CrossMark

Party-bosses vs. party-primaries: Quality of legislature under different selectorates

Haldun Evrenk *, Timothy Lambie-Hanson, Yourong Xu

Economics Department, Suffolk University, 41 Temple St., Boston, MA 02108, United States

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

We compare the legislature quality under an exclusive, centralized selectorate (such as a party-principal) with that under an inclusive, decentralized selectorate (such as a party-primary). In our model, two parties compete over three districts: two are home districts of each party while the third is a battleground district characterized by weaker and uncertain policy preferences. We find that when home districts are "safe," and the parties' candidate pools are of comparable quality, an equilibrium legislature under party-primaries is always of higher quality than an equilibrium legislature under party-principals. When we extend the model to include a general number of districts with candidates of only high or low quality, we show that, as long as there are not too few nor too many highest-quality candidates, party-primaries still perform better than party-principals.

© 2012 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

The nature of the workings of government depends ultimately on the men who run it. The men we elect to office and the circumstances we create that affect their work determine the nature of popular government. Let there be emphasis on those we elect to office Key (1956, 10).

1. Introduction

How can a society ensure that its leaders are of highest possible quality? When candidates do not differ in their policies, an informed electorate would choose the candidate with the highest quality.[1] But, since candidates do differ in their policies and voters differ in their preferences over policies, a high-quality candidate, for example, may have no chance of winning if he is nominated in a district where his party's policy is unpopular. Therefore, in legislative elections the selection process that determines in which districts candidates run has important implications for the quality of elected politicians.

The political body that fields the candidates is called the selectorate (blending the words selector and electorate, Paterson (1967) coined the term). Different selectorates have different objectives; thus, it is no surprise that under different types of selectorates the allocation of candidates may differ. In this paper, we study how the quality of the elected legislature differs under

---

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 617 573 8495.
  E-mail address: evrenk@suffolk.edu (H. Evrenk).

[1] There is a growing literature that studies two-candidate general elections when the quality (valence) of candidates differs. Typically in this literature candidate valence is exogenous. See, for example, Aragones and Palfrey (2002), Groseclose (2001) and Wittman (2007). In both Aragones and Palfrey (2002) and Groseclose (2001) all voters can observe candidate quality, while in Wittman (2007) only some voters can observe it (the rest infer it from the pressure group endorsements). When valence is modeled as endogenous, it can generally be produced at some cost. See Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita (2009), Herrera et al. (2008), and Zakharov (2009).

an exclusive and centralized selector(ate), which we simply refer to as the party-principal, and an inclusive and decentralized selectorate, which we simply refer to as the party-primary.[2] When neither party clearly dominates the other one in terms of popularity of its policies or its candidates, we find that party-primaries always result in equilibrium legislatures of strictly greater quality than party-principals.

In the base model introduced in Section 2, two political parties compete over three single-member districts in a legislative election. The policy of each party is fixed; the parties diverge, i.e., propose different policies. Each party has a pool of three candidates who differ in their quality,[3] i.e., non-policy characteristics that are desirable by all voters such as honesty and competence. The candidate pool of each party is of comparable but not, necessarily, identical quality. All voters prefer high-quality candidates, but the voters of the districts differ in their policy preferences. Two of the three districts are the home districts of each party where the median voter strictly prefers the policy of one party. The home districts are safe: the home party is able to successfully defend the home district with its second-highest-quality candidate. The remaining district is a battleground district in which partisanship is weaker, and the policy of each party is favored with non-zero probability. We assume that the battleground district is contestable in the sense that if each party runs its highest-quality candidate in the battleground district, each will win with non-zero probability. Under both selectorates the candidates propose and, when elected, support the party policy.

Under either selectorate, the candidate allocation problem can be modeled as a game. In the first case, the players are the party-principals; each principal's objective is to maximize the number of expected seats his party wins.[4] In the second case, the players are the candidates (the party-primary always chooses the candidate with the highest quality); the candidates are selfish with each maximizing the probability that he wins a seat. Given two outcomes in which this probability is the same, he chooses the one in which his party wins more seats.

Even in the base model with only three districts and three candidates in each party, under either party-primaries or party-principals the game typically has multiple pure strategy Nash equilibria (PSNE). However, due to differences in the objectives of the players of each game, we are able to demonstrate how (and, why) these two sets of PSNE systematically differ. Party-principals will always run their best candidates in the contestable battleground district since both parties' home districts can be secured by lower-quality candidates. Alternatively, when candidates decide in which district's primary to run, higher-quality candidates can ensure that they run in the primary of a district they will win with certainty. Thus, under party-primaries the top two candidates always win a seat, while under party-principals, the top two candidates never both win a seat. Since we also show that the third (lowest-quality) member of the legislature will be of no lower quality under party-primaries than under party-principals, it follows that the overall legislature quality will be higher under party-primaries (Theorem 1). Then, at the end of Section 3, we extend the model to include a general number of each type of district and candidates of only high and low quality. We show that as long as there are neither too many nor too few high-quality candidates, our main result holds (Theorem 2).[5]

Though we believe the restrictions that we employ on partisanship and candidate quality in the main body of the paper do not contradict the political environment in many societies, we examine the robustness of our results to remove these assumptions in Section 4. Though our results weaken to various degrees depending on which assumptions we remove, even if we relax all three assumptions of safe home districts, contestable battleground districts, and relatively-evenly matched candidate pools, we still find that by some metric party-primaries perform better than party-principals. Specifically, if an equilibrium legislature of optimal quality exists under party principals, then one will as well under party-primaries, while the converse does not hold.

Therefore, rather than being driven by our assumptions, we believe our main results come primarily from the incentives of the players and the criteria with which the selectorates choose candidates, as well as the perfect information scenario we examine. Since the party-principals' objective is to win as many seats as possible, each may be willing to sacrifice his high-quality candidates' winning chances to compete in a contestable district or force the other party to run a high-quality candidate in response. Alternatively, in the case of party-primaries, we assume that the voters choose the candidate of highest-quality in the primary *and* that they are perfectly able to discern the quality of the candidates. Given that the candidates both know the level of partisanship in each district and are able to choose where they run, it is no surprise that the highest-quality candidates are able to locate in the most desirable districts (in terms of being elected). Though beyond the scope of the paper, if we instead studied a framework where the selectorate in primaries were unable to discern the true quality of the candidates, while, in contrast, party-principals could identify high-quality candidates, the results may differ.

To our knowledge, there have been relatively few formal analyses comparing different types of selectorates. In the existing literature, several authors recently emphasized the informational advantage of party-primaries over selection by party-principals. Among these, our work is most closely related to Snyder and Ting (2011) and Serra (2011), both of whom study how candidate selection through party-primaries reveal information about the valence of the candidates. Both papers provide an analysis that focuses on an election in a single constituency (as well as a detailed review of related literature). Our results complement their findings: in a setup with several districts, if the party-principals cannot observe the candidate quality (Snyder and Ting, 2011) or