



Competitive primaries and party division in congressional elections



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ABSTRACT

We examine the effects of competitiveness and divisiveness in the 2010 congressional election, as the emergence of the Tea Party resulted in many competitive Republican primaries and highlighted significant divisions within the party. We find that competitive Republican primaries and competitive Democratic primaries increased turnout in the general election. The presence of divisiveness in the Republican Party has no discernible effect on turnout on its own, but actually increases the vote share captured by the Republican Party in November. Additionally, we find that while either a competitive primary or the presence of a Tea Party candidate was advantageous to the Republican Party, the presence of both in the same election was no more beneficial than if there was either a competitive primary or a division in the party.

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1. Introduction

The midterm election of 2010 did more than erase the Democrats' gains in the House from 2006. The Republican Party had its best showing since 1946 and gained a net 63 seats, claiming a 242–193 advantage in the lower chamber. The Republicans' general election success in 2010 may have been fueled, in part, by the fact that for the first time since the 1930s participation in Republican primaries exceeded the participation in Democratic primaries (Gans, 2010). One of the likely explanations for the increased Republican primary turnout was the higher than normal number of competitive Republican primaries which were due, in part, to the presence of the Tea Party movement. This increased primary turnout may have drawn new voters into the

process and created an atmosphere of excitement and interest that carried into November (Williamson et al., 2011).

While increased turnout may be normatively advantageous, the presence of the Tea Party and numerous competitive primaries may have also had negative effects. Much previous literature suggests that competitive congressional primaries tend to hurt the eventual nominee in the general election (e.g. Bernstein, 1977; Kenney and Rice, 1984) because voters are turned off by the intra-party conflict or are emotionally attached to an unsuccessful primary candidate and unwilling to shift their support to the party nominee in November (Kenney and Rice, 1987; Southwell, 1986; Sullivan, 1977–1978). Nevertheless, the large number of Republicans in 2010 who faced competitive primaries and went on to win the general election seems to suggest Republicans may have been successful despite this competition. This observation is supported by literature on competitive, congressional primaries that finds that competitive primaries might not be as detrimental as the aforementioned literature suggests (Born, 1981; Kenney, 1988).

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These conflicting results leave us puzzled over the effect of competitive primaries on general election outcomes in congressional elections. We test these competing hypotheses by investigating the relationship between competitiveness and divisiveness and their influence on both general election participation and the parties' electoral success in a highly competitive midterm election year.

On the Republican side, there is little dispute that the Tea Party increased the number of competitive congressional primaries in 2010, but what is less known is how these competitive primaries influenced the results in the general election. On the Democratic side, there were no more competitive primaries than usual. Based on our operationalization of competitiveness, which we discuss at length below, there were close to 90 more competitive Republican primaries than competitive Democratic primaries. This is ideal for our purposes here, as the variation in the number of competitive primaries across parties allows us to see if competition only affects general election outcomes under certain conditions. More specifically, this allows us to assess whether competition helped Republicans in 2010 because it mobilized new voters who aligned themselves with the Tea Party's principles. If true, this may suggest that when party cohesion breaks down or the party is experiencing divisiveness, as was the case for the Republicans in 2010, competition might influence general election results differently than it would without a clear division or fissure within the party.² Thanks to the high number of competitive primaries, 2010 is the perfect place to test the primary competition hypothesis, especially since the Tea Party helped make many primaries competitive, signaled a division within the Republican Party, and also increased the number of quality challengers present (Jacobson, 2011).³

2. Competitiveness vs. divisiveness

The key theoretical contribution of this paper is the separation of competitiveness and divisiveness as distinct concepts. We theorize that both competitiveness and divisiveness have individual and distinct effects on elections and therefore should not be conflated. Before analyzing the role a competitive primary (and divisiveness later in the paper) plays on turnout and a candidate's success in the general election, it is necessary to clarify how we distinguish between divisive and competitive primaries and the theoretical reasons for doing so.

² Traditionally, the Republican Party is viewed as more cohesive and less divided than the Democratic Party (Axelrod, 1972; Herrnson and Gimpel, 1995; Lengle et al., 1995). Because Democrats rely on a more diverse group of supporters, "tensions among them result in a larger and more diverse group of candidates running for Democratic than for Republican congressional nominations" (Herrnson and Gimpel, 1995, 131). However, in 2010, the emergence of the Tea Party signaled a divide within the Republican Party. Many moderate Republicans found themselves facing challenges from the Tea Party.

³ According to Jacobson (2011) Republican challengers in 2010 were the most experienced since 1968, with 22.5% of them being current or former office holders. Republican challengers linked to the Tea Party movement (about 46 percent of Republican challengers) were just as likely as other Republican challengers to have held prior office.

In most political science research, divisiveness and competitiveness are treated as synonymous concepts, with a divisive primary being measured by the closeness of the results. That is, contests with closer results are treated as divisive, and contests where one candidate wins by a landslide are considered not divisive. Essentially, most previous research has measured competitiveness and simply called it divisiveness. However, Wichowsky and Niebler (2010) note, "A close contest does not imply a divisive one." Wichowsky and Niebler (2010) contend that it is not a close result that creates a divisive contest, but one where the tone of the campaign is negative. They operationalize competitiveness as the closeness of the race and divisiveness as the negativity of the advertisements aired by the campaigns. They point out that a primary can be competitive without creating the divisive environment we hear so much about in the media. Furthermore, as Wichowsky and Niebler (2010) demonstrate when analyzing the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, divisiveness on its own does not necessarily harm primary winners in the general election. In fact, as they found for Obama in the 2008 Democratic primary, it may actually help.

In this paper we attempt to disentangle these two concepts in House elections. We operationalize competitiveness as the closeness of the race, using the 20% measure of competitiveness developed by Bernstein (1977). Based on our criteria, if a primary is classified as competitive, then we should see an increase in turnout in the general election. As we discuss in detail in the next section, this is because competitive primaries get voters engaged in the process and this mobilization continues into the general election. We also theorize that competition should influence electoral success in the general election. However, here we do not have a directional expectation, as the past scholarship noted above is inconclusive when it comes to electoral success. We operationalize divisiveness as races in which there was a clear division or fissure within the party. For our purposes here we leverage the 2010 data and define a divisive contest as those races where a Tea Party candidate was on the ballot. In 2010 the Tea Party signified a serious rift in the typically cohesive Republican Party over the role of the government and the necessary level of fiscal conservatism. We want to stress that the Tea Party represents a particular source of divisiveness, ideal for our purposes, but there are certainly other potential sources of divisiveness within a primary election.⁴ If a primary is divisive, indicated here by the presence of the Tea Party, then it should increase general election turnout and the electoral success of the party's candidate who emerged from the trenches. This is because a division within the

⁴ We define a divisive race as one where there is a clear division in the party. We utilize the 2010 congressional primaries because the presence of the Tea Party is a clear, easily measured operationalization of divisiveness. However, it is not the only way that divisiveness could be measured, as is evidenced by the work of Wichowsky and Niebler (2010). We believe that it is critical that competitiveness and divisiveness be separated theoretically and methodologically, so we encourage future research to continue to parse out these concepts and develop other operationalizations and measures of divisiveness.

party encourages new voters to mobilize and turnout in the general election.⁵

In order to test our theory, we proceed as follows. We first discuss the past literature on competition in primary elections. We then test whether competition in primaries influences turnout and electoral success in the general election. As expected, we find that competitive Republican and Democratic primaries increased turnout in the 2010 general election. When looking at the effect of competitive primaries on electoral success in November, we find that there is no evidence of a relationship in the 2010 congressional election. This suggests that the effect of competitive primaries might very well be conditional depending upon whether turnout or success is being examined.

We then move on to address whether the presence of the Tea Party, which we use as an indicator for divisiveness, affects turnout and electoral success in the general election. We find that divisiveness does not affect the turnout rate in the general election. However, divisiveness does contribute to Republican success in the 2010 congressional general elections. In other words, in races where there was a Tea Party candidate on the general election ballot, the Republican Party garnered a larger share of the two party vote than was otherwise expected. However, the presence of both competitiveness and divisiveness does not have an additive advantage for the Republican Party.

3. Competitiveness: background and expectations

In contrast to scholarly understanding of competition in presidential primaries, we know little about how competition affects outcomes in congressional primaries, and what we do know tends to be inconclusive.⁶ For example, [Born \(1981\)](#) finds that competitive primaries were not related to the general election vote in House contests, suggesting that competition at the nomination stage did not help or harm the primary's winning candidate in November. Similarly, [Kenney \(1988\)](#) finds that the effect of primary competitiveness in Senate elections is overstated, and that once the quality of primary challengers is controlled for, competitive primaries do not hurt the candidates. [Kenney \(1988\)](#) also finds that there appears to be no relationship between competitive primaries and general election outcomes in House races.

Some scholars, on the other hand, find that competitive primaries at the senatorial and gubernatorial level were associated with lower general election vote totals for those candidates in November and therefore did harm the candidate coming out of the competitive primary (e.g. [Bernstein, 1977](#); [Kenney and Rice, 1984](#)). These works fit better with the conventional wisdom in the presidential primary literature, which holds that competitive primaries

cause candidates to do poorly in the general election because intra-party conflict highlights tensions within the party ([Piereson and Smith, 1975](#)). As [Norrander \(2010\)](#) notes,

One of the earliest criticisms of presidential primaries, and primaries in general, is that they could divide the political party into two camps: those who supported the candidate who won the nomination and those who supported another candidate. If those who supported one of the losing candidates held intense feelings, they may be unwilling to support the party's nominee in the fall election. In other words, the primaries could be divisive (63).

Focusing first not on the party's electoral success, but on whether competitive primaries draw people into the process, we expect competitive primaries to increase turnout in the general election (H1). Competitive primaries should increase turnout in the general election because a competitive primary should be accompanied by increased engagement and interest in the process that then carries over to the general election. As a result of a competitive primary, more citizens learn about the candidates and issues, which lowers costs of voting in the general election. If there is a primary with no or minimal competition, habitual voters may still participate in both the primary and the general election. However, new or occasional voters may not even be aware that there is a primary occurring, leaving them uninterested come November.

While we expect competitive primaries to increase turnout, we also hypothesize that competitive primaries should affect the success of the parties in the general election (H2). There are reasons to suspect that a competitive primary could help or harm the party in the general election and there is research supportive of both conclusions, as described previously. On the one hand, a competitive primary may help the party in the general election because it draws voters into the process, engages them, and, in many cases, they remain interested and loyal through the general election ([McCann et al., 1996](#); [Stone et al., 1992](#)). On the other hand, it is also possible that a competitive primary may hurt the party in the general election because occasional or new voters may become turned off by the intra-party competition and conflict and shift their support to the opposing party ([Kenney and Rice, 1987](#)). Given that there are competing theoretical expectations and literature supporting both sides of the puzzle, we take this opportunity to reassess the relationship between competitiveness and electoral success in an election year where there are a high number of competitive congressional primaries.

4. Primary competition: influence on general elections

The first models assess competition in the 2010 congressional primaries and its influence on the general election. In other words, these models test whether a competitive primary is advantageous or harmful to the party in the general election. We assess the effects of competitive primaries on the general election in two ways.

⁵ See the sections below for more information on operationalization, our expectations regarding each concept, and data more generally.

⁶ As previously noted, past work has measured competitiveness and called it divisiveness. In an effort to clarify these concepts theoretically, we label it as competitiveness here since these analyses examine the closeness of the contest.

First, we determine whether competitive primaries increase turnout in the general election. We expect this to be the case due to increased interest and attention during the nomination stage. Second, we examine the effect of competitive primaries on general election success, captured by the Republican Party's share of the two party vote in 2010.

Our unit of analysis in all of the models that follow is each House race in the 2010 election.⁷ Our dependent variable in Model 1 is turnout, measured as the percent of the voting eligible population that voted in 2010. Our main independent variables are measures of the competitiveness of the primaries. We include two dummy variables, one indicating that the Republican primary was competitive (*Republican primary competitive*) and one that indicates that the Democratic primary was competitive (*Democratic primary competitive*). We consider a race competitive if the margin of victory between the primary winner and the second place candidate was less than 20% (Bernstein, 1977; Lengle, 1980).⁸

We also control for the openness of the primary by including a dummy variable for *open primary* since there is the expectation that open rules will increase turnout in the primary (Kenney and Rice, 1985) and increase turnout in the general election through spill-over effects (Calcagno and Westley, 2008). Since we expect turnout to be higher in races where there are quality candidates running, we also include a *quality race* variable. Our *quality race* variable indicates that both the Republican and Democratic candidates in the general election were quality candidates. Since our analysis involves both open seat races and races where there is an incumbent member of Congress running for reelection, we cannot simply include a variable indicating that there was a quality challenger. In races where there is an incumbent running for reelection, we only expect increased turnout if the challenger is a quality candidate, which we measure using Jacobson's (1989) criteria of having previously held elected office. In other words, we expect increased turnout when both candidates (the incumbent and the challenger) are quality candidates. We do not expect a race between an incumbent and a non-quality challenger to have higher turnout. In open seat races, we do not expect a race with one quality candidate and one non-quality candidate to have any impact on turnout. Thus, for both open seat races and races where there is an incumbent running for reelection, we indicate a

quality race as one where both candidates have held previous elected office and thus are quality candidates.⁹

Additionally, we include other control variables that might affect the turnout rate in congressional midterm elections, namely whether there is a *statewide primary*, which is a dichotomous variable taking a value of 1 if there is a Senate or gubernatorial primary occurring in the state, *logged total spending* in the congressional race, and a control for *previous turnout* in the district. Since turnout is higher in some districts than in others due to a variety of factors, including political culture and demographics of the district, we include this control for past turnout in the district.¹⁰

Model 1 in Table 1 is an OLS regression model that analyzes the relationship between competitive primaries and turnout in the 2010 House elections and tests our first hypothesis, which posits that competitive primaries will increase general election turnout. The results indicate that competitive Republican and Democratic primaries increase turnout in the general election. More specifically, the positive, statistically significant coefficients for *Republican primary competitive* and *Democratic primary competitive* indicate a competitive primary has a mean turnout rate in the general election that is 0.81% and 1.35% higher, respectively, than the mean general election turnout rate in districts that had non-competitive primaries. These findings are not only statistically significant, but substantively significant, given that an increase in turnout of this magnitude is noteworthy when total turnout in midterm elections hovers around 40% nationwide. The control variables in the model also indicate that an open primary decreases turnout in the general election compared to a closed primary, the presence of a statewide primary increases general election turnout, districts with higher average turnout rates in previous elections have higher turnout in the 2010 congressional general election, and as logged spending in the race increases, so does general election turnout in the district. In sum, we find support for our first hypothesis. Competitive primaries increase turnout in the general election.

Another goal of this paper is to explore the relationship between competitive primaries and electoral success in the general election. In Model 2 in Table 1, we analyze this relationship using an OLS regression model, where the

⁷ We dropped all of the House races in the state of Washington from our analysis since Washington holds interparty, rather than intra-party, primaries. Additionally, given the number of unusual Senate elections held in 2010 year, including special elections and successful write-in campaigns, and the important differences that exist between House and Senate elections, we chose not to include the Senate elections in the models presented here.

⁸ Scholars have utilized various levels of competitiveness, including classifying a contest as competitive when the winning candidate wins by less than 20%, less than 30%, or receives less than 65% of the vote (e.g. Bernstein, 1977; Lengle et al., 1995; Piereson and Smith, 1975). We felt that this twenty percent difference represented a realistic measure of competitiveness that was not overly generous or prohibitive and it has been used in the past by other scholars investigating these questions.

⁹ Since our measure of quality race captures the situations in which we would expect incumbency to increase turnout (when the incumbent is facing a quality challenger) and when we would expect incumbency to decrease or not affect turnout (when the incumbent is uncontested or not facing a quality challenger), we do not include a separate control for incumbency in the models presented. To ensure the robustness of our results, we did specify the models with a dichotomous variable for incumbency. The incumbency variable was statistically insignificant and our main findings were consistent with those presented here, so we chose to present the more parsimonious models.

¹⁰ For the races in our analysis, we use average turnout percentage from the 2002, 2004, 2006, and 2008 House elections as our *previous turnout* control. We chose to average turnout in the district over the past four races in order to capture average turnout in the district since the district lines were last redrawn. By averaging turnout in the district across four elections, our control is better insulated from idiosyncratic factors that may influence turnout in a single election year while reflecting the differences that exist across districts.

Table 1
Competitive primaries and the effect on the 2010 congressional elections.

Variable	Model 1	Model 2
	DV: Turnout	DV: GOP success
	Coefficient (Robust standard error)	Coefficient (Robust standard error)
Republican primary competitive	0.811* (0.400)	1.081* (0.656)
Democratic primary competitive	1.352* (0.699)	1.475 (1.129)
Open primary	–1.802* (0.342)	
Quality race	0.720 (0.470)	0.868 (0.732)
Statewide primary	3.014* (0.660)	
Previous turnout	0.769* (0.025)	
Log spending	0.622* (0.265)	
Republican log spending		0.549* (0.105)
Democratic log spending		–0.273* (0.092)
Republican incumbent		4.747* (1.132)
Democratic incumbent		–6.950* (1.286)
Past Democratic Presidential vote		–0.769* (0.037)
Constant	–6.731* (3.606)	89.747* (2.742)
Number of cases	426	404
R-squared	0.8059	0.9188
	$F_{(7,418)}$	$F_{(8,395)}$
	182.40	780.90

The dependent variable in Model 1 is turnout percentage in the 2010 congressional general elections. The dependent variable in Model 2 is the Republican Party's percentage of the two party vote in the 2010 congressional general elections. Cell entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients with robust standard errors. * $p \leq 0.10$.

dependent variable is the Republican Party's share of the district, two party vote in the 2010 congressional election. Our main independent variables, *Republican primary competitive* and *Democratic primary competitive* are operationalized in the same way as in our turnout model (Model 1). However, in Model 2, we do not include controls for the openness of the primary, whether there is a statewide primary, or the previous turnout level in the district since these factors are theorized to affect the turnout rate but not the electoral success of either party. We also include two variables indicating *Republican log spending* and *Democratic log spending* instead of overall log spending (as in the turnout model) since the amount spent by each party's candidate should affect the outcome of the general election. In our electoral success model, we include two dummy variables for incumbency, with one capturing whether there was a Democratic incumbent in the race (*Democratic incumbent*) and the second indicating whether there was a Republican incumbent in the race (*Republican incumbent*). The base category is an open seat race. Of course, one of the factors that will help explain the Republican Party's vote share in the general election is the Republican strength in the district, which we control for by including a variable that captures the *past presidential vote* in the district. This variable is the average percent of the vote that the Democratic presidential candidate captured in the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections.¹¹

¹¹ We utilize past presidential election results from 2004 and 2008 because they map directly onto the House districts in 2010.

We test our second hypothesis, which posits that competitive primaries will affect electoral success, which we measure as the Republican Party's share of the two party vote, in Model 2 in Table 1. This hypothesis is non-directional as there are competing theoretical expectations about whether a competitive primary should increase or decrease the party's share of the vote in the general election. We find mixed support for our hypothesis. We find that in districts where there was a competitive Republican primary, the Republican candidate does approximately 1.1% better, on average, in the general election than in districts where there is no competitive Republican primary. We find no evidence that a competitive Democratic primary has an effect on the electoral success of the parties in the general election, as seen by the statistically insignificant coefficient for this variable. Our control variables perform as expected. For instance, for every 1% increase in the two party vote captured by the Democratic presidential candidate in previous elections, we see about 0.77% decrease in the Republican share of the vote in the 2010 congressional elections. In other words, in districts or states that supported the Democratic presidential candidate more strongly, the Republican House candidate did worse in 2010. Additionally, for every 1% increase in the logged value of total spending that is spent by the Republican candidate, there is, on average, a 0.54% increase in the Republican candidate's share of the two party vote in the general election. As expected, a Republican incumbent in the district also increases the Republican candidate's share of the two party vote in the district while a Democratic incumbent decreases it. In sum, these findings suggest that the influence of a competitive primary on the general election may be conditional. That is, in 2010, given the fissure within the Republican Party, the effect of a competitive primary may be spurred by increased voter interest and support, which we examine in greater detail below as we parse out the effects of competitiveness and divisiveness.

Our investigation of the effects of primary competitiveness on the general election suggests that both competitive Republican and Democratic primaries increased turnout. Additionally, competitive Republican primaries had an observable effect on electoral success, measured by the percent of the two party vote captured by the Republican Party in November, but competitive Democratic primaries had no discernible effect on the vote in the general election. At this point, we have examined the effect of competitiveness, which most scholars have examined in the past, but referred to it as divisiveness. However, as Ware (1979) and Wichowsky and Niebler (2010) point out, competitiveness and divisiveness are separate theoretical concepts and should be treated as such. Consequently, we are also able to leverage our data from 2010 to explore the relationship between divisiveness and general election outcomes, using the Tea Party as an indicator of divisiveness, and further explore the difference between competition and divisiveness.

5. Divisiveness

The 2010 congressional elections provide us with an opportunity to assess divisiveness because of the presence

of the Tea Party, which signaled a deep fissure within the Republican Party. A Tea Party candidate was frequently referred to as signaling a battle “pit[ting] the governing pragmatists against the ideological purists” (Leibovich, 2010). The Tea Party campaigned vigorously in open seats and against moderate, incumbent Republicans in GOP primaries and, in many cases, these contested primaries led to the defeat of moderate Republicans, even ones endorsed by the Republican Party. For example, the GOP establishment endorsed Steve Heacock (MI-3) and Vaughn Ward (ID-1), but both lost their primary to a Tea Party candidate. In fact, many candidates affiliated with the Tea Party did well in Republican primaries. For example, candidates endorsed by the Tea Party Express or Sarah Palin received 8–9% more of the vote in the primaries than those candidates who did not receive either endorsement (Karpowitz et al., 2011). Additionally, those who were self-proclaimed Tea Party candidates – those who signed the Contract from America – saw their vote shares increase by more than 20 points in the primaries (Karpowitz et al., 2011).

As previously mentioned, we realize that the presence of the Tea Party in the 2010 congressional election represents only one possible indicator of divisiveness. Parties could certainly experience divisiveness without the presence of the Tea Party or a similar movement. For instance, there may have been some Democratic primaries in 2010 that could be classified as dividing the party. However, there are very few comprehensive operationalizations of divisiveness within a party where competitiveness and divisiveness are not conflated.¹² Given that the Tea Party represents a clear division within the Republican Party in 2010, we feel confident that this measure allows us to capture divisiveness in the 2010 Republican congressional elections and treat it as a distinct entity from competitiveness. As can be seen in Table 2, there are competitive primaries that did not have a Tea Party candidate in them and there were Tea Party candidates in both competitive and non-competitive primaries. This operationalization of divisiveness also allows us to assess the impact of a division within the Republican Party, which is traditionally considered more cohesive than the Democratic Party (Axelrod, 1972; Herrnson and Gimpel, 1995; Lengle et al., 1995).

Based on this operationalization, we hypothesize that divisiveness will increase turnout (H3). We believe that a division in the party will increase turnout because an organized movement within the party can encourage new voters to mobilize and turn out in the general election (Stone et al., 1992). The presence of the Tea Party in the 2010 congressional election signified a serious fissure within the party. The Tea Party was able to capitalize on conservative unrest nationwide and mobilize voters around its rallying cry of fiscal responsibility and smaller government.¹³ In other words, the Tea Party's presence, or the division within the Republican Party,

Table 2

Competitiveness and divisiveness in the 2010 congressional Republican primaries.

Tea Party	Not competitive	Competitive	Total
No Tea Party Candidate	93.02% (280)	78.40% (98)	88.73% (378)
Tea Party Candidate	6.98% (21)	21.60% (27)	11.27% (48)
Total	100% (301)	100% (125)	100% (426)

Note: the classification of whether the Republican primary was competitive is based on our measure of the difference between the first and second place finisher in the primary. A primary is considered competitive if the margin of victory between the primary winner and the runner-up is less than twenty percent. The classification of whether there was a Tea Party candidate in the 2010 congressional Republican primaries is based on Weigel (2010), as described in the text of the paper.

alerted citizens to the fact that this was an important election with critical issues and that they needed to be engaged and show up on Election Day to make their voices heard.

While we expect the Tea Party and the division that it represents within the Republican Party to increase turnout, it should also help the electoral success of the Republican Party (H4). Since the Tea Party movement engaged new voters in the process and signaled the importance of the election for determining the future direction of the country, there was a clearer distinction between candidates than in many recent elections. Additionally, the presence of the Tea Party highlighted issues traditionally owned by the Republican Party and the ability to set the agenda on issues related to fiscal responsibility and smaller government should have helped the Republican Party gain votes in the general election.

6. Divisiveness: influence on general election turnout

In this analysis, we classify divisiveness as the presence of the Tea Party in the race.¹⁴ First, we measure the presence of a Tea Party candidate in the primary with a variable named *Tea Party candidate in primary*, which is a dichotomous variable with a value of one indicating there was a Tea Party candidate in the primary and a value of zero indicating there was not a Tea Party candidate in the primary. In other words, this variable indicates whether there was a divisive Republican primary or not. In order to determine whether there was a Tea Party candidate in the primary we relied on a measure created by *Slate*, that considered a candidate to be a member of the Tea Party based on endorsements from Sarah Palin, Jim DeMint, the Tea Party Express or Freedom Works, or a local Tea Party group (Weigel, 2010). This measure was the most comprehensive list of Tea Party members during the primaries that included both winners and losers in the primary season. Additionally, we classified several candidates in the primary as members of the Tea Party based on a later endorsement by Sarah Palin that were not included in the *Slate* measure.

¹² With Wichowsky and Niebler (2010) being the notable exception.

¹³ As Skocpol and Williamson (2012) point out, the Tea Party's opposition to “big government” actually entailed a reluctance to pay for people viewed as undeserving, and was not a uniform opposition to social services provided by government.

¹⁴ There are, of course, other potential sources and measures of divisiveness.

We recognize, however, that the Tea Party grew very quickly in 2010 and that many candidates associated themselves with the Tea Party as the general election approached. Consequently, we also include a measure of divisiveness that captures a Tea Party candidate in the general election, which is depicted by the *Tea Party candidate in general* variable. This variable is a dichotomous variable with a value of one indicating that there was a Tea Party candidate in the general election and a value of zero indicating that there was not a Tea Party candidate in the general election. For this variable we used a classification by *The New York Times* to determine which candidates were considered members of the Tea Party.¹⁵ *The New York Times* measure considered a candidate to be a member of the Tea Party if the candidate “had entered politics through the movement, or are candidates receiving significant support from local Tea Party groups and who share the ideology of the movement. Many have been endorsed by national groups like FreedomWorks or the Tea Party Express, but those endorsements alone were not enough to put them on the list” (Zernike, 2010).

By using these two measures, we are able to determine whether there was a Tea Party candidate competing in the primary or a Tea Party candidate representing the Republican Party in the general election. In the models that follow, we also include interaction terms between a competitive Republican primary and our measures of divisiveness. The first interaction term *Competitive*Tea Party candidate in primary* indicates that the Republican primary was both competitive and divisive. The second interaction term *Competitive*Tea Party candidate in general* indicates that the Republican primary was competitive and there was a Tea Party candidate as the Republican candidate in the general election. In other words, there was a competitive Republican primary and divisiveness in the general election.

As can be seen by the positive, statistically significant coefficient for *Republican primary competitive* in Model 3 in Table 3, a competitive Republican primary increases turnout in the general election, as does a competitive Democratic primary, as we showed in Model 1. We also see the other control variables produce similar results to those discussed in Model 1 in Table 1. The main difference between Model 3 and Model 1 is that Model 3 includes a measure of divisiveness, captured by the variable *Tea Party candidate in primary* and the presence of the interaction term (*Competitive*Tea Party candidate in primary*), which allows us to test our third hypothesis that divisive primaries will increase turnout in the general election. However, the coefficient for *Tea Party candidate in primary* is not statistically significant, indicating there is no relationship between a divisive primary and turnout in the 2010 congressional general election. Additionally, calculating the appropriate linear combination for a competitive and divisive primary indicates that a primary that is both competitive and divisive has no additional impact on turnout. Thus, based on our analysis of this election year, it appears that it is only a competitive Republican primary,

Table 3

Competitiveness, divisiveness, and turnout in 2010 congressional elections.

Variable	Model 3	Model 4
	Coefficient (Robust standard error)	Coefficient (Robust standard error)
Republican primary competitive	0.840* (0.459)	0.221 (0.484)
Democratic primary competitive	1.359* (0.704)	1.473* (0.684)
Tea Party candidate in primary	−0.035 (0.732)	
Competitive*Tea Party candidate in primary	−0.126 (0.976)	
Tea Party candidate in general		−0.011 (0.478)
Competitive*Tea Party candidate in general		1.314* (0.781)
Open primary	−1.796* (0.346)	−1.870* (0.345)
Quality race	0.727 (0.475)	0.798* (0.480)
Statewide primary	3.002* (0.661)	2.961* (0.682)
Previous turnout	0.769* (0.025)	0.771* (0.025)
Log spending	0.631* (0.283)	0.571* (0.283)
Constant	−6.846* (3.783)	−6.020 (3.797)
Number of cases	426	426
Adjusted R-squared	0.8059	0.8077
	$F_{(9,416)}$	$F_{(9,416)}$
	144.74	156.54

The dependent variable in these models is the turnout percentage in the 2010 congressional general elections. Cell entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients with robust standard errors. * $p \leq 0.10$.

and not the presence of the Tea Party, that increased turnout in November 2010.

In order to further investigate this relationship between divisiveness and turnout, we used the alternate measure of division within the party, which is captured by *Tea Party candidate in general* and indicates that the Republican candidate in the general election was affiliated with the Tea Party, and report the results in Model 4 in Table 3. Using this measure of party divisiveness, neither a competitive Republican primary nor a Tea Party candidate in the general election increases the general election turnout. We do not find support for our third hypothesis that divisiveness will increase turnout, unless it occurs in a district that also experiences a competitive primary. Our findings indicate that if there was both a competitive Republican primary and a Tea Party candidate on the ballot in November then turnout in the general election was, on average, 1.52% higher than a race where there was neither a competitive Republican primary nor a Tea Party candidate.¹⁶

Thus, it appears that competitive Republican primaries and competitive Democratic primaries increased turnout in the 2010 general election. Divisive primaries – those with a Tea Party candidate, on the other hand, did not have an influence on participation in November. Yet, turnout was affected if there was a competitive Republican primary and a Tea Party candidate on the ballot in the general election. The combination of competitive primaries and the presence of the Tea Party on the November ballot appear to bring additional voters to the polls.

¹⁵ This measure was created after the completion of all primaries.

¹⁶ This interpretation is based on calculating the appropriate linear combination for the interaction term. $\beta = 1.52$, $p = 0.012$.

7. Divisiveness: influence on general election success

While competitive primaries and the presence of Tea Party candidates on the general election ballot increased turnout, it is essential to determine whether this competitiveness and divisiveness was beneficial or harmful to the Republican Party's electoral success. Consequently, to test our fourth hypothesis that the division within the Republican Party, represented in the 2010 midterm election by the Tea Party, would increase the Republican Party's share of the vote total, we analyzed the relationship between competitiveness, divisiveness, and the Republican Party's share of the two party vote in November. The results are presented in Models 5 and 6 in [Table 4](#).

As can be seen by the statistically insignificant coefficients in Model 5, neither a competitive Republican primary a competitive Democratic primary, nor the presence of a Tea Party candidate in the Republican primary appears to affect the electoral fortunes of the Republican Party in the general election. However, when calculating the appropriate linear combination to determine the effect of having both a competitive and a divisive Republican primary, the coefficient is statistically significant.¹⁷ Thus, this model suggests that, individually, neither a divisive primary nor a competitive primary influenced the Republican Party's success in the general election, but when both occur, the Republican House candidate is expected, on average, to receive an additional 2.5% of the general election vote compared to Republican candidates in districts with an uncompetitive primary without a Tea Party candidate.

Turning to the presence of a Tea Party candidate in the general election, rather than in the primary, we reassess this relationship in Model 6 in [Table 4](#). Here we find that a competitive Republican primary increases the Republican Party's share of the vote in November by approximately 1.8% compared to races where there was not a competitive Republican primary. We also see that a Tea Party candidate in the general election is beneficial to the Republican Party's electoral success, resulting in about a 1.7% increase in its percentage of the two party vote in the general election, compared to races where the Republican candidate is not affiliated with the Tea Party. Additionally, we find that a competitive primary is beneficial to the Republican Party as is the presence of a Tea Party candidate on the ballot, but if both occur together, this situation is no more advantageous for the party compared to divisiveness without competitiveness, as is indicated by the negative coefficient on the interaction term. In a race with a competitive Republican primary and a Tea Party candidate on the general election ballot, the Republican Party will, on average, receive 1.8% more of the vote share in November than a race that has neither a competitive primary nor a Tea Party candidate on the ballot.¹⁸ This effect is actually quite similar to the advantage derived simply from having a divisive primary alone (1.7%). In other words, a Tea Party candidate on the

Table 4

Competitiveness, divisiveness, and success in 2010 congressional elections.

Variable	Model 5	Model 6
	Coefficient (Robust standard error)	Coefficient (Robust standard error)
Republican primary competitive	0.805 (0.704)	1.792* (0.989)
Democratic primary competitive	1.464 (1.115)	1.323 (1.107)
Tea Party candidate in primary	0.590 (1.310)	
Competitive*Tea Party candidate in primary	1.142 (1.933)	
Tea Party candidate in general		1.721* (0.927)
Competitive*Tea Party candidate in general		-1.699 (1.425)
Quality race	0.760 (0.755)	0.977 (0.725)
Statewide primary	-1.307 (1.054)	-1.485 (1.010)
Republican incumbent	4.835* (1.093)	5.246* (1.114)
Democratic incumbent	-6.973* (1.234)	-7.208* (1.300)
Past Democratic presidential vote	-0.766* (0.037)	-0.768* (0.036)
Republican log spending	0.537* (0.103)	0.517* (0.101)
Democratic log spending	-0.281* (0.091)	-0.281* (0.092)
Constant	90.997* (2.846)	91.036* (2.796)
Number of cases	404	404
Adjusted R-squared	0.9198	0.9202
	$F_{(11,392)}$	$F_{(11,392)}$
	574.99	583.83

The dependent variable in these models is the Republican Party's percentage of the two party vote in the 2010 congressional general elections. Cell entries are unstandardized OLS regression coefficients with robust standard errors. * $p \leq 0.10$.

ballot is advantageous to the Republican Party, as is a competitive Republican primary. However, a division within the Republican Party *and* a competitive primary is advantageous compared to when neither is present, but not any more so than merely having a Tea Party candidate on the ballot or having a close, competitive primary. From these results, it becomes clear that independently competition or divisiveness was beneficial for the Republicans in 2010, but that when both competitiveness and divisiveness are present, the effect is not additive.

8. Conclusion

In order to conduct a clean test of our hypotheses, we analyze the 2010 House elections, where there were more competitive Republican primaries than usual, the divisiveness brought on by the Tea Party was well known, and there was not a presidential election affecting turnout and outcomes. Given this, we were able to leverage data from 2010 to reexamine the conflicted findings on the simultaneous effect of competition and divisiveness on general election outcomes. We were able to look at the effects of both competitiveness and a particular source of divisiveness on both turnout and electoral success, providing greater clarity to this area of investigation. Overall, this analysis reminds us that divisiveness and competitiveness are separate concepts that can have different effects and that these concepts should be studied and treated as distinct. We think future research should continue to explore this distinction, understand divisiveness more fully, and find other comprehensive indicators of divisiveness.

¹⁷ This interpretation is based on calculating the appropriate linear combination for the interaction term. $\beta = 2.54$, $p = 0.085$.

¹⁸ The appropriate linear combination results in a $\beta = 1.82$, $p = 0.038$.

Our findings suggest that a division within the party, as the Republican Party experienced in 2010 with the presence of the Tea Party, may actually be helpful to the party and increase the party's share of the vote total in the general election. However, this advantage comes from a Tea Party candidate being on the general election ballot and not from a divisive primary. It is likely that this advantage is the result of additional media attention and increased voter interest in the electoral process and policy issues generated from the presence of a Tea Party candidate. For instance, the Tea Party was able, by and large, to set the agenda for the 2010 congressional election and focus the discussion on issues that were owned by the Republican Party and were advantageous to its candidates. The Tea Party was also able to convince citizens that this election was pivotal in determining the future direction of the country. This likely caused voters to support the Republican Party to a greater extent than otherwise would have occurred.

There is also evidence that a competitive Republican primary aided the Republican Party in its electoral success in November, but the presence of both a competitive primary and divisiveness is no more advantageous for the Republican Party than either of these conditions on its own. In other words, either a competitive primary or a division in the party can aid the party, but when they occur in the same election, there is no additional electoral advantage. It is possible that the combination of both a competitive primary and a division within the party turns voters off from the electoral process and may even push them toward the other party if the other party is experiencing greater cohesion. In other words, there is a fine line between attracting voters and pushing them away; having both a competitive primary and a division in the party does not attract additional support. This finding is novel because it is the first time that competitiveness and divisiveness have been examined in conjunction in House elections.

Our results suggest that while competitive primaries may not be the best way for a party to secure an electoral advantage in the general election, competitive primaries increased turnout in the general election, which has normative implications for democracy and voting in the United States. Districts that held competitive Republican primaries saw an increase in turnout around 1% in the general election, and districts that held competitive Democratic primaries had a 1.3% increase in turnout in the general election. Given that turnout in midterm years for congressional elections is relatively low, this increase is considerable, particularly given the research that shows voting becomes habitual. Additionally, we find that the combination of a competitive Republican primary and a Tea Party candidate in the general election increases turnout, but divisiveness on its own does not affect turnout. These findings suggest that it is competition in the primaries and perhaps the accompanying campaign spending and mobilization, not a division within the party, that draws voters into the process and the polls.

While the 2010 congressional elections are somewhat of an anomaly given the presence of the Tea Party and the deep fissure within the typically cohesive Republican Party, they provide an ideal test of the simultaneous effects of competitiveness and divisiveness. It appears that our

findings from 2010 seemingly confirm the 2012 results in the House as the Republican Party may have performed better than expected in some districts where there was a Tea Party candidate running. Of course, future research should systematically analyze the results of the 2012 elections to determine whether the Tea Party had the same effect in a presidential election year. At initial glance, the Republican Party suffered some unexpected losses in the Senate due, in part, to divisive primaries, such as Richard Lugar's primary loss in Indiana and Tea Partier Richard Mourdock's subsequent defeat in the general election. Although 2012 is not directly comparable to 2010 since it is not a midterm election year, the Senate results in 2012 may indicate that going forward Senate elections might be more susceptible to divisive primaries actually harming the party's electoral prospects in the general election. It may be that the more moderate and heterogenous districts in the Senate, along with typically higher publicized races where voters have more information, do not allow the party to reap the same potential benefits from a division within the party in the general election. There is also the possibility that a division within the party can provide short term benefits and an electoral advantage in a couple of election cycles as voters become interested and aware, but if that division persists for several elections, voters may turn toward the more cohesive party or become disinterested and simply stay home.

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