“The Primary Threat: How the Surge of Ideological

Challengers is Exacerbating Partisan Polarization”

Abstract: Despite widespread speculation among pundits and politicians, statistical research finds little evidence that primaries are an important source of polarization in roll call voting. This manuscript moves beyond roll call votes by testing the effects of ideological primary challenges on partisanship in bill cosponsorship in Congress. Moreover, while extant research generally focuses on the one-to-one effects of primary challenges on the incumbents who experience a challenge, I measure and test the effects of the mere threat of a primary challenge from the ideological extreme. I find that the increased threat of an ideological primary challenge accounts about one-fourth of the rise in partisanship that occurred from the 1980s to the 2010s. These findings suggest the recent wave of ideological primary challenges is an important source of the escalation and intensification of polarization in recent Congresses.

After conducting anonymous interviews with several members from both parties, Elaine Kamarck and James Wallner concluded, “the fear of being primaried prompts members of Congress to change their behavior in ways that reduce the likelihood of it occurring and that increase the likelihood of prevailing if a challenger actually emerges.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Indeed, many members and staffers explicitly state that the recent wave of challengers from the ideological extreme is causing the rank-and-file and party leaders to act more partisan than they otherwise would, and thus exacerbating polarization.[[2]](#footnote-2)

However, contrary to the intuition of many people who work on Capitol Hill, the conventional wisdom among political scientists is that primaries are *not* a significant determinant of polarization. For one, the literature provides a litany of evidence that party leaders and members initiate polarization for ideological and strategic reasons. More ideologically extreme, and better sorted, cohorts of legislators have replaced the moderate members of yesteryear for reasons that apparently have little to do with primaries (Krehbiel 2006; Poole and Rosenthal 2007). As the party rank-and-file have ideologically polarized, party leaders increasingly protect the “party brand” by preventing bipartisan legislation that is divisive within their caucus from reaching the floor (Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005) while advancing more ideological bills that satisfy their increasingly homogenous membership (Aldrich and Rohde 2000). Moreover, members strategically engage in partisan teamsmenship to undermine the legitimacy of the opposition (Lee 2016) and to gain notoriety within their own party (Theriault and Rohde 2011; Theriault 2013). In sum, the dominant themes in the literature on polarization suggest that party leaders and members do not need an exogenous prompt, such as primary challenges, to polarize.

Moreover, quantitative studies on roll call voting consistently fail to find a statistically significant effect of primaries on polarization (Ansolabehere et al. 2001; Hirano et al. 2010; Boatright 2013; McGhee et al. 2014), or only modest and conditional effects (Bullock and Clinton 2011; Jewitt and Treul 2019). These null results are not entirely surprising, since neither institutional reforms to the nomination process, nor the recent surge in primary challengers, closely correlate to the patterns in roll call voting captured in standard measures of elite polarization (i.e. DW-Nominate).

However, while measures of roll call voting are an apt dependent variable to examine elite-driven processes of polarization, they are problematic for testing the effects of bottom-up forces like primary challenges. In an ideologically polarized legislature, party leaders strategically keep bipartisan bills that are divisive within their party off the legislative agenda (Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005). If a faction within the majority party is unwilling to vote for a bipartisan or moderate bill then party leaders will prevent that bill reaching the floor in the first place. Consequently, measures of roll call voting likely exaggerate intraparty homogeneity and interparty divergence. Members that might otherwise vote for bipartisan legislation on the floor rarely have that opportunity in recent Congresses. Thus, strategic agenda setting may deflate variation in roll call voting between members who experience a primary challenge and those who do not, and thereby artificially weakens the effect of ideological primary challenges in regression models.

This manuscript advances the literature on primaries and polarization by moving beyond roll call votes, and instead tests the effects of ideological primary challenges on an original dataset of bill cosponsorship. If primary challenges incentivize members to be more partisan, the effect should be more evident during this earlier stage of the legislative process, in which rank-and-file members have considerably greater discretion, and more opportunities to support bipartisan bills (Harbridge 2015).

Using an original measure of bipartisan bill cosponsorship, I demonstrate that polarization in this earlier stage of the legislative process has increased dramatically in recent Congresses. During the 1980s, on average, Republicans cosponsored with Democrats and fellow Republican at nearly equal rates, and Democrats cosponsored with about one Republican for every two Democratic cosponsors. From the 1980s to the 2010s, bipartisan cosponsorship declined by about fifty percent in both parties, and much of this decrease occurred relatively recently, during the presidency of Barack Obama. While polarization in roll call voting has gradually increased since the mid-20th century, these data on bill cosponsorship reveal a relatively sharp and recent escalation in partisan polarization among rank-and-file members. This rise in partisan bill cosponsorship reflects the erosion of bipartisan relationships and legislative coalitions, and ultimately results in gridlock and “unorthodox policymaking,” since bills that pass through the traditional legislative process generally require broad, bipartisan support (Sinclair 2012).

This manuscript also provides a second set of conceptual and methodological innovations. While extant research focuses on the one-to-one effects of primary challenges on the incumbents who experience a challenge, I theorize that incumbents preemptively respond to the mere threat of a primary challenge from the ideological extreme. I develop a two-stage model to test the effects of the threat of an ideological primary challenge. In the first stage, I use chamber- and district-level data to model the vote share received by ideological challengers in a given primary election. The coefficients from these models, and the same chamber- and district-level data, are then used to predict the vote share of ideological challengers for each incumbent in a given Congress. The predicted vote share of challengers from the ideological extreme is used as a proxy for the perceived threat of an ideological primary challenge. In the second stage, partisan bill cosponsorship is regressed on the predicted vote share of ideologically extreme candidates.

In the first section of analysis, I find that incumbents who undergo an ideological primary challenge decrease the rate at which they cosponsor bills with members of the other party. In the subsequent section, I find that the increased *threat* of an ideological primary challenge accounts for about one-fourth of the increase in partisan bill cosponsorship, among both Republicans and Democrats, from the 1980s to the 2010s. These findings suggest that the recent wave of ideological primary challenges is a highly important source of the recent escalation and intensification of partisan polarization.

**Primaries and Polarization**

Existing research finds that primary voters are more ideologically extreme than their less engaged copartisans (Jacobson 2012), that they prefer more ideologically extreme candidates (Brady et al. 2007), and that extreme candidates perform better in primary elections (Hall 2015; Hall and Snyder 2015). However, other scholars suggest that primary voters are simply more engaged, but not more ideological (Sides et al. 2018; Abramowitz 2008). But even if primary voters are more ideological than the general public, including their less engaged copartisans, and they vote for more extreme candidates, this does not necessarily mean that primary elections contribute to elite polarization. Party leaders and members may themselves share the ideological extremism of primary voters, or may strategically cater towards the radical wing of their party to mobilize “the base” to win general elections. In either case, evidence of extreme preferences among primary voters does not necessarily indicate that primary challenges have an independent effect on polarization in Congress. In fact, the reoccurring statistical finding is that primaries do *not* contribute to polarization in any significant way.

A number of studies provide compelling evidence that primary rules and procedures are not an important source of polarization. Bullock and Clinton (2011) find that a temporary law that allowed Californians to vote in either party primary, regardless of their party affiliation (i.e. blanket primaries), was only modestly effective at mitigating polarization. McGhee et al. (2014) find that increasing the openness of primaries—and seemingly taking control out of the hands of a small group of party elites—does not increase polarization. Hirano et al. (2010) find no difference in the voting behavior of U.S. senators and representatives—from a handful of states—in the years before and after direct primaries were instituted. As McGhee et al. (2014) note, these findings are consonant with the emergent UCLA School on parties, which developed around the premise that coalitions of policy demanders (Cohen et al. 2008; Bawn et al. 2012) or extended party networks (Masket 2009, 2016; Desmarais, La Raja, and Kowal 2015; Koger, Masket and Noel 2009; Hassell 2016, 2018) responded to democratizing primary reforms by coordinating to preserve their control over the nomination process.

Rather than simply focusing on primary rules and procedures, others suggest that ideological actors sometimes exploit the decentralized nomination process to move a party in their preferred direction. For example, several studies speculate that wealthy donors and grassroots activists on the right have pulled the GOP “off center” (Hacker and Pierson 2005; Skocpol and Williamson 2013; Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016).

However, statistical research finds no relationship between competitive primary challenges and legislative behavior. Ansolabehere et al. (2001) find no effect of competitive primaries on an individual’s roll call voting. Hirano et al. (2010) fail to find a relationship between the rate of primary challenges to party members in state government and more extreme voting among members of Congress from the same state. These earlier studies problematically assume that all primary challenges should have polarizing effects.[[3]](#footnote-3) However, more recent studies isolate the impact of primary challengers from the ideological extreme, but find no (Boatright 2013), or only modest and conditional (Jewitt and Treul 2019), effects on polarization.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Nevertheless, while the conventional skepticism among scholars of polarization towards primaries is empirically grounded, there is also reason for skepticism that the standard measures used in these statistical analyses are inadequate for capturing the relationship. For example, DW-Nominate, the most common measure of polarization, exaggerates the stability of individual legislators’ vote pattern. Poole and Rosenthal use linear trend estimates to determine the DW-Nominate score of a legislator in a given term. They argue that “higher polynomials in time did not appreciably increase the fit” of their models. Regardless, forcing linearity mitigates variation in an individual legislator’s ideal point estimates over the course of her career. This leads scholars to overestimate the extent to which polarization is caused by member replacement, and underestimate the extent to which polarization is caused by exogenous shocks—like ideological primary challenges—that prompt incumbents to rapidly increase their level of partisanship (Theriault 2006; Bateman and Lapinski 2016).[[5]](#footnote-5)

More generally, measures of roll call voting may obscure the effect of electoral forces on the legislative behavior of individual members. Party leaders strategically control the legislative agenda to minimize fractionalization within their own party. Consequently, bills that reach the floor for a roll call vote overstate intraparty cohesion (Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005), and likely exaggerate polarization among rank-and-file members (Harbridge 2015). If bipartisan or moderate bills rarely reach the floor in the first place, then members that might otherwise vote for such legislation rarely have that option in recent Congresses. Statistical models test the effects of ideological challenges on roll call voting by looking for variation between those who experienced a challenge and those who did not, but the strategic decisions of party leaders minimize variation across these groups.

However, members have considerably more discretion earlier in the legislative process (Harbridge 2015). In the absence of party influence, and with a broader range of opportunities to support moderate and bipartisan legislation, the effects of ideological challenges (or the mere threat of a challenge) should be more evident than in roll call voting.

In addition to these concerns about the standard dependent variable, existing research on ideological primary challenges and polarization also problematically conceptualizes the independent variable. In their regression models, Boatright (2013) and Jewitt and Treul (2019) implicitly assume that competitive ideological primary challenges *exclusively* influence the legislative behavior of the incumbent that directly faces the challenge.[[6]](#footnote-6) In reality, of course, members pay close attention to political attitudes and activity beyond their district. If a member in one district experiences a competitive primary challenge from the ideological extreme, a strategic copartisan in a district with demographically and ideologically similar constituents may respond by engaging in more partisan behavior to prevent a future challenge. If this is the case, statistical models that test the one-to-one effects of ideological primary challenges on the particular incumbents who are challenged likely underestimate the overall effects, since preemptive movement towards the poles by those who did not directly experience a challenge would narrow the discrepancy in partisanship between challenged and non-challenged incumbents.

**Active Monitoring, Ideological Primary Threats and Preemptive Partisanship**

I theorize that the effects of primary challenges on legislative behavior are conditional on the extent to which incumbents *anticipate* an ideological challenge. Members constantly survey the political landscape in search for electoral threats (Fenno 2003). Legislators examine attitudes and organizational activity in their district, and in districts with similar primary voters, to identify potential primary threats.

They meet with constituents to gauge the pulse of their district. They regularly discuss intraparty dynamics with copartisans in the chamber about activity in their districts. They track polls and the flow of campaign contributions and meet with influential PACs (i.e. Americans for Prosperity and Forward Majority) and interest groups (i.e. Emily’s List and the NRA) to assess what legislative behaviors are least likely to provoke an intraparty challenge from the ideological extreme.[[7]](#footnote-7) Bipartisan lawmaking is a principle target of ideological organizations, potential challengers and primary votes.[[8]](#footnote-8) Thus, as the likelihood of an ideological challenge increases, members are less likely to cross the aisle.

This active monitoring of potential electoral risks has important implications for the scope and timing of the effects of ideological primary challenges on polarization.

First, incumbents are highly responsive to ideological challenges that occur in similar districts. Certainly a surge in local activism and organization, ideological fervor among partisan constituents, and the emergence of a prominent ideological challenge provide clear signals. Under these conditions, incumbents engage in less bipartisan legislating because they recognize that activist organizations and potential primary challengers will use these actions against them in a primary. But members do not merely respond to primary voter attitudes, organizational activity, and candidates in their own district; members also pay especially close attention to electoral threats against similarly situated incumbents. Legislators take note when ideological fervor manifests in primary campaigns against copartisan incumbents from districts with demographic and ideological similarities, and they preemptively act more partisan to stave off a potential challenge.

Second, members do not merely wait until the subsequent Congress to adjust their behavior in response to an ideological primary threat. Rather, when an intraparty threat looms, members attempt to undercut it by preemptively engaging in more partisan legislative behavior. Indeed, given that members of the House serve two-year terms, the potential of a primary threat essentially lasts for the entirety of a Congressional session.

Of course, legislators must win primary and general elections to maintain their seat—the latter of which may counter the centrifugal force of the primary (Aldrich 1983). However, marginal Congressional districts have notoriously “vanished” in recent decades. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, even in competitive districts members may have a strong incentive to prioritize intraparty concerns. Most Americans consistently vote for the same party in (general) election after election (Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2002). Less partisan voters generally rely on their sense of near-term economic conditions (Bartels 2008; Achen and Bartels 2016), and feelings towards the president (Kernell 1977; Sides et al. 2018). In other words, factors that determine general election outcomes are largely beyond the control of an individual incumbent legislator (Achen and Bartels 2016). This is not the case in primary elections, in which primary voters, and influential groups and PACs within the party, are significantly more likely to hold incumbents accountable for their policymaking.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Polarization in Bill Sponsorship**

I test the effects of primary challenges on an original measure of partisan bill cosponsorship. For each Congress from the 96th to the 113th, I pulled cosponsorship data from GovTrack.us. These GovTrack data include every bill-cosponsor dyad in a given Congress. Each observation is an individual sponsor to a particular bill. Bills with multiple cosponsors have a row for each sponsor. I use these data to calculate the share of Republican and Democratic cosponsors for each bill.[[10]](#footnote-10) Next, I calculate a *partisanship* score for each member in each Congress, which is simply the average share of copartisan cosponsors on each bill sponsored by that particular member.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Figure 1 maps the average share of Republican cosponsors by party for each Congress in the dataset, alongside average ideal point estimates using DW-Nominate.[[12]](#footnote-12) Notably, the timing and dynamics of polarization are distinct across these two measures. While DW-Nominate scores portray polarization as a steady process that accelerated in the 1980s, the cosponsorship data reveal a choppier pattern. During the early 1990s, as the GOP regained control of the House under the leadership of Newt Gingrich, Republicans became significantly less likely to cosponsor legislation with Democrats. From the early 1990s to the mid-2000s, the level of polarization temporarily stabilized. However, in recent Congresses, members in both parties became considerably less likely to cosponsor with members from the other party.

Figure 1: Two Measures of Polarization in Congress



Raw partisanship scores based on bill cosponsorship are interesting, but one should be cautious about cross-party comparisons. During the 1980s, as Democrats were in the midst of a long reign of power in the House, Republicans had fewer copartisans with which to cosponsor, and legislative success was greatly enhanced by cooperating with members of the Democratic majority. Moreover, prior research finds that liberals are more likely to sponsor and cosponsor legislation (Campbell 1982; Krehbeil 1995). These factors should lead us to temper an interpretation that Democrats were, in fact, more partisan than Republicans during this period.[[13]](#footnote-13)

While these data are not necessarily conducive to making strong claims about each party’s precise contribution to partisan polarization, we can confidently interpret the growing gap between the parties as evidence that partisan cosponsorship has significantly increased. This is a deeply concerning phenomenon for Congress as an institution, as well as legislative outcomes. Prior research finds that bill cosponsorship networks reflect important social dynamics among members (Fowler 2006a, 2006b), and between members and interest groups (Box-Seffensmeier et al. 2019). The decline in bipartisan cosponsorship is indicative of the deterioration of bipartisan legislative coalitions. Moreover, members use bill cosponsorship to signal their support for legislative reform to other members and party leaders (Kessler and Krehbeil 1996; Koger 2003), as well as donors (Rocca and Gordon 2009). Thus, the decline in bipartisan bills exacerbates gridlock and “unorthodox policymaking,” as party leaders perceive that fewer and fewer bills on the legislative agenda have broad enough support to succeed through the traditional process (Sinclair 2012). In sum, as Laurel Harbridge (2015) argues, bill cosponsorship is an important part of the legislative process because it offers party leaders and members “an opportunity to assess legislative agreement prior to agenda-setting, provide public information about the policy positions of members, and capture positions that are not merely cheap talk (p.23).”

**Ideological Primary Challenges**

Before modeling the effects of the *threat* of an ideological primary challenge, I test the one-to-one effects of actual competitive ideological challenges on bill cosponsorship. Following Jewitt and Treul (2019), I use two data sources to identify primary challengers from the ideological extreme. First, I build on the methodological innovations of Adam Bonica (2016) to more precisely identify primary challengers who are more ideologically extreme than the incumbents they challenge. In his Database on Ideology, Money in Politics, and Elections (DIME), Adam Bonica uses campaign contribution data to construct ideal point estimates (CFscores) of donors and all general and primary election candidates. I use CFscores to identify ideological challenges, by comparing the ideal point estimates of incumbents to those of competitive ideological challengers.

More specifically, for each primary election in which the incumbent receives less the 75% of the vote[[14]](#footnote-14), I average the ideal point estimates of challengers who earn more than 15% of the vote.[[15]](#footnote-15) In most competitive primary elections, only one challenger meets these criteria. Next, I subtract the average challenger CFscore from the incumbent’s CFscore. For Republicans, I multiply this difference by -1 to standardize the interpretation of scores—positive values indicate that the incumbent is challenged from the ideological extreme, while negative values indicate a challenge from the center. Lastly, I convert these differenced scores into a dichotomous variable. An election is coded as an ideological challenge if the standardized ideal point difference is positive.

Second, I use Robert Boatright’s data on the reason for each primary challenge from 1970 to 2014. Boatright (2013) relies on descriptions of the primary races in each year’s edition of *American Votes* and the *Almanac of American Politics.* For each primary election in which the incumbent receives less the 75% of the vote, he codes a challenger as ideological if she criticizes the incumbent for “being too moderate or insufficiently partisan.” Boatright includes several other reasons for a challenge (i.e. scandal, competence, age, national issue, and more). These categories are all mutually exclusive. He prioritizes the most frequently mentioned motivation in the *Almanac.* Boatright includes separate categories for challenges motivated by particular policy issues, while acknowledging that distinguishing these from ideologically motivated challenges relies on an often-contestable judgment call.[[16]](#footnote-16)

**One-to-One Effects of Ideological Challenges**

In this section, I use data from the 96th to 113th Congress to test the one-to-one relationship between competitive primary challenges from the ideological extreme and partisan bill cosponsorship. I use fixed-effects models to exclusively explain variation in an individual member’s legislative behavior over time. The unique unit intercepts in fixed-effect models essentially function as each legislator’s partisan baseline. For each individual member of Congress, this unique baseline represents the partisan or ideological disposition that exists in the absence of exogenous considerations. Fixed-effects allow us to examine how changes in exogenous factors, such as primary challenges, correspond to an individual member’s deviation from that baseline.

The implications of my theory are that competitive primaries influence the incumbent’s behavior during the concurrent session. Thus, I use contemporaneous models, rather than models with lagged independent variables.

The models in Table 1 include a dichotomous measure of an ideological primary challenge using either the Bonica or Boatright data. In addition, I also include the general election margin in each regression. General election margins measures the centripetal force of a general election challenge from the opposing direction.[[17]](#footnote-17) I also control for both majority status and the number of copartisans in Congress. Majority status is a dichotomous variable, in which each member of the majority party in a given Congress is a coded as a one, while each member of the minority party is coded as a zero. Similarly, for each member in each Congress, the copartisan variable is the number of members from the same party. While majority status is a feature of the partisan breakdown of Congress, these two related measures serve distinct purposes. I include the majority status variable because Jewitt and Treul (2019) find that only members in the majority adjust their legislative behavior in response to primary challengers. I include the number of fellow copartisans given the nature of my dependent variable—since a member’s cosponsorship with the other party is, in part, a function of the number of copartisan and partisan counterparts in Congress. Lastly, I control for the average *partisanship* of members of the opposing party, since an increase in the average partisanship undoubtedly reduces a member’s opportunities to cosponsor across the aisle.

The dependent variable in each model is *partisanship*—the average share of copartisan cosponsors out of all bills cosponsored by the member in a given Congress. Models 1 and 3 use the Bonica measure of ideological primary challenge, while model 2 and 4 use the Boatright data. Positive coefficients indicate a predicted increase in the average share of copartisan cosponsors.

Table 1: Effect of Ideological Primary Challenges on Partisanship

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Republicans | | Democrats | |
|  | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) |
| Challenge (Bonica) | 1.54\*  (.63) |  | 1.83\*\*  (.54) |  |
| Challenge (Boatright) |  | 3.1\*\*  (1.05) |  | 3.14\*\*  (.97) |
| General Margin | -0.17  (.62) | -.09  (.62) | 1.12\*\*  (.41) | -.96\*  (.40) |
| Copartisans | .17\*\*\*  (.01) | .18\*\*\*  (.011) | .10\*\*\*  (.01) | .09\*\*\*  (.007) |
| Majority | -1.5\*\*  (.53) | -1.47\*\*  (.53) | -.48  (.36) | -.46  (.36) |
| Opposition  Partisanship | -.24\*\*  (.054) | -.24\*\*\*  (.054) | .11\*\*\*  (.026) | .11\*\*  (.027) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| R2 | .37 | .38 | .15 | .15 |
| n | 651 | 651 | 709 | 709 |
| N | 2646 | 2646 | 3312 | 3312 |
| T | 18 | 18 | 18 | 18 |

\*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01 and \*\*\* p < 0.001

The results are strikingly similar across the two parties, and somewhat similar across the two measures of ideological primary challenges. Based on the models using Bonica’s data to measure challenges, a competitive ideological challenge predicts that the average share of Republican cosponsors increases by about 1.5 percentage points for Republicans and about 1.8 percentage points for Democrats. That is, for both parties, an ideological primary challenge indicates that members cosponsor fewer bills with members of the opposing party. This amounts to about one-eight of a standard deviation change in partisan cosponsorship for Republicans, and nearly one-fourth of a standard deviation increase for Democrats. The effects of ideological primary challenges are slightly larger using the Boatright measure, which corresponds to about a about a 3.1 percentage point increase in *partisanship* for members in both parties.

It may be the case that these models underestimate the one-to-one effects of primary challenges on polarization. The results in these models are predicated on the assumption that each event is independent. That is, an ideological primary challenge against one member has no influence on the likelihood of a primary challenge or legislative behavior of another member. This standard independence assumption in regression analysis is often at least modestly improbable, but in this analysis it highly unrealistic. As I theorize above, ideological challenges against one member almost certainly prompt other legislators to engage in more partisan lawmaking. If this is the case, models that test the one-to-one effects of ideological primary challenges likely underestimate the relationship, since preemptive movement towards the poles among those who did not directly experience a challenge would water down the effects on those who did.

However, even if it were the case that the actual effect size is a few magnitudes larger than the results in these models suggest, they still would not account for much of the increased polarization in bill cosponsorship in recent Congresses. Since ideological primary challenges are so rare, the effects here amount to temporary changes in the behavior of a handful of legislators in a given session.

**Modeling the Threat of Ideological Primary Challenges**

If ideological primary challenges explain a significant share of the rise in polarization, it is because the recent surge in challenges prompts “scared” incumbents to act more partisan. Measuring the indirect effect ideological challenges have on the legislative behavior of members is difficult. Indeed, some leading scholars of primary elections claim it is impossible (Boatright 2013). However, the importance of this task is greater than the difficulty.

I conceptualize the threat of an ideological primary challenge as a quasi-latent variable. On the one hand, ideological threat is a force that can act upon legislators independent of any observable materialization of this threat. On the other hand, ideological threat manifests in measurable phenomena, such as the aggregate primary vote share or campaign receipts of challengers more ideologically extreme than the incumbent. In this section, I rely on the former as an observable manifestation of ideological threat. I test the effects of this quasi-latent variable with a two-stage model, in which partisanship in bill cosponsorship, *partisanship*, is regressed on the predicted vote share of ideological primary challengers.

Using Adam Bonica’s DIME data, I construct two sets of measures for two distinct conceptions of ideological primary challengers. First, I follow the same procedure from the previous analysis to identify all of the challengers who are more ideologically extreme than the incumbent they challenge. I refer to these candidates as *relative* ideologues. I calculate the difference in ideal point estimates (i.e. CFscores) between each challenger and the respective incumbent from 1979 to 2013. Positive differences indicate that the challenger was more conservative than the incumbent, and negative differences indicate that the challenger was more liberal. For Democratic primary contests, I multiply the difference in ideal points by -1, so that for each party positive values indicate challenges from the ideological extreme. I then drop all centrist and nonideological challengers.[[18]](#footnote-18) Next, I pool together the vote share of ideological primary challengers by incumbent and election cycle. In most cases, there are fewer than two ideological challengers, but when multiple extreme candidates challenge an incumbent, I aggregate their vote shares. This measure gives us the total share of votes received by challengers who were more ideologically extreme than then incumbent in a given primary election.

I also construct a measure of the total vote share of *absolute* ideologues. Rather than including all challengers who are more extreme relative to their respective incumbent, I use the CFscore of 1.25 as a cut point to identify ideological challengers.[[19]](#footnote-19) For each Congressional primary featuring an incumbent, I aggregate the vote share of all challengers for whom the absolute value of their ideal point estimate is at least 1.25.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Figure 2: Vote Share of Ideological Challengers and Partisan Cosponsorship



Figure 2 maps the rise in the average vote share of ideological challengers against the rise in partisan bill cosponsorship. In each graph, the y-axis on the left-hand side measures the average vote share received by relative and absolute ideologues. The y-axis on the right-hand side is the average share of copartisan cosponsors. In general, both measures of ideological challenger vote share are correlated with partisan cosponsorship. Most notably, the vote share of both relative and absolute ideological challengers surged from 2006 to the 2014, as did the rate at which members cosponsor legislation with copartisans.

I construct two-stage models for both relative and absolute ideological challengers. In the first stage, I model the effects of numerous district-level variables on total vote share received by all candidates more ideologically extreme than the incumbent. That is, I use a host of variables that may be associated with the threat of an ideological primary challenge to predict an observable manifestation of that threat. In the second stage, I test the effects of this threat on partisan bill cosponsorship. Since the factors that predict the vote share received by ideological primary challengers are distinct for Democrats and Republicans, I employ a distinct two-stage model for each party.

More specifically, the second stage model is as follows:

where are the fixed-effects for each individual legislator, is the overall errors component, and is the constant, is the coefficient of variables used to control for general election competitiveness[[21]](#footnote-21), is the coefficient for number copartisans and is a the coefficient for a dummy variable indicating whether or not the member is in the majority, and estimates the predicted values of the quasi-latent variable of ideological challengers, which is estimated in the first stage:

where is a regression coefficient of a variable that varies over time but not across members in a given Congress, and are coefficients of district-level variables that vary over time and members, is the coefficient of the interaction of negative partisanship and district ideology, and are coefficients for dummy variables on the geographical region in which the member’s district is located. This “garbage can” model incorporates district-level demographic data that may correspond to the threat of a primary challenger.[[22]](#footnote-22)

District ideology is simply the vote share of the copartisan presidential candidate in the previous president election cycle. Negative partisanship measures affect among partisans towards identifiers from the opposite side of the ideological spectrum. That is, this variable captures the average feeling Republicans’ (Democrats’) have towards liberals (conservatives). These measures come from ANES feeling thermometers. For self-identified partisans, I took the average thermometers rating of the opposite ideological group in each election cycle. I used rolling averages to estimate these scores for mid-term cycles for which ANES surveys were not conducted. I exclude partisan leaners to better approximate primary voters.

Unlike the other variables in the first-stage models, *negative partisanship* only varies by Congress, and not across districts. In this sense, *negative partisanship* functions as a more theoretically informed alternative to time fixed-effects. The primary election culture is certainly distinct across election cycles in ways that are related to the popularity of ideological challengers, and as recent studies demonstrate much of what animates change in the party base across time is affect towards members of the other party (Abramowitz and Webster 2016; Mason 2015, 2018). I also interact *negative partisanship* with *district ideology* to allow the effects of overall negative partisanship to vary across districts.

**Primary Threats and Preemptive Partisanship**

Table 2 displays the results from the second stage of the two-stage models.[[23]](#footnote-23) For both parties, the effects of the threat of a potential ideological challenge (both relative and absolute) are highly statistically and substantively significant.[[24]](#footnote-24) For Republicans, a one-percentage point increase in the predicted vote share of primary challengers who are more ideologically extreme than the incumbent corresponds to a 0.96 increase in the average share of Republican cosponsors, while a one-percentage point increase in the predicted vote share of primary challengers with a CFscore of at least 1.25 corresponds to about a 1.24 point increase in the average share of copartisan cosponsors. The results are more striking for Democrats. A one-percentage point increase in the predicted vote share of primary challengers who are more ideologically extreme than the incumbent corresponds to a 2.87 increase in the average share of Democratic cosponsors, while a one-percentage point increase in the predicted vote share of primary challengers with a CFscore of at least 1.25 corresponds to about a 5.7 point increase in the average share of copartisan cosponsors. In standardized terms, depending on the measure of ideological challenger, a one standard deviation increase in vote share predicts about a one-twelfth to one-tenth standard deviation increase in *partisanship*for Republicans, and about a one third to over two-thirds standard deviation increase in partisans cosponsorship for Democrats.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Table 2: Effects of Ideological Primary Threat on Partisan Bill Cosponsorship

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Republicans | | Democrats | |
| Relative | Absolute | Relative | Absolute |
| (5) | (6) | (7) | (8) |
|  | 96.16\*\*\*  (6.4) | 124.1\*\*\*  (6.8) | 287.7\*\*\*  (29.4) | 570.0\*\*\*  (54.0) |
| General Margin | -.81  (.60) | -.84  (.58) | 1.0\*  (.39) | 1.2\*\*  (.39) |
| Copartisans | .12\*\*\*  (.01) | .11\*\*\*  (.01) | .10\*\*\*  (.008) | .11\*\*\*  (.007) |
| Majority | .91  (.56) | .86\*\*\*  (.55) | -1.06\*\*  (.39) | -1.4\*\*\*  (.38) |
| Opposition  Partisanship | -.26\*\*\*  (.05) | -.30\*\*\*  (.05) | .09\*\*\*  (.025) | .079\*\*  (.025) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| R2 | .44 | .44 | .20 | .21 |
| N | 651 | 651 | 709 | 709 |
| N | 18 | 18 | 18 | 18 |
| T | 2646 | 2646 | 3312 | 3312 |

\*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01 and \*\*\* p < 0.001

These findings indicate that the recent surge in ideological primary challenges in both parties is having a meaningful effect on partisanship. Among Republicans, the predicted vote share of *relative* ideological challengers increased from less than 1.5% in the 1980s, to about 6.5% in the early 2010s. For Democrats, the predicted vote share of *relative* ideologues increased from about 1.86% in the 1980s to 2.9% during the Obama years. According to the results displayed in Table 2, this five-percentage point increase in GOP primary challenges corresponds to a 4.8 percentage point increase in *partisanship*, while the 1.04 percentage point increase in the predicted vote share of a Democratic challengers from the left accounts for about a 4 percentage point increase in *partisanship*.[[26]](#footnote-26)

To put these results in perspective, consider them in relation to the overall rise in partisan bill cosponsorship that occurred during this period. From the 1980s to the 2010s, the average share of copartisan cosponsors among Republicans increased from about 51% to 75.5%.

For Democrats, the average *partisanship* increased from an average of about 70% to 78% during this same period. However, these raw rates likely overstate the increase in partisanship among Republicans, while understating the degree of change among Democrats. Since Republicans held far more seats in the 2010s than the 1980s, we would expect the rate in which they cosponsor bills with fellow Republicans to increase over that period. Likewise, the increased rate of copartisan cosponsors among Democrats is especially noteworthy given that the party held an average of 63 fewer seats in the 2010s than the 1980s.

To more accurately approximate the extent to which each party’ rise in partisan cosponsorship is truly attributable to partisanship, I use the coefficients from Table 2 to estimate a contemporary Congress in which the balance of power between the parties remained constant from 1980 to the 2010s. Controlling for the number of copartisans serving in the chamber, Republicans increased their partisanship rate by about 17 percentage points, while Democrats increased by about 14.5 percentage points. These figures indicate that the increased threat of ideological primary challengers explains about one-fourth of the rise in partisanship in both parties during this period.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The explanatory power of the threat of an ideological challenge is especially noteworthy given that these models exclude the spillover effects a surge of ideological challenges in one party has on the rate of cosponsorship in the other party. By controlling for the average partisanship of members of the other party, these models essentially assume that a member’s decisions on cosponsorship are independent of ideological primary challenges against her colleagues across the aisle. In reality, of course, this is assumption is seriously violated. If the threat of primary challenges makes Democrats more reticent to cosponsor with Republicans, this will inevitably affects Republican *partisanship* scores, and vice versa. In the models above, the second order effects of the predicted *ideoshare* of ideological challengers are absorbed by the variable *opposition partisanship.*

**Conclusion**

Existing research finds minimal effects of primaries on the legislative behavior of legislators, as measured by patterns in roll call voting. However, since bills that reach the floor reflect the strategic calculations of party leaders, and are thus more ideological than the universe of bills introduced in a given Congress (Harbridge 2015), the effects of ideological primary challengers are less evident in roll call voting than they are in earlier stages of the legislative process in which members have more discretion. Using a novel dataset on partisanship in bill cosponsorship, this manuscript analyzes that effect of ideological challenges on members’ behavior earlier in the legislative process. I find that a competitive primary challenge from the ideological extreme decreases the rate at which Republicans and Democrats cosponsor bills with members of the other party.

This manuscript also advances the study of polarization by examining the effects of the mere threat of experiencing an ideological primary challenge. I use an innovative two-stage model to estimate the predicted vote share of challengers from the ideological extreme, and regress partisan bill cosponsorship on the predicted vote share. I find that the increased threat of an ideological primary challenge accounts for about a quarter of the rise in partisanship that occurred from the 1980s to the 2010s.

While elite preferences and strategy explain a great deal of the increased polarization that occurred from the 1960s into the 2000s, this manuscript indicates that the recent surge in ideological primary challengers—and the corresponding sense of threat among incumbents—provide an additional bottom-up incentive to polarize. Not only do elites have preferential and strategic motivations to engage in partisanship, but also the rise in ideological primary challenges is now coercing elites to behave more partisan than they would for purely ideological and strategic reasons regarding interparty competition. This helps explain the rapid escalation and intensification of partisanship evident during the Obama and Trump presidencies (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Fishkin and Posen 2018; Bernstein 2018).

In the colorful words of Barney Frank, “The House under Republican rule consists half of people who think like Michele Bachmann and half of people who are afraid of losing a primary to people who think like Michele Bachmann.” This manuscript is exclusively concerned with the latter group of incumbents (albeit in both parties) who are “afraid” of instigating an ideological challenger. Future research should examine the role of primaries in elevating “people who think like Michele Bachmann” into Congress.

That is, scholars should broaden their conceptualization of ideological primary challenges to include open-seat races. In addition to threatening incumbents, the recent wave of ideological challengers is likely exacerbating partisan polarization by thrusting ideologues into office against the will of the party establishment. From 2004 to 2014, one-third of House candidates and one-fifth of Senate candidates won open-seat primaries against establishment-favored candidates (Hassell 2018). In fact, many of the most ideologically extreme members—including, Michelle Bachmann, Rand Paul, Ted Cruz, Mike Lee and Bernie Sanders—entered Congress by defeating a candidate informally supported by their party’s establishment. Future research can attempt to measure the direct marginal contribution of these “open-seat challengers” to polarization. How much less partisan is a counterfactual Congress in which the establishment’s preferred candidates always win the nomination?

Moreover, future research can examine the extent to which these members indirectly increase partisan polarization by altering the strategic behavior of party leaders.

Since leaders prioritize legislation that achieves consensus within the party (Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005), even a relatively small increase in ideologically extreme members can significantly reduce the number of moderate, bipartisan bills on the agenda. Similarly, ideological insurgents who force their way into the congressional party—despite initial opposition of party leaders—can prompt the party establishment to minimize intraparty heterogeneity by supporting more ideologically extreme candidates in future primaries than they would have otherwise.

In addition to the findings presented here, this research program would likely provide compelling statistical evidence that the recent wave of ideological challengers against incumbents, and establishment-preferred candidates in open-seat races, explains a quite sizeable share of the recent escalation and intensification of partisan polarization.

Appendix 1. Ideological Extremists by Party

Ideologically Extreme Democrats in Congress

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Name | State-District | Congresses | CFscore |
| Bernard Sanders | VT-1 | 1994-2004 | -1.842 |
| Alan Grayson | FL-08; FL-09 | 2010; 2014 | -1.512 |
| Julia Brownley | CA-26 | 2014 | -1.512 |
| Carol Shea-Porter | NH-1 | 2008-2010 | -1.438 |
| Ann Kuster | NH-2 | 2014 | -1.438 |
| Donna Edwards | MD-4 | 2010-2014 | -1.391 |
| William Foster | IL-14; IL-11 | 2008-2010; 2014 | -1.389 |
| Amerish Bera | CA-7 | 2014 | -1.377 |
| Suzan Delbene | WA-1 | 2014 | -1.347 |
| Tammy Duckworth | IL-8 | 2014 | -1.366 |
| Dennis Kucinich | OH-10 | 1998-2012 | -1.365 |
| Jerry McNerney | CA-11; CA-9 | 2008-2014 | -1.358 |
| Jay Inslee | WA-1 | 1994; 2000-2012 |  |
| Elizabeth Markey | CO-4 | 2010 | -1.341 |
| Barbara Lee | CA-09; Ca-13 | 2008-2014 | -1.330 |
| Mark Takano | CA-41 | 2014 | -1.328 |
| Janice Schakowsky | IL-09 | 2000-2014 | -1.321 |
| Rochelle Pingree | ME-01 | 2010-2014 | -1.320 |
| Ann Kirkpatrick | AZ-1 | 2010, 2014 | -1.317 |
| Thomas Perriello | VA-5 | 2010 | -1.310 |
| Richard Nolan | MN-8 | 2014 | -1.292 |
| Timothy Waltz | MN-1 | 2008-2014 | -1.290 |
| John Hall | NY-19 | 2008-2010 | -1.275 |
| Keith Ellison | MN-5 | 2008-2014 | -1.259 |
| Christopher Murphy | CT-5 | 2008-2012 | -1.253 |
| David Loebsack | IA-2 | 2008-2014 | -1.252 |
| Jared Huffman | CA-2 | 2014 | -1.251 |

Ideologically Extreme Republicans in Congress

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Name | State-District | Congresses | CFscore |
| Ron Paul | TX-22; TX-14 | 1980-1982; 1998-2008 | 1.403 |
| Timothy Huelskamp | KS-1 | 2012-2014 | 1.403 |
| Justin Amash | MI-3 | 2012-2014 | 1.392 |
| Michele Backmann | MN-6 | 2008-2012 | 1.381 |
| Marlin Stutzman | IN-3; IN-1 | 2012-2014 | 1.370 |
| Louis Gohmert | TX-1 | 2006-2014 | 1.345 |
| Kevin Cramer | ND-1 | 2014 | 1.343 |
| Paul Broun | GA-10 | 2008-2012 | 1.339 |
| Steven King | IA-5 | 2004-2014 | 1.338 |
| Lynn Noem | SD-1 | 2012-2014 | 1.322 |
| Marilyn Musgrave | CO-4 | 2004-2008 | 1.313 |
| Scott DesJarlais | TN-4 | 2012-2014 | 1.309 |
| Michael Pompeo | KS-4 | 2012-2014 | 1.297 |

Appendix 2. Stage 1 Models on the Vote Share of Ideological Challengers

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Republican | | Democrat | |
| Relative | Absolute | Relative | Absolute |
| District Ideology | -.0088\*\*  (.003) | -.0073\*\*\*  (.002) | -.093  (.15) | -.0072  (.04) |
| Negative Partisanship | -.0067\*  (.003) | -.0049\*  (.002) | -.00076  (.0019) | -.00021  (.00099) |
| District Ideology  Negative Partisanship | .00016\*\*  (.00005) | .0013\*\*\*  (.000033) | .0018  (.0031) | .0001  (.0016) |
| % Black | .018  (.036) | .019  (.024) | .038\*\*  (.014) | .0083  (.0071) |
| % Blue Collar | -.089\*  (.038) | -.0016  (.03) | -.026  (.027) | -.016  (.014) |
| % Foreign Born | .04  (.036) | .024  (.024) | .015  (.023) | .0071  (.011) |
| % Unemployed | .30\*\*  (.11) | .19\*\*  (.07) | -.053  (.076) | -.003  (.039) |
| % Poverty | .036  (.066) | .029  (.0054) | .022  (.037) | .031  (.019) |
| Population Density | -.59  (.66) | -.13  (.44) | .55\*  (.26) | .31\*  (.13) |
| East North Central | .0081  (.0082) | .0023  (.0054) | -.0025  (.0062) | -.0029  (.03) |
| Mid-Atlantic | .016  (.009) | -.0017  (.0057) | -.0059  (.0062) | -.004  (.0032) |
| Mountain West | .003  (.01) | .01  (.0067) | -.02\*  (.0095) | -.0045  (.0049) |
| Deep South | -.01  (.0085) | -.0044  (.0056) | -.011  (.0057) | -.0058\*  (.0029) |
| Pacific | -.0035  (.0095) | -.004  (.0063) | -.01  (.0063) | -.003  (.0032) |
| West North Central | -.0023  (.01) | .0037  (.0065) | -.013  (.0076) | -.0015  (.0039) |
| Constant | .37 | .256\* | .056 | .0091 |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| N | 2763 | 2763 | 3442 | 3442 |
| R2 | .04 | .07 | .02 | .02 |

\*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01 and \*\*\* p < 0.001

Appendix 3. Effects of Ideological Primary Threat on Partisan Bill Cosponsorship with more Controls

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Republicans | | Democrats | |
| Relative | Absolute | Relative | Absolute |
| (5) | (6) | (7) | (8) |
|  | 103.3\*\*\*  (5.7) | 126.7\*\*\*  (6.2) | 237.7\*\*\*  (28.1) | 562.8\*\*\*  (54.9) |
| General Margin | .24  (.47) | .13  (.53) | .73  (.38) | .84\*  (.38) |
| Copartisans | .10\*\*\*  (.01) | .10\*\*\*  (.01) | .10\*\*\*  (.008) | .11\*\*\*  (.008) |
| Majority | 1.3\*  (.56) | 1.07  (.54) | -1.2\*\*  (.38) | -1.5\*\*\*  (.38) |
| Opposition  Partisanship | -.28\*\*\*  (.046) | -.31\*\*\*  (.046) | .067\*  (.028) | .05  (.028) |
| District Ideology | 26.4\*\*\*  (2.5) | 24.2\*\*\*  (2.5) | 3.27  (2.2) | 4.0  (2.3) |
| Member Ideology | 18.9\*\*\*  (2.4) | 19.2\*\*\*  (2.4) | -9.1\*\*\*  (2.2) | -9.8\*  (2.3) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| R2 | .52 | .54 | .22 | .23 |
| n | 651 | 651 | 709 | 709 |
| N | 18 | 18 | 18 | 18 |
| T | 2646 | 2646 | 3312 | 3312 |

\*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01 and \*\*\* p < 0.001

Appendix 4: Effects of Ideological Primary Threat on Partisan Bill Cosponsorship using the Hall-Snyder Ideal Points

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Republicans | | Democrats | |
| Relative | Absolute | Relative | Absolute |
| (5) | (6) | (7) | (8) |
|  | 182.0\*\*\*  (21.9) | 562.3\*\*\*  (54.7) | 310.4\*\*\*  (18.4) | 96.3\*\*  (30.5) |
| General Margin | -.78  (.59) | -.73  (.58) | .36  (.36) | .79  (.40) |
| Copartisans | .14\*\*\*  (.01) | .13\*\*\*  (.01) | .096\*\*\*  (.007) | .079\*\*\*  (.008) |
| Majority | -.25  (.54) | -.21  (.53) | -2.03\*\*\*  (.39) | -.14  (.45) |
| Opposition  Partisanship | -.15\*\*  (.15) | -.10\*  (.05) | .096\*\*  (.025) | .11\*\*\*  (.027) |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| R2 | .40 | .40 | .30 | .15 |
| n | 651 | 651 | 709 | 709 |
| N | 18 | 18 | 18 | 18 |
| T | 2646 | 2646 | 3312 | 3312 |

\*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01 and \*\*\* p < 0.001

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3. Robert Boatright (2013) systematically coded the reason of all congressional primary challenges from 1970 to 2016. Challengers most commonly criticize the incumbent for being too old or incompetent. Ideological challenges are the second most common. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jewitt and Treul (2019) find that members in the majority (but not the minority) who experience a challenge from the radical flank demonstrate more ideological behavior in roll call voting. Nevertheless, the effect size is rather modest. Moreover, while primary challenges from the radical flank are more common, competitive primary challenges are still rare, thus Jewitt and Treul’s findings only apply to a small minority of members. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Relatedly, this also gives undue descriptive credence to the assumption that vote patterns represent personal ideology, since ideology is associated with stability. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. I am referring to the standard assumption that observations are independent and identically distributed. Notably, Hirano et al. (2010) mitigate this problem by moving beyond analyzing the one-to-one relationships between challenges and an incumbent voting behavior, by using the frequency of state-level challenges as an indicator of the likelihood that an incumbent will be challenged. However, as discussed above, they do not isolate challenges from the ideological extreme, and thus wrongly (indeed, quite wrongly as Boatright’s research demonstrates) assume that all primary challenges are from the ideological extreme. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Nilsen, Ella. 2018. “Republicans Have Dominate State Races for Years. A New Liberal Super PAC Wants to Change That.” Vox. <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/3/9/17092822/foward-majority-liberal-super-pac-state-legislatures-2018-midterms> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For example, Republican incumbents who cross the aisle on salient votes are often labeled as RINOs (Republican In Name Only). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Nonetheless, one might reasonably question why incumbents would be so concerned about primary threats, given the continued strength of the incumbency advantage (Boatright 2013). But, as Fiorina and Levendusky (2006, p. 70) write, “Even though few incumbents face serious primary challenges, it would be a mistake to conclude that primary elections are unimportant. In all likelihood, incumbents act strategically to preclude primary challenges.” Moreover, ethnographic research finds that members worry a great deal about elections, even those they seemingly have little reason to be concerned about. Indeed, this concern and caution might be the very reason incumbents fair so well (Fenno 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I follow Harbridge’s (2015) practice of dropping bills that are sponsored by a single legislator. If I included solo bills, they would be coded as purely partisan, which is problematic because most individually sponsored bills are more particularistic than partisan. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Here is a simple hypothetical to illustrate how I created this measure. Let us say a Republican member only sponsored 2 bills. Bill A had 50 Democratic cosponsors and 50 Republican, so the share of Republican cosponsors is 0.5. Bill B had 5 cosponsors, all of which were Republican, so the share of Republican cosponsors is 1. This hypothetical Republican would have a *partisanship* score of 0.75 in this Congress. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For Democrats, *partisanship*, the main dependent variable in this paper, measures the average share of Democratic cosponsors. However, for the purpose of comparing partisan bill cosponsorship to DW-Nominate scores, I trace that the average share of Republican cosponsors for both parties in Figure 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. In the analysis sections that follow, I deal with these concerns by controlling for majority status, the number of copartisans, and the average *partisanship* rate of the other party in a given Congress. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. This is the standard threshold in the literature to measure a competitive *primary* election. To those more familiar with research on general elections, this may seem like an incredibly low bar for competitiveness. However, the dynamics in primary elections are quite different. In general elections, an incumbent’s vote share is generally quite stable, because partisanship is the distinguishing characteristic between the candidates, and it is the characteristic on which most voters make their decision. Since partisanship is a nonfactor in primary elections, voting is far more erratic. A twenty or thirty percentage point drop in vote share is not uncommon in a primary, as it would be in a general. Thus, a vote share of 75% in a primary represents a much higher level of vulnerably than it does in a general election. The statistical significance and magnitude of the results presented below are similar using slightly higher and lower thresholds. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. I theorize that an incumbent who is challenged from both the left and the right will not adjust her level of partisanship. The intentional result of averaging the ideal point estimates of all competitive challengers in a given primary election is to code these cases as a non-ideological challenge. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Using Boatright’s dataset, and my own research on what he coded as issue-based challenges, I consolidated all challenges in which the ideological direction is clear. These included Democratic challengers motivated by opposition to school integration policies (i.e. busing), and abortion, and Republican challengers motivated by opposition to abortion, free trade, and immigration policy. Using Boatright’s coding scheme, rather than these changes, does not alter the results discussed in the next sections. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. I also ran regressions with the additional control of Democratic vote share in presidential elections, as a measure of district ideology. This is a statistically significant predictor in many of the models, but it does not have much impact on the explanatory variables of interest. Moreover, it is not clear how much we should really be concerned about the relationship between changes in district ideology and changes in ideological and partisan behavior in the career of an individual member. If a member becomes more partisan or extreme in response to their district becoming more ideological, and their general election margins are wide, it seems that primaries might be an important source of this change. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. I also ran models in which I excluded 1) all challengers whose ideal point difference was less than a full standard deviation above the mean, 2) half a standard deviation above the mean, or 3) a quarter standard deviations above the mean. The results presented here do not significantly change with the use of these different thresholds. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The idea was to use a cut point that would identify challengers who are considerably more ideologically extreme than the average congressperson. For Republicans, 1.25 is over 1.56 standard deviations above the mean of all Republicans who served during this period, and for Democrats -1.25 are more than 1.84 standard deviations less than the mean. Only 27 Democratic members and 13 Republican members have CFscores that are this extreme. Regarding Democratic members, this ranged from Jared Huffman to Bernie Sanders, and for Republicans this ranges from Mike Pompeo to Ron Paul. See Appendix 1 for more details. Of course, the exact threshold of 1.25 is arbitrary. Lowering (1.0) and increasing (1.5 and 2.0) this threshold does not significantly alter the results. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. As a robustness check on the results found with the Bonica scores, I replicate the process described in this section using ideal points constructed by Andrew Hall and James Snyder. The Hall-Snyder ideal points are similarly estimated using campaign contribution data, only these scores only include donations given during the primary. These may be superior estimates of candidate ideology, since donations made during the primary are more likely to reflect the true preferences of donors. See Hall and Thompsen 2018 for discussion of these data. My process for identifying *relative* extremists using the Hall-Snyder data is identical to that using the Bonica data. For *absolute* extremists, I use 0.3 as the threshold, because the Hall-Snyder ideal points are clustered more tightly around zero. See Appendix 4 for results with these data. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. I use the marginal vote share of the general election winner by district and election cycle. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Just to be clear, all districts are included in both the first and second stage models, including those in which the vote share of ideological challengers is zero. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Appendix 2 for the results from the first stage. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. In the second-stage models I clustered standard errors to account for serial correlation and spatial autocorrelation. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. I also ran models that included measures of district and member ideology. The results did not significantly change. See Appendix 3 for these models. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. I also ran the same two-stage models with measures of vote share, for both relative and absolute extremists, using the Hall-Snyder ideal point estimates in lieu of the Bonica scores (see footnote 19). The statistical and substantive significance of the effects of predicted *ideoshare* on *partisanship* are very similar using the Hall-Snyder data. See Appendix 4 for the results of the second stage of these models. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. The magnitude of the effects of absolute primary challengers is even greater. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)