

# Do Voters Prefer Mavericks or Purists? Candidate Platforms and the Electoral Consequences of Ideological Consistency\*

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## Abstract

Candidates often face a choice between endorsing policy positions that appeal to their core constituencies, in which they appear ideologically pure, and those intended to generate support from more diverse groups of voters, in which they endorse a more ideologically varied set of policies. While this latter strategy may make overtures to a wider set of citizens, candidates employing such tactics may risk appearing inconsistent and unreliable. In this paper we develop a new measure of candidates' ideological consistency to test how the distribution of candidates' policy positions affects voters' support for candidates. Using data from the 2006 congressional elections, we find that ideological consistency substantially increases voter support at both the individual and aggregate levels. We further show that voters are more likely to perceive the more consistent candidate as closer to their own ideological position. Our results have important implications for candidate strategies in elections.

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In recent years, Republicans and Democrats in the U.S. have each debated whether to support potential candidates whose policy views sometimes violate the party lines.<sup>1</sup> For instance, during the campaign for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination, many of the candidates emphasized the necessity of adhering to core Republican doctrine and advocating consistently conservative policies.<sup>2</sup> These debates have important implications for voters' ability to discern the underlying ideologies of the candidates and predict the subsequent behavior of candidates elected to office. Whether election-seeking candidates should exhibit ideological purity or endorse a more varied set of policy positions, however, inevitably depends on how voters respond to these strategies.

Models of vote choice and electoral competition posit that voters make decisions on the basis of ideological congruence with the candidates. Citizens vote for the candidate whose ideological location is closest to their own (Adams, Merrill and Grofman 2005; Jessee 2009, 2012; Buttice and Stone 2012), and candidates choose ideological positions likely to appeal to the pivotal voter (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Stone and Simas 2010). However, over the course of most campaigns, candidates highlight their positions on a variety of issues. Citizens use the information about a candidate's positions on many issues to form some overall evaluation of the candidate's ideology, which they then relate to their own ideological preferences when determining whether to support the candidate.

Candidates face an important strategic decision, however, in choosing issue positions to maximize their electoral fortunes. To appeal to as many voters as possible, Downs (1957, 110) argues

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<sup>1</sup>See, e.g., "Haley Barbour: Ideological purity is the 'enemy of victory'", *The Washington Times*, Seth McLaughlin, May 30, 2014; available at <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/may/30/haley-barbour-ideological-purity-enemy-victory/>; Jason L. Riley, "Ideological Purity or Bust?", *Wall Street Journal*, March 11, 2014; available at <http://online.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304704504579433622026410960>; Jim L. Rutenberg and Adam Nagourney, "Conservatives Make a List to Measure Candidates' Commitment", *The New York Times*, November 23, 2009; available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/24/us/politics/24repubs.html>.

<sup>2</sup>Charles Lane, "The destructive path of ideological purity," *Washington Post*, March 26, 2012; available at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-destructive-path-of-ideological-purity/2012/03/26/gIQAGzsvcs\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-destructive-path-of-ideological-purity/2012/03/26/gIQAGzsvcs_story.html).

that candidates should not choose issue positions that “adhere too rigidly to any one philosophic outlook.” By selecting a relatively diverse mix of positions—some more moderate than others—across a range of issues, candidates may be able to win the support of voters whose personal preferences fall within that ideological range. At the same time, however, candidates also wish to maintain support from their core constituencies, and thus should not “put forth an unorganized jumble of policies” (Downs 1957, 110). Thus, candidates must identify a set of issue positions that simultaneously attracts votes from their core supporters as well as more ideologically moderate voters. And, in considering the bundles of policy positions that candidates present, voters balance each candidate’s “net position” against the spread of the candidate’s positions across the issues.

Building upon other research that studies issue strategies and uncertainty in elections (Alvarez 1998; Bartels 1986; Callander and Wilson 2008; Franklin 1991; Shepsle 1972; Tomz and Van Houweling 2009, 2010), we study how the role of perceptual uncertainty in congressional elections affects voting behavior. Specifically, we argue that the collection of policy positions a candidate emphasizes on the campaign trail characterizes the candidate’s degree of *ideological consistency*, which affects voters’ perceptions about the ideological congruence between themselves and the candidate. Though existing scholarship examines candidate strategies around ambiguity (Callander and Wilson 2008; Shepsle 1972; Tomz and Van Houweling), obfuscation (Franklin 1991), and “flip-flopping” (Tomz and Van Houweling 2010), it remains largely unclear whether and how ideological consistency affects a candidate’s electoral success.

In this paper, we examine how U.S. House candidates’ levels of ideological consistency affected their electoral fortunes in the 2006 congressional elections. We first introduce a measure of candidate consistency using variation in experts’ ideological placement of candidates for the U.S. House. Analyzing individual-level vote choice using the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study and aggregate district-level outcomes, we demonstrate that voters strongly preferred candidates with high levels of ideological consistency. We further show that voters perceived

candidates with high levels of consistency as more ideologically congruent, which suggests that risk-averse voters penalized candidates whose issue positions are widely dispersed. Our results contrast with recent research by Somer-Topcu (forthcoming), which shows that parties in multi-party systems receive electoral benefits from generating perceptual disagreement about their underlying policies, and have important implications for characterizing candidates' issue strategies and evaluating the role of ideology in congressional elections.

## Ideology and Elections

Canonical models of electoral competition posit that candidates (or parties) compete over ideology, and that voters choose the candidate whose ideology most closely matches their own (Downs 1957; Enelow and Hinich 1984).<sup>3</sup> Given these incentives, office-seeking candidates are expected to reap electoral benefits by presenting relatively moderate ideologies. A vast literature finds support for the role of ideology in voter decision-making (e.g., Jessee 2009, 2010, 2012; Joesten and Stone 2014; Tomz and Van Houweling 2008) and provides evidence that ideological moderation confers electoral rewards (e.g., Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005; Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Burden 2004; Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002).<sup>4</sup>

However, characterizing a candidate or party as “left-of-center” or “moderate” or “conservative” is of little use if the candidate’s ideological position is not related to any specific policy positions. As Downs (1957, 102) writes, “In order to be rational short cuts, ideologies must be integrated with policies closely enough to form accurate indicators of what each [candidate] is likely to do in the future.” Thus, while candidates may make general ideological overtures on the campaign trail, candidates are more often quizzed about their positions on the major policy issues of the day. Though candidates may have incentives to obscure their policy positions

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<sup>3</sup>For the sake of exposition we focus on electoral competition between opposing *candidates*, though our discussion applies equivalently to competition between *parties*.

<sup>4</sup>However, Stone and Simas (2010) and Montagnes and Rogowski (forthcoming) provide evidence that moderation may not increase a candidate’s vote share.

(Franklin 1991; see also Shepsle 1972; Tomz and Van Houweling 2009), linking these policy statements to subsequent behavior in office enables voters to hold candidates accountable and thus encourages responsibility (APSA Committee on Political Parties 1950; Downs 1957).

In developing what we call their portfolio of issue positions, however, candidates face a strategic decision. While a candidate's position on any one issue will be shaped by the desire to choose the best position given the public's preferences and the position of her competitor, candidates also desire to choose a portfolio that appeals to as many voters as possible. This motivation may lead candidates to consider choosing policy positions that span some range of the ideological space. For instance, based on the party's general ideology and public sentiment, a right-of-center candidate may choose to adopt conservative positions on fiscal policy and foreign affairs, but a more moderate position on social policy.

Importantly, the mix of issue positions that comprise a candidate's portfolio telegraphs two qualities: an underlying ideology position, and some degree of clarity associated with it. These two qualities frequently come into tension when candidates develop their electoral strategies. As Downs (1957, 133) writes:

“The rational party strategy is to adopt a spread of policies that covers a whole range of the left-right scale. The wider this spread is, the more viewpoints the party's ideology and platform will appeal to. But a wider spread also weakens the strength of the appeal to any one viewpoint, because each citizen sees the party upholding policies he does not approve of.”

Thus, candidates face a clear tradeoff between their overall ideology—the mean—and the distribution of issue positions around it, or variance. As the mix of policy positions is more widely dispersed across the ideological space, the candidate sends increasingly inconsistent signals about her underlying ideology, and thus generates perceptual uncertainty. This idea is closely related to the notion of ideological constraint (Converse 1964), as candidates whose issue positions are

distributed across a wide range of the ideological space have lower degrees of ideological consistency because the connections between issue positions are weaker than they are for candidates whose issue positions are distributed over a narrow range of the space. Thus, as consistency decreases, a candidate's position on any one issue is less predictive of her position on some other issue.

The strategic calculation by candidates, then, depends upon how voters respond to the perceptual uncertainty generated by the distribution of a candidate's policy positions. While an extensive literature investigates how elections are contested over the first moment of candidates' issue positions using a summary measure of candidate ideology, Downs' account suggests that the *second* moment—the variance of candidates' issue positions—may also play an important role in voter decision-making. Understanding how voters respond to the mix of candidate issue positions, then, has important implications for candidate and party strategies and for understanding the role of ideology in elections.

Our focus on the distribution of candidate issue positions, however, is conceptually distinct from other work that examines the consequences of uncertainty or ambiguity about candidate positions. For instance, research on voter uncertainty focuses on the voters' knowledge about the candidates and the issue positions they espouse. Individual-level differences in information levels among voters, then, are responsible for the relationships identified in the literature between uncertainty and candidate evaluations. Likewise, ambiguity about a candidate's position stems (usually) from intentionally imprecise policy statements on behalf of the candidate. At the voter level, the effects of both uncertainty and ambiguity on candidate support would be mitigated if only voters were provided more information about the candidate, or if the candidates were forced to provide more specific statements about their policy positions. By contrast, any potential effects of ideological consistency occur not as a result of the *quantity* of information voters have about candidates, but rather because of how voters process and make sense of the information they do have about the candidate. Put somewhat differently, ideological consistency may affect

candidate support *in spite of* complete information about the candidates' positions.

## Ideological Consistency and Voter Decision-Making

Though previous research has studied the correlates of “maverick” behavior in legislatures (Tavits 2009), existing scholarship offers relatively little guidance about how (or whether) candidates' ideological consistency affects voter decision-making. In one of the few exceptions, Somer-Topcu (forthcoming) studies the ways in which parties in nine Western European democracies adopt varied sets of policy positions, which she terms a “broad-appeal strategy,” and finds that parties perform better when they adopt this strategy. It is unclear, however, whether these findings apply to systems with weaker party systems, in which citizens cast votes for candidates who advocate more or less ideologically consistent sets of policy positions, rather than parties, who adopt platforms that contain more or less diverse issue positions.

The issue positions on which candidates in two-party systems seek office reveal two parameters: an underlying candidate ideology (the mean) and its clarity (characterized by the variance). High values of the latter attribute may generate perceptual uncertainty about the true value of the mean. Suppose, for instance, that the candidates adopt uniform distributions of issue positions around their underlying ideological positions, the means of which are equidistant from the median voter's ideal point ( $x_i$ ), where  $A_\mu < x_i < B_\mu$ .<sup>5</sup> Suppose also that the spread (variance) of candidate A's distribution is greater than the spread of candidate B's distribution; that is,  $A_{\sigma^2} > B_{\sigma^2}$ . The distribution of issue positions enables voters to make assessments about the candidates' likely performance in office, should they be elected. As the variance increases, the mean is less informative about the policies the candidate can be expected to support if elected, and thus perceptual uncertainty increases.

A voter's preferences over these two candidates may depend on two key factors. First, a

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<sup>5</sup>More precisely,  $|x_i - A_\mu| = |x_i - B_\mu|$ .

voter's attitudes toward risk may influence which candidate they prefer (Kam and Simas 2012; Morgenstern and Zechmeister 2001). A risk-neutral voter may be indifferent between the two candidates, such that the distribution of issue positions has no effect on her vote choice. On the other hand, a risk-averse voter may prefer candidate *B* because the lower level of clarity associated with candidate *A*'s ideological position leads the voter to believe that the candidate may actually be less ideologically proximate than the position alone would indicate. A risk-acceptant voter, however, may prefer candidate *A* because the candidate's lower level of clarity raises the possibility that candidate *A* could in fact behave more in line with the voter's preferences than candidate *B*. A voter's issue priorities could be a second factor that influences her preferences over these two candidates. For instance, if all voters care about exactly one issue and discount candidates' positions on all other positions, and different voters care about different issues, then whether a voter supports *A* over *B* depends on which candidate's position on voter's issue priority is more proximate to the voter's position. This scenario raises the possibility that candidates (or, alternatively, parties) can substantially affect their levels of support by strategically selecting key policy positions.

Existing research in related domains provides competing intuitions with which to consider the effect of ideological consistency on vote choice. First, candidates with relatively low levels of consistency may generate *ambiguity* among voters as to the candidates' true ideological position. Callander and Wilson (2008) show that even risk averse voters can develop a taste for candidate ambiguity, which leads them to support ambiguous candidates. Similarly, in a survey experiment, Tomz and Van Houweling (2009) show that voters often reward ambiguous candidates, especially in partisan settings. Thus, in adopting relatively low levels of consistency, candidates may be able to secure support from a larger number of voters by appearing relatively ambiguous.

At the same time, however, candidates with low levels of consistency may also generate *uncertainty* about the candidates' true ideologies. Studying U.S. presidential elections, Bartels (1986) and Alvarez (1998) find that uncertainty about a candidate's policy positions reduced voter



support for the candidate. Thus, these findings suggest that voters may penalize candidates for high levels of inconsistency. Studies outside the U.S. provide similar findings. For instance, as Mexico transitioned from one-party rule, Morgenstern and Zechmeister (2001) show that risk-acceptant voters in a Mexican presidential election were more willing to support the lesser-known opposition candidate, while risk-averse voters were more supportive of the incumbent party. Ezrow, Homola, and Tavits (2014) further show that in new postcommunist democracies, ideologically extreme parties received greater levels of support from voters because their extreme positions decreased voter uncertainty about the parties' policy intentions.

Candidate consistency could also be viewed through the lens of valence politics (Groseclose 2001; Schofield 2003). As Page (1976) and Tomz and Van Houweling (2009) suggest, candidates may choose to be more or less ambiguous in order to cultivate a certain image, and thus the degree of consistency could influence voters' character assessments. For instance, a candidate with a low degree of consistency could be viewed as "flexible" and willing to compromise, while a candidate with a high level of consistency could be viewed as "rigid" and inflexible (Blomberg and Harrington 2000; Canes-Wrone and Shotts 2007). On the other hand, high levels of consistency could benefit candidates by promoting images of reliability, integrity, and trustworthiness (Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989; McCurley and Mondak 1995), while candidates with low levels of consistency could be characterized as indecisive, inconsistent, or "spineless" (Campbell 1983). Given that models of candidate competition often predict trade-offs between ideological positioning and investing in valence, this framework offers a particularly appealing parallel means for considering the relationship between the mean and variance of candidates' issue positions.

Finally, research in political behavior suggests that voters may penalize candidates for low levels of ideological consistency because it may be difficult for voters to make sense of issue positions that do not fit well together. For instance, as Huckfeldt and Sprague (2000, 78) report, "[w]hen citizens are bombarded with politically inconsistent and discordant information, they are more likely to demonstrate the cognitive consequences of inconsistent attitudes." These con-

sequences include inhibiting the ability to evaluate the object in question (Mervis et al. 1981; Rips et al. 1973) and increasing the difficulty in retrieving it (Huckfeldt et al. 1998). Further, attitudes resulting from inconsistent information are less stable over time (Zaller and Feldman 1992) and more vulnerable to persuasion (Bassili 1996). Thus, platforms with low levels of consistency may weaken voter support by introducing additional cognitive demands associated with processing a more varied set of issue positions.

Thus, to summarize, while Downs and many scholars since have emphasized the strategic considerations that accompany candidates' choices regarding ideology, existing research has not directly considered how the distribution of candidates' policy positions affects their electoral fortunes. Research in related areas, meanwhile, provides conflicting hypotheses about the nature of this relationship. In the remainder of our paper, we focus on measuring ideological consistency in candidate platforms, examining its relationship with voter support, and identifying plausible mechanisms that explain how voters use candidate consistency in political decision-making.

## Data and Methods

The discussion above leads us to ask: do voters *penalize* or *reward* candidates for choosing issue positions that exhibit high levels of ideological consistency? We study this question using data from the 2006 congressional elections. To characterize the ideological positions and levels of consistency of candidates' issue positions, we use data from a survey of expert informants in 155 U.S. House races (Buttice and Stone 2012; Stone and Simas 2010). One hundred of these contests were sampled randomly from all 435 districts, and this sample was supplemented with an additional 55 contests that were expected to be competitive. These expert informants provided assessments of each candidate's ideological placement along an ideological scale that ranged from 1 (extremely liberal) to 7 (extremely conservative). Multiple expert informants provided

information in 138 of these contests, and our analyses focus on this subsample.<sup>6</sup> We then used these expert assessments to study individual-level vote choice among respondents in the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study.

The expert informants are used to construct our two key independent variables. First, we developed a measure of the ideological proximity between each respondent and the two candidates. We used the mean of the district experts' placements as an indicator for each candidate's ideological position. Because the CCES asked respondents to place themselves on a 101-point ideological scale that ranged from liberal to conservative (but not a seven-point scale), we projected the expert assessments into a 101-point space. In doing so, we assume that experts and voters used the ideological scale equivalently, and that the experts would have used the 101-point scale in the same way they used the seven-point scale.<sup>7</sup> Using these measures of candidate and voter ideology, we constructed the following independent variable:

$$\text{Republican proximity advantage} = |\text{Democrat Ideological Placement} - \text{Voter Placement}| - |\text{Republican Ideological Placement} - \text{Voter Placement}|.$$

Thus, positive values of *Republican proximity advantage* indicate that the Republican candidate is more proximate to the voter than the Democratic candidate, while negative values indicate the voter is more proximate to the Democratic candidate. A value of zero would indicate that the voter is equidistant from both candidates. In principle, values of this variable range from -101 to +101. Under the Downsian framework, we would expect that the probability a voter supports the Republican candidate increases as the values of this variable increase.

To characterize the candidates' levels of consistency, we used the standard deviation of each

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<sup>6</sup>We follow the procedures outlined in Buttice and Stone (2012) and Stone and Simas (2010) to correct the experts' judgments for partisan bias.

<sup>7</sup>We have also estimated models using respondents' ideological self-placements rather than *Republican proximity advantage*. See Table A2. The results from these models are strongly consistent with those reported in the text.

district’s expert placements of the candidates. This measure stems from the intuition that candidates who adopt issue positions that span a wide range of the ideological space are likely to generate disagreement among the experts about the candidates’ true underlying ideologies. When candidates adopt issue positions that exhibit high levels of consistency, however, experts are more likely to commonly perceive the candidates’ overarching ideologies. Thus, our second key independent variable characterizes the difference in the level of consistency between the two candidates:

$$\text{Republican's consistency advantage} = \text{Democratic Candidate's Inconsistency} - \text{Republican Candidate's Inconsistency}.$$

Positive values of the *consistency advantage* indicate that the Republican candidate exhibited higher consistency than the Democratic candidate (i.e. lower levels of inconsistency and lower standard deviations of placement among the experts), while negative values indicate that the Republican candidate exhibited less consistency than the Democrat (i.e., higher levels of inconsistency and higher standard deviations of placement among the experts).<sup>8</sup> We note that, following Somer-Topcu (forthcoming), we also used an alternative characterization of candidate consistency following the method advocated by van Eijk (2001) for aggregating results from ordinal rating scales. Our main results are substantively identical when using this alternative measure; the results can be found in tables A.3–A.7 in the supplementary appendix.

Table 1 below provides summary statistics for candidate positioning and consistency. Unsurprisingly, as the first two rows show, the mean placement of Republicans is to the “right” of the ideological center, while the corresponding figure for Democrats is to the “left” of center. Place-

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<sup>8</sup>We considered the possibility that variation in our measure of consistency could be due simply to variation in the number of experts across districts. However, when re-estimating our main models for districts with very similar numbers of expert informants, we continued to find support for the results reported in the text. (See table A.1 in the supplementary appendix.)

ment of the average Republican is somewhat more extreme relative to the Democrat, though experts did perceive the Democratic candidates as somewhat more heterogeneous than the Republican candidates. Overall, the average value of candidate inconsistency is 1.02, yet incumbent platforms exhibited less inconsistency (0.80) than challenger platforms (1.24), but the difference was not statistically significant at the 95% level, suggesting that variance in expert placement is not entirely a function of candidate inexperience.<sup>9</sup> Candidates in open seats, moreover, adopted platforms with higher levels of inconsistency (1.24). Interestingly, we see that Democratic candidates exhibited considerably less consistency on average (1.24) than Republican candidates (0.80). Still, the differences are not statistically significant. The summary statistics displayed below provide evidence of an interesting relationship between ideology and consistency, in which the more moderate candidates (Democrats) also exhibited lower levels of consistency.

**Table 1:** Summary statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	N
Republican Candidate Position	6.33	0.72	138
Democratic Candidate Position	2.95	1.08	138
Candidate Inconsistency	1.02	0.65	276
Incumbent Inconsistency	0.80	0.48	110
Challenger Inconsistency	1.24	0.76	110
Open Seat Candidate Inconsistency	1.00	0.56	58
Republican Candidate Inconsistency	0.80	0.54	138
Democratic Candidate Inconsistency	1.24	0.68	138

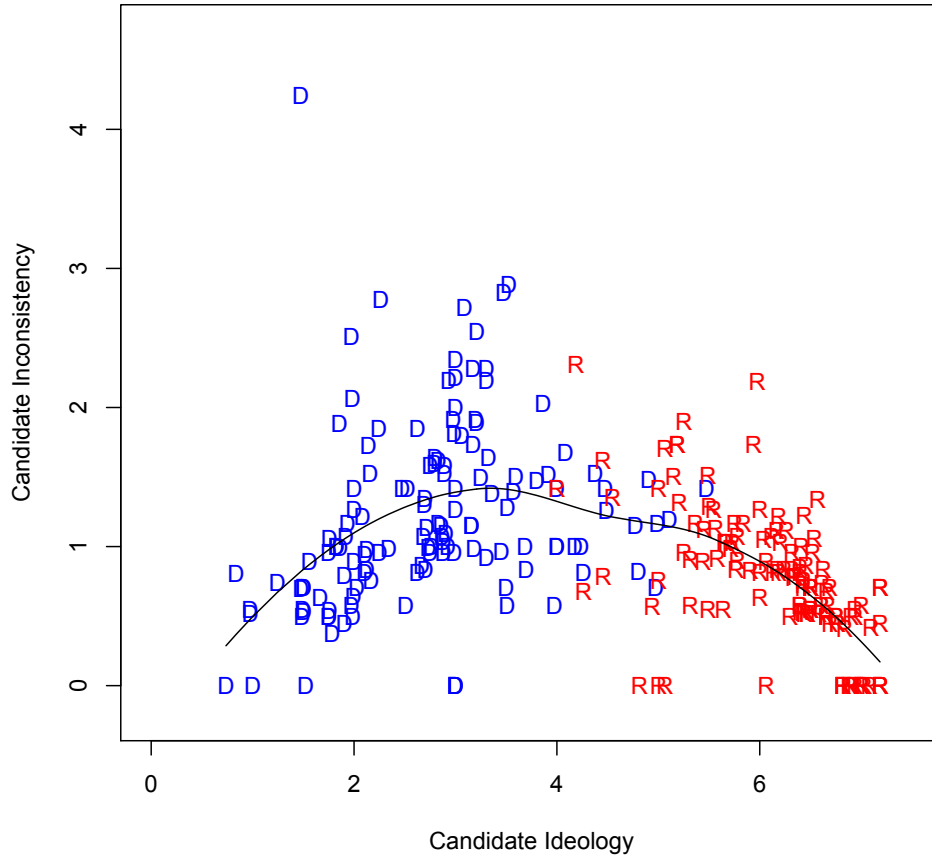
Candidate positions are the means of the expert placements of the candidates. “Inconsistency” is measured as the standard deviation of the experts’ ideological placements of the candidates.

Figure 1 below explores this relationship in greater detail. The x-axis displays each candidate’s ideological position, and the y-axis displays the candidates’ corresponding levels of ideo-

<sup>9</sup>We also considered the possibility that variance in placement among experts may be the result of variation in candidate quality. To explore this relationship we compared the mean of each candidate’s identified level of valence (Stone and Simas 2010) to the standard deviation of the expert’s ideological placement. The correlation was negative and quite small (-.15).

logical inconsistency. The fitted line indicates that candidates whose positions were closer to the center of the ideological space exhibited lower levels of consistency. More ideologically extreme candidates, in contrast, had higher levels of consistency. However, within both parties—and especially among Democrats—there is considerable heterogeneity in the relationship between ideology and consistency. Given a specific ideological position, for instance, candidates exhibit widely varying levels of consistency. For instance, among relatively moderate Democrats with an average ideology around 3, some candidates, such as Ron Kind (WI-3), exhibited high levels of consistency, while other candidates, such as Dutch Ruppersberger (MD-2), were evaluated very differently by the expert informants. This kind of variation provides us the opportunity to study how voter decisions reflect these two considerations.

**Figure 1:** Comparing Candidate Positions and Ideological Consistency



This plot represents the ideological positioning and consistency of 2006 candidates for House as specified by district experts. “D” indicates a Democratic candidate, while “R” indicates a Republican candidate. Candidate ideology scores are the average placements by the expert informants, and range from “very liberal” (1) to high “very conservative” (7). The y-axis inconsistency measure is the standard deviation of the experts’ placements, where higher scores represent decreased ideological consistency.

We use logistic regression to estimate the relationship between vote choice and the independent variables described above. Our key hypothesis concerns the relationship between *consistency advantage* and vote choice. Since we operationalized our key independent variables to capture the Republican candidate’s advantage over the Democrat, we use Republican vote choice as the outcome variable. If candidate consistency increases voter support, we would expect its estimate to be positively related to the dependent variable, indicating that respondents were more likely to support the Republican candidate when that candidate exhibited more consistency

than the Democratic candidate. On the other hand, if voters prefer candidates who exhibit lower levels of consistency, we would expect the coefficient for this variable to be negative.

We account for several other factors that may also affect vote choice. First, we include the respondents' self-reported party identification, which ranges from 1 (strong Democrat) to 7 (strong Republican). We also employ a trichotomous indicator for incumbency. Our *incumbency advantage* variable indicates the Republican's relative advantage over the Democrat. In the instance of a Republican incumbent, we code this variable as 1, whereas an incumbent Democratic candidate is coded as -1. Open races with no incumbent are coded as 0. Finally, we control for the Republican candidate's campaign spending advantage relative to the Democrat, measured as the difference between the two major parties.<sup>10</sup> We cluster our standard errors on districts, and weight the data to national population parameters.

## Results

Table 2 shows our main results. Consistent with other research on the relationship between ideology and vote choice in congressional elections (Buttice and Stone 2012; Simas 2013; Stone and Simas 2010), the results in column (1) indicate that voters were increasingly likely to support Republican candidates as the Republican's proximity advantage increased. Column (2) reports results when we also include our measure of the candidates' levels of consistency. As displayed in the model reported in column (1), the coefficient for *Republican ideological advantage* indicates that voters' decisions were highly sensitive to the relative positioning of the candidates. The coefficient for *consistency advantage* is positive and statistically significant, indicating that voters were significantly more likely to support Republican candidates who exhibited higher levels of consistency than the Democratic candidate. These results provide strong evidence that voters *dislike* candidates whose ideological positions are less certain due to the distribution of issue po-

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<sup>10</sup>All models were also estimated using the Republican's percentage of two party spending rather than the difference in spending between the two parties. Such a substitution yielded similar results.



sitions over a wider range of the ideological space. Instead, voters appear to prefer the candidate whose issue positions are more ideologically consistent.

The estimates for the other covariates are all consistent with general expectations. The probability of voting for the Republican candidate was higher among voters who identified as Republicans, among incumbent Republicans, and when the Republican candidate accounted for a larger proportion of campaign spending.

**Table 2:** Candidate Consistency and Vote Choice

Independent Variables	(1)	(2)
Republican ideological advantage	0.03*** (0.01)	0.03*** (0.01)
Republican consistency advantage		0.36** (0.12)
Party identification	0.74*** (0.03)	0.73*** (0.04)
Republican incumbency advantage	0.40*** (0.09)	0.29*** (0.10)
Spending advantage	0.14** (0.06)	0.15** (0.06)
Intercept	-3.05*** (0.19)	-3.13*** (0.18)
N	7855	7855
Log-likelihood	-2354.46	-2329.70
Wald $\chi^2$	1328.59	1309.41

Entries are logistic regression coefficients and standard errors, clustered by congressional district. The dependent variable is a reported vote for the Republican House candidate. All variables are defined in the text.

\*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* indicates  $p < 0.05$ ; and \* indicates  $p < 0.10$  (all two-tailed tests).

Figure 2 presents these results graphically. The plot on the left shows the predicted probability of voting for the Republican House candidate across the range of values of *consistency advantage* for a voter who is exactly equidistant from the candidates' ideological positions, while

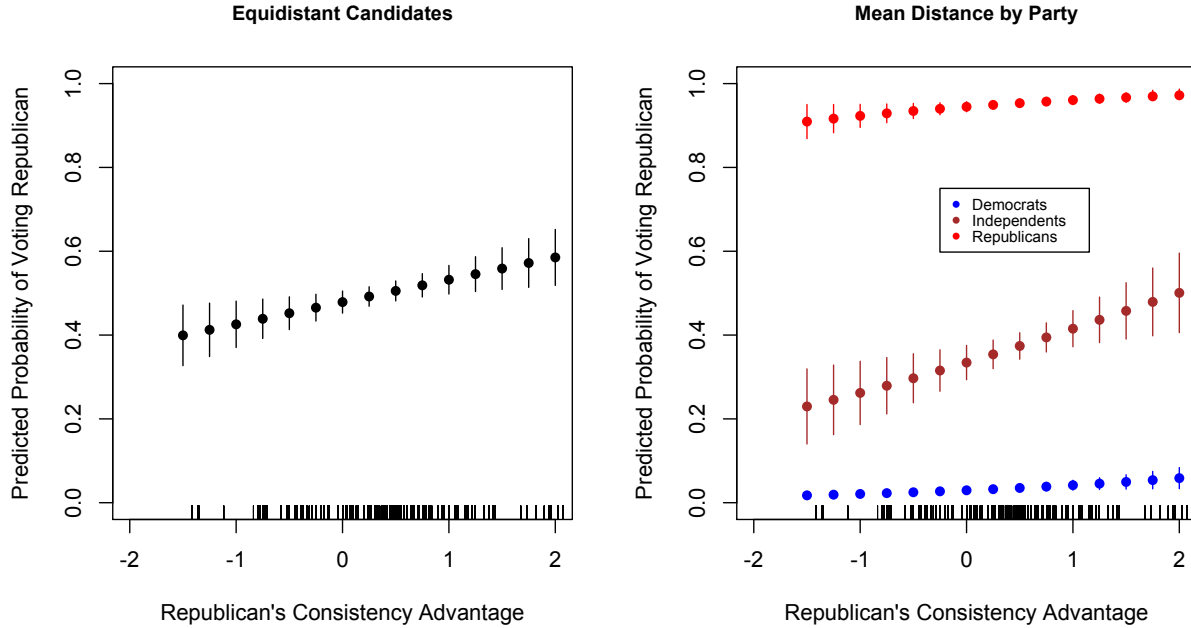
all other covariates are held at their mean values. When both candidates exhibit identical levels of consistency (a value of zero along the x-axis), the predicted probability of voting for the Republican candidate is 0.48. However, when the value of *consistency advantage* moves from one standard deviation less than zero (-0.82) to one standard deviation greater than zero (+0.82), the probability of supporting the Republican candidate increases from 0.43 to 0.52, a statistically significant rise in the probability of support. Thus, reasonable differences in candidates' observed levels of consistency can have important implications for voters' political decisions even when the candidates' overall ideological locations are equidistant from the voter.

The plot on the right, moreover, displays sensitivity to candidate consistency by partisan affiliation. The red points are the predicted probabilities of a Republican vote among self-identified Republicans, while the brown and blue points show the predicted probabilities for Independents and Democrats, respectively. Here, the value of *Republican ideological advantage* is fixed to the mean level by partisan identification.<sup>11</sup> All other covariates were held at their mean values. While the figure does not imply that variation in consistency compels a dyed-in-the-wool partisan to switch their loyalties in the congressional race, it does show that Independents are much more sensitive than partisans to ideological consistency. This finding is generally consistent with other work that shows that Independents are more sensitive than partisans to variation in ideological proximity (Jessee 2009, 2012). Ideological consistency, then, is strongly associated with citizens' voting decisions, and Independents, in particular, severely penalize candidates who exhibit low levels of consistency.

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<sup>11</sup>For example, among Democrats this value is -39.2 on a 101-point scale, while it is -18.0 and 27.8 for Independents and Republicans, respectively.

**Figure 2: Predicted Probability of Voting for Republican**



The plotted points indicate the predicted probabilities of voting for the Republican House candidate, and the vertical bars describe the 95 percent confidence intervals. The tick marks along the x-axes indicate observed values of *Republican consistency advantage*. In the left panel, predicted probabilities are provided for voters whose ideological locations are equidistant from both candidates while all other variables are held at their observed means. The three sets of predicted probabilities in the right panel hold partisan identification fixed, and use the mean level of *Republican ideological advantage* for each partisan group. Democratic and Republican identifications are fixed at the “strong” level on the traditional 7-point partisan identification scale (i.e., 1 and 7, respectively). Independent identification is fixed at 4.

These results are robust to considering alternative explanations for the observed relationships. Our theoretical discussion above distinguished candidate consistency from other characteristics voters might bring to bear on candidates, such as uncertainty. It is possible, however, that our measure of candidate consistency instead indexes uncertainty about the candidates’ true locations. Thus, we re-estimated three models subsetting based upon characteristics that distinguish relatively more politically informed voters from others. Specifically, we estimated models that consisted of the those respondents identifying with a “high” level of political interest, a

college degree, and the ability to place both candidates on an ideological scale.

Table 3 shows the results. Each of the three models provides findings that are strongly in line with those shown in Table 2. Even when accounting for other individual-level characteristics that might confound the relationship between candidate consistency and vote choice, the results provide strong evidence that decreased levels of consistency are associated with lower candidate support. Thus, while low levels of consistency may indeed generate uncertainty about the candidates' underlying ideologies, the results of these supplementary models suggest that inconsistency reduces voter support in ways that cannot be rectified simply by increasing voters' information about the candidates.

**Table 3:** Distinguishing Consistency from Uncertainty

Independent Variables	High Interest	College Graduate	Placed Both Candidates
Republican ideological advantage	0.04*** (0.01)	0.03*** (0.01)	0.03*** (0.01)
Republican consistency advantage	0.34** (0.14)	0.28** (0.14)	0.24** (0.12)
Party identification	0.82*** (0.05)	0.69*** (0.06)	0.84*** (0.05)
Republican incumbency advantage	0.29*** (0.11)	0.47*** (0.14)	0.01 (0.12)
Spending advantage	0.10 (0.07)	0.01 (0.08)	0.13 (0.08)
Intercept	-3.54*** (0.25)	-3.03*** (0.31)	-3.39*** (0.24)
N	4030	2055	4064
Log-likelihood	-974.45	-643.81	-996.87
Wald $\chi^2$	805.90	467.02	905.33

Entries are logistic regression coefficients and standard errors, clustered by congressional district. The dependent variable is a reported vote for the Republican House candidate. All variables are defined in the text.

\*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* indicates  $p < 0.05$ ; and \* indicates  $p < 0.10$  (all two-tailed tests).

## Consistency and Aggregate Election Outcomes

Though our results above provide strong evidence that candidate consistency affects individual voters' decisions about which candidate to support, it is unclear whether (and to what degree) candidate consistency is associated with election outcomes. In this section we replicate our models shown in table 2, but focus instead on aggregate election results. In particular, we regress the Republican candidate's percentage of the two-party vote on the Republican candidate's proximity advantage, incumbency status, and spending advantage. To characterize the values of the Republican candidate's proximity advantage, we use the expert informants' mean assessments of district ideology, and perform an analogous calculation to that used above: District Republican advantage =  $| \text{Democratic candidate placement} - \text{District ideology} | - | \text{Republican candidate placement} - \text{District ideology} |$ . In addition, we also estimate a model in which we include a measure of the district-level ideological heterogeneity (reported in Tausanovitch and Warshaw 2013), because candidates may have greater incentive to adopt platforms with lower levels of consistency in districts with heterogeneous constituencies.

The results are shown below in table 4, and are strongly consistent with the results from the individual-level analysis. Across all three models, Republican candidates won larger vote shares when they were better aligned with district preferences. As the results from column (2) show, however, candidates who exhibited higher degrees of consistency relative to their opponents received significantly greater vote shares. This result is robust to the inclusion of a measure of district heterogeneity, as column (3) indicates. The results imply, moreover, that a one standard deviation increase in the consistency differential (approximately 0.82 units), has the possibility to spell disastrous results for a candidate in a competitive seat. Such a change would predict a loss of nearly 4.5 percentage points of the two party vote share. Considering that the average margin between the two-party vote share across all districts in 2006 was only 8.2 percentage points, this result suggests that the degree of candidate consistency could have substantively important consequences.

**Table 4:** Consistency and Aggregate Election Outcomes

Independent Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)
District Republican advantage	3.84*** (0.54)	3.74*** (0.49)	3.62*** (0.49)
Republican consistency advantage		5.26*** (1.01)	5.45*** (1.01)
Republican incumbency advantage	8.20*** (1.41)	6.31*** (3.16)	6.19*** (1.34)
Spending advantage	1.57* (0.92)	1.55* (0.84)	1.39* (0.84)
District ideological heterogeneity			21.56* (11.78)
Intercept	43.08*** (0.89)	40.99*** (0.90)	12.94 (15.35)
N	138	138	138
MSE	10.19	9.33	9.24
R <sup>2</sup>	0.67	0.73	0.73

Entries are linear regression coefficients and standard errors. The dependent variable is the two-party vote for the Republican congressional candidate. All variables are defined in the text.

\*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* indicates  $p < 0.05$ ; and \* indicates  $p < 0.10$  (all two-tailed tests).

## Consistency and Voter Perceptions

In this section we consider a possible explanation for the findings reported above. *Why* do voters penalize candidates for low levels of ideological consistency? As our theoretical discussion indicated, the level of ideological consistency may affect the ways voters perceive the candidates. In particular, the second moment of a candidate's portfolio of issue positions—their spread across the ideological space—may affect how voters perceive the candidate's location relative to their own preferences. In particular, to explain the negative findings reported above, candidates whose portfolios exhibit low levels of consistency may lead voters to conclude that the candidate's

underlying ideology is less congruent with the voter's.

We explore this possibility using the subset of CCES respondents who placed both the Democratic and Republican candidates on the 101-point ideological scale. The dependent variable in this analysis is the voter's perceived proximity relative to each of the candidates: Perceived Republican advantage =  $|\text{Perceived Democratic candidate placement} - \text{respondent self-placement}| - |\text{Perceived Republican candidate placement} - \text{respondent self-placement}|$ . Thus, positive values of this variable indicate voters who perceived that the Republican candidate was more ideologically proximate to them, while negative values indicate voters who perceived the Democratic candidate as more ideologically proximate. We include the same battery of covariates that was included in the other individual-level analyses.

The results are shown below in table 5. As the first row of coefficients shows, voters' perceptions of the candidates are strongly associated with the experts' assessments of the candidates' locations. More critically, however, the coefficient for *consistency advantage* is positive and statistically significant. This indicates that, for instance, as the Republican candidate exhibits lower levels of ideological consistency, voters perceive that the Democratic candidate is more ideologically proximate. The estimates for the other covariates all are consistent with the findings presented in the tables above.

**Table 5:** Consistency and Perceptions of Candidate Ideology

Independent Variables	(1)	(2)
Republican ideological advantage	0.63*** (0.03)	0.64*** (0.03)
Republican consistency advantage		3.03*** (0.86)
Party identification	7.98*** (0.48)	7.84*** (0.50)
Republican incumbency advantage	-2.68*** (0.82)	-3.46*** (0.81)
Spending advantage	1.21** (0.59)	1.20** (0.59)
Intercept	-22.55*** (2.31)	-23.05*** (2.32)
N	5001	5001
R <sup>2</sup>	0.72	0.72
MSE	24.30	24.21

Entries are linear regression coefficients and standard errors, clustered by congressional district. The dependent variable is respondents' perceived proximity to the Republican candidate relative to the Democratic candidate. All variables are defined in the text.

\*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* indicates  $p < 0.05$ ; and \* indicates  $p < 0.10$  (all two-tailed tests).

The results from this analysis link the negative relationship between candidate consistency and voter support to voter perceptions of the candidates. Candidate consistency affects how voters perceive the relative positioning of the candidates. Candidates who exhibit lower levels of consistency than their opponent by, for instance, adopting some relatively extreme issue positions as well as some relatively moderate issue positions, lead voters to conclude that their opponent is more ideologically proximate. To use the terminology of Downs, not only do voters consider both the “mean” and the “spread” of candidates' issue positions, but that voters use the “spread” to make inferences about the candidates' true ideology.



## Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, we demonstrate that voters penalize candidates who advocate diverse sets of policy positions. When candidates' policy views generate disagreement about their ideological classification, voters perceive that the candidates are less ideologically proximate, and are thus less likely to support them. Our results complement, but run exactly counter to, those offered by Somer-Topcu (forthcoming). We suspect two potential explanations. First, and perhaps most obviously, the partisan context of the United States may simply be incommensurate with the partisan contexts in western European democracies. For instance, as the two U.S. parties have polarized in recent years, affective conflict between the parties has also increased (e.g., Iyengar et al. 2012). This development may have increased the importance for candidates to adopt internally and ideologically consistent platform positions, as failing to do so may indicate a weaker allegiance to party principles. In contrast, parties in western European democracies have incentives to cultivate governing coalitions based on looser sets of ideological principles, which thus may yield electoral benefits to parties that advocate a more varied set of policy positions. Second, our paper focuses on a different level of analysis than Somer-Topcu (forthcoming); while we focus on the incentives for *candidates* to advocate diverse issue positions, Somer-Topcu examines how voters react to *parties* to adopt varied sets of policy positions. It is not unreasonable to combine the findings from both papers, and conclude that political parties may benefit from endorsing ideological diversity among their slate of candidates, while each candidate benefits from advocating an ideologically consistent set of policy positions.

This paper extends and modifies some recent contributions to the literature on voter decision-making under various conditions of uncertainty. While voters' levels of information about candidates may affect how the candidates are evaluated (e.g., Alvarez 1998), *perceptual* uncertainty may also affect how voters evaluate candidates. For instance, while candidates may benefit from projecting an ambiguous position on any given issue (Tomz and Van Houweling), they may be

penalized for appearing to flip-flop on this same issue (Tomz and Van Houweling 2010). While other research finds that voters are not responsive to policy shifts by parties or candidates between one election and the next (Adams et al. 2011; Montagnes and Rogowski forthcoming), these policy shifts may affect voters' evaluations only when they influence voters' perceptions of the parties or candidates (Adams et al. 2011). We contribute to this research to show that the portfolio of policy positions advocated by candidates appears to generate perceptual uncertainty about the candidates' true ideology, and thus influences voters' assessments of the candidates' ideological positions.

The findings presented in this paper raise intriguing new questions about the role of ideology in elections. For instance, while a vast literature explores the benefits to ideological moderation, the argument presented in this paper suggests that moderation could take various forms. In the form most commonly explored in the literature, a candidate could attempt to gain the support of more moderate voters simply by moderating her policy views. Alternatively, the candidate could substantially moderate her position on one key issue, hoping that this revised issue position would be sufficient to appeal to relatively moderate voters. These two potential strategies would appear to describe contemporary debates within the Republican Party, in which some argue that Republicans would benefit in national elections by abandoning its conservatism altogether and moving toward the ideological center, while other key Republicans have adopted relatively moderate positions on only some issues (consider, for instance, Ohio Senator Rob Portman and the issue of gay marriage). The results of our analysis suggest that the latter strategy may backfire.

Finally, our paper contributes to a large and growing literature on the electoral consequences of candidate issue strategies. However, many additional questions remain. For instance, how does ideological consistency affect voters' affective evaluations of candidates along such dimensions as reliability, integrity, and pragmatism? Future research can assess how these issue strategies directly influence voter perceptions, and investigate possible tradeoffs between ideological

consistency and other dimensions of candidate platform choice.

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## A Supplementary Materials

**Table A.1:** Vote Choice and Candidate Consistency: Accounting for Potential Measurement Error

Independent Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)
Party identification	0.69*** (0.04)	0.70*** (0.05)	0.71*** (0.07)
Republican consistency advantage	0.55*** (0.16)	0.50** (0.22)	0.57*** (0.17)
Ideological advantage	0.04*** (0.01)	0.03*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)
Incumbency	0.20 (0.12)	0.48*** (0.13)	0.24 (0.19)
Spending advantage	0.13 (0.09)	0.15** (0.07)	0.05 (0.13)
Intercept	-2.98*** (0.20)	-3.06*** (0.20)	-3.16*** (0.37)
N	5344	2956	1631
Log-likelihood	-1517.53	-895.58	-467.04
Wald $\chi^2$	924.46	498.06	315.98
Clusters	87	53	29

Entries are logistic regression coefficients and standard errors, clustered by congressional district. The dependent variable is a reported vote for the Republican House candidate. Column (1) reports results from congressional districts with 5 or more expert informants. Column (2) reports results from congressional districts with between four and six expert informants. Columns (3) reports results from congressional districts with between seven and nine expert informants. All variables are defined in the text.

\*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* indicates  $p < 0.05$ ; and \* indicates  $p < 0.10$  (all two-tailed tests).



**Table A.2:** Consistency and Vote Choice: Alternative Measures of Ideology

Independent Variables	101 Point Scale	5 Point Scale
Ideological placement	0.05*** (0.01)	1.13*** (0.08)
Republican consistency advantage	0.31** (0.15)	0.28* (0.15)
Party identification	0.65*** (0.03)	0.74*** (0.03)
Republican incumbency advantage	0.40*** (0.10)	0.37*** (0.10)
Spending advantage	0.11* (0.06)	0.11* (0.06)
Democratic ideological location	-0.18** (0.07)	-0.16 (0.06)
Republican ideological location	-0.24** (0.1)	-0.15* (0.06)
Intercept	-4.06*** (0.80)	-5.69*** (0.85)
N	7855	7656
Log-likelihood	-2312.73	-2284.86
Wald $\chi^2$	1149.49	1063.30

Entries are logistic regression coefficients and standard errors, clustered by congressional district. The dependent variable is a reported vote for the Republican House candidate. All variables are defined in the text.

\*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* indicates  $p < 0.05$ ; and \* indicates  $p < 0.10$  (all two-tailed tests).

**Table A.3:** Summary statistics: Alternative Measure

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Dev.</b>	<b>N</b>
Candidate Agreement	0.86	0.01	276
Incumbent Agreement	0.89	0.01	110
Challenger Agreement	0.82	0.01	110
Open Seat Candidate Agreement	0.87	0.01	58
Republican Candidate Agreement	0.90	0.01	138
Democratic Candidate Agreement	0.82	0.01	138

“Agreement” is measured as the percentage of expert informants who agreed the candidate occupied a common ideological position; thus, higher values would indicate greater ideological consistency.

**Table A.4:** Vote Choice and Candidate Consistency: Alternative Measure

Independent Variables	(1)
Party identification	0.73*** (0.04)
Republican agreement advantage	0.18** (0.07)
Ideological advantage	0.03*** (0.01)
Incumbency	0.32*** (0.09) (0.13)
Spending advantage	0.14** (0.09)
Intercept	-3.13*** (0.18)
N	7895
Log-likelihood	-2345.69
Wald $\chi^2$	1308.56
Clusters	139

Entries are logistic regression coefficients and standard errors, clustered by congressional district. The dependent variable is a reported vote for the Republican House candidate. *Republican Agreement Advantage* consists of the difference between the percent of experts agreeing with the placement of the Republican and the percent of experts agreeing with the placement of the Democrat. This measure was then multiplied by 10, meaning a one unit change is equivalent to a 10 percentage point difference in the Republican candidate's agreement advantage. All variables are defined in the text.

\*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* indicates  $p < 0.05$ ; and \* indicates  $p < 0.10$  (all two-tailed tests).

**Table A.5:** Vote Choice and Candidate Consistency: Distinguishing from Uncertainty (Alternative Measure)

Independent Variables	High Interest	College Graduate	Placed Both Candidates
Party identification	0.82*** (0.05)	0.70*** (0.05)	0.84*** (0.05)
Republican agreement advantage	0.17** (0.08)	0.15* (0.08)	0.12* (0.07)
Ideological advantage	0.04*** (0.01)	0.03*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)
Incumbency	0.31*** (0.11)	0.48*** (0.14)	0.02 (0.11)
Spending advantage	0.10 (0.07)	0.01 (0.08)	0.12 (0.13)
Intercept	-3.54*** (0.25)	-3.04*** (0.32)	-3.39*** (0.25)
N	4056	2063	4071
Log-likelihood	-980.77	-645.72	-999.15
Wald $\chi^2$	801.93	470.54	909.18
Clusters	139	139	139

Entries are logistic regression coefficients and standard errors, clustered by congressional district. The dependent variable is a reported vote for the Republican House candidate. Column (1) reports results from those respondents claiming to have a high interest in political affairs. Column (2) reports results from those respondents who have identify as college graduates. Columns (3) reports results from those respondents who were able to place both candidates on an ideological scale. All variables are defined in the text.

\*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* indicates  $p < 0.05$ ; and \* indicates  $p < 0.10$  (all two-tailed tests).

**Table A.6:** Consistency and Aggregate Election Outcomes (Alternative Measure)

Independent Variables	(1)	(2)
District Republican advantage	3.82*** (0.49)	3.69*** (0.49)
Republican agreement advantage	2.99*** (0.57)	3.11*** (0.57)
Republican incumbency advantage	6.41*** (1.34)	6.29*** (1.33)
Spending advantage	1.53* (0.84)	1.37 (0.83)
District ideological heterogeneity		22.25* (11.77)
Intercept	40.94*** (0.91)	11.99 (15.33)
N	138	138
R <sup>2</sup>	0.73	0.73
MSE	9.31	9.22

Entries are linear regression coefficients and standard errors. The dependent variable is the two-party vote for the Republican congressional candidate. All variables are defined in the text.

\*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* indicates  $p < 0.05$ ; and \* indicates  $p < 0.10$  (all two-tailed tests).

**Table A.7:** Agreement and Perceptions of Candidate Ideology (Alternative Measure)

Independent Variables	(1)
Party identification	7.86*** (0.51)
Republican agreement advantage	1.44** (0.53)
Ideological advantage	0.64*** (0.03)
Incumbency	-3.21*** (0.78)
Spending advantage	1.17** (0.59)
Intercept	-22.97*** (2.31)
N	5001
R <sup>2</sup>	0.72
MSE	24.23

Entries are linear regression coefficients and standard errors, clustered by congressional district. The dependent variable is respondents' perceived proximity to the Republican candidate relative to the Democratic candidate. All variables are defined in the text.

\*\*\* indicates  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* indicates  $p < 0.05$ ; and \* indicates  $p < 0.10$  (all two-tailed tests).