
Voter Ideology and Candidate Positioning in the 2008 Presidential Election

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Abstract

Although classic Downsian theory predicts that candidates should converge to the ideological position of the median voter in the electorate, American elections generally feature major party candidates who offer divergent policy positions. Employing a survey and statistical estimation technique that allows for the estimation of the ideological position of candidates on the same scale as the distribution of voter ideology among voters, the author characterizes the actual degree of candidate divergence in the 2008 presidential election looking at the estimated stances of Barack Obama and John McCain. The results reveal that these candidates took positions that were closer to, and likely even more extreme than, the positions of their partisan and primary constituencies than to the nationwide voter median.

Keywords

political ideology, political campaigns, 2008 presidential election, Downsian theory, spatial model, ideal point estimation

The distribution of voter ideology and positioning of candidates play prominent roles in many influential theories of politics. Most notably, in the basic spatial voting framework (Downs, 1957; Hotelling, 1929), candidates are

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predicted to converge to the ideological position of the median voter. The empirical falsification of this prediction across a wide range of real-world elections, however, has led to further investigations of the conditions under which such divergence may occur. Although there is general agreement that in contemporary American politics major party candidates tend to take distinct positions (e.g., Stonecash, Brewer, & Mariana, 2003), obtaining directly comparable estimates of voter ideologies and candidate positions, which is necessary for assessing the actual degree of candidate divergence, has proven difficult with current survey approaches and analytical techniques. Using a nationwide survey conducted shortly before the 2008 presidential election, this article estimates the distribution of voter ideology on the same scale as the positions taken by Barack Obama and John McCain. The results suggest that the two candidates took positions closer to the median voters in their respective parties or primary constituencies than to the median voter in the electorate as a whole, sharply refuting the classic Downsian predictions of candidate convergence.

The distribution of voter ideology in the national electorate has been a topic of much discussion. Dating back to the work of Converse (1964), there has been an underlying debate over whether most Americans possess meaningful ideologies in the first place. Other scholars have attempted to compare the level of mass polarization with that at the elite level over time (Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2004). More recently, Ansolabehere, Rodden, and Snyder (2008) have shown that much of the conventional wisdom about the strength of ideological constraint among ordinary citizens has been influenced by issues of measurement error. They demonstrate that when multiple measures of issue positions are averaged together, the resulting scale is relatively stable and shows meaningful relationships with quantities such as vote choice. Jessee (2009, 2010) shows that ideology exerts a strong influence on vote choice for virtually all citizens. Among independent voters, the relationship between ideology and vote choice is shown to be very similar to that implied by the assumptions of spatial voting theory, while partisan voters are pulled strongly toward their party's nominee above and beyond their ideological proximity toward each candidate.

Whereas some have pointed to divergent candidate positions in real-world elections as a failure of Downsian theory, or of rational choice theory more broadly (e.g., Green & Shapiro, 1994), others have demonstrated that by varying the simple assumptions of basic spatial theories, predictions of distinct candidate positions are possible. In a review of this "neo-Downsian" literature, Grofman (2004) identifies 15 specific assumptions in the Downsian model, describing how modifications to many of these assumptions result in predictions of polarized candidate positions. Multistage elections, multiple constituencies, candidate ambiguity, and other factors can result in predictions of candidate divergence, contrasting with classic median voter convergence predictions.

Therefore, whereas the simplest spatial frameworks result in predictions of convergence, we should have reason to suspect that many of the intricacies of real-world elections may result in candidate separation.

To discriminate between such accounts of candidate positioning, we must be able to measure the actual positions taken by candidates relative to certain relevant characteristics of the ideological distribution of voters (e.g., national median, party medians, etc.). Such a systematic examination of the distribution of voter ideology and the positions taken by candidates in actual elections requires meaningful estimates of citizen ideology and of the campaign positions taken by candidates in directly comparable form. Without such measures, discussions of candidate divergence will be limited to general, even anecdotal, discussions of how extreme candidates are, with little way of arbitrating between differing views.

The following section describes a survey design that measures voter issue positions in a format that is directly comparable with candidates' campaign stances and explains how the technique of ideal point estimation can be used to translate these issue positions into measures of the overall liberal-conservative ideology of voters and candidates. These results can, for the first time, directly estimate the true locations of the candidates in a presidential election alongside the distribution of ideology in the electorate. The third section displays and discusses the estimated distribution of voter ideology and the positions taken by Barack Obama and John McCain in the 2008 presidential election. The fourth section describes several theories for candidate divergence and examines how the observed positioning of candidates in the 2008 contest matches up with their predictions. Finally, I discuss the overall results along with potential avenues for further research in this area.

Measuring Voter Ideology and Candidate Positions

Although most surveys in political science contain measures designed to tap respondent ideology, these questions generally do not provide the tools necessary for precise estimation of citizens' actual ideological positions. The most basic, and common, of such measures is the 5- or 7-point ideological scale. Although these items have a long history in political behavior research, they also have several problems. First, they provide, at most, a rough categorization or ideology rather than estimates along a full ideological spectrum. Perhaps more seriously, the meaning of each category on these scales is generally unclear. Respondents are left to determine for themselves what the responses mean, and there is no reason to think that the scales will be used identically by all respondents. Finally, measures of voter ideology produced

by such questions are generally not comparable with candidate positions. Some authors have used respondents' placements of the perceived positions of candidates, assuming that each candidate's true position is equal to the average of respondents' perceptions (see, e.g., Brady & Sniderman, 1985; Erikson & Romero, 1990). These assumptions, however, may be unrealistic if voters cannot accurately understand candidates' positions either because of lack of information or perceptual biases.

To obtain measures of voters' actual ideological views on the same scale as the positions taken by Obama and McCain in the 2008 election campaign, I conducted a survey of 2,000 likely voters during October 25-28, 2008. The survey was fielded to an Internet sample by YouGovPolimetrix.¹ Sample percentages approximate representativeness across factors such as age, race, gender, and income.² Furthermore, the sample proportion of the two-party vote for Obama was .542, nearly identical to the actual election result of .537. The overall level of political information in the sample is also similar to that of other recent national surveys.³

The survey asked respondents to provide their views on 10 specific policy statements, indicating whether they agree or disagree with each one. Figure 1 shows a portion of the screen as seen by respondents. The key advantage of this survey design is that the campaign positions of both Obama and McCain are known for each of these 10 issues. Therefore, the survey provides measures of the policy views of voters on a directly and objectively comparable scale to the positions articulated by both the presidential candidates. Table 1 shows the text of each of the 10 policy statements along with the percentage of respondents agreeing, disagreeing, and responding "not sure" along with the stated campaign positions of Obama and McCain. The policies come from a wide variety of issue areas including taxes, the environment, and abortion and are reflective of some of the prominent issues raised and discussed by candidates and the media during the course of the campaign.⁴

By measuring the positions of respondents in the strict agree-disagree response format, we can directly compare their responses to the positions taken by candidates. If the survey had asked respondents to indicate their positions on a 5- or 7-point scale, the direct comparability between respondent and candidate positions would be lost. For example, although it is known that both Obama and McCain oppose same-sex marriage, their degree of opposition to this policy (e.g., whether McCain is more opposed than Obama or whether each candidate's position on a 5-point scale would best be described as a one, two, or three) is far from clear.

Now that we have data on voters' policy views and candidates' policy positions, I use the technique of ideal point estimation to measure the underlying liberal-conservative ideological position of each voter and candidate

POLLINGPOINT 33%

Please tell us whether you personally agree or disagree with each of the statements below:

	Agree	Disagree	Not sure
The definition of marriage should apply only to relationships between a man and a woman.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
A "windfall profits" tax should be imposed on large profits made by oil companies.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The Supreme Court's decision in <i>Roe v. Wade</i> , which legalized most forms of abortion, should be overturned.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Figure 1. Example of survey question screen as seen by respondents

on the same scale. The basic idea behind ideal point estimation is that political beliefs are structured around some latent ideological dimension. Voters with lower (more liberal) positions on this dimension are more likely to support liberal policies and less likely to support conservative ones. As voters' ideological positions increase (become more conservative), they become less likely to support liberal policies and more likely to support conservative ones. Several variants of ideal point models have been used in political science (e.g., Clinton, Jackman, & Rivers, 2004; Heckman & Snyder, 1997; Poole & Rosenthal, 1985). In most applications, these models produce very similar results.

I follow Clinton et al. (2004) in estimating a probit link ideal point model. Under this model, the probability of person i supporting policy j is

$$P(y_{ij} = 1 | \beta, \alpha, x) = \Phi(\beta_j x_i - \alpha_j)$$

where x_i is the actor's ideal point and α_j and β_j are the policy proposal's difficulty and discrimination parameters.⁵ The difficulty parameter is related to how much opposition there is to the proposal among actors with ideal points at zero, whereas the discrimination parameter estimates how strongly and in what direction respondent ideal points are related to their probabilities of supporting a given proposal. Liberal (conservative) policies should generally have negative (positive) discrimination parameters, meaning that as one becomes more conservative, the probability of supporting the proposal decreases (increases). Because we have the views of both candidates and

Table 1. Survey Questions and Responses

Policy Proposal	Candidates		Respondents			Parameters	
	Obama	McCain	Yes (%)	No (%)	Don't Know (%)	β_j	α_i
The United States should begin a phased withdrawal of troops from Iraq.	Yes	No	64	24	12	-1.53	-1.11
The definition of marriage should apply only to relationships between a man and a woman.	Yes	Yes	58	33	10	0.88	-0.48
Younger workers should be allowed to invest some of their Social Security contributions in private investment accounts.	No	Yes	51	30	19	0.80	-0.39
The Supreme Court's decision in <i>Roe v. Wade</i> , which legalized most forms of abortion, should be overturned.	No	Yes	31	55	14	0.99	0.49
A mandatory cap on carbon dioxide emissions by American companies should be imposed, with a credit trading system so that companies who pollute less can sell their credits to other companies.	Yes	Yes	44	28	28	-0.98	-0.43
A "windfall profits" tax should be imposed on large profits made by oil companies.	Yes	No	59	25	16	-1.78	-1.18
Tax cuts for those making over \$250,000 should be reversed.	Yes	No	50	36	14	-1.19	-0.29
The federal government should require that all American children have health insurance.	Yes	No	57	28	14	-1.52	-0.83
Same-sex couples should be allowed to form civil unions that give them most of the same legal protections that married couples enjoy.	Yes	Yes	61	29	10	-0.53	-0.55
Up to \$700 billion dollars should be spent to have the federal government purchase troubled assets from financial institutions in an attempt to remedy current economic troubles.	Yes	Yes	24	50	26	-0.29	0.46

respondents on all 10 policy proposals, we simply pool them together and estimate the ideal point model for all of them, treating Obama and McCain as if they were each answering the survey's issue questions just like ordinary respondents. I estimate the model in a Bayesian framework, using vague priors for all unknown parameters.⁶ A major benefit of the Bayesian approach here is the relative ease with which inference can be made about the median ideal point among various groups of voters. Ideal point estimates are scaled so that they have a mean of zero and standard deviation of one for respondents and so that larger ideal point values correspond to more conservative ideological positions.

Candidate Positions and the Distribution of Voter Ideology

Figure 2 shows the results of the ideal point estimation, plotting the distribution of respondent ideal points by party identification along with the estimated positions of Obama and McCain and the estimated midpoint between the two candidates.⁷ As expected, Democratic respondents tend to have ideologies concentrated on the liberal side of the ideological spectrum, and Republicans tend to be more conservative. These distributions do show considerable overlap though, with 14% of Democratic respondents estimated to be more conservative than the average respondent and 16% of Republicans estimated to be more liberal than the average. The ideology of independent voters (or those not identifying with one of the major parties) tends to be concentrated near the center of the ideological spectrum but show a relatively large spread, with more than 20% of independent respondents estimated to be more than one standard sample standard deviation from the average respondent position. The estimated bill parameters in Table 1 show that the ideology estimates depend on a wide variety of issues, with the sign of the discrimination parameters β_j corresponding to general perceptions of the liberal-conservative nature of each proposal.

Table 2 shows the estimated positions of Obama and McCain along with 95% highest posterior density regions.⁸ Recall that, just like those for all respondents in the survey, the ideological positions of the two candidates are estimated based on their stated positions on the 10 policy proposals included in the survey. Therefore, there is considerable uncertainty in the estimate of any one person's ideal point, including the estimated positions of Obama and McCain. As expected, Obama is estimated to be on the liberal side of the ideological spectrum, and McCain is estimated to be more conservative.⁹ But the degree of ideological divergence between the two candidates is striking. That the simple Downsian prediction of total convergence to the median

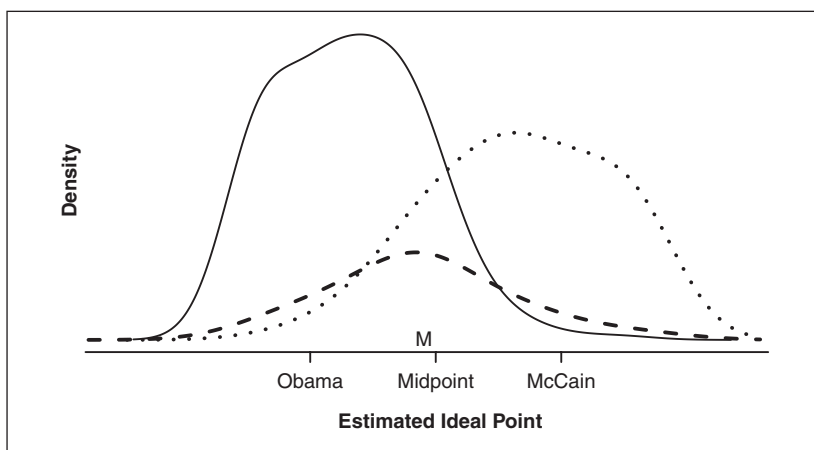


Figure 2. Estimated respondent ideal points by party identification. Solid, dashed, and dotted lines show the density of estimated ideal points for Democratic, Independent, and Republican respondents, respectively. An “M” indicates the estimated position of the overall median voter in the sample

Table 2. Candidate Ideal Point Estimates

Obama	McCain
-1.01 (-2.13, 0.09)	1.18 (0.42, 2.03)

Note: Estimated candidate positions with 95% highest posterior density regions in parenthesis.

voter is clearly falsified is unsurprising given the empirical regularity of Democratic candidates being more liberal than Republicans. But the gulf between the positions of the two candidates is quite large.

Although some degree of ideological separation between Democratic and Republican candidates would probably be expected by observers of modern American elections, the survey and estimation technique used here allow us to go further, examining the actual degree of separation between the two candidates relative to the distribution of voter ideology. In particular, whereas previous analyses generally supported findings that citizens perceived candidates to hold different positions, this analysis clearly establishes that the candidates’ true positions were in fact different and, even more, estimates the actual degree of divergence on the same scale as the true positions of citizens. Because the ideal points have been estimated subject to the identifying restriction that respondent ideology has a mean of zero and a standard deviation of one, we can see that Obama’s estimated position falls one sample

standard deviation to the left of the overall respondent mean, and McCain's position is estimated to be slightly more than one standard deviation to the right. This demonstrates that not only did the two candidates take ideologically distinct campaign positions, but each candidate took a position relatively far from the ideological center of the nation's voters. In fact, the estimated ideological positions of more than two thirds of respondents fell between the estimates of Obama and McCain.

Explanations for Observed Candidate Divergence

Several scholars have proposed theories for why candidates may offer divergent positions in contrast to the predictions of Downsian convergence. Candidates may be more responsive to the views of their core constituencies, including those who have helped them in the past. More directly, most elections (including presidential contests) consist of a two-stage process with candidates having to win a primary election to secure their party's nomination for the general election. Grofman, Koetzle, and McGann (2002) demonstrate that such two-stage processes, combined with partisan constituencies with differing ideological characteristics, can produce candidates that come from between each party's median and mode. Others have argued that primary contest should produce nominees that are located between a party's median and the national median (Aranson & Ordeshook, 1972; Coleman, 1972). Voter alienation could also pull the positions taken by candidates away from the national center if voters decide to stay home when no candidate espouses views sufficiently close to their own (Adams & Merrill, 2008). On a similar note, candidates or parties may fear that highly mobilized and ideologically extreme constituencies may create or support third-party candidates when major party nominees move too far to the center. Higher levels of campaign involvement and monetary contributions from more extreme voters could also induce candidates to move to the extremes (Aldrich, 1983).

In short, although the most basic spatial models predict complete convergence to the national median voter, several modifications of assumptions regarding voter behavior or electoral rules can produce predictions of divergence. Directly and formally testing any of these theoretical accounts would likely require estimates of voter ideology and candidate positions across multiple elections and hence is beyond the scope of this study. However, we can still examine how the estimated positions of Obama and McCain in the 2008 election match up with the predictions of these various arguments, which could provide some suggestive evidence regarding the actual degree of ideological divergence that is observed in presidential elections.

Table 3. Respondent Ideal Point Medians

All Respondents		
-.03 (-.06, .01)		
Party Identification		
Democrats	Independents	Republicans
-.62 (-.66, -.57)	-.00 (-.11, .08)	.83 (.78, .87)
Primary Turnout		
Democratic	None	Republican
-.56 (-.62, -.51)	-.03 (-.09, .02)	.87 (.81, .93)

Note: Estimated sample medians with 95% highest posterior density regions in parenthesis.

Table 3 shows the estimated medians, along with 95% highest posterior density regions, for all respondents as well as estimated medians by party identification and by primary participation.¹⁰ In addition to clearly diverging from the overall voter median, the positions of the two candidates are actually estimated to be more extreme than their respective party medians. Obama's estimated position of -1.01 is to the left of the median Democrat, who is located at -.62, and McCain's estimated position of 1.18 is more conservative than the estimated position of the median Republican at .83. Although we cannot be sure that the candidates are more extreme than their party medians (the posterior probabilities are .74 and .80 for Obama and McCain, respectively), these results are fairly suggestive. Furthermore, we can be relatively certain that the campaign position taken by McCain was closer to his party's median than the overall voter median, and there is strong evidence that the same statement is true for Obama.¹¹

We can also examine the ideological positions of voters in each party's primary. It may be expected that competitive primaries, which both Obama and McCain faced, may drive candidates toward the median of their primary constituencies. Figure 3 shows that the ideological distribution of primary voters is similar to that of partisans, but with a larger number of primary nonvoters than independent voters. As seen in Table 3, the estimated positions of party medians and primary voter medians are relatively similar. Again, both Obama and McCain are estimated to be slightly more extreme than the median positions in their respective primary constituencies.¹²

Other studies have shown that if one candidate has a valence advantage, this can cause an equilibrium prediction of candidate divergence. Groseclose (2001), for example, finds that when one candidate has even a small valence advantage, the opposing candidate can be induced to take a more extreme position. Although it could be argued that Obama had an advantage in the 2008 contest and that this might push McCain to the right, such a valence account cannot account for Obama taking a relatively extreme position to the left.

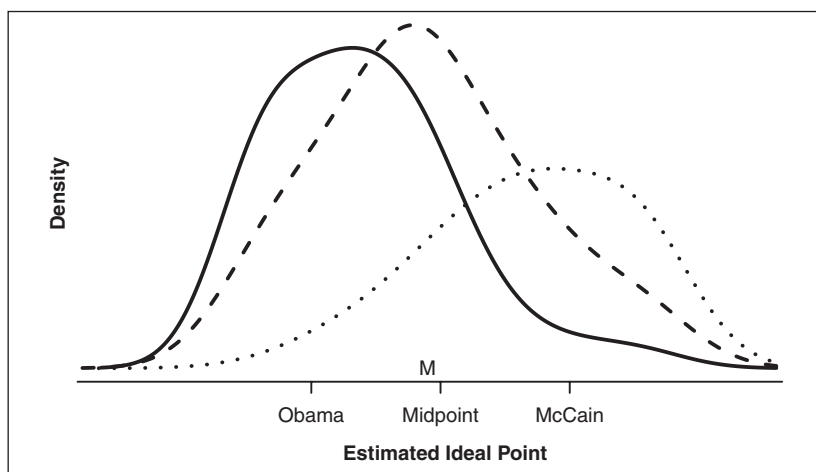


Figure 3. Estimated respondent ideal points by primary participation. Solid and dotted lines show the density of estimated ideal points for respondents who participated in the Democratic and Republican primaries, respectively, whereas the dashed line plots the density of estimated ideal points for respondents who reported not voting in either primary election. An “M” indicates the estimated position of the overall median voter in the sample

Overall, these results generally coincide with the predictions of several “neo-Downsian” accounts of candidate divergence. In 2008, both Obama and McCain took positions that appear to be closer to their median voter in their respective parties than to the national voter median. Clearly, observations from one particular election cannot discriminate precisely between the many theoretically suggested reasons for this divergence. But the large difference between the positions of Obama and McCain relative to the national distribution of voter ideology suggests that one or more centrifugal forces are operating strongly to pull the candidates away from classic Downsian equilibrium of the median position in the national electorate. Both candidates took positions roughly representative of the medians of both their partisan and primary constituencies. There is some evidence, however, that each candidate took a stance that was actually more extreme than the median voter of these partisan or primary constituencies, which may be predicted by contribution, mobilization, or other advantages for more ideologically extreme voters within these groups. Certainly, more data from a larger number of elections, and perhaps from elections at different levels of government, are needed to gain a greater understanding of the dynamics of candidate positioning, but the basic observations here tend to be compatible with common theoretical accounts of non-median results in this area.

Discussion

The survey and ideal point estimation techniques used here allow for the direct estimation of the ideological positions of candidates and voters on the same scale. Such measurements are necessary to appropriately test the predictions of theories of candidate positioning. The results presented here demonstrate that not only were there clear differences between the positions of Barack Obama and John McCain in the 2008 presidential election campaign, but the degree of divergence was dramatic relative to the overall distribution of voter ideology in the electorate, with more than two thirds of the voters estimated to hold positions between those of the two candidates. This clearly demonstrates that the classic Downsian prediction of candidate convergence to the median voter does not accurately describe contemporary American elections.

Several scholars have provided explanations for why candidates may offer positions that differ from that of the median voter. Because Obama and McCain are estimated to have taken positions near both their party and primary constituency medians, this suggests some support for the arguments that candidates feel beholden to specific constituencies such as those identifying with their political party or that competition (or the threat of competition) in their party's primary election may force them to move toward their party or primary median. But such results could also be compatible with arguments that campaign donations, volunteering, or other sources of assistance tend to come from more ideologically extreme voters. This could pull candidates to the extremes in order to attract such resources. At the least, the clear divergence between the positions of Obama and McCain shown here should underscore the importance of the theoretical debates regarding candidate convergence or lack thereof.

Studies of future elections can easily obtain comparable estimates of the ideology of respondents and the positions of candidates by crafting issue questions on which the stances of candidates are known. In many cases, this will simply require using response scales that give objective support-oppose options for respondents rather than vague ordinal categories that are likely to be understood in different ways by different respondents and on which the actual positions taken by candidates are generally unclear. Such procedures can help expand the field of inquiry in survey research, allowing scholars to ask and answer question not only about the views of citizens alone but also about how the positions taken by candidates relate to the distribution of ideology in the electorate or the public more generally.

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Notes

1. The company maintains a panel of more than one million respondents, recruited from Internet ads and other sources, who have agreed to be contacted from time to time for surveys on politics, current events, and other topics (see <http://www.pollingpoint.com>). A sample matching technique (Rivers, 2006) was used to select respondents from the pool in order to ensure balance on major demographic factors. An online appendix contains more information about the sample's characteristics, including comparisons to other surveys and data sources (available at <http://webspace.utexas.edu/~sjessee/>). With regard to the accuracy of online survey methods, Malhotra and Krosnick (2007) find that Internet samples show some differences when compared with the National Election Studies or other surveys, whereas Sanders, Clarke, Stewart, and Whiteley (2007) find only minor differences when looking at the British National Election Survey.
2. Although the sample for this study is approximately representative, sample weights, which vary between .68 and 1.33, are used in all analyses to ensure precise balance on such factors. Unweighted results are similar to those presented here.
3. For example, a recent survey by the Pew Research Center (2007) found that 76% of Americans could name which party controlled the House of Representatives, whereas 75% of the respondents in this sample knew this fact.
4. Clearly, the choice of these ten proposals was somewhat arbitrary. Although the choice of these issues could affect the estimated positions of candidates, the proposals represent a broad selection of issues discussed during the campaign. It should also be noted that the survey was conducted shortly before the election, while the candidates took most of their positions relatively early on.
5. Moving from this one-dimensional model to one estimating a two-dimensional ideological space resulted in only a small increase in the percentage of issue positions correctly predicted from 81.6% to 84.2%. Therefore, I use the simpler one-dimensional model throughout the article.
6. The model is estimated using "ideal" function from the *pscl* library in R (Jackman, 2009). The model was first run in an unidentified state using independent normal priors with mean zero and variance 100 for all bill parameters α_j and β_j and independent normal priors with mean zero and variance one for all ideal points x_i . The model was run for 550,000 iterations, with the first 50,000 discarded and every 10th iteration of the remaining 500,000 stored for a total of

- 50,000 iterations on which inferences are based. The results are postprocessed to impose identification.
7. Because leaning independents often display more partisanship than weak partisans (Keith et al., 1992; Petrocik, 1974), I include leaning independents as partisans throughout the article. Independents include “pure” (i.e., nonleaning) independents as well as those not expressing a party identification or identifying with a third party. Treating leaners as independents results in only small changes to the results presented here.
 8. Bayesian analyses produce a posterior distribution representing the beliefs that analysts should hold after updating their prior beliefs (which here are vague and uninformative) by looking at a set of observations. Highest posterior density regions are a Bayesian analog for confidence intervals. A 95% highest posterior density region is the smallest region of the parameter space that has a 95% probability of containing the parameter according to the posterior distribution.
 9. The posterior probabilities that Obama is to the left of the overall respondent median and that McCain is to the right are both more than 95%.
 10. It should be emphasized that the following discussions apply to sample medians rather than population medians. Attempts to account for the added uncertainty in these median estimates due to sampling error, including use of the bootstrap, produce relatively small changes in the results.
 11. The posterior probabilities that McCain and Obama are ideologically closer to their party medians than the overall voter median are .98 and .89, respectively.
 12. The posterior probabilities that Obama and McCain are more extreme than the median primary voter in their party are .76 and .77, respectively.

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