



How do voters matter? Evidence from US congressional redistricting

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ABSTRACT

How does the partisan composition of an electorate impact the policies adopted by an elected representative? We take advantage of variation in the partisan composition of Congressional districts stemming from Census-initiated redistricting in the 1990's, 2000's, and 2010's to examine how an increase in Democrat share within a district impacts the district representative's roll call voting. We find that an increase in Democrat share within a district causes more leftist roll call voting. This increase occurs because a Democrat is more likely to hold the seat, but also because – in contrast to existing empirical work – partisan composition has a direct effect on the roll call voting of individual representatives. The finding holds for both Democrats and Republicans. It is also true regardless of the nature of the redistricting (e.g., whether the redistricting was generated by a partisan or non-partisan process). Our main results are robust to an alternative identification strategy that does not rely on variation stemming from redistricting.

1. Introduction

What is the relationship between voters' preferences and the policies supported and enacted by their representatives? Broadly speaking, voters influence policy on both an extensive margin and an intensive margin. On the extensive margin: voters choose between candidates through elections. If different candidates are expected to support different policies once elected, voters are essentially choosing which policy bundle they prefer when they vote for a given candidate. On the intensive margin, shifts in voter preferences may directly lead an already-elected representative to support different policies.

Theoretical models of electoral competition differ on which of these margins matter. The Downsian model of electoral competition (Downs, 1957) and related models suggest that, in order to achieve and maintain electoral support, politicians adopt policies that please the median voter. Thus, shifts in preferences of voters may lead to shifts in policymaking by their representatives – an intensive margin response. These models also, therefore, imply that who is elected (the extensive margin) is of less consequence: all candidates propose policies close to the median voter's ideal. Other models (e.g., “citizen-candidate” models¹) assume that politicians adopt their personally preferred policies if elected, so elections only serve to select the candidate whose policy proposals are most preferred by voters. That is, under these

models, only the extensive margin is operative.

In our paper, we take advantage of variation in the partisan composition of Congressional districts stemming from post-Census redistricting in the 1990's, 2000's, and 2010's in order to empirically assess the importance of these two margins. To do so, we construct a new measure of “predicted Democrat share” within each district, which allows us to observe the share of Democrats within every Congressional district just before and after each wave of redistricting.

Using a difference-in-differences strategy (with continuous treatment), we ask: “Does a larger share of Democrats within a district lead to more leftist representation in Congress?” If so, does this happen only because a Democrat is more likely to be elected (an extensive margin response)? Or, does a leftward shift in representation occur even if the incumbent party or candidate remains in office both before and after the shift in the electorate (an intensive margin response)? The difference-in-differences strategy allows us to answer these questions while stripping away the influence of (1) general time trends in ideological positions in Congress and (2) unobservable differences between Congressional districts and representatives (that are constant across redistricting).

The extant empirical literature on this question has led to mixed results. Several researchers have documented a relationship between voters' preferences and the ideological position of their elected

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¹ For Citizen-candidate models, see: Osborne and Slivinski (1996), Besley and Coate (1997). The idea that politicians simply enact their personally preferred policy is also consistent with Alesina's (1988) model with limited concerns about future election outcomes.

representatives in the legislature (e.g., Levitt, 1996; Gerber and Lewis, 2004), but disentangling whether such a relationship occurs through the intensive or extensive margin is not the main goal of those papers. Most relevant is the work of Lee et al. (2004) who also study the US House of Representatives. They use a regression discontinuity strategy to isolate quasi-random variation in the electoral strength of a party, building on the notion that a narrow (quasi-randomly assigned) Democrat victory in the previous contest generates strength for the Democratic candidate in the next election due to the incumbency advantage. Ultimately, they find that increased electoral strength only impacts the roll call voting behavior of a district's representative through the extensive margin, with no intensive margin response. Indeed, they conclude: "Voters merely *elect* policies," and that once a candidate has been elected: "the degree of electoral strength has no effect on a legislator's voting behavior." In work concurrent to ours, Fedaseyev et al. (2015) document that voters become significantly more likely to vote for Republicans in areas where hydraulic fracturing (or "fracking") has driven fossil fuel extraction booms. This move towards Republican representation then in turn leads to more conservative representation in the House. As in Lee et al. (2004), they find that this result comes entirely through the extensive margin. Conditional on being elected, representatives from areas with shale booms, on average, vote no differently than do other members of their party. However, other research using the same empirical approach as Lee et al. (2004) has found conflicting evidence in the context of the US Senate (Albouy, 2011). Moreover, recent research suggests that the assumptions necessary for a valid regression discontinuity design are not satisfied in US Congressional elections (Caughey and Sekhon, 2011).²

Finally, in work that is in some ways more similar to our own, Mian et al. (2010) provide evidence that representatives are responsive to their constituent's financial interests when voting on a specific issue. They show that, all else equal, representatives whose constituents experienced a sharp increase in mortgage defaults were more likely to support the Foreclosure Prevention Act – especially in competitive districts.

Given these mixed results, we contribute to this literature by providing new evidence from a different empirical approach. In our analysis, we find clear evidence that both margins matter. First, not surprisingly, an increase in Democrats within a district leads to more leftist representation overall. Part of this result stems from the extensive margin: a positive shock to the number of Democrats in the district increases the likelihood that a Democrat is elected, and Democrats are more likely to hold a leftist ideological position in their roll call voting. However, this simple extensive margin effect does not entirely explain the shift to the left. We find that an increase in the number of Democrats within a district leads to more leftist representation even when controlling for party affiliation. Indeed, only about 63% of the overall shift to the left in response to a higher share of Democrats appears to be driven by increased likelihood of electing a Democrat. This is in contrast to Lee et al.'s (2004) result; in their paper, a change in Democrats' electoral strength within a district led to a shift to the left in roll call voting, but roughly 100% of this change was explained by increased likelihood of electing a Democrat.

The main threat to identification in our analysis is the fact that Congressional districts are not randomly drawn and therefore our treatment is not randomly assigned. As in any difference-in-differences approach, this fact only threatens the validity of our research design if the factors that determine treatment are also related to the anticipated trend of the outcome variable. We would therefore be concerned if districts experiencing the largest changes in partisan composition were markedly different in their pre-existing partisan composition or if the

pattern of redistricting varied substantially by the circumstances surrounding redistricting (e.g., party of incumbent, cause of redistricting, partisanship of redistricting authority). We address these concerns in a number of ways.

We begin by directly assessing the relationship between pre-existing Democrat share and redistricting-prompted changes in Democrat share – both in isolation and in relation to various types of redistricting processes. In the aggregate, we find no meaningful difference in the post redistricting change in Democratic share between districts with a low baseline Democrat share and those with a high baseline Democrat share.³ Although this finding may seem surprising given frequent discussion of heavy manipulation of redistricting for political purposes, recent research in fact suggests that the conventional wisdom on redistricting is not borne out in data. During the period we study, there has been a well-documented increase in partisan polarization in Congress largely driven by a rightward shift in the voting patterns of Congressional Republicans (McCarty et al., 2016). Redistricting is often suggested as an explanation for this trend. McCarty et al. (2009) provide evidence to suggest that there is in fact very little relationship between redistricting and an increase in polarization in Congress, which would be expected if redistricting was used by state governments to minimize the competitiveness of districts.⁴ Further, and perhaps more importantly for our analysis, the relationship between baseline Democrat share and the redistricting outcome does not appear to vary with the nature of the redistricting. To explore this issue, we split our sample along several dimensions that proxy for the likelihood that redistricting was associated with political motivations (e.g., non-partisan vs. partisan processes); we find no evidence that this relationship varies based on the likelihood that states were engaged in politically motivated redistricting.

While the descriptive evidence suggests that selective redistricting may not pose a threat to our analysis, in our empirical work we demonstrate that our results are robust to four different strategies for addressing the issue. First, we include a rich set of time trends (interacted at both the district and congress person level). Second, we replicate our analysis on different subsamples of the data, focusing on states whose redistricting processes were less likely to have been politically motivated. Third, we evaluate the impact of district composition on a second demographic dimension, percent black. Utilizing the Leadership Conference on Civil Right's (LCCR's) Congressional ratings as our outcome variable, we demonstrate the presence of an intensive margin effect of percent black on voting behavior relative to the LCCR's agenda. This result is robust to controlling for Democrat vote share. Fourth, we consider a completely different empirical strategy which employs a shift-share instrumental variables approach and takes advantage of within-decade variation in predicted Democrat share that arises due to broader demographic trends. Under this approach, we again find that the composition of an electorate impacts roll call voting behavior on the intensive margin.

Our finding of both an intensive margin and an extensive margin effect contributes to a literature in political science exploring the impacts of redistricting on legislators' behavior (Boatright, 2004; Crespin, 2010; Bertelli and Carson, 2011). These authors focus on representatives present before and after a single wave of redistricting and study their response to a change in partisan composition (as measured by presidential vote share in the most recent presidential election). Ultimately, results from those papers are mixed: Boatright (2004) and Crespin (2010) provide some evidence that representatives do change

³ A 1%age point increase in baseline Democrat share is, on average, associated with a 0.034 percentage point decrease in Democrat share following redistricting.

⁴ Similarly, Friedman and Holden (2009) challenge the notion that redistricting is aimed to provide incumbents an advantage; they provide causal evidence that the incumbent reelection rate is lower after each wave of post-Census redistricting during the time period we study, perhaps due to a tightening in the legal constraints (and enforcement of constraints) on redistricting in recent decades.

² Caughey and Sekhon (2011) find that narrowly elected Democrats are different in a number of ways (other than just the fact that they won): incumbency status, financial resources, political experience, and other observables.

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