Primary Concerns: Groups, Parties, and Nominating Challenges in Contemporary Politics

by

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Introduction

“Bipartisanship has brought us to the brink of bankruptcy. We don’t need bipartisanship, we need application of principle.”

So spoke Richard Mourdock, conservative primary challenger to then Senior Republican Senator Dick Lugar of Indiana in the Spring of 2012. Mourdock announced the challenge to Lugar over a year in advance of the primary date in a race that few would have expected to turn competitive given Lugar’s seniority and longstanding tenure in the Senate. Flash forward fifteen months, and Mourdock won the primary in an absolute landslide, taking 60 percent of the vote to Lugar’s 40 percent. The loss was a stunning blow to the GOP establishment and political leaders of both parties. Even Senator John Kerry (D-MA) viewed the loss as a “tragedy for the Senate” in an era of increasing partisanship and gridlock. One is left to question: what could have brought upon such a massive loss to Indiana’s senior incumbent Senator of over thirty years?

While on paper Lugar might have built an impressive resume that made him well-qualified to return to the Senate for another term, two factors in particular contributed to his demise. First, Lugar was facing a more conservative electorate than when he first ran for the Senate in 1976. Lugar’s constituents expressed dissatisfaction over his willingness to work with Democratic Party on bipartisan

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pieces of legislation in the Senate, with a full 33 percent of Indiana Republicans at the
time claiming that they wanted a “principled conservative” to represent them in the
Senate. Given Mourdock’s statements against bipartisanship such as the one that I
used to introduce this section, Mourdock fit this “principled conservative” to a T as
someone willing to stand up for principle over compromise in the Senate.

This dissatisfaction alone is not enough to explain why Lugar faced such a
strong challenge from the right. A second significant factor that tied into Mourdock’s
success over Lugar was the role that outside interest groups played in the primary.
Conservative interest groups poured millions of dollars in independent spending into
the race to oust Lugar, with the Club for Growth and Freedomworks for America
alone spending over $947,000 and $335,000 respectively against Lugar over the
course of the primary. The groups simply did not align ideologically with the more
moderate Lugar. As then-President of Club for Growth acknowledged, “Richard
Mourdock’s victory truly sends a message to liberals in the Republican Party. Voters
are rejecting the policies that led to record debt and diminished economic freedom.”

Lugar’s primary challenge in 2012 reflects multiple developing trends that
have been occurring over the past decade that I intend to explore further in this thesis.
First, Lugar’s primary demonstrates what many political pundits describe as
“polarization.” While I will discuss this further in the first chapter of my thesis,
polarization essentially expresses both the increasingly large ideological gap between

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the Democratic and Republican Parties and a trend in the parties themselves becoming more extreme. Lugar’s primary demonstrates tensions pertaining to the latter part of this explanation, with Mourdock representing a challenge to moderates within the party and a push within the party toward the political right. While Mourdock did ultimately go on to lose the general election to his Democratic opponent, the dissatisfaction that the Republican electorate expressed toward Lugar for being insufficiently conservative reflects polarization among the voters as well.

This trend in polarization relates to a second apparent trend that I intend to explore further in the Chapter Two of this thesis—an increase in the number of ideologically driven primary challenges. Lugar is certainly not the only elected official who has faced an ideologically driven primary challenge over the course of the past decade, nor is he the only Republican. Senators Blanche Lincoln (D-AR), Bob Bennett (R-UT), Thad Cochran (R-MS), Joe Lieberman (D-CT), and numerous other Senators all faced ideologically driven primary challenges in the past six election cycles, as did House Representatives such as Al Wynn (D-MD) and Bob Inglis (R-SC). As I will discuss in a series of case studies, some of these challenges were almost to be expected given the candidates’ stances on certain issues that broke from their party platform and primary electorate. Yet, in other instances, the source of the primary was less obvious. The sources of ideologically driven primary challenges are something that I will discuss further in Chapter Two. Specifically, I will use this chapter to analyze a set of case studies to try to determine a set of predictors for where one would expect to see an ideologically driven primary challenge occur. Moreover, I will seek to explain why these challenges do not arise
in cases where these predictors might be present despite no ideologically driven challenge occurring.

Two other trends that I intend to explore in my discussion in the following chapters are a partisan asymmetry in the number of primaries on the political left and right and a partisan asymmetry in the propensity of outside interest groups to engage in these primaries. In the above paragraph, I list Blanch Lincoln and Joe Lieberman as two examples of Democrats who have faced ideologically driven primary challenges over the past decade. However, I list both of them since, as I will discuss further in Chapter Two, these are two of the only Democratic Senate incumbents who faced ideologically driven primary challenges during this time period. To put this figure into perspective, Republican incumbents in the Senate faced more ideologically driven primary challenges in 2014 alone than Democrats did over the past six cycles. I will discuss this discrepancy in further detail in Chapter Two before analyzing it from the perspective of interest group involvement in Chapter Three.

Finally, Richard Lugar’s primary is notable partly because Lugar lost but partly because of the massive spending by outside interest groups that helped contribute to Lugar’s defeat. Similar to the discrepancy between the number of ideologically driven primaries on the left and the right, outside interest groups also appear to be more involved in primaries on the right than they do on the left. They appear to be more active both with respect to the number of primaries that they are involved in and with respect to the amount of money that they spend on certain races. As noted above, Club for Growth alone spent over $900,000 against Lugar in the

\(^7\) See Figure 1.3 in Chapter Two.
Indiana primary. For a total for comparison in a Democratic primary, this figure nearly quadruples the $250,000 that progressive organization MoveOn spent on Joe Lieberman’s primary opponent in 2006, something that I will discuss in greater depth in my Chapter Three analysis of this asymmetrical involvement of outside interest groups on the right compared to groups on the left. This chapter will also discuss in greater depth the history, missions, and roles that these various groups view themselves as having in modern politics in order to analyze potential reasons for this partisan asymmetry in groups’ propensity to engage in primaries.
Chapter One -- Polarization, Primaries, and Political Interest Groups: A Relationship Increasingly Intertwined

“Polarization” is an expression that has become quite commonly tossed around in U.S. politics. Congress is polarized. The Democratic and Republican Parties are polarized. The general political environment in the U.S. is becoming increasingly polarized. Despite the ubiquity of such broad assertions, there is some ambiguity about what polarization actually means with respect to U.S. politics. For example, does polarization just mean that the two parties are becoming increasingly distinct ideologically? Or does it mean that parties are becoming both ideologically distinct and increasingly ideologically extreme? Moreover, one is left to ponder what the consequences for governance in the U.S. might be of having two distinct, ideologically extreme parties. In short, why does polarization matter?

In this chapter, I intend to review several of the scholarly debates pertaining to the driving forces behind polarization, starting with a discussion on historical trends involving polarization and then moving to an analysis of several possible causes of polarization. In doing so, I will first define and assess polarization as it has manifested itself in Congress and in the broader electorate respectively, reviewing ongoing scholarly debates over the degree to which polarization extends to the mass electorate and the effects that this polarization might be having on the passing of legislation. Second, I will tackle scholarly debates concerning the relative contributions of the Republican Party and Democratic Party respectively to contemporary trends in polarization, engaging a growing literature on “partisan asymmetry” that emphasizes differences between the two parties’ dynamics. Third, I will describe and analyze literature pertaining to primaries in the modern political
system with the intention of determining what role (if any) ideologically driven primaries play in driving contemporary polarization. Fourth, I will detail recent literature pertaining to interest groups and the role that these groups have come to play in the primary process. Individual campaign contributions and political action committees (PACs) have both been driving forces behind political campaigns for decades, though outside interest groups and “dark” money appear to be playing increasingly large roles both in the primary process and in the general election. This will also include a discussion of the increasingly large role that conservative groups such as the Club for Growth and progressive groups such as MoveOn.org play in the election process. In addressing these four points, I intend to lay the framework for determining what factors will predict the presence of an ideologically driven primary challenge, as well as what factors can account for any partisan asymmetry that exists with respect to the involvement of outside interest groups on the left and the right in these primaries.

**Polarization: A Battle of the Extremes**

Polarization involves two distinct but intertwined elements. First, polarization involves party “sorting.” While the Democratic and Republican Parties once had a fair degree of ideological overlap, with liberals and conservatives each being present in both parties, the parties’ respective ideological compositions have grown increasingly distinct and internally coherent over time. Indeed, the ranks of conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans have fallen to nearly zero in both Congress and the broader electorate, as the Republican Party has become the party of conservative voters and the Democratic Party the party of liberals. Second,
polarization may also refer to the parties becoming more ideologically extreme and further apart from each other. That is, as the Democratic and Republican Parties are becoming increasingly sorted, they are also moving further to the political left and right respectively. In this regard, the two parties also have less room for moderates who do not stake out political stances that tilt largely one way or the other.

One need not look further than the historical political makeup of the electorate and Congress to view these two trends that have occurred as polarization has manifested itself over the past several decades. Michael Barber and Nolan McCarty synthesize several of the major causes and consequences of polarization in a chapter of the 2013 American Political Science Association Task Force Report,\(^8\) several of which directly address these trends. First, as noted above, any notions of “liberal” Republicans and “conservative” Democrats are borderline oxymorons in the modern political climate, given that few liberals identify as Republicans and few conservatives identify as Democrats. This is something that, historically, has not always been the case, with conservative Democrats exercising a considerable degree of influence in the South prior to the 1960s and liberal “Yankee” Republicans doing the same in the Northeast.\(^9\)

While the parties are ideologically distinct today, they have not always been, with this trend developing largely as a consequence of the “Southern realignment” that occurred following the passage of Civil Rights legislation during the 1960s.

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Many conservative white Democrats in the South began abandoning their party for the GOP, and the millions of southern African Americans and minorities who had once faced barriers in voting became enfranchised and threw their support overwhelmingly toward the Democratic Party. The development by no means occurred instantaneously, with Richard Nixon’s “Southern strategy” that courted angry white conservative ideologues opposed to issues such as affirmative action also playing a role in the gradual shift of once conservative Southern Democrats to the Republican Party. Although the trend toward two increasingly ideologically distinct parties has been five decades in the making, the two parties today are now more sorted than ever.

While the Democratic and Republican Parties have become increasingly ideologically distinct, they have also become increasingly extreme as well over the course of the past five decades as a consequence of polarization. A key method for measuring ideological differences between the Democratic and Republican Parties is the DW-Nominate system developed by Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal. The system scores congressional representatives on a -1 (more liberal) / +1 (more conservative) scale by looking at all of a representative’s votes in a given Congress session. This allows one to compare the overlap among the voting records of all members of Congress, which one can use to calculate a “score” for each member of Congress on this scale. Pool and Rosenthal assign these scores along a

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conservative/liberal ideological dimension, though these scores are interpretive to the extent that ideology alone is usually not the only factor that can influence or explain these placements. Nonetheless, one can still get a general idea of how “liberal” or “conservative” a given member of Congress is in comparison to others in the same Congress by comparing their scores, as well as compare trends in the average ideological scores across time by looking at the median scores of members of previous Congresses.

DW-Nominate scores reveal the growing ideological gap between the Democratic and Republican Parties in Congress as they have moved to the left and right respectively. Consider, for example, the following graph, which charts the average DW-Nominate scores of House Democrats and Republicans over the past 140 years.  

As demonstrated by the trend lines in the graph, the ideological gap between the two parties has grown drastically since the 1950s as both parties have moved away from

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the political “center.” The Republican Party has taken a sharp shift to the right over the past four decades, while the Democratic Party as a whole has taken a more modest but nonetheless significant shift to the left over the same span of time. The Democratic Party’s shift to the left can be partly be explained by in terms of changes in the ideological composition of Northern Democrats and Southern Democrats, two groups which are also plotted on the graph above. This distinction between groups is significant because, as noted previously, the Democratic Party at one point had a fairly powerful wing in the South that was ideologically more conservative than Northern Democrats. Beginning in the 1960s with the passing of Civil Rights legislation, many of these Democrats left the party for the GOP, explaining to some degree why the Democratic Party has moved to the ideological left and the Republican Party to the right. This, in turn, also resulted in a more progressive Democratic base in the South, similarly accounting for the Southern Democrats’ leftward drift over the past fifty years. Given these changes, one would be hard-pressed to argue that polarization is not a force that has drastically changed the ideological balance within and between the two parties over the past sixty years. As I will discuss in the coming pages, the reasons for the GOP’s comparatively sharper turn to the right are less clear.

The two different components of polarization become even more apparent when considering the actual ideological overlap between the two parties in Congress. In short, no overlap exists whatsoever. The most “conservative” Democrats in both the House and Senate are now more liberal than the most “liberal” Republicans. In the 113th Congress, for example, Joe Manchin, the most conservative Democrat in the
Senate, voted more “liberally” than Susan Collins, the most liberal Republican in the Senate. In terms of DW-Nominate data, Manchin scored a -0.07, further to the left than Collins’ 0.099. Moreover, this lack of overlap has now existed for more than ten years, when Barbara Sinclair discussed this party gap in *Party Wars*. This is a sharp contrast to a period as recent as the early 1970s, when there was ideological overlap among upwards of 35 House Representatives and 19 Senators. Thus, the number of “moderate” Congressional Representatives has fallen as the number of more extreme ones has risen, resulting in two ideologically distinct parties.

**Polarization: Tension between Party Elites and the Mass Public**

Political scientists disagree about the extent that polarization exists in the mass public. A leading skeptic is Morris Fiorina, who, starting with his 2004 work *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America* and continuing with 2009’s *Disconnect*, dismisses the notion that U.S. voters are deeply divided on most issues facing the country. While activists and political elites have become increasingly extreme, he argues, the broader electorate has remained moderate on most issues.

Fiorina has remained firm in his assertion that the American public is not as extreme and polarized as it appears even as the conservative Tea Party and progressive Elizabeth Warren-esque movements capture the fascination of voters on both sides of the political spectrum. Just last year, Fiorina published an article claiming that “Americans have not become more polarized” and emphasizing a

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14 “DW-Nominate Data for the 113th Congress,” [http://voteview.com/dwnl.htm](http://voteview.com/dwnl.htm)
16 Ibid., 11.
distinction between “polarization” and “sorting.”¹⁸ Fiorina argues, “Today partisanship, ideology and issue positions go together in a way that they did not in the mid-20th century. Issues and ideology used to cross-cut the partisan distribution, now they reinforce it.”¹⁹ Essentially, Fiorina believes that people have just become more “consistent” ideologically in terms of bringing their views in line with one party or the other depending on if they are liberal (the Democratic Party) or conservative (the GOP). However, Fiorina asserts that this trend applies only to ordinary Americans, with activists and congressional officials both sorting themselves ideologically and growing more extreme over time.²⁰ Moreover, given that party activists tend to be more committed to voting and supporting their preferred candidates, this latter trend would partially explain why parties have continued to become more extreme despite the fact that they are fairly sorted at this point in time. Indeed, activists are more likely than party moderates to turn out to vote during primaries,²¹ a fact that would support Fiorina’s “disconnect” hypothesis in a scenario in which small groups of voters composed largely of activists select extreme candidates unrepresentative of both the entire party and the broader electorate.

Political scientists such as Alan Abramowitz take drastically different stances on the extent to which polarization permeates the mass electorate. In contrast to Fiorina, Abramowitz believes that both the two major political parties and the broader

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¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Morris Fiorina, Disconnect, 9.

electorate are becoming more extreme with time as well. Abramowitz believes that party sorting and ideological polarization are separate but closely related phenomena that are part of a greater process that Abramowitz defines as “partisan-ideological polarization” in his 2010 work *The Disappearing Center*. Abramowitz’s argument rests on the premise that the electorate has essentially come to bring their views in line with their party identification (or vice versa) as their party leaders’ views become “increasingly consistent and distinct.”

Similarly, Abramowitz makes a key distinction between so-called “pure independents” and “independent leaners,” the latter of which he asserts should be considered “partisans rather than independents” due to their ideological tendency to support one party over the other despite their status as independents. Thus, Abramowitz asserts that both the parties and the broader electorate have also become more polarized and extreme. This is a distinction that I will later consider briefly in the context of states with forms of “open primaries” in which (often) anyone can vote, something that I will discuss in further depth in my Chapter Two case study of Thad Cochran’s 2014 primary.

Numerous polls and surveys support some of the claims made by Abramowitz with respect to polarization and the “disappearing center.” This information and support is important in context of understanding why candidates in political office today might be susceptible to facing primary challenges in a way that they once were not. In October 2014, Pew Research released a survey in the weeks leading up to the 2014 midterm elections that reported on trends in political polarization in the U.S. The percentage of respondents who identified as consistently

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23 Ibid., 59.
liberal or consistently conservative (22 percent total) was close to half that of
respondents who identified as “mixed” or ideologically consistent (39 percent).\textsuperscript{24} This
largely supports Fiorina’s view that the electorate is simply sorted and not polarized
due to the strong presence of voters with mixed views. However, when looking at
figures on the number of \textit{likely} voters, those with mixed views drops to 24 percent as
those with consistently liberal or conservative views jumps to 36 percent
(combined),\textsuperscript{25} which ties into Abramowitz’s arguments with respect to a disappearing
center in the modern political arena. This sort of disconnect between the percentage
of total respondents who identify as “mixed” and those who are \textit{likely} voters (and thus
less likely to have “mixed views”) could in part explain why fewer moderate
candidates have been elected to office in recent years, as well as potentially explain
why incumbents might be more likely to face ideologically driven primary challenges
given the more partisan composition of their primary electorates. Given that activists
tend to be both more ideologically extreme and more politically involved, it would
make sense that these groups are playing a significant role in fueling polarization
when ideologically driven primaries do occur.

Polarization has had several dire consequences for the legislation process in
Congress. In \textit{It’s Even Worse than it Looks}, Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein
argue that political extremism has essentially hijacked the policymaking process in
Congress to a degree that is even greater than might initially be apparent on the
surface. The two acknowledge that the number of filibusters in the Senate has been at

\textsuperscript{24} “Political Polarization in Action: Insights into the 2014 Election from the American Trends Panel,”
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
historic levels in the past decade as individual senators and the minority party seek to block legislation that deviates significantly from their party platform.\textsuperscript{26} Others scholars such as Scott Adler and John Wilkerson acknowledge symptoms of partisan divisions such as declining legislative productivity, but instead try portraying “dysfunction” in Congress in a much more positive light by asserting that Congress is still capable of solving problems given that most roll call votes pass Congress with a bipartisan majority. Such cases are votes in which a majority of Democrats and a majority of Republicans support the bills.\textsuperscript{27} Yet, true as this might be, the deep ideological divisions are becoming increasingly apparent when considering occasions such as the Joint Select Committee’s on Deficit Reduction inability in 2011 to come to an agreement on a deficit reduction plan.\textsuperscript{28} The parties have become so ideologically distinct that compromise has become increasingly difficult as a consequence of the fundamental differences in beliefs between the two. As noted by Sarah Binder, the percentage of salient issues of legislation caught up in congressional gridlock has over doubled since 1948.\textsuperscript{29} In short, rampant gridlock has been occurring in the Senate as a consequence of polarization.

\textbf{“Just a little more to the right”}

Thus far, several of the political scientists that I have referenced have framed polarization largely as a “symmetrical” phenomenon that has affected both parties

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{26} Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein, \textit{It’s Even Worse than it Looks}, (New York: Basic Books, 2012), 89.
  \item \textsuperscript{27} E. Scott Adler and John D. Wilkerson, \textit{Congress and the Politics of Problem Solving}, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 12.
\end{itemize}
equally, Mann and Ornstein and McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal excluded. Yet, in the past decade there has been an increase in the amount of literature concerning “asymmetrical” polarization that looks at trends within the two parties in order to examine in what ways the parties are driving polarization to different extents. In addition to the findings of McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal discussed above, Joseph Ura and Christopher Ellis pay close attention to this possibility in “Partisan Moods: Polarization and the Dynamics of Mass Party Difference.” They argue, “…polarization is, by definition, a construction of two separate, dynamic, variables: the policy preferences of the Democratic and Republican parties in the electorate.”

In this regard, Ura and Ellis break from many of their predecessors in analyzing mass polarization from the perspective of policy preferences within the two parties that might be driving polarization asymmetrically. In short, their argument rests on the premise that polarization might be in part due to one party moving further away from the ideological center rather than a scenario in which both parties are becoming more extreme at equal rates.

Returning to the graph on DW-Nominate scores in the House over time, one will note that both the Democratic and Republican Parties have become more liberal and conservative respectively as the Democratic line trends down and the Republican line trends up. However, what is more striking about the chart is how much further up the mean Republican score has trended relative to the mean Democratic score’s decline. The Republican score has risen by close to 0.6 between 1975 and 2014, while the Democratic score has fallen by less than 0.3 over the same time period.

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Thereby, Republicans have grown over twice as conservative as Democrats have become liberal compared to where they had been in the 1970s, with the Republican Party’s swing to the right asymmetrically driving polarization.

This Republican swing to right has not gone unnoticed in the scholarly political science community and has been subject to increased scrutiny in recent years. Matt Grossman and David Hopkins explain the differences in partisan asymmetry in terms of the groups that make up the Democratic and Republican Parties. They assert, “Republicans are more likely to reason ideologically whereas Democrats are more likely to think of politics as a competition among groups over benefits.”

The GOP is thus “best viewed as the agent of an ideological movement whose members are united by a common devotion to the principle of limited government” while the Democratic Party is more akin to “a coalition of social groups whose interests are best served by various forms of government activity.”

Consequently, the GOP has swung to the right specifically in an ideological push for limited government as the Democratic Party seeks to appease the wants and needs of various groups such as women, minority groups, and others.

Evidence supporting Grossman’s and Hopkins’ research varies depending on how one interprets the two scholars’ conception of voter coalitions. The two are debatably correct in asserting that the GOP is best viewed as a sort of “ideological” movement devoted to the “principle of limited government.” Indeed, data from the Pew Research Center reflects that Republicans prefer party principles over

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compromise even under a Republican president, while data from Grossman’s and Hopkins’s “Policymaking in Red and Blue: Asymmetric Partisan Politics and American Governance” shows that the Democratic Party is largely connected through a vast web of interest groups and unions. Nonetheless, one would be mistaken to argue that the Republican Party is not also a sort of “coalition” of various voting blocs, donors, and interest groups that come together and support the party. Indeed, the Republican Party has its own blocs that similarly represent a variety of views and interests, ranging from socially motivated right-wing Evangelical Christians to wealthy business-oriented voters supporting lower taxes to white working class voters in the North. As Hans Noel describes, these groups form voting blocs for the GOP in such a way that allows the party to capitalize on ideological language to fit its conservative agenda in a way that appeals to voters, with principles such as freedom of religion being able to appeal to voters in a country and, more specifically, particular regions (i.e., the South) that are heavily Christian. The fundamental difference that differentiates the two parties on a larger scale is the various blocs’ in the Republican Party outward emphasis on principles and ideology over discussion and compromise.

Grossman’s and Hopkins’s view that the Republican Party is a type of unified ideological coalition in comparison to a party focused on bargaining and coalition-building among different groups has drastic implications for what one would expect.

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34 Sinclair, Party Wars, 36.
35 Abramowitz, The Disappearing Center, 84
36 Hans Noel, “Democrats are as ideological as Republicans. And Republicans are as group-centric as Democrats,” in Mischiefs of Faction blog, March 2015, http://www.mischiefsoffaction.com/2015/03/democrats-are-as-ideological-as.html
to see in terms of intraparty nomination fights within the party. For a party focused on coalition building, one would expect to see varying degrees of compromise between different groups and ideas in order to form a winning coalition of voters. In a party focused almost exclusively on ideology, however, one would expect to see an incentive for representatives to be uncompromising with respect to anything pertaining to that ideology, which could in part explain why the Republican Party has moved to the right in recent years. This uncompromising mindset would, in turn, also create an incentive for candidates to challenge incumbents viewed as being insufficiently partisan to the conservative cause. This is something that I will explore in further depth later in this chapter in a discussion of literature related to primaries, as well as in my Chapter Two case study analysis of primary challenges.

While Grossman and Hopkins attribute the GOP’s rightward push largely to the party’s emphasis on ideology, other political scientists such as Mann, Ornstein, Jacob Hacker, and Paul Pierson attribute the shift to a variety of other factors. Mann and Ornstein acknowledge that party principles and conservative ideology have played a significant role in driving the party to the right, with a substantial majority of Republicans in 2011 pledging not to raise taxes under any circumstances. However, they also argue that the media and money have played a role in the party’s rightward tick. The rise of email and other forms of online media, they assert, has reinforced conservative ideology due to the fact that email attacks tend to be directed toward liberal targets, something that both parties can easily capitalize on with something as simple as the click of a button even though conservatives tend to be the ones that

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37 Mann and Ornstein, *It’s Even Worse than it Looks*, 55.
38 Ibid., 67.
employ such tactics more frequently. Similarly, the *Citizens United* Supreme Court decision has enabled SuperPACs and outside interest groups to flood the market with advertisements,\(^{39}\) something applicable to both parties in theory despite largely favoring Republicans and conservatives within the Republican Party in practice due to better finance operations and a more extensive donor network on the right.

Grossman, Hopkins, Mann, and Ornstein have accounts that put the bulk of the source of the GOP’s rightward push on factors that permeate the party from the elite to the rank and file level, but Hacker and Pierson describe a very different story in *Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy*. Citing the fact that the number of people who identify as “conservative” over the past two decades has remained fairly constant while the number of people who identify as “centrists” has remained both high and also fairly constant,\(^{40}\) Hacker and Pierson claim that Republican activists and Congressional Representatives have essentially “abandoned the middle” and left most of the country behind in their rightward shift. For Hacker and Pierson, the power of elite interests explains the source of partisan asymmetry rather than anything pertaining to the masses. They assert that the GOP is run largely by well-funded political elites that want to govern in such a manner that seeks to control the political agenda to serve their needs.\(^{41}\) In this regard, ideological forces are indeed at play in Hacker and Pierson’s argument, with conservative views and ideology forming the base of the GOP’s stances on most issues. However, Hacker and Pierson argue that grassroots groups have largely worked to mobilize and

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 80


\(^{41}\) Ibid., 71.
rally the conservative base that votes in far-right representatives. The leaders, in short, work the voters and the electoral system in order to pawn off their conservative agenda on the masses, who are less conservative than the party as a whole has come to be. In sum, the increasingly far-right party has largely forced its conservative agenda on a country that is at most center-right.

The leaders, in short, work the voters and the electoral system in order to pawn off their conservative agenda on the masses, who are less conservative than the party as a whole has come to be. In sum, the increasingly far-right party has largely forced its conservative agenda on a country that is at most center-right.

The various arguments on polarization and political asymmetry raise several questions about what might actually be at the root of polarization and political asymmetry. The fact that the GOP has control of at least one state legislature chamber in all but eleven states, unified control in thirty, and a solid majority in the House of Representatives despite having a lower overall party registration in comparison to the Democratic Party would seem to support Hacker and Pierson’s view that the GOP has indeed taken steps to, in a way, tilt the playing field in its favor, both on a state level and nationally. Similarly, the fact that an increasing number of House districts and Senate seats are “safe” in comparison to competitive or “swing” districts and seats raises questions about what other incentives individual Senators and Representatives might have to play to ideology at the expense of the electoral “center” where most people locate themselves politically. This is especially relevant when considering the arguments advanced by Abramowitz and supported by the Pew Research data that those most likely to vote are the partisan party activists, who have grown increasingly extreme in the past several decades. Consequently, I

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42 Ibid., 120
will explore specifically the question of what factors predict the presence of an ideologically driven primary challenge to an incumbent in this polarized political climate. Furthermore, the points discussed by Mann and Ornstein concerning the rise of SuperPACs, dark money, and outside interest groups raise the question of what reasons these groups might have in choosing to engage in ideological primary challenges that, as I will discuss, further fuel this polarization. Given these factors, I will now turn to the primary and the role that it might be playing in asymmetrical polarization in light of the above factors.

**The Primary: Cause for or Symptom of Asymmetrical Polarization, or Both?**

Political primaries have been present in the U.S. for over a century, yet they increasingly seem to play a larger role in the U.S. political process as the two major parties become more extreme and incumbents become safe. In 2010, 2012, and 2014, one need not have even looked further than the daily news to see reports of Republican House members and Senators being challenged by more conservative ideologues for being insufficiently conservative. However, before moving to a discussion of literature on primaries and the role that they might potentially play in polarization, I will first briefly touch upon the variations in rules governing primaries across states.

The most common type of primary that states utilize is the direct primary. Although voters in these primaries “directly” vote for the candidate of a given party that they support, the rules that govern said primaries are not always as direct as the name might imply. In many states in the South, direct primaries require that a candidate achieve a majority of the vote in order to receive the party nomination in a
primary, meaning that the party has a runoff between the top vote-getters in a primary if the top single candidate only initially receives a plurality of the vote. Moreover, the voters that are eligible to vote in a primary vary depending on whether the state has open, closed, semi open, or semi closed rules, with open primaries not requiring that voters be affiliated with a party on one extreme and closed primaries only allowing voters registered with a specific party to vote in that party’s primary on the other extreme.46

Although the vast majority of states operate under some form of the closed primary system, some states have (had) one of three other primary variations at some point within the past twenty years. First, California, Washington, and Alaska operated under the “blanket” primary until the early 2000s,47 a primary system in which voters could choose to vote for candidates of different parties for different offices all on one ballot. The goal of this system was to have more moderate candidates elected to office by allowing members of one party to crossover and vote for candidates in the other party. For example, a Democrat in a safe Republican House district but a competitive state at the statewide level could in theory vote for a Democrat in a primary for statewide contest but vote for a more moderate Republican in the House primary to avoid wasting a vote on a Democratic candidate that would inevitably lose in the general election. Second, in a “top-two” primary, all candidates for the same office are on a ballot regardless of their political affiliation, with the top two candidates then going on to the general election even if they are of the same

46 Ibid., 272.
47 Ibid., 272.
party. Finally, in a nonpartisan or “jungle” primary, all candidates are on a ballot regardless of their political affiliation, with the main factor differentiating this sort of primary from a top-two primary being that any candidate who receives 50 percent of the vote in a jungle primary is automatically elected to office (thus avoiding a general election “runoff”).

The literature on primaries has resulted in some mixed conclusions with respect to the impact that primaries have on polarizations. Literature on open and closed forms of primaries and the role that they may have played in political polarization in the U.S. has turned up mixed results. Elaine Kamarck describes how in primaries, voter turnout for both parties tends to be lower than in the general election, allowing for more extreme members of both parties to “dominate” closed primaries. Data released from Pew Research seems to support her assertions to some degree, given that consistent conservatives and consistent liberals voted at higher rates in the 2014 primary elections than their mostly conservative and mostly liberal counterparts. With respect to the potential effects that more open primaries can have on enabling moderate candidates to win, Kamarck cited the example of fairly conservative Republican Thad Cochran mobilizing thousands of traditionally Democratic African American voters to narrowly stave off a challenge from the right.

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48 Ibid., 272.
49 Ibid., 272.
in the 2014 Mississippi Senate runoff.\textsuperscript{52} Thus, evidence advanced by Kamarck supports to some degree the idea that closed primaries tend to mobilize voters from the political extremes while more open primaries can have a moderating effect in close elections. In this manner, closed primaries do contribute to polarization by having a more homogenous, ideologically extreme electorate decide on the candidate that a party will inevitably put up for election.

Looking at literature pertaining to some of the less traditional primary systems in the U.S., Will Bullock and Joshua Clinton discussed the effect that blanket primaries have on elected officials’ behavior in a 2011 article on the 1996 California blanket primary referendum. In theory, the blanket primary might seem like a primary that would lead either to more moderate candidates winning or to incumbents who are challenged in a primary attempting to moderate their behavior, given that members of a party in a district or region dominated by the other party could in theory “cross over” and vote for a more “moderate” candidate from the opposing party. Yet, Bullock’s and Clinton’s research showed that House incumbents did not change their voting behavior or moderate themselves in order to appeal to new “crossover” voters, with the exception of incumbents and newly-elected representatives in already competitive districts.\textsuperscript{53} In this manner, the only moderating effect that the blanket primary had in California was moderating candidates from districts where candidates already had an incentive to appeal to a more ideologically diverse electorate. Thus,


despite the fact that the Supreme Court ruled the California blanket primary unconstitutional in 2000 for violating political parties’ right to “pick the candidates their members want to speak for them,” the research released by Bullock and Clinton is still insightful into understanding how primaries in general may or may not influence ideological moderation or polarization of specific candidates. Specifically, uncompetitive districts and states give congressional representatives little incentive to ever moderate their behavior to appeal to a broader electorate since, in these cases, the primary electorate quite often reflects the views of (or, at the very least, agrees ideologically with) a substantial majority of the broader general election electorate.

Other political scientists such as Abramowitz and Hirano et al. provide evidence that works against some of the evidence put forth by Kamarck and the Pew Research data. Hirano et al. discussed in a 2010 article how only five of fifty moderate Democratic and Republican Senators between the 91st and 110th Congress left office as a consequence of losing a primary election, with double that number losing a general election and the vast majority ending their careers with retirement. The fact that several of these Democrats (Talmadge-GA; Krueger-TX) and Republicans (Weicker-CT; Goodell-NY; Chaffee-RI) lost general elections in what have grown to be solidly Republican and Democratic states respectively likely has to do with underlying trends in polarization and party sorting that have resulted in many states being solidly Democratic or solidly Republican in general elections.

Ultimately, however, Shigeo et al. found that primaries themselves rarely affect
Congressional representatives’ voting behavior, using various statistical models that
analyze the DW-nominate scores of the representatives to demonstrate their claims.\(^{56}\)

Abramowitz and Boatright are similarly skeptical of the role that primaries
play in polarizing the current political climate. Abramowitz published an article in
2008 that noted that exit polls from the 2000 presidential primaries and general
election showed that Democratic primary voters were only four points more liberal
than Democratic general election voters while Republican primary voters were only
one point more conservative than Republican general election voters.\(^{57}\) In more recent
literature, Boatright shows similar skepticism toward the role that primaries play in
polarizing the two major parties in the U.S. Boatright’s data detailing the number and
type of primaries over time demonstrates that both the number of overall primaries in
the past two decades and the percentage and number of primaries that are
ideologically driven have increased in comparison to the late 1980s and early 1990s.\(^{58}\)
However, he also notes that primary challengers rarely win against incumbents, a
pattern that has remained fairly consistent across time even as the number of primary
challenges has increased in the past decade in comparison to previous years.\(^{59}\)
Boatright’s arguments with respect to primaries can all essentially be summed up in
one quote from a short article that Boatright published in February 2014: “That’s not
to say there’s nothing new about primaries we see today. What’s unique now is how

\(^{56}\) Ibid. 188.
much attention we pay to them—in other words, congressional primaries matter more because we think they matter more.”

In short, Boatright argues that a large part of why primaries “play” such a big role in the today’s political culture is simply because they appear to be a greater problem than they actually are.

Despite the skepticism that Abramowitz, Hirano and even Boatright express over the impact that primaries have on polarization, a substantial portion of evidence points to the conclusion that primaries do actually play a role in contributing to polarization, at least in recent election cycles. As mentioned in my introduction, numerous Senators and House Representatives have faced ideologically driven primary challenges in recent years, from Bob Inglis and Al Wynn in the House to Richard Lugar and Bob Bennett in the Senate. Although (as noted by Boatright) incumbents such as these are still in the minority in Congress in terms of the number of incumbents who face serious primary challenges and lose, one would be foolish to argue that such primaries did not contribute to polarization in their respective election cycles given that each of the party nominees that emerged from the primaries were more ideologically extreme than the incumbents that they ousted. While occasionally the nominees go on to lose the general election, as was the case with Richard Mourdock in Indiana, they certainly contribute to polarization when the incumbents that they defeat are in “safe” states or districts that largely tilt one way ideologically. Such was the case when Donna Edwards emerged as the Democratic nominee in her

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61 Bob Bennett lost not in a direct primary but in Utah’s slightly more complex nominating system involving a party convention
Maryland House district, Trey Gowdy as the Republican nominee over Bob Inglis in their district in South Carolina, and Bob Bennett’s opponent as the Republican Senate nominee in Utah.

Primaries can even have a sort of “ripple effect” on sitting incumbents who themselves do not face primary challenges due to a perceived “threat” of a potential challenge in the event that the incumbents choose not pander to their primary electorates that favor more extreme policy positions. While empirically it is difficult to demonstrate “shifts” in the voting behavior of incumbents that occur as a result of ideologically driven challenges to their colleagues, one notable example where a behavior shift occurred was Bennett’s senior Senator Orrin Hatch. After conservative groups targeted and helped oust Bennett in a conservative challenge at the Republican nomination convention in Utah in 2010, Hatch took a noticeable turn to the right in his voting behavior in the following months to avoid a similar fate. In this manner, even the perceived threat of a challenge can contribute to polarization by causing incumbents to stake more extreme positions in states and districts that have strong partisan leanings. Thus, even though Boatright might be correct in asserting that few incumbents face the threat of a serious primary challenge each year, simply this threat of any ideologically driven primary challenge has the potential to shape incumbents’ voting behavior since no Congressional representative wants to risk being that incumbent who stakes a moderate position and regrets it down the road by facing (and potentially losing) a primary challenge.

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Moving Forward

While Boatright, Abramowitz, and several others show skepticism toward the role that primaries play in ideological polarization, they also appear to discount the significance of several trends that have developed with respect to primaries. Boatright acknowledges that ideological primaries have risen in number over the course of the past decade and disproportionally target the Republican Party. Moreover, he essentially dismisses the potential effects that primaries might have on polarization on the basis that the number of “competitive” primaries is lower than it was in the 1970s (an average of 49 in those cycles vs. 45 in the past decade). Yet, this analysis overlooks the fact that the stakes of today’s primaries are very different from those of the 1970s given that the challenges are now more ideological in nature and the parties both more sorted. While incumbents in the 1970s might have had incentives to compromise in order to appeal to broader electorates, incumbents today have little incentive to do so since they need to appeal to their homogenous, one-sided primary electorates. Even if incumbents might still generally be “safe,” they need to be mindful of their voting patterns in order to appease their electorates or else they likely would not be. Boatright makes several claims that simply underemphasize the effects that primaries are having on polarization by focusing too much on quantitative data and not enough on qualitative analysis that would identify consequences of these primary risks, such as preemptive voting behavior changes. He suggests that it is “difficult, if not impossible, to measure” the preemptive changes in behavior that Congressional representatives might make in an attempt to avoid being “primaried”

63 Ibid.
down the road.” As noted above, however, an example such as Orrin Hatch’s (R-UT) shift toward a more conservative voting record after interest groups helped oust his former co-Senator Bob Bennett in a 2010 challenge would clearly reflect some degree of a pre-emptive response to avoid being primaried himself.

With this skepticism in mind, I intend to spend the bulk of my thesis exploring two questions related to this increase in ideologically driven primary challenges. In doing so, I will spend my second chapter looking at various case studies over the course of the past six election cycles in order to identify conditions that will predict serious ideologically driven primary challenges. I will be taking into consideration a variety of cases and potential predictors, including major deviations in voting records from issues on party platforms, the involvement of outside interest groups, and others. In doing so, I will also be seeking to understand party asymmetry in these case studies since, as I will discuss, primary challenges have become more common on the left than they have on the right in recent years.

Following this analysis, I will also look to address the question of under what conditions outside interest groups are willing to engage in ideologically driven primary challenges to incumbents, and, why any potential asymmetry exists between the involvement of groups on the left and the right in these challenges. Boatright discusses some of the sources of primary challenge funding in Getting Primaried, referencing the rise of conservative grassroots organizations such Club for Growth.

66 Robert Boatright, Getting Primaried, Print, 2013, 189,
However, these groups are by no means limited to the political right, with groups such as MoveOn.Org and the Progressive Change Campaign Committee also playing a role in primaries on the political left. Indeed, Michael Murakami describes in “Divisive Primaries: Party Organizations, Ideological Groups, and the Battle over Party Purity” how such groups side ideologically with one of the two ideologically homogenous parties but disapprove of more moderate members of Congress, who they view as “siding with opposition” when they compromise. Given the extensive role that these groups have grown to play in politics over the course of the past decade, I will spend the third chapter of my thesis looking specifically at these ideological interest groups, under what conditions they are willing to engage in primary challenges, and potential reasons as to why groups on one side of the political spectrum may or may not be more willing to engage in challenges than groups on the other.

Chapter Two -- Primaries and Extremes: Sourcing the Roots

In advance of the 2016 presidential election, much of the current media focus has been on the ongoing presidential primaries in the Democratic and Republican Parties. On the left, voters, activists, and political pundits alike all fiercely debate over whether or not Democratic “Socialist” Bernie Sanders will be able to upset frontrunner Hillary Clinton with support from the progressive wing of the party. The prospect of this seems increasingly unlikely given Clinton’s overwhelming victories in states in the South as well as her more modest success in large states such as Illinois and Ohio. Meanwhile, the right has shaped into what has become a three-way contest between political outsider Donald Trump, conservative firebrand Ted Cruz, and moderate establishment candidate John Kasich, with the real question being whether the latter two will be able to keep Trump from winning a majority of delegates and force a contested convention in the summer. In this regard, voters in both parties have been offered a fairly clear set of ideological choices in the ongoing primary season, with candidates such as Clinton and Kasich being the more moderate candidates in the Democratic and Republican Parties respectively in comparison to candidates like Sanders and Cruz.

Competition between moderate and more ideologically extreme candidates within the two parties is by no means limited to the presidential race. Indeed, this is a tension that has become increasingly significant in congressional races over the past two decades. Both open seats and seats held by incumbent have been subject to primary campaigns that center largely around ideological differences within parties, with, to take another current example, Donna Edwards openly framing herself as the
more liberal candidate in comparison to opponent Chris Van Hollen in the Democratic primary for the open Senate seat in Maryland.  

Similarly, then Senator Joe Lieberman (D-CT) faced a primary challenge in 2006 for being too conservative on issues such as the war in Iraq, going on to lose the primary to more liberal challenger Ned Lamont.  

Lieberman went on to win the general election as an independent candidate, though the fact that he lost his primary election puts him in a historically small minority of incumbents who actually lose to a primary challenge.  

On the GOP side, numerous Senators have faced conservative challenges from the right over the past several election cycles, from Richard Lugar to Bob Bennett.  Thus, these ideological challenges are exclusive to neither party and often involve both open seats and those held by incumbents.  

The number of ideologically driven primary challenges in particular has risen over the past decades in comparison to primaries that have occurred on other grounds, such as the incumbent being involved in a scandal or viewed as incompetent by his or her constituents.  In 2014, for example, about 70 serious primaries to incumbents occurred in the House, around 30 of which were ideological in nature.  This is a sharp uptick compared to even as recent as a decade prior, when 5 of just under 30 primaries were ideologically driven challenges to incumbents.  

Moreover, this

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increase has been more pronounced in the Republican Party than it has in the Democratic Party, with all ideological challenges in the House in 2014 occurring within the GOP and none at all in the Democratic Party. Boatright details this data in the following two charts:72

The above two graphs plot the total number of serious primary challenges in the House since the 1970s. While ideologically driven challenges have experienced a general uptick over the past decade in the GOP, the same is not true for the Democratic Party. This is a trend that I will discuss further in the upcoming pages, as a noticeable imbalance occurs between ideologically driven primaries on the left and the right in the Senate as well.

Despite the fact that incumbents tend to prevail in primary challenges, the media often presents information pertaining to primaries in such a way that, at the very least, makes it seem that primary challenges are a greater threat to ousting

72 Ibid.
incumbents than they actually are. Primaries are becoming increasingly common and, moreover, these primaries are occurring largely on ideological grounds, which can have immense impacts on voting behavior of incumbents who work to avoid a potential challenge. When looking at the 2014 midterm elections, for example, only 2 of 291 incumbents ultimately lost their primaries. Still, one of these incumbents was House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, who lost his election in what was a major upset by a more conservative “fringe” candidate, while several Republican incumbents who did win (such as Senator Thad Cochran of Mississippi) faced very pressing ideological challenges from the right that they nearly lost. In this regard, even while most incumbents won their primaries, over half (291 of 535) at least faced the threat of a primary challenge. Moreover, as a consequence of this perceived threat of primary challenges, many Congressional representatives pre-emptively adjust their voting behavior in order to avoid being primaried in their next re-election cycle, as was the case with Orrin Hatch of Utah.

Given this common perception that primaries are playing a large role in the political process, this chapter will seek to accomplish two main tasks. First, I will look at data with respect to trends in primaries over time in order to denote whether primaries are actually becoming increasingly common or whether they are simply appearing to become increasingly common. Second, I will proceed to address the question of what variables predict the existence of a significant ideologically driven primary, looking at the incumbents’ degree of deviations from average party ideology.

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73 Connie Cass, “Just 2 Incumbents Have Lost Their Primaries This Year,” in The Huffington Post, Accessed December 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/29/incumbents-reelection_n_5541055.html]
and deviations from the partisan tilt of particular states and districts in order to
analyze the sources of these challenges and why they occur. I will do this by looking
at a set of case studies of both House and Senate candidates from the past six election
cycles, specifically Sen. Thad Cochran (R-MS), Sen. Joe Lieberman (D-CT), Sen.
Tom Carper (D-DE), former Rep. Albert Wynn (D-MD), and former Rep. Bob Inglis
(R-SC). In analyzing these cases, I may also make reference to other cases in which
ideologically driven primaries either were or were not present in order to give further
examples for comparison, though the bulk of my analysis will be on these specific
cases.

**Primaries: Fact or Fiction?**

Primaries have grown to play a critical role in shaping the U.S. political
system over the past several decades in both theory and practice. During the
Progressive Era of the early 20th century, a substantial majority of states began using
the primary as a system of choosing party nominees for political office in order to
make the process “more democratic” by empowering people to participate in the
selection process via popular participation. In short, control of the selection process
transferred largely from the hands of party leaders and elites to the people.

The vast majority of elections in the U.S. have taken place between one
candidate of one major party and one candidate of the other—a Democrat vs. a
Republican. Yet, the candidates that the two major parties field do not come from

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74 Stephen Ansolabehere, Shigeo Hirano, and James Snyder, “What did the direct primary do to party
loyalty in Congress?” in in *Process, Party and Policy Making: Further New Perspectives on the
History of Congress*, (California: Stanford University Press), 2007
nowhere. Primaries often help to weed out candidates deemed out of line with party principles or otherwise viewed as incompatible with the electorate in favor of a candidate viewed more highly in some way by the primary constituency. States vary greatly in their primary rules. California’s recently adopted blanked primary puts all candidates of all parties on the same ballot, with the two candidates with the highest number of votes going on to face off in the general election.\(^5\) States such as Utah utilize a multi-step caucus-convention process in which the candidates who ultimately appear on the direct primary ballot are first selected by delegates at a state convention and chosen through a caucus system.\(^6\) Some states, like Connecticut, allow parties to endorse challengers prior to the primary.\(^7\) In general though, the system of primaries in the U.S. functions in such a way that the general electorate of a state inevitably has a choice between candidates with oftentimes different visions on how best to govern the country.

Incumbents have historically fared well against challengers both during the primary season and during the general election. Since the 1960s, House incumbents have prevailed in the election cycle over 90 percent of the time, with Senate incumbents emerging victorious a slightly lower but nonetheless impressive 80 percent of the time.\(^8\) Moreover, these figures are even better for incumbents during the primary process, who have lost on average less than 2 percent of the time in the

That being said, this is a trend that appears to be changing to at least some extent. After hitting a high point in the 1970s of 40-60 per election cycle, a period during which redistricting created numerous minority-majority districts in the South and partisanship within the parties started to increase following the start of the “Southern realignment,” the number of House incumbents facing primary challenges dropped during the next two decades only to resurge again in the new century. According to data collected by Robert Boatright for the forty year period between 1970 and 2010, the number of House incumbents facing serious primary challengers bottomed out in 2000 at around 20, with a gradual increase over the next 5 election cycles to 60. Thus, the media is somewhat correct in portraying primaries as increasingly common, at least when considering the general trend in the number of primaries since the 1980s and 1990s.

One trend that has been occurring with respect to primaries over the past two decades is an increase in the number of Republican incumbents compared to Democratic incumbents. As noted by Boatright, Democratic incumbents had historically been more likely than Republicans to be “primaried” for the bulk of the election cycles between 1970 and 2010. However, this is a trend that has at least begun reversing itself in the past four election cycles. According to data published by the Brookings Institute, while the percentage of Democratic House incumbents facing primary challenges exceeded the percentage of Republican House incumbents in 2004

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81 Ibid., 30.
82 Ibid., 30.
83 Ibid., 100.
and 2006, the reverse was true in the election cycles in 2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014.\textsuperscript{84} Moreover, the percentage of Republicans facing primary challengers more than doubled between 2006 and 2010, rising from 18.7 percent in 2006 to 46.7 percent in 2010 and remaining fairly stable in the following two election cycles.\textsuperscript{85} Democrats in the House did experience a large number of primary challenges in the 2012 cycle, lying only four percentage points behind Republicans with respect to the proportion of incumbents facing challenges.\textsuperscript{86} However, given the general trend upward in the number of Republicans in the House that face primary challenges, the media is correct in portraying that Republicans are more likely to face primary challenges than Democrats.

The same is also true with respect to the Senate. Using a variety of sources including \textit{RealClearPolitics} and \textit{The Almanac of American Politics}, I compiled quantitative data on primaries in the Senate, limiting myself to the past three cycles since these three elections cover a full “cycle” of primaries for all 100 Senators (i.e., each Senator was up for re-election once during this period). This information also complements the data presented by Boatright in his works, as he focuses primarily on House challenges in his discussion of quantitative data.\textsuperscript{87} Given several trends that have appeared to have been developing over the past few election cycles, I concluded that a breakdown of recent Senate elections could be insightful into any asymmetries

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{87} Boatright, \textit{Getting Primaried}, 97.
that have developed between primaries on the left and the right that have occurred outside of the House of Representatives.

I looked at several factors in charting my data including whether the incumbent faced a primary, whether the primary was ideological in nature, and whether or not any sort of ideologically motivated outside interest groups spent money on the primary. My data also included special elections in which an incumbent appointed by the governor to fill the remainder of a former Senator’s term was up for re-election. The results that I have came up with are outlined below in Figures 1.1-1.3:

### Figure 1.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2010 Senate Elections</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Democratic Incumbents up for Re-election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Republican Incumbents up for Re-election</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Incumbents facing any sort of Primary Challenge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of Incumbents Facing Serious Primary Challenges</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Number of Serious Challenges that were Ideologically Driven</td>
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<tr>
<td>--Serious Ideological Challenges for Democratic Incumbents</td>
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<tr>
<td>--Serious Ideological Challenges for Republican Incumbents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of Incumbents that Lost</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of Serious Challenges Involving Outside Groups</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
In terms of coding the above data, I tallied an incumbent who received any opposition in a nomination contest as an incumbent facing a primary challenge. Moreover, I considered primary challenges in which the incumbent received less than 70 percent of the vote as “serious” challenges. I chose this figure to serve as a sort of benchmark by which close to 1 out of 3 voters opposed the incumbent, a far cry from the 1 in 2 needed to oust an incumbent in an election but high enough to at least “make the incumbent sweat” and need to spend some resources defending the seat. Moreover,
this figure is somewhat of a balance between two levels that Boatright uses in his analysis to determine whether a primary is competitive. Specifically, he looks at races where the incumbent received less than 60 percent of the vote, which is frequently cited as a benchmark for being able to determine whether the general election will be competitive, and races where the incumbent received less than 75 percent of the vote, which are races that usually feature “at least one challenger who raised enough to file with the Federal Election Commission.”88 Thus, my benchmark serves as a middle ground compared to the two that Boatright uses.

One can draw a wide range of conclusions from the data above, though I will return to my earlier comment about Republicans in the Senate. First, as noted in the tables, Republicans were generally more likely to face a primary challenge than Democrats over the three cycles, particularly with respect to ideologically driven challenges. These are races, to be discussed in further depth below, in which the challenger runs on the grounds that the incumbent has been insufficiently conservative in office (in the case of the Republican Party) or liberal (in the case of the Democratic Party). The percentage of Republicans facing this sort of challenge alone ranged from around 25 percent to just under 50 percent over these cycles.

A second trend that can be deduced by looking at these data tables in tandem with sources such as RealClearPolitics and the Boatright data on House elections is the fact that incumbents are increasingly at risk with respect to the primary challenges that they do face. This is not something that is easily discernible looking strictly at

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statistics pertaining to the number of incumbents who prevail from their primary challenges. According to the Boatright data, for example, the number of House primary incumbents losing their primaries has remained almost consistently below ten percent of all incumbents being primaried with the exception of 1992, a year with an unusually high number of primary challenges (close to 90 percent) and also an unusually high number of incumbent losses (about 20 percent). Similarly, the fact that only two incumbents lost their primaries in 2014 might seem to reinforce the notion that incumbents are generally safe. This being said, the number of “close call” Senate elections in the past four election cycles has gradually increased in comparison to prior election cycles, particularly on the Republican side. While Republican incumbent Senators averaged 89 percent of the popular vote in primaries between 2004 and 2008, they averaged less than 74 percent in 2014, which is particularly striking when considering that five of the eleven Republican incumbents fell at or below 60 percent of the popular vote in the 2014 election cycle.

Democrats, in contrast, are generally safer in comparison to their Republican colleagues, with only three Democrats facing major primary challenges over the past three election cycles. Moreover, one of these challenges occurred under special circumstances in which a candidate challenged a governor-appointed senator (Michael Bennet of Colorado) and one of the other two incumbents won (Blanche Lincoln), meaning that only one Democratic incumbent (Arlen Specter) actually lost

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89 Boatright, Getting Primaried, 30.
90 Nate Silver, “Republicans have more reason than ever to worry about primary challenges,” in FiveThirtyEight, August 6, 2014, http://fivethirtyeight.com/datalab/republicans-have-more-reason-than-ever-to-worry-about-primary-challenges/
91 Ibid.
his primary challenge.\textsuperscript{92} To be fair to the GOP, the 74 percent of the primary vote that Republican incumbents averaged in 2014 still far exceeds the 50 percent threshold necessary to win an election. Still, these numbers indicate that candidates in the Republican Party in particular are less safe than they have historically been, with candidates such as Thad Cochran, Pat Roberts, and even Mitch McConnell all having recently faced strong primary challenges from the political right in which they could potentially have lost without aggressive campaigning.

The third trend that is observable from the primary data is an increase in both the absolute and relative number of ideologically driven primaries over the past two decades. Boatright gives extensive attention to ideological challenges that he calls “primarying,” which he identifies as the process in which incumbents face primary challenges “for being too moderate or insufficiently partisan.”\textsuperscript{93} Looking at the number of ideological primaries over time, a fairly low number of primaries were ideologically driven in the 1980s and early 1990s, both with respect to absolute totals and in comparison to primaries launched for other reasons. Motivators for these other primaries include local issues, national issues facing the entire country (such as trade policy), scandal surrounding the incumbent, old age, challenges from the ideological center (i.e., on the basis that incumbents are too partisan in comparison to insufficiently partisan), and others.\textsuperscript{94} In terms of House primaries, the highest proportion of ideologically driven primaries over this time period occurred in 1996 when 8 (or 2/3 of the total) primaries were ideologically driven, with less than 5

\textsuperscript{92} Data from Figures 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3.
\textsuperscript{93} Boatright, \textit{Getting Primaried}, 67.
\textsuperscript{94} Boatright, \textit{Getting Primaried}, 67.
“serious”\textsuperscript{95} challenges per year occurring in all other years during that period. However, this number has risen gradually each year since 2000, becoming essentially the sole source of all 14 serious primary challenges in the House in 2010.\textsuperscript{96}

In sum, while the number of primaries occurring in recent election cycles is not at a historic high level compared to the tumultuous 1970s, several trends appear to be developing with respect to primaries when considering the past five election cycles. Both the average number of primaries and the number of primaries that are ideologically driven has increased since the 1980s and 1990s. Moreover, Republicans in both the House and Senate appear to be increasingly prone to primary challenges in comparison to their Democratic counterparts. The ideologically driven aspect of most of these primaries is something that I intend to explore further in the remainder of this chapter, looking at the specific case studies outlined in the introduction as a means of explaining where, when, and why these primaries occur.

\textbf{Challenges from the Left and from the Right (but especially from the Right)}

As demonstrated from the Boatright and Brookings data, the number of incumbents facing primaries has increased sharply in the past five election cycles. Yet, it is not totally obvious why these primaries are occurring when and where they do. With Senators such as Thad Cochran and Joe Lieberman, the answer seems fairly straightforward—the two Senators were viewed as insufficiently ideologically committed to their parties, particularly given the ideological makeup of their states and constituencies, and as a result faced primary challenges from the right and left respectively. However, one can look at the electoral history of other Senators, such

\textsuperscript{95} This figure comes from Boatright’s data and 75 percent benchmark rather than mine of 70 percent.

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 74.
as Tom Carper of Delaware, who one might expect to face primary challenges given the partisanship and ideological makeup of his state, and find that no significant primary challenge has occurred. I will spend the remainder of this chapter further exploring the electoral histories of five Senators and House Representatives in order to address the question of why these ideologically driven primary challenges are occurring when and where they do, and why not elsewhere. Specifically, I will look at the partisanship of the representatives’ states and districts, the voting records of the representatives, and the role (if any) of outside interest groups in the representatives’ elections in determining the likelihood of significant ideologically driven primary challenges.

In terms of the case studies that I selected, I chose to analyze the electoral histories Sen. Thad Cochran (R-MS), Sen. Joe Lieberman (D-CT), Sen. Tom Carper (D-DE), former Rep. Albert Wynn (D-MD), and former Rep. Bob Inglis (R-SC). I also use the example of Lindsey Graham (R-SC) to outline the criteria that I will be using to analyze the other cases. I chose these cases since they include members of both parties while also expressing some degree of variation in terms of whether a serious primary challenge was present or not. Lieberman, Wynn, and Inglis each faced primary challenges and lost. Cochran and Graham faced challenges and won with significant variations in the vote share that they received. Finally, Carper simply did not face a primary challenge despite demonstrating similarities to someone such as Cochran in terms of their more moderate voting record compared to the partisan makeup of their respective states.
In order to explain the dynamics of primary challenges, it is first important to define what actually constitutes a significant ideologically driven primary challenge. As previously discussed, Robert Boatright frequently cites 60 and 75 percent of the vote to the incumbent as thresholds for what constitutes a more “serious” challenge in his data on primary elections. For purposes of my case study analysis, I am considering a significant primary challenge as any race where the incumbent receives less than 70 percent of the vote. As previously noted, this figure is intended to be a bit of a compromise between the two figures that Boatright cites and is a level where a substantial number of voters (just under one in three) opposes the incumbent.

This 70 percent threshold which I used in the coding of my data above raises several significant points for discussion. Consider, for example, the case of Lindsey Graham. Graham faced a primary challenge in 2014 from several conservative candidates, and, looking exclusively at the final vote shares of Graham’s opponents in the primary, one might view Graham’s primary as fairly insignificant given that his closest competitor won less than 16 percent of the vote. However, Graham faced a fractured field with six lesser-known challengers and ultimately captured just 56 percent of the vote. The opposition would have collectively needed just seven more percentage points of the vote to trigger a runoff given the rules governing primaries.

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98 Ibid.

99 South Carolina is one of eleven states that will pursue a runoff election following a primary in which no candidate receives a majority of the vote. For further information, see the National Conference of State Legislatures ([http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/primary-runoffs.aspx](http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/primary-runoffs.aspx)).
in South Carolina. This could have proven devastating to Graham had the opposition then coalesced around the second place winner. This is similar to a fate that Bob Inglis (R-SC) met in a primary runoff in 2010, which I will discuss later in the chapter in a case study of its own.

A second brief point to consider is that “serious” is not necessarily interchangeable with “competitive” in the sense that results of the primary were close or even involved just one opponent. Returning to the example of Graham, the difference between 57 and 16 is a whopping 41 percent of the vote, far from “close.” Taking into consideration that 43 percent of the South Carolina Republican electorate opposed Graham, however, the fact that only 57 percent of Republicans supported Graham is significantly more telling about Graham’s margin of victory. Individually, Graham’s opponents were far off in the vote tally. Collectively, they reflected substantial opposition that came just seven points shy of depriving Graham of a runoff that might have forced a second more competitive primary.

Using Graham as a basis for comparison, there are two main criteria that I will use to explain what constitutes a significant ideologically driven primary challenge. First, the challenge must in some way be ideological in nature. Obviously, candidates in a primary will inevitably vary from each other in some way with respect to ideology. However, by claiming a primary to be ideological in nature, I am making a qualitative assessment of whether ideology is the major or otherwise central justification for a challenge. Second, the challenge must be credible to the extent that it appears to be a legitimate threat to the incumbent candidate. For purposes of my analysis, I determine this threat credibility using my 70 percent vote threshold. Thus,
I will focus on the 70 percent threshold for the candidate’s total share of the vote in tandem with primary candidates’ messaging emphasized in campaign appeals as indicators of the presence or absence of a serious ideologically driven primary challenge.

**The Cases: A Deeper Look into the Politics of Primaries**

The following section begins my analysis of five case studies that I will use to determine predictors of the presence of ideologically driven primary challenges to incumbents. For each case, I will first and most importantly note whether a challenge was present. In the event that the incumbent faced a primary challenge, I will analyze potential motivators in bringing on the primary challenge, including the senator’s voting record and DW-Nominate data, the partisan leaning/tilt of the district, and involvement of outside interest groups. In the event that no primary was present, I will attempt to explain any discrepancies between factors that in other instances might have pointed to a challenge and why no challenge actually occurred. I will finally draw conclusions with respect to what factors predict the presence of an ideologically driven primary challenge to an incumbent.

**Thad Cochran’s Run in with a Run Off**

Turning to the specific cases outlined in the introduction of this section, Senator Thad Cochran (R-MS) is the first Senator that I intend to discuss who faced a significant primary challenge. Cochran exemplifies the characteristics of an incumbent facing a significant ideologically driven primary. In the months leading up to 2014, Cochran, the senior Senator of Mississippi who first won his Senate seat in 1978, was not perceived by anyone as being vulnerable to a primary challenge. Indeed, the larger question in the latter half of 2013 seemed to be not whether
Cochran would need to defend himself from a more ideologically conservative challenger in a primary but rather whether Cochran would even choose to run for reelection in 2014 given his age. This is a far cry from how Cochran’s election ultimately played out, however, with Cochran going on to both seek reelection and face a serious primary challenge in the process.

That Thad Cochran would go on to face one of the closest primary challenges of 2014 after declaring his intent to seek reelection was somewhat surprising given Cochran’s longstanding incumbent status in a state that is solidly Republican in both national and statewide elections. As early as December 2013, however, polls had Cochran and his opponent, tea party-backed state Senator Christopher McDaniel, in a dead heat. The primary challenge from McDaniel meets both described standards for a significant ideologically driven primary. First, the primary was clearly ideological in nature. McDaniel and outside interest groups used fiery rhetoric that emphasized McDaniel’s “conservative” voting record in the state senate and that attacked Cochran for being insufficiently conservative, going so far as to claim that Cochran was “definitely left of center on most every issue.” Second, Cochran’s primary went on to be viewed by party leaders, outside interest groups, and the media as one of the most competitive in the country, with outside interest groups pouring millions of dollars into a race that Cochran went on to eventually win in a runoff with

less than 51 percent of the vote. In this regard, Cochran exemplifies the increasingly large threat that ideological primaries potentially play in the U.S. electoral system.

Given this information, the big question then remains as to why this primary occurred. Starting with Cochran’s political stances and partisanship, Cochran was by no means “left of center” on issues as some outside groups claimed. Indeed, looking at his DW-nominate score, an indicator of the relative conservatism (or liberalism) of a congressional representative’s voting record with respect to other members of Congress, Cochran scored a 0.286 on a -1/+1 scale, placing him on the conservative side of the spectrum in Congress. While this is a far cry from even the most conservative of Cochran’s Democratic colleagues in the Senate, this likely did not benefit Cochran in the Republican stronghold of Mississippi given the state’s even more conservative tilt. Mississippi has a Cook Partisan Voting Index (PVI) score of R+9, meaning that the state supported Mitt Romney and John McCain over President Obama 9 percentage points more than the national average in 2012 and 2008. Similarly, the three highest state officials, both Senators, and three of the four House members are all currently Republicans. Moreover, junior Senator Wicker has a DW-nominate score a full tenth higher at 0.38, with the three members of the House delegation having scores of 0.388, 0.487, and 0.573. In this regard, while Cochran

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104 DW Nominate Score Data.


107 DW Nominate Score Data.
has a conservative voting record, it simply is not as conservative as it can potentially be in a state that, all else equal, would be unlikely to elect even the strongest of Democratic candidates over a Republican.

Several of the events that occurred during the primary season back up this assertion. First, when looking at the polling data from December when Cochran and McDaniel were in dead heat, further data reflected Cochran leading a generic Tea Party candidate on a ballot by only 45 percent to 35 percent.\footnote{Jonathan Weisman, “Cochran holds off Tea Party Challenger in Mississippi,” in The New York Times, 2014, \url{http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/25/us/politics/thad-cochran-chris-mcdaniel-mississippi-senate-primary.html?_r=1}} While Cochran led in this poll, the fact that he could not even muster 50 percent of the vote versus a candidate with no name indicates a strong (Republican) voter preference for a more conservative candidate in Congress. Moreover, Cochran went on to campaign to get traditionally Democratic-leaning voters to the polls in the open primary runoff after failing to get 50 percent of the vote in the initial primary,\footnote{Ibid.} a fact that supports the notion that even Cochran was aware of the threat presented to him by the more conservative leaning voters of his own party. In this regard, while Cochran by no means had a “liberal” voting record, his more “moderate” record in a Republican heavy state left him vulnerable in a party that has become increasingly politically conservative over the past four decades.

When considering why Cochran might have faced a significant primary challenge in 2014 but not previous elections cycles, interest groups very likely played a significant role in making Cochran’s challenger more “threatening” to Cochran. However, it is important to note that McDaniel entered the race with conservative
outside support from groups including Club for Growth and Senate Conservatives Fund months before Cochran even announced that he would definitively be seeking reelection in 2014. In this regard, outside interest groups expressed interest in fielding a more conservative candidate in the Mississippi primary in the event that Cochran chose not to seek reelection, potentially trying to motivate Cochran to retire. That being said, the conservative groups definitely played a role in making the primary competitive once Cochran decided to seek reelection. Indeed, Tea Party supporters and groups such as Club for Growth funneled millions of dollars into the primary in support of McDaniel, capitalizing on Cochran’s “moderate” record to appeal to his more conservative constituents despite Cochran’s tenure in Washington and history of obtaining millions of dollars in federal funding for the state. Thus, outside interest groups were not necessarily the cause of the primary challenge in Mississippi in 2014, though at the very least they were a factor in both helping make the primary an ideological choice between two candidates and making it more competitive by funneling money to help Cochran’s opponent.

Groups Gaining “Joementum”

The 2006 primary challenge to Senator Joe Lieberman (then D-CT) shares some parallels with that of Cochran in Mississippi. Just a few years earlier, Lieberman had been a rising star in the Democratic Party, first as Al Gore’s running mate in the 2000 presidential election against George Bush and then later as a contender for the Democratic nomination for the presidency in 2004. Yet, Lieberman

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went on to both face and lose a significant ideologically driven primary only two years later, albeit going on to win the general election as an independent candidate. While too conservative for his liberal constituency, he was ideologically moderate enough to win enough voters from both parties in the general election.

While Cochran showed few signs that he would face a serious primary challenge in the 2014 election cycle, the same cannot be said for Lieberman in 2006. As early as December 2005, Lieberman faced criticism by members of his own party for his support for the war in Iraq, a criticism that quickly manifested itself in the form of an ideological primary challenge from the left. Indeed, while Lieberman’s challenger Ned Lamont made this issue a pivotal part of the primary challenge against Lieberman, the challenge as a whole was rooted in Lieberman’s ideological moderation in comparison to both the Democratic Party and Lieberman’s liberal Connecticut constituency. Lieberman himself questioned during his primary campaign, “You’ve got to agree 100 percent, or you’re not a Democrat?” and even attributed his later loss in the primary to “the old politics of partisan polarization.”

Thus, Lieberman’s more conservative stances on issues such as the war in Iraq played a huge role in his vulnerability in the 2004 primary.

In terms of looking at why Lieberman faced this ideologically driven primary, it is fairly clear that Lieberman’s more conservative stances with respect to issues

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113 Ibid.


such as the war in Iraq worked against him in his increasingly liberal Democratic Party. Indeed, Connecticut had a PVI of D+8 in 2006, indicating an overwhelming voter preference for Democrats Al Gore and John Kerry over President Bush in 2000 and 2004. Unlike Thad Cochran, however, who was largely supported by Republican Party leaders as the establishment candidate in the Mississippi primary, Lieberman faced criticism from the leaders within his own party. Senate Minority Leader Reid (D-NV) personally spoke with Lieberman on how his views “unfortunately” were at odds with those of most of the American public, while House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) publically announced that she “completely disagreed” with Lieberman on his views of the war in Iraq. In this regard, the fact that Lieberman’s own colleagues in Congress were skeptical of his more conservative views on the war in Iraq certainly did not help his campaign going into the primary season. Lieberman thus faced scrutiny not only from his liberal constituents in the Democratic Party, but also from his liberal colleagues in Congress.

While differing from Cochran in this regard, Lieberman’s primary does parallel Cochran’s in some respects given the role of outside interest groups in support of Lieberman’s more liberal challenger. Two fairly large progressive groups—Democracy for America and MoveOn.Org—began scoping the field for a liberal challenger to Lieberman months in advance of the primary. Moreover, once Ned Lamont emerged as Lieberman’s main challenger in the Democratic primary,

118 Ibid.
ActBlue, a national network directed at building grassroots support for candidates in the form of small money donors, spent the first months of 2006 helping Lamont raise over $161,000 in small donations.\textsuperscript{119} Thus, Lieberman faced clear opposition from progressive interest groups supporting a primary challenger, both with respect to finding a challenger in the months leading up to the primary and funding the challenger once he officially emerged.

Despite the presence of outside interest groups in both Cochran’s and Lieberman’s primaries, it is important to make a large distinction in the role that these groups played in their respective primaries. In Cochran’s primary, conservative groups such as Club for Growth directly spent millions of dollars opposing Cochran. The interest groups in Lieberman’s primary, however, played a more limited role in two ways. First, the groups played more of a secondary role in supporting the primary challenge rather than being the driving force in the challenge. As mentioned above, ActBlue contributed to Lamont’s campaign indirectly by helping to raise small donations of less than $200, rather than directly pouring millions of dollars into the challenge in a manner similar to the over $2 million spent by Club for Growth against Cochran. Second, the groups played a more limited role with respect to overall fundraising on behalf of Lamont, with Lamont personally contributing to his campaign over double the $161,000 raised by ActBlue in the form of small donations.\textsuperscript{120} This being said, it would be wrong to argue that interest groups played no role in driving the ideological primary challenge faced by Lieberman in 2006, as

\textsuperscript{119} Bib Biersack, “Primary Schooling: Recent Battles Offer Hints About 2014 faceoffs,” in OpenSecrets.org, February 3, 2014
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.
money and publicity are both necessary aspects of fielding a primary challenge. Rather, the groups just played a much more limited role in Lieberman’s primary challenge in comparison to Cochran’s primary challenge, perhaps partly as a result of the personal resources at the disposal of Lieberman’s opponent.

*Moderate? Tom Carper and What It Means to be Out of Line*

Congressional representatives’ “moderation” with respect to the partisan breakdown of their constituencies and that of their party as a whole is not necessarily a firm predictor of a primary challenge. Lieberman and Cochran faced primaries from the left and right respectively, with the former being insufficiently “liberal” with respect to issues such as the Iraq war and the latter being painted as insufficiently conservative for the conservative stronghold of Mississippi. However, when considering a fairly moderate representative such as Senator Tom Carper (D-DE), one might expect an ideologically driven primary challenge to emerge. Carper had a DW-nominate score of -0.178 in the 114th Congress, which is significantly less to the “left” than Cochran’s score of 0.286 was to the “right” (i.e., Carper is closer to the center ideological center than Cochran). While still a more liberal score than that of all of the Republicans in Congress, this score places Carper to the right of all but a handful of Democrats in the Senate. This is particularly surprising given the Democratic tilt of Delaware, with Carper being more conservative with respect to his constituency than even Lieberman was with respect to his during his tenure as Senator. Between 2006 and 2014, Delaware average a Cook PVI of D+7, just

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121 DW Nominate Data.
slightly behind Connecticut’s left-leaning PVI over this time period. Yet, despite his moderate voting record compared to his overall constituency, Carper has faced no significant ideologically driven primary. This raises the question why other representatives such as Lieberman and Cochran have while Carper has not.

One factor that might have played a role in why Carper has not faced a liberal primary challenge is simply the issues on which he tends to moderate himself. Unlike Lieberman, who very clearly and openly broke with his party on the issue of the war in Iraq, Carper has by and large appeared to dodge breaks with the party platform on high-salience issues during his Senate tenure. Indeed, the issues with which Carper has broken with party lines have largely been issues pertaining to banking and financing, broader issues very different than something such as the Iraq war during a time in which the war was unpopular among most Democrats. Even when considering something such as the Keystone XL Pipeline, which Carper supported alongside Republicans in the Senate, Carper’s support was less controversial than one might expect given that close to ten other Democrats voted in favor of Keystone XL as well when it finally passed the Senate. In this regard, while Carper might have a fairly moderate voting record, he has not truly broken with party lines any major issues such as the war in Iraq, health care, and welfare. Moreover, Carper is a known for being a “low profile” Senator both in terms of his voting record and “open, can-

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do” approach to getting measures passed in the Senate, a factor that has also likely helped him avoid scrutiny from the public and progressive interest groups.

While this might account for why Carper has not faced a liberal primary challenger as Lieberman did in 2006, it does not account for why Carper has not faced a primary challenger for being insufficiently partisan for his state as Cochran did in 2014. The discrepancy here may be due to the role that outside interest groups have played in helping fuel primary challenges on the right. As previously discussed, conservative groups such as Club for Growth staked huge claims in the Mississippi primary trying to oust Cochran in favor of the more conservative McDaniel. However, progressive groups with the sway and influence of conservative groups like Club for Growth have been largely absent in Carper’s case. As noted by New School professor Jeffrey Smith, progressive groups “generally don’t” make the effort to “seriously challenge incumbents (and establishment-anointed candidates) in primaries” as their more conservative counterparts do. Indeed, the fact that comparatively more conservative Senators such as Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), Pat Roberts (R-KS), and even Mitch McConnell (R-KY) faced primary challenges supported by conservative interest groups in the 2012 and 2014 elections while a

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fairly moderate Senator such as Carper could avoid a Democratic primary altogether supports this notion.

While thus far my case studies have looked exclusively at primaries that occurred in the Senate, it is also important to look at ideologically driven primaries in House races as well. In 2014 alone, approximately 550 people challenged Republican incumbents in House primaries in addition to 464 people who challenged Democratic incumbents. These figures vastly outnumbered the 129 challengers to Republican and the 58 challengers to Democratic incumbents in the Senate, though the higher figures for House challengers are to be expected given the size difference between the two chambers. Nonetheless, it is necessary given the sheer number of challengers to also look at House primaries in order to note any underlying trends. I now turn to two former House members who faced and lost ideologically driven primaries in their respective states: Rep. Albert Wynn (D-MD) and Rep. Bob Inglis (R-SC).

The House of Inglis

Bob Inglis provides a different perspective on ideologically driven primaries on the right because, unlike Cochran, Inglis lost his primary challenge in the 2010 midterm elections. The source of the challenge was very clear—Inglis faced an ideologically driven primary from Trey Gowdy on the grounds that Inglis simply was not conservative enough for his district. Indeed, in the years leading up to the election, Inglis broke with the majority of his party and the preferences of his primary

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constituency on a variety of issues. Prior to the election, Inglis voted to support the government financial bailout in 2008, broke with the majority of his party to oppose the war in Iraq, \(^{132}\) expressed concern over the threat of global warming, \(^{133}\) and faced criticism from his constituency in general for appearing to have become more “moderate” since first representing his district in the 1990s. \(^{134}\) While Inglis might have been more safe from a primary challenge if he had represented a “swing” or Democratic leaning district, the fact that he came from a solidly Republican district in an overwhelmingly Republican state simply did not look good on him in the eyes of his primary constituency. His district was, after all, carried by John McCain by over 23 points in 2008, having a PVI of R+15. \(^{135}\) Inglis went on to narrowly lose a primary with four other candidates before squaring off with a single more conservative challenger in a runoff, losing in a landside election by a margin of 71 to 29 percent. \(^{136}\) Ideology triumphed moderation.

While Inglis’s primary shares similarities with those of Lieberman and Cochran in that it was ideological in nature, it differs in terms of involvement of outside groups. Cochran faced great opposition from conservative outside interest groups such as Club for Growth in his primary, with Lieberman similarly facing opposition from liberal groups such as Democracy for America. In Inglis’s primary, however, such groups were significantly less present. To be clear, Club for Growth


\(^{136}\) Ibid.
did endorse Inglis’s challenger in the primary, and the challenger was also widely associated with the Tea Party movement that has swept many far-right conservatives into political office in the past several election cycles. Yet, this stopped short of Club for Growth specifically targeting and dumping thousands of dollars into the primary as they later did in Cochran’s primary. Rather, Inglis simply struggled to win over the more conservative branch of his constituency during the primary battle, even at one point failing to regain the support of a group of small donors who had given to Inglis’s campaigns in the past. Conservative groups ultimately had an interest in Inglis’s losing the primary challenge to a more conservative challenger, though such groups arguably did not need to spend so much money on Inglis’s primary when a significant portion of his constituency was already so dissatisfied with Inglis and ready to vote him out in favor of a more conservative candidate.

*Donna Edwards: The Real “Wynner” in 2008*

Similar to Inglis, Democrat Al Wynn of Maryland faced an ideologically driven primary challenge in the 2008 House elections. Wynn’s primary is an interesting example to explore given that Wynn’s background in some way parallels that of someone such as Tom Carper—both fairly moderate representatives with liberal constituencies. Wynn’s district voted overwhelmingly for President Obama in the past two elections with over 70 percent of the vote in both, though Wynn had a reputation as a centrist in the House with his willingness to work across the aisle,

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particularly on business-related legislation.\textsuperscript{140} Yet, very much unlike Carper, Wynn both faced an ideologically driven primary challenge and lost convincingly to challenger Donna Edwards with less than 36 percent of the vote.

In terms of analyzing the source of the primary, Wynn’s primary challenge was certainly ideological in nature. Challenger Donna Edwards herself commented in 2010, “… I think that we are exactly the kind of district that deserves to be represented by a progressive Democrat in Congress and to have that voice heard and shown.”\textsuperscript{141} In this regard, Edwards was the left’s challenge to Wynn’s more centrist stances on issues. Yet, the mere fact that Edwards was a “progressive” and Wynn more of a centrist does not explain why someone like Wynn faced a primary while someone else like Carper did not. A key difference here is the issues on which Wynn broke with his party. Throughout her campaign, Edwards repeatedly tied Wynn back to his initial support for the war in Iraq, an issue generally unpopular among Democratic voters at the time.\textsuperscript{142} Moreover, even though Carper and Wynn both had Democratic leaning constituencies, Wynn’s was even more Democratic leaning than Carper’s. As noted by Edwards during her campaign, Wynn’s district was close to 80 percent Democratic\textsuperscript{143} with a current PVI of D+26,\textsuperscript{144} figures so one-sided that they are not even matched by the still heavily Democratic but comparatively diverse state

\textsuperscript{141} Transcript, “Antiwar Candidate Donna Edwards Defeats Albert Wynn in Maryland Primary,” in Democracy Now, February 13, 2008, http://www.democracynow.org/2008/2/13/a_changing_tide_from_democratic_voters
\textsuperscript{142} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{144} Cook Political Report, 113\textsuperscript{th} Congress, http://cookpolitical.com/file/2013-04-47.pdf
of Delaware. Wynn thus really had no electoral incentive to be a centrist in such a Democratic dominated House district, given the unlikelihood that a Republican would ever win the district in a general election. In doing so, Wynn was unrepresentative of most of his constituency and, to a large degree, set himself up for a primary challenge from the left.

The fact that Wynn was a centrist in a Democrat-heavy district does not sufficiently explain why Wynn faced an ideologically driven primary challenge, with other factors such as outside interest groups playing a role as well. Edwards’ support in the primary did not just come from the district’s more liberal constituents—she also received monetary support and endorsements from these interest groups, even more so than Lieberman’s liberal challenger did in 2006. Indeed, Edwards received the support of groups including Progressive Democrats for America, the League of Conservation Voters, MoveOn, Emily’s List, and the Service Employee’s International Union. These groups spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on advertising in support of Edwards, giving her support in the form of funding that lesser known candidates often lack in primary elections. Thus, Wynn’s liberal constituency was not the only challenge that he faced in his 2008 reelection bid. He also faced pressure from outside groups that made sure that his centrism was known and that his more liberal challenger had a voice in the primary campaign cycle.

Given that outside interest groups played a large role in the primary election, the last question that remains in Wynn’s case is why progressive groups chose to even get involved. Obviously, Wynn was a moderate Democrat in a liberal House district, providing the optimal context to launch a serious challenge. Yet, the outside groups also had to have perceived that Wynn was vulnerable as a candidate or else they likely would not have targeted him, which is something that does not necessarily correspond to being “centrist.”

A large part of this likely has to do with the fact that Wynn also faced a primary challenge in 2006 and nearly lost. Edwards actually “primaried” Wynn for the first time in 2006, losing by only three points in the popular vote in what was viewed by many analysts as a “shock” due to Wynn’s longstanding status as an incumbent.147 The 2006 primary challenge was similarly ideological in nature---Edwards entered the raced criticizing Wynn for his initial support of the war in Iraq, opposing campaign finance reform, and voting to repeal the estate tax.148 Moreover, given the briefness of Edwards’ campaign, fundraising advantage of Wynn, and Wynn’s status as a longstanding incumbent in the district with widespread name recognition,149 Edwards’ loss by only 3,000 votes in 2006 was largely unexpected and reflected a large degree of vulnerability for Wynn going into the following election cycle. When considering the closeness of this election in the context of the less organized effort on Edwards’ part, it is not surprising that Edwards came back in 2008 to challenge an apparently vulnerable Wynn.

149 Ibid.
In this regard, it is also not surprising that outside interest groups viewed Wynn in 2008 as an opportunity to target a more centrist House representative from a liberal district in favor of a more progressive candidate. When Wynn first ran for office in 1992, he received the endorsements of a variety of unions due to Wynn’s “legislative background that shows he is concerned with the working man.”\(^{150}\) In 2006, however, many unions stayed out of endorsing either candidate in the race, likely a telling sign for Wynn with respect to how he was perceived as a progressive candidate. It is consequently not so surprising that unions including the SEIU and UFCW endorsed Edwards in the following cycle, with the SEIU executive director claiming, “We do a good job holding Republicans accountable during general elections, but we need to do a better job holding Democrats accountable, too. That’s what this is about.”\(^{151}\) Wynn also displayed other potential symptoms of vulnerability as an incumbent given Edwards’ support from liberal organizations such as the League of Conservation Voters as well as high profile endorsements from newspapers such as The Washington Post in the 2006 primary, both of which were critical of Wynn’s record.\(^{152}\) When considering these details and the implications they could have had for Wynn, his voting record, and the liberal tilt of the district, the “shock” that occurred in 2006 with Wynn’s near-loss really is not so shocking, with his loss in 2008 being even less so with the added involvement and spending of high profile progressive interest groups.


So What?

Although the media often emphasizes the battle of Democrats vs. Republicans in the general election, the past several election cycles have indicated a growing battle of Democrats vs. Democrats and Republicans vs. Republicans in primary elections leading up to the general election. Over the course of the past sixteen years, both the number of primary challenges to incumbents and the number of ideologically driven challenges has risen in comparison to the 1980s and 1990s. This chapter sought to understand the sources of primary challenges and why they do or do not occur under particular circumstances, using Sen. Thad Cochran (R-MS), Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), Sen. Joe Lieberman (D-CT), Sen. Tom Carper (D-DE), Rep. Albert Wynn (D-MD), and Rep. Bob Inglis (R-SC) as a set of comparative cases analyzing the where, why, and how of ideologically driven primaries in the U.S. to understand their source. That being said, one can use these examples to draw several conclusions pertaining to ideologically driven primary challenges.

First, the strongest indicator of where a significant ideologically driven primary challenge will occur appears to be a representative’s partisanship both with respect to the party platform and with respect to the representative’s constituency. Insufficiently partisan or ideologically centrist incumbents—two characteristics that correspond more tightly in the contemporary polarized age—in largely “safe” Democratic states or districts (Lieberman, Wynn), or in largely “safe” Republican states or districts (Cochran, Inglis), are generally at risk of being primaried by more partisan challengers. That being said, the issues on which candidates break from party lines also play a huge role in determining whether an incumbent will be
primaries. When certain issues are particularly pressing to an incumbent’s electorate, such as Democrats and the war in Iraq in 2006 (which Lieberman broke with most of his party to support) or with Republicans and the multiple issues that Inglis broke from his party on in 2010, incumbents who break with their party face a greater threat of a primary. This might in part make sense of why someone such as Carper (having not made any drastic breaks with the Democratic Party or his constituency on party values) has yet to face an ideologically driven primary despite having a moderate DW-Nominate score.

Second, interest groups can potentially play a driving force in fueling ideologically driven primary challenges, though they are not necessarily a sufficient or even a necessary condition in the manifestation of such challenges. Such groups played large roles in motivating challenges on both the left and right when considering Wynn’s, Cochran’s, and even Lieberman’s respective primaries. However, someone such as Inglis lost his primary despite, for the most part, the lack of a presence of outside interest groups beyond a formal endorsement of a challenger. In this regard, party activists and general dissatisfaction with a candidate also tend to play a role in motivating ideologically driven primaries, with both being present in Inglis’s case.

Third, interest groups play a larger role in spurring ideologically driven primaries on the right than they do on the left. This is a connection that I will explore further in the following chapter, though hints of a discrepancy between the willingness of groups on the left and the right to engage in challenges are evident when comparing Carper and Cochran. The former is closer to the ideological center
and yet has faced neither a primary nor serious scrutiny from progressive interest
groups, while the latter was slightly more ideologically extreme yet faced both an
ideologically driven primary and criticism from outside conservative groups.
Moreover, outside interest groups simply appear to be more involved in Republican
primaries in general than in Democratic primaries when one expands the purview to
include other examples such as Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-KY), and Sen. Pat Roberts
(R-KS) in 2014. On the Democratic side, these primaries were just not present in the
Senate that year.

That is not to conclude that progressive groups play no role in primary
challenges. They certainly do, as evidenced by Wynn’s loss in 2008. Unions and
online “netroots” groups such as MoveOn played a large role in holding Wynn
accountable to his constituents since, in the words of the SEIU executive director,
“that’s what this is about.” In general, however, they play a less active role on the
Democratic side than the Republican side. As noted in Figures 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3
earlier in the chapter, only two of twelve serious ideologically driven Senate
primaries in the past three cycles were to Democrats, with only one (Blanche Lincoln
in 2010) involving substantial involvement of outside groups.

In sum, although the reasons behind primaries are often circumstantial and
specific to individual representatives in Congress, they have grown to revolve largely
around issues pertaining to one’s partisanship in recent years. Outside interest groups
often play a large role in encouraging and financing primary challenges on these
ideological grounds, though this is something that is not always the case in spurring
these challenges and is present more so in Republican primary challenges than
Democratic ones. This involvement of groups and apparent asymmetry between the propensity of groups on the left and groups on the right to engage in primary challenges is something that I will explore in greater depth in the following chapter. Under what circumstances will these groups engage in ideologically driven primary challenges? What factors explain any discrepancies between interest groups’ on the left and groups’ on the right willingness to engage in primary challenges?
Chapter Three -- Join the Club: Interest Groups at Play

In April 2004, politically moderate Senator Arlen Specter (R-PA) faced an ideologically driven primary challenge for being insufficiently conservative in a party that has gradually shifted to the right over the past five decades. Given that Specter was the senior Senator in a “purple” state that had elected him four times since 1980, combined with the financial, logistical, and name-recognition advantages that incumbents tend to have over their opponents, one might have expected Specter to win fairly convincingly. Instead, while he did win, it was by an ever-so-slim margin of 13,000 votes, less than 2 percent of the overall votes cast.\(^{153}\) Challenger Pat Toomey put forth a formidable challenge with the backing of the conservative Club for Growth, which ultimately spent over $2.3 million on the primary race.\(^{154}\) Specter and many other congressional representatives viewed the race’s outcome as a win both for the incumbent and for Republican moderates everywhere given that it occurred in the face of such massive fiscal backing for Toomey from outside groups. As then-Representative Amo Houston (R-NY) described after the primary, “At some point, I guess they’ll [Club for Growth] just fall flat off the face of the Earth.”\(^{155}\)

Fast forward ten years later to 2014: Club for Growth was as powerful as ever before, donating over $3.4 million to conservative congressional candidates in the 2014 election cycles as well as spending over $8.5 million in independent expenditures.\(^{156}\) These totals included more than $3.1 million in spending against

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\(^{154}\) Ibid.

\(^{155}\) Ibid.

Senator Thad Cochran alone in his primary challenge from the right in Mississippi, a race that no one would have initially anticipated to be so competitive despite ultimately ending in Cochran’s narrow victory over his challenger. Former Representative Houston proved completely wrong in his analysis of the Club—not only did the group fail to fade into the background as moderate and establishment Republicans asserted control of the party, it actually grew stronger and more prominent to the chagrin of Republican leaders and establishment candidates.

The presence of ideological interest groups in primary and general elections is by no means exclusive to the Club for Growth and the Republican Party. Indeed, liberal interest groups such as MoveOn and Democracy for America garnered widespread media coverage and national attention during Connecticut Senator Joe Lieberman’s 2006 Democratic primary race with Ned Lamont. Such groups spent close to $300,000 supporting Lamont’s liberal challenge to Lieberman, which succeeded in winning the party nomination by a narrow 52-48 percent victory. Similarly, Donna Edwards’ successful challenge of incumbent Representative Al Wynn in the 2008 Maryland Fourth District primary drew national attention as labor unions, MoveOn, and other liberal interest groups poured hundreds of thousands of dollars into the race. In short, progressive primary challenges on the political left have mirrored many of the conservative primary challenges on the political right as

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outside interest groups have poured millions of dollars into efforts to secure party nominations for more ideologically extreme candidates.

While outside interest groups have played roles in supporting ideologically driven primary challenges in both parties, these groups have played a larger role in the selection of Republican congressional nominees in comparison to Democratic ones. News outlets extensively covered Republican primaries and the threat thereof in the 2010, 2012, and 2014 election cycles, with outlets in South Carolina going so far as to predict a conservative challenge to Senator Graham in 2014 as early as 2012.\(^{159}\) By contrast, news outlets and political pundits rarely discuss the threat of primary challenges to Democratic incumbents for being insufficiently liberal, as Senators such as Tom Carper reflect in their more moderate voting records.

The threat of primary challenges to incumbents supported by these interest groups is indeed a phenomenon more prevalent on the right than on the left. Both the total number of primary challenges supported by conservative groups and the amount of money spent on those challenges has exceeded by far the number and amount of money spent on primary challenges supported by liberal organizations in the past decade. Of the collective 45 Democrats and 30 Republican incumbents in the Senate who chose to run for reelection in the past three election cycles, a total of 12 faced ideologically driven primary challenges serious enough to keep their vote share below 70 percent.\(^{160}\) Only two of those challenges were to Democratic incumbents despite the fact that Democratic incumbents held fifteen more seats than Republican


\(^{160}\) See table in Chapter 2.
incumbents over this span. More still, only one of those two Democratic races involved outside interest groups. In contrast, seven of the primaries on the Republican side featured the involvement of conservative groups such as Club for Growth, Freedomworks, and the Tea Party Patriots. These groups also spent much heavier sums of money in independent expenditures compared to their liberal counterparts. Indeed, Club for Growth alone spent over $4.3 million in independent expenditures in primaries against Republican incumbents in 2014,\textsuperscript{161} compared to the $958,120 spent by MoveOn that year. More importantly, none of this money went toward primary challenges against Democratic incumbents, in stark contrast to the Club for Growth’s involvement in no fewer than four major primary challenges to incumbents in the House and Senate in 2014. Even concerning MoveOn’s involvement in some of the more prominent challenges to Democrats over the past decade, the group contributed “only” $251,126 and $152,100 to the campaigns of Ned Lamont and Donna Edwards respectively.\textsuperscript{162} While by no means small sums of money, these figures pale in comparison to the $2.4 million spent against Thad Cochran alone in independent expenditures by the Club for Growth during the 2014 Mississippi primary.

It is not as if there is less of a rationale on the Democratic side for ideological primary challenges than the GOP side—indeed, the opposite is true. It is the Democrats who are more heterodox than Republicans. Senator Susan Collins (R-ME), for example, is the only remaining Republican in Congress (and one of only three

\textsuperscript{161} I calculated this figure using data published on the OpenSecrets website for Club for Growth after determining which primaries involved incumbents.

\textsuperscript{162} Open Secrets Data for MoveOn.org
initially) who supported President Obama’s economic stimulus package in 2009, while, in contrast, no fewer than fourteen Democratic Senators voted to end debate on Keystone Pipeline XL legislation following the November 2014 elections. While Democrats such as Kay Hagan and Mark Prior had just lost their re-election bids and had little to lose in supporting run off-embattled colleague Mary Landrieu (D-LA) in bringing the legislation to a vote, the fact that so many Democrats supported the arguably anti-environmental legislation reflects less ideological conformity within the Party in comparison to the GOP—a comparative heterodoxy that extends to a wide range of issues, from welfare to tax cuts. Moreover, the fact that none of the other Democratic Senators faced either a primary challenge or even discussion of a primary challenge in subsequent months is something that no one in the GOP would have likely been able to avoid in the event that they had had voted against ending debate on the legislation. In short, the Republican Party has grown to be significantly more uniformly conservative ideologically than the Democratic Party has become uniformly liberal, with Democratic representatives also facing less pressure to conform on a variety of issues.

This chapter will consider in greater depth the role that outside groups such as Club for Growth and MoveOn are playing in primary challenges in order to generate possible explanations for the asymmetry between groups on the right and left. Specifically, I intend to first identify and profile the various interest groups that have been playing roles in primary challenges over the course of the past two decades, looking at differences between those groups on the political left and right. Second, I

will discuss the groups’ actual motivations for donating and contributing to various candidates in election cycles, using information drawn from these interests to analyze potential reasons as to why ideologically driven primaries appear to be increasingly common on the political right in comparison to the political left. Finally, I will use this information to draw conclusions about what role these interest groups will play in the future and how that role is potentially contributing to the partisan asymmetry that is occurring regarding polarization.

**Interest Groups: The Old, the New, and the Ugly**

Interest groups are not a new feature of the U.S. political system. One can trace their origins as far back as the 1820s, with the number of such groups gradually growing through the 1940s before exploding in number in the past 50 years or so.\(^{164}\) A wide variety of interest groups play a role in the modern political process. These groups might represent broad ideological interests or specific issues, be national in scope or more localized, and have varying degrees of influence on the legislative process depending on when and where they are trying to exert influence.\(^{165}\)

One of the starkest differences between today’s interest groups and groups of the past is an increase in the prominence of ideologically driven interest groups such as Club for Growth and MoveOn in the modern political process. By “ideologically driven” groups, I am referring to broader sort of umbrella groups that represent a wide range of issue agendas falling under an overarching ideological viewpoint rather than one particular issue. Robert Boatright notes in *Getting Primaried* that interest


groups have both grown to play a larger role in the primary process (by taking advantage of new technological developments and legal cases making it easier to contribute to campaigns) and taken on a new form in the rise of ideological interest groups. Boatright does not claim that “traditional” interest groups no longer exist. Such groups include single-issue interest groups, such as the National Rifle Association, as well as the more common groups that represent industries such as the financial and material industries. Rather, these groups have both been joined by several newer and highly influential ideologically driven ones that have come to spend unprecedented levels of money in independent expenditures over the past decade. Club for Growth, for example, advocates for a variety of positions related to a conservative economic philosophy, ranging from pushing tax cuts to reducing government spending. The Progressive Change Campaign Committee, for its part, pushes for a broad range of progressive principles under a “Elizabeth Warren-esque” brand of progressivism that includes advocacy for campaign finance reform, affordable college, and more expansive Social Security.

These groups have not come to replace traditional interest groups by any means in terms of spending, as only 3 of the top 20 PACs that contributed to primary challenges between 2000 and 2010 were ideologically driven groups. Nonetheless, that is not to assert that these groups have not become highly influential in the U.S. political process over the past two decades, as the involvement of groups such as Club for Growth and MoveOn in primary challenges would reflect. At the very least,

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these groups have become to play a powerhouse role in terms of spending, with no
PACs spending over $5,000 prior to 1988 but such groups collectively spending
amounts in excess of $1.5 million in the 2008 election cycle.\textsuperscript{169}

A more notable trend that has corresponded alongside the rise of these
ideologically driven groups is an increase in the involvement of other sorts of interest
groups in primary challenges. Groups such as the National Rifle Association
advocate for issues that might correspond to one side of the political spectrum or the
other and are narrower in focus than groups such as Club for Growth. Yet, while the
NRA has been around since the 1800s, its PAC has recently become heavily involved
in ideologically driven primary challenges, being second to only the Club for Growth
PAC in terms of spending on primaries between 2000 and 2010.\textsuperscript{170} As noted by
Boatright, this involvement (as well as the involvement of other narrow-focused
groups) would have been unheard of in the 1980s and 1990s, being largely a
consequence of changes such as party sorting, the rise of the Internet that has made
communication and fundraising easier, and the ability of these groups to find an
ideological or issue-related “niche” in politics that they can capitalize on and appeal
to in a sorted party system.\textsuperscript{171}

Club for Growth and the PCCC by no means represent the first umbrella
groups devoted to broad ideological principles on one side of the spectrum or the
other. Indeed, Boatright notes how the National Conservative PAC supported
multiple primary challenges to Republican incumbents during the 1980s.\textsuperscript{172} Similarly,

\textsuperscript{169} Ibid., 196.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid., 191.
\textsuperscript{171} Ibid., 60-61.
\textsuperscript{172} Robert Boatright, \textit{Getting Primaried}, 196.
Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) is one of the oldest organizations in the country devoted to promoting a wide range of liberal policies and has been involved in a variety of primaries and elections since the 1940s.\textsuperscript{173} Still, such groups in past decades have never been so actively involved in primary challenges as groups such as Club for Growth have been in the contemporary period, particularly with respect to spending. Four of the top five groups that spent the most in independent expenditures on primary challenges between 1980 and 2010 were groups with some sort of ideological focus in their mission.\textsuperscript{174} Simply put, changing times have corresponded to changing interest groups, with ideologically driven interest groups being able to capitalize on polarized times, diverging electorates, and loose campaign contribution laws in order to satisfy their ideological interests.

Umbrella-style ideologically driven advocacy groups such as Club for Growth and MoveOn make up one category of groups involved in ideological primary challenges. These groups tend to describe themselves as dedicated to some sort of ideological change in Congress in comparison to specific interests that lobbyists and other special interest groups will protect. On the political left, MoveOn claims to be an organization devoted to using “the connective power of the Internet to lead, participate in, and win campaigns for progressive change.”\textsuperscript{175} Similarly, Club for Growth asserts how the group exerts “maximum pressure on lawmakers to vote like free-market conservatives. And when they don’t, we hold them accountable by

\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., 193.
\textsuperscript{175} “What is MoveOn.org?” MoveOn.org, http://front.moveon.org/about/#.VscY0bQ-BsM.
publishing their voting record.”176 Thus, the groups’ self-described missions involve framing their messages in terms of ideology. They both judge congressional representatives on their legislative behavior using ideological criteria.

A significant number of ideologically motivated interest groups exist other than Club for Growth and MoveOn. Indeed, over the course of the past decade, numerous other groups dedicated to conservative and progressive principles have developed and contributed funds to ideologically driven primaries. On the left, grassroots organizations such as Democracy for America and the PCCC have pushed for progressive values and legislation in Congress, while on the right a large swath of conservative groups including Freedomworks, the Tea Party Patriots, and others have pushed for conservative bills and legislation in Congress.

A second major player in ideologically driven primary challenges over the past two decades is organized labor. Unions differ from the ideological interest groups invested in primaries in two main regards. First, union involvement in ideologically driven primary challenges is a phenomenon exclusive largely to the political left and the Democratic Party, unlike ideological interest groups that are present on both sides of the political spectrum. In 2014, the Tea Party Patriots, Freedomworks, and Club for Growth all contributed funds to ideologically driven conservative primary challenges, while MoveOn, the PCCC, and other progressive groups contributed to progressive candidates. Unions have played a similarly large role in primary challenges over the past two decades, comprising ten of the top twenty groups that spent against incumbents in primaries between 2000 and 2010.177

177 Ibid. 190.
More specifically, unions such as the AFL-CIO and SEIU played a role in endorsing the primary challengers and contributing to the progressive opponents in Blanche Lincoln’s 2010 primary in Arkansas and Al Wynn’s 2008 primary in Maryland. Various unions in the AFL-CIO committed millions to supporting Lincoln’s more progressive opponent, being a large source of monetary support for her opponent’s campaign. In this manner, while groups such as Club for Growth and MoveOn might have received significant national attention in recent years due to their involvement in high profile ideological challenges to incumbents, the involvement of unions in primaries cannot be understated.

The second main way that unions differ from umbrella ideological groups with respect to their involvement in primary challenges is that unions’ primary purpose for existence is not explicitly ideological in nature. Consider, for example, the mission of the SEIU:

We are the Service Employees International Union, an organization of 2 million members united by the belief in the dignity and worth of workers and the services they provide and dedicated to the improving the lives of workers and their families and creating a more just and humane society.

The description provided by the SEIU makes absolutely no reference to any sort of ideological motives. Rather, the focus of the organization is simply on “improving the lives of workers.” Similarly, the AFL-CIO also is not an organization necessarily committed to the ideological principles of progressivism, being a group of numerous smaller unions with missions and values often similar to those of the SEIU.

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In this regard, unions differ drastically from interest groups such as Club for Growth and the PCCC given that unions play an active and primary role in their members’ lives at the workplace, with political involvement mainly being an instrumental means to achieve better conditions for their workers. In an email correspondence with a representative from the United Food & Commercial Workers International Union (UFCW), a member described the union’s goal of “making life better for hardworking men and women and their families” by fighting for things such as “higher wages, stronger benefits, retirement security, and stable scheduling.”

Although such goals are unquestionably progressive in nature, the representative also acknowledged, “For our union family, elections can’t just be about a single party or political platform… we will only support candidates who are willing to stand up and fight for things that matter most to us—regardless of what party they are from.”

Thus, at least for the UFCW, the party and incumbency status of the candidates that they choose to support or endorse is more or less irrelevant so long as the candidate supports the goals of the union. This candidate is usually a Democrat given the progressive nature of the union’s goals and the consequences of long-term party sorting, though not always. The union did contribute over $20,000 to Republicans in Congress in 2014, and the even larger ALF-CIO contributed over $130,000 to Republicans in Congress that same year. Thus, support from these unions to congressional representatives in the GOP is more common than one might expect despite still being small compared to support for Democrats.

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180 UFCW Worker, email to UFCW communications department, March 2, 2016.
181 Ibid.
182 Open Secrets data for the UFCW and AFL-CIO.
One other aspect that likely impacts the manner in which unions approach their involvement in primaries is their organizational structure and network compared to those of ideological advocacy groups. As noted by Boatright, unions tend to be “less risk-averse” and more willing to support “even long-shot candidates” than other groups,\textsuperscript{183} which might simply be because they can due to the way that their groups are organized. Boatright describes how groups such as Club for Growth need to find a sort of issue-related or ideological “niche” of supporters to support them financially, which involves a certain degree of “selling” their ideas and showing that the they can actually have some sort of influence in the political process in the U.S.\textsuperscript{184} In contrast, unions usually already have a core set of members (and consequently, funding) that does not need to be drawn into their organization in the way that supporters of groups like Club for Growth do. Consequently, they can be a bit more strategic in the manner in which they approach their involvement in primaries. This would largely explain why many of the ideologically driven primary challengers that unions have supported have come from heavily unionized areas like Pennsylvania.\textsuperscript{185} In this regard, unions are, to an extent, almost opportunistic in nature, strategically engaging in primaries where they have the means and resources to do so rather than boldly tackling incumbents in ideological terms as ideologically driven groups do.

While unions are involved politically for the sake of achieving goals that benefit their members, ideological interest groups such as Club for Growth are involved specifically for the purpose of achieving their broad ideological principles.

\textsuperscript{183} Robert Boatright, \textit{Getting Primaried}, 191.
\textsuperscript{184} Robert Boatright, \textit{Getting Primaried}, 54.
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid., 202.
that tend to correspond to one side of the political spectrum or the other. Similar to
the UFCW, one would be wrong to characterize the interest groups as explicitly
committed to one party or the other, with Club for Growth, the PCCC, and others
specifically outlining their principles on their websites in nonpartisan terms as
independent nonprofit organizations for legal reasons. Indeed, Club for Growth
actually endorsed and contributed to incumbent Rep. Henry Cuellar (D-TX) in 2006
when he faced a Democratic challenge from the left.\textsuperscript{186} However, Cuellar, a
conservative Democrat largely out of line with his party on issues such as gun
control, fiscal measures, and abortion, is the only Democrat to date ever supported by
the Club.\textsuperscript{187} With the Democratic and Republican Parties more ideologically sorted
than ever, the interest groups’ beliefs have come to fall in line largely with the
ideological orientation of one party or the other.

**How and Why: What Role Groups Are Actually Playing in Primaries**

Interest groups such as Club for Growth and MoveOn have clear ideological
motives driving their campaign contributions, which raises the question of how they
actually achieve their stated goals and objectives. Donating to congressional
candidates that support values espoused by the organizations would be one logical
approach, and in an era of ideologically sorted parties one would expect that each
ideological group would gravitate toward the appropriate party. Yet, while it is indeed
the case that MoveOn and Club for Growth contribute almost exclusively to

\textsuperscript{186} Patrick O’Connor, “Conservative unrest fuels Club for Growth Spending,” in *The Hill*, April 4,
\textsuperscript{187} Emma Dumain, “Rep. Henry Cuellar: I will die a Democrat,” in *Roll Call*, September 24, 2014,
Democratic and Republican candidates for political office respectively, they also in some ways work against the traditional party system.

Part of what makes these ideologically motivated interest groups different from other interest groups is the fact that they often prioritize ideology over the party institutions that they use to achieve their ends. In this regard, being a Republican candidate for office (or even an incumbent at that) is not a sufficient condition to receive support from Club for Growth, as Arlen Specter’s initial primary challenge in 2004 and various other primaries since then have demonstrated. Similarly, being a Democratic candidate for public office is insufficient to receive support from groups such as MoveOn, as Joe Lieberman’s primary in 2006 demonstrated. In short, ideological interest groups are willing to field primary challenges to incumbents when they are being insufficiently liberal in the Democratic Party or insufficiently conservative in the Republican Party. Doing so puts them in conflict not only with those incumbent office-holders but, typically, national party leaders as well.

Political parties tend to have multiple reasons for supporting incumbents over primary challengers even in the event that outside groups or party activists view the incumbent as insufficiently partisan. Arlen Specter offers a dramatic illustration of this organizational tendency among parties, first receiving support from President Bush and the GOP leadership in his 2004 primary against Pat Toomey and then again receiving support from President Obama and both state and national Democratic leaders in his 2010 primary against Joe Sestak. As Boatright notes in *Congressional Primary Elections*, money spent by incumbents in a primary is money that either the incumbent or the party could have been using in a more competitive race or the
More importantly, however, incumbents are, everything else equal, often more likely to win in a general election than their primary opponents due to a combination of factors ranging from name recognition to experience to constituent service. Such was arguably the case with former Senator Richard Lugar (R-IN) in 2012, whose conservative went on to lose the general election after making controversial rape comments that Lugar surely would not have made had he had been the nominee given his campaign experience and tenure as a Senator. Finally, parties have an incentive to support incumbents over challengers since, if they were to neglect supporting an incumbent in a particular primary challenge, they might in the process (unintentionally) encourage more challenges to other incumbents in the future. Each of these challenges would similarly carry the other risks that I noted above. Thus, parties have a multitude of reasons for defending incumbents over primary challenges, even when those incumbents break from party lines on certain issues.

These ideological groups’ willingness to contribute to primary challenges raises the question of the frequency, seriousness, and type of involvement they actually muster. Not all primary challenges are the same. Primaries might take on a variety of forms, whether that be two challengers running for an open seat after a representative retires, a challenger choosing to oppose an incumbent for one of a variety of reasons, or two incumbents of the same party being redistricted to the same

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district following a census and squaring off for the House seat. The second of these three is the focus of our analysis, but ideologically driven groups certainly engage in many open-seat primary races as well.

The “success” of these groups’ involvement in primaries is debatable depending on how one defines being *successful* in these primaries. In terms of raw numbers, the groups have a poor success rate in ousting incumbents in primaries. Specter and Chafee were victorious (in their primaries) in 2004 and 2006. Bennett and Lugar were losers in 2010 and 2012. Yet, these ideological interest groups actually play a fairly limited role in the greater scheme of challenges to *incumbents* when one considers how many races occur in a given year. In the past three Senate election cycles, 45 incumbents Senators faced some sort of primary challenge in their reelection bids. Yet, only twelve of these could be categorized as serious ideological challenges. Moreover, outside groups were only involved in seven of the challenges, succeeding just three times even when one includes the loss incurred by Lisa Murkowski in the 2010 Alaska primary. Thus, the success rate of challenges to incumbent Senators is still fairly low, less than 50 percent for cases over the past three election cycles that involved outside interest groups.

One must note an important distinction between open races and races involving incumbents when considering the involvement of Club for Growth, MoveOn, and other ideological interest groups. In June 2010, for example, Club for Growth

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192 See Figure 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 in Chapter 2.
193 Even though Lisa Murkowski lost the primary, she ultimately went on to win the general election as a write-in candidate.
Growth President Chocola acknowledged the Club’s involvement in only a small number of races, with the bulk number of “A races” being “open-seat, safe Republican races.” Indeed, this has proven to be mostly true. In 2014, Club for Growth was involved in only four challenges to Republican incumbents, succeeding in ousting no incumbent other than former Rep. Ralph Hall of Texas. Comparatively, Club for Growth spent over $1,000 in independent expenditures on eight open-seat races, double the number of races in which the Club targeted GOP incumbents. This emphasis on open-seat races would largely make sense in the context of strategic targeting of races and limited resources such as money, as incumbents historically have had huge financial, name recognition, and networking advantages in primary challenges that are often not as present in open seat races. Moreover, the fact that Club for Growth and other groups are involved in only a limited number of primary challenges each cycle is unsurprising when one considers the limitations listed above for the Club’s involvement in open seats as well as a lack of an incentive to contribute to challengers, whether because those districts or seats are lost causes or because they are already held by representatives who fit well with the groups’ espoused missions.

The Club’s focus in 2010 on open races draws attention to the less covered and less discussed races in which interest groups also play a role. Boatright in general is skeptical about the impact of ideologically driven primary challenges on polarization given that incumbents tend to emerge victorious, as Chaffee, Cochran, and Lincoln all did in their respective primaries. Even Joe Lieberman “won” in a

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194 John McArdle, “Club for Growth Celebrates Record so Far,” in Roll Call, June 2014.
195 Information gathered in collecting OpenSecrets data for Figures 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3.
sense given that he won the general election as an independent after losing the primary. Yet, the bulk of Boatright’s analysis discusses primaries largely in the context of being “primaried,” i.e., an incumbent being challenged for being insufficiently liberal or conservative in his or her party. In this regard, Boatright fails to take into consideration the effects of electoral wins for more ideologically extreme candidates in primaries for an open seat. Doug Lamborn, for example, was an ideologically extreme Republican candidate supported by the Club for Growth over his more moderate opponents in a 2010 primary for an open House seat in Colorado. In this manner, Lamborn’s ultimate win contributed to polarization both in that Lamborn replaced a slightly more moderate Republican in the House and beat out several comparatively moderate opponents for the open seat, going on to score a 0.691 DW-Nominate score in his tenure in the House compared to his predecessor’s score of 0.583.  

Two significant trends related to ideological interest group involvement in primary challenges appear to have developed over the course of the past decade. First, conservative groups appear more likely to challenge Republican incumbents for being insufficiently conservative than progressive groups do Democratic incumbents. Second, these groups appear to have different reasons for engaging in primary challenges given the groups’ missions and relationships with the two parties. These are trends that I will explore in further depth for the remainder of this chapter, establishing first whether they are true and then analyzing what factors explain any

196 VoteView DW-Nominate Data.
discrepancies between the behavior of groups on the left and the right with respect to engaging in ideologically driven primaries.

Club for Growth rose to national prominence in 2004 when it led the conservative charge against Arlen Specter in Pennsylvania. Yet, one is left to question why this challenge was so well-publicized when in fact Specter ended up winning the primary before going on to win the general election fairly convincingly. Was it the fact that the Club challenged Specter for being insufficiently conservative in a party that had already moved fairly far right compared to where it had been in the 1960s and 1970s? Was it the fact that an interest group defied the wishes of the President and other high-profile party leaders in choosing to challenge a party member viewed internally as sufficiently loyal to the party? Or rather was it the implications that the challenge would have for the future of the party given how narrowly Specter won the challenge and how much funding was inevitably poured into the race by an extreme ideological group more invested in the group’s interests than in the Party’s control of Congress and chances of holding the seat?

The general reaction to the primary challenge was likely a consequence of all of these factors, though especially the last of these three with respect to the long term interests of the Republican Party. President Bush and Republican leaders expressed concern over whether Specter’s opponent Pat Toomey would be able to win in the general election if victorious in the primary,197 and the race garnered national attention as it was featured in prominent national newspapers such as The New York Times and The Washington Post. However, a huge portion of the attention drawn to

the race likely had to do with its implications for the future of the Republican Party and its relationship with outside interest groups. The race reflected a growing division in a Republican Party that has moved far to the right since the 1960s, with states like Pennsylvania shifting from swing states to Democratic-leaning states during presidential election years as thousands of moderates have left the GOP.\footnote{Ibid.}

Such was apparent in the final outcome of the primary that Specter ever so narrowly won despite his status as an incumbent in the state for over 24 years. Moreover, while moderates such as Amo Houston saw Toomey’s defeat as a victory for Republican moderates, conservatives and the Club for Growth saw the defeat as an opportunity for future conservative candidates given how close the race turned out. As Club President Stephen Moore described, the primary was “a short term defeat but long term building block for the Club for Growth.”\footnote{Helen Dewar, “GOP Club for Growth Shows Limited Clout,” in The Washington Post, April 2004, \url{http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A48378-2004May22.html}} Given the Club’s involvement in primaries since then, Moore’s prediction has thus far proven to be largely true.

While Club for Growth failed in its challenge of Specter in 2004, the group had significantly greater success in the years that followed. In 2006, the Club for Growth had its first major victory in helping oust moderate House Republican Joe Schwarz of Michigan in a primary.\footnote{“Rep. Schwarz defeated in the primary,” in NBC News, August 9, 2006, \url{http://www.nbcnews.com/id/14263102/ns/politics/t/rep-schwarz-defeated-michigan-primary/#.VsddFbQ-DR0}. Schwarz narrowly lost his primary by a margin of less than 4,000 votes after outside groups spent over $1 million on the race, with the Club for Growth alone spending over $300,000 against Schwartz in independent
This upset was right around the time that Joe Lieberman lost his primary in Connecticut with outside interest groups such as MoveOn pouring thousands of dollars into the race. Thus, in one election cycle, the Democratic and Republican establishments both suffered unexpected and stinging losses to more ideological candidates supported by these interest groups. This marked the beginning of a series of challenges within both parties over the course of the next four election cycles, with moderate Republicans such as Lincoln Chafee and even fairly conservative ones such as Thad Cochran becoming the targets of conservative interest groups on the right as Democrats such as Al Wynn became targets on the left.

In Chapter Two, I noted in Figures 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3 that interest groups were involved in no fewer than 10 of the ideologically driven primary challenges. However, conservative groups have been asymmetrically involved in the political process over the past decades compared to progressive ones, with conservative groups playing a role in nine of the ten Republican primary challenges and progressive groups playing a role in only one of the Democratic ones. Thus, while conservative interest groups appear to have been playing an increasingly large role in the political process over the course of the past decade, the same cannot necessarily be said for liberal groups. Joe Lieberman, Blanche Lincoln, and Al Wynn all faced opposition from more liberal opponents backed by unions and progressive interest groups in their respective primaries. However, these primaries are more of the exception than the rule in the Democratic Party, which in part explains the significant national attention they received. Lincoln, Lieberman, and Specter were the only incumbent Democratic

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Senators who faced serious ideological challenges in the past decade, in comparison to GOP Senators who faced ten serious ideological challenges in the past three election cycles *alone* and eleven altogether over the past decade. Only Lincoln and Lieberman two had opponents who were backed by liberal organizations such as MoveOn and labor unions. This would imply either one of two things about progressive interest groups—that they have less need to challenge incumbents in the Democratic Party due to ideological unity in voting patterns in the Democratic Party, or that they are less likely to challenge Democratic incumbents for some (to be determined and discussed) reason.

Given the voting patterns of Democrats in Congress, the first of these theories is unlikely. If anything, the Democratic Party is less ideologically homogenous than the Republican Party. Consider, for example, DW-Nominate data for the Senate. Using DW-Nominate data for the 113th Congress, I created the following graph detailing the spread of scores across the political spectrum:

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202 The latter figure includes Figures 1.1-1.3 data plus Lincoln Chaffee’s primary in 2006.
Any Senator with a positive score greater than 0 is a Republican while any score less than 0 reflects a Democrat. In short, there is no ideological overlap whatsoever between the parties.

The graph above clearly reflects greater ideological homogeneity among the GOP given that the bulk of GOP Senators have scores greater than 0.400, with only six Senators having scores less than this number. In contrast, Democratic Senators are spread across a wider range of scores fairly evenly, with a close to even number of Senators having scores “greater” than -0.400 (i.e., closer to the center score of zero) in comparison to Senators with scores less than -.400 (28 in the former range compared to 26 in the latter).

Numerous significant votes in recent congresses reflect this heterogeneity in the Democratic Party compared to the Republican Party. As previously noted, fourteen Democratic Senators voted to end debate on Keystone XL Pipeline legislation in November 2014, with none of the Senators facing significant backlash for their votes despite the Party’s increasingly pro-environmental stances on legislation. Obviously, the Keystone XL Pipeline legislation is not directly comparable to legislation supporting higher taxes, given that the latter issue speaks to a core ideological principle of the Club for Growth, Freedomworks, and the Tea Party Patriots while the former speaks to no core ideological principle of MoveOn or the PCCC. However, representatives in the Democratic Party in general appear less accountable to outside groups than their Republican counterparts with respect to their voting records. With the exception of when candidates break from their parties on extremely crystallized issues that staunchly divide the two parties, such as
Lieberman’s continued support of the Iraq War despite the Democratic Party’s
general opposition to it, Democratic legislators are more capable of breaking from
their party’s general views on an issue without suffering political repercussions in the
form of primary challenges.

Like conservative interest groups, progressive groups do still play a role in
primary challenges beyond those to incumbents. Indeed, Democracy for America,
MoveOn, and the PCCC all have endorsed candidates running for open seats in a
variety of political offices in the U.S. These include the PCCC’s endorsements of
high profile politicians such as Mazie Hirono (D-HI), Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), and
Alan Grayson (D-FL) during their campaigns for political office,203 Democracy for
America’s endorsement of Donna Edwards current bid for the Senate (as well as her
previous bid for the House),204 and others. Thus, to argue that progressive interest
groups play no role in the political process in the U.S. would be very much mistaken.
MoveOn alone contributed to 27 different House and Senate campaigns in 2014, all
of which were either open seats or challenges to incumbent Republicans rather than
challenges to Democratic incumbents.205 They simply play a different, less
aggressive role toward Democratic candidates for office, targeting open seats more
frequently than seats held by Democratic incumbents. This is a finding that I will
continue to explore further in the remainder of this chapter, looking to show more
evidence supporting this conclusion as well as analyze potential reasons for why this
might be the case.

203 Progressive Campaign Change Committee website
204 Democracy for America website
205 Open Secrets Data for MoveOn.org, Accessed April 9, 2016,
The Ideological Groups: A Deeper Look

What explains the difference between conservative and liberal groups’ propensity to support primary challenges to incumbents? I now turn to this question in an analysis of these groups’ underlying motives and the tactics that they employ in engaging such challenges. In doing so, I will also discuss the parties themselves and what incentives that incumbents might have in playing to ideological extremes. As noted in Chapter One, parties have become increasingly sorted, which surely minimizes the incentive for incumbents from safe districts and seats to compromise with the other party. Below, I profile the activities of outside groups involved in primary challenges, drawing on journalistic and scholarly sources, and discussing in greater depth four particular groups: Club for Growth, MoveOn, Freedomworks, and the Progressive Campaign Change Committee. The former three of these groups I selected for my analysis since they have a history of involvement in primaries, from Thad Cochran’s run-in with the Club for Growth to Dick Lugar’s falling out with Freedomworks to Lieberman’s battle with MoveOn. I selected the PCCC since, as I will discuss, this is a group that one might expect to engage in primary challenges despite rarely actually engaging in ideologically driven primaries.

Although Club for Growth, MoveOn, Freedomworks, and the PCCC are groups that have garnered national attention in the past decade due to their relatively recent involvement in primaries and the political process, they have received some degree of scrutiny from political scientists seeking to analyze their role in politics. Michael Murakami published an article in 2008 on groups such as Club for Growth and MoveOn, which he refers to as “party purity groups.” These groups, Murakami
asserts, “side ideologically with one of the two major parties, but are frustrated with moderates, who seem to betray core party values by siding with the opposition.” Consequently, they end up engaging in fierce battles in primaries in which ideological purity is made the criterion for support. This puts them into conflict with party leaders and the so-called “big-tent” approach to politics that such leaders often assert is essential for building winning electoral coalitions in general elections.

Murakami’s analysis of these “party purity groups” is particularly apt with respect to the political right. Founded in 1999 as an organization advocating for fiscal conservatism, lower taxes, and a broad vision of “economic freedom” with limited government involvement, the Club for Growth has never been an organization that has been concerned with the long term viability of the GOP in a way that one might expect an interest group advocating for conservative principles would be. Former Club President Chris Chocola acknowledged in 2012, “The D.C. crowd understands what we do, [but] they don’t always understand why we do it, because it’s hard for the establishment party folks to grasp or understand that we’re not in the business of electing Republicans.” The Club simply cares more about its mission and values than it does the Republican Party.

Indeed, the Club’s relationship with the Republican establishment is often tension-filled at best and hostile at worst. The Club’s record demonstrates that it quite frequently butts heads both with the Republican establishment and party leaders,

207 “What we do,” on About Club for Growth, http://www.clubforgrowth.org/about/
as evidenced in the Club’s involvement in Arlen Specter’s 2004 primary despite opposition from GOP leaders that included then-President Bush. As one GOP strategist described, “The [Republican] establishment just hates the Club for Growth. It’s more like the growth that won’t go away.” These comments more or less align with those of Amo Houston in the wake of Arlen Specter’s primary victory in 2004, who spoke wistfully of a future date when the organization would “fall flat off the face of the earth.”

Why is the relationship between the Club and the Republican establishment so hostile? Simply put, there are substantive, issue-based ideological differences between the Club’s agenda and key leaders in the party. In 2001, three years before the Club garnered national attention for targeting Arlen Specter in the Pennsylvania Republican primary, the Club’s then-President Stephen Moore published an article in *The National Review* titled “The Party of Reagan, Not the Party of Rockefeller: Republicans must not capitulate to the left-wing base.” Moore questioned, “If liberals in the party don’t want to cut taxes, then why are they Republican?,” criticizing GOP moderates such as Lincoln Chaffee and claiming that the best way forward for the Republican Party is to embrace a conservative agenda. In the Club’s vision for the GOP, moderates willing to compromise on fiscal and economic issues simply have no place.

This no-compromise sort of attitude with respect to fiscal conservatism has become increasingly apparent since Moore’s article in 2001, both through the Club’s

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209 Ibid.
211 Ibid.
support for primary challenges against establishment candidates and through statements released by officials affiliate with the Club. In 2005 Moore reiterated some of the earlier sentiments from the 2001 National Review article, claiming, “We want to be seen as the tax cut enforcer of the party.”\footnote{Peter Peterson, \textit{Running on Empty: How the Democratic and Republican Parties are Bankrupting our Future and What Americans can do about it}, (New York Picador Publisher, 2005), 14.} In this manner, the Club for Growth is playing the role as ideological enforcer within the GOP. Indeed, given the Club’s willingness to challenge incumbents such as Specter, Chaffee, and others, this “enforcer” role is largely what the Club has come to fill in matters pertaining to economic conservatism. Some might question this, given the Club’s fairly low success rate. As noted in Figure 1.3, for example, no Senate incumbents actually fell to primary challenges supported by the Club or any other interest groups in 2014. That said, however, the Club does “not keep a won-loss record” to measure its success, claiming that it has had a “ripple effect” on more moderate members in Congress. The group points to officials such as Orrin Hatch (R-UT) as examples, claiming that he shifted his voting record to the right after former Senator Robert Bennett (R-UT) lost to a more conservative challenge supported by the Club.\footnote{Sean Lengell, “Club for Growth targeting ‘establishment’ GOP candidates,” in \textit{The Washington Times}, May 2012, http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/may/3/club-for-growth-targeting-establishment-gop-candid/?page=all} Thus, the Club cares as much about how “threatening” representatives perceive its challenges to be as it does electing true fiscal conservatives, as the former has the potential to impact the voting records of those who are moderate.

The Club’s involvement in primaries also ties significantly back to Murakami’s theory concerning groups such as Club for Growth striving to attain

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\item Peter Peterson, \textit{Running on Empty: How the Democratic and Republican Parties are Bankrupting our Future and What Americans can do about it}, (New York Picador Publisher, 2005), 14.
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party purity. On the one hand, the Club *claims* to be highly strategic and victory-oriented in its approach to supporting challenges. Former Club President Pat Toomey claimed, “We want to make sure there is a plausible path to victory” for each challenger supported by the Growth, outlining an extensive vetting process for potential candidates including an interview, visit by a staff member to the state or district where the challenger will be running, and polling to ensure that the candidate has a chance of being able to ultimately win the seat.\footnote{Patrick O’Connor, “Conservative unrest fuels Club for Growth Spending,” in *The Hill*, April 2006, http://thehill.com/homenews/news/10207-conservative-unrest-fuels-club-fundraising-toomey} Former President of Americans for Tax Reform Grover Norquist similarly claimed, “Their [Club for Growth’s] strategy is completely correct: Nominate the Reaganite guy who can win in the primary and win in the general. And that’s different in different states.”\footnote{Sean Lengell, “Club for Growth targeting ‘establishment’ GOP candidates,” in *The Washington Times*, May 2012, http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/may/3/club-for-growth-targeting-establishment-gop-candid/?page=all}

Given the group’s staunch unwillingness to compromise on issues such as economic conservatism, however, the evidence for such strategic calculation in their approach often proves hard to identify. Indeed, the group does occasionally field challengers simply for the purpose of making a statement, with Lincoln Chaffee being a prime example. In 2001 Moore claimed, “Chaffee’s ransom isn’t worth paying. It will reduce the party’s voter base rather than expand it,” referencing Chaffee’s moderate image in the Republican Party and willingness to compromise with Democrats as a Republican Senator from Rhode Island.\footnote{Stephen Moore, “The Party of Reagan,” in *The National Review*, May 29, 2001.} Moreover, the Club went on to challenge Chaffee in a primary five years later despite opposition from GOP leaders, with Chaffee going on to fend off his conservative challenger but ultimately
lose the general election. Still, the Club’s willingness to invest in the primary despite the fact that Chafee’s conservative challenger would have been unlikely to win in such a liberal state says more about the Club’s subtler goal of making a point to the GOP establishment than it does the Club’s desire to win races. Republican incumbents do, after all, tend to respond to challenges fielded by the Club, as seen in Orrin Hatch’s more conservative voting record after his fellow Senator Bob Bennett fell to the Club in 2010 and Lindsey Graham’s aggressive moves to scare off potentially serious primary challengers in 2014 after the Club and other groups expressed interest in supporting a challenge. This reflects the success of the Club in terms of “enforcing” the conservative nature of the party and pressuring incumbents to vote in a conservative manner.

The article published by Moore in 2001 in *The National Review* on the Republican Party being the party of Ronald Reagan does raise an important point with respect to the way that the Party has changed over the past forty years. Moore asserted:

> In the 1960s and 1970s the Republican party was dominated by a left-leaning northeastern Rockefeller Republican ideology. There were up to a dozen very liberal northeastern Republicans in the Senate and several dozen in the House as recently as the 1970s (such as Case and Javits). They were not much different in their voting behavior than Mr. Jeffords (or Ted Kennedy, for that matter). And their stranglehold on the party helped insure that the GOP was a minority party for decades until the Reagan revolution began to convert the party into one that stood for bedrock GOP principles: lower taxes, less government, and more individual freedom.\(^\text{217}\)

Looking past Moore’s assertions with respect to why the GOP was the minority party in Congress for much of the mid to late twentieth century, Moore is correct in

emphasizing that the Republican Party has indeed changed ideologically over the past forty to fifty years. Part of what has enabled interest groups to field conservative primary challenges to incumbents is the fact that the Republican Party overall has become more conservative as time has passed. In the case of Arlen Specter, for example, 200,000 moderate Republicans\(^{218}\) switched their voter registrations to the Democratic Party between the 2008 presidential election and the time that Specter switched parties himself in April 2009, a shift that unquestionably played a role in the threat of a second primary challenge to Specter in a party that had drifted far to the right. This shift to the right within the party was by no means exclusive to Specter’s electorate either, with the Republican electorate in general becoming more conservative — in 2014, for example, over 56 percent of GOP voters in Tennessee said that they would be (very) likely to support a conservative challenge to Republican Senate incumbent Lamar Alexander, who actually had a decent approval rating of 57 percent at the time.\(^{219}\) Groups such as Club for Growth fielding ideological-driven primary challenges to incumbents are better able to do so as a result of the broader political climate that includes a more conservative base of Republican voters.

The Republican swing to the right in the past decade reflects a second significant change that has also contributed to the push for ideologically driven primaries on the right. Club for Growth was most certainly not the only ideological group involved with conservative primary challenges in the past several election

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cycles. The ideological challenge to Pat Roberts in 2014, for example, received massive support from groups including Freedomworks and the Tea Party Patriots, but not Club for Growth. These groups have largely been dedicated toward mobilizing voters as part of a serious push to model the Tea Party into a cohesive movement that could shape and impact political campaigns, voter turnout, and ultimately legislation. In 2010, Freedomworks organizer Brendan Steinhauser claimed, “This movement, if we can turn out hundreds of thousands to the streets to protest and wave signs and yell and make an impact on policy debate, then we can make a difference.”220 This reference to a movement by Steinhauser has, to a large degree, involved primarying incumbents. In 2009, the founder of dontGo, a conservative free-market group that has been involved in the Tea Party movement along with Freedomworks and the Tea Party Patriots, openly claimed, “Our agenda is to declare war on incumbency and long term power.”221 Thus, a huge part of why many Republicans are facing primaries from more conservative challengers runs deeper than just Club for Growth enforcing supply-side orthodoxy. As noted above, Club for Growth plays a large role as “enforcer” in the GOP in terms of ensuring members support tax cuts. The Tea Party Patriots and Freedomworks, however, are largely mobilizers of sorts, specifically engaging with the electorate to build a more active conservative base.

**What about the Progressive Cause?**

What role do progressive groups play in Democratic primaries and what explains the discrepancy between the involvement of conservative interest groups in

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Republican primaries and progressive groups in Democratic ones? Murakami claims that progressive groups such as MoveOn occupy a role in Democratic politics similar to the role that Club for Growth and conservative groups play in the Republican Party. But he overstates the role that these groups play in Democratic politics. Indeed, these groups do have the potential to play a role similar to that of Club for Growth, as MoveOn did contribute over $250,000 to Ned Lamont’s primary challenge to Joe Lieberman in Connecticut in 2006. On the whole, however, progressive organizations play a significantly smaller role in Democratic primaries to incumbents in comparison to conservative ones.

MoveOn’s contributed over $250,000 and $162,000 to Lamont’s and Edwards’ primaries respectively in 2006 and 2008, figures that pale in comparison to the over $2 million that Club for Growth alone spent against Thad Cochran in 2014. More importantly, however, these figures were on the higher end of total sums that MoveOn spent on candidates in the past decade, both in terms of money donated to particular candidates and independent expenditures. Even in 2012, the year of a presidential election, MoveOn spent a paltry $1.1 million in independent expenditures and $701,000 on campaign contributions on all candidates that it supported or opposed, with the vast majority of the independent expenditures going toward the presidential election and most of the remaining funds going towards the Senate campaigns of Elizabeth Warren, Tammy Baldwin, and Chris Murphy. The group was involved in no significant ideologically driven primary challenges to incumbents that year.

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222 Open Secrets Data.
223 Ibid.
The same is largely true for the Progressive Change Campaign Committee. When MoveOn bloggers founded the PCCC in 2009, they claimed that they planned on backing progressive candidates in open seats elections, though refused to rule out eventual challenges to incumbents down the road. But as of yet, seven years have passed since the group’s founding and no incumbents have been seriously challenged by the organization. In 2014, the group donated to only seventeen House and Senate campaigns (most of which received less than $1,000) and spent independently on a single race in the form of $175,000 against independent Senate candidate Larry Pressler in a three-way race for an open Senate seat. The bulk of the money raised by the organization rather went to salaries for workers at the PCCC. Thus, while the name might imply otherwise, the PCCC actually plays a fairly limited role in primary challenges to incumbents.

The PCCC and MoveOn differ from conservative interest groups on the political right in three main ways that likely factor into discrepancies between the two sorts of groups in terms of their involvement in primaries. First, none of the groups on the left originated as groups that intended to hold the Democratic Party accountable in a way that groups on the right do. When Adam Green cofounded the PCCC in 2009, he acknowledged that the group would be focusing on electing progressive candidates to office but would not be making specific, coordinated efforts to unseat conservative Democrats in the way that Club for Growth and conservative

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225 Open Secrets Data.
interest groups do to moderate Republicans.\textsuperscript{226} Rather, Green outlined three specific goals for the PCCC in terms of raising and spending money efficiently to help progressive candidates get elected to office: helping candidates connect with strong campaign managers, “working with campaigns to implement best practices” with respect to technology, and streamlining and making accessible things such as website templates to help campaigns save money and time on creating (often ineffective) alternatives themselves.\textsuperscript{227} Similarly, MoveOn also did not begin as an organization dedicated to holding the Democratic Party “accountable.” It began instead as a website encouraging Washington to literally “move on” from the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal and impeachment crisis in 1998, before gradually growing into the progressive bastion for change that it is today.\textsuperscript{228} The issues that it has been involved with have changed with time, though all have been progressive in nature, ranging from ending the Iraq War in 2006 to passing health care reform in 2009. This contrasts with the Club for Growth, which has essentially always been a group dedicated to supply-side economics.

The second major difference between groups such as MoveOn and others like Club for Growth that would help explain the discrepancy between the two with respect to involvement in primaries is the relationship that liberal organizations have with the Democratic Party. As previously discussed, Club for Growth has a set vision of what the Republican Party is and should be: an economically conservative party in


\textsuperscript{228} “A Short History,” on MoveOn.Org, http://front.moveon.org/a-short-history/#.Vuy0ucfzT6Y
the image of Ronald Reagan rather than a generally conservative party in the image of Nelson Rockefeller that is willing to compromise. For liberal groups, however, the Democratic Party is viewed more as a generally progressive party with a very progressive wing rather than a progressive party that necessarily needs to oust its moderates. In 2014, for example, the PCCC coined the expression “the Elizabeth Warren wing of the Democratic Party” to reference aggressive Democratic progressives pushing for “big ideas” such as affordable college. Given the group’s reference to this wing of the party and hesitation in primarying conservative Democrats simply for being conservative, the PCCC has a very different conception of what the Democratic Party is than Club for Growth does for the GOP. The GOP has no room for a moderate wing in the eyes of Club for Growth, something not necessarily true for progressive groups in relation to the Democratic Party.

This not to say that the relationship between interest groups and party leaders is conflict-free. MoveOn did after all support Joe Lieberman’s primary challenger in 2006 against the party’s wishes. However, the relationship differs greatly from that of Club for Growth and the GOP, being productive at best and tense at worst. In 2007, for example, MoveOn members met with Democratic Party leaders Pelosi and Reid numerous times to discuss ways to move toward ending the Iraq War. MoveOn has also been somewhat hesitant to attack though quick to praise party leaders such as President Obama and Nancy Pelosi on the issue of health care reform.

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In contrast, the Club for Growth’s relationship is tense at best with GOP leaders, with both openly challenging the other’s legitimacy over the past few years. Then-Speaker of the House John Boehner openly questioned the Club’s credibility following the Club’s opposition to a budget deal in 2008, and the Club for Growth floated the idea of supporting the primary challenger to then-Minority Leader Mitch McConnell in 2014. Such open hostility just is not openly present between party leaders and progressive groups on the political left.

Yet another way in which groups on the left and right differ relates to the manner in which they are actually involved in politics. Club for Growth plays a direct role in primaries through independent expenditures and campaign donations, though the Club is able to be as involved as it is in primaries due to an active and engaged conservative electorate that has developed over the past few decades. In contrast, progressive groups direct more of their resources toward building a progressive movement that does not yet exist in similarly organized terms. In 2009, organizers from MoveOn pushed to create a progressive PAC called “Accountability Now” that sought to “target incumbents to make space for Obama to be more progressive.” The PAC claimed to be “the opposite of Club for Growth” given its...

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focus primarily on targeting Democrats out of touch with their districts and Democrats with excessive strings to corporate interests. Yet, the group played little role beyond recruiting a challenger to Blanche Lincoln in 2010, essentially completely fading in the background since without even a trace of their former website. The one major push by progressives to build an organization dedicated to targeting incumbents largely failed.

Despite the disappearance of Accountability Now, however, progressive groups play a role similar to that of Freedomworks with respect to building a sort of ideological movement. The PCCC has made various claims in the past year about its progressive advocacy within the party, claiming to be “leading the charge for big ideas” and helping various progressive candidates win elections in open seats to Congress. Moreover, while the PCCC and MoveOn do not contribute or spend money on campaigns in the way that Club for Growth does, they do play a powerhouse role in terms of helping candidates fundraise and organize their campaigns. In 2014, for example, the PCCC claimed to have helped progressive candidates for Congress raise close to $1.5 million collectively, in addition to making over 4 million phone calls to help increase voter turnout for progressive candidates. Considering both this and Green’s statements on the PCCC’s short term goals in 2009, this points more towards groups such as the PCCC primarily being vested in strategically building a progressive movement.


Finally, groups on the left and right differ with respect to both the amount of money that they raise and the sources of that money, which also likely plays a factor in why conservative groups are more likely to spend money against incumbents. Simply put, progressive groups are not going to spend money that they do not have, nor will they raise money from sources that go against their progressive roots. In 2014, Club for Growth had more than 35 businesses and corporations that contributed over $10,000 to the group, at least 9 of which were donations greater than $100,000. Moreover, Club for Growth also had several large donations from wealthy businessmen who gave over $1 million in donations that year. In contrast, MoveOn’s donors in 2014 primarily came from small donors, with 2,063 donors giving upwards of $200 but less than $5,000 in donations. Similarly, the PCCC raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for Elizabeth Warren’s Senate campaign in 2012, though the average donation came out to a low $17.

This discrepancy between the sources of funds of groups on the political left and political great has great implications with respect to the groups’ level of involvement in the U.S. political process. Conservative groups both have more money and greater access to large potential donors. These groups dominated progressive groups in terms of spending in the 2010 midterm elections, outspending them over 2:1 with $169 million in House and Senate ads compared to $80 million.

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for progressive groups. Moreover, progressive groups do not have a simple solution in terms of being able to offset this imbalance. While in theory they could utilize the same changes in campaign laws that have enable conservative SuperPACs to raise and spend millions of dollars each election cycle, campaign finance reform and the rejection of corporate interests have become two critical components of the progressive cause over the past several election cycles. Part of why Blanche Lincoln was targeted in 2010 was this belief by progressive groups that she had gotten too close and dependent on big donors. Thus, although progressive groups have shown an impressive capacity to raise large sums of money from many small donors, as MoveOn and the PCCC have done before in elections such as Elizabeth Warren’s Senate run, this is still no easy task. To put figures into perspective, it would take over 58,823 small donations of $17 to a progressive group to match just one large $1 million donation to a conservative group.

While conservative groups often are recipients of donations from wealthy donors and corporations, they also have an extensive network of small donors comparable to that of MoveOn and progressive interest groups. The Tea Party Express PAC, for example, is a conservative PAC that raised over $10 million in 2012, though over 75 percent of these were small donations in the form of $200 or less. Thereby, these groups have a huge advantage over progressive ones in terms of their ability to fundraise: not only do they have vast networks of small donors similar to the ones that progressive groups do, but they also have large corporations

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and wealthy donors donating in ways unmatched on the side of progressive groups. Consequently, progressive groups need to be more strategic with both in terms of how they raise and where they spend their money.

Given these discrepancies between interest groups on the political left and right, the big question now remains under what circumstance progressive groups do choose to get involved in primaries. Evidence points toward two main scenarios. First, groups have gotten involved when representatives are drastically out of step with their constituents. When questioned about how Accountability Now hoped to approach primary challenges, co-founder Jane Hamsher claimed that Joe Lieberman’s primary was a prime example of someone being so out of step with his mainly Democratic constituents on the issue of the Iraq war that he deserved to be challenged.243 One would be truly hard-pressed to argue that Lieberman was not out of step since, as noted in the Chapter Two case study of Joe Lieberman’s primary, even party leaders at the time agreed that Lieberman was at odds both with his constituents and the Democratic Party as a whole on the issue of the war.

Similarly, progressive groups seem to get involved in primary challenges when incumbents drastically break from progressive values and, in a sense, “act like Republicans” when the do not need to do so. By acting like Republicans, I am referring to incumbents choosing to act in such a way that is regressive rather than progressive, not simply voting conservatively on an issue such as the Keystone XL Pipeline. Both of these actions involve acting out of step with the Democratic Party,

though they differ subtly in terms of the circumstances in which incumbents can justify their actions. Voting for a conservative measure on an issue such as the Keystone XL can be (and has been) justified by Democrats in conservative states who want to voting in line with their conservative constituents enough of the time to justify re-election. Certain actions, however, involve betraying the Democratic Party as a progressive vehicle altogether. In 2013, for example, Adam Green warned of recruiting challengers to any Democrats voting to support cuts to Social Security and welfare benefits, something that would have been completely out of step with the party and would have been outright regressive in comparison to the general progressive nature of the party.\footnote{Eric Dolan, “Progressive warns of ‘nuclear war’ if Democrats back safety net cuts,” in \textit{Raw Story}, January 09, 2013, http://www.rawstory.com/2013/01/progressive-warns-of-nuclear-war-if-democrats-back-safety-net-cuts/} Similarly, the primary challenges to Blanche Lincoln in 2010 and Al Wynn in 2008 centered largely on the Democrats’ ties to big businesses and corporations,\footnote{Jane Hamsher, “Accountability Recruits First Candidate for 2010: Bill Halter,” in \textit{Huffington Post}, May 1, 2010, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jane-hamsher/accountability-now-announ_b_480766.html} a type of relationship viewed with increasingly large hostility among the progressive Democratic base. Thus, regressive actions are likewise grounds for primary involvement among progressive groups since they also involve constituents being largely completely out of step with the Democratic Party.

A second set of circumstances under which progressive groups get involved in primaries relates back to interest from members. A 2007 \textit{New York Times} article described how MoveOn “upset” Democratic Party leaders by sending out a survey to members questioning whether the believed that the group should move to primary Democratic incumbents who were “not tough enough on war,”\footnote{Michelle Luo and Jeff Zeleny, “Behind an Antiwar,” in \textit{The New York Times}, September 2007.} with the implication
being that MoveOn was willing to go forward with primary challenges in the event that members supported the motion. Although MoveOn contributed to Al Wynn’s primary challenge in 2008 that in part was related to Wynn’s previous support for the war in Iraq, this was the only ideologically driven challenge that the group engaged in that year. Still, the fact that the group at least expressed interest in responding to the members’ concerns shows that this in part plays a role in when interest groups choose to engage in primaries.

While a bit different from other groups, the involvement of unions in primaries falls somewhere in between these final two categories. As previously mentioned, the UFCW is an example of a union that will poll its members every year to determine which issues matter most to them, then select people who support those issues to endorse in a primary or general election. Thus, the fact that members are indirectly involved in the process fits a bit into the second category, with the generally progressive nature of these peoples’ interests falling into the latter. That being said, however, accountability with respect to the issues that the unions poll is important for unions in terms of continuing to support certain candidates. As the UFCW representative explained to me, “… we actively grade the votes that they take to ensure that they are held accountable. Whether they are Democrats or Republicans, we will not overlook any elected leader who breaks their promises” While this information came from a UFCW worker, it is not something necessarily exclusive to the UFCW. As discussed in the previous chapter, a huge part of unions’ involvement in Blanche Lincoln’s primary was the SEIU and other unions’ push to prove a point

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247 UFCW Worker, email to UFCW communications department, March 2, 2016.

248 Ibid.
and show that union support was not necessarily something that could be taken for
granted. Her primary challenge was largely one that grew out of an effort to hold her
accountable and prove a point to other Democrats given her initial hesitation to
support issues such as President Obama’s Affordable Care Act. Support of labor
unions is contingent upon representatives’ willingness to fight for the issues that they
care about.

Conclusions

While the Democratic and Republican Parties have both become increasingly
polarized over the course of the past five decades, the Republican Party has moved
sharply further to the right than the Democratic Party has to the left. Big money
surely plays a role in primaries on the right, with conservative groups having access
to incomparably large amounts of money compared to progressive groups on the left.

In the past twenty years alone, a vast range of ideologically driven interest groups on
both sides of the spectrum have grown to find a place in the modern political system,
ranging from the PCCC, MoveOn, and Accountability Now on the left to Club for
Growth, Freedomworks, and the Tea Party Patriots on the right. While their clout
might be limited with respect to ousting incumbents from their seats, the groups can
at the very least be a thorn in the side of the traditional political establishment and at
the very most be a divisive force that splits the party. This is especially true on the
political right, whose groups have proven more active than the left’s in supporting
direct primary challenges against incumbents. This has also resulted in behavioral
changes among Republicans on the right to act more conservatively to preemptively
avoid a conservative, fueling polarization further even though no primary actually occurs.

The findings that I have uncovered in my analysis of progressive and conservative interest groups help make sense of the broader theories proposed by Grossman and Hopkins and Mann and Ornstein on partisan asymmetry that I discussed briefly in my literature review. In terms of progressive groups’ comparative tolerance for moderate Democrats, this propensity aligns well with Grossman’s and Hopkins’s assertion that the Democratic Party is a coalition of various voter groups in contrast to the ideological group that is the GOP. Taking a no-tolerance “progressives-only” sort of approach to challenges would go against any sort of “big tent” political approach that the party takes in its elections and potentially isolate many of the groups that allow moderate Democrats to be elected. Moreover, the “no tax pledge” that most House Republicans took in 2011 and referenced by Mann and Ornstein in *It’s Even Worse than it Looks* makes significantly more sense when considering the “tax-cut enforcer” role that the Club for Growth has taken on in recent years. While some Republican legislators might have taken the pledge because they legitimately opposed any new taxes, many likely did simply because, realistically, there is little chance that they could have gotten around any yes-vote on a bill involving tax increases without facing repercussions from the Club for Growth in the form of a primary challenge. These two factors would in part help explain the phenomenon that is asymmetrical polarization, with Republicans taking a sharper turn to the right than Democrats have to the left.
On the political left, groups have also played a role in ideologically driven primary challenges, albeit in a more limited manner. This is likely due largely in part to the groups’ different missions and goals in comparison to conservative ones. Groups such as the PCCC, Democracy for America, and MoveOn care more about progress to the extent that it involves achieving certain goal-oriented ends than they do about progressivism as a sort of end goal in and of itself. Consequently, the primaries on the political left tend to occur when Democratic incumbents stray from these progress-oriented long-term goals in favor of corporate and other outside interests at the expense of the broader electorate. They do not seek ideological unity at the expense of the party, something that is not necessarily true for the no-compromise, ideologically driven interest groups on the right. They work independent of ideology for people-oriented progress rather than ideologically-oriented self-interest.

Finally, big money surely plays a role in this discrepancy between the involvement of interest groups in ideologically driven challenges on the left and ideologically driven challenges on the right. Groups on the right are at an advantage both in terms of how much they can raise and how much they can spend, given sources of funding from both small donors and large corporations. Consequently, groups on the left need to be more strategic with how they raise and spend their money. Money spent on progressive primary challenges is both money that cannot be spent in general elections and is often money that is simply lacking to start with. Perhaps if they had more money, they would be more likely to engage in primary challenges in a manner similar to Club for Growth and Freedomworks.
Conclusions

No politician embodied the dynamics and pressures of nomination politics in a polarized age quite like the late Arlen Specter. In April 2009, the Pennsylvania Senator stunned leaders from both parties by announcing his intention to leave the Republican Party to become a Democrat. The proximate causes of Specter’s switch included huge dissatisfaction within the GOP electorate with Specter’s “yes” vote on President Obama’s economic stimulus package as well as discussion of a potential rematch with former primary opponent Pat Toomey.249 As he put it, “I’m not prepared to have my 29-year old record in the United States decided by the Pennsylvania Republican primary electorate, not prepared to have that record decided by that jury.”250 In an ironic turn of events, however, Specter went on to face an ideologically driven nomination challenge the following year anyway, this time from a more liberal member of his new party.252 He lost to Democrat Joe Sestak in the primary, ultimately bringing his three-decade career in the Senate to an end, while both of his former intraparty opponents squared off in the general election that year.

Specter’s fate shows one way that ideologically driven primaries contribute to polarization. The lifelong moderate nearly lost to conservative Toomey in the 2004 Republican primary, lost outright to progressive Sestak in the 2010 primary, and was ultimately replaced by conservative ideologue Toomey in the 2010 general election. Given the more partisan views of both of these candidates, Specter was left to be

250 Ibid.
replaced by someone who was more ideologically extreme regardless of which candidate won, thus demonstrating polarization through the replacement of a moderate by a more extreme representative. Beyond replacement effects, the threat of losing to an ideologically driven challenge can influence the legislative behavior of incumbents in ways that also contribute to party polarization, whether seen in Blanche Lincoln’s shift to the left on financial reform in the face of a primary challenge in 2010 or Orrin Hatch’s shift to the right to avoid a conservative challenge after his junior colleague fell to one such challenge at the Utah Republican nomination convention in 2010.

The connection between primaries and polarization serves to motivate my thesis’s investigation into the drivers and dynamics of primary challenges in both parties. In Chapter One, I laid out and analyzed the prominent literature on polarization, primaries, and ideological interest groups. This literature review provided the foundation for my engagement with the two major questions I pursued in the following chapters. First, what variables predict the presence of a significant, ideologically driven primary challenge? This question I discussed extensively in Chapter Two through a variety of case studies and empirical evidence. Second, what explains the partisan asymmetry that exists between the involvement of outside interest groups in primaries on the political right and (lack of) involvement of outside interest groups in primaries on the political left? I discussed this question extensively in Chapter Three through an analysis of the roots, motives, and involvement of major ideological interest groups such as Club for Growth and the Progressive Change Campaign Committee.
Primary Challenges Are Unpredictably Predictable

The number of primary challenges has risen over the past two decades, with the number of ideologically driven primaries in particular jumping over this time period. In order to determine what factors will predict an ideologically driven primary challenge, I analyzed a set of case studies that included Democrats and Republicans, Senators and House Representatives, and incumbents that both faced challenges and did not in order to account for a variety of potential variables that might influence where an ideologically driven primary would be expected to occur. These cases led me to draw several conclusions, with the main one being that no single factor can necessarily predict the presence of an ideologically driven primary. Rather, several factors influence the likelihood that an incumbent will face a primary challenge. These include the partisan makeup of a district, the voting record and DW-nominate score of the incumbent, and the “salience” of issues with which the incumbent’s views differ from those of his or her constituents and/or party.

To a point, the existence of such predictors are intuitive and unsurprising. For example, the fact that Joe Lieberman faced an ideologically driven primary challenge in 2006 is not all that shocking when one considers how salient the issue of ending the war in Iraq was to his Democratic base and the fact Joe Lieberman had no electorally justifiable motives in breaking from his party on the issue given the heavy Democratic tilt to the state of Connecticut. When comparing incumbents across parties, however, the reasons are less clear for why Lieberman’s experience is in many ways the outlier rather than the norm among Democrats, while Republicans increasingly experience such challenges as matter of routine. Thad Cochran is a
conservative Republican further to the right than Democratic Tom Carper is to the left, for example, and Mississippi is as strong a Republican stronghold as Delaware is a Democratic by measures like the Cook Partisan Voting Index, political affiliations of statewide elected officials, and others. Yet, Cochran faced an ideological challenge from the right in 2014 while Carper never has from the left. Why is this the case?

A significant element of this disconnect ties back to the role the outside interest groups play in primary challenges. Club for Growth and other conservative groups made Cochran a target given his insufficiently partisan voting record in the GOP stronghold of Mississippi, something that progressive groups did not do to Carper on the left. It is hardly the case that outside interest groups only play a role in primaries on the political right, nor that their involvement necessarily predicts the presence of a significant ideologically driven challenge. Progressive groups spent heavily in Lieberman’s primary in 2006, after all, while Club for Growth spends money on dozens of primaries each year that never become competitive. In short, involvement of interest groups is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for predicting where a serious ideologically driven primary challenge will occur. But they may help at least partly explain the comparative differences between the two parties in their respective tendencies toward primary challenges.

*Asymmetrical Infighting*

Republicans are more likely to face ideologically driven primary challenges than their Democratic counterparts are. Similarly, conservative interest groups are more likely than their progressive counterparts to engage in ideologically driven primary challenges. This partisan asymmetry is something that I explore in greater
depth in Chapter Three. Money is something that almost surely plays a part in why conservative interest groups are more involved in primaries on the right. As previously discussed, they raise more money in comparison to progressive groups, and they also have more corporate donors that make significantly larger contributions in comparison to the more numerous small-scale, people-funded donations of the PCCC, MoveOn, and other progressive interest groups. Given that these conservative groups have more money, it is to be expected that they are more involved politically than progressive groups in terms of both donating money to campaigns and spending independently.

Considered on its own, however, this imbalance of money does not necessarily explain why conservative groups are more likely to target incumbents in primary challenges than progressive groups are. This discrepancy is also a consequence of both the different roles that the groups view themselves as occupying in U.S. politics and their visions of what the parties should look like. Former Club President Moore openly claimed that the Club viewed itself as a tax-cut enforcer for the GOP, which helps explain why Republicans who break from the party on issues pertaining to taxes are likely to face primary challenges from the right. In contrast, the PCCC and MoveOn are groups that place a great emphasis on recruiting progressive candidates and building a progressive network, with neither group originating as a progressive movement machine with the goal of ousting moderates from the party. To a limited extent, these groups have come to act as a similar check on the Democratic Party, with (former) MoveOn-born PAC “Accountability Now” seeking to hold Democratic incumbents who are too dependent on corporations for
campaign funds “accountable” to progressive values by challenging them in primaries. Still, even this PAC had very limited clout compared to Club for Growth, as it was only really involved with Blanche Lincoln’s 2010 primary before fading from the political scene.

Finally, conservative and liberal groups simply have very different visions of how they view the parties that they align with ideologically. Conservative groups such as Club for Growth acknowledge that they are uncompromising on their values and visions, which often puts them at odds with both the Republican leadership and any sort of “moderate” politics that would involve some degree of compromise to appeal to a broader electorate. In contrast, the PCCC and MoveOn emphasize the limitations of this approach and instead choose to pick their battles, with the PCCC founders being skeptical of the Club’s approach to primary challenges when they first founded the group in 2009.253 The PCCC in particular expresses opposition to moderates within the Democratic Party only when they are fundamentally at odds with the most salient of progressive values, such as accepting money from corporations or acting in such a manner that is regressive rather than progressive. Perhaps this is something that will change in the coming years as progressive groups garner more support, raise more money, and play a more active role in Democratic politics. While in 2009 Adam Green emphasized the PCCC’s short term goals of helping progressive candidates organize political campaigns rather than fielding primary challenges, he did not rule out that the group would eventually come to challenge conservative Democrats. Similarly, he refused to deny that the group

would come to spend heavily independently on primary challenges in future elections. But barring a fundamental shift in the group’s mission, it is difficult to imagine what would potentially spur this change in direction other than an influx of desperately lacking money into the group. The ongoing Democratic presidential nomination process perhaps reveals a taste for this kind of ideological intraparty challenge among some Democrats. The Bernie Sanders movement and his strong support from progressives in a primary that political pundits once thought overwhelmingly favored Hillary Clinton reveals a growing rift between the Democratic Party’s establishment and the Party’s progressive wing. Whether this rift will continue to grow in the coming years or will fade away following the election cycle remains to be seen.

**Future Research**

Although I have tackled some pressing questions about primary challenges and the role that ideological interest groups play in them, my thesis is but one small piece of a puzzle far too great to cover in a 140-page thesis. Moreover, while my thesis really does vindicate some of the Grossman and Hopkins style arguments about enduring differences in the two parties’ behavior, it raises several potential questions for further study in the context of polarization, primary challenges, and interest groups. First, while I assert that primary challenges are certainly playing a role in polarization when one considers examples such as Arlen Specter, I do not go so far as to explore just how significant primaries and the threat of primaries are as a driver of polarization. This is something that future authors could engage by combining

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quantitative evidence with case study comparisons similar to the ones that I analyzed in Chapter Two of my thesis in order to observe the extent to which primaries are influencing polarization.

Second, one alternative argument to the ones that I make concerning intrinsic asymmetries in how the two parties work is the idea that both major parties are on a trajectory of growing polarization that encourages ideologically driven primary challenges, but the GOP and conservative movement are simply farther along this trajectory compared to the Democratic Party and progressive movement. Just this month, President Obama asserted, “The thing that Democrats have to guard against is going in the direction that the Republicans are much further along on, and that is this sense of, we are just going to get our way, and if we don’t, then we’ll cannibalize our own, kick them out and try again.” Future research could focus on this theory and questions related to what factors could play a role in spurring any such trajectory on the Democratic side.

Finally, what role do asymmetries in the relations between the parties and their corresponding ideological interest groups play in the asymmetry of primary challenges? Do progressive groups care more about maintaining good relations with major party organizations and leaders compared to conservative groups? If this is the case, then why? Qualitative research and interviews with both party leaders and ideological interest groups would be helpful in addressing such questions.

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