



# Candidate strategies in primaries and general elections with candidates of heterogeneous quality



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## ABSTRACT

I consider a model in which candidates of differing quality must win a primary election to compete in the general election. I show that there is an equilibrium in which Democrats choose liberal policies and Republicans choose conservative policies, but higher quality candidates choose more moderate policies than lower quality candidates. In this equilibrium, higher quality candidates choose more moderate policies if they have a larger quality advantage or there is less uncertainty about the median voter's ideal point in the general election, and the candidates in a given primary choose closer policies to one another when there is a smaller quality difference between the candidates in a primary. I further show that if the candidates have policy motivations, then a low quality candidate may strategically choose to enter a primary even if running for office is costly and the candidate will lose the primary election with certainty in equilibrium.

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## 1. Introduction

A large body of empirical literature addresses what strategies candidates in United States elections follow under different circumstances. This literature notes several empirical regularities regarding candidate strategies. Higher quality candidates typically choose more moderate policies than lower quality candidates, where quality can be measured by variables such as incumbency advantages, the electoral strength of an incumbent, and voter perceptions of non-policy factors such as integrity, ability to work well with other leaders, and strength as a public servant (Ansolabehere et al., 2001; Brady et al., 2007; Fiorina, 1973; Stone and Simas, 2010). Low quality challengers frequently choose to enter primary elections against an incumbent despite the fact that such challengers typically have almost no chance of defeating their higher quality opponents (Brady et al., 2007; Jewell and Breaux, 1991; Turner, 1953). And candidates from different parties typically choose divergent policies in the sense that the positions chosen by candidates running as Democrats are normally more liberal than the positions chosen by candidates running as Republicans (Enelow and Hinch, 1984; Erikson and Wright Jr., 1997; Page, 1978; Poole and Rosenthal, 1984, 1997; Sullivan and Minns, 1976; Sullivan and O'Connor, 1972).

While there has been extensive empirical work on how candidates behave in different circumstances, to the best of my knowledge, there is no theoretical model that is consistent with all the empirical evidence cited in the previous paragraph. In addition, there has been little theoretical work on candidate strategies in primaries and general elections when candidates differ in quality. This paper presents a theoretical model of candidate strategies in primaries and general elections that is consistent with empirical evidence regarding how candidates choose policies when they may differ in both their party labels and their quality as well as the fact that low quality challengers frequently choose to enter primary elections in which they have very little hope of winning.

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I consider a model in which there are four candidates, two of whom compete in the liberal primary, and two of whom compete in the conservative primary. In each primary there is one high quality candidate and one low quality candidate. Candidates first commit to policies on a continuous one-dimensional policy space before the primaries. Voters observe these policy choices and vote in their party's primary. The candidates who receive the most votes in the primaries then compete in the general election. The candidate who receives the most votes in the general election is then elected and adopts the policy he or she committed to before the primary. Throughout I assume that voters take electability into account when they vote in the primary elections and there is uncertainty about the preferences of the median voter in the general election.

I show that there exists a pure strategy equilibrium for the candidates in the policy selection game. In this equilibrium, the candidates in the liberal primary run on liberal policies and the candidates in the conservative primary run on conservative policies. But the high quality candidate in a given primary chooses a more moderate policy than the low quality candidate in the sense that higher quality candidates choose policies closer to the estimated preferences of the median voter in the general election.

The intuition for why the high quality candidates choose more moderate policies is as follows. Regardless of whether a candidate is high quality or low quality, the candidate will need to make an effort to try to appeal to the voters in the primary and choose policies that deviate from the center of the policy space. However, voters in the primaries will prefer to nominate a higher quality candidate because voters have an intrinsic preference for high quality candidates and high quality candidates are also more electable.

Since the high quality candidates can be confident that voters in their primaries will be willing to vote for them even if they do not choose policies that quite match the preferences of the primary voters, these candidates can afford to focus more on choosing policies that will be appealing in the general election without worrying so much about appealing to voters in the primary. Thus high quality candidates will choose more moderate policies that will be relatively more appealing to the median voter in the general election even though these policies are not as favorable in the primary.

I then consider an extension of this model in which candidates endogenously decide whether to run for office and compete according to the same two-stage process given above if they choose to run. Running for office is costly, and candidates care both about the final policy chosen by the elected candidate and about winning elections. When there is endogenous entry, I show that there is an equilibrium in this game in which both the low quality candidate and the high quality candidate strategically choose to enter the primary despite the fact that if both candidates enter the primary, the candidates will ultimately choose policies such that the low quality candidate loses the primary with certainty. The reason for this is that if the low quality candidate chooses not to enter the primary, then the high quality candidate will be free to choose policies that are appealing in the general election without worrying about appealing to primary voters, and the high quality candidate will run on more moderate policies. If the low quality candidate prefers extreme policies, this then means that the low quality candidate can be better off entering the primary and inducing the high quality candidate to run on extreme policies even if running for office is costly and the low quality candidate will lose the party primary with certainty.

The predictions of the model are consistent with empirical observations on candidate strategies in elections with candidates heterogeneous quality. First, the prediction that low quality candidates may enter a primary even though they will lose the primary with certainty in equilibrium is significant because there is empirical evidence that low quality challengers frequently choose to enter primary elections against an incumbent despite the fact that such challengers typically have almost no chance of defeating their higher quality opponents. Empirical studies have revealed that when an inexperienced challenger challenges an incumbent in a primary, the incumbent almost always wins the election. For instance, [Brady et al. \(2007\)](#) note that from 1956 to 1998, incumbents were only defeated roughly one percent of the time when they faced a challenger in a House primary. [Jewell and Breaux \(1991\)](#) note that, from 1968 to 1986, the percentage of incumbents who won their party's nomination in elections for state legislature was close to one hundred percent in most states in the South. And [Turner \(1953\)](#) notes that in congressional elections from 1944 to 1950, not only did incumbents win almost every contested primary, but most of these elections were also won with over two-thirds of the vote.

Despite the fact that these low quality challengers have little hope of defeating their higher quality opponents in the primaries, challengers often choose to compete in the primaries against the current incumbent. For instance, [Brady et al. \(2007\)](#) finds thousands of separate House elections from 1956 to 1998 in which an incumbent faced a primary challenge. [Turner \(1953\)](#) notes that most incumbents faced primary challenges in congressional elections from 1944 to 1950. And [Jewell and Breaux \(1991\)](#) give data from several states that indicates that large fractions of incumbents faced primary challenges in elections for state legislature from 1968 to 1986. My model can account for the fact that so many low quality challengers choose to enter primary elections against an incumbent despite the fact that such challengers typically have almost no chance of defeating their higher quality opponents.

The predictions of the model are also consistent with empirical evidence on how candidates choose policies when they may differ in both their party labels and their quality. The fact that the model predicts that high quality candidates choose more moderate policies is significant because there is empirical evidence that higher quality candidates choose more moderate policies in United States congressional elections. For example, [Ansolabehere et al. \(2001\)](#) compare the policy choices of incumbents, candidates running for an open seat, and challengers to incumbents. [Ansolabehere et al. \(2001\)](#) note that, on average, one would expect incumbents to be the highest quality candidates, candidates running for open seats would be the next highest quality, and challengers would be the lowest quality candidates. [Ansolabehere et al. \(2001\)](#) give empirical evidence from the 1996 United States House elections that indicates that incumbents choose the most moderate policies, candidates running for open seats choose the next most moderate policies, and challengers choose the most extreme

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