors in parenthesis, and the number of observations in brackets. High Quality is defined as follows. For Governor candidates, High Quality = 1 if candidate has previous experience as an elected statewide officer or mayor of a large city. For U.S. Senate candidates, High Quality = 1 if candidate has previous experience in the U.S. House or U.S. Senate. For U.S. House candidates, High Quality = 1 if candidate has previous experience in the state legislature, U.S. House, U.S. Senate. For IL Judge candidates, High Quality = 1 if candidate was rated favorably by state (or Chicago area) bar associations. IL Judge races are for state circuit courts. The number of observations is sometimes lower in the fourth column, because uncontested primaries are dropped (since the dependent variable is undefined for such cases).

We also estimate equation (1) examining primaries for the U.S. House of Representatives during the period 1978 to 2010. We have assembled data on the previous office holder

experience of all primary election candidates for the U.S. House for this period.[29] Here we define high quality as having had experience as a state legislator. The estimates of β for the U.S. House are presented in the second panel of Table 2. Just as for senate and gubernatorial primaries, the coefficient estimates on *Constituency Partisanship* are positive and statistically significant for all four dependent variables.[30] A two standard deviation increase in *Constituency Partisanship* is associated with a 21% increase in the probability that the winner of a U.S. House primary is high quality.

4.2 Judicial Evaluations in Illinois

In this subsection, we examine open seat primaries for Illinois Circuit and Appellate Court judicial elections.[31] These elections are relatively unique in that judicial candidates competing in the partisan primaries are evaluated by multiple bar associations prior to the primary. The evaluations provide an alternative and arguably more direct measure of candidate quality. Thus we can again examine the four dependent variables described above, but in this case quality is measured by the bar association evaluations rather than prior office holder experience. We again estimate the simple linear model in equation (1) above.

Our measure of quality is based on the evaluations of judicial candidates by the Illinois State Bar Association (ISBA) and various Chicago area (Cook county) bar associations. The ISBA Judicial Evaluations Committee gives ratings of Highly Qualified, Qualified, or Not Qualified based on questionnaires and interviews. The ISBA also gives ratings of Recommended or Not Recommended based on surveys of ISBA members. Similar to the ISBA, the largest bar association in the Chicago area, the Chicago Bar Association (CBA), rates

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[29]See Hirano and Snyder (2012) for details regarding this dataset. We have also analyzed the Jacobson's data for the period 1952 to 2000. These data cover previous office holder experience for all general election candidates. The data include information regarding whether candidates previously held offices other than in the state legislature. With these data we can examine the quality of the nominees elected through a primary. The results are substantively very similar to those we found for the 1978 to 2010 period.

[30]For both the statewide office and U.S. House races we examined whether the results differed for the South and non-South. We found no substantively significant differences.

[31]Both Circuit Court and Appellate Court judges are initially elected in partisan elections. Circuit Court judges serve six year terms and Appellate Court judges serve ten year terms. After their first term, both types of judges must win retention elections. There are 22 Circuits and 5 Appellate districts, and many vacancies are filled in elections where voting is restricted to a single county or sub-circuit.

judicial candidates as Highly Qualified, Qualified, or Not Recommended based on questionnaires and interviews. A number of other Chicago area bar associations also provided a similar rating of the qualifications of judicial candidates.[32] We call a candidate *High Quality* if she received a rating of Qualified or better from more than half of the bar associations that rated the candidate.[33]

We again construct a measure of *Constituency Partisanship* by averaging the vote share received by candidates for other offices within the boundaries of each judicial district. In this case we use votes for president, governor and senator from the *Official Vote* booklets published by the Illinois State Board of Elections. The mean and standard deviation of *Constituency Partisanship* for the judicial races is 0.53 and 0.11, respectively. We have evaluations, primary election information, and constituency partisanship data for nearly 1,700 judicial candidates from 1986 to 2010.[34]

The results for open seat Illinois judicial primary elections are presented in the third panel of Table 2. The coefficient estimates in the first column again show that the likelihood that a given party's primary will nominate a high quality candidate is increasing in the degree to which the constituency partisanship favors that party. A two standard deviation increase in *Constituency Partisanship* is associated with a 12% increase in the probability that the primary winner is high quality. The results in the next three columns show that not only is the overall number of candidates and the number of high quality candidates competing in a party's primary positively correlated with *Constituency Partisanship*, but also the proportion of high quality candidates competing in that party's primary. These results are very similar

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[32]The other Chicago area bar associations that rate candidates are: the Chicago Council of Lawyers, the Cook County Bar Association, the Women's Bar Association of Illinois, the Asian American Bar Association of the Greater Chicago Area, the Hellenic Bar Association, the Black Women's Lawyers Association of Greater Chicago, the Hispanic Lawyers Association of Illinois, the Lesbian and Gay Bar Association of Chicago, the Puerto Rican Bar Association of Illinois, the Decalogue Society of Lawyers, and the Northwest Suburban Bar Association. See Lim and Snyder (2012) for more details about the ratings data, including information about the criteria used, and checks on the validity of using it as an indicator of candidate quality.

[33]Note that the Chicago area bar associations only evaluate candidates running for Cook county judgeships, so outside Cook county we use only the ISBA ratings. We also conducted an analysis that relies exclusively on the ISBA evaluations even inside Cook county, and the results are quite similar to those reported here. We are missing ISBA evaluations for Cook county candidates before 1998.

[34]We have ratings and primary election information for many other candidates running in sub-circuits inside Cook county, but we do not have the electoral data at the sub-circuit level.

to the results for the open seat primary races for senate, governor and U.S. House. They provide further evidence that primaries are contributing to the electoral system through the selection of high quality nominees in safe constituencies.

5 Mechanism: Do Voters Matter?

The positive relationship between the quality of primary winners and constituency partisanship identified above most likely reflects a variety of factors including: (i) the pool of available politicians; (ii) strategic entry decisions of these politicians; (iii) decisions by other elites (e.g. endorsements and the allocation of campaign donations and other resources); and (iv) the choices made by voters. Some of the evidence above points to the importance of both (i) and (ii). In this section, we provide evidence that (iv) matters (and probably (iii) as well).

5.1 Variation in Candidate Quality

When faced with a choice between a high quality and not high quality candidate do voters choose the high quality candidate? To answer this question, we focus our attention on primaries where voters have a choice between high and low quality candidates.

Table 3: **Candidate Quality and Winning in Open Seat Primaries with Variation in Quality**

Office Sought and Time Period	Races with 2 Candidates	Races with 3-5 Candidates
Governor & U.S. Senate 1952-2012	79.76% [168]	65.84% [404]
U.S. House 1978-2012	80.43% [322]	68.93% [618]
IL Judges 1986-2010	83.96% [106]	83.59% [128]

Cell entries show percentage of races in which the winning candidate is High Quality. See Table 2 or text for definition of High Quality for each office sought. Number of races in brackets.

The results in Table 3 provide evidence that primary electorates are more likely to vote

for high quality candidates. The first column presents the probability that primary voters nominate a high quality candidate when they are given a choice between a high and not high quality candidate. The high quality candidate is nominated 80% of the time in gubernatorial, senate and U.S. House primaries and 84% of the time in Illinois Circuit Court primaries. The second column shows the probability of nominating a high quality candidate when there are three to five candidates in the race with at least one candidate that is high quality and one candidate that is not high quality. Again, in an overwhelming majority of cases the high quality candidate wins the election (over 65% of the gubernatorial, senate and U.S. House races and over 80% of the Illinois Circuit or Appellate Court judicial races).

Exploring the relationship between candidate experience and outcomes further reveals that voters act "as if" they even care about the type of previous experience candidates have, distinguishing between experience that is likely to be more or less relevant to the office sought. Consider, for example all two-candidate primaries in which one candidate has previous experience in the U.S. House and the other does not. The candidate with U.S. House experience wins 83% of the time when running for the U.S. Senate, but only 65% of the time when running for the state governor (the difference is statistically significant at the .05 level). Similarly, next consider all two-candidate primaries in which one of the candidates has previous experience as a down-ballot statewide executive and the other does not. The candidate with executive experience wins 80% of the time when running for governor, but only 59% of the time when running for U.S. senator (the difference is statistically significant at the .01 level). Thus, in both cases, the candidates with experience win more often when they run for an office for which their previous experience is "more relevant," compared to when they run for an office for which their previous experience is "less relevant."

5.2 Newspaper Endorsements

An additional measure of candidate quality that has not been used previously in the literature is newspaper endorsements. Newspapers around the U.S. routinely endorse candidates

running for office, both in primary and general elections.[35] We have collected thousands of primary election endorsements, mainly for the period 1990-2010 but in some cases for earlier years. These endorsements can be used to construct a measure of relative candidate quality. Thus, we can ask whether primary voters select the candidate who is the highest quality among the candidates competing in the primary.

Newspaper endorsements are likely to be particularly good indicators of relative quality in primary elections. Journalists and newspaper editors have much more information than others about the candidates, because they collect this information as a routine matter in the course of writing and publishing election news stories. In addition, most newspaper staffs conduct interviews of candidates before making their endorsements. Moreover, even if a newspaper has a partisan or ideological bias, this bias is not likely to matter much for its primary election endorsements, since all of the candidates in a given party's primary are affiliated with same party, and since the ideological differences between candidates in a given party's primary tend to be small.[36]

We have not attempted to construct a comprehensive catalogue of the criteria newspapers use to make their endorsements. After reading hundreds of endorsement editorials, however, our impression is that the dominant criteria are previous experience, accomplishments, and qualifications relevant for the office sought. Relevant experience would include prior state legislative experience for candidates running for congress or the other state legislative chamber; prior public sector or private sector auditing experience for candidates running for state auditor; and prior experience as a district attorney or prosecutor in the state attorney general's office when running for state attorney general. Newspapers often cite experience running a large bureaucratic organization – e.g., mayor of a large city, statewide executive officer, or civic association leader – for candidates running for governor or other executive office. They also often cite the opinions of other experts – e.g., legislative colleagues who

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[35]Some newspapers, such as the Los Angeles Times, have a policy of endorsing candidates in the general election but not in the primary election, or of endorsing in the primary election mainly in one-party areas where the primary election is likely to determine the final winner.

[36]It is possible that an extremely partisan newspaper might try to "sabotage" the nomination of the party it opposes, and endorse weak candidates in that party's primary. However, such behavior would be so outrageously unprofessional by today's journalistic standards that it must occur rarely if ever.

attest to how hardworking, responsible, and intelligent a candidate is.

For more direct evidence that endorsements are good indicators of quality, we can compare newspaper endorsements to other quality measures when other measures are available. Judges provide one excellent set of cases. We have both primary election endorsements and bar association evaluations for a large number of judicial candidates. In these cases, the newspaper endorsements are highly correlated with bar association evaluations.[37] There are 251 cases, and in 247 (98.4%) of them the highly-endorsed candidate received a bar association evaluation of Qualified or better. That is, in only 4 cases (1.6 %), did a highly endorsed candidate receive an Unqualified or Not Recommended evaluation. In these 4 cases *all* of the candidates in these races received Unqualified or Not Recommended evaluations.[38] Thus, at least in the case of judges, highly endorsed candidates are virtually never among the "low-quality" candidates.

It is also the case that for candidates running for statewide office or the U.S. House, there is a strong and positive relationship between being "highly endorsed" and having previous political experience. More specifically, call a candidate "experienced" if he or she is has previously served as an elected statewide officer, U.S. senator or U.S. House representative, state legislator, or mayor. Consider all open seat primaries for which we have 2 or more endorsements and in which at least one of the candidates is experienced and one is not experienced. In this sample, 73% of the highly endorsed candidates are experienced, while only 26% of the candidates who are not highly endorsed are experienced.

Now consider all open seat primary elections for statewide office or the U.S. House held during the period 1990 to 2010 for which we have two or more endorsements. We ask: How often do "highly endorsed" candidates win in the primary, compared to other candidates?

Table 4 shows the results. We vary the definition of a "highly endorsed" candidate (rows)

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[37]More precisely, consider the candidates who received at least 2 newspaper endorsements and for whom we have at least one bar association evaluation. Call these candidates "highly endorsed." The cases come from Illinois, California, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas and Washington. We include non-partisan general election races (from California and Washington), in addition to primary races, to increases sample size.

[38]We also call candidates unqualified if they are rated as "lacking qualifications" or if they refused to participate in the review process. Even the candidates with just one newspaper endorsement were rated as Qualified or better in 97.2% of the cases (out of 1,111). By comparison, the candidates who received no newspaper endorsements were rated as Qualified or better in only 63.8% of the case (out of 2,013).

Table 4: **Primary Outcomes and Endorsements, 1990-2012**

Definition of Highly Endorsed Candidate	2 Cands in Primary	3+ Cands in Primary
At Least 3 Endorsements and 75% of Total	86.2% [116]	67.5% [151]
At Least 2 Endorsements and 75% of Total	82.0% [217]	64.5% [265]
At Least 3 Endorsements and 67% of Total	84.4% [122]	65.7% [166]
At Least 2 Endorsements and 67% of Total	81.2% [234]	60.9% [317]

Cell entries give the percentage of endorsed candidates who won primary. Number of observations in brackets.

and consider primaries with different numbers of candidates (columns). For example, in the first row, a candidate is classified as highly endorsed if and only if he or she received at least three endorsements and also received at least three-quarters of the total number endorsements in our sample. The first column shows the results for races with exactly two candidates, and the second column covers the races with three or more candidates.

Consider first the two-candidate contests. In these races, the candidates with three or more endorsements win the primary about 85% of the time, and the candidates with two or more endorsements win more than 80% of the time. This is much higher than the 50% we would expect if voters were simply flipping coins.

Next, consider the races with three or more candidates. In these races, the candidates with three or more endorsements win more than 65% of the time, and those with two or more endorsements win more than 60% of the time. Again, this is much larger than what we expect under random voting. In our sample, the multi-candidate races involve an average of slightly more than 4 candidates, so if voting was random then we would expect each candidate to win about 25% of the time.

However, the bottom line from Table 4 is clear. Assuming that the highly endorsed candidates are relatively high quality – i.e., high quality compared to their competitors – the results show that open seat primary elections are much more likely to produce high quality

winners than a "random draw" from the pool. Since endorsements are a relative measure of quality, these results provide further evidence that voters are actively choosing high quality candidates. This suggests that the relationship between the quality of primary candidates nominees and constituency partisanship likely reflects voting behavior as well as differences in the pool of candidates.

Finally we examined whether voters' decisions vary across constituency partisanship – in particular, when given a choice, are voters in advantaged party primaries more likely to choose a high quality candidate than voters in other primaries? For gubernatorial, senate and judicial primaries, we find no significant differences between the different constituency types. For House primaries, we find a monotonic but nonlinear relationship between district partisanship and voting behavior. More specifically, compared to disadvantaged party primaries, voters in advantaged party primaries and primaries in competitive districts are more likely to choose the high quality candidate when given a choice.

6   The Quality of Open Seat Winners

The discussion above suggests that open seat primaries produce higher quality general election nominees for advantaged parties as compared to parties in competitive districts. In the introduction and theoretical considerations, we suggest that a low average quality of candidates nominated by primaries in competitive districts may not be as problematic as in safe districts since voters in these districts have an additional opportunity to screen for quality in the general election. We can now ask whether the quality of the eventual general election winners for open seats differs between safe and competitive districts.

In Table 5, we present the percentage of general election winners who are high quality in safe and competitive districts. We also present the percentage of all candidates competing in the primary elections who are high quality in the two types of districts, dropping token candidates who win less than 1% of the vote. If both primary and general election competition are effectively selecting high-quality candidates, then we should observe a similarly high percentage of general election winners being high-quality in both types of districts. These

Table 5: **Quality of General Election Winners vs. All Candidates for Open Seats**

	Uncompetitive District	Competitive District
Governor and U.S. Senate, 1952-2012		
Winners with High Quality	44.44%	49.15%
All Cands with High Quality	25.22%	20.22%
U.S. House Representatives, 1978-2012		
Winners with High Quality	53.77%	51.59%
All Cands with High Quality	26.17%	15.23%
Illinois Circuit Court Judges		
Winners with High Quality	89.29%	90.16%
All Cands with High Quality	64.84%	63.49%

Cell entries give the percentage races where a high quality candidate was elected to office.

percentages should be higher for the general election winners as compared to the general pool of candidates.

There are two clear patterns in Table 5. First, for the previous office holder experience and the bar association recommendation measures of quality, the percentage of general elections winners who are high quality is very similar in both the safe and competitive districts. This suggests that the primaries have an important role in selecting high-quality incumbents for safe districts.

Second, the politicians elected in primaries are more likely to be high quality than the average open seat candidate. Those skeptical of the value of primary elections often point to the fact that few incumbents are even contested in their primary, let alone fiercely challenged. However, since incumbents appear to be of higher quality than the "pool" of candidates, it is not clear that the lack of competition is a major problem. In fact, given the costs associated with competitive primaries – borne by candidates, government and voters – it might be socially optimal for most incumbents to be unchallenged. Instead, it is probably more efficient to allocate scarce "primary election resources" to open seat races and incumbent-contested races in the rare case where incumbents are low quality. In both cases, we should

be especially focused on constituencies where one party has an electoral advantage.[39]

7   Conclusion

Although primary elections are often uncompetitive, the analyses and discussion above demonstrate that they may be quite valuable for an important subset of situations – open seat races where one party has an advantage in the general election due to the partisan loyalties in the constituency. We find evidence that in these situations advantaged party primaries are not only more competitive but also especially good at selecting "high-quality" nominees. In fact, an open seat race in a safe district is almost as likely to elect a high quality official as an open seat race in a competitive district. Primaries, therefore, appear to be especially valuable when effective two-party competition is lacking. This is precisely where we expect them to be needed most. Since many voters live in states, counties or congressional districts that are dominated by one party, primaries have a substantial role in the U.S. electoral system.

While we have focused our attention on the importance of primaries in areas dominated by one party, primaries can potentially have an important role even in competitive areas. One reason is polarization. When the major parties are polarized, primaries might be valuable even in constituencies with competitive general elections, because there might be too few "swing" voters to effectively punish parties that choose weak candidates. In fact, if the *American Voter* view of "independents" is correct, then independents tend to be the least well-informed citizens. Therefore, we might not be able to rely on independent voters to vote against low-quality candidates, since they are less likely to learn which candidates are low-quality. Instead, we must hope that enough partisan voters vote against their party's candidate when they learn that this candidate is of low-quality. In a highly polarized environment, however, partisan voters are probably less willing to vote against their party's candidate, even knowing that the candidate is low-quality. Primaries can help in such an

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[39]These findings are consistent with models of electoral selection and the incumbency advantage – e.g. Zaller (1998) and Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita (2008). Other empirical work, e.g. Hirano and Snyder (2009), also finds evidence suggesting that incumbents are higher quality than the average general election open seat candidate.

environment by giving partisan voters an opportunity to vote against a low-quality candidate in favor of a higher-quality candidate of the same party. Note also that in primaries most voters tend to be partisans – and these are the people who also tend to be the most well informed. So, there is a good chance they will find out which candidates are of low-quality and which are not.

While our findings are encouraging, we do not want to overstate the case for direct primary elections. There are some important caveats. First, our argument focuses heavily on the role of elections as a selection mechanism. As noted above, there are important theoretical justifications for this emphasis. However, elections may also play a role in controlling politicians' behaviors. Second, although we employ several different measures of politician quality, our measures are relatively coarse. There is still potentially much work to be done on developing alternative measures of quality and in particular developing measures with more fine grained assessments of politician quality that can be compared across politicians and elections. Third, even taking our measures at face-value, we cannot say that primaries are "extremely" effective. We find that safe and competitive districts elect high-quality officials more often than what we would expect if the primaries were a completely ineffective screen for candidate quality. However, the probability of high quality candidates losing primaries might still be much lower than the "desired" probability. Finally, there may be preferable alternatives to primaries that achieve similar or better outcomes – e.g. non-partisan elections, third-party candidates, or even the old conventions or caucus system. However, we do not know if introducing these alternatives would also significantly change the quality of the candidates seeking office.

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