

The Elusive Quest for Convergence

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ABSTRACT

Does American political representation work as predicted by theory? On average, political candidates diverge considerably in their ideological positioning, but do they diverge less on issues of particular salience to their local constituents? We combine data on congressional roll call votes, electoral outcomes, district demographics, and substantive information about bills to search for convergence in the places we would most expect to find it. Despite the predictions of prominent models, legislators diverge just as much even when their constituents have strong interests in a particular policy area. These results provide new insights into policymaking and political representation, and they help distinguish between different theoretical explanations for why candidate positions diverge.

Keywords: Elections; political representation; legislatures

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Previous work has shown that Democratic and Republican legislators in the United States significantly diverge from one another, on average, but perhaps this divergence primarily takes place on relatively unimportant issues where voters lack strong opinions. In this paper, we search for convergence in Congress by looking for it where it matters most and where we would most expect to find it — important policy areas where a constituency has strong preferences. Even after searching as thoroughly as possible in the most probable places, we find little evidence of convergence.

Despite the influential prediction that two office-motivated candidates will converge to the preferences of the median voter (Downs, 1957), empirical research has uncovered significant divergence in American legislatures (e.g., Ansolabehere *et al.*, 2001; Lee *et al.*, 2004). Numerous theories have been developed to explain the failure of the median voter prediction (e.g., Alesina, 1988; Groseclose, 2001; Wittman, 1983), and some of these theories predict that candidate platforms will diverge less when voters care more about a particular policy area. Therefore, we assemble data for the U.S. House of Representatives and test whether partisan divergence decreases when districts have strong interests in a particular issue area. In doing so, we test whether convergence appears when it matters most and where we would most expect to find it. We also address Fearon’s criticism of existing roll call studies that “no account is taken of the fact that politicians almost surely put more weight on constituent interests on issues that their constituents care a lot about” (1999, p. 66). Our empirical strategy also allows us to distinguish between different theories of divergence and provide evidence on which theoretical mechanisms may be most relevant in the modern U.S. Congress.

In the subsequent sections, we describe our data, measures, and empirical design. We describe our proxies for district interests and our measures of roll call representation in narrow issue areas. We estimate partisan divergence using a regression discontinuity (RD) design and test whether issue-specific divergence decreases when districts have strong preferences in a particular policy domain. We apply this test across eight different issue areas — agriculture, civil rights, defense, education,

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energy, public transportation, senior issues (i.e., Social Security and Medicare), and welfare. Divergence is substantively large in every policy area examined and does not shrink even in the extreme scenarios where we would expect the greatest degree of convergence. For our primary analyses, we focus on a recent era (2003–2010) where we have the richest data, but in the Appendix we also analyze previous eras going back to 1953, and we find some evidence of less divergence on important issues in an earlier era, suggesting that the nature of congressional representation may have changed in recent decades. We conclude by discussing the implications of our results for theories of divergence and for political representation in general.

1 Data and Measurement

Do legislators converge on issues that the district cares about, even if they diverge on other, less important bills? Answering this question requires several steps of measurement and estimation. First, we need a scalar summary of the policy positions of each legislator in each issue area. Next, given these issue-specific policy positions, we need a method for estimating the extent of partisan divergence on a particular issue within a group of districts. Third, we need a measure of the level of interest that each district has in each issue area, allowing us to test whether divergence shrinks as district interest increases. The following subsections detail our approach for each of these three steps.

1.1 Measuring Issue-Specific Policy Positions

To measure issue-specific policy positions of legislators, we examine roll call voting from the 108th to the 111th Congresses (2003–2010). We focus on this period because it falls within a single redistricting cycle and because we have the richest data available for this period, although in the Appendix, we also analyze agriculture and defense roll call votes going back to 1953. To identify which bills fit into each issue area, we use issue codings compiled by the Political Institutions and Public Choice (PIPC) Program and used in, for example, Crespin and Rohde (2010) and Facchini and Steinhardt (2011). To our knowledge, PIPC codings are the most thorough, detailed, and well-established categorizations of congressional bills available. We focus on eight issue areas — agriculture,

civil rights, defense, education, energy, public transportation, senior issues, and welfare — that can be easily matched to constituent interests. No single bill is categorized into multiple categories, so those in each category pertain primarily to that category. For example, a bill that is primarily about international trade but pertains to agriculture will not be coded as an agricultural bill. More details on the included subcategories can be found in the PIPC data codebook. Combining these codings with roll call votes (obtained from voteview.com), we observe how each district's representative votes in each issue area.

Next, we summarize each district's roll call voting behavior in each issue area. There are many well-established roll call scaling methods (e.g., Clinton *et al.*, 2004; Heckman and Snyder Jr., 1997; Poole and Rosenthal, 1985), which are all highly correlated with one another and typically produce similar empirical results. We utilize the simplified method of Fowler and Hall (2012), called Conservative Vote Probabilities (CVP), which generates simple scalar summaries of roll call behavior on a substantively interpretable scale. Using this method, each district-congress is given a CVP — a probability that the district's representative votes in the conservative direction on any given bill, relative to the median legislator — for each issue area. For example, legislators X and Y might have CVPs of 0.3 and -0.1 , respectively, on defense bills, meaning that legislator X voted conservatively 40 percentage points more often on defense bills than legislator Y. At the same time, legislators X and Y might both have CVPs of 0.2 on public transportation bills, meaning that the two legislators, on average, cast conservative and liberal votes with the same frequency on public transportation bills.¹

Our focus on roll call voting stems from theoretical and substantive interest in addition to the convenience of data. Roll call voting is one of the most readily observable, publicly salient, and politically important forms of legislative representation. Surely, legislators provide other services for their constituents and influence policy in other ways, but American voters appear to care about how their representative votes

¹For convenience of interpretation, we arbitrarily set the median member of Congress for each issue and legislative session at 0. As a result, CVPs can be interpreted as probabilities of voting conservatively relative to the median member of Congress. However, this arbitrary choice of a reference point has no impact on our subsequent results. Congress fixed effects, implemented in all subsequent empirical tests, account for the fact that the scale of CVPs may shift between legislative terms.

on bills (e.g., Ansolabehere and Jones, 2010; Canes-Wrone *et al.*, 2002), and a vast literature predicts that legislators will cast roll call votes in accordance with their districts' preferences.

1.2 Measuring Divergence

With issue-specific policy positions of legislators in hand, we present our research design for estimating partisan divergence. We aim to estimate the average extent to which Democratic and Republican members of Congress differentially represent the same districts in each policy area. To do so, we implement a regression discontinuity (RD) design, which leverages close elections in which the assignment of a Democratic or Republican representative is as-if random. We can estimate the average difference in roll call behavior of barely elected Republicans and barely elected Democrats. Under our identifying assumption stated below, this difference provides an unbiased estimate of candidate divergence in close elections. See Imbens and Lemieux (2008) for more information on RD designs in general, and see Lee (2008) and Eggers *et al.* (2015) for more information on RD designs in electoral settings.

We assume that potential outcomes — the roll call behavior of a district's representative under Democratic and Republican control — are continuous at the electoral threshold determining whether a district will be represented by a Democrat or Republican. The intuition is that situations where Republicans barely win should be identical, in expectation, to situations in which Democrats barely win, so we can compare the roll call behavior of a district's representative in these two situations to estimate divergence — the extent to which Democratic and Republican legislators would differentially represent the same districts at the same time.

We implement our RD design by estimating the following equation using OLS:

$$\text{CVP}_{it} = \beta \text{Republican}_{it} + f(V_{it}) + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{it}. \quad (1)$$

β represents the average extent of candidate divergence in very close elections. δ_t represents year fixed effects which subsume the constant term. These fixed effects improve precision but are not necessary for unbiased estimates. V_{it} is the running variable — the Republican share of the two-party vote — which is specified as a flexible function. For

our main results, we include all contested races and model the running variable as a fourth-order polynomial (Lee, 2008), but we show in the Appendix that our results are robust across many different specifications and bandwidths. Although this regression includes many elections, inferences are drawn only from very close elections, because the flexible function of the running variable allows us to estimate the limit of the average outcome as the running variable approaches the electoral threshold from each side, and β represents the difference between these two limits. A positive value of β indicates a failure for Democratic and Republican candidates representing the same (hypothetical) constituency to converge. We estimate Equation (1) separately for high- and low-interest districts in each policy domain. Comparisons of estimates of β across districts with varying levels of interest in an issue area indicate whether or not divergence decreases with constituent interest. In testing whether divergence differs between high- and low-interest districts, we implement the following interactive regression:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{CVP}_{it} = & \beta_0 \text{Republican}_{it} + \beta_1 \text{Republican}_{it} \times \text{Interest}_{it} + f(V_{it}) \\ & + g(V_{it}) \times \text{Interest}_{it} + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{it}. \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

Interest_{it} is a binary variable indicating high interest in a particular policy domain. δ_t now represents congress-interest fixed effects instead of simply congress fixed effects, which subsume the main effect of Interest_{it} . β_0 indicates divergence for low-interest districts and β_1 indicates the difference in divergence between high- and low-interest districts.

1.3 *Measuring District Interest*

Our empirical strategy does *not* require that we measure district preferences directly or that we determine how a district wants its representative to behave. Rather, we only need proxies for the extent to which different districts care about specific issue areas. To determine which districts care more about a particular issue, we use statistical data on the demographics of congressional districts from the 2000 U.S. Census. The choice of the 2000 census accords with the timing of the other data in our analyses. The use of census demographics to explore the *strength* of attitudes is a well-established method (e.g., Adler and Lapinski, 1997; Erikson, 1978; Mayhew, 1966; Peltzman, 1984). Districts with many

farm and agricultural workers, for example, are surely more interested in farming-related bills than districts with few farmers.² Adler and Lapinski's (1997) study of congressional committees perhaps best exemplifies how district demographics connect to how strongly a district's voters care about differing policy areas. The logic the authors provide for using district demographics, as well as the conspicuous association they find between these measures of district demand and the resulting organization of legislative committees, helps to demonstrate their usefulness for our purposes. Furthermore, in the Appendix, we show that our district-level demographic measures of interest correspond with individual-level survey measures of interest.

This straightforward procedure is well-suited for this context because the economic and demographic characteristics of congressional districts, as indicated by the U.S. Census, line up closely with several important issue areas regularly taken up by Congress. Table 1 lists the issue areas that we focus on in this study along with the corresponding economic or demographic information used to measure the relative interest levels of

Table 1: Issue areas and demographic measures of interest.

Issue area	Demographic measure	Bills per congress	Close elections (high/low)
Agriculture	Farm workers	27	32/341
Civil rights	African-Americans	12	14/359
Defense	Military personnel	123	29/344
Education	Education workers	40	37/336
Energy	Energy workers	167	25/348
Pub. trans.	Public trans. users	8	5/368
Senior issues	People over 64	18	35/338
Welfare	People in poverty	26	12/361

²This method by no means provides a perfect measure of district interest, but it provides a categorization of districts so that we can compare partisan divergence across differing levels of interest and salience. This is a far less demanding task than estimating district ideology for inclusion as an explanatory variable in a regression.

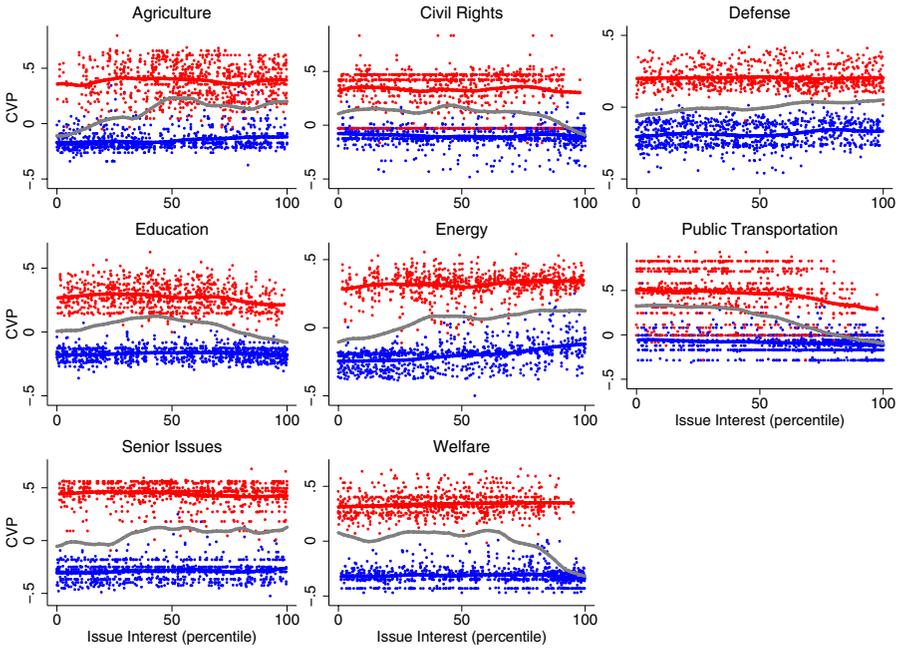


Figure 1: Descriptive relationship between roll call voting and district interest. The figure presents issue-specific CVP scores, de-meanded by congress, across our demographic measure of constituent interest (in percentiles) for each policy domain. Each dot represents a district-year, and the curves are kernel regressions for Republicans (red), Democrats (blue), and all members (gray).

districts in each issue area.³ Table 1 also indicates the average number of bills per congress within each issue area during the time period of our analysis — the 108th to the 111th Congresses (2003–2010). For the issue area of civil rights, we limit our attention to bills concerning the civil rights of African-Americans, allowing for a closer link between the bills and the demographic measure. And to give a sense of the number of close elections, Table 1 also lists the number of elections where the two-party vote fell between 40% and 60% for high- and low-interest districts within each issue area.

³While we prefer education workers in the district as our measure of education interest, we have also conducted the same analyses using school-aged children in the district. Results are unchanged.

Our ultimate objective is to measure divergence in a particular issue area and test whether it differs between districts that are interested or uninterested in that particular policy domain. We take the simplest possible approach requiring the least assumptions. We code a binary indicator of interest for each policy domain, classifying each district as either interested or uninterested in a particular policy domain. With these classifications, we estimate divergence among the interested and uninterested districts and test whether these estimates differ from one another. One challenge is that this procedure requires us to select an arbitrary cutoff for district interest. For our main results, we choose a 10% cutoff, meaning that the top 10% of districts are classified as interested and the remaining 90% are classified as uninterested. For example, the 10% of districts with the highest proportion of the work force employed in agriculture are classified as interested in agriculture. However, in the Appendix, we show that our results are robust across all possible cutoffs. In other words, we take a highly nonparametric approach and fail to find evidence of more convergence in more interested districts for any possible level of interest.

Before presenting our main results, we present the descriptive relationships between roll call voting and district interest. This exercise serves several purposes. First, it allows us to show our data in a transparent way. Second, it demonstrates that our measures of constituent interest indeed capture meaningful variation across districts. In Figure 1, we plot issue-specific CVP estimates, de-measured by congress, across our demographic measures of constituent interest (rescaled as percentiles) for each policy domain. The gray curves represent kernel regressions for all members, and the blue and red curves represent kernel regressions for Democrats and Republicans, respectively. For several policy domains, there is a strong relationship between our measures of interest and roll call representation, and this relationship is always in the expected direction. The more interested districts receive more conservative representation in agriculture, defense, and energy, while the more interested districts receive more liberal representation in civil rights, public transportation, and welfare. However, as a preview of our subsequent results, there is little relationship between interest and roll call representation within party. Democrats representing military districts are not noticeably more conservative on defense bills than other Democrats, Republicans representing poor districts are not noticeably

more liberal on welfare bills than other Republicans, etc. We see no descriptive evidence that Democrats and Republicans converge toward one another in high-interest districts. Although our measures of district interest are often strongly correlated with the party of the member representing the district, we see little signs of convergence or within-party responsiveness when constituents have strong interests.

2 Results: A Failure of Convergence across 8 Policy Domains

Table 2 reports the main results of our investigation. For each of the eight issue areas, we implement our RD design and separately estimate divergence in both low- and high-interest districts. Across all eight issue areas, divergence is substantively large and statistically significant. Some variation exists; for example, we see greater disagreement between Democrats and Republicans on senior issues and less disagreement on defense. Nonetheless, Democrats and Republicans representing the same voters diverge significantly across all major policy domains. Unfortunately, some of our estimates of divergence for high-interest districts are imprecise, because there are few close elections among some subsets of districts. For example, districts with a high proportion of African-Americans and a high proportion of citizens using public transportation are typically Democratic strongholds, meaning that our estimates of divergence among high-interest districts will be less precise when focusing on the issue areas of civil rights and public transportation. Nonetheless, we detect significant divergence for all of the policy domains and groups of districts for which we can obtain reasonably precise estimates. Our discovery of significant divergence is not new to the literature, but the third column of Table 2 presents our primary quantities of interest — the estimated difference in divergence between high- and low-interest districts for each policy domain. Positive numbers indicate that divergence is higher in high-interest districts, and negative numbers indicate that divergence is lower in high-interest districts. Three of these estimated differences are negative, five are positive, and *none* are statistically distinguishable from zero.

Figure 2 presents the same results graphically, plotting the average CVP scores — demeaned by congress — across different levels of the running variable for both low-interest districts (gray) and high-interest districts (black). The discontinuities at the electoral threshold provide

Table 2: RD estimates of divergence in high- and low-interest districts.

Issue area	Low-interest districts		High-interest districts		Difference	
Agriculture	.488	(.027)	.506	(.067)	.018	(.070)
Civil rights	.379	(.018)	.101	(.224)	-.278	(.215)
Defense	.332	(.011)	.304	(.032)	-.028	(.033)
Education	.397	(.016)	.435	(.032)	.038	(.035)
Energy	.435	(.019)	.439	(.058)	.004	(.059)
Pub. trans.	.520	(.035)	.531	(.076)	.011	(.081)
Senior issues	.652	(.018)	.730	(.046)	.078	(.048)
Welfare	.559	(.016)	.535	(.046)	-.024	(.047)
All Issues Pooled	.468	(.015)	.464	(.035)	-.005	(.035)
Placebo	.400	(.011)	.400	(.018)	.001	(.017)

District-clustered standard errors in parentheses. The first column presents our RD estimates of divergence for each issue area in low-interest districts, the second column shows our RD estimates of divergence for each issue area in high-interest districts, and the third column shows the estimated difference in divergence between high- and low-interest districts. The second-to-last row of the table presents aggregate estimates across all eight issue areas. The last row presents a placebo analysis which replicates the pooled analysis but analyzes roll call voting on all bills outside rather than within each issue area.

estimates of issue-specific divergence, and our primary quantity of interest is the difference in divergence between the high- and low-interest districts. As seen in Table 2, divergence is nearly identical for high- and low-interest districts for each issue area. One exception is civil rights, although our estimate of divergence for high-interest districts is imprecise, because predominantly African-American districts have few close elections. Indeed, this difference is not statistically significant.

In the second-to-last row of Table 2, we pool all issue areas together for our most precise, aggregate-level test.⁴ On average, across the eight issue areas, divergence is substantively large, statistically significant, and nearly identical in low- and high-interest districts. In other words, across the eight issues under investigation, we find no evidence that congressional candidates and representatives converge more toward the

⁴In conducting these pooled tests, we include issue-congress fixed effects instead of simply congress fixed effects. We also interact the running variable with dummies for each issue area. When implementing the interactive test to estimate the difference in divergence (and the associated standard error), we include issue-congress-interest fixed effects and interact the running variable with dummies for each issue-interest.

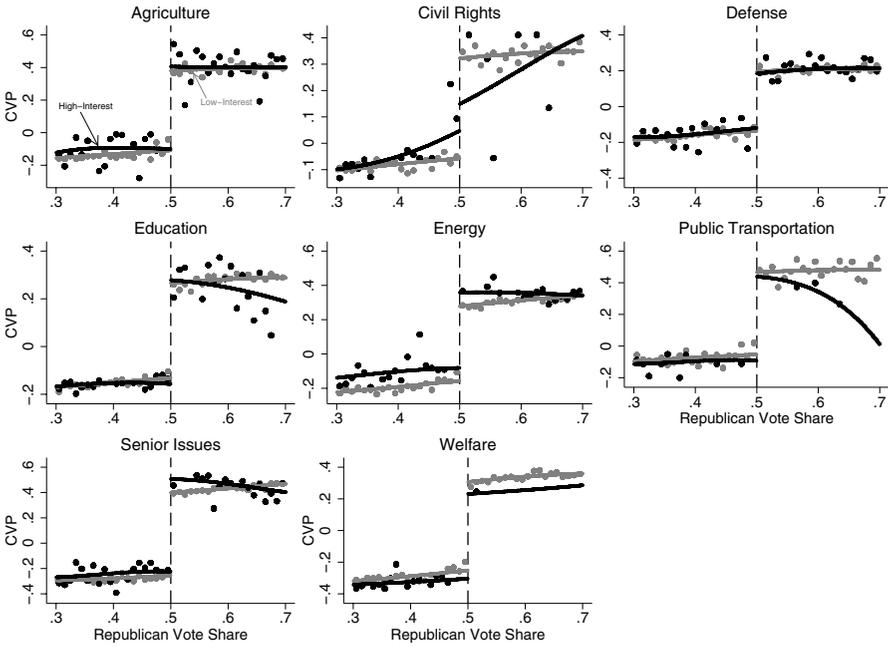


Figure 2: Estimates of divergence in high- and low-interest districts. For each issue area, we de-mean the issue-specific CVP scores by congress and plot the average roll call behavior across different values of the Republican two-party vote share separately for low-interest districts (gray) and high-interest districts (black). The solid lines represent fourth-order polynomial fits. The dots represent binned averages.

median voter when a district has particularly strong interests in a policy domain.

One potential explanation for our inability to detect increased convergence among high-interest districts is that high- and low-interest districts differ from one another along many dimensions, in addition to the extent to which constituents are interested in a particular policy domain. Perhaps unobserved differences between high- and low-interest districts lead divergence to be greater in high-interest districts across all issue areas, and perhaps our null differences within a particular policy domain represent a decrease from a baseline difference. To investigate this possibility, we generate CVP scores using all bills *outside* of a particular policy domain. For example, we can compare divergence in

farming and nonfarming districts using only nonagriculture bills. The final row of Table 2 presents precisely this kind of placebo analysis. We replicate the pooled analysis, but instead of analyzing CVP scores within a particular policy domain, we analyze CVP scores in all other policy domains. The estimated difference in divergence is almost exactly zero, suggesting that, on average, unobserved differences between high- and low-interest do not influence our inferences. Across all policy domains, high-interest districts exhibit the same level of divergence as low-interest districts for bills within and outside the domain of the district's interests.

Several additional analyses in the Appendix lend further credibility to our empirical results. We obtain the same results for any possible cutoff of district interest, instead of the 10 percent cutoff used for our main results. Our results are robust across many different RD specifications. We re-estimate all quantities from Table 2 using two alternative research designs and obtain virtually identical results using a selection-on-observables design or a differences-in-differences design. We also present several additional tests and specifications designed to account for concerns about the assumptions of our RD design. Finally, for the issues of agriculture and defense, we test whether congressional representation worked differently in earlier time periods, and we find some evidence of decreased divergence in previous decades. See the Appendix for more details on these additional tests.

3 What Explains Divergence?

The reasons that members of Congress do not converge on the most important issues are likely complex and outside the scope of any single study. Political parties may exert pressure on the roll call votes of legislators (Aldrich, 1995; Cox and McCubbins, 2007; Schwartz, 1989). Members of Congress may have their own personal policy preferences and systematically sort into parties accordingly. Legislators may cater their roll call votes to a subconstituency such as their partisan supporters and donors (Bishin, 2000; Clinton, 2006). Representatives might have systematically different perceptions of constituent opinion (Broockman and Skovron, 2014; Miller and Stokes, 1963) or put differential weight on the opinions of different constituents (Butler and Dynes, 2015).

These factors should be studied more thoroughly from theoretical and empirical perspectives as they may help us to understand why members of Congress do not converge to the preferences of their constituents.

The theoretical literature provides many compelling explanations for divergence, and our results may be useful in determining which theoretical mechanisms are most relevant in the case of the modern Congress. Here, we briefly discuss four classes of explanations and the extent to which they conform to our empirical results. We do not intend to provide an exhaustive list of theoretical contributions; instead we restrict our attention to four of the most prominent and influential classes of explanations: (1) If electoral outcomes are uncertain, conditional on the policy positions of the candidates, and if the candidates have divergent preferences over policy, divergence can arise as candidates sacrifice some probability of winning in return for policy positions closer to their preferences (Calvert, 1985; Wittman, 1983). (2) If voters care about another factor independent of policy positions such as valence, competence, campaign effort, etc., then divergence can arise because some candidates can afford to deviate from the median voter or because candidates may wish to avoid costly competition with one another (Ansolabehere and Snyder, Jr., 2000; Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita, 2009; Eyster and Kittsteiner, 2007; Groseclose, 2001). (3) If candidates have policy preferences and cannot credibly commit to deviating from their personal preferences, then divergence will arise naturally from the differences in the personal preferences of the candidates (Alesina, 1988; Osborne and Slivinski, 1996). (4) Lastly, candidates may diverge in response to the threat of outside entrants (Palfrey, 1984; Weber, 1992).

The first two sets of explanations, probabilistic voting and valence, despite predicting significant divergence in many cases, would predict that divergence will decrease as the salience of policy increases. For example, as voters care more about policy, we might expect a tighter relationship between policy positions and electoral chances — i.e., less variance in election results — in the probabilistic voting models, leading to less divergence. Similarly, as voters increase the weight that they put on ideological congruence relative to valence or campaign effort in the second class of models, we would expect more convergence. Our empirical results for the U.S. Congress are inconsistent with these predictions; divergence appears to remain the same even as the salience of policy increases. Alternatively, the latter two classes of explanations —

non-credible commitment and outside entrants — would not necessarily predict that convergence increases with salience. In both cases, candidates are already maximizing their vote share and would not converge more when voter interest increases. In one case, candidates cannot credibly commit to deviating from their preferred positions, regardless of the intensity of voter preferences, and in the other case, converging would make a candidate electorally worse off, even if voters care strongly about policy.

Of course, our results do not definitively support or reject particular models. Despite our null results, there could be some degree of decreased divergence — consistent with the predictions of valence or probabilistic voting models — that is simply too small for us to statistically detect. Furthermore, other models not discussed above could also be consistent with our results. We do not endorse any of the models discussed above as complete and accurate depictions of American elections. Rather, we think the mechanisms highlighted by these models are useful for understanding divergence. If divergence is explained by the inability of candidates to credibly commit to policy platforms or by the threat of third-party entrants or primary challengers, we would not expect divergence to decrease when voters care more about policy, and in that sense, our results are consistent with these mechanisms.

4 Conclusion

Divergence in Congress holds important substantive implications for electoral politics and political representation. Because we observe so much divergence, members of Congress, on average, do not closely represent the preferences of the median voters in their districts. Moreover, the ability of incumbents to cater their roll call behavior to the priorities of their constituents cannot voters explain the significant electoral advantages enjoyed by incumbents, because members of Congress fail to take advantage of this opportunity in many cases. Our findings also speak to an important debate between party-centered and constituent-centered models of legislation and lawmaking. If legislators freely shirk their partisan commitments in favor of their districts' preferences and their popularity at home, we should see notably less partisan divergence for issue areas where a district has strong preferences. Scholarly,

journalistic, and popular reports of lawmaking are littered with anecdotes about members of Congress who cater to the specific interests of their district. Purportedly, members of Congress from Nebraska look out for the corn, those from Wisconsin look out for the cheese, those from Virginia look out for naval ships, those from Texas look out for oil, those from West Virginia look out for coal, those from Massachusetts look out for higher education, and so forth. The results of this study cast doubt on the degree to which these anecdotes and the constituent-centered models of lawmaking that underpin them apply to the modern Congress.

Even when districts care deeply about a particular issue area, legislators of the two parties do not converge when voting on this issue. When voters go to the polls in American congressional elections, they face a stark choice between two candidates who will represent them in markedly different ways, not only on national issues but on local issues, issues that cut to the core of the district's interests. The modern Congress is marked by stark divergence between the parties that does not shrink even when constituents have strong interests in a particular policy domain.

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