*Getting Primaried*

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**Statement to professors**

This is the first book ever to provide a historical and theoretical accounting of primary challenges to House and Senate incumbents. Congressional primary challenges have never received very much scholarly attention, in part because they have been so rare and so rarely successful. In the past decade, however, we have seen a number of high profile challenges to sitting members of Congress, including challenges to veteran members of Congress such as Joseph Lieberman and Richard Lugar. The media and political elites have seized upon these challenges in order to explain the declining number of moderates of both parties in Congress. As I recount in this book, the reality is far more complicated. Challenges to incumbents – and in particular, challenges to centrist incumbents – have always been with us. What has changed, however, is the way in which such challenges are financed. Small donor fundraising, of the sort that propelled the Barack Obama campaign, and new types of highly partisan interest groups have fueled many of the more prominent primary challenges of the past decade. We are unlikely to see an increase in the number of such challenges in years to come, but we will certainly see a few such challenges every election cycle for the foreseeable future. Such challenges are not likely in themselves to change the composition of Congress, but they may well frighten many incumbents and provide an irresistible story line for political pundits.

This book will, I hope, be of value in two different ways. First, it provides a comprehensive accounting of primary challenges to incumbents. I have sought to categorize types of challenges to incumbents in a straightforward enough way that comparisons can be made over time not just in the number of challenges, but in the reasons for challenges. Second, the book is a contribution to the growing literature on political polarization in American government. Congressional primaries are often presented as one of the reasons for the growth in polarization in Congress. As I show here, there is little evidence that this is the case, but changes in the nature of congressional primary competition reflect broader changes in American elections and in interest group and party politics.

Classroom discussion questions:

1. Should we expect an increase in primary challenges to congressional incumbents in the next election? Why, or why not?
2. What effects do congressional primary challenges have on the level of polarization between the two major parties?
3. Should steps be taken to make it more difficult to mount a primary challenge against congressional incumbents? What sort of steps would there be?