

# **Strategic Party Government**

*Why Winning Trumps Ideology*

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## **Worst. Congress. Ever. Why?**

**T**he current US Congress is divided into two competing parties that struggle to govern together. Since 2011, Republican and Democratic Party leaders have worked hard to make party positions clear and avoid embarrassing defeats, but they struggle to actually enact policy measures. As a result, Congress's job approval rating reached 9 percent in 2011, an all-time low, and experts dubbed the 112th Congress (2011–12) “the worst Congress *ever*” (Klein 2012; Ornstein 2011).

Then Congress's performance got even worse. After the 2012 presidential elections returned the same power balance (Democratic president and Senate majority party, Republican House majority party), the players resumed the game. The parties clashed over passing disaster relief after Superstorm Sandy hit the East Coast, and firearm background checks failed in the Senate. In September 2013, the Republicans refused to raise the national debt limit and attempted to withhold all government funding unless the Affordable Care Act, or “Obamacare,” was repealed, leading to a government shutdown and fiscal crisis. By November 2013, the Senate Democrats' frustration at Republican obstruction of judicial and executive nominations culminated in a rare, highly partisan “nuclear option” reform to end filibustering against nominations. Congress passed zero of twelve appropriations bills before the October 1 deadline in both 2013 and 2014, while the 296 laws enacted barely edged the 284 enacted during the 112th Congress—the two lowest totals since World War II. Multiple pundits lamented that the 113th Congress was actually the worst Congress ever.<sup>1</sup>

Behind these criticisms and low job approval ratings is the sense that Congress is now primarily a forum for partisan competition. The majority parties in both chambers devote much of their time to crafting “message”

bills that convey party positions but have little chance of enactment. By itself, this is not new; legislating-as-position-taking is as old as the Capitol itself. But these efforts are combined with a failure to complete basic tasks: developing a bicameral budget, passing appropriations bills, reauthorizing major laws, and maintaining the full faith and credit of the United States by raising the federal debt limit in a timely manner. To the extent Congress did act on these topics, it was frequently after a period of crisis bargaining with actors attempting to make take-it-or-leave-it proposals so they could win without compromise. In other cases, key measures were approved over the objection of most members of the House Republican majority, such as a partial extension of the Bush-era tax cuts (January 2013), the Hurricane Sandy relief bill (January 2013), a reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act (February 2013), and funding for the Homeland Security Department (March 2015). These votes violated the “Hastert Rule,” which dictates that bills should not reach the floor of the House without the support of most of the majority party.

Why is Congress stalemated by partisan disagreements? The conventional answer is that members of Congress (MCs) fundamentally disagree with each other along ideological lines. Republicans are conservative, Democrats are liberal, and even though their primary goal is to improve public policy, there is a decreasing set of policies that members of both parties can support. They represent constituents in increasingly party-aligned districts and states who embrace starkly different aspirations for national policy. While there is some truth to this view, there is a lot that it does not explain.

This book provides a different account of party influence in Congress. Like Lee (2009), we think the “ideological” account overstates the depth of constituency and policy disagreement as a driver of congressional polarization. We view congressional parties as fundamentally diverse, so even in our polarized era, there are real disagreements *within* each party on major policy questions. We also recognize that legislators represent complex constituencies with potentially conflicting policy views, so it is an oversimplification to portray legislators as advocates for a single ideological viewpoint when they are actually trying to satisfy a diverse set of donors, activists, interest groups, party loyalists, and average constituents (Fenno 2008). Despite intraparty diversity and complex constituencies, the *competition* between two parties for *electoral gain* is a driving force behind the partisanship we observe—legislators unite into parties to win elections in an arms race of partisanship. In our assessment, the prevailing

view understates this critical component of competition in the congressional game. In order to avoid losing legislative battles, legislators may unite behind strong party leaders even when they have diverse policy views. They do so in the belief that party activists and voters will reward them for winning these contests, or at least trying to win.

Furthermore, even when legislators generally agree on matters of policy, they have an incentive to manufacture conflicts with the opposing party to diminish its reputation and slow its legislative progress. In several major policy areas, there are potential positive-sum compromises, so if legislators truly sought to maximize policy outcomes, they would gain by passing laws that codify significant areas of agreement while compromising on remaining issues.

As Norman Ornstein wrote, “Look what we have now: a long-term debt disaster with viable bipartisan solutions on the table but ignored or cast aside in Congress; an impasse over the usually perfunctory matter of raising the statutory debt limit placing the United States in jeopardy of its first-ever default; sniping and guerrilla warfare over . . . health-care reform and financial regulation; no serious action or movement on climate change, jobs, or the continuing mortgage crisis; and major trade deals stalled yet again despite bipartisan and presidential support” (2011). On the other hand, the political credit for legislative success is zero-sum, so a party that helps its opposition pass its agenda is contributing to its own electoral disadvantage. We propose an account of congressional parties based on electoral competition to help explain this behavior.

## **1.1 Understanding Legislative Parties**

From the beginning, political scientists have agreed on what congressional parties are *not*. Unlike European legislative parties, they are not consistently “strong,” unified teams that vote as a bloc following the command of a dominating party leader. In the first political science work on Congress, Woodrow Wilson lamented that party organizations had little effect on the behavior of legislators or the policy output of the Congress: “At least there is within Congress no visible, and therefore no controllable party organization. The only bond of cohesion is the caucus, which occasionally whips a party together for cooperative action against the time for casting its vote upon some critical question. There is always a majority and a minority, indeed, but the legislation of a session does not repre-

sent the policy of either” (1885, 80). When Wilson wrote his famous book, both congressional parties held diverse and uncoordinated views on the key issues of the day: tariffs, monetary policy, railroad regulation, and liquor. When party leaders involved themselves in legislating, their greatest challenge was often overcoming the diversity of their own members’ constituencies to achieve a result that advanced their party’s general electoral interests.<sup>2</sup>

Within ten years, however, majority party leaders had become dominating figures in both the House and the Senate. In the House, the majority party suppressed filibustering and centralized control over the floor agenda (Binder 1997; Cox and McCubbins 2005; Koger 2010; Schickler 2001). In the Senate, a clique of Republican leaders provided direction to Senate Republicans, albeit without the immense procedural powers of the House Speaker (Rothman 1966).

By the mid-twentieth century, however, congressional parties were once again decried as too “weak” by scholars echoing Wilson’s call for overt party government by urging electoral and legislative reforms to hold parties responsible for implementing their party platforms (APSA 1950). A coalition of interest groups and legislators sought to weaken the committee system, abolish or limit Senate filibustering, and increase party leaders’ influence over individual members (Rohde 1991; Zelizer 2004).

It would appear that these efforts were successful. By a variety of measures, congressional partisanship has increased dramatically over the last fifty years (Sinclair 2006; Theriault 2008, 2013), giving rise to fears that partisanship makes Congress a less respected and productive institution (Binder 2003; Jones and McDermott 2010). The recent increase in congressional partisanship has given urgency to a classic question: Why does the influence of congressional parties rise and fall over time?

While there is no shortage of empirical research documenting congressional partisanship and identifying possible causes, what we most need is an updated *theory* of congressional partisanship. By a “theory,” we mean a model that starts with clear assumptions about congressional actors, explains their strategies, and predicts their behavior with testable hypotheses. Since we are trying to explain behavior over time and across institutions, a useful theory will be flexible enough to explain how patterns of behavior shift as the political context changes and will help us explain past behavior so that we will understand why party influence has varied over time. It also will provide us with conceptual vocabulary we can use to interpret current events: What do the players want? Why do they behave

as they do? And finally, a good theory will help us predict future behavior and understand the effects of institutional changes.<sup>3</sup>

As we explain below, we believe our model of legislative parties offers several comparative advantages over prior accounts. But this does not mean that we consider prior research on this topic to be *wrong* or fundamentally flawed. Over the last two decades, legislative scholars have been at the forefront of developing and testing *competing* models (e.g., Krehbiel 1991), in which empirical studies are intended to select a “winner” (e.g., Sinclair 1994). This is a “cage match” approach to theoretical development: two (or more) theories go into the data, but only one comes out. This is not our intent, and our work is not organized as such. Instead, a better analogy is that of a “software upgrade.” We seek to build on the theoretical development and empirical insights of previous work on legislative parties. However, just as software may decline in usage if it remains static, a model of legislative parties may fade from use if it is not updated. Like a good software update, we seek to resolve “bugs” in existing theories, incorporate recent theoretical and empirical research, and add new features that we hope our readers find useful.

For example, our model includes familiar explanations for why partisanship varies with legislators’ preferences over time and why a majority party values the ability to keep issues off the chamber agenda. But our account goes further to explain how competition between parties leads to symmetric partisanship, why partisanship varies with party size, how parties select issues for the chamber agenda and ensure their passage (“positive agenda power”), and how and why partisanship in the legislature is tied to voters’ evaluations and election outcomes. Our empirical tests cover a wide range from experimental studies of individual voters to historical patterns of legislative outcomes, partisanship, and elections in both the US House and Senate. While there has been ample empirical research on congressional parties, this work is unique in its effort to trace the connections between electoral politics and governing.

## **1.2 Toward a Theory of Congressional Parties**

For the first eight decades of research on Congress, scholars were mostly interested in describing the activities of congressional parties, measuring their strength, and lamenting their “weakness” relative to European parties. One early effort to explain legislative party strategy was Froman and

Ripley's "Conditions for Party Leadership" (1965), based on analysis of votes and their observation of the House Democrats' whip system during the Eighty-Eighth Congress (1963–64). They found that partisanship varied with leadership involvement, whether the vote was procedural or substantive, visibility, constituency pressure, and the role of state delegations. This work helped explain why partisanship can vary from issue to issue, from vote to vote, during a two-year Congress.

Why, though, does partisanship vary over long periods of time? A classic answer is, "because congressional constituencies vary over time." Cooper and Brady (1981) develop this thesis with a comparison of party organization in the US House at the beginning and middle of the twentieth century. They attribute the declining power of House party leadership over this time span to the increased diversity of congressional districts; over time, the Democrats represented a broader range of economic interests, which made it difficult for the party to unify its members around a coherent economic program.

### *1.2.1 Conditional Party Government*

John Aldrich (1995) and David Rohde (1991) have refined the simple constituency model with their theory of *conditional party government* (CPG; Aldrich and Rohde 1997–98, 2000a, 2000b, 2001; Aldrich et al. 2007; Rohde 2013). Rohde (1991) attributes the recent increase in congressional partisanship to both constituency change *and* internal party innovation. The realignment of conservative Southern whites from the Democratic Party, the full enfranchisement of Southern blacks loyal to the Democratic Party, and the realignment of the Northeast from Republican to Democratic dominance all contributed to making congressional Republicans more conservative and Democrats more liberal. However, Rohde notes that partisanship is also endogenous: pro-party reforms of the 1970s contributed to the resurgence of congressional partisanship in the 1980s.

Stated in general terms, the central claim of the CPG theory is when the two parties are *internally homogenous* (the members of each party tend to agree with each other) and there exists *interparty disagreement* (the two parties tend to disagree on major issues), we should observe three patterns: (a) increased delegation of resources to party leaders, (b) increased use of party leadership powers, and (c) increased influence of parties on policy outcomes. In the US House of Representatives (the primary focus of this work), increased party influence should result in pat-



terns of policy outcomes that favor the majority party. When these conditions are met on a particular issue, we should expect to see party leaders actively striving to win. Over time, parties will grow stronger during eras when we observe internal homogeneity and interparty disagreement.

The CPG framework does not explicitly predict any relationship between legislative parties and electoral outcomes. Legislators' preferences will be influenced by the way in which they are recruited for office, are selected as the candidate of a party, and win their general election (Aldrich et al. 2007), but the focus of the theory is on the *legislative* role of party organizations and their leaders. In CPG, the party is a machine that focuses on *altering* policy outcomes on a subset of issues that divide the two parties from each other and unite them internally.

In response, Krehbiel (1993) questions whether the efforts of parties and their leaders have a significant net effect on policy outcomes. Party labels may be correlated with members' preferences in this view, but parties do not alter legislative behavior. This challenge provoked a torrent of research demonstrating significant "party effects" in voting, agenda setting, and outcomes.<sup>4</sup> Collectively, this work suggests that parties can influence legislators' votes, but party leaders minimize the extent to which members vote against their own electoral interests. Instead, House majority leaders carefully structure debates to minimize difficult choices between collective party interests and the induced preferences of party members. When difficult votes are inescapable, majority party leaders convert just enough votes to carry the day. Party leaders are thus most active when the majority party is internally divided and extra effort is necessary to overcome intraparty disagreement.

The evidence of "party effects," however, amplified the need for a more explicit theory of legislative parties, leading to Krehbiel's (1999) second critique of the CPG model. If members already agree on a given issue, Krehbiel asks, what is the marginal influence of party effort? If party members disagree on a policy issue, how do they gain by empowering a party leader to induce some of them to vote against their own personal views and electoral interests? He argues, "When the condition for CPG is met, behavior of partisans and nonpartisans is observationally equivalent" (35). Krehbiel concludes by calling for a simple, clearly stated model of legislative parties. Hill (2012, 919) echoes this request, noting that "the theory surrounding [CPG] has not been systematically articulated in the ways that science conventionally expects for a general theory," which results in confusion about exactly what the CPG model is and is not (921).

Furthermore, there is simply a great deal of party behavior that is outside the scope of the CPG model. Modern party leaders are highly involved in the reelection efforts of their members by raising funds and helping them develop their legislative resumé. Party leaders often schedule legislation that has great political value but little chance of surviving the legislative process—for example, the Republicans’ attempts in 2011, 2013, and 2015 to overturn the Democratic health reform law of 2010. Party leaders often invest great effort in issues that divide their parties—for example, civil rights legislation in the mid-twentieth century (Caro 2002; Mann 1996), which is often cited as a salient example of an issue that parties should keep off the chamber agenda and party leaders should abstain from. And Smith (2007) stresses that CPG does not incorporate the relative size of the two parties into its calculus and that any theory of legislative parties originating in the US Congress should be tested on *both* the House and the Senate.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the temporal sequence of the recent partisan era suggests that congressional polarization precedes any change in mass partisanship. Congressional partisanship began to increase after 1970, long before voters became more loyal to their parties (Bartels 2000; Hetherington 2001; see also chapter 6). Collectively, these questions suggest that an expanded model of legislative parties could be quite useful for explaining the behavior of contemporary parties.

### *1.2.2 Legislative Cartels and Agenda Control*

A second model of legislative parties is the cartel model (Cox and McCubbins 2005, 2007). In the cartel model, legislators form teams with the ultimate goal of promoting their shared reelection. Toward this end, they empower leaders to maximize the collective reputation, or “brand,” of their party. One important tactic of party leaders is to avoid legislation that splits their party coalition; presumably, such legislation will detract from the party brand when the party gets “rolled” by a subset of their party and the bulk of the opposing party. To avoid being “rolled,” parties seek to dominate the procedural power of their chamber by dictating the rules, choosing the leaders, and setting the agenda. If the majority party succeeds in maintaining procedural control of the chamber, it can suppress legislation that would divide the majority party.<sup>6</sup>

Our *strategic party government* (SPG) model shares several of the basic claims of the cartel model: the focus on electoral success, collective delegation to leaders to maximize electoral success, concern for the party image, and a key role for parties in the agenda setting process. Our focus

is much more expansive, however. We consider other tactics that party leaders might use to advance their parties' interests and how their efforts to promote (or oppose) a positive agenda can create tensions between the collective interests of political parties and the individual interests of their members. In particular, we emphasize the arms race competition between the strategies of the majority and minority parties, while in the cartel model the minority party plays a passive role. And since our account makes the primacy of electoral interests clear, we provide an explanation for why a majority party with agenda control would allow itself to be rolled: the majority party will "release" blocked proposals when doing so advances its public reputation or coalition-building strategy. Last, while the cartel model has been extensively tested in the legislative realm, we expand our empirical scope to test for relationships between legislative behavior and election results.

### *1.2.3 Vote Buying*

A third model of legislative parties focuses on a single but critical stage of the legislative process: winning key votes. Early models were not explicitly focused on party leadership (Groseclose and Snyder 1996; Snyder 1991), but more recent work has provided insight on the logic of partisan voting. Patty (2008) provides an insightful model in which legislators care about both policy outcomes and their public positions, and each party chooses a level of party pressure to conform to the party's position.

### *1.2.4 The Case for a New Model*

This review of the main strands of research on legislative parties highlights the need for a model of parties that is comprehensive in scope, spanning both elections and legislative behavior. Any such model should include an explicit set of propositions about who the main actors are, their goals, the structure of the game they are playing, and the strategies they pursue.

As the next section (and chapter 2) explains, we seek to provide such a theory. Our approach preserves the core question of CPG: why does congressional partisanship vary? And we retain its key insight: legislative partisanship is linked to the similarity of the constituencies of each party's members. To this we add a central role for strategic competition as an explanation for partisanship.

One key break with recent research is our focus on the electoral pur-

pose of legislative parties. While individual legislators may have complex goals, including career ambition and making good public policy, we assume that parties focus on providing the necessary condition for their members' primary individual goal: reelection. Reelection requires legislators to satisfy a diverse set of constituencies and requires legislative parties to maintain a brand name and to satisfy and expand the segments of the national party coalition.

Consequently, we avoid the use of a very common set of assumptions, which we call the "legislative spatial model." Following Duncan Black (1948), there has been a set of formal models assuming that legislators are policy seekers. They seek to minimize the difference between their ideal policy and the policy choice resulting from the legislative game. While early social choice studies questioned whether such legislators could make any stable decisions using majority rule when there are multiple issues at stake (Arrow 1950; McKelvey 1976; Plott 1967), subsequent works assumed a set of rules that limited debate to a single issue at a time and thus stable outcomes (Krehbiel 1998; Shepsle 1979).

We share Frances Lee's (2009) concern that legislative scholars have overemphasized the role of ideology in legislative decision making and Barbara Sinclair's (2002a) concern that the assumptions of the spatial model may cloud our understanding of what parties do and how they influence the legislative process. The legislative spatial model does not assume that legislators are disinterested in reelection but rather that any electoral interests are folded into the selection of an "induced" ideal point. However, the legislative spatial model distorts MCs' electoral incentives in two ways. First, it ignores the complexity of legislators' constituencies. Richard Fenno (1978) famously noted that legislators serve multiple constituencies of varying importance: personal, primary, reelection, and geographic (later he added "campaign contributors" as a distinct constituency; Fenno 2000). On top of this, legislators may have their own views that influence their actions and their estimations of constituent views (Miller and Stokes 1963). Rather than representing a single "ideal point," legislators must balance the views of multiple constituencies (Arnold 1990) and may seek help from party leaders and institutional rules to mitigate the tensions between competing constituencies.

Second, legislators do not *act* as if their rewards are tied to policy outcomes. As Mayhew (1974) suggests, a great deal of their behavior—including their votes—can be described as *position taking*. For MCs, the vote itself is the important thing, while the outcome is often simply a by-product of legislators choosing the position that best satisfies their mul-

multiple constituencies. Legislative parties may be more attentive to winning votes, but even so, they are motivated not by policy outcomes per se but by the effect of collective positions and outcomes on their reputations, their coalitions, and their individual members. Consequently, parties often invest effort in legislation that fails to alter public policy, such as Democrats' efforts as the Senate minority party to extend funding of Planned Parenthood in 2015. These attempts were doomed to fail, so in the legislative spatial model, they are a waste of time and effort. In the real world, the Democratic attempts served the political purpose of highlighting opposition among Republican senators in precarious states. Model assumptions should reflect this kind of political reality.

Similarly, we minimize our use of "ideology" scores such as NOMINATE. These scores are typically generated using the assumptions of the legislative spatial model and item response theory to estimate each legislator's ideal policy preference. While the scholars who create these scores often acknowledge the central role that political parties and constituencies play in shaping and influencing these "preferences," in practice, congressional scholars often treat them as if they measure something independent of—or prior to—party or electoral factors. Furthermore, if the estimated preferences are calculated without any independent information about the proposals under consideration, they will understate the number of issue dimensions (Londregan 2000) and can overstate the influence of "preferences" in cases of clear party influence. If all the members of each party vote together and in opposition to the other party but alternate between supporting liberal and conservative measures, item response models that are agnostic about the content of proposals will misclassify this behavior as ideological—as perfectly explained by policy preferences—rather than the strategic partisanship it actually is.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, we focus our analysis on direct measures of legislative behavior: outcomes and party unity in roll call voting. The classic party unity measure captures the percentage of votes on which a legislator sides with his or her party when most of his or her party votes against most of the other party, so it is a descriptive statistic.

### **1.3 Strategic Party Government: An Overview**

Our story begins with a simple claim: the primary purpose of a congressional party is to win elections. However, this simple goal requires complex trade-offs between the interests of the collective party and those of

individual members. Parties base their strategies on the preferences of their own members but also on the strength of the opposing party. This framework provides a rich set of propositions that we investigate in this book.

### *1.3.1 Just Win, Baby: Legislative Parties as Election-Maximizing Cartels*

We assume that parties try to maximize their share of the seats in each chamber of Congress. This does not imply that individual *legislators* are solely motivated by election. Indeed, it is likely that most modern politicians seek (re)election so they can advance their own notions of good public policy or to pursue their career interests. We contend, however, that party organizations do not cater to all of their members' personal goals. Instead, parties and their leaders focus on the "lowest common denominator" of providing the necessary condition for a successful legislative career—a job.<sup>8</sup> The activities of parties and their leaders can be classified into three categories: helping members as individuals, maintaining party coalitions, and promoting a positive collective image.

**HELPING PARTY MEMBERS GET ELECTED** Legislators govern together, but they campaign alone. Parties, however, can help individual members develop a marketable legislative resume and raise the funds to wage vigorous campaigns. First, legislators often desire some sort of accomplishment for which they can claim credit with their constituents—for example passing their own bills, funding a local pork project, or obtaining jobs and government benefits for individual citizens (Lazarus et al. 2012; Lazarus and Reilly 2010; Mayhew 1974b). Party leaders may possess enough influence in the legislative process to help their members pass their pet bills or get their priorities incorporated into larger bills, provided these bills do not impose excessive costs on other party members (Crespin and Finocchiaro 2008; Hasecke and Mycoff 2007; Lazarus 2009).

Second, parties may help members obtain committee assignments that confer extra influence on policies that are important to their constituents or that help members raise campaign funds. For most of congressional history, parties have dominated committee assignments in both chambers. Current research suggests that party leaders use committee assignments as a reward for party loyalty, as a mechanism for setting the chamber agenda, and as a way to help party members obtain reelection (Coker and Crain 1994; Cox and McCubbins 1993, ch. 7; Frisch and Kelly 2006; Heber-

lig 2003; Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991; Leighton and Lopez 2002; Rohde 1991, 77–79; Rohde and Shepsle 1973; Smith and Ray 1983).

Third, parties can help individual legislators raise campaign funds. In the modern era, this aid takes several forms. Party leaders appear at fundraisers for members and challengers of their party, and they raise and redistribute funds through their own “leadership” political action committees. Each congressional party has a formal campaign “committee” that coordinates electoral effort, including raising and redistributing campaign funds. These campaign committees also provide MCs with telephones, donor lists, and training to help them raise their own funds. Recently, leaders have also begun to identify their weakest incumbents so that donors who want to help the party retain seats know to whom they should give funds.

Fourth, individual legislators prefer a voting record they can defend to their constituents against the attacks of critical opponents. Ideally, this means that each legislator casts votes that are consistent with the preferences of his or her primary and general constituency. In practice, voting is an inherently risky activity because legislators are often uncertain about the policy consequences of their actions. Thus they seek to avoid specific votes that could be fodder for an opponent’s campaign. In addition, they seek to avoid overall voting records that are inconsistent with their constituents’ views (e.g., a high party unity score in a district that is moderate or leaning to the opposing party).

These efforts are consistent with the SPG model’s claim that the primary purpose of parties is to promote the reelection of their members. Consequently, legislators have an incentive to select leaders who will be effective at providing resources, responsive to requests for committee assignments and assistance on their personal legislative goals, and providers of campaign aid. Regardless of their policy cohesion, members of a party have an incentive to delegate power to leaders so that their leaders can help members build their individual reputations.

**MAINTAINING A PARTY COALITION** Congressional parties and their leaders may also strive to sustain and increase their party’s coalition. American political parties are best understood as coalitions of interest groups and activists whose appeal varies widely across demographic groups. Congressional parties may advance proposals and hold roll call votes to keep groups allied with their party satisfied and to appeal to potential new members of their party coalition (Karol 2009).<sup>9</sup> For example, in Septem-

ber 2010, the US Senate held a cloture vote on a defense authorization bill to limit the floor debate to three issues critical to Democratic constituencies: a repeal of the military's "Don't Ask Don't Tell" policy for homosexuals, a proposal to allow some undocumented aliens who came to the country as children to become permanent residents, and a bid to streamline the Senate's process for approving judicial nominations. The Senate Democrats lost this vote 56–43, but the failed effort helped demonstrate the majority party's interest in these issues (Donnelly 2010).

For the sake of coalition management, party leaders may work to promote legislative proposals that divide their congressional members. In doing so, most of the members of a party may vote against a proposal that passes—the technical definition of a "roll"—but their party coalition may nonetheless be strengthened. This occurs when the gains from assuaging affiliated groups or bringing in new allies outweigh the cost in lost seats, party switches, or diminished support from offended party backers. For example, during the 1950s and 1960s, Democratic Party leaders were heavily involved in organizing the passage of civil rights legislation that starkly divided the Democratic coalition (Caro 2002; Mann 1996; Valeo 1999). Bawn (1998) provides a formal model explaining why party leaders may side with intense minorities within a legislative party, while Scott James (2000) provides historical examples of how party leaders engineered the passage of regulatory legislation that appealed to critical electoral groups rather than their own party members. In each case, intraparty consensus was *not* a necessary condition for the involvement of congressional party leaders; instead, the critical factor was the collective electoral interest of the party.

**ADVANCING COLLECTIVE PARTY REPUTATION** Parties and their leaders have a second goal: promoting the collective image of the party. For years, public opinion scholars have argued that citizens have general ideas and memories about parties per se (e.g., Box-Steffensmeier and Smith 1996; Campbell et al. 1960; Erikson et al. 2002; but see Green et al. 2002) that influence their party affiliations and voting behavior (Cox and McCubbins 1993). The "brand names" of parties are based on cumulative and constantly updating memories, so they are both somewhat stable *and* responsive to politicians' actions (Erikson et al. 2002; Grynviski 2010; Pope and Woon 2009; Snyder and Ting 2002; Woon and Pope 2008).

Legislative parties seek to manipulate their collective image. One function of parties—today embodied in their "conference" leadership—is ar-



ticulating a unified media strategy. That is, party leaders help select and disseminate the talking points they want members to use to explain party behavior, and leaders often act as spokespersons for their parties.

A second tactic is enacting legislation that enhances the party brand. This includes landmark legislation like the creation of Medicare in 1965 that a party can hold up as a historic achievement. Of course, the linkage between major bills and party reputation also implies that credit-claiming is part of the legislative process; parties compete for their share of the credit for passing popular legislation, or they seek to make it clear which party is responsible for controversial legislation like the 1993 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act, the 2003 Medicare Modernization Act, or the 2010 Affordable Care Act. Also, parties must pass “maintenance” bills like appropriations bills and budget legislation, as well as those that reauthorize farm and highway programs, raise the debt limit, and pay for military deployments and other emergencies. Failure to do so could make a party seem incompetent (Adler and Wilkerson 2013). Responsibility for addressing major issues and passing maintenance bills falls primarily on the majority party, so the majority party probably feels greater urgency to enact legislation to satisfy public expectations.

Third, each party may seek to highlight clear issue contrasts that can be used in the next campaign. By bringing up bills and offering amendments that separate the parties on major issues, party leaders may seek to portray the opposing party as (for example) profligate spenders, antide-fense weaklings, tax increasers, corrupt scoundrels, or generally resistant to popular majorities on key issues. The roll call votes on these “message” issues may provide ammunition for challengers against incumbents of the opposing party and may provide themes for incumbents to use in their own campaigns.

For some issues, the predictions of the CPG framework are equivalent to those of SPG’s electoral reputation-based model. If a party conference is united behind a proposal that will improve the party’s reputation, then both theories would predict that party leaders will invest any necessary effort to ensure its passage. But they also diverge to the extent that party leaders prioritize issues that divide their membership to advance the collective interests of the party or suppress proposals that are supported by most of their membership but detract from the electoral interests of the broader political party. In order to achieve policy success and create partisan contrasts, party leaders must often ask their members to cooperate and to vote as a team. This creates a tension that is a key feature of con-

gressional parties: the tension between diverse individual interests and the incentives to cooperate as a team.

### *1.3.2 Madison's Joke: Local Interests, Collective Action*

It is well known that the authors of the US Constitution did not expect durable political parties to persist in the republic they designed (Hofstadter 1969). Nonetheless, parties soon developed and, under various names, have persisted to the present day. Politicians in the new republic soon found that their new institutions essentially required parties to function well but found that it was difficult to be both a local representative *and* a loyal team player.

The classic explanation for why America has almost always had two major parties is Duverger's law: if we elect representatives in single-member districts by plurality vote, a two-party system is likely to emerge, as additional parties will be unable to compete electorally (Duverger 1951). In the American case, parties solidified as the desire to coordinate on candidates for president (McCormick 1982) and Speaker of the House (Jenkins and Nokken 2000; Jenkins and Stewart 2012) led to the development of national party organizations. And within Congress, parties developed and persisted to increase efficiency and avoid chaos (Aldrich 2011).

However, American political culture has long undermined legislative party cohesion. In Federalist 10, James Madison predicts that the new nation would be so politically diverse that no single, passionate segment of society could command a majority in Congress. For example, modern American society is cleaved and subdivided by class, race, religion, gender, ideology, profession, state, sexual preference, ideology, and age.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the geographic segmentation of America into states and districts permits the demographic composition of districts to vary wildly, so the dominant faction in one district may be near-absent in another district. States and districts may also vary by primary industry or urban-rural composition, and they may have their own unique political history and culture. The consequence of this political diversity, Madison hopes, is that no nefarious schemes to benefit a particular group at the expense of another group or the public interest could succeed. No one faction would have the numbers to accomplish this feat, *and any coalition of factions would struggle to implement its schemes in the public eye.*

The inherent diversity of American society makes it challenging for "strong" parties to survive. While it is possible for legislative parties to

unite on some issues without coercion, complete voting cohesion on every question in the European style would require a typical legislator to side with his party over his local constituency some of the time. In practice, legislative parties do sometimes call on their members to support the “team” rather than follow their consciences or vote with their constituents’ preferences, but the members may pay a price for their loyalty at the ballot box.

This is *Madison’s joke*. As a nation, we need political parties to help choose our leaders, to make Congress work effectively, and to hold a governing faction jointly responsible for collective decisions. As citizens scattered across a diverse quilt of states and districts, however, we may be influenced by party labels when we vote, but we also consider legislators’ individual votes, accomplishments, promises, and behavior. Consequently, our legislators must often balance the benefits of collective action with the costs of taking positions that are unpopular with their constituents. Our model of congressional parties is grounded in this tension between collective action and individual accountability.

### 1.3.3 *The Strategic Balancing Act*

So far, we have shown that a party is an organization striving to retain and win seats while minimizing the number of unpopular votes its members have to cast. The members and leaders of a party decide how much they wish to cooperate as a party. A crucial element of this choice is *interparty competition*. Each party, after all, is striving for *relative* advantage: a better reputation, more pork projects, more policy achievements, a better issue agenda to campaign on, and more votes for its positions *than the opposing side*. As each party balances the costs and benefits of party influence, it makes sense for a party to look across the aisle and try to anticipate the strategies of the opposing party so it can make their best response.

In the next chapter, we explain why competition induces partially symmetric strategies: parties tend to adopt similar (but not identical) strategies over time in an arms race competition. Just as a nation allocates resources to military competition against a peer competitor while saving the rest for domestic consumption, parties strive to be strong enough to win the fights they can win while avoiding the unnecessary electoral costs of excess partisanship. This is why congressional parties can be quite influential even when their members do not vote in perfect unison on every issue.

### 1.3.4 Testing the Theory

By laying a broad foundation for our theory of legislative parties, we are able to incorporate the results of the recent torrent of research on parties into a cohesive framework. The SPG model also makes several unique predictions, which we test in the chapters to come.

In the electoral sphere, we expect that, at the margin, voters will punish politicians who are excessively partisan. This is easiest to observe in the presidential elections, where a candidate promises to be “a uniter, not a divider” (George W. Bush) or “change the tone in Washington” (Barack Obama) despite the long odds against bipartisanship in the current era. We test this claim in chapters 3 and 4. This would also help explain why quality challengers are more likely to emerge against incumbents with a partisan voting record (Carson 2005). We also expect that party leaders will allocate campaign funds and fundraising assistance to help marginal incumbents and the challengers who are closest to victory (Jacobson 2008). Finally, in chapter 5 we show that, collectively, parties *lose* seats as their partisanship increases but *gain* seats as their success rate increases.

In the legislative arena, we expect (as noted above) that parties will strive to help members develop their individual résumés by assigning them to favorable committees as well as helping them to pass their own bills and obtain funds and benefits targeted at their districts. We also expect that the majority party will attempt to bring up and pass “signature” legislation that enhances its reputation, and both parties will attempt to force roll call votes on issues that pit the opposing party against the preferences of most voters (or of critical voting blocs). One example of this is “blame-game politics,” in which Congress sends bills to a president of the opposing party to force a very public conflict on an issue (Gilmour 1995; Groseclose and McCarty 2001).

On critical votes that pit parties against each other, we expect the majority party to allow members to defect as long as it has enough votes to win (King and Zeckhauser 2003). At the same time, the minority party is likely to encourage its members to vote against the majority party if it has a chance to win the vote—thereby embarrassing the majority party—or if the conflicted majority party members would have to pay a greater electoral penalty for backing their party than the conflicted members of the minority party would. For this reason, we expect to see parties mirroring each other’s voting cohesion on individual votes and over time. As we highlight in chapters 6 and 7, the majority party’s vote counting is linked

to the relative size of the majority and minority parties: larger majorities can afford to be less cohesive because they can afford more defections without risking defeat (see also Patty 2008).

Unlike the CPG model, the SPG model specifies when we might observe a strong party even though its members are ideologically heterogeneous: competition with the opposing party can induce party members to overcome their differences. We also expect that majority parties may invest great effort to pass legislation on issues that divide the majority caucus if doing so is in the interest of their party's reputation or would aid in party coalition building. Furthermore, the SPG model incorporates several features of congressional parties that CPG theory does not explicitly explain, such as the dynamics of close votes, the influence of party size, and the efforts of party leaders to promote the public image of their parties and to help their members win elections. Finally, like cartel theory, SPG explains the importance of procedural partisanship as both parties seek to promote their "message" issues and shield their members from votes that force tough choices.

#### **1.4 Plan of the Book**

We begin our account of congressional parties in earnest in the next chapter, which explains our theory of strategic party government with greater precision. The rest of the book is devoted to testing our theory's assumptions and predictions. In chapter 3 we present the results of an experiment that tests the assumption that voters disapprove of partisanship per se and finds that citizens in the study disapprove of partisan behavior but not ideological extremism. Chapter 4 extends this question to the results of congressional elections from 1952 to 2004; we find that individual legislators pay an electoral penalty for voting with their parties.

Chapter 5 conducts a macrolevel study of congressional elections from 1789 to 2006. At the aggregate level, we find that parties pay an electoral price for their party unity. However, legislative victories are an electoral boon, which explains why parties seek to win important votes with a minimum level of party unity. Moreover, the US Senate provides a valuable natural experiment to demonstrate that these patterns are driven by campaigns and voters. The US Constitution initially allowed state legislatures to choose the members of the US Senate, but starting in 1914, the Seventeenth Amendment to the Constitution formally required that sen-

ators be directly elected by the voters of their states. Before 1914, we observe very little relationship between party unity and election outcomes (as measured by the share of the chamber controlled by each party). After 1914—and especially after 1930—this pattern changes dramatically so that the negative relationship between party unity and seat share is stronger in the Senate than the House.

Chapter 6 begins the institutional side of our analysis by analyzing macrolevel patterns of partisan voting in the House and Senate from 1789 to 2006. We test the central claims of our theory: in both chambers of Congress, parties are less unified as they grow in size and parties respond to each other's partisanship. The results are consistent with our expectations. Additionally, we find that the ideological cohesion of the parties has a limited role in explaining party unity. This chapter then goes on to apply this framework to the development of congressional parties over the last fifty years.

Chapter 7 begins by explaining the whip system in Congress, using the 2005 passage of the Central American Free Trade Act as a case study. We then apply the strategic party framework to individual roll call votes in Congress. Not surprisingly, we find that party cohesion in voting is directly linked to party success: parties that vote together are more likely to win. We also find that party influence is symmetric across votes; when one party bands together on an issue, the opposing party is likely to unite as well.

Chapter 8 concludes the book with a discussion of today's "polarized" Congress. Our framework provides a fresh interpretation of modern party politics. A key source of the polarization we observe in the modern Congress is interparty competition for power. Regardless of the extent to which party members agree with one another, each modern congressional party is polarized because the opposing party does an increasingly good job of presenting a united front. Anyone hoping to "cure" congressional polarization should consider the role of competition as an engine of polarization.