

## Moderate Caucuses in a Polarized US Congress

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### ABSTRACT

Despite putting themselves in a thorny relationship with heavy-handed party leaders, some legislators continue to join moderate coalitions. To understand why, we derive seven explicit hypotheses concerning electoral, institutional, and strategic dimensions and test them on two moderate coalitions from the 107<sup>th</sup> through the 110<sup>th</sup> Congress (2001-2008): the Republican Main Street Partnership and the New Democrat Coalition, along with the Senate's Gang of 14 during the 109<sup>th</sup> Congress (2005-06). We find that a member's ideology and previous affiliation, as expected, strongly predict who joins these caucuses. What is surprising from our findings is that the constituencies' partisanship does not always predict the legislators' decision to be a moderate caucus member. We also find little support that more electorally vulnerable members join these caucuses; on the contrary, when it does matter, members from competitive districts appear to stay away from moderate coalitions. Therefore, our findings call into question the prevailing "constituency-based" understanding of moderate coalition membership in a polarized Congress and call for a new examination of electoral connection between moderate members and moderate caucuses.

Forthcoming,  
*Journal of Legislative Studies*