Chamber Medians, Party Medians, and Theories of Party Politics in Congress

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Abstract

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This paper tests hypotheses derived from the debate between proponents of the conditional party government theory (Aldrich 1995; Aldrich and Rohde 2000; Rohde 1991) and those who argue that a preference based model accounts for outcomes as well as the more complex conditional party government theory (Krehbiel 1998). Analyzing data from the 87th (1961-62) through the 107th (2001-02) Congresses, we find that: (1) the median House member is significantly more likely to vote with the majority party median than with the minority party median; (2) the significant increase in the probability of joining a majority party coalition is independent of the ideological distance between the chamber median and the party medians; and (3) the asymmetric pull toward the majority party increases when the conditions of the conditional party government theory are met.

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Chamber Medians, Party Medians, and Theories of Party Politics in Congress

The rise in party voting in Congress has provoked a debate about whether political parties are an essential element of a completely specified theory of the U.S. Congress. Although research has long recognized that political parties in the U.S. are weak compared to those in parliamentary systems, party strength in American politics varies over time. Analysis of roll call voting in Congress revealed a long-term trend of declining partisanship through most of the 20th century (Brady, Cooper, and Hurley 1979; Hurley and Wilson 1989). But this trend reversed itself in the early 1980s, and by the 1990s party voting had climbed to levels not seen in decades. This amplified partisanship in Congress has persisted to the present (Aldrich 1995; Fleisher 1993; Fleisher and Bond 2000, n.d. [2004]; Rohde 1991; Sinclair 1995). The rise in party voting led some scholars to rethink the role of parties and to argue that parties are a vital element in a theoretical understanding of Congress. Others continued to question whether the apparent rise in partisanship in Congress really reflects an essential theoretical role for political parties in the legislative process.

On one side of this debate are theorists who argue that because of activities in committee, in the caucus, and on the floor, political parties exert a significant impact on members’ behavior and their policy products (Aldrich 1995; Aldrich and Rohde 2000; Binder 1997; Binder, Lawrence and Maltzman 1999; Cox and McCubbins 1993; Rohde 1991; Sinclair 1995). For some, party government is “conditional,” depending on the homogeneity of preferences within the majority party and the degree of policy disagreement between the parties (Aldrich 1995; Aldrich and Rohde 2000; Rohde 1991). If members of the majority party largely agree on the policies that they prefer, and if these preferences diverge from those of the other party, then the majority caucus will grant more power to party leaders. The aim of adding to
party leaders’ tools is to reduce uncertainty and thereby increase the probability that policies preferred by the majority party will survive the legislative obstacle course.

On the other side of this debate are scholars who question, “Where’s the Party” as they seek to develop a theoretical explanation of the workings of Congress (Kehbiel 1991, 1993, 1998; Schickler and Rich 1997). This group argues that parties and party leaders are not necessary components of a completely specified theory of congressional policymaking. Instead, choices made by legislators result from individual policy preferences in a system constrained by the institutional rules and procedures. Any apparent party effect merely reflects the distribution of preferences in the legislature.

The argument that the powers of party leaders are weak and theoretically irrelevant echoes much of the traditional scholarship on the workings of the U.S. Congress. Shepsle (1989) observed that in the conventional “textbook” conception of Congress, the partisan imperative was the weakest of the forces driving congressional politics. In his classic characterization of Congress, Mayhew (1974, 27) noted, “no theoretical treatment of the United States Congress that posits parties as analytic units will go very far.” For Mayhew, the key to understanding Congress is the electoral motives of the 535 individual members.¹

This perspective views Congress as an institution comprised of individuals whose decisions reflect rational choices between the benefits of proposed policies compared to those of the status quo. Regardless of how the choice is framed-- procedural motion, amendment, or final passage--each member calculates the benefits of the proposal and supports it when the benefits outweigh those associated with the existing state of affairs. If majority rule governs decision-making, the preferences of the median member in the chamber exert a pivotal effect on the outcome. Decisions that require super-majorities such as invoking cloture or

¹ Mayhew (2001, 265) has indicated that “parties would need to be handled differently in an updated Electoral Connection—possibly as devices for ‘bundling’ individual members’ electoral drives to meet the challenges of today’s electoral environment.”
overriding a presidential veto, however, induce non-median results. In such cases, the key pivot point shifts to the member needed to achieve the super-majority (Krehbiel 1998). But regardless of the decision rule, the basic theoretical argument is that decisions reflect individual preferences of members, and parties and their leaders do not significantly shift outcomes away from the pivot points.

In this paper, we seek to contribute to this debate. We argue that the majority party leadership has sufficient power over the construction of legislation to significantly increase the odds that the median member in the chamber will join a majority party coalition. Furthermore, the significant increase in the probability of joining a majority party coalition is independent of the ideological distance between the chamber median and the party medians. Finally, the increase in the probability of joining a majority party coalition increases when the conditions of the conditional party government theory are met.

We begin with a theoretical argument leading to the prediction of an asymmetric effect toward the majority party. Then we discuss the data used to test the hypotheses and present the evidence. We conclude with a discussion of the significance of the results.

**Theoretical Argument**

We adopt the basic rational actor assumption from the literature: when presented with an alternative \( A \), a member of Congress evaluates the benefits of the proposal relative to the status quo \( Q \), and supports \( A \) if and only if the benefits exceed those associated with \( Q \). The evaluation of \( A \) and \( Q \) can be based on a combination of factors including the desires of constituents, interest groups that provide campaign contributions, the president and other party leaders, or the member’s own preferences.

The version of \( A \) that defeats \( Q \), however, depends on what is available to be voted on. If the legislature operates with an open rule where members are free to propose different variants of \( A \), a rational actor theory predicts that the median member will hold out until the version under consideration is exactly
equal to the median’s ideal point. If all versions of A are available, the only version that will attract majority support and defeat Q is the one at the median voter’s ideal point.

But what if some actor in the legislative process can restrict the alternatives available for members to consider? In such a situation, the median member will vote to adopt a version of A that does not exactly match the median’s preferences if the only available alternative is still preferable to the status quo. Aldrich and Rohde (2001) argue that the distribution of powers within the legislative process allow the majority party to exert asymmetric control over the construction and presentation of policy alternatives. Sinclair (1995) describes how during the 1980s, the House Democratic leadership used restrictive rules to limit members’ choices to proposals that were in line with the preferences of the majority party. This asymmetric control over the legislative agenda by the majority party can induce the median member to side with the majority party even if the alternative is quite a distance from the median’s ideal point. All that is required is that the alternative presented be closer to the median’s ideal point than to the status quo.

The asymmetric influence of the majority party over the agenda flows from several sources. First, the majority party takes a disproportionate share of positions on each of the committees in the chamber. On the most important committees (i.e., those that are central to the party’s legislative agenda), the majority party grabs an even higher number of seats than on other committees. In addition, the majority party chairs all committees and sub-committees. Second, through its control over the referral of legislation to committee, the majority party can influence whether the alternative that emerges from committee is in line with the preferences of the majority party. Third, through its control of the House Rules committee, the majority party may limit alternatives available for consideration on the floor. By issuing closed or restricted rules, the majority party may block the presentation of alternatives that are more attractive to the median member than is the alternative presented by the majority party.
The ability of the majority party leadership to exercise such asymmetric influence has been quite variable over the course of congressional history. We have seen the legislative process shift from dominance by the majority party leadership at the turn of the 20th century, to a committee-dominated process at mid-century in which party leaders essentially served as facilitators, to the reemergence strong party leader influence at century’s end (Cooper and Brady 1981; Fleisher and Bond n.d. [2004]; Rohde 1991; Sinclair 1992, 1995, 2000). David Rohde and John Aldrich propose the “conditional party government theory” to explain the ebb and flow party power in Congress (Aldrich 1995; Aldrich and Rohde 2000; Rohde 1991). The key condition affecting party leaders’ power is the homogeneity of preferences within the majority party. And the homogeneity of preferences in the majority party caucus is a function of the partisanship of the electorate. If partisan constituencies across different regions have diverse policy preferences, parties in Congress reflect that diversity. Because members of diverse majority party must satisfy different electoral constituencies to win reelection, they are reluctant to grant party leaders powers to compel support for party positions that might conflict with local constituency preferences. If partisan constituencies become more homogeneous, parties in Congress become more ideologically homogeneous internally and more divergent from each other. A more ideologically homogeneous majority party caucus adopts reforms that empower leaders to forge party discipline to pass key issues on the party agenda. Aldrich and Rohde (Aldrich 1995; Aldrich and Rohde 2000; Rohde 1991) argue that since the 1980s, the conditions needed to empower the majority party leadership have been present, resulting in asymmetric party control over the congressional agenda.

The arguments of conditional party government theorists have not gone unchallenged. The most prolific critic has been Keith Krehbiel (1998). He challenges the theory on both theoretical and empirical grounds. Krehbiel argues that: (1) a preference based model accounts for outcomes as well as the more
complex conditional party government theory; (2) the minority party competes effectively with the majority to control agenda alternatives; and (3) “there is precious little systematic evidence supporting the hypothesis that the majority party in the Congress is disproportionately powerful at winning pivotal votes, much less noncentrist outcomes” (Krehbiel 1998, 185).

Hypotheses

The logic of conditional party government as well as that of its critics leads to specific predictions about the frequency with which the chamber median votes with each party median. If the conditional party government theory is correct that majority party leaders exert asymmetric influence by using their agenda powers to manipulate what alternatives are available to be voted on, then we should find that the chamber median is significantly more likely to join the majority party coalition than the minority party coalition. But if critics are correct that “competing party organizations bidding for pivotal votes roughly counterbalance one another” (Krehbiel (1998, 171), then we should observe no significant difference in the probability of joining the majority or minority party coalition. To be sure, the ideological distance between the chamber median and each of the party medians affects the frequency of voting agreement. Yet, after controlling for the distance between chamber and party medians, the conditional party government theory predicts that there will be a significantly higher probability that the median member will side with the majority party.

Furthermore, the strength of the asymmetric pull should vary depending on the extent to which the conditions associated with the theory of conditional party government are met. Specifically, the probability of voting with the majority party median should increase (decrease) as the homogeneity of majority party preferences increases (decreases).
Data and Methods

To test these hypotheses, we identified the DW-NOMINATE scores of the members at the chamber median and at both party medians for each Congress from the 87th (1961-62) to the 107th (2001-02) (Poole 2000, nd; Poole and Rosenthal 1997). Since more than one member may have a DW-NOMINATE score equal to the relevant median, we identified all possible chamber and party medians.

The dependent variable is the percentage of times the chamber median voted with each party median. For each Congress, we aggregated the results from the individual chamber and party medians to calculate a single voting agreement score measured as the percentage of votes on which the chamber median voted in agreement with the respective party medians. Thus, we have two observations for each of the 21 Congresses (n = 42).

To test for a party effect, we constructed a binary variable scored 1 if the observation is of the majority party median, and 0 if the observation is the minority party median. We use Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression to estimate the effect of this party variable on the probability that the chamber median votes with the majority party median. We expect a significant, positive coefficient for this party variable, indicating the percentage increase in the pull of the median member toward the majority party median. An insignificant coefficient would indicate no systematic asymmetric influence pulling the median member closer to the majority party. To see how robust any party effect is, we include controls for ideological distance between the chamber and party medians, and the effects of majority party homogeneity. In addition, we estimate the model for different types of votes.

The distance between the chamber median and the respective party medians affects which party the median member is most likely to agree with. To control for the effects of ideological distance, we include a variable indicating the absolute difference between the DW-NOMINATE scores of the chamber median
and each party median. The average ideological difference is .29 with a standard deviation of .13. On average, the chamber median is closer to the majority party median (mean = .22) than to the minority party median (mean = .35). This result is not surprising given that the chamber median is much more likely to be a member of the majority party, but a difference of means test indicates that the difference is statistically significant at the .000 level (F =15.6, 41 df). Yet, after controlling for the effects of the ideological distance to the respective party medians, a significant party coefficient would indicate that the majority party exerts an effect beyond the distribution of individual preferences.

The second hypothesis posits that the asymmetric pull of the majority party increases as preferences in the majority party caucus become more homogeneous. We use the standard deviation of DW-NOMINATE scores to measure party homogeneity. A large standard deviation indicates an ideologically diverse party; as the party becomes more homogeneous around some central value, the size of the standard deviation shrinks.

To examine the effect of majority party homogeneity, we include an interaction term consisting of the majority party variable (1 or 0) multiplied by the standard deviation of the majority party DW-NOMINATE score. This measure takes on the value of the standard deviation if the observation is agreement with the majority party median and 0 if the observation is the chamber median’s agreement score with the minority party median. Since larger standard deviations indicate less homogeneous preferences, we expect a negative coefficient. As preferences in the majority party become more diverse, the party’s asymmetric pull declines.

Finally, different types of votes reflect different mixes of partisan pressures. To control for this effect, we estimate the models on three sets of votes: (1) all votes, (2) conflictual votes defined as those with more than 10 percent voting on the losing side, and (3) party votes defined as those on which the majority
party leadership (party leader and whip) is on the opposite side of the issue from the minority party leadership. If the conditional party government theory is correct, then we should observe a significant asymmetric pull of the majority party in the analysis based on all votes, but the strength of the pull should be stronger on conflictual, and strongest on party votes.

**Results**

Table 1 presents results of the analysis estimating the effect of party and ideological distance on the percentage of times the chamber median voted with the respective party medians. The coefficient for the majority party variable indicates the advantage enjoyed by the majority party in attracting the support of the chamber median after controlling for the ideological distance between the chamber and party medians. We noted earlier that the chamber median is generally closer to the majority party median than to the minority. Controlling for the ideological distance holds this advantage constant. Any effect of the majority party variable must be due to something other than closer ideological proximity.

[Table 1 About Here]

As expected, ideological distance between chamber and party medians significantly affects the propensity of the chamber and party medians to vote together. If the ideological distance increases one standard deviation from the mean (.13), the model indicates that the propensity to side with the respective party median declines from 5% to 10% depending on the type of vote.

Most importantly, we find that that even after controlling for ideological proximity, the majority party enjoys an advantage over the minority in attracting support from the chamber median. Furthermore, the majority party advantage varies as expected on different types of votes, ranging from almost 9% on all votes to 10.6% on conflictual votes, to 12.5% on party votes. These results are consistent with expectations of
the conditional party government theory. The majority party appears to exercise asymmetric power, and the advantage is greatest when the party leaders take opposing positions.

Homogeneity of preferences is the key “condition” in the theory of conditional party government. As the preferences of members of the majority party become more homogeneous, the members are likely to increase party leaders’ powers and expect them to use these powers to enact the party’s agenda. Table 2 shows the results with the interaction term (majority party-majority party ideological heterogeneity) added to the model.

[Table 2 About Here]

The addition of the interaction term does not fundamentally alter the findings reported in Table 1: the affect of the majority party variable remains positive and significant. And the condition of party homogeneity has the expected effect on the relationship. That is, the coefficient for the interaction term is negative and statistically significant, indicating that as the majority party becomes more heterogeneous (i.e., less homogeneous), the advantage in attracting support of the chamber median declines.

To illustrate how different levels of heterogeneity of majority party preferences affect the level of agreement between the chamber and majority party medians, Table 3 presents the results estimated at the minimum, mean, and maximum level of majority party heterogeneity. For each type of vote, the likelihood of the chamber median voting with the majority party median is considerably greater when majority party heterogeneity is low than when it is high. The results are particularly striking when we limit the analysis to votes on which the party leadership disagrees. When majority party heterogeneity is at the minimum, the analysis indicates that on the subset of party votes, the chamber median votes with the majority party almost 33% more often than with the minority party. In contrast, when majority party heterogeneity is at its peak,

2 The minimum level of majority party heterogeneity is .14, the maximum is .28, and the mean level is .22.
the majority party enjoys no advantage in attracting the support of the chamber median. Since this analysis controls for the effect of the distance between the medians, these results provide clear and strong support for the theory of conditional party government.

[Table 3 About Here]

**Conclusions**

These findings tend to support those who argue that political parties are a crucial component of a general theory of congressional policymaking. The use of majority rule to make policy decisions appropriately focuses considerable attention on the behavior of the median member of the chamber. The empirical results generated in this analysis demonstrate that the chamber median is significantly more likely to vote with the majority party than with the minority. The tendency to pull the chamber median toward the majority persists even after controlling for the ideological distance between the chamber and party medians. Moreover, the asymmetric pull toward the majority party median increases as the conditional party government theory predicts—that is, when the preferences of majority party members are most homogeneous, the odds that the chamber median agrees with the majority coalition are much greater than when majority preferences are heterogeneous.

The conditional party government theory offers a persuasive explanation for these results. When the ideological preferences of majority party members are homogeneous, the majority party caucus is likely to grant leaders more power to influence the legislative process. Agenda control is among the most important and effective tools available to the majority party leadership. Controlling the policy agenda allows the leadership to limit the alternatives available for consideration. By limiting the policy alternatives, the majority party leadership can induce the chamber median to choose between two alternatives, neither of which
matches the chamber median’s ideal point. Assuming a rational choice, the median member will vote for a majority party alternative that is far away from the median’s ideal point if leaders structure alternatives so that the only other alternative is farther away.

Although we have not directly measured the impact of agenda control on the propensity of the chamber median to coalesce with the majority party, the results produced in this analysis are consistent with such an explanation. Moreover, the use of agenda control to prevent alternatives other than the one preferred by the majority party leadership is especially prevalent in the current Congress where the Republicans hold a very narrow majority. For example, the Republicans recently prevented Democrats from offering an amendment that would extend a tax credit to low income families out of fear that the proposal might attract the support of moderate Republicans (VandeHei and Eilperin 2003).
References


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<th>All Votes</th>
<th>Conflicting Votes</th>
<th>Party Votes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ideological Distance</td>
<td>-43.381*** (8.818)</td>
<td>-63.739*** (11.416)</td>
<td>-74.091*** (17.389)</td>
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<td>Majority Party</td>
<td>8.983*** (2.289)</td>
<td>10.572*** (2.964)</td>
<td>12.54** (4.515)</td>
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<td>Constant</td>
<td>-43.381*** (3.415)</td>
<td>71.85*** (4.421)</td>
<td>69.95*** (6.733)</td>
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<td>R²</td>
<td>0.682</td>
<td>0.699</td>
<td>0.578</td>
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*Entries are OLS regression coefficients; standard errors in parentheses. Dependent Variable is the percentage of times the chamber median voted with the party median. Majority party is a binary variable coded 1 if the observation is of the majority party. Ideological distance is the absolute difference between the chamber median and the party median.*
Table 2
The Effects of the Interaction of Majority Party and Majority Party Heterogeneity on the Percentage of Times the Chamber Median Votes with the Party Medians*

<table>
<thead>
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<th>All Votes</th>
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<th>Party Votes</th>
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<td>(13.357)</td>
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<td>28.442***</td>
<td>47.096***</td>
<td>68.873***</td>
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<td>(6.688)</td>
<td>(7.389)</td>
<td>(11.153)</td>
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<td>-164.828***</td>
<td>-254.224***</td>
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<td>(3.101)</td>
<td>(3.426)</td>
<td>(5.171)</td>
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<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.745</td>
<td>0.824</td>
<td>0.758</td>
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*Entries are OLS regression coefficients; standard errors in parentheses. Dependent Variable is the percentage of times the chamber median voted with the party median. Majority party is a binary variable coded 1 if the observation is of the majority party. Ideological distance is the absolute difference between the chamber median and the party median. Majority party heterogeneity is the standard deviation of members’ DW-NOMINATE Scores.

Table 3
Effects of Majority Party Heterogeneity on Propensity of Chamber Median to Vote with Majority Party Median*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MAJORITY PARTY HETEROGENEITY</th>
<th>MINIMUM</th>
<th>MEAN</th>
<th>MAXIMUM</th>
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<td>ALL VOTES</td>
<td>+16.15</td>
<td>+9.12</td>
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<td>+24.02</td>
<td>+10.83</td>
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<td>PARTY VOTES</td>
<td>+33.28</td>
<td>+12.94</td>
<td>-2.31</td>
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*Entries are the effects of the interaction of majority party and majority party heterogeneity at minimum, mean, and maximum values estimated from the values in Table 2.