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The Problem with Purity

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Union members in North Carolina have announced plans to try and unseat those Democrats in Congress from the state who voted against the health care bill. They believe that voting against such a long-time central plank of the party's platform was so egregious that these Congressmen should be punished for their votes.

In Arizona and Utah, stalwart conservatives are mounting similar challenges against the two incumbent Republican senators from those states, including the party's standard bearer in 2008, Sen. John McCain.

The quest for ideological purity misses an important fact about elections. They are binary choices. If the insurgent liberals in North Carolina succeed in forcing the Democratic incumbents to spend resources on a primary campaign, they are virtually conceding the seat to the GOP. It is difficult to see how the interests of the progressive movement are served by electing Republicans. A similar event happened, in reverse, in the special election last year in New York's District 23. The moderate nominee was challenged by a conservative, with the result that a Democrat picked up that seat for the first time since the Civil War.

This trend reinforces an already dangerous aspect of American politics. As a result of precise redistricting, most incumbents hold safe seats and the only likely challenge they will face is in a primary from the ideological extremes. The country's political climate would be well served if there was redistricting reform that made an increasing number of seats competitive, but in the meantime, it is beyond foolish for the extremes of either party to demand ideological purity. The Democrats in North Carolina are right to be upset about their congressmen's votes against health care, but they now are cutting off their nose to spite their face. It is a bad idea.

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