



Proximity voting in the 2010 U.S. House elections



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ABSTRACT

Utilizing data that allows for the placement of both of the candidates running and voters on the same ideological scale, I model proximity voting in the 2010 House elections. I demonstrate that though the literature predominantly emphasizes partisanship and incumbency, relative distance from the candidates also plays a significant role in the voting decision. Additionally, I show that these proximity effects are conditional upon the type of candidate running and the individual's partisan attachment. In total, these results show that while the rates of partisan voting and incumbent victory are high in House elections, voters do consider ideological proximity and can punish candidates who take positions that are too far out of line.

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Despite some arguments for the decline in partisanship in the U.S. (e.g. Wattenberg, 1996), the general consensus of recent studies of U.S. House elections is still that “most Americans have this sense of attachment with one party or the other. And for the individual who does, the strength and direction of party identification are facts of central importance in accounting for attitude and behavior” (Campbell et al., 1960, 121). Longitudinal analyses show that since 1978, the level of partisan voting in U.S. House elections has increased, with about 80% of voters casting votes for the candidate from their own party (Bartels, 2000; Born, 2008; Jacobson, 2009; Hetherington, 2001). A resulting implication of this literature is that voters may be willing to support candidates who take ideological positions that are extreme relative to their own, since the primary concern of voters is the party label and not policy. This implication, however, is at odds with proximity theories of voting (e.g. Downs, 1957), which state that voters should prefer the candidate who locates closest to them in the policy space. Indeed, a second body of empirical work finds that voters are responsive to the policy decisions of their legislators and that those members of the House whose voting records are not congruent with the

preferences of their district do face electoral penalties (Ansolabehere and Jones, 2010; Canes-Wrone et al., 2002; Ansolabehere et al., 2001). Thus, it seems that although partisanship plays a key role in the voting decision, the importance of policy proximity may be understated in much of the work on U.S. House elections¹.

Indeed, the recent work of Jessee (2009, 2010) posits a more hybrid model of voting. While a pure partisan model may predict that a voter should support his party's candidate regardless of where that candidate locates, the hybrid model predicts that because spatial proximity is also significant, the bias granted by partisanship is not absolute and that a candidate can take a position that is so extreme relative to his opponent's that even his own party's voters won't support him. To illustrate, consider the finding from Jessee's (2009) analyses of the 2004 presidential election that while the likelihood of a Democrat voting for Kerry remained over 50% even when that voter was actually closer to Bush, it did decrease and eventually drop below 50% once the Democrat was twice as close to Bush as he

¹ To say that partisanship is the only factor affecting the choice of House candidates is a gross oversimplification that even the staunchest advocates of the “Michigan Model” would most likely reject. Thus, it should be noted that my central argument is not that prior theories completely dismiss proximity effects, but rather, that they downplay their importance.

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was to Kerry². This same type of voting behavior has been evidenced in the 2008 presidential election as well (Jessee, 2010) and thus it is reasonable to expect that such a model also applies to voting in U.S. House elections.

As such, I seek to advance the literature on proximity voting in three major ways. First, I draw on data from the 2010 U.S. House elections to offer an empirical model that shows how partisanship and proximity both operate to affect the voting decision. The unique structure of my data set allows me to overcome many of the obstacles that have prevented previous researchers from offering strict and direct tests of proximity voting. The use of district experts' placements of candidates results in a measure that has a validity on par with measures derived from roll-call votes, but also has the added advantages of placing all candidates, not just those who win office, and placing them on the same scale as voters. To the best of my knowledge, no published study has been able to do this for U.S. House elections³.

Second, I take advantage of the variation in U.S. House races to explore how incumbency conditions the effects of proximity. The literature has well documented the electoral advantage enjoyed by House incumbents (i.e. Erikson, 1971; Mayhew, 1974; Cox and Katz, 1996; Cover, 1977; Desposato and Petrocik, 2003; McAdams and Johannes, 1988; Gelman and King, 1990). Feld and Grofman (1991) built this advantage into their spatial model, theorizing that it may at least partially stem from voters' willingness to grant incumbents policy leeway. Utilizing the expert placements of the candidates, I am able to offer the first empirical test of this theory and show how the effects of proximity depend upon whether or not there is an incumbent in the race.

Finally, I test for the possibility that the effects of proximity are conditional not only on the type of candidates in the race, but also on the type of voter. Specifically, I show that the effects of proximity do vary with the strength of one's partisanship but not with levels of political knowledge. In total, the unique ability to place candidates and voters on the same scale and empirically test for the effects of proximity allows me to offer new insight into the calculus of House voters.

1. Factors conditioning the effects of proximity

1.1. Incumbency

I hypothesize that policy proximity should matter less in elections where an incumbent is present vs. open seat

contests. This hypothesis stems from the fact that it is well documented that there are many other reasons, such as superior name recognition and service to the district, that lead voters to support an incumbent apart from policy positions (i.e. Fiorina, 1989; Gronke, 2000; Jacobson, 2009). As Feld and Grofman (1991) posit, these non-policy attributes may in turn create a situation where:

A voter might vote for an incumbent even while recognizing that the incumbent's policies are slightly less desirable than the challenger's; or the voter may perceive the incumbent as having a more favorable policy position than he actually has...in either case, the voter acts as if she is giving the incumbent a certain benefit of the doubt. (116–17).

If voters do in fact grant incumbents this benefit of the doubt, then this suggests that incumbents actually have a range of winning positions, not just the median, and proximity should matter less in races where an incumbent is present. Conversely, in open seat races, proximity should matter more because unlike incumbents, open seat candidates do not typically have established personal or service records with voters on which they can be judged, and so with more limited criteria, policy proximity should matter more.

1.2. Partisan attachment and political knowledge

Additionally, I expect the effects of proximity to be dependent upon two characteristics of voters: partisan attachment and political knowledge. First, while Jessee (2009, 2010) demonstrates that partisan bias does operate alongside proximity concerns, he does not explicitly account for studies which show that partisan bias increases with partisan extremity (i.e. Bartels, 2002; Gaines et al., 2007). As such, I hypothesize that the effects of proximity will be mitigated among strong partisans. That is, closeness to the candidates' ideological positions should matter most to pure independents and least to extreme Democrats and Republicans, as strong partisan attachments should lead individuals to place less weight on policy congruence.

Second, I expect that proximity should have a greater effect among the more knowledgeable. While partisanship and incumbency are typically clearly listed on the ballot, proximity calculations require the voter to glean at least rough approximations of two additional pieces of information: the policy positions of the two candidates. For many, this is not a realistic requirement, as "the amount of information about the candidates reaching less aware voters in House elections is lower than in any other type of race, an amount that is fairly close to nil" (Zaller, 1992, 252). Indeed, analyses of House elections from 1996 to 2002 show that even in the presence of other intense political campaigns, overall levels of candidate recall and knowledge are low for all candidates and especially so for challengers (Wolak, 2009). As such, it is not illogical to assume that in such a low-information context, those with higher levels of political knowledge will be able to utilize policy positions in their decision calculus, while those with lower levels of political

² The same pattern is evident when examining Republican voters and the likelihood of voting for Kerry.

³ A notable exception is the work of Jessee (2009, 2010), who uses ideal point estimation to place voters and both candidates on the same ideological scale. This work, however, focuses on the presidential, not the House level. An unpublished manuscript by Shor and Rogowski (2010) also uses ideal point estimation in similar analyses of 2000 and 2004 House and Senate races, but the higher turnout and partisan surges associated with presidential elections undoubtedly influence their results. Moreover, Shor and Rogowski (2010) do not explicitly account for incumbency status. Thus, my examination of midterm House elections makes a distinct and important contribution.

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