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### Moderate Caucuses in a Polarised US Congress

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# Moderate Caucuses in a Polarised US Congress

JUNGKUN SEO\* and SEAN M. THERIAULT

*Despite putting themselves in a thorny relationship with heavy-handed party leaders, some US legislators continue to join moderate coalitions. To understand why, this article derives seven explicit hypotheses concerning electoral, institutional, and strategic dimensions and tests them on two moderate coalitions from the 107th to the 110th Congress (2001–8): the Republican Main Street Partnership and the New Democrat Coalition, along with the Senate's 'Gang of 14' during the 109th Congress (2005–6). The article finds that, as expected, a member's ideology and previous affiliation strongly predict who joins these caucuses. What is surprising from the findings is that the constituencies' partisanship does not always predict the legislators' decision to be a moderate caucus member. There is little evidence that more electorally vulnerable members join these caucuses; on the contrary, when it does matter, members from competitive districts appear to stay away from moderate coalitions. Therefore, the findings call into question the prevailing 'constituency-based' understanding of moderate coalition membership in a polarised Congress and call for a new examination of electoral connection between moderate members and moderate caucuses.*

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Keywords: *US Congress; moderate caucus; party polarisation; electoral connection; strategic choices.*

The Democratic Leadership Council is sort of the Republican part of the Democratic Party ... the Republican wing of the Democratic Party. (Gov. Howard Dean on the campaign trail in New Hampshire, reported in *The Los Angeles Times*, 23 December 2003)

It is not an exaggeration to say that the resurgence of congressional party influence in American politics is a by-product of the increased ideological polarisation between the two parties (Binder 1996, Coleman 1997, Fleisher and Bond 2004, Jacobson 2001, Roberts and Smith 2003, Stonecash *et al.* 2003, Theriault 2008, Lee 2009). As the party members' ideologies have become more homogeneous within parties and more distinct across the parties, the rank-and-file members have delegated more authority to their party leaders (Cox and McCubbins 1993, Aldrich and Rohde 2000). In the 110th Congress (2007–8), Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Minority Leader John Boehner exercised powers that their 1970s' counterparts would have thought unthinkable. Although to a lesser extent, today's party leaders in the Senate routinely exercise institutional powers that Lyndon Johnson would not have dreamed of using in the 1950s. This age of intense party polarisation makes it harder for moderate members of Congress to maximise their internal power and, simultaneously, their electoral safety at home.

Just as the party leaders were consolidating power, moderates in both chambers became scarce. To combat the combined trends of more powerful and more extreme party leaders, more ideologically charged party caucuses, and their reduced ranks, moderates in both chambers formed institutionalised moderate caucuses (Koger *et al.* 2010). Although conservative Democrats enjoyed significant power during the heyday of the conservative coalition in the 1950s to the 1980s, both chambers had undergone significant changes rendering the idea of a moderate caucus, let alone the institutionalisation of one, far more suspect. In this highly partisan environment, the memberships in these moderate caucuses have remained stable, which suggests that they are still viewed as legitimate legislative coalitions.

Why would individual members risk alienating their party leaders to join these moderate caucuses in chambers where their party leaders control committee assignments, committee leadership positions, campaign resources, and floor procedures to a much greater extent than they did a generation ago? Their mere membership in these caucuses signals to their leaders that they are not only out of the mainstream of their parties, but also, on closely divided votes, the most likely party members to abandon their party. In the polarised atmosphere that pervades Capitol Hill today, where middle-of-the-road members suffer the same fate as armadillos in the middle of the road, why would members actively rebel against the mainstream of their party to join these moderate causes?<sup>1</sup> In this article, we flesh out the dynamics surrounding the membership in the Republican Main Street Partnership (RMSP), the New Democrat Coalition (NDC), and the Senate's 'Gang of 14'. First, we present the history of these caucuses. Second, in discussing the membership of these moderate caucuses, we offer seven hypotheses exploring the dynamics of who joins these caucuses. Third, we test our hypotheses and present our results. Fourth, we conclude.

Three findings from our analysis stand out. First, and least surprising, the members most likely to join these caucuses are moderate members; particularly those moderate members who signed on to the caucuses in the previous Congress. But, somewhat surprising, the decision to join a moderate caucus is more nuanced than simply considering a legislator's ideology or previous membership in the caucus. Depending upon the caucus, other variables in some but not all cases matter, including campaign contributions, seniority, majority party status, vote margin, and political ambition. Third, and perhaps most surprising, the 'forgivable' reasons for joining a moderate caucus prove to be an inconsistent indicator of actually joining one. In the eyes of the leadership, members should be allowed to join these caucuses if doing so increases their probability of re-election. Recognising that the only thing worse than a disloyal party member is a member from the opposite party, leaders condone members representing constituents who regularly vote for candidates from the opposite party straying from the party line. Nonetheless, our findings show that relatively inconsequential predictors of joining a moderate caucus are the partisan preferences of the members' constituencies and the members' electoral vulnerability.

### The Origins of the Moderate Caucuses

Congress has had ideological caucuses as long as it has had caucuses. In a time when the conservative coalition was in ascendancy, the liberals formed the Democratic Study Group (see Stevens *et al.* 1974, for an interesting article about the origins of the DSG). The Republicans were not as quick to form an ideological group, perhaps because the ideological tension within it was never as pronounced as it was in the Democratic Party. Moderate caucuses did not really enter the scene until after the 1994 elections, when moderates in both parties recognised opportunities presented in the highly competitive partisan environment. Republican moderates knew that they were critical for passage of the new Republican agenda, and Democratic moderates, whose ranks had been decimated in the election, knew that they could only again become a majority party if their ranks rebounded. This section describes the foundations of the Republican Main Street Partnership, the New Democrat Coalition, and the Gang of 14.

#### *Republican Main Street Partnership (RMSP)*

When the 1994 midterm election swept conservative Republicans into power, moderate Grand Old Party (GOP) members became concerned about the dominance of their conservative colleagues.<sup>2</sup> In light of the Clinton impeachment in 1998, moderate Republicans became even more troubled by the takeover of their party by social conservatives. Determined to voice their centrist policy agendas, Representative Amo Houghton (R-NY) along with a handful of centrist GOP members institutionalised their group as the Republican Main Street Partnership during the thick of the 1998 elections.<sup>3</sup> The moderate Republican members attempted to counter the GOP image as an impeachment party incapable of bipartisan lawmaking.

Using the electoral rebuke of the 1998 elections, moderate Republicans, mostly from Democratic-leaning districts located in the Northeast and Midwest, transformed the RMSP from a purely policy group into a political organisation with the intention of representing the moderate wing of the Republican Party (White 1999). As it has aged, it has grown, which is no easy feat, considering that the number of moderates in Congress, especially in the Republican Party, has declined (Binder 1996, Fleisher and Bond 2004). In the 107th Congress, it claimed 50 members (43 House members and seven senators).<sup>4</sup> Three congresses later, it had 57 members. The Main Street members define themselves as fiscal conservatives and social moderates, currently focusing on the issues of deficit reduction, education, ethical standards, health care, stem-cell research, high technology, and terrorism.<sup>5</sup>

#### *The House and Senate New Democrat Coalition (NDC)*

The origins of the New Democrat Coalition date back to the landslide loss of Walter Mondale to Ronald Reagan in the 1984 presidential election (Klinkner

2001, Shoch 2001). Moderate and conservative Democrats felt that the party was stuck with an outdated liberal ideology and was held captive by various 'special interests'. To move the party back to the political centre, moderate Democrats, particularly from the south and west, established the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) in 1985 (Hale 1995, Rae 1998, Baer 2000). Founded as an unofficial party organisation of elected Democrats, the DLC has tried to win not just the Congress but also the White House (Hale 1995).<sup>6</sup> In the end, the successful candidacy of Bill Clinton as a New Democrat in the 1992 presidential election, combined with the creation of the think tank the Progressive Policy Institute (PPI), facilitated the institutionalisation of the DLC as an influential moderate caucus within the party.<sup>7</sup>

Although the DLC had existed for the better part of two decades, it was not until 1997 that the DLC established an official House caucus, whose primary aims were passing strong defence and pro-business legislation. Three years later, Senators Evan Bayh (IN), Bob Graham (FL), Mary Landrieu (LA), Joseph Lieberman (CT) and Blanche Lincoln (AK) created the Senate New Democrat Coalition (SNDC). The NDC, which has separate organisations in the House and Senate, has included roughly one-third of Democratic House members, and two-fifths of Democratic senators.<sup>8</sup> As they have aged, their agenda has grown – for example, it now includes issues of personal responsibility and technology development.<sup>9</sup>

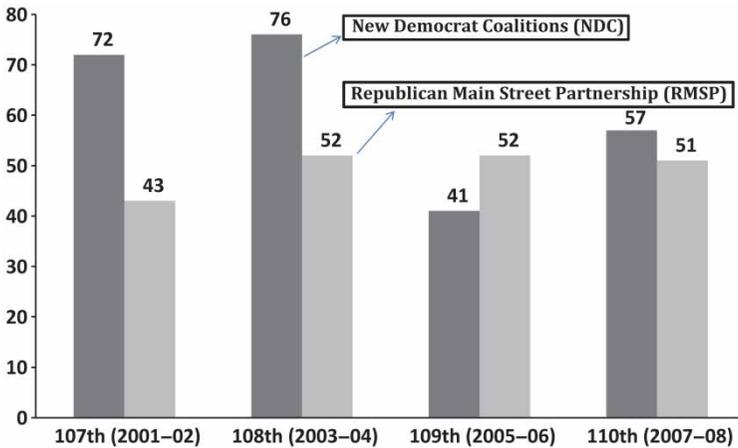
### *The Gang of 14 in the Senate*

In spring 2005, the Republican Senate majority leader Bill Frist (TN) proposed the so-called 'nuclear option' – or in his words, 'constitutional option' – a Senate rule change prohibiting filibusters on judicial nominations, to advance five appellate court nominees who had been blocked by Democrats. As the intensity over the issue increased and as the leadership of the respective parties dug in their heels, seven senators from each party brokered a compromise that averted a showdown. The group, which became known as the Gang of 14, advocated for an up-or-down vote on all judicial nominees except under 'extraordinary circumstances'.

The Gang of 14 was composed of seven GOP Senators – McCain (AZ), Graham (SC), Warner (VA), Snowe (ME), Collins (ME), DeWine (OH), and Chafee (RI) – and seven Senate Democrats – Lieberman (CT), Byrd (WV), Nelson (NE), Landrieu (LA), Inouye (HI), Pryor (AK), and Salazar (CO). Indeed, the Republican Party in the 109th Senate held a five vote Senate majority (55–45) and the Democratic Party kept only four more votes above the minimum 41 votes to sustain a filibuster. As a consequence, seven defectors from either party safely prevented the GOP from maintaining a simple majority for a rule change, and the Senate Democrats from holding a filibuster against cloture voting.

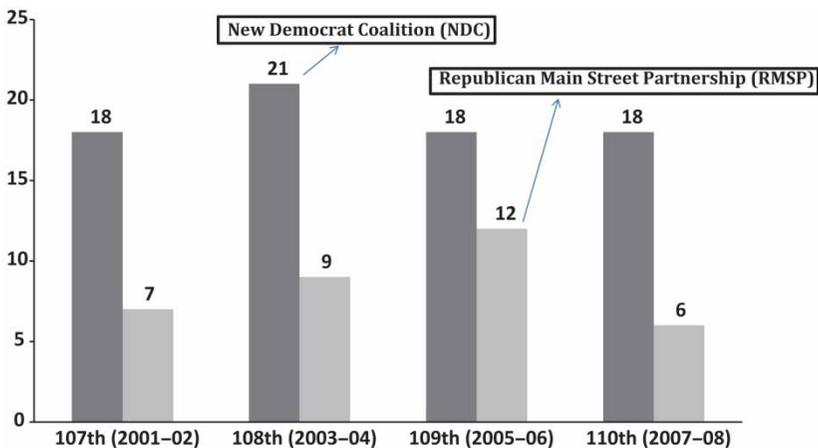
The Gang of 14 successfully prevented both judicial filibusters and the use of nuclear option in a vow to oppose their own party leaders. Criticised by both

Figure 1: Membership in the House Moderate Caucuses, 107th to 110th Congresses (2001–8)



conservatives and liberals in their parties, but hailed by moderates in Congress,<sup>10</sup> the Gang of 14 also helped pave the way for the Roberts and Alito Supreme Court nominations.<sup>11</sup> The remnants of the Gang of 14 helped to smooth the confirmation process for Obama’s two Supreme Court nominees. Although the group of 14 Senate moderates was less successful in trying to resolve partisan gridlock on other issues, they have become the senators to watch as the parties try to compromise on other legislative matters. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the magnitude of membership in moderate caucuses for both chambers from 2001 to 2008.

Figure 2: Membership in the Senate Moderate Caucuses, 107th to 110th Congresses (2001–8)



## Who Joins Moderate Caucuses?

Having these organisations on the books, of course, does not guarantee that members will join them. This section of the article explores the dynamics underlying members' decisions on whether to join these caucuses. We present seven hypotheses along three dimensions: constituency characteristics, member characteristics, and strategic decision-making.

### *Constituency Characteristics*

*H1. Constituency Partisanship Hypothesis:* Democratic (likewise, Republican) members coming from more conservative (liberal) constituencies are more likely to join moderate caucuses than members from liberal (conservative) constituencies.

The Constituency Partisanship Hypothesis tests the nature of representative democracy in America. In its purest form, members' behaviours on Capitol Hill should reflect the flavour of their constituencies' ideology. A plethora of studies find that members' voting records are very much in line with their constituencies (Miller and Stokes 1963, Mayhew 1974, Cain *et al.* 1987, Bartels 1991, Canes-Wrone *et al.* 2002). A few studies even find that their memberships in caucuses are heavily influenced by their constituents, though few of these studies examine ideologically based caucuses (Hammond 1998, Rae 1998, Reiter 2004, Medvic 2007). We use the *Democratic presidential vote within constituency* in the most recent election to test if members from moderate constituencies belong to moderate caucuses.<sup>12</sup>

*H2. Campaign Contributions Hypothesis:* Democrats (Republicans) who receive more contributions from labour Political Action Committees (PACs) are less (more) likely to join moderate caucuses.

With the Campaign Contributions Hypothesis, we recognise that members not only try to please their geographic constituencies, but also their primary and general election constituencies (Fenno 1978). The more support a Democratic member gets from labour, the less likely, we hypothesise, that they would join the more business-friendly New Democrat Coalition. Also, we test whether the more campaign money comes from labour PACs, the more likely Republicans are to join RMSP.<sup>13</sup> We operationalize *labour contributions* as the percentage of the members' total campaign receipts that come from labour PACs.<sup>14</sup>

### *Member Characteristics*

*H3. Inertia Hypothesis:* A member who belonged to a moderate caucus in the last Congress is likely to continue that membership in future congresses.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about this hypothesis is that it is included in the model at all. We assumed that upon their first election, members would decide which of the caucuses they would join and that they would continue their

**Table 1: Membership in Moderate Caucuses across Congresses, 2001–8**

	The House of Representatives				The Senate			
	NDC		RMSP		NDC		RMSP	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Consistent Members	67	(22.9)	49	(16.6)	17	(25.4)	7	(10)
Members who Join	19	(6.5)	28	(9.5)	7	(10.4)	5	(7.1)
Members who Leave	34	(11.6)	11	(3.7)	4	(5.9)	5	(7.1)
Consistent Non-members	173	(59.0)	208	(70.3)	39	(58.2)	52	(75.7)

membership in these caucuses as long as they maintained their seats in Congress – such logic is consistent with the ‘expanding’ and ‘protectionist’ phases of members’ congressional careers (Fenno 1978).<sup>15</sup>

That assumption proved to be true in a large number of cases, but not in every case. Across chambers and across parties, on average, about 7 per cent of all members leave moderate caucuses and 8.4 per cent of all veteran members sign up for a moderate caucus after having previously decided not to join it (see Table 1 for a chamber and party breakdown). Quite simply, the inertia hypothesis is tested by including an indicator variable, *previous moderate coalition member*, for membership in the moderate caucus in the previous Congress.

The second operationalisation of the inertia hypothesis is *years in the chamber*. We would expect more senior members to be substantially less likely to join moderate caucuses, while junior members are more likely to be interested in moderate coalitions to assess their potential chance to break with the party, if necessary (Lucas and Deutchman 2007).

*H4. Ideology Hypothesis:* A member with a more moderate ideology is more likely to join a moderate caucus than a more ideologically pure member.

Ideology, in our tests, is measured by members’ *DW-NOMINATE* scores (Poole and Rosenthal 1997). To ensure that we have a pure test of this hypothesis, we include the members’ ideology scores from the previous Congress. If we included the ideology score from the current Congress, we would be tainting the causal relationship. It could be that moderate members join moderate caucuses or that moderate caucuses encourage their members to vote moderately (Matthews and Stimson 1975, Panning 1983, Erikson 1990, Medvic 2007).

Because our dataset includes the 110th Congress (2007–8), we can test to see if moderate members are more likely to join moderate caucuses when they are in the majority versus the minority. In the 2006 midterm elections, the Democratic Party assumed majority control in both chambers for the first time since 1994. We add *majority party* variable to test whether majority status provides any positive

incentives for members to join moderate caucuses. Lucas and Deutchman (2010) find that members of moderate factions receive considerably more support from the leadership when their party is in the minority. Our focus, turning the table around, is on members' incentives to join moderate caucuses and, given the characteristics of majority party as a 'big-tent' coalition, we expect majority members to be more likely to sign on to moderate coalitions than minority lawmakers.

### *Strategic Considerations*

*H5. Vulnerable Member Hypothesis:* Members who just barely won their previous election or who face imminent threats are more likely to join a moderate caucus than electorally secure members.

Members who barely survived their last election are eager to expand their general election constituency to ensure an easier election the next time around (Fenno 1978). Likewise, senators with inconsistent caucus membership might sign on to caucuses in the Congress just before they face re-election. As such, this hypothesis has one operationalisation for the House and two for the Senate. For both chambers, the more vulnerable the member is – as measured by *two-party vote in their last general election* – the more likely the member is to join the moderate caucuses.<sup>16</sup> The additional operationalisation for senators is an indicator variable for senators whose terms expire at the conclusion of the current Congress. In other words, this variable, *up next*, indicates whether a senator is up for re-election or not.

*H6. Differentiation Hypothesis:* Members are more likely to join a moderate caucus if doing so differentiates them from their same-state colleagues.

Schiller (2000) suggests that senators from the same state feel pressure to differentiate themselves from their same-state colleagues. The nature of a two-member delegation in the Senate, according to Schiller, leads same-state senators to attempt to secure an independent reputation and to build distinctive coalitions. She tested this theory of 'dual representation' on senators' legislative behaviour such as roll-call voting, committee selection, bill (co)sponsorship, and amendment sponsorship. To some extent, we test her argument and see whether joining a moderate coalition is another strategy for senators to differentiate themselves successfully. Also, historically, such differentiation occurred naturally through geography (Brunell and Grofman 1998). Especially when state legislatures chose senators, they would reserve one senate seat for one part of the state and the other for a different part.

We hypothesise that members use memberships in moderate caucuses to differentiate themselves from other members from the same state. In the Senate, we test this hypothesis using two different indicator variables. First, the *same party* variable indicates if the senator's colleague is in the same party. Second, the *colleague coalition* variable indicates if the senator's colleague

is in the moderate caucus. All of the senators from states that have senators from the opposite party are coded zero. This scoring will not affect the coalition variable's influence in the model as the entire effect of the zero will affect the same party variable.

Although the desire for differentiation is probably not as great for House members, we nonetheless test the hypothesis in the House as well. The differentiation variable is the percentage of the member's same state and same party colleagues that are in the moderate caucus. For example, in the 109th Congress, Pennsylvania sent seven Democrats to the House. Only Representative Allyson Schwartz was a member of the New Democrats Coalition. As such, the differentiation variable takes on a value of 0.167 for all of the Democrats not in the NDC from Pennsylvania and 0 for Schwartz.

*H7. Moving-up Hypothesis (House only):* Members of the House from more moderate states are more likely to join moderate caucuses.

Members from moderate states, even if they represent highly partisan districts, may join moderate caucuses with an eye towards running for state-wide office. To see if such forethought can systematically explain membership in the moderate caucuses, the *states' two-party vote for the most recent Democratic presidential candidate* is included in the model. This variable should be inversely related to moderate caucus membership for Democrats and directly related to membership for Republicans.

### The Evidence from those who Join Moderate Caucuses

To determine what motivates a representative's decision to join moderate caucuses, we simultaneously test the seven hypotheses using logistic regression. The dichotomous dependent variable is whether the member joined the moderate caucus. All members and senators from the 107th to the 110th Congress (2001–8) are included in the analysis. The observations for the Gang of 14 include the senators serving only in the 109th Congress. Furthermore, because we do not have estimates for some of the independent variables for first-term members, our analysis must be a bit more nuanced. In the House, we divide our samples into two groups: freshman and veterans. In the Senate, because the freshman category would contain too few observations to run multivariate analysis, we include regression estimates for all the members deleting the variables from the analysis that we do not have for first-term members and for all the veterans, including the entire set of variables.

All 10 models perform well. The pseudo- $R^2$  is above 0.4 in six of the models and the percentage of observations correctly predicted is always more than 65 per cent. Roughly half of the independent variables are statistically significant<sup>17</sup> (see Tables 2 to 4 for the results). Because logistic regression results do not lend themselves to easy interpretation, we present the substantive results in Table 5. Because the results for the Gang of 14 were least interesting (only constituency

**Table 2: Incentives to Join Moderate Caucuses in the House**

Independent Variables	New Democrat Coalition		Republican Main Street Partnership	
	Frosh	Veteran	Frosh	Veteran
<i>Constituency Characteristics</i>				
Democratic Presidential Vote within Constituency	-5.591* (3.48)	3.069 (2.13)	13.31 (10.87)	8.683 ** (4.01)
Labor PAC Contribution Percentage	-0.102 *** (0.03)	-0.036 ** (0.01)	0.537 *** (0.21)	-0.035 (0.03)
<i>Member Characteristics</i>				
Previous Moderate Coalition Member	-	5.517 *** (0.42)	-	5.004 *** (0.55)
Years in Chamber	-	-0.072 *** (0.02)	-	-0.060 ** (0.02)
DW-NOMINATE	-	4.810 *** (1.82)	-	-10.86 *** (2.18)
Majority Party	0.725 (0.81)	2.254 *** (0.55)	-	-1.062 ** (0.54)
<i>Strategic Considerations</i>				
Vote Margin	0.0238 (2.94)	-2.10 (1.33)	-2.004 (7.68)	0.512 (1.51)
Same Party-Same State Moderate Coalition Member Percentage	-0.629 (1.30)	1.304 (0.89)	-0.924 (3.80)	-6.541 *** (1.46)
Democratic Presidential Vote in State	7.782 ** (3.66)	3.458 (2.92)	-1.651 (12.7)	11.45 *** (4.13)
Constant	0.422 (2.11)	-3.189 ** (1.50)	-7.186 (7.57)	-4.257 (2.79)
Number of Observations	95	758	104	591
Pseudo- $R^2$	0.16	0.70	0.24	0.68
Percentage Correctly Predicted	67.4%	94.3%	96.2%	93.7%

\*Statistically significant at 0.10; \*\* at 0.05; \*\*\* at 0.01.

Dependent variable coded 1 if member is in moderate caucus and 0 otherwise.

Table 3: Incentives to Join Moderate Caucuses in the Senate

Independent Variables	New Democrat Coalition		Republican Main Street Partnership	
	Veteran	All	Veteran	All
<i>Constituency Characteristics</i>				
Democratic Presidential Vote within Constituency	-0.040 (0.04)	-0.127*** (0.03)	-0.012 (0.06)	0.140*** (0.04)
Labor PAC Contribution Percentage	-0.003 (0.01)	-0.05*** (0.01)	0.165 (0.12)	0.503*** (0.10)
<i>Member Characteristics</i>				
Previous Moderate Coalition Member	3.484*** (0.63)	-	3.165*** (0.86)	-
Years in Chamber	-0.051* (0.02)	-0.062*** (0.02)	-0.118** (0.05)	-0.114*** (0.04)
DW-NOMINATE	8.628*** (3.22)	-	-16.11*** (4.97)	-
<i>Strategic Considerations</i>				
Vote Margin	-1.093 (1.83)	-1.597 (1.36)	4.186*** (1.73)	2.913*** (1.13)
Up Next	-0.374 (0.60)	-0.021 (0.38)	-1.106 (0.90)	-0.213 (0.56)
State Colleague in Caucus	-0.364 (0.66)	-0.446 (0.45)	2.487** (1.24)	1.297** (0.67)
Same Party State Colleague	1.415* (0.77)	1.232*** (0.48)	-1.158 (0.93)	-1.451*** (0.61)
Constant	4.187** (1.89)	7.462*** (1.43)	3.472 (3.94)	-8.022*** (2.20)
Number of Observations	171	193	186	205
Pseudo- $R^2$	0.58	0.24	0.69	0.40
Percentage Correctly Predicted	89.5%	76.68%	94.1%	89.3%

\*Statistically significant at 0.10; \*\* at 0.05; \*\*\* at 0.01.

Dependent variable coded 1 if member is in moderate caucus and 0 otherwise.

**Table 4: Incentives to Join the Gang of 14 in the Senate**

Independent Variables	Gang of 14	
	Democrat	Republican
<i>Constituency Characteristics</i>		
Democratic Presidential Vote within Constituency	-0.168** (0.08)	0.347** (0.14)
Labor PAC Contribution Percentage	0.002 (0.04)	0.219 (0.26)
<i>Member Characteristics</i>		
Years in Chamber	0.039 (0.05)	-0.079 (0.10)
<i>Strategic Considerations</i>		
Vote Margin	-1.369 (4.00)	4.02* (2.41)
Up Next	-0.367 (1.01)	0.891 (1.22)
State Colleague in Caucus	-2.335 (1.66)	-1.639 (1.45)
Same Party State Colleague	1.252 (1.52)	3.424 (2.53)
Constant	5.866 (3.82)	-21.50*** (8.23)
Number of Observations	45	55
Pseudo-R <sup>2</sup>	0.17	0.43
Percentage Correctly Predicted	86.7%	90.9%

\*Statistically significant at 0.10; \*\* at 0.05; \*\*\* at 0.01.

Dependent variable coded 1 if member is a member of the Gang of 14 and 0 otherwise.

partisanship seemed to have a significant effect on joining the Gang), we reserve most of our discussion to the eight models that predict moderate coalition membership.

#### *Constituency Characteristics*

Constituency partisanship appears to be, at best, an inconsistent factor when members consider joining moderate caucuses. In half the models, the result is insignificant. This result surprised us. Coming from a moderate constituency is, perhaps, the most legitimate reason in the eyes of party leadership that members have for joining moderate caucuses. Moving a member from a red district to a blue one increased their probability of joining the RMSP by 34 per cent. Table 5 reports the substantive significance for all of the hypotheses which contained variables that were statistically significant. Each percentage is evaluated for a member with mean characteristics except for the variable in question, which is moved from its minimum to maximum values.

Surprisingly, if we set aside the results for the Gang of 14, the percentage of labour contributions helps explain moderate caucus membership in more models than the constituencies' partisanship. Among each party in both chambers, labour contribution is significant in one of the two models. For example, switching a House Democrat from receiving almost no support from labour PACs to receiving a substantial amount decreases his probability of joining the NDC by almost 16 per cent. From the outset, we expected the relative importance of the two constituency variables to be reversed.

**Table 5: Incentives to Join Moderate Caucuses in Congress**

	House NDC		House RMSP		Senate NDC		Senate RMSP		Senate Gang of 14		
	Frosh	Veteran	Frosh	Veteran	Veteran	All	Vetran	All	Democrat	Republican	
<i>Constituency Characteristics</i>											
Constituency Partisan Hypothesis	-0.515			0.342			-0.720		0.503	-0.669	0.914
Campaign Contribution Hypothesis	-0.821	-0.161	0.547				-0.670		0.969		
<i>Member Characteristics</i>											
Inertia Hypothesis		0.805		0.816	0.701		0.184				
Seniority Hypothesis		-0.195		-0.135	-0.427	-0.510	-0.061	-0.215			
Ideology Hypothesis		0.628		-0.861	0.982		-0.952				
Majority Party		0.287		-0.110							
<i>Strategic Considerations</i>											
Vulnerability Hypothesis							0.223	0.326			0.282
Differentiation Hypothesis				-0.236	0.267	0.248	0.109	0.119			
Moving-up Hypothesis	0.548			0.383							

*Note:* Substantive significance of the variables for members evaluated at minimum to maximum levels on the variables of interest (all other variables evaluated at their mean). Numbers in cells are changes in probabilities of joining a moderate caucus coded in the direction of the hypotheses.

*Member Characteristics*

Without a doubt, member characteristics were the most important predictors of moderate caucus membership. Once members sign on to a moderate caucus, they are extremely likely to maintain that membership throughout their career. Interestingly, though, moderate caucus membership in the Senate did not help explain a senator's involvement in the Gang of 14 – five of the seven Democrats in the Gang of 14 were in the NDC and four of the seven Republicans in the Gang of 14 were in the RMSP. Although both are above 50 per cent, it is interesting that all of the members of the Gang of 14 did not come from these moderate caucuses (especially considering that 12 Republicans belonged to the RMSP and 18 Democrats belonged to the NDC). This might have to do with the nature of the Gang of 14, which came into existence to resolve a procedural issue in the Senate. The moderate caucuses exist to enact moderate policy solutions. As such, the Gang of 14 may be made up of senators who revere the old Senate, such as Warner and Inouye, more so than senators seeking moderate policies.

Because first-term members do not have values for previous membership, years in the chamber, and DW-NOMINATE, member characteristics were only evaluated for veterans. The results are consistent across both parties and both chambers. Unsurprisingly, previous membership in the caucus always predicted continued membership in the caucus. Furthermore, the longer a member served in the chamber without joining the moderate coalitions, the less likely they were to join.

Likewise, a member's ideology, unsurprisingly, was statistically significant in every model. Centrist Republicans and Senate Democrats have an 86 to 98 per cent higher probability of joining than their ideologically charged colleagues. The effect for House Democrats, while still substantial, is a bit muted. Centrist House Democrats are only 62 per cent more likely to join than their liberal colleagues. House Democrats were also more likely to join the NDC when they were in the majority, which increased their probability of joining by 28 per cent.<sup>18</sup>

*Strategic Considerations*

We had thought that if a member had just barely survived their last election, they would be more likely to join moderate caucuses as an attempt to appeal to the moderate voters in the hope of securing easier re-election. The multivariate analysis, however, suggests that just the opposite may be the case, especially among Republicans in the Senate. Safe Republicans were much more likely to join the Senate's RMSP and the vote margin variable was insignificant in the other seven models. The results for Republicans in the Senate suggest that vulnerability may lead Republicans to be more loyal party members in the hope of securing legislative favours and campaign contributions from party leaders. Democrats and Republicans in the House and Democrats in the Senate may be pursuing opposite strategies that render the hypothesis impotent in multivariate analyses.

The variables measuring the relationship between members' colleagues and their membership in moderate coalitions were a mixed bag. Differentiation

seemed to propel Senate Democrats into joining the coalitions, but hindered House Republicans. House Republicans who had same party–same state colleagues who were RMSP members were about 23 per cent less likely to join the coalition. When Republican senators had their colleagues in the RMSP, they were about 11 per cent more likely to join the same caucus.

## Conclusion

Congressional scholars continue to debate whether polarised parties have promoted responsible party government in America or have provoked a severe partisan gridlock on Capitol Hill. What is hardly disputed, however, is the fact that political parties in recent years have become internally cohesive and externally distinct. As a result, the subject of strong party leadership and homogeneous policy preferences among members has dominated the latest research of Congress. Indeed, a number of studies have identified the sources and consequences of party polarisation in contemporary American politics (Aldrich 1995, Stonecash *et al.* 2003, Fleisher and Bond 2004, Sinclair 2006, Carson *et al.* 2007, Bishop 2008, Theriault 2008, Lee 2009).

Given that ‘polarisation’ has become a buzzword in both practical and academic arenas, we found the mere existence of moderate caucuses quite puzzling. Previous studies of the party caucus formation, such as Hammond (1998), have largely focused on issue- and policy-oriented intraparty groups. Particularly when major American parties have long been described as ‘umbrella-like’ broad and encompassing organisations (Aldrich 1995), it has been natural for diverse intraparty caucuses to come and go in legislative processes. If the two parties have transformed into united and distinct legislative forces in Congress, we could have expected centrist groups to vanish inside each party. We notice, on the contrary, that moderate coalitions continued to exist in the most recent legislatures from 2001 to 2008.

In this article, we have confirmed and confronted a series of expectations in understanding why legislators join moderate caucuses in a polarised Congress. First, our findings confirm the solid relationship between ideology and membership so that we suggest that these moderate coalitions are ideologically cohesive. Moderate groups within parties are not fake but firm on their ideological grounds. Second, as expected, if legislators have been members of moderate coalitions, they tend to hang on to their membership over time. Finally, electoral vulnerability is, perhaps, the worst predictor of joining moderate coalitions. When it did matter (among Senate Republicans), it mattered in a way opposite to our hypothesis; safe members were more likely to join than their electorally weak colleagues.

Given the importance of member-oriented factors, we found that constituency-based understanding of moderate caucuses as a conventional wisdom ought to be re-evaluated. The media report on the tendency of representatives elected from neither red nor blue districts to join moderate caucuses. Our empirical analyses show a somewhat different electoral connection in the era

of partisan polarisation. Constituency partisanship is neither a dominant nor even a distinct reason for joining moderate coalitions in almost half of the models.

Indeed, this result is an interesting deviation from traditional explanations of moderate group formation. For instance, the Conservative Democratic Forum led by Representative Charles Stenholm (D-TX) was known to recruit many southern and conservative Democrats. The Tuesday Lunch Bunch within the GOP appealed to moderate Republicans from blue states. We suggest that in the era of a polarised Congress that endows party leaders with ample power, some legislators might find it risky to join moderate caucuses, and rewarding to appeal to the party base.<sup>19</sup>

Strategic positioning by politicians in the post-2006 election is a case in point. Senator Bob Corker of Tennessee, newly elected to the 110th Congress, was rumoured to be joining the Republican Main Street Partnership, but ultimately he decided to distance himself from this moderate group. After his close loss to Senator Corker, former House Democrat Harold Ford Jr., on the other hand, accepted the chairmanship of the centrist Democratic Leadership Council (DLC). In the end, the new incumbent found it necessary to hold on to his party base, while the challenger for a possible rematch sought to reach out to the political centre.

We believe that a natural next step for this research is to examine the impact of coalition membership on voting decision in the lawmaking processes. If members of moderate coalitions act together over key legislation, we ought to add moderate coalition membership as another critical voting decision principle in a polarised Congress. Yet if moderate groups do not behave as a voting bloc, two questions result. First, what really made legislators join moderate coalitions in the first place if they are not necessarily acting collectively to push for legislative agendas? The other puzzle to solve has to do with electoral connection between moderate coalition legislators and voters. If moderate coalition membership does not translate into moderate voices in legislative arenas, is a linkage between party-in-the-electorate and party-in-government simply shaky and distorted in a polarised US Congress.

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### Notes

1. The armadillo analogy, regrettably, is not original to us. Former Texas Agriculture Commissioner Jim Hightower famously noted that 'There's nothing in the middle of the road but yellow stripes and dead armadillos' (*New York Times*, 8 Nov. 1990). Congressman Pete Sessions (R-TX) also used it to explain to one of us that middle-of-the-road members should suffer the same fate as that armadillo on the road. It should be noted, during the same meeting, Congressman Sessions

- had mixed reactions when he learned that, according to the *Almanac of American Politics*, he was the fifth most conservative member in the House. He was delighted that others knew about his conservative voting record but jealous that four members had worked out a way to become more conservative than him.
2. Shortly after the Republicans took over Congress in 1995, Representatives Nancy Johnson (CT), Steve Gunderson (WI), and Fred Upton (MI) led an initial conversation of moderate Republicans. Gunderson served eight terms in the House and did not seek re-election to the 105th Congress in 1996. In 2006 midterm election, Rep. Johnson, the 11-term Congresswoman, lost her re-election bid, while Rep. Upton easily kept his House seat.
  3. Rep. Amo Houghton (NY) was one of only four Republicans who voted against all the impeachment articles against President Clinton in 1998. He also voted against permanently repealing the estate tax in 2001 and the use of military force in Iraq in 2002.
  4. After the 2006 midterm election, the Republican Party held only one of 22 House seats in New England. In turn, Rep. Christopher Shays' (R-CT) loss in the 2008 election makes the whole of New England's House delegation entirely Democratic in the 111th Congress (2009–10).
  5. For further information on membership and mission, see the RMSP website, <http://www.republicanmainstreet.org>
  6. According to Faux (1993), one of the main goals of 'New Democrats' was to recapture the Reagan Democrats who defected from the party in the 1980s.
  7. PPI scholars such as Galston and Kamarck (1989) laid out the political case against liberal Democrats. They claimed that the Democratic Party should be disillusioned from diverse myths such as 'liberal fundamentalism', 'mobilization', and 'congressional bastion'. The critics of the DLC, however, raised the question over their long-term commitment to centrist ideology. Klinkner (2001) claims that there is little indication that the ideas of the New Democrats constitute a truly transformative political ideology. Rae (1998) also points out that the New Democrats movement has failed to build a 'neo-liberal' grassroots as a new coalitional base for the Democratic Party.
  8. We thank Stephen Medvic for sharing his House NDC membership data during the 106th Congress.
  9. See for further details, the NDC website, <http://www.house.gov/tauscher/ndc/>; Moderate Democrats also founded the Blue Dog Coalition in 1994, whose membership has varied from 40 to 60 members. As a voting bloc, Blue Dog Democrats are most concerned about fiscal responsibility and economic policy. We did some preliminary analysis on the Blue Dog Coalition and found that the results for it did not differ appreciably from the NDC, though the Blue Dog Coalition had a more southern flavour.
  10. Conservative Senator George Allen (R-VA) said of Sen. Warner, a senior senator from the same state and a Gang of 14 member, that 'We clearly have different views on the filibuster' (Kane 2005). In the Democratic Party, Howard Dean questioned whether the compromise is good for Democrats. 'We don't know if this is a victory in the long run or not'. The Congressional Black Caucus blasted the agreement as 'more of a capitulation than a compromise' for allowing those votes. Senator Russell Feingold (D-WI) said it would encourage the White House 'to send more nominees who lack the judicial temperament or record to serve in these lifetime positions' (Balz 2005).
  11. On 29 September 2005, John G. Roberts was confirmed by 78 to 22 votes in the Senate. All 14 Gang members except for Sen. Inouye (D-HI) voted for Roberts as Chief Justice. The entire Gang of 14 members voted for the cloture motion, and then several Gang members later voted against the confirmation of Samuel Alito into the Supreme Court including GOP Senator Lincoln Chafee (RI).
  12. As such, we use the 2000 presidential election votes for the 107th–108th Congress (2001–4) and the 2004 presidential election for the 109th–110th Congress (2005–8).
  13. In their analyses of AFL-CIO's rating of RMSP and non-RMSP members, Lucas and Deutchman (2007, p. 13) found that 'RMSP members were more than twice as likely to support the position of the AFL-CIO in 1995, 1997, and 1998 than non-RMSP members, yet the evidence is not conclusive'.
  14. We used the figures gathered by <http://www.opensecrets.org/>. In those instances where <http://www.opensecrets.org/> did not provide the data, we consulted <http://www.fec.gov/>. Regrettably, the Federal Elections Commission does not aggregate campaign contributions for any Republican constituency fundamentally at odds with the Republican Main Street Partnership. Nonetheless, we

- include the labour contributions for Republicans simply for symmetry in the results between Democrats and Republicans.
15. Data gathered for the appropriate volumes of *Politics in America*.
  16. Medvic (2007, 2008) also finds that vulnerable Democrats are more likely to join the House New Democrat Coalition.
  17. We also report the maximum Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) as collinearity diagnostics for each model; 2.62 (House NDC), 2.33 (House RMSP), 1.77 (Senate NDC), 1.79 (Senate RMSP), 1.86 (Democratic Gang of 14), and 1.66 (Republican Gang of 14). In essence, the VIF scorers are much smaller than 10 so that we could rule out multi-collinearity problems.
  18. Due to peculiarities in the Senate data, the majority status variable could not be included in the analysis. All of the majority party members maintained their membership in RMSP and none of the minority members joined the RMSP.
  19. According to CQ Press, on 29 March 2007 the National Republican Congressional Campaign (NRCC) announced its launch of web-based attacks against 11 newly elected Democrats. The 11 targeted members are Jason Altmire (PA), Nancy Boyda (KS), Christopher Carney (PA), Brad Ellsworth (IN), Steve Kagen (WI), Tim Mahoney (FA), Jerry McNerney (CA), Harry E. Mitchell (AZ), Carol Shea-Porter (NH), Heath Shuler (NC), and Zack Space (OH). All of these freshmen took over the Republican-held seats in the 2006 midterm election, whereas George W. Bush carried all of these districts in the 2004 presidential election. We have checked these first-term members' membership of moderate caucuses in the 110th Congress and found that four members joined the New Democrat Coalition or the Blue Dog Coalition or both (Kapochunas 2007).

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