Presidential Endorsements by State Legislators in the 2016 Presidential Contest[*]

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Abstract

In modern presidential elections, presidential candidates seek out endorsements from other politicians and celebrities, and then publicize these endorsements as signals of their strength and broad support. The now-famous book on presidential nominations, The Party Decides (Cohen et al 2008) argues that these endorsements are a critical part of the nomination process. Yet we know relatively little about why or how party elites decide to make endorsements, when they may face political risks for doing so. We specify a model of presidential endorsements to explain their reasoning, which may include a decision to make no endorsement. We also present results from a survey of state legislative candidates in the 2016 election indicating that they see endorsements as a form of position-taking for which they may be held accountable by voters and opposing candidates. We find that state legislators were more likely to endorse presidential candidates in the 2016 election cycle as their ideology grew more extreme, and that ideology and geographic interests affected legislators' choice of presidential candidates.

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1   Introduction

One of the most important choices in American politics is the selection of Presidential candidates. The prize of the nations most powerful office has long motivated politicians to organize into national political parties (McCormick 1982) and to develop ever-evolving structures to focus the support of each party on a single person. Since the 1972 election cycle, both parties have employed a decentralized nomination process in which the critical phase is the competition for party convention delegates in primary elections and caucus meetings across the states, territories, and Washington, D.C. (Cohen et al 2008; Polsby 1983). However, in The Party Decides (hereafter TPD), Cohen et al argue that behind this apparently open process is a signaling game between party elites, in which the nominees (or at least major contenders) are selected in advance of the primary election phase during an invisible primary conducted by party insiders. These insiders communicate and choose a winner by making endorsements of presidential candidates. Candidates gain the inside track to their partys presidential nomination by accumulating a significant and diverse number of public supporters.

Despite their critical role in the electoral process, we do not know much about how party elites make these critical decisions. Scholars have researched the effects of endorsements on voters (McDermott 2006; Neddenriep and Nownes 2014) and party nominations (Cohen et al 2008; Dominguez 2011; Kousser et al 2015; Stone and Abramowitz 1983). Less is known, however, about why party actors make endorsements at all, and why they choose the candidates they do. TPD claims that these endorsements serve a social purpose: they help a diverse party to coordinate on a candidate early in the nomination process to avoid the emergence of a factional candidate or the persistence of public intra-party conflict. In this account, actors are primarily motivated by the benefits of securing the best possible Presidential candidatea public good for all party members.

We do not know, however, if party insiders also consider their individual interests when making endorsements, such as pleasing their constituents, enhancing their personal reputa-

tions, or currying favor with candidates who are likely to win. Incorporating these factors would help us to understand the likelihood of party leaders bandwagoning for a candidate who seems likely to win the nomination or splitting amongst multiple factional candidates. In particular, a more developed model of party insider behavior would help explain why insiders would withhold their endorsements. As the authors acknowledge (Cohen et al 2016), the Republican partys failure to coordinate on an inside candidate in 2016 and the subsequent victory of outside candidate Donald Trump was inconsistent with their model. A critical factor in this failure was the reluctance of many Republican insiders to make public endorsements, which was also a pattern in the 2012 Republican presidential cycle (Sides and Vavreck 2013). For reasons that are unknown, the collective goal of choosing the best candidate for a party is not sufficient to induce many party insiders to make endorsements, even when the resulting outcome is a candidate who lacks broad support.

This paper makes three contributions. First, it develops a model of elite signaling, highlighting that the costs of endorsing may deter actors from publicizing their preferences, and that party elites may have an incentive to endorse a suboptimal candidate. Second, it shares the results of a 2016 survey of state legislators who represent a pool of potential endorsers, showing that elected officials' endorsements are influenced by their own constituents' preferences. Last, we analyze patterns of endorsements by state legislators in 2016 and show that their personal ideology and constituencies affected whether they endorsed a presidential candidate and who they endorsed, with legislators with more extreme ideologies and more party-aligned districts displaying a greater tendency to endorse a candidate.

2 Presidential Nominations: A Signaling Model

We start with the assumption that endorsements matter. Prior research finds that party endorsements help legislative candidates to win party nominations (Dominguez 2011; Kousser et al 2015) and help Presidential candidates to succeed in the modern nomination system

(Cohen et al 2008). The mechanisms for this influence include mobilizing interest group members to participate in Presidential nomination caucuses (Stone and Abramowitz 1983) and providing informative signals to voters (McDermott 2006), especially less informed voters and those whose policy views are poorly aligned with their party loyalties (Neddenriep and Nownes 2014). More obviously, we note that politicians act as if endorsements matter: candidates announce endorsements and the media report them as if they are valuable signals.

Because endorsements are valuable, we also assume that presidential candidates solicit endorsements. In some cases, this is obvious. Interest groups often host cattle call sessions for presidential candidates to take turns making their pitches, and candidates participate in the hope of winning support from organizations that can provide useful endorsements. A hard test of this assumption is whether an outsider candidate like Donald Trump seeks endorsements from politicians. If so, this would be evidence that even the most nontraditional candidates believe that endorsements are valuable.

What do endorsers want? Stone and Abramowitz (1983) find that party activists (delegates at state party conventions) want a mix of ideological purity and electability, with ideology as a primary criterion in the abstract but electability becoming more central when discussing specific candidates in an approaching election. In TPD, party insiders are broadly defined to include officeholders, interest group leaders, and activists (2008, 102) who seek to identify a candidate who meets two criteria: acceptability to the key policy-demanding groups in the party coalition, and likelihood of winning. Once the insiders pick a candidate, they join together to present a *united front* of support to voters and the media, which should enable that candidate to survive and win the Presidential primary process.

Th selection of a Presidential candidate is a coordination game, and TPD points out that insiders will have to pay conformity costs:

> This is not to say that a party consists of members who care only about getting
> the best possible nominee for the party. As noted in our theoretical discussion
> in chapter 2, parties are not unitary actors. They consist of groups of intense

policy demanders whose greatest loyalty is to their own group rather than to the party itself. Each will therefore maneuver to secure the nomination of candidates favorable to its own interests and values. Yet Party members may be expected to understand the need to achieve party unity and should therefore compromise as necessary to achieve that goal (2008, 103).

Party elites may have individual interests, but they will prioritize the collective goal of choosing a good candidate:

Politics enters as well: pressure to go along with ones group, to get on the band-wagon of the likely winner, or to repay old obligations. But the main business of the invisible primary is figuring out who can best unify the party and win the fall election (2008, 14).[1]

While it may be in the collective interest of the party to unite in creating a frontrunner, it is not clear at all why it is in the individual interest of potential endorsers to do so, especially in the invisible primary period. Endorsements provide diffuse, shared benefits for members of the party. Every member of the party benefits from a strong, electable presidential candidate, and in turn, the candidate benefits from a united party and its endorsements. But that benefit is a *public good*: it is non-excludable and non-rival in consumption. Party insiders could choose to defect and not endorse, while enjoying the benefits of the party choosing an effective frontrunner.

At the same time, the potential costs for endorsers are private and concentrated. These include the cost of getting informed about the ideological and electoral qualities of the candidates. Even more significant is the gamble in choosing the wrong person, especially when the outcome of the primary campaign is most in doubt. Victorious candidates are unlikely

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[1]Similarly, Cohen et al later state that party members who make endorsementsdiffer in their preferences and are therefore likely to differ in their first choice of candidates but they know that factional favorites are a poor bet to unify the party. They may therefore be expected to support a candidate who is acceptable to key groups in the party. (2008, 187-88)

to look kindly on insiders endorsements of their opponents. And voters may be dissatisfied by an elected official's public endorsement, leading to electoral risk for the endorser.

This combination of shared benefits and individual costs present a classic case of a collective action dilemma. An equally classic solution to this type of dilemma is the provision of private benefits. These might involve post-election rewards from the winning candidate. They might also be strong signals of ideological positioning to other elites (like donors), their own potential future primary or general election opponents, and to voters.

It is also likely to be the case that there is significant heterogeneity in the exposure of different individuals at different times and in different places to varieties of benefits and costs.

3 Model

We focus on a subset of endorsers: elected officials. These insiders provide a convenient sample of party insiders for empirical analysis because we can identify both endorsers and non-endorsers. They also serve a theoretical purpose: elected officials illustrate how private incentives may complicate the search for a public good.

We assume that politicians are motivated by a combination of career ambition and policy interests, with reelection as a necessary condition for both. We also assume that politicians make individual utility calculations, and only make endorsements if the benefits exceed the costs. We next specify the costs and benefits of making an endorsement.

3.1 Policy Gain

Borrowing from the calculus of voter turnout, this is the marginal effect of legislator is endorsement on candidate cs probability of winning the nomination and the presidential election.

$$U_i(endorsement) = \Delta p_c(nomination|endorsement)(p_c B_i) \tag{1}$$

Where U_i is the utility for legislator i, Δp is the change in probability that candidate c wins the nomination due to the legislators endorsement, and $p_c B_i$ is a policy gain difference between is preferred candidate and the rest of the field of candidates, weighted by probability of winning the election if nominated. Cohen et al (2008) assumes that $p_c B_i$ is positive for all endorsers (no one endorses a candidate who offers a worse combination of winning and policy gain than other options) but stresses that party insiders are uncertain about candidates likelihood of success and, perhaps, their true policy views.

3.2 Campaigning

A presidential candidate influences the campaigns of down-ballot co-partisans across the country. For Republicans in 2016, having Donald Trump as the partys standard-bearer meant each candidate was likely to face questions about Trumps controversial statements and policy proposals, including unexpected quotes, Tweets, and leaked Access Hollywood tapes that arose without warning and crowded out Republican candidates' individual campaign themes. More subtly, politicians may prefer to campaign with someone from their region as presidential candidate, or someone with a campaign agenda that is a good fit for their districts. With this in mind, we update the equation to include the benefits of campaigning with a Presidential candidate,

$$U_i(endorsement) = \Delta p_c(nomination|endorsement)(p_c B_i)$$
$$+\Delta p_c(nomination|endorsement)(\Delta p_i R_i) \tag{2}$$

Where R is the benefit of reelection for legislator i and Δp_i is the change in is reelection probability if candidate c is the partys nominee. Again, this part of the calculation is discounted by the marginal change in nomination probabilities due to is endorsement.

3.3 Signaling Rewards

In the conventional calculus of voting, there is a D term capturing voters sense of duty or the personal happiness and pride they gain from acting on their preferences (Schuessler 2000). For politicians, the gains from taking a public stand are much more tangible: they expect that voters and donors will reward or punish them for the positions they take as well as the change they achieve (Mayhew 1974). Legislators expect that their endorsements will become publicthat is their purpose!and influence their supporters. But the signaling goes both ways: Smith endorses Trump conveys information about Trump (he is endorsed by Smith) but also about legislator i (Smith is a Trump-endorser). This information may affect voters perceptions of the legislator, or it may induce potential donors to give or withhold donations. Legislators, we assume, incorporate this payoff into their calculations.

$$U_i(endorsement) = \Delta p_c(nomination|endorsement)(p_c B_i)$$
$$+\Delta p_c(nomination|endorsement)(\Delta p_i R_i) \qquad (3)$$
$$+S_i$$

S_i is the signaling gain, and it is not tied to the outcome of the nomination contest or the election. Win or lose, legislator i gains or loses political credit based on his or her endorsement.

Instead of listing a parallel set of potential costs, we stress that some of these terms may be *negative*. A legislator might consider a presidential candidate to be positive in policy terms (pcB_i) but a drag on the campaign ticket (negative $\Delta p_i R_i$) or unpopular with a legislators constituents and potential donors (S_i). And, especially, legislators may have a strong incentive to endorse bad candidates (those with lower pcB_i terms, so they are unlikely to win the general election or offer worse policy benefits than other candidates) who are popular with the legislators constituents. Indeed, this is a central feature of s invisible primary: endorsement signals are more informative (higher Δp_c) when insiders pay higher conformity costs because the endorser pays a political price for making the endorsement.

Some politicians may shirk in such situations by endorsing a bad candidate who is more popular among their own constituents, regardless of the effect of their actions on their partys nomination decision.

3.4   Summary

By specifying the decision-making process, we gain three insights.

1. **It can be rational to abstain**. This is a simple result that arises when the benefits of endorsing are outweighed by the costs. That is, the net payoff of policy payoffs, campaigning together, and taking a public position is less than zero. In particular, let us consider cases in which the possible endorsers influence on the outcome is zero, or extremely small. This is arguably the case with many of the state legislators we study below. If that is the case, the key factor in their decision is if any endorsement provides positive benefit. As a practical matter, this is a function of how factionalized the presidential contest has become. The more a potential endorser believes that endorsing one candidate will lead to negative feedback from supporters of other candidates, the less attractive it is to make an endorsement.

2. **Suboptimal candidates can win the presidential nomination if they offer positive rewards for making endorsements.** Note that a candidate may gather more endorsements than his or her competitors and win the nomination and yet not be the best candidate, that is the option that provides the highest payoff for actually winning the election and changing policy (pcBi). In this sense the coordination problem of choosing a candidate becomes a free rider problem: not enough elites pay the price of endorsing a consensus candidate over the most popular candidate. We might call this the Jeb Bush scenario.

3. We may observe **factional splits** within the endorsers. Again, this can emerge when potential endorsers receive positive signaling gains from a range of candidates varying

in terms of the agendas, region, or personal characteristics, and when the conformity costs of accepting a consensus candidate are high.

The distinction between this model and TPD is that we do not necessarily expect that party elites will coordinate on the best candidate. The gap between collective interest and individual payoffs may help explain why the party often does not decide during the invisible primary, or ends up choosing a candidate who is popular among party faithful but not likely to win the election.

4   What do Party Elites Actually Want?

As a preliminary step toward testing our model, we surveyed a set of potential endorsers in the 2016 presidential campaign. We included several questions in this cycles National Candidate Survey on the decision to endorse.

The National Candidate Survey was conducted in September 2016. The Survey first collects contact information on the 9,241 people running for state legislature nationwide at that time. The study first collected email and/or physical mailing addresses for every registered candidate from Project Vote Smart. Most candidates had both. In mid-September and early October, the study sent three waves of email and postcard solicitations to the entire universe of candidates. Of those, 1,737 responded the overall survey, for an 18.8% response rate, which was comparable to the 2012 and 2014 iterations of the survey (and roughly double the response rate of a typical public opinion survey conducted at that time).

We asked candidates if they were contacted by candidates to solicit endorsements, if they made endorsements, and what they considered the prime considerations and risks when making presidential endorsements.

4.1 Evaluating Presidential Candidates

Here we present two preliminary results. The first is the answer of these state legislative candidates to the question, What factors are important when deciding which candidate to endorse for President? Respondents then chose from a list of options, with the option of marking more than one. The options were:

- Would make the best president

- Would be the best candidate to maintain and expand my party's coalition

- Would be the best candidate to maintain and expand my party's coalition

- Would be the best general election candidate for me to run with

- Popularity among party members in my district

- Best able to help me raise campaign funds

- Most likely to help my career if elected

The setup of the question allowed an all of the above approach, so it may be difficult to identify differences between responses. The results are based on responses from 754 Democratic candidates and 474 Republican candidates to this portion of the survey.

The results, illustrated in Figure 1, show a strong preference for best president, although one would not expect many to confess they were searching for the worst president, or someone barely mediocre enough to suffice.

The second and third most important criterion for both parties were to pick candidates who were good for the health of the party coalition, as TPD predicts, and who make for positive draws at the top of the party ticket. Few candidates indicated that fundraising or career connections were major factors in their decisions.
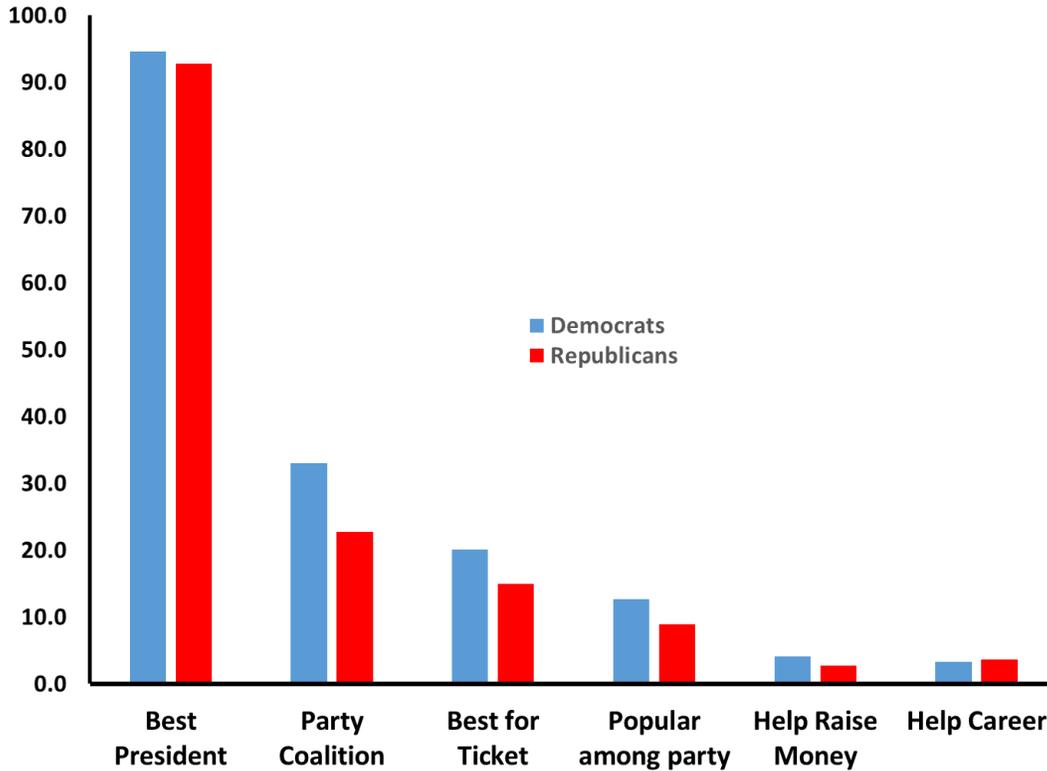
Figure 1: Criteria for evaluating Presidential candidates, by party.

4.2 The Risks of Endorsement

We also asked candidates about the potential pitfalls of endorsing a presidential candidate. The question was, What are the dangers or costs of endorsing a candidate? (Mark all that apply.) and the options were:

- "If you endorse a losing candidate and the party's candidate is elected President, he or she will be less likely to provide political support in the future"

- "An endorsement would anger party leaders who support another candidate"

- "An endorsement would anger interest groups that support another presidential candidate"

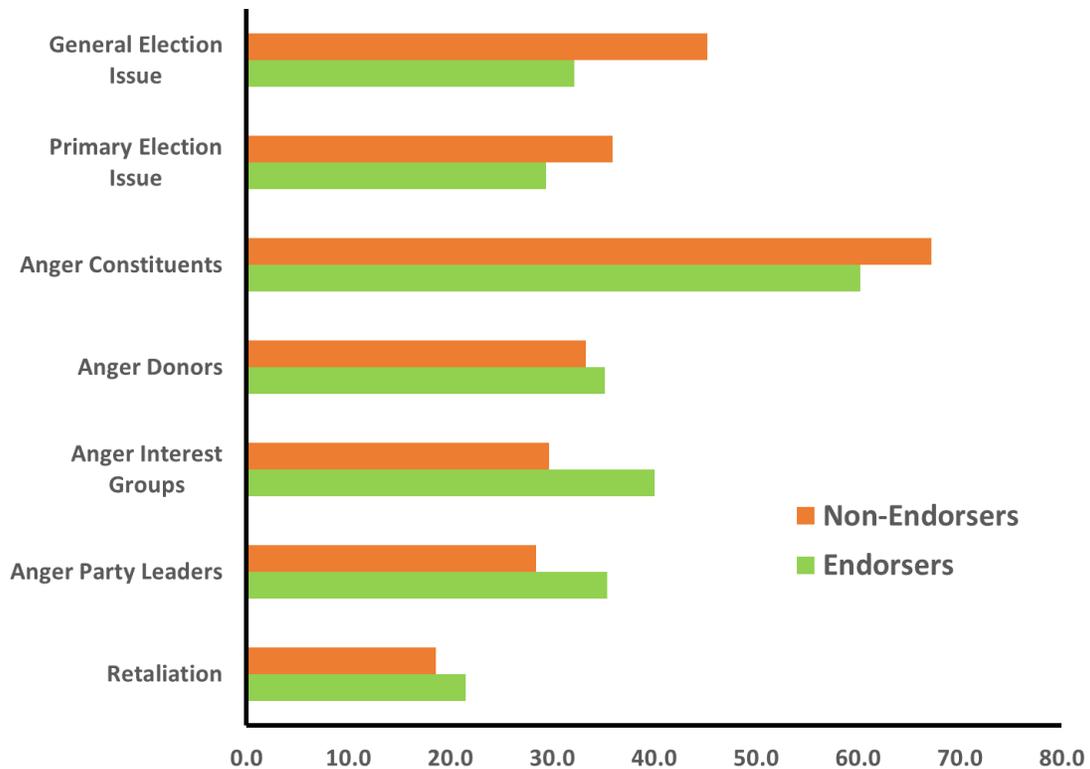- An endorsement would anger campaign donors that support another presidential candidate"

Figure 2: Risks of Presidential Endorsement, Democratic candidates.

- "An endorsement would anger constituents who support another presidential candidate"

- "A primary election opponent could use the endorsement as an argument against you"

- "A general election opponent could use the endorsement as an argument against you"

We separated the respondents in each party by whether they made an endorsement in 2016 or not, with the expectation that the risks identified by non-endorsers might help us understand the general reluctance of party elites to endorse in the 2016 cycle. We first present the results for 754 Democratic candidates (367 endorsers, 387 non-endorsers) in Figure 2.

About one-fifth of Democratic endorsers expressed concern that they might face sanctions for picking the wrong candidate. Larger percentages of both endorsers and non-endorsers were concerned about other forms of elite sanction by the party network: angering local party leaders, interest groups, or donors. By far, however, the greatest danger was that
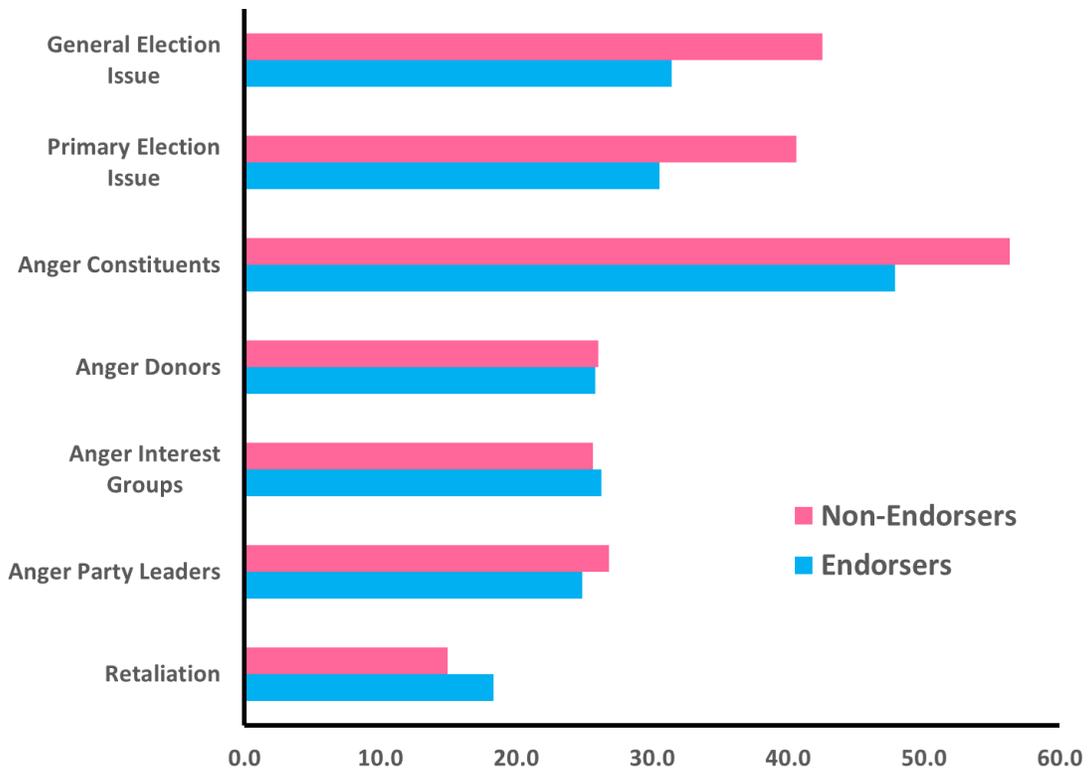
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Figure 3: Risks of Presidential Endorsement, Republican candidates.

voters would disapprove of their endorsement, followed by the threat that opposing primary and general election candidates might use an unpopular endorsement as a campaign issue. The common thread of these responses is the notion that endorsements are a form of position-taking for these state-level candidates, and voters may disapprove of their choices.

The results for 474 Republican candidates (213 endorsers, 261 non-endorsers) show the same pattern in Figure 3.

Once again, the results show that anger constituents who support another presidential candidate was the primary concern for both endorsers and non-endorsers, followed by the threat of primary and general election opponents using the endorsement as a campaign issue. While many candidates also feared sanctions from party insiders, these fears were not as widely spread.

5 Endorsement Data

5.1 Descriptives

We collected presidential endorsements made by current and former state legislators in the 2016 cycle. These totalled 7,940. Since the subject of the paper is the strategic calculus of current office holders, we subsetted the data to only those in office as of the date of endorsement. These come to 6,504, comprised of 3244 Republican endorsements and 3260 Democratic endorsements.[2] Of the 4,117 current Republican state legislators, about 47.4% made an endorsement. Of the 3,128 current Democratic state legislators, about 41.5% made an endorsement.

Figure 4 shows the big differences between the two parties. In the Democratic party primary, the party definitely decided. Hillary Clinton was the choice of 90% of the state legislative endorsers in her party. On the other hand, there was no such overwhelming choice in the Republican primary. Marco Rubio was the choice of the largest number of endorsers, with 29% of the endorsements. Eventual winner Donald Trump only collected 17% of endorsements, while his major opponents Ted Cruz collected 24% and John Kasich notched 11%.

We examine the trends in the two primaries, beginning with the Democratic primary in Figure 5. Hillary Clinton's lead in endorsements emerged very early in the spring of 2015 and never let up. Bernie Sanders, her major opponent, accumulated additional endorsements, but at a very small pace. Clinton, on the other hand, had huge endorsement spikes in the winter and spring of 2015-2016.

In Figure 6, we see the historical trends in the Republican party endorsement race. One obvious thing that jumps out from the plot is that Trump only started getting significant spikes in endorsements *only after* the primary had been decided in May 2016. In fact, those endorsements started only really rolling in around the time of the convention in the late

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[2]A very small number of these switched their endorsements, and each endorsement is recorded.
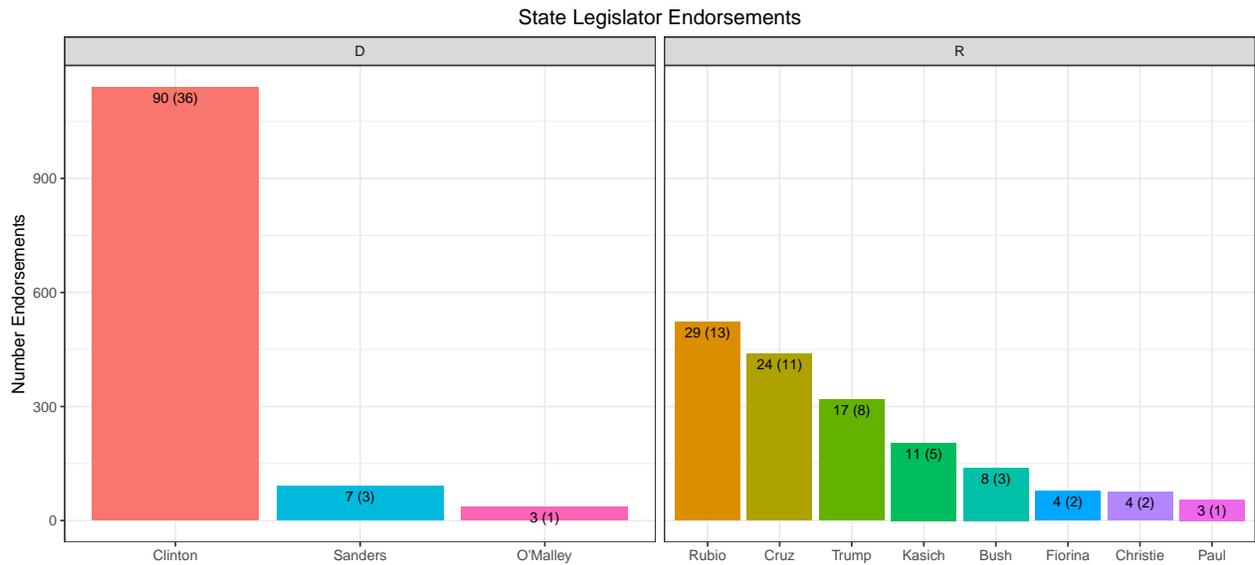
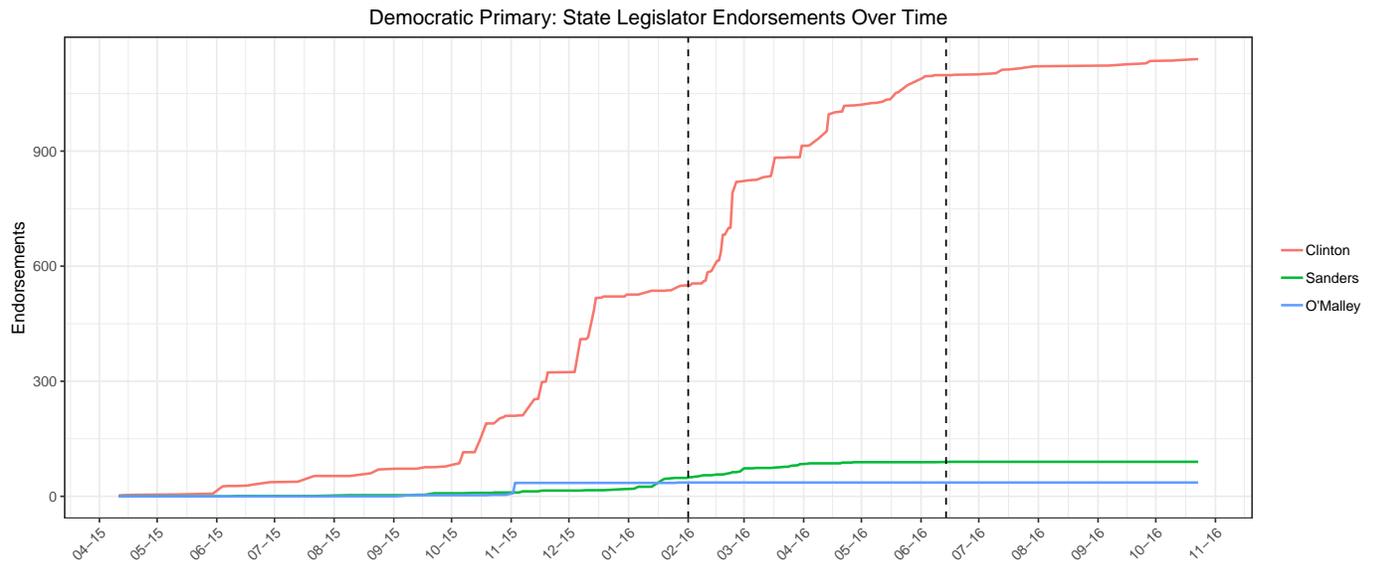Figure 4: Endorsements of candidates.

Figure 5: Endorsement trends for Democrats. Dotted lines indicate the start and (effective) end of the primary season.
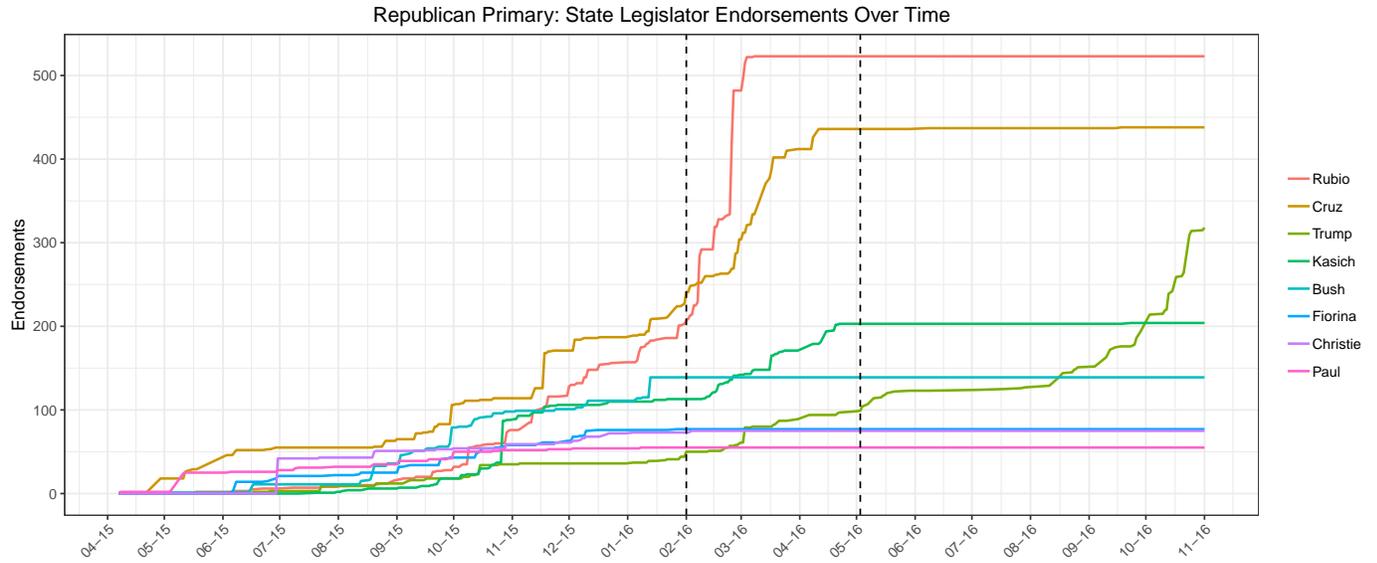
Figure 6: Endorsement trends for Republicans. Dotted lines indicate the start and (effective) end of the primary season.

summer of 2016.

The two major endorsement leaders, Rubio and Cruz, only emerged from the pack around November 2015, and experienced major spikes in the early months of 2016. John Kasich, on the other hand, only climbed into the top tier in March-April 2016, when the primary was starting to wind down.
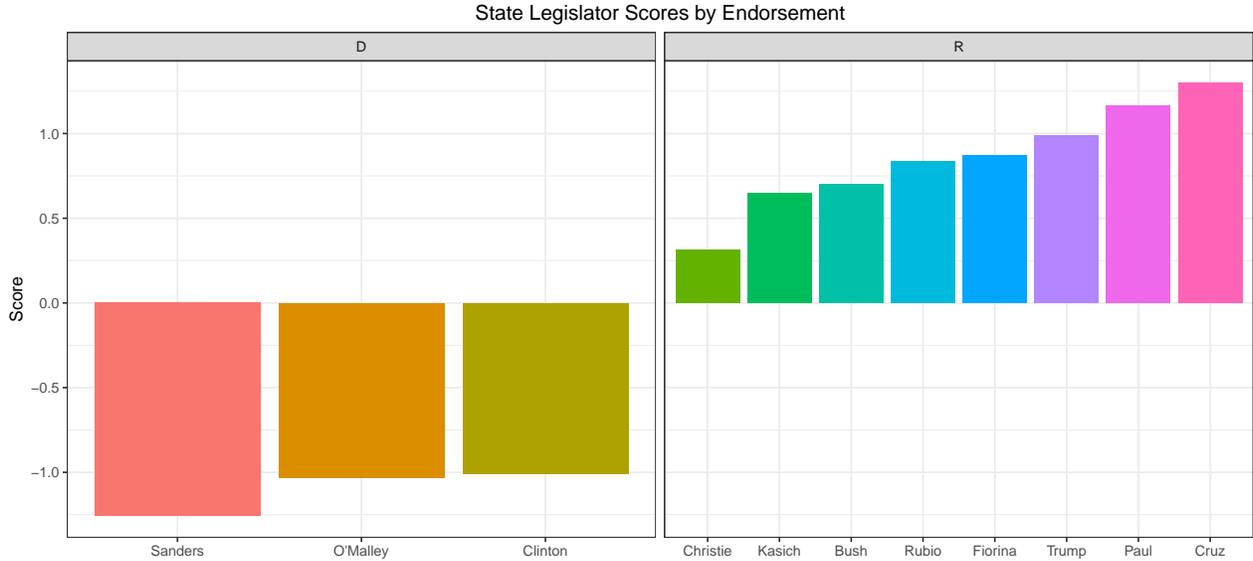
State Legislator Scores by Endorsement

Figure 7: Average ideology of endorsers by candidates.

5.2 Ideology and Endorsement

We turn to looking at the ideological profile of the candidates' endorsers. On the Democratic side, Sanders' endorsers stand out for being particularly liberal compared to Clinton's. The Republican candidate pool was quite heterogeneous with respect to ideology. Of the major candidates, Cruz had the most conservative endorsers, while Kasich's were the least conservative. Trump's endorsers were above average in terms of conservatism, but still substantially less so than Cruz's. Rubio was about in the middle.

Next, we model legislator endorsement decisions. The primary predictors are legislator conservatism (Shor and McCarty 2011) and district ideology (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2013). We subset the two parties to allow for effect heterogeneity between the parties. The models are linear probability[3] with state fixed effects to account for unobserved, state-specific endorsement factors. Consistent with our model of candidate choice, we expect ideologues to be more likely to endorse than more moderate types. We also expect more consistently ideological districts to push their representatives to endorse rather than staying out. We include a dummy for Senators to account for possible differences in constituency size in

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[3]Logit or multilevel models do not change the results.

endorsements.

Table 1 shows the results. The legislator ideology results are as expected, with conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats more likely to endorse than their more moderate colleagues. The Republican effect is substantially stronger than the Democratic one. The district opinion results are mixed, with the expected direction for Democrats but a flipped sign for Republicans. Republican Senators are more likely to endorse than their lower chamber counterparts, but the same is not true for Democrats.

Table 1

	Dependent variable:	
	Endorsed a Candidate in 2016	
	D	R
	(1)	(2)
Legislator Score	−0.071***	0.168***
	(0.021)	(0.019)
District Conservatism	−0.071***	−0.074**
	(0.027)	(0.029)
Senator	0.007	0.039***
	(0.014)	(0.013)
Constant	−0.036	−0.124**
	(0.067)	(0.057)
Observations	2,549	3,545
R^2	0.284	0.216
Adjusted R^2	0.270	0.206
Residual Std. Error	0.315 (df = 2501)	0.335 (df = 3497)
F Statistic	21.057*** (df = 47; 2501)	20.517*** (df = 47; 3497)

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

Now, conditional on endorsing, who do the legislators choose? We estimate two multinomial models with the primary predictor of interest being legislator ideology, separately for the two parties. For Democrats as shown in in Table 2, liberalism is a strong predictor of a

Sanders endorsement relative to Clinton, the base category. For Republicans in Table 3, as predicted, conservatism is the strongest predictor for a Cruz endorsements, less so for Trump and Rubio, and actually a negative predictor for Kasich. Being located in the candidate's home state helps sitting governors (Kasich and Christie), but not the others.

Table 2

	Dependent variable:	
	O'Malley	Sanders
	(1)	(2)
Legislator Score	2.1	−2.1**
	(1.3)	(1.0)
Homestate	47.0***	−0.5
	(0.01)	(1.4)
Senator	−0.1	0.8
	(0.8)	(0.8)
Constant	−25.1	−23.1***
	(181.3)	(1.1)
Akaike Inf. Crit.	296.1	296.1
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01	

Table 3

	Dependent variable:						
	Christie	Cruz	Fiorina	Kasich	Paul	Rubio	Trump
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Legislator Score	−3.1**	6.0***	0.6	−3.0**	6.1***	2.5***	3.6***
	(1.3)	(0.9)	(1.0)	(1.2)	(1.0)	(0.8)	(1.2)
Homestate	100.1***	3.4*	−21.1***	88.7***	−23.5***	−0.8	−0.4***
	(0.000)	(2.1)	(0.0)	(0.000)	(0.0)	(1.7)	(0.0)
Senator	−1.3*	−1.1**	−1.6***	−0.2	−0.2	−1.2***	−1.2*
	(0.8)	(0.5)	(0.5)	(0.5)	(0.6)	(0.4)	(0.6)
Constant	−33.2***	−34.4***	−22.3***	−26.9***	−33.7	−2.3**	−3.9**
	(0.9)	(3.1)	(4.7)	(1.7)	(35.3)	(1.1)	(1.6)
Akaike Inf. Crit.	1,817.3	1,817.3	1,817.3	1,817.3	1,817.3	1,817.3	1,817.3

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

6 Conclusion

This paper reports on ongoing research by the authors in elite endorsements in the 2016 electoral cycle. We specified a model of the decision to endorse, with the result that party elites may rationally choose not to endorse, or may endorse a candidate out of fear of reprisal or the expectation of rewards.

The paper also presents very preliminary results from a National Candidate Survey of state legislative candidates. Our most interesting finding so far is that the candidates consider endorsements to be a public signal that may anger constituents and make them vulnerable to campaign criticism.

We find that this concern affects the pool of presidential endorsers. In 2016, Republican state legislators were more likely to make an endorsement if they were more conservative, while Democratic legislators were more likely to endorse a candidate the more liberal their voting patterns. Among endorsers, there was some evidence of individual motives in endorsements, such as supporting "favorite son" candidates (Kasich and Christie) and the tendency for legislators to choose candidates based on their own ideology.

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