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Party, Policy, and the Ambition to Run for Higher Office

This article examines why some state legislators run for Congress and others do not. Our main argument is that there are differences in the expected value of a state legislative seat and the expected benefits of being a member of Congress. One key component of this value is how closely the candidate fits with her party. We find that the probability of seeking congressional office increases among state legislators who are distant from the state party and proximate to the congressional party and decreases among those who are distant from the congressional party and proximate to the state party.

In October 2013, veteran Republican representative C. W. Bill Young announced he would not seek re-election in Florida's 13th congressional district. National Republican leaders immediately began their candidate quest. They reached out to Jack Latvala, a longtime state senator who represents more than two-thirds of the US House district. Latvala had no interest in running for Congress and, in fact, he did not even return their call (Huey-Burns and Conroy 2013). RealClearPolitics asked Latvala why he passed on the opportunity. He said, "I make an impact on things in Tallahassee on a daily basis. I couldn't make much of an impact in Washington" (Huey-Burns and Conroy 2013). While it is difficult to say exactly what Latvala means by impact, we believe there is more to this story. What this simple comment does not reveal is the fact that Latvala's ideological preferences are well within the Republican Party mainstream in the Florida state senate, but if he were elected to Congress, he would be an ideological outsider in the congressional GOP delegation.¹

The case of current Republican Representative Patrick McHenry (NC-10) illustrates how ideological conformity, or lack thereof, can also work to spur congressional aspirations. McHenry was elected to the North Carolina state legislature in 2002. A social and economic conservative, he was significantly to the right of the bulk of the Republican delegation in the state House at the time. He was, however, a nearly

perfect ideological match with the Republican Party delegation in Congress.² He served one term in the state legislature and then ran for Congress. We think that McHenry's self-described "pro-growth, pro-life, pro-marriage, pro-gun, tax cut message" (quoted in Nowell 2004, 1) and his willingness to seek higher office is related to both his own ideological leanings and those of the party delegations to which he belonged and would ultimately belong.

The decision to run for political office is central to the study of democratic politics and legislative representation. Fifty years ago, Schlesinger claimed: "Ambition lies at the heart of politics" (1966, 1). Representative government relies upon a supply of individuals who wish to hold elective office. The election of candidates instills the democratic process with legitimacy, and it gives those who were elected the authority to rule. Elections are the principal mechanism that voters use to hold political leaders accountable and to evaluate government performance. It therefore behooves political scientists to keep political ambition and the decision to seek elective office at the center of theories about legislative politics. The democratic ideal deeply depends on, and indeed takes for granted, the existence of a vibrant and healthy pool of candidates from which voters can choose. This article seeks to shed theoretical and empirical light on why some individuals run for elective office and others do not.

Theoretical Explanation

Our specific question is which state legislators run for the US House. Choosing to do so is a rare event (in our data, 1.4% run), even though those who do are among the most likely to win the seat. State legislators make up the highest percentage of winners of those from any office other than incumbent members of the House themselves. And, indeed, former state legislators are a full 50% of sitting members of Congress (NCSL 2013).³

We believe that career ambition is necessary but insufficient to explain who runs for higher office. It is necessary to explain who does run, as the decision to run for the US House reflects a commitment to a truly intensive job and lifestyle, so one does not choose that option lightly. It is insufficient, we believe, because while many politicians have the ambition to hold high office, few actually choose to run. Our problem, then, is how to move toward a sufficient explanation. Part of the explanation, of course, is the set of costs and benefits associated with the run and the (ordinarily long) odds of winning (e.g., Maestas et al. 2006; Maisel and Stone 2014; Stone and Maisel 2003). Only a few of the otherwise

similarly situated state legislators face an open House seat in any given election, for example, and thus have lower costs of running and a higher probability of winning than those who would have to run against an incumbent seeking re-election.

Less attention, however, has been paid to differences in the benefits of holding one office compared to another (but see Maestas et al. 2006). If all office seekers care only about holding the office for its own sake, then there is little explanatory purchase in examining differential benefits from one legislator compared to another. But if, as we believe is increasingly true today, office holding is valued for the policies they can try to pursue as well as the value of office holding, per se, then such policy benefits and how they vary across circumstances becomes an important component of any explanation of who does and who does not run for higher office. We examine the implications of the theory of party fit (Thomsen 2014) for this case, a theory that focuses on the policy benefits of office holding, and we thus propose an explanation that combines ambition theory and party fit theory to move closer toward sufficiency in the explanation of office seeking.

Ambition theory, articulated first by Schlesinger (1966) and then transformed into a formal “calculus of candidacy” by Rohde (1979), provides one of the two theoretical bases on which our explanation rests. As formulated by Rohde, an ambitious politician desires a long career in elective office, and whether she or he stays in one office (“static ambition” in the original formulation by Schlesinger), seeks to advance up Schlesinger’s informal hierarchy of offices (“progressive ambition,” manifested by climbing the “opportunity structure”), or even withdraws from politics entirely (“discrete ambition”) is a comparison of the expected utility of the various choices and thus contingent on the various configuration of benefits, costs, and risks that the ambitious politician faces. Rohde (1979, 4) consequently posits the following equations that specify the expected benefits and costs from taking each action:

$$E(a_1) = P_1(O_1)U(O_1) + P_1(O_2)U(O_2) + P_1(O_3)U(O_3) - C(a_1) \quad (1)$$

$$E(a_2) = P_2(O_1)U(O_1) + P_2(O_2)U(O_2) + P_2(O_3)U(O_3) - C(a_2) \quad (2)$$

where

$E(a_i)$ is the expected utility of choosing alternative i ,

$P_i(O_j)$ is the probability that outcome j will occur if alternative i is chosen,

$U(O_j)$ is the utility the actor receives if outcome j occurs,

$C(a_j)$ is the direct utility cost incurred by choosing alternative i ,

and where specifically:

- O_1 = no office is occupied after the election,
- O_2 = the presently held office is occupied after the election,
- O_3 = the higher office being considered is occupied after the election,
- a_1 = the actor runs for the presently held office (i.e., re-election),
- and
- a_2 = the actor runs for the higher office.

As Rohde shows, these can be reduced to the simpler:

$$E(a_1) = P_1(O_2)U(O_2) - C(a_1) \quad (3)$$

$$E(a_2) = P_2(O_3)U(O_3) - C(a_2) \quad (4)$$

Thus, the expected value of running for an office (a_i) can be reduced to the probability of winning the office times its value less the costs of running for it.

As Rohde's title indicates, his account assumes that all elective politicians hold progressive ambition, which, to Rohde (and to us), means that every politician would take a higher (that is to say, more preferred) office, if offered without cost or risk.⁴ Given that all prefer higher office, he (and most subsequent research) has focused on the costs and risks part of the equation and thus on whether the race for higher office is an open seat or incumbent-re-election race and how prone to risk taking the individual has demonstrated herself to be in the past. Those following this approach assume implicitly that there is little difference in the relative evaluation of the benefits between the two offices (or that the benefits are distributed randomly) by ambitious office seekers.

Maestas et al. (2006) depart from this approach by emphasizing differences in the relative value of a higher office compared to a lower one, and they provide empirical support with the same office comparisons as we make (state and national legislative seats). Like them, we will also be modifying the common assumption that the benefits of office are constant across individuals. In place of the assumption that $[U(O_3) - U(O_2)]$ is approximately equal for most sitting state legislators, we assume that this difference varies as a function of our key independent variables. It is also all but universally assumed that $P_1(O_2) > P_2(O_3)$, that is, the probability of winning the currently held office is higher than the probability of winning any higher office. It certainly seems a reasonable approximation for many, which we take to be so here, although one

can imagine exceptions.⁵ Similarly, it is ordinarily assumed that $C(a_1) < C(a_2)$, that is, it is less costly to run for the current state seat than to run for a House seat, although one could conjure exceptions.

What is more important in the empirical work is the set of differences in these terms across definable (and measureable) circumstances. For example, the probability of winning higher office is much higher (in nearly every case) when the seat is open than when the incumbent is running for re-election. Or, as in Rohde's case, the smaller the number of congressional seats apportioned to the state, the closer one of those few congressional districts is to the state-wide constituency of the Senate, and when the state is, say, South Dakota, the congressional constituency *is* the senate constituency. Thus, while ordinal properties of the comparisons are often the same (everyone prefers higher to lower offices, has a lower chance of winning higher office, and finds it more costly to run for it), it is the large scale of the magnitude of these differences in measurable cases that makes it possible to gain empirical leverage. And, the empirical support thereby generated for ambition theory is extremely strong and robust. Our specific concern here is with what Maestas and Stewart call the "understudied 'B' term" (2012, 32). This article follows work by Maestas et al. (2006) and Maestas and Stewart (2012) that examines how the configuration of conditions at various levels of office influences progressive ambition and the relative value of higher office. Our claim is that there are significant differences in features of the offices, particularly those concerning policy preferences, such that some find the benefits of holding higher office to be substantially greater than do others. We generate the relevant hypotheses about this claim from party fit theory.

Party fit theory was developed by Thomsen (2014) as an extension of conditional party government (or "CPG") (Aldrich 2011; Aldrich and Rohde 2001; Rohde 1991). CPG is a theory of how electoral pressures create stronger or weaker incentives for party affiliates in office to take collective actions on their own behalf and thus strengthen or weaken partisan organizational features in the legislature. The two key components on which Aldrich and Rohde focus are the relative degree of internal party homogeneity (particularly on public policy preferences) and interpartisan polarization. The shorthand summary is the more homogenous the party, that is to say, the more partisan affiliates face highly similar electoral pressures on policy, the more they stand to gain from acting in concert, and the less they have to worry about their party taking collective actions contrary to their interests. The greater the interparty heterogeneity (aka "partisan polarization"), the more reason there is for party affiliates, as partisans, to act collectively to withstand what would

be a very different set of policy outcomes if they let the opposition choose what policies are enacted. A relatively heterogeneous party may still find in a partisan-polarized world that even the most moderate of its members stand for very different policies than the opposition. In such cases, the party might easily be able to unite to be a “party of no” but find it difficult to unite on positive action taking. Generally, the focus has been on changes that have affected the parties relatively similarly over time. Thus, both parties in Congress today are, relative to 1970, more homogenous internally and more polarized, but this similarity is not a perfect equality. For example, events in the 1990s might suggest a more united Republican than Democratic Party in those days, and there is evidence that the Democratic caucus remains somewhat more heterogeneous than the Republican caucus today (Bonica 2013) even though public attention has focused on differences between “establishment” and “Tea Party” or “House Freedom Caucus” Republicans.

Party fit considers circumstances that may vary sharply across individual affiliates. In a relatively homogenous party, most are happy to work in concert because they share much in common. But even the most homogenous party is not unanimous in all matters. Some members of the party hold quite different positions from many others. At the end of the last century, the “Blue Dog Democrats” stood out as distinctive and often found themselves uncomfortable with positions taken by their party peers from more liberal constituencies. Today, moderate Republicans are more often at odds with the party than before. Some members of Congress, that is, simply do not fit as well with their party delegation as others. This may have a large variety of consequences, but here it is sufficient to note that the attraction of an office in which one’s party stands for policies much like you prefer is more valuable than an otherwise identical office in which the member of Congress does not fit with his or her own party very well.

Our central hypothesis, then, is that while $U(O_2) < U(O_3)$ is assumed true for everyone, some will find the difference in utilities to be larger than will others. Those whose induced policy ideal point resembles the bulk of their own party affiliates in their current state legislature will be relatively happier with their current position than will those who do not fit their party very well. Similarly, those who resemble the party in Congress will be relatively more attracted to that position because they will expect to have more partisan support for, and even expect to win more on, policy than they would otherwise. That is, the better they fit with their party, the greater the benefits they derive from the office. It may well be modal in a partisan-polarized era (at state and national levels) for most to fit both their state and national legislative parties well.

But not all. And it is that fairly small set of state legislators who do not fit their state party that closely but do fit well at the national level from which we would expect a higher proportion to run for Congress. Thus, while the utilities are continuous and interval, we could think of the dichotomy being “in step” with the party when one’s preferences are similar to those of the party as a whole, and “out of step” with the party when one’s preferences are quite distinct. Then it follows that a legislator who is in step with her party is relatively highly attracted to that office, certainly more so than those not in step with their party.

There is a fairly natural metric for this, which is simply how similar the ideal point of the individual is to that of her party in the legislature. Let p_{ijk} denote a member, i , of party j (which is either D or R), in legislature k (choice 2, from above, being the state legislature, 3 is the US House), and let P_{jk} denote the ideal point representing the party j in assembly k , then the assumption is:⁶

$$U(O_k) = f(|p_{ijk} - P_{jk}|) \text{ for all } i, j, \text{ and } k. \quad (5)$$

That is, the utility for holding a seat in a legislature is a function of how close one’s own policy preferences are to the rest of one’s party, on average, *ceteris paribus*. We would expect that the probability of running for higher office would be highest for those “out of step” with their state party but “in step” with the national party. We would also expect that the probability of running for higher office would be lowest for those in step with their state party but out of step with the national party. Because two offices are involved in this case, we might also specify party fit as the state legislator’s relative distance between the state and congressional party. As the legislator’s relative distance between the state and congressional party increases, the value of a congressional seat is expected to increase.

Additional Hypotheses

Our major argument and thus principal hypothesis here is that there are systematic and measureable differences in the expected value of a state legislative seat and the expected benefits of being a member of Congress due to variations in party fit in the state and national legislatures. However, along with variation in the benefits of office due to party and policy, other variables may also be consequential. According to CPG, party fit may work differently for those who are in more heterogeneous state legislative parties. Holding party locations constant, it may

be easier for ideological nonconformists to succeed in the pursuit of their policy goals when the state legislative party is more diverse. It is also likely that majority-party status confers greater benefits, *ceteris paribus*, than does being in the minority. Those who are in the majority in state legislative office but would be in the congressional minority will be less likely to run for Congress, and those who are in the minority in state legislative office but would be in the congressional majority will be more likely to do so. In addition, the long-term expected value of retaining a seat in a state legislature with term limits is lower, all else equal, than in a state legislature without term limits.

There is, of course, the standard set of variables associated with tests of ambition theory, which are components of the variation in costs of running and probabilities of winning.⁷ If an incumbent is running for re-election, the odds of winning are lower, so the expected value of a run for higher office declines. Similarly, if the state legislator is a member of the president's party in midterm (presidential) elections, this will have a negative (positive) effect on her chance of winning. We further suppose, as do others, that a candidate who has proven an ability to raise larger rather than lesser sums of money will find that the probability to raise enough money to strongly compete for Congress is higher. Also, a state legislator is increasingly credible as a candidate for higher office (i.e., has a higher probability of winning) as she has more experience in winning elections. Thus, the probability of running for Congress increases with the number of terms the state legislator has served, though this value likely falls off for those who are aging. Finally, Maestas et al. (2006) show that state legislative professionalism can both stimulate and depress progressive ambition. Because we do not have precise expectations about the conditions under which the stimulating factors outweigh the depressing ones, or vice versa, we cannot predict their net impact but we know these factors are relevant.

Data and Method

We are interested in studying varying benefits to holding offices, particularly state legislators' ideological fit with their current state legislative party in comparison with the congressional party to which they would belong upon election, and we examine how these two levels of party fit matter for progressive ambition and the decision to run for congressional office. As noted above, we can also measure the relative distance between the state and congressional party. As the state legislator's relative distance increases, her probability of running is expected to increase as well.

To measure these distances, we draw on the Database on Ideology, Money in Politics, and Elections (DIME) (Bonica 2014). Bonica (2014) uses campaign finance records from state and federal elections to estimate the ideology of a wide range of political actors, including members of Congress, state legislators, interest groups, and individual donors. The data set includes ideal points for state legislators who did and did not run for Congress from 2000 to 2010.⁸ Most importantly here, state legislators and members of Congress are placed in a common ideological space, which allows us to compare how state and federal institutions matter for the decision to run for office.^{9,10}

We use logistic regression to estimate the relationship between these various types of party fit and the state legislator's decision to run for Congress. The model includes nearly 31,000 observations of state legislators who did and did not run for Congress between 2000 and 2010.¹¹ The dependent variable is coded 1 if the state legislator runs for Congress in a given year and 0 if she runs for the state legislature again.

State legislative and congressional party fit is measured as the state legislator's absolute distance from her state legislative and congressional party, respectively. Higher values correspond to increasing distance from the party.¹² We use the party leadership to measure the congressional party, and we follow Jessee and Malhotra's (2010) definition of party leaders. We use the party median as a proxy for the state legislative party, as elected leaders will likely hold ideologies similar to those of the party median (e.g., Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005; Jessee and Malhotra 2010; Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991; Rohde 1991; Sinclair 1995).¹³ The party fit hypothesis suggests that increasing distance from the state legislative party has a positive effect on a state legislator's probability of running for Congress, whereas increasing distance from the congressional party has a negative effect. We also measure the state legislator's relative distance from the state and congressional parties as the difference between her state party fit and congressional party fit. In additional specifications, we include an interaction of the standard deviation of the state legislative party and distance to allow for variation in the effect of party fit across different values of state party heterogeneity. This provides a test of the hypothesis that the value of the seat depends in part on the heterogeneity as well as the location of the party.¹⁴

We include various electoral, institutional, and partisan variables to specify different aspects of the calculus of candidacy. First and foremost, we account for whether there was an incumbent running for reelection in the state legislator's congressional district.¹⁵ We also include a variable for whether the state legislator is a member of the president's party in presidential and off-year elections. Bonica's (2014) data were

used to calculate the average amount of money individuals raised as state legislators, as this likely corresponds to their ability to fund a congressional campaign. We include the number of times individuals ran for state legislative office as well as the number of times squared to capture their experience as candidates. State legislative professionalization is measured with the Squire (2007) index, which is derived from factors such as salary, staff, and days in session. We used Klarner's (2013) data to create dummy variables for shifts from state legislative majority to congressional minority and vice versa, and we include a binary variable for whether the state legislature has term limits (NCSL 2013).

Results

The results are presented in Table 1.¹⁶ The coefficients on the party fit variables are statistically significant and properly signed across models. Column 1 shows the results with the separate measures of state and congressional party fit. State legislators who are increasingly distant from their state legislative party are more likely to run for higher office, and those who are increasingly distant from their prospective congressional party are less likely to run for Congress. In other words, the probability of running for Congress is higher for state legislators who are "misfits" in their current state legislative parties and lower for state legislators who are misfits in their prospective congressional delegation.

Column 2 shows the results with the relative measure of party fit.¹⁷ This model perhaps best captures how state and congressional party fit collectively shape the calculus of candidacy. Lower values indicate proximity to the state party and distance from the congressional party, and higher values indicate proximity to the congressional party and distance from the state party. We can see that state legislators are more likely to seek higher office as the relative distance between the state and congressional parties increases. Lastly, the results with the interaction between the relative measure of party fit and state party heterogeneity are provided in Column 3. The effect of a state legislator's relative distance from the state and congressional parties on the probability of running decreases with increasing levels of state party heterogeneity, which conforms to the expectations here. We focus on the results in Columns 1 and 2 as these variables are of most direct concern, and we discuss the results separately by party because the probability of running for Congress is higher for Republicans.¹⁸

Figure 1 presents the predicted probability of running for Congress for Republican state legislators across a range of distances from the state and congressional parties.¹⁹ Again, lower values indicate

TABLE 1
The Determinants of Running for the US House (2000–10)

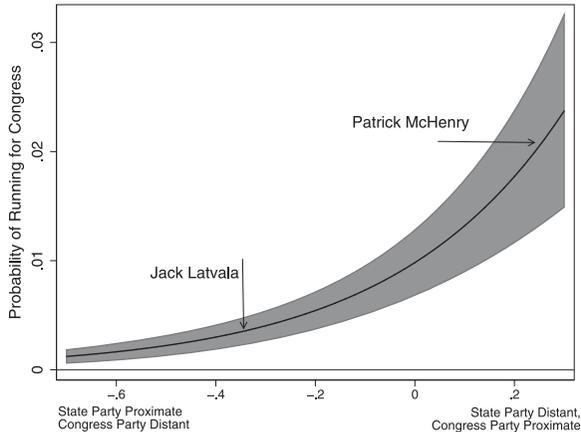
	(1)	(2)	(3)
State Legislative Party Fit (Distance from State Party)	4.02** (0.30)	—	—
Congressional Party Fit (Distance from Congressional Party)	-2.17** (0.31)	—	—
Relative Measure of Party Fit (Distance from State Party – Distance from Congressional Party)	—	2.97** (0.31)	5.38** (0.88)
Relative Party Fit × State Party Heterogeneity	—	—	-9.04** (3.17)
State Party Heterogeneity	—	—	1.46* (0.62)
Incumbent Running in Congressional District	-2.77** (0.15)	-2.76** (0.15)	-2.76** (0.15)
Log of Mean Receipts Raised as State Legislator	0.42** (0.07)	0.37** (0.06)	0.43** (0.07)
Number of Times Run for State Legislature	1.29** (0.20)	1.25** (0.20)	1.26** (0.20)
Number of Times Squared	-0.11** (0.02)	-0.10** (0.02)	-0.11** (0.02)
In Professionalized State Legislature	0.71 (0.43)	0.84 (0.45)	0.64 (0.47)
In State Legislature with Term Limits	0.77** (0.18)	0.73** (0.20)	0.74** (0.20)
In State Legislative Majority but Congressional Minority	-0.09 (0.14)	-0.25 (0.14)	-0.18 (0.16)
In State Legislative Minority but Congressional Majority	0.42** (0.15)	0.54** (0.15)	0.47** (0.16)
President's Party, Presidential Election Year	-0.13 (0.20)	-0.28 (0.20)	-0.23 (0.21)
President's Party, Midterm Election Year	-0.45* (0.21)	-0.57** (0.21)	-0.50** (0.23)
Republican	0.49** (0.11)	0.34** (0.13)	0.42** (0.13)
Constant	-10.83** (0.89)	-9.62** (0.84)	-10.58** (0.92)
Number of Observations	30,961	30,961	30,961
Log-Likelihood	-1655.71	-1682.25	-1670.18

Source: State legislator estimates are from Bonica (2014).

Note: Entries are logistic regression coefficients with robust standard errors clustered by state in parentheses. The dependent variable is coded 1 if the incumbent state legislator ran for the US House and 0 if the incumbent state legislator instead ran for the state legislature.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$.

FIGURE 1
Probability of Running for the US House among Republican State Legislators, across Different Values of Party Fit

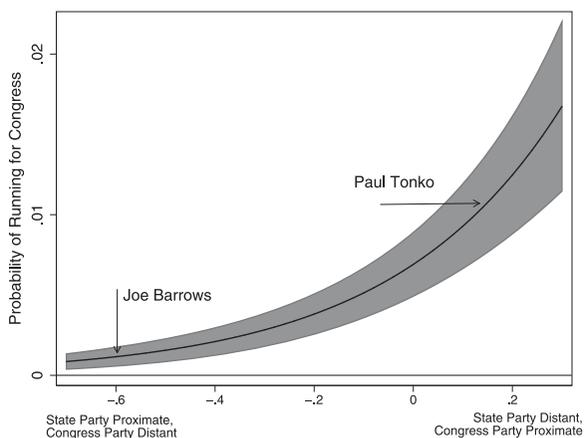


Note: These values are estimated from the model in Column 2 of Table 1.

proximity to the state party and distance from the congressional party, and higher values indicate proximity to the congressional party and distance from the state party. It is clear that the probability of seeking congressional office increases among state legislators who are distant from the state party and proximate to the congressional party and decreases among state legislators who are distant from the congressional party and proximate to the state party. We can use the state legislators introduced at the outset to examine differences in the probability of running across individuals with varying degrees of conformity with their state and congressional parties. North Carolina Congressman Patrick McHenry is nearly 2 standard deviations away from the Republican Party in the North Carolina state house and 0.3 standard deviations from the Republican Party in Congress, while Florida State Senator Jack Latvala is 1.5 standard deviations from the congressional GOP and 0.25 standard deviations from the Republican Party in the Florida state senate. And their likelihood of running for higher office differs dramatically: The probability that a state legislator like McHenry runs for Congress is 2.0% versus 0.4% for a legislator like Latvala.

Figure 2 shows the predicted probability of running for Congress for Democratic state legislators across a range of distances from the state

FIGURE 2
Probability of Running for the US House among Democratic State Legislators, across Different Values of Party Fit

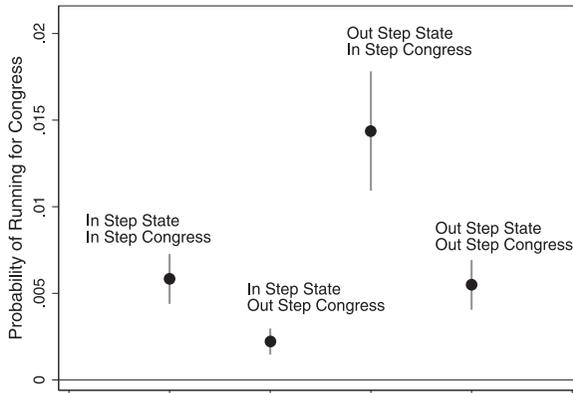


Note: These values are estimated from the model in Column 2 of Table 1.

and congressional parties. Like their Republican counterparts, the probability of seeking congressional office increases among those who are distant from the state party and proximate to the congressional party and decreases among state legislators who are distant from the congressional party and proximate to the state party. We can again examine differences in the probability of running across individuals with varying degrees of conformity with the state and congressional parties. For example, New York Congressman Paul Tonko is 1 standard deviation from the party in the New York state house but 0.3 standard deviations from the Democratic Party in Congress, whereas veteran Kentucky state legislator Joe Barrows is 0.25 standard deviations from the Democratic Party in the Kentucky state house and nearly 2 standard deviations from the Democratic Party in Congress. Similar to the patterns above, the probability that a state legislator like Tonko runs for Congress is 1.0% compared to 0.1% for a legislator like Barrows.

We also dichotomized state legislators as “in step” and “out of step” with their state and congressional parties. State legislators who are “in step” have an ideology score that is within \pm one-half standard deviation from the respective party, and those who are “out of step” have an ideology score that is more than \pm one-half standard deviation from the party.

FIGURE 3
Probability of Running for the US House for Republican State Legislators Who Are In Step and Out of Step with Their State and Congressional Parties

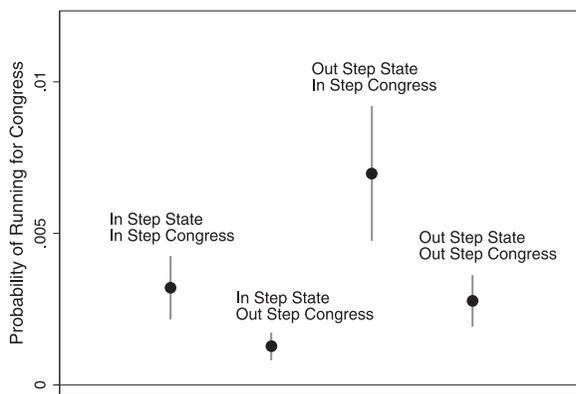


Note: These values are estimated from the model in Column 1 of Table 1.

Figure 3 presents the probability of running for Congress for Republican state legislators who are in step with their state and congressional parties, in step with their state party but out of step with the congressional party, out of step with their state party but in step with their congressional party, and out of step with their state and congressional parties. The probability of running for Congress for a state legislator who is in step with her state and congressional parties is equal to that for a state legislator who is out of step with her state and congressional parties (0.6% for both). Again, the probability of running for Congress is highest (and significantly so) for individuals who are out of step with their state party and in step with their congressional party (1.4%). Similarly, state legislators who are in step with their state party but out of step with the national party have the lowest probability of seeking congressional office (0.3%, again statistically significantly so).

Figure 4 shows the patterns for the same four types of Democratic state legislators. As noted above, these values are lower for Democrats, but the trends are the same. Like the Republicans, the probability of running for Congress for a Democratic state legislator who is in step with both her state and congressional parties is nearly equal to that for a state legislator who is out of step with both her state and congressional parties (0.3% and 0.3%, respectively). This probability is highest for individuals who are out of step with their state party and in step with the

FIGURE 4
Probability of Running for the US House for Democratic State Legislators Who Are In Step and Out of Step with Their State Legislative and Congressional Parties



Note: These values are estimated from the model in Column 1 of Table 1.

congressional party (0.8%) and lowest for state legislators who are in step with their state party but out of step with the national party (0.1%).

One of the variable benefits of the office is (anticipated) majority and minority status. As we expected, minority-party members who would be in the majority party in Congress are indeed significantly more likely to run for higher office. Finally, term limits, reducing the value of the state seat, are positively and significantly related to the probability of running for Congress.

In terms of additional factors that shape the costs and probabilities associated with the calculus of candidacy, state legislators are less likely to run for Congress when there is an incumbent seeking re-election (Jacobson 2004; Jacobson and Kernell 1983). Those who raised more money as state legislators have a higher probability of running for congressional office. Those with more experience as state legislative candidates are more likely to seek higher office, though this probability decreases among those who are in the later stages of their state legislative careers. Institutional and partisan variables also influence the value of the office. State legislators who are members of the president's party are also less likely to run for congressional office in midterm election years. State legislative professionalization is positive but does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance ($p < 0.10$), which echoes the findings in

Maestas et al. (2006) that state legislative professionalism can have both a positive and negative impact on progressive ambition.

In sum, the results provide evidence in support of the theoretical expectations outlined above, which suggest that ideological misfits are less likely to run for office than those with ideological preferences that conform to the party delegation. We find that the probability of seeking congressional office increases among state legislators who are distant from the state party and proximate to the congressional party and decreases among state legislators who are distant from the congressional party and proximate to the state party. While traditionally studied factors such as past political experience, the ability to raise money, and the presence of an incumbent matter in clear ways for whether state legislators run for Congress, scholars have yet to fully explore the implications of candidate ideology and party fit for patterns of candidate entry.²⁰

Conclusion and Implications

Political ambition has long been a prominent topic of inquiry among political scientists. This is for good reason. Representative government depends on a supply of individuals who wish to hold elective office, and the quality of representation can only be as good as those who are elected to serve. Yet while many individuals harbor ambitions to seek elective office, very few of them actually do so.

Our contribution is to extend the theory of the calculus of candidacy. In particular, we emphasize differences in the value of the office and use systematic variation in the benefits of holding office to help explain why some individuals run for congressional office and others do not. The perspective most often associated with Downs (1957) and Mayhew (1974) is that politicians care only about holding office, *per se*, and by implication, if that is true for everyone, the value of office should be effectively constant across all candidates.²¹ Our results show that to be true for a number of variables (e.g., term limits, majority or minority status). But our point of emphasis is that, perhaps different from the world in which Downs and Mayhew wrote, the contemporary politician may be assumed to value the use of office to propose and enact policies. Since that is likely to vary even across members of the same party, based on where the candidate and the rest of the party stand, we hypothesized—and demonstrated empirically—that one key component of this decision is how closely the candidate fits with the party delegation. Scholars of political ambition and candidate emergence have yet to consider many of the ways in which partisan institutions affect the decision to run for political office, but the findings presented here suggest that ideological

conformity with the party delegation is one, and one that matters for the ultimate makeup of the candidate pool.

Party fit can be a stabilizing force in party politics, as parties remain stable when they attract like-minded candidates to run for office. However, when parties begin to shift course due to some other factor or set of factors, candidate self-selection processes can be a mechanism of change as well. Thomsen (2014) suggests that the ideological makeup of the candidate pool is contributing to the growing ideological divide between the two parties in Congress. As the parties have polarized ideologically, liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats lost the leverage and bargaining power they once had. In the contemporary partisan era, it is increasingly difficult for moderates to achieve their policy goals and advance within the party or chamber, and they have fewer like-minded colleagues to work and interact with in office. The benefits of congressional service are now too low for them to run, and the consequence is that partisan polarization in Congress has become self-reinforcing.

The forecast is not overly bright for congressional politics. Congressional approval ratings have plummeted in recent years, and the absence of moderates from the candidate pool does not bode well for prospects of bipartisanship and comity in Washington. The number of Americans who approved of Congress's job performance sank to a record low of 9% in 2013. Thirty years ago, these ratings were three to four times higher than they are today. Gallup has tracked public evaluations of Congress since 1974, and prior to 2008 congressional approval had fallen below 20% only twice, in 1979 and 1992 (Riffkin 2014). Now around 80% of Americans consistently *disapprove* of congressional performance. The real irony is that Congress's record low approval ratings stem from the inability and unwillingness of members to work across party lines (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995; Ramirez 2009). Reformers have advocated a variety of policy changes to the legislative and electoral process, but if the only individuals who seek congressional office come from the ideological extremes, it is difficult to see how polarization will fade anytime soon.

We have focused here on federal and state legislative office in the United States, but the theoretical argument could be applied in a wide array of political and even nonpolitical contexts. For example, we could examine partisan change and stability cross-nationally and analyze whether similar patterns of candidate entry emerge under various electoral systems. With the continual emergence of new and better data, the range and applicability of the party fit argument could be explored in a variety of institutional environments. Indeed, the makeup of the

candidate pool has enormous implications for the types of policies that are enacted as well as the quality of legislative representation. These questions span national borders, apply across time periods, and matter in all political contexts, and they are fundamental to the study of politics.

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NOTES

1. Specifically, Latvala is nearly 1.5 standard deviations from the congressional GOP mean, compared to 0.25 standard deviations from the Republican Party mean in the Florida state senate (Bonica 2014). We describe the data and measures in detail below.

2. In fact, McHenry was nearly 2 standard deviations away from the GOP mean in the North Carolina state House and 0.3 standard deviations from the Republican Party in Congress (Bonica 2014).

3. Currently, there are 92 Democrats and 126 Republicans in Congress with state legislative backgrounds, or 46% and 54% of the party delegation, respectively (NCSL 2013). These figures do not differ by party when we look over time. In a comprehensive study of the professional backgrounds of members of Congress who served between 1999 and 2008, Carnes (2012) finds that the proportion of Democrats and Republicans with prior state legislative experience was similar (50.9% and 51.5%, respectively).

4. Rohde was examining members of Congress and whether they stayed in the House or ran for the higher offices of Senate or governor. It may be less true of state legislators, even though state legislatures are increasingly professionalized. The costs for holding higher office may be even higher when it includes a move from a state capital to Washington, DC, exacting personal and life costs that are not randomly distributed across state legislators. However, as Maestas et al. show, these costs and attractions appear to “shape ambitions but do not influence the decision to run” (2006, 195). Instead, they shape the timing of just when to run, which is precisely Rohde’s question.

5. For one example, consider large-scale redistricting of one’s state legislative seat in California, being thrown in with another incumbent, and having the good fortune of also living in a district with an open House seat consisting of much of one’s original state legislative district.

6. The ideal point could possibly be an n -dimensional vector, although we employ others’ estimates who pose a single dimensional framework. And there are any number of choices for measuring where the “party stands” on policy. One operationalization would be to use the ideal point of the mean or median party affiliate. Another option would be to use the position of the typical party leader in the chamber. Party leaders are the public face of the party and hence are most prominent in establishing the party’s

policy reputation for election. Of course, just as there are numerous ways to specify the party position, there are alternative distance metrics. In both cases, these are simply different measures of the same theoretical concept.

7. It is often hard to distinguish costs and probabilities. Those running from a legislative district with little overlap with a congressional district face lower probabilities of winning—or they are facing higher costs of competing as effectively as someone from a district with greater overlap. Of course, all that means is that a higher campaign cost can offset at least some of the reasons for why one might have a lower probability of winning.

8. Bonica's state legislator estimates are available from 1990 to 2010, but we restrict the sample from 2000 to 2010. The number of state legislative candidates who filed with the FEC was significantly lower prior to 2000, so the number of state legislators in the data set who could have run for office was unreasonably low and would not be considered even to approximate a random sample of state legislators. Specifically, there are 8,027 observations in the data set between 1990 and 1998, compared to 31,030 between 2000 and 2010. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, there are 7,300 state legislators nationwide in a given election cycle, so the latter figure is a much closer approximation of the eligible pool of state legislators (NCSL 2013).

9. The goal was to restrict the sample to “quality congressional candidates” who do and do not run for Congress (Jacobson and Kernell 1983). Thus, the sample includes state legislative incumbents who make their first run for Congress and state legislative incumbents who run for the state legislature again but could have run for Congress. The sample excludes nonincumbent state legislative candidates who are not yet quality candidates and those who have previously run for the state legislature and lost, as well as state legislators who seek higher state legislative office. The sample also excludes state legislative incumbents who have previously run for Congress, as the aim is to compare the decision to run for Congress across similarly situated state legislators.

10. We also used Shor and McCarty's (2011) state legislator estimates to measure state legislative party fit. The results are similar to those presented here, although the relationship is only significant for Republican state legislators. However, we are unable to measure congressional party fit as data for members of Congress are not publicly available, so these data are not included in the analysis here.

11. Summary statistics of all variables are provided in Appendix A of the online supplementary information. The state legislators represent 49 states; Nebraska is excluded because its legislature is nonpartisan. Of the pool of Republican state legislators who were well situated for Congress in a given election year from 2000 to 2010, 261 (1.8%) ran for Congress, and 14,161 did not. In the pool of Democratic state legislators, 176 (1.1%) ran for Congress, and 16,363 did not. We also ran a rare event logistic regression (King and Zeng 2001), and the results remain the same (see Appendix C). Year fixed effects are included in the models as well. State fixed effects are not included due to our interest in factors such as term limits and legislative professionalization, but the results are similar to those in Table 1 (see Appendix D).

12. The distributions of state legislative and congressional party fit are shown in Appendix B of the online supplementary information.

13. State legislative leadership data are not consistently available.

14. Of course, national party heterogeneity is constant cross-sectionally and fully observed with year fixed effects.

15. We used Census data to assign state legislative districts (SLD) to their corresponding congressional district (CD). For SLDs that fall into more than one CD, we used the CD in which their SLD comprised a larger portion of the CD population. The incumbency data were generously provided by Gary Jacobson.

16. We also estimated a multilevel model, and the results remain the same (see Appendix E of the online supplementary information).

17. We also examined if the effect of party fit is consistent throughout the 2000–10 period. It is possible that relative fit has a greater impact on the calculus of candidacy in the latter part of this period. To examine this question, we created a linear time trend and interacted it with relative fit. In addition, we divided the period into two (2000–04; 2006–10) and interacted this variable with relative party fit. The results are provided in Appendix F of the online supplementary information. There are no obvious trends that emerge with respect to party fit. All state legislators are less likely to run for Congress in the later years of this period, but the effect of party fit does not differ during this time period.

18. In this sample, 1.1% of Democratic and 1.8% of Republican state legislators ran for Congress. It is unclear why the probability of running for Congress is lower for Democrats than it is for Republicans. Part of the disparity is likely due to the slightly better ratio of open-seat opportunities for Republicans, but that is beyond the scope of the analysis here.

19. All other variables are set at their mean or mode.

20. We note that there are really three decisions facing these candidates. They can stay where they are, run for higher office, or retire. As the literature shows (and as is consistent with our estimates in Table 1), most state legislators who contemplate a run for national office are in the midst of a career, neither new to the game nor aging toward retiring in the usual sense, certainly in comparison to Rohde's study, in which House members contemplating a run for higher office are usually further along in their careers. Still, some may be looking to leave the state legislature one way or the other. A study of this three-part decision in terms of the case of House members (akin to Rohde's study) is Kiewiet and Zeng (1993). The principal conclusion relevant here follows: "Probably most intriguing is our finding that a member's age has little or no effect upon the unconditional probability of running for re-election" (1993, 928). By including number of times run for the state legislature and number of times run squared, we control for the two extremes of a career, and combined with the Kiewiet and Zeng finding, we feel confident that our estimates of our key parameters are little affected by simultaneity bias. This issue is studied more fully in a comparable data set in Thomsen (forthcoming).

21. To be sure, term limits would apply to the pure office seeker, simply as a more steeply time-discounted constant than a seat for the same office without term limits.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article:

Appendix A: Table 1. Summary Statistics

Appendix B: Histograms of Ideological Distance from State and Congressional Party

Appendix C: The Determinants of Running for the US House, Rare Event Logistic Regression (2000–10)

Appendix D: The Determinants of Running for the US House, State Fixed Effects (2000–10)

Appendix E: Multilevel Model of the Determinants of Running for the US House (2000–10)

Appendix F: The Determinants of Running for the US House, Over Time (2000–10)