

Title:

Out of Office, Out of Step? Electoral Incentives and Strategic Moderation in the U.S. House of Representatives

Abstract:

This paper proposes a novel identification strategy to separate electoral incentives from selection effects on incumbent politicians' policy choices. Exploiting the unique institutional setup of lame-duck sessions in the U.S. Congress, where lame-duck incumbents who lost reelection vote on the same issues as their reelected colleagues, I use a close election regression discontinuity design to leverage quasi-random assignment of reelection-seeking representatives to lame-duck status, which is orthogonal to voter preferences and incumbents' type. Comparing within-incumbent changes in roll call voting of barely unseated lame ducks to narrowly reelected co-partisans serving the same congressional term, I find that lame ducks revert to more extreme positions, with lame-duck Democrats (Republicans) voting more liberally (conservatively). Consistent with lame ducks' loss of reelection incentives driving the result, the effect of lame-duck status on roll call extremism is more pronounced among electorally vulnerable incumbents, representatives of districts with a large proportion of swing voters, and retirement-aged lame ducks who are less likely to rerun in the future. I also consider but ultimately dismiss several other mechanisms, including emotional backlash, logrolling motives, party control, and selective abstention. Although quantitatively dominated by selection effects, electoral incentives to moderate positions are large enough to reduce polarization by 21–26% and to flip high-stakes legislative outcomes under plausible counterfactual scenarios motivated by ongoing debates over U.S. constitutional design.