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—Soren Jordan, Auburn University

We have learned a great detail about polarization in the last decade. Scholars have provided sophisticated evidence
on the causes, especially, of elite polarization. Two mechanisms are at play: replacement (when moderates are replaced electorally by more extremists) and conversion (when the same members grow more ideological). But these mechanisms alone do not explain why certain members are replaced instead of others: especially those who do not run for reelection.

Danielle M. Thomsen provides a refined answer. In *Opting Out of Congress*, she illustrates how the benefit of being a member of Congress depends on party fit: whether the party stands for policies that the legislator or potential legislator prefers (p. 31). A (potential) member's party fit affects his or her ability to achieve policy goals, advance an agenda in Congress, and enjoy daily life in the institution. Members who fit the ideology of the party accomplish more of these three goals. Accordingly, as the parties grow more polarized, moderates fare worse with party fit, see less benefit from a seat in Congress, and abstain from running altogether, creating a problem in the supply of moderate candidates.

Thomsen uses anonymous interviews with former (moderate) members of Congress to demonstrate that the day-to-day life of a Congressperson who does not fit the party is at best personally unpleasant and at worst politically unrewarding. Most of the 22 elites she interviews share a common course to their Congressional careers: being a moderate in politics was tolerable, statistically less likely to run for higher office, especially the U.S. House, than ideologues (p. 90). This is especially true of open seats, where ideologues are more likely to run. Perhaps most importantly, Thomsen illustrates a potential driver of asymmetric polarization, where Republican ideologues are much more likely than Democratic ideologues to run for open seats (p. 111). Conversely, once in Congress, moderate members are more likely to retire, even if their electoral margins are still relatively safe (p. 130).

Thomsen employs a variety of data, but a real strength of her book is the subtle context afforded by elite interviews. Thomsen provides a refined answer. In *Opting Out of Congress*, she illustrates how the benefit of being a member of Congress depends on party fit: whether the party stands for policies that the legislator or potential legislator prefers (p. 31). A (potential) member's party fit affects his or her ability to achieve policy goals, advance an agenda in Congress, and enjoy daily life in the institution. Members who fit the ideology of the party accomplish more of these three goals. Accordingly, as the parties grow more polarized, moderates fare worse with party fit, see less benefit from a seat in Congress, and abstain from running altogether, creating a problem in the supply of moderate candidates.

The evidence here is voluminous. Thomsen uses a variety of ideological scores, including those not based on roll-call voting (which allow the comparison of non-members), to measure how well a member fits the ideology of party leadership. Thomsen also gives serious attention to the pool of potential moderate candidates, especially those in state legislatures, the strongest traditional pool of candidates for higher office. We learn that moderates who do not fit with party leadership are statistically less likely to run for higher office, especially the U.S. House, than ideologues (p. 90). This is especially true of open seats, where ideologues are more likely to run. Perhaps most importantly, Thomsen illustrates a potential driver of asymmetric polarization, where Republican ideologues are much more likely than Democratic ideologues to run for open seats (p. 111). Conversely, once in Congress, moderate members are more likely to retire, even if their electoral margins are still relatively safe (p. 130).

Some unanswered questions remain. Party fit is the main yardstick by which candidates measure the utility of a career in Congress, but polarization causes the scale of the measure for party fit to be asymmetric by party and varies over time (p. 107). If a party polarizes, the possible range of values of party fit is naturally going to grow, as the party grows more extreme. Yet this will only occur in the “negative” direction: a polarization party can never cause moderates to fit that party better. Unfortunately for us, this means that if one party polarizes asymmetrically, our models might reveal that one party plays an exacerbated role in polarization overall, simply because the independent variable in that party has more variation temporarily. Interpretation is also difficult: Thomsen interprets the
empirical results from a pooled model, in which several years’
worth of potential “party fits” are mixed, as a cohesive unit,
as if “party fit” means the same thing in 2000 as it does in
2010 (for instance, at p. 91), which we know not to be true.
Future work might consider the more explicit introduction of
time dynamics in these models.

Another challenge is less addressed: very few people run for
Congress. Not just of a moderate stripe, but of any stripe.
More commonly, we might call this a problem of rare events:
and we have grown to understand that explaining rare events
is much more difficult than explaining events that occur with
some frequency. Explaining non-occurrences becomes easier
than explaining occurrences: potentially problematic if our the-
ory explains why events do not happen (moderates do not
run). Here, positive events—where we successfully explain
candidacy—are almost entirely determined by open seats. This
predictor, though, is never interacted with the theoretical pre-
dictors of party fit and distance. Future work might consider
an explicitly rare events approach, interacting predictors with
an open seat, or just looking at open seat races alone.

This work offers an interesting and thorough look at the “sup-
ply” of candidates that we often ignore when studying Congress.
It moves our understanding of polarization forward by focusing
our attention on those individuals actually (not) running
for office and the systematic differences between them that lead
to polarization.