

The Partisan Mirror:
The Effects of Information and Partisanship on Voters' Perceptions of
Candidates' Ideology

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Abstract

In a political environment where information competes with “fake news” and partisanship dictates what is believed, voters must separate the two or be deceived. Though accurate information about politicians and policies is available, misperceptions persist, and increasing polarization in the government and the electorate exacerbate the reluctance to consume information that conflicts with existing attitudes. In this paper I identify the sources of information that affect people’s ability to correctly place Congressional candidates on the ideological spectrum and the factors that are associated with misperceptions of ideology. I draw on Bawn and Zaller’s notion of the *electoral blind spot* to illustrate the degree and skew of misperception in the electorate. I do this for incumbents and challengers in the 2010 and 2012 House of Representatives elections. Results suggest that voters are generally unable to discern degrees of partisanship in their candidates. Voters tend to believe candidates are more moderate than they are in reality, and this effect is greater if a candidate is a voter’s co-partisan. Additionally, voters project their own ideological self-identification onto their candidates: The distance a voter considers themselves to be from the ideological center influences, proportionally, how far the voter perceives candidates from either political party to be from the center. The heterogeneity of misperception and the projection of one’s own ideology onto candidates are inconsistent with the conception of the *electoral blind spot* as a set of policies over which the voter is indifferent, reflecting instead a strong *partisan mirror* effect on voters’ interpretation of political information.

INTRODUCTION – KNOWLEDGE, INFORMATION, AND PERCEPTION

Leading up to his 2017 inauguration, then-President-Elect Donald Trump began rejecting undesirable reporting as “fake news,” though many of the stories he declared fake were thoroughly investigated by the media outlets who reported them and were arguably clearly accurate (Tapper 2017). His claims resonated with conservative supporters who are suspicious of what they consider biased news media, and who actually appear to trust the President more than even traditionally conservative media outlets (Economist 2017). Despite clear evidence that so-called “fake news” is accurately reported, or that many popular stories are, in fact, fabricated, many Americans of all ideological persuasions readily believe false information, especially negative depictions of political opponents (BBC 2017; Coppins 2017).

Though accurate information about political actors and policy proposals is available, misperception of reality persists. One explanation of this misperception is that it may be caused by a simple lack of knowledge, where people just don’t understand the facts presented to them or are unable to discern between evidence and bluster. The inability to see the difference between two competing ideas leads one to make a decision based not on the information itself, but on some other less relevant criterion: characteristics of the messenger or intensity of the argument, for example. In a strictly political context, this phenomenon has been dubbed the *electoral blind spot*, an ideological space in which voters cannot credibly discern differences between candidates or policies, and, as a result, make voting decisions haphazardly, assessing new information without a clear reference to party (Bawn, et al 2012). In an environment where voters have little political information, the blind spot is large, and misperception of reality is more likely.

In this paper I demonstrate that voters' perceptions of political candidates' ideology are not consistent with the concept of an electoral blind spot. To do this, I consider the electoral phenomena that would logically provide evidence of the blind spot's influence: candidates perceived as more centrist than reality, differences in voter information influencing perception of candidate ideology, and voters failing to distinguish between candidates of different ideologies. To detect the presence or absence of these effects, I develop measures of candidate ideology and voter perceptions of those ideologies. To enable examination of both incumbents and challengers, I use data on the ideology of donors and supporters of each candidate from the Database on Ideology, Money in Politics, and Elections (DIME) in a given election to approximate the candidate's ideological positioning (Bonica 2016). To these I add data from numerous sources, including the Federal Election Commission; the Cooperative Congressional Election Study; and the Wesleyan Advertising Project to calculate whether, and under what circumstances, voters more correctly perceive their candidates' ideology. My evaluation of perception—and misperception—proceeds with analyses of both individual and aggregate district-level measures.

I find that a strong driver of misperception is the congruence between the voter's and the candidate's party, and an important factor is voters' own ideological self-identification, specifically how far they believe themselves to be from the political "center." Voters are generally unable to discern degrees of partisanship in their candidates, and there is a strong tendency to believe candidates are more moderate than they are in reality. This effect is greater if a candidate is a voter's co-partisan. These phenomena are more reflective of a tendency to view political information through a partisan lens, to react mechanically to political cues and one's own political predispositions. Voters resist information or constrain their response to align with their

partisan identification, effectively filtering out information that contradicts their partisan viewpoint (Zaller 1992; Goren, et al 2009). On top of this effect, voters generally project their own ideological self-identification onto their candidates. The distance a voter considers themselves to be from the ideological center correlates, proportionally, to the distance the voter perceives candidates from either political party to be from the center, often more so than the candidates' actual position, whether centrist or extremist. My findings indicate voters' attitudes are influenced by a *partisan mirror* phenomenon, a way of seeing political information that has a strong enough effect on attitudes to affect not only the general partisan interpretation of the information, but also to reflect the viewer's own degree of partisanship onto that interpretation.

BACKGROUND: INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE IN ELECTIONS

An informed electorate is a fundamental element of a properly functioning democratic system. Information and knowledge allow citizens to translate preferences into interests, identify candidates who will best represent those interests, and hold to account officials who fail to do so. The effectiveness of a democracy is directly related to the degree to which its electorate is informed (Kinder and Palfrey 1993; Highton 2004), both because voters need sufficient information to know how their own preferences align with policy positions (Althaus 2002), and because voters need to be able to distinguish among candidates to determine which of them hold policy positions that are similar to their own. Lacking information, a voter is in an electoral blind spot, unable to distinguish one candidate from another, and makes electoral decisions based on criteria that are likely less relevant to the quality of representation they might otherwise expect (Bawn, et al 2012).

Democracy may demand an informed electorate, but American voters are generally ill informed about the details of legislation, policy, or who even their own representatives are; because of the wealth of information one needs to digest or because we simply don't dedicate the time and work needed to become politically informed (Lupia 2016). The lack of effort that typical Americans devote to consuming political information results in a lack of knowledge that hinders their ability to select representatives who share their interests or to hold elected officials accountable for their performance in office (Campbell, et al 1960; Converse 1964; Delli-Carpini and Keeter 1996).

Despite the handicap of being uninformed, voters are still able to use political cues to detect important differences between candidates and policy proposals. By making efficient use of available political signals like party, demographic characteristics, and endorsements, poorly informed voters are able to make sense of political events and campaigns despite their inability to recall specific facts (Page and Shapiro 1992; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). Failure to remember names or other particular policy positions may be tempered by impressions voters formed when information was first presented to them (Graber 1988). Though they can't describe the details of government actions, they pick up enough information about political matters that they are able to take positions and make voting decisions similar to those they would probably make if they were, in fact, well informed (Popkin 1991; Bartels 1996; Bowler and Donovan 1998; Lupia 2016). The use of political cues as a substitute for detailed political information is imperfect, though, as voters' perceptions are colored by the source of the information they rely upon, and whether that source frames the information in a particular way (Krosnick and Brannon 1993). As a result, information

may be limited to particular issues, facts about only recent events, or strictly partisan evaluations (Miller 2013; Jesse 2010).

WHERE DO WE GET INFORMATION? Among the multitude of sources of information and political cues, the most partisan source is certainly the political campaigns themselves. Specifically designed to promote a candidate, campaign organizations have become adept at getting information to the voters, informing them about specific candidate positions, and giving them confidence that they know enough about a candidate to cast their vote (Alvarez and Franklin 1994). Voters consume and recall campaign information produced over the course of an election cycle, altering their perceptions of the candidate and demonstrating increased knowledge about the relevant issues (Alvarez and Glasgow 1997; Alvarez 1997). In order to cement their message in the minds of voters, campaign activities and advertising often deliver the same message repeatedly, increasing the likelihood that people will recall the information. (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954). Yet despite the repetition of the message and ads, voters often still forget the specific information they heard, though they will likely later be able to recollect their evaluation of the candidate based on that information, which will then influence their vote choice (Lodge, Stennburgen, and Brau 1995).

Political advertising, especially television advertising, probably has the broadest reach of a campaign's efforts to inform and influence voters. TV ads can be more effective at informing voters than newspapers, TV news programs, or even televised candidate debates (Just, Crigler, and Wallach 1990). Part of the explanation for the effectiveness of TV advertising, particularly negative or attack ads, is its ability to enhance the emotional appeal of the message through the use of music, imagery, or other symbols, often using these to evoke enthusiasm or fear. (Brader 2005; Lang 1991;

Brians and Watterberg 1996; Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000). Political advertising is an effective source of information, as viewers who recall seeing ads tend to have the most accurate assessments of candidate positions and are also more likely to use that information in their electoral decision (Brians and Watterberg 1996).

News media coverage of candidates can be similarly effective to campaign advertising, but without the clear partisan framing (West 1994). Among voters who pay attention to political coverage, news media can be a highly effective source of information, with print media chief among them. Newspaper readers tend to have stronger knowledge of candidates' issue positions than people who prefer television news programs (Price and Zaller 1993; Becker and Dunwoody 1982; Choi and Becker 1987). Newspapers are more informative than TV news simply because they are able, by the nature of the medium, to cover the candidates in more depth and detail (Robinson and Davis 1990). Regardless of the medium, one of the more important roles that news media plays in developing the information environment is bringing unflattering coverage or evidence of inappropriate behavior by candidates into the public forum, which can play a critical role in politicians' accountability to voters (Chang, Golden, and Hill 2010).

Incumbent candidates for office enjoy an information advantage in that they have usually been the subjects of media coverage over the course of their term(s) in office, and voters are likely more familiar with them and their issue positions. Even when an incumbent is less frequently the subject of media attention, voters remain familiar with them and their positions. When campaign season begins, incumbents' campaigns begin building on that familiarity with additional information designed to appeal to voters (Jacobson 2009). On the other hand, voters often are unable to identify or even recognize their names of challengers who are trying to unseat incumbent

legislators (Hinckley 1980). More credible challengers, who enjoy more familiarity among voters, inspire stronger efforts (and more spending) by incumbents to influence voters' decisions (Jacobson 1978; Popkin 1991). Generally, though, the information and familiarity advantage of incumbent candidates pays off, as incumbents win reelection on average over 90% of the time (Opensecrets.org).

THE ELECTORAL BLIND SPOT. The effect of all of this political information on perception (and misperception) of candidate ideology was described in "A Theory of Political Parties" as an *electoral blind spot* (Bawn et al 2012). This concept explained that voters who lack the ability to discern differences between candidates or policies will somewhat blindly make their vote choice based on non-ideological criteria. The inability to discern those differences is a function of the information available to the voter: an environment with less political information produces a larger *blind spot*, which is more likely to prevent voters from seeing candidates' policy differences. The blind spot is located at the center of the ideological spectrum¹, on the understanding that voters generally prefer centrist candidates, so parties that nominate candidates who fall to the left or right of the edge of the blind spot will likely see those candidates rejected by voters who recognize the more extreme policy positions.

While Bawn, et al, do not explicitly identify the electoral blind spot as an individual or collective phenomenon, it follows logically that each individual voter has their own electoral blind spot, centered on their own ideal point. The concept can also be applied collectively to an electorate at-large, a congressional district, for example. In

¹ This spectrum follows the convention that its left side reflects more liberal ideologies, and the right side more conservative, while the midpoint is the ideological, non-partisan center. To "place" an official on the spectrum is to identify their *ideal point*, or the point on the spectrum that corresponds not only to their general ideological leaning (liberal or conservative), but that is an appropriate distance from the center to reflect the official's degree of partisanship, where those furthest from the center on either side are the most extreme of their respective parties.

this case, the blind spot would be centered on the median ideal point of the district and extend in either direction a distance equal to that which is small enough such that a majority of voters are able to discern differences between candidates' ideology and their own. Figure 1 is a visualization of a district-wide electoral blind spot, depicting a sample congressional district with a distribution of individual blind spots. In this example, most of the voters in the district tend to be liberal, so the district median ideology is left of the ideological center. Each voter has their individual blind spot located at their personal ideal point, the size of the spot relative to their personal political knowledge. The area where a majority of individual blind spots overlap forms the collective blind spot for the district. Within this ideological space, a majority of voters will not be able to discern differences between candidates or policies. Just like the individual blind spot, an ill-informed electorate (high misperception, large blind spot) will not notice on average that a given candidate's ideal point is far from the district median. A collectively well-informed electorate will have a smaller blind spot and the majority of voters will take note of a candidate's non-centrist ideal point.

<< FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE >>

THE PARTISAN LENS. Even in an environment with abundant political information, it is unlikely to be interpreted the same by everyone. Information consumers of differing ideologies can have different perceptions of information about candidates, and party loyalty can facilitate alternative interpretations of the same information (Barber and Pope 2017). Viewing candidates and policies through this *partisan lens* can lead voters to resist information or constrain their response to align with their partisan identification, effectively filtering out information that contradicts their partisan viewpoint (Zaller 1992; Goren, et al 2009). Partisanship affects not only how messages are interpreted, but also whether voters retain political information, as

party membership correlates with greater political knowledge generally, and more informed partisans are more likely to resist information that conflicts with established party positions (Benz and Stutzer 2004; Zaller 1992).

Regardless of party membership, people are often use party labels to make candidate assessments, applying ideological and party labels as proxies for issue positions (Popkin 1994; McKelvey and Ordenshook 1986). Over the past 40 years, voters have increasingly considered their chosen political party's positions as closer to their own, while they perceive the opposing party and increasingly distant from themselves (Abromowitz and Webster 2015). If voters have knowledge of the party's ideology generally, they can apply a candidate's party label as a cue for policy positions, which allows voters to make the same choices they would make if they were more broadly informed about the candidate's positions on every issue, though the more one relies on party labels as a proxy, the weaker their preference tends to be for their chosen candidate (Lupia 2016; Palfrey and Poole 1987).

The ideological disposition of a voter's social environment can influence how people interpret partisan cues, as information from peers and other social contacts can be more influential on political attitudes than messages from political leadership (Pierce, Redlawsk, and Cohen 2013; Kertzer and Zeitzo 2016). Support or opposition to a particular candidate by others within a voter's environment can be a powerful social cue that will influence their own assessment of the candidate (Popkin 1991). An electorate that is generally more conservative than average, for example, will tend to consider relatively more conservative candidates, with an even greater tendency to do so among more liberal voters (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001). If a congressional district is more inclined to one side of the political spectrum or the other,

politicians and campaigns hoping to inform those voters will be more effective if they present messages tailored to the ideological leanings of the district (Lupia 2016).

If an informed electorate is a fundamental element in an effective democracy, then it is difficult to overstate the value of political information, whether acquired actively through research or incidentally through cues and proxies. With the variety of information sources available to voters and the role of personal and community partisanship in how that information is received, it is important to understand what factors affect actual knowledge and the ability of voters to accurately perceive the ideology of the people who would represent them in office.

MEASURING POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTION

The variety of methods often used to assess voter knowledge include measurements of an individual's ability to correctly name government officials, familiarity with the details of legislation and policy, ability to correctly identify the major political parties and their general ideological leanings, or consumption of particular media sources more or less often (Benz and Stutzer 2004; Erickson 1971). For the purposes of this study, I define an informed voter as one who can accurately place their congressional candidates' *ideal points* on a one-dimensional left-right ideological spectrum (Palfrey and Poole 1987; Highton 2004; Jacobson 1976). Knowledge of candidate ideology is necessary if voters are to be able select candidates who will best reflect a their policy preferences in office (Highton 2004; Ansolabehere and Jones 2010), and, unlike factual questions about candidates or policies, perceptions of candidate ideology will capture voters' general candidates assessments that are recalled despite having forgotten factual details (Lodge, Steenburgen, and Brau 1995).

Employing knowledge of candidates' ideological placement as my definition of an informed voter, I consider the state of being informed as a continuous measure centered on a point at which the voter knows exactly where a candidates' ideal points are on the ideological spectrum: correct *perception*. A respondent's degree of *misperception* is the distance between where that person thinks the candidate's ideal point is located and actual location² of the candidate's ideal point on the spectrum. The voter's misperception increases as the distance increases between the candidate's actual position and the voter's perception of that position. The voter's misperception may be either to consider the candidate more centrist than he or she actually is, or in the opposite direction, to perceive the candidate further from the ideological center than he or she actually is.

To develop a model of informational influences on knowledge and perception, given voters' beliefs and candidates' actual ideal points, I examine respondents' individual demographic characteristics to determine those which predict whether a voter is likely to more correctly perceive candidate ideology. I then apply those predictive characteristics to a model of district-wide collective knowledge and misperception, on the consideration that predictors of individual political knowledge may also predict collective knowledge. For example, I find that individual respondents' education level correlates to a more accurate perception of candidate ideology, so I consider whether a district with an overall higher education level is, collectively, better informed. In addition to voter characteristics, I also examine a variety of sources of information recognized in previous research that serve as short cuts, cues, and proxies

² A respondent's perception of a candidate's ideal point is determined by their response to the Cooperative Congressional Election Study (Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2013) when asked to identify a candidate's ideology. A candidate's actual ideal point is calculated based on an ideology score as calculated by Adam Bonica (2016) for the Database on Ideology, Money in Politics, and Elections. Both of these datasets are discussed in more detail herein.

voters might use to learn what they need to know in order to make a rational vote decision.³

MEASURING VOTER PERCEPTIONS. The foundation of this model is a measure of the ability of voters to accurately perceive their candidates' ideal point on the one-dimensional ideological spectrum. The first input to this measure is each voter's perception of their candidates for Congress. For this data, I used the Cooperative Congressional Election Studies (CCES) from 2010 and 2012⁴ (Ansolabehere 2012; Ansolabehere and Schaffner 2013). CCES respondents were asked to place their district's two major US House of Representatives candidates on a 7-point ideological scale. The CCES also provided each respondent's demographic and other personal data⁵, which I used to determine individual predictors of voter knowledge.

MEASURING CANDIDATES' POSITIONS. To measure a voter's ability to correctly perceive a candidate's position on the ideological spectrum, I identify a *true* position to compare to the voter's perceived position of that candidate. The ability to determine elected officials' ideal points has been well established by Poole and Rosenthal's DW-

³ Information sources to be considered in the model of district knowledge and perception include incumbency, general district partisanship, campaign efforts, political advertising, and media coverage to assess their effects on the information environment by way of making voters generally more likely to correctly perceive candidate ideology.

⁴ The CCES is a national stratified sample survey administered by YouGov/Polimetrix to 50,000+ people (55,400 in 2010 and 54,535 in 2012). The survey asks about general political attitudes, various demographic factors, assessment of roll call voting choices, and political information. I re-coded responses on candidate ideology as integers from -3 to +3, where -3 is *Very Liberal*, 0 is *Middle of the Road*, and 3 corresponds to *Very Conservative*. There are nearly equal numbers of Republican and Democratic candidates in the dataset for the two election cycles (843 and 821, respectively), and individual respondents to the CCES study were 40.7% Republican and 45.7% Democratic.

⁵ These other data include self reported voter registration status, age, gender, employment status, race/ethnicity, partisan identification, education, church attendance, ideological identification, interest in political news, retrospective assessment of the national economy, approval of presidential job performance, family income, types of political activity, and whether they had been contacted by a political campaign.

NOMINATE scoring system⁶ (2007), but NOMINATE scores are insufficient for this analysis because they are only available for candidates who have a legislative voting record. In almost every House campaign, at least one of the major party candidates lacks a voting history, and therefore lacks a NOMINATE score. In order to evaluate both candidates in a given election, a measure of candidate ideology is needed that includes candidates who do not already have a legislative voting record. Bonica (2013) developed a measure of ideology for both winning and losing candidates using campaign finance data instead of voting history to determine ideological relationships among candidates and donors. He assigns CF (Campaign Finance) scores by the convention that liberals have negative scores, centrists approach zero, conservatives are positive, and the absolute value of the score is the relative distance from the national median⁷.

A comparison of CF scores to the NOMINATE scores of the same candidates shows a correlation of more than 0.92 between the two measures across the 2010 and 2012 House elections. Within each party, the correlation is much lower (0.25-0.50), with a stronger relationship among conservative candidates. If one assumes DW-NOMINATE is a definitive measure, then CF Scores are a less than perfect proxy, but they enable a reasonably accurate comparison of the ideologies of both winning and

⁶ The DW-NOMINATE scoring system uses legislators' roll-call votes to identify those officials who more frequently vote the same way on a given bill and being ideologically similar. Poole and Rosenthal apply this process to thousands of votes across all Congresses to produce a scale of ideology, in which each legislator is assigned a NOMINATE score, with more negative values for more liberal officials and more positive for the more conservative.

⁷ Bonica's method "measures the ideology of candidates and contributors using campaign finance data. Combined with a data set of over 100 million contribution records from state and federal elections, the method estimates ideal points for an expansive range of political actors. The common pool of contributors who give across institutions and levels of politics makes it possible to recover a unified set of ideological measures for members of Congress, the President and executive branch, state legislators, governors and other state officials, as well as the interest groups and individuals that make political donations. Since candidates fundraise regardless of incumbency status, the method estimates ideal points for both incumbents and non-incumbents."

losing candidates. Figure 2 depicts the relationship between DW-NOMINATE scores and CF scores among officials who have scores on both scales.

<< FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE >>

I converted CF scores into a seven-point scale that aligns with the responses to the CCES survey. For each candidate, regardless of party, a negative (liberal) CF score was compared to the mean CF score among all Democrats in the same election cycle, and a positive (conservative) CF score was compared to the mean among Republicans. A candidate whose CF Score fell more than one standard deviation to the left of the mean Democrat was coded as *very liberal*. A *somewhat liberal* candidate was one who fell between 1 and 1.5 standard deviations to the right of the mean Democrat. *Middle of the Road* is the candidate who falls more than 1.5 standard deviations to the right of the mean Democrat and more than 1.5 standard deviations to the left of the mean Republican. Degrees of conservative labels were assigned in a similar fashion relative to the mean Republican. Figure 3 shows a distribution of the CF scores for a single campaign cycle (2012)⁸ with annotation to indicate the rules I used for conversion to the seven-point scale.

<< FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE >>

MEASURING CAMPAIGN EFFECTS AND ADVERTISING. Electoral campaigns exist fundamentally to influence citizens to vote for a particular candidate. To this end, they generally raise and spend funds, much of it for purchasing campaign ads. As both campaign efforts and candidate ads are known influences on the ability of voters to recognize candidates and identify their ideological positions, I include measures of these in the model. The amount of money spent by campaigns in a given election

⁸ The distribution of CF Scores in 2012 was typical of other election cycles.

should reveal the degree of effort made by the campaign to reach voters, and may correlate to the amount of information available to the voters about the candidates' ideological position. Similarly, the relative amount of spending between candidates for the same office can reflect each campaign's effort to produce information that they think will give their candidate an advantage. These spending data are readily available from candidates' campaign finance disclosures as summarized by the Federal Election Commission.

In addition to general campaign spending, the voter knowledge of candidates is also affected by the amount of advertising produced and aired by each campaign. Recognizing that the total number of ads, as well as specific types of campaign ads, negative or attack ads in particular, have been shown to be effective at promoting recall and identification of candidates, I considered various measures of campaign advertising⁹ to see whether any particular measure was more effective at increasing voters' knowledge of the candidates. The data from which to develop this measure is available from the Wesleyan Media Project (WMP), which analyzes political advertising archived by the Campaign Media Analysis Group and codes each ad's content and broadcast information (Fowler, Franz and, Rideout, 2014; Fowler, Franz and, Rideout, 2015). The WMP currently maintains a database of political advertising content and targeting for the 2010, 2012, and 2014 election cycles.

MEASURING MEDIA COVERAGE. To evaluate the influence of the various news media on voter information about candidates, I used data from the NewsBank website

⁹ Measures of data considered in the model include total ads run by the campaign, the number of ads run by a campaign relative to the number run by the opponent, the total number of attack ads from each candidate in the race, and the proportion of campaign ads that were attack ads.

which summarizes media mentions based on various criteria.¹⁰ I counted the number of web-only and newspaper articles mentioning each House candidate by name for the 2010 and 2012 election cycles, using only mentions that occurred during the 12-month period prior to the respective elections. My evaluation of voter knowledge considered the total number of times a candidate was mentioned, as well as the proportion of mentions relative to the opponent for the same seat.

MEASURING COMMUNITY IDEOLOGY. Partisan cues in one's social environment can affect perceptions of political parties and candidates. To measure the impact of partisanship within the constituency, I used a measure of the mean ideological positioning of the district as a whole. Tausanovitch and Warshaw's (2013) method for estimating the mean ideology of various constituencies (hereafter referred to as "TW score") provides such a measure.¹¹ TW scores follow a familiar convention that liberals have negative scores, centrists approach zero, conservatives are positive, and the absolute value of the score is the relative distance from the national median. To allow for a clearer comparison of the effects of constituent ideology on voter knowledge, I standardized the TW Score of each district to a measure of the number of standard deviations to the left or right of the mean TW Score.

A MODEL OF VOTER PERCEPTION

The critical measures for this study are voters' perceptions of their candidates' ideology, their perceptions of their own ideology, and their candidates' actual ideology.

¹⁰ The available data from Newsbank.com include multiple types of media sources, including newspapers, web-only sources, video, and magazines. Not all types of sources are available for all areas of the US, but the most consistently available of these data were those for web-only and newspaper sources.

¹¹ Tausanovitch and Warshaw's method to estimate the policy preferences of small geographic units jointly scale the policy preferences of respondents to seven large-scale national surveys using an item-response theory (IRT) model to pool the several datasets. This approach enabled them to develop a continuous measure of the policy preferences of 275,000 citizens in all 50 states.

To develop a model of the factors that predict correct perception that would also permit an exploration of the theorized electoral blind spot effects, I created a measure of *misperception* that would indicate whether voters believed candidates to be more or less moderate than reality. Among those CCES respondents who chose to attempt to correctly place their congressional candidates on the ideological spectrum, I determined for each respondent-candidate pair a level of *misperception*, calculated using the formula:

$$m_{cv} = \begin{cases} I_c - P_{cv}, & \text{for Democratic Candidates} \\ P_{cv} - I_c, & \text{for Republican Candidates} \end{cases}$$

Where: m_{cv} is the misperception of candidate c by voter v ,

I_c is the value of the ideal point of the candidate

P_{cv} is voter v 's perception of candidate c 's ideal point

In this formulation, the value assigned to *misperception* is zero if the voter correctly perceives the candidate's ideology. Regardless of liberal or conservative ideology, if the voter thinks the candidate is further from the ideological center than they actually are, the value of misperception is positive. If the voter thinks the candidate is more centrist than reality, then the value assigned to misperception is negative. The greater the absolute value of m_{cv} , the greater is the degree of misperception. For respondents to the 2010 and 2012 CCES surveys, the mean values of m_{cv} were, respectively, -0.39 and -0.55, with 72.3% and 77.7% of respondents having negative *misperception* scores.

PARTISANSHIP AS A DRIVER OF PERCEPTION. Recalling that partisan identification can significantly affect voters' impressions of political figures, an examination of *misperception* measure, controlled for the partisan identification of the respondents, shows that Republican and Democratic respondents see the same candidates in systematically different lights. Figure 4 shows the relationship between the values of

misperception of each candidate by Republican respondents compared to misperception by Democrats. Candidates of the two parties are distinctly separated, showing that Republican respondents tend to see Republican candidates as more moderate than they really are, but perceive Democratic candidates as closer to their actual ideological position. The same is true among Democratic respondents' perceptions of their co-partisan and opposite-partisan candidates.

<< FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE >>

Another interesting characteristic of the responses from the CCES is that there is a distinct relationship between the self-identified ideology of respondents and their perceived ideology of their candidates. Figure 5 depicts this relationship, controlling for the candidates' actual ideology. The mean values (among all CCES respondents, nationwide) of candidate perceived ideology do not appear to vary significantly with the candidates' actual ideology. The mean perception is more centrist than respondents' self-declared ideology, across the entire spectrum, and more so among co-partisans, and perception appears to be largely a function of the respondents' own ideology. The dominant effect is that respondents perceive their candidates to have ideologies proportional to their own in terms of distance from the center, regardless of the candidates' actual ideology.

<< FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE >>

INDIVIDUAL MISPERCEPTION. A model predicting individual-level misperception builds on the influence of partisanship and considers demographic and individual characteristics that might reasonably influence or describe how well informed a given voter might be. These characteristics include age, race, gender, employment status, education, income, church attendance, interest in the news, political activity, contact by campaigns, and perception about the state of the economy, in addition to party

identification. Table 1 includes regression results of these variables on misperception of both Democratic and Republican candidates separately¹². These results show significant and substantial effects of education, income, interest in news, political activity, assessment of the state of the economy, and party identification. All of these predict a similar effect of decreased *misperception* regardless of candidate party, with the exception of *state of the economy* and *party ID*. Recognizing that perception of the state of the economy is generally correlated to evaluations of the sitting president, it stands to reason that there would be a different partisan effect. In fact, those who think the economy is doing well are, similar to self-identified Democrats, more likely to be misperceived about the ideology of Democratic candidates (in this case during the Obama administration). Democratic identifying respondents reflect more misperception about Democratic candidates, and the corresponding effect, albeit smaller, appears among Republican respondents and candidates.

<< TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE >>

Individual Perception. Preliminary analysis of the relationship between CCES respondent self-identified ideology, perceived candidate ideology, and the CFScore-derived actual candidate ideology indicated that a respondent's own ideology may be a greater influence than a candidate's actual position on how that candidate is perceived. A model of candidate perception with descriptive variables of respondent self-perception and actual candidate ideology, controlled for incumbency status, shows that all of these factors have a significant effect on people's perceptions of their candidates' positions. Table 2 shows the regression coefficients (all are significant at the 0.01 level

¹² It is important to note here the interpretation of the positive and negative values of the coefficients. The large negative value of the constant term corresponds to the fact that most respondents have a negative misperception score, meaning they perceive candidates to be more moderate than they really are. A positive-valued coefficient implies that its respective variable, when increased in value, tends to decrease the magnitude of *misperception*, or make one more aware of the true degree of a candidate's partisanship.

except as noted) for this model. With the exception of Republican respondents' evaluations of Democratic candidates, respondents' self-identified ideology has a large effect on candidate evaluations. This effect is greatest among candidates challenging sitting representatives, in most cases larger than the candidates' actual ideological position. Relative to actual position, respondents' own position is consistently strongest among co-partisan candidates, regardless of incumbency status.

<< TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE >>

Collective Misperception. CCES respondents were asked separately about the ideology of the two major candidates in their respective districts, allowing an analysis of respondents' misperception for each candidate individually. Taking the mean of the *misperception* value of all respondents in a given candidate's district, I find a single aggregate measure of *misperception* for each candidate. Previous research has established that, generally speaking, candidates are perceived to be more centrist than they really are (Ansolabehere and Jones 2010). Accordingly, the calculated values of *misperception* for the 2010 and 2012 US House election cycles demonstrate the same phenomenon. In this dataset, 83.4% and 87.6%, respectively, of candidates are perceived as more centrist than reality.

Similar to the approach used to evaluate the factors that contribute to individual misperception, I developed a model of district-level misperception of each candidate using aggregated versions of the variables that were significant and substantial at the individual level, plus candidate- or district-specific variables, including measures of campaign spending, advertising¹³, media mentions, district ideology, candidates'

¹³ Campaign advertising was considered in the development of this model, but was not included in the final version. Advertising measures were consistently either insignificant, near zero effect, or both. Many candidates did not advertise, so removing this insignificant measure from the model allowed for inclusion of more cases in the analysis.

political party affiliation, and incumbency status. Table 3 includes the results of this full model, in which the aggregated individual-level variables are nearly all statistically insignificant, with the exception of “Interest in the News.” Campaign spending, incumbency status, and candidate party are all significant and substantial in this specification. Each of these factors contributes to a decrease in the degree of collective *misperception* of the candidate’s ideology by the district’s voters, meaning that incumbents and candidates for open seats are less likely to be misperceived than challengers, and Republicans are less likely to be misperceived than Democrats.

<< TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE >>

Given the noteworthy effects of co-partisanship between candidates and respondents, I considered how district-level factors affected *misperception* among respondents controlling for their partisan identification. Using the same model as the previous district-level misperception analysis, Table 4 shows the regression result of dividing the dataset by respondent partisanship. Comparing the original model with the three alternative models, I find that, despite some modest differences in magnitude, the relationships between the covariates and *misperception* are generally consistent across partisan respondent groups with a few noteworthy exceptions. The aggregated individual effects of *Interest in the News* and *Political Activity* are only significant among independent respondents, and are actually substantially large. *Interest in the News*, among independents, tends to decrease misperception, while *Political Activity* tends to increase misperception among independents. Among all respondents the difference in *misperception* between a Democrat and a Republican candidate is 0.35, or approximately one half of one standard deviation of the *misperception* measure distribution. Among only Democratic respondents, that difference nearly triples. Among Republican respondents, the magnitude is 0.37, but in the opposite direction, and among self-

described Independents, the effect of candidate party on misperception completely disappears.

<< TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE >>

To put these results in simpler terms, respondents generally perceive candidates of any party as being more centrist than they really are, and more so for Democratic candidates than Republicans. Both Democrats and Republicans have a tendency to perceive candidates of their own party as centrist, while being more likely to recognize the non-centrist tendencies of candidates from the other party. Respondents who claim partisan independence are not swayed by party in their evaluation of candidates, and their *misperception* measure is, on average, more a product of individual characteristics pertaining to general political knowledge.

Collective Perception. At the individual level, there is a strong relationship between respondents' self-identified ideology and their perception of their candidates' ideology. To measure this effect at a district level, I compare the mean perceived ideology of each candidate against the mean of all respondents' self-identified ideologies. Having already established that there are systematic differences in the way voters perceive co- and opposite-partisan candidates, I conduct the analysis in four cases: Conservative- or liberal-identifying respondents perceptions of Democratic or Republican candidates, respectively.¹⁴ The results, summarized in Table 5, demonstrate that in three of the four cases, the effect of district mean respondent ideology on mean perceived ideology is significant and substantial, while the effect of a candidate's actual ideology on their mean perceived ideology is either insignificant or less than one sixth the magnitude of the respondent ideology effect. The only exception to this is the

¹⁴ The four separate cases are necessary because the anticipated result is different for each pairing (ref. Figure 5), with a positive slope for co-partisan pairings, a negative slope for opposite-partisans, and different intercepts for each.

relationship between conservative respondents and Democratic candidates, in which neither respondent nor candidate ideology has a significant effect on perception. This result is not affected by the incumbency status of the candidate.

DISCUSSION: THE ELECTORAL BLIND SPOT AND THE PARTISAN MIRROR

Accurate perception (or misperception) of candidate ideology is a key element of the *electoral blind spot* concept. Recall that this theory considers candidates to be located within the constituency's collective "blind spot" if they the voters, on average, are unable to distinguish the candidates' positions to be different from one another or from their own ideological positions (Bawn et al, 2012). In practice, one would expect evidence of the blind spot to include a tendency to consider candidates as more centrist than they actually are, as well as varying degrees of voter information to impact the ability of voters accurately perceive their candidates' positions. These two characteristics are evident in the data, as candidates are generally misperceived as more centrist than reality, and informational factors like *education, income, interest in the news, and political activity* significantly reduce *misperception* at the individual level. At the district level *campaign spending* and *incumbency* are significant effects, indicating that available information is indeed a factor in constituent ability to detect candidate ideology. There are other characteristics of the data, however, that are not predicted by the blind spot concept; principal among them is the effect of partisanship on both perception and misperception of candidate ideology.

Democratic voters' degree of centrist misperception of Republican candidates is much smaller than it is for Democratic candidates, and likewise Republicans' misperception of Democratic candidates is smaller than it is for Republican candidates. Voters of each party see their co-partisan candidates in a more moderate light, an effect

that completely disappears among self-described independent voters. Among independents, candidate party isn't a significant driver of misperception, though respondents' degree of *interest in the news* reduces misperception, while respondent's degree of *political activity* actually increases misperception. The electoral blind spot was theoretically presented as a circle, obscuring the center of a two-dimensional ideological space, keeping centrist voters from detecting differences between partisan candidates, with the circle's radius determined by the voter's knowledge or available information. The results presented here argue that the area obscured is neither symmetrical nor universal. Effectively, partisan voters extend the blind spot further to their preferred side of the spectrum and simultaneously retract it from the opposition's side. They are quite aware of, and exaggerate, partisanship among the opposition, but convinced that their co-partisan candidates are more moderate.

This variation on the blind spot concept, based on analyses of *misperception*, is further eroded by the relationship between a voter's self-identified ideology and that person's perception of their candidates' ideologies. At both the individual and district levels of analysis, there is a strong relationship between voters' self-perception and their candidate perception, in several cases stronger than there is between the candidates' actual ideology and the voters' perception of it. Consistent with what was found through the *misperception* analysis, there is a significant tendency to perceive candidates as more centrist than they truly are, and this tendency is consistent across voter and candidate partisan affiliations. More noteworthy is the tendency of perception to mirror voters' self-identified ideology. A voter who considers themselves to be "somewhat" conservative or liberal for example, is more likely to think that both their candidates are also "somewhat" liberal or conservative, respective to their party affiliation. Likewise, a voter who considers themselves to be "very" liberal or

conservative tends to believe their candidates are both “very” liberal or conservative, respectively.¹⁵ This effect is consistent across degrees of candidate partisanship and, as noted, is often stronger than the effect of the candidate’s actual partisanship, particularly in the aggregate, district-level analysis.

CONCLUSION

While there are clearly a myriad of sources of information that voters may take advantage of in an effort to make their electoral decisions, a minority of citizens have the time or desire to pursue significant amounts of political information. Relying on cues can be an effective substitute for the effort of gathering one’s own political knowledge, and individuals are able to make voting decisions that approximate what they would have done had they been more fully informed. Collectively, as a constituency, the individual sources of voter information become less predictive of the ability of voters to identify their candidates’ true ideological position, and people begin to get more of their information from the specific cues of party, incumbency, and campaigns. The information that voters use in their assessments, both individually and collectively, is apparently insufficient to reveal to the voters the degree of partisanship of their candidates, just as the *electoral blind spot* concept would predict.

The distinct influence of partisan evaluations on the ability of voters to detect non-centrist candidates is at odds with the *blind spot*, or at least a symmetric version of the *blind spot*. The tendency of partisan voters to perceive their own candidates as moderate to a greater degree than they do opposite-partisan candidates might indicate a different, asymmetrically shaped blind spot, in which partisanship causes the

¹⁵ Voters who consider themselves “middle of the road” yet also identify with one of the political parties tend to follow the same pattern as voters who are “somewhat” liberal or conservative, as their partisan identification would indicate. Among self-identified partisan “independents” who also identify as “middle of the road” (approximately 5% of respondents), the relationship between actual and perceived ideology is smaller than among partisan respondents, but still statistically significant.

“blindness” to have a greater effect on one’s own side of the political center. This alternate concept fails to explain the strong tendency of voters to assign their candidates the same degree of partisanship the voters identify in themselves. Voters see in their candidates a reflection of their own ideology, both co-partisans and those of the opposing party. This partisan mirror is not predicted by the *electoral blind spot*.

In a world where with an *electoral blind spot*, party leadership will nominate a candidate as far from the ideological center as they can so long as the information available to voters prevents them from seeing just how partisan the candidate is. The result would be a check on candidate extremism and on polarization of representatives, so long as there was sufficient information available to voters. A *partisan mirror*, on the other hand, in which voters see their own distance from the center in both candidates, would permit parties to nominate candidates as extreme or moderate as they wish, expecting that the voters will simply see themselves, ideologically. This suggests that polarization among candidates and, subsequently, representatives, may not be driven by voter demand for more extreme candidates, but perhaps parties are simply taking advantage of the strength of partisan cues as a substitute for real voter information about candidate ideology.

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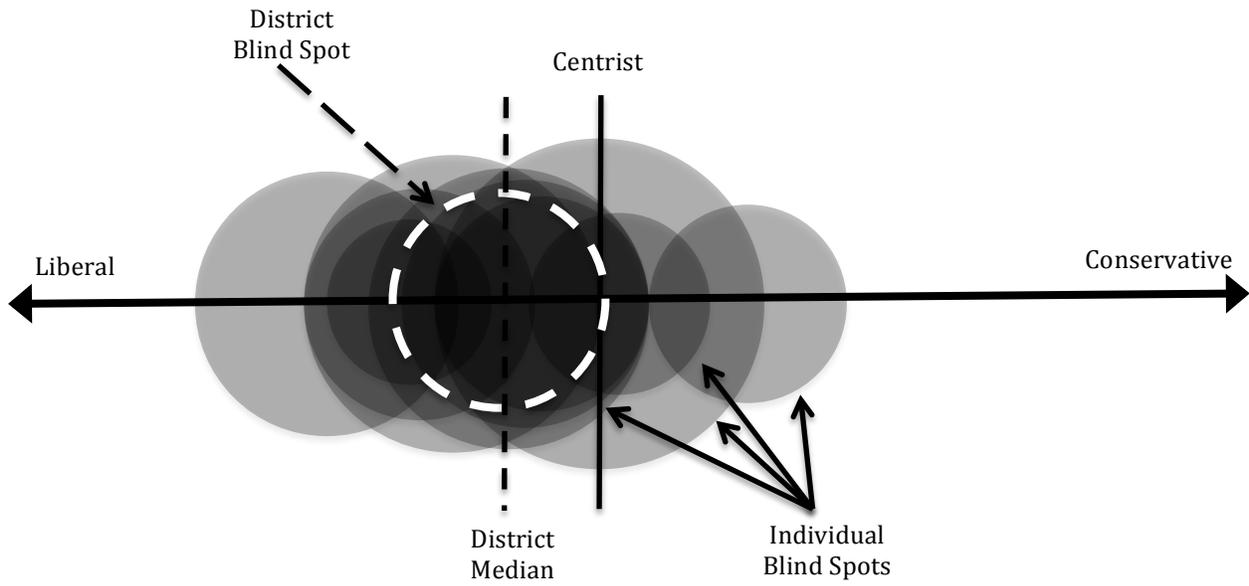
The Partisan Mirror: Tables and Charts

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Figure 1: Visualization of the Collective Electoral Blind Spot for a Congressional District



Note: For ease of interpretation, this image is two-dimensional, but the same principles apply in a single ideological dimension.

Figure 2: DW-NOMINATE Scores and CF Scores for US House Members, 112th and 113th Congresses, with fit lines for all members and for each party independently

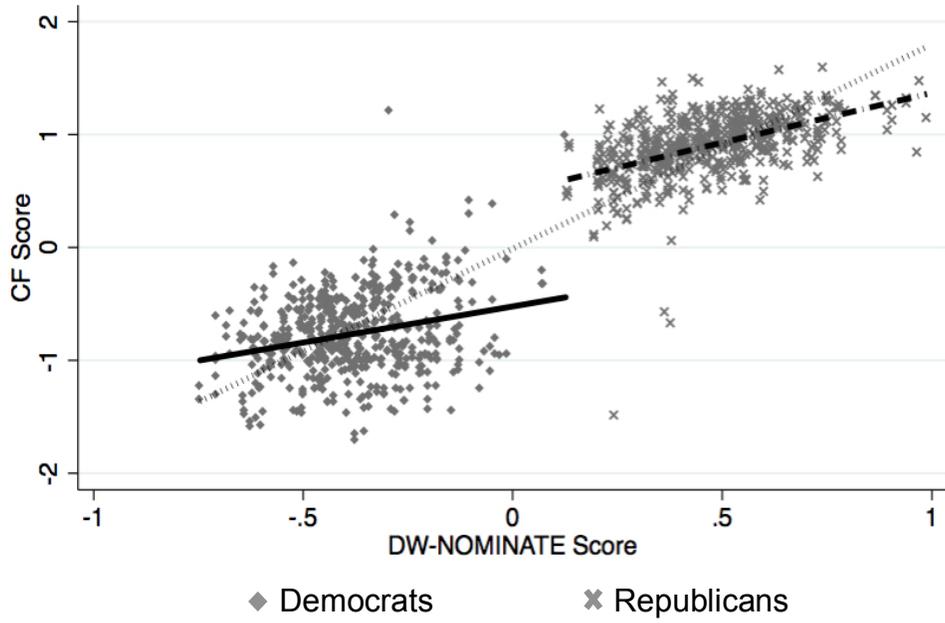


Figure 3: Distribution of Congressional Candidates' CF Scores (2012 election cycle), Annotated with Seven-Point Ideology Conversion Rule

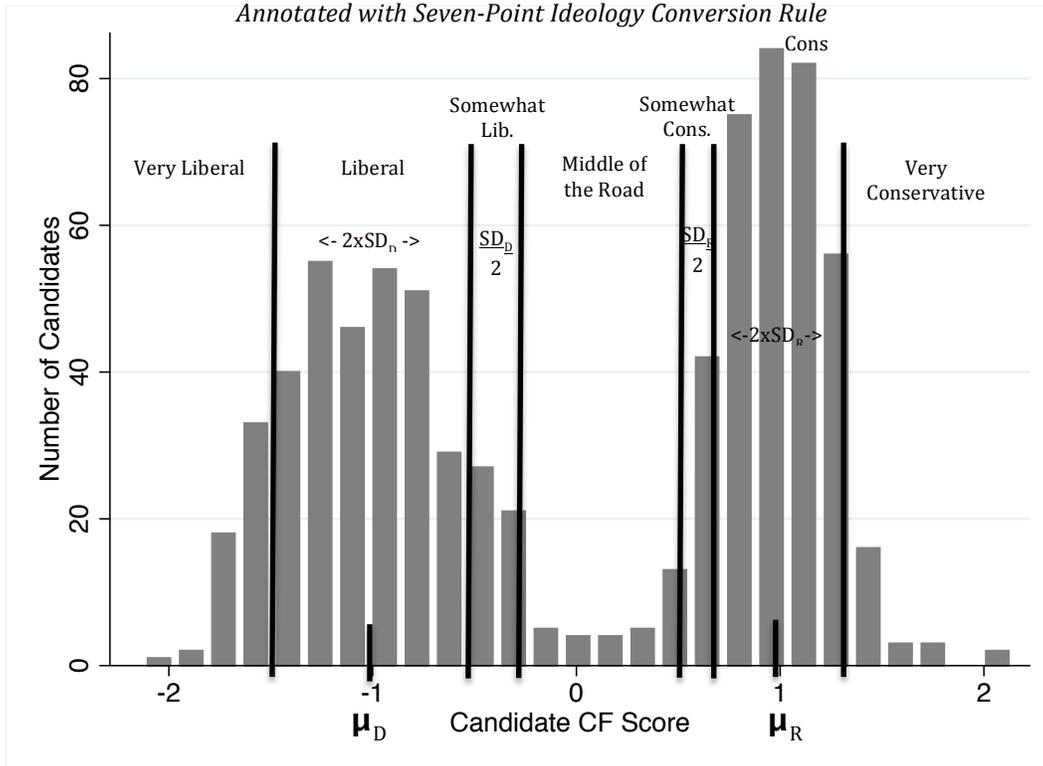


Figure 4: Candidate Misperception by Republicans versus by Democrats, by Candidate Party

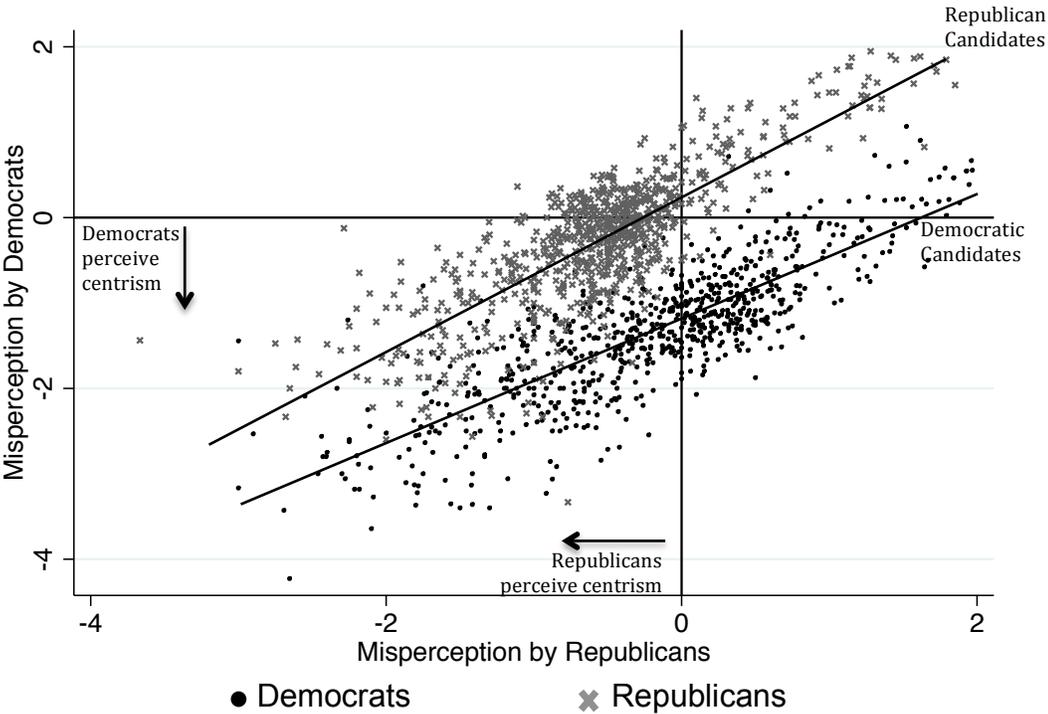


Figure 5: Perceived Candidate Ideology vs Respondent Ideology, by Candidate Actual Ideology

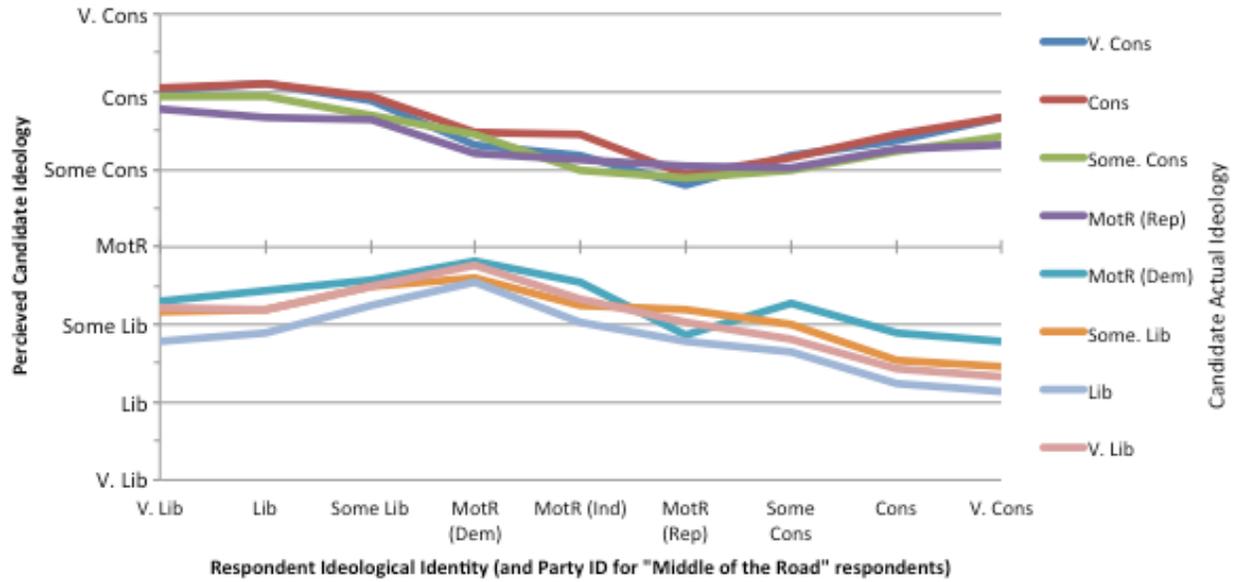


Table 1: Regression Summary of Individual Characteristics Predicting
 “Misperception” of Candidate Ideology, by Candidate Party
 (2010 and 2012 US House of Representatives)

	Democratic Candidates		Republican Candidates	
Age	0.00*	(0.00)	0.00***	(0.00)
Non-White	0.08***	(0.02)	-0.22***	(0.02)
Male	0.11***	(0.01)	0.01	(0.01)
Employed	0.01	(0.02)	-0.02	(0.01)
Education Level	0.26***	(0.03)	0.31***	(0.02)
Income	0.25***	(0.03)	0.30***	(0.03)
Church Attendance	-0.08***	(0.02)	-0.10***	(0.02)
Interest in the News	0.74***	(0.04)	1.06***	(0.03)
Political Activity	0.29***	(0.03)	0.32***	(0.02)
Campaign Contact	-0.09***	(0.03)	-0.12***	(0.03)
State of the Economy	-0.57***	(0.03)	0.45***	(0.03)
Respondent Party ID				
Republican	0.78***	(0.02)	-0.23***	(0.02)
Independent	0.23***	(0.03)	-0.45***	(0.02)
Const	-1.85	(0.05)	-1.69	(0.04)
	$R^2 = 0.14$	$n = 41,144$	$R^2 = 0.09$	$n = 44,944$

n : CCES Respondents

Standard Error values in parentheses

Significance levels: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 2: Regression Summary of Perceived Candidate Ideology by Respondent Self-Perception and Candidate Actual Ideology, Controlled for Incumbency Status and Co-Partisan Relationships (2010 and 2012 US House of Representatives)

		Among Incumbent Candidates		
		Liberal Respondents	Conservative Respondents	
Candidate Party Affiliation	Republican	-0.08 / 0.21	0.23 / 0.16	
	Democratic	0.22 / 0.36	-0.26 / 0.44	
	Among Challenging Candidates			
			Liberal Respondents	Conservative Respondents
	Republican		-0.06 / 0.12	0.22 / 0.15
	Democratic		0.19 / 0.03 #	-0.45 / 0.20
Among Candidates for Open Seats				
		Liberal Respondents	Conservative Respondents	
Republican		-0.10 / 0.19	0.28 / 0.09 #	
Democratic		0.19 / 0.19	-0.27 / 0.18	

Paired Values are Regression Coefficients for Respondent Self-Identified Ideology / Candidate Actual Ideology

All coefficients are significant at the $p < 0.01$ level except those indicated by #

*Table 3: Regression Summary of District and Campaign Characteristics Predicting
 “Misperception” of Candidate Ideology
 (2010 and 2012 US House of Representatives)*

Mean District Education Level	0.22	(0.43)
Mean District Income	0.23	(0.34)
Mean District Interest in News	0.93**	(0.43)
Mean District Political Activity	-0.36	(0.52)
Log of Campaign Spending	0.14***	(0.01)
Relative Media Mentions	0.00*	(0.00)
District Mean Ideology	-0.04*	(0.02)
Candidate Party: Republican	0.35***	(0.03)
Incumbency Status: Incumbent	0.52***	(0.04)
Incumbency Status: Open Seat	0.15***	(0.05)
Constant	-3.85***	(0.30)

n : 1545 Candidates; $r^2 = 0.35$

Standard Error values in parentheses

Significance levels: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 4: Regression Analysis Summary of District and Campaign Variables Predicting Misconception, By Respondent Party ID

Variable	All Resp	Democrats	Republicans	Independents
Mean District Education Level	0.22 (0.42)	0.30 (0.47)	0.16 (0.47)	0.62 (0.63)
Mean District Income	0.23 (0.34)	0.10 (0.37)	-0.21 (0.37)	0.41 (0.48)
Mean District Interest in News	0.93** (0.43)	0.67 (0.46)	0.71 (0.46)	1.70*** (0.61)
Mean District Political Activity	-0.36 (0.52)	0.25 (0.56)	-0.87 (0.56)	-2.22*** (0.74)
Log of Campaign Spending	0.14*** (0.01)	0.14*** (0.01)	0.15*** (0.01)	0.12*** (0.02)
Relative Media Mentions	0.00* (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
District Mean Ideology	-0.04* (0.02)	-0.09*** (0.02)	-0.09*** (0.02)	-0.03 (0.03)
Candidate Party: Republican	0.35*** (0.03)	1.09*** (0.04)	-0.37*** (0.04)	0.02 (0.05)
Incumbency Status: Incumbent	0.52*** (0.04)	0.52*** (0.05)	0.63*** (0.05)	0.60*** (0.06)
Incumbency Status: Open Seat	0.15*** (0.05)	0.13*** (0.06)	0.18*** (0.06)	0.15*** (0.08)
Constant	-3.85*** (0.30)	-4.30*** (0.33)	-2.88*** (0.33)	-4.41*** (0.43)
N (candidates)	1545	1545	1543	1517
R ²	0.35	0.51	0.37	0.20

Standard Error values in parentheses

Significance levels: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table 5: Summary of Regressions of Mean District Perception of Candidate Ideology on Mean Respondent Self-Identified Ideology and Candidate Actual Ideology

Variable	Case 1: Conservative Respondents, Republican Candidates	Case 2: Liberal Respondents, Republican Candidates	Case 3: Conservative Respondents, Democratic Candidates	Case 4: Liberal Respondents, Democratic Candidates
Respondents' Mean Self- Perception	0.61*** (0.05)	-0.56*** (0.04)	0.04 (0.06)	0.69*** (0.04)
Candidate Actual Ideology	0.10*** (0.01)	0.08*** (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)
Constant	0.07 (0.08)	0.98*** (0.05)	-1.76*** (0.12)	0.14*** (0.05)
N (candidates)	1544	1546	1519	1521
R ²	0.14	0.12	0.00	0.18

Standard Error values in parentheses

Significance levels: * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$