Primary Elections and the Quality of Elected Officials*

Shigeo Hirano
Columbia University

James M. Snyder Jr.
Harvard University and NBER

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Abstract

In this paper we argue that the literature underestimates the value of primaries, because it focuses on overall average effects. The value of primaries is likely to vary across situations. We argue that primary elections are most needed in safe constituencies, where one party's candidate will have a large advantage in the general election – even if that party's candidate is "low quality". In safe constituencies, it is the dominant party's primary that in most cases determines the winner. Moreover, if the main role of elections is to select good candidates, then primaries in open seat races are particularly consequential. In this paper we show, first, that many voters live in states, counties or congressional districts that are dominated by one party. In fact, this is true for about 60% of all congressional districts. Thus, safe constituencies loom large in the U.S. elections. Second, we present evidence that primary elections are especially competitive for the advantaged party in constituencies where one party has a clear advantage in terms of voter loyalties. Finally, we present evidence that a party's primary elections appear to especially good at selecting "high quality" types and at punishing poor performance in constituencies where the underlying voter loyalties in the constituency clearly favor that party. Primaries, therefore, appear to be especially valuable when effective two-party competition is lacking.

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1 Introduction

Almost all candidates for major elected offices in the U.S. are nominated in direct primary elections. What role to primaries play in the overall electoral system? Do primary elections substantially increase the quality or performance of elected politicians? Do voters use primaries to remove poorly performing incumbents, e.g., those who are shirking or engaged in malfeasant behavior? Do primaries at least help voters choose better candidates in open-seat races? Do primary elections sometimes serve as an adequate substitute for general elections?

More than fifty years ago Julius Turner studied competition in congressional primaries and found them lacking, mainly because few incumbents faced serious challenges and almost none of them lost. Pessimistically, he concludes: "The comparative usefulness of the primary as a method for selecting successors for retiring incumbents does not offset the fact that the primary is not a successful alternative to two-party competition in most parts of the United States" (Turner, 1953, p. 210).

Many modern textbooks on U.S. elections summarize the situation in similar terms. For example, Bibby et al. (2003, 171) write: "It was the expectation of the [progressive] reformers that the direct primary would stimulate competition among candidates for party nominations. This hope has not been fulfilled, however. In a substantial percentage of the primaries, nominations either go uncontested or involve only nominal challengers to the front runner... Since incumbents tend to scare off competition in the primaries, they, of course, win renomination in overwhelming proportion... In those rare instances when incumbent governor have been defeated, it is normally the result of serious intraparty rifts." Like Turner, Bibby et al. focuses on the low level of average primary competition for incumbent contested races and concludes that primaries are simply a "nuisance" in these cases.[1] Jacobson's (2009) text on congressional elections scarcely mentions primaries at all.

Of course, it is possible that few incumbents *deserve* to be removed or even strongly challenged in their parties' primaries. Why should we think that, under normal circumstances,

[1]After describing the low level of primary competition in incumbent contested congressional and state legislative races, Bibby et. al. (2003, 172) writes, "Thus, for most members of Congress and state legislators, the primary is not unlike the common cold. It is a nuisance, but seldom fatal."

there are candidates available to a party who clearly dominate the incumbent? Incumbents have experience and seniority, and track records that prove they can win elections. Given the large incumbency advantage that exists in general elections, a party would be reluctant, especially in competitive districts, to give up this electoral advantage unless the alternative was clearly superior on some dimension of value to the party. Such challengers may be rare.[2]

Recent studies, however, suggest that primaries fail even in cases where incumbents are involved in serious political scandals, and therefore probably ought to be removed or at least seriously challenged. These papers typically find that scandals do hurt incumbents in terms of vote-share. However, since the degree of competition in incumbent-contested primaries is so minimal on average, the authors typically conclude that primaries matter little or not all.[3] For example, Brown (2006b, pp. 8-9) states: "The scandal variables are statistically significant and large in magnitude in nearly all of the regressions. As predicted, incumbents are hurt by scandal and in the pooled regressions they are harmed more by morality scandals than by monetary scandals. Since incumbents, however, typically win primary elections by larger margins than they do general elections, the impact of losing more percentage points in a primary may have little or no effect on the outcome (the constants in these models suggest as much)." Some studies even find small and statistically insignificant effects. Welch and Hibbing (1997, p. 233) note that for the 1980's: "Primary defeats are even rarer than voluntary departures... More importantly, [the primary defeat rate] is only slightly higher than the primary defeat rate for incumbents not charged with corruption, despite the fact that an incumbent not charged with corruption almost never loses in the primary."[4]

In this paper we argue that the literature underestimates the value of primary elections, because it tends to lump all primaries together, and measure overall average outcomes or

[2]Hirano, et al. (2009) provide a model that incorporates this logic, and shows that in equilibrium we should expect few contested races.

[3]See, e.g., Jacobson and Dimock (1994) regarding the 1992 House Bank scandal, Brown (2006a) for a comprehensive study of U.S. House races between 1966 and 2002, and Brown (2006b) for a study of the 2006 elections.

[4]Similarly, Lazarus (2008) describes his findings on senate and gubernatorial races as follows: "... the coefficient on scandal is statistically significant and in the predicted direction only for one type of challenger: amateur out-party challengers in gubernatorial election. Thus, it does not seem as though the presence of a scandal results in the entry of a significant number of serious challengers of either party."

estimate overall average effects. In order to accurately assess how well primaries perform, we must distinguish among different situations.

To keep things simple, suppose there are just three types of constituencies – safely Democratic, safely Republican, and balanced – distinguished by the distribution of voter partisan attachments, and two types of candidates – high-quality and low-quality. Suppose further that our main objective is to elect as many high-quality politicians in office as possible. Consider the following cases: (1) an open-seat race in a safely Democratic constituency; (2) an open-seat race in a competitive constituency; (3) a race with a Democratic incumbent running in a safely Democratic constituency; and (4) a race with a Democratic incumbent running in a competitive constituency.

In case (1) we care mainly about the Democratic primary, because this party's nominee is very likely to win in the general election. So, we want at least one high-quality candidate to run in the Democratic primary, and we want the Democratic primary voters to choose one of the high-quality candidates as their party's nominee. As long as this occurs, we do not care what very much about the Republican primary. The same logic applies in a safely Republican constituency, with the party labels switched.

In case (2) we care about both party's primaries. However, we only really need one party to produce a high-quality nominee. Since the constituency is balanced, if one party nominates a high-quality candidate and the other party nominates a low-quality candidate, then the party with the high-quality candidate is very likely to win in the general election.

In case (3), if the Democratic incumbent is high-quality then we do not really need a primary in either party. If the Democratic incumbent is low-quality, then we want at least one high-quality challenger to run in the Democratic primary, and we want the Democratic primary voters to choose one of the high-quality challengers (not the incumbent) as their party's nominee. Again, we do not care very much about what happens in the Republican primary.

Case (4) is, roughly, a mixture of cases (3) and (2). If the Democratic incumbent is high-quality, then the situation is similar to the sub-case of case (3) with a high-quality Democratic

incumbent. We do not really need a primary in either party, since the Democratic incumbent is very likely to win re-election regardless. If the Democratic incumbent is low-quality, then the situation is similar to that in case (2). We want at least one high-quality candidate to run in one of the parties' primaries, and we want the voters in that primary to choose a high-quality candidate as their party's nominee.

The main takeaway points from this discussion are as follows. First, we care especially about how well the electoral system works in open-seat races. If most open-seat winners are high-quality, then most *incumbents* will be high-quality as well, since most incumbents were, at some point in the past, open-seat winners.[5] Second, within open-seat races we care especially about the dominant-party's primary in safe constituencies, and both parties' primaries in competitive constituencies.[6] Third, if we find that open-seat races tend to result in high-quality winners, then we should not be too concerned if there is relatively little competition in primaries (in either party) when an incumbent is running for re-election. Rather, we should focus our attention on what happens in the minority of cases involving low-quality incumbents.

In this paper we provide empirical support for several key parts of this of the argument. First, we document that many voters live in states, counties or congressional districts that are dominated by one party. In fact, this is true for about 60% of all congressional districts.

[5]This assumes that high-quality incumbents do not retire at much higher rates than low-quality incumbents. It is possible that high-quality incumbents retire at much higher rates than low-quality incumbents – e.g. if serving in an elective political office is a means of generating attractive job offers in the private sector (or bureaucracy), and if the private sector desires high-quality incumbents and can identify them. This does not seem likely, however, at least for most of the important elective offices in the U.S.

[6]It is interesting to note that some of the early progressive scholars and reformers make similar arguments. For example, in 1923 Charles Merriam (1923, p. 4) wrote: "[T]he significance of the vote under the direct primary varies in different sections of the country or of the state. About half the states are one-party states where the primary is of the very greatest importance, for here the election is practically decided. This list includes [list of states] and comprises more than half of the population of the United States. Many other states are preponderatingly Republican or Democratic. Of the 3,000 counties in the United States, it is safe to say that roughly half of them are one-party counties. Legislators, governors and United States senators are practically chosen in the primaries. In these instances ... the primary of the majority party if of the utmost consequence, for whatever the outcome, it is not likely to be overthrown in the subsequent [general] election." Somewhat more indirectly (and colorfully), in 1924 Gifford Pinchot (1924, p. 9) noted: "Under the convention system the only power that can clean up a party is the other party. Under the primary it is possible to clean up from within." And V.O. Key (1956, 88) stated: "The direct primary method of nomination apparently constituted at bottom an escape from one-partyism."

Thus, safe constituencies loom large in the U.S. elections.

Second, we present evidence that primary elections are especially competitive in the advantaged party of constituencies in which one party has a clear advantage in terms of voter loyalties.[7] This is pattern is most noticeable in open-seat races. Since the turn of the 20th century, roughly 80% of advantaged party's primaries are contested while less than 50% of the disadvantaged party's primaries are contested.

Third, we present evidence that primary elections appear to especially good at selecting good types and at punishing poor performance in the advantaged party of constituencies in which one party has a clear advantage in terms of underlying voter loyalties. Thus, primaries are especially valuable when effective two-party competition is lacking. And this is important, because in the U.S. effective two-party competition *is* lacking in many states and localities.

More specifically we find that in open-seat races for the U.S. House, Illinois Judicial elections, and statewide offices, high-quality candidates are more likely to compete and win in districts where the constituency favors one of the parties. We also find that in the U.S. House and the North Carolina state legislature, low-quality or poorly performing incumbents are more likely to face competition and be defeated in a primary elections, and that this is particularly true in constituencies that are relatively safe for the incumbent's party.

We do not want to overstate the case for direct primary elections. There are four important caveats.

First, the above argument focuses heavily on role of elections as a selection mechanism rather than as a means for rewarding and punishing incumbent behavior. There are good theoretical justifications for this emphasis. For example, Fearon (1999), Besley (2006), and others show that in many settings voters cannot use elections effectively to punish poorly performing incumbents, but they can use elections to select high quality types. On the other hand, other models of elections are more optimistic about the potential for elections to control politicians' behavior – e.g. Snyder and Ting (2008).

[7]Previous studies – e.g., Key (1956), Jewell (1967), Grau (1981), and Hogan (2003) – document similar patterns for earlier time periods and restricted sets of states.

Second, our analyses rely on relatively coarse and noisy measures of politician quality and performance. What we attempt to measure is probably best termed "competence." This depends on a variety of attributes, including general intelligence, disposition, energy level, and heath, task-specific human capital, and motivation. There are multiple dimensions of quality and performance for different offices, and these may not be equally relevant for all types of voters. Future research should investigate alternative measure of quality and performance.

Third, even taking our measures at face-value, we cannot say that primaries are "extremely" effective. For example, we find that an incumbent who is involved in scandals and represents a safe districts (for their party) and run for re-election faces a probability of losing their primary election of nearly 20%. Although this is much larger than the probability that an incumbent not in a scandal loses in a primary (less than 1%), it might still be much lower than the "desired" probability. The desired probability must depend on factors such as the severity of the scandal, whether the scandal indicates a temporary lapse or a pattern of behavior that is likely to continue, and so on.

Finally, there may be preferable alternatives to primaries. One possibility is non-partisan elections. But non-partisan elections have been criticized by many scholars and reformers for a variety of reasons (voters lack the necessary information to vote intelligently, turnout is low, the system favors businessmen, etc.). Another alternative is third parties or independent candidates. Unfortunately, there are no signs that vigorous third parties are emerging, especially the type of third parties that are needed – i.e., parties that can seriously threaten the near-monopoly that locally dominant parties often have. A third alternative is to return to conventions or caucuses. This might be worth exploring, but it does not appear to have much support at the moment. Of course we do not know if introducing these alternatives would also significantly change the quality of the candidates seeking for office.

2 The Degree of Inter-Party Competition

The degree of two-party competition in the U.S. varies considerably across states, congressional districts, and localities. It has also varied considerably over time. Figure 1 shows how competition at the state level has evolved over time (black curve). The figure also shows how competition at the state level compares with competition in counties (dark gray curve) and congressional districts (light gray curve). For the states, the y-axis gives the percentage of state-year observations with robust two-party competition. The classification is based on a 9-year moving average of the vote shares in all available elections for federal and statewide offices. More specifically, we classify a state as competitive in year t if the average difference between the two major parties' vote shares during the years $t-4$ to $t+4$ was less than 15 percentage points. (The data appendix provides details on the data and computations.)

Two-party competition was especially lacking during the Fourth Party System – also called the System of 1896 (Schattschneider, 1960) – which ran from 1896 through 1928. Democrats completed their conquest of the south, and many formerly competitive northern states shifted solidly toward the Republicans. Burnham described this as a period during which "democracy... was effectively placed out of commission – at least as far as two-party competition was concerned – in more than half the states" (Burnham, 1965, page 26). By our measure, one party dominated state politics in 56 percent of the state-years of this era. One-party dominance continued to prevail through the New Deal and the 1940s.

The case of the "solid south" is well known. In every year between 1898 and 1960 in every state of the former Confederacy, the Democrats won every statewide elective office – 1,920 out of 1,920 elections – and held large majorities in both houses of the state legislatures.[8] Republicans were so weak that in 57 percent of the elections for statewide offices during this period they did not nominate a candidate.

Even outside the solid south, however, robust two-party competition was as much the exception as the rule. Democrats dominated in Arizona, Oklahoma, and Tennessee, winning

[8]The Democrats won all of the statewide elections in 1896 also, except in North Carolina where they were defeated by a Republican-Populist fusion ticket.

95 percent of the statewide contests in these states between 1896 and 1950. Republicans dominated in much of the northern tier, midwest, and far west. In some states Republican dominance occasionally rivaled that of the Democracts in the south. In California, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Vermont, and Wisconsin, Republicans won 92 percent of the statewide contests between 1896 and 1950. So, while Republicans did not control the vote in the northern tier to the extent that Democrats did in the South, they controlled the outcomes of elections to nearly the same degree.

After 1950, two-party competition rose steadily, to the point that in the current period (1990-2010) about 75 percent of all states exhibit fairly lively two-party competition. This happened quickly in the non-south, and by the 1960s we classify 80 percent of the state-years as competitive. In the south, the situation remained largely uncompetitive until the 1980's (except for the three top offices of president, governor, and U.S. senate), but now the south is as competitive as the other regions.

There are some indications that two-party competition has been declining recently. Figure 1 shows that the fraction of states with robust inter-party competition fell from a high of 84 percent in 1992 to 70 percent in 2006. Other statistics paint a more mixed picture. The average victory margin in presidential contests at the state level rose from 6.2 percentage points in the elections of 1988, 1992 and 1996, to over 7.7 percentage points in 2000, 2004 and 2008. On the other hand, for statewide races the average victory margin remained flat: 8.6 percentage points during the period 1988-1999, and 8.7 percentage points during the period 2000-2009. In open-seat statewide races, the average victory margin even fell, 6.5 percentage points in 1988-1999 to 5.4 percentage points in 2000-2009. It is not clear whether the trend from 1992 to 2006 will continue, or whether it will reverse, as it did in 1978. In any case, at the state level the electoral arena today is still much more competitive than it was during the first four decades of the 20th century.

We might expect two-party competition to be even less robust at the level of the county, city or legislative district, since the geographic units are smaller and often more politically

more homogeneous. In the case of legislative districts, gerrymandering could exacerbate the problem. The majority party might pack the minority party's districts in order to waste minority votes, or a bi-partisan, incumbent-protecting gerrymander might produce many safe districts for both parties. Although we do not have a comprehensive data set of local election results, we do have data on various elections – e.g., president, governor, and U.S. senators – at the county level. We also have the presidential vote at the congressional district level.

Figure 1 above shows that two-party competition is in fact less prevalent at the county and congressional district level than at the state level. For counties, we construct the underlying measure of two-party competition as a 9-year moving average of the vote shares in all available elections for president, governor, and U.S. senator. For congressional districts we only have data for presidential elections. We classify a county or district as competitive in year t if the average difference between the two major parties' vote shares during the years $t-4$ to $t+4$ was less than 15 percentage points.

Over the past four decades, for example, two-party competition has been relatively robust in about 73 percent of the cases at the state level, but in only about 47 percent of the cases at the county level, and only 45 percent of the cases at the congressional district level.

One-party dominance of state legislatures is even more prevalent, since districts are smaller than congressional districts, and often even more politically homogeneous. During the 1980s, for example, more than 60 percent of state legislative districts were uncompetitive using the 15-percentage-point definition.[9]

We should note that assessing competition in the context of legislative elections can be subtle. From the standard, "dyadic representation," point of view we want to know the number of state legislative districts that are dominated by one party. However, from the "systemic representation" point of view we might be just as interested in the party dominance of the legislature as a whole. This is especially true when partisanship plays a large role in the organization and operation of the legislature. In such a legislature, even in a 50-50

[9]Calculation by authors based on data from the Record of American Democracy (ROAD) project.

district voters may find themselves favoring the candidate of the party expected to control the legislature, which is easier to predict in dominant party states. Because of this, we might be especially concerned about competitive primaries in the majority party of the state, even in relatively competitive districts.

The analysis above treats large and small state, and large and small counties, equally. However, as Figure 2 shows, the situation does not look much different if we weight by population.[10] This is especially true of the overall trends. The fraction of the population living in a competitive county is about 7 percentage points higher than the fraction of counties that are competitive, and this has not changed much over time. For the period 1896-1945, the percentage of county-years classified as competitive is 34.3 percent, and the fraction of people living in competitive counties is 41.3 percent. For the period 1970-2006, the figures are 47.4 percent and 54.1 percent, respectively. Thus, the percentage of county-years classified as competitive increased by 13.1 percentage points between the periods, while the percentage of people living in competitive counties increased by 12.8 percentage points.

Weighting by population does not dramatically change the picture at state level either. For the period 1896-1945, the percentage of state-years classified as competitive is 46.4 percent, and the fraction of people living in competitive states is 49.9 percent. For the period 1970-2006, the figures are 73.9 percent and 81.8 percent, respectively. Thus, the percentage of county-years classified as competitive increased by 27.5 percentage points between the periods, while the percentage of people living in competitive counties increased by 31.9 percentage points. So, the change between the periods is a bit larger when we weight by population.

While the patterns in the data are clear, they raise questions. Why is vigorous two-party competition lacking in many parts of the country? One reason is simply that the distribution of voters varies across space. The social, economic and issue cleavages that tend to produce an evenly divided electorate at the national level need not – indeed often do not – produce an evenly divided electorate in all localities. V.O. Key (1956, 246) articulated this nicely:

[10]We do not show the curve for congressional districts here, since congressional districts are of approximately equal population at least since about 1964.

> The electoral groupings that exist within individual states are profoundly affected by the impact of national issues and by the alternatives fixed by the competition of national political leadership. Current national issues – and the accumulative residual effects of past national conflicts – may push a state's local politics toward a Republican or Democratic one-partyism or they so divide the electorate of a state that it is closely competitive between the parties in both national and state affairs.

Economic interests and social groups concentrate in particular regions: cotton and Baptists in the South, manufactures and Congregationalists in New England, heavy industry and Catholics around the Great Lakes. Shared historical experiences, like the upheavals of the Civil War, create a specifically regional basis for political cleavages. Once formed out of profound experiences, partisan identifications are relatively durable not just through the life cycle, but even, through socialization, across generations (Campbell et al. 1960; Green et al. 2002). Accordingly, the powerful influence partisanship has on voter choice cannot easily be overcome (Campbell et al 1960; Bartels 2000).[11]

The old "Rockefeller wing" of the Republican is an example of state party organizations deviating from the national party on prominent issues in order to be more competitive locally. However, such examples are rare.[12] In fact, perhaps the most prominent and durable example of local parties deviating from the national party is the Democratic party in the South from about 1940 to 1970. Southern Democrats did not support that national party on key issues – e.g. civil rights, organized labor, women's rights. However, this did not result in robust two-party competition, but local one-party domination.

Another question is, why is there so little competition from third parties? In principle, third parties – especially regional parties or those with geographically concentrated groups of supporters – can provide a substitute for competition between the two major parties. In two instances third parties have in fact played this role, at least to a limited degree. In the 1890s

[11] V.O. Key provides an early example, arguing that the Civil War was an important force pushing states towards one-party domination: "The great sectional impact of the Civil War on American national politics left a lasting imprint on the form of the politics of the older states; it warped them, in varying degrees, toward a one-partyism of either Democratic or Republican persuasion" Key (1956, 169).

[12] It is perhaps not a coincidence that even the Rockefeller Republicans first appeared in New York – one of the few states that allows candidates to receive multiple party nominations to distinguish themselves from co-partisans.

the Populists competed in many states, and when they combined forces with the weaker of the two major parties they could pose a serious threat to the dominant party in a state or local area. Similarly, the uptick in general election competition from about 1908-1918 in Figure 1 is due in part to the success of various Progressive, Farmer-Labor, and Socialist parties.

Overall, however, third parties in the U.S. have been too weak and short-lived to provide a sustained alternative to two-party competition (e.g., Hirano and Snyder 2007). Institutional factors clearly play an important role. Virtually all elections in the U.S. are single-member-district, first-past-the-post . This system provides strong forces for two parties (Duverger 1955). In addition, the enormous importance of major executive offices – the president and state governors – make it difficult for small, locally-based third parties to survive. With essentially no chance of winning these major offices, such parties find it difficult to attract the resources and support needed to survive.

3 Competition in Primaries

How competitive are primary elections? In this section we show how the level of competition has varied over time, how it varies across parties and offices, and how it varies depending on whether or not the incumbent is running for re-election.

Consider statewide elections, for governor, U.S. senator, and statewide down-ballot offices. Figure 3 shows the patterns for two measures of primary competition. The first is the percentage of races which were "contested" – i.e. at least two candidates received more than 1% of the vote.[13] The second measure is the percentage of races with "competitive" races. Following the definition used above for general elections, we classify a primary election as competitive if the winner received less than 57.5 percent of the total votes cast. Uncontested elections are of course classified as uncompetitive. Also, we count as uncontested

[13]We drop cases where a nomination was made by convention. One question is what to do with cases where one party nominated its candidate by convention, but the other party held a primary election. We drop these cases. Alternatively, we might include them and count them as cases with "uncontested primaries," since the party holding a convention could have held a primary instead. All of these cases involve the Republican party in southern states. The overall patterns are similar if we count these cases as uncontested primaries.

– and therefore uncompetitive – any primary election in which *no* candidates ran for the nomination. We drop cases where the winner was nominated by a caucus or convention.

Figure 3 also splits the data along two important dimensions. The first is the underlying degree of two-party competition in the state around the time of each election. We divide the set of state-year-party observations into three categories: Strong Party, Weak Party, and Parties Balanced. A party is Strong in a given state and year if its candidates won more than 57.5% of the vote, on average, across all available statewide races in a 9-year window around the given year (t-4 to t+4). A party is Weak in a given state and year if the other party is favored in that state-year. In all other cases, the parties are Balanced. The second dimension is incumbency status, where we divide the races into the cases where an incumbent is running a party's primary for a given office, and cases where no incumbent is present in either party or there is an incumbent in the opposing party's primary.

Consider first primaries without incumbents. The most salient fact is that the rate of competition is much higher in Strong Party primaries (black curve) than in Weak Party primaries (dark gray curve). From the 1900s through the 1970s, the difference was relatively constant. Over this period, 88% of Strong Party primaries were contested, compared to just 30% in Weak Party primaries. Similarly, 65% of Strong Party primaries were competitive, compared to just 14% in Weak Party primaries.[14]

The situation has changed during the past three decades. First, the rate of competition in Strong Party primaries fell noticeably. This is especially clear for the percentage of primaries that are competitive, which was under 50% in the 2000s. On the other hand, primary competition actually rose in the Weak Party, and it has also been constant in cases where the parties are balanced.

The patterns are quite different in primaries with an incumbent running. First, the overall level of competition is lower. Second, it has been declining steadily since the 1930s. In the 2000s the level of competition was dismally low, just 31% incumbents in strong party primaries were contested and only 6% of strong party primaries with an incumbent could be

[14]The other two measures of competition mentioned above – the average number of candidates, and the percentage of votes won by losing candidates – exhibit patterns similar to those in 3.

classified as competitive. Third, the difference between strong parties and evenly balanced parties is much smaller than it is for races with no incumbent.

Figure 4 presents the graphs of primary competition for U.S. House races, for the post-war decades. Note first that the overall level of competition is lower than in statewide races. Also, until recently, the differences between Strong and Weak parties were less clear, even in races with no incumbent. Over the past two decades, however, the overall patterns are quite similar to those for statewide races. In particular, in primaries without incumbents, the rate of competition is much higher in Strong Party primaries than in Weak Party primaries (with the balanced cases in between).

4 Candidate Quality in Open-Seat Races

It is extremely difficult to measure either the quality or performance of politicians. For incumbents the task is somewhat easier, because there are various policy-related outcomes that are at least in part attributable to the incumbents' actions. For non-incumbents we need measures of future expected performance, which are more difficult to quantify. The most commonly used measure is prior electoral experience, following Jacobson (1980). Various studies find that that candidates with previous political experience have higher vote margins in the general election, even when facing incumbent candidates. A few other measures exist, such as bar association evaluations of judicial candidate. In the analyses below we employ these existing measures. We also introduce a new measure, based on newspaper endorsements.

4.1 Prior Legislative Experience in U.S. House Races

To investigate whether winners of primary elections with no incumbent present tend to be high quality, we first examine the previous office holder experience of the party nominees. This measure developed in Jacobson (1980) is a widely employed in subsequent analyses of candidate quality.[15] These studies find that state legislators do especially well in U.S.

[15]A sample of the papers that use previous experience as a measure of quality includes Jacobson and Kernell (1983), Bond et al. (1985), Jacobson (1989, 2009), Lublin (1994), Bond et al. (1997), Cox and Katz

congressional elections and interpret this as evidence that political experience is an indicator of candidate quality. This seems plausible, since the activities in state legislatures are similar to those in Congress – writing and amendment bills in committee, bargaining and building coalitions, working both within and across party lines, bargaining with an independently elected executive, and so on. So, many of the skills required to be successful in a state legislature are also valuable in Congress.

As discussed above, primaries are particularly important for selecting high quality candidates in Strong Party primaries – i.e. where constituency loyalty favors that party's candidates – and least important for selecting high quality candidates in the Weak Party primaries. Of course primaries in Parties Balanced cases also have an important role in selecting high quality officials. However, since the general election provides an additional competitive hurdle when voters can evaluate candidates of both parties, our main concern in these constituencies is that that at least one party puts forth a high quality candidate in the general election.

We first analyze Jacobson's data for the period 1952 to 2000. These data cover previous office holder experience for all general election candidates. The data set includes information regarding whether candidates previously held offices other than in the state legislature. With these data we examine the quality of the nominees elected through a primary. We have also assembled a data set on the previous office holder experience of all primary election candidates for the period 1978 to 2010.[16] These data allow us to ask additional questions about the quality of candidates who are defeated in the primary.

Using Jacobson's data, we first plot the percentage of primary election winners that had previous political experience for the three types of primaries: Strong Party (+1), Balanced Parties (0), and Weak Party (-1). For the period 1952 to 2000, Figure 5 provides evidence that for open-seat races to the U.S. House, the highest percentage of primary winners with previous office holder experience in the Strong Party primary. The percentage of primary

(1996), Van Dunk (1997), Goodliffe (2001, 2007), Carson and Roberts (2005), Carson et al. (2007), and Brown and Jacobson (2009).

[16]See Hirano and Snyder (2012) for details regarding this dataset.

winners with previous experience is slightly lower in the Balanced Parties case where voter loyalty in the constituency does not favor either party. The lowest percentage of experienced nominees winners occurs in the Weak Party primaries. This pattern is still evident if broaden our measure of quality to include other elected offices other than state legislator.

Using the data on previous experience in the state legislature for all primary candidates between 1978 and 2010, in the top left panel of Figure 6 we find the same relationship between previous office holder experience of the primary winners and the division of partisan loyalties in the different constituencies – i.e. the highest percentage of high quality winners in Strong Party primaries an the lowest percentage in the Weak Party primaries. Incorporating the additional information about the defeated primary candidates we find that primary competition is more severe in Strong versus Weak Party primaries. In top right panel of the figure we see that the number of candidates is highest in the Strong party primary and lowest in the Weak party primary. Moreover, the bottom two panels of the figure provide evidence that more of the primary candidates in the Strong Party primary have previous office holder experience than in the Weak Party primary, and the number of high quality candidates in the Balanced Parties cases in falling between these two types of cases.

These results are also evident in a simple regression of the various measure of primary competition on primary election type – i.e. Strong party, Balanced party, or Weak Party primary. These results are presented in Table 1.[17]

4.2 Judicial Evaluations in Illinois

In this subsection we again study open-seat primaries, in this case for judicial elections in Illinois. We focus on circuit courts, which are the general jurisdiction trial courts in the state. Circuit court judges are initially elected in partisan elections. Afterwards, every six years their terms expire, and to keep their position they must win a retention election. There are 22 circuits; in addition, many vacancies are filled in elections where voting is restricted to a single county or sub-circuit.

[17] Although Figures 5 and 6 suggest that the relationship between the competition measures and election type is not exactly linear, we use a simple linear specification.

Prior to each election, the Illinois State Bar Association (ISBA) and various Chicago area (Cook county) bar associations evaluate judicial candidates. The ISBA Judicial Evaluations Committee gives ratings of Highly Qualified, Qualified, or Not Qualified based on questionnaires and interviews. The ISBA also gives ratings of Recommended or Not Recommended based on surveys of ISBA members. The largest bar association in the Chicago area is the Chicago Bar Association (CBA). Similar to the ISBA, the CBA's Judicial Evaluation Committee gives ratings of Highly Qualified, Qualified, or Not Recommended based on questionnaires and interviews. The other Chicago area bar associations that rate candidates are: the Chicago Council of Lawyers, the Cook County Bar Association, the Women's Bar Association of Illinois, the Asian American Bar Association of the Greater Chicago Area, the Hellenic Bar Association, the Black Women's Lawyers Association of Greater Chicago , the Hispanic Lawyers Association of Illinois, the Lesbian and Gay Bar Association of Chicago, the Puerto Rican Bar Association of Illinois, the Decalogue Society of Lawyers, and the Northwest Suburban Bar Association.[18]

We call a candidate *High Quality* if he or she received a rating of Qualified or better from more than half of the bar associations that rated the candidate. Note that the Chicago area bar associations only evaluate candidates running for Cook county judgeships, so outside Cook county we use only the ISBA ratings.[19] Election data are from the *Official Vote* booklets published by the Illinois State Board of Elections. We construct the normal vote for each judicial district using the average vote for president, governor, and senator. As above, we classify a judicial district as safe for an incumbent if the normal vote for the incumbent's party exceeds 57.5%. We have ratings, primary election information, and normal vote data for over 1,460 judicial candidates from 1986 to 2010.[20]

The results for open-seat Illinois judicial primary elections are presented in Figure 7. The

[18]See Lim and Snyder (2012) for more details about the ratings data, including information about the criteria used, and checks on the validity of using it as an indicator of candidate quality.

[19]We also conducted an analysis that relies exclusively on the ISBA evaluations even inside Cook county, and the results are quite similar to those reported here. We are missing ISBA evaluations for Cook county candidates before 1998.

[20]We have ratings and primary election information for many other candidates running in sub-circuits inside Cook county, but we do not have the normal vote data at the sub-circuit level.

top left panel of the figure shows that the winners of Strong Party primaries (+1) are more likely to be high quality than the Balanced Parties cases (0) or Weak Party primaries (-1) – the probability is over 0.9, compared to about 0.8 and 0.7 respectively. In the top right panel we see that on average Strong Party primaries have close to three primary candidates, while Balanced Parties cases have on average slightly less than two candidate per race. The Weak Party cases have less than 1.5 candidates per primary. The bottom panels of the figure indicate that the primary candidates in the Strong Party primary also tend to be higher quality than in the Balanced Parties or Weak Party cases. These patterns are also evident in Table 1, where we regress the various measures of primary competition on primary type.

The patterns in Figure 7 for Illinois judicial primaries is very similar to Figure 6 for open-seat U.S. House primaries. These figures suggest that open-seat primaries are an effective selection mechanism for insuring that high quality types are likely to represent districts that are not likely to have significant general competition.

4.3 Newspaper Endorsements in Congressional and Statewide Races

In this sub-section we consider an indicator that has not been used previously in the literature on candidate quality: newspaper endorsements. We have collected thousands of primary election endorsements, mainly for the period 1990-2010 but in some cases for earlier years. These endorsements can be used to construct an accurate and reliable measure of relative candidate quality.

Newspapers around the U.S. routinely endorse candidates running for office, both in primary and general elections.[21] Journalists and newspaper editors have much more information than others about the candidates, because they collect this information as a routine matter in the course of writing and publishing election news stories. In addition, most newspaper staffs conduct interviews of candidates before making their endorsements.

We have not attempted to construct a comprehensive catalogue of the criteria newspapers use to make their endorsements. After reading hundreds of endorsement editorials, however,

[21]Some newspapers, such as the Los Angeles Times, have a policy of endorsing candidates in the general election but not in the primary election, or of endorsing in the primary election mainly in one-party areas where the primary election is likely to determine the final winner.

our impression is that the dominant criteria are previous experience, accomplishments, and qualifications relevant for the office sought. Relevant experience would include prior state legislative experience for candidates running for congress or the other state legislative chamber; prior public sector or private sector auditing experience for candidates running for state auditor; and prior experience as a district attorney or prosector in the state attorney general's office when running for state attorney general. Newspapers often cite experience running a large bureaucratic organization – e.g., as mayor of a large city, or statewide executive officer, or civic association leader – for candidates running for governor or other executive office. They also often cite the opinions of other experts – e.g., legislative colleagues who attest to how hardworking, responsible, and intelligent a candidate is.

We believe that most newspaper endorsements are good indicators of quality. This is especially true for primary election endorsements. Even if a newspaper has a partisan or ideological bias, this bias is not likely to matter much for its primary election endorsements, since all of the candidates in a given party's primary are affiliated with same party, and since the ideological differences between candidates in a given party's primary tend to be small.[22]

For more direct evidence that endorsements are good indicators of quality, we can compare newspaper endorsements to other quality measures when other measures are available. Judges provide one excellent set of cases. We have both primary election endorsements and bar association evaluations for a large number of judicial candidates.[23] In these cases, the newspaper endorsements are highly correlated with bar association evaluations. More precisely, consider the candidates who received at least 2 newspaper endorsements and for whom we have at least one bar association evaluation. Call these candidates "highly endorsed."[24] There are 251 cases, and in 247 (98.4%) of them the highly endorsed candidate received a bar association of Qualified or better. That is, in only 4 cases (1.6 %), did a highly endorsed

[22]It is possible that an extremely partisan newspaper might try to "sabotage" the nomination of the party it opposes, and endorse weak candidates in that party's primary. However, such behavior would be so outrageously unprofessional by today's journalistic standards that it must occur rarely if ever.

[23]See Lim and Snyder (2012) for more details about the bar association ratings, including evidence that these ratings do not exhibit a partisan bias.

[24]We include non-partisan general election races, in addition to primary races, to increases sample size.

candidate receive an Unqualified or Not Recommended evaluation.[25] Moreover, in these 4 cases *all* of the candidates in the race received Unqualified or Not Recommended evaluations. Even the candidates with just one newspaper endorsement were rated as Qualified or better in 97.2% of the cases (out of 1,111). By comparison, the candidates who received no newspaper endorsements were rated as Qualified or better in only 63.8% of the case (out of 2,013).

Thus, at least for the case of judges, highly endorsed candidates are virtually never among the "low-quality" candidates.

It is also the case that for candidates running for statewide office of the U.S. House, there is a strong and positive relationship between being "highly endorsed" and having previous political experience. More specifically, call a candidate "experienced" it he or she is has previously served as an elected statewide officer, U.S. senator or U.S. House representative, state legislator, or mayor. Consider all open-seat primaries for which we have 2 or more endorsements and in which at least one of the candidates is experienced and one is not experienced. In this sample, 73% of the highly endorsed candidates are experienced, while only 26% of the candidates who are not highly endorsed are experienced.

This evidence suggests that when we have endorsements from several newspapers for the same race, and one candidate receives most or all of these endorsements, then we can be relatively certain that this candidate is, at least relative to the others, a high quality candidate. It is less clear what newspaper endorsements mean when they are split relatively evenly across two or more candidates. If a candidate receives multiple endorsements, then he or she is likely a relatively high quality candidate, even if another candidate also received one or more endorsements. We are not as certain that this is the case when a candidate receives just one endorsement (although at least for judges it would appear to be the case), since even a relatively weak candidate is sometimes endorsed by his or her "hometown" newspaper.

Now consider all open-seat primary elections for statewide office or the U.S. House held during the period 1990 to 2010 for which we have two or more endorsements. We ask: How

[25]We also call candidates unqualified if they are rated as "lacking qualifications" or if they refused to participate in the review process.

often do "highly endorsed" candidates win in the primary, compared to other candidates?

Table 2 shows the results. The table is divided into several panels, in which we vary the definition of a "highly endorsed" candidate (rows) and consider primaries with different numbers of candidates (columns). For example, in the top panel a candidate is classified as highly endorsed if and only if he or she received at least three endorsements and also received at least three-quarters of the total number endorsements in our sample. The first column shows the results for races with exactly two candidates, and the second column covers the races with three or more candidates.

Consider first the two-candidate contests. In these races, the candidates with three or more endorsements win the primary 85-87% of the time, and the candidates with two or more endorsements win more than 80% of the time. This is much higher than the 50% we would expect if voters were simply flipping coins.

Next, consider the races with three or more candidates. In these races, the candidates with three or more endorsements win 65-67% of the time, and those with two or more endorsements win 60-64% of the time. Again, this is much larger than what we expect under random voting. In our sample, the multi-candidate races involve an average of slightly more than 4 candidates, so if voting was random then we would expect each candidate to win about 25% of the time.[26]

We do not present results comparing Strong Party, Weak Party and Balanced Parties primaries using the endorsements measure of quality. In fact, the differences are small and statistically insignificant. More precisely, the probability that the winner in a given party's primary is a highly endorsed candidate is approximately the same in constituencies that are safe for that party and constituencies that are not safe. The reason, most likely, is that endorsements only provide a measure of the relative quality conditional on the candidates who run, because newspapers almost always endorse exactly one candidate.[27] For example, Strong Party primaries probably involve two high quality candidates, where one candidate

[26]The average of the inverse of the number of candidates is also about 1/4.

[27]Occasionally a newspaper will decline to make an endorsement or will endorse multiple candidates, but such cases are rare.

is only slightly better than the other, much more often than Weak Party primaries. In such cases, newspaper endorsements might pile up on the slightly better candidate, but voters might sometimes choose the other candidate.[28]

The bottom line from Table 2 is clear, however. Assuming that the highly endorsed candidates are relatively high quality – i.e., high quality compared to their competitors – the results show that open-seat primary elections are much more likely to produce high quality winners than a "random draw" from the pool.

5 The Quality of Open-Seat Winners

The figures above suggest that open seat primaries produce higher quality general election nominees for the strong party in uncompetitive districts as compared to competitive districts. In the introduction we suggested that the lower quality of party nominees in competitive districts is less of a concern since the general election will serve as an additional screening mechanism. Thus, we can now ask whether the quality of general election winners for open seats differs between competitive and uncompetitive districts.

In Table 3 we present the percentage of general election winners who are high quality in competitive and uncompetitive districts. We also present the percentage of all candidates competing in the primary elections who are high quality in the two types of districts, dropping token candidates who win less than 1% of the vote. If both primary and general election competition are effectively selecting high quality candidates, then we should observe a similarly high percentage of general election winners being high quality in both types of districts. These percentages should be higher for the general election winners as compared to the general pool of candidates.

There are two clear patterns in Table 3. First, for the previous office holder experience and the bar association recommendations measures of quality, the percentage of general elections winners who are high quality is very similar in both the competitive and uncompetitive

[28]By contrast, we might expect to see cases involving a clearly high quality candidate and a clearly low quality candidate more often in Weak Party primaries. And these are the "easy" cases, where newspaper endorsements and voters are most likely to agree on which candidate is better.

districts. This suggests that the primaries have an important role in selecting high quality incumbents for uncompetitive districts.

The second pattern in Table 3 is that the winners are more likely to be high quality than the average open seat candidate. Those skeptical of the value of primary elections often point to the fact that few incumbents are even contested in their primary, let alone fiercely challenged. However, since incumbents appear to be of higher quality than the "pool" of candidates, it is not clear that the lack of competition is a major problem. In fact given the costs associated with competitive primaries – borne by candidates, government and voters – it might be socially optimal for most incumbent to be unchallenged. Instead, it is probably more efficient to allocate scarce "primary election resources" to open seat races and incumbent-contested races in the rare case where incumbents are low quality. In both cases we should be especially focused on constituencies where one party has an advantage.[29]

6 Candidate Performance in Incumbent Contested Races

Most existing statistical studies of performance-based accountability focus on policy related outcomes – such as the economy or crime rates or "bringing home the bacon" – but that also depend heavily on a wide variety of factors beyond the control of politicians. Few such analyses use *direct* evaluations of performance or quality, largely because such measures are unavailable. In the studies focusing on outcomes, it is often unclear what information voters actually have about outcomes, or even which outcomes they are using.[30] Moreover, a number of studies have found that negative outcomes have a negative effect on electoral support for the incumbent even when the incumbent has little influence over the outcome.[31]

[29]The findings are consistent with models of electoral selection and the incumbency advantage – e.g. Zaller (1998) and Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita (2008). Other empirical work, e.g. Hirano and Snyder (2009), also finds evidence suggesting that incumbents are higher quality than the average general election open seat candidate.

[30]What information do voters have to evaluate an incumbent's performance in "bringing home the bacon"? Researchers have no idea. In evaluating the economy do voters use unemployment, inflation, GDP growth, GDP growth in the last six months, or some mixture of these? A large literature has addressed this issue, from the seminal article by Kramer's (1971) to more recent work by Fair (2002), Ansolabehere, et al. (2011), and Healy and Lenz (2012), but there is still no consensus.

[31]See, e.g., Achen and Bartels (2004); Wolfers (2002); Healy et. al. (2010); Huber, et al. (2012).

A few existing studies use measures derived from specific activities of incumbents, or experts' evaluations of incumbent performance. For example, as noted in the introduction, a number of articles study the electoral impact of scandals. A few other studies have developed indices of legislative effectiveness or quality and shown that they are correlated with general election outcomes. Luttbeg (1992) studies journalists' rankings of legislators in several states, and finds that legislators with the highest rankings have a 12% higher probability of reelection than those with the lowest rankings. McCurley and Mondak (1995) employs measures of "integrity," "competence" and "quality" from content analysis of the biographical descriptions of U.S. House members in the *Almanac of American Politics* and *Politics in America*. They focus on the link between incumbent quality and voters' opinions as revealed in the National Election Studies. They find that incumbent integrity directly influences both feeling thermometer scores and voting choices, while competence affects elections indirectly via the behavior of potential challengers. Padro-i-Miguel and Snyder (2006) uses a measure of legislative effectiveness for the North Carolina state legislature, which we describe below, and finds that legislators with low effectiveness scores are less likely to be re-elected.

Few studies address accountability in primary elections. Among the exceptions are the papers cited in the introduction that examine the effect of political scandals on primary election outcomes involving incumbents.[32] These papers typically find that scandals hurt incumbents in terms of vote-share.[33] However, since the degree of competition in incumbent-contested primaries is so minimal on average, the authors typically conclude that primaries matter little or not all. For example, Brown (2006b, pages 8-9) states: "The scandal variables are statistically significant and large in magnitude in nearly all of the regressions. As predicted, incumbents are hurt by scandal and in the pooled regressions they are harmed more by morality scandals than by monetary scandals. Since incumbents, however, typically win primary elections by larger margins than they do general elections, the impact of losing more

[32]A number of papers also find that scandals hurt congressional and senate incumbents significantly in general elections, including Peters and Welch (1980), Abramowitz(1988, 1991), Alford et al. (1994), Jacobson and Dimock (1994), Stewart (1994), Welch and Hibbing (1997), and Brown (2006a, 2006b).

[33]See, e.g., Jacobson and Dimock (1994) regarding the 1992 House Bank scandal, Brown (2006a) for a comprehensive study of U.S. House races between 1966 and 2002, and Brown (2006b) for a study of the 2006 elections.

percentage points in a primary may have little or no effect on the outcome (the constants in these models suggest as much)." Some studies even find small and statistically insignificant effects. Welch and Hibbing (1997, page 233) note that for the 1980's: "Primary defeats are even rarer than voluntary departures... More importantly, [the primary defeat rate] is only slightly higher than the primary defeat rate for incumbents not charged with corruption, despite the fact that an incumbent not charged with corruption almost never loses in the primary."[34]

To our knowledge, only three studies examine the relationship between expert evaluations of incumbent performance and primary election outcomes. Mondak (1995) employs the McCurley and Mondak (1995) measures of competence and integrity and finds that incumbents with low competence are more likely to face primary opposition and have smaller primary election vote margins. Mondak interprets these findings as evidence for the potential role of primary elections in removing poorly performing politicians: "If we value legislative skills, then it clearly is good news that primary elections serve in part to weed out those congressional incumbents with the lowest levels of competence." Mondak (1995, 1060)). However, the analysis does not examine whether incompetent incumbents actually lose in a primary election. The pessimism regarding the role of primary elections in removing malfeasant incumbents in the above studies is because the those authors suspect that primary competition does not ultimately lead low quality incumbents to be *removed* from office. Most recently, Lim and Snyder (2012) use bar association evaluations of candidates running for judicial offices. They find evidence that candidates with low ratings receive significantly fewer votes in primary elections, non-partisan general elections, and retention elections.

We study two cases where relatively direct measures of candidate quality are available: (1) U.S. House races with incumbents involved in corruption scandals and (2) North Carolina state legislative races, using effectiveness rankings to measure of incumbent quality.

[34]Lazarus (2008) describes his findings on senate and gubernatorial races as follows: "... the coefficient on scandal is statistically significant and in the predicted direction only for one type of challenger: amateur out-party challengers in gubernatorial election. Thus, it does not seem as though the presence of a scandal results in the entry of a significant number of serious challengers of either party."

6.1 U.S. House Incumbents in Scandals, 1978-2008

One situation where it seems clear that an incumbent deserves to be replaced is when the incumbent has been involved in malfeasance of some sort – illegal activities, or activities that, while not illegal, violate the norms of proper behavior to an extreme degree. These are relatively rare cases, but they are especially useful in estimating a "lower bound" on the value of elections – i.e., do they at least help citizens remove the worst types of politicians from office?

We analyze the impact of scandals on primary and general election competition over three decades, 1978 to 2008. We begin by asking whether or not the incumbent involved in a scandal is more likely to lose in a primary election and whether this likelihood varies by the general election safety of their district. As above, we classify a congressional district as safe if the presidential vote for the incumbent's party is greater than 57.5%. We then plot the various primary election competition variables against seat safety, separately for incumbents involved and not involved in scandals.[35]

During this period, 12% of incumbents involved in scandals lose in a primary election. As shown in Figure 8 the relationship is even stronger in safe seats. Over 18% of incumbents involved in scandals who represent safe general election districts lose in a primary election as opposed to about 6% who represent competitive general election districts. For incumbents not involved in scandals, less than 1% of them lose their primary election in either safe or competitive districts.

We can also investigate how scandals are related to other aspects of primary competition. Key variables are: (1) the presence of a primary challenger; (2) the number of primary election challengers the incumbent faced; (3) the presence of an experienced challenger; and (4) the total vote share for all challengers.[36] These variables are shown in Figure 9. In all

[35]We drop Louisiana from all of our analyses due to its unique electoral system. The primary election data is described in Ansolabehere, et. al. (2006, 2010) and Hirano et. al. (2010).

[36]We drop token challengers who received less than 1% of the vote. We classify a challenger as experienced if she won an election for Congress, a major state level office, state or county legislator, mayor, city council, or county executive. The information was gathered from the ICPSR State Legislative data sets, newspaper reports, and various on-line databases.

cases, incumbents in scandals face stiffer competition in the primary, and this is especially true if for incumbents who represent safe districts. We present the results of regressions that show these same patterns in Table 4.

To assess the role of primaries in helping to remove malfeasant incumbents we would ideally like to know how likely it is that those who lost in the primary would have won in the general election. To estimate the relationship between scandals and general election vote shares, we regress the general election vote share on primary scandal, lagged general election vote shares, presidential vote share, presidential vote share squared, a Republican indicator variable and a freshman indicator variable.[37] We find that incumbent candidates involved in scandals have a roughly 10% lower than expected vote share compared to other incumbents. Thus, roughly 23% of the incumbents who were involved in relatively serious scandals and defeated in their re-election bids would probably have won in the general election had they not lost in the primary, and therefore the primary was probably necessary to remove them from office. Thus, sometimes, primary elections serve a valuable function.[38] This happens in relatively few cases – only 2.8% of incumbents who represent safe districts are involved in scandals – but these are especially important cases.

In the above figures we restrict attention to incumbents involved in scandals who choose to run for re-election. About one-third of incumbents involved in scandals retire without seeking re-election. Our analysis may underestimate the effect of scandals if the incumbents who retire would have done particularly poorly in either the primary or general election as a result of the scandal. However, we find that the retirement rates were relatively similar in both safe and competitive districts for incumbents involved in scandals. This is consistent with what we would observe if both primary and general elections were providing a significant hurdle for malfeasant incumbents.

The findings above are easily summarized. Incumbents involved in relatively serious scan-

[37] Uncontested incumbents are again assigned 100% of the vote.

[38] Of course, we do not know whether these incumbents would also have lost in conventions or "smoke-filled rooms," so we cannot assert that primaries are superior to other nomination methods. Moreover, we do not know if those involved in a scandal who lost in the primary would have had a drop of even more than 10% percentage points in the general election.

dals face a higher probability of being challenged in the primary than ordinary incumbents, and they also face a higher chance of losing their primary elections. They are especially likely to be challenged in the primary, and especially likely to lose, when they are involved in scandals *and* represent districts that are safe for their party. Thus, our findings indicate that primary elections can improve accountability by removing incumbents who face re-election in districts or regions dominated by one political party.

Our analysis may underestimate the value of holding incumbents in safe districts accountable through primary elections, for at least three reasons. First, incumbents in safe districts tend to be more senior and powerful than those from marginal districts. This is also true for incumbents involved in scandals. In our sample, the median number of terms served for incumbents involved in scandals from safe districts was 7, while the median number of terms served for those involved in scandals from non-safe districts was just 5. Party caucuses and conventions might be especially unwilling to remove powerful party members, such as senior members of congress, and this may give primaries an even more important role. Second, as noted above, some incumbents involved in scandals choose to retire rather than run for re-election, and they are excluded. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many of these incumbents would have faced serious primary opposition had they run. Finally, if primaries are a mechanism for holding incumbents in safe districts accountable, then incumbents should already be incorporating the potential loss of office in a primary election into their decisions about whether to engage in any type of political malfeasance.

6.2 Effectiveness of North Carolina Legislators, 1988-2010

We now turn to the North Carolina state legislature, where legislators are given a ranking by the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research (NCPPR). We ask similar questions to the previous analysis of scandals – i.e. do the least effective legislators face more primary competition and do they lose in primaries more often than others? Also, is the relationship different in districts which are safe versus competitive in the general election?

Unlike scandals, this measure of effectiveness likely captures not only effort, but also the

innate abilities of representatives.

We study North Carolina because of data availability and also because of its status as a hybrid legislature. The NCPPR compiles and publishes what is almost surely the best publicly available data about legislator effectiveness in the U.S.. Moreover, because NC has hybrid legislature – an amateur, citizens' legislature with some professional characteristics – so there is a large amount of variation in the workload across the legislators. What this means is that even though the effectiveness rankings are subjective evaluations (by journalists, lobbyists, and legislators themselves) we suspect that it is relatively easy for the evaluators to at least identify the least effective legislators.

The North Carolina legislature is called the General Assembly. It consists of two chambers, a House of Representatives with 120 members and a Senate with 50 members. All members are elected every two years for two-year terms. The General Assembly is typically described a hybrid – an amateur, citizens' legislature with some professional characteristics. Regular legislative sessions are biennial, convening in January following each election. In addition, there have been special sessions or short sessions in virtually every even-numbered year since 1974. In 1986-88 the North Carolina legislature was ranked 22nd by Squire's (1992) index of legislative professionalism. In 2001 legislative salaries were $13,951 plus a $104 per diem for living expenses. Legislative leaders earned substantially more – e.g., the Speaker of the House received a salary of $38,151 and an expense allowance of $16,956.[39]

The Democratic Party dominated the North Carolina General Assembly until very recently. Democrats held 86% of all state legislative seats during the period 1970-1979, 77% during 1980-1989, and 61% during 1990-1999. In 1994 Republicans won control of the state House for the first time in 100 years. They won again in 1996, but then lost in 1998.[40] Internally, the legislature is organized mainly along party lines. The majority party controls all committee chairs, but some vice-chairs and subcommittee chairs go to the minority.

[39]Despite its character as a citizens' legislature, some observers argue that until recently the North Carolina General Assembly was one of the most powerful legislative bodies in the nation. This is due to the fact that until 1996 the governor of North Carolina had no veto.

[40]The 2002 elections produced an exact 50-50 split in the House, resulting in a unique system of shared control. Democrats controlled the state Senate throughout the period under study, but with a narrow 26-24 margin during 1995-1996.

Electorally, party organizations in North Carolina are stronger than in most other southern states, but typically rank just below the U.S. average (see, e.g., Cotter, *et al.*, 1984). Morehouse (1981) classified North Carolina as a state in which pressure groups are strong.

The data on legislator effectiveness comes from the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research (NC Center), an independent non-partisan organization.[41] At the end of each regular legislative session after the legislature has adjourned, the NC Center asks state legislators, lobbyists and legislative liaisons, and capital news correspondents to rate the "effectiveness" of each member of the General Assembly. According to the NC Center:

> Ratings were to be based on their participation in committee work, their skill at guiding bills through floor debate, their general knowledge and expertise in special fields, the respect they command from their peers, the enthusiasm with which they execute various legislative responsibilities, the political power they hold (either by virtue of office, longevity, or personal attributes), their ability to sway the opinion of fellow legislators, and their aptitude for the overall legislative process. (From *Article II: A Guide to the 1991-1992 N.C. Legislature*, p. 212.)

The NC Center has conducted this survey continuously since 1977. The sample includes all 170 legislators, all lobbyists registered in the state capital who reside in North Carolina (250-325 lobbyists), and all journalists who regularly cover the state General Assembly (35-45 journalists), for a total sample size of 475-550.[42] The NC Center publishes a ranking based on these ratings in its biennial handbooks, *Article II: A Guide to the N.C. Legislature*.

As argued above, there are theoretical and empirical reasons to expect that the best we can hope for from elections is that voters use them to remove the least effective politicians. Therefore we collapse the legislator effectiveness rankings to a dichotomous variable identifying the bottom quarter – i.e. the bottom 30 state House members and bottom 12 state senators.

As noted above, the main weakness of the *Effectiveness* rankings is that they are based

[41]The NC Center was created in 1977. It is "an independent, nonprofit organization dedicated to the goals of a better-informed public and more effective, accountable, and responsive government" (see the URL: http://www.nccppr.org/mission.html#mission).

[42]Response rates were only about 33% for the period 1977-1981, but have been over 50% in later years. For more information see the North Carolina Political Review's August 2002 interview with Ran Coble, executive director of the NC Center. The text of the interview can be found at URL: http://www.ncpoliticalreview.com/0702/coble1.htm.

on subjective evaluations. This disadvantage is offset by several desirable characteristics: Each ranking is based on a large number of evaluations; the evaluators are all legislative "specialists" of one sort or another; and the rankings are constructed in a consistent manner over a long period of time.

Two other facts about the rankings are encouraging. First, between 1977 and 1992 the NC Center reported the average evaluation that each representative received from each of the three types of respondents – legislators, lobbyists, and journalists – in addition to the overall evaluation and ranking. The correlations across the three separate scores are quite high: the correlation between the average rating by legislators and the average rating by lobbyists is .93, the correlation between the average rating by legislators and the average rating by journalists is .89, and the correlation between the average rating by lobbyists and the average rating by journalists is .91. Thus, various biases that we might imagine in the responses – e.g., lobbyists might systematically underrate legislators who oppose their positions, and legislators might systematically underrate members of the opposing party – do not appear to be a problem.

Second, the NC Center's *Article II* guides also contain information on the number of bills each member introduced, and how many of these became law. For representatives serving during the period 1981-2000, the correlation between *Effectiveness* and the number of bills introduced is .51, and the correlation between *Effectiveness* and the number of bills ratified is .50. Thus, the more objective measures of activity are strongly and positively related to *Effectiveness*. On the other hand, the correlation is far from 1, indicating that *Effectiveness* measures something other than simply introducing and passing bills.

In order to classify districts we must measure the "normal vote" in each legislative district. We aggregate precinct level election results for all available statewide offices to estimate the *Normal Vote*. Due to redistricting we have two different sets of districts.[43]

Finally, to measure the primary election outcomes we collected primary election data on

[43]These statewide offices we use include: U.S. Senator, Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Secretary of State, Treasurer, Auditor, Attorney General, Commissioner of Agriculture, Commissioner of Insurance, Commissioner of Labor, and Superintendent of Public Instruction.

all candidates running for the North Carolina General Assembly during the period 1988-2010. We obtained this data from the North Carolina State Board of Elections.[44] As above, we classify a state legislative district as safe for an incumbent if the normal vote for the incumbent's party exceeds 57.5%.

Figure 10 shows the results. Clockwise from the top left, the figure displays the proportion of races with a contested primary, the average number of challengers in a primary contest, the average total vote share of the primary challengers, and the proportion of races where the challenger wins the primary. On average, incumbent legislators with relatively low legislative effectiveness scores are more likely to face a primary challenger, have lower vote primary election vote shares, and be more likely to lose the primary as compared to those with high legislative effectiveness ratings. When we compare safe versus competitive districts, both legislators with high and low legislative effectiveness scores face more primary competition in safe districts. However, when only incumbents with low effectiveness scores show an increase in probability of losing a primary election in safe as opposed to competitive districts. We again present the results of regressions that show these same patterns in Table 4.

While the patterns in the figure are not as dramatic as those in Figures 8 and 9 for U.S. House scandals, the patterns are consistent with our claim that primaries providing an important electoral mechanism for holding incumbents accountable when the general elections are not likely to be competitive.

7 Conclusion

Although primary elections are often uncompetitive, the analyses demonstrate that they maybe quite valuable for an important subset of situations. In particular, primary elections are especially competitive in the advantaged party of constituencies in which one party has a clear advantage in terms of voter loyalties. In addition we find evidence that primary elections appear to especially good at selecting "high quality" types in open seat races, and at punishing poor performance of incumbents, in primaries where the underlying voter

[44]We obtained some of this data in reports from the NC State Board of Elections and the NC State Legislative Library, and we extracted some from the URL: http://www.sboe.state.nc.us.

loyalties in the constituency clearly favor that party. Primaries, therefore, appear to be especially valuable when effective two-party competition is lacking. This is precisely where we expect them to be most needed. And as we also showed, many voters live in states, counties or congressional districts that are dominated by one party – this is true for about 60% of all congressional districts.

Although we have focused attention on the importance of primaries in areas dominated by one party, primaries can play an important role even competitive areas. One reason is polarization. If the increase in polarization in the U.S. is real, then primary elections are potentially even more useful. When the major parties are polarized, primaries might be valuable even in relatively balanced constituencies, because there might be too few "swing" voters to effectively punish parties that choose weak candidates. In fact, if the *American Voter* view of "independents" is correct, then independents tend to be the least well-informed citizens. Therefore, we might not be able to rely on independent voters to vote against low-quality candidates, since they will not learn which candidates are low-quality. Instead, we must hope that enough partisan voters vote against their party's candidate when they learn that this candidate is of low quality. In a highly polarized environment, however, partisan voters will not be willing to vote against their party's candidate, even knowing that the candidate is low-quality. Primaries can help in such an environment, by giving partisan voters an opportunity to vote against a low-quality candidate in favor of a higher-quality candidate of the same party. Note also, that, in the primaries most voters tend to be partisans – and these are the people who are most well informed. So, there is a good chance they will find out which candidates are of low quality and which are not.

Although our analyses focus on U.S., the issues that arise with local one party dominance is likely to exist in other majoritarian systems. Recently, primaries of various types have been introduced to varying degrees in other countries. An open research question concerns the degree to which primaries in other democracies appear to improve the selection of high quality politicians, or are the patterns we observe unique to the U.S. political system.

Although we employ several different measure of quality and performance, our measures

are relatively coarse. We classify politicians into two groups – high and low quality / performance types. There is still potentially much work to be done on developing alternative measures of quality and in particular developing measures with more fine grained assessments of politician quality and performance that can be compared across politicians and elections.

Finally, we should mention that our study focuses on how primaries are related to one particular dimension of representation relevant to electorate – quality / performance of elected officials. Of course, primaries may affect other aspects of representation, such as policy positions. In fact, a large literature may suggest that the benefits gained from elected quality politicians with primaries are offset by the losses primaries produce by pulling politicians away from the median voters of their districts.[45] Moreover, primaries may weakened party organizations reducing the possibility of responsible party government. Future research into the costs and benefits of primaries is needed to fully assess the desirably of employing this additional hurdle in the electoral process.

[45]Our previous research suggests that this problem may not be very severe (Hirano et. al. 2010).

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Table 1
Regression Estimates for Open Seat Primaries

U.S. House Representatives, 1952-2000				
Independent Variable	Winner is State Leg	Winner is Experienced		
Partisan Strength	0.09 (0.02)	0.11 (0.02)		
Observations	1905	1905		
U.S. House Representatives, 1978-2010				
Independent Variable	Winner is Experienced	Number of Candidates	Number Exp Candidates	Fraction Exp Candidates
Partisan Strength	0.16 (0.02)	1.20 (0.09)	0.49 (0.04)	0.09 (0.01)
Observations	1331	1331	1331	1331
Illinois Circuit Court Judges				
Independent Variable	Winner is High-Quality	Number of Candidates	Number H-Q Candidates	Fraction H-Q Candidates
Partisan Strength	0.10 (0.02)	0.80 (0.10)	0.63 (0.07)	0.05 (0.02)
Observations	693	693	693	693

Notes: Each column presents OLS estimates and robust standard errors of a linear regression, for the dependent variable listed at the top of the column.

Table 2
Primary Outcomes and Endorsements

Definition of Highly Endorsed Candidate	2 Cands in Primary	3+ Cands in Primary
At Least 3 Endorsements and 75% of Total	86.9% (107)	66.7% (120)
At Least 2 Endorsements and 75% of Total	81.8% (198)	63.9% (227)
At Least 3 Endorsements and 67% of Total	85.0% (113)	64.7% (133)
At Least 2 Endorsements and 67% of Total	80.5% (215)	60.4% (270)

Cell entries give the percentage of endorsed candidates who won primary.

Table 3: Quality of General Election Winners vs. All Candidates for Open Seats		
	Uncompetitive District	Competitive District
U.S. House Representatives, 1952-2010		
Winners w/ State Legis Exp	46%	50%
Winners w/ Any Elected Exp	70%	69%
U.S. House Representatives, 1978-2010		
Winners w/ State Legis Exp	53%	57%
All Cands w/ State Legis Exp	24%	25%
Illinois Circuit Court Judges		
Winners w/ Bar Assoc Rating	91%	91%
All Cands w/ Bar Assoc Rating	66%	63%

Table 4
Regression Estimates for Primaries with Incumbents

U.S. House Representatives

Independent Variable	Challenger Winner	Primary Contested	Number of Challengers	Experienced Challenger	Challenger % of Vote
Scandal	0.05	0.16	0.36	0.18	10.48
	(0.03)	(0.05)	(0.13)	(0.05)	(2.40)
Safe District	0.00	0.06	0.10	0.05	1.49
	(0.00)	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.31)
Scandal × Safe District	0.12	0.19	0.90	0.22	12.42
	(0.05)	(0.08)	(0.26)	(0.08)	(3.90)
Observations	6188	6188	6188	6188	6188

NC State Legislators

Independent Variable	Challenger Winner	Primary Contested	Number of Challengers	Experienced Challenger	Challenger % of Vote
Low Ranking	-0.01	0.08	0.06	—	2.59
	(0.01)	(0.04)	(0.04)		(1.54)
Safe District	-0.00	0.09	0.09	—	3.03
	(0.01)	(0.03)	(0.03)		(1.02)
Low Ranking × Safe District	0.06	0.02	0.10	—	3.23
	(0.03)	(0.06)	(0.07)		(2.35)
Observations	1235	1235	1235	—	1235

Notes: Each column presents OLS estimates and robust standard errors of a linear regression, for the dependent variable listed at the top of the column.

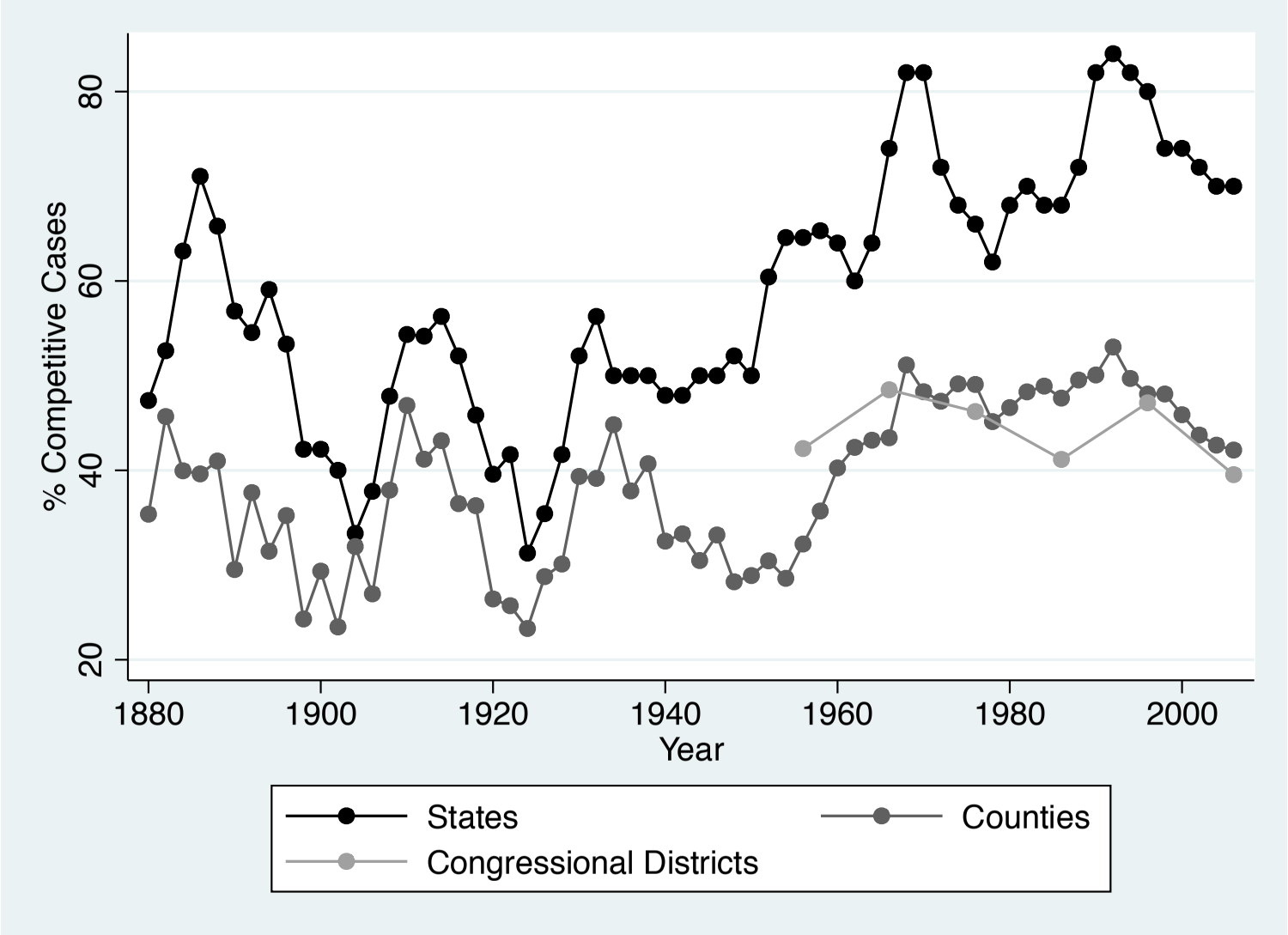

Figure 1: Two-Party Competition in the U.S., 1880-2006

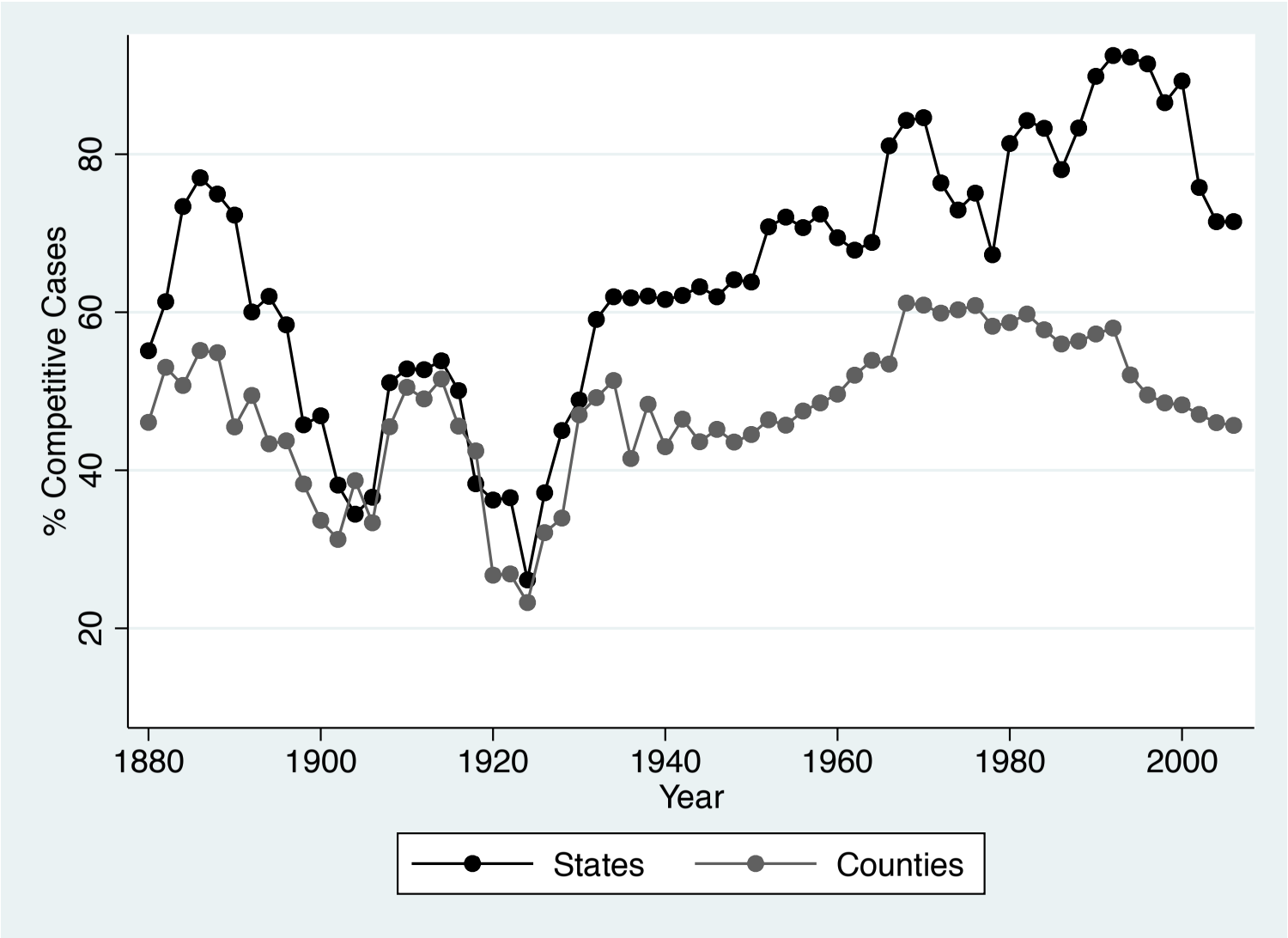

Figure 2: Two-Party Competition in the U.S., 1880-2006 (Population Weighted)

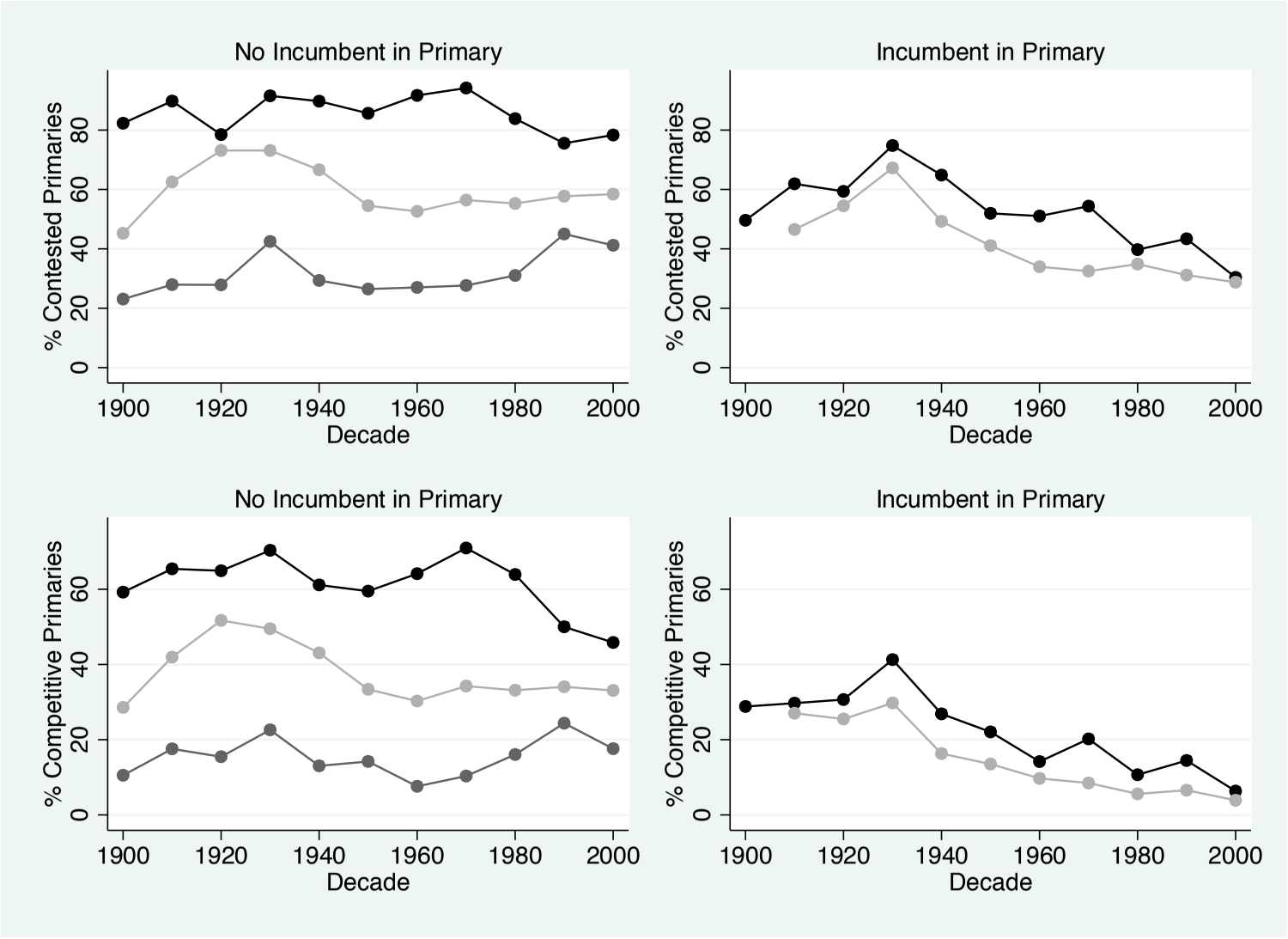

Figure 3: Primary Competition by Party Type and Incumbency, Statewide Elections

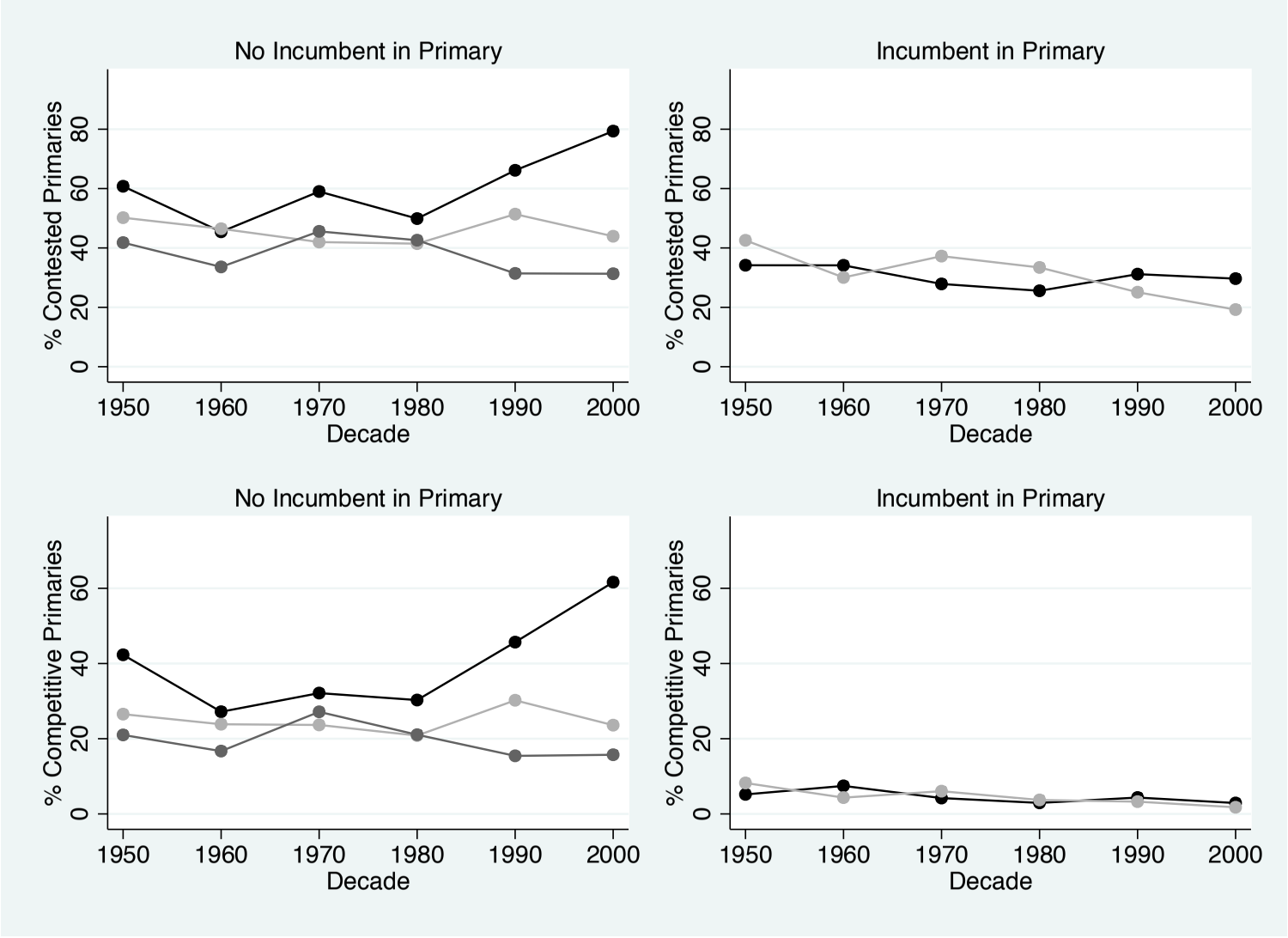

Figure 4: Primary Competition by Party Type and Incumbency, U.S. House Elections

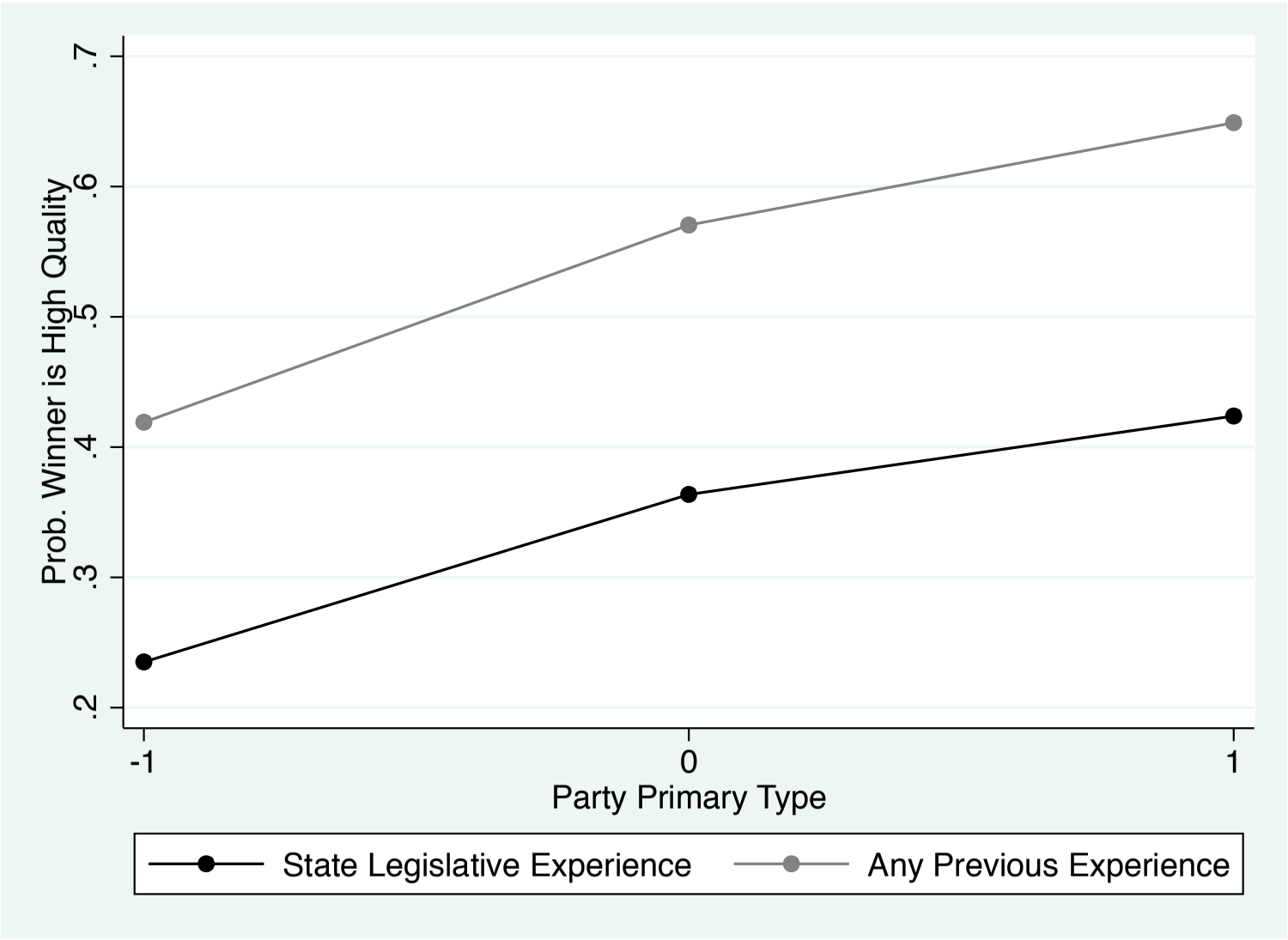

Figure 5: Prior Officeholder Experience in U.S. House Open-Seat Primaries, 1952-2000

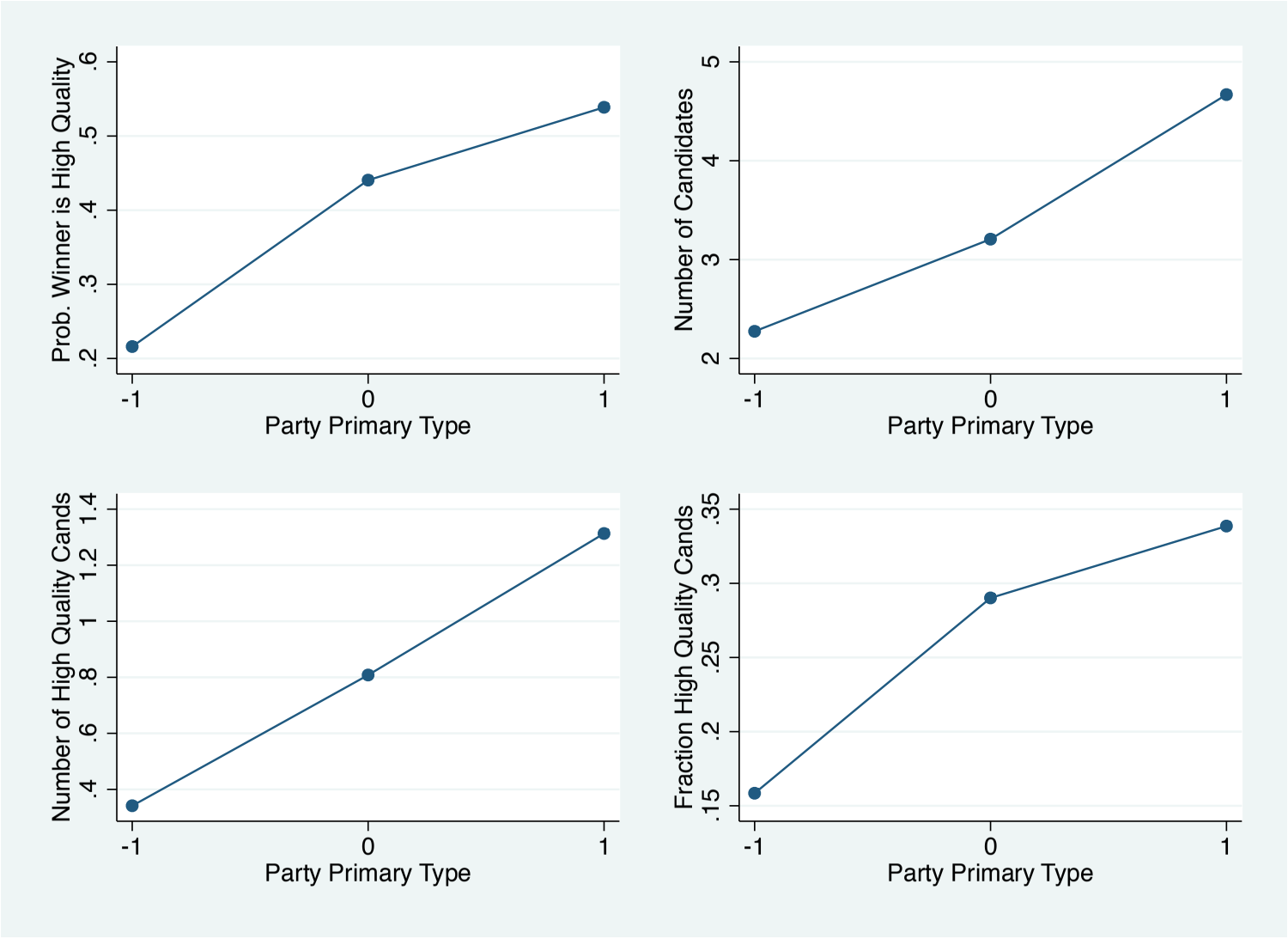

Figure 6: Prior Officeholder Experience in U.S. House Open-Seat Primaries, 1978-2010

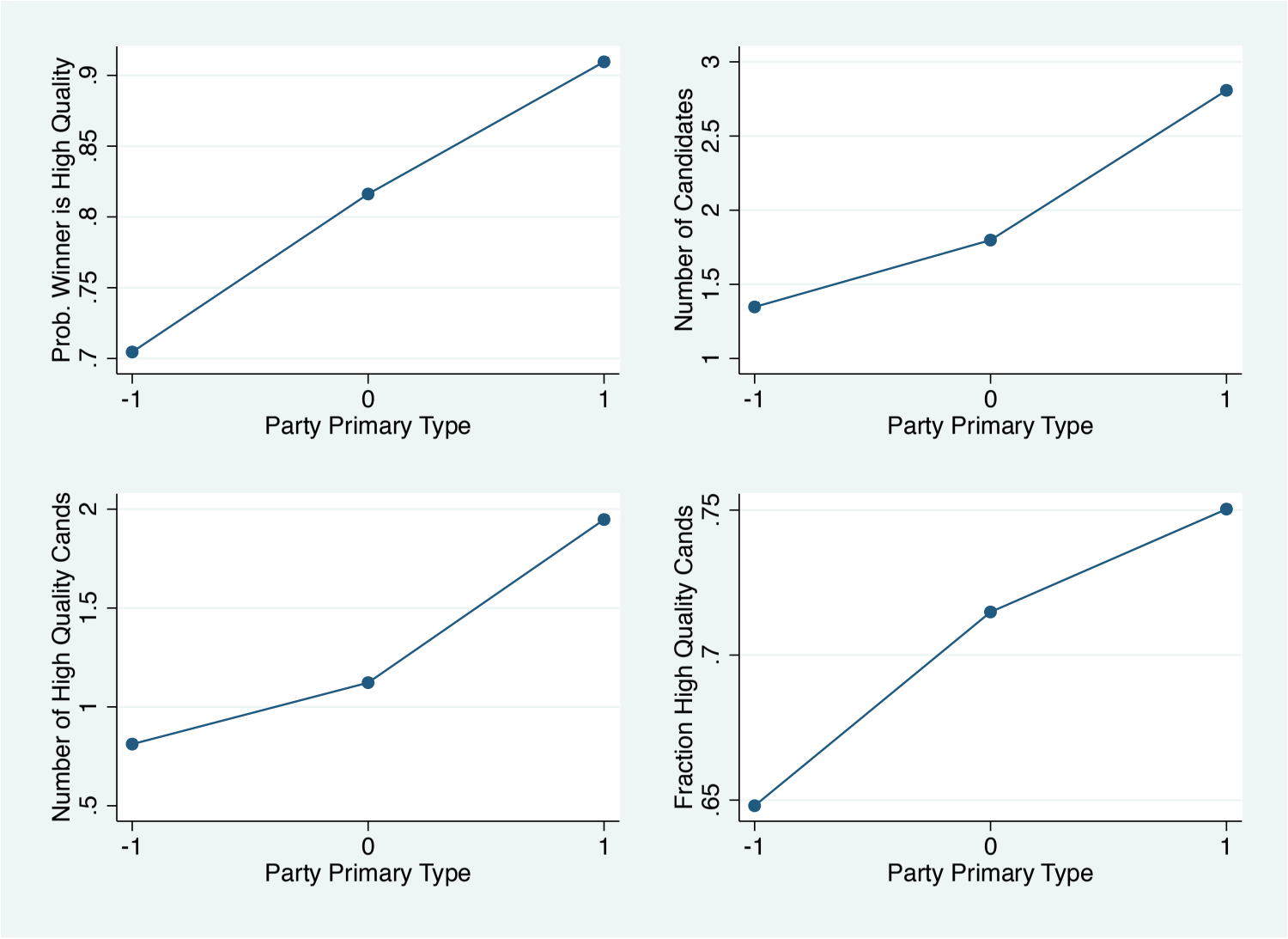

Figure 7: Quality, Seat Safety, and Competition in Illinois Judicial Primaries

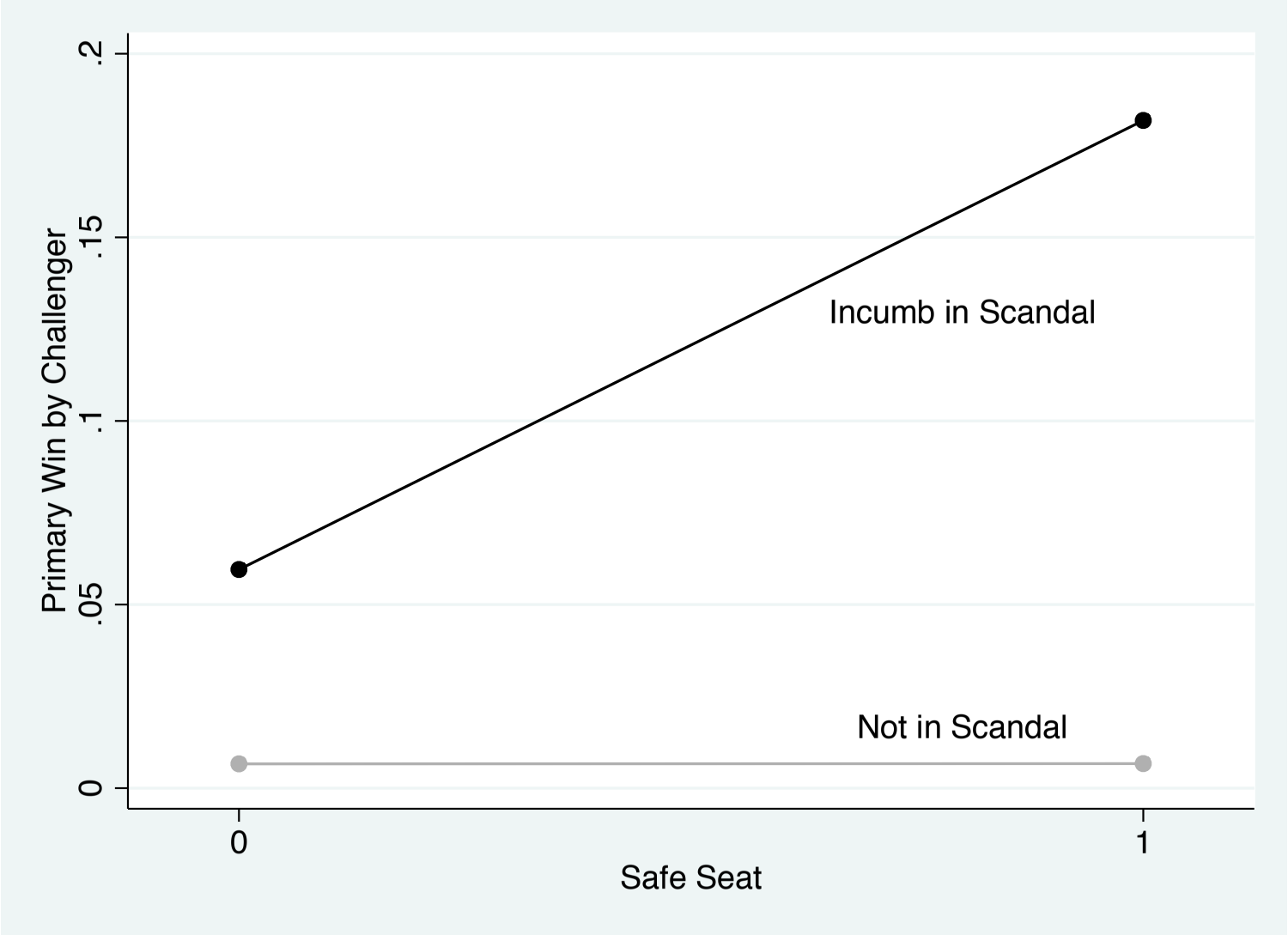

Figure 8: Scandals, Seat Safety, and Challenger Success in U.S. Congressional Primaries

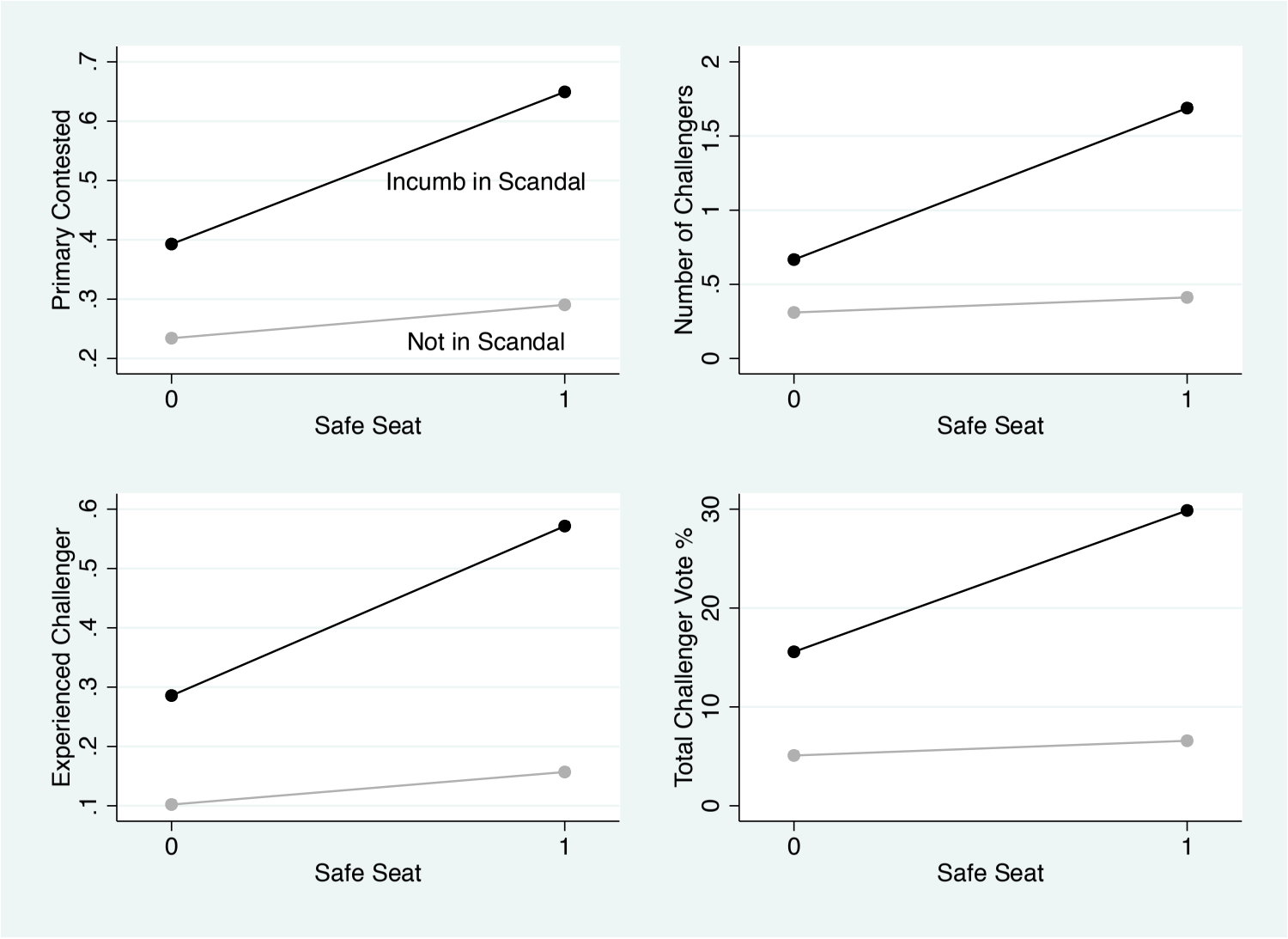

Figure 9: Scandals, Seat Safety, and Competition in U.S. Congressional Primaries

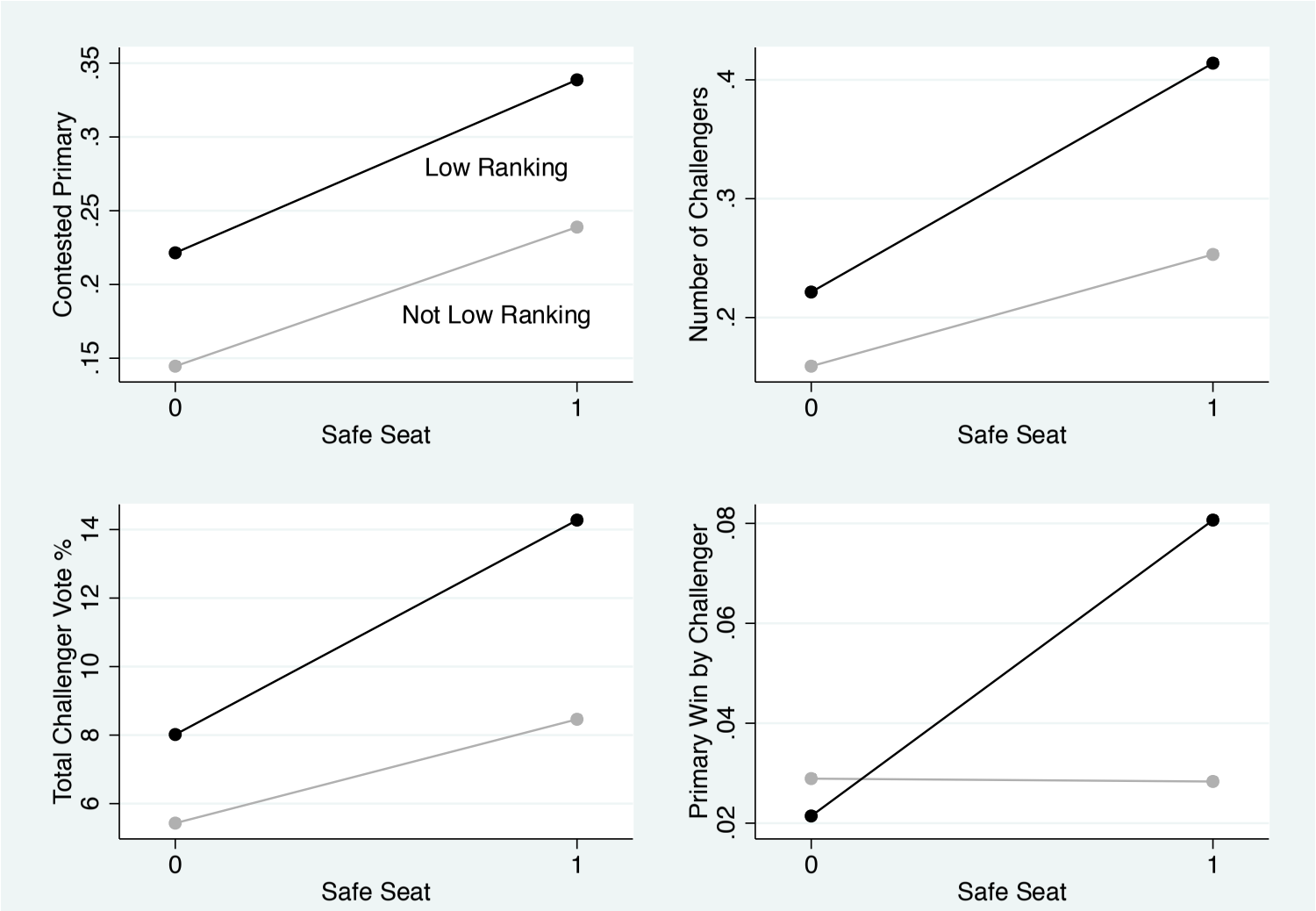

Figure 10: Effectiveness, Seat Safety, and Competition in North Carolina State Legislative Primaries