



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Electoral Studies

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/electstud](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/electstud)

# Moderate, extreme, or both? How voters respond to ideologically unpredictable candidates<sup>☆</sup>

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Candidate platforms  
Issue voting  
Spatial models

## ABSTRACT

Candidates and parties often face a choice between endorsing policies that appeal to their core constituencies or generate support from more diverse groups of voters. While the latter strategy may make overtures to a wider set of citizens, existing literature says little about how the overall mix of issue positions affects electoral support. We argue that candidates who endorse diverse sets of policy positions appear unpredictable to voters and incur subsequent electoral penalties. Using data from the 2006 congressional elections, we find that ideological predictability substantially increases electoral support at both the individual and aggregate levels and that voters perceive greater ideological congruence from more predictable candidates. Our results have important implications for candidate and party strategies and suggest that voters are responsive to the mean and the variance of candidates' policy stances.

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, major political parties in the U.S. have each debated whether to support potential candidates whose policy views sometimes violate the party lines.<sup>1</sup> For instance, many of the candidates for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination emphasized the necessity of adhering to core Republican doctrine and advocating consistently conservative policies.<sup>2</sup> This issue was front and center in the campaign for the 2016 Republican presidential nomination as Donald Trump asserted that “[v]oters want unpredictability” while party establishment figures worried that Trump's unpredictability would jeopardize party priorities if he were to be elected.<sup>3</sup> The outcomes of these debates have important implications for voters' ability to discern the underlying ideologies of the candidates and predict the subsequent behavior of candidates elected to office. Whether election-seeking candidates

should exhibit ideological purity or endorse a more varied set of policy positions, however, inevitably depends in part on how voters respond to these strategies.

Models of vote choice and electoral competition posit that citizens vote for the candidate whose ideology best reflects their own (Adams et al., 2005; Buttice and Stone, 2012; Jessee, 2009, 2012) and that candidates choose ideological positions likely to appeal to the pivotal voter (Adams, 2012; Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009; Ansolabehere et al., 2001; Stone and Simas, 2010).<sup>4</sup> Candidates face an important strategic decision, however, in choosing policy positions to maximize their electoral fortunes. To appeal to as many voters as possible, Downs (1957, 110) argues that candidates should not choose issue positions that “adhere too rigidly to any one philosophic outlook.” By selecting a relatively diverse mix of positions — some more moderate than others — across a range of issues, candidates may be able to win the support of

<sup>☆</sup> We thank Jim Adams, Henry Brady, Zac Callen, Justin Fox, Will Howell, Stephen Jessee, Jamila Michener, Claudia Sandoval, Betsy Sinclair, Walt Stone, and Margit Tavits for helpful comments. Earlier versions of this manuscript were presented to audiences at the 2009 American Political Science Association annual meeting and at the American Politics workshop at the University of Chicago.

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Jason L. Riley, “Ideological Purity or Bust?”, *Wall Street Journal*, March 11, 2014; available at <http://online.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304704504579433622026410960>; Jim L. Rutenberg and Adam Nagourney, “Conservatives Make a List to Measure Candidates' Commitment”, *The New York Times*, November 23, 2009; available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/24/us/politics/24repubs.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Lane, “The destructive path of ideological purity,” *Washington Post*, March 26, 2012; available at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-destructive-path-of-ideological-purity/2012/03/26/gIQAGzsvS\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-destructive-path-of-ideological-purity/2012/03/26/gIQAGzsvS_story.html).

<sup>3</sup> Eric Levitz, “Donald Trump Assures Voters They'll Never Know What He'll Do As President”, *New York Magazine*, January 5, 2016; available at <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2016/01/trump-voters-want-unpredictability.html#> (accessed March 25, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> For an alternative perspective about the role of ideology in voter decision-making, see Broockman (2016).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2017.10.004>

Received 2 November 2016; Received in revised form 7 April 2017; Accepted 12 October 2017

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voters whose personal preferences fall within that ideological range. At the same time, candidates should not “put forth an unorganized jumble of policies” (Downs, 1957, 110) so that they maintain support from their core constituencies. Thus, candidates must identify a set of issue positions that simultaneously appeals to core supporters and ideologically moderate voters.

For example, consider the 2004 U.S. Senate election in Oklahoma. Republican candidate Tom Coburn touted his consistent adherence to conservative ideals while, the Democratic candidate, Congressman Brad Carson, labeled himself a “maverick” because he broke “with his party to help our state, to help our country, [and worked] in a bipartisan fashion to achieve constructive results.”<sup>5</sup> Although he took liberal positions by supporting greater highway spending and increased Medicare prescription drug coverage while opposing the privatization of Social Security, Carson also voted for the Bush tax cuts, the Federal Marriage Amendments, and bans on partial birth abortion. Over the last few decades, the “maverick” label has been applied to other prominent American politicians including Senators William Proxmire<sup>6</sup> and John McCain.<sup>7</sup>

In this paper, we argue that voters consider the ideological distribution of policies endorsed by candidates to evaluate a candidate's degree of predictability. Building on research that studies voters' tolerance for risk (e.g., Kam and Simas, 2010, 2012; Morgenstern and Zechmeister, 2001) and reactions to uncertainty (e.g., Alvarez, 1998; Bartels, 1986), we hypothesize that candidates appear less predictable when choosing issue positions that span wide ranges of ideological space and are subsequently penalized by voters. While a good deal of existing research has examined the causes and consequences of consistency *within* particular issue areas (e.g., Karol, 2009; McTague and Pearson-Merkowitz, 2015; Tomz and Van Houweling, 2010), comparatively little scholarship has studied how candidates' policy positions relate to one another across issue areas. Our focus on the overall mix of candidates' issue positions identifies a form of voter uncertainty conceptually distinct from that resulting from voters' information deficits (e.g., Alvarez, 1998) and candidate strategies around ambiguity (e.g., Bräuniger and Giger, Forthcoming; Rovny, 2012; Tomz and Van Houweling, 2009).

We examine how ideological predictability affected the electoral fortunes of U.S. House candidates in the 2006 congressional elections. Analyzing individual-level vote choice and aggregate district-level outcomes, we demonstrate that voters preferred candidates with high levels of ideological predictability. Our results are robust to a wide range of model specifications, characterizations of key variables, and subsets of voters and elections. We further show that voters perceived candidates with greater predictability as more ideologically congruent, which suggests a potential mechanism through which voters penalized candidates whose policy positions were widely dispersed. Our findings illustrate the importance of considering both the mean *and* the variance of candidates' policy appeals, and have important implications for studying candidates' issue strategies and voter response to them.

## 2. Ideology and elections

Elections introduce myriad agency problems for voters. As a consequence, an important theoretical literature (e.g., Barro, 1973;

<sup>5</sup> Rob Martindale, Tulsa World, October 4, 2004, “Carson, Coburn in U.S. spotlight”; available at [http://www.tulsaworld.com/archives/carson-coburn-in-u-s-spotlight/article\\_f195c\\_3-dbec-53d1-9524-c2\\_8a87bc8c.html](http://www.tulsaworld.com/archives/carson-coburn-in-u-s-spotlight/article_f195c_3-dbec-53d1-9524-c2_8a87bc8c.html) (accessed November 23, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Richard Severo, “William Proxmire, Maverick Democratic Senator From Wisconsin, Is Dead at 90,” December 16, 2005, *New York Times*; available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/16/us/william-proxmire-maverick-democratic-senator-from-wisconsin-is-dead-at-90.html> (accessed November 23, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Dana Milbank, July 23, 2013, “John McCain, the maverick, is back,” *Washington Post*; available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/dana-milbank-john-mccain-the-maverick-is-back/2013/07/22/eacdec2-f30b-11e2-ae43-b31dc363c3bf\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/dana-milbank-john-mccain-the-maverick-is-back/2013/07/22/eacdec2-f30b-11e2-ae43-b31dc363c3bf_story.html) (accessed November 23, 2015).

Ferejohn, 1986) reaches rather pessimistic conclusions about the capacity of voters to exercise popular control over elected officials. More recent theoretical and empirical scholarship on electoral accountability, however, argues that elections enable voters to select high-performing public officials by observing their behavior in office and discerning their types (for an overview of these models, see Ashworth, 2012). One of the key insights from this line of scholarship is that incumbent behavior provides information about the incumbent's type, where “high” types are more likely to advance voter welfare than “low” types.

This logic structures how voters respond to candidates' policy positions. Canonical models of electoral competition posit that candidates (or parties) compete over ideology, and that voters choose the candidate whose ideology most closely matches their own (Downs, 1957; Enelow and Hinich, 1984).<sup>8</sup> Given these incentives, office-seeking candidates are expected to reap electoral benefits by presenting relatively moderate ideologies, for which a large literature finds support (e.g., Ansolabehere et al., 2001; Canes-Wrone et al., 2002).<sup>9</sup> However, as Downs (1957, 102) argued, “In order to be rational short cuts, ideologies must be integrated with policies closely enough to form accurate indicators of what each [candidate] is likely to do in the future.” In developing what we call their portfolio of policy positions, however, candidates face a strategic decision. While a candidate's position on any one issue will be shaped by the desire to choose the best position given the public's preferences and the position of the competitor, candidates also desire to choose a portfolio that appeals to as many voters as possible. This motivation may lead candidates to consider choosing policy positions that span some range of the ideological space.

We argue that the second moment of the distribution of issue positions, or the variance, provides information about the predictability of a candidate's behavior in office. Most research on ideology and elections, in contrast, focuses on how the candidates' issue positions signal an underlying ideological location, often characterized as the weighted mean of the individual issue positions. These two moments are frequently in tension. As Downs (1957, 133) writes:

“The rational party strategy is to adopt a spread of policies that covers a whole range of the left-right scale. The wider this spread is, the more viewpoints the party's ideology and platform will appeal to. But a wider spread also weakens the strength of the appeal to any one viewpoint, because each citizen sees the party upholding policies he does not approve of.”

The variance of a candidate's policy positions describes her level of ideological predictability. This idea is closely related to the notion of ideological constraint (Converse, 1964), as candidates exhibit lower levels of constraint when their issue positions are distributed more widely across the ideological space. Other research refers to unpredictable officeholders as “mavericks” (e.g., Lauderdale, 2010) for whom the main ideological dimension performs less well as a predictor of a legislator's behavior. While an extensive literature investigates how elections are contested over the first moment of candidates' issue positions using a summary measure of candidate ideology, Downs' account suggests that the second moment may also play an important role in voter decision-making.

Fig. 1 provides a stylized example of ideological predictability and contrasts it with ambiguity. Consider an election in which a candidate's issue positions are arrayed along a unidimensional policy space (the x-axes) ranging from liberal to conservative. The points represent the known ideological locations of a candidate's positions on five policy areas and are uniformly distributed across a given interval of the policy

<sup>8</sup> We assume a proximity model of vote choice (rather than directional or discounting models) for theoretical and empirical simplicity. For the sake of exposition we focus on electoral competition between opposing candidates, though our discussion applies equivalently to competition between parties.

<sup>9</sup> However, Stone and Simas (2010) and Montagnes and Rogowski (2015) provide evidence that moderation may not increase a candidate's vote share.

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