

**Growing the Vote:  
Majority Party Whipping in the U.S. House, 1955-2002**

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## **Growing the Vote: Majority Party Whipping in the U.S. House, 1955-2002<sup>1</sup>**

This paper reports on a broader study about partisan coalition building in the U.S. House and Senate, with an emphasis on the role of the whips and other party leaders prior to votes on some of the most significant legislation considered on Capitol Hill since World War II. By “whip” and “whipping,” I am referring both to positions of formal leadership within the Congress (each party within each chamber designates members as whips) and also to the myriad of tactics that party leaders employ to advance the party agenda on the floor (gauging the emergent preferences of members, lobbying potential defectors from the party program, altering bills or providing special favors to build support, and so on). Here, my focus is on majority party whipping in the House from 1955 to 2002, by all accounts an era of remarkable institutional transformation within the chamber.

In particular, I consider five main questions. How active were the majority party whips during this period and what factors account for any changes that may have occurred over time? What kinds of questions and issues have House majorities typically singled out for disproportionate whipping? Generally how large is the initial base of support that party leaders can count on at the beginning of floor fights on major bills? Have certain whips been especially effective at mobilizing member support for the party program and why? Does the partisan majority generally carry the day on whipped matters, and if so, are these victories accomplished without major substantive concessions on the floor? How might the answers to these questions inform ongoing debates among scholars and others about the role and impact of the political parties in Congress?

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The analysis of this paper is divided into six sections. First, I provide background about the whip function and the nature of my evidence. Section 2 is an exploration of the magnitude and composition of the whipped agenda for the House majority party over almost fifty years of recent House history. Next, I consider evidence from whip counts (private polls conducted by party leaders prior to important votes) to gauge the magnitude of the coalition-building challenges that have confronted House majorities on the floor, and also their relative success in mobilizing support, or “growing the vote.” Section 4 is an analysis of the outcomes of whipped questions for the majority party. Section 5 explores the whip count behavior of centrist members of the House, which is especially useful for evaluating theories of lawmaking. Concluding comments about the implications of this research are offered in Section 6.

### **1. The Whips as Evidence**

In the House, the office of party whip is the third ranking position for the majority party (following the Speaker and majority leader) and second ranking for the minority (after the minority leader). The position of Republican whip was created in 1899 by then Speaker Thomas Brackett Reed, and two years later the minority Democrats established an analogous office on their side of the aisle. According to reliable media accounts and the contemporaneous observations of members, the early whips served as key lieutenants to party leaders, conducting tallies of the preferences of fellow partisans before major roll calls, ensuring that supportive members were present on the floor for important decisions, and making arrangement for paired votes for absent members (Clark, 1920).

As the House parties became more internally divided after the 1910 revolt against Speaker Joseph Cannon, legislative authority shifted from party leaders to the committee system and the role of the whips became more circumscribed for a time. During the New Deal era, however, the House Democratic Whip, Patrick Boland of Pennsylvania, was a valued and highly effective ally of the Roosevelt administration. In the early 1930s, both House parties also expanded their whip operations to include networks of assistant, regional, and zone whips with geographic responsibilities. In 1933, for example, the House Democratic whip operation included 16 members, with one zone whip responsible for working with Democratic members from New England, another fulfilling this role for

the large Texas delegation, and so on (Evans and Grandy, 2009). The size of the House whip systems did not change all that much until the late 1970s, when the Democrats and then the GOP steadily expanded the number of members with some role in the party whip operation (Sinclair, 1995, Dodd 1978). By the mid-1990s, in a House increasingly polarized along party lines, fully 100 Democrats were whips of one kind or another, while on the Republican side of the aisle about 70 members had formal roles in their party's whip operation.

Although the size and organizational complexity of the two House whip networks have changed dramatically over time, the basic ingredients of effective whipping have been in place for decades. Among other duties, the whips work with other members of the leadership to formulate and implement party strategies; canvass the views of members of the relevant party rank and file prior to major floor actions; lobby individual members to stay loyal to the party program; manage and run regular meetings of the extended party whip organizations; provide members with policy and political information about major bills likely to appear on the floor agenda; communicate regularly with member offices about the upcoming floor schedule, especially the timing of votes; and act as public spokespersons for the party.

For these reasons, the whip networks of the House provide a unique vantage point for evaluating the tactics and impact of the congressional parties. There is considerable dissension among scholars and others about the causes and consequences of the rampant party polarization that characterizes the contemporary Congress and concerns so many citizens (Sinclair 2006, Theriault 2008). Is congressional partisanship primarily a product of the policy preferences of individual members, which in turn are shaped by constituency and other pressures rooted in the electoral environment (Krehbiel, 1998)? Or are party leaders and other internal characteristics of the Congress responsible for much of the rampant partisanship that has emerged on Capitol Hill since the 1970s? To the extent that it exists, is party power mostly procedural and centered at the agenda setting stage (e.g., Cox and McCubbins, 2005), or can leaders systematically whip their fellow partisans into line on the floor (Rohde, 1991, Aldrich and Rohde, 1998)?

Roll call data, of course, are the most accessible and commonly used form of evidence for analyzing congressional decision making, but the limitations of the roll call

record for identifying the causes and consequences of partisan behavior are well-known and fairly obvious (Kingdon, 1973, Jackson and Kingdon, 1992, Smith 2007). For one, a straight party-line vote on the House floor is not necessarily an indicator of leadership pressure. Plausible alternative explanations include the ideologically divergent constituencies represented by Democratic and Republican members, the lobbying effectiveness of interest groups that share agendas with one or the other party, pressure from the White House on members of the president's party, and even the different political philosophies held by Democratic and Republican members. Without systematic information about the positions and preferences of members prior to the voting decision – and about the lobbying tactics employed by party leaders and other coalition builders – there is simply no way to know for sure. An in-depth exploration of party whipping can provide just that evidence.

The whips have received only limited attention from political scientists, historians, and even journalists, however, because most of their activities are hidden from public view (but see Ripley 1964, Dodd 1978, and Burden and Frisby 2004). The canvassing of member viewpoints before major floor votes, for instance, can only be effective if members know that their personal communications with the leadership will be kept private and not shared with their political opponents or voters. Confronted by an upcoming floor fight on a significant issue, party leaders also will not want their strategic plans shared with leaders from across the partisan aisle. Indeed, in fall 2009, there was an uproar within the House Democratic Caucus after party liberals shared with journalists the results of an internal whip count regarding the so-called public option then under consideration for inclusion in the party's health care reform bill.<sup>2</sup>

Fortunately, the archived papers of former congressional party leaders include extensive records of party whip operations from the mid-1950s to the early 2000's, and a nearly comprehensive paper trail is available for the majority party. Not surprisingly, there are some gaps. Evidence about majority party whipping by House Democrats is unattainable for most of 1976 and 1991, and for the entirety of 1987, 1988, and 1990. For the Republican majorities of 1995-2002, I was able to comprehensively identify the

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<sup>2</sup> Mike Soraghan, "Whip count shows Democrats lack votes on 'robust' public option for healthcare," *The Hill*, October 22, 2009.

issues on which the majority whips were active, and detailed evidence about the emergent positions of individual members has been gathered for 1997-2002, but only sporadic information at the member level is available for 1995-96.<sup>3</sup> Still, approximately 30,000 pages of records have been reproduced and examined as part of my broader research about the whips, touching on much of the major legislation considered on Capitol Hill during the second half of the twentieth century.

## **2. Majority Whip Activity**

One useful indicator of party coalition building on the floor is the number and substantive focus of party whip counts. As mentioned, whip counts are essentially private polls conducted by House and Senate party leaders prior to major floor votes. Although there is some variance across parties, chambers, and over time, leaders generally use these polls to categorize their fellow partisans as “yes,” “leaning yes,” “undecided,” “leaning no,” “no,” or nonresponsive in some way on the upcoming matter. In the House, the majority whip process usually begins with a request from the majority leader, usually in consultation with the Speaker and other top party leaders, for a count of the leanings of rank-and-file members of the party on a matter pending before the chamber. The whip communicates the request to members of the extended whip system for the party (called zone whips by the Democrats and assistant or deputy whips by the GOP). These individuals in turn contact the members from their party over which they have been assigned responsibility and ask for responses to one or more specific questions that relate to the targeted matter. For the Democrats, whip zones have always been based on geography. The nature of the division of labor within the House Republican network has changed over time, and in the late 1990s was based on both geography and the personal ties of particular members. Especially for the Democrats, the questions being polled tend to be phrased so that a “yes” response is in favor of the position of the leadership.

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<sup>3</sup> For various reasons, information about whip behavior for the House minority party is only available for the 1970s and 1989-1993. Archival evidence about party whipping in the Senate is mostly confined to the late 19980s and 1995-2002. Evans and Grandy (2009) and Evans (2011) provide full information about the archival sources used for this project.

As they hear from their colleagues (directly or through staff), the zone or assistant whips report back to the party whip with their tallies, singling out particular members as potential problems or in need of contact or persuasion from the leadership. Typically, members of the whip organization meet with the relevant party leadership and (perhaps) leaders from the committee or subcommittee of jurisdiction to plot strategy and coordinate the pre-vote lobbying effort. These follow-up efforts often are referred to as “clean-up” and can be pivotal to the outcome.

Figure 1 summarizes the activity levels of the House majority whip operations, 1955-2002. The figure traces the number of polled questions that the majority leadership put to its members each year. If the leadership requested that the zone or assistant whips ask their members three separate questions dealing with a single bill (perhaps about the rule, an expected floor amendment, and the vote on final passage), then the request is treated as three polled questions. The missing entries are for years for which comprehensive whip count data for the majority party are unavailable. Overall, the evidence indicates several instructive trends.

Obviously, the level of majority whip activity has risen substantially over time. For the Democrats, the average number of whip counts per year for 1955-72 was about 9.3. During 1973-1982, the average rose to 29. During 1983-94, the average increased to a little over 35. For the Republican majorities of 1995-2002, the average number of whip counts per year was 55.5.

Although the number of whip polls has increased over the years, there were sharp spikes for the Democrats in the late 1970s and for the Republicans in the late 1990s. The well-known increase in partisan polarization from the 1970s to the late 1990s was probably responsible for some of the long-term growth in whip activity, especially the GOP spike during 1995-2000. Moreover, compared to prior Democratic majorities, the Republican majorities of 1995-2002 were relatively small. The modest size of the GOP margins during these years, combined with the high levels of partisan polarization, meant that the party needed to hold onto the votes of almost all of its members to win on the floor. One consequence was a highly active whip operation, which is reflected in the hundreds of counts that GOP Whip Tom DeLay supervised during the period.

The surge in whip activity among the majority Democrats during the late 1970s, in contrast, occurred during a time of relatively low partisan polarization and sizable majority party margins (almost 300 members). Why was the Democratic operation so active during those years? Prior to the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970, recorded votes were not conducted in the Committee of the Whole, which is the parliamentary device through which the chamber considers most amendments to legislation. With the inception of recorded voting in the 1970s, the number of floor amendments grew markedly, in part because the minority GOP sought to force the majority Democrats to cast public votes on politically divisive issues that could hurt them at home. Confronted with an avalanche of amendments and votes and a caucus that was large but divided, the Democratic leadership significantly stepped up its whip activity.<sup>4</sup> By the early 1980s, Democratic members had convinced Speaker O’Neill to clamp down on the floor amendment process via the use of more restrictive rules. For a time, the number of majority whip counts fell, before again rising because of the burgeoning partisan polarization within Congress.

Overall, about 70 percent of the over-time variation in majority whip activity can be explained with just two factors – the degree of partisan polarization within the House (as measured by the distance in mean DW-NOMINATE scores for Democrats and Republicans) and the size of the chamber workload (as reflected in the number of recorded votes per Congress).<sup>5</sup>

Table 1 provides summary information about the kinds of questions that were subject to majority whip activity, with 1955-2002 divided into four discrete periods that existing scholarship indicates are meaningful for understanding party politics. The first period, 1955-1972, covers the last decade or so of the “Textbook Congress,” in which the Democratic majority was often deeply divided along sectional lines, especially on matters

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<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the election of Jimmy Carter as president in 1976 meant that Democratic leaders were responsible for shepherding the administration’s legislative agenda through Congress, reinforcing the need for accurate intelligence about the evolving positions of members and for effective lobbying on the floor.

<sup>5</sup> The number of majority whip counts was regressed (using both ordinary least squares and negative binomial regression) against polarization, the number of roll calls, the minority party’s share of the membership, an interaction term that is the product of polarization and the minority proportion, and an indicator variable taking the value of one if the House majority party also controlled the White House. Only the polarization measure (when included separately and without the interaction term) and the number of roll calls produced statistically significant parameter estimates, and the impact of the number of votes was only slightly larger than the impact of polarization.



of civil rights and race, and committees had significant autonomy vis-à-vis the majority leadership. The next period, 1973-82, begins with the inception of recorded voting in the Committee of the Whole and the resulting surge in floor activity. Here, as a result of the 1960s enfranchisement of black Americans and the shift among Southern conservatives toward the GOP, the longstanding sectional cleavage within the majority Democratic Caucus grew substantially less important. But the large Democratic majorities of the 1970s were still deeply divided on the major issues of the day, the chamber was characterized by rampant member individualism, and at least during 1981-82, the party confronted an effective Republican president with an ambitious legislative program (Sinclair 2006). Following the Democratic Party's strong performance in the 1982 midterm elections, however, the House majority leadership stepped up its opposition to the Reagan policy program and party unity within the Democratic Caucus began to rise (Rohde 1991). This turn toward partisan polarization in Congress continued through 1994. The 1995-2002 period, of course, marked the emergence of a Republican majority in the House for the first time in forty years. According to some scholars, the GOP majorities of the mid to late 1990s are the closest the House has come to party government since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Aldrich and Rohde 1998).

In Table 1, the top row includes polled questions about the passage of entire bills or resolutions and the broad issue stances of members. The next category for conference matters includes questions about the adoption of conference reports and related motions, such as motions to instruct conferees during bicameral bargaining. The third row in the table is for questions about amendments, portions of legislation, and other discrete policy alternatives. Since the motion to recommit legislation to committee, with or without amendatory instructions, is a valued minority party prerogative within the House, such motions are treated as a separate question category in Table 1. The category for procedure and strategy is mostly comprised of questions about special rules and previous question motions on special rules, but also includes a range of other tactical questions that are primarily about process, rather than the substance of legislation. The final category is for questions about attempts to override a presidential veto.

As Table 1 indicates, overall just over half of the polled questions put to members by the majority leadership, 1955-2002, dealt with entire measures or general policy

matters. About 20 percent pertained to amendments or other alternatives, about 13 percent concerned procedure and strategy, and slightly less than seven percent were about conference matters. Relatively few whip counts dealt with motions to recommit or veto overrides.

Still, as expected, there is noteworthy variation across time periods. During 1955-72, prior to the inception of recorded votes on amendments and the dramatic rise in floor amending activity that ensued, the percentage of majority whip activity focusing on entire bills and broad policy matters was very high, over 70 percent, and the proportion of whip activity targeting the amendment process was relatively low. Not surprisingly, when the majority leadership began to rely on restrictive amendment procedures on the floor during the late 1970s, the proportion of whip activity allocated to procedural matters basically tripled. Indeed, during 1983-94, about one in five whip counts concerned procedure.

Whip attention to veto overrides was most prevalent during the 1970s, especially in 1973-76 when Republicans controlled the White House and Presidents Richard Nixon and (especially) Gerald Ford made regular use of the veto pen to block initiatives championed by the majority Democrats. Indeed, if we focus exclusively on that four-year span, 13 of the 88 polled questions (about 15 percent) dealt with veto overrides. Interestingly, during 1997-2000, when the Republican House majority regularly squared off against the Democratic administration of Bill Clinton, not a single one of the several hundred whip counts conducted by GOP Whip Tom DeLay dealt with a veto override attempt. The reasons are straightforward. The Democratic majorities of the 1970s were relatively large and cross-partisan coalitions were fairly common, making the successful override of a presidential veto potentially attainable. In the late 1990s, in contrast, GOP leaders had small margins and on veto overrides they could count on highly unified opposition from congressional Democrats. DeLay and other Republican leaders were reluctant to waste their time and political capital whipping for override attempts that almost certainly would fail.

Additional insight about the “whipped” agenda can be derived from comparisons with the contents of the roll call record. Table 2 juxtaposes the kinds of questions targeted for majority whipping with the contents of the questions subject to a recorded

vote on the House floor during the relevant years. Of the more than 1,000 questions polled by the House majority party, 1955-2002, for which there are archival traces, almost 80 percent can be linked directly to a roll call that occurred on the House floor, and the lion's share of these votes were nonunanimous (that is, neither side received fewer than 10 percent).<sup>6</sup> For the population of House roll call votes that occurred during the period for which majority whip poll data are available, I identified which votes linked to whip counts and then compared the composition of the two sets of questions – nonunanimous votes with polls and nonunanimous votes that were not whipped.<sup>7</sup> The cell entries in Table 2 are the percentage of the relevant agenda (whipped votes versus the others) that fell in the aforementioned question categories. For the 1955-72 period, for example, roughly 61 percent of polled votes dealt with House passage, while only 35.52 percent of the other roll calls were in this category.

Overall, the kinds of questions that were whipped were fairly representative of the broader agenda, albeit with certain exceptions. The disproportionate emphasis on House passage is also apparent in Table 2. While this category accounts for about 50 percent of the polled votes, it comprises just 21.3 percent of the other nonunanimous roll calls. At least since the early 1970s, questions related to the floor amendment process are less prevalent among polled votes relative to the others.

In Table 2, to facilitate comparisons between whip counts and the roll call record, the category for procedure only includes special rules and previous question motions on special rules.<sup>8</sup> Under the Democratic majorities of the 1970s and 1980s, as the majority leadership made increased use of restrictive procedures to limit minority party participation on the floor, these motions were much more prevalent on the polled agenda than they were in the roll call record writ large. During the pre-1970s “Textbook” era, in

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<sup>6</sup> At this point in the analysis, whip counts are linked to votes even if there were certain modifications to the underlying text between the time of the poll and the occurrence of the vote. For example, if the majority leadership tallied member positions about the bill as reported by committee, but a major amendment was adopted on the floor, the count is still linked to the final passage vote because our interest for now is in the kinds of matters that evoke whip attention, rather than the relative success of the leadership's lobbying effort.

<sup>7</sup> In assigning votes to question categories, I relied on Rohde, David, “Political Institutions and Public Choice House Roll-Call Database,” Duke University, Durham, NC, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> With the exception of special rules and previous question motions, it can be difficult to draw systematic linkages between the sorts of questions tagged as “procedural” or “strategic” in Table 1 and particular vote categories in Rohde 2010.

contrast, amendment rules tended to be relatively open and the associated votes often were not partisan, reducing the call for partisan whipping. And by the mid to late 1990s, the expectations for party loyalty on rule votes may have been so strong that whipping typically was not needed for the majority party to prevail.

Table 3 repeats the analysis of Table 2, but now votes (both polled items and other roll calls) are categorized by policy area, rather than question type.<sup>9</sup> Once again, there are important similarities. While items pertaining to the economy, budget, and taxation comprise about 20 percent of polled votes, they are only responsible for about 10 percent of the other nonunanimous roll calls. The differences between the two agendas largely derive from tax items and budgetary matters, which were significantly more common among polled items than they were among the other votes. Interestingly, the disproportionate emphasis on tax policy in the whipped agenda characterizes the Democratic majorities from 1973 to 1994, but *not* the Republican majorities of the 1990s. In part, the reason may be that tax votes had become such a regular feature of the roll call agenda by the early 1990s. But another factor is probably the substantial cohesion that had emerged among Republicans on tax issues, which reduced the need for them to engage their whip operation.

Table 3 also reveals noteworthy changes over time for appropriations bills, the annual spending measures that can create important managerial challenges for whichever party is organizing the chamber. Over 1955-2002, the proportion of roll call votes that occurred on appropriations bills grew substantially, from under 20 percent to almost one-third. Prior to the 1980s, party whip counts were relatively uncommon on appropriations, reflecting the bipartisan norms that structured the spending process during those years. Beginning in the 1980s, but especially during the GOP majorities of the 1990s, appropriations issues became a central feature of the whipped agenda. Indeed, during 1995-2002, over 35 percent of majority party whip counts in the House targeted appropriations bills in some fashion.

Interesting, this increase in polling activity did not target defense issues or the Labor-HHS spending bill, which touch on hot-button issues that often divide the two

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<sup>9</sup> Here, I relied heavily on the categorization scheme developed by Rohde and his colleagues. For details, consult the codebook for Rohde (2010).

political parties. Instead, the major disparities between the whipped agenda and the larger roll call record appear to center on appropriations for foreign operations, the legislative branch, the District of Columbia, and the Treasury-Postal bill. Regardless of which party has majority control of the House, it can be difficult to build floor majorities for these measures because they lack strong domestic constituencies and often are inviting targets for position taking by individual members. Spending on foreign aid, for instance, is seldom popular with U.S. voters. The majority party often whips the previous question motion on the rule for the Treasury-Postal bill because defeat of that motion is the primary mechanism through which self-styled populists can cut the salaries of members of Congress. Similarly, the appropriations bill that funds the legislative branch is a highly inviting amendment target for members seeking to position themselves as self-sacrificing reformers. The failure to move these measures through the House in a timely fashion, however, can create bottlenecks in the floor schedule, endangering other aspects of the majority party program. Moreover, gridlock in the annual appropriations process can result in a partial shutdown of visible federal programs, creating political problems for majority party members at home. Much of the disproportionate whip activity on appropriations matters, in other words, derives from the managerial responsibilities associated with majority status, irrespective of which party is organizing the chamber.

### **3. Whip Polls and Votes**

The remarkable scope of majority whip activity is suggestive of majority party influence in the legislative process. On the other hand, high levels of whip activity are also a possible signal of significant weaknesses in the majority coalition. Within both leaderships, there are significant opportunity costs to engaging the whip system. Political capital is not unlimited and allocating significant effort to one item reduces the stock of resources, goodwill, and obligation that leaders can draw on for other aspects of the policy agenda. Moreover, the willingness of rank-and-file members to make concessions to their leadership, that is, to downplay their personal priorities and instead promote the collective interests of their party, is likewise limited. For these reasons, the majority leadership should devote its attention and political capital to items and initiatives that (1) have at least the potential to unify the party rank and file; (2) where the outcome is still in

play; and (3) the underlying issue is a significant element of the party program or message agenda. As mentioned, since the public holds the majority party disproportionately responsible for managing day-to-day business within the chamber, the majority leadership also will need to build winning coalition on “must-pass” elements of the legislative agenda like appropriations bills.

As a result, in gauging the impact of partisan institutions like the whip networks, we need to consider the nature of the challenge confronting the leadership and its relative success or failure in meeting that challenge. One way to gauge this challenge on the floor is to examine the initial base of support for the party position at the beginning of the whip process.<sup>10</sup>

Consider Figure 2, which compares the percentage of majority party members supporting the party position on whip counts with party cohesion on roll calls (nonunanimous and party-line). Unfortunately, evidence about the poll responses of individual members is not available for all of the whip counts for which there are meaningful archival traces (the text of the polled question, the date, and other general information about the lobbying process may be available, but not detailed information about the emergent positions of individual members). Moreover, it was not unusual for there to be so many nonresponses or missing positions that the count appeared to be incomplete, or the leadership only polled a small number of members who were viewed as “in play” on the matter. Including these items might distort aggregate measures of party support across whip counts and they are dropped from this portion of the analysis.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> One common question about whip counts is whether the responses of members can be trusted. Are there any incentives for them to overstate their opposition to the party program, potentially securing favors in exchange for their support? Four points are worth mentioning in response. First, the whip process is a “repeated game” and members develop reputations. There are incentives for them to be truthful. Second, congressional leaders generally know a lot about the constituencies of rank-and-file members and can be very difficult to fool. Third, in a sense it does not matter. If a member claims that she will oppose a bill or amendment unless she receives some concession, then that essentially becomes her position and the polled question and the concession are for all practical purposes inseparable. Fourth, and most important, participants in the whip process believe that whip poll responses are accurate, which is precisely why they base strategic decisions on the results.

<sup>11</sup> A count is treated as incomplete or partial if response data of some form is missing for more than 60 members. During the Republican era, Tom DeLay made regular use of targeted whip checks and these items were denoted as such in office records.

Here, party support on a whip count is the sum of “yes” and “leaning yes” responses divided by the total number of responses.<sup>12</sup> As the figure demonstrates, initial party support on whip counts and party cohesion on votes tend to move together and have increased markedly over time. The only significant exception is the 94<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1975-76, and this may be largely an artifact of the record keeping practices of the leadership at the time.<sup>13</sup>

In the figure, party support on whip counts is systematically lower than roll call cohesion in part because the number of members switching from opposition on the count to support on the vote usually exceeds movement in the opposite direction. But the primary reason is that so many lawmakers respond as “undecided” on whip counts or otherwise decline to make a firm commitment one way or the other on the polled matter (they may respond as “no comment” or provide a substantive response that the whips cannot record using one of the standard response categories). As was the case for partisan behavior on roll calls, the size of the base on majority party whip counts (calculated as the sum of members responding as yes or leaning yes) has increased steadily and significantly over time. Much of the heightened party polarization in the House, in other words, appears to have been apparent near the beginning of the process of endgame lobbying on the floor.

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<sup>12</sup> Nonresponses and members who were not included in the poll are excluded, as are the occasional response that is illegible. Typically, the archival records of whip operations includes multiple drafts of a count, with the positions of some members changing from draft to draft as the lobbying process continues and the roll call nears. Indeed, for some issues five or more lists of the results may be compiled in the day or two before the relevant vote. The main changes from earlier to later drafts typically are a reduction in the number of nonresponders. To simplify matters, when the positions of members change across drafts, I coded the position that maximizes the level of response ambiguity. If a member is “undecided” on one draft and “leaning yes” on the next, the position is coded as “undecided.” If there is a tie in terms of distance from undecided (e.g., shifts from “no” to “yes,” or from “leaning no” to “leaning yes”), then I coded the response that was furthest from the leadership position. A nonresponse is coded if and only if the member is nonresponsive across all drafts.

<sup>13</sup> In contrast to the rest of the whip data, evidence for the 94<sup>th</sup> Congress could not be obtained from the personal papers of the relevant whip, John McFall, D-CA. For some reason, there are no traces of McFall’s leadership activities in his personal records. Instead, evidence about whip activity during 1975 and the first two months of 1996 was obtained from the papers of Carl Albert, who was speaker at the time and who kept records of the results of party whip counts. In contrast to the other whip records gathered for this project, these materials may predominantly reflect member positions at the very end of the whip process, and immediately prior to the relevant vote. This may explain why the level of party support on these counts was so similar to that apparent in the roll call record. Larry Dodd, who was an APSA Congressional Fellow in the whip’s office during the 93<sup>rd</sup> Congress, gathered whip data for McFall’s first Congress in the position and kindly shared the information with me.

Table 4 provides more detailed information about the responses of members on majority whip polls, this time broken down by the four periods. During the waning years of the Textbook Era, 1955-72, slightly more than 56 percent of members pledged to support the party program on whip counts and another 2 percent were leaning that way. About 13 percent were undecided, 11.57 answered “no,” and another one percent was leaning that way. The category for “other” (various forms of nonresponse) included 15.51 percent of the observations. Looking across periods, the proportion of undecideds increased somewhat during the 1970s and 1980s, before dropping back to 11.25 percent during the years of the GOP majority. The percentage answering no or leaning no declined from about 12 percent during the first two periods to about eight percent during 1983-94 and 1997-2002. Consistent with Figure 2, the party base on whip counts has increased markedly over time.

As mentioned, the “other” category includes a range of nonresponses. The proportion of observations in this category declined from 15.51 percent and 11.95 percent during the 1955-72 and 1973-82 periods, respectively, to about seven percent in the 1980s and 1990s. Two ingredients of the “other” category merit additional attention, zone aggregates and “if needed” responses.

Especially during the 1960s, certain geographic zones, mostly from the south, refused to provide the Democratic leadership with information about the positions of individual members and instead reported just the totals (e.g., “three are yes,” “four are undecided,” “11 no,” and so on). Zones that included the Carolinas and especially the Texas delegation mostly employed this tactic. The recollections of participants are not completely consistent about the underlying motivation. One view is that Texas representatives in particular felt like they had strong personal ties to the Johnson White House and preferred to deal directly with the administration. Another view is that Texas representatives and other southerners knew that the Democratic whips would share their information with the White House and these members did not want to be subjected to the famed “Johnson treatment” of intense personal lobbying.<sup>14</sup> There probably is some truth

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<sup>14</sup> For example, Gary Hymel, the top aide to Hale Boggs as whip and also a senior staffer to Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill during his speakership expressed the first view to me. The second perspective was articulated in a personal interview with former Speaker James Wright, who was a member of the Texas delegation during much of the Textbook Era.



to both explanations. But use of the tactic by Democratic zone representatives primarily occurred in the 1960s and early 1970s, and would not have been tolerated in the more polarized houses of the 1980s and 1990s.

On occasion, members tell the whips that they would rather vote against the party position, but are willing to stay loyal on the roll call “if needed.” Usually, such commitments are made late in the whip process and are not formally recorded in whip checks. Instead, a member will respond as no or leaning no to a succession of inquiries, as the roll call nears the leadership will inform the member that his or her vote may be pivotal, and at the last minute the member may switch from opposition to support. However, members occasionally adopt the “if needed” position early enough in the whip process for the commitment to be formally recorded. Although such occurrences are relatively rare, their incidence over time is informative about the importance of partisan ties. If we stay focused on completed whip counts, then there were 94 clear-cut instances in which a member was listed as “if needed” on majority whip counts, and more than two-thirds of those instances were from the Republican majorities of 1997-2002. Indeed, on the GOP whip counts, five or more members told the leadership that they would be with the party “if needed” on 23 polled questions, and in several instances more than a dozen members responded in this fashion.

### **The Base and Majority Pickup**

Percentages and support rates are informative, but to properly gauge the coalition building challenges that confronted majority party leaders and their relative success in meeting them, what really matters is the number of votes. A 70 percent support rate for the 300-member partisan majorities of the late 1970s, for example, would translate into 210 votes, which is close to a chamber majority, while an analogous support rate for the narrow Republican majorities of the 1990s would translate into just 160 votes and a substantial vote-growing challenge.

Since our interest now is in directly comparing the size of the base and vote gathering success on discrete items, let’s focus again on the polled items that could be directly linked to votes. And once again, let’s distinguish between votes that are party line and all nonunanimous roll calls. For each period, the average size of the majority

party base (yes plus leaning yes responses) on the polled items is provided in the first two rows of Table 5 (one row for counts that link to nonunanimous votes, and the other for counts that link to party-line votes). Notice that the average base does get larger over time, but its absolute size is smaller during the Republican majority, reflecting their narrow margins. And not surprisingly, the base tends to be slightly larger on the party-line items.

In the table, the next two rows are for the majority party pickup, which is the difference between the number of majority party members voting with the party on the relevant roll call and the size of the base. Interestingly, the average size of the pickup declined over time for the Democratic majorities, before rising somewhat under the Republicans in the last period. Over the decades of Democratic rule, in other words, the size of the base grew, but average pickup fell, illustrating how increased polarization within the House made floor decision making more predictable and less fluid. The smaller base and slightly larger pickup levels for the Republican majority (in comparison with the Democratic majorities of 1983-94) appear to reflect both the small GOP margins and effective vote gathering by Tom DeLay on the floor.

Expectations about the likely level of support on the underlying matter from members of the minority party are also a factor in the majority whip process. Party whips seldom approach members of the opposite party to ask about their views, but allied interest groups conduct their own canvassing and regularly share political intelligence with the whips. Alternatively, the whips may approach a member of the other party indirectly, through a member (of the whip's party) who has personal ties to the targeted individual. Indeed, lists of likely supporters from across the aisle are common in the archival record, and for some measures, such as trade votes, systematic counts may be conducted by both parties, the White House, and five or ten outside groups covering the entire House membership. One reasonable approach to estimate the prospects for cross-partisan support on a polled item is to simply look at the average number of minority party members who ended up voting with the majority party on the relevant roll call, and this information is provided in the bottom two rows of Table 5. Not surprisingly, for the questions that produced party-line votes, the average level of minority party support has steadily declined over time, reaching a low of 21.64 members during the Republican

period. For all nonunanimous votes, in contrast, the average level of minority support has been fairly stable over time, even increasing somewhat in 1997-2002.

If for party-line items we sum the appropriate rows, then base plus minority party support was roughly 181 members in 1955-72, 192 in 1973-82, 208 in 1983-94, and 194 in 1997-2002. The gap that needed to be filled to achieve the generic 218 votes was thus about 37 members for the Textbook period, 26 for the 1970s transition, just 10 members for the Democratic majorities of 1983-94, and 24 for the Republican years. Interestingly, the mean pickup closed this gap for every period but the first, where the gap and pickup were essentially the same. To properly compare the accomplishments of the whips, however, party size still needs to be factored in.

The results of a more systematic analysis of partisan vote gathering that includes majority party size are reported in Table 6. For all completed whip counts on which the majority took a clear position and for which there exists a nonunanimous roll call, I regressed the number of majority party votes for the party position against the size of the base (yes plus leaning yes responses on whip counts), the size of the majority party, and indicator variables for the periods, with 1955-1972 as the omitted category. The regression was repeated without the period indicators and instead with analogous indicator variables for the individuals who served as majority party whips in the House, 1955-2002. (Dates for their tenures as majority whip are denoted for reference.) Here, Carl Albert, Democratic whip from 1955 to 1961, serves as the omitted category. In the second equation, Tony Coelho, D-CA, and William Gray, D-PA, are necessarily captured by a single variable because only one year of comprehensive whip count data is available for their combined tenure in the office: The year is 1989, first session of the 101<sup>st</sup> Congress. During that session, Coelho was whip for the first six months and Gray for the last six months, and for practical reasons it is not possible to separate out their tenures for analysis.

In both regressions, the parameter estimates for the initial base and party size have the expected signs and are statistically significant.<sup>15</sup> Not surprisingly, an increase in

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<sup>15</sup> The number of observations for the regressions is substantially lower than the number of counts that link to votes because observations with incomplete counts and questions for which member-level responses do not exist are dropped from this part of the analysis. As the project continues, it may be possible to incorporate additional observations where there are references to poll aggregates in the archival record, but

either the base or party size produces increases in the number of majority party votes cast for the party position, although for both explanatory variables the magnitude of the associated increase is substantially less than “one-to-one.” Interestingly, the only statistically and substantively significant difference by period is for 1997-2002, the six years of Republican control for which member-level whip data are available. Controlling for the size of the base and – this is key – the size of the majority party, DeLay and his colleagues were especially successful at growing the size of the majority party vote.

Further insight on the relative vote-growing performance of DeLay and other whips is provided by the second regression equation, which drops the period dummies and instead includes indicator variables for the individuals who served as majority whip. None of the whip indicators achieve statistical significance (although Coelho/Gray is statistically significant and DeLay comes close if we use a one-tailed test). Yet, the sizes and signs of the parameter estimates for the whip indicators are instructive. The DeLay period still stands out, but so does the session in which Coelho and then Gray served as majority whip for the Democrats. Indeed, the substantively small size of the parameter estimate for the 1983-94 period in equation 1 appears to result from the divergent vote-growing experiences of Coelho and Gray, on the one hand, and Thomas Foley and David Bonior, on the other.

The results for Coelho/Gray are not unexpected. Close observers of party politics in the House have drawn parallels between Tom DeLay and Tony Coelho, just as they have between Newt Gingrich, R-GA, and James Wright, D-TX, who served as speakers when DeLay and Coelho, respectively, were majority whip. Like DeLay, Coelho earned a reputation for aggressive coalition building rooted in his close links to outside interest groups, lobbyists, and activists associated with his party (Barry 1990, Sinclair 2006). And although Coelho stepped down as whip in June 1989 amid an ethical cloud, the basic structure and personnel makeup of his whip operation remained in place for the

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for now data about the size of the base is only used where it can be calculated with confidence from individual level responses.

remainder of the 101<sup>st</sup> Congress, perhaps contributing to Gray's initial success in the post.<sup>16</sup>

#### 4. Outcomes

The ultimate aim of majority whipping, of course, is not to gather votes but to win on the floor. Indeed, once the 218-vote target has been achieved, there often are incentives for the majority leadership to allow cross-pressured members to vote against the leadership and with important interests in their districts, helping these members build electoral support at home. We need to consider the outcomes of the questions that were whipped by House majorities, 1955-2002. Overall, how successful was the majority party on whipped matters? Are there significant differences across periods or individual whips?

As part of the broader research for this project, detailed legislative histories were constructed for the hundreds of measures and over 1,000 polled questions included in the underlying data set. Considerable strategic information was gleaned from the archival evidence. In constructing these legislative histories, I also leaned on the standard sources used by congressional scholars. More concretely, the leadership papers were supplemented with information from the *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, *CQ Weekly Report*, *The Washington Post*, and other national media outlets.<sup>17</sup> When there were ambiguities, I consulted the floor debate on the matter in the *Congressional Record*, including any discussion of special rules and other procedural preliminaries. Based on these materials, it was fairly straightforward to assign the outcomes for each polled question to one of five main categories.

The first outcome category is for *unambiguous wins* by the majority party. Here, no significant changes were made to broaden support for the underlying proposal or motion and the majority party carried the day on the floor. During April 6-7, 1965, for example, the Democratic leadership polled its members about their views on the GOP

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<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the master records for whip counts conducted during 1989 were located in the personal papers of David Bonior, who served as chief deputy whip to both individuals, rather than the papers of either Coelho or Gray.

<sup>17</sup> Prior to the 1980s, *CQ Almanac* generally is sufficient, but after that point it was often necessary to also consult the weekly reports for sufficiently detailed information about coalition building on whipped questions.

motion to recommit and final passage for the legislation that established the Medicare program. The motion to recommit failed and the bill passed. Both questions are treated as unambiguous wins for the majority party. In late February 2001, the Republican leadership asked GOP members if they would support the proposed Bush tax cut as reported by the Ways and Means Committee. The bill was considered on the floor without major change and passed. This item also is treated as a clear-cut majority party win.

The second category is for questions that carried but only after *major changes* were made. Obviously, few major bills are adopted on the floor without the passage of any amendments at all. This is particularly the case for appropriations bills and other omnibus measures, which can draw dozens of amendment proposals. So here, it was crucial to distinguish between modifications based on their substantive importance and impact on the distribution of viewpoints on the polled question. Since whip counts typically deal with highly salient aspects of the legislative agenda and receive ample media attention, it was not difficult to identify instances of major change between the whip count on a matter and the decision made on the floor. On May 20, 1993, for example, the Democratic leadership polled its members about the rule for and initial passage of reconciliation language championed by the Clinton administration. Between the beginning of the whip process and the relevant votes on May 27, however, the administration was forced to accept major substantive changes relating to a proposed energy tax and spending on entitlements. Otherwise the bill would not have passed. The entitlement modifications were agreed to the day before the vote and folded into the measure on the floor via the rule. As a result, both final passage and the rule are treated as instances of major change.

Third is a category for items that the majority party opted to *pull from the agenda*. Usually these decisions were made after the relevant whip count indicated significant potential opposition within the majority caucus and there was little prospect of countervailing support from within the minority party. In assigning whip questions to this category, I looked for concrete evidence that the lack of floor action was a strategic decision made by the leadership or the relevant committee chair, rather than an indirect byproduct of some other action. On March 16, 1966 and again on September 1, 1967, for

example, House Democratic leaders polled their colleagues about proposals to allow common situs picketing, and in both cases the underlying measure was not brought before the full House because the counts indicated insufficient support.

A fourth category is for unambiguous *majority party losses*. In June 1981, for example, the Democratic leadership asked its members if they would support the previous question on the rule for the reconciliation bill of that year. The rule would have precluded Republicans from offering the Reagan budget cuts as a substitute. After a sufficient number of Democrats joined Republicans to vote against the previous question motion, the GOP offered an alternative rule that was adopted, which in turn enabled them to secure floor action and eventual passage of the Reagan initiative. Here, both the previous question motion and a related poll about passage of the Democratic bill are both treated as unambiguous defeats for the majority party.

The final category, “*other*,” is for outcomes that could not be meaningfully coded as wins, instances of major change, pulled items, or unambiguous losses. Usually, these questions were obviated by events within the House or otherwise did not receive floor attention for reasons rooted in the legislative context. On January 4, 1956, for example, the House Democratic leadership asked rank-and-file members whether they would be willing to support a highly salient school construction bill that had been reported the previous year by the Committee on Education and Labor. The bill as reported did not include controversial language drafted by Adam Clayton Powell, D-NY, that would have barred school construction funds from school districts that practiced racial segregation. When the measure was finally considered on the floor in July, the Powell amendment was adopted and the bill as modified went down in defeat. Clearly, the outcome was far from a victory for Democratic leaders, but at no point during floor action that year was there a freestanding decision by the House on the measure as reported and that was the gist of the polled question. As a result, this case is placed in the “other category” for the purposes of analysis.

Table 7 summarizes the outcomes for over 1,000 questions whipped by the House majority leadership across the four periods and using the aforementioned categorization scheme. Included are the motions that could be directly linked to recorded votes and thus constituted the evidentiary base for the analysis reported in Tables 5 and 6. But also

included are hundreds of questions that were not the subject of roll call votes and for which outcome categories still can be assigned. There are some minor differences across periods in the incidence of cases placed in the “other” category. This category comprised less than 3 percent of observations for 1955-72, but rose to 8-9 percent for the each of the next three periods. The cause may be the higher percentage of final passage questions for the Textbook Era – Such questions are less likely to be obviated by events. But to facilitate comparisons across periods, this category is excluded from Table 7.

Several patterns are discernable. For one, although the strategic calculations of party leaders imply that poll questions should be “in play” and the outcome in serious doubt – otherwise the leadership would not allocate valuable resources to the whipping effort – across all four periods the whips won most of these contests. Even with the fairly restrictive definition of party success employed here, the leadership unambiguously prevailed on almost three-quarters of the polled questions. That said, if we combine the categories for major change, pulled items, and unambiguous losses, the total is about 39 percent. Although the leadership success rates are high, in other words, they still tend to lose (to varying degrees) on a substantial minority of whipped questions. Any broad inferences about “party government” would be overdrawn.

Second, there are some noteworthy differences across periods. Most important, the proportion of unambiguous losses declined substantially over time, from a high of over 20 percent in 1955-1972 to just eight percent in 1995-2002. The real distinction, however, is between the first two periods, taken together, and the latter two periods. Indeed, the outcome distributions for 1955-72 and 1973-82 are very similar, as are the distributions for 1983-94 and 1995-2002. Across the 1980s and 1990s, the most prominent difference concerns the “major change” category, and here DeLay and his colleagues were about twice as likely to be associated with major modifications in the content of party initiatives as was the case for the Democratic whips of 1983-1994.

Once again, the main reason may have been the relatively small sizes of the Republican majorities. As a result, I conducted a multivariate analysis of the outcomes of the whip process across time periods and the results are reported in Table 8. Included are the explanatory factors from the vote gathering analysis reported on Table 6. Here, the dependent variable is an ordinal ranking of the outcome category, with “win” as the



highest ranking, “major change” second, “pull” third, and “losses” at the low end of the scale. Items placed in the “other” category are excluded. The estimator is ordered probit.<sup>18</sup> Once again, increases in the size of the base and of the majority party are associated with positive outcomes for the whips. Whip success (defined as more unambiguous wins and fewer instances of major change, pulled items, and clear-cut losses) was significantly higher for 1983-94 and for 1997-2002 than for the earlier periods. After controlling for party size, however, the relative effectiveness of the DeLay whip operation is fully apparent.

### **5. Whip Counts and the Floor Median**

Before concluding, in this section I look more closely at the poll behavior of centrist legislators – members with preferences near the chamber median – because of the pivotal role these members play in the leading theories of lawmaking. Characteristics of their whip count behavior provide further guidance about how party theories should be developed. The scholarly dispute about party influence in Congress is well known, but a few details will help motivate the discussion in this section.

Krehbiel (1998) presents a spatial model of lawmaking without consequential party organizations. As is standard with spatial theory, legislators are assumed to have preferences that can be represented as ideal points along one or more underlying dimensions of evaluation, typically the liberal-conservative continuum. Legislative alternatives and the status quo (existing law or some other reversion point) are also represented as points along the evaluation dimension. By assumption, legislators prefer the alternative that is spatially most proximate to their ideal points and cast their votes accordingly. If the focus is on a legislature with the internal rules and structure of the U.S. House of Representatives, then the outcomes of chamber decision making should

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<sup>18</sup> The number of observations is substantially lower relative to Table 7 because observations with incomplete counts and questions for which member-level responses do not exist are dropped from the analysis. Moreover, it was not feasible to conduct a second regression with indicator variables for individual whips. The results of such an analysis were not robust to alternative specifications, probably due to the number of categories in the dependent variable and the large number of dummy variables on the right-hand side.

approximate the ideal point of the floor median, the only alternative that cannot be successfully amended. Party organizations and leaders are not outcome consequential.<sup>19</sup>

The cartel model of Cox and McCubbins (and here I am mostly referring to the version in their 2005 book) is rooted in the same spatial logic as Krehbiel's theory, but includes a majority leadership with agenda-setting powers. If the leadership places a bill on the agenda, then the outcome of the House legislative process will tend to approximate the preferences of the chamber median *a la* the "weak parties model. But if a majority of the majority caucus prefers the status quo of existing law to the position of the floor median, then the leadership will close the gates and keep the bill off the agenda. Although the bills that pass reflect centrist preferences within the chamber, the majority leadership influences policy outcomes by blocking changes that would make a majority of the majority party worse off.

The conditional party government argument advanced by Aldrich and Rohde (Rohde 1991, Aldrich and Rohde 1998) also shares much of the basic spatial logic of the other theories, including member ideal points that are exogenously determined, a single underlying dimension of evaluation (typically, although not always), and preferences over alternatives based on spatial proximity. However, according to this model, when preferences within the majority party are homogeneous and the distance between the two party medians is large, rank-and-file members of the majority caucus will take steps to strengthen their leaders, enabling them to regularly pass bills that diverge from the position of the floor median toward the majority party program.

None of these theories are consistent with key aspects of the majority whip process in the House. Perhaps a simple thought experiment would help clarify matters. Suppose that the majority leadership has allowed a bill to be placed on the House agenda. The measure has been marked up in committee, perhaps amended in the Committee of the Whole, and now awaits a roll call on passage. Following the floor amendment process and immediately prior to the final passage vote, the majority leadership conducts a whip count, asking majority party members whether they will vote "yes" on initial

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<sup>19</sup> Krehbiel's theory incorporate supermajority procedures like the Senate filibuster and the 2/3 vote necessary to override a presidential veto, which of course can produce noncentrist outcomes. However, if we focus on initial House passage of legislation and set aside certain strategic calculations (e.g., adjusting legislation early on to secure maximum support and perhaps forestall a veto), then the prediction of median outcomes is appropriate for models of the House without parties.

House passage. No significant modifications are made to the legislation between the time of the whip count and the roll call on final passage. The bill clears the House. Under this scenario, would we expect large number of centrist legislators with preferences near the position of the floor median to respond as “undecided” on the whip poll? The answer to the question varies, depending on which theory of lawmaking is under consideration.

If we embrace the central premises of the spatial model, and we assume that leadership influence is absent from the legislative process or is exercised primarily at the agenda setting stage, then the expectation is that bills passing the House should fully reflect the preferences of the floor median. The assertion follows directly from the “weak parties” and party cartel models. As a result, if the aforementioned whip count concerns initial passage of a measure that is indeed adopted by the chamber without intervening changes, then members with preferences located near the floor median should be disproportionately less likely to respond as undecided or in opposition on the poll. Instead, the underlying spatial logic implies that undecided lawmakers should be concentrated near the cutting point that is equidistant between the final version of the bill and the status quo of existing law, wherever that might be located. But the floor median – who according to the majoritarian and cartel models is getting exactly the legislation she most prefers – should be if anything less likely than the typical legislator to respond as “undecided” or opposed on the initial passage whip count.

For the right set of polled questions and roll calls, then, the whip count responses of centrist legislators may illuminate the explanatory power of the competing theories of lawmaking. Again, it is critical that we focus solely on whip counts about initial House passage on measures that actually cleared the chamber without significant intervening modifications. None of the theories predict that amendments, procedural motions, or failed bills will necessarily reflect the floor median position – only bills that pass. And the leadership needs to have conducted a poll that explicitly asked for member views about the full content of the measure that cleared the chamber. Questions about particular titles, contingencies, or parts of the legislation are not sufficient here. Fortunately, the scenario of my thought experiment is not all that contrived. More than a hundred questions polled by the House majority party, 1955-2002, fit the bill.

To make the analysis tractable, I focus on the subset for 1955-62, 1978-84, and 1997-2002, roughly representing the beginning, middle, and end of the time span covered in this research project. Included are ten items from 1955-62, 31 for 1979-84, and 55 for 1997-2002. To identify which members have ideological views near the chamber median, I rely on first-dimension DW-NOMINATE values.<sup>20</sup> Especially for the 1950s-1970s, many votes on Capitol Hill were multidimensional (Poole and Rosenthal, 1997). But the leading spatial theories generally posit a unidimensional choice space and first-dimension NOMINATE has structured party differences in the roll call record for more than a century. For the exploratory purposes of this section, first-dimension NOMINATE data can help us approximate the subset of members near the effective floor median in a systematic fashion. To identify them, all House members during the appropriate Congresses were rank-ordered by their NOMINATE values and then (based on the ordering) divided into deciles of approximately 43-44 legislators each, with members of the fifth and sixth ideological groups treated as near the collective floor median for the purposes of analysis.

The results are summarized in Table 9. The ideological decile in which a member falls (for the full chamber) is denoted in the first column, and then for each subset of the evidence, denoted are the percentage of the poll respondents answering as “yes or leaning yes,” “undecided,” and “no or leaning no.” If the simple majoritarian version of the “weak parties” perspective and the party cartel theory are helpful for understanding the whip process, then the percentage of undecided and of opposing members should not peak at the fifth and sixth ideological deciles. Again, why would a House member who had just carried the day on one of the more salient measures on the floor agenda respond as undecided or opposed regarding her own most-preferred policy outcome?

Interestingly, the percentage of undecided and opposed legislators peaks substantially to the ideological right of the floor median for 1978-84. These were transitional congresses between the large, highly divided partisan majorities of the 1970s House and the more polarized chamber of recent years and centrist legislators may have indeed driven the lawmaking process. However, for the small number of whipped items in 1955-62 and the very large number from the DeLay years, the likelihood of being

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<sup>20</sup> These data were downloaded from <http://voteview.com>.

undecided or opposed was indeed highest near the ideological views of the chamber median.

Keep in mind that for the late 1950s and early 1960s, the scope of whip activity was narrow and highly selective, and as indicated throughout this paper, the majority leadership of that era was rolled on the floor relatively frequently. Still, for the small set of items from those years upon which the Democratic whip network was fully engaged and – this is key – ultimately successful, the results of Table 9 are inconsistent with the majoritarian version of the spatial model *and* with theories positing parties that primarily exert influence through agenda setting. And most important, for the very large number of analogous Republican items from the late 1990s and early 2000s, far more pervasive inconsistencies are apparent between these conceptual constructs and the results of Table 9.

Of course, an alternative explanation is that chamber centrists were often undecided or opposed because the bills diverged from their policy preferences toward the majority party position *a la* conditional party government. Perhaps the status quos were located somewhere on the minority party’s side of the floor median, the bills diverged from that median in the direction of most majority party members, and the views of centrist legislators were located somewhere in the middle, near the relevant cutting line. Cross-pressured between two alternatives roughly the same distance from their ideal points, not surprisingly the centrists often were undecided or opposed about final passage just days or hours before the vote. On first blush, this scenario seems plausible, at least for the small subset of items considered for 1955-62 and the large set for 1997-2002.

However, there also are good reasons not to fully embrace the standard conditional party government explanation. For one, any party influence detected during the 1950s and 1960s would have occurred before the party building reforms of the 1970s and 1990s, which are central features of the conditional party government argument.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the spatial representation of conditional party government posits member preferences that are fixed and determined exogenously to the legislative process, including leadership lobbying on the floor. How can this perspective inform the process

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<sup>21</sup> But see Lee (2009) for a “team-based” conceptualization of party influence that is less reliant on formal prerogatives.

through which members form preferences when preferences are treated as exogenous? More generally should party influence even be conceptualized and measured in terms of some deviation from the preferences of the floor median toward median preferences within the majority party? And what precisely is the median preference on the floor when dozens of centrist members are “undecided” on major roll calls just days before votes occur?

## 6. Conclusion

My analysis of nearly fifty years of majority whip history in the House indicates that, under the right conditions, the process of endgame lobbying by the leadership has significant consequences for the composition of coalitions and the content of legislation. The quantity of whip activity has increased substantially since the mid-1950s, largely because of heightened partisan polarization within the chamber and expansions in the floor workload. Although whip activity has predominantly targeted final passage votes and entire bills for many decades, the kinds of questions that were polled did change over time in response to the partisan and procedural context. When presidential vetoes were a central feature of party politics in the 1970s, for example, the majority leadership often polled on veto overrides, and as the chamber turned toward increasingly restrictive amendment rules in the 1970s and 1980s, the percentage of whip activity allocated to procedural matters tripled for a time. For the most part, the substantive issues targeted for whip activity track the broader policy agenda in important ways, but especially in recent years appropriations bills and other managerial challenges have been prominent on the whipped agenda.

Although the size of the leadership’s base (“yes” plus “leaning yes” responses on whip counts) has increased over time as the House became more polarized along partisan lines, on whipped items the majority leadership still typically needs to pick up the support of 30 or 40 of their fellow partisans in the days prior to major floor votes, and also usually relies on nontrivial support from minority party members in order to prevail. There is a surprisingly amount of position movement on even the most salient features of the legislative agenda and toward the end of the process of floor decision making. Across the four time periods that structure much of this study, a systematic analysis of the

outcomes of polled questions indicates that the partisan majority usually wins. Still, the proportion of unambiguous victories for the whips increased over time with party polarization, from 65 percent or so during 1955-72 and 1973-84 to almost 80 percent during the 1980s and 1990s. Similarly, the percentage of unambiguous leadership losses during the 1980s and 1990s was about half the level that characterized earlier decades.

After controlling for the size of the base and of the majority party, the whip operations of Tom DeLay during the GOP era appear to have been remarkable effective, although there are indications of similar effectiveness for Democratic whips Tony Coelho and William Gray, at least for the available evidence from the first session of the 101<sup>st</sup> Congress. Overall, the whip successes of the 1983-94 period may have mostly derived from increased preference homogeneity within the party (as reflected in part in the size of the base on whip counts) and the size of the majority party caucus, whereas the independent impact of the whips and other party leaders seems especially consequential for the Republican majorities of 1995-2002.

Much of the analysis of majority whip operations in this paper resonates more strongly with the conditional party argument (CPG) than it does with the party cartel theory or conceptualizations of lawmaking that do not integrate partisan institutions and incentives in important ways. When the majority party is relatively unified on the major issues of the day and there is a substantial gulf between the preferences of majority and minority party members, CPG maintains, then the majority rank and file will tend to empower their leaders with the resources necessary to whip potential defectors into line. Indeed, as the chamber became more divided along party lines in the 1980s and 1990s, the impact of the whip operations seemed to rise. Especially given the narrow partisan majorities of the Republican era – indeed, perhaps because of them – Tom DeLay’s vote gathering efforts were particularly impressive and appear to mesh well with the conditional party government argument.

Still, my analysis of five decades of whip history also indicates that much of what constitutes party influence in the House concerns the formation of positions and preferences and that appropriate conceptualizations and empirical tests of party influence need to address the emergence and movement of member positions. As a result, a more dynamic version of the conditional party government argument, rooted in the process

through which members made up their minds about major issues, may better account for the rhythms of whip activity in the House. For one, the distribution of member preferences or positions should not be treated as exogenous to the process of party influence. Instead, the leadership will gauge the evolving positions of rank-and-file members prior to floor action, focusing its attention primarily on items important to the party's name brand and for which there is at least the possibility of intra-party unity. Depending on the preference context, the leadership uses a menu of tactics – retreat, compromise over legislative substance, the insertion or removal of issue dimensions, side payments, persuasion, and so on – as part of efforts to build a winning coalition. The likelihood that the majority party will prevail should depend on the size of its base, the extent to which the opposition is entrenched or positions are in flux, the feasibility of altering the dimensional structure of deliberation or significant increasing support via incremental modifications, and the availability of side payments. Obviously, the size of the majority caucus is a central factor. But the critical departure is to construct theories of party behavior that capture the impact of the whips and other leaders on the process of position and preference formation over time.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See Smith (2007), Krehbiel (1991), Arnold (1990), Lee (2009), and especially Cooper and Hering (2003) about the importance of integrating preference endogeneity and position formation into theories of lawmaking.



Figure 1. Majority party whip activity, 1955-2002

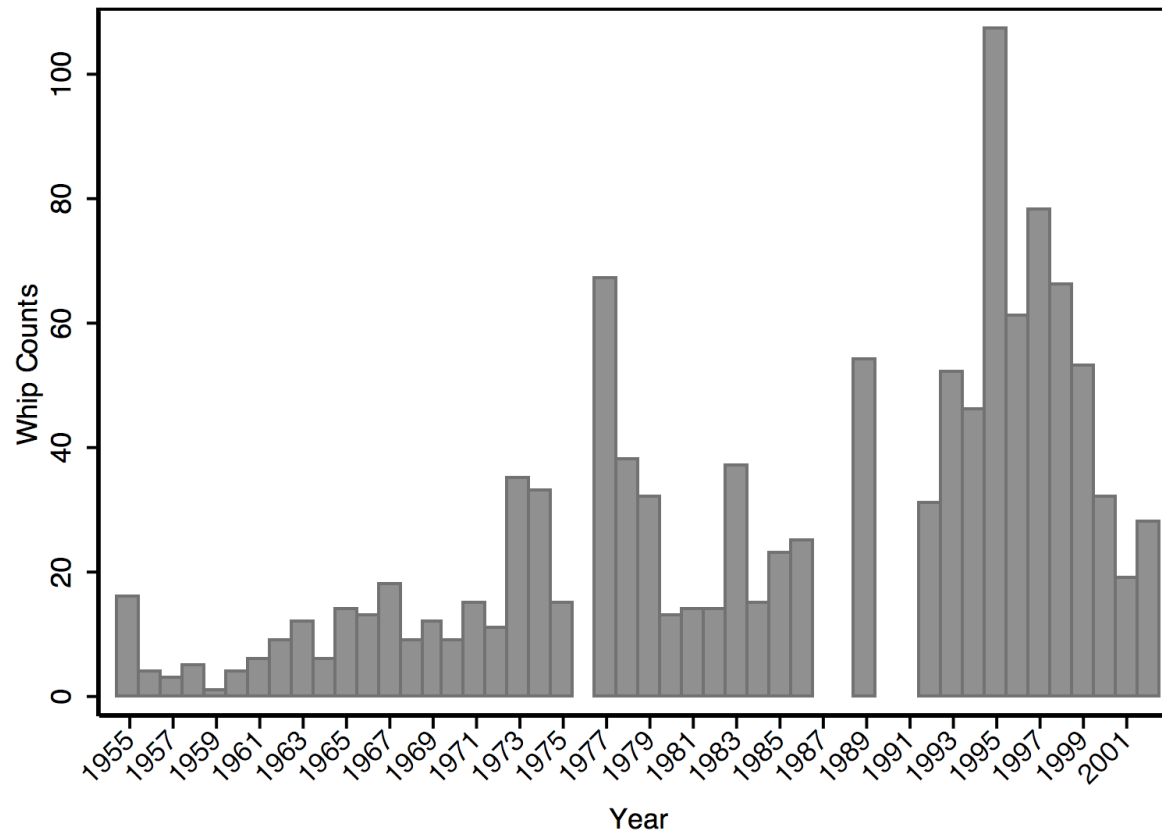
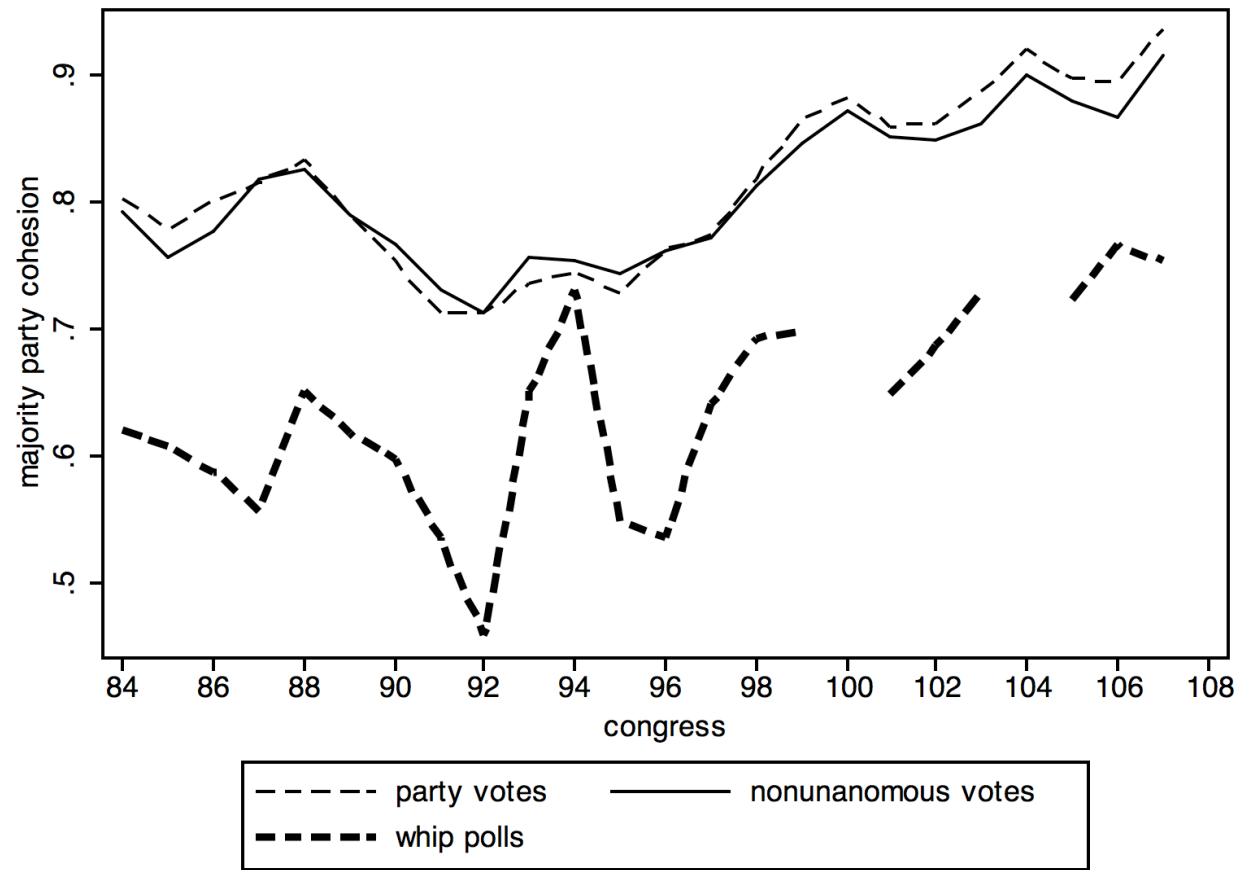


Figure 2 Majority party cohesion, votes and whip polls



**Table 1. Types of “questions” polled, by period**

	1955-72	1973-82	1983-94	1995-2002	Total
Bills, general policy	121 (72.46)	131 (49.25)	132 (44.00)	242 (55.13)	626 (53.41)
Conference matters	6 (3.59)	18 (6.77)	22 (7.33)	35 (7.97)	81 (6.91)
Amendments, parts of bills	24 (14.37)	59 (22.18)	88 (29.33)	93 (21.18)	264 (22.53)
Motion to recommit	5 (2.99)	6 (2.26)	5 (1.67)	10 (2.28)	26 (2.22)
Procedure, strategy	6 (3.59)	36 (13.53)	51 (17.00)	59 (13.44)	152 (12.97)
Veto overrides	5 (2.99)	16 (6.02)	2 (.67)	0	23 (1.96)
Total	167	266	300	439	1172

**Table 2. Prevalence of question types for nonunanimous votes by whip status**

		1955-72	1973-82	1983-94	1995-2002	Total
Bills, general policy	Whip	60.83	44.13	37.89	53.27	48.29
	Other	35.52	25.21	17.75	12.43	21.68
Conference matters	Whip	4.17	8.94	9.69	11.21	9.33
	Other	14.04	8.69	8.18	5.80	8.70
Amendments, parts of bills	Whip	11.67	20.67	29.96	21.50	22.20
	Other	19.43	49.37	43.13	46.77	41.97
Motion to recommit	Whip	13.33	3.91	2.20	1.87	4.01
	Other	16.13	3.38	3.24	5.20	6.04
Special Rules	Whip	3.33	13.41	17.62	10.90	12.16
	Other	7.07	6.03	11.64	13.16	9.53
Veto overrides	Whip	2.50	5.59	.88	0	1.77
	Other	.47	.32	.41	.40	.39
Other	Whip	4.17	3.35	1.76	1.25	2.24
	Other	7.33	7.00	15.65	16.24	11.70

Note: cell entries are the percentage of observations for the time period falling in the relevant category (all nonunanimous votes, whipped versus non-whipped items). Roll calls for 1976, 1987-88, and 1991 are excluded because of missing whip data.

**Table 3. Prevalence of policy areas for nonunanimous votes by whip status**

		1955-72	1973-82	1983-94	1995-2002
Congress, government operations	Whip	11.67	14.53	13.66	11.21
	Other	16.87	11.72	15.87	20.82
Defense, homeland security	Whip	.83	2.23	10.57	3.12
	Other	4.82	5.45	8.80	5.70
Foreign policy	Whip	9.11	8.94	9.25	4.05
	Other	7.39	8.54	8.21	5.37
Economy, budget, taxation	Whip	20.00	24.02	20.26	17.76
	Other	8.64	14.54	9.13	11.57
International trade	Whip	5.83	1.68	2.20	2.18
	Other	2.78	1.84	2.25	1.72
Energy, environment	Whip	5.0	14.53	1.32	4.05
	Other	6.91	11.83	7.81	5.54
Civil rights	Whip	6.67	1.68	1.32	0
	Other	6.02	1.84	1.10	.60
Social welfare	Whip	7.5	7.82	3.52	3.12
	Other	5.87	4.46	4.16	2.92
Health	Whip	1.67	1.68	1.32	4.36
	Other	.58	1.05	2.03	2.12
Education	Whip	7.50	0	3.08	3.43
	Other	3.14	1.6	2.47	2.42
Labor, consumers	Whip	5.83	7.82	7.49	4.67
	Other	4.03	3.64	1.80	1.43
Appropriations	Whip	5.00	5.03	18.94	35.51
	Other	18.39	20.69	27.07	31.99

**Table 4. Distribution of poll responses on completed counts**

	1955-72	1973-82	1983-94	1997-2002*
Yes	56.38	50.40	58.81	57.57
Leaning yes	2.09	8.16	10.30	16.32
Undecided	13.39	17.51	15.91	11.25
Leaning no	1.05	3.04	2.76	3.85
No	11.57	8.94	5.37	4.13
Other	15.51	11.95	6.84	6.88

\* In addition to portions of 1976 and 1987-88, member level records are unavailable for most of the majority party counts conducted during 1995-96.

**Table 5. Majority party base, vote pickup, and minority support**

	1955-72	1973-82	1983-94	1995-2002
Mean base (yes plus leaning yes), nonunanimous votes	148.22	157.52	179.20	165.25
Mean base (yes plus leaning yes), party-line votes	150.32	163.81	182.99	172.23
Mean majority pickup, nonunanimous votes	36.98	34.70	27.74	30.27
Mean majority pickup, party-line votes	36.46	33.90	27.83	30.76
Mean minority support, nonunanimous votes	41.84	40.26	35.18	42.29
Mean minority support, party-line votes	30.63	28.62	24.92	21.64

**Table 6. Majority vote gathering success 1955-2002**

	(1) majority votes	(2) majority votes
base	0.638***	0.656***
party size	0.243***	0.280**
1971-82	-0.487	
1983-94	1.263	
1997-2002	7.921*	
Boggs (1962-70)		-2.951
O'Neill (1971-72)		2.975
McFall (1973-76)		1.768
Brademas (1977-80)		-3.487
Foley (1981-86)		-2.047
Coelho/Gray (1987-91)		9.678
Bonior (1991-94)		-5.773
DeLay (1995-2002)		7.435
Constant	29.658	18.744
Observations	561	561
R-squared	0.433	0.443

\* significant at 10%; \*\* significant at 5%; \*\*\* significant at 1%



**Table 7. Majority Party Success on polled items, 1955-2002**

	1955-72	1973-82	1983-94	1995-2002	Total
Win	93 (65.03)	151 (65.65)	214 (79.85)	299 (77.46)	757 (73.71)
Major change	11 (7.69)	21 (9.13)	11 (4.10)	29 (7.51)	72 (7.01)
Pull	10 (6.99)	13 (5.65)	15 (5.60)	27 (6.99)	65 (6.33)
Loss	29 (20.28)	45 (19.57)	28 (10.45)	31 (8.03)	133 (12.95)
Total	143	230	268	386	1027

**Table 8. Outcomes for the majority party on polled items (ordered probit, cell entries are marginal effects)**

	(1) win	(2) change	(3) pull	(4) loss
base	.00266***	-.00045***	-.00054***	-.00166***
party size	.00179	-.0003	-.00036	-.0011
1973-82	-.0304	.0050	.0062	.0192
1983-94	.0956*	-.0172*	-.0201*	-.0582*
1997-2002	.146**	-.0274**	-.0313**	-.0872**

Observations; 661

Cutpoints statistically significant

McKelvey & Zaviona's R2; .110

significant at 10%; \* significant at 5%; \*\* significant at 1%\*\*\*

**Table 9. Whip count support and opposition by ideological deciles on successful final passage questions, selected congresses**

decile	1955-62 (10 questions)			1979-84 (31 questions)			1997-02 (55 questions)		
	Y/LY	U	N/LN	Y/LY	U	N/LN	Y/LY	U	N/LN
1	90.89	7.09	2.03	79.48	14.44	6.08			
2	89.03	7.98	2.99	85.04	11.12	3.84			
3	74.81	18.83	6.36	81.29	13.64	5.07			
4	70.68	20.42	8.90	68.29	22.21	9.50			
5	53.71	26.50	19.79	57.14	30.66	12.20	64.63	23.41	11.96
6	26.11	35.47	38.42	43.96	36.66	19.38	75.65	17.53	6.82
7	21.52	25.32	53.16	22.32	41.67	36.01	85.95	10.94	3.11
8	8.11	29.73	62.15	17.14	40.00	42.86	87.82	8.85	3.33
9	0	18.75	81.25	39.13	30.43	30.43	86.80	8.73	4.47
10				5.41	45.95	48.65	78.90	11.34	9.76

NOTE: Cell entries are the percentage of all respondents providing a substantive response (yes to no) that fell within each position category.

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