Moderation in the pursuit of moderation is no vice: the clear but limited advantages to being a moderate for Congressional elections[*]

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Abstract

It is sometimes believed that is is politically risky for a congressmember to go against his or her party. On the other hand, Downs's familiar theory of electoral competition holds that political moderation is a vote-getter. We analyze recent Congressional elections and find that moderation is typically worth less about 2% of the vote. This suggests there is a motivation to be moderate, but not to the exlusion of other political concerns, especially in non-marginal districts.

Keywords: Congressional elections, ideology, impeachment, median voter theorem

1 Introduction

Quotes from 1994 and 2006???

In a two-candidate election, it should be beneficial for candidates to claim the political center by holding moderate positions. This claim is supported by theory (dating back at least to Hotelling, 1929, and Downs, 1957) and empirical evidence of candidates moving to the center as elections approach (see, e.g., Levitt, 1996, and Erikson and Wright, 2000), as well as anecdotal evidence such as the failures of the Goldwater and McGovern campaigns for President.

However, there is evidence on the other side indicating that there must be some benefit to holding more extreme positions. Most notably, the U.S. Congress has become polarized in recent years between Democrats and Republicans with few congressmembers holding moderate positions (see Poole and Rosenthal, 1997, for a comprehensive historical study), and some commentators have noticed more ideological polarization in recent political debate (see King, 1997, and Fiorina, 1999, for some discussion of these patterns and their relevance to the "median voter theorem" of Hotelling and Downs). Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope (2006) argue that polarization within Congress
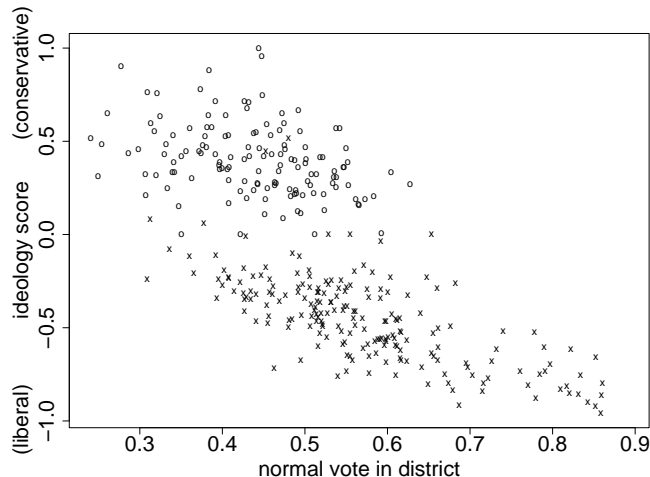
Figure 1: Political ideology of members of the 1993–94 House of Representatives vs. district normal vote (adjusted Democratic vote for President in 1992). Democrats and Republicans are indicated by crosses and circles, respectively. The moderates of both parties tend to sit in more marginal districts.

has led to voters having more extreme opinions about the two parties, even if voters themselves have become no more polarized in their own attitude positions.

In the U.S. Congress, the most successful vote-getters and longest-serving members are often at the extremes—liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans. At times, it even seems that incumbent congressmembers are punished for their moderation, as with Republicans who supported Nixon's impeachment in 1974 and centrist Democrats in the 1994 Republican onslaught.

Various explanations have been proposed to explain ideological polarization given the theoretical benefits of moderation. Motivations for departing from the median voter's position include primary elections, party discipline, motivating turnout, and politicians' individual policy preferences (see, for example, Fiorina, 1999, and Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart, 2001a,b).

A complicating factor in studying these patterns is the well-known pattern (see Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart, 2001b, for a review) that more ideologically extreme congressmembers tend to be in districts that strongly favor one party or another; for example, Figure 1 displays the ideologies of the members of the 1993–94 House of Representatives, plotted vs. the Democratic share of the vote for President in their districts in 1992.

In this paper, we estimate the electoral success of incumbents running for reelection in the U.S. House of Representatives, comparing moderates to more extreme candidates after controlling for party strength in their districts in previous elections. We find that these benefits are positive but weak, which lends support to the idea that moderation is just one of many factors leading to electoral success. Our analysis is thus consistent with evidence of the success of politicians of extreme ideology, and addresses the puzzle of "what happened to the median voter" (Fiorina, 1999).

This work, which is consistent with the findings of Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan (2002), fits in with a general trend in economics and political science research toward estimating the magnitude as well as the direction of important effects. Other examples in the study of Congressional election include the effects of incumbency (Gelman and King, 1990, Ansolabehere and Snyder, 2002), majority-minority districts (Cameron, Epstein, and O'Halloran, 1996, Lublin, 1999), and the effects of political advertising (Ansolabehere and Iyengar, 1995) and more generally money in politics (Green and Krasno, 1988, Jacobson, 1990, Gerber, 1998). The size of the "Downs effect" has important implications for positions and policies.

2 The benefits of political moderation in Congressional elections

2.1 Model and results for the House of Representatives

We examine the predictive relation between the ideology of House members and their vote share in running for reelection. We perform this analysis separately for Democrats and Republicans in each Congressional election year using simple regression analysis.

For clarity in exposition, we describe our estimation for the Democrats, with the understanding that we use a parallel procedure for the Republicans. Our first step is to define a measure of "normal vote" for each district, as the Democratic candidate's share of the vote in the district in the previous Presidential election, corrected for Presidential candidate effects in the corresponding state.[1] (We do *not* use previous vote in Congressional elections because this predictor is "endogenous," being affected by the individual congressmember's popularity, as we discuss further in Section 3.) We then run a regression of the Democratic incumbents' shares of the two-party vote (in contested elections) on normal vote and incumbent ideology, as measured by the primary dimension in the studies of Poole and Rosenthal (1997) of Congressional roll-call votes.

We estimate the effect of political moderation on the vote by the coefficient for incumbent's ideology score, multiplied by the standard deviation of the Democrats' ideologies in that Congress. This summary represents a comparison of districts that are the same in normal vote but differ by a standard amount in incumbent's ideology. (Poole-Rosenthal ideology scores are negative for liberals and positive for conservatives, so that the direction of the coefficient can be interpreted as the effect of moderation compared to extremism.)

Figure 2 shows the estimated effects of political moderation on incumbents' vote share among Democrats and Republicans for each Congressional election year since 1956. The estimation error

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[1]We obtain the Presidential candidate effects from the forecasting model of Gelman and King (1993), which itself is based on earlier models of Fair (1978), Rosenstone (1984), and Campbell (1992). The model predicts Presidential election results with a linear regression with errors at the state, region, and year levels. We define the Presidential candidate effect as the net home state advantage for the Presidential candidates plus the net Vice-Presidential candidate home state effect plus the net home region advantage (in the South) plus the effect of percent Catholic in the state (in 1960) plus the net effect of Presidential candidate ideologies plus half of the estimated regional error term.
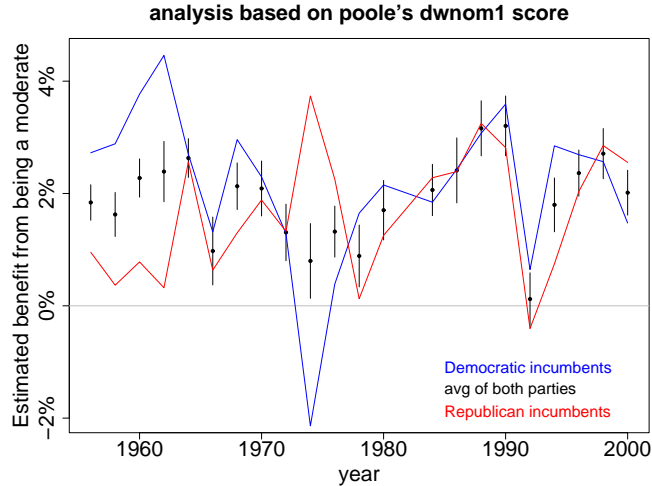
Figure 2: Estimates ± standard errors of the effect of political moderation on the percentage of the vote received by the incumbent in recent Congressional election years. The estimates show that, controlling for normal vote in the district, moderates tend to receive about 2% more of the vote, on average, than more typically liberal Democrats or conservative Republicans.

is high relative to the effect size, and the estimate is not statistically significant for both parties in all years. However, the average over the 22 election years is clearly significant (an average of 1.7% with a standard error of 0.3%).

To put it another way, suppose we compare two congressmembers, one who is a standard deviation more moderate than the average for his or her party and one who is a standard deviation more liberal (if a Democrat) or conservative (if a Republican), running for reelection in similar districts. The more moderate candidate would be expected to get about 2% more of the vote in a contested election.

2.2 Example: the 1994 election

In order to get further insight into these results, we display data and the fitted model from the most dramatic off-year elections in recent memory, in 1994. Newt Gingrich and the Republicans laid out the issues with their controversial Contract with America and, following a hard-fought campaign, won 52% of the vote and gained a majority in the House of Representatives, ending decades of Democratic dominance.

A variety of reasons were given for the unexpectedly poor performance of the Democrats, and in particular the individual Deomocratic congressmembers who ran for reelection and lost. Some commentators noted that most of the losers were politically moderate, while the liberals generally held on to their seats. This pattern can be seen in the upper-left graph of Figure 3: liberal Democrats got more votes, on average, than moderate or conservative Democrats. However, this pattern could be misleading: safe Democratic seats are generally held by liberals, whereas
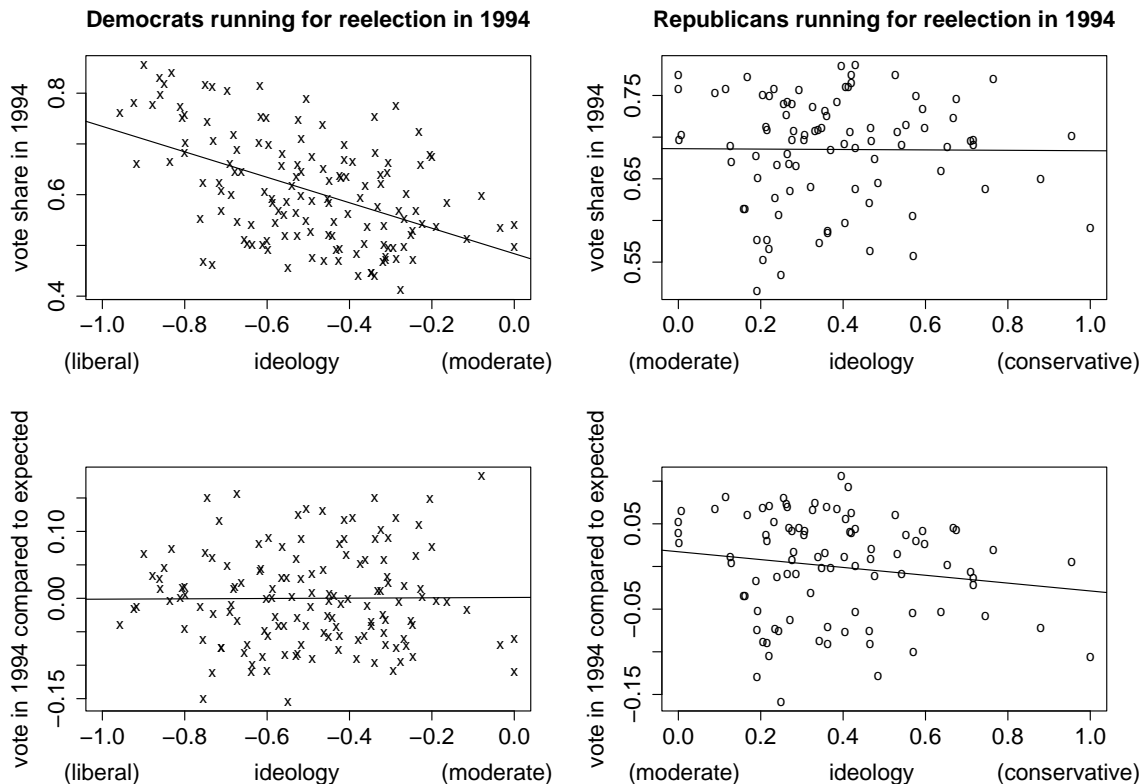
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Figure 3: (upper-left) Proportion of vote received by Democratic candidates for reelection in 1994 vs. political ideology. In general, the more liberal candidates did better. (lower-left) Residual of vote proportion for Democrats in 1994, after controlling for district normal vote, plotted vs. political ideology. After controlling for normal vote, the apparent advantage of liberalism disappears. (right side) Corresponding plots for Republicans: here, after controlling for normal vote, we see a benefit to moderation. Averaging the effects for the two parties gives a small positive estimated effect of moderation, which is displayed at 1994 in Figure 2.

Democrats in swing districts are more likely to be moderate or conservative (recall Figure 1).

Controlling for normal vote yields the pattern in the lower-left graph of Figure 3, where the apparent benefit of liberalism has disappeared. In general, over the period in our study, moderate Democrats have outperformed liberals (after controlling for normal vote), but the pattern is weak enough that it does not show up in every year.

The right graphs in Figure 3 shows the pattern for Republican incumbents in 1994. The upper-right graph shows no trend with the raw data, but after controlling for normal vote, the lower-right graph shows that more conservative Republicans did worse. Averaging the estimates for the two parties yields a small benefit for moderation—the estimate for 1994 displayed in Figure 2.

To summarize: the relative success shown by liberal Democrats in the 1994 election can be entirely attributable to those liberals sitting in districts with high normal votes for their party (see also Brady, Butler, and Pope, 2007). After controlling for normal vote, moderate Democrats did as
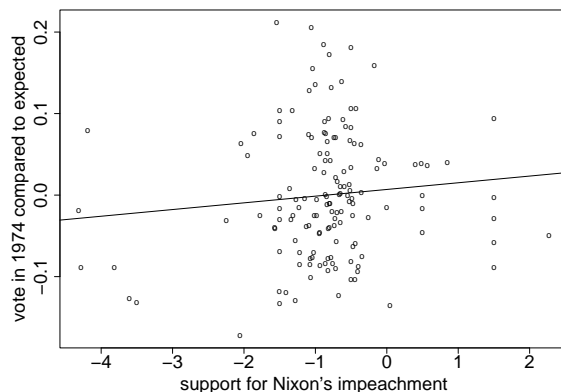
Figure 4: Residual of vote proportion for Republican incumbents in 1974, after controlling for district normal vote, plotted vs. a measure of support for Nixon's impeachment. The Republicans who supported impeachment did slightly better than expected, indicating that there is no evidence that voting for impeachment was politically damaging, at least at the level of the individual congressmember.

well as liberals, and moderate Republicans did better than conservatives. Thus, even in this highly ideological national election, it was beneficial, on average, to be a moderate. This is consistent with the finding of Griffin (2006) that incumbents in marginal seats are more vulnerable.

2.3 Example: Nixon's impeachment proceedings

The impeachment proceedings against Richard Nixon in 1974 are an interesting example where Republican congressmembers had the option of taking a politically popular stand that was in opposition to their own party (see, for example, Lukas, 1976).

Figure 2 shows an estimated positive electoral effect of moderation in that year. Here we shall estimate the effects of moderation in on a particular issue—Nixon's impeachment—for Republican incuments. We coded each congressmember's position on impeachment by starting with their public statements coded on a 1–4 scale.[2] In addition, the House Judiciary Committee voted on three counts of impeachment. For each of the 38 members of this committee, we added 1 point for each Yes vote and subtracted 1 point for each No vote to obtain a final "impeachment score."

Was it an electoral benefit for Republicans to take the politically moderate position of supporting impeachment? Or were journalistic reports accurate in portraying the political risks of these Republicans in going against their party? Figure 4 summarizes the data, plotting the Republican incumbents' share of the vote in 1974 (after controlling for the normal vote in their districts) against their impeachment scores. Supporting impeachment is positively correlated with higher

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[2]1: represents opposition to impeachment; 2: supports an investigation; 3: supports an impeachment investigation; 4: supports impeachment. We only found reported statements for 32% of the congressmembers; for the others, we used a regression imputation given party and ideology.

vote; however, this result is not statistically significant. In addition, after controlling for ideology, the estimated effect reduces in size (although remaining positive) and still is not statistically significant.

Thus, the evidence here is inconclusive, but there is certainly no reason to think that supporting impeachment was a political mistake for these Republicans. (Interpreting a similar analysis for the Democrats would be more difficult, since supporting impeachment was more politically popular, but for a Democrat it would signal moderation. The analysis for Republicans is more straightforward since the more moderate position was also supported by a majority of the population.)

2.4 Example: Clinton's impeachment proceedings

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3 Methodological issues

Our estimates are based on simple regressions but some methodological issues arise nonetheless. Our first step is to recognize that the political ideologies of Congressional districts change over time, and thus to separately estimate our model for each election year. Another option would be to pool the Presidential election votes within each decade in order to get a more stable measure of normal vote.

One of the difficulties of studying the electoral effect of political ideology is that it is correlated with other variables involved. For example, a natural measure of district-level "normal vote" is the incumbent party's share of the vote in the previous Congressional election. This vote, however, is affected by the popularity of the incumbent, and using it in the regression will bias the estimated effect of incumbent ideology. To see this, consider a Democrat incumbent who received 80% of the vote in the previous election and 80% in the current election. He or she will have a high positive residual in the regression of vote share on previous vote share (because the two votes are not perfectly correlated, the coefficient on such a regression will generally be a bit less than 1), and he or she is also more likely to be a liberal (since they tend to be in safer seats). A positive relation will thus show up between ideology and vote share, even in the absence of any true effect, just because of the use of this measure of normal vote. Figure 5 illustrates the bias graphically using the data from 1994.

4 Discussion

4.1 Resolving the puzzle

We can reconcile the fact that moderate congressmembers are more vulnerable with the theory that voters prefer the median by noting that the more moderate congressmembers tend to serve
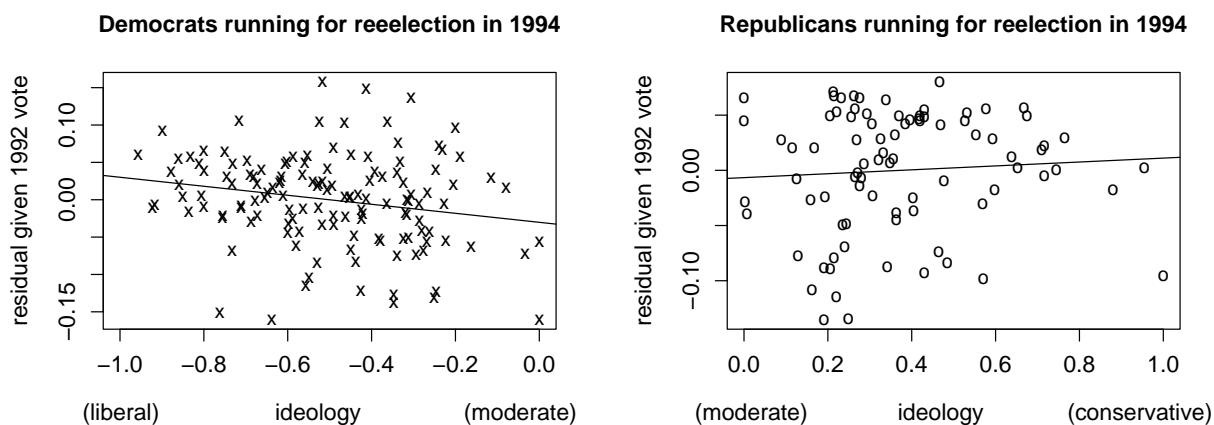
Figure 5: (a) Residual of vote proportion for Democratic incumbents in 1994, after controlling for their vote share in the previous election, plotted vs. political ideology. (b) Corresponding plot for Republicans. In both graphs, moderation *seems* to be a vote-loser; however this is an artifact arising from using an endogenous measure of normal vote. The lower graphs on Figure 3 show more appropriate estimates of the effect of ideology on the 1994 Congressional vote.

in districts that are more closely divided between Democrats and Republicans, and can thus be dislodged by national political swings. The appropriate way to study the electoral success of moderate or extreme incumbents is after controlling for party strength in their districts in previous elections. Absent information on challenger ideologies, we are estimating the total, or reduced-form effect of moderation, including any indirect effects (such as the potential for an ideologically-extreme incumbent to be more likely to attract a strong challenger).

As would be expected from standard political theory (and common knowledge), moderation is associated with higher votes in congressional elections, after controlling for the partisan predisposition of districts. This finding also sheds light on some recent political battles: contrary to some press reports, there is no evidence that supporting Nixon's impeachment was politically harmful to Republican congressmembers in 1974, or that supporting Clinton's impeachment was politically harmful to Democratic congressmembers in 1998.

4.2 Evidence from other elections

U.S. Congressional elections are a natural place to study the electoral effects of ideology because sample size is large, and abundant data and previous analyses are available on candidate ideologies. The small effect size and large variation between districts lead to relatively large standard errors, so that even for the House we need several national elections in order to see a statistically significant result (see Figure 2).

Results from other electoral systems will with sparser data will necessarily be only suggestive; however they are useful at least to check for consistency with our main findings. The elections

that have been the most studied are for U.S. President, and here the evidence is that moderation is beneficial; for example, Rosenstone (1984) estimates ... xx% of the vote.

any other literature out there on this???

4.3 Implications for positioning and policy

The data support Downs's theory. However, the benefits of moderation are relatively small—we estimate about 2% of the vote. Given the various forces *against* moderation (party discipline, fund raising, primary elections, personal convictions, etc.), we would expect the pressure to move toward the center to be easily resistable for legislators who are not in swing districts.

Because election outcomes can be highly uncertain, a push toward moderation may be important even for not-so-close elections (for example, Clinton's famed "triangulation" before the 1996 election might not have been necessary, but he did not know a year ahead of time that he would beat the Republican candidate so handily).

Recent studies of Congress have connected the decline of competitive districts to greater ideological polarization (Carson et al.,). This is consistent with our results. As Figure 2 shows, the benefits of moderation, in vote terms, have been in the 2% range for the past half-century; however, a 2% effect is less important in recent years, now that there are fewer marginal seats. For congressmembers in most districts, this 2% is highly unlikely to be necessary. In comparison, the effect of incumbency has estimated to range from 0–15% for individual House members in recent years (Gelman and Huang, 2007). In this environment, moderation appears to give a real but small benefit.

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