

**The Making of Partisan Issues:
Groups, Mass Publics and the Dynamics of Politics**

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Abstract

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Conventional depictions of political parties suggest conflicts, rooted in immovable ideological disagreements or long-term alliances within the parties' coalitions, are largely stable in the absence of major realignments. In this dissertation, I trace the evolution of partisanship in Congress across 18 issues from 1975 through 2004. I find variations in partisanship within issues over time, as well as significant differences across issues.

Why do some issues divide political parties while others win bipartisan cooperation? Party conflicts have their foundation in the parties' competition for political support amongst mass publics and organized groups. Understanding why issues divide political parties requires we consider when party members privilege the interests of the disinterested and disorganized over the engaged and mobilized and with what effect. I argue that issue attention enhances the power of mass publics relative to groups by activating the electoral considerations of party members. As the electoral risks associated with partisan battles mount, bipartisanship emerges as a likely outcome as party

members compromise their policy objectives to maintain their electoral bottom line. When mass publics are inattentive, party members have greater freedom to engage in conflicts. However, I find that they have few incentives to do so in the absence of mobilizations that bring competing interests to bear on a given issue. In this sense, partisan conflict and cooperation are similarly constrained by the activities of organized groups.

Collectively, my findings reveal American politics to be a *politics of issues*. Without an understanding of issues – their advocates and political environments – we lack a full portrait of how parties evolve (and why). Put simply, viewing party conflicts through the lens of issues enables us to understand party strategy and congressional operation in ways not possible through aggregate depictions. It brings attention to the relevancy of policy specialists and issue advocates in shaping political parties and suggests that the high politics of parties and presidents are intimately connected with the pluralistic competition among groups. In so doing, this research challenges the centrality of ideology to congressional life and reinvigorates the study of policy substance in American politics.

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CHAPTER 1. WHY PARTIES DIVERGE

To speak of politics is to speak of political issues.

- Carmines and Stimson, 1989

During the 1980 presidential campaign, then candidate Ronald Reagan characterized the Department of Education as the “new bureaucratic boondoggle” and called for its abolishment. Republican opposition accelerated in the mid-1990s as a newly empowered Republican majority sought to make good on Reagan’s promise of federal retreat in education. There were good reasons to expect Republican opposition to a federal role in the nation’s schools. Newly energized Evangelical groups were strongly opposed to federal intervention, whether or not such interventions were accompanied by promises of new funds. At the same time, federal spending on education – marked by its focus on redistribution to reduce inequality and promote social mobility – tapped into basic ideological divides between Republicans and Democrats over the appropriate role of government.

Yet, Republican opposition to a federal role has not been deep and unending. Prior to Reagan, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 enjoyed strong support amongst both parties with reauthorizations proceeding with little fanfare.

Shortly after Republicans advanced their Contract with America in 1995, doing battle with the Clinton Administration over issues like federal education spending, national education standards and an expanded teaching workforce, they engaged in an about-face in 2001 when Congress passed by large, bipartisan margins and George W. Bush signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Not only did NCLB result in the largest increase in federal education spending since 1965, it vastly expanded the federal government's role in the American education system.

The changing politics of education is not unique. Many contemporary public policy issues fail to divide the parties in a consistent fashion. The Medicare program once divided Republicans and Democrats but now the politics is far from partisan, as congressional Republicans and Democrats seem to agree more often than they disagree over the health care program for the elderly. Similarly, immigration issues once generated high levels of bipartisanship, resulting in major compromise reforms as recently as 1986 under President Reagan. But, more contemporary immigration politics suggests party divisions haven't just deepened, they've also widened. Similar transformations can be documented in civil rights, the environment, energy and criminal justice.

What explains these evolutions? Why do some issues divide political parties while others win bipartisan cooperation? As Carmines and Stimson (1989, p. 3) remark, "to speak of politics is to speak of political issues." But, what makes an issue political or, in other words, partisan? The evolution of partisanship is central to understanding

American politics. Yet we know little about its shape, dynamics, or consequences for policymaking across different public policy issues.

Contemporary depictions of congressional parties suggest party differences are deep and lasting. Deep because they are rooted in immovable ideological disagreements regarding the appropriate role and scope of government (Poole and Rosenthal 1993, 2005; Aldrich 1995; Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005; Rohde 1991) or, alternatively, long-term alliances between the parties and coalitions of interests and activists (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Bawn, Cohen, Karol, Masket, Noel, and Zaller 2012; Karol 2011). Lasting because such differences persist in the absence of major realignments that wholly reshape the contours of political parties inside and out of government (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Poole and Rosenthal 1993, 2005; Valentino and Sears 2005).

Increasing levels of partisan polarization and gridlock in Congress have only reinforced the predominance of these explanations in the scholarly literature. Parties are more divided than ever because of changes in the ideological composition of the parties' electoral bases (Rohde 1991; Jacobson 2000; Poole and Rosenthal 1997; Jacobson 2000, 2005; Fleisher and Bond 2004; Brewer, Mariani and Stonecash 2002; Stonecash, Brewer, and Mariani 2003; Carson, Crespín, Finocchiaro, and Rohde 2007) and reforms to congressional rule and procedure that have enhanced these ideological differences (Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005; Sinclair 2000; Roberts and Smith 2003; Theriault 2008).

Yet, the partisan instability revealed in education and other issue arenas challenges these conventional explanations regarding the sources of division in contemporary American politics. After all some issues are less polarizing today than

they have been historically while others never really divided the parties in the first place. In ignoring variability in partisanship across issues and over time, scholars have largely taken it for granted that some issues – like transportation or agriculture – win bipartisan support while others – like economics and health care – divide the parties. In ignoring these differences as well as the evolution in party issue alignments over time, we give up an opportunity to understand *why* parties diverge in the first place.

In considering why issues come to divide political parties, this research seeks to address three questions. First, how have party divisions evolved across the wide variety of issues that party members encounter? Second, what is the relative role of mass publics and organized groups in shaping these divisions? And finally, what are the sources of stability and change in party conflicts over time?

A Preview of the Theoretical Argument

The theoretical starting point of this research is that partisan conflict is fundamentally about issues. At first glance, such a stance may seem uncontroversial. After all, one can recall familiar scenes of candidates posturing over different issues and grand speeches about the merits of policy. But, in the study of political parties in Congress, issues have largely been deemed a secondary concern, if a concern at all. Instead, scholars have focused their attention on aggregate trends, an approach reinforced by the predominance of ideological conceptions of party cleavages in the literature. When attention turns to issues, it is done in passing – as when it is suggested that budget deficits polarize the parties – or in static terms – as when distributive policies are taken to be outside the realm of partisan posturing. Yet, issue positioning is the primary means by

which parties cultivate supporters and as a result, are the unit of analysis in which parties are best studied.

Congressional parties are institutions that exist in service to collective goals, chief among them – assembling national electoral majorities. Yet, parties are not alone in this pursuit; their interests are intimately bound up with those of their chief supporters – mass publics and organized groups. Mass publics deliver their support at the ballot box; groups deliver it during campaigns. In order to secure their collective goals, parties must cultivate support by selecting issues and positions that maximize their electoral advantages while minimizing those of their opponents.

While groups and mass publics are connected to political parties through their shared influence over the parties' collective political goals, they come to the political process with very different capacities and ways of relating to policymakers. Mass publics lack well-solidified ideas about policy, hold more impressionistic concerns over public problems and exercise influence primarily at the ballot box. In contrast, groups hold intense policy preferences, ready access to policymakers, and direct influence over the parties' policy objectives.

Recognizing these differences, understanding why an issue comes to divide the political parties requires we consider when party members privilege the interests of the disinterested and disorganized over the engaged and mobilized and with what effect. I argue that issue attention enhances the relative influence of mass publics over political parties by powerfully activating the electoral considerations of party members. As issue attention fades, parties become more responsive to groups.

As a result of these considerations, I suggest that party issue alignments emerge through two pathways: one characterized by an *opinion dynamic* for which parties compete for mass publics and are constrained by the contours of public opinion, and a second characterized by a *mobilization dynamic* for which parties compete over groups and are constrained by the alignment of interests. When the opinion dynamic is activated, party divisions are built on and sustained by favorable public evaluations of both parties – their members, positions, and behavior in legislating. When such goodwill is lacking for one party, as it was in the 1990s for Republicans on education, the electoral risks associated with partisanship increase and with them, the prospects for bipartisanship.

Just as increasing issue attention can activate the opinion dynamic by shifting party concern towards mass publics, waning issue attention shifts party concern back towards organized groups. In some ways, this shift provides them with greater freedom to wage partisan battles. However, driven by the same competitive logic as in the opinion dynamic, political parties lack the will or interest to fight in the absence of mobilizations that bring competing interests to bear on an issue. Simply put, issues that lack competing interests fail to generate the incentives necessary for parties to wage battles. The *mobilization dynamic* is driven by changes in the alignment of interests engaged with an issue.

The chapters that follow draw upon historical detail, quantitative analysis and case exploration to understand the forces that drive party conflict and cooperation. Amid the variety of evidence bases I consider, three themes emerge. First, and most importantly, my research reveals American politics is a *politics of issues*. Without an

understanding of issues – their advocates and political environments – we lack a full portrait of how parties evolve and come to shape representative institutions. Viewing political conflicts through the lens of issues enables us to understand party strategy and congressional operation in ways not possible through aggregate depictions. It brings attention to the relevancy of policy specialists and issue advocates in shaping political parties and suggests that the high politics of parties and presidents is intimately connected with the pluralistic competition among groups. In so doing, this research challenges the centrality of ideology to congressional life and reinvigorates the study of policy substance in American politics.

Second, political parties – like representative institutions more generally – face basic dilemmas around maintaining the political support of the most committed and organized members of their coalitions, while at the same time preventing electoral decay amongst the much more moderate but less engaged citizenry. This dilemma is a key source of instability in American politics. My research suggests that while groups may dominate many policy arenas by virtue of the fact that only a small number of issues reach the public's agenda at any one time, political parties ignore mass publics at their own peril. In pursuing partisan objectives that lack broader support, simply ignoring pressing policy problems, or otherwise failing to govern, parties enhance the leverage of their opponents while diminishing their own. In other words, the electoral connection ensures that political parties face consequences for their failures to govern.

Finally, parties are adaptive, dynamic institutions and these characteristics ensure that party cleavages are not cast in stone. New issues can generate groups where none

existed before. Mass publics can be drawn into the fray as a result of crises or the actions of policy entrepreneurs. And, public evaluations of the parties can change as a result of policy failures, historical circumstance or both. Each of these changes has consequences for the power of political parties to coalesce their members and advance partisan agendas in Congress. The end result is that party disagreements are neither immovable nor unending.

What Lies Ahead

The guiding focus of this research is why some issues divide political parties while others win bipartisan cooperation. It is not simply that parties reflexively oppose each other's legislative agendas, though this is the impression one gets from contemporary portrayals of congressional politics. Indeed, as I reveal, the parties continue to cooperate with each other on a great many issues confronting policymakers. In the pages that follow, I begin to unravel the sources of party divisions and the factors that shape party issue alignments.

Chapter Two proposes that changes in party issue alignments stem from the parties' competition for the support of mass publics and organized groups. I argue that party issue alignments emerge through two pathways: one characterized by an opinion dynamic for when parties compete for mass publics and a second characterized by a mobilization dynamic for which parties compete over groups. The opinion dynamic is driven by changes in public evaluations of the parties while the mobilization dynamic is driven by changes in the alignment of interests. Issue attention mitigates which pathway becomes dominant for a given issue at a particular point in time.

Chapter Three builds the empirical case for why considerations of party divisions should not rely on aggregate depictions alone and the centrality of issues to understanding American politics. Utilizing original data on the content of the congressional voting agenda, I trace changes in party issue alignments across eighteen issues from 1975 through 2004. My analyses reveal extensive variability in the extent of partisanship. Some issues, like economics and labor, consistently divide the parties' members in Congress. Other issues regularly win bipartisan support. But many have evolved considerably over the years I consider – becoming the subject of partisan controversy only to later become a matter of agreement. These analyses suggest that not only has the evolution of partisanship followed a wide variety of trajectories but also that party divisions tend to be highly unstable over time.

Amongst all this variability, Chapter Four begins to disentangle the common sources of party conflict and cooperation, focusing on how and with what effect mass publics shape party issue alignments. I develop a comprehensive set of public opinion data on public priorities and the parties' issue reputations for six issues from 1980 forward. Conceptualizations of political parties as primarily elite oriented institutions suggest that public evaluations of the parties and their positions should be largely irrelevant. If issue attention enhances the power of mass publics vis-à-vis the parties, then party divisions will be profoundly constrained by public opinion as issue attention increases. My quantitative analyses reveal that partisan disagreements depend on and are sustained by favorable public evaluations of the parties. I find that to the extent that one party is disadvantaged on an issue relative to her opponent, the likelihood of compromise

increases as the electoral costs associated with pursuing a partisan battle mount. My findings not only explain the rapid reversals in party positions that have proven difficult to understand, it also suggests that parties fail to govern at their own peril.

Chapter Five considers what shapes the dynamics of party conflicts when issues fall off the agenda, parties are unconstrained by public opinion and groups are the central players. If party conflicts are largely driven by long-term alliances between groups and parties, then short-term mobilizations that change the alignment of interests within a given issued domain should be of little consequence. Using four classic distributive policy issues – agriculture, energy, public lands, and transportation – I show that the mobilization (and demobilization) of competing interests is critical to understanding why parties choose the battles they do. I identify a mobilization effect for all four of my issues, despite the fact that distributive policies would seem to be present a ‘hard’ test. The results clearly reveal that shifts in the alignment of interests closely correspond to the ebb and flow of the partisan battle lines. This finding challenges the centrality of long-term alliances to explaining party divisions and suggests that the stability of party issue alignments is closely associated with the stability of the interest group community engaged with an issue.

In Chapter Six, I summarize my findings, their implications for American politics and future research considerations.

CHAPTER 2. THE POLITICAL FOUNDATIONS OF PARTY CONFLICT

The fundamental and underlying change is not in election results but in political agendas.

- William Riker, 1982

This dissertation seeks to explain why some issues divide political parties while others win bipartisan cooperation. In developing an understanding of the evolution of partisanship across different issues, I suggest that political parties are institutions that exist in service to collective goals. The question becomes this: under what conditions does the waging of partisan battles advance the parties' shared political interests, and under what conditions does it undermine them? The answer will inform our understanding of what makes an issue partisan and why this changes over time.

Because parties' collective political interests are bound up with the interests of their chief supporters—organized groups and mass publics—any theory of partisanship must consider the dynamics associated with these political actors. Organized groups and mass publics have different resources they offer political parties and different

relationships with party members. Despite these differences, both come to shape partisan battle lines because parties require their support to assemble national electoral majorities. That is, their fates are intimately wrapped up together. Yet, this basic attribute of political parties is also a key source of partisan instability as parties face basic dilemmas around maintaining the support of their most committed and energized supporters while also appealing to a much more moderate, but generally inattentive citizenry.

Why Parties Diverge? Towards a Theory

Parties are the basic institutions for translating the diverse interests in a democratic society into public policy (Schattschneider 1952; Key 1967). In acting as representative institutions, parties necessarily serve two masters. On the one hand, are the organized groups who have intense policy preferences. These ‘benefit seekers,’ as Schlesinger (1975) called them, have strong incentives to vet office-seekers before the campaign begins, support their candidates during elections and provide political buffer to office holders as they begin the difficult business of governing. On the other hand, there are the everyday members of the public who while often disinterested and unengaged in the political process, ultimately determine the fate of political parties as they seek to assemble national electoral majorities.

In focusing on their representative role, this dissertation does not speak to how changes in the ideological preferences of members may shape party conflicts. Ideological change and elite replacement have been important, indeed central, components of scholarly explanations for increasing partisan conflict (see Jacobson 2000, 2005; Fleisher and Bond 2004; Brewer, Mariani and Stonecash 2002; Stonecash, Brewer, and Mariani

2003; Carson, Crespín, Finocchiaro, and Rohde 2007). While recognizing these changes are no doubt influential in shaping leadership power and party cohesion (see Rohde 1991), I show in Chapter Three they provide an insufficient basis for understanding the dynamics of party conflicts across different issues.

I refer to the configuration of party members in relation to each other on a given issue as a *party issue alignment*.¹ As the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2012) notes, an alignment is “the result of arranging in or along a line, or into appropriate relative positions” and this is consistent with my focus on how issues divide the parties’ members. A party issue alignment can be characterized as partisan, when party members do not overlap. But, they can also be characterized as bipartisan, when party members find themselves on the same side. Rather than focusing on partisanship per se, this broader emphasis highlights that party conflict and cooperation are really two sides of the same coin and that any consideration of why parties wage battles must also seek to understand why, sometimes, they don’t.

In developing a framework, this research challenges much of the conventional wisdom about the sources and implications of partisan discord. It suggests that political parties, like interest groups, citizens, and policymakers themselves, are preoccupied with issues. It challenges the notion that ideology or shared political interests constrain parties to be partisan across the board. And, it suggests that parties are dually responsive to the

¹ This term is not without problems, given the large somewhat convoluted literature on critical realignments. For example, the contemporary literature often conflates the notion of realignments with critical elections when in reality realignments are a phenomenon that critical elections seek to explain (i.e., one is cause, the other effect). Suffice it to note that my focus is on explaining change in party issue alignments and critical elections or realigning periods are not my focus

organized groups who hold intense interests in policy as well as the mass publics who while less attentive, hold the keys for party power. Because of these factors – the nature of issues, the lack of constraint, and the shared influence of groups and mass publics – partisan battle lines ebb and flow far more than conventional depictions predict.

Parties as Representative Institutions

In considering the representative role of political parties, scholars are generally divided as to whether groups or mass publics dominate. Cohen, Karol, Noel and Zaller (2008, p. 6) define parties as broad coalitions of “interest group leaders, activists, and other ‘policy demanders’ working to gain control of government on behalf of their goals.” Party positions reflect the demands of those with intense interests in policy and as discussed by Bawn et al. (2012), political parties attempt to exploit the ‘electoral blind spot’ to pass extreme legislative agendas that deliver on promises to organized groups, not voters. In response to whether parties moderate their positions to win elections, they respond “somewhat, sometimes...but usually not very much” (p. 11).

Parties clearly derive political benefits from maintaining the support of groups within their coalitions. Organized groups and activist networks increasingly play key roles in elections, both in candidate campaigns (McDermott 2006) and in the initiative process (Lupia and Matsusaka 2004). And, group resources have only become more important in a post-*Citizens United* campaign context.

But, while group oriented theories offer a persuasive account of party coalitions, they have generally under-played the role of the electorate in shaping the contours of

political parties. Bawn et al. (2012) provide an especially pessimistic view of the role of mass publics in shaping party behavior in writing:

Many individual voters, especially better informed, are quite sensitive to policy and ideology. This sensitivity, however, leads them to become loyal partisans of one side or the other. Other voters, especially the poorly informed, are less sensitive to policy, less tied to a party, and hence more changeable between elections. The net result is an electorate that, in aggregate, is less responsive to ideological positioning (which the parties could affect) than to changes in national conditions (which they often cannot). In this situation, parties have relatively little incentive to trim their ideological sails. (p. 12)

David Karol (2011) echoes this argument in suggesting that voters are “seldom the source of party position change...policy reorientations usually have specific causes and focused advocates.”

Such perspectives contrast sharply with earlier conceptions of parties as electorally oriented institutions highly responsive to mass publics. In his classic treatise on democratic politics, Downs (1957) suggests that parties compete by seeking out positions that maximize vote share. That is, “political ideologies are truly the means to the end of obtaining votes” (p. 114). This perspective is shared by Carmines and Stimson (1989) who suggest that ‘issue evolutions’ and changing party cleavages are driven by

vote-seeking politicians who ‘try on’ new issue positions in an effort to gain electoral advantage (see also Adams 1997).²

Anecdote also supports the notion that party leaders are indeed sensitive to electoral considerations. In response to growing environmental concerns in the 1970s, Richard Nixon (along with Republicans in Congress) became one of the chief champions of new regulatory initiatives, going so far as to reorganize the federal bureaucracy to create a home for environmental policy for the first time (Andrews 1999; Bosso 1987). Democratic President Bill Clinton, along with many Democrats in Congress, ultimately came to support welfare reform after vetoing two prior proposals and despite opposition from liberal activists within the party (Ross 2000).

On each of these issues, it is difficult to suggest that the parties’ behavior was primarily aimed at integrating groups into the parties’ coalition.³ As Fiorina (2003) observes (in a footnote):

Seeing losses among their partisans, the hemorrhaging party acts to stem those losses. Thus, we have the emergence of law and order Democrats after the social disorders of the late 1960s, Atari Democrats after the stagflation of the 1970s, centrist Democrats after the Democratic presidential losses of the 1980s, and compassionate Republicans after the Clinton victories in the 1990s. Rational party leaders and candidates *adjust* their positions to counteract the negative

² Though, Carmines and Stimson’s (1989) model of issue evolution is largely elite-driven – policymakers take positions, elites communicate them to mass publics, and mass publics (re)identify with the party.

³ Indeed, three members of Clinton’s administration resigned in protest for his support of welfare reform suggesting his core supporters were far from happy with the decision (Clinton 2006)

impact of issues, events, conditions and candidacies on the partisanship of their mass base (p. 112, emphasis mine).

Arguably, ideological activists represent a third group for which parties are responsive to. They differ from interest groups in that they typically lack issue specialization and tend to advance broader ideas about what it means to be a conservative or liberal. Han Noel (2009) focuses specifically on the role of ideological activists—what he calls ‘political thinkers’—in the parties’ transformation on racial issues. Such activists are very likely to play a role on issues like economics, labor, social welfare and other social issues that ignite fundamental ideological disagreements about whether a particular societal condition (e.g., inequality) is a problem. In contrast, many of the issues I consider are better termed *valence* issues in that most everyone agrees that polluted air, unsafe cars, war, and an uneducated populace are problems; the disagreements stem from differences in how to go about addressing them.

Ideological issues are ‘hard’ issues when it comes to political compromise because they deal with fundamental values. As Adams (1997, 724) observes, “vacillating on a highly visible and emotional issue such as abortion is politically risky, and one would be hard pressed to come up with the names of more than a half-dozen politicians who did so successfully.” As a result, these kinds of issues are less subject to the dynamics in partisanship that is the focus of this research.

Groups versus Mass Publics: Not a Question of ‘If’ But ‘When’

In conceptualizing parties as in service to both groups and mass publics, this research focuses on unraveling the conditions under which they become relevant to party

positions and conflicts (as well as when their interests are largely ignored). Such considerations are central to understanding American politics because members of Congress and policymakers more generally often face a complex set of conflicting demands. This was central to Kingdon's (1979) depiction of congressional decision-making. Although Kingdon was writing more than three decades ago, his description of the scholarly literature fits as well as today as it did then. As he writes:

Congressional decision-making has been conceived alternatively as following the leads of political parties, the executive branch, the constituencies of the members, colleagues within the legislature, interest groups that present their demands and perhaps other actors in the system. Legislative studies have tended to concentrate separately on the place of each of these actors in the legislative system. We therefore have a rich literature on representation of constituents, another literature on parties, another on interest groups (p. 6).

While I am not quite as ambitious as Kingdon in my consideration of party issue alignments, I do attempt to put party conflicts into the context of the broader political environment that policymakers exist in, and out of which partisan issues emerge. In so doing, I do not focus on *whether* groups or mass publics dominate party coalitions but *when* parties are most responsive to different parts of their political environment.

The interplay between groups and mass publics is a foundational issue in the study of policy dynamics. Such concern is reflected in the work of Schattschneider (1960) who considered how political actors on the losing side of an issue attempt to expand the scope of conflict by drawing in the inattentive and disinterested. Baumgartner

and Jones (1993) built upon Schattschneider's insights to consider how groups attempt to exploit changes in the popular mood to put pressure on policymakers. Such 'outside initiatives' (Cobb, Ross and Ross 1976) suggest that agenda setting and issue attention is central to understanding the conditions under which mass publics come to shape public policy (see also Kingdon 1984).

The literature is replete with examples of how agenda setting that increases issue attention (re)shapes the relative influence of groups and mass publics in the policy process. David Price (1978) finds that committee members are more constrained on issues that are salient when compared to those that engender little attention. In his consideration of business influence in American politics, Mark Smith (2000) finds strong evidence that policymakers are especially attentive to public opinion on salient issues. In considering retrospective voting, Berry and Howell (2007) find that when the issue of education reform was prominent on the public agenda, voters effectively held local school board members accountable for student learning trends while failing to do so when the issue fell off the public's agenda. In seeking to address why Congress acts in service to both particularistic and general interests, Douglas Arnold (1990) suggests that members of Congress become highly sensitive to public opinion when issues are salient (or have the potential to become so). In analyses of members' votes, Bonney, Canes-Wrone, and Minozzi (2007) and Bovitz and Carson (2006) find that the electoral impact of a given position increases as attentiveness grows.

As discussed by Jacobs, Lawrence and Shapiro (1998), the electoral link is particularly strong for parties because party leaders are charged with pursuing collective,

over individual, goals. Thus, while individual members might face varying electoral incentives on a given issue because of different constituencies and policy preferences, party leaders are much more likely to concern themselves with positioning so as to secure the parties' broader political goals, which involve assembling national electoral majorities.

I argue that parties become electorally oriented institutions on issues that garner high levels of attention. Thus, while groups may hold many of the cards in the game of party politics due to their higher interest levels and better access to policymakers, mass publics are not without an ace or two. In integrating roles for both groups and mass publics, my perspective offers a more dynamic portrait of congressional parties that can explain the rapid changes in party issue alignments over time. Such changes, I show, are often the result of mass publics becoming newly attentive and aware of party issue positions.

Explaining Changing Party Issue Alignments

Figure 2.1 presents a schematic depiction of the theoretical framework I offer to explain party issue alignments. On the left, issue attention or salience⁴ represents the critical factor that shapes the part of their political environments that parties are most responsive. I argue that parties become increasingly oriented towards mass publics as issue attention increases, something I test directly in Chapter Four. As suggested by Arnold (1990), such responsiveness hinges as much on the potential for electoral accountability as it does on actual vote losses. As the issue moves up the public's agenda,

⁴ I use these terms synonymously.

the parties face greater electoral risks and the parties' collective fortunes depend on the support of mass publics. As issue attention decreases and the issue moves off the public's agenda, electoral risk declines and the parties become more responsive to organized groups. Such groups, in turn, offer other political resources to parties in exchange for pursuing their interests in the policy process.

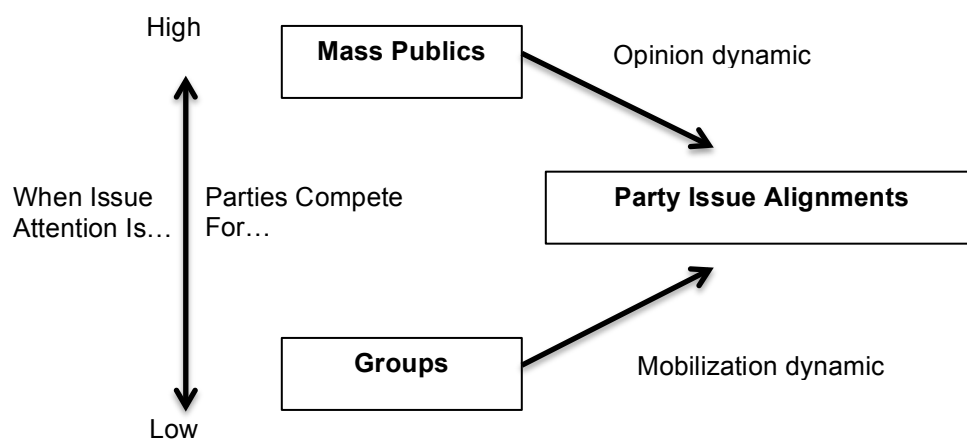


Figure 2.1. Mass Publics, Groups and Party Issue Alignments

It is important to note at the outset that this theoretical framework does not assert nor does it seek to categorize issues as salient or not. As depicted in so many accounts of agenda setting, issues can and do regularly move up and down the public's agenda (Kingdon 1984; Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Birkland 1998; Cob, Ross and Ross 1976). As a result, issues can be rapidly transformed in response to focusing events and other crises that instantaneously shift the status of an issue on the public's agenda.

To understand party issue alignments, we must not simply consider the conditional representative relationships that exist between parties, mass publics and groups. Such a consideration might tell us something about to whom party positions are developed for, but it does not tell us anything about the alignment of parties on the issues or how they end up on opposing sides.

As a result of their different ways of relating to policymakers, I argue that groups and mass publics influence party issue alignments through different pathways. Groups are highly knowledgeable, can make specific policy demands and are in a position to directly reshape political debates by introducing new ideas, evidence or both in the policy process. Mass publics, in contrast, tend to be less knowledgeable and more impressionistic in their evaluations of political actors and the policy alternatives they advance.

The theoretical framework I offer distinguishes between two dynamics – an *opinion dynamic* when issue attention is high and parties compete for the support of mass publics and a *mobilization dynamic* when issue attention is low and parties compete for the support of groups. These are distinguished along a variety of relevant dimensions in Table 2.1. While these dynamics share a common basis in the parties’ drive for political power and competition for political support, different processes drive party issue alignment change. Each of these dynamics are explored in depth in the coming chapters, but in the interest of providing additional background, theoretical development and a preview of what’s to come, I will briefly outline the rationale that guides this investigation.

Table 2.1: Explaining Party Issue Alignments		
Type	Opinion Dynamics	Mobilization Dynamics
Activated when	Issue rises on the agenda	Issue falls off the agenda
Primary actors	Mass publics	Organized groups
Causal mechanism	Competition for electoral support	Competition for group support
Change stems from	Change in public opinion	Change in interest alignments
Conflict occurs when	Mass publics rate parties similarly on an issue	Issue contestation among groups grows

Opinion Dynamics

Opinion dynamics are characterized by the high politics of elections – what Redford (1969) termed ‘macropolitics.’ When issues rise on the public’s agenda, parties become sensitive to the concerns of mass publics and the electoral risks and rewards associated with their partisan battles.

While in theory parties utilize a wide range of sources to gauge these risks and rewards, my focus in this research is on public opinion related to the parties’ collective issue reputations or brand names (Aldrich 1995; Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005; Petrocik 1996). Unlike groups, mass publics often lack the knowledge to pressure policymakers for specific policy alternatives and are more likely to shape party conflicts through their more impressionistic reactions to party members, positions and behaviors. In addition, existing research suggests that party members are inherently concerned about the quality of their party labels. After all, one of the primary benefits to joining a party

comes with its brand name, which provides information shortcuts to voters that are valuable for winning elections (Aldrich 1995; Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005).

In legislative studies, it is more or less assumed that members' electoral motivations provide sufficient incentives for parties to pursue popular policies that enhance the parties' brand name or, at least, diminishes that of their opponent's (Lee 2009). Thus party leaders are tasked with controlling the agenda to ensure that divisive (i.e., unpopular) policies do not come up for potentially embarrassing votes (Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005).

Yet, sometimes toeing the party line comes with electoral costs (Ansolabehere, Stewart and Snyder 2001; Canes-Wrone, Brady and Cogan 2002) and indeed, the literature on issue ownership suggests that parts of the parties brand names – their issue reputations – are regularly a liability for them (Petrocik 1996). As a result, candidates on the campaign trail tend to emphasize those issues for which they hold advantage while downplaying those for which they do not (ibid). This suggests it is the *relative* strengths and weaknesses of the parties' issue reputations that mediate conflicts in the opinion dynamic. Because parties exist in a competitive environment, they are evaluated not simply on the merits of their own positions or behaviors, but also those of their opponent's.

When one party's issue reputation is weakened on a salient issue—by policy feedback, historical circumstance or both—the disadvantaged party faces mounting electoral costs in the pursuit of a partisan agenda. Simply put, they lack the leverage to wage battle with their opponents and their options are limited: stem the losses by

compromising or fight a losing battle for which they lack public support. While saving face may not bolster the enthusiasm of the parties' most ardent and ideological supporters, it does secure the parties' collective political goals far more effectively than engaging in a fight for which they lack leverage or support.

In sum, when issues rise on the public agenda, the opinion dynamic suggests that the parties' competition for electoral support sometimes leads them head to head in battle while other times undermining conflicts and incentivizing compromise. When neither party is disadvantaged on an issue, the incentives for compromise are weak—why capitulate when holding steadfast carries few electoral risks? But, when disadvantage emerges, the potential electoral costs of holding steadfast in opposition are high.

Mobilization Dynamics

Mobilization dynamics are triggered when issues fall off of the public's agenda and groups gain privileged access to policymakers. The logic of the mobilization dynamic is straightforward – parties and groups exist in a representative relationship in which partisans have strong incentives to represent group concerns in their policy objectives. This representative relationship suggests that changes in the alignment of interests in a given issue arena, as a result of mobilizations and counter-mobilizations, can destabilize party issue alignments by bringing new interests to bear on an issue while putting others to rest.

To the extent that such mobilizations and counter-mobilization increase issue contestation by introducing competing policy demands, they have the effect of strengthening the incentives parties have to wage battles as they compete for different

bases of support. In this sense, partisan conflicts represent a simple extension of issue contestation among organized groups (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993).

The mobilization dynamic goes further than simply suggesting that partisan issues are characterized by the presence of competing groups; it suggests that without such groups, parties will be hamstrung by the lack of will or interest in sustaining conflicts over time. Examples of issues like this abound in American politics – farm subsidies, highways and transportation, science and space, criminal justice, defense contracting, etc. Such issues often lack the competition over policy ideas that support partisan battles.

This differs from other accounts of group-party relationships in suggesting that *short-term* mobilizations are just as important as *long-term* alignments among groups and party coalitions. The latter has been the primary focus of scholars. I show that this focus misses many of the dynamics associated with changing interest alignments, as the intensity of group demands shift over time to different issue foci.

Because interest alignments are rarely permanent, the partisan battle lines can and do ebb and flow. Energy policy was once characterized by the same norms of bipartisanship that dominate agriculture and transportation. It was transformed by the mobilization of environmentalists on issues such as sustainability, global warming and energy alternatives. Agriculture policy – a seemingly permanent fixture of distributive politics – is increasingly challenged by consumer advocates who demand greater regulation and oversight of food producers and manufacturers. The mobilization dynamic suggests such changes have important implications for the parties' future alignments.

From this perspective, conflict and cooperation have common roots in the parties' competition for group support. Issues like agriculture are not "groupless," as David Karol (2011) calls them. After all, farm subsidies clearly have focused advocates. What they lack is issue contestation. My perspective suggests that such issues are characterized by partisan restraint precisely because group influence exists.

Research Approach

With the theoretical framework in place, I now turn to the research approach advanced in this research. My approach is grounded in comparative issue dynamics (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, p. 23). I study a wide variety of issues across a relatively long time span. The diversity of the cases I explore gives me new leverage in considering the sources of party divisions and why they change over time. Indeed, the existing literature is characterized by a focus on case studies, usually on issues that have resulted in realignments or "issue evolutions" (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Wolbrecht 2000; Adams 1997). When a comparative approach is taken, the focus is on highly contentious issues that are assumed to divide the parties at the outset (Karol 2011). But, in ignoring the great many issues that *fail* to divide the parties with any regularity, we introduce classic selection bias and abandon much of the useful explanatory variance in party issue alignments

I begin with a comprehensive collection of issues that reflect the whole range of federal government activities in contemporary American politics. These include economics, civil rights, health care, agriculture, labor and employment, education, environment, energy, transportation, law and crime, social welfare, housing, business and

banking, defense, space and technology, foreign trade, foreign affairs, and public lands. Each of these issues has a definable institutional structure, as represented by the presence of cabinet level agencies and congressional committees, and exists around relatively stable policy communities (Heclo 1978).

For each of these issues, I focus on changes in party issue alignments or the arrangement of party members across different issues. This focus means I care less about what particular positions or stands the parties are advocating and more about why the parties find themselves in opposition (or not). Of course, issue positioning—through party platforms, hortatory proclamations, and voting decisions—and party issue alignments are inherently connected. As Mayhew (2002) discusses, “it is opposing issue positions, rather than...opposing interests off which issue propensities could in principle unproblematically be read, that are said to index [party] cleavages” (p. 11).

Indeed, in tracing changes to party issue alignments over time, I rely upon one of the most important types of positioning tools—the voting decisions of party members. As institutions, parties are empowered within government to build political coalitions, not least of which is the leadership offices in the House and Senate. Voting decisions are also more permanent and readily tied to individual members, making them higher stake decisions. A more detailed description of the dataset I use to study party issue alignments is included in Chapter Three.

My empirical analyses unfold in three parts. I begin with a consideration of the wide-ranging trajectories party issue alignments exhibit over time, as well as the significant differences that exist across issues. Party issue alignments can be relatively

stable, as is the case with the parties' long-standing divisions over economic policy, or they can be more movable, as I show is the case for issues like the environment, energy, and education. *Realignments* occur when the arrangement of party members changes – i.e., when an issue comes to divide the parties when it did not before and vice versa.

Although the political developments that come to define conflicts in different issue areas are no doubt unique, I argue that we can generalize across these diverse trajectories to understand what makes a given issue partisan and why party issue alignments change over time. I test the two components of my theory of party issue alignments, the opinion and mobilization dynamics, across two chapters. Because these dynamics are activated under different conditions—when issues rise on the agenda, in the case of the opinion dynamic, and when issues fall off the agenda, in the case of the mobilization dynamic—my research design attempts to deal with the mitigating affect of issue attention while maintaining a research strategy that engages both cross-sectional and temporal comparisons.

In considering opinion dynamics, my analysis consists of six issues—economics, education, environment, crime, defense, and foreign affairs—that each rose prominently on the agenda during the period considered (1980-2004). While each of these issues have been portrayed as being 'owned' by one or the other party, I show extensive evolutions in the parties' reputations and respective disadvantages over time. Using a panel dataset, I model changes in the party issue alignments as a function of the conditional relationship between issue attention and reputational disadvantage.

In considering mobilization dynamics, my focus is on a set of four issues—agriculture, energy, transportation, and public lands—during a period in which all were relatively low on the public’s agenda (1988-2004). These issues were selected because in theory, each are characterized by similar sets of policy demands reflecting disagreements over the relative mix of regulatory and distributive policy instruments. Despite these similarities, I show they exhibit very different party issue alignments over time. In explaining these differences, I connect changes in the makeup of different types of groups in each of these domains to changes in the divisions between the parties through both bivariate issue-specific analyses as well as multivariate cross-sectional time-series.

The selection of cases and time periods was done explicitly, so as to account for the mitigating role of issue attention in shaping the parties’ responsiveness to the opinion and mobilization dynamics. This approach enables me to better isolate the influence of mass publics and groups on party issue alignments where other studies have failed to consider or find an effect. This is particularly important given the existing scholarly dichotomy, which portrays mass publics as both powerless and all-powerful with respect to shaping party positions.

CHAPTER 3. THE (ISSUE) EVOLUTION OF PARTISANSHIP

*Some issues, like lines drawn in the dust, define what it means to be a party in political conflict.
Most are easily stepped over.*

- Carmines and Stimson, 1989

The theoretical framework developed in this dissertation offers a portrait of political parties preoccupied with issues and their advocates. It is undeniably true that elections, the organization of legislative parties, and institutional procedures for conducting business are important shapers of party power, but *issues* are what make the fight. Issue positioning is the primary means by which parties cultivate support and without such support—delivered during campaigns and elections—parties lack the political or electoral strength to advance partisan agendas in Congress. This perspective differs substantially from traditional conceptions of political parties where notions of shared political interests and unidimensional conceptions of ideology have left little room for issue politics to shape party positions or power.

This chapter draws upon original data collection to offer the most comprehensive assessment to date on the evolution of partisanship across the full range of policy

problems that government is called upon to handle. The empirical analyses offer a sharp contrast with those provided in existing research. They reveal extensive variability in the degree of conflict across issues and a long-run instability in party issue alignments over time, observations that challenge some of the contemporary explanations for increasing levels of partisanship in Congress. In so doing, this chapter sets the stage for the subsequent empirical analyses and builds a case for why any consideration of political parties cannot and should not be divorced from policy substance.

Why Study Substance?

The connection between issues and politics has a long and storied tradition in political science. Beginning with Ernest Griffith's (1939, p. 182) discussion of "policy whirlpools" with their "centers of activity focusing on particular problems," a generation of work put issues at the center of American politics. The congressional committee system became the linchpin connecting the issue politics of interest groups with congressional policymaking (see Berry 1989; Browne 1990; Burstein 1991; Heclo 1978; Laumann and Knoke 1987; McCool 1990; Redford 1969; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). Clausen and Cheney (1970) and Clausen (1973), writing at its high point, proposed a "policy-dimension" theory of congressional organization that put substance at the center of legislative coalitions (see also MacRae 1970 and Sinclair 1982). As Wilcox and Clausen (1991) discuss, "instead of a liberal/conservative dimension, these studies found a number of dimensions that reflected the diverse *issues* faced by Congress and the diverse political forces that influenced member's votes" (emphasis mine).

Perhaps strangely, the high point of political scientists' consideration of policy substance corresponds neatly with what Morris Fiorina (2002) calls the "down decades" for the study of political parties. As conglomerations of diverse interests, parties were too far removed from the issue politics that dominated policy communities in Congress. As suggested by Schattschneider (1960), the lack of issue specialization made political parties less prone to interest group capture and collusion and ultimately more democratic political institutions.

With the publication of Poole and Rosenthal's (1997, 2007) landmark analysis of two centuries of roll call voting, issue-centric conceptions of congressional coalitions were replaced by ideological ones emphasizing the power of party and ideology to readily simplify the complexities of congressional life.⁵ Parties became understood as essentially ideological institutions – held together by political conflicts that transcended the narrow politics of issues (see Lee 2009 for a review). While shared expertise bound interest groups, congressional committees and bureaucracy together in policymaking and oversight activities, parties were held together by the need to differentiate their legislative agendas and compete in elections.

The increasing polarization of the parties – extensively documented by scholars and pundits alike – reinforced the abandonment of issues as relevant units of analysis for the study of Congress. Figure 3.1 shows the degree of partisanship in the House of Representatives from 1975 through 2004, as measured by the average difference between the voting records of Democrats and Republicans. A perfectly partisan vote, which pit

⁵ Not all congressional scholars abandoned the focus on issues (see, for example, Krutz 2001; Lapinski 2008; Adler and Wilkerson 2012), though little of this literature considers focuses on political parties.

every Republican against every Democrat, would receive a value of one, signifying the proportion of Republicans that voted against Democrats. Partisanship rose steadily throughout the 1980s, reaching its mid-series peak in 1987, one year prior to the end of Reagan’s second term as President. The trend moderated during George H.W. Bush’s tenure as President but began to rapidly rise, reaching an all-time high in 1995, when Republicans came to power in Congress for the first time in decades advancing their “Contract with America.” Partisanship moderately declined after 1995 and began to recover its upward trajectory in 2001.⁶

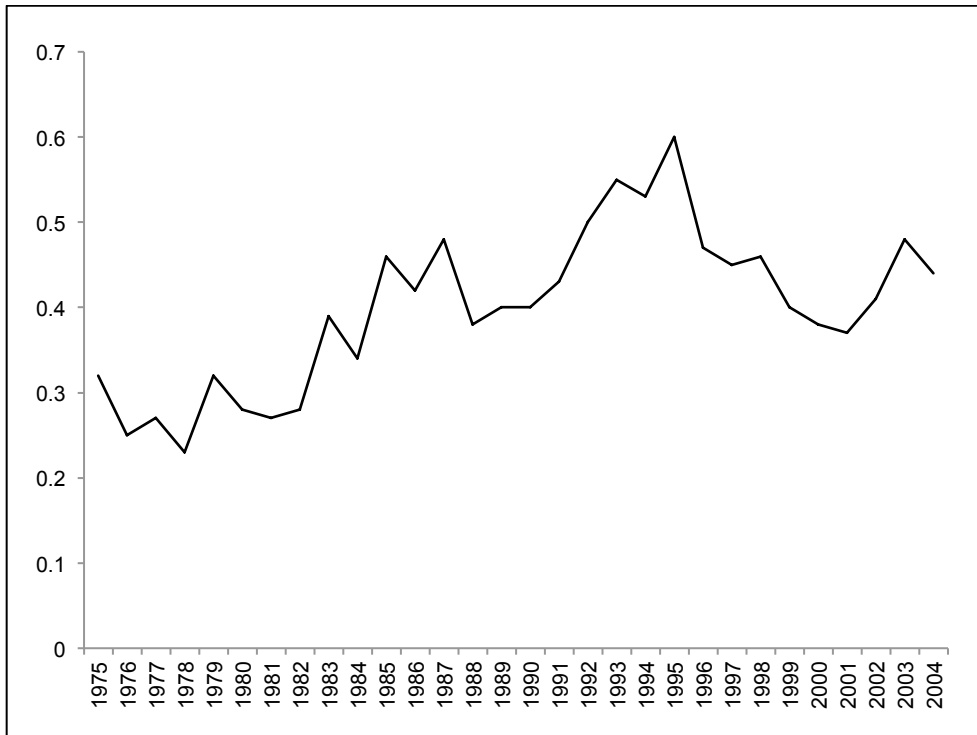


Figure 3.1. U.S. House Partisan Conflict – All Votes, 1975-2004.

Note: The Y-axis is the mean absolute value of the difference between Republicans and Democrats for each year from 1975 through 2004 in the House of Representatives. Author compiled data.

⁶ Crespín, Rohde, and Wielen (2011) suggest that changes in the types of vote up for consideration alter the observable pattern of partisanship. In particular, they suggest the growth in suspensions between the 103rd (1993-1994) and 107th (2001-2002) congresses resulted in lower levels of partisanship for some votes.

A large literature has developed in explaining these trends. Some focus on electoral changes that resulted in more internally homogenous parties, including the realignment of the South (Rohde 1991; Jacobson 2000; Poole and Rosenthal 1997; Roberts and Smith 2003) and the changing composition of the parties' electoral bases (Jacobson 2000, 2005; Fleisher and Bond 2004; Brewer, Mariani and Stonecash 2002; Stonecash, Brewer, and Mariani 2003; Carson, Crespin, Finocchiaro, and Rohde 2007). Others have suggested that increasing partisanship is primarily driven by changes in congressional rule and procedure that empowered party leaders to better control the legislative agenda (Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005) and manipulate legislative rules to secure favorable outcomes for the majority party (Sinclair 2000; Roberts and Smith 2003; Theriault 2008). Those working in the tradition of Aldrich and Rohde's "conditional party government" model (Rohde 1991; Aldrich 1995), suggest that these trends are best understood as an interplay between these electoral and institutional changes (for a review, see Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006).

Studying the (Issue) Evolution of Partisanship

At the outset of this project, it is useful to define what I mean by partisanship. A cursory review of scholarly work in American politics reveals a variety of definitions and measures. Some scholars focus on *party polarization* or ideological divergence between Republicans and Democrats (e.g., Poole and Rosenthal 1997, 2005). Others focus more directly on *partisan conflict* and the degree of disagreement between the parties (e.g., Lee 2009). In practice, measures of party polarization are highly correlated with those of

partisan conflict, which should be of little surprise given both measures rely on members' roll call voting records.

My main interest is in the parties' issue alignments, the extent to which a given issue divides the parties' members and how this changes over time.⁷ While in principal shared ideological preferences provides a potent source of difference between the parties, it is not the focus of this dissertation and indeed, I reveal strong evidence that strategic political calculations trump ideology more often than not. In this sense, I agree with David Karol (2011) that ideology is more flexible than many scholars presume and that party positions are changed just as often through the process of conversion, when existing party members shift positions, as they are through the process of electoral replacement.

My basis for measuring the degree of partisanship for different issues is provided in the voting records of members of Congress. The institutional locus of this research is the House of Representatives during the period of 1975 through 2004. Dating to the earliest congresses, the House has been considered to be the more partisan and raucous of the two chambers of Congress (Binder and Smith 1997). Existing measures of partisan conflict generally reveal this to be true, with partisanship intensifying to a greater extent compared with the Senate (Theriault 2008; Poole and Rosenthal 1997). Party leaders are also more likely to use restrictive rules and other procedural mechanisms in the House in an effort to curb the power of the minority party to shape legislation (Roberts and Smith 2003; Theriault 2008). In addition, members of the House tend to have greater issue specialization, given the larger number of subcommittees and members' narrower

⁷ I use the terms of *partisan*, *partisanship*, and *partisan conflict* interchangeably to characterize party issue alignments.

constituency bases. All of this makes the House an ideal place to consider party issue alignments.

The time span of this study is 1975 through 2004. The era in which I focus my attention is chosen deliberately so as to limit changes in the institutional context of Congress that have affected party power and influence. The Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970, which was implemented in 1973, authorized electronic voting in the House and led to a vast expansion of the roll call voting record. The Hansen-Bolling Committee reforms in 1974 resulted in long-lasting and influential changes in the relative power of committee chairs and party leaders (Smith and Deering 1984).

The coding of issues is based on the coding system developed by the Policy Agendas Project (www.policyagendas.org). Each roll call vote was coded into one of 18 major topics: economics, civil rights, health care, agriculture, labor and employment, education, environment, energy, transportation, crime, social welfare, housing, business, defense, science, foreign trade, foreign affairs, and public lands.⁸ A complete description of the policy areas utilized in this research is included in Appendix 2A and at the Policy Agendas Project's website (www.policyagendas.org). Appendix 2B presents summary statistics for the major issue areas I consider.

I measure partisanship by considering the degree to which Republicans and Democrats vote differently. For each issue, I assess the absolute value of the difference

⁸ I exclude major topic 20-Governmental Affairs because this category includes a mix of omnibus appropriation bills that span multiple major topics in addition to issues of governmental organization and intergovernmental relations. Procedural votes were coded based on the underlying issue at stake. For example, a motion to recommit on an appropriation bill for the Department of Agriculture and Related Agencies would be coded as "Agriculture." Amendment votes were coded on the basis of the amendment text. Final passage votes were coded on the basis of the bill title.

between the percent of Republicans voting yea with the percent of Democrats voting yea. A vote which pits every Republican against every Democrat would receive a score of “100” – indicative of perfectly divided parties. A vote in which all Republicans and Democrats voted together would receive a score of “0” – indicative of a convergence in party behavior.

Some scholars have used a variant of this measure based on party votes (e.g., Carey 2007; Lebo, McGlynn and Koger 2007). A party vote pits the majority of one party against the majority of the other party. Considering the actual differences between Republicans and Democrats, as I employ, provides a more robust measure of partisan conflict. For example, using the party vote method, a vote in which 90 percent of Republicans and zero percent of Democrats voted for a measure would be coded the same if 40 percent of Democrats voted for the measure. But, clearly the degree of divergence between the parties is much greater in the former case.

The Dynamics of Partisanship

How do trends across issues compare with the broader picture of party conflict portrayed above? Figure 3.2 depicts the average degree of partisan conflict across issues by averaging the differences between the parties across all votes in each issue category. The figure is ordered from most to least partisan. The degree of conflict varies considerably from issue-to-issue. Some issues, such as economics, labor, and civil rights, consistently divide the parties. This is evident by the fact that the average vote in these areas is a *party* vote – that is, it pits the majority of one party against the majority of the other. Economics and labor policy deal with fundamental divisions between Republicans

and Democrats regarding the appropriate role and scope of governmental activities (Lee 2009) and civil rights issues increasingly divides the parties' coalitions, as social issues have become more integrated into the parties' ideological bases (see Adams 1997; Carmines and Stimson 1989; Wolbrecht 2000).

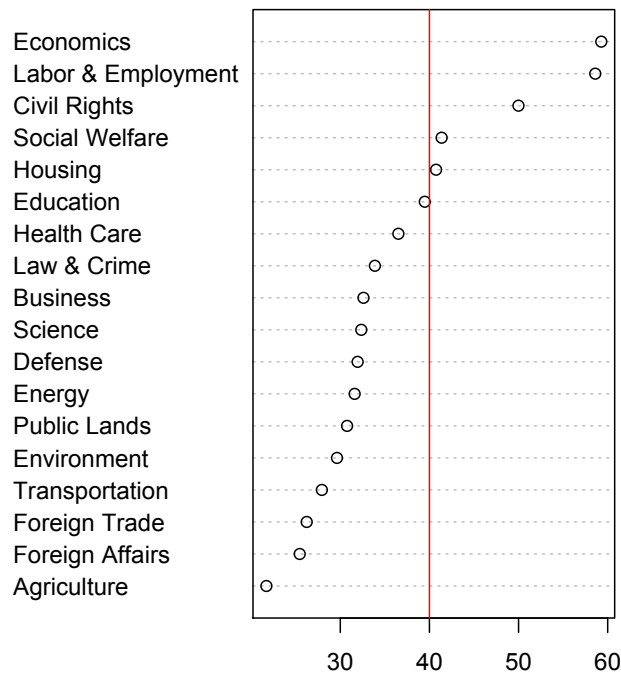


Figure 3.2. Average Level of Partisan Conflict across Issues. The X-axis is the mean absolute value of the difference between Republicans and Democrats for each issue... The red line displays the mean difference between the parties across all votes. Author compiled data.

These three issues exhibit two to three times the levels of partisanship as the least partisan issues and all are well above the mean level of partisanship across all votes (the red line in Figure 3.2). Consider, for example, agriculture in which the average vote only

divides 21 percent of the parties' members. That agriculture is not a partisan issue is perhaps not very surprising given its traditional focus on distributive politics, as perhaps best represented by the pork-laden farm bill. But, several issues stand out in challenging the conventional wisdom about what makes an issue partisan. Health care, energy, and the environment all reflect lower than average levels of partisan conflict, despite the fact that each deals with issues involving redistribution and regulation.

Why, given the predominance of issues that fail to regularly divide the parties' members, is the contemporary storyline about American politics one dominated by partisanship and gridlock? Many commentators might readily admit that issues like agriculture, public lands, and foreign affairs are not partisan issues, but given these issues relatively low salience they have a minimal impact on overall levels of partisan conflict. Surprisingly however, these issues together makeup almost a quarter of the congressional voting agenda during the years considered (see Appendix 2A). Meanwhile, the quintessential partisan issues of economics, social welfare, and health care together comprise a paltry 16 percent of the agenda during the same period. While conflict may make for a more interesting news story, the preceding analysis demonstrates that it does not provide an adequate portrait of legislative process and policymaking.

This analysis is useful in revealing trends across issues but does not show how partisanship is evolving over time. Figure 3.3 portrays changes in partisanship for each issue across two eras (1975-1988, 1989-2004). The eras were chosen so as to capture the two periods of increasing partisanship revealed in Figure 3.1. The earlier era includes the presidency of Ronald Reagan and the mid-series peak in partisan conflict and the later era

captures the Republican “revolution” of 1994, which resulted in the highest levels of partisanship in the period of study.⁹ The figure is arrayed from top to bottom by the change in partisanship across the two periods.

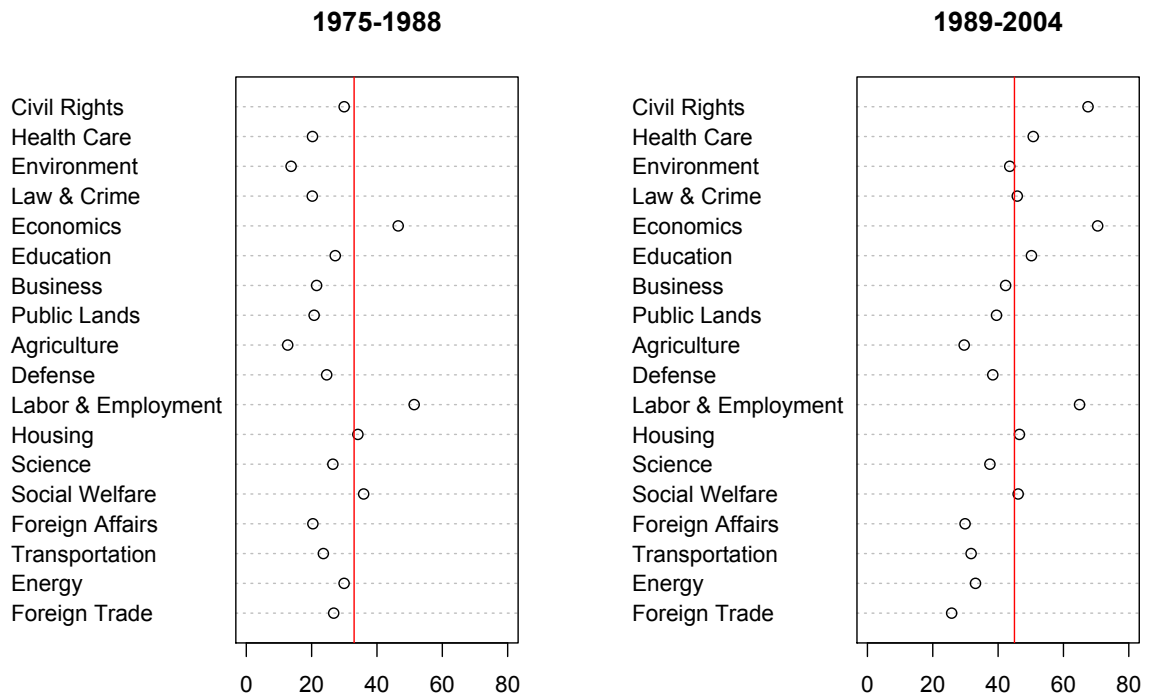


Figure 3.3. Change in Partisanship by Era. Figure displays the mean absolute value of the difference between Republicans and Democrats on roll call votes for each issue area. The vertical red line represents the mean level of partisanship across all votes in each era. Figure sorted by the degree of change for each issue. Author compiled data.

Divisions between the parties are clearly evolving for many issues. Three trends stand out as particularly noteworthy. First, the degree of change varies considerably. Foreign trade actually reflects a one percent *decline* in partisanship across the periods

⁹ The general insights of the findings – that different issue areas reflect different trends in partisanship – are not sensitive to changes in the cut point. Because the earlier period reflects lower levels of partisanship, moving the cut point forward in time results in some issues reflecting decreases in partisanship. Moving the cut point backwards results in the opposite pattern.

considered. This is in contrast to the 30 percent increase reflected in civil rights. These differences suggest that changes in the political context of Congress, like institutional reforms that empowered parties as procedural coalitions or electoral changes that changed the ideological contours of political parties, have not affected all issues equally and as a result, do not provide an adequate basis for predicting variation in partisanship across issues.

Second, the largest increases in partisanship are for the so-called “new issues” (Baumgartner and Jones 2009). The 1960s and 1970s resulted in a vast expansion of the policy agenda. Not only did government expand its reach, it also incorporated issues previously left to state or local governments or the private sector, including civil rights (Carmines and Stimson 1989), women’s rights (Wolbrecht 2000), environmentalism (Bosso 1987), health care (Green-Pedersen and Wilkerson 2006), and crime (Miller 2008). The changes in party alignments for these issues suggest that the dynamics of agenda setting – in mobilizing groups and mass publics – have important implications for the waging of partisan battles, something I test directly in the subsequent chapters.

Finally, compared with the earlier period, more issues reveal greater than average levels of partisanship. This suggests that an increasing number of issues has been pulled into the partisan divide over time. Energy policy, for example, once represented an area of widespread agreement between the parties but now is conflict ridden. However, fully half of the issues in the later period continue to exhibit low levels of partisanship suggesting some resistance to the trend toward greater partisanship.

This analysis clearly reveals the gaps between the parties are not simply widening across the board, irrespective of issue content. To reinforce this point, Table 3.1 presents a simple time trend analysis in which levels of partisanship are regressed against a time index variable, with issues ordered according to the size of the time trend coefficient. Energy, foreign trade and science are no more partisan in the contemporary period that they were historically. Even amongst those issues that reveal statistically significant changes over time, the rate of change varies considerably. The rate of party differentiation in civil rights, health care, and the environment is twice the rate in social welfare, transportation, and foreign affairs.

Table 3.1. Trends in Party Differentiation Across Issues, 1975-2004

Issue	Time Trend
Energy	0.31
Foreign Trade	0.43 †
Science	0.65 †
Social Welfare	0.79 **
Transportation	0.82 ***
Foreign Affairs	0.83 ***
Housing	0.89 **
Agriculture	0.92 ***
Public Lands	1.12 ***
Labor & Employment	1.14 ***
Banking & Finance	1.16 ***
Defense	1.18 ***
Crime & Law	1.31 ***
Education	1.53 ***
Economics	1.64 ***
Environment	1.75 ***
Health Care	1.85 ***
Civil Rights	2.56 ***

Table presents the results of modeling partisanship within each issue from 1975 through 2004 as a linear function of time. Coefficients reflect the predicted expected annual increase/decrease in partisanship. Ordered by coefficient size.

† p < .10, * p < .05, **p < .01, *** p < .001

These analyses reveal some noteworthy trends in how issues typically divide the parties and how this relationship has changed over time. But, these findings may be masking considerable year-to-year variability in partisanship. Figure 3.4 (A and B) depicts the evolution of partisanship across the 18 issues I consider from 1975 through 2004. The y-axis reflects the extent of partisanship, calculated by averaging the differences between Republicans and Democrats for each issue-year combination. If party conflicts are primarily driven by a set of processes that have affected all issues equally we would expect to see similar trends in the progression of party differences, regardless of the magnitude of change in any given area. Similarly, if some issues – such as those characterized by distributive concerns – are simply immune from these changes, then the degree of conflict should be relatively constant, reflective of the relative power of committee chairs over party leaders.

Figure 3.4 reveals a remarkable degree of variability in party alignments over time. Some issues, such as economics, civil rights, health care, and labor reflect a high degree of linearity with incrementally increasing levels of partisanship, with relatively little year-to-year variation. Economics and labor started the period relatively partisan and have only become more divisive over time. Others issues, like civil rights and health care, did not consistently divide the parties in the 1970s but increasingly do so today.

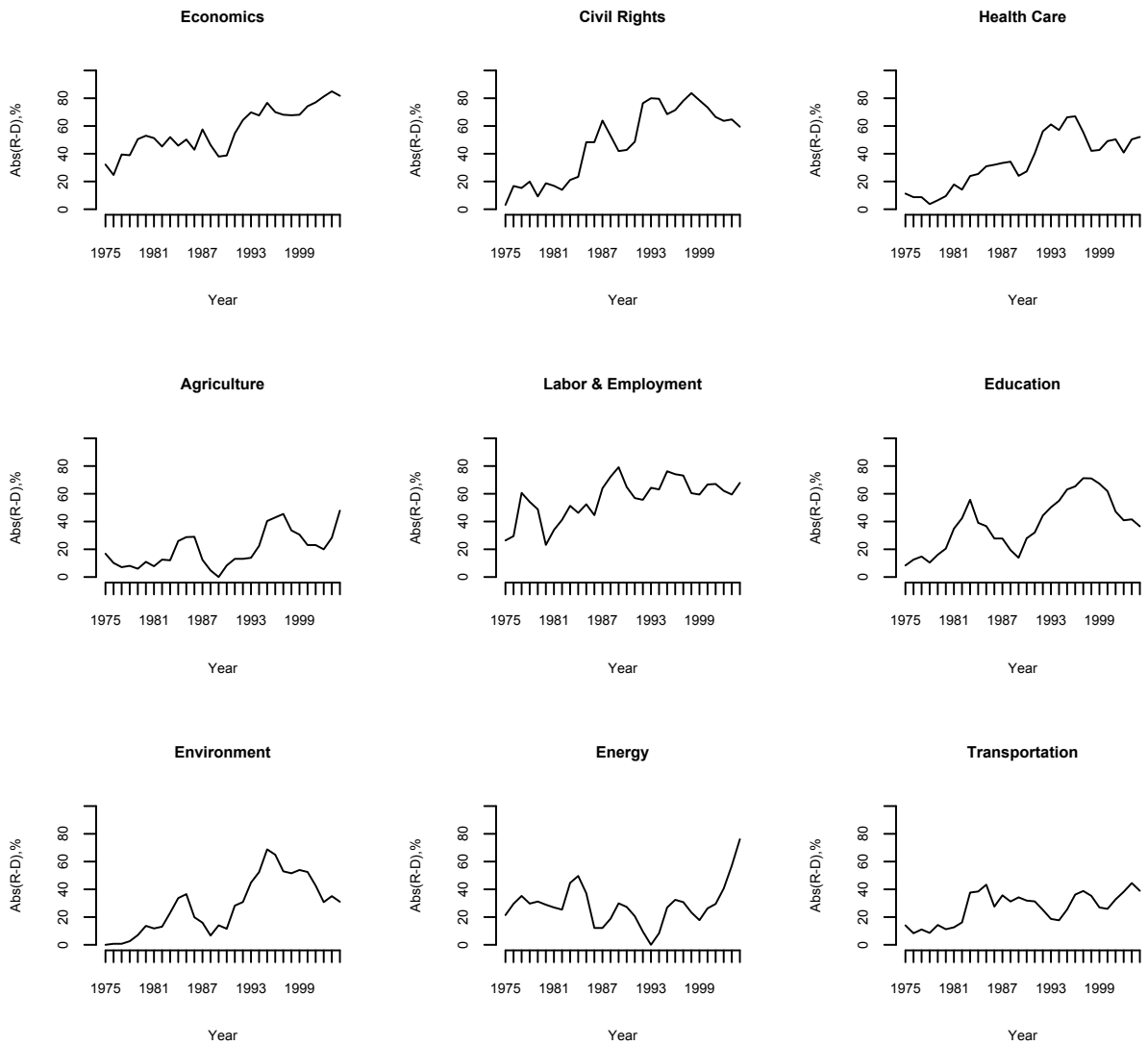


Figure 3.4A: The Evolution of Partisanship Across Issues, 1975-2004. Figure displays the average absolute value of the difference between Republicans and Democrats for each issue-year. Author compiled data.

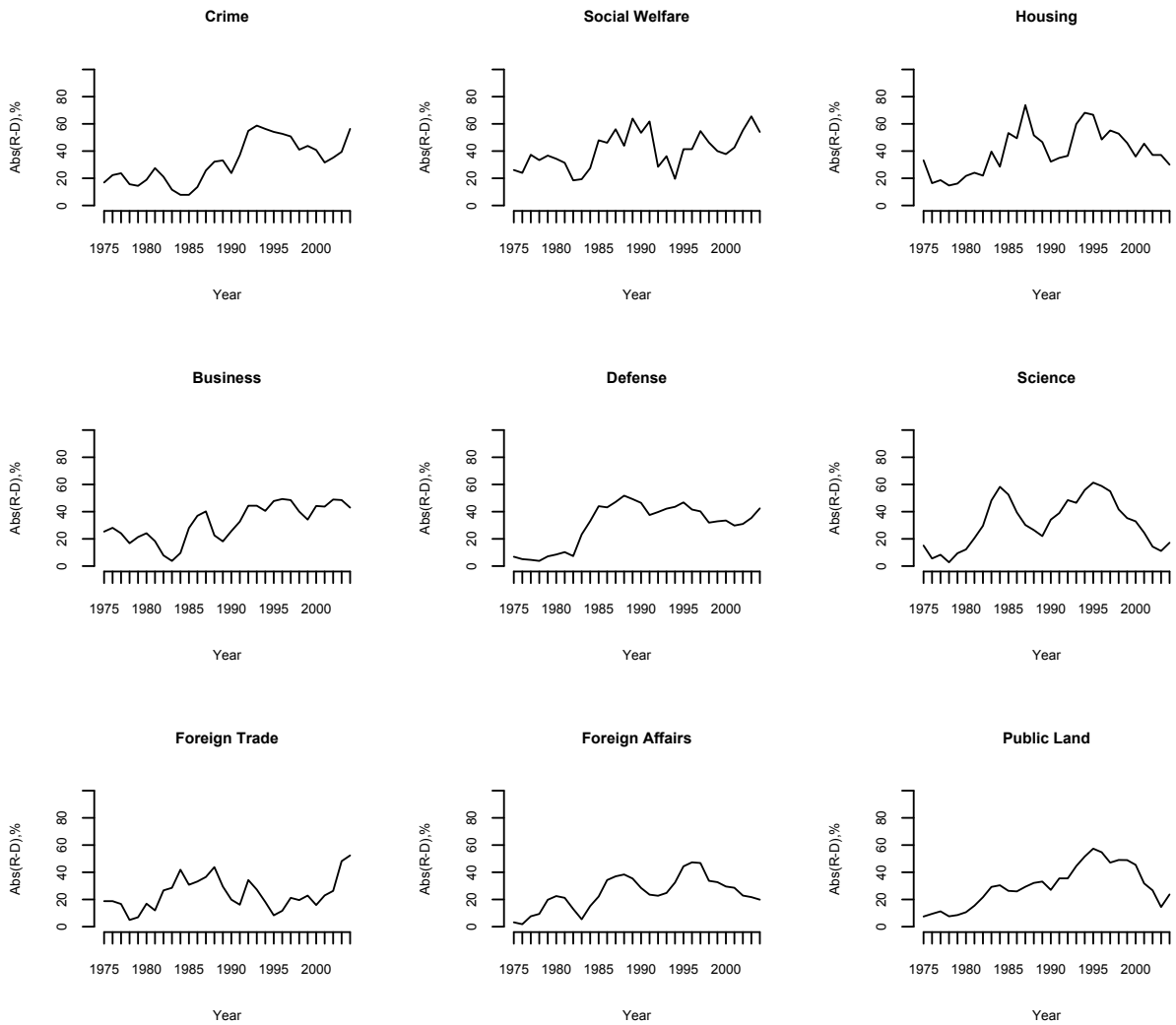


Figure 3.4B: The Evolution of Partisanship Across Issues, 1975-2004. Figure displays the average absolute value of the difference Republicans and Democrats for each issue-year. Author compiled data.

In contrast to these patterns, many issues reveal a more complex portrait. A diverse set of issues – agriculture, education, environment, energy, social welfare, housing, science, foreign trade, foreign affairs, and public lands – reflect high levels of volatility in partisan divisions. For these, partisanship appears to ebb and flow: rising and falling over a period five to ten years only to collapse. These patterns suggest parties are prone to Downsian “waves of enthusiasm,” mobilizing on a particular issue for a period of time only to abandon the cause at a later date (see Baumgartner and Jones 2009). The variation across issues, both in terms of average levels of conflict as well as different trajectories over time, provides convincing evidence that divisions over particular issues are not driven by electoral change that produces more internally homogenous and ideologically distinctive parties.

Parties and the Changing Institutional Context of Congress

It is possible that the changing party issue alignments revealed above simply reflect changes in the types of votes within each area. The overall composition of the roll call record changed with the introduction of electronic voting in 1974, with substantial increases in the number of procedural and amendment votes (Smith 1989) and these reforms have important implications for party power. Theriault (2008) finds that increases in party polarization can largely be traced to the growing number of procedural votes on the agenda. Roberts and Smith (2003) argue that amendment votes are more polarizing than final passage votes because they pit two alternatives against each other, rather than an alternative against (an unacceptable) status quo. Yet, Shafran (2011)

shows that amendment votes are more likely to diverge from members' ideological preferences.

In either of these cases, it is possible that changes in party issue alignments reflect differences in the types of votes—procedural or amendment—on a given issue agenda, rather than more substantive differences among the issues themselves. To assess this, I examine the relationship between vote type and partisanship for each of the 18 issues. I calculated the proportion of procedural and amendment votes using data from Rohde (2004). I am interested in the overall level of procedural and amendment votes in each area, whether these incidences have changed as a proportion of votes over time, and the relationship between vote type and partisanship across time.

Table 3.2 examines the correlation between the incidence of a given type of vote (procedural or amendment) and the level of partisanship. Most issues reveal little relationship between the proportion of procedural votes and the average differences between the parties. In other words, an increase in procedural votes does not seem to produce similar increases in partisanship. In just two issues – economics and energy – are increases in procedural votes associated with greater party cohesion. In three issues (housing, environment and science), the opposite pattern is produced – that is, as the proportion of procedural votes grow, partisanship actually *decreases*, a finding which has no theoretical basis in the extant literature.

Issue	Procedural Votes	Amendment Votes
Housing	-0.35 †	0.47 **
Environment	-0.33 †	0.42 *
Science	-0.32 †	0.79 ***
Public Lands	-0.22	0.56 ***
Foreign Affairs	-0.04	0.15 *
Social Welfare	0.05	0.22
Civil Rights	0.05	0.05
Education	0.08	0.30 †
Transportation	0.08	0.07
Labor & Employment	0.09	0.01
Agriculture	0.10	0.43 *
Defense	0.14	0.24
Crime & Law	0.17	0.24
Health Care	0.23	0.37 *
Banking & Finance	0.26	0.28
Foreign Trade	0.35 †	-0.20
Energy	0.42 *	-0.20
Economics	0.49 **	-0.12

Notes: Cell values display the Pearson's correlation coefficient between the proportion of procedural/amendment votes and partisanship for each issue over the period 1975-2004. Positive values indicate party differences increase as the proportion of proc./amend. votes on the agenda increase. Ordered according to the coefficient value for proc. votes. † $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

This is not to say that procedural votes themselves might not produce more partisan voting alignments. Indeed, Lee (2009) shows just this in her consideration of Senate votes. However, it does suggest that the variance in party issue alignments cannot be explained by changes in the composition of the roll call voting record.

The story for amendment votes is a bit more complex. Seven of the issues considered reveal statistically significant positive relationships between the proportion of amendment votes and degree of party differentiation. For these, increases in the number of amendment votes are associated with higher levels of partisanship (though, the

relationship varies considerably). But, the majority of issues are characterized by no (statistically) discernable relationship between the two.

Yet, it is unclear what this finding means. It could be that the parties tend to offer more amendments on divisive issues; hence the relationship is a consequence of conflict rather than a direct source of conflict. Whatever the cause, it does not appear to be reliably associated with changes in party issue alignments across the issues I consider.

Together, these findings provide strong evidence that the differences in party alignments across issues and the instability over time is not consistently related to the changing composition of the roll call voting record. While there is little doubt that procedural votes can serve to polarize the parties to a greater extent than more substantive votes, as has been shown consistently in the existing literature, the above analysis suggests that this effect is largely conditioned on the underlying issue at stake. So, for example, motions to recommit on the farm bill are treated considerably different than they are on legislation tackling tax cuts. In sum, while scholars of Congress tend to emphasize the types of votes on the agenda, this analysis suggests the issue on the agenda is perhaps more important in shaping party conflicts.

Conclusions

This chapter has depicted the evolution of partisanship across issues. My examination of this reveals several noteworthy trends. First, not all issues are created equal. Contrary to academic and popular accounts of American government, many issues – including those with prominent place on the agenda – do not regularly divide the parties. Second, tracing changes in party divisions over time reveals a substantial degree of

variability and these patterns are not adequately explained by traditional theories that point towards a changing electoral and institutional context. Finally, and most centrally to the present purposes, most issues are characterized by a long-run instability in partisan divisions over time.

This variation presents a puzzle: why do some issues divide the political parties while others win bipartisan cooperation? And, why do these divisions change with time? Any attempt to address these questions must first reconcile the considerable differences that exist across issues and the extensive variability across time. The framework sketched in Chapter Two suggests that the instability in partisan conflicts has its roots in the parties' competition for political support among mass publics and organized groups. The subsequent chapters further develop the my framework for understanding party issue alignments with respect to mass public-driven *opinion dynamics*, the subject of Chapter Four, and organized group-driven *mobilization dynamics*, the subject of Chapter Five.

CHAPTER 4. OPINION DYNAMICS

If a fight starts, watch the crowd because the crowd plays the decisive role.

- E. E. Schattschneider, 1960

In 2011, a battle unfolded between congressional Democrats and Republicans over extending the payroll tax for middle-income Americans. More conservative Republicans in the House favored a “no extension without cuts” position, which while ideologically consistent and potentially beneficial to the handful of members who came to power under the mantle of fiscal conservatism, was not a nationally viable position by any measure. A CNN poll taken in mid-December during the height of the crisis showed that the public trusted President Obama over congressional Republicans on a nearly two-to-one basis, and unfavorability ratings for Republicans grew significantly over the course of the debate (Litvan and Rowley 2011). The headline from the conservative editorial pages of the *Wall Street Journal* read “The GOP’s Payroll Tax Fiasco” where the Journal’s board wrote, “Given how [Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell] and House Speaker John Boehner have handled the payroll tax debate, we wonder if they might end up re-electing the president before the 2012 campaign even begins in earnest.” With mounting pressure on the party’s electoral bottom line, House Republicans

eventually compromised on the issue in a remarkable display of bipartisanship that stood in stark contrast to the gridlock that dominated the 112th Congress.

The debate over health care reform in the mid-1990s also invoked the ideological divide between an invigorated Republican party and a Democratic president. Yet, its unfolding and eventual outcome could not have been more different. In the fall of 1993, The *Washington Post*'s columnist David Broder warned “[Republicans] have to be perceived as supporting dramatic change in today’s health care system.” At the outset, public support for health care reform was high and Republicans initially treaded quite carefully so as to avoid appearing as obstructionists. As Jacobs, Shapiro and Smith (1998) observe:

“[T]he underlying motivation of both the Senate and House Republican leaders was to balance their electoral and policy goals. In order to avoid appearing too negative or partisan, the minority leaders started out by endorsing more incremental reforms than the Clinton plan...By taking this line of attack, the Republican leaders acknowledged that health care reform was both a policy issue and an issue that would influence the public’s assessment of the political parties...But, the two goals—the policy and political objectives—coexisted in an uneasy state of tension: protecting an appealing image of [the Republican] party as committed even to moderate reform conflicted with the preferences of conservative Republicans who objected to any expansion of the government’s role in health care.”

Ultimately, after a well-funded interest group campaign against the Clinton plan eroded public support for reform, Republicans were able to successfully link their policy and political objectives. With support for their position strengthening, rather than weakening, as happened in the payroll tax debate, Republican opposition was not obstructionist but “democracy at work,” to use the words of Bob Dole at the conclusion of the debate.

These examples of contemporary political debates reveal the powerful effects mass publics can have on the waging of partisan battles. It was the electoral connection that forced congressional Republicans to compromise on the payroll tax issue but enabled them to hold their ground on the health care reform debate. The purpose of this chapter is to understand how mass publics shape party conflicts through what I call the *opinion dynamic*.

I begin with the premise that parties are sensitive to mass publics on salient issues because such issues generate powerful electoral risks for party members. Understanding why responsive parties wage the battles they do requires we consider how public evaluations of the parties can transform an electoral risk—that is, an imagined consequence—into an electoral liability—that is, an impending one.

While in theory, a wide range of opinions may be relevant in informing the parties’ electoral considerations, my focus is on their collective issue reputations or brand names. I suggest that the *relative* strengths and weaknesses of the parties’ issue reputations shape their capacity to wage partisan battles as well as their propensity to compromise. My empirical results suggest that when one party emerges with a reputational disadvantage

on a salient issue, the mounting electoral costs forces them to compromise – a “if you can’t win, join ‘em” strategy.

Mass Publics and Partisanship

More than a half century ago, E. E. Schattschneider wrote of the different roles played by pressure groups and political parties. The defining feature of political parties, according to Schattschneider, is the need to assemble electoral majorities. This facet of the incentive structure ensured that political parties were bound to the great many individuals that were necessary to win elections. Indeed, writing in response to the pluralists who emphasized the centrality of pressure groups to democratic governance, Schattschneider suggested that parties were the more egalitarian and representative political institutions in American politics because of their closer connection to national elections.

Competition between the political parties for electoral support has long been considered to be central to understanding why parties adopt the positions they do. This chapter takes this insight and seeks to understand its implications for party conflicts. My starting point is the recognition that attention critically shapes the capacity of mass publics to hold political parties accountable for their legislative agendas and policy positions. That is, it mediates the relationship between mass publics and policymakers by shaping electoral risks and reelection prospects. Not only is such a stance widely supported in the literature on retrospective voting (Berry and Howell 2007), policy studies (Schattschnedier 1960; Kingdon 1984; Baumgartner and Jones 1993), and Congress (Arnold 1990; Bonney, Canes-Wronge and Minozzi 2007; Bovitz and Carson

2006), but it also figures into broader considerations about democratic politics including the importance of the media (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Wolfe, Jones and Baumgartner 2012) and candidate campaigning (Petrocik 1996).

What Are Parties Accountable For? Brands, Reputations, and Policy

If attention activates electoral risk, what influences the partisan response? At least since Downs' (1957) seminal work, theoretical treatments of political parties suggest that party brands send powerful cues to voters and are one of the primary means by which parties deliver electoral benefits to their members (see also Aldrich 1995; Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005). Students of political psychology show that 'party images' act as heuristics that enable voters to infer issue positions by using the party affiliation of candidates (Conover and Feldman 1983; Popkin 1991; Koch 2001).

There is ample anecdotal evidence that brand names are the linchpin of electoral accountability. Consider, for example, in the 2008 election when dissatisfaction with Republicans reached an all time high in the wake of two wars and declining economic growth. As reported in the Daily Kos at the time, Republican incumbents responded to the souring state of public opinion by running as 'mavericks,' emphasizing their differences with the party line (2008).

Party brands have arguably become more important as party cohesion has increased because it is increasingly difficult for incumbents to separate their actions in Congress from those of their party. As Morris Fiorina argued in his essay "The Decline of Collective Responsibility in American Politics," stronger parties result in "the subordination of individual officeholders to the party [and] lessens their ability to

separate themselves from party actions. Like it or not their performance becomes identified with the performance of the collectivity” (1980, pp. 26-27). Jones (2010) finds that increasing levels of party polarization has indeed increased electoral accountability amongst the majority party.

Party brands are more than just ideological labels, however. They are composed of collections of issues reputations. Such concern is reflected in the work of Stokes (1963) who suggests that parties compete and voters make decisions across multiple issues, as well as more recent work on the subject of issue ownership in campaigns (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994; Petrocik 1996; Sellers 1998; Sigleman and Buell 2004).

Importantly, conceptualizing party brand names as collections of issue reputations provides a way to connect the dynamics of parties with those of policy agendas. The relevance of any given issue reputation to the parties’ brand varies. In 2008, the issues that defined the election were the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the financial crisis. In 2000, education dominated the campaign. Such changes introduce opportunities for dynamism in congressional parties as weak issue reputations suddenly become an electoral liability as a result of agenda change.

Issue Reputations, Policy Positions and Performance

Despite a scholarly emphasis on the stability of the parties’ issue reputations, change is the norm. Pope and Woon (2008) document changes to the parties’ relative reputations over time and find that although each party tends to have advantages on certain issues, the patterns are far from permanent. They find that Republican advantages

on taxes and ‘law and order’ issues have been undermined over time, though Democrats have had more success in maintaining their advantage on social welfare issues.¹⁰

Changes in perceptions of the parties’ issue reputations likely stem from two sources: policy performance and policy positions.¹¹ The case of the 2008 election highlights the importance of past policy performance. Republican incumbents moderated their positioning – indeed, there was a growing convergence between the two parties during the election – but they still suffered because of their party’s past policy performance. In other words, party (or candidate) positions couldn’t make up for damage. The implications of past policy performance can be lasting and may even give the impression of a more permanent reputational advantage, as happened for Republicans on defense issues following Vietnam.

Party brands are also shaped by policy positions that party leaders advocate. In many ways, positioning provides mass publics an opportunity to assess future policy performance. Andrew Theriault (2012) finds that parties’ expressed positions in Congress are more important in shaping perceptions of issue advantages, than either historical policy performance or the composition of the party coalitions. Pope and Woon’s (2008) consideration of ideological brand names identifies policymakers’

¹⁰ The permanency of the Democratic advantage on social welfare suggests that Republicans have faced few incentives to improve their performance or positioning on issues related to poverty.

¹¹ My designations differ from Petrocik’s (1996) consideration in which he focuses on “the record of the incumbent” (a short-term component) and “constituencies of the parties” (a long-term component). Because party positions for many issues reflect the demands of concerned interests, it is difficult to suggest that position-taking and constituencies represent separate effects. Instead, I parse Petrocik’s notion of the record of the incumbent in two pieces – one that reflects policy positions and one that reflects policy performance.

legislative behavior to be a key source of public opinion, especially for non-incumbent challengers.

None of this should surprise close followers of politics. Consider, for example, the effects of Republican positioning on the payroll tax extension on their party's reputation on taxes. Republicans have held a long-term advantage on the tax issue. Indeed, in many ways it has *defined* the party's brand name since Ronald Reagan. Yet, Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research reported a 10-point swing toward Democrats on the tax issue over the course of the debate – a finding that suggests party issue reputations can be strongly responsive to current political debates.

The Opinion Dynamic: Electoral Liabilities and Partisanship

The preceding discussion reveals the centrality of the parties' issue reputations to their relationship with mass publics. Issue reputations serve to link the fate of party members by tying their electoral fortunes to their collective pursuits for political power. However, along with collective actions comes shared risks and opportunities.

In considering this, we must remember that electoral outcomes are not simply shaped by the record of the incumbent but also the quality of challenger (Hall and Bonneau 2006; Carson, Engstrom and Roberts 2007; Butler 2009). That is, parties exist in a strategic context in which they are evaluated not simply based on their own reputations, but also those of their opponent.

The relative strength and weaknesses of the parties' issue reputations are important because to the extent electoral outcomes are shaped by such evaluations, their effects are realized in a context in which voters are making choices between two parties

and candidates. That is, the parties compete for electoral support and reputations are the currency of exchange. This is what I call the *opinion dynamic*.

There is little doubt that positive issue reputations are electoral assets for party members. But, a positive issue reputation means more when your opponent is weak than when your opponent is viewed equally competent. Similarly, a negative issue reputation is an electoral liability. But, when your opponent is also viewed poorly, the cost of poor branding diminishes considerably.¹²

Ultimately partisanship stems from decisions about when conflict advances the parties' collective goals and when it undermines it. The parties' relative issue reputations critically shape this decision calculus because they affect the attainment of the parties' political objectives – namely, securing an electoral majority. When partisanship undermines a party's electoral opportunities, members face a choice. They can hold steadfast against their opponents, compromising their political objectives in pursuit of policy, or they can compromise their policy objectives in pursuit of a stronger political position. Given that success in the policy realm depends on securing favorable electoral outcomes, the choice really isn't a choice at all for reelection-oriented policymakers.

There is good reason to believe that parties try to transform their electoral liabilities into assets by responding to public opinion even when that means compromise. Patrick Egan (2009) finds that the party disadvantaged on an issue is more than twice as responsive to the median voter, presumably in an effort to regain lost credibility.

Anecdotally, consider that George W. Bush and a Republican House of Representatives

¹² For the most part, anyways. The rise of the Tea Party in the 2010 elections suggests that those dissatisfied with both parties may seek to elect their own candidates, to the dismay of party insiders.

led the charge to vastly expand the federal government's role in education, including one of the largest increases in education funding since 1965 while Republican Richard Nixon joined with congressional Democrats to pass landmark environmental policies in the 1970s. Such events suggest that political parties are not only in tune with what the public is attending to, but also whether they possess any leverage over their opponent.

What this means for party issue alignments is as follows. To the extent political parties accrue reputational disadvantages – as result of poor positioning, policy feedback or historical circumstance – it presents an electoral risk. Whether that electoral risk is transformed into an actual liability depends on whether the issue of concern is on the public's agenda. Changes in the political environment – focusing events, interest group mobilizations, or socioeconomic change – can bring attention to a problem long forgotten and ignored by mass publics. This change transforms an electoral risk into an electoral liability – i.e., from an imagined consequence to an impending one.

This dynamic powerfully changes the decision calculus and increases the likelihood of compromise – either because individual members defect from party leaders or because party leaders herd their members in a different direction. In either case, bipartisanship stems from a steepening of the cost curve associated with being a good partisan. Sometimes, if you can't win, you must compromise.

Data and Measures

To assess how the parties' issue reputations shape their propensity to wage battles and compromise, I utilize a cross-sectional time-series analysis of six issues – economics, defense, environment, education, foreign affairs and crime. These issues encapsulate

some of the most important substantive policymaking areas in contemporary American politics.¹³

In order to consider the influence the reputational disadvantages have on party conflicts, I must take into account both the parties' respective reputations *and* the status of the issue on the agenda. Reputational disadvantages matter little when an issue generates little public concern. In other words, the effect of reputational disadvantage *depends* on the issue's agenda status.

While each of the issues I consider is relatively salient, the extent of public attention has varied considerably over time. Figure 4.1 depicts the percent of respondents who selected the issue as the "most important problem" facing the nation as revealed with data drawn from the Policy Agendas Project. Considerable variability is evident across issues and within the same issue over time.

This variability is essential to testing the implications of the opinion dynamic because according to my theorizing, issue attention transforms reputational disadvantages into electoral liabilities. Without issue attention, a reputational disadvantage has too few electoral implications for party leaders to compromise their policy objectives.

¹³ Additional issues were not included due to data limitations in the data on the parties' respective issue reputations as well as the need for the issues to be cross-walked to the data on party issue alignments. The six included met the data requirements best.

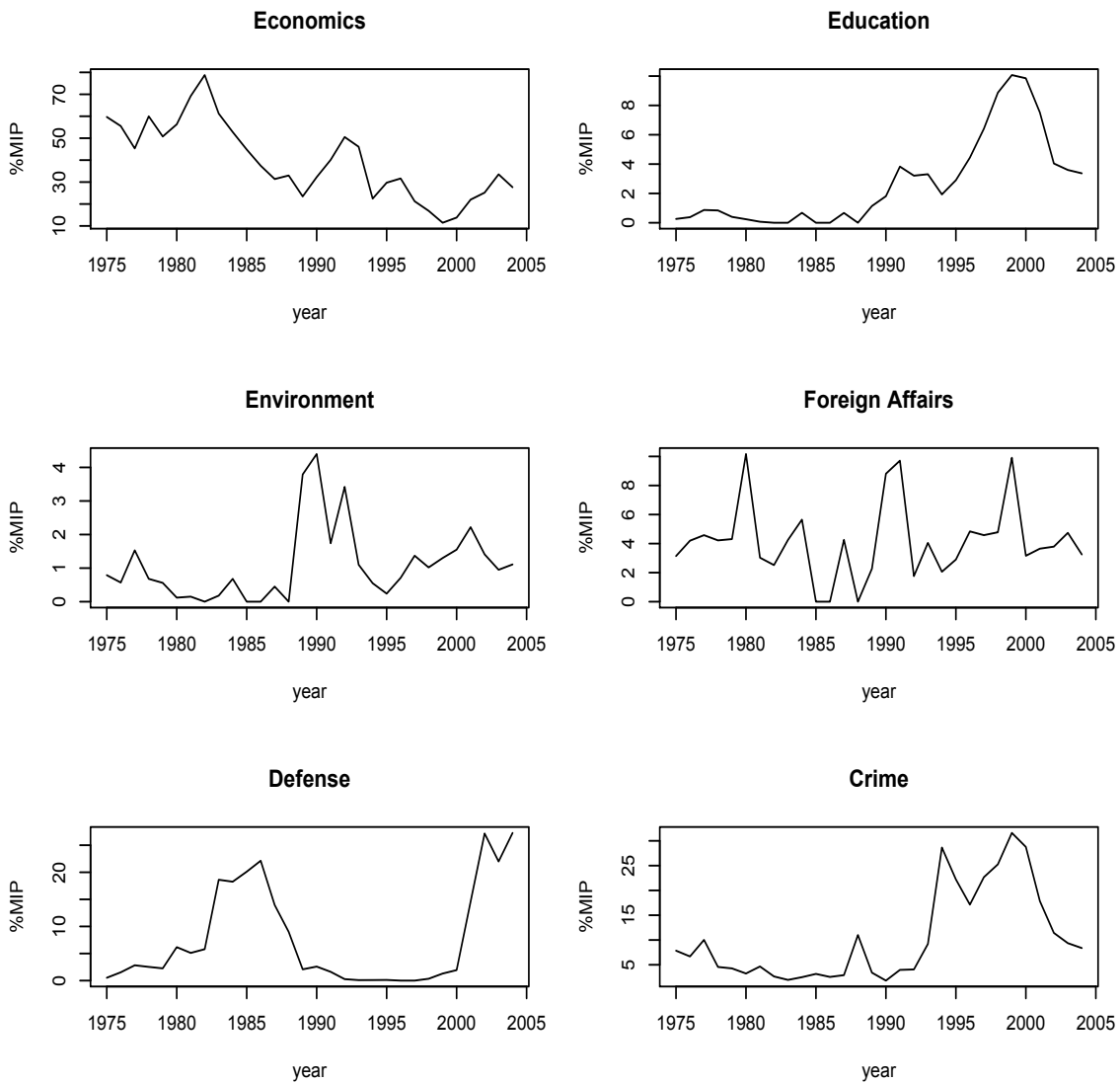


Figure 4.1: Issue Salience Over Time

Notes: Displays percent of respondents indicating a given issue is the "most important problem." Data drawn from the Policy Agendas Project.

In measuring issue salience, I need to capture the extent to which an issue is on the public agenda and shaping party responsiveness to mass publics. Most important problem (MIP) data provide a strong measure of public priorities and a good proxy for the issues in which parties are most responsive to mass publics. In addition, MIP data

provide a consistent and reliable historical record of the public's agenda as well as issue categories that are comparable to those used in my consideration of party issue alignments.

Because MIP questions only capture the top concern of a respondent, rather than the top three or five or ten, they provide a more limited measure of the public agenda given that parties are likely responsive to more than just the top concern. However, as discussed at length by Wleizen (2005), alternatives to MIP data are deficient and often lack the historical record necessary to conduct time-series analysis.

One possible alternative is media attention but an analysis of Policy Agendas Data on *New York Times* topics coverage and most important problem data suggests at best a weak correspondence between public and media attention. With the exception of energy, for which the two measures are correlated at 0.78, the maximum absolute value correlation is a paltry 0.35. The weak correspondence likely has a variety of sources. The media tends to cover not just a greater number of issues but also in greater depth, resulting in a longer attention span and fewer issue-attention cycles. In addition, as discussed by Walgrave and Aeist (2006), the media's agenda setting power is conditional on the kind of issues covered, the specific media outlet, and the sort of coverage. In sum, while at times media attention may closely proxy public attention, other times it is only weakly connected as the media pursues stories for which the public has little concern over.

To consider the parties' issue reputations I follow in the tradition of Petrocik (1996) among others (Petrocik, Benoit and Hansen 2003; Pope and Woon 2009) working

in the “issue ownership” tradition and utilize public opinion data on issue handling. An alternative measure is found in the open-ended ‘likes-dislikes’ questions in the American National Election Studies. Yet, the questions are only asked every two years during national elections and thus are a less comprehensive data source.

To construct a time-series measure of the parties’ respective issue reputations, I compiled data from the iPOLL database at the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. The iPOLL database catalogues public opinion data from all the major polling houses. Using a set of key words (Democrat*, Republic*, better and issue), I identified 452 polls on my six issues from 1980 to 2004. I aggregated data from different polling houses by weighting the results by sample size. A typical question reads, “Which party do you think is better handling _____ issue, the Republican Party or the Democratic Party?” A variety of variants of this wording are used across the different polling houses.

Using these data, I constructed a measure of *reputational disadvantage* based on the absolute value of the difference between the percent of respondents indicating Democrats as better able to handle the issue minus the percent of respondents indicating Republicans.¹⁴ Using the absolute value, rather than a directional difference, is consistent with my focus on party issue alignments. Such alignments – which reflect aggregate levels of partisanship across different issues – are not affected differently when Democrats are advantaged on an issue; in other words, it is the relative differences that shape the extent of conflict, not the direction.

¹⁴ This measure could just as well be conceived as a *reputational advantage* rather than a disadvantage. I focus on disadvantages since it is the disadvantaged party who seeks to save face through compromise. I.e., the dynamics stem from the electoral liabilities, not the assets.

The theoretical range of the measure is 0 to 100 with 0 representing the parties polling equally as well and 100 representing maximal disadvantage. In practice, however, the measure ranges from approximately 0 to 38. A question in which 60 percent of respondents favored Democrats while only 35 percent favored Republicans, would result in an estimated of disadvantage of 25.

Table 4.1 presents summary data on the parties’ respective reputational disadvantages across the six issues I consider. As is evident, reputational disadvantage varies considerably both in terms of the average disadvantage and the variance in disadvantage over time. Foreign affairs, for example, exhibits both a higher mean – suggesting more sustained disadvantages over time – and a higher variance – suggesting more volatility over time.

Table 4.1: Reputational Disadvantage Across Issues		
Issue	Mean	St. Dev.
Crime	8.09	3.6
Economics	10.52	5.78
Education	12.87	5.01
Defense	14.42	8.87
Foreign Affairs	15.57	10.16
Environment	23.05	7.11

Notes: Presents the average and standard deviation for reputational disadvantage. Reputational disadvantage is measured based on the differences in perceived competencies between Republicans and Democrats. Higher values indicate greater disadvantage. Author compiled data.

Figure 4.2 presents summary time series data for the six issues. Most of the issues I consider go through periods in which the parties have polled equally well and other periods in which one party is viewed significantly more competently than the other.

Consider, for example the case of defense in which moderate reputational disadvantage persisted throughout the 1990s and then accelerated in the early 2000s, in the aftermath of 9/11. Of all the issues I consider, environmentalism reflects the most long-standing and persistent reputational disadvantages. While an ebb and flow is still apparent, the differences between the parties run deeper.

In considering how the parties' relative reputations evolve in response to legislative enactments and exogenous shocks, patterning is also evident. In education, differences between the parties decline in the early 2000s when the No Child Left Behind Act was passed by bipartisan coalitions in Congress and the support of Republican President George W. Bush. In the case of foreign affairs, reputational disadvantages nearly disappear during the period of relative peace and prosperity of the 1990s.

These variations reveal just how responsive the parties' issue reputations are to the twin movers of policy performance and policy positioning. Reputations can be long-standing – environmental issues, for example, exhibit sustained differences between the parties' reputations, with Democrats historically holding the upper hand. But, they also evolve considerably over time providing strong evidence in favor of the notion that reputational disadvantages can be overcome.

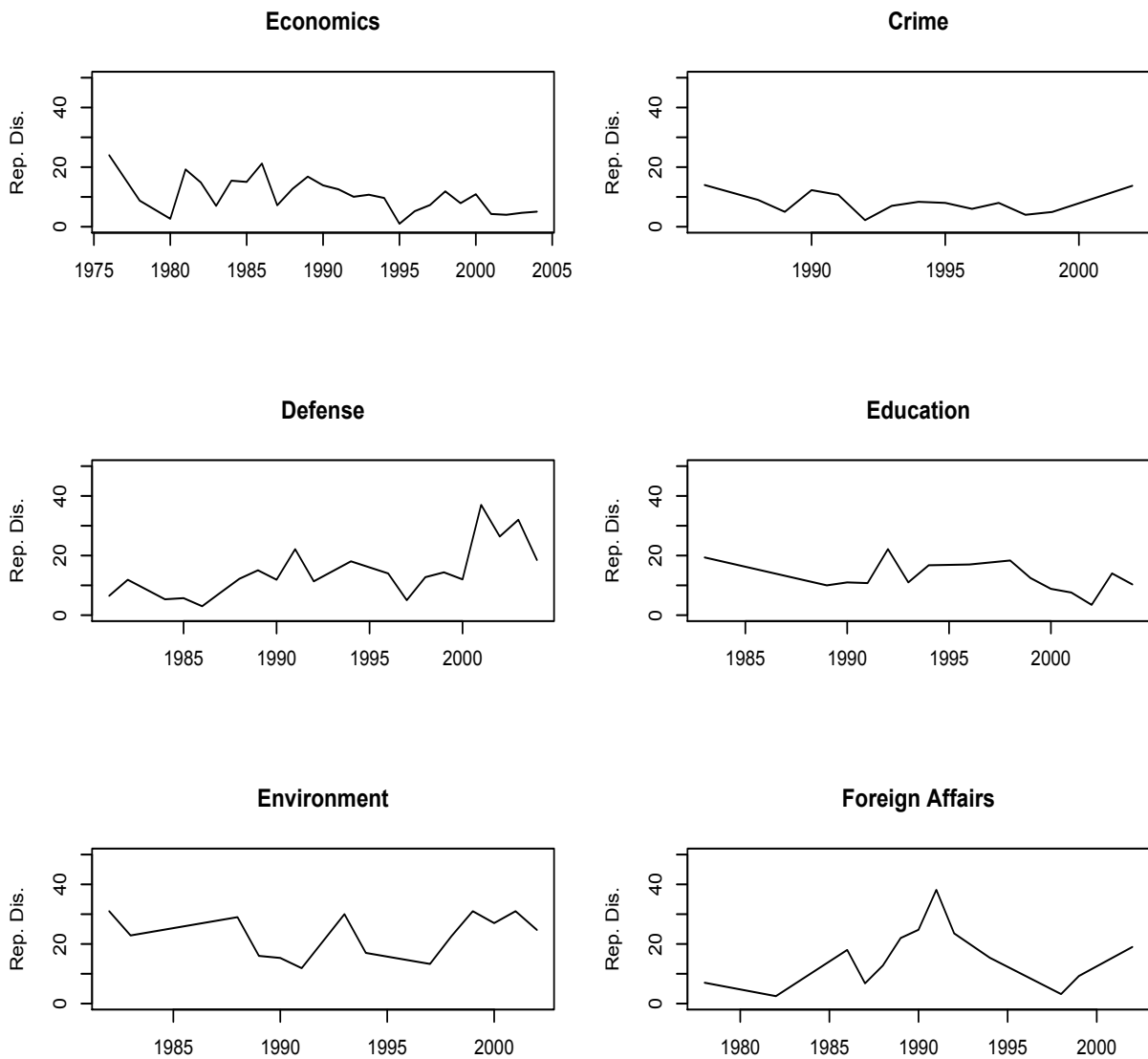


Figure 5.2. Reputational Disadvantage Across Six Issues, 1980-2004

Notes: Presents data on reputational disadvantage calculated for the following issues: economics, defense, environment, foreign affairs, education and crime. Reputational disadvantage is measured based on the absolute value of the differences in perceived competencies between Republicans and Democrats. Higher values indicate greater disadvantage. Data compiled by author.

The Political Limits of Partisanship

The opinion dynamic suggests that when issues become salient, a reputational disadvantage becomes an electoral liability, thereby increasing the weaker party's incentive to compromise. This suggests that not only do the parties' respective issue reputations matter, but that they matter differentially depending on the salience of issues on the agenda. To assess this dynamic systematically, I conduct a cross-sectional time-series analysis across the six issues from 1980 through 2004. My primary explanatory variables are issue salience, reputational disadvantage and an interaction term that tests the conditional relationship.

In addition to the key explanatory variables discussed above, I include a variety of controls. Issue specific controls include presidential attention, as measured by mentions in the State of the Union address (%) and the percent of procedural and amendment votes to account for potentially noteworthy variation in the composition of the congressional voting agenda. Francis Lee (2009) argues that presidential attention enhances party differences because of their role as party leaders. At the same time, as discussed in Chapter Three, political parties often more readily fight over procedure and amendments, rather than final passage (Theriault 2008).

In addition to these, I include a variety of political controls that may potentially affect party conflicts, including divided government (1=divided, 0=unified), the size of the House majority party, the extent of ideological polarization as measured by DW-NOMINATE scores, and election year politics (1=election, 0=no election). All of these

are part of a basic political context that would be expected to affect political parties, regardless of the issue in question.

Table 4.2 presents a linear fixed-effects unbalanced panel model (estimated with PLM for R) with standard errors reported in parentheses. The coefficient for reputational disadvantage, as measured by the absolute difference between Democratic and Republican favorability, is positive but not significant while issue salience is positive and significant. However, one cannot interpret these effects alone – the inclusion of the interaction term requires we examine their conditional influence as well as consider the conditional standard errors. The interaction term in this case is negative and statistically significant. Looking at the conditional effects suggests that the effect of reputational disadvantage shifts from positive to negative as attention increases. In practice, this means that as attention to an issue grows, the effect of disadvantage on partisanship becomes negative, meaning that bipartisanship increases for every unit increase in disadvantage.

To get a more complete picture of how reputational disadvantage shapes party conflicts, Figure 4.3 presents the conditional effect estimated using simulations along with 90 percent confidence intervals. The x-axis reflects a range of values for issue attention, as measured by MIP data. The y-axis reflects the predicted change in party conflict with a one standard deviation increase in reputational disadvantage. This change reflects an 8 percent increase in reputational disadvantage, roughly the equivalent of the growth in disadvantage faced by Democrats on foreign affairs in the aftermath of 9/11.

The line plots the predicted conditional effects on partisanship where negative values indicate a predicted decrease in partisanship.

Table 4.2: Attention, Reputations and Party Differences	
<u>Explanatory Variables</u>	
Reputational Disadvantage	0.24 (0.27)
Issue Salience	0.41** (0.19)
Issue Salience * Reputational Disadvantage	-0.03** (0.01)
<u>Controls</u>	
Ideological Polarization	0.78*** (0.19)
Presidential Attention	0.1 (0.18)
Election Year	-6.95** (2.83)
House Majority	0.09 (0.06)
Divided Government	1.07 (3.55)
Procedural Votes	0.35** (0.15)
Amendment Votes	0.35 (0.08)
<u>Model Statistics</u>	
F-Statistic	6.34
N	89

Notes: Estimated using a linear fixed effects unbalanced panel model using PLM package for R. Standard errors reported in parentheses. *p < .10, **p < .05, ***p < .01 (two-tailed)

At low levels of issue salience, the conditional effect of reputational disadvantage is not significant, as reflected by the fact that the confidence intervals cross the zero boundary line. This suggests that the parties' reputations are largely inconsequential when the public is not attending to the issue in question, as theorized. However, when issue salience increases to 10 percent, a one standard deviation increase in reputational disadvantage has the effect of decreasing partisanship by approximately 6 points and the effect is statistically significant. Another 5 percent increase in salience results in double

the impact: a 12 point decrease in partisanship. For the most salient issues – drawing the concern of 25 percent or more of the public, the effect is pronounced: a one standard deviation increase in reputational disadvantage decreases partisanship by nearly 30 points.

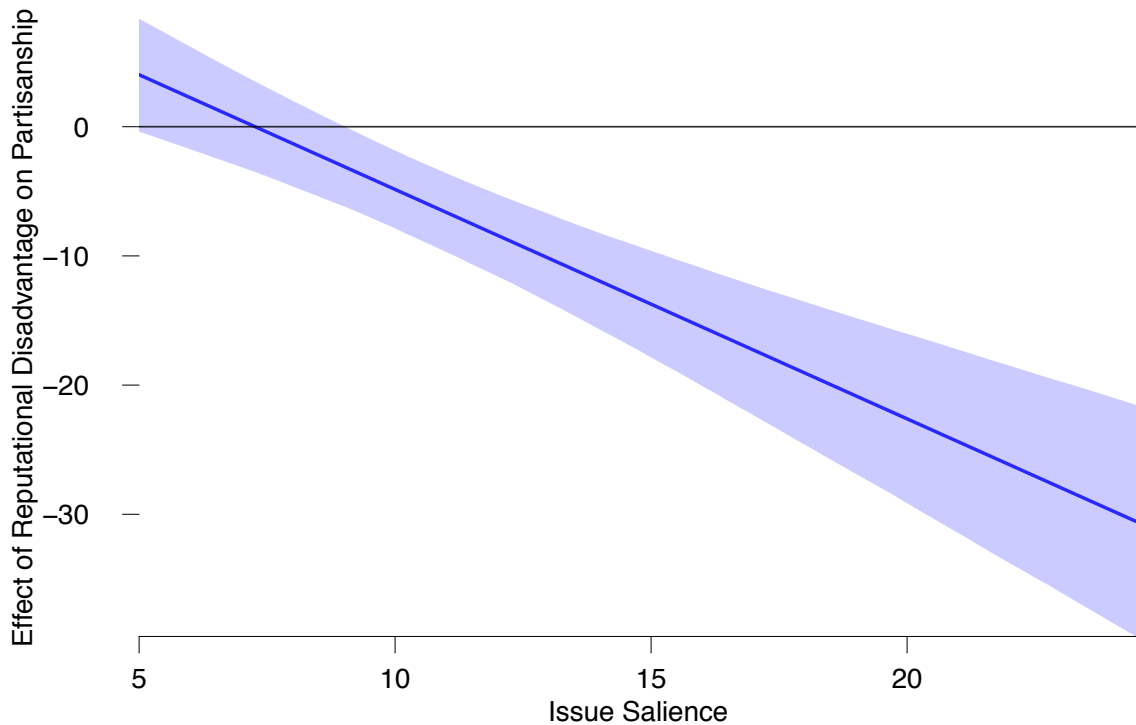


Figure 4.3 Predicted Effect of Reputational Disadvantage Notes: Figure displays the conditional predicted effect of reputational disadvantage on partisanship at varying levels of issue salience. The y-axis displays the predicted change in partisanship given a one standard deviation change in reputational disadvantage.

These differences are substantively significant. If a partisan issue like economics on average reflect a 55 point gap between the parties – indicating that a majority of each party is acting in opposition – the conditional effect of a poor reputation and high levels of issue attention would cut that gap by more than *half*, essentially transforming a partisan issue into a bipartisan one. Given the razor thin margins that increasingly

determine whether significant pieces of legislation are passed, such differences have profound implications for legislative productivity.

Interestingly, many of the issue-specific and political controls are not significant. Presidential attention – highlighted prominently in Francis Lee’s consideration of partisanship in the Senate, is not significant. The lack of effect is perhaps not surprising in consideration of the parties’ desire to maintain positive issue reputations on salient issues. Presidents are likely to be particularly susceptible to such effects given their reliance on national majorities to win reelection and the importance of policy performance to evaluating presidential administrations. History suggests that Presidents tend to select issues for which there is broad support for reform – Nixon on environmental protection, Reagan on economic policy, Clinton on welfare, and George W. Bush on education. Such issues are less likely to engage partisan bickering to the extent that the president utilizes the bully pulpit to successfully raise attention to his or her agenda.

Of the remaining control variables, only ideological polarization (as measured by DW-NOMINATE scores) and the percent of procedural votes are significant. Not surprisingly, as aggregate ideological differences between the parties grows, so does the extent of partisanship. Because parties often operate most effectively on procedural issues for which they can more readily ignore constituent preferences, procedural votes tend to be more partisan.

The Changing Politics of Education Reform

To illustrate these dynamics further, I turn my attention to the case of education reform for which I began in Chapter One. Since President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, party conflicts have evolved considerably. What started out as a no-strings attached commitment to federal funding expanded to include a cabinet-level department (established by President Jimmy Carter in 1979) and later a set of complicated federal regulatory guidelines governing the use of federal education funds. Figure 4.4 presents aggregate data on partisanship from 1975 through 2004.

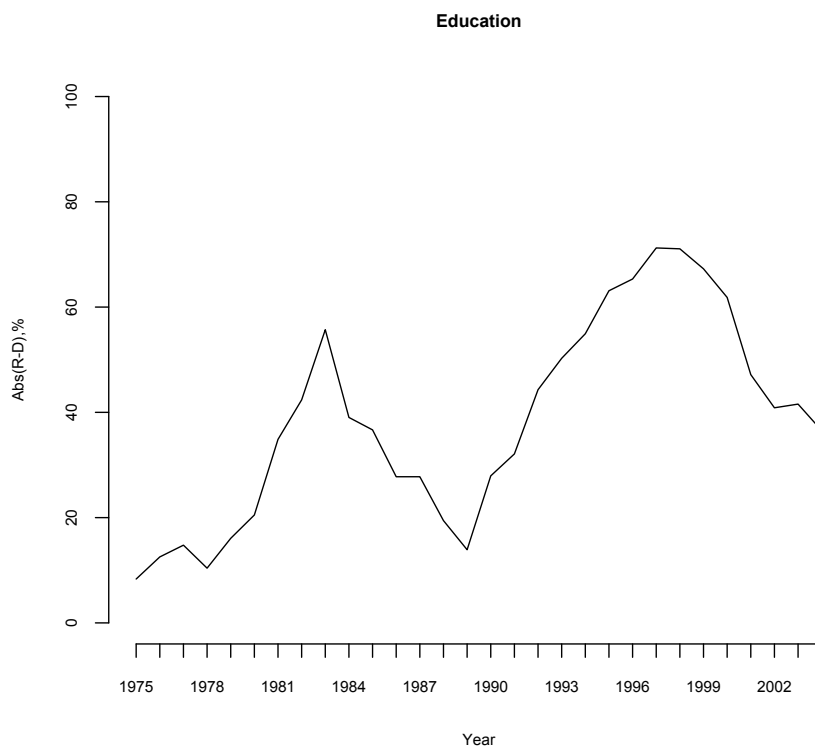


Figure 4.4 Partisanship in Education, 1975-2004 Y-axis represents the absolute value of the average difference between the voting records of Republicans and Democrats. Source: Author compiled data.

As Republicans integrated conservative Evangelicals and Southerners into the party coalition, disagreements between the parties expanded over the use of funds to resolve persistent patterns of segregation and inequality in the schools. Yet, despite the seeming permanency of these divides – with their emphasis on fundamental issues like race and the size of government – Republican positioning on education has evolved considerably over time, eventually cumulating with a convergence in the late 1990s and early 2000s. It was during this period of realignment that the Republican party, led by President George W. Bush and John Boehner, joined together with Democrats in both the House and the Senate to pass the No Child Left Behind Act, a landmark education law that vastly expanded the federal government’s role and authority over education. The photograph taken at the bill signing ceremony exemplified the political moment – House Speaker John Boehner, Senator Teddy Kennedy and President George W. Bush stood together to mark a new beginning in federal education policy.

The changing politics of education reveals a remarkable puzzle: why did a Republicans come to champion one of the biggest expansions of a domestic policy program, including the largest single increase in education funding in some 40 years? The interest group dynamics had certainly not changed between the early- to mid-1990s, when party differences in education reached an all-time high.

What had changed was the electoral environment. Table 4.3 presents data on the relative ranking of education as the “most important problem” in every presidential election since 1976. Between 1976 and 2000, education went from a little noticed issue to being the number one issue in the 2000 election. The rise of education was due in part

to the times – the late 1990s were characterized by a period of relative peace and economic growth, limiting the effect of agenda crowding. Growing concerns over trends in academic achievement also raised its importance in the minds of voters. But, it was also the result of concerted efforts by Democrats to highlight education as an important political issue. As Patrick McGuinn discusses (2006), Clinton began a counteroffensive against the Republican-led Congress by declaring education to be his first priority. In doing so, Clinton took an issue with broad public support for which his party already enjoyed strong advantages on and helped to make it an electoral issue by using the bully pulpit to portray Republican cuts as an affront to middle class values.

Table 4.3. Ranking of Education in Presidential Elections, 1976-2004

Year	Candidates	Relative Ranking of Education
1976	Carter-Ford	Not listed
1980	Carter-Reagan	23rd
1984	Mondale-Reagan	17th
1988	Dukakis-Bush	8th
1992	Clinton-Bush	5th
1996	Clinton-Dole	2nd
2000	Gore-Bush	1st
2004	Kerry-Bush	5th

Notes: Table reports the ranking of education with respect to education in every presidential election since 1976. Source: McGuinn (2006)

While education was slowly but steadily rising on the agenda throughout the 1990s, Republicans did not initially respond with calls for compromise. Indeed, when Republicans came to power in 1995, they advanced a Contract with America that was decidedly conservative on education issues. They promised to fulfill Ronald Reagan’s 1980 campaign pledge to eliminate the Department of Education, advanced new proposals to privatize education and proposed significant cuts to education spending.

These moves may have satisfied key components of the party’s coalition but they were not nationally viable positions. A poll taken in 1994 found that a whopping 70 percent of respondents believed the Department of Education to be “very necessary” (NBC News/Wall Street Journal 1994). According to a Phi Beta Kappa poll in the late 1990s, the public supported *more* federal oversight, was reluctant to turn over public dollars to private schools, and favored greater investments in education, rather than reductions (McGuinn 2006).

The mismatch between Republican’s pursued policy objectives and public opinion is well reflected in the party’s issue reputation during this period. While Democrats have long held an advantage on the issue, it increased throughout the 1990s. Table 4.4 presents four years of data on the parties’ reputations on education from 1996 through 2002, one year after the passage of the NCLB. Republican’s attack on national standards and the Department of education between 1995 and 1996, coupled with their nomination of Bob Dole, who endorsed party planks on school choice and prayer, just worsened the party’s prospects on this electorally important issue.

Party	1996	1998	2000	2002
Republican Party	27%	26%	32%	41%
Democratic Party	44%	46%	40%	44%

The story these data tell is clear: Republicans faced mounting political costs to their pursuit of a partisan policy agenda on education. As Al Gore said in response to the efforts of Gingrich and the Republican-led house, “[Republicans are creating] the most

anti-education Congress in the history of the country.” As Bill Galston discusses in an interview with Patrick McGuinn (2006):

Republicans weren’t able to make more progress with their assault of the federal role in education because they didn’t have much credibility with the public on the issue—they were not seen as defenders of public education. Calls for the [department’s] abolition... could easily be heard by the public as retrenchment of the national commitment to and federal role in education, and this was opposed by public (p. 111).

As the costs associated with the party’s position mounted, moderates in the party began to worry. Diane Ravitch, a former Reagan administration education official, warned that “a vote to repeal [the pursuit of educational standards] undoubtedly would be countered by a veto. Even if successful, repeal would send an unfortunate message that the new Congress is against academic standards” (quoted in McGuinn 2006, p.31). Jim Herni of the conservative Heritage Foundation would later observe, “the conservatives clearly lost the message war on education” in the 1990s.

It took losing the presidential election in 1996 to trigger renewed thinking about how Republicans could transform their electoral liabilities into assets. Doing so would require they abandon their more partisan policy objectives, shift their positions towards their more advantaged counterparts (Democrats), and ultimately compromise on landmark education reform.

Congressional Republicans began to do just that by softening their opposition to Democrats after their losses in the 1996 presidential elections (see Figure 4.4). Dole’s

defeat led to a rethinking of the parties' strategy on education. This led to bipartisan agreements for increasing funding, including more than \$7 billion in 1997 alone, as well as a reconsideration of how the federal government should target education dollars. By 1999, when the ESEA came up for reauthorization, Republicans countered Clinton's ambitious proposal based on his earlier legislative efforts with the "Academic Achievement for All Act," a plan noteworthy not just for its comprehensiveness but also for its interventionist approach to federal education policy.

These moves brought Republicans and Democrats closer than ever before but ultimately, it was the nomination and later election of George W. Bush and his championing of the No Child Left Behind Act (which closely resembled President Clinton's earlier reauthorization proposal) that solidified Republican's improved positioning on education. By 2002, the Republican disadvantage had nearly evaporated, reflecting a 17-point gain on Democrats in a matter of just 4 years.

It is important to note that upon the election of George W. Bush, Republicans could have sought to pursue a more conservative education reform agenda. After all, they held slim majorities in both houses of Congress (at least, before Republican Jim Jeffords of Vermont decided to caucus with Democrats in June of 2001). The fact that they came to agree on the No Child Left Behind Act suggests the power of the opinion dynamic to constrain party leaders, whether they have majority party status or not.

Conclusion

This chapter clearly shows that mass publics are important shapers of party conflicts. Parties may be elite oriented institutions, who exploit public inattentiveness to

pursue their partisan policy objectives. But, those same partisan policy objectives depend critically on cultivating positive issue reputations when issues rise on the agenda. Issue reputations are the currency of electoral competition – they are the very basis of what mass publics use to evaluate political parties. On salient issues, such evaluations have the potential to profoundly impact the ability of the party to secure its political objectives.

The power of mass publics to influence party issue alignments is in some ways surprising. After all, partisans often engage in media warfare in an effort to reframe political debates to their advantage. Thus, in 2010, the ongoing debate among Republicans and Democrats was whether the Great Recession was a ‘debt crisis’ or a ‘jobs crisis.’ Clearly such efforts at *heresthetics*, as Riker (1980) called them, are an important component of politics. Indeed, when effective, framing enables the weakened party to sacrifice less in pursuit of the party’s collective electoral benefits. But, as the payroll tax debate so clearly illustrates, it is not always effective, especially to the extent that the issue results in the imposition of real and direct costs or benefits. Furthermore, there is good reason to believe that weak issue reputations also undermine the ability of the party to reframe the debate in their favor – simply put, they are not credible.

With images of gridlock and petty bickering dominate the news headlines (and in many ways, the scholarly ones as well), it often seems like compromise is forever out of reach. However, the analyses presented in this chapter suggest that the failure to be responsive to popular concern on salient issues comes with significant costs. As reputational disadvantage increases as a result of policy failures, parties lose the leverage

they require to advance their partisan policy objectives. In other words, it pays to be responsive, or at least it does when people are paying attention.

The results presented in this chapter also have important implications for our understanding of legislative productivity and policy change. They suggest that a key reason that landmark laws are passed by bipartisan majorities, even in this age of polarization, is because political parties seek to be responsive to mass publics. Such problem solving activities, as Adler and Wilkerson (2013) call them, may not make headlines, but they do matter for our understanding of American politics. Understanding why parties cooperate does not require we abandon a strategic, inherently political conception of political parties. Cooperation and conflict are really two sides of the same coin, and both have roots in the parties' competition for political power.

CHAPTER 5. MOBILIZATION DYNAMICS

The dynamic of politics has its origin in strife.

- E. E. Schattschneider, 1957

In the early 1990s, a battle unfolded between the Clinton administration and congressional Republicans over public lands policy. Clinton and congressional Democrats wanted to reduce or eliminate grazing and timber sales on public lands while Republicans wanted to preserve industry access to national resources. The fight resulted in quite a political drama, with the Clinton administration bypassing a deadlocked Congress to protect wide swaths of public lands through presidential proclamations, a strategy that Republicans viewed as undercutting the legislative role of Congress.

In contrast to the emerging political struggle over public lands, the same period might be considered a low point for conflict over energy issues, a surprising phenomenon considering environmentalists had pressed for regulation of the industry and investments in clean energy sources since at least the 1970s. Instead of pushing for expanded regulation, congressional Democrats and the pro-environmentalist Clinton White House continued former President George H.W. Bush's effort to encourage deep-water oil and

gas exploration, support federal subsidization of oil extraction technology, and expand other oil and gas subsidies (Joskow 2001), who faced record low profits in the face of declining oil prices.

The divergent trajectories exhibited in energy and public lands issues in the early 1990s reveal an important puzzle about the relationship between organized groups and the parties' coalitions. Both issues involve classic debates between environmentalists and consumer advocates on the one hand, and industry interests on the other. However, neither has consistently divided the parties over time – public lands became more partisan in the 1990s at a time when the parties were converging on energy issues. What explains these dynamics?

E. E. Schattschneider observed more than a half a century ago that conflict begets conflict in politics. This chapter takes this fundamental insight into American politics and considers its implication for parties. My starting point is the recognition that when issues fall off the public agenda, the community of issue advocates and interest groups with a stake in an issue become the dominant players in shaping party issue alignments. This chapter considers how changes in this community – mobilizations and counter mobilizations that shift the alignment of interests – alter the incentives of parties to wage battles.

In the remaining pages of this chapter, I first discuss scholarly work on the relationship between groups and parties. Then I develop a framework for thinking about how changes in the alignment of interests come to shape party conflicts – what I call the *mobilization dynamic*. Next, I review the research design choices I made to study these

dynamics. The final section depicts my empirical consideration of four issues – agriculture, energy, transportation and public lands.

Groups and Parties in American Politics

Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, the proliferation of advocacy groups in Washington, DC accelerated. The emergence of new groups with fresh policy demands destabilized the policymaking environments for a wide variety of issues, leading to a vast expansion of the national policy agenda and the emergence of new programs. Groups with privileged access to American policymaking institutions became threatened, as new groups entered the political fray, including environmentalists, consumers, and civil rights activists. But, while these political developments have been well documented by political scientists (e.g., Baumgartner and Jones 1993), we know little of their effect on political parties or their alignments on the issues.

If the “shared fate” that unites party members in opposition is unrelated to the contours of advocacy coalitions with a stake in the issue, then interest group mobilizations should be of little consequence. That is, the parties’ drive for political power is largely independent of the makeup of policy demanders. If, on the other hand, issue contestation among groups drives the parties to differentiate their positions to gain supporters, then group mobilizations should destabilize party issue alignments and politicize issues previously left out of party divisions.

Separate or Shared Interests?

Political parties and groups in many ways represent opposite approaches to the study of American politics. Group theories of politics had their origins in the pluralist

tradition of Arthur Bentley and Robert Dahl. The conceptual ideal of the pluralists – multiple and shifting lines of conflict – is antithetical to the notion of strong, cohesive parties organized along an ideological dimension of conflict. While groups are motivated by their intense interest in policy, parties are motivated by the need to win elections (Schattschneider 1960).

Yet, observers of politics have long recognized the long-term alignments between issue advocates, ideological activists, and parties. Consider, for example, the common portrayal of Republicans as the party of business and Democrats as the party of unions. If parties are vehicles of policymaking and governing, then groups have powerful motivations to seek access and influence over them, especially given the increase in the majority party's legislative power since the 1970s.

More contemporary students of political parties argue that groups and parties exist in a representative relationship. Cohen, Karol, Noel and Zaller's (2008) consideration of Presidential nominating contests suggest that elites – groups, activists and others – have outsized influence over the selection of party candidates. Masket's (2007) consideration of the period of cross-filing in California from 1914 through 1959, which enabled incumbents to bypass elite control of the nominating contests by running under both party labels simultaneously, suggests that parties have few reasons to wage battles when groups lack control over candidate selection. He finds that without elite influence, party coalitions weakened substantially and other more ephemeral voting coalitions materialized. As he concludes “only when outsiders who desire something from

government have the will and the means to control party nominations will legislative parties actually fight each other” (p. 495).

While selection processes are an important source of group influence, one that is often more visible given the dynamics of campaigns and elections, groups also have strong potential to influence parties through more indirect pathways. Indeed, the more conventional depiction of groups’ relationship with policymakers suggests that groups act to pressure reelection sensitive policymakers prior to and after elections (Kingdon 1979).

In his book on party position change, David Karol (2009) identifies strong evidence that position change is driven just as much by conversion as it is by electoral replacement, a finding that suggests groups do not simply rely on nominating contests to exert pressure on political parties. He suggests that conversions are most influential in cases of coalition maintenance, when party-linked groups change their position on an existing policy issue (as did unions on the trade issue), and coalition expansion, when the party adopts a position to please new constituencies (as Republicans did for Evangelicals on the issue of abortion).

Regardless of the specific underlying mechanisms, it is evident that groups offer important political resources to parties, resources that if withheld would hamstring the parties’ ability to form coalitions and govern effectively. These include material resources related to campaign contributions and “boots on the ground,” informational resources that provide needed evidence for policy development, and less tangible resources such as legitimacy that are important for governing. In turn, groups operating through parties (rather than, for example, independently by lobbying policymakers) are

able to get more of their policy demands satisfied than otherwise (Bawn, Cohen, Karol, Masket, Noel and Zaller 2012).

When Conflict Begets Conflict: Mobilizations and Parties

The symbiotic relationship between groups and parties suggests that not only are party positions constrained by groups, but also that new conflicts can emerge as a result of changes within the community of advocacy coalitions with a stake in the issue.

Changes in the alignment of interests stem from *mobilizations* that either result in the creation of new groups (e.g., environmentalists in the 1960s) or a change in the policy demands of existing groups (e.g., environmentalists targeted oil spill regulation in the aftermath of the Exxon Valdez oil spill).

There is ample reason to suspect that mobilizations are an important source of dynamism in party conflicts. To the extent that mobilizations increase the confrontation between those seeking to maintain the status quo and those seeking change, they should increase the extent of conflict between the parties as groups shop their policy ideas to potential supporters. In this sense, issue contestation among groups is a precursor to party conflict without which, parties will be hard pressed to sustain differences over time because doing so delivers little in the way of political benefit. As Baumgartner, Berry, Hojnacki, Leech and Kimball (2009, p. 76) suggest, “the existence of conflict [within the interest group community] immediately increases the chances that others will be drawn into or begin to observe the policy debate. Conflict attracts attention. As interested others...become aware that an issue is contested, they too may ‘choose sides,’ thereby increasing the chances for greater and more visible conflict.”

Figure 5.1 depicts how interest groups mobilizations can shift the incentives of the parties to wage battles – what I call the mobilization dynamic. In the left panel, an uncontested issue is depicted by a single advocacy coalition characterized by a set of groups and advocates with similar policy demands, beliefs and interests in policy. This is a classic policy monopoly characterized by the predominance of a given set of interests, weak opposition, and little competition over policy ideas. Examples of such issues abound in American politics – the expansion of the nuclear power industry in the 1950s or the subsidization of tobacco farmers up until the 1970s, for example. These issues lack politically relevant opponents. To win supporters in this context, parties must adopt positions similarly supportive to the advocacy coalition in question. Differentiating their positions only alienates potential supporters for little political benefit.

The right-panel reveals what happens when the mobilization of new groups destabilizes the existing alignment and brings new policy demands, beliefs, and interests to bear on an issue. As Baumgartner and Jones (1993) discuss, such mobilizations often rise on a wave of criticism of those interests with privileged access to policymaking institutions and competition for political support (and power) makes some policymakers receptive to such calls. The mobilization dynamic suggests that issue contestation *activates* political parties by giving partisans a political reason to be different, to fight. It creates the potential for political windfalls, as the parties seek out new supporters or remain loyal to old friends.

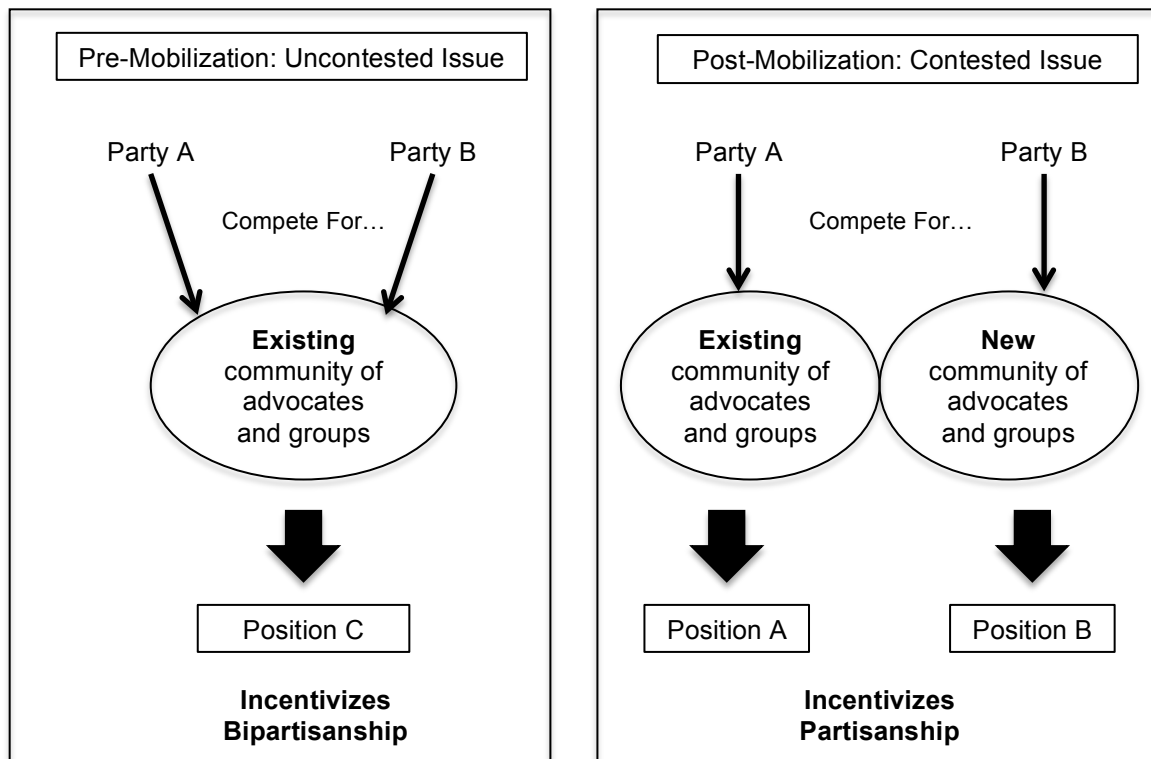


Figure 5.1. The Mobilization Dynamic: As the Alignment of Interests Shifts, So Do the Incentives of Parties to Wage Battles

It is worth pausing for a moment here to consider why parties are more likely to polarize their positions in this scenario rather than bridge the differences across interests, a process that would likely lead to more bipartisanship. The latter dynamic is unlikely because interest groups and issue advocates tend to hold intense policy preferences that are largely immutable (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993). Simply put, compromises are rarely satisfactory to interest groups and other elites (though, they are often popular with mass publics). As a result, parties won't be very effective at cultivating group support if they regularly engage in compromise. Anecdotally, this seems to be the case with groups often engaging in tough criticism in response to the forging of bipartisan agreements that

often compromise, at least some of, their interests. Empirically, Aldrich (1983) shows formally that a model of electoral competition that includes party activists results in a polarization of party positions.

Where do mobilizations come from? How relevant are they? Policy process scholars have discussed how social and economic crises can stimulate the creation of new political organizations (Truman 1951; Lowi 1969; Walker 1991) and how policy itself generates new demands for lobbying (Leech, Baumgartner, La Pira, and Semanko 2005). Mobilizations can also stem from the interaction of advocacy coalitions in a given issue arena. Consider, for example, efforts by business to side-step environmental regulations during the Reagan era actually emboldened environmentalists, leading them to take their cause to new venues (Kraft and Vig 2000, p. 14). As Truman (1951, p. 59) discusses:

When a single association is formed, it serves to stabilize the relations among the participants and the institutionalized groups involved. At the same time, however, in the performance of its function it may cause disturbances in the equilibriums of other groups or *accentuate cleavages among them* (emphasis mine).

As discussed by Lowery, Gray, Wolka, Godwin and Kilburn (2005), scholars generally speak of mobilizations occurring in two time frames – long and short. Long-term mobilizations are decades long equilibrating processes around macro-level interests like business, while short-term mobilizations are purely tactical responses to increase lobbying. When scholars consider the impact of mobilizations on parties, it is of the long-range variety that is their focus (see, for example, Karol 2009; Scholzman 2011).

But, short-term mobilizations are a potentially important source of dynamism in party conflicts over time. Indeed, the varying patterns presented in Chapter Three are more consistent with short-term changes in group mobilizations than long-term changes, the latter of which would be characterized by greater degree of stability in party issue alignments.

To illustrate the difference, consider Figure 5.2, which portrays two types of interest group activity among environmental groups: the formation of new organizations (a long-term activity) and witness testimony at congressional hearing (a short-term activity). Group formation is a far less volatile when compared to testimony delivery. This likely stems from the fact that the creation of new groups is more dependent on the flow of resources from wealthy patrons (Walker 1991). In contrast, short-term mobilizations are more likely to reflect strategic concerns among groups already in existence and be more responsive to changes in the external environment (the emergence of new problems, for example).

This is not to say that group formation is unimportant. In the decades immediately following World War II, group formation likely outstripped other types of interest group activity in terms of political impact (Baumgartner and Jones 1993, Chapter 9). However, short-term mobilizations represent an understudied phenomenon in both the interest group and parties literature and a potentially more fruitful venue for exploring the relationship between changes in the alignment of interests and party conflicts.

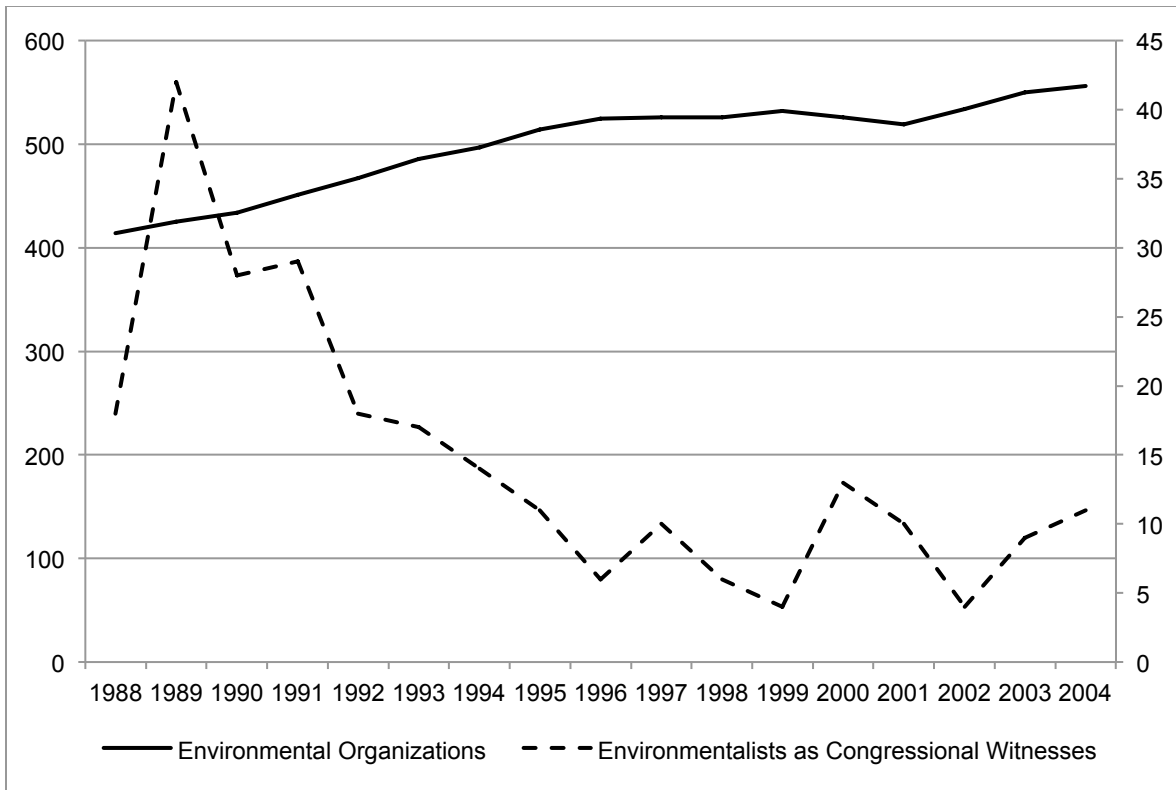


Figure 5.2: Two Types of Group Mobilization

Source: Data on environmental organizations drawn from Policy Agendas Project. Data on environmental witnesses at congressional hearings author collected.

Two insights are suggested from these considerations. First, issues for which there is greater competition among interests with different policy demands will be characterized by higher levels of party conflict. The logic of this hypothesis is straightforward and stems from the representative relationship among groups and parties on the one hand and the varying degree and intensity with which interest groups make their demands on the other. The implication of this hypothesis is that the most partisan issues will also be characterized by a greater diversity of interests, recognizing that party conflicts are often based around competing policy demands.

Yet, revealing differences across issues is not enough to suggest that issue contestation among group hardens the partisan battle lines. After all, such issues could be differentially affected by the shared ideological concerns of members. A better test would show that a *change* in the alignment of interests is associated with a *change* in party divisions. In other words, mobilizations that increase the diversity of interests and conflicts among them will be associated with growing differences between the parties as they strategically seek out political support amongst concerned interests.

Whereas the first hypothesis emphasizes differences across issues (as revealed in a cross-sectional comparison), this hypothesis suggests within issue variation in group mobilizations and party conflict over time (a temporal comparison). If correct, it suggests that as issue contestation among groups fades from view, party divisions will collapse – a finding that cannot be predicted based on any of the existing perspectives on party issue alignments. Importantly, it suggests there is nothing inherent about a particular issue that generates partisan conflict, a key precept of both ideological conceptions of politics and Lowi-esque policy typologies; instead, it is the alignment of interests around an issue that creates conflict.

Research Approach

I adopt a comparative case study approach that considers how changes in the relative of power of business and public interest groups from 1988 through 2004 have impacted party conflicts in four similar issue areas: agriculture, transportation, energy and public lands. Not only is the focus on issues consistent with the broader theme of the dissertation but it enables me to trace changes in the intensity with which similar sets of

groups (environmentalists, consumer activists, and labor unions) are pursuing different issues, thereby enabling a test of whether or not groups operate to constrain parties universally or whether their influence is conditional on the intensity with which they have mobilized.

The cases were chosen deliberately so as to maximize variability in how party divisions have evolved while holding constant the specific policy attributes that could shape those divisions. All four issues exhibit similar mixes amongst distributive and regulatory policies. This is important given the centrality ideological conceptions of politics have played in considerations of political parties.

Perhaps more importantly, each of these issues are characterized by a similar sets of competing interest groups – business and industry interests who seek lax regulation and subsidization on the one hand, and “public interest” groups such as environmentalists, consumer activists and unions concerned with the human and environmental costs of economic activity on the other.

These parallel structures are important for the sake of comparability. Not all issues are characterized in this way, of course. In health care, for example, many business and industry groups *compete with one another* rather than with public interest groups, complicating assessments of issue contestation within the interest group community (Baumgartner et al. 2009). Other issues are dominated by experts for which no public exists (May 1991).¹⁵

¹⁵ I do not address these other types of interest alignments here. It reasons to speculate, however, that as debate complexity increases, a key task of party leaders is to reduce the conflicting signals their members face. Thus, logrolling, vote trades, and agenda setting powers very likely become more important in

The time period selected is chosen deliberately so as to focus attention on the activities of groups while minimizing the influence of two potentially important confounding factors: public opinion and the ideological realignment of parties post-Civil Rights. As discussed in Chapter Two and empirically examined in Chapter Four, issue salience shapes the responsiveness of parties to mass publics. As a result, any consideration of the impact of groups on parties must attempt to minimize the role of mass publics by examining issues for which public engagement is low.

Table 5.1 presents data on the salience of the four issues I consider from 1988 through 2004. Only energy even shows up on the radar during this period, peaking at 3.7 percent of respondents – hardly the stuff of high electoral politics. If we shift attention towards the related issue of environmental protection, the results largely tell the same story with relatively low levels of attention to environmental issues throughout the period with the average percent of respondents indicating it as a top issue not exceeding 2 percent (see also Guber 2001). The lack of public attention to these issues during the period of study should give confidence that changes in party issue alignments are driven by the actions of groups, not mass publics.

Issue	Min	Max	Mean	St. Dev.
Agriculture	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Energy	0.0	3.7	0.7	1.1
Transportation	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Public Lands	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0

Notes: Data from Policy Agendas Project. Cell values indicate percent of respondents indicating a given issue was the "most important problem."

structuring the choice for such multidimensional issues. At the interest group level, coalition-building activities across groups may serve to simplify such debates.

The effect of the ongoing Southern realignment is another potentially confounding factor, especially given that each of the issues I consider may engage regional coalitions (for example, rural versus industrial economies). The starting point for my consideration is 1988 and the Southern realignment was virtually complete by this point. As reported by Merle Black (2005), the 1988 election brought equal proportions of Republican and Democratic identifiers, with a moderate trend in favor of Republicans through the 1990s. With a changing electorate came a pronounced resurgence of Republicans in national office, including winning all of the region's electoral votes during both of Ronald Reagan's elections in 1984 and 1988.

My consideration of interest alignments and mobilizations relies on a content coding of congressional hearings. Policy scholars have long used data from congressional hearings to characterize the composition of relevant interests (see Jenkins-Smith, St. Clair and Woods 1991; Worsham 1997, 1998, 2006; Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Miller 2008; Zafonte and Sabatier 2004) and they are particularly well suited to the task of examining the contours of advocacy coalitions in the policy process. As Christina Wolbrecht (2000, p. 117) notes in her discussion of party positions on women rights, "For those concerned with the representation of interests, agenda access is an important indicator of the responsiveness of government officials to that interest and, thus, of the relative power of that interest in the political sphere."

Though hearings can be politically orchestrated and reflect biases towards groups with established relationships with policymakers (Leyden 1995), these biases are less relevant in my consideration given my interest in comparing interest involvement across

issues and changes in interest alignments over time. In both cases, there is little reason to suspect the bias to be more intense in some issue arenas or to vary considerably over time.

The Policy Agendas Project Congressional Hearings dataset provides the starting point for the selection of relevant hearings. Using the major topic codes associated with each of my issues and excluding appropriation hearings for which deal with fewer substantive issues, the initial sample included 4,676 hearings including 886 for agriculture, 1,277 for public lands, 1,138 for transportation and 1,395 for energy, all in the House of Representatives.¹⁶ For each issue, I clustered a random sample of hearings by year with an N of five for every year from 1988 through 2004. This resulted in a total sample of 340 or 85 per issue. The resulting time span includes a variety of other potentially relevant exogenous shocks including periods of divided government, Republican and Democratic control of the House of Representatives, Republican and Democratic presidential administrations, and several wars and recessions.

Using ProQuest's Congressional Universe, which provides an archive of information for Congressional hearings, I collected and coded witness lists for individuals appearing at hearings in each of the issues considered. I identified 3,489 witnesses appearing across the four issues including 975 in agriculture, 785 in transportation, 999 in public lands, and 730 in energy. The number of witnesses ranged from 1 to 114 per hearing.

Each witness was categorized according to a coding scheme that delineated eleven types of witnesses including business and industry (including associations),

¹⁶ I exclude Senate hearings since the partisanship data are based only on roll call votes in the House of Representatives.

research experts, state government, local government, labor unions, consumer groups, environmentalists, representatives from the federal bureaucracy, legislative branch officials, other members of the executive branch (e.g., GAO) and a residual category for other individuals testifying. I collapsed these categories into six larger ones that include: research experts (research experts, federal bureaucracy); public interest groups (consumer groups, environmentalist, labor unions); business; intergovernmental interests (state and local governments); other governmental officials (legislative branch and other executive branch); and other individuals. My results focus on comparisons amongst the business and public interest group categories. Table 5.2 presents summary data on the interest alignments across the four issues I consider.

Table 5.2: Alignment of Interests Across Four Issues

Issue	Agriculture	Energy	Transportation	Public Lands
State & Local Government	7.6	10.4	12.9	17.7
Research Experts	19.6	30.0	22.3	25.4
Business & Industry	62.2	37.8	39.9	16.5
Public Interests	5.7	12.1	11.2	22.0
Other Government	4.1	9.2	9.8	9.6
Other Individuals	0.8	0.5	3.9	8.7

Notes: Table displays the percent of interests represented in each category based on a sample of 85 hearings per issues from 1988-2004. Author compiled data.

My main foci are the relationships between the interest alignments within a given issue area and partisanship. I utilize the following measures.

Interest Diversity. This is based on the composition of interests within a given issue arena. It is calculated using a rescaled Herfindahl index (1-Herfindahl), a measure traditionally used to study the degree of market share concentration among firms in given

sector.¹⁷ In this case, it indicates the degree of interest group diversity for a given issue with values closer to one indicating greater diversity.

Business Advantage. This is a modified measure of interest diversity based solely on the relative strength of business and public interest groups within a given issue arena. Like the interest diversity measure, it is calculated using a Herfindahl index. It is designed to depict the total “market value” based on the business and public interest group categories alone. It is scaled so that higher values indicate greater business dominance.

Partisanship. This is based on the average difference between the voting records of Republicans and Democrats in the House of Representatives. It is calculated by taking the percent of Democrats voting yea on a given vote minus the percent of Republicans voting yea and then aggregating votes by issue-year. Higher values indicate greater differences between the voting records of the two parties and hence, higher levels of conflict.

Mobilizations and the Making of Partisan Issues

To provide evidence the alignment of interests within a given issue arena shapes the extent of party conflict I must show two things. First, I must show that issues characterized by greater interest group diversity reveal higher levels of party conflict. Second, I must show that party issue alignments shift as competing interests mobilize on an issue. If the decision to wage partisan battles on weakly salient issues is connected to the mobilization of distinctive and opposing advocacy coalitions, then the four issues I

¹⁷ $H = \sum_{i=1}^N s_i^2$

consider should exhibit patterns of group mobilization that closely correspond to the ebb and flow of partisan battle lines.

Figure 5.3 sets the context for my comparisons and depicts aggregate data on the parties' issue alignments for the four issues. A variety of patterns are evident.

Transportation exhibits a high degree of stability over time, with little year-to-year variation. Energy starts the period less partisan, declining through the early 1990s and then increases significantly from that point forward. Contrary to popular depictions, party differences on agriculture actually expanded between 1988 and 1996, stabilizing in the late 1990s. Finally, party conflict grew over public lands, peaking in the early 1990s and then declining by nearly 20 points in subsequent years. Four cases – two increasing, one stable, and one declining with a variety of patterns in between.

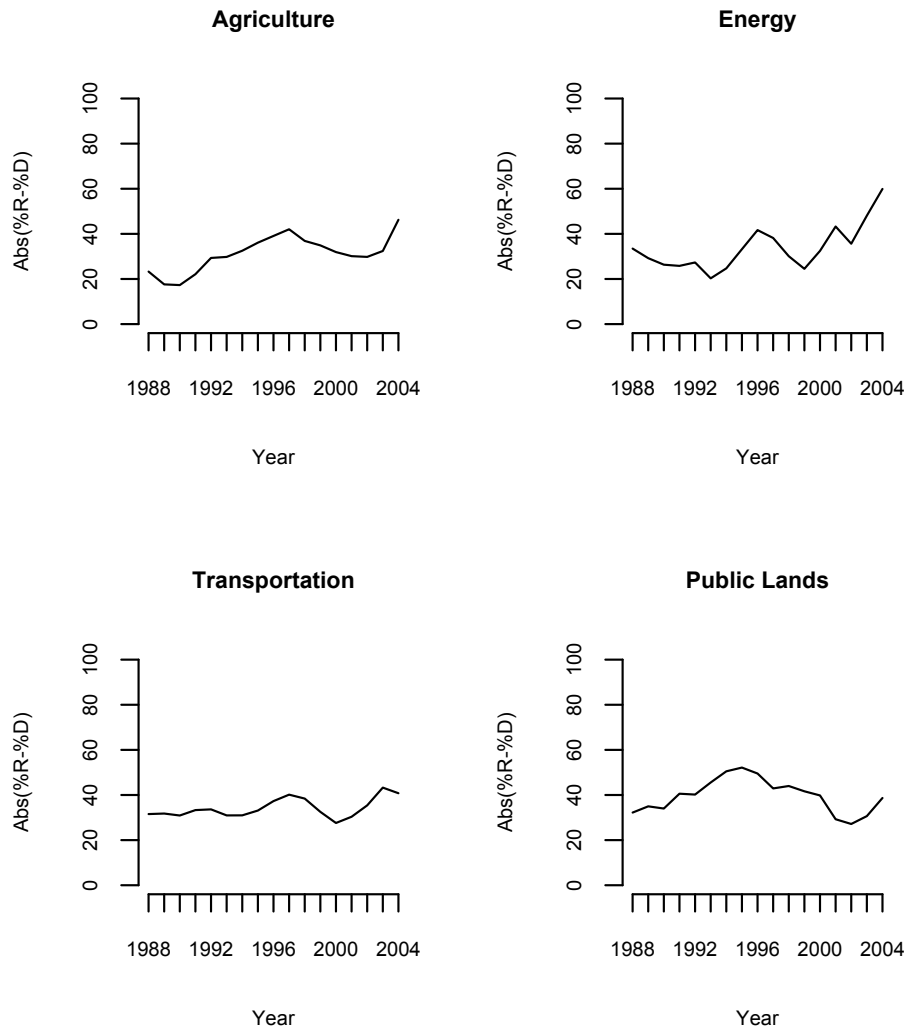


Figure 5.3: Changing Partisanship: Agriculture, Energy, Transportation and Public Lands Author compiled data based on roll call voting records in the House of Representatives. Y-axis represents the absolute value of the average difference between the voting records of Republicans and Democrats, with higher values indicating greater levels of conflict.

Table 5.3 uses these aggregate data to depict trends in party conflict across two eras, roughly corresponding to the structural breakpoints in the time series displayed in Figure 5.3. The issue most partisan at the beginning of the era was not the most partisan

at the end. Public lands pit Republicans and Democrats against each other from 1988 through 1996 but did not do so later. Energy started the period characterized by more bipartisanship but ended the period as the most partisan issue amongst the four. If we consider change over time, a variety of patterns are evident – some issues are growing more partisan (agriculture, energy), some less (public lands) and some have not changed very much at all (transportation).

Table 5.3: Four Issues, Four Trajectories

Case	Average Partisanship		
	1988-1996	1997-2004	Diff.
Agriculture	27.5	35.5	8.1*
Energy	29.1	39.0	9.9***
Transportation	32.6	36.1	3.5
Public Lands	42.2	36.8	-5.4**

Note: Displays the average level of partisanship across two eras as well as the change. Statistical significance based on a difference of means test. *p<.05, **p<0.01, ***p<.001

None of these issues are the kinds of issues that come to mind when one considers political parties. Indeed, both energy and public lands were once considered exemplar “iron triangles” as portrayed by Philip Selznick’s (1984) consideration of the expansion of the Tennessee Valley Authority and Daniel McCool’s (1987) consideration of the Bureau of Reclamation. Yet, as Table 4.3 reveals, the politics of these issues have evolved considerably over time.

Partisanship and Changing Issue Alignments

If group conflicts are translated into party conflicts, then issues characterized by fewer competing interests should reflect lower levels of partisanship. Table 5.4 presents cross-sectional comparisons across the four issues I consider in terms of the degree of

interest diversity and partisanship. Interest diversity, as measured by a rescaled Herfindahl index, reflects the degree of “market concentration” within the interest community and in this case, captures the degree to which any given issue is dominated by one or more interest groups. Higher values indicate greater diversity and hence, more competition and conflict if the mobilization dynamic is correct.

Several interesting patterns are of note. First, there is wide variability in the interest diversity index. Agriculture reflects the least amount of group competition, while, perhaps surprisingly, public lands reflect the highest. Second, there is a strong relationship between interest diversity and partisanship as reflected in the 0.86 correlation between the two variables.

Table 5.4: Interest Diversity and Partisanship Across Issues		
	Interest Diversity	Partisanship
Agriculture	0.56	31.26
Energy	0.73	33.78
Transportation	0.75	34.24
Public Lands	0.81	39.63
Correlation	0.86	

Notes: Interest diversity column presents a 1- Herfindahl index score based on the reduced categories of interests. The partisanship column presents the mean differences between the parties based on roll call votes from 1988-2004. The correlation value is the Pearson's R calculated based on the variation across issues in interest diversity and partisanship.

Yet, one challenge with using interest diversity is that it could overestimate the degree of group conflict to the extent that other, non-adversarial interests exists within a given issue area. To get around this issue, Table 5.5 takes a slightly different look at the relationship between group competition and partisanship by using a measure of “business advantage.” This is based on a segmented Herfindahl index that only utilizes business

and public interest groups as the basis for the “market share” calculation. Higher values indicate greater business dominance.

The relationship between group competition and partisanship is *strengthened* when one refocuses on the interests most likely to be in conflict, as reflected in the stronger correlation between the two indicators. Here again, agriculture is characterized by the greatest business advantage, with the ratio of business to public interest groups at 10.5 meaning for every one public interest group providing testimony at congressional hearings, *ten* business interests do – a shocking statistic even when one considers the potential for bias towards business. Again, energy and public lands reflect similar levels of both partisanship and business advantage. Finally, business interests face the most competition from public interest groups in the domain of public lands. Indeed, such groups actually hold an advantage over business in this issue arena – for every four public interest groups providing testimony, three business interests are represented.

Table 5.5: Business Advantage and Partisanship Across Issues		
	Business Advantage	Partisanship
Agriculture	0.85	31.26
Energy	0.63	33.78
Transportation	0.66	34.24
Public Lands	0.51	39.63
Correlation	-0.92	

Notes: Business Advantage column presents a Herfindahl index score based only on interests represented in the business/industry and public interest categories (higher values indicate *greater* business advantage). The partisanship column presents the mean differences between the parties based on roll call votes from 1988-2004 (higher values indicate *more* partisanship). The correlation value is the Pearson's R calculated based on the variation across issues in business advantage and partisanship.

The very fact that there is such tremendous variation across similar issues in interest group alignments and business advantage is an important finding. Scholars of

interest groups, with their focus on the long-term mobilizations of environmental groups, consumer activists and labor unions have largely ignored the differential impact these groups have had on the issues that affect their interests.

Such differences likely emerge from both external and internal agenda constraints for groups. Externally, groups are constrained by whatever issues are currently on the policy agenda and it may not make sense to expend considerable effort to overcome this barrier, especially when there are other issues of relevance for which to lobby on. This is consistent with Kingdon's (1984) notion of "windows of opportunity." Internally, groups with limited resources must make decisions about which issues they want to pursue at a given time. They cannot pursue every issue with the same degree of fanfare; they must prioritize and doing so means that some issues are winners of group time and attention while others are losers.

The Ebb and Flow of Partisanship Over Time

While these cross-sectional variations are noteworthy and provide prima facie evidence that group conflict and partisanship are related, to solidify my evidence base, I must also show the relationship between interest alignments and partisanship over time. Table 5.6 presents a series of correlation coefficients for each issue and for the two variables of interest. Each correlation coefficient represents the degree of association between either interest diversity or business advantage and partisanship from 1988 through 2004. The variables are scaled such that high levels of interest diversity signify greater interest competition and higher levels of business advantage signify less interest competition.

Table 5.6: Interest Diversity, Business Advantage and Partisanship Over Time		
Issue	Interest Diversity	Business Advantage
Agriculture	0.94	-0.75
Energy	0.49	-0.98
Transportation	0.80	-0.96
Public Lands	0.60	-0.97

Notes: Cell values display the correlation coefficient between each variable and partisanship from 1988 through 2004. Higher absolute values indicate a closer association between the variable of interest and partisanship. All correlation coefficients are significant at $p < 0.05$, one-tailed.

Overall, Table 4.6 presents strong evidence in favor of the notion that changing interest alignments shape the propensity of parties to wage battles. For the case of interest diversity, which reflects the degree of interest concentration, all four issues reflect positive and statistically significant correlations with partisanship across the years of interest. This suggests that as interest diversity increases – presumably resulting in greater competition among groups and hence greater conflict – party differences expand. Of the four issues considered, the relationship is weakest for energy and public lands. For these, it is likely that the “signal-to-noise” ratio is low, meaning that interest diversity is too blunt force a measure for issues that draw other types of interests into the fray.

To increase the signal-to-noise ratio, it is worth considering the relationship between business advantage and partisanship over time. Business advantage reflects a segmented Herfindahl index in which the total market value is determined only by the activities of public interest groups and business. The relationships for all issues but agriculture strengthen considerably with correlations near one, suggesting that as business advantage increases and public interest groups get crowded out of the policy process, party differences disintegrate.

These correlations are supportive of the mobilization dynamic and indeed, the comparisons across issues are helpful in illustrating the *similarities* that exist across issues. To provide a more complete test, Table 4.7 presents a cross-sectional time-series analyses of the two explanatory variables of interest: interest diversity and business advantage. In each case, I include a variety of relevant controls (operationalizations in parentheses) that were hypothesized to be potential shapers of party issue alignments in Chapter Four including ideological polarization (DW-NOMINATE scores), presidential attention (State of the Union mentions), election year (0=No, 1=Yes), size of the house majority, procedural votes (%) and amendment votes (%).¹⁸ Note that issue salience is not included because, by design, these issues garnered little public attention during the period of study.¹⁹

Table 5.7 validates the results presented above using a linear fixed effects model (estimated using PLM for R). In the case of the interest diversity model, increases in the diversity of interests (and presumably, competition among competing ideas, beliefs, and policy demands) have a positive and statistically significant impact on party issue alignments, widening the divide between Republicans and Democrats. The coefficient is substantively significant, suggesting that a 50 percent increase interest diversity would result in a nearly 10 point gain in partisanship, which in many issues is equivalent to a 30 percent change. For example, in public lands a 10-point increase in partisanship would nearly shift the party issue alignment from its mean of 39.63 to its maximum of 52.16.

¹⁸ Divided government was excluded because the variable did not vary during the period of interest.

¹⁹ Including a measure of issue salience does not change the results here and neither is the variable significant.

Table 5.7: The Mobilization Dynamic and Partisanship

Explanatory Variables	Interest Diversity Model	Business Advantage Model
Interest Diversity	19.65** (8.45)	- -
Business Advantage	- -	-11.72** (5.34)
<u>Controls</u>		
Ideological Polarization	41.84* (22.25)	38.32* (22.34)
Presidential Attention	9.49 (120.34)	14.54 (120.71)
Election Year	3.82* (1.95)	4.57* (2.00)
House Majority	0.04 (0.07)	0.03 (0.07)
Procedural Votes	11.94* (6.49)	12.05* (6.52)
Amendment Votes	3.31 (4.82)	2.83 (4.85)
<u>Model Statistics</u>		
F-Statistic	3.86	3.75
N	58	58

Notes: Estimated using a linear fixed effect balanced panel model using PLM package for R. Standard errors in parentheses. *p < .10, **p < .05 (two-tailed).

These results parallel those in the business advantage model where an increase in business advantage is associated with a negative and statistically significant decrease in partisanship. That is, as business interests crowd out other types of groups, differences between the parties shrinks. In this case, given the smaller range reflected in this variable, a 50 percent increase (roughly going from the minimum of 0.50 to the mean of 0.71) in business advantage would result in a nearly 6-point reduction in partisanship.

Taking a Closer Look at Mobilizations: Energy and Public Lands

It is worth considering the dynamics of this process in further detail for which I consider the changing politics of energy and public lands that I began this chapter with. These issues are noteworthy for their divergent trajectories. A student of contemporary

American politics would instantaneously recognize energy as a partisan issue. But, energy issues were not always so partisan and indeed, there is ample reason to predict low levels of partisanship given the distributive issues around subsidies for energy producers. Similarly, public lands is perhaps the quintessential *bipartisan* issue, universally loved and hated depending on whether stories of collusion from the Bureau of Reclamation or the Army Corps of Engineers make it on the public agenda.

The changing politics of energy and public lands reflect the political power of short-term mobilizations. Neither of these issues became politicized (or depoliticized) as a result of new groups. Environmentalists *could* have mobilized on these issues upon their formation, but they did not, focusing instead on setting regulatory standards for clean air and water, issues which failed to directly confront industry interests head on (Kraft and Vig 2000). But, the focus of these groups has evolved considerably over time and in the case of energy, expanded in ways that brought these groups in more direct confrontation with industry interests.

The changing agenda of environmentalists is one that largely corresponds with the ebb and flow of partisan battle lines presented above. As discussed by Kraft and Vig (2000) in their classic text on environmental politics, attention among environmental groups focused on public lands over energy issues throughout the late-1980s and mid-1990s. Robert Wood (2004) shows how the politics of public lands underwent a rapid shift during this time. Timber companies had harvested much of the old-growth forest and environmentalists mobilized to protect what small tracts of land were left through national park declarations. Like the debates over forests, the conflict over grazing policy

(another quintessential public lands issue) was also fierce during this period and largely revolved around efforts to protect fragile ecosystems from additional damage.

Environmentalists' mobilization on these issues came long after the "consensus politics" of the 1970s had faded and the result is strong and sustained increase in party conflict (see Figure 5.2).

Environmentalists did win some battles during this era, though many hinged on efforts in the executive and judicial branches given a gridlocked Congress. The venue shift, policy successes, and agenda crowding meant that attention to public lands faded in the late 1990s, just as energy issues were undergoing a renewal in national politics. By the early 2000s, energy became an important political issue. Whereas the debates of the 1990s emphasized subsidies for energy producers fraught with weak profits in the face of low prices, the 2000s brought renewed attention to the issues of energy conservation and alternative energy sources while global warming made an entrance on the national political stage for the first time (Cooper 2001).

The changing politics of energy was driven by two mutually reinforcing dynamics. First, as discussed by Chubb (1980), energy policy in the decades following WWII was characterized by high levels of fragmentation with separate subsystems around coal, oil and gas, and nuclear energy. This fragmentation made it difficult for energy to become politicized because rarely would energy interests present a united front towards opponents. Indeed, their greatest competition often came each other, as they fought over which industries would be subsidized and at what level.

Second, energy prices sagged in the decades following the energy crises of the 1970s as the result of the so-called “oil glut” – an era of falling demand and increasing supplies. This resulted in energy issues falling off the national policy agenda to a large extent. With the exception of oil companies themselves, not many viewed low gas prices as a problem.

This changed dramatically in the late 1990s when rising energy prices and growing alarm about global temperatures caused environmentalists to renew their attention toward energy issues. It was during this time that climate change was introduced in the national lexicon. Not only did environmentalists request more subsidies for alternative fuel development, they demanded an end to subsidies for the energy industry and new regulations to make traditional fuel sources cleaner. Such debates were decidedly different from the discussions over conservation initiated by President Jimmy Carter during the oil crisis of the 1970s.

Table 5.8: Energy and Public Lands: Different Mobilization Trajectories		
	Energy	Public Lands
Change in Partisanship	+33%*	-22%**
Change in Mobilization	+84%***	-61%***

Notes: Cell values display the percent change in congressional witnesses in the public interest category as well as party differences across two eras – 1988-1996, 1997-2004. Eras were chosen so as to reflect structural breakpoints in the partisanship time series. * p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001

Table 5.8 summarizes the trends in partisanship and mobilization across two eras, as determined by the structural breakpoints reflected in the partisanship data. Between 1988-1996 and 1997-2004, the environmentalists increased their political activity on

energy by 84 percent while decreasing it by 61 percent on public lands. At the same time, party differences on energy issues increased by 33 percent but decreased by 22 percent in public lands. Importantly, these shifts suggest that to some extent both groups and parties run up against agenda limits – they can't fight all the battles all the time.

Conclusion

This chapter considered what shapes party issue alignments when public attention fades and groups become dominant players in policymaking. I argued that not only do groups and parties exist in symbiotic representative relationships, but that the alignment of interests within a given issue arena provides the political foundation for party conflicts. Because interest alignments change – through mobilizations that bring new actors, demands, or both into policymaking – party issue alignments are not cast in stone.

Of course, such mobilizations are often driven by the strategic actions of policy entrepreneurs including presidents and members of Congress. For example, environmentalists both pressured Democrats to adopt a conservation energy agenda and they reacted to Republican's effort to develop domestic oil production in the early 2000s. However, it is important to note that while party leaders can certainly exacerbate conflicts through arm twisting and the like, their ability to sustain partisan coalitions on an issue is critically linked to the presence of competing advocacy coalitions.

Consider, for example, Republican efforts in 1995 to politicize farm subsidies. In the short-run, party leaders managed to hold their coalition together and reform subsidies; in the long-run, party conflict evaporated because their efforts lacked a firm foundation within the interest group community. Of course, as consumer activists increasingly turn

their attention to the problems of obesity and food safety, demanding new regulations of food producers and suppliers, farm politics may soon come to resemble contemporary energy politics. Only time will tell.

Importantly, the findings presented in this chapter suggest that historical divisions among pluralists and party theorists, like most scholarly divisions, were misplaced. Parties and groups are really two sides of the same coin. Groups are one important source of policy demands and only when competition among interest groups generates diverging policy demands can we expect parties to differentiate their agendas. Parties function through groups, not around them as pluralists once alleged.

Two implications of these findings are important. One is that by providing a political home for organized groups in policymaking, new government benefits, programs and agencies can politicize issues that previously generated little conflict. As Schattschneider (1957) wrote, “one of the more conclusive ways of checking the rise of conflict is simply to provide no arena for it or to create no public agency with power to do anything about it.” That is, government action institutionalizes the political basis of party conflicts by empowering newly mobilized groups.

A second implication of these findings is that the increase in party polarization so well documented in aggregate depictions of congressional behavior may have been driven in part by the transformation in the interest group community that unfolded in the 1960s and 1970s. As Baumgartner and Jones (1993) suggest “many sectors of American society have moved toward a much more crowded, more complicated and more representative system of interest representation.” This suggests that as interest group

competition and conflicts over policy means and ends increases, new issues get drawn into the partisan fray which once escaped, thus polarizing the parties over time.

Yet, one would also be wrong to think that such dynamics means unchecked polarization. Elites – interest groups, ideological activists and the like – must compete with citizens for the ear of the party leaders. As the political failures of recent years so well illustrate, the failure to govern and solve problems that citizens are attentive to comes with steep electoral costs.

CHAPTER 6. THE DYNAMICS OF POLITICS

So long as the possibility exists of mobilizing the previously indifferent through the redefinition of issues, no system based on shared preferences of the interested is safe.

- Baumgartner and Jones 1993

I began with the following question: why do some issues divide political parties while others win bipartisan cooperation? In answering this question, I sought to understand how party divisions evolve across the wide variety of issues that confront policymakers, the relative role of mass publics versus organized groups in affecting partisan divisions, and the sources of stability and change in party conflicts over time. In amidst the variety of evidence bases and empirical analyses I considered in the preceding chapters, the answers have informed both our understanding of political parties and American politics more generally.

Party conflict stems from the parties' competition for support among organized groups and mass publics. Their support enables the parties to secure their collective political interests—whether these entail shared policy objectives or the pursuit of political power. Yet, parties do not usually have to satisfy both mass publics and groups at the same time. They can exploit the 'electoral blind spot,' as Bawn et al. (2012) call it, to

pursue the interests of groups who not only are more organized than mass publics but also tend to hold more intense and extreme policy preferences. I argued and presented empirical evidence in favor of the notion that issue attention shapes the contours of that blind spot—widening it when attention to an issue wanes and shrinking it when an issue rises on the agenda. In other words, issue attention and agenda setting powerfully shape to whom parties are most responsive.

The shifting electoral blind spot not only reveals a key source of instability in party issue alignments over time, it also suggests that party conflicts are shaped by different dynamics as issues move up (and down) the public's agenda. Such notions have long been central to the study of policy dynamics, dating to Redford's (1969) distinction between macropolitics and subsystem politics. This distinction has long guided scholars but it has yet to be integrated into the study of political parties, who were long assumed to be basic components of the macropolitical environment, largely immune from the pluralistic competition among groups that characterizes policy subsystems.

When an issue moves up the agenda, party conflicts are shaped by opinion dynamics in which parties are not evaluated simply on their own merits, but also those of their opponents. This strategic environment means that the electoral risks associated with waging partisan battles are shaped by the relative advantages and disadvantages political parties hold on a given issue. *When one party is viewed considerably worse than her opponent, it makes the pursuit of a partisan agenda an electoral liability and increases the prospects for bipartisanship, even when it means back-pedaling on stated positions.* My cross sectional time series analysis reveals the powerful effects public opinion has on

party divisions. My simulations of these effects suggest that the opinion dynamic – in which one party is disadvantaged on a salient issue – can cut party differences in *half*, an impact with important implications for legislative productivity. Importantly, the effects of disadvantage are conditional on high levels of issue attention reinforcing the point that agenda setting is central to understanding partisan conflict.

When an issue moves down and off the agenda, party conflicts are shaped by mobilization dynamics in which the parties' collective interests drive them to cultivate support amongst competing interests. But, alliances between groups and parties are contingent upon continued mobilization. As the alignment of interests within a given domain shifts, driven by the mobilization (and demobilization) of groups who bring different interests, issue foci and policy ideas to policymakers, so do the partisan battle lines. *In the absence of competing interests, political parties lack the will or the interest in engaging their opponents in conflict and their collective pursuit for political power leads them to compromise.* My case explorations and quantitative analyses reveal that short-term mobilizations are a potent, but far from permanent, source of conflict in American politics

In considering these different dynamics, I engaged in one of the most comprehensive considerations of party issue alignments. I presented original data that depicted the evolution of partisanship not just on those issues that dominate news headlines like economics or defense, but the whole array of issues that come to confront federal policymakers. These descriptive analyses reveal the centrality of issues to understanding American politics. While there is little doubt that issues like economics

and labor have long divided the parties, a great many other issues reveal diverse patterns and trajectories in party issue alignments. Aggregate depictions, while informative in understanding the basic political context of Congress, conceal much of the interesting variation and dynamism in party conflicts over time.

Implications

These findings inform our understanding of both political parties and American politics more generally. They challenge the centrality of ideology to understanding the motivations and constraints of political actors and reveal the centrality of issue politics to political institutions. They inform our understanding of the sources and implications of instability in political arrangements. Finally, they reveal shared role and influence groups and mass publics have in shaping representative institutions.

Issue Politics, Ideology and Constraint

In revealing that not only do party issue alignments change over time but also that issues vary considerably in terms of their propensity to divide political parties, my work puts issues back at the center of American politics. It suggests that while shared ideology and political interests may enhance the power of parties to coalesce their members, it is *issues* that make the fight. These findings have important implications for our understanding of how ideology shapes and constrains political actors, parties included.

More than a half century ago, Philip Converse's (1952) introduced the notion of constraint to political scientists. Constraint, he suggests, exists to the extent that opinion on one issue is predictive of opinion on another issue. Whether one begins with Edmund Burke's definition of a political party as "a body of men united...upon some particular

principle” (Burke 1770 [Cited in Bawn et al. 2012, 578]) or, with Joseph Schumpeter’s (1942, 283) notion that “a party is a group whose members propose to act in concert in the competitive struggle for power,” constraint dominates political scientists consideration of political parties and indeed, of politics more generally.

The very notion that congressional politics can be organized along a single dimension of conflict (Poole and Rosenthal 1997, 2007)—an empirical finding that has influenced the field of American politics like no other—suggests the power of ideology to organize political actors across different issues is nearly limitless. A wide variety of perspectives on Congress, as well as the relationship between Congress and the bureaucracy, the President and the Courts has lent credence to this perspective and reinforced the notion that ideology transcends issue politics in theoretical and substantive import (e.g., Krehbiel 1993, 1998, Rohde 1991; Aldrich 1995; Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005).

Even those who question the centrality of ideology to congressional parties arrive at similar conclusions. In her tellingly titled book *Beyond Ideology*, Francis Lee (2009) challenges the notion that ideology is the most important source of partisan disagreement. She suggests that the parties diverge far more often than one would expect based on ideological differences alone. She argues party conflict instead stems from the parties’ competition for political power and that the ‘shared risk’ that party members face leads them to create conflicts where none previously existed. Yet, while this competing perspective offers a different source of constraint, the conclusion remains the same: the

parties' power of issue integration is boundless because the sources of disagreement run long and deep.

My theorizing and findings show that not only is this emphasis disconnected from the political reality in which issues organize political actors into policymaking and oversight roles, it also fails to reconcile the different trajectories party issue alignments experience over time. As discussed by David Karol (2011), "the development of parties' stands on issues is more akin to... 'multiple orders' than to any all-encompassing party system."

Instability and Policy Feedback in American Politics

In tracing the evolution of partisanship across 18 different issues, I revealed a wide variety of trajectories and considerable instability over time. In explaining these differences, my framework drew heavily from work on policy dynamics, a field that has long emphasized instability in political arrangements. The result is a portrait of political conflicts that emphasizes their malleability in the face of changing political circumstances.

As long as political scientists have studied parties, they have emphasized the stability of cleavages in the absence of major realignments that uproot the parties' regional or demographic bases of power. Whether one turns towards the discredited critical elections literature (Burnham 1970; Key 1955; Schattschneider 1960; Pomper 1967) or alternatively the issue evolution perspective (Carmines and Stimson 1989; Adamas 1997; Wolbrecht 2000), the conclusion regarding party stability is the same. Indeed, the assumption is so pervasive, it even shows up Baumgartner and Jones (1993)

aply titled book *Agendas and Instability* in which they write, “partisan conflict is stable and repetitive” (p. 22).

This research powerfully reveals that party issue alignments are characterized by a long-run instability and are inherently prone to change. Issues that divide the parties at one particular moment may unite them in another. After all, groups become mobilized and demobilized, mass publics fall in and out of engagement, and public opinion evolves in response to policy feedback and historical circumstance. These factors each destabilize party issue alignments and in the process, strengthen or undermine their differences.

This long-run instability suggests that policy feedback is a formidable force in American politics. On the one hand, policy feedback can powerfully shape interest group mobilizations. As Schattschneider (1957, p. 938) wrote, “one of the most conclusive ways of checking the rise of conflict is simply to provide no arena for it or to create no public agency with power to do anything about it.” The creation of new policies, programs and agencies may serve to institutionalize conflicts between the parties by permanently mobilizing groups and providing arenas for them to pressure parties and their members.

On the other hand, policy failures (or alternatively, successes) have the potential to reshape public evaluations of the parties, and in turn, their incentives to cooperate with their opponents to solve public problems. This suggests, despite long-term trends indicating an ever more polarized polity, that there are limits to people’s tolerance for

partisan behavior and those limits are reached when policy problems go unaddressed or are addressed in ways with perverse, (un)intended side effects.

Elites, Mass Publics and Representative Institutions

Does the American political system privilege the interests of elites over those of mass publics? This question is central not just to any consideration of representative institutions, including political parties, but to our understanding of democratic politics more generally. My findings suggest that political parties face a dilemma around maintaining the political support of their most committed while also preventing electoral decay amongst a more moderate but less attentive citizenry. This dilemma stems the fact that groups often hold not just more intense but also more extreme preferences compared with mass publics.

While groups may be dominant players in partisan politics because of the small number of issues that dominate the public agenda at any one time, political parties ignore the electoral implications of their behavior at their own peril. By pursuing partisan objectives that fail to generate popular support, ignoring policy problems, and otherwise failing to govern, parties put themselves in a situation in which they will have to compromise their partisan policy objectives to secure their political objectives, namely an electoral majority. It is not a question of ‘if’ but one of ‘when.’

In this sense, the hope expressed by Schattschneider (1960), Key (1955) and other advocates of responsible party government that parties act as more representative institutions is very much intact, despite the negative chorus that increasingly accompanies discussion of political parties in Congress. As Adler and Wilkerson (2012) argue,

Congress has strong collective incentives that crosscut party lines to solve public problems – their electoral fates depend on it. While stories of conflict, ineptness, and collusion may dominate both the headlines and scholarly depictions of congressional politics, this research suggests that these stories are at best an incomplete portrait, and at worst, an incorrect one.

Future Research

In tracing the evolution of partisanship, this research put political parties in the context of their political environments in which their activities are intimately wrapped up with those of their chief supporters—organized groups and mass publics. It reveals that the study of political parties, including who they represent and with what impact, is a topic that merits additional attention from both scholars of American politics and public policy. In the study of American politics, this research reveals new questions related to the connections between organized groups and political parties as well as the relative influence of groups and mass publics. For students of the policy process, this research reveals the centrality of political parties to the study of policy dynamics and suggests new avenues for incorporating a role for them in the policy process.

Alas, this research has likely raised many more questions that it has answered. But, in so doing, it has provided a basis to forge new connections in American politics between those who study groups, public policy, Congress, political parties and public opinion. It is our common interest in political arrangements—their sources, stability and consequences—that provides us with new paths forward in and between our respective fields of inquiry.

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