

Shirking in the Contemporary Congress: A Reappraisal

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This paper replicates the findings that appeared in the article “Severing the Electoral Connection: Shirking in the Contemporary Congress,” published in the *American Journal of Political Science* (44:316–325), in which Lawrence Rothenberg and Mitchell Sanders incorporated a new research design and, contrary to all previous studies, found evidence of ideological shirking in the U.S. House of Representatives. We investigate the robustness of their results by reestimating their model with Congress-specific fixed effects and find that their results no longer hold.

1 Introduction

In recent years, a number of studies have investigated whether members of Congress who are about to leave office “shirk”—that is, alter their voting behavior more than members seeking reelection. Using different data, approaches, and time periods, these studies to a very large degree have reached the same overall conclusion: no evidence of ideological shirking

Authors' note: This is a substantially revised version of a paper presented at the 2002 Annual Meeting of the Southern Political Science Association in Savannah, GA. We thank Lawrence Rothenberg and Mitchell Sanders for sharing their data. We are also grateful to Chuck Finocchiaro, Keith Gaddie, Brian Gaines, Christian Grose, Michael Herron, Gary King, Tim Nokken, Keith Poole, Jason Roberts, Greg Wawro, and Chris Zorn for helpful suggestions.

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is found (see Lott and Bronars 1993; Poole and Romer 1993; Poole and Rosenthal 1997; Poole 1998). Recently, however, Rothenberg and Sanders (2000) revisited the shirking question for House members from the 102nd (1991–1992) through 104th (1995–1996) Congresses and established a new research design, whereby they analyzed only vote choice in the last six months of consecutive Congresses. They uncovered significant evidence of ideological shirking by departing House members and, as a result, argued that previous null findings were due to flawed research designs and improper measures.

Before dismissing the extant shirking literature out of hand, we first subject Rothenberg and Sanders's findings to further scrutiny. Specifically, they assert that their "results are robust to any congress-to-congress measurement error in ideological positions" (fn 13, p. 320). To test the veracity of their claim, we rerun their analysis with Congress-specific fixed effects.

2 Inclusion of Fixed Effects

Our argument for including fixed effects has dual methodological and substantive components. First, the W-NOMINATE estimation technique that Rothenberg and Sanders employ is a *static* procedure. That is, individual Congresses are estimated separately, as there is no dynamic element (as with D-NOMINATE and DW-NOMINATE) that connects congressional choice spaces across time. This is a potential problem, as the congressional environment is not static; among other things, the electoral context, the distribution of members, and, more important, the issue agenda (a key element for measuring member ideology) vary from Congress to Congress (see Rohde 1991, 1992; Crespin et al. 2002; Roberts and Smith 2003). For example, during the period of Rothenberg and Sanders's analysis, partisan control of the House changed (in the 104th Congress), which had significant implications for changes in member behavior (Aldrich and Rohde 1997–1998). In addition, the departing House members in the 102nd Congress were very likely different than those in succeeding Congresses due to the unique political context associated with the 1992 election.¹

These substantive across-Congress differences, combined with the W-NOMINATE estimation procedure, almost certainly produce different Congress-by-Congress choice spaces. As a result, Congress-specific fixed effects must be included in the model in order to control for shifts in the mean ideological change from one pair of Congresses to the next (see Poole and Romer 1993 and Poole and Rosenthal 1997 for a similar argument). If fixed effects are not included, the model may suffer from omitted variable bias. Depending on the direction of the bias, the coefficients will be incorrect. If the bias inflates the coefficients, this may lead one to conclude that variables are statistically significant when, in fact, they are not (Greene 2000, p. 560). For all of these reasons, we replicate the Rothenberg and Sanders (2000) results and extend them, by incorporating Congress-specific fixed effects, to determine whether they are as robust as originally believed.

3 Replication and Extension

Our results appear in Table 1. After exactly replicating Rothenberg and Sanders's results, which appear in column 2, we then rerun their model, adding two Congress-specific dummy

¹Of the 142 retirees that Rothenberg and Sanders identify, 54% left office after the 102nd Congress. This is due, in large part, to two factors. First, many legislators departed as a result of the House Banking scandal (Groseclose and Krehbiel 1994; Jacobson and Dimock 1994). Second, the campaign finance laws were such that members could retire and keep any remaining money in their campaign war chests for personal use, which encouraged others not to seek reelection.

Table 1 Ideological change (102nd through 104th Congresses)

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Replication of Rothenberg and Sanders results</i>	<i>Rothenberg and Sanders model with fixed effects</i>
<i>Constant</i>	0.074* (0.011)	0.076* (0.011)
<i>Retiring</i>	0.039* (0.013)	0.016 (0.012)
<i>Pursuing statewide office</i>	0.033* (0.016)	0.027 (0.015)
<i>District political change</i>	0.54* (0.080)	0.076 (0.084)
<i>Electoral slack</i>	0.016 (0.016)	0.006 (0.015)
<i>Seniority</i>	0.000025 (0.00025)	-0.00002 (0.0002)
<i>102nd Congress</i>		0.047* (0.005)
<i>103rd Congress</i>		-0.014* (0.005)
Number of Cases	998	998
R ²	0.062	0.186

* $p < .05$.

variables. These results appear in column 3, wherein we find no evidence of ideological shirking among retirees or members pursuing statewide office.² The coefficients in the extended model are smaller than those reported by Rothenberg and Sanders, suggesting the presence of omitted variable bias (which was confirmed by running the Ramsey-RESET test; $F_{3,989} = 12.21$). In addition, the fixed-effects dummies are jointly significant ($F_{2,990} = 75.45$) and are not correlated with the key variables (*Retiring* and *Pursuing Statewide Office*) in the model, and thus are not stealing their explanatory power. Finally, with the inclusion of the Congress-specific fixed effects, we observe a threefold increase in model fit.

4 Conclusion

Our results suggest that Rothenberg and Sanders's model suffers from omitted variable bias as a result of not including appropriate controls for Congress-specific fixed effects. When their model is better specified, we find no evidence of ideological shirking, which is in keeping with the extant literature.³

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²None of the explanatory variables in the extended model are statistically significant, indicating that any observed change is a function of Congress-specific differences captured by the fixed effects as opposed to ideological changes in member behavior. This is consistent with the results uncovered by Poole and Romer (1993) and Poole and Rosenthal (1997) as well as the general notion that legislative behavior does not vary over time (see Poole 1998).

³Comments on Rothenberg and Sanders's response to this piece can be found on the *Political Analysis* Web site.

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