

The Plurality Problem: Plurality Primary Victors Hurt Parties in General Elections

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Abstract

Most states do not have majority thresholds for primary elections, which means that “plurality primary victors” (who won the primary with less than 50% of the vote) often advance to the general election. Harbridge-Yong and Hutchinson examine whether plurality primary victors harm their party in general elections. Building on the divisive primaries literature, of which “plurality primaries” share several characteristics and likely mechanisms, they hypothesize that candidates who win their primary election with a plurality of votes perform worse than majority primary victors, relative to expectations. They examine U.S. House, U.S. Senate, and gubernatorial partisan primaries from 2010–2022 in which three or more candidates ran. The researchers find that plurality primary winners underperform relative to expectation and that in competitive districts, this translates into a reduced likelihood of winning the general election. They conclude by discussing how potential reforms, such as ranked choice voting (RCV), might change the partisan and representational consequences of plurality primaries.

In the 2022 general election, Republicans lost a slew of competitive statewide general elections. The list includes Kari Lake's bid for Arizona's governor, Doug Mastriano for Pennsylvania's governor, Christine Drahan for Oregon's governor, Tim Michels for Wisconsin's governor, Blake Masters for Arizona's US Senate seat, and Mehmet Oz for Pennsylvania's US Senate seat. These candidates also have something else in common; they all won their primary elections with less than 50% of the votes cast, a phenomenon we refer to as "plurality primary winners." Their vote shares in the primary range from 48% for Kari Lake, to just 23% for Christine Drahan.

In most states, when a race has three or more candidates, a candidate does not need a majority of votes to win. When there are three candidates, one could win with just 34% of votes. In fact, the more candidates there are, the smaller the vote share one needs to win. Some states reconcile this problem by holding primary runoff elections, while other state parties use ranked choice voting (RCV) to produce a majority nominee. However, most states have no majority requirement for primary elections.

While primary voters may value having several choices on the ballot, and thus a say in the direction of their party, when votes are split between many candidates, the candidate with the most votes may not broadly represent the party and its voters. This poses two potential problems – one for parties, and one for broader democratic interests. First, absent strong support from within their own party, the nominee may be poised to perform poorly in front of the general electorate. In these cases, plurality nominees may hurt their party's chances electorally.

Second, plurality primary victories raise questions about the quality of democratic representation and voter choice, particularly in safe seats. In races like the 80% of House seats that are safely Republican or Democratic (FairVote, n.d.), primary elections are the decisive

election. Plurality primary winners may still underperform in the general election relative to how a candidate who advanced from the primary with majority support would fare, but nonetheless win the election for the party given the safety of the seat. Absent majority requirements in primaries, a candidate can win office with a fraction of support from the primary electorate – already a small and unrepresentative sample of voters (Hill, 2015; Kamarck and Podkul, 2018). For example, Democrats Wes Moore and Daniel McKee easily won the Maryland and Rhode Island 2022 gubernatorial elections after winning 32% and 33% in their respective primary elections. These types of victories raise questions about how much the winning candidate reflects the will of the people.

Because the party’s electoral concerns might dictate whether there is internal support for reforms that could also impact representation, this paper examines how plurality primary victories impact the general election performance of candidates. We hypothesize that candidates who win their primary election with a plurality of votes (less than 50%) tend to perform worse in general elections than majority primary victors, relative to expectations for the party in that jurisdiction. Our hypothesis is based on several mechanisms at play in the “divisive” primary literature, which broadly suggests that nominees from competitive primaries will perform poorly in general elections (Key 1953; Hacker 1965; Kenney and Rice 1984; Piereson and Smith 1975). These mechanisms speak to how both divisive and plurality primaries might alienate co-partisans who supported a different candidate in the primary, decrease enthusiasm for the nominee, and/or raise of the financial costs of running for office.

We test our plurality primary hypothesis using a dataset of all US House, US Senate, and gubernatorial primaries from 2010-2022 in which three or more candidates ran, and thus where a plurality primary winner is possible. Dividing the dataset into “plurality” and “majority” primary

victors, we compare their relative general election performances against expectations, while controlling for other factors that influence general election performance (i.e., incumbency, national partisan tides). We find support for our hypothesis that plurality primary winners underperform. Moreover, among competitive races, plurality primary winners are less likely to win the general election. The final section of the paper explores potential solutions, such as ranked choice voting (RCV), that might ensure a broader base of support for primary election winners by changing candidates' incentives for how they campaign, changing voters' attachment to individual candidates, and selecting a more broadly representative candidate. Since contemporary parties often lose control over how divisive and competitive their primary elections are, this research offers an important insight about the challenges facing parties and whether reforms that utilize runoff elections or ranked choice voting to ensure majority support for the nominee might benefit parties and the public.

Background and Expectations

The theoretical framework behind our hypothesis derives from the divisive primary hypothesis. First proposed by Key (1953) and Hacker (1965), the divisive primary hypothesis poses that when a primary election is closely contested, the party's nominee will perform poorly in the general election. Divisiveness is typically measured by observing how close the results of a primary are (Lazarus 2018; p. 177).

Plurality primaries share several characteristics with divisive primaries. Because a plurality winner can only arise from a contest with three or more candidates and where no candidate receives the majority of support, plurality winners generally arise from competitive primaries, which often stem from or spark intra-party divisions. However, not every divisive

primary is a plurality primary. If divisive primaries are characterized by a close result, this can certainly occur in a two-way race (e.g., a 51%-49% result). In addition, not every plurality primary is a divisive primary, if judged by a close margin of victory. Plurality primaries can be closely fought (e.g., a 45% - 43% - 12% result) or more moderately competitive (e.g., a 45% - 38% - 17% result). The former would likely be classified as a divisive primary while the latter would not. In this paper, we pay specific attention to plurality primaries because they raise important questions about democratic representation and choice. Non-majoritarian outcomes – when someone becomes a party nominee despite the majority of the party having voted for different candidates – are potentially concerning for democracy as they suggest that candidates might be elected by, and thus represent, a small slice of the electorate.

The similarities between divisive and plurality primaries suggest that we can draw from the broader divisive primary literature to formulate our hypothesis about plurality victors. Like divisive primaries, plurality primaries are likely to occur in hard-fought battles and result in many voters “whose first-choice candidate does not appear on the general election ballot” (Lazarus, 2018; p. 176). As a result, three mechanisms within the divisive primaries literature are relevant for understanding plurality primaries as well.

First, voters who supported a losing candidate in the primary may not want to support a party nominee who was not their first choice, especially if their first choice is ideologically distant from the candidate who did win the nomination (Comer, 1976; Henderson et al, 2010; Johnson and Gibson, 1974; Stone, 1986; Lazarus 2018). Strong in-group/out-group dynamics toward candidates even within the same party and emotional attachment to candidates may prevent voters who identify with one candidate from switching camps (Kenney and Rice, 1984; Norrander, 2015). For instance, some Bernie Sanders supporters refused to vote for Hillary

Clinton in the 2016 presidential election (Lazarus 2018). In plurality primaries, a *majority* of voters initially voted for a different candidate, likely exacerbating this mechanism. Thus, plurality primaries may also dampen turnout among the base or lead co-partisans to select third party candidates in the general.

A second mechanism at play in the divisive primary hypothesis is that voters may be discouraged by the intra-party conflict and negative campaigning that plays out in a competitive primary (Kenney and Rice, 1987; Piereson and Smith, 1975; Lengle et al, 1995). These conflicts might dampen turnout, as voters are less enthusiastic about their party's nominee (Kenney and Rice, 1987), and reduce support for the candidate among independents or other swing voters in the general election, especially if the primary criticisms are repeated by the opposing party challenger in the general election. For instance, Democratic candidate Al Gore criticized Michael Dukakis' furlough program that contributed to convict Willie Horton's crime spree in the 1988 Democratic primary, and Republican nominee George Bush later used it as ammunition in an attack ad (Lazarus 2018).

Since most plurality primaries are, by nature, at least moderately competitive, they may be subject to the same intra-party conflict that often plays out in a competitive primary. In addition, the margin of victory does not necessarily have to be small for intra-party conflict to have occurred. For example, Doug Mastriano won the 2022 Republican gubernatorial primary in Pennsylvania with 43.8% of votes, with the next highest vote-getter winning 20.3%. However, this primary was still penned as divisive by commentators (Gomez and Smith, 2022; Levy, 2022; Otterbein and Montellaro, 2022). Notably, Mastriano lost in November.

A third mechanism in the divisive primary hypothesis is that it is simply expensive to win a competitive primary election, and the nominee may have depleted their funds come the general

election campaign (Hacker, 1965; Hogan, 2003). For instance, some political observers blame Republican Tommy Thompson's unsuccessful bid for Wisconsin's US Senate seat in 2012 on his need to spend millions in a closely contested primary (Lazarus 2018). Because most plurality primaries are at least moderately competitive and therefore potentially expensive to win, this mechanism may also apply.

Each of the divisive primary mechanisms may also apply to plurality primary winners, suggesting that candidates who win with only a plurality of votes might underperform in the general election because they depress base turnout, dampen support among swing voters, or weaken the financial standing of the candidate. Moreover, in plurality primaries where candidates from the far left or the far right prevail, the nominee may be ideologically distant from the median voter, further hurting the party's prospects with swing voters in the general election.

Although the divisive primary hypothesis is often referred to as the "conventional wisdom" (Ebner, 2020; Hogan, 2003), there are also counter arguments. For example, competitive primaries may mobilize new voters who align with a candidate or movement within the party and/or energize the existing base, helping that party increase its vote share in the general election (Cox 2010; Jewitt and Treul, 2014; Peress, 2010; Stone et al, 1992; Wichowsky and Niebler, 2010). This has been conceptualized as a "primary bonus" hypothesis (Ebner, 2020); competitive primaries allow candidates to build resources, professionalize, message-test, and get exposure (Hogan, 2003; Ware, 1979). Candidates that are "unfit" will be weeded out in a competitive primary. A similar argument could apply in plurality primaries, since the winner had to beat at least two other candidates. However, others contend that a candidate that is "fit" for a primary electorate may not be "fit" for a general electorate (Brady et al, 2007; Hall, 2015).

The impact of divisive primaries and plurality primaries may also be conditional. For example, some evidence suggests divisive primaries hurt incumbents but help challengers (Alvarez et al 1995; Hogan, 2003; Jacobson and Kernell, 1981; Kenney, 1988; Lazarus, 2018; Lazarus, 2008; Lazarus, 2005). If an incumbent survives a competitive primary and/or invites enough legitimate challengers that they only win with a plurality, it may be an indication that the incumbent is vulnerable. Challenger nominees, on the other hand, emerge from competitive races with the clout of having defeated an incumbent, and are equipped with the skills and resources that helped them win the primary.

One complicating factor to the logic of the divisive primaries hypothesis is that more candidates may tend to run in the primary (which increases the likelihood of a plurality win) when they perceive they can win the seat in the general election (Boatright and Moscardelli, 2018; Herrnson and Gimpel, 1995; Lazarus, 2005), either because the district favors that party (Snyder and Hirano, 2012) or the national partisan environment is favorable (Boatright, 2013). Despite the perceived favorability for the party in the general election, the literature shows that divisive primaries hurt nominees in races where the party is poised to win (Bernstein, 1977) or seriously compete (Piereson and Smith, 1975). This suggests that the impact of both divisive and plurality primaries may be conditional on the competitiveness of the jurisdiction.

The impact of divisive and of plurality primaries may also differ depending on the office. Several studies show that divisive primaries harm presidential (Atkeson, 1998; Gurian et al 2016; Kenney and Rice 1987; Lengle et al 1995) and US Senate (Bernstein, 1977; Kenney and Rice, 1984; Segura and Nicholson, 1995) candidates, but not gubernatorial (Kenney and Rice, 1984; Piereson and Smith, 1975) and state legislative candidates (Fourinaies and Hall, 2020). It is perhaps the case that primary elections will only influence general elections in up-ballot races

that attract more media and where voters pay more attention to the primary (Hogan, 2003; Lazarus, 2018), which might explain why the effect is more apparent for presidential and Senate races.

Overall, where the divisive primaries hypothesis has been investigated empirically, the results are mixed. Some studies have found that competitive primaries hurt candidates (e.g., Gurian et al 2016; Segura and Nicholson, 1995). Other studies have found that they help candidates (e.g., Ebner 2020; Jewitt and Truel 2014; Hogan 2003). Still others have found they have a null effect (Born 1981) or a conditional effect (Kenney 1988; Lazarus 2005, 2018).

Since plurality primaries overlap in keyways with divisive primaries, even if they are not always highly competitive, we hypothesize that plurality primary victors will underperform in the general election as a result of similar mechanisms to the divisive primaries literature. However, these non-majoritarian victories are particularly important to study because of their implications for both performance in the general election and whether elected officials reflect the “will of the people.” Moreover, parties have vested interests in primary elections, not necessarily for the sake of democracy, but because who wins will impact the party’s performance in the general election and therefore its share of seats. Our expectations about the empirical relationship between plurality primaries and the party’s performance in the general election suggest that if plurality primary winners are bad for the party’s electoral interests, parties may be open to electoral reforms that broaden the coalition supporting primary election victors.

Methods

To investigate the hypothesis, we analyzed US House, Senate, and gubernatorial elections from 2010-2022. Although we measure the primary election performance of candidates to

determine which nominees were “plurality” versus “majority” victors, our unit of analysis is the general election candidate from each of the two major parties. Our dataset includes elections from states that use a partisan primary nomination process¹ and includes primary elections in which three or more candidates ran² (in other words, primaries in which it was possible that a candidate won with less than 50% of votes) and the winner competed in a general election in which the frontrunners were a Democrat and a Republican. We exclude races in states with runoff elections, since this precludes the possibility of advancing to the general with a plurality vote.³ We also exclude races where a candidate won a nomination as a write-in or where the nominee dropped out or became disqualified and the party convened or appointed a new nominee, as we are unable to measure the independent variable (primary performance) for those candidates. The key independent variable of interest is an indicator for whether the candidate won their primary with a plurality (less than 50%, as opposed to a majority) of the vote. The dependent variable is how well the candidate performed in the general election, relative to expectations for someone in their party in their jurisdiction.

For House and Senate elections from 2010-2020, we collected all primary and general election results from the Federal Election Commission (n.d.). At the time of data collection, the FEC did not yet have 2022 results compiled. For 2022 House elections, we collected general

¹ This excludes states like Connecticut, Virginia, and Utah that often use conventions as a nominating mechanism, states like California (2012 and after), Washington, and Alaska (2022 and after) that use nonpartisan primaries, and Louisiana which does not use primary elections.

² In our count of “how many candidates ran in the primary,” we included candidates who won 1% or more of the primary vote. Though a primary featuring a third candidate with 1% of the vote does not automatically make the race competitive/divisive, it could, especially if the race is close between two frontrunners.

³ We excluded races from states that use runoff elections (when no candidate wins 50% of votes) from our dataset (Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas). Nominees from these states do not have the opportunity to be in the “plurality group,” but do not necessarily belong in the “majority group.” The testing of our hypothesis rests on the “majority group” nominees having more support from their primary electorates than the plurality group. However, congressional primary runoffs see a near-universal decline in turnout, with a median decline of 40% (Rose, 2022). This means a “majority” primary winner in a runoff state will likely have “majority support” from a small group of primary voters. Because nominees from runoff states do not necessarily belong in either the plurality or majority group for the initial election, we exclude them from our dataset.

election results from the Cook Political Report 2022 National House Vote Tracker. For 2022 House primary elections, 2022 Senate primary and general elections, and all gubernatorial primary and general elections, we looked to each state’s election authority’s website for official election results. Our data include 1,305 general election candidates, made up of 589 “plurality” primary winners and 716 “majority” primary winners. The dataset includes 953 House candidates, 201 Senate candidates, 151 gubernatorial candidates, 326 incumbents, 744 Republicans, and 561 Democrats.

Our key outcome measure is general election performance relative to expectation. For each candidate, we calculated an “expected general election performance” equal to the district-level (or state-level, in the case of Senate and gubernatorial elections) partisanship – the amount by which a district favors Democrats or Republicans. To determine district-level partisanship, we looked at results from the most recent presidential election, specifically, the two-party split. For example, for a 2016 candidate, we looked at 2016 presidential results. For a 2018 candidate or an off-cycle 2019 candidate, we also looked at 2016 presidential results. This approach follows others who have used presidential results to estimate district or statewide partisanship and create an “expected” two-party performance split for a general election (Ebner, 2020; Jewitt and Treul, 2014; Lazarus, 2018).

District partisanship, and thus the expected general election performance, is calculated by taking the difference between the presidential vote margin in the district or state and the national vote margin from the most recent presidential election (see Equation 1), based on the assumption that the presidential election is a better measure of constituent sentiment than any single congressional district race. Subtracting the national vote margin helps control for an exceptional presidential candidate. Two additional scaling factors are included to calibrate partisanship

around 50%. First, the vote margin difference is divided by two, which reflects how much the two-party split deviates from 50%. For example, if a Democrat loses by ten points in a two-way race, the vote margin was 45%-55%. In this example, dividing the vote margin of 10% by two shows that the Democratic performance is -5% and the Republican performance is +5%. Second, we add 50% to calibrate the overall expected partisanship around 50%.

The formula is below, with an example from Alabama’s 1st district in 2020 for a Democratic candidate (see Equation 2). In 2020, Biden beat Trump by 4.54% of the national popular vote but lost to Trump by 28.58% in Alabama’s 1st district. Thus, the expected district partisanship in Alabama’s 1st congressional district is 33.44% for the Democratic candidate. This is the formula FairVote (n.d.) uses in its biannual House forecasting, which consistently predicts over 95% of House results successfully.

$$\text{District Partisanship} = \frac{(\text{District vote margin Dem } \%) - (\text{National vote margin Dem } \%)}{2} + 50\% \tag{1}$$

$$\text{District Partisanship}_{AL-01} = \frac{-28.58\% - 4.54\%}{2} + 50\% = 33.44\% \text{ Democratic vote share} \tag{2}$$

For each candidate, we subtracted the expected general election performance for their party from their actual general election performance to create our dependent variable: performance relative to expectation. In our data, this measure ranges from -37.49 to 40.79, with a mean of -0.40 and a standard deviation of 6.36.

We use linear regression models to test whether there is a negative relationship between plurality primary winners and general election performance relative to expectation. As a second and more consequential test of the impact of plurality primary winners, we focus on races that are reasonably competitive based on district partisanship (45% - 55% for the candidate’s party)

and use a dependent variable that is 1 if the candidate won the general election and 0 if they lost. Our models include controls for factors that might be related to both primary election patterns and general election performance. These include indicators for whether the candidate is the incumbent office holder, whether the general election challenger is the incumbent, whether the general election challenger won their primary unopposed, whether the general election challenger won their primary with a plurality, the generic ballot advantage for the candidate's party in polling before the election,⁴ indicators for the type of race (House and Senate, with Governor as the omitted category), and an interaction between whether the candidate is in the same party as the president and the election cycle (presidential election year and off-cycle election year, with midterm election years as the omitted category). Finally, because we have many observations in each election cycle, we cluster our standard errors by year. We also analyze the data for key subsets of the races, or with interaction effects. These models look for any differences in the impact of plurality primary winners across party, district competitiveness, incumbency status, and type of office.

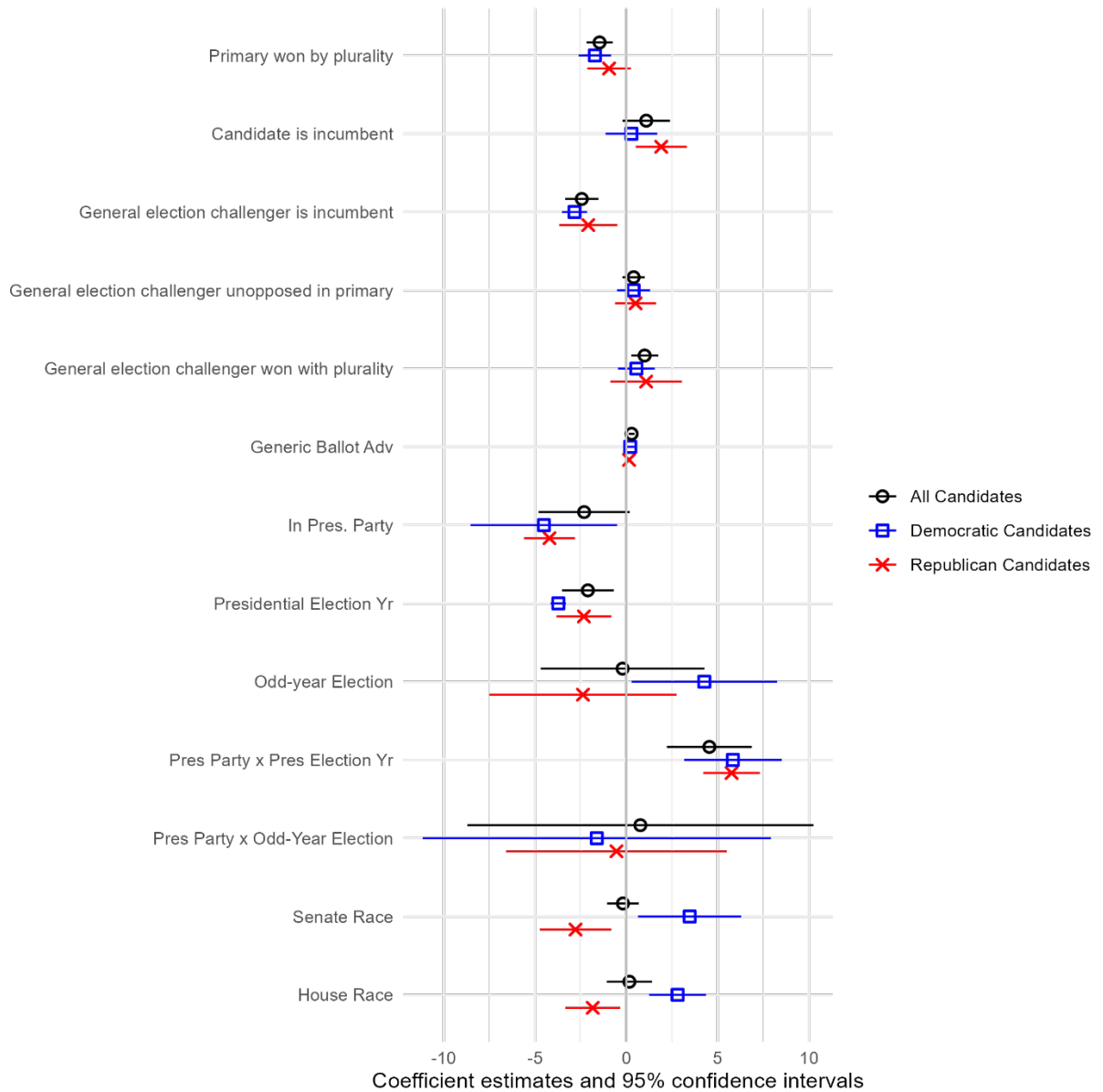
Results

The regression results yield strong support for the plurality primary hypothesis. The regression coefficients and 95% confidence intervals are presented in Figure 1 (see the full regression results in Appendix Table A1). Pooling across all candidates, we find that winning the primary election with a plurality (as opposed to a majority) is associated with a decline in general election performance by 1.47 percentage points ($p < 0.001$). This is a modest effect, but one that

⁴ Generic ballot advantage is from Center for Politics data (<https://centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/the-key-to-forecasting-midterms-the-generic-ballot/>) for 2010-2020. The data is from RealClearPolitics final generic ballot average before the election. For 2022, we used FiveThirtyEight's generic ballot data (<https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/polls/generic-ballot/2022/>), specifically a November 3-6 YouGov poll.

can be particularly important if it affects who wins or loses a close election. Moreover, when a candidate from party A faces a general election challenger from party B who won their own primary with a plurality, candidate A tends to do better. This offers further support for the plurality primary hypothesis as it suggests that competing *against* a plurality winner is beneficial to the other candidate in the general election.

Figure 1. Plurality primary winners do worse in general elections relative to expectation
 General Election Performance Relative to Expectation



Many of the control variables also have significant effects on general election performance relative to expectation in ways we might expect. For instance, candidates do worse in the general election when facing an incumbent from the opposing party, they do better when the generic ballot advantage favors their party, and they do worse when they share the partisanship of the president in midterm years (but better in presidential election years).

As suggested by the examples that motivated this paper, popular press accounts of recent election cycles might suggest that the underperformance of plurality primary winners is a Republican phenomenon. However, the results suggest that the effect is similar in both parties. In addition to showing the results pooling all races, Figure 1 also shows the results subset by Democratic and Republican candidates. The results show a significant negative effect of plurality primary victories among Democrats and an insignificant effect among Republicans. However, the interaction between plurality primary winners and party in Appendix Table A1 is insignificant, suggesting that the effects across the two subgroups are similar (even if greater noise around the estimate yields a null in the Republican subset).

The negative relationship between plurality primary winners and general election performance is relatively unconditional. That is, across many ways of subsetting the data or including interaction terms, the effect is similar. Plurality primary winners tend to underperform in the general election by a small but significant margin. Figure 2 shows that the negative relationship between plurality primary winners and general election performance is similar in places with a relatively competitive district partisanship (defined as between 45-55%) and non-competitive district partisanship. Appendix Table A2 shows that the interaction between primary plurality winners and competitiveness is not significant. Figure 3 shows that the penalty associated with being a plurality primary winner is similar for incumbent and non-incumbent

candidates (and there is not a significant interaction in Appendix Table A3). Finally, Figure 4 shows that the effect is similar across House, Senate, and Gubernatorial races. While the relationship between plurality primary winners and general election performance is larger for Gubernatorial races than House or Senate races when the model is analyzed on subsets of the data, there is a significant negative effect for all types of races and the interactions in Appendix Table A4 between plurality winner and race type are not significant. Overall, these patterns suggest that plurality primary victories tend to hurt the candidate in the general election regardless of the type of party, place, or race.

Our final analysis turns from measuring general election performance as a continuous measure to evaluating whether the candidate won the general election. Here, we focus on races where the district partisanship signals a potentially competitive race; those where the district partisanship measured based on the presidential vote is between 45% and 55% for the candidate's party. We also control for district partisanship in the regression model, in addition to the other model controls from previous analyses. Figure 5 shows the results of a linear probability model where the outcome variable is 1 if the candidate won the general election and 0 otherwise.⁵ Plurality primary winners are 11.3 percentage points less likely to win the general election. This effect is roughly half the size of facing an incumbent in the general (negative effect) or of being an incumbent (positive effect), suggesting that this is a substantively meaningful predictor of who wins the general election.

⁵ See Appendix Table A5 for the full results of this model and a robustness check using a logistic model. An alternate specification that includes all races, shows a null effect of plurality primary winners (which is not surprising given the number of safe seats).

Figure 2. Plurality primary winners do worse in general elections relative to expectation in competitive and non-competitive places

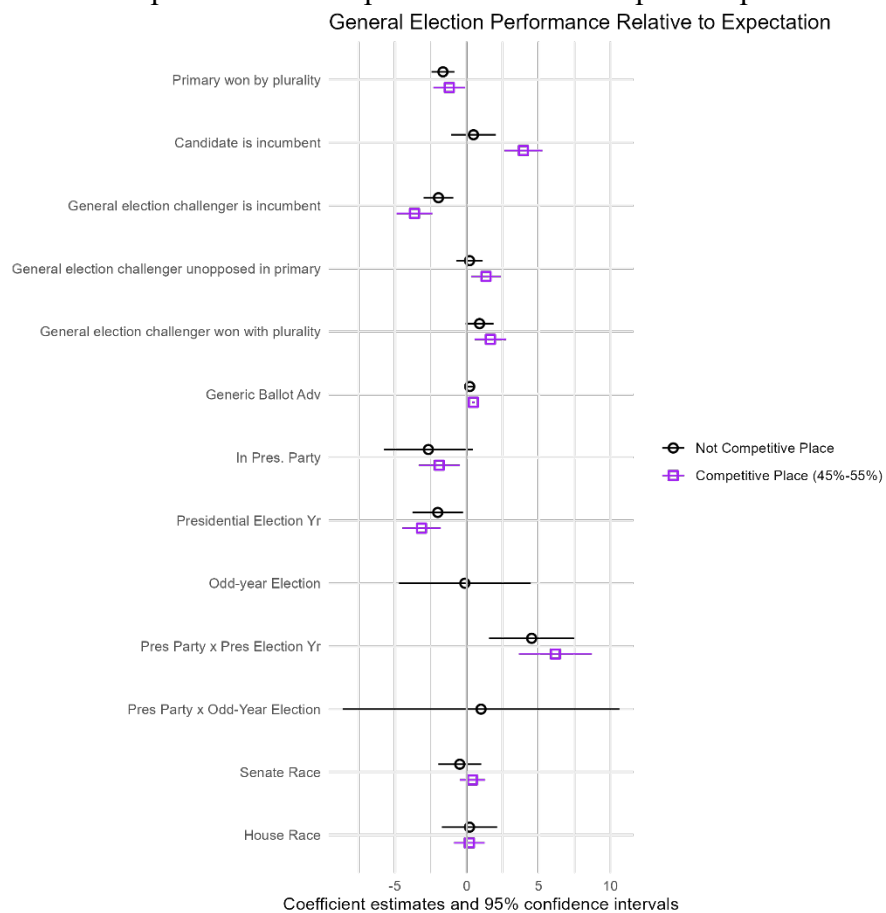


Figure 3. Plurality primary winners do worse in general elections relative to expectation among incumbents and non-incumbents

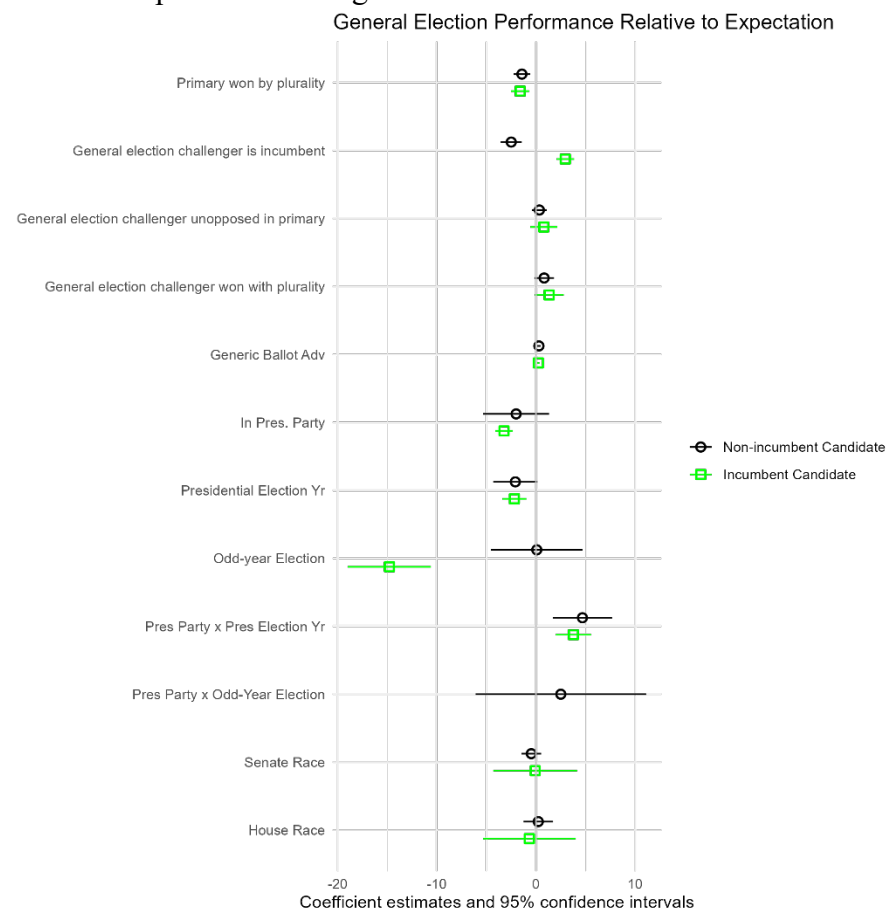


Figure 4. Plurality primary winners do worse in general elections relative to expectation in most types of races

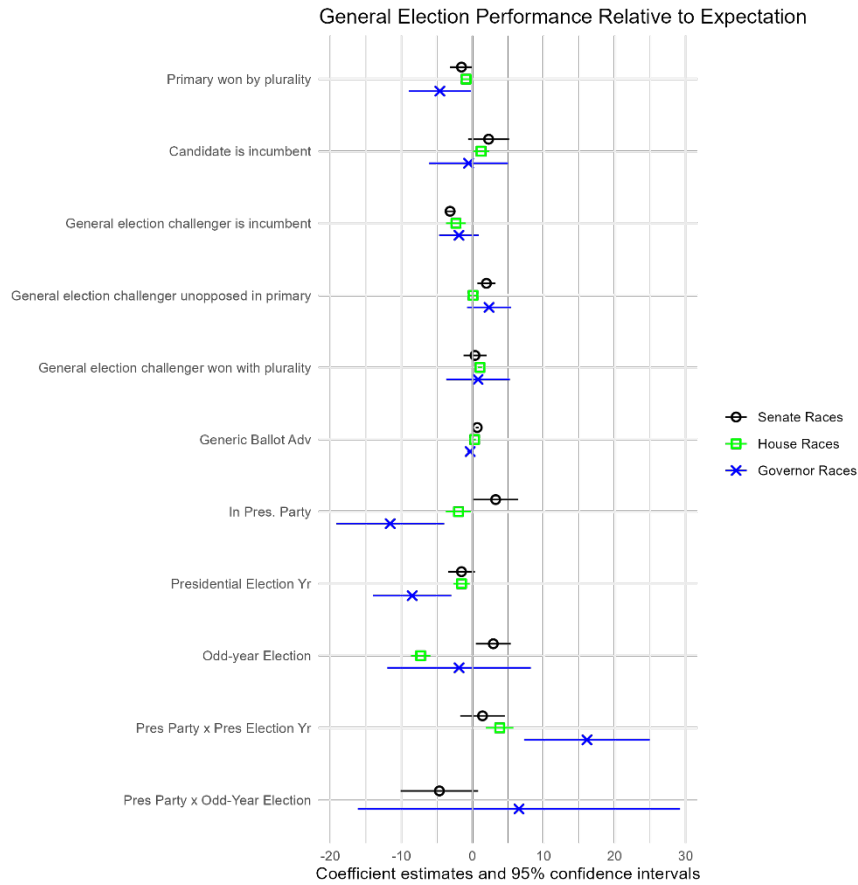
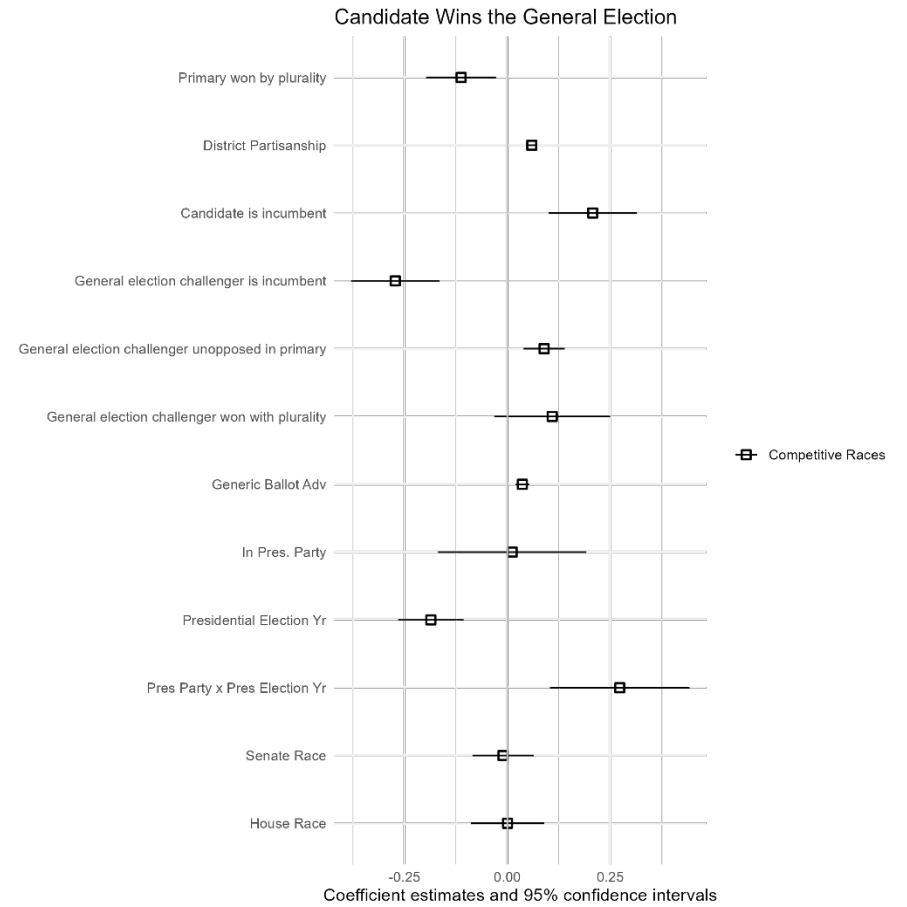


Figure 5. Plurality primary winners are less likely to win general elections in competitive places



Discussion and Implications for Electoral Reform

The results provide support for the hypothesis that plurality primary winners tend to underperform relative to majority primary winners in the general election. Moreover, these patterns are relatively unconditional, holding across parties, degrees of competitiveness, incumbency status, and office type. Though the results suggest plurality primaries may be subject to the same mechanisms as divisive primaries, since both can hurt the nominee electorally in the general election, our findings depart from some of the literature that suggests the effect is conditional.

These findings raise two concerns, one practical and one normative. First, in an era of narrow majorities and competition for majority control in Congress (Lee 2016), plurality primary winners may be costly for their party. Across our data, 79 general election contests were decided by two percentage points or less (e.g., two-party general election split is between 49% and 51%), pointing to cases where underperformance by plurality winners could cost a party seats and, potentially, majority control. These insights are reinforced by our final analyses, which shows that in competitive places, plurality primary winners are significantly less likely to win the general election. Second, the prevalence of plurality primary winners (589 out of 1,305 observations), even if they underperform in general elections but nonetheless win, raises concerns about how well our electoral processes aggregate the voices of the public and how representative our elected officials are of their constituents.

One potential reform that might simultaneously benefit parties and broaden representation, is to introduce majority thresholds for primary elections, where they do not already exist. There are two main options for this type of reform: runoff elections and ranked choice voting. Besides just creating technical majority winners, these solutions may reduce

conditions that contribute to the electoral liabilities of divisive primaries and plurality primary victories in the first place, such as intra-party conflict and ingroup-outgroup dynamics.

At present, ten southern states hold primary runoff elections. When no candidate receives a majority of votes, the state holds another election at a later date.⁶ The top two vote-getters face off, and mathematically one must walk away with a majority of votes. However, primary runoffs have a near universal decline in turnout, with one analysis finding that across House and Senate primary runoff elections from 1994-2022 the median turnout decline was 40% (Rose 2022). Therefore, the “majority threshold” is a majority of a much smaller group of voters and this group may be unrepresentative of the broader primary electorate. As a result, this approach is unlikely to address concerns about general election nominees reflecting the preferences of a small slice of the primary electorate.

Another option is ranked choice voting (RCV). With RCV, voters rank the candidates on the ballot in order of preference. If a candidate has a majority of first-choice preferences, that candidate is the winner. If not, an “instant runoff” is triggered. The candidate with the least first-choice support is eliminated. Voters who ranked that candidate first now have their ballot count towards their next choice. This repeats until a candidate has at least 50% of votes. Maine has used RCV in partisan primaries since 2018. Utah Republicans use RCV in conventions, and the Virginia Republican Party has used RCV in some congressional and gubernatorial conventions since 2021.

An example from Virginia provides suggestive evidence that RCV and the majority support that it builds can help candidates in the general election. At the Republican convention in 2021, where they nominated Glenn Youngkin for governor, Winsome Sears for lieutenant

⁶ North Carolina (30%) and South Dakota (35%) have a lower threshold.

governor, and Jason Miyares for attorney general, all three candidates led in the first round of tabulation, but with less than 50% of votes. As the tabulations went on, each won backup support and eventually crossed the 50% threshold. Come the general elections, all of which were competitive, the three Republicans all won their respective races.

We can also leverage variation in the use of RCV across Virginia's congressional districts to illustrate how RCV might help parties by increasing support for the winning candidate. In 2022, the Virginia Republican parties in three congressional districts used RCV in their nominating conventions. The Center for Campaign Innovation (2022) surveyed Republican voters in the 7th district, which did not use RCV, and the 10th district, which did use RCV. The nominee in the RCV district, Hung Cao, received a higher net favorable image (+78) than the nominee in the non-RCV district (+51), Yesli Vega. Using the same methodology as this paper, Hung Cao overperformed in the general election by over 3%, whereas Vegas underperformed by 2%. Notably, Vega won her primary with just 28.9% of votes.

There are a few reasons that RCV might mitigate the general election liabilities of being plurality winner, and each breaks down a mechanism from the divisive primary hypothesis. One such mechanism is intra-party conflict. Proponents of RCV have argued that when candidates benefit from being the backup choice of their opponents' supporters, they have incentive to find common ground (Richie, 2017). Therefore, RCV primaries might be characterized by policies the party has in common rather than ones they disagree on, increasing party unity and support for the nominee as they head to the general election. For instance, much of the 2021 Virginia gubernatorial GOP primary field "ran on red-meat conservative issues" (Montellaro, 2021) like pro-life policy, the second amendment, taxes, and election integrity.

The other mechanism is the strong in-group/out-group dynamics and emotional attachment to candidates that prevent some party identifiers from voting for their nominee in the general if they did not vote for them in the primary (Lublin and Reilly, 2023). If voters can rank the candidates, they may be less attached to just one, and more voters may be invested in the nominee's success. In the 2021 Virginia gubernatorial GOP primary, Youngkin won 33% of votes in the first round, but his vote share grew to 55% by the final round, suggesting that more voters were part of his "in-group" by the end of the primary convention.

Primary runoffs may also have this effect, to the extent that if a candidate makes it to the runoff, they will need support from voters who voted for a different candidate in the first round. However, candidates' initial objective is to make it *to* the runoff. Therefore, a candidate's incentive is to quash potential threats to their chance of making the runoff, potentially by attacking opponents and highlighting areas of disagreement. For example, in the 2023 Chicago mayoral election, incumbent Lori Lightfoot and challenger Rep. Chuy García were particularly combative (Spielman, 2023), despite both positioning themselves between more conservative candidates like Paul Vallas and far left candidates like Brandon Johnson. Though not a party primary, this example shows that runoff elections can create intra-faction friction between candidates who otherwise might find common ground. In their investigation of House and Senate elections, Fournaies and Hall (2020) find that when a party primary goes to a runoff, the party's vote share decreases by about 6% and probability of winning decreases by about 21%. These findings suggest that the internal fights in runoff primaries may heighten the costs of plurality primary winners rather than mitigate them.

In today's political environment, parties cannot control who runs in their primaries, what positions they take, nor how they campaign (Boatright 2013). Many voters see this as a positive;

people generally do not want to return to the days of party bosses and smoke-filled rooms. But it comes with the costs of a potentially fractured primary field and a nominee who reflects the preferences of a small slice of the electorate. However, parties can have power to determine the rules of their nominating process. In some states, parties run their own primaries, and can choose whatever nominating mechanism they like. In other states, the state runs primary elections. Here, party members within the state legislature can pass legislation to change how primary elections run. As RCV expands in the US, a future study might observe the relationship between RCV primaries specifically and general election performance.

Returning to the slew of Republican plurality winners in 2022, several came from Arizona – Kari Lake for Governor, Blake Masters for US Senate, as well as Mark Finchem for Secretary of State. Notably, Arizona Republicans lost nearly every statewide contest in 2022, including these three.⁷ In the aftermath, Arizona Republican officials met to tell potential 2024 U.S. Senate candidates to ‘play nice’ (Goodwin and Sanchez, 2023). One attendee said, “One lesson that everybody there claims to have learned is that bitter primaries are bad and should be avoided.” However, a slap on the wrist is unlikely to change party fortunes, especially when outsider status is increasingly popular among party voters (Porter and Treul, Forthcoming). Candidates and legislators are driven by election prospects (Mayhew, 1974). If edging out opponents with divisive behavior and/or a plurality of votes is an effective way to win a crowded primary, candidates are likely to continue that behavior, regardless of whether doing so leaves the party worse off for the general election. If electoral reforms like RCV change the incentives

⁷ In addition to being plurality primary winners, these candidates all supported Donald Trump’s false claims that the 2020 election was stolen. This position, as well as their plurality primary wins, likely contributed to their general election losses.

for candidates in how they campaign, this reform might mitigate the risks of plurality primary winners.

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