The Electability of Moderate Candidates in United States Federal Congressional Elections

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Abstract

This study explores the idea of moderate candidates being more electable in United States general elections compared to more firebrand members of their party. This study takes election data from incumbents running for re-election in the 2018 midterm elections, 2020 congressional elections, and 2020 Presidential election. Each incumbent's margin is subtracted from their respective party's 2020 Presidential nominee's margin in their location to determine how much each incumbent overperformed or underperformed their party's nominee. Data was also taken from GovTrack to indicate each candidate's ideology and graphs were created with the x-axis representing ideology and y-axis representing electoral overperformance or underperformance. The study generally demonstrates that there is a slight and very weak correlation in general between a candidate's electoral overperformance or underperformance and their ideology, with more moderate candidates performing slightly better compared to more extreme ones. However, the study showed stronger evidence supporting the idea that moderate incumbents running for re-election in districts or states won by the opposite party's Presidential nominee had higher overperformances compared to more extreme members of their party. The conclusions drawn from this study can be used by primary voters who care the most about electability of their party's candidate in a general election.

Keywords: Election, Moderate, Ideology, Candidate, Democratic, Republican

INTRODUCTION

Voters often care about voting for a candidate in their respective party's primary election that can defeat the opposing party's nominee in the general election whether it be for the House of Representatives, Senate, or even for President. While some argue that moderate candidates are more electable as they can earn crossover support from the opposing party and/or from independent voters, others claim that moderates are unelectable since they can cause apathy for more progressive voters who may decide to vote for a third-party candidate or decide not to vote at all in the general election (Kendi). Increasingly, primary voters have cared more about the "electability" of a candidate, or the chances of their preferred candidate winning in a general election against a member of the opposing party. A prominent example of this was in the 2020 Democratic Presidential Primary, where voters generally cared more about electing a candidate that could defeat Donald Trump over a candidate that they agreed with more (Seitz-Wald).

To help give voters a general sense of the electability of moderates, this study aims to analyze the relationship between an incumbent candidate running with a moderate voting record and the chance that they have of winning their election compared to those who are not considered moderate. In particular, it analyzes first in general whether moderates are more electable, and then also analyzes moderate congressional candidates in areas where the opposing party's 2020 Presidential nominee won the district or state. For instance, a Democrat running in a district won by Trump would fit this criterion and would be included in that graph.

These results can serve as a guide for voters who value electability to help them determine which candidate to vote in a primary election. With the 2022 midterm and primary elections coming up, these results can be useful in primary elections for the senate like that of the progressive John Fetterman against the centrist Conor Lamb in the Pennsylvania Senate Election (Arkin).

HYPOTHESES

1. Moderate Democratic Congressional candidates perform better in general elections compared to more liberal candidates.
2. Moderate Republican Congressional candidates perform better in general elections compared to more conservative candidates.
3. Moderate incumbent Democratic Congressional candidates running for re-election in congressional districts or states won by the Republican Party's Presidential Candidate perform better when compared to more liberal candidates.

4. Moderate incumbent Republican Congressional candidates running for re-election in congressional districts or states won by the Democratic Party's Presidential Candidate perform better when compared to more conservative candidates.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Determining Ideology & Omissions

This study quantitatively analyzes the relationship between an incumbent Senator or Representative's voting record and the results of their re-election. Specifically, this part of the study focuses on all members of the House of Representatives of the 116th Congress and Class I and Class II senate incumbents of the 115th and 116th Congress, which means that each senator in this study stood for re-election in 2018 or 2020. Senators who did not stand for election in 2018 or 2020 (including Class I or Class II senators who chose to retire) were not included in this study. To determine a senator or congressman's ideology, the non-partisan website GovTrack was used to determine each senator's 2017, 2018, 2019, and 2020 congressional report card scores. GovTrack determines these ideological scores by determining which bills senators co-sponsored or sponsored, with 0 being the most liberal score and 1.0 being the most conservative. For senators who were in office from 2017 to 2020, these four-year report card scores were averaged to determine their ideological scores ("Analysis methodology"). Senators who lost reelection in 2018 had only their 2017 and 2018 ideology score averaged to determine their ideology. Senators who were newly elected in 2018 were not included. Additionally, Senator Dianne Feinstein of California was omitted from the list as California has a top-two primary system, meaning that she was against a fellow Democrat and not a Republican. Senator Tom Cotton was also excluded from this study as he did not face a Democratic opponent, rather facing a Libertarian one as the Democratic Party chose not to nominate a candidate for the Senate seat.

For members of the House of Representatives, each congressman or congresswoman's GovTrack ideology score in 2020 was used to determine their ideology on the x-axis. Congressional districts where the incumbent representative did not run for re-election were omitted from the study, as were districts where the incumbent ran unopposed or only faced third-party opposition. Also omitted were representatives in California who faced only same party opposition in the general election due to California's aforementioned top-two primary system.

Determining Electoral Performance

Class I senators' ideology scores were compared using their 2018 Senate Election results, Class II senators' ideology scores were compared using their 2020 Senate Election results, and all the congressmen/congresswomen were compared using their 2020 House Election results. The House results of each election were taken from the Cook Political Report's website (Andrews), which provides the raw data for the results of each House election that took place in 2020. The 2018 Senate Election results ("U.S. Senate election results 2018," 2018), 2020 Senate Election results ("U.S. Senate Election Results: Democrats win," 2020), and 2020 Presidential Election results ("Presidential election results," 2020) were taken from the New York Times. The raw results of both the House and Senate elections were then put onto an Excel sheet and the margin was calculated by subtracting the incumbent senator or congressman's percentage of the vote received in the general by the second-place candidate's percentage of the vote received (either a Democrat or Republican).

However, since the partisanship of each state varies greatly and plays a great factor in a senator's odds of re-election, it would be unfair to compare the raw margin of each senator's wins or losses in each state. So, the y-axis instead compared their margin of victory or loss against the performance of the presidential nominee of their respective party: Joe Biden for the Democrats and Donald Trump for the Republicans. For instance, if a Democratic senator won re-election by three points in a state won by Joe Biden by one point, the total overperformance by the Senator would be recorded as two points. This same method was used for the House as each congressman or congresswoman was compared to either Biden or Trump's performance in their congressional district. These results were taken from the Daily Kos, a website that provides the raw data on the 2020 Presidential Election broken down by congressional district. However, it is important to note that this type of comparison is not perfect as 2018 had a Democratic-leaning national environment compared to the 2020 Presidential Election, so many Democrats performed better than they likely would have in a year without that favorable environment. Additionally, the 2020 Presidential Election comparison brings the factor of vote splitting to the table as members of both parties were less likely to vote split if they voted for their preferred candidate for President. Nevertheless, these numbers can still provide for a decent comparison between how the incumbents perform in a state compared with its partisanship.

Data Analysis

These overperformance and underperformance numbers were then put on the Excel spreadsheet next to each lawmaker's GovTrack ideology score. Using Excel's graphing software, a scatter plot was created that showed the correlation between the ideology of a lawmaker and their margins of underperformance or overperformance compared to their party's respective nominee. The x-axis of the graph represents the ideology, spanning from 0 to 1, and the y-axis represents the election results. Colors were also added to distinguish the Republicans andDemocrats, and lines of trends were created to show any correlation between the x and y axes. Two graphs were created: one for incumbent senators and another for incumbent congressmen or congresswomen.

RESULTS

Democratic Representatives

As illustrated below in Figure 1, there is a very weakcorrelation between the ideology of an incumbent congressman and their election performances. In figure 1.1, Democratic congressmen with ideologies between 0.4 and 0.6, a range that can be considered to consist of the "moderate" congressmen, generally performed better compared to Joe Biden in their congressional district when compared to the more extreme end of the spectrum like those who were given a GovTrack rating between 0 and 0.2. However, it is important to note some of the outliers in this data like Ilhan Omar, the left-wing congresswoman from Minnesota's fifth district. Although she is marked on the graph as underperforming Biden by nearly a 25-point margin, this can be partially attributed to the strength of Michael Moore, the Legal Marijuana Now party nominee, who likely away some of the liberal votes that Omar would have gotten. Nevertheless, the graph still does show some evidence of moderate Democratic candidates performing better compared to more liberal ones

Republican Representatives

As seen in Figure 2, the correlation between the ideology of Republican congressmen and their electoral performances was similar, although even weaker than the already weak correlation between the ideology of their Democratic counterparts and their electoral performances. Especially between 0.65 and 0.8, there seem to be varied results with representatives with similar ideologies. However, as seen with the trendline, the average is still trending up slightly as the ideologies of the congressmen move closer to the center near the 0.4 and 0.65 range.

Figure 3 shows a combination of the two scatterplots, showing that the trendlines of the two party's representatives do meet in the middle. However, the graph again demonstrates that the correlation between the two variables isrelatively weak as there is no clear linear trend that demonstrates that moderate congressmen always perform better.

Democratic Senators

The graph showing the correlation between Democratic senators' ideologies and performances in elections yielded similar results. As seen in Figure 4, there is a slight link between being more moderate and being more successful in re-election campaigns. Between ideology scores of 0.5 and 0.7, there is a slight upward trend in the senator's margin of victory compared to that of Joe Biden's performance in the state in 2020, with moderate West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin achieving a 3 point victory in a state Trump would win by nearly 40 points in 2020. However, a clear trend is still unclear as some senators who had ideology scores between 0.1 and 0.3 still performed as well as some of those who had ideology scores further to the right.

Republican Senators

Although Democratic senators had some kind of relationship seen in the graph, the correlation between the ideology of Republican senators and their election performances is much less clear. As seen in Figure 5, many of the senators were clumped near the 0.8 and 0.9 range and had varying levels of electoral success. In general, however, there is no evidence in this graph that clearly demonstrates that moderate Republican Senate candidates perform better in elections. For instance, despite being around the same ideologies, Senator Ben Sasse of Nebraska managed to overperform Donald Trump by 19 points, while now-Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell actually underperformed Trump by about 6 points.

When combined together, as seen in Figure 6, the two graphs do have trendlines that point to the center of the ideological scale, but it still remains unclear what relationship Republican senators' ideologies have on their electoral performances as many of them are clumped together in the same place and the electoral successes of those with similar ideologies greatly vary. The line likely only trends towards the middle thanks to moderateSenator Susan Collins's 8-point victory in 2020, which may not be reflective of all moderate Senators as some senators who had similar

ideologies to her underperformed Trump. Therefore, although Democrats have some sort of trend of moderate candidates having greater electoral success, moderate Republicans do not have any established or clear trends.

Democratic Lawmakers in 2020 Trump Districts/States

Compared to previous graphs, when specifically looking at districts or states where Donald Trump won, there is a clearer correlation between the ideology and electoral performance of Democratic incumbents. As seen in Figure 7, with the exception of outlier Ohio Senator Sherrod Brown on the left side of the graph, there is a general trend demonstrating that moderate Democrats performed better in Trump districts compared to those who are further to the left of them. For instance, moderate West Virginia senator Joe Manchin and moderate Minnesota 7th District's representative Collin Peterson, outran Biden's performance in their respective state/congressional district by large margins. On the other hand, Democrats who were between 0.3 and 0.4 on GovTrack's ideology score generally performed worse, such as Florida 27th Congressional District's Representative, Donna Shalala, who underperformed Biden by 5.9 points. However, it is worth noting that her performance may have also been hindered because she referred to herself as a "pragmatic socialist," which likely hurt her in her heavily-Cuban Miami district where many have likened socialism to Fidel Castro.

Republican Lawmakers in 2020 Trump Districts/States

As confirmed in Figure 8, Republicans generally matched this pattern, although there were fewer lawmakers to base this data off of as only a few Republicans ran for re-election in districts or states Biden won. Moderates like Representative Brian Fizpatrick, who outran Trump by 19 points, still performed much better. He outperformed more conservative lawmakers running in Biden states or districts, like Georgia Senators Kelly Loeffler, who underperformed Trump in her 2021 Georgia runoff election by almost two points.

Figure 9 below shows a combination of the two graphs together, with the slight pattern showing both trendlines facing towards the center of the graph near the more moderate range of lawmakers.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study partially help determine the validity of the hypotheses as more data and future studies may need to be conducted to make definitive conclusions on some of the hypotheses put forth.

Hypothesis 1 Conclusions

The study demonstrates that Democratic congressional candidates do tend to perform slightly better in general compared to more extreme members, therefore making the first hypothesis partially true. However, the relationship between these two variables is very weak and could be potentially insignificant to other factors surrounding an election (LeTourneau).

Hypothesis 2 Conclusions

The study also shows a more unclear relationship between the electoral successes of moderate Republican congressional candidates, thus making the second hypothesis false. Although the trendline demonstrates that there is a slight increase in electoral performances the closer the candidate's ideology is towards the middle, Republican congressional candidates with the same ideological score had electoral successes that varied, thus putting the hypothesis posed into question.

Other Factors At Play in Hypotheses 1 & 2

Although the graphs show a slight correlation between a favorable electoral performance and being more moderate, there are often more factors that are involved that could be more important in these types of elections other than ideology. For instance, the name recognition of the incumbent candidate, name recognition of an incumbent's challenger, or the ideology of an incumbent's challenger are some examples of factors that often play a role in an incumbent's chances of getting re-elected (LeTourneau).

An example of this is the 2018 Texas Senate Election where Democratic Senate nominee Beto O'Rourke received massive media coverage (Terris) and had large fundraising hauls ("2018 election United States Senate - Texas," 2018) that helped him come close to defeating incumbent Ted Cruz in a traditionally red state. Although Cruz's ideology may have had some role in the way voters voted, it is likely that Beto's name recognition, fundraising, and media coverage played a larger role in narrowing the margin than Cruz's conservative ideology necessarily hurting him.

Hypothesis 3 Conclusions

This study demonstrates that there is some evidence supporting that moderate congressionalDemocratic candidates running for re-election in Republican districts perform better compared to more liberal ones as there is an upward trend in electoral success as the ideological score of a lawmaker moves towards the middle (to be sure, however, the r value of the graph was still quite weak).

The likely cause of this is that these candidates are more attractive to Republican voters as they are more willing to cross-over to vote for a Democratic candidate with more conservative views. An example of this was seen in 2018 when West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin ran on a very moderate platform in his solid red state, campaigning heavily on his voting record against the Cap and Trade deal (joemanchinwv), his record for supporting gun rights (joemanchinwv), and his vote to confirm controversial Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh when all other members of his party voted against it (Kercheval). With this more moderate, and almost conservative platform, not only did Senator Manchin win re-election in a state won by Trump by nearly 40 points in 2020, but he also impressively notched 17% of Republican voters, which contributed greatly to his victory ("2018 Midterms: EXIT," 2018).

This pattern was also seen in the House of Representatives in 2020 with the case of Minnesota congressman Collin Peterson. He also ran with a moderate and almost borderline conservative voting record. Throughout the campaign, he touted his voting record (Petersonforcongress, 2018) by emphasizing his decision to vote against Donald Trump's impeachment in 2020(Petersonforcongress, 2020) and for being rated as being the most bipartisan member of Congress. Although he did lose in a sizable 14-point margin against Michelle Fischbach, he outran Joe Biden by 16 points who lost the increasingly conservative district by 29 points. Therefore, many Trump voters crossed over to support Peterson, showing that moderate Democrats can do better in Republican areas as they win over some Republican voters.

Hypothesis 4 Conclusions

This study shows a small correlation between moderate Republican congressional candidates and higher electoral successes, although the conclusion may be partially incomplete since there were not many Republicans who ran for re-election in areas Biden won in 2020. As this study focused only on 2018 and 2020, the data may not fully represent the true impact of running as a moderate Republican in a Democratic area. From the data that was collected during this period, however, this study generally supports Hypothesis 4 as more moderate candidates tended to outperform Donald Trump by greater margins.

For instance, this was seen in the campaign that Susan Collins ran in Maine, a state that Biden won by 9 points ("Maine 2020 Election Results," 2020). Senator Collins often discussed her vote to save ObamaCare and her vote against the confirmation of Supreme Court Justice nominee Amy Coney Barrett (NEWS CENTER, 2020). This allowed her to win re-election by 8 points, although it should be noted that Maine has a ranked-choice voting system and Lisa Savage, the progressive nominee who earned 5% of the vote, told her voters to rank Sara Gideon second. Collins's centrist rhetoric undoubtedly helped her win over some Democrats and independents, whose votes helped her get re-elected. Therefore, this case helps explain why moderate Republicans can perform better in blue areas: they win over more independent and even some Democratic voters.

Potential Studies in the Future

Future studies can examine in greater depth the impact of ideology on running solely in areas that were won by presidential candidates by less than five points. This study did not have enough data points from 2018 and 2020 alone to include only candidates that were in these areas to create a graph.Additionally, studies in the future should also re-visit Hypothesis 4, as although there is a general trend from this study between electoral success and being a moderate Republican in aDemocratic area, there may not be enough data to definitively make that conclusion from these data points alone.

Implications of this Data

This data can be used for primary election voters who care more about their party's representation in Congress compared to the actual policies that the candidates support. However, even though this data does show some evidence that moderate candidates have more electoral success, it is important to keep in mind that ideology is only one small factor that measures the electability of a candidate. As mentioned in the "Other Factors At Play in Hypotheses 1 & 2" section of this study, there are other factors that influence a candidate's chance at winning a general election.

FIGURES
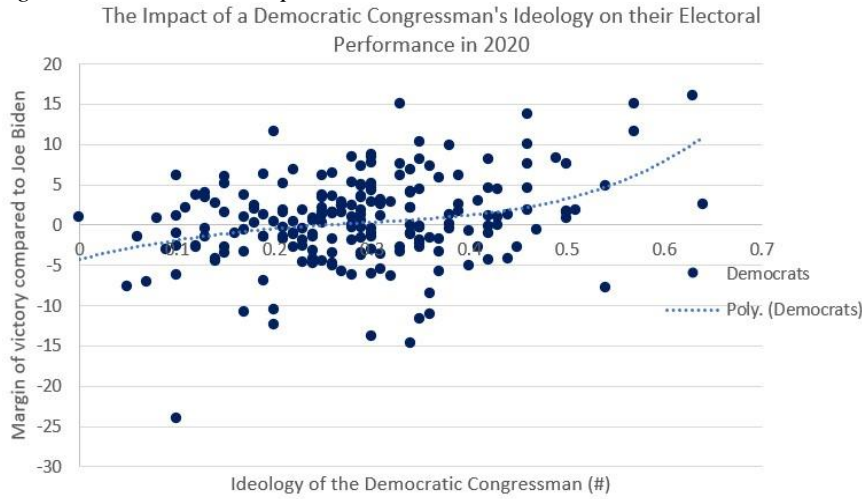
Figure 1 - Democratic Representatives

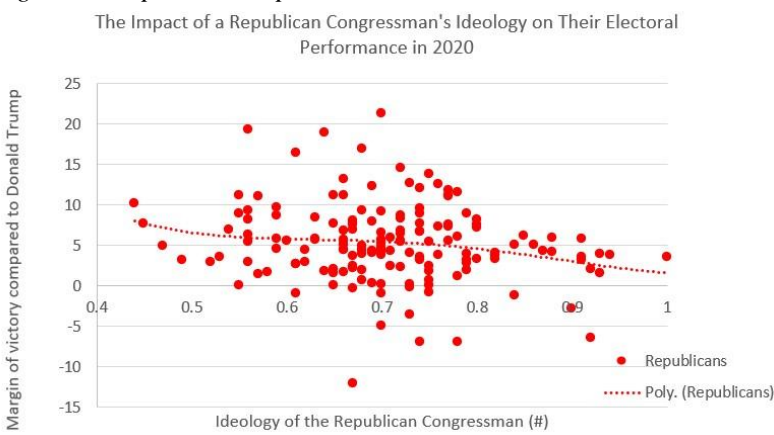*Figure 2 - Republican Representatives*

Figure 3 - Democratic & Republican Representatives
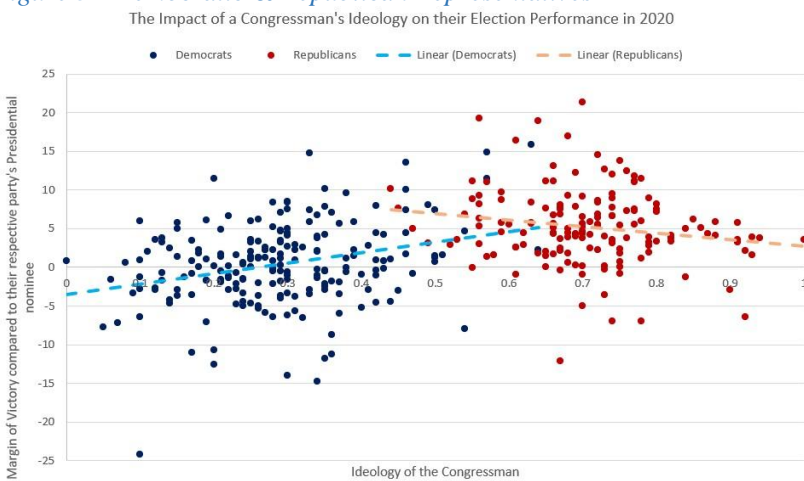
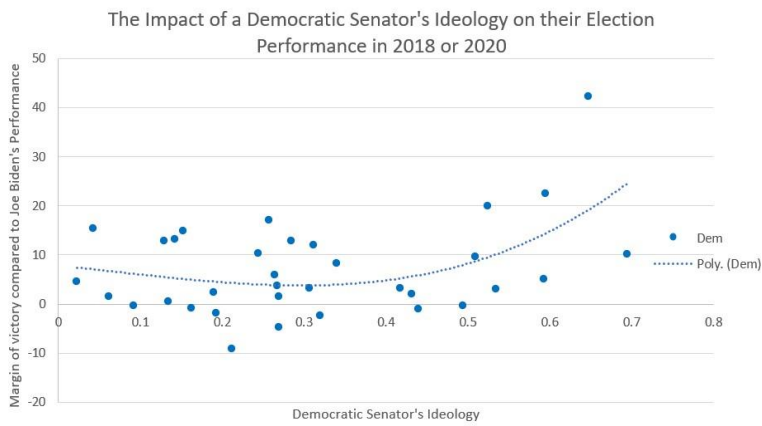*Figure 4 - Democratic Senators*

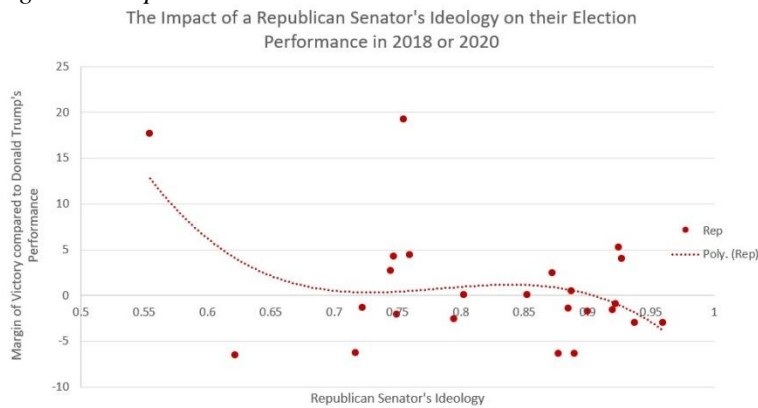*Figure 5 - Republican Senators*
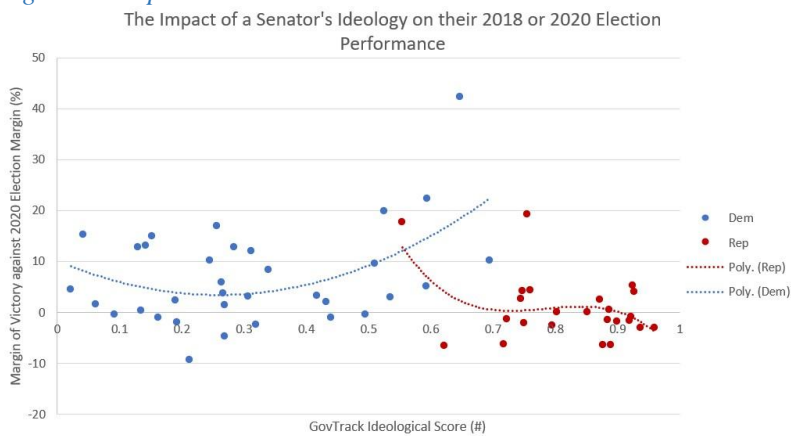

Figure 6 - Republican & Democratic Senators

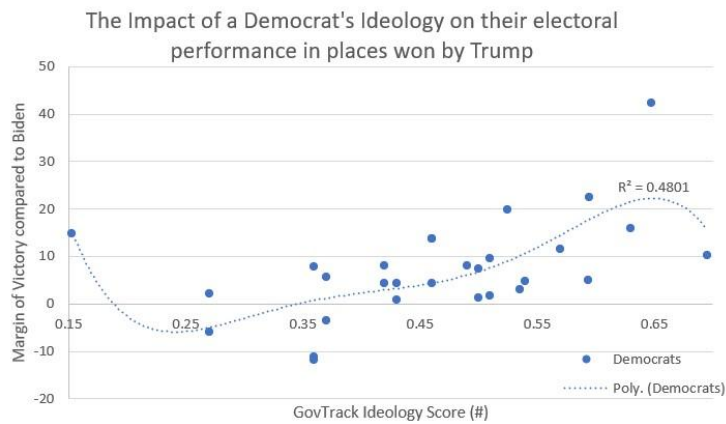*Figure 7 - Democratic Lawmakers in Trump-Won Districts/States*

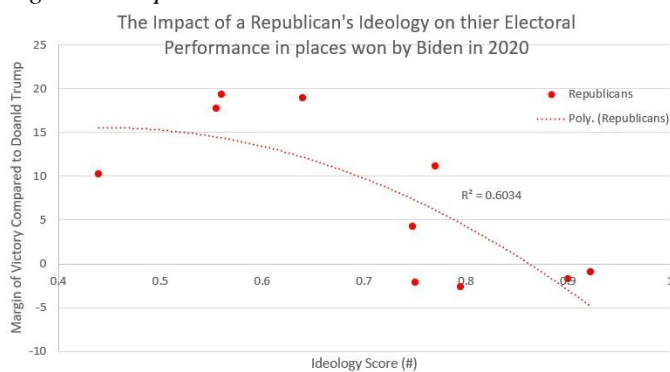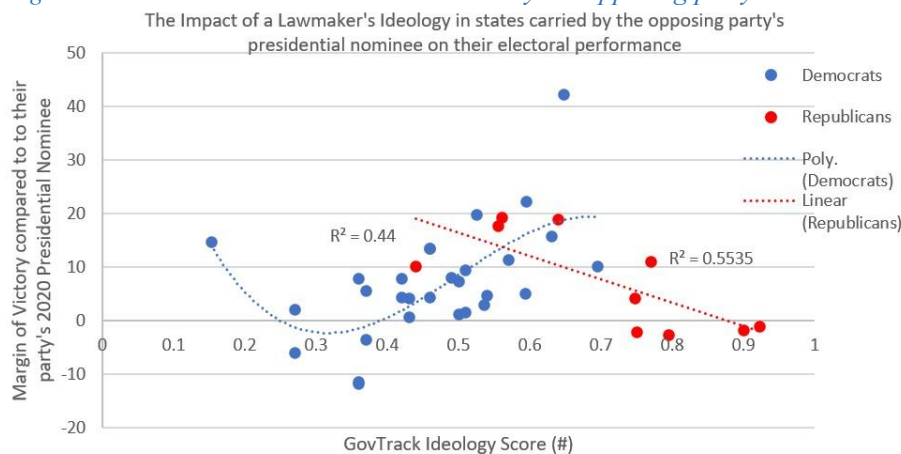*Figure 8 - Republican Lawmakers in Biden-Won Districts/States*

Figure 9 - Lawmakers in districts/areas won by the opposing party's Presidential nominee

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