State Legislatures, Term Limits, and Polarization*

Revision 5.1

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Abstract

How do term limits affect the ideological composition of state legislatures? While existing work documents increased polarization in term-limited incumbents' voting records, little is known about how term limits affect the candidate pipeline, electoral selection, and incumbents' ideology over time. Pairing a first-of-its-kind dataset of state legislative election returns for 1992-2020 with novel roll-call-based candidate ideology scalings introduced in Handan-Nader, Myers, and Hall (2021) and a difference-in-differences design, I implement the first comprehensive study of the ideological effects of term limits in state legislatures. I find that term limits generate increased polarization among candidates at all stages of the candidate pipeline, from the pool of primary and general election candidates to eventual race winners. Contrary to pundits' expectations, I show that this effect is not mediated by asymmetric polarization. Term limits also appear to systematically shift the electorate's preferences, resulting in a decline in the electoral return to moderation in general election races. Finally, I present evidence that term limits do not significantly induce incumbents to shift their ideological positions. In sum, term-limited legislatures simultaneously attract more extreme candidates and reward extremity at a higher rate at the ballot box. These findings have important implications for models of electoral accountability and incentives.

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1 Introduction

Over the past three decades, twenty-one states have passed legislative term limits, often with the intent of increasing legislator responsiveness and reducing the influence of interest groups.[1] Contemporary gridlock and ideological extremity, however, have generated new interest in legislative term limits as a mechanism to reduce partisan ideological polarization. A diverse group of politicians, from presidential hopefuls to former members of congress, have endorsed legislative term limits as a means to reduce ideological extremity.[2] Even among the American public, interest in term limits is high. Facing increasing partisan gridlock and polarization, a 2013 Gallup poll reported that 75% of American adults supported term limits for Congress (Gallup, 2013).

Recent research, however, casts doubt on the ability of term limits to moderate ideological extremity. In an analysis of states for 1993-2016, Olson and Rogowski (2020) illustrate that state legislative term limits have instead increased partisan polarization among sitting legislators. While informative as a diagnostic tool, this finding leaves important unanswered questions related to the effect of term limits on the the non-incumbent candidate pipeline, electoral selection, and incumbents' ideology over time.

In this paper, I investigate how term limits affect the ideological composition of state legislatures. Specifically, I aim to trace the effect of term limits on the supply of state legislative candidates, the role voters play in shaping the candidate pool and selecting winners, and the evolution of term-limited incumbents' ideology over time.

My research follows in a rich literature on the effects of legislative incentives on incumbents' behavior and candidates' ideology. Previous work underscores how factors such as legislator pay (Hall, 2019), electoral competitiveness (Fiorina, 1993; Ansolabehere, Brady, and Fiorina, 1992; Griffin, 2006), primary election format (Norrander, 1989; Gerber and Morton, 1998; Kaufmann, Gimpel, and Hoffman, 2003; McGhee et al., 2014), and primary challengers (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart, 2001; Brady, Han, and Pope, 2007) shape candidates' behavior.

As an important determinant of legislative incentives, previous research evaluates the extent to which legislative term limits affect a variety of behavioral and policy outcomes. Outcomes of interest include legislative productivity (Fouirnaies and Hall, 2021), fiscal policy (Johnson and Crain, 2004; Erler, 2007), women and minority groups' representation (Casellas, 2010; Carroll, 2005; Robert, 1996), bills' policy complexity (Kousser, 2006), voter turnout (Nalder, 2007), and the electoral advantage of incumbents (Rogers, 2014).

Existing scholarship also explores the effect of term limits on incumbents' ideology states' and measures of polarization. Olson and Rogowski (2020) provide the most-comprehensive evidence on the effect of legislative term limits on partisan polarization. Analyzing NP-Scores for incumbents, Olson and Rogowski (2020) find that term limits increase the ideological gap between Democrats' and Republicans' voting records. Olson and Rogowski (2020) argue that term limits increase the role of parties in the legislative process and alter legislators' career incentives. Although informative for incumbents, this work does not address the effect of

[1] Legislative term limits imposed by voters in six states were nullified by court or legislative action. Fifteen states currently have legislative term limits in effect.

[2] See, for example, comments by former Utah governor Jon Huntsman and former U.S. Senator Joseph Lieberman reported in Olson and Rogowski (2020).

term limits on the broader pool of candidates who run for office.

Other related studies report null results. Wright (2007), comparing nation-wide legislative roll-call voting for the 1999-2000 session, finds no evidence that term limits increase levels of partisan polarization among state legislatures. Similarly, in the context of the Arkansas state senate (Titiunik and Feher, 2018) and California legislature (Cain and Kousser, 2004), scholars find no significant effect of the introduction of term limits on candidates' ideological positions. This work, however, is hampered by its cross-sectional design and focus on individual states, precluding extrapolation to other settings.

Finally, my research also complements scholarship on the electoral returns to moderation (Handan-Nader, Myers, and Hall, 2021; Caughey and Warshaw, 2019; Hall, 2019, 2015). Given the growing scholarly and public concern with the polarization of the American political system, it is important to fully understand how term limits contribute to this effect.

I begin by showing how term limits increase partisan polarization within the aggregate pool of candidates running for office. As Hall (2019) demonstrates in the context of U.S. House elections, the ideological composition of office-seekers shapes overall legislative polarization. If the legislative candidate pipeline becomes more polarized, legislative polarization will increase in tandem.

Subsequently, I demonstrate that, contrary to scholarly expectations, state legislative polarization is asymmetrically driven by Democratic candidate extremity. While surprising, this finding parallels recent work in Handan-Nader, Myers, and Hall (2021).

Candidates are not, however, the only source of increased polarization among term-limited states. I illustrate that voters in term-limited states punish extreme candidates at half the rate of their non-term-limited counterparts in general elections. Thus, extremist candidates face less-significant electoral penalties at the ballot box and prospective extremists receive a strong indicator of their potential success.

Finally, I find that legislative term limits do not significantly induce incumbents to alter their ideological positions, complementing similar work by Fouirnaies and Hall (2021). Overall, I conclude that the polarization of term-limited states can be traced to a changing candidate pool as well as the preferences of voters.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 contextualizes the introduction of term limits and underscores the importance of studying the relationship between term limits and candidate ideology. In Section 3, I outline my solution to the methodological challenges of studying candidate pool ideology and introduce a new dataset on state legislative election results. Section 4 documents the polarizing effects of term limits across all stages of legislative elections. Section 5 illustrates how the electorates' ideological preferences change under term limits. In Section 6, I investigate whether term limits cause incumbents to change their ideological positions. Section 7 is the conclusion.

2 Term Limits and Polarization

Before presenting my data and analysis, I consider why the relationship between term limits and legislative polarization is an important object of study.

State legislative term limits and their effects on polarization are important to study for at least three reasons. First, state legislatures are increasingly consequential policy-making

bodies. Many of today's most controversial political issues–including abortion rights, voting access, and election certification–originate and are decided in statehouses. If term limits alter the ideological composition of state legislatures, they will also impact a host of essential policy outcomes.

Second, state legislatures are a key source of members of Congress. By one count, nearly half of the members of the 116th Congress were former state legislators.[3] Thus, policies that affect the composition of state legislatures are certain to shape policy-making and polarization at the federal level (Hall, 2019; Thomsen, 2014).

Finally, the study of state legislative term limits offers insights into age-old questions about electoral accountability and legislative incentives. The direct link between a legislator's actions and her hopes for re-election form the foundation of models of electoral accountability (e.g. Barro 1973; Fearon 1999). To the extent that they alter legislators' incentives, term limits comprehensively shape the democratic system. Hence, careful study of legislative term limits has implications for key state-level policy outcomes, the composition of Congress, and models of democratic representation.

3 Data and Methods

To implement my study, I combine data on state legislative primary and general election returns with novel roll-call-based candidate ideology scores. Overall, these data cover all 50 states for the years 1992-2020, ensuring comprehensive coverage of term-limited as well as non-term-limited state legislative candidates. In accordance with existing work, I exclude Nebraska from the analysis and focus on Democratic and Republican candidates. Table 1 summarizes the relevant details of term-limited states included in my analysis.

General election data were extracted from the State Legislative Election Returns dataset (SLERs) (Klarner, 2021) and includes full coverage of this study's window of analysis. The majority of the primary election returns data was aggregated in Handan-Nader, Myers, and Hall (2021) with supplementary data collected by the author for this study.[4] After merging primary and general election returns, the combined dataset features 75,479 distinct general election candidates and 42,068 distinct primary election candidates across 146,855 races with a total of 208,589 candidate-year observations. See Appendix Table A.1 for a state-by-year matrix of my data's coverage.

Legislative ideology is best measured by the observed roll-call behavior of legislators in office. Unfortunately, a roll-call-based ideology score, such as Shor and McCarthy's (2011) NP-Scores, is only available for the subset of state legislative candidates who become sitting legislators. In response, Handan-Nader, Myers, and Hall (2021) construct a generalizable roll-call-based measure of candidate ideology called NP-DIME scores. Leveraging a supervised machine learning scaling procedure, NP-DIME scores are designed to predict roll-call behavior, as measured by NP-Scores, using candidate campaign finance records. The resulting NP-DIME scores correlate highly with NP-Scores ($r = 0.97$), but are available for

[3] https://www.ncsl.org/blog/2018/11/02/how-many-former-state-legislators-serve-in-congress.aspx.

[4] Although every effort was made to construct a complete primary returns dataset, returns for a small number of primary races were not available online. Overall, my primary dataset covers approximately 86% of all state-year-chambers.

Table 1: Summary of Term-Limited States in Analysis

State	Year Enacted	Type	Term Limit House	Term Limit Senate
AR	1992	$\begin{cases}\text{Lifetime} & t < 2020 \\ \text{Consecutive} & t \geq 2020\end{cases}$	$\begin{cases}6 & t < 2014 \\ 16 & t \in [2014, 2020) \\ 12 & t \geq 2020\end{cases}$	$\begin{cases}8 & t < 2014 \\ 16 & t \in [2014, 2020) \\ 12 & t \geq 2020\end{cases}$
AZ	1992	Consecutive	8	8
CA	1990	Lifetime	$\begin{cases}6 & t < 2012 \\ 12 & t \geq 2012\end{cases}$	$\begin{cases}8 & t < 2012 \\ 12 & t \geq 2012\end{cases}$
CO	1990	Consecutive	8	8
FL	1992	Consecutive	8	8
LA	1995	Consecutive	12	12
ME	1993	Consecutive	8	8
MI	1992	Lifetime	6	8
MO	1992	Lifetime	8	8
MT	1992	Consecutive	8	8
NV	1996	Lifetime	12	12
OH	1992	Consecutive	8	8
OK	1990	Lifetime	12	12
SD	1992	Consecutive	8	8

election losers in addition to winners and are dynamic over time. NP-DIME scores are the main measure of candidate ideology employed throughout this paper.

Finally, after merging ideology scores to the election returns dataset, I construct indicators for candidate-level and chamber-level term limits using data from the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL).

4 Term Limits Generate A More-Polarized Candidate Pool

In this section, I explore the effect of legislative term limits on candidate-pool partisan polarization. I aim to evaluate whether term limits increase the overall level of ideological extremity among legislative candidates. In closely related work, Olson and Rogowski (2020) analyze the impact of legislative term limits on the state-level partisan polarization of incumbents. They find that legislative term limits are associated with increased partisan polarization among incumbents. I complement this analysis by studying partisan polarization at all stages of the election process.

The analysis in this section proceeds in two stages. First, I consider the effect of term limits on state-level partisan polarization. Studying state-level trends provides an understanding of the overall ideological effects of term limits. In the second subsection, I decompose the effects of term limits by party.

4.1 State-Level Analysis

Consistent with Olson and Rogowski (2020), I employ a state-level difference-in-differences design for the years 1992-2020. Specifically, I model

$$Y_{st} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \tau_{st} + \Omega X_{st} + \alpha_s + \delta_t + \epsilon_{st} \tag{1}$$

where Y_{st} is the level of partisan polarization in state s in year t, τ_{st} indicates whether state s in time t had term limits in effect, X_{st} is a vector of controls, and α_s and δ_t are state and year fixed effects, respectively. The error term, ϵ_{st}, is clustered at the state level. Using this specification allows me to make comparisons within state-year units.

I define partisan polarization, Y_{st}, as the difference between the median Republican and Democratic candidates' NP-DIME scores in state s in year t. The term limits variable, τ_{st}, indicates state-years for which tenured incumbents are no longer eligible to run for re-election.[5] When years of impact differ between a state's house and senate, I code treatment as beginning on the first year of impact.[6] Both Y_{st} and τ_{st} mirror definitions in Olson and Rogowski (2020).

Table 2: Term Limits and Partisan Polarization

	Candidate Pool		General Election Candidates		General Election Winners			
	(1) NPDIME	(2) NPDIME	(3) NPDIME	(4) NPDIME	(5) NPDIME	(6) NPDIME	(7) NP	(8) NP
Term Limited	0.108*	0.110*	0.101*	0.103*	0.087	0.088	0.195**	0.200**
	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.08)	(0.07)
Log(Leg Prof)		0.028		0.015		0.016		0.076
		(0.05)		(0.05)		(0.05)		(0.07)
Divided Government		-0.005		-0.010		-0.005		-0.006
		(0.01)		(0.01)		(0.01)		(0.02)
Party Competetiveness		0.000		0.000		0.000		-0.000
		(0.00)		(0.00)		(0.00)		(0.00)
N	591	591	591	591	470	470	485	485
Standard Deviation	.39	.39	.39	.39	.4	.4	.47	.47
Year FEs	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
State FEs	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

* p<.1, ** p<.05, *** p<.01

Note: Standard errors in parentheses are clustered at the state level. Dependent variables are listed below model numbers.

Table 2 shows the results for my state-level analysis. For all specifications I present a univariate model and, to guard against the possibility of attributing non-static state features to the effect of term limits, a model with state governance controls. The battery of controls was first introduced in Olson and Rogowski (2020). *Legislative professionalism* (Squire, 2017) combines information on legislator salary, session length, and staffing resources to quantify

[5] XXX Note about alternative definition.

[6] For example, τ_{st} for Michigan, which implemented 6 year house and 8 year senate term limits beginning in 1992 and has biannual house elections, is defined

$$\tau_{st} = \begin{cases} 0, & t < 2000 \\ 1, & t \geq 2000 \end{cases}.$$

legislator engagement in policy making. *Divided government* indicates whether one party simultaneously controls the governorship, house, and senate. Finally, *party competitiveness* measures the absolute two-party difference in control of legislative seats.

Columns 1 and 2 in Table 2 estimate the effect of legislative term limits on partisan polarization across the entire candidate pool, including primary winners and losers and general election candidates. The coefficients on *Term limited* in columns 1 and 2 are positive and statistically significant, indicating that partisan polarization is greater, on average, among candidate pools with legislative term limits. These novel findings are robust to the inclusion of control variables in column 2, a pattern that holds across all specifications in Table 2.

Next, I restrict the sample to general election candidates in columns 3 and 4. I find continued evidence that term limits increase partisan polarization, but in this case among candidates who reach the general election. Finally, columns 5 and 6 analyze only general election winners or, equivalently, candidates who become legislators. While the coefficients on *Term limited* among general election winners are not significant at traditional levels, the point estimates are strikingly similar to those of columns 1-4. Note that the effects outlined in Table 2–approximately one quarter of one standard deviation–are substantively meaningful in addition to statistically significant.

As an external validity check, I replicate the incumbent analysis using NP-Scores in columns 7 and 8. The resulting coefficients mirror those of Olson and Rogowski (2020), lending external validity to my NP-DIME score findings.[7]

The results in Table 2 establish an important finding: state legislative term limits produce meaningfully higher levels of partisan polarization among all office seekers, rather than only among office holders. Hence, legislative term limits not only cause incumbents to take more-extreme positions in the legislature, but also increase the overall level of extremity of legislative candidates.

4.2 Party-Level Analysis

In this section, I evaluate whether the ideological effects of legislative term limits vary by party.

A growing body of scholarship explores the prevalence of asymmetric polarization in American elections. In the standard account, scholars argue that ideological polarization is disproportionately driven by rising Republican extremity (e.g McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2007; Grossman and Hopkins 2016). Recent evidence at the state level, however, reaches different conclusions. Olson and Rogowski (2020) find no evidence of asymmetric polarization among incumbent legislators in term-limited states. Handan-Nader, Myers, and Hall (2021) also find little evidence of asymmetric polarization among the pool of general election candidates, but illustrate that Democratic primaries favor extremists at a higher rate than Republican primaries.

In Table 3, I re-estimate Equation 1 on the candidate pipeline after defining Y_{st} separately for Democrats and Republicans. Pooling across chambers, columns 1 and 4 demonstrate that term limits are associated with a shift to the left among Democratic office-seeks and a shift to

[7]That the NP-Score coefficients are larger in magnitude than their NP-DIME score equivalents suggests that the results in columns 1-6 constitute a lower bound estimate of the true effect.

Table 3: Asymmetric Polarization in the Candidate Pipeline

	Democrats			Republicans		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	NPDIME	NPDIME	NPDIME	NPDIME	NPDIME	NPDIME
Term Limited	-0.067**	-0.060**	-0.070**	0.042	0.037	0.045
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Log(Leg Prof)	-0.003	-0.027	0.026	0.017	0.024	0.009
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.03)
Divided Government	-0.003	-0.000	-0.006	-0.007	-0.010	-0.005
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Party Competetiveness	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
N	1,128	579	546	1,136	583	548
Standard Deviation	.85	.85	.85	.85	.85	.85
Specification	Pooled	House	Senate	Pooled	House	Senate
Year FEs	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
State FEs	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

* p<.1, ** p<.05, *** p<.01

Note: Standard errors in parentheses are clustered at the state level. Outcome is NP-DIME score for entire candidate pool.

the right among Republican office-seekers compared to non-term-limited candidates. Only the effect for Democratic candidates is statistically distinguishable from zero, however, a surprising finding in light of national-level asymmetric polarization research. These results hold when I restrict my sample to state house candidates (columns 2 and 5) and state senate candidates (columns 3 and 6).

The coefficient estimates in Table 3 suggest that term limits' effects are approximately 40% larger among Democrats than Republicans. In Appendix Table A.3, I illustrate that this asymmetric polarization does not approach statistical significance.

The findings presented in this section suggest a more-nuanced picture of the ideological effects of legislative term limits, including an important role of electoral selection to which I now turn.

5 The Electorate's Changing Ideological Preferences

The origins of the effects observed in Section 3 may be divided into two constituent parts. First, term limits may directly influence the ideological positions of legislative candidates and incumbents. From this perspective, termed-out legislators may systematically shift their ideology once electoral incentives are removed, or term limits may foster ideological selection into the candidate pool. Second, term limits may alter the preferences and behavior of the electorate. Under the first scenario, candidates and legislators would drive the increased polarization observed in Section 3, while voters would play the same role in the second scenario. In this section I consider the latter explanation, leaving analysis of the former to Section 5.

To assess the role term-limited states' electorates play in producing increased partisan polarization, I employ two modeling strategies. Because general election races feature direct two-party competition, it is possible to compare the ideology of competing Democratic and Republican general election candidates and predict their electoral returns to changes in ideological platform. To do so, I adopt the midpoint method of Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2001). Consequently, I estimate an equation of the form

$$Y_{dct} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Midpoint_{dct} + \beta_2 Distance_{dct} + \Omega X_{dct} + \alpha_d + \delta_t + \epsilon_{dct} \tag{2}$$

where Y_{dct} is either the Democratic candidate's general election vote share or a victory indicator in district d in chamber c in year t. *Midpoint* and *Distance* are the midpoint and distance between Democratic and Republican candidates, respectively. Finally, X_{dct} is an optional vector of controls, α_d and δ_t are district and year fixed effects, respectively, and the error term, ϵ_{dct}, is clustered by district i.[8]

The coefficient of interest is β_1, the estimated electoral return for the Democratic candidate arising from a rightward (i.e. positive) shift in *Midpoint*. Previous research on Congress (Hall, 2019; Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart, 2001) as well as state legislatives (Handan-Nader, Myers, and Hall, 2021) suggest that β_1 is positive and significant. After replicating existing findings, I test whether β_1 differs significantly between term-limited and non-term-limited states.

Since the midpoint model cannot be applied to races with multiple candidates from the same party, I apply a candidate ideological extremism model to study primary election returns. Specifically, I estimate the model

$$Y_{jpdt} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 Extremism_{jpdt} + \alpha_{pd} + \delta_{pt} + \eta_{pdt} + \epsilon_{jpdt} \tag{3}$$

where Y_{jpdt} is the vote share or a victory indicator for candidate j in party p in district d in year t. *Extremism* is the absolute value of a candidate's NP-DIME score. The variables α_{pd}, δ_{pt}, and η_{pdt} are party-by-district, party-by-year, and number of primary candidates fixed effects, respectively.

The coefficient β_1 captures the electoral return to becoming more extreme. Previous work finds a positive coefficient (Handan-Nader, Myers, and Hall, 2021; Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart, 2001; Brady, Han, and Pope, 2007), indicating that primary candidates receive an electoral boost from ideological extremism.

Results are reported in Table 4. The baseline general election models, listed in columns 1 and 5, provide compelling evidence that general election candidates are punished by voters for ideological extremity. These estimates closely approximate estimates in Handan-Nader, Myers, and Hall (2021), providing credibility to my subsequent extension.

I am interested in the difference in *Midpoint* coefficients between term-limited and non-term-limited state-years. To estimate this difference, columns 2 and 6 interact *Midpoint* with *Term Limits*, an indicator for the presence of legislative term limits defined in Section 3. If voters in term-limited states reward ideological extremity at a higher rate than their peers

[8]The midpoint model requires the ideology of districts' mean voter to be held constant. Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2001) use presidential vote share for this purpose. Because presidential vote share is not available at the level of state legislative districts, I employ district fixed effects to hold the median voter constant.

Table 4: Term Limits and Electoral Selection

	Dem Vote Share		Primary Votes		Dem Win		Primary Win	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Midpoint	0.047***	0.058***			0.300***	0.327***		
	(0.01)	(0.01)			(0.06)	(0.07)		
Distance	0.017*	0.017*			0.135***	0.135***		
	(0.01)	(0.01)			(0.05)	(0.05)		
Dem Contributions	0.441***	0.440***			1.074***	1.070***		
	(0.01)	(0.01)			(0.05)	(0.05)		
Rep Contributions	-0.408***	-0.407***			-1.103***	-1.102***		
	(0.01)	(0.01)			(0.06)	(0.05)		
Term Limits		0.008		0.013		0.007		-0.033
		(0.01)		(0.02)		(0.06)		(0.04)
Term Limits · Midpoint		-0.033*				-0.082		
		(0.02)				(0.10)		
Extremism			0.020***	0.022***			0.052***	0.043***
			(0.01)	(0.01)			(0.01)	(0.02)
Contributions			0.083***	0.083***			0.213***	0.213***
			(0.00)	(0.00)			(0.00)	(0.00)
Term Limits · Extremism				-0.008				0.035
				(0.01)				(0.03)
N	21,702	21,702	42,595	42,595	21,702	21,702	49,134	49,134
District FEs	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	N	N
Year FEs	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	N	N
District-by-Party FEs	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y
Party-by-Year FEs	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y

* p<.1, ** p<.05, *** p<.01

in non-term-limited states, the interaction term would be negative. Conversely, if, relative to non-term-limited-states, voters in term-limited states punish candidates for ideological extremism more, the interaction term would be positive.

It turns out that the interaction terms in both models are negative and significant, indicating that extreme ideological positions are penalized at a lower rate in term-limited states. These effects are decidedly large. In fact, the vote-share penalty for ideological extremism is more than 50% lower in term-limited states. Similarly, the decline in term-limited candidates' win probability as a function of ideological extremism is 45% lower in term-limited states.

Next, I consider primary elections. Columns 3 and 7 explore the overall relationship between extremism and primary election outcomes. Contrary to general elections, I find that, on average, primary election candidates receive an electoral advantage from taking more extreme ideological positions. The coefficient estimates are on par with existing research. I find no evidence, however, that legislative term limits affect voters' primary election behavior. The interaction terms in columns 4 and 7 are small and not statistically significant.

In Appendix Table A.2, I re-estimate equations 2 and 3 using only open-seat races. The coefficient on *Midpoint* vote share is almost three as large for only open-seat races compared to all races. Although not a dispositive test, this finding suggests that polarization in term-limited legislatures can be partially attributed to cyclic replacement of more-extreme legislators.

Taken as a whole, I find compelling evidence that voters contribute to the elevated ideological polarization in term-limited states. This relationship, however, is limited to

general elections. It now remains to investigate the potential for term-limited legislators' actions in office to shape partisan polarization.

6 Termed-Out Legislators' Ideology is Constant

In the final portion of this paper, I evaluate whether incumbents contribute to the heightened partisan polarization observed in states with legislative term limits. To do so, I consider whether termed-out legislators systematically shift their ideological positions.

Legislative term limits comprehensively alter candidates' electoral incentives. Candidates who are termed-out need not consider the electoral implications of their policy actions, at least as long as they don't plan to run for higher office. As a result, some observers suggest that term-limited candidates may pander to their partisan bases, leading to increased ideological extremity (Canes-Wrone, Herron, and Shotts, 2001). Conversely, if candidates become more responsive to their constituents in their final term–a perspective supported by the "ideological shirking" and "marginality hypothesis" literatures–we might expect term limits to reduce term-limited candidates' ideological extremism.[9]

Ultimately, this is an empirical question, but one that has received little direct scholarly attention. Related research on the effect of district electoral incentives on legislator responsiveness reaches mixed conclusions (e.g. Fiorina 1993; Ansolabehere, Brady, and Fiorina 1992; Burden 2004; Griffin 2006). Further, most research focuses on Congressional elections rather than state legislative elections.

The notable exception is Fouirnaies and Hall (2021) which analyzes how legislative term limits influence legislators' behavior in office, including ideological positioning. Using W-NOMINATE scores derived roll-call records as well as interest group ratings, Fouirnaies and Hall (2021) find no evidence that termed-out legislators systematically shift their ideological platforms. Instead, they argue that termed-out legislators allocate less time to legislative activities. Due to data and modeling limitations, however, this analysis applies to 16 of the 29 term-limited state-chambers and uses only 2 non-term-limited control states.

Since NP-DIME scores are dynamic over time and feature near-complete coverage, I extend the analysis framework of Fouirnaies and Hall (2021) to all term-limited state-chambers (with the exception of non-partisan Nebraska) and use all available control states. I implement a difference-in-differences design within individuals and states, allowing me to control for legislator time effects.[10]

Specifically, I estimate the equation

$$Y_{jct} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \, Term\ Limited_{jct} + \alpha_j + \Omega + \epsilon_{jct} \tag{4}$$

where Y_{jct} is the absolute value of legislator j's NP-DIME score in time t in chamber c, *Term Limited* indicates whether a legislator is serving in their final term before term limits apply,

[9]For a review of work related to ideological shirking, see Bender and Lott (1996). See Griffin (2006) for an overview of electoral competition and marginality-hypothesis-related research.

[10]Since NP-DIME scores are constructed with reference to candidates' campaign contributions, and final-term candidates likely accrue fewer donations, these results should be considered in conjunction with those of Fouirnaies and Hall (2021).

α_i are legislator fixed effects, and Ω stands in for either chamber-by-year or chamber-by-party-by-year fixed effects. The error term, ϵ_{jct}, is clustered at the legislator level.

Table 5: Individual Level DiD - General Elections

	Incumbent Ideology	
	(1) NPDIME	(2) NPDIME
Term Limited	-0.006**	-0.006**
	(0.00)	(0.00)
N	64,443	64,402
Standard Deviation	.32	.32
Legislator FEs	Y	Y
Chamber-by-Year FEs	Y	N
Chamber-by-Party-by-Year FEs	N	Y

* p<.1, ** p<.05, *** p<.01

Note: Dependent variable is the absolute value of incumbents' NP-DIME score.

Table 5 reports the results. In the first column, which includes legislator and chamber-by-year fixed effects, the effect of being term-limited is calculated within groups of legislators serving in the same chamber and year. Thus, the institutional factors that define term limits, as well as other unobserved static features, are held constant. The estimate on *Term Limits* in column 1 is negative and significant, suggesting that candidates moderate their ideological platforms in their final term. However, the coefficient–representing roughly 1.5% of one standard deviation–is quite small, especially in comparison to the results in Tables 2 and 4.

To ensure the results are not confounded by inter-party differences, the second column substitutes in chamber-by-party-by-year fixed effects. In this model, the counterfactual for a term-limited candidate is a candidate in the same chamber and same party. Again, while the coefficient estimate in column 2 is statistically significant, it is not meaningful.

Overall, I find no evidence that termed-out legislators meaningfully shift their ideological platforms. This finding is consistent with empirical results reported in Fouirnaies and Hall (2021) and the theoretical expectations of the marginality hypothesis literature.

7 Discussion and Conclusion

Political leaders, scholars, and the general public alike are increasingly concerned about partisan polarization and the accompanying legislative gridlock. Proponents argue that term limits will reduce legislative polarization by tempering the incumbent advantage, reducing the influence of lobbyists and special interests, and redirecting legislators' priorities from reelection to policy. Recent research, however, suggests that term limits fail to achieve this objective, at least among incumbents.

Using ideological scalings and election returns introduced in Handan-Nader, Myers, and Hall (2021), I conduct the first comprehensive analysis of the effects of legislative term limits on legislative ideology. I establish three empirical findings.

First, I demonstrate that legislative term limits produce increased polarization at all stages of the political process. The average state legislative politician is significantly more extreme in legislatures with term limits compared to non-term-limited legislatures. This pattern holds for the aggregate pool of candidates, general election candidates, and eventual office holders. Contrary to national theories of asymmetric polarization, I find no evidence that either political party disproportionately contributed to term-limit-driven polarization at the state level.

Second, I illustrate that term limits systematically shift voters' preferences. Voters in term-limited states punish ideological extremity at less than half the rate of non-term-limited states in general elections. Surprisingly, I find no evidence that term limits shape voters' primary election preferences.

Finally, in accord with recent work by Fouirnaies and Hall (2021), I show that legislative term limits do not meaningfully impact incumbents' ideology. Taken together, my analysis suggests that term-limit-included polarization is driven by voters and candidates, but not meaningfully by incumbents.

From a broader perspective, my paper contributes to an expansive literature on electoral incentives. Over the last thirty years, stronger electoral incentives–in the form of legislative term limits–have led to increased polarization. Future research should investigate the causal relationships that mediate the effects outlined in this paper. Research of this kind might explore how term limits affect voter preferences and candidate selection. State legislatures shape key domestic policies. Future research that explores how term limits affect these key policy-making bodies will be well-rewarded.

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Appendix

Contents

A.1 Data Descriptives

state	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
AK	0|88		123|102		37|86		129|90		55|80		62|82		48|88		52|88		47|84		40|87		24|78		133|100		106|90		105|76		125|88		111|77	1197|1384
AL	0|208				236|206				177|222				186|212				168|207				172|203				151|195				172|204			1262|1657
AR	0|146		82|165		96|160		73|155		106|170		106|156		105|180		71|149		81|149		60|140		103|155		73|199		57|155		45|145		46|165		48|164	1152|2553
AZ	0|143		136|134		118|122		144|137		104|128		152|137		201|135		174|134		186|145		185|147		220|141		171|134		190|143		163|131		216|150		162|144	2522|2205
CA	0|185		291|192		205|196		218|193		185|191		182|197		136|186		121|192		180|188		126|191		295|192		270|194		262|193		258|193		140|187		160|189	3029|3059
CO	0|142		25|149		35|146		32|143		51|145		42|144		158|139		154|146		169|149		177|157		171|155		176|158		160|147		175|151		179|155		172|155	1876|2381
CT	0|334		100|365		54|347		14|327		32|323		17|302		22|316		24|299		26|304		37|302		41|327		32|334		39|321		24|325		48|349		20|338	530|5213
DE	0|79		28|101		29|77		26|84		17|72		17|81		35|95		21|77		30|81		11|85		26|86		46|93		24|80		19|76		44|85		28|78	401|1330
FL	0|217		267|250		149|211		110|211		139|192		230|219		169|217		97|183		133|195		122|208		165|212		179|232		97|193		211|233		156|237		180|254	2404|3464
GA	0|307		287|318		176|312		439|339		443|336		407|318		454|333		493|340		383|308		369|291		416|314		398|288		364|283		304|280		435|325		467|349	5835|5041
HI	0|93		115|108		129|109		103|112		105|124		95|113		98|136		43|119		60|116		57|96		104|126		93|123		128|108		139|96		140|85		136|99	1545|1763
IA	0|210		130|229		77|197		57|224		42|201		33|211		101|222		57|205		26|199		56|221		61|209		100|217		211|188		231|210		255|214		253|215	1690|3372
ID	0|207		27|161		20|151		31|162		25|148		27|151		46|179		27|161		19|163		23|163		33|161		284|183		205|160		209|167		76|163		65|158	1117|2638
IL	0|219		329|317		154|234		121|266		104|238		66|204		152|278		59|209		71|239		70|229		99|219		343|253		226|191		254|218		299|239		253|205	2600|3758
IN	0|216		122|217		100|210		77|209		55|195		33|192		85|186		71|192		94|207		115|208		100|215		268|208		215|189		238|205		264|211		252|209	2089|3269
KS	0|224		123|299		108|211		112|279		69|190		113|265		88|180		171|252		61|200		88|274		77|200		399|280		245|202		353|275		232|188		334|273	2573|3792
K	0|186		136|165		104|165		132|190		118|185		60|165		69|164		82|181		58|172		53|156		77|185		84|172		60|178		92|189		122|220		89|187	1336|2860
LA		0|277				0|275				0|239				0|233				0|277				0|223				0|222				16|248		16|1994
MA	0|336		62|312		141|286		76|262		128|258		64|258		122|263		77|310		80|254		75|236		124|294		326|266		348|277		308|247		342|260		281|242	2554|4361
MD	0|305				485|329				367|307				402|314				387|313				365|317				107|308				394|305			2507|2498
ME	0|330		142|334		139|336		93|354		38|327		349|323		374|341		402|362		391|363		379|350		398|361		397|355		369|347		378|344		370|343		320|328	4539|5498
MI	0|276		281|207		311|295		209|220		409|295		145|218		368|295		255|218		308|291		321|210		492|293		360|218		525|296		417|222		569|296		393|219	5363|4069
MN	0|377		45|390		0|256		29|390		0|260		20|384		145|390		0|266		21|395		2|272		28|396		56|394		0|259		36|393		0|267		50|395	432|5484
MO	0|267		214|287		168|292		169|296		352|289		360|274		486|309		390|291		375|296		357|277		412|282		391|269		332|269		336|255		434|313		372|270	5148|4536
MS		0|232				148|246				188|223				338|250				274|238				270|240				260|231				322|213		1800|1873
MT	0|219		63|219		108|228		58|208		81|193		91|222		82|216		105|216		85|229		104|224		132|217		283|226		292|230		281|222		255|210		259|205	2279|3484
NC	0|247		175|279		175|262		156|287		99|265		129|272		231|272		175|252		114|254		112|259		183|284		220|266		129|257		131|262		173|337		132|326	2334|4381
ND	0|257		193|236		189|226		193|227		182|229		95|146		93|141		120|133		88|132		90|134		121|124		140|137		124|120		133|133		133|127		129|123	2023|2625
NE	0|43		90|50		48|44		48|45		46|42		47|41		48|44		55|38		82|47		71|47		51|39		0|48		0|46		0|46		0|43		0|45	586|708
NH	0|638		733|712		472|692		652|721		650|686		545|682		656|747		691|770		702|762		675|771		507|790		57|774		59|759		64|760		55|777		59|826	6577|11867
NJ		0|235		97|232		2|158		85|231		0|158		90|231		96|234		0|154		86|228		5|159		88|238		89|236		1|158		192|235		181|158		1012|3045
NM	0|104		26|161		53|105		88|178		53|101		81|172		47|100		62|156		35|97		77|155		50|103		228|166		125|102		188|154		118|102		239|191	1470|2147
NV	0|100		97|101		69|97		56|95		45|95		43|91		16|95		85|96		61|85		59|100		126|103		87|96		79|87		100|93		84|89		75|86	1082|1509
N	0|371		53|388		22|372		15|377		13|369		6|354		27|358		17|347		21|357		27|356		25|375		41|345		124|337		128|336		102|342		154|350	775|5734
OH	0|229		118|223		91|221		72|219		108|219		310|212		149|214		81|202		134|220		92|208		141|215		261|216		272|210		266|200		325|223		264|207	2684|3438
OK	0|194		154|186		163|184		142|217		102|194		108|198		100|189		242|206		130|187		102|192		99|179		108|169		125|173		200|213		317|216		122|174	2214|3071
OR	0|141		94|134		88|137		99|135		88|129		65|131		67|133		75|131		34|138		42|120		43|146		154|135		151|124		136|125		102|130		178|141	1416|2130
PA	0|399		285|425		197|377		194|390		116|360		92|349		118|366		108|345		252|383		159|346		158|364		420|346		412|332		354|345		464|372		452|376	3781|5875
RI	0|227		155|238		95|230		45|227		53|197		46|202		68|169		64|184		46|168		67|172		111|184		196|161		171|143		153|146		192|157		173|149	1635|2954
SC	0|169		145|235		84|165		120|239		45|159		123|234		105|159		94|221		94|155		177|223		91|159		80|207		61|154		145|209		102|171		149|251	1615|3110
SD	0|167		78|191		32|178		44|193		43|170		72|178		78|170		70|173		69|190		85|203		36|166		78|169		149|155		67|171		61|194		81|160	1043|2828
TN	0|163		186|179		148|175		144|175		86|159		82|160		163|180		95|176		134|169		97|160		89|183		169|173		219|162		246|171		289|202		162|162	2309|2749
TX	0|233		375|253		333|248		313|229		283|225		265|212		381|260		294|229		346|243		302|242		307|231		379|247		308|220		328|222		407|272		384|273	5005|3839
UT	0|147		16|162		42|160		25|142		32|158		34|162		25|146		20|150		26|159		10|174		16|162		34|161		14|158		20|147		40|160		11|149	365|2497
VA		0|215		12|155		12|226		17|138		21|195		18|150		34|189		46|136		36|188		35|153		41|191		23|143		49|189		10|160		77|227		431|2655
VT	0|308		283|318		245|306		231|313		227|300		261|313		177|287		165|299		154|276		158|286		160|287		241|234		249|245		281|262		258|253		293|280	3383|4567
WA	0|225		0|236		0|223		0|226		0|207		0|221		0|202		0|230		0|210		0|218		0|213		0|215		229|213		257|195		208|220		225|220	919|3474
WI	0|188		140|186		97|184		98|194		66|184		69|183		90|175		115|179		80|189		122|191		137|199		283|197		238|177		219|173		224|190		264|205	2242|2994
WV	0|200		256|196		269|189		272|200		218|180		212|185		230|195		135|227		42|204		265|186		269|193		276|194		281|215		0|227		301|222		293|213	3319|3226
W	0|132		177|155		38|114		36|114		33|109		28|112		49|108		59|108		50|101		37|105		77|101		138|95		143|100		177|130		137|103		153|96	1332|1783
zTotal	0|10196	0|959	6957|10265	109|387	6129|10051	162|905	5495|9994	102|369	5790|9806	209|815	5384|9426	108|381	7050|10084	468|906	5768|9442	46|290	6133|9973	396|931	5653|9372	40|312	6932|10138	399|892	8452|9647	112|379	8375|9491	310|800	8169|9373	202|395	9405|10161	596|846	8397|9756	107348|166742

Note: Table displays counts of all unique legislators in analysis dataset by state-year-election. Cell tuples denote number of observed primary candidates (first) and general candidates (second).

Table A.1: Data Coverage Matrix

A.2 Open Seat Electoral Selection

Table A.2: Term Limits and Electoral Selection - Only Open Seat Races

	Dem Vote Share		Primary Votes		Dem Win		Primary Win	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Midpoint	0.028	0.087**			0.659***	0.701**		
	(0.03)	(0.04)			(0.22)	(0.29)		
Distance	0.000	0.004			0.077	0.093		
	(0.03)	(0.03)			(0.17)	(0.17)		
Dem Contributions	0.448***	0.439***			1.358***	1.336***		
	(0.03)	(0.03)			(0.18)	(0.18)		
Rep Contributions	-0.401***	-0.395***			-1.533***	-1.518***		
	(0.03)	(0.03)			(0.22)	(0.22)		
Term Limits		0.035		-0.016		-0.039		-0.112
		(0.03)		(0.02)		(0.20)		(0.07)
Term Limits · Midpoint		-0.098**				-0.069		
		(0.05)				(0.30)		
Extremism			0.047***	0.049***			0.133***	0.107***
			(0.01)	(0.01)			(0.03)	(0.03)
Contributions			0.089***	0.089***			0.240***	0.240***
			(0.00)	(0.00)			(0.00)	(0.00)
Term Limits · Extremism				-0.005				0.067
				(0.02)				(0.05)
N	2,102	2,102	18,893	18,893	2,102	2,102	19,337	19,337
District FEs	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	N	N
Year FEs	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	N	N
District-by-Party FEs	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y
Party-by-Year FEs	N	N	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y

* p<.1, ** p<.05, *** p<.01

A.3 Testing Asymmetric Polarization

Table A.3: Asymmetric Polarization Within Candidate Pool

	Democrats		
	(1) NPDIME	(2) NPDIME	(3) NPDIME
Term Limited	0.121*	0.117	0.124*
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Dem	0.094	0.092	0.096
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Term Limited · Dem	-0.135	-0.136	-0.134
	(0.14)	(0.14)	(0.14)
Log(Leg Prof)	0.004	0.023	-0.019
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Divided Government	-0.001	-0.004	0.002
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.01)
Party Competetiveness	-0.000	-0.000	-0.000
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
N	2,264	1,162	1,100
Standard Deviation	.3	.3	.3
Specification	Pooled	House	Senate
Year FEs	Y	Y	Y
State FEs	Y	Y	Y

* p<.1, ** p<.05, *** p<.01