

The Divisive Primary Hypothesis in Presidential Elections

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Introduction

The lengthy battle between Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton throughout the 2008 Democratic Presidential nomination campaign evoked questions of whether either candidate would stand a chance in the November election. While Senator John McCain secured the Republican nomination on March 4, 2008 when former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee dropped out of the race, it took Obama an additional three months to defeat Clinton on June 4. In addition, Senator McCain outscored Huckabee by 1,297 delegates, whereas Obama only defeated Clinton by a slim margin of 305 delegates. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi openly expressed her concern about party infighting between Clinton and Obama: “There is absolutely no question that I have concerns about the attacks that are being made on one candidate or another. I do have concerns that the negativism can diminish our prospects for the general election” (Coile). House Speaker Pelosi’s comments were echoed by

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Democratic Party elites, who worried that the division of support for Obama and Clinton would be detrimental to the eventual nominee in the general election.

The Clinton-Obama nomination race is just one of many hotly contested primaries that have been thought to cause division within a certain political party before a major election. The close primaries between Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan in 1976 and between Pat Buchanan and George H.W. Bush in 1992 resulted in bitter defeats for the Republican Party in November. These two instances are products of the 1972 election reforms championed by Senator George McGovern and Representative Donald Fraser. Prior to the reforms, state and national party elites controlled the delegate selection process during the nomination campaign, and, therefore, controlled who would be selected as their party's nominee. The rules changes of McGovern-Fraser Commission "transferred the responsibility of selecting a nominee from the party professionals to the party rank and file" (Atkeson, 2000). The McGovern-Fraser reforms were implemented to legitimize the nomination process by increasing voter participation and allowing underrepresented constituencies to voice their opinions. The result of these reforms is an open, democratic nominating process that is ultimately determined by the party rank and file. Referred to as the

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“candidate supremacy” or “plebiscitary” model, this process forces nominees to appeal directly to their constituents and compete for votes within party lines.

Literature Review

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In the midst of increased factionalism of political parties, social scientists developed a hypothesis that the party with the more divisive nomination contest will find itself significantly handicapped in the general election. This hypothesis stems from the belief “that supporters of losing primary candidates may be so disillusioned that they abstain from voting for their party’s nominee in the fall election” (Kenney and Rice, 1987). In addition, the party faces the problem of disenchanting their supporters so severely that they actually vote for the opposing party. The individual candidate factions that remain at the end of a hard-fought nomination season must be reunited in order for the nominee to succeed in the general election. The nominee must form a coalition between factions within the party; a process that is seriously hindered by a lengthy nomination campaign. Thus, the divisive primary hypothesis incorporates the idea that divisive nomination campaigns are detrimental to the formation of a strong party coalition prior to the November election (Atkeson, 2000).

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The theoretical framework underlying the divisive primary hypothesis is grounded in the fields of sociology and psychology and their explanation of group conflict. Social-psychological research has consistently shown “that individual members of groups engaged in conflict over scarce resources become intensely loyal to their group—the in-group—and develop intensely hostile feelings toward the other group—the out-group” (Kenney and Rice, 1987). At the end of the group conflict, the losing group is likely to maintain feelings of hostility towards the winning group despite their common background. Perhaps the most important finding in these studies is that these individual group members are usually unable to set aside their hostility to unite against a common enemy.

Kenney and Rice (1987) draw parallels between these studies and the divisive primary hypothesis. The conflict is a nomination campaign and the groups are the supporters of candidates from a certain party. In this case, the scarce resource is the party nomination and the common enemy is the opposing party’s nominee. Throughout the primary season, it is evident that party infighting occurs between candidates and tension heightens within the party prior to the general election. The party then begins to divide into factions as nomination activists side with a certain candidate “based on their knowledge of the

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candidate, the candidate's own character and personal qualities, the candidate's performance in previous primaries and caucuses, and his ideology and issue stands" (Atkeson, 2000). At the end of a hostile nomination campaign, it is unlikely that supporters of losing candidates will set aside their differences and return to the party fold in support of the general nomination campaign against the opposing party. Thus, it is the argument of proponents of the divisive primary hypothesis that the more intense the nomination campaign, the poorer the chances are of that party's nominee in the general election (Kenney and Rice, 1987).

Research on the Divisive Primary Hypothesis

A multitude of studies have examined the effects of divisive primaries on party electoral prospects. Although some of these studies have found some support for the divisive primary hypothesis in presidential, senatorial, and gubernatorial elections, the conclusions are mixed. The general conclusion from these studies is that divisive primaries have little to no effect on congressional and gubernatorial election prospects, while they seem to have a more significant effect on presidential elections. It should be noted, however, that presidential elections have been relatively under-researched in comparison to congressional and gubernatorial elections. Much of this

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disproportion of studies is based on the fact that there have been far fewer presidential elections for scholars to include in their datasets. Lonna Rae Atkeson cites two specific methods used to research the divisive primary hypothesis—“aggregate data on election outcomes and survey data on the behavior of individual voters and campaign activists” (Atkeson 2000). Regardless of the methods, the goal of this research is to examine the link between nomination campaigns and general elections.

Andrew Hacker was the first scholar to study the divisive primary hypothesis through his analysis of senatorial and gubernatorial elections. Hacker defines a divisive primary as one where the winning candidate received less than 65 percent of the vote. Hacker’s definition is representative of many early studies on divisive primaries, as he uses an arbitrary cutoff point as a determination for divisiveness. Hacker examines the 220 senatorial and gubernatorial elections that occurred between 1956 and 1964. From his study, Hacker came to the “conclusion that the candidate emerging from a divisive primary stood a better than two-to-one chance of being defeated at the general election” (Hacker, 1965). However, Hacker also found that one-third of the candidates who survived a divisive primary managed to reunite the party and win the general election. Thus, Hacker’s initial study

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contained mixed results that neither confirmed nor rejected the divisive primary hypothesis.

In another of the initial, unsophisticated studies on primary divisiveness, Robert Bernstein refined Hacker's definition of a divisive primary to any primary in which the winning candidate finishes less than 20 percentage points higher than the runner up (Bernstein, 1977). Using data from nearly 600 Senate primaries from 1956-1972 to explain election outcomes, Bernstein was the first to include controls for incumbency and partisan orientation of the state in his analysis. Bernstein firmly concluded that divisive primaries reduce a candidate's chances for winning the general election. In 1984, Patrick Kenney and Tom Rice duplicated the results of Bernstein using a multivariate regression analysis that controlled for incumbency, party orientation, and the unique politics of the South. Kenney and Rice extended Bernstein's study and found a strong relationship between divisive primaries and the general election success of gubernatorial candidates (Kenney and Rice, 1984).

As the number of presidential elections increased to a number sufficient to provide an adequate dataset for a regression, scholars began to examine the divisive primary hypothesis at the presidential level. The first of these studies was conducted by James Lengle in

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1980, who examined state-level presidential primary data from 1932-1976. Lingle used Bernstein's dichotomous variable that defined a divisive primary as one where the winner defeats the runner up by fewer than twenty percentage points. After controlling for incumbency and party orientation, Lingle found that a divisive primary in a certain state hurt the eventual winner's chances to win that state in the general election, with a more pronounced effect for Democratic candidates (Lingle, 1980). A 1995 study by Lingle, Diana Owen, and Molly Sonner expanded the dataset to include more elections, confined the study to the Democratic Party, and compared the effects of primaries and caucuses separately. However, Lingle, Owen, and Sonner still confirmed the conclusion of previous studies that divisiveness does hurt the winning candidate (Lingle, Owen, Sonner, 1995).

The first study to contain a sophisticated variable to measure divisiveness in presidential elections was Kenney and Rice's 1987 report. Their study examined states that held presidential primaries between 1912 and 1984. Kenney and Rice argue that previous studies have incorrectly determined that Democratic and Republican primary divisiveness are independently related to the November vote.

According to Kenney and Rice, "[i]t is not enough, then, to measure

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the divisiveness of each party's primary simultaneously; the two primaries must be considered relative to each other" (Kenney and Rice, 1987). To account for the relationship between Republican and Democratic divisiveness, Kenney and Rice create a single interval measure by subtracting the Republican nominee's percentage of the primary vote from the Democratic nominee's percentage of the primary vote. Thus, a negative score would indicate that the Republican nominee is advantaged in the general election, while a positive score would mean that the Democratic nominee is favored in November. The Kenney and Rice model controls for traditional state voting patterns, minor-party movements, incumbency, and the unique politics of the South, and concludes that divisive primaries have a strong negative effect for the candidate in the general election (Kenney and Rice, 1987).

Additional studies in support of the divisive primary hypothesis "have focused on the behavior of individual party activists (caucus goers and party chairpersons) and primary voters during the nomination and general election stages of the campaign" (Atkeson, 2000). Research from Johnson and Gibson (1984), Comer (1976), Stone (1984, 1986), Southwell (1986), and Buell (1986) has confirmed the theory that there is a negative carryover effect that is consistent

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with the divisive primary hypothesis (Atkeson, 2000). The negative carryover effect illustrates that supporters of losing candidates are less active on behalf of the party's nominee than are supporters of the winning candidate (Johnson and Gibson, 1984).

However, there has been a recent movement among certain election scholars who believe that the negative effects of primary divisiveness are overstated. Referred to as revisionists, these scholars argue that measures of candidate quality need to be included in the analysis of the effect of divisive primaries on general elections. This is based on the idea that not all incumbents are equal, and weak incumbents attract more competition and generally have more difficult general election campaigns (Atkeson, 2000). In 1981, Richard Born conducted the first analysis of divisive primaries that included a control for candidate quality. Born examined House elections and found that divisive primaries had only a small negative effect on election results. In addition, Born concluded that this effect was "not sufficiently acute in itself to cause defeat" (Born, 1981). In a similar study, Kenney and Rice (1988) found no effect of divisive primaries on Senate and House elections. Mark Westlye (1991) updated Kenney and Rice (1988) and found a modest effect in the Senate. However, Westlye's major contribution to the study of divisive primaries was

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finding that incumbent vulnerability has a greater impact on general election results than does incumbent primary divisiveness (Westlye, 1991).

The most sophisticated study to date on the effects of divisive primaries on general election outcomes was prepared by Lonna Rae Atkeson (1998). Atkeson alters the dataset used by Kenney and Rice (1987) to create a national model of presidential elections from 1912-1996. By changing the Kenney and Rice (1987) regression to national level analysis “a national context can be examined and can provide us with the added capability of including additional election year controls in the model that capture candidate quality” (Atkeson, 1998). This is based on Atkeson’s belief that presidential elections are national events where voters take into account the performance and ideologies of candidates on a national level. Atkeson uses Gallup Poll results from the incumbent’s final year as president as a control for candidate quality. In addition, Atkeson accounts for the general context of the election by including the unemployment rate at the end of the incumbent’s term as a measure of the strength of the economy. Atkeson generally concludes that the effect of divisive presidential nomination campaigns on general election outcomes is reduced when

candidate quality and general election context are considered (Atkeson, 1998).

**Towards a Better Understanding:
Candidate Quality and Election Context**

Despite the multitude of research on the divisive primary hypothesis, there is still room for a good deal of improvement. Atkeson (1998) does well to create a national model that can take into account election year characteristics, but she leaves out a number of important issues that contribute to the eventual success or failure of the candidate. This paper will expand on the presidential study by Atkeson, (1998) through the inclusion of additional controls for candidate quality and general election year context, and by adding two additional presidential elections.

In addition to the approval rating of the incumbent candidate, this analysis includes economic indicators, gross domestic product and inflation, that measure the strength of the economy during the incumbent's presidency and are not included in Atkeson's study. The traditional voting patterns of particular groups such as minorities, voters with high incomes, voters with high levels of education, and southern voters are also controlled for in this study. Finally, a variable for the presence of an incumbent candidate and a variable for the U.S.

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involvement in a war during the presidency of an incumbent are included. These additional candidate quality and election context controls may explain a considerable amount of the variation in the vote for the incumbent party candidate.

Data and Methodology

Dependent Variable

This study employs a panel dataset from the American National Elections Survey (ANES) cumulative file, which includes all national elections from 1948-2004. In contrast to previous studies, I use a dichotomous dependent variable, which is equal to 1 for all those who voted for the incumbent candidate and 0 for all those who voted for the opposing candidate. Rather than previous studies which primarily use Democratic percentage of the two-party vote in the general election as the dependent variable, the dichotomous variable emphasizes the effect of incumbency in general elections and does not assume that the percentage of the vote received by the Republican candidate is the mirror image of the percentage of the vote gained by the Democrat candidate. An ANES variable measuring the percentage of vote for the two major parties also aggregates the effect of the major third party candidates in presidential elections. Candidates such as Strom Thurmond on the States' Rights Party ticket in 1948 and George

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Wallace of the American Independent Party in 1968 received electoral votes, while Independent Ross Perot won 18.9 percent of the popular vote in 1992. In addition to candidates who have garnered significant amounts of the presidential vote, candidates such as 2000 Green Party nominee Ralph Nader—who only received 2.4 percent of the popular vote—may shift close elections in favor of either major party. Thus, the aforementioned variable is recoded so that the incumbent party in each election year is equal to 1 and the opposing party and the major third party—because no major third party has won a presidential election—is equal to 0. This dependent variable allows me to explicitly measure the impact of divisive nomination campaigns on both candidates from both of the major parties, while still incorporating challenges from third party candidates.

Measuring Primary Divisiveness

The independent variable of interest is the divisiveness within the incumbent party in the primary elections. The selected measure of incumbent primary divisiveness is the percentage of the primary vote received by the candidate who received the most total primary votes. In continuing with the assertion that presidential elections are national entities, I used an aggregated percentage that accounts for total percentage of votes received by the incumbent party frontrunner in

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each caucus and primary in the presidential nomination process. Thus, the smaller percentage of the total popular vote received by the candidate who received the most votes in the nomination campaign, the more division exists within the party. I added an additional independent variable to measure the primary divisiveness within the opposing party, using the percentage of primary vote received by the opposing party frontrunner.

National-Level Independent Variables

In order to accurately measure the effects of primary divisiveness on general election vote, a number of controls were included in the regression that account for the context of the particular presidential election year. The academic literature studying the economy in relation to voting patterns illustrates that voters “have tended to hold governments accountable for bad economic times, reducing their support for parties holding government office in conditions of high unemployment or inflation or of low economic growth” (van der Brug et. al., 2007). Thus, macroeconomic conditions can have a significant effect on voter preferences in certain election years. The first of these controls considers level of economic growth experienced under the incumbent party, as measured by real gross domestic product (GDP). This variable was created by measuring the

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percentage change in GDP from the President's third year in office to his fourth year in office, or the general election year.

In addition to GDP, a variable measuring the national unemployment level was added to the regression. Similar to negative economic growth, increasing unemployment can indicate bad economic times in a manner that is more visible to potential voters, who may blame increased job loss on the president (Atkeson, 1998). The national unemployment rate, as measured in the Current Population Survey conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), for each general election year was used as another indicator of the general health of the economy.

The third and final economic indicator controlled for was the level of inflation in each election year. Using BLS data from the Consumer Price Index, I calculated the percentage change in inflation from the President's third year in office to his fourth year in office.

In addition, a variable is needed to control for the presence of an incumbent candidate in the presidential campaign. Previous studies have concluded that incumbent candidates running for reelection in federal offices have a distinct advantage over nominees from opposing parties, because they often secure a large base of supporters and boast four years of presidential experience (Ansolabehere & Snyder, 2002).

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Thus, a dummy variable is included and is equal to 1 for all election years in which the incumbent is present in the nomination campaign and equal to 0 for all years in which the incumbent is not present.

As Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, the President of the United States is considered to play a significant role in decisions to engage in armed conflict with other nations. The foreign policy of the United States is continually one of the major issues that shape voter preferences. Hence, a variable is added to control for the effect of war during the incumbent party's time in office. From 1948 to 2004, I consider only four major armed conflicts—the Korean War (1950-53), the Vietnam War (1959-75), the Persian Gulf War (1990-91), and the War on Terror/Iraq War (2002-present). I employ another dummy variable equal to 1 for election years when the United States is actively engaged in war and equal to 0 for all years when the United States is not involved in war.

Individual-Level Independent Variables

In addition to general election context, the quality of each individual candidate plays a significant role in the general election outcome. Previous election studies have failed to recognize that not all presidential incumbents possess the same qualities, and they often overstate the advantages of certain incumbent candidates (Atkeson,

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1998). To control for the quality of the incumbent candidate, I use an ANES variable that measures popular presidential approval.

Respondents to the survey were interviewed every four years and asked whether they approved of or disapproved of the performance of the president in his last four years in office. By adding this control to the regression, it is now possible to determine the relative strength of each incumbent up for reelection and control for any advantages they may possess over opposing party candidates.

Several traditional voting patterns are present in American presidential elections. In addition to controlling for the characteristics of particular presidential candidates, it is important to control for the characteristics of particular voters. One of the most prominent patterns in American presidential voting is the sectionalism of the political South. States located in the Deep South have traditionally deviated enormously from the national vote, which is most recently attributable to its staunch support of the Republican Party after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s (Schantz, 1992). Although other regions of the United States demonstrate allegiances to particular political parties, the support of the Republican Party in the political South is twice as pronounced as support for the Democratic Party in New England (Schantz, 1992). I employed an ANES variable that

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distinguishes between Republican-dominated Southern states, including Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas, that significantly deviate from the national vote. In addition, I recoded another ANES variable that identified the party of the president to equal 0 for years when the incumbent was Democrat and equal to 1 for Republican incumbents. I created an interactive variable, “southrep,” which consists of the political South variable multiplied by the Republican Party variable to control for Southern sectionalism.

Another important phenomenon in presidential election voting is the relationship between socioeconomic status and party affiliation. Recent political science literature explains that as the income of registered American voters increases, the more conservative they tend to be in relation to a number of political issues such as government spending, abortion, and minority rights (Himmelstein & McRae, 1988). Thus, I created another interactive variable to control for the tendency of those with high incomes to vote for Republican presidential candidates. Created by multiplying an ANES variable measuring family income and the aforementioned recoded Republican Party incumbent president variable, this variable controls for conservative voting trends in families with high incomes.

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In addition, scholars have argued that, as the level of voter education increases, voters are more likely to vote for the Republican candidate in presidential elections (Himmelstein & McRae, 1988). As the level of voter education progresses from middle school education to higher education, the tendency to vote conservative on political issues increases, peaking in the first years of college. Therefore, I recoded a seven category ANES variable measuring respondent education level to equal 0 for all those with up to high school diploma or equivalency and equal to 1 for those respondents with at least some college education. Another interactive variable was created by multiplying the education variable by the Republican Party incumbency variable to control for the effects of education level on presidential voting.

Finally, I controlled for the tendency of minority voters to vote for the Democratic nominee in presidential elections. It is clear from previous studies that, from era of the Civil Rights Movement to the present, non-white voters are extremely liberal on political issues (Himmelstein & McRae, 1988). To account for this trend, I recoded a six category respondent race variable to equal 0 for those who reported that they are White and to equal 1 for those who responded that they were Black, Asian, Native American, Hispanic, or of another race. In

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this case, I recoded the party identification variable to equal 1 for those who are Democrats and 0 for those who are Republican to isolate the Democratic voters. The interactive variable controlling for minority voting trends was created by multiplying the respondent race variable with the same presidential party variable now coded 1 for Democratic incumbents and 0 for Republican incumbents.

Logistic Regression

Combining the dichotomous dependent variable with the twelve previously explained independent variables, I create a model predicting the percentage of vote received by the incumbent party in the general election. The formalized model is:

$$INCV = b_0 + b_1INCDIV + b_2OPPDIV + b_3G + b_4INF + b_5U + b_6INC + b_7WAR + b_8APP + b_9SR + b_{10}INCOMER + b_{11}ER + b_{12}RACED + e$$

where *INCV* represents incumbent vote in the general elections between 1948 and 2004; *INCDIV* is the level of primary divisiveness within the incumbent party; *OPPDIV* is the level of primary divisiveness within the opposing party; *G* is the yearly percentage change in GDP in the election year; *INF* is the yearly percentage change in the CPI in the election year; *U* is the unemployment rate in the election year; *INC* is the dummy variable for the presence of an incumbent in the election; *WAR* is the dummy variable for United

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States involvement in war during the election year; *APP* is approval rating of the previous president; *SR* is the control for Southern voting patterns; *INCOMER* is the control for voters with high incomes; *ER* is the control for voters with some higher education; *RACED* is the control for minority voters; and *e* is the error term.

Results

Due to the fact that I employ a dichotomous dependent variable measuring the effect of primary divisiveness on both the incumbent party's general election success, I perform a logistic regression in addition to the traditional ordinary least-squares (OLS) method. According the parameters shown below in Table 1, the logistic regression model performs quite well. The Nagelkerke R-square value, which attempts to provide a logistic analogy to the R^2 value in OLS regression, is equal to .549, meaning 54.9 percent of the variance in incumbent party general vote percentages is accounted for by the independent variables in the regression. I use the regression coefficients from the OLS regression to estimate the size of the effect of each independent variable on the dependent variable (Table 2). Nine of the twelve independent variables are statistically significant at .05 levels or better, while an additional variable is statistically

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significant at the .10 levels or better (Table 1). Thus, the accumulated data seems to fit the logistic model fairly well.

Table 1: Logistic Regression

	B	S.E.	Sig.	Exp(B)
Incumbent Party Primary Divisiveness	.023	.003	.000	1.023
Opposing Party Primary Divisiveness	-.009	.005	.058	.991
Growth	-.151	.073	.040	.860
Inflation	8.856	2.699	.001	7016.106
Unemployment	-.227	.089	.011	.797
Incumbent Dummy	-.283	.100	.005	.753
War Dummy	.023	.158	.886	1.023
Presidential Approval	3.474	.067	.000	32.251
Race*Democrat	1.340	.140	.000	3.818
South*Republican	-.090	.084	.283	.914
Education*Republican	.210	.076	.005	1.234
Income*Republican	.216	.034	.000	1.242
Constant	-2.444	.963	.011	.087
Cox & Snell R Square	.412			
Nagelkerke R Square	.549			

The independent variable of interest, primary divisiveness in the incumbent party, is strongly significant in the positive direction. The positive regression coefficient shown in Table 1 implies primary

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divisiveness within the incumbent party is related predictably to the incumbent's percentage of the general election vote. In other words, as the level of divisiveness within the incumbent party primary increases, the incumbent party's share of the general election vote decreases. However, the OLS regression coefficient for this variable also indicates that this effect is rather marginal. More specifically, its value of .003 means that a one percent increase in the vote received by the incumbent party primary frontrunner would increase the probability of voting for the incumbent party's candidate by 0.3 percent. In addition, the incumbent divisiveness variable has a p-value of less than 1 percent, qualifying it as statistically significant because it is below the 5 percent cutoff. The strong positive relationship between incumbent party primary divisiveness and general incumbent election vote contradicts the conclusion of the Atkeson (1998) model, upon which this model is based. Atkeson (1998) concludes that primary divisiveness little to no effect on general election results for the incumbent party. However, Atkeson (1998) controls only for unemployment rate and presidential approval rating, while my model includes a number of other statistically significant control variables.

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Table 2: OLS Regression

	B	Std. Error	Standardized coefficient	t	Sig.
(Constant)	.054	.129		.422	.673
Incumbent Party Primary Divisiveness	.003	.000	.100	6.892	.000
Opposing Party Primary Divisiveness	-.001	.001	-.031	-2.127	.033
Growth	-.017	.010	-.060	-1.723	.085
Inflation	1.235	.359	.082	3.441	.001
Unemployment	-.028	.012	-.088	-2.328	.020
Incumbent Dummy	-.036	.013	-.031	-2.689	.007
War Dummy	.003	.021	.002	.134	.894
Presidential Approval	.660	.008	.651	81.638	.000
Race*Democrat	.182	.017	.087	10.608	.000
South*Republican	-.013	.011	-.013	-1.165	.244
Education*Republican	.028	.010	.026	2.815	.005
Income*Republican	.029	.005	.099	6.503	.000
R-squared	.466				
Adj. R-square	.465				

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Thus, my model explains to a greater degree the variance in the incumbent election vote and finds the independent variable of interest to have a significant effect.

The economic growth variable yielded a strong negative relationship between percentage change in GDP and general election vote for the incumbent party. According to the OLS regression coefficient, a one percent increase change in GDP percentage change from one year to the next would decrease the probability of an individual voting for the incumbent party candidate by 1.7 percent, holding all other factors constant. The GDP variable is statistically significant, as it has a p-value of .4 percent. While the fact that economic growth during a political party's occupation of the White House would hurt its chances in the upcoming presidential election may seem counterintuitive, the significantly poor economic conditions of the late 1970s and the early 2000s saw the rate of GDP growth either slow dramatically or dip into the negatives. Thus, the poor economic conditions sustained during the incumbent's presidency may have cost him votes in his reelection campaign.

The variable measuring the yearly percentage change in inflation exhibited a strong positive correlation with the general election vote of the incumbent. The variable's regression coefficient

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was 1.235, indicating that a one percent increase in inflation percentage change would increase the probability of voting for the incumbent party candidate by 123 percent. Although this effect seems large, yearly changes in inflation usually range from 0.1 to 0.2 percent. The p-value of the inflation variable was below one percent, indicating that it is statistically significant.

Another economic control variable, unemployment rate, showed a weak negative correlation with the dependent variable. The coefficient value of $-.028$ indicates that a one percent increase in unemployment results in 2.8 percent lesser probability that an individual would vote for the incumbent party candidate. In addition, the p-value for the unemployment rate variable is 1.1 percent, making it statistically significant. Although the correlation was relatively weak, this result was expected, as it directly reflects my previous assertion that voters often blame the incumbent party in the presidential election for poor economic conditions, especially increased unemployment.

The dummy variable controlling for the presence of an incumbent presidential candidate running for reelection generated a negative correlation with the general election vote. The incumbent dummy variable is statistically significant at the 5 percent level

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because its p-value is less than 1 percent. Although several incumbent presidents in the elections from 1948-2004 have won reelection, the slight negative effect of incumbent candidate presence in the election may be caused by the extremely poor performance of certain United States Presidents contending for reelection. For example, incumbent Gerald Ford, who secured the 1976 Republican presidential nomination despite an extremely vicious primary campaign with Ronald Reagan, was defeated by Democrat Jimmy Carter in the general election. In addition, Carter's loss to Reagan in 1980—489 electoral votes to 49 electoral votes—and Bill Clinton's defeat of incumbent President George H.W. Bush—370 electoral votes to 168 electoral votes—marked the two worst incumbent losses, in terms of electoral votes, in presidential history (CQ Press, 2005).

Not surprisingly, the regression yielded a strong positive correlation between presidential approval rating and incumbent general election vote. The coefficient value of .660 means that a one point increase in presidential approval rating would increase the probability of voting for the incumbent party candidate by 66 percent. The presidential approval rating variable is statistically significant, with a p-value of less than one percent. Thus, if voters approve of

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presidential performance, they will continue to vote for the incumbent party, even if the same candidate is not up for reelection.

Of the independent variables controlling for voter characteristics, three were statistically significant: the variable controlling for minority voters, the variable controlling for voters with high incomes, and the variable controlling for voters with high levels of education. All three variables yielded p-values of less than 1 percent, indicating their statistical significance. The significance of these variables shows that the tendency of voters with high incomes and high levels of education to vote Republican and the tendency of minority voters to vote Democrat in presidential elections has a direct effect on the success of the incumbent party in the general election.

The three remaining independent variable failed to reach statistical significance. While these results were unexpected, there are a number of factors, including the small number presidential election data upon which to draw and the change in voting patterns after the Civil Rights Movement, that could have contributed to the high p-values of these variables. Thus, the results indicate that primary divisiveness within the opposing party, southern voting patterns, and the United States involvement in armed conflict did not have a

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pronounced effect on the success of the incumbent party in the presidential elections from 1948-2004.

Overall, the logistic regression model employed in this study performed very well. The relatively high value of the Nagelkerke R-square demonstrates that primary divisiveness along with the general election context explain a significant amount of the variance in presidential voting. However, it is clear that presidential approval rating has the most significant effect on the success of the incumbent party in the general election. In addition, the majority of the independent variables qualified as statistically significant, with p-values under 5 percent. Finally, the incumbent primary divisiveness variable, which was the variable of interest, yielded a relatively strong positive correlation with incumbent general election vote, allowing us to conclude that the divisive primary hypothesis is justified in its application to presidential elections.

Conclusion

In this study, I introduced an improved model to explain the outcomes of presidential elections. I included additional independent variables not considered by Atkeson (1998), such as inflation, unemployment and war. The dichotomous dependent variables employed in my studies, coupled with two separate independent

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variables for primary divisiveness within each party, are an improvement over previous studies. This methodology allows me to separate out the effects of primary divisiveness on each party's success in the general election. Finally, a binary logistic regression was employed in addition to an ordinary least squares regression to test the divisive primary hypothesis.

The findings of the study indicate that the effect of primary divisiveness in federal elections has been overstated by previous studies that found strong links between divisive primaries and general election outcomes. Once the general election context and candidate quality are controlled for, it is clear that the influence of divisive primaries on general election outcomes is greatly diminished. The effect of divisive primaries in my study seems to be stronger than in the similar study by Atkeson (1998) but still not as strong as earlier studies that employed aggregated data. As primary divisiveness is not primarily responsible for the variation in general election vote, it appears that the main factor in determining the success of presidential nominees is candidate quality as determined by the voters.

Finally, a suggestive next step in the research on what allows a candidate to succeed in federal elections would be the inclusion of other potential independent variables. These variables may include,

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but are not limited to, campaign spending figures and the content analysis of press reports, campaign speeches, and candidate advertisements, to evaluate the effect of contentious primary battles on the November vote.

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