

Party Labels and Information: The Implications of Contagion in Coelection Environments

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Abstract

In related empirical work, we demonstrate that in presidential elections a more ideologically moderate electorate, relative to midterm elections, produces a more extreme and polarized Senate. In this paper, we propose a unified model in which the presence of party labels in an environment of incomplete information produces a contagion effect across contemporaneous races for office. In the aggregate, this contagion generates electoral outcomes that are consistent with our new empirical findings and other well-known phenomena from the literature, such as presidential coattails and midterm attrition. Our work raises policy questions about the role of party labels in elections for offices; in particular, offices that have little to do with or are designed to be removed from ideological contamination, such as school boards and judicial elections. A broader implication of our model is that the introduction of unbiased public signals may have perverse effects on the aggregation of private information and preferences.

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