Party Size and Constituency Representation in the 1890s: A Research Note

Scott R. Meinke
Bucknell University
Department of Political Science

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In earlier work, I argue that party size affects individual members' voting calculations and, using evidence from the 1860s, I evaluate the hypothesis that party voting not only declines but also becomes more strongly linked to constituency factors as relative party size increases (Meinke 2012). The Civil War case reveals that the jump in party size coincides with (1) a decrease in party voting among individual continuing members, (2) a strengthening association between some constituency factors and party voting, and (3) patterns of decline in individual party voting that are explained in part by constituency measures.

The 1861 shift is a singular case in congressional history, resulting as it did from a drastic exogenous shock. Other moments of sharp change in relative party size are less tidy cases but nonetheless provide an opportunity to examine member responses to party and constituency before and after large party size shifts. Of these significant, electorally produced shifts in party size, the Democratic landslide of 1890 (52nd Congress) is one of the largest. To supplement my findings from the Civil War era, I examine the relationship between constituency interest and partisanship in the 1890s in this research note.

The 1890 elections took place in the midst of an era of very high partisanship in the electorate, relatively strong partisanship in Congress (Strahan 2007, 88-89), and clear party divisions over key economic issues (Williams 1978, ch. 1). The conditions for strong party government in the House were high, by most accounts, in the late 1880s and early 1890s (Aldrich, Berger, and Rohde 2002; Smith and Gamm 2009; but see Schickler 2001, 33-34 for caveats). Meanwhile, the 1890 elections ended a relatively long era of near-parity between Republicans and Democrats in House majority control and party size. Between 1865 and 1890, Democrats controlled the House in six Congresses and the Republicans held the majority in seven (Remini 2006, 242). Despite some Republican gains in the 1886 midterm elections, the Democratic administration maintained considerable public support

(Williams 1978, 8-9), and Democrats remained in control of the House in the unremarkable 50th Congress (Remini 2006, 243). After 1888 brought the Republicans a presidential victory and control of the 51st House, plans to move major GOP legislation were stymied by Democratic obstruction tactics.

What happened next in the 51st House is familiar to political scientists—Thomas Reed (R-MA) broke the House deadlock in dramatic fashion. In early 1890, Reed circumvented the "disappearing quorum," exercised the power of recognition to squash dilatory attempts, and established leadership control (via Rules) over the legislative agenda (Remini 2006, 247-250; Riker 1986, 129-134; Schickler 2001, 32-43; Williams 1978, 20-25). The confluence of sharp party differences, very narrow majority margins, and the strategic, entrepreneurial leadership of Speaker Reed (Strahan 2007, 110) brought about a set of rules that allowed for active majoritarian lawmaking. With Reed rules in effect, the Republicans passed a major tariff bill, the Lodge federal elections bill, the Sherman Antitrust Act, a compromise currency bill, and the Dependent Pensions Act, among others (Morgan 1969, Valelly 2007, Williams 1978).

[Figure 1 here]

It was a testament to the effectiveness of Reed's strategy that the 51st House passed so much consequential legislation[1] with such a thin majority (see Figure 1). Despite this remarkable legislative success, the congressional Republicans faced an electoral nadir in the 1890 elections, losing nearly half of their numbers as voters elected a 52nd House with 238 Democrats and only 86 Republicans. ("NINETY LONE REPUBLICANS: The Fifty-

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[1] Many of the House's significant actions were ultimately signed into law (e.g., the Sherman Anti-Trust Act); others died in the Senate (e.g., the federal elections bill). The 1890 session would ultimately produce more top-500 statutes than any other year between 1877 and 1910 (Clinton and Lapinski 2007).

Second Congress Nearly All Democratic" dramatized the *New York Times*.[2]) Formerly

Republican seats in the House became occupied territory: Democrats' House ranks swelled

to such an extent that 75 Democrats took seats on the Republican side of the aisle (Remini

2006, 254). The Democrats' huge gains followed from a successful campaign against the

perceived excesses of the Republican "Billion Dollar Congress," a campaign that linked

tariff legislation to price inflation (Morgan 1969, 354) and Reed rules and the elections bill

to fears of "big government" (Strahan 2007, 120). Historians also note the role of

subnational politics in the anti-Republican, antigovernment tide (Morgan 1969, 355;

Williams 1978, 46).

The Democratic 52nd House would not feature the same entrepreneurial leadership

and strict majoritarian rule as the Republican 51st. The dominant issues were similar—

tariffs, currency, etc.—but the Democrats would have only limited success in undoing

Republican policies in the 52nd (1891-93) and later in the still-strongly-Democratic 53rd

(1893-95). Democrats repealed Reed's rules in 1892 and selected a weak speaker (Schickler

2001, 43-45), and party voting levels fell (Brady, Cooper, and Hurley 1979; Cooper and

Young 2002; see Figure 2). Under these conditions, the very large majority made little

legislative progress (Remini 2006, 254). As the economy entered into crisis, Democrats

struggled with currency and tariff legislation in the 53rd Congress (Morgan 1969, ch. 11),

ultimately reinstating some Reed rules to circumvent Republican mischief (Schickler 2001,

46-47; Smith and Gamm 2009, 149).

[Figure 2 here]

In their broad outlines, these four Congresses appear to highlight the relevance of

party size in leadership strength and partisan behavior. Though the majority-control

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[2] *New York Times*, 6 Nov. 1890. The *Times* (prematurely) celebrated the defeat of key GOP figures, including William McKinley and Joseph Cannon: "Partisans who enjoy the defeat of obnoxious persons will rejoice at the retirement of the vulgar Cannon of Illinois."

switch in 1891 complicates our observation of change across these Congresses, we can see

nonetheless that strong party government conditions (cohesion and polarization) combined

with near-parity in party size to set the stage for highly partisan leadership and rank-and-

file behavior by 1890. Relative party size changed dramatically in 1891 even as cohesion

and polarization declined only modestly (Smith and Gamm 2009), with apparent results for

both leadership strength and member behavior.

Analysis

I examine the Democratic party in the 50th (1887-1889) through 53rd (1893-1895)

Congresses, testing the expectation that *members from districts with weaker patterns of*

Democratic constituency support will exhibit greater declines in party support in association

with the shift in relative party size. I construct similar models of Democratic party voting

and of change in party voting for each of the four Congresses. The variables in the models

parallel the Civil War analysis[3] except for the regional variable, which takes the form of an

indicator for the south in these models to account for the important regional divisions

among late 19th century Democrats. I assume in this analysis that party size is relevant to

both majority and minority parties, with incentive for party voting stronger in both small

majorities and large minorities.[4]

Party Voting. Democrats in this unstable and partisan period show some continuity and

some change in the patterns that explain individual unity levels. In contrast to the Civil

War-era analysis, the results for the analysis of Democratic party unity show that district

manufacturing levels remain a statistically significant predictor of party voting across all

four of these Congresses (Table 1). Democrats from districts with higher levels of

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[3] Data sources are the same except for census data, which was coded by the author from Parsons, Dubin, and Parsons (1990).

[4] The switch from the 51st to 52nd Congress took House Democrats from a narrow minority to a majority that accounted for about 70% of the chamber.

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manufacturing activity—an indicator of more Republican-oriented constituencies—show lower levels of party unity in each of these four Congresses when other factors are controlled. The substantive impact of this variable varies across Congresses, however. In the closely competitive 51st Congress, an increase of one standard deviation in per capita manufacturing leads to an average decrease of 2.12 points in a member's party voting score. By comparison, in the Democratically dominated 52nd Congress, a one-standard-deviation increase in manufacturing levels yields an average decrease of 5.08 points in party voting.

[Table 1 here]

The other variables show more inconsistent effects across these four Congresses. District partisanship (presidential vote) has a modest positive effect on Democratic loyalty in the relatively competitive 50th Congress, but that variable fails to approach significance in any of the other Congresses, including the very competitive 51st and the overwhelmingly Democratic 52nd. Interestingly, regional divisions emerge after the 1890 landslide, likely because the huge expansion in the party's size was almost entirely based on districts outside of the South. Freshmen in the 52nd—a group that accounted for nearly half of the caucus—were similarly less loyal.

[Figure 3 here]

Party Voting Change. Figure 3 depicts continuing members' shift in party support in 1891 (52nd). The sharp individual-level change in the figure parallels the change in the post-secession 37th House. The results in Table 2 demonstrate that these declines in individual party support as Democratic party size jumped in 1891 were systematic and related in part to constituency signals. As in the Civil War models, the dependent variable is continuing

[Table 2 here]

Democratic members' change in party unity from t-1 to t. In the Democrat-dominated 52nd Congress, continuing members' change in party support is negatively predicted by the

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district manufacturing variable, in contrast to the party-competitive 51st, where constituency measures actually positively predict term-to-term change. In the 52nd, Democrats with higher per-capita district manufacturing activity—again, a trait associated with Republican interests—saw significantly bigger declines in party loyalty from the 51st (Model 2). Meanwhile, continuing Democrats from the south increased their party support. In the more competitive 53rd Congress, continuing Democrats from high manufacturing districts showed greater increases in party loyalty relative to their levels in the 52nd (Model 3). Looking at individual behavior during this volatile period, we can see that continuing members realigned their party support more closely with district signals when the party's share of the House increased sharply.

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Table 1. Party Unity of House Democrats, 50th-53rd Congresses

|	Model 1 50th	Model 2 51st	Model 3 52nd	Model 4 53rd
Manufacturing/ capita	-.061*** (.016)	-.035*** (.009)	-.064*** (.011)	-.041*** (.007)
South	2.085 (2.033)	1.153 (1.335)	10.241*** (1.635)	1.990* (1.018)
Freshman	1.421 (1.697)	1.235 (1.108)	-4.401*** (1.399)	.862 (.872)
Presidential Vote	.241** (.096)	.012 (.062)	.006 (.077)	.032 (.031)
Constant	68.107*** (5.547)	89.633*** (3.606)	79.140*** (4.309)	88.860*** (2.273)
N	140	145	209	185
F	11.99***	5.80***	55.08***	22.30***
R^2	.30	.15	.48	.37

Notes: *p<.10, **p<.05, ***p<.01, two-tailed tests. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Democratic members only.

Table 2. Change in Party Unity of Continuing House Democrats, 51st-53rd Congresses

	Model 1 51st	Model 2 52nd	Model 3 53rd
Manufacturing/ capita	.048*** (.015)	-.041*** (.015)	.039*** (.011)
South	-1.374 (2.622)	6.214*** (2.142)	-3.860** (1.735)
Presidential Vote	.057 (.105)	-.064 (.079)	-.019 (.068)
Constant	2.165 (5.911)	-5.492 (4.490)	9.090** (4.182)
N	92	107	115
F	5.23**	10.19***	16.44***
R^2	.13	.26	.31

Notes: *p<.10, **p<.05, ***p<.01, two-tailed tests. Dependent variable is the member's change in party unity score from t-1 to t. Robust standard errors in parentheses. Democratic members only.

Figure 1. House of Representatives Membership by Party, 50th-53rd Congresses
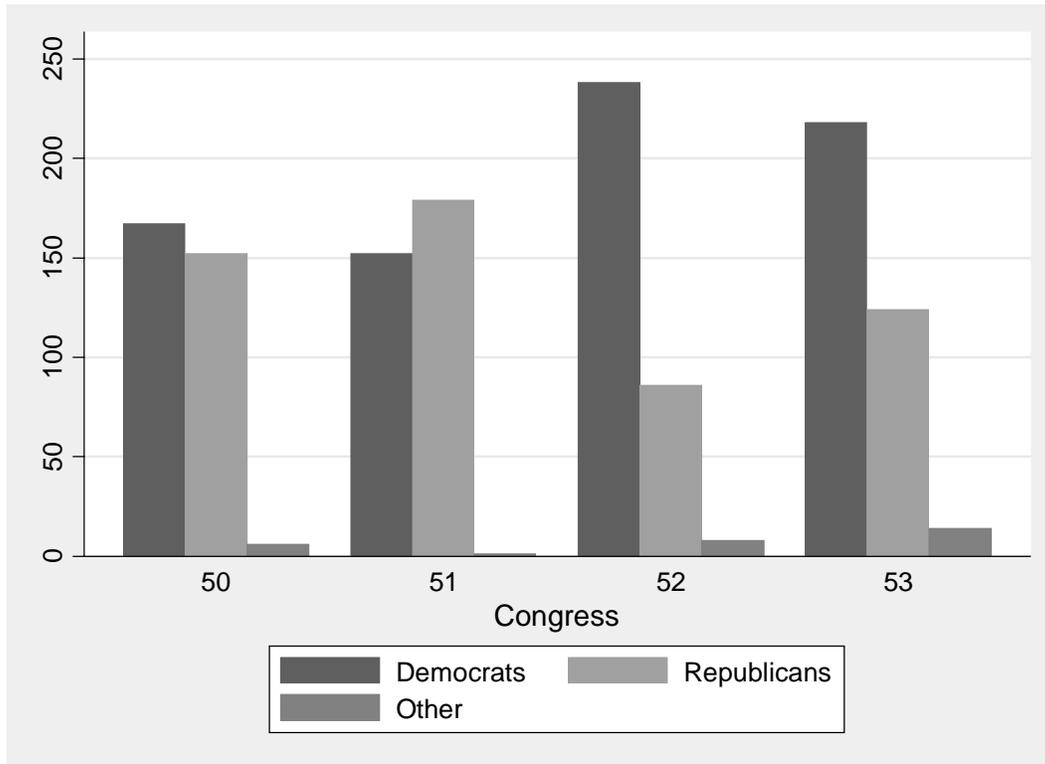
Note: Party totals from Martis (1989).

Figure 2. Average House Party Unity Scores by Party, 50th-53rd Congresses
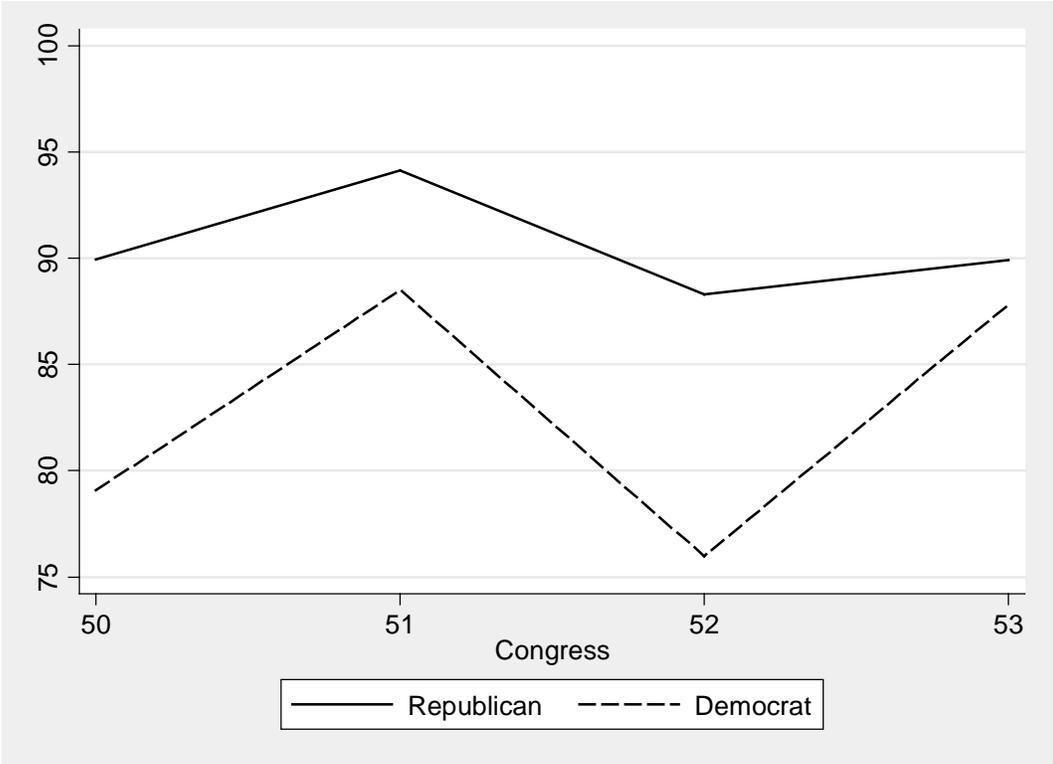
Figure 3. Congress-to-Congress Change in House Party Unity Voting, 51st-53rd Congresses