

Determining Ideology of FEC Commissioners

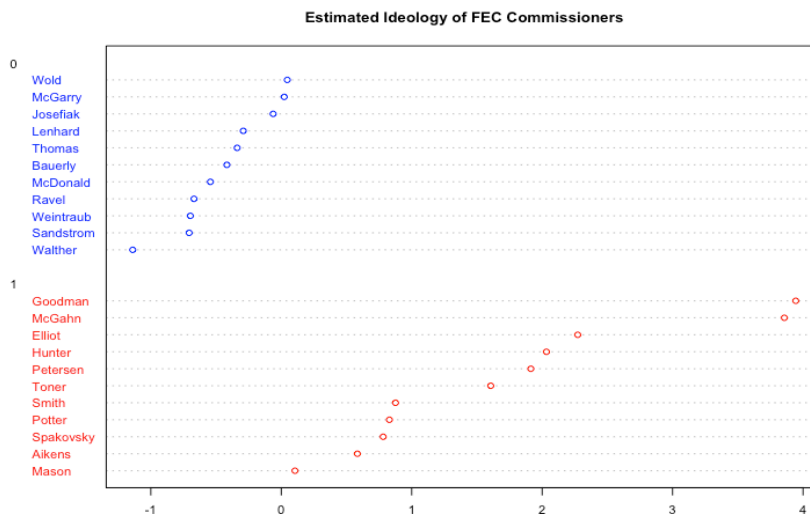
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The purpose of this project was to create ideology scores for commissioners of the Federal Election Commission (FEC). The FEC is composed of at most six commissioners, including no more than three from either party, and the Commission votes on legal questions pertaining to campaign finance. Through qualitative and anecdotal evidence, recent observers have found an increase in polarization among the committee. Professor Franz and I worked to test this hypothesis quantitatively, determining whether Democrat and Republican members had truly moved further apart over time.

Much of the work involved creating a database of votes, which was needed to run the scaling procedure. The information for every vote is stored on the FEC website, but in a format un conducive to analysis. For each vote, the pertinent information was entered into a spreadsheet. In total, the data set included approximately 5,000 votes.

The scaling itself was performed through the statistics program, R. A package for R, available online, was used to create Martin-Quinn scores. This methodology has been traditionally used to estimate the ideology of Supreme Court Justices. Since the Supreme Court and FEC share similarly small voting bodies, this scaling technique is a good fit for both. The package used a Markov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) algorithm which, using the voting data and party affiliation of each commissioner, made an estimate of ideology. If commissioners had similar voting records, they received similar ideology scores. Democratic commissioners were given negative values and Republican commissioners received positive ones. The scores for each commissioner are pictured in the figure below.

Our findings supported the original hypothesis; the FEC has become increasingly polarized along party lines. Commissioners from the 1990's, such as Aikens and Wold, received ideology scores fairly close to zero. Those on the FEC today, such as Walther and Goodman, diverged widely (see figure). We also found that this increase in polarization differed in magnitude for Democrats and Republicans. Republican ideology scores increased far more rapidly than Democrats' scores decreased. In other words, Democrat commissioners are far more likely to take the Republican position than vice-versa.



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