

# Candidates Matter: Policy and Quality Differences in Congressional Elections

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*We reexamine voting choice in congressional elections by using panels of district experts to identify the ideological positions and leadership qualities of candidates running in a national sample of districts. We show that: (1) candidate-quality differences affect voting choice; (2) that the effect of candidate quality increases with reduced differences between candidates on ideology; and (3) that the effect of issues on voting depends on candidate differences in quality and ideology. The conditional nature of these effects has consequences for candidate position taking that challenge conventional wisdom because candidates with a quality advantage have an incentive to moderate while candidates who are at a quality disadvantage do not. Analyses that do not include competitors' differences on both ideology and quality are incomplete because the effects of moderation depend on the position of the opponent and which candidate has the quality advantage.*

We re-examine elections to the U.S. House of Representative by focusing on two fundamental dimensions of voter choice between competing candidates: ideological differences between the candidates and differences in their quality as leaders.<sup>1</sup> These dimensions of candidate difference are fundamental to the workings of representative democracy because voters must enforce their interests in policy outcomes and high-quality leaders by selecting between competing candidates. We demonstrate not only that candidate differences in policy and quality “matter” by affecting voting choice, but also that candidate differences on one dimension condition the impact of differences on the other. The conditional nature of these effects has important and nonobvious implications for candidate strategy and political representation. In particular, we show that candidates may not benefit from moderating their ideological position if doing so increases the impact of a quality disadvantage with their opponent.

The claim that voters in congressional elections respond to ideological and quality differences between local candidates competing for their votes may seem unremarkable. After all, these dimensions of choice are

obviously of intrinsic interest to voters and are often the focus of political campaigns. The literature on congressional elections, however, demonstrates that voters have limited incentives to ferret out and retain information about congressional candidates. Especially in House elections, voters are typically not aided in whatever efforts they might make because of severe resource differences between candidates. The incumbent frequently is not vigorously challenged, spending levels are unbalanced, and the overall visibility of the campaign is low. In 2006 for example, less than two-thirds of voters recognized the names of both their candidates, and only about 37% placed both candidates on an ideological scale. Such facts raise questions about voters' ability to choose in accordance with their policy and leadership interests in House elections.

The importance in the literature on House elections of incumbency and associated advantages in resources and visibility conferred on one candidate over the other can hardly be overstated. While such differences can be easily observed by measuring office-holding status and spending levels, they do not capture either policy or leadership-quality differences between the candidates. Party may serve as a reasonable proxy

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of policy differences, especially in the polarized partisan environment of contemporary American politics, but it cannot capture variation in policy differences between Democratic and Republican candidates competing in local districts. Spending and office-holding experience are often referred to as describing the “quality” of House candidates, but scholars usually mean that such candidates are likely to mount effective campaigns (Jacobson and Kernell 1983). In contrast, we refer to “candidate quality” as the characteristics, abilities, and traits such as integrity and skills in governing that voters value intrinsically in their elected officeholders. We pose the question of whether and how these differences affect voting choice above and beyond the effects of visibility, incumbency, and resource differences.

We demonstrate that voters respond in reasonable ways to differences in ideology and quality between locally competing candidates and that muted differences in candidate ideology enhance the impact of quality differences on voting choice, while reduced differences in candidate quality increase the impact of voter issue preferences. Despite copious evidence that voters in House elections are not attentive or well informed, we find that local candidate differences related to voters’ fundamental interests help explain voting choice and vote shares. Because our study is unique in assessing the effects of candidate quality differences, we explore at some length the impact of candidate quality in House elections.

## Candidate Differences and Voting Choice in House Elections

We distinguish between two types of candidate differences: candidate differentials and candidate contrasts. Candidate differentials are analogous to Downs’ party differentials and describe the directional difference between candidates on a dimension of choice. A candidate differential on ideology describes how much more conservative one candidate is than the other; a candidate differential on quality describes how much more of the leadership qualities voters value in office holders one candidate has over the other. Candidate differentials may also refer to differences in resources such as experience or expenditures, where the differential measures the resource advantage of one candidate over the other. Candidate contrasts, on the other hand, capture the magnitude of the candidate differential, without the directional component.

An example illustrates the difference between candidate differentials and contrasts. Imagine a candidate-integrity measure scored on a 7-point scale from  $-3$  to  $+3$ . Candidate differentials might be calculated by subtracting the integrity score of the Democratic candidate from that of the Republican candidate. Positive scores would indicate the candidate differential favors the Republican candidate while negative scores would mean that the Democratic candidate’s integrity was stronger than the Republican’s. A candidate differential of  $+1$  in one district would indicate a one-unit integrity advantage for the Republican candidate; a score of  $-3$  in another district would mean the Democratic candidate had a three-unit advantage in integrity over his Republican competitor. In addition to comparing the districts on candidate differentials, the contrast between the candidates differs. In the first district the magnitude of the difference between the two candidates is only 1 point; in the second it is 3 points.

Both the directional and magnitude (or contrast) components of candidate differences are relevant to understanding voting choice. However, we are aware of no study of voting in House elections that includes a comprehensive way of studying the effect of candidate differences on voting choice in district races.<sup>2</sup>

### Candidate Differences in Quality

We begin with what is perhaps the most basic, yet underinvestigated, hypothesis about voting choice in House elections: voters prefer high-quality candidates over scoundrels; the well qualified over the incompetent. The underlying dimension of interest relates to discussions in the literature on candidate quality, “valence,” and candidate traits.

As noted, the candidate-quality literature on congressional elections emphasizes incumbents and experienced and/or well-financed challengers (Green and Krasno 1990; Jacobson 1989; Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Squire 1992). Here, a quality candidate is one who can mount a credible campaign, usually because she has significant resources. Such candidates may have the personal skills and traits we emphasize, especially if potential challengers, contributors, other activists, and voters in previous elections value personal quality in candidates (Stone, Maisel, and Maestas 2004). Likewise, much of the literature on candidate

<sup>2</sup>Wright and Berkman (1986), Kahn and Kenney (1999) and Wright (1978) are prominent studies that include candidate ideological contrasts; the latter is the only such study of House elections of which we are aware.

“valence” conflates nonpolicy advantages such as incumbency or funding with advantages rooted in qualities of intrinsic interest to voters, such as intelligence, competence, and integrity (Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005; Feld and Grofman 1991; Groseclose 2001). In his original critique of the spatial model, Stokes (1963) argued that “valence issues” such as prosperity or competence in governing may have powerful effects on election outcomes without candidates and voters taking different positions because one candidate or party is associated with good or bad outcomes. This is closer to what we mean by candidate quality because holding government leaders accountable for policy or personal failures in government is a reasonable way for voters to advance their interests, whereas rewarding candidates merely for being visible is not.

The extensive literature on candidate traits in presidential elections (Bartels 2002; Druckman, Jacobs and Ostermeier 2004; Funk 1999; Kinder et al. 1980) makes clear that voters value certain qualities in political leaders, especially those related to performance and trust (Bianco 1994; Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier 2004). The smaller literature on candidate traits in congressional elections has tended to focus on the Senate, where candidates are more visible than in House elections (Druckman 2004; Fridkin and Kenney 2011; Hayes 2010), although there are studies of candidate traits in House elections as well (Gronke 2001; Miller 1990). Gronke (2001) relies on candidate likes/dislikes, which include personal qualities, rather than fixed-choice trait items. Fridkin and Kenney (2011) provide intriguing evidence that Senate campaign emphasis on candidate characteristics can affect voters’ trait evaluations, although in House elections where most candidates are far less visible than Senate candidates, voters may not prove as responsive to candidate-quality differentials. In any case, the risks of measurement bias from partisanship and candidate affect (Kilburn 2005; Rahn, Krosnick, and Breuning 1994) have meant that most studies of congressional elections do not even include items designed to measure respondents’ assessments of candidate quality.

Scholars of House elections focusing on the incumbency effect have linked incumbents’ success to the personal following incumbents cultivate as part of their interaction with their constituents (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987; Fenno 1978). The “personal vote” is usually seen as resulting from the efforts incumbents make to build an image of trust, responsiveness, and competence tied to their individual efforts on behalf of their constituents (Mayhew 1974), but it is also linked to simple visibility (Stokes and Miller 1962). In a pair

of innovative studies, Mondak explored the degree to which incumbents’ electoral advantage could be tied to their reputations for personal integrity and competence (McCurley and Mondak 1995; Mondak 1995). He finds that incumbents with strong reputations for competence and integrity win larger vote shares, are less likely to be confronted by strong challengers, and are more highly evaluated by constituents. This research is suggestive of the importance of quality, but since it does not compare the quality of incumbents and challengers, it cannot address whether and how quality differences affect voting choice.

### Ideological Differences

The standard approach to studying issue effects in congressional elections is to include voter issue or ideological preferences without an explicit measure of their local candidates’ issue positions. Issues are seen as reflecting national forces and the observed effect of preferences on voting choice is assumed to be constant across congressional districts. In 2006, for instance, attitudes toward the Iraq War affected voting choice, but were analyzed as part of a referendum on the George W. Bush presidency and his policies. The unpopularity of the president and the war in Iraq influenced voting choice (and election outcomes) in 2006 because local candidates were linked to the issue, largely by virtue of their party. Voters who opposed the war did so by voting for Democratic House candidates, against Republicans (Grose and Oppenheimer 2007; Jacobson 2007, 2009a, 2009b). In this view, voters are attentive to salient national issues, but not necessarily to the differences between candidates running in their districts. Of course, candidates running locally may differ on issues in ways that are correlated with party, but party differences are national rather than defining unique candidate differences by district.

How might local candidate differences on issues affect issue voting? The policy-differential hypothesis was suggested by Downs in his discussion of the “rationality crisis” that can occur in two-party systems when parties seek to maximize votes by adopting similar stands on the issues. This strategy can make “it more difficult for each citizen to vote rationally” (1957, 136–39; i.e., based on ideological differences between the parties). Downs’ argument, applied to congressional elections where individual candidates rather than parties compete, suggests that a relatively large contrast between candidates on the issues makes issue voting easier and therefore more likely; candidates who adopt similar stands on the issues make

voting on the issues more difficult and therefore less likely.<sup>3</sup> Wright and Berkman, in their seminal study of voting choice in Senate elections, argue: “voters will use their ideological identifications more when there is a clear ideological choice between candidates, and not use it when candidates do not offer such a choice” (1986, 576).

### Conditional Effects of Candidate Differences

The finding that the impact of voters’ issue preferences depends on the magnitude of the difference between candidates is an effect observed in studies of Senate and other elections (Abramowitz 1981; Ensley 2007; Ensley and Bucy 2010; Highton 2004; Page 1978; Page and Brody 1972; Wright 1978; Wright and Berkman 1986; Zaller 2004). This widely observed effect alerts us to the importance of candidate differences in structuring the dimensions of voting choice, an effect critical to our understanding of how differences in candidate ideological positioning and quality interact to affect voter choice.

Note that the absence of candidate differences, even on a fundamental dimension of choice, does not necessarily indicate the absence of democratic control. In many spatial models two competing candidates converge on the median voter’s preferences precisely because voter issue preferences dominate. Such models simultaneously imply a representative outcome in the ideological position of the winning candidate and the inability of voters to choose on the basis of ideology. *The critical question in the event of candidate convergence is what other criteria motivate choice and whether voters’ fundamental interests beyond ideology are advanced.*

When candidates converge on ideology, Downs argued that “voters are encouraged to make decisions on some basis other than the issues” (1957, 136). Indeed, he suggests that voters rely on party performance, a concept related to Stokes’ original notion of valence because it is rooted in recent economic performance under the parties (Downs 1957, 44). Recent research on British politics has shown that the ideological depolarization of the Labour and Conservative parties led to

increased levels of valence-based voting (Green 2007; Green and Hobolt 2008). In House elections where candidate-based considerations tend to dominate, voters may reasonably turn to quality differentials rather than party economic performance. Thus, in addition to an additive effect of quality, the impact of quality differentials on voting choice should be conditioned on the magnitude of candidate differences on policy.<sup>4</sup>

If we are correct that both policy and quality affect voting choice, the conditional logic should also apply to the impact of voter policy preferences. Policy preferences are conditioned on the magnitude of candidate differences on ideology, but they should also depend on the magnitude of candidate quality differences. If the absence of ideological contrasts between candidates encourages voting choice on the basis of quality differentials, the absence of quality differences between the candidates should encourage policy voting because a small or nonexistent difference between the candidates on quality indicates the absence of a choice on that dimension.<sup>5</sup> A variety of causal mechanisms may produce the expected effects. For example, increased candidate contrasts on one dimension may enhance the salience to voters of that dimension over the other. Candidates undoubtedly emphasize the dimension on which they believe they have an advantage, which affects the cues voters receive. Our purpose in this article is not to investigate the specific mechanisms at work, although that is obviously a direction for future research to explore.

To summarize our argument, we suggest four hypotheses about the impact of candidate differences on voting choice in House elections:

*H1:* The greater the quality differential between the candidates, the more likely voters are to support the advantaged candidate.

*H2:* The greater the ideological contrast between the candidates, the stronger the relationship between voters’ issue preferences and their voting choice.

*H3:* The greater the ideological contrast between candidates, the weaker the relationship between candidates’ quality differentials and individuals’ voting choice.

*H4:* The greater the quality contrast between candidates, the weaker the relationship between individuals’ issue preferences and their voting choice.

<sup>3</sup>The distinction between candidate contrasts and differentials on ideology disappears if all Republican candidates are more conservative than their Democratic opponents. In the current relatively polarized party system in U.S. House elections, this condition appears to hold as the ideological differential between candidates is identical to the ideological contrast in our data. We consider the ideological difference between candidates as a contrast throughout most of the article, but note that the alternative interpretation (as a differential) is also informative when we evaluate the effects of candidate positioning.

<sup>4</sup>Mondak and Huckfeldt (2006) test a version of this argument with experimental data and find it wanting. Grose and Globetti (2008) test a version in a field experiment in Senate campaigns and find support for a conditional effect.

<sup>5</sup>Unlike differences on ideology, there is no reason to believe that candidate differentials and contrasts on character are correlated.

The hypothesized effects suggest a voter responsive to the choices posed by candidates in House elections on fundamental criteria of direct interest to voters. Recognizing the conditional effects of candidate differences on ideology and quality extends beyond our understanding of voting choice to a reconsideration of the effects of candidate positioning. We raise questions about approaches to candidate positioning effects that do not take into account the ideological positions of *both* candidates, as well as those that consider candidate-positioning effects isolated from quality differences.

### A Model of Voting Choice in U.S. House Elections

Our analytic approach is to extend a baseline model that captures the conventional understanding of voting choice in House elections to one that introduces candidate differences designed to test Hypotheses 1–4. The baseline model estimates the effects of party identification, issue preferences, and candidate resources, including those linked to incumbency and spending, but does not include candidate contrast and differential measures on ideology and quality. Both models include characteristics of the individual voter and of the political context as structured by candidate differences:

#### Baseline Individual Variables:

$$\begin{aligned} Pr(\text{Vote Republican}) = & \text{logit}^{-1}(\beta_0 + \\ & \beta_1(\text{Issue Preferences}) + \\ & \beta_2(\text{Party Identification}) + \\ & \beta_3(\text{President Approval}) + \\ & \beta_4(\text{Candidate Familiarity}) + \dots \end{aligned}$$

#### Baseline Candidate Variables:

$$\begin{aligned} & \beta_5(\text{Experience Differential}) + \\ & \beta_6(\text{Campaign Spending Differential}) + \\ & \beta_7(\text{Scandals}) + \dots \end{aligned}$$

#### Candidate Differences:

$$\begin{aligned} & \beta_8(\text{Quality Differential}) + \\ & \beta_9(\text{Ideological Contrast}) + \\ & \beta_{10}(\text{Issue Preferences X Ideological Contrast}) + \\ & \beta_{11}(\text{Quality Differential X Ideological Contrast}) + \\ & \beta_{12}(\text{Quality Contrast}) + \\ & \beta_{13}(\text{Issue Preferences X Quality Contrast}) \end{aligned}$$

where:

$$\text{Quality Differential} = \text{Quality}_R - \text{Quality}_D$$

$$\text{Ideological Contrast} = |\text{Ideology}_R - \text{Ideology}_D|$$

$$\text{Quality Contrast} = |\text{Quality}_R - \text{Quality}_D|$$

The effect of the candidate quality differential is positive if candidates with a quality advantage attract more votes (Hypothesis 1). We expect the *Issue Preferences X Ideological Contrast* interaction to be positive since the impact of issue preferences on voting choice should increase with the magnitude of differences between candidates on ideology (Hypothesis 2). To the degree that the effect of quality declines as policy contrasts between the candidates increase (Hypothesis 3), the *Quality Differential X Ideological Contrast* interaction will be negative. Likewise, the *Issue Preferences X Quality Contrast* interaction will be negative if the impact of issue preferences declines as the magnitude of candidate differences on quality increases (Hypothesis 4).

### Design and Measures

A fundamental methodological problem that has impeded the study of candidate differences is the absence of comparable data on both House candidates competing against one another in district elections. We do not typically have data on the issue positions both candidates take in the campaign, although there are exceptions (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Burden 2004; Wright 1978). A scandal or other anecdotal evidence may speak to the quality of one of the candidates, but comparative data on opponent quality have not been available. However, to test our hypotheses we require measures of candidate differences on ideology and quality. These measures must be external to the mass voter survey to avoid the severe rationalization effects that accompany survey-respondent perceptions of candidate quality (Bartels 2002; Fischle 2000; Lebo and Cassino 2007; McGraw et al. 1996) and policy positions (Bartels 1988; Brody and Page 1972; Conover and Feldman 1986). In addition, we must demonstrate that our design produces reliable and valid measures of the variables in question.

We conducted a survey of political expert observers in 155 congressional districts to provide data on competing candidates' ideological positions and leadership qualities. The expert survey was of delegates from the 2004 national conventions and state

legislators from both parties because they are likely to be attentive to the campaigns and well informed about the candidates. The district sample is composed of 100 randomly sampled House districts in the contiguous 48 states, supplemented by a purposive sample of competitive and/or open seats.<sup>6</sup>

The district-expert measures are placements of candidates on the liberal-conservative scale<sup>7</sup> and ratings of the candidates on items designed to tap candidate personal quality.<sup>8</sup> Expert respondents rated both the Republican and Democratic candidates running in their district on these items. Because the district expert panels<sup>9</sup> averaged just above six respondents per district, the measures we employ are district means of individual expert ratings, adjusted to correct for partisan bias in individual perceptions.<sup>10</sup> Once we have estimates of

<sup>6</sup>In June of 2006 we consulted Congressional Quarterly, Cook Report, Sabato Crystal Ball, and National Journal for districts anticipated to be competitive. Districts rated as “toss-up” or “leaning competitive” by any of the sources were included in the competitive supplemental sample. There was substantial overlap among the four sources, with correlations among them  $> .70$ . We identified 72 districts in this manner, 17 of which were included in the random cross section. The supplemental sample is composed of the remaining 55 districts. Individual weights applied to the analysis adjust for demographic and geographic variables, including district competitiveness, to approximate the characteristics of a random cross-section. In supplementary materials we replicate the analysis on the random subset of districts, and we replicate the analysis without weights.

<sup>7</sup>The liberal-conservative item was: “How would you rate the following groups and individuals.” Two of the prompts were “The Democratic [Republican] U.S. House candidate in your district.” Response categories were on a seven-point scale ranging from “Very Liberal” to “Very Conservative.”

<sup>8</sup>Informants were asked to place the Republican and Democratic candidates on 7-point scales and to rate candidates’ “personal integrity,” “competence,” “ability to work well with other leaders,” “grasp of the issues,” “ability to find solutions to problems,” “qualifications to hold office,” and “overall strength as a public servant.”

<sup>9</sup>We refer to the collections of experts in each district interchangeably as “samples” or “panels.” They are not based on a sample of a population in the usual sense since we sought to identify the most expert, attentive, and interested individuals we could in each of our sample districts. They are “panels” only in the sense that they are selected for their expertise, not because they were convened in any way or communicated with one another. Each respondent answered the survey independently.

<sup>10</sup>We regress expert responses to each item on six dummy variables, reflecting the party identification of the expert on a 7-point scale; independents are the omitted category. Coefficient estimates on these variables reflect the average partisan bias associated with being a “Strong Republican,” “Republican,” and so on. We correct for partisan bias by subtracting these estimates from expert responses, leaving us with values that estimate the answers independent experts would have given. Most expert respondents identify as strong Democrat or Republican, but all response categories are represented in the sample.

candidate positions on the left-right scale and their personal characteristics, it is a simple matter to compute candidate differentials and contrasts for each district. The online appendix provides detailed analysis of the ideological placement and quality measures we employ. This analysis suggests that our measures are both reliable and valid and that there is little difference in the reliability for incumbents and challengers.

The constituent survey data are from the 2006 CCES, which included pre- and postelection waves of respondents to the common content survey. The data set has about 9,000 respondents who live in the sample districts for this study.<sup>11</sup> The dependent variable in the survey analysis is vote choice, coded 1 if respondents voted for the Republican and 0 if they voted for the Democrat. Party identification is coded so that higher values reflect stronger attachment to the Republican Party, so we expect both party identification and presidential approval to be positively associated with voting for the Republican. Individuals are also more likely to vote for a candidate they recognize, so dummy variables indicate candidate name recognition. We use an index consisting of ideology and issue position questions to measure respondents’ issue preferences coded so that conservative views are scored higher.<sup>12</sup>

## Baseline Analysis of Voting in House Elections

Table 1 presents the results from a baseline model of vote choice that employs standard predictors in the congressional elections literature.<sup>13</sup> Individual issue preferences, party identification, and presidential approval all have strong effects. Respondents were

<sup>11</sup>Because voters are nested within congressional districts a multilevel model may be appropriate. We present results from a pooled model with clustered standard errors but our conclusions are the same when a random-intercept model is used.

<sup>12</sup>The index includes 5- and 101-point ideology items and 10 issue questions, including attitudes toward stem cell research, the Iraq war, the minimum wage, abortion, the environment, immigration, social security, affirmative action, taxes, and free trade ( $\alpha = .88$ ). We standardize each item and use the average across items as our measure of issue preferences.

<sup>13</sup>The baseline model is meant to capture a consensus point of departure in the literature. There are a great many important extensions that describe conditional relationships of interest (e.g., Basinger and Lavine 2005), including those defined by resource differences (e.g., Kenny and McBurnett 1994).

**TABLE 1** Baseline Model of Voting Choice in Congressional Elections

	Voted Republican
<i>Individual Characteristics</i>	
Issue preferences	2.77** (0.15)
Party identification	0.31** (0.03)
Presidential approval	0.43** (0.04)
Familiar with Republican	0.49** (0.18)
Familiar with Democrat	-0.69** (0.15)
<i>Candidate Characteristics</i>	
Experience differential	0.20** (0.06)
Campaign spending differential	0.02** (0.01)
Republican scandal	-0.34 (0.21)
Democratic scandal	0.55 (0.68)
Constant	-1.21** (0.22)
Observations	8260
Pseudo $R^2$	0.62
AIC	4011

\*  $p < 0.10$  \*\*  $p < 0.05$ .

Note: The dependent variable is individual vote choice coded 1 if the respondent voted for the Republican candidate and 0 for the Democrat. Logit coefficient estimates and standard errors clustering on district in parentheses.

more likely to vote for candidates with greater office-holding experience<sup>14</sup> and whose name they recognized, but no less likely to vote for Republicans or Democrats touched by scandal. The results in Table 1 confirm the conventional wisdom that voting choice in 2006 was influenced by party, issue preferences, and presidential approval, along with candidate resources and visibility. The issues effect is consistent with the usual interpretation that issues reflect national forces in House elections. In this specification, there is no room for local candidate differences on ideology to affect voting choice. Likewise, of course, there are no indicators of candidate-quality differences in the model.

### Candidate Differences and Vote Choice

On both the ideological and candidate personal-quality dimensions, there is substantial variation.

<sup>14</sup>The experience differential is a 5-point variable coded 2 if a Republican incumbent faced an inexperienced Democratic challenger, 1 if a Republican incumbent competed against an experienced Democratic challenger, 0 if the seat was open, and so on. When using dummy variables to capture incumbency and challenger experience, the Democratic tide in 2006 is evident, with stronger gains associated with Democratic incumbents than with Republicans. We use this specification because it captures the standard definition of “quality” and because the key findings reported in this article are robust across various specifications.

Histograms of the candidates’ ideological contrasts and quality differentials within the districts are in the online appendix. The ideological contrast between House candidates ranges from a low of almost no difference to nearly the maximum possible on our scale, with a mean contrast of 3.6 and a standard deviation of just over one unit (1.1). There is variation in the quality differential between candidates as well, from districts in which the Democratic candidate had a strong advantage (-3.5) to districts in which the Republican was the much stronger candidate (+3.5).<sup>15</sup>

While it is beyond our purpose to consider explanations for why candidates diverge or converge on ideology, or the conditions under which candidates present substantial differentials and contrasts in quality, it is worth noting that the dimensions of candidate difference do not reflect a common background condition to which voters might react. Ideological and quality contrasts are weakly correlated at .22, while quality differentials and ideological contrasts are correlated at only .07. Candidate-quality differentials and contrasts are likewise weakly correlated (-.16). Thus, although candidate position taking on ideology and quality differences may be modestly correlated (in fact, the relationship between them is complex; Stone and Simas 2010), they are sufficiently independent to permit us to assess their effects on voting behavior.

The results in Table 2 demonstrate that candidate differentials and contrasts have direct and conditional effects on voting choice consistent with our hypotheses. Model 1 adds the quality differential to the baseline model to demonstrate that it has the effect expected by Hypothesis 1.<sup>16</sup> As the quality differential favoring the Republican candidate grows, voters are more likely to vote for the Republican candidate. Figure 1 plots differences in the predicted probability of voting for a Republican candidate as the quality differential increases based on Model 1.<sup>17</sup> When the Democratic candidate has a maximum-quality advantage over the Republican, the predicted probability that a moderate and independent voter will vote Republican is about .23. The probability increases to .47 when the Republican candidate holds

<sup>15</sup>The mean quality differential slightly favored the Democrat (-.17) and has a standard deviation of 1.3. The quality contrast between candidates ranges from nearly 0 to a high of almost 4, with a mean of 1.1 and standard deviation of .8.

<sup>16</sup>Results from a likelihood-ratio test ( $p < .01$ ) and a comparison of the models’ AIC and BIC estimates support the inclusion of the additional candidate differences.

<sup>17</sup>In this and all figures we set all other variables to their median. The quantities of interest are estimated using Zelig (Carnes 2007; Kosuke, King, and Lau 2007, 2008).

**TABLE 2 Candidate Contrasts, Differentials, and Individual Voting Choice**

	Model 1	Model 2
<b>Baseline Variables</b>		
Issue preferences	2.75** (0.15)	2.00** (0.52)
Party identification	0.31** (0.03)	0.31** (0.03)
Presidential approval	0.44** (0.04)	0.43** (0.04)
Familiar with Republican	0.49** (0.19)	0.46** (0.18)
Familiar with Democrat	-0.72** (0.15)	-0.70** (0.16)
Experience differential	0.11* (0.07)	0.15** (0.07)
Campaign spending differential	0.01* (0.01)	0.01** (0.01)
<b>Additional Candidate Differences</b>		
Quality differential	0.15** (0.07)	0.57** (0.18)
Ideological contrast		0.10 (0.08)
Issue preferences X ideological contrast		0.36** (0.13)
Quality differential X ideological contrast		-0.12** (0.04)
Quality contrast		0.00 (0.11)
Issue preferences X quality contrast		-0.41** (0.17)
Constant	-1.18** (0.22)	-1.52** (0.39)
Observations	8260	8260
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.62	0.63
AIC	4002	3957

\*  $p < 0.10$  \*\*  $p < 0.05$ .

Note: The dependent variable is individual vote choice coded 1 if the respondent voted for the Republican candidate and 0 for the Democrat. Logit coefficient estimates and standard errors clustering on district in parentheses.

the maximum-quality advantage. This effect provides preliminary evidence that voters respond sensibly to the quality differences between the candidates running in their districts.<sup>18</sup> It is, however, estimated in a model in which the interactions between candidate ideological contrast and voter ideology and between quality differences and ideology contrasts are not

explicitly taken into account. Thus, Model 1 does not capture the full effect of candidate differences on voting choice.

Model 2 in Table 2 provides a full test of the conditional effects of candidate differences on voting choice. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, the *Issue Preferences X Ideological Contrast* coefficient indicates that the effect of issue preferences on voting choice increases as the ideological contrast between the candidates in the district grows. This effect is seen in Figure 2(a), which presents the marginal effect of issue preferences on the predicted probability of voting for a Republican candidate as the ideological contrast between candidates increases. The x-axis in Figure 2(a) is the ideological contrast between the candidates within the district, while the y-axis plots the effect of a standard deviation increase in issue preferences on the predicted probability of voting for the Republican.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the y-axis plots the difference between the predicted probability that a conservative and moderate voter will vote for the Republican candidate.

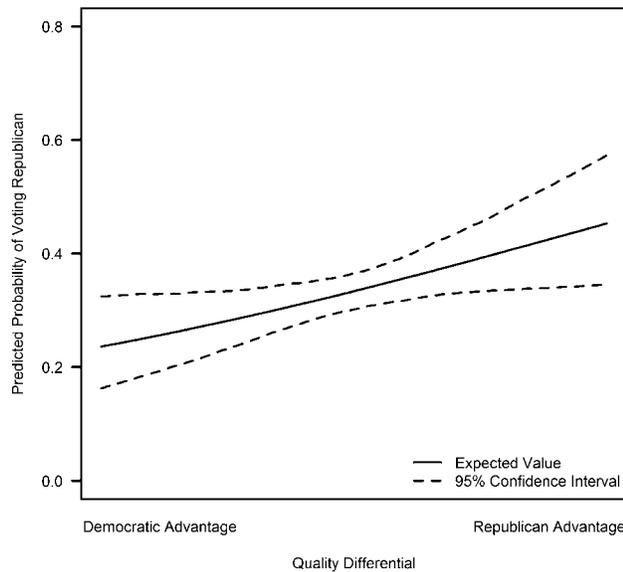
The slope of the line is positive, indicating that the effect of issue preferences on vote choice is weakest when candidates converge to ideologically similar positions and increases as the contrast between them grows. When candidates converge on the ideological scale, the predicted probability of voting Republican for a moderate voter is .33 and .60 for a conservative voter. The difference between these—.27—is represented in Figure 2(a) by the solid line where the contrast between candidates is at its minimum. In a district where candidates are separated by the maximum contrast, the same difference in issue preferences is associated with a .49 increase in the predicted probability of voting for the Republican (.41 for a moderate and .90 for a conservative).

As the ideological contrast between candidates running in a district increases, issue effects on vote choice go up, while at the same time the impact of quality differentials goes down. Figure 2(b) plots the marginal effect of candidates' quality differential on the predicted probability of voting Republican as the ideological contrast between candidates increases. The slope of the line in Figure 2(b) is negative, indicating that quality differences have the strongest effect when candidates take similar ideological positions.

<sup>18</sup>We drop from this and subsequent estimations the scandal dummies because including them does not alter any of the effects reported, and they are irrelevant once we include the quality differential in the full specification.

<sup>19</sup>While the particular effect of issue preferences changes depending on the "one-unit" shift considered and the values of other variables, the results presented in this graph, as well as all others presented, are representative of alternative comparisons.

**FIGURE 1 Effect of Candidate Quality on Voting Choice**



Note: Predicted probabilities are calculated using estimates from Model 1, Table 2.

In districts where candidates take close to identical ideological positions, a standard deviation difference in quality has a large effect. Voters have a .32 probability of voting for the Republican when candidates of similar quality compete versus a .49 probability when the Republican has a quality advantage. In other words, a standard deviation increase in the quality differential translates to a .17 increase in the predicted probability of voting for the Republican (represented in 2(b) where the ideological contrast is at its minimum).

As candidates are further apart in their ideological stands, however, the effect of quality differences between competing candidates drops significantly. The same shift in the candidate-quality differential has no effect on vote choice when candidates are separated by the maximum ideological distance observed in our data, as the confidence interval around the marginal effect includes 0. In races where the candidates sharply distinguish themselves on policy, therefore, the effect of candidate-quality differences diminishes substantially. Thus, the evidence supports the hypothesis that the effect of candidate-quality differences on vote choice is conditioned on the degree of ideological difference between the candidates.

Finally, the relationship between issue preferences and vote choice is also conditioned on the contrast in quality between candidates. Hypothesis 4, which expects greater contrasts between candidates on

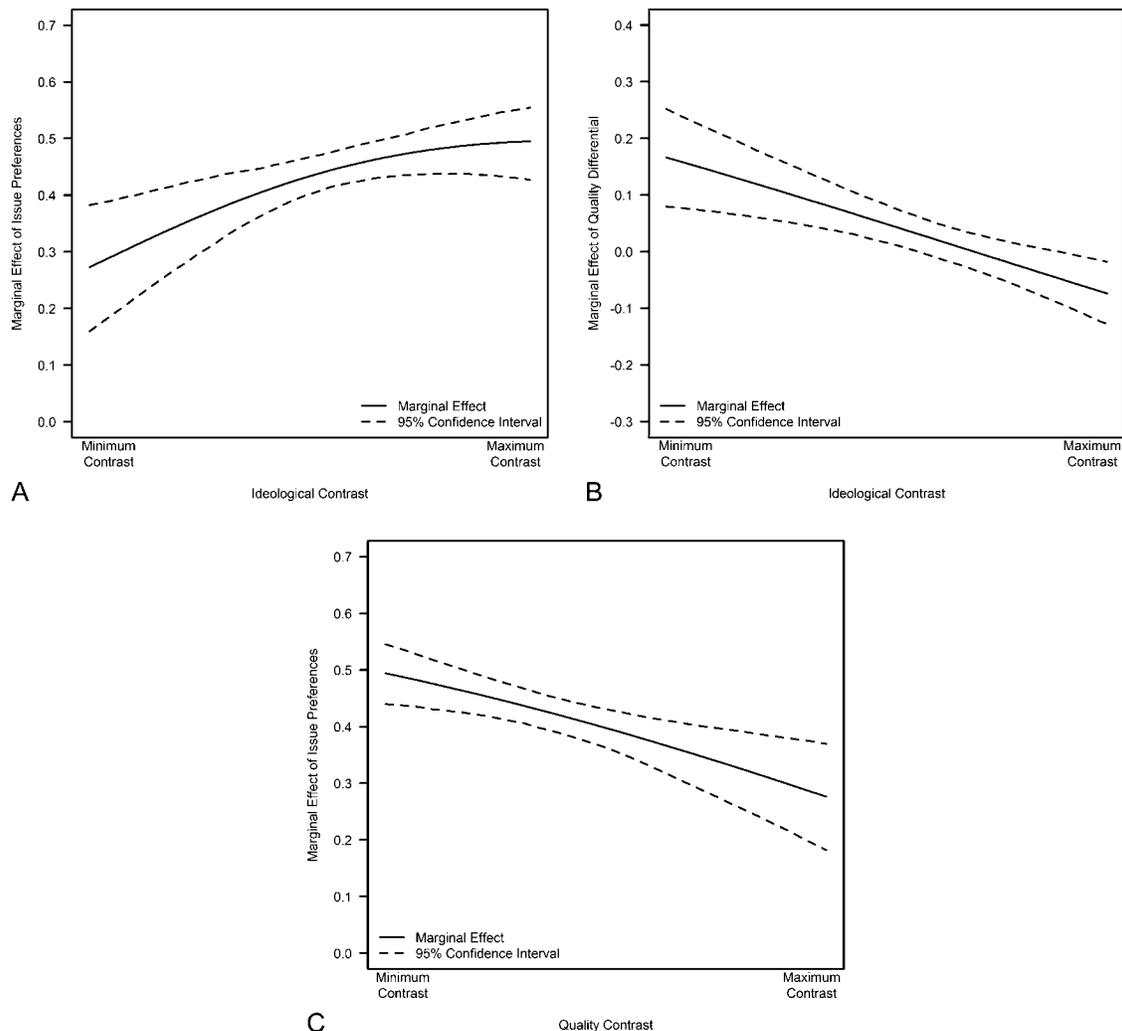
quality to depress the effect of issue preferences, is confirmed by the *Issue Preferences X Candidate Quality Contrast* coefficient. Figure 2(c) plots the marginal effect of a standard deviation change in issue preferences on candidates' quality contrast. The slope is negative, meaning that the relationship between issue preferences and vote choice is strongest when there is little distinction between two candidates on quality. When the difference between candidate quality is close to zero, a standard deviation increase in issue preferences is associated with a .48 increase in the probability of voting for the Republican. The effect of that same standard deviation shift in districts with the maximum level of quality contrast drops to .30.<sup>20</sup>

Taken as a whole, our results indicate the importance of the differences between candidates competing in each district. Ideological and quality contrasts have important conditioning effects on choice. Issue preferences have stronger effects as ideological contrasts between candidates increase; these effects decline as quality contrasts increase. Likewise, candidate-quality differentials increase in their effect as ideological contrasts shrink. That we observe these effects in an election like 2006, widely considered a "nationalized" election structured by party polarization and dissatisfaction with then-President George W. Bush, lends considerable credibility to the claim that local House candidates affect voting choice.

The evidence we have presented thus far focuses on individual voter choice using data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study. In the next section, we shift the focus from individual voting choice to vote shares won by the candidates. The experience of the scholarly community with the CCES data is necessarily limited because 2006 was the first year in which the study was undertaken. While we cannot replicate the analysis backward in time with the more familiar ANES series of congressional election surveys because of the absence of district-expert indicators of candidate differences, we can consider a parallel extension at the district level of analysis. This analysis not only replicates the questions addressed in the individual data, it examines the effects at the level of political outcomes in House districts.

<sup>20</sup>When candidate contrasts on both ideology and quality are high, the marginal effect of issue preferences increases, while quality effects do not. When candidate contrasts are low on both dimensions, the marginal effect of quality differentials decreases, while issue effects remain constant; the marginal effect of incumbency is especially strong under this condition.

FIGURE 2 Effect of Candidate Contrasts and Differentials on Voting Choice



Note: Marginal effects are calculated using estimates from Model 2, Table 2.

### Vote Shares and Candidate Differences: A Partial Replication

The analysis in Table 3 tests for effects of candidate differences that parallel our voting-choice analysis without employing data from the CCES survey.<sup>21</sup> Average presidential vote share and the 2004 Republican House vote share capture districts' fundamental ideological and partisan predispositions. The effects of experience and visibility are represented by the experience and spending differentials. Note that the effect of the quality differential in Model 1 is positive

and significant, consistent with Hypothesis 1. The effect is also politically substantial, as the difference between a candidate two standard deviations below the mean in relative quality compared with a candidate two standard deviations above the mean would amount to about 8.9% in vote share.

The signs of all three interactions in Model 2 are in the expected direction, with two of the three reaching conventional levels of statistical significance. As many scholars have done before us, we treat the presidential vote share in the district as a measure of the ideological preference of the district, analogous to the issue-preference indicator we employed from the survey data (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002; Erikson and Wright 1980). The first interaction term indicates

<sup>21</sup>As before, results from a likelihood-ratio test ( $p < .01$ ) and a comparison of the models' AIC and BIC estimates support the inclusion of the additional candidate differences over a baseline model (not shown).

**TABLE 3 Candidate Contrasts, Differentials, and District Vote Shares**

	Model 1	Model 2
<i>Baseline Variables</i>		
Presidential vote share	0.54** (0.05)	0.48** (0.13)
District House vote 2004	0.13** (0.04)	0.10** (0.04)
Experience differential	2.34** (0.51)	2.39** (0.53)
Campaign spending differential	0.12** (0.04)	0.13** (0.04)
Open or competitive district	-1.51* (0.87)	-1.40 (0.89)
<i>Additional Candidate Differences</i>		
Quality differential	1.68** (0.40)	5.38** (1.04)
Ideological contrast		-1.90 (1.48)
Presidential vote share X ideological contrast		0.05* (0.03)
Quality differential X ideological contrast		-0.94** (0.24)
Quality contrast		2.97 (2.10)
Presidential vote share X quality contrast		-0.05 (0.04)
Constant	11.25** (2.25)	13.57** (7.38)
Observations	135	135
R <sup>2</sup>	0.87	0.88
AIC	827	822

\*  $p < 0.10$  \*\*  $p < 0.05$ .

Note: The dependent variable is the Republican candidate's share of the two-party vote in 2006. OLS coefficient estimates and robust standard errors in parentheses.

that the effect of the district presidential vote on the House Republican candidate's vote share increases as the ideological contrast between the candidates increases. Figure 3(a) plots the marginal effect of a standard deviation change in a district's ideology (presidential vote share) on vote share as the ideological contrast between candidates increases. As in Figure 2(a), the slope is positive with the effect of district ideology ranging from about 5% when the minimum contrast is observed to 8% when candidates position themselves on opposite ends of the ideological spectrum. This result reinforces our confidence in Hypothesis 2 and is consistent with the analogous effect we observe in the voting-choice analysis.

The second significant interaction in Table 3 indicates that the candidate-quality differential has a reduced impact on the GOP vote share in the

district as the ideological contrast between the candidates increases in magnitude. Note that the significant coefficient on the *Quality Differential* coefficient shows the strong impact of quality when ideological differences between the candidates are absent. Figure 3(b) depicts a negative slope, indicating that the relationship between quality and vote share weakens as the ideological contrast between candidates grows. Among candidates with similar positions, a standard deviation change in the quality differential variable translates into about a 7% increase in the predicted vote share for the Republican. This effect diminishes such that it is no different from zero when candidates' ideological contrast is at its maximum value. The *District Ideology X Quality Contrast* coefficient, as noted, is not statistically significant, although the negative sign is consistent with the expectation that ideology decreases in effect with the magnitude of candidate-quality differences.

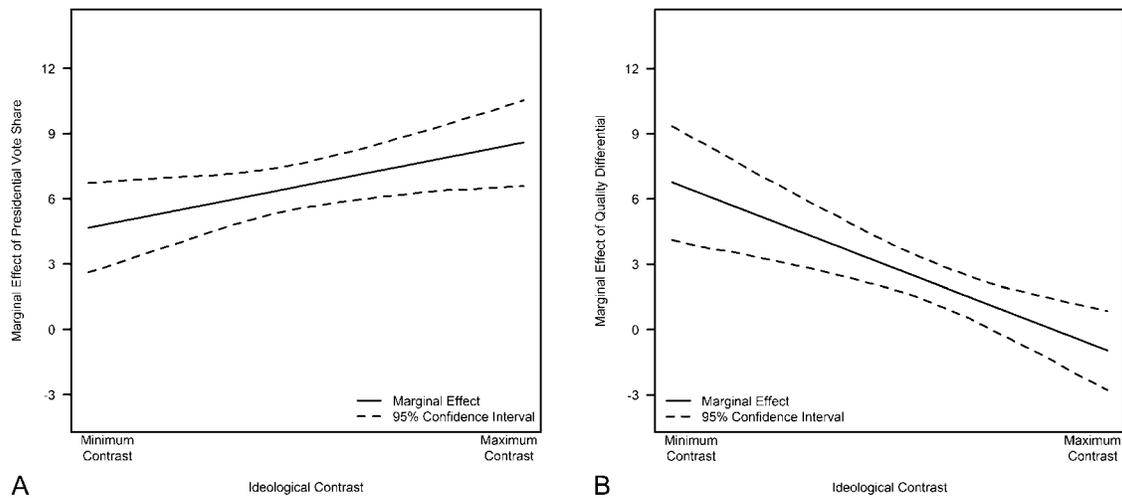
## Discussion: The Impact of Candidate Quality on Vote Share

In analyzing both individual vote choice and district vote share, and controlling for a variety of other explanatory factors, we have evidence that the candidate with a quality advantage attracts votes. Hypothesis 1, which posits a simple additive effect, is strongly supported in the district-level analysis, while at both levels of analysis candidate-quality differentials show sharply increasing effects conditioned on the ideological contrasts between the candidates. It is worth speculating further on the size of this effect because of the substantive importance of candidate quality in understanding House elections. Figure 4 presents the bivariate relationship between quality differentials and Republican vote share in our sample districts. It is clear from the Lowess curve in Figure 4 that the relationship is linear and considerably stronger than reported in Table 3, Model 1.<sup>22</sup> By this analysis, the favored candidate can expect to pick up about 4.8% in vote share for each unit advantage in quality, about three times the magnitude of the effect reported in Table 3, Model 1.

Is this estimate of the impact of candidate-quality differentials overstated in its magnitude? Possibly. But if it is overstated, one can also argue that the effect estimated in Table 3 is too conservative. Strategic entry by challengers and the electoral rewards of strong leadership skills and high character among incumbents

<sup>22</sup>The bivariate regression equation is [S.E.]: Republican Vote Share = 47.38[1.00] + 4.76[0.70] (Quality Differential) +  $\epsilon$ ;  $R^2 = .24$ .

FIGURE 3 Effect of Candidate Contrasts and Differentials on District Vote Shares



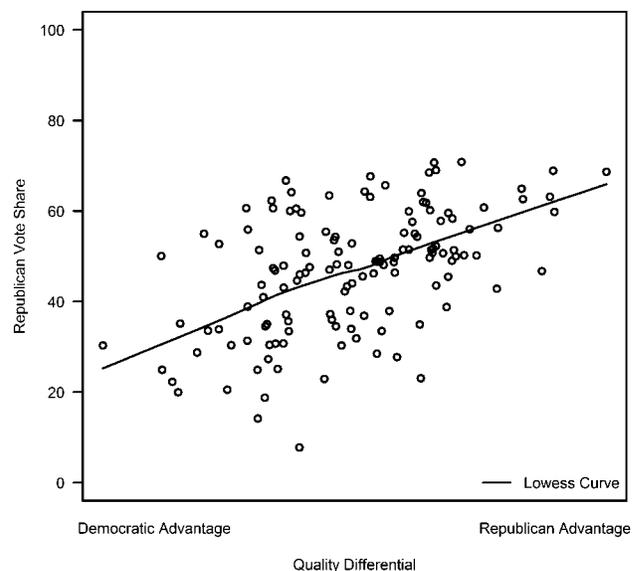
Note: Marginal effects are calculated using estimates from Model 2, Table 3.

may mean that variables such as the spending and standard candidate-quality differentials mediate the effects of quality. If potential campaign contributors value candidates of high quality, they will open their pocket books for candidates with a marked quality advantage. If so, the spending differential in Table 3 intervenes between quality and vote share. Likewise, if incumbents are rewarded with reelection when they are of high quality (Mondak 1995; Stone et al. 2010; Zaller 1998), the process selects for incumbents with strong personal qualities. Strong challengers will be less likely to take on such incumbents, so the spending differential and incumbency effect in any given district should depend on the quality differential. Moreover, numerous studies have posited a link between candidate quality and position taking, so a candidate's character may also affect positioning on the issues (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Burden 2004; Groseclose 2001; Stone and Simas 2010). As Ansolabehere and Snyder note, "valence politics and positional politics are inextricably linked" (2000, 333).

Based on this sort of reasoning, the presidential vote share in the two previous elections may be the only other exogenous variable included in Table 3, although it too may affect who runs and, as a result, the quality differential we observe in a district. When we include the district GOP presidential vote share, the effect of the candidate-quality differential on vote share remains strong [S.E.]:  $\text{Republican Vote Share} = 46.42[.061] + 10.14[0.53](\text{Republican Presidential Vote}) + 3.52[0.49](\text{Quality Differential}) + e$ ;  $R^2 = .73$ .

Consider this an upper bound on our estimate of the effect of quality differentials on House elections. Why might it be too generous? One possibility is measurement endogeneity that may be present to some unknown degree in our design. By relying on district experts to rate candidates' quality, we depend on the validity of their perceptions in calculating quality differentials. We know there is partisan bias in these perceptions, and we have adjusted individual perceptions as a correction against that source of

FIGURE 4 Republican Vote Share by Quality Differential



error, but since informants make their judgments about candidate quality in the midst of the election campaign, it is possible they are influenced by the campaign. Indeed, they *should* be influenced by the campaign to the extent that the contest between the two candidates reveals information about each candidate's skills, integrity, and competence. But, of course, campaigns are also efforts to mobilize bias, and expert judgments may reflect biased input. Candidates, for example, expend money to persuade voters that they are qualified for the office they seek. If experts are also persuaded by their efforts, candidates with a spending advantage may correspondingly boost their quality ratings among district expert informants as a consequence of the money they spend, rather than as a reflection of their actual competence as potential legislators. Likewise, experts may infer from the incumbency or experience advantage of one candidate over the other a quality advantage.

This sort of endogeneity is impossible to measure in the absence of suitable instrumental variables for candidate quality. The absence of these instruments amounts to an important reason why we employ district experts in the first place. We are optimistic that this problem does not render district expert ratings useless for several reasons, not least because of the evidence for their validity and reliability. The fact of their expertise makes them less susceptible to the effects of biased campaign messages than would otherwise be the case. We can also think of partisan bias as a hedge against this problem, since out-party experts' bias further insulates them against campaign effects. When we estimate the effect of quality differentials on vote share using only opposite-party informants as the district expert samples, the effect remains strong.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup>That is, we use Democratic experts to rate the quality of Republican candidates and Republican experts to judge the quality of Democratic candidates. This has two effects that should yield conservative estimates of the effect of quality differentials on vote share: it reduces our district-expert samples in size by about half, but it also means that our estimates rely on informants least susceptible to the campaigns of the candidates rated because they are from the opposing party. The resulting effect of quality differentials indicates a strong effect, reduced from that reported above by a magnitude consistent with the reduced sample size of the district expert samples [S.E.]: Republican Vote Share = 44.85[0.73] + 10.85[0.88](Republican Presidential Vote) + 2.63[0.46] (Quality Differential) +  $\epsilon$ ;  $R^2 = .65$ . In addition, when we reestimate Model 1 from Tables 3 and 4 using only the opposite party ratings of candidates' quality and ideological positions, the effect of the quality differential remains strong and significant.

## Discussion: Candidate Positioning Effects in 2006

If candidate quality is a fundamental component of the choice facing voters, what are the implications for candidate positioning in elections? Candidates may not have much leeway to manipulate perceptions of their quality relative to their opponent. They can emphasize their strengths (and the weaknesses of their opponent), and they may repackage themselves to present a "new face" to the voters, but the foregoing section suggests that candidates' governing skills, character traits, and personal qualities may be relatively fixed, for good or ill. Much, of course, depends on who decides to run (or not to run), and candidates high in personal quality are probably strategic in their entry decisions no less than candidates with strong office-holding resumes (Jacobson 1989; Jacobson and Kernell 1983; Stone, Maisel, and Maestas 2004).

This suggests that the dimension over which candidates have the most control once they decide to run is in the policy positions they take, especially for challengers. In 2006 with the anti-Republican tide that structured House elections, Democratic challengers stood to benefit. We simulate the marginal effect of Democratic challengers moving one unit to the left or right on the liberal-conservative scale on district vote share while the Republican remains fixed. We base the analysis on the second model in Table 3, which recognizes the conditional effects of ideological and quality differences between candidates.<sup>24</sup> The simulation moves Democratic candidates one unit on the left-right scale from "somewhat liberal" to "moderate," and again from "somewhat liberal" to "liberal" to reflect a move one unit toward the liberal extreme. We observe the effects of ideological movement as the quality differential moves from the maximum Democratic advantage found in Republican-held districts to the maximum Republican advantage in the same set of districts.<sup>25</sup>

An ideological shift by the Democratic candidate has two kinds of effects in our model. The first results directly from a change in the ideological differential between the candidates. Recall that the ideological contrast (the magnitude of the ideological difference between the candidates) and the ideological differential (how much more conservative the Republican

<sup>24</sup>These models also produce conservative estimates of the impact of quality differences, by the logic of the previous section.

<sup>25</sup>All other variables are held to the median in Republican-held districts.

is than the Democrat) are identical when the Republican candidate is to the right of the Democratic candidate, which is the case for all candidate pairs in our sample. Thus a move by the Democrat one unit to the right simultaneously narrows the ideological contrast between the candidates and makes the Democrat more conservative when compared to the Republican. Because the average voter in Republican-held districts is conservative, this shift to the right increases the Democrats' vote share. By the same logic, a one-unit shift to the left by the Democrat moves that candidate *away* from district preferences and produces a vote gain for the Republican.

A second, indirect effect of an ideological shift by the Democratic candidate alters the impact of the quality differential and issue preferences on voters' choices. This occurs because when the Democrat shifts to the moderate position, the ideological contrast between the candidates is reduced. By the conditional nature of our model, this increases the impact of candidate quality on vote choice and vote share. At the same time, the reduced ideological distance between the candidates lowers the impact of issue preferences. Thus, when the Democrat has the quality advantage, a move to the center increases the effect of that advantage and results in a gain in vote share. A one-unit shift to the left, on the other hand, increases the ideological contrast. This reduces the impact of quality, which hurts the Democrat if she has a quality advantage, but benefits her if she has a quality *dis*advantage.

Figure 5 presents the net effect of a Democratic challenger's ideological movement in our simulation.<sup>26</sup> We observe this effect over the range of the quality differential, from the maximum Democratic advantage in Republican-held districts to the maximum Republican advantage observed in the sample. The effect of a move to the center by the Democratic challenger on the Republican candidate's vote share is shown in Figure 5(a). When the Democrat has a quality advantage, the move to the center benefits her in two ways: she is rewarded for moving closer to her district's preferences; and especially by increasing the impact of quality on vote choice. Thus, on the left-hand side of the figure, the direct and indirect effects of the move work in tandem to increase her vote share.

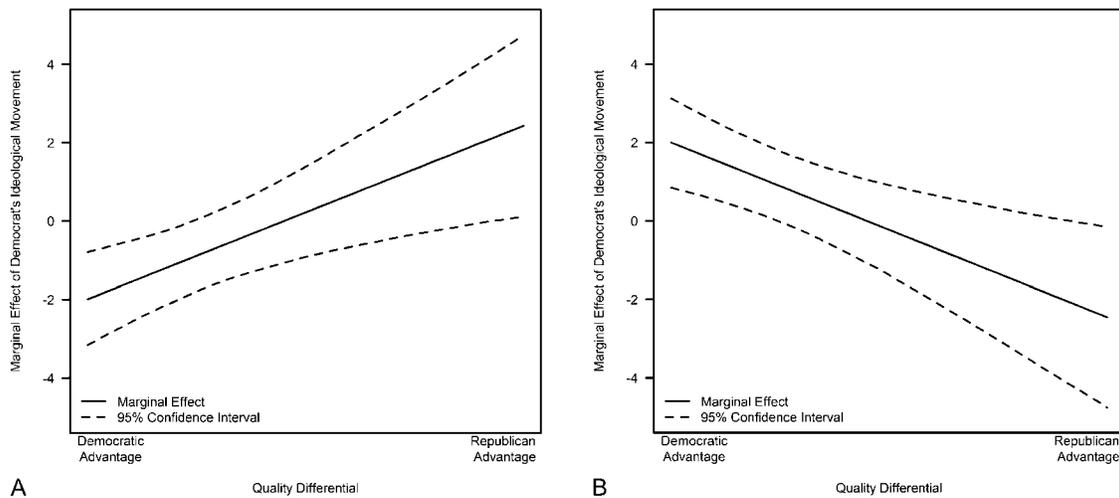
As the quality advantage favors the Republican, however, the indirect effect of moderating her position works *against* the Democrat because the increased weight of quality benefits the Republican. The positive slope in Figure 5(a) indicates that the indirect effect associated with reducing the ideological contrast swamps the benefit to the Democrat of moderating in districts where the Republican candidate had the greatest quality advantage. In these districts, we estimate approximately a 2% vote gain for the Republican despite the Democratic candidate's gain in support from moving to the center.

The conditional logic of the model works in reverse when the Democrat moves one unit toward the liberal extreme (see Figure 5b). The direct effect increases Republican votes because the Democrat is punished for moving away from the average voter in her district. The move toward the extreme, however, also decreases the impact of the quality differential in the model. When the Democrat has a quality advantage (left-hand side of Figure 5b), a shift to the left decreases the importance of the dimension on which she is advantaged and increases the Republican's vote share relative to what it would have been without the policy shift. However, when the Republican has the quality advantage, the indirect effect of the move to the left decreases the impact of quality on which the Democrat is disadvantaged. The net effect of increasing the ideological contrast and diminishing the impact of the Republican's quality advantage is a 2% decrease in the Republican candidate's vote share in the district. Note that the Democrat picks up vote share by moving to the extreme only when the Republican candidate's quality advantage is nearly at the maximum observed value. The effect, then, is to blunt the effect of that large advantage. This is not to say that Democratic challengers at a great quality disadvantage somehow convert that disadvantage into an absolute electoral benefit. Moving under these conditions is an optimal, but not necessarily a winning, strategy.

The analysis in Figure 5 shows two things: first, candidates have the greatest incentive to moderate toward district preferences when they enjoy a strong quality advantage. It is important to see that this advantage stems primarily *not* from the direct effects of moderation itself, although when the district is relatively conservative, as in our simulation, there is a benefit from moving toward the district's preferences. The biggest payoff to moderating comes from the indirect effect of closing the ideological contrast between the candidates, which increases the weight of the quality advantage on voting choice. This means that the effect of moderation must be weighed in

<sup>26</sup>The substantive effects on individual voting choice are identical to those represented in the figure based on the district-level analysis.

FIGURE 5 Effect of Democratic Candidate Ideological Movement



Note: Marginal effects are calculated using estimates from Model of Tabel 3.

comparison with the opposite candidate. In our simulation, we fixed the position of the Republican incumbent, but if the opponent moves an equal distance away from the candidate, the ideological contrast is not affected, and the magnitude of issues and quality effects on the vote remain unchanged.

The second conclusion also follows from recognizing the conditional nature of the model: *the net effect of moving toward the district does not necessarily help the candidate; moving away from the district does not necessarily hurt*. The impact of an ideological shift depends on which candidate has the quality advantage. A move to the center by the Democrat hurts that candidate if the move only accentuates the impact of the quality advantage of her Republican opponent. Conversely, our model shows how a candidate can benefit from moving *away* from her district when the mover has a quality disadvantage. Although such a move carries a penalty associated with shifting away from district preferences, it also reduces the impact of the quality differential.

## Conclusion

Fundamental differences between candidates competing in House districts help explain how voters respond in congressional elections. Enhancing our understanding of how voters respond, in turn,

increases our appreciation for the incentives and pressures at work on candidates. Extending the conventional understanding of voting in congressional elections to include candidates' ideological and quality differences takes us well beyond the usual focus on incumbency, challenger spending, and the occasional scandal. Our results show that the candidates carry a fair amount of the freight in these elections, even in the context of nationally polarized parties, widespread dissatisfaction with a sitting president, and deep frustration with national policies. At the same time, the evidence that candidate differences matter offers optimistic possibilities for how congressional elections work. While differences in visibility and resources are undeniably important, they do not swamp voters' fundamental interests in policy and leadership quality.

The use of district experts to capture variation in campaigns, candidate position taking and quality and other aspects of the electoral context can help us to place the voter into the political context to which she reacts. As Franklin stated in his classic appraisal of candidate position-taking in Senate elections, "As we have become adept at studying voters, it is ironic that we have virtually ignored the study of candidates. Yet it is in candidate behavior that politics intrudes into voting behavior. Without the candidates, there is only the psychology of the vote choice and none of the politics" (1991, 1211). Congressional elections provide enormous variation in the political contexts

candidates help define. By incorporating a richer understanding of the political context in congressional races, we confront the expressly political character of citizen behavior.

The conditional nature of candidate-difference effects relates to literature on both ideological polarization and candidate positioning. While the increased ideological polarization between the elected officials and other political elite (Abramowitz and Saunders 1998, 2008; Hetherington 2001) enhances the impact of issue preferences on voting choice, it may diminish the effect of quality or “valence.” This second consequence of polarization has received less attention than it deserves. Also, the literature on incumbent positioning considers the impact of ideological moderation without taking into account its impact on candidate differences, and without recognizing that altering the difference between candidates on one dimension affects the weight of candidate differences on the other.

A candidate may move toward the center and pick up votes because voters are more satisfied on policy only to enhance the impact of her opponent’s advantage on quality. Votes gained by moderating under these conditions can be more than offset by losses because of a quality disadvantage. Likewise, a quality disadvantage can partially be offset by a move toward the extreme. An incentive for a quality underdog to move toward the extreme has been noticed in other studies (Ansolabehere and Snyder 2000; Groseclose 2001; Stone and Simas 2010); this is the first to identify conditions rooted in voter behavior. If, when the incumbent moderates the challenger also moves toward the extreme, the ideological contrast does not change. If the challenger moves toward the center as well, the contrast is reduced even further than implied by the incumbent’s move alone. Either effect of movement by both candidates could alter the impact of issue preferences on the vote, with consequences for how the candidates fare. And of course, if the incumbent’s move to the center increases an unmeasured quality advantage of the challenger, positioning models will miss the negative implications of the move entirely.

A focus on candidate differences highlights the importance of politics in House elections. The quality and ideological positioning of candidates matter; how voters react to these factors also matters. Assessing the complex interplay of policy and quality in House elections can foster a greater understanding of, and appreciation for, how the rich tapestry of our politics plays out in the diverse array of district races nationwide.

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