

When Extremists Run for the U.S. House of Representatives

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In the decade since Andrew Hall's findings in his study called "What Happens When Extremists Win Primaries," the atmosphere of American politics has changed drastically. Not only has more animosity in the media surrounding politics increased in the past decade, but so has the polarization between Republicans and Democrats. In a Pew Research Center study completed in late 2019, the share of Republicans who value Democrats "cold" on a 0-100 feeling thermometer has increased 14 percentage points since 2016, and Democrats show a similar increase in the three years prior in "very cold" ratings (Asheer et al., 2019). This polarization implies that the nominations of extremist candidates on both sides of the political spectrum in primary elections are more likely to occur. As more and more people share a distaste and cold feeling towards members of the opposite party, candidates for the U.S. House of Representatives start to lean further to the outskirts of the political spectrum, allowing for an increase in extreme candidates moving forward from 2010.

According to Voteview, the eight most right-wing members and the two most left-wing members of the U.S. House of Representatives, measured by their DW NOMINATE scores, have been elected in the past decade, 2010-2019 (UCLA Department of Political Science, 2020). Let alone, candidates in third parties known for their more extreme take on the Republican or Democratic party gaining traction in and sometimes winning their races. In 2018, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez ran in her primary against an undefeated Democratic incumbent in her district as a Democratic Socialist, and won the primary, leading to her victory of the seat. In the 2020 election, the Constitution party (the fifth largest political party in the U.S. grounding itself in extreme conservatism and originalism) was officially on the ballots in 14 states, gaining considerable traction for a comparatively extreme third party. Hall's findings present that extremist candidates dilute the vote share of their party in the general election for the years 1980-

2010, which unfortunately do not account for this recent change in political atmosphere. Hall used a regression discontinuity design to display is observational data that extremist candidate nominations in primary elections have a negative effect on their party's vote share in the general election. However, in this experiment I tried to find causal evidence of his findings, but I also tried to find evidence of the extent to which his findings apply in the decade following his research.

I theorized still that if an extremist candidate runs for the US House of Representatives, their vote share (of voters in the same party) will decrease in the primary election. This is attributed to my doubt that an entire trend of political thought would be changed by one decade. However, due to the increased polarization presently, the presence of a nomination of an extreme candidate in the primary election would cause voters to behave differently in the general election. Therefore, my following prediction would be that if an extremist candidate wins the primary for the US House of Representatives, their vote share (of voters in the same party) will decrease in the general election. However, I also predicted the loss in vote share will decrease from the primaries model to the general election model because of the higher stakes that a general election poses. Based on the theory that many voters vote along their registered party lines, voters would be more likely to vote for the candidate of their party whether or not they are extremist or not as long as it prevents the opposite party from collecting the victory. I also predicted age will have a negative effect on whether the subjects voted for the extremist candidate in primaries and general elections as well. Implying that as age decreases, the vote share for the extreme candidate increases because younger voters would have grown up in a period of extreme and continual political polarization from the years 2010-2020 and formed their

political affiliations and beliefs based on more extreme and polarized political candidates as well as media.

Administered through social media platforms including Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and Email, the experiment created through Qualtrics randomly assigned 86 subjects to the treatment and control group. The average age of the subjects was 24 which is seemingly a low number to be a completely representative group of eligible voters, and the average PartyID identification was 3.15, which is “Weak Democrat” near the moderate choice, but the sample still seems to lean more Democratic. The survey they received began with simple demographic questions asking about age, gender, and PartyID on a scale of 1 “Strong Democrat” to 7 “Strong Republican.” The next screen on the internet-based survey revealed either the treatment or control – the treatment being “An extremist candidate challenger with your party affiliation runs for the US House of Representatives in your district,” and the control being “A moderate candidate challenger with your party affiliation runs for the US House of Representatives in your district.” 48 subjects received the treatment, while 38 received the control. They were then directed to the same screen which prompted them to answer two questions: “Would you vote for the candidate in the primary elections?” and “In the condition that the candidate won the primary and is representing your party in the general election, would you vote for that candidate in the general election?” These questions were asked to collect the necessary information about “voter” behavior in this hypothetical situation.

It is important to recognize the difference between my strategy and Hall’s and why they are not completely comparable. Hall takes real voting data observed from two decades to generate observational data absent of causal evidence, while the study above creates a hypothetical primary and general election with no real voters or specific candidates. Mine

assesses the presence of an “extremist” candidate in a general application of the concept, however Hall’s observation compiles data across multiple elections in various locations to locate a specific answer to both our hypotheses. While my data can be used to prove a causal claim, Hall’s could be considered more accurate as it deals with literal voting behavior, not just hypothetical voting behavior.

The first regression model tested with the results of the survey tests the effects on the “vote share” of the extremist candidate for primary elections after the subjects received the treatment. For every additional respondent that received the treatment, there is a -0.363 change in the vote share, which is a statistically significant large value that explains about 14% of the variation in vote share of the candidate. Less voters will nominate an extremist for their party in the primary election knowing that they are an “extremist.” This model (Figure 1) allows me to reject the null hypothesis that if an extremist runs for the U.S. House of Representatives, that no effect on the candidate’s vote share will take place. This model accentuates Hall’s findings and my first hypothesis that candidates that run for a primary nomination are less likely to get those nominations if they are extremists in their party. To show the regression visually, the model.1 is plotted as a coefplot, revealing the marker at -0.362 representing the coefficient of the regression and its confidence interval, spanning about 1 point in each direction out from the marker (Figure 2).

Figure 1:

```

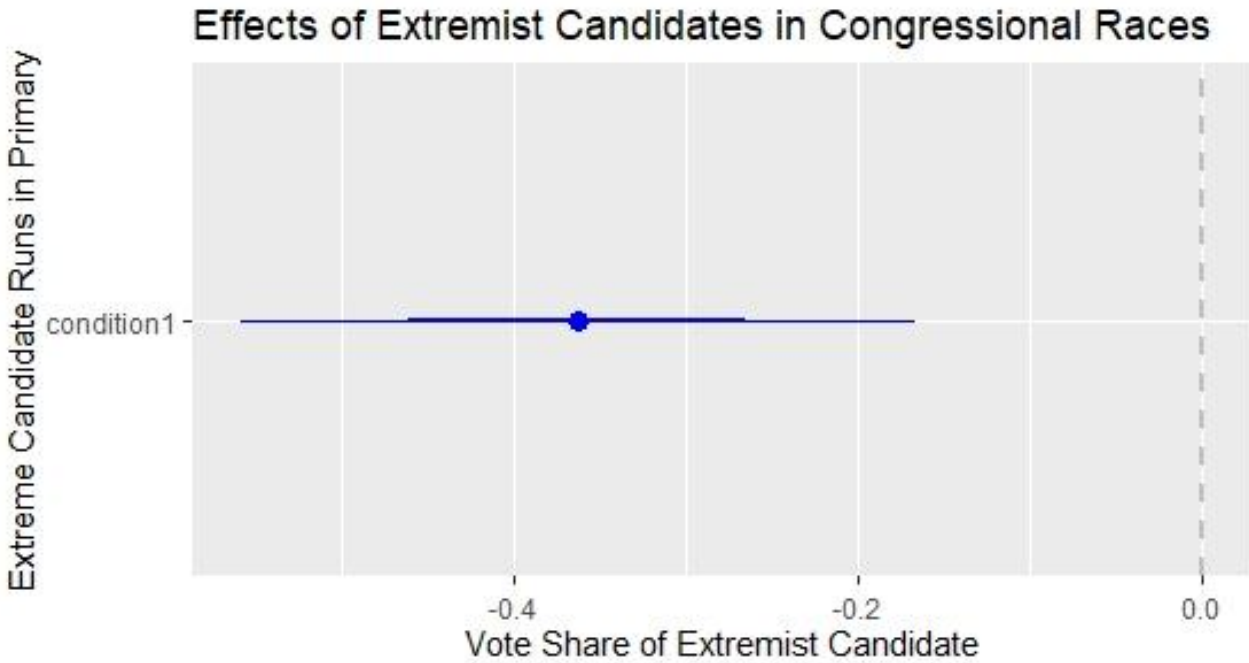
Call:
lm(formula = voteshare_primary ~ condition, data = Extremists_in_Primarys)

Residuals:
    Min       1Q   Median       3Q      Max
-0.8421 -0.4792  0.1579  0.5208  0.5208

Coefficients:
            Estimate Std. Error t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)  0.84211    0.07305   11.528 < 2e-16 ***
condition1  -0.36294    0.09777   -3.712 0.000369 ***
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Residual standard error: 0.4503 on 84 degrees of freedom
Multiple R-squared:  0.1409,    Adjusted R-squared:  0.1307
F-statistic: 13.78 on 1 and 84 DF,  p-value: 0.0003688
    
```

Figure 2:



The second regression model was another bivariate regression but instead of testing the first question of the “Outcomes” page of the survey, this model tests the effects on the “vote

share” of the extremist candidate for general elections after the subjects received the treatment. For every additional respondent that received the treatment, and were asked the question revealing that the extremist candidate won the nomination in the primary and is representing their party in the general election, there was a -0.281 change in the vote share of the party (Figure 3). The correlation was still negative and a relatively large statistically significant value, once again allowing me to reject the null hypothesis that the treatment in this case has no effect on the party’s vote share in the general election. However, this particular regression shows a higher coefficient than the last – almost an entire point’s difference than the first model (Figure 4), demonstrating the second part of my hypothesis. Despite the candidate being an extremist representing the party, less subjects said they would not vote for them. The correlation was still negative, but the diluting effect on the party’s vote share was less prevalent in the general election than in the primary. While I do not have concrete causal evidence on why this is the case, I can infer that when the stakes are higher in the general election and the choice is no longer between candidates of the same party, voters are more likely to vote along party lines, no matter who the candidate was. This hypothesis would require another experiment, but it would be something worth looking into to bolster the current evidence.

Figure 3:

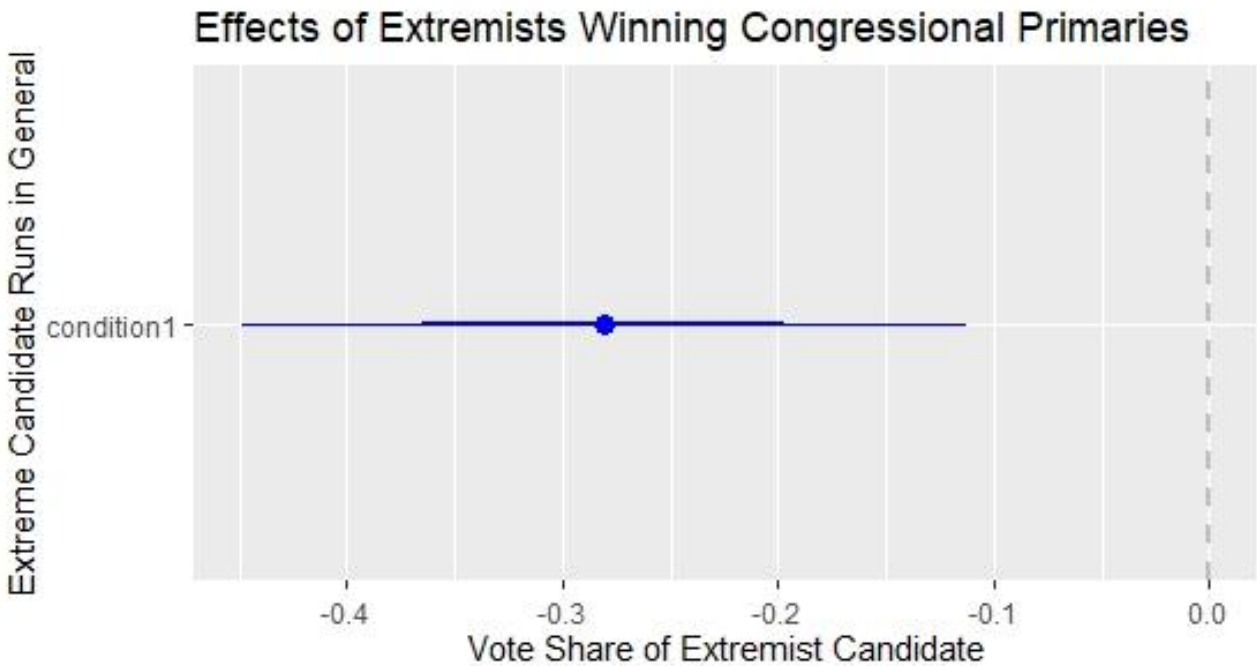
```
Call:
lm(formula = voteshare_general ~ condition, data = Extremists_in_Primarys)

Residuals:
    Min       1Q   Median       3Q      Max
-0.94737  0.05263  0.05263  0.33333  0.33333

Coefficients:
            Estimate Std. Error t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)  0.94737    0.06273   15.102 < 2e-16 ***
condition1  -0.28070    0.08397   -3.343  0.00124 **
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Residual standard error: 0.3867 on 84 degrees of freedom
Multiple R-squared:  0.1174,    Adjusted R-squared:  0.1069
F-statistic: 11.18 on 1 and 84 DF,  p-value: 0.00124
```

Figure 4:



The next two models I ran were multivariate regressions of age on the two outcomes – primary elections and general elections – holding the treatment constant. This was to test if being



a younger voter contributes to a positive effect on the vote share in each type of election. The results of the third model were statistically insignificant, small and could not allow me to reject the null hypothesis (Figure 5). Age has limited to no effects on whether people vote for extremist candidates in primary elections. However, this is not the case for the fourth model ran. The model regresses age on “vote share” of the candidate in the general election if they have received the treatment. The regression found that as age increases, vote share for the party in general elections putting up an extremist candidate decreases by -0.010. The value is very small, but it is statistically significant and accounts for more than 25% of the variation in the vote share in the general election. The age covariate would be something to look into in the future with further investigations. As more and more generation z citizens come of voting age in the past decade and in the future, does the political atmosphere shift more extreme? Or is it a more a cultural shift, absent of age as a covariate.

Figure 5:

```
Call:
lm(formula = voteshare_primary ~ condition + age, data = Extremists_in_Primaryies)

Residuals:
    Min       1Q   Median       3Q      Max
-0.8717 -0.4974  0.1363  0.4947  0.6573

Coefficients:
            Estimate Std. Error t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)  0.935143   0.112737   8.295 2.75e-12 ***
condition1  -0.358448   0.104605  -3.427 0.000983 ***
age          -0.003966   0.003698  -1.073 0.286783
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Residual standard error: 0.4517 on 77 degrees of freedom
(6 observations deleted due to missingness)
Multiple R-squared:  0.1621,    Adjusted R-squared:  0.1404
F-statistic: 7.451 on 2 and 77 DF,  p-value: 0.001102
```

Figure 6:

```

Call:
lm(formula = voteshare_general ~ condition + age, data = Extremists_in_Primaryes)

Residuals:
    Min       1Q   Median       3Q      Max
-1.01910 -0.00891  0.00638  0.25502  0.66255

Coefficients:
            Estimate Std. Error t value Pr(>|t|)
(Intercept)  1.192297   0.089829  13.273 < 2e-16 ***
condition1  -0.253735   0.083350  -3.044  0.00319 **
age          -0.010188   0.002946  -3.458  0.00089 ***
---
Signif. codes:  0 '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05 '.' 0.1 ' ' 1

Residual standard error: 0.3599 on 77 degrees of freedom
(6 observations deleted due to missingness)
Multiple R-squared:  0.255,    Adjusted R-squared:  0.2356
F-statistic: 13.18 on 2 and 77 DF,  p-value: 1.198e-05

```

The results of the study reflect causal evidence that extremist candidates continued to have a diluting effect on a party's vote share in both primary and general elections. However, the treatment is less effective on general elections. The core assumption that follows being that people, especially as voters age decreases, are more likely to vote on party lines currently despite an extremist candidate representing their party on the ballot. In the future, to expand the results, I would want to look at data the way Hall did in an observational way when more data comes out about the 2018 and 2020 U.S. House of Representatives elections is published in order to adequately compare the two blocks of time. Maybe also, to create a scenario with specific candidates representing specific extreme platforms to test on subjects because in retrospect, the experiment might have been too broad and out of touch with the respondents. In the experiment, though, causal evidence *was* found to solidify Hall's findings about extremists in congressional races.

## Appendix

Code in RStudio:

```
#simple linear regression models for both dependent variables
model.1 <- lm(voteshare_primary ~ condition, data=Extremists_in_Primarys)
summary(model.1)

model.2 <- lm(voteshare_general ~ condition, data=Extremists_in_Primarys)
summary(model.2)

model.3 <- lm(voteshare_primary ~ condition + age,
              data=Extremists_in_Primarys)
summary(model.3)

model.4 <- lm(voteshare_general ~ condition + age,
              data=Extremists_in_Primarys)
summary(model.4)

#data visualization
Extremists_in_Primarys <- rename(Extremists_in_Primarys,
                                Extremist_Candidate_in_Party = condition,
                                Age = Age)

coefplot(model.1, title="Effects of Extremist Candidates in Congressional Races"
          intercept=FALSE,
          ylab="Extreme Candidate Runs in Primary",
          xlab="Vote Share of Extremist Candidate",
          sort="magnitude")

coefplot(model.2, title="Effects of Extremists Winning Congressional Primaries",
          intercept=FALSE,
          ylab="Extreme Candidate Runs in General",
          xlab="Vote Share of Extremist Candidate",
          sort="magnitude")
```

## References

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