

Electoral Choice, Ideological Conflict, and Political Participation

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Generations of democratic theorists argue that democratic systems should present citizens with clear and distinct electoral choices. Responsible party theorists further argued that political participation increases with greater ideological conflict between competing electoral options. Empirical evidence on this question, however, remains deeply ambiguous. This article introduces new joint estimates of citizen preferences and the campaign platforms chosen by pairs of candidates in U.S. House and Senate races. The results show that increasing levels of ideological conflict reduce voter turnout, and are robust across a wide range of empirical specifications. Furthermore, the findings provide no support for existing accounts that emphasize how ideology or partisanship explains the relationship between ideological conflict and turnout. Instead, I find that increasing levels of candidate divergence reduce turnout primarily among citizens with lower levels of political sophistication. These findings provide the strongest evidence to date for how mass political behavior is conditioned by electoral choice.

If, as Schattschneider claimed, “[d]emocracy is not to be found in the parties but *between* the parties” (1942, 60, emphasis in original), the nature of the electoral alternatives offered to citizens has important implications for democratic health. Perhaps chief among them is the way these alternative visions of governance affect how citizens participate in political decision making. Drawing from arguments made by Tocqueville ([1840] 1963), Wilson ([1884] 1901), and Bryce ([1888] 1995), responsible party theorists in the 1940s and 1950s believed that voter turnout would increase if the parties adopted more ideologically distinct platforms (APSA Committee on Political Parties 1950). They argued that increasing the scope of conflict (to use Schattschneider’s phrase)—that is, expanding the range of policy alternatives—engages more citizens in the democratic process. Ideological conflict has the capacity to affect mass political behavior because, as Sniderman writes, “[c]itizens do not operate as decision makers in isolation from political institutions” (2000, 68). Put differently, the key claim put forth by responsible party theorists and others is that the decision

context—characterized by the kinds of electoral choices that appear on the ballot—affects whether citizens decide to participate in the exercise of collective choice.

The relationship between elite conflict and mass political behavior has received significant attention as a consequence of contemporary levels of partisan polarization in Congress (e.g., McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Theriault 2008). Elite polarization is said to help citizens better match their political beliefs to a party or candidate (e.g., Hetherington 2001; Levendusky 2009, 2010) and increase the importance of electoral outcomes (e.g., Abramowitz 2010; Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Hetherington 2008). But whether the ideological differences between parties affect levels of citizen participation remains altogether unclear. Abramowitz (2010) and Hetherington (2008, 2009), for instance, report that increasing policy differences have increased voter turnout, while Fiorina (2011) argues that elite conflict disengages the electorate. According to Layman and Carsey (2002) and Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner (2012), meanwhile, elite conflict has rather limited effects on political

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participation, which are mostly concentrated among particular segments of the electorate. Though results from studies of party polarization may offer important insights into how elite conflict affects the mass public, scholars have devoted much less attention to how the choices offered to citizens in elections affect political participation.

This article directly examines how ideological conflict between competing candidates in elections affects voter turnout. I utilize a novel data source to characterize the ideological content of the platforms offered by candidates in U.S. House and Senate races, where greater dissimilarity in candidates' platforms indicates elections with higher levels of ideological conflict. This approach contrasts with other scholarship that investigates the form and consequences of ideological conflict using measures such as interparty polarization, intraparty unity, congressional agreement with the president, and the platform congruence between presidential candidates. In addition, this approach avoids the theoretical and measurement limitations associated with the use of roll-call voting records or citizen perceptions to characterize candidates' platform locations.

The results indicate that rather than stimulate political participation, increasing policy differences between candidates significantly *reduce* voter turnout. Citizens in districts in which the candidates adopted clearly distinct sets of policy positions were about 5 percentage points less likely to vote than citizens in districts where the candidates' policy differences were not as substantial, and these results are robust to a wide range of model specifications. Furthermore, I demonstrate that citizens with lower levels of education and political information are disproportionately demobilized by ideological conflict. I find no evidence, however, of demobilization due to increased alienation based upon either ideology or partisanship, as Fiorina (2011) and others have recently argued. The results shown here highlight the ways in which contextual factors, including the nature of the electoral choices on offer, affect mass political behavior.

Ideological Conflict and Political Participation

Ideological conflict is a pervasive feature among the parties in Congress (e.g., McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Theriault 2008) and candidates in elections (e.g., Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001a; Burden 2004; Fiorina 1974; Wright and Berkman 1986).¹ Because elite

¹Fiorina (1999) and Grofman (2004) provide in-depth reviews of theoretical explanations for these phenomena.

phenomena can substantially shape mass attitudes and behavior (e.g., Carmines and Stimson 1989; Zaller 1992), the degree of ideological conflict between candidates may affect mass political participation. Voter turnout is an important barometer of democratic health because, as Dalton writes, "citizen involvement in the political process is essential for democracy to be viable and meaningful" (1988, 35).

Existing literature provides several ways of thinking about the relationship between ideological conflict and voter turnout but offers conflicting predictions about the direction of this relationship. Responsible party theorists, such as those serving on the APSA Committee on Political Parties, made the argument that nonvoters "can be converted into voters when they become sufficiently convinced that voting is important, which in turn depends upon whether a real choice is presented on matters they consider critically important" (1950, 90).² That is, greater ideological conflict increases the stakes associated with the election outcome, and therefore increases political participation (see also Downs 1957). Abramowitz (2010) argues that increased party polarization in Congress has increased political engagement for precisely this reason. I term this the *mobilization hypothesis*.

Other accounts, however, suggest that ideological conflict *decreases* voter turnout. A large theoretical literature posits that citizens decide not to vote when neither candidate is sufficiently attractive (Adams and Merrill 2003; Brody and Page 1973; Callander and Wilson 2007; Hinich and Ordeshook 1969; Riker and Ordeshook 1968; Smithies 1941), for which Adams, Dow, and Merrill (2006) and Plane and Gershtenson (2004) find empirical support. As ideological conflict increases and candidates are located farther and farther away in the ideological space, citizens located around the center of the space might decide that neither candidate appeals enough to them to turn out to vote. Turnout is likely to decrease, then, as more citizens are alienated by choices offered to them.³ Fiorina expresses this argument most succinctly: "We divide evenly in elections or sit them out entirely because we instinctively seek the center while the parties and candidates hang out on the extremes" (2011, xiii). I will refer to this as the *demobilization hypothesis*.

²Of course, the APSA committee proposed a variety of other reforms, too, but this article focuses mainly on the panelists' concern for the articulation of clear and ideologically distinct platforms.

³Critically, this assumes that citizens have mostly moderate preferences. But if citizens themselves are polarized, the predictions regarding turnout are more ambiguous.

Existing Evidence

Recent empirical work focused on congressional polarization is divided about whether the mass public has responded in positive or negative ways. The small body of literature that examines the relationship between congressional polarization and turnout finds virtually unanimous support for the mobilization hypothesis (Abramowitz 2010; Abramowitz and Saunders 2008; Abramowitz and Stone 2006; Hetherington 2008, 2009). The standard conclusion in this literature is that polarization “does not seem to have demobilized the electorate” (Hetherington 2009, 443).

But research that focuses on other consequences of party polarization reaches more conflicting conclusions. For instance, King (1997) and Brady, Ferejohn, and Harbridge (2008) report that polarization decreases trust in government, but Hibbing and Smith (2004) find that increased polarization has not given rise to a “frustrated moderate” class of citizens. Wagner (2007) shows that increasing partisan divisions and ideological extremity among members of Congress lead constituents to feel less satisfied with their legislator’s casework and less likely to feel that the legislator would be helpful if contacted, but Brady, Ferejohn, and Harbridge (2008) find no evidence between polarization and either accountability or responsiveness. Polarization better enables citizens to match their policy interests to a candidate or party, thus strengthening the connection between election results and policy outcomes (Hetherington 2001; Levendusky 2010), but it also generates increased ambivalence toward the parties (Thornton 2013) and leads to lower-quality opinion formation among citizens (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013). In short, existing literature on party polarization provides no clear guidance about how ideological conflict in elections affects voter turnout.

Furthermore, it is not at all clear that the findings from such literatures, even if they were consistent, would generalize to the relationship between candidates’ platforms and citizen participation. To be sure, congressional polarization is a subset of the kind of ideological conflict Schattschneider and others had in mind; the congressional parties, certainly, seem to have heeded the responsible party theorists’ recommendations. However, without a theoretical explanation for the connection between congressional polarization and voter-turnout decisions in elections that, at least in practice, have little to do with the dynamics of Congress, existing research cannot tell us very much about how candidates’ platform choices affect voter turnout.

Empirically, there are two primary difficulties in examining this relationship. First, systematic data on the platforms selected by electoral candidates are scarce. In-

stead, many scholars have used roll-call voting records to characterize the platforms of legislative candidates or citizens’ perceptions of the candidates’ ideological positions. However, both of these approaches have their limitations. The use of roll-call voting records offers the advantage of characterizing legislators’ ideologies in a systematic way, but the relationship between legislative and electoral forms of behavior remains largely unclear. Citizens’ perceptions are useful for examining how voters view the nature of the electoral choices that are presented to them, but the use of perceptions to examine this question requires researchers to make strong assumptions about the relationship between the platforms candidates adopt and how citizens view the candidates. Perceptions data also introduce measurement issues, as it is not clear whether all citizens use ideological scales in a comparable way either within or across districts, and item nonresponse on candidate placement questions is generally higher among less educated and informed citizens. Thus, the degree to which education and information are distributed asymmetrically across citizens in different elections creates additional challenges for characterizing candidates’ platforms in a systematic way.

Second, though presidential elections may offer an opportunity to examine how varying levels of conflict between the candidates affect turnout in those elections, it can be difficult to convincingly identify the relationship between ideological conflict and turnout while also accounting for the other contextual and time-varying factors that also affect levels of participation. For instance, Abramowitz and Saunders (2008) conclude that voter polarization about George W. Bush contributed to large increases in voter turnout in 2004 compared to the 2000 presidential election but do not account for any of the other factors (such as mobilization) that also may have changed between these elections. Somewhat similarly, Hetherington (2008) compares trends in presidential election turnout over the last several decades with trends in congressional polarization and, seeing that both have increased, concludes that elite polarization has stimulated citizen engagement. While presidential elections offer a wealth of data on the candidates’ positions across a variety of issues, an analysis of voter turnout across time as a function of the different levels of conflict between presidential candidates would also need to account for the changing ways in which elections are conducted, including, for instance, an increased reliance on voter mobilization, as well as the historically specific circumstances of these elections, such as the presence of war. The difficulties in doing so, then, have precluded research that examines how the platform choices of presidential candidates affect voter turnout in those elections.

This article addresses both sets of limitations. I characterize ideological conflict by examining differences in the platforms chosen by pairs of candidates running for the same office. Because these alternatives are the electoral choices that are offered to citizens, this measure provides a way to directly examine how clearly defined and ideologically distinct platforms affect turnout. This approach stands in stark contrast to other scholarship that investigates the form and consequences of ideological conflict using measures such as interparty polarization, intraparty unity, congressional agreement with the president, and the platform congruence between presidential candidates. Furthermore, characterizing ideological conflict in this way focuses specifically on the incentives for and consequences of the platforms that candidates select. I use two sets of elections to examine the relationship between candidate divergence and turnout. First, I examine a sample of elections for the U.S. Senate that occurred between 1996 and 2006 and complement these data with a sample of U.S. House races that took place in the same election year (2006).

The combination of these two sources of data allows me to examine the effects of divergence across a wide swath of time and contexts, and, particularly important, the House elections data allow me to implicitly control for all of the other time-varying features of the political environment that may also affect levels of turnout. Focusing on a single election year sharply reduces the possibility that the results are confounded by time-varying characteristics and contextual factors that are otherwise unaccounted for. The main identification strategy, then, uses the variation in the level of ideological divergence between pairs of candidates in a large number of U.S. House and Senate races. Thus, I examine citizens' willingness to vote as a function of the level of ideological conflict between candidates in the district in which they live. Employing this strategy yields dramatically different results from the existing research on polarization and turnout described above. Rather than increase voter turnout, I find that increasing levels of ideological divergence *reduce* turnout.

Data

I use candidate survey data collected by Project Vote Smart to characterize candidate platforms in U.S. House and Senate races. Project Vote Smart is a not-for-profit, nonpartisan organization that collects information about candidates for distribution to voters and the media. During each federal and state election, Project Vote Smart distributes questionnaires to candidates for president, the

U.S. House and Senate, governor, and state legislatures.⁴ These questionnaires are completed prior to each state's filing deadline and include approximately 150 questions over a comprehensive range of policy areas.⁵ These questions bear a close resemblance to roll-call votes, as the format of most questions asks candidates to indicate whether they would support or oppose a particular policy proposal.⁶ Both major-party candidates completed the survey in 37 Senate races between 1996 and 2006 (19% of all contested races over this period) and 50 House races in 2006 (13% of all contested races).⁷ Fortunately, both samples of elections are quite representative of all contested races that occurred over this time period. There are no major differences in the share of the vote received by either Democratic presidential or Senate/House candidates, and presidential and Senate/House elections were decided by nearly equivalent margins of victory, suggesting that the samples cover a full range of levels of competitiveness. These comparisons increase confidence in this study's external validity.⁸

⁴It is possible that campaign staffers or people other than the candidates actually completed the surveys or that the survey responses are an attempt to obfuscate a candidate's record. However, as will be elaborated below, the survey data correlate very highly with both DW-NOMINATE scores (for successful candidates) and citizens' perceptions of the candidates' positions.

⁵Of course, elections are often contested over some smaller subset of the full range of issues contained in the Project Vote Smart data. However, the results of two supplementary analyses suggest that this is not likely to systematically bias the candidate estimates that result from using these data. First, the candidates' positions are strongly correlated across issue areas. Candidates who took conservative positions on abortion also take conservative positions on education, crime policy, trade, and the environment. Table B.1 in the online supporting information shows the pairwise correlations between candidates' issue-specific ideal point estimates that are generated using only those subsets of questions on a given issue area. In addition, the questions scale extremely well across issue areas, as Table B.2 shows. This implies that a candidate's position on, say, guns is highly correlated with her position on health care. The strong correlations across issue areas suggest that using the full set of issue areas captured in the Project Vote Smart survey introduces no systematic bias into the platform estimates even if candidates do not address all issue areas during the campaign.

⁶I coded the questions following the procedures used in Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2001b).

⁷A complete list of all Senate races and House districts included in the sample can be found in Tables A.1 and A.2, respectively, in the online supporting information.

⁸These comparisons are found in Table A.3 in the online supporting information. One may also wonder whether the results are an artifact of the selection process by which candidates chose to complete the survey. Indeed, the probability of answering the survey was lower among Republicans, incumbents, first-term members of Congress, quality challengers, victorious candidates, and better-funded candidates. However, for selection to explain the results shown here, the probability of answering the survey would need to

To study the relationship between candidate divergence and turnout, I use two sets of individual-level survey data. For the Senate races, I use the November voting supplements to the Current Population Studies (CPS) for election years between 1996 and 2006, each of which includes a nationally representative sample of approximately 150,000 people. The large sample sizes make the CPS an attractive source of data, and the time-series nature of the study enables me to examine the extent to which candidate divergence affects voter turnout across time and context. To study voter turnout in the 2006 House elections, I use the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES). The CCES contains a nationally representative sample of 36,421 respondents, with good coverage across 432 of the 435 congressional districts (Alaska and Hawaii were not included in this study).⁹

Several trade-offs accompany the use of the CPS and the CCES. While the CPS have significantly larger sample sizes and are available across many election years, the CCES contains a much richer set of political variables. These variables—such as partisanship, policy attitudes, and questions about mobilization—are important to include in analyses of voter turnout and are also important for testing potential explanations for the relationship between candidate divergence and turnout. In addition, the CCES provides validated voter turnout for all of its respondents, whereas the CPS contain self-reports of voter turnout. Validated turnout information guards against fears of overreports of voter turnout that are common in studies of political participation, and, to the extent that overreports are correlated with candidate divergence, produces more precise estimates of the relationship between turnout and divergence. Thus, I use the CPS and the CCES as complements to identify the main effects of divergence, but then I rely mainly on the CCES to examine these findings more closely.¹⁰

Estimates of Candidate and Citizen Ideology

Testing hypotheses generated from existing work about the relationship between divergence and turnout requires

be correlated both with the level of ideological conflict in a given election and candidates' expectations about how the chosen level of conflict would affect voter turnout decisions. While I cannot rule out the possibility that an unmeasured confounder could affect the results, it is difficult to think of an unobservable that meets these criteria.

⁹A complete table of variable summaries is available in Table A.4 in the online supporting information.

¹⁰Verified voter registration status and a full set of demographic controls are available for 2,249 of the CCES respondents, but the results are nearly identical when the analysis is expanded to include all 4,435 respondents who reside in one of these districts.

measures of candidate and citizen preferences that are directly comparable, and thus I focus on generating joint estimates of House candidate and citizen ideology using the CCES. The CCES contains a relatively large number of policy-oriented questions—21 in all—and these 21 questions can be further partitioned into 25 unique responses with which to assess citizen ideology.¹¹ Fortunately, seven of these questions are nearly identical to the questions asked of the candidates on the Project Vote Smart survey, and using the same approach found in Bafumi and Herron (2010) and Jessee (2009) allows me to jointly estimate citizen and candidate ideology in common space. These seven questions are termed “bridge items” because they are the “glue” that links citizens' policy views to the candidates' views.¹²

Candidate and citizen ideal points are estimated using the Bayesian procedure detailed in Clinton, Jackman, and Rivers (2004). Just as roll-call voting scores model the probability that legislator i voted “yea” on roll-call vote j , I model the probability that a candidate or citizen indicated support for a particular policy proposal.¹³ As is standard in the literature, I assume that a single dimension adequately characterizes the candidates' and citizens' positions on the set of issues used to generate these estimates.¹⁴

The candidate platform estimates have a great deal of face validity. In every race, the Republican candidate adopted a more conservative platform than the Democratic candidate. The left panel of Figure 1 shows the distributions of House and Senate candidates' platforms. These platform estimates also have a high degree of correspondence with the winning candidates' subsequent

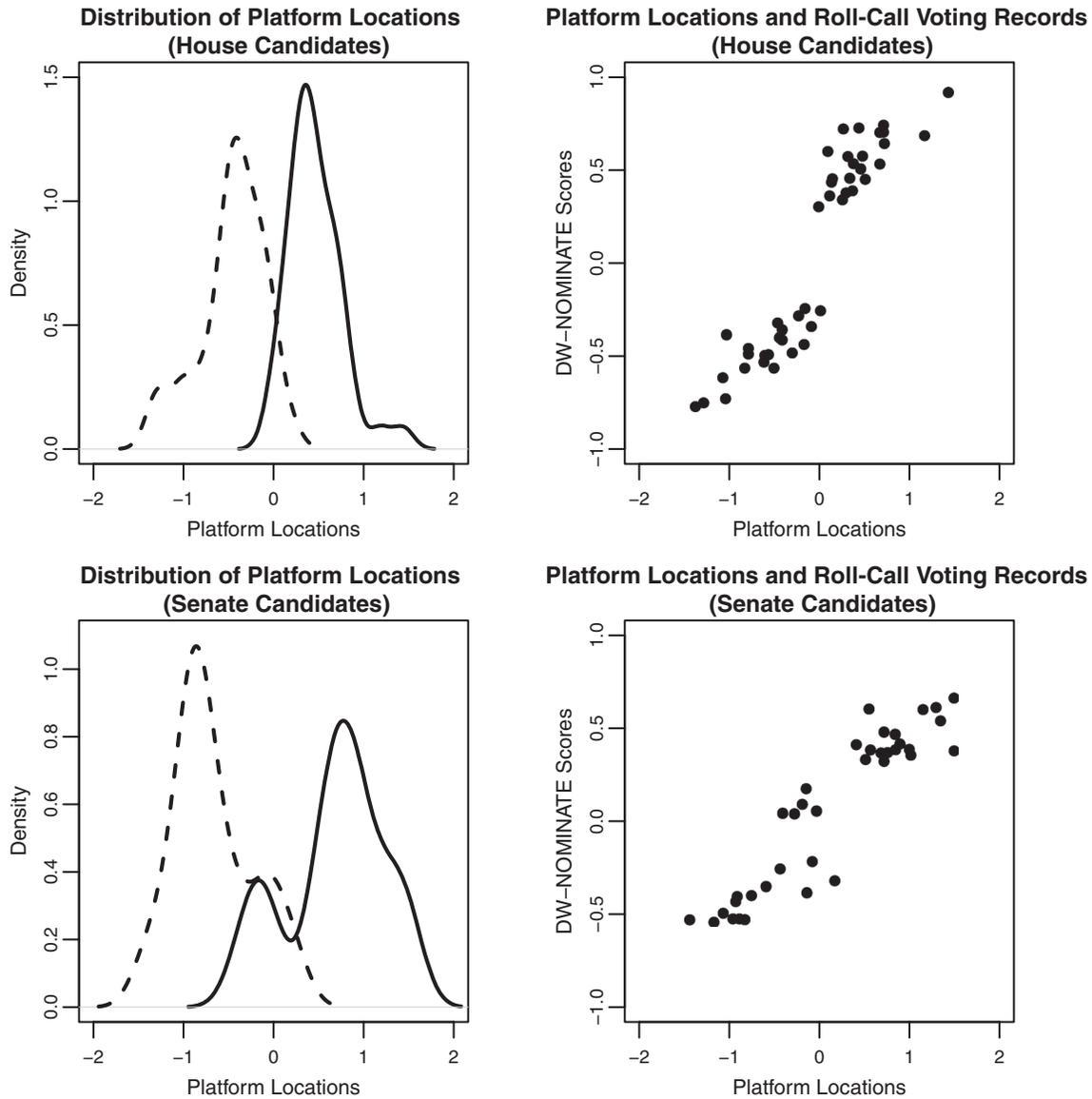
¹¹Most of the CCES policy questions were accompanied by dichotomous response options; several questions, however, offered more than two response choices. For these cases, I created $k-1$ response entries, where k indicates the number of response options. For instance, a question on abortion preferences offered four response options, ranging from a total ban on abortion to lifting all restrictions on abortion. From these four categories, I created three distinct responses.

¹²The CCES and bridging questions and the distribution of responses are shown in Table B.3 in the online supporting information. Though seven questions is not an extremely large number of bridge items, Shor, McCarty, and Berry (2008) show that bridging can be accomplished successfully with as few as four items. The main consequence of this approach is simply that the candidate ideal points are estimated with greater precision simply because there are more issue positions available for them.

¹³The Senate candidates' platforms are estimated using the same procedure with a separate matrix of candidates and survey responses.

¹⁴I ran 50,000 iterations after a burn-in period of 10,000, thinning by 100. This generates posterior distributions of candidate ideal points with a sample size of 500.

FIGURE 1 Candidate Platforms



Note: The left plots show the distribution of Senate and House candidates' platform locations. Democratic candidates' platforms are shown by the dashed lines; Republicans are shown with the solid lines. The right plots show the relationship between platform locations and roll-call voting records for successful Senate and House candidates. The DW-NOMINATE scores reflect legislative voting records in the Congress subsequent to their election.

roll-call voting records. The right panel of the figure shows the relationship between candidate platforms and DW-NOMINATE scores for the winning candidates in the subsequent Congress. Though the estimates cannot be directly compared because they are estimates from different sets of data, the correlation between the two measures for both sets of candidates is extremely high.¹⁵ Furthermore, and particularly crucial, there is a strong correspondence

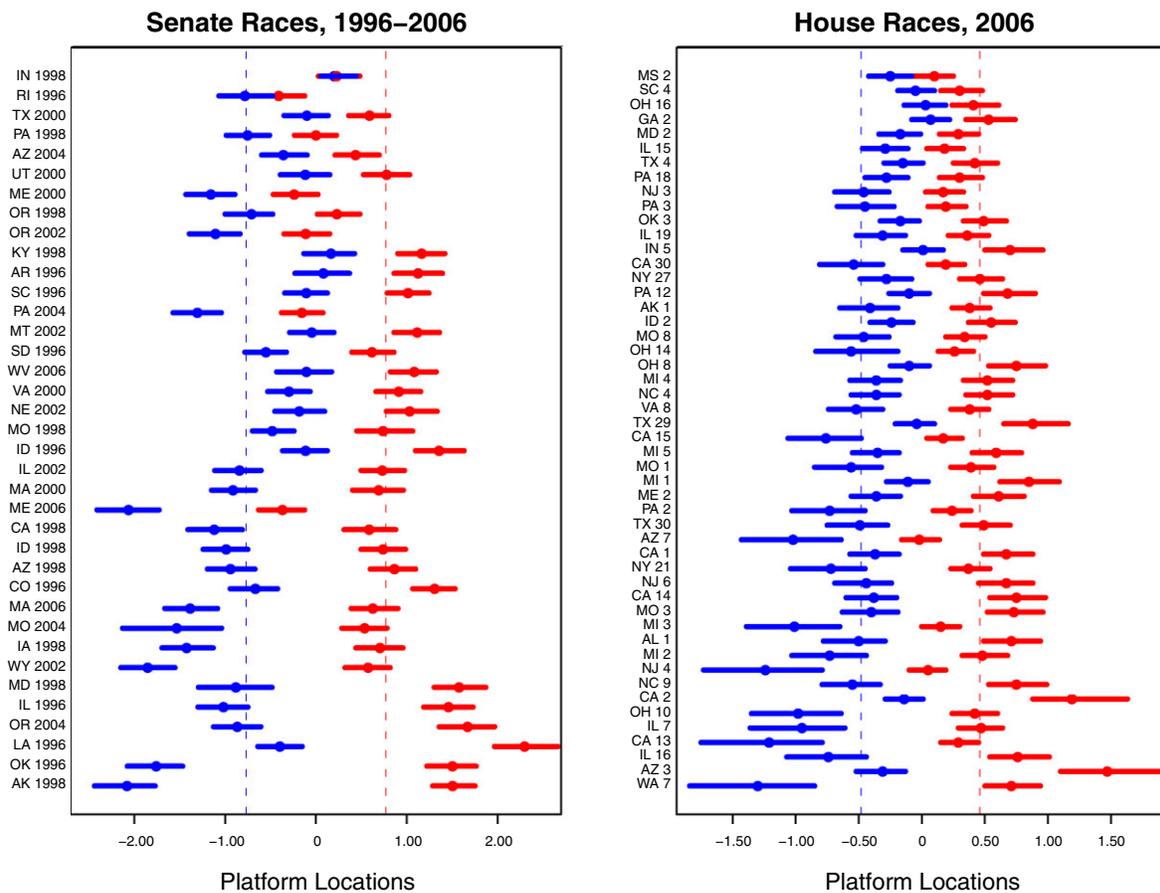
¹⁵Within-party correlations are also quite strong; in the House, the correlation between Democratic candidates' platform and roll-call

between the candidates' platform estimates and CCES respondents' placements of the candidates along a 101-point ideological scale.¹⁶

Armed with these estimates, I calculate the level of ideological divergence between the candidates running in estimates is 0.83, and 0.74 for Republicans. The correlations are 0.80 and 0.85 for Senate Democrats and Republicans, respectively.

¹⁶The correlation between CCES respondent mean placement and platform estimates is 0.46 for Democratic candidates and 0.28 for Republican candidates. These comparisons are shown graphically in Figure B.1 in the supporting information.

FIGURE 2 Candidate Platforms and Ideological Divergence



Note: The circles represent the point estimates for each candidate’s platform, and the horizontal lines are the 95% credible intervals from the posterior distribution. Republicans are shown in red, and Democrats are shown in blue. The dashed lines display the mean platform estimates.

the same election, which is characterized by the absolute value of the difference between the candidates’ ideology scores. For instance, if the Democratic candidate’s platform estimate is -1 , and the Republican candidate’s platform estimate is $+1$, the amount of candidate divergence is 2. Figure 2 shows the platform positions of the candidates in these races, ordered by the level of divergence between the candidates. The dashed lines show the mean platform estimates among each group of candidates. In the Senate contests, the candidates were least divergent in the 1998 open-seat race in Indiana between Evan Bayh (D) and Paul Helmke (R), whereas the highest level of divergence was in the Alaska race in the same year between incumbent Frank Murkowski (R) and challenger Joe Sonneman (D). Among House races, the candidates were least divergent in the MS-2 race between incumbent Bennie Thompson (D) and challenger Yvonne Brown (R) and most divergent in the race in WA-7 between Democratic

incumbent Jim McDermott and Republican challenger Steve Beren.

The estimates of citizen ideology obtained for the CCES respondents are also quite reasonable. Democratic respondents have more liberal ideal point estimates than Republican respondents, and Independents have ideal point estimates somewhere in between. Furthermore, the correlation between these estimates and the respondents’ ideological self-placements is remarkably high (0.76). Thus, the ideal-point-estimation procedure used here produces reasonable estimates of ideology for both candidates and citizens and enables me to evaluate the relative ideological proximity between pairs of candidates and between citizens and the candidates in their districts.

This empirical strategy constitutes a hard test of the relationship between electoral choices and voter turnout. While Senate elections often can be hard-fought contests, the attention they receive often pales in comparison to

presidential campaigns, and House races generally are low-information contests. Though 2006 was an off-year election, virtually every state had at least one higher-profile election in the form of a gubernatorial or Senate race. It would not be altogether unsurprising, then, to find null effects, especially in the House analyses, as citizens' turnout decisions are likely to be more heavily influenced by the nature of electoral competition in more high-profile contests.

Statistical Model

To begin, I estimate the following model to examine the relationship between candidate divergence and voter turnout:

$$\begin{aligned} Pr(\text{Vote}_{ijk}) = & \text{logit}^{-1}(\beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Divergence}_j \\ & + \beta_2 \text{Competitiveness}_j + \beta_3 \text{Age}_i \\ & + \beta_4 \text{Education}_i + \beta_5 \text{Income}_i + \beta_6 \text{Female}_i \\ & + \beta_7 \text{Black}_i + \beta_8 \text{Latino}_i + \beta_9 \text{Asian}_i + D_k), \end{aligned}$$

in which i , j , and k index individuals, electoral contests, and states, respectively; Vote_{ijk} is the probability that an individual in a given electoral contest and state reported voting. The estimate of β_1 describes the relationship between ideological divergence and voter turnout, where positive estimates indicate that individuals are more likely to vote as ideological conflict increases, and negative estimates indicate that individuals are less likely to vote as divergence increases.¹⁷ The estimates for β_2 – β_9 describe the relationship between voter turnout and a standard set of political and demographic controls.¹⁸ *Competitiveness* indicates the winning candidate's margin of victory in the previous election, which is transformed such that larger values indicate more competitive electoral environments.¹⁹

¹⁷One could suppose that citizens who enjoy voting all choose to live in congressional districts or states in which candidates adopt highly divergent platforms, and citizens who prefer *not* to vote all choose to live in districts or states where the candidates choose highly convergent platforms, in which case the estimates of β_1 are biased due to endogeneity. Though this may be a valid concern when cities, towns, or counties are the political units of interest—in which geographic borders delineate political environments and constituencies that may be quite different—it is unlikely to be a concern here. Thus, under the assumption that the covariates discussed here account for all other relevant differences in respondents' "assignment" to districts with varying levels of divergence, the estimates of β_1 are unbiased.

¹⁸Using a dichotomous measure for respondent race generates identical results.

¹⁹Using the margin of victory in the current election produced nearly identical results. These data were gathered from the official election statistics published by the Office of the Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives.

Finally, D_k represents state fixed effects that are included to account for state-specific attributes—such as the presence of another statewide contest or ballot proposition—that may also contribute to an individual's decision to vote.²⁰ I clustered the standard errors by election contest to account for intrarace correlation in the error terms among respondents who are exposed to the same campaign, the level at which divergence is measured.

Results

The first column of Table 1 shows the results for the regression model shown above using the Senate data. The coefficient for divergence is negative and statistically significant, indicating that respondents are less likely to vote as the level of divergence between Senate candidates increases. In addition to the coefficient estimates, the row labeled "Change in probability of voting" displays the substantive impact of divergence, which is assessed by comparing the predicted probability of voting at different levels of divergence. Specifically, I estimated the predicted probability of voter turnout when divergence is at its 25th and 75th percentile values (0.99 and 2.07, respectively), while all other continuous, categorical, and dichotomous variables are held at their mean, median, and modal values, respectively. The difference in the predicted probability of turnout when *Divergence* is at its 25th and 75th percentile levels indicates that citizens are about 5 percentage points less likely to vote in races with the higher level of divergence, and this difference is statistically significant. All else equal, for instance, we would expect the same individual to be about 5 percentage points less likely to turn out in the 2004 Missouri race between Kit Bond (R) and Nancy Farmer (D) compared to the 2002 Oregon contest between Bill Bradbury (D) and Gordon Smith (R). This evidence indicates that ideological conflict between candidates *reduces* voter turnout.

The CCES data strongly confirm the Senate results in an altogether different context and level of election. They do so while also addressing the limitations of the CPS data that are enumerated in the previous section. The second column of coefficients in Table 1 shows the results using exactly the same model used to estimate the Senate results. In addition to the statistical model shown in equation (1), I also estimate a model that includes additional covariates

²⁰This term implicitly adjusts for variation in the competitiveness of statewide races (and the levels of mobilization activity that may accompany them) that may also generate differential levels of turnout across states. I also include a term for year fixed effects in the Senate races.

TABLE 1 Candidate Divergence and Individual-Level Turnout

Independent Variables	Senate Elections (1)	House Elections	
		(1)	(2)
Divergence	-0.22* (0.03)	-0.77* (0.32)	-0.78* (0.33)
Competitiveness	0.13* (0.02)	0.10 (0.07)	0.10 (0.07)
Age (<i>decades</i>)	0.41* (0.01)	0.26* (0.05)	0.23* (0.05)
Education	0.50* (0.02)	0.08 (0.06)	0.04 (0.06)
Income	0.10* (0.01)	0.07* (0.02)	0.06* (0.02)
Sex (Female)	0.10* (0.02)	-0.23* (0.10)	-0.32* (0.11)
Black	0.47* (0.09)	-0.36 (0.26)	-0.37 (0.26)
Latino	-0.10 (0.13)	-0.58* (0.29)	-0.54 (0.30)
Asian	-0.32* (0.11)	-0.20 (0.34)	-0.24 (0.32)
Mobilized			0.46* (0.16)
Partisan Identifier			0.62* (0.17)
Ideology			-0.08 (0.08)
(Intercept)	-4.25 (0.11)	1.89 (0.65)	1.47 (0.68)
N	51407	2249	2249
Log-pseudolikelihood	-29112.83	-790.40	-779.26
AUC	0.76	0.85	0.86
Change in probability of voting	-5.45*	-5.53*	-4.83*
Number of races	37	50	50
State fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes

Note: Senate data are from the Pooled 1996-2006 November Voting and Registration Supplement to the Current Population Study. House data are from the 2006 Cooperation Congressional Election Study. Entries are logistic regression coefficient estimates and standard errors, clustered by election. Year (Senate model only) and state fixed effects were also estimated but are not shown. The row labeled “Change in probability of voting” represents the reduction in the predicted probability of turnout (in percentage points) as polarization increases from the 25th to 75th percentile levels (continuous, categorical, and dichotomous variables are held at their mean, median, and modal levels, respectively).

*p < .05, two-tailed tests.

that may also confound the relationship between divergence and turnout. In particular, because candidate or party contact is a significant predictor of voter turnout (e.g., Green and Gerber 2008; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993), I control for whether or not the respondents reported being contacted to vote by a party or an organization (*Mobilized*). I also include the estimates of citizen ideology described in the previous section to account for variation in turnout that corresponds to ideology. Finally, I include an indicator for whether respondents identify with one of the two major political parties, as partisans tend to vote at higher levels than Independents.²¹ Across both models, the coefficients for divergence are negative and large in magnitude.²² For both models, the predicted probability of voting when divergence increases from its 25th to 75th percentile levels (0.68 and 1.15, respectively) decreases by about 5 percentage points. The coefficients for the controls, moreover, are generally consistent with what we would expect given existing research. Individuals are more likely to turn out to vote in more competitive electoral environments, when they are mobilized to do so, when they identify with a political party, and as age, income, and education increase.

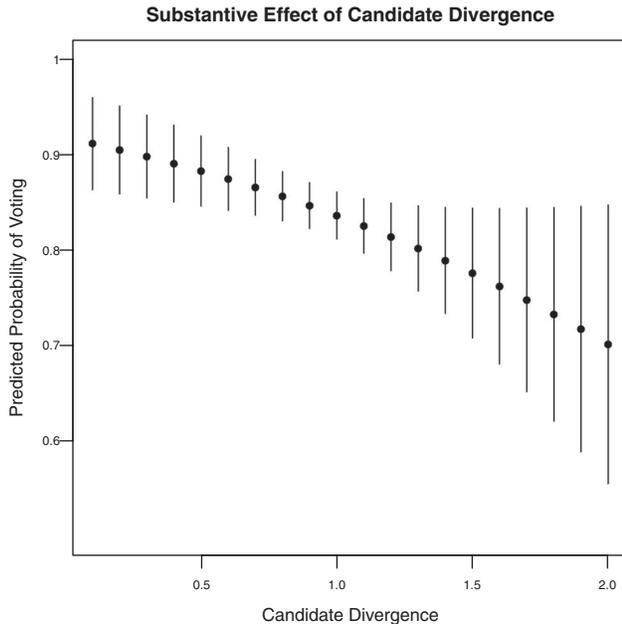
Figure 3 below plots the substantive effects of ideological divergence using the estimates shown in the third column of Table 1. The plotted points show the predicted probability of voter turnout across the full range of values of divergence. The figure clearly shows that voter turnout decreases with increasing levels of ideological divergence and that this relationship is both statistically and substantively significant. This set of results weighs heavily against Schattschneider’s and Abramowitz’s claims that ideological conflict stimulates voter turnout and instead indicates that citizens are less likely to vote as competing candidates adopt increasingly incongruent platforms.

Moreover, these results are robust to a wide range of specifications, modeling strategies, and characterizations of the key independent variable. The findings are consistent when including an expanded battery of covariates, including variables on campaign spending and challenger quality, and the inclusion of an indicator for open-seat races does not change any of the results, nor does the inclusion of a variable that accounts for respondents’ ideological extremity (the absolute value of the raw ideology

²¹ Following Keith et al. (1992), I classified “leaners” as partisans.

²² Models that include partisan strength, operationalized as dummy variables for increasing degrees of partisan strength from a folded version of the 7-point party identification scale, provide nearly identical results.

FIGURE 3 Candidate Divergence and Voter Turnout



Note: Predicted probability of voting over the range of values of candidate divergence, while all other covariates are held at their means (dichotomous variables are held at their modes, and categorical variables are held at their medians). The points represent the predicted probability of turning out to vote, and the vertical lines are the 95% confidence intervals. Predicted probabilities are generated from the estimates shown in column (2) of the House elections results shown in Table 1.

score).²³ Multilevel models with varying-intercept terms that partially pool observations across districts and states show a strong negative relationship between divergence and turnout. Results from generalized additive models reveal some nonlinearities, but the relationship between divergence and turnout is still monotonically decreasing over virtually the entire range of values of divergence. Linear probability models estimated to account for potential measurement error in the candidate divergence variable also provide strong and significant evidence of a negative relationship between divergence and turnout. Moreover, results from genetic matching (Sekhon 2011) indicate that the findings shown above are robust to concerns about common support among the covariates, dependence upon parametric assumptions, and the additive

²³The coefficient for ideological extremity is positive and statistically significant, indicating that more ideologically extreme respondents were more likely to turn out to vote. The coefficient for party identifier, meanwhile, attenuates a bit, to 0.46, due to the correlation between ideological extremity and partisanship. None of the other coefficients are substantially different. Tables C.3 through C.9 in the online supporting information display and discuss a wide range of such robustness checks.

functional form assumed about the relationship between the covariates and voter turnout.²⁴ In addition, because not all candidates address all issues over the course of the campaign, I reestimated the candidate platform estimating using only particular subsets of issues. I also used the measures of candidate ideology obtained using expert surveys (Stone and Simas 2010) to estimate the relationship between divergence and turnout. Both of these alternative characterizations of divergence produce substantially similar results.

Finally, it may simply be the case that ideological conflict, as measured by the candidates' platforms, simply proxies the level of conflict found more generally in campaign discourse. High levels of campaign conflict—such as that found in negative advertising—may simply turn off voters and thus are responsible for the negative coefficients reported above. To investigate this possibility, I used data collected by Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin (2009) on the content of 2006 House candidates' websites.²⁵ In particular, they code for whether candidates "went negative" against their opponents and whether such attacks targeted an opponent's issue positions or were personal in nature. I reestimated the model shown in the third column of the table above and included indicators for whether or not at least one candidate "went negative." The inclusion of terms for either issue negativity or personal negativity does not change the substantive results reported here. Candidate divergence continues to have a strong negative association with voter turnout.

Exploring Potential Mechanisms

Though the results above provide consistent evidence of a negative relationship between candidate divergence and voter turnout, it is less clear what mechanism is responsible for these patterns. Though observational data such as those used here do not allow us to completely identify causal mechanisms, one way to gain insight into what might generate this association is to examine whether the demobilizing effects of candidate divergence are disproportionately concentrated among particular segments of the electorate. To the extent that the effects of divergence are heterogeneous across individuals, we may be able to

²⁴A complete discussion of this procedure and the accompanying estimates is available in Tables C.1 and C.2 in the supporting information.

²⁵Unfortunately, Druckman, Kifer, and Parkin (2009) did not examine the universe of House candidates' websites. Both candidates' websites in 12 of the 50 House races included in my sample were also included in their project.

shed light on the mechanism responsible for the relationship between ideological conflict and voter turnout.

For starters, the effects of candidate divergence may depend upon how citizens respond to ideological conflict. Electoral campaigns are often fraught with disagreements between candidates on the issues and personal attacks lobbed by both candidates and outside groups. As Bartels reports, for many citizens, “the electoral process is marked by cynicism and dissatisfaction with the nature and tone of contemporary campaign discourse” (2000, 1). Moreover, during election season, citizens are often placed into the position of defending their chosen candidate against the opposing candidate; high levels of conflict between candidates could lead to more heated discussion between a candidate’s supporters and the opposing candidate’s supporters. While in general citizens tend to dislike political confrontation (Hibbing and Theiss-Morris 1995) and disagreement (Mutz and Reeves 2005), citizens appear to vary in their interest in and tolerance for such conflict.²⁶ Those citizens who dislike confrontation, furthermore, tend not to participate in politics (Ulbig and Funk 1999).

In the case of candidate divergence, political sophistication may condition the association between candidate divergence and turnout. Similar to how political sophistication may condition the ways citizens make judgments about the economy (Gomez and Wilson 2001), a person’s level of political sophistication may provide insight into how citizens interpret the meaning of candidate divergence. Politically sophisticated citizens, or those for whom ideology plays a significant role in structuring political thought and influencing political judgment, may readily identify that election results—regardless of the level of divergence—have significant consequences for policy outcomes and representation. Citizens with lower levels of sophistication, meanwhile, may not readily connect high levels of issue disagreement to more abstract debates over ideological orientations and thus not readily move past the recognition of heightened conflict.²⁷ Consistent with this account, then, we would expect citizens with lower levels of political sophistication to be more sensitive to increased levels of candidate divergence; as divergence increases, low sophisticates should be demobilized to a greater degree than high sophisticates.

²⁶For instance, Gerber et al. (2011) show how the taste for political conflict can vary across personality traits, while Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1997), Brooks and Geer (2006), and Kahn and Kenney (1999) show that the effects of negative advertising vary across demographic groups.

²⁷This intuition accords well with recent work by Fridkin and Kenney (2011), who find that political sophistication and political interest are two important predictors of tolerance for negative advertising.

Lacking a precise measure of sophistication, I test this hypothesis using three indicators that are closely related to it: educational attainment, policy awareness, and political knowledge.²⁸ I estimate the same regression shown in the third column of Table 1, and include each of these variables along with its interaction with *Divergence*. If the demobilizing effects of divergence are concentrated among citizens with lower levels of sophistication, the coefficient estimates for these interaction terms should be positive, which indicates that the negative effects of divergence attenuate among citizens with increasing sophistication. I again use predicted probabilities to assess the substantive relationship between divergence and these measures of sophistication.

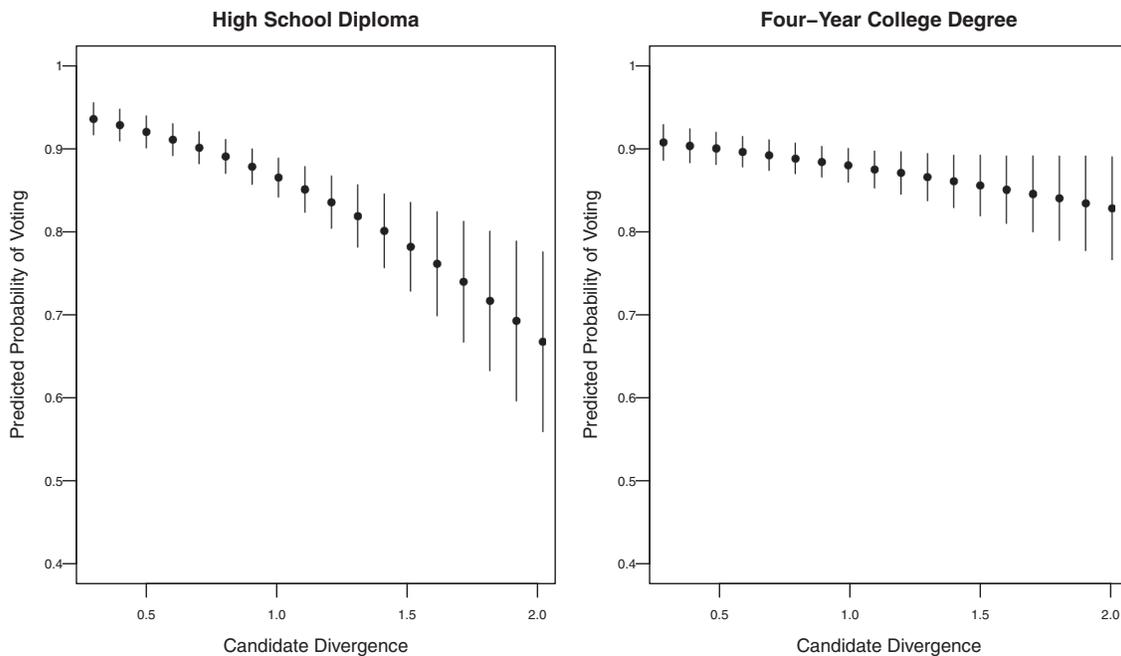
Consistent with the hypothesis outlined above, the interaction of education and divergence is positive and statistically significant, indicating that the demobilizing effects of divergence are strongest among citizens with lower levels of education, and attenuate among citizens with higher levels of education.²⁹ Figure 4 graphically compares the relationship between divergence and turnout among citizens with lower levels of education (high school diploma) and higher levels of education (four-year college degree). Note that the probability of voting for respondents with both low and high levels of education are quite similar at the 25th percentile value of divergence, but the probability of voting decreases dramatically among less educated respondents as divergence increases. Turnout among better-educated respondents, however, is barely sensitive to the level of divergence; none of the point estimates are statistically distinct.

I find similar results for the relationship between divergence and the other indicators of political sophistication. The demobilizing consequences of divergence are particularly strong for people with low levels of policy awareness and political knowledge.³⁰ Though additional research is needed to more clearly specify the role played by political sophistication in producing these results, this general pattern strongly suggests that high levels of ideological conflict between candidates in elections

²⁸Educational attainment is measured on a 4-point scale, ranging from no high school diploma to a four-year college degree. Policy awareness is measured by the number of “don’t knows” that respondents gave to the 26 policy items used to generate estimates of CCES respondent ideology, where larger numbers indicate less sophistication. Political knowledge is measured using respondents’ knowledge of their senators’ votes on the seven key roll-call votes from the 109th Congress included in the 2006 CCES. I generate an additive index of the sum of the roll-call votes on which respondents correctly identified their senators’ vote.

²⁹The coefficient estimates are shown in Table D.1 in the online supporting information.

³⁰See Table D.1 and Figure D.1 in the supporting information.

FIGURE 4 Education Level and Ideological Conflict

Note: The plots show the predicted probability of turning out to vote for varying levels of platform divergence. The plot on the left shows the probability of voting for a range of values of divergence among respondents with high school diplomas, and the plot on the right shows the probability of voting among respondents with four-year college degrees. The dots are the point estimates, and the vertical lines are the 95% confidence intervals associated with the probability estimates.

disproportionately demobilize the kinds of citizens who are less likely to move past the fact of political disagreement and recognize the practical and political consequences of election results.

Other Potential Explanations

Moreover, the results shown above cannot be explained by other potential rival mechanisms. In particular, the demobilizing effects of candidate divergence shown above are not explained by the withdrawal of ideological moderates, abstention due to ideological alienation, decreased participation among Independents, decreases in political interest that correspond with ideological conflict, or decreased effectiveness of mobilization in races with higher levels of divergence.

The first set of analyses stems from Fiorina's (2011) argument about the relationship between polarization and turnout. First, ideological conflict could disproportionately demobilize citizens with weaker (i.e., more moderate) ideological commitments. To test this, I use the CCES data and estimate the same model shown in Table 1 above, but I include a measure of respondent ideological extremity and its interaction with candidate divergence.

Relatedly, increased ideological conflict could decrease turnout among citizens with weak party attachments. To test this, I include a term for the interaction between divergence and an indicator for partisan strength.³¹ For these two tests, positive interaction terms provide support for Fiorina's contention. Finally, citizens may decide not to vote when neither candidate sufficiently represents their policy views, in which case abstention may result from alienation. I include a measure of the spatial distance between each respondent's ideal point and the candidate whose platform estimate is most similar to the respondent's. If this explains the negative relationship between divergence and turnout, the coefficient for this term will be negative.

None of these hypotheses is supported by the data.³² Though ideologically extreme citizens *are* more likely to vote, citizens with strongly ideological views are not affected by divergence to any greater or lesser degree than

³¹This measure is a folded version of the 7-point party identification scale such that pure Independents are coded zero and "strong" partisans are coded 3. I also performed this analysis using dummy variables for each level of partisan strength and obtained substantively similar results.

³²The full table of results can be found in Table D.3 in the online supporting information.

their more moderate counterparts.³³ Citizens also are not disproportionately demobilized by divergence on the basis of partisan strength.³⁴ Nor do I find evidence that citizens are less likely to vote as the distance increases between their ideal point and the most proximate candidate's ideal point.³⁵ Alienation on the basis of policy congruence, then, is not a compelling explanation for the demobilizing impact of ideological conflict.³⁶ Thus, the groups of voters Fiorina (2011) suggests are most likely to be affected by increased party polarization do not appear to be disproportionately demobilized by candidate divergence in elections.

Finally, I also examined whether divergence is associated with lower levels of political interest, thereby lowering turnout. In multivariate analysis, I find no evidence of a relationship between divergence and political interest, nor do I find that the interaction between divergence and political interest is a significant predictor of reduced turnout. I also do not find any evidence of a systematic relationship between divergence and mobilization. Citizens in districts with high levels of divergence are no more likely to be mobilized by a party or campaign, nor does the effectiveness of mobilization covary with the level of candidate divergence. In sum, the close association between political sophistication and divergence does not appear, then, to be an artifact of other explanations for voter turnout found in existing literature.

Discussion and Conclusion

For generations, scholars have argued quite consistently that ideological conflict is a normatively desirable feature of democratic elections because it expands the range of choices available to voters, thereby increasing political participation and enhancing the quality of popular rule.

³³The predicted probability of voting as divergence increases declines by nearly 5 percentage points for moderates and nearly 4 percentage points for citizens with more extreme preferences, but these differences are not statistically distinguishable.

³⁴Pure Independents and strong partisans are both less than 4 percentage points less likely to vote as divergence increases from its 25th to 75th percentile values.

³⁵To the contrary, I find that citizens are significantly *more* likely to turn out to vote as this distance increases.

³⁶I also characterized alienation in two other ways. First, I use the sum of the spatial distances between each of the candidates and the respondent. Second, I measure alienation using only the distance between partisan respondents and the copartisan candidate. The results are shown in Table D.4 in the online supporting information. Neither characterization changes the substantive conclusions.

Challenging a key component of arguments made by responsible party theorists in support of party reform in the 1950s, this article provides strong and persistent evidence that ideological conflict in elections has a demobilizing effect on voter turnout. Moreover, these effects are robust to a wide range of empirical specifications and political contexts. These findings give rise to something of a paradox: though clearly defined differences on policy grounds may increase the relevance of programmatic differences for electoral decision making and increase the policy stakes associated with electoral outcomes, as previous scholars have argued, increased levels of ideological conflict *reduce* participation in the exercise of collective choice.

Furthermore, this article demonstrates that ideological conflict in elections does not intensify the divisions between partisans and Independents, or ideologues and moderates. Instead, in electoral contests with high levels of ideological conflict, the relevant chasm between voters and nonvoters appears to be defined on the basis of political sophistication. The asymmetric effects of candidate divergence across citizens with varying levels of political sophistication are broadly consistent with the predictions generated from formal models that relate information and abstention (e.g., Feddersen and Pesendorfer 1996; Matsusaka 1995). The explanation I offer, though, differs from these models in at least one important respect. This article shows that increasing differences between candidates—which, by clarifying the policy positions associated with each candidate should also increase citizens' confidence in their preference over candidates—lead to decreased turnout, in contrast to other models that show how information increases turnout by boosting citizens' confidence in their preferences over candidates (e.g., Matsusaka 1995). In other models, voter turnout is said to be a function of where a citizen is located in the distribution of preferences in the electorate (e.g., Feddersen and Pesendorfer 1996), whereas the findings shown in this article suggest a citizen's relative ideological position vis-à-vis the candidates has little impact on her decision to vote.

In addition, the results shown here indicate that ideological conflict in elections evokes a more widespread response than might be expected based on existing research on polarization. Layman and Carsey (2002) and Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner (2012) both argue that polarization has limited effects among the mass public and that these consequences are concentrated among rather small subgroups in the electorate. Instead, the results shown here suggest that candidates may quite effectively use their platform choices to generate particular patterns of voter turnout, which future research should explore in greater detail.

The empirical findings presented here, however, have a few limitations of their own. The ideal research design would be to randomly assign citizens to an election in which the candidates have adopted varying levels of platform divergence. Lacking the advantages of such an approach, the results on offer rely upon observational data. The primary concern is that citizen behavior is endogenous to the platforms candidates have selected. That is, strategic candidates likely chose platforms based upon their expectations of citizen behavior. Theoretical models of candidate competition suggest that divergent platforms may be chosen when the candidates have genuine policy motivations or are uncertain about citizen preferences, when voters are uncertain about how well the candidates' platforms reflect what they would actually do if elected to office, or when candidates differ along a valence dimension.³⁷ Or, furthermore, candidates may have chosen platforms based on deliberate efforts to mobilize/demobilize particular segments of the electorate (e.g., Adams and Merrill 2003; Callander and Wilson 2007). But if candidate divergence is endogenous to expectations about citizen behavior, this likely means that the results shown here *understate* the true magnitude of the relationship between divergence and turnout. In particular, if candidates selected platforms in a fully rational manner based on their expectations of how those choices would influence turnout, it would not be altogether surprising if the magnitude of the observed effects is attenuated in an observational study such as this one. Consistent with this, the matching results shown in the supplementary information suggest that the effects are larger than those shown in the regression tables above. Nevertheless, that the cross-sectional results using observational data are consistent across various data sets and a range of election years, types of races, and contexts provides strong evidence of a systematic relationship that should be examined further in more controlled settings.

Considerable theoretical and empirical work remains. Given these results, for instance, how might strategic candidates adopt platforms that reflect a particular mobilization strategy based upon ideology? How sensitive are election outcomes to abstention produced by candidate divergence? Given earlier scholars' insistence on the importance of ideologically distinct choices, is there an ideal level of candidate differentiation that ensures an "optimal" level of turnout? Do these results transfer into other modes of political participation? In the absence of formal institutions that regulate the platforms candidates select, the normative and positive implications of the patterns identified here merit further scrutiny.

³⁷For a review of these models, see Grofman (2004).

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Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

- A. Sample Details
- B. Estimates of Candidate and Citizen Ideology
- C. Main Results: Alternative Model Specifications and Robustness Checks
- D. Exploring Potential Explanations for the Effect of Divergence on Turnout