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# A Voter-Centric Explanation of the Success of Ideological Candidates for the U.S. House

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## Abstract

In recent years, ideological candidates for the U.S. House have become increasingly successful, to the point where their chances of being elected are indistinguishable from moderates. However, scholars have still not uncovered exactly why this is happening. Using survey data from the American National Election Studies, I find that voter-centric explanations of vote choice – a voter’s partisanship, ideology, and presidential approval rating – have increasingly predicted their vote choice in U.S. House elections from 1980-2016. Using data on candidate ideology, I find that candidate ideology is an increasingly poor predictor of individual vote choice over time. Original experimental data supports these claims, finding only a small electoral advantage for moderates, compared to ideologues of their own party, and evidence suggesting that, at least among Democrats, ideological candidates are rated more favorably than moderates. Taken together, these results suggest that the increased electoral success of ideological candidates can be attributed to changes in voters’ decision calculus, rather than structural or ideological explanations.

**Word Count:** 7022

*“I think you can overdo it. We have to really appeal to that sensible center. It’s a thin stripe now. It used to be a lot wider stripe, but it’s an important and determining factor in most elections.” – Sen. Dick Durbin (D-IL)<sup>1</sup>*

Conventional wisdom has long suggested that moderate candidates should be more successful in elections than ideological candidates. Even in the lead-up to the 2018 midterm elections, politicians such as Dick Durbin, the second ranking Democrat in the U.S. Senate, cautioned against candidates being too ideological, noting that appealing to moderates may be a sensible strategy for Democratic candidates. Pundits often bemoan that a candidate may be too liberal, or too conservative, to win a general election, and suggest that moderate candidates are more likely to realize electoral success than ideological candidates.

Of course, these beliefs have long been backed up with rigorous work from political science, from classic theories suggesting that candidates should appeal to the median voter (Downs 1957), to modern studies showing that ideological candidates harm their party’s chances of winning an election (Hall 2015; Hall and Thompson 2018). However, recent evidence demonstrates that this electoral advantage for moderates has mostly disappeared in recent years in U.S. House elections (Utych 2020). Over time, elected officials from both parties are becoming more ideological (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2006). This suggests that the conventional wisdom is changing, but leaves open an important question of *why* ideological candidates are enjoying more success in recent elections than they have in the past.

One explanation for this change is structural and relates to redistricting. Redistricting has made Congressional districts more ideologically similar (Abramowitz, Alexander and Gunning 2005). This would make the median voter in these districts more ideologically extreme (Owen and Grofman 2006), allowing more ideological candidates to win election, even without a change in general voter preferences. Indeed, ideological candidates perform better in electorally safer districts (Hall 2015; Greene 2016). However, a competing explanation – changes in voter preferences -- is also a compelling explanation for this change. American politics are becoming increasingly nationalized, with presidential

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<sup>1</sup> On “Connected to Chicago” podcast, October 15, 2017. <https://audioboom.com/posts/6392484-connected-to-chicago-10-15-2017>

approval predicting a decline in the incumbency advantage (Jacobsen 2015) and state legislative voting decisions (Rogers 2016). At the same time, individuals are increasingly loyal to their own party (Abramowitz and Webster 2016), and are becoming more ideologically sorted into their preferred party (Levendusky 2009; Lelkes 2016).

I test whether voter-centric explanations can explain the rise in ideological candidates in recent years demonstrated by Utych (2020). Using data from the American National Election Study, I find that three key voter-centric factors – partisanship, ideology, and presidential approval – have become significantly more impactful predictors of vote choice in U.S. House elections from 1980 to 2016. Using data from Bonica (2013) on candidate ideology, I find that candidate ideology is becoming a weaker predictor of vote choice over time, to the point where moderates and ideologues are equally likely to be supported by co-partisans by 2012. Using original experimental data, I find that a moderate candidate does enjoy a small electoral advantage over an ideological candidate, but that this does not appear in co-partisan affect towards the candidate, and the electoral advantage is mediated by individual’s perceptions of candidate viability.

### Candidate Ideology and Electability

Concerns about how candidate ideology influences electoral outcomes are not new to political scientists. In his seminal work, Anthony Downs argues that the dominant strategy for politicians is to appeal to the median voter in an election, someone who is very likely to be an ideological moderate (1957). Through more recent times, the trend of voter preferences for moderates has been robust (Erikson and Wright 2000). Even when ideologues succeed in primary elections, they generally are less successful than moderates in general elections (Hall 2015; Hall and Snyder n.d.; Hall and Thompson 2018).<sup>2</sup> However, we have seen a rise in recent times of ideological candidates, and evidence has demonstrated that, since about 2008, ideological moderates may no longer be advantaged, compared to strong ideologues (Utych 2020). Why, then, are ideological candidates increasingly successful in U.S. Congressional elections?

One explanation could suggest this is simply a structural effect – that redistricting has created more safe seats, allowing for candidates to become more ideological for this reason, without an overarching change in voter preferences. There is mixed evidence for this effect. While scholars agree that an increase in single party composition of a district increases liberal or conservative roll call voting from that district, some find evidence this is due to only to the increased likelihood of a Republican or Democrat being elected (Lee, Moretti and Butler 2004; McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal 2009). However, more recent work finds that an increased liberal [conservative] district composition increases the member of Congress’ liberal [conservative] roll call voting (Jones and Walsh 2018) also increases. From a Downsian perspective, this makes sense. Candidates may appeal to the *party* median, rather than the district median, in their elections, realizing their own party is their main base of support (Grofman 2004), and ideologically extreme candidates may succeed when districts become more homogenous for this reason (Owen and Grofman 2006). The mixed evidence for this explanation, however, suggests that we may need to turn to a voter-centric explanation for why ideological candidates have become increasingly successful in recent years.

Compelling evidence suggests that the explanation for the rise of ideological candidates is indeed voter-centric. This explanation suggests that voters are increasingly likely to rely on their personal predispositions to guide vote choice, rather than evaluations of candidates. If this is true, candidate traits, like their ideology, should matter less and less over time. Partisanship is an increasingly important factor in voting decisions (Bartels 2000; Levendusky 2009; Achen and Bartels 2016). Indeed, individuals seem very unwilling to support candidates from the opposing political party in recent years (Jacobsen 2015; Abramowitz and Webster 2016). For ideologically moderate voters, candidate ideology seems to play little impact in voting decisions, compared to partisanship (Adams et al. 2017). Racial animus in the context of the 2016 election lead to distortions of spatial voting predictions (Algara and Hale 2019). Individuals are also increasing in affective polarization, or their dislike of the out-party, in recent years (Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2015). Taken together, this evidence suggests that partisanship should be playing an

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<sup>2</sup> While these studies provide important insight, they treat effects of ideology on candidate success as time invariant. Given that we see crucial effects of time on things like the incumbency advantage in elections (Jacobsen 2015; Algara 2019), the effect of state level partisanship on voting outcomes (Algara 2019), local elections (Hopkins 2018), and US House elections (Utych 2020), it is vital to consider how these factors change over time.

increased role in voter decision making. If voters are relying on their partisanship to guide their voting decisions in a two-party general election, their choice between the Democrat and Republican should be increasingly swayed by their own characteristics, and the candidates' ideologies should matter less and less.

One way candidate ideology may matter in voter decision context is how it influences perceptions of viability. Individuals have a psychological desire to support a winner, also known as a bandwagoning effect (Abramowitz 1987; Bartels 1988). In situations where one is relatively indifferent between two candidates, individuals may infer a moderate is more likely to win election, based on the conventional wisdom, making them more likely to vote for a moderate candidate. Perhaps more importantly, individuals may view a co-partisan ideologue as less likely to win an election, making them more likely to abstain from voting. Indeed, candidate viability has been shown to have an important impact on voting decisions in primary elections (Utych and Kam 2014). While this logic may be less applicable to general elections, where candidate differences are clearer and more readily discerned, individuals still must make a choice between voting for a candidate, a costly act, or abstaining from voting. In this way, perceptions of moderates as more likely to win may influence voter calculus.

At the same time, the public is becoming more ideologically polarized, and sorted into parties based on their ideology. There is an increased correlation between an individual's ideology and their partisanship over time (Levendusky 2009), and this correlation has increased dramatically within the last 30 years (Lelkes 2016). Over the past 30 years, Republicans are becoming more conservative, and Democrats are becoming more liberal (Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Abramowitz 2010). Indeed, the primary opposition to ideologically extreme candidates seems to come from out-partisans, rather than members of the candidate's party (Stone 2017). This increase in ideological sorting has risen in concert with affective polarization (Mason 2018). As ideology becomes increasingly aligned with partisanship, it is easier for citizens to engage in directional, rather than spatial voting (Rabinowitz and Macdonald 1989). This theory suggests that voters will vote for candidates who share the *direction* of their ideology, even if not the same intensity. As Democrat and liberal (and Republican and conservative) becoming increasingly interchangeable terms, directional voting should become easier for citizens, as they are more certain co-partisan candidates will share the direction of their ideology. If voter ideology is becoming an increasingly important component of vote choice, this again suggests that candidate ideological positions should matter less, and voter-centric traits should predict vote choice more.

Another voter-centric explanation of the rise of ideological candidates involves the increased nationalization of elections. The nationalization of elections can be explained as the influence of evaluations of the president on voting decisions for lower-level political offices, and has been used to explain the decline of the incumbency advantage in recent years (Jacobsen 2015). Presidential approval is one of the most impactful factors in voting decisions for state legislative elections (Rogers 2016), and state and local level political elections are becoming increasingly nationalized in recent years (Hopkins 2018). This nationalization again suggests that candidate ideology may be a less important factor in voting decisions – as individuals are increasingly relying on how they feel about the president to inform their voting decisions, once again, candidate ideology should matter less and less over time.

This leads to some key hypotheses that I will test. First, I predict that voter-centric explanations of vote choice for U.S. House elections – partisanship, ideology, and presidential approval – will have an increased impact on vote choice over time. That is, these individual level factors should have an increasing impact on voting decisions for the U.S. House in 2016, compared to 1980. This provides an explanation for why ideological candidates are performing increasingly better in elections over this same time period (Utych 2020) – if voters are relying on their predispositions increasingly more, then ideology should matter less. I also predict that, considering the rise in importance of voter-level predispositions, voters are likely to show no preference for a moderate candidate, compared to an ideological candidate, of their own party. If voters are basing their decisions primarily on things like partisanship, that should be a driving factor in their voting decisions, and candidate ideology should not matter. This does not, of course, mean that ideological candidates should see an *advantage* in modern elections – in fact, if ideology is becoming less important in voter decision-making, this would mean that moderate and ideological candidates should become roughly equally likely to win election.

### **Study 1 – How Partisanship, Ideology, and Presidential Approval Predict U.S. House Voting**

To test these hypotheses, I analyze data from the American National Election Studies (ANES) time series cumulative file. While this data file goes back to 1948, for ease of comparability to studies using the Bonica (2013) data on candidate ideology, results presented are from 1980 – 2016 only. These models allow me to test a voter-centric explanation of the increasing success of ideological candidates' in House elections since 1980. If voters are using a

decision criteria not related to candidate specific characteristics, such as their partisanship, ideology, or presidential approval, increasingly over this time period, this suggests that candidate ideology should play a lessened role in candidate success. If voters are basing their decisions on U.S. House votes on individual traits, like their partisanship, ideology, and approval of the current president, traits about the candidates should not matter as much as personal characteristics of the voters.

First, using the Bonica (2013) data, it is clear that candidates are becoming more ideological over time. In 1980, the average strength of ideology among all candidates for the U.S. House (with higher values indicating more ideological candidates) was 0.697 (s.d. = 0.316), while by 2012, the average strength of ideology was 1.027 (s.d. = 0.415), a considerable increase. Moreover, this increase occurs steadily over time, year by year<sup>3</sup>, rather than having large jumps and plateaus. This suggests that all candidates for the U.S. House are becoming steadily more ideological over time.

I examine how these factors predict vote choice in U.S. House elections.<sup>4</sup> My dependent variable in the partisanship and ideology models is voting for the Republican House candidate, coded as 0 for those who vote for the Democratic candidate, 1 for those who vote for the Republican candidate, and missing if respondents did not vote, or voted for a third party candidate. In the model using presidential approval, this variable is coded differently – 0 for those who did not vote for the House candidate from the incumbent President’s party, 1 for those who did vote for the House candidate from the incumbent President’s party, and missing otherwise. Partisanship is measured by the standard ANES partisanship question, ranging from Strong Democrat (1) to Strong Republican (7). Ideology is measured by the standard ANES ideology question, ranging from Extremely Liberal (1) to Extremely Conservative (7).<sup>5</sup> Presidential approval is rated on a four point scale, asking whether individuals approve or disapprove of the job of the current president, and how strongly. This variable ranges from Strongly Disapprove (1) to Strongly Approve (4).<sup>6</sup> The year variable ranges from 0 (1980) to 36 (2016). Importantly, each of these variables is then interacted with year, where a positive coefficient on the interaction term indicates an increasing value of the moderator as a predictor of House vote over time.<sup>7</sup> These models include controls for a variety of standard individual level demographics, along with some election specific controls. I control for incumbency with a variable, *Republican Incumbent*, coded 1 if there is a Republican incumbent running in the election, and zero otherwise. Importantly, to account for the competing hypothesis that redistricting creates safer seats over this time period, I include controls for the previous presidential two-party vote share, with higher values indicating a larger vote share in the district for the Democratic candidate. Since both large and small values of this variable indicate a safe seat, I also include this variable squared. In all analyses, standard errors are clustered at the district-year level, to account for participants within the same district year deciding between the same slate of candidates. Results of these analyses are presented in Table 1<sup>8</sup>, and graphically in Figures 1 – 3.

<sup>3</sup> Full descriptive statistics broken down by year are available in the Appendix.

<sup>4</sup> Here, I presume that voter predispositions occur prior to US House voting decisions. At least on the grounds of partisanship, a strong and stable predisposition (Campbell et al. 1960), this seems incredibly likely. While it’s not highly likely that choices of candidates for the US House cause partisanship, increased polarization can certainly influence mass attitudes and attachments (see Hetherington 2001). As such, while there is likely a causal element operating here, it is safest to view these analyses as correlation.

<sup>5</sup> Those who did not place themselves on the ideology scale are excluded from analysis.

<sup>6</sup> All results are robust to including a binary measure of partisanship and ideology (excluding independents and moderates) and a binary measure of presidential approval. These results are included in Appendix A.

<sup>7</sup> This strategy is used to mimic the analytical strategy in Utych (2020). Using a strategy with covariates interacted with each individual year becomes difficult, as some predisposition x year interaction terms then become omitted from models due to multicollinearity. Using this strategy, however, interaction terms become consistently positive and statistically significant for the year 2004 and later. In the Appendix, I examine year as a binary variable, coded 0 if the year is between 1980 and 2002, and 1 if the year is between 2004-2016. Results are substantively and statistically similar using this technique.

<sup>8</sup> Results are robust to excluding respondents from all Southern states, and are presented in Table A2. Results are also robust to examining each presidential year individually, and are presented in Table A8, which shows an increase over time of partisan and ideological alignment with voting.

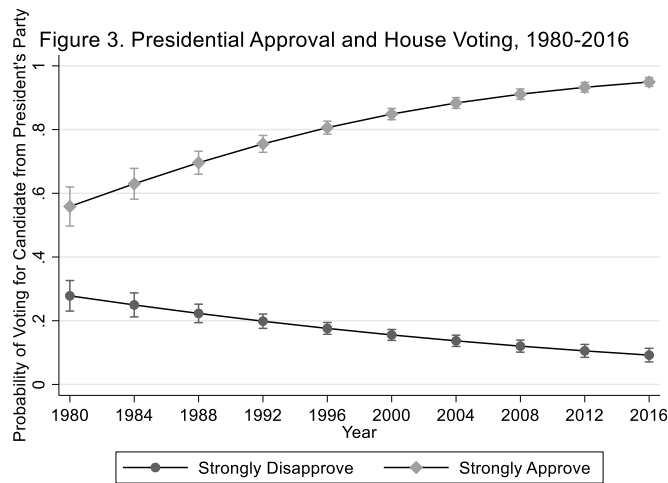
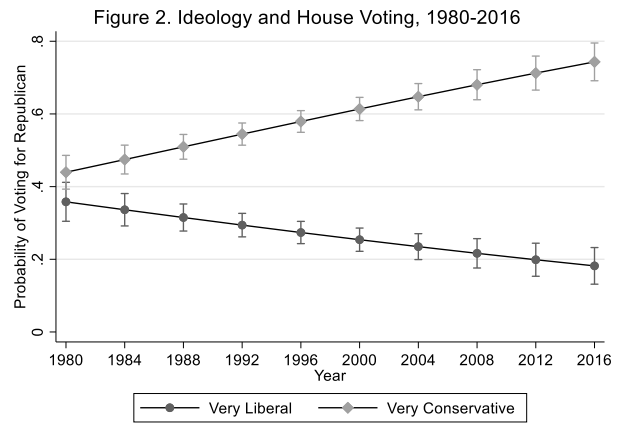
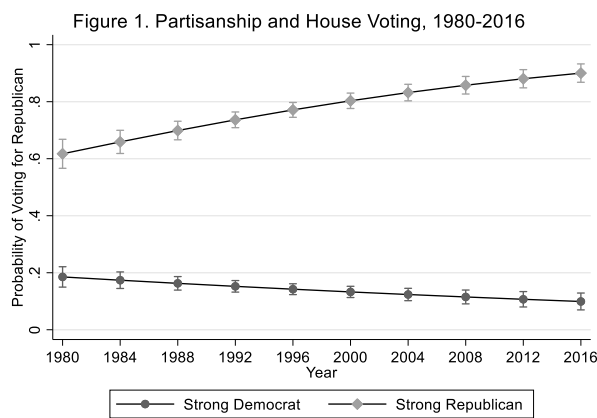
**Table 1.** *Partisanship, Ideology, and Presidential Approval in House Voting 1980-2016*

	Partisanship	Ideology	Pres. Approval
Year	-0.038** (0.010)	-0.059** (0.013)	-0.076** (0.009)
Republican	0.425** (0.036)	0.639** (0.023)	0.045* (0.022)
Conservative	0.368** (0.033)	0.099 (0.054)	0.013 (0.030)
Pres. Approval	-0.142** (0.037)	-0.170** (0.035)	0.409** (0.059)
Republican x Year	0.014** (0.002)		
Conservative x Year		0.017** (0.003)	
Presidential Approval x Year			0.038** (0.003)
Female	-0.043 (0.077)	-0.045 (0.077)	-0.134* (0.064)
Age	0.000 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)	0.003 (0.002)
Black	-1.304** (0.220)	-1.385** (0.228)	-0.225 (0.153)
Other Race	-0.081 (0.230)	-0.095 (0.234)	0.109 (0.220)
Hispanic	-0.492 (0.279)	-0.489 (0.281)	-0.387 (0.261)
Education	-0.046 (0.050)	-0.051 (0.049)	0.098* (0.043)
South	-0.122 (0.111)	-0.072 (0.111)	0.063 (0.120)
Income	0.099* (0.042)	0.104* (0.042)	0.025 (0.036)
Catholic	-0.112 (0.098)	-0.098 (0.098)	-0.129 (0.088)
Jewish	-0.131 (0.232)	-0.104 (0.227)	0.248 (0.227)
Other / No Religion	-0.322** (0.115)	-0.289* (0.112)	-0.030 (0.100)
Religious Attendance	0.030 (0.028)	0.033 (0.027)	-0.040 (0.022)
Married	0.088 (0.087)	0.108 (0.087)	-0.079 (0.074)
Social Class	-0.009 (0.027)	-0.011 (0.027)	0.025 (0.022)
Republican Incumbent	1.541** (0.117)	1.538** (0.118)	0.536** (0.116)
Previous Presidential Vote Share (Democrat)	-8.709** (2.276)	-8.911** (2.335)	-3.932 (2.230)
Previous Presidential Vote Share Squared	6.819** (1.970)	7.097** (2.021)	4.221* (1.898)
Constant	-1.533* (0.697)	-1.119 (0.715)	-1.267 (0.692)
<i>N</i>	8042	8042	8042
<i>Pseudo R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.4590	0.4570	0.2737

Table entries are logit coefficients with standard errors, clustered by district-year, in parentheses. Survey weights are used in all analyses.

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

As shown in Table 1 and Figure 1, Republican Party identification increasingly predicts vote choice for the Republican candidate over the study period. In 1980, strong Republicans were about 62% likely to vote for a Republican house candidate – this probably increases to about 90% in 2016. The change for Democrats voting for a Republican is more muted, with strong Democrats about 18.5% likely to vote for a Republican House candidate in 1980, but just under 10% likely in 2016. The findings for ideology are considerably starker – in 1980, very conservative individuals were only about 44% likely to vote for a Republican House candidate, while they were 74% likely in 2016. Similar patterns emerge for very liberal respondents, who were about 36% likely to vote for a Republican House candidate in 1980, but only 18% likely in 2016.



Column 3 of Table 1, and Figure 3, demonstrate that Presidential Approval also has an increasing effect on House voting decisions over time, suggesting an increased nationalization of elections. In 1980, those who most approved of the President had only a 56% likelihood of voting for his party in House elections, a likelihood that increased to almost 95% by 2016. Those who strongly disapprove of the President show the opposite effect, with a 28% likelihood of voting for the President's co-partisan House candidate in 1980, which dropped to only 9% in 2016.

Of course, these results on their own do not fully explain why we see a rise in the success of ideological candidates over time. To this end, I combine data from the ANES cumulative file with data on candidate ideology from the Database on Ideology, Money in Politics, and Elections (DIME) (Bonica 2013). I use Bonica (2014)'s CFscore to measure ideology, where higher values indicate more liberal ideology, and lower values indicate more conservative ideology. Since I am interested in only strength, rather than direction, of ideology, I collapse this measure into a one-tailed measure of 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. For each respondent in the ANES cumulative

dataset<sup>9</sup>, I use ideological extremity scores from the Republican and Democratic U.S. House candidates running for election in that year. Since theoretical predictions relate to co-partisan candidates, I create measures of *in-party ideology* and *out-party ideology*, based on the candidate's and respondent's partisanship, where *in-party ideology* measures the ideology of the candidate from the Democratic [Republican] Party for Democratic [Republican] respondents, and vice versa for out-party ideology.<sup>10</sup> From these measures, I create a score, *relative extremity*, by subtracting the ideological extremity of the out-party candidate from the ideological extremity of the in-party candidate.<sup>11</sup> I again measure the year of the survey<sup>12</sup>, and interact this variable with relative extremity of the in-party candidate. These independent variables are then used to predict an individual's vote choice. This variable, *in-party vote*, is coded as 1 if the respondent voted for the candidate from their own political party, and 0 if they voted for either the other political party, a third-party candidate, or abstained from voting in the House election. This strategy allows me to capture individuals who choose not to vote in response to ideological extremity from their own party. These results are presented in Table 2, and Figure 4.

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<sup>9</sup> Only elections where there is only 1 Democratic candidate, or 1 Republican candidate, or 1 of each, are included in these analyses. This excludes a small number of elections for which there was more than one candidate from either party.

<sup>10</sup> All analyses include partisan leaners, but exclude pure independents. Results are robust to models measuring only in-party and out-party ideology, individually, and are presented in Appendix A.

<sup>11</sup> This variable ranges from -3.90 (out-party much more extreme) to 3.90 (in-party much more extreme), with a mean of -0.04 and a standard deviation of 0.56.

<sup>12</sup> Since the Bonica (2013) is available only until 2012, these analyses only include responses from 1980-2012.

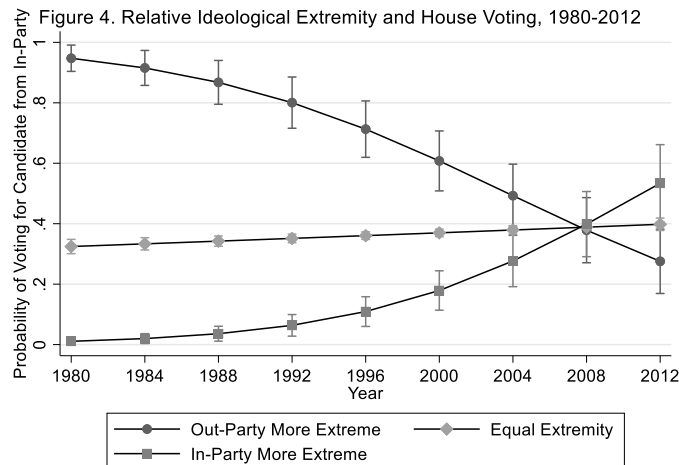


**Table 2.** *Candidate Ideology and Vote Choice – 1980-2012 (In-Party and Out-Party Ideology Measures)*

	Vote for In-Party Candidate
Year	0.011** (0.003)
Relative Extremity	-1.326** (0.188)
Relative Extremity x Year	0.048** (0.007)
Female	0.136* (0.061)
Age	0.019** (0.002)
Black	0.753** (0.117)
Other Race	-0.237 (0.175)
Hispanic	0.273 (0.198)
Strength of Partisanship	0.417** (0.042)
Strength of Ideology	0.055 (0.035)
Presidential Approval	-0.028 (0.034)
Education	0.389** (0.040)
South	-0.241** (0.086)
Income	0.022 (0.034)
Catholic	0.279** (0.080)
Jewish	0.689** (0.193)
Other / No Religion	0.356** (0.090)
Religious Attendance	-0.035 (0.023)
Married	0.042 (0.068)
Social Class	-0.000 (0.021)
In-Party Incumbent	0.459** (0.108)
Previous Presidential Vote Share (Democrat)	6.558** (1.779)
Previous Presidential Vote Share Squared	-4.772** (1.548)
Constant	-6.125** (0.548)
<i>N</i>	6849
<i>Pseudo R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.1128

Table entries are logit coefficients with standard errors in parentheses. Survey weights are used in all analyses. Standard errors are clustered at the Congressional District-Year level.

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$



These results demonstrate how candidate ideology influences vote choice in U.S. House elections over time. Looking at relative candidate ideology, as shown in Figure 4, we begin to see a complete picture of how ideology’s effect on vote choice has changed over time. Early in the study period, individuals were incredibly likely to vote for their own party’s candidate when the out-party nominated a relatively more extreme candidate than the out-party<sup>13</sup>, and considerably less likely to vote for their own party’s candidate when their in-party nominated a relatively more extreme candidate. For situations where candidates are equally extreme, we see only a very small increase in the likelihood of voting for a candidate of one’s favored party over time. However, the effects of relative extremity converge over time, to the point where relative extremity of candidates seems not to matter much at all by 2012 – voters actually seem to prefer in-party candidates who are relatively more extreme compared to when extremity of candidates is equal, though this difference is not statistically significant.<sup>14</sup>

These results provide substantial evidence for a voter-centric explanation of Utych (2020)’s findings that ideologues are becoming more electable in House elections over time. Over time, voters are relying more on their partisanship, their ideology, and their evaluations of the incumbent President to inform their voting choices for House elections. Because characteristics of the voter are starting to matter *more*, this by nature suggests that candidate ideology should matter less. This may serve to explain why ideologues are not penalized as harshly as they have been in the past – if voters care more about a partisan match, or if elections are being nationalized, a candidate’s partisanship is becoming far more impactful for voter decision making than a candidate’s ideology. Using data on candidate ideology, I find support for this, suggesting that in-party moderates were previously advantaged, but no longer have an advantage by 2012. For out-party candidates, moderates seem to do a bit better over time, but by 2012, there is no effect of the relative extremity of the major party House candidates on voter decision making.

By controlling for previous presidential vote share, I am able to isolate the effects of ideology while accounting for a measure of partisan safety in the district. Essentially, this allows me to account for the competing hypothesis that redistricting has created more partisan safe seats, allowing more ideological candidates to flourish. To further examine this, I look only at competitive House districts, where the previous Democratic presidential two-party vote share in the district is between .45 and .55.<sup>15</sup> In this test, I find results that are substantively and statistically similar to the results looking at all districts. Certainly, these findings leave room for redistricting as an important explanation for the recent success of ideological candidates, but, given that this occurs even in competitive districts, redistricting could not be the only explanation.

<sup>13</sup> For the purposes of this figure, out-party relatively more extreme is calculated with a high extremity score of -3, in-party relatively more extreme is calculated with a similarly high extremity score of 3, and equal extremity is calculated with an extremity score of zero.

<sup>14</sup> The over time effects modeled here of a relatively more extreme out-party candidate making one less likely to vote for an in-party candidate are puzzling, but likely an artifact of the analytical technique. When looking at the effects of candidate extremity in each individual year, I generally find a trend where an out-party extremist causes individuals to be more likely to vote for an in-party candidate in the early study period, but that this effect disappears in 2008 and 2012. These models are available in the appendix.

<sup>15</sup> These models are available in the Appendix.

However, this analysis leaves out an important test of the causal mechanism. In a single election, voters are not allowed to choose between an ideologue of their favored party, and a moderate of the same party. Typically, they are simply faced with the choice (if they have a choice at all) of the Democrat vs. the Republican. While these results tell us that voter-centric characteristics are increasingly predicting vote choice over time, they do not tell us whether voters prefer a moderate or ideologue, when partisanship is held constant. To this end, I turn to an experimental test where I vary candidate ideology and determine how ideology impacts voting decisions and candidate evaluations at the individual level.

## Study 2 – An Experimental Test of Ideology and Voter Preferences

In general elections, however, observing voting behavior is confounded with multiple factors about the candidates – voters do not choose between a large slate of varied candidates in this context, instead, they must choose, typically, between a Democratic and Republican candidate. While voters have the choice to abstain from voting, or voting for a third-party candidate, voters who prefer an ideologue or moderate may still simply vote for whatever candidate is nominated by their party. Further, there is little way to test how ideology influences perceptions of candidate viability and likelihood of winning via existing survey data. Additionally, a candidate's ideology may not be well-known, or may be confounded with other factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, age, and campaign funding in a real-world setting. To better examine the mechanism of how candidate ideology influences voting decisions, I turn to an experimental study that varies the ideology of candidates from both parties between ideological and moderate in a hypothetical election.

This survey was conducted in October 2017 on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (mturk). Participants completed the study, which took approximately 4 minutes, in exchange for a payment of 50 cents into their mturk account. A total of 1,521 participants were involved in this study.

During the study, participants were presented with information about two hypothetical candidates running for election for the U.S. House of Representatives. In this study, a 2x2 design was implemented, varying the ideological extremity and partisanship of the candidates. That is, participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental groups – one with a moderate Democrat and moderate Republican, one with a moderate Democrat and conservative Republican, one with a liberal Democrat and moderate Republican, and one with a liberal Democrat and conservative Republican. The full text of these treatments are available in Appendix B.<sup>16</sup> For ease of interpretation, these were coded into two distinct treatment variables. *Democrat Liberal* takes a value of 1 for when the Democrat, Philip Burns, was presented as liberal, and 0 when he was presented as moderate. *Republican Conservative* takes a value of 1 for when Thomas Wilson, the Republican candidate, was presented as conservative, and 0 when he was presented as moderate.

To test the validity of the manipulation, I included a post-treatment manipulation check question, asking participants to rate the candidates' ideology, from Very Liberal to Very Conservative. This check did suggest that the manipulation was effective, as Philip Burns was rated as considerably more liberal when he was an ideological candidate, compared to when he was a moderate (1.88, 2.69,  $t=16.16$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Similarly, Thomas Wilson was rated as more conservative when he was ideological, compared to when he was a moderate (5.99, 5.30,  $t=12.43$ ,  $p<.01$ ). When candidates were presented as more ideologically extreme, participants rated them as more ideological, suggesting that ideology was indeed successfully manipulated by the experimental treatments.

After reading about the candidates, participants were asked whether they would vote for either candidate, or abstain from voting/vote for a third party candidate.<sup>17</sup> This variable was recoded into two new variables, *Vote for Democrat* and *Vote for Republican*.<sup>18</sup> Results of these analyses are presented in columns 1 and 2 of Table 4, allowing for an interactive term between the participant's partisanship and their in-party candidate's ideology. This is done since expectations are that Republicans and Democrats will evaluate an in-party ideologue quite different from an out-party ideologue.

<sup>16</sup> Treatments were varied based on ideology of the candidates. In the appendix, the first text in brackets corresponded to the liberal [conservative] ideological candidate, while the second text corresponded to the moderate candidate. All non-bracketed text was the same across conditions.

<sup>17</sup> Full question text for all dependent variables is available in Appendix C.

<sup>18</sup> Pure independents are excluded from all analyses, as there are unclear predictions for those who do not have a clear partisan cue.

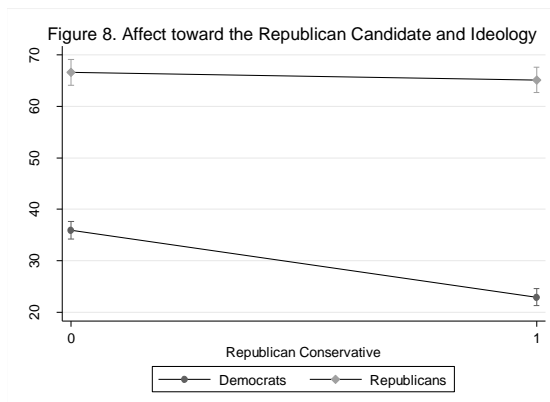
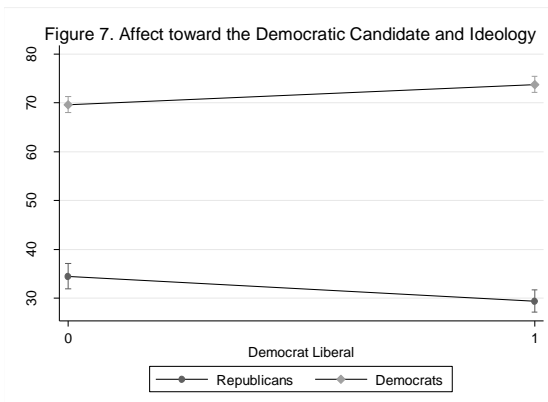
**Table 4.** *How Candidate Ideology Influences Candidate Evaluations*

	Vote for Democrat	Vote for Republican	FT Democrat	FT Republican
Democrat Liberal	-0.54 (0.37)		-5.08** (2.08)	
Democrat	3.85*** (0.28)		35.11*** (1.84)	
Democrat Liberal x Democrat	0.27 (0.41)		9.24*** (2.51)	
Republican Conservative		-0.49* (0.25)		-12.99*** (1.44)
Republican		3.71*** (0.25)		30.59*** (1.83)
Republican Conservative x Republican		-0.14 (0.35)		11.57*** (2.57)
Constant	-2.17*** (0.25)	-2.19*** (0.16)	34.52*** (1.56)	35.94*** (1.02)
<i>N</i>	1268	1268	1266	1266
<i>(Pseudo) R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.4012	0.4025	0.4529	0.4117

Table entries are logit (M1 and M2) or OLS (M3 and M4) coefficients with standard errors in parentheses

\* p<0.1, \*\* p<0.05, \*\*\* p<0.01

Here, some differences emerge between ideological candidates and moderate candidates in vote choice. Individuals are slightly less likely to vote for a Democrat when he is ideological, though this effect does not reach standard levels of statistical significance, and there is no significant difference between Democratic and Republican respondents. Individuals are less likely to vote for the Republican when he is conservative, though again this does not seem especially heightened among Republican participants.<sup>19</sup> This provides some suggestive evidence that moderates may indeed be preferable voting choices for respondents than ideologues. However, it is important to also consider how individuals feel towards the candidates. These results are presented in columns 3 and 4 of table 4.



Differences do emerge when looking at feeling thermometer ratings of the candidates. All participants were asked to rate both candidates on the 0-100 feeling thermometer measure. Both candidates are rated lower, in general, when they are ideological, but are rated more highly by co-partisan respondents than out-partisan respondents. To ease in interpretation of these results, they are presented graphically in figures 7 and 8. These figures demonstrate how ideology seems to influence candidate evaluations. Democrats rate the liberal candidate a bit higher than the moderate, by about 4 percentage points<sup>20</sup>, while Republicans rate him lower, by about 5 percentage points.<sup>21</sup> For the Republican

<sup>19</sup> T-tests show that, among Democratic participants, Burns is marginally more likely to be selected when he is a moderate, compared to a liberal (.844 vs. .805,  $p = .13$ ), and among Republican participants, Wilson is significantly more likely to be selected when he is a moderate, compared to a conservative (.821 vs. .709,  $p = .01$ ).

<sup>20</sup> Effects are significantly different at the 95% confidence level.

<sup>21</sup> Effects are statistically significant at the 90% confidence level.

candidate, Republicans rate him roughly the same regardless of his ideology, while Democrats rate him a whopping 13 points lower when he is conservative, compared to when he is moderate.<sup>22</sup> This suggests, unsurprisingly, that out-partisans tend to prefer moderate candidates from the out-party. Interestingly, the results also suggest that Republicans seem indifferent towards ideology of co-partisan candidates, and Democrats seem to actually prefer ideological candidates to moderate candidates. However, these differences do not appear in terms of vote choice. How can the difference between affect towards candidates and vote choice be explained?

To address this concern, I turn to a final dependent variable. Participants were asked, regardless of whom they voted for, who they believed would win the election. Here, differences emerged based on candidate ideology. When the Democrat was liberal, about 47% of respondents believed he would win, compared to 59% when he was moderate. When the Republican was conservative, only 43% of respondents believed he would win, compared to roughly 51% when he was moderate.<sup>23</sup>

**Table 5.** *How Perceptions of Viability Influence Ideology's Effect on Vote Choice*

	Democrats	Republicans
ACME	-0.019 (-0.030, -0.011)	-0.015 (-0.035, 0.001)
Direct Effect	-0.017 (-0.060, 0.028)	-0.096 (-0.167, -0.025)
Indirect Effect	-0.036 (-0.077, 0.007)	-0.112 (-0.182, -0.042)
Percent of Total Effect Mediated	0.451	0.134
<i>N</i>	868	396

Table entries are ACME coefficients, with 90% confidence intervals in parentheses.

This suggests a potential mechanism why individuals were less likely to vote for ideological candidates, despite the fact that they rated co-partisan ideologues as more favorable than (for Democrats) or equally favorable to (for Republicans) moderate co-partisans. Individuals have a psychological desire to back a winning candidate (Abramowitz 1989), and this evidence shows that individuals perceive the ideological candidate as less viable. Since individuals are less likely to vote for non-viable candidates than viable candidates, even when the non-viable candidate is preferred (Utych and Kam 2014), this suggests that desire to vote for a candidate<sup>24</sup> may be mediated by perceptions of viability. To test this prediction, I turn to an Average Causal Mediation Analysis (ACME) (Imai et al. 2010) to test the mediating role of perceptions of viability on vote choice. These results are presented in Table 5.

These results do suggest a small mediating effect of perceptions of viability on vote choice. Ideological candidates are perceived as less likely to win, which makes individuals slightly less likely to vote for them. For Republicans, a direct effect of ideology remains ( $p=.02$ ) – suggesting that something else influences voting decisions for Republicans choosing a moderate over an ideologue other than perceptions of viability. For Democrats, however, the direct effect of ideology on vote choice disappears when account for perceptions of viability ( $p=.52$ ). This helps to explain the disconnect in candidate affect and voting decisions that emerged in this study. Republicans like the ideological and moderate candidate equally as much, but were much more likely to vote for the moderate candidate. This can be explained partially by perceptions of viability of the ideologue. Democrats actually show an affective preference for

<sup>22</sup> Effects are statistically significant at the 99% confidence level.

<sup>23</sup> Both differences are statistically significant at the 99% confidence level.

<sup>24</sup> It may seem unlikely that viability concerns would lead a partisan to “switch” their vote to the other party, but recall that participants were given an option to abstain from voting or vote for a third party candidate (who was not previously mentioned) in the election. 11.3% of partisan respondents chose one of these two options.

the ideological candidate, but are marginally more likely to vote for the moderate. When accounting for how ideology influences perceptions of viability, however, this effect completely disappears. These results provide some evidence that genuine voter preferences may explain, at least partially, the rise in success of ideological candidates in recent years. Voters seem to actually prefer, or at least feel no differently towards, ideological co-partisan candidates compared to moderates from their own party, but they do seem to have a lingering belief that moderate candidates are more electable than ideological candidates, which may be influencing their voting decisions.

## Discussion and Conclusions

I find that, over time, voter characteristics of partisanship, ideology, and presidential approval are an increasingly important predictor of vote choice in U.S. House elections. These effects persist when examining candidate ideology, finding that in-partisan moderates lose their electoral advantage over time, but individuals begin to prefer out-partisan moderates a bit more. When examining both candidates, I find that relative ideological extremity of candidates was impactful in the past, but seems to have no effect on vote choice in more recent elections. This provides individual-level evidence for a voter-centric explanation of Utych (2020)'s aggregate findings that ideological candidates have become more successful in House elections over time.

Using original experimental evidence, I find a slightly increased likelihood for citizens to vote for an ideologically moderate, compared to an ideologically extreme, candidate of their own party. However, this difference does not emerge in affective responses towards the candidates – where Democrats actually prefer ideological Democratic candidates, and Republicans show no preference between ideologues and moderates of their own party. An affective preference for moderates appears only for views of the opposing party – that is, Democrats and Republicans prefer a moderate from the *other* party, compared to an ideologue.

This work provides broad implications for scholars of American electoral politics, and political behavior more broadly. In general, we have seen a rise in polarization within the American electorate, which has fueled ideologically polarizing choices at the ballot box (Abaramowitz 2010; Mason 2018). While Utych (2020) demonstrates that ideological candidates appear to no longer be disadvantaged in elections, compared to moderates, this work extends upon these findings by providing an explanation. This falls in line with previous work that finds that individuals are increasingly less likely to switch parties (Smidt 2017), vote for members of opposing parties (Jacobsen 2015) and are more likely to use national concerns voting in local elections (Hopkins 2018). As voter-centric characteristics play an increasingly strong role in vote choice, ideology should matter less and less. As voters base their decisions on their pre-dispositions, candidate ideology is likely to play a less important role in electoral outcomes.

This does not, however, mean that candidates should uniformly become ideologically extreme. Voter-centric factors examined in this study only would suggest that ideology should not play as important of a role in voter decision making as it has in the past – the theory does not predict that ideological candidates would gain an advantage over moderates. And experimental evidence is mixed – there is a small effect where individuals are more likely to vote for co-partisan moderates than ideologues, even if they don't show a preference in candidate evaluations for moderates. Indeed, both experimental and observational evidence suggest a benefit for moderate candidates, but a benefit that is largely limited to *out-partisan* voters.

Further, this work does not look at the importance of context in each individual race. It remains possible that ideology may still matter for political independents, who make up a small but significant portion of the population. Therefore, in close races, moderates may still gain an advantage over ideologues due to an increased appeal to independents. Moderates also seem to be considerably more appealing to out-party voters, so in a context where one's own party is heavily disadvantaged in a district, being less ideological may work to these candidates' advantage. Further work is needed to fully adjudicate the true electoral impact of ideology in specific contexts. Additionally, future work could examine other candidate-centric factors, such as race, gender, ethnicity, age, religion, and a host of others, to determine what, if any, candidate-centric factors can improve a candidate's electoral success.

While academics and pundits alike bemoan the role of a candidate's ideology on their eventual electoral fortunes, I find that this may be an increasingly unimportant consideration. As voter-centric characteristics become increasingly predictive of vote choice, traits about the candidates should matter less. However, this is not necessarily true in all contexts, as I find that voters retain a healthy preference for moderate candidates from the opposing party. It seems that the rise in success of ideological candidates in recent years can largely be explained by the fact that voters may care more about whether they have a D or an R next to their names, rather than their ideological leanings. Ideological

candidates, therefore, are not likely to see increasing electoral success because their ideology is necessarily more appealing to voters, but because voters simply are less concerned with candidate ideology, at least in U.S. House elections, than they were in the past.

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