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Gender Turnover and Roll-Call Voting in the U.S. House of Representatives

A number of studies suggest that the gender of a legislator affects his or her congressional ideology. We argue that these studies may have produced misleading results because of insufficient controls for constituency influences. To better account for constituency effects, we use a longitudinal research design based on electoral turnover, which holds constituency constant while allowing gender and party to vary. We apply ordinary least squares regression to data from the 103d, 104th, and 105th Houses of Representatives and estimate the effect of gender turnover on changes in DW-NOMINATE roll-call voting scores. We find that, when we sufficiently control for both party and constituency influences, gender is not a determinant of the liberalness of a representative's roll-call voting behavior.

Congressional policymaking is based on the policy preferences and voting decisions of elected officials in an environment of competing demands. Voting choices in Congress depend, in large part, on the proximity between a legislator's own position in an ideological space and the location of the issue at hand. Thus, a legislator's ideological leaning determines to a great extent the nature of his or her voting decisions. Yet representatives are exposed to pressures from multiple sources, both within and outside the legislature, that shape their ideological positions. Such forces rival one another and pull members of Congress in different directions. Given this context, a frequently debated issue among scholars is the extent to which competing demands, such as political party, constituents, and personal traits and experiences, influence representatives' positions in the ideological space and, consequently, their roll-call votes.

Political party is said to be the strongest determinant of congressional ideology and voting. Candidates run for office under the party label with which they identify ideologically. Party affiliation, in turn, constrains the range of policy positions available to a member of

Congress. Such constraints operate as a result of party discipline and a member's need to use the party label as a meaningful "signal" to supporters of his or her ideological position (Snyder and Ting 2002). Not surprisingly, Democrats consistently vote in a more liberal manner, and Republicans vote more conservatively.

The constituents in an electoral district also are likely to influence the policy position of their member of Congress and his or her roll-call votes. Representatives know that effective representation of the interests and concerns of their constituents is necessary to achieve reelection, the principal goal of members of Congress (Mayhew 1974). As a result, the ideological position of a representative should be similar to the ideological position of the median voter in the representative's electoral district (Downs 1957).

Another argument—often put forth by gender and minority politics scholars—is that a representative's personal traits, such as gender and race, may affect political ideology. The shared characteristics and experiences held by female and minority representatives, for instance, may lead them to assume ideological positions that differ from those of white congress*men*. As a result, divergent roll-call voting patterns may emerge. Several studies have examined the impact of gender on ideology in congressional voting (Clark 1998; Leader 1977; Vega and Firestone 1995; Welch 1985). The studies have found that, although political party is the primary determinant of liberalness or conservatism in voting patterns, gender still has an effect, particularly within parties, after the analyses are adjusted for constituency characteristics and party affiliation. The general conclusion drawn from these studies is that female representatives are more liberal than male representatives in their roll-call voting behavior.

We think this conclusion may be erroneous. We argue that women may be more liberal than men but that this tendency is not likely to be exhibited in roll-call voting patterns. What may appear to be women voting more liberally than men may actually be a function of the fact that women tend to be elected in more-liberal districts (Welch 1985). Because representatives tend to run for and win office in districts with ideological positions similar to theirs (Poole 1988), the influence of personal traits on their ideology is likely to be closely intertwined with the influence exercised by their constituencies. So, although it appears that gender influences roll-call voting patterns, this pattern may in fact be the result of constituency ideology, which has been overlooked because of insufficient measures of constituency with regional dummy variables or demographic data. To obviate this shortcoming, we use data on congressional turnover in the 103d to 104th and 104th to 105th U.S.

Houses of Representatives to estimate the impact of gender on political ideology (measured through roll-call votes) while controlling for party and constituency.

A research design based on congressional turnover provides a better control for constituency effects because it removes them from the equation (Clausen 1973). In this way, we can separate gender effects from constituency effects and better estimate the independent impact of gender both within and across political parties. With the turnover model, the district, rather than the legislator, is the unit of analysis. Since it is reasonable to assume that district composition is unlikely to change much during two consecutive congresses, constituency effects can be said to be constant over time. This method allows us to compare change in the gender and party of the legislator representing a district seat with change in the voting score for that district seat across the two successive Congresses. If it is really constituency that influences representatives' roll-call voting behavior, then we expect that isolating gender from constituency effects by holding constituency constant will mute any effect of gender on roll-call voting.

This article focuses on gender differences in overall patterns of liberalness and conservatism in roll-call voting. To investigate this issue, we employ DW-NOMINATE scores, which provide a measure of liberalism or conservatism for each legislator in a Congress. This article does not address gender differences in roll-call voting on specific bills or issues that may be of unique interest to women. Although this line of research is clearly important, it stems from theoretical and practical concerns different from those we address here.

Determinants of Political Ideology

Several gender and politics scholars have argued that female legislators tend to be more liberal than their male counterparts and that the difference is detectable in congressional roll-call votes. Leader (1977) was one of the first to examine gender differences in political ideology. Her research shows that in the first session of the 94th House, female legislators voted liberally a larger percentage of times than did men in the same party. Welch (1985) applied a longitudinal approach to the study of gender and roll-call voting by focusing on the four Congresses from 1972 to 1980. She found gender to be an important determinant of voting within parties, although the differences between men and women decreased over time. Vega and Firestone (1995) updated Welch's work and found no significant differences between men's and women's voting

scores in the 1980s. Their study indicates, however, that women became more liberal again in the early 1990s, above and beyond the effects of party and district characteristics. Finally, Clark (1998) examined the voting records of women in Congress from 1993 to 1995, corroborating earlier findings that gender is important. Nevertheless, she conceded that party is a bigger determinant of a legislator's ideological position. These studies report variation in the extent to which female legislators are more liberal than male legislators over time, but their central conclusion is that women *are* more liberal than men in their roll-call voting patterns.

Party affiliation is a prominent part of any examination of political ideology, since party is consistently found to be the key determinant of a legislator's views of politics. Still, it is plausible to expect that a representative's constituency will also be an important predictor of his or her legislative behavior. Voters in an electoral district want their representative to be similar to them and responsive to their interests and concerns. Thus, a district's ideological makeup and a constituency's policy preferences place limits on the ideological latitude within which a representative can move. A member of Congress elected in a liberal district, for instance, cannot push too far to the right without suffering electoral repercussions. It is thus essential for scholars to include a measure of constituency influences in their studies of roll-call voting.

Yet such influences are extremely difficult to measure. Public opinion surveys at the district level would be the ideal measure (see, for example, Miller and Stokes 1963), but they are expensive, time-consuming, and unavailable in recent years. One of the most common proxies for constituency effects is to control for region of the country by categorizing states according to geographical location. Another popular proxy for constituency effects is to measure district characteristics, such as the percentage of the population living in urban areas, the percentage of foreign-born residents, or the percentage of ethnic minorities, hypothesizing that urban and minority-dominant districts will be more liberal than rural and majority-white districts. Using these types of measures, Leader (1977), Welch (1985), and Vega and Firestone (1995) find female legislators to be more liberal than male legislators after controlling for constituency, although Welch (1985) shows that her constituency controls substantially decrease the ideological distance between men and women in Congress.

Prior studies' conclusions that female legislators vote more liberally than male legislators and the inconsistencies reported in the effect of gender over time are likely artifacts of the mediocre measures of constituency effects in the studies. Regional groupings and district demographics are better than no measure of constituency effects, but they remain less than optimal and potentially highly imprecise (Clausen 1973).[1] We argue that a better control for constituency exists. We present a quasi-experimental model that holds constituency constant by measuring turnover in district seats from one election to another.

The Turnover Model

The turnover approach to the study of constituency influences on voting patterns in Congress was first used by Aage Clausen (1973). Three major types of turnover are distinguished in Clausen's model. In a *holdover,* "the same person holds the seat in both Congresses" (1973, 137). *Person turnover* occurs when "different persons from the same party serve the constituency in the two Congresses" (Clausen 1973, 138). Finally, there is *partisan turnover,* in which both the person and the party serving a constituency change (Clausen 1973, 138).

Generally, holdovers do not cause changes in roll-call voting patterns. Research on congressional voting shows that, once elected, individual representatives maintain the same ideological stance throughout their careers (Lott 1987; Poole and Daniels 1985; Poole and Rosenthal 1991). Instead, "changes in congressional voting patterns occur almost entirely through the process of replacement of retiring or defeated legislators with new blood" (Poole and Rosenthal 1991, 257). Electoral turnover can manifest as partisan turnover or person turnover. When control of a district seat shifts from the Republican Party to the Democratic Party, the roll-call voting patterns associated with that seat should become more liberal. Conversely, if a Republican is elected to represent a district that was previously Democratic, then an ideological shift in a conservative direction should occur.

Person turnover is important because, regardless of partisanship, legislators differ from each other in regard to personal beliefs, policy priorities, issue concerns, and so on. Many factors shape the beliefs, priorities, and concerns of legislators, including family background, work experiences, age, ethnicity, and gender. Variations in ideology among legislators may be a result of different personal traits and experiences. When one representative has held a seat for several years, the voting patterns of that seat are unlikely to change until turnover in personnel occurs. In this article, we focus on one specific type of person turnover—gender turnover. We are interested not simply in whether or not a change in the seat-holder leads to a change in ideology; rather, we are interested in whether or not a change in the *gender* of the seat-

holder leads to a new ideological bent for that seat. The existing literature suggests that gender should have an effect (Clark 1998; Leader 1977; Vega and Firestone 1995; Welch 1985). Our argument, however, is that if female legislators are elected in more-liberal districts and we control for constituency effects appropriately, then person turnover that includes a change in gender should not result in a significantly different voting pattern for a district's seat.

Study Measures

For this study, we use House seats as the unit of analysis. The 1993–98 period is the empirical domain, and it includes the 103d, 104th, and 105th Congresses. Although we would like to track the evolution of representatives' voting records for a longer period of time, we are constrained by the necessity to compare districts that do not undergo alteration of size or composition during the period of analysis. The data are limited to the post-1992 period because of the possibility that redistricting after the 1990 census may have affected the outcome of several congressional races and rendered the 1992 electoral cycle unique in certain respects. Several studies have shown that redistricting—especially minority redistricting in the South—can influence congressional ideology (Bullock 1995; Glazer and Robbins 1985). We expect the process of redistricting to have been completed by 1992, and we assume that its effects were no longer detectable afterward.[2] Despite restricting the data to this time period, we argue that our findings are generalizable beyond the 103d, 104th, and 105th Congresses.

The two electoral cycles in this paper, 1994 and 1996, yield a total of 167 cases of electoral turnover (19.5%) and 691 cases of reelection.[3] There are 93 cases of party turnover—23 changes to a Democratic representative; 70 to a Republican representative—and 39 cases of gender turnover—23 changes to a female representative; 16 to a male representative. The small rate of turnover is not surprising if we consider the frequency with which incumbents have been reelected in the U.S. Congress since the early part of the twentieth century (Hibbing 1991; Jacobson 1997; Mayhew 1974; Polsby 1968). As mentioned previously, we focus exclusively on instances of turnover.

We use DW-NOMINATE scores as the measure of political ideology in voting (Poole and Daniels 1985; Poole and Rosenthal 1991).[4] The various NOMINATE scores were developed in response to flaws in common interest-group roll-call voting measures, such as the American Democratic Association (ADA) and American Conservative Union (ACU) scores. The interest group scores do not account for shifts in the ideological bent of issues on the House agenda in different Congresses, making them inappropriate for time-serial comparisons (Groseclose and Levitt 1999; Poole and Rosenthal 1991). In addition, ACU and ADA scores refer only to a small number of votes, specifically those of special concern to the American Conservative Union or American Democratic Association. Thus findings that rely on these scores may be artifacts of the measure employed (see, for example, Clark 1998, Leader 1977, Vega and Firestone 1995, and Welch 1985). The first dimension of the DW-NOMINATE scores is a better measure of the liberalness or conservativeness of legislators' voting behavior because it is designed to be comparable over time[5] and includes almost all roll-call votes.[6]

In the following analyses, the dependent variable, change in ideology, is measured by computing the differences in DW-NOMINATE voting scores from the 103d to 104th and 104th to 105th Congresses (Poole and Daniels 1985; Poole and Rosenthal 1991).[7] DW-NOMINATE scores range from –1.00 (very conservative) to 1.00 (very liberal), and changes in scores can range from –2.00 to 2.00.[8]

Change in gender and change in political party from one Congress to the next are the covariates of principal interest in our model. We code these two variables according to a couple of critical criteria. First, cases of gender turnover and party turnover must be separated from same-sex and within-party turnover. Second, the direction of change needs to be identified. For example, changes from female to male legislators may be more conservative and need to be distinguished from changes of male to female legislators, which could be more liberal.

We employ a trichotomous categorization for the operationalization of gender turnover: the first category represents a change from a male representative to a female representative; the second category refers to changes from a female representative to a male representative; and the final category refers to absence of gender turnover or, in other words, same-sex turnover.[9] We exclude the same-sex turnover category in the models; this category then functions as the baseline comparison category. The regression coefficients should be interpreted as the changes in voting ideology produced either by a female-to-male turnover or by a male-to-female turnover vis-à-vis same-sex turnovers. The variable indicating partisan turnover is also trichotomized, expressing change from a Republican representative to a Democratic one, change from a Democrat to a Republican, and within-party turnover. The within-party category will be the excluded category in the data analysis section.

Finally, we control for shifts in electoral support, measured as the vote margin by which the newly elected representative won office, and

the election year in which turnover occurred.[10] A representative who wins office by a wide margin has more freedom to pursue liberal or conservative tendencies while maintaining a strong base of support. On the other hand, a representative elected by a small margin needs to keep his or her ideological position near that of the median voter to maximize chances for reelection. We include a year dummy variable to control for any ideological changes that may be due to the unique features of either the 1994 or 1996 election. Although we are not interested in election-specific peculiarities, it is important to control for any confounding effect that they might have on the direct effects of gender and party.

Does Gender Matter?

Table 1 shows the results of the ordinary least squares (OLS) regression equation that estimates the effects of gender turnover, party turnover, margin of victory, and election year on political ideology measured through roll-call voting scores.[11] We find that change in the political party holding the district seat is the key determinant of change in voting patterns. Both types of change in political party are strongly significant. As expected, change to a Democrat leads to more-liberal voting scores. Turnover to a Republican representative, on the other hand, makes a seat's voting patterns more conservative. The impact of political party is substantively strong as well. Election of a Democrat to replace a Republican leads to a liberal score change of 0.67, quite large on an ideological scale ranging only from –2 to +2. Similarly, when a Republican is elected to a previously Democratic seat, the score change is 0.61 in a conservative direction.

More important than the effect of political party is that gender turnover has no statistical significance. Neither a change to a female representative nor a change to a male representative produces statistically significant differences in roll-call voting scores when we hold constituency preferences constant. Surprisingly, the effects of district turnover to a female candidate are negative. Although not statistically significant, a transition from a male to a female legislator results in more-conservative voting scores than when same-sex turnover occurs. In part, this result may be an artifact of the Republican surge of 1994, although the control for year is insignificant. The dummy variable controlling for year simply reveals that there are no major shifts in liberalness in the 1994 or 1996 electoral cycles that might obscure the findings of gender or party. Margin of victory also is insignificant, indicating that shifts in electoral support do not confound our results.

TABLE 1
Multivariate Regression Results of Gender and Party Turnover's Effect on Roll-Call Voting
(standard errors in parentheses)

	Change in Voting Score
Change to a Female Representative	–.01 (.03)
Change to a Male Representative	.01 (.04)
Change to a Democratic Representative	.67 ** (.04)
Change to a Republican Representative	–.61 ** (.03)
Margin of Victory	–.0004 (.0008)
Year	.03 (.03)
Intercept	–.05 (.03)
N = 167 R^2 = .91	

Note: Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients.
* statistically significant at the .05 level.
** statistically significant at the .01 level.

Many of the studies on gender and liberalness show that, although party is overwhelmingly significant, gender still has some small effect "at the margins." In other words, male and female Democrats vote liberally, whereas male and female Republicans vote conservatively, but women within each party are more liberal than their male partisan colleagues (Clark 1998; Leader 1977; Vega and Firestone 1995; Welch 1985). We tested this theory with an interaction term between change in gender and change in political party in the regression model but found the interaction to be statistically insignificant.[12] To further elucidate this point, we offer Table 2, which presents a comparison of mean voting scores for men and women who changed to the same party. There is a slight difference between changes to a female Democrat and changes

TABLE 2
Mean Voting Scores for Changes in Gender and Political Party

	Change in Voting Score (n)	Female–Male Differences
Change to a Democrat and a Female Representative	.712 (5)	.037
Change to a Democrat and a Male Representative	.675 (2)	
Change to a Democrat and No Gender Change	.654 (18)	
Change to a Republican and a Female Representative	–.633 (3)	.044
Change to a Republican and a Male Representative	–.589 (7)	
Change to a Republican and No Gender Change	–.675 (61)	

to a male Democrat, but the increase in liberalness is an insignificant 0.037 ($t = -0.24$). When gender turnover accompanies turnover to the Republican Party, the difference in average voting scores is similarly small, 0.044, and statistically insignificant ($t = 0.40$). These comparisons confirm that gender plays little role in the liberalness of roll-call voting even "at the margins."

The Implications of Gender's Negligible Impact on Roll-Call Voting

Contrary to the conclusions of the existing literature on gender and voting ideology, we find that being a woman does not have a significant influence on the degree of liberalism reflected in roll-call votes in the U.S. House of Representatives. This finding holds true not only across political parties but also when we compare the voting patterns of men and women with the same political party affiliation. It is likely that the gender differences found in earlier studies resulted from inadequate controls for constituency effects.

We think it important to mention two qualifications to the implications of our findings. First, although we find few perceptible differences between male and female representatives' ideologies when voting, we do not argue that male and female legislators are ideologically similar, more generally. Women may still be more liberal than men, but this difference probably plays itself out at the stage of candidacies and elections. A greater degree of liberalism among female candidates may lead them to run for and win office in districts with ideological viewpoints similar to their own. Our results indicate that it is actually constituency effects, not personal characteristics, that influence the liberalness of representatives' roll-call voting.

Second, our finding on the unimportance of gender in the liberalness of voting patterns is not necessarily generalizable to voting on specific pieces of women's interest legislation or other legislative activities, such as initiating bills, sitting on committees, or interacting with other legislators. A number of scholars have found that women are more likely to vote in favor of specific women's interest bills, such as those involving abortion (Clark 1998; Swers 1998; Tatalovich and Schier 1993), the ERA (Leader 1977), and more general issues concerning women, children, and family (Dolan 1997; Swers 2002; Thomas 1994). Since these types of votes are only a small number of the total votes that occur in a given year, differences that may appear on these specific issues are not likely to significantly influence overall liberal or conservative voting patterns.[13] In addition, ample evidence shows that female representatives hold different attitudes and behave differently from male representatives in terms of policy priorities, bill initiation patterns, committee assignments, and collegial interaction (Blair and Stanley 1991; Carey, Niemi, and Powell 1998; Diamond 1977; Dodson and Carroll 1991; Johnson and Carroll 1978; Kathlene 1994, 1998; Kelly, Saint-Germain, and Horn 1991; Richardson and Freeman 1994; Swers 1998; Thomas 1991, 1992; Thomas and Welch 1991). These studies suggest that female legislators play a key role in shaping the congressional agenda by bringing women's issues to the forefront. Our findings do not contradict these conclusions but reveal that these differences are not discernable in terms of overall liberal or conservative voting patterns.

Despite these caveats, our study makes several important contributions. We question the findings of previous studies and show that women's roll-call voting patterns do not reflect greater liberalism, either across parties or within them. Although women may hold more liberal ideologies than men, this difference emerges during the election period and in other parts of the legislative process (for example, bill initiation, committee assignments, and so forth). We also confirm that political party remains the primary determinant of ideology in voting when scholars adjust for both gender and the effects of constituency. Finally, this study contributes methodologically to the study of women and politics. Rather than continuing to control for constituency with census data or regional groupings, we choose to hold constituency constant by examining changes over time, which we consider a more appropriate method. Although we cannot claim to be using a perfect measure of

constituency effects, this study suggests that scholars must find better ways to measure district-level influences in order to assess correctly the impact of gender on the liberalness or conservatism of roll-call voting behavior.

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NOTES

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1. Census data and regional groupings present an inaccurate picture of districts because they aggregate heterogeneous intradistrict characteristics. In addition, census characteristics only provide information about the constituents' demographics, not about their political attitudes. Although some demographics are highly correlated with attitudes, they cannot be considered interchangeable.

2. Several states underwent redistricting between the 1992 and 1996 elections, but only a small number of them resulted in electoral turnover (Barone and Ujifusa 1998). The most problematic are Louisiana's 4th and 5th districts and Georgia's 4th and 11th, where redistricting prior to the 1996 election led to district-hopping by incumbents. Turnover in 1994 in Minnesota's 6th district and turnover in 1996 in Texas' 5th, 8th, and 9th districts also resulted from redistricting, but there was no district-hopping. Because we needed to compare unchanged districts, we excluded these districts from our analyses. This exclusion ensures that the results are not spurious and affected by changes in district composition rather than by gender or party. We also ran the models excluding only the Minnesota and Texas districts and then again excluding none of these cases; the results were almost identical to those presented here.

3. In our dataset, the cases of turnover include 14 midterm changes in representatives.

4. The DW-NOMINATE measure calculates voting scores through a complex algorithm that allows votes to fall on multiple dimensions. This algorithm results in two key dimensions. The first is a liberal-conservative ideology measure; the second relates the vote to the political party. Because we are interested in the liberalness-conservatism of votes, we will use voting scores from the first dimension. Also, Poole and Daniels (1985) and Poole and Rosenthal (1991) suggest that the first dimension should be used most often. On the whole, the two dimensions are very similar except during a few key periods in U.S. history, such as the civil rights era, when partisanship determined the vote on key issues.

5. It is important to note that, because of the linear model from which they are derived, DW-NOMINATE scores tend to detect a limited amount of time-serial change in voting scores for incumbent legislators. Our data show that over 50% of reelected representatives display no change in voting scores across Congresses, and the mean score change is only –0.004. In cases of turnover, DW-NOMINATE scores amplify voting score changes. In our data, cases of turnover yield score changes ranging from –1.01 to +0.88, with a mean of –0.21. Because of the nature of the measure employed here, it seems unlikely that gender turnover will have no explanatory impact, as we hypothesize. Thus, it will be quite remarkable if our results show that gender turnover has no effect on changes in congressional ideology.

6. Poole and Rosenthal (1991) include all roll-call votes "except those with fewer than 2.5% of those voting supporting the minority side" (235). Their exclusion of these highly consensual votes in the NOMINATE scores is not problematic because these votes are largely symbolic and convey little or no information about the ideological position of legislators or the saliency of the issues involved. The inclusion of such votes may result in an even larger bias than that caused by their omission.

7. We subtract the two-year (one-term) voting score for the incumbent legislator from the two-year (one-term) voting score for the newly elected legislator. Some readers may argue that this method is inappropriate because newly elected representatives may be in an "expansionist" stage, more concerned with solidifying a base of support and position within their party than in following their true policy preferences, which could cause their voting scores to be unrepresentative of their real ideological positions. Yet, as discussed earlier, empirical research shows that very little change in voting patterns is detected over a representative's tenure (Lott 1987; Poole and Daniels 1985; Poole and Rosenthal 1991). Thus, we maintain that this problem is likely to be minimal.

8. The DW-NOMINATE scores are coded by Poole and Rosenthal as –1 (liberal) to +1 (conservative). To make score changes more intuitive, given our covariates of gender and party changes, we reverse the direction of the coding. Positive score changes are in a liberal direction, and negative score changes are in a conservative direction.

9. A single variable with three values (–1, 0, 1) yields the same results. We use the trichotomous categorization because it is substantively more interesting.

10. We ran the regression analysis both with and without a year control. Year is not entirely necessary since the omitted category for gender turnover and party turnover includes same-sex and same-party changes across the two elections. The regressions with and without a year control yielded very similar results, but we opted to include the year control to show explicitly that the results were not unique to one of the two election years.

11. Prior to estimating the models, we tested for statistical multicollinearity among the covariates in the model. We found no instances above the generally accepted threshold of 0.70.

12. Results of the OLS regression models with gender turnover and party turnover interaction are available from the authors upon request. We present the model without the interactions since they are insignificant and do not substantially alter the findings. Estimating the interaction between gender and party is complicated by the small number of cases of gender change and party change. Unfortunately, until larger proportions of women are elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, the small-n problem will continue to hinder research on women and Congress.

13. We thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing our attention to this point.

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