What do the 2020 Congressional Primaries Tell us About the Direction of the Democratic and Republican Parties?

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Abstract:

The 2020 House of Representatives primaries were among the most competitive in at least a decade, particularly among Democrats. What does competition in the two parties' primaries tell us about the ideological direction of the parties? In this paper I draw on data covering the period from 1970-2020 to compare the rise of competition in Democratic primaries to competition in prior years. I focus in particular on comparisons to the increased competition in Republican primaries that characterized the rise of the Tea Party in 2010 and 2012; I consider not only the success of these candidates, but the way in which party leaders have responded to the election results. This paper explores three theories about the increase in competition: that this is a consequence of voter and donor mobilization efforts by ideological interest groups; that it is a result of enthusiasm following the wave election of 2018; and that it was inspired by charismatic politicians, particularly Donald Trump. I conclude that the group mobilization model best describes the surge in primary challenges, and I discuss how this might influence future elections.

Primary elections are an important barometer of the health and the ideological direction of the two major political parties. This is particularly the case for primary challenges to incumbent officeholders. It is common for political analysts to interpret such challenges as a sign that incumbents have lost touch with their constituents, that the party is experiencing factional conflict, or that incumbent legislators are failing to address issues of concern to voters. Such critiques can quickly become hyperbolic – to include, for instance, references to "civil war" between progressives and liberals, conservatives and moderates, elites and insurgents, or the status quo and the forces of change.[1]

Such interpretations are rarely accurate, yet if repeated often enough they can come to be accepted as truth. Incumbent primary defeats are uncommon – if one excludes redistricting years, the average election since 1968 has featured fewer than four incumbent primary defeats. When such defeats do happen they often have more to do with the personal failings or mistakes of individual incumbents, or the dynamics of particular congressional districts, than with broader national trends. Yet the attention lavished upon them can make them an alluring target for candidates or organizations seeking to make a grand statement. The 2014 defeat of House Majority Leader Eric Cantor may have had more to do with Cantor's inattention to his newly drawn district than with a rejection by conservatives of the Republican leadership, but national

[1] See, e.g., Brooks 2019, Wang 2019.

conservative groups were certainly willing to present Cantor's loss as a referendum on Republican policy goals (Bell, Meyer, and Gaddie 2017). Similarly, Representative Joseph Crowley's loss to 28-year-old political neophyte Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez may also have had more to do with the changing demographics of Crowley's New York district and his preoccupation with national matters, but this did not prevent Ocasio-Cortez from being seen as the leader of a national progressive movement.

What are we to make, then, of the tumult in the 2020 House of Representatives primaries? Eight incumbent House members were defeated in the primaries, more than in any election since 1992, and more than in any non-redistricting year since 1974. While both parties took steps to protect incumbents, some of the victorious primary challengers in both parties were able to secure endorsements from party leaders. The 2020 election also featured more competitive challenges than in any year since 1992; the increase was particularly noteworthy in the Democratic Party, which has had fewer competitive incumbent primaries than have the Republicans in almost all elections since the 1990s. Activists groups on both sides have sought to claim credit for some of these defeats – particularly on the Democratic side. Yet given the incentive they would have to claim responsibility regardless of their role, it is necessary to consider how the 2020 primaries were different from those of prior years, particularly on the Democratic side, and to look for differences in candidate strategy, in the characteristics of the incumbents who were challenged, and in the financing of primary challengers' campaigns.

In this paper I summarize patterns in congressional primary competition over the past five decades, paying particular attention to the causes of increased primary competition since 2010. I then explore the characteristics of the 2020 primaries and the strategies of organizations seeking to influence primary elections. I close with a discussion of what the 2020 primaries suggest about future interparty conflict for Democrats and Republicans, and with a brief note comparing House and Senate primaries.

Three Theories about Primary Challenges

There are three frames one might use for looking at changes over time in the number of primary challenges. First, one can consider the incentives for nonparty groups to support challenges. In my 2013 book *Getting Primaried*, I argued that ideological interest groups (as distinct from issue-oriented or access-seeking groups) had begun to use primary challenges as a means of pressuring legislators into supporting their agenda. Organizations such as, at the time, the Club for Growth and MoveOn.org had realized that bundling contributions or channeling independent expenditures into one or two carefully selected challenges could have the effect of driving media coverage and intimidating large numbers of incumbents. Moderates of both parties might worry that they could possibly be one of the legislators challenged next time. Given the low turnout in primaries, funding a primary challenge was far less expensive than playing a role in an open seat primary or a general election campaign, and it did not necessarily jeopardize the group's preferred party's hold on the seat. The challenge could effectively send a message even if it was unsuccessful, in that it could encourage incumbents to retire or modify

their voting habits. Between 2006 and 2010, Challenges to incumbent Senators such as Lincoln Chafee (R-RI), Arlen Specter (R-PA), Joseph Lieberman (D-CT) and Bill Halter (D-AR) fit this model (although this paper is mainly about House challenges, I list Senators here because their names are likely more familiar to contemporary readers). The Supreme Court's 2010 *Citizens United v. FEC* decision and the subsequent *SpeechNow.org v. FEC* appeals court decision led to an expansion in independent advocacy spending that also was useful for primary challenges (Boatright, Malbin, and Glavin 2016). Groups that wanted to support primary challenges could now more easily raise and spend money without needing first to generate substantial grassroots support for their efforts. For instance, $7.3 million in independent expenditures were made on behalf of unsuccessful Mississippi Senate challenger Chris McDaniel.[2]

In *Getting Primaried* I caution, as well, that we should not consider all primary challenges to be motivated by ideology. In fact, most challenges are not. There, I drew upon the major election retrospective analyses to develop a coding scheme for primaries. I propose eleven different categories for challenges; in most years, the majority of challenges are prompted by scandals; by the perception that the incumbent is too old or otherwise has become incompetent; or by galvanizing national or local issues that often have no clear ideological component. Ideological challenges from the center (that is, allegations that the incumbent is too extreme) are also not uncommon. It is only over the past fourteen years (since 2006) that ideological challenges from the extremes – the phenomenon usually referred to when activists call for an incumbent to be "primaried" – have eclipsed these other reasons.

Second, in a 2018 book chapter, Vincent Moscardelli and I explored the relationship between general election results and primary challenges. We argue there that many primary challengers are opportunistic. When there is a surge for one party or the other in the general election, it is often accompanied by a surge in ideological challenges to centrist legislators in the primaries. For instance, the 2010 Republican gains in Congress were accompanied by an increase in challenges from the right in primaries. Similar increases in primary challenges accompanied partisan swings in the 2006, 1994, and 1974 general elections. These increases in primary challenges also occurred over multiple elections before subsiding; for instance, the 2012, 1996, and 1976 primaries also featured an atypically large number of challenges.

And third, it is worth considering the influence of President Trump – or, more generally, the influence of individual presidents or individual politicians – in encouraging primary challenges. It is exceedingly rare for sitting presidents to encourage challenges to incumbent members of Congress, but it has happened. Most notably, Franklin Delano Roosevelt endorsed challengers in Southern Senate primaries in 1938, although there is little evidence that his intervention influenced the election outcomes or that he wanted to do anything more than send a message to incumbents who had not supported the New Deal (Dunn 2012; Grantham 1994, 130; Mickey 2015, 136). Earlier, Woodrow Wilson also endorsed challengers to anti-war Southern Senators and representatives in 1918 (Bateman, Katznelson, and Lapinski 2018, 339). Trump does not necessarily lead any sort of organized effort, akin to the Tea Party, MoveOn.org, or Justice Democrats. Yet it is evident that he has the power and the desire to prompt challenges to legislators who he dislikes. In 2018, for instance, Trump's openly encouraged prospective

[2] See the Open Secrets summary page, at https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2014/06/cochran-on-the-hot-seat-in-mississippi/.

primary challengers to Arizona Senator Jeff Flake (who subsequently retired). It is plausible that other prominent politicians on the left might have or wish to have similar power.

These three explanations are not mutually exclusive. The increase in primary challenges within the Republican Party over the past decade exemplifies all of them. The pattern is illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1 shows two different times series for all competitive primary challenges, broken out by party. I present two different thresholds for defining what a "competitive" challenge is. In the top figure, I show all races where the incumbent was held to less than 75 percent of the primary vote. This is the threshold I have used in prior work; the argument I have made about this in the past is that almost no challengers who receive less than 25 percent of the vote raise more than a token amount of money, but using some sort of threshold eliminates the variation one sees across states due to differences in ballot access.[3] Studies of general election competition often use a threshold of 60 percent or less; even though in my judgment this threshold is too low and misses some challenges that might compel the incumbent to campaign, I present a time series using this threshold as well.

[Figure 1 about here]

The pattern for Republicans in this graph is clear: before 2010 it had never been the case that more than ten percent of Republican incumbents faced competitive primary challenges; the number had increased somewhat at the time of the Republicans' 1994 gains on Congress but had subsequently declined. The number of challenges among Republicans steadily increased during the first decade of the 2000s, however, and increased substantially during the period from 2010 through 2014. Republicans challenges have declined somewhat since that time, however. If one uses the more generous measure of competitiveness they remain somewhat higher than usual while if one uses the stricter measure they have returned to the levels they were at before 2010. The changes for Republicans correspond both to the pattern of increasing primary competition in good general election years, and with the rise of intraparty ideological conflict at about the time of the 2010 election.

Democratic primaries were more competitive than Republican ones throughout the 1970s and 1980s but became far less so by the 2000s. Although there was a slight increase in Democratic primary competition around 2006, that increase was far less substantial than the Republican increase in 2010 or the Democratic increase over the past two election cycles. Democratic challenges increased somewhat in 2016 and 2018, but the increase in 2020 was unique for Democrats. Both of these narratives exclude the substantial surge in 1992, a redistricting year that also featured a large number of ideological challenges and a major scandal.

Figure 2 provides two different time series for ideological primary challenges. Here I use the same method I have used in the past, categorizing challenges according to election

[3] Some states with lower ballot access requirements, for instance, feature large numbers of primary challengers who receive one or two percent of the vote, but such challengers arguably do not pose enough of a threat that we would expect the incumbent to respond in any way.

retrospectives provided in the *Almanac of American Politics*.[4] The upper figure shows changes in the number of ideological challenges by party and year, using the 75 percent threshold. The lower figure shows the proportion of primary challenges that have to do with ideology. These figures show that ideological challenges have usually been more common in Republican than in Democratic primaries, but that they have increased substantially over the past decade both in number and proportion.

[Figure 2 about here]

This account suggests a number of expectations for 2020. Given Democratic gains in the 2018 general election, and widely shared expectations that the party would make further gains in 2020, there was reason to expect that opportunistic progressive candidates might emerge. The high visibility of the progressive group Justice Democrats and its connection to the Ocasio-Cortez victory in 2018 also suggested that the organization could follow the model that conservative groups had used in 2010 and before. The corresponding pessimism among Republicans about gaining seats and the absence of a strong conservative group with the intent of championing conservative challengers in 2020 also suggested that Republican primaries would be less competitive than in prior years.

The two wild cards here, however, were the whims of President Trump, and a Democratic Party effort to discourage primary competition that appears to have been more serious and effective than any comparable Republican one. Without any sort of organized effort, Trump had shown in 2018 that he could influence Republican primaries; some observers gave him credit for the primary defeat of South Carolina Representative, and occasional Trump foe, Mark Sanford (Conroy, Rakich, and Nguyen 2018). And the Democratic Party leadership in both chambers had successively dissuaded candidates in several primaries in 2018, suggesting that something about the Democratic Party leadership or culture made it more able to ward off primary battles. This tendency is reflected in Hassell's (2016) work on party interventions in primaries and in my own work (Boatright and Albert 2021) showing that Super PAC spending in Democratic primaries had been more concentrated than was the case in Republican primaries. There were thus also reasons why one might Democratic competition to increase less than had Republican competition in prior elections.

The 2020 Democratic House of Representatives Primaries

In most election years, the primaries that receive the most attention are the small number of incumbent defeats. In 2020, three Democratic incumbents lost in their primaries: sixteen-term representative Elliot Engel of New York, defeated by middle school principal Jamaal Bowman; eight-term incumbent Daniel Lipinski, of suburban Chicago, defeated by marketing

[4] As I discuss in *Getting Primaried* and subsequent work, this method likely misses some lower profile challenges which could be categorized by using other means, such as candidate websites or media coverage. I use it, however, in order to maintain the ability to do accurate comparisons over the 1970-2020 time period, for which internet media and other similar information sources are not as easily available.

consultant and political activist Marie Newman; and ten-term incumbent William Lacy Clay of St. Louis, defeated by nurse and political activist Cori Bush. The three successful Democratic primary challenges share a common thread: all took place in urban, heavily Democratic districts, all were instances where older male incumbents were defeated by women or people of color, and the three challengers were all supported by Justice Democrats, among other groups. Newman and Bush had waged competitive primary challenges in 2018 and Bowman modeled his campaign on competitive New York primary campaigns from that year.

Yet there are important differences between these campaigns as well. Of the three, only Lipinski could be considered to be centrist or conservative, and his district, which encompassed working class white areas to the Southwest of Chicago, has historically been relatively conservative, particularly on abortion and other social issues. While Lipinski had been among the most conservative House Democrats and had faced opposition from progressives almost since joining Congress, much of that opposition has had to do with the way in which he acquired the seat; his father, long-time representative William Lipinski, abruptly retired and ensured that his son (who was teaching political science in Kentucky at the time) received the party nomination without a primary. This path to office ensured that Lipinski would face some opposition from other ambitious politicians who might have been waiting for the elder Lipinski to step down. Prior to 2020 Lipinski faced primary opponents in five of his seven reelection bids and was held to less than sixty percent of the vote three times.

Lipinski's opponent Marie Newman had run a competitive race against Lipinski in 2018. As was the case in 2018, she benefitted from extensive support from outside the district; a total of over $1.5 million was spent on her behalf, the bulk of which came from Women Vote! (an arm of EMILY's List). A variety of reproductive rights organizations, environmental groups, and other progressive groups spent on her behalf, and she received endorsements from several elected officials, including Ocasio-Cortez, some Chicago-area House members, and Senators Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders (Edmondson 2019c). Newman raised nearly $1.2 million from donors outside of the state of Illinois. Newman had received similar levels of support in 2018; in fact, she received 49 percent of the vote in 2018 as compared to 47 percent in 2020 – the presence of a third candidate in the race drove down Lipinski's vote share from 51 percent in 2018 to 45 percent in 2020. The 2020 Illinois primary was held on March 17, just as the effects of the COVID pandemic were becoming apparent. This early date and the paucity of other major Democratic primaries at that time allowed progressive groups to focus their energy on that race, but the pandemic may also have influenced voting.

Clay and Engel, on the other hand, were among the most liberal members of Congress. During has career Engel had been among the most liberal third of the Democratic Party and Clay had been among the leftmost quarter of the party, according to DW-NOMINATE scores. Redrawing of the New York City area districts had slowly made Engel's district less white – as of the 2010 census it was 32 percent white and 3 percent black. Yet Engel had not faced consequential primary competition in recent years. The primary threat here was evident early on, however, and both Engel and Bowman spent heavily. Over $3.4 million was spent by outside groups in the race; $2.2 million of this was in support of Engel and $1.2 was in support of Bowman. Bowman raised over $2.8 million, the majority of which came from out of state and the majority of which came from small donors. This made the New York race the most

expensive of the 2020 Democratic incumbent primaries for both the incumbent and the challenger.

Like Lipinski, Clay had a father who held the seat for decades. Bill Clay had won the seat in 1969, and was one of the generation of African-American representatives that included Louis Stokes, John Conyers, and Charles Rangel. The district has been drawn since the 1960s to be overwhelmingly African-American. Majority minority districts such as Clay's have generally exhibited a much higher amount of primary competition than have majority white districts, largely because there is no prospect of general election competition. Between 1970 and 2012, for example, representatives of majority minority districts were held to less than 75 percent of the vote in 17.5 percent of their reelection bids, as compared to 9.1 percent of all incumbents (Boatright 2014, 219). Clay's opponent Cori Bush had also run in 2018, with the support of Justice Democrats, receiving 37 percent of the vote. Bush built her 2020 campaign around vocal advocacy for the Black Lives Matter movement, and the August 4 Missouri primary came shortly after the summer's unrest regarding George Floyd's death had begun. The race received far less outside attention than Newman's, however; Justice Democrats spent $150,000 but there was only $100,000 in additional spending on behalf of Bush and only $40,000 spent on behalf of Clay.

These three incumbents, therefore, were already at higher risk than other Democrats of facing primary opponents, and an organization that was looking for opportunities to knock off an incumbent would have had reason to focus on these races. Justice Democrats, which endorsed Bowman, Bush, and Newman, also endorsed three other progressive primary challengers: Alex Morse, the mayor of Holyoke, Massachusetts, who ran against House Ways and Means Committee Chair Richard Neal in a Western Massachusetts district; Jessica Cisneros, who ran against incumbent Henry Cuellar in a majority Latino/a district in Western Texas; and Morgan Harper, who ran against incumbent Joyce Beatty in a majority minority district in Columbus, Ohio. All but Harper garnered over forty percent of the vote, and all have expressed some interest in running again in 2022. As Table 1 shows, there were many other ideological challengers in Democratic primaries but all Justice Democrats endorsees but Harper placed among the strongest. Some media accounts of Harper's race suggest that she may have been harmed by the postponement of the Ohio primary from March 17 to April 28 due to the COVID pandemic (Craven 2020).

[Table 1 about here]

The remaining competitive Democratic primaries show a range of challenger motivations. Three of the four members of the "squad" of younger progressive 2018 winners (Rashida Tlaib, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and Ilhan Omar) faced primary opponents. Each of the three challengers to these candidates received some national support but fell short. Of the three, Tlaib's challenge was the most serious – Tlaib, a Palestinian American, represents a majority black district that has historically elected black representatives. Tlaib faced veteran local politician Brenda Jones, who had narrowly lost the 2018 special election to Tlaib. In all three races, challengers criticized the incumbents for the high profile they had gained in the media, and Omar and Ocasio Cortez's opponents promised to be somewhat more centrist in their approach.

As was the case in 2018, the most competitive incumbent primaries in 2020 also took place in disproportionately Democratic districts. As I note above, majority minority districts tend to have more primary competition. In New York City, the Ocasio-Cortez race likely inspired other challenges, just as the 2018 Ayanna Pressley victory had in Massachusetts. All but one of the Massachusetts incumbents had a primary opponent, though only Neal and Steven Lynch (who has drawn challenges in most of his reelection bids) faced opponents who drew more than 25 percent of the vote. In the thirteen districts that include parts of New York City, six (64 percent) of eleven incumbents faced challengers who drew more than 25 percent of the vote and three (27 percent) faced challengers who drew more than forty percent. Over the previous decade, 17 percent faced challengers with more than 25 percent and 10 percent were held to less than 60 percent, as compared to 12 percent and 5 percent, respectively, of Democrats overall. So New York, like other urban areas, tends to have higher than average primary competition but competition there was particularly high in 2020.

Group Influence

In previous work on primaries, I focused upon the strategies of interest groups that supported primary challengers during the 2000s and 2010s. For Republicans, these included the Club for Growth and, later, a number of groups affiliated with the Tea Party. For Democrats, these included MoveOn.org and, at times, a number of progressive labor-affiliated groups. In order to explore the extent to which the 2020 Democratic primaries were inspired by the desire of ideological interest groups to exert leverage upon the Democratic Party, it is important to note eight characteristics of ideological primary challenges of this time period:

- They were driven by a small number of groups that recruited and trained a small number challengers and targeted individual incumbents, in some cases over multiple election cycles. That is, organizations such as the Club for Growth and the various Tea Party groups recognized that they could be most effective if they limited their attention to a small number of races.
- Groups sought to claim credit for the defeat of incumbents who might have already been vulnerable.
- National groups also sought to take advantage of idiosyncratic primary rules in some states.
- Groups sought to nationalize individual primary races by advertising them to their members; the signs of this are evident in data on out-of-state contributions, small contributions, and independent expenditures.
- Some groups were willing to risk general election defeat for their preferred party, for instance by supporting conservative challenges to moderate Republicans in swing districts.
- Groups employed bellicose rhetoric about their activities, in order to persuade other incumbents that they might subsequently be at risk.
- Groups denigrated party leadership efforts to stop them.
- Group success also inspired other groups or candidates to emulate them, albeit with less success or media attention.

Media reports of this time suggest that the organizations sponsoring primary challenges saw them as efforts to burnish their brand name – the Club for Growth's Steven Moore, for instance, proclaimed in a *New York Times* interview that his goal was to make sure that Republican Party leaders "wet their pants" when they thought about the group (Bai 2003). As media attention to these races increased, the number of primary challenges also grew, as did the number of groups with an interest in primaries. This yielded some surprising results – most notably the 2014 defeat of House Majority Leader Eric Cantor – but the increase was not accompanied by greater success for these candidates. The *Citizens United v. FEC* decision in 2010 gave groups the ability to spend large sums of money in some races without having to raise that money in small amounts. So some challenges emerged that were largely financed by one individual or a small number of individual donors. The *Citizens United* decision also, however, gave political parties the opportunity to develop party-allied organizations that could spend money in primaries to beat back such challenges.

This model resembles the approach taken by Democratic groups such as MoveOn.org in 2006 and 2008, although Democratic groups were less successful in their activities. Democratic organizations tended to support fewer challengers, and they tended to emphasize issues of identity (that is, electing more women or racial minorities to office) as much or more than they emphasized ideology and progressivism. This was evident in 2018 as well; the two highest-profile primary challenges, those of Ocasio-Cortez and of Ayanna Presley in Massachusetts, were challenges to liberal white Democratic male incumbents. Particularly in Pressley's case, the issue was not as much the incumbent's voting record as it was about his age, perceptions of whether he understood the concerns of minority voters, or merely about style – whether it was time for a younger, more vigorous or confrontational representative.

The principal group active in the three Democratic primary defeats in 2020, as well as the Texas, Ohio, and Massachusetts primaries described above, was Justice Democrats. Justice Democrats was formed in early 2017 by several people who had worked on the 2016 Bernie Sanders campaign. In 2018 Justice Democrats endorsed over seventy candidates for state and federal office. It provided training and other campaign support for some of them, but in most instances its support was limited to providing an endorsement (Cochrane 2019). The candidates also varied substantially in their fundraising and political backgrounds. Ocasio-Cortez's victory, and Cori Bush's near-victory, gave the group far more visibility after the election than it had before, as did the 2019 Netflix documentary film *Knock Down the House*, which profiled four of the candidates Justice Democrats supported.[5]

In 2020, Justice Democrats narrowed its focus considerably, focusing on eight nonincumbent candidates – six challengers, one open seat candidate, and one candidate running for the nomination to challenge a sitting Republican in a competitive district. All six of the challengers were running in lopsidedly Democratic districts. Justice Democrats worked in particular with minority communities in many of these districts. Its engagement in the campaigns varied significantly, according to the needs of the candidates. In the case of candidates such as Jessica Cisneros and Jamaal Bowman, who had not run for political office before and were recruited by the group, Justice Democrats was able to draw on its experience working for Ocasio-Cortez to do more extensive grassroots work and training – including

[5] The film is available at https://knockdownthehouse.com/.

texting, phone banking, developing national donor lists (Shure 2019; Otterbein 2020). Justice Democrats spokesperson Waleed Shahid noted in a post-election interview I conducted with him that Justice Democrats was also able to work with local media a bit more in this race because New York media tend to take a more adversarial position toward incumbent officeholders than do media in other states. Shahid mentioned that the group had studied political science research on primaries and deliberately sought to select a small number of elections sequentially in order to maximize its impact and visibility.

To some extent, the Democratic primaries follow the model established in Republican primaries during the late 2000s. Justice Democrats clearly provided crucial assistance to candidates, and it chose its candidates and its districts carefully. The group showed a willingness to target particular incumbents who were out of step with their districts in some way, whether because of overall ideology, positions on specific issues, or because of changes in the ethnic composition of the district. Although Justice Democrats has emphasized its grassroots organizing skills, it also made independent expenditures in 2020, spending $2.27 million – including $920,000 on the Bowman/Engel race, $715,000 in the Morse/Neal race, and smaller amounts on behalf of Kara Eastman, a candidate for a Republican-held seat in Nebraska, and Cori Bush.[6] Approximately half of the independent expenditure money went into advertising. These expenditures pitted Justice Democrats against organized labor, African-American groups, and several access-oriented PACs. The majority of the money raised by the group came in amounts of $5,000 or less, but the group did received $450,000 from biotech entrepreneur Charles Dunlop between May and July of 2020.

Before entering these races, Justice Democrats established a platform of sorts, which included calls for immigration reform, reducing the cost of higher education, abolishing the death penalty, and modifying U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East (Cochrane 2019). The relatively heterogeneous set of proposals placed the organization on the left of the Democratic Party, but it did provided the group with some flexibility in terms of who to support and what to emphasize. In the case of the Engel, Neal, and Clay challenges, for instance, the group identified different rationales for challenging members of the party who had not necessarily been seen as centrists.

The rhetoric used in these campaigns was also similar to claims made by conservative groups years earlier. Sean McElwee, of the progressive polling group Data for Progress, described the Neal challenge as an effort to frighten the Democratic Leadership: "If Neal loses, every one of these motherfuckers can go down. And there's nothing they can do to stop it" (Marans 2020). Elsewhere, McElwee (whose group works with Justice Democrats) described Ocasio-Cortez as "the Christopher Columbus of primaries, with less genocide" (Stewart 2019). Much of the rhetoric, however, was directed at the voting records of the challenged incumbents and of Democrats in general. In my interview with him, Shahid spoke of the ways in which the Bowman challenge had caused Engel to shift his positions on foreign policy issues, and of how Justice Democrats had sought to use the Ocasio-Cortez campaign to push Democrats (including the presidential candidates) to prioritize income inequality and climate change in 2020. More generally, media accounts of the challenge to Neal and of the successful Ayanna Pressley race

[6] These data, and other campaign finance data used in this paper, are taken from the Center for Responsive Politics, www.opensecrets.org.

noted ways in which members of the Massachusetts delegation had changed positions on major issues in anticipation of primary challenges (Koczela and Gormley 2019).

Finally, given the media attention given to the 2018 challenges, it is noteworthy that other groups drew media attention in races that Justice Democrats did not invest money. This change resembles the expansion of conservative efforts in 2012. In New York, two other primary challengers -- Lindsey Boylan, a challenger to House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerrold Nadler, and Suraj Patel, running against Representative Carolyn Maloney – raised over $1 million. Although it is hard to measure results, some summaries of the 2020 campaign season noted that state and local groups in Maryland, Rhode Island, and New Jersey had engaged in grassroots work for long-shot primary challengers (Weigel 2020), and the newsletter *Primaries for Progress*, created by two progressive activists in New Jersey and distributed by email and through Substack, was designed in order to alert national audiences to lower profile primary challengers.[7]

All of these factors suggest that the Democratic surge resembled efforts on the right, and that in fact many of these groups had learned from these races. Shahid, in his interview with me, described how the Eric Cantor challenge – which drew enormous national attention despite the negligible amount of money raised by Cantor's challenger – had shown him how a single primary defeat can shape the national conversation.

The Democratic primaries differ from those of prior years in two important ways. First, there was a more organized, and more public, effort by the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee and by the party leadership in general to push back against primary challenges. The DCCC announced that it would "blacklist" any vendors who worked on behalf of primary challengers. Judging by the extensive media coverage the blacklist received, it appears to have had an effect in communicating the party's unhappiness with the efforts of progressive groups, yet it also proved to be highly controversial (Marketic 2019; Shure 2019). Prominent progressives sought to use the establishment of the blacklist as a fundraising opportunity. Some newly elected members (including some who had had DCCC support and had flipped Republican districts in 2018) worried that the blacklist would harm consultants with whom they had worked in the past (Steinhauer 2019). In his interview with me, Shahid mentioned that he understood that incoming DCCC chair Sean Patrick Maloney intended to relax the blacklist policy.

Second, successful primary victors from 2018 found themselves playing a much greater role in discussions of the 2020 challenges than was the case for previous successful challengers. For instance, David Brat (Eric Cantor's successful challenger in 2014) did not play a leadership role in the Republican Party following his victory, and Patrick Toomey, who challenged Arlen Specter twice in the early 2000s, has not played a major role in Republican electoral politics and is arguably not even among the more outspokenly conservative members of the party today. Other successful primary challengers from 2010 and 2012 include Republicans such as Mo Brooks, John Ratcliffe, and Trey Gowdy, who have maintained a high profile within the party but have not necessarily gotten attention because of their victories over more centrist opponents.

[7] Available at https://primaries.substack.com/.

One might argue that the sponsors of these challenges drew more attention than the candidates themselves. This is not necessarily true for Democrats.

Ocasio-Cortez and Pressley were certainly highly visible during the 117th Congress. Ocasio-Cortez spoke publicly about building a sort of parallel campaign arm to help progressive candidates, and her first chief of staff, who had previously led Justice Democrats, gave interviews where he criticized moderate Democrats in harsh terms (Edmonson 2019a, b). Her political action committee spent on behalf of Newman, Bowman, and Morse (Zanona and Caygle 2020). Four other House members also endorsed Bowman or Morse, and several others supported Newman. Senators Warren and Sanders also endorsed primary challengers, and Pelosi endorsed Representative Joseph Kennedy III's challenge to incumbent Senator Ed Markey. Despite these endorsements, however, it is a judgment call whether a small number of incumbents' support in a small number of primaries constitutes a rebuke of the party leadership or a sign that tensions within the party are on the rise. Some analysts suggested that Ocasio-Cortez's decision to limit her engagement to only three races – and not to become involved in the challenge to Lacy Clay – showed some restraint and a desire to work within the system (Thompson and Otterbein 2020). In Massachusetts, Pressley (who, having served as a Boston City Councilor before running for Congress, had more political experience than other Justice Democrats candidates) was occasionally referred to as a possible statewide candidate but was more active in supporting Democratic open seat candidates than in primary challenges.

The Democratic primaries, then, show many similarities to the primaries within the Republican Party a decade earlier, but with signs of a stronger response by the party and somewhat more pragmatism in the choice of targets.

Partisan Swing

In our 2018 piece, Vin Moscardelli and I noted the high correlation between incumbent challenges and incumbent general election defeats. We explained this pattern as a matter of opportunity. In a good year for Republicans such as 2010, some enthusiastic conservatives won their party's nomination and ran successfully against Democrats. Other conservatives, similarly disenchanted with the status quo in Washington, happened to reside in Republican-held districts, and thus waged a primary challenge against a sitting Republican. The chances of this were higher, of course, if that incumbent could credibly be accused of not being conservative enough. In other words, group efforts can supplement grassroots fervor but they do not cause it.

We noted, further, that there seemed to be an effect in the subsequent election as well. The energy behind the Tea Party did not dissipate entirely after the 2010 election, and there was still a higher-than-usual number of conservative primary challenges in 2012, a year that was not quite as promising for Republicans overall. This effect is visible if one looks at the pattern of challenges (shown in Figure 2) for Democrats in 1974-76 and 2006-08, and for Republicans in 1994-96 and 2010-12. In our paper we found significant correlations over the 1970-2014 time period between primary challenges and general election competition were significant both overall, and within each party (that is, between Democratic primary challenges and Republican general election incumbent defeats, or vice versa).

What is striking about 2020 – and for that matter, about the past three election cycles – is the collapse of this relationship. The overall correlation between the number of competitive primary challenges and the number of defeated incumbents remains significant; a .41 correlation at $p < .05$. Yet the correlation was much stronger as of 2014, when it stood at .72 ($p < .01$). Furthermore, when one runs correlations within each party for the full 1970-2020 period, there is no longer a significant relationship.

It might seem tempting to tie this directly to misperceptions about 2020. Progressive Democrats, according to this line of reasoning, may have been excited by the results of the 2018 election and hence more interested in challenging centrists. This seems consistent with the surge in places such as Massachusetts and New York where one might expect local activists to have been particularly influenced by primary results there. Yet Figure 3 suggests that the relationship between primary and general election competition began to untangle as early as 2014. For the past four election cycles now, the annual numbers of primary challenges and general election incumbent defeats have been moving in different directions. This may well say something about polarization or an increase in intraparty conflict for both parties. It is an important development in that it suggests primary conflict no longer goes away after surges. Our claim in our 2018 piece would suggest that waves of primary conflict subside in predictable ways – conflict among Republicans rooted in the 1994-96 swing toward them had declined by 1998, and Democratic conflict from 2006-08 subsided by 2010. Although Republican competition has declined from its peak in 2010, it remained higher than one might have predicted in 2016 and 2018, two difficult years for the party in congressional general elections. This suggests that general election losses by Democrats in 2020 may not necessarily lead to a decline in primary competition in 2022 or afterwards.

[Figure 3 about here]

The 2020 Republican House of Representatives Primaries

Although the Republicans lost more incumbents than the Democrats in their primaries, overall competition in Republican incumbent primaries declined to its lowest level since 2008. This largely corresponds to historical patterns – although Republicans did wind up gaining seats in the 2020 general election, they had lost control of the chamber in 2018 and it seems reasonable to say that few analysts expected Republicans to gain as many seats as they did in 2020. Many discussions of conservative activism during the Trump administration also have suggested that conservatives have less interest in challenging Republican incumbents today than they did in prior years (Plott 2020). The financial infrastructure for such challenges also seems to have withered over the past four years.

As a consequence, the defeated Republican incumbents all had idiosyncratic problems. Iowa Representative Steve King had been criticized for a string of controversial comments, had been formally rebuked by the House, and had been stripped by the Republican Party of his

committee assignments in early 2019. His opponent Randy Feenstra was a six-term state legislator with strong connections to state Republican leaders. Kansas Representative Steve Watkins and Florida Representative Ross Spano also were enmeshed in personal scandals. Virginia Representative Denver Riggleman lost an unusual drive-in primary to an opponent who criticized Riggleman for officiating at a same sex wedding.[8] The lone defeated Republican who arguably faced a clear ideological challenge was Colorado Representative Scott Tipton. Tipton's opponent Lauren Boebert, the owner of a gun-themed bar and restaurant, raised only $64,000 for the primary, and newspaper coverage shortly before the primary suggested she had spent less than $40,000 by the week before the election (Salvail 2020). In contrast, challengers in the Florida, Iowa, and Kansas races all drew support from various local politicians and had outraised their incumbent opponents at the time of the primary.

None of these races seem indicative of a national effort to influence the direction of the GOP, although it could be argued that party leaders saw some of them – perhaps King in particular – as being embarrassing to the party's overall image. However, several older or more conventional Republicans – Kay Granger of Texas, Brian Fitzpatrick of Pennsylvania, and Fred Upton of Michigan, among others – faced primary opponents who did not come close to winning; each of these representatives had faced stronger challengers in the past. Several other Republicans who faced somewhat competitive challenges were people who have persistently had opponents but have not been seriously threatened. Of the Republican candidates who ran what are classified as ideological challenges in Table 1, only one (Granger's opponent) raised more than $150,000, and more than two-thirds of his fundraising total is made up of his own money. There is thus no evidence whatsoever of outside conservative groups seeking to play a role in Republican primary challenges in 2020. While Boebert has drawn substantial media attention during her short time in office, she has not generally been presented as a sign of future primary challenges on the horizon.

Table 2 compares the top five Republican primary challenges for each year from 2012 through 2020. Much of the variation across years is idiosyncratic – some representatives consistently draw strong challengers either because of the makeup of their districts or because they have had persistent ethical problems. Some of the incumbents who tend to have the most difficulty in primaries do not even draw particularly well-financed challengers; others fell victim to feuds particular to their states or districts. Yet one pattern that seems consistent through the table is the declining financial support for ideological challengers. In 2012 and 2014, the best-funded challengers were running to the right of the incumbents, and their challenges were supported by large infusions of cash from small donors, from outside of the district, and from Super PACs or other independent expenditure groups. This sort of concentration (absent the Super PACs) was a feature of Republican primaries in previous years as well. Yet financial support for such candidates declined from 2016 through 2020, to the point that there was little money for such candidates in 2020. This does not mean that ideological primary challengers are less likely to win, as the Colorado case shows, but it is not evident that there are Republican donors out there looking to support such candidates.

[8] Virginia gives state parties much greater latitude for setting primary rules than do other states; the primary in this district was hastily arranged in order to comply with the state's COVID restrictions. For discussion see Edmondson 2020.

[Table 2 about here]

The lack of ideological competition may suggest that the party had become sufficiently unified behind Trump that there were not easy targets. Yet it is remarkable in part because threats about primary challenges to anyone who was insufficiently supportive of Trump had become commonplace, and in part because of the perception that Trump had been successful in 2018 and 2020 in using Twitter to interfere in Republican primaries and had recorded a robocall used in the primary defeat of Trump antagonist Mark Sanford (see Isenstadt 2020). Trump's post-election threats against Georgia Governor Brian Kemp and Senate Majority Whip John Thune suggest that Trump sees a role for himself in Republican primaries after his presidency. There is also no evidence that Republicans have as robust a party effort to tamp down primary competition as Democrats do. The fluky nature of primary defeats such as Tipton's suggest that Republican primaries continue to have the potential to be more volatile than Democratic ones, but there is clearly nothing left of the organized anti-incumbent efforts of the early 2010s.

Much of this depends on Trump's post-presidency. There has been some speculation since January 2021 about primary retribution against the ten House Republicans who voted for Trump's second impeachment, although narrow margins in Congress may inspire party leaders to try to quell such conflict (Epstein and Glueck 2021). The degree to which Republican leaders work to save these candidates may depend on how safe these districts are in the general election. These incumbents are listed in Table 3. The two Republicans on this list whose seats are safest in the general election appear certain to draw competitive challengers, as does outspoken Trump critic Adam Kinzinger. Three other Republicans, those from Ohio and Michigan, represent states with Republican-held state legislatures and declining populations, which may mean that these Republicans may be penalized in the 2022 redistricting. Paradoxically, the safest Republicans on the list may be those who hail from Democratic-leaning states and have not had consistent primary challenges in the past.

[Table 3 about here]

Primary Challenges and the Future of the Democratic and Republican Parties

Which theory about primary challenges is correct? The easiest response is to say we will have an answer to this question in 2022, or 2024. It is certainly far too early to conclude that the surge of progressive activism within the Democratic Party is epiphenomenal to the 2018 wave election, or that the energy behind the conservative challenges that characterized Republican challenges of a decade ago have faded. We can, however, draw some conclusions by comparing the two movements.

The most consequential difference between conservative primary challenges of 2010-12 and the progressive challenges of 2018-20 have to do with the relationship between activists and the party. Despite the Democratic Party's organized effort to push back against primary challenges, the relationship between the grass roots and the party leaders within the Democratic

Party seems less hostile than that within the Republican Party. As Rachel Blum (2020) recounts in her work on the Tea Party, conservative activists have been willing, even eager, to risk general election defeat for the Republican Party when they have supported primary challenges. There is little evidence either in the rhetoric or the targeting strategies of progressives that they have a similar view. This is of a piece with the low opinion conservatives held at the time of their party leadership, of their presidential nominees, and even of the very notion that they were Republicans. In Blum's accounting, this has made the Republican Party a party of insurgency – one that repeatedly turns on its own leaders. It is hard to make the case that conflict within the Democratic Party is anywhere near as extreme.

The wave of Republican challenges also took place in a different general election context. Republicans failed to gain unified control of government until 2016, long after conservative primary challenges had become common. Primary challenges designed to pull the party to the right were thus not followed by the articulation of any sort of Republican governing agenda. A more conservative Republican Party, as of 2012 or so, might be counted on to be more confrontational toward President Obama and toward Democratic Senate leaders, but it was not required to show results. The election of Joe Biden in 2020 means, depending on how one looks at it, that there are expectations that the Democratic Party will achieve results, or that progressives will play a role in shaping government policy to an extent that conservatives never really did. People associated with progressive political activism in 2018-20, such as Senator Bernie Sanders, occupy committee chairmanships and arguably wield more power in a Biden administration, more soon after the primary surge, than was the case for conservatives of 2010-12. The party's narrow majorities and the prospect that this power could be fleeting – that Democrats are at real risk of losing control of one or both chambers in 2022 – potentially gives progressives more leverage but also increases the need for concerted action by the party.

Despite these contextual differences, it is evident that Justice Democrats has done some things to consciously emulate other groups that focused on primaries. There is a template for how a group uses primary challenges to make a point. Is this, then, the story of one or two groups, of individual political entrepreneurs trying to call attention to themselves? One might ask how important one group, or one primary challenge, is. There is no definite answer to this, which is part of the problem. It does seem evident that the Ocasio-Cortez primary challenge of 2018 shaped the narrative of that year's elections and created a platform for Ocasio-Cortez that made her far more influential and visible than the average first-term member of Congress. It is only natural that such an election should inspire other candidates to try to follow her example, and should inspire progressive groups to try to locate the next AOC. The rarity of primary challenges make them noteworthy for the media; if they do in fact become more common, they will become less interesting, and incumbents are likely to be better prepared that those defeated in 2018 and 2020 were. Changes in policy positions – shifts to the extremes – or the retirements of potentially vulnerable incumbents may also reduce the number of targets if groups like Justice Democrats are sincerely looking to change the direction of the party. Thus, even apart from the broader political context, the politics of group influence may well be cyclical in nature.

Finally, it is important to note that there is no real model for how presidents can shape congressional primary challenges, and there is certainly no precedent that can help us to understand how an ex-president who retain a loyal following might do so. Previous presidents

have tentatively waded into some primaries, but the presidents who did so (FDR and Wilson) seem to have wanted to push Congress to support their legislative priorities. Perhaps the closest parallel to Trump in this regard is former Louisana Senator Huey Long, who spent his time in office building a public following and holding events similar to Trump's rallies. Long intervened in the primary campaigns of two much weaker Senators, in Arkansas and Mississippi, and almost singlehandedly ensured their victories (Brinkley 1982, 53, 218).

In a similar fashion, Trump, having lost the presidency, may well see primary challenges as a means of retribution or personal gain, rather than as a way to pursue policy goals. There is a credit-claiming calculation here; as I have noted in my exploration of Trump's 2016 congressional endorsements, many of his endorsements were of candidates who would have won without him, which allowed him to claim his endorsement mattered (Boatright 2017). Should targets of Trump's post-presidential ire such as Georgia Governor Kemp, South Dakota Senator John Thune, or another politician Trump has threatened fall to a primary opponent in 2022, it would be tempting for Trump to claim credit for this – especially if he wants to run for president again in 2024. These would of course be higher-profile battles than House primaries; I have said little about the Senate here because there was only one challenge to any incumbent Senator in 2020. The prospect of Trump-inspired challenges in Senate or gubernatorial races raises the possibility that they would serve as proxy battles over the future of the Republican Party, and Trump's support might also spark a response by party leaders, other potential presidential aspirants, or Republican donors. What is novel about these challenges, should they emerge, is that, as discussions since the second impeachment vote have shown, Trump may not even need to be actively involved. Were this to happen, it would certainly be far different from the dynamics described in this paper.

The most important takeaway from this look at 2020, however, is simply that the logic of primary challenges has changed over the past decade. For much of the past half-century, primary challenges had little role in shaping the parties – they were isolated instances where incumbents had performed poorly, or where ideological enthusiasm stirred up opposition to incumbents who were out of step with their districts. Changes in media, in fundraising techniques, and in interest group strategies made ideological challenges a central part of conservative strategy during the early 2000s, but progressives groups that sought to do this had limited success and indicated that perhaps there was something unique about the state of the contemporary Republican Party that rendered the part vulnerable to insurgents. The past two election cycles show us that the Democratic Party is also at least somewhat vulnerable to similar movements.

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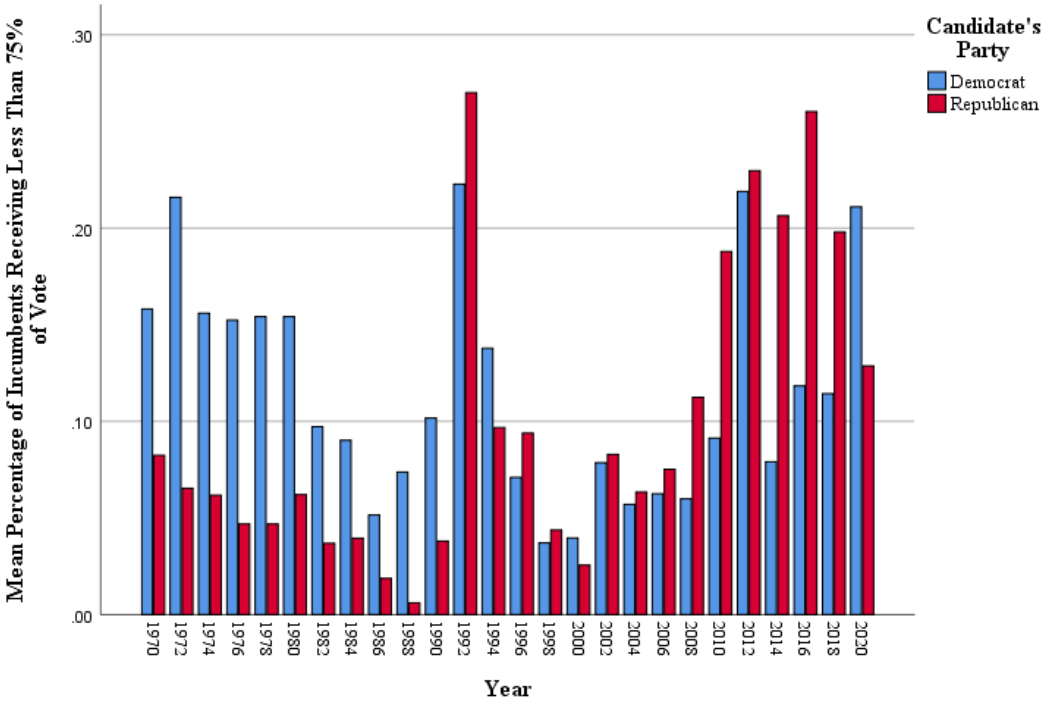
Figure 1: Primary Challenges to Incumbent Representatives, 1970-2020



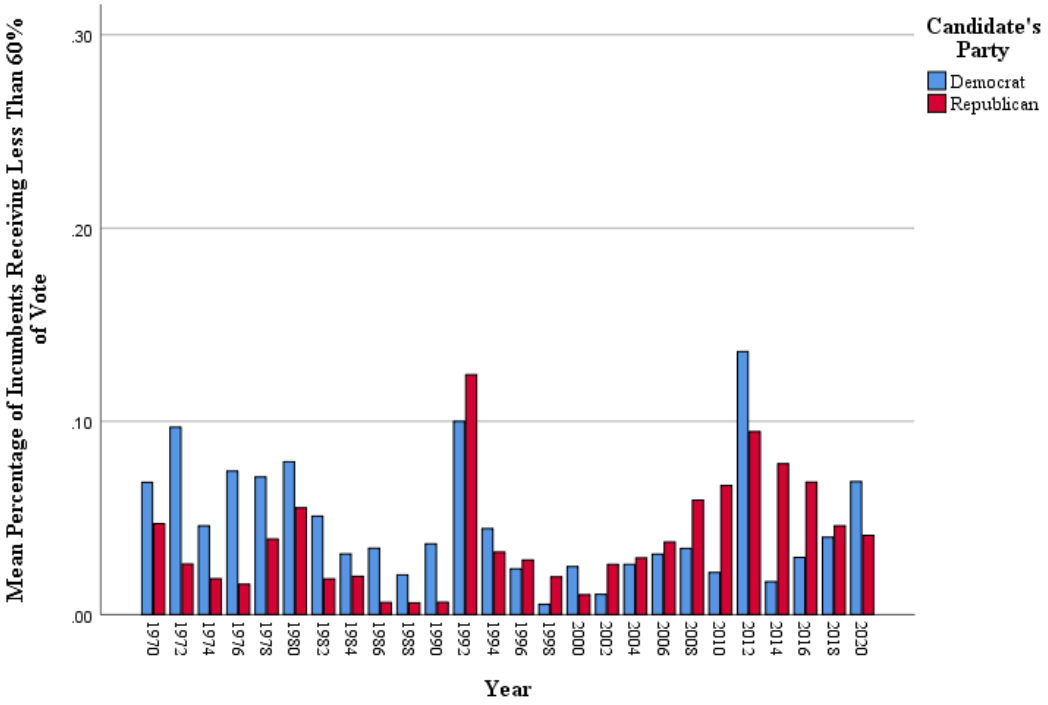
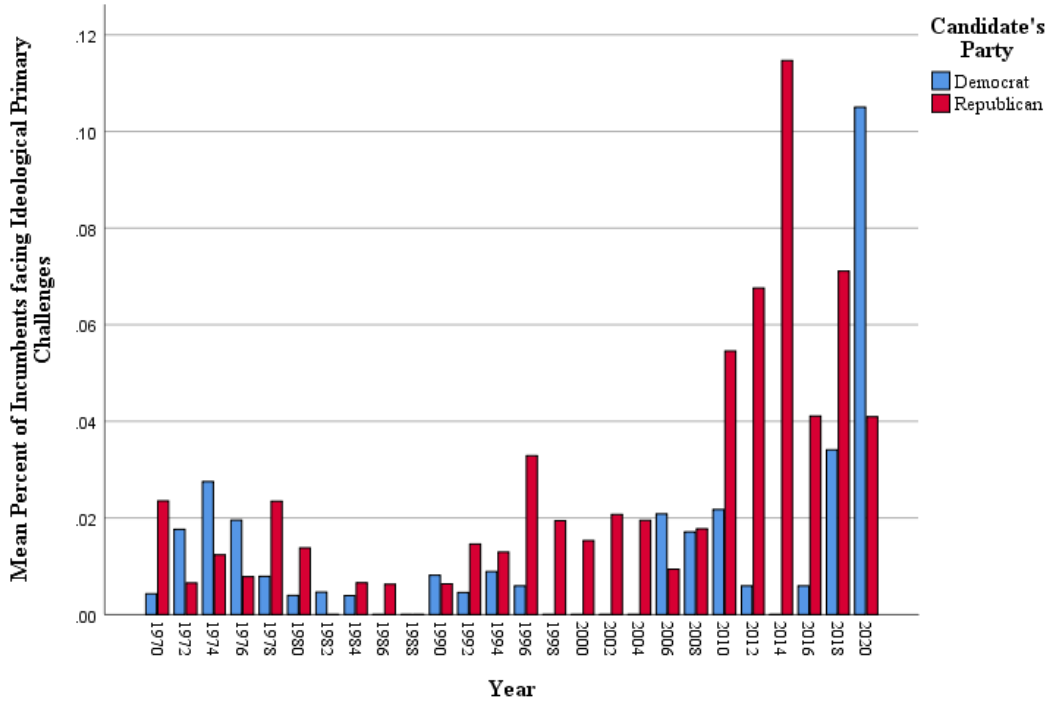


Figure 2: Ideological Primary Challenges to Incumbent Representatives, 1970-2020



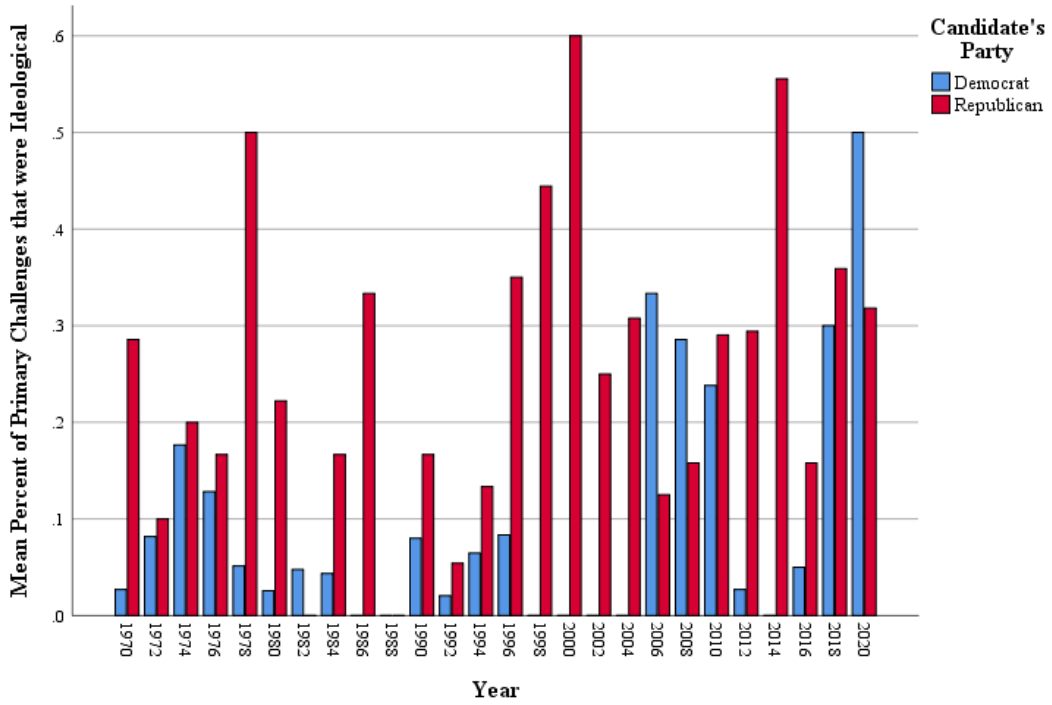


Figure 3: Primary and General Election Competition Compared, 1970-2020

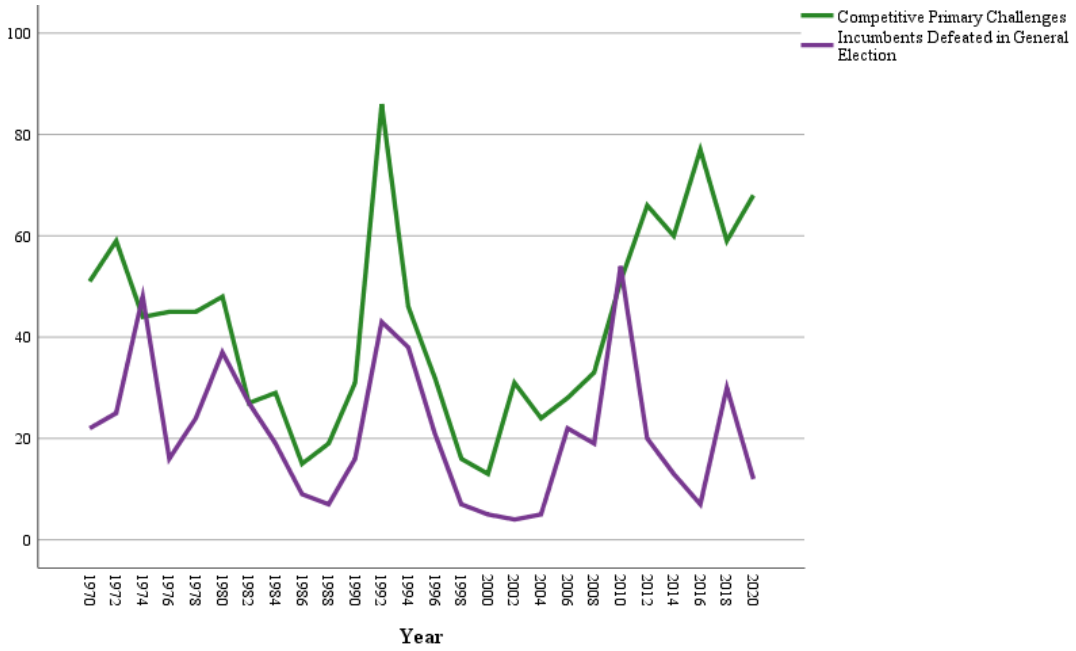


Table 1: Competitive House of Representatives Primary Challenges, 2020

State	District	Candidate Name	Primary Vote Percentage	Reason for Challenge
Democrats (46)				
NEW YORK	*16*	*Engel*	*36*	*Ideological challenge*
NEW YORK	12	Maloney	42	Local Issue
ILLINOIS	*3*	*Lipinski*	*45*	*Ideological challenge*
MISSOURI	*1*	*Clay*	*45*	*Ideological challenge*
GEORGIA	13	Scott	52	Ideological challenge
TEXAS	28	Cuellar	52	Ideological challenge
FLORIDA	5	Lawson	56	Machine/Party Faction
MINNESOTA	5	Omar	57	Competence/Age
TENNESSEE	5	Cooper	57	Ideological challenge
CALIFORNIA	16	Costa	58	Ideological challenge
ARIZONA	1	O'Halleran	59	Ideological challenge
ILLINOIS	11	Foster	59	None listed
MASSACHUSETTS	1	Neal	59	Ideological challenge
NEW YORK	13	Espaillat	59	Race
CALIFORNIA	34	Gomez	60	Ambitious challenger
ILLINOIS	7	Davis	61	Ideological challenge
NEW YORK	6	Meng	61	Ideological challenge
NEW YORK	9	Clarke	62	Competence/Age
NEW YORK	10	Nadler	62	National Issue
TEXAS	33	Veasey	63	Race
MARYLAND	5	Hoyer	64	Race
GEORGIA	4	Johnson	65	Competence/Age
CALIFORNIA	40	Roybal-Allard	66	Competence/Age
MICHIGAN	13	Tlaib	66	Competence/Age
RHODE ISLAND	2	Langevin	66	Ideological challenge
MASSACHUSETTS	8	Lynch	67	Ideological challenge
NEW YORK	3	Suozzi	67	Ideological challenge
NEW YORK	25	Morelle	68	Ideological challenge
OHIO	3	Beatty	68	Ideological challenge
PENNSYLVANIA	18	Doyle	68	Ideological challenge
FLORIDA	20	Hastings	69	Competence/Age
OREGON	5	Schrader	69	Ideological challenge
NEW JERSEY	5	Gottheimer	70	Ideological challenge
CALIFORNIA	29	Cardenas	71	Scandal
CALIFORNIA	32	Napolitano	71	Ideological challenge
TEXAS	30	Johnson	71	Ideological challenge
FLORIDA	23	Wasserman Schultz	72	Ideological challenge
ILLINOIS	1	Rush	72	Ideological challenge
NEW JERSEY	8	Sires	72	None listed
CALIFORNIA	44	Barragan	73	Race

MARYLAND	2	Ruppersberger	73	None listed
MARYLAND	6	Trone	73	None listed
NEW YORK	14	Ocasio-Cortez	73	Centrist challenge
TEXAS	35	Doggett	73	Race
ILLINOIS	5	Quigley	75	None listed
TEXAS	34	Vela	75	None listed
Republicans (21)				
KANSAS	*2*	*Watkins*	*34*	*Scandal*
IOWA	*4*	*King*	*36*	*Competence/Age*
VIRGINIA	*5*	*Riggleman*	*42*	*National Issue*
COLORADO	*3*	*Tipton*	*45*	*Ideological challenge*
FLORIDA	*15*	*Spano*	*49*	*Scandal*
PENNSYLVANIA	1	Fitzpatrick	58	Ideological challenge
TEXAS	12	Granger	58	Ideological challenge
ARIZONA	4	Gosar	63	Competence/Age
FLORIDA	8	Posey	63	None listed
MICHIGAN	6	Upton	63	Ideological challenge
MISSOURI	7	Long	66	None listed
MISSISSIPPI	4	Palazzo	67	None listed
TENNESSEE	4	Desjarlais	71	Scandal
IDAHO	2	Simpson	72	Ideological challenge
NORTH CAROLINA	10	McHenry	72	Redistricting
WEST VIRGINIA	2	Mooney	72	Other
SOUTH CAROLINA	2	Wilson	74	None listed
TEXAS	26	Burgess	74	None listed
WYOMING	1	Cheney	74	Machine/Party Faction
ALABAMA	5	Brooks	75	Ideological challenge
MISSOURI	3	Leutkemeyer	75	None listed

Note: Candidates listed in ascending order of vote percentages. Candidates in *italics* lost. Primary vote totals for candidates from California indicate the percentage of votes cast in the Top Two primary for candidates of their party.

Table 2: Primary Election History for House Republicans who Voted for Donald Trump's Second Impeachment

Representative	District	Year Elected	Republican Presidential Vote 2020	Primary Challenges since 2010 (held to < 75% of vote)
Cheney, Elizabeth	WY-AL	2016	70	2020, 74% 2018, 68%
Rice, Tom	SC-7	2012	59	
Newhouse, Dan	WA-4	2014	58	2016, 61% **
Kinzinger, Adam	IL-16		57	2018, 68% 2012, 57% ***
Gonzalez, Anthony	OH-16	2018	56	
Upton, Fred	MI-6	1986	51	2020, 63% 2014, 71% 2012, 67% 2010, 57%
Herrera Beutler, Jamie	WA-3	2010	51	
Meijer, Peter	MI-3	2020	51	
Katko, John	NY-24	2014	44	
Valadao, David	CA-21	2012*	44	**

* Valadao lost his seat in 2018 and regained it in 2020.
** Top 2 primary; primary vote calculated from percentage of votes for Republican candidates.
*** Incumbent vs. incumbent primary.

Table 3: Strongest House Republican Primary Challenges, 2012-2020

State	District	Incumbent	Primary Vote Pct.	Reason for Challenge	Receipts for strongest Challenger	IEs for strongest Challenger
2020						
Kansas	2	Watkins	34	Scandal	328,561	547,293
Iowa	4	King	36	Competence/Age	925,849	168,289
Virginia	5	Riggleman	42	National Issue	185,790	750
Colorado	3	Tipton	45	Ideology	133,256	5,500
Florida	15	Spano	49	Scandal	237,441	157,625
2018						
North Carolina	3	Jones	43	Ideology	461,205	46,448
North Carolina	9	Pittenger	46	Scandal	572,567	0
South Carolina	1	Sanford	46	Ideology	200,073	10,261
Oklahoma	2	Mullin	54	Centrist	132,199	0
Tennessee	8	Kustoff	56	Ideology	3,073,199*	0
2016						
North Carolina	9	Pittenger	35	Scandal	180,694	0
Kansas	1	Huelskamp	44	Centrist	414,135	1,915,344
New Hampshire	1	Guinta	47	Scandal	268,175	29,300
Pennsylvania	9	Shuster	51	Ideology	308,098	0
Tennessee	4	DesJarlais	52	Scandal	1,582,496*	0
2014						
Michigan	11	Bentivolio	34	Competence/Age	933,796	177,702
Virginia	7	Cantor	45	Ideology	824,321	50,498
Tennessee	4	DesJarlais	45	Scandal	21,496	0
Texas	4	Hall	45	Competence/Age	69,723	126,076
Mississippi	4	Palazzo	51	Ambitious challenger	320,457	0
2012**						
Florida	6	Stearns	33	Ideology	521,537	0
Tennessee	3	Fleischman	39	Competence/Age	331,037	0
Ohio	2	Schmidt	43	Ideology	715,109	134,746
Maryland	6	Bartlett	44	Competence/Age	100,818	0
Oklahoma	1	Sullivan	46	Competence/Age	283,067	0

* Almost all of this amount was self-financing.
** Excluding incumbent vs. incumbent primaries.