Punching and Counter-Punching in the U.S. Congress:
Why Party Leaders Tend to be Extremists

David C. King
and
Richard J. Zeckhauser

John F. Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University

December 9, 2002

Political leaders, especially in western-style legislatures, are immersed in ongoing negotiations over the substance of legislation and when legislation should be allowed "on the floor" for a vote. Legislative leaders influence the types of policies – and compromises – that emerge. Party caucuses, following often-harsh campaigns within each party, elect these leaders periodically. "When casting their secret ballots, caucus members are likely to seek a range of ideologies, ethnicity and gender, ultimately producing a leadership whose competing factions are balanced and generally moderate in tone" (Foerstel 2002: 1449).

A political leader's ideology reinforces a group's stand in bargaining situations, serving as an anchor (Raiffa 1982). The surprising implication is that a group that is engaged in significant negotiations will have a strategic interest in choosing a leader with an ideology somewhat more extreme than the group's own ideology. That makes it more likely that the ultimate bargain struck will be closer to what the group desires.

A naïve reading of principal-agent theory might lead one to expect that the ideal agent will either have no ideology, hence being readily willing to carry out the principal's wishes, or an agent with precisely the principal's ideology. That is no longer true if the agent is a negotiator, and the final outcome will be influenced by the agent's ideology, not just that of the principal. In the terminology of Thomas Schelling, appointing an extreme leader enhances the credibility of the threat to let negotiations break down unless a settlement is reached that is favorable to the group (1968: 123-31).

Extreme ideologies, like extreme stands, are not without costs in a negotiation. They may it more likely that negotiations break down, and that no deal is struck. A leader's ideology cannot come through mere statements, through what economists would

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refer to as "cheap talk." Such statements will not be believed by the other side, and correctly so. However, a leader who has a record of supporting a particular ideology, will have created a valuable reputation. Say someone has a twenty-year record of militant support for a particular cause. He is unlikely to change his mind, and even if he did, he might find that too costly to indicate that, since he would surely be accused of treason to his cause.   The very histories of such leaders assure the group, but warn the opposite side, that they will not compromise easily.

This paper seeks to apply these lessons to the U.S. Congress. Legislatures are a cauldron of negotiation (King & Zeckhauser 1999), and elected leadership teams serve as the lead negotiators (Peabody 1983), both in their dealings with the other side and in keeping their troops in line. Many dozens of times per year within Congress, whenever there is an attempt to pass a bill, a negotiation ensues. With collective bargaining, as labor negotiator John Dunlop (1984) has remarked, any contract requires three negotiations, one across the table, and one on each side of the table. Legislative deals are much the same. They reflect negotiations within each side, usually represented by a party, and between the sides. In legislatures, party leaders are the principal negotiators, orchestrating the process within their coalition, and hammering out deals across party lines.   A considerable part of a legislative leader's role in life is to be an effective negotiator, or, in the term often used by scholars of Congress, to be an effective bargainer (Baron & Ferejohn 1989).

Legislative leaders present a quite different picture than most leaders: their executive role is small; they are selected by party peers, not by the electorate at large, and one of their principal roles is to negotiate with the other side. Negotiation may not be

everything for a Congressional leader, but it is a great deal. All laws are born of

negotiations. The settings and contexts for these negotiations contrast sharply with those

for labor leaders and business executives, who are usually blessed with quiet negotiation

rooms, reasonably unified principals, and the task of completing deals one at a time.

Politicians often negotiate in a bubble, with interests groups and the media watching.

Constituents and fellow party members rarely speak with a single clear voice.

Negotiations on dozens of issues take place simultaneously, some failing and some

succeeding.

Politicians are the "human embodiments of a bargaining society," and their

careers depend on successful negotiations to shape laws (Jones 1995: 129). Leadership

teams structure many of these negotiations, establish the sequence of issues to be

discussed in the House and Senate, and strongly influence what kinds of amendments, if

any, will be allowed. Votes are visible and easily monitored by principals, but the art of

negotiation lies strongly in shaping legislation before a vote.

II. Median Voter Theory and Legislative Leadership

Should one expect legislative leaders to be centrists or extremists within their own

parties? Economists and political theorists are especially fond of assessing representation

in terms of the preferences of the median citizen. Imagine a single policy dimension over

which a legislature chooses how much money to spend. With public policies designed to

reflect the median citizen's preferences, half the population would want the legislature to

spend more, half less. The median is a stable political (and philosophical) solution

because any move away from it will make a majority worse off and will be voted down

(Black 1958). The median voter approach has powerful implications for elections as well.

When seeking to maximize votes in an election, rational parties tend to take policy positions that most closely match (or mimic) the wishes of the median voter (Downs 1957). The idea that parties and candidates tend to gravitate toward the preferences of the median voter has had a far-reaching impact on the study of elections (Enelow & Hinich 1984; Glazer, Grofman & Owen 1989; Ferejohn 1993; Alvarez 1997). Although complicated by the two-stage nature of elections, with primaries preceding general elections (Burden 1999, King 2001), campaigns tend to produce winners who are centrist with respect to the relevant electorate.

Within Congress, party caucuses elect leaders when an opening arises, and the contests for these positions are intense. The elections follow months of behind-the-scenes lobbying on behalf of one faction's candidate or another (Rohde 1991). If elections involving the general public tend to produce centrist candidates, what of elections for leadership teams within legislatures? "The most common view is the 'middleman theory' of party leadership, which asserts that party leaders come from the (ideological) center of their respective parties" (Grofman, Koetzle and McGann 2002: 88). David Truman articulated this in 1959, arguing that "the likelihood of getting elected and of performing effectively as an agent of the party both [hinge] on being a 'middleman' … not only in the sense of a negotiator but also in a literal structural sense. One would not expect that he could attract the support necessary for election unless his voting record placed him somewhere near the center in an evenly divided party" (Truman 1959: 106, cf. Patterson 1963, Sullivan 1975). Similarly, Kiewiet and McCubbins (1991)

looked at the ideological positions of party leaders, finding precisely what one would expect from the median voter model, namely that party leaders "have clearly tended toward the caucus median. Indeed, in 1979, then majority leader Jim Wright's [ideology ranking] indicated that he was *the* median Democrat in the House of Representatives" (pg. 51).

Like Kiewiet and McCubbins, we use Poole and Rosenthal's DW-NOMINATE scores to measure how liberal or how conservative a member is (Poole & Rosenthal 1997), and besides Jim Wright (D-TX), we notice several House leaders who were the median members of their party caucuses. Tommy Boggs (D-LA) was the statistical "middleman" when he won his first leadership race for party whip in 1962. Gerald Ford (R-MI) was the median Republican when he ascended to party leader in 1966, and Jack Kemp (R-NY) became Chairman of the Republican Conference in 1984 when he, too, was the ideological centrist in his party. Relying on anecdotal evidence of this sort, however, is dangerous. In 2002, for example, Republican leader Trent Lott was at the 69th percentile of his party, and Democratic leader Tom Daschle was at the 68th percentile of his party, where the 100th percentile would be most extreme for either party. To draw inferences in this paper, we depart from single instances, and look at each Congress individually from 1990 forward.

III. Legislative Leaders as Negotiators

Within the general public, the logic leading voters to prefer centrist candidates is based on the expectation that voters want to minimize the ideological distance between their own ideal positions and the likely actions of elected representatives. A member's

ideology – and its proxy through political party identifications – is an efficient shortcut

for voters who have limited time to assess and anticipate any number of political issues

(Popkin 1991). A legislator's daily choices about which issues to spend time on is most

strongly influenced by what a member perceives as constituency interests (Hall 1996).

Nearly 5,000 bills are introduced in Congress every year, and the vast majority spawn

from parochial interests in which the fingerprints of constituency control are easy to

discern.   It is fairly straightforward for most legislators to be faithful agents for their

constituent principals. They are agents ever wary of the next election.

Party leaders, though, serve multiple masters. They are accountable to the

constituents back home, but on a day-to-day basis the bulk of their time is spent in a

series of ongoing competitive negotiations with the leadership team of the opposing party

and with members of their own party. Legislative leaders are negotiators, ever mindful

of the need to swing a majority, however small. In the House of Representatives, the

magic number is 218 votes, while 51 votes is the critical threshold in the Senate.[1]

Because party leadership teams serve as the lead negotiators for members of

Congress, party caucuses play an important role in legislatures and in selecting the

leadership teams.   In the House of Representatives, the critical party leaders are the

speaker, the majority and minority leaders, the majority and minority whips, and the

conference or caucus chairs. The Senate leadership structure is the same, except that the

majority leader also assumes a role similar to the House speaker. Although one's image

of a party leader may be someone like Robert Dole (R-KS), who served 16 years in

various leadership positions, or Sam Rayburn (D-TX), who was Speaker for 17 years,

turnover is substantial. In practice parties select new leaders for one of their major

positions nearly every Congress.

Established research traditions treat leaders as within-party representatives,

influencing committee assignments, party agendas, and the like (Sinclair 1983, Rohde

1991, Cox & McCubbins 1993.) They do this, to be sure. However, their negotiation

role has been slighted.   The leaders will be selected not only for their skills but also for

the bargaining leverage that their policy views create. The importance of negotiation as

part of the job description has a feedback effect on who is given the role of party leader.

The negotiation game between leaders of different parties is similar to the "dance

of negotiation," described by Howard Raiffa (1982).   In a negotiation dance, such as

bargaining over the price of a rug at an open air bazaar, the buyer starts with a low bid

and the seller starts with a high bid. After tugging and hauling, they dance closer

together and end up near the middle of the original offer.

We expect to find that legislative leaders tend to be more extreme than their party

medians because the benefit of negotiating a favorable outcome may lead fully rational

political parties to select relatively extreme leaders.

Each legislative negotiation begins with the leader, and his or her ideology,

walking into the room. Consider a hypothetical legislature with ideologies arrayed from

0 to 1 and where the median Republican is at 0.6 and median Democrat at 0.4. Say the

Democrats have selected negotiator with a 0.4 ideology. If the Republicans select a

negotiator at 0.6, we would expect a 0.5 outcome. However, if the Republicans select a

negotiator at 0.7, they should be able to shift that outcome to 0.55 (half of 0.4 + 0.7),

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[1]When filibuster are threatened in the Senate, which is common on controversial bills, a 60 vote plurality is

which is closer to their party median.   Anticipating this, or learning from past losses, the Democrats should counter with a more extreme leadership team in hopes of tugging the result closer to their party median. The centrifugal force of this escalation game would lead to electing the two most extreme members of the party caucuses.

There is a strong countervailing centripetal force that keeps the parties from settling on their most extreme members as negotiators. An extreme negotiator does not achieve a better – i.e., closer to the party median – outcome by magic. He simply refuses or prevents deals that other leaders might accept. Hence, the more extreme a negotiator, the less likely a deal is to be secured. Thus, a caucus would be unwise to select its most extreme member; probably little would get done. How to balance these two forces optimally is our focus below.

## IV. A Model of Leadership Extremism

When the House Democratic leadership team for the 108th Congress (2003-2004) was elected by the party caucus, the eventual minority leader, Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) faced a challenge from Harold Ford, Jr. (D-TN). Backed by a coalition of politically moderate (and mostly Southern) "Blue Dog Democrats," Ford's supporters argued that Pelosi was too liberal to represent the party on a national stage. To regain a national majority, said Charles Stenholm (D-TX), "Democrats cannot win merely by rallying the faithful. We need to earn the support of the independent and swing voters as well" (Ferrechio 2002).

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required for cloture

Nancy Pelosi won her leadership race handily, with 177 caucus votes while Ford received 29 votes. She won, however, not for her potential as a national spokesperson for the Democratic Party. Her caucus supporters pointed to the ongoing battles across the aisle, chiefly with new Republican Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-TX). The core of negotiation-based model was articulated by Norman Ornstein's in his observations of Pelosi's role. Because Democrats are the minority party in the House, noted Ornstein, Pelosi's role would be "limited to counterpunching. The key to the next two years is the punchers – the Republicans, who will set the policy agenda in substance and timing and will be able to frame the debate and priorities in a nearly unfettered way" (Ornstein 2002).

Members of party caucuses may rationally choose non-median leaders because of the "punching and counterpunching" across party aisles, and we expect that the logic behind Nancy Pelosi's rise to the minority leader position is of long-standing

Figure 1 displays the calculus of a conservative caucus. The caucus median (0.60) lies to the right of medians of both the other party and the chamber. The calculus

Figure 1: Ideal Negotiator for a Conservative Caucus
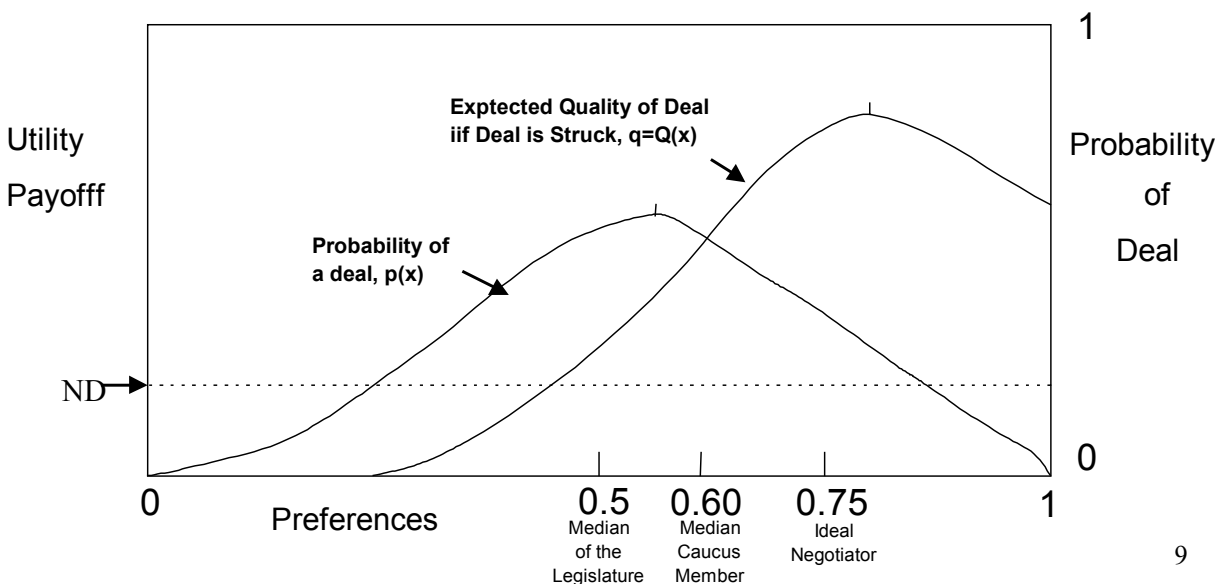
involves two curves and a horizontal line. One curve, judged from the standpoint of the median caucus member, shows the expected quality of a deal conditional on a deal being consummated with the other party. Denote this value as q, where q = Q(x/deal), hereafter abbreviated as Q(x). It is constructed assuming some location for the negotiator in the other party, and a negotiating process of the type described by Raiffa. Its payoff is in measured in utiles, or more technically as a vonNeumann-Morgenstern utility.

The second curve gives the probability of a deal, P(x), which falls over as the conservative negotiator moves to the right from 0.55 to 0.60. Its probability values are scaled at the right of the diagram. (Below 0.55, this curve falls off because the conservative caucus would not support such a moderate leader.)

The dashed horizontal line represents the status quo, No Deal, offering payoff ND. It represents the expected value in utiles of doing nothing. Possibly nothing will happen in the future, or a new deal may be struck. The expected value of this future lottery is ND.

In choosing among candidates for negotiator, a caucus member will compute the expected value his ideology will bring. With a negotiator at x, the expected payoff will be:

$$P(x)Q(x) + (1-P(x))ND. \tag{1}$$

Rearranging terms we get

$$P(x)[Q(x)-ND] + ND. \tag{2}$$

To maximize this, the member effectively maximizes the probability of a deal times the gain in the deal over the status quo. This is the first term in the sum; the second term, ND is not affected by x. In the diagram, for the median voter at 0.65, the ideal negotiator is at 0.75, the point were $P(x)[Q(x)-ND]$ is maximized.

Taking derivatives, and maximizing (2), we get

$$P'(x)/P(x) = -Q'(x)(Q(x)-ND), \qquad\qquad (3)$$

the condition for the ideal location of the leader. This optimum expression (3) tells us the two elasticities with respect to the negotiator's location are set equal: The elasticity of the probability must equal the negative of the elasticity of the gain from a deal. The implication is that a caucus will choose a more extreme leader/negotiator the less this affects the probability of a deal, the more it affects the quality of a deal, and the better is the no deal outcome. What the example illustrates is that it often will be desirable for a caucus to select a legislative negotiator who is substantially more extreme than its median member, though it should hardly choose its most extreme member.

V. Empirical Evidence on Leader Ideology

Neither party exists in a vacuum, and laws are passed by holding onto one's own party base while attracting as many members of the opposing party as possible. Temporary coalitions are built bill-by-bill, but party leaders' own preferences anchor the negotiations. Accordingly, we suspect that partisans think strategically and elect negotiators who are more extreme than their caucus medians – yet not so extreme that credible deals are unlikely to be completed.

Leaders' Extremism Relative to Party. Evidence consistent with this explanation is found in the ideology of the 100 leadership teams (two per two-year Congress) that were elected by their party caucuses from 1900 through 2000, or from the 56th through the 105th Congresses. A legislator's ideology is measured using Poole-Rosenthal DW-

NOMINATE scores. These scores come from factor loadings derived from an analysis of all recorded House and Senate votes in a given Congress. Although depending on the magic of a factor analysis machine, DW-NOMINATE scores are widely used and accepted as indicators of legislators' ideology, and the scores correlate highly with other measures of ideology.

Adapting Groseclose's (1995) approach, we measure the extremeness of a leadership team relative to the party caucus by reporting the percent of the party caucus members who have ideology scores more moderate than the average for the leadership team. For example, following the November 1994 elections, Republicans took control of the House of Representatives in January 1995 and elected a leadership team consisting of Speaker Newt Gingrich (GA), Majority Leader Dick Armey (TX), Whip Tom Delay (TX), and Conference Chair John Boehner (OH). The median member of the Republican caucus in that congress was Jay Kim (CA), who by all accounts never played a pivotal role in the Republican caucus, though 50 percent of the caucus was more moderate than he. By contrast, 55.1 percent the Republican caucus was more moderate than Newt Gingrich that year, 95.5 percent was more moderate than Dick Armey, 91.5 percent was more moderate than Tom Delay, and 77.9 percent was more moderate than John Boehner. Averaging these four percentile rankings, the Republican leadership team was more conservative than nearly 80 percent of the members of their party caucus. On the other side of the Aisle, Richard Gephardt (MO) headed up a leadership team that on average was more liberal than 72 percent of the Democratic party caucus.

If the median voter theory applied to the election of leaders, we would expect the distribution of extremism scores for leadership teams to be centered around 50 percent. (Democrats are more extreme if they are more liberal, whereas Republicans are more extreme if more conservative.) A Congress lasts for two years, with leadership teams usually elected in January of the odd numbered years. Results for the 100 majority and

Figure 2
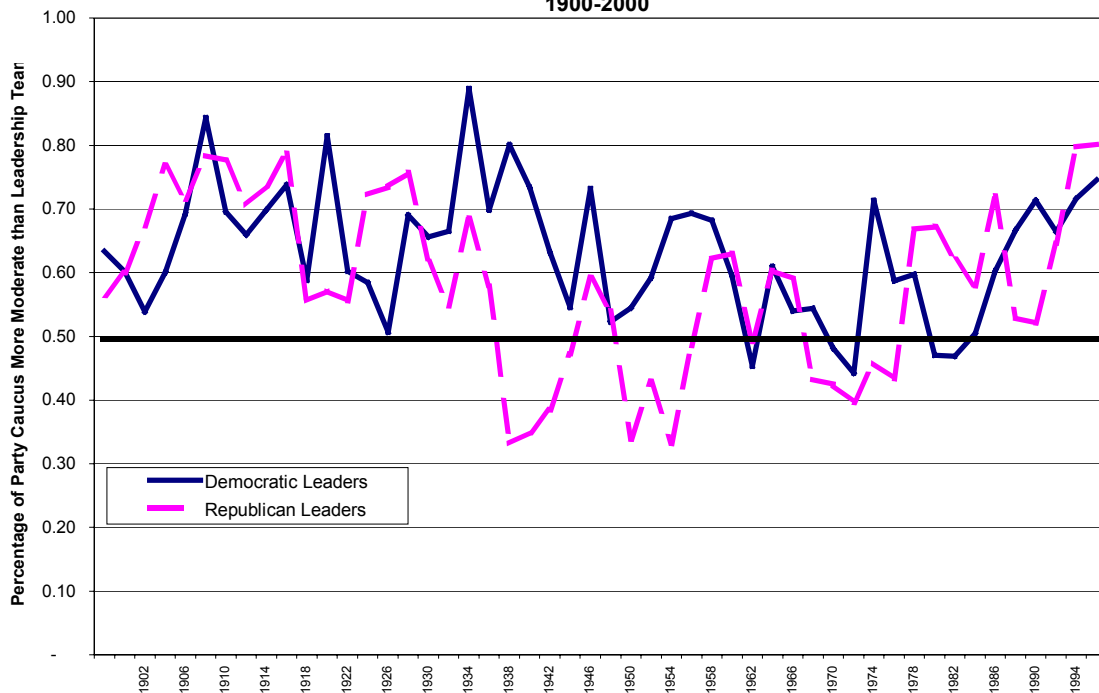**House Leadership Teams & Extremism**
1900-2000
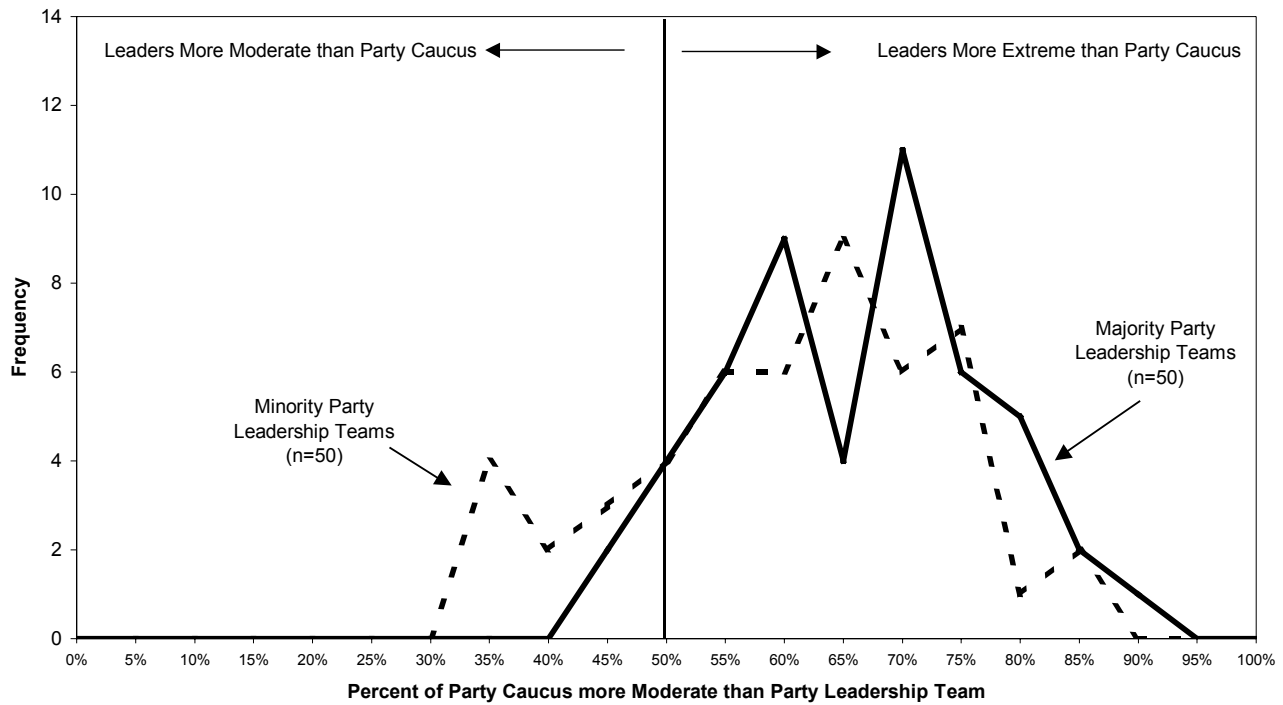
Average DW-NOMINATE scores for 100 leadership teams (two per Congress). Leadership teams include Speakers, Party Leaders, Chief Whips, and Conference Chairs.

minority party leadership teams are shown in Figure 2, and the pattern is decidedly non-centrist.

A distinctive pattern emerges from the aggregate statistics. Across the 100 leadership teams in our sample, 82 were more extreme than their party's median. The majority party has had leadership teams at or below the party's ideological median just six times in the 100 years. The minority party – perhaps hopeful at times of building governing majorities by attracting moderates from the other party – has had leadership teams at or below the party median 12 times in 100 years. The average ideological gap between the party's median and the leader (61.2% of party more moderate) is substantial. The hypothesis that leaders reflect the median can be easily rejected (p< 0.0005).

Figure 3
House Leadership Extremism Over Time
1900-2000

Average DW-NOMINATE scores for 100 leadership teams (two per Congress). Leadership teams include Speakers, Party Leaders, Chief Whips, and Conference Chairs.

Likewise, while both the majority and minority party leadership teams tend to be more extreme than their party medians, minority party leadership teams tend to be more moderate than their majority party counterparts (p<.01).

The evidence reported in Figure 2 is as predicted by our model of legislative leaders as negotiators. On average, legislative leaders are noticeably more extreme than their party medians. The median party member may be willing to support more extreme leaders, (and increase the presumed agency loss on a range of matters) because party members anticipate the "dance of negotiation" and the importance of having agents whose initial positions help to anchor negotiations favorably.

Though our extremism results are very strong, there is one era that appears to be anomalous. From 1936-58 Republic leaders were more moderate than their party. This was an era when the Democrats majority was significant, and Republicans were seeking to build temporary coalitions with conservative Southern Democrats. This is a one-time happening, the amount of data is limited, and we are hesitant to explain exceptions on a case-by-case basis. Nevertheless, this unusual behavior is widely discussed in the literature (Manley 1973, Sinclair 1982, Rohde 1989).

Levels of Leadership. If our theory is correct, it should apply to all leaders, but should apply most strongly to those who participate most actively in negotiations both across and on their side of the aisle. To test this, we ranked all members of a party from least influential (not holding a leadership position) to most influential. The latter would be Speaker of the House for the majority party in the House, and Party Leader for the House minority party or either party in the Senate. The pattern that emerges is as predicted, as shown in Table 2. The more senior the figure, the more extreme was his ideology relative to his party. This pattern is particularly indicative, given that the Party Leaders and the Speaker of the House play a prominent additional role representing

parties to the electorate at large. Presumably that responsibility creates a pull to the

median of the electorate, which in turn is more moderate than the median of the party.

Table 2

Leadership Progressions,
Percentage of Party Caucus more Moderate than Legislator
1900-2000

	House	Senate
Not Currently Holding a Leadership Position	49.9%	50.0%
Conference or Caucus Chair	57.9	(na)
Party Whip	62.3	54.4
Majority or Minority Party Leader	63.2	57.6
Speaker of the House	65.8	(na)

Voting Histories of Potential Leaders. In our opening discussion, we remarked

that it is important that the leader have a personal reputation for an extreme position, that

it can not just be adopted once one assumes a leadership position. To determine whether

reputation is essential, we looked at leaders' ideologies before, during and after their

leadership careers. Table 3 shows the record. In the House, there is a slight decline in

extremism after finishing one's leadership position. In the Senate, leaders are slightly

more extreme before assuming leadership, and somewhat less so afterwards. If anything,

leaders were chosen for being extremists, moderated very modestly while in office, and

then moderated somewhat more after leaving office. In all phases, they were more

extreme than their party.

Table 3
Leadership Extremism Over a Career,
Percentage of Party Caucus more Moderate than Legislator,
1900-2000

	House	**Senate**
Member Never Held a Leadership Position	49.8%	50.0%
Career Before Election to Leadership Team	61.3	57.6
While Serving on Leadership Team	61.1	55.8
Career after Leaving Leadership Team	58.1	52.6

VI. Summary and Conclusion

Legislative leaders are the prime negotiators shaping our laws – on a daily basis and at every level of government. As negotiators, they are agents for themselves, their constituents, and their fellow party members.

The negotiation of legislation is conducted beneath the public eye. Public attention rewards grandstanding and puffery, and punishes concessionary compromise, which makes serious legislative action more challenging. Many bills are not serious; they are products of conspicuous introduction intended to impress constituents. We focus particular attention on the ideology of legislative negotiators. Conventional wisdom suggests that a party leader's will align well with that of a median member. However, if leaders are negotiators, and if agents' positions anchor negotiations, parties will have incentives to appoint extreme leaders. In effect, presumed agency loss actually secures more favorable outcomes. The need to reach legislative agreements, however, constrains tugs to the extremes. Empirical analysis of 20th century congressional leaders finds them

to be more extreme than their parties. Moreover, they were more extreme before they were elected to their positions.

There is a rich literature on the private sector counterpart to the problem studied here, namely: How faithful and effective are private sector leaders, i.e., corporate managers, as agents for the stockholders they are supposed to serve (Jensen & Meckling 1976, Pratt & Zeckhauser 1985). A central lesson from that literature is that stockholders reap substantial benefits when their interests and those of the managers are properly aligned. Our examination of political parties and their leaders might suggest that preferences are out of alignment. Leaders' policy positions, as revealed through votes, are considerably more extreme than those of the members they represent. We have offered a contrary interpretation for this finding. To improve negotiation outcomes, it is in the collective interest of a party's representatives to have an extreme leader. Such a leader -- through his own reputation and tactics, and by strengthening the members' resolve -- will drag policy outcomes in the members' preferred direction.

Legislation is born of negotiations. Thus, it is no surprise that arm twisting and staking out positions are as much the repertoire of great legislative leaders as are managing agendas and crafting legislation. What we have discovered here is that a convincing way to stake an extreme position is to select leaders whose reputations show them to be extreme. It is comforting that party members in Congress recognize this lesson.

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