Legislative Signaling or Random Error? An Analysis of Spatially Incorrect Voting in Congress

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Abstract

Theoretical and empirical models of congressional voting assumes that legislators vote with the sole purpose to move policy closer to their ideologically ideal point, with the most prominent being the NOMINATE model. While NOMINATE correctly classifies the vast majority of votes cast by members of Congress, a significant number of votes are misclassified and coded as spatial error. The literature on congressional voting assumes this error to be random and idiosyncratic across members. We dispute this conventional notion and argue that spatial error in congressional is not random, but rather systematic across members. We present a theory positing that spatial error is more likely on roll-call votes tackling salient policy issues and among members representing districts with greater ideological divergence between the median voter and the member's primary election constituency. Using Aldrich-McKelvey scaling to place legislators and constituencies in the same ideological common space, we find support for our theory. We attribute this finding to the greater electoral uncertainty faced by ideological moderates and members representing districts with greater ideological divergence between key constituencies. These findings are stronger for majority members and in the U.S. House. Our findings have implications for the NOMINATE model, the nature of spatial error in legislative voting, and the electoral cross-pressures faced by legislators.

Key words: spatially incorrect voting, ideological extremity, constituency responsiveness, electoral cross-pressures, Aldrich-McKelvey scaling

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