

Section 1: Research Proposal

Party nominations have received increasing scholarly attention as declining general election competition and low primary turnout rates raise fears that a small, unrepresentative core of voters determines our candidates and, by extension, our politics. Yet scholars continue to disagree over the nature of primary electorates and the role they play in exacerbating partisan polarization (see Drutman 2021 for a review). While some have found that primary voters are more ideologically extreme (e.g. Brady et al. 2007; Albert and La Raja 2020), others have found only marginal differences (e.g. Sides et al. 2020). Similarly, while candidates are fearful that they will be punished by primary voters for ideological nonconformity (Boatright 2013; Anderson et al. 2020), studies examining the impact of primary rules to broaden or restrict participation have found little effect on the ideology of nominees (McGhee et al. 2014; Norrander and Wendland 2016).

The field is left with a sense that primary electorates are different but conflicting evidence over *how* they differ. This project hopes to add to this conversation while setting aside disagreements over ideological, issue-based differences. Instead, I ask: *Are primary voters more likely than non-voters to support illiberal attitudes and violations of democratic norms?* The timing for such a project is ripe. While popular accounts of growing support for political violence might be overblown (Westwood 2022), there is evidence of an illiberal turn in American politics (Carey et al. 2019; Graham and Svobik 2020), especially in the Republican Party (Donovan 2019).

Furthermore, there are theoretical reasons to believe that primary voters are at the forefront of emerging anti-democratic trends. The main consensus among scholars is that primary electorates care much more deeply about political outcomes compared to non-voters (Drutman 2021). Increased ideological and affective polarization should further increase the existential stakes of each electoral contest. Thus, primary voters might adopt “win at all costs” attitudes when it comes to their own partisan team, leading them to condone or even advocate for anti-democratic actions (e.g. political violence or prohibitions on opponents’ speech and assembly rights) that give their party an edge. Negative attitudes toward partisan opponents (i.e. negative partisan or affective polarization) might also lead strong partisans to believe that out-party members are not worthy of these protections. And primary voters may also be more attentive to – and likely to internalize – anti-democratic messaging from trusted elites. In short, there are several avenues by which primary voters might attain increased levels of support for anti-democratic actions, including elevated perceptions of electoral stakes, higher levels of affective polarization, or greater exposure and receptivity to messaging effects.

This proposal seeks to test these initial predictions about the relationship between primary participation, anti-democratic attitudes, and the factors related to both. I propose two primary participation questions, and a democratic norms question to be added to the five already on the core survey content. My early descriptive analyses will probe these relationships and potentially inform experimental work on this topic in the future.