



In Party We Trust? Voter Support for Party-Backed Candidates in Primary Elections

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Abstract

When parties decide, do voters listen? We argue that the answer depends on voters' trust in the institutions of American politics. Using both a conjoint experiment and a traditional survey experiment with subjects voting in hypothetical congressional primary elections, we find that respondents from both parties are more likely to support a candidate when that candidate is endorsed by a member of the party or when the candidate has previously served in elected office. However, these findings are conditional on trust and partisanship. For Democrats, we find that support for party-backed candidates erodes among low-trust respondents. Low-trust Democrats are particularly resistant to candidates endorsed by traditional party elites such as Speaker Pelosi, President Obama, and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, and are less likely to support experienced candidates. While low-trust Republicans are more skeptical of endorsements from traditional party actors like Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, the most salient attribute for Republicans is an endorsement from President Trump, which significantly boosted support in both studies independent of trust. Our findings support party-centric theories of primaries but suggest that voter distrust in the political system threatens parties' control over their nominations.

Keywords Political parties · Primary elections · Voting behavior · Congressional primaries · Conjoint experiment · Survey experiment · Endorsements · Voter trust · Trust in government

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Introduction

When parties decide, do voters listen? Scholars of primary elections have argued that political parties shape electoral outcomes by boosting their preferred candidates (Cohen et al. 2008; Bawn et al. 2012). In an age of popular primary elections, for party organizations to see their preferred candidates nominated, the voters must act in accordance with the wishes of party elites. Yet it is not clear that voters always follow the cues of the party.

In the special U.S. Senate election in Alabama in 2017, for example, Republican primary voters nominated Roy Moore, a former state supreme court judge who had been removed from office for judicial misconduct on two separate occasions. Moore handily defeated the appointed incumbent U.S. Senator Luther Strange in the primary runoff on September 26, 2017. Strange was the clear choice of the Republican establishment. Not only had Strange been appointed earlier that year by the governor of Alabama to fill Senator Jeff Session's vacant seat, Strange also had received enthusiastic endorsements from President Trump, Vice President Pence, and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (along with \$7 million from the McConnell-led Senate Leadership Fund) (Rogin et al. 2017). Shortly after Moore defeated Strange in the primary, multiple women came forward to accuse Moore of sexual assault and misconduct. The allegations included credible accusations of misconduct perpetrated against minors. Moore went on to narrowly lose the general election to Democrat Doug Jones, marking the first time a Democrat won a U.S. Senate election in Alabama since 1992. Republican voters' rejection of the establishment choice in the primary in favor of a candidate who already had serious red flags almost certainly cost Republicans a Senate seat in a deep-red state.

Why do primary voters sometimes reject the party establishment's preferred candidate? In this article, we use two original studies designed to assess subjects' candidate preferences in hypothetical primary elections for the U.S. House of Representatives. Study 1 uses an original conjoint survey experiment in which the candidates' attributes are randomly assigned. Study 2 refines the results from Study 1 to further hone in on voters' preferences in primaries using a traditional survey experiment.¹

Our findings suggest endorsements and other indicators of candidates' party ties play a complicated role in congressional primaries. On the one hand, we find that respondents are more likely to prefer candidates who have been endorsed by prominent members of the party or by the party organization itself than candidates who did not receive any endorsement. Respondents also preferred candidates who have had some previous political experience—another indication of ties to the party establishment.² On the other hand, that conclusion masks significant differences by party. For Democrats, the results are conditional on trust: we find that support for party-endorsed and experienced candidates decreases considerably among

¹ The replication files for both studies can be found at: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/JF3Z7V>.

² As the Roy Moore example shows, a candidate certainly can have previous political experience without being the party's preference in a primary.

Democrats exhibiting less trust in political institutions and Democratic leaders. Low-trust Republicans are more skeptical of endorsements from traditional party actors, but an endorsement from President Trump is the most important consideration in evaluating a candidate regardless of trust in institutions and controlling for other relevant candidate characteristics. Our findings lead us to conclude that when party leaders themselves feed into voter cynicism toward the political system, they may be undercutting their own effectiveness at nominating preferred candidates.

We begin by highlighting this paper's contributions to research on primary elections, elite cues, and voter distrust. Next, we present the research designs and results from our two studies. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings and paths for future research.

Party Nominations and Voter Distrust

Many scholars have argued that political parties exert significant control over which candidates win party nominations (Hassell 2018; Bawn et al. 2012; Koger et al. 2009; Masket 2009). In their study of presidential nominations, Cohen et al. (2008) argue that endorsements from major party players, rather than polling, news coverage, fundraising capacity, or any other factor, are the best predictors of a candidate's delegate share in presidential primaries. From this vantage point, primary voters take cues from party elites and vote along with what they perceive to be the elites' consensus. Parties will thus concentrate their resources, including money, staff, information, and endorsements in order to endow preferred candidates with an advantage (Hassell 2016; Masket 2009).

Though recent scholarship has shown that party-backed candidates still win much of the time, especially in congressional elections (Kamarck and Podkul 2018; Conroy et al. 2018; Hassell 2018), the idea that "the party decides" has come under scrutiny after some high-profile cases of the party apparatus failing to nominate its preferred candidates or being forced to deploy significant resources in a primary that had been previously reserved for general elections. The nominations of Donald Trump in 2016, David Brat (R-VA) in 2014, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) in 2018, and Roy Moore in 2017, to name a few examples, have either harmed general election electability, created headaches for party leaders in governing, or both. Some scholars (Raja et al. 2015; Manento 2019) have pointed to changes in the campaign finance system, including the Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act's ban on unlimited soft money contributions to parties and the Supreme Court paving the way for super PACs in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010), as reasons why the parties have become somewhat weaker players in recent primary election cycles. Though these campaign finance changes matter, the voters still have the ultimate say on Primary Election Day. Which voters are more likely to reject the party establishment's preferred candidate? We argue that voters who are less trusting of government institutions and party leaders are less receptive to cues from party elites about which candidate to support in a primary election. Our findings are especially relevant given voters' declining trust in institutions, and they provide context for recent internal party divisions beyond ideological or policy disagreements.

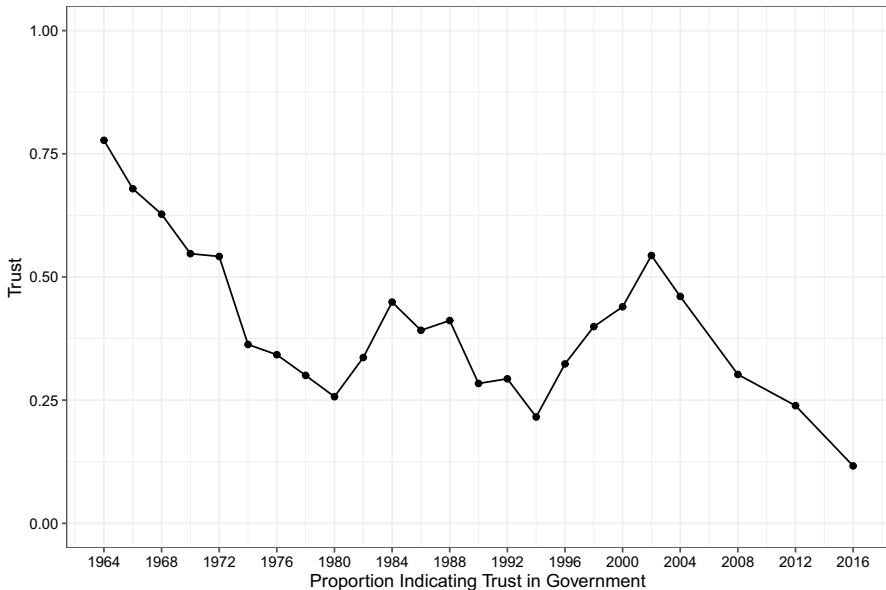


Fig. 1 Proportion of ANES survey respondents indicating trust in the federal government, 1964–2016

Ignoring the Cues: Voter Distrust and Outsider Candidates

In low-information environments voters utilize heuristics, including elite cues, in order to more easily process information and form political opinions (Sniderman et al. 1992; Downs 1957). Previous research on elite cues suggests that voters respond more positively to persuasive appeals from elites with whom they deem to be like-minded. Gilens and Murakawa (2002, p. 26) write that “Effective cue givers are often taken to be political elites that share the same ideological or partisan orientation as the member of the public.” This sentiment is supported by Zaller’s (1992) elite cues model, which suggests that voters with higher levels of political awareness will be more likely to develop a “resistance” to cues from elites with whom they disagree. It is not controversial to suggest that congressional primary voters are more likely to be higher in political awareness than non-voters. If those voters find themselves with less of a reason to identify with the elites giving cues in primary elections, they will be more likely to resist cues from those elites. As Page and Shapiro (1992, p. 365) write, citizens “can learn enough to form intelligent preferences simply by knowing whom to trust for a reliable conclusion. If the public lacks like-minded and trustworthy cue givers . . . collective deliberation breaks down.”

Using American National Election Studies (ANES) data, Fig. 1 shows that citizen trust in the American political system has fallen in recent years.³ We argue that this erosion of trust affects the extent to which voters listen to party elites in primary elections, ultimately undermining the effectiveness of the political parties to ensure their preferred candidates appear on the ballot in the general election.

There is evidence that distrust in government can have a significant effect on voting behavior and attitudes more broadly. Distrust has been associated with a decrease in support for liberal economic policies, especially redistributive programs (Hetherington 2005), and a decrease in support for centrist policies (Miller 1974). Previous research has also shown that voters who express less trust in the federal government are more likely to vote for a third-party candidate (Chressanthis and Shaffer 1993; Rosenstone et al. 1996; Peterson and Mark Wrighton 1998).

This body of research is supported by a recent study conducted by Dyck et al. (2018). The authors conduct a survey in which they ask voters how often they trust the federal government to do what is right. They find that respondents from both parties who are less trusting of the federal government were more likely to support their party's insurgent candidates in the 2016 presidential primaries: either Donald Trump or Bernie Sanders. We extend the spirit of this study and the ANES question in three ways. First, we create a more comprehensive measure of trust that includes respondents' views of several government and party institutions beyond solely the federal government. Because views of the federal government can be heavily influenced by which party holds power (Marien 2013), we combine additional measures into a composite measure of trust described more fully in the next section. Second, we utilize a conjoint analysis experimental design in Study 1 to more directly test exactly what it is that appeals to low-trust voters. By assessing the effect of several candidate attributes on the probability of respondents voting for that candidate, we can disentangle various factors that can lead to vote choice rather than relying on well-known candidates about whom voters may have strong feelings for possibly idiosyncratic reasons. We extend these results through more tailored experiments in Study 2 examining the roles of experience and endorsements for Democratic voters and President Trump's endorsement for Republican voters. Third, we focus our study on primary elections for the U.S. House in order to further disassociate from established figures in presidential politics and to better allow scholars to apply these findings to a larger sample size of primary elections.

Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) convincingly contend that citizens' trust is driven by attitudes about the process and functioning of government rather than by the policies it produces. With intense partisan polarization and gridlock among political elites combined with gerrymandering and geographic sorting driving down general election competition, voters are often left without a way to manifest any process- and institutional-related frustrations through their votes in general elections.

³ Respondents from 1964 to 2012 were counted as trusting of the federal government if they indicated they trusted the federal government to "do what is right" most or all of the time. The 2016 version of the question used a five-point scale with respondents coded as trustful if they said the federal government could be trusted to do what is right most of the time or always.

As a result, primary elections have emerged as a venue for citizens distrustful of political parties and institutions to express their frustrations through their vote choices and thus provide fertile ground for studying the effects of distrust on voting behavior. We argue that the combination of declining levels of political trust and the increased salience of primary elections leads these partisans to increasingly prefer outsider candidates in primaries.

An outsider candidate may be considered an outsider for many different reasons but we are primarily referring to candidates with fewer ties to established political institutions, especially the political parties themselves, in seeking a nomination. To operationalize the concept, an outsider in our study refers to candidates who (1) receive fewer expressions of support (endorsements) from members of the party establishment and (2) lack political experience. Our survey design in Study 1, which we detail in the next section, allows these attributes to vary randomly across several permutations of candidate profiles. A candidate with endorsements from key members of the party organization, including members of Congress and party leaders, can signal to primary voters that he or she is will be a “team player” for the party if elected. Candidates with endorsements from fringe members of the party coalition (e.g. someone like Bernie Sanders), or no endorsements at all, can signal a lack of ties to the establishment. Previous political experience can work in the same way; House candidates who have already held public office in some capacity signal to voters that they have existing connections to the party. A candidate’s lack of political experience can indicate both party outsider and Washington outsider status, perhaps lending credence for some voters to the common campaign refrain of “fixing” Congress from the outside.

Alternatively, candidates might be outsiders or perceived as outsiders by voters if they deviate from the party’s ideological mainstream, and/or (especially from the point of view of Democratic respondents) are women, minority, and younger candidates. Ideological deviation from the party’s mainstream is a bit difficult to pin down because voters may have idiosyncratic views about the parties’ prevailing ideology, but voters nonetheless may use ideology as a heuristic by which to vote for a candidate who will push back on what they view as the party’s establishment. And in the case of candidates’ gender, race, and age, Democratic voters in particular may view a candidate who is not an older white male as an outsider representing change to an exclusionary establishment. While we believe trust in government will be related to respondents’ views on ideology and descriptive representation, we think the more straightforward cue giving (endorsements and experience) is a clearer insider indicator.

Study 1

Sample and Research Design

In Study 1, we use a conjoint experiment in order to evaluate voters’ support for outsider candidates in congressional primary elections. Conjoint experiments are a technique for “handling situations in which a decision maker has to deal with options

Table 1 MTurk sample

Variable	N	Mean
Female	557	0.47
Male	630	0.53
Age	1195	38.35
White	986	0.83
African American	93	0.08
Asian American	87	0.07
Latinx	75	0.06
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	4	0.00
American Indian	15	0.01
Other race	4	0.00
Democrat	804	0.67
Republican	391	0.33
Voted in primary	908	0.76
All respondents	1195	–
Total choices	1195	–

that simultaneously vary across two or more attributes” (Green et al. 2001, p. S57). By allowing for the experimental manipulation of multiple factors, the conjoint design can assess the relative influence of several factors on one observed outcome: vote choice. Following Hainmueller et al. (2014), conjoint analysis offers distinct advantages including that we can better approximate real-world decision making than a standard survey experiment while testing the plausibility of multiple theories of voting in primaries. This design is particularly well-suited to assessing voter attitudes in primary elections (see Henderson et al. 2019). As we discussed in the previous section, there are various ways in which a candidate might come across as an outsider to a primary voter. By varying candidate attributes including party endorsements, previous political experience, and ideological ratings, we can assess the effect of multiple signals that a candidate is more or less of an outsider in the same study rather than fielding several survey experiments in which only one attribute varies.

The sample for Study 1 consists of 1195 subjects recruited through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) survey platform.⁴ The survey was administered in February 2019. Public opinion scholars such as Berinsky et al. (2012) note that MTurk samples tend to be less representative than national probability samples—though more representative than convenience samples—usually because they tend to be younger and more liberal (Huff and Tingley 2015). Descriptive characteristics of our MTurk sample are presented in Table 1. The average age of the sample is 38, with a plurality of subjects identifying as Democrats. Straight partisans were assigned to

⁴ The MTurk HIT was described as a survey on voting in primary elections. In order to qualify for the study, the respondents needed to have at least a 99% Human Intelligence Task (HIT) approval rate and be located in the U.S. We discuss further data quality checks below.

the branch of the survey matching their party identification. For those identifying as independent or third party, we asked a follow-up that forced subjects to indicate with which of the two major parties they more closely identify. Those respondents were placed in the survey branch more closely matching their party identification.

Another problem identified with MTurk samples is the presence of “non-respondents” (bots) and non-serious respondents (Ahler et al. 2020). We include several data cleaning measures in order to test the quality of the sample. First, we removed any instances in which the JavaScript failed to populate the subject’s screen with our survey questions or if the subject failed to complete the survey. The remaining 1195 survey respondents comprise our full sample. Next, though we required MTurk users to reside in the United States in order to take the survey, we used the “rgeolocate” R package to flag as problematic any users with IP addresses originating outside of the U.S. Responses were also flagged as problematic if they failed at least three of these six data checks:

- Completion time (< 1 percentile or > 99 percentile),
- Total time on conjoint profile pages (< 1 percentile or > 99 percentile),
- Attention check: “Regarding primary elections, for this question, please just mark ‘somewhat agree’ and proceed to the next screen”,
- Age validation (same age entered at the beginning and end of the survey),
- Country of origin unable to be determined by IP address
- IP address appears twice.

These data checks produced 36 respondents flagged as problematic. As shown in the “Appendix”, our results are unchanged when excluding these potentially problematic respondents.

After filling out a demographic questionnaire, we asked respondents to indicate on a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always) how often they trust the following to represent the best interests of the public:

- Congress,
- The Supreme Court,
- The news media,
- The federal government,
- Democratic Party leaders,
- Republican Party leaders,
- President Trump.

We created a *composite trust score* for each respondent equal to the mean of their trust ratings for all of the categories except for President Trump and the opposing party’s leaders. We exclude these trust ratings because in the case of Republicans’ feelings towards Trump, trust in the president may actually indicate *distrust* in political institutions, given the president’s own professed attitudes toward the media, the court system, the justice department, and other institutions. And measuring partisans’ attitudes toward leaders in the opposing party (and Democrats’ attitudes toward Trump) is more closely measuring negative partisanship than trust in government

institutions and party leadership. Separately for each party we coded respondents below the median composite trust score as low-trust, and high-trust otherwise.⁵

After the demographic questionnaire and trust ratings, respondents began “voting” in congressional primary elections matching their own party. Each respondent was presented with five pairings of hypothetical candidates, about whom they know the randomly assigned attributes of age, gender, race, occupation, previous political experience, an ideological rating, who has endorsed the candidate, and the competitiveness of the district in general elections. The 5 primary elections per respondent produces a total of 5795 votes in elections containing 11,590 candidates.⁶

The layout and possible attributes of the candidates are presented in Table 2. Each of the values are randomly assigned to apply to each of the candidates, with the caveats that the district must be the same and that both candidates may not be endorsed by the same endorser.⁷ A screenshot of an example Democratic primary election is presented in the “Appendix” in Fig. A.1. Democratic and Republican candidate profiles differed only in the endorsements and ideological ratings categories. Though imperfect, we used as endorsers members and organizations of the Democratic and Republican parties that are comparable to one another; for example, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) and the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC), or Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. The ideological ratings used the same scale that ranged from 6 out of 10 (moderately liberal/conservative) to 9 out of 10 (extremely liberal/conservative); the Republican ratings were given by the fictional “Conservative Candidates Association” while the Democratic ratings were given by the fictional “Progressive Candidates Association.” Altogether, we designed the elections to approximate a reasonable amount of information that a voter might know or perceive about the candidates without having the benefit of party differentiation.

Hypotheses

In this section we describe our pre-registered hypotheses (H_1 and H_2).⁸ Our hypotheses are related to the effects of trust on the types of candidates partisans support in

⁵ As a robustness check measuring other ways in which distrust can manifest in vote choice, we also included a “wildcard” category in which respondents were randomly assigned to either Special Counsel Robert Mueller, federal law enforcement, corporations/business leaders, local government, or executive branch staff. This additional test allows for additional plausible ways in which distrust can affect vote choice without keeping subjects on this section for an extended period of time. For example, a far-right respondent may distrust what they think of as agents of the so-called “deep state,” perhaps including Special Counsel Robert Mueller or federal law enforcement; or a respondent who is further to the left ideologically may trust the political system but harbor distrust toward corporations and business leaders. These additional results are included in the “Appendix”.

⁶ Regardless of which candidate they supported, subjects rated the candidates on a scale from 1, “this candidate would never represent my interests in Washington,” to 7, “this candidate would always represent my interests in Washington.”

⁷ Candidate race probabilities were weighted to match nationwide demographic characteristics.

⁸ EGAP identification number 20190205AB.

Table 2 Possible candidate attribute values in conjoint experiment

Attribute	Possible values (Democratic candidates)	Possible values (Republican candidates)
Age	37, 46, 52, 60, 68, 75	37, 46, 52, 60, 68, 75
Gender	Male, female	Male, female
Race	African American, Asian, Latino/a, White	African American, Asian, Latino/a, White
District competitiveness	General election is likely to be a toss-up; leans towards Democrats in general elections; solidly favors Democrats in general elections	General election is likely to be a toss-up; leans towards Republicans in general elections; solidly favors Republicans in general elections
Occupation	Businessperson, teacher, doctor, lawyer, Military	Businessperson, teacher, doctor, lawyer, Military
Previous political experience	None, State Senator, Mayor, City Council Member	None, State Senator, Mayor; City Council Member
Ideology	Rated 6 (moderately liberal), 7 (solidly liberal), 8 (solidly liberal), 9 (extremely liberal) by the Progressive Candidates Association	Rated 6 (moderately conservative), 7 (solidly conservative), 8 (solidly conservative), 9 (extremely conservative) by the Conservative Candidates Association
Endorsements	None, DCCC, Senator Bernie Sanders, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, President Obama, The state Democratic Party, The Local Democratic Town Committee	None, NRCC, Senator Ted Cruz, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, President Trump, The state Republican Party, The Local Republican Town Committee

primaries. Additionally, we describe hypotheses derived from other theories of primary voting behavior, which we also outline in our pre-analysis plan.

H₁: Democratic respondents are more trusting in institutions and are more supportive of establishment-style candidates than Republicans.

Though there was a lot of media speculation about the rise of a “Democratic Tea Party” in 2018, establishment-friendly candidates mostly fared well in Democratic congressional primaries (Kamarck and Podkul 2018; Conroy et al. 2018). We expect Democrats to respond more positively than Republicans to cues that suggest a primary candidate has ties to or is supported by the party establishment.

H₂: Low-trust voters are more likely to support outsider candidates.

As we described previously, we expect high levels of distrust to translate into more support for candidates who have never held elected office, candidates who are not endorsed by party elites or who are endorsed by outsider elites, and candidates who are more ideological.

We also test three alternative theories for voters’ decisions in primary elections. First (H₃), some scholars argue that gender shapes perceptions of ideology and candidate quality. Aside from the potential for voters to oppose women candidates for outright misogynistic reasons, previous research has shown that women are perceived to be more liberal than they actually are (Kitchens and Swers 2016; King and Matland 2003; McDermott 1998; Koch 2000), which can have a significant effect on the voting calculus in a primary election. On this view, we might expect Democrats to be more supportive of women regardless of their trust in government and Republicans to be less supportive of women regardless of trust. Second, (H₄), perhaps voters who turn out to vote in primary elections (especially open seat races) seek to elect the most liberal or the most conservative candidate possible, regardless of their feelings towards institutions. We include the ideological ratings for this reason. Third, scholars of political parties have argued that in low-information elections, endorsements from party elites can serve as a quality signal for voters (Cohen et al. 2008; Hassell 2018; McNitt 1980; Kunkel 1988; Masket 2009). On this view (H₅), voters should be more likely to support a candidate if they see that their party’s campaign committee or a high-ranking elected official has endorsed that candidate. This should be true regardless of individuals’ trust in institutions.

Results and Discussion

Part one of H₁ states that Democrats will exhibit more trust in government and party institutions than their Republican counterparts. The distributions of composite trust scores for Republicans and Democrats are presented in Fig. 2. Democratic respondents indeed tend to have a slightly higher composite trust score ($\mu_{Dem} = 2.90$) than Republican respondents ($\mu_{Rep} = 2.73$).

The second part of H₁ is that Democrats should be more likely to vote for establishment candidates than Republicans. In this section we present average marginal component effects (AMCEs) for candidate attributes, with results separated by party.

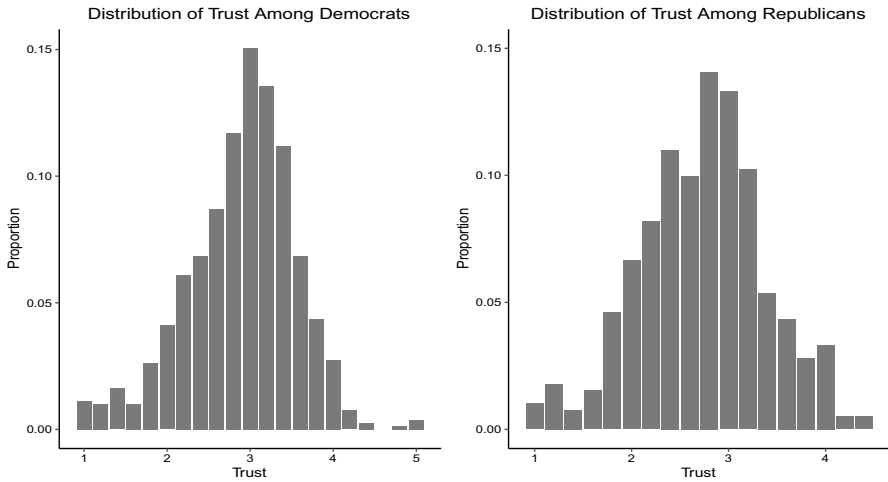


Fig. 2 Distribution of trust among Democrats and Republicans

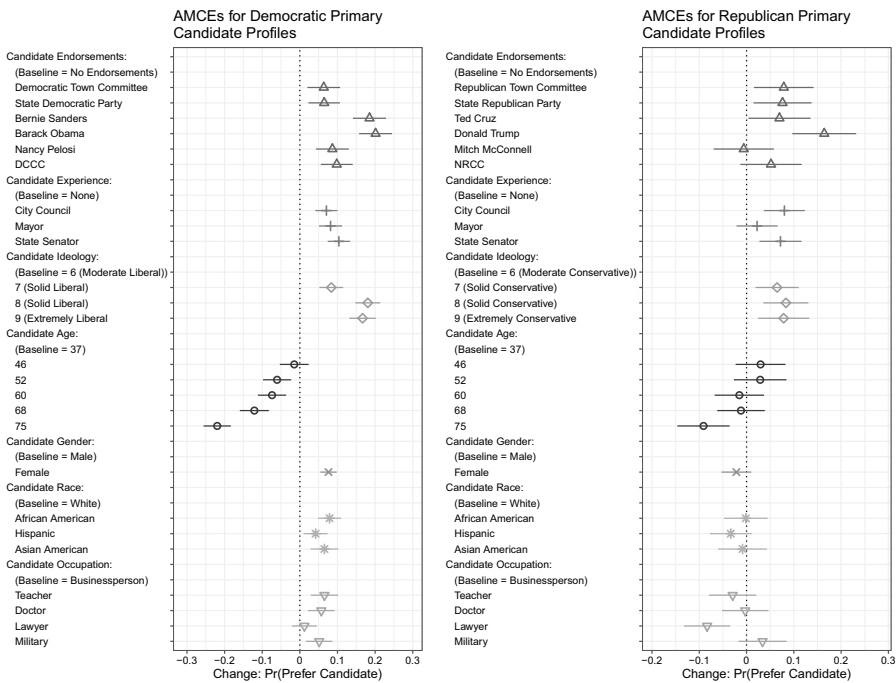


Fig. 3 AMCE estimates for Democratic and Republican samples

AMCEs reflect the increase in the population probability of the candidate’s profile being chosen if the value of its *l*th component were changed from X_0 to X_1 , averaged over all the possible values of the other components given the joint distribution of the profile attributes (Hainmueller et al. 2014).

Figure 3 displays the AMCEs of our unconditional models for Democrats and Republicans in the full sample. Keeping in mind that the Democratic and Republican samples represent separate experiments, Democrats are indeed more likely than Republicans to support candidates endorsed by party elites and are more likely to support candidates who have had some previous political experience. Democrats, for example, were about nine percentage points more likely to support a candidate endorsed by Speaker Pelosi than a candidate with no endorsements. Republicans were no more likely to support a candidate endorsed by Majority Leader McConnell than a candidate with no endorsements. These party differences in support of establishment-style candidates support H_1 .

Republicans, however, were less apt than Democrats to support candidates with more “extreme” ideological ratings. Though Democrats were indeed more likely to respond to establishment cues, they did prefer ideological outliers. Respondents from both parties preferred candidates described as either “solidly” or “extremely” liberal/conservative to those described as “moderately” liberal/conservative. This lends some support to H_4 , though the effect is more acute on the Democratic side. In the “Appendix”, we also explore the possibility that endorsements and experience interact with ideology. We find some evidence that endorsements provide an additional boost to ideologically moderate candidates.

The demographic characteristics of the candidates were of clear importance to Democratic respondents. The probability of Democrats voting for a candidate decreased as the candidates’ age deviated further from the baseline of 37. Democrats were about 23 percentage points less likely to support a 75-year-old candidate than they were a 37-year-old. Democrats were also more likely to support female and minority candidates than male and white candidates. For Republicans, there were no statistically significant differences when it came to the race and gender of the candidates. Age did not make much of a difference for Republicans either, except that Republican subjects also preferred not to support 75-year-old candidates. The gender results for both parties provide some support for H_3 .

Democrats also responded positively to endorsements, especially preferring candidates endorsed by President Obama and Bernie Sanders. Republicans also generally preferred candidates who were endorsed by someone to candidates who were not, but the effects were less pronounced. Overall, the AMCEs for endorsements tend to support the “party decides” hypothesis, H_5 . For the party to successfully coalesce around a candidate in a primary, voters need to be receptive to the choice of the coalition. These results show that voters do indeed value such signals from the party, on balance.

We hypothesized that voters who indicate less trust toward party and government institutions should be less likely to respond to cues from party elites and more likely to support candidates with outsider traits. The left panel of Figs. 4 and 5 show the conditional AMCE estimates by level of trust, comparing subjects at or above the median in their composite trust score (high-trust) with subjects below the composite trust score median (low-trust).⁹ Because, as Leeper et al.

⁹ As a robustness check, we tested whether adding a “medium trust” categorization (thus breaking our sample into low-, medium-, and high-trust respondents) changes our results, but the differences between

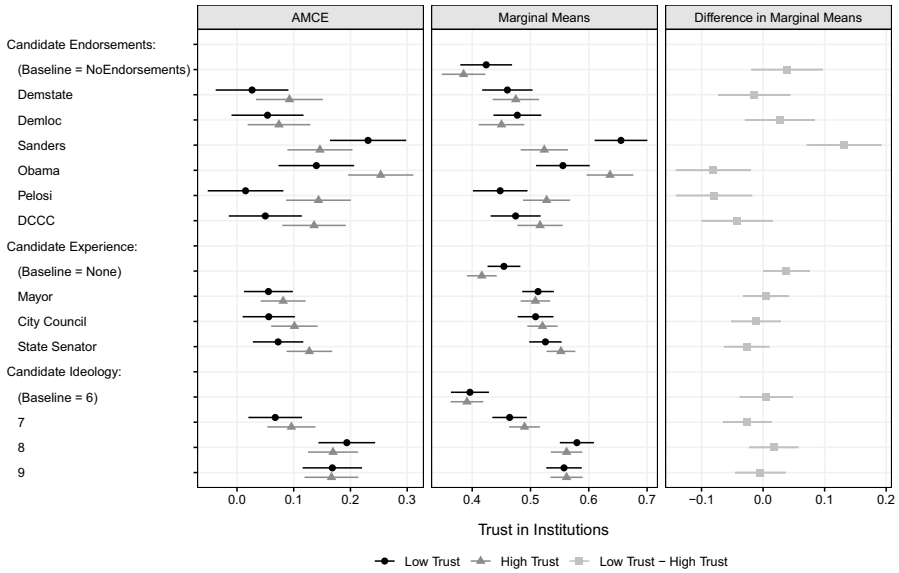


Fig. 4 Democratic support for party outsiders by level of trust

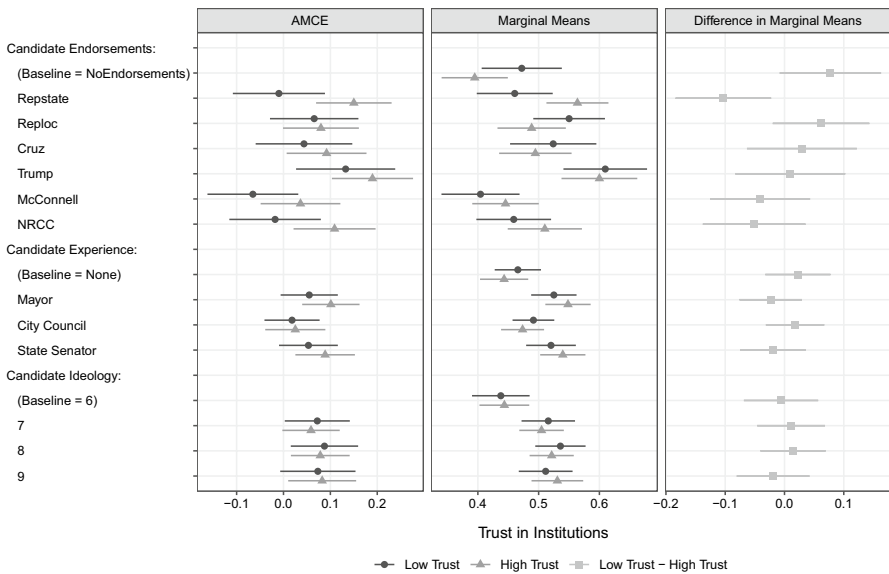


Fig. 5 Republican support for party outsiders by level of trust

Footnote 9 (continued)

low- and high-trust respondents were very similar to these main results. Those results are presented in Figs. A.16 and A.17 in the “Appendix”.

(2020) show, using only conditional AMCEs to compare subgroups can produce misleading results, we also present marginal mean estimates in the middle column of Figs. 4 and 5 and marginal mean differences (low-trust–high-trust) in the right column. Marginal means describe the level of favorability toward a profile attribute, ignoring all other attributes. As opposed to AMCEs, which restrict the AMCE for the reference category to zero, marginal means convey information about the preferences of respondents for all attribute levels. The results for Democrats and Republicans are presented in Figs. 4 and 5, respectively.

The results suggest that high- and low-trust voters in both parties prefer candidates who have an endorsement, some prior experience, and ideological congruence. High-trust voters appear to punish candidates without any endorsements or prior experience more than low-trust voters. Alternatively, low-trust voters are more open to outsider candidates, supporting H_2 . This is particularly true among Democrats: low-trust voters reward candidates with an endorsement from Bernie Sanders, while high-trust voters reward candidates with any endorsement, but especially those with support from “traditional” party elite sources like President Obama, Speaker Pelosi, and the DCCC. An F-test confirms that the interaction between respondents’ levels trust and candidate endorsements is statistically significant ($p < .0001$). This finding holds for each constituent measure of trust. Low-trust Democrats were also significantly more likely to prefer candidates with no previous political experience.

Although similar, the results are more muted among Republicans, perhaps because of the smaller sample size. Prior experience does not seem to matter much for either high- or low-trust Republicans. Low-trust Republicans were significantly more likely to support candidates with no endorsements than high-trust Republicans, and significantly less likely to support candidates endorsed by the Republican Town Committee. For Republicans, the only statistically significant overall interactions according to our F-tests were for the trust in party leader/endorsements and the trust in Trump/endorsements relationships. These results, along with results using all of the constituent measures of trust, are presented in the “Appendix”. Republicans with low trust in party leaders hold an endorsement from Mitch McConnell in very low esteem. These Republicans also do not prioritize ideological purity, as they are significantly less likely than subjects with high trust in Republican party leaders to support candidates described as extreme conservatives. Republicans with low trust in President Trump also appear to dislike Trump endorsements, especially in contrast to Republicans with high trust in Trump. Interestingly, these low-trust Republicans also seem to prefer candidates described as moderates and dislike extremely conservative candidates.

Using our trust results, we also estimated predicted values of candidates that high- and low-trust respondents are most and least likely to support. These values are presented in Table 3. The values emphasize the finding that Democratic voters are prioritizing candidate diversity regardless of trust in government. For both high- and low-trust Democrats, the predicted least preferred candidate is a 75 year-old, white, male, moderately liberal businessman with no endorsements or previous political experience. Although low-trust Democrats prefer a Sanders endorsement to an Obama endorsement, the predicted most preferred candidate in both cases is

Table 3 Least and most preferred candidates by trust level (predicted values)

	Democrats			Republicans		
	Least preferred	Most preferred		Least preferred	Most preferred	
Low trust	Age: 75 Gender: Male Race: White Occupation: Business Experience: None Ideology: Moderate liberal Endorsement: None	Age: 46 Gender: Female Race: Asian American Occupation: Teacher Experience: State senator Ideology: Solid liberal Endorsement: Sanders		Age: 75 Gender: Female Race: Latina Occupation: Lawyer Experience: None Ideology: Moderate conservative Endorsement: McConnell	Age: 46 Gender: Male Race: White Occupation: Military Experience: Mayor Ideology: Solid conservative Endorsement: Trump	
High trust	Age: 75 Gender: Male Race: White Occupation: Business Experience: None Ideology: Moderate liberal	Age: 37 Gender: Female Race: African American Occupation: Military Experience: State senator Ideology: Solid liberal		Age: 75 Gender: Female Race: Latina Occupation: Lawyer Experience: None Ideology: Moderate conservative	Age: 52 Gender: Male Race: Asian American Occupation: Military Experience: Mayor Ideology: Extreme conservative	Endorsement: Obama Endorsement: None Endorsement: None Endorsement: Trump

a young woman who is a racial minority, is a solid liberal, and who has served as a State Senator.

For both high- and low-trust respondents, Republicans' predicted most preferred candidates are conservative, middle-aged, males with a military background and an endorsement from President Trump. Their predicted least preferred candidates are older, Latina, women who are moderately conservative lawyers. One notable difference is that the high-trust Republicans' least preferred candidate does not have any endorsements, while low-trust Republicans' least preferred candidate is endorsed by Mitch McConnell.

We did not find strong statistical evidence to suggest that Democratic respondents' composite trust scores are related to support for women, racial minority, and younger candidates. The unconditional AMCEs presented in Fig. 3 suggest that Democrats support candidates from underrepresented groups at higher rates in congressional primaries, and this does not appear to vary significantly among high- and low-trust respondents. The overall evidence presented in this section supports the notion that lower trust voters, especially on the Democratic side, are less likely to heed the cues of the party establishment in primary elections.

Study 2

Study 1 highlights the many possible factors—ideology, endorsements, experience—that can shape the preferences of primary voters. As several scholars have noted however, the AMCEs from a conjoint experiment are not directly equivalent to the majority's preferences in an election (see e.g. Abramson et al. 2019 and Leeper et al. 2020).¹⁰ To address these concerns, we conducted a second study using a more tailored experimental design informed by the results of Study 1 to assess how endorsements and experience shape voter preferences for party insiders relative to party outsiders. By holding most of the candidate attributes fixed, Study 2 provides a clearer window into factors that shape voters' relative preferences for insider and outsider candidates. Further, Study 2, uses a nationally representative sample of 1050 registered voters—525 Democrats and 525 Republicans—to address valid concerns about generalizing from samples recruited through MTurk.

Sample and Research Design

The sample for Study 2 is a random sample of 1050 registered voters—525 Democrats and 525 Republicans—recruited by Qualtrics in late May 2020. Descriptive statistics of the sample are presented in Table 4. The sample is designed to be nationally representative of registered voters for each party using U.S. Census benchmarks

¹⁰ Abramson et al. (2019), in particular, show that, in some cases, strong preference intensity can outweigh majority preference in the AMCEs from a conjoint design. For example, a small minority of respondents might have a strong preference for male candidates that could overpower a slight preference for female candidates among the majority of respondents.

Table 4 National sample statistics

Variable	Democrats		Republicans	
	N	Mean	N	Mean
Female	290	0.55	234	0.45
Male	235	0.45	291	0.55
Age	525	43.14	525	45.59
White	255	0.49	435	0.83
Black/African American	104	0.20	20	0.04
Asian American	53	0.10	17	0.03
Latinx	60	0.11	24	0.05
Other/declined	53	0.10	29	0.05
Voted in 2018 or 2020 primary	448	0.85	449	0.85
All respondents	525	–	525	–

Table 5 Experimental design for Study 2

Democrats		Republicans	
Candidate A	Candidate B	Candidate A	Candidate B
Age: 46	Age: 48	Age: 75	Age: 46
Gender: Male	Gender: Male	Gender: Female	Gender: Male
Race: White	Race: White	Race: Latina	Race: White
Occupation: Teacher	Occupation: Doctor	Occupation: Lawyer	Occupation: Military
Experience: None/State sen.	Experience: None	Experience: None	Experience: Mayor
Ideology: Solid liberal	Ideology: Solid liberal	Ideology: Moderate conservative	Ideology: Solid conservative
Endorsement: None/Pelosi	Endorsement: Sanders	Endorsement: None/Trump	Endorsement: State Rep. Party

on age, gender, race, education, and income. This national sample allows us a more robust basis from which to generalize our results.

The survey in Study 2 uses a similar broad structure to Study 1: respondents indicate their level of trust in various political institutions and then are presented with a single pair of hypothetical candidates.¹¹ In fact, respondents see the same style of side-by-side comparison for Candidates A and B on their screens as they would have in Study 1, except the only characteristics we manipulate in Study 2 are endorsements and experience. The candidate attributes used in the experimental design for Study 2 are presented in Table 5, with experimental manipulations in bold.

¹¹ We altered the design of the trust questionnaire to use a six-point scale rather than a five point scale, which forces respondents to indicate whether they trust an institution to do what is right “more than half” or “less than half” of the time.

Democratic respondents are randomly assigned to one of four treatment conditions: we vary Candidate A's political experience (none or State Senator) and Candidate A's endorsements (none or Speaker Pelosi), while holding all other attributes constant. Candidate B has no previous political experience in all four treatment conditions and is always endorsed by Senator Bernie Sanders. This allows for a contrast between Candidate A, with varying levels of insider cues, and the unambiguous party outsider in Candidate B.¹² We hold age, gender, and race constant, and use occupations that did not differ significantly with one another in Study 1. Building on the first study, we expect the results to be conditional on trust:

H₁: High-trust Democrats will be more likely to support Candidate A when the candidate has previous political experience and an endorsement from Speaker Pelosi.

There are two treatment conditions to which Republican respondents are randomly assigned: Candidate A either has no endorsement or an endorsement from President Trump. We assigned the rest of the candidate attributes using the least- and most-preferred candidate predicted values from Table 3. Candidate A is a moderately conservative 75-year-old Latina female lawyer with no previous political experience, which is an amalgam of the least-preferred characteristics among Republicans in Study 1. Candidate B represents the most-preferred candidate among Republicans in Study 1 sans Trump endorsement, which is a solidly conservative 46-year-old white male military officer who has served as a Mayor. From the results of Study 1, we expect that:

H₂: Regardless of trust in government, Republicans will be more likely to support Candidate A when the candidate has an endorsement from President Trump.

The results from Study 1 suggest that a Trump endorsement has the largest AMCE on Republican voters candidate preferences. Study 2 tests whether a Trump endorsement makes a difference in voters' calculations when *every other* characteristic is less preferable to the opposing candidate's characteristics.

Results and Discussion

We present average treatment effects (ATE) and conditional average treatment effects (CATE) for Democrats and Republicans separately. Each figure shows the change in support for the insider candidate. The Democratic results are presented in Fig. 6. The left graph shows treatment effects conditional on trust using the composite measure, and the right graph displays treatment effects conditional on trust in Democratic Party leaders. The x-axis delineates the CATE values.

¹² Sanders-endorsed candidates were strongly preferred by low-trust Democrats in Study 1, so this design allows us to examine a Sanders effect more directly.

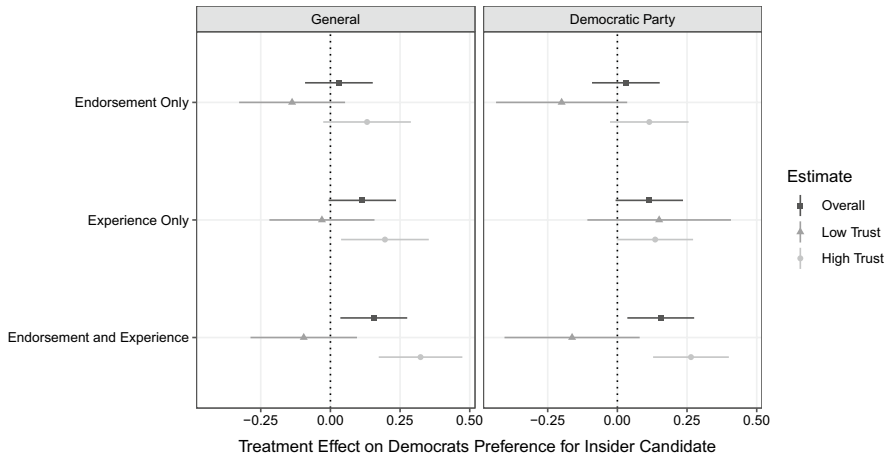


Fig. 6 Democratic support for party insider

Democrats are overall significantly more likely to support the insider than not when Candidate A has experience as a State Senator, and even more so when Candidate A has experience and a Pelosi endorsement. When broken out by trust, it becomes clear that this pattern is being driven by Democrats with high trust in institutions and party leaders. Low-trust Democrats are slightly less likely to support the Pelosi-endorsed candidate in each treatment condition, and are significantly less likely to back the party insider than high-trust Democrats. Low-trust Democrats support the outsider candidate at about the same rate regardless of Candidate A's experience. These results provide evidence for our hypothesis that high-trust Democrats would be more likely to support Candidate A when there are clearer indications that Candidate A is a party insider, controlling for other characteristics.

It is notable that we find statistically significant results given that the candidates are so similar on most attributes. While the findings for low-trust Democrats do not replicate the strong support for Sanders-backed candidates that they did in the first study—a result possibly affected by the fact that Senator Sanders ended his run for president less than 2 months prior to the survey entering the field—we were able to replicate the results for high-trust Democrats and for the differences between high- and low-trust respondents.

Republican respondents were randomly assigned to one of two conditions with President Trump endorsing the outsider, Candidate A, in the treatment condition. In each case the insider candidate has the attributes of the most-preferred candidate from Study 1: a solidly conservative 46-year-old white male military officer who has served as a Mayor. The outsider candidate who receives the Trump endorsement in the treatment condition is the least-preferred candidate from Study 1: a moderately conservative 75-year-old Latina female lawyer with no previous political experience. Republican ATEs and CATEs are presented in Fig. 7, with results broken out by composite trust score, trust in Republican Party leaders, and trust in President Trump.

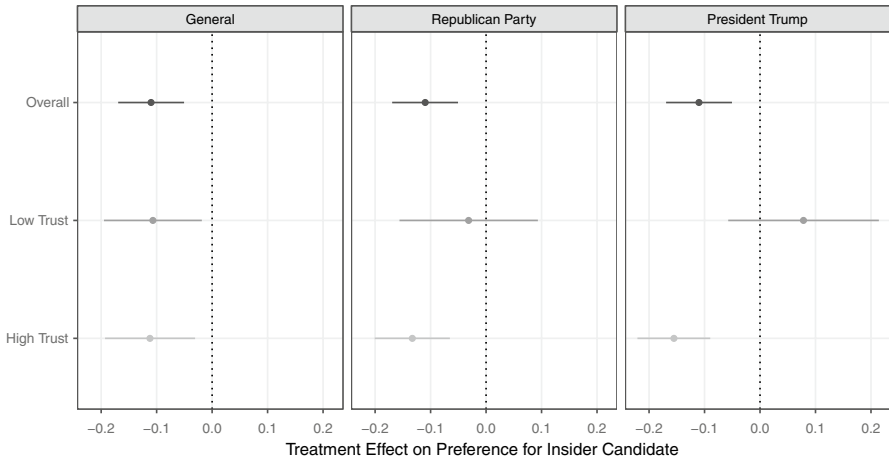


Fig. 7 Republican support for party insider

In the Trump endorsement condition, support for the insider showed a statistically significant drop of over ten percentage points, supporting H_2 . Differences between high- and low-trust Republicans are minimal when using the composite trust score, which we expected given the comparable AMCEs between low- and high-trust Republicans in Study 1. We do observe some differences conditional on trust in party leaders and President Trump. The large differences when examining Republican voters’ trust in President Trump are perhaps not surprising given that the endorsement is coming from Trump himself. The cross-section of respondents with high trust in the president were the most likely to follow the lead of that endorsement. Republican voters with lower trust in President Trump were not convinced by the Trump endorsement and were, if anything, less likely to support the outsider candidate.

The Republican results from Study 2 provide strong support for the finding in Study 1 that a Trump endorsement plays a significant role in the voting calculus for many Republican voters. In an actual congressional primary race with multiple high-quality Republican candidates, a Trump endorsement can have a large enough impact to make the difference in who ultimately wins the primary.

Conclusion

Collectively, the results of our two studies provide important insights into how citizens decide who to vote for in primary elections. Democrats are broadly more supportive of candidates who have ties to and support from the party organization. Democratic respondents with lower levels of trust in government and party institutions are less likely to adhere to the preferences of the party organizations, especially if those preferences come from traditionally powerful positions within the party.

Low-trust Democrats are also less likely to support candidates who have previously served in elected office.

We did not find the differences between high- and low-trust Republicans to be as consistent. One possible explanation for the relative lack of trust-related findings for Republicans is President Trump's political persona. His 2016 candidacy was that of a party outsider, and it helped lead him to victory in the Republican primary. It is much more difficult to argue that Trump is a party outsider now that he has assumed the presidency and reshaped the party in his own image. When a party outsider captures the party, who is then considered an outsider? Trump's simultaneous status as party leader, institutional leader, and stylistic outsider may uniquely position him to unite high- and low-trust Republicans—at least among those that still call themselves Republicans.

We tested three additional hypotheses of voting in primary elections and found at least moderate support for each of them. Scholars have argued that race and gender play a role in candidate evaluation and vote choice, and that evaluation differs by party. We find in Study 1 that Democrats were more likely to vote for women and minority candidates, while Republicans were less likely to support women candidates (though that result was not statistically significant). We also tested whether respondents prefer to elect the most liberal or conservative candidate possible. We find, with some interesting subgroup differences, that voters from both parties are less likely to support candidates described as ideologically “moderate” but are about equally likely to support “solid” and “extreme” liberals/conservatives. Finally, we find evidence that voters from both parties do indeed prefer candidates who apparently have the support of the party.

Republican voters are less likely to heed party cues than their Democratic counterparts. This can and does cause headaches, division, and electoral casualties for the party and its leaders. And while important cues like endorsements and (to a lesser extent) previous political experience still do matter to low-trust Democratic primary voters, they matter less, which could cause problems for the electoral success of party-backed candidates over a large sample size of primaries. And if trust among the electorate is tied to attitudes about the process of government (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002), then the party may only find more success if citizens feel more positively about things like the state of polarization or gridlock in Congress. Ironically, the very types of candidates who benefit from the voting behavior of low-trust voters in both parties may themselves be agents of polarization and gridlock, as they have less of an incentive to toe the party line.

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