Title

Separation of Ideology: Does Money Separate Representatives from their Constituents

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Separation of Ideology: Does Money Separate Representatives from their Constituents

The fact that, in the United States, there is an increase in ideological polarization among the members of Congress is established (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Burden 2004; Stone and Simas 2010; Kujala 2019). Traditional literature points towards primary elections as one of the reasons for this polarization. Primary elections give a space for candidates to take ideological positions that are more ideologically separated from the general electorate and the median voter (Snyder and Stewart 2001; Barber 2016; Stone and Simas 2010). Recent work has pointed to the idea that the influence of donors plays a role in the increase of ideological polarization both during and after primary elections (Kujala 2019).

I argue that the effect that donors have on ideological polarization continues into and beyond the general election. I hypothesize that as more money is donated to general election campaigns there will be an increase in ideological distance from the winning representatives' ideology to that of the average ideology of their constituents.

Using publicly accessible data from the Database on Ideology, Money in Politics, and Elections (DIME) and the Cooperative Elections Study (CES) I will be looking to see if there is a correlation between the amount of money donated and if there is an increase in ideological distance between representatives and their constituents. The DIME dataset will provide information regarding the winners of the general elections, including which race they won, their ideology scores, and their campaign donation information. The CES will provide individual data from approximately 60,000 individuals that I will be using to create a median voter for each of the 435 federal congressional districts. The median voter will act as a baseline that the representative will be compared to when evaluating ideological distance. These two data sets will be used to evaluate the effects of campaign donations on the ideological separation between

representatives and median voters.

Significance

People expect there to be a dyadic relationship between a representative and his or her constituents (Miler 2018), but that simplistic belief becomes far more complex when donations enter the equation. Research finds that members of Congress are more likely to respond to groups that are likely to be campaign donors (Powel and Wilcox 2010). Donors have different policy preferences than nondonors (Gilens 2009), and donors are more likely to hold more polarized positions than nondonors (Barber 2016). These factors change the simple dyadic relationship into a tiered structure separating the donors from the nondonors and their access to and effect on their representatives.

This issue affects the United States in a significant way because money is not restricted to a set location and is minimally constricted in any given political campaign. The Federal Elections Commission (FEC) does place limits on how much individuals and certain groups called Political Action Committees (PACs) can spend on political campaigns, but corporations and independent expenditure-only committees (Super PACs) have no such limits. With corporations and Super PACs permitted to spend unlimited amounts of money on political campaigns the difference in policy preferences (Gilens 2009) and more polarized positions (Barber 2016) would suggest that representatives would hold politically distant ideologies from their constituents. Additionally, corporations and Super PACs are not regionally restricted and turn congressional political campaigns from considering local ideological preferences to considering national preferences. This would be in line with Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart's (2001) finding that policy positions that candidates take "reflect national positions of the party". This makes representatives take a more homogenized position to the nation and a less curated

position more befitting their constituents' policy preferences and ideology.

While this research will focus on federal elections, the significance of this research does not end there. California's state elections also follow the same pattern of primaries and general elections and the politicians running for office ideologically align themselves with their donors like their federal counterparts. Yet unlike their federal counterparts, California can regulate the amount of money individuals, PACs, and Super PACs can donate to any political campaign. In 2019, Assembly Bill 571 changed how the Fair Political Practice Commission (FPPC) can regulate state and local election campaign donations starting in 2023. The change sets campaign donation limits for state and local elections unless the assembly district or city explicitly sets their campaign donation limit. While weakening the FPPC's original broad state-wide control on donation caps, AB 571 hopes to scale that control back which should limit potential litigations over the FPPC's ability to regulate and monitor all state and local elections even if the FPPC is no longer able to set some campaign donation limits.

Background

Previous research has found that ideological polarization is increasing in the United States primary elections (Kujala 2019; Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Burden 2004; Stone and Simas 2010). Where and how that polarization manifests as well as how to combat it is unclear. Issues on whether the polarization is the donors affecting the representative or if the representative's position is attracting certain donors is unclear (Kujala 2019). Work has suggested that instead of limiting the amount of money spent on elections, we should look towards empowering the average electorate to bring representatives more in line with their constituents (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001). Hall (2015) presents the idea that even though polarized candidates may win primary elections, they run the risk of losing in general

elections, and by extension, the related political party risks losing the seat for several elections.

These findings are in line with the median voter thorium, or the Downsian framework (Downs 1972). This framework predicts that when there is a single round of voting between two candidates the candidates will converge towards the median, or most central, voter. This framework assumes only one race between two candidates, although that is not how elections are done in The United States. Additionally, in the Downsian framework, there is difficulty in evaluating the effects of donors on representatives because the framework requires putting representatives' and constituents' preferences on the same scale. Previous research overcame this challenge by converting two commonly used ideology scales for representatives, CFscores and DW-NOMINATE, and placing them on a 7-point ideology scale that surveyors use to evaluate constituents' ideological leaning (Kujala 2019).

Research also points to representatives' ideologies being consistent when using either roll-call votes or the CES donor data to calculate these ideologies (Barber 2016). There is research that points to the fact that challengers taking a more extreme position is an effective strategy and risks increasing ideological distance between representatives and constituents (Stone and Simas 2010). As political campaigns transitioned from being a local focus to being seen as a national interest, the polarization of both the representatives and constituents has increased over the past several decades (Bonica and Cox 2018).

While the body of study looks at primaries as a significant reason for polarization and most agree that the general election has a centralizing effect on representatives, there is some contention in the modern space. A contemporary paper presents the idea that divergence in viability as well as voting along party lines permits more ideologically polarized individuals to win elections rather than more centrist ones (Lockhart and Hill 2023). Looking at general

elections as not just a centralizing medium but the outcome of the polarizing effects of the invisible election and the primary elections is a relatively unexplored area in the field of political polarization, especially compared to primary elections.

Changes to campaign finance laws have been very minimal since 2010 due to the Supreme Court case *Citizens United vs. The Federal Elections Commission.* This case defines donations to political campaigns as political speech. Doing so gave a nearly unregulated ability for Super PACs and corporations to fund ideologically aligned campaigns. It must be restated that these groups are often found to be ideologically distant from nondonors (Gilens 2009). These two factors together lead to those who can donate having a greater ability to donate to campaigns, but that can lead to an increased amount of money being donated to campaigns.

California has had limits placed on how much an individual and small contributor committees can donate since 1988 with the passing of California Proposition 73 which set campaign limits for various state and local elections. Since then, the bulk of Proposition 73 has been overturned. In 2000, Proposition 34 was passed to limit direct individual donations, but the proposition also allowed for the creation of Independent Expenditure Committees, which can spend donations on sending political messages but are not regulated by campaign finance laws.

The most contemporaneous bill involving campaign finance in California is AB 571. As stated earlier, AB 571 effectively limits the FPPC's ability to set campaign donation limits in state and local elections. By making the campaign donation limits optional this will hopefully keep the law from running afoul of possible First Amendment litigation. The effects of this assembly bill may be worth evaluating in a few years if its openness does keep the bill from being overturned.

Theory and Argument

I believe that the polarization of representatives and constituents is an important aspect of representative democracies that should be constantly evaluated. In my research, I found a lack of research evaluating polarization at the general election level, especially when compared to primary elections. This paper will look at the relationship between the amount of money donated to political campaigns and the ideological distance between representatives and their constituents. The idea behind this research comes from the finding that donors often have more polarized positions than non-donors and representatives take ideological positions close to their donors (Barber 2016). The lack of research into how polarization has affected general election results, and the finding that donors affect representatives' ideology has led me to research this research topic.

The independent variable I will be evaluating is the amount of money donated to each of the 435 winning House of Representatives campaigns in the 2020 general election. This data was collected from DIME. Donations are independent because the groups that donate to political campaigns are going to attempt to influence the representative by supporting the candidate they believe will be more politically aligned with them.

My dependent variable is the distance between two separate variables. The first component variable that I will be evaluating is the ideology scores of individuals from the 2022 CES survey. Within this survey, there are two questions regarding political ideology a 3-point question and a 7-point question. I will be using the 7-point ideology question because it allows for a greater level of granularity. The respondents are then grouped into each of their respective congressional districts so that my unit of analysis is consistent across both component variables. The second component variable is representative ideological scores which were gathered from

DIME. Within DIME the ideological scores of representatives are calculated by two scales either dynamic weighted nominal three-step estimation (DW-NOMINATE) or common-space campaign finance scores (CFscores). DW-NOMINATE scores are calculated by looking at roll call voting and basing its score on how the representative votes in relation to other representatives (Poole and Rosenthal 1985). CFscores come from calculating ideologies based on what industries and corporations are donating to a campaign and their average political and ideological leanings are averaged together to calculate a campaign's CFscore (Bonica 2014). CFscores are not calculated by the amount of money donated to a given campaign, just who is donating to the campaign, keeping those values distinct from one another. This, in turn, should keep them from being directly correlating to one another. I elected to use CFscores as the ideological measurement for this research.

A possible alternative explanation for why groups donate to political campaigns is not trying to shift political ideology but trying to fund political campaigns in competitive elections. This would increase the amount of money donated to campaigns and vice versa in non-competitive campaigns. This is a possible explanation disassociated from any ideological reasoning. I hope to overcome this alternative explanation by evaluating each winning political campaign, this will hopefully normalize for both competitive and non-competitive elections.

There is also the effect of incumbency status on elections. Incumbents are more ideologically closer to their constituency than challengers, or open-seat primaries (Kujala 2019). While this is a possible confounding factor, averaging winners regardless of incumbency status, will hopefully overcome that factor by looking at the overall trend of representatives' ideological distance from all winners. But should be a factor when evaluating the data.

As stated previously, representatives are closer in ideology to their donors than their

average constituents (Barber 2016). This influence is caused by donors donating to political campaigns. At the same time, the median voter is ideologically neutral when compared to the ideologically more extreme donors. Thus, as the amount of donations increases then the ideological distance between the median voter and representative will increase.

To test this using data from DIME and CES, I evaluated the ideological distance between the representatives and constituents and evaluated how that relationship is affected by the amount of money donated to the winning general election campaigns. With this work, I found a statistically significant relationship between the amount of money donated to campaigns and the ideological distance between representatives and constituents.

Research Method

This research paper will be a large-n study looking at all 435 congressional election winners in the 2020 House of Representatives general election. This makes the research contemporary but keeps the data manageable. By going with the 2020 election rather than the 2022 election I am avoiding the effects of the congressional redistricting, which will make applying the data to one another more difficult. Additionally, since I was able to get the data for all the election winners, my research will show a complete cross-section of the present federal political landscape.

For House elections, the DIME contains both campaign finance and ideological data for all of the general election winners. The finance information granulates between certain classifications of donation types from individuals to PACs. I will be using the total donation amounts because those who donate to campaigns are going to influence representatives and the data is not granulated enough to aggregate the donation amounts between large donors and small donors. The ideology score that I will be using is the CFscore. CFscores for representatives are

created by evaluating what sectors donate to a given political campaign and taking their average CFscore. Each sector is given a CFscore based on how many donors and what average political leaning those donors have. Scores range from -2 to 2 range with negative scores being assigned to more liberal groups and positive scores being given to more conservative groups. This is why I will be using total donations to keep the donation amounts and CFscores related to one another. I also elected to use CFscores as the scale for this research because of its directional nature, later I can control for the directionally by looking at the total distance between representatives and their median voters, keeping the scale in a 0 to 2.5 range.

To create a median voter, I took individual survey data from the CES 2022 survey. The survey has the individuals answer several questions, but the question that I used is the 7-point ideology question, which is a self-reported political leaning question ranging from strong, lean, or not very strong with one of the two political parties, or independent. I elected to set independent as a score of 0 and removed the not sure responses which left me with 58,272 respondents. The CES survey also has data about who their current representative is, which I cross-referenced with the 2020 House election results to transition this data from individual data to congressional district data. Once grouped by congressional district, the scores were then averaged to create a median voter for each district. The average number of respondents for the districts was 133 respondents. This is a small number of individuals given that congressional districts contain approximately 700,000 individuals but is a large enough number to create a representative median voter for the districts.

The next step was to convert the 7-point scale used for the median voters onto the same scale as the CFscore. Using this formula: CFscore =0.5165946*(7-point)-2.056548 I was able to put the median voters on the same scale as representatives. This allowed me to evaluate the

distance between representatives and their median voters using the Downsian framework. This

distance is what will be used as my dependent variable to evaluate the effects of donations on the

political extremity of representatives.

Figure 1: CFscores Distance of Representatives and Median Voter
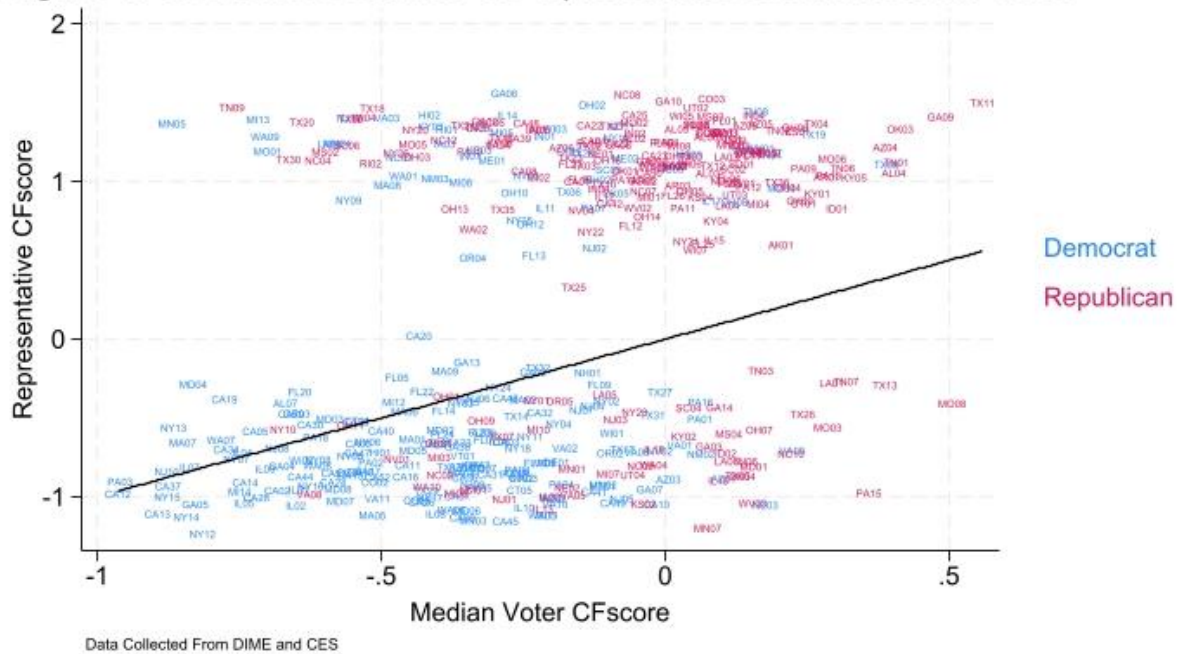
Data Collected From DIME and CES

Figure 1 shows the relationship between representatives' and median voters' CFscores.

They are coded by the representatives' party affiliation. The figure shows that more conservative

representatives, those with a positive CFscore, have more politically neutral median voters.

Whereas more liberal representatives, those with a negative CFscore, have more liberal median

voters. Districts that are closer to the black line are ideologically similar to their median voter.

This trend shows a slight party-specific trend. Democrats cluster closer to the median voter.

While Republicans cluster further away from the median voter. But Democrat representatives

who are more conservative are more ideologically distant from the median voter compared to

their equally conservative Republican counterparts. This trend holds for more liberal

Republicans and their Democrat equivalents.

Figure 2: Ideological Extremity of Representatives and Median Voters
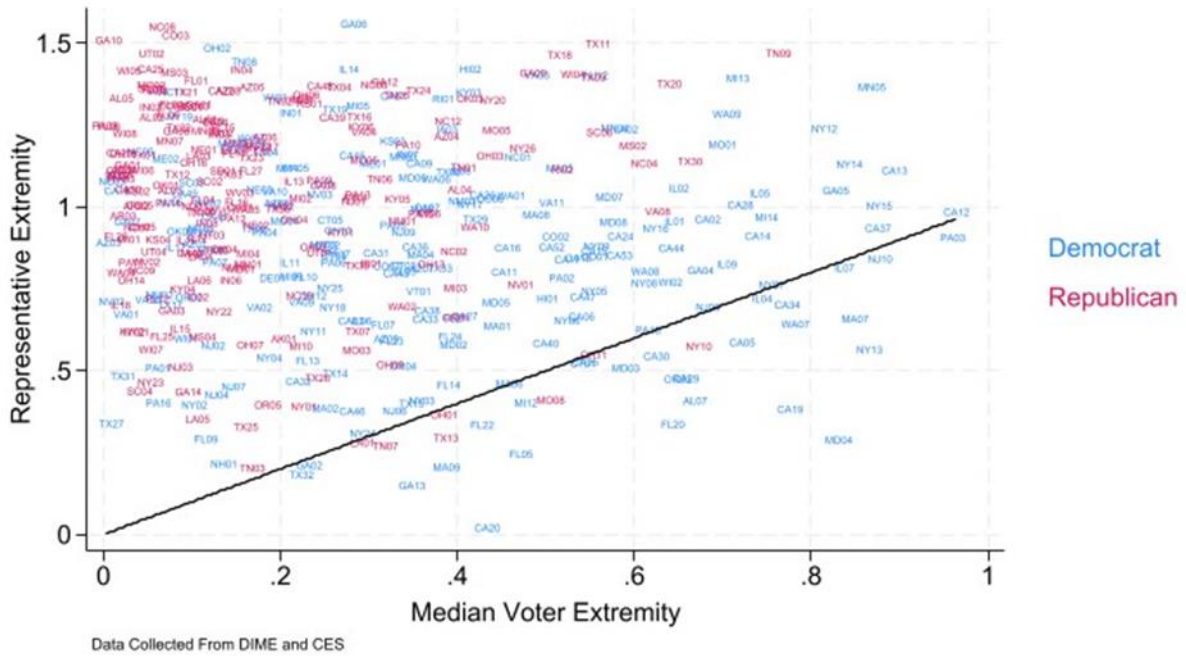
Data Collected From DIME and CES

Figure 2 then modifies the CFscore scale by removing ideological direction as a factor and allows the data to be evaluated as an extremity of ideology of the representative relative to the median voter. This puts representatives on a 0 to 1.5 scale and median voters on a 0 to 1 scale while maintaining their relationship. This is proven by the districts with similar ideological positions in Figure 1 maintaining that relationship when looking at the ideological extremity. It also further magnifies the party disparity. Democrats cluster closer to their median voters while Republicans cluster further away.

Figure 3: Ideological Distance Between Representative and Median Voter
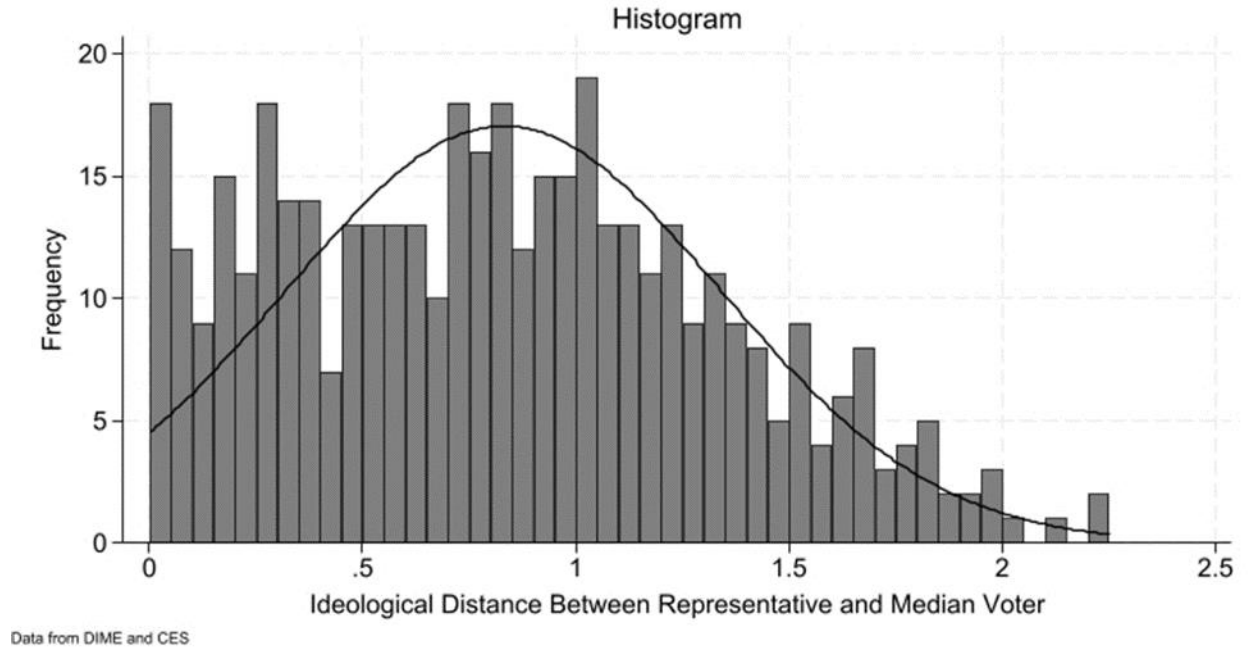
Data from DIME and CES

Figure 3 shows ideological extremity as a frequency of occurrence. Each bin is a .02 separation in ideological score between representatives and constituents. There is a high frequency of ideologically similar districts, but the trend is that districts have an ideological distance of .60 to .66 ideological separation. Having an ideological separation of .60 to .66 means that there is a moderate ideological separation between representatives and their median voters.

Figure 4: Relationship Between Donations and Ideological Distance
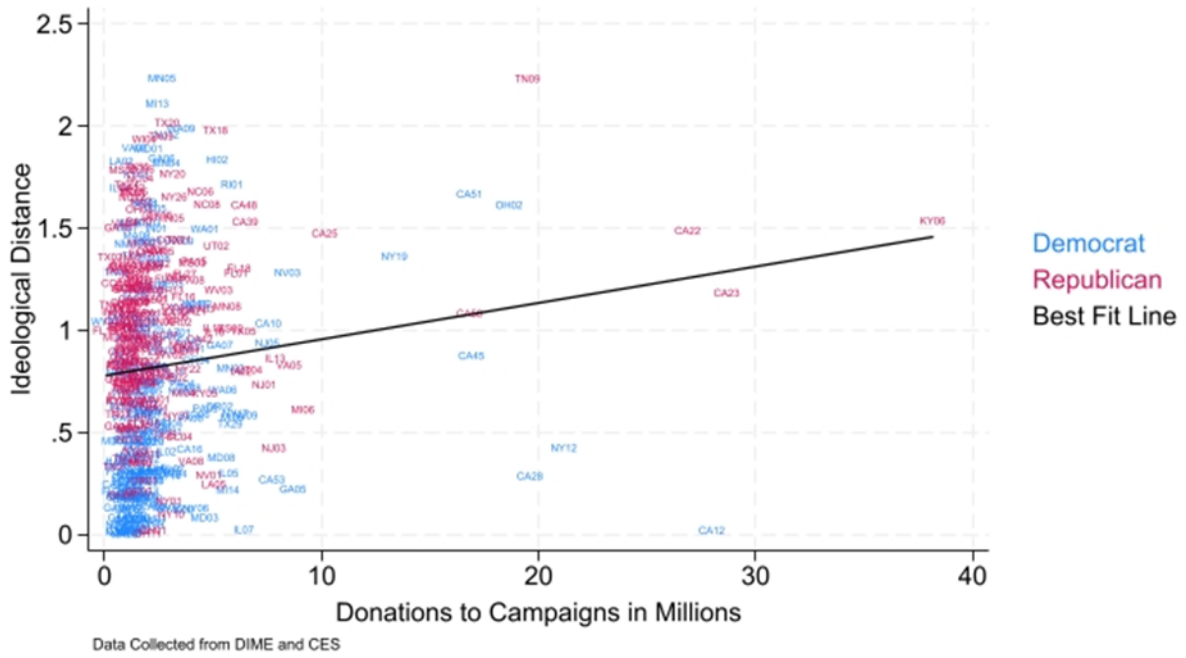
Taking the distances found in Figure 2, I graphed its relationship with the amount of money donated to the political campaigns, shown in Figure 4. The top 13 campaigns with the most donations have a near-even split between Democrats and Republicans, with 7 and 6 representatives respectively.

Figure 5: 95th Percentile of Donations

Data Collected from DIME and CES
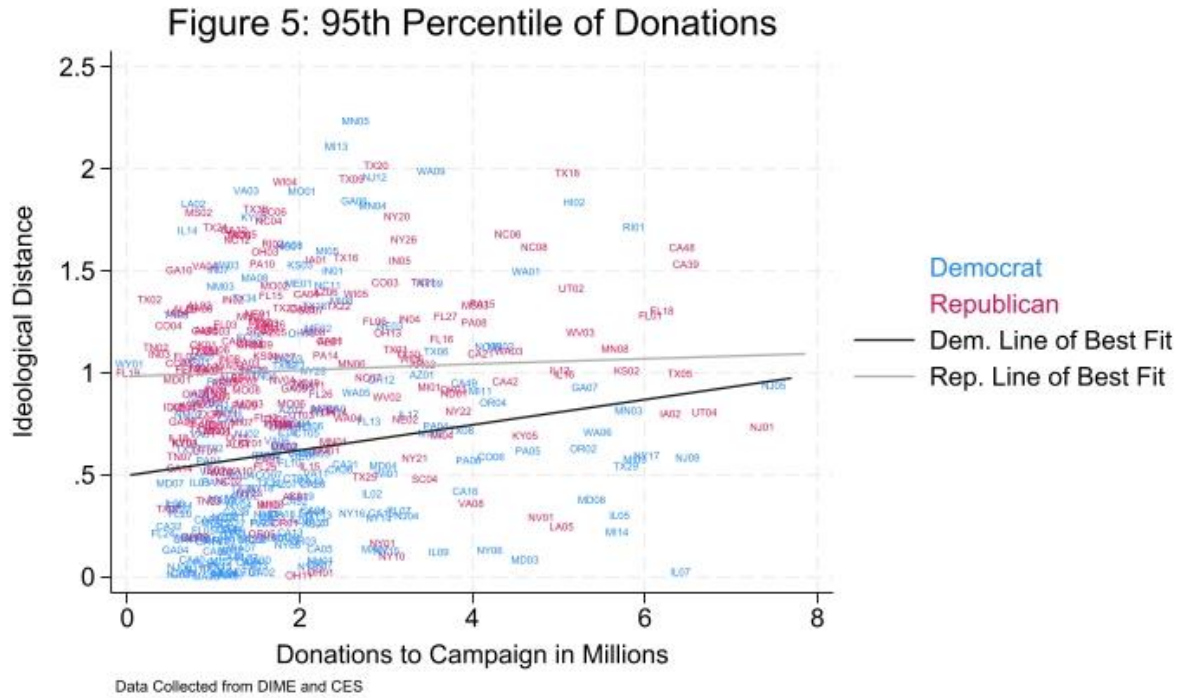
For clarity, Figure 5 has up to the 95th percentile of donations which brought the top

range of donations to within 8 million dollars. Figure 5 shows that most campaigns receive

around 2 million dollars in donations. That trend is shared by both parties. At around 2 million

dollars of donations, ideological distance varies significantly. Anywhere from .006 to 2.23. This

variation suggests that other factors are affecting ideological distance, not just donations.

Table 1: The Effect of Donations in Millions on the Ideological Distance Between Representatives and Constituents

Ideological Distance	Coef.	St.Err.	p-value	Sig
Total Donations in Millions	0.178	0.00635	0.005	***
Constant	0.7803434	0.0301472	0	***
R-squared	0.0177	Number of obs.		435

*** p<.01, ** p<.1, * p<.5

To evaluate this, I ran a regression to test for a possible correlation and possible statistical

significance. Table 1 shows that by looking at the relationship between ideological distance and the amount of money donated in millions, assuming all else is equal, there is a statistically significant relationship between those two variables. While the relationship is statistically significant, with a p-value of .005, there is only a weak positive correlation between the variables, an r-squared of .017. This strongly suggests that other unaccounted-for variables are affecting this relationship and need to be accounted for in further research to get a greater understanding of the effects of donations on ideological distancing between representatives and their constituents.

Considerations

There are multiple factors to consider when evaluating this paper's data. The data has no missing data points, each representative has an associated CFscore, donation amount, and party affiliation. Each congressional district has a median voter that can be compared to its representative. My dataset does lack granularity when it comes to factors like vote percentage in the presidential election, demographics data, primary election data, the competitiveness of the general election, and the historical political alignment of the congressional district. All these factors are worth controlling for to better identify the relationship between donors and ideological extremity. Despite this lack of granularity, this data is reliable and valid for evaluating the effects of donations on ideological distance because the relationship presents itself without accounting for these factors, therefore the impact of donations may become more pronounced as you control for more factors.

Analysis/Results

Firstly, my findings suggest that ideological separation is not limited to one political party or the other but is instead a systemic outcome of the federal political system the United

States has. At the same time, my findings point to ideologically liberal districts having a greater

likelihood of having a representative who is more ideologically aligned with the median voter,

and districts that are ideologically neutral have a higher likelihood of having a representative

who is more ideologically distant than the median voter. This might be caused by the respondents

to the survey being slightly more ideologically liberal than conservative. The frequency of the

median voters is shown in Figure 6.
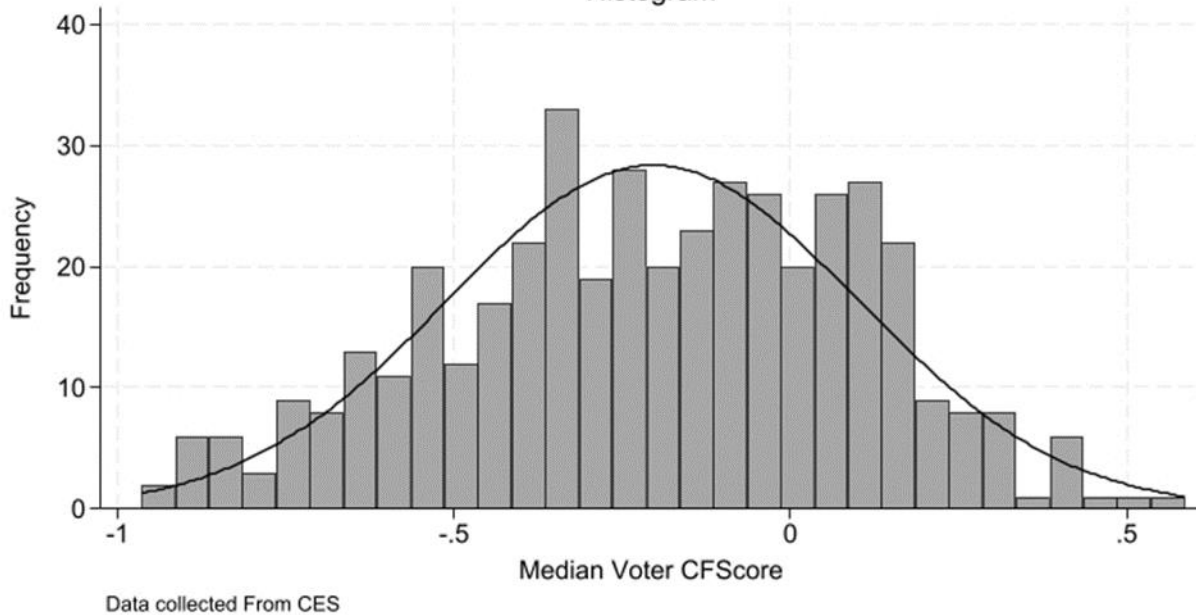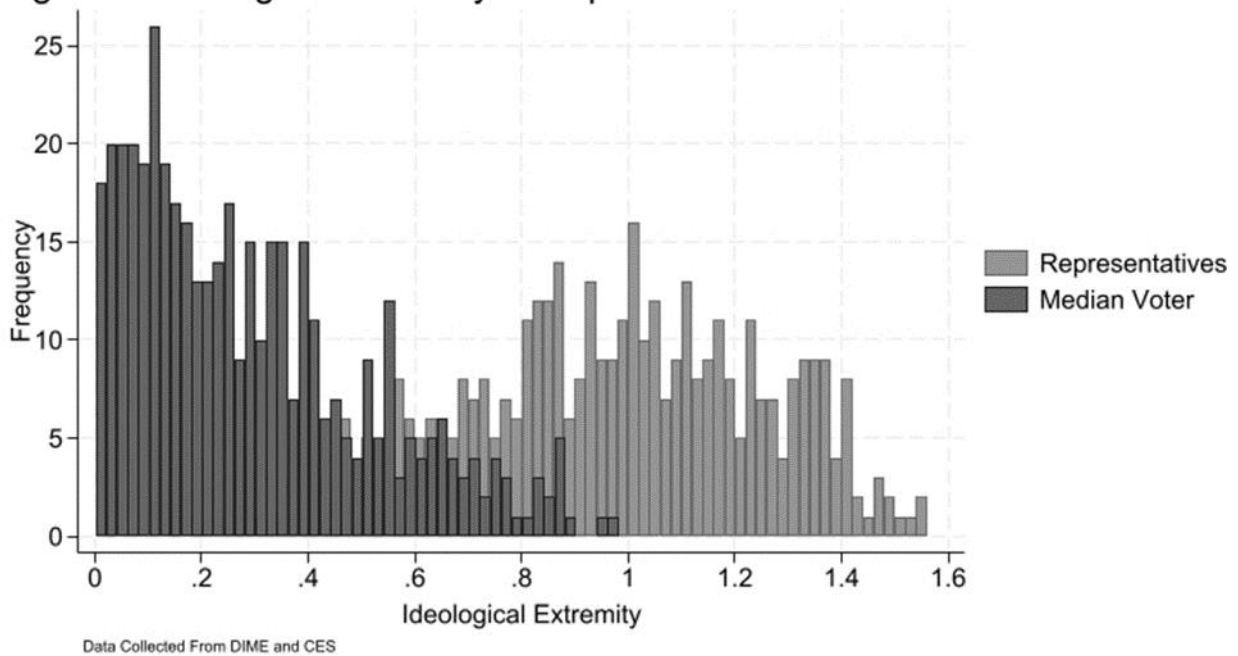

Figure 6: Frequency of Median Voter CFscore

Data collected From CES

Figure 7: Ideological Extremity of Representatives and Median Voters

Data Collected From DIME and CES

Controlling for ideological direction then showed that while median voters are ideologically closer to neutral, representatives are more likely to be moderately more extreme as shown in Figure 7. This could be because representatives do not need to ideologically align with all their voters, but only to align themselves with a majority of their voting constituents to win their general election. This is a way for more ideologically extreme positions to be held by representatives while still potentially representing the portion of their district that voted for them. More granular data, like individual party affiliation, voting results, and voting share, would need to be integrated into the dataset to evaluate the potential effects of individual polarization on their representatives.

When adding the relationship between donations to ideological distance some interesting pieces of information become highlighted. Each party starts clustered. Democratic districts are, primarily, less ideologically extreme while the Republican districts are, primarily, more ideologically extreme. Yet as the amount of donations breaks about the 2 million dollars mark the

districts start trending towards the best-fit line, which starts at approximately a .7 and trends upwards towards a 1, or a 1.5 when the most extreme cases are examined. This suggests that as donations to campaigns increase ideological extremity moves towards a more extreme ideological position. This is likely because donors hold a more ideologically extreme position compared to the average person. Representatives are seeking their financial backing to win office and in turn, become more ideologically extreme to appease their potential donors.

Implications

While this does support my hypothesis it also raises more questions than answers. Yes, as donations to political campaigns increase ideological distance between representatives and constituents increases. That now raises the question of why. Past research shows that primaries have a polarizing effect on representatives (Snyder and Stewart 2001; Barber 2016; Stone and Simas 2010) but the conventional belief is that general elections are supposed to reduce the polarizing effects of the primary election (Downs 1957). This research findings run counter to the conventional belief that two-party voting will lead to candidates appealing to the more moderate median voter. Instead, my findings point towards a slight relationship between donations pushing representatives toward more ideologically extreme positions.

Conclusions

With my research supporting my hypothesis, what does that mean for federal elections and Californian elections?

For federal elections, as stated earlier, very little can be done to limit donation amounts because of the Supreme Court ruling in *Citizens United vs. The Federal Elections Commission.* The case gave Super PACs and private corporations the ability to donate an unregulated amount of money to federal elections and given that the case cites First Amendment justification for that

deregulation, there is very little chance that restrictions will be placed on donation amounts.

In California, it is a similar story to the federal government with some significant distinctions. The largest distinction is that the state government can regulate the amount of money that is directly donated to political campaigns, with the caveat that the assembly district or city opts into being regulated by the state. If not, local regulation supersedes any campaign donation limits set by the state thanks to Assembly Bill 571. This lack of direct regulatory control comes with a lessened risk of the bill being overturned in court like several of California's previous attempts to regulate campaign finance. But at the same time, it allows for the FPPC to mandate certain reporting practices. Elected officials and their associated campaigns, in California, are required to report at a minimum bi-annually how much and where the money to fund their campaigns comes from. While not limiting the effect money has on polarization, doing this can help keep California voters more aware of who is funding a given political campaign and help voters make better, more informed decisions.

Future Study

There are a lot of additional studies that can be done to look at the ideological separation of representatives and constituents beyond looking at the polarizing effect of primaries or the restrictive pre-primary phase. For future studies, I would like to perform this study while controlling for more traditional effects of polarization in the election process. Incumbency status influences polarization. Incumbents tend to be more ideologically like their constituents especially when compared to challengers, or open-seat nominees (Kujala 2019). Competitiveness is another factor that I would be interested in controlling for. Looking at both the winners and their opponents could allow for more relative data analysis. With both competitors, you can look

at the difference in donations as an additional factor that might bring outlier races more in line with the less competitive races. Running this study again over multiple election cycles is another continuation I have considered.

I have also considered taking this model and applying it to California. As stated earlier, campaign finance reform is possible at the state and local levels, especially when compared to the federal level. With Assembly Bill 571 taking effect in 2023 this could allow for a pre-treatment and post-treatment study of districts depending on if they changed their campaign finance limits to be in line with California's limits, higher, or lower. This research would need to control for similar factors that I mentioned earlier to increase the model's strength. It would also likely need several years to allow for the different treatments to take effect.

There is still a lot that this dataset and model can provide for researching political extremity and how campaign finance plays a role in it. By adding to and refining the metrics used in this dataset there are still several untold factors to be explained.

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