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SHORT ARTICLE

Man Bites Blue Dog: Are Moderates Really More Electable than Ideologues?

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Are ideologically moderate candidates more electable than ideologically extreme candidates? Historically, both research in political science and conventional wisdom answer yes to this question. However, given the rise of ideologues on both the right and the left in recent years, it is important to consider whether this assumption is still accurate. I find that, while moderates have historically enjoyed an advantage over ideologically extreme candidates in congressional elections, this gap has disappeared in recent years, where moderates and ideologically extreme candidates are equally likely to be elected. This change persists for both Democratic and Republican candidates.

Are moderates more electable than ideologues? Conventional wisdom and existing political science research suggest that, yes, moderate candidates should be more electable in a general election than ideologically extreme candidates. Classic studies of candidate positioning suggest that, in a general election, politicians should compete for the median voter to win, leading to a candidate who is ideologically moderate (Downs 1957). However, in recent years, strongly ideological candidates have risen and achieved varying levels of success, from Tea Party–supported conservative Republicans to very liberal Democrats, as evidenced by the insurgent presidential campaign of Bernie Sanders, while there are fewer ideologically moderate candidates. Blue Dog or moderate Democrats are shrinking in numbers in the US House of Representatives, declining from 54 after the 2008 election to 26 after 2010, down to just 14 after the 2014 elections. Indeed, over time, Republican-elected officials are becoming more conservative, while Democratic-elected officials are becoming slightly more liberal (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006).

However, it is important to explain whether moderates are still more likely to be elected than ideological candidates. There are multiple competing explanations for the rise of ideologues in Congress: redistricting has made congressional districts more ideologically homogenous (Abramowitz, Alexander, and Gunning 2005), voter decision making in primaries may be changing (Owen and Grofman 2006), ideologically extreme candidates are becoming more successful in primaries (Brady, Han, and Pope 2007), and, at least among partisan individuals, the public is becoming more ideologically polarized (Lelkes 2016). Anecdotal evidence suggests that ideologues may be performing better today than they have historically, but little large-scale empirical work has been done to demonstrate whether this is occurring in a systematic way.

HOW IDEOLOGY CAN INFLUENCE ELECTORAL SUCCESS

Scholars and the media alike have consistently proclaimed a truth about electoral politics—ideologically extreme candidates are simply less electable than moderates. Indeed, classic work on electoral incentives for politicians has claimed that candidates should appeal to the median voter, who is likely to be ideologically moderate (Downs 1957). Voters have traditionally been shown to prefer moderate candidates to extreme candidates in general elections (see Burden 2004). However, evidence also exists to suggest that primary voters tend to prefer ideological, rather than moderate, candidates (Brady et al. 2007), although primary voters may also take strategic concerns into account (Mirhosseini 2015). While ideologues may be more successful in primaries, they have been shown to

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be less successful in general elections (Hall and Snyder 2015). When ideological candidates win primaries, this leads to a decrease in the probability of their party winning the election, compared to moderate candidates (Hall 2015). Findings that there has traditionally been a trade-off between electability and ideology in elections are generally strong and robust.

However, an extreme ideology does not always cause candidates to suffer electorally. Traditionally, this has been demonstrated in primary elections, where the median voter for the primary is ideologically more extreme than the median voter in the general election. States with closed primaries limited to registered partisans tend to offer more ideologically extreme candidates than areas with open or semi-open primaries (Gerber and Morton 1998). This still suggests that candidates appeal to the median voters but that they may have different constituencies. Grofman (2004) argues this very point, suggesting the within-party median is a more likely goal for candidates to appeal to than the district median. In recent years, incumbents, especially those in districts that ideologically favor the other party, have seen their traditional incumbency advantage decrease (Jacobsen 2015). This suggests that what we understand about elections may be changing, and traditional predictors of candidate success may be less relevant today.

Why might the electability versus ideology conflict be disappearing? One obvious answer is the rise of the Tea Party and ideological purity within the Republican Party, followed temporally by the rise of Bernie Sanders Democrats. Tea Party activity tends to actually increase support for even mainstream Republican candidates (Rapoport 2015). Essentially, ideological extremity seems to no longer be a fringe element but is being pushed to the mainstream. Partisans do not punish ideological extremity within their own party—the primary backlash toward ideologically extreme candidates tends to come from independents and out-partisans (Stone 2017). Additionally, parties may be behaving in a strategic manner. The most competitive districts for a party should be "outlier" districts—those with a Republican (Democratic) advantage in the electorate but a moderate Democrat (Republican) serving as the representative. These districts are most ripe for partisan change and may attract more ideologically extreme candidates to replace the current ideologically moderate representatives (Brunell, Grofman, and Merrill 2016).

Another explanation for increased success of ideological candidates is a change in voter preferences. Polarization in the mass public is a hotly debated topic among political scientists. With a focus on issue consistency (i.e., individuals consistently taking liberal or conservative positions across a variety of issues), scholars have found a substantial increase in polarization from the 1980s to the present day (Abramowitz 2010). Others argue that American voters simply appear to be becoming more polarized, because of an increase in ideologically polarized candidates, and remain generally moderate on most issues (Fiorina 2004). If voters are indeed adopting more extreme policy preferences, the rise of ideological candidates simply follows a change in voter preferences. On the contrary, candidates for office may simply be becoming more ideologically extreme, while voter preferences remain largely unchanged.

There is some additional nuance needed to evaluate the idea that voter preferences may be changing. Individuals are much better ideologically sorted into their preferred party today than they have been in the past, leading to an increased correlation between ideology and party (Levendusky 2009; Noel 2014). Indeed, this correlation has more than doubled between 1972 and 2012 (Lelkes 2016). This has also lead to increased voter loyalty toward a preferred party (Abramowitz and Webster 2016). Additionally, affective polarization, or dislike of the out-party, has risen simultaneously with partisan sorting (Lelkes 2016; Mason 2018). While a debate exists about the extent to which the public is becoming polarized, it does seem that polarization of the electorate is occurring to some extent and that this is heightened among more intense partisans.

Nonacademics involved in campaigns and the media frequently bemoan how ideology and electability must be balanced, as shown dramatically in hacked Democratic National Committee e-mails that encouraged the elevation of "Pied Piper" Republican candidates, such as Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, and Ben Carson, in the 2016 presidential election, who were viewed as more ideological than their competitors (Sainato 2016). Regardless of whether ideological candidates are less electable, it appears political operatives believe that they are. This leads to a one main hypothesis—over time, ideologically extreme candidates are becoming increasingly likely to win election, while moderates are becoming less likely to win. Because of an array of potential changes that are likely to work together, such as partisan sorting, less competitive districts, and changes to voter ideology, ideological candidates are seeing increasing electoral success.

METHOD AND RESULTS

Using data from the Database on Ideology, Money in Politics, and Elections (DIME; Bonica 2013) from 1980 to 2012, I am able to test the effect of ideology on electability over time. Bonica's (2013) database uses campaign contributors to estimate ideology scores of candidates. This provides an advantage over other measures, like DW-NOMINATE scores, in that it does not require that candidates achieve election to Congress in order for their ideologies to be estimated.

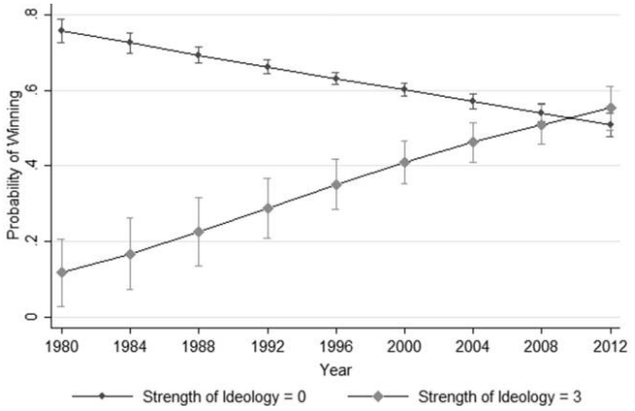

Figure 1. Ideology and electability, 1980–2012

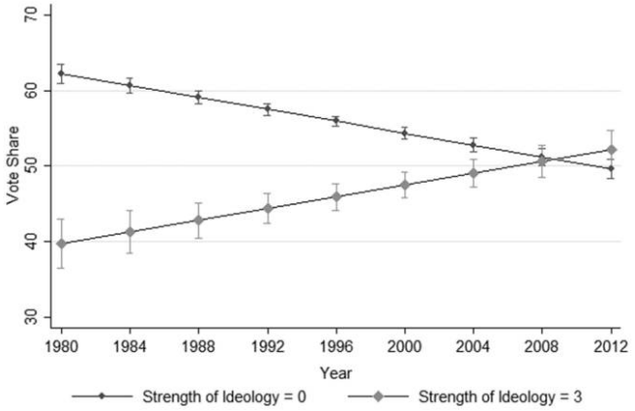

Figure 2. Ideology and vote share, 1980–2012

This data set allows me to measure the effect of candidate ideology on the likelihood of a candidate winning an election.[1] I use Bonica's (2014) CFscore to measure ideology, where higher values indicate more liberal ideology, and lower values indicate more conservative ideology.[2] Since I am interested in only strength, rather than direction, of ideology, I collapse this into a one-tailed measure, Ideological Extremity, which ranges from 0.001 (most moderate) to 4.981 (most extreme). This measure has a mean value of 0.826, with a standard deviation of 0.388. I also include a time variable, Year, which is coded from 0 (1980) to 32 (2012), to capture the year in which an election occurred. To test my prediction that ideologues are becoming increasingly likely to be elected over time, I interact the variables Ideological Extremity and Year.

I examine two dependent variables available in the Bonica (2013) data set. The first is an indicator variable, Winning Election, which takes a value of 1 if a candidate won election in a given year and 0 otherwise. I additionally examine the total vote share in the general election, Vote Share, attained by a candidate. This variable ranges from 0 to 100, with a mean of 53.41 and a standard deviation of 20.33. In these analyses, I also include controls for partisanship, whether the candidate is an incumbent, whether a seat is open, logged candidate campaign spending, and the ideological composition of the district.[3] Models include state-level fixed effects, and standard errors are clustered at the congressional district-year level. Results of these analyses are presented graphically in figure 1.

The results for ideological extremity's effect on the probability of winning an election provide support for my hypothesis. I find that ideological candidates are becoming increasingly likely to win US House elections over time, while moderate candidates are becoming increasingly less likely to win. I find that ideologically extreme candidates are indeed less likely to win than moderates but that this effect gets smaller over time during the study period. These results suggest that ideologically extreme candidates are very unlikely to win elections at the start of the study period, while moderates were quite likely to win—very extreme candidates were less than 20% likely to win election in 1980, while ideologically moderate candidates were nearly 80% likely to win. However, around 2008, ideologically extreme candidates and moderates became indistinguishable in their likelihood of winning an election, with predicted probabilities of winning hovering around 50% for both. This provides support to the hypothesis that ideologically extreme candidates are becoming more likely to win House elections over time.

Results for ideological extremity's effect on vote share are displayed in figure 2 and present a similar pattern to probability of winning. In 1980, an ideologically extreme candidate was expected to win only about 40% of the vote, while a moderate candidate was predicted to win over 60%. These numbers move closer to 50% each over time, again crossing in

1. Here, analyses are limited to general elections only. I restrict analyses to US House elections only. I additionally remove candidates who are not members of the Republican or Democratic Parties, as these candidates rarely win elections and are likely to have incentives different from candidates of major parties.

2. The CFscore is computed using campaign contributions, where a common pool of contributions across elections allows Bonica (2014) to estimate ideology of candidates using the ideology of campaign contributors, who are presumed to be ideologically proximate to those they donate to. For elected candidates, the CFscore correlates highly ($r = .92$) to roll call voting measures of ideology (Bonica 2014).

3. This variable is calculated by taking the previous presidential vote share in the district and collapsing it (since candidate ideology is measured only by strength), to range theoretically from 0 (completely voted for candidate of one party) to .5 (a tie between both major party candidates). In practice, this variable ranges from 0.04 to 0.5, with a mean of 0.395 and a standard deviation of 0.084.

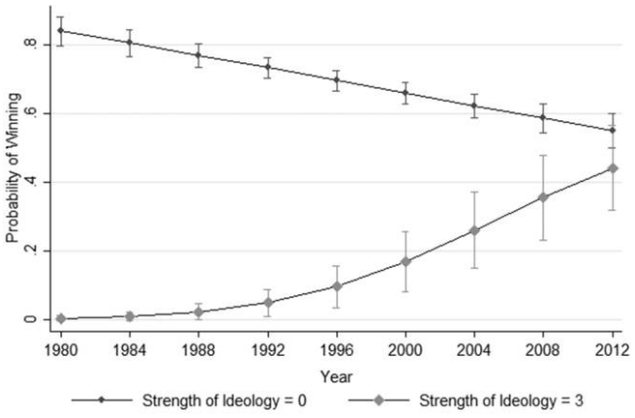

Figure 3. Ideology and electability, 1980–2012: Republicans

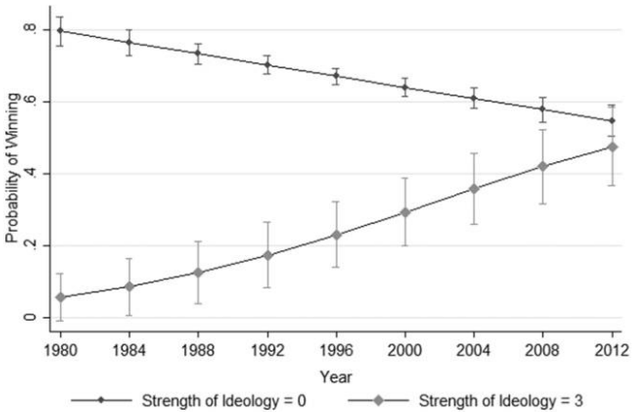

Figure 4. Ideology and electability, 1980–2012: Democrats

2008. By 2012, ideologically extreme candidates are predicted to have a slight (although not statistically distinguishable) advantage in both vote share and probability of winning, compared to moderates.

As examples, the strongest ideologues early in the study period include Richard Ferraro of California, who received 28% of the vote, Leo Yambrek of Alabama (18%), and Anthony Pollina of Vermont (27%). In 2010 and 2012, while most strong ideologues still did not win, victorious ideologues include Democrat Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin and Republican Jim Graves of Georgia.

Figures 3 and 4 present results for ideology and probability of winning an election, broken down by candidate party.[4] As demonstrated in the figures, this effect persists for both Republicans and Democrats (and is actually slightly larger for Democrats). In the early years of the study period, ideologues were incredibly unlikely to be elected, while moderates were highly likely to be elected. By 2010, the difference between moderates and ideologically extreme candidates was indistinguishable, suggesting that moderates and ideologically extreme candidates were equally likely to be elected during this time. This suggests that it is not simply a single party driving these results but that Democrats and Republicans who are ideologically extreme enjoy similar improvements in their electoral fortunes over the study period.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

I demonstrate that, while ideologues have historically been electorally disadvantaged, compared to moderates, this gap has shrunk over time, to the point where an ideologically extreme and moderate candidate are now roughly equally likely to be elected to Congress. This research has consequences for both scholars and practitioners of politics. It suggests that the correlation between ideological moderation and electoral success is considerably weaker than research and conventional wisdom have shown in the past.

Of course, this does not mean that politicians and pundits are necessarily wrong to suggest that parties should avoid candidates who are too ideological. Moderates and ideologues are similarly likely to win elections today. I have not demonstrated that ideologues are overall advantaged compared to moderates, simply that they are no longer disadvantaged. This research also does not address the underlying mechanism for this change. District composition and voter preferences may have a vital impact on electoral success, and practitioners of politics should consider these factors, as there are likely to be areas where moderates remain advantaged and, similarly, areas where ideologues may have an advantage. Further research is required to adjudicate the mechanism through which ideologues have been enjoying greater electoral success in recent years.

4. Regression tables are available in the online appendix. Similar results are obtained for analyses using vote share as the dependent variable.

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