When Loyalty Is Tested

Do Party Leaders Use Committee Assignments as Rewards?

Nicole Asmussen

Vanderbilt University

Adam Ramey

New York University Abu Dhabi

8/24/2011

Theories of parties in Congress contend that one tool that party leaders possess to induce loyalty among rank-and-file members is control over committee assignments. While empirical tests of the linkage between member loyalty and success in committee assignments have been supportive of the party control hypothesis, these tests fail to distinguish loyalty from simply voting one’s preferences in accordance with party leaders. We conceptualize loyal legislators as voting with party leaders when it matters despite having preferences far from party leaders. Using NPAT surveys to measure preferences and a new dataset of party leader position-taking, and committee assignment data for 1993-2005, we are able to distinguish whether loyalty really matters for the allocation of committee seats or whether what has been inferred as loyalty is really an artifact of preferences.
The search for party effects in Congress has been characterized by sharp disagreement between party skeptics and party enthusiasts over the most appropriate methods, data, and even the very definition of “party effect.” Yet one thing both camps can agree on is where we should expect to find evidence of party effects, if indeed such evidence exists: the committee assignment process (Cox and McCubbins, 1993, 166; Krehbiel 1993, 241). Many theories of parties cite the leadership’s control of the committee assignment process as a way to induce loyalty among rank-and-file members. Indeed, of the potential tools in a party leader’s “toolbox,” the ability to make committee assignments has been one of the most frequently mentioned and most thoroughly explored empirically. However, the failure of empirical tests to distinguish party loyalty from simply voting one’s preferences in accordance with party leaders means that we cannot claim with confidence that leadership control of the committee assignment process has any effect on voting behavior. After all, members voting “loyally” out of preference similarity would do so even in the absence of committee assignment incentives. To answer convincingly the question of whether party leaders are able to induce loyalty through the promise of committee assignments requires a reconceptualization of what it means to be loyal.

Such a reconceptualization is long overdue. For the last 50 years, political scientists have used basically the same operationalization of loyalty—the percent of times voting with one’s party on party unity votes (votes where majorities of each party oppose one another)—with few improvements. While this operationalization may have accomplished some useful purposes (such as serving as a crude measure of preferences), these so-called “loyalty scores” capture only a weak definition of loyalty, that is, the propensity to vote
with one’s party or party leaders. But a strong definition of party loyalty implies a commitment to vote with one’s party even when other influences dispose one to vote against it.

The task of this paper is to reconceptualize loyalty in a way that both captures the full meaning of the word and lends itself to empirical testing. We characterize loyal legislators as those voting with the party when it matters despite have preferences far from the mainstream of the party. Hence, loyalty requires both party support on important votes and preference dissimilarity. In designing our empirical tests, we have chosen data and methods that closely approximate the concepts we seek to quantify. To measure party support on important votes, we use a new dataset we collected of positions taken on roll-call votes by party leaders in floor speeches. To measure preferences, we use members’ responses to the National Political Awareness Test—not roll call votes which are reflective of both preferences and decisions to behave loyally—to estimate ideal points. Finally, we explore committee assignments during a time period that has not previously been studied: 1993-2007. Our results suggest that Republicans do reward their more liberal members who exhibit high levels of support on important votes, which lends support to the claim that leadership control of the committee assignment process can affect voting behavior.

**Existing Literature**

Anecdotal evidence that party loyalty matters in the committee assignment process is readily available. Sinclair’s (1995) account of the deliberations of the committee on committees shows that party loyalty is a prime factor in its decisions:

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the importance of party loyalty had increased significantly. The party leaders computed party-support scores for
members based on their own selection of key votes. In nominating speeches for exclusive committees, the nominee’s party loyalty in voting and his or her efforts on behalf of party causes are prominently mentioned (Sinclair, 1995, 94).

Furthermore, her account shows that members perceive that their voting record is an important determinant of whether they receive an assignment to an important committee:

[The leadership] was watching and so we who were interested in Appropriations did watch our votes at the end of the 101st, feeling that might make a difference, that we could screw things up if we didn’t watch out. (Anonymous member, quoted in Sinclair 1995, 99).

Frisch and Kelly (2006) also find that members interested in transfer to control committees were more likely to mention their partisanship, indicating that members perceive party support as being important to receiving favorable committee assignments.

Showing that what is apparent from these examples is widespread and significant when controlling for other factors is a tricky business, and two important studies of the committee assignment process come to completely contradictory conclusions on the matter. While Cox and McCubbins (1993) find that “loyalty to the party leadership is a statistically and substantively important determinant of who gets what [committee] assignment” (186), Krehbiel (1993) comes to the opposite conclusion: “When controlling for preferences and other hypothesized effects, positive and significant party effects [on committee assignments] are rare” (235). This divergence is not surprising when we see that these studies use completely different specifications and data. Cox and McCubbins (1993) test whether “loyalty” on party leadership votes (votes in which both the leader and whip of
one party vote in opposition to the leader and whip of the other party) increases success in requesting a committee transfer during the period 1947-1987. However, they do not include any control for preferences. Krehbiel (1993), on the other hand, includes variables for party and vote-based measures of preferences in explaining assignment to policy committees in 1985. However, his specification does not even attempt to test whether party loyalty increases the likelihood of achieving a certain committee assignment—only whether being a member of a party increases the probability of assignment. Based on these two studies, no conclusions can be drawn about whether party control of committee assignments affects voting behavior.

Although other committee assignment studies have attempted to answer the same question (Frisch and Kelly 2006, Goodman and Nokken 2007, Kanthak 2004, Rhode and Shepsle 1973, Shepsle 1978, Smith and Ray 1983), all of them suffer from similar short-comings, the most severe of which is the failure to include separate measures for preferences and party support. As such, they are not really testing "loyalty," at least, nothing more than a weak definition of it.

**Conceptualizing Loyalty**

Loyalty scores, as they are conventionally measured by *Congressional Quarterly* party unity scores or Cox and McCubbins party leadership scores, are problematic in several respects. First, a member's score can be high even if she is purely voting her preferences, for example, if the member's ideal point lies close to the mainstream of her party. Therefore, testing for the effects of loyalty without controlling for preferences results in omitted variable bias, since preferences most likely are correlated with loyalty and have an effect
on the dependent variable of interest. Second, loyalty scores contain many type I and type II errors, that is, they include many votes for which the party has not taken a position, and they may exclude votes for which the party has taken a position. If this is the case, loyalty scores are at best a noisy measure. Finally, it is not clear that the party wants their members to maximize their loyalty scores. When electoral concerns are acute, the party may prefer "disloyal" behavior, with the exception of votes where the member is pivotal. Despite these shortcomings it is easy to see why these scores are widely used: they can be easily computed from the roll call record with no additional data collection required.

However, when inferring party effects, omitted variable bias poses a real problem, and so it is worth the effort to carefully collect new data and construct measures that capture the strong definition of "loyalty," that is, voting with the party when it matters despite having preferences far from the mainstream of the party. We construct two variables to measure support for party leader positions and preference dissimilarity. The intersection of these constitutes loyalty.

Two comments are in order. First, note that for members close to the mainstream of the party, we cannot distinguish loyal behavior from voting based on personal preferences. In a sense, their loyalty is never "tested." Therefore, the reward of favorable committee assignments to party mainstreamers gives us no insight into the question of whether parties can influence voting through control of committee assignments. Second, we suspect that parties are not equally interested in rewarding both loyal extremists and loyal chamber moderates. Although both groups have dissimilar preferences from the mainstream of the party, loyalty by chamber moderates is more consequential in the sense of passing legislation that might otherwise fail. To see why, consider what sorts of cutlines divide the party
mainstream from these two groups. Any piece of legislation whose cutline divides the mainstreamers from the extremists already has the support of a majority of the chamber, but any piece of legislation whose cutline divides the mainstreamers and the chamber moderates does not necessarily command the support of a majority. Therefore, loyalty when displayed by chamber moderates is more likely to be rewarded. Therefore, we have the following hypothesis regarding committee assignments:

*Members with both moderate preferences and high party leader support are more likely to receive favorable committee assignments.*

The next sections describe the data, methods and results of our preliminary analysis.

**Data and Methods**

The data and methods used in this analysis differ in several respects from previous studies. We choose to investigate the time period 1993-2007 due to the availability of the data we use to estimate legislator preferences. This time period has not been examined elsewhere, which means that the period in which Republicans held majorities in the House has yet to be explored. Second, instead of using the probability of success of a committee transfer request as the dependent variable, we use the probability of assignment to an exclusive committee. This allows us to explore a more recent period for which committee transfer request data is not available as well as avoid the possible endogeneity bias in using transfer requests, which may only be submitted when a member perceives her success as being likely. Unfortunately, we must substitute the assumption that members always desire transfer to exclusive committees. Finally, we use newly developed measures for party leader support and preferences.
The dependent variable in our analysis is a dummy variable that takes on the value of 1 if the member received a new assignment to an exclusive committee during the current congress, and 0 otherwise. During the time period under investigation, the exclusive committees were Appropriations, Energy and Commerce, Rules, and Ways and Means. Members already serving on exclusive committees are excluded from the analysis since assignment rules prohibit members from serving on more than one exclusive committee at a time.

The main independent variables of interest are Preferences, Leadership Support and Preferences*Leadership Support. Our measure of preferences uses members’ survey responses from Project VoteSmart’s National Political Awareness Test (NPAT). Since the survey is administered and publicized during the campaign season, we expect members’ responses to be reflective of their constituents’ opinions as well as their personal positions. Using this data is preferable to roll call data, since roll call data reflects not only constituency and personal preferences, but also decisions to vote loyal to one’s party. Furthermore, it also allows us to measure preferences and party support using different data, which gives us more confidence that we are tapping two different concepts.

The estimation procedure is relatively straightforward and follows extant approaches in the literature. First, the NPAT data is divided into a series of datasets separated by election cycle. Second, we apply a standard one-dimensional item response theory ideal point model (Clinton, Jackman, and Rivers 2004; Martin and Quinn 2002) to each of the election cycle datasets. We employ Bayesian Markov Chain Monte Carlo techniques to estimate this model.\footnote{This model has become quite common in political science, thanks in large part to the pio-}

---

1 This model has become quite common in political science, thanks in large part to the pio-
we opt for commonly-used, diffuse normal prior distributions for all parameters. For identification, we constrain the NPAT ideal points of a known liberal (conservative) to be drawn from negatively (positively) truncated normal distributions.

While we might be tempted to proceed with our analysis at this point, there are two major issues that preclude us from doing so: missing data and intertemporal comparability. On the subject of missing data, it is well known that low response rates have plagued surveys for decades. The NPAT is certainly not immune in this respect. While response rates were reasonably high during the early years (ca. 1992-1998), response rates have dropped drastically since then. Fortunately, Snyder and Groseclose (2001) have observed that NPAT ideal points correlate highly with ideal points estimated from lopsided roll call data. As a practical consequence of this, we can “impute” missing NPAT ideal points by regressing observed NPAT ideal points on lopsided roll call ideal points and use the coefficients from this regression to generate NPAT ideal points for NPAT non-responders.²

The issue of intertemporal comparability is a little more complicated. Since question wording on the NPAT has changed slightly over time, the data-estimated ideal points are not necessarily comparable. To deal with this, we employ Groseclose, Levitt, and Snyder’s (1999) scale-and-stretch method. This method assumes that year-to-year variation is due
to random error. As a result, we can estimate yearly (or election-year) intercepts and slopes. These transform the raw data to a common, comparable scale.

We also repeat our empirical analysis using Poole and Rosenthal’s more familiar DW-NOMINATE scores.

To measure support of the party leader, we collected data on positions taken by party leaders (the Speaker, Majority Leader, and Minority Leader) on roll-call votes during floor speeches. Such position-taking takes place relatively infrequently. Democratic leaders took positions on an average of 5.3% roll calls per congress, and Republican leaders took positions on an average of 5.7% of roll calls. These were usually votes on nontrivial and contentious rules, amendments, final passage votes and motions to recommit; therefore, these seem to be the sort of votes important enough to merit rewards for those members who are reliably supportive of the party’s position. We calculate a member’s leadership support score as the percent of times a member voted with her party on one of these position-taking votes in the previous congress. For comparability across congresses, we standardize the scores.

As a control variable, we also include Electoral Marginality, which takes a value of 1 if the member received less than 55% of the vote in the previous general election. This is to account for the possibility that parties protect members in unsafe districts by awarding them with favorable committee assignments. Given the dichotomous nature of the dependent variable, we use a logit estimation with congress fixed effects.
Results

Results are displayed in Table 1 below. Looking at the results for Democrats, we can see that committee assignments are not explained very well by the included variables. However, for Republicans the results confirm our hypothesis. Figure 1 below displays predicted probabilities for the first regression of Table 1. The solid line represents the predicted probability a moderate Republican (a member whose NPAT ideal point falls in the 20th percentile of the party) receives an assignment to an exclusive committee. As

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Likelihood of Assignment to an Exclusive Committee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginal Seat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Support (LS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NPAT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DW-NOMINATE (DW)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NPAT*LS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DW*LS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-2*LogLik</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Logit estimation with congress fixed effects. Standard errors in parentheses.
* p < 0.10  ** p < 0.05  *** p < 0.01
the member’s support of party leadership increases, her probability of assignment increases from near 0 to over 50%. Interestingly, leadership support seems to matter very little for the party median, and has the opposite effect for a party extremist (a member whose NPAT ideal point falls in the 80th percentile of the party). Returning to the table, we can see that Republican members in marginal seats are significantly more likely to receive a favorable assignment. Also note that the same estimation using DW-NOMINATE scores instead of NPAT scores produces coefficients with the same sign, but the effects are all much smaller.
Future Work

The results presented here raise interesting questions, particularly why the variables that explain the Republican Party’s committee assignment process do not work for the Democratic Party. Whether this is due to the Republican Party’s majority status during this period, or perhaps an effect of Gingrich’s leadership style in particular remains to be explored.

We also need to be sensitive to the assumption inherent in our model specification that all members desire transfer to an exclusive committee. Some members, particularly those who have been serving on an important policy committee or who have accumulated much seniority on their current committee may be disinclined to transfer. We can include in our model variables to measure a member’s seniority rank on their current committee and to measure the value of a seat on their current committee (for example, by using the Grosewart method of computing the value of committees as in Edwards and Stewart 2006).

We would also like to consider different goals, such as geographic balance and the overall ideological composition of the committee. If possible, we would like to connect our analysis to the literature on committee outliers. A key question is whether adding loyal moderates to exclusive committees conflicts with other party goals.

Conclusion

The search for party effects in Congress has often been set up as a contest between the explanatory power of preferences versus the explanatory power of party. The purpose of this essay has not been to prove the merit of one explanation over the other. Rather, we argue that the concept of loyalty cannot be measured except when preferences and party
interact. As future work clarifies our initial findings, we hope to shed additional light on our hypothesis that party leaders reward loyal voting behavior of moderates with favorable committee assignments.
References


