

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 (Norrande, 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

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

²See, 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 (Titunik 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 Fourniaies 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>.

⁴Although 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		Term Limit	
			House		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

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

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)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
	NPDIME	NPDIME	NPDIME	NPDIME	NPDIME	NPDIME	NP	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

⁵XXX Note about alternative definition.

⁶For 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-seekers and a shift to

⁷That 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) NPDIME	(2) NPDIME	(3) NPDIME	(4) NPDIME	(5) NPDIME	(6) NPDIME
Term Limited	-0.067** (0.03)	-0.060** (0.03)	-0.070** (0.03)	0.042 (0.03)	0.037 (0.03)	0.045 (0.03)
Log(Leg Prof)	-0.003 (0.03)	-0.027 (0.04)	0.026 (0.03)	0.017 (0.02)	0.024 (0.02)	0.009 (0.03)
Divided Government	-0.003 (0.01)	-0.000 (0.01)	-0.006 (0.01)	-0.007 (0.01)	-0.010 (0.01)	-0.005 (0.01)
Party Competetiveness	-0.000 (0.00)	-0.000 (0.00)	-0.000 (0.00)	-0.000 (0.00)	-0.000 (0.00)	-0.000 (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

$$Y_{dct} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \textit{Midpoint}_{dct} + \beta_2 \textit{Distance}_{dct} + \Omega X_{dct} + \alpha_d + \delta_t + \epsilon_{dct} \quad (2)$$

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 legislatures (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

$$Y_{jpd} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \textit{Extremism}_{jpd} + \alpha_{pd} + \delta_{pt} + \eta_{pdt} + \epsilon_{jpd} \quad (3)$$

where Y_{jpd} 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

⁸The 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*** (0.01)	0.058*** (0.01)			0.300*** (0.06)	0.327*** (0.07)		
Distance	0.017* (0.01)	0.017* (0.01)			0.135*** (0.05)	0.135*** (0.05)		
Dem Contributions	0.441*** (0.01)	0.440*** (0.01)			1.074*** (0.05)	1.070*** (0.05)		
Rep Contributions	-0.408*** (0.01)	-0.407*** (0.01)			-1.103*** (0.06)	-1.102*** (0.05)		
Term Limits		0.008 (0.01)		0.013 (0.02)		0.007 (0.06)		-0.033 (0.04)
Term Limits · Midpoint		-0.033* (0.02)				-0.082 (0.10)		
Extremism			0.020*** (0.01)	0.022*** (0.01)			0.052*** (0.01)	0.043*** (0.02)
Contributions			0.083*** (0.00)	0.083*** (0.00)			0.213*** (0.00)	0.213*** (0.00)
Term Limits · Extremism				-0.008 (0.01)				0.035 (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 Fourniaies 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, Fourniaies 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 Fourniaies 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

$$Y_{jct} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \textit{Term Limited}_{jct} + \alpha_j + \Omega + \epsilon_{jct} \quad (4)$$

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,

⁹For 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.

¹⁰Since 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 Fourniaies 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)	(2)
	NPDIME	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 Fourinaies 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 Fournaies 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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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	37/80		129/90	15/80		177/222		62/82	48/88	180/212	52/88		47/84	40/87		40/87	172/203	24/78	133/100	133/100	100/90	131/195	451/45	103/76	125/88	111/77	1197/1384		
AL	0/208		82/165	230/206		73/155	100/170		177/222		106/156	29/130	186/212	71/149		108/207	69/140		69/140	172/203	24/78	133/100	133/100	100/90	131/195	451/45	103/76	125/88	111/77	1197/1384		
AR	0/146		82/165	230/206		73/155	100/170		177/222		106/156	29/130	186/212	71/149		108/207	69/140		69/140	172/203	24/78	133/100	133/100	100/90	131/195	451/45	103/76	125/88	111/77	1197/1384		
AZ	0/146		82/165	230/206		73/155	100/170		177/222		106/156	29/130	186/212	71/149		108/207	69/140		69/140	172/203	24/78	133/100	133/100	100/90	131/195	451/45	103/76	125/88	111/77	1197/1384		
CA	0/146		82/165	230/206		73/155	100/170		177/222		106/156	29/130	186/212	71/149		108/207	69/140		69/140	172/203	24/78	133/100	133/100	100/90	131/195	451/45	103/76	125/88	111/77	1197/1384		
CO	0/146		82/165	230/206		73/155	100/170		177/222		106/156	29/130	186/212	71/149		108/207	69/140		69/140	172/203	24/78	133/100	133/100	100/90	131/195	451/45	103/76	125/88	111/77	1197/1384		
CT	0/334		100/865	54/347		32/143	132/143		32/143		42/144	29/144	158/139	151/146		169/140	136/191		136/191	205/192	205/192	270/104	270/104	269/103	269/103	258/103	170/151	170/151	170/151	170/151	170/151	
DE	0/79		28/101	29/77		17/72	33/233		33/233		17/72	33/233	22/316	24/290		26/304	37/302		37/302	41/327	41/327	32/334	32/334	30/321	30/321	24/325	48/349	20/338	530/523	20/338	530/523	
FL	0/217		267/250	149/211		110/211	139/192		110/211		220/219	169/217	97/183	21/77		118/5	118/5		118/5	26/86	26/86	46/93	46/93	97/193	97/193	19/76	19/76	44/85	28/78	40/1130	44/85	28/78
GA	0/367		287/318	170/312		439/339	407/318		439/339		407/318	443/336	443/336	493/340		369/291	369/291		369/291	416/314	416/314	398/288	398/288	364/283	364/283	304/280	435/325	467/349	585/5041	467/349	585/5041	
HI	0/93		115/108	129/109		100/112	105/124		105/124		98/136	98/136	98/136	43/119		60/116	60/116		60/116	104/126	104/126	139/123	139/123	128/108	128/108	139/96	140/95	136/99	1545/1763	136/99	1545/1763	
IA	0/210		130/229	77/197		57/224	42/201		57/224		33/211	33/211	100/222	57/205		26/199	26/199		26/199	56/221	56/221	100/217	100/217	211/188	211/188	255/214	253/215	1690/3372	253/215	1690/3372		
ID	0/207		27/161	20/151		31/162	23/148		23/148		27/151	46/179	27/161	19/163		33/163	33/163		33/163	33/163	33/163	33/163	33/163	226/191	226/191	254/218	299/229	651/158	1117/2638	226/191	226/191	
IL	0/219		329/317	154/234		121/266	66/204		121/266		66/204	104/258	104/258	59/209		71/239	71/239		71/239	99/219	99/219	343/253	343/253	226/191	226/191	254/218	299/229	651/158	1117/2638	226/191	226/191	
IN	0/216		122/217	100/210		77/229	53/195		77/229		33/192	85/186	85/186	71/192		94/207	94/207		94/207	115/208	115/208	343/253	343/253	226/191	226/191	254/218	299/229	651/158	1117/2638	226/191	226/191	
KS	0/224		123/259	108/211		113/279	69/190		113/279		33/192	85/186	85/186	71/192		94/207	94/207		94/207	115/208	115/208	343/253	343/253	226/191	226/191	254/218	299/229	651/158	1117/2638	226/191	226/191	
KY	0/186		136/165	103/165		132/190	118/185		132/190		60/165	69/164	69/164	58/172		58/172	58/172		58/172	58/172	58/172	58/172	58/172	58/172	58/172	58/172	58/172	58/172	58/172	58/172	58/172	58/172
LA	0/336	0/277	63/312			76/262	128/258		64/258		64/258	122/263	122/263	77/310		80/254	75/256		75/256	124/294	124/294	326/266	326/266	348/277	348/277	0/222	38/247	16/248	281/242	254/1361	254/1361	
MA	0/336		63/312			76/262	128/258		64/258		64/258	122/263	122/263	77/310		80/254	75/256		75/256	124/294	124/294	326/266	326/266	348/277	348/277	0/222	38/247	16/248	281/242	254/1361	254/1361	
MD	0/336		63/312			76/262	128/258		64/258		64/258	122/263	122/263	77/310		80/254	75/256		75/256	124/294	124/294	326/266	326/266	348/277	348/277	0/222	38/247	16/248	281/242	254/1361	254/1361	
ME	0/336		63/312			76/262	128/258		64/258		64/258	122/263	122/263	77/310		80/254	75/256		75/256	124/294	124/294	326/266	326/266	348/277	348/277	0/222	38/247	16/248	281/242	254/1361	254/1361	
MI	0/276		281/207	331/205		93/354	38/327		349/323		349/323	374/341	374/341	402/362		398/361	379/350		379/350	321/210	321/210	402/362	402/362	360/218	360/218	525/296	417/222	569/296	393/219	5393/4069	393/219	5393/4069
MN	0/377		45/390	0/256		29/390	0/260		20/384		20/384	145/380	145/380	0/266		21/395	2/272		2/272	28/396	28/396	36/393	36/393	0/267	0/267	36/393	0/267	432/584	50/395	432/584	50/395	432/584
MO	0/267		214/287	168/292		169/296	352/289		352/289		352/289	486/390	486/390	390/291		375/296	357/277		357/277	412/282	412/282	391/269	391/269	332/269	332/269	338/255	434/313	372/270	5148/4536	372/270	5148/4536	
MS	0/232					148/246	188/223		188/223		91/222	82/216	82/216	105/216		85/229	104/224		104/224	132/217	132/217	270/240	270/240	292/230	292/230	281/222	322/213	299/205	2279/3484	299/205	2279/3484	
MT	0/219		63/219	108/228		58/208	175/262		175/262		129/272	231/272	231/272	175/252		114/254	114/254		114/254	121/259	121/259	220/266	220/266	120/257	120/257	131/262	173/337	132/236	2334/4381	132/236	2334/4381	
NC	0/247		175/279	175/262		156/287	193/227		193/227		95/146	93/141	93/141	120/133		88/132	90/134		90/134	121/124	121/124	140/137	140/137	124/120	124/120	133/133	133/127	129/123	2023/2625	129/123	2023/2625	
ND	0/257		193/296	180/226		193/227	48/45		48/45		47/41	48/44	48/44	55/38		82/47	71/47		71/47	50/790	50/790	57/774	57/774	0/46	0/46	0/46	0/46	0/46	0/46	0/46	0/46	0/46
NE	0/43		90/60	48/44		48/45	48/45		48/45		47/41	48/44	48/44	55/38		82/47	71/47		71/47	50/790	50/790	57/774	57/774	0/46	0/46	0/46	0/46	0/46	0/46	0/46	0/46	0/46
NH	0/638		733/712	472/692		632/721	545/686		545/686		90/231	63/234	63/234	69/170		702/762	86/228		86/228	675/771	675/771	89/226	89/226	125/102	125/102	188/154	192/235	59/826	657/11867	125/102	657/11867	
NJ	0/104		261/61	53/105		88/178	53/101		88/178		53/101	63/156	63/156	62/156		62/156	62/156		62/156	50/103	50/103	281/266	281/266	125/102	125/102	188/154	192/235	59/826	657/11867	125/102	657/11867	
NM	0/100		97/101	69/97		56/95	45/95		45/95		43/91	16/95	16/95	85/96		61/85	59/100		59/100	126/103	126/103	87/96	87/96	70/87	70/87	100/93	100/93	75/86	1082/1509	75/86	1082/1509	
NV	0/100		97/101	69/97		56/95	45/95		45/95		43/91	16/95	16/95	85/96		61/85	59/100		59/100	126/103	126/103	87/96	87/96	70/87	70/87	100/93	100/93	75/86	1082/1509	75/86	1082/1509	
NY	0/371		53/88	223/72		15/377	13/369		13/369		6/354	27/358	27/358	17/347		21/357	27/356		27/356	25/575	25/575	261/216	261/216	272/210	272/210	266/200	325/223	264/207	2684/3438	264/207	2684/3438	
OH	0/229		118/223	91/221		72/219	108/219		108/219		310/212	108/198	108/198	242/206		130/187	102/192		102/192	99/179	99/179	108/169	108/169	125/173	125/173	200/213	317/216	122/174	2214/3071	122/174	2214/3071	
OK	0/194		94/184	163/184		88/137	99/135		88/137		65/131	75/131	75/131	34/138		42/120	42/120		42/120	154/135	154/135	154/135	154/135	151/124	151/124	136/125	102/130	178/141	1416/2130	178/141	1416/2130	
OR	0/141		94/134	88/137		99/135	88/137		88/137		65/131	75/131	75/131	34/138		42/120	42/120		42/120	154/135	154/135	154/135	154/135	151/124	151/124	136/125	102/130	178/141	1416/2130	178/141	1416/2130	
PA	0/399		285/425	95/230		194/390	116/360		116/360		92/349	118/366	118/366	108/345		222/383	159/346		159/346	420/346	420/346	196/161	196/161	171/143	171/143	145/209						

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 (0.03)	0.087** (0.04)			0.659*** (0.22)	0.701** (0.29)		
Distance	0.000 (0.03)	0.004 (0.03)			0.077 (0.17)	0.093 (0.17)		
Dem Contributions	0.448*** (0.03)	0.439*** (0.03)			1.358*** (0.18)	1.336*** (0.18)		
Rep Contributions	-0.401*** (0.03)	-0.395*** (0.03)			-1.533*** (0.22)	-1.518*** (0.22)		
Term Limits		0.035 (0.03)		-0.016 (0.02)		-0.039 (0.20)		-0.112 (0.07)
Term Limits · Midpoint		-0.098** (0.05)				-0.069 (0.30)		
Extremism			0.047*** (0.01)	0.049*** (0.01)			0.133*** (0.03)	0.107*** (0.03)
Contributions			0.089*** (0.00)	0.089*** (0.00)			0.240*** (0.00)	0.240*** (0.00)
Term Limits · Extremism				-0.005 (0.02)				0.067 (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
Specifcation	Pooled	House	Senate
Year FEs	Y	Y	Y
State FEs	Y	Y	Y

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