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Research Statement
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Vote choice in American politics has become relatively easy to predict over the past few decades. Increasingly, voters who identify with one party are overwhelmingly supporting candidates with the same political affiliation, and split-ticket voting has become a rarity in American politics. This would seem to suggest that voting behavior, particularly who an individual will vote for, has become predictable and simultaneously challenging to research, given the overwhelming correlation with partisan identification. Despite the challenge of moving beyond partisan identification, my research revisits this question by eliminating the presence of party identification and studying vote choice in one of the few scenarios in which party identification is no longer useful to voters: presidential primaries. Specifically, in my dissertation, I examine the age-old question of whether primary voters use ideology and issues to make decisions, as well as a closer examination of abstract candidate qualities that are important to primary voters, like electability. By leveraging primaries, my work moves us beyond partisanship in our understanding of vote choice and demonstrates that certain traits and messages still resonate with the American voter.

Dissertation Research

My dissertation examines how voters make decisions in presidential primaries, and the impact of ideology, issues, voter demographics, and candidate qualities have on these decisions, as well as an examination of political elites' ability to discern what voters want in a given cycle. In my view, there still exists a tension in the literature as to whether or not voters hold consistent ideological positions, and in turn whether they use these to make voting decisions. I argue that ideology, demographics, and candidate qualities are all likely to matter in vote choice at varying degrees, depending on the political circumstances of the party holding the primary. In the first chapter of my dissertation, I directly examine the impact that voters' self-reported ideology, as well as their own demographic characteristics, and the qualities that they value in a nominee have on their vote choice in presidential primaries. I find that, under different political circumstances, primary voters value each of these during different cycles. For instance, when facing an incumbent president who is unpopular with the party holding the nomination, voters are likely to value candidate qualities, particularly a candidate's ability to beat said incumbent, more than ideology or issues. I also find that as polarization, particularly affective polarization, has increased over time, candidate qualities, especially electability likely matter more, given the clear differences between candidates that were not as apparent in the late 20th century. Simultaneously, it is likely that ideology also plays more of a role in vote choice, as partisan sorting has occurred, and voters are more likely to be faced with the choice of candidates who span the ideological spectrum. That being said, some or all of these factors play a role in vote choice, depending on the nomination cycle.

In the next part of my dissertation, I perform an in-depth analysis of candidate qualities, specifically electability, to understand what types of voters engage in strategic voting, which is necessary if voters are making decisions related to who is capable of winning an

election in the future, and under what circumstances electability is the most important factor to primary voters. I theorize that ideological moderates within both parties are likely to value electability more, given the widely held belief that candidates who hold moderate policy positions are more likely to win an election, in line with expectations laid out in the Median Voter Theorem. I also theorize that demographic groups of candidates who were recently nominated and lost the general election are likely to be skeptical of their groups chances of winning the next election, so they will be more inclined to value electability in the next cycle. For instance, I found that women were significantly more likely than men to value electability more in the 2020 Democratic nomination, which I argue can be associated with skepticism and cautiousness, following Hillary Clinton's surprising 2016 defeat. Lastly, I aim to disentangle the relationship between perceptions of a candidate's electability and their preferences or feelings towards a candidate. I find that often perceptions of electability are simply projections of a voter's overall feelings toward a candidate. Both of the previously discussed works rely on the usage of publicly available exit survey data from each party's primary contests from 1976-2020.

In the next chapter of my dissertation, I utilize text analysis of candidate websites and primary debate transcripts from 2000-2020 to determine if political elites are following their voters, or vice versa, and discussing things that voters were basing their decisions on in each of the cycles. For instance, defeating Donald Trump was the highest priority for Democratic voters in 2020, according to existing surveys, thus I expect that we would see similar trends in what candidates are talking about in the 2020 debates and on their websites. Beyond identifying trends, I seek to explain the causal direction between elite discourse and voter priorities in a nominee. I theorize that voters are greatly influenced by what candidates and the media are talking about, and that these frames help to determine what is important to primary voters in each instance. Thus, I expect that an increased discussion by candidates of defeating an incumbent, for example, is likely to cause this to be a more salient issue in the primary. The causal arrow, thus goes from elites to voters, rather than from voters to elites, and it is elites who are driving the the discourse in nominations, and they are not simply following voters. I also expect that these frames are effective and that discussion of things such as ideology, electability, and demographics by candidates will be strongly associated with the most predictive characteristics of vote choice in that respective cycle.

Previous Work/Articles in Progress

Beyond the work on my dissertation, I recently had a co-authored work with Austin Bussing, Jason Roberts, and Sarah Treul accepted for publication at *Political Behavior* in 2020. The project, titled *The Electoral Consequences of Roll Call Voting: Health Care and the 2018 Election*, had two main goals. First, utilizing data obtained from "The Town Hall Project," we were able to assess whether having more town halls, and thus more (mostly negative) feedback from constituents regarding a proposed repeal of the Affordable Care Act led to a decrease in the likelihood of Republican members of Congress voting for the repeal. Interestingly, we find that Republican members of Congress were no less likely to support repeal despite hearing from more constituents at town halls. Next, we do find that voting for repeal did have significant, negative impacts on the likelihood

that Republican incumbents would be re-elected in the 2018 midterm elections. This work was first presented at the Midwest Political Science Association's annual conference before publication.

Another component of my previous research has also focused on institutional rules and their impact on electoral outcomes. In my Master's thesis, title *Can the Party Still Decide? National Party Changes and Their Effect of Presidential Primaries*, I use state population data as well as the number of delegates apportioned to each state by each major party's national committee to the national convention to examine the impact of increasing polarization and the implementation of a "partisan loyalty" delegate bonus on representation at both the Democratic and Republican National Conventions. I find that as states have become more reliably "Republican" and "Democratic" in presidential and congressional elections, the larger the apportionment bias has become, as states that consistently vote more for Democratic candidates are overrepresented based on their population at the DNC, while the same is true for Republican-leaning states, as well. I argue that this could have major impacts in future presidential nominations, as the national party tends to want to nominate the candidate best capable of winning an election, and thus nominate the more moderate, "establishment" candidate, however that may be more difficult with more ideologically extreme delegate pool, particularly in a contested convention.

In an additional ongoing project, co-authored with Caitlin Jewitt, we analyze how the ordering of congressional primaries throughout the calendar year and their concurrence with presidential primaries affects turnout and the representativeness of the congressional primary electorate. State governments must choose when to schedule their congressional primaries, a decision that is often made when considering when to hold their presidential nominating contests, as well. In an effort to save money, some states choose to hold congressional primaries on the same day as presidential primaries or caucuses, however they must follow the national parties timing rules in these scenarios. Our work analyzes the impact of holding these contests on the same day as presidential nominations on turnout. It also answers the question as to whether holding primaries later or earlier in the calendar year have an impact on turnout, as well as whether this higher turnout leads to a more representative electorate.

Another of my ongoing projects seeks to explain how perceived "fairness" and trust in the presidential primary process is impacted by a voter's preferred candidate's standing in the primary at a specific point in time. Using data from the 2020 AP/NORC VoteCast survey conducted during the Democratic nomination cycle, I am able to demonstrate that voters are more likely to view the primary process as unfair if their candidate is under-performing in the primary and if they are losing in the pledged delegate count. This seems to suggest that voters would only have faith in the primary process if their chosen candidate was winning. I am currently in the process of analyzing other variables of interest and their impact on perceived fairness of the nomination process.

Beyond my current work, I plan to expand the scope of my dissertation research to include decision-making in congressional primaries, as well. Given the limited availability of existing survey research on congressional primaries, I plan to field surveys to get a better understanding of what congressional primary voters use to make their decisions.

Next, I plan to assemble a book manuscript with the findings from my dissertation, as well as a historical account of each party's nomination cycle in the post-reform era, with the goal of providing a comprehensive, empirical review of how primary voters have changed over time, and when certain factors are salient in primaries. With this, I hope to better understand and illuminate a process that has has largely proved to be confusing to the American public. Lastly, I plan to expand my research in the areas of the U.S. Congress as an institution, beyond elections, as well as the presidency.