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

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Primary elections are an important barometer of the health and the ideological direction of the two major political parties. This is particularly the case for primary challenges to incumbent officeholders. It is common for political analysts to interpret such challenges as a

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

What are we to make, then, of the tumult in the 2020 House of Representatives primaries? Eight incumbent House members were defeated in the primaries, more than in any election since 1992, and more than in any non-redistricting year since 1974. While both parties took steps to protect incumbents, some of the victorious primary challengers in both parties were able to secure endorsements from party leaders. The 2020 election also featured more competitive challenges than in any year since 1992; the increase was particularly noteworthy in the Democratic Party, which has had fewer competitive incumbent primaries than have the Republicans in almost all elections since the 1990s. Activists groups on both sides have sought to claim credit for some of these defeats

their voting habits. Between 2006 and 2010, Challenges to incumbent Senators such as Lincoln Chafee (R-

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

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

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

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

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

The rhetoric used in these campaigns was also similar to claims made by conservative groups years earlier. Sean McElwee, of the progressive polling group Data for Progress, described the Neal ch

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

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

[Figure 3 about here]

The 2020 Republican House of Representatives Primaries

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

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

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

None of these races seem indicative of a national effort to influence the direction of the GOP, although it could be argued that party leaders saw some of them – perhaps King in particular – as being embarrassing to the party's overall image. However, several older or more conventional Republicans – Kay Granger of Texas, Brian Fitzpatrick of Pennsylvania, and Fred Upton of Michigan, among others – faced primary opponents who did not come close to

Party seems less hostile than that within the Republican Party. As Rachel Blum (2020) recounts

Grantham, Dewey W. 1994. *The South in Modern America: A Region at Odds*. New York: HarperCollins.
Hassell, Hans J. G. 2017.

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

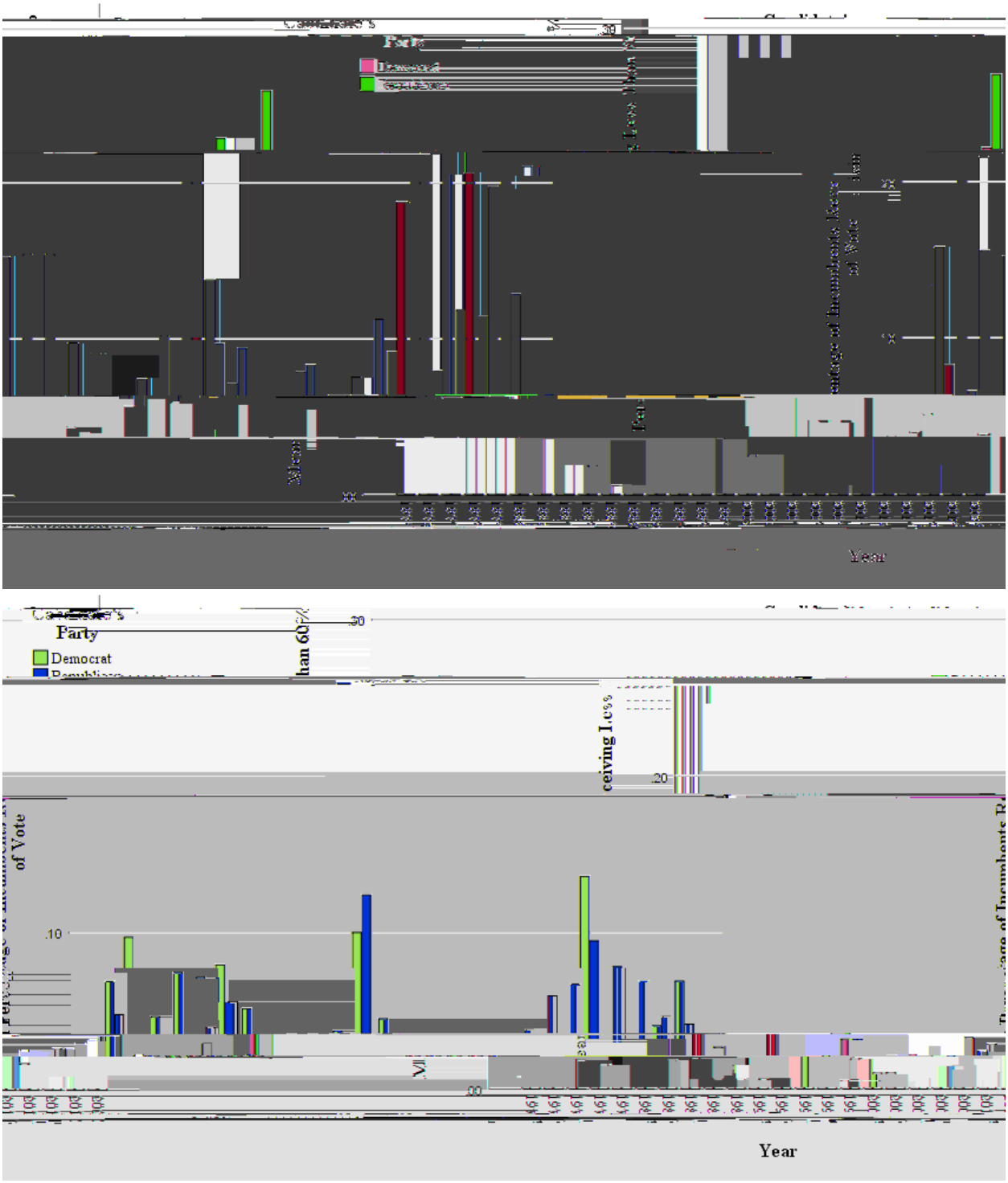

Table 1: Competitive House of Representatives Primary Challenges, 2020

State	District	Candidate Name	Primary Vote Percentage	Reason for Challenge
Democrats (46)				
NEW YORK	*16*	*Engel*	*36*	*Ideological challenge*
NEW YORK	12	Maloney	42	Local Issue
ILLINOIS	*3*	*Lipinski*	*45*	*Ideological challenge*

MARYLAND	2	Ruppersberger	73	None listed
MARYLAND	6	Trone	73	None listed
NEW YORK	14	Ocasio-Cortez	73	Centrist challenge
TEXAS	35	Doggett	73	Race
ILLINOIS	5	Quigley	75	None listed
TEXAS	34	Vela	75	None listed
Republicans (21)				
KANSAS	*2*	*Watkins*	*34*	*Scandal*
IOWA	*4*	*King*	*36*	*Competence/Age*
VIRGINIA	*5*	*Riggleman*	*42*	*National Issue*
COLORADO	*3*	*Tipton*	*45*	*Ideological challenge*
FLORIDA	*15*	*Spano*	*49*	*Scandal*
PENNSYLVANIA	1	Fitzpatrick	58	Ideological challenge
TEXAS	12	Granger	58	Ideological challenge
ARIZONA	4	Gosar	63	Competence/Age

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