

# Campaign Spending in Primary Elections in the U.S. House\*

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## Abstract

Although there has been extensive research on campaign spending in general elections, less is known about the effects of campaign spending in primary elections. We use data from 1984-98 in the U.S. House to compare primary and general elections and examine incumbent and challenger spending in different types of primary elections: in-party (challenging the incumbent in the primary), out-party (a primary that determines who runs against the incumbent in the general), and open (no incumbent in either election). We find that the type of primary and competitiveness of the election are major factors in primary spending. We also examine the role of PACs and self-financing in the primary, as well as the effect of primary spending on turnout and vote in the primary. Finally, we explore how these effects have changed over time. We obtain results qualitatively similar to the findings in general elections, namely, spending appears to help the challengers.

Comments welcome.

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## Introduction

Direct primaries are peculiar to the United States. Nominations in other democracies are determined by political parties without a separate election. Primary elections were a Progressive Era reform, first adopted in Wisconsin in 1903. In presidential elections, primaries were once seen as important bellwethers for the majority of delegates selected by other means. But since 1972, the vast majority of delegates to nominating conventions in both major parties have been elected in primaries.<sup>1</sup>

Primaries have had important consequences for our electoral system. They have “reduced the importance of the parties in the electoral process” (Luttbeg and Gant 1995, 50; Price 1984, 80). Primaries elevate the importance of candidates and their organizations. As John Bibby argues, “the direct primary, therefore, imposes a personal responsibility upon each candidate to create a campaign organization capable of winning the primary” (1994, 25). Primaries thus give candidates independence from the parties and “many candidates like it that way” (Hershey 1984, 28). Primaries also require representatives to think about both primary and general election constituencies (Fenno 1978).

Not surprisingly, adding a second election adds to the costs of democracy. Not only do governments need to pay the administrative costs of these elections, but “the costs of politics escalated dramatically with the use of the direct-primary system of nomination” (Huckshorn 1984, 106).

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<sup>1</sup>The proportion of delegates to presidential nominating conventions elected in primaries rose from 34 percent in 1968 to 72 percent in 1972.

Primaries exclude parties to varying degrees. The role of the party in the nominating process can be divided into three types—a formal role which continues in some states that have pre-primary conventions or endorsements, an informal party role in which some party groups endorse candidates or try to simplify the choice for voters, and primaries in which parties take no active role (Maisel, Gibson, and Ivry 1996, 152). Table 1 provides the list of states falling under each category, according to Maisel, Gibson, and Ivry.

As V. O. Key observed decades ago, in one-party states, “the Democratic primary in the South is in reality the election” (Key 1950, 407). In Southern states, one-party dominance led to the creation of a runoff primary between the two candidates receiving the most votes in the first election (Jacobson 1997, 13). Runoff primaries continue in ten of the eleven former confederate states. One southern state has its own approach to runoff primaries; in Louisiana all candidates run on the same ballot without regard to party, if no candidate wins a majority of the vote, the top two vote-getters then run against each other in a runoff, even if they are both from the same party. One scholar called this Louisiana version of a blanket primary, the “nonpartisan” primary (Kuzenski 1997, 207).

As the Southern runoff primaries illustrate, primaries have changed over time to respond to different state cultures. States with stronger party systems are more likely to hold closed primaries, limiting voters in their primary to persons registered with their party. States with a more individualistic tradition and weaker parties generally do not restrict primary voting to registered partisans in open primaries. Alaska, Washington, and most recently, California have adopted a new primary system that permits voters to cast ballots for a person from one party for

**Table 1: The Role of Parties in the Nominating Process**

<i>Formal Party Role</i>	<i>Informal Party Role</i>	<i>No Active Party Role</i>	
<i>States hold party conventions that have a significant impact on access to a primary ballot (e.g., in the form of pre-primary endorsements)</i>	<i>Party organizations or other party groups endorse candidates or take other actions in their favor without that action having an official role in primary process</i>	<i>Party organization or other party groups play no active role in primary process</i>	
Colorado	California	Alabama <sup>c</sup>	Montana
Connecticut	Delaware	Alaska	Nebraska
Iowa <sup>a</sup>	Illinois	Arizona	Nevada
New Mexico	Louisiana	Arkansas	New Hampshire
New York	Massachusetts	Florida	New Jersey
North Dakota	Minnesota	Georgia	North Carolina
Rhode Island	Ohio	Hawaii	Oklahoma
Utah	Pennsylvania	Idaho	Oregon
Virginia <sup>b</sup>		Indiana <sup>d</sup>	South Carolina
		Kansas	South Dakota
		Kentucky	Tennessee
		Maine	Texas
		Maryland	Vermont
		Michigan <sup>d</sup>	Washington
		Mississippi	West Virginia
		Missouri	Wisconsin <sup>e</sup>
			Wyoming

Sources: Maisel, Gibson, and Ivry 1996; Bibby 1996; Council of State Governments 1996

Notes: <sup>a</sup> In Iowa, a post-primary convention nominates candidates when no candidates poll 35 percent in a primary.

<sup>b</sup> In Virginia, the political parties' executive committees may substitute a convention for a primary; this practice is usually followed for congressional nominations and has been used for statewide office.

<sup>c</sup> In Alabama, the political parties' executive committees may substitute for primaries, but they have not done so in recent years.

<sup>d</sup> In Indiana and Michigan, conventions are used to nominate state-wide candidates below the level of governor and United States senator.

<sup>e</sup> In Wisconsin, the Republican party has a provision for pre-primary endorsements, but that provision has not been used since 1978.

governor, another party for attorney general, and so forth. Such a primary is called a blanket primary.<sup>2</sup>

California voters enacted the blanket primary by approving Proposition 198 in 1996. During that initiative campaign and in the ensuing litigation over the constitutionality of Proposition 198 there was substantial debate among political scientists about the impact of blanket primaries. One element that both sides agreed on was that independent voters would be more important. At least one source argues that candidates with the resources to appeal to such voters will be advantaged under blanket primaries. “It is these moderate, independent voters, who have been the most sought-after targets of self-financed candidates such as Perot, Huffington, and more recently, Checchi and Harman, since they are, by definition, disengaged from the more traditional means of political identification, that of party affiliation” (*California Journal* 1998, 2-3). Under blanket primaries, candidates facing only token opposition may be inclined to spend more “to keep their supporters energized and to keep the media from writing them off” (*California Journal* 1998, 3). In conventional open primaries or blanket primaries, party leaders worry about crossover voters who identify with one party but vote in the other party primary. However, according to Alvarez and Nagler there is “very little crossover voting,” and there is not much strategic behavior by voters in primary elections (Alvarez and Nagler 1999).

We are again indebted to the work of Maisel, Gibson, and Ivry who have categorized the varieties of primaries and whose table is provided as Table 2. We have shifted California in their table from a closed primary to a blanket primary classification.

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<sup>2</sup>Some refer to the blanket primary as an open primary, but in other open primary states, voters may not switch from party to party as they move from office to office. Instead, they select one party and are limited to candidate sets in that party.

**Table 2: Varieties of Primary Systems**

<u>Closed Primary</u>	<u>Open Primary</u>	<u>Blanket Primary</u>
<i>States maintain party lists; voters cannot change party affiliation after a certain date</i>	<i>Voters must choose a party on election day, but states do not maintain party lists</i>	<i>Voters are not required to choose a party prior to voting</i>
		<i>Voters may choose to vote in one party's primary for one office and another party's primary for a different office, and so on</i>
Arizona	Alabama	Hawaii
Connecticut	Arkansas	Idaho
Delaware	Georgia	Michigan
Florida	Illinois	Minnesota
Iowa	Indiana	North Dakota
Kansas	Mississippi	Utah
Kentucky	Missouri	Vermont
Maine	South Carolina	Wisconsin
Maryland	Tennessee	
Massachusetts	Texas	
Nebraska	Virginia	
Nevada		
New Hampshire		
New Jersey		
New Mexico		
New Mexico		
North Carolina		
Ohio		
Oklahoma		
Oregon		
Pennsylvania		
Rhode Island		
South Dakota		
West Virginia		
Wyoming		

Sources: Maisel, Gibson, and Ivry 1996; Bibby 1996

## Study Design and Methodology

We examine campaign spending in primary elections for the U.S. House during the 1984-98 election cycles. Using data from the FEC detailed candidate report files, we merged primary vote data from the published editions of *America Votes* (Scammon and McGillivray 1985, 1987, 1989, 1991, 1993, 1995; Scammon, McGillivray, and Cook 1997, 1999).<sup>3</sup>

The FEC does not require candidates to report complete receipts and expenditures for the primary election phase. Candidates are required to report twelve days prior to the primary.<sup>4</sup> To derive an estimate of primary spending, we calculated the number of days between the pre-primary report and the next FEC report submitted. We also calculated the average expenditure per day for that period and then, knowing the number of days between when the pre-primary report was submitted and the primary date, added the average expenditure per day times the number of days to the pre-primary expenditures. We realize that this is only an estimate; however, such an estimate is superior to relying on the pre-primary report or the next regular submission to the FEC.<sup>5</sup>

We exclude Louisiana from our analysis as a result of its unusual primary (which usually functions as a general election),<sup>6</sup> as well as several primary elections in Texas in 1996, as a result

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<sup>3</sup>We are grateful to Rhodes Cook for providing information before the 1998 edition was published.

<sup>4</sup>Candidates may also file a report thirty days after the primary. Few, if any, do so.

<sup>5</sup>To compare across years, we adjust the financial data for inflation; all figures are in 1998 dollars.

<sup>6</sup>We include Alaska and Washington (and California in 1998) since the top vote-getter in each party advances to the general election. Even though it is a blanket primary, we have divided the votes into the two parties to get the percentage received by each candidate within his or her

of a court decision.<sup>7</sup> We have also excluded special primary elections and third-party primary elections, and a few other unusual cases.<sup>8</sup> This leaves us with 6221 primary elections.

We classify primary candidates into four categories: incumbents, in-party challengers (who challenge the incumbent in the primary), out-party challengers (who will generally face the incumbent in the general election if they win the primary), and open-seat candidates (who will face the winner of the other primary in the general election if they win the primary).

### **Election Results**

We first investigate the frequency and competitiveness of primary elections, and whether election results in the primary are related to those in the general election. While certain elections are thought to be bad for Democrats or Republicans, some elections will be hard on incumbents generally. The most recent example of this was in 1992, which was a bad year for incumbents for two reasons. First, the reapportionment forced five incumbents to run against five other

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party.

<sup>7</sup>“In August 1996, the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Texas, in *Vera et al. v. Bush et al.*, redrew district boundaries, invalidated the results of the primary and runoff elections, and ordered new elections in thirteen congressional districts. In those districts, candidates participated in a special general election on November 5, 1996. Where no candidate received a majority of the vote cast, a runoff election was held on December 10, 1996, between the top two vote-getters, regardless of party” (Federal Election Commission 1997). The districts were 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 18, 22, 24, 25, 26, 29, and 30.

<sup>8</sup>When comparing primary and general elections, we exclude cases where the primary winner drops out of the race. Whenever there was a special election in a district during an election cycle, we also exclude the subsequent (regular) primary election, for we have not yet been able to separate the spending in the special and general (primary) elections, as a result of inconsistencies in FEC coding. Finally, we generally omit the four primary elections in which two incumbents ran against each other.



incumbents (in four primary elections, and one general election). Other redistricting changes forced incumbents to adjust to a new constituency. Second, in 1991, the public learned that many House members had bounced checks at the House Bank. In response to this scandal, voters could vote against the incumbent in the general election *and* the primary election.<sup>9</sup> Given the potential increased vulnerability of incumbents, strong challengers would be more willing to run against the incumbent (in both the primary and general election), exacerbating incumbent vulnerability (Jacobson and Kernell 1983). Writing about U.S. Senate elections, Mattei wrote, “A party primary has offered an early indication about the vulnerability of an incumbent; several studies have shown that the presence of a strong challenge and the incumbent’s margin of victory in his or her party primary are related to the general election results” (1996, 38). We expect that the number of general election defeats of incumbents to be correlated with the number of primary election defeats in the U.S. House as well. An incumbent who is very vulnerable may also decide to retire rather than risk running and losing in one of two elections.<sup>10</sup> Thus, we also investigate whether retirements are correlated with election defeats (Kiewiet and Zeng 1992).

In Table 3, we list the number of retirements, primary election defeats, and general election defeats for the U.S. House from 1946 to 1998. Since 1946, an average of 6.9 incumbents have been denied renomination in the primaries, but there is wide variability over time.

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<sup>9</sup>Jacobson and Dimock find that the “House banking scandal was the major reason for the usually high turnover of House seats in 1992. It contributed significantly to exit from the House by all routes: retirement, defeat in the primary election, and defeat in the general election” (1994, 621).

<sup>10</sup>Groseclose and Krehbiel who found that financial inducements “caused nearly twice as many retirements as redistricting and nearly four times as many retirements as the House Bank scandal” (1994, 95).

**Table 3: U.S. House Incumbents Retired or Defeated, 1946-1998**

Year	Retired	Primary Defeat	General Defeat
1946	32	18	52
1948	29	15	68
1950	29	6	32
1952	42	9	26
1954	24	6	22
1956	21	6	16
1958	33	3	37
1960	26	5	25
1962	24	12	22
1964	33	8	45
1966	22	8	41
1968	23	4	9
1970	29	10	12
1972	40	11	13
1974	43	8	40
1976	47	3	13
1978	49	5	19
1980	34	6	31
1982	40	10	29
1984	22	3	16
1986	40	3	6
1988	23	1	6
1990	27	1	15
1992	65	19	24
1994	48	4	34
1996	49	2	21
1998	33	1	6

Source: Ornstein, Mann, and Malbin (2000), Table 2-7.

Most incumbents are denied renomination in the election following redistricting. Since 1984 the average number of incumbents denied renomination for non-redistricting years has been 2.1.

There has also been a general trend towards fewer incumbents defeated in primaries: In the 1960s, with the multiple redistrictings resulting from the Supreme Court's malapportionment decisions, the average number of incumbents defeated was 7.4. In the 1970s, the average number denied renomination was 7.6. That number dropped to 4.6 in the 1980s and 5.4 in the 1990s. The most incumbents denied renomination from 1946 to 1998 was nineteen in 1992. When this unusual year is removed, only two House members on average have been denied renomination since 1984.

A slightly different trend is found in general elections. The number of incumbents denied reelection in general elections declined on average from 28.4 in the 1960s to under twenty per election in the 1970s, and bottomed out in the 1980s with only 17.6 suffering defeat in the general election. In the 1990s that number rose again to twenty per election.

The number of House retirements do not seem as sensitive to redistricting years as the number of incumbents defeated in primaries. The 1992 election again stands out as atypical with sixty-five House members retiring, the most of any election in the period in Table 3.

The bivariate correlation between general and primary defeats between 1946 and 1998 is 0.55 ( $p = 0.003$ ).<sup>11</sup> Neither the correlation between primary defeats and retirements, nor general defeats and retirements is statistically different than zero, even when controlling for the third

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<sup>11</sup>The correlation is qualitatively the same when controlling for retirements or election year.

variable (though they are both positive).<sup>12</sup> We conclude that primary and general defeats are related, and investigate this relationship further.

We explore how a competitive primary election affects the competitiveness of the general election for incumbents, open-seat candidates, and challengers, and how this has changed over time. We define a competitive primary as one in which the difference in vote percentage between the first- and second-place candidates was less than 20 percent. This is the standard that Bernstein (1977) and others use to define a divisive primary.<sup>13</sup> It also gives us a general measure of competitiveness that applies in two-candidate and multi-candidate elections.<sup>14</sup> Besides competitive primaries, there are two other categories: unopposed and weakly competitive. Unopposed candidates automatically receive 100 percent of the vote. In weakly competitive primaries, the difference between the top two vote-getters is somewhere between 20 percent and 100 percent.

In Table 4, we present the average two-party vote-share according to the competitiveness of the primary election and the type of candidate who won the primary.<sup>15</sup> We break this up into

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<sup>12</sup>Interestingly, the correlation between retirements and primary defeats is 0.51 ( $p = 0.008$ ) when controlling for the election year.

<sup>13</sup>Herrnson (2000) also uses the 20 percent margin to define a competitive general election.

<sup>14</sup>Hacker (1965) defines a divisive primary as one in which the winning candidate receives less than 65 percent. If one measures by absolute vote percentage, one cannot distinguish between a candidate who defeats one candidate 55 to 45 from a candidate who wins 55 percent of the vote while three other candidates split 45 percent evenly.

<sup>15</sup>We exclude those cases in which the incumbent lost in the primary election (or primary runoff) to a challenger ( $N = 22$ ), and cases where the incumbent ran against another incumbent in the primary ( $N = 4$ ). We also drop candidates such as Dean Gallo of New Jersey's 11<sup>th</sup> district in 1994; after he won the primary election, he withdrew from the general.

**Table 4:** Average U.S. House General Election Percentage by Primary Competitiveness and Candidate Type, 1984-1998**1994-1998**

Primary Competitiveness	Incumbent (N)	Open Seat (N)	Out-Party Challenger (N)
Unopposed	69.9 (818)	42.8 (41)	31.8 (539)
Weakly Competitive	68.1 (283)	48.4 (88)	36.5 (261)
Competitive (within 20%)	63.8 (11)	52.5 (121)	37.4 (161)

**1992**

Primary Competitiveness	Incumbent (N)	Open Seat (N)	Out-Party Challenger (N)
Unopposed	66.8 (212)	46.5 (29)	31.5 (153)
Weakly Competitive	64.9 (100)	51.9 (42)	38.9 (76)
Competitive (within 20%)	52.0 (18)	52.7 (71)	37.2 (93)

**1984-1990**

Primary Competitiveness	Incumbent (N)	Open Seat (N)	Out-Party Challenger (N)
Unopposed	73.1 (1136)	48.8 (60)	30.0 (755)
Weakly Competitive	71.4 (401)	50.4 (69)	35.4 (301)
Competitive (within 20%)	66.6 (20)	49.8 (92)	32.4 (229)

Source: Compiled from *America Votes*.

Notes: General Election Percentage is percent of two-party vote. Data include candidates who won the primary election and did not drop out of the race before the general election, and exclude incumbents who ran against other incumbents.

three different periods: 1994-1998, 1992, and 1984-1990. We use these categories because we would like to examine the difference between the 1980s and 1990s, and 1992 was a (potentially unusual) redistricting year. The second column of the table confirms the correlation found in Table 3: For incumbents, on average, a more competitive primary led to a more competitive general election. For example, between 1984 and 1990, an incumbent who wins a competitive primary receives about 67 percent of the two-party vote. On the other hand, after winning uncompetitive and unopposed primaries, incumbents (from 1994 to 1998) receive about 71 and 73 percent of the two-party vote, respectively. The general election percentages for incumbents are lower in 1992 than other years—as expected, redistricting affects incumbents’ reelection prospects adversely. In addition, the average general election percentages for incumbents in the 1980s are higher than in the 1990s. This is mostly a result of fewer unopposed incumbents in the 1990s than in the 1980s. Competitive primaries also led to a greater chance of drawing an experienced challenger (or any challenger at all), more competitive general elections, and a greater chance of losing the general election—trends related to Table 3. Herrnson (2000, 49) notes that the “same advantages of incumbency and preelection activities that make incumbents confident of reelection make them seem invincible to those contemplating a primary challenge.”

It is important to note the paucity of competitive primary elections for the incumbent: Out of 2669 incumbent primaries in non-redistricting years, only 31 (1.2 percent) of them were competitive. Over 73 percent of incumbents are unopposed in the primary election. There is no qualitative difference between 1984-1990 and 1994-1998. If we examine 1992 alone, incumbents’ primaries are more often competitive, but not by much: Incumbents had competitive primaries about 6% of the time and weakly competitive primaries 30% of the time (as opposed to

about 25% of the time in non-redistricting years). Thus, redistricting years hurt incumbents in both the general and primary election. This difference is explained by redistricting: Once incumbents adjust to their new primary and general election constituencies, they are less vulnerable in either election (Fenno 1978).

We expect to see a different pattern for open-seat candidates and challengers. For open-seat candidates, those that face (and win) competitive primaries should receive a higher vote percentage in the general election than those that face uncompetitive primaries. In districts where one party has an advantage, there is usually stiff competition in that party's primary, for whoever wins the primary is likely to win the general. In addition, the exposure in a competitive primary may boost the winner's chances in the general election. But if a party is favored to win an open seat, candidates from the opposing party will be reluctant to run, making an unopposed primary more likely.

In the third column of Table 4, we present the open-seat candidate's average two-party vote-share according to the competitiveness of the primary election.<sup>16</sup> Open-seat candidates in 1994-1998 who were unopposed in the primary receive about 43 percent of the two-party vote, those who were weakly competitive receive about 48 percent, and those who had competitive elections receive about 53 percent. A greater proportion of open-seat candidates from competitive primaries won the general election than those who won uncompetitive primaries. We also note that about half (284 out of 613) of all primary elections for open seats are competitive. This supports the findings of Herrnson: "Open-seat primaries are the most competitive of all

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<sup>16</sup>When making comparisons across primary and general elections, we only include winning primary candidates—losing candidates have no general election vote (or behavior).

nominating contests. They typically attract many highly qualified candidates, often pitting one elected official against another. Relatively large numbers of candidates with officeholding experience ran for open seats in 1998” (2000, 54; see also Jacobson and Kernell 1983, 33; and Maisel et al. 1996, 148). In general, there are more competitive open-seat primaries in 1994-1998 than 1984-1990, and even more in 1992.

We expect a similar pattern for challengers in the opposition party (out-party) as we found for open-seat candidates. For out-party challengers, those that face competitive primaries do so because there is a better chance of defeating the incumbent in the general election, i.e., the incumbent looks weak. Competitive primaries, then, should lead to competitive general elections. This pattern is borne out in the last column of Table 4, where we present the out-party challenger’s average two-party vote-share according to the competitiveness of the primary election.

In 1994-1998, unopposed out-party challengers received about 32 percent of the two-party vote in the general election, and those who were opposed (competitively or not) received about 37 percent. Similar percentages are found for the other election years as well. This repeats the pattern of open-seat candidates, although the general election percentage is lower, and such challengers win less often than open-seat candidates. Jacobson found a similar pattern for challengers in the 1972-1976 elections: “On the average, challengers who have had primary campaigns do better in the general election than those who have not, but then this may only mean that more candidates choose to compete for nominations to oppose weaker incumbents” (1980, 138). There were more competitive primaries for out-party challengers in 1992 than in other election years (29% vs. about 17%).



Finally, we note that of the 30 challengers who beat incumbents in the primary (in-party challengers), 25 went on to win the general election. All eight challengers who easily defeated the incumbent (a weakly competitive primary) won the general election; and of the 22 challengers who beat the incumbent in a competitive primary, 17 won the general election. Only four percent, however, of in-party challengers were able to defeat the incumbent in the first place; most (94 percent) were not even competitive.<sup>17</sup>

Thus we find that there is a definite pattern between competitive primary and general elections. For incumbents, open-seat candidates and challengers, a competitive primary portends a competitive general election. This is encouraging for open-seat candidates and challengers, but deleterious for incumbents. For incumbents, however, uncompetitive primaries are likely to lead to uncompetitive general elections—an easy election race. For open-seat candidates and challengers, an uncompetitive primary leads to an uncompetitive general election—most often, a general election loss. In the year of redistricting (1992), there are more competitive primary and general elections.

### **How Candidates Fund Their Races**

We next investigate if patterns of primary election funding resemble the those in general elections. In general, challengers have trouble raising money, and thus, winning elections: “Underfinanced candidates usually lose, no matter what other resources they can muster. This has already been documented for challengers’ campaigns against incumbents in general elections; it is

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<sup>17</sup>This does not include incumbents who faced other incumbents in primaries, nor the challengers who ran against two incumbents in a primary.

equally true in primaries” (Maisel 1982, 60). For incumbents, we expect that the various funding sources in primary elections to be similar to the funding patterns in general elections as incumbents attract contributions throughout the election cycle. “Most incumbents keep at least a skeleton campaign organization—at minimum, the fundraising operation—permanently in place” (Jacobson 1997, 65). Thus, a snapshot of funding sources before the election should look similar to a snapshot right after the election, at least in percentage terms (the overall total amount raised should increase over the election cycle). On the other hand, we expect that open-seat candidates and challengers will have to wait until after the primary election to receive much of their funds from political action committees (PACs), especially if their primary election is contested. Thus, we expect that in primary elections such candidates will rely more on contributions from individuals and personal funds.

In Table 5, we present the sources of money (in percentage terms) for primary winners and losers for both primary and general elections, for 1984-1990 and 1992-1998.<sup>18</sup> For general elections, we use the money that the candidate received *after* the primary election. We first examine differences in funding patterns across candidate types in 1992-1998, and then examine differences from the primary election to the general election for each type of candidate. Finally, we examine how primaries in 1984-1990 differed from those in 1992-1998.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Herrnson (2000) presents figures for the 1998 general election (Figures 6-4, 6-5, and 6-6). His data are consistent with the results presented here. It is also consistent with data in Ornstein, Mann and Malbin (2000, Table 3-8).

<sup>19</sup>In general, all financial data is right-skewed. However, all of our conclusions hold when using the median as a basis for comparison. For ease of exposition we use the mean (average). The percentages do not add up to 100% because they do not include miscellaneous categories such as interest accrued in candidate accounts. Not all of the incumbents who lost in primaries are in Table 5: Incumbents that lost to other incumbents are not included, nor are the two incumbents who had won a special election earlier in the election cycle.

**Table 5:** Sources of Campaign Receipts in U.S. House Primary and General Elections, 1984-1998**1992-1998**

Candidate	Election Status	Average	Percentage of Contributions from:				N
			PAC	Individual	Candidate	Party	
Incumbent	Primary Losers	\$ 411,879	30.%	58.%	4.%	1.%	22
	Primary Winner	410,873	42	52	1	1	1442
	General	259,912	46	48	1	0	1442
Open Seat	Primary Losers	92,507	6	53	39	0	999
	Primary Winner	215,536	17	63	18	1	392
	General	392,434	32	48	15	2	392
Out-Party Challenger	Primary Losers	36,124	5	53	39	0	1067
	Primary Winner	81,543	13	64	20	1	1283
	General	145,826	21	55	18	2	1283
In-Party Challenger	Primary Losers	34,452	6	54	36	0	589
	Primary Winner	328,347	7	39	53	0	22
	General	474,370	24	36	34	1	22

**1984-1990**

Candidate	Election Status	Average	Percentage of Contributions from:				N
			PAC	Individual	Candidate	Party	
Incumbent	Primary Losers	\$ 320,949	22.%	70.%	2.%	0.%	6
	Primary Winner	311,157	39	55	1	0	1559
	General	250,782	59	41	1	2	1559
Open Seat	Primary Losers	93,262	8	64	27	0	455
	Primary Winner	223,376	18	67	13	0	221
	General	431,849	37	43	15	4	221
Out-Party Challenger	Primary Losers	22,362	5	57	35	0	822
	Primary Winner	55,440	14	69	16	0	1292
	General	118,631	27	48	20	5	1292
In-Party Challenger	Primary Losers	29,329	9	61	28	0	548
	Primary Winner	399,588	5	81	12	0	6
	General	473,651	30	50	16	2	6

Source: Federal Election Commission data.

Notes: All figures adjusted for inflation (1998 dollars). General election spending is money raised after the primary election. Candidate contributions include loans candidates made to their own campaigns. Primary winner and general election data include candidates who won the primary election and did not drop out of the race before the general election, and exclude incumbents who ran against other incumbents.

Among primary winners in 1992-1998, incumbents raise almost twice as much money as open-seat candidates by the primary election, and five times as much money as out-party challengers. In-party challengers who won the primary (*i.e.*, defeated the incumbent) spent nearly as much money as incumbents. The disparities are even greater when examining those that lost primary elections.

An important component of financing a campaign, for any candidate, is contributions from Political Action Committees. In allocating their resources, PACs follow an access (or legislative) strategy or an electoral (or ideological) strategy, or a mixed strategy (Wright 1996). PACs that follow an access strategy generally contribute to incumbents. They will also contribute to open-seat contests, but usually stay out of primary contests (Herrnson 2000). “Ideological PACs spend more time searching for promising challengers to support than do PACs that use access-seeking or mixed strategies. Ideological committees are also more likely than other PACs to support nonincumbents in congressional primaries” (Herrnson 2000, 129) For example, in contested primaries, WISH List will contribute funds to pro-choice Republican women candidates who face pro-life conservative opponents (Rozell 1999). Ideological PACs are strategic, however, in that they give money where they think it will make a difference—in competitive elections.

We find that open-seat candidates and out-party challengers have similar funding patterns. Incumbents receive a larger percentage of their funds from PACs than any non-incumbent candidate. Specifically, incumbents in 1992-1998 received 42 percent of their primary funds from PACs, while open-seat candidates, out-party and in-party challengers received 17 percent, 13 percent and 7 percent, respectively. Primary losers received even less of their funds from PACs: The percentage decreases to 30 percent for incumbents and about 6 percent for all other candidates.

Receiving so little funds from PACs and parties, primary candidates often turn to individual contributors, and that failing, their own pocketbook. While all candidates rely most heavily on individual contributions, incumbents rely on them less than open-seat candidates and out-party challengers. Incumbents in 1992-1998 received 52 percent of their funds from individual contributions, while open-seat candidates and out-party challengers received 63 percent and 64 percent, respectively. In-party challengers who win their primaries received 39 percent of their funds from individual contributions; those that lose to the incumbent received 54 percent from individuals, a percentage more in line with the other types of candidates. Incumbent, open-seat, and out-party primary losers received 58 percent, 53 percent, and 53 percent of their funds from individuals.

The greatest differences are found in how much each type of candidate contributes to his or her campaign.<sup>20</sup> “In primaries and the general elections for the House in 1994 some 163 candidates contributed \$50,000 or more to their own campaigns” (Eismeier and Pollock 1996, 86). Not surprisingly, from 1992-1998 incumbents—who can raise funds more easily—only contributed 1 percent of the funds to their own campaigns (on average). In contrast, open-seat and out-party primary winners contributed 18 percent and 20 percent of the funds to their campaigns. Those that lost the primary contributed 39 percent of their own funds to their campaigns. Among challengers who defeat incumbents, over half of their funding (53 percent) comes from their own pocketbook. Parties do not appear to play a large role in funding primary elections.

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<sup>20</sup>Following Herrnson, “candidate contributions include loans candidates made to their own campaigns” (2000, 155).

We now explore the differences between primary and general elections for each type of candidate. For incumbents, the percentage of contributions from each source is about the same in primary and general elections. Specifically, incumbents receive about half of their funds from individual contributions, and most of the remainder of their funds from PACs. Hardly any of their funds come from political parties or their own pockets. In addition, incumbents receive about 60 percent of their total funds before the primary election.

In contrast, after winning the primary election, open-seat candidates and both types of challengers receive a much higher percentage of their funds from PACs. For example, in 1992-1998 the winner of a primary for an open seat receives on average 17 percent of his or her primary funds from PACs. After the primary, the primary winner receives 32 percent of his or her funds from PACs. In fact, in relative terms, incumbents receive over half of their PAC funds before the primary. Open-seat candidates and challengers receive most of their PAC funds (over 80 percent) after the primary. For open-seat candidates and out-party challengers, individual contributions are a smaller percentage of general election funding than primary election funding. For in-party challengers, the candidate reduces his or her own funding of the campaign. The parties also become more involved in funding non-incumbent campaigns after the general election.

We now more closely examine the issue of self-funding in primaries. Magleby and Nelson found that, “[p]arty committees welcome, and sometimes expect, challengers and candidates for open seats in the House to be willing to spend \$25,000 or more in personal funds” (1990, 58). In fact, for open-seat candidates and out-party challengers, primary winners contribute about the same amount (in absolute terms) to their campaigns as primary losers. But primary winners are able to attract more money elsewhere.

How does self-funding relate to how much is spent in the primary? Maisel states that the “more that is spent on a campaign, the lower the percentage of that expenditure that comes from the candidate” (1982, 68). We test this proposition by calculating candidate self-funding (contributions and loans) as a percentage of that candidate’s total primary spending for each type of primary and correlating it with the candidate’s total primary spending. According to Maisel, the correlation will be negative, with the idea that one spends one’s own money on hopeless causes. In Table 6, we see how Maisel arrived at his conclusion; there is indeed a negative correlation between spending and self-funding percentage for the top two vote-getters in all races:  $r = -.13$  ( $p < 0.001$ ) in 1992-1998. But this correlation does not control for the type of primary and candidate—we would expect candidates to spend more of their own money if the race is close. When we calculate the correlation for each type of race, the correlation is positive.<sup>21</sup> In fact, self-funding increases (as a percentage of total funding) as the races become more competitive. The relationship is strongest for open-seat and in-party challengers.

When we make the same calculations for the general election (not shown), we find that when examining all races together, once again there is a negative correlation between self-funding and spending in the election cycle. But once we control for the type of candidate, no correlation is negative, and the correlation is positive (and significant) for open-seat candidates.

There are several differences between the primary fund-raising patterns in 1984-1990 and 1992-1998. First of all, in terms of average funds raised, there is not much difference between the 1980s and the 1990s for most candidates. However, incumbents raised about \$100,000 more before the primary election in the 1990s than in the 1980s. Incumbents in the 1980s also raised a

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<sup>21</sup>The same results hold when examining only the winner in each primary.

**Table 6:** Correlation Between Percent Self-funding and Total Spending in U.S. House Primary Elections, 1984-1998

	1992-1998		1984-1990	
	Correlation (r)	N	Correlation (r)	N
All Candidates	! 0.13*	4523	! 0.08*	4203
Incumbents	0.07*	1462	! 0.00	1558
Open-seat Candidates	0.13*	718	0.03	382
Out-Party Challengers	0.05*	1907	0.05*	1834
In-Party Challengers	0.16*	436	0.20*	429

Source: Federal Election Commission data

Notes: \* correlation significant at  $p < 0.05$  (2-tailed). All figures adjusted for inflation (1998 dollars). Data include top two vote-getters, and exclude incumbents who ran against other incumbents.

greater percentage of donations from PACs after the primary election than incumbents in the 1990s. This is consistent with the conventional wisdom that incumbents are now fund-raising throughout the election cycle, continuing the pattern of “running scared” (Jacobson 1987). As a result, they are raising more money for each election.

### Spending and Competitiveness

Patterns of primary election spending closely resemble patterns in general elections. Our hypothesis is that more competitive general and primary elections attract more money. There are two related difficulties with testing this hypothesis. First, it is difficult to construct a measure of competitiveness of a race before the election takes place. Often competitiveness is measured by the amount of money spent. Second, it is difficult to disentangle the causal relationship between money and competitiveness: Does a competitive election attract money, or does money cause a



competitive race? Following Herrnson's study of spending and competitive races in the 1996 general election, we define competitive elections to be "contests that were decided by margins of 20 percent of the vote or less" (2000, 152). We acknowledge that it is not possible in the following analyses to prove which way causation runs. However, we are able to demonstrate that the same relationship between competitiveness and spending exists for both primary and general elections. As elections get more competitive, we expect spending to go up. As incumbents move from being unopposed to attracting strong competition, they should spend more because they are more vulnerable. As open-seat candidates or challengers get to a level of viability (here defined as greater than 40 percent of the two-party vote), they should spend more to put them over the top.

In Table 7, we calculate the total amount of money spent in a general election (by the two major-party candidates) according to the type of candidate and his or her level of competitiveness in the two different decades.<sup>22</sup> We find our hypotheses to be confirmed. In 1992-1998, unopposed incumbents spend about \$345,000 (on average), incumbents that draw weak competition spend about \$517,000, and incumbents that draw strong competition spend about \$902,000. Uncompetitive open-seat candidates spend about \$278,000, while competitive candidates spend about \$670,000. Finally, uncompetitive challengers on average spend about \$111,000 and competitive challengers spend about \$518,000 in the general election. These results are consistent with Herrnson's (2000) findings for the 1998 election. If we look at average

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<sup>22</sup>For this section, general election spending includes spending that occurred before the primary election. The spending that took place before the primary election likely was affected by (and affected) the competitiveness of the general election race. As Goldenberg and Traugott note, "Incumbents who were vulnerable spent a great deal of money both before and during the general election campaign" (1984, 83). We expect viable challengers and open-seat candidates to do the same.

**Table 7:** Average General Election Spending and Competitiveness, U.S. House 1984-1998

Candidate Type	Competitiveness (2-Party Vote)	1992-1998		1984-1990	
		Average Spent	N	Average Spent	N
Incumbent	Unopposed (100%)	\$344,513	164	\$300,254	271
	Weakly Competitive (60-99%)	517,517	842	459,244	994
	Competitive (< 60%)	902,821	440	805,473	295
Open Seat	Uncompetitive (< 40%)	277,791	88	326,106	51
	Competitive (> 40%)	670,674	304	741,950	170
Challenger	Uncompetitive (< 40%)	111,815	933	88,415	1042
	Competitive (> 40%)	518,792	372	529,441	255

Sources: Federal Election Commission data and *American Votes*.

Notes: All figures adjusted for inflation (1998 dollars). General election spending is spending through the entire election cycle.

spending by candidate type (combining all levels of competitiveness), incumbents spend the most with about \$615,000, open-seat candidates spend on average \$582,000, and challengers spend the least with \$228,000. The main difference between 1984-1990 and 1992-1998 is that incumbent spending has increased in the latter set of years, and open-seat spending has decreased.

In Table 8, we calculate the average spent before the primary election by each type of candidate according to the competitiveness of the primary election for both time periods. We use only the primary winner in our calculations (the results are qualitatively similar if the top two candidates are included). We find the same pattern that is found in general elections: As elections become more competitive, primary candidates spend more money. For example, in 1992-1998 an average candidate for an open seat that is unopposed in the primary spends about \$105,000 before the primary election, an open-seat candidate that draws weak competition spends about

**Table 8:** Average Primary Election Spending and Competitiveness, 1984-1998

Candidate Type	Competitiveness (Difference)	1992-1998		1984-1990	
		Average Spent	N	Average Spent	N
Incumbent	Unopposed	\$ 252,116	1030	\$ 201,665	1138
	Weakly Competitive	283,274	383	215,009	401
	Competitive (within 20%)	517,117	29	328,675	20
Open Seat	Unopposed	105,632	70	140,686	60
	Weakly Competitive	166,926	130	217,291	69
	Competitive (within 20%)	177,373	192	180,142	92
Out-Party Challenger	Unopposed	39,185	692	39,238	754
	Weakly Competitive	83,050	337	60,145	299
	Competitive (within 20%)	71,139	254	42,375	239
In-Party Challenger	Weakly Competitive	201,389	7	525,813	1
	Competitive (within 20%)	342,239	15	335,123	5

Sources: Federal Election Commission data and *American Votes*.

Notes: All figures adjusted for inflation (1998 dollars). Data include candidates who won the primary election and did not drop out of the race before the general election, and exclude incumbents who ran against other incumbents.

\$166,000 in the primary election, and the winning open-seat candidate in a competitive primary election spends \$177,000. The only anomaly to this trend is for out-party challengers: Winning primary candidates on average spend more in weakly competitive elections than competitive elections (this anomaly disappears when considering the top two finishers in the primary).

Winning in-party challengers had to spend a lot of money on average to defeat the incumbent.

However, when one includes losing in-party challengers, the average spent by the incumbent dwarfs the challenger's spending. Even the average incumbent unopposed in the primary spends

more than the average competitive open-seat candidate or (out-party) challenger. In the general election, the average competitive open-seat candidate or challenger spends more than incumbents who are unopposed or draw weak competition. Combining all levels of competitiveness together, incumbents spent \$265,000 before the primary election, open-seat candidates spent \$161,000, and (out-party) challengers spent \$57,000—the same pattern that is found in general elections.

Comparing across the two time periods, incumbent spending is higher for all levels of competitiveness in 1992-1998 than in 1984-1990, and open-seat spending has decreased. Because general election spending in Table 7 included the primary spending, it appears that the difference in Table 7 was a result of the spending before the primary election.

It is also interesting to compare the number of competitive races for each type of candidate (comparing N in Tables 7 and 8 for each type of candidate). While incumbents are least likely to be opposed in the primary election, they are likely to have some competition in the general election (though usually weak). Out-party challengers will most likely be unopposed in the primary election and lose the general election to the incumbent. Of course, the trends for out-party challengers and incumbents are related. Open-seat candidates, on the other hand, will most likely face both a competitive primary and general election.

### **Impact of Spending on Turnout**

We now turn to the influence that primary spending has on turnout for the primary election. In general, we expect that as the total spending in a primary increases, turnout for that

primary will also increase.<sup>23</sup> Thus, we are positing that campaign spending will mobilize voters.

In Table 9, we give two statistics for each type of primary: the correlation between total spending in the primary and total turnout, and the coefficient of spending for the simple Ordinary Least Squares Regression of spending (independent variable) on turnout (dependent variable).<sup>24</sup>

There is indeed a positive correlation between spending and turnout for all types of primaries. However, the relationship is weaker for incumbents and open-seat candidates, and stronger for out-party challengers in 1992-1998, and stronger for open-seat candidates in 1984-1990. The coefficient (B) shows how much we would expect turnout to increase if total spending increased in the primary by \$100,000. In the time period 1992-1998, it appears that spending has the greatest impact on turnout in out-party challenger primaries: Increasing spending by \$100,000 will increase turnout by about 2740 votes. This is about 5% of the vote in the average primary.

There is a difference between the two time periods in the marginal effect of spending on turnout. In 1984-1990, spending had its greatest return (and strongest relationship) in open-seat primaries, and weakest return in out-party primaries—the opposite of the strong and weak returns in 1992-1998.

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<sup>23</sup>In all of the calculations for turnout, we exclude unopposed primaries. For blanket primaries, this exclusion may be problematic.

<sup>24</sup>The relationship is significant at  $p < 0.05$  (two-tailed) level.

**Table 9:** Correlation Between and Slope Coefficient of Total Spending and Turnout in U.S. House Primary Elections, 1984-1998

Candidate Type	1992-1998		1984-1990	
	Correlation (r)	B	Correlation (r)	B
Incumbents	0.16	1180	0.21	2220
Open-seat Candidates	0.25	885	0.45	2380
Out-Party Challengers	0.36	2740	0.20	1870

Source: Federal Election Commission data

Notes: All correlations (and slope coefficients) significant at  $p < 0.05$  (2-tailed). Total spending is for all candidates in the primary election and is in units of \$100,000, adjusted for inflation (1998 dollars). Data exclude incumbents who ran against other incumbents.

### Impact of Spending on Vote

Finally, we examine the relationship between primary spending and primary vote. We expect to find relationships similar to those found between general spending and general vote: Incumbents do not appear to benefit while challengers (and open-seat candidates) do.<sup>25</sup> For incumbents, more money should be a sign that the incumbent is doing poorly: “the larger their expected vote, the less they raise and spend” (Jacobson 1997, 38). For open-seat candidates and challengers, more money should lead to more votes.

In Table 10, we calculate the slope coefficient for the ordinary least squares regression of spending on vote percentage as well as the correlation between spending and the percentage of the vote for the different types of candidates. For the primary election, we use the spending of the

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<sup>25</sup>In this section, we exclude unopposed primaries, since, by definition, spending cannot affect the vote percentage.

**Table 10:** Correlation Between and Regression Coefficient of Spending and Vote for U.S. House Primary and General Elections, 1984-1998

Candidate Type	1992-1998		1984-1990	
	Primary B (r)	General B (r)	Primary B (r)	General B (r)
Incumbent	! 1.47 (! 0.26)	! 0.84 (! 0.40)	! 1.64 (! 0.24)	! 1.02 (! 0.40)
Open Seat	2.06 (0.19)	0.73 (0.22)	1.45 (0.17)	1.31 (0.38)
Challenger	2.83 (0.17)	1.51 (0.51)	5.09 (0.21)	2.10 (0.57)

Sources: Federal Election Commission data and *American Votes*.  
Notes: All correlations in this section are statistically significant ( $p < 0.001$ , two-tailed). Data exclude unopposed candidates. For the primary election, data include spending of the top two finishers and the percentage of the primary vote. For the general election, data include the total spending of the primary winner and the percentage of the two-party vote. Spending is in units of \$100,000 and is adjusted for inflation (1998 dollars).

top two finishers and the percentage of the total vote. For the general election, we use the spending of the primary winner and the percentage of the two-party vote.

For incumbent candidates, the correlation between spending and vote is negative for both elections. Incumbents appear to spend the most when they feel most threatened—when they face a strong well-financed challenge. The slope coefficient indicates how much the vote percentage should change if spending increases by \$100,000. Thus, an incumbent who spends \$100,000 more in the primary election in 1992-1998 can expect to receive 1.47 points less than if spending were not increased. The effect is smaller in the general election: An increase of \$100,000 should decrease the incumbent's vote by 0.84 percentage points. The negative relationship is also

somewhat stronger in the general election  $r = 0.40$ ) than in the primary  $r = 0.26$ ). The probable explanation is that there are more competitive general elections than competitive primary elections.

Open-seat candidates and challengers receive more votes as they spend more in both primary and general elections. For open-seat candidates, increasing spending by \$100,000 in the primary increases the vote by 2.06 percent; increasing spending by \$100,000 in the general increases the vote by 0.73 percent. Once again, the return to spending is greater in the primary election than the general election. The relationship between spending and votes received is about as strong in the primary election  $r = 0.19$ ) as it is in the general election  $r = 0.22$ ). However, for challengers, the relationship between spending and votes is much stronger in the general election  $r = 0.51$ ) than it is in the primary election  $r = 0.17$ ). The returns to spending for challengers is still greater in the primary election (2.83 percent) than the general election (1.51 percent). It is interesting to note that if we include only the primary winner for open-seat and challenger primaries, the relationship between spending and vote is *negative* (the second-place candidates are driving the relationship). Thus, it appears that spending does not help non-incumbent candidates in the lead. The probable explanation for this finding is similar to the one for incumbents: Candidates in the lead spend money to maintain their lead—they are rarely able to extend it.

In comparing the two time periods, there is a definite trend in the general elections: The effect of spending on the vote is greater in 1984-1990 than in 1992-1998. Thus, it takes more money in 1998 to get the same increase in votes that one got in 1990. However, the same trend cannot be seen in primary elections. Although the effect of spending is greater in 1984-1990 for incumbent and challenger primaries, the effect of spending is greater in 1992-1998 for open-seat



primaries. This is the opposite of the trend found for the effect of spending on turnout generally. Perhaps this is because spending in open-seats has actually gone down over the two decades, and thus there is a greater return on money spent.

### **Conclusion**

Many of the patterns we observe in general elections are found in primary elections as well. First, it is very difficult to defeat an incumbent in a primary or general election. Second, open-seat races (at both the primary and general level) are often the most competitive, and attract the most money among challengers. In fact, any competitive primary attracts more money than weakly competitive or unopposed primaries, regardless of the type of primary election. Third, increased spending in primaries is correlated with increased turnout. Fourth, the relationship between spending and vote in primary elections is similar to the relationship found in general elections. Fifth, while primary elections in the 1990s are very similar to primary elections in the 1980s, there are a few differences. Incumbents now raise more money earlier in the election cycle, especially from PACs. Interestingly, while the spending in primary contests for open seats have decreased over time, the effect of spending on vote has increased for open-seat candidates. And finally, the effect of total spending on turnout has decreased over time for open-seat primaries.

Because incumbents win reelection so often in primary and general elections, it is difficult to conclude whether primary elections offer another opportunity for defeat or another roadblock to potential challengers. Many other insights gained in the study of general elections may apply to primaries. We plan to investigate how candidate quality affects a candidates' ability to win

elections and raise money. We would like to explore if the returns to spending for turnout are different in the different elections. Gerber and Morton (1998) have already shown that the type of primary affects the type of candidate nominated. We plan to examine if the type of primary affects the spending and turnout patterns as well. Since primaries set the agenda for the general election, they merit further study. Indeed, we may better understand primary *and* general elections by studying them together, particularly in the areas of agenda setting and campaign spending.

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