

Out of Balance:
*Partisanship Over Governance in
Contemporary Politics*

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Steps to understanding whether partisanship has come to trump governance.

- Differentiate whether members of Congress are unable to find common ground or choose not to pursue common ground.
- Understand whether the public really wants bipartisan compromises or if they give elected officials incentives to engage in partisanship.
- Evaluate the importance of governance to the majority party.

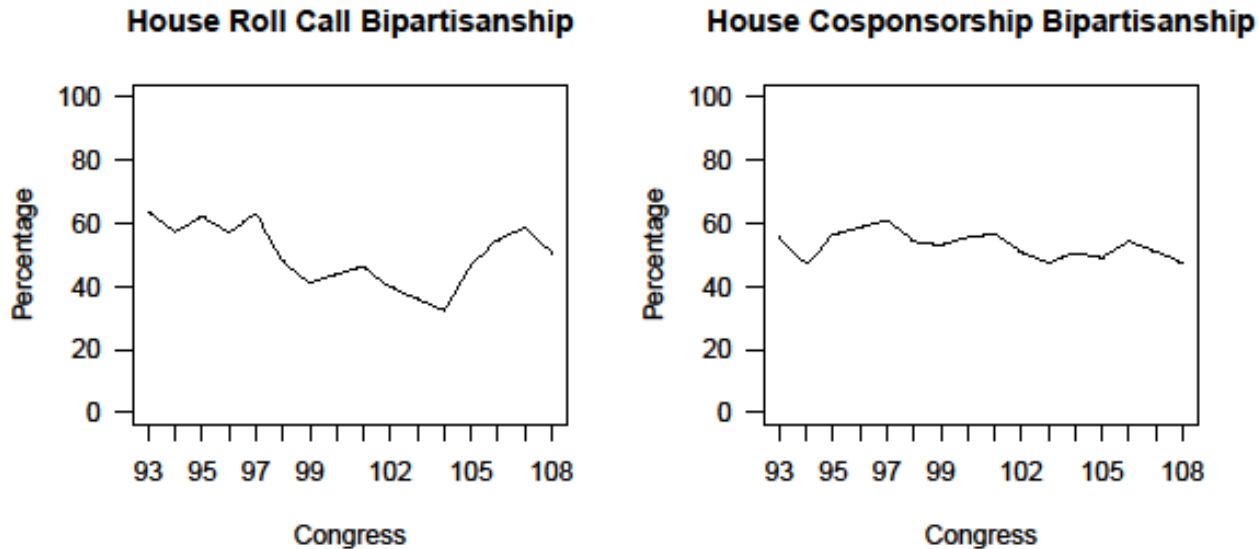


CBS News/AP 2013.

How much bipartisanship has there been in the House of Representatives?

- Bipartisanship in House voting declined from the 1970s to 1990s.
- But votes do not tell the whole story of bipartisan agreement.

Trends in bipartisan agreement: 1973-2004



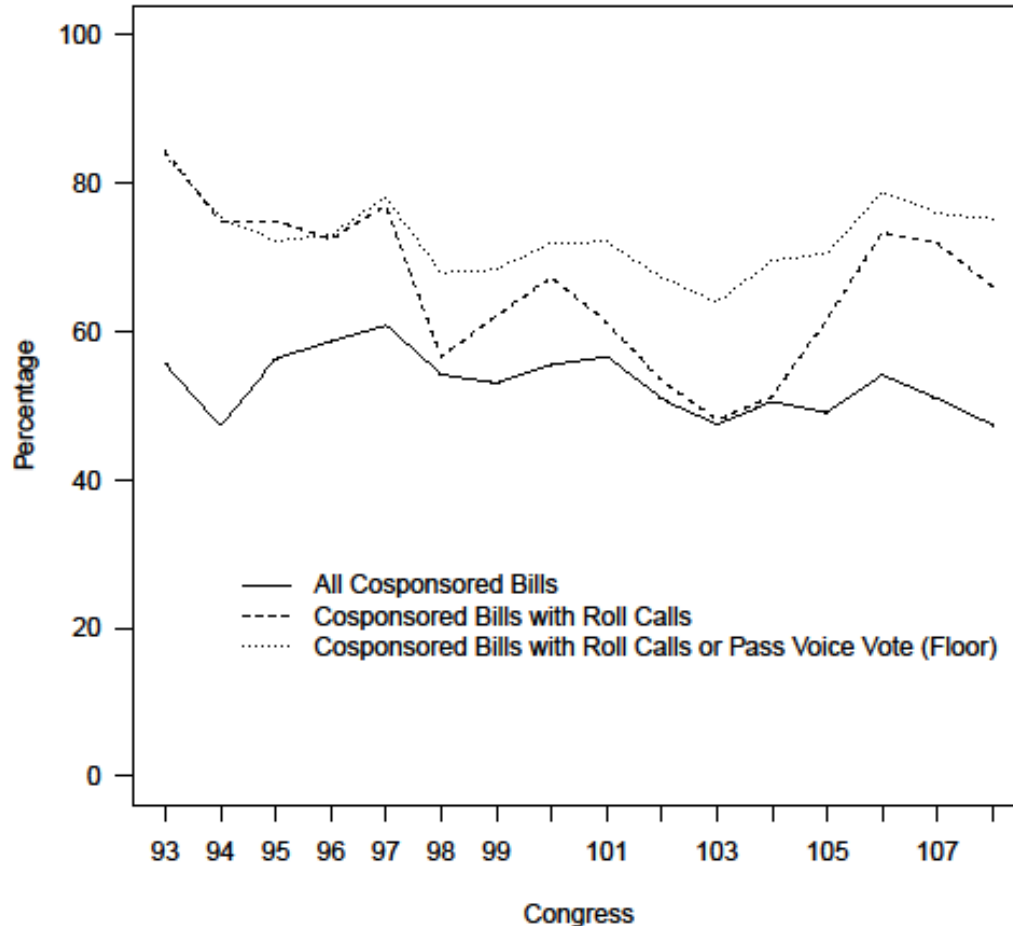
Roll Call Voting: Percent of votes where a majority of Democrats vote with a majority of Republicans.

Cosponsorship Coalitions: At least 20% of the cosponsors are from the party opposite the party of the sponsor.

Puzzle: The frequency of bipartisanship in voting coalitions declines by 50% from the early 1970s to 1995; bipartisanship in bill cosponsorship coalitions declines by less than 20% over the same period. Common ground may be more similar from 1973-2004 than we may have thought.

House leaders shifted their attention to bipartisan legislation over time.

Bipartisanship on the House Agenda



Why shift from pursuing bipartisan legislation to pursuing partisan legislation?

- Changes in the alignment of parties and districts.
 - 1970s: Congressional parties represented districts that were often unaligned (e.g., Democrats represented conservative Southern districts).
 - 1990s and 2000s: Alignment of the electoral coalitions with the party of the representative increased.
 - Overall, increased “sorting” of congressional districts over this period.

Why shift from pursuing bipartisan legislation to pursuing partisan legislation?

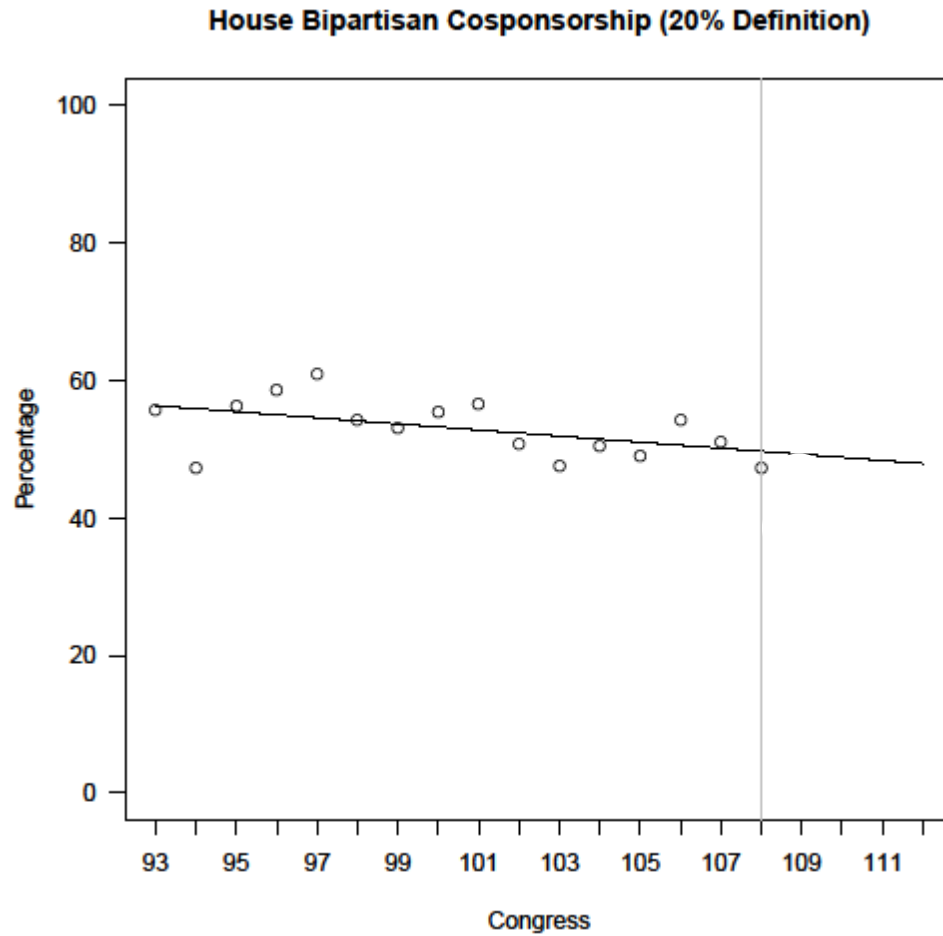
- Benefits from differentiating the two parties.
 - Emphasize positions of party brand.
 - Interest groups concentrate on partisan extremes and not the center.
 - Primary election concerns.
 - Media environment incentives attention to primary voters.
 - Competition for majority control.

What has historically constrained partisanship?

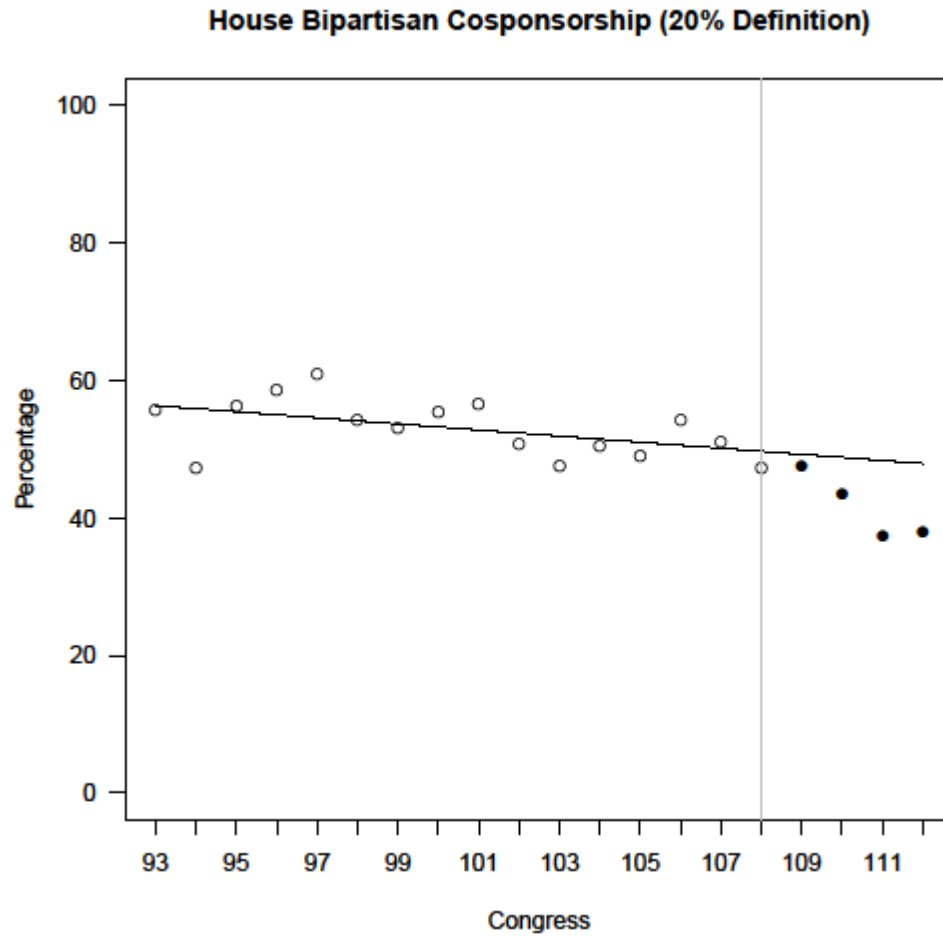
- Members' general election concerns.
 - Partisanship hurts members in “unsorted” districts much more than it does members in “sorted” districts.
- The majority party has incentives to produce a record of legislative success.
 - Partisan conflict damages institutional approval, and congressional approval affects members' vote shares and challenger emergence.
 - The public holds Congress accountable for legislative problem-solving.
 - Bipartisan bills are easier to enact into law during divided government and times with small majorities.

What has happened to bipartisanship since
2008?

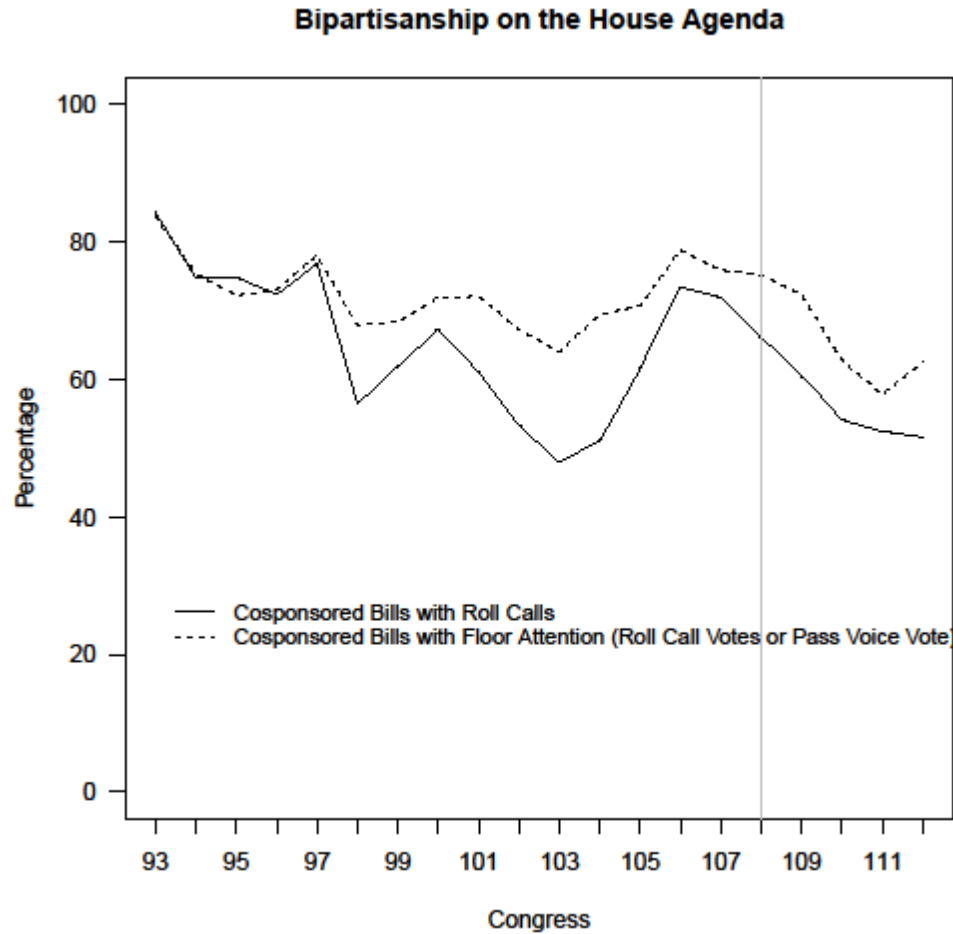
A breakdown in House bipartisanship since 2008.



A breakdown in House bipartisanship since 2008.



A further decline in bipartisan agenda-setting.

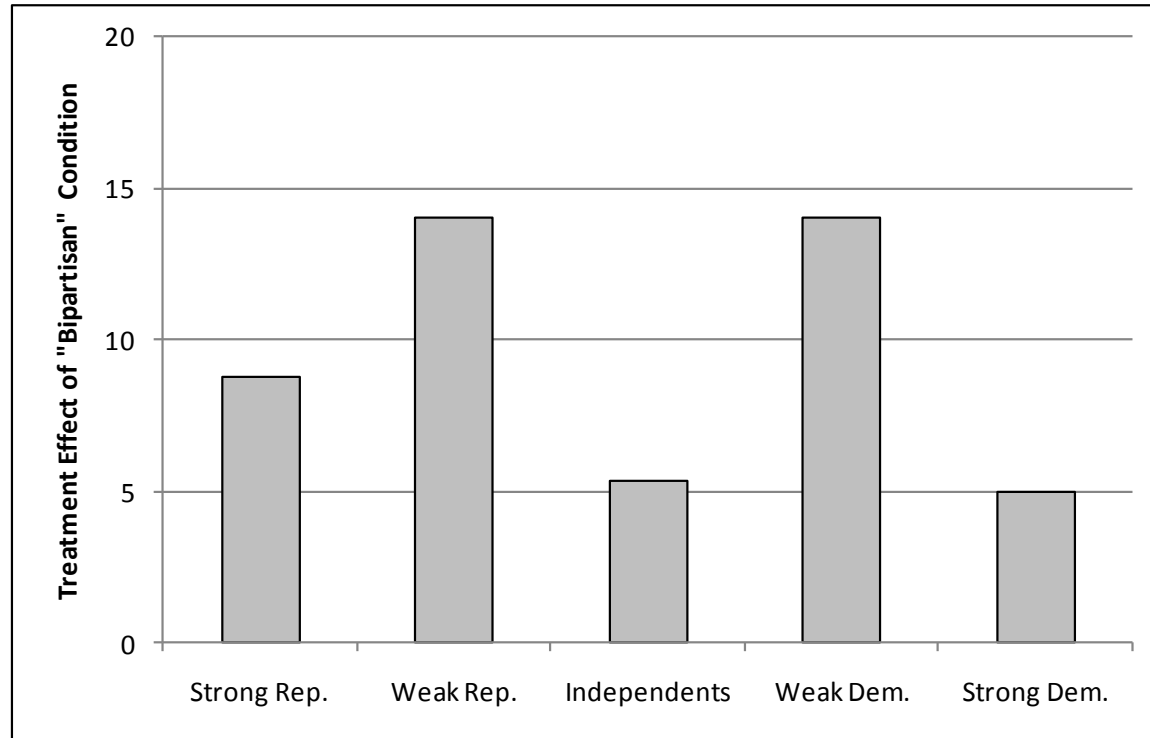


Lessons

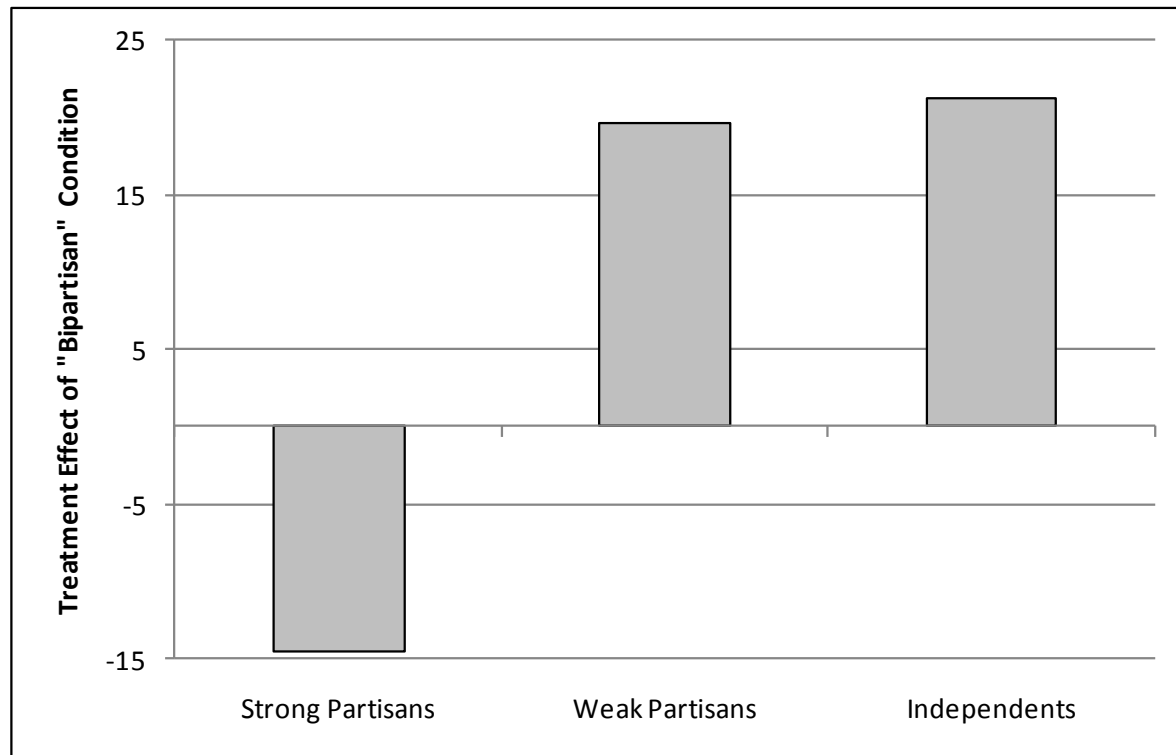
- Even when there is common ground between the parties, leaders need not focus the floor agenda on these bills.
- The potential for bipartisan agreement declined relatively little between 1973 and 2004 but dropped dramatically after 2008.
- Declining bipartisanship in these cosponsorship coalitions is magnified by how party leaders structure the legislative agenda (and what actually receives a vote).

Does the public really want bipartisanship?

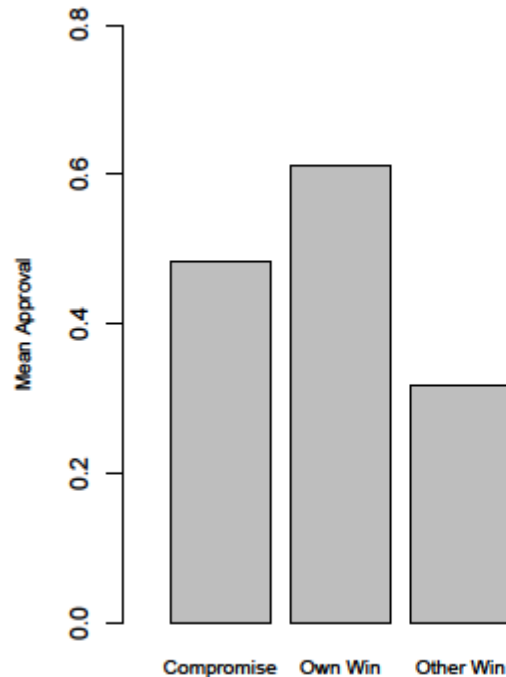
Bipartisanship improves evaluations of Congress.



But bipartisanship hurts evaluations of members
(by strong partisans).



And approval of how Congress is handling a policy is higher when partisan conflict results in a party win than in compromise.

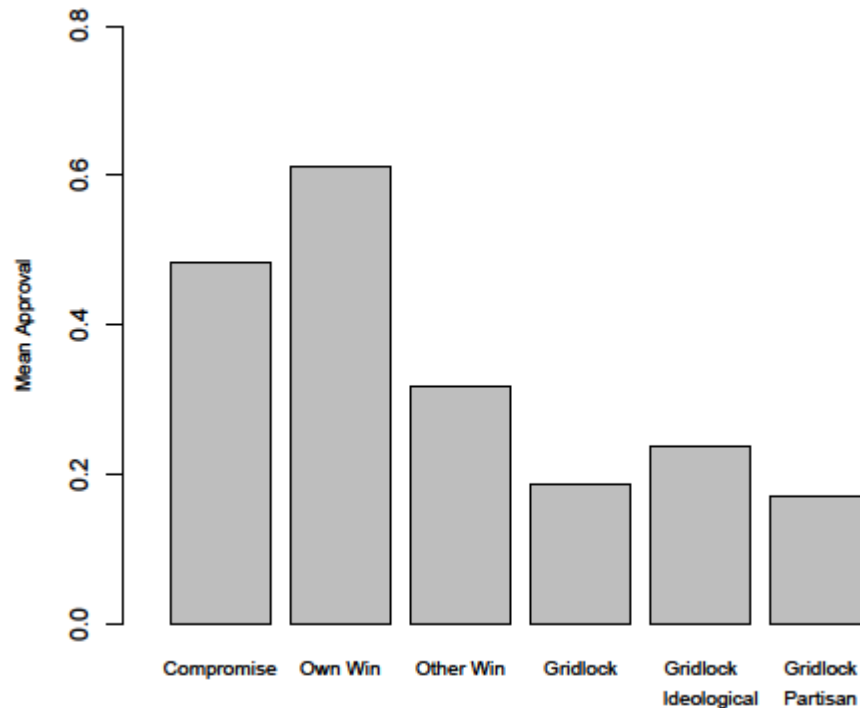


Take-away point:

When partisan conflict can result in legislative victory for one's own party, preferences for a bipartisan process in policymaking do not trump partisan identities.

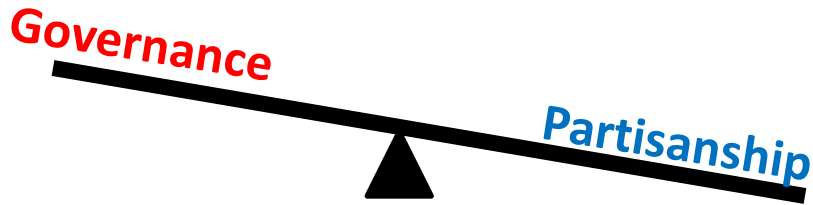


But, partisanship resulting in gridlock hurts evaluations of Congress.



Governance might be important and may constrain partisanship.

Does the majority party care enough about governance to reign in partisanship?



- Patterns from even a decade ago suggest that leaders must balance partisan differentiation and governance.
- Concerns about governance appear to be lower in recent years than in the past.

Balancing partisan differentiation and governance: The GOP in the 104th-105th Congresses

- 104th Congress
 - GOP over-stepped in their pursuit of partisan legislation.
 - Resulted in legislative failures.
 - Partisan bills passed the House but did not become law.
 - Fewest bills enacted into law since World War II.
 - Risked electoral defeat for members and loss of majority.
 - 18 members lost in 1996; those re-elected did not see much incumbency advantage and challenger vote shares were relatively large; GOP lost national vote.

Balancing partisan differentiation and governance: The GOP in the 104th-105th Congresses

- 105th Congress
 - GOP back-tracked and pursued more bipartisan pieces of legislation.
 - Bipartisan agenda-setting increased.
 - Concern about governance.
 - Suggests that leaders saw divided government and a small majority as a constraint on their pursuit of a partisan agenda. Needed to balance partisan differentiation and governance.

Out of Balance: Partisanship and Governance in the Obama Era

- Partisanship at record highs in both the 111th and 112th Congresses despite a shift in 2010 from unified to divided government and to smaller seat shares.

Legislative success possible in the 111th Congress even with partisan bills.

- Highly partisan agenda but combination of well sorted districts, unified government, and 59% of seats held by Democrats.
- 385 public laws enacted.
- Nearly a 1/3rd of partisan bills that passed the House were enacted into law. Not significantly different from the success rate for bipartisan bills.

Legislative failures in 112th Congress driven by the pursuit of partisan bills.

- Highly partisan agenda but combination of well sorted districts, divided government, and 56% of seats held by Republicans.
- Least productive Congress on record.
 - Among bills that received a roll call vote and passed the House, 19% of partisan bills became public law compared to 59% of bipartisan bills.

Why hasn't the GOP done more to balance governance and partisan differentiation?

- 1) Fewer places of bipartisan agreement. This is dramatic shift from past, not just a continuous decline.
- 2) Costs of failing to produce a record of success may be lower.
 - Republicans are less likely than Democrats to prefer compromises in order to make sure the job gets done (Pew 2012).
 - Tea Party seeking to re-define governance as limiting (or eliminating) government activities.
- 3) GOP members concern about primary threats from the right. Electoral costs to pursuing bipartisanship (rather than previous eras where general election costs to partisanship).

Implications

- Common ground between members fell after 2008.
 - But the legislative agenda even further emphasizes places of partisan disagreement.
- When a partisan victory is possible, the public gives elected officials few incentives to pursue bipartisan compromises.
 - But partisanship resulting in gridlock damages evaluations, suggesting that the public does not approve of partisanship trumping governance.
- Historically, the need to govern constrained partisanship by the majority party. But the current majority appears to be taking less of an electoral hit for over-stepping.

What can be done?

- Public must hold members of Congress accountable for their own partisanship.
 - General election concerns must be as big as primary fears.
- Public must hold members of the majority party accountable for legislative success and governance.

