

U.S. ELECTIONS ARE INCREASINGLY BIASED AGAINST *MODERATES*

William A. Niskanen

One important pattern in the 2002 congressional elections may have important implications for the 2004 elections and the future of American politics: the most vulnerable incumbents were *moderates* who had sometimes voted with the other party on an important issue.

I first suspected this pattern on reading the next-day newspaper reports of the election results. Sens. Jean Carnahan (D-Mo.) and Max Cleland (D-Ga.) lost, Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.) faced a December runoff election, and Sen. Tim Johnson (D-S.Dak.) faced a potential recount; all four, for example, had voted for the Bush tax cut and had campaigned as moderates. The only Senate Republican to lose was Tim Hutchinson of Arkansas, a conservative who had been involved in a personal scandal; (there must be something in the water in Arkansas). The most visible House Republican to lose was Connie Morella of Maryland, who had made a career of being a moderate and had voted against the Iraq war resolution. Before making any statistical analysis, I reported this suspected pattern and the potential implications of this pattern in a November 20, 2002, op-ed in the *Investor's Business Daily*.

To my knowledge, the only other person to report this pattern was David Broder, a leading political commentator. In a January 2, 2003, column in the *Washington Post*, Broder observed that party

caucuses on both sides of the Capitol have become more cohesive internally and further apart from each other philosophically. . . . with almost every session, (there are) fewer moderates or progressives on the Republican side and fewer conservatives among the Democrats—especially when it comes to fundamental economic and social questions and the role of government in American life.

Cato Journal, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Winter 2004). Copyright © Cato Institute. All rights reserved.

William A. Niskanen is Chairman of the Cato Institute. An earlier version of this study was presented at the March 2003 meeting of the Public Choice Society. The author thanks Julie Cullifer for gathering the data for the statistical analysis in this study.

This article first summarizes my statistical analysis of the 2002 congressional elections to test the hypothesis that the most vulnerable incumbents in this election were moderates. The implications of these findings for voting theory, the distribution of the ideological positions of the winning candidates, and the problems of governing are then considered.

A Statistical Analysis of the 2002 Congressional Elections

My null hypothesis, again, is that the most vulnerable incumbents in the 2002 congressional elections were moderates. My measure of the moderation of Republican incumbents is their Americans for Democratic Action rating during the first session of the 107th Congress. Similarly, my measure of the moderation of Democratic incumbents is their American Conservative Union rating in this same period. I test this hypothesis for both the Senate and the House by a difference-of-means test. Only three Senate incumbents and four House incumbents lost their bids for reelection. These samples of losing incumbents are too small for this test, so I have defined the vulnerable incumbents in both houses as those who won less than 55 percent of the popular vote in their states or districts in this election. Even by this measure the samples of vulnerable incumbents were surprisingly small.

The results of these tests are summarized in Table 1.

	Sample	Score		S.D.	t-ratio
		Median	Mean		
Senate					
Vulnerable	6	30	24.00	13.13	
Nonvulnerable	21	10	12.19	9.90	
Difference		20	11.81	5.78	2.04
House					
Vulnerable	18	12	22.06	23.16	
Nonvulnerable	368	5	11.34	14.59	
Difference		7	10.72	5.51	1.94

As the t-ratios indicate, the mean scores of the vulnerable incumbents in both houses were significantly higher than the mean scores of the nonvulnerable incumbents (at the 5 percent level for a one-tailed test).

A simple difference-of-means test of course, does not control for other conditions that may also explain whether a candidate is vulnerable. Senator Hutchinson, for example, lost his bid for reelection for personal reasons, not because he was a moderate. Most of the nonvulnerable incumbent Republican moderates were from the northeast, and most of the nonvulnerable incumbent Democratic moderates were from the south. Controlling for these personal and regional conditions would almost surely strengthen the conclusion that the most vulnerable incumbents in the 2000 congressional elections were ideological moderates.

Moreover, the effects of this type of pattern appear to have accumulated over the past several decades. Each year, the *Congressional Quarterly* calculates and reports a “Party Unity” score on the basis of the roll call votes in which a majority of Republicans oppose the position of a majority of Democrats and the percent of votes that each member has voted with the party majority on these votes. As reported by Broder in the above-referenced column:

When I averaged the year-by-year results for both chambers, I found the percentage of partisan-divide-roll calls has gone from 39 percent in the 1970s to 47 percent in the 1980s to 58 percent in the 1990s.

Even more striking is the growth in cohesion—call it discipline or philosophical agreement—within both party caucuses. In the 1970s, on the partisan roll calls, the average member of Congress backed the party position 65 percent of the time. In the 1980s, the average degree of partisan loyalty rose to 73 percent; and in the 1990s, to 81 percent. In these past two years, it has been 87 percent.

Someone else could well use these Party Unity scores to confirm Broder’s analysis of the increase in the polarization of Congress.

Implications for Voting Theory

The above results are strongly inconsistent with the standard median voter theory of public choice. One implicit assumption of the median voter theory is that the decision of *whether* to vote is independent of the issue positions of the candidates. Only in this case do candidates have an incentive to choose an issue position close to their perception of the preferences of the median voter because they do not risk the loss of votes from their party base. If the decision to vote,

however, is endogenous, candidates have an incentive to choose an issue position closer to the median of their party base than to the median of the total electorate (in the relevant constituency). And if turning out two or more of your own probable voters is more efficient than attracting one swing vote, candidates will spend their time and campaign funds to energize their party base rather than to appeal to potential swing voters. This is consistent with the increasing relative attention of both parties to turnout efforts. In this case, the outcome of democratic elections will be increasingly determined by the relative size of the party base and the effectiveness of the party and the candidate in energizing that base.

The Republican victory in the 2002 congressional elections is broadly attributed to a greater effectiveness in energizing their party base; it is less clear whether the winning candidates represent the preferences of a majority of potential voters. Public choice scholars need to rebuild voting theory to incorporate the effects of a candidate's issue position on both the decision to vote and the choice among those who decide to vote.

Implications for the Ideological Distributions of Those Elected

Over time, this pattern of voting behavior will lead to an evolutionary reduction in the moderates in both parties and an increasing divergence of the ideological positions of the two major parties. On this issue, Broder was again an astute observer:

Party caucuses on both sides of the Capitol have become more cohesive internally and further apart from each other philosophically. More and more issues divide on party lines. And the new leaders in the House and Senate, like the old ones, reflect that growing gulf between the parties.

This pattern was most apparent in the House of Representatives where Dick Armey was replaced as majority leader by Tom Delay and Richard Gephardt was replaced as minority leader by Nancy Pelosi; I doubt whether Delay and Pelosi agree on the time of day. This pattern is also consistent with the recent finding by political scientists Melissa Collie and John Mason (2000) that the variance of votes in Congress is more polarized than the variance of opinion in the electorate.¹

¹I am grateful to John Samples, director of Cato's Center for Representative Government, for this reference.

Implications for the Potential to Govern

Finally, this pattern of voting behavior will make it more difficult for Congress to govern. More issues will be subject to partisan deadlock, more issues will be decided by near party-line votes, and a reduction of the number of moderates in both parties will make it much more difficult to achieve the bipartisan consensus that is necessary for a major reform to survive a change in the majority party. For different reasons, Congress is becoming more like the Italian parliament—more partisan, a reduced ability to address major reforms, and an increased centralization of political power in the executive. Not a happy thought.

References

- Broder, D. (2003) "Don't Bet on Bipartisan Niceties." *Washington Post*, 2 January.
- Collie, M. P., and Mason, J. L. (2000) "The Electoral Connection between Party and Constituency Reconsidered: Evidence from the U.S. House of Representatives, 1962–94." In D. W. Brady, J. E. Cogan, and M. P. Fiorina (eds.) *Continuity and Change in House Elections*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press/Hoover Institution Press.
- Niskanen, W. A. (2002) "Important Unnoticed Patterns in the Midterm Elections." *Investor's Business Daily*, 20 November.