

Pre-Analysis Plan: Voter Distrust and the Resonance of Party Outsiders in Primary Elections

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Introduction

The bounded rationality of the American voter is well documented. Heuristics like differentiation between the parties represent one solution for how citizens make complex decisions without full information, but in primary elections, when all candidates are running under the same party label, no such heuristic exists. Which heuristics, then, do voters utilize when making decisions in primary elections? This survey experiment will utilize a conjoint analysis design to estimate the marginal effects of five factors which the literature suggests can influence voting decisions in primaries: gender, strategic general election considerations, ideology, party endorsements, and previous political experience.

Prior to presenting respondents with profiles of two candidates running in a hypothetical open-seat U.S. House election, we will ask questions designed to measure the respondent's attitudes toward both government and party institutions. We hypothesize that respondents who are less trusting of those institutions will be less likely to choose the more "establishment"-style candidate. While some scholars have pointed to voters' risk tolerance to explain support for outsider candidates (Kam and Simas 2012), this study will build on the preliminary work of Dyck, Pearson-Merkowitz, and Coates (2018) to assess the effect of distrust toward government and party institutions on support for party outsiders.

Theoretical Expectations

The current political system is characterized by intense partisanship with mostly uncompetitive congressional elections (exacerbated by gerrymandering and geographic sorting). For voters who feel disaffected with the system yet are strong partisans, the general election does not represent a prime opportunity to vote for change. When institutional distrust and party identification clash, it is a safe bet to assume that party identification will win out; and even if distrust wins, the would-be voter would likely rather stay home than vote for a candidate of the opposing party. Primary elections, however, offer voters the chance to express their frustrations with the political system by supporting an outsider promising change without having to vote for the opposing party. Moreover, open seat primary elections are often much more competitive than primaries that feature an incumbent, and they also represent a central means of selecting new individuals to our representative government. Thus, an open seat primary election offers us an ideal setting to measure the shape that voter distrust may take in voting decisions and how those decisions ultimately effect who represents us in Congress.

We hypothesize that, when respondents indicate a higher level of distrust in government institutions and/or their own political parties they will be more likely to support candidates they perceive to be outsiders who can change the status quo. How exactly a candidate may come across as an outsider, however, is a more difficult question to answer and one that is well-suited to a conjoint analysis design, as we describe in the next section.

Our intuition is that being perceived by voters as an outsider candidate in a primary election is conditional on the candidate possessing some combination of the following attributes: 1) no previous political experience; 2) fewer expressions of support from the formal party organization; 3) ideological extremity; and 4) for Democratic respondents, women, minority, and younger candidates. Thus, our survey design will allow these attributes to vary randomly across several permutations of candidate profiles. As we show in the exploratory data analysis, support for outsider candidates in the 2016 presidential primary elections was asymmetric; Republicans were more consistently supportive of Donald Trump when they expressed disapproval for national government institutions. Because of the caveats explained in that section we are hesitant to hypothesize that the effects of distrust on support for outsider candidates will be asymmetric in our study. Both a lack of formal party organization support and a perception of a candidate as ideologically extreme are plausible indicators of outsider status to primary voters, particularly as outsiders to the party establishment. A candidate's lack of political experience can also indicate party outsider status, but it can also indicate Washington outsider status, perhaps lending credence for some voters to the common campaign refrain of "fixing" Congress. In the case of candidates' gender and race, we think that Democratic voters would be more likely to support women, minority, and younger candidates for office as a way to express a desire to change an exclusionary

system, which is another way that distrust toward political institutions might manifest in primary election vote choice. The results of the 2018 congressional primaries suggest that Democrats are more motivated than ever in particular to support women candidates while Republicans have nominated women at similar levels that they have in previous elections. This study can help us disentangle which types of candidates distrustful voters are likely to support.

Research Design

This study will use a conjoint analysis experimental survey design to estimate the marginal effects of the four factors which we hypothesize will signal to respondents whether the candidate is an outsider or insider, along with other factors that may influence vote choice in a primary including the age of the candidate, the candidate’s occupational background, and the competitiveness of the district in the general election.

Conjoint analysis fits well with this study because it can assess the relative influences of those several factors on the one observed outcome: voting. Conjoint analysis is an experimental technique for “handling situations in which a decision maker has to deal with options that simultaneously vary across two or more attributes” (Green et al. 2001, S57). In this way, we can better approximate real-world decision making than a standard survey experiment while having the distinct advantage of being able to assess the plausibility of multiple theories of voting in primaries.

The conjoint design allows us to estimate the average marginal component effect (AMCE) of several causal quantities of interest – such as party endorsements or candidates’ previous political experience – on the probability of that candidate being chosen. When repeated over multiple attributes, we can estimate the AMCE for several candidate characteristics and begin to make causal claims about the relative effects of those characteristics. By contrast, a traditional survey experiment would only allow us to estimate the effect of one or two factors, would not lend itself to multiple choice tasks with the same respondent, and would not be as close to approximating a real-world decision scenario.

This design will be implemented through the Qualtrics survey platform with 1,200 subjects recruited through Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk) online platform.¹ There are some small but important differences between MTurk samples and nationally representative samples. Berinsky et al. (2012) conclude that MTurk samples are more representative than in-person convenience samples, but less representative than national probability samples. Connor Huff and Dustin Tingley (2015) find that MTurk samples tend to be younger than nationally representative samples, but those younger MTurk respondents tend to resemble the younger respondents from national samples politically and demographically. Older MTurk respondents are less likely to be African American and tend to be more liberal than in national samples. Finally, Casey et al. (2017) note that MTurk sample composition can vary by time of day (though day of week differences are minimal), which we will account for by advertising our survey at different times of day.

A general questionnaire will be administered to learn some demographic and relevant political information about the respondent and to assign respondents into partisan consistent profiles. The questionnaire will also include respondents’ reported levels of trust toward government and party institutions. Using a five-point scale (never, rarely, sometimes, most of the time, always), respondents will be asked: How often do you trust the following to represent the public’s best interests:

- Congress
- The Supreme Court
- The news media
- The federal government
- Democratic Party leaders
- Republican Party leaders

¹After data cleaning - which we describe in the next section - we expect the sample size to settle at around 1,000 respondents.

Table 1: **Candidate Attributes**

Candidate A (Democrat/Republican)	Attributes	Candidate B (Democrat/Republican)
37, 46, 52, 60, 68, 75 (random)	Age	37, 46, 52, 60, 68, 75 (random)
Male/Female (random)	Gender	Male/Female (random)
African American, Asian, Hispanic, White (weighted random)	Race	African American, Asian, Hispanic, White (weighted random)
Toss-up, leaning towards the respondent's party, solidly favoring the respondent's party (random)	District Competitiveness	Always the same as candidate A.
Businessperson, Teacher, Doctor, Lawyer, Military (random)	Occupation	Businessperson, Teacher, Doctor, Lawyer, Military (random)
None, State Senator, Mayor, City Council Member (random)	Previous Political Experience	None, State Senator, Mayor, City Council Member (random)
Rated 6 (moderately lib/con), 7 (solidly), 8 (solidly), 9 (extremely) by the Progressive/Conservative Candidates Association	Ideology	Rated 6 (moderately lib/con), 7 (solidly), 8 (solidly), 9 (extremely) by the Progressive/Conservative Candidates Association
None, DCCC/NRCC, Sanders/Cruz, Pelosi/McConnell, Obama/Trump, State Dem/Rep party, Local D/R Town Committee	Endorsements	None, DCCC/NRCC, Sanders/Cruz, Pelosi/McConnell, Obama/Trump, State Dem/Rep party, Local D/R Town Committee

- The President
- One wildcard option²: respondents will be randomly assigned to either Special Counsel Robert Mueller, federal law enforcement, corporations/business leaders, local government, or executive branch staff.

Next, the respondent will be presented with two candidate profiles for a hypothetical open seat primary election for the House of Representatives; the party of the primary election will be determined by the respondent's reported party identification. Strong partisans will be assigned to the party matching their party ID. Pure independents and "leaner" respondents will receive a forced choice follow-up: If you HAD to vote in a primary, which party's primary would you choose? We will group leaners into the main analysis while independent/neutral identifiers will be reported in separate subgroup analyses in the appendix.

Candidate profiles will take on random values across the attributes of age, gender, race, district competitiveness, occupation, previous political experience, ideology, and endorsements. Respondents will be randomly assigned to one of three attribute orderings in order to test (and potentially account) for respondents' over-valuing attributes that are presented at the top or bottom of the page. Respondents will each "vote" in five primary elections with randomly generated profiles, and to avoid confusion each individual respondent will see the same attribute order for all five profile pairings. Presenting each respondent with five profile pairings will yield a total of about 5,000 responses.³ A template for candidate profiles is presented in Table 1.⁴ And finally, respondents will be asked to rate each candidate on a scale of 1 to 7 to indicate their preference intensity; in this case their intensity of belief that each candidate would represent the interests of "people like me" in Washington if elected to Congress.

²We include this wildcard option in order to test for other plausible ways in which distrust can manifest without keeping subjects on this section for too long. For example, a far-right respondent may distrust what they think of as agents of the so-called "deep state," perhaps including Special Counsel Robert Mueller or federal law enforcement; or a respondent who is further to the left ideologically may trust the political system but harbor distrust toward corporations/business leaders.

³This increases the statistical power of our analysis under the assumption that the responses are independent. We will test for independence by controlling for the primary matchup number.

⁴Table 1 shows how the candidate profiles will be presented to respondents taking the survey on desktop under one of the attribute orderings. This particular design does not render as well on mobile devices so mobile users will see a slightly different layout, with each attribute for Candidate A listed above each attribute for Candidate B. We will test whether there are systematic differences between mobile and desktop users; we do not expect any significant differences.

Data Cleaning

Some data cleaning will be necessary to ensure the quality of the sample. First, we will use the R package “rgeolocate” to determine the country of origin of subjects’ IP addresses. Responses with IP addresses originating outside of the United States will be removed from the sample. Next, subjects failing at least three of these five data checks will be coded as “problematic.” Analyses will be run with and without the problematic responses.

- Completion time (< 1 percentile or > 99 percentile)
- Total time on conjoint profile pages (< 1 percentile or > 99 percentile)
- Attention check:
"Regarding primary elections, for this question, please just mark 'somewhat agree' and proceed to the next screen."
- Age validation (same age entered at the beginning and end of the survey)
- Country of origin unable to be determined by IP address

Hypotheses

Conjoint analyses require a forced choice between alternatives to generate an observed outcome. This survey will require the respondent to indicate which of the two candidates they would vote for in their party’s primary.

H1: Voters who indicate less trust toward government institutions and/or their own parties in part one of the survey will be more likely to support candidates who have the traits of an outsider in part two.

As we described previously, we expect high levels of distrust to translate into more support for candidates who have never held elected office, candidates who are not endorsed by party elites or who are endorsed by outsider elites (e.g. Bernie Sanders, Donald Trump, or Ted Cruz), candidates who are more ideological, and among Democrats, women, minority, and younger candidates.

H2: Democratic respondents will exhibit more trust in institutions and be more supportive of establishment-style candidates than Republicans.

Though there was a lot of media speculation about the rise of a “Democratic Tea Party” in 2018, establishment-friendly candidates mostly fared well in Democratic congressional primaries (Kamarck and Podkul 2018; Conroy et al. 2018). We expect Democrats to respond more positively to cues that suggest a primary candidate is an insider.

We will test four alternative theories for voters’ decisions in primary elections. First, some scholars argue that gender shapes perceptions of ideology and candidate quality. Aside from the potential for voters to oppose women candidates for outright misogynistic reasons, previous research has shown that women are perceived to be more liberal than they actually are (Kitchens and Swers 2016; King and Matland 2003; McDermott 1998; Koch 2000), which can have a significant effect on the voting calculus in a primary election. On this view, we might expect Democrats to be more supportive of women regardless of their trust in government, while Republicans would be less supportive of women regardless of trust. Both candidates’ genders will be randomized in this study, yielding some woman vs. woman, woman vs. man, and man vs. man pairings. Second, we will randomize whether or not the House district is likely to be competitive in the general election. Perhaps voters value quality and electability indicators like endorsements, ideology, and political experience to a greater extent if they want to maximize the chance of winning the seat in the general election. Indeed, many scholars have argued that political viability can matter to voters nearly as much as candidate characteristics or issues (Bartels 1988; Brady and Johnston 1987; Abramowitz 1989; Abramson et al. 1992). On the other hand, voters may be more comfortable nominating an ideologically extreme, inexperienced, or non-endorsed

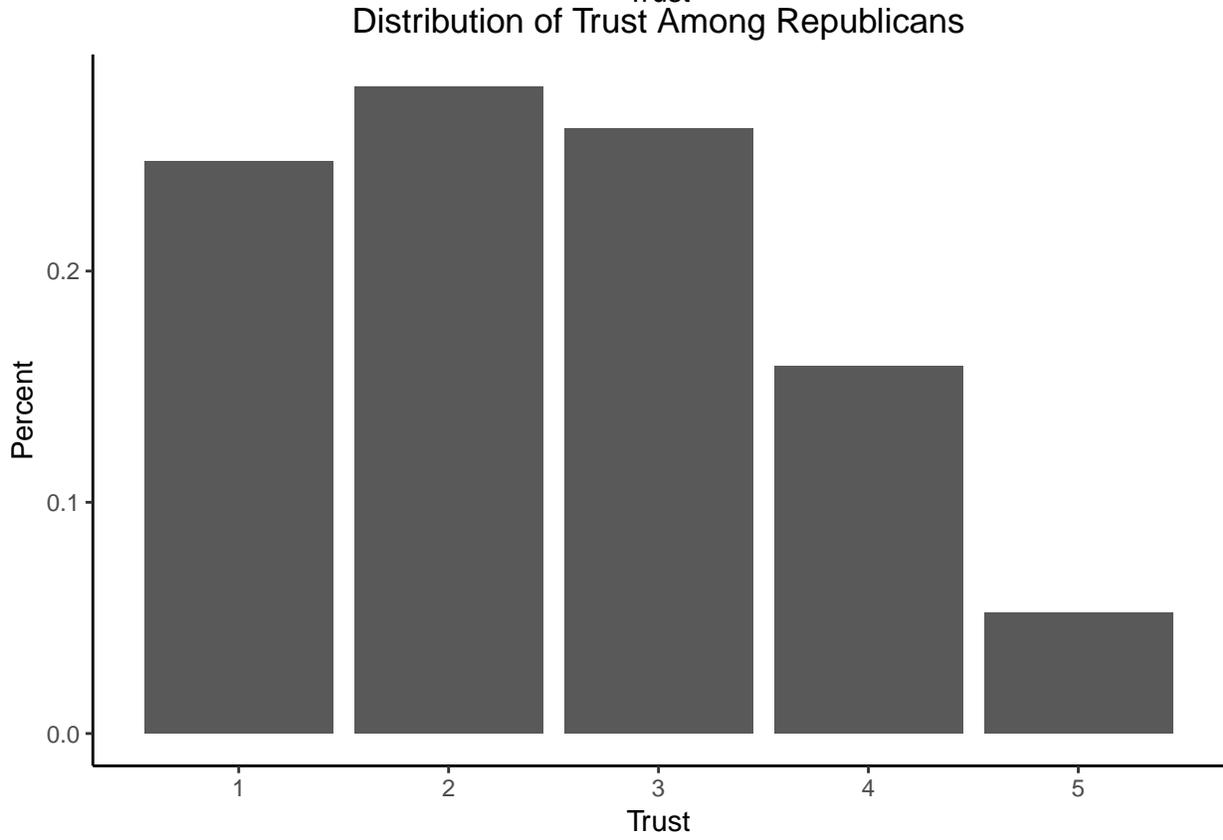
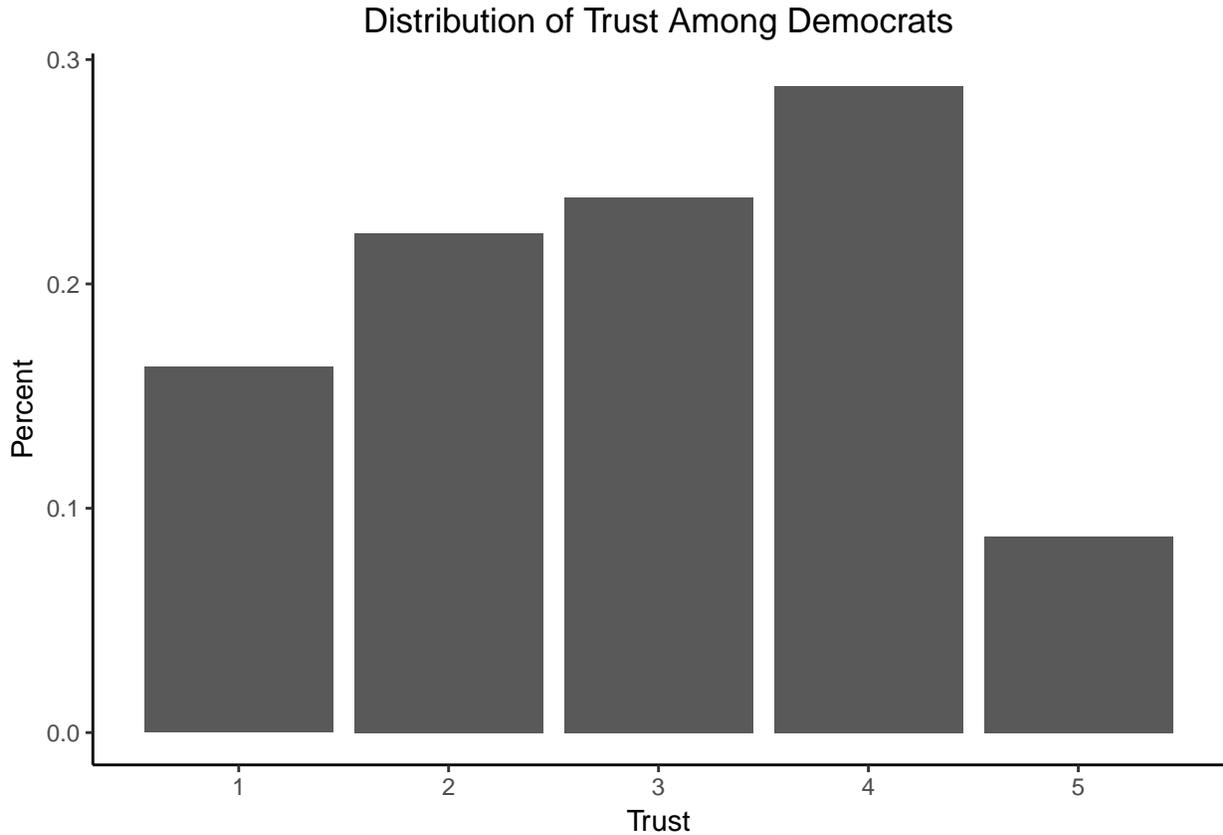
candidate if the risk of losing the general election is low. We will randomly assign the candidates to be competing in a district that is described as a “tossup in general elections,” “leans towards [respondent’s party] in general elections,” or “solidly favors [respondent’s party] in general elections.” Third, perhaps voters who turn out to vote in primary elections (especially open seat races) seek to elect the most liberal or the most conservative candidate possible, regardless of their feelings towards institutions. We will include in the candidates’ profiles a note indicating an ideological score from a made-up liberal or conservative group. The candidates will be randomly assigned to be rated between 6 out of 10 (with 10 being the most conservative/liberal) and 9 out of 10. These values offer the advantages of being sufficiently distinct for voters to have a real ideological choice, while being sufficiently similar to not act as a deal-breaker for voters who may want a solid liberal/conservative but value other attributes more. This attribute also doubles as a quality signal from a nonparty source. Ideological ratings are preferable to creating issue platforms for the candidates because voters prioritize issues differently and thus a general sense of conservatism/liberalism may get lost in the details. Fourth, we will randomize which candidate received an endorsement from the parties’ congressional campaign committees, state parties, local parties, and key partisan actors. Scholars of political parties have argued that in low-information elections, endorsements from party elites can serve as a quality signal for voters (Cohen et al. 2008; Hassell 2018; McNitt 1980; Kunkel 1988; Masket 2009). On this view, voters should be more likely to support a candidate if they see that their party’s congressional committee or a high-ranking elected official has endorsed that candidate. Our analysis will preclude both candidates from being endorsed by the same person or group.

Exploratory Data Analysis

Data Simulations

In this section we draw on Austin Knuppe’s (2017) template for simulating conjoint analyses. First, we generated data for 1000 survey “respondents” assuming a relatively representative mix of demographic characteristics and of Democrats and Republicans. Next, we assigned weighted probabilities of trusting in institutions to respondents, assuming that Democrats are more likely than Republicans to report trust in institutions (H1). The distributions in trust levels for Democrats and Republicans are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Distribution of Trust Among Democrats and Republicans



After constructing our conjoint profiles we assigned population averages and variance for each possible attribute level and subsequently estimated AMCE coefficients for our respondents. The AMCE results for a model with no variable interactions for Democrats and Republicans, respectively, are presented in Figures 2 and 3.

Figure 2: AMCE Estimates for Democratic Profiles

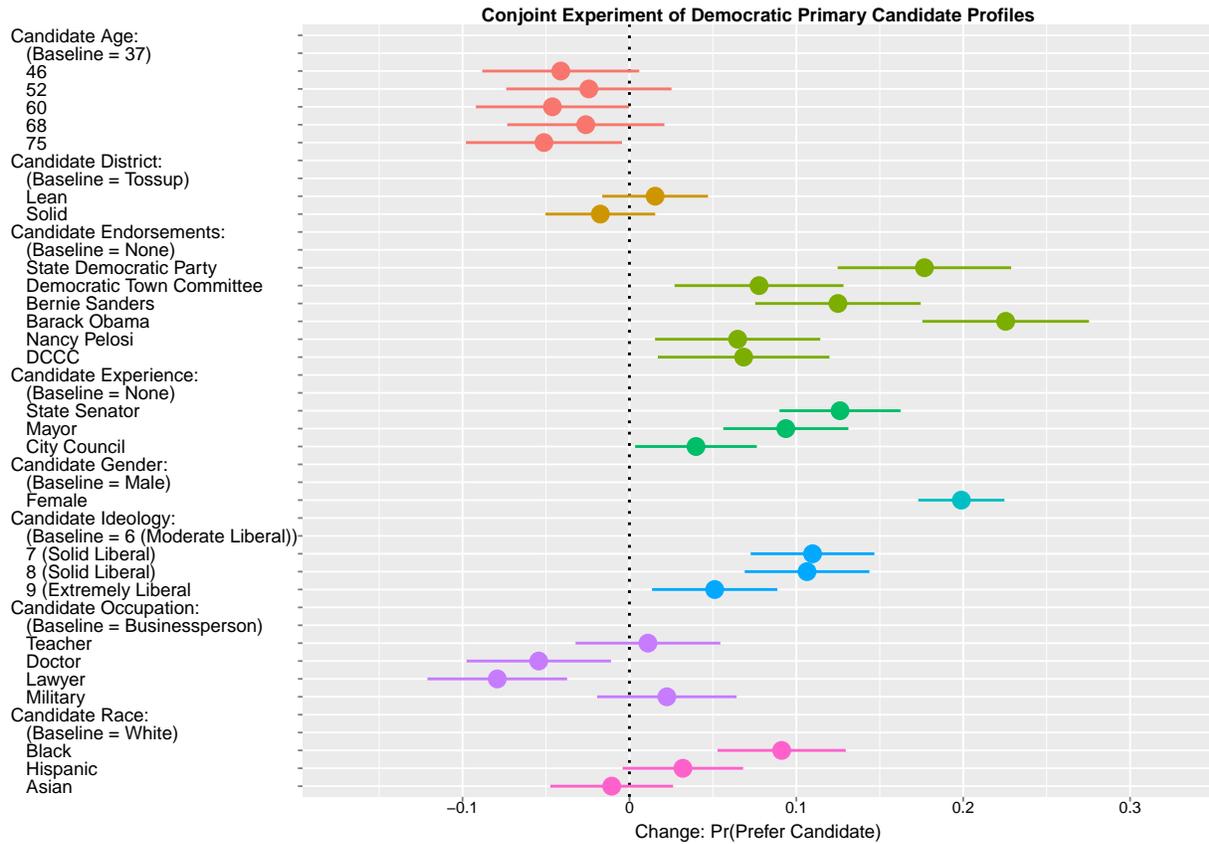
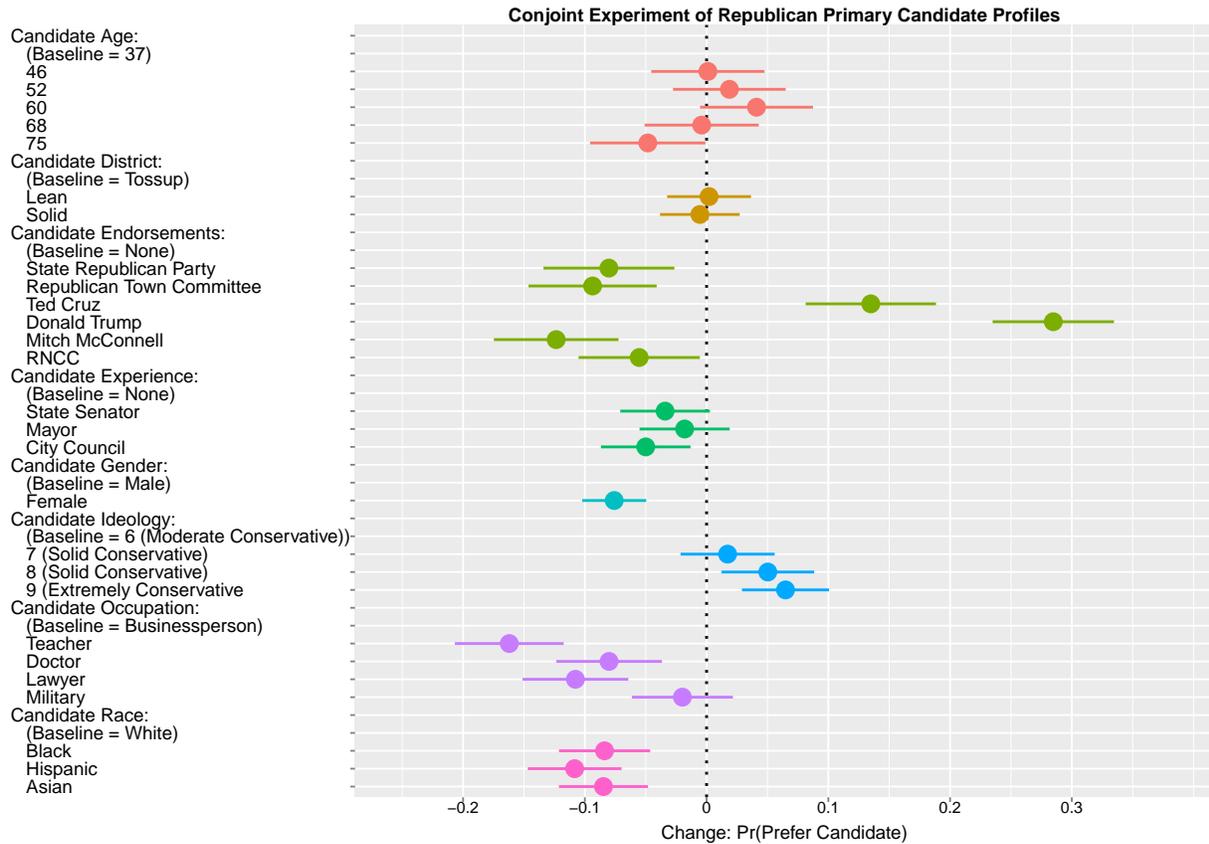
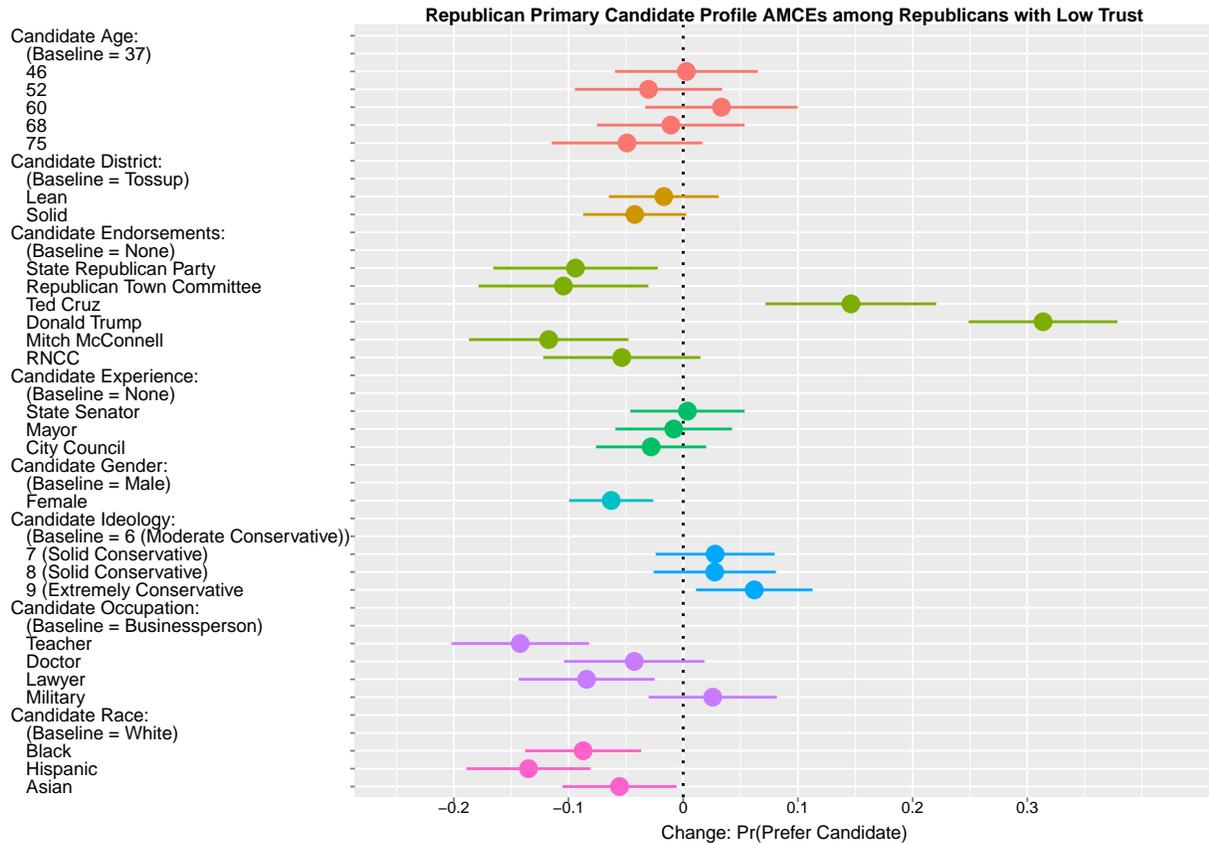


Figure 3: AMCE Estimates for Republican Profiles



We are ultimately interested in the relationship between trust and support for outsider versus establishment candidates in congressional primaries. We will run separate analyses for low/high-trust Democrats, and low/high-trust Republicans in order to test this relationship. An example of one such subgroup analysis is presented in Figure 4. Respondents will be coded as low-trust if their cumulative value on the trust questions is below the median value for all respondents, and high-trust if their cumulative trust value is above the median.

Figure 4: AMCE Estimates for Republican Profiles Among Low-Trust Republicans



Evidence from 2016

Utilizing data from the 2016 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey (CCES), we find some preliminary evidence to suggest that trust in government institutions is negatively correlated with support for outsider candidates in primary elections. The survey asked respondents who they voted for during the 2016 presidential primary elections. By utilizing the CCES’s validated voter data and voters’ reported party identification, we were able to narrow down which primary the respondent voted in. For the purposes of this preliminary analysis, and following Dyck, Pearson, and Coates (2018), we considered Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders to be the outsider candidates in the 2016 presidential primaries. Trump, a businessman and television host with no previous electoral experience, failed to receive many endorsements from party elites until it was already clear that he was going to win the party’s nomination. Sanders has served in Congress since 1991 but did not switch his party registration from Independent to Democratic until just before he announced his presidential run, and also failed to receive endorsements from many Democratic Party elites.

Voter distrust in political institutions is difficult to measure. The CCES asked respondents whether they approve of the way Congress, the Supreme Court, their Governor, and their state’s legislature are doing their jobs using a four-point scale (somewhat/strongly approve or somewhat/strongly disapprove). We coded a respondent as being distrustful of political institutions if they answered that they somewhat or strongly disapprove of *all* of those institutions, and not distrustful otherwise. This is not a perfect measure of trust; one might imagine a Democrat from a state with a Republican governor and legislature disapproving of all of these institutions because of their partisan makeup at the time of the survey (though the Supreme Court had an even ideological split at the time). Thus, this measure may overestimate Democratic distrust. Republicans’ distrust is likely more accurately measured for the same partisan makeup reasons.

Summary statistics are presented in the tables below. The left side of Table 2 shows distrustful, confirmed-voter, Democratic identifiers and their vote choices in the 2016 Democratic primary. Hillary Clinton carried those voters by a 55 to 44 percentage point margin. The right side of the table shows the same information for voters not coded as distrustful. Clinton gained about two percentage points while Sanders lost about three in the more-trustful population. This suggests a modest correlation between distrust and support for Sanders. Again, the way we are measuring distrust may be overestimating the number of distrustful Democrats by potentially including Democrats who disapprove of the current partisan makeup of those institutions. Table 3 includes self-identified independent voters along with Democratic identifiers. This inclusion may potentially mitigate some of that confounding effect. When independents are included, support for Sanders among distrustful voters surpasses support for Clinton. Clinton’s lead jumps back up to ten percentage points among more-trustful Democrats and independents.

Table 2: 2016 Democratic Presidential Primary Distrust

2016 Democratic Primary Vote	Distrustful Voters		Higher-Trust Voters	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Hillary Clinton	1,161	55.10	4,377	57.79
Bernie Sanders	932	44.23	3,167	41.81
Another Democrat	14	0.66	30	0.40
Total	2,107	100	7,574	100

Table 3: 2016 Democratic Primary Distrust (Including Independents)

2016 Democratic Primary Vote	Distrustful Voters		Higher-Trust Voters	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Hillary Clinton	1,218	49.19	4,563	54.71
Bernie Sanders	1,241	50.12	3,729	44.71
Another Democrat	17	0.69	48	0.58
Total	2,476	100	8,340	100

Table 4: 2016 Republican Presidential Primary Distrust

2016 Republican Primary Vote	Distrustful Voters		Higher-Trust Voters	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Donald Trump	999	56.66	2,482	45.73
Ted Cruz	420	23.82	1,441	26.55
John Kasich	136	7.71	593	10.93
Marco Rubio	124	7.03	632	11.65
Another Republican	84	4.76	279	5.14
Total	1,763	100	5,427	100

The Republican side is more consistent whether independents are included or not. From the left side of Table 4 (distrustful Republican voters) to the right side (more-trustful Republican voters) support for Donald Trump drops by nearly 11 percentage points. And when independents are included in Table 5, Trump’s support again drops by nearly 11 percentage points.

2016 Republican Primary Vote	Distrustful Voters		Higher-Trust Voters	
	N	Percentage	N	Percentage
Donald Trump	1,233	55.34	2,900	44.82
Ted Cruz	546	24.51	1,679	25.95
John Kasich	186	8.35	782	12.08
Marco Rubio	147	6.60	725	11.20
Another Republican	116	5.21	385	5.95
Total	2,228	100	6,471	100

Table 5: 2016 Republican Presidential Primary Distrust (Including Independents)

Though the measures can be improved and the results show some partisan asymmetry, the preliminary evidence presented here suggests that there is a relationship between attitudes toward government institutions and support for outsider candidates in primary elections. The relative advantages of fielding our own survey and using a conjoint analysis as proposed in this pre-analysis plan are that we can 1) devise a measure of trust that does not risk measuring partisan preferences; and 2) present the respondent with profiles of fake candidates which avoids association with confounding connotations of actual candidates.

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