Moderate and Liberal Republican Primary Voters

Abstract: The moderate or liberal bloc of the Republican Party is surprisingly strong in presidential years, comprising the second-largest voting bloc with approximately 25–30 percent of all GOP voters nationwide. They are especially strong in early voting states such as New Hampshire (where they have comprised between 45 and 49 percent of the GOP electorate between 1996 and 2012), Florida, and Michigan. Moderates and liberals tend to prefer presidential candidates who are independent-minded and keep politics separate from religion. Although the GOP is known as a conservative party, the choice of moderates and liberals has ultimately emerged as the nominee in the last two nomination cycles.

Keywords: ideology, presidential elections, presidential primaries, Republican Party

In this chapter, we address the role moderate and liberal voters have played in Republican presidential primaries since 2000. Specifically, we establish that this bloc of voters is significantly more secular than more conservative voters. They hold a distinctive position on abortion, an issue of great importance to the party. Further, although moderates and liberals do agree with more conservative Republicans on a number of issues, their issue priorities are unique among primary voters. We then demonstrate that these voters do behave as a cohesive bloc during the nomination season.

While moderates and liberals are a minority within the Republican Party, they make the most of their numbers by rallying behind a single candidate very early in the nomination process. The first-in-the-nation New Hampshire primary is a crucial catalyst to their success. Its electorate is tailor-made for the success of a moderate Republican: Candidates who succeed in attracting the lion’s share of moderates there have an excellent chance of winning the primary outright. The winner of the New Hampshire primary is also guaranteed the rapid communication of his personal qualities and ideas nationally. As a result, a candidate who succeeds in persuading New Hampshire’s moderate Republicans becomes overnight the leader of the moderate/liberal faction nationally. The early bonding of Republican moderates and liberals to a single champion of their values gives their candidate a fighting chance against more conservative opponents, even though he leads a minority faction.

The presence of moderate and liberal voters in Republican primaries

The moderate or liberal bloc is surprisingly strong in presidential years, comprising the second-largest voting bloc with approximately 25–30 percent of all Republican voters nationwide. Their turnout (and influence) in Republican primaries has decreased over the past decade, but they remain an important bloc for candidates to consider. In recent cycles, they have been especially strong in early voting states such as New Hampshire (where they have comprised between 45 and 49 percent of the GOP electorate between 1996 and 2012), Florida, and Michigan. They are, however, surprisingly numerous even in the Deep South, the most conservative portion of the country.