Candidates and parties often face a choice between endorsing policies that appeal to their core constituencies or generate support from more diverse groups of voters. While the latter strategy may make overtures to a wider set of citizens, existing literature says little about how the overall mix of issue positions affects electoral support. We argue that candidates who endorse diverse sets of policy positions appear unpredictable to voters and incur subsequent electoral penalties. Using data from the 2006 congressional elections, we find that ideological predictability substantially increases electoral support at both the individual and aggregate levels and that voters perceive greater ideological congruence from more predictable candidates. Our results have important implications for candidate and party strategies and suggest that voters are responsive to the mean and the variance of candidates’ policy stances.

1. Introduction

In recent years, major political parties in the U.S. have each debated whether to support potential candidates whose policy views sometimes violate the party lines. For instance, many of the candidates for the 2012 Republican presidential nomination emphasized the necessity of adhering to core Republican doctrine and advocating consistently conservative policies. This issue was front and center in the campaign adhering to core Republican doctrine and advocating consistently conservative policies. This issue was front and center in the campaign 2012 Republican presidential nomination emphasized the necessity of adhering to core Republican doctrine and advocating consistently conservative policies. This issue was front and center in the campaign for the 2016 Republican presidential nomination as Donald Trump asserted that “[v]oters want unpredictability” while party establishment figures worried that Trump’s unpredictability would jeopardize party priorities if he were to be elected. The outcomes of these debates have important implications for voters’ ability to discern the underlying ideologies of the candidates and predict the subsequent behavior of candidates elected to office. Whether election-seeking candidates should exhibit ideological purity or endorse a more varied set of policy positions, however, inevitably depends in part on how voters respond to these strategies.

Models of vote choice and electoral competition posit that citizens vote for the candidate whose ideology best reflects their own (Adams et al., 2005; Butticé and Stone, 2012; Jesse, 2009, 2012) and that candidates choose ideological positions likely to appeal to the pivotal voter (Adams, 2012; Adams and Somer-Topcu, 2009; Ansolabehere et al., 2001; Stone and Simas, 2010). Candidates face an important strategic decision, however, in choosing policy positions to maximize their electoral fortunes. To appeal to as many voters as possible, Downs (1957, 110) argues that candidates should not choose issue positions that “adhere too rigidly to any one philosophic outlook.” By selecting a relatively diverse mix of positions — some more moderate than others — across a range of issues, candidates may be able to win the support of...
voters whose personal preferences fall within that ideological range. At the same time, candidates should not “put forth an unorganized jumble of policies” (Downs, 1957, 110) so that they maintain support from their core constituencies. Thus, candidates must identify a set of issue positions that simultaneously appeals to core supporters and ideologically moderate voters.

For example, consider the 2004 U.S. Senate election in Oklahoma. Republican candidate Tom Coburn touted his consistent adherence to conservative ideals while, the Democratic candidate, Congressman Brad Carson, labeled himself a “maverick” because he broke “with his party to help our state, to help our country, [and worked] in a bipartisan fashion to achieve constructive results.”\(^5\) Although he took liberal positions by supporting greater highway spending and increased Medicare prescription drug coverage while opposing the privatization of Social Security, Carson also voted for the Bush tax cuts, the Federal Marriage Amendments, and bans on partial birth abortion. Over the last few decades, the “maverick” label has been applied to other prominent American politicians including Senators William Proxmire\(^6\) and John McCain.\(^7\)

In this paper, we argue that voters consider the ideological distribution of policies endorsed by candidates to evaluate a candidate’s degree of predictability. Building on research that studies voters’ tolerance for risk (e.g., Kam and Simas, 2010, 2012; Morgenstern and Zechmeister, 2001) and reactions to uncertainty (e.g., Alvarez, 1998; Bartels, 2008), we hypothesize that candidates appear less predictable when choosing issue positions that span wide ranges of ideological space and are subsequently penalized by voters. While a good deal of existing research has examined the causes and consequences of consistency within particular issue areas (e.g., Karol, 2009; McTague and Pearson-Merkowitz, 2015; Tomz and Van Houweling, 2010), comparatively little scholarship has studied how candidates’ policy positions relate to one another across issue areas. Our focus on the overall mix of candidates’ issue positions identifies a form of voter uncertainty conceptually distinct from that resulting from voters’ information deficits (e.g., Alvarez, 1998) and candidate strategies around ambiguity (e.g., Bräuniger and Giger, Forthcoming; Rovny, 2012; Tomz and Van Houweling, 2009).

We examine how ideological predictability affected the electoral fortunes of U.S House candidates in the 2006 congressional elections. Analyzing individual-level vote choice and aggregate district-level outcomes, we demonstrate that voters preferred candidates with high levels of ideological predictability. Our results are robust to a wide range of model specifications, characterizations of key variables, and subsets of voters and elections. We further show that voters perceived candidates with greater predictability as more ideologically congruent, which suggests a potential mechanism through which voters penalized candidates whose policy positions were widely dispersed. Our findings illustrate the importance of considering both the mean and the variance of candidates’ policy appeals, and have important implications for studying candidates’ issue strategies and voter response to them.

2. Ideology and elections

Elections introduce myriad agency problems for voters. As a consequence, an important theoretical literature (e.g., Barro, 1973; Ferejohn, 1986) reaches rather pessimistic conclusions about the capacity of voters to exercise popular control over elected officials. More recent theoretical and empirical scholarship on electoral accountability, however, argues that elections enable voters to select high-performing public officials by observing their behavior in office and discerning their types (for an overview of these models, see Ashworth, 2012). One of the key insights from this line of scholarship is that incumbent behavior provides information about the incumbent’s type, where “high” types are more likely to advance voter welfare than “low” types.

This logic structures how voters respond to candidates’ policy positions. Canonical models of electoral competition posit that candidates (or parties) compete over ideology, and that voters choose the candidate whose ideology most closely matches their own (Downs, 1957; Enelow and Hinich, 1984).\(^8\) Given these incentives, office-seeking candidates are expected to reap electoral benefits by presenting relatively moderate ideologies, for which a large literature finds support (e.g., Ansolabehere et al., 2001; Canes-Wrone et al., 2002). However, as Downs (1957, 102) argued, “In order to be rational short cuts, ideologies must be integrated with policies closely enough to form accurate indicators of what each [candidate] is likely to do in the future.” In developing what we call our portfolio of policy positions, however, candidates face a strategic decision. While a candidate’s position on any one issue will be shaped by the desire to choose the best position given the public’s preferences and the position of the competitor, candidates also desire to choose a portfolio that appeals to as many voters as possible. This motivation may lead candidates to consider choosing policy positions that span some range of the ideological space.

We argue that the second moment of the distribution of issue positions, or the variance, provides information about the predictability of a candidate’s behavior in office. Most research on ideology and elections, in contrast, focuses on how the candidates’ issue positions signal an underlying ideological location, often characterized as the weighted mean of the individual issue positions. These two moments are frequently in tension. As Downs (1957, 133) writes:

“The rational party strategy is to adopt a spread of policies that covers a whole range of the left-right scale. The wider this spread is, the more viewpoints the party’s ideology and platform will appeal to. But a wider spread also weakens the strength of the appeal to any one viewpoint, because each citizen sees the party upholding policies he does not approve of.”

The variance of a candidate’s policy positions describes her level of ideological predictability. This idea is closely related to the notion of ideological constraint (Converse, 1964), as candidates exhibit lower levels of constraint when their issue positions are distributed more widely across the ideological space. Other research refers to unpredictable officeholders as “mavericks” (e.g., Lauderdale, 2010) for whom the main ideological dimension performs less well as a predictor of a legislator’s behavior. While an extensive literature investigates how elections are contested over the first moment of candidates’ issue positions using a summary measure of candidate ideology, Downs’ account suggests that the second moment may also play an important role in voter decision-making.

Fig. 1 provides a stylized example of ideological predictability and contrasts it with ambiguity. Consider an election in which a candidate’s issue positions are arrayed along a unidimensional policy space (the x-axes) ranging from liberal to conservative. The points represent the known ideological locations of a candidate’s positions on five policy areas and are uniformly distributed across a given interval of the policy

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\(^8\) We assume a proximity model of vote choice (rather than directional or discounting models) for theoretical and empirical simplicity. For the sake of exposition we focus on electoral competition between opposing candidates, though our discussion applies equivalently to competition between parties.

\(^9\) However, Stone and Simas (2010) and Montanges and Rogowski (2015) provide evidence that moderation may not increase a candidate’s vote share.
space. In panel (A), the candidate’s issue positions are tightly clustered in the center-left region of the space. In panel (B), however, the candidate’s issue positions are more widely distributed across the space, with a far-left position on environmental policy and a center-right position on trade. Note that in both panels (A) and (B), the median and mean issue positions are the same. Most models of candidate positioning and vote choice make no distinctions between the representations presented in (A) and (B), but we argue that the different distributions of issue positions affect how voters evaluate the candidates.

We further note that our emphasis on the distribution of issue positions is theoretically and conceptually distinct from ambiguity in which candidates present unclear policy positions. Panel (C) presents an example of a candidate with the same issue positions as shown in panel (B), but with some ambiguity about the candidates’ positions on two issues (abortion and trade). These issue positions are represented as probability distributions over a central tendency. Contrast the probability distributions in panel (C) with those shown in panel (D), where the probability distributions are much more widely dispersed. Research on voter response to ambiguity focuses on comparing support between candidate (C) and (D), while the effect of the overall collection of issue positions – the difference between (A) and (B) – has received less attention from existing research.

2.1. Ideological predictability and voter decision-making

We argue that voters use the distribution of a candidate’s issue positions to make inferences about the candidate’s type. In systems where voters choose between individual candidates (as opposed to when parties themselves appear on the ballot), voters face uncertainty about how a candidate’s platform translates into the candidate’s level of support for the voters’ preferred party. Thus, voters use the degree of ideological predictability to make inferences about the candidate’s likelihood of supporting the voter’s party once in the legislature. Using information on the candidates’ issue positions in this way, voters are able to select elected officials most likely to advance constituency priorities.

Our central claim is that voters value predictability. Put somewhat differently, when it comes to selecting candidates during election campaigns, voters want to know what they are buying. Though risk preferences may vary across voters (e.g., Kam and Simas, 2010, 2012), on the whole voters prefer to know where their chosen candidate stands rather than leave it to chance (e.g., Morgenstern and Zechmeister, 2001). Polls taken in recent years further indicate that while voters may profess commitment to political compromise in the abstract, on salient issues they would rather remain in gridlock rather than see their political representatives compromise. More generally, research on dynamic patterns of representation finds that voters generally fail to provide incentives for elected officials to update their policy positions in response to new information (e.g., Canes-Wrone and Shotts, 2007) and instead value politicians who hold firmly to their professed beliefs.

In electoral contexts, voters’ preferences for predictability lead them to discount candidates who profess support for issue positions that span wide ranges of ideological space. While candidates may sometimes choose a wide ideological range of issue positions so that they appeal to diverse constituencies, voters are likely to perceive these candidates less as “something to everyone” than as “nothing to anyone.” Politics is inherently uncertain; not only are voters uncertain about what particular manifestation of abortion or environmental legislation may arise in the next Congress, but they are also uncertain about what new issues or crises may come to the forefront. They do want to know, however, which candidate is most likely to reliably advance their interests, and this preference for certainty advantages the candidates who stake out ideologically consistent policy positions. While some voters might find...

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10 We also emphasize that our focus is on ideological voting as opposed to issue voting, in which voters cast ballots based on a single issue area.

appeal in the candidate who professes dovish foreign policy views while also endorsing limits on abortion access and an expansive view of religious freedom, voters cannot know for certain where this candidate is likely to align on issues s/he does not discuss in the context of the campaign or that arise due to exogenous events. The relatively wide distribution of issue positions endorsed by this candidate thus generates greater unpredictability relative to a candidate who advocates ideologically consistent positions across a large number of issues, and thus voters are likely to prefer the latter candidate. That is, holding constant the mean position of a candidate's preferred policies, voters react more favorably to candidates when those issue positions are tightly dispersed.

The effects of unpredictability generated by a wide distribution of policy positions differ from uncertainty that results from voters' lack of knowledge about candidates and their issue positions. For instance, Bartels (1986) and Alvarez (1998) find that uncertainty about a U.S. presidential candidate's policy positions reduced voter support for the candidate, while Ezrow et al. (2014) show that ideologically extreme parties in new postcommunist democracies received greater levels of support from voters because their extreme positions decreased voter uncertainty about the parties' policy intentions. Similarly, parties may strategically disguise (e.g., Rovny, 2012) or render ambiguous (e.g., Bräuniger and Giger, Forthcoming) their positions on particular policy dimensions. In this research, individual-level differences in information levels among voters are responsible for the observed relationships. Other research shows that ambiguity about a candidate's policy positions — which usually results from intentionally imprecise policy statements — can increase a candidate's support (e.g., Callander and Wilson, 2008; Tomz and Van Houweling, 2009).

At the voter level, the effects of both uncertainty and ambiguity on candidate support would be mitigated if only voters were provided more information about the candidate or if the candidates were forced to provide more specific statements about their policy positions. By contrast, any potential effects of ideological predictability occur not as a result of the quantity of information voters have about candidates, but rather because of how voters process and make sense of the information they do have about the candidate. Put somewhat differently, ideological predictability may affect candidate support in spite of complete information about the candidates’ positions.

Our argument predicts that voters penalize candidates who endorse an ideologically diverse mix of policy positions because they infer these candidates to be “unpredictable” types. This account contrasts with research on related concepts, which implicates the volume of information voters know about a candidate or otherwise would expect a positive relationship between unpredictability and voter support. We now describe the data and methods we use to measure ideological unpredictability and examine its association with voter decision-making.

3. Data and methods

We study how voters react to ideological predictability in the context of the 2006 congressional elections. To characterize the ideological positions and levels of predictability of candidates' issue positions, we use data from a survey of expert informants in 131 U.S. House races that has been used in recent research on candidate behavior and voter decision-making (Adams et al., 2017; Buttice and Stone, 2012; Simas, 2013; Stone and Simas, 2010). These expert informants provided assessments of each candidate's ideological placement along an ideological scale that ranged from 1 (extremely liberal) to 7 (extremely conservative). Multiple expert informants provided information in 131 of these contests and we used these expert assessments to study individual-level vote choice among respondents in the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study. Importantly, the use of expert ratings, corrected for partisan biases, helps address many of the limitations associated with using voters' ideological placements of the candidates which are often subject to biases due to projection and motivated reasoning.

The expert informants are used to construct our two key independent variables. First, we developed a measure of the ideological proximity between each respondent and the two candidates. We used the mean of the district experts' placements as an indicator for each candidate's ideological position. Because the CCES asked respondents to place themselves on a 101-point ideological scale that ranged from liberal to conservative (but not a seven-point scale), we projected the expert assessments into a 101-point space. Using these measures of candidate and voter ideology, we constructed the following independent variable:

\[
\text{Republican proximity advantage} = \frac{\text{Republican Ideological Placement} - \text{Voter Placement}}{\text{Democrat Ideological Placement} - \text{Voter Placement}}.
\]

Thus, positive values of Republican proximity advantage indicate that the Republican candidate is more proximate to the voter than the Democratic candidate, while negative values indicate the voter is more proximate to the Democratic candidate. A value of zero would indicate that the voter is equidistant from both candidates. In principle, values of this variable range from −101 to +101. Under the Downvian framework, we would expect that the probability a voter supports the Republican candidate increases as the values of this variable increase. Though we acknowledge that the creation of the Republican proximity advantage measure is not ideal, several pieces of supplementary evidence provide reassurance in our use of this measure. First, a small subsample (N = approx. 600) of CCES respondents and analyzed in Buttice and Stone (2012) answered both a seven-point and 101-point ideological self-placement scale. The correlation between these two measures is \( r = 0.87 \), suggesting that respondents used the 101-point scale in the same way they would have used a seven-point scale. Second, as we discuss below, we also present analyses that use aggregate election outcomes and do not depend on characterizing individual voters' ideologies relative to the candidates' placements. Third, in additional analyses we obtain results generally similar to those reported in the main text when estimating our main regression model using respondents' ideological self-placements rather than the Republican proximity advantage measures.

Following approaches in related literature (e.g., Somer-Topcu, 2015), we used the variation in experts' placements of the candidates to characterize the candidates' levels of predictability. Specifically, we calculated the standard deviation of each district's expert placements of the candidates. This measure stems from the intuition that candidates who adopt issue positions that span a wide range of the ideological scale obtained in additional analyses we obtain results generally similar to those reported in the main text when estimating our main regression model using respondents' ideological self-placements rather than the Republican proximity advantage measures.

12 Altogether, expert informants were surveyed from 155 districts. One hundred of these contests were sampled randomly from all 435 districts, and this sample was supplemented with an additional 55 contests that were expected to be competitive. Additional information about the survey can be found at http://psfaculty.ucdavis.edu/wstone/.

13 We follow the procedures outlined in Buttice and Stone (2012) and Stone and Simas (2010) to correct the experts' judgments for partisan bias.

14 An average of eight informants in each district rated the candidates. For more information about the use of expert informants to measure candidate characteristics, see Maestas et al. (2014). We also point out that expert placements have long been used to study party positioning in comparative politics.

15 The expert placements are correlated reasonably well with CCES respondents' placements of the candidates, with correlations of 0.49 for Democratic candidates and 0.37 for Republican candidates.

16 In doing so, we assume that experts and voters used the ideological scale differently, and that the experts would have used the 101-point scale in the same way they used the seven-point scale. Strictly speaking, the expert placement variable operates as a “lumpy” distribution of values along the 101-point scale due to the projection of the expert placements.

17 Please see Table A.1 in the Supplementary Appendix.

18 In an ideal world, we would collect systematic data on the positions taken by a large sample of candidates across a range of issue areas. Unfortunately, such data are rarely available for both candidates across many election contests.
space are likely to generate disagreement among the experts about the candidates’ true underlying ideologies. When candidates adopt issue positions that exhibit high levels of predictability, however, experts are more likely to commonly perceive the candidates’ overarching ideologies. Thus, our second key independent variable characterizes the difference in the level of predictability between the two candidates:

Republican’s predictability advantage = Democratic Candidate’s unpredictability
− Republican Candidate’s unpredictability.

Positive values of the predictability advantage variable indicate that the Republican candidate exhibited higher predictability than the Democratic candidate (i.e., lower standard deviations of placement among the experts), while negative values indicate that the Republican candidate exhibited less predictability than the Democrat (i.e., larger standard deviations of placement among the experts). We note that all results reported in the text are robust to a variety of measurement considerations. Investigating the possibility that variation in our measure of predictability could be due simply to variation in the number of experts across districts, we continued to find support for our results when re-estimating our models for districts with very similar numbers of expert informants (please see Table A.2 in the supplementary appendix). Furthermore, following Somer-Topcu (2015), we also used an alternative characterization of candidate predictability using the method advocated by Van Der Eijk (2001) for aggregating results from ordinal rating scales. This alternative measure generates patterns substantively similar to our main results and are shown in Tables A.3–A.6 in the supplementary appendix.

Across a range of comparisons, our measure of ideological predictability appears to be relatively distinct from other measures of related concepts. First, we compared each candidate’s quality rating as provided by the experts (see Stone and Simas, 2010) to the standard deviation of the experts’ ideological placement. The correlation is extremely small in magnitude (∼0.06), and thus weighs against the claim that our measure of candidate predictability results from differences in knowledge the experts may have had about lower quality or more obscure candidates. Second, we investigated the possibility that the experts’ measures reflect differences in the available information about candidate policy positions. To do so, we used data collected from candidates’ websites about the number of specific issue positions advocated by the candidates (Druckman et al., 2009), which ranged from 0 to 8. If the variation in expert placements was an indicator of the lack of availability of information about the candidates’ issue positions, we would expect a negative relationship between the standard deviation of expert placements and the number of issue positions discussed on the candidates’ websites. Instead, we found that the correlation between the number of issue positions on candidate websites and our measure of predictability is 0.12, again providing little evidence that the predictability measure reflects differences in familiarity with the candidates’ policy positions or candidates’ attempts to obfuscate their policy positions. Thus, while not dispositive, these comparisons suggest that our measure of predictability characterizes candidate platforms in ways that are largely distinct from other candidate attributes. Moreover, as we will discuss in greater detail, we conducted a series of additional analyses to examine the robustness of our main results to potential measurement error in Republican predictability advantage and its effects across various subsets of voters.

Table 1 below provides summary statistics for candidate positioning and predictability. Unsurprisingly, as the first two rows show, the mean placement of Republicans is to the “right” of the ideological center, while the corresponding figure for Democrats is to the “left” of center. Placement of the average Republican is somewhat more extreme relative to the Democrat, though experts did perceive the Democratic candidates as somewhat more heterogeneous than the Republican candidates. Overall, the average value of candidate unpredictability is 0.99, yet incumbent platforms exhibited less unpredictability (0.79) than challenger platforms (1.20), but the difference was not statistically significant at the 95% level, suggesting that variation in expert placement is not entirely a function of incumbent status. Candidates in open seats, moreover, adopted platforms with similar levels of unpredictability (0.98) as candidates in races with an incumbent. The summary statistics displayed below provide evidence of an interesting relationship between ideology and predictability, in which the Democrats were more moderate on average and also exhibited somewhat higher average levels of unpredictability (1.23) than Republican candidates (0.76), though the difference is not statistically significant.

Candidate positions are the means of the expert placements of the candidates. “Unpredictability” is measured as the standard deviation of the experts’ ideological placements of the candidates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Republican Candidate Position</td>
<td>6.31</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Candidate Position</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candidate unpredictability</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incumbent unpredictability</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenger unpredictability</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Seat Candidate unpredictability</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>0.57</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican Candidate unpredictability</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratic Candidate unpredictability</td>
<td>1.23</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Candidate positions are the means of the expert placements of the candidates. “Unpredictability” is measured as the standard deviation of the experts’ ideological placements of the candidates.

20 We continue to find these patterns when measuring candidate predictability by the percentage of experts who agreed on a given candidate’s ideology. Please see Figure A.1. However, we note that the use of a seven-point scale could introduce censoring at the endpoints and potentially inflate the measure of predictability for candidates judged to be near the extreme ends of the scale, and thus we are reluctant to overinterpret the correlations between ideology and predictability.

21 Interestingly, this stylized example suggests that, at least among political elites, one can be a “reliable” moderate in addition to being classified as a moderate by expressing support for some combination of liberal and conservative policies.
expect the coefficient for this variable to be positive.²²

We account for several other factors that may also affect vote choice. First, we include the respondents’ self-reported party identification, which ranges from 1 (strong Democrat) to 7 (strong Republican). We expect the coefficient to be positive, indicating that the probability of a Republican congressional vote increases in voters’ ties to the Republican Party. We also include several factors that may affect both vote choice and candidates’ chosen levels of predictability. We employ a trichotomous measure of incumbency (incumbency advantage) which indicates the Republican’s relative advantage over the Democrat. In the instance of a Republican incumbent, we code this variable as 1, whereas an incumbent Democratic candidate is coded as −1. Open races with no incumbent are coded as 0. We control for the Republican candidate’s campaign spending advantage relative to the Democrat, measured as the difference between the two major parties. We include the Republican share of the two-party vote in the 2004 congressional election in each district. These variables help account for the possibility that unfavorable electoral settings lead voters to be less predictable and also receive less electoral support, though we acknowledge it is difficult to entirely rule out the possibility of endogeneity. Finally, though we do not include demographic covariates in the models we report in the text because we do not have a theoretical reason to expect they would confound the relationship between the candidate on the same side of the issue space as the voter, and her opponent. Given the difficulty in distinguishing empirically between the predictions of proximity and directional theory (see, e.g., Lewis and King, 1999), we leave this for future research.

Finally, we include the Republican share of the two-party vote in the 2004 congressional election in each district. These variables help account for the possibility that unfavorable electoral settings lead candidates to be less predictable and also receive less electoral support, though we acknowledge it is difficult to entirely rule out the possibility of endogeneity. Finally, though we do not include demographic covariates in the models we report in the text because we do not have a theoretical reason to expect they would confound the relationship between predictability advantage and vote choice, we obtain identical patterns from models that include them. Standard errors are clustered on districts and sample weights are used to match the sample to parameters of the national population.

We note that examining the relationship between candidate predictability and vote choice may require a different empirical specification if alternative models of vote choice are posited. For instance, under the directional voting model, the relationship between ideology and vote choice, we obtain identical results in column (1), the coefficient for Republican ideological advantage indicates that voters’ decisions were highly sensitive to the relative positioning of the candidates. The coefficient for predictability advantage is positive and statistically significant, indicating that voters were significantly more likely to support Republican candidates who exhibited higher levels of predictability than the Democratic candidate. These results provide evidence that voters dislike candidates whose ideological positions are less certain due to the distribution of issue positions over a wider range of the ideological space. Instead, voters appear to prefer the candidate whose issue positions are more ideologically predictable. The estimates for the other covariates are all consistent with general expectations. The probability of voting for the Republican candidate was higher among voters who identified as Republicans, among incumbent candidates, and when the Republican candidate accounted for a larger proportion of campaign spending.

Fig. 3 presents these results graphically. The plot shows the predicted probability of voting for the Republican House candidate across the range of values of predictability advantage for a voter who is exactly equidistant from the candidates’ ideological positions, while all other covariates are held at their mean values. The tick marks along the x-axis show the distribution of values of predictability advantage. When both candidates exhibit identical levels of predictability (a value of zero along the x-axis), the predicted probability of voting for the Republican candidate is 0.49. However, when the value of predictability advantage moves from approximately one standard deviation less than zero (−0.75) to one standard deviation greater than zero (+0.75), the probability of supporting the Republican candidate increases from 0.47 to 0.52, a statistically significant rise in the probability of support. Thus, reasonable differences in candidates’ observed levels of predictability can have important implications for voters’ political decisions even when the candidates’ overall ideological locations are equidistant from the voter.

### Table 2
Candidate predictability and vote choice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Republican proximity advantage</td>
<td>0.03* (0.01)</td>
<td>0.03* (0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican predictability advantage</td>
<td>0.22* (0.10)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party identification</td>
<td>0.75* (0.03)</td>
<td>0.74* (0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican incumbency advantage</td>
<td>0.23* (0.10)</td>
<td>0.18 (0.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending advantage</td>
<td>0.14* (0.06)</td>
<td>0.14* (0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004 Republican Candidate Vote Share</td>
<td>0.01* (0.01)</td>
<td>0.01 (0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>−3.41* (0.26)</td>
<td>−3.39* (0.26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>7639</td>
<td>7639</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log-likelihood</td>
<td>−2257.47</td>
<td>−2249.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wald χ²</td>
<td>1371.46</td>
<td>1359.55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Entries are logistic regression coefficients and standard errors, clustered by congressional district. The dependent variable is a reported vote for the Republican House candidate. All variables are defined in the text. * indicates p < 0.05 (all two-tailed tests).

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²² We note that examining the relationship between candidate predictability and vote choice may require a different empirical specification if alternative models of vote choice are posited.

²³ All models were also estimated using the Republican’s percentage of two party spending rather than the difference in spending between the two parties. Such a substitution yielded similar results.

²⁴ Substituting the Republican share of the two-party vote in the 2004 presidential elections produces similar results. See Tables A.7–A.9 in the Supplementary Appendix.

²⁵ These covariates include age, race, sex, education, and income. Please see Table A.10 in the Supplementary Appendix.
We find no evidence, however, that the relationship between ideological predictability and vote choice is conditioned by partisanship. Fig. 4 displays the predicted probabilities of supporting the Republican House candidate from a model where we interacted predictability advantage with party identification. The red points are the predicted probabilities of a Republican vote among self-identified Republicans, while the black and blue points show the predicted probabilities for Independents and Democrats, respectively, while all other covariates were held at their mean values. While the figure does not imply that variation in predictability compels a dyed-in-the-wool partisan to switch their loyalties in the congressional race, it does show that vote choices among Democrats, Republicans, and Independents alike are all responsive to ideological predictability. Republican identifiers are more likely to support their copartisan candidate as that candidate’s predictability increases, while Democratic identifiers are less likely to support their copartisan candidate as that candidate’s predictability decreases.

These results are robust to several potential alternative explanations for the observed relationships. Our theoretical discussion above distinguished candidate predictability from other characteristics voters might bring to bear on candidates, such as uncertainty. It is possible, however, that our measure of candidate predictability instead indexes uncertainty about the candidates’ true locations. Uncertainty could manifest in two ways. First, the experts themselves could have been uncertain about some of the candidates’ placements because the experts simply were not well-enough informed about the policies advocated by some of the lesser-known candidates. To examine this possibility, we re-estimated the models shown in Table 2 but focused on the highest profile congressional races in our sample, which reflects the contents in which the experts would have likely had the greatest familiarity with both candidates. We used four separate criteria to distinguish these elections: contests that were rated by the National Journal as likely to be one of the 50 most competitive elections in 2006; districts in which the 2004 presidential election was decided by less than 10 percentage points; districts in which campaign expenditures by both the Democratic and Republican candidates were higher than the mean spending levels within their party; and districts in which at least 30 percent of the CCES respondents registered an ideological placement of both candidates.26 We also distinguished respondents who were able to provide a placement of both candidates on the ideological scale. In each model, Republican predictability advantage is positive and statistically significant at the 0.10 level or below.27

Finally, we also explored the possibility that our results are driven by potential non-linearities in the relationship between vote choice and Republican predictability advantage. Estimates from a binomial generalized additive model, however, suggest that Republican predictability advantage increases the probability of a Republican congressional vote across the range of values of Republican predictability advantage and indicates that the relationship is approximately linear.28

Across these supplementary analyses, we find that ideological predictability is strongly related with citizens’ voting decisions even when accounting for candidate-, district-, and individual-level factors that may have implicated the role of uncertainty rather than predictability. Thus, while low levels of predictability may indeed generate uncertainty about the candidates’ underlying ideologies, the results of these supplementary models suggest that unpredictability reduces voter support in ways that cannot be rectified simply by increasing voters’ information about the candidates.

Finally, we note that the results reported here and in the following sections are robust to using respondents’ evaluations of candidate unpredictability in place of the expert-based measure. For each district, we calculated the standard deviation of respondents’ placements of the candidates along the 101-ideological scale. Though are we are reluctant to place too much emphasis on these additional results due to patterns of nonresponse and potential biases from respondents’ tendencies to project their own ideologies onto the candidates, these additional models support our substantive conclusions.29

4.1. Predictability and aggregate election outcomes

Though our results above provide strong evidence that candidate predictability is associated with individual voters’ decisions about which candidate to support, in this section we focus instead on aggregate election results. In particular, we regress the Republican

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26 This requirement eliminates the bottom quartile of the districts in our sample in which at least one of the candidates was relatively unfamiliar to their constituents.
27 These results can be found in Table A.11 in the supplementary appendix.
28 Please See Figure A.1 in the Supplementary Appendix.
29 Please See Tables A.12-A.14 in the Supplementary Appendix. In addition, we also find that the coefficients for both the respondent-based and expert-based measures of Republican predictability advantage are positive when included in our individual-level models of vote choice, though the latter falls just short of statistical significance (p = 0.107). We believe these findings help reinforce our claim that the distribution of candidates’ issue positions, and not uncertainty, is the main driver of the results in this section.
candidate’s percentage of the two-party vote on the Republican candidate’s proximity advantage, incumbency status, and spending advantage. To characterize the values of the Republican candidate’s proximity advantage, we use the expert informants’ mean assessments of district ideology, and perform an analogical calculation to that used above:

\[
\text{District Republican advantage} = |\text{Democratic candidate placement} - \text{District ideology}| - |\text{Republican candidate placement} - \text{District ideology}|
\]

In addition, we also estimate a model in which we include a measure of the district-level ideological heterogeneity (reported in Tausanovitch and Warshaw, 2013), because candidates may have greater incentive to adopt platforms with lower levels of predictability in districts with heterogeneous constituencies.

The results are shown in Table 3 and are strongly consistent with the individual-level analysis. Across all three models, Republican candidates won larger vote shares when they were better aligned with district preferences. As the results from column (2) show, however, candidates who exhibited higher degrees of predictability relative to their opponents received significantly greater vote shares. This result is robust to the inclusion of a measure of district heterogeneity, as column (3) indicates. While this coefficient is positive and relatively large in magnitude (12.59), it falls short of conventional levels of statistical significance.

The predicted values of Republican vote share as a function of differences in ideological predictability are displayed below in Fig. 5. The results imply that a one standard deviation increase in the predictability differential (approximately 0.77 units) has the potential to spell disastrous results for a candidate in a competitive seat. Such a change would predict a loss of nearly four percentage points of the two party vote share. Considering that the average margin between the two-party vote share across all districts in 2006 was only 8.2 percentage points, this result suggests that candidate predictability could have substantively important consequences.

4.2. Predictability and voter perceptions

Our theoretical discussion indicated that voters used a candidate’s level of ideological predictability to make inferences about the candidate’s type, where more consistent candidates are perceived as more reliable. In this section, we offer a suggestive test of this explanation by examining the relationship between candidate predictability and voter perceptions of the candidate’s ideological congruence. Candidates who exhibit low levels of predictability are expected to be viewed as less reliable, and thus lead voters to conclude that the candidate’s underlying ideology is less congruent with the voter’s.30

We explore this possibility using the subset of CCES respondents who placed both the Democratic and Republican candidates on the 101-point ideological scale. The dependent variable in this analysis is the voter’s perceived proximity relative to each of the candidates:

\[
\text{Perceived Republican advantage} = |\text{Perceived Democratic candidate – respondent self placement}| - |\text{Perceived Democratic candidate – respondent self placement}|
\]

Thus, positive values of this variable indicate voters who perceived that the Republican candidate was more ideologically proximate to them, while negative values indicate voters who perceived the Democratic candidate as more ideologically proximate. We include the same battery of covariates that was included in the other individual-level analyses.

The results are shown in Table 4. As the first row of coefficients shows, voters’ perceptions of the candidates are strongly associated with the experts’ assessments of the candidates’ locations. More critically, however, the coefficient for Republican predictability advantage is positive and statistically significant. This indicates that, for instance, as the Republican candidate exhibits lower levels of ideological predictability, voters perceive that the Democratic candidate is more ideologically proximate. The estimates for the other covariates all are consistent with the findings presented in the tables above.31

The results from this analysis link the negative relationship between candidate predictability and voter support to voter perceptions of the candidates. Candidate predictability affects how voters perceive the relative positioning of the candidates. A candidate who exhibits lower levels of predictability than his opponent by, for instance, adopting some relatively extreme issue positions as well as some relatively

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30 We note that there are several other plausible mechanisms that could link predictability with voters’ evaluations of candidates, including variation in voters’ risk propensities, and the connection between predictability and voters’ assessments of candidate valence attributes. At present, however, we lack the necessary data to fully consider these possibilities.

31 Interestingly, the coefficient for Republican incumbency advantage is negative, indicating that Republican incumbents are perceived as less proximate relative to the Democratic candidate. This could reflect the context of the 2006 midterm elections in which many Republican incumbents were defeated.
moderate issue positions leads voters to discount the overall correspondence between their own ideology and the candidate’s mean ideological position. As a consequence, the voter is likely to conclude that the candidate’s opponent is more ideologically proximate. To use the terminology of Downs, not only do voters consider both the “mean” and the “spread” of candidates’ issue positions, but voters use the “spread” to make inferences about the candidates’ ideological commitments.

5. Discussion and conclusion

In this article, we demonstrate that voters penalize legislative candidates who are ideologically unpredictable. When candidates endorse policy positions across a wide ideological range, voters perceive those candidates as less ideologically congruent and are less inclined to support them. Our results complement, but run exactly counter to, those offered by Somer-Topcu (2015). Consistent with our theoretical account, the importance of ideological predictability may be conditioned by the nature of the electoral system. Voters in more party-centered contexts may react differently to ideological predictability because this cue is less relevant for distinguishing more and less reliable types. In addition, the partisan context of the United States may simply be incommensurate with the partisan contexts in western European democracies. For instance, as the two U.S. parties have polarized in recent years, affective conflict between the parties has also increased (e.g., Iyengar et al., 2012) and may have increased candidates’ incentives to adopt internally and ideologically consistent platform positions, as failing to do so may indicate a weaker allegiance to party principles. In contrast, parties in western European democracies have incentives to cultivate governing coalitions based on looser sets of ideological principles, which thus may yield electoral incentives to cultivate governing coalitions based on looser sets of ideological principles. In contrast, parties in western European democracies have commitments, as failing to do so may indicate a weaker allegiance to party principles.

Entries are linear regression coefficients and standard errors, clustered by congressional district. The dependent variable is respondents’ perceived proximity to the Republican candidate relative to the Democratic candidate. All variables are defined in the text. * indicates p < 0.05 (all two-tailed tests).

The empirical relationship between candidate extremity and ideological predictability has relevance for contemporary debates about party polarization in the U.S. In particular, it may be electorally feasible for candidates to stake out more ideologically extreme policy positions if those positions are also relatively consistent. While this finding does not provide an explanation for increases in polarization, it could imply that the parties and their candidates can be in equilibrium while also being highly divergent in the policy space. Similarly, the results could shed light on party asymmetries with respect to polarization. As Democratic and Republican voting records in Congress have diverged over the last several decades, the most significant increases in ideological extremism have occurred among Republicans (Mann and Ornstein, 2012; McCarty et al., 2006). Our findings suggest that voters’ preferences for ideological predictability may help explain why it has been electorally viable for the Republican Party to polarize so dramatically, as Republican candidates’ higher levels of ideological predictability helps to compensate for penalties they may pay for being out of step with the median voter. Voters’ preferences for predictability may also help explain why Republican incumbents with more moderate backgrounds have been defeated in primaries by challengers who exhibit greater ideological purity.

The findings presented in this paper raise intriguing new questions about the role of ideology in elections. For instance, while a vast literature explores the benefits to ideological moderation, the argument presented in this paper suggests that moderation could take various forms. In the form most commonly explored in the literature, a candidate could attempt to gain the support of more moderate voters simply by moderating her policy views. Alternatively, the candidate could substantially moderate her position on one key issue, hoping that this revised issue position would appeal to relatively moderate voters. These two potential strategies would appear to describe contemporary debates within the Republican Party, in which some argue that Republicans would benefit in national elections by abandoning its conservatism altogether and moving toward the ideological center, while other key Republicans have adopted relatively moderate positions on only some issues (consider, for instance, Ohio Senator Rob Portman and the issue of gay marriage). The results of our analysis suggest that the latter strategy may backfire. Though our paper contributes to literature on the electoral consequences of candidate issue strategies, many additional questions remain. For instance, how does ideological predictability affect voters’ affective evaluations of candidates along such dimensions as reliability, integrity, and pragmatism? Given that models of candidate competition often predict trade-offs between ideological positioning and investing in valence (Groseclose, 2001; Schofield, 2003), such a

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Table 4
Predictability and perceptions of candidate ideology.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>(1)</th>
<th>(2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Republican proximity advantage</td>
<td>0.64* (0.03)</td>
<td>0.65* (0.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican predictability advantage</td>
<td>4.07* (1.02)</td>
<td>4.07* (1.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party identification</td>
<td>8.91* (0.54)</td>
<td>8.69* (0.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican incumbency advantage</td>
<td>−2.07 (1.05)</td>
<td>−2.79* (1.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spending advantage</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>1.34*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004 Republican Candidate Vote Share</td>
<td>0.00 (0.04)</td>
<td>0.00 (0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>−27.37* (3.07)</td>
<td>−26.77* (3.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>4064</td>
<td>4064</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MSE</td>
<td>25.21</td>
<td>25.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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For examples of research that suggests how candidate issue strategies may affect non-policy assessments, see, e.g., Blomberg and Harrington (2000), Campbell (1983), and Canes-Wrone and Shotts (2007).
framework offers an appealing parallel means for considering the relationship between the mean and variance of candidates’ issue positions. Similarly, support for one candidate over another as a function of predictability may depend on attitudes toward risk (Kam and Simas, 2012; Morgenstern and Zechmeister, 2001). Risk-neutral voters may be unaffected by a candidate’s level of predictability, while risk-averse voters may be less inclined to support a candidate whose overall ideology is appealing but whose distribution of policy positions raises questions about the candidate’s predictability. Future research can assess how these issue strategies influence voter perceptions and investigate possible tradeoffs between ideological predictability and other dimensions of candidate platform choice. Just as the relationship between ideology and vote choice may vary with other attributes of individual voters and electoral context (e.g., Adams et al., 2017; Rogowski, Forthcoming; Shor and Rogowski, Forthcoming), so may the effects of candidate predictability. Finally, researchers could also explore how electoral institutions affect candidates’ issue strategies; for instance, ideological predictability could have different implications in two-stage elections that begin with a primary, in which a candidate may emphasize different issue positions than she does in a general election.

Appendix A. Supplementary data
Supplementary data related to this article can be found at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2017.10.004.

References