The Competence and Integrity of Congressional Extremists

Jaclyn Kaslovsky & Michael P. Olson
Harvard University

Department of Government
Harvard University
Phone: (262) 247-5952
Email: michaelolson@g.harvard.edu

Introduction

Many popular and scholarly sources have remarked upon the distinct uptick in gridlock and partisan rancor in Congress in recent years. A compelling body of literature points to the increased ideological distance between the parties as the source of this increased gridlock (Krehbiel 1998). Constituents have responded negatively, generally awarding Congress an approval rating below 20% in recent years.

A fairly obvious cause/effect of polarization (it matters not which) has been the decline in the number of moderates in the Democratic and Republican legislative parties and a subsequent influx of "extremists." In theory, these extremists would bear the brunt of the public's ill-will; though the blame for gridlock is a collective blame, individuals with extreme preferences are certainly the most flagrant contributors. **How is it, then, that these extreme members retain their seats in Congress?**

A burgeoning literature examines the electoral fortunes of extremists. The most obvious explanation for extremists' continued electoral success is that they represent their districts well; evidence shows, however, that extreme members actually disproportionately are elected from moderate or evenly-matched districts. Hall (2015) points out that nominating an extremist rather than a moderate in a primary ultimately leads to an increased chance to lose the seat and generally swings the district's representative's ideology towards that of the other party. Despite this finding, however, there continue to be extremists in Congress, and many of them continue to be reelected in spite of their extremism.

Understudied, we feel, is the relationship between ideological extremism and so-called "valence attributes" such as character, integrity, and competence. We posit that ideological extremists may exploit valence attributes as a means of bolstering their electoral prospects and gaining/retaining seats in Congress. We explore the relationship between valence and ideological extremism here.

Theory

Drawing on a variety of formal and non-formal theoretical work, we isolate three possible pathways through which ideological extremism is possibly related to valence attributes such as integrity and competence.

1. Extremism may itself be a cue that an individual is sincere and committed; a willingness to take publicly unpopular stances may itself be a valence signal.
2. Ideological Extremism may lead MCs to actively build valence by focusing the resources of their office on their district.
3. Ideological Extremism may be correlated with underlying characteristics, such as schooling, military service, or religious beliefs, that constituents use as signals of competence or integrity. (Results not presented here)

Constituent Perceptions

We begin by establishing that there is, in fact, a connection between ideological extremism and valence attributes.

We use data from the 2010 Common Content Election Study (CCES) to test the difference between perceived levels of competence and integrity for extremists and moderates. Respondents to the CCES survey in 2010 were asked to rate the personal integrity of their representative on a scale from 1 to 7, going from "Extremely Weak" to "Extremely Strong." Respondents were also asked to rate the competence of their representative on the same scale. We use an ordered probit model to assess the impact of extremism on constituent perception of these valence attributes. the equation for the ordered probit is:

Representative Competency Rating = β_1 Absolute DW-NOMINATE Score + β_2 Constituent Extremism + β_3 Copartisans + β_4 Republican Representative + β_5 Absolute DW-NOMINATE Score * Republican Representative + β_6 Constituent Education Level + β_7 Constituent Income + β_8 Presidential Vote Share in District + ϵ

	Moderate	Extreme	Difference
Extremely Weak	0.026	0.018	-0.007
Weak	0.030	0.023	-0.007
Somewhat Weak	0.034	0.027	-0.007
Fair	0.120	0.103	-0.018
Somewhat Strong	0.129	0.117	-0.012
Strong	0.284	0.279	-0.005
Extremely Strong	0.378	0.432	0.054

Table 1: Marginal Changes in Probability, Republican Representatives

	Moderate	Extreme	Difference
Extremely Weak	0.055	0.021	-0.034
Weak	0.052	0.026	-0.026
Somewhat Weak	0.053	0.030	-0.023
Fair	0.164	0.110	-0.054
Somewhat Strong	0.150	0.122	-0.028
Strong	0.272	0.282	0.010
Extremely Strong	0.253	0.409	0.156

Table 2: Marginal Changes in Probability, Democratic Representatives

Tables 3 and 4 show the marginal change in probability of landing in each integrity category. Results using competence as an outcome variable are substantively similar and As demonstrated by the results, the effect of extremism varies by political party. The marginal increase in probability of being in the highest category is 5.4% for extreme Republicans and 15.6% for extreme Democrats. **Extremism is positively associated with valence evaluations for both Democrats and Republicans.**

Extremism as Cue

To attempt to determine if extremism itself signals competence or integrity to constituents, we conducted a survey experiment using Harvard Digital Lab for the Social Sciences (DLABSS). In this experiment, we presented survey respondents with a vignette describing a (fictional) representative from the Twin Cities area of Minnesota. This brief biography was adapted from a historical biography of a real member who served in the middle of the 20th century. The "treatment" was a cue as to whether the member was one of the most extreme ("conservative" or "liberal") or one of the most "moderate" members of the U.S. House. All respondents were presented a vignette in which the fictional House member was their copartisan. Below we present difference-in-means results for two of our five outcome variables. Though extremists consistently under-perform moderates, the tightly-estimated null results strongly suggest that the extremism of MCs is not itself a cue of integrity or competence.

Sample	N	Mean Extreme	Mean Moderate	Difference	p-value
All	450	4.458	4.502	-0.044	0.742
Democrats	329	4.414	4.479	-0.065	0.684
Republicans	121	4.576	4.577	-0.001	0.998

Table 3: Difference in Means, "Special Interests" Question

Sample	N	Mean Extreme	Mean Moderate	Difference	p-value
All	450	2.639	2.665	-0.026	0.799
Democrats	329	2.636943	2.665	-0.028	0.816
Republicans	121	2.644	2.667	-0.023	0.912

Table 4: Difference in Means, "Policy Knowledge" Question

Compensating for Extremism

Here we present OLS estimates relating ideological extremism to resource allocation and legislative effectiveness. All outcome variables are transformed using the Inverse Hyperbolic Sine Transformation. All models report the absolute value of an MC's DW-NOMINATE score with an indicator variable for Democrats; as these results suggest, there are strong heterogeneous effects across parties. Interestingly, these results suggest that, for Democrats, ideological extremism is associated with putting less effort into one's district while putting more into legislating; for Republicans, the effect is just the opposite.

Table 5: OLS Results: Extremism and Relationship with District

	Dependent variable:		
	District Staff	Travel	Franking
	(1)	(2)	(3)
|DW-NOMINATE|	0.337	0.270	−0.774*
	(0.357)	(0.214)	(0.437)
dem	0.554*	0.248	−0.483
	(0.299)	(0.186)	(0.335)
|DW-NOMINATE| × Dem	−0.695	−1.087***	−0.387
	(0.537)	(0.350)	(0.663)
Constant	0.734	12.028***	15.349***
	(0.914)	(0.540)	(1.087)
Congress Fixed Effects	✓	✓	✓
Observations	1,408	1,378	1,376
Adjusted R^2	0.077	0.124	0.213
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01		
	Control variables are not reported.		
	SEs Clustered by MC.		

Table 6: OLS Results: Extremism and Legislative Effectiveness

	Dependent variable:
	LES
|DW-NOMINATE|	−0.206***
	(0.074)
Dem	−0.291***
	(0.048)
|DW-NOMINATE| × Dem	0.588***
	(0.120)
Constant	−0.112
	(0.169)
Congress Fixed Effects	✓
Observations	7,641
Adjusted R^2	0.476
Note:	*p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
	Control variables are not reported.
	SEs Clustered by MC.

Conclusions

- Unfortunately, we have not yet established the relationship between ideological extremism and valence attributes in Congress.
- Observational results suggest that both Democratic and Republican constituents associate high levels of valence with legislative extremism.
- Experimental results strongly suggest that ideological extremism is not a sort of "intrinsic cue" that informs voters either positively or negatively. Our estimates from a direct test of this hypothesis are tightly estimated near zero.
- Extremism has heterogeneous effects across parties as it relates to the number of resources directed towards one's district and legislative effectiveness. In short, Republicans seem to direct more resources to their districts as they become more extreme, while Democrats become more effective legislators. Causal claims are based a "selection on observables" assumption.
- Not presented here, we also have evidence that extremism is not associated with any particular levels of education or religious creeds. These cues, then, do not appear to be the basis for our results.

A puzzle remains, therefore, as to the exact relationship between ideological extremism and valence attributes. It remains unclear if ideological extremists are singularly focused "true believers" or if they strategically exploit or build valence attributes to compensate for their extremism. We can effectively rule out that extremism is intrinsically related to valence. We have established that there is an association between valence and extremism.

Acknowledgements