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# Why Party Leaders Tend to Be Extremists

## Faculty Research Working Paper Series

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# Why Party Leaders Tend to Be Extremists

David C. King\*      Benjamin Schneer†      Richard Zeckhauser‡

## Abstract

This paper proposes that strategic concerns about negotiations strongly influence whom parties select to be legislative leaders. Leaders tilt more extreme than the typical party member. Hence, they can credibly threaten to let negotiations break down if they find proposed legislation personally unacceptable. Such threats move negotiations towards the ideal point of the median party member. We present a simple framework for analyzing the roles of extreme leaders in legislative negotiations. We then confirm the tendency towards extreme leaders empirically in congressional data ranging from 1900 to the present. We also evaluate and reject several alternative explanations for extremeness. Extreme leadership cannot be explained by a tendency for more senior members of Congress to come from safer, more extreme congressional districts. Nor is it merely a product of recent polarization. Instead, as our theory predicts and our empirical results confirm, rank-and-file members balance their own ideologies with knowledge of the opposing party's ideological orientation. In response, they select leaders extreme enough to aid in negotiations but not so extreme as to lead to total breakdowns in negotiation. Hence, as the evidence reveals, the degree of extremeness for a leader is greater for majority than minority parties, and for the majority party when its majority is greater. The filibuster threat inhibits the Senate Majority Leader from being as extreme as the Speaker of the House.

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## Introduction

Political leaders, especially in western-style legislatures, are immersed in ongoing negotiations with the opposing party over the substance of legislation and the broader legislative agenda. In the contemporary Congress and historically, legislative leaders have played a major role influencing the types of policies – and compromises – that emerge or fail to emerge. For example, in the 115th and 116th Congresses, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) have engaged in high-stakes negotiations with the Republican leadership and President Donald Trump on issues ranging from immigration and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) to infrastructure to conflict in Syria.

More than 50 years ago, passage of the Civil Rights Act hinged on efforts by Senate Majority Whip Hubert Humphrey (D-MN) to negotiate with and ultimately persuade Senate Minority Leader Everett Dirksen (R-IL) to deliver votes in favor of that landmark legislation (Purdum 2014). More than a century back, House Speaker Joseph Cannon (R-IL) used his position to beat back a series of attempts to pass restrictionist immigration legislation, until the Cannon Revolt in 1910 (Tichenor 2002).

In these and in other cases, a political leader's ideology serves as an anchor; it thereby reinforces a group's stand in bargaining situations (Raiffa 1982). The surprising implication is that a group engaged in significant negotiations will have a strategic interest in choosing a leader whose ideology is somewhat more extreme than the group's own ideology. Doing so increases the likelihood that the ultimate bargain struck will be closer to what the group desires.

A naïve reading of principal-agent theory could suggest that the ideal agent will either serve as an ideological blank slate, hence being readily willing to carry out the principal's wishes, or will mirror the principal's ideology. That is not true when the agent plays a major role negotiating on behalf of the principal, and the agent's own ideology will have some influence on the final outcome. In the terminology of Thomas Schelling, appointing an extreme leader creates a credible threat that negotiations will break down unless a settlement at least barely acceptable to the agent is reached (Schelling 1968, p. 123-131). If acceptable to the agent, it will be reasonably favorable to the principals, the rank-and-file members who are more moderate. It is this unique dynamic

between congressional leaders and party members that leads our case to depart in important ways from several other principal-agent relationships, such as the President and bureaucratic officials, studied in depth by scholars of American political institutions.

A leader who has a record of supporting a particular ideology will have a credible reputation; “cheap talk” alone would not be convincing. For example, leaders with twenty-year records of militant support for a particular cause (e.g., Paul Ryan in favor of tax cuts) will be unlikely to accept generous compromises. The very histories of such leaders assure the group members that they will not compromise easily, and simultaneously issue a warning to the opposite side. At the same time, extreme ideologies are not without risk; they make a break down in negotiations more likely.

This paper elaborates a theory of legislative leaders as negotiators. It then develops predictions implied by this theory that explain why rank-and-file members would want to select leaders more extreme than themselves. These predictions are tested using historical data on the United States Congress since 1900. In line with much past research, we confirm the tendency for leaders to be located towards the extreme wing of their party as opposed to near the median. (That is, Democrats are more extreme if they are more liberal, whereas Republicans are more extreme if more conservative.)

Next, we consider the electoral dynamics faced by extreme versus moderate members of Congress. A plausible alternative account would explain extreme leadership as a natural consequence of two facts: (1) ascending into congressional leadership requires seniority; and, (2) long-term survivors in Congress tend to be extreme, since they tend to come from safer, i.e., more solid red or blue, districts. Under this account, extreme leadership would result simply from sample selection rather than the mechanisms explored in this and other papers. Our analysis accounts for different durations spent in Congress based on ideology, and we show that the relationship between extreme ideology and selection as a leader nonetheless persists.

Finally, we analyze how the institutional context in Congress matters for leadership selection. If our model of leadership selection as driven by bargaining concerns is correct, then shifts in institutional conditions that make effective bargaining a more compelling concern will increase

the incentives for the rank-and-file to select extreme leaders. Hence, we examine how factors such as the degree of polarization, divided partisan control of government, and the size of the majority party's advantage affect the extremeness of leaders.

Our account focuses on the legislature as a cauldron of negotiation (King and Zeckhauser 1999), with elected leadership teams serving as the lead negotiators (Peabody 1984) both in their dealings with the other side and in keeping their troops in line. Thus, it is no surprise that conventional negotiation tactics such as position staking and arm twisting are as much the repertoire of great legislative leaders – Lyndon Johnson being an exemplary arm twister – as are managing agendas and crafting legislation. Those active measures are complemented by adhering to a well-recognized set of extreme positions. Accordingly, as our analysis shows, party members tend to elect extreme leaders as a weapon to improve bargaining outcomes.

This account of congressional leaders as negotiators recognizes that legislative leadership differs from most leadership roles in the public and private sectors. Ideology can be an important selection criterion for leaders in this context *because* of three unique characteristics of legislatures: (1) Legislative leaders have only a modest executive role; one of their primary responsibilities is to negotiate effectively, or, in the language often used by scholars of Congress, to bargain effectively (Baron and Ferejohn 1989). In fact, leaders' careers depend on successful negotiations to shape laws (Jones 1999, p. 129). (2) They are selected by party peers attuned to both ideology and strategy.<sup>1</sup> (3) All stages of the negotiation process can be monitored by principals. Roll-call votes are visible to the rank-and-file members, and these members also observe how leadership teams structure negotiations before a vote ever takes place, establish the sequence of issues to be discussed in the House and Senate, and maneuver to influence what amendments, if any, will come to the floor.

## **Median Voter Theory and Legislative Leadership**

Should one expect legislative leaders to be centrists or extremists within their own parties? The median voter theorem, if applicable, would predict that parties tend to take policy positions that <sup>1</sup>Matters would be different if they were selected by a probably less strategic electorate, which would likely choose a leader with views like its own.

most closely match (or mimic) the wishes of the median voter in order to maximize votes in an election (Downs 1957). The idea that parties and candidates tend to gravitate toward the preferences of the median voter has dominated the theory of elections (Enelow and Hinich 1984; Glazer, Grofman, and Owen 1989; Ferejohn 1995; Alvarez 1998).<sup>2</sup> Campaigns have often produced winners who are centrist with respect to the relevant electorate. In more recent years, as the parties have become increasingly polarized, scholars have questioned the predictive power of the median voter result. For example, they have failed to find convergence to the median across a range of different policy issues (Fowler and Hall 2016), or have identified convergence only under certain conditions such as homogenous districts (Gerber and Lewis 2004).

The selection of leaders is subject to many of the same forces. Within Congress, party caucuses elect leaders when an opening arises, and the contests are intense, often requiring many rounds of voting (Jenkins and Stewart 2013). Months of behind-the-scenes lobbying on behalf of the candidates of different factions precede such elections (Rohde 2010). If elections involving the general public provide a tug to the center, what of elections for leadership teams within legislatures? For a long time, “The most common view [was] the ‘middleman theory’ of party leadership, which assert[ed] that party leaders come from the (ideological) center of their respective parties” (Grofman, Koetzle, and McGann 2002, p. 88). David Truman articulated this theory in 1959, arguing that “the likelihood of getting elected and of performing effectively as an agent of the party both [hinge] on being a ‘middleman’ . . . not only in the sense of a negotiator but also in a literal structural sense. One would not expect that he could attract the support necessary for election unless his voting record placed him somewhere near the center in an evenly divided party” (Truman 1959; Patterson 1963; Sullivan 1975). Similarly, when Roderick and McCubbins (1991, p. 51) looked at the ideological positions of party leaders, they found precisely what the median voter model would predict, namely that party leaders “have clearly tended toward the caucus median. Indeed, in 1979, then majority leader Jim Wright’s [ideology ranking] indicated that he was the median Democrat in the House of Representatives.”

Since this early work, scholars have refined and revised the middleman theory of party leader-  
<sup>2</sup>The median-voter idea is complicated by the two-stage nature of elections, with primaries preceding general elections (Burden 2001; King 2001)

ship. Grofman, Koetzle, and McGann (2002) study the shapes of ideological distributions within parties and note that the mode rather than the mean or median appears most important for explaining leadership selection. Finding that leaders tend to have a more extreme ideology relative to their party's median – but not much more extreme – the authors note that a concentrated number of party members often tend to cluster to the right of the party median for Republicans and to the left for Democrats. Such a theory matches variation over time in the relative extremeness of leadership. For example, when parties include several ideologically distinct constituencies and are clumped ideologically at different places (as during the first part of the twentieth century), leaders may be less extreme relative to their parties than when parties have a single mode.

In addition, the structure of party leadership elections, which have multiple candidates who are eliminated sequentially, provides one theoretical explanation for the selection of leaders who are more extreme than the party median. McGann, Koetzle, and Grofman (2002) illustrate this possibility using both simulation and game-theoretic models. In a similar vein, Jesse and Malhotra (2010) confirm that leaders tend to be more extreme than the median party member, but closer to the median than if they had been selected from within the party at random. Performing Monte Carlo simulations on the actual distribution of party members' ideologies, they construct a distribution of leaders' ideologies if leaders were selected randomly. They then locate leaders within this distribution of possible ideologies.

Narrowing their study to congressional leadership since the early 1990s, Heberlig, Hetherington, and Larson (2006) note that parties have increasingly selected leaders more extreme than their party's median rather than "middlemen." The authors argue that changing campaign dynamics, and particularly increasing costs due to advertising, have led members to tolerate more extreme leaders who also possess fundraising acumen: "Members may be willing to accept the risk of extreme leaders, and the potential for non-median policy outcomes, in exchange for the collective benefit of electoral resources and the individual career benefits that accrue from majority status" (Heberlig, Hetherington, and Larson 2006, p. 995). The authors hold up examples such as Dick Armey (R-TX), Tom DeLay (R-TX) and Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), describing them as "all ideologues and aggressive fundraisers." Similarly, Harris and Nelson (2008) assess the role of leaders in a po-

larized contemporary Congress, emphasizing their many roles beyond negotiating, which include media and public relations in addition to fundraising. In an era of bi-partisan cooperation, the authors note, middlemen may be more appropriate – but extreme leaders fit with an increasingly polarized Congress. And, even those leaders who are ideologically moderate, such as former Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV), may assume combative personas: “In the contemporary partisan-polarized Congress, even the middle-men counterpunch” (Harris and Nelson 2008, p. 54).

Finally, recent work has examined how entry into leadership affects legislators’ ideological leanings. Hatcher (2010) focuses on how the ideological positions of Senate Majority Leaders evolve *after* becoming a leader. Unlike House Speakers, they continue to vote and thus have roll-call voting records both before and during their time as leaders. Hatcher finds that Senate leaders appear to begin their terms close to the median position in the party but over time drift closer to the extremes of the party. Other work has rejected ideology-based explanations for the selection of leaders almost entirely. Green and Harris (2019) employ a broader framework, viewing ideology and personal relationships as two aspects affecting leadership elections but by no means the most important ones. Instead, the authors advance a “mixed motives” hypothesis that takes party members’ self-interest seriously – members of Congress ask “what can the leader do for me?” and also vote for people they have worked with in the past.

Most work agrees that leaders tend to be located between the median and the extreme wing of the party. Existing work has less to say, however, on several key questions related to the ideological positions of leaders. Those questions are investigated here: (1) What motivates party members to choose extreme leaders? (2) Do strategic considerations for negotiation play a role? (3) Do electoral dynamics, and particularly the different electoral circumstances faced by extreme versus moderate members of Congress, help explain why extreme leaders get selected? (4) Given that leaders tend to have been in Congress much longer than the median, do selection factors related to longevity (such as representing a safe district) play a major role in the choice of extreme leaders? (5) What role do characteristics of the chamber at large, including the level of centralization of leadership, the level of polarization, and the size of the majority party’s majority, play in this

process? For example, if the parties are highly polarized, does this create an incentive to choose an extreme leader? (6) If different parties control the Senate and the House, or the Presidency and a particular chamber, will the potential for bargaining beyond the chamber promote extremeness in leaders? We take up these questions in this paper.

## **Legislative Leaders as Negotiators**

The logic that leads voters to prefer centrist candidates is based on the expectation that voters want to minimize the ideological distance between their own ideal positions and the likely actions of elected representatives. A candidate's ideology – and the proxy of political party identification – provides an efficient shortcut for voters who have limited time to assess and anticipate any number of political issues (Popkin 1994). A legislator's daily choices about which issues to spend time on is most strongly influenced by what a member perceives as constituency interests (Hall 1996). Most legislators have a straightforward path to serve as faithful agents for their constituent principals. As agents, this is the trail to success in the next election. Thousands of bills are introduced in Congress every year. The vast majority spawn from parochial interests, and most are introduced to secure support from constituents. (Few constituents understand how little chance of passage those bills may have.)

Party leaders, by contrast, serve an array of diverse principals. They are accountable to their constituents, but on a day-to-day basis spend the bulk of their time in a series of ongoing adversarial negotiations with the leadership team of the opposing party, as well as negotiating with members of their own party. Legislative leaders are ever mindful of the need to produce a majority, however small, for their favored measures. In the House of Representatives, the magic number is 218 votes; in the Senate, 51 votes.<sup>3</sup>

In the House of Representatives, the critical party leaders are the speaker, the majority and minority leaders, the majority and minority whips, and the conference or caucus chairs. The Senate leadership structure is the same, except that the majority leader also assumes a role similar

<sup>3</sup>When filibusters are threatened in the Senate, which is common on controversial bills, a 60 vote plurality is required for cloture. When the party of the President matches the majority party in the Senate, the Vice President casts a tie-breaking vote and only 50 votes may be needed.

to the House speaker. Some of the best-known party leaders – including Robert Dole (R-KS), who served 16 years in various leadership positions, and Sam Rayburn (D-TX), who was Speaker for 17 years – are unusual for their longevity as leaders. Most serve much shorter terms. Nearly every Congress, parties select new leaders for one of their major positions. For example, in the past ten congresses (from 106th to the 115th Congress), 26 different members held one of these leadership positions in the House.

Established research traditions treat leaders as within-party representatives, influencing committee assignments, party agendas, and the like (Sinclair 1983; Rohde 2010; Cox and McCubbins 2007). Their negotiation role has been slighted. Yet leaders will be selected not only for their skills in that role but also for the bargaining leverage that their known policy views create. The importance of negotiation as part of the job description influences who is selected to the role of party leader.

The negotiation game between leaders of different parties resembles the “dance of negotiation,” described by Howard Raiffa (1982). In a negotiation dance, such as bargaining over the price of a rug at an open-air bazaar, the buyer starts with a low bid and the seller starts high. Then through tugging and hauling, they dance ever closer together. They usually end up near the middle of the original offers. We expect to find that legislative leaders tend to be more extreme than the party medians as a means to negotiate a more favorable outcome. Hence, fully rational political parties will tend to select relatively extreme leaders. In the terminology of negotiation, they are selected to set an initial anchor at an extreme value. Following this logic, even the median member of a party has an incentive to prefer an extreme leader.

Each legislative negotiation begins when two leaders, and their ideologies, walk into the room. Consider a hypothetical legislature with ideologies arrayed from 0 to 1 and where the median Republican resides at 0.6 and the median Democrat at 0.4. Say the Democrats have selected a negotiator with a 0.4 ideology. Posit that the legislature is evenly split. If the Republicans select a negotiator at 0.6, we would expect a 0.5 outcome. However, if the Republicans select a negotiator at 0.7, they should be able to shift that outcome to 0.55 (half of 0.4 + 0.7), a value closer to their party median. Anticipating this, or learning from past losses, the Democrats should counter with

a more extreme leader of their own in hopes of tugging the result closer to their party median. The centrifugal force of this escalation game, if that were the only factor, would lead to electing the two most extreme members in the respective party caucuses/conferences.

But there is a strong countervailing centripetal force: An extreme negotiator might refuse or prevent deals that other leaders would accept, and that the party members would welcome. The more extreme a negotiator, the less likely a deal is to be secured. Thus, a caucus would be unwise to select its most extreme member; too little would get done. The optimal balance of these two forces is our focus below.

## **A Model of Leadership Extremism**

When the House Democratic leadership team for the 108th Congress (2003-2004) was elected by the party caucus, the eventual minority leader, Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) faced a challenge from Harold Ford, Jr. (D-TN). Backed by a coalition of politically moderate (and mostly Southern) “Blue Dog Democrats,” Ford’s supporters argued that Pelosi was too liberal to represent the party on a national stage. To regain a national majority, said Charles Stenholm (D-TX), “Democrats cannot win merely by rallying the faithful. We need to earn the support of the independent and swing voters as well” (Ferrechio 2002).

Nancy Pelosi won her leadership race handily, with 177 caucus votes compared to Ford’s mere 29. She won, however, not for her potential as a national spokesperson for the Democratic Party. Her caucus supporters pointed to the ongoing battles across the aisle, chiefly with new Republican Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-TX). As Norman Ornstein (2002) observed, because Democrats were the minority party in the House, Pelosi’s role would be “limited to counterpunching. The key to the next two years is the punchers – the Republicans, who will set the policy agenda in substance and timing and will be able to frame the debate and priorities in a nearly unfettered way.”

Members of party caucuses may rationally choose non-median leaders because of the “punching and counterpunching” across party aisles, and we expect that the logic behind Nancy Pelosi’s victory in securing the minority leader position represents a general phenomenon.

Figure 1 – Ideal Negotiator for a Conservative Caucus

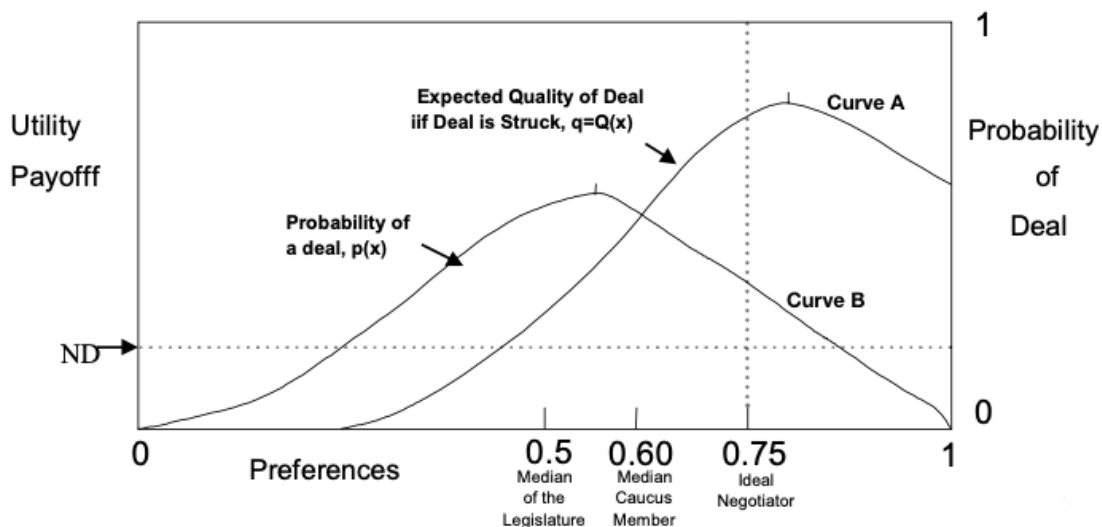


Figure 1 displays the implicit calculations conducted by an optimizing conservative caucus. The caucus median (0.60) lies to the right of the medians of both the other party and the chamber. The calculations involve two curves and a horizontal line. Curve A shows the median caucus member's expected quality of a deal with the other party should one be reached. Denote this value as  $q$ , where  $q = Q(x/deal)$ , hereafter simplified to  $Q(x)$ . It is constructed assuming some location for the negotiator in the other party, and a negotiating process with the qualitative properties of the dance described by Raiffa (1982). Its payoff is measured in utiles, or more technically as a von Neumann-Morgenstern utility.

Curve B gives the probability of a deal,  $p(x)$ , which starts to decline as the conservative negotiator moves to the right from 0.55 to 0.60. Its probability values are shown at the right of the diagram. (Below 0.55, this curve falls off because the conservative caucus would not support such a moderate leader.)

The dashed horizontal line represents the status quo, No Deal, offering payoff  $ND$ . It represents the expected value as a von Neumann-Morgenstern utility of doing nothing. Possibly nothing will happen in the future, or a new deal may be struck. The expected value of this future lottery is  $ND$ .

In choosing among candidates for negotiator, a caucus member will compute the expected value his or her ideology will bring. With a negotiator at  $x$ , the expected payoff will be:

$$p(x)Q(x) + (1 - p(x))ND. \quad (1)$$

Rearranging terms we get

$$p(x)(Q(x) - ND) + ND. \quad (2)$$

To maximize this, the member effectively maximizes the probability of a deal times the gain an agreed deal would offer over the status quo. This is the first term in the sum; the second term,  $ND$  is not affected by  $x$ . In the diagram, for the median voter at 0.65, the ideal negotiator is at 0.75. That point maximizes the value of  $p(x)(Q(x) - ND)$ .

Taking derivatives, and maximizing (2), we get

$$p'(x)/p(x) = -Q'(x)/(Q(x) - ND), \quad (3)$$

the condition for the ideal location of the leader. This optimum expression (3) tells us that the two elasticities with respect to the negotiator's location are set equal: The elasticity of the probability must equal the negative of the elasticity of the gain from a deal. Looking at the right-hand side of equation (3) first, this implies that a caucus will choose a more extreme leader the more it affects the quality of a deal, the better is the no-deal outcome, and the less extremeness affects the probability of a deal. That is, it often will be desirable for a caucus to select a legislative negotiator who is substantially more extreme than its median member. Some extremeness will improve the deal struck; too much cuts the probability of a deal too severely. Furthermore, several possible extensions to this basic model stand out. Given the importance of the deal probability  $p(x)$  and the marginal deal probability  $p'(x)$ , institutional factors that plausibly affect the probability of a deal should influence the optimal selection of a leader. If a party has few worries about passage, then the theory suggests selection of more extreme leadership.<sup>4</sup> The majority party (particularly

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<sup>4</sup>Passage rates will primarily reflect the ideological location of proposed legislation, the status quo, and the ideological positions of party members and leaders.

in the House), has an advantage in negotiations since moves towards the extreme will generally influence deal probability less.<sup>5</sup> Thus, we predict majority parties will tend to select more extreme leaders relative to the party median, and this tendency will be increasing in the size of the majority. The Senate, where the filibuster looms, provides incentives that limit the push to extremism. Lastly, increasing polarization of the parties has an ambiguous effect – on the one hand, as the median party member grows more extreme the payoff to selecting extreme leaders increases; on the other, as the parties move apart, the reduced probability of a deal from a more extreme leader will also influence leadership selection.<sup>6</sup>

## **Empirical Evidence on Leader Ideology Relative to Their Party**

We now test our first, prime hypothesis – that party leaders will tend to be selected who are more extreme than the median member of the party caucus.<sup>7</sup>

We find evidence consistent with this hypothesis in the ideologies of the leadership teams (two per two-year Congress) elected by the party caucuses from 1900 through 2017 (the 56th through the 115th Congresses).<sup>8</sup> These scores were computed from an analysis of all recorded House and Senate votes in a given Congress, and allow us to measure extremeness relative to the positions of members of Congress (MCs) (Nokken and Poole 2004).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Whenever the chamber median is closer to a given party median (as will normally be the case for the majority party), the party leadership will overall have more room to stake out extreme positions relative to the party median (as long as preferences are symmetric, single-peaked, etc.), though the specifics for any single piece of legislation will also depend on the status quo policy.

<sup>6</sup>This is true even when holding fixed the ideological locations of the opposing party members.

<sup>7</sup>Since a Congress lasts for two years, with leadership teams usually elected in January of the odd-numbered years, our units of observation consist of Congress-chamber-party combinations.

<sup>8</sup>To be precise, we have data for House leadership teams from the 56th to 115th Congresses; for Senate leadership teams, we have data starting from the 57th Congress for Democrats and from the 64th Congress for Republicans.

<sup>9</sup>The estimates from Nokken and Poole (2004) are allowed to vary based on a member's changing voting behavior from congress to congress, but they are also anchored to be comparable across time.

We begin by calculating the percent of party caucus members whose ideology scores are more moderate than those of each leader and reporting the average for the leadership team. For example, following the November 1994 elections, Republicans took control of the House of Representatives in January 1995 and elected a leadership team consisting of Speaker Newt Gingrich (GA), Majority Leader Dick Armey (TX), Whip Tom Delay (TX), and Conference Chair John Boehner (OH). (The median members of the Republican party in that congress were Elton Gallegly (R-CA) and Charles Bass (R-NH), who did not play pivotal roles in the Republican party.) That year, 62.7 percent of the Republican caucus was more moderate than Newt Gingrich, 86 percent more moderate than Dick Armey, 80.9 percent more moderate than Tom Delay, and 69.9 percent more moderate than John Boehner. The Republican leadership team was on average more conservative than nearly 74.8 percent of the members of their party. On the other side of the aisle, Richard Gephardt (MO) led a team that on average was more liberal than 72.6 percent of the Democratic party caucus.<sup>10</sup>

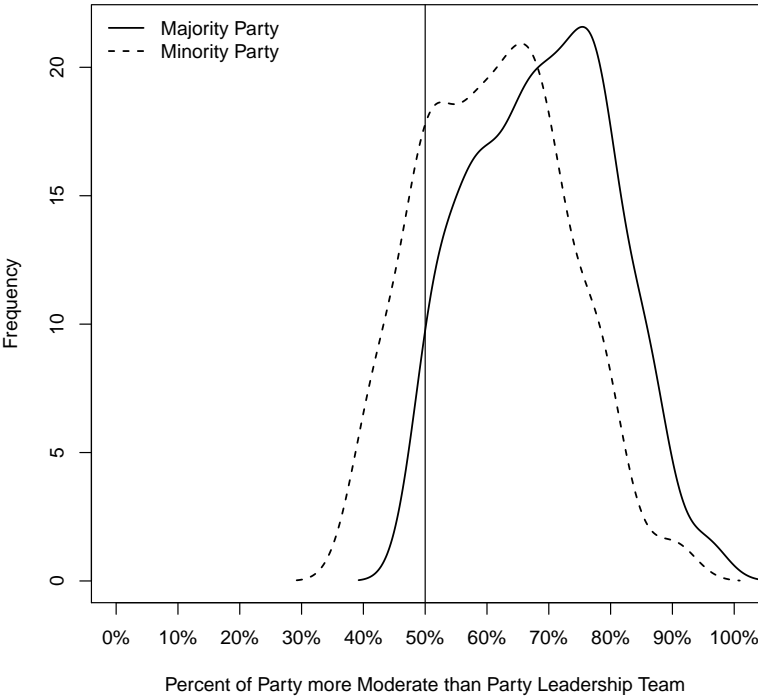
A Congress lasts for two years, with leadership teams usually elected in January of the odd-numbered years. If MCs voted for leaders whose preferences reflected their own, leaders would tend to be located near the median MC, and the extremism scores for leadership teams would tend to be clustered around 50 percent. Results for the majority and minority party leadership teams in our time period are shown in Figure 2, and the pattern tips decidedly toward the extremes. For the majority and minority parties in the House and Senate, the share of MCs with ideologies less extreme than the leadership team tends to be greater than 50% in most congresses.

Across the House leadership teams we have in our sample, 89.7 percent were more extreme on average than their party's median. The majority party has had a leadership team at or below the party's ideological median just once in almost 120 years.

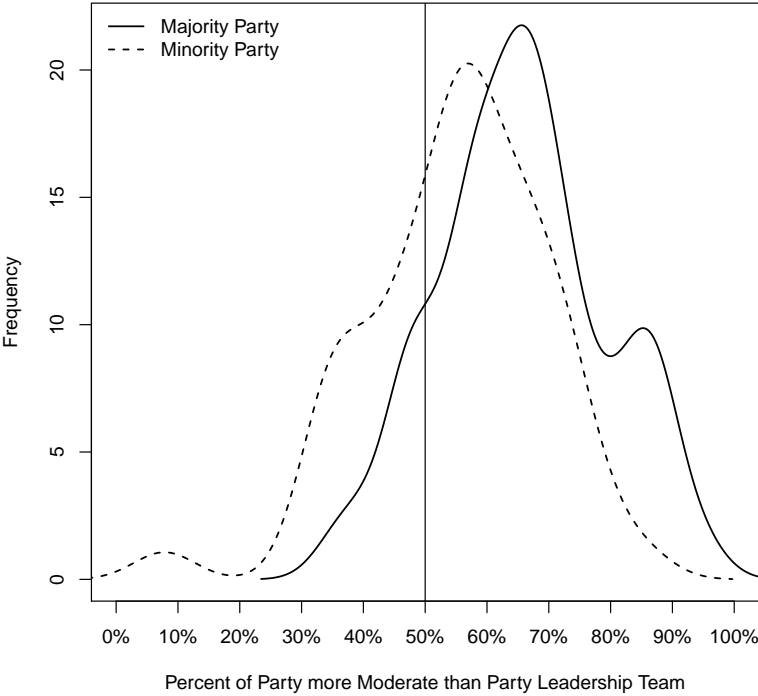
The strategies for the minority party differ from those for the majority, which in turn affects leadership selection. The minority party cannot hope to pass legislation on its own. But it can hope to build a coalition attracting moderates from the majority party and thereby temper legislation that gets passed. This hope reduces the incentive to select an extreme leader. Hence,<sup>10</sup>To be clear, these percentages refer to how many members of a party, in that Congress, were less extreme than each leader mentioned based on voting records from that Congress.

Figure 2 – Leadership Teams & Extremism

(a) House



(b) Senate



we should expect that on average minority party leaders will be less extreme among their members. This phenomenon is clearly shown in Figure 2, where the curve for the minority party is substantially to the left of that for the majority party. The minority party in the House has had leadership teams at or below the party median 11 times since 1900. Turning to Congress as a whole, the ideological gap between the party's median member in a chamber and the average leader is substantial; on average, 63 percent of MCs are more moderate than their leaders. The hypothesis that leaders reflect the preferences of the median MC in their caucus can be easily rejected ( $p < 0.001$ ). And, while both the majority and minority party leadership teams tend to be more extreme than their party medians, minority-party leadership teams are significantly less extreme than their majority-party counterparts ( $p < 0.001$ ).<sup>11</sup>

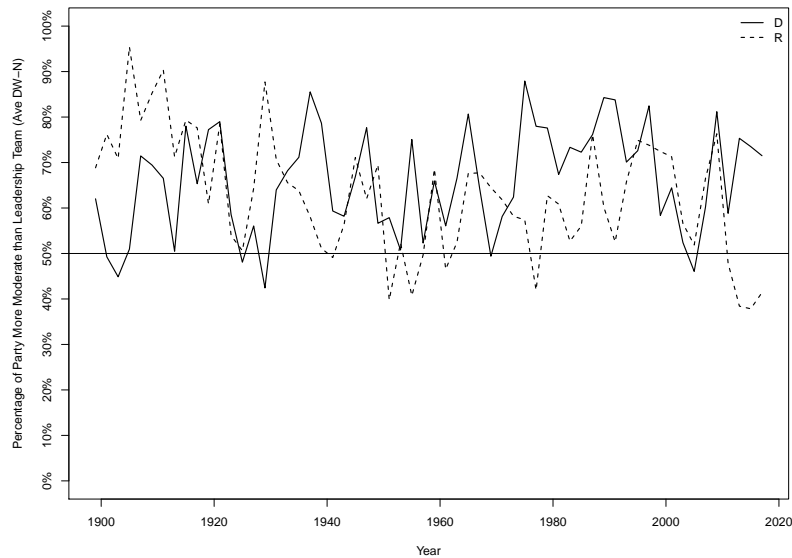
The same results obtain when turning to individual-level data in a regression framework. Tables A2 and A3 in the Appendix describe results from regressions with controls for chamber, party and time. This approach yields estimates showing that leaders had significantly more extreme ideologies than rank-and-file members, with a difference in magnitude amounting to about half of a standard deviation in the measure of ideological extremeness. Moreover, these differences in ideology between leaders and rank-and-file obtain for a variety of different approaches to measuring ideological positioning, including: (1) when measuring extremeness by the percentage of MCs who are more moderate in the chamber; (2) when measuring extremeness by the Nokken-Poole DW-Nominate score for each member; (3) when measuring extremeness for leaders using the percentage of MCs more moderate in the chamber from the congress *before* they joined the leadership ranks.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>The p-value for the comparison between median MC ideology and the ideology of the leader is calculated from a two-sample t-test where the null hypothesis is that the average leader's ideology is in the 50th percentile in their chamber/party combination. The p-value for the difference between the majority and minority is calculated from a two-sample t-test where the null hypothesis is no difference between the average extremeness of the ideology of the majority party as compared to the minority party.

<sup>12</sup>This last approach guards against concerns that the results might be driven entirely by changes in behavior occurring only after joining the leadership ranks.

**Figure 3 – House Leadership Extremism Over Time**



Though these extremism results are conclusive, at least one era appears anomalous. From 1936-58 Republican leaders were more moderate than their party median about 30 percent of the time (see Figure 3). In this period, the Democratic party majority was significant, and Republicans were seeking to build temporary coalitions with conservative Southern Democrats. We are hesitant to explain exceptions on a case-by-case basis. However, we should note that this unusual behavior is widely discussed in the literature (Manley 1973; Sinclair 1982; Rohde 2010).

### **Levels of Leadership**

If our theory is correct, it should apply to all leaders, and most strongly to those most actively involved in negotiations across the aisle. To test this, we ranked all members of a party from least influential (not holding a leadership position) to most influential. The latter would be Speaker of the House for the majority party in the House, Party Leader for the House minority party, and either party in the Senate. The pattern that emerges (see Table 1) confirms that the more senior the leader, the more extreme is his or her ideology relative to the party. This pattern provides particularly strong evidence for our hypothesis, given that the party leaders and the Speaker of the House play a prominent additional role representing parties to the electorate at large. Presumably,

that responsibility would make closeness to the median of the overall electorate favorable, and that electorate is more moderate than the median of either party.

**Table 1** – Leadership Progressions, Share of Party Caucus more Moderate than Legislator, 1900–2017

	House	Senate
Not Currently Holding a Leadership Position	0.50	0.50
Party Whip	0.64	0.59
Conference or Caucus Chair	0.60	
Majority or Minority Party Leader	0.68	0.62
Speaker of the House	0.71	

### Voting Histories of Potential Leaders

A leader secures superior outcomes for his or her party by holding an extreme ideology. However, a candidate for leadership cannot just choose an ideology anew. Reputations are built over years, so a shift to the extreme upon competing for or assuming leadership would likely be regarded as “cheap talk” and would undermine its effectiveness as a negotiation tactic (Farrell and Rabin 1996). Nevertheless, might leaders strategically choose to become more extreme once appointed? To answer this question, we looked at leaders’ ideologies before, during, and after their leadership careers.

Table 2 shows the record. In both chambers there is a slight boost in extremism during leadership and a slight decline after finishing one’s leadership position. However, the salient result is that whether before, during or after leadership, leaders were more extreme than their party.

**Table 2** – Extreme Leaders: Before, During and After Leadership

Chamber	Period	Share Less Extreme Than MC	N (Congresses)
House	Pre-Leadership	0.60	720
House	During Leadership	0.65	432
House	Post-Leadership	0.56	248
Senate	Pre-Leadership	0.58	261
Senate	During Leadership	0.60	220
Senate	Post-Leadership	0.58	121

## **Ideology and Leaders as Long-Time Members of Congress**

Ascending into congressional leadership requires seniority in Congress. Extreme ideology might correlate with seniority because MCs from consistently far-right or far-left districts face fewer competitive general elections and tend to hold extreme ideology themselves. Thus, we hypothesize that the pool of long-time survivors in Congress, individuals who more frequently assume leadership roles, is disproportionately extreme. That is, extremeness is correlated with seniority, hence longevity, which in turn promotes ascension into leadership positions. If this is so, then sample selection might explain extreme leadership, as a complement to or in place of the hypothesis that it is due to strategic choices to improve negotiated outcomes.

First, we examine whether leadership positions tend to require seniority. The evidence is clear, though its strength varies across chambers. If we restrict the sample to non-leaders and MCs in their first term of leadership, then 98 percent of the time the new House leadership has had longer average tenure than the typical non-leader in the House. In the Senate, this is true 73 of the time. It seems safe to say that leaders are on average much more senior than those they lead.

The next question is whether a longer tenure in Congress is associated with extreme ideology, controlling for other factors. We estimate a Cox Proportional Hazard model, where the hazard is leaving Congress. The departure probability is a function of time already spent in Congress, as well as a function of ideological extremeness (in first term), party, age, and age-squared (in first term).

Table A1 in the Appendix summarizes the results. In the House, ideological extremeness has a strong (and significant) negative association with the probability of leaving Congress. In the Senate, the association is much weaker and not significant. The source of this difference might be that a states' voters are substantially more heterogeneous on average than are those in congressional districts'. The result could be that senators face a greater risk of losing future elections.

To show how these estimates unfold over the course of a congressional career, we plot the hazard functions in the House and Senate for MCs who have different levels of ideological extremeness. Figures 4a and 4b display the results for MCs in the 10th–90th percentiles of ideological extremeness within their chamber. As the figures illustrate, the gap in hazard rates appears

meaningful for the House but is only slight for the Senate. To put the magnitudes for the House in perspective, about half of MCs with ideological extremeness in the 10th percentile of their party have exited the House after 3 terms, whereas it takes 4 terms for someone in the 90th percentile of extremeness to have attrited to the same degree. This difference is meaningful but not massive.

Thus, it appears that this selection-based hypothesis – that more extreme legislators have longer careers and are thus more likely to ascend to leadership positions – could explain some portion of the difference in ideology observed for leaders versus non-leaders. To know for sure, the ideal experiment would randomly assign seats in the legislature to some extreme and some moderate MCs while holding district characteristics constant. It would then track the rates at which extreme versus moderate legislators became leaders.

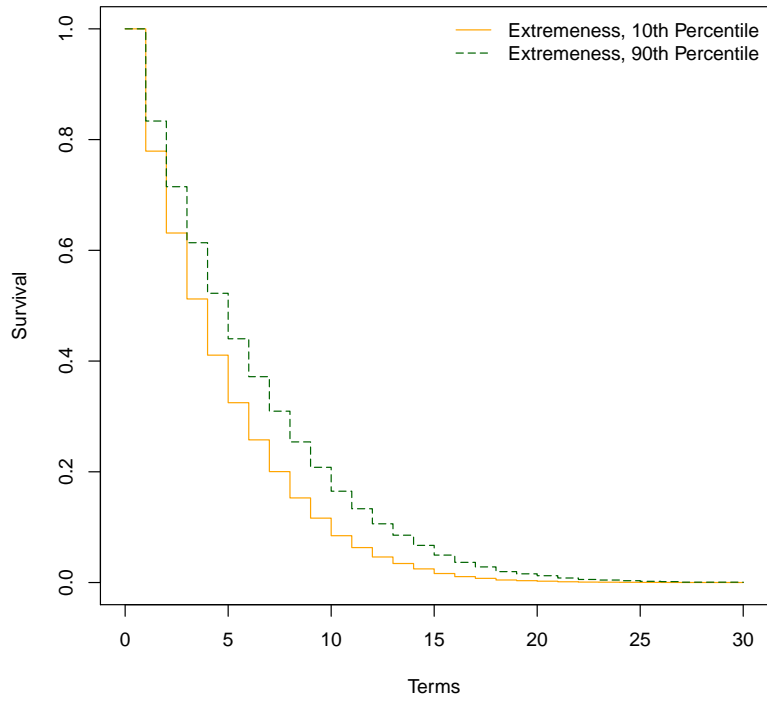
We pursue a more practical empirical strategy, one that enables us to estimate the likelihood that a legislator will join the leadership while accounting for how ideology affects tenure in office. Posit a legislature with a tenure system such that, upon election, officials serve a fixed number of years and then leave office. This scenario would eliminate the problem of different attrition rates for extreme versus moderate MCs.

We can construct a similar counterfactual scenario that holds constant the length of tenure for everyone (see Figure 5). In this scenario, exit from Congress and joining leadership are *competing risks*. We then re-estimate a duration model. Some MCs leave Congress early, which precludes them from ever joining leadership. Others will have long careers and never become leaders. We are also dealing with a problem where some observations are censored because members are still serving today (i.e., those MCs in the 115th Congress). A competing risks model estimates the marginal probability of joining leadership while accounting for the overall probability of having remained in the sample of non-leaders sufficiently long to do so.<sup>13</sup>

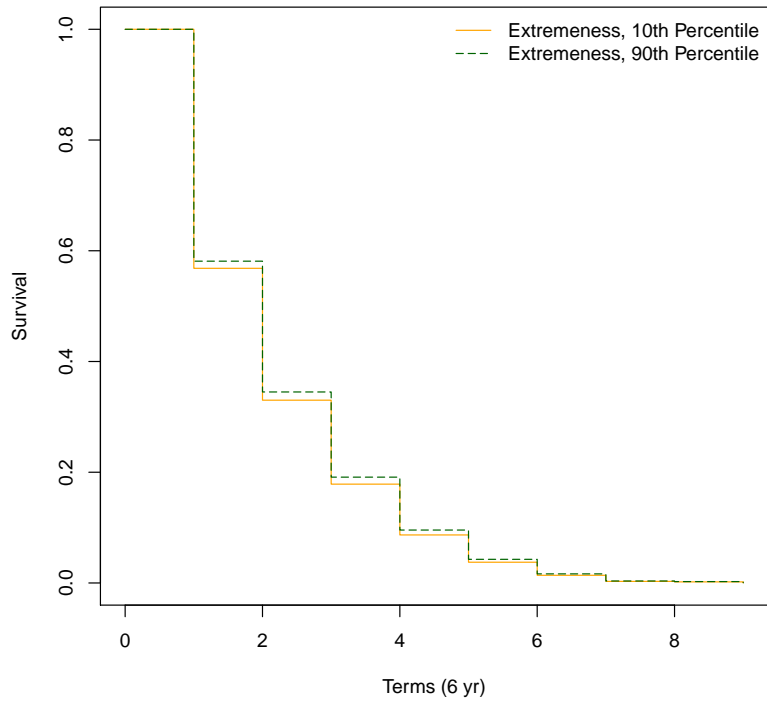
<sup>13</sup>Consider the random variable  $T$ , which denotes the number of Congresses in an MCs career until they either leave Congress or became a party leader.  $T$  is drawn from the CDF  $F(\cdot)$  on the interval  $[0, \infty)$ . The probability of staying in Congress for any number of  $t$  Congresses as a non leader is then given by the survival function  $S(t) = 1 - F(t)$ . In any one Congress, the probability of joining leadership is denoted by  $h_L(t)$ . Thus, we want to know the probability of joining leadership at time  $t$  conditional on having stayed in Congress and not joined leadership

**Figure 4** – Probability of Exit from Congress by Ideological extremeness

(a) *House*

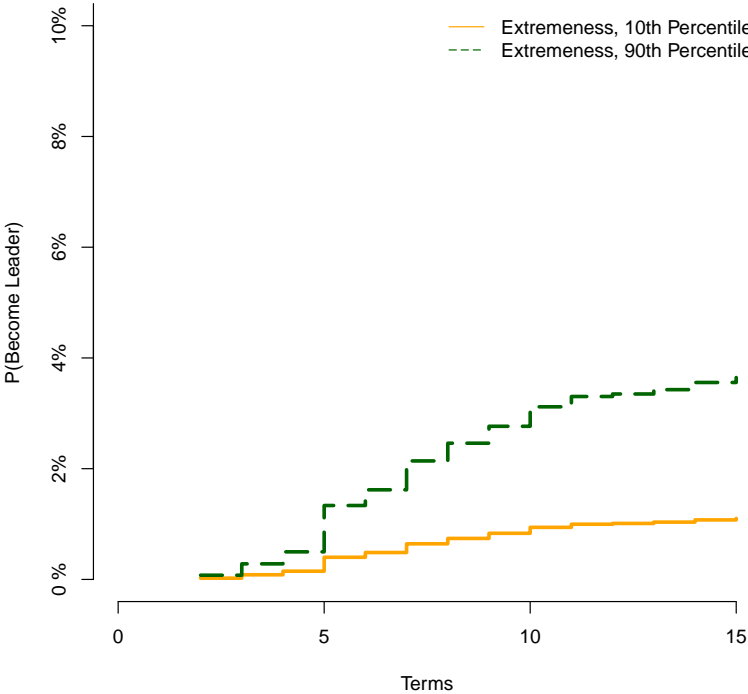


(b) *Senate*

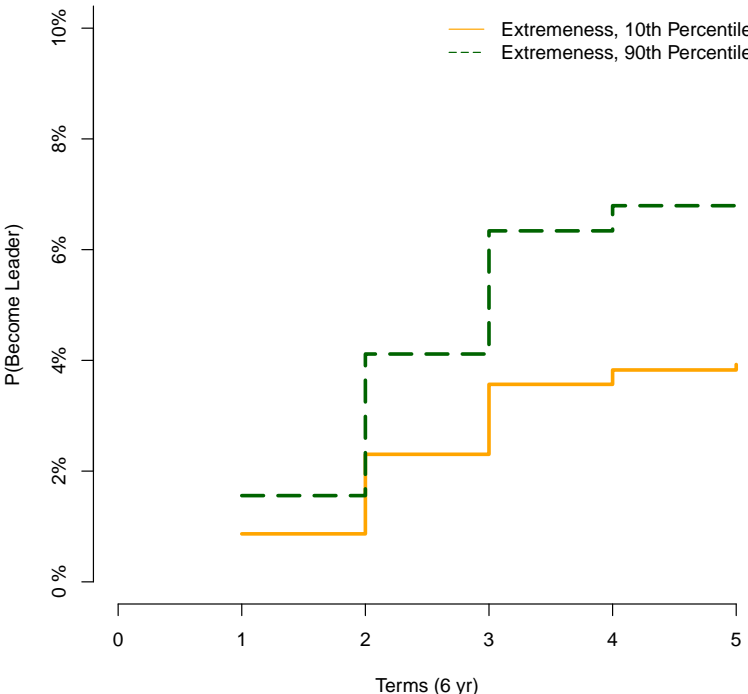


**Figure 5 – Probability of Joining Leadership When Accounting for Differential Odds of Exiting Congress Based on Extremeness**

(a) *House*



(b) *Senate*



Figures 5a and 5b present the probabilities over time that MCs holding low (10th percentile) and high extreme (90th percentile) ideologies join leadership, accounting for their differential rates of exiting Congress. As is evident, the overall probability of joining leadership is low across the board. But the MC with a more extreme ideology is considerably more likely to join leadership in both the House and Senate. (The results are similar for the two parties; hence the figures combine them.) Furthermore, if we calculate the fitted values (i.e., the probability of joining leadership) for each MC by chamber and use them to calculate the ideological score for leaders, then the estimates do not diverge meaningfully from the ideologies of leadership in the historical sample.

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up until time  $t - 1$ . That is, we want  $H_t = S(t - 1) \times h_L(t)$ . We can estimate each of these components – for instance, the latter could be estimated by the number of MCs joining leadership at time  $t$  divided by the number of non-leader MCs remaining in the sample at the time. Now further suppose that these probability distributions are affected not only by time in Congress  $t$  but also by a set of fixed characteristics  $X$  for an MC (i.e., age entering Congress, party, gender, etc.) along with *Extremeness*. Then, we want to estimate for all MCs and for all  $t$  the quantity  $H(t|Extremeness, X, t - 1)$ .

## Leadership Selection and Context

We next evaluate how contextual factors in the House and Senate influence leadership choices. We find that while parties tend to select extreme leaders regardless of context, the level of extremeness nonetheless responds to institutional conditions in Congress. This is consistent with the model, introduced by Figure 1, in which the probability and quality of a deal influence rank-and-file MCs' choices over the ideal extremeness for a leader. We further examine the selection of extreme leaders in relation to changes in the party median, within-chamber partisan polarization, within-chamber centralization of leadership, and unified or divided government (across chambers and the executive branch).

This analysis studies polarization. Hence, our measure of extremeness should allow for relative comparisons in magnitude across time.<sup>14</sup> For this reason, we measure ideological extremeness as follows. Define  $x$  as an MC's ideology (Nokken-Poole DW-Nominate score), where  $x$  ranges from -1 to 1, with a negative value representing a more liberal ideology.<sup>15</sup> MCs belong to either the Democratic or Republican party ( $party \in \{D, R\}$ ). Then,

$$Extremeness = \begin{cases} -x, & \text{if } party = D \\ x, & \text{if } party = R. \end{cases} \quad (4)$$

To examine how contextual factors influence selection of leaders, we narrow our sample from all MCs to party leaders. We start by using a model similar to those employed in the study of representation in congressional elections (Achen 1978). The model takes the form:

$$Extremeness\ of\ Ideology_{it} = \alpha + \beta Extremeness\ of\ Party\ Median_{it} + X_{it} \cdot \theta + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (5)$$

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<sup>14</sup>The other analyses in the paper employ the percent of the party/chamber less extreme than a leader as a measure of Extremeness.

<sup>15</sup>The rescaling below seeks to make Republican and Democratic ideological locations comparable in terms of their extremeness, but note that the location of the "zero" in DW-Nominate scores is somewhat arbitrary. As a result, we also present Tables replicating the following empirical exercise for each party on its own in the Appendix.

where  $i$  indexes leaders,  $t$  indexes congresses,  $\alpha$  estimates the “bias” of the electoral system, the coefficient  $\beta$  on the variable  $Party\ Median_{it}$  estimates the “responsiveness”, and  $X_{it}$  includes covariates measuring the institutional conditions in Congress and other leader-level controls.

Using this straightforward empirical model, we estimate a “bias” (i.e.,  $\hat{\alpha}$ ), which in our case is a tendency to extremeness, of 0.115 and a responsiveness to the party median (i.e.,  $\hat{\beta}$ ) of 0.923 in column 1 of Table 3. Both of these estimates accord with our theoretical model. First, leadership selection is indeed responsive to the location of the party median. As the median voter within a party changes position, so too does the choice of a leader (in an almost one-to-one fashion). Second, beyond this median-party-member effect, the ideology of party leaders remains more extreme than the median party member’s ideology. That is,  $\hat{\alpha} > 0$ , a result significant for all formulations at the 0.001 level.

Next, we examine how polarization affects the selection of leaders. Polarization, defined as the distance (based on DW-Nominate scores) between the mean Democratic member and the mean Republican member, has varied considerably over time since 1900. In the first half of the 20th century, ideological divisions between the parties declined significantly (Poole 2005); however, there have been large increases in polarization since the mid-1960s passage of the Voting Rights Act and Civil Rights Act led to a long, slow realignment of Southern Democrats. For simplicity, our formal theoretical framework focuses only on the extremeness of one party’s leadership. But the intuition of the model readily extends to incorporate polarization. Specifically, our theoretical framework would suggest that an increase in polarization should exert two opposing forces on the selection of extreme leaders. As the parties move apart, legislators react to (1) changes in the elasticity of the probability of reaching a deal and (2) changes in the negative elasticity of the benefit from reaching an agreement. For any level of extremeness, the probability of reaching a deal matters, but so does the *marginal* probability (i.e., the change in probability as a more extreme leader is selected). At an already high level of extremeness, the marginal probability of reaching a deal may be low and so even further moves towards the extreme could be rational if the marginal benefits are large. Ultimately, whether this preference for an extreme leader predominates under heightened polarization amounts to an empirical question.

Column 2 reports results from regressing extremeness of leaders on polarization and finds a strong positive relationship between the two variables. As polarization increases, we observe more extreme leadership selections as well. The marginal probability of reaching a deal may be low under high polarization. Relating this polarization measure on its own to our theoretical model proves difficult because polarization captures two distinct factors – the location of the mean or median party member along with the distance to the mean or median of the opposing party. We therefore separate polarization into two components: the locations of the medians of the two parties.<sup>16</sup>

This empirical approach reveals a more subtle dynamic at play. (See columns 3–8 of Table 3.) When the opposing party grows more extreme, one’s own party tends to respond by moderating. Intuitively, increases in polarization due entirely to the opposing party reduce the deal probability and create incentives for selecting a more moderate leader. On the other hand, as one’s own party median grows more extreme, the extremeness of own party leadership increases. This pattern of results holds up across several different specifications (without controls for time, with a linear time trend, and with Congress fixed effects), and it aligns well with key insights from our model. MCs ultimately must balance their preference for an extreme leader to get a more preferred policy outcome against the concern that extreme leaders reduce the probability of striking a deal. When the deal probability is low but the marginal deal probability is high, members may be willing to select more moderate leaders.

One main concern arising with the approach discussed above revolves around the rescaling of the DW-Nominate scores to make extremeness directly comparable across parties. As a result, we also estimate these models separately by party, which ensures measures of extremeness are comparable since all comparisons are made within party. Tables A4 and A5 present the results.<sup>17</sup> For

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<sup>16</sup>This is a slight variation on the standard measure of polarization in the literature, which is the distance between own and opposing party means rather than medians. We use medians since it is consistent with our theoretical model and in practice captures essentially the same concept as the traditional measure of polarization.

<sup>17</sup>We exclude the party dummy and specifications with Congress fixed effects since we now focus only on one party at a time.

the Republican party, essentially all of the same conclusions remain unchanged. For Democrats only, we observe qualitatively similar but slightly noisier results.

**Table 3** – Leadership and Extremeness ( $DW - N$ ), Leaders Only

	Extremeness of Party Leadership							
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Party								
Median Extremeness	0.923*** (0.102)		1.013*** (0.098)	1.056*** (0.121)	1.035*** (0.093)	0.990*** (0.119)	0.773*** (0.192)	0.869*** (0.211)
Polarization		0.386*** (0.059)						
Opposing Party								
Median Extremeness			-0.219*** (0.073)	-0.256** (0.100)	-0.204*** (0.075)	-0.331*** (0.107)	-0.494*** (0.179)	-0.468** (0.197)
Unified Gov.				-0.001 (0.011)		-0.011 (0.011)		
Centralized				0.026 (0.017)		0.046** (0.020)		-0.004 (0.027)
Republican	-0.027*** (0.010)	0.009 (0.012)	-0.038*** (0.011)	-0.034*** (0.011)	-0.038*** (0.011)	-0.034*** (0.011)	-0.037*** (0.009)	-0.033*** (0.009)
Senate	-0.027** (0.011)	-0.031** (0.012)	-0.029*** (0.011)	-0.034*** (0.012)	-0.027** (0.011)	-0.036*** (0.012)	-0.033*** (0.012)	-0.032** (0.013)
Constant	0.115*** (0.035)	0.150*** (0.043)	0.164*** (0.042)	0.158*** (0.060)	0.215*** (0.044)	0.288*** (0.084)		
Congress Trend	no	no	no	no	yes	yes	no	no
Congress FE	no	no	no	no	no	no	yes	yes
N	637	637	637	591	637	591	637	591
R <sup>2</sup>	0.190	0.116	0.197	0.225	0.204	0.233	0.295	0.309

\*p < .1; \*\*p < .05; \*\*\*p < .01

SEs clustered by Party/Congress/Chamber.

Our focus has been on negotiations within a single Congressional chamber. However, there are also negotiations across chambers, and with the President. Unified government – defined here as when the same party holds the presidency and a majority in both chambers of Congress – might be expected to reduce the need for extreme leadership. Negotiations across chambers, being intra-party, would be greatly eased, suggesting that the incentives to select extreme leaders would be reduced. Nevertheless, even under unified government a majority party may still need to engage in significant negotiations with the minority party within its chamber. While the specifics of the negotiation will depend on the distribution of ideologies in the chamber, this within-chamber concern should be particularly relevant in the Senate when the party in power does not have a

filibuster-proof majority.

Turning to the data, we find no meaningful effect of unified government on leadership selection.<sup>18</sup> One possible explanation for this result is that the demands of within-chamber negotiations significantly outweigh the importance of across-chamber negotiation. A second explanation is that leaders are selected recognizing that they will likely remain in power beyond the period of unified government.<sup>19</sup>

Lastly, we look at centralization, as indicated by two factors: (1) the strength of party caucuses that can compel party members to stay in line; and, (2) periods when the Speaker or Majority Leader possess more formal prerogatives. One might expect particularly extreme leaders during historical moments when centralization was high. In such moments, the ideologies of party leaders will serve as stronger anchors for negotiation efforts. To measure centralization of leadership, we employ a coding scheme developed in Brady, Cooper, and Hurley (1979), as extended in Aldrich, Berger, and Rohde (2002) and Ansolabehere, Palmer, and Schneer (2018).<sup>20</sup>

Our estimates yield mixed results on the role of centralization. Without controls for time period, we find a positive but not statistically significant relationship between increasing centralization and selection of extreme leadership. When a linear time trend is included, the effect remains positive and also becomes significantly different from zero. The positive coefficients on centralization accord with the notion that in moments where leaders held more power they also tended to be more extreme. Finally, if Congress fixed effects are included, the relationship disappears. This

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<sup>18</sup>Note we could not estimate the effect of unified government for the specification including Congress fixed effects, since unified vs. divided government is measured at the level of the entire Congress.

<sup>19</sup>Since 1970, there have only been two Congresses with a unified government that were followed by such a Congress.

<sup>20</sup>One note of caution here is that centralization measures are essentially ex-post judgments made by scholars after legislators have selected leaders and cast roll-call votes. In practice, measures of centralization identify broad periods or congressional eras where conditions for leaders stayed relatively constant for multiple congresses at a time; this somewhat reduces concerns about hindsight bias.

likely occurs because in most cases centralization measures are the same for both the House and the Senate, meaning the fixed effect absorbs all of that variation.

In sum, we observe that parties select more extreme leaders when polarization increases, but that this pattern is driven solely by increases in one's own party median. Increases in extremeness of the opposing party provide a countervailing effect (though smaller in magnitude). Ultimately, there is less robust evidence that other potentially influential factors such as centralization of leadership or unified government materially affect whether parties select more or less extreme leaders.

Our basic model posits that there is a tradeoff between the advantages of selecting a more extreme leader and passing legislation. That implies that when a party is more firmly in control (and hence passage more secure) it can indulge in extreme choice. If so, we should expect more extreme leaders from majority parties when the size of the majority is greater, when the President is from the majority party, and when the other chamber is controlled by the same party. The potential for filibuster, only relevant for the Senate, will inhibit extremeness in the Senate relative to the House.

Table 4 tests for these predictions first by regressing extremeness of leadership on: majority status, extent of majority, and whether the President's party and the party controlling the other chamber is that of the majority. Second, it looks at the Senate and the filibuster threat.<sup>21</sup>

On average, majority parties select leaders that are five percentage points more extreme than minority parties. Presumably, the minority party has to be somewhat more accommodating to have influence. When the President too is from the majority party, that further tempers the extremeness of the minority choice for leader. As the seat share of the majority party increases, it has less need for minority support in case of defectors. It tends to select a more extreme leader, departing more from a moderate path. These results all accord with our model. There is one contrary result: a mismatch in party control of the other chamber produces a negative coefficient on extremeness, though not statistically significant.

In the Senate, where a filibuster looms, less extreme leaders should be expected. Our estimates support this logic – we find across three different specifications that leadership selections

<sup>21</sup>This measure accounts for changes in the threshold required to invoke cloture and end a filibuster that have occurred since 1900.

**Table 4** – Institutional Factors in Congress and Extreme Leadership (Pct. Less Extreme in Party/Chamber)

	House and Senate			Senate Only		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Majority	0.056** (0.025)	0.104*** (0.019)	0.016 (0.024)	0.096*** (0.028)	0.046 (0.033)	0.108*** (0.031)
Pres. Party Mismatch	-0.062*** (0.023)				-0.070** (0.032)	
Cong. Party Mismatch		0.053 (0.039)				0.055 (0.056)
Size of Party Split			-0.254 (0.202)			
Supermajority				0.110** (0.053)	0.109** (0.053)	0.109** (0.053)
Pres. Party Mismatch X Majority	0.064* (0.033)				0.079 (0.048)	
Cong. Party Mismatch X Majority		-0.066 (0.046)				-0.097 (0.082)
Size of Party Split X Majority			1.079*** (0.276)			
Republican	-0.003 (0.017)	0.003 (0.018)	0.033* (0.019)	0.011 (0.028)	0.006 (0.027)	0.020 (0.030)
Senate	-0.043** (0.017)	-0.044** (0.017)	-0.041** (0.016)			
Constant	0.643*** (0.022)	0.596*** (0.019)	0.602*** (0.021)	0.543*** (0.027)	0.593*** (0.028)	0.533*** (0.031)
Congress Trend	no	no	no	no	yes	yes
N	591	591	591	203	203	203
R <sup>2</sup>	0.064	0.059	0.084	0.092	0.105	0.097

\* p < .1; \*\* p < .05; \*\*\* p < .01  
SEs clustered by Party/Congress/Chamber.

in the Senate tend to have extremeness measures that are 4 percentage points smaller than their counterparts in the House. A similar logic obtains when looking specifically at the role of the filibuster within the Senate. In specifications 4-6 of Table 4, we restrict the sample to the Senate only, and we include a variable capturing whether a party holds a supermajority (i.e., a filibuster-proof majority) on top of their majority status. Across all three specifications, we observe a roughly 11 percentage point increase in extremeness for parties that hold a supermajority, above and beyond the increase attributable to holding a majority in the first place. When a party is free from a filibuster threat, it has free reign to select more extreme leadership.

## Summary and Conclusion

Legislative leaders are the prime negotiators shaping our laws. They engage in negotiations daily and at every level of government. As negotiators, they act as agents for themselves and their constituents, and more formally for their fellow party members.

We focus attention on the ideology of legislative negotiators. Conventional wisdom, drawing on a naïve version of the Median Voter Theorem, suggests that a party leader's ideology will align well with that of its median member. However, if leaders are negotiators, and if a negotiator's position anchors negotiations, the median member of a party will have an incentive to appoint an extreme leader.<sup>22</sup> In effect, the extremeness of the leader as compared to the median caucus member – which could lead to agency loss – actually anchors the negotiation process and thus secures more favorable outcomes for the median member. The need to reach legislative agreements, however, constrains this tug to the extreme. Effective legislative leaders have to be *reasonably tough*; both words in that phrase play a role. We illustrate this logic in our theoretical model; our empirical estimates confirm it.

Empirical analysis of twentieth century congressional leaders finds them, as hypothesized, to be more extreme than their parties. Moreover, that is primarily because they were already more

<sup>22</sup>In a similar spirit, effective labor union leaders are likely to have reputations for extreme positions. For example, John Dunlop has noted how even in joint labor-management committees “leaders can readily be undermined in their unions by policies, statements, and appearances that convey that they are too collaborative or too responsive to management” (Dunlop 1988, p. 33).

extreme before they were elected to their positions. While extremeness is linked to tenure in the House and longer tenures increase the odds an MC is selected as a leader, these relationships explain little of the tendency towards selecting extreme leaders. Furthermore, while the location of the party median and polarization both matter for selection of leadership, other factors such as whether there is unified government or centralization of party leadership anchor have little effect on the process. On the other hand, factors that strongly alter the probability of a deal (overall and on the margin), strongly correlate with patterns of leadership selection: rank-and-file members select more extreme leaders when in the majority, when the size of the majority is greater, and, in the Senate, when holding a filibuster-proof majority.

There is a rich literature on the private sector counterpart to the problem studied here, namely: How faithful and effective are private sector leaders, i.e., corporate managers, as agents for the stockholders they are supposed to serve (Jensen and Meckling 1976; Pratt and Zeckhauser 1985). A central lesson from that literature is that stockholders reap substantial benefits when their interests and those of the managers are properly aligned.

By contrast, our examination of political parties and their leaders might suggest that preferences are out of alignment. Leaders' policy positions, as revealed through their votes, are considerably more extreme than those of the members they represent. Our model presents a framework for this finding. To improve negotiation outcomes, it is in the collective interest of a party's representatives to have an extreme leader. Such a leader – one whose own reputation helps to anchor negotiations toward his or her side – will anchor policy outcomes in the preferred direction of his party members. A superior outcome is achieved.

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## Appendix

### Additional Analysis

#### MC Tenure

The table below presents estimates of the relationship between MC tenure and ideology. The key result is that, in the House, more extreme ideology is associated with a decrease in the rate of leaving office.

**Table A1** – Cox Proportional Hazard: Effect of Ideology on MC Tenure

	House
Extremeness (Share MCs Less Extreme)	−0.394*** (0.050)
Age	−0.051*** (0.013)
Age Square	0.001*** (0.0001)
Democrat	0.118*** (0.029)
N	5,375
R <sup>2</sup>	0.052
Log Likelihood	−38,096.040

\*p < .1; \*\*p < .05; \*\*\*p < .01

#### Extreme Leaders

Here we establish in a regression framework the same empirical pattern observed in Tables 1 and 2.

We regress MCs' ideological extremeness on a binary variable for whether or not someone holds a leadership position and controls including party and chamber. Table A2 presents the results. Column 1 is the simplest specification, where we control only for party and chamber. In subsequent specifications, we control for time period (a linear time trend and then a Congress fixed effect). The time-period controls help account for across-time, systematic swings in ideology,

as does our relative measure of extremeness. Across all of these specifications, we estimate that holding a leadership position is associated with having a more extreme ideology relative to the other members in the chamber, an increase of 0.135.<sup>23</sup>

**Table A2** – Leadership and Extremeness (Pct. Less Extreme in Party/Chamber), All Members

	Extremeness of MC			Previous Congress Extremeness of MC		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Leader	0.143*** (0.010)	0.143*** (0.010)	0.143*** (0.010)	0.134*** (0.010)	0.134*** (0.010)	0.134*** (0.010)
Republican	0.009*** (0.0004)	0.009*** (0.0004)	0.010*** (0.0004)	0.009*** (0.001)	0.009*** (0.001)	0.009*** (0.001)
Senate	-0.003*** (0.001)	-0.003*** (0.001)	-0.003*** (0.001)	-0.005*** (0.001)	-0.005*** (0.001)	-0.005*** (0.001)
Majority Party	0.001*** (0.0004)	0.001*** (0.0004)	0.001*** (0.0004)	0.0002 (0.001)	0.0003 (0.001)	0.0003 (0.001)
Constant	0.493*** (0.0004)	0.493*** (0.001)		0.494*** (0.0005)	0.492*** (0.002)	
Congress Trend	no	yes	no	no	yes	no
Congress FE	no	no	yes	no	no	yes
N	30,036	30,036	30,036	30,012	30,012	30,012
R <sup>2</sup>	0.005	0.005	0.005	0.004	0.004	0.004

\* p < .1; \*\* p < .05; \*\*\* p < .01  
SEs clustered by Party/Congress/Chamber.

Table A3 displays the same results when using an extremeness measure based on DW-N that does not rescale members based on their percentage extremeness in the chamber. The effect is an increase of 0.065 in the extremeness measure, equivalent to about one-half of a standard deviation.

<sup>23</sup>The covariates in the model also yield some findings of note. Republicans were on average more extreme even when controlling for other factors; members in the Senate are on average less extreme.

**Table A3 – Leadership and Extremeness (DW-N), All Members**

	Extremeness of MC		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Leader	0.072*** (0.006)	0.072*** (0.006)	0.073*** (0.006)
Republican	0.057*** (0.010)	0.056*** (0.009)	0.045*** (0.004)
Senate	-0.019** (0.008)	-0.019*** (0.007)	-0.020*** (0.004)
Majority Party	0.026*** (0.010)	0.025*** (0.010)	0.027*** (0.004)
Constant	0.294*** (0.010)	0.338*** (0.026)	
Congress Trend	no	yes	no
Congress FE	no	no	yes
N	30,036	30,036	30,036
R <sup>2</sup>	0.028	0.030	0.105

\*p < .1; \*\*p < .05; \*\*\*p < .01

SEs clustered by Party/Congress/Chamber.

**Table A4 – Leadership and Extremeness (*DW – N*), Leaders Only, D Party**

	Extremeness of Party Leadership					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Party						
Median						
Extremeness	0.419** (0.185)		0.490** (0.198)	0.337 (0.238)	0.353 (0.233)	0.298 (0.246)
Polarization		0.080 (0.067)				
Opposing Party						
Median						
Extremeness			-0.102 (0.088)	-0.183 (0.118)	-0.046 (0.093)	-0.115 (0.178)
Unified Gov.				-0.007 (0.017)		-0.004 (0.017)
Centralized				0.030 (0.024)		0.022 (0.029)
Senate	-0.044** (0.017)	-0.054*** (0.017)	-0.042** (0.017)	-0.049** (0.019)	-0.046** (0.018)	-0.049** (0.019)
Constant	0.279*** (0.065)	0.361*** (0.051)	0.292*** (0.066)	0.363*** (0.094)	0.255*** (0.063)	0.313** (0.126)
Congress Trend	no	no	no	no	yes	yes
N	328	328	328	308	328	308
R <sup>2</sup>	0.057	0.041	0.059	0.060	0.065	0.061

\*  $p < .1$ ; \*\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .01$

SEs clustered by Party/Congress/Chamber.

## Leadership and Legislative Outcomes

**Table A5 – Leadership and Extremeness (*DW – N*), Leaders Only, R Party**

	Extremeness of Party Leadership					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Party						
Median						
Extremeness	1.143*** (0.117)		1.234*** (0.101)	1.393*** (0.106)	1.107*** (0.097)	1.203*** (0.117)
Polarization		0.708*** (0.084)				
Opposing Party						
Median						
Extremeness			-0.304** (0.136)	-0.283* (0.147)	0.082 (0.171)	-0.163 (0.161)
Unified Gov.				-0.016 (0.012)		-0.022* (0.012)
Centralized				0.031* (0.018)		0.053*** (0.019)
Senate	-0.022* (0.013)	0.006 (0.015)	-0.033*** (0.012)	-0.038*** (0.013)	-0.012 (0.015)	-0.031** (0.013)
Constant	0.008 (0.037)	-0.072 (0.054)	0.075 (0.056)	0.024 (0.062)	0.140*** (0.054)	0.154** (0.074)
Congress Trend	no	no	no	no	yes	yes
N	309	309	309	283	309	283
R <sup>2</sup>	0.352	0.296	0.359	0.458	0.384	0.466

\*p < .1; \*\*p < .05; \*\*\*p < .01  
SEs clustered by Party/Congress/Chamber.

**Table A6 – Extreme Leaders and Legislative Outcomes**

	log(Public Acts) (1)	log(Significant Acts) (2)	Pct Party Unity Votes of Winning Votes (3)	Pct Party Members Unified in Winning Party Unity Votes (4)	Percent Opposing Party Members Unified in Winning Party Unity Votes (5)
Extremeness of Party Leadership	-0.107 (0.262)	-0.074 (0.412)	-0.006 (0.037)	0.206* (0.106)	0.029 (0.043)
Party Median Extremeness	-2.234*** (0.485)	-2.591*** (0.938)	0.202*** (0.060) 0.005 (0.006)	0.314* (0.179) 0.027 (0.017) -0.022 (0.018)	0.207*** (0.065) 0.005 (0.005) -0.014*** (0.006)
Republican				0.295*** (0.061)	0.413*** (0.020)
Constant	7.318*** (0.245)	1.222*** (0.411)	0.429*** (0.019)	yes 231	yes 231
Congress Trend			0.676	0.077	0.700
N	215	215	231	231	231
R <sup>2</sup>	0.228	0.390			

\* p < .1; \*\* p < .05; \*\*\* p < .01

SEs clustered by congress in columns 1 and 2, by congress and chamber in 3, and robust SEs used in 4 and 5.  
Unit of Observation is a leadership team, i.e., a Congress x Chamber x Party combination.

**Table A7 – Extreme Leaders and Legislative Outcomes, Alternative Specification**

	log(Public Acts) (1)	log(Significant Acts) (2)	Pct Party Unity Votes of Winning Votes (3)	Pct Party Members Unified in Winning Party Unity Votes (4)	Pct Opposing Party Members Unified in Winning Party Unity Votes (5)
Extremeness (Percentile in Party) of Leadership	-0.267 (0.170)	-0.017 (0.316)	-0.019 (0.022) -0.001 (0.007)	0.059 (0.063) 0.012 (0.018) -0.007 (0.017) 0.431*** (0.061)	0.0001 (0.025) -0.002 (0.006) -0.007 (0.006) 0.484*** (0.026)
Senate					
Republican					
Constant	6.667*** (0.279)	0.312 (0.517)	0.500*** (0.027)	yes 231	yes 231
Congress Trend		yes 215	yes 231	yes 231	
N	215	215	231	231	231
R <sup>2</sup>	0.018	0.327	0.647	0.009	0.660

\*p < .1; \*\*p < .05; \*\*\*p < .01

SEs clustered by congress in columns 1 and 2, by congress and chamber in 3, and robust SEs used in 4 and 5.  
Unit of Observation is a leadership team, i.e., a Congress x Chamber x Party combination.

**Table A8** – New Member Ideology versus Leader Ideology, Pct. Less Extreme in Party/Chamber

Chamber	Type	Extremeness
House	New Members	0.49
House	Others	0.50
House	Leaders	0.65
Senate	New Members	0.52
Senate	Others	0.49
Senate	Leaders	0.60