The Role of Ideology Through the Lens of Primary Elections

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Abstract
This paper serves as an in-depth look at the role ideology plays in modern America, and uses the primary electoral system as a mechanism through which one can examine ideological shifts in politicians and the electorate. The evidence gathered indicates that primary elections are breeding grounds for increased ideological extremism as a result of the more radical nature of politically engaged voters, the only group who on average take part in these elections. As a result, only the most ideologically dogmatic candidates move on to the general election and thus potentially into office. The effects this has upon policy and American democracy are significant, as radical politicians have proven less willing to compromise with opponents or moderate their views, contributing to contentious gridlock in Congress and growing public discontent. The mostly moderate American electorate has thus been slowly eroded by ideologues to become increasingly polarized, displaying that in contemporary America, ideology serves to harm institutions and civil discourse rather than bolster them.

Keywords
Ideology, primary elections, primaries, extremism, partisanship, political science, congress
The Role of Ideology Through the Lens of Primary Elections

Mark P. Walsh

Ideology is an enigmatic and easily misunderstood concept in modern America. It is everywhere, but also seemingly nowhere, all at once, with politicians, media pundits and other elites explaining constantly how it does and does not constantly drive the chaos currently enveloping contemporary politics. Upon reflection, however, it becomes rather easy to see that ideology, even in the smallest of political matters, looms large over our civil processes and institutions. The extremes of dogmatism and ideology have always been one of the greatest enemies of democratic nations, and in the midst of contemporary America’s tumultuous political landscape, such ideas have increasingly found a safe haven. Nowhere is this more readily seen than in the primary system. Primary elections function as a perfect microcosm of ideology’s impact upon modern American politics and society: it shows how increasing ideological extremism pushes and pulls at the nation’s politicians, as well as how the broader populace, be they politically engaged or not, respond to such crucial shifts. By carefully observing and understanding this system, one can not only see how ideological rigidity and radicalism affects and influences America’s elections and policies, but also how it impacts the broader electorate itself, and if these repercussions ultimately bode well for the health of the nation overall.

Before one can analyze the ideological nuances of the primary system, however, it is important to know what it is in the first place. Primaries are a relatively recent and unique American phenomenon; it wasn’t until 1917 that most states implemented the process to choose partisan candidates for local, statewide and congressional elections, and it would take until the 1970s before a similar process was adopted for presidential elections (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2015). Generally speaking, a primary is the process through which registered party members can vote and choose who they want to represent their party in the general election. As a result, it can be easy to dismiss primary elections as relatively minor aspects of today’s democratic process. After all, the winners of these elections must then go on to win the general election, and should they ultimately fall short, their previous primary victory means nothing. To brush aside the consequences of these contests as temporary and insignificant, however, is a dangerous and easy mistake. Indeed, for many candidates, the tone and tenor of their entire campaign is forged within these early primaries and, as a result, they offer a vivid glimpse into how ideology directly manifests itself in modern partisan politics. Barry C. Burden explores this phenomenon in his article “Candidate Positioning in U.S. Congressional Elections”, a study in which survey data regarding ideological positioning, election opponents and district locations is taken directly from potential congressional candidates. He found that most candidates who ran in primary elections tended to identify as more ideologically extreme than those who didn’t. Moreover, the strongest candidates coming out of the primaries and into the general election didn’t moderate their views, instead choosing to remain relatively ideologically extreme (Burden, 2004). The initial shift during the primaries into more extreme ideologies amongst these candidates is easy to understand, as they must cater to a more politically engaged and extreme electorate than the general election. Gary C. Jacobson in 2012 noted this partisan reality in his examinations of the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, which documented the behavior of both general election and primary voters. The data was decidedly clear: even when compared to an increasingly partisan general electorate, primary voters proved to be among the most ideologically extreme in the country (Jacobson, 2012). Increased party loyalty amongst the general electorate is hardly a new phenomenon, with Alan Abramowitz and Steven Webster observing in ANES data collected between 1980
and 2014 that an increase in negative partisanship across the country has led to the highest rates of straight ticket voting the nation has seen in sixty years. This trend is accompanied, however, with a similarly large proportion of general voters who are wary and reluctant to openly admit to this increased partisan loyalty, displaying clearly that the broad social desire to remain as unbiased and independent as possible remains strong across large swathes of Americas citizenry (Abramowitz and Webster, 2016). This is not the case for the politically engaged voter, who stands out from the rest of Americas population as vocally active and ideologically entrenched in the electoral system, and as a result ready to go and vote for whomever they deem worthy. Such a dogmatic population of readily engaged citizens thus necessitates the extreme ideological orthodoxy of aspiring candidates. It remains striking, however, that once more extreme candidates win the primaries and enter the general election, which consists of a much larger and more moderate population, they do not temper their ideological views back towards the center. Instead, they remain relatively extreme, and this is especially the case with strong candidates who lacked substantial general election competition (Burden, 2004). It makes sense for candidates without a substantial electoral challenger to stay the more ideologically extreme course, but less so for those in closer and tougher races; one would expect these candidates to make a more substantial effort in toning down their rhetoric and ideological tone to appeal to the broader populace who, by and large, are far more moderate. It is here that Abramowitz and Webster’s research becomes especially important, as it helps explain that the general electorate, while remaining relatively unextreme in an ideological sense, is increasingly extreme in a partisan sense. While the average Republican voter might not agree on an ideological level with a certain Republican candidate, they will still vote for them to prevent a Democrat, who they see as the far greater threat, from taking power. In short, the increasingly partisan general electorate prioritizes voting against the rival party, not necessarily for their own, and by doing so unwittingly allows the more politically engaged of their own party to transform the ideological landscape into something many average citizens now find unrecognizable. Take the transformation in Republican candidates from 2012 and 2016, which saw the more moderate and mild-mannered Mitt Romney transformed into the bellicose and dogmatic Donald Trump, as an especially vivid example of this phenomenon in action. Indeed, within these findings one can plainly see how heavily ideology impacts modern America’s political culture, since the possession of a more extreme one can help ensure a politician’s electoral triumph.

It has been noted above that politicians and candidates for office are more than willing to drift to the ideological extremes if it means securing victory. Walter J. Stone and Elizabeth N. Simas take this point in particular and make it a cornerstone of their 2010 study, titled “Candidate Valence and Ideological Positions in U.S. House Elections”. They discovered that, over the course of the 2006 elections, candidates and incumbents relied more upon their personalities and ideological credentials to secure victory, as opposed to emphasizing specific policy goals and common ground with other Americans. This combination allowed these politicians to safely express increasingly extreme views, even if such views were typically too radical for their specific constituencies (Stone and Simas, 2010). In the face of strict and oftentimes unrealistic ideological demands coming from both challengers and engaged voters, candidates have lately been forced to place policy aside and prioritize their commitment to ideological purity rather than elaborate upon or detail their plans as representatives. Instead of rebuking this increasingly devoted ideological radicalism, however, voters have fled to the fringes alongside the dogmatic victors, displaying clearly the direct link between candidate and voter attitudes. These revelations are reinforced by Jon C. Rogowski and Joseph L. Sutherland in their 2016 article, “How Ideology Fuels Affective Partisanship”. Their experimental survey of citizens across the country revealed that voters are very responsive to ideology, and
even more so to ideological extremism, especially in the case of the politically informed and engaged. As candidates began to drift further towards the fringes, so did a great deal of respondents, who almost immediately began to mirror the ideological shifts of their preferred candidates (Rogowski and Sutherland, 2016). The shift towards extremism that was sparked by these politicians was rewarded by the increased support of engaged voters, thus providing a greater incentive for those same politicians to shift even farther away from the center, something that engaged voters, in turn, will generally support. Extremism in both groups is actively rewarded, especially by the politically active voter, and thus a toxic cycle of increasing ideological radicalism is born. The effects of this cycle upon the health of the nation, which became apparent under the Clinton presidency but has since reached new heights in the wake of the 2016 presidential elections, is, to put it kindly, depressing: extreme partisanship, increased polarization and contentious political gridlock have made American government and society uniquely virulent, with hardly anything thus far indicating an immanent break or slowdown of this decay. Take, for example, the sudden rise of Bernie Sanders in the 2016 and 2020 Democratic primaries. Despite ultimately succumbing to Hillary Clinton, former New York Senator, Secretary of State and First Lady, as well as to Joe Biden, the former Vice President of the Obama administration, the impact of his considerably more radical ideological movement upon national politics was immense; Democrats in the House and Senate after 2016 began adopting increasingly radical positions on policy issues such as health care, immigration and college tuition, plans that mirrored much of Bernie’s former campaign platform. Furthermore, by 2020 several fellow candidates, including Elizabeth Warren, Beto O’Rourke, Kamala Harris, Bill de Blasio and Cory Booker, assumed many of the ideologically extreme positions Bernie had been previously championing, such as Medicare for All, the forgiveness and/or elimination of student loans, and increased government control and action regarding climate change. Indeed, an examination of Joe Biden’s current platform, which advocates for a $15 federal minimum wage, two years of free college, and a climate policy plan that incorporates parts of the Green New Deal, reveals a striking leftward shift in both policy and ideology within the party as compared to even several years ago, one that was no doubt sparked by the ideological success of Bernie’s previous candidacies. Thus, despite the more radical candidate ultimately lost, the radical ideas and plans pioneered by them were consumed by the most politically active American partisans, and as a result, the more ambitious and moderate candidates found themselves forced to shift farther to the political fringes.

These findings are further reinforced by David W. Brady, Hahrie Han and Jeremy C. Pope (2007). Using datasets of House primary and general election outcomes, they were able to discern the extent to which primaries forced candidates to adopt increasingly radical positions. The very nature of primaries, as also explained by Burden and Jacobson, draws in a much more politically active, as well as radical, group of voters. As a result, candidates are forced to decide whether or not they wish to cater to these radicals early on in the race, and thus become more ideologically extreme, or risk losing the primaries by staying more moderate in anticipation for the general election. The data indicates that candidates will oftentimes choose the former. Furthermore, the researchers discovered that remaining moderate in a primary race was noticeably risky, as these candidates were much more likely to be targets of radical primary challengers, increasing the risk that they are knocked out of their races early on.

These findings were so striking, in fact, that the researchers speculated that these primary election realities could be partially responsible for today’s political and ideological gridlock in Congress (Brady, Han and Pope, 2007). A quick glance at the past several years of politics provides ample evidence of this: President Trump’s impeachment and subsequent Senate trial, as well as House Democrats’ soft and indirect denunciation of a member’s antisemitism, all display the inability of party establishments to reign in the extremists on their own sides of the aisle. The impacts upon
congressional policy and behavior are thus clear: with more radicals from both parties put in positions of power and influence, one can expect that the legislation they propose, draft and eventually pass to also be more extreme in nature, further fueling ideological conflict both in and out of the halls of government. It would seem that the primary election system, which pits members of the same party up against each other, breeds ideological extremism amongst ordinarily moderate candidates, and not only because of the people who would vote for them, but also because if they fail to be radical enough, a new challenger will do it for them. These already detrimental circumstances are only compounded by the fact that primaries attract low turnouts as compared to general elections, with only the most ardently engaged partisans bothering to take part. These primary elections thus work perfectly to display the undertones of dogmatism currently infesting Americas political system, especially amongst those who are in, or would like to assume, power.

By analyzing the effects of a singular electoral institution and its effects upon Americas electorate, it becomes easy to see just how influential ideology is upon even the minor aspects of national politics. In a certain sense, this increase in ideological fervor serves a useful purpose: it helps to engage ordinarily apathetic citizens to participate in the democratic process, and it also encourages citizens to hold the nations parties and politicians more accountable for mistakes and offenses that might have otherwise gone unnoticed. As with all things, however, ideology comes with its own uniquely destructive drawbacks, and human history is filled to the absolute brim, especially as of late, with instances of radical ideology consuming nations and driving them into war, tyranny and chaos. In turn, one can see how this malignant aspect of ideology is slowly but surely corroding the foundations of civil discourse and participation in America, with extreme candidates and voters increasing in size and strength every day. The political animosity and violence that has increasingly spread across the country is dependent upon this decay, and the rot will only spread further should radical ideologues continue to dominate the polls and halls of government. Indeed, the 2017 Charlottesville rally and continuing clashes on the streets of Portland, Oregon and Seattle, Washington all but confirm the severity of this deterioration. But perhaps most crucially, the federal system established by the Constitution requires compromise and moderation to function properly, as opposed to the parliamentary and Westminster systems used in other Western nations, and as long as radical ideology continues to make such things increasingly difficult to achieve, one can only expect Americas political gridlock and divide to continue to worsen.
References


