

# Primary Elections and the Quality of Elected Officials\*

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## Abstract

In this paper we argue that the literature underestimates the value of primaries, because it focuses on overall average effects. We argue that primary elections are most needed in safe constituencies, where the advantaged party's candidate can usually win the general election – even if she is “low quality.” If the main role of elections is to select good candidates, then primaries in open seat races for advantaged parties are particularly consequential. We provide three pieces of evidence to support our argument. First, many voters live in states, counties or congressional districts where voter loyalties favor one party. Thus, safe constituencies loom large in the U.S. elections. Second, primary elections are especially competitive for the advantaged party in safe constituencies. Finally, and most importantly, primary elections are especially effective at selecting “high quality” types and punishing poor performance in safe constituencies.

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# 1 Introduction

Almost all candidates for major elected offices in the U.S. are nominated in direct primary elections. What role do primaries play in the overall electoral system? Do primary elections substantially increase the quality or performance of elected politicians? Do voters use primaries to remove poorly performing incumbents, e.g., those who are shirking or engaged in malfeasant behavior? Do primaries at least help voters choose better candidates in open-seat races? Do primary elections sometimes serve as an adequate substitute for general elections?

More than fifty years ago Julius Turner studied competition in congressional primaries and found it lacking, mainly because few incumbents faced serious challenges and almost none of them lost. He concludes pessimistically: “The comparative usefulness of the primary as a method for selecting successors for retiring incumbents does not offset the fact that the primary is not a successful alternative to two-party competition in most parts of the United States” (Turner, 1953, 210).

Many modern textbooks on U.S. elections summarize the situation in similar terms. For example, Bibby (2003, 171) writes, “It was the expectation of the [progressive] reformers that the direct primary would stimulate competition among candidates for party nominations. This hope has not been fulfilled, however. In a substantial percentage of the primaries, nominations either go uncontested or involve only nominal challengers to the front runner... Because incumbents tend to scare off competitors in the primaries, they of course win renomination in overwhelming proportion.” Like Turner, Bibby focuses on the low level of average primary competition for incumbent contested races and concludes that primaries are simply a “nuisance” in these cases.<sup>1</sup> Jacobson’s (2009) text on congressional elections scarcely mentions primaries at all.

It is possible that few incumbents *deserve* to be removed or even strongly challenged in their parties’ primaries. Under normal circumstances, why should we think that there are candidates available to a party who clearly dominate the incumbent? Incumbents have

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<sup>1</sup>After describing the low level of primary competition in incumbent contested congressional and state legislative races, Bibby (2003, 172) writes, “Thus, for most members of Congress and state legislators, the primary is not unlike the common cold. It is a nuisance, but seldom fatal.”

experience and seniority, and track records that prove they can win elections. Given the large incumbency advantage that exists in general elections, a party should be reluctant, especially in competitive districts, to give up this electoral advantage unless the alternative was clearly superior on some dimension of value to the party. Such challengers may be rare.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, we argue that in order to accurately assess how well primary elections perform, we must distinguish among different situations. In particular, we must consider important differences in the contribution primaries make in safe versus competitive constituencies, and in open-seat versus incumbent-contested races. We believe the existing literature underestimates the value of primaries, because it tends to focus on the average effect across all situations.

Our argument also makes an important distinction between the role of elections in helping to select “good types” in open-seats, and the role of elections in helping to hold incumbents accountable (i.e., to reward and punish incumbents based on their performance). Since most incumbents run for reelection, studies of overall averages implicitly put a larger weight on the accountability role and less weight on the selection role. An important body of theory, however, argues that elections are more effective as a selection mechanism than as an accountability mechanism – see especially Fearon (1999), Besley (2006), and see Ashworth (2012) for a review of the literature. While we find evidence that primaries have a role in holding incumbents accountable, the primaries are particularly valuable in facilitating the selection of high-quality candidates.

The intuition for our argument can be conveyed with a simple stylized framework. Suppose there are three types of constituencies – safely Democratic, safely Republican, and balanced – distinguished by the distribution of voter partisan attachments, and two types of candidates – high-quality and low-quality. Suppose further that our main objective is to elect as many high-quality officials as possible. Consider the following cases: (1) an open-seat race in a safely Democratic constituency; (2) an open-seat race in a competitive constituency; (3) a race with a Democratic incumbent running in a safely Democratic constituency; and (4) a

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<sup>2</sup>Hirano, et al. (2009) provide a model that incorporates this logic and shows that in equilibrium we should expect few contested races.

race with a Democratic incumbent running in a competitive constituency.

In case (1) we care mainly about the Democratic primary, because this party's nominee is very likely to win in the general election. Therefore, we want at least one high-quality candidate to run in the Democratic primary, and we want the Democratic primary voters to choose a high-quality candidate as their party's nominee. As long as this occurs, we do not have to be very concerned about the Republican primary. The same logic applies in a safely Republican constituency, with the party labels switched.

In case (2) we care about both party's primaries. However, we only need one party to produce a high-quality nominee. Since the partisan loyalties in the constituency are relatively balanced, if one party nominates a high-quality candidate and the other party nominates a low-quality candidate, then the party with the high-quality candidate is very likely to win in the general election.

In case (3), if the Democratic incumbent is high-quality, then we do not really need a primary in either party. If the Democratic incumbent is low-quality, then we want at least one high-quality challenger to run in the Democratic primary, and we want the Democratic primary voters to choose a high-quality challenger (not the incumbent) as their party's nominee. Again, we do not have to be very concerned about what happens in the Republican primary.

Case (4) is roughly a mixture of cases (2) and (3). If the Democratic incumbent is high-quality, then the situation is similar to the sub-case of case (3) with a high-quality Democratic incumbent. We do not really need a primary in either party, since the Democratic incumbent is very likely to win re-election. If the Democratic incumbent is low-quality, then the situation is similar to that in case (2). We want at least one high-quality candidate to run in one of the parties' primaries, and we want the voters in that primary to choose a high-quality candidate as their party's nominee.

This discussion highlights three main points. First, we care especially about how well the electoral system works in open-seat races. If most open-seat winners are high-quality, then most *incumbents* will be high-quality as well, since most incumbents were, at some point in

the past, open-seat winners.<sup>3</sup> Second, within open-seat races, we care most about the quality of the candidates competing in the advantaged party’s primary in safe constituencies. In these constituencies, the advantaged party’s primary is largely responsible for selecting the quality of the elected official.<sup>4</sup> Third, if we find that open-seat races tend to result in high-quality winners, then we should not be too concerned if there is relatively little competition in primaries (in either party) when an incumbent is running for re-election. Rather, we should focus our attention on what happens in the minority of cases involving low-quality incumbents.

In this paper, we provide empirical support for several key parts of this argument. First, we document that many voters live in states, counties or congressional districts where the underlying voter loyalties clearly favor one party. In fact, this is true for about 60% of all congressional districts. Safe constituencies loom large in the U.S. elections. Thus, if primaries facilitate the election of high quality officials in safe constituencies, then primaries would be making a substantial contribution to the U.S. electoral system.

Second, we present evidence that primary elections are especially competitive for the advantaged party of constituencies in which a disproportionate number of voters are loyal to one of the parties.<sup>5</sup> This pattern is most noticeable in open-seat races. Over the postwar

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<sup>3</sup>This assumes that high-quality incumbents do not retire at much higher rates than low-quality incumbents. It is possible that high-quality incumbents retire at much higher rates than low-quality incumbents – e.g. if serving in an elective political office is a means of generating attractive job offers in the private sector (or bureaucracy), and if the private sector desires high-quality incumbents and can identify them. This does not seem likely, however, at least for most of the important elective offices in the U.S..

<sup>4</sup>It is interesting to note that some of the early progressive scholars and reformers made similar arguments. For example, in 1923 Charles Merriam (1923, 4) wrote, “[T]he significance of the vote under the direct primary varies in different sections of the country or of the state. About half the states are one-party states where the primary is of the very greatest importance, for here the election is practically decided. This list includes [list of states] and comprises more than half of the population of the United States. Many other states are preponderatingly Republican or Democratic. Of the 3,000 counties in the United States, it is safe to say that roughly half of them are one-party counties. Legislators, governors and United States senators are practically chosen in the primaries. In these instances ... the primary of the majority party is of the utmost consequence, for whatever the outcome, it is not likely to be overthrown in the subsequent [general] election.” Somewhat more indirectly (and colorfully), in 1924 Gifford Pinchot (1924, 9) noted, “Under the convention system the only power that can clean up a party is the other party. Under the primary it is possible to clean up from within.” And V.O. Key (1956, 88) stated, “The direct primary method of nomination apparently constituted at bottom an escape from one-partyism.”

<sup>5</sup>Previous studies – e.g., Key (1956), Jewell (1967), Grau (1981), and Hogan (2003) – document similar patterns for earlier time periods in a restricted sets of states.

period, roughly 80% of advantaged party's primaries for statewide offices were contested, while less than 50% of the disadvantaged party's primaries were contested. If the main role of elections is selection, then the competitiveness of open-seat primaries for the advantaged party is a better indicator of whether primary competition is contributing to the electoral system than the competitiveness of incumbent contested primaries which has been the focus of much of the existing literature.

Finally, and most importantly, we present evidence that primary elections appear to be especially good at selecting high-quality nominees and at punishing poor performing incumbents in the advantaged party of constituencies in which one party has a clear advantage in terms of underlying voter loyalties. Compared to competitive constituencies, where both the primary and general election contribute to selecting high-quality public officials, safe constituencies place a much greater burden on the advantaged party's primary to insure high-quality officials are elected. We find that primaries are so effective at selecting high-quality nominees for advantaged parties in safe constituencies that we observe little difference in the quality of the eventual winners in safe versus competitive constituencies. Moreover, in the rare event that an incumbent in a safe constituency is involved in a scandal or performs poorly in office, the advantaged party's primary in that constituency tends to be not only more competitive, but also more likely to remove the incumbent from office. This is evidence that primaries contribute to the U.S. electoral system by helping to insure that elected officials are of high quality, even when effective two-party competition is lacking.

More specifically, we find that in open-seat races for the U.S. House, Illinois judicial offices, and statewide offices, high-quality candidates are more likely to compete and win in the primary elections of parties that have an electoral advantage in terms of the underlying distribution of voter partisanship in the state or district. We also find that in the U.S. House and the North Carolina state legislature, low-quality or poorly-performing incumbents are more likely to face competition and be defeated in a primary election than other incumbents. This is particularly true in districts that are relatively safe for the incumbent's party.

Although our findings are encouraging, we do not want to overstate the case for direct

primary elections. There are some important caveats, which we will also return to below. First, our argument focuses heavily, though not entirely, on the role of an election as a selection mechanism. As noted above, there are important theoretical justifications for this emphasis. However, elections may also play a role in controlling politicians' behaviors. Second, even taking our measures at face-value, we cannot say that primaries are "extremely" effective. We find that safe and competitive districts elect high-quality officials more often than what we would expect if the primaries were a completely ineffective screen for candidate quality. However, the probability of high quality candidates losing primaries might still be much lower than the "desired" probability. Third, there may be preferable alternatives to primaries that achieve similar or better outcomes – e.g. non-partisan elections, third-party candidates, or even the old conventions or caucus system. However, we do not know if introducing these alternatives would also significantly change the quality of the candidates seeking office.

Finally, our analyses rely on relatively coarse and noisy measures of politician quality and performance. What we attempt to measure is probably best termed "competence." This depends on a variety of attributes, including general intelligence, disposition, energy level, health, task-specific human capital, and motivation. There are multiple dimensions of quality and performance for different offices, and each may not be equally relevant for all types of voters. One of the contributions of this paper is to examine different measures of quality. We also introduce a new measure of quality, newspaper endorsements. However, future research should investigate alternative measures of quality and performance.

## 2 Theoretical Considerations

Our argument is that primaries are valuable to the U.S. electoral system because of their role in electing high-quality officials, especially in constituencies that lack effective two-party competition in the general election. An open question concerns how good are primaries at selecting high-quality types in these safe districts? Do competitive districts, where candidates potentially face serious competition in both the primary and general election, still result

in significantly higher quality officials being elected?<sup>6</sup> In this section we highlight several reasons why the primaries of parties favored to win the general election may be more likely to result in a high-quality nominee than primaries for non-favored parties. These reasons have to do with differences in the informational environments, the incentives for candidate entry, and the pool of potential primary election candidates. If primaries in safe districts function particularly well at nominating high quality candidates, then we might expect that safe and competitive districts would elect officials of similar quality.

In terms of information, the empirical evidence suggests that primary candidates for parties favored to win the general election receive more media attention.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, these candidates also tend to spend more resources during the campaign, part of which is presumably used to advertise information about the candidates.<sup>8</sup> Thus, to the extent that this additional exposure to information improves the ability of voters to choose among primary candidates, we should expect that the quality of nominees is higher for the advantaged party in safe constituencies.

In addition to the voters in an advantaged party primary being more likely to identify high-quality candidates than in other primaries, we might also expect there to be higher proportion of high quality candidates competing in the the advantaged party primary in a safe district. There are two reasons why this might occur. The first has to do with incentives for candidate entry. If the probability that a candidate will enter is increasing the likelihood

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<sup>6</sup>We might expect that higher quality officials to be elected in competitive districts if the mechanism by which high quality candidates are elected is simply that voters learn who the higher quality candidates are and vote for them. If this were the only mechanism, then we might expect that districts with competitive general elections would elect higher quality officials compared to safe districts. The competitive general election would serve as an additional screen for candidate quality. In contrast in safe districts the primary is often the only electoral screen for candidate quality.

<sup>7</sup>First, to demonstrate that candidates in the primary election for a party with a partisan advantage receive more media attention, we can examine the number of times candidates' names are mentioned in newspapers for the primary election for an advantaged party. Although we do not have access to a large historical database of newspapers throughout the country, we the database available through [www.newslibrary.com](http://www.newslibrary.com) which allows us to examine newspapers from different regions of the U.S. for the period 1998 to 2006. For each election during this period, we counted the number of times candidates' names were mentioned for each party. We find that the advantaged party's candidates receive about double the amount of newspaper coverage as the other party's candidates.

<sup>8</sup>In the period 1992 to 2006, when no incumbent is competing in a Senate race, the losing primary candidate from the advantaged party spends substantially more than the losing primary candidate from the other party.

that the candidate will be elected, then increasing the probability of winning the general election will have a positive effect on the likelihood that high-quality candidates will enter the primary. The probability of winning the general election is likely to have a multiplier effect on the incentive for high-quality candidates to enter an election.

The intuition for this multiplier effect can be seen in the simple cross-partial derivative of the probability of winning office,  $W$ . Suppose  $W$  is equal to the probability of winning the primary,  $P$ , times the the probability of winning the general election,  $G$ . Suppose further that the probability that a candidate wins the primary is increasing in her quality,  $q$ , so  $\partial P/\partial q > 0$ . Finally, suppose that voting in the general election is driven entirely by voters' partisan attachments,  $a$ , so quality has no affect on the probability of winning in the general election; define  $a$  so that higher values mean more voter's are attached to the candidate's party, so  $\partial G/\partial a > 0$ .<sup>9</sup> Then  $W(q, a) = P(q)G(a)$ , so  $\partial^2 W/\partial q\partial a = (\partial P/\partial q)(\partial G/\partial a) > 0$ . Thus, high-quality candidates will have a greater incentive to enter their party's primaries as their districts becomes safer for their party. As long as quality is not also correlated with some other attribute affecting voting behavior, increasing the proportion of high-quality candidates competing in a primary should naturally increase the likelihood that a high-quality candidate will win the nomination.<sup>10</sup>

This positive relationship between the number of high-quality candidates competing in a district's primary and probability of winning the general election in that district should still exist even if candidates enter sequentially. Of course, the probability that later entrants will win the primary is lower when the preceding entrants are high-quality. This suggests that potential candidates will have weaker incentives to enter an election when the prior entrants are high-quality, leading to fewer high quality candidates in primaries with an initial high-quality entrant, e.g. when there is an incumbent. Nonetheless, among races where there is an initial high-quality entrant, the intuition outlined above should still hold, and we should

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<sup>9</sup>This assumption is for simplicity – the argument will hold as long as the effect of quality is “small” relative to the effect of partisanship.

<sup>10</sup>The concern is that when quality is also correlated with some other attribute or dimension, the high-quality candidates may divide the “high-quality” vote in a way that allows the low-quality candidate to win.

expect more high-quality candidates competing in the primaries for parties with an electoral advantage in the general election as compared to the primaries for other parties.

The proportion of high-quality candidates in a party's primary may also be increasing in that party's general election safety simply due to changes in the "pool" of potential primary election candidates. The proportion of candidates in this pool who are high-quality is likely to be larger for parties favored in general election. This relationship will naturally arise from the multi-levels of elected office in U.S. government. For example, in a congressional district that is safe for the Democrats, we would expect that more of the state legislators elected from districts with boundaries that fall within that congressional district will be Democrats. If prior legislative experience is an indicator of quality, then there will be more high-quality types who could consider entering the Democratic primary in this congressional district – assuming that state legislators are more likely to run for congressional seats that overlap with their state legislative district. Thus, even if candidates are not necessarily strategic in their entry decisions and voters are not necessarily better able to identify high-quality candidates, we might still expect that this "mechanical" effect will lead parties favored in the general elections to nominate high-quality candidates.

This discussion suggests that the claims about the limited role of primaries (e.g. Turner, 1953) may understate their value especially for safe seats. The advantaged party primaries for an open seat are especially likely to produce high-quality nominees. Several scholars have noted that if most open-seat winners are high-quality, then most *incumbents* will be high-quality as well, since most incumbents were, at some point in the past, open-seat winners (e.g. Ashworth, 2005; Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita, 2008; Zaller, 1998). While the existing literature focuses on how the election of high-quality officials in open-seat general elections could produce an incumbency advantage in subsequent general elections, the same logic would suggest that the nomination of high-quality candidates in open-seat primaries could reduce competition in incumbent contested primaries even in safe districts.<sup>11</sup> In this framework, the lack of primary or general election competition for incumbents is consistent

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<sup>11</sup>Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita (2008) also note that selection on quality is likely to be highest when the ideological differences between the candidates are low, as is the case in primary elections.

with an electoral system that works particularly well on the initial selection of public officials.

Another implication of the above discussion is that the advantaged party's primaries in safe districts should also be particularly effective at holding incumbents in safe districts accountable for their performance in office. From an informational standpoint, voters in an advantaged party's primary are likely to have more information about the poor performance of incumbents. More importantly, the calculus of entry described above would predict more high-quality candidates entering the advantaged party's primary in safe districts when an incumbent reveals herself to be low-quality or poor performer in office. As in the case of open seats, the incentives for a high-quality candidate to challenge a poor performing incumbent will be increasing in the probability the candidate's party will win the general election.

### 3 The Degree of Inter-Party Competition

Since we argue that primaries are particularly useful in safe constituencies, the value of primaries to an electoral system depends in part upon the proportion of constituencies in the system that are considered safe. In this section, we document how the degree of two-party competition in the U.S. has varied considerably across states, congressional districts, and localities over time. Figure 1 shows how competition at the state level has evolved over the post-war period (black curve). The figure also shows how competition at the state level compares with competition in counties (dark gray curve) and congressional districts (light gray curve).

For states, the y-axis in Figure 1 shows the percentage of state-year observations with robust two-party competition. The classification is based on a 9-year moving average of the vote shares in all available elections for federal and statewide offices. More specifically, we classify a state as competitive in year  $t$  if the average difference between the two major parties' vote shares during the years  $t-4$  to  $t+4$  was less than 15 percentage points.<sup>12</sup>

Two-party competition rose fairly steadily over the post-war period, to the point that in the current period (1990-2010) about 75% of all states exhibit fairly lively two-party

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<sup>12</sup>See Ansolabehere and Snyder (2002) and Ansolabehere et al. (2010) for details about the data, including sources.

competition. This happened quickly in the non-South, so that by the 1960s we classify 80% of the state-years as competitive. In the South, the situation remained largely uncompetitive until the 1980s (except for the three top offices of president, governor, and U.S. senate), but is now as competitive as the other regions.

There are some indications that two-party competition has been declining recently. Figure 1 shows that the fraction of states with robust inter-party competition fell from a high of 84% in 1992 to 70% in 2006. It is not clear whether the trend from 1992 to 2006 will continue, or whether it will reverse, as it did in 1978. In any case, the current electoral arena at the state level is still much more competitive than it was in the early 1950s.

We expect two-party competition to be even less robust at the level of the county, city or legislative districts, since the geographic units are smaller and often more politically homogeneous. In the case of legislative districts, gerrymandering could exacerbate the problem. The majority party might pack the minority party's districts in order to waste minority votes, or a bi-partisan, incumbent-protecting gerrymander might produce many safe districts for both parties. Although we do not have a comprehensive data set of local election results, we do have data on various elections – e.g., president, governor, and U.S. senators – at the county level. We also have the presidential vote at the congressional district level.

Figure 1 shows that two-party competition is in fact less prevalent at the county and congressional district level than at the state level. For counties, we construct the underlying measure of two-party competition as a 9-year moving average of the vote shares in all available elections for president, governor, and U.S. senator. For congressional districts we only have data for presidential elections. We classify a county or district as competitive in year  $t$  if the average difference between the two major parties' vote shares during the years  $t-4$  to  $t+4$  was less than 15 percentage points.

Over the past four decades, two-party competition has been relatively robust in about 73% of the cases at the state level, but in only about 47% of the cases at the county level, and only 45% of the cases at the congressional district level.

One-party dominance of state legislatures is even more prevalent, since state legislative dis-

tricts are smaller than congressional districts, and often even more politically homogeneous. During the 1980s, for example, less than 40% of state legislative districts were competitive using the 15-percentage-point definition.<sup>13</sup>

The analysis above treats large and small states, and large and small counties, equally. However, the situation does not look much different if we weight it by population.<sup>14</sup> The fraction of the population living in a competitive county is about 7 percentage points higher than the fraction of counties that are competitive, and this has not changed much over time. During the period 1970-2006, the percentage of county-years classified as competitive is 47.4%, and the fraction of people living in competitive counties is 54.1%. Weighting by population does not dramatically change the picture at state level. For the period 1970-2006, the percentage of state-years classified as competitive is 73.9%, and the fraction of people living in competitive states is 81.8%.<sup>15</sup>

## 4 Competition in Primaries

Part of our argument is that primaries might not be competitive overall, but if the main role of elections is selection, then we should be particularly interested in the primaries for open seats in safe districts. In this section, we document how the level of primary competition has varied over time, how it varies across parties and offices, and how it varies depending on whether the incumbent is running for re-election.

Consider statewide elections, for governor, U.S. senator, and statewide down-ballot offices. Figure 2 shows the patterns for two measures of primary competition. The first is the

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<sup>13</sup>Calculation by authors based on data from the King et al. (1997) Record of American Democracy project.

<sup>14</sup>This is evident for congressional districts, since congressional districts have approximately equal populations at least since 1964.

<sup>15</sup>While the patterns in the data are clear, they raise important questions. Why is vigorous competition between the two major parties lacking in so many parts of the country? Why is there so little competition from third parties? In particular, why are there no strong regional parties, as there are in Canada and India? Answering these questions is beyond the scope of this paper. See Key (1956, 246) for one argument, “The electoral groupings that exist within individual states are profoundly affected by the impact of national issues and by the alternatives fixed by the competition of national political leadership. Current national issues – and the accumulative residual effects of past national conflicts – may push a state’s local politics toward a Republican or Democratic one-partyism or they so divide the electorate of a state that it is closely competitive between the parties in both national and state affairs.”

percentage of races which were “contested” – i.e. at least two candidates received more than 1% of the vote.<sup>16</sup> The second measure is the percentage of races that are “competitive”. Following the definition used above for general elections, we classify a primary election as competitive if the winner received less than 57.5% of the total votes cast. Uncontested elections are classified as uncompetitive. Additionally, we count as uncontested – and therefore uncompetitive – any primary election in which *no* candidates ran for the nomination.

Figure 2 also splits the data along two important dimensions. The first is the underlying degree of two-party competition in the state around the time of each election. We divide the set of state-year-party observations into three categories: Strong Party, Weak Party, and Parties Balanced. A party is Strong in a given state and year if its candidates won more than 57.5% of the vote, on average, across all available statewide races in a 9-year window around the given year (t-4 to t+4). A party is Weak in a given state and year if the other party is favored in that state-year. In all other cases, the parties are Balanced. The second dimension is incumbency status, where we divide the races into the cases where an incumbent is running a party’s primary for a given office, and cases where no incumbent is present in either party or there is an incumbent in the opposing party’s primary.

Consider first primaries without incumbents. The most salient fact is that the rate of competition is much higher in Strong Party primaries (black curve) than in Weak Party primaries (dark gray curve). From the 1950s through the 1970s, the difference was relatively constant. Over this period, 88% of Strong Party primaries were contested, compared to just 30% in Weak Party primaries. Similarly, 65% of Strong Party primaries were competitive, compared to just 14% in Weak Party primaries.<sup>17</sup>

The situation has changed somewhat during the past three decades. First, the rate of competition in Strong Party primaries fell noticeably. This is especially clear in the

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<sup>16</sup>We drop cases where a nomination was made by a caucus or convention. We also drop cases where one party nominated its candidate by convention, but the other party held a primary election. Alternatively, we could have included them and counted them as cases with “uncontested primaries,” since the party holding a convention could have held a primary instead. All of these cases involve the Republican party in southern states. The overall patterns are similar if we count these cases as uncontested primaries.

<sup>17</sup>When we examine two other measures of competition – the average number of candidates, and the percentage of votes won by losing candidates – the patterns look similar to those in 2.

percentage of primaries that are competitive, which was under 50% in the 2000s. On the other hand, primary competition actually rose in the Weak Party and has also been constant in cases where the parties are balanced.

The patterns are quite different in primaries with an incumbent running. First, the overall level of competition is lower. Second, it has been declining steadily overall, especially in Strong Parties. In the 2000s, the level of competition was dismally low. Only 31% incumbents in Strong Party primaries were contested, and only 6% of Strong Party primaries with an incumbent could be classified as competitive. Third, the difference between Strong Party primaries and Parties Balanced primaries is much smaller than in races with no incumbent.

Figure 3 presents the graphs of primary competition for U.S. House races in the post-war decades. Note first that the overall level of competition is lower than in statewide races. This is especially true when an incumbent is running. In these cases the percentage of competitive races is near zero. Thus, Turner's (1953) main point holds as strongly today as it did in the 1950s. Also, until recently, the differences between Strong and Weak parties were less clear, even in races with no incumbent. Over the past two decades, however, the overall patterns are quite similar to those for statewide races. In primaries without incumbents, the rate of competition is much higher in Strong Party primaries than in Weak Party primaries (with the Parties Balanced cases in between). In fact, over the past decade the percentage of Strong Party primaries that are competitive is higher in congressional races than in statewide races.

## 5 Candidate Quality in Open-Seat Races

The above section suggests that open-seat primaries for Strong Parties are the most competitive. The next question is whether Strong Party primaries are also associated with the nomination of higher-quality candidates compared to Weak Party or Parties Balanced primaries. One challenge in examining this relationship is the difficulty of measuring either the quality or performance of politicians. For incumbents, the task is somewhat easier, because there are various policy-related outcomes that are at least in part attributable to the in-

cumbents' actions. For non-incumbents, we need measures of future expected performance, which are more difficult to quantify.

In this section, we examine three different measures of candidate quality. First, we employ the most commonly used measure of candidate quality – prior electoral experience. Another measure we examine is bar association evaluations of judicial candidates. Finally, we also introduce a new measure of candidate quality based on newspaper endorsements.

## 5.1 Prior Legislative Experience in U.S. House Races

Previous office holder experience of the party nominees, which was developed in Jacobson (1980), is a widely used measure of candidate quality in the literature.<sup>18</sup> These studies find that state legislators do especially well in U.S. congressional elections and interpret this as evidence that political experience is an indicator of candidate quality. This seems plausible, since the activities in state legislatures are similar to those in Congress – writing and amending bills in committee, bargaining and building coalitions, working within and across party lines, bargaining with an independently elected executive, and so on. Thus, many of the skills required to be successful in a state legislature are also valuable in Congress.

As discussed above, primaries are particularly important for selecting high-quality candidates in Strong Party primaries – i.e. where constituency loyalty favors that party's candidates – and least important for selecting high-quality candidates in Weak Party primaries. Of course primaries in Parties Balanced cases also have an important role in selecting high quality officials. However, since the general election provides an additional competitive hurdle where voters can evaluate candidates of both parties, our main concern in Parties Balanced cases is that at least one party puts forth a high-quality candidate in the general election.

We first analyze Jacobson's data for the period 1952 to 2000. These data cover previous office holder experience for all general election candidates. The data include information regarding whether candidates previously held offices other than in the state legislature. With these data we examine the quality of the nominees elected through a primary. We have also

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<sup>18</sup>A sample of the papers that use previous experience as a measure of quality includes Jacobson and Kernell (1983), Bond et al. (1985), Jacobson (1989, 2009), Lublin (1994), Bond et al. (1997), Cox and Katz (1996), Van Dunk (1997), Goodliffe (2001, 2007), Carson and Roberts (2005), and Carson et al. (2007).

assembled data on the previous office holder experience of all primary election candidates for the period 1978 to 2010.<sup>19</sup> These data allow us to ask additional questions about the quality of candidates who are defeated in the primary.

Using Jacobson’s data, we first plot the percentage of primary election winners that had previous political experience for the three types of primaries: Strong Party (+1), Balanced Parties (0), and Weak Party (-1). For the period 1952 to 2000, Figure 4 provides evidence that for open-seat races for the U.S. House, the Strong Party primary has the highest percentage of primary winners with previous office holder experience. The percentage of primary winners with previous experience is slightly lower in the Balanced Parties case. The lowest percentage of experienced nominees winners occurs in the Weak Party primaries. This pattern is still evident if we broaden our measure of quality to include elected offices other than state legislator.

Using the data on previous experience in the state legislature for all primary candidates between 1978 and 2010, in the top left panel of Figure 5 we find the same relationship between previous office holder experience of the primary winners and the division of partisan loyalties in the different constituencies – i.e. the highest percentage of high-quality winners is in Strong Party primaries and the lowest percentage is in the Weak Party primaries. Incorporating the additional information about the defeated primary candidates, we find that Strong Party primaries are more competitive than Weak Party primaries. In top right panel of the figure, we see that the number of candidates is highest in the Strong Party primary and lowest in the Weak Party primary. Moreover, the bottom two panels of the figure provide evidence that more of the primary candidates in the Strong Party primary have previous office holder experience than in the Weak Party primary, and the number of high-quality candidates in the Parties Balanced case falling between these two types of cases.

These results are also evident in a simple regression of the various measures of primary competition on primary election type – i.e. Strong party, Balanced party, or Weak Party primary. These results are presented in Table 1.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>See Hirano and Snyder (2012) for details regarding this dataset.

<sup>20</sup>Although Figures 4 and 5 suggest that the relationship between the competition measures and election

## 5.2 Judicial Evaluations in Illinois

In this subsection, we again study open-seat primaries, in this case for judicial elections in Illinois. We focus on circuit courts, which are the general jurisdiction trial courts in the state. Circuit court judges are initially elected in partisan elections. Afterwards, every six years their terms expire, and to keep their positions they must win a retention election. There are 22 circuits, and many vacancies are filled in elections where voting is restricted to a single county or sub-circuit. These judicial elections are relatively unique in that we have evaluations of the quality of the judicial candidates competing in the partisan primaries.

Prior to each election, the Illinois State Bar Association (ISBA) and various Chicago area (Cook county) bar associations evaluate judicial candidates. The ISBA Judicial Evaluations Committee gives ratings of Highly Qualified, Qualified, or Not Qualified based on questionnaires and interviews. The ISBA also gives ratings of Recommended or Not Recommended based on surveys of ISBA members. The largest bar association in the Chicago area is the Chicago Bar Association (CBA). Similar to the ISBA, the CBA's Judicial Evaluation Committee gives ratings of Highly Qualified, Qualified, or Not Recommended based on questionnaires and interviews. The other Chicago area bar associations that rate candidates are: the Chicago Council of Lawyers, the Cook County Bar Association, the Women's Bar Association of Illinois, the Asian American Bar Association of the Greater Chicago Area, the Hellenic Bar Association, the Black Women's Lawyers Association of Greater Chicago, the Hispanic Lawyers Association of Illinois, the Lesbian and Gay Bar Association of Chicago, the Puerto Rican Bar Association of Illinois, the Decalogue Society of Lawyers, and the Northwest Suburban Bar Association.<sup>21</sup>

We call a candidate *High Quality* if she received a rating of Qualified or better from more than half of the bar associations that rated the candidate. Note that the Chicago area bar associations only evaluate candidates running for Cook county judgeships, so outside Cook county we use only the ISBA ratings.<sup>22</sup> Election data are from the *Official Vote* booklets

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type is not exactly linear, we use a simple linear specification.

<sup>21</sup>See Lim and Snyder (2012) for more details about the ratings data, including information about the criteria used, and checks on the validity of using it as an indicator of candidate quality.

<sup>22</sup>We also conducted an analysis that relies exclusively on the ISBA evaluations even inside Cook county,

published by the Illinois State Board of Elections. We construct the normal vote for each judicial district using the average vote for president, governor and senator. As above, we classify a judicial district as safe for an incumbent if the normal vote for the incumbent's party exceeds 57.5%. We have ratings, primary election information, and normal vote data for over 1,460 judicial candidates from 1986 to 2010.<sup>23</sup>

The results for open-seat Illinois judicial primary elections are presented in Figure 6. The top left panel of the figure shows that the winners of Strong Party primaries (+1) are more likely to be high quality than the Parties Balanced cases (0) or Weak Party primaries (-1) – the probability is over 0.9, compared to about 0.8 and 0.7 respectively. In the top right panel, we see that on average Strong Party primaries have close to three primary candidates, while Parties Balanced cases have on average slightly less than two candidate per race. The Weak Party cases have less than 1.5 candidates per primary. The bottom panels of the figure indicate that the primary candidates in the Strong Party primary also tend to be higher quality than in the Parties Balanced or Weak Party cases. These patterns are also evident in Table 1, where we regress the various measures of primary competition on primary type.

The patterns in Figure 6 for Illinois judicial primaries is very similar to Figure 5 for open-seat U.S. House primaries. These figures suggest that open-seat primaries are an effective selection mechanism for insuring that high-quality types are likely to represent districts that are not likely to have significant general competition.

### 5.3 Newspaper Endorsements in Congressional and Statewide Races

In this sub-section, we consider an indicator that has not been used previously in the literature on candidate quality: newspaper endorsements. We have collected thousands of primary election endorsements, mainly for the period 1990-2010 but in some cases for earlier years. These endorsements can be used to construct a measure of relative candidate quality.

Newspapers around the U.S. routinely endorse candidates running for office, both in pri-

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and the results are quite similar to those reported here. We are missing ISBA evaluations for Cook county candidates before 1998.

<sup>23</sup>We have ratings and primary election information for many other candidates running in sub-circuits inside Cook county, but we do not have the normal vote data at the sub-circuit level.

mary and general elections.<sup>24</sup> Journalists and newspaper editors have much more information than others about the candidates, because they collect this information as a routine matter in the course of writing and publishing election news stories. In addition, most newspaper staffs conduct interviews of candidates before making their endorsements.

We have not attempted to construct a comprehensive catalogue of the criteria newspapers use to make their endorsements. After reading hundreds of endorsement editorials, however, our impression is that the dominant criteria are previous experience, accomplishments, and qualifications relevant for the office sought. Relevant experience would include prior state legislative experience for candidates running for congress or the other state legislative chamber; prior public sector or private sector auditing experience for candidates running for state auditor; and prior experience as a district attorney or prosecutor in the state attorney general's office when running for state attorney general. Newspapers often cite experience running a large bureaucratic organization – e.g., as mayor of a large city, statewide executive officer, or civic association leader – for candidates running for governor or other executive office. They also often cite the opinions of other experts – e.g., legislative colleagues who attest to how hardworking, responsible, and intelligent a candidate is.

We believe that most newspaper endorsements are good indicators of quality. This is especially true for primary election endorsements. Even if a newspaper has a partisan or ideological bias, this bias is not likely to matter much for its primary election endorsements, since all of the candidates in a given party's primary are affiliated with same party, and since the ideological differences between candidates in a given party's primary tend to be small.<sup>25</sup>

For more direct evidence that endorsements are good indicators of quality, we can compare newspaper endorsements to other quality measures when other measures are available. Judges provide one excellent set of cases. We have both primary election endorsements

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<sup>24</sup>Some newspapers, such as the Los Angeles Times, have a policy of endorsing candidates in the general election but not in the primary election, or of endorsing in the primary election mainly in one-party areas where the primary election is likely to determine the final winner.

<sup>25</sup>It is possible that an extremely partisan newspaper might try to “sabotage” the nomination of the party it opposes, and endorse weak candidates in that party's primary. However, such behavior would be so outrageously unprofessional by today's journalistic standards that it must occur rarely if ever.

and bar association evaluations for a large number of judicial candidates.<sup>26</sup> In these cases, the newspaper endorsements are highly correlated with bar association evaluations. More precisely, consider the candidates who received at least 2 newspaper endorsements and for whom we have at least one bar association evaluation. Call these candidates “highly endorsed.”<sup>27</sup> There are 251 cases, and in 247 (98.4%) of them the highly-endorsed candidate received a bar association evaluation of Qualified or better. That is, in only 4 cases (1.6 %), did a highly endorsed candidate receive an Unqualified or Not Recommended evaluation.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, in these 4 cases *all* of the candidates in these races received Unqualified or Not Recommended evaluations. Even the candidates with just one newspaper endorsement were rated as Qualified or better in 97.2% of the cases (out of 1,111). By comparison, the candidates who received no newspaper endorsements were rated as Qualified or better in only 63.8% of the case (out of 2,013).

Thus, at least in the case of judges, highly endorsed candidates are virtually never among the “low-quality” candidates.

It is also the case that for candidates running for statewide office or the U.S. House, there is a strong and positive relationship between being “highly endorsed” and having previous political experience. More specifically, call a candidate “experienced” if he or she is has previously served as an elected statewide officer, U.S. senator or U.S. House representative, state legislator, or mayor. Consider all open-seat primaries for which we have 2 or more endorsements and in which at least one of the candidates is experienced and one is not experienced. In this sample, 73% of the highly endorsed candidates are experienced, while only 26% of the candidates who are not highly endorsed are experienced.

This evidence suggests that when we have endorsements from several newspapers for the same race, and one candidate receives most or all of these endorsements, then we can be relatively certain that this candidate is, at least relative to the others, a high-quality

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<sup>26</sup>See Lim and Snyder (2012) for more details about the bar association ratings, including evidence that these ratings do not exhibit a partisan bias.

<sup>27</sup>We include non-partisan general election races, in addition to primary races, to increase sample size.

<sup>28</sup>We also call candidates unqualified if they are rated as “lacking qualifications” or if they refused to participate in the review process.

candidate. It is less clear what newspaper endorsements mean when they are split relatively evenly across two or more candidates. If a candidate receives multiple endorsements, then he or she is likely a relatively high-quality candidate, even if another candidate also received one or more endorsements. We are not as certain that this is the case when a candidate receives just one endorsement (although at least for judges it would appear to be the case), since even a relatively weak candidate is sometimes endorsed by his or her “hometown” newspaper.

Now consider all open-seat primary elections for statewide office or the U.S. House held during the period 1990 to 2010 for which we have two or more endorsements. We ask: How often do “highly endorsed” candidates win in the primary, compared to other candidates?

Table 2 shows the results. The table is divided into several panels, in which we vary the definition of a “highly endorsed” candidate (rows) and consider primaries with different numbers of candidates (columns). For example, in the top panel, a candidate is classified as highly endorsed if and only if he or she received at least three endorsements and also received at least three-quarters of the total number endorsements in our sample. The first column shows the results for races with exactly two candidates, and the second column covers the races with three or more candidates.

Consider first the two-candidate contests. In these races, the candidates with three or more endorsements win the primary 85-87% of the time, and the candidates with two or more endorsements win more than 80% of the time. This is much higher than the 50% we would expect if voters were simply flipping coins.

Next, consider the races with three or more candidates. In these races, the candidates with three or more endorsements win 65-67% of the time, and those with two or more endorsements win 60-64% of the time. Again, this is much larger than what we expect under random voting. In our sample, the multi-candidate races involve an average of slightly more than 4 candidates, so if voting was random then we would expect each candidate to win about 25% of the time.<sup>29</sup>

We do not present results comparing Strong Party, Weak Party and Balanced Parties

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<sup>29</sup>The average of the inverse of the number of candidates is also about 1/4.

primaries using the endorsements measure of quality. In fact, the differences are small and statistically insignificant. More precisely, the probability that the winner in a given party’s primary is a highly-endorsed candidate is approximately the same in constituencies that are safe for that party and constituencies that are not safe. The reason, most likely, is that endorsements only provide a measure of the relative quality conditional on the candidates who run, because newspapers almost always endorse exactly one candidate.<sup>30</sup> For example, Strong Party primaries probably involve two high-quality candidates, where one candidate is only slightly better than the other, much more often than Weak Party primaries. In such cases, newspaper endorsements might pile up on the slightly better candidate, but voters might sometimes choose the other candidate.<sup>31</sup>

However, the bottom line from Table 2 is clear. Assuming that the highly endorsed candidates are relatively high quality – i.e., high quality compared to their competitors – the results show that open-seat primary elections are much more likely to produce high quality winners than a “random draw” from the pool.

## 6 The Quality of Open-Seat Winners

The figures above suggest that open-seat primaries produce higher quality general election nominees for the Strong Party in safe districts as compared to competitive districts. In the introduction, we suggested that the lower quality of party nominees in competitive districts is less of a concern since the general election will serve as an additional screening mechanism. Thus, we can now ask whether the quality of the eventual general election winners for open seats differs between competitive and uncompetitive districts.

In Table 3, we present the percentage of general election winners who are high quality in competitive and uncompetitive districts. We also present the percentage of all candidates competing in the primary elections who are high quality in the two types of districts,

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<sup>30</sup>Occasionally, a newspaper will decline to make an endorsement or will endorse multiple candidates, but such cases are rare.

<sup>31</sup>By contrast, we might expect to see cases involving a clearly high-quality candidate and a clearly low-quality candidate more often in Weak Party primaries. And these are the “easy” cases, where newspaper endorsements and voters are most likely to agree on which candidate is better.

dropping token candidates who win less than 1% of the vote. If both primary and general election competition are effectively selecting high-quality candidates, then we should observe a similarly high percentage of general election winners being high-quality in both types of districts. These percentages should be higher for the general election winners as compared to the general pool of candidates.

There are two clear patterns in Table 3. First, for the previous office holder experience and the bar association recommendations measures of quality, the percentage of general elections winners who are high quality is very similar in both the competitive and uncompetitive districts. This suggests that the primaries have an important role in selecting high-quality incumbents for uncompetitive districts.

The second pattern in Table 3 is that the winners are more likely to be high quality than the average open-seat candidate. Those skeptical of the value of primary elections often point to the fact that few incumbents are even contested in their primary, let alone fiercely challenged. However, since incumbents appear to be of higher quality than the “pool” of candidates, it is not clear that the lack of competition is a major problem. In fact, given the costs associated with competitive primaries – borne by candidates, government and voters – it might be socially optimal for most incumbent to be unchallenged. Instead, it is probably more efficient to allocate scarce “primary election resources” to open-seat races and incumbent-contested races in the rare case where incumbents are low quality. In both cases, we should be especially focused on constituencies where one party has an advantage.<sup>32</sup>

## 7 Candidate Performance in Incumbent Contested Races

Although our main argument is that primaries perform an important role helping to select high-quality candidates in open-seat races, we are also interested in whether primaries help hold incumbents accountable when they reveal themselves to be bad types. In this section, we examine two situations where it is plausible to expect the poor performance of incumbents

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<sup>32</sup>These findings are consistent with models of electoral selection and the incumbency advantage – e.g. Zaller (1998) and Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita (2008). Other empirical work, e.g. Hirano and Snyder (2009), also finds evidence suggesting that incumbents are higher quality than the average general election open seat candidate.

to significantly affect their reelection prospects: (1) when an incumbent is involved in a corruption scandal, and (2) when the legislature is clearly composed of a mix of professional and amateur representatives – e.g. in “hybrid” state legislatures – and an incumbent has a low legislative effectiveness ranking. More specifically, we study U.S. House races with incumbents involved in corruption scandals, and North Carolina state legislative races with incumbents who experts do not consider effective.<sup>33</sup>

## 7.1 U.S. House Incumbents in Scandals, 1978-2008

One situation where it seems clear that an incumbent deserves to be replaced is when the incumbent has been involved in malfeasance of some sort – illegal activities, or activities that, while not illegal, violate the norms of proper behavior to an extreme degree. These are relatively rare cases, but they are especially useful in estimating a “lower bound” on the value of elections – i.e., do they at least help citizens remove the worst types of politicians from office?

A number of papers study incumbents involved in scandals and find that scandals hurt incumbents significantly in general elections.<sup>34</sup> A few papers in this literature study the impact of scandals on primary elections.<sup>35</sup> Although most of these papers find that scandals hurt incumbents in terms of vote-share, the authors typically conclude that primaries matter little or not all, because the degree of competition in incumbent-contested primaries is so minimal on average. For example, Brown (2006b, pages 8-9) states, “The scandal variables are statistically significant and large in magnitude in nearly all of the regressions. As predicted, incumbents are hurt by scandal and in the pooled regressions... Since incumbents, however, typically win primary elections by larger margins than they do general elections, the impact

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<sup>33</sup>There are other measures of legislative effort or effectiveness for members of Congress, such as roll call absenteeism and legislative effectiveness. We observe patterns consistent with our claims when we examine roll call absenteeism. However, we do not observe these patterns with the Volden and Wiseman (2013) Legislative Effectiveness Scores (LES). The distribution of LES scores are highly skewed to the right. Thus, we suspect that these scores may be better at identifying the highly effective legislators rather than unusually ineffective legislator. Primaries are probably most useful in holding the particularly bad types accountable.

<sup>34</sup>See, e.g., Peters and Welch (1980), Abramowitz (1988, 1991), Alford et al. (1994), Jacobson and Dimock (1994), Stewart (1994), Welch and Hibbing (1997), Brown (2006a, 2006b), and Lazarus (2008).

<sup>35</sup>See, e.g., Jacobson and Dimock (1994), Welch and Hibbing (1997), Brown (2006a, 2006b) and Lazarus (2008).

of losing more percentage points in a primary may have little or no effect on the outcome (the constants in these models suggest as much).” As shown below, we find much larger effects in safe constituencies than in marginal and unsafe constituencies. This is consistent with the theoretical arguments above, and again demonstrates the need to disaggregate the cases in order to accurately assess the value of primaries.

We analyze the impact of scandals on primary and general election competition over three decades, 1978 to 2008. We begin by asking whether the incumbent involved in a scandal is more likely to lose in a primary election and whether this likelihood varies by the general election safety of his or her district. As above, we classify a congressional district as safe if the presidential vote for the incumbent’s party is greater than 57.5%. We then plot the various primary election competition variables against seat safety, separating incumbents involved and not involved in scandals.<sup>36</sup>

During this period, 12% of incumbents involved in scandals lose in a primary election. As shown in Figure 7 the relationship is even stronger in safe seats. Over 18% of incumbents involved in scandals who represent safe general election districts lose in a primary election as opposed to about 6% who represent competitive general election districts. For incumbents not involved in scandals, less than 1% of them lose their primary election in either safe or competitive districts.

We can also investigate how scandals are related to other aspects of primary competition. The key variables are as follows: (1) the presence of a primary challenger; (2) the number of primary election challengers the incumbent faced; (3) the presence of an experienced challenger; and (4) the total vote share for all challengers.<sup>37</sup> These variables are shown in Figure 8. In all cases, incumbents in scandals face stiffer competition in the primary, and this is especially true if for incumbents who represent safe districts. We present the results of regressions that show these same patterns in Table 4.

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<sup>36</sup>We drop Louisiana from all of our analyses due to its unique electoral system. The primary election data is described in Ansolabehere, et al. (2006, 2010) and Hirano et al. (2010).

<sup>37</sup>We drop token challengers who received less than 1% of the vote. We classify a challenger as experienced if she won an election for Congress, a major state-level office, state or county legislator, mayor, city council, or county executive. The information was gathered from the ICPSR State Legislative data sets, newspaper reports, and various on-line databases.

To assess the role of primaries in helping to remove malfeasant incumbents, we would ideally like to know how likely it is that those who lost in the primary would have won in the general election. To estimate the relationship between scandals and general election vote shares, we regress the general election vote share on primary scandal, lagged general election vote shares, presidential vote share, presidential vote share squared, a Republican indicator variable and a freshman indicator variable.<sup>38</sup> We find that incumbent candidates involved in scandals have a roughly 10% lower than expected vote share compared to other incumbents. Thus, roughly 23% of the incumbents who were involved in relatively serious scandals and defeated in their re-election bids would probably have won in the general election had they not lost in the primary, and therefore the primary was probably necessary to remove them from office. Thus, sometimes, primary elections serve a valuable function.<sup>39</sup> This happens in relatively few cases – only 2.8% of incumbents who represent safe districts are involved in scandals – but these are especially important cases.

In the above figures, we restrict attention to incumbents involved in scandals who choose to run for re-election. About one-third of incumbents involved in scandals retire without seeking re-election. Our analysis may underestimate the effect of scandals if the incumbents who retire would have done particularly poorly in either the primary or general election as a result of the scandal. However, we find that the retirement rates were relatively similar in both safe and competitive districts for incumbents involved in scandals. This is consistent with what we would observe if both primary and general elections provided a significant hurdle for malfeasant incumbents.

The findings above are easily summarized. Incumbents involved in relatively serious scandals face a higher probability of being challenged in the primary than ordinary incumbents, and they also face a higher chance of losing their primary elections. They are especially likely to be challenged in the primary, and especially likely to lose, when they are involved in

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<sup>38</sup>Uncontested incumbents are again assigned 100% of the vote.

<sup>39</sup>Of course, we do not know whether these incumbents would also have lost in conventions or “smoke-filled rooms,” so we cannot assert that primaries are superior to other nomination methods. Moreover, we do not know if those involved in a scandal who lost in the primary would have had a drop of even more than 10% percentage points in the general election.

scandals *and* represent districts that are safe for their party. Thus, our findings indicate that primary elections can improve accountability by removing incumbents who face re-election in districts or regions dominated by one political party.

Our analysis may underestimate the value of holding incumbents in safe districts accountable through primary elections for at least three reasons. First, incumbents in safe districts tend to be more senior and powerful than those from marginal districts. This is also true for incumbents involved in scandals. In our sample, the median number of terms served for incumbents involved in scandals from safe districts was 7, while the median number of terms served for those involved in scandals from non-safe districts was just 5. Party caucuses and conventions might be especially unwilling to remove powerful party members, such as senior members of congress, and this may give primaries an even more important role. Second, as noted above, some incumbents involved in scandals choose to retire rather than run for re-election, and they are excluded. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many of these incumbents would have faced serious primary opposition had they run. Finally, if primaries are a mechanism for holding incumbents in safe districts accountable, then incumbents should already be incorporating the potential loss of office in a primary election into their decisions about whether to engage in any type of political malfeasance.

## 7.2 Effectiveness of North Carolina Legislators, 1988-2010

We now turn to the North Carolina state legislature, where legislators are given a ranking by the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research (NCPFR). We ask similar questions to the previous analysis of scandals – i.e. do the least effective legislators face more primary competition and do they lose in primaries more often than others? Also, is the relationship different in districts which are safe versus competitive in the general election?<sup>40</sup>

Unlike scandals, this measure of effectiveness likely captures not only effort, but also the

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<sup>40</sup>A few previous studies have developed and/or used indices of effectiveness or quality, and shown that these indices are correlated with general election outcomes (Luttbeg, 1992; McCurley and Mondak, 1995; Mondak, 1995; Padro i Miquel and Snyder, 2006; and Lim and Snyder, 2012). Only two of these, Mondak (1995) and Lim and Snyder (2012), examine the relationship between incumbent performance and primary election outcomes, and neither of these distinguishes between safe and marginal constituencies.

innate abilities of representatives.

We study North Carolina because of data availability and also because of its status as a hybrid legislature. The NCPPR compiles and publishes what is almost surely the best publicly available data about legislator effectiveness in the U.S.. Moreover, because NC has a hybrid legislature – an amateur, citizens’ legislature with some professional characteristics – so there is a large amount of variation in the workload across the legislators. This means is that even though the effectiveness rankings are subjective evaluations (by journalists, lobbyists, and legislators themselves) we suspect that it is relatively easy for the evaluators to at least identify the least effective legislators.

The North Carolina legislature is called the General Assembly. It consists of two chambers, a House of Representatives with 120 members and a Senate with 50 members. All members are elected every two years for two-year terms. Regular legislative sessions are biennial, convening in January following each election. In addition, there have been special sessions or short sessions in virtually every even-numbered year since 1974. In 1986-88 the North Carolina legislature was ranked 22nd by Squire’s (1992) index of legislative professionalism. In 2001, legislative salaries were \$13,951 plus a \$104 per diem for living expenses. Legislative leaders earned substantially more – e.g., the Speaker of the House received a salary of \$38,151 and an expense allowance of \$16,956.<sup>41</sup>

The Democratic Party dominated the North Carolina General Assembly until very recently. Democrats held 86% of all state legislative seats during the period 1970-1979, 77% during 1980-1989, and 61% during 1990-1999. In 1994, Republicans won control of the state House for the first time in a 100 years. They won again in 1996, but then lost in 1998.<sup>42</sup> Internally, the legislature is organized mainly along party lines. The majority party controls all committee chairs, but some vice-chairs and subcommittee chairs go to the minority. Electorally, party organizations in North Carolina are stronger than in most other south-

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<sup>41</sup>Despite its character as a citizens’ legislature, some observers argue that until recently the North Carolina General Assembly was one of the most powerful legislative bodies in the nation. This is due to the fact that until 1996 the governor of North Carolina had no veto.

<sup>42</sup>The 2002 elections produced an exact 50-50 split in the House, resulting in a unique system of shared control. Democrats controlled the state Senate throughout the period under study, but with a narrow 26-24 margin during 1995-1996.

ern states, but typically rank just below the U.S. average (see, e.g., Cotter, *et al.*, 1984). Morehouse (1981) classified North Carolina as a state in which pressure groups are strong.

The data on legislator effectiveness comes from the North Carolina Center for Public Policy Research (NCPPr), an independent non-partisan organization.<sup>43</sup> At the end of each regular legislative session after the legislature has adjourned, the NCPPr asks state legislators, lobbyists and legislative liaisons, and capital news correspondents to rate the “effectiveness” of each member of the General Assembly. According to the NCPPr:

Ratings were to be based on their participation in committee work, their skill at guiding bills through floor debate, their general knowledge and expertise in special fields, the respect they command from their peers, the enthusiasm with which they execute various legislative responsibilities, the political power they hold (either by virtue of office, longevity, or personal attributes), their ability to sway the opinion of fellow legislators, and their aptitude for the overall legislative process. (From *Article II: A Guide to the 1991-1992 N.C. Legislature*, p. 212.)

The NCPPr has conducted this survey continuously since 1977. The sample includes all 170 legislators, all lobbyists registered in the state capital who reside in North Carolina (250-325 lobbyists), and all journalists who regularly cover the state General Assembly (35-45 journalists), for a total sample size of 475-550.<sup>44</sup> The NCPPr publishes a ranking based on these ratings in its biennial handbooks, *Article II: A Guide to the N.C. Legislature*.

To keep the analysis simple and comparable to the other analyses involving incumbents, we collapse the legislator effectiveness rankings to a dichotomous variable identifying the bottom quarter – i.e. the bottom 30 state House members and bottom 12 state senators.

As noted above, the main weakness of the *Effectiveness* rankings is that they are based on subjective evaluations. This disadvantage is offset by several desirable characteristics: Each ranking is based on a large number of evaluations; the evaluators are all legislative “specialists” of one sort or another; and the rankings are constructed in a consistent manner

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<sup>43</sup>The NCPPr was created in 1977. It is “an independent, nonprofit organization dedicated to the goals of a better-informed public and more effective, accountable, and responsive government” (see the URL: <http://www.nccppr.org/mission.html#mission>).

<sup>44</sup>Response rates were only about 33% for the period 1977-1981, but have been over 50% in later years. For more information see the North Carolina Political Review’s August 2002 interview with Ran Coble, executive director of the NCPPr. The text of the interview can be found at URL: <http://www.ncpoliticalreview.com/0702/coble1.htm>.

over a long period of time.<sup>45</sup>

In order to classify districts, we must measure the “normal vote” in each legislative district. We aggregate precinct level election results for all available statewide offices to estimate the *Normal Vote*. Due to redistricting we have two different sets of districts.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, to measure the primary election outcomes, we collected primary election data on all candidates running for the North Carolina General Assembly during the period 1988-2010. We obtained this data from the North Carolina State Board of Elections.<sup>47</sup> As above, we classify a state legislative district as safe for an incumbent if the normal vote for the incumbent’s party exceeds 57.5%.

Figure 9 shows the results. Clockwise from the top left panel, the figure displays the proportion of races with a contested primary, the average number of challengers in a primary contest, the average total vote share of the primary challengers, and the proportion of races where the challenger wins the primary. On average, incumbent legislators with relatively low legislative effectiveness scores are more likely to face a primary challenger, have lower primary election vote shares, and be more likely to lose the primary as compared to those with high legislative-effectiveness ratings. When we compare safe versus competitive districts, both legislators with high and low legislative effectiveness scores face more primary competition in safe districts. However, incumbents with low-effectiveness scores show an increase in probability of losing a primary election only in safe districts and not in competitive districts. We again present the results of regressions that show these same patterns in Table 4.

While the patterns in this figure are not as dramatic as those in Figures 7 and 8 for U.S. House scandals, the patterns are consistent with our claim that primaries provide an important electoral mechanism for holding incumbents accountable when the general elections are not likely to be competitive.

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<sup>45</sup>See Padro i Miquel and Snyder (2006) for additional checks regarding the validity of this measure.

<sup>46</sup>The statewide offices we use include the following: U.S. senator, governor, lieutenant governor, secretary of state, treasurer, auditor, attorney general, commissioner of agriculture, commissioner of insurance, commissioner of labor, and superintendent of public instruction. See Hirano and Snyder (2009) for sources.

<sup>47</sup>We obtained some of this data in reports from the NC State Board of Elections and the NC State Legislative Library, and we extracted some from the URL: <http://www.sboe.state.nc.us>.

## 8 Conclusion

Although primary elections are often uncompetitive, these analyses demonstrate that they maybe quite valuable for an important subset of situations. In particular, primary elections are especially competitive in the advantaged party of constituencies where voter loyalties clearly favor one party. In addition we find evidence that primary elections are especially good at selecting “high-quality” types in open-seat races, and at punishing poor performance of incumbents, in an advantaged party’s primary in a safe districts. Primaries, therefore, appear to be especially valuable when effective two-party competition is lacking. This is precisely where we expect them to be needed most. We also show that many voters live in states, counties or congressional districts that are dominated by one party – this is true for about 60% of all congressional districts.

Although we have focused our attention on the importance of primaries in areas dominated by one party, primaries can play an important role even competitive areas. One reason is polarization. When the major parties are polarized, primaries might be valuable even in relatively balanced constituencies, because there might be too few “swing” voters to effectively punish parties that choose weak candidates. In fact, if the *American Voter* view of “independents” is correct, then independents tend to be the least well-informed citizens. Therefore, we might not be able to rely on independent voters to vote against low-quality candidates, since they will not learn which candidates are low-quality. Instead, we must hope that enough partisan voters vote against their party’s candidate when they learn that this candidate is of low-quality. In a highly polarized environment, however, partisan voters are probably less willing to vote against their party’s candidate, even knowing that the candidate is low-quality. Primaries can help in such an environment by giving partisan voters an opportunity to vote against a low-quality candidate in favor of a higher-quality candidate of the same party. Note also that in the primaries most voters tend to be partisans – and these are the people who also tend to be the most well informed. So, there is a good chance they will find out which candidates are of low-quality and which are not.

Although our analyses focus on U.S., the issues that arise with local one-party dominance

is likely to exist in other majoritarian systems. Recently, primaries of various types have been introduced in varying degrees in other countries. An open research question concerns the degree to which primaries in other democracies appear to improve the selection of high-quality politicians, or are the patterns we observe unique to the U.S. political system.

Although we employ several different measure of quality and performance, our measures are relatively coarse. We classify politicians into two groups – high and low quality / performance types. There is still potentially much work to be done on developing alternative measures of quality and in particular developing measures with more fine grained assessments of politician quality and performance that can be compared across politicians and elections.

Finally, we should mention that our study focuses on how primaries are related to one particular dimension of representation relevant to electorate – quality / performance of elected officials. Of course, primaries may affect other aspects of representation, such as policy positions. In fact, a large literature may suggest that the benefits gained from elected quality politicians with primaries are offset by the losses primaries produce by pulling politicians away from the median voters of their districts.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, primaries may weaken party organizations reducing the possibility of responsible party government. Future research into the costs and benefits of primaries is needed to fully assess the desirability of employing this additional hurdle in the electoral process.

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<sup>48</sup>Our previous research suggests that this problem may not be very severe (Hirano et al. 2010).

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| <b>Table 1</b>                                      |                        |                       |                       |                         |
|---|------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| <b>Regression Estimates for Open Seat Primaries</b> |                        |                       |                       |                         |
| <b>U.S. House Representatives, 1952-2000</b>        |                        |                       |                       |                         |
| Independent Variable                                | Winner is State Leg    | Winner is Experienced |                       |                         |
| Partisan Strength                                   | 0.09<br>(0.02)         | 0.11<br>(0.02)        |                       |                         |
| Observations  | 1905                   | 1905                  |                       |                         |
| <b>U.S. House Representatives, 1978-2010</b>        |                        |                       |                       |                         |
| Independent Variable                                | Winner is Experienced  | Number of Candidates  | Number Exp Candidates | Fraction Exp Candidates |
| Partisan Strength                                   | 0.16<br>(0.02)         | 1.20<br>(0.09)        | 0.49<br>(0.04)        | 0.09<br>(0.01)          |
| Observations  | 1331                   | 1331                  | 1331                  | 1331                    |
| <b>Illinois Circuit Court Judges</b>                |                        |                       |                       |                         |
| Independent Variable                                | Winner is High-Quality | Number of Candidates  | Number H-Q Candidates | Fraction H-Q Candidates |
| Partisan Strength                                   | 0.10<br>(0.02)         | 0.80<br>(0.10)        | 0.63<br>(0.07)        | 0.05<br>(0.02)          |
| Observations  | 693                    | 693                   | 693                   | 693                     |

Notes: Each column presents OLS estimates and robust standard errors of a linear regression for the dependent variable listed at the top of the column.

| <b>Table 2</b>                           |                    |                     |
|--|--------------------|---------------------|
| <b>Primary Outcomes and Endorsements</b> |                    |                     |
| Definition of Highly Endorsed Candidate  | 2 Cands in Primary | 3+ Cands in Primary |
| At Least 3 Endorsements and 75% of Total | 86.9%<br>(107)     | 66.7%<br>(120)      |
| At Least 2 Endorsements and 75% of Total | 81.8%<br>(198)     | 63.9%<br>(227)      |
| At Least 3 Endorsements and 67% of Total | 85.0%<br>(113)     | 64.7%<br>(133)      |
| At Least 2 Endorsements and 67% of Total | 80.5%<br>(215)     | 60.4%<br>(270)      |

Cell entries give the percentage races where the highly endorsed candidates won the primary.

| <b>Table 3: Quality of General Election Winners<br/>vs. All Candidates for Open Seats</b> |                           |                         |
|---|---------------------------|-------------------------|
|   | Uncompetitive<br>District | Competitive<br>District |
| <b>U.S. House Representatives, 1952-2010</b>  |                           |                         |
| Winners w/ State Legis Exp  | 46%                       | 50%                     |
| Winners w/ Any Elected Exp  | 70%                       | 69%                     |
| <b>U.S. House Representatives, 1978-2010</b>  |                           |                         |
| Winners w/ State Legis Exp  | 53%                       | 57%                     |
| All Cands w/ State Legis Exp  | 24%                       | 25%                     |
| <b>Illinois Circuit Court Judges</b>  |                           |                         |
| Winners w/ Bar Assoc Rating   | 91%                       | 91%                     |
| All Cands w/ Bar Assoc Rating   | 66%                       | 63%                     |

Cell entries give the percentage races where a high quality candidate was elected to office.

| <b>Table 4</b>  |                   |                   |                       |                        |                      |
|---|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|----------------------|
| <b>Regression Estimates for Primaries with Incumbents</b> |                   |                   |                       |                        |                      |
| <b>U.S. House Representatives</b>                         |                   |                   |                       |                        |                      |
| Independent Variable                                      | Challenger Winner | Primary Contested | Number of Challengers | Experienced Challenger | Challenger % of Vote |
| Scandal   | 0.05<br>(0.03)    | 0.16<br>(0.05)    | 0.36<br>(0.13)        | 0.18<br>(0.05)         | 10.48<br>(2.40)      |
| Safe District   | 0.00<br>(0.00)    | 0.06<br>(0.01)    | 0.10<br>(0.02)        | 0.05<br>(0.01)         | 1.49<br>(0.31)       |
| Scandal × Safe District                                   | 0.12<br>(0.05)    | 0.19<br>(0.08)    | 0.90<br>(0.26)        | 0.22<br>(0.08)         | 12.42<br>(3.90)      |
| Observations  | 6188              | 6188              | 6188                  | 6188                   | 6188                 |
| <b>NC State Legislators</b>                               |                   |                   |                       |                        |                      |
| Independent Variable                                      | Challenger Winner | Primary Contested | Number of Challengers | Experienced Challenger | Challenger % of Vote |
| Low Ranking   | -0.01<br>(0.01)   | 0.08<br>(0.04)    | 0.06<br>(0.04)        | —                      | 2.59<br>(1.54)       |
| Safe District   | -0.00<br>(0.01)   | 0.09<br>(0.03)    | 0.09<br>(0.03)        | —                      | 3.03<br>(1.02)       |
| Low Ranking × Safe District                               | 0.06<br>(0.03)    | 0.02<br>(0.06)    | 0.10<br>(0.07)        | —                      | 3.23<br>(2.35)       |
| Observations  | 1235              | 1235              | 1235                  | —                      | 1235                 |

Notes: Each column presents OLS estimates and robust standard errors of a linear regression for the dependent variable listed at the top of the column.

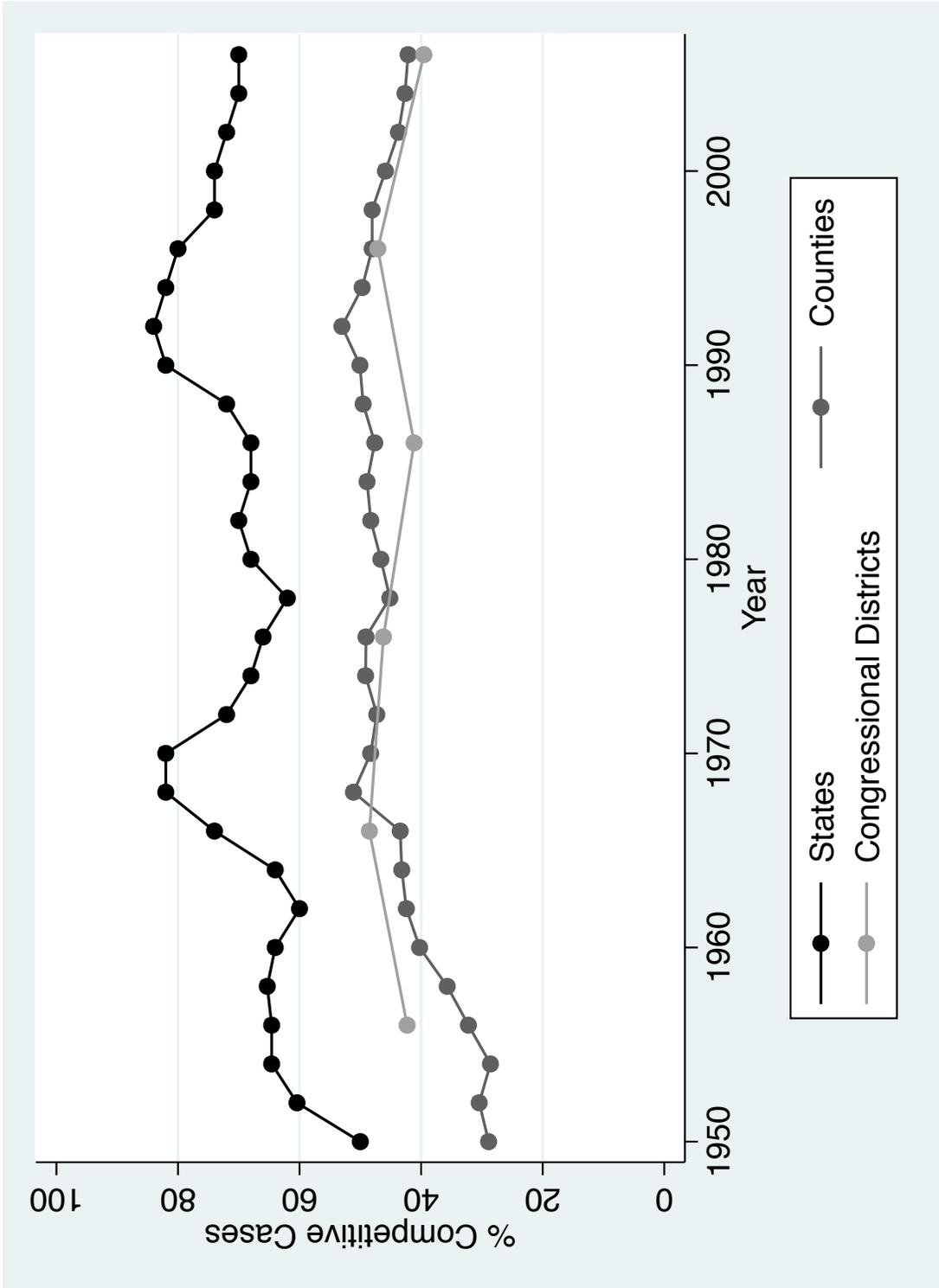


Figure 1: Two-Party Competition in the U.S., 1950-2006

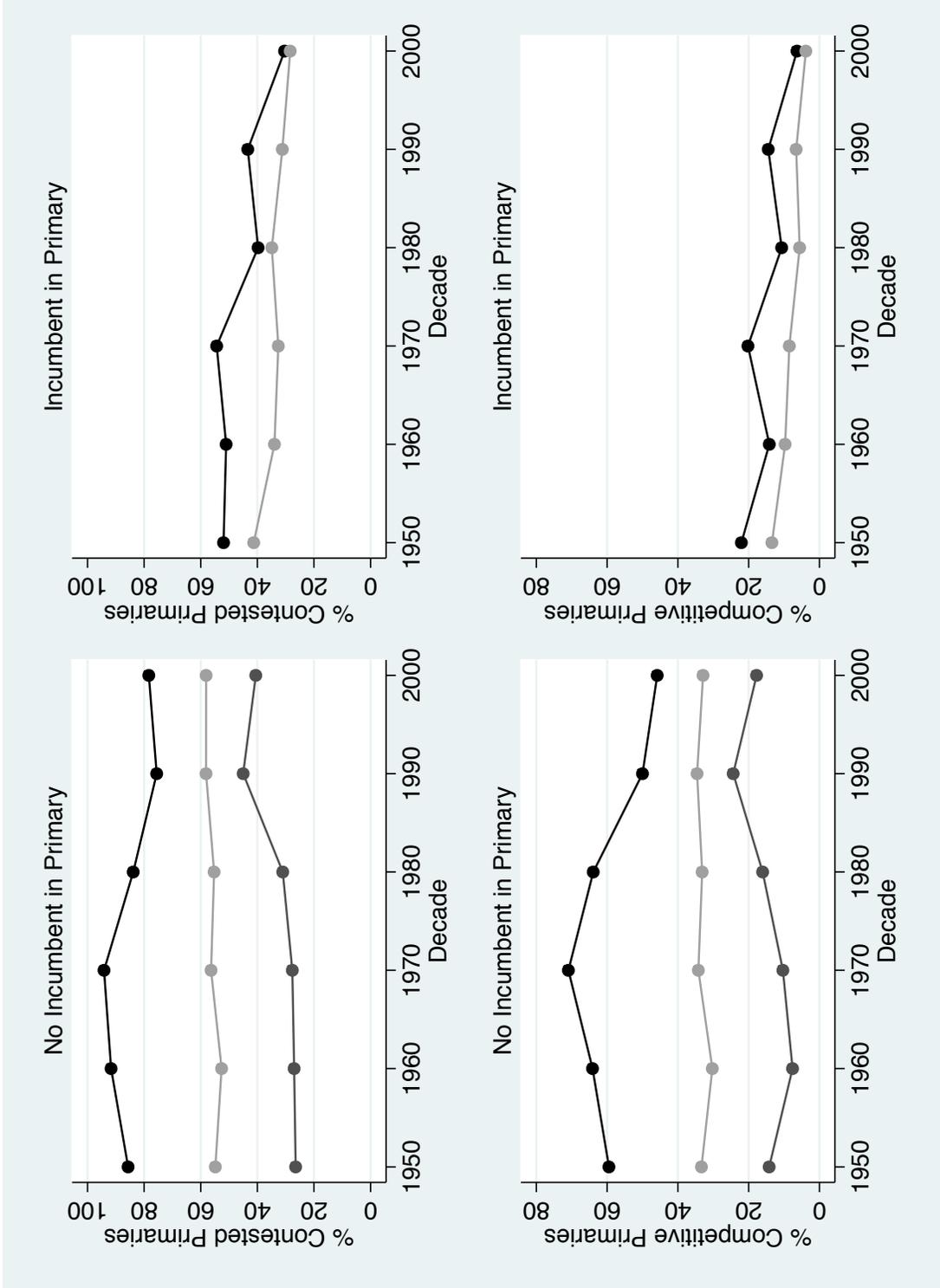


Figure 2: Primary Competition by Party Type and Incumbency, Statewide Elections

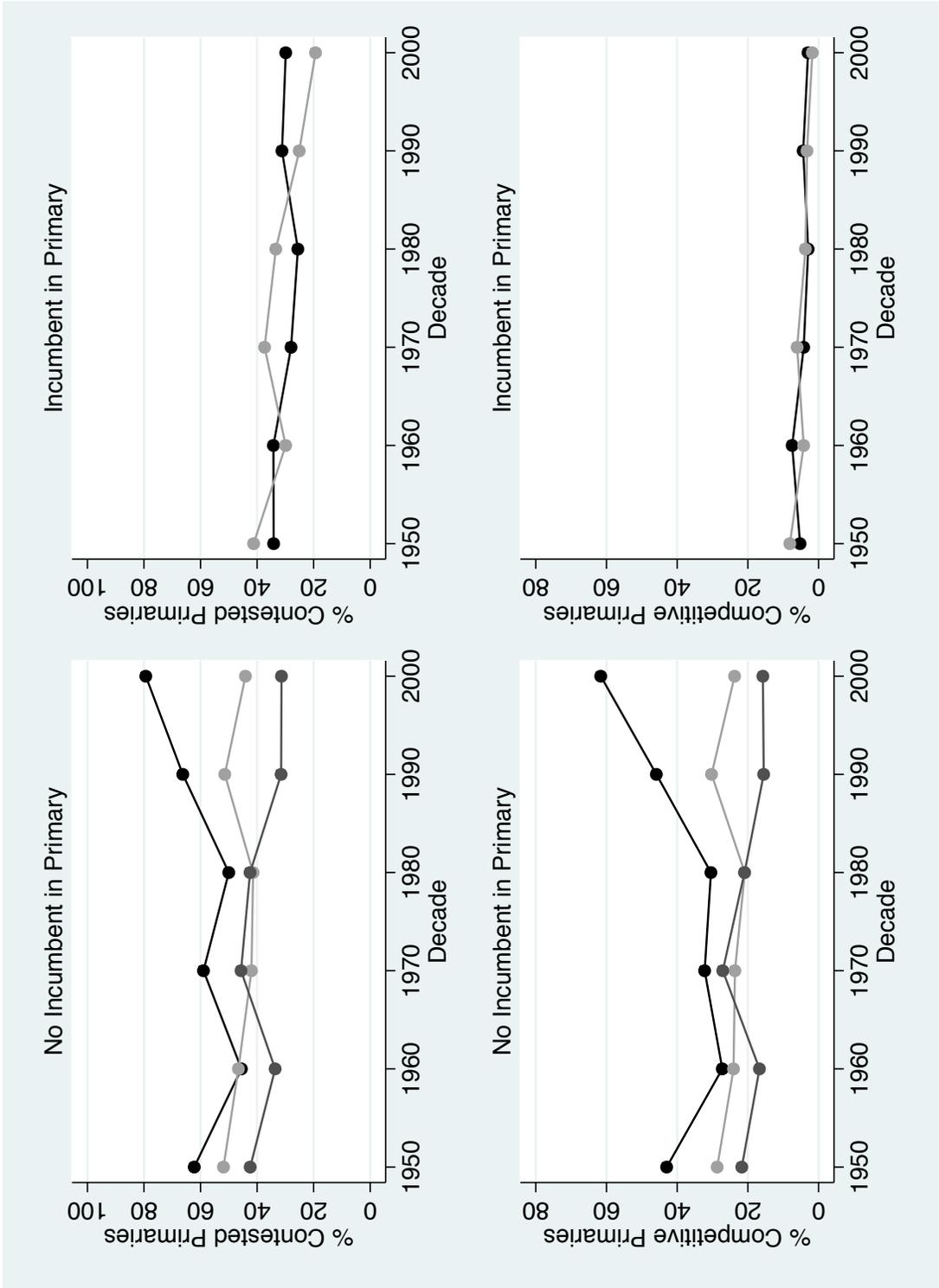


Figure 3: Primary Competition by Party Type and Incumbency, U.S. House Elections

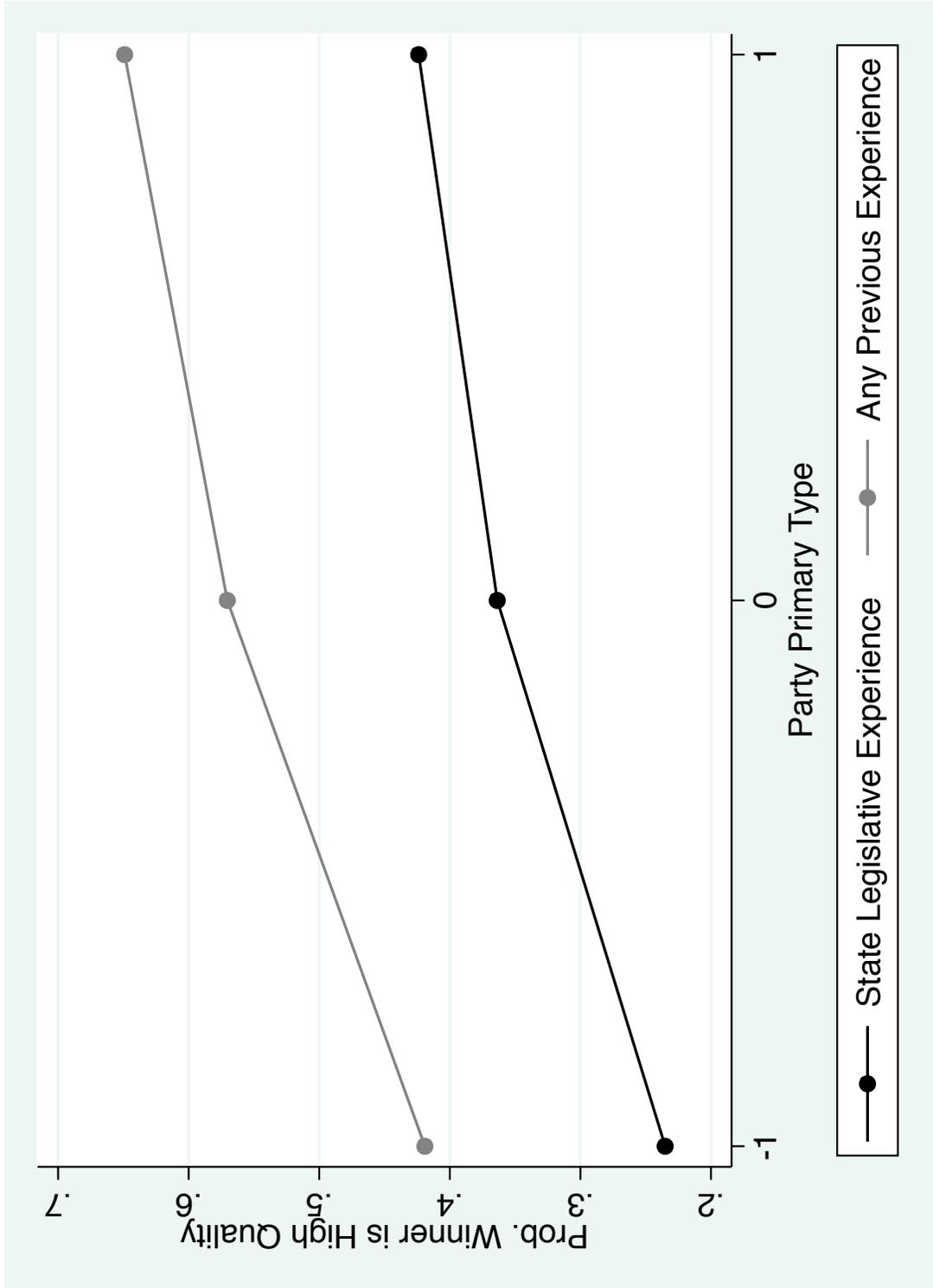


Figure 4: Prior Officeholder Experience in U.S. House Open-Seat Primaries, 1952-2000

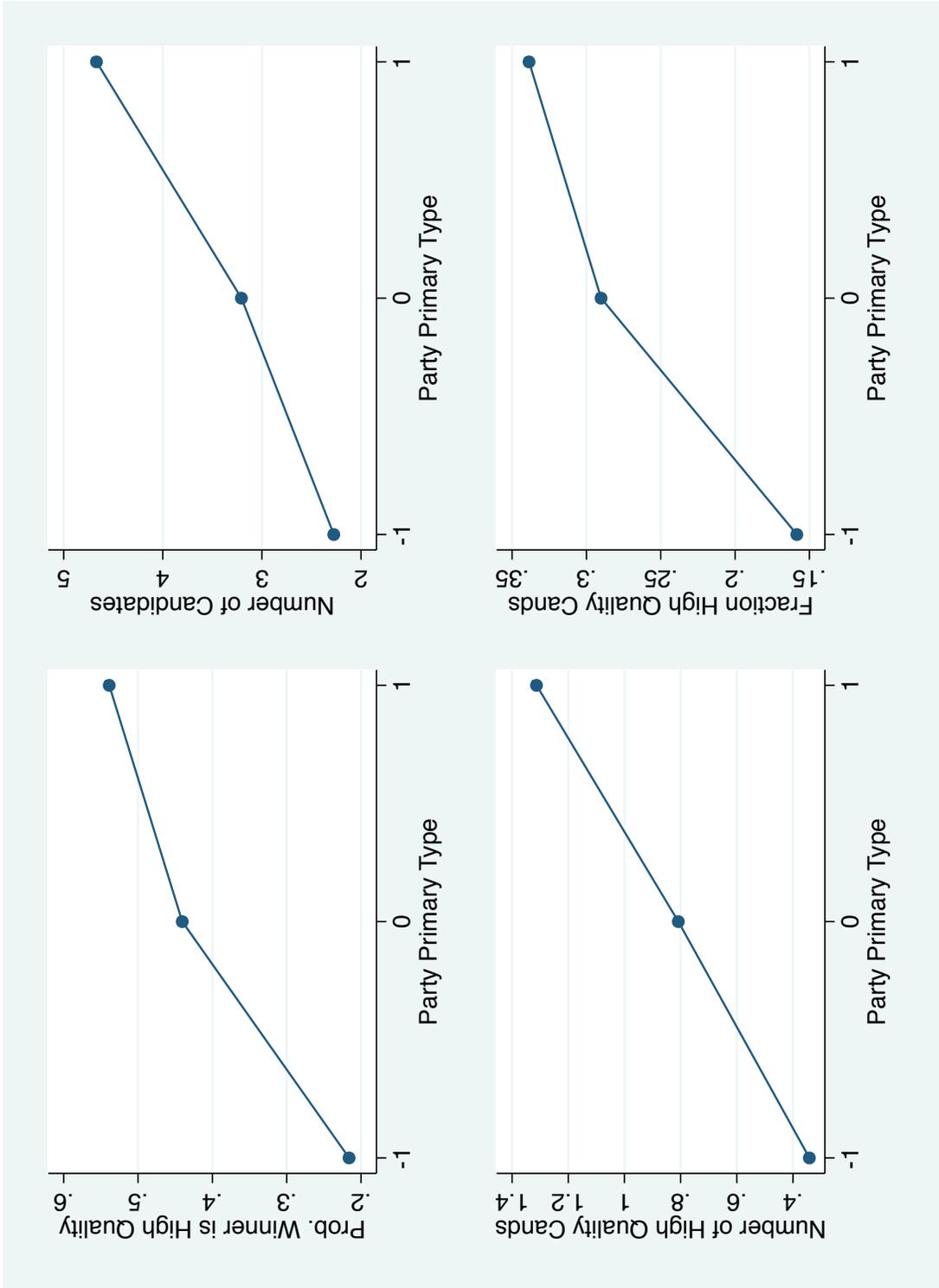


Figure 5: Prior Officeholder Experience in U.S. House Open-Seat Primaries, 1978-2010

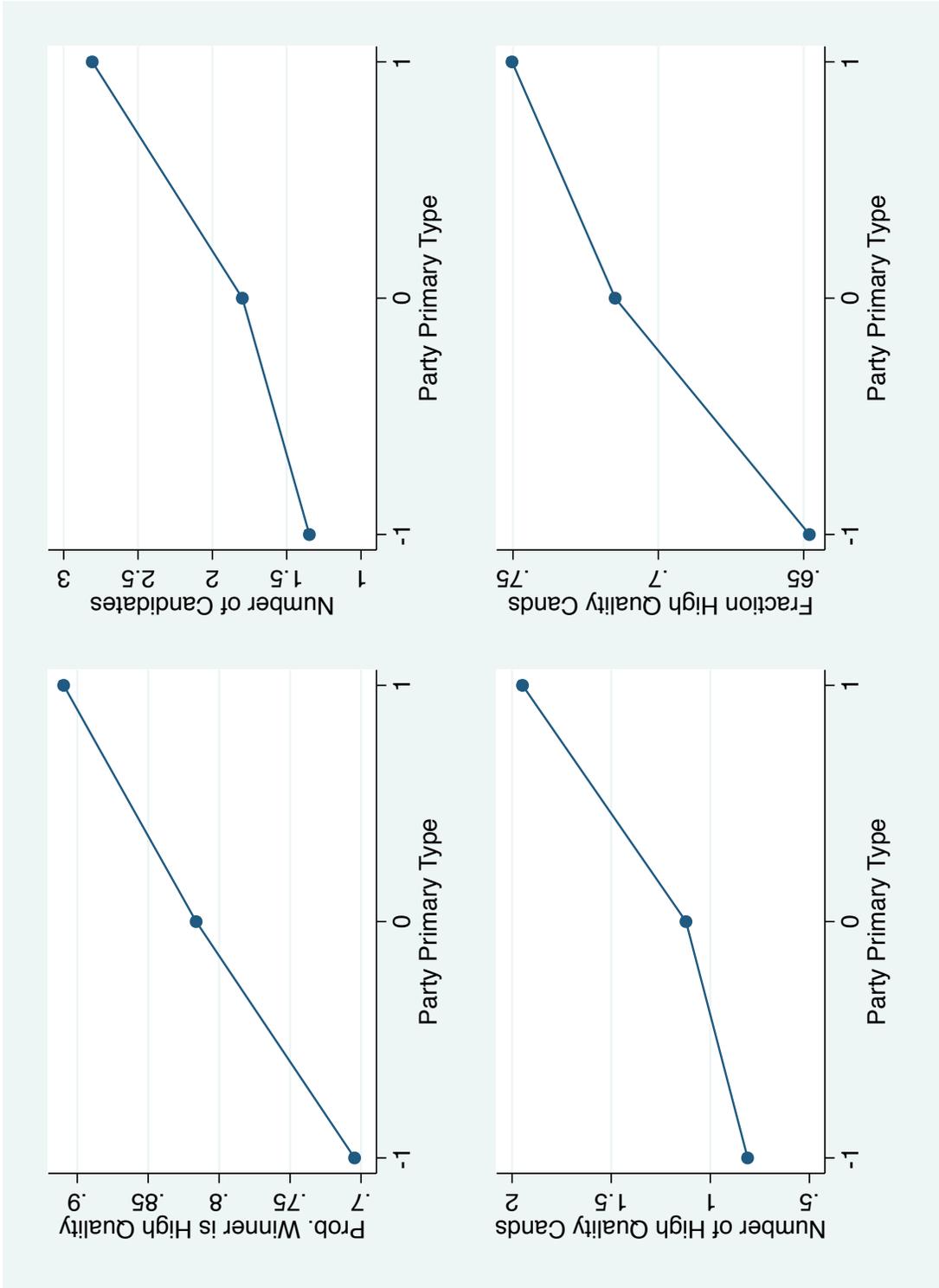


Figure 6: Quality, Seat Safety, and Competition in Illinois Judicial Primaries

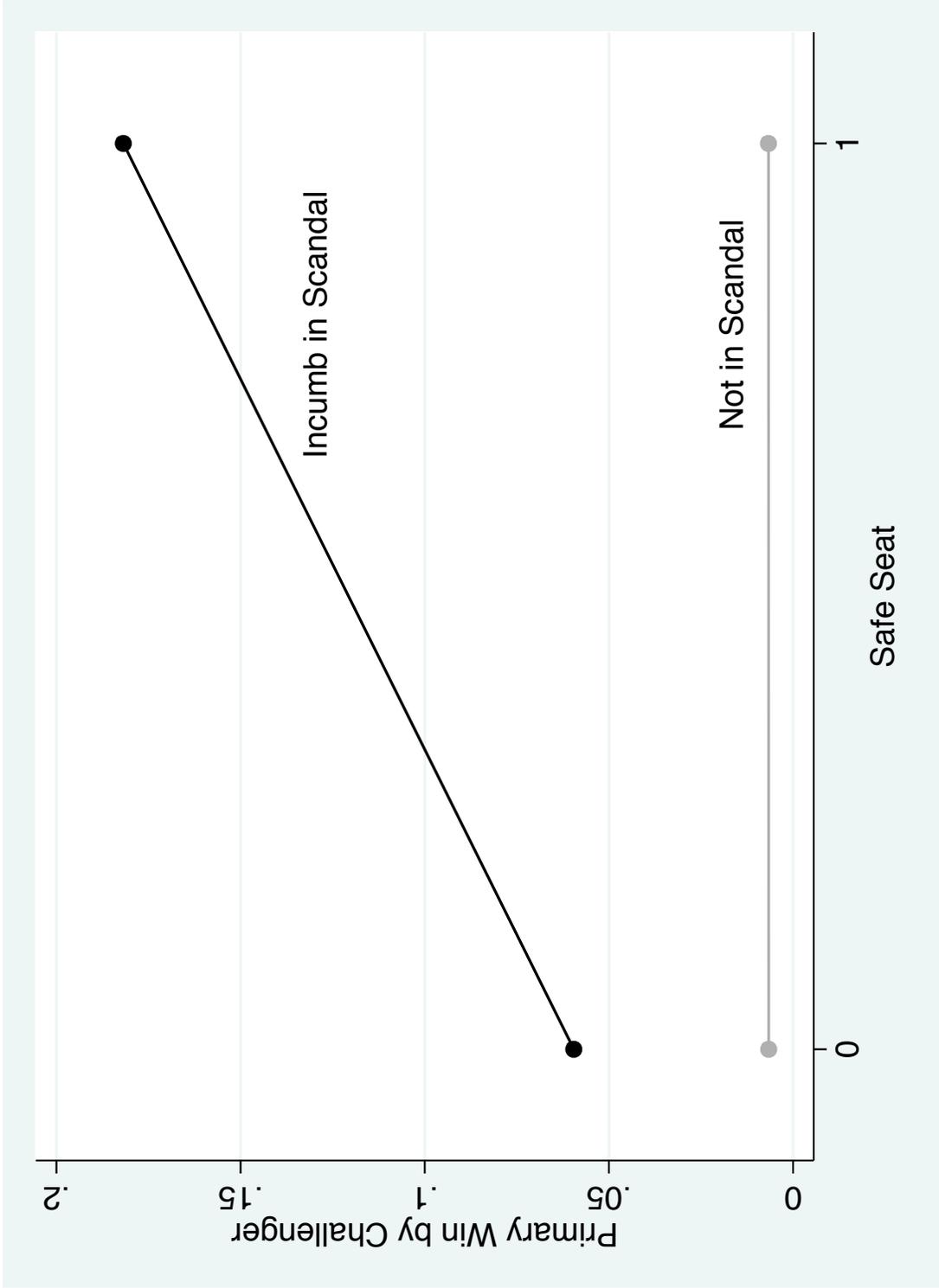


Figure 7: Scandals, Seat Safety, and Challenger Success in U.S. Congressional Primaries

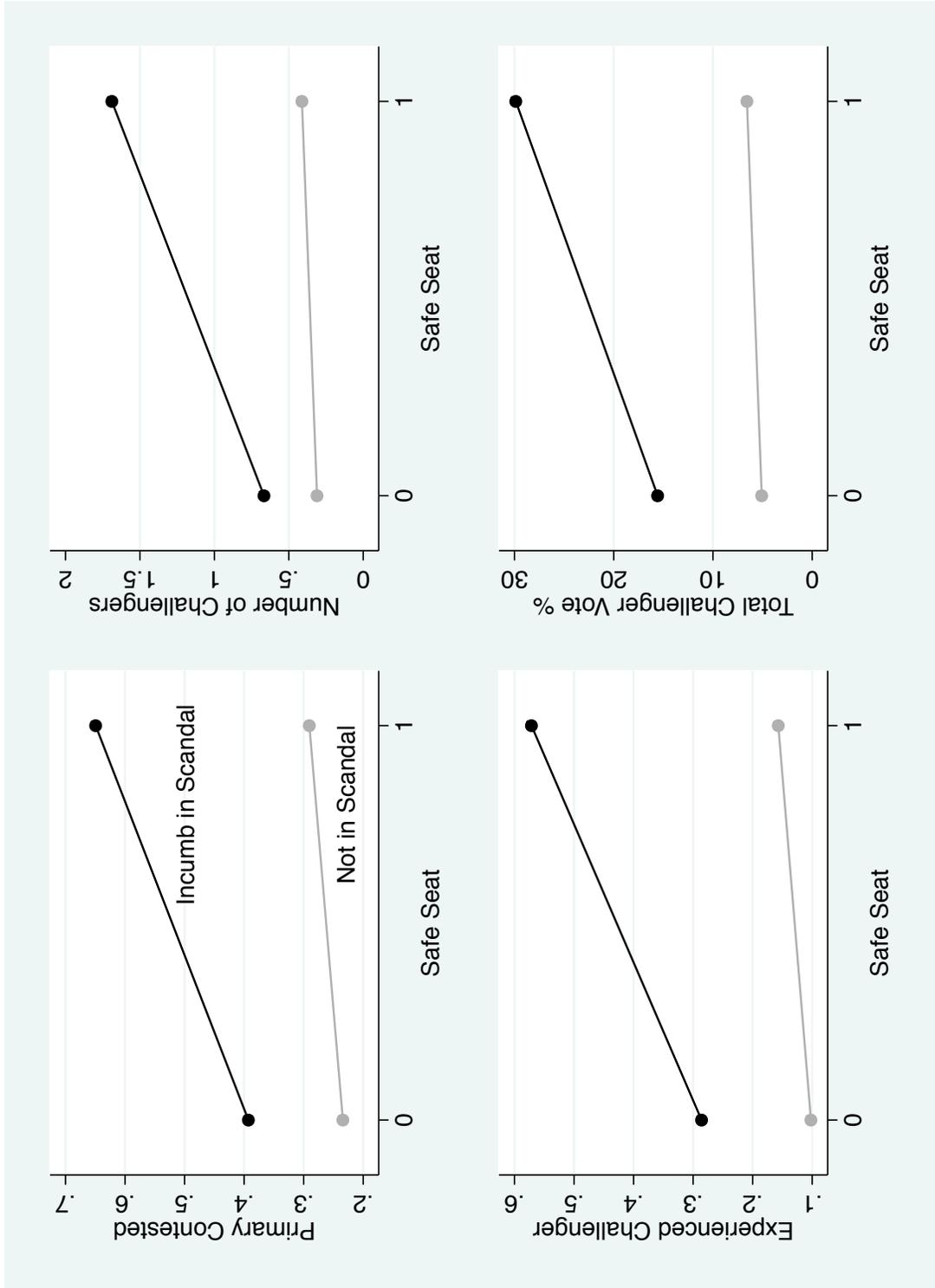


Figure 8: Scandals, Seat Safety, and Competition in U.S. Congressional Primaries

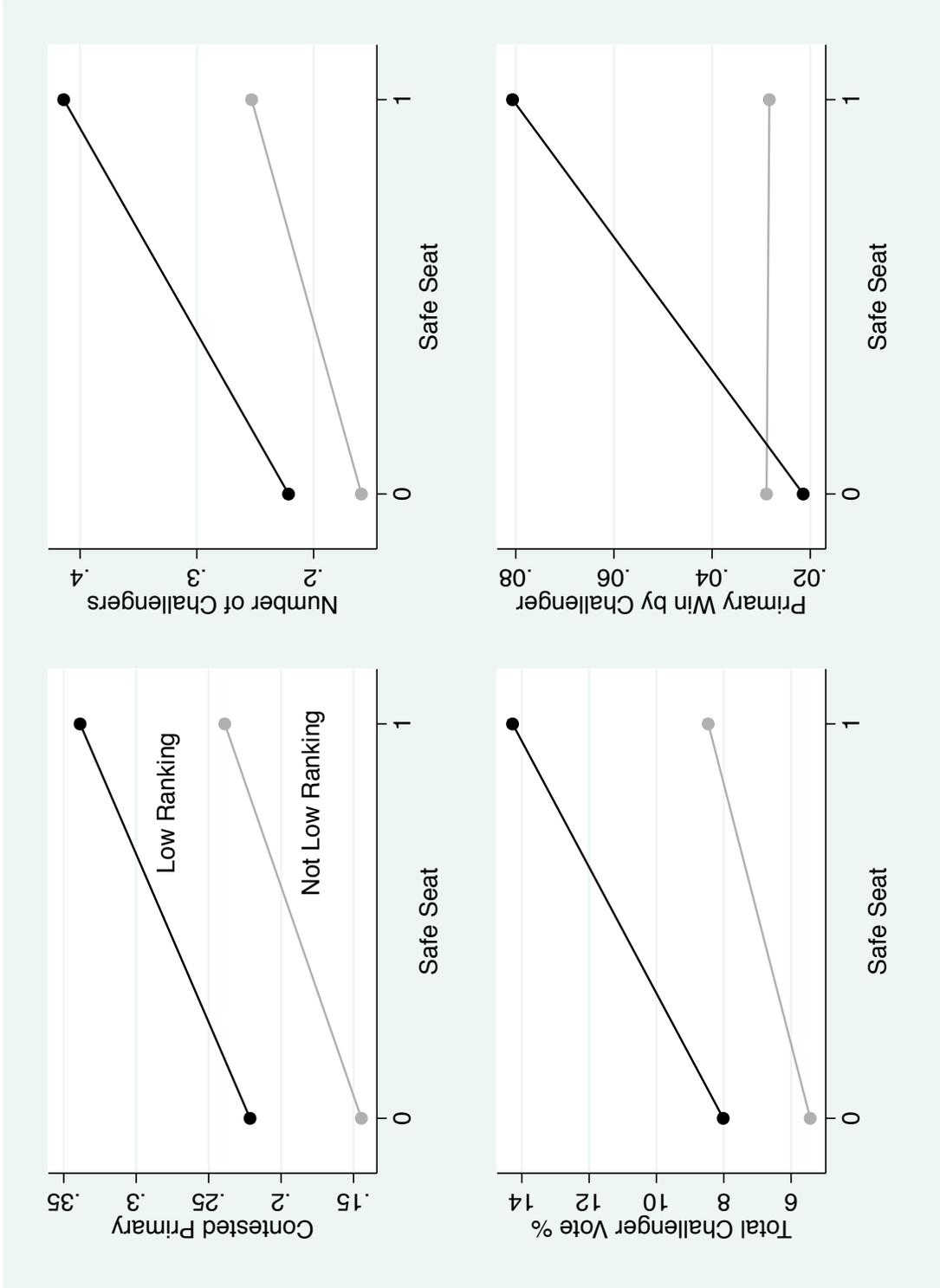


Figure 9: Effectiveness, Seat Safety, and Competition in North Carolina State Legislative Primaries