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2011

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Bringing Policy Back into the Policy Making Process

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2011

Abstract

Bringing Policy Back into the Policy Making Process

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

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My research project is a break from the current trend in the literature that focuses on the conflict associated with roll call voting—party polarization and institutional friction. I am interested in determining how policy characteristics of roll call decisions can affect legislators' vote choices. Bills not only differ according to issue content—agricultural policy versus social welfare policy—but also according to how ambiguous they are—a collection of disparate issues versus one specific issue. Using a dataset of House roll calls from 1985-2004 and the Policy Agendas Project content coding scheme, I show that variation in both policy area and policy ambiguity of a given bill is associated with variation in the accuracy of ideology in predicting roll call vote choice.

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Introduction

When studying decision making in Congress, scholars tend to focus on conflict—partisan polarization or institutional clashes (Poole and Rosenthal 1985; Poole and Rosenthal 1997; Theriault 2005; Theriault 2008; Canes-Wrone and de Marchi 2002). This line of research is important and has offered many insights into relationships between the two parties and between Congress and the President. However, decision making in Congress can be studied in terms other than just conflict, we can also study it in terms of policy making. Previous studies have looked at decision making in a few specific policy areas (Snyder and Groseclose 2000), but there has been little focus on a systematic approach. This study aims to provide such a systematic approach to studying policy differences in roll call voting. In addition to controlling for common conflict measures, I investigate how congressional decision making varies according to the number of policy areas contained within a bill's roll call packet (all roll call votes—rule, procedural, amendment and final votes) as well as systematically across policy areas.

The policy-focused approach used in this paper is important for three reasons. First, conflict (between parties and/or branches) does not explain all roll call vote choices. While ideology and party differences explain a large proportion of roll call vote choices, they do not explain one hundred percent of votes (Poole and Rosenthal 1985; Poole and Rosenthal 1997). Second, studies that focus on conflict as the main determinant of congressional roll call vote choices do not usually differentiate between policy areas and if they do, it is not in a systematic fashion. Third, these studies treat each roll call as though it is made independent of all other roll calls. A bill is often voted

on in a series of rule, procedural, and amendment votes. For each roll call, a member of Congress must consider how this particular vote will affect the outcome of the final passage vote. This paper aims to address all three of these concerns in the extant literature.

The following section of this paper will provide a brief review of the current congressional decision making literature, followed by a discussion of the policy characteristics of roll call decisions. My two main hypotheses are that the ability of ideology to predict roll call votes will vary by policy area; and votes on bills with roll call packets that focus on a single policy area are more accurately predicted by ideology than roll calls on bills that address multiple policy areas. In order to test these two hypotheses, I have constructed a dataset that includes roll calls from the 99th to 108th Congresses (1985-2004) coded according to the Policy Agendas Project content coding scheme.¹ I find support for both hypotheses.

¹ The Policy Agendas Project uses a consistent policy content coding scheme. This coding system allows policy processes to be compared to one another as well as across time. The Policy Agendas Project's major and minor topic codes identify the main or general topic area (e.g., 1 = Macroeconomics) and then the minor or specific subtopic area (e.g., 108 = Industrial Policy) considered by each roll call. The Policy Agendas Project data used here were originally collected by Frank R. Baumgartner and Bryan D. Jones, with the support of National Science Foundation grant number SBR 9320922, and were distributed through the Department of Government at the University of Texas at Austin and/or the Department of Political Science at Penn State University. Neither NSF nor the original collectors of the data bear any responsibility for the analysis reported here.

Congressional Decision Making with a Focus on Conflict

Previous studies of legislative decision making have been dominated by a focus on conflict, most frequently between the left and right. Scholars have often used the NOMINATE scores to estimate the ideology of individual members of Congress (e.g. Poole and Rosenthal 1985; Poole and Rosenthal 1997; and Theriault 2008). The NOMINATE algorithm produces the estimates of ideological liberalism or conservatism based on a spatial voting model (Poole and Rosenthal 1985). Using this, they can estimate where individual legislators stand on a one-dimensional continuum based on previous roll call votes.² Where legislators are placed on this left-right continuum is used as a proxy for their ideology. An important feature of the spatial model of legislative voting is that it assumes politicians know what they want and what they do not want from the policy process, leaving no room for tradeoffs in the decision making process (Everson et al 2004). While the Poole and Rosenthal model is a good predictor of most legislative decision making, it is far from perfect.

Previous studies of congressional roll call voting have focused on ideological conflict and the ability of exogenous actors (public, parties, and the president) to influence that conflict. Theriault (2005) finds that when the public is not attentive to the issue at hand, individual ideology will be the best predictor of decisions. Once the public is engaged, however, their concerns must take top priority for those legislators wishing to

² It is important to note two things about the NOMINATE scores. First, they are basically a summary score of previous roll call votes. Second, they approximate induced ideology rather than a legislator's true ideology, meaning that some of the variation that should be associated with the independent variables will be absorbed by the dependent variable.

remain in office (Theriault 2005). Parties tend to reinforce ideological conflict in roll call voting. Party influence on votes is more likely to occur in homogeneous, large majorities (Aldrich and Rohde 2000). The majority party can use agenda controls (e.g. procedural votes) to influence member behavior (Cox and McCubbins 1993).

Presidential involvement in legislative decision making can affect both ideological conflict and conflict between the executive and legislative branches. In terms of ideological conflict, the president can focus attention to a specific problem and change the motivations of actors (Baumgartner and Jones 1993). The president can not only act as an agenda setter for Congress, but also change motivation from party or ideology support to something else (i.e. rally 'round the flag effect). Conflict between the president and Congress is most likely to occur during divided government. During times of unified government, however, members of Congress are inclined to pay attention to his policy positions (Kingdon 1973).

Congressional Decision Making with a Focus on Policy

In many of the previously mentioned conflict-focused studies, there is little attention paid to differences in the policy content of the roll calls. Different types of policies may be characterized by different levels of dimensionality (Jochim and Jones 2009). Issues that are innately ideologically structured will be split along a single left-right dimension, allowing for ideological preferences to dominate legislative decision making. Examples of such issues are economics, health care, labor, and defense policies. Issues that are ideologically ambiguous will be characterized by multiple dimensions rather than a single dimension. For example, issues such as agriculture and energy will be greatly influenced by regional- and district-based preferences in addition to ideological preferences of legislators.

Given policies vary in terms of how well they are characterized by a single left-right dimension, two important implications emerge. First, policy areas can be split into two groups—one innately structured by ideology and one that is ideologically ambiguous. Second, within each group there will be variation between specific policy areas. The preference that determines a non-ideological vote in agriculture will not necessarily translate to international relations or trade for example.

Previous conflict-focused studies also tend to treat roll calls independently rather than considering how multiple roll calls on the same bill can affect one another. Each vote is a part of a decision making *process*. Legislators must be aware of how an amendment, for example, will affect the final content of the bill and the likelihood of its passage. This paper analyzes roll calls in terms of bill packets (all roll calls on a bill,

including rule, procedural, amendment and final votes) to measure policy ambiguity. Bills characterized by low policy ambiguity will only address one specific issue area. For example, HR 5013 in the 99th Congress was a highly focused policy aimed at establishing safety regulations and guidelines for personal injury cases for employees of fishing industry vessels (www.policyagendas.org). On the other hand, bills characterized by high policy ambiguity will often address multiple, disparate issue areas. The Agriculture, Rural Development, FDA, and Related Agencies Act of 1996, is an excellent example of a bill characterized by high policy ambiguity. This bill and its amendments covers a range of topics including WIC funding, reduction in funds for low-income rural housing, funding for the peace for food program, and prohibiting the use of marketing funds for the promotion of alcohol (www.policyagendas.org). This bill has an ambiguous policy focus because of the amount of disparate topics included in the text and subsequent amendments of the bill.

Policy ambiguity can force members to make difficult tradeoffs (See Simon 1983 and Jones et al. 2004). According to the earlier discussion on policy differences—what determines roll call vote choice in one ideologically ambiguous area will not necessarily translate to other policy areas. Further, even when all policies addressed by a bill are ideologically structured, once they are grouped together, the choice space created may or may not remain consistent with a single left-right continuum. Given the likelihood of multidimensionality in the choice space, tradeoffs will not necessarily be consistent with ideology or from member to member. The presence of multidimensionality leads to the following two problems for the current literature on congressional decision making.

First, the tradeoffs may or may not be consistent with ideology (e.g. regional or district preferences will not always be consistent with legislators' ideological preferences).

Second, the DW-NOMINATE scores, which are commonly used to approximate ideology, are not capable of taking multiple preferences into account when predicting roll call votes (Everson et al 2004).

To effectively study policy making, especially across time, the key is to be systematic. The Policy Agenda Project's content coding scheme allows for just that. In this specific instance, roll calls are coded according to content and placed in one of 19 major topics and one of over 200 minor topics. Amendments, procedural, votes, and resolutions are coded based on their specific content and not the content of the bill to which they are attached. Using the Policy Agendas' data to study roll call voting is an improvement over current studies which have looked at policy because it is both comprehensive and consistent. The dataset has a code for all policy types, not just a few specific issues. Further, it is consistent over time—new codes are not created for time-specific issues.

Hypotheses

The focus of this paper is to investigate the policy characteristics of roll call voting while controlling for variables previously established in the conflict-focused studies. Some policy issues are ideologically structured (e.g. social welfare and macroeconomics) and fit easily along the single left-right dimension. Other issue areas are ideologically ambiguous (e.g. agriculture and energy) and are not as neatly explained by a single ideological dimension (Jochim and Jones 2009). Decisions on issues that are ideologically structured will be dominated by the ideological preferences of legislators.

Policy Differences Hypothesis: Roll calls vary in how well they are predicted by ideology across policy areas. Those ideologically ambiguous policy areas are less accurately predicted by ideology than those policy areas characterized by ideologically structured politics.

Legislators voting on bills characterized by high policy ambiguity are forced to make tradeoffs among the multiple issue areas present. Because these tradeoffs are made across multiple areas by multiple actors, it is less likely that a single ideological dimension can accurately characterize and predict the votes on these types of roll calls.

Policy Ambiguity Hypothesis: Roll calls characterized by policy ambiguity are less accurately predicted by ideology.

Members of Congress are faced with hundreds of roll call decisions every session. Policy ambiguity can overwhelm the decision making process, requiring difficult policy tradeoffs by law makers.

In addition to investigating the effects of policy differences and policy ambiguity on roll call votes, I also control for previous findings of studies that have focused on conflict (constituent demands, party conflict, and presidential influence) in legislative decision making. Signals from the exogenous actors (public, party, and the president) provide information to the legislators about the correct vote choice (Kingdon 1977). These signals can encourage or discourage ideological conflict in legislative decision making.

Members are held accountable by their constituents for their policy decisions. As a result, members wishing to be successful and maintain their offices will pay attention to those issues the public deem to be most important (Canes-Wrone et al 2002). When the public is attentive to an issue area, members of Congress will respond with heightened ideological responses.

Parties can also encourage ideological conflict in decision making in two ways. First, parties provide structure or act as floor voting coalitions for members in Congress (Cox and McCubbins 1993; Aldrich and Rohde 2000). Homogeneous parties have more success than heterogeneous parties in ensuring that members vote according to the party line. In the period under study, the Republican Revolution took place. During this time, the Republican Party was seen as a highly homogenous party. Second, parties can use procedural votes to control the agenda and structure voting coalitions (Cox and McCubbins 1993; Theriault 2008). As a result, debates are increasingly likely to be structured around procedures rather than substance causing the corresponding votes to be much more polarized. Partisanship and ideology are closely related, causing procedural

votes to be more accurately predicted by ideology than substantive votes (amendments and final bills).

Finally, the president can signal whether or not he is in favor of a given piece of legislation. These signals can vary in how they affect ideological conflict in roll call voting. First, when the government is unified, majority party members in Congress will pay greater attention to the president's positions on legislative initiatives (Kingdon 1973). Therefore, it is likely that the proportion of votes correctly predicted by ideology will increase during times of unified government. Second, when presidents have high public approval ratings they are in better position to effectively influence legislation (Canes-Wrone and de Marchi 2002). As the president's public approval increases, members of Congress will face greater pressure to vote in favor of the president's position regardless of individual ideology.

As I said before, this paper is not arguing that ideological conflict is not important or that it does not explain the majority of roll call votes. I am, however, arguing that by ignoring the differences in the policy characteristics of roll call voting we have missed a very interesting and important aspect of congressional decision making. Some policy areas are not accurately characterized by a single liberal-conservative dimension and, therefore, roll calls in these policy areas are not as accurately predicted by ideology as other policy areas. Further, roll calls characterized by policy ambiguity are more likely to demand trade-offs and satisficing, increasing the likelihood of members defecting from ideology.

Data and Methods

To explore the importance of policy differences in roll call decisions, I used United States House of Representative roll call votes from the 99th to 108th Congresses (1985-2004). I obtained the list of roll calls from the Policy Agendas Project's Congressional Roll Call Votes Dataset (<http://policyagendas.org>). The dependent variable for this study is the proportion of votes correctly predicted by the DW-NOMINATE scores (a proxy for ideology) for 7,765 roll calls during this time period.³ For each roll call vote I used Poole and Rosenthal's DW-NOMINATE Scores Dataset (<http://voteview.com/>) to identify the proportion of votes correctly predicted by the DW-NOMINATE scores. The proportion of votes correctly predicted per roll call ranges from .514 to 1, with a mean of .89 and standard deviation of .082. The DW-NOMINATE scores estimate members' ideological stances and predict their votes on roll calls accordingly. For a given roll call, the higher the percentage of votes correctly predicted by DW-NOMINATE scores, the more accurate ideology is as a predictor of legislative votes.

I am most interested in determining how differences in policy areas and policy ambiguity affect the ability of ideology (as estimated by the DW-NOMINATE scores) to predict votes on roll calls. Controlling for policy area differences was straightforward. Each roll call is coded using the Policy Agendas Project's major codes. The policy area with the most roll call votes was government operations with 1,559 roll calls.

³ Roll calls that were purely procedural (i.e. election of speaker and approval of the journal) and roll calls that did not have NOMINATE scores available were dropped from the dataset.

Creating a measure for policy ambiguity was more involved. For each bill, I constructed a "bill packet" which consisted of all votes pertaining to that particular bill—resolution⁴, amendment, procedural and final passage votes. I was able to identify the number of issues each bill packet addresses, using the Policy Agendas Project major and minor topics provided by the Policy Agendas Project Roll Call Dataset. For a bill packet that covers multiple issues (major or minor topics), each of its roll calls were coded as being policy ambiguous. Roughly 59.7 percent of the roll calls were coded as policy ambiguous. Again, policy ambiguity implies that legislators must make trade-offs across the multiple topics, leading to lower proportions of votes being correctly predicted by ideology.

In addition to these variables of interest, I also wanted to control for the effects of exogenous actors—public, party and president—on ideological conflict in roll call voting. First to measure the effects of the public, I coded each roll call based on whether the vote concerned a topic considered by the public to be one of the most important problems facing the nation for each session of Congress. I again consulted the Policy Agendas Project for its Gallup's Most Important Problems Dataset (www.policyagendas.org).⁵ Using this dataset, I was able to identify which three issues the public thought were most important during each session of Congress (excluding the "Other/Don't Know" category). If a roll call considered an issue that the public thought to be one of the three

⁴ Resolutions that specifically address a bill are included in that bill's bill packet. Resolutions that address multiple bills or address a policy rather than a bill are given their own bill packets.

⁵ The Most Important Problems Dataset codes the problems the public considers most important to the nation with the Policy Agendas Project's issue coding scheme (uses major topics only).

most important problems facing the country during that particular congressional session, it was coded as 1 and 0 otherwise. About 20 percent of the roll calls addressed an issue the public considered to be important. Three areas made up the majority of the most important problem roll calls (macroeconomics (37.8%); law, crime, and family issues (23.2%); and defense (25.3%)).

Second, the party can provide structure for roll call voting. The Republican Party is generally considered more homogeneous and, therefore, more capable of influencing its members to tow the party line. I coded each roll call for majority party. Further, procedural votes are used by the parties to induce certain voting behavior and should be predicted much more accurately than amendments and final passage votes (See Cox and McCubbins 1993; Theriault 2008). I coded each roll call for vote type (Rohde 2004). Amendments are the most frequent type of vote in this dataset, accounting for about 44 percent of the roll calls. Final passage and procedural votes account for about 27 and 29 percent of the roll calls respectively.

Lastly, to control for presidential influence, each roll call was coded according to whether the president expressed a position on the bill (www.policyagendas.org), unified government, and the president's average approval rating per quarter.⁶ The president takes a position on about 18.5 percent of the roll calls, divided government is the norm, and the average approval rating of the president is about 56 percent with a standard deviation of 9.6.

⁶ Available online at www.americanpresidency.org

To estimate the effects of differences in policy characteristics on the ability of ideology to predict votes on roll calls, I use beta regression estimated by maximum likelihood as specified by Ferrari and Cribari-Neto (2004).⁷ The proportion of votes correctly predicted by ideology is not normally distributed because a variable with a mean close to the minimum (0) or maximum (1) will most likely have a much smaller variance than a variable with a mean near 0.5 (Paolino 2001; Ferrari and Cribari-Neto). The mean of the dependent variable is close to 1 (where it is truncated) so it cannot be normally distributed. Beta regression, unlike linear regression estimated by OLS, is flexible because its density can vary depending on the values given to its two parameters (Paolino 2001; Ferrari and Cribari-Neto 2004). Beta regression does not assume a constant variance or that the dependent variable could have any variance.

⁷ The following is the beta density: $f(y|\mu, \phi) = \frac{\Gamma(\phi)}{\Gamma(\mu\phi)\Gamma((1-\mu)\phi)} y^{\mu\phi-1}(1-y)^{(1-\mu)\phi-1}$, $0 < y < 1$.

It is estimated using the following likelihood function:

$$\ln L(\mu_i, \phi | y_i) = \log \Gamma(\phi) - \log \Gamma(\mu_i \phi) - \log \Gamma((1 - \mu_i) \phi) + (\mu_i \phi - 1) \log(y_i) + ((1 - \mu_i) \phi - 1) \log(1 - y_i).$$

The model is obtained by assuming that: $g(\mu_i) = X\beta$.

In this case, $g(\mu_i)$ will be specified using the following logit link function: $\mu_i = \frac{\exp(X\beta)}{1 + \exp(X\beta)}$.

Now, you can substitute μ_i in the previously specified log likelihood function and show that the parameters can be interpreted as the odds ratios that are associated with β units change in X (Ferrari and Cribari-Neto, 2004).

Results

The results of the beta regression are presented in a coefficient plot in Figure 1. (Full regression results are presented in Table 1 in Appendix A). The dots on the coefficient plot represent the point estimates of the coefficients; whereas, the lines represent 95% confidence intervals for each estimate. The coefficients can be interpreted as the odds ratios that are associated with β units change in X . Overall, these results show that the accuracy of ideology as a predictor of roll calls varies with both policy characteristics and the influence of exogenous actors.

The results show support for both the *policy differences* and the *policy ambiguity hypotheses*. The baseline policy area for analyzing differences between policy areas is government operations because approximately one-fifth of the roll calls address this issue. Government operations is an issue area that is going to be well predicted by the DW-NOMINATE scores because it addresses topics such as government efficiency and presidential nominations (www.policyagendas.org). Therefore, issue areas whose coefficients are both statistically significant and positive are going to be incredibly ideological. These policies—social welfare, education and macroeconomics—being associated with the highest proportions of correctly predicted roll call votes should come as little surprise. Issue areas whose coefficients are not statistically significant are still structured by ideology, just not to the same extent as these three hyper-ideological policy areas.

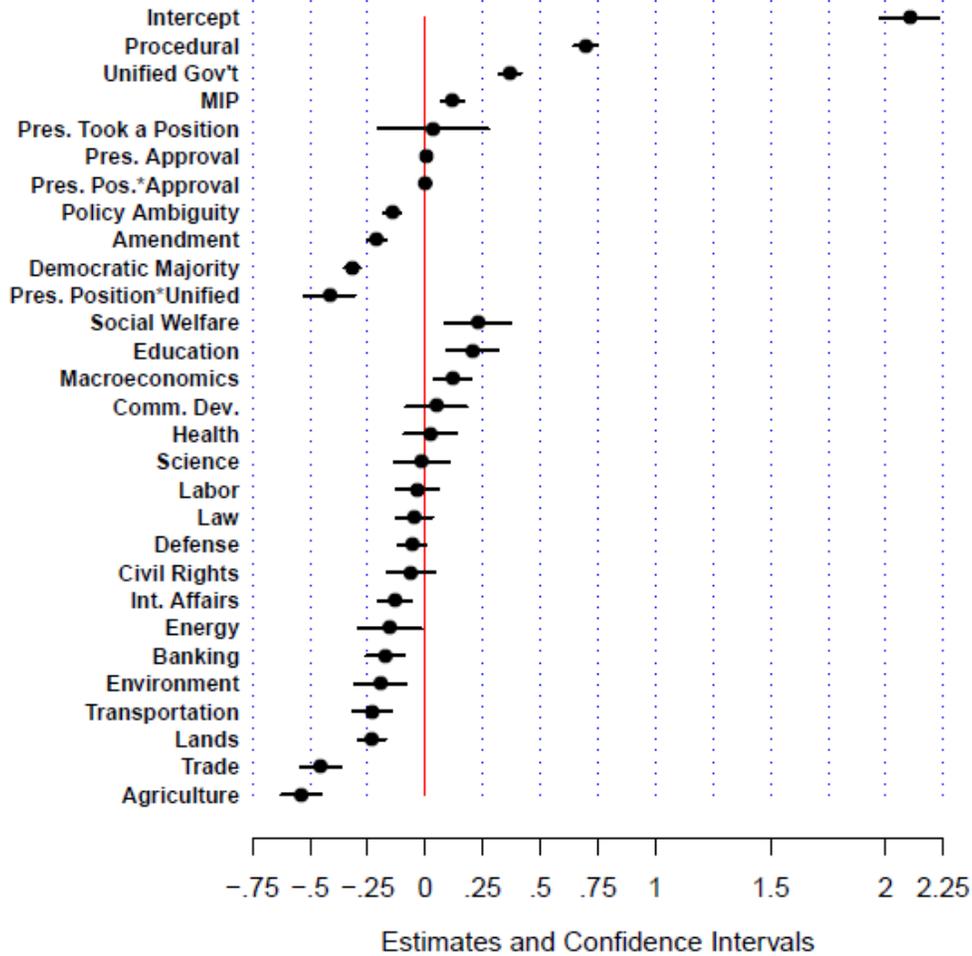


Figure 1: Accuracy of Ideology in Roll Call Predictions

Note: The dots represent the point estimates of the coefficients, while the lines represent the 95% confidence intervals. The point estimates whose confidence intervals do NOT cross zero are significantly significant.

On the other hand, there is a group of policy areas whose coefficients are both negative and statistically significant. These policy areas are not predicted nearly as accurately by ideology as the other areas. Agriculture, transportation, and public lands are issue areas that would naturally be influenced by a variety of preferences other than ideology (e.g. regional preferences). For these types of policy areas, concerns about how

a vote will affect a member's constituents or region are just as common as concerns about the level of government intervention. The results demonstrate the fact that there is considerable variation between policy areas. As a result, congressional scholars should act with caution when assuming that roll call votes should be studied without consideration of policy content. In fact, the logged odds (see Table 1 in Appendix A) show that the difference between the average percent of votes per roll call correctly predicted in social welfare policy and agricultural policy is about 8.5 percent (or 37 votes).

The second policy characteristic explored here, policy ambiguity, is both negative and statistically significant. For roll calls with bill packets that address multiple policy areas, ideology is less likely to accurately predict votes than for roll calls in bill packets that are focused on one specific issue. This finding suggests that when faced with multiple policy choices, members make trade-offs that are not always consistent with ideology. Policy ambiguity has both practical and research implications. First, the majority party should strive to make decisions as simple and focused as possible if they want to ensure a vote based on ideology. Second, policy ambiguity suggests that congressional scholars should focus attention to determining how and why some bill packets become ambiguous while others remain focused. Do the policy processes for policy ambiguous and policy focused bills differ?

In short, policy characteristics really seem to matter in these two important ways. There are differences in how ideologically structured each policy area is, and therefore, variation in how well the different policy areas are predicted by ideology. Further, when

bill packets are focused on a single policy area they are better predicted by ideology. For policy focused roll calls, there is no need to balance preferences in one policy area with preferences in other areas.

In addition to looking at policy characteristics, I also control for variables often cited in the conflict-focused literature on congressional decision making. First, roll calls dealing with an issue considered most important to the public are positively and significantly related to the proportion of votes correctly predicted by ideology. This suggests that when the public is concerned with a specific policy area, Congress attends to that issue with heightened ideological responses.

Second, as expected the results show that parties are related to the accuracy of ideology in roll call voting in multiple ways. First, a Democratic House majority is negatively (or, conversely, a Republican House majority is positively) related to the accuracy of ideology as a predictor of roll calls. The Republican Party is generally considered a more cohesive party with lower levels of defection from the party stance, which is associated with greater accuracy by ideology in roll call vote predictions. In addition, unified government also increases predictability of ideology regardless of party, most likely because the more of government a party controls, the more control the party has over agenda (what problems law makers are focusing on). Party influence is also evident through differences of vote type. (Here, the baseline vote is final passage.) Procedural votes are associated with the highest levels of accuracy, illustrating that fact that the party is more involved in these votes than others. Amendment votes are associated with much lower proportions of accurately predicted roll call votes. Parties

seemingly allow the most discretion in this type of vote.

Last, Figure 1 displays some interesting effects for presidential influence on roll call voting. The findings presented here suggest that under unified government, the president taking a position on legislation is negatively related to ideology as an accurate predictor of roll call votes. The president can have a significant influence on congressional decision making by highlighting preferences other than ideology, especially when his party controls both houses of Congress. The policies that the president tends to take a position on include defense, law, and foreign affairs. An example of what this variable is picking up on is the rally 'round the flag effect. The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 took place during the time under study. Bush was able to highlight a dimension (patriotism or domestic security) other than ideology.⁸ Though it is not readily evident from the coefficient plot, president approval is both positive and statistically significant. The coefficient is very small—less than a percentage point once the logged odds ratio has been calculated. The finding does suggest, though, that there is a small, yet significant, relationship between presidential approval and the accuracy of ideology. As presidential approval increased so too do ideological votes in Congress.

One critique that the policy ambiguity measure may receive is that it is measuring the difference in the accuracy of vote predictions caused by open and closed rules on bills

⁸ The finding that roll calls the president take a position on under unified government are less well predicted by ideology does not change if you exclude the G.W. Bush years from the analysis. The variable remains both negative and statistically significant, showing that the finding is not merely an artifact of the first G.W. Bush term.

rather than the differences in accuracy of vote predictions caused by the number of issue areas associated with a bill. To preempt this critique, I recoded the roll calls to account for the fact that some bills are procedurally advantaged with the use of closed rules and some bills are procedurally disadvantaged with the use of open rules (See Sinclair 1994). The new coding scheme has three categories: procedurally advantaged with low policy ambiguity (bills will one vote on one specific issue), procedurally disadvantaged with low policy ambiguity (these bills may have multiple amendments and procedural votes, but all focus on same issue area), and procedurally disadvantaged with high policy ambiguity (these bills have multiple amendments and procedural votes that address a range of issue areas). If the decreased accuracy of vote predictions is caused by variation in rules (open versus closed), then procedurally advantaged bills should be statistically different from both types of procedurally disadvantaged bills. There would be no difference between the two types of procedurally disadvantaged bills.

Further, previous analysis and discussion suggest that one simple way to account for differences in policy areas would be to place them into one of two groups: ideologically structured and ideologically ambiguous. To test for this, I coded the policy areas according to the findings of Jochim and Jones (2009) which showed that some policy areas are characterized by a single left-right dimension and others are not. For example, agriculture and international affairs were coded as ideologically ambiguous; whereas, civil rights and health were coded as ideologically structured. (Refer to Appendix B to see how each policy area was coded.)

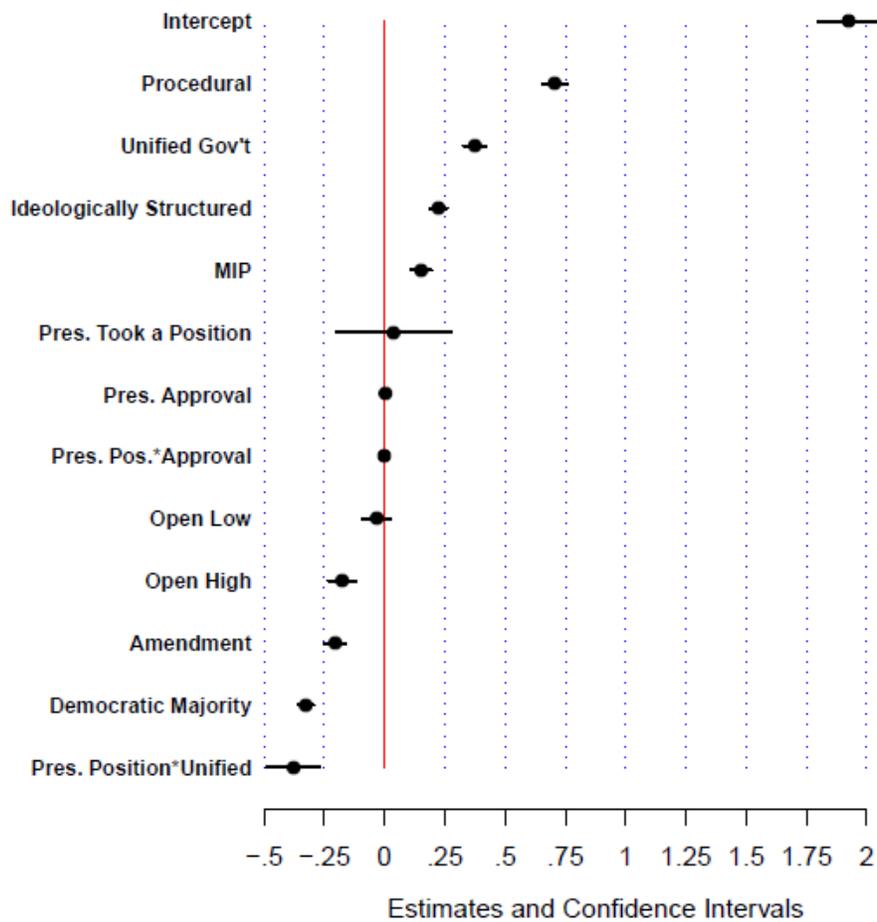


Figure 2: Policy Characteristics Revisited

Note: The dots represent the point estimates of the coefficients, while the lines represent the 95% confidence intervals. The point estimates whose confidence intervals do NOT cross zero are significantly significant.

With these two new measures, I reran the beta regression. The results are presented in a coefficient plot in Figure 2. (Full regression results are presented in Table 2 in Appendix A.) As you can see, the roll calls associated with bills that were procedurally disadvantaged with low policy ambiguity are predicted with the same level of accuracy as roll calls associated with bills that are procedurally advantaged. There is still a statistically significant and negative relationship in the accuracy of ideology in

predicting roll call votes for those bills characterized by policy ambiguity. These results show that the policy ambiguous variable is picking up on differences between bills addressing multiple policy areas and bills addressing a single policy area. It also shows that bills that are characterized by low ambiguity are predicted at the same rate regardless of whether they were forced to be that way by rules or if they were that way naturally. Second, the results show that ideologically structured policy areas are more accurately predicted than ideologically ambiguous policy areas. These results are exactly what we would have expected based on the earlier findings of this paper. Further, this current specification of the model is much more parsimonious, allowing it to be easily implemented into future conflict-focused roll call studies.

Implications and Conclusions

The goal of this paper was to suggest that there was more than one way to study roll call voting. In addition to focusing on conflict—partisan polarization or institutional clashes—we can also explore systematic differences between policy roll calls based on policy characteristics. This paper shows that policies vary across the board in how well they are predicted by ideology. It also suggests a parsimonious dichotomous variable for those studies in which policy is not necessarily the variable of interest.

Differences between variables that are ideologically structured versus those that are not suggest that we should explore coalition building processes in different policy areas. Are coalitions consistent in a given policy area or do they vary from vote to vote? For example, in agriculture policy, do the same members from districts dominated by agriculture always coalesce or is it more situational? Do bipartisan coalitions formed in one issue area (ex. energy policy) carry over to another issue area (ex. environmental policy)?

This study demonstrates that members of Congress regularly defect from their predicted ideological voting patterns, but the findings do not address who is defecting. Possible follow-up research would look at which legislators are most likely to deviate from their ideological preferences. Moderate defectors would suggest logrolling, but defectors in the extremes of the parties would suggest serious preference trade-offs.

Further, the findings in this paper show roll calls characterized by policy ambiguity are less accurately predicted by ideology. Future studies should focus on the process in which bill packets come to be characterized by policy ambiguity. Can policy

ambiguity be limited by limiting the number of committees to which a bill is referred? How much control do the parties have over ensuring focused policies? Are there certain circumstances when the majority party would encourage policy ambiguity?

In terms of the conflict control variables, the only finding that really seems to stand out is that when a president takes a position on a bill under unified government, the accuracy of ideology in predicting roll call votes decreases. A few policy areas including macroeconomics, defense, and education make up the majority of those bills. Future research should focus on why the president takes a position on such few bills and why positions are limited to a few policy areas. Also, a study comparing this phenomenon during the first terms of Clinton, Bush and Obama would be insightful to show presidents introduce new dimensions into the policy debate and the affect the new dimensions can have on roll call voting.

In summary, this paper demonstrates that there is room in the current literature on legislative decision making to explore the effects that differences in policy characteristics can have on the policy making process. Not only do policy areas vary in how well they are predicted by ideology, but when a bill addresses disparate issue areas it forces legislators to make difficult trade-offs. To truly understand how legislators make decisions, we should focus on incorporating policy characteristics into our roll call studies.

Appendix A

Table A.1: Accuracy of Ideology in Roll Call Predictions

Independent Variable	Estimate (Std. Error)	Pr(> t)	Logged Odds
<i>Policy Characteristics</i>			
Policy Ambiguity	-0.142 (0.019)	4.69e-14 ***	0.877
Macroeconomics	0.119 (0.041)	0.004 **	0.903
Civil Rights	-0.0619 (0.052)	0.236	
Health	0.024 (0.058)	0.676	
Agriculture	-0.539 (0.044)	< 2e-16 ***	0.828
Labor	-0.033 (0.046)	0.473	
Education	0.205 (0.058)	0.0004 ***	0.910
Environment	-0.193 (0.058)	0.001 ***	0.872
Energy	-0.154 (0.069)	0.026 *	0.876
Transportation	-0.232 (0.042)	3.69e-08 ***	0.867
Law	-0.046 (0.039)	0.239	
Social Welfare	0.229 (0.073)	0.002 **	0.912
Community Dev.	0.048 (0.066)	0.467	
Banking	-0.174 (0.042)	4.03e-05 ***	0.874
Defense	-0.055 (0.03)	0.063	
Science	-0.015 (0.059)	0.795	
Trade	-0.455 (0.044)	< 2e-16 ***	0.840
International Affairs	-0.13 (0.037)	0.0004 ***	0.879
Lands	-0.233 (0.03)	1.39e-14 ***	0.867

Table A.1 (Continued): Accuracy of Ideology in Roll Call Predictions

Independent Variable	Estimate (Std. Error)	Pr(> t)	Logged Odds
<i>Public Salience</i>			
MIP	0.118 (0.026)	3.66e-06 ***	0.903
<i>Parties</i>			
Democratic Majority	-0.316 (0.017)	< 2e-16 ***	0.857
Unified Government	0.369 (0.024)	< 2e-16 ***	0.923
Amendment	-0.212 (0.021)	< 2e-16 ***	0.870
Procedural	0.697 (0.025)	< 2e-16 ***	0.943
<i>President</i>			
Pres. Takes Position	0.034 (0.122)	0.779	
Pres. Approval	0.004 (0.001)	0.0004 ***	0.892
Pres.Pos.*Unified Govt	-0.414 (0.055)	7.81e-14 ***	0.845
Pres. Pos.*Approval	-0.001 (0.002)	0.646	
<i>Beta Regression</i>			
Intercept	2.11 (0.064)	< 2e-16 ***	0.892
N	7,765		
Log-likelihood	1.142e+04 on 30 Df		
Pseudo R-Squared	0.284		

Notes: Signif. codes: '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05

The logged odds are only calculated for the significant coefficients.

Table A.2: Policy Characteristics Revisited

Independent Variable	Estimate (Std. Error)	Pr(> t)	Logged Odds
<i>Policy Characteristics</i>			
Open Rule with Low Ambig.	-0.033 (0.03)	0.266	
Open Rule with High Ambig.	-0.176 (0.029)	7.39e-10 ***	0.851
Ideologically Structured	0.223 (0.018)	< 2e-16 ***	0.895
<i>Public Salience</i>			
MIP	0.151 (0.022)	1.05e-11 ***	0.888
<i>Parties</i>			
Democratic Majority	-0.327 (0.017)	< 2e-16 ***	0.831
Unified Government	0.375 (0.024)	< 2e-16 ***	0.908
Amendment	-0.206 (0.022)	< 2e-16 ***	0.847
Procedural	0.705 (0.026)	< 2e-16 ***	0.932
<i>President</i>			
Pres. Takes Position	0.037 (0.122)	0.762	
Pres. Approval	0.003 (0.001)	0.003 **	0.872
Pres.Pos.*Unified Govt	-0.378 (0.056)	1.17e-11 ***	0.824
Pres. Pos.*Approval	-0.001 (0.002)	0.556	
<i>Beta Regression</i>			
Intercept	1.92 (0.065)	< 2e-16 ***	0.872
N	7,765		
Log-likelihood	1.132e+04 on 14 Df		
Pseudo R-Squared	0.2732		

Notes: Signif. codes: '***' 0.001 '**' 0.01 '*' 0.05

The logged odds are only calculated for the significant coefficients.

Appendix B

Table B.1: Policy Agendas Project Issue Codes*

Code	Topic	Ideologically**
1	Macroeconomics	Structured
2	Civil Rights, Minority Issues, and Civil Liberties	Structured
3	Health	Structured
4	Agriculture	Ambiguous
5	Labor, Employment, and Immigration	Structured
6	Education	Structured
7	Environment	Structured
8	Energy	Ambiguous
10	Transportation	Ambiguous
12	Law, Crime, and Family Issues	Structured
13	Social Welfare	Structured
14	Community Development and Housing Issues	Structured
15	Banking, Finance, and Domestic Commerce	Structured
16	Defense	Structured
17	Space, Science, Technology, and Communications	Ambiguous
18	Foreign Trade	Ambiguous
19	International Affairs and Foreign Aid	Ambiguous
20	Government Operations	Structured
21	Public Lands and Water Management	Ambiguous

*See Policy Agendas Project (www.policyagendas.org)

**Based on the work of Jochim and Jones 2009

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