

**A Temporary Return to Unified Government and
The Increasing Salience of Party Labels**

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"The voice of the people is but an echo chamber. The output of an echo chamber bears an inevitable and invariable relation to the input. As candidates and parties clamor for attention and vie for popular support, the people's verdict can be no more than a selective reflection from among the alternatives and outlooks presented to them." (Key 1966, p. 2)

Split party control of the executive and legislative branches has been a defining feature of American national politics for more than thirty years, the longest period of frequent divided government in American history. Even when voters failed to produce a divided national government in the 2000 elections, the party defection of a lone U.S. senator (former Republican James Jeffords of Vermont) has created yet another divided national government. In addition, the extremely close competitive balance between the two major parties means that ticket splitters often determine which party controls each branch of government. These features of American politics have stimulated a lot of theorizing about the causes of split-ticket voting.

In recent years, the presence of divided government and relatively high levels of split ticket voting are commonly cited as evidence of an electorate that has moved beyond party labels (Wattenberg 1998). Another theory holds that some voters split their ballots in a strategic fashion to produce divided government and moderate policies (Fiorina 1996; Alesina and Rosenthal 1995). However, the 2000 elections narrowly produced a unified national government as ticket splitting declined to the lowest levels in over thirty years. What explains the decline in ticket splitting? How strong is the public preference for divided government, and what happened to divided government and ticket splitters in the 2000 election?

The decline in ticket splitting is best understood as a public response to elite polarization along party and ideological lines. The ideological positions of the parties

help determine the salience of party labels and ideological considerations when voters cast their ballots. Under what might be called a party salience theory of voting, voters who blur the differences between the parties are most likely to be ticket-splitters. Thus, ticket splitting should decline when the major parties move apart along an ideological dimension (making party labels more salient to voters). When the political parties converge toward the ideological center, voters rely less on policy and partisan considerations and are more likely to split their ballots. I test several propositions derived from this theory, and they are supported by empirical evidence. In addition, the evidence runs contrary to a central prediction of policy balancing theories of ticket splitting. These findings also reinforce the idea that the collective choices of American voters are, in part, a response to the ideological reputations of the parties in government.

The Recent Decline in Ticket Splitting

By a number of measures, major-party ticket splitting in national elections declined substantially in the last twenty years. Figure 1 displays the percentage of split congressional districts (i.e., districts carried by a presidential candidate of one party and House candidate of another party), the percentage of split Senate delegations (since 1900), and the percentage of major-party President-House ticket splitters (since 1952).¹

The same pattern is evident from all three measures: increasing levels of ticket splitting

¹ The split district figures for 1900-96 come from Stanley and Niemi (2000). The split district calculation for 2000 is from Polidata @ (2001). The ticket splitting estimates are calculated from surveys conducted under the auspices of the National Election Studies (Sapiro et al. 1997; Burns et al. 2001). Elections before 1900 are excluded because ticket splitting was extremely rare prior to the Australian ballot reforms just before the turn of the century (Rusk 1970). In addition, direct election of U.S. Senators was constitutionally mandated in 1913.

from the 1950s to the 1980s and a significant decline thereafter. In addition, the 2000 elections produced the lowest levels of ticket splitting observed in several decades. The frequency of president-House ticket splitting in 2000 (18%) is the lowest observed since 1968. The number of split districts in 2000 (86) is the fewest since 1952, and the number of split Senate delegations in 2000 (28) is the lowest observed since 1956.² There remains a non-trivial amount of ticket splitting in the United States, but its frequency has dropped to levels last seen in the 1950s and 1960s. This substantial drop in ticket splitting is consistent with evidence of increased partisanship in the mass public during the last twenty years (Miller 1991; Bartels 2000; Hetherington 2001; Jacobson 2001; Weisberg 2001). These developments require an explanation, and they provide an opportunity to test theories of split-ticket voting.

[Figure 1 about here]

Theories of Ticket Splitting

Theories of split-ticket voting abound. One explanation attributes the bulk of ticket splitting behavior to “candidate-centered politics” (Wattenberg 1991). According to this point of view, weakening party loyalties among voters, an increasing reliance on mass media communications in campaigns (often bypassing party organizations), a growing incumbency advantage, and (until recently) a Democratic advantage in fielding quality candidates for Congress, produced increasing levels of ticket splitting (Wattenberg 1991, 1998; Jacobson 1990). From this perspective, ticket splitting is a by-

² In the 2000 election, only 10 states were carried by presidential and Senate candidates of different parties (out of 34 states holding Senate elections), the lowest total since 1964.

product of independent voting decisions that rely heavily on candidate characteristics as opposed to partisan or ideological considerations (Burden and Kimball 1998).

From the candidate-centered perspective, a potential explanation for the drop in ticket splitting might focus on congressional incumbency. Abundant evidence indicates that the incumbency advantage in congressional elections is an important source of ticket splitting (McAllister and Darcy 1992; Alvarez and Schousen 1993; Born 1994; Burden and Kimball 1998; Born 2000; Mattei and Howes 2000; Garand and Lichtl 2000).

Perhaps the incumbency advantage has declined during the 1990s, prompting a concomitant decline in ticket splitting? As it turns out, however, one common measure (Gelman and King 1990) indicates that the incumbency advantage remained large throughout the 1990s. In fact, the 2000 election produced the largest incumbency advantage observed during an on-year election over the past 100 years. The candidate-centered approach provides a sound explanation for rising ticket splitting in the 1960s and 1970s, but requires some revision to help us understand the recent drop in ticket splitting. As I argue below, growing party polarization among elites helps the parties overcome, to some extent, the candidate-centered nature of campaigns by strengthening mass partisanship.

Another theory of ticket splitting emphasizes certain structural features of the American electoral system. The Australian ballot (Rusk 1970) increased the likelihood of ticket splitting, while straight-party (“one-punch”) ballot devices and the party column ballot format (Campbell and Miller 1957; McAllister and Darcy 1992; Kimball 1997; Burden and Kimball 1998) reduce ticket splitting by modest amounts. However, ballot format cannot account for the drop in ticket splitting, since states have gradually been

eliminating the party column ballot and one-punch devices designed to promote straight-party voting (Kimball and Owens 2000).

A third explanation of ticket splitting is "policy balancing" (Fiorina 1988, 1996), which posits that moderate voters behave strategically and split their ballots in order to strike a balance between two ideologically extreme parties, perpetuate divided government, and produce middle-of-the-road policies (also see Alesina and Rosenthal 1995; Ingberman and Villani 1993; Lacy and Niou 1998; Lacy and Paolino 1998; Smith et al. 1999; Mebane 2000). With national elections in the 1990s perpetuating divided government, it has become common for political pundits and leaders of both parties to speculate that American voters prefer divided government and intentionally split their tickets as a result (Kimball 1997; Lang et al. 1998).³

One way in which policy balancing theory might explain the recent decline in ticket splitting is if fewer voters see divided government as desirable. However, slightly more than half of the respondents to the 2000 survey conducted by the National Election Studies expressed a preference for divided government, and earlier surveys show similar levels of support for divided government (Petrocik and Doherty 1996). While this survey question is not a good predictor of voting behavior (Beck et al. 1992; Sigelman et al. 1997; Lacy and Paolino 1998), it suggests that voters have not grown weary of divided government. Alternatively, perhaps moderate voters (those with the strongest ideological motivation for ticket splitting) comprise a smaller share of the voting public. However, the share of moderates in the electorate has remained stable for the last twenty years, including 2000 (National Election Studies 1995-2000). Thus, it does not appear that any

³It was not always this way. For example, David Broder (1972) and Kevin Phillips (1975) argue that ticket splitting increased in 1972 because voters did not perceive meaningful policy differences between the two

decline in the share of voters who might have a moderate desire for partisan balance in government has declined.

A final perspective argues that ticket splitting is the result of sincere policy-based proximity voting (Frymer 1994; Frymer et al. 1997; Grofman et al. 2000; Brunell et al. 2001). Since American parties are diverse coalitions, congressional candidates may hold ideological positions quite different from the presidential candidates of their own party. In addition, median voter and party preferences vary from one district to another, even within the same state. As a result, some voters may find themselves closer to the policy positions of a presidential candidate of one party and a congressional candidate of the opposite party. This argument may be best understood when considering white southerners who regularly voted for Republican presidential candidates and conservative Democratic House candidates in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.⁴ This theory may also explain the recent drop in ticket splitting. As the parties (and their candidates for Congress) have polarized, fewer candidates are trying to run away their party's positions and fewer voters may find themselves proximate to presidential and congressional candidates of opposite parties.

Most studies of ticket splitting, and most tests of policy balancing theories, have focused on individual-level analyses using survey data.⁵ The evidence from these studies

major parties.

⁴ A similar perspective, "issue ownership" (Petrocik 1991; Petrocik and Doherty 1996), holds that ticket splitting is the result of sincere voters who confront different issues in campaigns for different offices. For example, salient issues in the presidential contest (e.g., taxes, national defense) may favor a Republican candidate while salient issues in the House contest (education, local economic needs) may favor a Democratic candidate.

⁵ For examples, see Alvarez and Schousen (1993), Born (1994, 2000a, 2000b), Fiorina (1996), McAlister and Darcy (1992), Soss and Canon (1995), Beck et al. (1992), Garand and Lichtl (2000), Campbell and Miller (1957), Brody et al. (1994), Kimball (1997), Maddox and Nimmo (1981), DeVries and Tarrance (1972), Sigelman et al. (1997), Tarrance et al. (1998), Mebane (2000), Smith et al. (1999), Lacy and Paolino (1998), Forgette and Platt (1999), Mattei and Howes (2000). For exceptions, see Burden and

is mixed -- some fail to find evidence of policy balancing behavior, although others do. Meanwhile, one of the critical implications of policy balancing theory is an aggregate-level prediction that has gone largely untested. If moderate voters are inclined to balance control of government between two ideologically polarized parties, and if the share of moderates in the electorate remains stable, then ticket splitting should increase in frequency when the parties move further apart on the ideological spectrum. The greater the policy distance between the parties, the larger the pool of voters located between the parties with a motive for splitting party control of government.⁶ This prediction is made most clearly by Fiorina in the following passage on the “crucial importance of party polarization”:

"When the parties are relatively close, near the center of gravity of the electorate, ticket splitting declines. When the parties move away from each other, following their own internal dynamics toward the extremes of the voter distribution, they open up a large policy range in which ticket splitting is the voter response" (Fiorina 1996, p. 81).

To be fair, more recent studies have revised Fiorina’s initial policy balancing theory by focusing more specifically on voter expectations of election outcomes and subsequent government policies (Lacy and Paolino 1998; Smith et al. 1999; Mebane 2000; Scheve and Tomz 1999). However, the revised balancing theories still depend on ideologically polarized parties as the central motivation for moderate voters to engage in balancing behavior. Thus, the policy balancing perspective might suggest that the recent

Kimball (1998) and Grofman et al. (2000).

⁶Born (1994) examines the relationship between perceived ideological differences between the parties and ticket splitting for the 1972-1988 period. However, the 1972-1988 period marked a high plateau when there was little variation in ticket splitting, since the period came after the increase in the 1960s and before the decline in the 1990s. Brown and Wright (1992) examine the relationship between ticket splitting and state-

decline in ticket splitting is the result of the two major parties moving toward the center of the ideological spectrum. Instead, however, the parties have polarized (Rohde 1991; Poole and Rosenthal 1997; Carmines and Layman 1997). There are theoretical reasons to expect that increased party polarization should lead to less ticket splitting.

A Party Salience Theory of Ticket Splitting

It is possible to make sense of the recent decline in ticket splitting using a theory of voting that emphasizes the importance of party positions along an ideological spectrum. At its core, this theory posits that when parties offer clear choices to voters, then party labels are more salient decision aids when voters decide how to cast their ballots, thus reducing the chances that voters will cast split ballots. A brief explanation of a party salience theory of ticket splitting and its assumptions follows.

The first assumption is that voters rely on party labels to make inferences about the ideological positions of candidates and the policies candidates will pursue if elected. This inferential process is especially important in low-information races (like many congressional contests), where voters often do not learn much about the candidates during a campaign. For example, Franklin (1991) finds that voters' perceptions about the ideological position of an incumbent legislator depend, in part, on the ideological location of the incumbent's party. In high-information races (like a presidential contest) voters do not need to rely as much on party label inferences since the campaign provides more information about the candidates and their policy positions.

level party polarization in the 1980s and also find an inverse relationship.

The second assumption is that the degree to which voters rely on ideological inferences based on party labels depends on the ideological distance between the two major parties. The salience of party labels depends on the degree to which the two parties offer clear and contrasting policy positions. Party labels are less useful to voters when both parties have similar ideological records. This is certainly not a new idea. As the introductory quotation suggests, Key (1966) argues that voters rely on policy preferences when parties and candidates provide clear choices during the campaign. However, when voters confront indistinguishable or vague policy alternatives, they rely on other considerations (such as candidate traits and experiences). In a well-known spatial model of voting, Downs (1957) argues that "parties will try to be similar and to equivocate" in order to appeal to middle-of-the-road voters in a two-party democracy (p. 137). By taking this strategy, however, parties encourage voters to behave "irrationally" (by making voting decisions based on considerations other than ideology). Similarly, the authors of *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960, p. 170) posit that voters "must perceive that the political system offers alternatives" as a condition for issue-based voting.

There is empirical evidence to support this conditional view of issue voting. When competing candidates offer similar or ambiguous policy proposals, voters often rely on character assessments and personal traits when making voting decisions (Page 1978; Asher 1988). In contrast, ideological considerations have a stronger influence on vote choice when opposing candidates take clear and contrasting policy positions (Page 1978; Wright 1978; Abramowitz 1981; Wright and Berkman 1986).

Thus, as the ideological distance between the platforms of the two major parties increases, party labels become more informative, and it becomes easier for voters to identify and vote for the candidate or party closest to their policy preferences. In contrast, as the parties converge toward the ideological median, it becomes harder for voters to recognize ideological differences between the parties, issues become less relevant, and voters rely on non-policy criteria. Assuming that non-policy characteristics (such as appealing candidate traits) are distributed to candidates independently of party affiliation (at least for presidential and congressional races), then voters will be more likely to split their ballots when the parties converge toward the center. This is not to suggest that Republican and Democratic candidates always offer identical policies. There is ample evidence that Republicans take more conservative positions than Democrats (for example, see Alesina and Rosenthal 1995, Poole and Rosenthal 1997). However, there is still some room for maneuvering, and thus variation in the degree to which the two parties support different policies.

In contrast to policy balancing theory, the third assumption of a party salience theory is that voting decisions in presidential and congressional contests are made independently of each other.⁷ Voters choose the most preferred candidate in each contest (based on policy and non-policy considerations), regardless of other contests on the ballot. In most studies of ticket splitting, the assumption of independent contests is implied rather than stated forcefully (Smith et al. 1999; for an exception, see Frymer 1994). Because of the high level of information in presidential elections, voters will

⁷In contrast, balancing theory assumes that voters have conditional or "non-separable" preferences (Lacy and Niou 1998; Lacy and Paolino 1998). That is, their choice for one office depends on the likely winner or the party of their preferred candidate for another office.

likely identify the candidate closer to their ideological preferences even when the two parties have similar ideological platforms and policy records. Indeed, Lau and Redlawsk (1997) find that a large majority of voters "correctly" choose the presidential candidate closer to their own policy preferences.

Even though voters make their presidential and congressional selections independently, they will tend to select the same party in both contests if they rely on policy considerations and party labels (with one exception discussed below). When the parties move farther apart ideologically, voters will rely more on party label inferences, and they are more likely to select the same party in both contests. When the parties converge, voters will eschew party label inferences and rely more on non-policy considerations in congressional contests, increasing the likelihood of a split ticket. Thus, it is not surprising that the congressional contest is usually the source of ticket splitting. In almost every election since 1952, a majority of voters split their ballots by defecting from their identified party in the congressional contest (Brody et al. 1994; Kimball 1997).

The one exception to this predicted pattern (and another route to ticket splitting) is when one (and only one) of the presidential candidates is an ideological extremist. In this situation, voters from the extremist's party may find the other party's candidate closer to their own views and split their ballots by defecting in the presidential contest.⁸ One can use the 1972 election as an example. By most accounts, George McGovern ran well to the left the median Democrat, while Richard Nixon ran as a moderately right-of-center Republican. Under this scenario, a moderate-to-liberal-leaning voter (slightly to the left of center) deciding on the basis of proximity to presidential candidate positions and party

⁸The same logic is used by Frymer (1994) and colleagues (1997) to explain why many southern voters selected Republican presidential candidates and Democratic House candidates in the 1970s and 1980s.

label inferences might choose Nixon in the presidential contest and a Democrat in the House contest. The McGovern candidacy, combined with relatively similar national party positions, may explain why the 1972 election produced the highest levels of ticket splitting this century.

In sum, the party salience theory departs from policy balancing theory at the individual and aggregate level. At the individual level, the party salience theory predicts that voters who see no policy differences between the parties are most likely to cast split ballots. At the aggregate level, the party salience theory predicts that ticket splitting should be more common when party polarization wanes. Thus, Key's (1966) echo chamber metaphor can explain why ticket splitting should decrease when the parties polarize. When parties offer a meaningful choice, voters respond by clearly selecting one of the parties in several different races. In contrast, when parties and their candidates move toward the ideological center and blur their differences, the response from the electorate should be equally vague: ticket splitting and divided government. Clarity from the parties begets clarity from the voters; confusion begets confusion.⁹

Testing Propositions of the Party Salience Theory of Ticket Splitting

The party salience theory may sound appealing, but is there evidence to support it? This section tests some of the propositions of the party salience theory of ticket splitting. A theory of divided government should be able to account for variation in ticket splitting over time, not just across individuals. Thus, the empirical tests that follow employ both individual-level and aggregate-level data.

⁹Indeed, Key advocated more distinctive issue-oriented party platforms (as well as stronger party organizations) as a way to revitalize partisan ties in the electorate (Epstein 1983).

The first test examines whether the public actually recognizes party positions and, more importantly, ideological distance between the major parties. Note that this is an important component of both the party salience and policy balancing theories of ticket splitting. If voters are generally unaware of the relative ideological positions of the two major parties, the motivation for making policy inferences based on party labels or policy balancing disappears.

Proposition 1: Voters have a rough idea of the ideological distance between the two parties. When the parties move apart, more people perceive important policy differences between the parties; when the parties converge to the center, fewer people see important policy differences between the parties.

There is evidence to support this proposition. Figure 2 plots the percentage of NES respondents who see “important differences” between the parties against the ideological distance between the Republican and Democratic parties in the House of Representatives. The ideological distance measure is the difference between the mean DW-NOMINATE scores (Poole and Rosenthal 1997) for Republicans and Democrats in the House during the session preceding each presidential election from 1952 to 2000.¹⁰ As the figure indicates, there is a strong positive correlation ($r = .84, p < .01$) between the two variables. As the ideological distance between the parties in the House increases, more voters perceive “important differences” in what the parties stand for. This relationship encompasses significant party polarization during the last thirty years. In 1972, the mean distance between Republicans and Democrats in the House was .4 and only 46% of NES respondents saw important differences between the parties. By 2000,

¹⁰ There is no data point for 1956, when NES did not ask the “important differences” question. Since DW-NOMINATE scores for the 106th Congress are not yet available, I use scores from the 105th Congress to

the mean distance between the parties in the House was over .7 and 64% of NES respondents saw important differences between the parties.¹¹

[Figure 2 about here]

Interestingly, the party differences measure is not correlated with the ideological distance between presidential candidates ($r = -.19$, $p = .59$), or the relative extremism of the two candidates for the White House ($r = .08$, $p = .82$).¹² Thus, public perceptions about party positions seem to depend more on the aggregate positions of party members in Congress than the positions of individual presidential candidates.

Having established that public perceptions of party polarization are closely related to an objective indicator of party positioning, the next question is whether these perceptions make any difference in voting decisions. According to the party salience theory, the extent to which voters rely on partisan and ideological factors depends on whether they perceive any policy differences between the parties. Thus, voters who see a wide ideological gap between the parties should be more likely to cast their ballots on the basis of party labels and ideological considerations than voters who see no differences between the parties. This leads to the next proposition.

Proposition 2: People who see no policy differences between the parties rely less on party labels and ideological considerations and more on candidate traits when making voting decisions.

Table 1 provides the results of an empirical test of this proposition. Using data from the NES Cumulative Data File and the 2000 Election Study, I estimate a model of

measure polarization in 2000.

¹¹ Hetherington (2001) demonstrates a similar relationship between elite polarization and public perceptions of party differences.

vote choice in presidential elections (first column) and House elections (second column) using three main factors: party, ideology, and candidate attributes.¹³ In the presidential model, the candidate factor is measured by the candidate affect differential: the sum of the number of likes for the Republican and dislikes for the Democrat minus the number of likes for the Democrat and dislikes for the Republican (up to 5 mentions). Incumbency (coded -1 for a Democratic incumbent, 0 for an open seat, and +1 for a Republican incumbent) measures the candidate factor in the House model. Only contested House races, where voters have a choice between at least 2 candidates, are included in this analysis.

To test proposition 2, I interact each of the three main factors with the “important party differences” NES variable (coded 1 if the voter sees important differences between the parties, 0 if not). The interaction terms should be positive and significant for the party and ideology factors, indicating that party and ideology weigh more heavily in the voting decisions of people who see major policy differences between the parties. The interaction term should be negative and significant for the candidate factor, indicating that candidate attributes weigh more heavily in the voting decisions of people who see no policy differences between the parties.

[Table 1 about here]

The dependent variable in each case is dichotomous (coded 1 for Republicans, 0 for Democrats), so logit regression is used to estimate the voting models. For voting in presidential and House elections, the results support the first two parts of the proposition

¹² I use measures of presidential candidate positions created by Zaller and Hunt (Zaller 1999).

¹³ Party identification is measured on a 7-point scale (-3 is a strong Democrat, +3 is a strong Republican). Ideology is measured using the 3-point self-placement question (-1 is a liberal, 0 is a moderate, +1 is a conservative). Both are coded so that they should be positively correlated with the vote measures.

but fail to support the third. All three factors are significant predictors of vote choice for voters who see no differences between the parties, as indicated by the logit coefficients for the main factors. The positive and significant interaction terms for party identification and ideology in both models indicates that people who see important differences between the parties indeed rely more heavily on party and ideology when making voting decisions. In contrast, the interaction between party differences and the candidate factor falls well short of statistical significance. Apparently, incumbency and candidate affect equally shape the voting decisions of all voters, regardless of their perceptions of party positions.

Nevertheless, if voters who see no important differences between the parties place less emphasis on party and ideology, their votes are more likely shaped by to non-partisan and non-policy considerations such as other candidate traits. Assuming that other candidate traits (experience, speaking ability, appearance, etc.) are evenly or randomly distributed between the parties, voters who see no differences between the parties should be more likely to vote for candidates of different parties in different contests. This leads to the next testable proposition of the party salience theory.

Proposition 3: Voters who see no differences between the parties are more likely to cast split tickets than voters who see important differences between the parties.

According to several studies, the greater the perceived ideological distance between the parties, the lesser is the chance that voters will split their ballots (Born 1994; Soss and Canon 1995; Kimball 1997; Garand and Lichtl 2000; Mattie and Howes 2000). Among respondents in the 1948-96 NES Cumulative Data File, roughly 30% of voters

who see no important differences between the parties split their tickets in presidential and House elections, as compared to 20% of voters who do see important party differences.¹⁴

Of course, many other factors may cause voters to split their ballots. To see whether perceptions of party differences are still an important determinant of ticket splitting when controlling for other factors, I estimate a multivariate model of president-House ticket splitting.

Several independent variables are included in the model to test different theories of ticket splitting. In an era of candidate-centered politics, it is commonly stated that ticket splitting reflects a weak psychological attachment to either major party (Campbell et al. 1960; Wattenberg 1998). Thus, strong partisans (as opposed to independents) and those who care a great deal about the outcome of the presidential contest (as opposed to those who don't care) are less prone toward ticket splitting (Campbell and Miller 1957; Beck et al. 1992; Mattei and Howes 2000). Both measures are included in the analysis here.¹⁵ Since both measures are strongly correlated with perceptions of party differences (Hetherington 2001), including them in a multivariate model makes it more difficult for perceptions of party differences to account for any variation in ticket splitting.

Second, the multivariate model includes a measure to test policy balancing theories of ticket splitting. Other things being equal, ideological centrists should be more motivated to split their ballots than other voters. Thus, the model includes a dichotomous variable indicating whether a voter places herself in between the two major parties on the

¹⁴ Third party votes and uncontested House races are excluded from these calculations. Uncontested races afford the voter no choice between casting a split ticket or a straight ticket. Third party votes do not reflect policy balancing behavior and thus confound tests of balancing theory.

¹⁵ A complete description of each variable is included in the appendix.

liberal-conservative spectrum. Similar measures have been used in other studies (Born 2000b; Mattei and Howes 2000; Garand and Lichtl 2000).¹⁶

Third, it is important to control for the quality of the competing House candidates. One obvious determinant of ticket splitting is incumbency. Voters are more likely to split their ballots when confronting an incumbent of the opposite party on the ballot (McAlister and Darcy 1992; Alvarez and Schousen 1993; Born 1994; Brody et al. 1994; Sigelman et al. 1997; Born 2000a, 2000b). Thus, the model includes two measures indicating whether the House contest features an incumbent of the same or opposite party of the voter's chosen presidential candidate.

Given that incumbency is a crude measure of candidate quality, it is important to also control for candidate familiarity. Some incumbents face strong, highly visible challengers while many others face relatively unknown, token opposition. Ticket splitting should be more common in the latter contests. To account for these variations in candidate quality (especially for challengers), the model includes measures indicating whether voters can recall the names of the House candidates from their own party and the opposite party.

Fourth, one must allow for the quality of the presidential candidates to influence ticket splitting. Some voters may split their ballots simply because they find the presidential candidate from their party to be inferior to the opposition candidate (Mattei

¹⁶ Another test of policy balancing might examine a voter's expectations about election outcomes (Mebane 2000; Scheve and Tomz 1999). A policy balancing voter who expects his chosen presidential candidate to occupy the White House may be inclined to split his ballot to help the opposite party win control of Congress (and vice versa). In analyses not reported here, I find that ticket splitting is uncorrelated with such expectations.

and Howes 2000). Thus, the model includes two variables indicating whether partisans are cross-pressured by finding the opposition presidential candidate more appealing.

Finally, I include controls for region and ballot format. A dummy variable for residents of southern states accounts for higher rates of ticket splitting among those voters (Alvarez and Schousen 1993). There is a historical pattern unique to the South of selecting Republican presidential candidates while electing Democrats to Congress, although this regional distinction has gradually disappeared (Burden and Kimball, n.d.). An additional dummy variable indicates states with a straight-party device on the ballot, which reduces ticket splitting (Campbell and Miller 1957; McAllister and Darcy 1992; Burden and Kimball 1998).

The results of a multivariate analysis of president-House ticket splitting can be seen in Table 2. The sample used for this analysis includes NES respondents from 1980 to 2000 and excludes third party votes and House races that were not contested by both major parties.¹⁷ Thus, the analysis covers a period in which president-House ticket splitting declined substantially (from 27% in 1980 to 17% in 2000 among voters in this sample). The first column provides the estimated logit coefficients and standard errors for each explanatory variable. Since logit coefficients are not easily interpreted, I also calculate the change in predicted probability of casting a split ballot when varying each independent variable from its minimum to maximum value while holding the other explanatory variables constant (see the second column of Table 2).¹⁸ The change in

¹⁷ Footnote 13 explains why third party votes and uncontested House races were dropped. The name recall questions were not included in the NES battery before 1978. Otherwise the variables used for this analysis go back to 1972.

¹⁸ The strength of partisanship variable is held constant at 1 (pure independent) and all other variables are held constant at 0. These are the median values for each variable except for strength of partisanship (median is 3, a weak partisan), important party differences, and care about outcome (where the median is 1 instead of 0).

probability values provide a more substantive comparison of the relative impact of each explanatory variable.

[Table 2 about here]

As expected, perceptions of important party differences remains a significant predictor of ticket splitting even after controlling for several other important factors. While candidate-centered factors (incumbency and name recall in House contests, candidate affect in presidential contests) have the strongest impact on ticket splitting, a fair amount of ticket splitting can be attributed to voters who blur any distinctions between the parties (i.e., political independents, those who don't care about the outcome of the presidential election, and those don't see important party differences).

Furthermore, the decline in ticket splitting from the 1970s to 2000 can be explained almost entirely by changes in the composition of the electorate for these three variables. In 2000, 79% of the voters in the sample see important differences between the parties, as compared to 55% in 1976. In 2000, 89% of the voters cared a great deal about the presidential outcome, as compared to 67% in 1976. In 2000, 41% of the voters are strong partisans, as compared to 32% in 1976. This represents a significant increase in the salience of party affiliation among voters, and provides a compelling explanation for the recent decline in ticket splitting. None of the other variables in the model, with one exception (discussed below) move in a direction that would lead to less ticket splitting over the last twenty years.

Another factor contributing to the decline in ticket splitting is greater unity among Democrats in affection for the party's presidential candidate. Only 4% of Democrats in 2000 were conflicted in their evaluations of the presidential candidates, down from 11%

in 1976. In addition, increased electoral competition in the South, the result of a gradual shift of voters to the Republican party, must also account for the drop in ticket splitting (Aistrup 1996; Brunell and Grofman 1998; Burden and Kimball n.d.). In the three most recent presidential elections, president-House ticket splitting was no more common in the South than in any other region of the country.¹⁹

It is worth noting that there is some support for policy balancing theories in Table 2. Ticket splitting is positively associated with being located between the parties on an ideological spectrum (note the positive logit coefficient and change in probability score for the “place self between the major parties” variable). On the other hand, the model coefficient barely reaches conventional levels of statistical significance, and the substantive impact of being a moderate is weaker than the other explanatory variables, including whether one lives in a state with a straight-party ballot mechanism. In addition, the number of voters who place themselves in between the two major parties has remained constant over the last twenty years (at around 23%), so ideological moderation by itself does not account for the recent decline in ticket splitting.

On the whole, the evidence in Table 2 provides more support for a party salience theory of ticket splitting. When party labels are less salient and less informative about candidate policy positions, there is less to prevent a voter from crossing party lines. Thus far, we see that public perceptions about party differences respond to party movement (as measured by congressional roll call votes) and that voters weigh party and ideology more heavily when they perceive important policy differences between the parties.

Furthermore, voters who fail to see important policy differences between the parties are

¹⁹ When the multivariate model in Table 2 is modified to estimate separate effects of the South variable for each election, the South is a significant predictor of ticket splitting in 1984 and 1988 (the only elections

more likely to cast split tickets. This suggests that ticket splitting should be more common when the parties converge ideologically and less common when the parties diverge.

Proposition 4: President-House ticket splitting should increase when the parties polarize and decrease when the parties converge toward the center.

One way to test this proposition is to examine the number of congressional districts with split outcomes each year (i.e., districts carried by a presidential candidate of one party and a House candidate of a different party). I estimate a regression equation in which split-district outcomes from 1900 to 2000 are modeled as a function of party polarization, presidential victory margin, and incumbency.

As in Figure 3, Poole and Rosenthal's (1997) DW-NOMINATE scores are used to measure party polarization. I simply calculate the difference between the mean Republican and Democratic DW-NOMINATE scores in the House for the Congress preceding each presidential election as my measure of party polarization. According to the party salience theory, party polarization should be inversely related to ticket splitting. In contrast, policy balancing theory predicts a positive relationship between party polarization and ticket splitting.

In an era of "candidate-centered" politics, many argue that ticket splitting occurs when an appealing candidate manages to attract voters from the opposite party (Wattenberg 1991; Beck et al. 1992). The multivariate analysis includes the president's margin of victory (in percentage points) to account for the expectation that popular presidential candidates may generate more ticket splitting by attracting an unusually large

when the Democrats failed to nominate a southern candidate for president).

number of votes from the opposition.²⁰ The final explanatory variable is a measure of the incumbency advantage in House elections (Gelman and King 1990). Given that incumbency is a strong predictor of ticket splitting, when the incumbency advantage increases, we should observe more ticket splitting.

It is possible that presidential landslides only influence ticket splitting in the modern candidate-centered campaign era with smaller presidential coattails. Thus, I estimate a second regression model that includes as an explanatory variable an interaction between the margin of victory in the presidential race and a dummy variable marking elections in the “candidate-centered” period of modern American politics. I choose 1952 as the beginning of the candidate-centered era, since Eisenhower and Stevenson were the first presidential candidates to use television ads in a presidential campaign (Ansolabehere et al. 1993). The main effect for victory margin should be insignificant, while the interaction term should produce a positive and significant coefficient, consistent with the idea that candidate-driven ticket splitting is a characteristic of the modern era of American politics.

[Table 3 about here]

As the regression estimates in Table 3 indicate, party convergence, incumbency, and lopsided presidential elections are associated with higher levels of President-House ticket splitting. These results hold in both models presented in Table 3, with one caveat discussed below.²¹ Thus, we find more support for a party salience theory of ticket

²⁰ The presidential victory margin variable probably also captures the effects of ideologically extreme candidates (discussed above). Some may argue that a presidential candidate may win by a landslide because of higher levels of ticket splitting. However, the outcome reflects the relative popularity of the two candidates before the election.

²¹ Diagnostic tests revealed no autocorrelation in the regression models in Table 3. However, they did indicate that 1920, 1984, and 2000 were influential observations in model 1, with Cook's d values slightly larger than

splitting, and the evidence runs contrary to policy balancing theories. When the parties converge toward the ideological center, ticket splitting increases. When the parties polarize, ticket splitting decreases.²² Again, a substantial increase in party polarization since the 1970s goes a long way toward explaining the decline in split districts during the last twenty years. The difference between mean party DW-NOMINATE scores in the House has increased from .39 in 1972 to roughly .75 in recent Congresses (on a scale that runs from -1 to +1). According to the regression equations in Table 3, this increase in party polarization led to an expected decline in split districts of about 9 or 10 percentage points.

The results in Table 3 also suggest that the association between the president's winning margin and split districts is stronger for the latter half of this century. As expected, the interaction term is positive and significant in the second model, while the main effect for the victory margin variable is not statistically significant.²³ Landslide presidential elections generally failed to produce divided government before the 1950s because the fate of congressional candidates was closely linked to the performance of the party's presidential candidate. In contrast, lopsided presidential contests are more likely to produce divided outcomes today because congressional campaigns are more independent of the race at the top of the ticket.

the critical value of .18 (Fox 1991). In model 2, none of the observations generated influence statistics exceeding the critical value. The results for both models are the same when influential cases are dropped or when a robust regression method, which corrects for outliers and influential cases (Fox 1991), is used. See Brunell et al. (2001) for similar results.

²² Some may try to square this evidence with policy balancing theory by arguing that moderate voters are more comfortable splitting their votes between moderate candidates from each party rather than splitting their votes between ideological extremists. Voters may be less certain about the likely policy outcomes negotiated by elected officials occupying opposite poles on the ideological spectrum (Lacy and Niou 1998). However, this argument guts the theory by subverting the basic motivation for policy balancing: the need to strike a balance between ideologically extreme parties and their elected officials.

²³ An F test indicates that the coefficients for the interaction term and the main effect for victory margin are

Conclusion

It is still fashionable discuss ticket splitting in terms of a partisan decline in the mass electorate. One text states that “attachments to the parties are weak and getting weaker” (Lawrence 1999, 173). Another argues that voters use party identification “less and less as a cue in voting behavior” (Wattenberg 1998, 27). Another concludes that “these changes are reflected in increased split-ticket voting” (Patterson 2001, 221). It is apparent that the conventional wisdom regarding partisan decline and ticket splitting needs to be revised. There is abundant evidence of increasing partisanship among the mass public and a substantial decrease in ticket splitting in recent elections. The increased ticket splitting of the 1960s and 1970s is certainly related to weakened party attachments and the rise of candidate-centered campaigns during that period. More recently, however, we have witnessed the converse of this relationship: resurgent partisanship and decreased ticket splitting as party labels and ideological positions have become more relevant to voters.

The rise and fall of ticket splitting can be understood in terms of a fall and rise in the salience of party labels. When the parties converge toward the ideological center, voters rely less on party and policy considerations, produce more ticket splitting. The evidence provides some support for a party salience theory of ticket splitting. Public perceptions of the parties indeed respond to party movement at the national level. Voters who see important differences between the parties rely more heavily on party and

statistically different from one another at the .05 significance level.

ideology and thus are less likely to cast split ballots. Finally, when the parties polarize, as they have during the last twenty years, ticket splitting declines.

As V.O. Key has argued, it is important to consider American voting behavior in light of the actions of the parties in government. In recent years, ideological disputes in Washington have highlighted the policy differences between the parties. As a result, voters have come to see government and candidates in a more partisan and ideological light, which increases the salience of party labels in the voting booth.

The extremely close competitive balance between the two major parties makes it difficult to predict the future of divided government in the United States. However, the theory and evidence here does suggest some indicators to follow. If the bipartisanship that has largely prevailed in the capital since September 11, 2001 continues to obscure party differences on the major issues of the day, we should expect to see an increase in ticket splitting in the coming elections. If, on the other hand, government returns to the ideologically charged partisan disputes that characterized American politics before the terrorist attacks, then ticket splitting should remain at the relatively low levels seen in the 2000 election.

Appendix – Summary of NES Variable Codes

Split ticket voting: coded as 1 for respondents who voted for presidential and House candidates of opposite parties, 0 for respondents who voted for candidates of the same party.

Party Identification: The standard seven-point party identification scale, ranging from strong Democrats (coded as -3) to strong Republicans (+3).

Strength of Partisanship: coded 1 for pure independents, 2 for independent leaners, 3 for weak partisans, and 4 for strong partisans.

Ideology: Summary of a respondent's self-assessed ideology, coded as -1 for liberals, 0 for moderates, and +1 for conservatives. This summary measures preserves a lot of missing data that is lost when using the seven-point ideological self-placement.

Incumbency: coded +1 for a Republican incumbent, 0 for an open seat, and -1 for a Democratic incumbent.

Presidential Candidate Affect: Based on open-ended questions about the presidential candidates, this variable is the sum of the number of likes for the Republican and dislikes for the Democrat minus the number of likes for the Democrat and dislikes for the Republican (up to 5 mentions each). Values range from -10 (extreme affect for the Democrat) to +10 (extreme advantage for the Republican).

Important Party Differences: Coded as 1 if the respondent says there are "important differences" in what the two major parties stand for, 0 if the respondent says "no" or "don't know."

Care About Outcome: Coded as 1 if the respondent cares "a good deal" about who wins the presidential election, 0 if the respondent doesn't care very much or doesn't know.

South: Coded as 1 for resident of one of the eleven former Confederate states, 0 for all others.

Straight-Party Ballot Device: coded 1 if the respondent resides in a state with a straight-party option on the ballot, 0 if not.

Place Self Between the Major Parties: coded as 1 for those who place themselves to the left of the Democratic party and to the right of the Republican party on the seven-point ideology scale, and 0 otherwise (including those who fail to place themselves or both parties on the scale).

House Incumbent of Own Party: coded 1 if the respondent resides in a congressional district where the incumbent is from the same party as the respondent's chosen presidential candidate, 0 otherwise.

House Incumbent of Opposite Party: coded 1 if the respondent resides in a district where the incumbent is from the opposite party, 0 otherwise.

Recall Name of Own Party House Candidate: Coded as 1 if the respondent accurately recalls the name of the House candidate from the same party as his chosen presidential candidate, 0 otherwise.

Recall Name of Opposite Party House Candidate: Coded as 1 if the respondent accurately recalls the name of the House candidate from the opposite party, 0 otherwise.

Presidential Pull on Republicans: coded as 1 if a Republican partisan rates the Democratic presidential candidate better than the Republican candidate on the presidential candidate affect scale, 0 otherwise. Leaners are treated as partisans.

Presidential Pull on Democrats: coded as 1 if a Democratic partisan rates the Republican presidential candidate better than the Democratic candidate on the presidential candidate affect scale, 0 otherwise. Leaners are treated as partisans.

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Table 1
A Multivariate Analysis of Voting in National Elections
1984-2000

Independent Variables	Dependent Variable: Vote Choice	
	President	House
Constant	.14 (.09)	-.04 (.07)
Party Identification	.53*** (.05)	.54*** (.03)
Ideology	.43*** (0.10)	.19** (0.08)
Incumbency	----	1.23*** (0.07)
Presidential Candidate Affect	.59*** (.04)	----
Important Party Differences	-.11 (.13)	-.03 (.08)
Party Identification * Important Party Differences	.19*** (.07)	.14*** (0.04)
Ideology * Important Party Differences	.29** (.14)	.31*** (.10)
Incumbency * Important Party Differences	----	-.04 (.09)
Presidential Candidate Affect * Important Party Differences	.05 (.06)	----
Number of cases	4584	5290
Model Chi-square	4403.8***	2911.1***
PRE	.69	.40

Note: The House vote model only includes races contested by both major parties. The dependent variables are coded 1 for Republican votes and 0 for Democratic votes. Cell entries are logit coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).

***p<.01 (two-tailed)

**p<.05 (two-tailed)

*p<.1 (two-tailed)

Sources: NES Cumulative Data File 1948-96, 2000 Pre- and Post-Election Study

Table 2
A Multivariate Analysis of President-House Ticket Splitting
1980-2000

Independent Variables	Coefficient (Std. Error)	Change in Probability
Important Party Differences	-.49*** (.10)	-.11
Strength of Party Identification	-.34*** (.05)	-.20
Care About Outcome	-.27** (0.11)	-.06
South	.19* (.10)	.05
Straight-Party Ballot Device	-.20** (.09)	-.05
Place Self Between the Major Parties	.18* (.10)	.04
House Incumbent of Own Party	-1.12*** (.16)	-.22
House Incumbent of Opposite Party	1.09*** (.14)	.27
Recall Name of Own Party House Candidate	-.96*** (.12)	-.19
Recall Name of Opposite Party House Candidate	.95*** (.11)	.23
Presidential Pull on Republicans	1.32*** (.18)	.31
Presidential Pull on Democrats	.91*** (.17)	.22
Constant	-.10 (.20)	---
Number of cases	4200	
Model Chi-square	1152.6***	
Pseudo-R ²	.26	

Analysis only includes House races contested by both major parties. The dependent variable is coded 1 for a split ticket and 0 for a straight ticket. Cell entries are logit coefficients (std. errors in parentheses). Change in probability values are calculated by moving the variable of interest from its minimum to maximum value while holding all other variables constant at modal values. ***p<.01, **p<.05, *p<.1 (two-tailed)

Sources: NES Cumulative Data File 1948-96, 2000 Pre- and Post-Election Study

Table 3
A Multivariate Analysis of Split-District Outcomes, 1900-2000

Independent Variables	Model 1	Model 2
Constant	27.73*** (7.13)	27.52*** (7.01)
Mean Distance Between Parties (D-NOMINATE)	-31.65*** (8.34)	-25.42*** (8.47)
President Victory Margin (Percent)	0.29* (0.15)	0.01 (0.19)
Incumbency Advantage (Gelman-King)	2.26*** (0.45)	1.75** (0.67)
Modern Era (since 1948)	----	-1.99 (5.67)
President Victory Margin * Modern Era	----	0.60** (0.28)
Number of cases	26	26
Adjusted R ²	.75	.79
Std. Error of Estimate	5.97	5.50
Durbin-Watson <i>d</i>	1.92	2.17

Note: The dependent variable is the percentage of House districts won by a presidential candidate of one party and a House candidate of another party. Cell entries are OLS coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).

***p<.01 (two-tailed)

**p<.05 (two-tailed)

*p<.1 (two-tailed)

Figure 1
Indicators of Ticket Splitting, 1900-2000

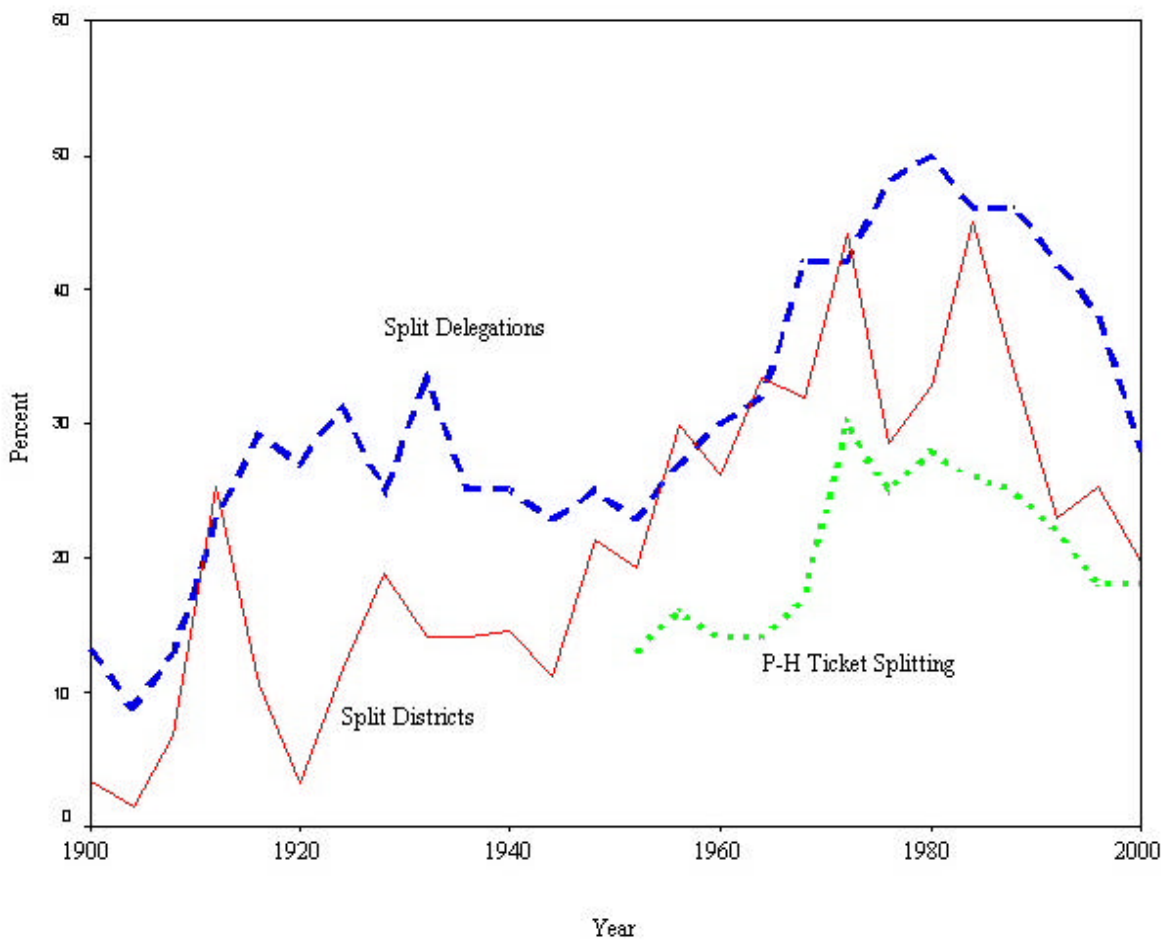


Figure 2
Relationship Between Party Polarization and
Public Perceptions of Important Party Differences, 1952-2000

