

## Phoning It In and Failing to Show: The Story of the 2014 House Primaries

By Jill Lawrence and Walter Shapiro

**INTRODUCTION:  
STUMBLING TOWARD 2016**



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Too often impressions of congressional primaries are based entirely on the outcomes of high-profile Senate races. Christine O'Donnell (famed for her "I am not a witch" TV commercial) winning the 2010 GOP primary in Delaware symbolized a triumphant Tea Party movement. And Thad Cochran hanging on in the Senate runoff this year in Mississippi heralded the taming of the Tea Party. Of course, political reality is not nearly this tidy. We had marquee evidence of that this year in the cosmic (and premature) conclusions drawn from the single 2014 House primary that everyone remembers: House Majority Leader Eric Cantor's defeat by under-funded Tea Party challenger David Brat.

We wanted to try something different—and hopefully better than simply jumping to conclusions based on a handful of headline races. Before writing this paper, we looked closely at more than more than 200 candidates in more than 60 House primaries in both parties. (For details on how we chose the races, please see the methodology section below). The winner of each of the primaries that we studied has a realistic shot at being a member of the 114th Congress in January.

Our goal was to look for patterns and to tease out the internal issue debates among Republicans and Democrats. Primaries have traditionally been the venue where parties forge their ideology as voters are forced to make decisions based on candidates and ideas rather than political labels. In theory, there should be more issue diversity in House primaries than Senate contests, since public appearances

# THE PRIMARIES PROJECT

and personal alliances are often as important as 30-second spots. But, as we learned, the nationalization of politics has eliminated many of the idiosyncrasies in House primaries.

What we did discover, however, were the fault lines in both parties and the areas of lockstep political conformity. In a sense, what follows is a portrait of two political parties stuck in the past—both rhetorically and substantively—as they stumble uncertainly towards 2016. It may not be pretty or uplifting, but it is the reality of the 2014 House primaries.

## **METHODOLOGY: HOW WE CHOSE OUR RACES**

We studied 63 contested Democratic and Republican primaries for House seats that are open, competitive or potentially competitive. For at least part of the primary season, they were rated toss-ups or leans by Charles Cook of the Cook Political Report, or toss-ups, tilts or leans by Stuart Rothenberg of Roll Call Rothenberg Political Report, the leading non-partisan handicappers of congressional races.<sup>1</sup> Though the ratings changed occasionally, they produced a cross-section of intriguing and representative primaries. In open seats in districts that were not competitive by the Cook and Rothenberg standards, we included contested primaries only for the party almost certain to win the seat. We did not study primaries in which only one candidate raised enough money to have to file with the Federal Election Commission. We have occasionally noted in our report Senate and House races outside these criteria that are illustrative of our larger points. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from interviews we conducted.

## **THE REPUBLICAN NARRATIVE: A SPLIT DECISION**

The midterm Republican House primaries have been framed as a battle between the establishment and the Tea Party, and that's certainly one way to look at them. There were plenty of races that featured competitors identified with one side or the other. But the primaries can also be seen as a back-to-basics struggle between two factions split by both tactics and their definitions of what constitutes "basics."

The Tea Party faction was comprised of candidates endorsed by Tea Party groups or in alignment with core Tea Party principles such as "liberty" and a much smaller, less expensive, less intrusive government. Many of them had a confrontational approach to government; some even pledged to oust their own Republican leadership.

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<sup>1</sup> Please refer to the Cook Political Report House Race Ratings, found here: <http://cookpolitical.com/house/charts/race-ratings> and Rothenberg Political Report House Ratings, found here: <http://rothenbergpoliticalreport.com/ratings/house>.

The establishment faction, led by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, prioritized stable government and policies that help business. This wing of the party is so frustrated by the disruption crowd that Chamber officials added what might seem like a surprising topic to their discussions this year with congressional candidates: governing. “If you’re not coming here to govern, what’s the point?” asked Chamber senior political strategist Scott Reed. Compromise is “absolutely” part of that, he added.

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Which side “won?” That depends on the meaning of the word. In the end, House Majority Leader Eric Cantor’s loss to an obscure professor with local Tea Party backing was an aberration, particular to Cantor’s lofty post, corporate orientation and lack of connection with his Richmond, Virginia constituents. There was no Tea Party wave before his defeat, and his defeat did not trigger a subsequent wave of Tea Party victories.

And yet, there was a remarkable degree of uniformity to the Republican agenda in ads and on websites. Often the laundry lists differed only in the order in which candidates mentioned Obamacare, federal spending and constitutional issues like gun rights. The anodyne positions and priorities reflect the increasingly conservative Tea Party world that Republicans now inhabit. “It’s the opposite of NASCAR. You’re constantly turning right and hitting the gas pedal,” says Todd Rehm, a Republican consultant and blogger in Georgia.

It is possible that if not for Tea Party pressure, for instance, some candidates might have supported new federal spending on infrastructure or proposed specific changes to the Affordable Care Act rather than demanding repeal of the entire law (a goal they all know is impossible in the short term). That goes to the more fundamental influence of the Tea Party, which has been to instill in lawmakers a fear of settling for the half-loaf that is greater than the fear of what might happen if the government were to shut down or default on its debt.

That is not to say the Tea Party struck out at the polls. More than a dozen Tea Party candidates won primaries for open seats in majority-GOP districts that likely will send them to Congress, and about half of them would replace more establishment-oriented predecessors. Their records and campaigns suggest they will be either inclined or under pressure to resist compromise and party discipline. Among the Tea Party nominees are Georgia-10’s Jody Hice, an activist pastor, radio host and former House candidate who has tangled with the government over Ten Commandments displays and endorsements from the pulpit, and who would abolish the IRS and birthright citizenship; and Glenn Grothman, a state senator who ran against welfare, “yes men” and “weak-kneed” politicians in Wisconsin-6.

Nor did the Chamber always get its preferred candidate. Libertarian Tea Party incumbent Justin Amash of Grand Rapids survived a Chamber-backed challenge from businessman Brian Ellis in Michigan-3. And Patrice Douglas, chair of the Oklahoma Corporation Commission and a former mayor, lost a runoff against tea party backed Steve Russell, a former state senator, gun company owner and Iraq veteran who wrote a book about his role in the capture of Saddam Hussein. The chamber endorsed Douglas but put no money into her race. Reed said that wasn't "necessary." Translation: It was out of reach.

*"New Jersey's hapless Steve Lonegan, a former mayor and former state director of Americans for Prosperity, is a walking case study of what happens when someone holds fast to Tea Party views in a non-Tea Party state."*

Tea Party candidates were relatively rare in the northeast and Florida. In clashes there and elsewhere, the establishment held its own. Its winners included businessman Tom MacArthur in New Jersey-3, Reps. Dan Benishek in Michigan-1, Mike Simpson in Idaho-2 and David Joyce in Ohio-14, former Rep. Doug Ose in California-7, and state House speaker Andy Tobin in Arizona-1.

Even in the South, Tea Party candidates didn't run the table. Take the Georgia-1 runoff in the Savannah area between state Sen. Buddy Carter, a pharmacist, and Bob Johnson, running on his identity as a surgeon, a former Army Ranger, a Christian missionary and a political outsider. "For those who are looking for the prototype of a Tea Party candidate, Dr. Bob Johnson is the superlative example," Drew Ryun, political director of The Madison Project, wrote in endorsing Johnson.

The two were reasonably well matched on fundraising and each self-funded about a quarter of their campaigns. Carter focused on fixing Washington with themes that played on his profession. "Our nation needs healing, and I can fill that prescription," he said in one ad. Johnson was more interested in storming the gates of a capital he said was perpetrating a "liberal nightmare."

Like virtually every Republican running, he and Carter wanted to kill Obamacare. But Johnson also wanted to eliminate the Education Department and Common Core and, at a February forum in Waycross, he seemed tempted to add the Transportation Security Administration to his list. "I'd rather see another terrorist attack, truly I would, than to give up my liberty as an American citizen" by submitting to TSA screenings at airports like an indoctrinated sheep, he said. He apologized for the "stupid" language, but not the sentiment, after *Politico* posted a

video of the remarks in May.<sup>2</sup> The Club for Growth spent nearly \$400,000 against Carter<sup>3</sup> on Johnson's behalf, but Carter won a runoff in July.

New Jersey's hapless Steve Lonegan, a former mayor and former state director of Americans for Prosperity, is a walking case study of what happens when someone holds fast to Tea Party views in a non-Tea Party state. Lonegan lost a 1998 House race, 2005 and 2009 primary runs for governor and the 2013 special Senate election against Cory Booker before losing the New Jersey-3 primary to MacArthur, a moderate. He lost by 20 points despite the best efforts of Democrats to help him win the nomination. The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee alone poured more than a half million dollars into attacks on MacArthur in the vain hope that GOP voters would choose Lonegan.

MacArthur, like Douglas in Oklahoma, was one of the many candidates endorsed by the Chamber of Commerce but not backed with money. The group spent millions during the primary season but was highly selective. It bypassed intra-GOP House contests where its preferred candidates were well ahead or hopelessly behind, and sank money into fewer than 20 House races.<sup>4</sup> The objective was to block Tea Party candidates who did not share chamber goals such as passing immigration reform and avoiding default.

For instance, the chamber spent \$300,000 against trial lawyer Woody White<sup>5</sup> in order to secure the nominee it wanted in southeast North Carolina's 7<sup>th</sup> district, former lobbyist and congressional aide David Rouzer. One state analyst described White as a populist "bulldog." The chamber went after him by trying to tarnish his profession, even raising the sullied specter of another North Carolina trial lawyer. "It's called *jackpot justice* and we've seen it before with trial lawyers like John Edwards," said a narrator. "In search of big paydays, their lawsuits hurt businesses and destroy jobs... The last thing Congress needs is another trial lawyer like Woody White."

The establishment enjoyed a positive rate of return this year and could be said to have checked Tea Party momentum. At the same time, new Tea Party House members with new stores of energy are waiting to make their entrance. The Tea Party has not been tamed, and in fact may be reinvigorated next year by the presidential candidacies of movement pioneers such as Ted Cruz and Rand Paul.

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2 Emily Schultheis, "House candidate: I'd 'rather see' terror attack than TSA screening," *Politico* (May 6, 2014) (<http://www.politico.com/story/2014/05/bob-johnson-georgia-tsa-106393.html>)

3 Outside spending data found using the Campaign Finance Institute Money and Polarization in Congressional Primaries tracking tool, found here: [http://cfinst.org/Federal/election\\_2014/primaries.aspx](http://cfinst.org/Federal/election_2014/primaries.aspx).

4 Campaign Finance Institute project on Money and Polarization in Congressional Primaries.

5 Outside spending data found using the Campaign Finance Institute Money and Polarization in Congressional Primaries tracking tool, found here: [http://cfinst.org/Federal/election\\_2014/primaries.aspx](http://cfinst.org/Federal/election_2014/primaries.aspx).

## THE DEMOCRATIC NARRATIVE: A MISSING DEBATE

Most of the Democratic House primaries we looked at for this report were non-competitive open seats where the incumbent is either retiring or running for another office. What this should have meant, in theory, is that these primaries offered the Democratic candidates a chance to talk to the party faithful about issues without any fears that their comments would come back to haunt them in the general election. But rather than providing a window into the internal policy debates apt to shape the future of the Democratic Party, these primaries illustrated the lockstep uniformity of the president's party on almost all issues.

To illustrate the power of Democratic conformity, let's look at some examples from the winning campaigns in open-seat primaries in districts where the Republicans have virtually no hope even in tidal-wave elections. Barring a miracle, all these Democrats will be part of the House minority in the 114th Congress starting in January. They are, in short, the future of the congressional wing of the party. But despite glib talk from left-wing cause groups about a progressive revival, little that they are saying is different than the prevailing Democratic gospel in Washington. And so much of that ideology revolves around safeguarding prior gains rather than forging any new direction for the nation.

Nothing is more central to the Democrats' ideology than protecting Social Security (an FDR program) and Medicare (an LBJ program). As Ruben Gallego declared on his website in the race to fill the heavily Latino open seat in Arizona-7, "Social Security is a sacred contract between every worker...I would also fight any attempt to reduce the funding and effectiveness of Medicare or Medicaid." In the race to succeed Henry Waxman in Congress in liberal California-33 (Los Angeles-Santa Monica-Beverly Hills), winner Ted Lieu began a 30-second TV spot, "Two of the most important programs that America has ever done are Social Security and Medicare." And Mark Takai, who easily won the open-seat primary in Hawaii-1, promises in a commercial to "protect Social Security and Medicare."

The other issue most Democrats are willing to go to the barricades over is protecting women's reproductive rights. In New Jersey-12 (a safe seat vacated by Rush Holt), Bonnie Watson Coleman declared on her website that she is "100% pro-choice and will always fight for a woman's right to choose." In Hawaii, Takai pledged, "In Congress, I intend to be a faithful defender of a woman's right to choose." Alma Adams avoided a runoff in the race to succeed Mel Watt in North Carolina-12 partly by stressing women's issues. The top issue on Adams' website was "standing up for women" in the areas of reproductive and economic (paycheck fairness) rights. Her website stated that "a woman cannot call herself free if she does not own and control her own body."

When it comes to abortion, there may be even less dissent within the Democratic Party than among the anti-abortion Republicans. A squishy prior record on abortion means

that a candidate has to rush to get square with Democratic orthodoxy. In the race in Pennsylvania-13 (a Philadelphia-area seat abandoned by Alyson Schwartz to run for governor), Brendan Boyle affirmed his support for *Roe v. Wade* as he said defensively on his website, "If the pro-choice movement consisted exclusively of only those who never changed their mind on this critical subject, then it would be a much smaller group in Congress."

*"Why are the policy pronouncements from House Democrats—even those running in safe districts—so tepid?"*

Democrats also embrace raising the federal minimum wage (which dates back to 1938). Adams, for example, boasted about her record in the North Carolina legislature: "I led the fight to increase the minimum wage." The other issue that received heavy emphasis from Democrats in these safe seats was college affordability. Often the idea to reduce the tuition burden of college was little more than a sentiment. In New Jersey, Coleman vaguely promised she would work on making "college affordable and easing the student loan burden that mark today's youth." At the more ambitious end of the spectrum, Ruben Gallego in Arizona supports price controls (even though he does not call them that): "In Congress, I will introduce legislation capping the amount that colleges can increase their tuition each year."

Even in competitive districts, there were rarely full-throated debates over any substantive issue in the Democratic primaries. Part of it may have been the decline in newspaper coverage of politics and the necessity to compress issues to fit within 30-second television commercials. But the larger reason was that it was hard to find Democratic primary voters eager for ideological combat within their own party. While a few major candidates dissented over National Security Agency (NSA) eavesdropping programs or emulated Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren in her get-tough approach to Wall Street, these were the exception in a campaign year otherwise notable for a heavy dose of Xanax.

Why are the policy pronouncements from House Democrats—even those running in safe districts—so tepid?

While there is no definitive answer, a few theories are worth mentioning. With virtually no legislation emerging from a divided Congress, a sense of fatalism may have prevented candidates from offering ambitious, if unattainable, programs. The downsized expectations surrounding Barack Obama's remaining time in office may also be dampening Democratic dreams. With the Democrats feeling defensive on all fronts from the GOP onslaught in Washington, there may have been a sense that the party could not afford the kind of internecine warfare that was the norm from the 1960s through the 1980s. Another factor probably is that issues like NSA data collection policies and the aggressive deportation of

undocumented immigrants would have aroused the passions of Democratic primary voters—if only a Republican were in the White House.

But sooner or later the Democrats have to decide what they stand for—beyond preserving the social welfare programs of the past (plus Obamacare) and upholding liberal positions on social issues. Maybe policy innovation is impossible as long as there is a Democratic president. But if the Democrats have a roadmap for governing after 2016, it certainly was not visible during this year's House primaries.

## **IMMIGRATION: A THORNY THICKET**

The Democratic consensus in favor of immigration reform rendered it almost invisible in the party primaries we looked at, where it either wasn't mentioned or all the candidates said roughly the same thing. In contrast, the volume level was high on the Republican side, the primary season unfolding against a din of anti-reform rhetoric and calls for draconian security. At the same time, however, GOP candidates displayed a surprising if sometimes subtle diversity of opinions.

The level of opposition to immigration reform among Republicans was often inversely proportional to the importance of agriculture in a district, and the money spent on behalf of farmers and others reliant upon immigrant labor and skills. There were few candidates overtly in favor of immigration reform. Rhetorical breadcrumbs on websites and a look at endorsements and spending on their behalf were sometimes the only clues that a candidate might be open to the type of comprehensive, compromise reform bill that the Republican National Committee said in 2013 was essential to the party's future. The issue bubbled to the surface in several races that held to this pattern. Rep. Renee Elmers won renomination in North Carolina-2 against a former talk-radio host who vowed to protect the district against immigrants, amnesty and multiculturalism, and after a widely publicized argument in which radio host Laura Ingraham attacked her as "infuriating" for saying the system was broken and farmers couldn't get enough workers.

North Carolina-7 winner David Rouzer—a former state senator, federal agriculture official, agriculture lobbyist and congressional aide—had lobbied for a 2007 agriculture bill that included a years-long path to legal residency for farm workers who paid fines and back taxes, learned English and passed a citizenship exam. His website says he supports a system that allows employers and their undocumented employees "to *get on track to a legal workforce.*" Rival Woody White attacked him as supporting "amnesty," but Rouzer prevailed with help from a huge cash infusion against White by the pro-reform U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

In central Washington-4, a heavily agricultural district where candidates from both parties were on a single ballot in the state's new "jungle primary" system, the top two finishers were



both Republicans. In many respects the pair represented a classic Tea Party-establishment matchup—except on immigration.

The top vote-getter, former Redskins football player Clint Didier, won multiple Tea Party endorsements with alarmist rhetoric (a president and Congress engaged in “incomprehensible spending and unconscionable deficits,” a government that is the “greatest threat” to liberty in a time that is “the most dangerous” since World War II). But he is a farmer, and on immigration he was more calibrated. He reiterated his opposition to amnesty for “illegal aliens” but said farmers need more seasonal workers and called for a revamp of the temporary visa program.

The second-place Republican, Dan Newhouse, a former state legislator and former state agriculture director, was the rare GOP candidate to endorse a path to citizenship and survive a primary. “For undocumented workers already here, we need a long-term solution, not blanket amnesty,” Newhouse said on his website. “I would support a plan to allow undocumented workers with no serious criminal record to apply for legal status, learn English, pay taxes and a penalty and then go to the back of the line and work toward citizenship.”

The same dynamic was present in Michigan-4, where a picture of a barn on state Sen. John Moolenaar’s homepage signaled the agricultural nature of the district. Immigration was at the top of Moolenaar’s issues list. He stressed the importance of the temporary guest worker program to Michigan farmers and sounded open to comprehensive reform. “We must find a way to deal with those already in our country illegally that will not include amnesty,” he said. “The rule of law must be respected and there needs to be consequences for breaking the law.”

For something completely different, check out the candidates who ran in Alabama-6, a suburban Birmingham district that *National Review* describes as conservative but not hard-right. GOP voters rejected corporate executive Will Brooke, who had come under attack from rivals and outside conservatives for saying at a forum that “we do need to have a path to legal status for those who are in the country illegally so that we can begin to deal with them.” They also rejected Chad Mathis, the consensus Tea Party candidate, who reacted to Brooke’s statement by tweeting “What is Will Brooke Thinking!?!”

The runoff winner was Gary Palmer, founder and former president of the Alabama Policy Institute, whom *National Review* anointed “congressional candidate of the year.”<sup>6</sup> The magazine called him a “veteran think-tank workhorse” who could quickly become “a conservative congressional superstar.” Immigration was last on Palmer’s issues list but his position sounded as unforgiving as that of any Tea Party activist. He said he opposed “amnesty” and had signed a national organization’s pledge to “oppose legislation that would grant any form of work authorization to illegal aliens. “On the other hand, Palmer was mildly

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<sup>6</sup> Quin Hillyer, “Congressional Candidate of the Year,” *National Review* (April 14, 2014) (<http://www.nationalreview.com/article/375677/congressional-candidate-year-quin-hillyer>)

critical of Alabama's harsh 2011 immigration law (he said it could be costly to enforce and low-level jobs might go unfilled). One primary rival ran an ad branding Palmer "wrong on immigration." Of course, so was the law; much of it was permanently blocked under a court settlement.

The champion for immigration hardliners in the next Congress could turn out to be Jody Hice, the pastor and radio host who won a runoff in east Georgia's conservative 10<sup>th</sup> district. Hice wants to crack down on employers and cut off job availability so that illegal immigrants will "self deport"—a phrase Republicans generally have avoided since Mitt Romney used it in 2012 and triggered an intense backlash. Hice also wants to end birthright citizenship, a popular Tea Party cause in 2010 that has faded since then. He could be a more polished spokesman for those views than, say, Iowa's Steve King. "Hice is very articulate. He makes his living by speaking and preaching," says University of Georgia political scientist Charles Bullock. It doesn't hurt that Hice's wife is, as he says on his website, "of Hispanic heritage. In fact, her great, great, great grandfather was the first president of Argentina."

Immigration was a thicket for candidates who attempted nuance. One who survived was Mark Walker, a pastor who posted a surprise runoff win in North Carolina-6 against Rockingham County district attorney Phil Berger Jr., namesake son of the president pro tem of the state Senate. Walker told the *Greensboro News & Record* in April that he would secure ports and borders, and would not separate families but would not offer citizenship to "*these illegals*."

He added, "an alternative status may be best in order to contribute into our revenue base" —in other words, make them legal and collect their taxes. A couple of months later he found himself under attack by Berger. "Because I refused to say that we should be for mass deportation, my opponent has therefore taken that to mean I'm actually for amnesty. I'll tell you, it is untrue," Walker told activists in Dobson. "He also said that those who break the law here should not receive any government services but said he isn't sure 'rounding up children who have been here 28 years' is going to solve the problem," the *News & Record* reported.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to the intraparty struggle that seeped and sometimes erupted into the GOP primary contests, Democrats largely agreed on immigration (the statements by all four candidates on their websites

*"The few exceptions came in heavily Latino districts. For instance, in Arizona-7, immigration dominated a 30-minute public television debate even though all the candidates held similar positions."*

<sup>7</sup> Susan Ladd and Joe Killian, "Congressional candidate Mark Walker clarifies position on amnesty," *News & Record* (July 1, 2014) ([http://www.news-record.com/news/government/elections/article\\_dc9c491c-0194-11e4-bd87-0017a43b2370.html](http://www.news-record.com/news/government/elections/article_dc9c491c-0194-11e4-bd87-0017a43b2370.html))

in New Jersey-12 endorsed comprehensive reform) or did not bother to mention it (most candidates in Iowa-1 ignored the issue in their lengthy position summaries). The few exceptions came in heavily Latino districts. For instance, in Arizona-7, immigration dominated a 30-minute public television debate even though all the candidates held similar positions. And long-time local official Arizona's 5th District Representative Mary Rose Wilcox highlighted on her website her concern that reform might be accomplished badly through limited, piecemeal and temporary policies and executive action. "I am running for Congress to usher in immigration reform, and more importantly, to make sure that it is implemented correctly," she said. "I worry that the United States government is going to screw up reform programs and leave many good people in limbo."

Republicans may have a different definition of what it means to "screw up reform programs," but a surprising number of them are talking about the need for at least partial reform. This is no solid wall of condemnation from hundreds of candidates trying to outdo each other on the Obamacare abhorrence spectrum. For now, immigration reform appears to be in the hands of Obama and whatever he can come up with on his own. But there is the outside chance that House Republicans will surprise us between now and 2016, as Tea Party voices face competition from a determined business wing and perhaps a few presidential hopefuls aware of the need to send friendly signals to Hispanic and Asian voters.

## **OBAMACARE: HEALTH POLITICS ON AUTOPILOT**

The Affordable Care Act was a key factor in the birth of the Tea Party movement and the frenzied conservative mood around the 2010 midterms. "Obamacare" continues to be unpopular in polls, but so far this year—to the dismay of conservatives—it has not risen to the point of inflaming half the nation. During the primary season, the health law was more like wallpaper. The party positions were so generic and consistent that both sides seemed to be on automatic pilot. This is, after all, an argument voters and their leaders have been having for years. Everyone knows their roles.

Internal debate over the ACA was infrequent among Democrats and non-existent within the GOP. A few Democrats reflected liberal unhappiness with the law, but they were exceptions to the overwhelming number who adopted a "mend it, don't end it" approach that large majorities favored over starting the whole debate over again (in a [Sept. 9, 2014 Kaiser Family Foundation poll](#), the margin was nearly two-to-one in favor of improving the law rather than repealing and replacing it). In the Republican Party—so intent on killing Obamacare that Texas Sen. Ted Cruz would have shut down the government rather than fund the law—adamant, even angry calls for full-out repeal were campaign boilerplate.

Some Republican contenders made a nearly imperceptible bow to reality by pledging to “join the fight” for repeal rather than insisting outright that they would “repeal and replace.” Candidates who had what the hard right would consider squishy positions on immigration, current House leaders or compromising with Democrats blared their opposition to Obamacare as a way to prove their conservative credentials. But it was a useless yardstick given the universal denunciation of the law. A sampling of competitive descriptors: Destructive, dangerous, reckless, debacle, train wreck, monstrosity, mess, failure, nightmare, disaster, job-killer, budget-buster, colossal mistake and (the unkindest cut of all for this audience?) massive redistribution scheme.

State Sen. Steve Knight, a top-two finisher headed to the fall ballot in California-25, was one of the few who didn’t mention Obamacare in the issues or videos sections of his campaign website. That may have been because, inexplicably, they centered on complaints about Sacramento instead of Washington.

The threat posed by any association at all with Obamacare was starkly illustrated in Arkansas-4. State House majority leader Bruce Westerman, an agricultural engineer, was part of a group of lawmakers exploring whether the ACA’s Medicaid expansion could be adapted to rely on private insurers, a free-market approach some conservatives said they might support. A young political newcomer with backing from national and local Tea Party groups, investment banker Tommy Moll, seized on Westerman’s role and came close to staging an upset.

Westerman quit the Medicaid group after some late numbers suggested to him that the “private option” would not work financially. Regardless, Moll ran an ad that showed Westerman beside Obama and said the lawmaker had “sponsored not just one but two bills to implement Obamacare in Arkansas.” Westerman countered in a radio ad that “when it comes to Obamacare in Arkansas, there was only one type of vote I ever took: a ‘No’ vote, five times this year alone. Sadly, my opponent Tommy Moll is lying about me.”

The image of Obama carried power. “There’s a reflexive and vitriolic opposition to President Obama and anything associated with his presidency, particularly among the rural whites who are a major factor in the 4th district,” said Hal Bass, a political scientist at Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia. He said Westerman “got his hands dirty fooling with the private option” but ended up “only mildly compromised” because “he covered his rear.” The private Medicaid expansion passed without Westerman and Westerman won his primary. Oh, and the program did indeed incur cost overruns.

The much safer course for Republican primary candidates was to avoid any hint of interest in keeping or bettering the law. As state Sen. John Moolenaar said in an ad in the Michigan-4 primary, “I don’t back down from the tough fights like leading the charge to stop the expansion of Obamacare in Michigan. In Congress, no one will work harder to demolish it.” He won a three-way race with 52 percent of the vote.

Democratic House candidates were almost, but not quite, as monolithic as Republicans. By far the most common coping mechanism was a variation on the theme of building on the act. “I want to find reforms that fix and improve the Affordable Care Act. The roll-out was abysmal, but I think it’s wrong to hurt the middle-class by going backwards,” wrote Ann Callis, a former judge who won the Democratic nomination in Illinois-13. In Virginia-8 in the Washington suburbs, eventual winner Don Beyer called the law historic but flawed. “Instead of trying to repeal the law, like the Tea Party Republicans are doing, we need to make it better,” he said on his website.

Liberal Democrats felt freer than moderate Republicans to depart from the party line. State Sen. Adam Ebbin in Virginia-8 said he wanted to expand the ACA “by creating a public option to ensure access to Medicare for all.” The candidate endorsed by the *Chicago Tribune* and the *News Gazette* in Illinois-13—physics professor George Gollin—called the ACA “a good start” that he hoped would evolve into a single-payer system.

The consensus in Pennsylvania-1, in the Philadelphia area, was that Obamacare needed to move to the left. “In Congress, I will join the push to create a ‘public option,’” primary winner Brendan Boyle said on his website. State Sen. Daylin Leach, the third-place finisher, supported single-payer.

In a few cases, Democrats defended Obamacare to as a way to show their anti-Tea Party moxie. The website for state Rep. Pat Murphy, the primary winner in Iowa-1, declared “he’ll continue to fight for affordable health care by standing up to right-wing efforts to repeal Obamacare.” At the other end of the spectrum, some Democrats omitted any mention of the ACA or health care. They included Ruben Gallego in heavily Latino Arizona-7 and Mark Takai in Hawaii-1, both of whom won their primaries.

Last fall, when Republicans were ramping up their primary campaigns, Obamacare seemed like the gift that would give forever. The new online insurance marketplace was hopelessly dysfunctional and new minimum requirements forced many people out of their existing plans. Could there be any better campaign weapons than the utterly incompetent marketplace launch or Politifact’s designation of “if you like your health care plan, you can keep it” (Obama’s

*“Last fall, when Republicans were ramping up their primary campaigns, Obamacare seemed like the gift that would give forever. The new online insurance marketplace was hopelessly dysfunctional and new minimum requirements forced many people out of their existing plans.”*

repeated reassurance) as the 2013 lie of the year?<sup>8</sup> But by spring, despite continuing GOP antipathy toward Obamacare, the federal website was working and millions had signed up for coverage. Insurance prices have not spiked and several Republican governors have found ways to adopt the ACA's Medicaid expansion, and to accept the federal money that comes with it.

The disasters that did not happen instilled hope in Democrats that the issue would fade. Also, voters now have personal experience with Obamacare, which usually trumps partisan rhetoric. However, people benefitting from the law may not realize it, while those who feel like they've gotten a raw deal tend to be quite vocal about it—whether the law is to blame or not. There's no doubt that once again, Obamacare will be a useful turnout tool for the GOP. The open questions are whether Democrats in toss-up districts and states will try to use the law to their advantage, and whether that will work.

## **ECONOMICS: MIRED IN FDR VS. REAGAN**

The economy was second only to the Affordable Care Act in illuminating the vast gap between Democrats and Republicans. Both parties have national agendas that their primary candidates followed with little deviation. There was no Democratic drive to cap executive salaries, for instance, or Republican crusade to end corporate welfare. Candidates mainly tried to outdo one another as the most fervent foes of spending, taxes and regulations (Republicans) or champions of women, seniors and the middle class (Democrats).

As in the case of Obamacare, the predictability was a neutralizing force. When everyone is saying the same thing, how do candidates gain an advantage? In many cases they used their life stories to personalize their policy stands—their hardships growing up, or their experiences running small businesses. In others they targeted appeals to core constituencies that, if sufficiently motivated, could provide the winning margin in traditionally low-turnout elections.

Democrats frequently highlighted the need to create jobs, especially in pockets of distress such as Michigan, where Debbie Dingell in Michigan-12 zeroed in on reviving her state's manufacturing sector. But the most mentioned economic issue on Democratic websites and Facebook pages was raising the minimum wage, a top priority of the Obama administration. In many cases, it was a proxy for talking about jobs. With the employment picture improving, the omnipresence of the minimum wage issue reflected a new focus on people who have jobs but are barely scraping by.

In heavily Democratic North Carolina-12, all six Democrats at a debate agreed that the federal minimum wage should rise to \$10.10 an hour. In New Jersey-12, also a near-lock for Democrats,

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<sup>8</sup> Angie Drobnic Holan, "Lie of the Year: 'If you like your health care plan, you can keep it,'" *Politifact* (December 12, 2013) (<http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2013/dec/12/lie-year-if-you-like-your-health-care-plan-keep-it/>)

winner Bonnie Watson Coleman hinted that the Obama minimum wage plan was not good enough. She pledged to fight in Congress for “a living wage” (the phrase is the name of a movement that to require wages that meet the cost of living in their areas).

Labor-favorite Brendan Boyle of Philadelphia went with class warfare in his winning Pennsylvania-13 campaign, highlighting on his homepage an article headlined “Majority of Members of Congress Now Millionaires.” And the massive number of candidates in the California-33 primary to succeed Henry Waxman offered massive amounts of detail on their positions, reinforcing the idea that Santa Monica and Beverly Hills liberals take themselves exceedingly seriously.

Two Democrats running in California-31 released TV ads that married biography and policy in their competition to make the top two—and the fall ballot—under their state’s jungle primary system. Eloise Gomez Reyes said she had “worked in the fields copping onions every summer as a teen. Pull, clip, clip. Hardest work I’ve ever done,” then worked three jobs in college and law school. “I made the journey, but for people these days that journey has become so much harder,” she said. “In Congress I’ll fight for families working hard to join the middle class and those struggling to stay there.”

In “Abuelas,” Redlands Mayor Pete Aguilar sat between his grandmothers Jennie and Juanita as they asked questions that made them sound like strategists distilling the essence of every Democratic focus group ever held. “You’re going to make sure that every child gets a good education, right?” “Of course, Grandma.” “You’re going to protect Medicare and Social Security, correct?” “They’re sacred, Grandma Jennie.” “You’ll look out for the middle class, not big corporations?” “I always have, Grandma.” “You’ll still answer me when I call you Petey Pie, correct?” “Of course, Grandma Jennie.” Corny, but memorable.

The two California Democrats also ran economic-themed ads designed to turn out their supporters. “I remember what it was like being the only woman in a man’s world,” Reyes says in “Equal Pay.” “Today women still earn less money for doing the same work as men ... In Congress I will fight to guarantee equal pay for equal work.” Aguilar tried to mobilize his union backers in an ad called “Unity.” “We’re supporting Pete because he knows we need an economy that’s fair for middle-class families,” said a black woman identified as Sandra Hall of IBEW 477. “Pete will stand up to Republicans who want to give even more tax breaks to big corporations,” said Erick Jimenez, president of the Inland Valley Democratic Club. Aguilar barely made it onto the general election ballot as Democrats split their votes.

Every conservative priority—and the gap between the parties—was captured in one gulp in a radio ad for pastor and activist Jody Hice, the winner in Georgia-10. “We can continue down same path of higher taxes, more regulation, out of control government spending and Obamacare,” a narrator says, “or we can choose liberty, freedom and prosperity. As your

congressman, Jody Hice will work to repeal Obamacare, pass a balanced budget amendment, abolish the IRS and pass the FAIR tax.”

The ad spotlighted perhaps the only notable economic variation among Republicans, the chunk of primary hopefuls urging an end to the income tax, the Internal Revenue Service and (in at least one case in the races we studied) the constitutional amendment that permits a federal income tax. The vehicles for this were the flat tax (replacing progress income tax rates with a single rate for everyone) and the FAIR tax (replacing the income tax with a single national consumption tax on retail sales).

Republican officials frowned on explicit support for those proposals, viewing them as potential ammunition for Democrats in general elections. But that didn’t discourage widespread advocacy for the sweeping tax overhauls, particularly in conservative districts where they did not pose political danger. Two Georgia districts illustrated how their appeal crosses factional lines. The flat and fair taxes were championed by both Hice, a Tea Party favorite, and state Sen. Buddy Carter, a pharmacist with establishment backing who won the Georgia-1 primary. Carter said approvingly on his website that either tax reform plan would make the IRS “obsolete.”

The fair and flat taxes were less of a draw in more moderate districts such as northeastern Ohio-14, where state Rep. Matt Lynch mounted a strong but unsuccessful Tea Party challenge to freshman GOP Rep. Dave Joyce. Glenn Beck, interviewing Lynch on his radio show right before primary, praised him as one of the most outspoken supporters of the flat tax this cycle. “We’ve got to get rid of the Sixteenth Amendment,” Lynch said. Joyce, who won, ran a TV spot that focused directly on jobs. “I want to make sure every American who wants a job has one,” he said as visuals showed him on a shop floor.

*“With the exception of paeans to Israel, congressional candidates in both parties almost completely ignored the world on the other side of the ocean. It was not so much isolationism as profound indifference.”*

Joyce stood out for departing from the GOP’s iron triangle of taxes, spending and regulation. Republican Rick Allen, who won the primary to take on conservative Democratic Rep. John Barrow in Georgia-12, stuck to the formula but tweaked it by framing it as a matter of faith. “Obama’s big spending; it burdens our children with debt. The Bible says that’s immoral. But as a businessman I can help fix it,” Allen said in his first TV ad. Rebuilding the economy won’t be easy, he added, “but with strong faith and common sense, we can do it. We have to.” More typical was Bruce Poliquin, who won the nomination in Maine-2. The first item under the first issue on his website (economy and jobs) was “Eliminate unnecessary job-killing regulations.”



The economic themes of the primary season reinforced the policy ruts both parties have been in for decades. Republicans are still living in the Reagan era, when small-government rhetoric (if not reality) was the answer to all questions. Democrats are living at least partially in the New Deal, even though those programs badly need changes to avert a budget-busting nightmare. A few Democrats are open to reforming entitlements, but that was hardly the way to fire up the party faithful who vote in primaries. The conservative fervor for the flat and fair taxes was an interesting display of diversity in a year of very little. But it entailed little risk and likely helped candidates stoke enthusiasm in conservative districts.

## **NATIONAL SECURITY: WARS? WHAT WARS?**

The primary season took place during a spring and summer of foreign policy crises—Russia seized Crimea in mid-March and Islamic militants spread panic by taking Mosul in mid-June. But here is a tip for future historians wanting to see how these global challenges played out in the 2014 congressional primaries: Don't waste your time.

With the exception of paeans to Israel, congressional candidates in both parties almost completely ignored the world on the other side of the ocean. It was not so much isolationism as profound indifference. In our research, we did not come upon a single television ad that dealt directly with these new foreign policy challenges. In fact, most candidates did not even discuss national security or international affairs on their campaign issues pages, no matter how lengthy.

This was true across the primary calendar regardless of what was happening overseas. Start in April, when Democrat Brendan Boyle won a primary in Pennsylvania-13 without mentioning foreign affairs. In May, Alex Moody prevailed in the GOP race in West Virginia-2 without referring to any global issue except Israel on his website. The complete lack of interest in foreign policy was also evident in June when Pat Murphy emerged as the top Democrat in Iowa-1 and Leo Zeldin came out on top in the GOP race on the tip of Long Island in New York-1. The pattern continued in August when Ruben Gallego totally ignored global issues in winning the Democratic nod in Arizona-7. On September 9, the final day of the primary season, Marilinda Garcia captured the GOP nod in New Hampshire-2 without any talk of national security other than a boilerplate mention on her website that "America has no greater ally in the Middle East than Israel."

The vacuum-cleaner data collection policies of the NSA might have been a major issue in the primaries since it is a domestic subject that highlights fault lines in both parties. But while Tea Party conservatives and civil-liberties liberals critiqued the NSA's disregard of constitutional rights in some primary races, there was little evidence that this was a winning gambit even among partisan voters.

Perhaps the most dramatic television ad of the primary season was called “Rifle Shot” and aired by Matt Rosendale, a well-financed state senator and Tea Party favorite running in the GOP primary for the Montana at-large seat. In the ad, Rosendale pretends to shoot down a government drone with a rifle as he says, “Spying on our citizens—that’s just wrong.” Rosendale finished third in the tightly bunched primary with 29 percent of the vote.

In New Hampshire-1, Republican Dan Innis, a business school dean, also stressed his concerns about the NSA overstepping its bounds. “We need a civil liberties board with subpoena power to make sure Americans are protected,” Innis said during an early September debate. He added, “We know who the terrorists are. That’s who we should be spying on.” Innis fell short with 41 percent of the vote in a four-way primary.

The issue was not an automatic vote-getter on the Democratic side either. Running in the same Philadelphia-area primary in which Boyle won the nomination without ever talking about foreign policy, veteran state legislator Daylin Leach ran a web video in which he declared, “I’ve been very disturbed to hear some of the things that the federal government is doing in regards to the NSA. In regards to mining phone records.” The banner on the screen said, “Protecting Civil Liberties” as Leach went on to talk about the need to close Guantanamo. Illustrating the political power of civil liberties, Leach finished a weak third in the primary.

There were a few situations on the Democratic side, however, when opposition to the NSA served as a potent symbol that the candidate was an unabashed liberal. Running successfully in California-33 (a film-community district that Mark Leibovich in the *New York Times* called the heart of the “Botox Belt”<sup>9</sup>), Ted Lieu broadcast a television ad stating flatly, “I want to stop the National Security Agency from violating our privacy.” His principal Democratic opponent in this atypical district—failed Los Angeles mayoral candidate Wendy Greuel—actually had a section of her website in which she discussed nuclear negotiations with Iran.

Mistreatment of veterans was a late-developing issue that had more electoral traction than standard national security issues. With Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki being forced to resign at the end of May, the VA scandal emerged as a continuing motif in late primaries. Running successfully in the August GOP primary in Michigan-4, John Moolenaar said on his website, “Sadly, the current situation of Veterans Administration is proof that the federal government is failing our veterans in the most basic way.” In rural Michigan-1, Tea Party challenger Alan Arcand went after GOP incumbent Dan Benishek in a TV ad in which a woman said off-screen, “I’m sick and tired of Washington politicians like Dan Benishek allowing scandal after scandal in the VA. Our veterans are suffering because Dan Benishek did nothing on the Veteran’s Oversight Committee but look the other way.” Despite the blunt attack, Benishek won re-nomination to the safe seat by a better than two-to-one margin.

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9 Mark Leibovich, “The Real House Candidates of Beverly Hills,” *New York Times Magazine* (April 24, 2014) ([http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/27/magazine/the-real-house-candidates-of-beverly-hills.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/27/magazine/the-real-house-candidates-of-beverly-hills.html?_r=0))

In Hawaii-1, a Honolulu-area district with a large contingent of active duty and retired Armed Forces personnel, victorious Democrat Mark Takai listed “Military & Veterans” as the first issue on his website. “Mark believes it’s wrong that some in Congress have proposed cutting crucial services like assistance to homeless vets, suicide prevention programs and job training assistance,” the website states. His major opponent in the August primary, Donna Mercado Kim, promised to “be a tireless fighter for our veterans...and advocate for allowing Veterans to go to private doctors if they are not able to get an appointment in 30 days.”

During the early days of the Cold War, it was an article of faith that politics stops at the water’s edge. Judging from the 2014 primaries in both parties, interest in global issues now stops at the water’s edge. This omission might be understandable if the next Congress would not be debating the scope of America’s latest military commitment to Iraq, the question of arming some factions of the Syrian rebels (a subject not found in our research) and the nation’s response to an expansionist Russia. As a result, pressing issues that should be debated in 2014 will have to wait until the 2016 presidential race.

## ISSUES: MISSING IN ACTION

There is no better symbol of the irrelevance of policy debates in most 2014 primaries than the decision by serious candidates for Congress not to even bother to put a bare-bones issues section on their campaign websites. That is right—they offered nothing for voters who wanted to know where they stood.

Amanda Renteria, who will be the Democratic candidate on the November ballot in California-21, is certainly well acquainted with congressional issues since she served as chief of staff to Michigan Sen. Debbie Stabenow. Renteria did provide primary voters with a slogan, “From Our Valley, For Our Values,” but nowhere on her website did she explain what those values were. The closest to any issue specificity Renteria offered during the primary was a brief description of herself as “a pro-growth Democrat.”

Inexperience was also not the reason why Republican Matt Doheny skipped an issues page in his primary race in New York-21, which he lost to Elise Stefanik. In 2012, Doheny came within

*“The award for the campaign most emphatically about nothing goes to former state representative Tom Emmer, who won the Republican nomination in Minnesota-6, the district represented by the retiring Michele Bachmann. Emmer pursued a calculated no-issues strategy.”*

5,000 votes of defeating Democratic incumbent Bill Owens, who is now retiring. Instead of issues, a central item on Doheny's website was an angry response to a barrage of attack ads being aired against him by Karl Rove's Super PAC, American Crossroads. "Elise and Karl might think their negative attack ads will buy her the seat," Doheny said on the website. "We know the voters of the North Country won't be fooled."

In fact, the voters of the North Country gave Stefanik 61 percent of the vote in the low turnout primary.

State Rep. Delvis Dutton, a contender in Georgia-12, was another experienced candidate who skipped an issues page. He did run a series of 15-second ads, however, including one that showed him carrying a gun and another in which he said that "the other guys are running for Congress. But me, I'm running against Congress. If you want more of the same, I'm not your guy. But if you want to send a message, I'm your man." Apparently they didn't; he finished third.

Two of the three Democratic contenders in California-31—Eloise Gomez Reyes, a labor lawyer backed by EMILY's List and Joe Baca, a former congressman—had no issues pages on their websites. An issues page was also conspicuous by its absence from the website of Bruce Westerman, the majority leader of the Arkansas House, during the primary season. He didn't even have a "Meet Bruce" page. But he won the nomination and he's got both of those pages now.

The award for the campaign most emphatically about nothing goes to former state representative Tom Emmer, who won the Republican nomination in Minnesota-6, the district represented by the retiring Michele Bachmann. Emmer pursued a calculated no-issues strategy. He had no issues page on his website or Facebook page, and told the St. Paul *Pioneer Press* he was only talking about issues if voters asked—"but Minnesotans aren't asking."<sup>10</sup>

The newspaper reported that "he's handing out his cellphone number and trying to make personal connections," telling people that "I want to work for you... This is about being your servant. Do you feel like government has been listening to you? No. Do you feel like you actually have a say in what happens? No. Alright, well, I want to try and help you with that." The Minneapolis *Star Tribune* endorsed Anoka County Commissioner Rhonda Sivarajah, who made a substantive appeal. But Emmer, backed by the GOP establishment, crushed her nearly three-to-one.

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<sup>10</sup> Doug Belden, "6th District GOP primary: Rhonda Sivarajah is persistent underdog," *Twin Cities Pioneer Press* (August 3, 2014) ([http://www.twincities.com/politics/ci\\_26269724/sixth-district-rhonda-sivarajah-is-persistent-underdog](http://www.twincities.com/politics/ci_26269724/sixth-district-rhonda-sivarajah-is-persistent-underdog))

## IDENTITY POLITICS: THE SELFIE ELECTION

Identity politics have been a staple of American campaigns since long before William Henry Harrison in 1840 was falsely portrayed as having grown up in a primitive log cabin. The message “I’m just like you” remains one of the most potent in politics. But while there is no way to quantify this, our impression is that these just-folks appeals were especially common in the 2014 congressional primaries.

There is an obvious reason for this—hatred of Washington. It is difficult in either party to run for a seat in a legislative body that everybody hates in a city that almost everybody scorns. So any hint of the Washington taint needed to be airbrushed away whether the candidate is a newcomer or an incumbent.

Three examples from successful primary candidates illustrate the lengths that they would go to in an effort to camouflage the realities of their public lives:

Running for his third term representing Michigan-1 (a rural district covering the Upper Peninsula and the northern part of the state), Republican Dan Benishek, a former surgeon, faced primary opposition from under-funded Tea Party insurgent Alan Arcand. On his campaign website and in his television ads, Benishek is always called “Doctor Dan” and never “Congressman.” Typical was an ad called “Cares” in which an unidentified older woman declares, “Doctor Dan is working hard to see that seniors get the health care that they need.”

In California-21, a largely Hispanic district covering the Central Valley, Democrat Amanda Renteria moved back home in August 2013 to run against GOP incumbent David Valadao. She has a glittering résumé: Stanford, an MBA from Harvard and a lengthy stint on Capitol Hill becoming the first Latina to serve as a senator’s chief of staff (to Michigan’s Debbie Stabenow).

*“About the only thing better in  
the Republican hierarchy is a  
military record, though the  
Democrats too swoon  
over uniforms.”*

But you wouldn’t know any of this from her 30-second bio commercial called “Raised.” Without mentioning Stanford or Harvard—let alone Stabenow—she says to the camera, “I worked my way through college and returned to teach and coach at my old high school.” Her father then drives home the message by saying, “Politicians have forgotten our Valley. But Amanda has never forgotten her home.”

If elected in November to the open seat in upstate New York-21, 29-year-old Republican Elise Stefanik would be the youngest woman to ever serve in Congress. A Harvard graduate, she worked in the George W. Bush

White House, served as issues director for Tim Pawlenty's short-lived presidential campaign and was in charge of 2012 debate preparation for Paul Ryan. In short, she is a creature of Washington.

That reality was masked in her closing ad of the primary campaign in which she introduces herself as "a small businesswoman from Willsboro." Even in a web video in which she does acknowledge her elite pedigree, she claims that her presence in the district has nothing whatsoever to do with politics: "I chose to return home to the North Country to be close to my family and help grow our small business."

As the 2012 Mitt Romney campaign illustrated, small business owners are a touchstone of Republican identity. Having met a payroll in the private sector suggests to GOP voters that a candidate would be frugal with tax dollars. It also serves as an implicit guarantee that a candidate won't go Washington on them. Ken Reed, a self-funding pharmacist who finished second in a seven-way GOP primary in West Virginia-2, personified this imagery as he wore a white coat in his ads, looking as if he had just filled a prescription for Viagra. "I'm not a career politician," he declared on his website and repeated in his TV commercials. "I'm a small businessman and health-care professional."

About the only thing better in the Republican hierarchy is a military record, though the Democrats too swoon over uniforms. After a runoff in Oklahoma-5, Republicans nominated Steve Russell—a former state senator, a gun-company owner, and a retired Army Ranger and battalion commander. Russell's claim to fame is that his intelligence unit in Iraq helped capture Saddam Hussein and he wrote a 2011 book about it, entitled *We Got Him!* "He didn't reach down into the spider hole" and never said he did, explained Keith Gaddie, chairman of the political science department at the University of Oklahoma. But since voters nevertheless viewed him as "the guy who killed Saddam...his narrative sold really well," Gaddie said.

After 35 years in the Marines (mostly in the Reserves), Gary Lambert ran unsuccessfully (28 percent of the vote) in the four-way GOP primary in New Hampshire-2. Asked about why he was running for Congress in a TV interview last spring, Lambert said, "I'm retiring from the Marine Corps on June 1. And, frankly, I'm looking for another way to serve." And in his winning campaign in the GOP primary for Montana's at-large seat, Ryan Zinke boasted of his record in the Navy. "In the SEALs," he said in a TV ad, "we were taught to lead from the front—and never quit until the job was done."

Identity politics played a different and often bigger role in the Democratic primaries. With issue debates muted, when they existed at all, Democratic candidates needed some way to differentiate themselves for primary voters. For a party devoted to diversity as perhaps its defining concern, appeals based on gender and ethnicity were common. Few candidates, however, were as blunt as Upendra Chivukula, the first Indian-American to serve in the New

Jersey legislature, who won 22 percent of the vote in a losing effort in the 12th district. He began a TV ad by looking into the camera and saying, "I'm the Tea Party's worst nightmare. I don't look like them. I don't sound like them."

Diversity was also a central issue in the primary in Iowa-1 for the seat being vacated by Bruce Braley. Even though this northeastern Iowa district (92 percent white) seems to be the antithesis of melting pot urban areas like New York and Los Angeles, two of the five candidates were foreign-born women. And they stressed these biographical details in their losing campaigns. Former state senator Swati Dandekar, who was born in India, ran a television ad in which the voiceover said, "Swati's life from a young girl to a progressive American leader is the dream we want for all our children." The website of Anesa Kajtazovic, who came to Iowa from war-torn Bosnia, was equally direct: "Only in America could a refugee rise up to graduate from college in three years with a double major and become the youngest elected woman to the state legislature at age of 24."

Not to be outdone, Monica Vernon, a Cedar Rapids local official who finished second in the Iowa-1 primary, ran on the slogan, "A working mom for Iowa!" Perhaps the most unvarnished feminist appeal was made by Valerie Arkoosh, an obstetric anesthesiologist, in Pennsylvania-13. She ran a web ad in which she argued, "In Pennsylvania, we have our 18 members of the House of Representatives, and, of course, our two U.S. senators, and we have only one woman...We just have to do better than that." Women's groups played a major role in Southfield Mayor Brenda Lawrence's narrow victory against two strong rivals in Michigan-14. In her victory statement, Lawrence declared, "When women stand together, women win."

Hardship narratives were as common in the Democratic primaries as they were in proletarian novels of the 1930s. In Hawaii-1, Donna Mercado Kim, the president of the state senate, ran a web video in which her mother talked about the candidate's childhood: "Nobody had hot water. Hot water was a luxury. And if you had hot water, you were more kind of high class." Ruben Gallego in Arizona-7 began his opening statement in a television debate by declaring, "I am running for the American dream. I was a very lucky man. I grew up poor. I didn't have a bed until I got to college."

It's hard to top stories like this, but other Democrats arduously tried to spotlight their blue-collar roots. Brendan Boyle, who won the primary in Pennsylvania-13, ran a campaign video that emphasized that his father swept out stations for the Philadelphia transit authority

*"The closer you get, the worse it looks. We say that after diving deep into the 2014 House nomination process, with its runoffs, conventions, jungle primaries and overall abysmal turnout."*

and his mother was a school crossing guard. “We didn’t have much,” he said. In affluent California-33, Ted Lieu wrote on his website, “As a child, I grew up poor and my family sold gifts at flea markets to make ends meet.” And running in Virginia-8, Bill Euille, the mayor of Alexandria, broadcast a television ad saying, “Single mom. Public housing. Segregated schools...I beat the odds. Now my life is about changing the game.” But Euille will not be changing the game in Congress: He finished fourth in the ten-way primary.

For populist passion, the 2014 primary award has to go to Troy Jackson, a logger and the majority leader of the Maine state Senate who was running in the 2nd District. At the state Democratic convention, Jackson gave what one newspaper columnist called “a speech for the ages.” He spoke of what it felt like to have to leave home every week for logging jobs while Canadian companies logged nearby: “Sunday nights, my son who was three or four by then, would ask me not to go. He would tell me that he was going to stay awake, holding my hand all night so when morning came I would still be there...As if all the strength he had in his little hand could counter generations of corporate greed that was keeping other young children in the St. John Valley from their parent.”

Jackson went on to lose the low-turnout primary by a better than two-to-one margin to Emily Cain, also a state senator.

But win or lose the Democratic primaries were the opposite of Lake Wobegon—everyone’s income, at least growing up, was below average. Such born-in-a-log-cabin boasting would be understandable if it were accompanied by robust issue debates. But too often it seemed as if biography was all that the Democrats had to offer, even in primary races for safe seats.

## **DEMOCRACY LITE: THE PROBLEM WITH PRIMARIES**

The closer you get, the worse it looks. We say that after diving deep into the 2014 House nomination process, with its runoffs, conventions, jungle primaries and overall abysmal turnout. A tiny fraction of American voters, generally the most partisan, choose our House nominees.

California is now in the second cycle of its top-two jungle primary system. It has not boosted turnout—in fact the opposite has occurred. Only 25.2 percent of registered voters participated in the June 2014 primaries, the lowest turnout for any statewide election in California, according to the secretary of state’s office.<sup>11</sup> Nor is there evidence that California’s new system is delivering on its primary objective, of producing more moderate nominees. Instead, parties,

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<sup>11</sup> Press Release from California Secretary of State Debra Bowen, “June Primary Results Certified, Showing Record-Low Turnout and Record-High Vote-by-Mail Rate,” (July 11, 2014) (<http://www.sos.ca.gov/admin/press-releases/2014/db14-057.htm>)



candidates and interest groups are doing what they've always done—mobilizing their bases and getting their supporters to the polls.

Primary campaigns, it turns out, are not an ideal venue for conveying to voters where various candidates sit on the spectrum of Tea Party hellraiser to business-first Republican, or Warren populist to Wall Street Democrat. Instead, research shows, voters take their cues from the D or R after a candidate's name. "They don't know anything about people other than their party label," said Thad Kousser, a political scientist at the University of California-San Diego who has studied the system.

Then there are the outside forces like parties, activists, labor unions and the business community. "They don't necessarily want moderation. They don't want compromise," said Keith Smith, a political scientist at the University of the Pacific in Stockton. "The big selling argument was that the system would force candidates to compete for the middle in a way that they don't have to in closed primaries," he added. "I just don't see it happening."

A moderating effect could emerge in November in Washington-4, when that state will have its first one-party congressional election since adopting a jungle primary system in 2008. Democrats who make up about a third of the central Washington farming district will have to choose between Tea Party farmer Clint Didier, former state agriculture director Dan Newhouse, or skipping that line on the fall ballot. If they help elect Newhouse, a moderate who supports a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants, that will be a point in favor of jungle primaries - at least their impact on a general election. But it won't be much comfort to Democrats aware that a vote for Newhouse, tolerable though he may be to them on some issues, is a vote for continued control of the House by a party far more conservative than he is.

In more competitive districts, where victory is in reach for both Democrats and Republicans, the primaries often draw swarms of hopefuls from both sides. That puts the pressure on the parties to coalesce behind a single candidate to ensure they have a top-two finisher who advances to the November ballot. The process encourages a heavy-handedness that recalls smoke-filled rooms where party elders decided who would run.

Securing a slot in the general election is easier in theory than in practice, even when party groups try to put their thumbs on the scale. Take the tangled history of California-31 in the San Bernardino area. In 2012, the field consisted of two Republicans who finished first and second, and four Democrats who destroyed each other's chances to advance. So that November, as President Obama was winning the district by 16 points for the second time, there was no Democratic House candidate on the ballot. This year, the party quickly anointed Redlands Mayor Pete Aguilar, the third-place finisher in 2012, to try again. But EMILY's List decided to back labor attorney Eloise Gomez Reyes, and former Rep. Joe Baca decided to try for a comeback. History very nearly repeated itself. Aguilar defeated a Republican by 209 votes to

secure second place and a spot on the fall ballot in a district considered one of his party's best chances to pick up a seat.

Democrats were shut out this year in California-25, a northern Los Angeles County swing district that Mitt Romney carried by 2 points in 2012. Democrat Lee Rogers, a podiatric surgeon, placed second in the jungle primary that year and lost the seat to veteran GOP Rep. Buck McKeon. After McKeon announced his retirement, Democrats gave Rogers their blessing to try again. But that didn't stop a bid by Evan "Ivan" Thomas, a former Air Force combat pilot and commander who said he would bring a practical, goal-oriented "Mission First" approach to Congress. He drew only 6,149 votes—but in a low-turnout primary, which was more than enough to push Rogers down to third and put two Republicans on the fall ballot.

Rogers ended up endorsing state Sen. Steve Knight, the more moderate of the GOP pair. So that election will be another test of the proposition that jungle primaries could send more moderates to Capitol Hill. The price, however, is that Democrats—who outnumber Republicans in the district—don't have a candidate of their own. To avoid that, the party would have had to clear the field. That would have meant forcing out a military veteran in California-25, and two viable Hispanic contenders—one of them a woman—in California-31. It's no way to cultivate loyalty or energize the base.

Democrats were on the short end of these results in 2012 and 2014, but there is no guarantee that Republicans won't be the ones disenfranchised in the future. Someday there will be a primary season in which the GOP has little to argue about, an unmotivated base and multiple candidates who won't be deterred from running. And as a result, it will be Republicans shut out of the general election.

Jungle primaries are not the only undemocratic aspect of primaries. In Iowa-3, Republicans bore the brunt of a system that defies logic. When no one received 35 percent of the vote in

a multi-candidate primary, the law mandated that delegates to a party convention had to choose a nominee. The shocking result was that 17 days after David Young placed fifth in the primary, 512 delegates picked him as their standard-bearer. The former aide to Sen. Charles Grassley was so obscure that the *Cook Political Report* didn't even mention him in an article analyzing the strengths, weaknesses and convention odds of the top four finishers.

What about the delegates? Did they consider whether Young could win the seat? Craig Robinson, publisher of *The Iowa Republican* blog, laughed at that idea. "They asked those questions about everyone except

*"Anyone interested in a less polarized Congress was also bound to be disappointed. The jungle primary experiments so far have not sent a crop of moderates to the House."*

David Young,” he said. “The one candidate that they never discussed was David Young.” Robinson described Young as “quiet, thoughtful and respectful,” with personal ties to many in the district. “No one disliked him. His demeanor never created any ill,” he said. So the choice was understandable. Still, Robinson acknowledged that “an outsider would think it’s unreflective of the will of the people.” After the convention, political leaders in both parties said they were open to the idea of runoffs instead of conventions if a primary winner finished with less than a designated percent.

Yet runoffs pose their own problems. With the exception of anomalies like the headline-making battle over the Republican Senate nomination this year in Mississippi, turnout tends to decline in runoffs, especially if there’s a long gap between the primary and the runoff. In Oklahoma-5, turnout started at a nothing-to-brag-about 31.3 percent in the primary and dropped to an even worse 18.6 percent in the runoff nine weeks later. Keith Gaddie, chairman of the political science department at the University of Oklahoma, is an advocate of instant runoffs, in which primary voters rank their choices and their votes are distributed in order of preference until somebody clears 50 percent. “If we did instant runoff, we could save \$2 million a year (in Oklahoma) and still have majority government,” Gaddie said. Even if states and parties began to warm to instant runoffs, however, that would still leave the larger problem of low turnout in primaries overall.

## **CONCLUSION: PHONING IT IN AND FAILING TO SHOW**

The 2014 House primaries were entertaining and compelling in ways that had everything to do with some of the people who ran and the way they presented themselves. We would be remiss if we did not mention Arkansas-2 Republican Conrad Reynolds, who held a “Win an AR-15” contest, or Georgia-12 Republican Eugene Yu, a South Korean immigrant and founder of a “military grade armaments” supply firm who drew attention for a \$700,000 campaign loan that had no discernible source. We would not have wanted to miss the duel of large families in Wisconsin-6 where Joe Leibham, one of 13 siblings, featured some of them interrupting him incessantly in an ad and Dwey Stroebel, father of eight, compared his family to a baseball team in an ad that ended with a kid yelling “you’re out” to career politicians.

We would be equally negligent if we did not credit Donna Mercado Kim in Hawaii-1 with what probably was the worst singing commercial of the 2014 primary season: Dozens of Hawaiians, including bearded guys in hard hats, singing “Oh Donna, Oh Donna” as the screen flashed “A Strong Voice FOR THE ISSUES YOU CARE ABOUT.” Then there was perhaps the worst temper tantrum by a serious candidate, which occurred in New Jersey-12 after state Sen. Linda Greenstein lost the endorsement of the Mercer County Democrats. “I hate everyone here!” she shouted.

But as fascinating as some of the 2014 primaries proved to be from a *People* magazine perspective, they were not stellar examples of participatory democracy. Too often, candidates phoned it in and voters didn't show up. Anyone interested in policy would have been disheartened. Issues pages ran the gamut from missing to standardized to a few enigmatically focused on state legislative business (yes, there were several that, perhaps lifted directly from previous campaigns, seemed to suggest that a congressional contender aspired to move to the state capital). Debates were scarce and original ideas even more so.

Anyone interested in a less polarized Congress was also bound to be disappointed. The jungle primary experiments so far have not sent a crop of moderates to the House. And where it wasn't breaking historic records for previous lows, midterm turnout was merely customarily low. In Iowa, according to the Center for the Study of the American Electorate, it was less than 10 percent.

Primaries have a profile problem and an image problem. Some people don't know they are happening and some who do know don't consider them important. The universe of those who actually cast primary ballots is small and hyper-partisan, and rewards candidates who hew to ideological orthodoxy. Outside interest groups do their part with endorsements, money and ads for those in alignment with them. This year some Republican primaries were influenced by a countervailing moderate force in the form of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, but the group didn't compete everywhere and it remains to be seen whether its efforts will bring more order and productivity to the House.

Enticing more voters to the polls, especially those in the middle of the political spectrum, is Job One for reform advocates. The most intriguing idea to accomplish that, backed by Brookings' Elaine Kamarck<sup>12</sup> and the Bipartisan Policy Center,<sup>13</sup> among others, is a national primary day for congressional elections.

Under the current system, we have a string of low-profile contests scattered through the calendar from March to September. It is diffuse and confusing and hard to frame voting in them as a civic duty, much less a way to shape the course of the nation. A single-day primary extravaganza would generate headlines and anticipation as the whole country prepared to choose House and Senate nominees. In the best case, it would also provoke debate on issues and draw the connection for busy, often cynical voters between their lives and whom they choose to run for Congress.

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12 Elaine Kamarck, "Increasing Turnout in Congressional Primaries," Brookings (July 25, 2014) (<http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2014/07/increasing-turnout-congress-primaries>)

13 "Governing in a Polarized America: A Bipartisan Blueprint to Strengthen our Democracy," Bipartisan Policy Center (June 24, 2014) (<http://bipartisanpolicy.org/strengthen-american-democracy>)

Regardless of whether a national primary day comes to be, the responsibility rests with both candidates and voters to turn primaries into meaningful exercises. It is a candidate's choice to be part of the ongoing partisan ground war in Washington, rather than work to end it. It is his or her choice to offer platitudes and sound bites, rather than ideas interesting enough to make the disaffected perk up and listen. Voters, for their part, need to remember not just their civic obligations but also the power and relevance of their votes—especially in primaries, where the smaller voter universe makes each ballot matter more. The best way to increase participation in primaries is for candidates to engage each other and those they seek to represent in robust debates about the future of the country and their parties. The 2014 primary season in key districts was defined instead by too many echoes, too little choice, and too many tuned-out voters.

## APPENDIX: HOUSE PRIMARIES STUDIED

Below are the 63 House primary races included in our study. Those without a party designation are jungle primaries that include both parties.

Alabama-6 Republican	Georgia-12 Republican	New York-1 Republican
Arizona-1 Republican	Hawaii-1 Democratic	New York-4 Democratic
Arizona-2 Republican	Idaho-2 Republican	New York-21 Republican
Arizona-7 Democratic	Illinois-13 Democratic	North Carolina-6 Republican
Arkansas-2 Republican	Illinois-13 Republican	North Carolina-7 Republican
Arkansas-4 Republican	Iowa-1 Democratic	North Carolina-12 Republican
California-7	Iowa-3 Republican	Ohio-14 Republican
California-11	Maine-2 Democratic	Oklahoma-5 Republican
California-21	Maine-2 Republican	Pennsylvania-8 Democratic
California-25	Michigan-1 Republican	Pennsylvania-13 Democratic
California-26	Michigan-4 Republican	Texas-36 Republican
California-31	Michigan-8 Democratic	Virginia-8 Democratic
California-33	Michigan-8 Republican	Washington-4
California-36	Michigan-12 Democratic	West Virginia-2 Democratic
California-45	Michigan-14 Democratic	West Virginia-2 Republican
California-52	Minnesota-6 Republican	West Virginia-3 Democratic
Colorado-4 Republican	Montana-at-large Republican	Wisconsin-6 Republican
Florida-18 Republican	New Jersey-1 Democratic	
Florida-26 Republican	New Jersey-3 Democratic	
Georgia-1 Democratic	New Jersey-3 Republican	
Georgia-1 Republican	New Jersey-12 Democratic	
Georgia-10 Republican	New Hampshire-1 Republican	
Georgia-11 Republican	New Hampshire-2 Republican	

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