

Experts to Know: Primaries, Polarization, and Election Reform

A reporter's guide of leading political scientists studying how primaries shape American politics — and how reform is changing it.



ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This resource connects journalists with political scientists whose research helps explain the outsized role of primary elections in shaping American politics. It also highlights how reforms including open primaries are changing the incentives for candidates and voters. All experts included here are available as sources for interviews, background, and commentary.

FEATURED EXPERTS

- **Dr. Richard Barton**, Syracuse University
- **Dr. Christian Grose**, University of Southern California
- **Dr. Laurel Harbridge-Yong**, Northwestern University
- **Dr. Jesse Crosson**, Purdue University
- **Dr. Daniel Butler**, Washington University in St. Louis
- **Dr. Joshua Ferrer**, American University
- **Dr. Rachel Porter**, University of Notre Dame



Dr. Richard Barton



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CAN SPEAK TO:

- How donors, interest groups and parties shape primary outcomes
- How the threat of being “primaried” influences legislator behavior
- The broader societal impacts of primary reform
- Differences between primary voters and the broader electorate

SELECT PUBLISHED RESEARCH:

- “*The Influence of Special Interests in Primary Elections*” (2025) - Open, all-candidate primaries blunt the impact of ideological PACs.
- “*California’s Top Two Primary*” (2023) - California’s open primary system has decreased polarization, increased competition, and improved turnout.
- “*Louisiana’s Long-Term Electoral Experiment*” (2022) - By abolishing primaries altogether, Louisiana has increased meaningful participation, mitigated polarization, and improved governance.
- “*The primary threat*” (2022) - The recent wave of ideological primary challenges is an important source of the escalation of polarization in recent Congresses.

WORKING PAPERS AND ONGOING RESEARCH:

- The impact of primary reform on societal outcomes - Initial findings suggest that open, all-candidate primaries have a significant impact on societal outcomes.
- Reforming Primary Elections - Forthcoming book on primary reform (co-editor with Clark University’s Robert Boatright)



Dr. Laurel Harbridge-Yong



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Northwestern University



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CAN SPEAK TO:

- Why primary elections harm representation
- Differences between primary and general electorates
- How open, all-candidate primary systems affect candidate moderation
- How primary voters make decisions in elections where party cues are not helpful

SELECT PUBLISHED RESEARCH:

- “*Rejecting Compromise: Legislators’ Fear of Primary Voters*” (2020 - [book](#), [news story](#))- Fear of primary backlash drives gridlock in Congress.
- “*Top-Four Primaries Help Moderate Candidates via Crossover Voting: The Case of the 2022 Alaska Election Reforms*” (2023) - Alaska’s system enables cross-party voting and boosts moderates.
- “*Information for Perceptions of Electability in Primary Elections*” (2025 - [paper](#), [news story](#)) - How primary voters use information to assess electability of candidates
- “*Do U.S. Elections Have a Primary Problem?*” (2025) - Summary of published research on primaries.

WORKING PAPERS AND ONGOING RESEARCH:

- “*The Electoral Challenge of Balancing Primary and General Electorates*” (2023) - Legislators respond more to primary voters.
- Ways that the primary electorate differs from the general electorate
- Do top-two primaries yield more moderate candidates?
- Dislike of the opposing party impacts voting decisions for primary voters



Daniel Butler



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- “*Rejecting Compromise: Legislators’ Fear of Primary Voters*” (2020) - Fear of primary backlash drives gridlock in Congress.
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- “*Information for Perceptions of Electability in Primary Elections*” (2025) - How primary voters use information to assess electability of candidates

WORKING PAPERS AND ONGOING RESEARCH:

- “*The Electoral Challenge of Balancing Primary and General Electorates*” (2023) - Legislators respond more to primary voters.
- How redistricting leads to more extreme primary electorates
- Why and when do legislators in leadership vote against their constituents?
- Survey: How are high school civics courses teaching about election participation?



Dr. Jesse Crosson



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Purdue University



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CAN SPEAK TO:

- How open primaries affect candidate moderation
- Why same-party competition can reduce polarization
- Why open primaries give parties more control over nominating electable candidates
- The institutional incentives driving hyperpartisanship in Congress
- History of the blanket primary and top-two primaries, developed in Washington State

SELECT PUBLISHED RESEARCH:

- *“Extreme districts, moderate winners”* (2020) - Same-party competition in general elections — a feature of top-two primary systems — can lead to more moderate legislators.
- *“Polarized Pluralism”* (2020) - Party polarization has extended to interest groups.

WORKING PAPERS AND ONGOING RESEARCH:

- *“Party Power in Nonpartisan Primaries”* (2024) - Open, all-candidate primaries can strengthen parties' ability to nominate broadly appealing candidates.
- *“Do Local Roots Impact Washington Behaviors? District Connections and Representation in the U.S. Congress”* (2025) - Locally rooted legislators—namely, ones born in the district they represent—attract more bipartisan cosponsors and are least likely to exhibit “party soldier” behaviors.
- *“Taking Sides: Party Competition, Interest Group Strategy, and the Polarization of American Pluralism.”* (2025) - Forthcoming book exploring the polarization of interest groups over the past 50 years. [Preview here.](#)



Dr. Rachel Porter



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CAN SPEAK TO:

- How primaries impact candidate characteristics and policy positions
- The causes and consequences of electing less experienced candidates (i.e., “amateurs”), and how it erodes bipartisanship

SELECT PUBLISHED RESEARCH:

- *“Evaluating (in)experience in congressional elections”* (2024) - Driven in large part by America’s primary system, amateur politicians are increasingly successful. (Podcast)
- *CampaignView* — An open source database of policy platforms and biographical narratives for congressional candidates (2025)

WORKING PAPERS AND ONGOING RESEARCH:

- *“Electing amateur politicians reduces cross-party collaboration”* (2025) - Amateurs consistently exhibit lower levels of bipartisanship.
- *“Strategic Heterogeneity in Issue Positioning: Evidence from Congressional Campaigns”* (2025) - Candidates exhibit greater positional flexibility in districts that are not safe for their party and where constituent policy preferences are heterogeneous.



Dr. Christian Grose



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University of Southern California



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CAN SPEAK TO:

- How open and top-two primaries reduce polarization
- The effects of top-four + ranked choice voting in Alaska
- How reform impacts ideological diversity in legislatures
- Partisan and voter attitudes toward election innovation

SELECT PUBLISHED RESEARCH:

- “Reducing Legislative Polarization” (2020) - Top-two primaries are linked to less extreme legislators.
- “Electoral Innovation and the Alaska System” (2024) - Reform enabled Murkowski’s win, expanded voter choice, and drew broad support — except from populist-leaning voter

WORKING PAPERS AND ONGOING RESEARCH:

- “Top-Two Primaries and Ideological Diversity” (2025) - Greater political diversity observed in California and Washington compared to closed-primary states.
- “Elected officials’ opinions on primary reform” - Survey and randomized experiment: (2026)



Dr. Joshua Ferrer



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American University



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CAN SPEAK TO:

- Changes in primary rules over past quarter century
- Differences between primary, general, registered, and eligible electorates
- How primary rules affect the demographic and partisan composition of the electorate
- Primary voter turnout in midterm cycles, 2010-2024
- Effect of primary rules, including same-day registration and registration deadlines, on voter turnout

SELECT PUBLISHED RESEARCH:

- “The Effect of Open Primaries on Turnout and Representation” (2024) - Open and nonpartisan primaries increase turnout and produce electorates that are more representative of the public than closed primaries.
- “2022 Primary Turnout: Trends and Lessons for Boosting Participation” (2023) - States that adopted top-two or top-four primary systems saw an average turnout boost of about 3 percentage points; consolidating primary dates also increased participation.
- “2018 Primary Election Turnout and Reforms” (2018) - Adopting open primaries and consolidating primary election dates increase turnout.

WORKING PAPERS AND ONGOING RESEARCH:

- “The Effect of Partisan Primaries on Turnout and Representation” (2024) - States that open primaries to unaffiliated voters see turnout rise by about 5 percentage points, and the electorate becomes more racially and politically representative of the general public.

NEED HELP WITH CONNECTING TO AN EXPERT?

Contact **Ross Sherman** at ross@uniteamerica.org for coordination, background briefings, or more information.

