Politics to the Extreme: Mapping the Interest Group Universe
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Recent years have witnessed an alarming increase of ideological polarization in the US

House of Representatives. Last October, the country endured a 16-day federal government

shutdown that cost the economy upwards of 6 billion in lost output and negatively affected real

GDP growth by as much as 0.6 percent.[1] Congress passed only 58 bills signed into law by the

president in 2013: many of them "naming post offices or transferring federal land,"[2] as opposed

to substantive legislation such as taxing and spending authority. The 113th Congress is on pace to

be the least productive in modern history, [3] and is deeply unpopular: the US Congress received a

9% national approval rating in November 2013.[4] The success of the nation as a functioning

democracy demands that our legislative body accomplish what it is tasked to do – legislate

effectively within the constraints of a two-party system.

Some political observers suggest a possible role for interest groups. Speaker of the House

John Boehner (R-OH) – speaking about interests and their influence over members – recently

told reporters at a press conference, "[Groups are] using our members… for their own goals."[5]

Many interest groups monitor the activities of members of Congress, threatening to withhold

campaign contributions or even support primary challengers if members do not support the

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[1] Office of Management and Budget, "Impacts and Costs of the October 2013 Federal Government Shutdown"
http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/reports/impacts-and-costs-of-october-2013-federal-government-shutdown-report.pdf
[2] David Welna, National Public Radio, Congress Is On Pace To Be The Least Productive Ever, (Dec. 23, 2013)
http://www.npr.org/2013/12/24/256696665/congress-is-on-pace-to-be-the-least-productive-ever
[3] Gallup Politics: http://www.gallup.com/poll/166838/congress-job-approval-starts-2014.aspx
[4] Ibid.
[5] http://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/boehner-lashes-out-conservative-groups-budget-deal-v21863224

group's position.[6] This creates a challenge for congressional members: Either support the positions of powerful interests or risk being ousted at the polls.

This research aims to accomplish two things: 1) to calculate the policy ideal points of interest groups, and 2) explore whether polarization in the Congress is reflected in the interest group universe. I utilize congressional roll call vote data coupled with a mathematical algorithm to map shifting ideological "ideal points" of interest groups over time in one and two-dimensional space. I observe potentially meaningful similarity between movements of legislator and interest group ideal points, wherein interests groups are treated as voting members of the US House.

Design and Methodology

Interest groups take positions on legislation and "score" individual legislators' votes based their support for the group's position. Groups announce their positions, and their intention to score a vote, in an attempt to influence how legislators vote on a bill. Interest groups policy positions disregard the political constraints—for instance, the need to compromise or support a leadership position—of voting members.

Political scientists Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal developed an algorithm (NOMINATE) for mapping the policy ideal points of legislators in two-dimensional space. NOMINATE reduces large, multi-dimensional congressional roll call data matrices – total number of votes taken in Congress in a particular year times the number of members of Congress – into one and two-dimensional spaces. The purpose is to estimate individual policy "ideal points" along the x-axis of an x/y graph. The position of the ideal point on the x-axis represents liberal, moderate, or conservative ideology. The y-axis of the space represents salient policy issues that divide

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[6] Indeed, the most serious electoral challenges to Republican congressional members are often in the form of intraparty primary challenges. Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, *It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How The American Constitutional System Collided With The New Politics Of Extremism* (USA, Basic Books, 2012)

legislators. According to Poole and Rosenthal, most variation in ideal points are described by the ideological dimension (x-axis). The x-axis varies from -1(most liberal) to 1 (most conservative). This research expands on Poole and Rosenthal by estimating the policy ideal points of groups in the Washington interest group universe. By treating the votes that the groups are scoring *as if* the groups were actual voting members in the House, the NOMINATE algorithm can be used to estimate groups' ideal points in the same two-dimensional space. This approach provides an opportunity to better understand the shape of the interest group universe, and explore the interaction between members and constellations of interests.

Findings and Implications

Interest group policy preferences are similar to the movement of individual legislators' preferences. Generally speaking two things stand out in my analysis: 1. In the conservative hemisphere, there is something akin to a "gravitational pull" led by interest groups "pulling" legislators to the extreme conservative ideological position; 2. The general trend across the x-axis in both liberal and conservative hemispheres' is rightward. In all three graphs the x-axis is the ideological spectrum where -1 represents the extreme liberal position and 1 represents the extreme conservative position. That trend is reflected in the interest group universe, consistent with the Poole and Rosenthal data set on legislators' movements, and suggests that perhaps interest groups are exercising a gravitational pull on legislators. Figures one and two illustrate the ideal points of members (blue representing Democrats and Red representing Republicans), along with the ideal points of prominent interest groups that score congressional votes. The graphs demonstrate noticeable rightward movement specifically in the conservative hemisphere, from the 103rd Congress (Figure 1) to the 113th Congress (Figure 2).

Figure 3 is a linear representation of legislator and interest group movement over time: Recall that -1 is liberal, 0 is moderate, and 1 is conservative along the x-axis. Between the 103rd

(1993-1995) and 112th Congress (2010-2012), the figure shows House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi move from a substantially liberal -.53 to a markedly less liberal -.40 on the x-axis. House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer moved from -.36 to -.32. For conservatives, House Majority Leader Eric Cantor moved from .67 to .76 in the space between the 107th and 112th Congress. In the same time period, House Budget Committee Chair Paul Ryan moved from .73 to .87. Notice that conservative leaders in the House generally have higher ideological numbers – those between -1 and 1 on the x-axis – than do liberals. Figures 1 and 2 uniquely demonstrate this by visualizing the spread along the ideological x-axis. Interest groups in the conservative hemisphere largely bunch in the extreme conservative position.

At minimum, interest group movement tracks with the movements of legislators. Interest groups are free to choose their "important legislation", mostly avoiding the constraints and potential contradictions that legislators must often reconcile. As with legislators' movements, conservative interest groups show increasingly rigid ideological extremity over time. In the interest group universe and on a scale from -1 to 1, the liberal Americans for Democratic Action (ADA) moved from -.77 to -.74 between the 103rd and 111th Congress. The AFL-CIO moved from a very liberal -.75 to a much less liberal -.56 between the 103rd to the 112th Congress. On the conservative side, the economically oriented Chamber of Commerce (COC) saw rightward movement from .38 to .47 from the 103rd to the 112th Congress while the socially oriented Christian Coalition (CC) moved from .78 to .91 over the same time period. Most strikingly, the American Conservative Union (ACU) moved from .84 to a rigid and uncompromising 1 over the same time period.

Conclusion

Increasingly the US House of Representatives is a dysfunctional institution characterized by ideological polarization and an inability to fulfill its Constitutional responsibilities. Political

observers suggest that interest groups contribute to the current gridlock. This research seeks to establish a means of mapping the interest group universe, laying the foundation for understanding the role of groups. By treating interest groups as legislators I used an established algorithm to calculate policy ideal points for interest groups. The results suggest several things: 1) NOMINATE can successfully be used to characterize the policy ideal points of interest groups; 2) That the interest group universe has changed over this period, with interest groups migrating to the left and right, with the rightward movement of conservative groups being more pronounced; 3) Initial results suggest that Republican members have been particularly responsive to the rightward movement of the conservative constellation of interests.

These findings have important implications for understanding of legislative gridlock. The movements we witnessed are generally away from a "pragmatic center" and toward extreme ideological positions. Interest groups are protected by the First Amendment's protection of speech, and the right of the people to petition government. We cannot restrict attempts by groups to influence the legislative process. Thus, the remedy to curbing their influence likely lies in electoral reform. California recently amended election rules to prevent partisans from redrawing electoral districts for strategic advantage. This tactic makes it more likely that Democrats and Republicans will be competitive in districts previously drawn for partisan gain. Non-partisan electoral redistricting may be a potential solution to this problem. With this research, I hope to make strides in illuminating the power of interest groups in the hope it will translate into positive electoral reform. From here, I seek to extend this research back in time, and incorporate the US Senate, in the hope that a large body of research on the increasingly powerful role of interest groups will garner the attention it deserves.
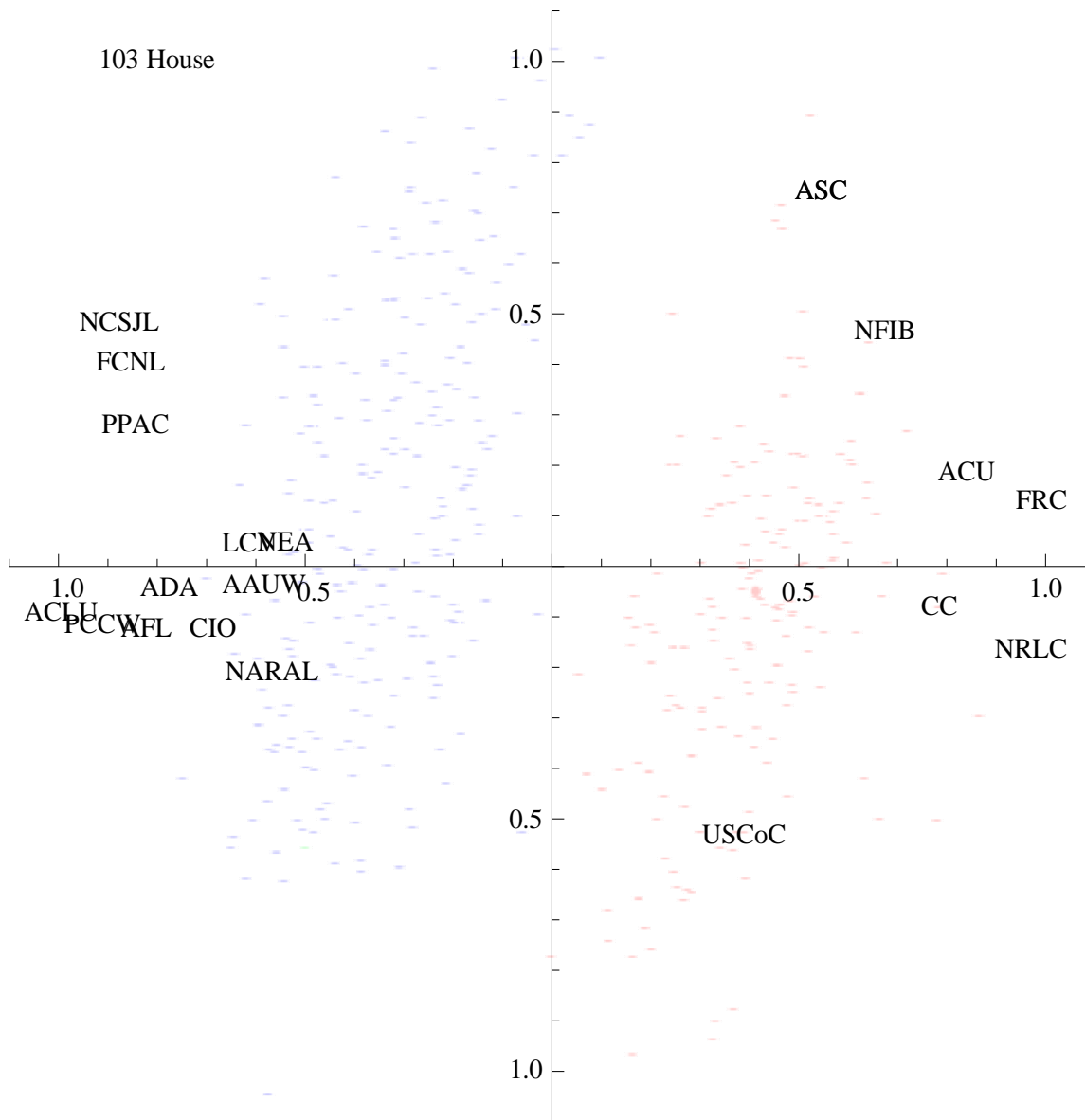
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ASC

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NFIB

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LCV NEA

1.0   ADA   AAUW 0.5   0.5   1.0

ACLU   CC

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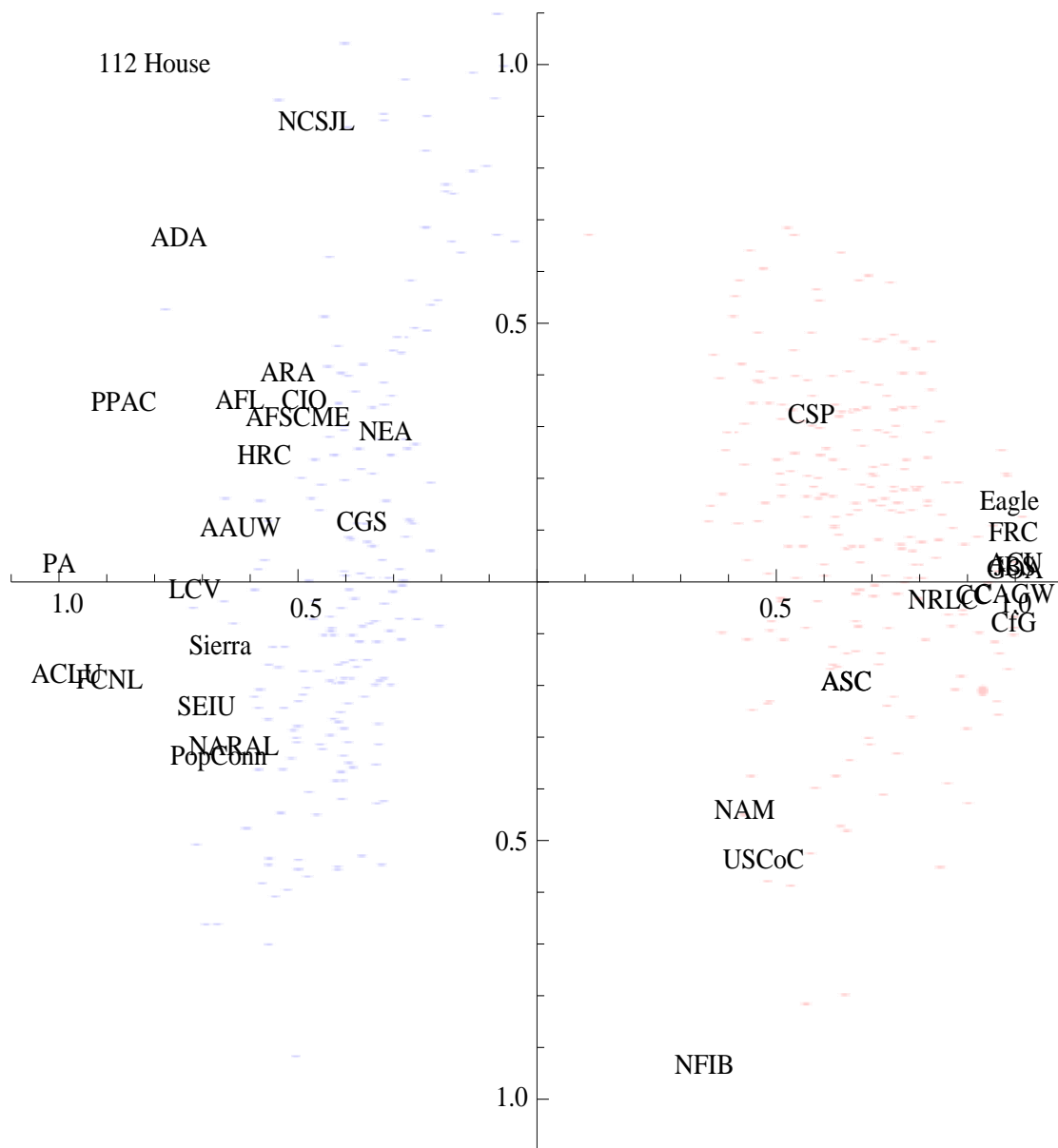**Figure 1: Interest Group and Legislator Ideal Points, 103rd House**

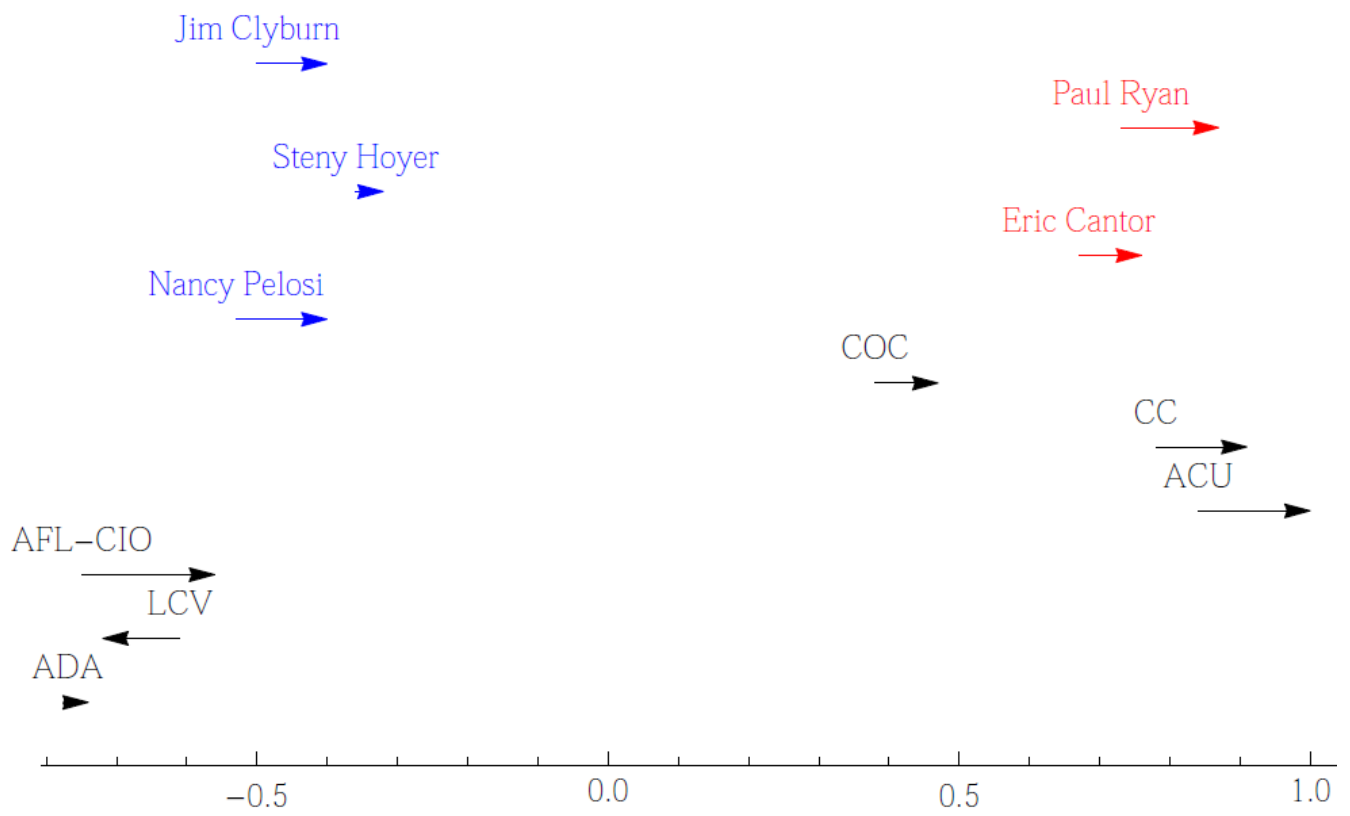**Figure 2: Interest Group and Legislator Ideal Points, 112th House**

Figure 3: Ideological Movement of Legislators and Interest Groups, 103rd to 112th Congress