

# Partisan brand name building and deficit politics: examining the role of power sharing on party issue consistency\*

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**Abstract:** Scholars of political parties frequently note that a party's candidates are aided by the presence of a consistent and favourable party brand name. We argue that partisan success in maintaining a consistent position on important policy issues hinges on how their role in the government motivates their strategies about public policy formation. Specifically, when parties share control of government institutions, parties need to balance their electoral interest in promoting a consistent brand name with the need to generate public policy that leads to effective governance. When control is held by one party, the costs and benefits of effective governance are born entirely by the majority, absolving both parties of the need to compromise on the substance of policy. By employing item response theory methods to assess patterns of party voting on deficit issues, we find strong support for these hypotheses.

**Key words:** budgetary politics, congressional politics, party politics, quantitative methods

## Introduction

On 25 September 2008, President George W. Bush delivered a speech urging members of Congress to support the passage of a \$700 billion federal bailout. The administration's proposal sought to purchase bad debts from failing American financial firms, raise the national debt ceiling

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by \$1 trillion, and grant substantial emergency powers to Treasury Secretary Henry M. Paulson. The president argued that the bailout was necessary to prevent “a long and painful recession (Montgomery and Kane 2008)”. Shortly after the speech, presidential candidates John McCain and Barack Obama released a joint statement calling for a bipartisan response to the financial crisis. Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) and Republican Minority Leader John Boehner (R-OH) released a statement highlighting the positive nature of the negotiations (Herszenhorn 2008a).

Despite the enthusiasm of both parties’ leaders, the bailout proposal encountered significant difficulties in the US Congress. Members of both parties were forced to weigh a wide array of factors in deciding whether or not to support the president’s proposal. Republicans wanted to support the president, but also sought to promote their partisan brand with a message of “fiscal conservatism”, and a vote for the bailout would have damaged this. Majority-party Democrats did not want to support the president, but agreed with many of the bill’s main tenets. The result was that the bailout legislation (HR 1454) was met with aggressive criticism from members of both parties, and was initially rejected in the House, 228 to 205.<sup>1</sup> Stocks plummeted in response to the bill’s defeat, dropping 7 per cent – a new one-day record (Weisman 2008).

In the wake of the bill’s defeat and the Dow’s sharp drop, criticism and pressure were heaped on defecting members of both parties. The Senate moved quickly, passing the bill just two days after its initial defeat in the House, by a vote of 74–25.<sup>2</sup> The House followed suit, passing the measure two days later 263 to 171. Opposition to the bill was fairly dispersed amongst the two parties, with 63 Democrats joining 108 Republicans in voting no.

One month after the passage of HR 1424, Barack Obama defeated John McCain to capture the presidency. The newly elected president and congressional Democrats, who now held majorities in both the House and the Senate, sought to respond to the still-slumping economy with a stimulus bill. Like his predecessor, Obama announced that he was committed to attracting broad, bipartisan support. Congressional Republicans praised this effort and promised to work with the president (Calmes and Hulse 2009; Zelany and Herszenhorn 2009).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Democrats broke 140 to 95 in favour of the plan, whereas Republicans went 65 to 133 against.

<sup>2</sup> Nine Democrats joined 15 Republicans and one independent in opposition to the bill. Senator Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA) was being treated for brain cancer and did not vote (Hulse 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Obama was quoted as saying that the economic situation was “not a Republican problem or a Democratic problem at this stage”. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) noted that he “thought the atmosphere for bipartisan cooperation was sincere on all sides” (Zelany and Herszenhorn 2009).

At the onset of the 111th House, Democratic leaders introduced HR 1 – The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Once again, despite pledges of bipartisanship, it became clear that the bill would be met with substantial resistance in Congress. This time, however, opposition was not dispersed among both parties. Instead, the criticism was largely concentrated within the Republican Party. House members expressed concern over the size of the stimulus package and argued for less spending and more tax cuts (Otterman 2009). Moreover, by staying unanimous in their opposition, House Republicans sought to rebuild their fiscal conservative partisan brand. Public opinion polls highlighted this partisan split. A Gallup poll released on 8 January showed support for stimulus package at 64 per cent among Democrats, 54 per cent among Independents and just 32 per cent among Republicans (Agiesta 2009).<sup>4</sup> The \$819 billion measure passed the House on 29 January 2009, 244 to 188. All 177 House Republicans opposed the measure.

Partisan opposition was united in the Senate as well. Republicans filibustered the measure, stressing the debt the bill would pass to future generations. McCain argued that Republicans “want to stimulate the economy, not mortgage the future of our children and grandchildren by the kind of fiscally profligate spending embodied in this legislation (Hulse and Herszenhorn 2009)”. To overcome the minority’s filibuster, Senate Democrats agreed to cut nearly \$110 billion from the measure in exchange for the support of Senators Susan Collins (R-ME), Olympia Snowe (R-ME) and Arlen Specter (R-PA) (Hulse and Herszenhorn 2009).<sup>5</sup> The measure was then formally passed in the Senate on 10 February and signed by the president several weeks later. The drastic shift in party attitudes towards the bailout and stimulus bills highlights how difficult it can be for party leaders to promote a favourable electoral brand name while still generating good public policy.

In this paper, we examine an existing literature looking at co-governance in parliamentary democracies. Multiple parties sharing power via coalitions is a key feature of many parliaments and such power sharing has been shown to affect both the behaviour and success of parliamentary parties (Klingemann et al. 1994; Royed 1996). The separation-of-powers

<sup>4</sup> In contrast, a September 2008 Washington Post/ABC news poll showed comparable levels of partisan support for the Bush stimulus package (49 per cent for Republicans, 42 per cent for Democrats, and 46 per cent for Independents).

<sup>5</sup> At the time, the party controlled 56 seats. The support of 60 senators is required to end a filibuster. Senators Joe Lieberman of Connecticut and Bernie Sanders of Vermont were technically listed as Independents, but caucus with the Democrats. A Minnesota Senate race, later declared to be won by the Democratic candidate Al Franken, had not been decided in time for him to be seated.

system in the United States also requires parties to share control of government. As such, the United States provides an interesting case to reassess how co-governance affects party behaviour outside of parliamentary democracies. As with parliamentary parties, the behaviour of US political parties should be affected by whether or not they are required to share control of the government. We argue that changes from unitary control to co-governance will alter how consistently parties vote in support of their previously stated positions. Specifically, when control of government is shared, parties need to balance their electoral interest in promoting a consistent set of policies with the need to be able to pass legislation that effectively confronts emerging problems, leading to less consistent voting. When control is held by one party, it is easier for both majority and minority parties to pursue policies that are consistent with that party's traditional brand name. During such periods of unified government, the costs and benefits of effective governance are largely born by the majority, minimising the need for parties to compromise on policy substance and leading to more consistent voting. Parties' needs to pursue different strategies under shared and unified control of government should lead to clear differences in party voting patterns. Under unified government, differences in voting between the parties should be stark. When the amount of shared governance increases, party members balancing the need for good governance with electoral concerns should exhibit less consistent voting patterns.

We make an initial exploration of this theory using votes from the 110th and 111th Houses. We assess final passage votes on bills that significantly affect the federal deficit. We use deficit votes because it is frequently characterised as an issue that clearly separates the two major parties on a traditional liberal/conservative policy space (Poole and Rosenthal 1997, 2007). By employing item response theory methods (IRT), we examine whether votes on deficit issues do a good job of distinguishing liberal and conservative members of the Congress. We find that while votes on deficit-related items do not explain party differences well when government control is shared, differences between the two parties are clear when one party controls both chambers of Congress and the presidency. These differences in voting under shared and unified government demonstrate that parties' policy-making strategies change as their role in government changes. The next section discusses political parties' legislative strategies under both single party control and shared party control.

### *Political parties and shared power*

The primary goal of many legislative scholars is to best describe the conditions and factors that lead to changes in public policy. Since most

significant policy change is accomplished via the passage of legislation, students of legislative politics have long debated the factors that influence the formation and passage of legislation. As such, the role that political parties play in the legislative process has received a great deal of attention by scholars; arguably more than any other factor. Parties are generally seen as pursuing both policy and electoral goals, with both of these goals playing a key role in the policy formation process (Aldrich 1995; Smith 2007).<sup>6</sup> Parties in government must consider how passing legislation that moves policy closer to their collective ideological preferences will affect their future electoral prospects (Krehbiel 1998). Parties in government have an advantage in passing preferred legislation and can only maintain this advantage if their members win elections and the party remains in government.<sup>7</sup> Because of this, electoral considerations must play a key role in the formation of parties' legislative behaviour (Downs 1957; Mayhew 1974).

However, standard theories of party have a much more difficult time explaining party behaviour when parties are required to share power (Schmidt 1996). It has long been recognised that parties' strategies about how to pursue policy and electoral goals change when parties share political power. In parliamentary democracies, parties frequently share power via parliamentary coalitions.<sup>8</sup> Policy strategies of parties clearly change when they are forced to share power with other parties (Klingemann et al. 1994). Issues important to parties are left off the agenda if coalition partners do not agree on the substance of those issues. Minor issues where all coalition partners can find common ground are much more likely to receive legislative attention. As argued by Klingemann et al. (1994, 33), "[o]verall policies of coalitions are unlikely to mirror the exact emphases of members' electoral programs in the same way as do policies of single-party governments".

The differing legislative strategies employed by parties operating under single-party majority governments and coalition governments, lead to

<sup>6</sup> Much of the literature on parliamentary democracies also considers parties to be multi-goal organisations. An examination of policy and electoral goals is mirrored in this literature. Additionally, many consider office-seeking goals, where parties seek to maximise control over political offices (see Strom 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Majority parties in the US House can prevent the consideration of legislation counter to their policy goals via their dominance of the committee system (Cox and McCubbins 2005). They can also move preferred legislation through effective use of the same committee system. Party-favoured legislation can be scheduled for consideration and protected from change via the majority party-controlled Rules Committee (Sinclair 1983, 2007; Rohde 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Power sharing also occurs in parliaments via single-party minority governments. These minority governments must gain support from other parties to successfully pass legislation. See Artés and Bustos (2008) and Artés (2013) for a discussion of parties' legislative strategies and behaviors under this form of power sharing.

differing levels of legislative success.<sup>9</sup> Scholars frequently measure the legislative success of parties by examining if parties are able to enact policies that they pledged they would enact (Royed 1996). Examining electoral pledges made by parties in both the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, Thomson (2001) finds that, “pledges made by parties that enter coalition governments are less likely to be fulfilled than those made by parties that enter single party governments in parliamentary democracies”.<sup>10</sup>

These differing levels of legislative success have clear implications for parties’ electoral prospects. It has long been thought that a “responsible electorate” will reward parties for doing well and punish parties for doing badly in regards to their electoral pledges (Key 1966). Power sharing makes electoral accountability more difficult for voters. While voters will place full electoral responsibility on the majority party in single-party governments (Klingemann et al. 1994), voters will be unsure which party is responsible in coalition governments. When voters are unclear about who is responsible for government action, they will not be able to effectively reward/punish parties for their successes/failures (Powell and Whitten 1993; Powell 2000).<sup>11</sup> The realisation that power sharing changes how effective voters are at accurately assessing electoral responsibility, plays a role in parties’ decisions to change policy strategies under coalition governments, as discussed above.

Coalition governments in parliamentary democracies are, of course, just one possible form of legislative power sharing. Presidential systems often require legislative powers to be shared between the parties of the legislature and the executive (Shugart and Carey 1992). When power is shared between branches, legislative parties’ strategies in regards to policy and electoral goals again change in ways similar to those induced by coalition governments. The possibility of presidential vetoes alters what policies legislatures take up, and affect the ideological content of the legislation considered (Krehbiel 1998; Cameron 2000; Tsebelis 2002). Additionally, just as power sharing via coalition government makes parties less likely to be legislatively successful, power sharing among branches also inhibits parties’ ability to effectively fulfill electoral pledges. Royed (1996), comparing the United Kingdom and the United States,

<sup>9</sup> Power sharing also affects the content of legislation. Iversen and Soskice (2006) show that center-left parties are more likely to be successful in coalition governments, leading to greater economic redistribution than under single-party majority governments.

<sup>10</sup> Also see Mansergh and Thomson (2007) for further evidence and discussion of differences between single majority parties and parties in coalition governments.

<sup>11</sup> But see Royed et al. (2000) for a reassessment and critique of the Powell and Whitten’s “clarity of responsibility” theory.

finds that conservative governments of the Thatcher era were better able to fulfill electoral pledges than were the shared Democrat and Republican governments of the Reagan era. Power sharing between branches of government also obfuscates electoral accountability. While government responsibility is the easiest to assess when a single party controls both the legislative and executive branches, power sharing among parties will make it, “harder for citizens to determine who should bear the responsibility for policy success and failure and to use their electoral resources effectively as instruments for reward and retribution” (Powell 2000, 52).

### *Shared power in American politics*

Shared power is a dominant feature of American politics. The US Constitution dictates that powers be shared between the political branches. Legislative power is formally shared between the legislative and executive branch via the presidential veto (Cameron 2000). Within the Congress, power is shared between the House and Senate. As the American Recovery and Investment Act example demonstrates, legislation must also garner the support of numerous veto players – like the Senate filibuster pivot and committee leaders – in order to become law. Once enacted, legislation is subject to judicial review and bureaucratic enforcement.

In addition to the comparatively large number of veto players, electoral institutions also contribute to shared governance in the American system. Unlike many parliamentary democracies, American congressional nominations are chosen by local primary electorates. These electorates generally have weaker ties to the larger national party (Mayhew 1974). These candidates also often raise their own campaign finances and mobilise their own reelection campaigns. Finally, whereas loyal rank and file members in parliamentary governments can be rewarded with key cabinet positions, no comparable institutional reward exists in the American context (Downs 1957; Mayhew 1974). In sum, even when a party enjoys unified control of the American political institutions, the American system of government rarely looks like the type of single-majority party government frequently found in parliamentary democracies like Britain (Royed 1996).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Krehbiel (1998) argues that lawmaking in the United States can be effectively explained without considering party at all, but rather by accounting for the relative ideologies of the president and key members of the House and Senate.

Alternative theories of lawmaking posit that despite weak electoral institutions, majority parties enjoy agenda-setting advantages in the

<sup>12</sup> Royed (1996, 47) argues that, “Compared to the British, the legislative process in the United States is an obstacle course, whether or not there is divided government”.

legislative process. These parties must approach legislating with both policy and electoral goals in mind. Cox and McCubbins (2005) articulate a theory of congressional parties that takes into account the weak party discipline that is possible among congressional parties. Their theory argues that parties consider elections when generating legislative agendas. Parties pursue policy goals in a way that enhances the party's "brand name". Similar to systems with strong party discipline, parties use their control of legislative institutions to pass legislation that improves the public's perception of the party. Because weak party discipline creates the possibility that members will defect from their party on legislative votes, parties must actively prevent the consideration of legislation that could divide their party, thus damaging the parties' brand name. This active attempt to control what policies appear on the legislative agenda protects individual party members' reputations, cultivating the prospects of the party as a whole in future elections (Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005).

Traditional theories of congressional parties do not consider a party's goals and strategies to be conditional on their role in unified or shared government. We, however, posit that what makes up a party's name brand changes substantially depending on whether or not a party must co-govern. A party's name brand is made up of the set of issues and beliefs that a party supports, combined with the success or failure of the policies instituted while the party is part of government. When a party enjoys unitary control, its members are able to confront emerging problems by passing legislation. Because the party will not need to compromise to pass legislation, policy will generally be consistent with the party's traditionally held beliefs. This increases their ability to simultaneously stay unified on floor votes while protecting their party's brand name. Minority parties under unified government will not be held responsible for the success or failure of majority-generated policies, so these parties will focus solely on their support of traditionally held positions when considering their name brand. Knowing that the majority is likely to be held accountable for any legislation that is eventually viewed as being unpopular, the minority has strong incentives to be united in their opposition and will seek to highlight party differences in an effort to "rebrand" the majority. These two views of name brand maintenance will lead to high levels of party cohesiveness under unified governance.

When shared governance increases, parties view of their name brand will change. When parties share power, the electorate will view both parties as being responsible for government actions. As such, parties will feel compelled to support legislation that is vital to effective governance, even if the passage of such legislation requires compromise that both



parties find to be ideologically distasteful.<sup>13</sup> Under shared governance, parties will have to sacrifice the consistent pursuit of their traditionally held beliefs, and instead emphasis effective governance in the constructive of their party name brand. While parties will be collectively better off sacrificing some ideological principles for effective governance, this will not be true for all party members. Some members will have electoral reasons to favour ideological purity over good governance. Weak party discipline means that such members will be able to defect from their party's position on such compromises with little threat of punishment, allowing them to distance themselves from electorally unpopular actions taken by their own party. The individual electoral incentive to defect will trump collective party goals, leading to high levels of defection and lower levels of party cohesion during periods of power sharing.

### *Party reputation and the deficit spending*

Party strategies about legislation and voting are intrinsically linked to elections (Mayhew 1974). Given this, it is tempting to conclude that parties should always favour raising the deficit. Raising the federal deficit generally presents congressional leadership with a source of policy benefits that are non-zero sum. By passing the costs of policies to future generations, members of Congress can avoid having to off-set them by either raising taxes or subtracting policy benefits from the districts of certain members (Weingast 1979). If Congress was forced to directly counterbalance federal expenditures, leaders would be more inclined to craft narrow legislation in order to maximise their policy benefits (Riker 1962). By running higher deficits, congressional leaders may be able to pass budget legislation in greater haste with less controversy. Consistent with this, Mayhew (1991, 190) argued that “nothing we know about electoral behavior suggests that American voters, whatever the circumstances of party control, will reward a government for balancing budgets”.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> This suggests that successful, salient proposals under divided government will necessitate more compromise. This is consistent with work on enacting coalitions in Congress (Krehbiel 1998). However, this does not imply increased policy responsiveness during eras where shared power is low. As Binder (2003) notes, high levels of shared governance increases legislative gridlock, suggesting some salient legislation will not be enacted.

<sup>14</sup> Comparative politics literature suggests that the makeup of American political institutions make deficits especially likely in the US. The increased number of “veto players” in the US system, caused by both bicameralism and separation of powers, leads to higher deficits as budgets must be used to build super-sized winning coalitions (Heller 1997; Tsebelis 2002). Also, budgets typical legislative support from both Democrat and Republican members to pass. As more parties are involved in budget making, increased deficits more likely (Roubini and Sachs 1989).

Nevertheless, both the scholarly literature on congressional politics and the conventional public wisdom regarding partisan politics suggests that the two major parties have staked out countervailing and well-formed positions on federal spending issues, including the deficit. As the case study suggests, Republicans have sought to position themselves as aggressively opposed to federal spending and high deficits. In contrast, Democrats have cultivated a brand-name of a party willing to trade-off higher levels of government expenditures in exchange for policies that support lower and middle class voters.<sup>15</sup>

There are several reasons why we might think the promotion of a party's brand name on deficit issues will vary significantly with levels of power sharing. First, as discussed above, shared control of the government masks accountability on budgetary issues. Mayhew (1991) refers to this concept specifically as it relates to deficit spending, dubbing it "budgetary coherence". When one party controls Congress and the presidency, it is easier for voters to attribute success or blame for the deficit situation and act accordingly.<sup>16</sup> During periods of shared control, it is difficult to correctly determine who is to blame and both parties need to be concerned about being perceived as unable to govern. Therefore, parties have less of an incentive to aggressively whip their members into supporting the brand name position. The parties are likely aided in this capacity by long and confusing bills that include a great deal of ambiguities. Binder (2003) provides some evidence for the claim that shared governance leads to less accountability and a slower process on budget issues. She finds that from the 94th to the 106th Congresses, during the three eras of unified government, Congress was on average 11 days late in missing the budget deadline. Conversely, Congress was on average two months late during periods of shared government.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> As we discuss later, while these positions are well-established they may not mesh with the empirical realities of government spending. Existing literature on federal resource expenditures has produced contradictory evidence. For example, Lee (2004) argues that there is unlikely to be a divide between the two parties in the allocation of transportation funds. Balla et al. (2002) find that pork barrel expenditures are tilted towards members of the majority party – regardless if the majority was Republican or Democrat. In contrast, both Levitt and Snyder (1995) and Carsey and Rundquist (1999) argue that there is a Democratic Party bias in pork barrel allocations.

<sup>16</sup> Mayhew (1991, 185) notes that the question is open, since "not much scholarship has appeared on the history of budgeting". However, he argues that the existing evidence suggests deficit politics are not more likely under divided government. In particular, he cites to work by Peterson and Rom (1989) which points to success enjoyed by Presidents Roosevelt and Reagan despite large federal deficits.

<sup>17</sup> The Congressional Budget Act of 1974 set a target deadline for the adoption of the budget resolution. The original date was set at May 15 but has shifted in recent decades (Schick 2000).

Periods of low shared governance or unified government control provide increased incentives for the majority party to minimise floor divisions and promote its brand name. It also incentivises minorities to remain unified in an attempt to sharpen its brand at the expense of the majority. For example, by remaining unified against the Obama stimulus plan, Republicans forced Democrats to take sole ownership of the \$700 billion stimulus bill. In the 2010 elections, Republicans sought to emphasise this vote in electoral races featuring vulnerable Democrats.<sup>18</sup> Thus, during periods of unified government, the minority will not only seek to promote its brand name, but also actively attempt to “rebrand” their opponents. Given this, we expect that the clarity of a party’s brand name will vary systematically with their status in the government.

In general, Republicans hoping to maintain their fiscally conservative brand name should be motivated to fight against spending measures. In contrast, Democrats should feel less pressure to maintain strict spending controls at the expense of other budgetary priorities. Because of these positions, one would expect spending measures that affect the deficit to exhibit cohesive party voting. However, this may not be true when parties’ status in government is taken into account.

When Democrats controlled both houses of Congress and the presidency, as they did in the 111th Congress, all the costs and benefits from effective government were attributed to their party. Thus, they had little incentive to compromise with the minority. During such periods, there should be stark voting differences between the two parties on spending measures, with both parties voting in cohesive blocks. Conversely, when Republicans controlled the presidency, the parties shared the burden of governing. The increasing need for compromise will increase individual members’ incentives to consider their electoral needs for ideological consistency over their party’s need for good governance, leading to increased defections and less cohesive voting.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Herszenhorn (2010) describes a typical advertisement on this point, targeted against Senator Michael Bennet (D-CO): “For Michael Bennet, reckless spending has become a bad habit. Obama’s failed stimulus. Trillion-dollar government-run health care. And to pay for it? More taxes, higher national debt. Michael Bennet: he spends, we pay”. These ads likely contributed to the Republicans picking up six seats in the Senate (though not Bennet’s) and 63 seats (and majority control) in the House.

<sup>19</sup> Senator McConnell suggested that his support for Bush’s bailout measure was related to concerns about effective governing. He argued that “when there’s a fire in your kitchen threatening to burn down your home, you don’t want someone stopping the firefighters on the way and demanding they hand out smoke detectors first or lecturing you about the hazards of keeping paint in the basement, you want them to put out the fire before it burns down your home and everything you’ve saved for your whole life” (Herszenhorn 2008b).

The expected differences in voting as the level of power sharing changes has clear implications for spending issues. We hypothesise that when Democrats control unified government, and the Republicans are in the minority, votes on spending issues will clearly split the two parties. But when Republicans and Democrats share power, votes on deficit spending issues will do a poor job of delineating liberal and conservative members of the Congress as parties become less cohesive in their voting. In the remainder of this paper, we seek to empirically test this hypothesis.

### *Methods*

In this section, we seek to systematically analyse the role of party in House voting on deficit-related issues. To do this we develop an analysis strategy employing IRT commonly used in the educational testing literature to analyse the ideological information contained in such bills.

IRT models were originally used in the educational testing literature to build and analyse tests of intelligence (Birnbaum 1968; Lord 1980). Standardised tests use a series of questions to create a multiple indicator proxy for intelligence. Test-takers that answer a high number of questions correctly are assumed to be more intelligent than test-takers that answer a low number of questions correctly. These test-building techniques allow researchers to accurately measure the latent variable of intelligence.

The basic idea of IRT is that as the level of the latent trait (intelligence) increases, so does the probability that an individual will correctly answer test items. In addition to estimating latent trait levels, IRT models also estimate parameters that help evaluate the quality of test questions. IRT models estimate an item difficulty parameter ( $\beta$ ), which describes how difficult a test question is. A test item with a lower  $\beta$  value is likely to be answered correctly, even by individuals of low ability. A test item with a high  $\beta$  value is unlikely to be answered correctly, even by high ability individuals. IRT models also estimate an item discrimination parameter ( $\alpha$ ) that describes how well a question separates individuals of different ability levels. An item with a low  $\alpha$  value is likely to be answered correctly by some low ability individuals and answered incorrectly by some high ability individuals. An item with a high  $\alpha$  value is likely to be answered incorrectly by most low ability individuals and answered correctly by most high ability individuals. The only data required to estimate such a model are individual responses – right or wrong answers – to these test items.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> For a good reference on item response models and item parameters see Hambleton et al. (1991). It should be noted that the  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  parameters discussed here follow notation used by Hambleton et al. and others in the educational testing literature. Much of the political science

IRT models are now commonly used in the political science literature. By replacing intelligence with ideology and test questions with votes, IRT models can be used to estimate the ideal points of political elites.<sup>21</sup> They are typically used to estimate ideal points from legislative roll call data or from judicial case voting data (Jackman 2001; Martin and Quinn 2002; Clinton et al. 2004). IRT has also been used to assess commonly used latent variable proxies.<sup>22</sup>

While IRT is almost exclusively used in the political science literature as a means to estimate the ideal points of legislative actors, we focus on the discrimination parameters to assess how well votes affecting deficit spending divide the two parties.<sup>23</sup> By viewing each deficit-impacting vote made by the House we are able to assess whether “fiscal conservative” votes are actually a good way to differentiate between liberals and conservatives. When they are, it speaks to the parties’ voting cohesively on fiscal issue.

To do this, we estimate and analyse item parameters for all votes taken during a particular Congress of the US House. We then examine the  $\alpha$  values that correspond with votes identified as creating significant changes to future deficit levels. By looking at  $\alpha$  parameters for each of the votes chosen, we are able to assess whether the vote used was a good one to use. If the absolute value of  $\alpha$  is low this indicates that the vote is not good at separating liberal and conservative types and that parties are not voting together. If the absolute value of  $\alpha$  value is high, this indicates that the vote can accurately separate between liberal and conservative types. The sign of the  $\alpha$  values will also allow us to determine whether a yes vote or a no vote is considered to be the conservative response. If  $\alpha$  is negative then a no vote is the conservative answer and if  $\alpha$  is positive then a yes vote is the conservative answer.

To formally test our hypothesis that spending bills are will clearly measure the liberal/conservative dimension only under unified government, we use Bayesian methods to conduct a simple difference of means test. We expect that the mean absolute value of  $\alpha$  for spending bills will be

work on IRT models reverses  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  labels from the definitions used in the educational testing literature.

<sup>21</sup> In political science applications conservatives take the place of high ability (smart) test-takers and liberals take the place of low ability (not smart) test-takers. This is not a statement of ideological preference by political methodologists, but rather an attempt to make the traditional left-right terminology of voting correspond to the established scales of education psychology.

<sup>22</sup> See Treier and Jackman (2008) for an analysis of Polity scores.

<sup>23</sup> See Treier and Jackman (2008) and Jackman (2001) for other examples of work making use of discrimination and difficulty parameters.

significantly higher than those of other measures when Democrats control the House, Senate and presidency. To test our hypothesis that spending bills will be poor measures of the liberal/conservative dimension under shared power, we repeat this difference of means test with the expectation that the mean absolute value of  $\alpha$  will be significantly lower than other votes during such shared control. The estimation procedure used is outlined in Appendix A.

*Data.* To initially assess how unified versus shared government affects the cohesiveness of party voting, we examine roll call voting data from the 110th and 111th Houses. In the 110th Congress, a Democratic House and Senate shared power with Republican President George W. Bush. In the 111th Congress, Democrats enjoyed control of the House, Senate and presidency. These two congresses allow us to assess the effects of party status on the consistency of votes on spending issues.<sup>24</sup> These data include 1,865 votes for the 110th House and 1,263 votes for the 111th House (Lewis and Poole 2010; Poole 2010).<sup>25</sup>

We then identify votes that had a significant effect on the deficit. To do this we made use of the legislative cost estimates produced by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO). According to the CBO, a cost estimate is developed for “virtually every bill reported by Congressional committees to show how it would affect spending or revenues”. These cost estimates report changes to direct spending and revenues anticipated if the bill under consideration became law. The CBO also estimates changes to outlays based upon the authorisation levels of a bill. Since the CBO does not provide cost estimates for appropriation bills, we use the expected increase in outlays under these authorisations as a proxy for the net effect of the bills on future appropriation levels.

We coded all CBO cost estimates for 110th and 111th Congresses that were listed as having at least a \$500,000 effect on the deficit. We recorded the estimated ten-year impact on the deficit for the 155 such cost estimates from the 110th Congress and the 96 cost estimates from the 111th Congress. We reduced this list to cost estimates that had an estimated positive or negative effect on the deficit of at least \$5 billion.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> We had initially hoped to examine data from the Senate as well. Unfortunately, the Senate has many fewer recorded votes on issues that are estimated to have a significant effect on the deficit.

<sup>25</sup> Our data from the 111th House includes all votes through 13 May 2010. These data were downloaded on 15 May 2010 from Jeff Lewis’s website (2010).

<sup>26</sup> These costs estimates were precise in their estimates with the exception of the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008, which included the Troubled Assets Relief Program (TARP). For this particular bill, the CBO notes that the “net cost is likely to be substantially less than \$700 billion but is more likely than not to be greater than zero”. For this paper we assumed the net cost of the TARP will exceed \$5 billion.

Table 1. Deficit-impacting bills, 110th House

Bill	Vote (total, D, R)	Estimated effect on deficit
Water Quality Financing Act	303–108, 224–0, 79–108	9,114
Emergency Economic Stabilization Act	263–171, 172–63, 91–108	700,000
National Defense Authorization Act	397–27, 202–25, 195–2	631,317
Homeland Security Authorization Act	296–126, 223–2, 73–124	39,609
Food, Conservation, and Energy Act	231–191, 212–14, 19–177	17,500
Terrorism Risk Insurance Reauthorization Act	312–110, 224–2, 88–108	8,400
Coast Guard Authorization Act	395–7, 220–0, 175–7	7,444
Children’s Health and Medicare Protection Act	225–204, 220–10, 5–194	72,900
Housing and Economic Recovery Act	241–172, 215–9, 26–163	33,376
Tax Increase Prevention Act	352–64, 157–64, 195–0	50,593
Recovery Rebates and Economic Stimulus Act	380–34, 215–6, 165–28	124,400
Emergency Extended Unemployment Act	274–137, 225–0, 49–137	9,962
Comprehensive American Energy Security Act	236–189, 221–13, 15–176	–6,660

*Note:* Included are deficit-impacting bills that received a recorded vote in the 110th House. To be considered deficit impacting, the CBO had to estimate that a bill would have a ten-year positive or negative effect on the deficit of at least \$5 billion. Vote gives the total yeas and nays for each vote and vote breakdown for Democrats and Republicans. Estimated effect on deficit is in millions of dollars.

We eliminated all duplicate cost estimates for the same bills, retaining the one that most closely corresponds to the versions upon which a roll call vote was taken. We were forced to eliminate a large number of bills for which no recorded votes were held. We were left with a list of 13 bills that had a significant effect on the deficit for the 110th House and 11 bills for the 111th House. These bills are listed in Tables 1 and 3.

### Results

The IRT model described above was estimated using roll call voting data from both the 110th and 111th Houses, respectively.<sup>27</sup> Tables 2 and 4 report information on the item parameters for the 110th House and 111th House.

We argue that parties will show more unified voting on traditional brand name issues when one party controls unified government. The need to effectively govern will temper these voting patterns when a party

<sup>27</sup> These two models were estimated using ideal point estimation software from the R *pscl* library (Jackman 2010).

Table 2. Deficit-impacting bills' item parameters, 110th House

Bill	Discrimination parameter ( $\alpha$ )	Difficulty parameter ( $\beta$ )
Water Quality Financing Act	-7.084	-2.590
Emergency Economic Stabilization Act	-0.721	-0.160
National Defense Authorization Act	1.219	-2.143
Homeland Security Authorization Act	-3.943	-1.154
Food, Conservation, and Energy Act	-2.692	0.267
Terrorism Risk Insurance Reauthorization Act	-3.579	-1.297
Coast Guard Authorization Act	-2.239	-2.876
Children's Health and Medicare Protection Act	-5.043	0.786
Housing and Economic Recovery Act	-3.626	-0.027
Tax Increase Prevention Act	1.048	-1.433
Recovery Rebates and Economic Stimulus Act	-1.150	-1.513
Emergency Extended Unemployment Act	-5.500	-1.421
Comprehensive American Energy Security Act	-2.830	0.335

*Note:* The absolute value of  $\alpha$  indicates the ability of the vote to distinguish between liberals and conservatives. Negative and positive values merely indicate whether a ye vote (+) or a no vote (-) is considered to be a conservative vote.

controls or shares power. These hypotheses imply that spending bills should explain liberal-conservative differences poorly when the Democratically controlled 110th Congress shared power with President George W. Bush. While some deficit-impacting bills in the 110th House did a good job of delineating members' ideologies on the primary liberal/conservative dimension, most did not. The absolute value of only one vote – HR 720, the Water Quality Refinancing Act – exceeded the average  $\alpha$  value of 6.291 for all 110th House roll call votes. We report Bayesian difference of means for the mean discrimination parameter values in Table 5. The average  $\alpha$  value of deficit-impacting votes, 3.187, was significantly lower than the average for all bills. The difference between the posterior distributions for the mean of all bills and the mean of spending bills averaged 3.034. The 95 per cent Bayesian credible interval ranged from 2.653 to 3.318 and did not contain 0.<sup>28</sup>

Figure 1 show kernel density plots for the absolute value of  $\alpha$  values for all bills and for deficit-impacting votes. The distribution of  $\alpha$  values for all bills shows that these votes are in general much more informative about the liberal/conservative dimension than are  $\alpha$  values for the

<sup>28</sup> The Bayesian credible interval reports the interval of the posterior distribution which has a 95 per cent probability of containing the mean.



Table 3. Deficit-impacting bills, 111th House

Bill	Vote (total, D, R)	Estimated effect on deficit
American Recovery and Reinvestment Act	244–188, 244–10, 0–178	819,500
TARP Reform and Accountability Act	260–166, 241–10, 19–156	–13,900
FAA Reauthorization Act	277–136, 239–4, 38–132	44,419
Helping Families Save Their Homes Act	234–191, 227–23, 7–168	–14,323
Water Quality Investment Act	317–101, 243–0, 74–101	17,696
Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act	219–212, 219–34, 0–178	–118,000
Affordable Health Care for America Act	220–215, 219–38, 1–177	–138,000
Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act	223–202, 223–26, 0–176	–7,300
American Workers, State, and Business Relief Act	241–181, 238–10, 3–171	98,632
Continuing Extension Act	289–112, 240–1, 49–111	18,229
Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act	220–211, 220–33, 0–178	–25,000

*Note:* Included are deficit-impacting bills that received a recorded vote in the 110th House through 15 May 2010. To be considered deficit impacting, the CBO had to estimate that a bill would have a ten-year positive or negative effect on the deficit of at least \$5 billion. Vote gives the total yeas and nays for each vote and vote breakdown for Democrats and Republicans. Estimated effect on deficit is in millions of dollars. The estimated effect of HR 4872 is the reduction relative to cost of HR 3590 (Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act) without changes enacted by the passage of HR 4872.

deficit-impacting bills. The intuition from the densities is further confirmed by the much lower means and medians of the deficit-impacting group of bills. These figures provide clear evidence that bills that significantly affected the deficit were much less informative about liberal/conservative differences than are other votes conducted in the 110th House.

These analyses provide strong evidence that deficit-impacting votes are not exhibiting clear differences in voting between liberal and conservative members. In general, fiscal issues do not do a good job explaining traditional liberal-conservative differences during the 110th House. The item with the lowest  $\alpha$  value was the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008, the federal bailout bill discussed in the introduction. This vote split both parties, with 63 of 235 majority-party Democrats recording a no vote, and 91 of 199 opposition-party Republicans voting for the bill. Some spending bills not only failed to explain liberal/conservative differences; they ran counter to it. For three bills the  $\alpha$  values indicate that a vote to increase the deficit or a vote to prevent a reduction of the deficit was a conservative vote, contrary to the fiscal-conservative mantle held by the Republican party. An example of this is the positive  $\alpha$  value for

Table 4. Deficit-impacting bills' item parameters, 111th House

Bill	Discrimination parameter ( $\alpha$ )	Difficulty parameter ( $\beta$ )
American Recovery and Reinvestment Act	-7.856	1.408
TARP Reform and Accountability Act	-3.604	-0.174
FAA Reauthorization Act	-3.510	-0.710
Helping Families Save Their Homes Act	-4.013	0.605
Water Quality Investment Act	-5.626	-2.431
Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act	-6.466	1.984
Affordable Health Care for America Act	-6.309	1.977
Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act	-4.981	1.198
American Workers, State, and Business Relief Act	-4.413	0.488
Continuing Extension Act	-4.325	-1.413
Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act	-7.491	2.321

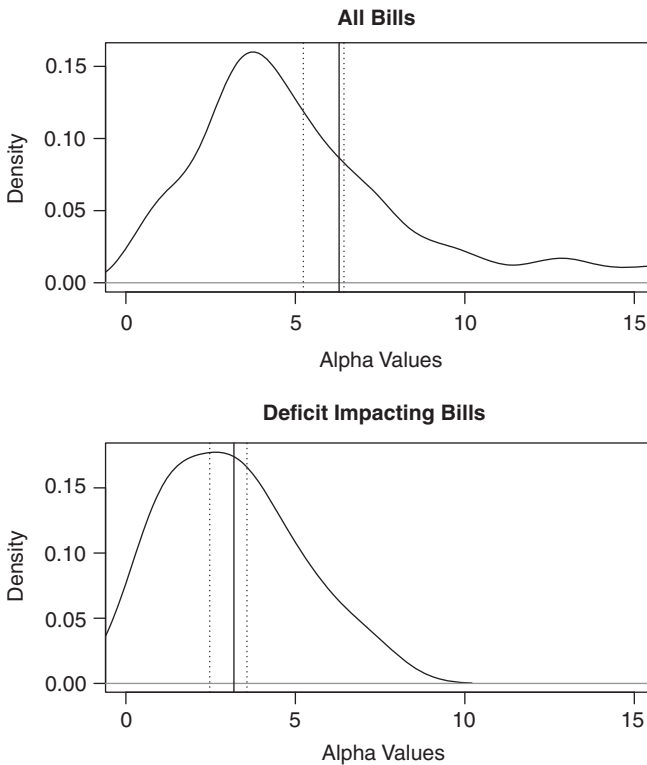
*Note:* The absolute value of  $\alpha$  indicates the ability of the vote to distinguish between liberals and conservatives. Negative and positive values merely indicate whether a yea vote (+) or a no vote (-) is considered to be a conservative vote.

Table 5. Examining difference of means

Mean $ \alpha $ all bills	Mean $ \alpha $ spending bills	Difference of Means
<i>110th Congress</i>		
6.291 (5.234, 6.434)	3.187 (2.474, 3.572)	3.034 (2.653, 3.318)
<i>111th Congress</i>		
4.832 (4.324, 5.09)	5.331 (4.641, 5.953)	-0.509 (-1.057, -0.068)

*Note:* The above table reports the mean of the absolute value for the posterior distribution of estimated  $\alpha$  parameters. 95 per cent Bayesian credible intervals are reported in parentheses. Difference of means are calculated by estimating a posterior distribution of difference. The absolute value of  $\alpha$  for spending bills was calculated by subtracting from the absolute value of  $\alpha$  for all bills to generate this posterior density.

HR 1585, the National Defense Authorization Act. This positive value means that a yes vote is consistent with the conservative position, even though the measure was estimated to add \$631 billion to the federal deficit over the next ten years. This particular bill provides a nice example of Republicans in a power-sharing position supporting increased spending, in this case to support national defense, despite the bill's negative effect on

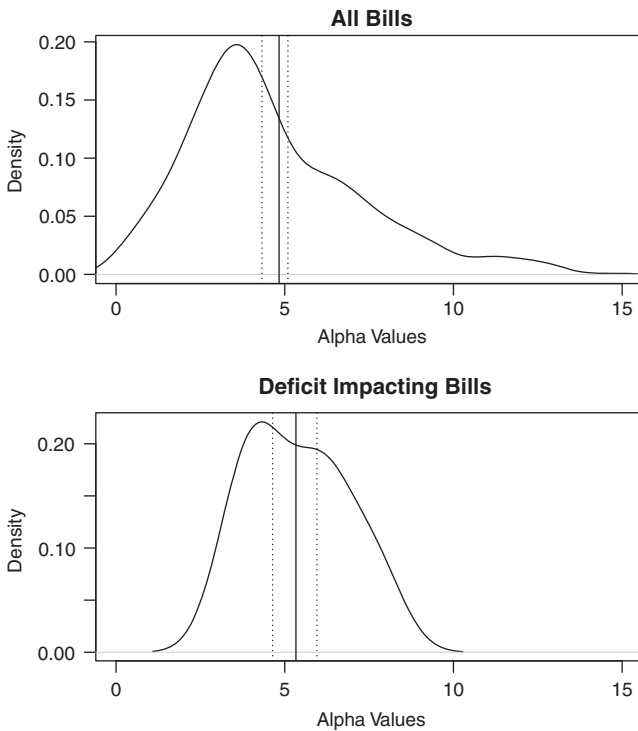


**Figure 1** Density of discrimination parameters, 110th House.

*Note:* The figure displays density plot of the absolute value of item discrimination parameters ( $\alpha$ ) for all bills and deficit-impacting bills with aggregate means and medians included. The mean  $\alpha$  value for all bills is 4.621 (the median value is 3.340). The  $\alpha$  values for deficit-impacting bills are significantly lower (mean value of 2.275 and median value of 1.993), indicating that votes on deficit-impacting bills in the 110th House are not good at delineating between liberal and conservative legislators.

the deficit and its potential damaging impact to the Republicans' fiscal-conservative name brand.

The results from the 111th House model paint a much different picture. When Democrats controlled the Congress and the presidency during the 111th Congress, the  $\alpha$  values reported in Table 4 indicate that spending issues did a much better job of capturing differences between liberal and conservative members. In fact, spending votes in the 111th Congress did a better job of explaining ideological differences than did other bills. The average value for deficit-impacting votes of 5.331 is larger than the 4.832 average for all other bills. The difference between the posterior



**Figure 2** Density of discrimination parameters, 111th House.

*Note:* The figure displays density plot of the absolute value of item discrimination parameters ( $\alpha$ ) for all bills and deficit-impacting bills with aggregate means and medians included. The mean  $\alpha$  value for all bills is 2.871 (the median value is 2.412). The  $\alpha$  values for deficit-impacting bills are slightly larger (mean value of 3.208 and median value of 3.122).

distributions for the mean of all bills and the mean of spending bills averaged  $-0.509$ . The 95 per cent Bayesian credible interval ranged from  $-1.057$  to  $-0.068$  and did not contain 0. This analysis, combined with the density plots presented in Figure 2, show that spending bills do an excellent job of delineating liberal and conservative ideologies.

While this indicates that deficit issues are good items to delineate liberal and conservative members during the 111th House, the meaning of “liberal” and “conservative” is still a little muddled. While the party splits are clear, these splits have little to do with the impact of the votes on the deficits. Of the 11 votes considered, a conservative vote – as indicated by the sign of the  $\alpha$  value – is only consistent with a vote to reduce spending or increase revenues in five of the 11 votes. The Republican Party’s

opposition to these measures seems to have much more to do with their opposition to Obama and Democratic objectives than with concern over deficit-spending. There is no evidence that either Republicans or Democrats are consistently voting to limit deficit spending.

### *Conclusion*

In this manuscript, we have argued that consistency while voting on key issues will be significantly related to shared control of the government. Specifically, votes on deficit items will not accurately capture liberal/conservative differences when the government is under shared control – despite the prominence of economic issues in American politics and the non-zero sum nature of deficit politics. Conversely, we have argued that votes on deficit items will accurately expose ideological differences during periods where one party controls both branches of Congress and the presidency. The results from our analysis are supportive of these claims. Unified party control should lead to greater accountability on the part of voters. As such, the majority has no incentive to compromise with their minority party colleagues. This increases their ability to stay unified on floor votes and protect its brand name. The minority – knowing that the majority is likely to be held accountable for unpopular legislation – will pursue a strategy of forcing the majority to cast difficult votes. The difficult votes will be publicised come election-time in an effort to “rebrand” the majority.

The fact that party differences should be the most visible during unified government has clear implications for the content of the policies being made by legislatures. Party-based motivations give both majority and minority members of the US House less incentive to compromise when a single party controls the levers of government, leading to less moderate policy. When both parties share control of government, members must be more reliant on compromise and moderation to *successfully* confront emerging political problems. However, as scholars have pointed out, the necessity for moderation required by shared power can lead to gridlock and ineffective legislative reactions to various crises (Binder 2003).

These results contribute to the existing literature on shared governance in democratic legislatures. Existing literature demonstrates that shared governance will lead parties to change their agendas, leading to parties being less successful in fulfilling their electoral pledges relative to single-majority party governments. The weak party discipline of the US Congress provides an opportunity to see how varying levels of shared governance affects the cohesiveness of parties. This analysis implies that parties are not only less successful in legislating under shared government; they are also less capable of collectively acting as a unified party. The temptation for individual

members to defect from their party is simply stronger during periods of shared governance.

This research also highlights the need for additional exploration of co-governance in its various forms. Most literature on co-governance currently focuses on power sharing within parliaments. This initial exploration of co-governance within a separation-of-powers framework highlights the other types of co-governance that are possible. Work like Shugart and Carey's (1992) examination of various institutional forms of shared powers between presidents and assemblies implies a future research agenda that considers how co-governance changes parties' strategies and behaviour under various types of power-sharing arrangements.

Despite the strong differences seen in party voting between the 110th and 111th Houses, a few caveats should be raised about the generalisability of our results. First, the analysis relies on data from only four years of policymaking from a single country. While there are clear differences between the shared governance of the 110th Congress and the unified Democratic control of the 111th, it is still unclear if the conclusions drawn from these two Houses are indicative of trends present in policy-making across a longer time period and across other governments. Additional data collection and analysis will be able to further assess the validity of partisan control's impact on issue consistency.

Second, the analysis presented focuses solely on issues that have a significant impact on the federal deficit. Additional work should be done to see if the trends present in deficit votes generalise to other issue areas as well. Fiscal issues are often frequently characterised as unidimensional and variation in the parties' consistency on them likely suggests similar variation on unrelated issues. Moreover, these results are consistent with recent scholarship tracking the increasing propensity of coalition builders to package several different issues into an omnibus bill (Baumgartner et al. 2000; Krutz 2001). These omnibus bills can make supporting the underlying measure more palatable to members who may be inclined to oppose it on unidimensional grounds. Finally, this implies that majority leaders in each chamber likely face a more difficult balancing act in selecting policies to prioritise during periods of divided government.

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## Appendix A. Estimation procedure for IRT model

An IRT model is estimated for all votes in a certain period of interest. The IRT model is estimated using a one-dimensional scale of ideology. We use a two-parameter item response model to estimate the latent variable of ideology ( $\theta$ ). In addition to estimating ideology, a two-parameter item response model estimates  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  coefficients, where  $\alpha$  is the item discrimination parameter and  $\beta$  is the item difficulty parameter.

The data in the estimation model consists of  $n$  legislators voting on  $m$  different roll call votes. For each roll call  $j = 1, \dots, m$ , legislator  $i$  (where  $i = 1, \dots, n$  and  $n$  is the total number of legislators) chooses between voting “yea” or “nay”. Let  $y_{i,j} = 1$  if the  $i$ th legislator votes “yea” on the  $j$ th roll call, and let  $y_{i,j} = 0$  if the  $i$ th legislator votes “nay” on the  $j$ th roll call. If the legislator does not vote, then  $y_{i,j}$  is missing. Because votes are not identified as being “liberal” or “conservative”, the IRT model estimates whether the items are “liberal” or “conservative”. If the  $\alpha$  value for an item is negative, then a liberal legislator would be expected to vote “yea” on the item. If the  $\alpha$  value for an item is positive, then a conservative legislator would be expected to vote “yea” on the item.  $\mathbf{Y}$  is the  $n \times m$  matrix of observed roll call votes, containing  $y_{i,j}$  for all  $i$  and  $j$ . Legislators are assumed to have quadratic utility functions over the  $\mathfrak{N}^1$  policy space, such

that  $U_i(\psi_j) = -\|\theta_i - \psi_j\|^2 + \eta_{i,j}$  and  $U_i(\zeta_j) = -\|\theta_i - \zeta_j\|^2 + v_{i,j}$ , where  $\theta_i \in \mathfrak{R}^1$  is the ideal point of the  $i$ th legislator,  $\eta_{i,j}$  and  $v_{i,j}$  are the errors of utility, and  $\|\cdot\|$  is the Euclidean norm. Let  $y_{i,j}^* = U_i(\zeta_j) - U_i(\psi_j)$ . Through utility maximisation:

$$y_{i,j} = \begin{cases} 1 \Leftrightarrow y_{i,j}^* > 0 \\ 0 \Leftrightarrow y_{i,j}^* \leq 0. \end{cases}$$

This gives the following equation for  $y_{i,j}^*$ , which can be rearranged and substituted to form the second equation (see Clinton et al. 2004),

$$y_{i,j}^* = -\|\theta_i - \zeta_j\|^2 + \|\theta_i - \psi_j\|^2 + v_{i,j} - \eta_{i,j}$$

$$y_{i,j}^* = \alpha'_j x_i - \beta_j + \varepsilon_{i,j}$$

where  $\alpha_j = 2(\zeta_j - \psi_j)$ ,  $\beta_j = \psi'_j \psi_j - \zeta'_j \zeta_j$ , and  $\varepsilon_{i,j} = \eta_{i,j} - v_{i,j}$ . Given binary roll call data, these equations produce a probit model.

The likelihood is,

$$L(\alpha, \beta, \theta | Y) = \prod_{i=1}^n \prod_{j=1}^n \phi(\theta'_j \alpha_j - \beta_j)^{y_{ij}} (1 - \phi(\theta'_j \alpha_j - \beta_j))^{1 - y_{ij}}$$

where  $\alpha$  is an  $m \times 1$  vector of discrimination parameters ( $\alpha_j$  is the discrimination parameter for the  $j$ th roll call),  $\mathbf{B}$  is an  $m \times 1$  vector of discrimination parameters ( $\beta_j$  is the discrimination parameter for the  $j$ th roll call), and  $\theta$  is an  $n \times 1$  vector of ideal points ( $\theta_i$  is the ideal point parameter for the  $i$ th legislator).