

Progressive Ambition, Electoral Selection, and the Creation of Ideologues*

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Abstract

The process by which high-level office-holders are selected is shown to result in pure office-seeking politicians looking like ideologues.

1 Introduction

What do politicians care about? In modelling the preferences of politicians, researchers have specified a diverse set of preferences ranging from pure office-seekers to pure ideologues. Since the work of Downs (1957), a common assumption in formal political theory is that politicians are driven by the desire to hold office. Twenty years later, Wittman (1977) formally explored the implications of allowing politicians to intrinsically value policy. Then Wittman (1983) and Calvert (1985) considered the dependence and sensitivity of results to the weights that politicians attach to holding office and to policy. While there is no systematic empirical work which documents the relative presence of office-seekers and ideologues in the political realm, it would seem that, in principle, one could examine the degree of ideological consistency in

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politicians' positions.¹ However, even that exercise is limited as it would only allow indirect inferences to be drawn about the extent of office-seekers in the population for one cannot directly observe a politician's behavioral rule but only realizations of that rule as it responds to a politician's environment and, in particular, to the policy preferences of constituents. An office-seeking politician whose behavioral rule is to pander to voters may appear ideological if he is fortunate enough to have seen little variation over his political lifetime in the dominant ideology of his constituents. If the median voter is always liberal then one would expect an office-seeker to consistently support liberal positions and thereby give the appearance of being a liberal ideologue.² But how likely is it that a politician will have faced little variation in the preferences of his constituents? Can we really expect many office-seekers to achieve ideological consistency by virtue of luck? The answer is "no" but, as we show in this paper, they may be able to do so by virtue of progressive ambition and, so to speak, survival of the fittest in the political arena. As described by Schlesinger (1966), *progressive ambition* is the process by which politicians who are successful at achieving office will run for higher office and, if successful there, run for yet higher office.³ For a population of pure office-seekers, we show that the dynamic of progressive ambition and electoral selection results in a disproportionate number of high-level office-holders looking like ideologues.

2 A Model of an Electoral System

An electoral system such as in the U.S. is comprised of many different types of offices. They range from low-level positions like town mayor and state legislator to more significant positions such as city mayor and U.S. House Representative, all the way up to such high-level offices as state governor and U.S. Senator, and at its pinnacle, the U.S. Presidency. Though there are exceptions, most high-level office-holders began by successfully running for a low-level office and then running for progressively higher levels. As Joseph Schlesinger notes: "Politics is, after all, a game of advancement, and a man succeeds only if he advances as far as his situation permits."⁴ Let us then

¹Relatedly, Blomberg and Harrington (1997) examine the variability in the ADA scores of Congressional members and find that more extreme legislators exhibit less variability in their voting records.

²There are examples in which an ideologue can, it would appear, reveal himself by sticking with his position even when it is unpopular. In that light, this paper examines this issue from the perspective of someone who only has information on past positions rather than past electorates which is a fairly reasonable assumption for voters. Campaigns are full of information about a politician's past positions but very little information about what voters' positions were at the time those positions were taken.

³"... ambitions may be *progressive*: The politician aspires to attain an office more important than the one he now seeks or is holding." [Schlesinger, 1966; p. 10]

⁴Schlesinger (1966); page 9. Studies that document the progressive paths to higher office include Schlesinger (1966) and Mezey (1970).

conceive of an electoral system as a hierarchy of offices in which ambitious politicians strive to work their way up the political ladder. Recall that our objective is to provide insight into the extent to which this selection process - by which some politicians advance to higher office and some do not - results in high-level office-holders looking like ideologues even if they are purely driven by holding office. Therefore, we assume that politicians are of the crassest sort; they are myopic office-seekers in the sense that they support whatever policies maximize the probability of winning the current race.

Voters are endowed with an ideology and, in deciding how to cast their votes, are assumed to care foremost about what policies a candidate currently supports and secondarily about a candidate's past positions. What this will imply is that politicians - being driven only by the prospect of holding office - will always support those policies consistent with the ideology of the current median voter. Hence, the extent to which politicians appear ideological (that is, their current and past positions are ideologically consistent) is solely the result of having always faced a median voter with the same ideology.

As mentioned above, there is a hierarchy of offices. These levels will be denumerated 1, 2, 3 and so forth where level 1 offices are at the bottom and are the ones for which new political aspirants compete. There is a large (countably infinite) number of level 1 electoral offices and each office involves a race between two candidates.⁵ For simplicity, a two-element ideology space, denoted $\{L, C\}$, is specified. In each of these races, there is a median voter whose ideology is either L or C which we will refer to as liberal and conservative, respectively. Without loss of generality, the median voter's ideology is L in a proportion $b \in [\frac{1}{2}, 1]$ of all contests. After observing the median voter's ideology, candidates choose which policies to support. What we imagine is that there is some small set of issues central to this race so that when we say a candidate "chooses ideology x ," it is meant that he supports the policy for that issue which is consistent with ideology x . Since, prior to taking positions, candidates running for level 1 offices are perceived by voters as being identical, a voter votes for the candidate who supports the policies consistent with the voter's ideology. If both candidates support the same policies then voters randomize so that each candidate has probability $\frac{1}{2}$ of winning the election. In that politicians care only about holding office and are myopic, the optimal strategy is for them to support the policies preferred by the median voter. This means that the winners in the first round of offices will be randomly determined since, in any race, the two candidates are indistinguishable in that they both support the policies desired by the median voter.

The politicians who are elected to a level 1 office are assumed to hold this office for some specified number of terms while the losers drop off of the political map

⁵ Assuming the number of political aspirants and the number of electoral offices are countably infinite will make the dynamical system - which characterizes the process by which politicians are selected for advancement up the political ladder - deterministic and this greatly simplifies the analysis.

and do not compete any further (or at least do not compete with those politicians who were initially successful in achieving office).⁶ For simplicity, we suppose a strong incumbency advantage in that re-election is assured as long as the office-holder always supports policies consistent with the median voter's ideology. After some number of terms, level 1 office-holders are assumed to run for the next higher office which is a level 2 office. Let $\rho \in [0, 1]$ denote the probability that, during their time in a level 1 office, the ideology of an elected official's median voter did not change. ρ is then the probability that, when he runs for a level 2 office, a politician's policy positions while in a level 1 office are ideologically consistent. If there is a lot of persistency in the median voter's policy preferences then ρ will be close to 1.

For analytical convenience, there are half as many level 2 offices as level 1 offices. In that we assume only those politicians who hold a level 1 office consider running for a level 2 office, the level 1 office-holders are matched into pairs to compete for a level 2 office.⁷ For each of these offices (and pairs of candidates), a median voter is randomly selected whose ideology is L with probability b . Thus, a proportion b of all races for level 2 offices have a liberal median voter. After observing the median voter's ideology, politicians choose whether to support liberal or conservative policies. In deciding how to cast their votes between candidates for a level 2 office, voters have more information than just a politician's current positions. They also have their positions from when they held a level 1 office. It is assumed that voters put a lot more weight on politicians' current positions. Specifically, a voter votes for the candidate who currently supports his ideology. If both candidates support his ideology (which, since politicians are myopic office-seekers, will always be the case) then voters are assumed to prefer the candidate whose past positions are more consistent with that ideology.⁸ As it turns out, we need only assume that if one candidate has always supported the median voter's ideology and the other has not then the former wins. A complete specification of how voters vote is unnecessary for establishing our main result.⁹

⁶Of course, there are many notable exceptions, such as Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, who initially failed in their quest for some office and succeeded subsequently. To allow for this possibility in our model would generate a notational morass without the apparent promise of any additional insight.

⁷Thus, Ross Perot, Steve Forbes, and the like are assumed away in that political aspirants are not allowed to "jump" the hierarchy by initially running for high-level office. It is also implied by this structure that there are no substantively different political parties in that the two candidates in a race are drawn from the same distribution of politicians. This is a simplification that is made with some loss of generality but we have no reason to believe that it biases our model toward generating ideologically consistent office-holders.

⁸Bernhardt and Ingberman (1985) also allow candidates' past political positions to influence the electoral outcome. Their motivation is that candidates whose current positions are consistent with their past positions are more credible and therefore less risky.

⁹The specification as to who wins can also be motivated by assuming there are two types of voters - poorly-informed and well-informed. Let us assume that a voter's informedness is unrelated to his ideology so that the ideology of the median voter for poorly-informed voters is the same as

As before, those politicians who are elected will hold their level 2 office for some specified number of terms and with probability ρ the median voter's ideology will not have changed (and, therefore, neither will the ideological positioning of the politician). At the end of their time in a level 2 office, these politicians are randomly matched into pairs to compete for a level 3 office with a proportion b of those races having a median voter whose ideology is L . This process is iterated as we consider yet higher level offices. The question is: what does the history of high-level office-holders look like? To what extent do these self-serving opportunists look like men and women of integrity and principle?

Let us make a few comments about this model. While there is no aggregate uncertainty in this model, an individual politician does face an uncertain environment. Regardless of the ideology of the median voter for, say, a level h office-holder's constituency, he will face, with probability b , a median voter with ideology L when he runs for a level $h + 1$ office. That a politician may find the policy preferences of the median voter changing as he moves across offices does not imply that voters are not ideological nor that they are fickle. The preferences of the median voter can change because the identity of the median voter has changed. In running for a different office, a politician will typically face a different constituency and, for that reason, the identity of the median voter can change (for example, as one goes from running for the U.S. House of Representatives to running for the U.S. Senate). Even if the constituency does not change, the identity of the median voter can change if the participation rate for different voter groups varies across elections. This is apt to occur if the central campaign issues change over time. For example, the participation rate of various groups would presumably be quite different if the central issue was welfare policy as opposed to social security. That the ideology of the median voter faced by a politician is assumed to be independently distributed across offices is an unrealistic assumption. For example, suppose the U.S. House of Representatives is a level h office and the U.S. Senate is a level $h + 1$ office. Then this assumption says that the probability distribution over the ideology of the median voter for the state - which is relevant if one is running for the U.S. Senate - is the same regardless of the ideology of the median voter for a Congressional district in that state. In reality, we would expect there to be some positive correlation. If a House district is conservative then it is more likely that the entire state is conservative. The assumption of independence of the median voter's ideology across levels of office is made for simplicity. Note, however, that it is an assumption that biases the model against office-seekers

the ideology of the median voter for well-informed voters. Suppose that poorly-informed voters only have information as to candidates' current positions and that a high percentage of voters are poorly-informed while well-informed voters know candidates' current and past positions. If current positions differ then the poorly-informed voters determine the outcome of the election. However, if current positions are the same then these poorly-informed voters cancel each other as they split their votes between the two candidates since to them they appear identical. In that case the swing voters are the well-informed voters and then a candidates' political past determines the outcome of the election.

looking like ideologues because it makes it more likely that a politician will face an ideologically different median voter as he runs for a higher office than if we assumed a positive correlation in the ideology of median voters across offices. In that we show how progressive ambition and electoral selection can make myopic office-seekers look like ideologues, that there is no correlation in the policy preferences of the median voter across offices makes that result more powerful.

As another simplification, we do not explicitly model the decision to run for re-election, run for higher office, or exit politics.¹⁰ Rather we assume that all politicians are ambitious and choose to run for higher office. However, one could allow for a strict subset of office-holders to run for higher office as long as the decision to do so is independent of past political positions. In reality, such a decision is likely to depend very much on a politician's political past but modelling that process here would be a serious complication. In particular, we might imagine that those politicians who are lucky enough to have remained ideologically consistent would run for higher office at a higher rate in that they are in a better position to succeed. Hence, assuming, as we do here, that the decision to run is independent of one's political past biases the model against finding a significant percentage of high-level office-holders being ideologically consistent. Though this assumption is descriptively unrealistic, it should not bias our model toward making office-seekers look like ideologues.

This model is a modification of that developed in Harrington (1998). In that paper, a hierarchical system is presented in which agents compete for advancement. Agents are endowed with behavioral rules with some being rigid (that is, their behavior does not respond to the environment) and others being flexible (that is, they always select the myopically optimal action in response to the environment). The mix of rigid and flexible agents at high levels of the system is explored.

3 Properties of High-Level Office-Holders

We will refer to a politician as a liberal (conservative) ideologue if he has always chosen liberal (conservative) positions. However, that he is an ideologue is only apparent as recall that all politicians are myopic office-seekers who always take the position of the median voter.

That some politicians, in spite of being myopic office-seekers, should look like ideologues is to be expected for our model. There is some probability that a politician will be lucky enough that the ideology of his median voter will not have changed while holding a particular office and moving between offices. Indeed, the *ex ante* probability of the median voter not changing across h level of offices is $(b\rho)^h + [(1-b)\rho]^h$. For reasonable values of ρ , b , and h , this is, of course, a rather small percentage of level h offices. In this section, we show that the presence of office-seekers with the

¹⁰For an empirical analysis of this decision, see Kiewiet and Zeng (1993) and references cited therein.

appearance of being ideological is considerably more frequent than what that analysis suggests. If the frequency with which the median voter is liberal is sufficiently high (that is, b is sufficiently high) and a voter's ideology is sufficiently persistent (that is, ρ is sufficiently high) then the proportion of politicians in a level h office who are "ideological" is bounded from below by a number which is *independent of h* ; that is, it is independent of how high the office is in the electoral hierarchy.

Let f_I^h denote the proportion of level h office-holders who have just completed their time in that office and have always supported positions consistent with ideology $I \in \{L, C\}$; that is, they have always faced a constituency in which the median voter's ideology is I . Theorem 1 establishes conditions whereby the proportion of politicians at higher offices who look like liberal ideologues is bounded above zero for all levels of office. No matter how many levels of office there are in the electoral system, there is a significant proportion of politicians who are ideologically consistent even though, down deep, they are simply myopic office-seekers.

Theorem 1 *If $b\rho > \frac{1}{2}$ then $f_L^h > \frac{2b\rho-1}{b\rho}$ for all h .*

Proof: First note that $f_L^1 = \rho b$ and $f_C^1 = \rho(1 - b)$. A proportion b of politicians face a liberal median voter when they run for their first political office while a proportion $1 - b$ have a conservative median voter. Since a proportion ρ of level 1 office-holders will not experience a change in the ideology of their median voter, we then have $f_L^1 = \rho b$ and $f_C^1 = \rho(1 - b)$. Next note that we can characterize the progression of these two types of ideologues up the hierarchy of offices as a dynamical system:

$$f_L^{h+1} = \rho \left[(f_L^h)^2 b + 2f_L^h (1 - f_L^h) b \right] \quad (1)$$

$$f_C^{h+1} = \rho \left[(f_C^h)^2 (1 - b) + 2f_C^h (1 - f_C^h) (1 - b) \right] \quad (2)$$

where $1 - f_L^{h+1} - f_C^{h+1}$ is the proportion of politicians exiting a level $h + 1$ office who have, during their political lifetime, supported both liberal and conservative policies. Examining (1), after completing one's time at a level h office, a proportion f_L^h of all such politicians will have always espoused liberal policies. In randomly matching agents to compete for a level $h + 1$ office, a proportion $(f_L^h)^2$ of those matchings will match two politicians whose positions are consistent with a liberal ideology. A proportion b of those matchings will face a liberal median voter (that is, the median voter associated with the constituency for that level $h + 1$ office) in which case these candidates will both take liberal positions. Hence, the winning politician will be a liberal ideologue (which of the two candidates wins is indeterminate and, for our purposes, irrelevant). This gives us the first term in the brackets in (1). A proportion $2f_L^h (1 - f_L^h)$ of all matchings will pair a liberal ideologue with either a conservative ideologue or a non-ideologue (that is, someone who has supported both liberal and

conservative positions). In those matchings, a proportion b have a liberal median voter in which case the liberal ideologue wins by virtue of supporting a liberal platform (as does his opponent) and having a history which is more supportive of liberal positions. A proportion $1 - b$ of those matchings have a conservative median voter in which case the liberal ideologue supports a conservative position and thus is no longer a liberal ideologue. Whether or not he wins is then irrelevant for determining the next level's proportion of liberal ideologues. This gives us the second term in the brackets in (1). The bracketed terms are then the proportion of entering level $h + 1$ office-holders who are liberal ideologues. Multiplying it by ρ gives us the proportion of exiting level $h + 1$ office-holders who are liberal ideologues. In an analogous manner, one can describe the derivation of (2).

From (1)-(2), we can derive:

$$\Delta f_L^h \equiv f_L^{h+1} - f_L^h = f_L^h [(2b\rho - 1) - b\rho f_L^h] \quad (3)$$

$$\Delta f_C^h \equiv f_C^{h+1} - f_C^h = f_C^h [(2(1-b)\rho - 1) - (1-b)\rho f_C^h] \quad (4)$$

It is straightforward that:

$$\text{If } f_L^h > 0 \text{ then } \Delta f_L^h \geq 0 \text{ as } f_L^h \leq \frac{2b\rho - 1}{b\rho} \quad (5)$$

$$\text{If } f_C^h > 0 \text{ then } \Delta f_C^h < 0 \quad (6)$$

Recall that $f_L^1 = \rho b$ and $f_C^1 = \rho(1 - b)$. From (6), it follows that:

$$f_C^h < \rho(1 - b) \text{ for all } h \geq 2 \text{ and } \lim_{h \rightarrow \infty} f_C^h = 0 \quad (7)$$

Turning to (5), one can show that $b > \frac{2b\rho - 1}{b\rho}$ so that $f_L^1 > \frac{2b\rho - 1}{b\rho}$. Next note that

$$\Delta f_L^h = b\rho f_L^h \left[\left(\frac{2b\rho - 1}{b\rho} \right) - f_L^h \right] \quad (8)$$

Since $b\rho f_L^h \in (0, 1)$, it follows:

$$\text{If } f_L^h > \frac{2b\rho - 1}{b\rho} \text{ then } f_L^{h+1} \in \left(\frac{2b\rho - 1}{b\rho}, f_L^h \right) \quad (9)$$

We conclude that $f_L^h > \frac{2b\rho - 1}{b\rho}$ for all h and, in addition, $\lim_{h \rightarrow \infty} f_L^h = \frac{2b\rho - 1}{b\rho}$. ■

An initial inspection of the problem might suggest that the proportion of politicians who are liberal ideologues at the end of their time in a level h office would be of order $(b\rho)^h$ which is the *ex ante* probability that a politician would have only faced a liberal constituency. What this analysis misses, however, is the role and power

of electoral selection. In that it is advantageous to have been ideologically consistent - everything else the same, voters prefer politicians who have supported their preferred positions in the past - selection will disproportionately select ideologically consistent politicians. This selection advantage offsets the fact that it is increasingly unlikely, as one moves up, to have faced the same type of median voter. This then suggests that the proportion of liberal ideologues at level h will exceed $(b\rho)^h$. Theorem 1 goes beyond that statement to say that the proportion of politicians who are liberal ideologues is not only greater than $(b\rho)^h$ but is of an order which is independent of the number of levels in that it is bounded from below by $\frac{2b\rho-1}{b\rho}$ (which does not depend on h). Though the proportion of conservative ideologues is not bounded above zero, the proportion is typically considerably higher than $[(1-b)\rho]^h$, as established through numerical analysis. This is shown below in Tables 1 and 2 for $(\rho, b) \in \{(.9, .6), (1, .55)\}$. When $(\rho, b) = (.9, .6)$, 29% of level 5 office-holders are liberal ideologues while 6.3% are conservative ideologues. This is to be compared with what random chance predicts which is that only 4.6% of such politicians are liberal ideologues and just a little above $\frac{1}{2}$ of 1% are conservative ideologues.

Table 1: $(\rho, b) = (.9, .6)$

h	f_L^h	f_C^h	$(b\rho)^h$	$[(1-b)\rho]^h$
1	.540	.360	.540	.360
2	.426	.213	.292	.130
3	.362	.137	.157	.047
4	.320	.092	.085	.017
5	.290	.063	.046	.006
6	.268	.044	.025	.002
7	.251	.031	.013	.0008
8	.237	.022	.007	.0003
9	.226	.016	.004	.0001
10	.216	.011	.002	.00004

Table 2: $(\rho, b) = (1, .55)$

h	f_L^h	f_C^h	$(b\rho)^h$	$[(1-b)\rho]^h$
1	.550	.450	.550	.450
2	.439	.314	.303	.203
3	.377	.238	.166	.091
4	.336	.189	.092	.041
5	.308	.154	.050	.018
6	.286	.128	.028	.008
7	.270	.108	.015	.004
8	.257	.092	.008	.002
9	.246	.079	.005	.0008
10	.238	.068	.003	.0003

When $b\rho < \frac{1}{2}$ then the proportion of ideologues - both liberal and conservative - go to zero as the level becomes arbitrarily high.¹¹ However, even in this case, the proportion of ideologues at the end of level h is considerably higher than $(b\rho)^h + [(1-b)\rho]^h$ as shown in Tables 3 and 4 for $(\rho, b) \in \{(.8, .5), (.9, .5)\}$. There is a considerable disparity between what pure chance predicts and what selection produces. For example, when $(\rho, b) = (.8, .5)$, the *ex ante* probability of the median voter not changing across five level of offices is only 2%. Yet almost 20% of office-holders at that level

¹¹It is important to remember that we are assuming $b \in [\frac{1}{2}, 1]$. If we let $b < \frac{1}{2}$ and if $(1-b)\rho > \frac{1}{2}$ then there would be an analogous statement to Theorem 1 but with the proportion of conservative ideologues being bounded above zero and the proportion of liberal ideologues going to zero as $h \rightarrow \infty$. Thus, if $b\rho < \rho - \frac{1}{2}$ (which is necessarily less than $\frac{1}{2}$) then the proportion of ideologues is also bounded above zero.

are ideologically consistent. In this manner, selection of the fittest (or luckiest) in the political arena makes the unlikely likely.

Table 3: $(\rho, b) = (.8, .5)$

h	$f_L^h + f_C^h$	$(b\rho)^h + [(1-b)\rho]^h$
1	.800	.800
2	.512	.320
3	.357	.128
4	.260	.051
5	.195	.020
6	.148	.010
7	.114	.0032
8	.089	.0014
9	.069	.0006
10	.055	.0002

Table 4: $(\rho, b) = (.9, .5)$

h	$f_L^h + f_C^h$	$(b\rho)^h + [(1-b)\rho]^h$
1	.900	.900
2	.628	.405
3	.476	.182
4	.378	.082
5	.308	.037
6	.256	.017
7	.215	.0075
8	.183	.0034
9	.158	.0015
10	.136	.0007

4 Concluding Remarks

Our model has several key features. First, the electoral system is perceived as a hierarchy of offices. Second, politicians are ambitious though myopic office-seekers. Myopic office-seeking takes the form of always supporting the positions of the current median voter. Politicians are ambitious in the sense that they continually strive for higher office. Third, voters not only care about what policies candidates are currently espousing but also what positions they have taken in the past. Specifically, if two candidates both support policies consistent with the voter's ideology, the voter prefers the one whose past positions are more consistent with that ideology. In spite of all politicians caring only about holding office and having short horizons, we show that there is a significant percentage of high-level office-holders who look like ideologues in that their current and past positions are ideologically consistent.

The point of this result is not to argue that all ideologues are office-seekers in disguise. We believe that there are true ideologues (as articulated, for example, in Wildavsky, 1965). Rather, the contribution of this result is in establishing how the electoral selection process is biased to producing ideologically consistent politicians, to making the unlikely event of an office-seeker looking like an ideologue likely. For this reason, there may be a tendency to overestimate the extent to which ideologues are really present among successful politicians.

In concluding, let us note a highly speculative though potentially interesting implication of our analysis. In our model, it was assumed that politicians began with the objective of holding office and never veered from that objective. However, if, by virtue of progressive ambition and the manner in which high-level office-holders are selected, a politician finds herself consistently espousing the same ideology over a

long period of time, this process of trying to convince others as to the correctness of a particular ideology may convince the politician herself. It may be difficult to continue to place little weight on what policies are implemented when one is continually articulating and arguing as to the appropriateness of a particular ideological view. There may be certain cognitive processes that cause sustained external support for certain views to be internalized so that one comes to intrinsically care about those positions. If so, then progressive ambition and electoral selection may not only create politicians who look like ideologues but who truly are ideologues.

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