Asymmetric Polarization and Asymmetric Models: Democratic and Republican Interpretations of Electoral Dynamics

PRELIMINARY DRAFT

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abstract

This paper argues that Republican office-holders have become more ideologically extreme than Democrats in part because Democratic and Republican elites rely on electoral narratives that imply different models of the electoral process. While many Democratic narratives resemble the basic premise of the Downsian spatial model and its pressure towards ideological centrism, popular Republican narratives suggest at least four alternative models. In particular, a model derived from Phyllis Schlafly's *A Choice Not An Echo* suggests that Republicans electoral fortunes improve if they to move to the right, not towards anything resembling a center, and narratives constructed around Ronald Reagan encourage belief in such a model. Such divergence in conceptual models at the elite level can lead to asymmetric polarization among office-holders.

While volumes continue to be written on the increasing ideological gap between Democratic and Republican office-holders, what is most perplexing about that polarization is its asymmetric nature. The median Democratic official is more liberal today than several decades ago, but that is primarily because the moderate-to-conservative-leaning Southern Democrats are largely gone. In contrast, not only are the moderate-to-liberal-leaning Northeastern Republicans no longer in office, the conservative wing of the Republican Party at the elite level is far more conservative today than even a few years ago. We can see this in legislative voting scores, where the median Democrat's DW-NOMINATE score in the 112th House was -.398, whereas the median Republican's DW-NOMINATE score was .674. We can see this in policy proposals, where Republicans continue to advocate ever-lower tax rates, whereas even President Obama's demand during the 2010 "fiscal cliff" debate was that only the top marginal rate return to the Clinton-era rate of 39.6%, leaving everybody else at the rates established by President Bush's 2001 tax cuts. While Bonica's (2013) contribution-based analysis of ideology suggests otherwise, direct analysis of ideology leaves little doubt that Republican officeholders are more extreme than Democrats. Why?

The question is especially perplexing in the context of spatial theory. Spatial models of electoral politics are dominated by the mechanics of Downs' (1957) model, but while symmetric polarization is partially reconcilable with Downsian mechanics, asymmetric polarization is not. The core principle in the Downs model is that if voters have single-peaked and relatively symmetric[1] preferences, then the party closest to the median voter will win in a two-way race,

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[1] While Downs' original specification did not require strict symmetry, more formalized specifications show that violations of symmetry actually have more important consequences than Downs thought. See, for example, Roemer (2001).

putting pressure on office-seeking parties to converge to the location of the median voter. While factors such as primaries, the threat of extremist abstention, or candidates' policy motives can prevent complete convergence, the candidate closest to the median voter should win deterministically unless we include non-policy factors, such as valence characteristics (as in Enelow & Hinich 1982). To have one party consistently adopt positions further from the center, then, is a greater challenge to Downsian models than simple, symmetric polarization. Moreover, while journalists fallaciously attribute polarization to gerrymandering,[2] the direction of the asymmetry is still further evidence that gerrymandering is *not* responsible for this pattern. Since Democrats are packed into their districts more inefficiently than Republicans due to a combination of urbanization, mandates to create majority-minority districts and some partisan gerrymandering, Democrats would be the party moving further from the center if gerrymandering were the culprit. Instead, it is the Republicans, in their more narrow majority districts who have become more extreme.

In Downsian terms, why are Republicans less willing to converge than Democrats? While Grossman & Hopkins (2015) explore the underlying preferences of the parties' bases with respect to the concepts of purity and compromise, the unexplored question is: what do the parties actually *believe* about electoral mechanics? By "parties," I mean the broad array of candidates, high-profile activists, contributors and opinion-leaders sometimes known as the expanded party network, and who are the focus of models such as *The Party Decides*. Do party elites believe Downs, or some competing model?

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[2] For elaboration, see Abramowitz et al. (2006), Brunell (2006, 2008), Buchler (2009, 2010a, 2010b), McCarty et al. (2009)

How do we assess what elites *believe* about electoral dynamics? Conventional analysis has revolved around empirical examination of positioning decisions. If candidates adopt more centrist positions in Circumstance 1 than in Circumstance 2, that implies that they believe Model X rather than Model Y. We can label this approach, "the axiom of revealed assumptions," in reference to the more famous economic axiom. Regardless of model specification, though, such analysis assumes that everyone is acting under the same conceptual model despite the fact that different candidates, even within parties, might believe different models. Large N analysis in the conventional sense simply calculates the *net* effect of what may be competing beliefs within a sample. In principle, we could hypothesize that different candidates operate under different assumptions, and include a first stage selection model that determines whether a candidate should behave as a Downsian candidate or a Rabinowitz & McDonald (1989) candidate, but that process too is fraught.

If positioning decisions are only weakly informative with respect to the underlying models that elites believe, then what remains to be analyzed is the set of narratives that these actors construct around election outcomes, and in that context, the narratives used by activists and pundits may be as important as those told by the office-holders themselves because they influence the strategic decisions of the candidates. There is a well-known pattern by which political actors conclude that their side's victories convey policy mandates, but their losses don't. Azari (2014) argues that in recent years, even those who win by narrow margins have come to claim mandates. At a deeper level, though, narratives can reveal the specific, underlying conceptual models by which political actors derive these beliefs, beyond mere motivated reasoning. Possibly even more important than narratives around victory, though, are the

narratives constructed around losses, which reveal beliefs (or at least assertions) of what the party must do to return to power. In the context of labor negotiation, Beckwith (2015) describes how the construction of these narratives is both constrained by empirical circumstances, and used to serve broad purposes such as rallying or strategizing for the next round. However, electoral processes lead to a wider array of potential explanatory models since they involve large and diversely motivated electorates rather than simply employers and employees with clear preferences. Thus, the options available for narratives to explain defeat are not as easy to categorize broadly as the labor narratives discussed by Beckwith. Nevertheless, if we do not understand these narratives, then we cannot understand how elites think of the electoral process, and if they do not operate under conceptual models that suggest convergence, there is no reason for observers to expect convergence. Moreover, if the narratives constructed by the two parties diverge, so to speak, then there is no reason to expect polarization to be symmetric. If one party seems to believe a set of models that don't require convergence, or at least require less convergence, then asymmetry should be unsurprising.

One need not look far to see examples of Democratic narratives that resemble Downsian models. Losses by candidates like McGovern in 1972 are often attributed to ideological extremism. Mondale's 1984 loss is popularly attributed to his direct assertion that he would raise taxes. Dukakis' 1988 loss is often similarly attributed to his left-leaning stances on crime, and the death penalty in particular. While election forecasting models, such as Abramowitz' "Time For a Change" model, or Hibbs' "Bread and Peace" model characterize election outcomes very differently, these kinds of narratives about candidates like McGovern, Mondale and Dukakis, which should be easily recognizable to political observers, encourage Democrats to think that

they cannot move as far to the left as they might like and still win. That belief encouraged the development of the Democratic Leadership Council, which reached its apex with Clinton's 1992 victory and 1996 reelection. Whether one calls his overall approach "triangulation" or merely centrism, Clinton's electoral success helped to convince many Democrats that centrism conveys electoral benefits, as Downs would argue.

Such an understanding in 2004 led to complications for Howard Dean's candidacy. When he built his 2004 campaign around a promise to represent "the Democratic wing of the Democratic Party," the nervousness that many elite Democrats had was that Dean represented a return to the kind of ideological extremism that produced electoral defeats like 1972 rather than the victories of 1992 and 1996. The closest that liberals could claim to electoral vindication in recent years would be Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 victories, but even then, many within the Democratic Party have been timid about claiming a mandate for liberalism. Many attributed his victories to a combination of the economic collapse under George W. Bush and his supposed potential to act as a unifying force in American politics. Moreover, while Republicans were unwilling to treat the 2006 midterm wave against Republicans as an indictment of conservatism, many Democrats were open about the relationship between the 2010 elections and passage of the Affordable Care Act as demonstrated empirically by Nyhan et al. (2012). All of this suggests that even if Democratic elites do not uniformly believe Downs, the common narratives they use suggest some relatively broad acceptance of the general model.

One can certainly find examples of Democrats constructing alternative narratives, such as attributing any loss to boogeymen like money or the mythical bias of low turnout, but the prominence of these Downsian narratives among Democrats is not difficult to see. What *is*

difficult to see is a real analog among Republicans, whose electoral narratives are more varied and elaborate. Readers should ask themselves a simple question: "when was the last time I heard a prominent Republican leader attribute a Republican loss to extreme conservatism, or a victory to moderation?" Such statements are rarities at best.

Alternatives to Downsian narratives among elite Republicans

So what kinds of narratives do Republican elites tell about election results, and what underlying models do they suggest? This paper will discuss four common narratives and their associated models. The narratives will be discussed in broad strokes rather than detailing every rhetorical example of political figures invoking them, but each narrative will be familiar to political observers.

The first alternative to Downs that common Republican narratives suggest is what we can call the "CRN" model. Consider the ubiquitous refrain, "America is a center-right nation," (hence "CRN"). The substance of the assertion is actually just a simple twist on Downs — that the median voter's location in the policy space can be described as somewhat conservative. The electoral model implied by the phrase and the narrative surrounding it is essentially Downsian, with the modification that the electorally optimal location is a conservative-leaning location, allowing Republicans to win elections even when they are more extreme than Democrats in *absolute* terms because they are still closer to the median voter. The phrase, and hence the underlying logic, are so prominent not just among Republican elites but among pundits that actually tracing its origin is quite difficult. Its ubiquity speaks for itself. Moreover, if Republicans believe that the median voter is somewhat conservative, but Democrats

believe that the median voter is moderate, then Democrats will converge more to absolute center, leading to asymmetric polarization. Even if Democrats accept the CRN model too, their own policy preferences will prevent them from running as conservative candidates to converge fully to the median voter, still leaving us with asymmetric polarization at the elite level.

A somewhat more significant break from Downsian models for which we can see some acceptance among Republican narratives is the "directional" model, proposed by Rabinowitz & McDonald (1989). The model itself is sufficiently abstract and academic that prominent figures do not invoke it directly, but its basic premise is audible. In the directional model, voters lack preferences over policy locations, and instead have preferences over the direction they want policy to move. Thus, they will sometimes hand victory to an extremist over a centrist because the extremist will move policy in the direction that voters want. If one perceives voters to want policy to move in a more conservative direction without any distinct preferences over a specific location, then electoral politics suggest ever-rightward movement among Republicans in particular, again leading to asymmetric polarization at the elite level. So how does this model show itself in common Republican narratives? Consider the following question: is there a non-zero tax rate at which Republicans— politicians or voters— would *stop* advocating tax cuts? If not, then tax preferences among Republicans are characterized by an eternal, Zeno-like, asymptotic approach to zero. That is a directional preference, not a positional preference, and the prominence of directional thinking in Republican narratives becomes clear. While many Republican presidential candidates propose specific tax rates (e.g. Bob Dole's 17% flat tax proposal in 1996, Herman Cain's 9-9-9 plan), actual preferences are directional unless we accept the premise that if such a plan were enacted, the party would stop seeking tax cuts. That seems

implausible, and the Republican Party's adherence to tax *cuts* rather than a specific set of tax *rates* indicates directional rather than positional thinking.

Moving away from abstract positioning entirely, one can also see evidence of belief in what we might call the redistributive model. Buchanan & Tullock (1962) constructed a model of political decision-making based on the notion that policy choices impose costs on some groups to provide benefits for others. Constructing a winning coalition in a majoritarian system, then, means imposing costs on minorities for the benefit of majorities, frequently through simple redistribution, or at least market interference. Less formally, the argument resembles Ayn Rand's conception of politics as an eternal struggle between the "makers" and the "takers," to use the language favored by Rand's followers. Assertions of "class warfare," common in Republican rhetoric, are essentially manifestations of a belief in Buchanan & Tullock's model, or at least Ayn Rand. Both before and after the 2012 election, Romney offered an electoral model within that framework. Essentially, Democrats win by redistribution, providing "gifts" to those who choose not to live responsible lives. Buchanan and Tullock's central critique of majoritarianism is that it permits exploitation, and in the Ayn Rand tradition, Romney and many other Republicans fear a system in which 51% can confiscate as much as they want from "the makers," "the most successful among us," or, "the job creators." The irony of the 47% cut-off made famous in Romney's secretly recorded speech is that if the 53% who pay income taxes go up against the 47% who don't, the 53% shouldn't be able to lose, but a looser reading of the underlying logic is that Republicans who oppose redistribution face an absolute cap on their vote shares of 53%, so Democrats have a relatively small hurdle to get above 50%, whereas the exploitative nature of majoritarian systems make it more difficult for the party whose platform is based on economic

nonintervention. Nevertheless, acceptance of the redistributive model suggests that spatial positioning is a pointless abstraction, so one shouldn't worry about how one's platform would be characterized in a meaningless policy space. This does not necessarily suggest extremism, but it does intrinsically reject the idea that winning means converging to the mythical location of the mythical median voter. To the degree that Republicans accept the model underlying these kinds of narratives, then, they should not necessarily feel pressure to converge, so we should not be surprised by their reluctance to do so.

As visible and as appealing as these competing models are, though, there may be an even more important conceptual model widely accepted by the most conservative candidates and activists, the policy-demanders as Noel (2014) calls them, and those most concerned with ideological purity. If these are the actors most responsible for the continued rightward march of the party as an Aldrich (1983a, b)-type model might suggest, then the model warrants special attention. The source may be Phyllis Schlafly, whose 1964 book, *A Choice Not An Echo*, has been central to the thinking of conservative activists since its publication. Schlafly's book demonstrates not merely how the conservative wing of the Republican Party thinks about policy and society, but about the electoral process. Schlafly's book is primarily remembered for characterizing not just American liberalism, but the moderate wing of the Republican Party as complicit in what is effectively a socialist conspiracy, while advocating the nomination of a true conservative whose policies are readily distinguishable from the Democratic nominee to provide the electorate with a more substantive choice, interestingly echoing the APSA's exhortations from *Towards a More Responsible Two-Party System*. However, in order to address the obvious issue of electability, buried within the argument is the assertion that nominating the true

conservative will not lead to defeat. Extremism will not doom the true conservative nominee because the electorate is not the normally-distributed electorate characterized by Downs, but one that will reward true conservatives who run on their convictions when presented with the "choice," not the "echo." Goldwater's "extremism in defense of liberty" quote is not truly a statement embracing extremism, but a rejection of the moderate-extremist distinction as being useful. The spectrum is not one that distinguishes liberalism from conservatism, but one that distinguishes liberty from tyranny. Any labels beyond that are distractions at best.

Derived from Schlafly, then, is the prominent assertion that Republicans win when they nominate true conservatives of conviction, and lose when they nominate mere "echoes." One could fill a book with examples of prominent Republicans making variations on that statement. It is somewhat ironic that Schlafly popularized this belief in 1964, when Republicans declined to nominate a moderate, choosing instead conservative icon Barry Goldwater, who lost in a landslide. Of course, the expectation of loss factored into the 1964 Republican Convention's decision to nominate Goldwater anyway, and conservative advocates had a variety of ways to explain away Goldwater's loss, but the model itself has been a convenient narrative tool for explaining presidential elections, as we shall see. However, before understanding why the model has been so useful to conservative activists, we must specify it since unlike Downs (1957), Rabinowitz & McDonald (1989) or Buchanan & Tullock (1962), it has only existed as a folk narrative rather than a formal model. It can be formalized quite simply, and its appeal to conservative activists as a narrative tool will become apparent when we do so.

Specifying the Schlafly model

The first thing to understand about formalizing the Schlafly model is that the Democratic Party and its candidates are not actually strategic actors in the model. To Schlafly and similarly-minded Republicans, Democrats are not well-intentioned people who simply prefer a somewhat higher tax rate to support a social safety net. Rather, they are either knowing or mindless agents of socialism who seek policies that would ensure the destruction of the U.S. Rather, their function for the electorate is that voters need a method to punish the central strategic actors— Republicans— when they shirk, to use the language more common in game theoretic models. Electing Democrats is never an act of endorsing their platform— it is merely a rejection of the Republicans' platform at the time. As a simplification, then, consider the following two-player game.

Actors

1) The pivotal voter. For simplification purposes, this model will assume that there is one pivotal voter whose choice determines the outcome of the election. In conventional Downsian models, that actor is the median voter, but for obvious reasons, that distinction will make little sense here. As in Downsian models, there is a policy dimension over which the voter has preferences. However, rather than a single ideal point with single-peaked, symmetric preferences, the voter has monotonically increasing preferences with a risk averse utility function. Consider, for example, $U_v(p) = \ln(p)$. As policy moves to the right, meaning gets more conservative, the pivotal voter receives increasing utility, subject to diminishing marginal returns. As policy approaches the absolute lower bound of 0, representing pure socialism, the pivotal voter's utility function asymptotically approaches negative infinity. This utility function

represents the world view that Democrats are not merely advocates of a somewhat higher level of government intervention in the economy than Republicans prefer, but varying degrees of closeted socialists, whose policies would, if enacted, leave Americans "spending their sunset years telling their children and their children's children what it was once like in American when men were free," as Reagan warned about the creation of Medicare. That possibility is represented by a utility function that asymptotically approaches negative infinity as policy approaches the absolute lower bound of pure Marxism at $p = 0$. Moreover, this specification leaves infinite room to move further and further right in a never-ending journey towards the Platonic ideal of pure conservatism. Since the Democratic candidate is not actually a strategic actor, we will assume that she runs on a fixed policy platform of D where $0 < D < 1$, such that $Uv(D) < 0$.

2) The Republican. The Republican candidate is the one who strategically selects a platform under the following constraint. The Republican's goal is to win elections, and she will receive $B > 0$ utils for victory. However, while the voter receives positive utility for any policy greater than 1, Washington D.C. infects whoever wins the election with a condition known as "Potomac Fever," which imposes increasing costs on anyone who attempts to implement a policy position greater than 1. Let that cost function be represented by $C(p)$, which is defined for any value of $p > 1$ with $C(p) > 0$ and $dC/dp > 0$. In Schlafly's terms, this cost is not simply "Potomac Fever," but the adverse influence of conspirators within the Republican Party who are complicit in the socialist agenda. Either way, the math is the same.

One-shot interaction

Suppose we begin with a rudimentary model in which the Republican selects a binding platform, and the pivotal voter selects a winner. The solution is quite simple. By backwards induction, the pivotal voter will always vote for the Republican because $U_v(D) < U_v(p)$ as long as $p \geq 1$, and $U_R(p) = B - C(p)$, which is maximized when $p = 1$ such that $C(p) = 0$ and $U_R(p) = B$. Thus, the Republican will adopt a platform of $p=1$, forcing the pivotal voter to choose the Republican despite the Republican's unwillingness to act as a true conservative.

Repetition

The structure of the game leads to a familiar solution for the voter, who requires repetition in order to get any policy of $p > 1$. The problem for the voter is that voting for the Democrat is costly. Specifically, her utility loss will be $\ln(p) - \ln(D)$, and since $\ln(D)$ approaches negative infinity as D approaches 0, that may be unboundedly costly. Given that, the only way to achieve any policy of $p > 1$ is to threaten to punish the Republican, and herself in the process, by voting for the Democrat unless the Republican adheres to a sufficiently conservative platform of P^*. As long as $C(P^*) < B$, then the folk theorem implies that there is some strategy of threats in an indefinitely repeated game in which the Republican candidate adheres to P^* in equilibrium. The upper bound on policy that the pivotal voter can achieve, then, is $C^{-1}(B)$. Less formally, this means that when holding office is very appealing, the voter can pose a threat that yields more conservative policy. As the costs of implementing conservative policy go up, though, the voter's ability to incentivize conservatism goes down, as we would expect intuitively.

Implications for Republican candidates

The implications of believing the Schlafly model depend on how candidates perceive themselves. Those who see themselves as true believers in the concept of conservatism may see themselves as immune to Potomac Fever. If elected, they will go to Washington and "knock the hell out of the place," as former Rep. Ben Quayle (R-AZ) claimed he would do in an ad, perform the fiscal equivalent of hog castration as Sen. Joni Ernst (R-IA) claimed, or otherwise disregard $C(p)$. If such a candidate perceives herself to be a "citizen-legislator" who shares the preferences of Tea Party activists such that her utility for winning on a platform of p is given by $U_R(p) = \ln(p) + B$, then at any fixed point in time, the limit of her conservatism is only an artifact of the process that requires platform selection to involve the choice of a single, fixed value. Every subsequent platform selection will move ever further rightward, anchored by the initial platform selection. The result is a perpetual quest for increasing levels of conservatism based on the premise that whatever is more conservative is definitionally better, both in policy and electoral terms.

For those who are not true believers in these premises but accept the basic mechanics of the Schlafly model, the process is more complicated. Such a candidate's incentive structure depends on her interpretation of the voter's credibility in threatening to punish succumbing to Potomac Fever. Nevertheless, there is an upper bound on the degree to which she can be moved to the right by such a threat: $C^{-1}(B)$. Even primary threats cannot move such a candidate to the right of this point because for any $p > C^{-1}(B)$, the benefit of winning office no longer outweighs the cost of conservatism, so she would rather lose the primary than win at such a location. This observation suggests that primaries may be somewhat less important to the Republican Party's

rightward movement than one might think, although still relevant. That leaves only three structural mechanisms to make office-holders more conservative.

First, primary voters can nominate true believers, who do not find it costly to adopt ever-more-conservative platforms. The nature of modern Republican primaries bears out this mentality. The other two mechanisms are somewhat more complex. The second is to increase B. If $dC/dp > 0$ and $C^{-1}(B)$ is the upper bound on the conservatism that conventional Republican politicians will support, then the upper bound increases as B increases. Substantively, this means making electoral victory more appealing. Precisely *how* to do that, though, is not clear. Pay for lobbying will always be higher, so perhaps as post-political lobbying jobs become more lucrative, the job of holding office as a stepping stone becomes increasingly appealing, yielding a different structure than what Parker (2008) would argue. Nevertheless, the tools available are minimal.

That leaves affecting the functional form of C. Anything that reduces the cost of conservatism necessarily increases the upper bound on conservatism. If the source of the cost is something called "Potomac Fever," then one can think of the condition in similar terms to other communicable conditions. The simplest approach is to avoid contact with infected individuals. Avoid cross-party interactions as well as any interaction with infected Republicans or interest groups who function as common vectors of transmission. Instead, if Republicans interact primarily with right-minded individuals both within and outside Congress, then they will receive positive reinforcement for increasing conservatism rather than negative reinforcement, making conservatism less costly, thereby moving the upper bound. Much has been written about the role of conservative media outlets, the breakdown of cross-party relationships, and the increasing

insularity of party elites. To the degree that one accepts the mechanics of the Schlafly model,

these factors follow logically from the incentives of anyone seeking to move the upper bound on

conservatism, and unlike mere primary threats, they are capable of moving the upper bound.

That does not mean primaries, or at least exaggerated primary threats are irrelevant— it simply

means that they are structurally limited in their efficacy if one accepts the Schlafly model. Their

only capacity to avoid the upper bound is if they result in the nomination of the types of citizen-

candidates often venerated by activists of all stripes, who view politics the way the activists

themselves view them rather than as Potomac-susceptible politicians might.

Schlafly and the Reagan-centric Republican narrative

One should not need extensive documentation to assert that the central figure in nearly all

Republican political narratives is Ronald Reagan, who has become the Republican rosetta stone

through which electoral politics can be understood, and as the triumph of Schlafly over Downs.

In 1976, Reagan challenged President Gerald Ford for the Republican presidential nomination,

and while he lost, his challenge secured his position as the central figure within the conservative

wing of the party, and opened a path to the 1980 nomination. Many thought he was too

ideologically extreme to win. In March of 1980, Ford himself urged his fellow Republicans not

to nominate Reagan, arguing that he (Ford) would be a stronger candidate to run against the man

who defeated him four years earlier. The Democrats who, like Ford, believed that Reagan would

be easily defeated wound up regretting that they ever hoped to run against him. Logically,

Reagan's 1980 and 1984 victories demonstrate that such conservatism does *not* doom one's

candidacy. To Schlafly adherents, though, his victories did not merely occur *despite* his

conservatism— they occurred *because of* his conservatism. *Post hoc ergo propter hoc* issues

notwithstanding, Republican's next presidential loss was in 1992, and that loss too could be

explained in terms of Reagan and fit within the Schlafly framework. According to a popular

narrative, George H.W. Bush broke his "no new taxes" pledge, and was punished for doing so.

In the context of the Schlafly formalization presented here, voters needed to punish the GOP in

1992 to prevent further leftward drift as Potomac-infected Republicans became less willing to

bear the policy costs of seeking out true conservatism and holding the line on taxes.

This explanation for 1992 runs into the problem that Reagan also agreed to several tax

increases, but the point is not historical accuracy-- the point is to examine how many

Republicans understand electoral politics through Reagan and Schlafly, and Dole's 1996 loss

provided similar fodder. Conservative activists seeking to challenge Dole's credentials as a true

conservative need look no further than his record on taxes. While Dole selected supply-side icon

Jack Kemp as his running mate and adopted a 17% flat tax as his campaign platform, his

legislative record did not show the kind of aversion to taxes that a Schlafly-influenced Reagan

devotee would like, and Kemp himself said of his running mate, "Bob Dole never met a tax he

didn't hike," in the 1988 presidential nomination contest. Dole can be interpreted as another

example of Republicans nominating someone with sketchy conservative credentials, and losing

as a result based on the Schlaflian voter's need to convince Republicans to bear the costs of

conservatism.

While George W. Bush currently occupies a curious position in Republican politics given

that he left office in 2008 with the economy slipping into the worst recession since the Great

Depression, it is worth remembering that he was considered a conservative in good standing

prior to those events, particularly for his 2001 and 2003 tax cuts and outreach to evangelical conservatives, and at the time, Schlaflian Republicans could point to his two terms as vindication of the public's preference for conservatism. After 2004, Karl Rove began talking about the establishment of a long-term conservative majority based on continued mobilization of the evangelical base rather than an appeal to a centrist median voter.

However, the next two Republican losses return to simpler narratives for Schlaflian Republicans. Neither Senator John McCain nor Governor Mitt Romney were seen as true conservatives. Sen. McCain's actual voting record was relatively conservative, but his habit of publicly breaking from Republican Party leadership to side with Democrats on issues such as campaign finance reform made him an object of intense distrust by conservative activists, and Gov. Romney's record left Schlaflians with even more fodder. His Massachusetts healthcare reform policy was the basis of "Obamacare," and bringing his social positions into line with conservative activists required repudiating a wide range of his previously-stated beliefs, most obviously abortion. A Schlaflian would predict losses by both candidates.

When Republicans examine the sequence of presidential elections from 1976 through 2012, then, many come to a very simple conclusion. When they run a candidate of their convictions-- a true conservative in the Reagan mold-- they win. When they tack to the center with someone like McCain or Romney, or cave on taxes like George H.W. Bush, they lose. This narrative is not universal among Republican elites, but it is not difficult to find prominent figures who espouse this belief. For our purposes here, what is most important is how radically different this model is from the basic spatial model that predicts ideological convergence between the parties, and how different it is from how Democrats look at the process.

This view has faced its challenges, in particular a set of Senate candidates from 2010 and onward who lost races that should have been easy victories. In particular, Christine O'Donnell in Delaware's 2010 election, Sharron Angle in Nevada's 2010 election, Todd Akin in Missouri's 2012 election, and Richard Mourdock in Indiana's 2012 election, stand out as important anecdotes. Each of these candidates was an extreme conservative who lost a race that no Republican had any business losing. Adhering to the Schlafly model of electoral politics requires explaining away these losses in non-ideological terms. Fortunately for adherents to that model, doing so was easy. Christine O'Donnell was an inexperienced candidate whose most famous ad was intended to rebut the charge that she practiced witchcraft. Sharron Angle openly and wistfully mused about assassinating Democrats when Republicans don't win elections. Todd Akin asserted confidently that rape cannot result in pregnancy, so women seeking abortions after claiming to have been raped were just lying. Richard Mourdock asserted that rape victims who became pregnant were pregnant because of divine will. These kinds of statements, while electorally toxic, are not fundamentally about ideology, and a person can be a conservative while rejecting them. Thus, writing off these losses has been easy for Republicans, allowing them to continue believing that election results are determined by the ideological purity of the Republican candidate-- true conservatives win, whereas sell-outs lose.

Contrasting models and their narrative power

Constructing narratives to explain elections since 1976 through the Schlafly lens, then, is quite simple. Why Schlafly, though? What is it about this model that might make it more appealing to Republican elites than the CRN model, the directional model, or the redistribution

model? The Schlafly model has a number of analytical and psychological advantages over the other prominent models within Republican politics. Consider, for example, the CRN model. Where the Schlafly model breaks from CRN is that the CRN model accepts the premise of basic Downsian mechanics, and simply asserts that the median voter's ideal point is at least moderately conservative, and therefore closer to a truly conservative platform than it is to a truly liberal platform. Thus, Republicans can safely campaign on solidly conservative platforms and still win because the Democratic candidate will be even further from the median despite their proximity to some arbitrary zero point. Moreover, if one characterizes all Democrats as extreme socialists, as the most conservative activists in the Republican Party do, then Democrats will be so far to the left that Republicans can run on truly extreme platforms and still be closer to the right-leaning median voter. The analytic problem with the CRN model is relatively obvious, though. A conventional liberal Democrat should never defeat a conventional conservative Republican except in districts that skew significantly Democratic, much less would a dyed-in-the-wool socialist have a chance against any Republican. At the presidential level, the CRN model has problems explaining, for example, Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 victories. If neither Romney nor McCain was a true conservative, but simply had platforms that lean conservative, then a center-right nation should never elect a supposed-socialist over these center-right candidates. The directional model has a similar problem. If voters have a general preference for moving policy to the right, then even if Romney and McCain were only offering to move policy very modestly to the right, that should still be more appealing than the supposedly socialist platform offered by Obama. Neither the CRN model nor the directional model is well-suited to explain Republican losses, and the ability to construct a narrative of defeat is critical.

The Schlafly model, though, has a simple explanation. The fact that neither McCain nor Romney was a true conservative was precisely why the country did not elect them— electing and reelecting Obama, while costly to Schlalflian voter in the short-run, is necessary to maintain the credibility of the threat to elect Democrats when Republicans succumb to Potomac Fever, thereby creating the incentive for Republicans to run as true conservatives despite the costs of doing so.

The Schlafly model has a different, but equally important advantage over the redistributive model. The analytic benefit of the redistributive model is that unlike the CRN model, it can explain Republican losses. Rather, the problem is that it has a hard time explaining Republican *victories*. The problem with even the modest version of the 47% argument is that once we accept the Buchanan & Tullock logic, there is no reason Democrats *wouldn't* propose to confiscate from the "makers" and distribute it to *more* than 50%, thereby making themselves unbeatable. That, of course, is *why* Buchanan & Tullock are troubled by the concept of majoritarianism, which should simply lead to ever more confiscatory policies with perpetual Democratic victories until the "makers" finally can take no more, and "go Galt," as in *Atlas Shrugged*. Perversely, the redistributive model has more difficulty explaining Reagan's victories than Romney's loss.

Schlafly, of course, *obviously* predicts Republican victories because rather than portraying the American people as predominantly "takers," who simply want to mooch off of the "makers," Schlafly characterizes the electorate as consisting primarily of people who, even if they are not now wealthy, simply want the opportunity to become so on their own, echoed by such comments as "we are a nation of haves and soon-to-haves," as Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL)

prefers to say. Thus, as appealing as both the CRN model and the redistributive model of electoral politics may be to many Republicans, the former has a difficult time explaining Republican losses, and the latter has a difficult time explaining Republican victories. By predicting both victories and losses, and tying those outcomes to conventional assessments of Republican presidential nominees and their conservative *bona fides*, the Schlafly model neatly avoids both sets of logical problems.

Empirically, of course, the Schlafly model is difficult to reconcile with more rigorous analysis. At both the presidential[3] and congressional level (Ansolabehere et al. 2001, Canes-Wrone et al. 2002), the evidence is clear that ideological extremism reduces a candidate's vote share. Of course, if we are trying to explain positioning decisions rather than electoral outcomes, though, what matters is not how elections actually work, but how the relevant strategic actors perceive them to work, which can be more influenced by narratives than by quantitative analysis. This leads to two important points about narrative-driven analysis of elections. First, one can construct narratives to justify nearly any conclusion, which is precisely why Political Science models of elections focus more on measuring aggregate patterns in order to avoid the pitfalls of narrative construction. Second, and equally important, though, is that those untrained in statistical analysis have no means to adjudicate competing quantitative models, and their comfort with qualitative analysis makes narratives more appealing. The Schlafly-style narrative of Reagan and post-Reagan Republican presidential candidates is easy for anyone to understand. The multivariate statistical analysis in Canes-Wrone et al. is not. Thus, when faced with the pure

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[3] While most predictive models exclude ideology altogether from presidential election forecasting models, Bartels and Zaller's (2001) meta-analysis shows at least a measurable benefit to ideological moderation.

Downs model, the CRN model, the makers-and-takers model, the directional model, and the Schlafly model, the psychological comfort that the Schlafly model provides to conservative activists makes its narrative support particularly appealing. Schlafly tells them that there is no tension between their desire for conservative policy, or perhaps conservative purity as Grossman & Hopkins argue (2015), and their electoral goals. In fact, one achieves them with the same behavior— rightward movement. The CRN model suggests that there is a limit to the degree of conservatism that the electorate will tolerate. The makers-vs.-takers model can lead to hopelessness, and the directional model suggests the possibility for directional preferences to run the other direction. Thus, motivated reasoning clearly advantages the Schlafly model.

The question this raises, though, is that if Republican elites frequently believe an incorrect model that leads them to suboptimal positioning decisions, how do they win? The basic answer is that even if they are wrong, they are not wrong enough. While positioning decisions do appear to affect election results in at least the direction suggested by Downs rather than Schlafly, the results are relatively modest, and overshadowed by other factors. At the level of legislative elections, the partisan composition of the electorate, the presence or absence of an incumbent and the strength of the challenger can easily overshadow the electoral costs of extreme positioning, as can the legislative agenda (Buchler 2011). At the presidential level, the state of the economy, whether or not a party has won two elections in a row (Abramowitz), troop deaths (Hibbs) and other factors similarly overshadow candidate positioning. As long as other factors hide the electoral costs of extremism to any method beyond the multivariate statistical methods used by political scientists, the politicians themselves can make relatively modest mistakes while suffering minimal consequences while the narrative appeal of the alternative

model perpetuates itself until it runs into a case around which narratives simply cannot be constructed. However, if sufficiently motivated, narratives can be constructed to defend nearly any model, which returns us to the case of George W. Bush, whose conservatism was not questioned by most Republicans until the economic collapse of 2008 made it necessary to reverse-engineer an argument against his credentials so that the collapse could be interpreted as a vindication of conservatism (specifically, that he was a profligate spender, despite a lack of opposition to his fiscal policies among conservatives at the time). The appeal of the Schlafly model is not its empirical support— it is that the model tells purity-seeking activists that there is no trade-off between their quest for purity and their electoral fortunes, and a narrative can always be constructed to defend a model when those seeking to do so are not constrained by large-N multivariate methods.

Alternative models and narratives among Democrats

The discussion so far has focused on the prominence of non-Downsian narratives among Republican elites, but while elite-level Democrats do not show the same aversion to Downsian arguments as Republicans, one can see the influence of other models in some common Democratic narratives. While there is no direct rhetorical analog to the CRN model among Democrats, one can see similarities between the appeal of the CRN model to Republicans and Democrats' frustration with the belief that a majority of the public agrees with them on many key issues, such as the preservation of Social Security and Medicare in the face of Republican efforts to privatize or otherwise reduce the programs, but the observation that many who agree with Democrats on these policies vote Republican anyway. Popularly associated with Thomas

Franks' *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, Democrats often puzzle over the contrast. Built into

that puzzlement is the belief that, on balance, the country is center-*left*, not center-right, but the

argument is not used explicitly to push the party leftward in the way that the CRN model does

for Republicans. Instead, it simply formalizes many liberals' frustration with election results.

One can also see Democratic narratives associated with the redistributive model. While

connected to the Franks argument, its more direct manifestation is in liberal activists' adoption of

the 99%-vs.-1% language. Again, though, the narrative is more of a source of puzzlement

among the liberal wing of the party since the narrative implies that the top 1% of the income

distribution have unique policy interests that are at odds with the other 99%, and served by the

Republican Party, so why doesn't the Democratic Party regularly trounce Republicans in ways

that resemble the fixed elections of dictatorships with sham elections? While the language of the

1%-99% distinction is often used by liberal activists, it is not used to convince Democrats that

moving to the left *is* electorally beneficial, but rather that it *should be* electorally beneficial.

What has no analog at all among Democratic elites, though, is the Schlafly model. No

prominent leader in the party proudly proclaims that the electorate will reward the Democratic

Party with victory when they run a true-believer liberal, but punish them by voting Republican if

Democrats succumb to the temptation to moderate. This, too, speaks to the nature of asymmetry

at the elite level. Democratic and Republican elites believe that the electorate is fundamentally

on their sides. Democratic and Republican elites similarly see redistributive conflicts at the

center of political disputes. Where they differ most clearly is in their propensity to believe a

Schlafly-like model. Republicans do, Democrats don't, and it is the former who have moved

further from the ideological center. Whether that is the direct influence of Schlafly herself, the

conservative movement more broadly, or the absence of a liberal Democratic president feted as Reagan is by Republicans is difficult to determine since these factors are closely associated with each other.

Directions for empirical work

While this paper has presented informal discussion of common narratives about elections, focusing in particular on Republican elites, the question remains: who believes what? Romney's prominent statements about the redistributive nature of electoral politics suggests that he views the process through more of a Buchanan & Tullock lens. Jon Huntsman, who described himself as "a center-right candidate for a center-right country," clearly seems to believe the CRN model. The Rabinowitz & McDonald model is sufficiently exotic that candidates do not reference it directly, but any time candidates discuss the direction in which policy should move rather than detailed policy proposals, they are operating within the directional framework. And of course, the Schlaflian model is clearly favored by many conservative activists, talk radio-style pundits and the most stridently conservative elected officials. The basic point, then, is that different actors believe different models. The prominence of the Schlafly model can help to explain why Republicans don't converge, and hence the development of asymmetric polarization, but the empirical question is just how strong adherence to the Schlafly model is among Republicans. The familiarity of the Reagan-centric electoral narrative should make it clear that many Republicans do, in fact, believe a model closer to Schlafly than to Downs, but determining how many Republicans believe any given model requires something other than examining positioning

decisions. It requires a more extensive, systematic analysis of rhetoric. This paper merely suggests that such analysis is important to understanding modern trends.

The obvious direction for future research, then, is to determine which candidates, office-holders and activists believe which of the competing electoral models. One might hypothesize, for example, that conservatives are more likely to believe Schlafly than moderate Republicans, whereas moderates are more likely to believe CRN. One might similarly hypothesize that business-oriented Republicans are more likely to believe the redistributive model than evangelicals, whereas evangelicals are more likely to believe Schlafly. Rather than simply looking at positioning decisions in aggregate, determining the influence of any given model requires determining who believes which, and there is no reason to believe that an entire party, much less all strategic actors within a political system will believe the same model. At a crude level, the prominence of Schlafly's thinking and the Reagan-centric narrative of election results suggests an explanation for why Republicans have moved further from the center than Democrats, but drawing a direct causal connection will require more thorough analysis of competing beliefs among Democratic and Republican elites.

Concluding remarks

This paper has posed a potential explanation for the puzzling observation that not only has polarization reached historic levels among elected officials, it is asymmetric, with Republicans consistently adopting more extreme positions than Democrats. While Grossman & Hopkins suggest that this is a reflection of contrasting preferences among the parties' bases, this paper suggests that it may also be a function of contrasting beliefs at the elite level about how

elections work. While many prominent Democrats, in particular those associated with or

otherwise sympathetic to the DLC seem to believe that the core of the Downsian model is

correct, few Republican elites tell narratives that suggest a similar belief. Rather, the narrative

that many Republican elites tell about presidential elections since 1976, revolving around

Reagan, suggests a belief in the model implicitly proposed by Phyllis Schlafly in *A Choice Not

An Echo*, in which the electorate will reward the Republican Party with victory when they

nominate true-believer conservatives, but not necessarily when they moderate and fail to

distinguish themselves from Democrats sufficiently. If these are the models that party elites

believe, then true or not, one would expect Republicans to move further from the center than

Democrats. What remains, then, is to determine which actors believe which model because we

cannot simply assume that all actors operate under the same assumptions about how the political

system works.

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