

Want to reduce polarization in Congress? Make moderates a better job offer

By Andrew B. Hall

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Polarization among those willing to run for office may be a more important factor in the rise of legislative division than the polarization of voters.
- As running for office gets more expensive and holding political office has less appeal, moderates are less likely to run.
- States that have raised legislator salaries have seen more moderates run for office. And their legislatures have become less polarized.
- Campaign finance reform focused on reducing the amount of time candidates spend fundraising could make running for office easier and could encourage more moderates to run. Subsidizing the campaigns of moderate candidates could also help.

Congress has become increasingly polarized over the past several decades, with Democrat and Republican legislators farther and farther apart ideologically (e.g., McCarty 2019).

Research suggests that this growing polarization is a key reason that the policy process has broken down, as Congress struggles to complete the budgeting process let alone pass any new legislation (McCarty 2014). The result is dysfunction and uncertainty.

Where is this polarization coming from? A large literature in political economy and political science examines how voters have become more polarized, focusing on factors like the media, gerrymandering, and primary elections and how these translate voter extremism into legislative polarization.

But my research suggests that, when it comes to polarization, who chooses to run for office is at least as important as whom voters support at the polls. In particular, my book, *Who Wants to Run? How the Devaluing of Political Office Drives Polarization* (University of Chicago Press, 2019), presents a range of statistical evidence that more-moderate citizens are not running for political office. And that constrains the choices voters are able to make and helps drive legislative polarization.

Moderates aren't running

Ideologically moderate citizens — people with more centrist views who believe in political pragmatism — are increasingly unlikely to run for political office, and this has a lot to do with why our legislatures have polarized so dramatically.

Establishing this claim requires overcoming a fundamental challenge: How do we measure the ideological positions of people who run for office? For those who win office, we can examine their roll-call votes to understand their ideology, but losing candidates don't get the chance to cast those votes.

Recent work in political science overcomes this hurdle by using the mix of campaign contributions that candidates receive to measure the ideological positions of candidates for the U.S. House (Bonica 2013; Hall and Snyder 2015). The basic logic is that candidates who receive most of their money from donors who tend to support far-right incumbents are likely to be farther to the right ideologically — and vice versa for candidates who receive most of their money from donors who tend to support far-left incumbents.

Using these measures of candidate ideology, we see that the candidate pool has polarized substantially over the past several decades. Democrats and Republicans who run for office are more ideologically distant from one another than they used to be.

A simulation using this data shows why who runs for office helps to drive polarization in the legislature and may be more important than the views of voters. Following the method of Bonica (2017), I examine how polarized the House would have been over the past several decades if, in every race, voters had elected the most-moderate available candidate, instead of whichever candidate they actually elected. Even in this extreme hypothetical, legislative polarization would still have risen 80 percent as much as it did in reality.

Most legislative polarization is already baked into the set of candidates who run for office.

Moderate candidates can win

The lack of moderate candidates is important, because the more-moderate people who do run for Congress tend to do fairly well, electorally.

A variety of statistical analyses support this conclusion. The key challenge to estimating the electoral advantage or disadvantage of more-moderate candidates is that which candidates run in which districts is not randomly assigned, leading to selection bias. In particular, more-extreme candidates tend to run for office in places that prefer more-extreme candidates, causing basic

comparisons of more-extreme versus more-moderate candidates to underestimate the advantage of more-moderate candidates.

I start by focusing on close primary elections between a more-moderate and a more-extreme candidate, with the idea that the outcome of these close nomination contests is like an “experiment” in which one candidate or the other is randomly assigned to run for office in the general election.

Using this approach, I find that the “randomly” nominated extremists do much worse in the general election than the more-moderate candidates do. It appears that more-moderate candidates possess a significant electoral advantage, on average, in U.S. House races. I then replicate this finding with a number of other strategies that don’t require zooming in on close primary elections, continuing to find a marked advantage for more-moderate candidates, consistent with previous work on the subject (e.g., Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002).

When moderates run for office, they tend to do well, electorally. This suggests, though does not prove, that if more moderates ran for office, they would also do well.

Why don’t moderates run?

If more-moderate people tend to do well, electorally, why have they become so reluctant to seek office? I argue that they are opting out of running for Congress because of how difficult we have made campaigning and how unappealing we have made holding political office.

Although the costs of seeking office and the benefits of holding office might accrue equally to all types of candidates, I build on formal models of candidate entry that suggest why more-extreme citizens may be more willing to bear the rising costs and falling benefits than more-moderate citizens (Besley and Coate 1997; Osborne and Slivinski 1996).

The basic logic is that more-moderate citizens are relatively more ambivalent about the prospect of being represented

by someone from either end of the ideological spectrum — being as they are in the middle — while people on the ends find the prospect of being represented by the other end more repellent. This compels more-extreme people to run even in conditions in which more-moderate people will not.

What are these costs and benefits that have changed over time?

The primary cost to running for office is campaign fundraising. Would-be candidates are told to spend four hours or more each day raising money, a prospect that many people find extremely unappealing. And these burdens have risen considerably over time. Candidates are raising far more money from more donors than ever before, and the “race to the bottom” encourages them to fundraise relentlessly out of fear that their opponents are doing the same.

Moreover, running for office means quitting your day job — or, at least, taking a prolonged leave of absence from it. Not surprisingly, these financial considerations also loom large with potential candidates (Lawless and Fox 2005).

At the same time, holding a seat in Congress may be less alluring to moderate citizens because traditional opportunities to influence the policy process are rarer today. In past eras, a moderate could look forward to accruing seniority through repeated re-elections and could use this seniority to work in committees to shape important policies. Today, the central party leadership plays the dominant role in shaping major legislation, with committees somewhat marginalized in the process. The increasingly partisan organization of the legislature may therefore dissuade moderates from running (Thomsen 2017).

What about material rewards? Although members of Congress are still paid far more than the median American (\$174,000 per year, currently), compensation in real dollars for our legislators has fallen by 35 percent from its high in 1969.

In short, running for Congress is probably more difficult and time-consuming than ever before, at the same

time that holding a seat in Congress has become a less appealing prospect. Who wants to seek out this job? More and more, it is people on the ideological extremes and not those in the middle, who are willing to step forward.

Policies to encourage moderates to run for office

These facts suggest that we could convince more-moderate individuals to run for office by making them a better offer.

A basic way to improve the incentive to run for office is to raise salaries for legislators. To see if this could change who runs, I looked to the state legislatures, where pay for lawmakers varies a remarkable amount across space and time. When states increased their legislative salaries, I found, the set of people who ran for office became less polarized, as did the statehouses.

Giving raises to our current members of Congress, presiding over one of the least popular congresses of all time, is not politically tenable. However, an independent commission tasked with considering the incentives we give to future members of Congress might face better odds. Paying our legislators more could convince more-moderate people to seek office and could open the legislature up to people for whom it’s currently unaffordable.

The idea is not to encourage people to enrich themselves by seeking political office — or to further reward the millionaires who currently occupy many seats in Congress. Rather, lawmakers should be paid a wage that reflects the importance and prestige that the job should warrant, with an eye toward attracting a different set of future members of Congress.

Another solution is to tackle the costs of running. Campaign finance is a fraught undertaking and is usually focused on the potential corrupting influence of donations. But campaign finance reform focused instead on reducing the amount of time that candidates are required to spend fundraising might be more effective in altering who runs for office. If citizens knew that they

would only have to spend a certain amount of time fundraising, and that their opponents faced the same constraint, a different set of people might be willing to seek office.

Finally, private actors and interest groups can step in to reduce the costs of running for office by, in essence, providing subsidies to more-moderate candidates. This could include plugging in would-be candidates into pre-existing networks of donors who want to support more-moderate and less partisan candidates.

With Honor, a cross-partisan super PAC and nonprofit that recently invested more than \$14 million in the 2018 mid-term elections, is one example of this approach. The group supports veterans who wish to run for office in either party and take a values-based pledge to serve with integrity, civility, and courage. By focusing on the crucial step of candidate recruitment, groups like With Honor could help moderate our highly polarized legislatures.

All of these policies should be regarded with some caution. Reducing polarization inevitably implies trade-offs. In the 1950s, political scientists worried that there wasn't enough polarization and that led to voter confusion and corruption.

Each of the policy suggestions above could have unintended consequences. Higher salaries might encourage more venal people to run for office. Campaign finance reform could chill political speech and leave voters less informed. And successful interest group interventions might lead to more special-interest politics.

We must decide as a society how we want to resolve these trade-offs. If reducing ideological polarization is a worthy goal — and the dysfunction of our current federal government suggests it is — then changing the nature of our campaigns and our legislatures to make the job of legislator more appealing to moderate citizens is an important policy challenge that deserves far more attention.

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Policy Brief is based on research and findings detailed in his recent book, *Who Wants to Run? How the Devaluing of Political Office Drives Polarization*.

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