

# Electoral Accountability for Ideological Extremism in American Elections\*

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## Abstract

Do voters hold candidates accountable for their ideological positions? Past work on this topic has focused almost exclusively on U.S. House elections. It typically finds that candidates pay an electoral penalty for ideological extremity. In this paper, we extend the study of accountability to a far wider range of offices. We use roll call voting and campaign finance receipts to measure ideological extremism and a difference-in-difference identification strategy to examine accountability across five different offices: U.S. House, U.S. Senate, governor, state house, and state senate. In every office, ideologically extreme candidates pay a penalty at the ballot. But we find significant variation in the penalty for extremism across offices. The smallest penalty for extremism is in state house elections, where voters barely punish extremists, and the largest penalty is in gubernatorial elections, where candidates receive a 7-8% increase in vote share by moving halfway across the range of ideological positions in their party. Our results have implications for literatures on representation, accountability, congress, and state politics.

Keywords: Accountability, representation, state politics

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# 1 Introduction

Electoral sanctioning for policy extremity is one of the foundations of democratic governance. Thus, it is crucially important to understand the nature of electoral accountability in United States elections. There is a large literature on electoral accountability for ideological extremism in the U.S. House. The bulk of these studies find that ideological moderation has an important influence on candidates' vote margins (e.g., Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002; Hall 2015), although there is some evidence that the electoral penalty for extremity is declining as elections are growing more nationalized (Wilkins 2013; Bonica and Cox 2018; Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2018). However, there is almost no literature on accountability for ideological extremity in other offices (cf. Rogers 2017).

In this paper, we use a unified research design to examine electoral accountability across a number of federal and state offices in American elections, including the U.S House, U.S. Senate, governor, and state legislatures. The first building block of any study of accountability for extremism is data on the ideological positions of candidates. Unfortunately, there is no perfect measure of candidate positions. Various measures tend to capture different dimensions of candidates' political orientations (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2017; Bonica 2018). As a result, we use all available panel measures of candidate positions in our analyses, including both roll call-based measures (Poole and Rosenthal 2000; Shor and McCarty 2011) and campaign finance-based measures (Bonica 2014, 2018; Hall and Snyder 2015). We examine the effect of candidates' ideological positions on their electoral margins using a difference-in-difference identification strategy (Angrist and Pischke 2008).

Across offices, we find that candidates *always* are held accountable for their ide-

ological positions. Consistent with past work, we find that voters prefer moderate candidates. Moreover, the size of the penalty for extremism is larger than in some past studies that use cross-sectional regression frameworks. This could be because many past studies control for many variable that are measured post-treatment (e.g., after donors and voters learn about candidates' ideological extremism). But we find significant variation across offices. The smallest penalty for extremism is in state house elections, where voters barely punish extremists, and the largest penalty is in gubernatorial elections, where candidates receive a 7-8% increase in vote share by moving halfway across the range of ideological positions in their party.

Our results have implications for literatures on representation, accountability, congress, and state politics. First, they show that ideologically extreme candidates pay a penalty at the ballot box. This suggests that general elections are probably not the primary cause of the growing polarization in Congress. However, our results suggest that the penalty for extremism is declining in recent elections as voting becomes more nationalized. Second, our results show that politicians have electoral incentives to be responsive to their constituents. Moreover, the largest incentives for responsiveness are actually among governors, who pay a very large penalty for extremism. Thus, there appears to be an electoral foundation for the consistent finding in past work that state policy is responsive to constituent preferences (Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; Caughey and Warshaw 2018). In future research, we plan to extend our results to more offices in order to paint an integrated picture of electoral accountability in American elections.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we review past literature on electoral accountability for ideological extremism. Second, we discuss our data and research design. Third, we discuss our findings on electoral accountability in the U.S. House, U.S. Senate, governors, and state legislatures. Finally, we briefly conclude.

## 2 Prior Literature on Electoral Accountability for Ideological Extremism

The spatial voting theory implies that citizens should be more likely to vote for individual candidates that share their ideological preferences (Downs 1957). Since the average voter tends to be more moderate than elected officials (Fiorina and Abrams 2008), this implies that more moderate positions should be rewarded at the ballot box. Indeed, a number of prior studies find that ideological moderation has a small, but important, influence on candidates' vote margins, especially in the modern, polarized Congress.

Table 1 summarizes prior work on electoral accountability for ideological extremity in American elections. It shows that most prior studies have focused on the U.S. House. Moreover, most of these studies have focused only on incumbents. For instance, examining elections between 1956-1996, Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan (2002, 133) find that shifting from the middle of their party to the extremes lowers an incumbent's vote share by "1 to 3 percentage points." In recent years, several studies have used campaign finance data to measure the ideological positions of non-incumbents as well. For instance, Hall and Snyder (2015) uses campaign contribution data to measure the ideological positions of both incumbents and non-incumbents in U.S. House elections from 1980-2010. They show that a "a one standard deviation move to the right" is associated with an increase in the Democratic candidate's vote share of "1.3 to 2 percentage points." Using this same set of campaign finance-based data, Hall (2015) uses an RDD to examine what happens when extremists win primary elections. He finds that when parties nominate ideological extremists in House elections, the party's general-election vote share decreases on average by approximately 9–13 percentage points, and the probability that the party wins the seat decreases

by 35–54 percentage points. In a related paper, Hall finds that the mechanism for this electoral penalty is probably largely variation in turnout, whereby extremists mobilize the other party’s base (Hall and Thompson 2018).

There is much less prior work on electoral accountability for ideological extremism in other offices. In one of the few studies on state governments, Rogers (2017) uses the common space ideal points for state legislators developed by Shor and McCarty (2011) to examine whether state legislators pay an electoral price for ideological extremity. He finds that incumbents in state legislative elections pay only very small electoral penalties for ideological extremity.

Methodologically, Table 1 shows that most prior studies on electoral accountability use cross-sectional designs, where they regress electoral margins on extremity and a host of controls (e.g., district ideology, candidate fundraising, incumbency status, etc). This leads to two well-known inferential problems. First, these studies typically lack a causal identification strategy. As a result, they could be confounded by any number of omitted variables. Second, the control variables are typically measured post-treatment. For instance, candidates’ fundraising could be influenced by their ideological extremity. This can introduce severe, and unknown, levels of bias in the results of these studies (Montgomery, Nyhan, and Torres 2018). Our paper is part of a smaller set of recent studies that use a quasi-experimental research design to identify the effect of extremism (Hall 2015).

### **3 Data and Research Design**

In order to evaluate electoral accountability for ideological extremity across offices, we built a panel dataset of constituency-level election returns for U.S. House, U.S. Senate, governor, state house, and state senate elections (see Table 2). For U.S. House

Table 1: Previous Large-Scale Panel Studies on Electoral Accountability for Ideological Extremism

| Author                                  | Office        | Time Period | Non-incumbents? | Measure of Extremity   | Research Design     | Findings                          |
|---|---------------|-------------|-----------------|------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Erikson and Wright (2000)               | U.S. House    | 1976-1996   | No              | Roll Call Ideology     | XS with controls    | Small penalty                     |
| Ansolaehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2001) | U.S. House    | 1956-1996   | No              | Roll Call Ideology     | XS with controls    | Small penalty                     |
| Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan (2002)    | U.S. House    | 1956-2004   | No              | Roll Call Ideology     | XS with controls    | Small penalty                     |
| Carson et al. (2010)                    | U.S. House    | 1900-2010   | No              | Roll Call Partisanship | XS with controls    | Small penalty                     |
| Wilkins (2013)                          | U.S. House    | 1900-2010   | No              | Roll Call Ideology     | XS with controls    | Small penalty in recent elections |
| Montagnes and Rogowski (2015)           | U.S. House    | 1996-2006   | Yes             | NPAT-based Ideology    | XS with controls    | No penalty in recent elections    |
| Hall and Snyder (2015)                  | U.S. House    | 1980-2010   | Yes             | Campaign Finance       | XS with controls    | Small penalty                     |
| Hall (2015)                             | U.S. House    | 1980-2010   | Yes             | Campaign Finance       | RDD using primaries | Large penalty                     |
| Rogers (2017)                           | State Leg.    | 2001-2010   | No              | Roll Call Ideology     | XS with controls    | Small penalty                     |
| Bonica and Cox (2018)                   | US House/Sen. | 1980-2012   | Yes             | Campaign Finance       | XS with controls    | Small penalty                     |

and Senate elections, we have data from 1980-2016. For state government elections, we have data from 1998-2016.<sup>1</sup> The outcome variable is the Democratic candidate’s share of the two-party vote for each office.<sup>2</sup>

Table 2: Offices

| Office       | Temporal Coverage | Source of Election Results |
|--------------|-------------------|----------------------------|
| House        | 1980-2016         | MIT Election Lab           |
| Senate       | 1980-2016         | CQ                         |
| Governor     | 1998-2016         | CQ                         |
| State Senate | 1998-2016         | ICPSR/Klarner              |
| State House  | 1998-2016         | ICPSR/Klarner              |

### 3.1 Treatment Variable: Candidates’ Ideological Extremity

The main treatment variables in our analysis are various measures of candidates’ ideological positions. In an ideal world, we would have a comparable measure for both incumbents’ and challengers’ ideological positions in all elections based on candidates’ roll call votes and public platforms. In other words, we would have something akin to the Nominate scores developed by Poole and Rosenthal. However, we generally lack such a measure for challengers in legislative elections. We also lack it for both challengers and incumbents in non-legislative elections where candidates do not cast roll call votes (e.g., gubernatorial elections). As a result, scholars have increasingly turned to measures of candidates’ ideological positions based on their campaign do-

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1. The more limited time frame here is due to the limited availability of data on the ideology positions of state legislative candidates prior to this.

2. As Hall, Yoder, and Karandikar (2017) points out in the context of their study of accountability for foreclosures in the Great Recession, “it might seem more logical to use incumbent party vote share, rather than Democratic party vote share, as our dependent variable... However, it seems unlikely that counties trend in terms of their general support for incumbents, and far more likely that they might trend in terms of their partisanship. As such, it makes more sense to use the ... specification with Democratic vote share as the dependent variable, so that we can account for these trends directly.”

nations (Bonica 2013, 2014; Hall and Snyder 2015). The assumption of these studies is that donors make donations to candidates that reflect their ideological positions. Thus, the ideological positions of donors can be used as a proxy for the ideology of candidates.

We use three distinct campaign finance-based proxies for candidates' ideology in our analysis. Each of these measures tends to capture slightly different dimensions of candidates' political orientations (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2017; Bonica 2018). First, we use the CF-Scores developed by Bonica (2014). These are based on a correspondence analysis of the patterns in 100 million contribution records from state and federal elections. It provides an indicator of the latent political orientation of candidates based on these donations patterns. This measure has the advantage of being available for almost all candidates using nearly all of the available campaign finance data. Moreover, it corresponds extremely well to candidates' party identification. But it is only modestly correlated within-party with candidates' DW-Nominate scores (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2017). In addition to the main dimension of ideology, it could be capturing other aspects of candidates' ideological positions or other factors such as candidate quality. Also, it is a static-score that is measured based on the full history of candidates' campaign finance contributions. Thus, it is based on both pre-and post-election contributions (Hall 2015).

Second, we use the DW-DIME scores developed by Bonica (2014). These scores are based on a machine learning algorithm to infer roll-call scores from campaign contribution data. Unlike the CF-Scores, the DW-DIME scores correspond quite closely to candidates' DW Nominate scores within party. But they are only available for candidates with a large number of donors. Moreover, it too is based on the full history of candidates' campaign finance contributions. Thus, it uses pre-and post-election contributions.

Finally, we use the average estimated positions of candidates’ primary elections donors. Similarly to Hall and Snyder (2015) and Hall (2015), the donors’ positions are estimated as the contribution-weighted average DW-NOMINATE score (Poole and Rosenthal 2000) of incumbents they have donated to, but excluding donations to candidate<sub>*i*</sub> when computing the score for candidate<sub>*i*</sub>. The measurement model here is simpler than in Bonica’s work, but it has the advantage of being based on candidates’ primary election donors. This ensures that it is measured entirely based on donations *prior* to the general election.

We standardize each of our measures of candidates’ ideological positions so the regression estimates are comparable across offices. This means that the regression estimates show the effect of a one standard deviation move to the right in candidates’ ideological positions. However, it is important to keep in mind that a one standard deviation move to the right roughly spans the full range of within-party candidate positions. Most constituencies are very unlikely to see this large a change in candidate positions from election-to-election. So we can generally divide these estimates in half to qualitatively describe a more plausible change in candidate positions.

### 3.2 Research Design

In order to estimate the causal effect of changes in candidates’ ideological positions, we estimate a series of difference-in-difference panel models using the following equation:

$$DemVotePct_{it} = CandConservatism + \gamma_i + \tau_r t, \tag{1}$$

A move to the right in candidate conservatism (CandConservatism) should always increase Democratic vote share if citizens are voting spatially. Indeed, a move to the right means that Democratic candidates are taking more moderate positions, while

Republican candidates are taking more extreme positions.

Our difference-in-difference models use constituency fixed effects ( $\gamma_i$ ), to account for time-invariant confounders in each constituency, such as the partisan or ideological preferences of voters.<sup>3</sup> Our models also use region-year fixed effects ( $\tau_{rt}$ ), to control for time-varying confounders at the region and national levels (Fowler and Hall 2018). The region-year fixed effects mean that our analysis is comparing constituencies with more ideologically extreme candidates with constituencies that have less ideologically extreme candidates in the same region and year. However, we obtain substantively similar results using a variety of other specifications. All models cluster standard errors by constituency (e.g., state or legislative district).

In some respects, this research design is inferior to the regression discontinuity (RD) design used by Hall (2015). Given its transparent and testable identifying assumptions, the RD design is an appealing mode of causal inference, but its emphasis on observations near the RD threshold restricts the effective sample size (Caughey, Xu, and Warshaw 2017). Indeed, there are relatively few nearly tied contested primaries in Senate and gubernatorial elections. Moreover, primary election data for state legislative seats is not readily available. Our difference-in-difference design enables us to examine each office using a unified framework. Moreover, it leverages a far larger number of elections than an RDD. Finally, our focus on using fixed effects to account for unobserved confounders enables us to avoid using control variables that could be measured post-treatment (Montgomery, Nyhan, and Torres 2018).

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3. For legislative districts, we use decade x district fixed effects to account for changes in districts due to redistricting.

## 4 Results

In this section, we discuss our main results for the effects of candidates' ideological extremity on vote margins in U.S. House, U.S. Senate, governor, state house, and state senate elections. In each section, we show the results of a series of difference-in-difference models on the effect of candidate extremity.

It is worth noting a few common features of all of the analyses that follow. First, we show our results in each section using graphs of the main treatment effect of a one standard deviation shift to the right in candidates' ideological positions. The top panel of each graph shows the results of changes in the ideological midpoint between the Democratic and Republican candidate. The second panel of each graph shows the effect of Republican candidates' spatial positioning. The third panel of each graph shows the effect of Democratic candidates' spatial positioning. Finally, the measures of candidate positions vary a bit by office (as reflected in the graphs). However, we've tried to use all available measures of candidates' ideological positions that are available for each office. If voters are voting spatially, a shift to the right by candidates should always increase Democratic vote share.

### 4.1 U.S. House

Prior research strongly suggests that voters punish U.S. House candidate for ideological extremism (e.g., Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002; Hall 2015). Our results for U.S. House elections from 1980-2016 are broadly consistent with prior findings (Figure 1). First, we examine accountability for incumbents based on their DW-Nominate scores (Poole and Rosenthal 2000). This analysis indicates that Republican incumbents are penalized about 8 percentage points for moving from the most moderate to extreme wings of their party, while

Democrats are penalized by about 6 percentage points. As we mentioned earlier, however, it is extremely unlikely candidates will shift across the range of their party’s ideological positions within a particular constituency. A more realistic shift of halfway across the range of party positions suggests that Republicans are penalized about 4 percentage points for moving from the middle to extreme wings of their party, while Democrats are penalized by about 3 percentage points.

Next, we examine accountability based on candidates’ CF-Scores (Bonica 2014). This analysis yields smaller results, indicating that candidates are penalized by 2-5 percentage points for a one standard deviation increase in extremity. Next, we use a measure of candidate positions based on candidates’ primary election donors as our measure of candidate extremity. This indicates that candidates are punished by 5-7 percentage points for a one standard deviation increase in extremity. Finally, we use the DW-DIME scores developed by Bonica (2018). This analysis suggests a larger penalty for extremity, particularly for Democrats.

Overall, our analyses using a variety of both roll call and campaign finance-based measures of candidate positions suggest that voters punish candidates for ideological extremity. However, it is important to note that we rarely find an effect as large as the 9-12 point penalty for extremism in Hall (2015), which suggests that this can be qualitatively seen as an upper bound on the penalty for extremism.

## **4.2 U.S. Senate**

Figure 2 shows our results for U.S. Senate elections. Due to the smaller number of Senate elections, the results here are noisier than for House Elections. Overall, they show that Senate candidate are penalized for extremity, but the penalty is probably smaller than in House elections.

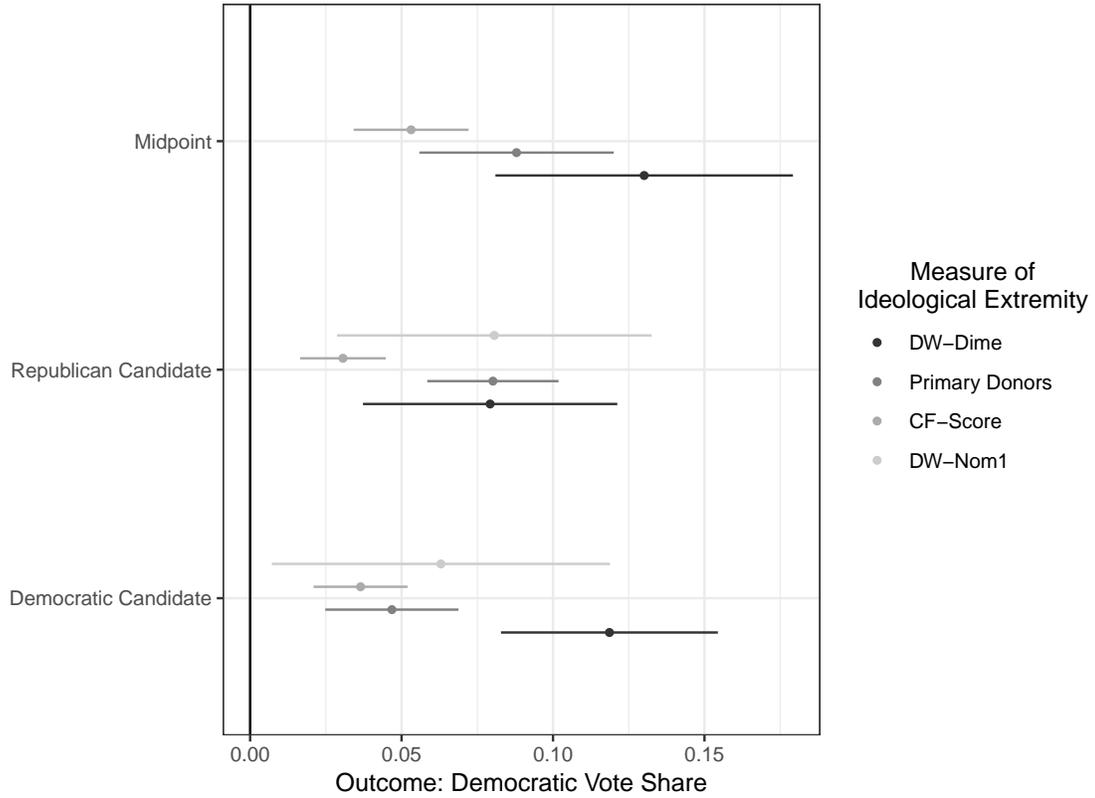


Figure 1: Accountability for Ideological Extremism in U.S. House Elections

First, we examine accountability for incumbents based on their DW-Nominate scores (Poole and Rosenthal 2000). This analysis indicates that Republican incumbents are not penalized for extremism, while Democrats are penalized by about 4 percentage points for a one standard deviation increase in extremism (2 points for a more realistic shift halfway across their party). Next, we examine accountability based on candidates CF-Scores (Bonica 2014). This analysis suggests a large penalty for extremism for Republicans, indicating that Republican candidates are penalized by 15 percentage points for extremism. Next, we use a measure of candidate positions based on candidates' primary election donors as our measure of candidate extremism. This indicates that candidates are punished by 5-7 percentage points for extremism. Finally, we use the DW-DIME scores developed by Bonica (2018). This analysis in-

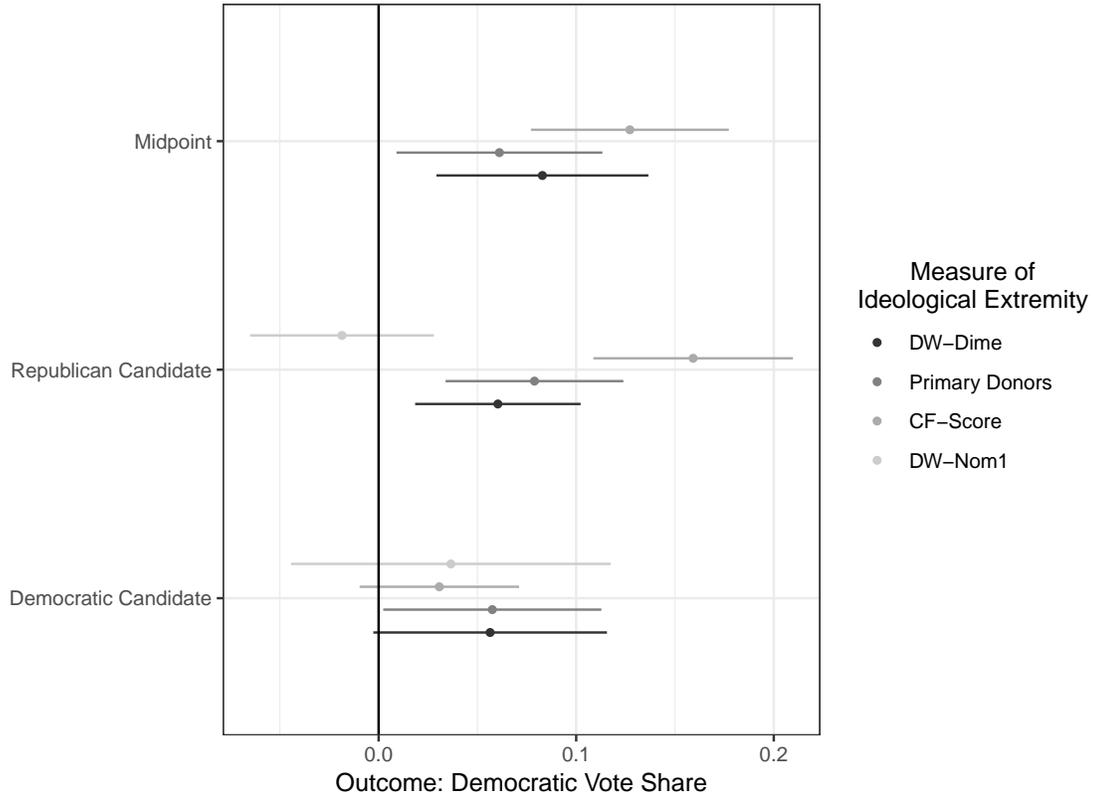


Figure 2: Accountability for Ideological Extremism in U.S. Senate Elections

indicates that candidates are punished by about 5 percentage points for a one standard deviation increase in extremism.

### 4.3 Governor

Figure 3 shows our results for gubernatorial elections. Due to the small number of gubernatorial elections, the results here quite noisy. There is no roll-call based measure of the positioning of gubernatorial candidates. So, first we examine accountability based on candidates' CF-Scores (Bonica 2014). This analysis suggests a very large penalty for extremism for Republicans, indicating that Republican candidates are penalized by 20 percentage points for a one standard deviation increase in extremism and Democratic candidates are punished by 15 points. Next, we use a measure

of candidate positions based on candidates' primary election donors as our measure of candidate extremity. This indicates that candidates are punished by about 15 percentage points for extremity. Finally, we use the DW-DIME scores developed by Bonica (2018). This analysis indicates that candidates are punished by about 12-15 percentage points for extremity.

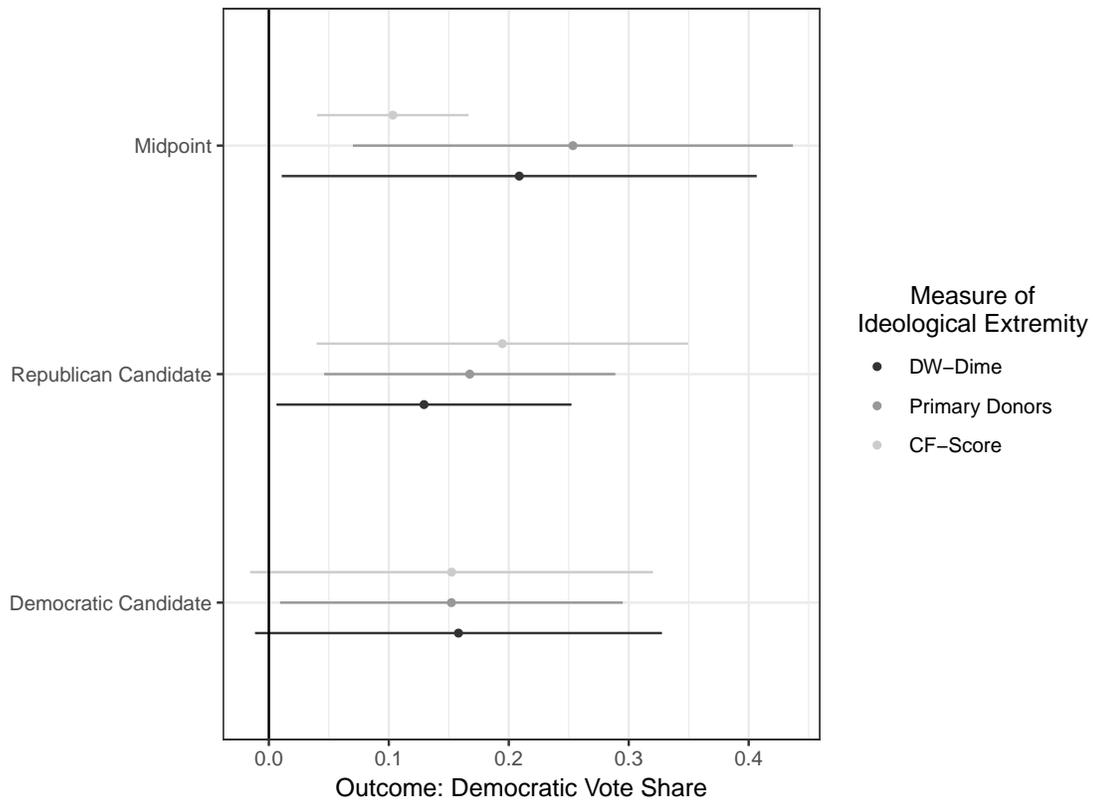


Figure 3: Accountability for Ideological Extremism in Gubernatorial Elections

Overall, these results show a large electoral penalty for ideological extremism among gubernatorial candidates. However, it is important to note that these findings are entirely based on campaign finance-based measures. In the future, we hope to show the robustness of these findings using other measures of gubernatorial candidates' ideological positions.

## 4.4 State Legislature

In this section, we examine accountability in state legislative elections. Prior work suggests that voters know much less about state legislative elections than congressional and gubernatorial elections. As a result, we might expect accountability to be more muted in state legislative elections, particularly in state house elections. Indeed, Rogers (2017) finds only modest effects of accountability in state house elections.

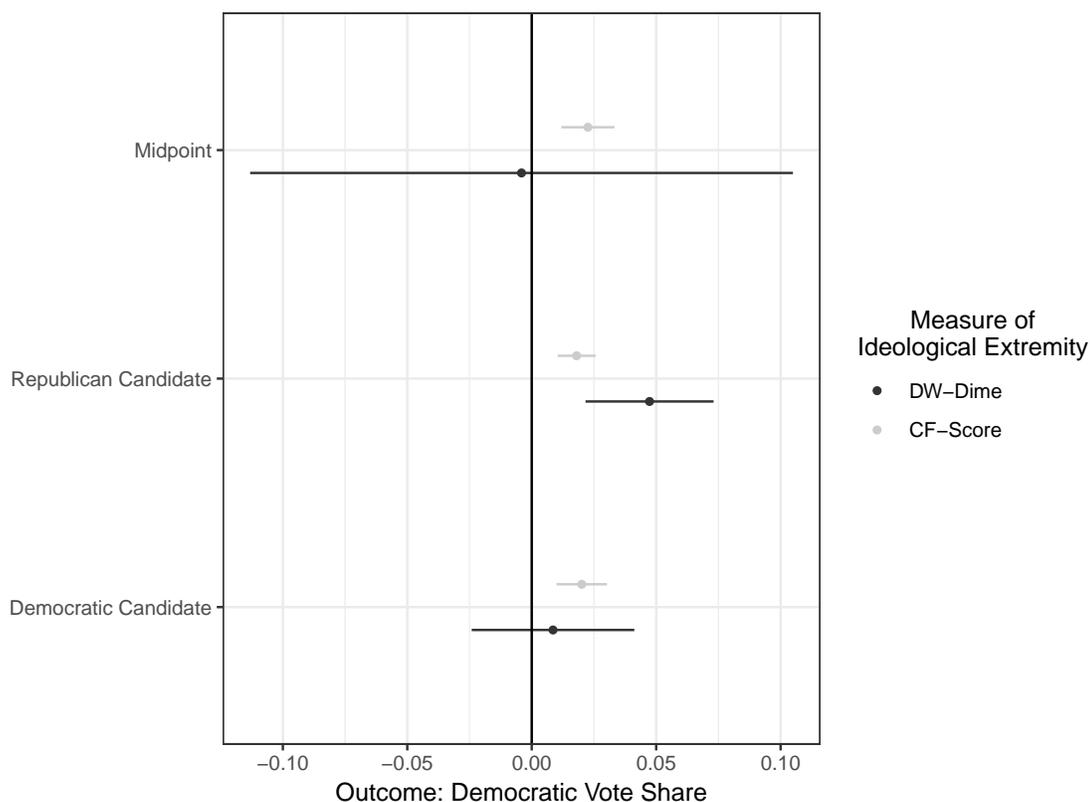


Figure 4: Accountability for Ideological Extremism in State House Elections

Figure 4 shows our results for state house elections. Shor and McCarty (2011) have developed roll-call based measure of the positioning of gubernatorial candidates. However, we have not yet matched these estimates with elections. So, we focus on campaign finance data to measure candidate positions. First, we examine accountability based on candidates' CF-Scores (Bonica 2014). This analysis suggests a two

percentage point penalty for extremism. Next, we use the DW-DIME scores developed by Bonica (2018). This analysis indicates that candidates are punished by about 1-5 percentage points for extremism. These results are consistent with those of Rogers (2017).

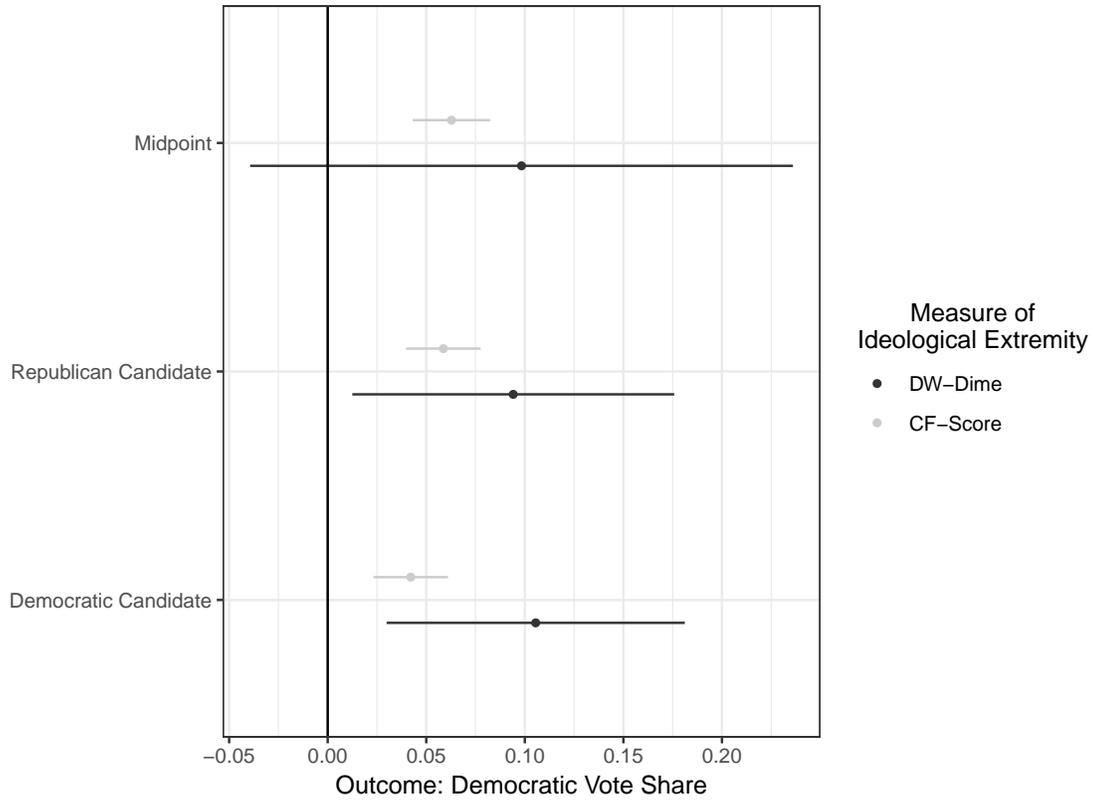


Figure 5: Accountability for Ideological Extremism in State Senate Elections

Figure 5 shows our results for state senate elections. First, we examine accountability based on candidates' CF-Scores (Bonica 2014). This analysis suggests a 4-6 percentage point penalty for extremism. Next, we use the DW-DIME scores developed by Bonica (2018). This analysis indicates that candidates are punished by about 10 percentage points for extremism, but the results are very noisy because only a relatively small subset of candidates have enough donors to receive DW-DIME scores.

## 4.5 Accountability Across Offices

Finally, we compare accountability across offices. Figure 6 compares the effect of ideological extremity on candidates' vote shares based on extremity in candidates' DW-DIME scores. This shows that candidates across all offices are held accountable for ideological extremity. But the penalty for extremity is far higher in gubernatorial elections than in other elections.

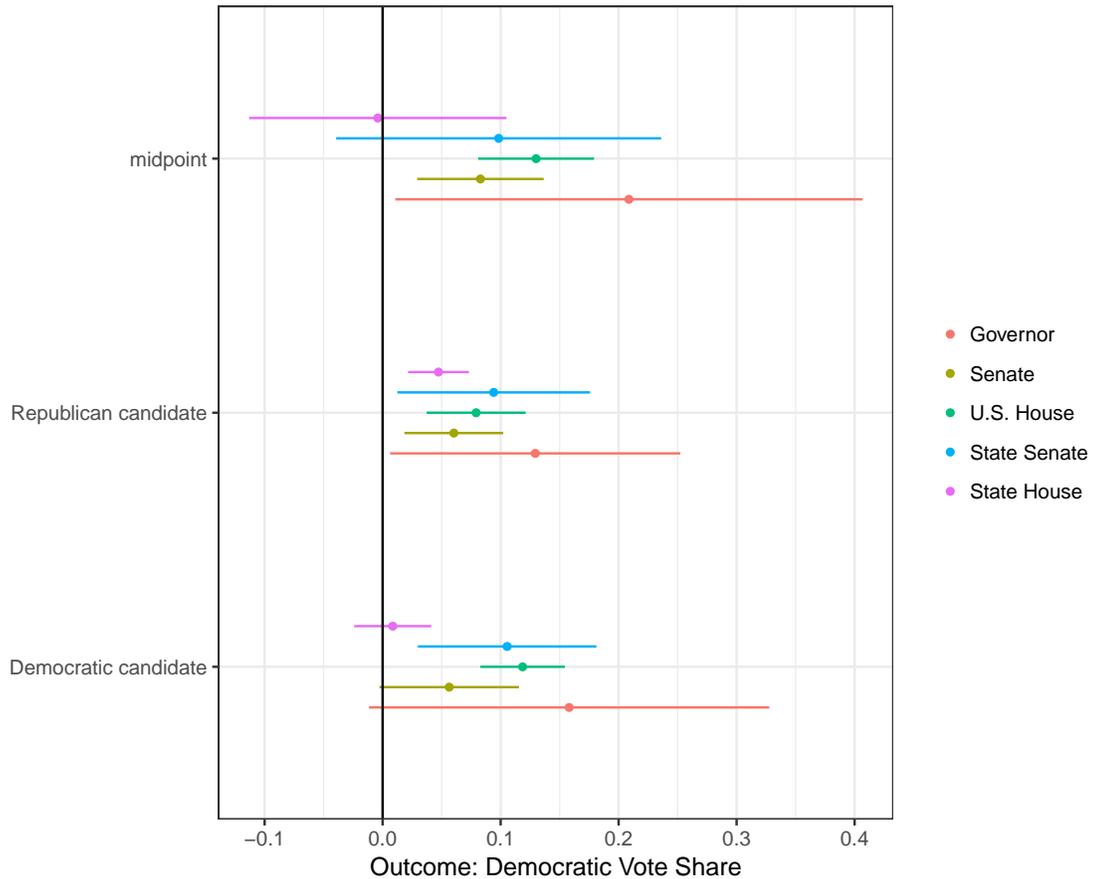


Figure 6: Accountability for Ideological Extremism Across Offices (Vote Share)

Figure 7 compares the effect of ideological extremity on candidates' probability of winning based on extremity in candidates' DW-DIME scores. Once again, this shows that candidates across all offices are held accountable for ideological extremity. But

the penalty for extremity is generally the smallest in state legislative elections, and highest in gubernatorial elections. The higher penalty for extremity in gubernatorial elections could be due to the fact that voters are willing to cross party lines in gubernatorial elections to a great extent than in congressional elections. Moreover, voters know far more about gubernatorial candidates' ideological positions than they do about state legislative candidates' positions.

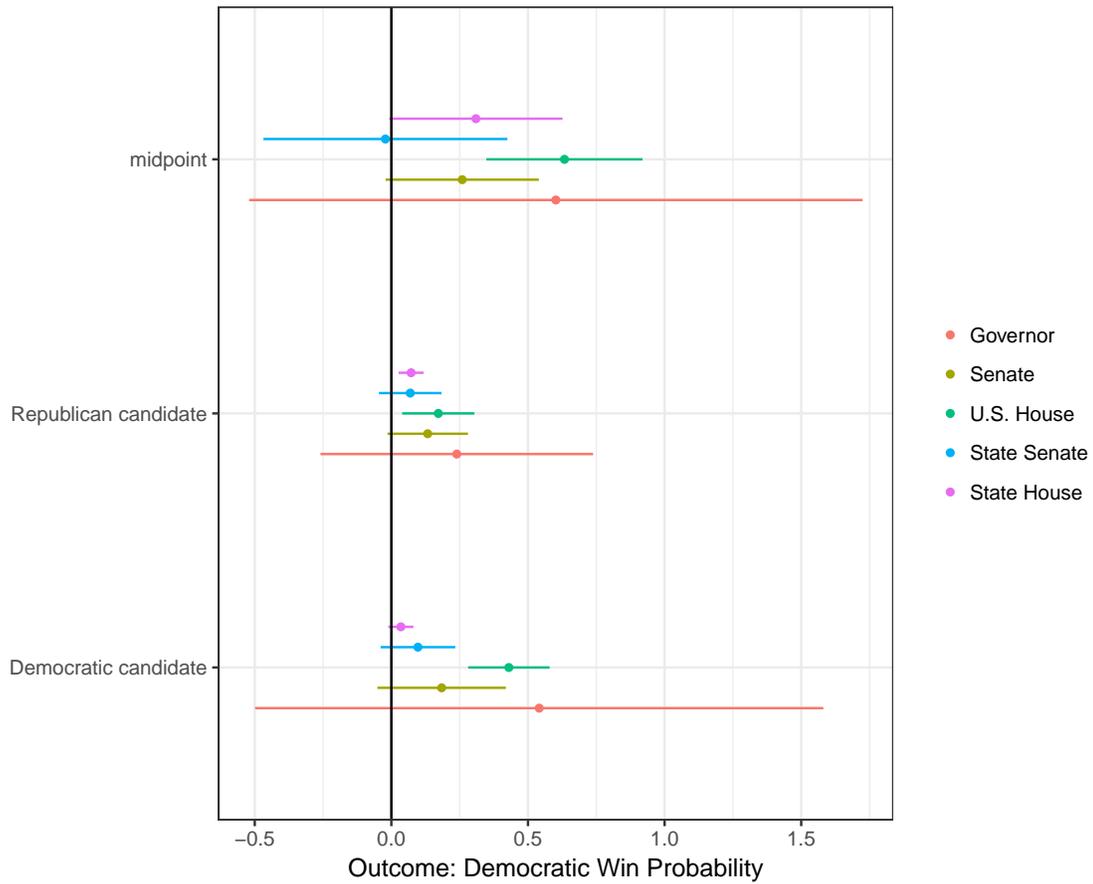


Figure 7: Accountability for Ideological Extremism Across Office (Probability of Victory)

## 5 Conclusions

This paper has examined electoral accountability for ideological extremity across offices in American elections. We have shown that ideologically extreme candidates pay a penalty at the ballot box across each office. The smallest electoral penalty is in state house elections, while the largest electoral penalty for extremism is in gubernatorial elections. This provides a strong incentives for governors to be responsiveness to their constituents, which provides an electoral foundation for the consistent finding in past work that state policy is responsive to constituent preferences (Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993; Caughey and Warshaw 2018).

Methodologically, our paper shows that the point estimates of accountability vary considerably using different measures of candidate positions. We believe one lesson is that future studies on accountability should employ a variety of measures of candidate positions rather than relying upon a single measure. Future work should also deploy multiple causal identification strategies where feasible. However, it is important for scholars to avoid controlling for post-treatment variables in cross-sectional regression models.

In future work, we plan to extend our analyses in this paper in several directions. First, we plan to examine more measures of candidate positions, since each measure could be capturing a different dimension of candidates' political orientation (Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2017; Bonica 2018). Second, we plan to examine more offices in order to paint an integrated picture of electoral accountability in American elections. Most importantly, we hope to examine other statewide offices, such as attorney general elections. We also hope to examine local elections, such as mayoral, city council, and county council elections. Finally, we hope to examine variation in accountability across institutions and election context. For instance, how does local

media coverage affect accountability (Snyder and Strömberg 2010)? Is accountability stronger in midterms than in presidential elections?

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