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Endorsements in Congressional Primaries

In the article “Does the Party Matter? Endorsements in Congressional Primaries”, Casey Dominguez seeks to analyze the effects that endorsements have on the results of primary elections. By studying 67 candidates who ran in open seat congressional primaries in 2002, Dominguez was able to investigate whether individual and group endorsements influenced election outcomes. (p. 536) The findings of the study concluded that a larger share in partisan endorsements in a race led to a significant increase in a candidate’s share of the vote, even when accounting for campaign fund distribution and candidate quality. (p. 534)

Before attaining the results, Dominguez offers the hypothesis that candidates seeking election should prioritize attaining endorsements, particularly from groups and individuals that are recognizably partisan; these endorsements can help candidates “establish ideological and partisan credibility” with voters, an important feat when contesting a competitive partisan primary electorate. (536) In addition, Dominguez provides 4 more hypotheses: (1) Most endorsers should be recognizable to partisan voters; (2) Endorsements should have a distinct effect on primary outcomes; (3) Recognizably partisan endorsements should affect outcomes more significantly than all other endorsements; and (4) Recognizably partisan endorsements should have a significant effect on election outcomes, even while accounting for candidate quality and campaign spending. In the research, Hypothesis 1 and 2 were not supported, while Hypothesis 3 and 4 were supported.

This article ties into class lectures of candidate-centered and party-centered models. The candidate-centered model claims that primary outcomes are mainly a result of the individual

candidate's decisions, personal attributes, and campaign spending. This model posits that voters judge candidates on their resume of past held elected offices, education, name recognition, and ability to fundraise, and suggests that higher-quality candidates should succeed in attaining more endorsements and funds. Thus, endorsements are not believed to contribute much value to a political campaign that is not already grounded by high measures of candidate-quality and spending.(534-35)

In contrast the party-centered model contends that election results are heavily influenced by partisan elite activities. (p. 534) By directing resources, such as money and manpower, to primary campaigns, partisan elites can influence the primary election results. Under this model, partisan elites, like governors and members of Congress, are also believed to affect primary outcomes, as endorsements from such politically influential individuals provide candidates with increased credibility among voters and an increase in voter share. (p. 535) The blind trust that voters have in political leaders does raise concerns for the notions of security and Democracy; if voters are swayed by the opinions and endorsements of Congresspeople and other party members, it could make it easier for those with money and political connections to unfairly control most of the open seats, and diminish options for lesser-known and less-financially-endowed candidates. This circumstance could discourage aspiring candidates from campaigning for office, and leave House and Senate seats up for grabs by the wealthy and influential, who may not have the citizenry's interest at heart.

Dominguez believes the study of congressional primaries is important because they are not sufficiently covered by the press, and as such, voters have reduced access to candidate information; in these circumstances, endorsements are expected to have the biggest impact. (p. 534) Previous studies found a correlation between endorsements from elite partisan actors and

the outcomes of presidential nomination processes, and Dominguez's study expands those theories to congressional primaries.

The research that shows that partisan endorsements indeed can help candidates win primary elections has important implications for the way the role of candidates and parties play in primaries are understood and studied. For instance, while party rules do not allow individuals to specifically choose candidates or prevent others from running, the results suggest that candidates have "explicit incentives" to garner political allies in the party in order to progress in their political careers. (p. 534) In tallying the number of endorsements for the 67 candidates considered in the study, Dominguez found that 57 of them had received at least one endorsement, and at least one candidate in every race received an endorsement. (p. 537); this statistic alone highlights the importance the candidates place on attaining endorsements, as they realize political elite support is influential in gaining the largest traction in close races.

Secondly, Dominguez's research has important implications for future study of congressional elections. The findings allow the possibility of a merge between the candidate-centered and party-centered models; since there is evidence that partisan elites can (and do) manipulate primary outcomes, candidates should ambitiously seek those endorsements, starting with developing relationships with influential leaders within the party. (p. 541) This concept raises questions about why candidates seek endorsements and the possible benefits that groups and individuals have as a result of sponsoring these candidates.

Third, this research highlights that in primary races where candidates have the same political quality score, or are separated by one or two points, partisan endorsements can literally define the outcome of the election. (p. 540-41) While endorsements did not weigh as much in

races where opponents were separated by much larger margins, this finding suggests that the ‘who-you-know’ aspect of politics is very important if one wishes to advance their political careers. This circumstance raises questions of ethics and possible corruption within parties, as nepotism and bribery may loom large among highly ambitious candidates anxious to win coveted seats.

Areas for further study not covered by this article include expanding the research pool (only 67 candidates were evaluated), investigating whether the findings also apply to incumbent races, examining the effect of endorsements in general elections, and analyzing the role that a candidate’s resume credentials and access to partisan elites play in the emergence of opponents in races and their likelihood for success in the election. A weakness of Dominguez’s study lies in the lack of analysis on the access candidates had to elites; availability of endorsements might vary depending on a candidate’s region, ethnicity, age, educational background, gender, sexual orientation, and celebrity status. Another weakness lies in the measurement of candidate quality. In order to measure the “quality” of a candidate, factors such as currently holding an elected office, having successfully run for office in the past, and name recognition were scored. (p. 537) Other factors should have been included in these calculations, such as ability to work in a team, integrity, satisfaction ratings by community in which they held office, and professionalism. The addition of these factors would have allowed the findings to extrapolate more hypotheses as to why disparities in endorsements vary among candidates. Lastly, the survey conducted by Dominguez did not inquire if and how candidates used the endorsements in their campaigns; this probe could have drawn attention to the ways candidates promote their endorsements—as some would undoubtedly market them more aggressively—and the effects such publicity activities could have had on campaign outcomes. It would also be interesting to further study how the type

of organization that endorses a candidate—such as a bank, labor union, or news station— influences the success of candidates; for example, are endorsements by major corporate banks more likely to propel candidates to winning office than an endorsement by a local radio station?

In sum, Dominguez argues that partisan endorsements indeed have a “statistically significant effect” on increasing a candidate’s probability of winning the election and on their share of the primary vote. (p. 540). Dominguez’s research coincides with previous findings that endorsements affect primary elections, especially when the endorsements come from groups and individuals that are both appealing and recognizable to partisan voters. (541) As discussed above, her findings have important implications in how we understand the roles of candidates and parties in primary elections, candidate-centered and party-centered model dynamics, and questions of ethics in political campaigns.