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Direct Democracy and Political Extremism

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ABSTRACT

Direct Democracy and Political Extremism*

We study how citizens' right to directly decide on policies through popular initiatives affects the attractiveness of extreme candidates in representative elections. In our theoretical framework, single prominent policy issues on which individual voters hold extreme views get a large weight in their assessment of candidates, thereby favoring ideologically extreme ones. If citizens can decide the controversial policy issues separately on the ballot, this decouples the issues from legislative politics and moderate candidates become relatively more attractive to voters. We apply our theory to U.S. state legislative elections and find that ideologically extreme candidates receive significantly lower voter support in initiative than in non-initiative states. This holds in particular for states with low qualification requirements for initiatives. In concurrent elections for the U.S. House we do not observe this difference in the electoral success of extreme candidates between initiative and non-initiative states. The effect seems partly mediated by lower campaign donations to extreme candidates.

JEL Classification: D02, D72

Keywords: campaign donations, direct democracy, extremist ideology, initiative right, moderating selection effect, polarization, political institutions, voting

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1 Introduction

In many democracies around the world, a growing proportion of citizens are voting for parties and candidates that hold extreme political views. Often, this is accompanied by a rise in political polarization related to concerns ranging from legislative gridlock and a weakening of democratic norms to negative partisanship among citizens. These developments have led to a widespread discussion regarding the root causes and potential responses. Within this discourse, the role different democratic institutions play in the electoral success of extremist forces constitutes a particular challenge (see, e.g., Bordignon, Nannicini, and Tabellini, 2016; Gonzalez-Rostani, 2026; Pildes, 2024; Wang et al., 2021).

In this paper, we study how direct democratic rights influence the attractiveness of voting for ideologically extreme political candidates. In particular, we examine how the initiative right, that allows citizens to put issues on the political agenda and to decide about them directly, alters the set of relevant issues in representative elections. In our theoretical framework, individuals put a large weight on the few policy issues on which they hold extreme views when assessing candidates. Thereby, the differential weighing of issues might be reinforced by ideological spin given to policies, media-driven salience of topics, or the presence of single-issue parties. As a result, elections are often fought over a small number of policy issues on which the electorate is deeply divided, even when most voters prefer moderate policies for the majority of issues. This focus on the most polarized issues favors extremist candidates who provide a better match for voters with regards to these few issues than moderates. Importantly, as political elites hold more ideologically consistent views than the general public (see, e.g., Converse, 1964), voters give up on a better representation among the less controversial issues when electing extreme legislators. The calculus we propose squares with the puzzling empirical observations of a generally moderate public (Fiorina and Abrams, 2008; Fowler et al., 2023) electing legislators who have far more extreme policy preferences than voters themselves (see, e.g., Bafumi and Herron, 2010). While not empirically tested in our paper, the election of extreme and ideologically consistent candidates who negotiate about policies is in turn likely to increase the probability of gridlock for all issues (Binder, 1999). To the extent that gridlock prevents gains from productive logrolling, the election of extreme candidates leads to welfare losses. If instead the divisive policy issues are decided separately in popular votes, the legislature's influence on policy-making in these areas is reduced. Since an issue must mobilize citizens sufficiently strongly that they launch an initiative, the issues on which they are most polarized are also most likely the ones that will be put on the ballot for a direct vote. Consequently, moderate candidates become relatively more attractive to voters in elections.

We thus argue that direct democracy affects the political process and policy outcomes

by changing citizens' calculus when *selecting* representatives, resulting in what we call the *moderating selection effect of direct democracy*. This effect complements the function of direct democratic rights as an additional means for *controlling* representatives that scholars of the institution usually emphasize.¹ So far, the effects of direct democracy on political selection have been barely analyzed (see, e.g., the overviews by Besley 2005 and Braendle and Stutzer 2019). We are only aware of the works by Matsusaka (2008) and Prato and Strulovici (2016) who look at the link between direct democratic rights and representative elections.²

We test our theory based on a sample of candidates (incumbents and challengers) running for the lower chamber of U.S. state legislatures in the five election cycles between 2002 and 2010. U.S. states are particularly well-suited for our empirical test, as roughly half of the states grant their citizens the right to propose initiatives on the state level.³ We concentrate on states with concurrent (even-numbered year) elections and similar voting procedures for the state legislature to get a sample of comparable jurisdictions. Still, there might be correlated differences in political culture or voter preferences that could lead to a false attribution of observed correlations.⁴ We therefore compare the state-level results with the results from an equal set of estimations for the elections to the U.S. House of Representatives for which the same electorate votes at the same time. Given the absence of a national initiative right, the proposed calculus is not expected to affect voters' decisions in federal elections. Moreover, we examine whether the state-specific qualification requirements for placing an initiative on the ballot (i.e., for example, a lower or higher threshold for the required number of signatures) further moderates voter choices within the group of states that all know the initiative right. Finally, in an exploratory analysis, we also adopt a more dynamic longitudinal design based on the variation in the number of recent initiatives in a particular state.

For our empirical analyses, we combine data from multiple sources on candidates' political ideology and other characteristics, the outcome of electoral races, and campaign

¹There is substantial evidence that direct democratic participation rights have systematic effects on the political process in terms of the public discourse and the policy outcomes (see, e.g., Benz and Stutzer 2004; Bowler and Donovan 2004; Leemann and Wasserfallen 2016; Stutzer, Baltensperger, and Meier 2019, and for overviews, e.g., Frey and Stutzer 2006; Lupia and Matsusaka 2004; Matsusaka 2020).

²Prato and Strulovici (2016) model that the ability of voters to directly amend policies reduces their incentive to investigate the competence of candidates and thus leads to a worse selection of candidates, both from the demand and the supply side. In contrast, Matsusaka (2008) argues that when voters can directly decide individual issues through initiatives, it enables them to evaluate the performance of executive politicians based on a narrower set of issues and dimensions, such as the economic situation. This provides stronger incentives for good performance and contributes to the selection of competent governors.

³On the local level, some municipalities in non-initiative states also provide direct democratic rights to residents.

⁴The existing empirical evidence, however, does not point to significant differences in political culture and preferences that correlate with direct democracy on the state level (see, e.g., Matsusaka 2004, Ch. 3).

donations to form a novel data set that allows comparing elections across states and political levels. Specifically, we make use of the measure by Bonica (2013) of candidate ideology. Based on this measure, we define the absolute distance of a candidate’s ideology score from the center as his or her value of extremism. We then estimate the partial correlation between a candidate’s ideological extremism vis-à-vis his or her opponent and his or her electoral support, i.e., the vote share or the probability of winning the election, considering an interaction with the initiative right in the state. We control for incumbency status, gender, education, as well as state and year fixed effects.

The estimation results support the hypothesis of direct democracy constituting a moderating force in representative elections. Voters in states with the initiative right support extreme candidates relatively less than voters in states without this right. Controlling for various candidate characteristics, the estimated differential effect of a one standard deviation higher relative extremism is for the more extreme candidate related to a 1.5 percentage points ($p < 0.01$) lower vote share or a 5.3 percentage points ($p < 0.01$) reduction in the probability to win the election for a seat in the state legislature. Looking only at states with the initiative, the lower the requirements for citizens to propose and vote on initiatives, the lower the support for ideologically extreme candidates ($p < 0.01$).⁵ The results for the analysis on the variation over time in the number of initiatives decided on election day suggests that relatively more extreme candidates are slightly less successful when more political issues are simultaneously decided at the ballot.

When we perform the same analysis for U.S. congressional candidates, i.e., the level at which no voter has the initiative right, we find neither statistically nor economically significant differences in how voters react to candidate extremism between initiative and non-initiative states. This finding provides evidence suggesting that the patterns in voting behavior related to direct democracy at the state level are due to considerations regarding the electorally relevant issue set rather than state-specific differences in political culture. This interpretation is corroborated by the analysis of campaign donations in state legislative elections, i.e., a complementary behavioral indicator. Relatively more extreme candidates receive significantly lower amounts than their less extreme opponents (i.e., about 27 % less per standard deviation of relative extremism, $p < 0.01$). In initiative states, this imbalance is about twice as large. Moreover, when considering campaign donations in the empirical model, they can statistically account for a substantial fraction of the differential correlation between ideological extremism and electoral support in states with and without the initiative. Campaign donations thus make potentially also for an important mechanism in the political selection of extreme candidates.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, we outline the

⁵All these findings are maintained when not controlling for the ideological distance between the voters and the candidates or when using a state-specific definition of the measure for ideological extremism.

theoretical framework within which we study the effect of initiatives on voting behavior. Section 3 explains the empirical strategy adopted to identify institutional effects on the electoral support of extreme candidates. Moreover, it introduces the setting of U.S. state legislative lower chamber elections. Section 4 describes the different data sources we use and provides descriptive statistics. In Section 5, we present and discuss the empirical findings. Concluding remarks are offered in Section 6.

2 Theoretical framework

We pursue our analysis on voters' support of ideologically extreme candidates within a simple theoretical framework. In Subsection 2.1, we set up this framework with voters who follow their general ideological view when choosing between two candidates in a single-member electoral district. We adjust it in Subsection 2.2 and represent the set of underlying forces favoring extreme candidates in terms of issue weighting, i.e., voters form ideological ideal points considering those issues for which they have more extreme views with a larger weight. In Subsection 2.3, we explain how in such a setting, the unbundling of policy issues through initiatives affects voters' electoral calculus and reduces their support of extreme candidates. A complementary argument on voters' donations to electoral campaigns is formulated in Subsection 2.4. Finally, in a short digression in Subsection 2.5, we add some considerations on the supply of extreme candidates in states with and without the initiative.

2.1 Ideology and voter choice

In our framework, two parties exist, and both of them nominate one candidate to run per legislative electoral district. The candidate who receives a simple majority of the votes in his or her district is elected to serve the term in the legislature. Once an election has occurred, voters retain no (binding) control over policy making and the agenda in the purely representative systems. Any policy changes arise only from the legislative bargaining process between delegates from different electoral districts. Furthermore, we assume that voters engage in spatial voting when choosing between the two candidates. Following the Hotelling-Black-Downs tradition, every possible preference for all policy issues can be represented as an individual point on the same one-dimensional ideological spectrum. Moving away from the ideological center, here referred to as zero, preferences become more extreme, until they constitute the most liberal or conservative views at the respective opposite ends of the spectrum. The distribution of a citizen's preferences (or bliss points) regarding the set of policy issues reflects a general ideological world view on this spectrum. While the universe of policy issues is large, elections require voters to condense the views on them into a single optimal policy position, or *ideal point*. If a

citizen considers all issues as about equally important, an assumption that we replace in the next section, then this ideal point reflects what one could call his or her general ideological world view. A voter then selects the candidate whose position lies nearest to his or her ideal point. In Figure 1, this initial setting is depicted with a numerical example in Panel A. Voter V_i has policy-specific bliss points V^A , V^B , and V^C for the three issues A, B, and C. His or her ideal point (marked with a large black square) is at the mean value 2. In the corresponding voting decision between a moderate candidate from the left C_L and an extreme candidate from the right C_R , he or she chooses C_L who is ideologically closer.

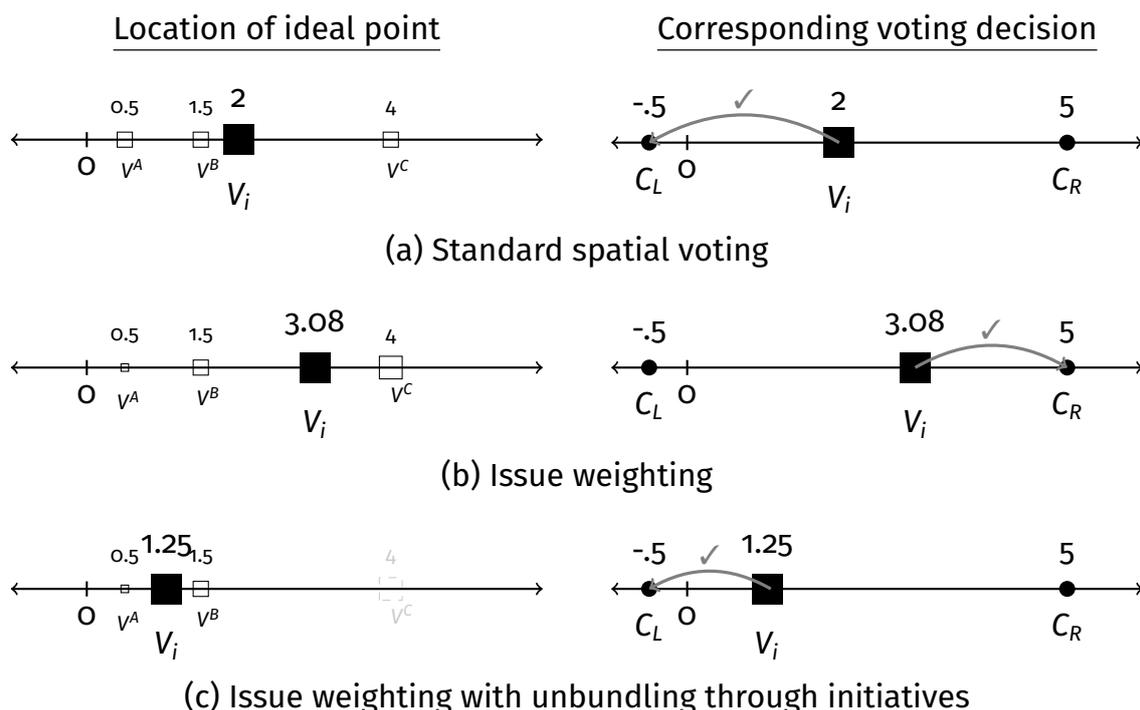


Figure 1: Graphical depiction of the theoretical framework governing voting decisions

Notes: In this example, three policy issues, A, B, and C, exist. The corresponding policy preferences of voter V_i are shown as white squares. The larger black squares represent the ideal point of V_i under the respective assumptions and institutional setting. The positions of the two candidates running in the voter's district, C_L and C_R , are shown as black circles. In (a), all issues matter equally to the voter, and thus the ideal point is simply the average of all policy preferences. In (b), with issue weighting (equal to the absolute value of the ideology score of an issue), the voter cares more about his or her extreme policy preferences, shifting the ideal point to a location further away from the center. In (c), voters additionally hold the initiative right, and issues that voters collectively care most about become unbundled through citizen initiatives. Here issue C ceases to be relevant for the formation of the ideal point applied to evaluate the two candidates.

2.2 Electoral demand for extreme candidates

For our analysis, we adjust one assumption from the initial received setting, i.e., that the positions for all the policy issues get about the same weight when voters form their ideal point. Instead, we consider these weights to be a function of the distance of the issue-

specific bliss point form the ideological center. In other words, issues for which voters hold more extreme preferences get a larger weight in their overall ideological positioning. This characterization fits a large body of research in political psychology showing that individuals care relatively more about extreme preferences (see, e.g., Liu and Latané 1998, and for an overview, Howe and Krosnick 2017). Even though voters typically hold “extreme” views only on a small number of issues⁶, *issue-weighted* ideal points occupy strictly more extreme locations than their original unweighted counterparts.

This framework squares with many observations about the political process in representative democracies. For instance, it can account for the observation that issues on which public opinion diverges most strongly dominate representative election campaigns and subsequent voter choices, although these issues represent only a very small fraction of overall policy matters the legislature deals with. Moreover, the framework could easily be extended to account for phenomena discussed in the context of polarization. For example, the large weight of extreme policy preferences is reinforced when parties, candidates and other political activists purposefully attempt to make the most divergent and polarized issues particularly salient as “wedge issues” in their campaign strategies. The media also has an incentive to focus its coverage more than proportionally on the issues many citizens feel strongly about, thereby increasing the salience of polarizing topics also for citizens holding moderate views on them (see, e.g., Balles, Matter, and Stutzer 2026 on the political economy of attention).

Importantly, with *issue-weighted* ideal points, extreme candidates receive a larger vote share, even though they represent worse fits than moderates on the majority of issues.⁷ We illustrate this point in Panel B of Figure 1. If the extreme position V^C for issue C gets a relatively larger weight than the other issues, the ideal point V_i is also moved to a more extreme position. Here in this numerical example the issues are weighted equal to the absolute value of the ideology score of an issue. This leads to an ideal point at 3.08 on the ideological spectrum. With issue weighting, candidate C_R is

⁶The majority of voters has a general ideology that lies relatively close to the center and as a result prefers moderate policies for most issues (see, e.g., Fiorina and Abrams 2008; Fowler et al. 2023). This might sound surprising as many take high levels in affective polarization in the U.S. as indicative of political mass polarization in general. However, Mason (2015) stresses the difference between issue and affective polarization, showing that the increase in the latter has not been matched by increases in the former. Resulting in a situation she describes as a “nation that agrees on many things but is bitterly divided nonetheless” (p. 128).

⁷If citizens take into account how their vote for a particular candidate affects the policy *outcome* in the legislature, extreme candidates can expect even bigger support. Discounting theory (Grofman, 1985) and extensions in a similar vein (such as Kedar 2005 or Patty and Penn 2019) account for voters being conscious of the current status quo policies and legislative bargaining. Accordingly, voters choose candidates under the knowledge that not the most proximate candidate is likely to bring the policy outcome closest to any voter’s preferred policy, but a more distant one. These and similar (Polborn and Snyder, 2017; Krasa and Polborn, 2018) voter considerations can be present in our model world, but do not change how our mechanism influences the success of ideologically extreme candidates in representative elections.

now ideologically closer and gets the vote from V_i .

The so-far implicit assumption that ideologically extreme politicians are extreme across-the-board follows the empirical findings of Converse (1964) and substantial subsequent research (e.g., Lupton, Myers, and Thornton, 2015) showing that political elites hold more ideologically consistent policy views than the average citizen. The election of extreme candidates thus results in legislators who pursue similarly extreme policy goals across most issues. This difference in ideological consistency between elected legislators provides an explanation for previously discussed findings of issue polarization being much higher among elected legislators than among the general public. The passage of extreme policies, gridlock and other forms of political breakdown are thus likely to occur not just for the political issues, for which the majority of voters actually prefer unyielding ideologues as their representatives, but for potentially many more issues.⁸

2.3 Voter moderation through issue unbundling

In order to reduce the demand for extreme politicians in the described setting, an institutional approach would need to attenuate the importance of the most polarized issues in the election calculus of voters. We argue that popular initiatives provide exactly such a function. They are a right in the hands of voters to put a single policy issue on the political agenda and have a binding vote on it in the citizenry at large. In order to qualify for a vote, popular initiatives require a certain number of signatures from citizens supporting it. For citizens to put in this effort, issues must be perceived as sufficiently important. Since the weight citizens place on an individual issue increases in the distance of the corresponding bliss point to the ideological center, matters for which the views among the public diverge the most are most likely to be successfully launched as citizen initiatives. These are thus the same policy matters that otherwise would dominate voter decisions in representative elections.⁹

Once an initiative has been decided, the legislature takes the respective policy as given and remains responsible only for policy making on the remaining issues.¹⁰ The

⁸Rogowski and Tucker (2018) present evidence that citizens indeed regard some issues as too important for legislators to find compromises with the opposite party, even though the public generally welcomes legislative compromises for most issues.

⁹A case in point is the prominence of access to abortion in electoral campaigns after 2022 when the Supreme Court in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* overturned *Roe v. Wade* that protected abortion rights (see, e.g., Meisels, 2025; Mutz and Mansfield, 2024). Lockhart, Gerber, and Huber (2024) show that abortion policy preferences became more important for people's partisan preferences after the decision contributing to the topics polarization potential. Moreover, the decision motivated citizen-led initiatives in several states. In 2024, no less than ten states hold abortion rights ballot measures (Guarnieri and Leaphart, 2024). In the meantime, however, Democrats in particular are less focused on abortion (Knowles, 2025). One reason might exactly be that the issue is approached in many states via ballot measures. Similarly, Matsusaka (1992) argues and provides empirical evidence that the level of division among public opinion on an issue constitutes a key determinant of whether the issue is placed on the ballot rather than handled by the legislature.

¹⁰It is conceivable that the initiative right also has an indirect effect (similar to the referendum right)

most polarized issues thus become “unbundled” from legislative activity and voters do not consider them when evaluating candidates in subsequent representative elections.¹¹ Consequently, their ideal points move to locations closer to the center, and moderate candidates become relatively more attractive to voters compared to extremists and thus receive more electoral support than if they ran in pure representative systems. We call this the *moderating selection effect of direct democracy*. In Figure 1, this effect is captured in Panel C. As policy issue C is decided at the ballot box directly, it is no longer relevant for V_i 's ideal point, which therefore moves towards the center. The moderate candidate C_L is now ideologically closer and gets V_i 's vote rather than the extreme candidate C_R . Accordingly, our main hypothesis states that the relatively more extreme candidate in a race loses electoral support when citizens have access to the initiative right.

2.4 Complementary behavioral reaction: Campaign donations

Many citizens support their favored candidates in at least two ways. They vote for them on election day, and before, they donate to their campaigns. We might well assume the same calculus when deciding about whom to donate to as when deciding about whom to vote for.¹² The candidate who is ideologically relatively closer is supported. This leads to the complementary hypothesis that the unbundling of particular, polarizing issues from the representative democratic agenda also reduces the attractiveness to financially support the campaign of extreme candidates. As a consequence these candidates then have less means to run media campaigns and to gain votes through persuasion. The same argument can be made for interest group activists who shift their financial support from ideologically aligned candidates to initiatives related to their cause. A part of any observed moderating selection effect of direct democracy might thus be mediated by changes in campaign donations.

2.5 Supply of ideologically extreme candidates

Voters chose from the pool of candidates who end up on the electoral lists. There are many factors that affect the cost-benefit considerations of potential candidates (see, e.g.,

affecting voters' considerations when assessing candidates in expectation of a possible initiative if some issue would take an ideologically extreme turn.

¹¹This general notion of issue unbundling through citizen initiatives is similar in concept to Besley and Coate (2008). In their model, popular initiatives lead to a better alignment of policy outcomes with majority preferences than pure representative democracy in situations where two issues exist, but to which voters pay different degrees of attention. We deviate from their model by assuming that popular initiatives decide the issues, voters pay the most attention to, whereas in Besley and Coate (2008) the non-salient issues are unbundled through initiatives. In addition, we connect the salience of an issue to the extremity of voters' policy preferences.

¹²Donations may thereby be motivated by an electoral motive in expectation of an instrumental benefit (see, e.g., Bouton, Castanheira, and Drazen, 2024) or an expressive (or other consumption) benefit (see, e.g., Ansolabehere, de Figueiredo, and Snyder, 2003).

Gulzar 2021 for a review). Besides the material aspects, ideology-motivated candidates benefit from the fact that they prevent a political opponent (Hall, 2019). Individuals who are particularly motivated by specific political issues benefit if they can push goal-oriented policies. For both groups, the calculus for standing as a candidate changes with the availability of the initiative right. The relatively more policy-motivated individuals become involved in the initiative process and the more ideology-motivated individuals are more likely to end up campaigning as candidates. The candidate pool might thus consist of more ideologically extreme candidates in states with the initiative right. However, due to the unbundling of polarizing political issues the benefits from preventing a political opponent also get smaller. Strongly ideologically-motivated individuals might then be attracted less to engage in the political process. The net effect of the availability of the initiative right in a state on the supply of extreme candidates is thus theoretically open.

3 Institutional setting and empirical strategy

To test our theory of the moderating force of direct democracy in representative elections, we study U.S. state legislative lower chamber general elections. Members of state houses of representatives run in single-member districts with first-past-the-post voting in the majority of states. In these races, voters can directly and easily contrast the two candidates competing against each other. In most cases, this is an evaluation of a pair with one candidate each from the Republican and Democratic parties. In roughly half of the states, citizens hold additional direct democratic rights for the decision on state-level policies, whereas the other half can be described as pure representative democracies (Bowler and Donovan, 2014). While in all states (except Delaware) the legislature may put legislation up for a vote by the electorate, we understand the right of citizens to put issues on the political agenda, i.e., the initiative right, as the crucial aspect of direct democracy. Referendums provide citizens with the possibility to challenge new policies from the legislature, but not with the means to unbundle and decide about policies against the will of a potentially unresponsive or gridlocked political elite. As in our theory, we therefore concentrate on initiatives. Table A1 in Appendix A provides a list with topics that were the subject of initiatives. The three most important topics during our observation period were Tax & Revenue, Health, and PreK-12 Education.

To fix ideas, the estimation approach takes up the theoretical aspect that voters' evaluation is with regard to the relative ideological extremism of the two candidates. A vote more for the Republican candidate means a vote less for the Democratic candidate. We thus rely on the individual races as observational units. Accordingly, in the basic multiple regression model, we study the statistical relationship between the relative vote share of the Republican vis-à-vis the Democratic candidate (as dependent variable) and

the relative extremism of the Republican vis-à-vis the Democratic candidate. The latter explanatory variable we interact with the variable for the availability of the initiative in a state to test our central hypothesis.

The following subsections explain the empirical strategy in more detail. In Subsection 3.1, we present our strategies for the identification of the moderating selection effect of direct democracy. Subsection 3.2 describes in detail the selection of the time period, the states, and the electoral races for the empirical analyses. Finally, Subsection 3.3 explains the estimation model and the control strategy.

3.1 Identification

The initiative right in the U.S. is a stable political institution at the state level. Accordingly, we study its effect on citizens' voting behavior first of all in the cross-section, based on different approaches. A second explorative strategy is to exploit the variation in the number of actual initiative measures that were brought to a vote concurrently with the respective election (and the resulting closeness as a proxy for the level of division in the electorate regarding the issues on the ballot). We describe the two identification strategies in turn.

Variation in the cross-section — The identification in the cross-section requires assumptions regarding the non-existence of unobserved differences across states that correlate with the initiative right as well as the vote share of extreme candidates (for a discussion in the U.S. institutional context, see, in particular, Besley and Case 2003). While this assumption is obviously problematic, we also see three reasons that alleviate the identification problem in this context. First, with few exceptions, the adoption of the initiative right in the U.S. states was a hallmark of the Progressive Era.¹³ Thus, for almost all the states that know the initiative right, nearly a century lies between the adoption and the beginning of our sample period. Considering the high geographic mobility of people in the U.S., it appears quite unlikely for the same political forces that led to the introduction of the initiative to persist and affect representative elections still today. Second, with direct democracy being considered (then as today) as a rather radical political concept, it appears unlikely that citizens in states that adopted the initiative right already have had a penchant for moderate, centrist candidates at the time of the adoption. And third, Smith and Fridkin (2008) analyze the reasons for the introduction of direct democracy across states and provide empirical evidence that the adoption of “the initiative was not the by-product of an endogenous, uniquely Western political culture or particular set of socioeconomic conditions” (p. 333), but rather the concurrent political conditions, such as party competition, appear to have been decisive

¹³Indeed, only four of the states we use in our analysis have introduced the initiative after 1918. The last state that adopted the initiative right is Florida in 1972.

as to why some states, but not others, adopted the initiative right in the early 1900s.

In order to assess whether any unobserved correlated factors drive the empirical findings at the state level, we complement them with corresponding results from cross-section analyses at the *federal* level, i.e., for candidates running in the simultaneously occurring elections for the U.S. House of Representatives. At this level, we do not expect to see systematic differences in voting behavior regarding candidate extremism between states with and without the initiative right (if voters indeed react to the opportunity to unbundle particular policy issues).

Whether any observed correlation between citizens' right to propose an initiative and the electoral support of extreme candidates can be attributed to the unbundling of the most polarized issues is a further challenge (quite independently from the cross-section design). For example, in states with direct democracy voters might also have adopted auxiliary political institutions that reduce the electoral attractiveness of extreme candidates. Such institutions could be different rules on redistricting, campaign finance or term limits. We attempt to address this issue in two ways. First, we complement the binary measure of the initiative right with an index measure for the legal ease with which citizens can put initiatives on the ballot (the so-called *Qualification Difficulty Index* (QDI) of Bowler and Donovan (2004)¹⁴). Based on it, we can exploit institutional variation between the states with the initiative right. We expect the moderating effect to be stronger in states where it is easier for citizens to launch an initiative. Second, we also adopt a longitudinal design.

Longitudinal variation — In a second approach, we identify the moderating effect of direct democracy exploiting the variation in the number of votes on initiatives that are on the ballot on election day, i.e., they take place simultaneously with state house elections. This approach allows for a control for state-specific unobserved factors that might be correlated with the presence of the initiative right in a state and the electoral performance of extreme candidates. However, since the number of initiatives in most states is quite low, the variation we can exploit, i.e., the *deviations* in the number of initiatives from the state average, is rather small in this setting.

3.2 Sample selection

Selection of states and time period — Since every state can set the procedural rules of its state legislative elections individually, the comparison of voter decisions across states could suffer from citizens considering further institutional factors in their voting calculus than just the presence of the initiative right. To keep the institutional environment

¹⁴The index is determined in particular by state differences regarding the number of signatures required, the limitations on the time available to collect them, requirements for the geographic distribution of collected signatures, and whether there are any restrictions to the subject matter. The latter criterion thereby factors in to a smaller amount.

as similar as possible across states, we only consider states where candidates for the state houses of representatives run in single-member districts.¹⁵ Since these races are decided by a single-staged majoritarian system, voters can directly and easily contrast the candidates competing against each other. We analyze candidates running in the five election cycles between 2002 and 2010. This keeps state legislative districts constant and avoids any confounding effects of redistricting. Furthermore, in order to have all elections occurring under the same national political environment, we remove the states (LA, MS, NJ, and VA) that hold state legislative elections in off-years (i.e., in odd numbered years). We also exclude Alabama from our analysis, as state house legislators serve four-year terms, which may affect how voters react to candidate extremism, as they have to wait longer for the possibility to “correct” their choices in previous elections. Nebraska is not part of our analysis as it uniquely has a non-partisan state legislature. These restrictions on the sample of states not only ensures a very similar institutional setting across states for state legislative elections, it also mirrors exactly the electoral cycle for the U.S. House of Representatives, allowing us to compare voter decision-making between state and federal elections.

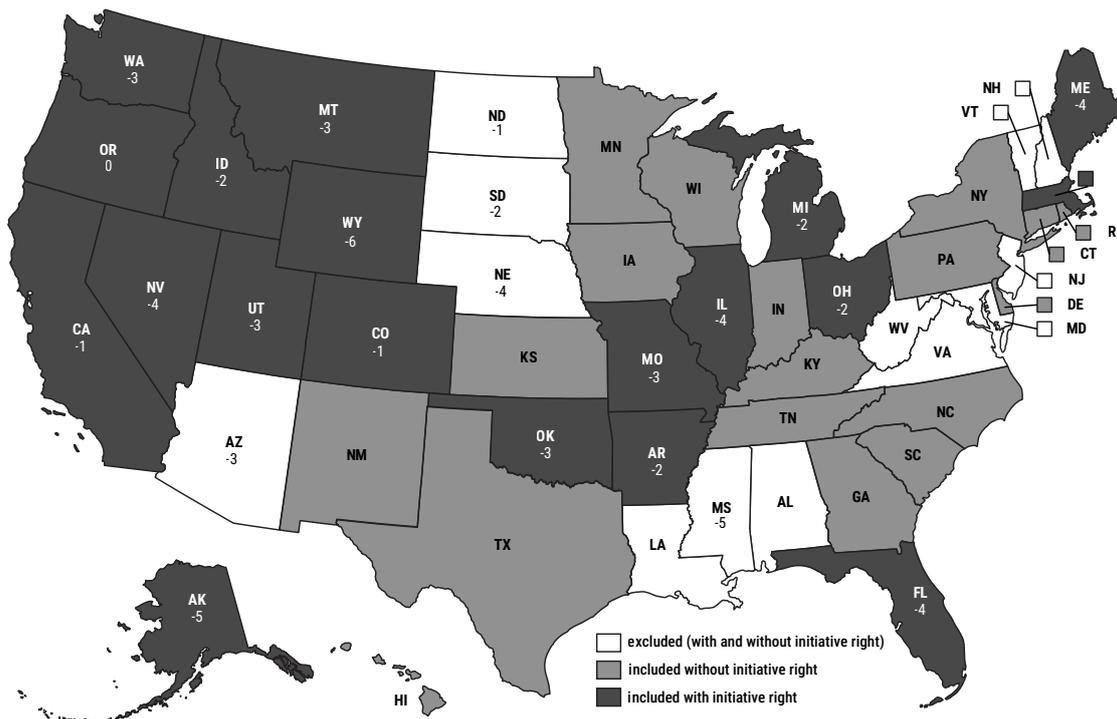


Figure 2: Overview of the initiative right across U.S. states

Notes: The number below the state abbreviation indicates how easily initiatives can be launched based on the index of Bowler and Donovan (2004). Lower values imply greater, higher values (closer to zero) lower legal hurdles for placing initiatives on the ballot.

Selection of races — We use every state legislative race for the lower chamber in

¹⁵This excludes states (AZ, MD, NH, NJ, ND, SD, VT, and WV) that use some form of multi-member districts.

the states and during the time period selected above in which both a Democratic and a Republican candidate ran, thereby excluding unopposed contests. However, the comparability of the elections may still not be secured if third-party or independent candidates run in some races, but not in others. For this reason, we only consider the votes the two major-party candidates received and then re-calculate a candidate’s respective vote share as a fraction of the Democratic and Republican vote total in the respective race.¹⁶ Accordingly, every election in each district included in our analysis involves two candidates whose vote shares always add up to exactly one hundred percent.

With this sample selection, we end up with 37 states in total for our empirical analysis. Nineteen of these states grant the initiative right to citizens, whereas 18 do not. Figure 2 provides an overview of the initiative right in the fifty states and the hurdles to launch initiatives (based on the index by Bowler and Donovan (2004)). In conclusion, U.S. state legislative elections with our selection of states promise an ideal setting in which voters face an almost identical choice environment in the voting booth, save for the candidates and the initiative right.

3.3 Estimation model

We estimate the baseline model for the effect of the initiative right on voters’ support of extreme candidates based on the following multiple regression model

$$\begin{aligned} \Delta Y_{rst} &= Y_{rst}^R - Y_{rst}^D \\ &= \alpha_0 + \beta_1 \times \Delta \textit{extremism}_{rst} + \beta_2 \times \Delta \textit{extremism}_{rst} \times \textit{initiative}_s \\ &\quad + \delta X_{rst} + \mu_s + \eta_t + \epsilon_{rst} \end{aligned} \quad (1)$$

The dependent variable measures the relative electoral success ΔY_{rst} , i.e., the relative vote share (or an indicator for being the winner or loser) of the election, of the Republican minus the Democratic candidate in race r in state s in year t . This variable is regressed on a value capturing the relative *extremism* of the Republican vis-à-vis the Democratic candidate, i.e., $\textit{extremism}_{rst}^R - \textit{extremism}_{rst}^D$, an interaction term of this value with a dummy for the *initiative* right, a series of candidate pair characteristics X , and a full set of state s as well as year t fixed effects. We cluster the standard errors at the level of the electoral districts.

Ideological extremism — The political ideology of candidates and voters is quantified on a one-dimensional ideological spectrum. An ideology value of zero represents the political center, while values to the left (i.e., negative ones) indicate liberal (or in this case Democratic) positions and values to the right (i.e., positive ones) stand for conservative (Republican) views. Individuals’ ideal points are thus captured as a single numerical

¹⁶We do not find any statistically significant relationship between the share of votes that non-major party candidates receive and the existence of direct democracy in the state.

value on this spectrum. Throughout most of our analyses, a candidate’s ideological extremism is then given by the absolute value of his or her ideal point (i.e., the Euclidean distance to zero). This means that a candidate’s extremism is considered relative to the political center of the entire nation. Later, we replace this reference point and calculate a candidate’s ideological extremism as the distance between his or her ideal point and the average ideology of all the candidates running in the respective state. This latter approach thus results in a state-specific measure of ideological extremism. It can account for voters potentially having a different understanding as to what they consider to be extreme policy views depending on the political environment and social norms in the state they live in. In preview, we find the same results when adopting the national and the state-specific measure of extremism.

Individual-level control variables — We control for personal characteristics of candidates that possibly relate to both their ideological orientation and their success in elections. First, we consider the incumbency status. Given that voters have approved of incumbents at least once in a previous election, sitting legislators are less likely to hold the most extreme views. Since incumbents typically have a substantial advantage in elections, we would thus risk overestimating the negative effect of extremism on voter support if we were to ignore the incumbency status. The corresponding control variable, assigning any incumbency status to either the Republican or the Democratic candidate in a race, is calculated by subtracting from an indicator of the Republican candidate holding incumbency status an indicator for incumbency status of the Democratic candidate leading to a variable with the values 1/0/-1, i.e., 0 with neither candidate having been a house member before.

Second, we take features of a candidate’s biography into account that are readily available (and quickly identifiable) to voters and can serve citizens as heuristics in the evaluation of prospective legislators. Particularly a candidate’s educational background likely poses a measure that influences citizens’ perceptions of competence. However, educational attainment and other valence characteristics may also factor into the development of individuals’ political views.¹⁷ Specifically, we consider whether a candidate has a graduate or professional degree (e.g., J.D., M.D, MBA or Ph.D.) and whether he or she attended a highly prestigious university (here designated as *Ivy plus alumna/alumnus*). As with incumbency status, the educational background is coded for the Republican candidate vis-à-vis the Democratic candidate. With both or neither candidate being highly educated, and thus the variable taking a value of zero, also no effect on the relative vote share is expected.

¹⁷Stone and Simas (2010), for example, review the debate regarding whether a candidate’s valence advantage allows her to hold more extreme views than her opponent or if a candidate with a disadvantage in terms of valence needs to move to more extreme positions to distinguish herself more in the policy dimension.

Third, we also include a control for the candidate’s gender, as voters’ perception of ideological extremism may differ between female and male candidates. Concretely, the variable *female* is 1 if the Republican candidate is female and the Democratic male, 0 if both candidates are either female or male, and -1 if the Republican candidate is male and the Democratic female.

Aggregate-level control variables — We include state fixed effects to consider systematic differences in party preferences across states. Due to this flexible state-specific effects, the “main effect” for the time-invariant indicator of the initiative right is absorbed. Moreover, year fixed effects account for the national political environment in a given year. In particular, these fixed effects control for whether the election occurs during a presidential or mid-term election and how the simultaneously occurring federal elections may influence voter mobilization for Democrats and Republicans down-ballot for state legislative races thus affecting their relative vote share. Wave elections that dramatically shift the prospects of winning (or losing, respectively) for all candidates of a party independently of their own policy positions might otherwise distort the results.

4 Data

Our research design simultaneously relies on information on candidates’ ideology, socio-demographic characteristics and election results. In an extension, we also consider the campaign donations collected by the candidates. In Subsection 4.1, we list the different data sources and describe the data merge. In Subsection 4.2, we provide descriptive statistics for this newly compiled data set.

4.1 Data sources

Candidates’ socio-demographic characteristics — As a starting point, we collected a list of all candidates running for the lower chambers of state legislatures between 2002 and 2010 by scraping data from *Project Vote Smart* (PVS). We did this through the open source interface *pvsR* (Matter and Stutzer, 2015). As part of this procedure, we also collected detailed biographical information about these candidates, which allows us to define indicator variables capturing a candidate’s gender and educational achievements.

Candidates’ ideology — For the measurement of candidate ideology we take the data from Bonica (2013). We use an updated version of the data in his original article available in the *Database on Ideology, Money in Politics, and Elections* (DIME) version 2.0. The ideological position of candidates, summarized in *Cfscores*, results from campaign donations from individual citizens to candidates for political office on virtually every level of U.S. politics. Under the assumption that donors engage in *spatial giving*, i.e., they give money to the candidates who are most ideologically proximate to their own

preferences (just as spatial voting models assume citizens to vote in elections), Cfscores convert the information from whom candidates receive how much in campaign contributions into an ideal point on the typical one-dimensional ideological scale. For the ideological extremism of a candidate, we simply use the absolute value of his or her Cfscore, which is equivalent to the Euclidean distance to the political center.¹⁸ Bonica’s procedure results in a measure of ideology that makes candidate positions comparable across states as well as different political levels, i.e., state legislative and U.S. House elections. The reliance on campaign donations to measure ideology, rather than roll-call votes in the legislature, further enables the inclusion of unsuccessful candidates, a crucial aspect to test our theory.

Election results — For state legislative election results we use the data collected by Klarner et al. (2013) and for the results of U.S. House elections we integrate the data from Kollman et al. (2017).

Campaign donations — Information on the total amount of campaign donations a candidate has received during an electoral cycle also comes from Bonica (2013). To make campaign contributions comparable across states and to account for – in some cases – large differences in the campaign funds available to candidates, we take two steps. First, we express the total amount raised in donations by a candidate in terms of dollars per 1,000 residents in the state legislative district (which is roughly equal for all candidates running within a given state). Second, we take the natural logarithm of this value.

Due to our demanding data strategy, we are required to merge data from several sources. As a consequence we lose some of the electoral races that would qualify for our analysis according to our sample selection. If a candidate is missing from any of the original data sets we described above, we lose the observation of one race even if the full information for his or her competitor is available. Since there exists no common identifier across the multiple data sources, we were often required to match information to the correct general election candidates based on the names of candidates (along with some additional pieces of information). Even though we employed a fuzzy string matching technique that allowed us to deal with most minor spelling differences in names, some loss of races proved to be unavoidable. Overall, we observe roughly 10,750 lower chamber state legislative races taking place between 2002 and 2010 in the 37 states we consider. Data merges based on our selection criteria leave us with 8,346 races. Thus, we lose about a fifth of the possible observations due to missing data in any of the original sources or due to candidate matching problems.

¹⁸Cfscores assume an ideological value of zero to represent the most centrist and moderate political view. As a practical example, a Democratic candidate with a Cfscore of -2 has an extremism value in our data of 2 and is thus treated as more extreme than a Republican candidate with a Cfscore of 1.5 and a corresponding extremism value of 1.5.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for State Legislative Elections

	Initiative right				No Initiative Right			
	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Vote Share Diff.	1.37	27.05	-93.21	94.1	-0.02	26.92	-96.95	71.88
Winner Diff.	11.05	99.4	-100	100	3.02	99.97	-100	100
Ease of Initiatives								
... = 1 (hard)	0.22	0.42	0	1	-	-	-	-
... = 2 (medium)	0.38	0.49	0	1	-	-	-	-
... = 3 (easy)	0.4	0.49	0	1	-	-	-	-
No. of Initiatives	2.59	2.66	0	11	-	-	-	-
No. of Close Initiatives	0.66	1.03	0	5	-	-	-	-
No. of Very Close Initiatives	0.32	0.68	0	3	-	-	-	-
Ideological Extremism Mean	0.92	0.45	0	6.76	0.89	0.50	0	7.05
Ideological Extremism Diff.	-0.12	0.68	-5.3	5.99	0.11	0.77	-6.18	6.29
Incumbency Diff.	0.04	0.81	-1	1	-0.03	0.89	-1	1
Female Diff.	-0.14	0.6	-1	1	-0.08	0.6	-1	1
Advanced Degree Diff.	-0.09	0.62	-1	1	-0.12	0.64	-1	1
Prestigious Alma Mater Diff.	-0.03	0.28	-1	1	-0.01	0.31	-1	1
ln(Donations Pop-Adj.) Mean	8.70	1.41	0	12.11	8.87	1.27	0	13.39
ln(Donations Pop-Adj.) Diff.	0.09	1.92	-8.73	9.7	-0.01	1.71	-10.27	6.24

Notes: Data generally refers to 8,346 state legislative races forming the main sample for the empirical analyses. All differences are expressed in terms of the Republican candidate minus the Democratic candidate. For mean ideological extremism and mean donations, the values refer to the 16,692 candidates.

4.2 Descriptive statistics

In total, we have 8,346 observations of electoral races for the lower chamber of state legislatures in the five cycles between 2002 and 2010. These observations are from 11,165 different individuals and 2,995 individual lower state legislative districts. In Table 1, we present descriptive statistics for the variables we use in our regressions, split between states with and states without the initiative right.

In states with the initiative right, Republican candidates, on average, receive a 1.4 percentage point higher vote share than Democratic candidates. In states without the initiative right, the candidates of the two parties, on average, split the votes about equally. In both groups of states in our sample of races, the winner is more likely the Republican candidate, i.e., the probability is 55.5 % in initiative states and 51.5 % in non-initiative states. We observe races in initiative states for each level of qualification difficulty. On average, 2.59 initiatives are voted on concurrently with a given election for the state legislature, but only a few of them are related to a close (0.66) or very close (0.32) outcome.¹⁹ Figure 4 shows that the number of initiatives that were brought to the ballot is, on average, higher in initiative states with less stringent qualification

¹⁹We consider an initiative as close if the margin of the eventual outcome is within 10 percentage points, and very close if it is within 5 percentage points.

requirements. This holds for the total number of initiatives as well as for close and very close initiatives.

Drawing on Bonica's (2013) Cfscores, Figure 3 shows the distribution of candidates by their ideology. The distribution follows the pattern of a two-humped camel (and not the dromedary expected from median voter theory) in both states with and without the initiative right. The median candidate running in direct democratic states tend to hold somewhat more liberal views than candidates in the other states who gravitate more towards a conservative ideology. The mode for Democratic candidates is at about -1 on the liberal to conservative scale, while the respective mode is about 1 for Republican candidates. This is reflected in values of extremism that vary around one. When calculating values for the differential in extremism for individual races, Table 1 indicates that they are close to zero, on average. However, there is quite some variation across races in both states with (std.dev.=0.68) and without (std.dev.=0.77) the initiative right.

There are almost 72 % of the races that include an incumbent, whereby they are about as likely from the Republican and the Democratic party over all observations. In 44 % of the races, female candidates are involved, i.e., 7 % with women only, and 37 % with both a woman and a man. Most often (i.e., 65 %) this means a male Republican being challenged by a female Democrat. When one candidate with and one without an advanced degree (or a prestigious Alma Mater) compete, then it is more often the Democratic candidate who has a higher formal education. These patterns are similar across initiative and non-initiative states. Neither group has substantially more female or better educated candidates running for a seat in the state legislatures. Overall, the descriptive statistics indicate no vast differences in the supply of candidates across the two regimes.

Candidates in initiative states receive, on average, about the same amount in campaign donations over an election cycle, taking district size into account, as candidates from non-initiative states. In both groups of states, there are no large systematic differences in the amounts Republicans and Democrats manage to raise.

The corresponding descriptive statistics for the sample of candidates in U.S. House elections are in Table B1 in the Appendix.

5 Results

We present the results of our analyses in several steps. In Subsection 5.1, we provide some descriptive evidence for the link between the initiative right in a state and the electoral support of extreme candidates. Subsection 5.2 then offers the main regression results. The following Subsections 5.3 and 5.4 discuss results for the complementary evidence on campaign donations, voters' ideological distance to candidates, and the sensitivity to

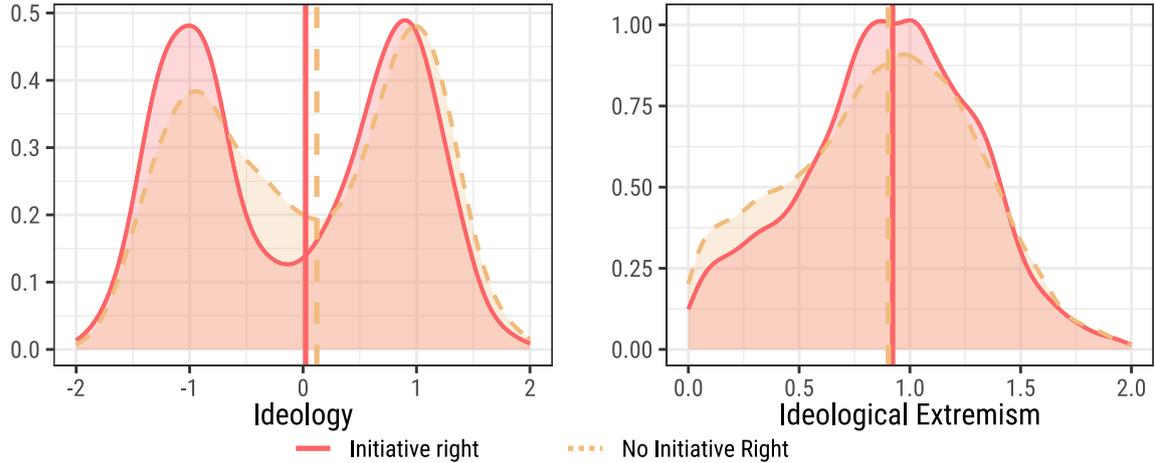


Figure 3: Candidate Ideology and Extremism by Initiative Right in State
Notes: Vertical lines indicate the median in the respective group.

considering turnout.

5.1 Descriptive evidence

Figure 5 depicts the raw statistical relationship between candidates' ideological extremism and their vote shares in state legislative elections separately for non-initiative and initiative states between 2002 and 2010. 16,692 candidate observations are grouped by ideological extremism into 20 equally sized bins. Each point represents the median vote share of candidates in the respective bin. The two lines represent unconditional linear fits (based directly on the candidates, not on the bins) for both groups of states individually. The binned observations and the trend lines show that voters generally tend to prefer moderate over extreme candidates. Figure 5 also presents a first piece of evidence for direct democracy being a moderating force in representative elections. When citizens have the initiative right, they seem to support candidates with views far from the political center relatively less than their fellow citizens who do not have the same rights on the state level. For low levels of extremism, candidates in states with the initiative right (indicated by dots) get a higher vote share and are also more likely to win the race than candidates in non-initiative states (marked with triangles). Correspondingly, for levels of extremism above about 0.8, candidates from initiative states turn out relatively less successful than candidates from non-initiative states. This pattern is summarized by the steeper slope of the fitted line for the initiative states. As this correlational analysis does not take further characteristics of candidates into account, we switch to a multiple regression analysis.

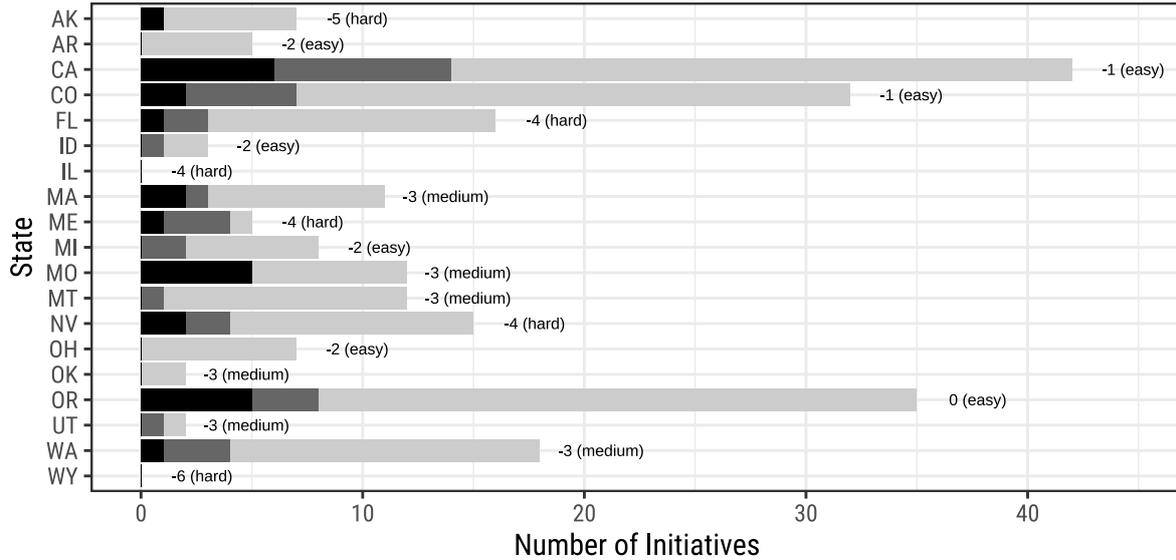


Figure 4: Total Number of Initiatives at General Elections between 2002 and 2010
Notes: Light gray bars represent all initiatives, dark bars represent gray close initiatives (yes share between 45% and 55%), black bars represent very close initiatives (yes share between 47.5% and 52.5%). Numbers indicate the state’s respective initiative qualification difficulty index by Bowler and Donovan (2004) and our assignment into three categories.

5.2 Main regression results

Effects of extremism on electoral support in initiative and non-initiative states — Table 2 presents our main results from linear OLS regressions of estimation model (1) for the differential effect of candidate extremism in states with and without the initiative right on voter support in state legislative elections. A dummy variable for initiative states, interacted with ideological extremism, captures the institutional variation to test the central hypothesis. The negative coefficients for the interaction term reveal that ideologically extreme candidates are supported statistically significantly less in initiative than in non-initiative states, i.e., they receive a lower vote share and face a lower probability to win the election ($p < 0.01$ in both specifications). A one standard deviation higher relative extremism, i.e., a +0.68 more extreme Republican candidate than his or her Democratic competitor is related to a -5.4 percentage points larger difference in vote shares in states without the initiative right ($-7.9 \times 0.68 = -5.4$), i.e., the relatively more extreme Republican candidate loses 2.7 percentage points. In states with the initiative right, the difference is -8.4 percentage points ($(-7.9 + -4.4) \times 0.68 = -8.4$), i.e., the Republican candidate loses 4.2 percentage points. The differential effect of the initiative right thus amounts to 1.5 percentage points, i.e., it adds roughly 50 % to the main effect. By construction, the effects are equivalent for a one standard deviation more extreme Democratic candidate vis-à-vis his or her Republican competitor. When calculating the same consequences for the probability to win the elections, a one standard deviation higher relative extremism is related to a 9.4 percentage points lower chance of winning

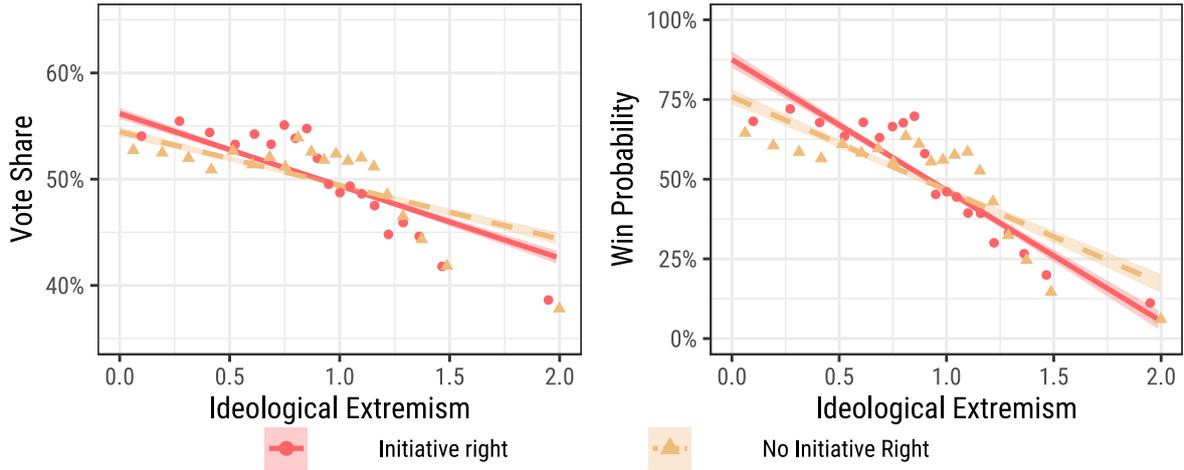


Figure 5: Candidate Extremism and Election Outcomes by Initiative Right in State
Notes: 16,692 candidate observations from state legislative elections in 37 states between 2002 and 2010 are grouped by extremism into 20 equally sized bins. Each point represents the mean in the respective extremism bin. The two lines represent unconditional linear fits for both groups of states individually.

in non-initiative states and of 14.7 percentage points in initiative states. These results are consistent with our main hypothesis and reflect sizeable effects. With the median winning candidate in our sample being 10 percentage points above the crucial 50 %, the initiative right presents a meaningful obstacle to the election prospects of extreme candidates. The reduction of electoral support of ideologically extreme candidates in initiative states is sufficiently large so that a position one standard deviation further away from the political center more or less negates the positive returns to having an advanced degree or having graduated from a highly prestigious university. It also amounts to about one fourth of the electoral advantage incumbents hold over their challengers in state legislative elections.

Complementary test for U.S. House elections — In the interpretation above, we attribute the effect of direct democracy to voters who evaluate ideologically extreme candidates as less attractive if the initiative right allows them to unbundle political issues. However, the differential response may instead reflect differences in state political culture that led to both, the adoption of the initiative right and to better election chances of moderate candidates today. If this were the case, we would expect to observe the same dynamics we find for state legislatures also in federal elections.

We test this alternative explanation and run exactly the same regressions, using the same states and years, as before, but now with candidates for the simultaneously held elections to the U.S. House of Representatives. On the same ballot (and under the same voting procedure) on which voters decide about their representatives in the state legislature, they also decide about whom to send to Congress. Since we are able to make use of the same data sources for U.S. House elections as for state legislative elections, we can directly compare the reactions of voters to the ideological extremism of candidates

Table 2: Effects of Candidates Relative Extremism on Electoral Success for States with and without the Initiative Right

	Vote Share (1)	Win Probability (2)
Ideological Extremism	-7.9*** (0.70)	-27.6*** (2.2)
Ideological Extremism \times Initiative Right	-4.4*** (0.87)	-15.5*** (2.7)
Incumbency	17.2*** (0.34)	63.3*** (1.1)
Female	0.54 (0.37)	2.0* (1.2)
Advanced Degree	3.9*** (0.37)	18.1*** (1.2)
Prestigious Alma Mater	4.8*** (0.83)	18.7*** (2.6)
State Fixed-Effects	✓	✓
Year Fixed-Effects	✓	✓
Observations	8,346	8,346
R ²	0.59	0.55

Notes: Ideological extremism refers to the difference between the extremism of the Republican candidate minus the extremism of the Democratic candidate. Standard errors are clustered on the level of state legislative electoral districts. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

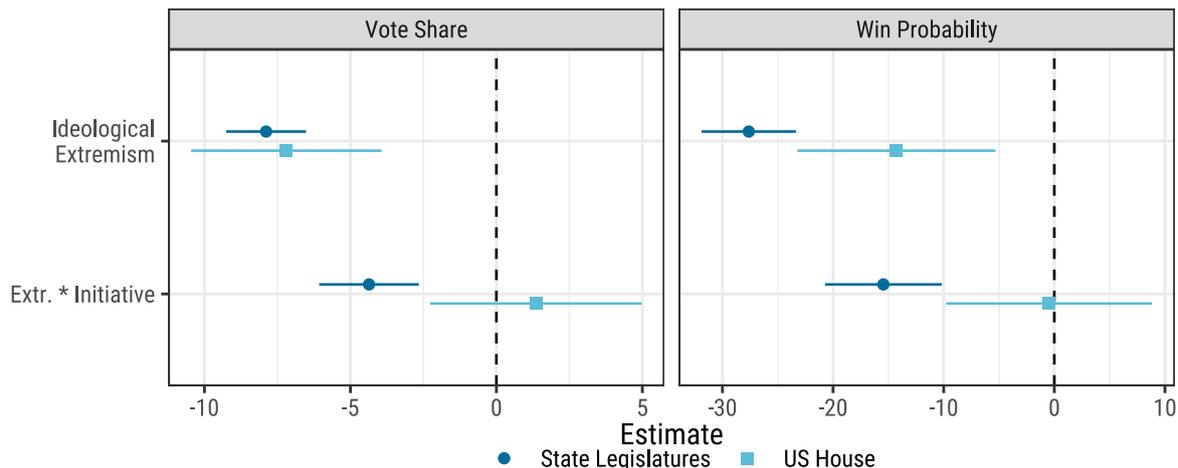


Figure 6: Effect of Candidate Extremism Difference on Election Outcomes by Initiative Right

Notes: Horizontal lines represent 95%-confidence intervals (standard errors are clustered on the level of state electoral districts and U.S. house districts, respectively). Full regression results are in Table C1 in the Appendix.

on the state and the federal level.²⁰

Figure 6 presents a summary of the results for the candidates to the U.S. House and puts them in contrast to the results in Table 2. Relatively more extreme candidates get relatively less support at both the state and the federal level. However, this effect is not larger for initiative states than non-initiative states when analyzed for the U.S. House. We interpret the combined results as support for a moderating force that affects voters' evaluation of candidates at the state level in initiative states.

Differential effects depending on the qualification requirements for initiatives — Initiative states differ in how easy it is to bring an initiative on the ballot, or in other words, how easy it is for citizens to unbundle a political issue. We can thus test whether *within* the group of direct democratic states, the moderating force of the initiative is more pronounced with lower requirements. Figure 7 shows the results when we compare the effect of relative extremism on the electoral success of candidates for three different qualification requirements. The sample of races is now restricted to those taking place in initiative states. In states with the most restrictive regime (like Illinois), a +0.68 (i.e., one standard deviation) more extreme candidates, on average, loses 2.9 percentage points in his or her vote share and 11.2 percentage points in his or her probability to win the seat. In states with an intermediate level of requirements, the corresponding losses in voters amount to 4.3 percentage points for the vote share and 14.5 percentage points for the winning probability. Finally, when initiatives can be put on the ballot relatively easily (like in Oregon), relatively extremist candidates lose the most, i.e., 5.2 percentage

²⁰There is just one divergence. We do not have information on the educational background of Congressional candidates. We thus cannot control for the two corresponding variables we included for state legislative candidates.

points in vote share and 17.5 percentage points in the probability to win. We do not observe any such differential consequences when comparing the success of relatively more extreme candidates at the federal level in elections to the U.S. House across the three groups of states.

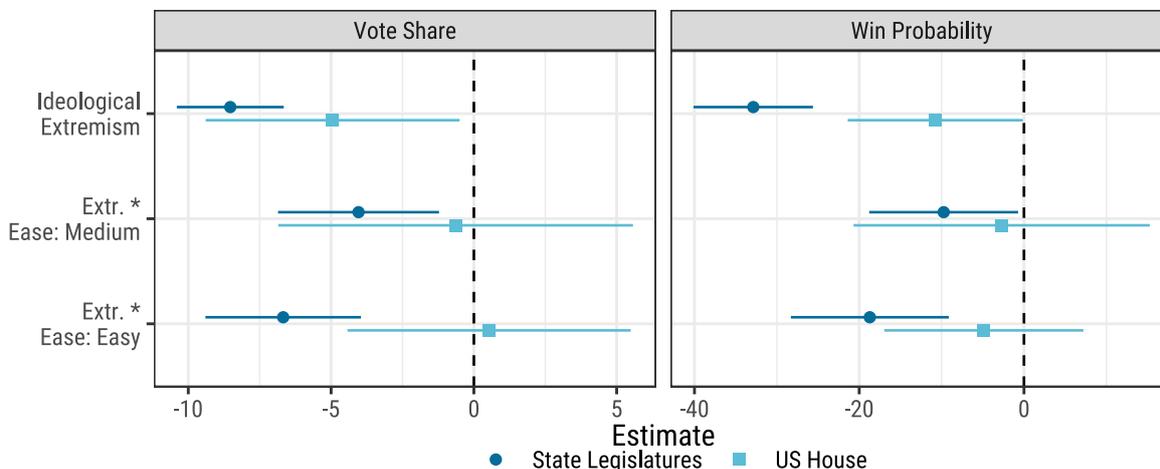


Figure 7: Effect of Candidate Extremism Difference on Election Outcomes by Initiative Qualification Requirement (States with the Initiative Right Only)
Notes: The reference category for the ease of initiatives is "hard". Bars represent 95%-confidence intervals (standard errors are clustered on the level of state electoral districts and U.S. house districts, respectively). Full regression results are in tables C1 in the Appendix.

Differential effects depending on variation over time in the use of initiatives — In an exploratory test, we study the differential demand of relatively more extreme candidates when potentially ‘hot’ topics are simultaneously decided as single issues at the ballot. For this, we exploit variation over time within a state in the use of initiatives at election day. It is not ex ante clear whether issues that split the electorate about equally become particularly salient during the pre-election phase or issues that take up extreme minority positions. We therefore estimate three models considering first the total number of initiatives, second the number of close initiatives, and third the number of very close initiatives decided on at election day. The analysis is again restricted to states that hold the initiative right. Figure 8 summarizes the findings. They suggest that relatively more extreme candidates are slightly less successful when more political issues are simultaneously decided at the ballot. The moderation seems most pronounced in the relatively rare occasion of an additional vote on a initiative that is decided with a very close margin. The point estimate for the interaction term of -1.7 amounts to 14 % of the main effect. No such differential effect on the support of relatively more or less extreme candidates to the U.S. House is observed.

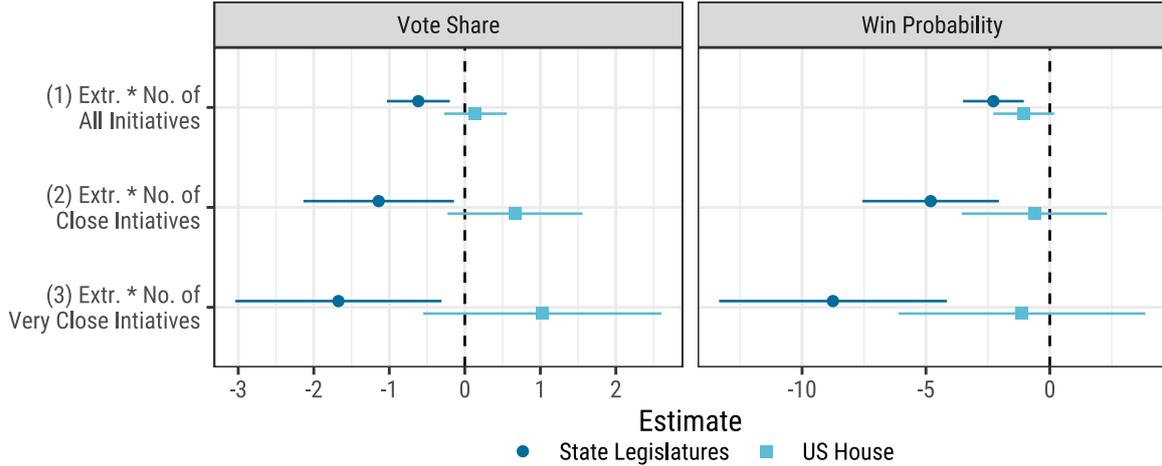


Figure 8: Effect of Candidate Extremism Difference on Election Outcomes by Number of Initiatives at General Election (States with the Initiative Right Only)

Notes: Interaction coefficients stem from different models (not estimated simultaneously). Bars represent 95%-confidence intervals (standard errors are clustered on the level of state electoral districts and U.S. house districts, respectively). Full regression results are in Table C2 in the Appendix.

5.3 Complementary behavioral reaction: campaign donations

In our theoretical framework, the same voter calculus applies to the support of extreme candidates in the voting booth and in donations to their campaigns. Supporting extreme candidates with campaign money becomes less attractive if the controversial topics on which they hold firm positions are decided at the ballot. If this theoretical prediction holds true, we should observe extreme candidates receiving less campaign contributions in direct democratic compared to pure representative states.

Based on the same specifications as above, Table C3 in the Appendix shows the regression results for the difference between the logarithmized amount of total campaign donations per 1,000 residents in the electoral district the Republican candidate received during the electoral cycle and the corresponding amount of the Democratic candidate as the dependent variable. They clearly show that ideologically relatively more extreme candidates in our sample of state level races receive economically and statistically significantly less than their less extreme opponents. The coefficient for the main effect, i.e., the relationship in states without the initiative right, implies that a Republic candidate who is one standard deviation more extreme than the Democratic candidate receives about 27 % less donations than his or her opponent.²¹ In states with the initiative right, the corresponding imbalance is about twice as large. If a candidate is one standard deviation more extreme than his or her opponent, he or she, on average, receives about 51 % less donations.²²

²¹ $Donations^R = e^{\beta \times \delta \Delta extremism} \times Donation^D = e^{-0.46 \times 0.68} \times Donation^D = 0.73 \times Donation^D$

²²Independently of the distribution of campaign donations between candidates in a race, ideologically more extreme candidates also receive less donations when compared to all other candidates in a state. Table C4 indicates that if they are one unit more extreme, they receive about 8 % less donations. In

The observation that relatively more extreme candidates collect less campaign donations from voters might partly explain why they win less electoral support.²³ However, we do not have the necessary exogenous variation in campaign support to quantify the relevance of this mechanism. We can just estimate whether there are any effects of ideological extremism and the initiative right that go beyond the related phenomenon of campaign donations when we include the latter as a control variable.

Table C5 shows the results when we include campaign donations, i.e., $\ln(\text{donation}^R) - \ln(\text{donations}^D)$, as an additional explanatory variable in the estimation models for electoral support. Relatively larger funds are thereby clearly positively correlated with a candidate’s vote share or winning probability. For example, if the Republican candidate raises 50 % more campaign donations, he or she is predicted to increase his or her relative vote share by 2.8 percentage points. Compared to the partial correlations in Table 2, the effects of the initiative right or of less strict qualification requirements for initiatives (in the reduced sample) on the electoral support of extreme candidates are substantially smaller. Overall, the evidence suggests that campaign donations are a potentially relevant mechanism for the moderation effect of direct democracy.

5.4 Discussion with further results

Voters’ ideological distance to candidates — The observed electoral disadvantage of ideologically extreme candidates might be due to two closely related forces, i.e., on the one hand that they hold extreme positions on the ideological spectrum and on the other hand that they are ideologically more distant to the average voter. In some additional tests, we try to disentangle the two aspects. We consider how close candidates are positioned ideologically to the voters in the district in terms of the absolute distance between the ideal point of the average voter in a district and the corresponding candidate’s ideological position.²⁴ If held constant in the regression model, we construct races that involve pairs of candidates who are similarly ideologically distant from their voters.²⁵

states with the initiative right, they receive even 30 % less. Thereby the biggest reduction is measured for initiative states with low qualification requirements and more frequent use of initiatives.

²³How much campaign donations themselves matter for electoral success still remains a topic of debate in the empirical literature (see, e.g., the recent reviews by Stratmann 2019 or Sides, Vavreck, and Warshaw 2022). Unquestionably though, candidates with larger campaign funds than their opponents tend to win elections at higher rates.

²⁴Rogers (2017) uses a similar methodological strategy to test whether the ideological closeness of candidates and voters predicts electoral success. However, he does not separate the effect of candidate extremism on voter support.

²⁵With this strategy, a further constellation of voter and candidate preferences can be addressed, which could potentially lead to a misinterpretation of estimation results. Parties likely nominate candidates with the policy stances of the constituency in mind. In a very conservative district, for example, the Democratic nominee probably has relatively moderate views, whereas the Republican nominee would likely belong to the most conservative wing of his or her party. Since it is nonetheless probable that in this case the moderate option would succumb to the more extreme opponent, this would give the (potentially wrong) impression that voters actually have a preference for ideologically extreme politicians.

For voter ideology within each electoral district we rely on the measure provided by Tausanovitch and Warshaw (2013). They use responses to policy questions from 275,000 Americans in national election surveys, with identical issues serving to bridge across multiple surveys, to estimate citizens’ ideological preferences. The ideology estimates are thus based on voters’ views on actual issues, representing a measure of “operational” rather than self-declared “symbolic” ideology. Operational ideology not only closely resembles our understanding of ideal points as an accumulation of individual policy bliss points, but has also been shown, for example, by Adams et al. (2017) to explain real voting outcomes better than voter self-placements on an symbolic liberal to conservative scale. Based on their approach, they can estimate the average ideal point of voters for both the state legislative and the congressional district level. Tausanovitch and Warshaw (2013) construct their measure of voter ideology similarly to ideology measures for politicians. Liberal positions have negative, conservative positions positive values, zero marks the ideological center and increasing distance from zero indicates more extreme voter ideal points.

By combining the data from Bonica (2013) and Tausanovitch and Warshaw (2013), we can measure for each candidate how ideologically distant he or she is to the average voter in the respective state legislative district. We calculate the ideological distance as the absolute value of the difference between the ideal point of a candidate and the average voter ideal point.²⁶ The relative ideological distance again considers the difference $ideologicaldistance^R - ideologicaldistance^D$.

We find that the relative ideological distance of the two candidates to the average voters is highly predictive for their relative voter support (see Table C6 in the Appendix). This holds irrespective of whether the state offers the initiative right or not. A one standard deviation larger relative distance (i.e., 0.82) of the Republican candidate vis-à-vis the Democratic candidate is related to a roughly 19 percentage points lower vote share difference, i.e., a 10 percentage points lower vote share for the Republic candidate. Moreover, once we control for the ideological congruence between the pair of candidates and the average voter in the electoral district, relative extremism is positively correlated with the vote share difference. This could reflect partisan voters’ tendency to give priority to candidates from “their” party if they are in a situation in which the ideological distance is more or less the same to both candidates. Importantly, we still observe a negative partial correlation for the interaction term between relative extremism and the availabil-

²⁶While the measures of candidate and voter ideology are from two different sources, we consider the scales as sufficiently close in their idea and construction to use them in this way. Moreover, our primary interest lies not in the extent to which ideological congruence between voters and candidates explain electoral outcomes, but in the comparison of voters’ reactions to extreme candidates based on whether they have the initiative right. It seems unlikely that any disturbances arising from differences between the two measures have a systematic link to the direct democratic rights on the state level. The only significant assumption we need is that the ideological center point has roughly the same meaning in both voter and candidate ideology.

ity of the initiative right in a state, i.e., controlling for ideological distance, an extreme partisan stand is gaining appeal less. Based on this supplementary finding, we conclude that the larger ideological distance of extreme candidates is lowering their chances in elections, and particularly so in states with the initiative right.

Turnout — The theoretical considerations, so far, follow a perspective in which candidates are more or less attractive to a given set of voters and this determines their fate at the poll. Thus, voters are modeled as being largely non-partisan (or “swing voters”) with their participation probability fixed. Alternatively, voters might be strongly partisan who rather decide on whether to turn out or not depending on candidates’ characteristics. Previous research for representatives of the US House (Hall and Thompson, 2018) indeed finds that the disadvantage of extreme candidates in elections is to a large extent due to their partisan base turning out less. Translating these considerations to our setting at the state level, the initiative right and actual ballot decisions concurring with state house elections might affect turnout and thus at least partly explain the observed patterns in the electoral success of extreme candidates.

We approach this argument by simultaneously taking into account cross-section variation in turnout and the initiative process. Level differences in turnout might thereby capture mobilization effects as well as differences in the composition of voters. If our measures related to the initiative right capture variation in turnout, we might misattribute the mechanism and pick up a finding that is due to mobilization rather than differential demand from the side of voters. If there is no causal link between the initiative right (or its use) and participation (but still a correlation) we might face an omitted variable bias.

Our robustness check indicates that the main results are not driven by turnout differences between states with and without the initiative right. The coefficients for the interaction terms between extremism and the initiative right (or the ease of adopting an initiative and its use) are rather similar, i.e., the vote share of a one standard deviation more extreme candidate is reduced by an additional 1.6 percentage points rather than 1.5 percentage points as estimated for the main specification. For states in which initiatives can easily be launched (compared to not), the respective effect on the vote share is 2.1 percentage points rather than 2.3 percentage points in the main specification (see Table C7 in the Appendix).

6 Concluding remarks

In many representative democracies, students of public opinion observe a frustration of citizens with politics and a distrust of elected representatives. Simultaneously, extremist candidates and parties achieve high vote shares. In this amalgam, it is difficult to discern

what causes which problems for political systems and pressing questions ensue. Why are voters supporting extreme candidates in elections at the risk of undermining democracy? Does the cure lie in less influence of ‘unreliable’ citizens and more expertocracy? Or does democracy need further development?

We follow a comparative institutional approach to learn about the demand for extremist candidates. Specifically, we focus on an institutional feature that fundamentally affects the democratic process, i.e., citizens’ right to launch and decide popular initiatives. This direct democratic instrument allows citizens to unbundle the most controversial issues from the election decision. In order to understand some of the changes in voters’ calculus when they have the initiative right, we first develop a theory that provides an explanation for why generally moderate citizens elect extreme ideologues to legislatures. We then show how direct democratic rights can moderate such voter behavior.

In our theoretical framework, voters care most about issues for which they have extreme preferences. As a result, the policy questions with the highest degree of polarization among the electorate as a whole dominate voter choices over prospective representatives in elections. Ideologically extreme candidates benefit from being more congruent with voters than moderates on these divisive issues, despite offering a worse fit for their constituents on many of the remaining political issues. Initiatives provide citizens with an instrument to unbundle the most controversial issues so that they are no longer in the scope of legislatures. As a consequence, citizens consider the unbundled issues much less when assessing candidates, and policy preferences of the electorate for the remaining issues are, on average, more moderate. The otherwise successful extreme partisans are then more likely to find themselves ideologically at odds with large parts of the electorate, and the moderate candidates receive higher vote shares compared to regimes without the possibility of initiatives.

Our empirical findings from U.S. state legislative elections between 2002 and 2010 support the predictions from our theory regarding the moderating selection effect of direct democracy. Ideological extremism of candidates is associated with significantly lower vote shares in initiative than in non-initiative states. Moreover, the easier it is for citizens to place initiatives on the ballot, the stronger this effect becomes. We do not find any such differential effect in the support of extreme candidates between initiative and non-initiative states when we repeat the same analysis with candidates for the U.S. House. This suggests that the moderating influence of direct democracy on voter behavior is not the product of some more general differences in political culture across states but the consequence of the initiative right that offers citizens the constitutional mean to put pressing issues directly on the political agenda.

The presented perspective on issue unbundling via initiatives and political selection might inspire different debates on direct democracy. First, the unbundling of specific single political issues facilitates the deliberation of these very same issues. The political

discussions prior to a popular vote help citizens to learn about and understand opposing views as well as the concerns of minorities. Citizens are thus expected to vote with more tolerance on the ballot than if they delegate their decision. This hypothesis is consistent with the evidence in Ahler (2014) showing that misperceptions about the views of citizens on the other side of the ideological divide cause voters to adopt more extreme positions themselves and that informing them about the actual views leads to more moderate opinions afterwards. Second, direct democracy is often considered a demand by extreme populist parties in order to control a self-serving elite in government. Here, we derive an argument why the initiative right might rather work as a way to cope with the extreme parties themselves. Third, politics is often considered too complicated for citizens leading to voter alienation and facilitating their manipulation. The unbundling and the dual process of democratic decision-making via delegation and popular votes reduces the complexity in the assessment of candidates and thereby also strengthens accountability in the representative democratic process. Initiatives also reduce the otherwise enormous stakes in elections since not all political input of voters takes the form of a single choice every few years. This likely lessens the role of political “team” identities for citizens, as individual candidates and parties no longer constitute the sole means of delivering the desired political goals. Individuals on the other ‘side’ of the ideological spectrum are thus no longer the “enemy” who must be defeated by all means in elections, but they are rather a potential partner for a coalition in one of the upcoming ballot measures. In this way, the lower importance of representative elections may offer a way to reduce the emotionalization of political discourse and thus also negative partisanship. Third, if controversial issues cannot be unbundled they are not automatically dealt with in the parliamentary process. Strategic considerations and gridlock might rather prevent legislative solutions on these issues. Voters are left dissatisfied by the unresponsiveness of the legislature, raising tensions and potentially fueling further support for extremists so that they eventually might come to power. Direct democracy might thus stabilize representative democracy by diminishing swings in party and faction politics. In sum, these considerations highlight that we are only at the beginning of understanding how direct democracy affects political selection.

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Online Appendix

Direct Democracy and Political Extremism

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A Appendix A: Description of Ballot Initiatives

Table A1: Distribution of Initiatives by Topic Area in U.S. states between 2002 and 2010

Initiative Topic Area	Share (%)
Tax & Revenue	21.3%
Health	15.4%
Education: PreK-12	12.2%
Budgets	11.5%
Civil & Constitutional Law	11.2%
Drug/Alcohol/Tobacco Policy	11.2%
Elections	8.4%
Gambling & Lotteries	8.4%
Labor & Employment	8.4%
Criminal Justice	7.7%
State Government	7.7%
Local Government	7%
Business & Commerce	5.6%
Transportation	5.2%
Environmental Protection	4.9%
Ethics/Lobbying/Campaign Finance	4.9%
Natural Resources	4.9%
Education: Higher Ed	4.2%
Energy & Electric Utilities	4.2%
Land Use / Property Rights	4.2%
Animal Rights/Hunting & Fishing	3.8%
Legislatures	3.8%
Human Services	3.5%
Bond Measures	3.1%
Abortion	2.4%
Insurance	2.4%
Redistricting	2.4%
Judiciary	1.4%
Term Limits	1.4%
State-Tribal Relations	1.4%
Agriculture	1%
Economic Development	0.7%
Elections Initiative Process	0.7%
Federal Government	0.7%
Arts & Culture	0.3%
Banking & Financial Services	0.3%
Telecom & Info Technology	0.3%

Notes: In total, there were ballot votes on 286 initiatives between 2002 and 2010 in the states we consider in our voting behavior analyses. The subject matter of initiatives can refer to multiple topic areas, hence the shares do not add up to 100%. Data on initiative topics come from Jordan and Grossmann (2016).

B Appendix B: Additional Statistics

Table B1: Descriptive Statistics for U.S. House Elections

	Initiative right				No Initiative Right			
	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Vote Share Diff.	-0.15	32	-78	58	1.3	30	-79	72
Win Probability Diff.	12	99	-100	100	4.1	100	-100	100
Ease of Initiatives								
... = 1 (hard)	0.25	0.43	0	1	-	-	-	-
... = 2 (medium)	0.19	0.39	0	1	-	-	-	-
... = 3 (easy)	0.56	0.5	0	1	-	-	-	-
No. of Initiatives	3.9	3.7	0	11	0	0	0	0
No. of Close Initiatives	1.1	1.5	0	5	0	0	0	0
No. of Very Close Initiatives	0.44	0.85	0	3	0	0	0	0
Ideological Extremism Mean	0.97	0.48	0.047	5	0.99	0.46	0.016	5
Ideological Extremism Diff.	-0.06	0.77	-4.3	4.3	0.13	0.68	-3.6	4.1
Incumbency Diff.	0.056	0.95	-1	1	0	0.94	-1	1
Female Diff.	-0.15	0.56	-1	1	-0.052	0.52	-1	1
ln(Donations Pop-Adj.) Mean	8.6	1.9	0	12	8.8	1.9	0	12
ln(Donations Pop-Adj.) Diff.	0.18	3	-10	10	0.2	2.9	-11	10

Notes: Data refers to 1,152 U.S. House races forming the main sample for the empirical analyses. All differences are expressed in terms of the Republican candidate minus the Democratic candidate.

C Appendix C: Full Regression Results

C.1 Main Results

The full regression results for our main analysis is presented in Table C1. The differential effects depending on variation over time in the use of initiatives are presented in Table C2. Tables C3, C4, and C5 show the findings considering campaign donations.

C.2 Discussion Results

The results considering ideological distance as a control variable are presented in Table C6. Table C7 shows the the results if turnout is considered as an additional control variable.

Table C1: Effect of Ideological Extremism by Initiative Right and Ease

	State Legislatures				US House			
	Vote Share		Win Probability		Vote Share		Win Probability	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Ideological Extremism	-7.9***	-8.5***	-27.6***	-32.9***	-7.2***	-4.9**	-14.3***	-10.8**
	(0.70)	(0.96)	(2.2)	(3.7)	(1.7)	(2.3)	(4.6)	(5.4)
Ideological Extremism × Initiative Right	-4.4***		-15.5***		1.4		-0.47	
	(0.87)		(2.7)		(1.8)		(4.7)	
Ideological Extremism × Ease of Initiatives: Medium		-4.0***		-9.7**		-0.64		-2.7
		(1.4)		(4.6)		(3.1)		(9.1)
Ideological Extremism × Ease of Initiatives: Easy		-6.7***		-18.7***		0.53		-4.9
		(1.4)		(4.9)		(2.5)		(6.1)
Incumbency	17.2***	16.7***	63.3***	62.9***	24.3***	26.3***	80.4***	80.7***
	(0.34)	(0.45)	(1.1)	(1.6)	(0.90)	(1.3)	(2.4)	(3.4)
Gender	0.54	0.25	2.0*	0.48	3.0**	2.4	1.3	3.6
	(0.37)	(0.51)	(1.2)	(1.7)	(1.2)	(1.5)	(2.8)	(3.4)
Advanced Degree	3.9***	3.9***	18.1***	16.6***				
	(0.37)	(0.53)	(1.2)	(1.8)				
Prestigious Alma Mater	4.8***	4.3***	18.7***	14.2***				
	(0.83)	(1.2)	(2.6)	(3.7)				
State Fixed-Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year Fixed-Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Standard-Errors	State Legislative District				Congressional District			
Observations	8,346	4,209	8,346	4,209	1,152	591	1,152	591
R ²	0.59	0.57	0.55	0.54	0.75	0.77	0.73	0.75

Notes: Ideological extremism refers to the difference between the extremism of the Republican candidate minus the extremism of the Democratic candidate. The ease of launching an initiative refers to the qualification requirements compiled by (Bowler and Donovan, 2004). Standard errors are clustered on the level of state electoral districts. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table C2: Effect of Ideological Extremism by Number of Concurrent Initiatives

	State Legislatures						US House					
	Vote Share			Win Probability			Vote Share			Win Probability		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Ideological Extremism	-10.8*** (0.88)	-11.6*** (0.80)	-11.9*** (0.75)	-37.4*** (2.9)	-40.1*** (2.7)	-40.7*** (2.6)	-5.4*** (1.3)	-5.8*** (1.2)	-5.5*** (1.1)	-9.2** (4.3)	-13.5*** (4.0)	-13.5*** (3.8)
No. of Initiatives				-0.25 (0.19)								
Ideological Extremism × No. of Initiatives				-0.61*** (0.21)								
No. of Close Initiatives		0.54 (0.37)			1.4 (1.4)			0.82 (0.59)			3.6* (2.0)	
Ideological Extremism × No. of Close Initiatives		-1.1** (0.51)			-4.8*** (1.4)			0.66 (0.46)			-0.62 (1.5)	
No. of Very Close Initiatives			0.04 (0.48)			1.7 (1.9)			-0.31 (0.87)			3.8 (3.0)
Ideological Extremism × No. of Very Close Initiatives			-1.7** (0.70)			-8.8*** (2.3)			1.0 (0.81)			-1.1 (2.5)
Incumbency	16.9*** (0.46)	16.9*** (0.45)	16.9*** (0.46)	63.1*** (1.6)	63.3*** (1.6)	63.3*** (1.6)	26.4*** (1.3)	26.4*** (1.3)	26.3*** (1.3)	80.6*** (3.5)	80.7*** (3.4)	80.7*** (3.4)
Gender	0.25 (0.51)	0.26 (0.51)	0.26 (0.51)	0.50 (1.7)	0.51 (1.7)	0.48 (1.7)	2.5* (1.5)	2.5* (1.4)	2.5* (1.4)	3.1 (3.3)	3.5 (3.4)	3.4 (3.4)
Advanced Degree	4.0*** (0.53)	4.0*** (0.53)	4.0*** (0.53)	16.7*** (1.8)	16.7*** (1.8)	16.7*** (1.8)						
Prestigious Alma Mater	4.2*** (1.2)	4.3*** (1.2)	4.3*** (1.2)	14.0*** (3.7)	14.5*** (3.7)	14.6*** (3.7)						
State Fixed-Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year Fixed-Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Standard-Errors	State Legislative District						Congressional District					
Observations	4,209	4,209	4,209	4,209	4,209	4,209	591	591	591	591	591	591
R ²	0.57	0.57	0.57	0.54	0.54	0.54	0.77	0.77	0.77	0.76	0.76	0.75

Notes: Ideological extremism refers to the difference between the extremism of the Republican candidate minus the extremism of the Democratic candidate. The number of initiatives refers to propositions decided simultaneously on election day. The sample is restricted to races taking place in states with the initiative right. Standard errors are clustered on the level of state electoral districts. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table C3: Extremism and Donations Difference

	ln(Donations Pop-Adj.) Difference				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Ideological Extremism	-0.46*** (0.06)	-0.75*** (0.08)	-0.71*** (0.06)	-0.87*** (0.06)	-0.94*** (0.06)
Ideological Extremism × Initiative Right	-0.60*** (0.07)				
Ideological Extremism × Ease of Initiatives: Medium		0.007 (0.10)			
Ideological Extremism × Ease of Initiatives: Easy		-0.69*** (0.12)			
No. of Initiatives			-0.04* (0.02)		
Ideological Extremism × No. of Initiatives			-0.12*** (0.02)		
No. of Close Initiatives				-0.05 (0.04)	
Ideological Extremism × No. of Close Initiatives				-0.24*** (0.06)	
No. of Very Close Initiatives					-0.05 (0.05)
Ideological Extremism × No. of Very Close Initiatives					-0.31*** (0.08)
Incumbency	0.93*** (0.02)	0.94*** (0.04)	0.94*** (0.04)	0.94*** (0.04)	0.95*** (0.04)
Female	0.04 (0.03)	0.03 (0.04)	0.03 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)
Advanced Degree	0.23*** (0.03)	0.27*** (0.04)	0.27*** (0.04)	0.27*** (0.04)	0.28*** (0.04)
Prestigious Alma Mater	0.37*** (0.06)	0.33*** (0.10)	0.31*** (0.10)	0.32*** (0.10)	0.33*** (0.10)
State Fixed-Effects and Year Fixed-Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	8,346	4,209	4,209	4,209	4,209
R ²	0.45	0.47	0.47	0.46	0.46

Notes: Ideological extremism refers to the difference between the extremism of the Republican candidate minus the extremism of the Democratic candidate. The ease of launching an initiative refers to the qualification requirements compiled by (Bowler and Donovan, 2004). The number of initiatives refers to propositions decided simultaneously on election day. In specifications (2) to (5), the sample is restricted to races taking place in states with the initiative right. Standard errors are clustered on the level of state electoral districts. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table C4: Extremism and Donations (Non-Difference with all Candidates)

	ln(Donations Pop-Adj.)				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Ideological Extremism	-0.08*** (0.02)	-0.30*** (0.03)	-0.24*** (0.02)	-0.29*** (0.02)	-0.32*** (0.02)
Ideological Extremism × Initiative Right	-0.28*** (0.03)				
Ideological Extremism × Ease of Initiatives: Medium		0.11*** (0.04)			
Ideological Extremism × Ease of Initiatives: Easy		-0.21*** (0.05)			
No. of Initiatives			-0.004 (0.01)		
Ideological Extremism × No. of Initiatives			-0.04*** (0.008)		
No. of Close Initiatives				-0.01 (0.02)	
Ideological Extremism × No. of Close Initiatives				-0.09*** (0.02)	
No. of Very Close Initiatives					-0.07** (0.03)
Ideological Extremism × No. of Very Close Initiatives					-0.12*** (0.03)
Incumbency	0.54*** (0.01)	0.55*** (0.02)	0.54*** (0.02)	0.55*** (0.02)	0.55*** (0.02)
Female	0.02 (0.01)	0.02 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)
Advanced Degree	0.13*** (0.01)	0.16*** (0.02)	0.17*** (0.02)	0.17*** (0.02)	0.17*** (0.02)
Prestigious Alma Mater	0.21*** (0.03)	0.20*** (0.05)	0.21*** (0.05)	0.21*** (0.05)	0.21*** (0.05)
State Fixed-Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year Fixed-Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	16,692	8,418	8,418	8,418	8,418
R ²	0.29	0.33	0.32	0.32	0.32

Notes: All variables of the respective candidate and not expressed as relative to her opponent. The ease of launching an initiative refers to the qualification requirements compiled by (Bowler and Donovan, 2004). The number of initiatives refers to propositions decided simultaneously on election day. In specifications (2) to (5), the sample is restricted to races taking place in states with the initiative right. Standard errors are clustered on the level of state electoral districts. * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table C5: Extremism and Election Outcomes with Donations as Control

	Vote Share (1)	Win Probability (2)	Vote Share (3)	Win Probability (4)	Vote Share (5)	Win Probability (6)	Vote Share (7)	Win Probability (8)	Vote Share (9)	Win Probability (10)
Ideological Extremism	-4.7*** (0.51)	-20.1*** (1.7)	-3.3*** (0.77)	-20.5*** (3.3)	-5.8*** (0.75)	-25.7*** (2.7)	-5.5*** (0.66)	-25.8*** (2.5)	-5.3*** (0.62)	-25.4*** (2.4)
ln(Donations Pop-Adj.)	7.0*** (0.21)	16.4*** (0.57)	7.0*** (0.33)	16.4*** (0.86)	7.0*** (0.34)	16.4*** (0.85)	7.0*** (0.34)	16.4*** (0.85)	7.0*** (0.33)	16.3*** (0.85)
Ideological Extremism × Initiative Right	-0.19 (0.68)	-5.6** (2.2)								
Ideological Extremism × Ease of Initiatives: Medium			-4.1*** (1.2)	-9.9** (4.2)						
Ideological Extremism × Ease of Initiatives: Easy			-1.8* (1.1)	-7.4* (4.1)						
No. of Initiatives					-0.008 (0.18)	0.06 (0.70)				
Ideological Extremism × No. of Initiatives					0.25 (0.20)	-0.24 (0.57)				
No. of Close Initiatives							0.86*** (0.33)	2.2* (1.3)		
Ideological Extremism × No. of Close Initiatives							0.53 (0.51)	-0.91 (1.4)		
No. of Very Close Initiatives									0.40 (0.45)	2.5 (1.8)
Ideological Extremism × No. of Very Close Initiatives									0.49 (0.72)	-3.7 (2.3)
Incumbency	10.7*** (0.34)	48.1*** (1.2)	10.2*** (0.50)	47.5*** (1.8)	10.3*** (0.49)	47.7*** (1.8)	10.3*** (0.50)	47.8*** (1.8)	10.3*** (0.49)	47.8*** (1.8)
Female	0.24 (0.31)	1.3 (1.2)	0.01 (0.41)	-0.08 (1.6)	0.01 (0.41)	-0.06 (1.6)	0.009 (0.41)	-0.08 (1.6)	0.004 (0.41)	-0.12 (1.6)
Advanced Degree	2.3*** (0.32)	14.3*** (1.2)	2.1*** (0.47)	12.2*** (1.7)	2.1*** (0.47)	12.2*** (1.7)	2.1*** (0.47)	12.2*** (1.7)	2.1*** (0.47)	12.2*** (1.7)
Prestigious Alma Mater	2.2*** (0.68)	12.7*** (2.4)	2.0** (0.97)	8.9** (3.5)	2.0** (0.97)	8.9** (3.5)	2.1** (0.97)	9.2*** (3.5)	2.0** (0.97)	9.2*** (3.5)
State Fixed-Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year Fixed-Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	8,346	8,346	4,209	4,209	4,209	4,209	4,209	4,209	4,209	4,209
R ²	0.71	0.60	0.71	0.60	0.71	0.60	0.71	0.60	0.70	0.60

Notes: Ideological extremism refers to the difference between the extremism of the Republican candidate minus the extremism of the Democratic candidate. The ease of launching an initiative refers to the qualification requirements compiled by (Bowler and Donovan, 2004). The number of initiatives refers to propositions decided simultaneously on election day. In specifications (3) to (10), the sample is restricted to races taking place in states with the initiative right. Standard errors are clustered on the level of state electoral districts.

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table C6: Effect of Ideological Extremism with Control for Ideological Distance to Voters

	Vote Share (1)	Win Probability (2)	Vote Share (3)	Win Probability (4)	Vote Share (5)	Win Probability (6)	Vote Share (7)	Win Probability (8)	Vote Share (9)	Win Probability (10)
Ideological Extremism	15.2*** (1.0)	23.6*** (3.0)	16.5*** (1.4)	23.2*** (4.8)	14.8*** (1.3)	19.8*** (4.2)	14.7*** (1.3)	18.9*** (4.1)	14.8*** (1.2)	19.1*** (4.1)
Ideological Extremism × Initiative Right	-2.2** (0.87)	-10.7*** (2.8)								
Ideological Extremism × Ease of Initiatives: Medium			-2.9** (1.4)	-7.1 (4.7)						
Ideological Extremism × Ease of Initiatives: Easy			-2.8** (1.3)	-10.1** (4.9)						
No. of Initiatives					-0.08 (0.16)	-0.13 (0.67)				
Ideological Extremism × No. of Initiatives					-0.03 (0.18)	-0.96 (0.62)				
No. of Close Initiatives							0.67** (0.30)	1.8 (1.3)		
Ideological Extremism × No. of Close Initiatives							0.07 (0.40)	-2.1 (1.3)		
No. of Very Close Initiatives									0.15 (0.40)	1.9 (1.8)
Ideological Extremism × No. of Very Close Initiatives									-0.39 (0.60)	-5.9** (2.3)
Ideological Distance	-23.6*** (0.73)	-52.3*** (2.1)	-25.2*** (1.0)	-56.6*** (3.0)	-25.4*** (1.0)	-56.8*** (3.0)	-25.4*** (1.0)	-56.9*** (3.0)	-25.4*** (1.0)	-56.9*** (3.0)
Incumbency	14.6*** (0.31)	57.5*** (1.1)	13.9*** (0.40)	56.5*** (1.5)	14.0*** (0.40)	56.7*** (1.6)	14.0*** (0.40)	56.8*** (1.6)	14.0*** (0.40)	56.7*** (1.6)
Female	0.69** (0.33)	2.4** (1.2)	0.66 (0.45)	1.4 (1.6)	0.67 (0.45)	1.4 (1.6)	0.67 (0.45)	1.4 (1.6)	0.67 (0.45)	1.4 (1.6)
Advanced Degree	3.1*** (0.34)	16.2*** (1.2)	3.0*** (0.47)	14.5*** (1.7)	3.0*** (0.47)	14.6*** (1.7)	3.0*** (0.47)	14.5*** (1.7)	3.0*** (0.47)	14.5*** (1.7)
Prestigious Alma Mater	3.2*** (0.69)	15.2*** (2.5)	2.8*** (0.96)	10.8*** (3.5)	2.7*** (0.96)	10.7*** (3.5)	2.8*** (0.96)	11.0*** (3.5)	2.8*** (0.96)	11.1*** (3.5)
State Fixed-Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year Fixed-Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	8,346	8,346	4,209	4,209	4,209	4,209	4,209	4,209	4,209	4,209
R ²	0.67	0.58	0.67	0.58	0.67	0.58	0.67	0.58	0.67	0.58

Notes: Ideological extremism refers to the difference between the extremism of the Republican candidate minus the extremism of the Democratic candidate. The ease of launching an initiative refers to the qualification requirements compiled by (Bowler and Donovan, 2004). The number of initiatives refers to propositions decided simultaneously on election day. In specifications (3) to (10), the sample is restricted to races taking place in states with the initiative right. Standard errors are clustered on the level of state electoral districts.
 * $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Table C7: Extremism and Election Outcomes with Turnout as Control

	Vote Share (1)	Win Probability (2)	Vote Share (3)	Win Probability (4)	Vote Share (5)	Win Probability (6)	Vote Share (7)	Win Probability (8)	Vote Share (9)	Win Probability (10)
Ideological Extremism	-11.8*** (1.4)	-30.6*** (4.4)	-15.0*** (2.2)	-44.2*** (6.6)	-17.7*** (2.1)	-50.8*** (6.5)	-18.7*** (2.1)	-53.7*** (6.4)	-19.0*** (2.1)	-54.4*** (6.3)
Turnout	0.33*** (0.04)	0.84*** (0.12)	0.32*** (0.06)	0.99*** (0.18)	0.32*** (0.06)	0.99*** (0.18)	0.32*** (0.06)	0.99*** (0.18)	0.32*** (0.06)	0.99*** (0.18)
Ideological Extremism × Turnout	0.12*** (0.03)	0.10 (0.11)	0.18*** (0.05)	0.32** (0.15)	0.20*** (0.05)	0.37** (0.16)	0.20*** (0.05)	0.38** (0.16)	0.20*** (0.05)	0.39** (0.16)
Ideological Extremism × Initiative Right	-4.6*** (0.86)	-15.8*** (2.7)								
Ideological Extremism × Ease of Initiatives: Medium			-3.6** (1.4)	-10.0** (4.5)						
Ideological Extremism × Ease of Initiatives: Easy			-6.2*** (1.4)	-18.2*** (4.7)						
No. of Initiatives					-0.32* (0.19)	-0.64 (0.71)				
Ideological Extremism × No. of Initiatives					-0.59*** (0.21)	-2.2*** (0.62)				
No. of Close Initiatives							0.47 (0.37)	1.6 (1.4)		
Ideological Extremism × No. of Close Initiatives							-1.1** (0.51)	-4.5*** (1.4)		
No. of Very Close Initiatives									0.07 (0.50)	2.0 (1.9)
Ideological Extremism × No. of Very Close Initiatives									-1.5** (0.70)	-8.2*** (2.3)
Incumbency	17.0*** (0.33)	62.7*** (1.1)	16.5*** (0.45)	62.0*** (1.6)	16.6*** (0.45)	62.3*** (1.6)	16.7*** (0.45)	62.5*** (1.6)	16.7*** (0.45)	62.4*** (1.6)
Female	0.60 (0.37)	2.3* (1.2)	0.33 (0.51)	0.74 (1.7)	0.33 (0.51)	0.75 (1.7)	0.34 (0.51)	0.76 (1.7)	0.34 (0.51)	0.73 (1.7)
Advanced Degree	3.8*** (0.36)	17.9*** (1.2)	3.8*** (0.52)	16.3*** (1.8)	3.8*** (0.52)	16.4*** (1.8)	3.8*** (0.52)	16.4*** (1.8)	3.9*** (0.52)	16.4*** (1.8)
Prestigious Alma Mater	5.0*** (0.83)	19.2*** (2.6)	4.2*** (1.2)	14.1*** (3.8)	4.1*** (1.2)	13.8*** (3.8)	4.2*** (1.2)	14.2*** (3.8)	4.2*** (1.2)	14.4*** (3.8)
State Fixed-Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year Fixed-Effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	8,324	8,324	4,199	4,199	4,199	4,199	4,199	4,199	4,199	4,199
R ²	0.60	0.56	0.58	0.55	0.58	0.55	0.58	0.55	0.58	0.55

Notes: Ideological extremism refers to the difference between the extremism of the Republican candidate minus the extremism of the Democratic candidate. The ease of launching an initiative refers to the qualification requirements compiled by (Bowler and Donovan, 2004). The number of initiatives refers to propositions decided simultaneously on election day. In specifications (3) to (10), the sample is restricted to races taking place in states with the initiative right. Standard errors are clustered on the level of state electoral districts.

* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$