

SHIFTING POLICY PRIORITIES FOR PRESIDENTIAL
CANDIDATES BETWEEN THE PRIMARY AND
GENERAL ELECTION

by

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Presidential candidates are often suspected of becoming more moderate in the general election to appeal to swing voters, despite having shown more extreme views in the primary election. This study attempts to find the prevalence of that effect by comparing the prioritization of policy areas between presidential primary and general election debates to observe if candidates change based on how contentious a policy is. I create an original data set by doing a content analysis of 59 debates across three presidential elections. I create a measure of contentiousness based on polling data for consistent issues across 2012, 2016, and 2020 and find the frequency in which candidates address these issues. This study finds some evidence to support the post-primary moderation effect based on the way that Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton addressed healthcare in 2016 along with Mitt Romney's policy prioritization in 2012, but also finds general trends towards all candidates bringing up contentious policies more in the general election.

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Introduction

U.S. voters are likely to see Donald Trump, Ron DeSantis, Nikki Haley, Tim Scott, Asa Hutchinson, and many others squaring up on a debate stage later in 2023 and 2024. With the biggest audiences of the Republican primary, they will each be forced to make a decision: How should they position themselves ideologically? Will focusing on one position in the primary election hurt them if they make it to the general election? In the primary election, should they attempt to win over the party base by focusing on more divisive policies, or try to appear as a more electable, moderate candidate? In the general election, should they try to drive excitement in the party base with policies that might be widely unpopular, or try to win over more centrist swing voters? These questions impact how candidates run their campaigns, which in turn, affects the course of their presidency and limits what policies they can push for and what they can get passed. Conventional wisdom says that candidates will make this decision to position themselves as more extreme in the primary before moving to the center in the general election.¹ My research finds some evidence to support this theory in the 2016 election in discussions about healthcare and from Romney's policy prioritization in the 2012 election, but finds that it was more common for candidates to bring up contentious policies in general election debates.

This research will describe the potential effect of candidates becoming more moderate in the general election as the post-primary moderation effect, a name inspired by research on the topic from Brice Acree et al.² Understanding the prevalence of this effect will have benefits in several areas. First, how politicians communicate in elections affects what and how much they are able to get done if they are successfully elected. Future studies could observe the post-

¹ John M. Carey and John Polga-Hecimovich, "Primary Elections and Candidate Strength in Latin America," *The Journal of Politics* 68, no. 3 (August 2006): 530–543, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2508.2006.00443.x>.

² Brice D. L. Acree et. al, "Etch-a-Sketching: Evaluating the Post-Primary Rhetorical Moderation Hypothesis," *American Politics Research* 48, no. 1 (January 2020): 99–131, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X18800017>.

primary moderation effect in relation to aspects of presidential performance. Second, many voters care about knowing when politicians are being dishonest about their views. Knowing the prevalence of this effect would help those voters look out for artificially shifted views between primary and general elections. Lastly, it is important for presidential candidates to understand this effect, so they can make more advantageous decisions. If research in this area finds that winning candidates make the shift to the center, that could influence future candidates. This research will also add to the literature of research on presidential debates and offer new methods to analyze messaging prioritization.

Forces that push primary candidates have always changed between election years, suggesting that researchers should not assume candidates will always act the same way. Before 1968, the nomination process was mostly driven by party elites, making the conventions an important occasion for actually selecting the nominee with contention and deal-making between party elites. With the Democratic Party's reforms in 1968, primaries became the main way to apportion delegates. This gave influence to individual party voters. In this modern primary process, candidates must appeal to these party voters in order to become the nominee. These voters will be further away from the center on average than general election voters since most are members of the party and passionate enough about the party to vote on its nominee. This can lead to a candidate being more extreme in the nomination process and being more moderate in the general election.³

This effect may have become even more significant in recent years with the increase in polarization. According to the Pew Research Center, increasing numbers of Republicans and

³ Joseph A. Pika, John Anthony Maltese, and Andrew Rudalevige, "Election Politics," In *The Politics of the Presidency*, 10th ed., 87, Thousand Oaks, CA: CQ Press, 2021.

Democrats describe members of the other party as closed-minded and immoral.⁴ Gallup polls show that Obama and Trump each set the record for the average difference in approval rating between Republicans and Democrats with 77 points in Obama's eighth year and 79 points in Trump's second year.⁵ When voters in each party are becoming more hostile to both public officials and voters of the other party, presidential candidates are encouraged to do the same in primaries. This leads to harsher rhetoric towards the other party and more commitment to their own party's policies without considering moderate policies or ideas from the other party.

After moving to the general election, the candidate would have to appeal to a wider electorate, making them more likely to use more moderate rhetoric and be open to more compromise on policies. A 2021 CNN poll showed that 87% of voters support attempts at bipartisanship.⁶ However, there is a conflict between the motivation of a candidate to appeal to the center, and the fact that the center is both shrinking⁷ and not necessarily moderate.⁸

Presidential debates are some of the most-watched events of the primary and general election. Because of this, candidates will carefully prepare their messages and what they want to prioritize. Debates can also shift voters' opinions, particularly in the primary election where voters are getting to know the candidates and their only exposure to all of them might be from a debate.⁹ In addition, a researcher can get a snapshot of the campaign's most important

⁴ "How Partisans View Each Other," Research Topics, Pew Research Center October 10, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/10/10/how-partisans-view-each-other/>

⁵ Jeffrey M. Jones, "Trump Job Approval Sets New Record for Polarization," *Gallup*, January 16, 2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/245996/trump-job-approval-sets-new-record-polarization.aspx>.

⁶ Jennifer Agiesta, "CNN Poll: Americans want bipartisanship, but most don't think it will happen," *CNN*, April 29, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/29/politics/cnn-poll-bipartisanship/index.html>.

⁷ Frank James, "Pew Poll: Most Americans Are Political Purists," *NPR*, June 12, 2014, <https://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2014/06/12/321417426/pew-poll-more-americans-are-political-purists>.

⁸ Lee Drutman, "The Moderate Middle Is A Myth," *FiveThirtyEight*, September 24, 2019, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-moderate-middle-is-a-myth/>.

⁹ Mitchell S. McKinney and Benjamin R. Warner, "Do Presidential Debates Matter? Examining a Decade of Campaign Debate Effects," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 49, no. 4 (March 2013): 238-258, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00028533.2013.11821800>.

messaging, and how they are trying to position themselves in the field. This makes debates a more useful and reliable method to studying messaging.

Literature Review

My research investigates whether presidential candidates present themselves as more extreme in primaries and more moderate in the general election through analysis of debates. This brings together an important overlap between two fields: research on presidential debates and research on ideology.

Prior research on presidential debates has shown the extent to which candidates adapt to the largest stages of the election. Doerfel and Marsh examine grouping strategies in the 1992 presidential debates with Clinton, Perot, and Bush, finding that candidates matched up in different two versus one scenarios depending on the topic.¹⁰ The group dynamic is important and magnified by primary debates that can have as many as 11 candidates at the same time. Warner et. al found that debates with larger numbers of candidates led to more people changing their voting preference, suggesting that candidates on a crowded stage have more to gain from a positive debate performance.¹¹ Candidates have to adapt to the circumstances of each debate. That could lead them to deprioritize contentious policies in order to avoid attack, or bring them up as a defense against candidates that are more extreme.

Galdieri analyzes the 2020 Democratic Primary to determine who benefits from large primaries. He identified that candidates with poor fundraising will use extreme tactics to try to meet fundraising thresholds.¹² This is less of a factor for the candidates who end up winning the primary, who often enter as frontrunners rather than fringe candidates desperately trying to stay

¹⁰ Maya L. Doerfel and Pamela S. Marsh, "Candidate-Issue Positioning in the Context of Presidential Debates," *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 31, no. 3 (2003): 212-237, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909880305380>.

¹¹ Benjamin R. Warner et. al, "Presidential primary debates compared: timing of debate and size of candidate field as moderators of debate effects," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 54, no. 1-2 (2018): 122-138, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00028533.2018.1446868>.

¹² Christopher J. Galdieri, "Primary Debates and the Presidential Nomination Process," *Society* 57 (2020): 675-79, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-020-00545-9>.

on the stage. However, those fringe candidates might direct their energy at a frontrunner in order to remain relevant. The additional worries in a group setting for a primary debate could affect how candidates address contentious policies to avoid attacks or defend themselves.

Deltas and Polborn analyze primary elections from 2000-2012 and find that candidates with similar positions in a primary have a significant impact on each other's vote due to vote-splitting, which can lead to a candidate potentially weaker for the general election winning the primary.¹³ Candidates are likely aware of this effect as they fight to change votes to them from other candidates during the primary season. A candidate could become more moderate to be differentiated from a large group of extreme candidates, or more extreme to be differentiated from a moderate group. While this study was not on debates, debates would be the most prominent display of how candidates execute strategy to avoid vote-splitting.

Painter and Fernandes investigated rhetorical styles in presidential debates over time, finding that presidential candidates employ rhetoric with more optimism and certainty in general election debates.¹⁴ These findings show differences in the way that candidates prepare for primary and general election debates that could extend to the level of contention of policies as well. If candidates plan to be more optimistic in the general, they might also plan to be less contentious. Similarly to Painter and Fernandes, Romero et. al take a historical approach and evaluate the use of language style matching in presidential debates, finding that candidates who

¹³ George Deltas and Mattias K. Polborn, "Candidate competition and voter learning in the 2000–2012 US presidential primaries," *Public Choice* 178 (2019): 115-51, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11127-018-0620-7>.

¹⁴ David L. Painter and Juliana Fernandes, "They're Not Just Words: The Verbal Style of U.S. Presidential Debate Rhetoric," *Communication Studies* 72, no. 5 (September 2021): 899-914, <https://doi-org.libproxy.uoregon.edu/10.1080/10510974.2021.1975145>.

match their opponents' speaking patterns do better.¹⁵ Candidates are influenced by the other people on the stage with them.

McKinney and Warner explore presidential debate effects between 2000 and 2012. Primary debates have more of an effect on voter choice, as voters are unfamiliar with the candidates in the early stages of the election. More recent general election debates have not been as significant for voters according to McKinney and Warner.¹⁶ This is likely due to growing polarization that mutes the potential impact of debates. This brings up the question of how that polarization influences candidates when it comes to prioritization of policies.

Prior studies on presidential debates have included historical approaches and quantitative methods of analyzing aspects of a candidate's speech. The literature on the connection between debates and ideology is thinner, but research from Benoit and Hansen on issue ownership theory has shown efforts by presidential candidates in both parties to emphasize issues that voters believe a party is better suited for.¹⁷

The central study of the post-primary moderation effect is from Acree et. al, who cover speeches made in the 2008 and 2012 election. Acree et. al create an ideological measure through an analysis of political books, then matches ideologically charged wording from that analysis to the words of politicians in speeches. Their research finds significant differences in choice of words between the primary and general elections, lining up with the post-primary moderation

¹⁵ Daniel M. Romero et al., "Mimicry Is Presidential: Linguistic Style Matching in Presidential Debates and Improved Polling Numbers," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 41, no. 10 (2015): 1311-1319, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167215591168>.

¹⁶ Mitchell S. McKinney and Benjamin R. Warner, "Do Presidential Debates Matter? Examining a Decade of Campaign Debate Effects," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 49, no. 4 (March 2013): 238-258, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00028533.2013.11821800>.

¹⁷ William L. Benoit and Glenn J. Hansen, "Issue ownership in primary and general presidential debates," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 40, no. 3 (2004): 143+, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00028533.2004.11821603>.

hypothesis.¹⁸ However, the audience for presidential debates dwarfs speeches. It is not clear whether candidates will give the same treatment to their largest audiences of the campaign.

Prior research has used various methods to measure extremism. Nielson and Visalvanich analyze congressional candidates through the Item Response Theory count model, which uses the ideology of donors, assuming that the candidate will match with the ideological views of the donors. Their research suggests Republican voters and candidates have little diversity and are more extreme compared to the Democratic Party, leading to more extreme Republican candidates winning primaries.¹⁹ Benoit and Hansen also found a difference between the Democratic and Republican Party in that Democrats prioritize the issues their party is seen as suited for more in primary debates than in general election debates, while not finding that shift between the primary and general election for Republicans.²⁰ Both studies provide evidence for Democratic candidates being more likely to shift tactics between the primary and general election.

The existing body of literature lacks overlap between debates and ideology, particularly shifts between the primary and general election. Considering the importance of debates, especially primary debates, my research has a role in bridging this gap to determine how candidates act for the largest audiences of the election. I also employ a distinct method of assessing moderation that gives my research an advantage when comparing between multiple years.

¹⁸ Brice D. L. Acree et. al, "Etch-a-Sketching: Evaluating the Post-Primary Rhetorical Moderation Hypothesis," *American Politics Research* 48, no. 1 (January 2020): 99–131, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X18800017>.

¹⁹ Lindsay Nielson and Neil Visalvanich, "Primaries and Candidates: Examining the Influence of Primary Electorates on Candidate Ideology," *Political Science Research and Methods* 5, no. 2 (November 2017): 397-408, <https://doi.org/10.1017/psrm.2015.60>.

²⁰ William L. Benoit and Glenn J. Hansen, "Issue ownership in primary and general presidential debates," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 40, no. 3 (2004): 143+, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00028533.2004.11821603>.

Research questions and hypothesis

This study seeks to find if the post-primary moderation effect exists in presidential elections, and to see its change between election years. I predict that Romney in 2012 moderates himself in the general election in order to focus more on his business acumen that he believes will get the country recovering faster from the Great Recession, after being forced into more contentious issues by a competitive Republican primary field. I predict that Trump in 2016 remains roughly the same between the primary and general election due to his communication methods. I predict that we see the most moderation in Clinton in 2016 due to a desire to match the progressivism of Bernie Sanders in the primary election debates and be seen as a common-sense alternative to Trump in the general election debates. Finally, I predict that Biden in 2020 remains roughly the same between the primary and general election due to his desire to position himself as the moderate candidate of choice in the primary election in contrast to Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, and again in the general election to position himself as moderate in contrast to Trump.

Methods

My research focuses on the level of contention of different policies in order to evaluate how presidential candidates will treat policies based on how contentious they are. I define the level of contention by the difference in support of a policy between Republican-identifying people and Democrat-identifying people. For example, if 30% of Republicans supported a policy and 20% of Democrats did, the difference would be 10%. This would be a more contentious policy than if 30% of Republicans supported it and 25% of Democrats did. The level of contention serves as a measure of moderation to answer the question on the extent of the post-primary moderation effect. Prior literature has used polling data on which party voters think handle certain issues better to categorize issues as either Democratic or Republican issues.²¹ Research on polarization from Fiorina et. al has used polling data from red and blue states on issues to argue that voters are less extreme than conventional wisdom would suggest.²² My measure would build on this by comparing polling data on issues between Democrats and Republicans, creating a measure of how close together party voters are to each other on issues.

I decided to use a consistent source of data, the General Social Survey, accessed through the GSS Data Explorer from the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. The GSS polls on the same questions across all the years that I wanted to research. This allowed me to look at the same issues year-to-year while drawing from data with the same method of collection. Within the issues surveyed by GSS, I pulled out opinion data on national spending on a list of 18 issues. These responses are measured by too little, about right, or too much. Focusing on national spending only allowed me to have a consistent measure of responses. It is also

²¹ William L. Benoit and Glenn J. Hansen, "Issue ownership in primary and general presidential debates," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 40, no. 3 (2004): 143+, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00028533.2004.11821603>.

²² Morris P. Fiorina et. al, *Culture War? The Myth of a Polarized America*, Pearson Education, Inc., 2005.

important that national spending encompasses many issues that vary from year to year that could influence how popular a policy is. For example, the percentage of Democrats who think the U.S. spends too much on law enforcement jumped from 12% to 37% between 2018 and 2021, likely due to the awareness to the issue brought on by protests following the murder of George Floyd. This shows how important it is to adapt the measure each year rather than assuming the same issues will be the most and least contentious, as public opinion is always shifting based on current events.

I pulled the national spending data and party identification data into Stata, giving me the party and answer of each person for each spending issue. I created a new binary party identification variable called `partyid01` in order to incorporate as many answers as possible, rather than using the GSS Data Explorer measure that left out all independents. I coded “Strong Democrat,” “not very strong Democrat,” and “Independent, close to Democrat” as 1 and “Strong Republican,” “not very strong Republican,” and “Independent, close to Republican” as 0. I still left out the “Independent (neither, no response)” and “Other party” categories so I could have a clear measure of the contentiousness between two groups. I created a new variable called `partyid012021` to isolate the 2021 responses that I would use as the closest measure to the 2020 election, a new variable called `partyid012016` to isolate the 2016 responses that I would use as the closest measure to the 2016 election, and the same for a new variable called `partyid012012`.

I then took the mean of each national spending variable for Democrats and Republicans separately, and subtracted the average support of Democrats from the average support of Republicans to find the level of contention. This method allowed me to take the data provided by GSS for each year and turn it into a useful measure of moderation. This method could be applied

in the future for research on moderation to other sets of polling data or for further research using the GSS.

Researchers like Acree et. al²³ and Benoit and Hansen²⁴ have used software to count words in literature on policy in presidential debates. While this strategy is valuable, especially for large sets of text, it risks overestimating the prioritization of an issue when a candidate says a lot of keywords associated with that issue in the same response. It also risks underestimating the prioritization of an issue if a candidate brings up that issue without saying the right keywords. To avoid these issues, I decided to do a manual content analysis. I created a guide to remain consistent, where I would count mentions of specific policies in a policy area (e.g. “I gave \$1 million to foreign aid efforts in Syria”), calls to action related to a policy area (e.g. “We should increase the amount of foreign aid we give to Syria”), and general statements of value related to that policy area (e.g. “It’s necessary to provide foreign aid”). I would not count explanations or following up on the original point or previewing a statement. However, I would count repetition if a candidate came back around to the same point in another answer or after changing the topic within an answer. These rules allowed me to evaluate how much value candidates placed on bringing up each policy area. I counted a wide range of ways of mentioning policies, but avoided the drawbacks of word-counting software by not counting multiple mentions in a single statement or thought.

I used debate transcripts from The American Presidency Project at UC Santa Barbara, which covered all presidential primary and general election debates in 2012, 2016, and 2020. However, I only analyzed debates where the candidate who won the primary was present,

²³ Brice D. L. Acree et. al, “Etch-a-Sketching: Evaluating the Post-Primary Rhetorical Moderation Hypothesis,” *American Politics Research* 48, no. 1 (January 2020): 99–131, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X18800017>.

²⁴ William L. Benoit and Glenn J. Hansen, "Issue ownership in primary and general presidential debates," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 40, no. 3 (2004): 143+, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00028533.2004.11821603>.

because my research is based on the difference in strategy between the general and primary election for candidates who were a part of both. This means that out of the four Democratic primary debates in 2020 that were divided into two groups, I only analyzed the two that included Biden. This led to a total of 11 primary debates and 2 general election debates in 2020. In 2016, I analyzed Clinton in the Democratic primary and Trump in the Republican primary, which led to 12 Republican primary debates, 9 Democratic primary debates, and 3 general election debates. In 2012, I analyzed Romney in the Republican primary, which led to 19 Republican primary debates and 3 general election debates. For all debates, I only analyzed the answers of the candidates that won a primary election because the other candidates would not be able to demonstrate a shift in strategy if they did not make it to the general. This means that I analyzed answers across the general and primary for Biden in 2020, Trump in 2016, Clinton in 2016, and Romney in 2012.

After going through all of Biden's primary debate answers in 2020 and counting up the frequency that each policy area was brought up, I got the sum of the count for each policy area across all nine primary debates. I then added up all of these to get the total number of times that any policy was brought up.²⁵ I wanted to create a measure that would be applicable across all candidates, so I decided to find the percentage of policies brought up for each policy area. For example, Biden invoked foreign aid 8 times in the primaries, which was about 3% of the 263 times he brought up any policy area. Using this percentage, I could compare across the primary and general election debates no matter how many there were or how many times policies were brought up.²⁶

²⁵ See Figure 5, appendix

²⁶ See Figure 6, appendix

I repeated these steps for Biden in the general election debates, then for Trump and Clinton in their primary and general election debates, and finally for Romney in the primary and general election debates.

Results

Romney 2012: Level of Contention vs. Difference in Use

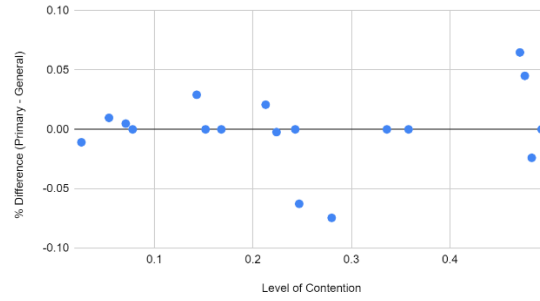


Figure 1: Level of Contention vs. Difference in Use for Romney in 2012

Trump 2016: Level of Contention vs. Difference in Use

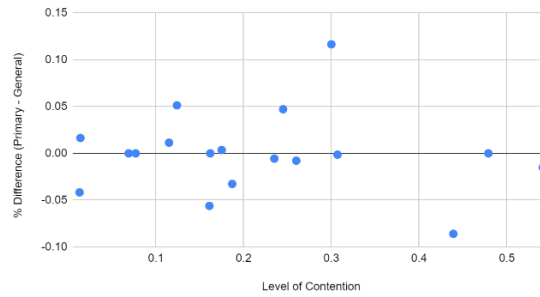


Figure 2: Level of Contention vs. Difference in Use for Trump in 2016

Clinton 2016: Level of Contention vs. Difference in Use

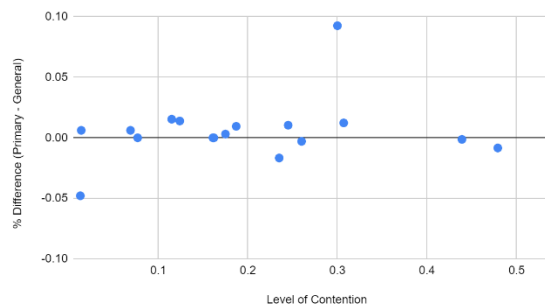


Figure 3: Level of Contention vs. Difference in Use for Clinton in 2016

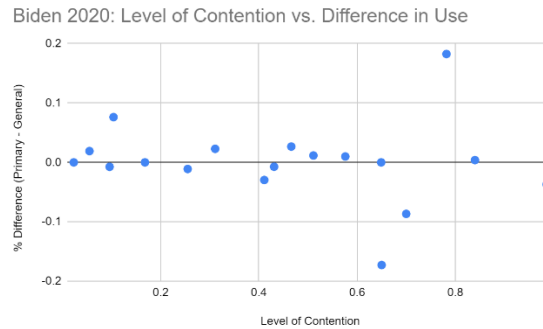


Figure 4: Level of Contention vs. Difference in Use for Biden in 2020

After finding the percentage of policy areas brought up by each candidate, I subtracted the percentage in the general from the percentage in the primary to see which had the biggest difference. This is represented on the y-axis. Policy areas with positive values were mentioned more frequently in the primary debates, and policy areas with negative values were mentioned more frequently in the general election debates.

Based on the graphs, there is not an immediately obvious correlation between level of contention and the percent difference being positive or negative. There does seem to be generally greater differences for the more contentious policies, while the less contentious policies are more likely to remain close to no difference. For example, Biden in 2020 was 17.3 percentage points more likely to bring up alternative energy — the 5th most contentious policy — in the general election, and 18.3 percentage points more likely to bring up arms and defense — the 3rd most contentious policy — in the primary. Crime was the only less contentious policy with a change larger than 5 percentage points. Clinton and Trump in 2016 follow the same trend generally but with more variation for certain less contentious policies. Trump was over 5 percentage points more likely to bring up helping big cities in the general election and to bring up social security in the primary, both policy areas in the bottom half of contention. Both Clinton and Trump brought

up halting rising crime, the least contentious policy area in 2016, over 4 percentage points more in the general election. Romney in 2012 brought up alternative energy 6.3 percentage points more in the general election and education 7.5 percentage points more in the general election, both middle of the road policy areas in terms of contention (ranked 8 and 7 respectively out of 18).

Policy area	Percentage point difference	Level of contention ranking (1-18)
Education	-7.45	7
Health	6.48	4
Alternative energy	-6.27	8
Welfare	4.51	3
Space	2.91	14

Table 1: Largest percentage point differences for policy areas for Romney in 2012 (sorted by absolute value) and their level of contention ranking

Policy area	Percentage point difference	Level of contention ranking (1-18)
Health	9.25	5
Defense	-9.19	1
Crime	-4.79	18
Law enforcement	-1.67	8
Addiction	1.53	12

Table 2: Largest percentage point differences for policy areas for Clinton in 2016 (sorted by absolute value) and their level of contention ranking

Policy area	Percentage point difference	Level of contention ranking (1-18)
Health	11.6	5
Helping Black people	-8.59	3
Helping big cities	-5.61	12
Social security	5.13	13
Education	4.71	7

Table 3: Largest percentage point differences for policy areas for Trump in 2016 (sorted by absolute value) and their level of contention ranking

Policy area	Percentage point difference	Level of contention ranking (1-18)
Defense	18.3	3
Alternative energy	-17.3	5
Law enforcement	-8.67	4
Crime	7.62	15
Helping Black people	3.72	1

Table 4: Largest percentage point differences for policy areas for Trump in 2016 (sorted by absolute value) and their level of contention ranking

I used Stata to run regressions to assess the general trend on whether candidates mentioned more contentious policies in the primary or general election. I removed the policy categories that were not brought up at all, like space exploration in 2020 and 2016. Instead of using the percent difference, negative percentages — policy categories that were mentioned more in the general election — became 0, and positive percentages — policy categories that

were mentioned less in the general election — became 1. This creates a binary scale, allowing the regression coefficient to be read as a percentage.²⁷

Figure 12: Table of regression coefficients	
Candidate and year	Regression coefficient
Biden 2020	-.162
Trump 2016	-1.29
Clinton 2016	-1.56
Romney 2012	-.132

Table 5: Regression coefficient for each candidate based on level of contention and use in primary vs. general election

Each candidate tended towards mentioning more contentious policies in the general election debates. A one unit increase of the contention scale²⁸ in 2020 made that category 16.2% more likely to be brought up in the general election than the primary election.

²⁷ See Figure 11, appendix

²⁸ The level of contention is the difference of averages of a 1-3 scale, not a percentile or another number with significance outside of this data set.

Discussion

I hypothesized that the extent of the moderation effect would vary based on the circumstances of the election, specifically that Biden and Trump would not see a difference in level of contention, and that Clinton and Romney would be less contentious in the general election. The regression coefficients do not show this relationship. As the level of contention increased, all candidates were more likely to have brought up those policies more in the general election.

Another way to look at the data is to pull out the policies with the biggest differences, as the regression does not take the size of the difference into account. However, in the top five policies with the biggest difference in percentage points, as shown in Tables 1-4, there were two or three that were favored in the primary and the others were favored in the general. These are also almost evenly split within contentious policy areas and less contentious policy areas. For Trump as an example, the biggest differences were in contentious policies around health and helping Black people — but health was more prominent in the primary and helping Black people in the general. There were also differences for Trump in less contentious policies around helping big cities and social security — with social security more prominent in the primary and big cities in the general.

There are explanations that could explain this data outside of the level of contention. Most importantly, the debate format forces candidates to address certain issues, particularly the issues with the most salience that moderators are likely to bring up. Biden was 3.72 percentage points more likely to address helping Black people in the 2020 general election compared to the primary, despite it being the most contentious issue. This could be attributed to the murder of George Floyd that raised the salience of the issue, which followed the end of the 2020

Democratic primary and preceded the general election debates. Romney brought up space in a 2012 Republican primary debate due to the location of the Kennedy Space Center in Florida. He did not bring it up in the general election, leading to a 2.91 percentage point difference.

The biggest supporting evidence of the post-primary moderation effect is that Trump and Clinton in 2016 both had health as the policy area with the largest difference between the primary and general elections, both favoring the primary. Health was the 5th most contentious policy in 2016, which could be a reason for the candidates placing less of a priority on health. Following the passage of the Affordable Care Act, both Republican and Democrat support for spending more on health dropped. In 2008, 85% of Democrats said the U.S. was spending too little on health, compared to 70% in 2016. For Republicans, support dropped from 65% to 50% in the same time frame. Clinton would have been motivated to bring up healthcare in the primary because Sanders was in favor of immediate expansion of Medicare to everyone — Clinton expressed her support for “universal” healthcare 14 times in the Democratic primary debates, but never used that word in the general election. Similarly, Trump would have been motivated to bring up the ACA being a disaster in the Republican primary to appear more conservative than opponents like Ted Cruz, who he connected to the ACA through Cruz’s support for Chief Justice Roberts, who decided on a case favoring the ACA. Trump continued to describe it as a disaster in the general election, but did not prioritize it as much as a line of attack. This could be due to its high level of contention for 2016 voters.

Romney’s shifts between the primary and general election debates in 2012 are another piece of supporting evidence for the post-primary moderation effect. He brought up the policy areas of education and alternative energy — ranked 7 and 8 out of the 18 policy areas in level of contention — more in the general election. He brought up the policy areas of health and welfare

— ranked 3 and 4 out of the 18 policy areas in level of contention — more in the primary election. Particularly when removing the 7 policy areas that were not brought up at all by Romney in 2012, education and alternative energy are towards the lower end of contention. This provides some support for my hypothesis that Romney would be motivated to go after contentious issues in a competitive Republican primary field. Romney seemed particularly aggressive in his opposition towards Obamacare and how the Obama administration was managing Medicaid. One possible explanation is that he wanted to make up for his history of passing healthcare legislation as governor of Massachusetts. Republicans who thought the U.S. was spending too little on healthcare was even lower in 2012 than 2016 at 44%, suggesting that Obamacare was unpopular among Republican primary voters. Among all voters, a majority of 59% thought the U.S. was spending too little on healthcare. This could have motivated Romney to shift towards the less contentious policy areas of education and alternative energy during the general election.

Conclusion

This study begins to fill in a gap in the literature in how presidential candidates communicate their ideology in presidential debates. This is important for voters to understand, who should be able to know whether or not politicians are going to give a full and accurate range of their views on different policy areas in a debate. It is also important for politicians to understand how past candidates have presented their policy priorities in order to make advantageous decisions themselves. This study provides new evidence through a regression analysis that candidates tend to mention contentious policies more in general election debates. This has not been found before in the literature on the post-primary moderation effect. This is the first study of its kind addressing the 2016 and 2020 elections, suggesting that the presence of Trump may challenge conventional wisdom that has historically been applied to assume that candidates will become more moderate in general elections.

This study does provide some new evidence supporting the post-primary moderation effect in 2016 that was found by Acree et. al in 2008 and 2012²⁹ due to the way both Clinton and Trump addressed healthcare. It also backs up the research of Acree et. al by finding that Romney prioritized less contentious policies in the general election and more contentious policies in the primary election when looking at the policies with the biggest shifts.

With these conflicting findings, this study does not make a conclusion on the extent of this effect in 2012, 2016, or 2020, particularly due to the confounding variables unique to debates. Still, debates remain some of the biggest audiences of the primary and general elections, and can be particularly important for voters who do not know the candidates well. These voters

²⁹ Brice D. L. Acree et. al, "Etch-a-Sketching: Evaluating the Post-Primary Rhetorical Moderation Hypothesis," *American Politics Research* 48, no. 1 (January 2020): 99–131, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X18800017>.

are likely to have their opinions influenced based on how often a candidate brings up issues important to them — positively or negatively. Further research should be done using similar methods to this study for additional years of elections to observe any trends and patterns over time. The methods presented in this study are novel to this topic in terms of the measure of contention and the content analysis of debate transcripts, but other studies should adapt them in ways to avoid some of the confounding factors brought on by debates. Examples of this could include focusing on times when the candidate diverts from a policy area brought up by the moderator to jump to another policy area, or focusing on opening and closing statements where the candidate is free to talk about anything. Debates are too important to be left out when considering the post-primary moderation effect.

Appendix

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	Description	Variable	General #1	General #2	Total general	Primary #1	Primary #2
2	foreign aid	nataid		1	1	1	1
3	space	natspac			0		
4	health	natheal	8	8	16	6	11
5	help big cities	natcity			0		
6	halt rising crime	natcrime	1		1		2
7	addiction	natdrug	2		2		1
8	improve ed	nateduc	3	2	5	5	
9	help blacks	natrace	2	4	6	1	2
10	arms/defense	natarms			0	1	2
11	welfare	natfare			0		
12	roads and bridge	natroad			0		
13	social sec	natsoc	1		1		
14	transportation	natmass	1	1	2		2
15	parks and rec	natpark			0		
16	childcare	natchld			0		2
17	sci research	natsci			0	1	1
18	alt energy	natenrgy	8	6	14	1	5
19	law enforcement	natcrimy	2	3	5		2

Figure 5: Example of tallying and summing policy counts for 2020

% primary	% general	% diff	contention
0.03041825095	0.01886792453	0.01155032642	0.511
0	0	0	0.023
0.3117870722	0.3018867925	0.009900279791	0.576
0	0	0	0.649
0.09505703422	0.01886792453	0.07618910969	0.104
0.02661596958	0.03773584906	-0.01111987947	0.255
0.06463878327	0.09433962264	-0.02970083937	0.411
0.07604562738	0.1132075472	-0.03716191979	0.986
0.1825095057	0	0.1825095057	0.782
0.003802281369	0	0.003802281369	0.84
0.01901140684	0	0.01901140684	0.055
0.01140684411	0.01886792453	-0.00746108042	0.096
0.03041825095	0.03773584906	-0.00731759810	0.431
0	0	0	0.168
0.02661596958	0	0.02661596958	0.466
0.02281368821	0	0.02281368821	0.311
0.09125475285	0.2641509434	-0.1728961905	0.65
0.007604562738	0.09433962264	-0.0867350599	0.7

Figure 6: 2020 percentages gathered by dividing each policy tally by the total

	A	B	C
1	cont2020	diff2020	binary2020
2	0.65	-0.1728961905	0
3	0.7	-0.0867350599	0
4	0.986	-0.03716191979	0
5	0.411	-0.02970083937	0
6	0.255	-0.01111987947	0
7	0.096	-0.00746108042	0
8	0.431	-0.00731759810	0
9	0.84	0.003802281365	1
10	0.576	0.00990027979	1
11	0.511	0.01155032642	1
12	0.055	0.01901140684	1
13	0.311	0.02281368821	1
14	0.466	0.02661596958	1
15	0.104	0.07618910969	1
16	0.782	0.1825095057	1

Figure 7: Creating a binary variable prior to regression

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