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What is This?

Strategic Party Government and the 2010 Elections

Gregory Koger[1] and Matthew J. Lebo[2]

Abstract

This article applies the strategic parties framework to the 111th Congress and 2010 election results that followed. In 2009-2010, the Democrats pursued an ambitious agenda over the nearly unanimous opposition of Congressional Republicans, leading to a high level of partisanship on both sides. This partisanship was costly in the 2010 elections. Like other papers on this election, we find some evidence that key roll calls were linked to decreased electoral vote share. However, the clearer pattern is that overall patterns of partisanship had a consistent detrimental effect on incumbents running for reelection.

Keywords

Congress, Congressional elections, financial regulation, health care, legislative party

In the 2010 elections for the U.S. House of Representatives, the Republicans gained 63 seats and regained majority control of the chamber. At first glance, the Democrats' loss is easy to explain: They were the President's party in a midterm election with a weak economy. However, the Democrats had amassed a record of legislative achievements to respond to the economic

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crisis and the 2008 electoral mandate for "change." The impact of those achievements as Democrats ran for reelection remains unclear.

This article uses recent research on the electoral goals of legislative parties (e.g., Cox & McCubbins, 2005; Lebo, McGlynn, & Koger, 2007; Patty, 2008) to explain these results. We provide a *joint* explanation for the legislative partisanship of House members and the effects of this behavior on the 2010 election. Compared with other recent works on the 2010 election (Brady, Fiorina, & Wilkins, 2011; Jacobson, 2011), we link legislators' voting records to models of legislative partisanship, and we treat voting records as endogenous. That is, we expect that legislators consider their electoral vulnerability when casting roll call votes and control for this behavior when we analyze the relationship between legislative voting and election outcomes. We also examine both the influence of individual roll call votes, such as on health care and financial reform, and the impact of general patterns of partisanship on all votes, key votes, and Presidential priorities.

We find that legislators engaged in a high-stakes partisan struggle during the 111th Congress, with Democrats investing maximum effort to enact their agenda and Republicans risking their fortunes on a strategy of maximum opposition. Legislators paid an electoral price for their party loyalty: Controlling for constituent partisanship and other factors, a 10% increase in party unity was correlated with a 3% decrease in incumbents' reelection vote share. Of course, legislators are not naïve about the costs of being a "team player." We also find that legislators conditioned their party loyalty on their constituents' preferences and that members of both parties were apparently rewarded with spending projects for supporting Democratic positions.

The next two sections review the literature on Congressional parties and elections, emphasizing the need for a model that explains how legislative parties strategize to win elections and how these strategies affect electoral outcomes. We subsequently test the predictions of the strategic party government model for patterns of legislative partisanship and then test the relationship between party unity and the 2010 election results.

Legislative Parties and Congressional Elections

For more than a century, legislative scholars have marveled at the varying role of Congressional parties compared with their European counterparts (Wilson, 1885).[1] The strength of Congressional parties varies over time from extremely polarized to a minimal "caretaker" role (Cooper & Brady, 1981; Theriault, 2008) and also varies across issues within a period of time (Froman & Ripley, 1965). The dominant explanation for the variation in

party influence is the *conditional party government* (CPG) framework, which holds that parties will be influential if two conditions are met: there is general agreement on key policy issues within each party and there is general disagreement between the two major parties (Aldrich, 1995; Aldrich & Rohde, 2001; Rohde, 1991). Under these conditions, the policy gains from working as a team are high (due to the interparty differences) and the costs of cooperation are relatively low (due to the intraparty agreement).

Though the CPG model is compelling and useful, it has been criticized for failing to explain why parties need to "influence" a homogenous membership (Krehbiel, 1999). In addition, the CPG framework focuses on legislators' interest in changing policy and emphasizes the role of party leaders in influencing policy outcomes. However, over the past thirty years there has been a dramatic increase in the role of Congressional parties in public relations and electoral competition (Sinclair, 1995), so we need a theory that explains this behavior. Cox and McCubbins (2005) start with the assumption that legislative parties are primarily interested in winning elections but focus their theory and empirical testing on the ability of party leaders to keep proposals that divide the majority party off the chamber agenda. Additional research is required to explain how election-driven parties set the agenda and mobilize their legislators.

While most research on legislative parties has lacked an explicit account of the electoral role of parties, research on Congressional elections has often lacked a legislative component. Early work on aggregated Congressional elections has emphasized the economic or structural component of aggregate outcomes, such as the state of the economy and the effects of Presidential coattails and midterm losses for the President's party (e.g., Tufte, 1975). Other scholars have explored the role of legislative behavior but have focused on the role of legislators' *ideology* (being too liberal or conservative) on election outcomes (e.g., Canes-Wrone, Brady, & Cogan, 2002; Erikson, 1971). This invites the question, why would legislators who want to be reelected repeatedly vote in a manner that jeopardizes their jobs? To answer this question, we need to fuse an account of electoral outcomes with a complementary theory of legislative behavior.

In an effort to combine institutional and electoral research on Congressional partisanship, two recent articles propose a "strategic party government" (SPG) model of election-oriented parties (Carson, Koger, Lebo, & Young, 2010; Lebo et al., 2007). The SPG model assumes that parties compete to maximize their share of the legislative chamber. To do so, the members of the majority (minority) balance the electoral benefits of organizing the chamber and passing (defeating) legislation with the *costs* of party influence—particularly the electoral costs accrued by individual legislators as they vote for

(oppose) the passage of majority party agenda items, perhaps against the preferences of their constituents. Lebo et al. (2007) analyze patterns of aggregate partisanship and electoral results since 1789 and find that parties choose their optimal level of party influence to balance the efforts of the opposing party, so the unity of the two parties are seemingly tethered to each other over time. Carson et al. (2010) test the claim that House members (1956-2004) pay an electoral price for their party unity and find that higher party unity does decrease vote share, while ideology is *not* directly linked to election results.

The SPG framework generates a number of hypotheses regarding legislative behavior, campaigning, and elections. This article extends the Carson et al. (2010) analysis by testing whether party unity was costly for legislators in the 2010 election, particularly by comparing the effects of party unity scores to Presidential support, specific roll call votes, and party unity on a few key roll call votes. In addition, we test SPG's predictions regarding variation in partisanship across legislators and votes within the 111th Congress and discuss the Democratic policy agenda for 111th Congress.

Strategic Party Government and the 111th Congress

Just as David Mayhew (1974) started with the simple assumption that legislators seek to get reelected and then sought to explain as much as possible about their behavior, we start with the assumption that the foremost goal of each Congressional party is to win elections. This includes as subgoals the reelection of current officeholders, attaining (or retaining) majority status, and expanding its share of the chamber's seats. In addition, like duopolistic firms, parties make their choices as a best response to a peer competitor.

The majority party may have an interest in enacting policy, but this is primarily as a means of enhancing its collective reputation, maintaining the party coalition, or providing party members with benefits that promote their individual reelection. While it is logically possible that the collective interests of the majority party coincide with the interests and preferences of every majority party legislator, in practice the political diversity of Congressional districts makes it unlikely that there will be uniform support within the majority party for its major initiatives. Nonetheless, majority party leaders may schedule legislation that is opposed by a significant segment of the party but in the collective interest of the party membership, and so intraparty homogeneity is not a necessary condition for party influence; indeed, intraparty *dis* agreement is often the reason why party leaders invest effort and resources in a legislative battle.

In addition, the minority party may oppose legislation proposed by the majority *even if minority party members prefer the majority's proposal to the status quo*, that is, interparty differences on policy are not a necessary condition for partisan behavior. The minority party has two incentives to do so. First, its leadership may wish to draw a clear distinction between the two parties on major issues by minimizing the number of minority party members supporting the majority party's position. Second, on votes on which the majority party lacks enough easy votes to win, the minority party can gain electorally by making the majority party "buy" as many votes as possible from its own membership. This increases the number of majority party incumbents who pay an electoral cost in the next election for voting with their party. For the minority party to gain from this strategy, however, it must induce its own conflicted members to vote against the majority party's proposal. This strategy only benefit the minority party if the costs paid by conflicted majority party members exceed those paid by conflicted minority party members.

The Democratic Agenda for the 111th Congress

Although it would be difficult to prove,[2] we assume that the Democratic leaders selected the legislative agenda that, *according to their expectations*, would maximize their electoral interests. Just as individual members must balance the views of subgroups of their constituents (Arnold, 1990), party leaders weigh the effects of each bill on their party base, allied interest groups, donors, and the general public.

After the Democrats made large gains in the House and Senate in 2006 and 2008, then won the White House in 2008 based on the promise of "change you can believe in," they believed they had earned a mandate for ambitious policy proposals. This mandate was both amplified and complicated by a breakdown in the financial system in 2008 and a sharp downturn in the U.S. economy. The main Democratic agenda consisted of (a) a US$787 billion economic stimulus bill that both increased federal spending to ameliorate the economic crisis and funded key Obama initiatives like "green jobs" and school reform; (b) a major overhaul of the health care system; (c) a bill to prevent climate change by instituting a cap-and-trade system for carbon emissions; (d) reform of the nation's financial regulation system; (e) comprehensive immigration reform, including a provision for undocumented aliens to become citizens (Koger, 2009). Of these initiatives, the stimulus bill, health care reform, and financial reform became law. The House passed

climate change legislation but the Senate did not act on the issue and neither chamber tackled immigration reform.

The House Democrats moved early on their agenda. The stimulus bill, of course, was intended to be a swift response to the economic downturn and was enacted in February 2009. After that, House Democrats passed climate change (June 2009), health care (November 2009), and financial regulation (December 2009). During 2010, the House worked on completing health care and financial regulation bills, a few second-tier bills, and small-scale economic relief measures. The Democrats did not even attempt to pass appropriations bills.

The Congressional Republicans' general response to this agenda was solid opposition. Nearly zero Republicans in either chamber voted for any of the Democrats' primary agenda items. This was a strategic choice by the Republicans; although the Democratic leadership sought their cooperation in shaping these bills, Republicans believed their electoral interests were better served by avoiding any responsibility for these bills and criticizing them as dramatic increases in the scope and cost of government. The Republican strategy was amplified by the emergence of a small government "Tea Party" conservative movement, which threatened and challenged incumbents and establishment candidates in Republican primary elections.

The Republican strategy forced the Democrats to muster majorities from their own members to pass their bills and to take full public responsibility for their agenda. For Democrats from swing districts, some of these critical votes gave their challengers fodder for critical campaign ads. Indeed, passing major legislation posed a collective action dilemma for Democratic leaders—the party's reputation and base of support would improve if their agenda succeeded, but at the margins, individual legislators would suffer increased electoral risks to help provide this collective good.

Reducing and Allocating the Electoral Costs of Party Unity

We expect that the House leadership uses two strategies to ameliorate the costs of party loyalty. First, party unity should be allocated across members on the basis of their electoral vulnerability; the more likely it is that a vote will cost a MC her seat, the less likely the majority party is to ask for her support for a party initiative. We use the vote share of the MC's 2008 Presidential candidate in her district (i.e., McCain's share for Republican MCs, Obama's share for Democrats) as a measure of general election vulnerability, so our hypothesis is as follows:

Hypothesis 1: The higher the Presidential vote in a MC's district, the greater her party unity score.

We also expect that majority party leaders will attempt to reduce the number of costly votes as elections draw near. This is based on the expectation that roll call votes attain greater electoral significance as elections approach, perhaps because challengers emerge to draw attention to roll calls that deviate from district preferences. Following Vander Weilen et al. (2011), we expect to observe two patterns: a decreasing number of party votes over the course of a Congress and decreasing party loyalty on those votes.

Hypothesis 2: The shorter the duration to the next election, the lower the likelihood that a roll call vote will be a party vote.

Hypothesis 3: As the duration to the next election decreases, average party unity will decrease.

Finally, following Carson et al. (2010), we expect that higher party unity will have negative consequences in subsequent elections.

Hypothesis 4: As a legislator's party unity increases, his or her electoral vote share decreases.

Without restating each of these as separate hypotheses, we compare our results for overall party unity with the effects of Presidential support, party unity on key votes, and individual roll call votes.

Legislative Partisanship in the 111th Congress

Which legislators contribute the most to maintaining (or opposing) the majority party's domination of the House floor and passage of the majority party agenda? Our claim is conventional: the cost of maintaining the party reputation will be borne by those who are best able to pay it, that is, legislators whose districts share their partisan outlook, while legislators from districts that are marginal or lean to the opposing party will enjoy greater latitude to defect from the party position. Our results not only confirm this expectation but also suggest a strong role for intraparty caucuses and distributive benefits as predictors of legislative partisanship. We also find that party loyalty varies over time in response to the overall fortunes of the two parties and the vulnerability of the incumbent.
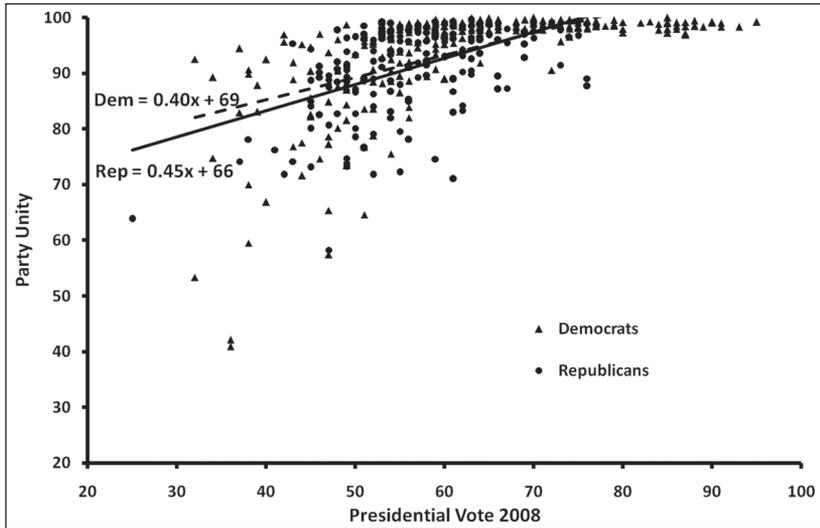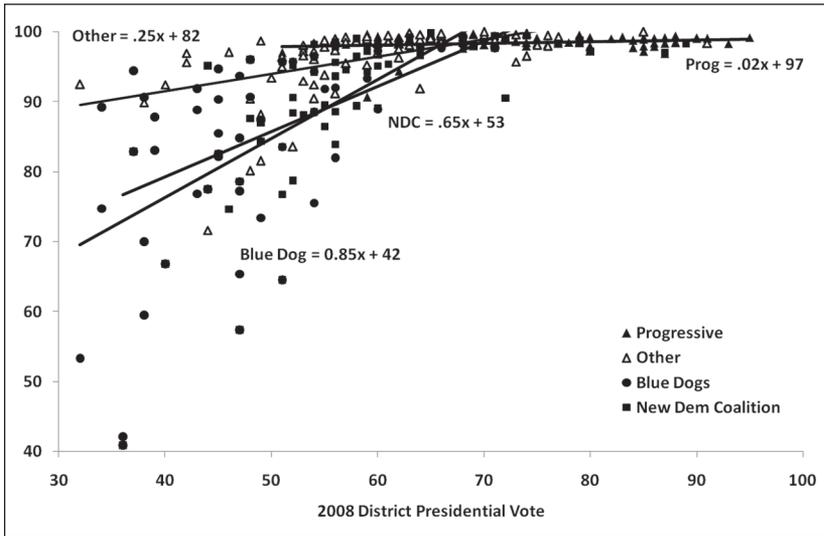
Figure 1. Constituency partisanship and party unity, 111th Congress
Note: The data on party unity are from voteview.com; the data on presidential vote are from swingstateproject.com.

We use the conventional definition of party unity: The percentage of party votes on which a legislator sided with his or her party's position. A "party vote" is a roll call that pits most of one party against most of the opposing party. Figure 1 depicts the general relationship between party unity (the vertical axis) and constituency preferences, characterized as the percentage of the 2008 presidential vote in each district for the candidate of the incumbent's party. As shown, members of both parties begin with a high baseline of party unity (69% for Democrats, 66% for Republicans) and then increase at a steady rate for each percentage of Presidential vote.

There are significant subgroups within each party. Figure 2 illustrates the constituency–party unity relationship for House Democrats with separate markings for members of the moderate Blue Dog Caucus (circles), Progressive Caucus (black triangles), moderate New Democratic Coalition (NDC; squares), and nonaffiliated Democrats (empty triangles). Whereas Progressives voted consistently with their party regardless of constituency, Blue Dogs and NDC members exhibited a higher rate of responsiveness to district partisanship.

We observe a similar pattern among Republicans, who were subdivided into members of the conservative Republican Study Committee (RSC) and

Figure 2. Partisanship and constituency for House Democratic subgroups
Source: Blue Dog membership, voteview.com; Progressive caucus membership, http://cpc
.grijalva.house.gov; and NDC membership, http://ndc.crowley.house.gov.
Note: Trend lines are based on a bivariate regression.

the moderate Republican Main Street Partnership (RMSP). As Figure 3 shows, RSC members (circles)—like their Progressive counterparts—exhibit a high level of partisanship that does not vary significantly, even for RSC members from marginal districts. RMSP members (triangles) and unaffiliated Republicans (empty diamonds), however, vary significantly from a baseline of 59% unity based on their district partisanship. Thus for both Democrats and Republicans, party loyalty is partially constrained by district preferences, but legislators also have some autonomy as they balance their constituents' interests with their personal views and party's goals.

As a preliminary to the electoral analysis below, we confirmed these findings by regressing (with robust standard errors) party unity on Presidential vote, caucus membership, and an indicator variable for whether a member was a Democrat. We also included the number of Fiscal Year 2010 pork projects ($M = 20.4$; $SD = 14.9$) which Citizens Against Government Waste attributed to each member[3] to determine whether party leaders were using appropriations projects to "buy" votes. We found no clear distinction between parties once other factors were considered, while party unity clearly decreased for members of the Blue Dog (–8.7%), NDC (–2.3%), Progressive (–2.3%), and Republican Main Street Partnership (–3.8%) and increased for RSC
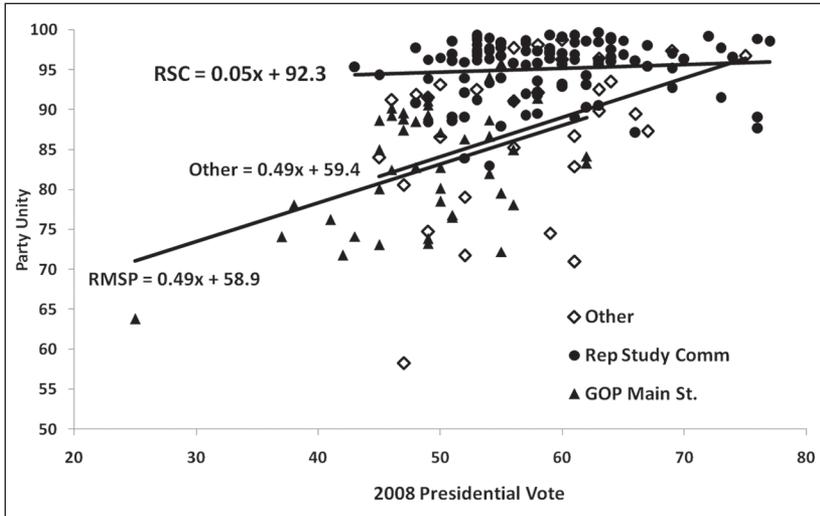
**Figure 3.** Partisanship and constituency for House Republican subgroups
Source: RSC, http://rsc.tomprice.house.gov; Republican Main Street Partnership, http://www.republicanmainstreet.org/.
Note: Trend lines are based on a bivariate regression.

members (5.6%). As predicted, there was a clear relationship between constituency partisanship and Congressional party unity: A 1% increase in Presidential vote was correlated with a .28% increase in party unity.[4]

We also found that the number of pork projects was correlated with a pro-Democratic bias among both Republicans and Democrats. Among Democrats, an increase from zero projects to the mean of 20 projects was correlated with a 2% increase in party unity. Among Republicans, a similar increase by 20 projects was correlated with a 3.4% decrease in party unity, that is, a shift toward voting with the Democratic majority. Obviously, these results do not allow us to identify the mechanism at work. Perhaps these were explicit vote trades, post hoc rewards for allies in both parties, or a more benign explanation. We simply stress that this pattern is present and suggests some deliberate mechanism.

Finally, we expect that party unity will decrease over time, as stated in Hypothesis 3. We find that this claim is true in the aggregate for the Democrats but not the Republicans: Average party unity among Democrats decreased from 94.2% in 2009 to 93.0% in 2010, whereas mean Republican unity *increased* from 90.3% to 93.9% in 2010. However, these statistics obscure significant variation in party unity among members of each party. Figure 4
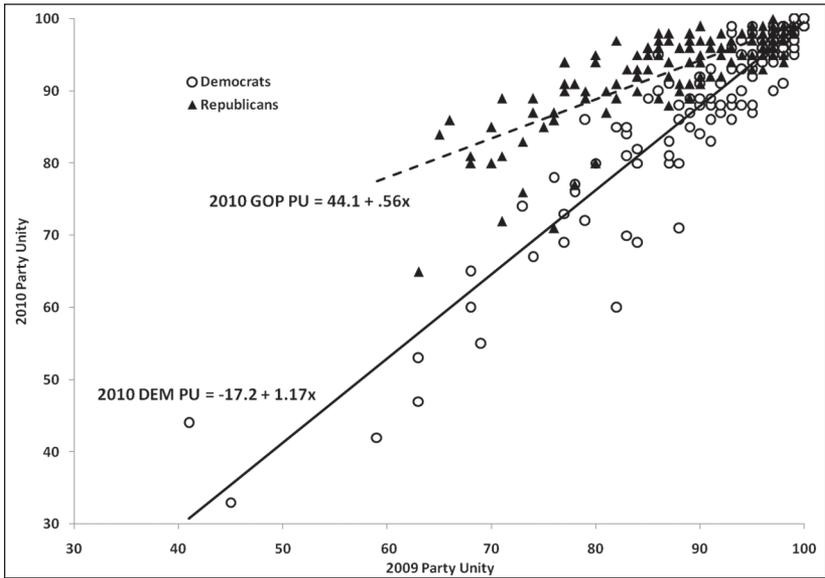
Figure 4. Party unity by member and party, 2009 and 2010
[a]Endogenous variable. Instruments used: membership in the Blue Dog Caucus, Republican Policy Committee, and Progressive Caucus.

plots the 2009 party unity (*x*-axis) and 2010 party unity (*y*-axis) for Democrats (circles) and Republicans (triangles), with a simple slope and intercept equation for each party.

For the Republicans, the increase in Republican party unity was (perhaps out of mathematical necessity) concentrated among members with less than 90% party unity in 2009, many of whom increased their voting loyalty by 10 to 20%. Obviously, Republicans who had loyalty scores above 90% in 2009 could not increase as much. House Democrats, however, saw a decrease in party unity that was concentrated among the most vulnerable members, as the estimated slope indicates. Much of this decline was among Democrats whose districts gave 60% or less of the 2008 presidential vote to Barack Obama. The divergence in party unity between the two parties suggests that as the 2010 elections neared, the Republicans became increasingly optimistic about their collective prospects. For Republicans, party unity served to intensify the distinction between the two parties so they could better benefit from their brand advantage. Furthermore, Republicans sought to hurt the reputation of the Democrats by making the passage of legislation as difficult as possible. For

Democrats, however, as it became increasingly clear that the Democratic brand would be a disadvantage in the 2010 elections, members in swing districts defected from their party more often with members from sure Democratic districts picking up some of the slack.

Party Loyalty and the 2010 Elections

What was the effect of party loyalty in the 2010 elections? In this section, we test the claim that legislators paid an electoral price for cooperating with their parties. To be sure, we do not expect that legislators lost vote share for *every* vote they cast in agreement with most of their party. Presumably, legislators affiliate with parties they generally agree with, and they are elected by voters who are comfortable with their party label. Thus legislators should often find their personal, partisan, and constituency interests aligned. In practice, however, the House majority party must manufacture floor majorities for legislation that is vital to its collective reputation; this was true for the four Democratic agenda proposals passed in 2009.[5] Behind these major votes are dozens of votes to fend off amendments and maintain majority domination of the floor agenda. At the margin, therefore, we expect that higher rates of party unity *across all votes* will be associated with a lower share of the vote. In the 2010 elections, for example, the National Republican Congressional Committee ran attack ads against incumbent Democrats for "voting with Pelosi" (actually party unity scores).

In addition to testing for the cost of party unity across all party votes, we compare overall party unity to subsets of salient roll calls: party unity on all Congressional Quarterly "key votes" that were party votes, and Presidential support scores calculated by Congressional Quarterly on a subset of roll calls on which President Obama took a public position. Like Brady et al. (2011) and Jacobson (2011), we also test the influence of highly salient votes on Democratic agenda items—health care, financial regulation, cap and trade, and the stimulus bill. We find that legislators' overall party unity score is the best "vote score" predictor of election results and that both overall partisanship and specific key votes help explain the costs of partisanship in the 2010 election.

Method and variables. Like Carson et al. (2010), we use two-stage least squares to analyze the relationship between partisan voting and election results.[6] This method develops a proxy version of an endogenous variable using instruments that are correlated with the endogenous variable but not the dependent variable; we use membership in the Blue Dog, Progressive, and RSC caucuses as instrumental variables.[7] In practical terms, if one thinks that

legislators from vulnerable seats consider their electoral danger when making voting decisions, then one must use a statistical technique that controls for this anticipation; otherwise the true effect of the predictor will be understated.

Thus, we estimate these two equations:

Party Unity = β_9 + β_{10}(Blue Dog) + β_{11}(Progressive) + β_{12}(RSC) + [all 2nd-stage variables] + ξ

Incumbent Vote Share = β_0 + β_1($\widehat{Party\ Unity}$) + β_2(Democrat) + β_3(2008 Presidential vote) + β_4(Pork Projects) + β_5(Dem. Pork Projects) + β_5(Spending Gap) + β_6(Freshman) + β_7(New Democratic Coalition) + β_8(GOP Main Street) + ε

Freshman is a control variable coded "1" for 1st term members. *Spending Gap* is the natural logarithm of challenger expenditures minus the natural logarithm of incumbent expenditures (see Carson et al., 2010; data from the Federal Election Commission). The NDC and GOP Main Street members are included in the second stage because preliminary regressions (and Sargan statistical tests) suggested that membership in these caucuses was correlated with both party unity and electoral vote share. We estimate variations of this model substituting party unity on Congressional Quarterly key votes and Presidential support; we calculate the latter variable separately for each party.[8]

Results. As the results of the first stage mirror those of the previous section, we focus here on the second stage results, shown in Table 1.[9] The main story is that, controlling for other factors, there is a significant penalty for party loyalty, even when controlling for other factors: A 1% increase in party unity was correlated with a .3% decrease in vote share. For the dozens of Democrats who garnered 45% to 49.9% of the 2010 vote share, this is a noticeable difference, and one within their control. This effect diminishes if we focus on key votes (column 2) with a lower R^2, suggesting the result is *not* driven by a few key votes. Presidential support also cost Democrats while Republicans may have *gained* vote share for moderating their opposition to President Obama.[10]

The coefficients for *2008 Presidential Vote*, *Spending Gap,* and *Freshman* have the long-demonstrated effects, whereas the sizeable coefficient for *Democrat* reflects the overall disadvantage the Democrats faced as the President's majority party in a midterm election with a poor economy. Interestingly, pork projects were correlated with party unity (implying that they were a reward or enticement of some sort), yet it did not have a direct relationship with electoral vote share.

Table 1. 2SLS Analysis of 2010 House Incumbent Voteshare

Voteshare	Party unity (all)	CQ key vote unity	Presidential support (GOP)	Presidential support (Dems)
Party Unity[a]	−0.301 (0.104)**			
CQ Key Vote Unity[a]		−0.199 (0.073)**		
Presidential support[a]			0.556 (0.326)#	−0.243 (0.111)*
Democrat	−14.848 (1.342)***	−16.113 (1.636)***		
2008 Presidential vote	0.877 (0.052)***	0.899 (0.060)***	0.949 (0.144)***	0.849 (0.048)***
Pork projects (FY 2010)	−0.028 (0.039)	0.012 (0.033)	−0.059 (0.068)	0.039 (0.027)
Democratic pork projects	0.078 (0.055)	0.036 (0.047)		
Spending gap	−0.196 (0.031)***	−0.192 (0.031)***	−0.214 (0.050)***	−0.149 (0.043)***
Freshman	−3.747 (0.951)***	−3.727 (0.936)***	−4.185 (1.907)*	−3.289 (0.982)***
New Democratic coalition	−2.220 (0.972)*	−1.113 (0.960)		−1.651 (0.785)*
GOP main street	−1.259 (1.344)	−0.522 (1.236)	−4.671 (3.514)	
Constant	47.037 (8.023)	35.680 (4.496)***	1.084 (14.680)	27.569 (7.759)***
N	389	389	155	234
Centered R^2	.777	.528	.521	.404
R^2 of excluded instruments	.207	.173	.078	.181

[a]Endogenous variable. Instruments used: membership in the Blue Dog Caucus, Republican Policy Committee, and Progressive Caucus.
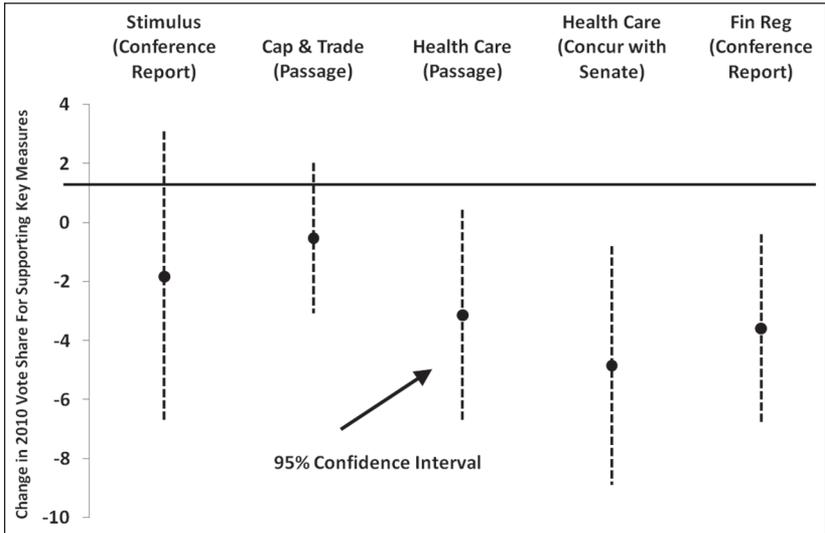
Figure 5. Effects of key votes on reelection vote share

Next, we wanted to test the intuition that, in addition to a general pattern of party loyalty, legislators paid an extra penalty for helping the Democrats to pass major agenda items. Compared with similar work (Brady et al., 2011; Jacobson, 2011), we provide a more nuanced test of the effect of these votes by controlling for the electoral effects of each legislator's overall pattern of party loyalty. We focused on five key votes: the conference report on the stimulus bill (February 13, 2009), final passage of the bill to "cap and trade" carbon emissions (June 26, 2009), final passage of health care reform (November 7, 2009), concurring with the Senate's health care reform proposal (March 21, 2010), and the conference report for revising the financial regulation system (June 30, 2010). We recalculated the 2SLS model with each vote as an additional second-stage variable.[11]

Figure 5 presents the key parameters: the effect of each vote on reelection, controlling for overall party unity and other variables. With the exception of the vote to concur with the Senate health care bill, the effect of party unity was robust ($p < .05$ in each analysis) in each model. Figure 5 provides the estimated effect of each vote (the large dots) with a 95% confidence interval (the dotted lines). It offers three interesting findings. First, the stimulus and cap and trade bills did not have a clear *additional* cost above the general pattern of partisanship exhibited by each member. Second, the final passage vote on the health care bill has a substantively significant (–3.1%) effect but is only significant at the ($p < .1$) level, which implies that the effect of this vote

could vary significantly across members. However, the effect of the vote to concur with the Senate's health care bill in March 2010 was stronger (–4.8%) and statistically significant, suggesting that this particular vote was especially costly. Third, the vote on financial reform appears to have cost around –3.6% in vote share on average, and this effect achieves conventional levels of statistical significance. Although these are obviously different policy proposals with distinct political circumstances, it is noteworthy that the political costs seem to increase with proximity to Election Day.

Discussion

Whether we measure partisan loyalty in terms of overall party unity, subsets of key votes, support for President Obama, or individual roll call votes, the central finding is that members of both parties paid a price for their partisanship. At the margins, this helps explain why some Democrats survived the 2010 elections while others paid a price for helping their party to pass its ambitious agenda.

This finding leads to two possible interpretations. One interpretation is that the Democrats would have been better off as individuals if they had more latitude to break with their party. Although a more bipartisan approach might have helped some incumbents, it is important to put the Democrats' partisanship in context. The Republicans' decision to present a united front against the Democratic agenda—both in terms of votes and public criticism—made it difficult for the Democrats to pass any legislation—liberal, moderate, or conservative—without appearing to be partisan.

Alternatively, the implication is that the Democratic majority managed to enact a significant set of legislation without gaining a great deal of political benefit. As Brady et al. (2011) stress, the Democrats did especially poorly in historical terms even controlling for being the in-party and the state of the economy. It seems that the Democratic agenda did not provide the short-term political credit or economic recovery necessary to retain their majority in the U.S. House. However, we cannot know whether a less ambitious policy agenda would have been a safer electoral strategy, as Democrats and liberal activists would have likely been severely disappointed by a failure to seek meaningful policy change. Our results do suggest that perhaps the same agenda, pursued more quickly, at a greater distance from the 2010 elections, may have reduced the electoral consequences. In the long-term, Democrats can hope that the policy successes of the 111th Congress will yield political dividends, especially if public support for the Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010 increases over time.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. This section is truncated due to the space constraints of the special issue. There is a voluminous literature on both legislative parties and Congressional elections, and this section omits many valuable contributions while providing only a simple description of the cited works. For more thorough reviews of the literature on Congressional parties, see Aldrich (1995), Lebo et al. (2007), Smith (2007), and Theriault (2008). For more thorough reviews of research on Congressional elections, see Canes-Wrone et al. (2002) and Carson et al. (2010).

2. Prior research has identified patterns of legislative agenda-setting and found evidence of a partisan tilt, for example, Cox and McCubbins (2005). For this section, however, the best test would be to compare the actual Democratic agenda with a series of counterfactual agendas to determine whether the Democratic leaders could have chosen a better agenda *and* that they should have known that a better agenda was possible.

3. From http://www.cagw.org/. For projects with multiple sponsors, each sponsor received full credit. The 111th Congress did not enact appropriations bills for FY 2012, so the only projects approved were enacted in FY 2011. The mean and standard deviation for Republicans were 15.8 and 15.3, respectively. For Democrats, the mean was 23.6 projects with a standard deviation of 13.8.

4. Full Results: Party Unity = 75.17(2.66) + 1.82(1.78) * Democrat + .28(.04) * 2008 Presidential Vote – 8.74(1.72) * Blue Dog – 2.26(1.22) * New Democrat Coalition – 1.59(0.77) * Progressive + 5.63 Rep. Study Committee – 3.84(1.40) * GOP Main Street – .17(.03) * Pork Projects + .27(.04) * Democratic Pork Projects + ε. N = 437, R^2 = .536. Tobit results using an upper bound of 100% were virtually identical; we use ordinary least squares (OLS) because the results are easier to interpret.

5. In theory, a majority party could limit the agenda to proposals that promote the party's reputation and the individual preferences of every party member, or of enough members to form a winning coalition. In practice, parties often bring up legislation that lacks the unconditional support of a winning coalition. Sometimes, this occurs when a party must address a national problem with no easy solutions and lots of political losers, for example, balancing the federal budget or regulating the financial system. However, even when a party is committed

to a general goal, for example, the Democratic consensus to reform the health care system, it can be difficult for a party to develop a proposal that satisfies the diverse views within a party, so there can be political risk for individual members who support the resulting compromise.

6. Specifically, we use the ivreg2 procedure in STATA 11.2.

7. Carson et al. use DW-NOMINATE scores as an instrument in the first stage. Although this approach satisfies the statistical conditions for an instrument, we sought an instrument that was not based on roll call votes, in this case caucus membership. We also estimated our equations using DW-NOMINATE 1st dimension scores and caucus membership as instruments. We found that using DW-NOMINATE made a slight improvement in the R^2 of the instruments but no substantive change in our findings. Here we report our findings using just the caucus memberships.

8. Unlike Jacobson (2011), we do not include prior vote share as an independent variable; a lag term would almost certainly be correlated with contemporary explanatory variables (e.g., voting patterns) and therefore increase the risk of misinterpretation.

9. A Sargan test of each model suggests that our instruments are not overidentified.

10. For the Presidential support results, the R^2 of the excluded instruments is a bit low for the Republicans. In a separate result, we recalculated this equation adding pork projects as an instrument. This increased the R^2 without raising endogeneity problems. The results for other variables in both stages were essentially the same. Here, we display the initial results to maintain consistency across models and to demonstrate that pork projects are not directly related to electoral success.

11. This is an imperfect approach. Like overall party unity, we would expect these votes to be endogenous; vulnerable members avoid voting for controversial measures. Full results for this analysis are available in the online appendix.

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Bio

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