The Rise of Safe Seats and Party Indiscipline in the U.S. Congress

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Early draft: June 25, 2021

Abstract

Scholarly work has missed the key reason for the extraordinary levels of political polarization and poor governance in American politics in recent years. Contrary to the appearance that *strong* party leaders dictate member behavior, we argue that *weak* party discipline produces polarizing rhetoric in lieu of actionable policy proposals. We attribute this weak discipline to the rising number of safe House districts that play into the hands of extreme primary electorates. First, we provide comprehensive historical evidence of the rise of safe seats in U.S. House districts and show that this trend coincides with the greater divergence of legislators' preferences not just *between* but also *within* parties. Second, we demonstrate that representatives from safer districts—and especially those from the GOP—have more ideologically extreme and divergent preferences across multiple alternative measures. We then use redistricting as a plausible source of exogenous variation in electoral competition and corroborate that seat safety causes ideological extremism. Finally, we explore the potential mechanisms behind this relationship, showing that the more-extreme ideological tendencies in safer seats are likely present due to a combination of more extreme electorates, primary challengers, and donor influence there, which can all undermine legislators' willingness to support their party agendas.

Keywords: Party Discipline; Legislator Preferences; Electoral Competition; Effective Governance

Words: 7800

Introduction

U.S. Congressional parties are more polarized than they have been in decades, yet they struggle to advance their agendas even when they control Congress and the Presidency. Most prominently, multiple Republican attempts to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act in 2017 failed despite the strong will of its leadership and a dearth of leverage among Senate Democrats. Moreover, even when there is considerable bipartisan interest in enacting programmatic legislation, as with comprehensive immigration reform, the legislation typically fails.

Similarly, despite relatively steady economic growth and the rising revenues over the past several decades, many observers have noted the inability of the U.S. government adequately to address the country's aging infrastructure, modernize its healthcare and immigration systems, or respond to new challenges such as climate change. Scholars and practitioners alike have suggested various explanations, most prominently the increasing ideological polarization between congressional parties and its interaction with other institutional features of the U.S. government such as multiple veto powers (e.g., Persily 2015). Here we focus on another, often overlooked, institutional source of government dysfunction related to declining party discipline. We argue that, given the robust role of primaries, the ability of party leaders to whip their members into line has been significantly diminished by the rising number of safe congressional districts (for parties) over the last fifty years.

We begin our analysis by providing comprehensive historical evidence on the share of safe seats in U.S. House districts. According to our assessment of the CLEA dataset supported by the expanded Cook Partisan Voting Index, we find that electoral competition between the Republican and Democratic parties has been, with a few fluctuations, almost steadily decreasing since the end

of the 19th century. We also discuss the possible implications of this trend which coincides with increased government dysfunction as measured by legislative gridlock, as well as decreases long-term orientation as evidenced by the declining investments in infrastructure and children (in contrast to adults) regardless of the party in power.

Much of the recent literature implies that the increasing *interparty* polarization in Congress has made the parties more disciplined and thus also impeded the legislative process which often requires bipartisanship (Binder 2015). If polarization between parties is the main institutional culprit, however, it is unclear why the supposedly more disciplined majority parties of recent years are actually *less* capable of passing even their own legislative agendas under unified government (Curry and Lee 2019). Unlike the prevailing accounts emphasizing *interparty* disagreements, we argue instead that the increase of *intraparty* disagreements hamper parties' ability to enact programmatic policies aimed at advancing the long-term interests of the national median voter.

First, we show that the decrease in electoral competition between parties in House districts—at least when it coexists with the robust system of primary elections—almost necessarily leads to the greater divergence of legislators' preferences not just between but also *within* parties, which endogenously weakens the disciplining capacity of party leaders to enact their agenda or programmatic policy more generally.

Second, as the main empirical focus of our paper, we demonstrate that representatives from safer districts—and especially those from the GOP—have more ideologically extreme and divergent preferences across a variety of alternative measures. We then use redistricting as a plausible source of exogenous variation in electoral competition and provide evidence that seat safety causes ideological extremism among both parties, corroborating our descriptive analysis.

Finally, we explore the potential mechanisms behind the relationship between seat safety and weak party discipline by comparing the behavior and preferences of voters, legislators, candidates, and donors of both parties in more and less competitive congressional districts. Overall, our results indicate that the more extreme ideological tendencies in safer seats are likely present due to a combination of more extreme electorates, primary challengers, and donor influence there, which can all undermine legislators' willingness to support their party agendas.

Our paper draws attention to the declining discipline within American parties despite their apparent divergence from one another. The growth of safe seats, combined with an augmented role for money in politics and primary challenges, has increased ideological divergence within the parties as well. This has made it harder for parties to govern in the interests of a broad swath of the electorate, as they face internal discord in aligning on the policies. Our paper aims to illuminate how intraparty disagreements may arrest the enactment of programmatic policy, even in an era of profound polarization.

Motivation: The Rise of Government Dysfunction in the United States

To further motivate our analysis, we provide an overview of the evidence documenting the rise of government dysfunction in the United States across a number of indicators. First, we consider legislative gridlock as a common measure of government effectiveness.[1] As Binder (2015) famously shows, gridlock has significantly increased over the last seventy years (see Figure A12). But since gridlock can result from a variety of causes including polarization, we also consider the extent to which majority parties are able to enact their own agendas across time. As Curry and Lee

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[1] While there can be a number of ways to approach the issue, here we rely on the most recent estimates by Binder (2015) which take into account the national salience of various issues.

(2019) convincingly demonstrate, parties have become less, not more, able to advance their agendas even when they control the presidency and a legislative majority (see Figure A13).

Of course, Congress's inability to pass major legislation does not necessarily imply that the government is unable to advance the long-term interests of the median voter. Even a productive legislature could enact inconsequential laws or, for that matter, harmful ones. Unfortunately, the literature to date has not quantified the broad welfare consequences of enacted legislation. To address this difficulty, we also consider two measures of government priorities that are *prima facie* indicative of a long-term orientation towards public welfare: the share of public spending on infrastructure, and public spending on children.[2] Compelling empirical studies about the effects of infrastructural investment to the contrary notwithstanding, Figures A14 and A15 document the steady relative decline of government spending on infrastructure and childhood education since 1970s. Over this timeframe, there has been a nearly 40 percent decline in infrastructural spending, from 1.1 to 0.7 percentage points of the GDP. And while the government has increased its spending on children from 0.6 to 1.9 percentage points of the GDP, this increase has not kept up with other government expenditures. The government spent three times more money on adults and the elderly than on children in 1960-1970s, and over four times more in 2010s.

These trends are especially striking given the general increase over the last 50 years in the U.S. in productivity, average income, standard of living, higher life expectance, and education

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[2] A substantial literature documents the high economic and social returns on the economy of infrastructural investment (Rogowski et al. 2020). Despite some potential for clientelism and corruption as with any government spending (Fair 2019) federal spending on infrastructure can indicate the U.S. Government's "future-orientedness." Government spending on children might be an even a better indicator of a long-term orientation. Spending on early childhood education and care can reduce social costs by improving health, and can promote economic growth by improving workforce quality. Echoing Heckman (2012), recent analyses of U.S. expenditure policies concludes that investing in quality early childhood development offers the best single way to reduce deficits and create better education, health, social and economic outcomes (Hendren and Sprung-Keyser 2020).

(Jones 2016). The U.S.'s relative decline in these investments is also noteworthy when compared to other countries: most advanced democracies have increased their spending and overall spent more on infrastructure and children spending over the last fifty years (Daly et al. 2020; Fair 2019). The outlier status of the United States on these matters would appear to support the popular conception that U.S. Congress has become less able to pass legislation aimed at the long-term interests of the median voter.

Effective Governance and Party Discipline

While these trends in legislative dysfunction have multiple causes, in this paper we will focus on (declining) *party discipline* defined as the ability of a political party to get its rank-and-file members to support the agenda of their party leadership. This ability rests on a variety of norms and institutions, from the rules governing candidate selection and campaign finance to the repertoire of rewards and punishments available to the party leadership. From the point of view of the leadership, party discipline implies picking the candidates that can both get (re)elected and vote according to the party platform. From the point of view of rank-and-file members, party discipline implies delegating some of your power to the leadership so that it can both help your (re)election and whip other members to back the policy platform you support (also see Aldrich and Rohde 2001).

Disciplined parties that face alternation in government by these means are motivated to cultivate and protect their reputations for policies that work and thus are arguably essential to responsible government. While voters cannot themselves coordinate on punishment or reward strategies, strong parties with good information and the right incentives can play this role. More disciplined parties, so motivated, are more likely than less disciplined ones to implement effective

policies and invest in projects that generate strong and inclusive economic growth, making most people better off in the long run. Without these incentives, politicians will more likely offer policies that favor narrow groups or jurisdictions at the expense of the public as a whole, or symbolic policies that have no economic benefits at all (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018).[3]

Institutions that motivate parties to offer policies aimed at the encompassing and long-term interests of the electorate, rest on fragile foundations. This is especially true in the U.S. where the institutional environment has been inhospitable to strong parties from the very start. Bicameralism, federalism, the separation of powers, and other sources of veto points all contribute to candidate-centered campaigning and the inability of the party leadership to deselect their elected members in Congress (Cox and McCubbins 2007; Mayhew 2004; Pearson 2015; Taylor et al. 2014).

The more recent democratic reforms over the last decades, including the McGovern-Fraser reforms and the McCain-Feingold campaign finance law, have weakened the parties even further (Persily 2015). These developments have spurred intraparty competition in the form of primary elections and the declining role of parties in campaign finance, all marking the further shift to a more individualized and fragmented political campaigning. Some scholars now aptly describe U.S. parties as "hollow" (Schlozman and Rosenfeld 2019), the apparent rise of partisanship notwithstanding.

While the exogenous institutional factors determining party discipline as described above are important, the ability of the party leaders to whip members and enact a coherent policy agenda also depends on the expected electoral fate of the individual members and its overlap with a party

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[3] In this respect, contrary to some other literature, we do not view the better provision of *local* public goods or constituency service per se as necessarily indicative of effective *national* governance.

as a whole. U.S. parties face stark trade-offs between maximizing their control of policy agenda versus their electoral majority in disciplining their rank-and-file members (Pearson 2015).

In district-based, plurality systems like the U.S., the ideal condition is for the median voter of each district to have the same economic position and interests as the median voter of the country as a whole (Carey and Shugart 1995; Lupia and McCubbins 2008). To the extent that district medians diverge, representatives will not delegate whipping authority to party leaders that could result in policies counter to local interests (Aldrich and Rohde 2001; Cox and McCubbins 2005). Party members want strong leaders only when strong leaders solve their coordination problems— tie their hands from pursuing myopic policies that would undermine a valued party brand name— but not when strong leaders might enforce policies that, however good for an electoral majority, would be bad for their median voter, and therefore for the candidate, in a particular district. Any increase of interdistrict ideological differences (or "geographic polarization") in plurality systems reduces competition between parties and undermines the median voter's alignment across districts.

Documenting the Rise of Safe Seats in the United States

How has such dynamic manifested itself in the United States across time? Overall, it appears that states and congressional districts have become less like one another in recent decades for a number of reasons. Partisan and bipartisan gerrymandering, the advent of majority-minority districts, urbanization that creates blue cities in red states, and "partisan (self-)sorting" have all played their parts in increasing geographic polarization (Rodden 2019). Relatedly, many scholars have documented the vanishing of marginal seats in U.S. House elections and its other possible causes (Abramowitz 2006; Ferejohn 1977; Mayhew 1974).[4] Below we provide an update to this evidence

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[4] Our argument is agnostic about the causes of rising seat safety if they are exogenous to the operation of Congress.

based on the new data from the Constituency-Level Elections Archive (CLEA), documenting that electoral competition between the Republican and Democratic parties has been almost steadily decreasing since the end of the 19th century.

Each point in Figure 1 indicates the proportion of competitive House elections in which the margin of victory between the two largest parties was less than 10% in that year. The advantage of this measure is that it is intuitive and available for all elections going back to at least 1872. The disadvantage is that it can be volatile due to redistricting and other institutional state and district idiosyncrasies. It also arguably does not show *ex-ante* competitiveness since all uncontested elections are assumed to be perfectly safe.

Figure 2 illustrates the proportion of safe (Republican or Democrat) and swing House seats in a particular year based on the Cook Partisan Voting Index (2019). Unlike the simple margin of victory in the previous chart, this index indicates an *ex-ante* competitiveness based on how strongly a particular district has been leaning Democratic or Republic compared to the nation as a whole. PVIs are calculated by comparing a congressional district's average Democratic or Republican Party share of the two-party presidential vote in the past two presidential elections to the national average share for those elections (e.g., the 2020 index is based on the 2016 and 2012 elections).[5]

Since both plots are based on the arbitrary threshold of 10 and 5 percent to define swing districts, we calculate and visualize a more general indicator of the margin of victory or the PVI of the median district in a particular year in Appendix (Figures A1 and A2). These figures indicate

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[5] The advantage of this measure is that it indicates *ex-ante* competitiveness based on the assumed partisan composition of various districts and thus it is less volatile than the previous measure based on the contemporaneous election results. Furthermore, it also allows comparison of the number of safe seats by partisanship in a straightforward way. The main disadvantage is that it is only available starting in 1990 and it mostly changes every four years (apart from some fluctuations related to redistricting). One may also dispute the assumption that the previous presidential elections are uniformly indicative of the underlying voter preferences across districts.

that, in 2016, 50% of all House elections had the margin of victory above 30% and the absolute PVI value of 12% (compared to the median margin of 23% and the absolute PVI of 7% in 1992).[6]

Still, one might wonder how much of the rise in government dysfunction is due to declining electoral competition or weaker party organizations as we claim. Other concurrent trends might be relevant, such as increases in inequality or immigration. While it is not possible to assess the causal effects of the declining electoral competition by looking solely at country-wide correlations over time, in this paper we test the potential mechanisms of this relationship with more finely-grained district-level data on the ideology and preferences of congressional candidates and representatives.

Figure 1: The Rise of Safe Seats in U.S. House Elections (1872-2016, CLEA)

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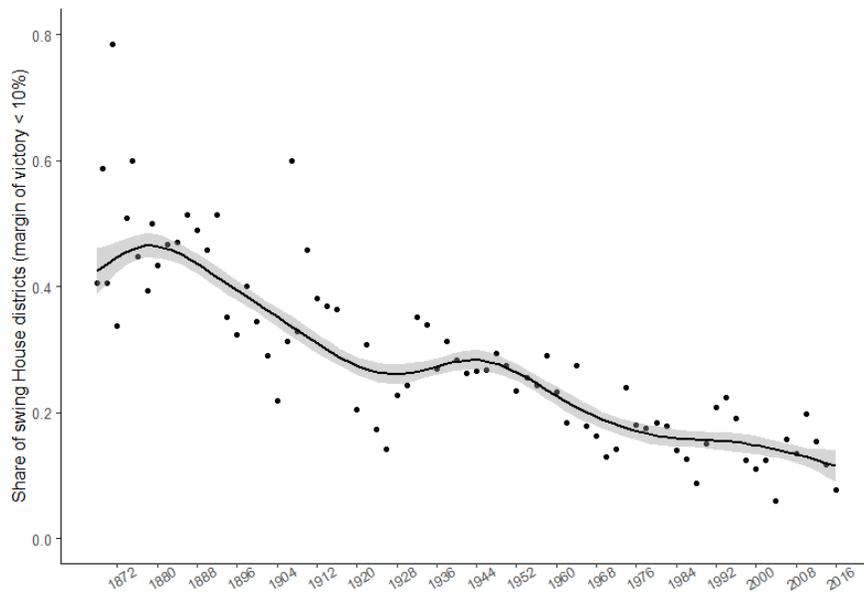
[6] Although other elections are beyond our paper's scope, it is worth nothing that one can see a somewhat similar decline of competitiveness in the Senate since the 1960s (see Figure A10).

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Figure 2: The Rise of Safe Seats in U.S. House Elections (1992-2020, Cook PVI)
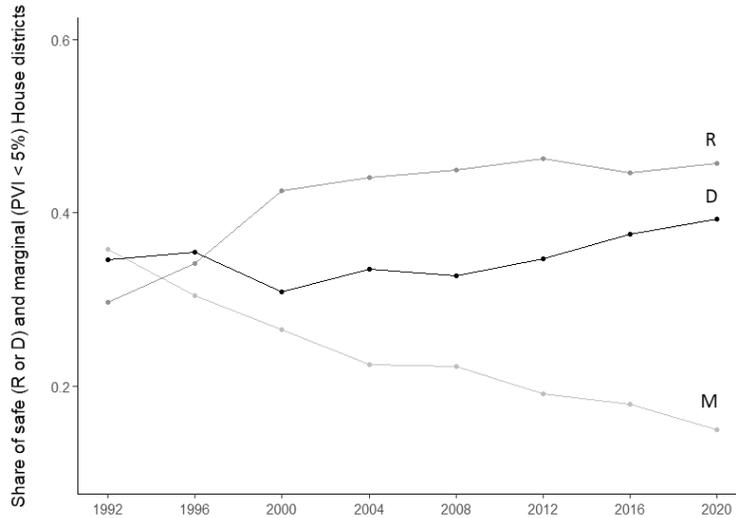
Theoretical Expectations: Electoral Competitiveness and Endogenous Party Discipline

The argument we advance in this paper is that, as a result of the growing number of safe seats in the United States House of Representatives, the *already exogenously weak U.S. parties may also start to weaken endogenously.* That is, when districts and thus the interests of their representatives increasingly diverge from one another, backbenchers become more likely to withhold authorization from their leaders.[7] Furthermore, when safe seats are combined with the pressures of intense primary competition and a largely under-regulated campaign finance system, they may also often play to outside and extreme interests who have a mobilizational advantage.[8]

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[7] It is worth noting that, as an important countertrend in the last several decades of the 20th century, the post-Civil Rights realignment has conversely contributed to the decrease of intraparty heterogeneity (Cox and McCubbins 2005). At the same time, party leaders have also arguably gained some power due to several deliberate changes in congressional rules and procedures such as the centralization of the committee assignment process (Theriault 2008).

[8] But safe seats need not undermine party discipline. When the conditions for intraparty competition are limited or when party leaders can punish wayward members and reward effective politicians with safer seats, safe seats can contribute to party discipline (as is often the case in the United Kingdom). Even in the U.S. context, one might conjecture that the rise of safe seats could result in fewer members who are "cross-pressured" between their parties and their districts (Theriault 2008). This reasoning assumes, however, that (i) the rise of more ideologically homogeneous, safer districts occurs alongside homogeneity *among* districts for the party and (ii) that the preferences of party leaders are better aligned with median voters in safer districts, both of which are unlikely. Moreover, since constituent preferences are only one source of influence on politicians, it is also unlikely that representatives of even equally safe districts will have similar preferences, given variation of interest groups and donors among those districts.

Between-party and within-party interests align the most when all of its members are elected from competitive districts. This stands in contrast to a counterfactual in which districts are divided into an almost equal number of competitive and safe seats,[9] yielding the following theoretical expectations (where the baseline expectation is the conventional between-party polarization story):

> **Hypothesis 0a [polarization]:** *A larger share of safe seats in the U.S. House is associated with a greater divergence of legislator preferences between parties*

> **Hypothesis 0b [indiscipline]:** *A larger share of safe seats in the U.S. House is associated with a greater divergence of legislator preferences within parties*

Since variation across time is limited to the number of congresses, as the empirical focus of our paper we consider the implications of our theory for the discipline-related legislator differences *within* each particular congress. We thus derive the following hypothesis about the divergent ideological preferences as a possible factor in party weakness at the House district level:

> **Hypothesis 1:** *Safer seats in the U.S. House are more likely to elect legislators with more extreme ideological preferences*

Our general argument is not party-specific, but we expect this relationship to be more pronounced among Republican legislators. Partisan (self-)sorting over the last several decades has given the Republican party a more favorable electoral geography, effectively disincentivizing leaders from appealing to the national median voter to win the elections (Hacker and Pierson 2006). Moreover, there is evidence of partisan differences in the responsiveness to donors (Kujala 2019) alongside other organizational asymmetries (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016), all of which may diminish

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[9] As can be seen from a simple visual model in Figure A11, compared to the state of the world of mostly competitive seats, the increase of safe seats would necessarily increase not only the ideological heterogeneity of districts between parties but also within parties. It is only when most seats are already safe, their further increase could potentially (but not necessarily) decrease the ideological differences within parties.

potential cross-pressures for moderation from Republican safe seat representatives (Hacker and Pierson 2006):

> **Hypothesis 2:** *The difference in legislators' preferences between more or less competitive districts is greater among Republicans than Democrats*

Scholars disagree as to how best to measure legislator preferences or their sources. Consequently, we also consider the ideological composition of voters and primary challengers, as well as campaign funding in more or less competitive districts, all of which can undermine party discipline under certain conditions.

Data and Methods

Measuring the preferences of legislators has remained a persistent challenge in the literature. The contours and definitions of conservative and liberal ideologies are hotly contested, as are the salient issues that motivate them in a particular context or time. As a result, over the past few decades, scholars have assembled several competing methods to measure legislator ideology.

These methods fall into three categories: vote-based metrics, donor-based metrics, and interest group-based metrics, each with advantages and drawbacks. Vote-based metrics, which rely on spatial representations based on weightings of congressional votes, bear the closest resemblance to our real-world quantity of interest. However, the reliance on vote-based scores confronts limitations (Bateman and Lapinski 2016). For one, the plethora of symbolic or inconsequential votes in Congress make vote-based metrics fairly noisy (Lee 2015). As further emphasized by Lee (2018), roll-calls can also exaggerate party unity because many important policy questions that divide party members might be not up for a vote and many votes are symbolic in as much as they cannot become law.

Alternatively, donor-based metrics utilize the revealed ideological appraisals of millions of American political contributors to map the similarities among candidates and create ideal points. These measures can be assembled for any candidate—not just ones that ultimately prevail in their elections. But interpreting these ideal points can prove difficult and their validity may depend on a particular point in time (Barber 2020).

Finally, interest group-based metrics rely on the scorecards put out by leading think tanks, lobbying groups, and unions. An advantage of these measures is that they are arguably based on more meaningful votes than roll-call based metrics. But these measures are also skewed toward the concerns of the particular interest groups.

To harness the advantages of each of these metrics and mitigate their drawbacks to the extent possible, we report results using multiple metrics. When reporting results on legislators, we use DW-NOM scores and adjusted Americans for Democratic Action Scores (Anderson and Habel 2009; Groseclose, Levitt, and Snyder 1999; Poole and Rosenthal 2001). When reporting results on candidates, we use CF Scores (Bonica 2014). We supplement our data on ideology with Cook PVI scores to measure the competitiveness of a district (with negative/positive values indicating a Democratic/Republican lean) and campaign finance records from the Center for Responsive Politics. For additional details and sources, see Appendix.

Safe Seats, Party Indiscipline, and Ideological Extremism

Ideological Divergence Between and Within Parties Across Time

Echoing the literature on polarization, we find a strong and gradual separation of the parties over past half-century, as they become increasingly ideological and increasingly extreme. At first blush, one might expect that this polarization ought to contribute to *more disciplined* parties: as the

party's ideology grows increasingly distinct, party leaders should be able to use that common vision as a mechanism for unity. However, an important but oft-overlooked caveat to our understanding of polarization is that the parties remain internally heterogeneous.

Figure 3: Ideological Composition of Congress Across Time
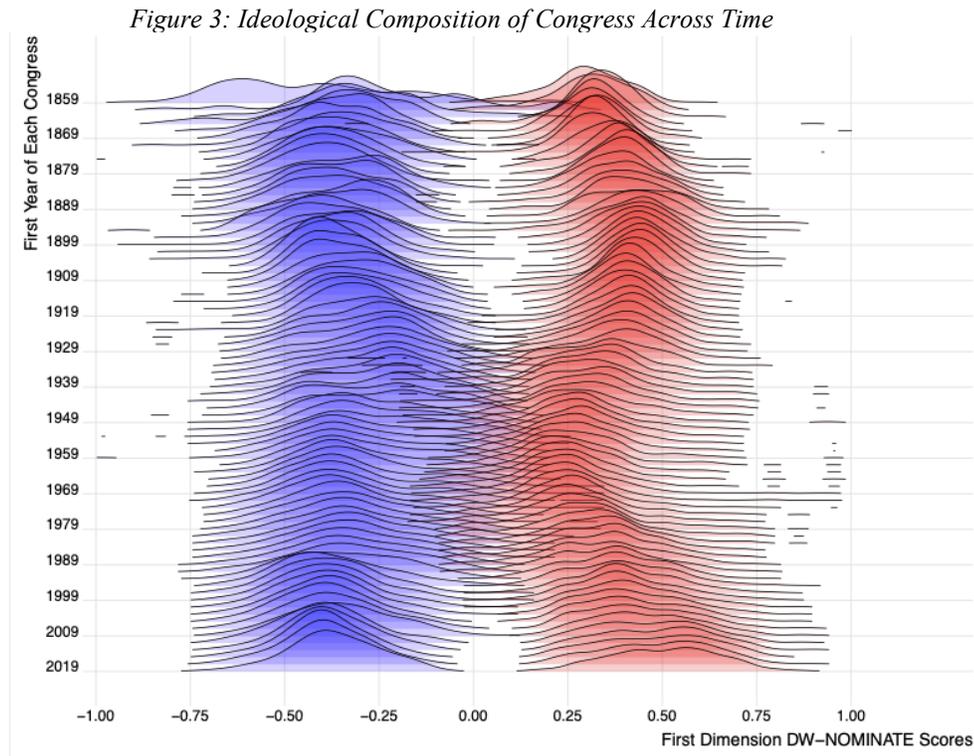
As Figure 3 shows, the gap *between* the parties is considerably smaller than the gap between the extremes *within* each party. Despite intense scholarly and public debate over polarization, the ideological distance within parties is bigger than the ideological distance between them. This makes it hard to craft policy that all members of a party can support. When parties are so weak, even the presence of moderates like the Problem Solvers Caucus or the Gang of Eight cannot coalesce around the floor median because the members on the extremes function as veto players. As previously mentioned, the failure of immigration reform under subsequent administrations illustrates this problem as well.

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Next, we proceed by examining the relationship between seat safety and weak party discipline at the district level. Seat safety, we expect, increases legislators' vulnerability to primary challengers, increases candidate susceptibility to donor influence, and produces ideologically more extreme legislators. Each of these factors diminishes the control that party leaders can exercise over back-benchers, thereby contributing to weaker party discipline.

District Competitiveness and Candidate Extremism

Congressional extremism originates at least in part in the proliferation of safe seats. The ideology of voters, candidates, and congressional districts offer strong evidence of this phenomenon. As the Republican advantage in a congressional district swells, so does the number of "very conservative" voters, and the ideology of the mean district voter trends rightward (see Appendix: Figures A5-7). The ideology of "serious candidates" who run in Republican primaries (as measured by CF Scores) varies with the PVI of their constituency, as does the ideology of the elected legislators (as measured by DW-Nom scores). This is true across time as well—ADA scores from 1990-2008 show that PVI corresponds to legislator ideology, particularly among Republicans.

Ideological scores by district reveal a clear pattern. Figures 4 and A4 plot the ideological scores of all legislators between 1990-2008, as well as their smoothed conditional means overall and for each party using generalized additive models. Table A1 presents regression results on the same data. They show that, across time, legislators from safe seats are more extreme than their competitive seat counterparts.[10] This pattern is especially strong for Republicans, who demonstrate sharper ideological responsiveness to seat safety, but it is true among Democrats as well.

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[10] While higher DW-NOM scores may also be indicative of higher party unity, for the purposes of our argument it is sufficient to show that legislators from safer and marginal districts have distinct preferences.

Figure 4: Legislator Ideology by Seat Safety (DW-NOM)
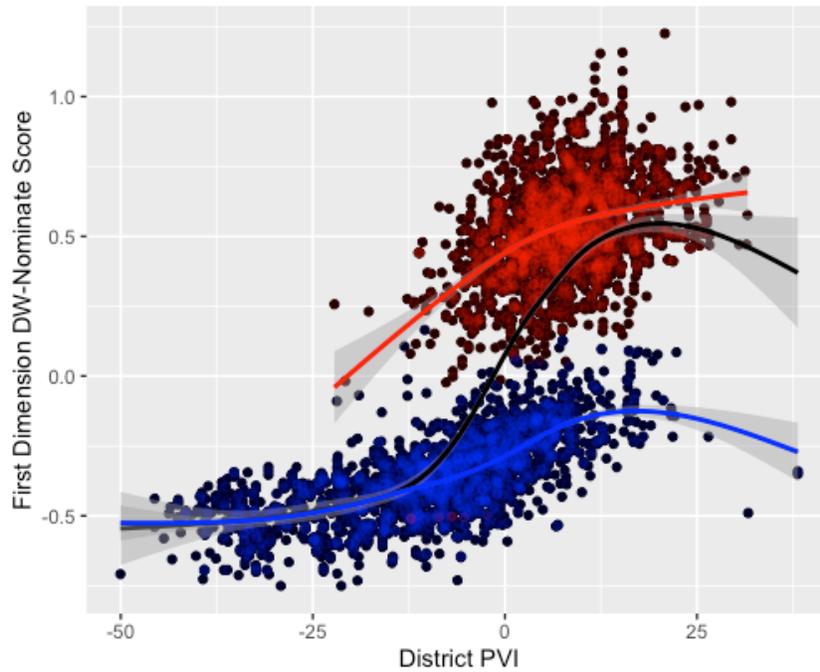
NOTE: The red/blue line indicates smoothed conditional means for Republicans/Democrats and the black line indicates smoothed conditional means for all legislators.

However, establishing that safe seats cause ideological extremism proves more challenging. The analysis posed above is entirely observational, and therefore potentially subject to confounding effects. To make such a stark claim about the relationship between electoral competition and legislator ideology, it would be appropriate to incorporate more experimental or quasi-experimental evidence.[11]

Exploiting Redistricting as an Exogenous Source of Rising Seat Safety

Every ten years, incumbents are forced into a redistricting cycle, where the partisan lean of their district may change as a result of shifting borders. Because redistricting is at least in part an

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[11] Marshaling such evidence, however, proves difficult. Because we are studying real-world outcomes of significant importance over the lives of millions, it would be difficult to design and implement a field experiment. We cannot and should not, for example, attempt to randomize the districts in which candidates run. To do so, in addition to being logistically difficult, would be ethically suspect in the manner in which it would interfere with democratic elections.

exogenous shock to these candidates—and one they can rarely fully prepare for—we are able to isolate a causal effect of augmenting seat safety on incumbents' ideology.

In particular, we choose to study the most recent round of redistricting in 2010. We examine legislators' first dimension DW-NOMINATE scores in the Congress prior to their election and contrast it with their scores in the Congress that follows redistricting. We are able to treat redistricting as an exogenous shock, because there is no reason to believe that legislators' prospective ideological shift should cause them to be redistricted. Put differently, our methodology relies on two suppositions: that redistricting cannot be caused by the ideological shift that occurs in its wake, and further that traits that made one more likely to be redistricted are not correlated with the likelihood of an ideological shift. The first point is self-evident: since redistricting occurs *before* our measurement of the ideological shift, it is impossible that the latter event caused the former. The second assumption is slightly more complex. While there is little extant evidence in the literature to suggest that particular groups of legislators were both more likely to be redistricted and more likely to shift their ideologies, we control for several demographic traits to ensure our effect is not confounded.

We are not the first to consider the potential for redistricting as a natural experiment. Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2000) use redistricting to study the personal vote as part of the incumbency advantage. In line with our research question, Carson et al. (2007) use redistricting to establish a link between redistricting (in the abstract) and polarization. But they lack the data on electoral competition to argue that safe seats are to blame, rather than a general intertemporal trend toward polarization (which would also explain their findings). Sekhon and Titiunik (2012) provide bounds on when and where redistricting can be used as a natural experiment. They establish two criteria. We believe we meet the first condition—the exogeneity criterion—with the design

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outlined above. We also meet the second condition, which states that the data must be responsive to the quantity of interest, because we are able to extract the exact change in ideology over time, and therefore can isolate the effect of district characteristics on our primary outcome of interest.

Table 1 displays the results of an OLS regression with robust standard errors that investigates the impact of a change in seat safety on legislators' post redistricting (2013-2014), controlling for the legislator's pre-redistricting ideology (2009-2010). The selection of 2009-2010 as our measure of pre-redistricting ideology rather than 2011-2012 is intentional for two reasons. First, since redistricting plans are released in the middle of the congressional term, only roughly half of the time period would actually fall in the pre-redistricting period. Second, and more importantly, if voters engage in any form of retrospective voting, then we must consider legislative incentives to be driven by the following electoral district, rather than the previous one.

Table 1: Effect of Redistricting on Incumbent Ideology (from 2009-2010 to 2013-2014)

	Dependent variable:		
	Post Ideology		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Pre Ideology	0.912***	0.902***	0.903***
	(0.020)	(0.023)	(0.022)
PVI Change	0.019***	0.019***	0.019***
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Female		−0.012	−0.012
		(0.030)	(0.030)
Age		−0.002*	−0.002*
		(0.001)	(0.001)
Log(Total Receipts)			−0.003
			(0.019)
Constant	0.024**	0.147*	0.187
	(0.011)	(0.076)	(0.293)
Robust SEs	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	332	332	332
Adjusted R^2	0.821	0.822	0.821

NOTE: All models are OLS regressions with robust standard errors given in parentheses.

According to the models, a one-point change in PVI (i.e., a one percentage point shift toward either party) is associated with a one percentage point change in a legislator's ideology, as measured by DW-NOMINATE scores. The addition of covariates does not meaningfully change the estimated effect of the PVI change, suggesting little confounding effect at least across demographic lines. As a result, based on both our extensive time series data on legislator ideology and our natural quasi-experiment, we see suggestive evidence that safe seats may *lead* to greater extremism among their representatives.

Ideological Extremism in Safe Seats: Exploring Mechanisms

What explains more-extreme ideological tendencies in safe seats? We consider three possibilities. For one thing, safe seat legislators face more extreme electorates—not just across parties, but within their own parties. Second, turnout is lower in primaries, amplifying the voices of voters on the fringes. Third, candidates in safe seats depend more heavily on out-of-district donors.

Constituent Ideology by Seat Safety

If politicians represent the interests and beliefs of their constituents, even simple "folk theories" of democracy should predict that legislators respond to extreme constituents. Evaluating constituent ideology, however, is hard to do. We use the five-point measure of ideology embedded in the 2016 CCES survey to estimate mean constituent ideology in the last general election.

Figure A5 suggests that mean ideology of congressional districts in 2016 corresponded with the PVI of the district. However, the mean does not capture the distribution of ideologies. Mean ideology alone cannot differentiate between a (seemingly moderate) safe Democratic district populated by moderate Democrats and one with a mixture of moderate Republicans and extreme Democrats. Consequently, we also examine the proportion of voters who identified as either "very

conservative" or "very liberal" in Figure A6. As Figures A5 and A6 illustrate, safe seats do in fact have more extreme voters than their more-competitive counterparts. Furthermore, as expected, this relationship is especially apparent among the GOP.

Taken together, these data show that legislators in safe seats rely disproportionately on support from extreme constituents. Even if safe seat legislators wanted to embrace the median voter in their party, the safety of their seats pushes them to respond to primary voters.

Primaries and Intraparty Competition

Primaries introduce intense intraparty competition. Instead of offering programmatic competition with the opposing party, primaries force incumbents to differentiate themselves from fellow partisans and often even the party's national platform. This makes them fundamentally antithetical to party discipline. Primaries force candidates to promote themselves rather than their party brand.

Table 2: Probability of a Primary Challenge by PVI

	Dependent variable:			
	Probability of Primary Challenge			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Relative PVI	0.010***	0.009***	0.010***	0.009***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)
Republican	0.067***	0.056***	0.067***	0.056***
	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.019)	(0.019)
Constant	0.258***	0.160***	0.258***	0.160***
	(0.016)	(0.027)	(0.019)	(0.028)
Fixed effects	No	Yes	No	Yes
Clustered SEs	No	No	Yes	Yes
Observations	3,618	3,618	3,618	3,618
R^2	0.032	0.080	0.032	0.080
Adjusted R^2	0.032	0.077	0.032	0.077
Note:				*p**p***p<0.01

NOTE: All models are OLS regressions with robust standard errors given in parentheses. Where indicated, standard errors are clustered by candidate and FEs are by year. Relative PVI refers to the absolute PVI value.

As Table 2 shows, safe seat incumbents are more susceptible to primary challenges. Between 2000 and 2018, a one-point increase in the absolute value of the PVI is associated with a one-percent increase in the likelihood that the incumbent will face a primary challenge. The threat of a primary challenge is also more common among Republicans than Democrats: Republican incumbents are 5-7% more likely to face a primary challenge than their similarly situated non-Republican counterparts. Safe seat incumbents, and particularly among the GOP, are thus disproportionately likely to face primary challengers and unlikely to face serious general election contests.

As Figure A16 also shows, non-incumbents who win party primaries are more extreme than incumbents among both Republicans and Democrats. When incumbents are forced to compete against primary challengers, legislators have incentives to out-flank their more extreme challengers. Safe seat legislators who face heightened primary competition and also diminished general election competition have fewer electoral reasons to moderate.

Campaign Finance and Reliance on Outside Donors

Another mechanism to explain extremism in safe seats is campaign finance. Conventional wisdom holds that safe seat legislators have less need to fundraise, but recent scholarship has complicated this picture. Schuster (2020) finds that legislators who did not face a general election challenge (i.e., those in safe seats) spent *more* money over the course of the congressional cycle than those running in contested elections. Safe incumbents "are likely to maintain large staffs and begin building war chests to prepare for future political battles, raise funds for their party, and donate to candidates and committees" (Schuster 2020).

The sources of safe seat funding undermine party discipline. Of course, both Republicans through the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) and Democrats through the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) raise and spend hundreds of millions of dollars each cycle. However, party leaders' primary interest in giving money to candidates is arguably to win the election, not to create loyal members or establish a coherent legislative agenda.

The staff of party campaign professionals aim to elect as many party members as they can. As Figure A17 illustrates, investments are almost exclusively concentrated in competitive districts. In the 2018 cycle, the average Democrat in a seat rated as "even" by Cook Political received $1 million. The average Democrat in a seat with a PVI rating of 10 or greater received nothing.

In the ideal condition for representation, electoral funding would flow from ordinary voters in the district. However, this does not appear to be the case in safe seats. Figure A8 uses campaign finance records to illustrate the proportion of funds that originate out of district for all candidates in the 2018 cycle who raised more than $10,000. In Democratic safe seats, much of the money flows from out of district. But as Gimpel, Lee, and Pearson-Merkowitz (2008) show, out-of-district money generally flows to "ideologically distinct extremists." Safe seat Democrats relying on national donors might cultivate profiles that are differentiated from the party's priorities. Part of these differences between partisan safe seats may stem from demographics: some districts have more rich donors than others. But regardless of the cause, the resulting effects on political competition are clear: Democratic safe seats predispose their members of Congress to play to a more ideologically extreme audience in order to cultivate out-of-district donors.

Figure A9 also plots the total funding from corporate PACs received by 2018 incumbents, up to June 2018 (around the end of the primary season) according to data from MapLight based on FEC records. Republicans—and particularly Republicans in safe seats—rely more on donations

from corporate PACs. Corporate donations reinforce already-strong Republican Party predisposition toward low corporate tax.

Campaign finance pushes weak parties toward their extremes. Individual safe-seat Democratic candidates find their own donors and fall out of step with the district and the party. Safe seat Republicans adopt ultra-conservative economic policies to the right of their district's their voters. For both Democrats and Republicans, the lack of funds flowing from party coffers limits central party influence on safe seat candidates.

Conclusion

The number of safe U.S. House districts has risen steadily over the last century with important implications for party discipline and governance. By the 2010s, only twenty percent of Congressional district were competitive in general elections. We have argued that this may have contributed to widespread government dysfunction marked by some of the highest levels of legislative gridlock in U.S. history.

Safe seats by themselves need not corrode party discipline; it is the combination of safe seats and primaries that have turned control of parties' agendas over to extreme groups in the districts and the donors that support them. Recent commentary on American politics often mistakes this disfunction as a product of strong partisanship. Parties' attention to divisive issues and negative campaigning occurs instead because they are incapable of whipping their members to support moderate policies that most voters prefer (Cox and Rodden 2019).

The stakes are high. E. E. Schattsneider saw why undisciplined political parties undermine democratic accountability: parties, and not individual politicians, give voters choices between policy programs that can be implemented and evaluated by voters (Baron and Ferejohn 1989;

Schattschneider 1942). Without disciplined parties that can enact a program, voters face insurmountable information and coordination problems. Voters can send signals of approbation or discontent, but solo politicians, accountable to disparate groups across multiple constituencies, cannot credibly commit to any national course of action.

We document a critical way in which safe seats may undermine party discipline: by producing legislators with increasingly divergent preferences who have to respond to more extreme electorates, primary challengers, and donors. Most of these dynamics apply to both parties, but they are especially pronounced for the GOP. The number of safe seats and the ensuing inability of party leaders to whip their backbenchers can help explain why, despite high partisan polarization, majority parties have been unable to pass legislation that would benefit most Americans.

Our evidence on the connection between safe seats, ideological extremism, and party indiscipline is not without limitations. But our hope is that this paper will stimulate further examination of the causes and consequences of preference divergence not just between but also within American political parties.[12] Future research can elaborate on the mechanisms behind the associations uncovered here, as well as identify other sources of exogeneous variation in electoral competition and/or party discipline. Our analysis also generates insights for the burgeoning literature on the electoral fates of more or less ideologically extreme congressional candidates. As recently documented by Utych (2020) the electoral penalty faced by extreme candidates has gradually disappeared. While in line with our account, future research might benefit from examining whether and how this relationship varies by seat safety (also see Hall 2015).

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[12] While our paper focuses on party discipline in Congress, for instance, it is in line with the recent evidence documenting the increase of intraparty polarization in the electorate (Groenendyk, Sances, and Zhirkov 2020).

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Appendix

Data Sources

Constituency-Level Elections Archive (CLEA) (http://www.electiondataarchive.org/)

To produce Figure 1 and measure ex-post competitiveness, I calculate the share of elections at time t in which the margin of victory of any of the two major parties (D or R) was more than 10%. Note that, for the purposes of this analysis, uncontested elections were assumed to be perfectly safe (100% margin of victory); and the rare third-party victories or at-large elections were omitted. For details on the construction of Cook Partisan Voting Index (PVI) as a measure of ex-post electoral competitiveness in Figure 2, see https://cookpolitical.com/pvi-0.

- Data on DW-Nominate scores come from https://voteview.com/

- CF scores come from Adam Bonica's Data on Ideology, Money in Politics, and Elections (DIME) available at https://data.stanford.edu/dime

- Adjusted ADA scores come from Anderson and Habel (2009) available at https://www.jstor.org/stable/25791958

- Data on campaign finance and spending come from the Center for Responsive Politics (https://www.opensecrets.org/)
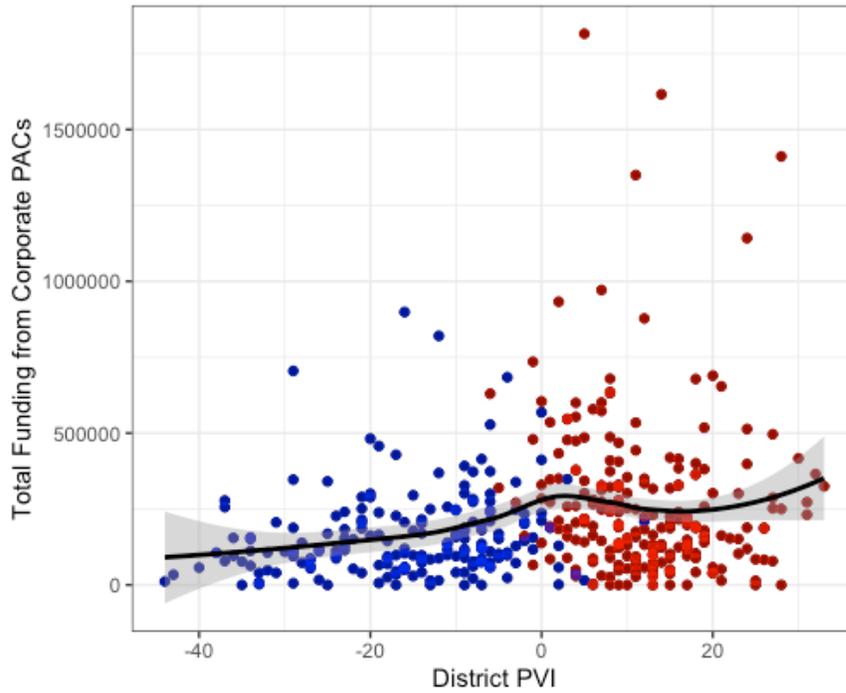
Figure A1: The Decline of Electoral Competitiveness in U.S. House Elections (1868-2016, CLEA)
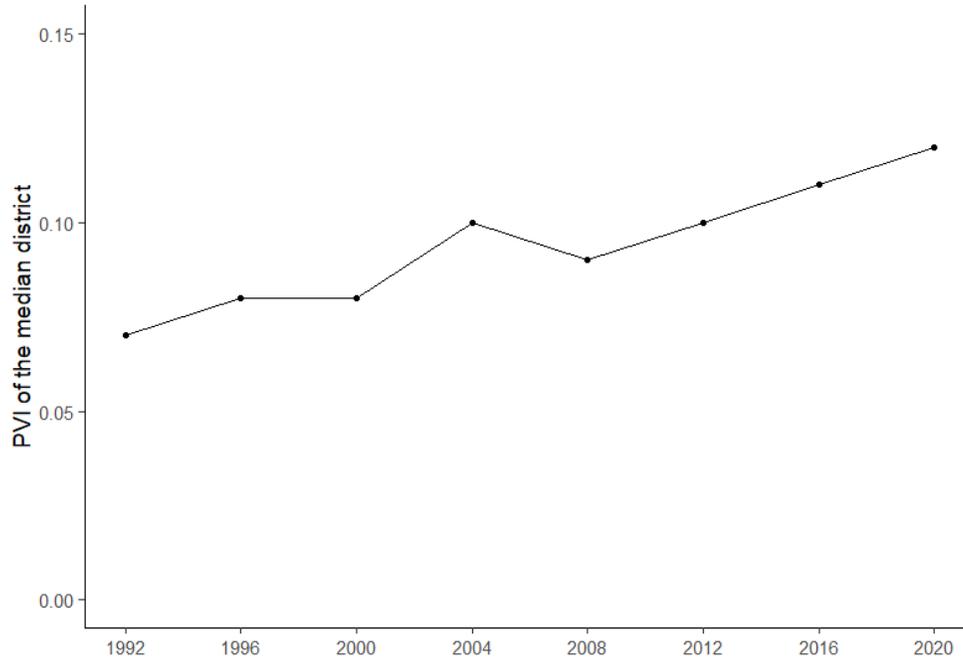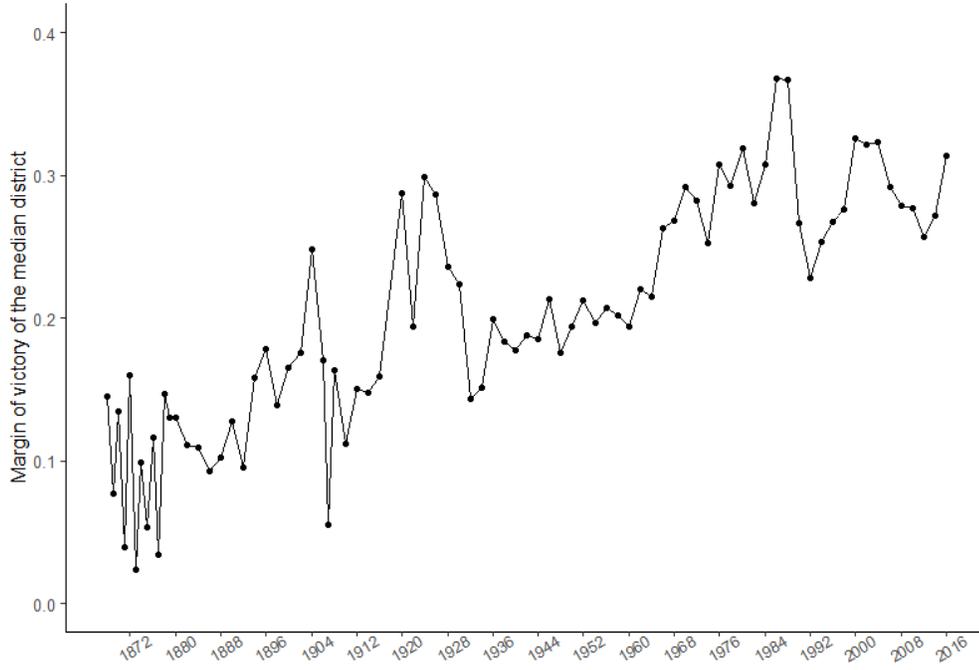
Figure A3: Ideological Composition of Congress Over Time (Adjusted ADA Scores)
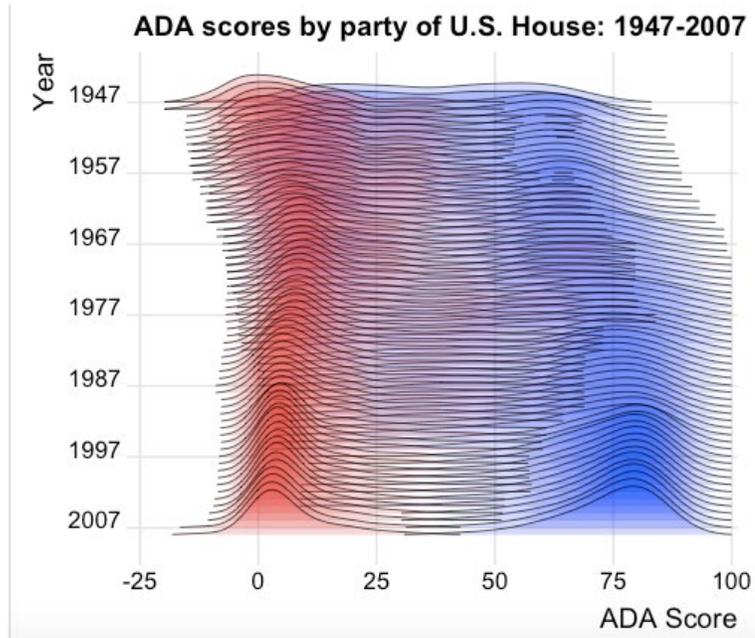
Figure A4: Legislator Extremity by Seat Safety (DW-Nominate)
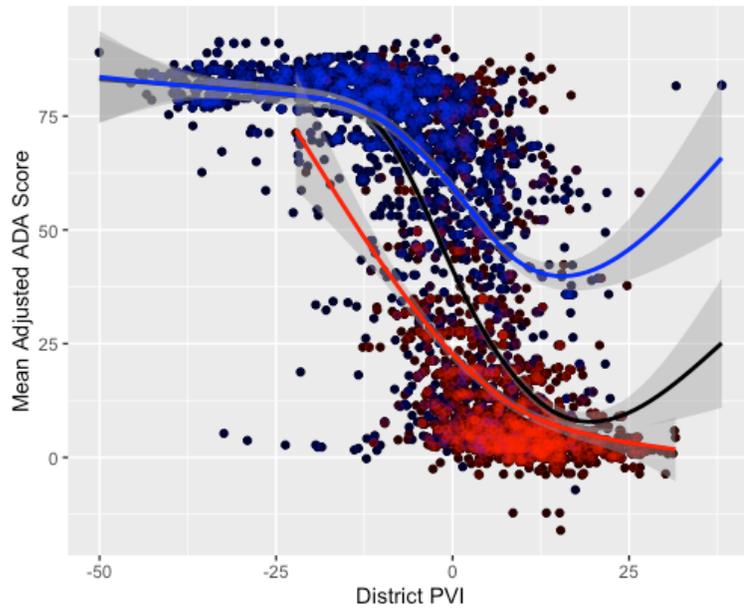
NOTE: The red line indicates smoothed conditional means for Republicans, the blue line indicates smoothed conditional means for Democrats, and the black line indicates smoothed conditional means for all legislators.

Figure A5: Mean Constituent Ideology by PVI
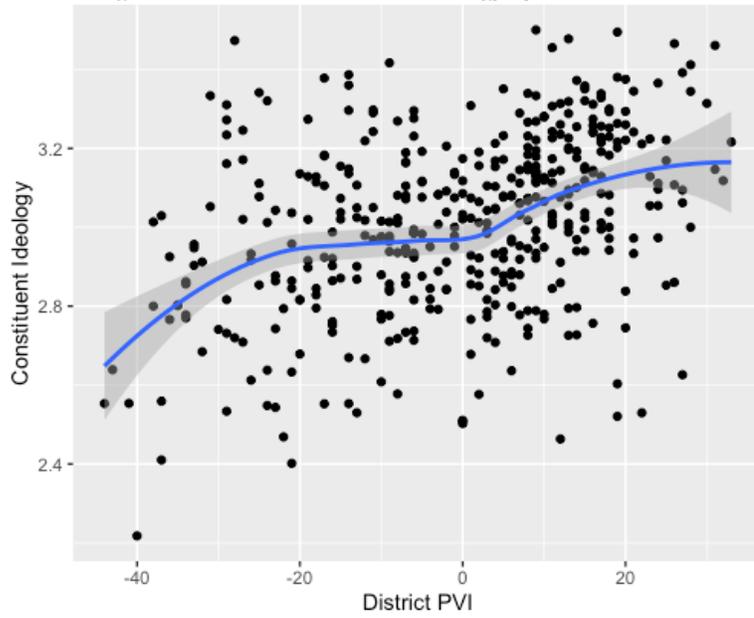
Figure A6: Very Conservative by PVI
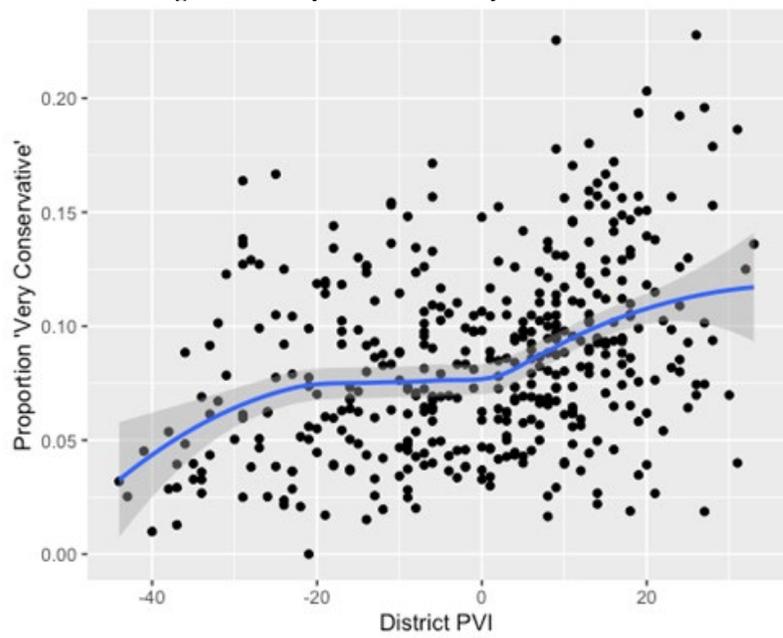
Figure A7: Very Liberal by PVI
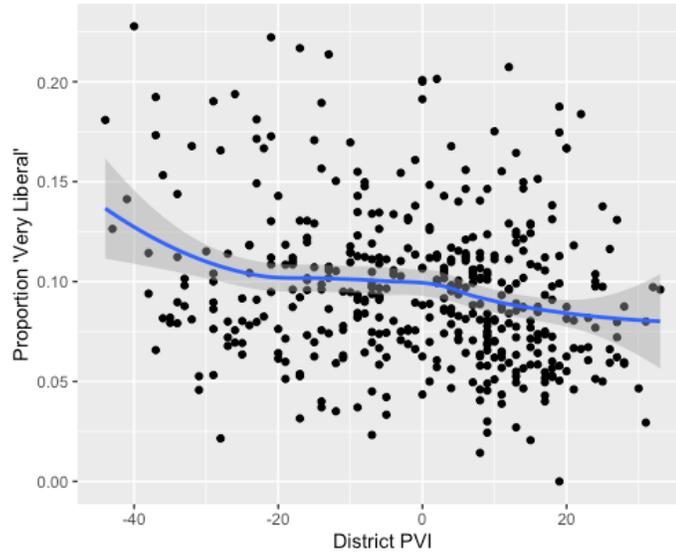
Table A1: Legislator Extremity by Seat Safety (DW-NOM)

	Dependent variable:			
	First Dimension DW-NOM			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
PVI	0.008***	0.008***	0.008***	0.008***
	(0.0002)	(0.0002)	(0.0004)	(0.0004)
Republican	0.695***	0.693***	0.695***	0.693***
	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.038)	(0.039)
PVI*Republican	0.005***	0.004***	0.005	0.004
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.003)	(0.003)
Constant	-0.281***	-0.329***	-0.281***	-0.329***
	(0.004)	(0.008)	(0.007)	(0.011)
Fixed effects	No	Yes	No	Yes
Clustered SEs	No	No	Yes	Yes
Observations	4,187	4,187	4,187	4,187
R^2	0.892	0.898	0.892	0.898
Adjusted R^2	0.892	0.897	0.892	0.897

*p**p***p<0.01

NOTE: All models are OLS regressions with robust standard errors given in parentheses. Where indicated, standard errors are clustered by candidate and fixed effects are by year.

Figure A8: Which Candidates Rely on Out-of-District Funding?
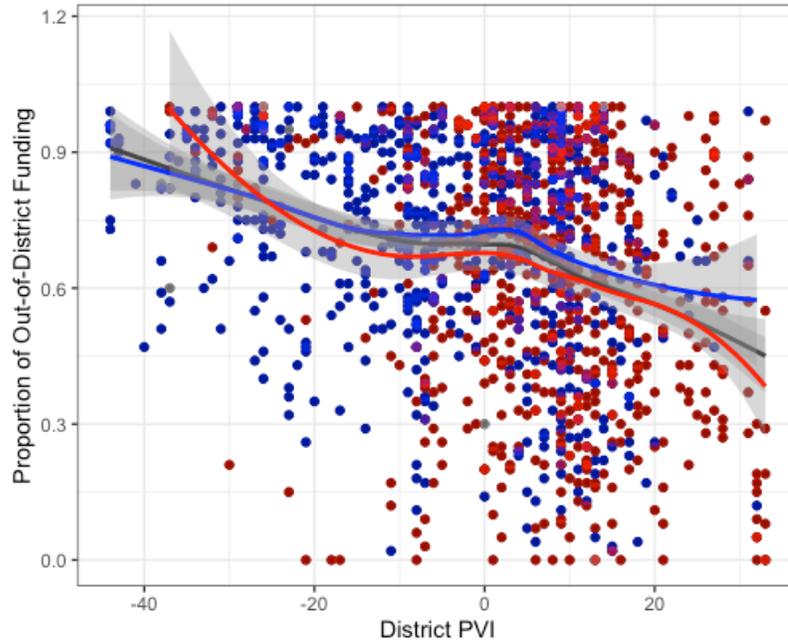
Figure A9: Which Candidates Rely on Corporate PAC Donations?
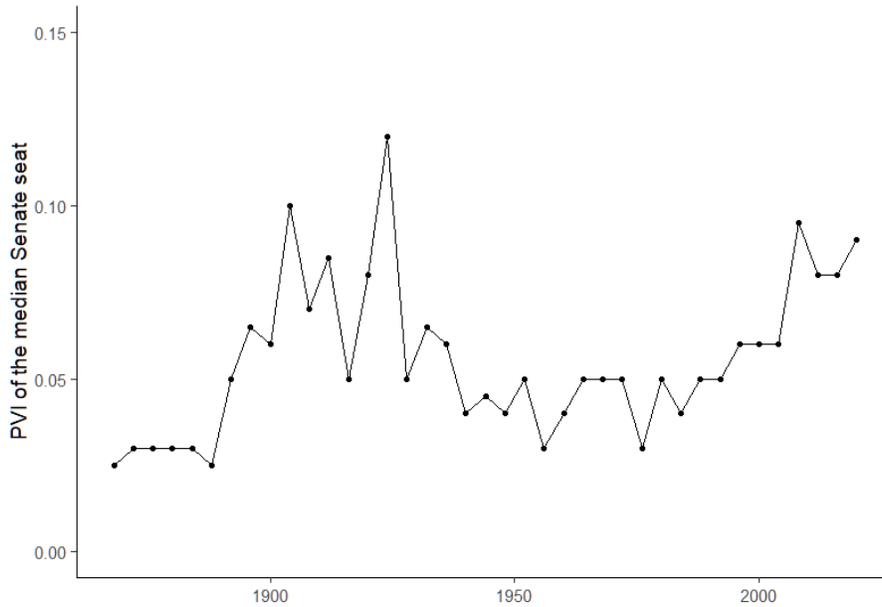
Figure A10: The Decline of Electoral Competitiveness in U.S. Senate Elections (1868-2020, Cook |PVI|)
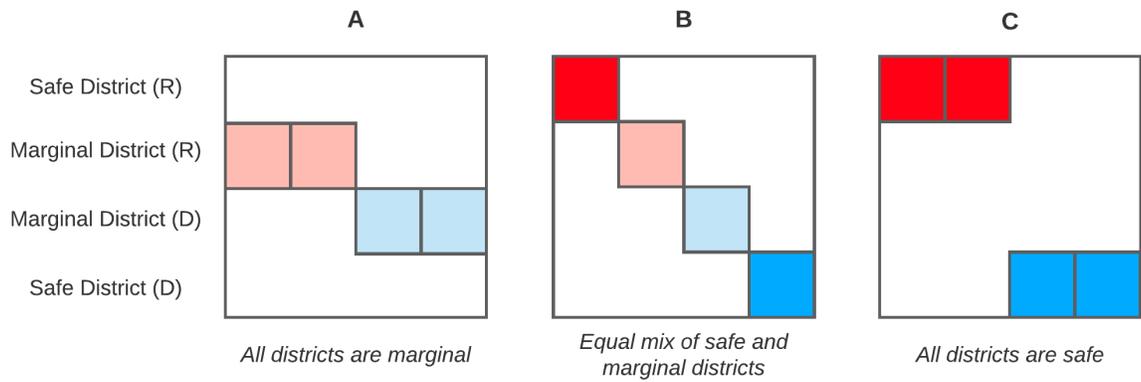

*Figure A11: The Hypothetical Distribution of Partisanship Across Districts*

A	B	C
All districts are marginal	*Equal mix of safe and marginal districts*	*All districts are safe*

NOTE: All scenarios assume the same population with equal R and D preferences who can be sorted into either marginal or safe partisan districts. Scenario B maximizes heterogeneity both between and within parties. While the transition from Scenario A and B increases district differences both between and within parties, the transition from Scenario B and C only increases district differences between parties.

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Figure A12: Frequency of Legislative Stalemate (1948-2016). Adopted from Binder (2018).
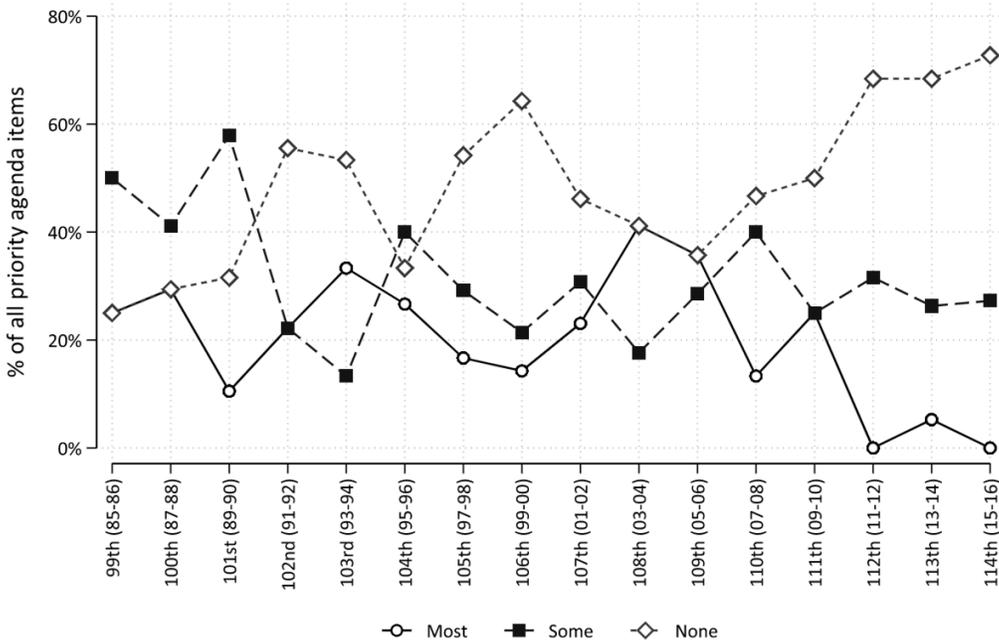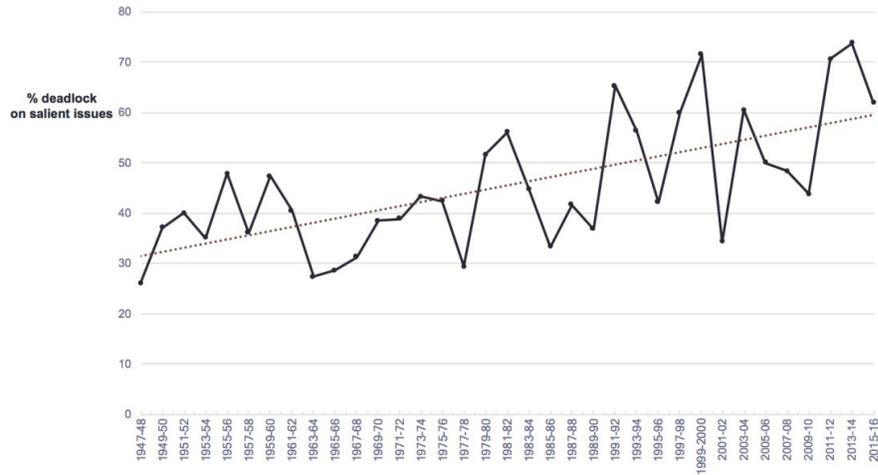
Note: The 99th, 107th, 112th, and 113th congresses featured split party control of the House and Senate. The combined agenda items of both parties are included in these tallies.

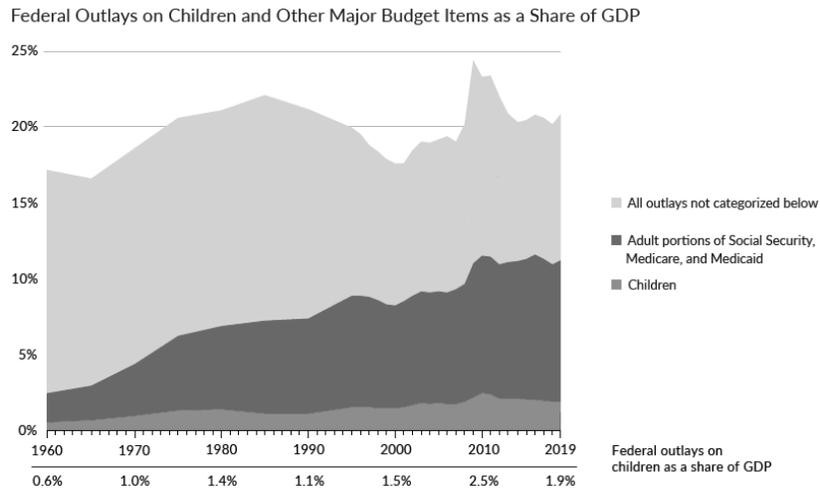*Figure A14: U.S. Children Spending (1960-2019). Adopted from Daly et al. (2020).*

Federal Outlays on Children and Other Major Budget Items as a Share of GDP

■ All outlays not categorized below

■ Adult portions of Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid

■ Children

Federal outlays on children as a share of GDP

1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2019
0.6%	1.0%	1.4%	1.1%	1.5%	2.5%	1.9%

Figure A15: U.S. Infrastructure Spending (1950-2017). Adopted from Fair (2019).

Total Infrastructure/GDP (T/Y) 1950--2017
Change 2017-1969=-0.450, Percent Change=-0.385
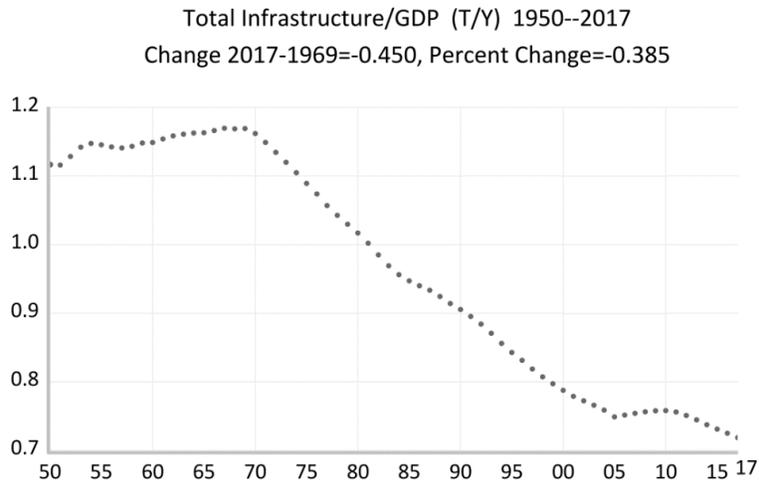
Figure A16: Distribution of Primary Victors' Ideology Over Time by Party
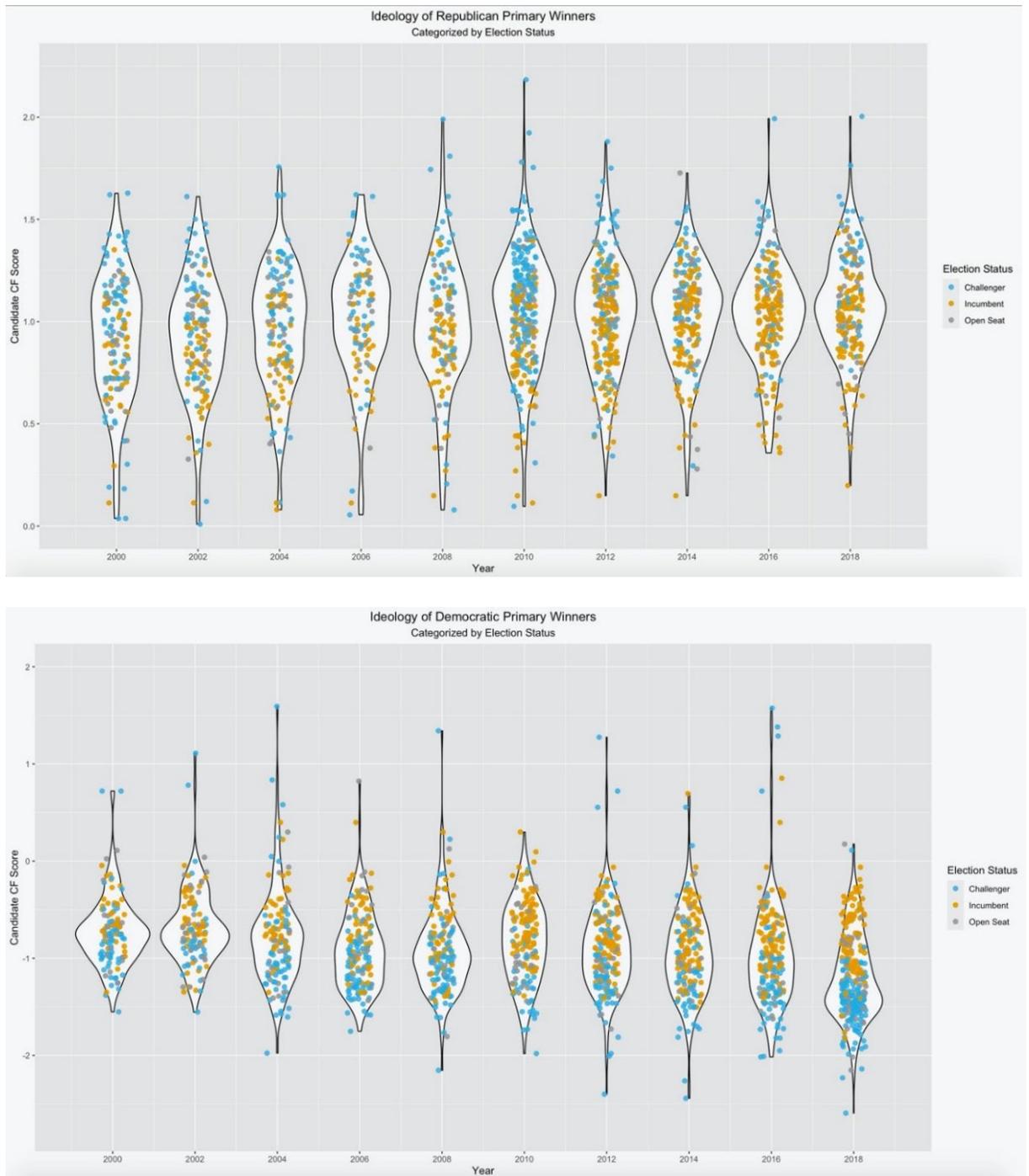
Figure A17: DCCC and NRCC Spending in the 2018 Cycle by PVI