

PARTY LOYALTY AND ELECTORAL COMPETITIVENESS IN THE U.S. SENATE

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Before the 2006 and 2008 Senate elections, many Republican incumbents distanced themselves from their party. This strategy was reflected not just in their rhetoric but also in their votes in the Senate. In 2006, former Sen. Mike DeWine (R-OH) voted the Republican position on only 65% of party-line votes. Earlier in his term, Sen. DeWine voted with his Republican colleagues 92% of the time. Sen. DeWine lost his seat to the Democratic challenger, current Ohio Sen. Sherrod Brown. In Minnesota, former Republican Sen. Norm Coleman voted the Republican position on 92% of party-line votes during his first year in office but only 69% of party-line votes during his last year in 2008 (CQ, 2010).

These changes in senators' voting behavior exhibit a relationship between senators' party loyalty and electoral competitiveness. Senators facing competitive general elections appeal to swing voters by distancing themselves from their party. Meanwhile, senators have strong incentives to demonstrate their party loyalty to colleagues, party leaders, and their party's electoral base. When senators vote, they must balance these partisan and electoral considerations.

In this project, I examine the link between senators' voting records and the competitiveness of Senate elections from 1996 to 2008. I hypothesize that senators facing competitive elections will be less likely to vote with their party than other senators.

PARTY LOYALTY IN THE U.S. SENATE

Parties in the U.S. Senate have become more polarized.

- Parties within the Senate became more cohesive after the realignment of the South from Democratic to Republican (Harris, 1993).
- The number of centrists in the Senate is declining (Davidson, Oleszek, & Lee, 2008).

Senators have strong incentives to display party loyalty.

- Party leadership in the Senate can incentivize loyalty through committee assignments and chairmanships (Pearson, 2008).
- In reelection campaigns, senators who have demonstrated support for the party have advantages in primary elections and fundraising (Monroe, Roberts, & Rohde, 2008).

Senators demonstrate their party loyalty in part through their voting records.

- Senators can show party loyalty through their voting records as well as through other methods such as fundraising (Pearson, 2008).

Senators' voting records have become more partisan over the past three decades.

- In 1978, the average senator voted the party position on party-line votes only 6 in 10 times.
- In recent years, senators on average have voted their party's position 85-90% of the time.

PARTY LOYALTY AND SENATE ELECTIONS

Senate races can be competitive, but incumbents usually win.

- Senate races often attract experienced challengers with substantial resources (Jacobson, 2009).
- Incumbents are generally more well-known than their challengers. Incumbents raise and spend more money (Davidson, Oleszek, & Lee, 2008).
- The success rate of incumbent senators seeking reelection averaged 86% from the 1996 to 2008 elections (Jacobson, 2009).

Senate incumbents' voting records can be a liability when seeking reelection.

- Since the 1970s, public scrutiny of senators has increased as media coverage of the Senate has expanded greatly (Harris, 1993).
- Incumbents' voting records can link them to divisive issues (Davidson, Oleszek, & Lee, 2008).
- Unpopular votes can provide fodder for negative campaign ads (Harris, 1993).

Electoral considerations may affect senators' votes.

- Senators need to cast "explainable" votes. Senators that regularly vote against their constituency may face electoral consequences (Jacobson, 2009).
- Senators facing reelection may feel pressure to moderate their voting behavior (Carson, 2008).
- Senators are not punished for extreme behavior if they have the support of their constituency (Carson, 2008).

PROJECT AND DATA

Given the tradeoff between incentives for party loyalty and electoral pressures, I hypothesize that senators will show less party loyalty in their voting record when they face competitive elections. To study the relationship between party loyalty and electoral competitiveness, I have analyzed data related to Senate elections from 1996 to 2008. I have divided this project into three parts:

- A comparison of senators running and not running in each election.
- A comparison of senators based on their electoral vulnerability in each election.
- An analysis of senators' voting records and electoral competitiveness across elections.

Party Unity Scores from Congressional Quarterly (CQ)

- Party unity scores act as a measure of party loyalty in a senator's voting record.
- CQ bases these scores on senators' roll-call votes when the majority of senators from one party vote against the majority of senators from the other party. A senator's party unity score is the percentage of these votes during a given year in which that senator voted with his/her party.
- A higher party unity score reflects higher party loyalty.
- Independent senators are grouped with the party with which they caucus or vote with on organizational matters. Sen. Joe Lieberman (CT) and Sen. Bernie Sanders (VT) are grouped with the Democrats. Sen. Jim Jeffords (VT) is grouped with the Democrats from 2001 to 2006.

Party Unity Ratios

- I have calculated a party unity ratio as a senator's party unity score divided by the mean party unity score in that senator's party for that year.
- A party unity ratio greater than 1 indicates that the senator showed more party loyalty than the average senator in that party in that year. A party unity ratio less than 1 indicates that the senator showed relatively less party loyalty.
- Using party unity ratios as opposed to the raw party unity scores allows for better cross-year comparisons. It controls for the long-run increase in party unity scores occurring during this period. It also controls for differences in party unity scores between parties.

Competitiveness of Senate Elections

- CQ categorizes Senate races into four levels of competitiveness. I have collected the ratings for each election published a few weeks prior to Election Day (mid- to late October).
- CQ's rankings are an editorial judgment based on candidates, polls, previous elections, and political climate. These assessments are made before the results of the election have been observed.
- I have recoded the four levels into two categories: "Competitive" and "Safe." I have grouped "Tossup" and "Leans Democratic/Republican" into "Competitive." I have grouped "Democrat/Republican Favored" and "Safe Democratic/Republican" into "Safe."
- These rankings measure the competitiveness of Senate elections. They are based on similar things a senatorial campaign may observe leading up to an election. Therefore, these rankings should parallel a senator's perception of electoral vulnerability.

ELECTORAL CONTEXT (1996-2010)

1996 President Clinton reelected with 8.5-point margin in popular vote. 13 senators retired – the highest number in 80 years. Republicans won two seats in the South after conservative Democrats retired.

1998 Republicans faced some public backlash over impeachment proceedings. The partisan balance in the Senate was unchanged.

2000 President Bush was narrowly elected. 5 Republican Senate incumbents lost their seats; 3 were staunch conservatives first elected in 1994.

2002 President Bush had high approval ratings following the attacks of September 11, 2001 and subsequent invasion of Afghanistan.

2004 Senate elections generally matched the state-by-state results in the presidential election. Few Senate incumbents faced competitive elections.

2006 President Bush had approval ratings below 40%. The 2006 midterm election became highly nationalized; Democrats won majorities in both chambers of Congress.

2008 President Obama was elected by 7.3-point margin; Democrats expanded their majorities.

2010 By April 2010, 11 senators had announced their retirements. Democrats are poised to lose seats in both chambers of Congress.

Source: Jacobson, 2009.

Table 1. Summary of Senate elections by party holding Senate seat (1996-2008)

| Year | Competitive Races | | Safe Seats | | Retirements (Open Seats) | | Special Elections | |
|------|-------------------|---|------------|----|--------------------------|---|-------------------|---|
| | D | R | D | R | D | R | D | R |
| 1996 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 7 | 8 | 5 | 0 | 2 |
| 1998 | 6 | 2 | 8 | 11 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| 2000 | 1 | 6 | 9 | 10 | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 2002 | 4 | 2 | 8 | 13 | 1 | 5 | 0 | 0 |
| 2004 | 1 | 1 | 13 | 10 | 5 | 3 | 0 | 1 |
| 2006 | 2 | 5 | 12 | 8 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| 2008 | 1 | 8 | 11 | 8 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 2 |
| 2010 | 4 | 2 | 7 | 10 | 5 | 6 | 2 | 0 |

RUNNING OR NOT RUNNING?

Hypothesis

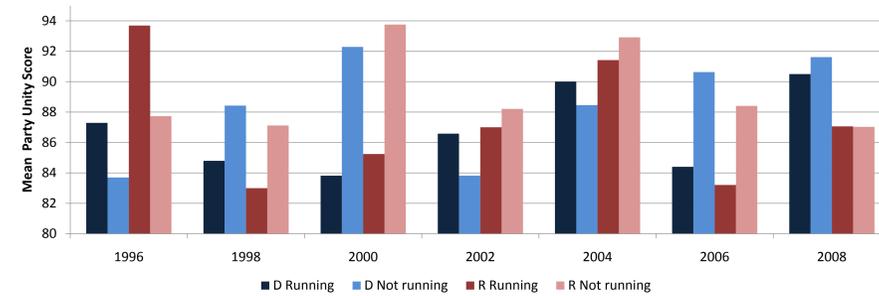
Senators up for reelection should have lower party unity scores on average compared to senators not up for reelection.

Method

I have compared mean party unity scores of the group of senators running for reelection in each election year with those not running. Senators not running could either be in a different class or could be retiring. (Only one-third of the Senate – one of three classes – is up for reelection in a particular election year.) Senators running includes both senators who have served full terms and those who have served partial terms.

Results

Figure 1. Mean party unity scores by party and whether running for reelection (1996-2008)



- In 9 of 14 cases, senators running for reelection had lower party unity scores on average than those not running.
- In 4 of 7 elections, Democratic senators running for reelection had lower party unity scores on average than Democrats not running for reelection.
- In 5 of 7 elections, Republican senators running for reelection had lower party unity scores on average than Republicans not running for reelection.
- Averaging across elections, party unity scores were lower in both parties among senators running for reelection.
 - From 1996 to 2008, the difference between Democratic senators running for reelection and those not running in an election was on average -1.65 points.
 - From 1996 to 2008, the difference between Republican senators running for reelection and those not running in an election was on average -2.08 points.

Conclusions

In the majority of cases, party unity scores are lower among senators running for reelection. The difference between senators running and those not running is fairly small yet negative. However, this observation is not consistent across elections. This variation can be explained by some election-specific factors. For instance, several conservative Democrats retired in 1996.

HOW COMPETITIVE?

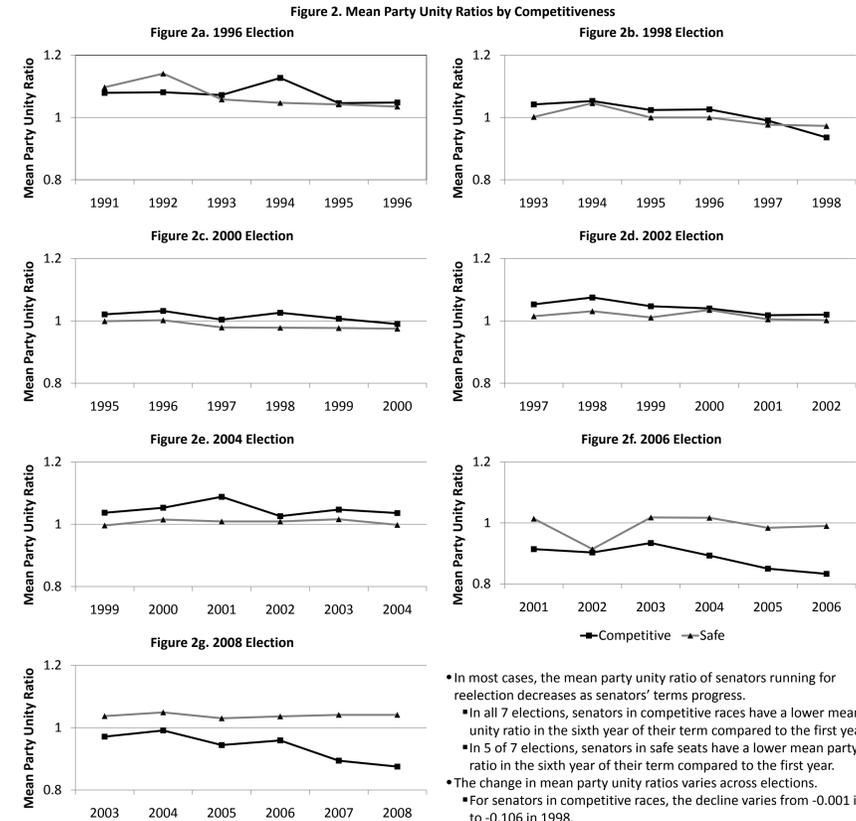
Hypothesis

A senator's party unity ratio should decline over the course of a senator's six-year term. This decrease should be larger for senators facing competitive elections at the end of their terms compared to those in safe seats.

Method

In this part, I have looked only at the party unity ratios of senators running for reelection who have served full six-year terms in the Senate. I have compared the mean party unity ratios of those senators in elections coded as "Competitive" and those in elections coded as "Safe." I have used party unity ratios from 1991 to 2008 in order to cover elections from 1996 to 2008.

Results



- In most cases, the mean party unity ratio of senators running for reelection decreases as senators' terms progress.
- In all 7 elections, senators in competitive races have a lower mean party unity ratio in the sixth year of their term compared to the first year.
- In 5 of 7 elections, senators in safe seats have a lower mean party unity ratio in the sixth year of their term compared to the first year.
- The change in mean party unity ratios varies across elections.
 - For senators in competitive races, the decline varies from -0.001 in 2004 to -0.106 in 1998.
 - For senators in safe seats, the change varies from 0.004 in 2008 to -0.062 in 1996.

- The decline among senators in competitive races is generally greater than the decline among senators in safe seats.
 - In 6 of 7 elections, the decline among senators in competitive races is greater.
 - On average, the difference in changes between senators in competitive races and those in safe seats is -0.033.

Conclusions

Party loyalty, as measured by party unity ratios, generally decreases as senators approach an election. The decrease is greater among senators anticipating competitive races. Election-specific factors can explain some of the variation across years.

PARTY LOYALTY AND ELECTORAL COMPETITIVENESS (1996-2008)

Hypothesis

The effect of electoral competitiveness on party unity ratios is negative and increases as the next election approaches.

Method

Instead of analyzing each election separately, I have analyzed all senators that have served a full six-year term and then run for reelection. For example, the 1991 party unity ratio of a senator that runs for reelection in 1996 is paired with the 2003 party unity ratio of a senator that runs for reelection in 2008. I have compared competitive and safe seats using a linear regression with competitiveness as a dummy variable (0 = safe, 1 = competitive). The constants are the mean party unity ratio of senators in safe seats. The coefficients for the competitiveness variable are the differences in mean party unity ratios between senators in competitive races and those in safe seats.

Results

Table 2. Regression models of party unity ratios for each year of a senator's term

| | 1 st Year | 2 nd Year | 3 rd Year | 4 th Year | 5 th Year | 6 th Year |
|-------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Constant | 1.017 (0.009) | 1.034 (0.009) | 1.012 (0.009) | 1.015 (0.009) | 1.004 (0.010) | 1.000 (0.012) |
| Competitive | -0.003 (0.018) [-0.182] | -0.011 (0.018) [-0.597] | -0.006 (0.017) [-0.335] | -0.003 (0.018) [-0.168] | -0.035* (0.020) [-1.748] | -0.049* (0.023) [-2.143] |
| N | 176 | 176 | 178 | 178 | 178 | 178 |
| σ | 0.104 | 0.107 | 0.102 | 0.109 | 0.117 | 0.134 |

* statistically significant at the 0.05 level

- In all six years of a senator's term, the effect of competitiveness is negative.
- The effect of competitiveness on party unity ratios is substantially greater and statistically significant in the last two years of a senator's term.

Conclusions

The expectation of a competitive election has a negative effect on senators' party loyalty during the last two years of a senator's term. At this point, a senator and the senator's campaign probably has a sense of how competitive the upcoming election will be.

2010 SENATE ELECTION

Hypothesis

Considering the political climate approaching the 2010 election, Democratic senators running for reelection should have lower party unity scores than Democratic senators not running in 2010. Senators in competitive races should have lower party unity scores than those in safe seats.

Method

Using the CQ rankings of 2010 Senate races published in April 2010, I have analyzed senators' 2009 party unity scores. Within each party, I have compared mean party unity scores of the group of senators running for reelection in 2010 with those not running. Using the same regression model as described above, I have compared mean party unity ratios of senators in competitive races and those in safe seats.

Results

Figure 3. Mean party unity scores by party and whether running for reelection (2009)

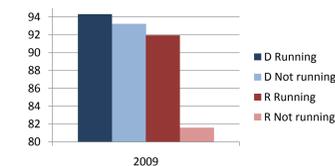


Table 3. Regression model of 2009 party unity ratio for senators running in 2010

| | 2009 |
|-------------|--------------------------------|
| Constant | 1.053 (0.033) |
| Competitive | -0.133* (0.051) [-2.598] |
| N | 36 |
| σ | 0.151 |

* statistically significant at the 0.05 level

- In both parties, the mean party unity score of senators running in 2010 is greater than that of senators not running in 2010.
- The mean party unity score of Democratic senators running in 2010 is 1.1 points greater than that of those not running.
- The mean party unity score of Republican senators running in 2010 is over 10 points greater than that of those not running.
- Competitiveness has a large and statistically significant negative effect on a senator's party unity ratio.

Conclusions

Competitiveness has the expected negative effect on the party unity ratios of incumbent senators running in 2010. However, senators running in 2010 on average have higher party unity scores than those not running. Given these two observations, the high mean party unity scores among senators running in 2010 must be driven by the party loyalty of senators in safe seats.

DISCUSSION

Electoral considerations affect senators' voting behavior.

- In the majority of cases, senator running for reelection displayed less party loyalty in their voting record during an election year than senators not running for reelection that year.
- Party loyalty as measured by party unity ratios generally decreases over the courses of a senator's term (i.e. as the senator approaches reelection). This observation is more pronounced for senators facing competitive races.
- Competitiveness has a significant effect on party loyalty in the last two years of a senator's term.
- In 2009, senators facing competitive elections in 2010 displayed less party loyalty than safe incumbents.

The effect of elections on senators' party loyalty varies considerably across elections.

- Differences in party unity scores between senators running and not running for reelection were not consistent in direction or magnitude across years.
- Elections differ greatly in how many individual Senate races are competitive and how those competitive races are distributed across parties.
- Senate elections may reflect political factors such as presidential approval or the economy.

Potential areas for further research

- The methods applied in this project can be applied to additional election years.
- Competitive primaries may have a positive effect on incumbent senators' party loyalty. This could help explain the high party unity scores of Republican Senate incumbents running for reelection in 2010.
- Competitiveness can be unbundled into specific indicators such as previous margin of victory, challenger quality, and a state's partisan leanings. These variables may then be analyzed separately.
- The effects of electoral competitiveness on partisan behavior in the Senate should be compared to such effects in the House of Representatives.

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