

**WHAT DID THE DIRECT PRIMARY
DO TO PARTY LOYALTY IN CONGRESS?¹**

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Abstract

Between 1890 and 1920, most states adopted the direct primary as the method for nominating candidates for the U. S. House. It was widely thought at the time that this mechanism would produce greater independence from the parties inside the legislature, would increase the defeat rate of sitting incumbents who were party stalwarts, and would produce greater independence of candidates from their parties in the general elections; this would take the form of decreased party loyalty in the legislature, and increased split ticket voting in the electorate. In this paper, we examine the panel of elections and roll call votes from 1890 to 1920 and find some evidence for these conjectures. Loyalty in Congress did fall among a state's congressional delegation following the introduction of the primary. Also, incumbent defeat rates for renomination and split ticket voting increased in states that introduced the primaries compared with states that did not. The data reveal, however, suggest that the primaries were not transformative. The effects of primaries on loyalty and elections, although statistically significant, they are quite modest and likely had only marginal effects on congressional politics, with one important exception. The largest effect on the direct primaries on disloyalty occurred within the Congress elected in 1908, which ultimately revolted against speaker Cannon.

1. Introduction

The direct primary stands as one of the most significant and distinctive political reforms of the Progressive era in America. Within a relatively short period of time – roughly, 1896 to 1915 – all but a handful of states adopted the primary as the chief method of nominating candidates for federal, state, and local offices.¹ Among the world democracies, only the United States has made regular use of primary elections to nominate candidates at all levels of government. All other democracies rely on party or private organizations to select candidates for the general election.

The conventional wisdom among scholars is that the direct primary was introduced with one principle objective: to increase popular participation in the process of nominating candidates for elective office, and thereby reduce the role played by party leaders and bosses. Outside the south, the direct primary sought to wrest control of the nomination process from party leaders and machine organizations, leading individual politicians to be more responsive to the electorate.² In the southern states, the white primary was introduced as one of several ways to exclude blacks from the electoral process, but still allow a large number of whites to participate in nominating and electing candidates. This contributed to one-party dominance by the Democrats, and strongly factional and personal politics (Key, 1949; Kousser, 1974).

Assuming primaries had the desired effect, one likely consequence would be a decline in party discipline and loyalty. This view was stated clearly in a U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Ray v. Blair* (343 U.S. at 212, 1952): “Direct primaries, which have become by far the most common method of selecting party nominees, allow candidates to appeal over the heads of voters. They have become a prime device for weakening party discipline.”³

In this paper, we estimate the effects of introducing the direct primary on party loyalty in the U.S. Congress from 1890 to 1920. If the primaries weakened the party organizations and parties in the electorate, then they should have weakened the parties in government as

¹On the adoption of primary election systems see Merriam and Overacker (1928) and Ware (2002). Several other significant reforms followed a similar pattern of rapid adoption – *e.g.*, on the adoption of the Australian ballot see Evans (1917).

²Ware (2002) offers a different view, which we discuss below.

³Quoted in Lowenstein and Hansen (2001), p. 43.

well. Did party loyalty fall with the introduction of the direct primary, and, if so, by how much?

Our research design exploits the fact that different states adopted the primary at different times. If the primaries reduced discipline, then the party delegations of states with primaries should exhibit lower rates of loyalty than the delegations nominated through caucuses or conventions. We use various combinations of individual, state, district, and year fixed effects to control for other factors that might affect loyalty, such as the progressive tendencies of a state's voters and the resources available to congressional party leaders. This allows us to isolate the independent influence of the primary. Also, we can distinguish two different effects. The primary might have changed party loyalty in Congress by changing the electoral incentives facing sitting members, or it might have changed loyalty by replacing party stalwarts with new, independent politicians.

To our knowledge, no previous research has sought to determine whether or not the introduction of the direct primary had a noticeable impact on party loyalty and discipline in Congress. This is surprising given the massive empirical literature that analyzes party loyalty, cohesion, and inter-party conflict in Congress and state legislatures.⁴ For example, Brady and his collaborators attempt to account for changes in loyalty over time, and emphasize the importance of intra-party homogeneity and rules. In particular, they argue that the realignment of 1896 produced party delegations in the House and Senate that were much more homogeneous in terms of district interests – Republicans drawn heavily from manufacturing areas, Democrats from the agricultural south.⁵

A few recent papers examine a question that is related to ours. Haeberle (1985), Gerber and Morton (1998), King (1999), Grofman and Brunell (2001), and Kanthak and Morton

⁴See, for example, Jewell (1955), Clubb and Allen (1967), Brady (1972), Shade, *et al.* (1973), Brady and Althoff (1974), Sinclair (1976, 1977), Clubb and Traugott (1977), Cooper, Brady and Hurley (1977), Brady, Cooper, and Hurley (1979), Rosenthal (1981), Hurley and Wilson (1988), Patterson and Caldeira (1988), Brady, Brody, and Epstein (1989), Cox and McCubbins (1991), Morehouse (1996), Snyder and Groseclose (2000).

⁵Even here, the basic facts are in dispute. Rothman (1966) claims that party loyalty was low in the 1870s and 1880s but high in the 1890s, and many authors cite this in support of their arguments. However, Shade, *et al.* (1973) show that party loyalty was just as high in the 1870s and 1880s as it was in the 1890s.

(2001) attempt to estimate whether different types of primaries – open, closed, “semi-open”, and “semi-closed” – have different effects on ideological extremism in congressional voting. The findings reported in these papers are decidedly mixed. Haeberle finds that the type of primary used has no effect on party loyalty; Gerber and Morton find that closed primaries are associated with greater extremism; King finds just the opposite; Kanthak and Morton find a non-linear relationship in which open primaries and closed primaries both lead to the more extremism than semi-open and semi-closed systems; and Grofman and Brunell find that open primaries lead to more divided senate delegations and less polarization.

Finally, a limited body of previous research examines the relationship between primary elections and voter loyalty. Most relevant to our inquiry, Harvey and Mukherjee (n.d.) find higher rates of split ticket voting in the 1910s and 1920s following the introduction of the direct primaries.⁶

2. Arguments and Conjectures

At the turn of the century progressives had high hopes for the primary, expecting that it would reduce the power of party machines and bosses, help more independent-minded, honest, and progressive politicians win office, increase voter participation and give voters a greater sense of political efficacy, and generally help reduce corruption in government. A few quotes are revealing.

Senator George W. Norris of Nebraska: “The direct primary will lower party responsibility. In its stead it establishes individual responsibility. It does lessen allegiance to party and increase individual independence, both as to the public official and as to the private citizen. It takes away the power of the party leader or boss and places the responsibility for control upon the individual. It lessens party spirit and decreases partisanship. These are some of the reasons why the

⁶Key (1949), Ranney (1954), and Kousser (1974), among others, tie the direct primary to one-partyism and factionalism in the south.

primary should be retained and extended.”⁷

Governor Walter R. Stubbs of Kansas: “The power has been taken out of the hands of those few men who formerly dictated the list of candidates and made the platform... A man to be nominated now must be worth while and offer something for the good of the state, instead of his chief qualification being whether or not he can be handled.”⁸

Governor Charles Evans Hughes of New York: The direct primary makes “the elective officer more independent of those who would control his action for their own selfish advantage and enables him to appeal more directly to his constituency upon the basis of faithful service.”⁹

Historian Charles A. Beard: “The direct primary was carried forward in New York politics when the insurgent forces in the Republican party felt that there was no other way of capturing the established organization which had been discredited by the insurance investigation, the legislative scandals, and other serious exposures during the first years of the new century.”¹⁰

Over the past hundred years, political scientists and historians have assessed the consequences of the direct primary and made a variety of claims about its impact on political life. Overall, the general assessment seems to be that primaries transformed the parties from disciplined organizations up and down the ladder – from voter to boss to legislator – into collections of like-minded but independent politicians and voters operating without the assistance of bosses and machines as intermediaries. The ratio of conjecture to hard evidence in this literature is quite high, however, and the evidence that exists is decidedly mixed.

In one of the earliest analyses, Millspaugh (1917, p. 173) writes that the direct primaries “had taken from him [the party professional] his most prize powers and have made him the

⁷Gubernatorial acceptance speech, August 8, 1900, quoted in Ranney (1975, p. 125).

⁸Report to the New York Commission, quoted in Fanning (1911), p. 66.

⁹Quoted in *Outlook* (1909), p. 91.

¹⁰Beard (1910), p. 187.

appointee of the candidate, thus reversing the former relation.” This caused a breakdown on discipline: “Since the candidate is simply a self-assertive individual who steps out of the ranks and gathers around him a following which is one of the several factions and often merely a minority of the party membership, his control is ephemeral and decentralizing and encourages insubordination.” Another early assessment by Brown (1922, p. 246) is similar: “The primary had made the Congressman an individualist and had deadened the old sense of clanship.” Therefore: “With party lines weakened the tendency was for each man to think and act for himself. He was no longer coerced or instructed by the caucus, and the restraining influences of that instrument of stern discipline no longer held his intellectuality in check. Inevitably a candidate for reelection, he outlined his own campaign, and paddled his own political canoe. Gradually he committed himself to his constituents on an increasingly large number of issues” (pp. 245-246)

Later scholars largely concur with this view, although there is some dissent and attention to variation. V.O. Key (1964, p. 342) writes: “The adoption of the direct primary opened the road for disruptive forces that gradually fractionalized the party organization. By permitting more effective direct appeal by individual politicians to the party membership, the primary system freed forces driving toward disintegration of party organizations and facilitated the construction of factions and cliques attached to the ambitions of individual leaders. The convention system compelled leaders to treat, to deal, to allocate nominations; the primary permits individuals aspirants by one means or another to build a wider following within the party.” In a similar vein, Ramey (1975, p. 129) argues: “the direct primary in most instances has not only eliminated boss control of nominations but party control as well. Whatever may have been the case before the La Follette revolution, there are today no officers or committees in the national parties and very few in the state and local parties who can regularly give nominations to some aspirants and withhold them from others.” And, Galderisi and Ginsberg (1986, p. 116) claim: “The primary can be seen as an antiparty reform on three separate counts. First, by weakening party leaders’ capacity to control nominating processes, primary elections undermine the organizational coherence of established parties. Second, primaries

tend to direct the attention of voters and political activists toward the nominating contests of the party most likely to win the general election, and away from the interparty race. Over time, primary elections have probably helped to erode two-party competition in at least some states. Last, and most interesting, primary elections have the effect of inhibiting the formation of new parties.”¹¹

Swenson (1982. pp. 24-25) makes some of the strongest claims, arguing that not only did the direct primary lead to less party loyalty, but it was also a major driver of “professionalization” and “institutionalization” in Congress. The logic is as follows: Party organizations were weakened, causing candidates to rely more on their own personal resources and supporters to win nomination and election contests. Combined with civil service reforms and other reforms, the weaker party organizations were also unable to continue serving “as an immense employment agency for defeated congressmen.” Congressmen therefore began to see Congress itself as a career: “Thus the 20th century congressman, lacking easy mobility within as well as outside politics, at the mercy of a relatively unpredictable electorate in direct primary elections, sought to turn the occupation of congressman into a protected profession. Thus we see after the 1920s increasing evidence of behavior and arrangements in the House that have been called ‘legislative professionalism’ (Price, 1975). Where once congressmen were usually career politicians, they were by the 1930s becoming career legislators, or more precisely, professional congressmen.”

On the other hand, others argue that the primary did not live up to its promise. In an early analysis of the situation in Missouri, Loeb (1910, p. 171) states: “the direct nomination system has not weakened the party organization nor lessened the influence of the professional politician.” McKenzie (1938, p. 318) argues: “Designed originally to eliminate the evils of a party machine under the convention system, it is doubtful if the direct primary has accomplished as much as its supporters claimed for it. Certainly the machine continues to

¹¹This last prediction – that the direct primaries would crippled third-party activity – deserves further study. The timing certainly seems consistent, as the number of parties in the U.S. declined throughout the period that primary elections were adopted in the states. Also, the hypothesis is testable using the methodology of our paper. We leave this for future work.

exist in undiminished prestige.” Beard’s (1924, p. 551) assessment is similar: The direct primary “has not fulfilled all the hopes of its advocates. It has not destroyed party bosses, eliminated machines, or led to radical changes in the character of the men nominated. Its actual achievements are difficult to measure. In fact no searching examination has yet been made into the operations of the direct primary throughout the Union.” Ranney and Kendall (1956, p. 284) agree: “Few attempts have been made to measure precisely what effects the direct primary has actually had on the control of nominations. What evidence we have on this point consists of statements made by students on the subject on the basis of personal observation of the general workings of the system over a number of years. But certainly the consensus among these students is that the party organizations or ‘machines’ put forward slates of carefully selected candidates, back them in the primaries, and elect them, often with little or no opposition.” Pollack (1943, pp. 61-62) provides a more mixed assessment: “I do not find that the party system in Michigan has been weakened by the primary system. I do not find that party responsibility is any weaker today than it was in 1909... I do find that the primary system has broadened the control over nominations and the control of political parties, although politics is still pretty much of an insider’s game even today... The failure of the rank and file of the parties to participate in large numbers in the primary, as demonstrated in Chapter III, has made it easier for organization leaders to control nominations in the primary. But this control has not been absolute, nor steady, and it has always been subject to popular revolts.”

Ware (2002) concurs in the notion that primaries had limited effects, and offers a revisionist view of the history of the adoption of the primaries in the first place. He argues, contrary to the traditional and dominant view, that many party loyalists and “machine” politicians actually supported the primaries. After all, how could the primaries be adopted by party organizations and state legislatures if the machines opposed their introduction? Under this view, we might not expect primaries to hurt the parties much, if at all.

Much of the progressive and revisionist history concerns the northeast, midwest, and west. Southern politics presents a noticeably different story, but provides lessons that may

have general application. Ranney and Kendall (1956, p. 284) argue: “In the ‘multifactional’ one-party areas especially, the direct primary has undoubtedly lessened the power of the few leaders at the top of the party hierarchy to make nominations; so that the Democratic primaries in such states as Arkansas, Florida, and Mississippi probably resemble more closely the utopia of the partisans of the direct primary than those in the two-party states or the bifactional states.”

While it would be unfair to term it a consensus, the dominant view is certainly that the primaries were expected to decrease party strength in the electorate and create a new class of independent representatives. Loyalty rates in Congress should have declined, unless, of course, the revisionist view of the history holds.

3. Introduction of Primaries

During the first two decades of the last century, almost all U.S. states changed their method of nomination, abandoning conventions and caucuses in favor of direct primaries. Merriam and Overacker (1928) describe the relatively rapid adoption of this mechanism throughout the country. While progressives led the way, the reform was chosen both in progressive and conservative states. Ware (2002) offers an excellent analysis focused on a puzzling question: If party regulars controlled the electoral and legislative processes in most states, then why were primaries adopted in the first place? In the southern states, Key (1949) and Kousser (1974) argue that the primaries were designed to preserve one-party rule by white elites and middle class citizens. Elsewhere it is generally believed that the primary reflected the rise of progressivism.

As noted above, we exploit the variation in the pattern of adoptions to estimate how much primary elections affected the loyalty of members of Congress to their parties within the legislature and of voters to the parties in congressional elections. Within a state the adoption of the primary may have had two effects on representatives. It may have turned out representatives who were unpopular or out of line with their party’s electorate. It

may also have changed the incentives facing sitting incumbents, making them less reliant on local party officials and more attuned to their electoral base. By examining behavior before and after the adoption of the primaries, we can assess whether popular control of the nominating process affected roll call voting in Congress and general election competition. We can also exploit variation across states to examine how behavior within specific Congresses is affected, because not all states adopted primaries at the same time. Within a given Congress, we expect that legislators from states with primaries will be less loyal to their party than legislators from states with convention or committee nomination procedures.

Somewhat surprisingly (to us), one of the most difficult problems is determining when and where the direct primary was actually used. In this respect, two features of the direct primary in the early 20th Century complicate the coding. First, in many states primaries were mandatory, but in some states they were optional, and in some cases they were used only to “advise” a convention or nominating committee (sometimes the party delegation in the state legislature). Second, although some states codified the primaries in statute immediately, in others the primary emerged as a regular party practice that was not enshrined in state law until later.

Using a variety of sources, including historical works, state manuals, and election results, we coded the dates and types of primary elections used in each state and year. In some cases the coding is difficult and involves an element of judgement. The most difficult cases are those where the primary is optional but appears to be used routinely as a matter of party practice. The white primaries in the south are particularly difficult to date since many of these were allowed by law or party rules and used at the discretion of the party leaders. Further complicating the coding, some states use primaries for only some offices – *e.g.*, for many years, Indiana and New York used primaries to nominate candidates for the U.S. House but not for the U.S. Senate.

Table A.1 shows our coding of mandatory and optional primaries for U.S. House and U.S. Senate elections outside the south. The dates reflect the date the law was passed. This table is used in the data analyses below to identify which candidates had to run for election under

a primary system and when in the panel the change occurred. We do not consider this table definitive, and appreciate comments and corrections. We have inspected tables published in other works, such as Merriam and Overacker (1928), Galderisi and Ezra (2001), Ware (2002), and Harvey and Mukherjee (n.d.), and find noticeable discrepancies. We have built on these tables and done our best to resolve discrepancies, but some questions remain.¹²

In the analysis below we restrict our definition of primaries to mandatory primaries, or cases where optional primaries were used every year (Kentucky) and would therefore appear to be effectively mandatory from the point of view of individual House candidates. We omit cases where the coding of the primary election law is unclear or contradictory.¹³

As always, a major methodological concern is omitted variables. In particular, our analysis must somehow incorporate unmeasured characteristics of a state's politics – a strong progressive ideology, for example – that influence both party loyalty in the state's congressional delegation and the introduction of the direct primary in the state. Omitting these characteristics could lead us to infer a causal link between party loyalty and the direct primary, even when none exists. The panel structure of the data alleviates this problem to a large degree. We can include state fixed effects and even district fixed effects, which will capture the underlying unmeasured state characteristics.

Even fixed effects will fail us, however, if the unmeasured factors are trending rather than fixed. Suppose, for example, that a state party is trending away from the national party. Then its congressional delegation might have decreasing loyalty rates. In addition, it might adopt the primary, perhaps in order to guarantee its independence from the national party in the future (as Ulysses lashed himself to the mast in order to hear the sirens sing.) The result would be a spurious positive correlation between the use of the primary and party disloyalty – reflecting the changing nature of the state's politics – even with the inclusion of state and year fixed effects.

¹²We used the following materials: Joint Committee of the Senate and Assembly of the State of New York (1910), Aylsworth (1908, 1912), Merriam (1908), Merriam and Overacker (1928), and various newspapers.

¹³Another plausible view is that only a binding primary has teeth. When we drop the optional states the results are virtually identical to those reported here.

We do not have sufficient data to estimate a trend for each district or state. However, we can assess whether short run changes in loyalty of a state’s delegation explain which states adopt primaries and when. We find that loyalty rates and changes in loyalty rates do not provide any leverage in explaining the timing of the adoption of primaries. This is consistent with Ware’s (2002) description of how and why the direct primary was adopted. He attributes it to a practical, problem-solving approach – the “problem” being how to nominate and elect candidates in a large and growing society with highly decentralized political parties and a participatory culture – together with a variety of idiosyncratic factors including personal goals and rivalries, factional battles, and inter-party conflict. He notes that the pattern of timing across states cannot be explained by conventional arguments. And he describes a number of cases, including Illinois, Massachusetts, Missouri, and Pennsylvania, where party loyalists and party regulars were instrumental in passing primary laws. As he and others have observed, states with strong party organizations were just as likely and almost as quick to adopt the direct primary as states with a progressive or populist streak.

4. Primaries and Loyalty in Congress

The main dependent variable of interest in this study is *Party Loyalty* within Congress. We measure this in two ways: (i) the percentage of times that members of Congress vote in the same direction as a majority of the members of their party, and (ii) the percentage of times that members of Congress vote in the same direction as a majority of the leadership of their party.

As noted above, some scholars speculate that the introduction of primaries would lead to the selection of more extremists within parties, while others argue that introduction of primaries might lead to policy moderation as legislators must attend more to voters and less to party elites. To test these hypotheses, in future work we will study ideological measures, such as Poole and Rosenthal’s (1997) Nominate scores and “pro-progressivism” roll call scores.

In formulating the dependent variable, one question is what population of roll call votes ought to be included in the analysis. A large number of roll call votes are nearly unanimous or very lopsided and reflect grand standing or symbolic politics. These carry little information about the influence of party in government. In order to capture the issues where party loyalty likely matters, we study all roll call votes decided by less than 80%. We also examined the subset of very close votes – those with a division of 60-40% or less.

A second methodological question is what to do about the optional primaries, especially in the south. In most southern states primaries were optional, but they were used so regularly by the Democratic party that they probably appeared mandatory, at least from the point of view of the individual congressman. For the purposes of this paper we omit the southern states – we will study them in the future once we determine when a state’s use of the primary is *de facto* mandatory. This has the unfortunate effect of limiting the inferences that we can draw about Democrats, because most of them came from southern states in this period.

A simple “before and after” analysis suggests that that direct primaries lowered party loyalty rates somewhat. Consider all states that passed primary laws during the period of intense activity, 1904-1917, and consider the loyalty scores of their congressional delegations before and after the change. Using the “loyalty to the party membership” variable defined in (i) above, the average loyalty rate across the five pre-primary congresses is 90%, and the median is 92%. For the five post-primary congresses, the corresponding average and median figures are 81% and 82.5%, respectively. Thus, there was a 9 point drop in the mean loyalty rate, and a 9.5 point drop in the median. Figure 1 shows the distribution of loyalty rates for each of the ten pre- and post-primary congresses. There is a clear drop between the pre- and post-primary periods. Importantly, the series is not simply trending downward.

[Figure 1]

To exploit all of the available data, and to control for district preferences and year effects, we employ standard panel data methods. We regress loyalty rates on an indicator of primary election plus fixed effects for years and fixed effects for either districts or members. When using district effects, we include a separate effect for each district for each decade. This

captures the partisanship of the district within the decade, as well as other factors, such as state level factors.

The choice of district or member fixed effects reflects two possible ways that primaries might affect loyalty. Primaries might create less loyalty either by replacing one legislator with another, or they might increase the responsiveness of the existing member to the partisans in the district. Estimates using member-specific fixed effects capture the latter. Specifically, member-specific effects hold constant the preferences of the individual legislator. Any change in loyalty attributable to the introduction of the primary reflects a change in the individual legislator's roll call voting behavior. Estimates using district-specific fixed effects capture both channels of influence – turnover and responsiveness. The district-specific fixed effect holds constant the district's preferences as well as features of the state. Any change in loyalty attributable to primaries may reflect either a change in who represents the district or the behavior of a single representative over time. The difference in the direct primary effect between these two analyses, then, is substantively meaningful as it reflects the change attributable to turnover and the change attributable to responsiveness.

Table 1 presents the estimated effects of the direct primary on party loyalty rates of the House of Representatives. The analyses show Democrats and Republicans separately, and two different dependent variables: loyalty to the party membership (top panel) as well as loyalty to the party leadership (bottom panel). For each party, we present three regressions. The first (Model 1) contains district fixed effects, plus several control variables drawn from the literature. The controls are: the share of seats held by the member's party (*Share of Seats Held by Member's Party*), whether the member is in the majority party (*Member is in the Majority Party*), and whether the member is of the same party as the president (*Member is in the President's Party*). The second analysis (Model 2) includes district fixed effects and year fixed effects. The effect in this model reflects “conversion” and “replacement.” The third analysis (Model 3) includes fixed effects for each representative. The effect in this model reflects only “conversion.” For Models 1 and 2 we compute clustered standard errors, where each cluster is a representative.

[Table 1]

Overall, the results are consistent with the claims that moving to direct primaries reduced party loyalty, especially for Republicans. Looking at the top panel, for Republicans there is a 4-5 percentage point drop in loyalty rates overall attributable to the introduction of primary elections, except in Model 2. The results are more sensitive to specification for Democrats – Models 1 and 3 show a 4 percentage point drop in loyalty under the direct primary, but Model 2 does not.¹⁴ For Republicans, the estimates in the bottom and top panels are similar. For Democrats, the results are suggestive but more variable across specifications.

A large literature suggests that Congress changes primarily through turnover. Interestingly, our findings indicate that much of the effect of the direct primary is *within* legislator, and thus reflects responsiveness as much as turnover. For Republicans, in the panel analyses with member-specific fixed effects the effect of the introduction of the direct primary is about 4 percentage points (Model 3, top panel). Panel analyses with district-specific fixed effects yield a smaller, and statistically insignificant, estimated effect (Model 2, top panel).

While generally statistically significant, the effect is of a modest size. For example, consider a Congress with 235 Republicans and 220 Democrats, and suppose party loyalty falls by 5 percentage points, from 85% to 80%. On average, this will lead to almost 12 additional Republican defections. If the Democrats suffer equally, then this would be offset by an average of 11 defections by Democrats, leading to an expected net loss of just 1 Republican vote. On the other hand, the loss could loom large for a risk averse leadership. If majority party leaders want to be *certain* they have enough votes to pass a bill, then the 5 percentage point decline in loyalty means that the leaders must plan on spending resources to persuade 12 additional members to vote with them. Even in this context, however, our findings imply that the direct primary hardly produced the transformation that many Progressives imagined and many commentators feared.

How robust is the effect? We checked robustness in two ways. First, we considered how

¹⁴In a separate analysis, not shown, we considered the U.S. Senate. The pattern is qualitatively similar to that in the House – indeed, for Republicans the estimated coefficients are even larger than those the House – but the analyses are leveraged on only 30 cases, so we do not have much confidence in the estimates.

the effect varied across regions. Second, we considered how specific years in Congress affected the estimates.

Region appears to be quite important. We divided the nation into west (all states west of the Mississippi), and nonwest (east of the Mississippi but outside the south). Prior commentary and research argues that the westerners were more likely to break from their party, because the Progressive movement was much stronger in the upper midwest and far west than in the east (*e.g.*, Nye, 1951; Sanders, 1999). Indeed, the data bear out the distinctiveness of the west.

Table 2 shows the estimated effect of the introduction of the direct primary on Republicans in the west and in the non-west. Based on Model 2, among western Republicans the introduction of the primary election reduced loyalty rates by more than 8 percentage points. Among eastern Republicans, the introduction of the primary election had at most a tiny and statistically insignificant effect. The difference between the regions' coefficients is statistically significant at the 1% level. The differences are also large and statistically significant using Model 1. The estimates based on Model 3, however – with member-specific fixed-effects – do not show much difference between regions. The results are similar for loyalty to the party leadership (right-hand side of the table).

[Table 2]

The variation across years is also interesting. (Note, we do not present the year fixed effects in the tables to conserve space.) One way in which year matters is through the direct effect on loyalty rates. Party loyalty may be lower in some years than others. Indeed, some of the years do stand out – party loyalty rates are much lower, on average, in the 54th Congress (1895-1896) and 61st Congress (1909-1910). The 1894 election brought into Congress a large number of Populists and new Republicans. This election heralded the realigning election of 1896. The 61st Congress experienced one of the most dramatic events in the early 20th Century Congress – the revolt against Speaker Cannon. Both years saw somewhat lower rates of loyalty overall. Even controlling for these facts, the introduction of the primaries significantly affects loyalty.

As a further test of the importance of years we omitted each year from the data and reestimated the effect of primaries on loyalty. The effects are unchanged across the analyses run with one of the years dropped, with one exception.

The exception is the 61st Congress. When we omit this Congress from the data, the estimated effect of primaries on loyalty falls by nearly 50%. Based on Model 1, for example, the effect of primaries on loyalty overall drops from 5.6 percentage points to 3.5 percentage points. The large difference suggests that most of the observed effect of the primaries on loyalty was manifest in the 61st Congress. Specifically, this result means that in 1909 and 1910 representatives subject to primary elections were especially disloyal, relative to those not subject to the primary. This is clear from the marginals: the average party loyalty score among Republicans in the 61st congress who were not yet subject to primary elections was 90%, while the average party loyalty score for those who faced primaries was just 72%.

The 61st Congress is historically very important. It is the Congress that revolted from Speaker Cannon. Indeed, the direct primaries might have contributed to the insurgency against the old order. Primaries may have freed members sufficiently from control by local political organizations to allow them to oppose the Speaker without fear of electoral retribution. Some evidence of this is found using the analysis in Baker (1973). Baker identifies the insurgent legislators who led the attack on Cannon, and further classifies them as Progressives or non-Progressive based on their voting records on Progressive issues. The Progressive insurgents were: William Cary (WI), Henry Cooper (WI), Charles Davis (MN), Asle Gronna (ND), Gilbert Haugen (IA), Elbert Hubbard (IA), Irvine Lenroot (WI), Charles Lindbergh (MN), E.H. Madison (KS), Eben Martin (SD), Clarence Miller (MN), Elmer Morse (WI), Victor Murdock (KS), John Nelson (WI), George Norris (NE), and Miles Poindexter (WA) (Baker, 1973, p. 680). All of the Progressive insurgents either won nomination in a primary or would have to run in a mandatory primary in 1910. Of the 27 non-Progressive insurgents, 15 faced primary elections. Thus, 72% of the 43 insurgents faced primaries. This compares with just 45% for non-insurgents.

Finally, we should point out that our results might either over-state or under-state the

importance of the direct primary, because we have not attempted to weight the various roll calls in terms of their “importance”. It is possible the reduction in loyalty mainly took the form of defections on symbolic votes – it is even possible that the agenda changed to incorporate more such votes, in response to a demand by congressmen seeking to signal back to their primary constituencies. This requires careful study and coding of the votes, and we leave it for future research.

One thing we can say for certain: It is not simply the case that the effect of the primary appears only on lopsided roll calls. If anything, the opposite is true. When we restrict the sample to the set of close roll calls – with a vote division of 60-40% or less – and re-estimate the specifications shown in Tables 1 and 2, we almost always find even stronger effects of the direct primary.

5. Primaries and Loyalty in the Electorate

Elections are the mechanism through which primaries affect loyalty within the Congress. Primaries may affect loyalty by changing people or by changing the incentives of those in office. Voters might use primary elections to remove party stalwarts and replace them with representatives who are more responsive to voters. Candidates might realize that without party organizations controlling nomination they need to act more independently and establish a personal base. The first effect would be evident in turnover rates: renomination rates should be lower with primaries. The second effect would be evident in voters’ loyalty rates: split ticket voting in general elections should grow in states with primaries. To our knowledge, no study has looked at the first sort of effect; a small literature examines the effects of primaries on party voting in general elections.

We first consider the effects on renomination. For every member of Congress, we used ICPSR study number 7803, plus primary election returns, to determine whether the member ran for reelection and won or lost the nomination. In the decade before a state adopted the primary, about 2.6% of U.S. House members were *not* renominated. In the decade after

a state adopted the direct primary, about 4.5% of U.S. House members lost in a primary election. The difference between these proportions is significantly different from 0 at the .05 level.

To control for state and year effects, we estimated a conditional logit model (Chamberlain, 1980). This procedure adjust for systematic variation in renomination rates across states and within years. The results are shown in Table 3. Holding constant the state and year, the estimated coefficient on the indicator of whether the state has a primary election was .93. This is statistically significant at the 5% level. The estimate implies that in a “typical” state, the direct primary increased the probability an incumbent would lose renomination from .04 to .046. If this mechanism is used to replace stalwarts, then clearly very few were actually replaced as a result of the introduction of the primary, which produced at most a few additional replacements a year within each party.

[Table 3]

Viewed from another perspective – the congressional career – the effect might be more a bit more important. While the magnitude of this effect is modest, it represents a 15% increase in incumbent defeats at the nomination stage. If legislators are highly risk averse, then the primary represented a nontrivial increase in the risk of defeat. Over the course of 5 elections, it increases the probability of defeat at some point from about .185 to .21, a 14% increase.

A second way that the electoral connection is manifest is through the party loyalty of voters. The primaries, it was widely argued at the time of their adoption, were expected to make politicians freer agents. While we cannot observe directly how independent they were of the party organizations, general elections do provide indirect evidence of the independence of politicians. If politicians indeed became less tied to their parties and their campaigns more personalistic, then party line voting within elections should have declined.

We measure the “split-ticket” voting in U.S. House elections using the absolute difference between the democratic vote share for the U.S. House candidates and for governors. Our specification differs from that in Harvey and Mukherjee (n.d.), in four respects. First our

analysis is at the county level so we include county level fixed effects instead of state or district level effects. Second, we only include House races where the partisan affiliations of the House candidates match the partisan affiliations of the gubernatorial candidates. Third, we include year fixed effects to take into account national shifts in “split-ticket” voting. Finally, we disaggregate the effect of the direct primaries on “split-ticket” voting in the western and non-western states.¹⁵

Table 4 presents the regression results including both county and year fixed effects. The estimates reveal that the introduction of the primaries is associated with an increase in the difference between the partisan vote in House and gubernatorial elections. Introducing direct primaries increased the difference between the democratic vote share in the House and gubernatorial elections by 0.7 percentage points.

[Table 4]

The results suggest there is a modest increase in personalistic voting and a drop in party line voting, which is consistent with findings in Harvey and Mukherjee (n.d.). The overall effect of the direct primary on “split ticket” voting is less than a third as large as the effect of the party ballot, and about half as large as the effect of having a straight-party-ticket circle or lever. Again, the effects are much more pronounced in the west. There, the effect of the direct primary nearly as large as the effect of the party ballot, and larger than the effect of the straight-ticket level. The estimates suggest that the direct primary had no effect in the non-west, or might even have led to a slight decline in split-ticket voting.

Primaries might have contributed to increases in governor-House ticket-splitting in several ways. One possibility is that individual politicians asserted their political independence and developed a personal vote. Interestingly, there was a small increase in the incumbency advantage in this period, but it is never more than 2 percentage points (*e.g.*, Gelman and King, 1990).

¹⁵In a separate analysis not presented here we also considered all statewide offices up and down the ballot. In these elections, the candidates in all offices face a common electorate. We compute the standard deviation of the vote across all offices within each state. This analysis revealed that the introduction of the primaries is associated with a modest increase in the variability of the vote across statewide offices, indicating a modest decline in party line voting.

Another important possibility is that the institution of primary elections weakened party organizations. Party organizations no longer had the function of nomination and recruitment, and they may have lost some of the reward that they could offer loyalists within the organization. In New York, for example, Thomas Platt was a long time Republican party boss and, at the end of his career, was rewarded with a U.S. Senate seat. Without the ability to assign loyalists to posts, the party organizations lost a valuable reward that they could offer in exchange for the effort local leaders exerted on behalf of the state and local machines. Split ticket voting and variance in electoral returns might have grown not because politicians were more assertive and independent but because parties were simply weaker. Party nominees, then, became a more heterogeneous lot. Voters responded in turn. And election results became more variable.

6. Conclusions

At the time of their passage, and for a century since, most students of political science and history have viewed the primaries as a sweeping reform that fundamentally transformed party organizations, elections, and ultimately behavior within the institution. Revisionists have suggested that party loyalists in fact supported the introduction of the primary election (Ware, 2002). By extension, the introduction of the primaries ought to have strengthened the hand of the party organizations.

Reality falls between these views. Contrary to the revisionist view, the introduction of the primary decreased loyalty in Congress, especially in the Congress that revolted against Speaker Cannon. And, the primaries lowered party loyalty within the electorate, producing higher levels of split ticket voting, more variability in election results, and slightly lower renomination rates for incumbents. The traditional view, however, grossly exaggerates the importance of the primary. While the reform did affect party loyalty, it was hardly the transformative electoral institution that many envisioned. The effects on party loyalty in Congress and on split ticket voting are statistically significant, but seem substantively modest.

Nonetheless, there exists the possibility that the true impact of the primary was not felt in the immediate aftermath of the reform but, gradually, many years later. If our estimated effects of the primary on electoral competition are roughly correct, then the introduction of the primary created an incentive for politicians to establish their independence, and a mechanism through which voters could replace stalwarts with legislators more representative of the voters' views. The effects are modest, but over the decades their effects on elections would certainly cumulate. If primary had a gradual, cumulative effect, then it would have allowed voters to select more independent partisans leading to a gradual decline in party loyalty and a gradual increase in split ticket voting.

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Table 1: The Direct Primary and Party Loyalty in Congress, 1890-1920

Loyalty to Party Membership						
	Republicans			Democrats		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Direct Primary	-5.63** (1.35)	-2.32 (1.43)	-3.86** (0.77)	-4.09* (1.64)	0.74 (1.86)	-3.97** (1.37)
Share of Seats Held by Member's Party	-28.75** (2.17)	--	--	-18.14** (4.46)	--	--
Member is in Majority Party	3.85** (0.61)	--	--	0.07 (1.03)	--	--
Member is in President's Party	7.17** (0.48)	--	--	-3.04** (0.79)	--	--
Year	-0.04 (0.08)	--	--	0.20* (0.09)	--	--
Adjusted R ²	0.46	0.54	0.62	0.63	0.72	0.72
# Obs.	2836	2836	2836	1352	1352	1352
Loyalty to Party Leadership						
	Republicans			Democrats		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Direct Primary	-6.48** (1.37)	-2.20 (1.44)	-3.43** (0.79)	-5.01** (1.85)	0.73 (1.55)	-1.06 (1.38)
Share of Seats Held by Member's Party	-33.65** (2.34)	--	--	-31.19** (5.30)	--	--
Member is in Majority Party	4.65** (0.60)	--	--	-0.52 (1.16)	--	--
Member is in President's Party	9.62** (0.51)	--	--	2.52 (1.47)	--	--
Year	-0.15 (0.08)	--	--	0.07 (0.16)	--	--
Adjusted R ²	0.50	0.58	0.65	0.64	0.77	0.77
# Obs.	2816	2816	2816	1318	1318	1318

Models 1 and 2 contain district fixed effects. Model 3 contains individual level fixed effects for each representative. Models 2 and 3 also contains year fixed effects. Clustered standard errors are in parentheses, where each cluster is a representative.

Table 2: The Direct Primary and Party Loyalty in Congress, 1890-1920 Republicans Only, By Region						
	Loyalty to Party Membership			Loyalty to Party Leadership		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Direct Primary Western States	-11.68** (2.40)	-8.47** (2.40)	-4.01** (1.02)	-12.36** (2.50)	-8.14** (2.47)	-3.54** (1.04)
Direct Primary Non-Western States	-2.94* (1.15)	0.33 (1.30)	-2.84** (0.86)	-3.86** (1.18)	0.37 (1.33)	-2.16* (0.88)
Share of Seats Held by Member's Party	-28.79** (2.16)	--	--	-33.66** (2.34)	--	--
Member is in Majority Party	3.83** (0.60)	--	--	4.62** (0.59)	--	--
Member is in President's Party	7.15** (0.49)	--	--	9.60** (0.52)	--	--
Year	-0.03* (0.08)	--	--	-0.14 (0.08)	--	--
Adjusted R ²	0.47	0.55	0.62	0.50	0.58	0.65
# Obs.	2836	2836	2836	2816	2816	2816

Models 1 and 2 contain district fixed effects. Model 3 contains individual level fixed effects for each representative. Models 2 and 3 also contains year fixed effects. Clustered standard errors are in parentheses, where each cluster is a representative.

* statistically significant at the .05 level

** statistically significant at the .01 level

Table 3: The Direct Primary and Party Nominations, 1890-1920		
Dep. Var. = Member Renominated		
	All States	By Region
Direct Primary	1.87** (0.53)	--
Direct Primary Western States	--	1.97** (0.61)
Direct Primary Non-Western States	--	1.82** (0.55)
Pseudo R ²	0.064	0.064
# Obs.	2353	2353

Both models contain state and year fixed effects, and are estimated using a conditional logit specification.

* statistically significant at the .05 level

** statistically significant at the .01 level

Table 4: The Direct Primary and Split Ticket Voting, 1890-1920 Dep. Var. = Absolute Difference Between House and Governor Vote		
	All States	By Region
Party Ballot	-2.67** (0.24)	-1.92** (0.25)
Straight Ticket	-1.17** (0.15)	-0.80** (0.16)
Direct Primary	0.68** (0.24)	--
Direct Primary Western States	--	1.60** (0.25)
Direct Primary Non-Western States	--	-0.65* (0.26)
Adjusted R ²	0.11	0.13
# Obs.	7251	7251

All models contain county and year fixed effects.

* statistically significant at the .05 level

** statistically significant at the .01 level

AZ	1909	NV	1909
CA	1909	NH	1909
CO	1910	NJ	1911
CT	1955	NM	1939
DE ¹	1978	NY	1913
ID ²	1909-1919, 1931	ND	1907
IL	1910	OH	1913
IN	1915	OK	1907
IA	1907	OR	1904 ⁴
KS	1908	PA	1907
KY ³	1912	RI	1947
ME	1911	SD	1907
MD	1910	TN	1909
MA	1911	UT	1937
MI	1909	VT	1915
MN	1901	WA	1907
MO	1907	WV	1915
MT	1912	WI	1904 ⁴
NE	1907	WY	1911

¹ Delaware had optional primaries beginning in 1913, but did not use them in U.S. House elections.

² Idaho repealed its primary law in 1919, and passed a new law in 1931. Between 1920 and 1930 U.S. House candidates (and all statewide officers) were nominated by convention.

³ Kentucky had optional primaries from 1920-1935; both parties used them every election for U.S. House nominations during this period, so we treat them as if they were mandatory.

⁴ The Oregon and Wisconsin laws did not go into effect until the elections of 1906. For the analyses in this paper we use 1906 as the year these states switched to having direct primaries. There is no substantive change in the results if we use 1904.

Figure 1

