Abstract

Recent accounts hypothesize increasing political party leaders’ influence in primaries would decrease polarization, expecting party leaders to support nominating centrists in hopes of winning general elections. We theorized that local party leaders – especially Republicans – might not perceive large electoral incentives to nominate centrists. We evaluated this theory with an original survey of 1,118 local party leaders. In experiments, we find Republican leaders prefer nominating extremists over centrists overwhelmingly (by 10 to 1) and Democrats prefer nominating extremists mildly. Republicans also spontaneously mention conservatism as desirable in nominees six times more often than centristism. This asymmetry appears to arise because Republicans alone believe they ‘can have their cake and eat it, too,’ expecting extremists to be more loyal and more likely to win general elections. Additional data suggests this may be because Republicans overestimate the electorate’s conservatism. These findings suggest reformers may want to avoid empowering local party leaders.
Over the last fifty years, centrist candidates and officeholders have virtually disappeared from American politics. Nearly all the candidates parties nominate for office today are more extreme than their predecessors were, producing polarization, generating gridlock, and dismaying voters (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2006; Lee 2009; Theriault 2006). Over the same period, the influence formal political party leaders wield over who their parties nominate has declined; outside groups like the Koch network now dominate many primary elections (Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016).

Recently, a number of scholars have suspected that these two trends are related, with the disappearance of centrist candidates stemming in part from the declining influence party leaders have on who their parties nominate (e.g., Persily 2014, 2015; McCarty 2015). This suspicion arises from the observation that political parties are “the sole political organizations whose primary goal is to win [general] elections” (La Raja and Schaffner 2015; Hassell 2016). Because evidence from political science finds that parties are significantly more likely to win general elections when they nominate centrists (e.g., Hall 2015; Jacobson 2011), many expect party leaders to be especially strong advocates for nominating centrists. This line of reasoning suggests a rare policy remedy that could decrease elite polarization: “perhaps...we should be enhancing the role of parties” and their leaders in primary elections through a variety of reforms to elections and campaign finance (McCarty 2015, p. 143) – a line of reasoning influencing public debate and the direction of electoral reform (Edsall 2014). However, this is by no means a consensus: others depict political party leaders as proponents of extremist candidates and would caution against further empowering them (e.g., Hacker and Pierson).

For the sake of concision, throughout the paper we use “party leaders” to refer to people who have formal elected or appointed positions in the parties’ organizational structures. Other work persuasively argues informal party leaders are significant for a variety of outcomes, but they are outside of our focus.
In this paper we make two contributions to this debate. First, empirically, we provide some of the first data about how local party leaders seek to influence primaries. Many of the policies to empower national and state party leaders reformers have considered would also increase the already-considerable influence local political party leaders wield in primaries, but existing data largely focuses on national and state party leaders alone. Second, theoretically, we open the black box of party leaders’ judgments in primary elections, considering how local party leaders subjectively perceive their incentives to nominate centrists and how such perceptions might differ by party. Party leaders’ belief that nominating centrists will help their parties win general elections is the key mechanism expected to lead them to favor nominating centrists. Existing literature often takes it for granted that national and state party leaders hold this belief, perhaps because it is conventional wisdom among political scientists (e.g., Canes-Wrone, Brady and Cogan 2002; Downs 1957; Hall 2015). However, we argue that there are good theoretical reasons to expect many local party leaders to believe extremist candidates are more appealing to the general electorate than political scientists do. For example, over the last several decades, local party elites in both parties – and especially Republicans – have been surrounded by ideological activists who have sought to alter local elites’ perceptions of what the general public wants and to convince elites that pursuing extreme policies will ‘fire up the base’ of polarized activists to turn out in general elections (e.g., Hacker and Pierson 2015; Skocpol and Williamson 2011). In some cases, these activists have even worked to install themselves as local party leaders (Fiorina, Abrams and Pope 2005; Persily 2014) thus notes reason to “fear...political capture [of parties] by the extremes” (see also La Raja and Schaffner 2015, p. 22). As a result of these efforts and
other changes, local party leaders may not perceive large incentives to nominate centrists or might even see extremists’ positions as more popular, undermining the theoretical logic that would lead them to prefer nominating centrists in the same manner their state and national counterparts appear to.

This paper presents several studies consistent with this theory, supported by original data we collected that provides an unusual glimpse at how local political party leaders navigate the strategic calculus of who to back for their party’s nomination. In particular, we compiled contact information for and conducted a survey of county party leaders, who we believe represented a reasonable proving ground for our ideas: they are extremely active in primary elections at the local, county, state, and federal levels [Crowder-Meyer 2011; La Raja and Schaffner 2015]. Our survey of this group achieved a high response rate (18%, more than double typical surveys of the mass public) and a representative sample (see next section).

We find that many local party leaders believe the general electorate prefers extremist candidates and their party’s positions to a much greater extent than political science evidence suggests, undermining the key mechanism that would lead them to favor nominating centrists. As a result, they tend to favor nominating extremists over centrists, sometimes overwhelmingly. We show this pattern in three methodologically distinct studies, each of which has complementary strengths and weaknesses.

In our first study, we presented these local party leaders with conjoint experiments [Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014] that showed them potential candidates for their party’s nomination whose traits, including ideology, we experimentally varied. We then

\footnote{For example, 78% of these leaders indicate supporting candidates in contested open primaries and 57% of candidates for state legislative office (the level of office most empirical work in this literature considers, e.g., La Raja and Schaffner 2015; Masket 2007) indicate such leaders were important in encouraging their candidacy.}
asked party leaders which candidates they would encourage to run for their party’s nomination (their strategic choices), which candidates they thought would be more likely to win if nominated (measuring perceived electoral incentives), and which candidates would be more likely to remain loyal to the party’s policies (measuring perceived ideological incentives). Local leaders in both parties preferred nominating candidates who are even more extreme and polarized than their party is today. Intriguingly, and consistent with our theory, party leaders appear to favor nominating extremists because they do not believe their party will face a significant electoral penalty for nominating an extremist.

This first study also uncovered a stark partisan difference: Republican local party leaders in particular preferred extremist nominees over centrists overwhelmingly. When faced with a choice between a candidate more extreme than their party or less extreme, Republicans preferred nominating the extreme candidate overwhelmingly, by a 10 to 1 margin. This strong preference for extremists appears to arise from Republican leaders’ belief that extremists are actually much more electable than centrists in general elections. We call this phenomenon among Republican leaders the belief that they “can have their cake and eat it, too”: nominating extremists, they believe, provides both ideological and electoral rewards. Democrats, by contrast, do perceive the tradeoff political scientists have identified between party loyalty and electability, believing that extremist nominees are slightly less likely to win general elections. But because they believe the penalty for extremism is only slight, Democrats still prefer nominating extremists on average, although not nearly as overwhelmingly as Republicans. These results are robust: they hold even for the party leaders in our sample who regularly face close general elections and work in closely divided areas.

To corroborate our finding that local Republican party leaders believe the general elec-
torate is more conservative than many political scientists expect, we conducted a second study where we elicited party leaders’ beliefs about public opinion on a number of issues. Consistent with our findings and broader theory, we find that local Republican party leaders perceive public opinion on a number of issues as significantly more conservative than public opinion data indicates that it is. As a result, local Republican party leaders think nominating extreme candidates brings electoral rewards. We show this result using two different methodological approaches and that it is robust to whether we examine public opinion among voters only.

To check the external validity of our findings, our third study examines what party leaders spontaneously say about the traits they look for in candidates for their party’s nomination. One concern with our first two studies is that they prompt party leaders to think about policy and ideology, which might lead them to place more weight on those concerns than they normally would. However, we find that party leaders often mention candidate ideology spontaneously. Moreover, local Republican party leaders are especially likely to say that they look for conservative candidates: even when unprompted to consider ideology, Republican leaders mention it as an ideal nominee trait twice as often as Democrats and over six times more often than they mention ideological centrism.

These results suggest an important caution for recent efforts to reduce polarization. To the extent potential reforms would empower local party leaders – who already wield important influence today – they may further empower individuals who do not perceive the tradeoff between extremity and electability that political scientists perceive. As a result, reformers may wish to take a more surgical approach, empowering the national and state leaders who appear more supportive of centrists (La Raja and Schaffner 2015) while avoiding empowering
local party leaders to the extent possible. At the same time, our data suggest intriguing potential strategies for reducing polarization, a point we return to later.

Theoretical Perspectives and Existing Evidence

The formal leaders of political party organizations are capable of influencing primary elections in a number of ways: they can recruit new primary candidates with attributes they like (Lawless 2012), direct financial and human resources to potential nominees they favor (Cohen et al. 2008; Masket 2016), boost the fortunes of potential nominees they endorse (Kousser et al. 2015), and “gatekeep” potential nominees they dislike by withholding their support (Niven 2006; Sanbonmatsu 2006).

Over the last several decades, the influence formal leaders of local political party organizations wield has generally decreased as elites in an “extended party network” have wielded more and more (e.g., Masket 2009). For example, recent years have witnessed changes to party nomination processes and campaign finance regulation (such as the Citizens United decision and state-based equivalents) that have dramatically reduced the electoral influence of national, state, and local political party organizations in primary elections. The share of campaign funds provided by formal party committees today is just half what it was a decade ago, while outside groups’ influence in primary elections has dramatically increased (Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016).

One classic perspective on polarization would welcome political party leaders’ declining influence in primary elections. This perspective depicts political party leaders as the principal proponents of polarized candidates. For example, Hacker and Pierson (2005) blame national
“party leaders themselves” for the success of extremists in the Republican party (p. 9), documenting instances when they coordinated with outside groups to champion hard-right officeholders and priorities (p. 12).

However, a number of other scholars have argued that the declining influence of political party leaders might actually exacerbate elite polarization (e.g., Persily 2015; McCarty 2015). A compelling theoretical logic supports this suspicion. Many of the interest group “policy demanders” (Bawn et al. 2012) and “purist” ideological activists (Fiorina, Abrams and Pope 2005) who have gained influence over the last several decades are thought to be especially focused on advancing extreme policy agendas and thus supporting extremists in primaries. In contrast, party leaders oversee “the sole political organizations” – parties – “whose primary goal is to win [general] elections” (La Raja and Schaffner 2015). Although party leaders have their own policy demands, they are thought to have a stronger focus on winning general elections than others in extended party networks. As a result, they are expected to be especially likely to support centrist candidates for their party’s nomination: conventional wisdom in political science is that the median general election voter prefers centrists (Carson et al. 2010) and that centrists perform better than extremists in general elections (Canes-Wrone, Brady and Cogan 2002; Hall 2015).

If true, this line of reasoning suggests a rare strategy to decrease polarization in Congress and state legislatures: increase party leaders’ electoral influence in primaries. Empowered party leaders might, this reasoning suggests, use their influence to “clamp down on candidates and incumbents outside the mainstream” and throw their weight behind moderates (Persily 2015, p. 132), ultimately “exercis[ing] a moderating effect on those who win office” (La Raja and Schaffner 2015; Hassell 2016; Pildes 2015; McCarty and Shor 2015).
Relatively little existing data directly measures party leaders’ preferences, making it difficult to distinguish between these perspectives, and the data that does exist is mixed; McCarty (2015a) writes, “we still have a poor understanding of the role played by political party organizations in producing more or less polarization” (p. 136). Existing data and theory also tends to focus on parties at the highest levels, where preferences for moderates might be especially strong (La Raja and Schaffner 2015, p. 23). Examining national parties, Hassell (2016b) finds “no systematic ideological difference between party supported and non-party supported candidates in primary elections” that lead to competitive general elections. However, national elites appear more likely to support moderate candidates ahead of non-competitive general elections because they are more closely aligned with moderate candidates on policy issues (Hassell 2016b). Anecdotally, some accounts indicate national party figures like Karl Rove have coordinated to support moderates; other accounts of the same individuals suggest the opposite (Hacker and Pierson 2005). At the state party level, where more systematic data is available, La Raja and Schaffner (2015) find that parties tend to support moderate candidates for state legislature, but that this relationship might be explained by the fact that candidates facing close general elections tend to be more moderate anyway. Data is sparse about local parties, although scholars agree that they are extremely active in primaries, too. La Raja and Schaffner (2015) conjecture that local parties may be more enthusiastic about nominating extremists, as they “nurture some of the most ideological activists in the party” (p. 22).

We make two contributions to this literature. First, we consider a central theoretical mechanism that has received little attention in existing work: how party leaders perceive their party’s incentive to nominate moderates. On a theoretical level, there is broad agreement
on two principal goals party leaders have when evaluating potential nominees: loyalty and electability. On the one hand, party leaders want their nominees to remain loyal to the party if they are elected (Bawn et al. 2012; Hacker and Pierson 2005). On the other hand, party leaders want their parties to win elections, giving them an incentive to favor primary candidates who will be “most competitive in a general election” (La Raja and Schaffner 2015, p. 23). These two goals are thought to be in tension, however. Party elites care about victory in general elections and the party brand (Aldrich 2000) and political scientists have found that nominating extreme candidates imperils both (Canes-Wrone, Brady and Cogan 2002; Hall 2015; Jacobson 2011). We theoretically consider reasons why party leaders – especially Republicans – might estimate that their parties face lower electoral incentives to nominate centrists than political scientists generally estimate.

Second, we collect some of the first data that speaks to how local party leaders navigate these trade-offs. Existing data largely focuses on national and state parties, but many of the reforms scholars have considered to empower party leaders would also give already-powerful local party leaders additional influence in primaries. Indeed, many have noted concern that these local party leaders might be systematically different than the state and national elites that have been the subject of greater study (La Raja and Schaffner 2015; Persily 2014). But little data has examined local political parties directly.

Bringing these two areas of focus together, there are several reasons we expected local party leaders – and especially Republicans – to estimate smaller electoral rewards for nominating centrists than conventional wisdom in the political science literature expects. First, there is little ex ante reason to believe party leaders have access to unbiased estimates of the electoral penalties extreme candidates face in the first place. Elections are noisy, and it
is difficult to estimate whether any particular candidate would have done better or worse if they had a different ideological position. This should be especially true for local party leaders, who do not closely observe as many elections as national party leaders. Next, there is good reason to think local party leaders might overestimate the general electorate’s support for extremist candidates and policies. In recent years, polarized ideological activists have focused on barraging political elites with expressions of support for extreme agendas in direct communication, at town halls, with protests, and other tactics (Hacker and Persson 2015; Skocpol and Hertel-Fernandez 2016; Skocpol and Williamson 2011). A principal aim of these tactics is to alter elites’ perceptions of their incentives and of the public (see also Kollman 1998). To the extent that activists successfully cause local party leaders to overestimate popular support for extreme policies, the theoretical mechanism that might lead leaders to nominate centrists is undermined. And as leaders reflect on what kind of nominees will perform well with voters, they may think of the most vocal activists, not the typical voter (Miller 2009). In addition, party leaders of both parties may also be subject to false consensus effects and the availability heuristic, whereby they overgeneralize from their own opinions and the opinions of other partisans in their social networks about what the general electorate wants (Butler and Dynes 2016). Selection could also play a role: people who believe their polarized ideologies are favored in general elections (versus those who do not) might be more likely to agree to serve as party chairs in the first place (e.g., Thomsen 2014).

To the extent some local party leaders do not perceive extremism as bearing a large electoral penalty, we expected this pattern to be stronger for Republicans. Locally rooted, genuinely grassroots organizations that represent liberal constituencies have atrophied in
the last few decades, while their conservative counterparts have focused on pressuring party
elites and are experiencing a renaissance (Blee and Creasap 2010; Hacker and Pierson 2005,
2015; Skocpol and Williamson 2011). To the extent the organizations engaged in such strate-
gies are stronger on the right, we expected Republican elites to be more likely to perceive
extremists as more popular.

Data

To examine how party leaders evaluate potential nominees, in 2013 we fielded a national
survey of the chairs of the county-level (or equivalent) branches of the Republican and
Democratic parties.

We chose county-level parties as the initial testing ground for our ideas for several reasons.
First, they and their local equivalents are often the most active organizations in primary
elections at the state and federal levels (Crowder-Meyer 2011). They also recruit a large
share of candidates for local and state office and, in turn, many of the candidates who later
run for higher offices (Crowder-Meyer 2013; Lawless 2012). Consistent with their importance
in primary elections, over 78% of the party chairs in our sample indicated that people in their
county party organization have helped support a particular candidate in an open primary. In

\footnote{For example, Fang (2013) discusses how conservative organizations buy advertising time during Rush
Limbaugh’s conservative talk radio show that encourages listeners to call political elites on the same theme
that Limbaugh had just been discussing, producing an avalanche of communication from conservative ac-
tivists to political elites.}

\footnote{Some states do not have county parties but instead have parties at the parish (LA), borough (AK),
district (ND), city (CT), or sub-city (MA Dems) level.}

\footnote{Nine states were excluded because neither party provided contact information for county-level officials:
GA, IN, IA, KY, MI, NH, NM, OK, and WI.}
that people in their local party organization were important in encouraging them to run for office (citation removed for peer review). This echoes recent research by Feinstein and Schickler (2008) and Carr, Gamm and Phillips (2016), who find that political changes at the national level are often preceded by changes that occur in state and local parties. In addition, county parties are numerous enough to allow us to make statistically meaningful inferences while still providing a theoretically well-defined sampling frame (both parties in each county in the US). We would of course welcome further research on whether our conclusions would hold for party leaders at lower or higher levels, as such evidence would have important consequences for the shape of reform efforts that would complement the data we gathered.

To administer the survey, we first manually compiled contact information for 6,219 county party chairs. We gathered this information by searching the internet for the name of every county in the US together with the name of each of the two major parties. In some states, we found directories. In many states, we made inquiries to individual parties to gather contact information for each chair where it was missing.

In November 2013, we sent each chair a pre-notification and then a survey invitation at his or her email and/or postal addresses. (If both were available, we attempted contact at both.) We received responses from 1,118 (18%), a response rate comparable to recent surveys of politicians (e.g., cite removed for peer review).

The respondents were broadly representative of the sampling frame. Response rates were nearly identical by region; for Republican (18.0%) and Democratic party chairs (17.9%); and for party leaders previously identified as men (18.2%) and women (18.5%). One potential concern with the data is that only party chairs in uncompetitive areas would respond. However, Figure 1 indicates that the underlying partisan composition of the areas where our
respondents are from is fairly representative.

Figure 1: Obama 2012 County Vote Share Among Survey Respondents and Non-Respondents

Another possibility is that only county party chairs from very small counties would be willing to respond to our survey, undermining the external validity of our inferences. Figure 2 shows that, if anything, the opposite is the case: we received a similar response rate in counties of all sizes, and very slightly more responses from larger counties.
Table OA1 in the Online Appendix provides regression models predicting whether party leaders responded to the survey as a function of covariates. The only significant coefficient is the finding that party leaders in larger counties were slightly more likely to respond.

All three of our studies draw on data from this original sample.

**Study 1: Candidate Choice Conjoint Experiment**

Our first study consisted of a conjoint experiment within the survey (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014). Conjoint experiments involve forcing respondents to make trade-offs between two possible choices that differ along a variety of dimensions and estimating which dimensions drive their choices. Providing respondents with a forced choice allows for
a statistical estimation of their revealed preferences over each dimension and places respondents’ preferences on common scale. Providing multiple dimensions enhances the naturalism of the choices respondents face and allows direct comparisons of how important different dimensions are in driving their choices. Such experiments have been shown to be accurate proxies for actual choices in real-world validations (Hainmueller, Hangartner and Yamamoto 2015).

**Design**

In our experiment, we asked county party chairs to pick which of two possible candidates they would prefer to run in their party’s primary for an open seat. Our experiments began, “Suppose there is a primary for an open [county board / state legislative / US House] seat in your county and the two individuals below are considering running. We’d like you to consider the following two potential candidates for this office.” The survey then described “Candidate A” and “Candidate B” by displaying two side-by-side lists of the candidates’ personal attributes. After the local party leaders viewed the candidates, we then asked, “Which of the above candidates would you be more likely to encourage to run for office?”

Unbeknownst to the party leader completing the survey, each aspect of each candidate’s biography was independently generated at random: the survey supplied each candidate’s gender (signaled by first name), age, occupation, experience in the party, life circumstances, personal characteristics, and political ideology. For political ideology, we described some candidates as more moderate than the typical voter in their party (for Democrats, more

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6The level of government was randomized to assess the robustness of the results. County party leaders play a role in recruiting and screening candidates at all these levels of government. The results do not meaningfully differ based on the level of government displayed in the vignette.
conservative; for Republicans, more liberal); we described other candidates as similar in ideology to typical party members; still others we described as more extreme than typical party members (for Democrats, more liberal; for Republicans, more conservative). Providing several traits for each candidate beyond ideology was intended to enhance the naturalism of the experiment and ensures party leaders are not cued to focus on ideology when making their evaluations (Hainmueller, Hopkins and Yamamoto 2014). However, all of the traits (ideology, gender, etc.) were independently randomized, meaning that we can compare how party leaders reacted to candidates with each trait to estimate the effects of each trait, as each trait is uncorrelated with the others by design.

Online Appendix Table OA2 gives the full language for each condition. Online Appendix Figure OA3 shows how the survey instrument appeared to respondents in the online version of the survey. To match our theory, we focus on cases where party leaders were presented with a choice where one candidate was more centrist than their party and where one was more extreme.

**Results: Who Party Leaders Prefer To Run**

When faced with a choice between a candidate more extreme than their party (increasing polarization) or a candidate more centrist (reducing polarization), each of whom had many other randomly assigned attributes, party leaders preferred that the more extreme candidate run 76% of the time, or by a more than 3-to-1 margin. Disaggregating the data by party shows that this is largely driven by Republican party chairs. Democratic party chairs preferred extremists 63% of the time, but Republicans preferred extremists 91% of the time, or by
about 10 to 1. Regardless of the other traits each candidate had, Republican party chairs preferred the extremists almost every time.

Figure 3 communicates the magnitude and robustness of these results. Each panel shows the ‘win margin’ of the extremist candidate in these match-ups, subtracting the share of party leaders who preferred the centrist nominee from the share who supported the extremist nominee. The error bars show one standard error around our estimate of the mean. The first panel shows the results just described, where a larger share of chairs in both parties prefer an extremist to a centrist.

Figure 3: Party Leaders’ Preferences In Primaries

(a) Main results

(b) Robustness checks

The bottom two panels of Figure 3 help evaluate the robustness and generalizability of
this finding. First, one potential concern with these results is that many county party leaders work in areas where their party is guaranteed to win or lose elections, reducing their incentive to nominate more electable candidates. The bottom left panel of Figure 3 therefore shows the results just for the subset of county party chairs in counties where Obama received between 40% and 60% of the two-party vote in 2012, and therefore where general elections are likely to be competitive. Next, the bottom right panel shows the subset of county party chairs who subjectively perceive general elections in their area as competitive. As the figure illustrates, the results are largely robust when we examine these especially relevant subgroups. Indeed, if anything, party chairs who perceive elections in their area as more likely to be up for grabs are more likely to prefer extremist nominees, with Republican party chairs in such areas preferring extremists by 15 to 1.

Mechanisms: ‘Having Their Cake And Eating It, Too’

After party leaders selected which primary candidate they preferred, we also asked them several follow-up questions to understand the mechanisms driving their choices, including their perceptions about which of the two candidates would be more likely to win the general election and which of the two candidates would be more likely to stay loyal to the party if elected. Party leaders were significantly more likely to select as preferred candidates who they perceived as having these qualities, by about a 4 to 1 margin for each.

Figure 4 plots the margin by which party leaders were more likely to say that extremists would stay loyal to the party (relative to centrists). Party leaders on both sides recognize

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7Specifically, we asked party leaders what share of offices in their county their party reliably won. We include in this category party leaders who indicated that their party won between 26-50% or 51-75% of the time.
that extremists are more likely to toe the party line (Bawn et al. 2012).

Figure 4: Will the extremist or the centrist be more loyal if elected?

![Graph showing loyalty preferences]

More surprising is how party leaders perceive extremists’ and centrists’ electability. Do party chairs appreciate the trade-off between extremists’ greater loyalty and centrists’ greater electability? For Democratic party chairs, the answer seems to be yes. The first panel of Figure 5 shows that Democratic chairs appear to see this trade-off to some extent; they are slightly more likely to see centrist candidates as more electable, although this difference is not statistically significant. At worst, Democratic party chairs see centrists and extremists as similarly electable, making their judgments about electability based on the other traits in the candidate profiles.

The picture is quite different for Republican party chairs. Republican chairs overall – and in both objectively and subjectively competitive counties – see extremist candidates as more likely to win general elections. 75% of Republican party chairs indicated they thought the extremist candidate they saw in the conjoint would be more likely to win the general election than the centrist candidate they saw, a margin of 50% for the extremist candidates. This difference persists for Republican party chairs who work in closely divided counties and is
Figure 5: Is the extremist or the centrist more likely to win the general election if nominated?

(a) Main results

(b) Robustness checks

even larger for Republican chairs who subjectively perceive elections in their areas as close.

Together, these results suggest an intriguing explanation for why Republican party chairs prefer extreme candidates for their party’s nomination over centrists: unlike Democrats, most Republican party chairs appear to believe they can ‘have their cake and eat it, too’ by nominating extremists, reaping both electoral and ideological rewards. Ironically, political science evidence suggests the exact opposite is more likely to be the case: Hall (2015) finds that the penalty for nominating extreme candidates in general elections is especially large for Republicans.

This divergence between party leaders’ perceptions and political science evidence under-
scores our point that political scientists cannot necessarily assume that local party elites perceive the political world in the same way that they do. It may well be the case that party leaders understand something political scientists do not – but regardless of who perceives political parties’ incentives more accurately, Study 1 provides our first indication that political scientists’ and party leaders’ perceptions of the general electorate and their political incentives appear to diverge. Study 1’s results are consistent with our argument that local party chairs – especially Republicans – might not perceive nominating centrists as bearing electoral rewards.

**Study 2: Party Leaders’ Perceptions of Public Opinion**

Could it really be the case that local Republican party chairs perceive the general electorate in their area as much more conservative than political scientists? One weakness of our previous study is that it assumes party leaders can understand or are prone to think in terms of the ideological labels that political scientists do. Therefore, our second study focuses on local party leaders’ perceptions of the general electorate on individual issues. In particular, as a methodologically distinct test of our hypothesis, we also queried party leaders’ beliefs about public opinion in their counties and their states. If Republican party chairs in particular expected extremist nominees to perform better than centrists, we believed this might be reflected in an overestimation of the conservatism of citizens in their areas.
Data

To query party leaders’ perceptions, we asked them to estimate public opinion in their county and in their state on several issues. In particular, we asked them “What percent of people living in your state would agree with the following statements?” and “What percent of people living in your county would agree with the following statements?” followed by a series of statements. Each party chair made estimates of public opinion for both their state and their county on three issues that were randomly assigned (to prevent fatigue). We asked party leaders to estimate public opinion in both their state and in their county because party leaders indicate they are active in primaries for local, countywide, statewide, and Congressional office. Although not all offices line up to county and state boundaries exactly, many elections do and we expected these two boundaries to be well-known to county party leaders.

In order to be able compare party leaders’ perceptions to reasonably precise estimates of reality, we asked party chairs to estimate county and state opinion on items that had been asked in the 2012 CCES, a large sample survey (Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2013). We were therefore constrained in the kinds of issues we could ask about, as the CCES only asked the full public sample about their opinions on a limited set of issues. Table 1 reports the text of the issue items in the 2012 CCES that were available, as well as the ideological direction of the “Yes” side and whether the policy represented a status quo change in 2013. We also report weighted national mean support for each issue in the CCES.

The results are robust when we limit to voters only; voter mean opinion is typically within

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8Recent high-profile errors of national and state polls in American politics provide some caution about interpreting these results, but we will show that the magnitude of the differences between CCES-measured opinion and party leaders’ perceptions of this opinion will be many times larger than these errors.
Table 1: Issue questions available in the 2012 CCES.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CCES Issue Item Wording</th>
<th>National Mean “Yes” Support in CCES</th>
<th>“Yes” direction</th>
<th>Status quo change?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Same-sex couples should be allowed to marry.”</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>Some states</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Grant legal status to all illegal immigrants who have held jobs and paid taxes for at least 3 years, and not been convicted of any felony crimes.”</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Laws governing the sale of firearms should be made less strict than they are.”</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Let employers and insurers refuse to cover birth control and other health services that violate their religious beliefs.”</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“By law, abortion should never be permitted.”</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Always allow a woman to obtain an abortion as a matter of choice.”</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 percentage point of overall mean opinion reported in Table 1 with the largest difference being a 3 percentage point difference on the religious exemption issue. This difference is nearly an order of magnitude smaller than the differences in perceptions between parties we discuss below and so elites thinking about voters only instead of all residents is unlikely to drive the results.
Empirical Strategy 1: Raw Data

Because each state and county has a relatively small number of CCES respondents, special care is required to compare party leaders’ estimates of public opinion with the CCES’ estimates of true public opinion. We use two approaches that both yield similar results.

We will begin by describing our first approach in the context of the county estimates. Our goal is to compare the average of party leaders’ perceptions across all their counties to the CCES estimate of public opinion across all the counties where chairs responded. Our estimation strategy is as follows. Let $C$ represent the set of all CCES respondents who live in counties where a party leader responded to the survey, with respondents indexed by $c$ and issues by $i$. Denote opinions expressed on issue $i$ by CCES respondent $c$ as $o_{c,i}$. All the CCES questions we use are binary choice, such that $o_{c,i} \in \{0, 1\}$. Let $p_{c,i}$ represent the perception of the party leader in $c$’s county of average support for issue $i$; that is, $p_{c,i}$ is a party leader’s estimate of $E(o_{c,i})$ for their county. The average of $p_{c,i} - o_{c,i}$ within each county thus captures an estimate of party leaders’ average overestimation of support for policy $i$. For example, suppose a party leader perceives support for a policy in their county at 80% but true support is only 60%. In this example, $E(p_{c,i} - o_{c,i}) = 0.8 - E(o_{c,i}) = 0.8 - 0.6 = 0.2$. To estimate party leaders’ average overestimation of support for $i$, we estimate the mean of $p_{c,i} - o_{c,i}$ across all the CCES respondents.$^9$ To incorporate the CCES weights, we take the weighted mean of this quantity, multiplying by the CCES survey weights $w_c$, which have mean 1. In addition, because the CCES has many more respondents from larger counties than smaller counties, we weight these estimates inversely to county size so that party leaders from large counties and small counties matter equally. In particular, we weight each CCES observation

\[^9\text{We acknowledge Doug Rivers for this suggestion.}\]
by \( \frac{\bar{s}_{c_i}}{s_c} \), where \( s_c \) is the size of each CCES respondents’ county in 2013 according to the US Census. This makes party leaders the effective unit of analysis and counts party leaders from small and large counties equally. Our results are similar regardless of the weighting approach we use, however. We seek to estimate \( y_i \), party leaders’ average overestimation of county support for issue \( i \). We therefore estimate \( y_i \) with:

\[
\hat{y}_i = \frac{\sum_{c \in C} \left( p_{c,i} - o_{c,i} \right) w_c \star \frac{\bar{s}_{c_i}}{s_c} }{n(C)},
\]

(1)

where \( n(C) \) is the number of CCES respondents.

We can also estimate public opinion in the average county – what party leaders’ average perceptions would be if their perceptions were perfectly accurate – using:

\[
\hat{o}_{c,i} = \frac{\sum_{c \in C} o_{c,i} w_c \star \frac{\bar{s}_{c_i}}{s_c} }{n(C)}.
\]

(2)

This quantity can be interpreted as ‘the expectation of county opinion for a party chair respondent chosen at random.’

Likewise, party leaders’ mean perception can be estimated with:

\[
\hat{p}_i = \frac{\sum_{c \in C} p_{c,i} w_c \star \frac{\bar{s}_{c_i}}{s_c} }{n(C)} \approx \bar{p}_i.
\]

(3)
Our analysis at the state level is identical, except with $s_c$ corresponding to the size of each CCES respondents’ state. We cluster the standard errors at the county level for our county analysis and at the state level for our state analysis. In addition, our county analysis excludes the states where parties are not organized at the county level because the levels at which these parties are organized (parish, etc.) are not available in the CCES data: LA, AK, ND, CT, and MA.

Results: Republican Party Leaders Overestimate Support for Conservative Positions

Consistent with the findings from Study 1, the data from Study 2 indicates that Republican county party leaders perceive the general electorate as more conservative than political science evidence depicts it.

Figure 6a shows our estimates for party leaders’ perceptions of public opinion in their counties and our estimates from the CCES of what their average perceptions would have been were they forming their perceptions in the same manner as political scientists. Table 2 shows point estimates. (Because smaller counties are more conservative but we weight all counties equally, the mean county opinion is more conservative than mean national opinion reported in Table 1.)

On average, Republican leaders appear to underestimate public support for the liberal policies on the CCES by about 10 percentage points and to overestimate public support for the conservative policies on the CCES by almost 40 percentage points. For example, only 13% of CCES respondents believe that “Laws governing the sale of firearms should be made
Figure 6: Party leaders’ perception of public opinion

(a) County opinion

**Liberal Issues**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Democratic Chairs</th>
<th>Republican Chairs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Same-sex marriage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amnesty for undocumented immigrants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion always legal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(b) State opinion

**Liberal Issues**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Democratic Chairs</th>
<th>Republican Chairs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Same-sex marriage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amnesty for undocumented immigrants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion always legal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conservative Issues**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Democratic Chairs</th>
<th>Republican Chairs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weaken gun control laws</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth control religious exemptions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion always illegal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average Public Support – CCES Estimate
Chairs’ Average Perception of Public Support
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue (see Table 1 for item wording)</th>
<th>Democratic Chairs</th>
<th>Republican Chairs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elite Perception</td>
<td>Actual Public Opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal Policies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion always legal</td>
<td>44.1 (2.449)</td>
<td>45.6 (2.914)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amnesty for undocumented immigrants</td>
<td>40.7 (2.340)</td>
<td>38.5 (3.136)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same-sex marriage</td>
<td>38.6 (2.470)</td>
<td>46.2 (3.398)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative Policies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion always illegal</td>
<td>45.0 (2.622)</td>
<td>19.4 (3.256)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth control religious exemptions</td>
<td>48.1 (2.551)</td>
<td>39.2 (3.746)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weaken gun control laws</td>
<td>51.8 (2.846)</td>
<td>18.8 (2.692)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** = p < 0.001. ** = p < 0.01. * = p < 0.05. Standard errors are clustered at the county level.
less strict than they are,” but Republican county party leaders perceive their counties as 67% supportive. On the other hand, the CCES evidence indicates that about 37% of people in the typical county supported same-sex marriage in 2013, but the typical Republican county party leader perceived county support at 27%. Democrats do not consistently overestimate voter liberalism, and indeed if anything appear to overestimate voter conservatism as well.

Figure 6b and Table 3 report the results for party leaders’ estimates of state opinion. The results are similar: Republicans overestimate state support for conservative policies and underestimate state support for liberal policies.

Robustness Check: MRP

As a robustness check and to gain a better appreciation of the nature and magnitude of these misperceptions, we also used multilevel regression and poststratification (MRP) to estimate true public opinion in each state and compared these state-level MRP estimates to party leaders’ perceptions their state.\[10\] MRP uses individual-level survey data and demographic information about the districts from the US Census to construct state-level estimates of support for each issue.\[Lax and Phillips 2009a, b 2012; Park, Gelman and Bafumi 2004]\n
Our MRP procedure first fits multilevel choice models to the responses to each issue question from the 2012 CCES. Each model fit returns estimated effects for demographic and geographic predictors. We then use the estimates from the multilevel model to estimate support for various demographic cells, identified by age, race, education, gender and state. Finally, using data from the US Census’ American Community Survey, we weight those cells

\[10\] MRP estimates at the county level would be extremely imprecise, so we focus on the state-level where our estimates are more defensible.
Table 3: Party leaders’ perceptions of statewide public opinion and actual opinion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue (see Table 1 for item wording)</th>
<th>Democratic Chairs</th>
<th>Republican Chairs</th>
<th>Average Misperception</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elite Perception</td>
<td>Actual Public Opinion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Liberal Policies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion always legal</td>
<td>49.1</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>3.47*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2.080)</td>
<td>(1.643)</td>
<td>(1.668)</td>
<td>(2.005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amnesty for undocumented immigrants</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>44.3</td>
<td>-6.56**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1.764)</td>
<td>(0.977)</td>
<td>(2.239)</td>
<td>(1.775)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same-sex marriage</td>
<td>46.0</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>-5.17**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2.820)</td>
<td>(1.454)</td>
<td>(1.834)</td>
<td>(2.909)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conservative Policies</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abortion always illegal</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>25.07***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2.074)</td>
<td>(0.626)</td>
<td>(2.019)</td>
<td>(1.827)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth control religious exemptions</td>
<td>44.0</td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>4.70*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2.198)</td>
<td>(0.856)</td>
<td>(2.072)</td>
<td>(2.015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weaken gun control laws</td>
<td>49.0</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>34.57***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2.978)</td>
<td>(0.602)</td>
<td>(2.992)</td>
<td>(3.287)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*** = p < 0.001. ** = p < 0.01. * = p < 0.05. Standard errors are clustered at the state level.
by their frequency in each state. The result is an estimate of the percent of each state supporting each issue. We then compare these estimates to party leaders’ perceptions. Because of the large sample size of the CCES, many states have relatively large samples. For states with sufficiently large samples, MRP is designed so that the results approach disaggregation and rely very little on MRP’s demographic weighting. Online Appendix C provides further details.

We present the MRP results graphically in Figure 7 with a loess smoother for each party. The x-axis on each graph show the MRP estimate of state support and the y-axis shows party leaders’ estimate of state support. If party leaders were perfectly accurate, we would expect their responses to concentrate around the black line, which shows the line $y = x$. However, the results from the MRP estimates match the raw data: it appears that Republican party leaders consistently overestimate support for conservative policy positions, whereas Democrats do not do the same with liberal policy positions.

**Discussion of Study 2**

The results of our second study represent methodologically distinct evidence for the same finding as Study 1: whereas Democratic county party chairs perceive a general public that looks relatively similar to what political science evidence suggests, Republican county party chairs perceive a much more conservative general public.\(^{11}\) These are exactly the perceptions conservative grassroots organizations have worked to give Republican leaders (Fang 2013; Skocpol and Williamson 2011). Importantly, these differing perceptions suggest that

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\(^{11}\) Broockman and Skovron (2016) queried sitting officeholders about their perceptions of public opinion in their districts and found similar results.
Figure 7: Party chairs’ perceptions of state opinion compared to MRP estimates of true state opinion.

on many issues where political scientists would expect extremely conservative candidates to take positions out-of-step with public opinion, Republican leaders appear more likely to expect such candidates would be in-step. Given these differing perceptions, it is not surprising Republican local party leaders expect very conservative candidates to perform better in general elections than political science conventional wisdom predicts.
Study 3: In Describing Ideal Candidates, Republican Chairs Spontaneously Mention Ideology More Often Than Democrats, and Conservatism Six Times More Often Than Centrism

Both of our first two studies relied on explicitly prompting party chairs for their beliefs about the electorate’s ideological composition. However, it remains possible that ideological extremism is not a quality chairs proactively seek out in candidates and that other qualities we failed to ask about overshadow this concern.

To measure whether ideological loyalty is a “top of mind” consideration for party leaders when they think about potential candidates, prior to our conjoint experiment, we asked party leaders an open-ended question (on the paper version of the survey only): “In an ideal world, what personal qualities would you like all of your party’s political candidates to have? Please list as many as you would like.” 84% of the 234 party leaders who answered the question listed at least one characteristic. (Respondents were again broadly representative of the broader sample. Online Appendix Table OA1 and Figures OA1 and OA2 shows the representativeness of those who answered the open ended question.) We grouped their responses into 36 categories.

The data reveal two patterns consistent with our other results.

First, local party leaders of both parties seek out ideological orthodoxy when thinking about potential nominees. Figure 8 plots the frequency of each type of response across both parties. Characteristics clearly related to ideological loyalty – conservative, liberal, loyal to
the party, and loyal to the Constitution – were mentioned by 28% of the sample, more than three times the number who mentioned ideological moderation or centrism (difference in proportions $p < 0.001$).

Second, Republican elites prioritize ideological loyalty far more than Democratic elites. Figure 9 plots the percentage of leaders in each party who mentioned each of the five most common traits as well as the percentage who mentioned any of the ideological responses we identified. Republican party chairs were twice as likely as Democrats to mention ideology.
Notes: Percentage values correspond to the share of open-ended responses that mentioned each quality. p-values correspond to difference of means tests between how often chairs of each party mention the quality.

(p < 0.001) – the starkest inter-party difference by far. These findings mirror other work finding that Republican elites place a special premium on ideological loyalty (Grossman and Hopkins 2016) – but are at odds with hopes that Republican political party leaders might place more weight on centrism in order to win elections. In addition, while chairs of both parties were more likely to spontaneously mention extremism as a desirable quality than moderation or centrism, this differed by party – Democrats were twice as likely to spontaneously mention extremism than centrism as desirable, but Republicans were nearly six times as likely to do so.
Discussion: Having Their Cake And Eating It, Too

As elite polarization has continued to grow, political scientists have started asking how to reduce it. Recently, scholars have considered one counterintuitive possibility: that reforms empowering formal political party leaders might actually reduce polarization, as party leaders might be more likely to favor nominating centrists in hopes their parties will perform better in general elections. However, many of these potential reforms would also further increase the power of local party leaders.

In this paper, we examined a novel reason why empowering these local party leaders might actually exacerbate polarization. Even if local party leaders face a trade-off between nominating electable centrists and less-electable loyalists in reality, we theorized that they might discount the probability that nominating centrists would aid their party electorally for a variety of reasons: for example, not only are party leaders likely to be surrounded by likeminded and polarized individuals, a bevy of grassroots organizations – especially on the political right – have focused on distorting party elites’ perceptions of the general electorate’s demands (Fang 2013; Hacker and Pierson 2015; Skocpol and Williamson 2011).

Our findings are consistent with exactly that expectation: most Republican county party leaders see extremists as more electable than centrists, while their Democratic counterparts appear to see centrists as only slightly more electable. In this way, Republican party leaders act as if nominating extremists allows them to ‘have their cake and eat it, too’ – winning more votes in general elections while only offering voters the opportunity to select extreme party loyalists. It may well be the case that the formal leaders of local parties are less enthusiastic about extremists than other local party activists like donors and interest group leaders. But
many local party leaders appear not to believe nominating centrists would help their parties win, and, as a result, many appear plenty enthusiastic about extremists still.

Our data has several limitations, and we would welcome future research that addressed them. First, this study uses survey data, not data on how local party leaders actually behave. Although this allowed us to randomly assign candidate attributes and better capture key theoretical mechanisms, observational data on how party leaders actually recruit candidates would complement this data. Moreover, our analysis does not definitively establish why local party leaders seem to underestimate the electoral rewards of nominating centrists; as with all studies that identify key mechanisms, questions remain about what mechanisms underpin those mechanisms themselves. We also focused on open seats in our conjoint experiment, since this is where polarization appears to be more pronounced (Theriault 2006), but the dynamics when incumbents are running for re-election would also be of interest. In addition, we look forward to seeing whether these patterns persist over time; variation over time would be informative about mechanisms. Finally, it remains possible that if political parties’ resources and incentives did change, chairs might have access to different information or different people might become party leaders in equilibrium (Masket 2016; McCarty 2015a). It would also be of interest for reform efforts to understand whether these same patterns persist or are reversed at other levels of government. For example, the chairs of the RNC or DNC might perceive the world differently precisely because they are less subject to the grassroots pressures and other dynamics we identified.

Our findings that Democratic party leaders seem less sanguine about extremists’ electoral prospects than Republicans also suggest a new mechanism that may underpin asymmetric polarization. As McCarty (2015b) recently reviews the literature, there appears to be a
“major partisan asymmetry in polarization,” with “the movement of the Republican Party
to the right account[ing] for most of the divergence between the two parties.” The same
pattern generally holds at the state level (Shor 2015). Our results about how Republicans
local party leaders believe they can ‘have their cake and eat it, too’ when considering potential
nominees raise the possibility that other Republican elites misperceive how conservative it
is in their electoral interest to be.

At the same time, our data suggest an intriguing potential strategy for reducing polar-
ization: consistent with recent field experiments (e.g., Butler and Nickerson 2011), supplying
local party leaders with more reliable information about public opinion and their incentives
might change their perceptions and reduce their support for extremists. If local party leaders
came to believe they were undermining their party’s electoral prospects, they might be less
likely to favor nominating extremists than they appear today. This hypothesis is ripe for fu-
ture research. More broadly, in an era when an unprecedented crush of activists has sought
to warp how elites and voters perceive each other, our results underscore the importance of
studying how political actors subjectively perceive the political world (e.g., Broockman and
Skovron 2016, Miler 2009).

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670.

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McCarty, Nolan. 2015b. What we know and do not know about our polarized politics.


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Respondents to the open-ended item used in Study 3 were similarly representative to non-respondents.
Figure OA1: Obama 2012 Two-Party Vote Share Among Open End Respondents and Non-Respondents

The graph shows the distribution of Obama vote share in county for Democratic Chairs, Republican Chairs, and all chairs, differentiated by whether they responded to the open end. The x-axis represents the Obama vote share in county, while the y-axis represents the distribution of chairs in the study. Two graphs are presented side by side, one for Democratic Chairs and the other for Republican Chairs, with lines indicating the vote share for those who responded and those who did not respond to the open end.
B Conjoint experiment

Table OA2 lists the attributes that the hypothetical candidates could have. Attributes were fully randomized, with the exception of age, which was constant, with the first profile always being 43 years old and the second profile always being 47 years old. Two different sets of first names were used for the two profiles in order to ensure that no pair of candidates had the same name. Figure OA3 shows how a respondent on the online survey would have seen the experiment.

C Details of MRP Estimation Procedure

Estimation of an MRP model proceeds in two stages. First, a hierarchical logistic choice model is estimated for the opinion item being studied. Our models include predictors at
Suppose there is a primary for an open county board seat in your local party area and the two individuals below are considering running for the seat. We’d like you to consider the following two potential candidates for this office.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Potential Candidate A</th>
<th>Potential Candidate B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>Alexander</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Small business owner</td>
<td>Factory worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience in party</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life circumstances</td>
<td>Is independently wealthy</td>
<td>Military veteran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talents</td>
<td>Well known in community</td>
<td>Physically attractive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positions and ideology</td>
<td>Somewhat more liberal than the typical voter from your party in your county</td>
<td>Somewhat more conservative than the typical voter from your party in your county</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Which one of the above candidates would you be more likely to encourage to run for office?

- [ ] Candidate A
- [ ] Candidate B
Table OA2: Treatments in Conjoint Experiment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attribute</th>
<th>Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Name (gender)                 | Male names: Donald, Laurence, Nathan, Nicholas, Samuel, Alexander, Andrew, Christopher, Charles, Daniel.  
                                  | Female names: Donna, Lauren, Natalie, Nicole, Samantha, Alexandra, Andrea, Charlotte, Christina, Danielle. (No pair of candidates had the same name.) |
| Age                           | 43, 47                                                                                                                                 |
| Occupation                    | Attorney, business executive, investor, lawyer, nurse, small business owner, social worker, teacher, receptionist, restaurant server, factory worker |
| Experience in party           | Active and well known in county party organization, active and well known in group important to the party, frequent campaign volunteer for the last four election cycles, frequent campaign volunteer in last election cycle, none |
| Life circumstances           | Has a great deal of free time, has two young children, has flexible work hours, is independently wealthy, military veteran               |
| Talents                       | Assertive, experienced fundraiser for local charities, hard worker, physically attractive, talented public speaker, well known in community |
| Positions and ideology        | Much more conservative than the typical voter from your party in your county, somewhat more conservative than the typical voter from your party in your county, similar views to the typical voter from your party in your county, somewhat more liberal than the typical voter from your party in your county, much more liberal than the typical voter than the typical voter from your party in your county |

two different levels. At the individual level, we include random effects for the respondent’s education, gender, and race/ethnicity. At the state level, we include individual state random effects and fixed effects for Obama’s share of the 2012 Presidential vote in the state (see Lax and Phillips (2009a)). State random effects are centered around regional random effects.

\[12\] The models are estimated using the `bglmer()` function in R.
C.1 Hierarchical Model

The general form of the model is a varying intercept, varying slope model:

$$\theta_j = \text{logit}^{-1}(X_j\beta + \sum_s \alpha^S_{S(j)})$$  (4)

where $j$ indexes cells, each of which is identified by the unique combination of race, gender, education, and state, and $S$ represents subsets of the grouping variables. $\beta$ represents the fixed effects and is modeled with a uniform prior distribution. $\alpha^S$ are random effects, modeled with hierarchical Gaussian priors.

The response model is specified as:

$$\Pr(y = 1) = \text{logit}^{-1}(\beta_0 + \alpha_{\text{gender}}^{j[c]} + \alpha_{\text{race}}^{k[c]} + \alpha_{\text{edu}}^{m[c]} + \alpha_{\text{gender}\times\text{race}}^{m[c]} + \alpha_{\text{state}}^{s[c]} + \alpha_{\text{region}}^{r[c]})$$  (5)

The individual-level random effects are modeled as:

$$\alpha_{\text{gender}}^j \sim N(0, \sigma^2_{\text{gender}}) \text{ for } j = 1, 2$$  (6)

$$\alpha_{\text{race}}^k \sim N(0, \sigma^2_{\text{race}}) \text{ for } k = 1, 2, 3$$  (7)

$$\alpha_{\text{age}}^l \sim N(0, \sigma^2_{\text{age}}) \text{ for } l = 1...4$$  (8)

$$\alpha_{\text{edu}}^m \sim N(0, \sigma^2_{\text{edu}}) \text{ for } m = 1...4$$  (9)

---

13 The model for the other issues is the same except that it does not use the fixed effects for state percent Mormon and evangelical.
The state and region effects are modeled:

\[ \alpha_s^{state} \sim N(\alpha_{[r]}^{region} + \beta \text{presvote}, \sigma_{state}^2) \text{ for } s = 1...50 \]  
\[ \alpha_r^{region} \sim N(0, \sigma_{region}^2) \text{ for } r = 1...4 \]

This model yields predictions for the share of individuals in any given state who support same-sex marriage or universal health care in all possible combinations of race, gender, and education. Because of the CCES’ large sample size, the state-level random effects dominate the estimation, meaning MRP makes only slight adjustments to the disaggregated data from the CCES.

### C.2 Poststratification

The final step in constructing state-level estimates is poststratification. We first use data from the US Census American Community Survey 2013 5-Year file to calculate the share of individuals in each state that fall into each ‘cell’: for example, of all the individuals living in California, what share of them are college-educated white women? These official US Census estimates are exceptionally accurate.

We then merge these cell-level state proportion estimates from the Census with our cell-level opinion estimates from the multilevel regression model to construct the state-level opinion estimates. This poststratification process is a straightforward aggregation process by which estimates for each cell \( \theta_j \) in each state are summed in proportion to the share of the state that they represent. Note that the cells in each state are exhaustive and mutually exclusive.

\[ \theta_{state} = \frac{\sum_{j \in J_{state}} N_j \theta_j}{\sum_{j \in J_{state}} N_j} \]

The result of this poststratification process are estimates of state support for each issue.
for each of the nation’s states.