Conditional Party Government in the States

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We extend theories of congressional parties and committees to the state legislative setting, using the variation among legislatures to explore the links between elections and parties and between parties and committees. We examine elections by comparing the electoral concentration of parties to measures of conditional party government. We examine informational and partisan theories of committees by looking to the relationship between committee representativeness and conditional party government. With data from eleven states, we find that competitive party systems breed highly polarized legislative parties, and these two traits lead to representative committees.

Although theories about legislative politics continue to proliferate, their range of empirical application is all too often limited, generally encompassing only the U.S. Congress or even just the House. Here, we conduct what is essentially comparative research by testing theories of parties and committees in a number of state legislatures. This provides us the variation to be able to examine current theories of the role of the political party in legislative politics and its connections to informational and partisan theories of legislative design. We combine some aspects of electoral politics to develop a measure of the effective number of parties, roll-call voting to estimate legislators' preferences, and committee membership to examine the effects of differing levels of partisan polarization on the representativeness of committees.

In the next section, we develop the relevant theoretical considerations. We then turn to data and measurement issues. The analytic sections then consider how closely state legislators satisfy the polarization condition in Aldrich and Rohde's conditional party government account. We then examine these results with respect to the number of effective parties and the degree of partisan competition. That is, the electorate's actions are compared to the distribution of (estimated) preferences among the winners of these elections. The third analytic section examines the impact of partisan competition and polarization on the distribution of legislators to committees.

We find that there is substantial variation in the degree to which state legislatures meet Aldrich and Rohde's polarization condition, extending far beyond the extreme values observed for the modern U.S. House. We find a strong negative relationship between the size of the majority party and the polarization of the parties. Finally, we find that chambers with more equally sized parties and more polarized parties tend to choose more representative committees.

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Theory

We approach this topic with three primary questions. The first is empirical: is there enough variance in polarization across chambers for it to be analytically useful? Second, if there is variation, what might be a cause of more polarized party systems? Third, what consequences follow from variations in polarization?

Causes

What determines the level of polarization of a chamber's parties? Partisan theories of legislatures require two at least logically independent variables. The first is the degree of electoral competitiveness. In some states, one party or the other dominates; in others there is close competition between the two parties so that electoral competitiveness is substantially more variable at the state than at the national level. Second, in a two-party system, both parties have to be broad and encompassing, adhering to the mythology if not always the reality of the "big tent." Just how different one party is from the other in its policy stands can in principle vary a great deal (see, e.g., Aldrich, Berger, and Rohde 1999).

These two variables are not likely to be independent of one another. V.O. Key, Jr. (1949) wrote powerfully of the failures of democratic politics in a determinedly one-party system and of the necessity of effective electoral competition between two "regular" parties over time for the viability of democracy. In the state legislative setting, Rosenthal writes that ". . . as competition for control of legislative bodies became more balanced and intense, partisanship assumed greater salience both in those legislative bodies where it already mattered and in those where it never mattered much at all" (1998, 184). He also notes that more evenly matched party competition is linked to a higher percentage of party votes in the legislature (187) and that "(w)hat has transpired is that the function of the legislature has been shifting toward crystallizing, rather than resolving, divergent partisan views (190)." Likewise, Francis found that as the majority party increases its seat share, both the party caucus and the party leadership become less significant centers of decision making and policy committees become more so (Francis 1989, 46).

Consequences

Competitiveness and distinctness also predict some effects of legislative polarization. Aldrich and Rohde (1998, 2000) theorize that the organizational strength of legislative parties is related to the breadth and cohesion of the parties themselves. They therefore expect congressional parties to behave like strong parties *if* two conditions apply to the distribution of policy preferences. They argue that strong party behavior is more likely if the two parties are polarized, and they argue that polarization in the chamber follows from electoral forces.

They consider three consequences of partisan polarization: the powers granted party leaders; resources provided to the legislative party; and the polarization of enacted policy. Here, we also explore a fourth possible consequence. Specifically, we ask if polarization of the legislative parties has any effect on how a legislature organizes and controls its committees.

Cox and McCubbins (1993) provide a second model linking legislative parties and committees. For them, the party reputation is a collective good, and party leaders are selected and appointed to protect that good. One way they do this is through committee assignments—if a committee's actions are likely to affect the party's reputation, the leaders will appoint members who are representative of the caucus (Cox and McCubbins 1993, 191). Obviously, if both party contingents are representative of the parent caucuses, then the committee will be approximately representative of the larger chamber. This links Cox and McCubbins' cartel account to Gilligan and Krehbiel's information-based model of committees subservient to the full chamber.

Empirically, Francis (1989) used a state legislative survey to show that the larger the majority party is, the smaller the influence of the party caucus and the party leaders. In their place, he found an increase in committee influence.

Data

Examining conditional party government in the state legislative setting requires some estimate of legislator preferences. We use unidimensional NOMINATE scores from eleven states: Connecticut, Georgia, Louisiana, Maine, Minnesota, Nebraska, New Hampshire, South Carolina, Rhode Island, and Vermont, all in 1997–98 or 1999.

These states are *not* a random sample of states, but were selected with the primary goal of capturing some variability. For each state, we created scores generally using only the first 100–175 votes in a session, which allows us to include the eleven chambers here rather than full-vote-based scores from only six or seven. One concern is that if the omitted votes differ systematically from the included votes, then the resulting scores will be biased, but

this seems not to be the case. Examination of the full-vote datasets for several U.S. Congresses, the Georgia House, and the Minnesota House indicate that truncated-vote scores are correlated with full-vote scores at 0.95–0.99. While the omitted votes at the end of the session may be of different substantive importance, they do not divide the chamber along different cleavages. There is an increase in the standard error for each ideal-point estimate, but it is smaller for state legislatures than it is for the U.S. Congress because state legislatures cast fewer nonunanimous votes.

Polarization and Depolarization in Legislatures

We present the distributions of unidimensional NOMINATE scores for four of the partisan states. Figures for the other six chambers are available on request. Figure 2 presents two of the six with polarized parties and Figure 3 two of the four with depolarized parties. For comparison, Figure 1 provides the distributions of Poole-Rosenthal first-dimension coordinates for two U.S. Houses: the unpolarized 92^{d}, and the polarized 104^{th}, typical of Houses from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries (see Aldrich, Berger, and Rohde 1999).

In general, these state legislatures fall into two categories: chambers with highly polarized preferences (also including Georgia, Maine, Minnesota, and New Hampshire) and states with much flatter distributions (also including South Carolina and Vermont), establishing that there is enough variation in polarization to continue. In the one-party dominant states of Rhode Island and Louisiana in Figure 3, the modes for both parties are close together. There is an obvious relationship between the evenness of the partisan balance in a chamber and the polarization of its parties, with a more even partisan balance corresponding to more polarized parties.

Figure 1a illustrates the distribution of NOMINATE scores for the 92^{d} House, which is depolarized for a U.S. House. Note, however, that this distribution is positively polarized compared to what one sees in one-party dominant states. Further, consider Figure 1b, which illustrates the 104^{th} House—this House is highly polarized, but many of the more evenly matched states under consideration here are dramatically more polarized.

Nebraska's distribution is particularly interesting (see Figure 4). Its legislature is doubly unique in being both unicameral and nonpartisan. The distribution of estimated ideal points is noisily flat—a uniform distribution distorted by a few spikes and valleys. This is similar to the aggregate distributions in the one-party dominant states.

Causes of Polarization: Party Competition

One of the advantages of looking to the state legislatures is the ability to discover under what circumstances or conditions a particular theory holds. A logical antecedent to party polarization, following Key, is the degree of party competition in the electorate.

We measure competition by the effective number of electoral parties (see Kollman and Chhibber 1998, among others). Defined as the reciprocal of the Herfindahl index, in two-party systems it reaches a maximum when the parties are equally sized. Our measure ranges from 1.342 in the Rhode Island Senate to 1.996 in the Minnesota House. In general these scores tend to be lower than Kollman and Chhibber's scores for the U.S. House, which are generally slightly over 2. This reflects their use of vote shares rather than seat shares to determine the effective number of parties. Seat share is appropriate in our case, as we seek to link electoral fortunes to intralegislative arrangements. We ask how variation in electoral competition affects the degree of polarization.

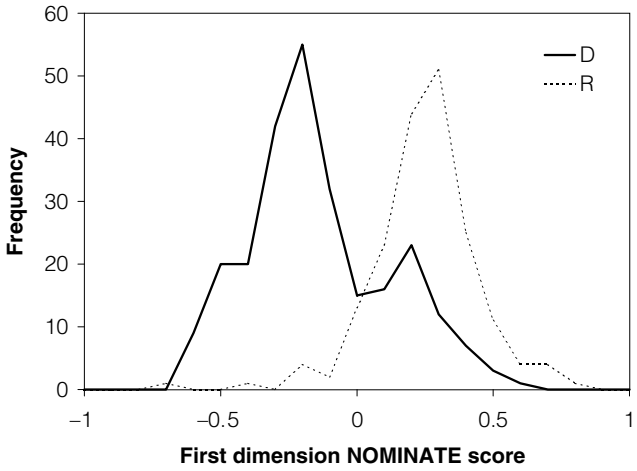
We use four measures of polarization preferred by Aldrich and Rohde (1998):

- Median: The standardized difference between the location of the median Democrat and the median Republican. It captures one aspect of interparty heterogeneity;
- $\frac{\sigma_{maj}}{\sigma_{chamber}}$: The ratio of the standard deviation of ideal points in the majority party to that of the full House, which indicates variation in intraparty homogeneity;
- 1-Overlap: The proportion of overlap between the two parties' distribution of ideal points subtracted from one. Overlap is measured by the minimum number of ideal points that would have to be changed to yield a complete separation of the two parties, with all Democrats' ideal points being to the left of all Republicans' ideal points on the first Poole dimension for Congress and the unidimensional scores we use here;
- R^2: The R^2 resulting from regressing the member's ideal point estimate and party affiliation.

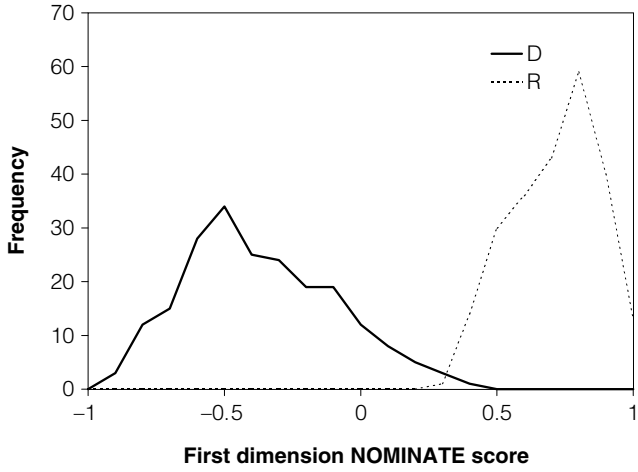
Table 1 presents these indicators of polarization within the ten partisan chambers. Even in this small selection, there is substantial variance in each of the indicators. States fall neatly into types, with some very polarized chambers and others with much more uniform distributions, and this is clear across measures.

The correlation matrix presented in Table 2 reveals two findings. First, the indicators of polarization are strongly correlated. We can usefully speak, then, of a single polarization condition rather than a mere collection of

FIGURE 1 Polarization and Depolarization in the U.S. House

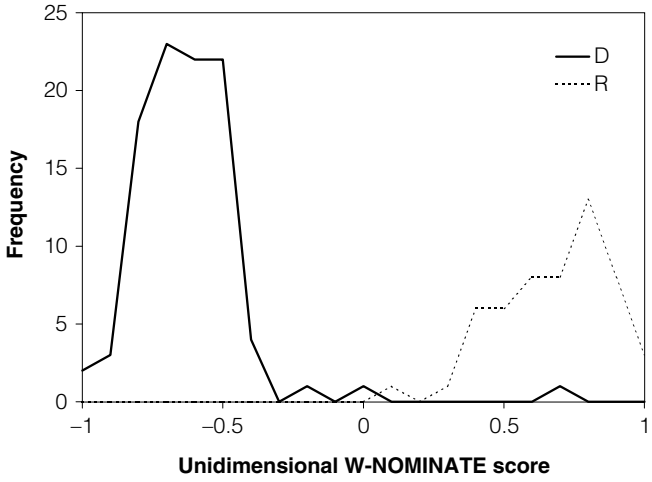


(a) Distribution of est. ideal points by party, 92d U.S. House

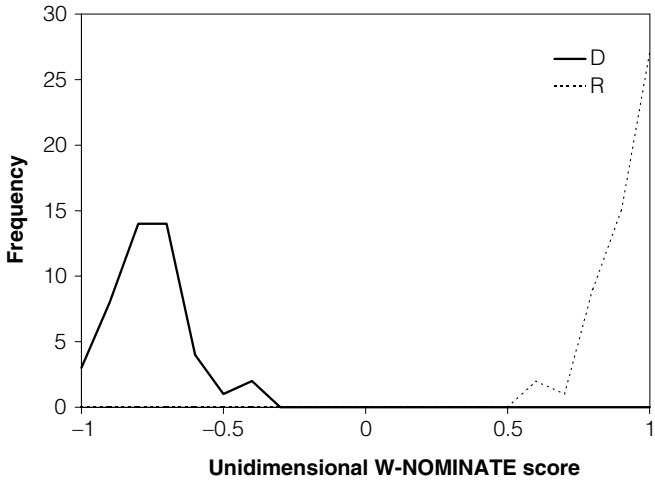


(b) Distribution of est. ideal points by party, 104th U.S. House

FIGURE 2 Two States with Polarized Parties

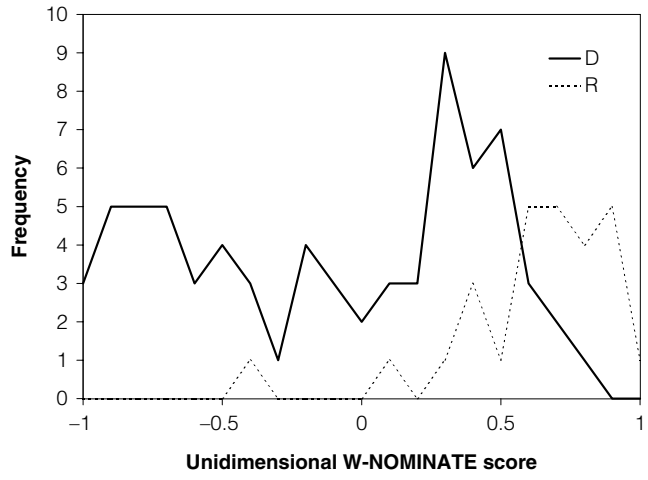


(a) Distribution of est. ideal points by party, 1997 CT House

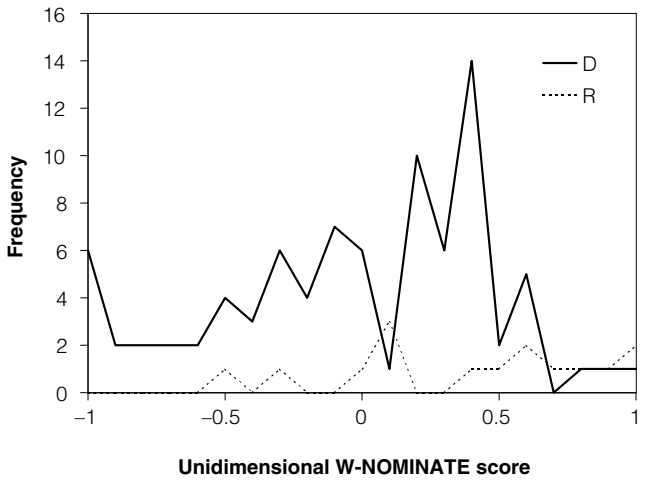


(b) Distribution of est. ideal points by party, 1997 IA House

FIGURE 3 Two States with Depolarized Parties



(a) Distribution of est. ideal points by party, 1999 LA House



(b) Distribution of est. ideal points by party, 1997 RI House

FIGURE 4 Distribution of Est. Ideal Points in a Nonpartisan Legislature: Nebraska, 1999

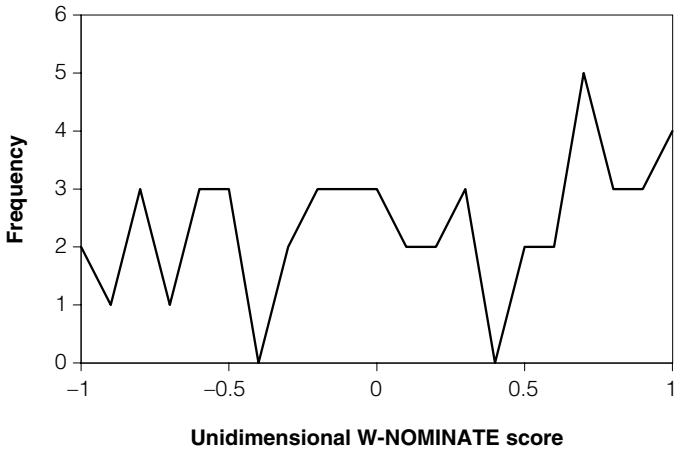


TABLE 1 Measures of Polarization

Year	Chamber	Eff. # Parties	Median Diff.	$\frac{\sigma_{maj}}{\sigma_{chamber}}$	1-Overlap	R^2
1997	CT H	1.850	1.03	0.70	0.99	0.91
1998	GA H	1.973	0.88	0.59	0.99	0.78
1997	IA H	1.986	1.01	0.87	1.00	0.98
1999	LA H	1.686	0.61	0.07	0.87	0.13
1997	ME H	1.991	0.98	0.69	1.00	0.91
1997	MN H	1.996	0.89	0.69	1.00	0.90
1997–98	NH S	1.882	1.04	0.73	1.00	0.92
1997	RI H	1.342	0.44	0.03	0.87	0.09
1997	SC S	1.965	0.72	0.22	0.89	0.49
1997–98	VT S	1.923	0.86	0.34	0.90	0.61

TABLE 2 Correlation Matrix

	Eff. # Parties	Median Diff.	$\frac{\sigma_{maj}}{\sigma_{chamber}}$	Overlap	R^2
Eff. # parties	1.000				
Median diff.	0.748	1.000			
$\frac{\sigma_{maj}}{\sigma_{chamber}}$	0.687	0.929	1.000		
1-Overlap	0.630	0.870	0.966	1.000	
R^2	0.775	0.955	0.975	0.941	1.0000

indicators. In addition, there are high correlations between the measures of polarization—internal, legislative characteristics—and the effective number of parties, an external, electoral characteristic. This supplies some limited support for the conditional party government thesis and its link between electoral concerns and congressional characteristics, although really strong support would require dynamic data which are, unfortunately, not available.

In practice, these correlations seem to indicate a necessary condition. Having relatively balanced parties does not guarantee having parties that are distinct and internally unified, as the South Carolina Senate shows, but

party polarization seems to occur only when the parties are relatively balanced. This is not to say that near parity is necessary, but rather that a system approaching if not achieving one-party rule leads to *ad hoc* coalitions and the uniform or random distributions of ideal-point estimates that arise from such voting patterns. Such a necessary condition makes sense in light of Key (1949), who argues that party competition is necessary to elevate policy debates out of a morass of ordinary distributive politics.

Consequences: Committee Representativeness

Another benefit of looking to the states is that the variation among the states creates opportunities to build and test more generalized theories. Looking across states, we can begin to make some sense of the consequences of varying degrees of meeting Aldrich and Rohde's polarization condition.

Battista (1999) offers a general approach to legislative institutional choice with legislators choosing the benefits of their own office. The model demonstrates that electoral pressures combine with a legislator's preference weighting over different kinds of benefits to drive them into behaving as "extremists." Even though a member may *sincerely* prefer a mix of benefits, the electoral effects of increasing officeholding benefits drive him or her *strategically* to prefer a degenerate mix consisting of only one benefit.

This creates a strategic environment where all members are concentrated at two ideal points, and so the legislature should adopt the ideal point of whichever point contains the most members. That is, when the model equilibrates we should expect to see a controlling majority of legislators behaving as if they were motivated purely by achieving policy goals *or* purely by electoral concerns similar to those voiced in Downs (1957), but we would not expect to see behavior consistent with a legislator mixing between the two concerns.

The model makes no analytical assumptions about the content of these types, but one distinction that seems to make sense is that between policy and everything else—between the facets of legislative life that are merely examples of what can happen in any job or occupation compared to the opportunities (more or less) unique to politics for actually making law. One consequence of this model is that legislatures should be fully (or at least heavily) policy-oriented or Downsian, nonpolicy-oriented.

From this, we make some predictions about the effects of meeting the polarization condition. If Key is correct in his discussion of the importance of party competition, we can characterize a strongly competitive party system as an example of a policy-oriented institution, since it is an important part of enabling discussion and conflict over policy. Another legislative institution that we might reasonably characterize as policy-oriented is the use of informational committees Gilligan and Krehbiel 1990; Krehbiel 1991). To be sure, these works are careful to point out that informational committees need not be purely policy-oriented examples of good government. However, the use of representative, informational committees is clearly *more* policy-oriented than is the use of unrepresentative, definitively distributive committees.

Therefore, legislatures with well-defined and distinct parties ought to have more representative committees. To get at this, we look at the six kinds of committees represented across all but one or two of the states here, excluding, of course, the nonpartisan Nebraska legislature. These committees are those dealing with money (including Appropriations, Taxation, Ways and Means, and Finance), Education, Environment (or Natural Resources), Judiciary, Rules (or Legislative Management), and Transportation. Obviously, the precise bounds of a committee's jurisdiction will vary from one state to another. For each committee, we find a *p*-value for the difference in ideal point locations between the committee and the chamber using a Monte Carlo simulation method comparing means.[1] For each chamber, we simulated 10,000 committees of average size, rounded to the nearest integer, and

[1]We are seeking a way to compare the collective "preference" of the committee to that of the parent chamber. Researchers in this field typically compare medians, building on the very strong results of the median voter theorem when they are using unidimensional measures of preference. However, they forget that the median voter theorem is *strictly* unidimensional—if there is even a whiff of a second dimension, extending even an arbitrarily small distance from the main one, the median voter theorem collapses in the absence of a median in all directions, which is highly unlikely. Further, Hinich (1977) proves that the median voter result is also highly dependent on a total lack of uncertainty in the process. What this means is that comparing medians is not merely a methodological choice—it implies a substantive claim that the legislature under observation really is absolutely, purely, and totally unidimensional, with perfect certainty. While we present unidimensional scores, we do so only as a useful simplification of a higher-dimensional issue hyperspace. In the absence of a median voter result, we must make some other claim about what collective preferences should look like, be they the uncovered set, McKelvey set, convex hull of all possible medians, Pareto set, or some other concept. Means are well suited to capturing these notions of centrality, since the mean, like these other solution concepts, can lie in a range that is itself empty of legislators. In addition, Hinich (1977) supports the use of the mean.

Table 3 OLS Regressions of Committee representativeness

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Variable	Coef. (*p*)	Coef. (*p*)	Coef. (*p*)	Coef. (*p*)	Coef. (*p*)
Money	0.075 (0.696)	0.064 (0.521)	0.071 (0.500)	0.075 (0.693)	0.071 (0.494)
Education	0.180 (0.171)	0.155 (0.200)	0.170 (0.180)	0.181 (0.174)	0.171 (0.174)
Environment	0.021 (0.861)	0.021 (0.850)	0.021 (0.857)	0.021 (0.863)	0.021 (0.856)
Judiciary	0.098 (0.426)	0.098 (0.388)	0.098 (0.411)	0.098 (0.431)	0.098 (0.407)
Rules	0.029 (0.816)	0.026 (0.822)	0.041 (0.738)	0.048 (0.705)	0.037 (0.761)
Transportation		*–omitted category–*			
Eff. # parties	0.586 (0.006)				
Median diff. (std.ized)		0.814 (0.000)			
$\frac{\sigma_{maj}}{\sigma_{chamber}}$			0.430 (0.001)		
1-Overlap				1.636 (0.012)	
R^2 measure					0.407 (0.000)
Constant	–0.483 (0.223)	–0.082 (0.638)	0.395 (0.000)	–0.950 (0.124)	0.333 (0.004)
N	65	65	65	65	65
R^2	0.164	0.291	0.218	0.145	0.231

compared the actual committees to the distribution of simulated committees. A committee's *p*-score is simply the proportion of simulated committees with means at least as far from the chamber mean as is the committee. This is similar to the approach taken in Groseclose (1994). If Cox and McCubbins (1993) are correct, we should see control committees and committees more generally important to a party's reputation to be more representative of the parent chamber (if each party's contingent is more representative of the larger party). We then conduct a series of simple OLS regressions of committee representativeness against a suite of dummies for committee type, as well as some measures of polarization. Table 3 reports the results of these regressions.

There are four important findings to note in this table. First, the effective number of parties is closely related to the representativeness of the committees. This finding is evidence once again of a tie between the external electoral environment and the internal structure of legislatures. Second, and perhaps as the means by which this link between external and internal environments exists, all of the measures of the Aldrich-Rohde condition are closely related to the representativeness of the committees. Serial correlation does not appear to be a problem as in no case are residuals correlated with any independent variable. At least three reasons exist for why this might be the case. We may be observing a statistical artifact. If all parties were assigning legislators to committees in a purely random fashion, we would expect chambers with two tightly organized and distinct parties to result in more representative committees. Alternatively, the causal process outlined before may actually be taking place. Finally, as always there may be some other process working to drive this. Here, we do not explore the varying rationales but note the relationship. However, even if it were merely a statistical artifact, the link between partisan elections, polarized legislative parties, and representative committees is worth noting, especially because

committees are not as representative in less partisan electoral (and perhaps legislative) settings.

Third, the type of committee makes little or no difference. The closest approach to traditional levels of significance are the Education committees, with significance hovering between 0.17 and 0.20. This is reasonable enough given a Cox-McCubbins framework, since at the state level education committees might well be an important contributor to a party's reputation. However, that the money and rules committees are no more representative than other types is a surprising result from the Cox-McCubbins perspective.

Fourth, the coefficients on the committee types remain nicely stable across the different models. This bolsters the notion that the committee jurisdiction really does make little to no difference (with the possible exception of Education).

Conclusions

In this article, we have endeavored to show three things. First, we demonstrated that there is considerable variation across the states in the degree to which their partisan affiliates are polarized. At least in the states so far analyzed, it appears to be nearly the case that the state parties-in-legislatures either are very polarized or very unpolarized, with little in between. This variation far exceeds the observed variation in party polarization in the U.S. House in the past century. Second, we showed that legislative polarization appears to be closely related to the degree of competitiveness of elections, as measured by the number of effective parties in the states. Aldrich and Rohde link polarization to their account of conditional party government. Doing so leads to our third major set of results. We built on Key's seminal analysis of Southern parties to link them with the debate over the nature of congressional committees, arguing that uncompetitive parties should be associated with relatively less representative committees. Empirical analysis confirmed this connection.

Our results may, of course, be sensitive to the particular states we have used and the particular time period in which our analysis is set. While we are advantaged by having more variation than when using only the federal Congress, additional richness can be had by expanding the selection of states in both time and space. This is clearly a good tactic to pursue on general principles, but a few times and places merit some particular attention as they might provide additional tests beyond merely increasing the sample size. One important period to observe are the years surrounding 1934 in Nebraska as the legislature adapts to its new unicameral and nonpartisan status—do preexisting voting blocs endure, or are they torn by the increased ability of previous copartisans to defect from what otherwise might have been party decisions? Similarly, the 1980's and 90's in Colorado also bear examination. In 1988, the majority in the state House lost their ability to use binding caucus votes as a result of the GAVEL (Give A Vote To Every Legislator) initiative passed by the voters. If Krehbiel (1993, 1998) is correct, the loss of this institutional tool should not significantly affect the observed cohesion of the party, since that is to him merely a reflection of the underlying ideological or policy cohesion of the party members. If, however, parties and their institutional tools really matter, this hamstringing should result in an observable dissipation of power.

A different but also potentially useful tactic would be to work to integrate estimates of preferences (however derived) with survey data that asked questions about the relative importance of party and committee, among other things. Examples of such studies include the 1981 survey conducted by Francis (reported primarily in Francis 1989) and the 1995 survey by Carey, Niemi, and Powell (reported in Carey, Niemi, and Powell 1998 and Carey, Niemi, and Powell 2000). The latter survey is primarily on the effects of term limits but includes questions on changes in the influence of various actors or institutions.

These extensions would serve to demonstrate further the theoretical virtues developed in this article for the study of the states for understanding legislative politics. Further, doing so, as here, helps put knowledge garnered from the (extensive) studies of the U.S. House and Congress more generally into comparative context. Finally, the study of state legislative politics helps us learn about the politics of the states themselves, always important and increasingly so in the current era.

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