

Boatright, Robert G. *Getting Primaried: The Changing Politics of Congressional Primary Challenges*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2013. vii, 263 pp. (\$60.00 cloth, \$30.00 paper).

The subject of a research project, on occasion, becomes more important as a scholar gathers data, develops hypotheses, and tests her or his argument. The scholar (and publisher!) is really lucky when the subject becomes even more important after a book is written, in press, or on shelves of bookstores. The only downside for the scholar in this situation is that the publication rarely becomes the final word on the subject.

A scholar who recently found himself in this situation is Robert G. Boatright. His research subject is primary elections. And the downside was never even part of his objective. He confesses in the conclusion that he hoped that his book would be only the opening word in a longer conversation about the subject. This book is much more than the opening word – it is at least a good first chapter.

Boatright seeks an understanding of why primary elections to the U.S. Congress have become so important that the concept developed into a new catchy phrase, “getting primaried,” which he defines as “to mount a primary campaign against an incumbent member of Congress” (p. 1). Few question that more time on news shows, more space in newspapers, more blog posts, and more effort by incumbents is being given to primary elections. These trends were encapsulated in a pithy quote from Barney Frank when he described the Republican Party as consisting of “half of people who think like Michele Bachman . . . and half of people who are afraid of losing to people who think like Michele Bachman” (p. 17) – the quote, according to Google now generates more than 400,000 hits in 0.62 seconds (as of March 11, 2014).

In his important new book, Boatright seeks to address three claims of the conventional wisdom surrounding primaries: “that they are becoming more common, that they are more consequential, and that they effect the behavior of members of Congress” (p. 212). Only because of the pervasiveness of the conventional wisdom do Boatright’s findings seem so unsettling. In short, he finds no evidence for the first and third claims. The findings for the second claim are a bit more nuanced. The interest group and campaign finance environments for incumbents have changed. In combination, Boatright shows how primaries can now become nationalized in a way that would not have happened in the 1970s, 1980s, or 1990s. In this sense, then, the conventional wisdom is at least partially correct – or at least heading in the right direction.

To be sure about the null findings that he gets for the first and third claims, Boatright slices and dices his data many different ways, whether by breaking it up into different time periods, different parties, or different underlying causes of the primary. While some coefficients in these various regressions do reach standard levels of statistical significance, the thrust of the overall answer does not change. Competitive primaries are

no more prevalent now than they were in the 1970s and the 1980s. What explains the frequency of primaries then and now seems to be variance in party composition in Congress as mediated by volatile election cycles.

As for the third claim – that which is substantiated by Barney Frank’s quote – that primaries change members’ behavior, Boatright finds little support. He notes that few incumbents lose in primaries and those that do survived competitive primary elections fare almost as well in their reelection efforts (90.8 percent) as those that easily win primaries (94.3 percent). Furthermore, he finds that incumbents become a bit more ideologically extreme after surviving a competitive primary – but just a bit.

My only quibble with Boatright’s analysis is in the testing of this last relationship between competitive primaries and roll-call voting scores. He uses DW-NOMINATE to see if those incumbents who survive a primary challenge – or a strong challenge – vote differently as a consequence of the challenge. Although DW-NOMINATE is a great measure in almost every other context, is inappropriate for this test. Poole and Rosenthal constrict this measure to change linearly over the course of a member’s career. As such, if a Republican member votes exactly the same over the first 5 terms of her career and then because of a primary challenge votes more conservatively in the sixth term, the DW-NOMINATE algorithm will compute the member’s score as getting slightly more (approximately one-fifth the total movement from first to sixth term) conservative *each* term rather than making a bold move after the fifth term because of the most recent primary challenge. Using DW-NOMINATE as the dependent variable simply would mask the change that the conventional wisdom would suggest. It is quite likely that even the correct dependent variable would yield the same result, but we cannot be sure until it is explicitly tested.

This one criticism is rather minor in a book filled with powerful, compelling, and robust statistical tests. Because of Boatright’s work in analyzing congressional primaries, we must, at least, question the conventional wisdom. Such rethinking should be done at all levels of political understanding and engagement. Scholar and political observer, alike, need to heed these results.

Because it is so meticulous and careful, the “sheer amount of data” analysis can get can “a little bit overwhelm[ing]” at times (p.99). On this score, Boatright cannot be criticized. It is the nature of demonstrating that the conventional wisdom exaggerates the consequence of getting primaried. Digging through regression results and looking for significant coefficient estimates is the purview of congressional election scholars – but they must hold the conventional wisdom accountable for what it gets wrong – or at least asserts without systematic evidence.

Boatright has given political scientists – especially those studying congressional elections – much to mull over in his “opening word.” I suspect that the vary voices that contribute to this wisdom becoming conventional will not be persuaded. With data analysis and systematic hypothesis testing on his side, they should be. It is only in

wrestling with his findings that the conventional wisdom can begin to understand why members continue to run scared from potential primaries. Cracking this puzzle will likely be the next chapter in the congressional primaries book – a chapter that Boatright very well may write in his next book.

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