Strategic Partisanship:
Party Priorities, Agenda Control and the Decline of Bipartisan Cooperation in the House

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1. Book Overview

> With both parties becoming more homogeneous and less diverse, the nation's political leaders have been freed to take harder positions, draw sharper lines and forsake the time-honored tradition of reaching across party lines to find common cause with the other side (Westphal 2004).

This quote captures three key aspects of the conventional wisdom of rising partisanship in Congress – that members have been become increasingly polarized into two separate and non-overlapping ideological camps, that bipartisan cooperation has fallen as a result, and that these changes work against normatively desired and time-honored efforts to find common ground in the legislative process. Those most critical of partisanship have gone even further, arguing that it produces gridlock, a lack of policy innovation, and a lack of responsiveness on any level.

My book argues that this portrayal of congressional politics is incomplete, and in some respects, inaccurate. Importantly, the research in this book demonstrates that bipartisan agreement at earlier stages of the legislative process remains relatively unchanged since the early 1970s. Moreover, strategic agenda setting balances partisan goals and governing demands, resulting in varying attention to bipartisan legislation but a continual pursuit of policy innovation, with gridlock being the exception rather than the norm. Finally, I argue that despite declining representation on vote-based measures, representation and responsiveness by members to constituent interests has increased in their behavior at earlier stages of the legislative process. Thus, my results dramatically differ from much of the presumed wisdom concerning elite polarization and partisan conflict.

The persistence of bipartisanship at this earlier stage – measured by cosponsorship coalitions – relative to declining bipartisanship in House voting patterns provides two important insights that are often overlooked in accounts of polarization. First, the relatively stable patterns of bipartisan agreement in bill cosponsorship coalitions provide a puzzle for accounts of

congressional partisanship that focus on ideological differences between members and the resulting lack of substantive agreement between the two sides. If members are truly so far apart that Democrats and Republican cannot agree on legislation, bipartisanship in cosponsorship coalitions should have declined as well. Second, differences in the patterns of bipartisan agreement in roll call voting and in bill cosponsorship coalitions suggest that we ought to seriously consider the intermediate steps of agenda setting that move us from the introduction of bills to floor voting on bills. More broadly, the accounts of congressional partisanship which focus on ideology often fail to explicitly consider the joint roles played by member preferences and party strategy (e.g., McCarty et al. 2006). Similarly, literature on party influence suggests that parties have important indirect power (e.g., Smith 2007), but little work systematically examines these effects in relation to rising partisanship on the floor relative to other stages of policy-making. This book takes on part of that task, focusing on how party strategy contributes to floor partisanship.

I argue that parties engage in strategic partisan agenda setting, which I define as balancing the pursuit of partisan legislative objectives with bipartisan legislation to achieve policy success when partisanship is too costly. Although party leaders often want to pursue partisan policy objectives, they are constrained by their membership (in terms of their electoral interests) and by institutional features such as divided government or the size of the majority party (in terms of the ability to pass legislation). When the electoral coalitions of parties are poorly sorted, majority parties are forced to put bipartisan issues on the agenda. As parties sort, partisan issues become feasible. Since partisan issues also help members build their party brand and differentiate their side from the opposing side, partisan agenda setting has become increasingly possible and profitable.

I test this argument empirically, drawing on bill cosponsorship coalitions as a pre-agenda measure of bipartisan agreement and roll call votes as a post-agenda measure of agreement. Cosponsorship coalitions are an excellent complement to roll call votes as they are another avenue for members to take positions, signal support for legislation, and join a coalition, but are distinct from roll call votes in allowing the behavior of members to be independent of party influence, especially over agenda setting. Finally, because votes occur on a subset of the legislation that is available for cosponsorship, I am able to track bills through the legislative process and look at the selection of bills for votes.

In addition to presenting patterns of bipartisanship over time at each legislative stage, I examine changes in agenda setting over time and across issue areas, and explore how changing floor strategies affect representation. I look first at the selection of bills for roll call votes and the conditions under which bipartisan legislation declines relative to partisan legislation on the floor. I then examine agenda setting by issue areas, looking at changes over time both within and between issues. The results suggest that strategic partisan agenda setting affects what issues receive attention in the House. Finally, I turn from the analysis of bills to looking at individual members and examine the consequences of strategic partisan agenda setting for representation. I find that while assessments of representation and responsiveness have declined on vote-based measures, the same is not true for cosponsorship-based measures. In light of this finding, and the assumption that members are driven by electoral interests, I further examine the electoral costs of a partisan strategy and how members can balance a partisan floor strategy with a record of bipartisan cosponsorship. Throughout the book, I complement the empirical analysis leveraging pre- and post-agenda measures with qualitative evidence from archival work and interviews with former members of the House and high-level staffers.

Through this approach, I seek to understand the rising levels of partisan conflict in the House in spite of public preferences that espouse a desire for greater bipartisanship and the electoral incentives of members that would seem to point to electoral costs for partisanship and to a current disconnect in representation (Fiorina and Abrams 2009; Fiorina et al. 2005). The findings provide important insights into party influence, member-party relationships, and evaluations of representation. My approach highlights how parties strategically pursue either bipartisanship or partisanship on the House floor, with their strategy reflecting the trade-offs between the individual goals of members and the collective goals of the party. The results indicate much more stability in bipartisanship, and ultimately representation, at earlier stages of the legislative process, but a decline in bipartisanship and representation in floor voting. These differences highlight the importance of party influence, via agenda setting, in mediating the relationship between constituents, elected officials, and policy-making.

2. Chapter Synopsis

Chapter 1: Introduction

High levels of partisan conflict in Congress seem standard in recent years but observers of American politics know that the current political climate represents a dramatic shift from the politics of the 1960s and 1970s, when bipartisan floor coalitions appeared routinely and members frequently crossed party lines. What accounts for this dramatic shift in the House of Representatives? Many accounts of rising partisanship have focused on increasing ideological divergence between the parties and growing homogeneity within each party; what is often called polarization. Within the work on rising polarization, some scholars have suggested that increasing ideological polarization leads to conditions where rank and file members will grant

party leaders greater power to pursue collective goals (Rohde 1991; Aldrich and Rohde 2001). However, little work systematically examines how this power is used with respect to agenda setting or how agenda setting itself contributes to rising partisanship and the appearance of growing polarization between members.

The first chapter of this book argues that a more complete understanding of congressional partisanship must be based on consideration of both member preferences and party strategy; and how the latter affects the choices that members face when voting on the floor. I begin with a discussion of rising partisanship in the House and the insights gained from existing work, both on polarization and party influence. I then suggest that we need to better integrate these two bodies of work, especially the role of indirect party influence, via agenda setting, in our theoretical and methodological approaches to studying floor partisanship.

Methodologically, I suggest that a systematic analysis of House agenda setting requires that we look beyond roll call votes, which are the standard measure of legislative behavior and party conflict but occur only post-agenda control. Looking at only roll call votes conflates the positions of members with the structure of the floor agenda and the choices members are given to vote for or against. For instance, leading up to the impeachment of President Bill Clinton in 1998, a large number of members, particularly Democrats, would have liked to vote on censuring the president. However, the Republican leadership did not allow that option to come to vote. Since the only choice up for a vote was impeachment or no punishment, the result was a party unity vote, with only five Democrats voting to impeach and five Republican voting to acquit. This example highlights how vote-based measures can miss places of common ground between the two sides – in this case, supporting censure of the President. Examining the combination of data on bill cosponsorship coalitions as a pre-agenda measure of bipartisan agreement and data

on roll call votes as a post-agenda measure of bipartisan agreement thus allows me to better understand how agenda setting has changed over time and has contributed to rising levels of floor partisanship. Through this approach, I seek to fill two major gaps in the literature; first, by looking at votes relative to cosponsorship coalitions, I seek a better understanding how the floor agenda is constructed; and second, by tying together party control over the agenda with rising levels of partisan conflict in the House, I emphasize the ways parties mediate the relationship between constituents and policy-making.

Chapter 2: A Puzzle of Declining Bipartisanship

Chapter 2 provides the factual scaffolding for the book by presenting a puzzle of declining bipartisanship that is dependent on the legislative stage at which we assess coalitions. The conventional wisdom of vote-based polarization and party conflict is that members are too far apart to find common ground, which suggests that bipartisan agreement should have declined since the 1970s across all legislative stages and in all measures of legislative behavior. Instead, I find that bipartisanship is relatively stable in bill cosponsorship coalitions. The decline of bipartisanship in voting, despite the persistence of bipartisanship in cosponsorship coalitions is the puzzle that motivates the remainder of the book.

After discussing the pros and cons of roll call votes to assess partisan conflict and bipartisan agreement and providing a rationale for why cosponsorship coalitions offer important insights, Chapter 2 presents a number of measures of bipartisan agreement on legislation. I show that bipartisanship in the House of Representatives declined substantially from the early-1970s to early-2000s on roll call votes, with the low point occurring in the mid-1990s, while bipartisanship in legislative cosponsorship coalitions barely declined across this same period. These patterns suggest two important points – first, that increased partisanship in Congress is not

solely the result of ideological polarization among members, and second, that party strategy might explain the divergence between bill cosponsorship coalitions and roll call voting.

Chapter 3: Strategic Partisan Agenda Setting

What explains the divergence overtime between bipartisanship in cosponsorship coalitions and roll call votes? I suggest that party strategy determines the legislative agenda and the bills that receive roll call votes, which in turn affects the level of floor conflict. Importantly, conflict on the floor occurs in spite of the continuance of bipartisanship in cosponsorship coalitions. If the majority party prioritizes legislation that can achieve bipartisan support in constructing its legislative agenda, bipartisan voting is likely to occur. However, if the majority party prioritizes legislation that can only get partisan support, party unity votes will occur. These two statements may appear intuitive and, perhaps, tautological, but research has rarely examined these relationships systematically. As a result, our understanding of bipartisan cooperation in Congress has not been linked to party strategies. I suggest that considering how the majority party structures its legislative agenda, pursuing either a bipartisan or partisan strategy, and how this strategy has changed provides useful insights to understanding both partisan conflict and party goals.

Chapter 3 presents the theoretical intuitions for thinking about party strategy and agenda setting. Drawing on insights from literature on legislative behavior, party influence, and elections, I argue that parties strategically choose the level of partisanship to pursue on the floor agenda given the position of the leadership and the degree of sorting in the party. Although individual members may have incentives for greater bipartisanship, as shown by their behavior in bill cosponsorship coalitions, the policy benefits from working together and the electoral benefits from developing a party brand lead to partisanship as a legislative strategy. I also argue that

parties (and the majority party in particular) are concerned with the passage of legislation and a record of effective governance. Thus, whether partisanship or bipartisanship is pursued on the House floor may depend not only on the number of cross-pressured members in the coalition but also on institutional constraints. Institutional constraints are important to the extent that they affect the likelihood of passage for partisan bills relative to bipartisan bills, since bipartisan bills are a lower risk option than partisan bills. Ultimately, the structure of the floor agenda is a strategic product that balances the policy and electoral goals of both individual members and the collective party.

Chapter 4: Variation in Strategic Partisan Agenda Setting

Has the structure of floor agenda varied over time in a way that explains the puzzle of diverging bipartisanship between cosponsorship coalitions and roll call votes? Chapter 4 empirically tests the argument of strategic partisan agenda setting. First, I set out evidence of a necessary condition – that the structuring process of the agenda varies over time. Then I examine the conditions under which a bipartisan or partisan strategy is pursued. Looking at the type of bills selected for roll call votes, I show that, relative to bipartisan legislation, partisan legislation was increasingly prioritized through the 1980s and 1990s. The degree to which the electoral coalitions of the parties were sorted or unsorted is the strongest predictor of when a partisan versus bipartisan legislative strategy is pursued. Evidence for constraints from majority size and divided government is weaker in the empirical evidence but a qualitative examination of the Republican Revolution and changes in strategy between the 104th and 105th Congresses suggest that the new majority underestimated the importance of bipartisan legislation when governing during divided government, and shifted course when the risks to individual members and to the party as a whole became visible. In addition to looking at the ultimate divergence in

bipartisanship between cosponsorship coalitions and roll call votes, I look at other steps in the agenda setting process, including committee reporting of legislation and the selection of special rules for considering bills on the House floor. The findings in this chapter emphasize how party strategy in the intermediate steps between the introduction of bills and floor voting drives the degree of bipartisan agreement or partisan conflict on the floor.

Chapter 5: Strategic Partisan Agenda Setting By Policy Area

Strategic partisan agenda setting occurs not just at the aggregate level, as bills are selected for roll call votes, but within and between policy areas as well. After presenting patterns of bipartisan cooperation in bill cosponsorship coalitions for a range of policy areas, I test whether within-issue prioritization of partisan legislation is driven by electoral sorting and institutional constraints (as was the case at the aggregate level), as well as whether between-issue prioritization of partisan legislation is driven by variation in the level of bipartisan support by members across issue areas. Finally, I explore whether the strategy of partisan agenda setting has led to a trade-off between what issues receive legislative attention over time. I find that when a partisan floor strategy is pursued, those issues that are most likely to achieve bipartisan agreement – foreign policy, agriculture, international affairs, environment, space, transportation, and defense – receive less legislative attention than when a bipartisan strategy is pursued.

Chapter 6: Representation and Member-Party Relationships

The previous chapters provide evidence that agenda setting on the House floor has increasingly been used to pursue partisan legislative goals. If partisanship is pursued as a legislative strategy and members increasingly vote with their party, does this mean that members are increasingly unresponsive to the more moderate public? Chapter 6 explores the implications of a partisan strategy of agenda setting for representation, and, ultimately for members' electoral

concerns. The findings shed light on why members support a partisan legislative strategy despite engaging in bipartisan cosponsorship coalitions. While it does not offer a comprehensive account of member-party relationships, this chapter focuses on some of the possible trade-offs members may face when choosing to support a partisan legislative strategy. I find that while responsiveness has declined on roll call votes, it has increased on bill cosponsorship coalitions. Despite this seemingly costly disconnect, I find that the electoral costs of being out-of-step in voting are lower among sorted congressional districts and that members can turn to their records of bipartisanship in bill cosponsorship coalitions when a floor strategy paints them as increasingly partisan. This extends our understanding of member-party relationships and, ultimately, leads to the realization that the balance of individual and collective goals produces greater representation at some legislative stages compared to others.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Chapter 7 concludes, bringing the research back to broad implications such as the way institutions moderate the relationship between constituents, members, and policy outcomes in the House of Representatives. I also consider the applicability of my argument to other time periods and other institutional contexts, including why floor partisanship seems to have risen in recent congresses even as it appears to damage productivity. I suggest that if the minority party chooses to obstruct, even on bipartisan bills, or if the public fails to punish congressional parties for legislative inaction, then floor partisanship will exceed the level that might otherwise be expected under the theory of strategic partisan agenda setting. Examples from the congressional terms since the election of Barack Obama suggest that we are in a new era of politics where both of these caveats ring true. Even with these potential changes in the constraints on partisan agenda setting, the findings of this book highlight the importance of looking beyond roll call votes and

carefully considering how party strategy affects the legislative process. Partisan conflict in the

House goes beyond the positions of members, as bipartisanship continues in cosponsorship

coalitions, and can be a strategic aim of the majority party when setting the agenda.

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