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# The Shrinking Center: When Are Centrists More Effective Lawmakers?

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# The Shrinking Center: When Are Centrists More Effective Lawmakers?

## Abstract

Legislative effectiveness is an inherently amorphous -- even subjective -- concept. Yet, arguably, it is among the most important considerations when evaluating the performance of members of Congress. Using Volden and Wiseman's index, the Legislative Effectiveness Score (LES), I evaluate when ideology informs or predicts effectiveness in passing laws, which I conceptualize as the fundamental role of legislators. In particular, I assess the extent to which centrists are more or less effective than their more partisan peers. I find that, while the number of centrists has declined precipitously, their ideology does not -- at least at the broadest level -- predict their effectiveness in passing legislation. Future research will dig deeper into the underlying question of when centrists are more or less effective, looking at particular Congresses and speakerships to analyze the extent to which centrists' declining numbers result in declining (or perhaps enhanced) effectiveness.

## Keywords

Centrism, legislative effectiveness, political polarization, lawmaking

## Disciplines

American Politics | Models and Methods | Political Science

## Comments

Written for POL 215: Political Science Research Methods.

**Authors note:** The research for this paper will be expanded in an upcoming paper.

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POL 215: Political Science Research Methods  
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April 4, 2018

*The Shrinking Center: When Are Centrists More Effective Lawmakers?*

Barack Obama's signature promise in the 2008 presidential election campaign was to enact healthcare reform, and, upon taking office, it was among his earliest major legislative priorities. In January 2009 – the beginning of the 111<sup>th</sup> session of the United States Congress – Democrats held a 256-178 seat advantage in the House of Representatives and a 57-41 seat advantage in the Senate. Ostensibly, Democrats had the margins to pass sweeping legislation at least in the House, but a resolute group of centrist Democrats known as the Blue Dogs stood in the way. As Rubin (2017) describes the centrist intraparty organization's influence, "So long as the Blue Dogs could respect the results of the organization's voting procedures and maintain unity, the Coalition could continue to hold the upper hand in negotiations with party leaders," (Rubin 2017, 217). Indeed, the ardent advocacy of the Blue Dogs and their moderate Senate counterparts was chronicled throughout the media, and, ultimately, Democratic leaders had no choice but to acquiesce to many of the centrists' fiscal concerns in the final bill such as elimination of the so-called "public option," (Rubin 2017, 216-22; Dennis 2009; Lothian 2009).

The parties' roles were switched when Republicans took their own shot at healthcare reform in 2017 and the moderate Republican Tuesday Group stalled the party's efforts to repeal the Affordable Care Act (Kane 2017). Yet, moderates have also shown a capacity to break through gridlock; in January 2018, an ad hoc "Common Sense Coalition" met in Senator Susan Collins' (R-ME) office and, using a talking stick to limit one person to talking at a time, the group forged a consensus to end a government shutdown (Ellefson 2018).

Media coverage and public consciousness of the increasing polarization and endemic gridlock in the U.S. Congress has become ubiquitous in recent years, and, in each of the last several election cycles, retiring moderates have made their rounds to bemoan Congress's lack of ability to forge consensus and work across the aisle (see, for example, Tomasky 2017; Helderman 2012; and Preston et al. 2010). Yet, amid this polarization, a plurality of Americans consistently identifies themselves as moderates – with only three exceptions from 1972 until 2010, exit polls in each biennial election showed that more Americans identified as moderates than either liberals or conservatives – and books such as *The Radical Center* (2001) and advocacy organizations such as No Labels have emerged to promote centrist ideas and candidates (Best and Krueger 2012). With Congress's approval rating failing to top 20 percent over the past eight years in the Gallup poll as Americans continue to express frustration over the body's inability to pass legislation, one might assume that moderates matter more than ever in forging compromise and passing legislation (Brenan 2017). Volden and Wiseman (2011) developed an index – the Legislative Effectiveness Score (LES) – that sheds light on how to evaluate whether legislators are effective based on how many bills they advance through the legislative process. Using that tool, this paper will explore under what conditions moderates are, in fact, effective lawmakers.

### **Legislative Effectiveness**

What makes an effective legislator? That question has consumed significant, though not exhaustive, scholarly attention as far back as Davidson (1970), who aimed to define what attributes effective legislators share. He suggested that, despite each legislator having different goals, any measure of success must include writing and passing of legislation. Frantzich (1979) builds on this work and measures success quantitatively through the number of bills passed in the 94<sup>th</sup> Congress, finding that although ideologically moderate congressmen constitute an overrepresented group

among those he finds to be effective, as a whole, those congressmen who were successful in getting legislation passed actually saw a decrease in their electoral margins, suggesting that voters do not always reward legislative effectiveness (Frantzich 1979, 425). Volden and Wiseman (2011) aim to address the gap in scholarly literature for quantifying legislative effectiveness by developing the Legislative Effectiveness Score (LES) as a “transparent and substantively plausible technique for measuring a legislator’s lawmaking effectiveness,” (Volden and Wiseman 2011, 238). Their score encompasses lawmakers’ success in five components of the legislative process and weights substantive and significant bills more heavily than ceremonial bills; the LES is the first numerical index to measure legislative effectiveness, and it provides abundant opportunities for ongoing exploration and application of the concept, which this paper endeavors to do.

Despite the robust nature of LES, it does have limitations; while, conceptually, enacting legislation is a key component of effective lawmaking, surely the three examples of moderates influencing the legislative process mentioned in the introduction of this paper are also examples of successful exertion of political power to promote one’s policy agenda, yet, because, in those examples, moderates did not push legislation of their own, their efforts would not be encompassed in LES. Furthermore, securing federal money for one’s district is a feat in exertion of one’s influence towards a political end, which, again, may well meet a definition of legislative effectiveness but is not necessarily captured by LES. Moderates actually secure a seven percent increase in federal funding to their district for every one standard-deviation increase in their proximity to the ideological median of the House, Alexander, Berry, and Howell (2016) found, which supports the median voter theorem’s conclusion that, when considering a single issue whose voters follow a standard distribution, the equilibrium outcome corresponds to the median voter’s preference, making that the most desirable point (for an overview, see Chaturvedi 2017, 1251). Cox and McCubbins (2005)

expound on the median voter theory's implications for those close to their party's median in Congress by suggesting that negative agenda control – the ability to keep items off the agenda, typically exercised by the majority party – results in those bills that do make it on the agenda aligning with the preferences of those close to the party median. However, these party medians are increasingly polarized, so this finding suggests less about the overall effectiveness of centrists.

Passing legislation, however, requires legislative organization, which, in the modern Congress, is typically manifested through political parties. Although party leaders tend to have the greatest potential for influence in the chamber, that influence depends to a considerable extent on institutional context (Cooper and Brady 1981; Fenno 1973). Without carrots and sticks, cajoling disparate intraparty factions has proven challenging for party leaders on both sides of the aisle (Kane 2017; Dennis 2009). Former Speaker of the House John Boehner resigned in 2015 amid intraparty conflict spurred by the right-wing Freedom Caucus, a successor to the Tea Party that thrust Republicans to power in 2010 whose political positions Boehner found untenable (or, in many cases, non-existent) and thus struggled to wrangle especially after he ended one of party leaders' historically best carrots to wrangle reluctant voters (earmarks) and was reluctant to use sticks such as committee reassignments (although he eventually did so in a few cases) (Alberta 2017).

The struggles of recent legislative leaders notwithstanding, securing a post in the party leadership tends to be a boon for members of Congress seeking to build influence (Fenno 1973; Meinke 2016). In both parties, leadership organizations and whip structures have grown precipitously since the 1970s, particularly in the Democratic party, where centrism has, on occasion, been a positive predictor of membership in the whip structure as opposed to the GOP, where centrism has never been a positive predictor of holding a leadership position (Meinke 2016). Both parties have long used peripheral leadership positions as carrots to engender party loyalty (Meinke 2016, 42-46).

Traditional scholarship suggests that, when parties are divided, they tend to aim for more inclusiveness and representation in their leadership structure, but during times of homogeneity, they choose party loyalists (Meinke 2008). However, Heberlig and Larson (2012) show that the ability to fundraise is a key to advancing in a party's leadership structure, particularly in tight election years. In fact, the ability and willingness to redistribute campaign funds to more vulnerable co-partisans may well be increasingly overshadowing other criteria such as party loyalty and racial and gender diversity as criteria for advancement (Heberlig and Larson 2007). This finding expands on their prior research, which shows that members of Congress select ideological extremists over ideological middlemen when the extremists distribute more money than the centrists (Heberlig, Hetherington, and Larson 2006). In sum, their research suggests that moderates are largely being shut out of party leadership positions, which ostensibly weighs down moderates' potential to succeed in passing major legislation.

Yet, even without presence in the party's formal leadership, intraparty organizations such as the Blue Dogs, Tuesday Group, and Freedom Caucus have each proven effective in promulgating their respective agendas when they hold together sufficient capacity to stall the chamber, effectively organizing pivotal votes into a single bloc (Rubin 2013; 2017; Lucas and Deutchman 2009). Republican leaders have, however, been more willing to discipline recalcitrant moderates than extreme conservatives (Pearson 2015, 170). Furthermore, Republican leaders can often convince Tuesday Group members to fall in line more easily than Freedom Caucus members (Pearson 2015, 49). On the Democratic side, despite the Blue Dogs' desire (and success) in promulgating centrist policy priorities, Nancy Pelosi largely acquiesced or attenuated the concerns of Blue Dogs, bringing them under the party's tent during her speakership during which she secured record-high party unity scores (Pearson 2015, 175). As such, Pearson concludes that moderate Democrats exercise greater

influence in policy than moderate Republicans. Kirkland and Slapan (2017) conclude that ideologically extreme legislators are less loyal to their party when it is in the majority, while ideological moderates become more loyal when they transition to the majority, an assertion that aligns with the cases discussed elsewhere in this paper.

Perhaps the most significant phenomenon in the study of moderates' legislative effectiveness is their declining number. As the ideological gulf between the two parties continues to widen (as it has in nearly every election since the 1970s), the number of moderates in Congress has continued to decrease (Thomsen 2017, 1). Much research exists on polarization in Congress and the asymmetric nature thereof – namely, that Republicans have moved further right than Democrats have moved left – but, in many cases, the declining number of moderates in Congress is considered as an endogenous factor (on asymmetric polarization, see Grossman and Hopkins 2016). Thomsen, however, suggests that a cascading effect – particularly on the Republican side, where rank-and-file members who value doctrinal purity display more overt hostility towards their moderate co-partisans – wherein polarization begets more polarization has led to fewer traditionally-qualified moderate candidates running and more moderate legislators retiring irrespective of the electorate's ideological tendencies (Thomsen 2017; Grossman and Hopkins 2016). Maestas et al. (2006) cites data showing that being an ideological moderate was a statistically significant deterrent to running for potential Republican candidates for the House of Representatives, while it was not statistically significant in either direction for Democrats. Thomsen asserts further that traditional explanations for why fewer moderates run – gerrymandered congressional districts, money in politics, and an ideologically extreme primary electorate – do not explain the dearth of candidates. Ansolabehere et al. (2010) show that primary elections do not significantly send legislators' voting positions further to the poles even when the ideological composition of the primary electorate appears to be extreme; in other



words, legislators are growing more extreme even as the electorate is not. Furthermore, Bafumi and Herron (2010) show not only that members of Congress are more extreme than their constituents, but that when a legislator is replaced by a new member from the opposing party, the new member is also more extreme than the constituents, a concept they call “leapfrog extremism.”

Potential moderate candidates do still exist in state legislatures, the primary feeding pool for the House of Representatives, but, evidently, they do not judge potential congressional service to be a fulfilling proposition (Thomsen 2017, 54). Even controlling for seat type, district partisanship, legislator experience, and ability to fundraise – and, as Kim (2011), shows, fundraising demands for moderates far exceed those for more ideologically extreme candidates – liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats “are much less likely to seek congressional office than those at the extremes,” (Thomsen 2017, 97). Furthermore, moderates are also retiring at a faster pace than extremists, and, through interviews, Thomsen finds that retired moderate legislators find life outside of Congress far more rewarding than their work was prior to their retirement (Thomsen 2017, 121). Each of these findings exacerbates the incumbency effect and results in Congress having fewer and fewer “senior moderates.” Ultimately, Thomsen introduces a concept she calls “party fit” to explain the dearth of moderates seeking and retaining office: essentially, moderates cease to fit in the modern political party duopoly.

“The central hypothesis is that, in the current polarized context, the value of congressional office is too low for liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats to run. It has become increasingly difficult for ideological moderates to influence the policy agenda, advance within the body, and forge bonds with their co-partisans.” (Thomsen 2017, 35)

That moderates find a decreasing value in holding office is significant for two reasons, Thomsen argues: it will exacerbate long-term polarization if parties do not have moderate anchors at the center, and, as legislation is increasingly developed to win support of a single party, legislators

at the chamber median can “neither credibly threaten to work with an increasingly distant and insular opposition party nor muster significant numbers to influence the direction of their own party” (Thomsen 2017, 50-52). Thus, partisan polarization is self-reinforcing insofar as the hollowing of the political center has discouraged ideological moderates from running for and remaining in Congress.

Whether this affects the overall legislative effectiveness of those moderates remaining in Congress is an open question. As Thomsen compellingly argues, “[M]embers of Congress are part of a team that has a clear policy agenda and benefits of the office are distributed based on their adherence to this agenda” (Thomsen 2017, 35). In a theoretical sense, Volden, Wiseman, and Wittmer (2013) argue in a paper on when women are more effective legislators than men that certain institutional contexts such as contentious, partisan activities may help men outperform women when in the majority, but that women’s propensity to form coalitions and introduce new policies may help them outperform men when in the minority party. A similar finding seems plausible for centrists.

### **So, When Are Centrists More Effective Lawmakers?**

Given rapid proliferation in congressional polarization, changes to the interbranch balance of power over the past several decades, evolving campaign finance laws, and expanding party leadership structures, identifying a singular answer to whether centrist legislators are more effective seems implausible. However, harnessing the time series data in Volden and Wiseman (2011) allows ample opportunity to make comparisons in legislative effectiveness across various institutional contexts, which Cooper and Brady (1981) identified as key to effective analysis of legislative power.

Certainly, in the 1980s and 1990s, moderates in both parties found success when they worked as a bloc that forced the hand of party leaders to make concessions towards centrism (Thomsen 2017, 36). For example, moderates such as Beverly Byron (D-MD) and Amo Houghton (R-NY) sat on

powerful committees and achieved legislative goals, but party lines then were far blurrier than they are today (Thomsen 2017, 27). Yet, moderates today lament an inability to foster interparty dialogue or affect their party's agenda as the parties drift towards the poles, clearly making it harder to be effective (Thomsen 2017, 39). In spite of this polarization, I argue that attaining leadership roles and securing desirable committee assignments and positions remain key components of being an effective lawmaker. Further, I accept Volden's and Wiseman's conception of what makes an effective lawmaker as manifested in the LES, cognizant of its aforementioned limitations relevant to centrists, who may be more likely to exercise legislative power at veto points than to pass legislation, a question that is worth investigating, but is beyond the scope of this paper.

As such, I hypothesize that, in a comparison of members of Congress, those who are centrists will be less effective than those who are not centrists, and that the difference in effectiveness between non-centrists and centrists increases over time. The independent variable under consideration is level of centrism as indicated by the legislators' DW-NOMINATE score, the standard measure in the field, and the dependent variable is the legislators' Legislative Effectiveness Score using Volden's and Wiseman's dataset. In testing the hypothesis, I will control for whether the legislator is in the majority or the minority, seniority, and race, each of which was a statistically significant factor in Volden's and Wiseman's analysis (2011, 252). Ultimately, in addition to presenting aggregate data, I will break down the data by session of Congress to identify trends such as whether, since the Republican takeover of the U.S. House of Representatives in 1994, after which lawmaking was consolidated to a much larger extent in the hands of the majority leadership and which many of the interviews in Thomsen's book identify as the moment in which being a moderate was increasingly untenable, centrists have been less effective. I anticipate that the results before 1994, when moderates recall frequently being courted for their vote and having their concerns taken seriously, and after

1994, when – particularly on the Republican side – moderates bemoan overt hostility towards their beliefs may diverge; if that is the case, further analysis will be warranted to identify a causal explanation.

## **Research Design**

### *Introduction*

In order to test these hypotheses, I examined data from the Legislative Effectiveness Score (LES) developed by Volden and Wiseman, which include data from 21 Congresses between 1971 and 2014 with observations from each of the 9366 members during that time period. I selected these data because this index is the first significant attempt to quantify the effectiveness of legislators in fulfilling their primary constitutional responsibility, passing laws. As discussed earlier in this paper, LES has several constraints, the most obvious of which is that it conceptualizes lawmaking rather narrowly: being the primary sponsor of a bill that advances in the legislative process. Brokering a tough compromise, making a speech or engaging behind-the-scenes wrangling to encourage affirmative votes, and exercising power at one of the many veto points to stop a piece of legislation that a legislator opposes are not captured in the dataset. Furthermore, conceptually, it seems that conservatives who favor small government may be less likely to propose new legislation and more likely to try to block legislation that expands the government, activities that would result in a lower LES score. Such a hypothesis would require additional analysis beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, LES provides a window into the effectiveness of legislators in lawmaking, which makes it useful for this paper.

### *Variable Measurements*

LES is measured on an additive scale that is normalized in each Congress such that the average is 1 for that Congress (Volden and Wiseman 2011, 245). For introducing a bill that achieves

any of five criteria – being introduced to the House, receiving action in committee, pass committee and receive action on the House floor, pass the House, and become law – a legislator receives an addition to his or her score, and the total additive score at the end of the Congress represents that member’s LES. To account for the lesser impact of naming a post office than adopting a budget, the score also divides bills into one of three categories: commemorative, substantive, and substantive & significant. Bills that received year-end write-ups in the *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* were deemed substantively significant, bills that provided for the renaming, commemoration, or celebration of a person or event were deemed commemorative, and all other bills were deemed substantive; the bills were thus weighed accordingly. The highest recorded value in the original dataset is Charlie Rangel, who scored 18.69 in the 100<sup>th</sup> Congress while serving as Chair of the House Committee on Ways and Means (Volden and Wiseman 2011, 242-46). Table 1, reproduced from Volden and Wiseman (2011) shows the average impact of various activities on an LES score through the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress (the original data go through the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress; subsequently, three additional Congresses have been appended).

	Commemorative	Substantive	Substantive & Significant
Introductions	0.0023	0.0116	0.0231
Action in Committee	0.0146	0.0732	0.1464
Actions beyond Committee	0.0181	0.0904	0.1808
Passed House	0.0223	0.1116	0.2232
Becomes Law	0.0457	0.2285	0.4570

Source: Volden and Wiseman (2011), 247

To measure ideology, I use the DW-NOMINATE measure developed by Poole and Rosenthal (1985), which places members on a scale of -1, which represents, most liberal, to 1, which represents most conservative; the theoretical center – and my area of interest – is near 0. For the purposes of generating descriptive statistics, I recoded DW-NOMINATE into a five-category ordinal measure, each of which represents an equal interval of theoretical ideological space within the index. As such, -1 to -0.6 represents extremely liberal, -0.6 to -0.2 represents liberal, -0.2 to 0.2 represents

moderate, 0.2 to 0.6 represents conservative, and 0.6 to 1 represents extremely conservative. Using this conceptualization, the underlying premise of the literature on centrism – namely the argument of Thomsen (2017) – as well as the theoretical foundation for this paper – that centrists are declining in number as Congress, and specifically the Republican party, moves to the right – is resoundingly confirmed in Table 2.

Ideology using DW-NOMINATE	Year at Start of Congress		Total
	Before 1994	1994 and After	
Extreme Liberal	158	169	327
Liberal	1970	1748	3718
Moderate	1263	294	1557
Conservative	1336	1357	2693
Extreme Conservative	80	816	896
Total	4807	4384	9191

Source: DW-NOMINATE score (Poole and Rosenthal 1985) recoded to five categories, each representing the same theoretical ideological space

Table 3 shows the mean legislative effectiveness for each group over the entire span of the data (1971-2014) (a graphical representation of which is shown in Figure 1), and Table 4 splits the timeframe almost in half – before 1994 and since 1994 – to begin probing the notion that moderates may have become less effective in the Gingrich era and beyond.

	Mean	Std. Err.	[95% Conf. Interval]	
Extreme Liberal	1.162158	.0819513	1.001516	1.322801
Liberal	1.104687	.02873	1.04837	1.161004
Moderate	.8475347	.0346334	.7796454	.9154239
Conservative	.9198844	.0280676	.8648657	.9749031
Extreme Conservative	1.025621	.0532819	.9211766	1.130065

Source: LES and DW-NOMINATE recoded to five categories, each representing the same theoretical ideological space

Figure 1: LES, by Ideology

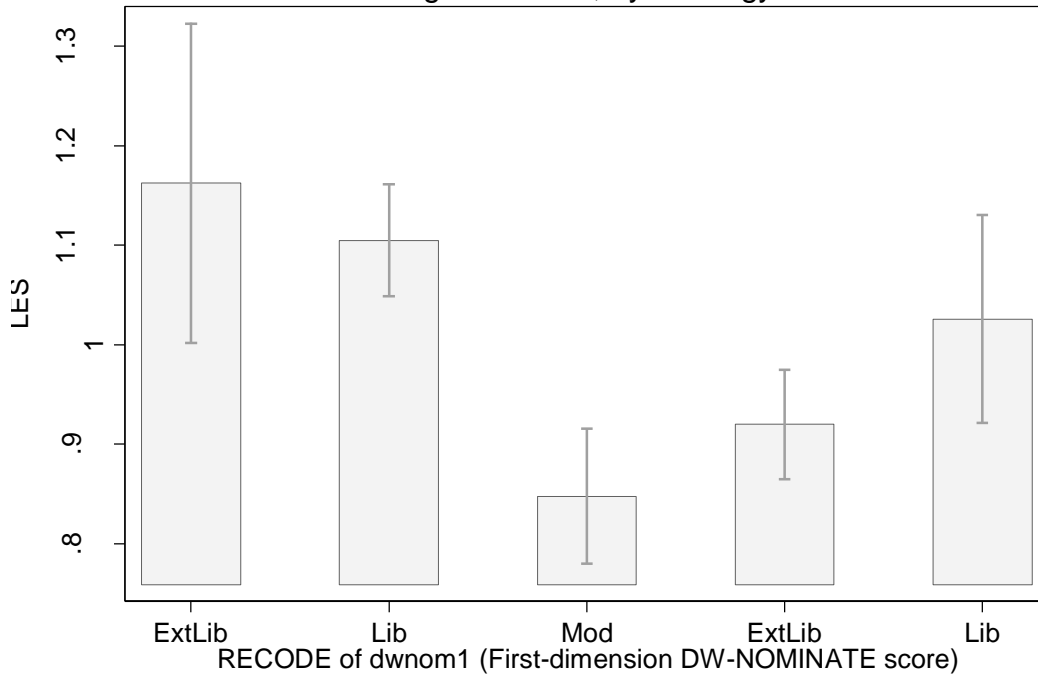


Table 4: Legislative Effectiveness by Ideological Group Before and After 1994

	Mean	Std. Err.	[95% Conf. Interval]	
Extreme Liberal Pre-1994	1.402041	.1127945	1.180939	1.623143
Extreme Liberal Since 1994	.9378895	.1161077	.7102927	1.165486
Liberal Pre-1994	1.543917	.047705	1.450405	1.63743
Liberal Since 1994	.6096734	.0240827	.5624659	.6568809
Moderate Pre-1994	.8234099	.0379739	.7489726	.8978472
Moderate Since 1994	.951173	.0837098	.7870832	1.115263
Conservative Pre-1994	.3752659	.0128106	.3501542	.4003775
Conservative Since 1994	1.456075	.0501725	1.357726	1.554424
Extreme Conservative Pre-1994	.3431658	.03487	.2748129	.4115187
Extreme Conservative Since 1994	1.092528	.057881	.9790687	1.205988

\*Source: LES Data (Volden and Wiseman) and Poole's DW-NOMINATE score recoded to five categories, each representing the same theoretical ideological space

Noting the high overlap in confidence intervals and cognizant of the breadth of endogenous factors that may affect legislative effectiveness, I added several control variables to isolate the affect of ideology on LES.

### *Model Estimation*

Because both the independent and dependent variable are interval level measurements, I used OLS regression to approximate the expected values for LES under a variety of conditions and controls. I ran two separate interactions and thus two separate models to analyze the effectiveness of legislators by ideology before and after 1994 as well as the effectiveness of legislators by ideology based on their seniority, cognizant that seniority is clearly suggestive of one's likelihood to hold key committee assignments and chairmanships as well as one's general influence.

In the first model, which interacted ideology and seniority, I controlled for majority status, chairmanship of a committee or subcommittee, party affiliation, and gender. Each of the control variables is a nominal level of measurement represented by a dummy variable, so I held each at their respective modal values (1 for majority status and party affiliation (Democrat=1), 0 for all others (Female=1)).

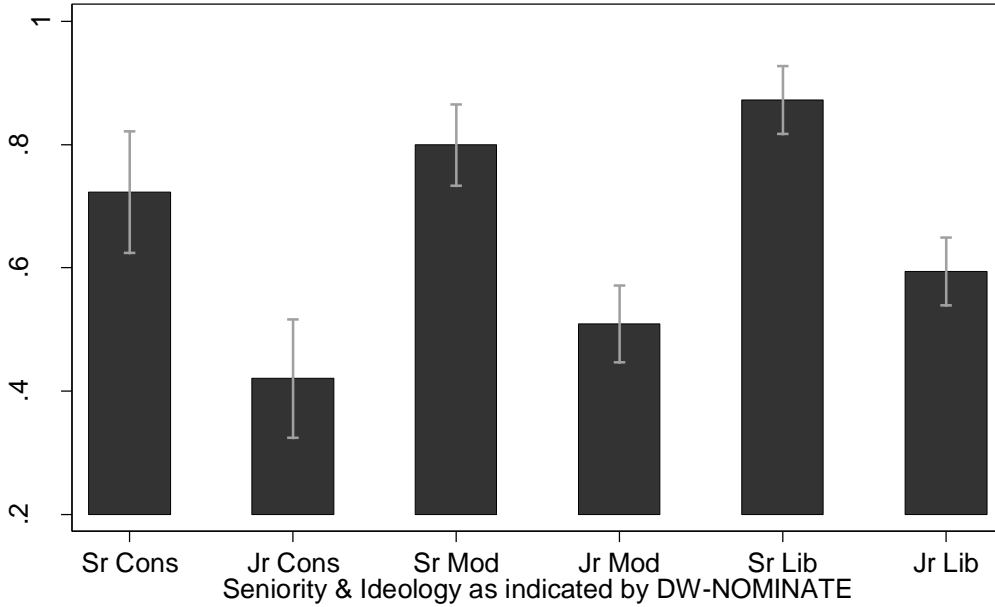
In the second model, which interacted ideology and whether the term in question was before 1994 or since 1994, I controlled for seniority, majority status, chairmanship of a committee or subcommittee, party affiliation, and gender. Seniority, an interval level measure wherein a score of 1 indicates a member is in his or her first term of service, 2 indicates second, and so forth, was held at its mean value, while all other control variables, as in the first model, were held at their modal values as indicated.

### *Results*



Model 1: Interaction of Ideology and Seniority

Figure 3: Legislative Effectiveness by Seniority & Ideology



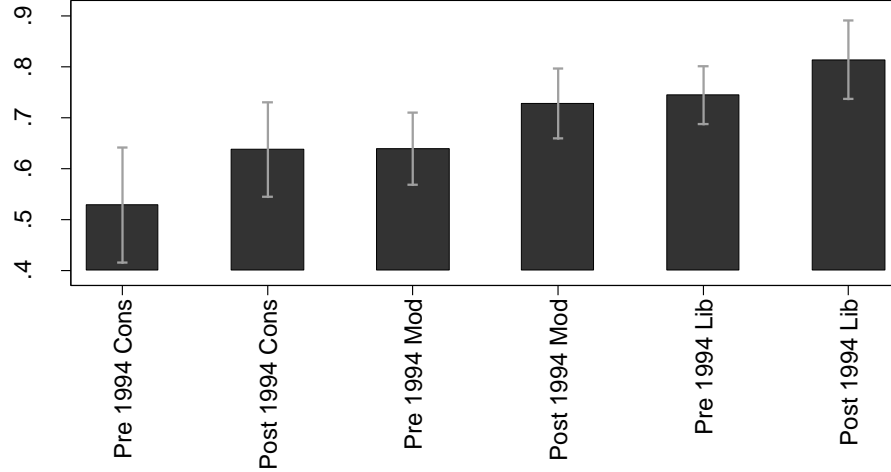
Data source: LES dataset. Results estimated using linear regression, holding leadership status, majority status, and gender at their modal values.

VARIABLES	(1) les
dwnom1	-0.271*** (0.0760)
seniority	0.0579*** (0.00363)
seniorconservative	0.00691 (0.00720)
majority	0.496*** (0.0323)
chair	3.183*** (0.0639)
subchr	0.818*** (0.0357)
dem	-0.336*** (0.0582)
female	0.0586 (0.0431)
Constant	0.234*** (0.0388)
Observations	9,194
R-squared	0.422

This model gives strong support to the value of seniority in determining legislative effectiveness, but, as indicated by the overlapping confidence intervals for moderates and liberals among junior and senior members and overlapping of confidence intervals for all three ideological groups, provides no evidence to reject the null hypothesis, that moderates and non-moderates are indistinguishable with respect to legislative effectiveness. The regression coefficients confirm Volden and Wiseman’s findings (2011) that committee and subcommittee chairmanship as well as status in the majority are among the best predictors of legislative effectiveness. Seniority and party affiliation bore lesser – yet still statistically significant – regression coefficients. This analysis produced no statistically significant findings with respect to the effect of gender on legislative effectiveness. In sum, this model provides no evidence to support the hypothesis that centrists are less effective than non-centrists in passing legislation.

Model 2: Interaction of Ideology and Term of Service

Figure 4: Legislative Effectiveness by Ideology & Year of Service



Ideology as indicated by DW-NOMINATE and Term of Service

Data source: LES dataset. Results estimated using linear regression, holding leadership status, majority status, and gender at its mode and seniority at its mean

VARIABLES	(1) les
dwnom1	-0.315*** (0.0862)
since1994	0.0890*** (0.0265)
dwnomsince1994	0.0548 (0.0886)
seniority	0.0560*** (0.00362)
majority	0.485*** (0.0415)
chair	3.185*** (0.0639)
subchr	0.826*** (0.0358)
dem	-0.358*** (0.0589)
female	0.0321 (0.0439)
Constant	0.217*** (0.0405)
Observations	9,194
R-squared	0.422

This model provides no evidence to reject its corresponding null hypothesis, that, since 1994, moderates have grown less effective as legislators in the post-Gingrich era. In fact, for none of the three ideological groups has the expected value for legislative effectiveness changed at a statistically significant level within this time gradation. Notably, however, pre-1994 conservatives appear less effective than post-1994 moderates and post-1994 liberals. Prior to 1994, Democrats held a majority in the House of Representatives, a majority that Republicans seized in 1994 and held through 2006 and again after the 2010 midterm elections. This finding may suggest that Democrats are more effective at legislating from the minority or that, as noted above with respect to the theoretical constraint of the LES model, that conservatives are inherently less apt to advance legislation and thus – in the construction of this model – engage in “effective lawmaking.” And, as with the previous model, the regression coefficients remain largely the same or very similar, and the same control variables that indicated statistical significance previously indicate it once again. In sum, this model provides no evidence to support the hypothesis that centrists have become less effective in the post-Gingrich era, and, furthermore, it provides no evidence that centrists are less effective than conservatives or liberals as lawmakers.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

The null hypothesis cannot be rejected in either case. As such, the data – at least in the permutations examined – does not support the theoretical argument I made that, as centrists have declined in number (which is established by the data), they have decreased in effectiveness. This is an interesting finding particularly with respect to the work of Thomsen (2017), who shows compellingly that, as moderates exhibit declining values of “party fit” (ideological adherence to their party), they are more apt to be defeated or, more likely, to retire. To some extent, this may suggest that those legislators who remain in Congress are those who are more effective, which may help to

explain the relative consistency of moderates' LES score across time despite their decreasing numbers. Similarly, those moderates who do decide to stay and continue to get re-elected establish the seniority that helps all legislators be more effective. Further research could help confirm or disprove those hypotheses.

What is clear is that moderates have declined precipitously in number, yet, at the same time, their effectiveness has not decreased correspondingly. Future research should analyze the effectiveness of moderates within narrower time windows – such as the periods of House speakerships – as well as longitudinal data showing the effectiveness of moderates over time to drill deeper into the question of under what conditions moderates are more effective legislators. Such research could also help voters – who exhibit profound antipathy towards the overall ineffectiveness of Congress – know which types of legislators are more apt to get things done. Until then, the current gridlock may well continue.

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