

**Electoral Competition and Roll-Call Voting:
Congress in a More Partisan Era**

Stanley P. Berard
Southern Arkansas University

How does electoral competition affect the preferences expressed by representatives in their roll-call votes? Literature on representative-constituency relations suggests two contradictory hypotheses on this issue. One hypothesis is that intense electoral competition induces more ideologically extreme behavior on the part of representatives, because competition increases their need for the electoral resources provided by committed activists. The other is that competition provides incentive for more moderate legislative behavior, as a means of gaining marginal votes outside the representative's activist base. Using the measure of liberal policy agreement computed by the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), this article reports that competition is more frequently a polarizing than a moderating influence on roll-call behavior. The analysis also reveals some peculiar partisan and regional differences that can produce further insight concerning the impact of elections on legislative behavior.

During the 1980s, partisanship became a more prominent feature of policy-making in the U.S. Congress, especially in the House of Representatives. The resurgence of partisanship was reflected in the increased incidence of partisan roll calls, as well as in efforts by the Democratic leadership in the House to entice conservative Democrats to support the priorities set by the liberal majority within the House Democratic caucus.¹ The turn to partisanship is proving to be a persistent policy making phenomenon in Congress, with a dramatic manifestation in attempts by House Republican leaders to use policy priorities outlined in the 1994 "Contract with America" as an instrument for building party cohesion among the Republican ranks.

The renewed importance of partisan concerns in congressional behavior makes the relationship between partisan electoral competition and roll-call voting critical to understanding elections as a means of influencing Congress. In a more partisan era, does electoral competition between the parties contribute to a more polarized politics, or does it induce a moderation of partisan conflict?

Two Views of Electoral Competition

Scholars have presented two basic characterizations of the relationship between electoral competition and the policy positions taken by representatives. First consider the potential moderating influence of electoral marginality on legislative behavior: those representatives whose seats are not "safe" have greater incentive to represent the median constituent on any given issue.² To simplify matters, assume that the preferences of the electorate on all sorts of issues can be scaled on a single dimension. Also note that most congressional elections are contested by two candidates, nominees of the Democratic and Republican parties. In such electoral competition, the number of votes received by the candidates is quite arguably a function of their relative distance from the median of the distribution of voter preferences. The candidate closer to the median voter will win, so both candidates will try to represent the median.

This behavior will also be reflected in the roll-call voting of the winner of the election. Representatives who are faced with stiff electoral competition have more incentive to moderate their roll-call voting than do representatives from "safe" seats. Increasing strength of the opposition party in the district of a given representative reflects a decreasing distance between the opposition party and the median voter. The representative should take pains to maintain greater proximity than the opposition to the median voter, and moderate his roll-call voting and other behavior accordingly.

A second, contrasting model of electoral competition emphasizes the potential polarizing influence of competition on representation. Candidates must consider not only the likely electoral gains from moving toward the median voter, but also the likely electoral losses.

On the one hand, a candidate positioned to the left of both his opponent and his constituency's median voter can gain votes by moving toward the median and still remain the preferred candidate of those voters to the left of his own position (assuming he does not move to the right of the opponent). On the other hand, the voters on the left still have the option of denying their preferred candidate votes by abstaining from the election. As the difference between the candidates is reduced, the potential benefits for any voter of supporting one candidate over the other are also reduced. A candidate moving toward the median voter (and hence toward his opponent's position) risks alienating his natural supporters--those to the left of the left candidate or to the right of the right candidate. Such natural supporters might abstain from the election if the costs of mobilizing in support of their favored candidate outweigh the gains that would accrue from that candidate's victory.

At this point, one should note that the constituency is typically seen by the representative not as an undifferentiated mass of individuals but as a collection of groups. The certain support of many groups is not only reflected in votes but also in campaign resources (money, campaign workers, etc.). Position-taking (on roll-call votes, for instance) depends heavily on how the legislator assesses which groups in the district are most concerned with the underlying issue and which of these groups are most likely to make a substantial difference in his or her chances

for re-election (Kingdon 1989). It is critical for the candidate to maintain existing sources of group support, for it will be difficult to replace the votes and effort of natural support groups that are alienated. Moreover, the greater the strength of the opposition party, the greater the likelihood that alienating a natural support group will result in losing the election. Hence, the incentive to avoid moving too far away from one's natural supporters (and toward the median voter) is greater for representatives from marginal districts than for those from safe seats (Huntington 1950).³

For individual representatives, the polarizing and moderating effects of competition probably do not operate exclusively of one another. Whether increased competition causes a given representative to be more or less likely to move closer to the median voter is likely to depend on assessments of the risks and benefits of staking out more or less ideological positions in specific circumstances. For evaluating the aggregate impact of party competition on representation, however, one is left with two simple and contradictory hypotheses: (1) Stronger electoral opposition is typically associated with less extreme position taking by representatives; or (2) Stronger electoral opposition is typically associated with more extreme position taking by representatives.

Electoral Competition and Roll-Call Voting: Data and Method

Two sets of data are used here to test these hypotheses: victory margins from House elections in 1982-90, and scores indicating the rate of support by representatives on positions taken by Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) on roll-call votes during the first session of each of the 98th-102nd Congresses. The ADA score is a commonly accepted measure of the relative liberalism of members of Congress. It is assumed that in any congressional district, Democratic groups and activists are to the left of the median voter and of Republican groups that are to the right of the median voter. Thus, for Democratic representatives, higher ADA scores represent more extreme legislative behavior. For Republican representatives, higher ADA scores indicate movement toward the center.⁴

Two sets of analyses are reported. The first set tests the association between the degree of electoral competition and support for ADA positions among each party's House members to address the question of whether representatives from closely contested districts are more or less extreme in their roll-call voting than those from safe districts. The effects of electoral competition on roll-call voting might be indistinguishable, however, from the effects of differences across districts in the placement of their median voters. To account for this possibility, a second set of analyses examines the effect of vote margin on the magnitude of change in ADA scores among seats that switch party control. The change in ADA score associated with switched party representation is greater in congressional districts where the parties take positions that are farther from one another than in those where both parties are attempting to move to the district median. Thus, comparing the magnitude of change in ADA scores among "switch districts" is a

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means of comparing the degree of moderation or polarization among those districts (Strain, 1963; Fiorina, 1973; Fiorina, 1974).

Historical differences between regions in the pattern of party competition make it desirable to analyze Southern congressional districts separately from those in the rest of the U.S. Until the 1960s, the Democrats most likely to hold safe seats in Congress were Southerners, who were also the most conservative Democrats. A liberal Northern majority emerged within the Democratic party, but far more Northern than Southern Democrats represented competitive districts (Fiorina, 1973; Shannon, 1968). Under these conditions, safe seats were associated with policy moderation, simply because safe Southern Democrats were the most likely legislators to deviate from the liberal positions taken by the majority of Northerners in their party.

Now that Northerners constitute a majority of safe Democratic representatives, the association of electoral safety with ideological moderation may no longer be true for all Democratic members of Congress.⁵ The Northern Democrats emerging as "safe" in the last two decades may well represent the most liberal Northern Democratic constituencies and thus have more liberal voting records than those from more competitive districts. Nonetheless, safe-seat Southerners continue to be among the least liberal Democrats, and competition is modestly associated with greater partisanship among Southern Democrats in the House (Forgette and Kubik, 1990. See also Fleisher, 1993). Thus, the effects of competition on roll-call voting could be contingent on the regional context in which competition occurs.

Comparing Representatives Across Districts: Electoral Margin and ADA Scores

Are representatives from more competitive districts more or less ideologically extreme than those from less competitive districts? Two tactics are taken to address this question here. First, the roll-call voting of representatives who were effectively uncontested (having won with 90 percent or more of the vote) is compared to that of contested representatives. The simple existence of competition, rather than the closeness of the election, may well be the effective threshold for altering roll call voting. Second, the association between vote margin and ADA score is reported.

Table 1 displays the association between contestation and ADA scores among Democrats serving in the House in the first session of each of the 98th-102nd Congresses. The pattern of association is striking. For the five sessions of Congress combined, the mean ADA score for Democrats who won their seats with ninety percent or more of the vote in the previous election was 59. The mean score for all the Democrats with victory margins of less than ninety percent was 73. Democrats who were effectively uncontested in the preceding election were on average 14 points less supportive of ADA positions than were those who faced a substantial challenge from Republican candidates. One can see in Table 1,

however, that the difference in ADA scores between contested and uncontested Democrats declined steadily from 24 points in 1983 to 9 points in 1991.

Table I
Average ADA Score by Contested Status of Seat in Prior Election
House Democrats, 1983-1991

year	uncontested	contested	difference
1983	51 (26)	75 (235)	24**
1985	53 (47)	70 (202)	17**
1987	65 (46)	77 (207)	12**
1989	63 (55)	75 (199)	12**
1991	59 (40)	68 (223)	9*

Ns are in parentheses.

**p < .001, two-tailed t-test.

*p < .03, two-tailed t-test.

That electoral competition is associated with more liberal roll-call voting among Democrats is consistent with the polarization model of party competition. From this perspective, one would expect contested Republicans to have more conservative roll-call scores than uncontested Republicans. One finds the opposite, however: contested Republicans averaged 8 points higher in their ADA support scores than uncontested Republicans during the 98th-102nd Congresses. The magnitude of this difference increased from 6 points in 1983 to 10 points in 1991. (See Table 2.)

A similar pattern is revealed in the Pearson correlation coefficient between electoral margin and ADA score for members of each party. (See Table 3.) Larger electoral margins were associated with lower ADA scores among Democrats, but the association declined in strength over the five Congresses from -.27 in 1983 to -.11 in 1991. Larger electoral margins were also associated with lower ADA scores among Republicans during the 1980s, although on average the correlation was weaker among Republicans. The effects of competition are small but consistent: competition is associated with more liberal behavior among both

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Table II
Mean ADA Score by Contested Status in Prior Election
House Republicans, 1983-1991

year	uncontested	contested	difference
1983	8 (4)	14 (161)	6
1985	8 (6)	15 (176)	7
1987	9 (14)	17 (164)	8
1989	8 (17)	17 (154)	9*
1991	7 (27)	17 (138)	10**

Ns are in parentheses.

**p < .01, two-tailed t-test.

*p < .06, two-tailed t-test.

Table III
Correlation Between Electoral Margin and ADA Score
Democrats and Republicans Compared

year	Democrats	Republicans
1983	-.27** (250)	-.14* (158)
1985	-.18** (246)	-.06 (178)
1987	-.22** (248)	-.06 (175)
1989	-.11* (254)	-.11 (171)
1991	-.11* (263)	-.11 (165)

Cell entries are Pearson's r.

Ns are in parentheses.

**p < .01, two-tailed t-test.

*p , .10, two-tailed t-test.

Democrats and Republicans, defying any simple description of party competition as either a polarizing or a moderating influence on congressional behavior. Competition appears to be associated with more extreme behavior among Democrats, but more moderate behavior among Republicans.

Could the differential impact of party competition across regions explain these divergent findings? Southern Democrats might be the only regional party group in the House for which one *should* expect an association between electoral competition and more liberal roll-call voting. Table 4 compares the effect of contested seats on ADA scores among four regional party groupings.⁶ The table reveals that an association between electoral competition and higher ADA scores appears consistently among Southern Democrats but not among Northern Democrats. Curiously, an association between greater competition and higher ADA scores emerged in the late 1980s among Southern Republicans. In the South, the apparent effect of electoral competition is to move Democratic representatives toward more liberal voting and to move Republicans toward less conservative voting.

Comparing the correlation coefficients among the four groups reveals a similar pattern. (See Table 5.) The correlation between electoral margin and ADA score fluctuates around zero among Northern Democrats and Republicans, while among Southern Democrats the correlation lies in a range between -.11 and -.32 in each of the five Congresses. Most dramatic is the emergence in the last two Congresses of a relatively strong association among Southern Republicans between lower margins of victory and higher ADA scores. Certainly, these results defy any assertion of a simple relationship between electoral competition and extremism or moderation in roll-call voting, and they demand some attention to the *conditions* under which competition might have a moderating or a polarizing effect on representation.

Comparing Party Divergence Within Districts: Party Switch Districts and ADA Scores

When one party replaces the other as occupant of a given congressional seat, change occurs in how that district is represented ideologically: Republicans provide more conservative representation than Democrats, even when we compare Republicans and Democrats selected by the same district electorate. In congressional elections during 1982-90, there were 72 instances of switched party control of congressional seats. Thirty eight of these switches were from Democratic to Republican control, and 34 were switches from Republican to Democrat. When a Democrat replaced a Republican, the ADA score of the district's Democratic representative in the Congress following the election was higher than the score of the Republican representative in the preceding Congress by an average of 53 points. Republicans replacing Democrats decreased the ADA scores of their districts by an average of 50 points. Overall, party switches typically produced a change in ADA scores of about 52 points.

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Table IV
Difference Between Contested and Uncontested Representatives'
ADA Scores by Party and Region

year	northern Democrats	northern Republicans	southern Democrats	southern Republicans
1983	0	11#	16**	-2
1985	-5	18#	7	-2
1987	5	7	6	2
1989	3	1	6	4*
1991	-3	6	7	8**

A positive cell entry indicates a higher mean ADA score among contested representatives.
 #In the 1982 and 1984 elections, only one northern Republican representative was uncontested.

**p < .01, two-tailed t-test.

*p < .10, two-tailed t-test.

Table V
Correlation Between Electoral Margin and ADA Score
by Party and Region

year	northern Democrats	northern Republicans	southern Democrats	southern Republicans
1983	-.03	-.15*	.31***	-.13
1985	.16**	-.10	-.10	.13
1987	-.01	-.02	-.26**	.14
1989	.01	-.01	-.11	-.22
1991	.13*	.08	-.20*	-.40***

Cell entries are Pearson's r.

***p < .01, two-tailed t-test.

**p < .05, two-tailed t-test.

*p < .10, two-tailed t-test.

Although it is apparent that a Republican legislator provides substantially more conservative representation than a Democrat from the same district, the question remains whether the distance between the parties within a given congressional district is associated with the electoral margin separating the parties. The short answer is yes: switched seats for which victory margins are relatively narrow typically display greater change in ADA scores than do seats that switched party by relatively large electoral margins. The first row of Table 6 reports the effect of electoral margin on the absolute change in ADA scores. The effect appears to be substantial, whether indicated by the Pearson correlation coefficient between electoral margin and change in ADA score, or by the difference in the mean ADA change between "safe switch" and "marginal switch" districts. (See Table 6.)

The association between victory margin and roll-call change is more apparent among Republican switched seats than among Democratic ones. For instance, Table 6 shows that Democrats succeeding Republicans increased their districts' ADA score by an average of 54 points in marginal-switch districts, and 50 points in safe-switch districts. Thus, closer electoral margins were associated with larger changes in ADA scores among the seats switching to the Democrats, but the difference was only four points. The difference in the mean change between marginal and safe switches to the Republican party was 18 points; thus Republicans succeeding Democrats were less supportive of ADA positions by an average of 56 points when their victory margin was less than 55 percent, but they were more conservative by only 38 points when the party switch was by a margin of more than 55 percent.

Table 6 also reports the patterns within each region. In Northern districts, Republicans succeeding Democrats were less supportive of ADA positions than their predecessors by an average of 63 points when their victory margins were close, and by an average of only 50 points when the victory margin was more than 55 percent. Similarly, Northern Democrats succeeding Republicans by safe margins increased the ADA scores for their districts by an average of 42 points, but the increase was 14 points greater among those Democrats succeeding Republicans with less than 55 percent of the vote. Both of these results are consistent with the polarizing model of party competition, although neither difference is statistically significant. In the South, Republicans replacing Democrats by close margins had ADA scores 49 points lower on average than their predecessors, while Republicans winning by safe margins were only 12 points less supportive of ADA positions than the Democrats they replaced, the strongest evidence yet for the polarizing model of party competition.

The behavior of Southern Democrats replacing Republicans in the 1980s indicates, however, that perhaps the polarization model cannot be universally applied. Democrats replacing Republicans in the South by margins of less than 55 percent were more liberal than their Republican predecessors by an average of 50 points on the ADA scale. This change in representation is comparable in magnitude to that occurring when Southern Republicans replace Democrats by close margins. However, in the two cases where Southern Democrats defeated

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Table VI
Change in ADA Score When Seats Change Parties --
Marginal and Safe Party Switches Compared

	victory margin > 55%	victory margin < 55%	difference	r
all party switches (absolute change in ADA score)	43 (19)	55 (53)	-12**	-.32*** (72)
all Democratic gains	50 (7)	54 (27)	-4	-.19 (34)
all Republican gains	-38 (12)	-56 (26)	18**	.36** (38)
North--Democratic gains	42 (5)	56 (19)	-14	-.39* (24)
North--Republican gains	-50 (8)	-63 (14)	13	.19 (22)
South--Democratic gains	71 (2)	50 (8)	21	.37 (10)
South--Republican gains	-12 (4)	-49 (12)	37***	.47* (16)

Ns are in parentheses.

Positive cell entries indicate that larger increases or smaller decreases in ADA scores are associated with larger victory margins.

***p < .01, two-tailed t-test.

**p < .05, two-tailed t-test.

*p < .10, two-tailed t-test.

incumbent Republicans with a margin of over 55 percent, the two Democrats averaged an ADA score 71 points higher than their Republican predecessors. This change was 21 points greater than that among Southern Democrats winning narrow victories.

Summary and Conclusion

What can one make of these decidedly mixed results? Recall that the effects of varying electoral margins on the divergence of representatives *from one another* appeared primarily among Southern Democrats, but that in the 101st and especially the 102nd Congresses the roll-call voting of Southern Republicans also displays a correlation between victory margin and ADA scores. Yet, Democrats and Republicans in the South appear to have behaved in opposite manners in 1989 and 1991. For Southern Democrats, competition appeared as a polarizing force, but for Republicans it was a moderating force. Apparently in the South, Republicans from competitive districts represent more moderate coalitions than do safe Republicans, even as Democrats from competitive districts represent *less* moderate coalitions than do safe Democrats.

In the second analysis, smaller electoral margins among congressional seats switching partisan control were associated with greater change in ADA scores during the 1980s. More narrow electoral margins appear to be associated with somewhat greater differentiation between the parties in the character of representation they offer a given congressional district. This effect is relatively small compared to the overall difference in ADA scores between the parties in each switch district. More important than the degree of competition between the parties is the fact of competition: party switches usually produce substantial changes in representation, even in "safe-switch" districts.

Nonetheless, the effect of electoral margin is observable, and it is especially large among Southern seats switching from Democrat to Republican. In fact, most of the association between electoral margin and change in ADA scores can be accounted for by party switches in the South. Only four "safe" Democrat-to-Republican switches occurred in the South between 1982 and 1990, but these are part of a gradual trend in which long-time conservative Democratic members are either retiring and being replaced by Republicans or becoming Republicans themselves. Safe switches from Democrat to Republican in the South are usually indicative of the movement of the most conservative Southern districts from Democratic to Republican control. Meanwhile, the existence of marginal party switches indicates the presence of substantial core constituencies for both parties in some Southern districts.

On the other hand, Republican-to-Democrat switches in the South did not follow the overall pattern; the two safe switches to the Democrats produced even larger increases than did the marginal ones. These two cases may reflect the effects of competitive politics based on substantial group constituencies for both parties. The "safe" Republican-to-Democrat switches in the South, one each in

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1986 and 1988, both occurred in districts that had switched from Democratic to Republican representation in the 1984 election. One might conclude from these two outstanding cases that, once partisan competition is established as a regular feature of district politics, change in party representation will result in substantial change in how the district is represented on roll-call votes, regardless of electoral margin.

This conclusion is provided further support by the finding that Southern Democrats are the only regional party group for which a correlation between narrower electoral margins and more extreme (higher) ADA scores occurs across all five Congresses. Yet, by the 102nd Congress, Southern Republicans demonstrate a linkage between *larger* electoral margins and more extreme (lower) ADA scores. Variation in the level of competition afforded Southern Republicans has a meaning different from that of variation in the competition faced by Southern Democrats.

A new phenomenon in the South of the late 1980s was an increase in the number of uncontested *Republican* incumbents. Typically, the most conservative Southern Democrats were the last to be affected by the emergence of Republican competition, but it appears that the most conservative Southern Republicans have been the *first* to emerge as uncontested incumbents. In 1983, only three of 38 Southern Republican incumbents were uncontested, and in 1985 only five of 47 were uncontested. This proportion increased to seven of 44, 12 of 43, and 17 of 43 in the next three elections. As the last column of Table 4 indicates, the Southern Republicans left uncontested by Democrats in these later elections were substantially more conservative than those with Democratic opponents.

One can postulate that the very different patterns between Southern Democratic, Southern Republican, and Northern districts result from different patterns of party competition. Uncontested Southern Republicans represent a new dominant conservative coalition in their districts that is deemed unbeatable by any Democratic challenger with a reasonable chance at victory. Uncontested Southern Democrats represented an older conservative coalition likely to be replaced by a more liberal coalition upon the emergence of Republican competition. Compared to both sets of Southern districts, Northern districts display much more regular patterns of party competition. Accordingly, Democratic coalitions are consistently liberal and Republican coalitions are consistently conservative. In the context of partisan coalitions that have become fairly stable, a narrow electoral margin in one election has a smaller association with roll-call voting than when those coalitions are in the process of change, as they were in the South of the 1980s.

NOTES

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1. For a useful statement of the forces within the House and in congressional constituencies that have contributed to the strengthening of partisanship among Democrats in Congress, see Rohde (1991, chapter 3).
2. Early explanations of the implications of incentives toward moderation on the behavior of political parties include those of Schattschneider (1942, 85) and Downs (1957, chapter 8).
3. Also important here is the reference by Richard Fenno to the different types of constituency within congressional districts. Each representative must be responsive not only to his or her "geographic constituency," but also to a partisan "election constituency" within the district, and probably to a "primary constituency" within the party as well, in order to be renominated. See Fenno (1978, chapter 1).
4. Use of the ADA score in this fashion assumes that aggregate measures of roll-call voting reflect representatives' positions on a single ideological dimension (liberalism-conservatism), and that an ADA score is a valid measure of this dimension. For evidence supporting both of these assumptions, see Poole (1981) and Poole and Rosenthal (1987).
The mean ADA scores for Democrats and Republicans are reported in the following table:

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Table A
Mean ADA Support Scores:
Democrats and Republicans Compared

year	Democrats	Republicans
1983	72 (261)	13 (165)
1985	67 (249)	15 (182)
1987	75 (253)	17 (178)
1989	73 (254)	16 (171)
1991	67 (263)	16 (165)
mean	71	15

5. On the changing proportion of southerners among uncontested Democrats in Congress, see the data presented by Keefe and Ogul (1991, 295), as adapted from Wolfinger and Hollinger (1971, 53).

6. For this purpose, the southern states consist of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.

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