

Divisive primaries help challengers and hurt incumbents

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Divisive primaries may waste precious campaign resources and damage the primary winner's reputation and chances to win the general election, according to a study in the current *American Politics Research* (published by SAGE). The timing of the primary in proximity to the general election can also play a role in the results.

To test the effects of divisive primary battles on general [election](#) outcomes, researchers gathered primary and general election vote data for all incumbent House races between 1972 and 1998 in which both parties held a primary contest. They looked at when those primary elections were held, from early in the spring to those held less than two months before the general election.

Research found that divisive primaries held very early in the electoral calendar did not affect general election performance. Those held after mid-April, however, had a negative and statistically significant impact on the results. This negative effect became more pronounced the closer the primary was to the general election.

Voters seem to weigh recent information more heavily than distant events. Additionally, late-season primaries leave challengers with little time to refill campaign coffers, assuage the hurt feelings of the losing primary opponent's supporters, and repair the negativity generated by the divisive primary.

"Our findings have important implications for parties, candidates, and

reformers," write the authors, Gregg B. Johnson, Meredith-Joy Petersheim and Jesse T. Wasson. "We conclude that although electoral prospects matter, fiercely contested primaries waste resources and lead to reputational costs, which primary winners need time to overcome. Greater attention to this and perhaps even an exploration of the relationship between candidate quality and divisive primaries appears warranted."

More information: The article "Divisive Primaries and Incumbent General Election Performance: Prospects and Costs in U.S. House Races," in *American Politics Research* is available free for a limited time at apr.sagepub.com/content/38/5/931.full.pdf+html

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