The Disappearing Middle: An Incumbency-Based Explanation For The Decline of Congressional Moderates

Richard Forgette and Glenn Platt

Why has Congress become more partisan? We offer and test an explanation for the rise of institutional partisanship. Relative to their peers, ideologically moderate House incumbents from electorally unsafe seats are more likely to attract quality challengers, have smaller vote shares, and have a higher defeat rate. A growing quality effect, though, has insulated these moderate members electorally over time allowing them to cast more ideological votes. We test this explanation using district and member-level data for House elections from 1952 to1998 and find evidence confirming our expectations.

Introduction

Why has Congress become more partisan? Traditional spatial models of electoral choice lead us to expect a convergence between legislators' actions and median constituency preferences (Downs 1957; Davis et al. 1970; Enelow and Hinich 1984; Calvert 1985). One might be inclined to believe that a more partisan Congress is the reflection of a more partisan electorate, but the divergence of institutional and electoral partisanship can be gauged by a number of measures.

Traditional measures of legislative partisanship—percent of party unity votes, average conservative coalition scores, and average party unity scores—all indicate a significant rise of intra-party homogeneity and inter-party divergence in House roll-call voting during the last two decades (Rohde 1991; Poole and Rosenthal 1997). The percent of party unity votes as a share of all roll calls rose from 33 in 1978 to 56 in 1998. Average party unity scores for House Democrats increased from 67 percent in 1978 to 86 in 1998. Among House Republicans, the rate changed from 64 to 83 percent.

Furthermore, Aldrich and Rohde (1997; 2000) and Sinclair (1997; 2000) provide rich and convincing accounts of how preference-induced partisanship among co-partisans additionally has led to rising structural partisanship. That is, legislative procedures and party rules for (committee) appointment, agenda, and amendment control power have been more tightly controlled and aggressively used by the majority party leadership. Forgette and Sala (1999) find confirming evidence for structural partisan effects in Congress controlling for preference homogeneity. A structural partisan

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RICHARD FORGETTE and GLENN PLATT are Associate Professors of Political Science, Miami University, Ohio.

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theory implies that these party leadership powers have further enhanced party cohesion beyond what would occur from mere preference homogeneity.

The various demonstrations of rising institutional partisanship, be they preference or structurally-induced, are largely silent, though, regarding their relationship with electoral partisanship. The evidence is mixed as to a corresponding rise of electoral partisanship. Traditional wisdom is of a decline of electoral partisanship since the 1950s that continues today. This weakened electoral partisanship in House elections is evidenced by party defection behavior among self-expressed partisan voters. The rate of partisan voters defecting from their party during the congressional election cycles in the 1980s and 1990s is a 60 to 80 percent increase of the average defection rate during congressional elections of the 1950s (Jacobson 1990; 1996). The proportion of intense party identifiers has declined with a corresponding rise of leaning or true independents (Wattenberg 1998; Ladd 1995). Additionally, public attitudes of congressional party leaders and parties' roles in Congress reflect a growing public hostility toward a perceived conflict-ridden, partisan institution (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995; King 1997).

Other works, though, have questioned the declining electoral partisanship thesis, suggesting some positive association between institutional and electoral partisanship. Numerous studies have demonstrated that southern partisan realignment has brought about greater ideological homogeneity within congressional party caucuses (Rohde 1991; Hood, Kidd, and Morris 1999). Additionally, at least for presidential races, most voters still identify with political parties and follow party cues (Bartels 2000). On the other hand, there is some evidence that parties' electoral constituencies have greater intra-party ideological homogeneity over time (Collie and Mason 1999; Fiorina 1999; Jacobson 2000). Additionally, these works conclude that growing electoral party polarization is even more pronounced among party activists, those who provide campaign resources. This electoral polarization may have its most pronounced effects in electorally competitive districts with contested primaries. King (2000) argues that members have taken more extreme positions (they "sing to the wings, not center stage") as primary election turnout has declined and as the ideological extremism of party activists has increased. He and Powell and Niemi (2000) conclude that a member's ideological divergence from their district median voter's preferences are most pronounced in electorally competitive districts.

Despite these works, there is strong reason to doubt that electoral partisanship alone has caused the growing rate of institutional partisanship. As Jacobson notes, mass electoral and institutional partisanship are jointly causal. Many voters' party choices may be following from or responding to clearer party differences observed between congressional partisans. Institu-

tional partisanship may be creating the appearance of greater electoral partisanship. Also, there is strong polling evidence that voters perceive excessive elite partisanship. Most voters favor divided government and agree with the view that Congress is "too involved in partisan politics" (Jacobson 2000). Thus, if institutional partisanship has at least outdistanced electoral party polarization, how can we explain a widening ideological gap between modal Republican and Democratic legislators? How can we explain the "disappearing middle" inside Congress?

Aldrich and Rohde (1997; 2000) and others have offered the already noted structural partisanship hypothesis, stating that heightened preference homogeneity within party caucuses has induced co-partisans to delegate greater institutional powers to their party leadership. In this article, we offer and test an explanation for institutional party polarization complementary to the effects of electoral polarization, contested primaries, or structural partisanship. This explanation addresses the decline of moderate House members from electorally competitive districts in particular as demonstrated in the next section.

Measuring the Disappearing Middle

The changing makeup of the House is evident when classifying members by their individual ideology and their district's electoral competitiveness. While recognizing the endogeneity of House roll-call voting, we measure members' ideology using first dimension DW-NOMINATE voting scores.[1] We use the member's first dimension DW-NOMINATE score to compute a Euclidean distance from the mean of each Congress (which approximates 0) for each member equal to

$$\sqrt{(x_{ik} - x_{mk})^2}$$

where $_{xi}$ is member i's DW-NOMINATE first dimension score for the k^{th} Congress and x_{mk} is the mean first dimension W-NOMINATE score for the k^{th} Congress. This Euclidean distance variable, IDEOLOGY, effectively folds over the DW-NOMINATE first dimension score thus measuring how divergent or ideological a House member's voting record is relative to their peers.

We use a district's electoral competitiveness as a proxy for the median voter in the district. A House district's electoral competitiveness is measured using the two-party, incumbent presidential vote share in a district for each presidential election from 1952 to 1998. A House district's presidential vote is a function of both the district's political makeup and its election-specific

conditions. Therefore, we control for the election-specific conditions in order to better assess better the district's political makeup. We use the district deviation from the expected normal vote (based on election-specific conditions) as a proxy for the district's median voter. Using Lewis-Beck and Tien's (2000) election forecasting model, we regress district presidential vote share on an economic performance measure (percentage change in GNP between the fourth quarter of the year before the election and the second quarter of the election year), presidential popularity (Gallup Poll's presidential approval in July of the election year), and a peace and prosperity measure (an additive index of Gallup Poll percentages favoring the incumbent presidential party keeping the United States out of war and keeping the country prosperous).[2] We then use the district residual as a measure of its electoral competitiveness in both that presidential year and following midterm election year.[3]

For descriptive purposes, we initially collapse the measures of ideology into thirds using cut-points from a pooled, cross-sectional time-series of member and district-level data from 1952 to 1998. We identify the top and bottom cohorts from our ideology measure as moderates and ideologues respectively.

We also trifurcate the electoral competitiveness measure initially. An "unsafe" district is one in the top two-thirds of our ranked electoral competitiveness measure for members from different parties than the incumbent president (or in the bottom third for members of the incumbent president's party). For instance, Jack Quinn (R-NY) represents a Buffalo district where President Clinton received 66.4 percent of the two-party vote share in 1996. His residual was among the highest in the dataset for that election year. This would place him in an "unsafe" district because his district is voting significantly more for the incumbent, opposing party's presidential candidate than is expected. Figure 1 summarizes the classification of members by ideology and electoral competitiveness.

According to this classification scheme, how has House membership changed over time? Figures 2 and 3 chart the changing composition among House moderates and ideologues respectively over the period.[4] Moderates evidently are more likely to represent electorally-competitive districts. However, the proportion of moderates from both safe and unsafe seats has sharply declined since 1980. Between 1974 and 1998, electorally unsafe moderates declined from 30.4 to 9.8 percent of the House members. Unsafe moderates compose a higher proportion of the Democratic Caucus compared to the Republican Conference throughout the time period. However, the percentages of moderates decline for both parties. Additionally, while the decline of these unsafe moderates is most evident among southern state

Figure 1. Classification of House Members by Ideology and Seat Safety

	House Member Ideology	
Seat Safety	**Safe Moderate** ● First dimension DW1 Nominate Score in cohort closest to congressional mean. ● District presidential vote share, after accounting for "expected vote," is significantly for the party of the Representative	**Safe Ideologue** ● First dimension DW1 Nominate Score in cohort farthest to congressional mean. ● District presidential vote share, after accounting for "expected vote," is significantly for the party of the Representative
	Unsafe Moderate ● First dimension DW1 Nominate Score in cohort closest to congressional mean. ● District presidential vote share, after accounting for "expected vote," is significantly for the opposing party of the Representative	**Unsafe Ideologue** ● First dimension DW1 Nominate Score in cohort farthest to congressional mean. ● District presidential vote share, after accounting for "expected vote," is significantly for the opposing party of the Representative

Figure 2. Percentage of Safe and Unsafe Moderates

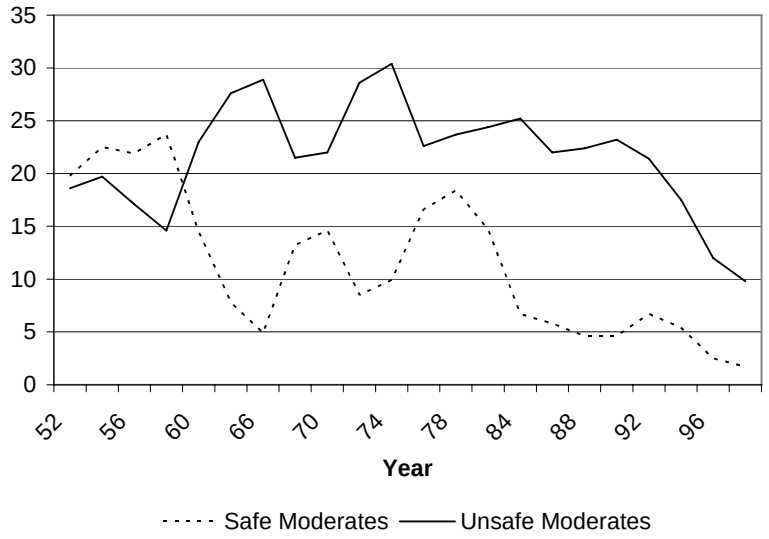
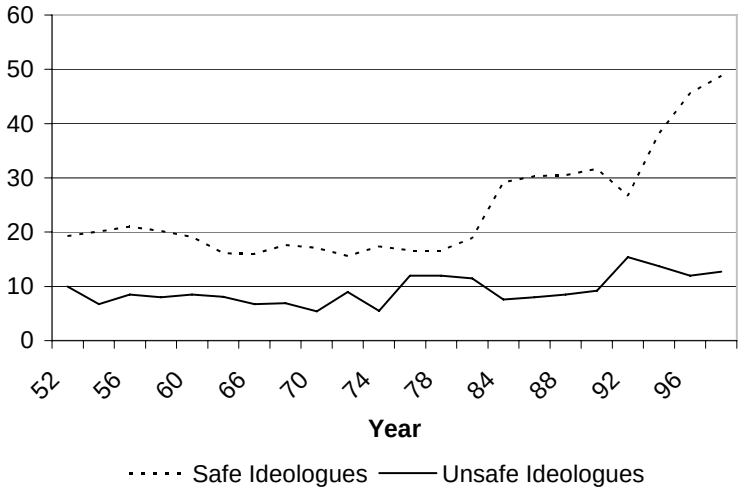


Figure 3. Percentage of Safe and Unsafe Ideologues



members since the late 1980s, a clear decline is apparent among non-southern members also.

Corresponding with the decline of moderates is the marked increase of House ideologues. Between 1972 and 1998, safe ideologues have increased from 15.6 to 48.8 percent of the membership. There has been a smaller increase in unsafe ideologues (5.5% in 1974 to 12.7 in 1998). The trend is evident among both Republican and Democrat ideologues.

One anomaly presented by this analysis is the tendency for moderates to be most vulnerable to national tides. Incumbents, when defeated or retired and then replaced by opposing party candidates (districts with party switches), were more likely to be from the moderate cohort. In fact, districts with party switches were about twice as frequent among unsafe moderates compared to the next closest category (unsafe ideologues).[5] This relative vulnerability of moderates is more pronounced in election cycles with stronger national tides, inter-election party vote swings. In both 1974 and 1994, for instance, two-thirds of the party switches occurred in districts held by moderates. Why would national party forces in House elections tend to affect most those incumbents who are least supportive of their national party? It appears that national tides are more likely to wash out the moderates.

In the next section, we present a model that addresses this observation and offers an electoral explanation for the disappearing middle. We then present some bivariate and multivariate tests of our model.

An Incumbency-Based Explanation for the Disappearing Middle

We offer a simple decision-theoretical explanation for congressional election vote choice, where the probability of reelection for the incumbent member, R(pc), is based on national party assessments (p) and candidate assessments (c) by voters. While incumbents largely control candidate factors, they are largely unable to control the national party tides.

Furthermore, we posit that this voter candidate assessment can be represented by the function C(d,q), where d is the distance of the median constituent (x_m) to the legislator's voting position (x_i) over s relevant issue scales, $d = \Sigma(x_{is}-x_{ms})^2$ and q is a quality effect, the added vote share gained by an incumbent by having a weak or nonexistent challenger. The incumbent may manipulate both of these variables and will do so to lessen electoral uncertainty. The incumbent controls issue-proximity by her voting record and campaign position-taking. She controls the quality effect to the extent to which she can avoid an experienced, well-financed challenger with high district name recognition. We posit that q is determined both by candidate behavior (e.g., raising money, name recognition, and public approval) and exogenous factors (e.g., national party tides, economic, and political conditions).

Given these reelection and incumbent candidate models, what happens when small exogenous shocks occur in national party tides (inter-election deviations in the electoral party share)? In terms of the above model, what happens when p and the exogenous component of q decline? The model implies two consequences. First, obviously, incumbents of the disadvantaged party see a direct effect, a decline in vote share resulting from p. Second, the quality effect, q, for a disadvantaged-party incumbent could decrease if a quality challenger strategically enters the race in response to the deviation in national tides.

According to our model, these national electoral shocks are largely exogenous to an incumbent's direct actions; however, their anticipated effects may condition incumbents' campaign behavior. Since the incumbent, to some extent, can control the value of candidate assessment, they will seek to increase it to counteract the effect of the decrease in the party vote. Specifically, incumbents will adjust their voting records, if they have not already done so, to moderate toward the district median on any issue, thereby decreasing d. They will work to establish a voting record that conforms to median constituency opinion and, thus, is more electorally defensible. Incumbents who are most vulnerable to these indirect effects of national tides (the diminished quality effect), though, will be those who already have shifted their voting record to maximize their candidate vote share and thus cannot decrease d. These incumbents are *not* more vulnerable because they

have moderated but rather because they tend to represent electorally competitive districts sensitive to small changes in party vote share. As described earlier and shown by Erikson and Wright (1997), policy moderates are more likely to represent electorally competitive districts or even districts that lean to the opposite party. These moderate incumbents already have crafted relatively independent voting records prior to the shift in p because of the smaller national party vote in their districts relative to their co-partisans.

The model, thus, implies that inter-election party vote swings have their greatest effect on members from electorally competitive districts. Since policy moderates over-represent this class of vulnerable incumbents, national tides tend to wash out weak partisans first. Furthermore, the model implies that the quality effect, the vote share gained by the incumbent by having a weak challenger, is most pivotal to election outcomes among those members from electorally competitive districts, again, districts over-represented by moderates. A shift in national tides toward the opposition party results in relatively independent partisan members attracting quality challengers. Disadvantaged parties can only respond to the extent to which they can avoid issues before elections that force weak partisans to take difficult votes.

While our model implies members will moderate strategically to avoid electoral challenge, there are evident exceptions to the model, cases in which insecure incumbents defy the electoral incentives and cast ideologically-charged votes. The case of Marjorie Margolies-Mezvinsky, the Pennsylvania Democrat from an electorally marginal district in the 103rd Congress, may be an example. Despite a 76 year Republican reign over her district, the newly elected Congresswoman Margolies-Mezvinsky cast a tie-breaking vote on the 1993 Clinton Budget Bill and was later defeated. These profiles in courage, though, are out-of-equilibrium cases; they are exceptions that prove the rule. They do occur, but perhaps they demonstrate why 1994 was an exceptional election year for party turnover. Our model implies that members generally moderate when representing electorally competitive districts.

An important question regarding the disappearing middle still is left unanswered. Why would the newly elected member replacing a moderate incumbent not be every bit as much an independent partisan as their predecessor? That is, does not the candidate replacing the incumbent respond to the same set of constraints and, thus, moderate their voting record as did their earlier incumbent opponent?

A more complex model might suggest that more ideologically extreme challengers are emerging due to the electoral polarization of party activists or to a rise in contested primaries. We propose a complementary incumbency-based explanation. A central component to our thesis is a growing

quality effect over time. Cox and Katz (1996) deconstruct the incumbency advantage into a direct, scare-off, and quality effect. Their analysis shows that most of the incumbency advantage growth is attributable to increases in the quality effect, the added vote share a party accrues when it has an experienced rather than an inexperienced challenger (independent from incumbent resources). Box-Steffensmeier (1996) also finds that House incumbents benefit from deterrence strategies to scare off potential quality challengers. She finds empirical support that incumbent war-chests deter quality candidate entry.

Following these findings, we argue that a growing quality effect insulates incumbents from inter-election party vote-swings and, in terms of our model, allows incumbents to have greater freedom in their voting records. Their electoral incentive to moderate decreases as the risk of attracting quality opponents decreases. While insulating all incumbents, the growing quality effect has its most critical effect on moderate members from electorally competitive districts. The emptying of the middle within Congress over time may be partly attributable to the more recent incumbents enjoying greater quality effects.

Like any model, our explanation is a simplification of a much more complex reality. Unlike our decision theoretical explanation, congressional elections involve both incumbents and challengers. They include both primary and general elections. This incumbency-based argument, though, is not inconsistent with the electoral polarization and contested primary explanations for institutional polarization discussed earlier. In fact, the electoral polarization of party activists, those providing campaign resources, may be partly contributing to the emergence of war-chests and to a growing quality effect. These explanations may complement one another. In the next section, we discuss our research design for testing our incumbency-based explanation.

Hypotheses, Data, and Results

The main implication of our model is that the entrance of a quality challenger is endogenous to the strategic context of any election. This is hardly a new conjecture in the legislative studies literature (Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Jacobson 2000). At the same time, we offer two additions to the strategic politician model.

First, the model implies that moderate incumbents tend to be more sensitive to national party tides than ideologues since they are disproportionately from electorally unsafe districts. Specifically, we test the following:

> ***H1**: Compared to other incumbents, members from unsafe districts have a lower vote share and higher defeat rate, and they attract more quality challengers.*

We posit that moderates may indirectly attract more quality challengers and have lower vote shares than their ideologue counterparts because they tend to have more marginal reelection constituencies. This district marginality makes them more vulnerable to electoral tides than their more ideological counterparts. We do not argue that voters cast ballots against incumbents because they are ideological moderates. Instead, we argue that voters are more likely to support credible quality challengers over incumbents, and these quality candidates are more likely to oppose ideologically moderate incumbents.

Our second addition to the strategic politician model is to posit a dynamic effect. We argue that a growing quality effect has insulated incumbents from electoral shocks, giving them more leeway in their voting records. Over time, members who are disproportionately moderate from marginal districts have derived greater electoral benefit from this growing quality effect. Consequently, we test a second hypothesis:

> ***H2**: As the quality effect has risen, electorally unsafe moderates have attracted fewer quality challengers over time.*

This dynamic effect is central to our explanation of the disappearing middle. We argue that a growing quality effect, over time, has heightened the moral hazard of electorally unsafe members to cast more ideological votes.

We test both of these expectations using member and election-level data for all House districts from the 82nd Congress (1951-52) to the 105th Congress (1997-98). Our data combines Poole and Rosenthal's DW-NOMINATE scores with district-specific data for quality challenger entry and incumbent vote margin for the following election. Again, the DW-NOMINATE scores place House members in a two-dimensional ideological space (Poole and Rosenthal 1996, 1998). We measure our IDEOLOGY variable as described earlier. More moderate members have smaller ideology values.

We combine this variable with district-level data for the election following any Congress. Notably, we use Jacobson's measure of candidate quality. $QUALITY_{jt}$, in district j at election t, takes a value of 1 if the incumbent's challenger had previously held elective office and 0 otherwise. Also, we operationalize $IVSHARE_{jt}$ as an incumbent's proportion of the two-party vote in district j at election t.

Table 1. Average Incumbent Vote Share, Defeat Rate, and Probability of Attracting a Quality Challenger, by Cohort

Cohort	Incumbent Vote Share	Defeat Rate	Probability of Quality Challenger
Safe Ideologue	.685	.024	.133
Safe Moderate	.667	.020	.146
Unsafe Moderate	.619	.070	.227
Unsafe Ideologue	.649	.094	.277
F	206.9*	32.7*	37.4*

*Difference in means between cohorts significant at 1%.

Bivariate tests of the member and district-level data reported in Table 1 offer preliminary support for our model. Incumbent vote share, the incumbent defeat rate, and the probability of attracting a quality challenger are reported by the ideology-seat type classification. Given our hypothesis, we would expect that unsafe ideologues would have the lowest vote share, the highest defeat rate, and the highest probability of attracting a quality challenger. We would expect unsafe moderates to follow next behind this unsafe ideologue cohort. As the data indicates, incumbents who are disproportionately moderate from electorally competitive districts (until the 1990) have smaller reelection vote margins, a higher defeat rate, and a higher probability of attracting a quality challenger than their more ideological counterparts. There is a 6.6 percent difference between the vote shares of unsafe moderate and safe ideologues. The proportion of unsafe moderates attracting a quality challenger is 71 percent greater than the proportion for safe incumbent ideologues. As shown in Table 1, these differences across categories are statistically significant. The differences remain significant when examined within each decade cohort.[6] This analysis indicates that there is evidence to support hypothesis one.

Do these differences persist when controlling for other determinants of quality candidate entry and general election incumbent vote share over time? We next report results from a multivariate test using quality challenger entry and incumbent vote share as our dependent variables. We control for a number of factors widely known to affect quality candidate entry and incumbent vote share. FRESHMEN is a dummy variable taking the value of 1 in cases in which the incumbent is standing for reelection for the first time. We expect this variable to be positively associated with quality challenger entry and vote share (a sophomore surge effect).

SOUTHERN DEM is a variable crafted to control for Rohde's (1991) and others' conclusions of a southern realignment resulting in growing

Republican electoral competitiveness in that region. The electoral dominance of southern Democrats during much of our time-series discouraged Republican candidate entry. This variable is operationalized as the interaction of a southern dummy variable (including Oklahoma and Kentucky as southern states) and an election-year counter variable. The counter variable takes the value of 24 (the number of election years in our file) for 1952 (the first election in our data file) counting down to 1 for 1998. This is to imply a convergence of electoral competitiveness (and thus attraction of quality challengers) among southern and non-southern districts over time. With this operationalization, we expect a negative coefficient in the quality challenger model and a positive coefficient in the vote share model. That is, as SOUTHERN DEM decreases, the probability of attracting quality challengers increases and incumbent vote share decreases.

A third effect we control for is prior district or incumbent vulnerability as indicated by incumbent vote share in the previous election year. $IVSHARE_{t-2}$ is the lag of a non-freshman incumbent's two-party vote share. We expect a negative relationship between this variable and the quality challenger dependent variable and a positive relationship for the incumbent vote share variable.

Finally, we control for economic and political conditions known to condition quality candidate entry. To assess the effects of economic conditions, we include an INCOME variable which is the percent change in real disposable income (constant dollars) from the fourth quarter of the year preceding the election to the second quarter of the election year multiplied by a dummy variable scored one for incumbents of the president's party. We interact the same dummy variable with PRESPOP measured by the President's popularity in June of the election year as reported by the Gallup Poll. We expect both variables to be negatively related with quality candidate entry. Also, we use a continuous electoral competitiveness measure using the district residual discussed earlier as a gauge of a district's political makeup. As district SAFETY increases, incumbents are less likely to attract a quality challenger and to have a greater two-party vote share.

Controlling for these other determinants, we test the model by first including our continuous IDEOLOGY variable as previously discussed. A negative and significant coefficient would support Hypothesis 1 in our model of quality challenger entry; that is, ideological moderates (low IDEOLOGY value) have a greater probability of attracting quality challengers. We would expect a positive coefficient in our second, incumbent vote share, model.

To test the dynamic effect hypothesis, we offer alternative measures and model specifications. First, we specify a model using a simple counter variable (1952 = 1 through 1998 = 24). We expect a negative coefficient.

This initial test is admittedly atheoretical, but it provides a baseline for the next specifications. In a second specification, we test the dynamic effect hypothesis by examining whether ideologues are becoming more electorally insulated over time. We re-specify the model with a counter variable (1952 = 1 through 1998 = 24) interacted with IDEOLOGY, anticipating a negative relationship quality candidate entry.

In a final specification, we incorporate Cox and Katz' (1996) measure of an election year quality effect and extend their measure for elections since 1990 (the last election year in their analysis). Again, they deconstruct the incumbency effect into a direct incumbency component and indirect scare-off and quality components. The scare-off component is the independent effect of incumbency status on the entry of an experienced, quality challenger in an election year. The quality component is the independent effect of a quality candidate differential on election vote share. The authors conclude from their two-equation path analysis model that the quality effect has been the primary source for the growth in the total incumbency effect over time. This quality effect more than doubles from 1968 to 1976 and, despite fluctuation, it stays at a higher mean after 1976 than in the previous period.

We interact the quality effect measure with our dummy variable taking the value of one for members in the unsafe moderate cohort. We expect this interaction dummy variable, UNSAFE MODERATE * QUALITY EFFECT, to have a negative coefficient. The quality effect is a measure of the electoral context affecting candidate entry for each election. As quality effects have grown over time, unsafe moderates have been less likely to attract experienced challengers.[7]

The results of estimated logit of quality challenger entry are reported in Table 2. In Table 3, we report tobit results using incumbent vote share as the dependent variable. For these models, the expected signs are inverted. The results generally support our expectations. In Table 2, the economic and political contextual variables are statistically significant only without including the temporal dummies. Not surprisingly, the incumbent's vote share lagged from the previous election and the electoral safety of the district appear to be the strongest determinants of quality challenger entry and incumbent vote share. Most important for our purposes, the interaction variables (as well as the counter variable) across the three model specifications support the dynamic effect hypotheses. The IDEOLOGY variable is not significant, though, in the second equation due to its high collinearity with the ideology-counter interaction variable.

As indicated by the quality effect interaction in Table 2, column three, and when holding all other variables at their means, the model indicates that there was a 20 percent decline in the probability of unsafe moderate members attracting a quality challenger between 1966 and 1976, the period of

Table 2. Logistic Regression Model Controlling for Temporal Duration of the Probability of Attracting a Quality Candidate, 1952-98

Variables	Coefficients (Standard Errors) [Marginal effects, +/- a Std Dev change in X]		
Constant	2.815*** (.305)	2.657*** (.303)	2.959*** (.319)
IDEOLOGY (The ideological distance from mean representative of Congress)	-.3246 (.210) [-.008]	.1098 (.301) [.003]	-.5776** (.232) [-.015]
FRESHMEN (First re-election campaign)	.1951** (.092) [.01]	.1892** (.092) [.01]	.1675* (.093) [.009]
SOUTHERN DEM (Southern state * Congress counter)	-.0171*** (.006) [-.014]	-.0162** (.006) [-.013]	-.0131** (.007) [-.01]
$IVSHARE_{t-2}$ (Incumbent vote share in previous election)	-.0627*** (.004) [-.093]	-.0636*** (.004) [-.094]	-.0670*** (.004) [-.097]
INCOME (The percentage change in real disposable income)	-.0271 (.022) [-.006]	-.0303 (.022) [-.007]	-.0341 (.022) [-.008]
PRES POP (The presidential popularity, according to the Gallup Poll, in June of the election year)	-.0032 (.003) [-.006]	-.0026 (.003) [-.005]	-.0025 (.003) [-.005]
SAFETY (District residual of Presidential vote share for the Representative's party)	-.0163*** (.004) [-.025]	-.0149*** (.004) [-.023]	-.0169*** (.024) [-.025]
UNSAFE MODERATE * QUALITY EFFECT (Unsafe Moderate cohort dummy variable* election year quality effect)			-.0520** (.024) [-.012]
COUNTER * IDEOLOGY (Counter * ideological distance from the mean)		-.0307** (.013) [-.019]	
COUNTER (1952 = 1)	-.0132*** (.004) [-.014]		
N	7065	7065	6843
Model Chi-Square	769.5***	766.6***	749.0***
Percent Correctly Predicted	77.27	77.85	78.11

*Significant at the .1 level; **significant at the .05 level; *** significant at the .01 level.

Table 3.Tobit Regression Model of Incumbent Vote Share, 1952-98

Variables	Coefficients		
Constant	30.630*** (.839)	32.179*** (.820)	30.228*** (.839)
IDEOLOGY (The ideological distance from mean representative of Congress)	-.139 (.615)	-4.521*** (.885)	2.085** (.656)
FRESHMEN (First re-election campaign)	.878*** (.275)	.914*** (.276)	1.045*** (.278)
SOUTHERN DEM (Southern state * Congress counter)	.086*** (.019)	.075*** (.019)	.018*** (.020)
$IVSHARE_{t-2}$ (Incumbent vote share in previous election)	.496*** (.011)	.504*** (.011)	.528*** (.011)
INCOME (The percentage change in real disposable income)	.498*** (.065)	.519*** (.065)	.573*** (.065)
PRES POP (The presidential popularity, according to the Gallup Poll, in June of the election year)	-.043*** (.008)	-.048*** (.008)	-.055*** (.008)
SAFETY (District residual of Presidential vote share for the Representative's party)	.238*** (.012)	.226*** (.012)	.228*** (.024)
UNSAFE MODERATE * QUALITY EFFECT (Unsafe Moderate cohort dummy variable* election year quality effect)			.351*** (.071)
COUNTER * IDEOLOGY (Counter * ideological distance from the mean)		.299*** (.036)	
COUNTER (1952 = 1)	.125*** (.013)		
N Model Chi-Square	6445 3708.6***	6445 3689.5***	6254 3658.1***

*Significant at the .1 level; **significant at the .05 level; *** significant at the .01 level.

pronounced growth in the quality effect. There is an overall decline of close to 30 percent in the probability of unsafe moderates attracting quality challengers as this interaction variable ranges from its minimum to maximum. The ideology-counter interaction variable in second model indicates a comparable yet gradual change in probabilities between 1960 and 1990.

Conclusion

The decline of party identification, increasing importance of campaign skills and fundraising, and the redistricting brought on by *Wesberry v.*

Sanders (1964) all may have contributed to the growth of the quality effect. The model we propose and test here involves a possible *consequence* of that growing quality effect. Our argument is that the quality effect is the principal basis for partisan defection in congressional elections and that this effect has been most pivotal in electorally marginal districts more frequently represented by ideological moderates. Despite their moderate voting records, these incumbents tend to be most vulnerable to quality challengers. Growing quality effects over time, though, have benefitted these strategically moderate members from marginal districts electorally. Consequently, this electoral insulation over time has permitted them to cast more partisan votes.

Our results using district and member-level data support this explanation. Unsafe members, generally, have been more likely to attract quality challengers and to have had lower electoral vote shares. All other things being equal, greater quality effects have suppressed quality challenger entry and have expanded vote margins for unsafe members over time. We do not argue that this has been the only cause for the growth of institutional partisanship. Fiorina (1999) discusses nine different explanations for polarization while acknowledging that his review may not be exhaustive. Our incumbency-based explanation complements other approaches. Particularly, the growing quality effect may be partly due to a growing electoral polarization of party activists, those providing campaign resources. As seen in Figures 2 and 3, the probable replacement of safe moderates with safe ideologues over time suggests the likely role of party activists and contested primaries on partisan polarization.

Another test of this incumbency model would be to examine expected effects in voters' behavior. Particularly, is party defection behavior in House elections different in districts with ideologically moderate incumbents? Earlier works have demonstrated that most congressional election party defection occurs when voters cast ballots for opposing party *incumbents* (Jacobson 1990). Our model implies that these party defecting voters are more likely to be in districts in which the incumbent is relatively moderate and in periods when quality effects are greater. We would expect less of this party defection among voters who perceive a broad ideological difference between candidates and who reside in a district with a quality challenger from their party.

NOTES

[1]DW-NOMINATE coordinates, in theory, range between –1 (liberal) and 1 (conservative), and they place House members in a two-dimensional space with coordinates computed using an algorithm explained in Poole and Rosenthal (1997; 1998).

[2]We conducted all of our analyses using only the uncorrected district presidential vote share as our measure of electoral competitiveness. The results were comparable and slightly stronger in support of our findings.

[3]We account for redistricting. The lagged electoral competitiveness measure is not given in midterm elections for any district with changed boundaries. Trend lines in Figures 2 and 3 do not include values for 1962 and 1982 because of the high percentage of seats redistricted since the preceding presidential race.

[4]For clarity of the graphs, we do not report a trend line in Figures 2 and 3 for the percentage of the middle ideology category. These are legislators that are classified as neither ideologues or moderates. There was about a five percent decline of this cohort in the 1990s, but they generally accounted for about a third of the cases in any year. However, we do include these middle category legislators in the population for calculating the percentages of ideologues and moderates in any year. Thus, percentages for these other reported categories do not sum to 100 in any year.

[5]Unsafe ideologues do have a higher rate of party switches (14.2 compared to 13.5%). However, there are only about half the number of members in this cohort compared to the unsafe moderate cohort.

[6]The only deviation from expectation in this table is that unsafe ideologues have a slightly higher vote share than unsafe moderates. We feel this is an artifact of the bivariate nature of the analysis rather than a refutation of the hypothesis. Furthermore, as these vote shares are both lower than those for safe districts, there is an indication that further multivariate analysis is warranted.

[7]Following the lead of Beck, Katz, and Tucker (1998), we control for serially correlated errors in our binary, time-series, cross-sectional data in all reported model specifications. Ordinary logit/probit standard errors are incorrect for time series with serially correlated errors (Poirier and Ruud 1988). We estimate the model using temporal dummy variables indicating "time since event" to control for duration dependence in the data.

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