

Political Party Competition and Fidelity to the Median Voter in the U.S. Congress

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1. Introduction

Most Americans think about politics as happening in one of two venues: a *market* where services are bought and sold (with policy awarded to the highest bidder), or an *arena* (in which politics is a sport, with a few teams competing and most of us in the audience rooting or booing). Both perspectives have a powerful idea in common: Competition is good. In the United States, two-party competition is fiercest in politically centrist districts where the odds of either party's candidates winning are essentially the same.

Competition makes the political market more efficient and rewards superior political teams. Among scholars, few things are more revered than strong *party* competition. Elections hold lawmakers accountable to constituents, and – if the Downsian framework is essentially right – competition yields parties and policies reflecting the median voter's preferences (Downs 1957). Competition brings about more media attention, which heightens voter interest and encourages candidates to be clearer about their issue positions (Kahn & Kenney 1999). Competition leads to higher turnout in elections and makes the spectacle more fun to watch (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Competitive elections help legitimize the political process and are important for socializing new citizens (Dennis 1987:323-73; Carmines 1994). Competition is good, and there is an overwhelming consensus that policies thwarting political competition should be dismantled (Berelson, Lazarfeld & McPhee 1954; Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes 1960; Dahl 1965, 1971; Ranney 1975; Ceaser 1982).

Amid the chorus of praise for vigorous two-party competition, this paper sounds a discordant note. Are members of Congress faithful agents of the ideological interests in their districts? This paper explores the extent to which a political party's dominance in a congressional district is related to how faithfully members of Congress represent the ideological composition of their voters. There are tradeoffs between a member's fidelity to district interests and polarization in the Congress at large, and I argue that polarization has risen with the increase of centrist (or competitive) congressional districts. That polarization continues apace is beyond doubt (Poole & Rosenthal 2001; Ansolabehere, Snyder & Stewart 1999a, Fiorina 1999), and I

have shown elsewhere that polarization is strongly related to decreased trust in the federal government over the past generation (King 1997).

To track the relationship between a district's two-party competition and a member's fidelity to voter interests, I begin with a review of the Downsian framework. In theory, legislators should represent the median voters in their districts, regardless the degree of party competition. Second, I outline a story linking a district's level of political competition with the fidelity that members of Congress may have to their district's ideological interests. Third, I examine how faithfully members of Congress represented the ideological preferences of their districts from 1993 – 2000. Finally, I put competition and polarization within a broader framework, exploring how various primary election rules might improve representation in Congress.

2. The Power of the Median Voter

If one views politics as a marketplace in which voters shop for parties and candidates offering policies that are “closest” to voters desires, then rational vote-maximizing candidates offer voters policies closest to the preferences of the median voter. Drawing on work by Harold Hotelling (1929), Anthony Downs (1957) formalized long-held suspicions about how and why candidates in two-party systems tend to be fairly moderate in their issue positions. There is a strong pull, Downs argued, to the median voter, as both parties vie for the affection of that pivotal voter. Successful parties and successful candidates will be those that locate at the median and remain faithful to the median voter's wishes. The apparent stability of the median voter result was comforting to a generation of political scientists trained in the wake of World War II. In the post-war period, the dominant question among election scholars was why the United States remained so centrist while our European counterparts swung wildly to the political left and right. The answer: rational vote-maximizing parties, utility-maximizing voters, and strong two-party competition.

The Downsian formulation reduces politics to two dimensions, left and right, and while politics is certainly more complicated than that, this basic ideological continuum strongly

underlies contemporary politics. Citizen preferences on an overwhelming majority of policy issues flow from citizen ideological frameworks and from cues about affiliated party positions on those issues (Converse 1964, Carmines 1994, Bartels 2000). In Congress, votes tend to be highly consistent with a member's basic ideological preferences, and a member's ideology (which may, of course, reflect his or her constituents' ideology) is by far the best predictor for how legislators vote (Poole & Rosenthal 1997). So while the left-right continuum is a simplification, it is a very powerful one, and it captures reality fairly well.

In practice, parties fail to converge precisely at the position of the median voter because parties are uncertain about voter preferences and because partisan primaries entice candidates to commit to policies in the primary that do not reflect the wishes of likely voters in the general election. Voters also do not simply vote by minimizing the policy distance between their ideal points and a party. Character matters, and a multiple dimension of issues matter (Plott 1967; Davis, Hinich & Ordeshook 1970). Voters weigh what a candidate says he or she will do and an incumbent's track record (Fiorina 1981). These, and other forces, help spread the parties apart, but the general pull remains toward the median.

In the simplest Downsian models, voters will select among parties no matter how far away the party's positions may be. Extremists, far to the left or far to the right, will not abstain from voting. "As long as there is even the most infinitesimal difference [between the parties], extremist voters would be forced to vote for the one closest to them, no matter how distasteful its policies seemed in comparison with those of their ideal government" (Downs 1957: 119). In political systems with unimodal preference distributions skewed far to the right or to the left, party and candidate positions will still converge on the position of the median voter. We know from experience, though, that extremists do abstain when their own party seems "too far" away. If extremist voters become alienated, then parties will not converge at the median when the ideological distribution is skewed to the left or the right (Hinich, Ledyard & Ordeshook 1972). The outcome from alienation of extremists is clear as it applies to congressional districts. In overwhelmingly left-leaning districts, candidates will appeal to the median of the likely voters, which will not include abstaining extremists from the right. The candidate will naturally be to the

left of the median citizen. The opposite outcome is expected in right-leaning congressional districts, where extremists from the left are more likely to become alienated and abstain from voting.

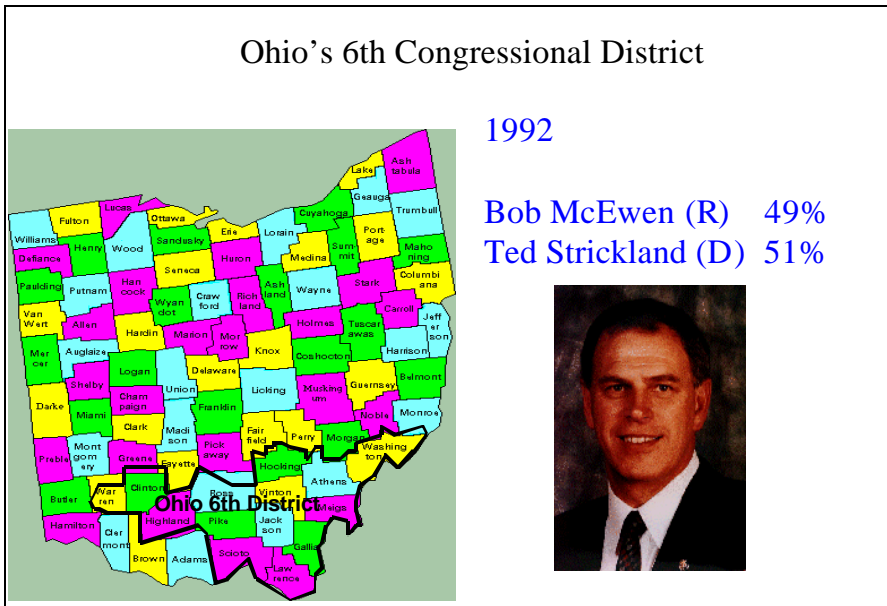
We are left with two strong predictions linking the strength of two-party competition with politicians' fidelity to the median voter. If extremists do not become alienated, politicians will be faithful. If extremists become alienated and do not vote, then fidelity will be worse in one-party dominant congressional districts. Politicians from politically competitive districts, where either party has roughly the same chance of winning, will be the most faithful to the ideological wishes of the median voter.

3. Motivating Examples

If Anthony Downs were looking for the median voter in the United States, he would do well to begin his search in southern Ohio, where rolling green hills give way in the east to a more rugged terrain at the West Virginia border. Democrats and Republicans fight hard for each office in Ohio's largest congressional district, the 6th, which runs "from Marietta down the Ohio River to the gritty industrial towns of Ironton and Portsmouth," skirting the Dayton and Cincinnati suburbs (Barone & Ujifusa, 1997:1118). In national votes, the Ohio 6th leans slightly Republican (Bush defeated Clinton 40 percent to 39 percent in 1992, and Clinton nipped Dole 43 percent to 42 percent in 1996), but the local parties contest every position, from city councils to county commissions.

The Ohio 6th is middle America, short on minorities and inner cities, but centrist in most respects. Procter & Gamble – the Cincinnati-based maker of diapers, tissues, toothpaste and soap – market-tests its products in the region. So does Burger King. In the minds of marketers, Portsmouth, Ohio has replaced Peoria, Illinois. Political marketers know the 6th district, too. Following his presidential nomination in August 1992, candidate Bill Clinton took to the road in a bus caravan. A route was drawn to take Clinton the length of Ohio 6th, with camera crews in tow. A year later as president, Clinton made a highly visible trip to the district, selling middle-America his 1993 economic stimulus plan, again with television cameras rolling.

From 1981 through 1992, Republican Bob McEwen represented southeastern Ohio in the U.S. House of Representatives. McEwen was a stalwart Reaganite, consistently rated among the most conservative House members by the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) and the American Conservative Union (ACU).¹ As a simple measure of ideology, consider the average interest group ratings from three organizations: the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League (NARAL), and the



ADA. McEwen's average for the 102nd Congress (1991-1992) was 4.3 out of 100 – an unmistakably conservative record. Despite apparently being to the right of his constituency, McEwen's

electoral grip seemed secure throughout the 1980s. Then in 1992 McEwen faced a difficult challenge in the Republican primary election, was found to have bounced 166 checks in the House Bank scandal, and was accused of “missing 25 roll call votes on days he received honoraria for speeches” (Barone & Ujifusa 1993: 1002). McEwen lost to a political newcomer, Democrat Ted Strickland, who garnered 50.72 percent of the vote to McEwen's 49.28 percent.

Ted Strickland had never before held elective office, but he was well-known in the district as a liberal activist, a Methodist minister, the former director of a children's home, and an advocate for the homeless. He won the 1992 Democratic primary by a 2 to 1 margin while

¹ In 1991, for example, McEwen's ADA score was 5 out of 100, and his ACU score was 100 out of 100.

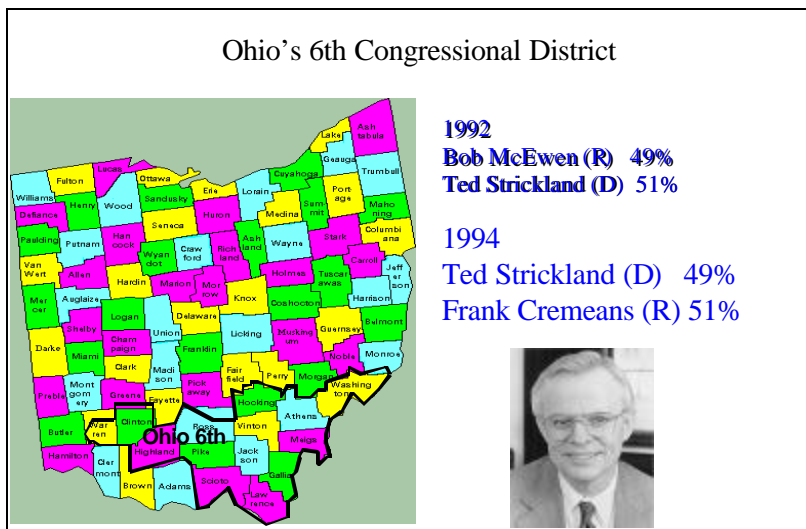
touting firmly pro-choice views to the party faithful. Once in Washington, Strickland quickly made a name as a political liberal. The average of his ACLU, NARAL and ADA scores was 87.8 out of 100, a remarkable change from McEwen's pattern. Along with a majority of Democrats, Strickland voted against the North American Free Trade Agreement, but bucked his party by opposing President Clinton's crime bill and its assault-gun weapons ban. Nonetheless, Strickland's vocal pro-choice position gave him prominence, and "more important, he voted federal funding for the procedure," leaving him "vulnerable to an assault from a well-organized constituency," – the Christian Coalition (Kaplan 1994: 3044). Strickland's liberalism got him noticed in the White House. When Hillary Clinton put together her healthcare task force, members of Congress were systematically excluded, with Strickland a notable exception. He was called to serve on the executive branch task force despite having been assigned to no health-related committees in the House. To Clinton, he possessed a more important credential: Strickland was an outspoken and liberal proponent of overhauling the healthcare system.

Strickland took some stands marking him as an occasional moderate. He was frugal with the House's own money, voting against the addition of new elevators in the Longworth House Office Building, for example. On big-ticket items, however, such as health care and education, Strickland was out front calling for new and improved government programs (Merida 1994:A1). His liberalism did not set him apart from the party faithful back in Portsmouth, Chillicothe, and Athens. Easily renominated in the 1994 Democratic primary, Ted Strickland faced a political newcomer, Republican Frank Cremeans, in the November 1994 general election.

Frank Cremeans ran as a no-nonsense businessman who successfully grew a small company into a major enterprise. The founder and manager of Cremeans Concrete, Frank Cremeans was southern Ohio's cement magnate. He spent over \$600,000 of his own money on the 1994 election, and he promised to bring business principles to Congress. Cremeans was also motivated by conservative social causes, most notably his opposition to homosexuality. He considered AIDS to be a judgment by God against homosexuals, and when asked whether

homosexuals should be allowed to serve in the armed forces, Cremeans replied, “The Greeks and Romans were homosexuals. Their civilizations did not stand” (Kaplan 1994:3044). Strickland, in contrast, fought for gay rights, and on this and many other policy dimensions, the choices presented to voters in the Ohio 6th district were polar opposites.

The tag line for Cremeans’ 1994 television ads posed a fundamental question in the minds of many voters: “Ted Strickland and Bill Clinton: Are they too liberal for southern Ohio?” General election voters apparently answered “yes,” with Cremeans just barely beating



Strickland, 50.95 percent to 49.05 percent. On his first day in Congress, January 4, 1995, Cremeans showed himself a strong Newt Gingrich supporter by offering an amendment to the House Rules – promised in the Contract with America –

mandating public access to committee proceedings (Congressional Record, January 4, 1995: H60). So supportive of Speaker Gingrich was Cremeans (he sided with him more than 98 percent of the time in 1995 and 1996) that Cremeans was featured on an Internet site displaying the biggest “Newt Toadies.” In quick order, Cremeans voted for a balanced budget amendment (H J Res. 1), for overhauling welfare (HR 4), and for term limits on members of Congress (H J Res. 73). The average of Cremeans’ ACLU, NARAL, and ADA scores during his first term: 2.5 out of 100.

Imagine what it must have been like to be a political centrist in one of America’s most “average” districts, switching representation from McEwen (4.3 out of 100 on the ideology scale) to Strickland (87.8) to Cremeans (2.5). One might get whiplash from the wild ideological swings. These are see-saw districts.

A generation ago, Mo Fiorina wrote about this phenomenon under the heading “the myth of the moderate marginal representative.” Looking at House races in the 1960s, Fiorina asked whether the data

“support the contention that representatives from marginal districts vote in [a] moderate, middle-of-the-road fashion? Hardly. Instead we see a picture of ‘flip-flopping’ representation. The representatives from these districts represent their part of the constituency and the devil take the other. Extremes replace extremes” (Fiorina 1974:102-3, cf. Fiorina 1973).

Fiorina’s insight has been overlooked by scholars, but what he found then remains true (though Fiorina’s measure of marginality was endogenous to his results). Over the last decade, several districts have swung wildly, year-by-year.

Top Ten “See Saw” Congressional Districts 1993 - 2000

	District	103 rd to 104 th Congress	104 th to 105 th Congress	105 th to 106 th Congress
1	WA - 3 rd	Unsoeld (D) to Smith (R) Right 251	Smith (R) reelected	Smith (R) to Baird (D) Left 146
2	CA - 1 st	Hamburg (D) to Riggs (R) Right 216	Riggs (R) reelected	Riggs (R) to Thompson (D) Left 167
3	MI - 8 th	Carr (D) to Chrysler (R) Right 185	Chrysler (R) to Stabenow (D) Left 206	Stabenow (D) reelected
4	WA - 9 th	Kriedler (D) to Tate (R) Right 195	Tate (R) to Smith (D) Left 187	Smith (D) reelected
5	WI - 8 th	Roth (R) reelected	Roth (R) to Johnson (D) Left 167	Johnson (D) to Green (R) Right 157
6	NM - 3 rd	Richardson (D) reelected	Richardson (D) to Redmond (R) Right 153	Redmond (R) to Udall (D) Left 187
7	CA - 22 nd	Huffington (R) to Seastrand (R) Right 64	Seastrand (R) to Capps (D) Left 253	Capps (D) reelected
8	NC - 6 th	Valentine (D) to Funderburk (R) Right 133	Funderburk (R) to Etheridge (D) Left 199	Etheridge (D) reelected
9	OH - 6 th	Strickland (D) to Cremeans (R) Right 168	Cremeans (R) to Strickland (D) Left 164	Strickland (D) reelected
10	NJ - 12 th	Zimmer (R) reelected	Zimmer (R) to Pappas (R) Right 50	Pappas (R) to Holt (D) Left 138

Table shows moves to the left or right on D-Nominate ideology rankings for the district’s representative, out of 398 districts.

Looking at ideology based on DW-Nominate scores, I ranked legislators in 1990s from most to least liberal (Poole and Rosenthal 1997, 2001). For reasons explained later, the sample size was 398 per two-year Congress, meaning that – at the extreme – a district’s representative might move, between elections, 397 places to the left or to the right. The table shows the top ten “see-saw” districts in the 1990s.

Flip-flopping districts, like the Ohio 6th, are common, yet even if there were only one or two examples they would present an interesting puzzle for political scientists. Sometime in 1995 or early 1996, careful, rational political scientists might have advised the Democratic and Republican parties in Ohio's 6th district to nominate more centrist candidates. The 1992 and 1994 elections were squeakers, decided by less than a percentage point. A more moderate candidate from either party would presumably eat into the other candidate's general election vote.

This logic, impressed upon anyone reading Anthony Downs, is compelling. Rational parties and rational candidates should select positions near the median of their relevant voting constituencies. In the general election, this usually calls for staking out centrist positions. This formula is especially appealing in districts, such as the Ohio 6th, that have had a series of narrow wins and losses. Duncan MacRae, in Dimensions of Congressional Voting, wrote about candidates in such districts, concluding, "By taking a middle-of-the-road position on many matters, including his roll-call votes, he may be able to increase his security in the district" (MacRae 1958:282 in Fiorina 1974:20).

In his classic 1950 "Revised Theory of American Party Politics," Sam Huntington predicted an opposite strategic approach in close elections. Candidates, he surmised, would not try to mobilize centrist voters, choosing – instead – to mobilize "a high degree of support from a small number of interests" rather than "a relatively low degree of support from a large number of interests." (Huntington 1950:671 in Fiorina 1974:21). The battle, thought Huntington, would be over turnout. As one long-time Washington staffer explained to me, candidates should "sing to the wings, not center stage." Among political practitioners, this is "getting out the base," or "preaching to the choir," and in 1994 that strategy by the Christian Coalition was widely credited with helping the Republican Party take control of the House for the first time in 40 years (Rozell and Wilcox 1995; Wilcox 1996; Carney 1998).

Implications of Huntington's thesis have not been widely discussed among younger political scientists, and it is rarely cited any longer. While much analysis has explored the strategic issue-positioning of presidential candidates (Shepsle 1972:555-68; Aldrich 1980;

Bianco 1984:351-64; Bartels 1988; Brady and Ansolabehere 1989:143-63; Erikson and Romero 1990:1103; Alvarez 1997), congressional scholars have tended to write about the strategic decision of whether or not to run for office – not what positions to take once a campaign is underway (Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Kazee 1994; Jacobson 1997).

The theoretical simplicity of playing to the median voter is complicated in the practical world by several obstacles (or realities). Primary elections precede general elections. Voters who show up for primary elections are more ideologically extreme than their general election counterparts, and candidates are limited as to how much they can credibly change their positions between the primary and general elections (or which issues they can emphasize) (Schlesinger 1991:162-84).

Recall the importance of primary elections in the old Democratic South. V.O. Key explicitly warned against thinking of the South as a monolithic “one-party system,” noting differences from state-to-state. (Key 1949). Party factionalism was high in states without organized Republican opposition, but when small opposition formed (as in North Carolina and Tennessee after World War II), the Democratic party became all the more unified. Regardless the state variance in factionalism, however, one “fact” of the old South was constant everywhere and every year: *Primaries were tantamount to the general election.*

As Key described,

The Democratic primary in the South is in reality the election. The Democratic “nominees” not only usually win the general election but in an overwhelming majority of instances, if one includes local officials in the calculations, are unopposed. Not uncommonly Democratic nominees for the governorship, the United States Senate, and the national House of Representatives meet no opposition in the general election. (Key 1949:407)

Consider the old South in Downsian terms. Since there was only one election that “really” mattered, conservatives and liberals battled each other within the Democratic primary. It was no coincidence that southern Democrats in Congress were far more conservative than their northern counterparts. They were drawn from a different ideological distribution because

of the lack of southern two-party competition. Moderately conservative politicians, who would today be in the Republican party, wisely chose to compete within the Democratic party – reinforcing one-party dominance and making it especially difficult for Republicans to gain a strong-hold in the South.

Facing essentially the same distribution of voter preferences in the primary and general elections, Downsian candidates would locate their policies at the median primary voter – which would be very close to the preferences of the median general election voter. The less the preference distributions of primary and general elections diverge, one from the other, the more median – and representative – a party’s nominee will be. This, I will argue in the next section, is a function of how competitive the parties are with each other.

Across the country, and especially in the South, political parties are far more competitive than was the case ten, twenty, and thirty years ago. One-party political machines – such as Tammany Hall in New York, the Pendergasts in Kansas City, Frank Hague’s machine in Jersey City, and the Curley organization in Boston – have been replaced by networks of grassroots activists from both parties. Surveys of party strength by Beck and by Dalton & Huckfeldt show considerable growth in staffing and budgets for local party organizations during the 1980s and early 1990s (Beck 1997: Table 3.2; Gibson, *et al* 1985). The number of states with divided governments grew by 20 percent from 1964 through 1998, and the number of individuals actually running for elections – at all levels of government – has increased nearly every two-year cycle for a generation.

As I mentioned, party activists in the Ohio 6th might have been well advised to seek more centrist candidates in 1996, hoping to gain that critical extra one percent of the vote from centrist swing voters. Instead, the Democrats renominated Ted Strickland, *unopposed* in the party primary, and the Republicans renominated incumbent Frank Cremeans. The 1996 campaign played out like the one two years earlier, with the challenger (Strickland, this time) attacking the incumbent (Cremeans, this time) for being “too extreme.” Cremeans held to his pro-life, anti-gay, flat-tax stands, and Strickland pressed for pro-choice, pro-gay, pro-healthcare positions. Strickland attacked Cremeans as too close to Gingrich, but Strickland

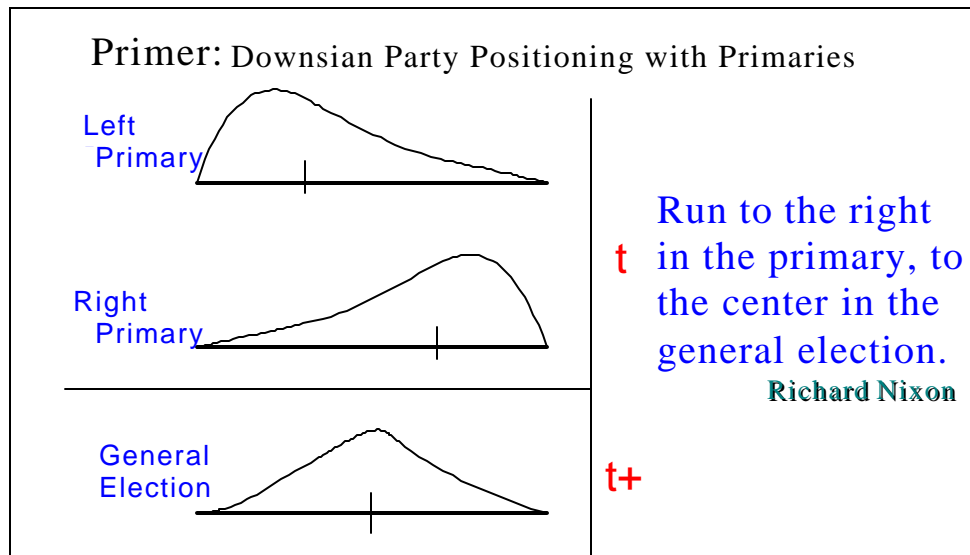
also pledged to be more of a moderate in his second term, emphasizing his stand against President Clinton's gun-control legislation. In October 1996, Strickland was endorsed by the Dayton Daily News, which credited him for serving "honorably, capably and moderately," whereas Cremeans ran "a re-election campaign so outrageous that his opponent campaigns in some quarters by distributing Rep. Cremeans' own literature" (Dayton Daily News, October 16, 1996).

As with the 1992 and 1994 elections, the 1996 outcome in southern Ohio was not announced until early in the morning. The result: Strickland by 6,096 votes, or 51.3 percent to 48.7 percent. When I spoke with Congressman Strickland at a "New Members of Congress" gathering hosted by the Kennedy School, he credited his victory to getting out the steelworkers in larger numbers than in 1994, and to the relative weakness of the Christian Coalition in 1996. Strickland's responses are perfectly consistent with Huntington's 1950 perspective. Strickland was given a seat on the House Commerce committee, pledging to bring "good pork" back to the district. In the 1998 elections, a divisive Republican primary nominated the moderate female lieutenant governor of Ohio (who was pro-choice and defined herself as a "commonsense conservative"). Her base within the Republican party, however, was fractured, as a majority of the primary vote was split between Cremeans and some to *his* right. Ted Strickland then ran as the "true fiscal conservative" in the general election, ironically painting the Republican moderate female as "too liberal" for Southern Ohio. Strickland won, 57 percent to 43 percent.

4. How Two-Party Competition May Undermine Fidelity to the Median Voter

Elections are a two-stage game. First candidates have to attract the attention of primary election voters, then – if they survive the primary (and most do not²) – they turn their attention to the general election (Brams 1978; Aldrich 1980; Enelow and Hinich 1984; King & Matland 1999). As Key argued, in the old South both sets of voters – and their preference distributions

² Ohio, for example, has 19 congressional districts. In the March 19, 1996 primaries, 63 Democrats and Republicans received at least 10 percent of the primary vote in their districts.

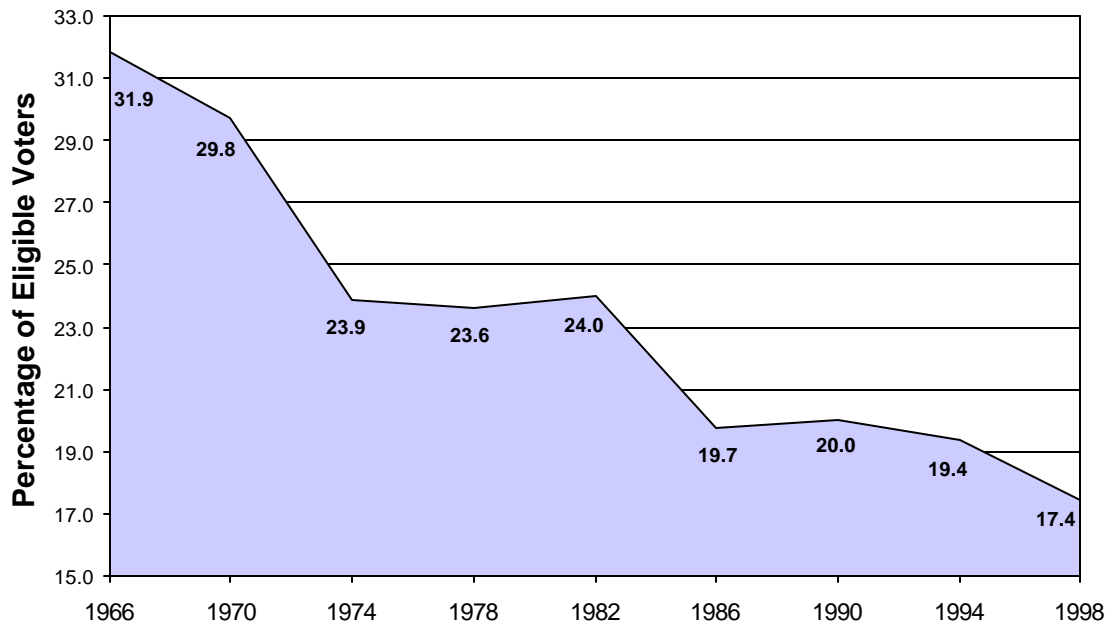


– were essentially the same. Accordingly, candidates who staked positions near the general election median were likely to win the primaries as well.

With few exceptions (Aranson and Ordeshook 1972; Aldrich 1983; Wittman 1991, Cooper & Munger 2000), political scientists have not focused their formal modeling skills on the dynamics of two-stage elections (primary then general) and the related impact on candidate position-taking. Empirical evidence on candidate positions in the primary and general elections is just now being gathered (Gerber & Morton 1998; Burden 1999; Kanthak & Morton 2000). Candidates, however, devote a great deal of attention to how different the two stages of the game are. Campaigns and Elections magazine, the leading publication for campaign managers, routinely emphasizes differences in the primary and general election voters. Campaign managers often call for strategies that bring out a candidate’s primary election base of voters, intentionally suppressing turnout in the general election (Fauchux 1998:24-32).

That the kinds of people who vote in primary elections are different from the kinds of people who vote in general elections (or abstain altogether) is well known. Primary election voters are far more likely to be ideological purists, more likely to have contributed to a political party, more likely to have tried convincing someone how to vote, and more likely to be upper-middle class (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980; Neuman 1986; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; McCann 1996). For the most part – and as turnout in primary elections continues declining – primary elections have been dominated by the preferences of party activists.

Turnout in Congressional Midterm Primaries 1966 - 1998



Primary election turnout percentages are difficult to calculate since voter registration requirements and reporting systems vary state-by-state, and often county-by-county. Still, we know that participation is very low. Consider the 1996 party primaries in Ohio's 15th district, which includes Columbus. Both parties had contested primaries -- and a related surge in turnout -- with a total of 54,591 voting. Assuming 75 percent of the district's population was eligible to vote, the primary election turnout was 12.7 percent. In contrast, 237,454 -- or 55.46 percent -- of the eligible voters turned out for the general election. Nation-wide, turnout in congressional midterm primaries has dropped from 31.6 percent of eligible voters in 1966 to 17.4 percent in 1998. As I show elsewhere (King 1997), the voters who remain active in primaries are far more likely to be ideological extremists than was the case just a generation ago. (Also see Mayer 1996a).

Party activists are, on average, more extreme in their ideological and policy views than most voters, and for good reason (King 1997). Potential activists have to become *activated*, and this is more likely to happen when the "other" party's positions seem especially onerous. From the perspective of a potential activist, the more extreme one's own political views are, the

more distasteful the opposition's alternatives appear. As choices between the parties become more compelling, it is easier for potential activists to overcome inertia. Potential activists fear the *other* side will win, so they essentially minimize their maximum regret. By trying to tug the status quo in their direction, potential participants on the other side of the issue see their potential loss in utility and become activated as well. Policy debates often become battles of “good” against “evil” – adjectives used to describe opponents on issues ranging from abortion to sex education, and from trade policy to education standards. Because of selective participation and the anticipation of large utility losses if the “other side” wins, political battle lines are sharply drawn and potential activists are called to the barricades. Centrists are more likely to watch from the sidelines.

There is good empirical evidence of this effect throughout the United States and in Western Europe (Aldrich 1983:974-90; Aldrich 1995; Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; Ranney 1972, 224:38). For example, James McCann has compared the policy and ideology preferences of four groups of American voters: mass-level partisans, partisans who attended a political caucus, caucuses attendees who also were campaign activists, and state-level party delegates. The percentages of Democrats who called themselves liberals in these four categories were 38, 50, 62 and 68, respectively. Activist Democrats are far more liberal than run-of-the-mill Democrats. Likewise, the conservatism measures for the four categories of Republicans were 65, 80, 87, and 91 (McCann 1996:79-80, in Mayer 1996b).

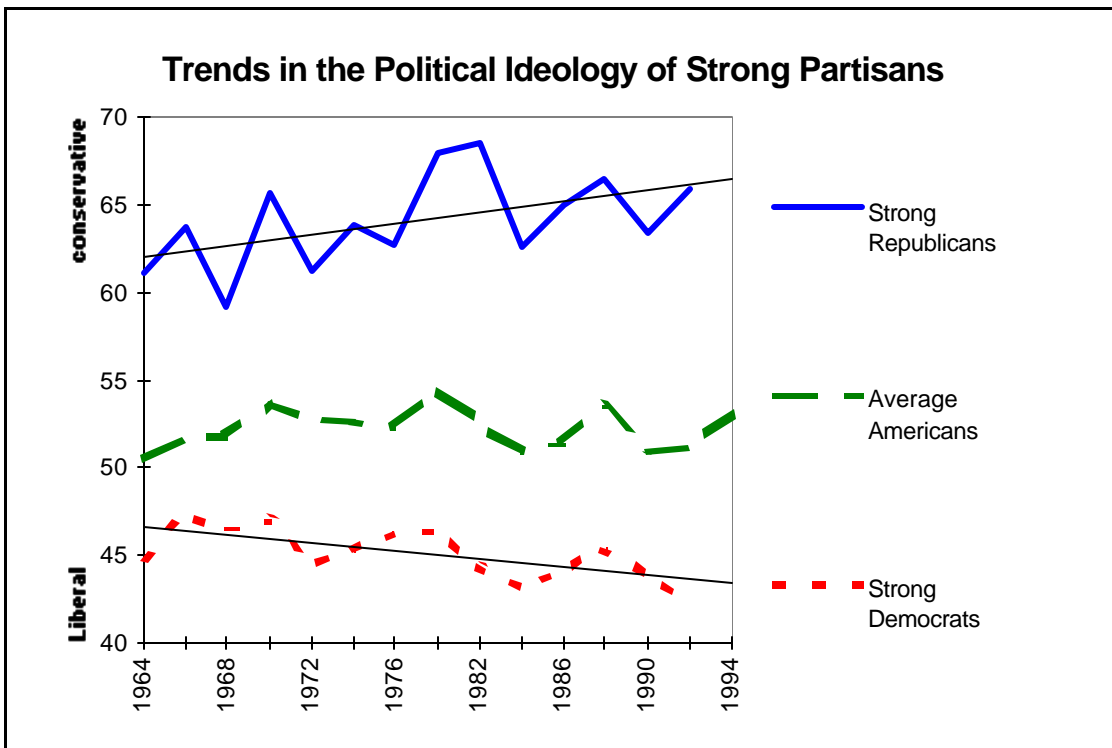
Party activists are not merely more extreme than average Americans, *they are also less likely to compromise* (they might say "betray") core beliefs. Primary election voters are far more likely than general election voters to say that it is more important to “be right” than to “win.” A version of this has been documented by political scientists at every national party convention since 1956. To the extent that parties are dominated by these purists, it makes working with political opponents especially difficult (McClosky 1964:361-82; Kirkpatrick 1976; Polsby 1983; Stone and Abromowitz 1983:945-56; Miller and Jennings 1986; Bibby 1996:118-121). It also means that the most intense ideological fights happen within primaries,

among the true believers – or “wingnuts” – and not necessarily in general elections (King & Matland 1999).

One 1996 House primary is a poignant example. Karen L. Martynick ran for the Republican nomination in Pennsylvania’s 16th congressional district to replace Bob Walker (R), who was retiring. A long-serving Republican activist and county commissioner in suburban Chester County, Martynick faced off against Joseph Pitts, a state legislator and vocal advocate of “traditional family values.” Martynick was pro-choice, Pitts pro-life. When Martynick’s “two sons turned out to help her at polling places,” they were confronted by Pitts supporters. The children walked a gauntlet of Martynick haters, who screamed “Your mother’s a baby-killer. She has blood on her hands”(Germond 1996:1A). Local party politics can be a long way removed from Lee Atwater’s “big tent.” For now, Martynick has sworn off electoral politics, worried that there is no place in the Republican party for traditional moderates.

Consider the old South – or similar one-party dominant districts like the Massachusetts 8th – at one extreme of a continuum marked “two-party competition.” Place Ohio’s 6th congressional district – and others, like some of the traditional swing districts mentioned above – at the “highly competitive” pole. Because of the two-stage nature of elections, general election candidates from low-competition districts will more faithfully represent the interests of the median voter than candidates from highly competitive districts. Why? (1) primary election voters tend to be more ideologically extreme than general election voters (because they have the most utility to lose if the *other* party wins), and (2) as parties become more competitive with each other in local areas, political moderates are forced either to choose sides within polarizing parties or drop out of the political process entirely.

It is a fact that the political parties have been polarizing over the last thirty years, partly because of the decline of the New Deal coalition. The source for the Figure below is the National Election Studies Cumulative Index File, Question 801 (not asked in 1978). It shows a growing gap between the ideology of strong partisans and average Americans (King 1997, Fiorina 1999). The picture is one of polarization. On average, strong Republicans – those most likely to run for office and contribute to candidates – have grown more conservative. Likewise,



strong Democrats – those most likely to vocally oppose the Republicans – have grown more liberal. Data on campaign activists is strikingly similar and continues through the most recent polls (Fiorina 1999). Polarization is happening both within legislatures and within the mass public.

Perhaps the most important cause of polarization is electoral realignment associated with the demise of the New Deal Democratic and the coeval shift of Republican support from the Nelson Rockefeller wing in the Northeast to the South and West, personified in Barry Goldwater’s surprise 1964 nomination and culminating in Ronald Reagan’s presidency. The

demise of the New Deal Coalition has gained scholarly acceptance and is nicely documented in Ronald Radosh's Divided They Fell (Radosh 1996; also see Brennan 1995). Of course, electoral realignment may be partly endogenous, since moderates are more likely to call themselves independents as they see the party faithful moving to extremes, which in the end reinforces polarization.

Since party realignment is widely discussed elsewhere, this paper focuses on two-party competition and the selective participation of extremists in primaries. My strong sense from examples such as the Ohio 6th district is that vigorous two-party competition, coupled with highly selective participation by ideological extremists in party primaries, *creates* polarization. It creates polarization by bringing to the general election two candidates more likely to diverge from the median voter's wishes. This leads to a specific testable hypothesis with respect to representation in the U.S. Congress: *The more competitive parties are in congressional districts, the less well Members will represent interests in those districts.* Call this the "competition and polarization" hypothesis, because the more party competition there is, the more divergence one expects from delegate-type representation.

5. Evidence on Party Competition and Polarization

Operationalizing a test of the "competition and polarization" hypothesis requires three kinds of information: (1) constituency preferences along some policy or ideology dimension in congressional districts, (2) observations of Member behavior on the same policy or ideology dimensions, and (3) exogenous indicators of the degree of party competition in each congressional district.

It is inherently difficult to measure constituency preferences for any large fraction of the 435 congressional districts, though many have tried. Some, beginning with Miller and Stokes, have used public opinion surveys, but these suffer from small sample sizes and associated large error bands. More typically, scholars have inferred constituency opinion from demographic indicators, such as the number of elderly, the number of cows, or the education level in a district. Unfortunately, this precludes analysis of the vast majority of congressional issues –

those having little direct connection to demographic indicators. Several years ago, John Jackson and I used a national public opinion poll to create a model generating district-level estimates of constituency opinion, but that approach, too, relies on available demographic data (Miller and Stokes 1962:45-56; Clausen 1973; Fiorina 1974:249-66; Jackson 1974; Jackson and King 1989; Hall 1996).

Likewise, it is difficult to measure member preferences. Some scholars have simply asked Members (or their staffers) where they stand on a set of issues. Response rates tend to be low, and it is impossible to disentangle a Member's true preferences from the indirect influence of constituency preferences on that Member's responses. It also may not be enough just to watch how Members vote on the floor of the House or Senate, since much legislative work happens in committees, caucuses, and informal meetings away from the probing glare of political scientists and television cameras. Worse still, when Members vote for the record, on most issues – low in visibility and salience – they tend to follow the lead of a few critical cue-givers, such as committee chairs or members from similar constituencies (Davidson, Kovenock, and O'Leary 1966; Matthews and Stimson 1975; Kingdon 1989).

My approach does not control for all of the multiple inadequacies of various approaches, but it significantly improves on previous measures of divergence. I am constrained by a need to use measures of Member and district preferences that can cross several years and multiple constituencies. For reasons that will soon become clear, I also limit our present analysis to one dimension – which is the blend of ideology and partisanship reflected in Poole and Rosenthal's DW-NOMINATE scores (Poole & Rosenthal 1997, 2001; Ansolabehere, Snyder & Stewart 1999b).

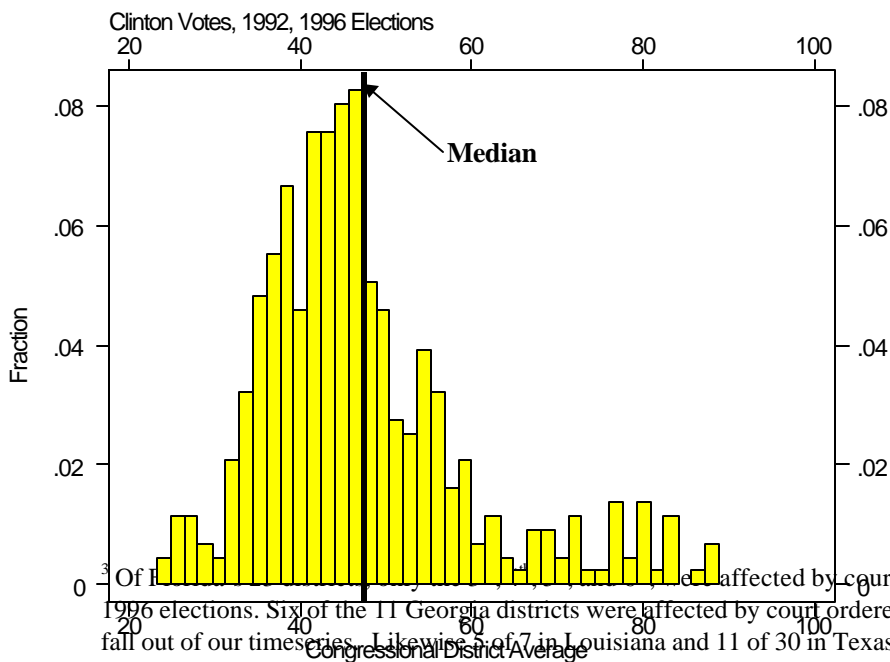
4.1. District Preferences

Congressional elections were held in 1992 for the 103rd Congress, 1994 (104th) and 1996 (105th). Presidential elections fell in 1992 (Bill Clinton 43%, George Bush 37%, Ross Perot 19%) and 1996 (Bill Clinton 49%, Bob Dole 41%, Ross Perot 9%). Following the 1990 Census, most 1992 House district boundaries were redrawn, making it impossible to track

district preferences precisely in a single timeseries spanning the 1990 Census. After the 1992 reapportionments, a number of state plans were challenged in the federal courts as racially discriminatory, leading to a series of 1994 and 1996 modifications in district boundaries – notably in Georgia, Louisiana, Texas, and Florida. Redistricting makes establishing a reliable measure of district preferences problematic.

Of the 435 congressional districts, 26 were significantly redistricted under court order, by which I mean at least one percent of the land mass in the district changed. In most cases, such as the districts surrounding Florida’s unconstitutional 3rd district, post-1992 reapportionments only affected a handful of bordering districts.³ If we include all congressional districts that changed not at all, or changed by less than one percent of their land mass, we are left with 409 stable House districts for the 1992, 1994 and 1996 elections. Furthermore, I remove from the analysis eleven congressional districts in which the major party presidential candidates in 1992 and 1996 lived for some period of their lives, thereby lowering the sample to 398.

Measuring ideology in states and districts has been done in various ways, from aggregates of Gallup polls, to state-level survey responses in the National Election Studies, to analyses of the composition of state legislatures (Erikson, Wright, & McIver, 1993). Our unit of



analysis, however, is often finer than states. Alaska and Wyoming may have just one congressional district per state, but California alone has

³ Of the 26 districts affected by court ordered reapportionment for the 1996 elections, six of the 11 Georgia districts were affected by court ordered reapportionment, and therefore fall out of our timeseries. Likewise, 5 of 7 in Louisiana and 11 of 30 in Texas.

52, Illinois 20, Indiana 10, and so on. To measure district-level preferences – in this case defined as “ideology” – I use the average 1992 and 1996 percentage vote for Bill Clinton. Then I rank order the districts from 1 (the most liberal) to 409 (the most conservative).

Nationwide, Clinton’s average vote over the last two elections was 47.16 percent, though his support varied widely across congressional districts, from 88.75 percent in New York’s 11th (including Flatbush and Crown Heights) to 24.2 percent in Texas’ 19th, which includes parts of Lubbock and Amarillo. This measure of district ideology, while far from perfect (Leogrande & Jeydel 1997) has the benefit of including two presidential elections and generates a handsomely varying distribution district-by-district. (Holbrook & Van Dunk 1993).

The most liberal and most conservative districts, reflected in the histogram above, are detailed in the table below. Notice that the third most conservative district, by this measure, is the Indiana 6th (surrounding Indianapolis). In 1992 and 1996, that district posted an average

District Ideology, Based on Clinton's Vote Averages					
Most Liberal Districts			Most Conservative Districts		
1	NY 11	Flatbush	1	TX 19	Lubbock, Amarillo
2	NY 15	Harlem	2	UT 1	Ogden
3	NY 16	Bronx	3	IN 6	Indianapolis Suburbs
4	NY 10	Bedford-Stuyvesant	4	NE 3	Grand Island, N. Platte
5	MI 14	Harper Woods	5	UT 3	Provo

Clinton vote of 25.35 percent. A typical Clinton district (near the histogram’s

mode) is California’s 45th, which includes parts of Los Angeles County, including Burbank. True to its stereotype, and down the road in the California 47th district, Hollywood ranks liberal, with an average 66.4 percent Clinton vote in the 1990s. The measure of ideology conforms to expectations, with a wider range of ideological differences in states recognized as having set up partisan gerrymanders. One district may have gone heavily liberal in the 1990s while a neighboring district proved conservative. Is this district-by-district variance in ideology related to how closely Members represent their constituents?

4.2 Member Preferences

Because our measures of district and Member preferences need to be along the same dimension, we need a good indicator of the ideology for each representative from the 398 districts in our sample. The questions of how ideology should be measured, and whether ideology is really significant in legislative behavior has been contentious (Kau and Rubin 1979; Fowler 1982; Kalt and Zupan 1984; Jackson and Kingdon 1992; Koford 1994; Poole and Rosenthal 1997). Are Members driven by the reelection imperative, by some over-arching ideology, by deeply held values, by personal experiences, or by a messy combination of it all?

I have had occasion to spend considerable time with Members of Congress since joining the Kennedy School, and I am continually struck by how deeply moved most Members are by a core and consistent set of values, often highly liberal or highly conservative. Certainly, Members know they have to get reelected, but that imperative acts more as a brake pedal (keeping them from pursuing certain issues or voting certain ways) than an accelerator pedal, dictating daily policy stands. The reelection imperative also feels inadequate when I speak with potential candidates who are considering a first run for office. They know that their chances of surviving a party primary are slim. Almost uniformly, these young candidates seem driven by deep-seated values, not avarice and ambition. Ideology matters.

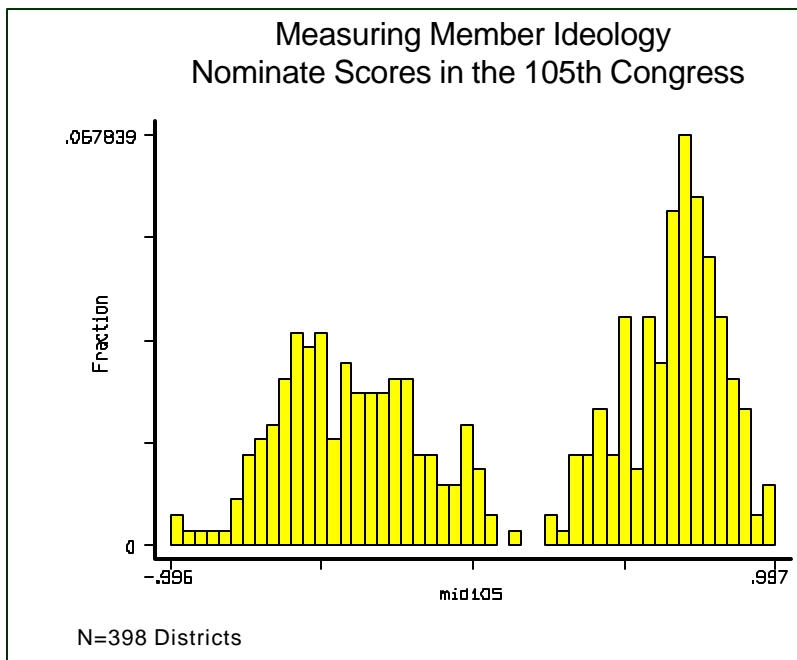
Despite methodological shortcomings surrounding their approach, Poole and Rosenthal's first dimension DW-Nominate score fairly accurately captures a complex combination of ideology, party and values. I use that to measure member preferences.

DW-Nominate scores were gathered for each Member of Congress in the 103rd through 106th Congresses, reflecting votes from January 1993 through December 2000. In theory, DW-Nominate scores can range from -1 (liberal) to 1 (conservative), though the average scores are almost always somewhat closer to zero. Recalling the Ohio 6th, Ted Strickland's DW-NOMINATE score for the 103rd Congress was -0.432, which swung more than a full point to Frank Cremeans' 104th Congress rating of 0.687.

The 104th House, controlled by Republicans for the first time in 40 years, was particularly divisive ideologically. By DW-Nominate scores, Mel Watt, representing North Carolina's 12th district, was the most liberal, scoring -0.958, followed by Ron Dellums (D-CA-

10) at -0.957. Neither name would surprise any student of Congress. Among the most conservative were Mel Hancock (R-MO-7) at 0.996, and Bob Stump (R-AZ-3) at 0.955. Again, neither name would surprise students of Congress, though neither Stump nor Hancock have been as nationally visible as Phil Crane (R-IL-8), the third most conservative member of the 104th Congress, or Dan Burton (R-IN-6), the fifth most conservative member, who recently gained national attention while chairing a House campaign finance investigation.

The histogram of DW-Nominate scores in the 105th Congress shows little “middle ground,” and as Poole and Rosenthal have demonstrated, this is part of a polarizing trend in the U.S. Congress (Poole and Rosenthal 1997). Groseclose, Levitt & Snyder found the same using “inflation adjusted” ADA scores, though their timeseries can only be consistently used



following the expansion of teller voted mandated by the 1970 Legislative Reorganization Act. By any measure – anecdotal to highly analytical – polarization has been increasing in the U.S. Congress. The center has disappeared, and party unity has been increasing steadily since the early

1970s. All of these trends, of course, are linked. It is telling that the Congress is polarizing and increasing in partisanship while the mass public has grown in the percentage of self-identified independents and ticket-splitters. Perhaps Members of Congress are not very representative of the interests in their districts.

From the previous table, however, Dan Burton (R-IN-6) would appear to be a strong counter-example. His district showed up as the third most conservative in the country, and

Burton’s DW-Nominate score marks him as the fifth most conservative House member – a nearly perfect match. By subtracting the rank orders of district ideology from Member ideology, one can generate a measure of “divergence” for every Member serving in the 103rd through 106th congresses.

Fidelity to District Ideology, Based on Ordinal Rankings									
106th Congress (1999-2000)									
Faithful Agents					Unfaithful Agents				
		D	M	Diff		D	M	Diff	
Matsui	CA 5	86	86	0	Brown	OH 13	255	43	Left 212
Bono	CA 44	249	249	0	Chabot	OH 11	173	381	Right 208
Jackson	IL 2	9	10	0	Bonior	MI 10	251	47	Left 204
Jones	OH 11	24	25	Right 1	Pomeroy	ND	345	142	Left 203
Thompson	MS 2	51	52	Right 1	DeFazio	OR 4	225	32	Left 193

Note: District and Member rankings are from most to least liberal, out of 398 congressional districts

The more divergent a member is from her district, the more polarized one expects the representation to be. Burton’s divergence score for the 104th Congress was two. On closer inspection, a surprising number of Member’s had divergence scores at or close to zero. Bill McCollum (R-FL-8), widely marked as a vocal conservative during President Clinton’s impeachment proceedings, was the 72nd most conservative member of the House in the 105th Congress. By my measure, however, his Orlando district is also the 72nd most conservative district in the country. Similarly, Diana Degette (D-CO-1), Charles Canady (R-FL-12), and Roy Blunt (R-MO-7) were perfect matches for their districts, with “divergence” scores of zero. At the other extreme, however, several Members seemed wildly out of touch with their districts by this divergence measure, yielding a nice distribution with which to work. In the 105th Congress, for example, David Bonior (D-MI-10) had a divergence score of 231 by representing the 251st most liberal district while voting as the 20th most liberal member.

4.3 Divergence from District Preferences

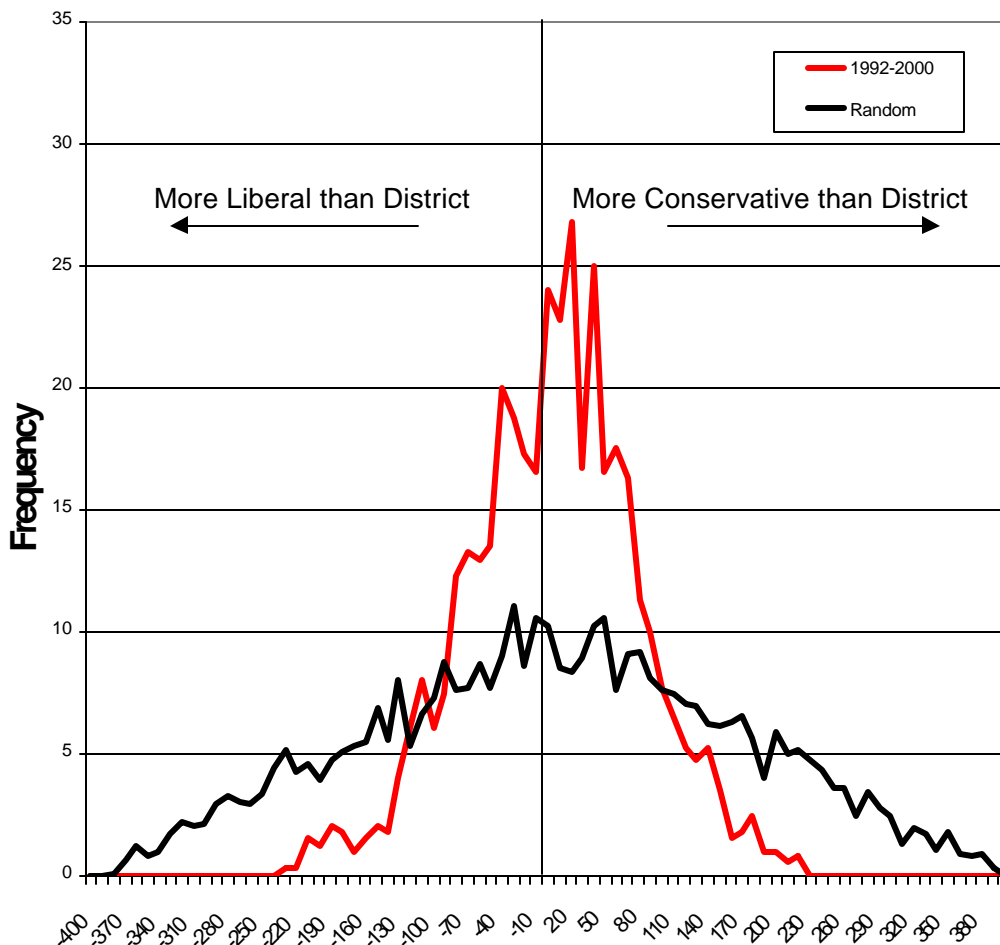
For the 103rd – 106th Congress, the aggregate divergence scores are shown in the figure below, with a contrasting distribution computed by randomly assigning members to actual districts.⁴ Representatives to the “right” on the figure are more conservative than their districts, while Members to the left are more liberal. There is a large spike close to zero, and a majority of the representatives fall within 30 rank divergence points. Compared with the randomly generated representatives, Members of Congress did very well – not surprisingly, but reassuringly, nonetheless.

If our measure of Member-District divergence is useful, we should expect the outliers – those most unrepresentative of their districts – to be punished at the polls. As an indicator, consider the fate of the most divergently liberal and divergently conservative members of the 103rd Congress. The most divergent members proved overwhelmingly likely to retire or be defeated. Of the ten most liberally divergent Members in the 103rd Congress, only one – David Bonior (D-MI-10) – was present in the 104th Congress. His is a special case, since Bonior has stayed in office as a vocal (and rare) defender of pro-life positions among Democrats. Bonior’s abortion stand gives him considerable leeway to be more liberal on a host of less visible and less salient issues. Of the ten most divergently liberal Members, four retired (with their districts switching parties) and five were defeated in the 1994 general election.

The 1994 elections were a sweep for the Republicans, with the party picking up 56 seats. Even Jay Dickey (R-AK-4), predicted by most observers to be handily defeated, posted a 52-48 percentage point win. Still, among the group of most conservatively divergent members, one finds several intriguing losses. David Levy (R-NY-4) was defeated in the Republican primary, then ran in the general election (and lost) under the Conservative Party banner. Rod Grams (R-MN-6) retired and his district switched to the Democrats, as did Ron Machtley’s (R-RI-1) district. In contrast, of the top twenty *least* divergent Members of the 103rd Congress, 18 remained for the 104th Congress, with two Members retiring. There are electoral rewards for representing one’s district well, and punishments for being too divergent.

⁴ A representative was simulated, by randomly generating a nominate score between 0 and 1, for each district. The random member’s ideology was then subtracted from the district’s actual ideology ranking.

Member - District Divergence 1993-2000



Recall the Ohio 6th district. Based on his voting in the 103rd Congress, Ted Strickland's divergence score was 127. In the 104th, Cremeans' divergence score was 41 – more representative than Strickland, but less representative than a majority of the Republican party. Returning to Strickland in the 105th Congress, his score was minus 123, slightly more moderate than his past record but still highly divergent from the district. Ideological whiplash, again.

4.4 Party Competition and Centrist Districts

I have argued that the extent of party competition – largely because of selective participation by activists in the primaries – is an important cause of divergence, and thus polarization. From the point of view of the median voter in a district with consistently divergent

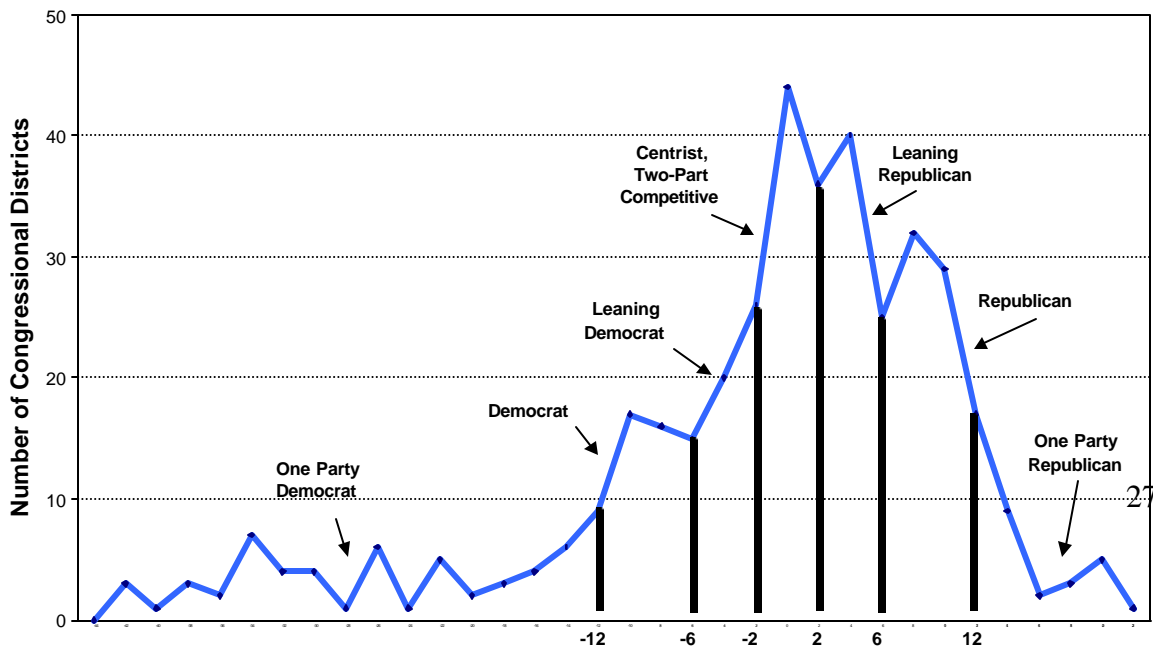
This was done 30 times for each district, then averaged to produce the “random” distribution.

representatives, the parties seem especially distant. Elsewhere, I have shown that the greater the gap between an individual and the “closest” party ideologically, the more likely that individual is to mistrust government, fail to participate in campaigns, and not vote in party primaries. The more polarized political parties are, the less most of us care about the political process (King 1997).

To test the “competition and polarization” hypothesis, we need one more measure: the extent of party competition in a district. An older literature, building off of Mo Fiorina’s work in the mid-1970s, focused on marginal districts. However, when trying to explain the variance in divergence scores, a district’s marginality is certainly endogenous. We have already seen that highly divergent members are the most likely to retire or be defeated, and the least divergent members are the most likely to run again and win. Performance in office is likely driving the marginality of the office – not the other way around. Constructing an exogenous measure of party competition, however, is daunting. A natural approach might be to explore the ratio of party registrants in a district, but these are reported in only 26 states, and are usually only recorded at the county level.

To reflect the degree of party competition, I use congressional district votes for Clinton and measure the difference from the national median. Seven categories are used, ranging from one-party Democrat districts (with the Clinton vote at least 12 points above the median) to one-

Party Competition in Congressional Districts

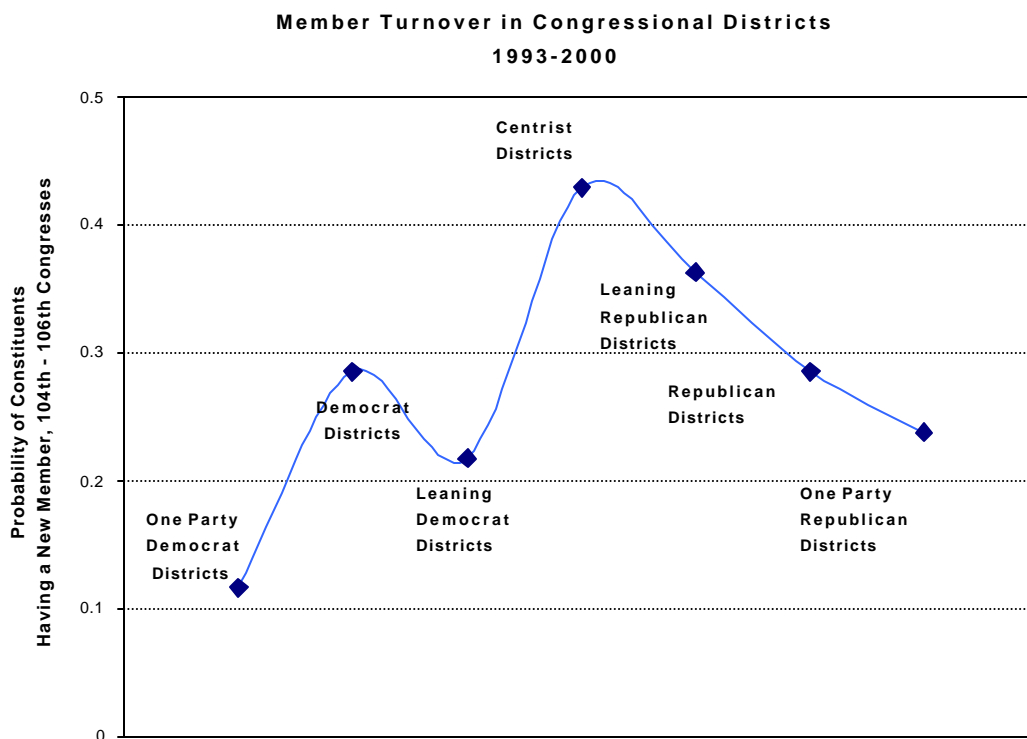


party Republican districts. Centrist and two-party competitive districts are defined as those with a two point spread around the Clinton median vote.

In the original Downsian formulation, fidelity to the median voter's ideology should not vary systematically as we move from one-party dominant congressional districts to competitive ones. Furthermore, if we accept the Hinich, Ledyard & Ordeshook (1972) clarification of the conditions under which rational extremists will abstain from voting, fidelity should be worse in one-party areas and best in congressional districts that are two-party competitive. One could also argue that the Downsian model should predict convergence toward the median voter in a two-stage game – as long as primary election voters were strategic enough to anticipate how the general election preference distribution would appear.

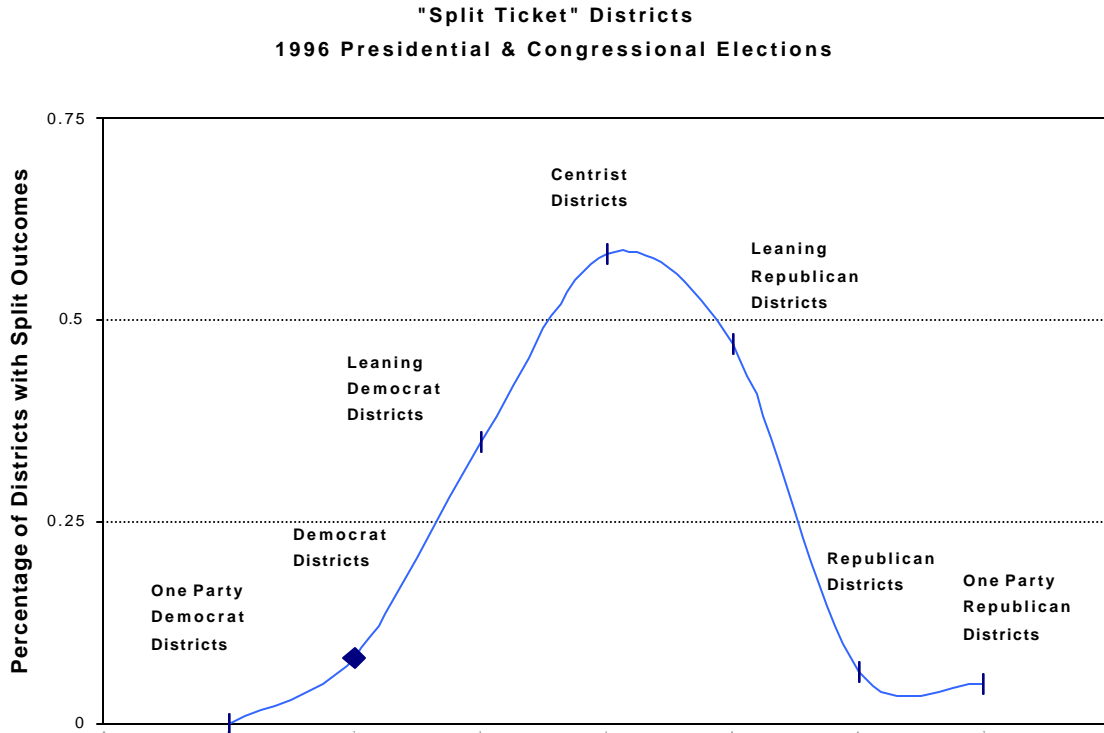
In pre-primary days, when party nominations were made in “smoke filled rooms” by party leaders, the conventional wisdom is that nominees were selected in anticipation of attracting swing voters. Especially in highly competitive districts – where the probability of a party *losing* the general election is at its peak, one might expect primary election voters to anticipate and reflect the preferences of the general election median voter. That, at least, would seem the rational approach, which is another reason why the continual whiplashing between ideological extremes, such as Strickland and Cremeans, might disappoint centrists in the Ohio 6th. What do the data show?

First, as one would expect, candidates from centrist districts are the most electorally vulnerable. In the adjacent figure, member turnover – from any source, including death and retirement – is reported. Voters in centrist districts, those with Clinton vote averages plus or minus two percentage points from the national median, had a 43% chance of at least experience member turnover in the 1994, 1996 and 1998 elections combined. Some districts, of course, experienced two or more switches in representation. The turnover rates in one-party dominant congressional districts were a half to a quarter of the rate in centrist districts. Within centrist



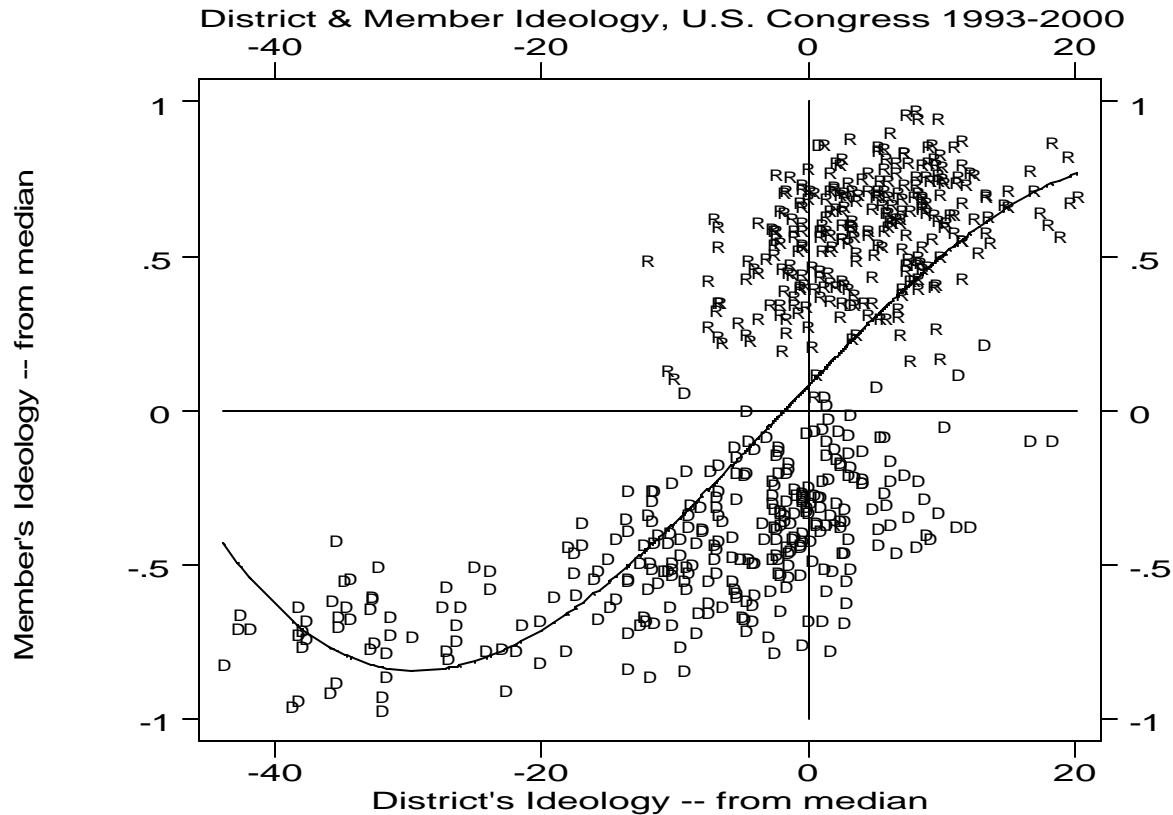
districts, the possibility that the minority party may unseat the majority party is highest of all, and this emboldens activists in the minority party within those areas. Not surprisingly, patters for split ticket voting – in which a district elects a member of one party to the U.S. House and a member of the other party to the White House – is also highest in centrist districts. In 1996, for example, not one of the 60 one-party Democrat districts produced split-ticket results, and less than 5 percent of the one-party Republican districts had split tickets. Meanwhile, 58 percent of the two-party-competitive districts had split ticket results.

The fact that centrist districts have higher rates of member turnover is important to



potential political activists. Political activity is a choice, and political inactivity is the norm. The likelihood of potential activists becoming activated depends, in part, on two things: on how extreme their preferences are from the within-district status quo, and on the likelihood that they might win election in order to change policy in their direction. Extremists are more likely to become activated in politically competitive, moderate districts.

How representative were members in the 1990s? Analysis to this point in the paper has depended on ordinal rankings of districts and members. Below I use cubic relationship between the raw numbers for districts and members. A cubic functional form, using district ideology to predict member ideology, works better than a simple linear model, but the results reported below are consistent across ordinal, linear, and cubic models.



The graph above pools average DW-Nominate scores for each member of the House over 8 years (1993-2000). Because of turnover, some districts are represented twice, yielding 587 observations. Democrats are marked with a “D” and Republicans with an “R.” Clearly, party matters and helps structure how one votes. Perfect representation would have each member line up on the cubic, exactly translating House floor votes based on their district’s ideology. These would be perfectly faithful agents, and the distance away from the cubic line would represent the degree of faithlessness. By this measure, the average member of Congress had a “faithless” score of 0.36, and the range was from 0 to 0.96. There is a lot of residual faithlessness in Congress, as members vary from the ideological preferences of their districts.

Upon closer examination of the fidelity measure, several intriguing patterns emerge. First, for every separate two-year Congress, majority party members are, on average, less faithful to their district’s ideological preferences. In the 103rd Congress, for example, the average Democrat’s measure of unfaithfulness was 0.439 (n=236), compared with an average

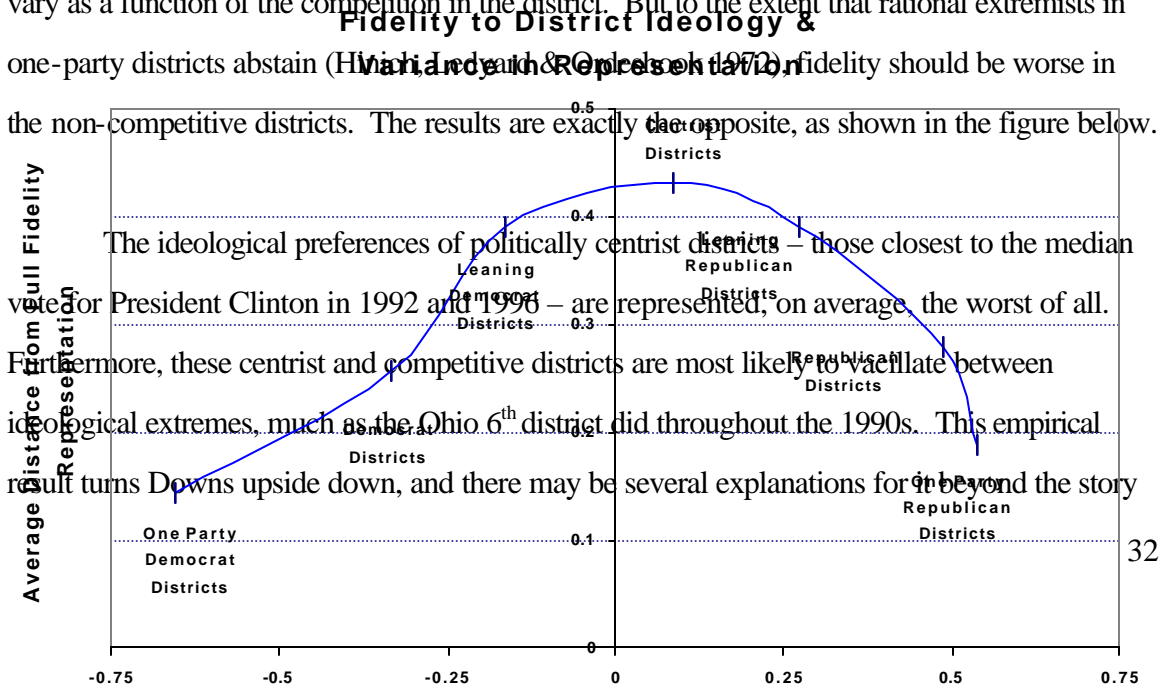
of 0.208 (n=162) for Republicans. In terms of representation, there is a price to be paid for being in the majority party. Similarly, in the 106th Congress, the average Republican's unfaithfulness score was 0.446 (n=200), and the Democrats had voting records much closer to their district preferences, with an average score of 0.241 (n=197).

I have argued elsewhere that the type of primary that a member survives is strongly predictive of how faithful the member will be to district interests. Beyond partisanship and the gymnastics of surviving primaries, three characteristics of members are consistently related to faithfulness: a member's seniority, the race of a member, and a member's gender.

Members who have survived at least three elections tend, on average, to be more faithful representatives. This may be because disgruntled voters weed out poor representatives, and it may be because members learn over time to be more faithful. In the 106th Congress, for example, the unfaithfulness measure for members who had served at least three terms was 0.283 (n=166), while their more junior members were less faithful, scoring 0.391 (n=231). Likewise in the 106th Congress, women proved better representatives, 0.319 (n=48) than men, 0.391 (n=231), and non-whites were more faithful, 0.298 (n=50) than whites 0.352 (n=347). Each of these relationships survives in multivariate tests and warrants further investigation. The purpose of this paper, though, is to explore the link between a district's two-party competitiveness and the quality of representation.

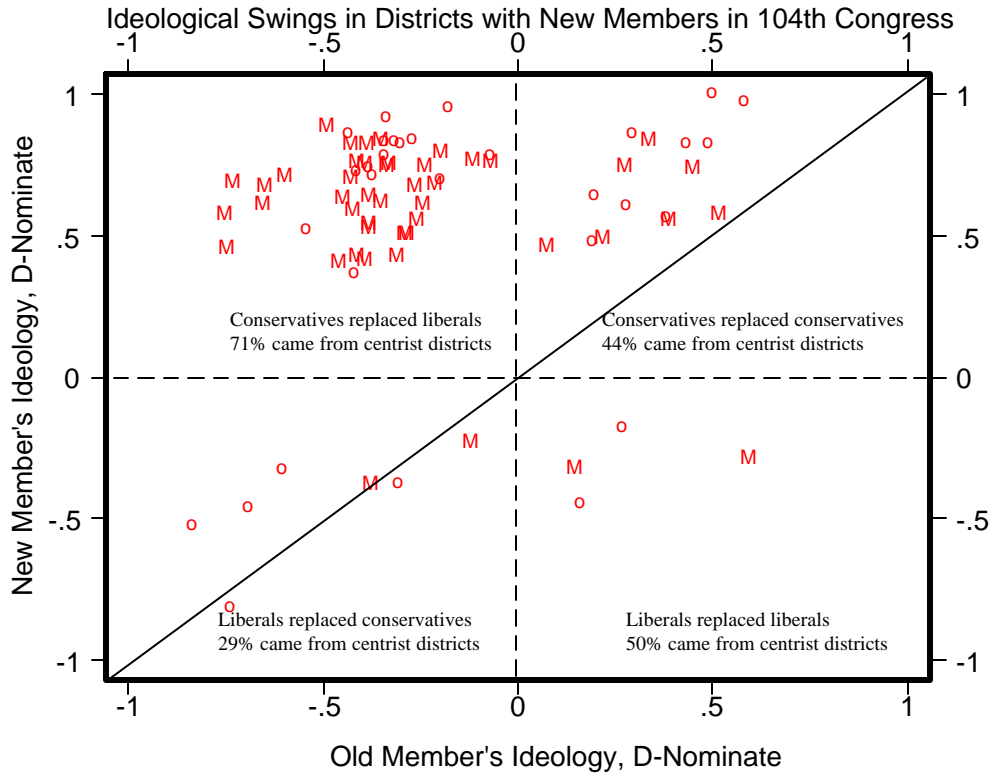
The standard Downsian expectation is that fidelity to a district's interests should not vary as a function of the competition in the district. But to the extent that rational extremists in one-party districts abstain (Hart, Jayaram & Represon 1972), fidelity should be worse in the non-competitive districts. The results are exactly the opposite, as shown in the figure below.

The ideological preferences of politically centrist districts – those closest to the median voter for President Clinton in 1992 and 1996 – are represented, on average, the worst of all. Furthermore, these centrist and competitive districts are most likely to vacillate between ideological extremes, much as the Ohio 6th district did throughout the 1990s. This empirical result turns Downs upside down, and there may be several explanations for it beyond the story



told earlier in the paper. Any theory, however, needs to recognize the ongoing polarization among political activists and the dwindling numbers of people actually voting in congressional primaries.

That the centrist districts tend to have representatives that fit those districts less well, and that those districts are most likely to swing between ideological extremes, may shed light on what happened with the Gingrich “revolution” in the 104th Congress. The Gingrich revolution was short-lived as the likes of Frank Cremeans were quickly replaced in the 105th Congress. In January 1995, Speaker Gingrich claimed a broad mandate, sensing a strong national shift toward conservatism. That shift, however, came overwhelmingly from moderate districts, as shown in the figure below. The figure lists the DW-Nominate scores for new members of the 104th Congress, plotting that against the ideology scores of the members they replaced. Not surprisingly, there is a shift on the graph up and to the left, as conservatives replaced liberals in Congress. The preponderance of those members, however, came from ideologically moderate districts, defined here as having Clinton vote percentages leaning Democrat, centrist, and leaning Republican.



Foot soldiers in the Gingrich revolution were recruited from ideologically moderate districts, and that proved to be electorally unstable terrain. Again, from a pure Downsian perspective, this is unexpected. Moderates are supposed to come from moderate districts, conservatives from conservative districts, and so on. Yet in ideologically centrist districts throughout America, the party primaries have been overtaken by ideological purists.

If the dominant metaphors for politics in America are the market and the arena, both holding vigorous competition central to how we think politicians and citizens should behave, perhaps we should find room for an alternative venue: the forum. In a forum, spectators may become participants, and a dialogue unites rather than divides. Our current primary system, built out of our faith in political competition, may be more divisive than we once believed. Party competition and political polarization go hand in hand.

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