

## **Constituency Congruency and Candidate Competition in Primary Elections for the U.S. House**

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### **Abstract**

Previous research on congressional elections has largely concluded that House elections have become much less competitive in the modern era. Our research investigates one area where we should theoretically expect to observe more competition – namely, primary elections. In this paper, we examine when and where a state legislator will emerge to run in a congressional primary. All else equal, we expect that state legislators who can carry a large portion of their old state reelection constituency to the “geographic” congressional constituency will be more likely to emerge and receive a higher vote share in the election. Using GIS software, we are able to derive a measure of constituency overlap by focusing on the degree of congruency between state legislative and congressional districts. Our results indicate that state legislators are more likely to emerge in a primary if constituency congruency is relatively high, especially in open seat contests. When state legislative candidates start with a strong voter base, we also find that they do better in the primary election.

The extant literature on congressional elections has focused largely on the high reelection rates of incumbent House members, winning an average of 96 percent of the time over the past 10 years (Jacobson 2009). As such, many students of congressional and electoral politics believe there is little competition left to study. We should not, however, confuse the reelection rate with the turnover rate. For example, at the start of the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress, 50 of the 435 House members were freshman (Davidson, Oleszek and Lee 2008). These new members earned their way to Congress either by defeating an incumbent or winning an open seat, and in many cases, their first hurdle was to survive a crowded primary race. For instance, after 12-term Representative Major Owens (D-NY) announced he would not seek reelection to the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress, Yvette Clarke emerged to win the Democratic primary over three other challengers including Chris Owens, Major's son. In the general election she cruised to victory, winning with 90 percent of the vote in the heavily Democratic district. In another race, this time in Ohio, Betty Sutton had to fend off six other challengers in the primary before earning a 22-point win in Sherrod Brown's old seat. If we were to classify these races according to the usual standard, we could not deem them competitive. However, these freshmen had tough primary races, winning by 3.4 and 6.4 percent respectively. These cases highlight the fact that while general elections may lack competition, there is still quite a bit of fighting taking place at the primary stage.

Despite this apparent competition, most of the literature examining candidate emergence and electoral competition of congressional elections has focused exclusively on the general election. This is unfortunate since a considerable amount of competition in the contemporary era occurs during the primary stage of the electoral process. Indeed, we often consider a large number of congressional seats to be "safe" since only one of the two major parties has a realistic chance of representing particular House districts. Nevertheless, when incumbents retire or face a

primary challenge, there is often increased competition as reflected by the greater number of candidates who opt to run under those circumstances. Furthermore, when emergence studies only focus on general election candidates, they may suffer from selection bias since they miss any candidates who ran, but ultimately lost in a primary election. This paper seeks to enrich our understanding of how these new members get to Washington, focusing specifically on congressional primaries. Given that competition – regardless of the stage in the electoral process – is a cornerstone of representative democracy, neglecting these elections leaves a serious gap in our understanding of who participates, who succeeds, and why.

This paper aims to fill this gap in the literature, combining what little we currently know about primary elections with the vast strategic politicians literature found in studies of general elections – specifically the advantages that accompany a quality candidate’s personal vote. First, by looking at all state legislators serving prior to the 2004 and 2006 congressional elections, we predict when and under what conditions we should expect to see potential quality challengers emerge in the subsequent congressional primaries. We maintain state legislators will act strategically, taking into consideration the costs and benefits of seeking higher office and running when their chances of winning are highest. Second, we assess how those state legislators who choose to emerge fare in the primary elections. We believe that state legislators who can bring a larger “personal” vote (which we measure as overlap between their current state legislative constituency and the “new” constituency of the congressional district) to the primary election will both emerge and win more often than those with a smaller personal vote.

Expanding what we know about primary elections is beneficial on several levels. First, by addressing questions of emergence and outcomes in primary elections, our paper tackles a significant void in the literature. Given the influence primaries have on the way the general

election unfolds, it is imperative we gain a better understanding of this early stage in the electoral process. Second, examining who emerges and wins during the congressional primaries allows for greater comprehension about those individuals competing in the general election, who they are, and why they are successful. Third, by focusing on a race other than the general election, we can find additional evidence to support the strategic politicians theory. Finally, this paper speaks to issues larger than congressional primaries as we examine the intersection of strategic behavior at the national and state levels.

### **Literature Review on Primary Elections**

Although limited in comparison to general elections studies, scholars have not ignored primary elections altogether. A candidate must first secure her party's nomination before running in the general election. Perhaps more importantly, with a majority of congressional districts dominated by one political party, the only real competition and choices between viable candidates for voters occurs during the nomination stage of the electoral process. While most incumbents do not face a serious challenge in their primary, competition can be fierce in open seats, or in cases where incumbents are perceived to be vulnerable (Jacobson 2009).

A number of studies have looked at primary elections for different types of offices, such as presidential primaries (Aldrich 1980; Burden 2002; Haynes et al. 2004), gubernatorial primaries (Bardwell 2002; Berry and Canon 1993), and state legislature primaries (Gierzynski and Breaux 1991; Grau 1981; Hogan 2003). Their findings confirm similar trends found in general elections, namely that the presence of an incumbent stifles opposition emergence and competition, especially if the incumbent is popular and has previously won by a sizable electoral margin.

Though not as important as the presence of an incumbent, money has also been found to play a part in the outcome of primary elections. Money is directly related to competitiveness in primaries, as the more a challenger is able to raise, the more she can compete at an equal level with an incumbent (Goodliffe and Magleby 2001). While incumbents have shown fundraising superiority, a challenger's ability to out-spend incumbents increases their chances of upsetting an incumbent in the primary. However, despite being more skilled in fundraising, states with more professional legislatures see fewer state legislators emerging to run for the U.S. House (Berkman and Eisenstein 1999).

Other studies have demonstrated that greater primary competition affects a nominee's chances in the general election (see, e.g., Atkeson 1998; Kenney and Rice 1987; Schantz 1980). However, primaries also stifle competition, often by deterring quality challengers. The presence of a primary race deters strong candidates from emerging in two different ways. First, challengers will assess their chances of winning the general election and will choose not to run if they feel they cannot win this final stage (Banks and Kiewiet 1989). Second, they may evaluate their chances of winning the actual primary and decide to run or abstain depending on how they think they will fare. Maisel and Stone (2001) find that in districts that are dominated by one party, some strong candidates do not emerge because so many others enter the race, decreasing their probability of winning. Whether evaluating their chances of winning either the primary or general election, the decision not to run results in a lack of quality challengers, which inevitably lowers competition in both the primary and general elections, and has even been linked to an increase in weak candidates contesting seats (Banks and Kiewiet 1989).

Some analyses of congressional primaries have focused on the calculus of candidate emergence. Maestas et al. (2006) employed a nation-wide survey of state legislators and found

that for those state legislators who have progressive ambition, the important underlying question is when they should run for higher office. Fox and Lawless (2005), in surveying members of four professions most likely to emerge as potential candidates, found that efficacy as a candidate, being approached by a political party or leader, and a politicized upbringing led to progressive ambition. Recruitment of candidates certainly has an impact on who emerges in congressional primaries, as party organizations, both at the state and national level, may encourage potential, but otherwise wary candidates to run (Herrnson 1988; Kazee and Thornberry 1990; Snowiss 1966). In summary, these studies clearly indicate that state legislators are strategic in deciding when to seek higher office (on this point, see also Matthews 1984).

Quality challengers (those that have previously held elective office) in particular are more likely to emerge in races where their chances of winning are greater (see, e.g., Maisel and Stone 1997; Stone and Maisel 2003; Stone, Maisel, and Maestas 2004). These “serious” or quality candidates use a number of factors to determine the likelihood of winning, which include district party vote, an incumbent’s vulnerability, war chests, national conditions, or when the incumbent is not of their party (Maestas and Rugeley 2008). Herrnson and Gimpel (1995) also find that the likely field of primary candidates, either their quality or the overall number of contestants, influences an individual’s decision to run.

However, candidates are not only concerned with winning the primary election. Rather, they choose to enter a primary when they feel their chances of winning both the primary and the general election are strong (Maisel and Stone 2001). That is why it is important to build upon findings from the general election literature, applying factors found to influence the decision to run in the general election to the decision to emerge in the primary election. This calculus is comprised of a number of factors listed above (see Jacobson 1989, 2009; Jacobson and Kernell

1983), as well as several not yet tested in the context of research on primary elections. Like the literature on primaries, potential candidates must possess progressive ambition as well as be comfortable with taking risks (Rohde 1979). Quality candidates generally do not emerge if an incumbent is present, especially if he is popular (Kazee 1983) or well-funded.<sup>1</sup>

### **Theoretical Considerations**

Previous research on congressional elections has demonstrated that candidates act strategically in their decisions to run for office. As Jacobson and Kernell (1983) among others have shown, experienced or quality candidates are more likely to run when conditions are most favorable to their chances of success—that is, when running against a weak or marginalized incumbent or in an open seat. One additional consideration that may factor into this calculus is the amount of the “personal” vote the challenger can bring to the primary race, which we define as the degree of overlap between the candidate’s current constituency and the “new” set of voters that she is seeking to represent in the new position. For instance, state legislators may be more likely to run in a House primary if the degree of constituency congruency is relatively high between the state and congressional district. These candidates may also do better in the primary election if this condition is met because they do not have to convince an entirely new set of voters to support them since they are already starting with a strong voter base. Indeed, voters who already have a strong connection with candidates (i.e., strong name recognition) who previously served in the state legislature may continue to support those individuals seeking a House seat as a result of their personal “homestyle” or unique style of representation (Fenno 1978). These factors should be especially helpful in low-information primary elections given

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<sup>1</sup> On this latter point, see Box-Steffensmeier 1996; Goidel and Gross 1994; Hersch and McDougall 1994; for an opposing view, see Goodliffe 2001; Krasno and Green 1988.

that voters cannot rely simply on party identification when deciding between candidates at the ballot box.

In Fenno's terminology, a state legislator who shares a large portion of their reelection constituency with their new congressional geographic constituency will have an advantage over other candidates who have to build their group of supporters from scratch. As Fenno (1978: 8) maintains, the reelection constituency are "those people in the district who he thinks vote for him." Key (1949) calls this the "friends and neighbors constituency." If a candidate can get her state reelection constituency to support her in the primaries, then she has a built in base of support that a non-quality challenger would not have. Within the field of potential quality challengers, some candidates (such as stage legislators) can bring a larger set of old voters to the new district.

In interviewing candidates, Ezra (2001) found that candidates viewed primaries as quite burdensome, forcing them to exhaust precious resources, dividing the party, and often leading to damaging negative advertising. However, if a candidate is already well known, as a result of her state legislative constituency, she will not need to expend as many resources. Analyzing his personal bid for Congress, Maisel (1982) noted that his chances of winning were faint from the beginning, primarily because he did not have the name recognition to survive the first contest. He notes that in primaries, a traditionally low salience race, name recognition with voters means just about everything, and without it, a candidate did not stand a chance. Additionally, when Fenno (1978: 20) asked a member of the U.S. House to describe his strongest supporters, he answered "...And the people who were in my state legislative district, of course." As this statement clearly suggests, a state representative with a district that significantly overlaps the congressional district should be more likely to emerge and do well in primary elections.

Our approach has analogs to a study conducted by Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2000) with respect to the incumbency advantage. In their analysis, they take advantage of the “quasi-experiment” associated with congressional redistricting in the U.S. to determine the extent to which the advantage incumbents enjoy stems from their personal vote (the vote that incumbents receive as a result of the connection legislators maintain with their constituents). In particular, they compare legislative vote percentages in the old and new territory within redrawn congressional districts while controlling for the political inclinations of both sets of voters. All else equal, they hold that incumbents should do better within the counties of their district that they have represented before since voters are already familiar with them and their policies, which positively shapes their personal vote. As expected, Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2000) find that a significant portion of the advantage incumbents retain stems from a legislator’s personal vote—in fact, they conclude that the personal vote comprises anywhere from one-half to two-thirds of the overall incumbency advantage on average.

Since we are focusing explicitly on challengers rather than incumbents, we derive a measure tapping the *challenger’s* personal vote based on the degree of constituency congruency between “old” state and “new” congressional districts. In applying this measure to general election contests, Carson et al. (2008) found that state legislators are more likely to emerge at the general election stage to run for a seat in the U.S. House if constituency congruency is relatively high. Their results not only indicated these state legislators were more likely to run, but that they were also more successful in their general election bids, with incumbent vote shares decreasing as the two districts became more congruent. We believe this logic can be extended to primary elections. The larger the personal vote from the beginning, the greater the chances of success, not only in the general election, but in the primary election as well. Larger personal votes mean

a candidate will not have to expend as many resources to get her name recognized. This acts as a built-in fundraising advantage, which could serve to discourage other potential candidates from running.

In the context of primary elections, we pay special attention to open seat contests given that is where most of the action takes place. In fact, studying open seat races at the primary level presents us with a unique opportunity. While these races have been analyzed by both scholars and pundits in the context of general elections (see, e.g., Gaddie and Bullock 2000), almost no attention has been paid to open seat primary races. Open seat races are substantially different from races where an incumbent and her “looming shadow” pretty much guarantee victory. Here, challengers face a more level playing field and therefore tend to emerge at greater rates given the increased chance of victory absent an incumbent. Furthermore, these races are generally more competitive, either between the two parties or within a party (Gaddie and Bullock 2000).

We should expect state legislators to be more likely to emerge in these races since they represent the best chances for electoral success. However, there has been mixed support as to the importance of partisanship and the emergence of candidates. Bond, Fleisher, and Talbert (1997) find that local partisan forces (normal district vote and the party holding the seat) are the most important determinants of whether a quality candidate emerges. Nevertheless, most evidence seems to indicate that national conditions and the strength of the party as a whole influence the decision to run, with positive views of the party or president indicating a member of that party is more likely to emerge in a primary (Bianco 1984; Canon 1990; Jacobson 1990; Jacobson and Kernell 1983). In their study of repeat primary challenges, Taylor and Boatright (2005) found that challengers in an open seat rely more on broader partisan trends when determining whether

to run again, unlike those challengers facing an incumbent, who base their emergence decisions on personal desires and abilities.

Carson et al. (2008) find that those state legislators with greater district overlap run for Congress at a higher rate when they have the opportunity to contend for an open seat. Given that for many candidates the only viable time for them to run and succeed is when an incumbent is not present, we would expect them to emerge at greater rates in these open races. In addition, similar to the results found in the studies on general elections, we expect these state legislators to garner more electoral support, in large part due to the advantage they have in terms of a personal vote and name recognition.

## **Data**

The central variable of interest in our analysis of candidate competition is the degree of population overlap between a state legislative district and a congressional district for the 2004 and 2006 congressional election cycles. To make our measure clear, consider a hypothetical congressional district made up of 100 residents and four 50 constituent state legislative districts A, B, C, and D that partially overlap with the congressional district. Assume that out of the 100 residents in the congressional district, 40 came from state legislative district A, 30 from B, 25 from C, and 5 from D. We would then say that the degree of overlap between district A and the congressional district is 40 percent, between district B and the congressional district is 30 percent and so on.

In order to generate this variable for our study, we turn to geographic information systems technology (GIS). Political scientists have begun recently to use GIS to study political phenomenon. Some examples include studies of interstate conflict (Berry and Baybeck 2005),

electoral competition (Crespin 2005), turnout (Darmofal 2006), and campaign finance (Gimpel, Lee, and Kaminski 2006; Gimpel, Lee and Pearson-Merkowitz 2008). It is likely that a study such as ours would be impossible without GIS. Previous work that tried to match district boundaries without the aid of GIS (Carson, Crespin, Finocchiaro, and Rohde 2007) relied on large geographic units (the county) and was only able to provide a rough dichotomous measure of continuity. By using GIS, we can use small geographic units to get a continuous measure of overlap with minimal measurement error. To create our independent variable of interest, *overlap*, we took advantage of the Geographic Correspondence Engine, which allows us to select “source” and “target” geocodes to produce a file that lists the percentage population overlap between both state upper and lower chambers and U.S. congressional districts.<sup>2</sup> We should note that considerable variation exists across states for our measure. For example, in California, the average degree of overlap is 22 percent, while in states like Maine, the average amount of overlap is quite small (2 percent).<sup>3</sup>

Next, to obtain a list of all candidates who emerged in a congressional primary, we relied on the Federal Election Commission (FEC) Candidate Financial Summary Files.<sup>4</sup> All senators, third party candidates, and individuals running to represent one of the territories were deleted from the dataset. These files provided each candidate’s name, party, and a wealth of fundraising data and electoral outcomes. To identify which candidates were state legislators, we cross

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://mc2c2.missouri.edu/websas/geocorr2k.html>. This engine uses the block group data from the 2000 Census as the geographic unit for measuring population. For an application of this technique, see Crespin (2005).

<sup>3</sup> California only has 40 state senators compared to 53 members of Congress so state senators actually represent more voters than members of the U.S. House.

<sup>4</sup> Any individual wishing to campaign for Congress is required to file with the FEC once he has raised or spent \$5,000 on campaign related activities. Within fifteen days a new candidate for office is required to submit a statement of candidacy to the FEC, designate a principal campaign committee and begin filing regular fundraising reports (Federal Elections Commission 2008). Each individual who filed with the FEC in a given election cycle are included in the Candidate Financial Summary Files.

referenced the FEC files with the Directory of Elected Officials, 2003 and 2005, an annual publication from the Council of State Governments.

In 2004 and 2006 there were 191 state legislators who were found to have emerged as candidates for the House of Representatives. However, upon further investigation, 71 of those individuals did not actually appear on the ballot for any congressional primary.<sup>5</sup> To test our expectations, we fit several models of candidate competition in the ensuing analysis focusing separately on two types of races – incumbent contested and open seat races in 2004 and 2006. In the general election, open seat races are typically more competitive than those contested by an incumbent (Gaddie and Bullock 2000; Jacobson 2009). Along related lines, we should expect the effect of constituency overlap to be more pronounced for state legislators in open seat primary races since they represent the best chances for electoral success.

In our initial set of models, we test for candidate emergence in congressional primaries. Our dependent variable is coded “1” if a state legislator decides to run in a primary race and 0 otherwise. In addition to the degree of overlap described above, we control for the presence of term limits at the state level. All else being equal, we might expect legislators from states with term limits to be more likely to run for a seat in the U.S. House if they are progressively ambitious (see, e.g., Lazarus 2006; Powell 2000; Steen 2006). Since the degree of legislative professionalism can influence career choices, we include a measure from Squire (2007) as a control variable. Legislators from more professional legislatures (those with higher pay, better staffs, greater retirement benefits, etc.) are giving up more if they decide to run for higher office so their decision calculus may differ from members from less professionalized state legislatures.

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<sup>5</sup> The reasons for this vary significantly. Some individuals seem to have filed the initial paperwork with the FEC to become a candidate and then immediately abandoned their campaign. Others may have remained in the FEC dataset because they were paying off debts from previous election cycles and were still required to file. These individuals were excluded from both the emergence and outcome models.

We also control for the relative safeness of the congressional district using the incumbent party's share of the presidential vote in the most recent election. Finally, we include an election-specific fixed effect to control for any year-to-year differences that might otherwise bias the results.

For our second analysis, our dependent variable is the state legislator's vote share in the primary election. Again, our key variable of interest is the amount of overlap between the state legislative district and the congressional district the legislator is seeking to represent. In this model, we control for candidate spending measured as the natural log of the candidate's total net expenditures in the congressional primary.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, we control for the legislators' vote share in their most recent state legislative election. We expect legislative candidates who do better in their state legislative districts to perform better in the congressional districts, all else equal. We also included the number of candidates in each primary race. As the number of candidates increases, each individual's share of the primary vote should decrease.

## **Results**

### *Emergence*

Table 1 presents the results from three separate logistical regression models that test our emergence hypotheses. We estimate the first model on all races, the second on open seats, and the third on incumbent contested races only. As we expected, as the amount of overlap between a state legislative district and a congressional district increases, so does the probability that a quality challenger will emerge in a congressional primary. This key result holds across all three

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<sup>6</sup> To determine each state legislator's primary campaign expenditures, we utilized the FEC Federal Disclosure Database. Each candidate in a congressional primary is required to file a pre-primary report no later than twelve days prior to their primary election, from which we collected their pre-primary net expenditures. For those individuals who did not file a pre-primary report, the contributions and expenditures from their quarterly report prior to the date of the primary were used. If no report was filed that could properly identify them then they were coded as having both received and spent \$5,000 (Jacobson 2009). We also coded individual candidate vote shares from the FEC website: <http://www.fec.gov/pubrec/electionresults.shtml>.

models. Consistent with previous literature on candidate emergence, we find that candidates are more likely to emerge in open seat primary races as indicated by the positive and significant coefficient for the open seat variable in the first model.

In terms of our control variables, we find mixed but sensible results. For all races and open seats, we find that the level of professionalism does not predict emergence. However, we find moderate support ( $p = .059$ ) that as professionalism increases, quality challengers are less likely to emerge to run in a congressional district with an incumbent seeking reelection. This makes sense and indicates that candidates from more professional states legislatures are acting strategically by not running in districts with a sitting member of Congress. We also find that term limits only exert a weak effect ( $p = .11$ ) in incumbent contested races and no effect in other races. Finally as the seat gets safer for the incumbent's party, quality challengers are less likely to emerge to run in a seat with an incumbent, but safety does not influence emergence decisions in open seats.<sup>7</sup> Taking these three control variables together, it appears that when a House seat is open, potential challengers will emerge if they have some chance of winning the race. When an incumbent is seeking reelection, in contrast, state legislators are much more strategic with their emergence calculus.

In order to provide a substantive interpretation of the effect of overlap on emergence, we created Figures 1, 2, and 3, which present the probability (with 95% confidence intervals) that a candidate will emerge over the theoretical range of the overlap variable.<sup>8</sup> In Figure 1, which is for just for open seat races, we see that the probability that a candidate emerges is quite low when overlap is small but steadily increases along with overlap. In states such as California, for instance, where the degree of overlap between a state senate and congressional district can easily

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<sup>7</sup> We find similar results if we substitute the incumbent's previous vote share in the incumbent-contested model.

<sup>8</sup> In both figures, we set continuous variables to their mean while dichotomous variables are set to 0.

pass 60 percent, the probability of that particular state senator emerging is relatively high. In other states like New Hampshire where the average overlap is much lower, no one candidate should have a large advantage over any other. Furthermore, for races with an incumbent seeking reelection (Figure 2), the probability that a quality challenger emerges is statistically significant but substantively quite small. This suggests that we should be much less likely to see primary candidates emerge against congressional incumbents.

When we combine both open seat and incumbent-contested races in Figure 3 (for all races), we really observe the difference in emergence patterns across these two types of races. The effect of overlap is greater in open seats than incumbent-contested races across the entire range. Moreover, this difference is statistically significant between these distinct races. This offers clear and convincing evidence that experienced state legislators are more likely to emerge in primaries without an incumbent seeking re-nomination.

### *Election Results*

For the second set of models, we estimate the effect of overlap on quality candidate's vote share in the primary elections.<sup>9</sup> Table 2 displays these results. In the model that includes both open seats and incumbent-contested races, the variable measuring overlap is not statistically significant. Indeed, the only variable that is statistically significant in this model is the one that measures the total number of candidates running in each primary. As the number of candidates increases, the vote shares across all the candidates decrease.

In the model focusing on open seat races, we observe that the effect of overlap is both positive and statistically significant. For every one percent increase in constituency overlap, the candidate's vote share increases by nearly one-half percentage point. At the average level of

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<sup>9</sup> We do not include candidates who ran unopposed in the congressional primaries in these models.

overlap (8.3 percent), candidates can expect a 3.6 percentage increase in their vote share. A state senator from California with 60 percent overlap can expect an increase of approximately 26 percent in the congressional primary, all else equal. This represents a sizeable advantage over the other potential challengers for that congressional seat. Once again, we observe that as the number of candidates in a race goes up, individual vote share goes down. Moreover, we find no significant effects for spending or prior state legislative vote margin. Upon closer inspection, this latter result is not surprising and is most likely a function of the relatively uncompetitive nature of state legislative races. Indeed, the average previous vote share for the candidates who emerged to run in a primary election is 76.5 percent and the mode is 100 percent.

For incumbent-contested races, overlap is not statistically significant. Since such a small number of experienced state legislative candidates run in districts where an incumbent is seeking re-nomination, we are hesitant to draw any systematic conclusions about this sample. In fact, these specific races appear to be largely idiosyncratic given that these are not ideal conditions for qualified candidates to emerge.

## **Conclusion**

This paper set out to add to the literature on representation and democratic accountability in congressional elections by taking advantage of a distinctive aspect of our electoral system—namely, the overlap of multiple districts within our federalist system. Previous research has focused almost exclusively on congressional district-specific factors and national trends in explaining why candidates emerge or are more likely to win. Although we believe these are indeed important, we argue that certain institutional features not exclusively related to the congressional district can influence elections as well. In particular, we consider the degree of

population congruency between state legislative and U.S. congressional district boundaries in seeking to understand candidate emergence and election outcomes in congressional primaries. The level of congruency can vary across states, depending on how district boundaries are drawn. In some states such as California, the degree of overlap can be substantial and so can the effects on the corresponding elections. In other states like New Hampshire or Maine where overlap is low, no particular quality challenger should have an advantage relative to another.

We examine the effects of district congruency in two stages—candidate emergence and its impact on primary election outcomes. For entry decisions, we find that candidates with previous state legislative experience are more likely to emerge in the primary for the House seat that overlaps significantly with their legislative district. This effect is especially pronounced in open seat contests where there is no incumbent seeking reelection, which is consistent with prior research on strategic behavior by ambitious politicians in the general election (see, e.g., Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Jacobson 1989). Indeed, we find that the combination of both an open seat and substantial district overlap appear to be necessary conditions for state legislators to emerge in congressional primaries. As such, this strongly suggests that challengers take into account their “personal vote” with their state legislative constituency when deciding whether or not to run for a seat in the U.S. House (Fenno 1978).

Once state legislators commit to run in a House primary, how effective is their personal vote in earning the congressional nomination? Our results indicate that when constituency congruency is high, there is a significant increase in candidate vote share for open seat races. In contrast, we find no effect for constituency overlap for incumbent-contested races. These effects may have help us better explain why so many prospective challengers are risk averse when it comes to running for higher office. Given that most legislators will have to give up their seat in

the stage legislature to run for higher office, they should only be likely to emerge in those races that offer them the best chance of winning.

Previous research has focused almost exclusively on context regarding the decision to run for higher office. This research takes the next step by differentiating between *which* candidates within the pool of qualified challengers should opt to run for a U.S. House primary. As such, we find that the challenger's personal vote appears to be exerting an effect on electoral success independent of other factors, particularly in open seat contests. Given that the first step toward earning a congressional seat involves winning in the primaries, our findings have notable consequences for elections and competitiveness. Indeed, in an era when political pundits lament the exceedingly high reelection rate of incumbents, our results suggest that primaries offer some hope for increased competition in congressional races.

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**Table 1 – Emergence in Congressional Primaries**

Variables	All Races		Open Seats		Incumbent Contested	
	Coefficient (Standard Error)	Change <sup>†</sup>	Coefficient (Standard Error)	Change <sup>†</sup>	Coefficient (Standard Error)	Change <sup>†</sup>
Overlap	0.044* (0.006)	.0007	0.049* (0.014)	.0164	0.042* (0.005)	.0005
Professionalism	-1.281 (0.793)	-.0024	0.714 (0.944)	.0028	-2.287 (1.213)	-.0004
Term Limit	0.223 (0.206)	.0004	0.175 (0.257)	.0069	0.465 (0.291)	.0007
Incumbent Party Presidential Vote	-0.028* (0.011)	-.0005	0.005 (0.012)	.0020	-0.065* (0.016)	-.0008
Open Seat	2.896* (0.206)	.0290				
2006	0.125 (0.204)	.0002	-0.245 (0.270)	-.008	0.436 (0.287)	.0006
Constant	-4.742* (0.648)		-4.114* (0.724)		-2.777* (0.823)	
<i>N</i>	20901		1625		19276	
Number of Clusters	863		68		795	
% Correctly Classified	99.45		95.69		99.76	
Wald $\chi^2$	317.7*		27.34*		96.27*	

\* p<0.05

<sup>†</sup>+/- ½ s.d. for continuous variables and 0-1 for dichotomous variables

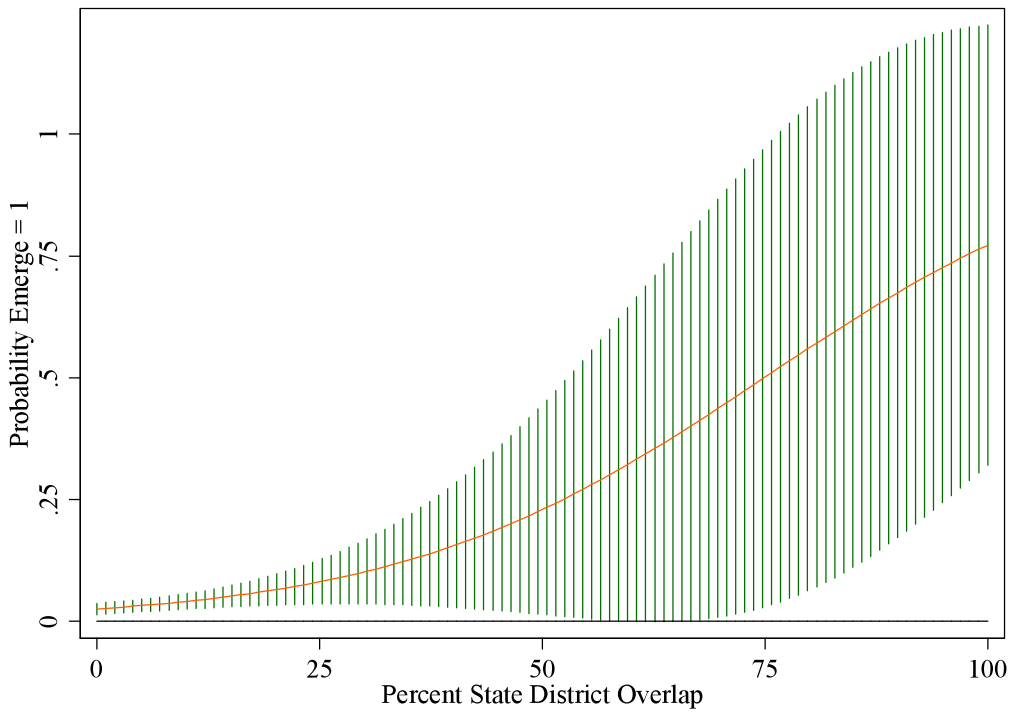
Robust standard errors in parentheses

**Table 2 – Outcomes in Congressional Primaries**

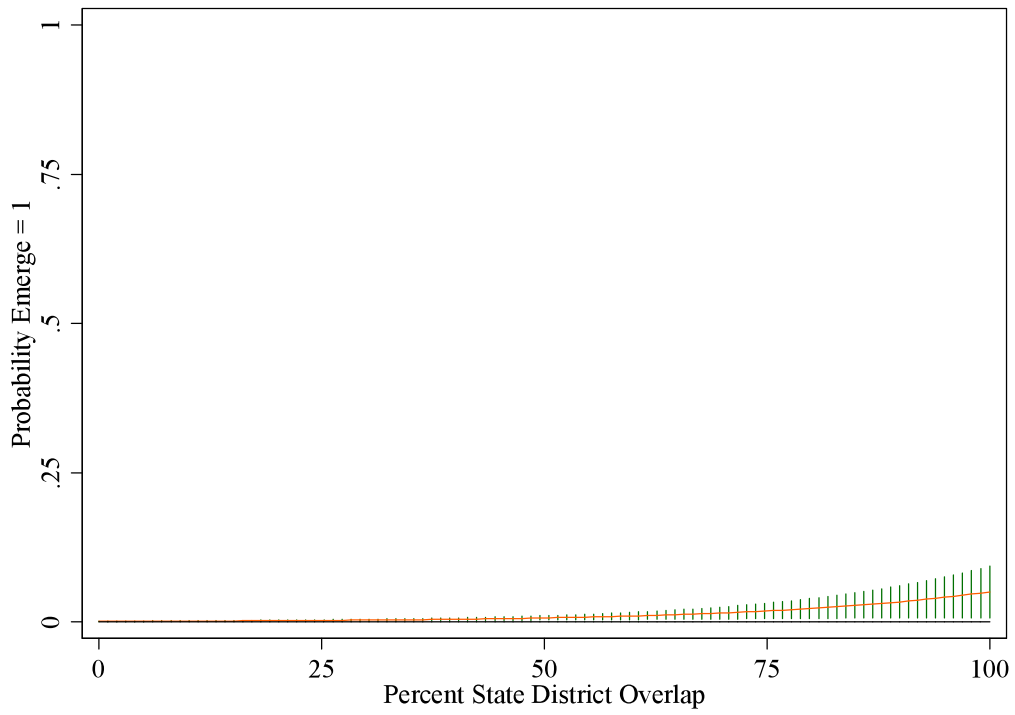
<b>Variable</b>	<b>Coefficient (Standard Error)</b>		
	<b>All Races</b>	<b>Open Seats</b>	<b>Incumbent Contested</b>
Overlap	0.161 (.147)	0.438* (.189)	0.007 (.157)
Spending(ln)	-2.111 (1.303)	-0.521 (1.576)	-5.061 (2.851)
Previous State Legislative Vote	0.004 (.121)	0.002 (.146)	-0.090 (.223)
Number of Candidates	-4.539* (.942)	-4.317* (.924)	-5.166* (1.596)
2006	5.288 (4.531)	11.647* (4.846)	-2.074 (10.185)
Constant	77.751* (18.893)	51.692* (20.800)	124.448* (43.712)
<i>N</i>	83	54	29
Number of Clusters	67	41	28
R <sup>2</sup>	0.335	0.421	0.438
F	6.27*	7.09*	5.93*

\* p<0.05, Robust standard errors in parentheses

**Figure 1 – Probability of Candidate Emergence in Open Seats**



**Figure 2 – Probability of Candidate Emergence in Incumbent Contested Districts**



**Figure 3 – Emergence in Open Seats vs. Incumbent-Contested Primaries**

