

Is Competition in U.S. Elections Desirable?

Written by Vilius Semenas

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VILIUS SEMENAS, DEC 28 2013

Electoral competition can be argued to be a key component of a flourishing democracy. Only through competition it is possible to ensure the government's responsiveness to the wishes and aspirations of citizens (Brunell, 2008: 5). However, when it comes to presidential and congressional elections in the U.S., there is another side to this argument. The need for competitive general elections is offset by primary elections, where party candidates compete among each other (Brunell, 2008: 113). Candidates' awareness of the constituents' wishes is ensured during these elections, thus guaranteeing the candidate's accountability and responsiveness. The more competition there is in subsequent elections, the closer the outcome is; consequently, there are more dissatisfied voters. As argued by Brunell and Buchler (2009: 450): 'if the purpose of democracy is to create a government that the public likes and trusts, then non-competitive elections are paradoxically healthy for democracy.'

This essay will therefore argue that competition in congressional and presidential elections is generally undesirable; however, to some extent, still needed. The argument will first be supported by determining the nature of competition in presidential and congressional elections. Then, reasons for less competition will be determined in terms of winner and loser satisfaction with elected officials. Finally, the change of patterns of competitiveness in the U.S. elections will be analyzed, opposing Brunell's (2008) argument for redistricting, and determining the reasons of decline in competition in recent years.

The electoral system is one of the major factors determining the nature of electoral competition in a country. In the case of U.S., it is the Single Member District (SMD) electoral system, otherwise called First-Past-The-Post (FPTP). Contrary to proportional representation (PR) systems, constituents vote directly for their desired candidate instead of party lists, and only one candidate gets elected in a district. Thus, the FPTP is a winner-takes-all system. Consequently, there exist only two major parties, as is in most other countries that use FPTP. Whilst the U.S. has been reluctant to change electoral systems and has never intended to switch to PR, there have been quite a few changes in electoral law. However, these changes have ultimately only reinforced two-partyism, for example, by preventing easy ballot access to third parties. Blais (2008: 94) argues that 'new party entrants to the system have largely been kept out of politics by the dominance of the two main parties', meaning that third parties in the U.S. are weak and work better as interest groups rather than serious challengers of main parties. The U.S. has never seen, and is unlikely to see, a phenomenon such as the sudden rise of Liberal Democrats in the UK in 2010. As party identification with Democrats or Republicans is deeply entrenched within the electorate, there is very little space for candidates of third parties to be elected.

Frymer's (2010: 30) statement that '[party] goal is both not to alienate important swing voters and to maintain their hold on their electoral base' basically summarizes the nature of electoral competition in congressional elections, and makes further explanation fairly simple. Over time, politicians have become more ideologically polarized (Gelman et al, 2008: 113). A perfect example of this is the gap in support for the war in Iraq by Democrats and Republicans (a gap which has significantly widened despite already having been quite large when the war began) in comparison with common support by both parties for the Vietnam War in the 1960s' (Gelman et al, 2008: 114-116). Liberal-Conservative polarization is also evident in many social issues, such as abortion and taxation. Similarly, voter polarization has also increased. It is well illustrated by the 'increase in partisan voting: voting in House elections is now much more consistent with voting in presidential elections' (Abramowitz et al, 2006: 88). In addition, split-ticket voting has decreased from more than 25% in the 1980s' to less than 15% now (Gelman et al, 2008: 125-126). Voters

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are likewise polarized on social issues depending on their partisanship. Consequently, the existence of the so-called 'Red' and 'Blue' states, which have respective tendencies to vote Republican and Democrat, cannot be denied. It can therefore be concluded that party and voter polarization, as well as winner-takes-all elections, explain the nature of competition in both congressional and presidential elections.

Whether competition in elections is desirable or undesirable ultimately raises the question whether competition actually exists. It can be argued that during the last two decades, competition at the federal level has been high as House and Senate elections have generally been close. In the period 1995-2007, the biggest difference between the majority and minority parties was 31 seats out of 435 in the House of Representatives, and 11 seats out of 100 in the Senate (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). This shows that the electorate is fairly evenly polarized. However, the fact that Representative incumbents during the same period of time have maintained at least a 94% rate of re-election, whereas Senators maintain at least only 79%, shows that at the state level, there was very little competition (Center for Responsive Politics, 2012). The House election of 1998 saw even more shocking numbers: only 6 of 401 candidates who sought re-election did not succeed. These two contradictory arguments require some further elaboration. The lack of state level competition in congressional elections leads to a realization that it is counterbalanced in primaries. During congressional primaries, candidates of the same party compete for the support of the public, and only one of each party in a district can afterwards compete for a seat in Congress. Thus, states, either Red or Blue, elect the candidate most suitable to their needs long before actual elections. Consequently, Abramowitz (2006: 78) argues that 'despite the appearance of national competitiveness, however, the number of competitive House contests has fallen since 1994'. The same explanation basically applies to presidential elections, which Beaumont (October 2012) sums up concisely:

'The presidential battleground map is as compact as it's been in decades, with just nine states seeing the bulk of candidate visits, campaign ads and get-out-the-vote efforts in the hunt for the 270 Electoral College votes needed for victory. That means just a fraction of Americans will determine the outcome of the race for the White House.'

Due to the existence of swing states (and districts) and a more or less equal polarization of the electorate, the winner-takes-all nature of FPTP competition results in large numbers of voters who lose elections. Brunell (2008: 11) argues that, 'the cry for more competition in House elections is so prevalent that we rarely reflect upon the costs associated with competitive elections nor do we question the link between competition and responsiveness.'

Countries using PR do not face such difficulties, as there is much less polarization in multi-party systems where parliaments often consist of a wider range of politicians in terms of ideological position. In the U.S., on the other hand, ideological stance has a significant effect on polarization and competition. Wrighton & Squire (1997: 457-459) give two good reasons why competition has fluctuated in the past. First, partisan realignment in 1932 led to the introduction of New Deal policies turning around US politics and, in a sense, inverted parties ideologically. This provided incentive for, in this case, the Democrats to challenge hitherto uncontested seats. Second, from 1960s onwards, an increase of incumbency advantage has been evident. Cox & Katz (1996: 494) argue that, 'not only were incumbents by definition experienced themselves but also their presence could scare off experienced challengers from the other party.'

For example, although president incumbents have not always been re-elected, when they do, they are likely to win by a greater margin than new challengers, whereas when they lose, the margin is usually smaller (Prakash, 2012). Taking into account the latter two reasons, it can now be argued whether competition in congressional and presidential elections is desirable or not.

Voters want their chosen candidate to win, and this is a fact. Therefore, electoral competition is undesirable. Winning elections tends to have a positive outcome on the satisfaction with elected officials, electoral institutions, and the government as a whole (Brunell, 2008: 32). However, more competition in elections results in a higher number of losing voters. This is not to say that competition in general is bad. Without competition, there could be no democracy, legitimacy, and responsiveness. Yet, to some extent, lesser competition benefits both voters and parties. Brunell (2008: 35) states that 'losers have a significant number of negative responses and far fewer positive things to say than winners' about their representative. This is in fact a natural consequence of events. Losing voters cannot be as

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satisfied with election outcomes, as their wishes are less likely to be regarded. Consequently, they tend to express discontent. Also, Brunell and Buchler (2009: 453) argue that 'non-competitive elections yield Representatives who are in more ideological agreement with their constituents.' If a particular district has a significantly larger proportion of citizens identifying with one party than the other, there consequently is more coherence between the electorate and the Representative in terms of ideological views and opinions on specific issues. Furthermore, higher competition in elections does not necessarily improve accountability. Primary elections are argued to be serving the purpose of maximizing responsiveness to citizen wishes; thus it can be concluded that 'the utility of competitive general elections is quite low', and therefore, undesirable (Brunell, 2008: 113).

A study by Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning (2006) has shown that electoral competition in House election in 2002 was the lowest since the 1970s. The number of safe districts for both Democrats and Republicans has reached its highest point thus far, whereas the number of marginal districts is at its all-time low (Abramowitz et al, 2006: 76). Even though at federal level there seems to be a fairly high degree of competition; given that majorities in the House have been smaller than they used to be throughout the 20th century, it is debatable whether there is a need for less competition. Ansolabehere et al (2006: 22) suggest that, 'today, only about 25 percent of statewide candidates face serious primary opposition, and less than 8 percent win after competitive primaries but uncompetitive general elections.'

Therefore, the argument by Brunell (2008) and Brunell and Buchler (2009) that competitiveness in congressional and presidential elections should be reduced through redistricting seems to be lacking evidence. Abramowitz, Alexander and Gunning (2006) did not find evidence that redistricting particularly affects the decline of electoral competition. On the contrary, their study found that 'a shift in the partisan composition of House districts' occurred only between redistricting cycles, whereas 'a decline in the ability of challengers to compete financially with incumbents' was another major reason for decline in competition (2006: 86). Campaign spending is argued by Gierzynski (2000: 64) to be more important for the non-incumbent candidates to seriously challenge incumbents. However, he provides evidence that in most cases, incumbents raise significantly higher amounts of money, which then gives them a much higher chance of re-election. Even though this essay has agreed with Brunell's argument for less competition, it does not agree with the notion of redistricting to reduce competition. Competition in both congressional and presidential elections at the state level is already low, in spite of marginal results that add up at the federal level. Redistricting could reduce competition at the state level even further, but in the end results would basically be the same.

This essay argued that competition in the U.S. congressional and presidential elections is generally not desirable. In order to support this argument, this essay first of all looked into the nature of competition in elections, emphasizing the importance of the FPTP electoral system and voter polarization. Then, the extent of competition in the U.S. was examined at state and federal levels, with the conclusion that whereas competition has significantly decreased overall at the state level, with very few competitive districts remaining; close results of recent elections at the federal level were the result of high voter polarization and a handful of swing states. Next, the positive effects of less competition on winning and losing voters were examined, leading to a conclusion that competition is not desirable. Finally, the implications of decline in competition were discussed, emphasizing the advantage of incumbency, as well as the role of money in campaigns; finishing with opposition to Brunell's (2008) argument that competition should be reduced by redistricting.

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