

# Securing the base: electoral competition under variable turnout

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**Abstract** I evaluate the ‘Securing the Base’ strategy, which prescribes that candidates position themselves away from the political center in order to maximize turnout among their supporters and reduce defections of their supporters to third party candidates. My results support the notion that voters abstain due to indifference and imply that candidate positioning has a large effect on voter turnout and third party voting. Nonetheless, my results indicate that the candidates can best compete by adopting centrist positions. While a candidate can increase turnout among his supporters by moving away from the center, many moderate voters will defect to his opponent.

**Keywords** Spatial competition · Abstention

## 1 Introduction

Many theories of political competition in single-winner elections imply that candidates should adopt centrist positions in order to maximize their chances of being elected. In the Downsian model (Downs 1957; Black 1958), both candidates converge to the median voter’s position in equilibrium. The probabilistic voting model (Hinich 1977) implies a similar result, with both candidates converging to the mean voter’s position when the voters have quadratic utility functions. For a more general class of utility functions, both candidates converge to the position that maximizes the Nash social welfare function (Coughlin and Nitzan 1981; Banks and Duggan 2005).

In reality, we observe candidates taking divergent positions (Wright and Berkman 1986; Ansolabehere et al. 2001; Burden 2004). One can rationalize this by questioning the assumptions inherent in the Downsian and Probabilistic Voting models. Both models assume that candidates can credibly commit to changing their positions. The candidates’ ability to change their positions may be severely limited, meaning that losing candidates would like to move to centrist positions, but cannot. The candidates may be forced to take off-center

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positions in order to succeed in their party's primary. Some argue that while taking extreme positions may run counter to a party's short term interests, it may have the effect of swaying voters in the long term.

All of the above explanations suggest that candidates may diverge despite the fact that it costs them votes in the general election. Many partisans, however, do not believe that taking extreme positions hurts their candidate's electoral prospects. According to this view, in order to win elections, candidates must appease their core supporters so that they turn out in large numbers and do not defect to extremist third party candidates. A number of popular press articles have documented that this strategy has been adopted in recent years, and is generally accepted on both sides of the political spectrum (Nagourney 2003; Milbank and Allen 2004; Brownstein 2004; Minter 2005).

Matthew Dowd, a senior advisor to George W. Bush's re-election campaign, said "there's a realization, having looked at the past few elections, that the party that motivates their base—that makes their base emotional and turn-out- has a much higher likelihood of success on Election Day" (quoted in Nagourney 2003). Stanley Greenberg, the Democratic pollster who advised Bill Clinton in the 1992 election, agreed, saying that "things have changed over the decade since 1992. The partisans are much more polarized. And turnout has actually gone up because the partisans have turned-out in much greater numbers and greater unity" (quoted in Nagourney 2003). Green party activist Charlene Spretnak argued that "Gore could have demonstrated that he had read the Green Party platform. . . and had identified several issues on which he could publicly promise action that the Democratic Party was otherwise likely to take. In that way, he surely would have gained badly needed votes." (Spretnak 2000).

Many politicians, party activists, and political consultants have come to believe in the 'Securing the Base' strategy- that by moving away from the center, a candidate may actually gain more votes (due to greater turnout among his supporters and fewer defections of his supporters to third party candidates) than he loses (due to heavier defections of swing voters to his opponent). The Securing the Base strategy has become a widely accepted alternative to the Swing Voter strategy, which suggests that a candidate should position in the political center in order to pick up as many moderate voters as possible.

The theories of abstention due to alienation and abstention due to indifference provide a possible justification for the Securing the Base strategy. Abstention due to alienation (Converse 1966) posits that an individual will be less likely to vote if he is dissatisfied with both major party candidates (or alternatively all candidates). Abstention due to indifference (Downs 1957) posits that an individual will be more likely to vote if the candidates are not equally far away from him. I will refer to both of these cases collectively as 'variable turnout', since both imply that voter turnout depends on the positions that the candidates take. If the Downsian or Probabilistic Voting models are altered to allow for abstention due to alienation or indifference, divergent equilibria may result (Hinich and Ordeshook 1969; Adams and Merrill 2003; Adams et al. 2005; Glaeser et al. 2005).<sup>1</sup>

The presence of third party candidates may provide a second motivation for candidates to move away from the political center. Some suggested that in 2000, Al Gore could have raised his vote share (at the expense of Ralph Nader's) by moving further to the left. Once again, we have competing forces. A leftward move by Gore probably would have increased the number of strong liberals voting for him, but would have cost him the votes of many

<sup>1</sup>Brody and Page (1973) and Zipp (1985) find strong evidence in favor of abstention due to indifference in U.S. presidential elections. Thurner and Eymann (2000) find some support for abstention due to indifference in German general elections. Plane and Gershtenson (2004) find support for abstention due to alienation and indifference in U.S. Senate elections.

swing voters. In order to determine the electoral consequences of such a move, we need to evaluate their relative strengths empirically.

It is worth noting that the Swing Voter strategy used to be more widely accepted than the Securing the Base strategy. Many believed that Bill Clinton's electoral successes in 1992 and 1996 were due to his ability to appeal to swing voters. The goal of this paper will be to determine which view of political competition is the correct one. I will make the case that the Swing Voter strategy is more effective. Candidate positioning has an appreciable effect on voter turnout and third party voting. Moreover, these effects are often asymmetric, benefiting one candidate over the other. However, these effects are not strong enough to cause the candidates to gain votes from moving away from the center. While moving away from the center will often increase turnout among a candidate's base and reduce third party voting, this increase is not large enough to offset the loss of votes from the center of the political spectrum.

## 2 Theoretical background

Here, I outline a model of voter behavior. Individuals choose whether to vote and, if so, for whom to vote. Assume that, in making their voting decisions, individuals consider the policy positions of the candidates as well as non-policy factors. While non-policy factors affect the voters' decisions, the candidates cannot compete over them in the same way as they compete over policy. Non-policy factors are an extension of 'valence' (Stokes 1963). Unlike valence, non-policy factors are not (necessarily) perceived uniformly across the population.

Individuals are characterized by their ideal point  $v$  and by their evaluations of non-policy factors  $z = (z_D, z_R)$ . Let  $f(v, z)$  signify the distribution of the individual characteristics. Let  $y_D$  denote the position of the Democratic candidate and let  $y_R$  denote the position of the Republican candidate. The utility an individual characterized by  $(v, z)$  receives from voting for candidate  $k$  is given by  $u(y_k - v, z_k) = z_k - \rho|y_k - v|$ , where  $\rho > 0$ . An individual's utility depends on the closeness of the candidates' policy positions to their ideal point, as well as the individual's non-policy evaluation of the candidate.<sup>2</sup>

Individuals may abstain, and moreover, the probability that an individual abstains may depend on the positions candidates take. The probability that an individual turns out will be represented by  $p(v, z_D, z_R, y_D, y_R)$ . This feature of the model allows us to incorporate abstention due to alienation and to indifference. For example, we could consider,<sup>3</sup>

$$p(v, z_D, z_R, y_D, y_R) = \Phi(\alpha + \beta \text{Min}\{|y_D - v|, |y_R - v|\} + \gamma|y_D - v| - |y_R - v|)$$

The term  $\text{Min}\{|y_D - v|, |y_R - v|\}$  represents abstention due to alienation since the probability that an individual votes decreases with the individual's distance from the nearest candidate. The term  $|y_D - v| - |y_R - v|$  similarly represents abstention due to indifference.

The candidates' vote shares will be characterized by,

$$s_D(y_D, y_R) = \int_{\{(v,z):u(y_D-v,z_D)\geq u(y_R-v,z_R)\}} p(v, z_D, z_R, y_D, y_R) f(v, z) dv dz$$

$$s_R(y_D, y_R) = \int_{\{(v,z):u(y_R-v,z_R)\geq u(y_D-v,z_D)\}} p(v, z_D, z_R, y_D, y_R) f(v, z) dv dz$$

<sup>2</sup>This framework closely follows Banks and Duggan (2005) and Peress (2010).

<sup>3</sup>Here,  $\Phi$  represents the standard normal cumulative distribution function.

The Democratic candidate will win the election if  $s_D(y_D, y_R) > s_R(y_D, y_R)$  and the Republican candidate will win the election if  $s_D(y_D, y_R) < s_R(y_D, y_R)$ .<sup>4</sup>

A candidate has a non-policy advantage if that candidate would win the election if both candidates were to locate at the same position. Define,

$$\tilde{z} = \int [1\{z_D > z_R\} - 1\{z_R > z_D\}] p(v, z_D, z_R, y_D, y_R) f(v, z) dv dz$$

Here,  $1\{\cdot\}$  represents the indicator function, so that  $\tilde{z}$  equals the share of voters who prefer the Democratic candidate based on non-policy factors minus the share of voters who prefer the Republican candidate based on non-policy factors. If  $\tilde{z} > 0$ , then the Democratic candidate has a non-policy advantage and if  $\tilde{z} < 0$ , the Republican candidate has a non-policy advantage. Otherwise, we say that neither candidate has a non-policy advantage. If non-policy factors were not included in the model, then the winning candidate would always be the candidate who is located closer to the median voter. This is not always the case (as we will see later), so non-policy factors are necessary to explain this discrepancy. A candidate who is located further from the median voter may still win the election if he has a non-policy advantage.

Equilibria in these types of models have been studied elsewhere. Hinich and Ordeshook (1969) generalized the Downsian model to allow for abstention due to alienation. They found that, as long as the ideology distribution was unimodal, the unique equilibrium involved both candidates converging to the mean voter's position. Adams and Merrill (2003) analyzed the probabilistic voting model with abstention due to alienation. Their model differs from Hinich and Ordeshook's model in that non-policy factors are introduced and allowed to be correlated with the voters' policy positions. Adams and Merrill found that if voters were allowed to abstain due to alienation, it was indeed possible to sustain divergent equilibria, with both candidates diverging in the direction of their partisan constituencies. Conversely, they found that if voters were allowed to abstain due to indifference, convergent equilibria resulted.

It is important to realize that both of these results rely on a restrictive framework. Hinich and Ordeshook assume that non-policy factors are absent. Both frameworks assume that ideologically centrist voters are as sensitive as extremist voters to candidate positioning. My framework allows voters to differ in their sensitivity to position-taking by the candidates. This is important because popular press accounts of the Securing the Base strategy stress that ideologically extreme voters are indeed more sensitive to position-taking in their turnout decisions. In order to evaluate the Securing the Base strategy fairly, we must allow for this possibility.

In my framework, it is possible to obtain divergent equilibria under both abstention due to alienation and abstention due to indifference. Abstention due to alienation can lead to divergence if extreme voters are more sensitive than others to the candidates' positions. Abstention due to indifference can lead to divergence if voters on one side of the ideological spectrum are more sensitive to candidates' positions. In the online appendix, I construct two examples to show how variable turnout can lead to divergent equilibria. In addition, it is well known that the presence of third party candidates can lead to divergent equilibria (Adams 2000; Schofield 2003, 2004; McKelvey and Patty 2006). Consequently, the validity of the Securing the Base strategy is theoretically ambiguous, and must be evaluated empirically.

<sup>4</sup>By focusing on vote shares rather than electoral votes, I am ignoring the effect of the Electoral College on the candidates' incentives.

### 3 A model of voting and turnout

I will describe estimation of a statistical model consistent with the theoretical model described in the previous section. This model compares with previous work<sup>5</sup> but has some important differences. Much of this work does not model the turnout decision. Lacy and Burden (1999, 2001) include abstention due to alienation only. Adams and Merrill (2003) and Adams et al. (2005, 2006) include abstention due to both alienation and indifference. These specifications are not ideal for our purposes because they assume that alienation and indifference are the *only* sources of voter abstention. I would like to use a framework that allows me to test for both types of abstention and allows turnout to differ for other reasons, such as demographic characteristics.<sup>6</sup> The specification used here will be consistent with, but will not necessarily imply, both types of abstention. Thus, it will allow me to test whether each type of abstention occurs, as well as determine the consequences of abstention due to alienation and indifference on candidate positioning strategies.

#### 3.1 Two candidate competition

Let  $y_{n,k}$  denote individual  $n$ 's placement of candidate  $k$ , and let  $v_n$  denote the individual's ideal point. The variable  $\text{Min Dist}_n = \text{Min}\{|y_{n,D} - v_n|, |y_{n,R} - v_n|\}$  will represent abstention due to alienation and the variable  $\text{Diff Dist}_n = ||y_{n,D} - v_n| - |y_{n,R} - v_n||$  will represent abstention due to indifference. If abstention due to alienation occurs, we would expect the coefficient on  $\text{Min Dist}_n$  to be negative. If abstention due to indifference occurs, we would expect the coefficient on  $\text{Diff Dist}_n$  to be positive. I specify the turnout equation as follows,

$$t_n = \delta' X_n + \beta_2 \text{Min Dist}_n + \gamma \text{Diff Dist}_n + \varepsilon_n^V$$

Here,  $t_n$  is a latent variable representing the propensity to vote,  $X_n$  is a vector of control variables, and  $\varepsilon_n^V$  is a disturbance term. The individual votes if  $t_n \geq 0$  and does not vote otherwise.

Let  $\text{Dist}_{n,k} = |y_{n,k} - v_n|$  be the distance between the individual and the candidate. The utility an individual receives from voting for the candidates is given by,

$$\begin{aligned} u_{n,D} &= \alpha'_D X_n - \rho \text{Dist}_{n,D} + \varepsilon_n^D \\ u_{n,R} &= \alpha'_R X_n - \rho \text{Dist}_{n,R} + \varepsilon_n^R \end{aligned}$$

Here,  $z_n = (\alpha_D - \alpha_R)' X_n + \varepsilon_n^D - \varepsilon_n^R$  represents the individual's evaluation of non-policy factors. For identification purposes, I normalize  $\alpha_R = 0$ . The estimation controls for gender, race, the South, party registration, age, education, and income.

<sup>5</sup>See Erikson and Romero (1990), Schofield et al. (1998), Quinn et al. (1999), Lacy and Burden (1999, 2001), Adams and Merrill (2003), Adams et al. (2005, 2006), Callander and Wilson (2006), and Schofield and Sened (2006).

<sup>6</sup>Lacy and Burden (1999, 2001), Adams and Merrill (2003), and Adams et al. (2005, 2006) allow demographics to affect turnout only by altering the alienation and indifference thresholds.

Assume that  $\varepsilon_n = (\varepsilon_n^V, \varepsilon_n^D, \varepsilon_n^R)$  is normally distributed with mean zero and variance matrix  $\Omega$ .<sup>7</sup> This specification thus yields a bivariate binomial probit model.<sup>8</sup> The identification issues that arise in this model are similar to those that arise in the multinomial probit model. If the turnout and candidate choice equations are estimated separately, each equation would yield a binomial probit model. Estimating a joint model of turnout and candidate choice allows for correlation between the error terms in the two equations.<sup>9</sup>

### 3.2 Three candidate competition

For 1980, 1992, and 1996, three candidates are included in the analysis.<sup>10</sup> The turnout equation now becomes,

$$t_n = \delta' X_n + \beta_2 \text{Min Dist}_n + \beta_3 \text{Min Dist All}_n + \gamma \text{Diff Dist}_n + \varepsilon_n^V$$

where  $\text{Min Dist All}_n = \text{Min}\{|y_{n,D} - v_n|, |y_{n,R} - v_n|, |y_{n,T} - v_n|\}$ . Since the theory of abstention due to alienation is ambiguous as to whether the voter should consider only the major party candidates or all three candidates, both possibilities are included in the analysis.

The individual's utility from the third party candidate is,

$$u_{n,T} = \alpha'_T X_n - \rho \text{Dist}_{n,T} + \varepsilon_n^T$$

Assume that  $\varepsilon_n = (\varepsilon_n^V, \varepsilon_n^D, \varepsilon_n^R, \varepsilon_n^T)$  is normally distributed.<sup>11</sup> This specification yields a bivariate multinomial probit model.

### 3.3 Maximum likelihood estimation

Consider first the two candidate case. Let  $Y_n = 0$  if the individual does not vote,  $Y_n = 1$  if the individual votes for the Democratic candidate, and  $Y_n = 2$  if the individual votes for the Republican candidate. Let  $\theta = (\delta, \alpha_D, \alpha_R, \rho, \beta_2, \gamma, \Omega)$  denote the vector of parameters.

The probability that an individual does not vote is given by,

$$\begin{aligned} \Pr(Y_n = 0 | X_n, \theta) &= \Pr(t_n < 0 | X_n, \theta) = \Pr(\varepsilon_n^V < -\delta' X_n - \beta_2 \text{Min Dist}_n - \gamma \text{Diff Dist}_n) \\ &= \Phi(-\delta' X_n - \beta_2 \text{Min Dist}_n - \gamma \text{Diff Dist}_n) \end{aligned}$$

<sup>7</sup>For identification purposes, normalize  $\sigma_V^2 = \sigma_D^2 = 1$  and  $\sigma_{VR} = \sigma_{DR} = \sigma_R^2 = 0$ , where,

$$\Omega = \begin{pmatrix} \sigma_V^2 & \sigma_{VD} & \sigma_{VR} \\ \sigma_{VD} & \sigma_D^2 & \sigma_{DR} \\ \sigma_{VR} & \sigma_{DR} & \sigma_R^2 \end{pmatrix}$$

<sup>8</sup>More accurately, it is a bivariate binomial probit model where one equation is censored by the other, i.e., the outcome of the candidate choice equation is observed only if the voter votes.

<sup>9</sup>Lacy and Burden (1999) have shown that inclusion of such a term can substantially affect the inferences one makes.

<sup>10</sup>While I would have liked to include Ralph Nader in our analysis for 2000, I was unable to do so. The American National Election Study (ANES) did not ask respondents to place Nader on the liberal-conservative scale and the sample contained a very small number of Nader voters.

<sup>11</sup>For identification purposes, normalize  $\alpha_T = 0$ ,  $\sigma_V^2 = \sigma_D^2 = 1$ , and  $\sigma_{VT} = \sigma_{DT} = \sigma_{RT} = \sigma_T^2 = 0$ .

The probabilities of voting for the Democratic and Republican candidates are given by,

$$\begin{aligned}\Pr(Y_n = 1|X_n, \theta) &= \Pr(t_n \geq 0, u_{n,D} \geq u_{n,R}|X_n, \theta) \\ &= \int_{t_n \geq 0, u_{n,D} \geq u_{n,R}} \phi(\varepsilon_n^V, \varepsilon_n^D, \varepsilon_n^R; 0, \Omega) d\varepsilon_n^V d\varepsilon_n^D d\varepsilon_n^R \\ \Pr(Y_n = 2|X_n, \theta) &= \Pr(t_n \geq 0, u_{n,R} \geq u_{n,D}|X_n, \theta) \\ &= \int_{t_n \geq 0, u_{n,R} \geq u_{n,D}} \phi(\varepsilon_n^V, \varepsilon_n^D, \varepsilon_n^R; 0, \Omega) d\varepsilon_n^V d\varepsilon_n^D d\varepsilon_n^R\end{aligned}$$

where  $\phi$  denotes the normal probability density function.

The above integrals involve computing rectangles of the normal distribution and have no closed-form solution. I compute these integrals using the Geweke-Hajivassiliou-Keane method (Geweke et al. 1994), which uses simulation.

The log-likelihood can then be formed in the usual way,

$$\begin{aligned}l(Y_n|X_n, \theta) &= \sum_{n=1}^N \{1\{Y_n = 0\} \log \Pr(Y_n = 0|X_n, \theta) + 1\{Y_n = 1\} \log \Pr(Y_n = 1|X_n, \theta) \\ &\quad + 1\{Y_n = 2\} \log \Pr(Y_n = 2|X_n, \theta)\}\end{aligned}$$

The log-likelihood for the three candidate case can be formed in a similar way.

## 4 Data

In order to estimate the parameters of the model, I rely on data from the American National Election Studies (ANES). I analyze the presidential elections between 1972 and 2004. The ANES interviews respondents both before and after the election. The pre-election survey provides the respondents' characteristics (gender, race, the South, age, education, and income), party registration, self-placement on a liberal-conservative scale, and placement of the candidates on the same scale.<sup>12</sup> The post-election survey provides whether the respondents voted and for whom they voted. The sample is constructed using respondents who participated in the pre- and post-surveys and responded to all relevant questions.

## 5 Estimation results

The effect of variable turnout is summarized by the Alienation and Indifference coefficients in Tables 1 and 2.<sup>13</sup> There is very strong support for abstention due to indifference and moderate support for abstention due to alienation. The coefficients on abstention due to alienation are statistically significant in two out of the nine elections considered. The coefficient on abstention due to indifference is statistically significant in all but one election. The

<sup>12</sup>Demographics and party identification are measured in the obvious way (e.g. whether a respondent is Female is determined using the Gender item in the pre-election survey). The voter's ideological position and the candidates' positions are determined using the standard 1–7 ideology scale provided by the ANES.

<sup>13</sup>The full estimation results, including the coefficients on the demographic variables, are reported in the online appendix.

**Table 1** Abstention due to alienation and indifference (two candidate elections)

	1972	1976	1984	1988	2000	2004
Alienation	-0.086 (0.057)	-0.195 <sup>**</sup> (0.054)	0.017 (0.042)	0.030 (0.056)	-0.028 (0.051)	0.016 (0.070)
Indifference	0.112 <sup>**</sup> (0.033)	0.028 (0.039)	0.094 <sup>**</sup> (0.026)	0.121 <sup>**</sup> (0.034)	0.122 <sup>**</sup> (0.031)	0.126 <sup>**</sup> (0.042)
Policy Distance	-0.425 <sup>**</sup> (0.034)	-0.447 <sup>**</sup> (0.041)	-0.209 <sup>**</sup> (0.018)	-0.395 <sup>**</sup> (0.039)	-0.327 <sup>**</sup> (0.033)	-0.412 <sup>**</sup> (0.049)
<i>N</i>	1348	1098	1341	1101	1044	751

Estimation results for two candidate elections

\* Significance at the 5% level

\*\* Significance at the 1% level



**Table 2** Abstention due to alienation and indifference (three candidate elections)

	1980	1992	1996
Alienation (Major Party Candidates)	-0.149 <sup>a</sup> (0.104)	-0.012 (0.081)	-0.016 (0.109)
Alienation (All Candidates)	-0.133 (0.119)	0.025 (0.090)	-0.103 (0.113)
Indifference	0.115* (0.050)	0.200** (0.038)	0.159** (0.037)
Policy Distance	-0.372** (0.066)	-0.233** (0.040)	-0.180** (0.042)
<i>N</i>	607	1362	1073

Estimation results for three candidate elections

<sup>a</sup>A Wald test indicates that the two alienation coefficients are jointly significant at the 5% level

\*Significance at the 5% level

\*\*Significance at the 1% level

**Table 3** Candidate positions

	Year	Median voter	Democratic position	Republican position	Third party position
	1972	4.2	2.1	<b>5.1</b>	-
	1976	4.3	3.0	<b>5.2</b>	-
	1980	4.4	<b>3.5</b>	5.8	3.6
	1984	5.0	2.4	<b>6.5</b>	-
Position of the median voter and the positions of the candidates. The candidates' positions are measured by the median respondent's placement. <b>Bold</b> indicates the candidate that is closer to the median voter	1988	4.6	2.7	<b>5.7</b>	-
	1992	4.2	<b>2.9</b>	5.7	4.4
	1996	4.8	2.7	<b>5.7</b>	4.7
	2000	4.8	3.5	<b>5.7</b>	-
	2004	4.4	2.5	<b>6.0</b>	-

findings here are similar to Zipp (1985) and Thurner and Eymann (2000). This contrasts with the work of Plane and Gershtenson (2004) who find support for both types of variable abstention in U.S. Senate elections between 1988 and 1992.

Table 3 reports the positions of the median voter and the candidates in each election.<sup>14</sup> If voters voted only on the policy positions of the candidates, we would expect the candidate that is closer to the median voter to win in every election. This does not occur- Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter (in 1980), Bob Dole, and George W. Bush (in 2000) are all examples of popular vote losers who were closer to the median voter. This discrepancy can be explained either by non-policy voting, or by the presence of third party competition.

Table 4 reports the non-policy factors of the candidates. These factors represent the share of votes the candidates would receive if all the candidates were located at the same position (e.g., in 1976, if both Carter and Ford were located at the same ideological point, Carter would receive 51.3% of the vote and Ford would receive 48.7% of the vote). These measures capture the fact that some voters who are closer to candidate A than to candidate B, may still vote for candidate B for some other reasons (e.g. charisma, party identification, and retrospective economic evaluations). If a Republican candidate has a strong non-policy ad-

<sup>14</sup>I measure a candidate's position using the median placement of the candidate in the ANES survey.

**Table 4** Non-policy factors

	Year	Democratic candidate	Republican candidate	Third party candidate
	1972	42.4%	57.6%	–
	1976	51.3%	48.7%	–
	1980	36.3%	57.0%	6.7%
	1984	40.1%	59.9%	–
	1988	48.9%	51.1%	–
Non-policy factors of the candidates. The non-policy factor indicates the vote share that the candidate would receive if all the candidates located in the same location	1992	46.6%	33.9%	19.5%
	1996	62.7%	28.5%	8.8%
	2000	51.9%	48.1%	–
	2004	47.2%	52.8%	–

vantage over the Democratic candidate, this means that the Republican can position himself far to the right, and still win the election. Indeed, all candidates I identified that lost the popular vote despite being closer to the median voter were disadvantaged based on non-policy factors.

## 6 The impact of candidate positioning in two candidate elections

The effect of candidate positioning on the candidates' votes shares will depend on both the sensitivity of voter turnout to candidate positioning and the sensitivity of candidate choice to candidate positioning. In order for the candidates to be incentivized to move away from the center, three conditions must be met. First, candidate positioning must have a substantial effect on voter turnout (*Condition A*). Second, this effect must be asymmetric in a way that benefits the mover more than his opponent (*Condition B*). Third, this effect must be large enough to compensate for the loss of swing voters (*Condition C*). Each of these conditions is considered in turn.

Table 5 reports the marginal effect of candidate positioning on aggregate voter turnout. Consider the effect of a one unit change in a candidate's position on turnout. Turnout in the baseline column matches actual turnout exactly, due to the weighting scheme used.<sup>15</sup> Turnout is then computed under four alternative scenarios- the Democratic candidate moves one unit to the left, the Democratic candidate moves one unit to the right, the Republican candidate moves one unit to the left, and the Republican candidate moves one unit to the right. The alternative scenarios often lead to large changes in turnout (as much as 7% in 1996). Moving the candidates further apart always leads to an increase in turnout over the baseline. This move has the effect of making most voters less alienated and indifferent, thus increasing the likelihood that they vote. Thus, *Condition A* is met.

Figure 1 plots turnout as a function of ideology. To save space, only two representative elections are reported- 1976 and 2004. Consider first 1976. In the baseline scenario, moderate voters turn out at low rates. Mainstream liberals and mainstream conservatives turn out at the highest rates while extreme liberals and extreme conservatives turn out at lower rates.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup>The details of the weighting procedure are described in the online appendix.

<sup>16</sup>This pattern, while unusual, is not an artifact of the model, and is present in the ANES data for 1976. These are the changes in turnout predicted by the alienation and indifference theories if the candidates both located relatively close to the center, which was the case in 1976.

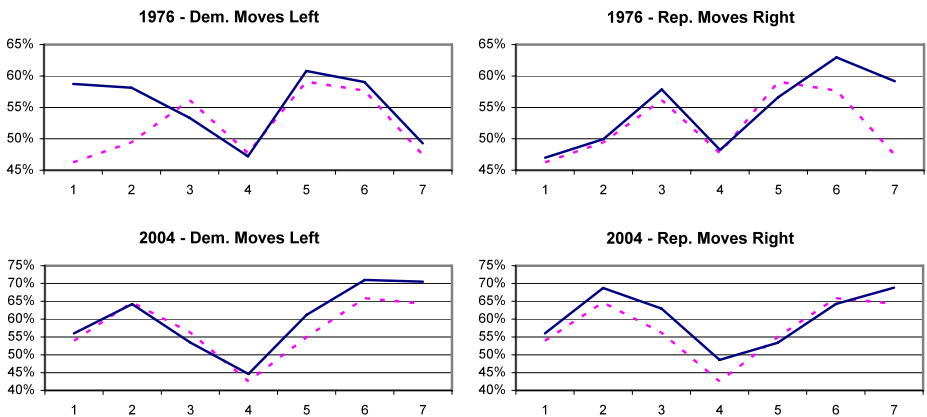
**Table 5** Marginal effects of candidate positioning on voter turnout

Year	Baseline	Democrat moves left	Democrat moves right	Republican moves left	Republican moves right
1972	54.2%	57.6% <sup>**</sup> (1.1%)	54.9% (0.8%)	56.5% <sup>**</sup> (0.7%)	55.7% (0.8%)
1976	52.5%	53.8% (0.9%)	53.8% <sup>*</sup> (0.6%)	53.7% (0.7%)	54.2% (0.9%)
1980	51.7%	55.7% <sup>**</sup> (1.3%)	51.5% (1.2%)	51.2% (1.1%)	54.3% <sup>*</sup> (1.2%)
1984	52.9%	55.6% <sup>**</sup> (0.7%)	51.5% <sup>*</sup> (0.6%)	52.6% (0.5%)	54.1% (0.7%)
1988	49.8%	52.5% <sup>**</sup> (0.8%)	48.8% (0.6%)	49.0% <sup>*</sup> (0.4%)	51.7% <sup>*</sup> (0.8%)
1992	54.7%	59.7% <sup>**</sup> (1.0%)	55.6% (0.9%)	55.0% (0.9%)	60.4% <sup>**</sup> (1.1%)
1996	48.2%	55.0% <sup>**</sup> (1.2%)	46.3% (1.1%)	47.5% (1.1%)	51.7% <sup>**</sup> (1.2%)
2000	49.3%	54.9% <sup>**</sup> (1.0%)	48.3% (0.7%)	49.1% (0.6%)	53.1% <sup>**</sup> (0.8%)
2004	54.7%	57.6% <sup>**</sup> (1.0%)	55.2% (0.7%)	54.5% (0.7%)	57.9% <sup>**</sup> (1.0%)

Marginal effects of candidate positioning on voter turnout. Since the observations are weighted, the baseline levels of turnout match the actual fraction of the voting-age population that voted. Standard errors for the difference between the baseline and alternative scenarios are in parentheses

<sup>\*</sup>Significance at the 5% level

<sup>\*\*</sup>Significance at the 1% level



**Fig. 1** Turnout by ideology. Predicted voter turnout under two alternative scenarios. The baseline scenario, depicted with a *dotted line*, has the candidates positioned in their current position. The alternative scenario, depicted with a *solid line*, depicts either the Democratic candidate moving one unit to the left, or the Republican candidate moving one unit to the right

If Jimmy Carter moved one unit to the left, turnout would increase dramatically among the most liberal voters- from 46% to 59%. This move leads to a much smaller increase in turnout among the most conservative voters- from 47% to 49%. Similarly, a rightward move by Gerald Ford would increase turnout among the most conservative voters from 47% to 59%, but would increase turnout among the most liberal voters only from 46% to 47%. This indicates that in 1976 at least, candidate positioning has a very asymmetric effect on turnout (and the asymmetry is in the direction that would incentivize the candidates to leave the center).

This asymmetry was not observed in all of the years we considered. In 2004, the baseline scenario has turnout highest among the most extreme voters and lowest among moderate

**Table 6** Candidate best responses

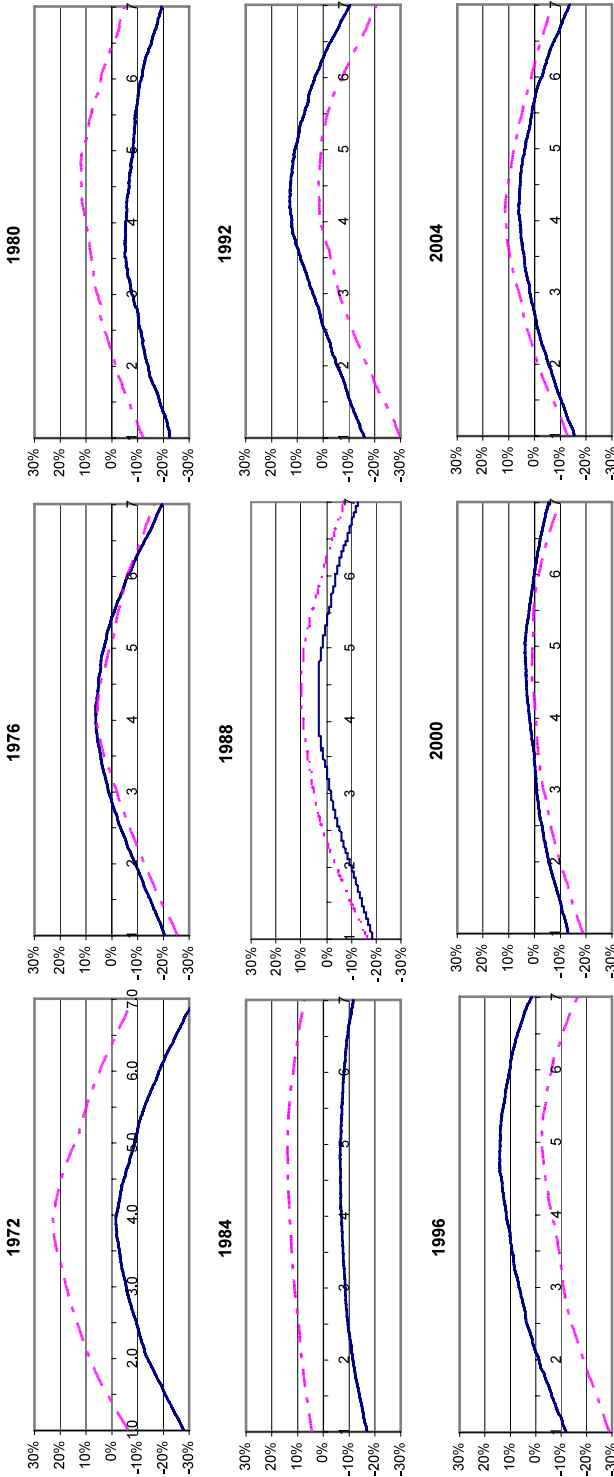
	Year	Median voter	Best response	
			Democrat	Republican
	1972	4.1	3.9	4.0
	1976	4.3	4.0	4.0
	1980	4.5	3.5	4.6
	1984	5.0	4.8	5.1
	1988	4.6	4.5	4.3
	1992	4.2	4.3	4.6
Margin-maximizing positions of the Democratic and Republican candidates. These values correspond to the peaks of the curves plotted in Fig. 2	1996	4.8	4.7	5.0
	2000	4.8	5.0	4.6
	2004	4.4	4.2	4.2

voters. If John Kerry were to move one unit to the left, the model predicts a moderate increase in turnout among conservative voters and a slight increase in turnout among liberal voters. If George W. Bush were to move one unit to the right, this would lead to a moderate increase in liberal turnout and a slight increase in conservative turnout. In 2004, candidate positioning has an asymmetric effect on turnout, but the asymmetry is in the opposite direction. In general, candidate positioning most often had an asymmetric effect on turnout. The direction of the asymmetry varied from election to election, sometimes benefiting his candidate moving away from the center and sometimes benefiting the other candidate. Overall, *Condition B* is met in about half the elections considered.

Figure 2 graphs the candidates' vote margins over their opponents, as a function of their positions. A candidate will win the election when his vote margin is positive, or when the corresponding line in Fig. 2 is above zero. Table 6 reports each candidate's vote-maximizing position, fixing the other candidate at their actual position. Let us focus on the two candidate elections for now. Proponents of the Securing the Base strategy claim that a candidate may actually gain votes by moving away from the center. The methodology used in this paper has the potential to either confirm or refute this conclusion since variable turnout can potentially cause the vote margin functions to peak at locations away from the center of the ideological distribution. My results indicate that candidates would gain votes by moving towards the center and lose votes by moving away from the center. If one of the candidates were to move away from the center, this would increase turnout substantially, often in an asymmetric way. However, candidates lose too many swing voters by moving away from the center and the net effect thus is negative.

In order to demonstrate that my framework provides a meaningful test, I considered the following experiment. For 2004, I replicated Fig. 2, changing only one thing. I multiplied the coefficient representing alienation by 25. In this case, the graph no longer peaked in the center, indicating that the candidates would gain votes by moving away from the center. Similarly, I replicated this figure while multiplying the indifference coefficient by 25. Once again, the vote margin function peaked away from the center, and the candidates would gain votes by moving away from it.<sup>17</sup> This demonstrates that lack of support for the Securing the Base strategy is not 'hard-wired' into my framework, but occurs because the data do not support the degree of asymmetry necessary to justify the Securing the Base strategy. The

<sup>17</sup>This illustrates that there is indeed substantial asymmetry in how voters respond to positioning by the candidates.



**Fig. 2** Vote margins. Vote-margin of each candidate over his opponent, as a function of the candidate's position, holding the other candidate's position constant at his actual position. *Solid lines* represent the Democratic candidate's vote margin and *dashed lines* represent the Republican candidate's vote margin. A candidate will win the election when the line is above zero, indicating a positive vote margin over his opponent

**Table 7** Marginal effects of candidate positioning on third party vote share

Year	Baseline	Democrat moves left	Democrat moves right	Republican moves left	Republican moves right
1980	6.7%	8.5%** (0.5%)	9.4%** (0.9%)	4.9%* (0.8%)	11.9%** (1.1%)
1992	19.0%	20.5%** (0.5%)	19.5% (0.3%)	19.9% (0.5%)	21.9%** (0.6%)
1996	8.5%	9.1% (0.5%)	8.7% (0.4%)	9.0% (0.3%)	9.0% (0.4%)

Marginal effects of candidate positioning on the vote share of the third party candidate. Since the observations are weighted, the baseline third party vote share matches the actual vote share in the population. Standard errors for the difference between the baseline and alternative scenarios are in parentheses

\*Significance at the 5% level

\*\*Significance at the 1% level

argument advanced by proponents of the Securing the Base strategy is qualitatively correct (extremist voters are indeed more sensitive to position-taking in their turnout decision), but this effect is not large enough to compensate for the swing voters one would lose by moving away from the center.

## 7 The impact of candidate positioning in three-candidate elections

In the three-candidate elections, there are additional mechanisms that might incentivize candidates to move away from the center. By moving away from the center, candidates may be able to reduce defections of their supporters to third party candidates. In order for this to be the case, three conditions must be met. First, candidate positioning must have a substantial effect on third party voting (*Condition D*). Second, third party voters must defect in an asymmetric way (*Condition E*). Third, this effect must be large enough to compensate for the loss of swing voters (*Condition F*).

Table 7 summarizes the effect of candidate positioning by the major party candidates on the third party candidate's vote share. The effect on Anderson's vote share in 1980 is particularly large. For example, if Reagan were to move one unit to the right, Anderson's vote share would increase from 6.7% to 11.9%. The effect on Perot's vote shares in 1992 and 1996 is more moderate, ranging from 0.2% to 1.9%. This indicates that *Condition D* is met.

To evaluate the effect of the presence of a third party candidate, I use an approach similar to Alvarez and Nagler (1995) and Lacy and Burden (1999, 2001). I proceed by eliminating the third party candidate from the voters' choice set and computing the resulting vote shares for the major party candidates. The results are presented in Table 8. Consider first 1980, when John Anderson ran as an independent and garnered 6.6% of the vote. Jimmy Carter received 44.7% of the two party vote while Ronald Reagan received 55.3%. Anderson was located only slightly to the right of Jimmy Carter. This suggests that many of Anderson's voters would have voted for Carter had Anderson not run. However, when non-policy factors are taken into account, Carter would have received 44.3% of the two party vote had Anderson not run. This indicates that Jimmy Carter's policy advantage among the Anderson voters was almost exactly canceled out by Reagan's non-policy advantage among these voters. We also find that Anderson's presence had a negligible effect on voter turnout. Consequently, Anderson's candidacy had almost no effect on the election.

**Table 8** The Effect of Third Party Candidates

Year	With third party competition		Without third party competition		Difference Dem. margins
	Democrat	Republican	Democrat	Republican	
1980	44.7%	55.3%	44.3%	55.7%	0.8% (1.4%)
1992	53.5%	46.5%	50.2%	49.8%	6.5%** (1.7%)
1996	54.7%	45.3%	52.8%	47.2%	4.0%** (0.8%)

Major party candidates' share of the two-party vote under the baseline scenario and an alternative scenario where the third party candidate does not run. Since the observations are weighted, the candidates' vote shares in the baseline scenario matches the actual vote shares exactly. Standard errors for the difference between the margins with and without third party competition are in parentheses

\*Significance at the 5% level

\*\*Significance at the 1% level

Now consider 1992, when Ross Perot ran as an independent and garnered 18.9% of the vote. Bill Clinton received 53.5% of the two party vote and George H.W. Bush received 46.5%. Had Perot not run, Clinton would have received 50.2% of the two party vote while Bush would have received 49.8%, indicating an extremely close election. In 1996, Ross Perot ran as a reform party candidate and garnered 8.4% of the vote. Bill Clinton received 54.7% of the two party vote and Robert Dole received 45.3%. If Perot had not run, Clinton would have received 52.8% of the two party vote and Dole would have received 47.2%. My results thus indicate that reductions in third party voting can often affect the major party candidates asymmetrically (and consequently *Condition E* is sometimes met). This also indicates that third party candidates can have a significant effect on electoral outcomes. This effect was particularly strong in 1992.<sup>18</sup>

Consider Fig. 2 once again, which displays the effect of candidate positioning on the candidate's vote margins. My results indicate that candidates would gain votes by moving towards the center and lose votes by moving away from the center. This is never violated in any of the elections considered, although in 1980, Carter's margin-maximizing position involves moving only slightly to the right. The vote share functions for both candidates peak near the median voter's position. The largest discrepancy occurs in 1980, where Carter had an optimal position of 3.5.<sup>19</sup> If one of the candidates were to move away from the center, this would affect both turnout and third party voting. An outward move necessitates losing some support among swing voters and the net effect is for the vote margin of the moving candidate to decrease.

In 1976, 1988, 1992, 2000, and 2004, my results indicate that the candidate that lost the popular vote could have won by positioning himself closer to the center. In 1972, 1980, 1984, and 1996, the winning candidate's non-policy advantage was so strong that the losing candidate could not have changed the election outcome by positioning himself differently.

<sup>18</sup>Interestingly, my results are consistent with Alvarez and Nagler (1995) but differ from Lacy and Burden (1999, 2001).

<sup>19</sup>This is not surprising given the results in Table 6. If Carter were to move to the left, many moderate voters would defect to Anderson. If Carter were to move to the right, he would lose liberal voters Anderson, but would fail to gain many moderate voters due to Reagan's strong non-policy advantage.

The results suggest that the swing voter strategy is a more effective approach to increasing a candidate's vote margin.<sup>20</sup>

## 8 Conclusions

I have attempted to evaluate the Securing the Base strategy as an alternative to the Swing Voter strategy. Proponents of the Securing the Base strategy most often argue that even though moving away from the center will cause swing voters to defect to a candidate's opponent, that candidate's core supporters will turn out at higher rates. A somewhat less prominent argument is that moving away from the center will reduce defections of a candidate's supporters to third party candidates. This argument was particularly common in relation to the 2000 U.S. presidential election, when some suggested that Al Gore should move to the left in order to reduce the defection of liberal voters to Ralph Nader. My results refute both of these arguments.

In my estimation results, I found strong support for abstention due to indifference and moderate support for abstention due to alienation. Moreover, candidate positioning has a substantial effect on aggregate turnout and third party voting. This leaves open the possibility that candidates may gain votes from moving away from the center. I find, however, that this is not the case. In all of the elections considered, both major party candidates would gain votes by positioning themselves closer to the center. In five of the nine elections, the losing candidate could have won by doing so. In 1972 (Nixon), 1980 (Reagan), 1984 (Reagan), and 1996 (Clinton), the winning candidate had a non-policy advantage so large that he was immune to policy competition.

My results imply that the arguments advanced by proponents of the Securing the Base strategy are qualitatively correct. I find that ideological extremists are more sensitive to position-taking in their turnout decisions. Furthermore, candidates can reduce third party defection by taking more extreme positions. Nonetheless, these arguments overstate the sensitivity of voter turnout and third party voting to position-taking by the candidates, and understate the sensitivity of candidate choice to position-taking by the candidates.

The results of this paper suggest that the dominant view among political strategists is incorrect, and overstates the sensitivity of the turnout decisions of base voters to candidate positioning. It does not necessarily imply that candidates are failing to respond optimally, because optimal behavior does not necessarily entail maximizing (expected) votes. Candidates may choose to position away from the political center because they have incorrectly assessed the political environment, or because of factors such as policy motivation, uncertainty, and primary elections. An advantage of my framework is that I can evaluate the claim that candidates gain votes by moving away from the center, while remaining agnostic about the form of the candidates' utility functions. Explaining exactly why presidential candidates position where they do is an important area of future research, but will require overcoming certain problems- generating measures of the candidates' perceived uncertainty, generating measures of candidate policy ideal points that are independent of their taken positions, and considering primary elections.

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<sup>20</sup>An implicit assumption here is that the choice of a nationally prestigious third party candidate to run is exogenous (e.g. not effected by positioning by the major party candidates). Rosenstone et al. (1984) present evidence that a small number of other factors almost completely account for whether a third party candidate runs.



Finally, since this paper has focused exclusively on presidential elections, it leaves open the possibility that the Securing the Base strategy is more effective in midterm elections. Since the base rate of turnout is smaller in midterm elections, there is more room for variable turnout to have a substantial effect. In fact, Plane and Gershtenson (2004) find more convincing evidence for abstention due to alienation in midterm Senate elections. The positions taken by candidates in such elections may have larger effects on voter turnout and, hence, create stronger incentives for vote-maximizing politicians to move away from the center.

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