

# **Party Proximity to the Median Voter in U.S. Presidential Elections\***

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\* This paper relies heavily on arguments put forward in Robert S. Erikson, Michael B. MacKuen, and James A. Stimson, *The Macro Polity*, (Cambridge University Press, 2001). Both as a formality and, more importantly, in the actual fact of authorship, that work is collaborative among all three authors. I have listed myself as the sole author here only because coauthors should not be held responsible for errors in this revised work.

In the theory of voter choice nothing is more central than the idea that voters choose that candidate or party closer to their preferred stance on public policy issues. Too old to trace in the lore of government, that idea receives formalization in Anthony Downs' classic *Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957). In that formalization voters are positioned in a unidimensional space that represents the fundamental conflicts of the day, choosing between parties located in the same space. Voters observe where they are, where each of the parties is, and vote for the closer of the two. They minimize a loss function in the words of Hinich and Munger (1994).

All this is well known, often propounded, often tested. This proximity notion is the central theory of voting, now too widely believed and well established to be a mere hypothesis.<sup>1</sup> But if one asks on what basis it is believed, the evidence is both common and sparse. The idea is often put to test of one sort or another with micro voting data, never rejected. What makes it sparse is that those numerous micro-level tests carry similar research design problems that limit the confidence one can draw in any of the tests.

Proximity is easily observed. The standard, designed for that very purpose, is the ANES seven point scales that allow mapping respondents, parties, and candidates all in the same perceived issue space. The problem is that it is "perceived" issue spaces that we observe, and we have known for thirty years that these perceptions are biased, and usually in the direction of confirming the proximity notion. As Page and Brody (1972) noted, in addition to accurate perception of where parties and candidates actually stand, voters may also be "persuaded" (that is, adopt the policy stance of the preferred candidate, previously chosen on other than policy grounds) and they may also "project" candidates into fictitious issue positions that give comfort to the voter's need for consistency, but do not reflect real candidate positions. In either of these cases, which do in fact occur (Page and Jones 1976), the evidence of proximity voting is false. The appearance of voting for the nearest candidate, that is, does not reflect a causal process in which the voter used proximity to make the choice. When we observe that a voter seems to be selecting the candidate closer in issue space, we may either be observing that the voter has used proximity as a guide to decision or that he or she made the choice on some other grounds and rationalized it by misperceiving the nexus of self and two candidates.

None of these design and causality issues reflect badly on the theory. They just cause discomfort about the evidence used to test it. It is preeminently a micro model of voting. But the micro data on which it is tested are unsatisfactory.

But the proximity model also has macro-level implications. If the micro model holds, then we expect in the aggregate that the party closer to the median voter is advantaged. And, ceteris paribus, the party closer to the median wins. That is what is to be explored here. The

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<sup>1</sup>. It is not universally believed. But the leading alternative, the "directional" model of Rabinowitz and Macdonald (1989) and Rabinowitz, Macdonald, and Listhaug (1998), has implications at the aggregate level, where this analysis is headed, that appear to be inseparable from the micro model of proximity.

testbed is outcomes of US presidential elections, 1952-1996. In three different analyses we shall ask whether the party closer to the median voter is advantaged. And then, doing our best to deal with *ceteris paribus*, we ask whether the party closer to the median voter wins.

### **What Can We Learn From Macro Analysis?**

The advantage of a macro focus here is in research design. If we can observe that actual public opinion moves closer to one of the parties, or that the parties move relative to opinion, there will be no rationalization in the process. The measures will have no perceptions, and therefore no perceptual bias. Whatever other problems they have, they can not be rationalizations of issue proximity.

Our public opinion concept is Public Policy Mood (Stimson 1991 and 1999, Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2001). This indicator, derived as a latent dimension underlying survey marginals on diverse domestic issues over time, we will take as an estimator of the position of the median voter in the American electorate. We will assess party positions in three different ways, detailed below, none of which is a perception by a respondent who contributes to the opinion measure. Although there are some complications to come in estimating party positions, the analysis will be simple. We will ask whether the party closer to the median in particular election years is advantaged and *ceteris paribus*, whether the closer party wins. This macro level evidence will then supplement the extensive, but troubled, micro evidence for proximity effects.

### **Three Approaches to Estimating Macro Proximity Effects**

The design of this analysis will follow the chronology of three approaches we have actually used to assess the matter of macro level proximity. The first of these, from Stimson (1991 1999) begins with the simple (and false) assumption that the parties have unknown but fixed positions in policy space, Democrats always to the left of the median voter, Republicans always to the right. The implication is that liberal movements in public opinion necessarily are movements toward the fixed liberal position of the Democrats, and therefore add to the Democratic vote and that movements to conservatism similarly produce Republican votes. This serves principally as a baseline for more powerful analyses to follow.

In a second analysis we introduce actual measures of what the parties proposed, based upon content analyses of party platforms. This allows specification of a model in which both opinion and party movements contribute independently to the voting outcome. Then in a third analysis we make some stronger assumptions about the joint space of parties and voters which allow a direct measurement of party proximity to the median voter in each election year, and therefore a very direct specification of the Downsian model.

#### **I. Assume Fixed Party Positions and Moving Public Opinion**

A convenient, if not necessarily accurate, way to think about the voter calculus is to assume that the parties are fixed in space, one always to the left, the other always to the right. This the commonplace in our analytic tradition, not because we actually have reason to believe

that parties are truly unmoving, but because it obviates the necessity of coming up with a measure of movement. It is a useful starting point here for two reasons, (1) it allows a simple assessment of the effect of a median voter who moves over time, and (2) it serves as a baseline for more powerful analyses to come in which we let both parties and voters move.

If Democrats are always fixed on the left and Republicans are always fixed on the right, then the proximity model implies that movement of the median voter either left or right will directly benefit the party toward which that median is moving. We let Public Policy Mood estimate the position of the median voter. Then the analysis is no more complicated than predicting the outcome (Democratic share of the two-party national presidential popular vote division) as a function of Mood. In a first analysis we assess Mood only (see Table 1), leaving out the ceteris paribus, and find that it does not work. Its coefficient is sizeable in the right direction, but with only 11 cases not close to being statistically significant. If we could believe this not reliably estimated coefficient, however, the observed effect is a large one.

Table 1. Democratic Percent of the Two-Party Presidential Vote: 1956-1996

Variable	(1) Mood Alone	(2) Party Added	(3) Party and Incumbency
Policy Mood <sup>a</sup>	0.42 (0.52)	0.52 (0.56)	0.84 (0.41)
Incumbency <sup>b</sup>			6.16 (2.02)
Democratic Macropartisanship <sup>c</sup>		0.43 (0.68)	0.20 (0.48)
Intercept	23.14 (31.82)	-7.45 (58.83)	-13.10 (41.23)
R <sup>2</sup>	.07	.11	.62
R <sup>2</sup> (Adjusted)	-.04	-.11	.46
N	11	11	11

a. Biennial estimate: value for the election year and the preceding (odd numbered) year is used.

b. Effects dummy: Coded 1 if Democratic incumbent, -1 if Republican incumbent, 0 otherwise.

c. Democratic percent of national (Two-Party) party identification.

Source: James A. Stimson, *Public Opinion in America*, Westview, 1999, page 102.

We complicate the model in column two by adding Macropartisanship. That should sharpen the estimates at the expense of one precious degree of freedom. The Macropartisanship measure employed here is the average level of Democratic partisanship for the biennium ending with the presidential vote (which we will learn below is not a particularly good choice). The result is like the first column, a confirmation in size and direction of coefficients which is wholly unsatisfactory from the point of view of statistical significance. The coefficients are strong, but chance could have produced stronger ones.

We add an additional control, for incumbency, in column three, about as complicated a specification as we can manage with only 11 degrees of freedom. As expected, an incumbent seeking a second term gets about six points advantage, all else equal. That has the effect of increasing the coefficient for Mood, already large, and reducing its standard error, so that the effect is now reliably estimated by a small margin. Macropartisanship remains correctly signed, but nonsignificant in this final specification.

What we have learned is suggestive of a possible proximity effect. But the results are far from overwhelming and the assumption of fixed party positions leaves out half of the proximity dynamic. If we could observe party movement, we should do better. That is where we go next.

## **II. Distance Modeled as Joint and Separable Effects of Party Position and Moving Public Opinion**

We would like to do more. We would prefer to measure the temporal oscillations in party policy positions on the liberal-conservative dimension. Toward this end, we are fortunate to have quadrennial measures of party positions on the left-right scale, borrowed from Budge and Hofferbert's and McDonald's work on party manifestos and platforms (Budge and Hofferbert 1990; McDonald, Budge, and Hofferbert 1999). These authors coded U.S. party platforms for left-right content, with each party's platform scored as percent liberal minus percent conservative statements.<sup>2</sup>

Using these data, we can measure the net electoral advantage accrued by the parties due to their policy promises. On the Mood dimension, all the voters to the liberal side of the Democrats and to the conservative side of the Republicans choose easily enough—leftists vote Democratic and rightists vote Republican. Those *between* the two parties split their votes—the hypothetical voter exactly halfway between the two parties marks the dividing line (being equally close to the two parties, this voter is indifferent). We can calculate this indifference point as the mean of the two parties' positions. For example, if the Republicans are at 50 and the Democrats at 80, the dividing line is 65: voters "above" 65 (that is more liberal than 65) vote Democratic and those "below" vote Republican.

The mean of the parties' positions thus serves as an indicator of how the parties' strategic policy stances will affect elections. With the Democrats to the left of most voters, we expect the Democrats to win votes in proportion to their movement toward the center, thus in the conservative direction. By the same logic, the Republicans on the right should gain votes by

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<sup>2</sup>. The data were collected by the Manifesto Research Group for what has become known as the Comparative Manifesto Project (Budge, Robertson, and Hearl 1987). The update through 1996 in the U.S. was supplied to us through Ian Budge. Note that these data calibrate the liberal/conservative content (or agendas) of the party platforms and thus represent something akin to a "directional" rather than a "proximity" measure of party positions. Further, the *Mood* measure surely contains a dose of "direction" as well. Nevertheless, for convenience sake, we rely on the logic of proximity modeling—understanding all the while that matters may be more complicated and perhaps more interesting.

moving to the center, thus in the liberal direction. Thus, *liberal* movement by either party shifts the dividing line between Democratic and Republican voters further to the *liberal* side of the voter distribution: The result is fewer people with a Democratic preference and more with a Republican preference. Overall, combining party positions and Mood, the best electoral scenario for the Republican party is a conservative electorate wooed by relatively liberal parties, so that the electorate sees a moderate Republican party best representing its views. The best electoral scenario for the Democrats is a liberal electorate wooed by relatively conservative parties.<sup>3</sup>

Our expectation is not that voters generally read party platforms, of course, but rather that the content of the platforms reflects the tone of the party's presidential campaign. But we must ask: Do the latest platforms really represent where the parties and candidates are positioned? Our answer is, no, not quite. Platforms rather are the parties' *current* assertions of where they stand. Yet citizens use information grounded in the past as well as novel information of a more speculative sort; they rationally develop expectations from all the information available. Applying this principle to voters' choosing presidential administrations, we expect them to weigh both information from the past along with the latest platform promises. The question is how we operationalize prior history. Here, we approximate the experience of past promises with a smoothed version of prior platforms—understanding that past promises reflect past realities because parties *do* more-or-less follow up on their promises (Ginsberg 1976, Pomper and Lederman 1980, Budge and Hofferbert 1990, McDonald, Budge, and Hofferbert 1999). Thus, where the parties stand in the eyes of the electorate will incorporate both the present platform and past platforms. In the end, while the parties are able to use the platforms as a vehicle for altering the image of where they stand, they can alter that image only slowly over time.

To produce measures that capture the dynamics of inertial positions we offer a second, smoothed measure of party position as the exponentially weighted moving average of current and past platform positions.

$$\text{Position}_t = \alpha \text{Platform}_t + (1.0 - \alpha) \text{Position}_{t-1}$$

starting from our first measure of platforms, for 1948, which we treat as  $\text{Position}_{t-1}$  for 1952, the first year of our series.<sup>4</sup> For the  $\alpha$  parameter we choose .20, a number that suggests that parties can be only partially successful at reinventing their appearance with each new platform.<sup>5</sup> To

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<sup>3</sup>. Actually, the idea that moderation wins votes does not require that the median voter is ideologically in the middle between the two parties. As long as the Democrats stay to the left of the Republicans, either gains voters by moving toward the others' position.

<sup>4</sup>. In effect, the 1948 *Platform* scores serves as a proxy for the earlier platforms of the New Deal Era.

<sup>5</sup>. More exactly, the  $\alpha = .20$  parameter gives one fifth weight to current platforms compared with past positions. An  $\alpha$  of 1.0 would mean that only the current platform matters. An  $\alpha$  of zero would mean a constant party stand (rooted in the 1948 platform) independent of year-to-year strategic adjustments. Such would be the naive expectation that the parties merely stand at opposite ends of the political spectrum, without any important dynamics. Our empirical

distinguish between them we shall refer to the current assertion of position as Platform, and the smoothed estimate of perceptions as Position.

Figure 1 shows the ideological scores for the two parties, 1952-1998, both the “current” Platforms as measured, and “smoothed” Positions. For each election, the Democrats, of course, are to the left of the Republicans (i.e., higher on the graph), while both parties score more conservatively over time. Importantly, each party shifts its policy appeals considerably over our period, with the Republicans moving from a moderate to a very conservative stance in the 1980s and the Democrats becoming more centrist during the century’s last decade. Statistically, the platform time series are difficult to explain by other variables. Although there is at least a hint that parties enact more moderate platforms given adverse Macropartisanship, there is little evidence that party platforms respond to Mood.<sup>6</sup> Platforms may be written more to satisfy party constituents than to win general elections. But they have, as we will see, important electoral consequences.

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analysis indicates a maximum fit parameter of something like  $\alpha = .50$ —but with only 12 cases (and fewer degrees of freedom) such an estimate cannot mean much. We can only say that the true value likely lies between the extremes of zero and one.

Our choice of the value  $\alpha = .20$  is driven by a theoretical plausibility constraint. We have very strong theory that suggests that the two parties will approach the median voter in their attempt to maximize votes but that they will not actually cross over the median. That is, we expect the parties to bracket the voters’ ideal point. For our data, it turns out that an  $\alpha$  of something less than .21 is necessary to meet that constraint. Larger values applied to the actual Platform data produce anomalous elections in which both parties line up on the same side of the median. We choose .20 as a reasonable approximation. Beyond theory, we have examined the American National Election Studies issue scales for 1972-1996, creating a smoothed combination of the major issues tapped by the surveys, to see that indeed the mean voter preferences lie in between the more conservative Republicans and the more liberal Democrats.

<sup>6</sup>. Correlations between smoothed *Position* and *Mood* are -.13 for Republicans and -.24 for Democrats. In terms of current platform scores, they are .10 for Republicans and -.45 for Democrats. The negative correlations for Democratic platforms reflects the Democrats’ conservative platform tilt in the ‘nineties when Mood was relatively liberal.

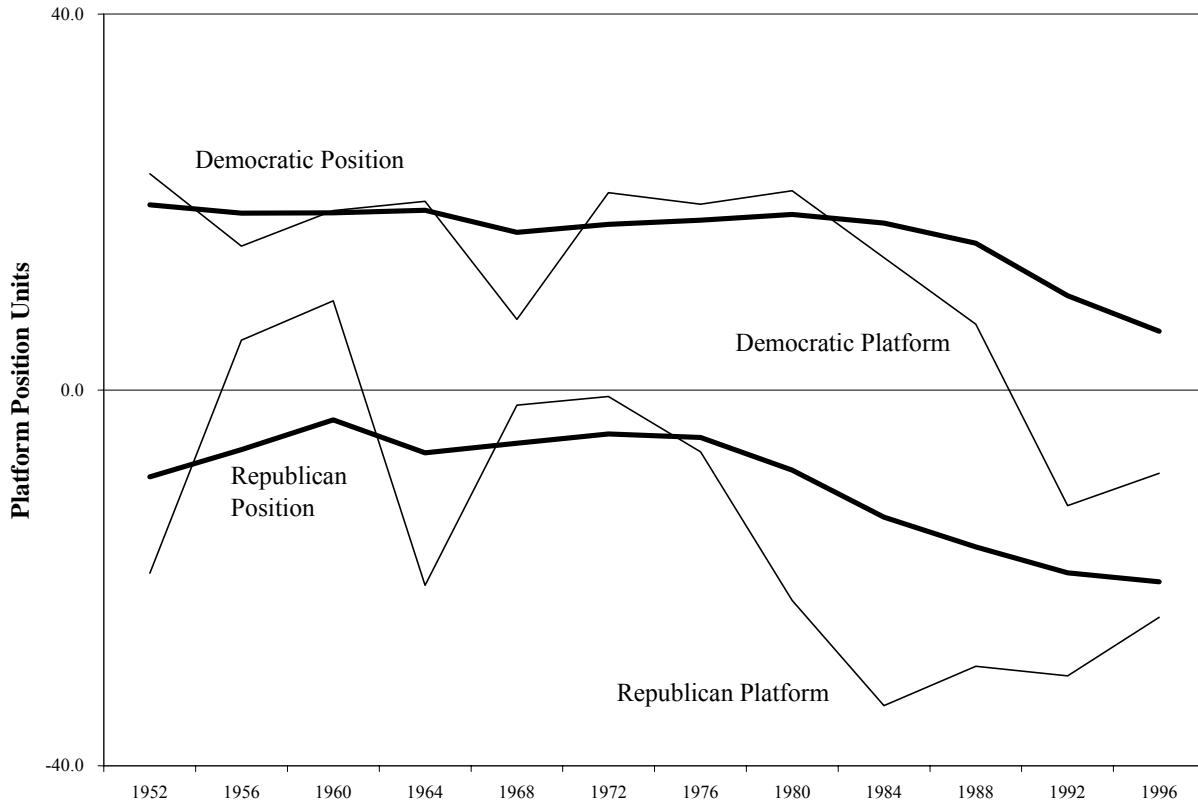


Figure 1. Platforms and Position of the Two Parties, 1952-1996.

Our theory suggests that policy-oriented voters will choose candidates and parties that promise the right sorts of things. Using space as an analogy for similarity of policy preferences, spatial theory (Downs 1957) holds that voters choose the candidates and parties that are closer to them in an issue space. At the macro level the theory implies that the party closer to the midpoint of the electorate's policy preferences is advantaged. Is this true, we ask? We now have a specification that allows putting these ideas from spatial theory to test. We measure the electorate's collective preferences by Policy Mood. We measure the net electoral advantage due to party policies as the mean of the Democratic and Republican Platform scores—the mean being the cutting line that divides Democratic and Republican choosers. Call this Platform Midpoint. To be explained is the Democratic percentage of the two-party vote. Our expectation is that liberal Mood increases the Democratic vote while liberal Platform Midpoint decreases it. Table 2 presents the estimated effects of Mood and Platform Midpoint on the presidential vote, 1952-1996. Column 1 shows the predictive power of the two variables standing alone on the right-hand side of the equation. The result is interesting. As indicated by the negative adjusted  $R^2$ , Mood and Platform Midpoint together predict the vote worse than would be expected by chance. Thus, our first analysis suggests that issue proximity does not matter after all. But so far, we have been modeling the effects of policy considerations and partisanship separately, without controlling for the other.

Table 2. Regressing the Democratic Presidential Vote on Mood, Platforms, and Macropartisanship, 1952-96.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Mood and Observed Platforms	Macropartisanship Added	With Smoothed Party Position	Without Platform or Position
Policy Mood, Election Year (Percent Liberal)	0.36 (0.88)	0.90 <sup>a</sup> (6.96)	0.91 <sup>a</sup> (8.23)	0.92 <sup>a</sup> (3.23)
Party Positions (Percent Liberal - Percent Conservative)			.	
Mean Platforms	-0.15 (-0.82)	-0.32 <sup>a</sup> (-5.93)		
(Smoothed) Position			-0.44 <sup>a</sup> (-7.15)	
Macropartisanship (Percent Democratic), October		1.41 <sup>a</sup> (10.14)	1.49 <sup>a</sup> (12.18)	1.15 <sup>a</sup> (3.98)
Constant	26.07 (1.05)	-90.00 <sup>a</sup> (-6.86)	-94.73 <sup>a</sup> (-8.15)	-75.05 <sup>a</sup> (-2.59)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	-.02	.92	.94	.60
Standard Error of Estimate	6.64	1.89	1.62	4.14

T-ratios in parentheses. N = 12 elections, 1952-96

<sup>a</sup> indicates significant at .05 level

To find evidence that presidential elections are affected by the parties' relative closeness to the voters, we introduce Macropartisanship, measured in October of the election year. As shown in column 2 of Table 2, controlling for Macropartisanship on the cusp of the election changes everything. All three coefficients are highly significant, with the expected signs, and together explain 92 percent of the variance in the Democratic presidential vote. This is a level of predictive power considerably higher than that provided by any combination of economic indicators and attitudes toward the candidates. It tops even the prediction one can make on election eve from the *final* Gallup Poll (adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = .90).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup>. See *The Macro Polity*, Chapter 7, for these alternative prediction models.

There is more. We have measured party issue Positions not only from the content of the current platforms but also incorporating platforms past, as an exponentially weighted moving average of platforms past and present. In column 3, we introduce this smoothed measure of party Position in a similar Position Midpoint, to go along with Mood, and October Macropartisanship. The result is much the same, with a marginal improvement in the model, as the adjusted  $R^2$  rises from .92 to .94.<sup>8</sup>

In the last column of Table 2, we estimate the effect of Mood and Macropartisanship again, this time dropping the party measures altogether. These estimates reassure that the contributions of Mood and Macropartisanship do not require the importing of party positions into the model. By themselves, these variables account for 60 percent of the variance, and are highly significant. Their coefficients suggest that one point of each is worth about one percent of the vote, just about the maximum effect one could expect. But equally important, a comparison of the last two columns indicates that the parties' ideological stances matter enormously.<sup>9</sup>

### III. Projecting Party Positions into Public Opinion Space and Deriving Net Distance

We now wish to approach the proximity issue more directly. To this point we have used the average of the two parties' Platforms and Positions to lever the logic of which party was closer to the median voter. That did provide a clean test of the prediction of spatial theory, and we have seen that test passed with flying colors. What this approach lacks, however, is a direct measurement of the proximity concept. Such a direct measure is more readily interpretable, but requires assumptions we have not had to impose up to now. That is the logic of our presentation, presenting first the indirect test that required no special assumptions. Now as we proceed to the direct appraisal, the reader can be confident from the result *already known* that we have not "cooked" a relationship between proximity and the vote by heroic assumption.

Ideological positioning of the parties matters. We have shown that the U.S. electorate votes more Democratic when its Mood is liberal and when the party platforms are conservative. We would like to do more, and track the left-right positioning of the party positions relative to the electorate over time.

We first need to align Mood and the Party Positions on the left-right scale. This can be done by assumption: whether the median voter (measured by Mood) is to the left or right of either party is unknowable from statistical information alone, because while we can force the

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<sup>8</sup>. As further verification, we divide smoothed *Position* into its two components, (smoothed) *Republican Position* and *Democratic Position*. The two coefficients are -.23 and -.50

<sup>9</sup>. The stronger performance of Macropartisanship as compared to Table 1 is principally a function of the choice here of a measure from the month before election day. That makes it an excellent control because it captures some late movements in the election season. It would not be a conservative choice if our goal were to demonstrate the importance of partisanship.

measures on a common metric, we have no means of aligning their zero points. As a likely approximation, we set the mean of the two Party Positions to that for Mood. We assume that the two parties are equally adept at matching the policy views of the American political center over the near half century of our analysis (but not necessarily in any particular electoral contest).

The trick now is to place the parties' Positions in the same metric as Mood in order to understand how close the parties are to the median voter—to generate a measure of party Proximity. Here we use the scalar information in Table 2 where we see how the metric of both Mood and Position translate into presidential votes. Since Table 2, column 3, suggests that 0.91 units of Mood liberalism has the equivalent electoral impact of 0.66 (i.e., 1/1.49) units of Position Advantage conservatism, we re-configure Position in Mood units and compute the difference. For each party, Proximity is the distance from the “median voter” or the absolute value of the difference between the two:

$$\text{Party Proximity}_t = | \text{Mood}_t - (0.66/0.91) \text{ Party Position}_t |$$

where (0.66/0.91) is the translation of Party Position into Mood units. This tells us, in Mood units, how close each party is to the decisive voter.

We can now place the parties in our issue space. Figure 2 shows, on the same scale, the histories of the (rescaled) Democratic Position and the Republican Position as well as Mood. Implicit in the figure are the Party Proximity scores—the vertical distance between the parties' Positions and Mood. In the 1950s and 1960s, we can see that the GOP took moderate stands while the Democrats consistently stood on the progressive side of the spectrum. In the early years, a conservative electorate rewarded the Republicans' moderate positions, but when the public started to demand more liberal policies in the 1960s, the Democrats steadfast liberalism started to work for them. When the public turned rightward in reaction to the Great Society, the relative moderation of the GOP under Nixon and Ford produced large policy proximity advantages for the party with clear electoral implications. Up until 1980, the dominant portion of the dynamics was associated with changes in public preferences rather than in the parties' stances. Then, of course, the Reagan Revolution pushed the Republicans firmly toward the Right so that by 1984 both parties stood at some distance from the public's ideal point. Finally, under Clinton's leadership, the Democrats moderated substantially so that they reaped considerable support during the 1990s. All of this is reasonable enough—it accords with common understanding of our era's politics—and, happily, the picture reinforces our confidence in our Proximity measures.

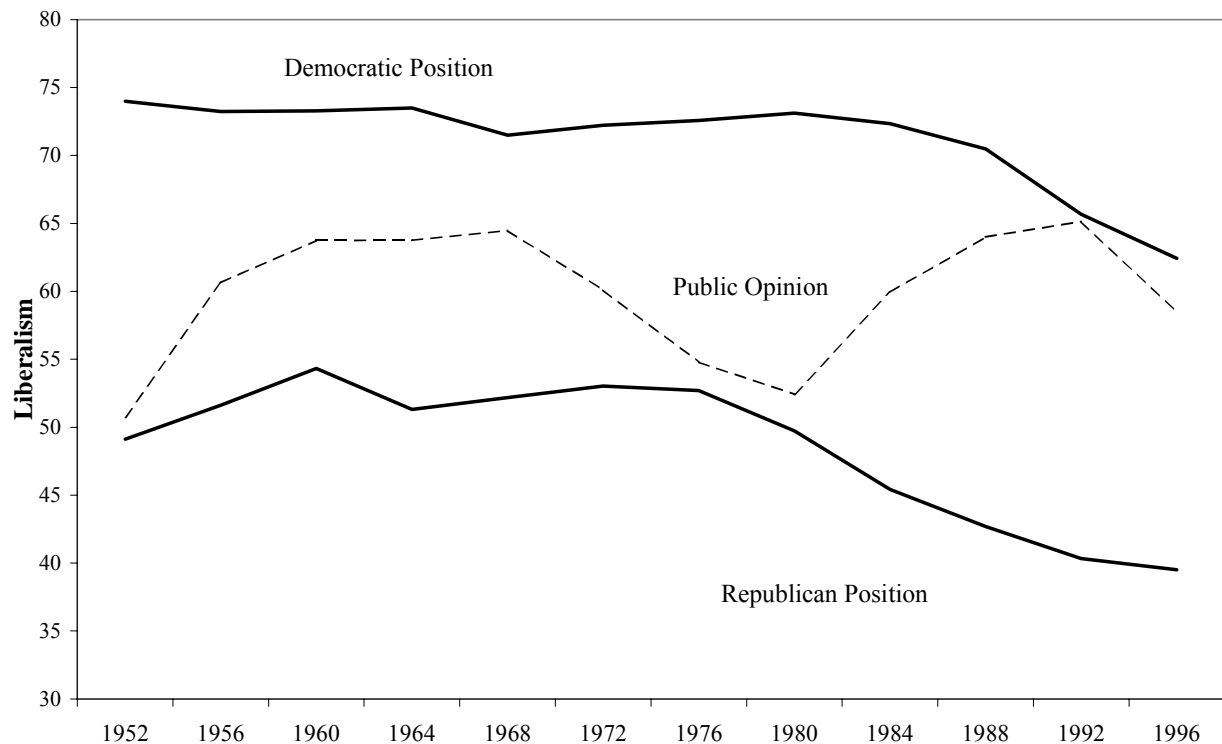


Figure 2. Party Positions Relative to the Median Voter, 1952-1996.

Next, we can construct the election specific measure (Democratic) Proximity Advantage<sub>t</sub> by taking the *difference* between the Republican and Democratic Proximities, with the larger score for the Republicans marked a “plus” for the Democrats. That is to say that when the Republicans are farther away from the median voter than the Democrats, the Democrats gain an advantage, and vice versa, of course.

Now we are ready to put the question directly: Is the party closer in issue space to the median voter thereby advantaged in election outcomes? The answer, given in Table 3, is quite dramatically "yes." Proximity Advantage is now measured in Mood units and scores the relative Democratic advantage over the Republicans. For each party, a single point of movement toward the political center, again controlling for Macropartisanship, is worth .45 points of election outcome. And, of course, a move toward ideological purity similarly costs .45 of the vote. That is an effect of huge consequence, leveraging so many points of movement in the outcome between parties that its absence would change the outcome of many American presidential elections. Its statistical properties approach the limit of what is possible in such a restricted sample, but it is the substantive message that most matters.

Table 3. The Direct Effect of Party Issue Proximity to the Electorate on the Democratic Vote Share (Controlling for Macropartisanship), 1952-96.

Policy Proximity (Mood minus Smoothed Party Position in Mood Units)	0.91 <sup>a</sup> (11.59)
Macropartisanship (% Democratic), October	1.49 <sup>a</sup> (12.93)
Constant	-94.72 <sup>a</sup> (-9.25)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.95
Standard Error of Estimate	1.52

Notes. T-ratios in parentheses. N = 12 elections, 1952-96

<sup>a</sup> indicates significant at .05 level

by the Democrats, the Democrats generated windfalls of 7, 11, and then 7 points. Clearly, party proximity to the center is a powerfully important determinant of American election outcomes. Excepting only Macropartisanship, the contribution of which is necessary to observe this powerful effect, it has no rival.

Figure 3 provides a sense of policy's import for U.S. elections. Here the Proximity Advantage scores implicitly illustrated in Figure 2 are translated into a percentage of the vote that was determined by movement in the public's preferences and in the parties' positions. To be sure, these exact numbers come from our assumptions about structure and equivalence. Nevertheless, they do provide a strong suggestion of how matters of public policy have affected the vote. Ignoring 1952 (we are cautious about the sparsely measured Mood of 1952) we see modest advantages to one side or the other during the 1950s and 1960s. But in 1976 and 1980, the GOP reaped huge advantages of 7 and then 8 percentages of the vote—when the public turned rightward toward the Republicans and the Democrats remained consistent in their liberalism. And rather quickly, with the rush to hard conservatism in the GOP and the move to moderation

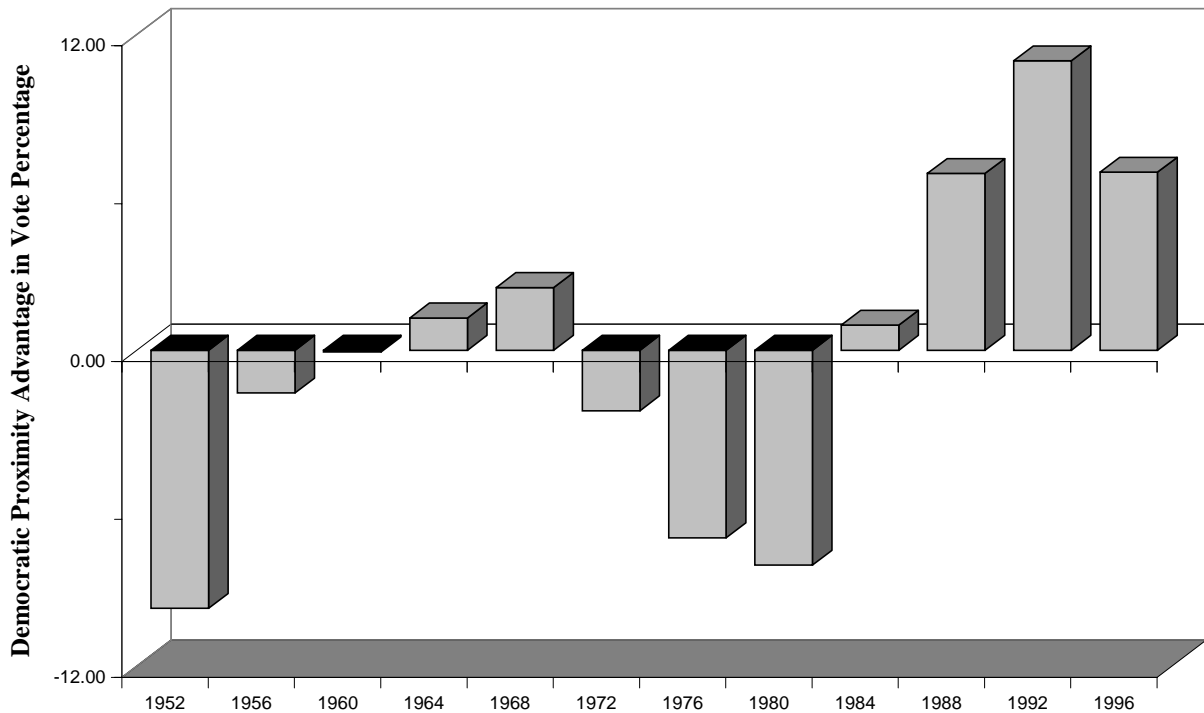


Figure 3. Net party Proximity Advantage in Twelve Elections: Positive Bars Show Democratic Advantage, Negative Republican.

We have seen now that the public’s policy preferences matter for presidential election outcomes and that party platforms matter as well. The Downsian policy distance calculus appears to correctly model the behavior of the macro electorate, so that the party closer to the median voter in its policy stands gains electoral advantage. But that is not all. We also see for the first time strong evidence that Macropartisanship is a dominant predictor of the vote.

This important pair of results came about only by estimating each while controlling for the other. The independent variables are correlated in a way that masks their effects in the absence of the control. October Macropartisanship correlates at  $-.44$  with annual Mood,  $.40$  with (smoothed) Position Midpoint, and  $-.54$  with the combined index of Proximity Advantage. In short, the controls are necessary because parties produce their most ideologically extreme platforms when strong in terms of party identification, as if parties spend their electoral capital (Macropartisanship) on platform commitments for their ideological activists.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>. By this argument, the stronger the party’s long-term electoral standing, the more the party will cater to its ideological wing in the next election and at platform writing time. We see possible evidence of this from the  $-.65$  correlation between October *Equilibrium Macropartisanship* and *Proximity Advantage*. Even more impressive is the  $-.79$  correlation

Given the fact that both partisanship and policy proximity have been ignored in forecasting studies, their massive contribution to predicting the vote presents a surprise. Yet this predictive power is precisely the finding we would expect by extrapolating from micro-level analysis. In micro-level studies, party identification and, to a lesser degree, policy proximity dominate as predictors of the vote. The macro-level implications may have gone ignored because for so long it was commonly assumed that aggregate levels of partisanship and left-right preferences were essentially constant over time. We have seen that both assumptions are wrong. The evident macro-level effects of partisanship and ideological proximity escaped detection as long as the relevant macro-level indicators went unmeasured. Here, we were able to apply measures of both macro-level opinion and party positions, along with the crucial ingredient of Macropartisanship.

### **On What We Have Learned About Proximity**

Authors and readers bring diverse priors to an hypothesis test. So what we have found depends to a good degree on whether our priors were similar to those of readers. If we had asked ourselves what we expected to find from a spatial analysis of presidential elections, the answer would probably have been that we expected -- hoped -- to tease out an effect-confirming bit of evidence. We believe the proximity theory and our experience is that macro-level analyses often find effects that are elusive in micro data.

If we had further asked how strong a relationship we would find, then the literature on presidential election outcomes would have been a useful guide. It posits, depending upon scholarly traditions, that economic performance matters hugely as does candidate image, the ability to be more liked, for whatever reason, than one's opponent. In *The Macro Polity* we have investigated both and found both to be exceedingly good predictors of outcomes. Either, in a variety of specifications, can predict outcomes with  $R^2$ 's in the neighborhood of .90. That makes it evident that outcomes are predictable and equally that each predictor must predict the other in addition to outcomes. They can not be independent.

Our prior belief about spatial proximity would have been that it would have placed third in this contest, if discernable at all. In actuality, proximity and Macropartisanship combined are the single dominant predictor, although clearly no great claims about dominance can come from a sample of 12. That counts as a surprise, a confirmation of the macro proximity story well beyond that which we expected.

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between *Proximity Advantage* and *Long-Term Partisanship* in quarter 12 of the electoral cycle (one year before the election), at the time when parties are formulating their electoral strategy.

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