The Changing Value of Seniority in the U.S. House: Conditional Party Government Revised

Andrew B. Hall   Harvard University
Kenneth A. Shepsle   Harvard University

In this article, we argue that institutional changes to the seniority system have electoral consequences to incumbents. Building on the theory of Conditional Party Government, we argue that the consolidation of power in the hands of party leadership reduces the electoral value of seniority. This reduction occurs because power that was previously in the hands of committee chairs, whose roles are obtained through seniority, is ceded to party leaders. By increasing the party's brand, this centralization also delivers a dividend received by all members regardless of seniority. We present empirical evidence supporting this argument. Our findings suggest that the "condition" of Conditional Party Government, i.e., preference homogeneity among the majority party, is only a necessary condition; in order for centralization to occur, party reformers must also overcome the opposition of entrenched senior members.

P artly in response to the famous interrogative of Krehbiel (1993)—"Where's the party?"—a number of scholars have proposed arguments in which legislative parties play a consequential role in chamber politics.[1,2] The cartel theory associated with Cox and McCubbins (2007) and the conditional party government theory of Aldrich and Rohde (2001) share the view that parties influence legislative outcomes through leadership control of institutional arrangements and practices. But majority-leadership impact on legislative proceedings is *variable*, a point made especially clear in the Aldrich-Rohde theory of conditional party government (CPG, hereafter)—centralized party government is *conditional*.

The "condition" part of CPG theory is the degree of homogeneity of policy preferences among members of the majority party and, a frequent accompaniment, the degree of polarization between it and the opposition.[3] When the majority party coheres around policy, its members are willing to "grease the skids" for the prosecution of the party's policy agenda by delegating agenda-setting authority and other powers and resources to their party leaders. In general, that is, "there is a relationship between chamber CPG and the internal organization of the chamber" (Aldrich, Berger, and Rohde 2002, 32) or, more concretely, "the greater the degree to which the condition [preference homogeneity within and preference divergence between legislative parties] is met, the more likely that members of a party choose to provide their legislative party institutions and party leadership with stronger powers and greater resources" (Aldrich, Rohde, and Tofias 2007, 103). Majority-party success in passing commonly supported legislation burnishes the party label and underscores the record of accomplishment of its members. These are assets when majority legislators next face their constituents for contract renewal.

---

[1]An online appendix for this article is available at http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0022381613001102 containing additional statistical results and robustness checks. Data and replication code are available at http://thedata.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/hs13.

[2]This literature is summarized by Cox and McCubbins (2005, chap. 1; 2007).

[3]The CPG literature has not focused much on the extent of preference homogeneity among members of the opposition party. Perhaps this is because homogeneity in either party is a function of sorting in the electorate (along with reinforcing redistricting), so that homogeneity in one is often accompanied by homogeneity in the other. We will devote most of our attention, as does the CPG literature, to the state of the majority party. However, our argument suggests some interesting distinctions of CPG's effect on the majority and minority parties that we examine in the empirical section.

The policy preferences of members of the majority party, however, may be heterogeneous— think the north-south split in the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s in Sam Rayburn's Democratic majority (lingering on in the rest of the 1960s and into the 1970s under McCormack and Albert). In circumstances such as these, majority-party members are loathe to entrust their leaders with unchecked discretion. Instead, leaders are made beholden to their caucuses and to their far-from-reliable, indeed sometimes irreconcilable, powerful senior colleagues.[4]

As a theoretical expectation of CPG theory, then, we should see incumbents of the majority party (and perhaps the minority party) keen to strengthen party organization and institutional authority in eras when the "condition" is satisfied and to decentralize authority in eras when the "condition" fails. Moreover, we should see incumbents of the majority party benefitting electorally from these moves in periods in which the condition is met. That is, we should see stronger electoral advantage for majority-party incumbents in an era of centralized party government. We provide evidence supporting this view.

But that is not the end of the story. In a strong-party era—one in which central party institutions and leadership have been strengthened—we uncover a differential effect on electoral benefits among members of the majority party. In an era of weak party leadership, there is electoral benefit to seniority. Because senior members dominate committee and party institutions, they are valuable to their districts and electorally successful as a result. The electoral value of seniority, however, declines in a strong-party era. With central party leaders calling more of the shots, majority-party members play less consequential agenda-setting roles and, in the extreme, are essentially foot soldiers for, e.g., Newt Gingrich or Nancy Pelosi. That is, while there is a clear upside for majority-party members in a strong-party era from facilitating the prosecution of their party's agenda, the costs of strengthening party institutions are unevenly borne by its members. With more to lose institutionally from the strengthening of leadership, senior members are affected more significantly than junior members.

This is our novel revision of CPG theory, and it, too, is revealed quite clearly in our empirical analysis.

The centralization of agenda power in the majority party is associated with a marked decrease in the electoral return to seniority. Moreover, this diminishing advantage of seniority in strong-party eras relative to weak-party eras is exclusively a majority-party affair. No such tax on political capital (seniority) is exacted from members of the minority party. These and other empirical expectations are examined in the empirical section. There we describe a dataset comprising congressional elections from 1946 to 2008 enabling us to analyze a modified version of CPG theory. This 62-year period covers widely varying historical and political contexts and straddles the dramatic southern realignment of the 1960s and 1970s. At all turns, we take care to generate robustness checks from theory and from the history of the House of Representatives.

We demonstrate that majority-party leaders endowed with enhanced agenda power and other institutional authority benefit the majority party rank-and-file, but at the partial expense of seniors in the majority party. Majority-party members may exhibit consensus on policy but nevertheless benefit differentially from making the institutional moves to capture the fruits of this consensus. Indeed, even if members agreed perfectly on policy, senior members might still be loathe to surrender institutionally granted powers that allow them to secure benefits for their constituents. As this consensus decreases, the negative agenda power vested in senior members becomes all the more valuable.

Our argument should be seen as fitting into a literature connecting the electoral and legislative arenas. Too frequently those forecasting congressional elections fail to take on board the impact of legislative arrangements and political behavior therein. Legislative elections are not dependent exclusively on national conditions and presidential popularity on election day, but also pivot on how legislators have conducted themselves, *as legislators*, in the previous legislative session (see, for example, Brady, Fiorina, and Wilkins 2011). And, in light of this, legislators—especially *majority* legislators—arrange institutional practices with a gimlet eye on future electoral contests, a perspective that goes back to Mayhew (1974), Fiorina ([1977] 1989), and their intellectual progeny.

That many other changes occur across the political landscape over the time period we study is indisputable. Whenever possible, the analysis addresses these potentially confounding factors. We examine, for example, the pattern of empirical evidence in state legislatures and the U.S. Senate—bodies that did

---

[4]There is, of course, a mixed case in which majority preferences are homogeneous on many but not all issues. Majority-party success on issues with intraparty preference heterogeneity may actually *harm* some of its members. This appears to have been the case in 2010 on "cap and trade" environmental legislation. See Brady, Fiorina, and Wilkins (2011).

not carry out the same reforms as the House—and find no effect on the electoral benefits of seniority. This suggests that broader historical forces do not account for what we find in the House. The results also do not depend on the inclusion of southern states whose politics changed so much in the middle of the century.[5] Nevertheless, we view the primary contribution of the article to be a *theoretical* amendment of CPG; the statistical analyses are consistent with our claim but leave many empirical avenues unexplored.

Theoretical Context, Empirical Strategy, and Data

Theoretical Context

We demonstrate that periods of majority-party policy cohesion are indeed associated with an increased centralization of legislative agenda-setting authority in party leaders, just as postulated by CPG theory. But we also observe that this constitutes a reallocation away from senior party members who, as committee and subcommittee chairs, had formerly possessed agenda power in their respective jurisdictions. This reallocation produces a *gross* electoral benefit enjoyed by all party members as a consequence of the coordination of legislative policymaking in areas of widespread majority-party consensus. The leadership, through its control of plenary time and agenda rules, greases the skids for party policy objectives widely shared by its members. However, it also imposes a tax disproportionately borne by those who previously enjoyed agenda power.

We think about this theoretically in terms of valence effects. A legislator anticipating the next election thinks in terms of the profile of characteristics he or she will bring to the campaign and how they will fare against those of an (unknown) opponent. Some, like the legislator's campaigning skills or his or her socioeconomic characteristics (age, gender, race, ethnicity, etc.), are fixed elements of the legislator's profile. Others, like his or her votes in the legislature or the party's policy successes and failures, are de-

termined by actions during the legislative session which, in turn, are affected by how the majority party structures legislative arrangements and procedures. Among these latter characteristics are personal chamber assets. As a member of the majority party, his or her party label will be an electoral benefit or burden depending upon the performance of the majority party in the session and on the district's characteristics; so, too, will the member's committee assignments, leadership posts, and seniority, each of which affects his or her ability to impress constituents and deliver benefits to the district.

Seniority, in particular, is a summary statistic of member potential to serve constituency interests. As a measure of experience, it calibrates a member's knowledge, involvement, and understanding of legislative issues and the nuances of the legislative process. An experienced legislator knows the legislative context and is embedded in the network of important players in policy jurisdictions of importance to the constituency. An experienced legislator is familiar with how Washington works, both on the Hill and downtown in executive branch agencies. An experienced legislator also has a track record of previous legislative successes (and electoral victories). These assets are given the broadest room to have impact when important chamber positions are matched to experience. An experienced majority-party legislator who also enjoys jurisdictional agenda power possesses advantages in attuning policy to his or her constituency's requirements. In short, a seniority system consisting of decentralized subsets of majority-party legislators with disproportionate influence in their respective jurisdictions attached to experience benefits senior majority incumbents.

Thus, seniority is a valence characteristic that, along with other characteristics well matched to constituency inclinations, plays a positive role in the electoral arena for all incumbents, especially for senior majority-party incumbents when legislative authority is seniority-based. Indeed, among such valence characteristics it enjoys the property that it cannot be trumped by a challenger, once his or her identity is known. A challenger may be better educated or of an age or race or ethnicity better suited to constituency preferences; he or she may even hold policy preferences more popular with voters. But a challenger cannot be more senior. As long as the incumbent's party maintains its majority, an incumbent's seniority is a valuable asset to the constituency. It thus provides a valence cushion against the possibility of a bad draw

---

[5]Thus, the decline in the value of seniority in the late twentieth-century House was not driven by the replacement of senior southerners in the ranks of the Democratic majority.

(for the incumbent) from the distribution of potential challengers.[6]

This claim forces a revision of CPG theory. The electoral fortunes of majority-party members who collectively share policy preferences are facilitated by the centralization of agenda control in the party leadership.[7] This allows the majority party to prosecute its shared aspirations effectively, a result redounding to the electoral benefit of its members. But it is not the only thing happening. The reallocation of agenda power away from senior majority-party members results in their losing the valence value they enjoyed in a more decentralized seniority system. Thus, they may not be keen supporters of centralization, even if they share the same policy aspirations as other party members. That is, the policy-consensus condition of CPG is no more than a necessary one.

Empirical Strategy

Our goal is to examine the electoral returns to seniority across eras of strong and weak legislative parties. If the theoretical claim is correct, eras of stronger parties should feature lower electoral returns to seniority for majority-party incumbents. This reduction in the electoral returns to seniority stems from the reallocation of agenda power from senior members to the party leadership, a reallocation not accounted for in existing theories of conditional party government. To test this claim, we exploit the reforms of the 1970s in the House of Representatives which, we argue, partition the postwar period into the "Weak Party Era" (WPE; 1946–76) and the "Strong Party Era" (SPE; 1977–present).

Due to many factors including an increase in party homogeneity, both parties undertook a series of rule changes in the early 1970s that augmented the power of the party leadership at the expense of senior members. The majority Democrats in particular assaulted the tradition of deference to seniority in assigning committee chairmanships. No longer would plum committee chairmanships belong exclusively to senior members by right; instead, increasing discretion over committee chairmanships would devolve upon the party caucus and party leadership. The majority Democrats (and later the majority Republicans) strengthened the party leadership, particularly its control of the Rules Committee, plenary time, committee assignments, and bill referral.

Shaw captures the changes clearly: "In various ways traditional norms of deference were giving way to new arrangements designed to involve junior representatives and senators in matters previously the concern of senior members" (1981, 274). Discussing these changes to the committee chairmanship selection process, Democratic Speaker of the House Carl Albert declared: "The seniority system – for sixty-two years the path to legislative domination – died that day . . . From that moment on every chairman knew that power flowed not from personal longevity but from the entire Democratic membership" (as quoted in Remini 2006, 433). The upshot of the reforms was a stark shift from an era of weak legislative parties, in which committee agenda power and deference to seniority loomed large, to an era of strong parties, in which party leadership held a far tighter grip on the reins.[8]

We take advantage of this historical change by comparing the electoral performance of incumbents of differing levels of seniority in the WPE and the SPE. Our main prediction, which we test below, is that seniority is more valuable electorally in the WPE, when senior members are able to convert their longevity into more value for their constituents. Because the reforms steadily accumulated through the mid-1970s (Shaw 1981), we take 1976 to be the last election considered part of the WPE. However, all of the results we report are robust to moving the end of the WPE backwards or forwards in time.[9]

---

[6]Voters need not be consciously aware of their representative's seniority for this logic to carry through. We imagine instead that voters care about electing a candidate who matches their partisan views but, crucially, also care about the goods and services the legislator provides to the district. If the incumbent is good enough at providing these goods—and a senior incumbent granted institutional power may be quite good at this—then voters, especially moderate voters, may be willing to forego partisan match in favor of maintaining their district's position in the seniority queue in Congress.

[7]This is an "on-average" claim. A successful majority-party record is appealing on average to majority-party districts; majority-party legislators in districts ideologically distant from the party platform may be hurt by those very successes.

[8]Because the Democratic Party was the majority party in the SPE until 1995, most of the relevant action occurred in the Democratic Caucus. Of course, in 1995, the Republicans dramatically centralized control in their leadership.

[9]Our empirical strategy coarsens the data considerably and may seem inferior to using a continuous measure of party homogeneity, such as those used in McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006) and Aldrich, Berger, and Rohde (2002). These measures, highly useful in other contexts, are not appropriate for this analysis. Such measures focus on *ex post* voting behavior. These legislative votes occur after—and indeed depend on—decisions of legislative organization.

Data and a First Look

To test our argument, we use a dataset on congressional elections from 1946 to 2008 that comes from a series of articles including Ansolabehere et al. (2010) and Hirano et al. (2010).[10] It identifies representatives by name, district, and year and contains electoral results for all candidates. Because we have representatives' names, we are able to track them over time to determine their seniority, avoiding problems from redistricting. For a full description of all data, along with summary tables, see the online appendix.

We expect the distribution of majority-party incumbent vote shares to have changed from the WPE to the SPE in two respects. First, a positive mean shift is expected, reflecting the net benefit to all majority-party members from the newly strengthened party leadership. Second, we expect a concentration in the distribution, i.e., a variance reduction, reflecting the fact that vote shares of junior and senior members have become more similar as seniority matters less.[11] More formally, our null hypotheses are:

$$H_{o,\mu} : \mu_{WPE} = \mu_{SPE},$$
$$H_{o,\sigma} : \sigma^2_{WPE} = \sigma^2_{SPE}.$$

A one-sided means test rejects the null hypothesis that the means are the same in the two eras against the alternate hypothesis that $\mu_{SPE} > \mu_{WPE}$ with p-value $< .0001$. A one-sided equality-of-variance test rejects the null hypothesis that the variances are the same against the alternative hypothesis that $\sigma^2_{WPE} > \sigma^2_{SPE}$ with p-value $< .001$.[12] We therefore find strong evidence for our hypotheses about the changing distribution of majority-party incumbent vote share. Figure 1 is consistent with both the shift and the concentration predictions: the distribution of majority-party incumbent vote share has shifted to the right in the SPE, and it has become more concentrated.

FIGURE 1 Distribution of Majority-Party Incumbent Vote Share by Era
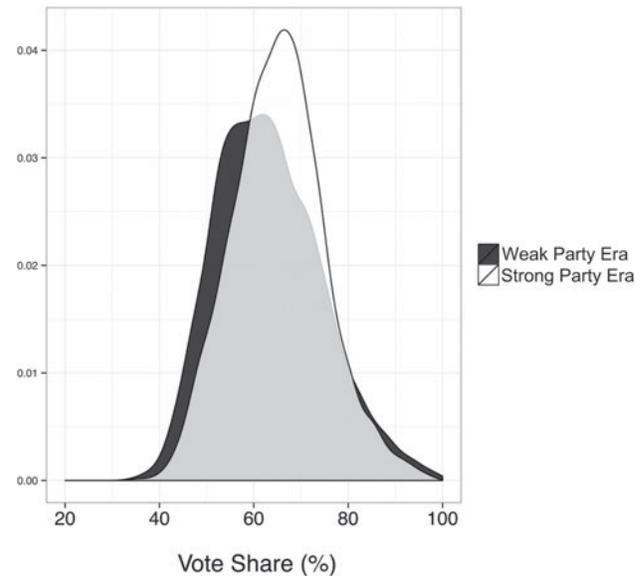
Note: In this figure, we plot the density of majority-party incumbent vote share in the Weak Party Era (1946–76), drawn in black, and in the Strong Party Era (1977–2008), drawn in white. The graph shows that majority-party incumbent vote share has shifted to the right in the Strong Party Era, representing a common benefit to all majority-party incumbents, and has also condensed, representing an increase in the similarity of majority-party incumbents.

Empirical Results

Main Result

In Table 1, we present our main ordinary least squares (OLS) results. Our dependent variable is the two-party vote share, measured in percentage points (i.e., ranging from 0 to 100), for all majority-party incumbent representatives running for contested re-election in the House from 1946 to 2008. The variable "SPE" is a dummy variable coded as 1 for all years after 1976.

We measure seniority as the number of previous times an incumbent has won reelection. For example, a two-term representative has a seniority value of 1, since she has successfully run one previous time as an incumbent.[13] To address autocorrelation among

---

[10]The dataset was generously provided to the authors by James Snyder.

[11]We operationalize vote share as the share of the two-party vote for each majority-party incumbent candidate.

[12]For the *t*-test, we use Welch's test to account for unequal variance (done using t-test with the unequal option in Stata), although our results are robust to other forms of the test. To test for unequal variance, we use Levene's test (using the command sdtest in Stata), but our results are robust to using Bartlett's test as well (using the command oneway in Stata).

[13]This definition may seem odd, but it allows for an easier interpretation of the constant term. Since we are only using incumbents, every observed representative has served at least one term in Congress. We are merely taking the number of terms a representative has served and shifting back by one. The constant therefore has a clean interpretation: it is the mean vote share for an incumbent running for her first reelection.

TABLE 1   Majority-Party Incumbent Electoral Outcomes and Seniority Across Eras, 1946–2008

Variables	Ordinary Least Squares (1) Vote Share	Representative Fixed Effects (2) Vote Share	Probit (Mfx) (3) Win Election
SPE ($\hat{\alpha}_{SPE}$)	4.84*	0.66	0.08*
	(0.63)	(0.83)	(0.01)
Seniority ($\hat{\beta}_S$)	0.83*	0.54*	0.02*
	(0.08)	(0.12)	(0.00)
Seniority · Strong Party Era ($\hat{\beta}_{SPE}$)	-0.56*	-0.62*	-0.01*
	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.00)
Constant ($\hat{\alpha}$)	61.24*	64.75*	
	(0.46)	(0.49)	
Observations	6,065	6,065	6,065
Number of fixed effects		1,863	

Note: We present our main results. In column (1), we regress vote share on seniority for majority-party incumbents, along with a dummy indicating the Strong Party Era (SPE; 1977–2008) and an interaction of this dummy and seniority. The results show that seniority provides a high return in the WPE (1946–1976), but a much lower return in the SPE. In column (2), we use fixed effects for individual representatives and find a similar result. Column (3) presents marginal effects from probit estimation of the probability of incumbent reelection. Standard errors (clustered by representative) in parentheses; *$p < 0.05$. Reported probit coefficients are marginal effects.

repeated observations of the same incumbent, we cluster all standard errors by representative.

Column (1) corresponds to the following model:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \alpha_{SPE}SPE_{it} + \beta_S S_{it} + \beta_{SPE}(S_{it} \cdot SPE_{it}) + \epsilon_{it}.$$
(1)

Here *it* indexes representative-year observations (note that we are pooling over *t*), $\varepsilon_{it} \sim N(0, \sigma_i^2)$, *S* is our measure of seniority, and *Y* is vote share.[14] This directly tests our hypothesis that the returns to seniority should be lower in the SPE. β_{SPE} represents the additional vote share associated with an increase of one in seniority in the SPE. The overall increase in vote share associated with an increase of one term of service in the SPE is therefore $\beta_S + \beta_{SPE}$. Since we are interested in whether the return to seniority changes in the SPE relative to the WPE we focus on the sign and the significance level of $\hat{\beta}_{SPE}$.

The regression results are consistent with our hypothesis. While an additional term of seniority in the WPE is associated with a .83 percentage-point increase in incumbent vote share, an additional term in the SPE is associated with only a .27 percentage-point increase, a difference that is statistically significant at the .01 level.[15]

[14]A reviewer advocated for the addition of year fixed effects to account for unobserved time-varying factors. Our results are robust to the inclusion of these dummies. The analysis is available from the authors upon request.

[15]Note that all majority-party incumbents enjoy a boost of 4.84% in vote share in the SPE, independent of seniority — the dividend of a more effective majority party.

To illustrate, a freshman member of the majority party (an incumbent who has never run as an incumbent so that $S = 0$) can expect a vote share in the SPE of 66.08% (61.24% + 4.84%), whereas she can expect only 61.24% in the WPE—an SPE premium of 4.84%. The ability of her party to prosecute its agenda in the SPE burnishes the party label and provides a dividend—indeed, a nontrivial dividend. As seniority accumulates, a member's expected vote share grows, but the size of the SPE dividend shrinks and ultimately turns negative. Thus, a four-term member ($S = 3$) expects a 66.89% vote share in the SPE (61.24% + 4.84% + 3 (0.27%)) and 63.73% in the weak party era (61.24% + 3 (0.83%)), yielding a net SPE dividend of 3.16%. Compared to the freshman, a four-term member expects a larger vote share (66.89% v. 66.08%) but a smaller net dividend (3.16% v. 4.84%) in the SPE. An 11-term member ($S = 10$) in the SPE expects a vote share of 68.78% compared to 69.54% in the WPE—a negative net dividend of -0.76%. The value of seniority in the WPE, when large enough, exceeds the value of being a senior member of a strong majority party. This pattern of results requires a reinterpretation of conditional party government, something we develop further in the discussion section.

In column (2), we add fixed effects for individual representatives. This strategy controls for unobserved differences across representatives. The results show that even within a given majority-party incumbent's career, the switch to the new party regime is associated with a significant reduction in

the return to seniority.[16] Finally, in column (3), we use incumbent reelection as the outcome variable and estimate the model from Equation (1) by probit. The results show that the changing return to seniority has meaningful electoral consequences for incumbents, not just changes in vote share.

In the above regressions, we use majority-party incumbent-vote outcomes in contested elections. We are not including incumbents who run unopposed or who choose not to run.[17] It is well-known that these factors trouble many estimates of incumbency advantage (see, for example, Gelman and King 1990). We are not estimating the incumbency advantage, but rather we are showing that, *among incumbents*, the returns to seniority have diminished in the SPE. Because we are looking at the *difference* between two eras among incumbents, these issues will not affect our inference unless incumbents have systematically altered their strategic behavior since the WPE in a manner that depends on the level of their seniority.[18] This seems unlikely.

Robustness Checks

In our main specification, we employ a linear model as a good first approximation of the return to seniority. It is reasonable, however, to suspect that the relationship between seniority and vote share is nonlinear, with gains to seniority accruing faster in earlier terms. A sophomore legislator might see her vote share increase markedly in her second reelection attempt compared to her first, but it is unlikely that John Dingell gains significant vote share between, say, his 25th and 26th terms of service. Alford and Hibbing (1981) provide evidence for such a diminishing-returns relationship. With the advantage of 27 additional years of data, we are able to confirm this nonlinearity and compare returns across our two eras.

In Figure 2, we employ a generalized additive model (GAM), the widely-used scatterplot smoothing method proposed in Hastie and Tibshirani (1990), to show the graphical relationship between seniority and

---

[16]It is worth noting that, while the coefficients appear to suggest that the seniority effect here, $\hat{\beta}_S + \hat{\beta}_{SPE}$, has gone negative, this sum is not significantly different from zero ($p = .31$). The attenuation of $\hat{\alpha}_{SPE}$ in the fixed-effects model likely results from only estimating it using members whose careers span the two eras.

[17]Our results are robust to the inclusion of uncontested elections, where incumbents are coded as receiving 100% of the vote share. See Table 9 in the appendix.

[18]A change in behavior across the two eras common to all incumbents regardless of seniority is not sufficient to affect our estimate since it would not affect the slope of the seniority curve.

FIGURE 2 **Seniority and Vote Share**
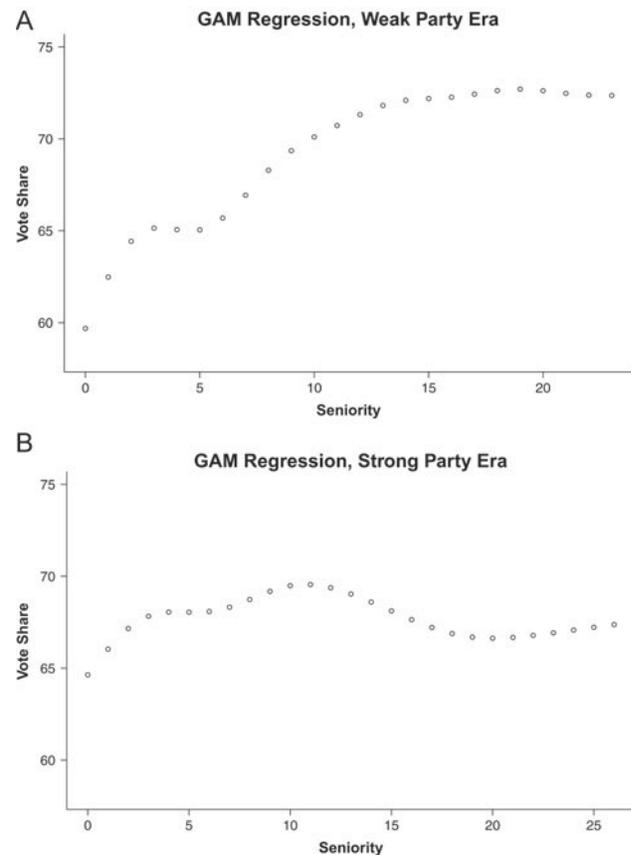
Note: In the above figures, we use nonparametric scatterplot smoothing to show the positive, nonlinear association between seniority and majority-party incumbent vote share in the WPE, and the relatively flat, attenuated association between the two variables in the SPE. Each point on the graph represents the GAM estimate for the average majority-party incumbent vote share, conditional on the level of seniority.

vote share in the WPE and the SPE. This method does not impose a parametric model, allowing the data to define the relationship between seniority and vote share.

In each graph, we plot the expected vote share for majority-party incumbents conditional on seniority (as calculated in the smoothing model). The return to seniority is the slope of the line in each graph. We see that the WPE has a positive slope throughout nearly the entire domain. In the SPE, on the other hand, after a few terms of benefit from seniority, that benefit flattens out and even begins to decline. This suggests, as we have argued, that the value of seniority was higher when committees, rather than party leaders, possessed agenda power. At lower levels of seniority, it should be noted, the conditional mean of vote share has been pulled up in the SPE. For example, first-time incumbents in the WPE are

predicted to receive about 59% of the two-party vote in this model, while first-time incumbents in the SPE are predicted to receive 65%. This shift represents the dividend resulting from a party label enhanced by centralized power. The graphs make our argument clear: while there has been a dividend to all party members from a strengthened party leadership, it has disproportionately benefitted more junior members.

In the OLS and fixed-effects analyses of Table 1, we include all 50 states in our sample. The one-party nature of the South in the WPE could bias our results. During the WPE, southern Democratic incumbents received extremely high vote shares and were very senior on average. The SPE coincides with many changes in the political landscape, including the effects of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. If the Voting Rights Act decreased southern Democratic incumbents' vote shares, the decline in the importance of seniority we observe more generally could be driven by the southern states rather than by our proposed emphasis on the centralization of agenda power. Alternatively, our finding could stem from safe southern Democratic districts in the WPE turning into safe Republican districts in the SPE. Because the majority party in our study is almost always the Democratic party, our results could come from effectively ignoring southern incumbents in the SPE (until 1995). To address these and other possible concerns about the southern states, we re-run the analysis from Table 1 using only northern states. As seen in Table 2, our result is stronger when restricted to northern incumbents.

Interpretations

Trends in the Returns to Seniority

We have presented evidence that the average return to seniority for majority-party incumbents is lower in the SPE than in the WPE. In this subsection, we address two concerns about our empirical strategy: we show that our finding is not the result of one or two strange elections and that it is not caused by a trend in voting behavior over time.

In Figure 3, we report the results of a cross-sectional regression of vote share on seniority for each year in our dataset. Specifically, for each election year, we run the regression $Y_i = \alpha + \gamma S_i$ and plot the estimate $\hat{\gamma}$. The figure shows that all but one year in the WPE exhibit returns to seniority higher than the SPE mean. It confirms that the difference in the average return to seniority between the two eras, which $\hat{\beta}_{SPE}$

TABLE 2   Northern Majority-Party Incumbent Vote Share and Seniority Across Eras, 1946–2008

Variables	Ordinary Least Squares (4) Vote Share	Representative Fixed Effects (5) Vote Share
SPE ($\hat{\alpha}_{SPE}$)	6.16*	0.66
	(0.75)	(0.96)
Seniority ($\hat{\beta}_S$)	0.96*	0.85*
	(0.10)	(0.13)
Seniority · Strong Party Era ($\hat{\beta}_{SPE}$)	-0.66*	-0.83*
	(0.14)	(0.16)
Constant ($\hat{\alpha}$)	59.39*	62.94*
	(0.52)	(0.54)
Observations	4,113	4,113
Number of fixed effects		1,249

Note: We reproduce our main results, restricting the sample to only nonsouthern states. In column (4), we regress vote share on seniority for majority-party incumbents, along with a dummy indicating the Strong Party Era (SPE; 1977–2008) and an interaction of this dummy and seniority. The results show that seniority provides a high return in the Weak Party Era (WPE; 1946–76), but a much lower return in the SPE. In column (5), we use fixed effects for individual representatives and find a similar result. Standard errors (clustered by representative) in parentheses, *$p < 0.05$.

measures in earlier tables, is not the result of one or two negative shocks but is instead a relatively consistent change.

Another concern with our measure of the change in the average return to seniority is that we might be picking up a trend in voter behavior. If voters are becoming more "antiseniority" over time, for example, we might observe a decrease in the returns to seniority that is unrelated to institutional factors.[19] To address this issue, we replicate Table 1 using the *minority* party instead of the majority party. The results in Table 3 show that there is no decrease from the WPE to the SPE in the average return to seniority for the minority party, i.e., $\hat{\beta}_{SPE}$ is not negative. This table provides compelling evidence that voters are not simply becoming more antiseniority over time. (Indeed, the average minority incumbent's seniority contributed positively to vote share in the SPE.)

Polarization as an Alternative Explanation

Because of the necessarily crude nature of our analysis—comparing returns across two time periods—we can

---

[19]"Antiseniority" could be reflected in complaints about so-called "career politicians."

FIGURE 3 **Return to Seniority by Year** $(\hat{\gamma})$
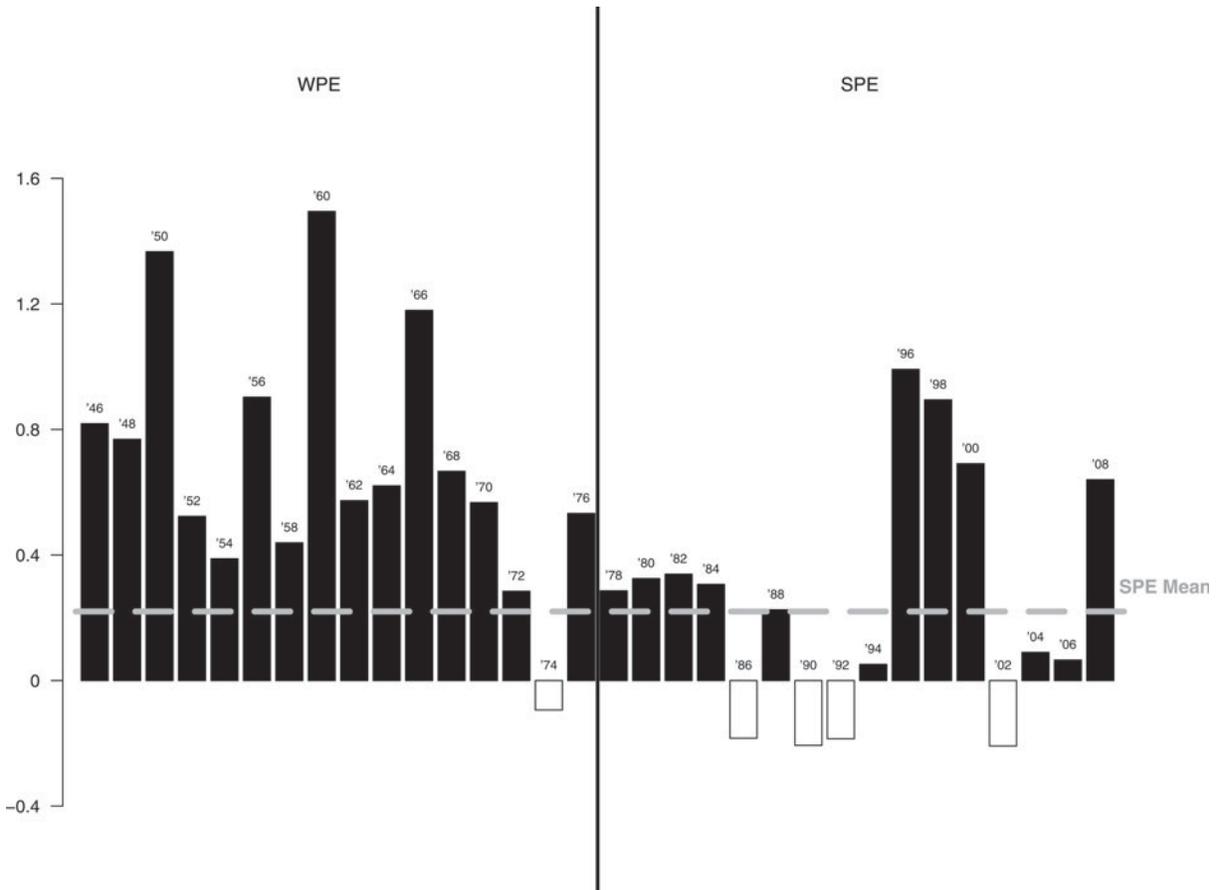
Note: In this figure, we graph the return to seniority by year. Each bar represents $\hat{\gamma}$ in a regression $Y_i = \alpha + \gamma S_i$ for year t, i.e., a cross-section regression of vote share on seniority in a single congress. The results suggest a persistent decrease in the returns to seniority in the SPE: only one year in the WPE exhibit returns to seniority at or below the mean return for years in the SPE, as indicated by the dashed grey line in the figure.

never precisely identify either the change in the returns to seniority or the change in the average majority-party incumbent vote share *caused* by the congressional reforms of the 1970s. However, we can marshall evidence suggesting that our story is more consistent with the data than are alternative explanations.

Consider the case of polarization. A significant body of work in political science examines the growing polarization of American politics (see for example McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). Much of the evidence we have presented seems consistent with an increase in partisan polarization. Increased polarization leads to more partisan voting behavior in the electorate. Voting on a wholly partisan basis reduces the returns to seniority; as polarization increases, voters attach more weight to party label than to other characteristics such as seniority, specific policy goals, or even candidate quality.

Polarization and its electoral consequences will affect both parties. If polarization explains the majority party's reduction in the returns to seniority, we should see the same phenomenon in the minority party. However, as Table 3 showed, returns to seniority for the minority party, positive in the WPE, do not attenuate in the SPE (and in fact increase, if anything). The differing effects for the majority and minority parties, respectively, suggest that our results are not driven by a single factor that affects the whole legislature at once, like polarization.

Furthermore, polarization should affect all facets of American politics. If polarization drives our empirical findings, then we might expect to find the same reduction in the returns to seniority and accompanying strong-party "bump" in other areas. In Table 4, we replicate our empirical strategy using the U.S. state senates, state assembly houses, and the U.S. Senate.

TABLE 3   Minority-Party Incumbent Vote Share
and Seniority Across Eras, 1946–2008

Variables	All States (6) Vote Share	North (7) Vote Share
Strong Party Era ($\hat{\alpha}_{SPE}$)	4.53*	4.60*
	(0.59)	(0.68)
Seniority ($\hat{\beta}_S$)	0.09	0.03
	(0.07)	(0.07)
Seniority · Strong Party Era ($\hat{\beta}_{SPE}$)	0.35*	0.50*
	(0.11)	(0.13)
Constant ($\hat{\alpha}$)	61.91*	61.48*
	(0.34)	(0.36)
Observations	4,793	3,621

Note: We rerun our main specification (from Table 1) restricting the sample to minority-party incumbents. In column (6) we include all states, and in column (7) we exclude the southern states. In both cases, we find no reduction (and indeed, an increase) in the returns to seniority for the minority party. Standard errors (clustered by representative) in parentheses, *$p < 0.05$.

Because the datasets for these three legislative bodies do not extend back far enough to generate accurate estimates for the seniority levels of 1940s legislators, we use legislator fixed effects in all three cases. The results are clearly at variance with those found above in our analysis of the U.S. House of Representatives. Majority-party incumbent legislators in the states have seen somewhat positive mean-shifts in vote share since 1976, but they have seen no real changes in the returns to seniority. The U.S. Senate, which we might think is the best control case for the U.S. House, sees a large decrease in average vote share and no change in the returns to seniority.[20] Overall, the results seem to demand a House-specific explanation like the one we provide, rather than an explanation based on a macro political force like polarization, which we would expect

to affect a wide range of institutions (an expectation unfulfilled).[21]

Minority Party and Returns to Seniority

Because it is the majority party that can directly influence procedure and thereby affect the returns to seniority, we have largely restricted our analysis to majority-party incumbents. We can now investigate whether the returns to seniority are different for majority and minority members. In the WPE, we might expect that the returns to seniority by and large accrue to members of the majority party, since it is the majority party that controls the committees. In the SPE, when parties rather than committees hold power, we might expect seniority to matter less in both parties.

To investigate these hypotheses, we specify a new model; the parameter estimates are reported in Table 5:

$$Y_{it} = \gamma + \gamma_M Min_{it} + \gamma_S S_{it} + \gamma_{SM}(Min_{it} \cdot S_{it}) + \epsilon_{it}. \quad (9)$$

Here *Min* is a dummy variable equaling one if the candidate is a member of the minority party. γ_{SM} represents the return to seniority for members of the minority party, benchmarked against returns to seniority for members of the majority party.

In column (11), we use the entire sample. The results show, as expected, that returns to seniority are higher for members of the majority party. In columns (12) and (13), we split the sample into the WPE and the SPE.[22] Column (12) shows that there is a clear difference between the parties in returns to seniority in the WPE. Minority party incumbents receive .74 less percentage points of vote share for each term of

---

[20]It is worth noting that institutional change in the U.S. Senate undermining seniority was well underway in the 1950s and 1960s. These include the decline in the apprenticeship norm and the adoption of the Johnson Rule (facilitating the appointment of junior senators to top committees). The increasing Senate workload, additionally, made it necessary to rely on junior members, another development occurring during midcentury decades before the so-called Strong Party Era in the House. This is not to say that *everything* happened in the Senate before the SPE. For example, the election of committee chairs in the Senate, and the more equitable allocation of staff (S.Res. 60), occurred in the 1970s. For details, see Ornstein, Peabody, and Rohde (1977) and their updates in the the three subsequent editions of *Congress Reconsidered*.

[21]The positive coefficient for SPE in state senates is noticeable. For this to be evidence of a trend that effects our analysis, it would have to be the case that state senates and the U.S. House have something in common that state lower chambers and the U.S. Senate do not (since their SPE coefficients are not large and positive). It seems more likely that the SPE coefficient here is the result of other unknown factors. More generally, the estimated results in the other chambers may, at first blush, appear to be inconsistent with our theory, in that the returns to seniority appear to be negligible across these other contexts. However, the results for the state legislatures average over many different types of legislatures, with varying degrees of professionalization. As a result, these estimates should be seen only as testing for broad macro trends in the electorate. Any tests of a theory of legislative organization would have to focus on particular legislatures.

[22]Because we are already interacting seniority with minority, we felt it was easier to interpret these results by splitting the sample (into WPE and SPE), rather than by using a three-way interaction term. Results for the three-way interaction are substantively consistent with this strategy.

TABLE 4   Placebo Tests Using Other Chambers

Variables	State Houses (8) Vote Share	State Senates (9) Vote Share	U.S. Senate (10) Vote Share
Strong Party Era ($\hat{\alpha}_{SPE}$)	1.08	4.01*	-9.21
	(0.89)	(1.86)	(5.40)
Seniority ($\hat{\beta}_S$)	-0.22	-0.28	-1.13
	(0.32)	(0.77)	(1.82)
Seniority · Strong Party Era ($\hat{\beta}_{SPE}$)	-0.22	-0.60	1.29
	(0.33)	(0.80)	(2.21)
Constant ($\hat{\alpha}$)	65.31*	63.51*	66.69*
	(0.69)	(1.46)	(2.59)
Observations	21,612	6,217	427
Number of fixed effects	10,312	3,345	254

Note: We replicate our main analysis on three other legislatures: U.S. state assembly houses, U.S. state senates, and the U.S. Senate. We do not find a consistent result across these chambers, suggesting that our findings on the House are not the result of macrolevel phenomena in the United States over the same time period. Standard errors (clustered by representative) in parentheses, $^*p < 0.05$.

seniority relative to majority-party members, and this difference is significant at the .01 level.

Column (13) shows that, in the SPE, majority- and minority-party members receive the same return to seniority, a return that is much lower than the majority party's return in the WPE. These results suggest, consistent with our story, that seniority in the WPE is a defining characteristic for senior majority-party incumbents, a characteristic that differentiates them from both junior members of the majority party and members of the minority party. In the SPE, in contrast, the strength of the party reduces the salience of seniority, lowering the return to seniority for majority-party incumbents and making the returns to seniority in the majority party and the minority party converge.

Further Robustness Checks

In this section, we show that our results are robust to a variety of additional perturbations of the model and the data.

Because the precise year when the reforms of the 1970s started mattering is not pinned down, we test our model using different cut points between the Weak and Strong Party Eras. In Table 6, we report estimates for $\hat{\beta}_{SPE}$ using five different definitions for the boundary between the WPE and the SPE and three models (OLS, Fixed Effects, OLS with Uncontested).

The results show that the estimate is robust to the definition of the eras. Using different era definitions and three different specifications, we continue to find an estimate of $\hat{\beta}_{SPE}$ close to our main estimate, which found an average decrease in the return to seniority in the SPE of -.56 percentage points in majority-party

incumbent vote share. As the columns of Table 6 show, our finding is not the result of one or two idiosyncratic years in the 1970s that need to be kept to one side of the boundary or the other.

The table shows that our results become more negative as we move the cutoff back in time. It is tempting to revise our definition of the SPE in light of this fact. Crook and Hibbing (1985) suggests using 1970 as the cutoff in a similar analysis, arguing that the reforms of the mid-70s were already anticipated by 1970 in Washington DC.[23] This definition of the end of the WPE in fact generates the strongest possible result for our specification (moving any farther back before 1970 begins to attenuate the result). However, we believe it is prudent to continue to use 1976. This is a more conservative cutoff which keeps the Watergate election in the WPE, biasing us against finding a result.

To test whether our cutoff is particularly meaningful, we carry out a Monte Carlo permutations test. We randomly sample 16 years of our data to assign to a placebo WPE and assign the remaining 16 to a simulated SPE. Using these new era assignments, we rerun our main specification (column 1 in Table 1) and store the coefficients. We repeat this procedure 10,000 times. We find that Table 1's estimate for $\hat{\alpha}_{SPE}$, 4.84, is larger than over 99% of the estimates from the permutation test. Likewise, we find that our estimate for $\hat{\beta}_{SPE}$, -.56, is smaller than over 99% of the simulated values. The histograms in Figure 4 display these findings graphically. In each histogram, the small region shaded

---

[23]This cutoff is perhaps more reasonable in the case of Crook and Hibbing (1985) because it is a story about the behavior of representatives and not voters. The former might reasonably be expected to anticipate reform earlier than the latter.

TABLE 5   Returns to Seniority in Majority and Minority Parties, 1946–2008

Variables	All Years (11) Vote Share	1946–76 (12) Vote Share	1977–2008 (13) Vote Share
Minority ($\hat{\gamma}_M$)	0.22	0.67	0.37
	(0.45)	(0.54)	(0.62)
Seniority ($\hat{\gamma}_S$)	0.54*	0.83*	0.27*
	(0.06)	(0.08)	(0.08)
Seniority · Minority ($\hat{\gamma}_{SM}$)	-0.21*	-0.74*	0.17
	(0.08)	(0.10)	(0.10)
Constant ($\hat{\gamma}$)	63.72*	61.24*	66.08*
	(0.33)	(0.46)	(0.44)
Observations	10,858	5,315	5,543

Note: We regress vote share on a dummy variable for members of the minority party, along with our measure of seniority, and an interaction of the two. In column (11), we use the whole sample. In columns (12) and (13), we divide the sample into the Weak Party Era (WPE; 1946–76) and the Strong Party Era (SPE; 1977–2008). The results show that seniority is more valuable in the majority party during the WPE but roughly equal across the parties in the SPE. Standard errors (clustered by representative) in parentheses, $*p < 0.05$.

in black represents simulated values more extreme than those estimated in our regressions. Both black regions contain less than 1% of the simulated density. The test suggests that the era division we have proposed is meaningful and that the differences we find between the two eras are not replicable under a large number of other ways to split the data.

Our results are also robust to the following:

• **Minor Candidates**. Including all candidates, instead of simply using two-party vote share, does not affect our results.

• **Uncontested elections**. We can include uncontested elections by attributing 100% vote share to the incumbent in these cases. See Table 9 in the appendix.

TABLE 6   Robustness of The Finding: Measuring $\hat{\beta}_{SPE}$ in Different Specifications

Model	Cutoff Year				
	1972	1974	1976	1978	1980
OLS	-.62	-.58	-.56	-.52	-.49
	(.12)	(.12)	(.12)	(.11)	(.11)
Fixed Effects	-.68	-.71	-.62	-.49	-.47
	(.13)	(.13)	(.13)	(.12)	(.12)
OLS with	-.93	-.91	-.91	-.81	-.73
uncontested	(.15)	(.15)	(.15)	(.14)	(.14)

Note: We summarize our estimates for $\hat{\beta}_{SPE}$, the reduction in the return to seniority in the Strong Party Era. Across the columns, we use different cutoff years for our definition of the Weak and Strong Party Eras. In the first row, we use our normal Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) specification. In the second row, we add fixed effects for individual representatives. In the third row, we repeat the OLS including uncontested elections, in which 100% of the vote share is attributed to the incumbent. In all cases, we cluster by representative.

• **Logging seniority**. Repeating the analysis using log (Seniority) does not affect the results. See Table 10 in the appendix.

• **Committee Rank**. We can replace our measure of seniority with rank on a member's most important committee without affecting our results. See Table 11 and discussion in the appendix.

Finally, our results are robust to the inclusion of a variable measuring economic conditions. In Table 7, we control for the growth rate of per capita real disposable personal income, averaged over the past seven quarters of the congressional term, as used in Hibbs (2010). A large body of scholarship shows that voters hold members of the president's party accountable for the economy's performance (e.g., Fair 1978, Kramer 1971). We therefore interact the measure of Hibbs (2010) with a dummy indicating party match with the president. Formally, in column (14) we estimate

$$\begin{aligned} Y_i = \alpha &+ \alpha_{SPE}SPE_{it} + \alpha_{PM}PM_{it} + \beta_S S_{it} \\ &+ \beta_{SPE}(S_{it} \cdot SPE_{it}) + \beta_I I_{it} \\ &+ \beta_{PMI}(PM_{it} \cdot I_{it}) + \epsilon_{it}. \end{aligned} \quad (14)$$

Here I is the average growth rate of per capita real disposable personal income over the previous seven quarters, and PM is a dummy indicating party match with the president. β_{PMI} represents the additional vote share associated with economic growth for members of the same party as the president, benchmarked against members of the opposing party (whose return on economic growth is represented by β_I). In column (15), we add fixed effects for individual representatives.

As expected, we find a positive coefficient on $\hat{\beta}_{PMI}$, the interaction of Party Match and Average

FIGURE 4 Simulated Tests for Year Cutoff
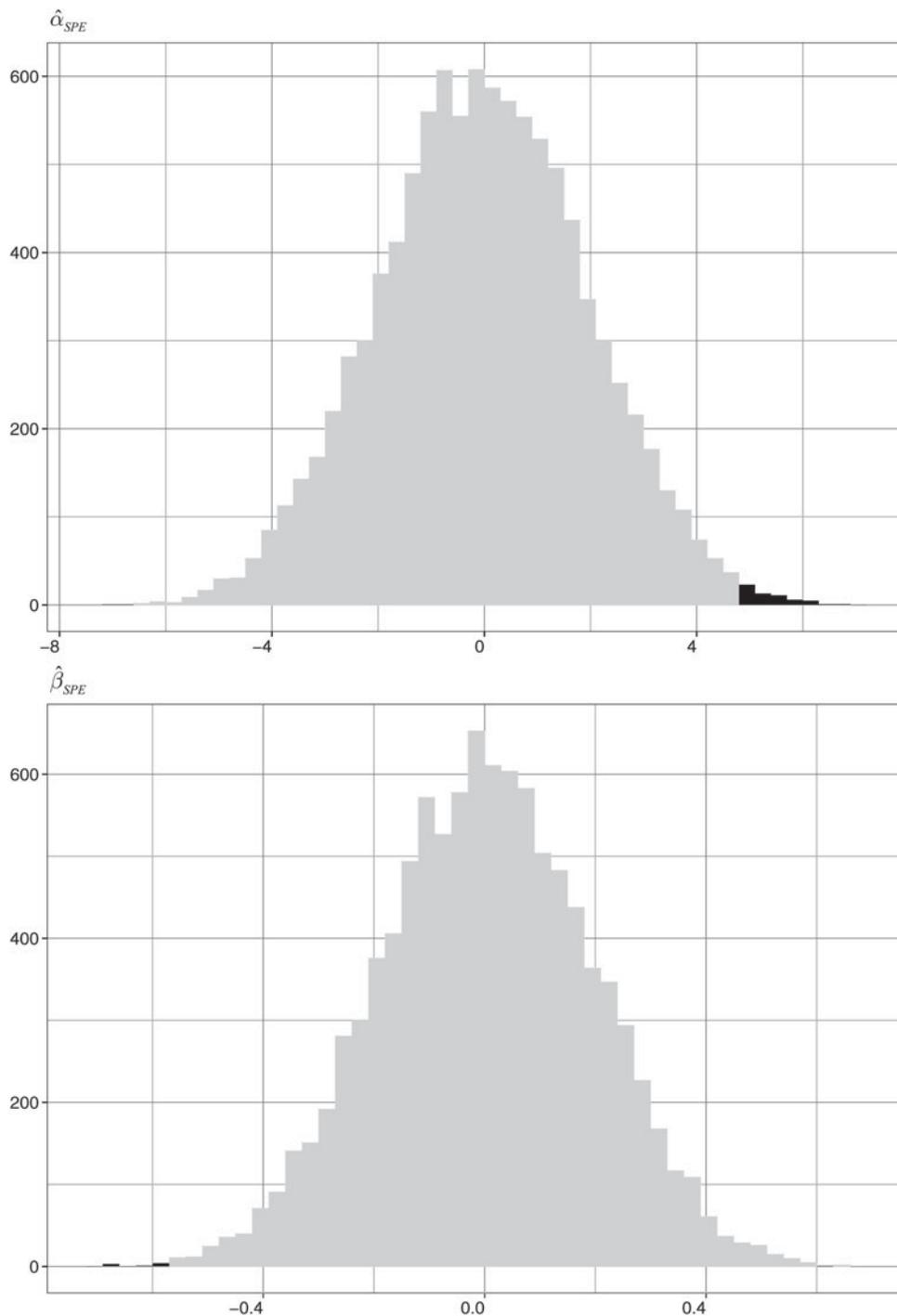
Note: Above are histograms from the simulations for the Strong Party Era (SPE) intercept ($\hat{\alpha}_{SPE}$) and for the SPE change in the return to seniority ($\hat{\beta}_{SPE}$). The simulations come from Monte Carlo permutations tests in which years are randomly assigned to the Weak Party Era (WPE) and SPE, respectively. The regions shaded in *black* show the simulations producing values more extreme than those found in our main specification. More than 99% of simulated coefficients are in the gray area, i.e., less extreme than our estimates.

Income Growth, confirming the previous findings in the literature. More importantly, the inclusion of this variable does not affect our result, which remains significant with more than 99% confidence. In effect, all majority-party members gain a premium in the SPE ($\hat{\alpha}_{SPE} = 3.20$), but senior members, while still better off

TABLE 7 Controlling for Economic Growth

Variables	Ordinary Least Squares (14) Vote Share	Representative Fixed Effects (15) Vote Share
Strong Party Era ($\hat{\alpha}_{SPE}$)	3.20*	3.25*
	(0.67)	(0.56)
Seniority ($\hat{\beta}_S$)	0.70*	0.57*
	(0.08)	(0.08)
Seniority · Strong Party Era ($\hat{\beta}_{SPE}$)	-0.44*	-0.65*
	(0.20)	(0.16)
Average Income Growth ($\hat{\beta}_I$)	-1.27*	-1.20*
	(0.20)	(0.16)
Party Match · Income Growth ($\hat{\beta}_{PMI}$)	1.90*	1.73*
	(0.18)	(0.14)
Party Match ($\hat{\alpha}_{PM}$)	-3.78*	-2.81*
	(0.38)	(0.29)
Constant ($\hat{\alpha}$)	64.47*	64.06*
	(0.57)	(0.47)
Observations	5,540	5,540
Number of fixed effects		1,622

Note: We show that our results are robust to the inclusion of a measure of economic growth over the past congressional term. In column (14), we use our baseline Ordinary Least Squares model, and in column (15), we use fixed effects for individual representatives. The results confirm the well-known result that economic growth helps candidates in the president's party ($\hat{\beta}_{PMI}$) while showing that $\hat{\beta}_{SPE}$ remains negative and statistically significant. Standard errors (clustered by representative) in parentheses, *$p < 0.05$.

than junior members, are less better off than in the WPE $\left(\hat{\beta}_{SPE} = -0.44\right)$ Seniority is not as valuable.

Discussion

In the present article, we have sought to link two literatures—on congressional elections and legislative organization. Most analyses of congressional elections, whether for forecasting or explanatory purposes, tend to focus on election-specific features of the political environment (state of the economy, presidential popularity, etc.) and ignore institutional conditions. Most analyses of legislative organization, on the other hand, tend to stop at the boundaries of the legislature. We have demonstrated a link between the two arenas. Legislative organization, as Mayhew reminded us nearly 40 years ago, has an electoral connection. For incumbents running for reelection, the electoral value of both the party label and their own member-specific characteristics is affected by the ways in which parties organize their legislative affairs.

The bulk of the analysis in this article has established an empirical link between legislative organization and majority-party electoral prospects. We have demonstrated that the electoral value of seniority for majority partisans is diminished by the centralization of agenda power in their party's leadership. For most senior members of the majority party, indeed for all majority partisans, there is compensation—an electorally more valuable party label enhanced by legislative accomplishments from a sleeker legislative organization to pursue party goals. But the compensation may not, on net, be sufficient for the very most senior members.

This may have looked like an empirical exercise (and the reader may be exhausted by the numerous robustness checks we provide), but we would like to think of our argument as primarily theoretical, a corrective requiring a revision of conditional party government theory. We contrast two modes of legislative organization—the weak-party arrangement that typified mid-twentieth century congresses (1946–76) and the strong-party arrangement that emerged in the last quarter of the twentieth century and has continued on into the twenty-first century (1977–2008). Taking our cue from models of CPG, we adopted the view that homogeneity of policy preferences among members of the majority party induces them to organize the legislature in order to prosecute its agenda of commonly shared policy goals. This is accomplished by ceding power and resources to legislative party leaders, particularly the power to organize the legislative agenda and otherwise shape agenda setting. The CPG approach argues that, in facilitating the passage of policies consensually preferred by majority-party members, the party label becomes a more highly valued asset in subsequent elections.

Our results are consistent with this expectation but with an important proviso. As implied by the CPG argument, there is a large and statistically significant boost in the vote shares of majority-party incumbents in the SPE. We estimated, from Equation (1), a vote-share premium of 4% to 5%. This is enjoyed by all members of the majority party. However, strong party organization is not pure profit for majority-party members, even when they share a policy consensus. It comes at a cost, a cost rising with seniority as given by $\hat{\beta}_{SPE} = -.56$. This must be netted out. Senior members pay a price for centralizing agenda power in the party leadership—party leaders acquire authority and resources that formerly were commanded by seniors through the operation of seniority in the decentralized committee system.

This finding revises the standard CPG model in an important way. The benefits of a burnished party label redound to all party members. But the loss of a member's independent authority from ceding power to party leaders falls differentially on party members, viz., mainly on more senior members. *Thus, the "condition" of conditional party government—preference homogeneity among party members—is no more than a necessary condition.* Sufficiency requires that there be enough nonseniors willing to support trading off senior discretionary power in exchange for a burnished party label. Because the cost of lost influence must be netted out from the party-label benefits, there must be a "coalition of the willing" in the majority party prepared to empower party leaders. We expect the case for conditional party government is strongest after a homogenizing election in which the majority party is heavily endowed with junior legislators. The years 1974 and 1994 suggest themselves as cases strongly satisfying these conditions.[24]

Our main result, as previous sections revealed, is quite robust. In a number of specifications, we continue to find a "seniority tax" associated with the majority party in the Strong Party Era. A further embellishment of CPG theory is the effect of conditional party government on members of the minority party, something on which the existing CPG theory has little to say. As Table 5 shows, minority party members in the Weak Party Era were not as well rewarded for accruing seniority as were majority party members, but they also have not borne a seniority tax in the Strong Party Era. The trade-off between concentrating agenda power (beneficial to majority-party members) and reducing the agenda power associated with seniority (a tax on seniors in the majority-party) is strictly a majority party affair.

The changes in legislative organization we have documented have not arisen in an historical vacuum. In the period after World War II, perhaps the biggest shock to the system was the Voting Rights Act of 1965, transforming the electoral bases of both major parties. Inside the House over the decade or so following its passage, this manifested itself in the "secession" of conservative white southern legislators from the ranks of the Democrats. In contrast, when Harry Truman was sworn in in 1949, the Democratic Party in the House was more than 50% southern. In principle, this poses a possible confounding effect for our analysis. Southerners were among the most senior Democrats in the Weak Party Era, and they tended to win election by large margins. Reducing their electoral margins in the Strong Party Era as the composition of their constituencies changed, or even replacing them with junior Republicans, could well be driving our results. That is, it may have been compositional change in the southern electorate, not institutional change in the legislature, that dampened the electoral margins of senior southerners. Were we picking up a spurious relationship between a decline in the electoral worth of seniority and the centralization of legislative agenda power in party leadership? We worried about this. However, in Table 2 where we restricted analysis to northerners only, the value of seniority in the strong party era declined as well. As column (4) in that table shows, a northern legislator's electoral margin increased by about one percentage point per term of seniority in the Weak Party Era, but only about a fifth of a point in the Strong Party Era. It is unlikely that changing constituency composition could account for this. The change in electoral bases occasioned by the Voting Rights Act, it would appear, is not the confounder it potentially could have been. Likewise, we checked for other broad historical changes that might have muddled our inferences—the rise of polarization, the emergence of anti-incumbent voting—and were able to reject these as well.

While the effects we have documented are not the foremost factors in understanding, explaining, or forecasting congressional elections—economic conditions just before an election, both national and local, remain of paramount importance—they are not trivial either. The accumulation of seniority, on the one hand, is clearly associated with increased vote share; and, on the other hand, the tax on this benefit for majority-party members in periods of strong party leadership is highly significant as well. We believe these results should encourage students of

---

[24]One might think 2010 qualifies as well. But we are not convinced that the majority party of the 112th Congress is homogeneous in the sense required by the CPG theory. The Main Street/Wall Street/Tea Party divide seems profound enough to undermine unified majority-party preferences for strong legislative leadership. Warsh (2011), for example, writes: "The leading Tea Party figures in the House — Representatives Eric Cantor (R-Va.), Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) and Paul Ryan (R-Wis.), together with their allies among lobbyists, religious evangelists, editorialists and talk-show hosts — have fashioned a machine capable of bringing to bear enormous force on the Republican leadership on a moment's notice." Noteworthy is the fact that Speaker Boehner appears to enjoy roughly the same agenda powers possessed by Speaker Gingrich almost two decades earlier. This suggests it may be more difficult, and possible only with a lag, to *reduce* centralized agenda power in response to *heterogeneity* than to increase it in response to homogeneity. After all, it required a revolt in 1910–11 to reverse centralized party leadership and substantially transform legislative organization. This asymmetry requires more analysis and constitutes a further revision of CPG theory.

congressional elections to take these endogenous legislative features on board in their attempts to explain electoral results and students of congressional organization to take on board anticipated election effects in their analysis of prior choices about legislative organization.

Acknowledgments

References

Aldrich, John H., David W. Rohde, and Michael W. Tofias. 2007. "One D is Not Enough: Measuring Conditional Party Government, 1887–2002." In *Party, Process, and Policy Making: Further New Perspectives on the History of Congress.*, eds., David Brady, and Mathew D. McCubbins. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 102–13.

Aldrich, John H., Mark M. Berger, and David W. Rohde. 2002. "The Historical Variability in Conditional Party Government, 1877–1994." In *Party, Process, and Political Change in Congress.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 17–35.

Aldrich, John H., and David W. Rohde. 2001. "The Logic of Conditional Party Government: Revisiting the Electoral Connection." In *Congress Reconsidered.* 7th ed., eds., Lawrence C. Dodd and Bruce I. Oppenheimer. *Washington DC*: CQ Press, 269–92.

Alford, John R., and John R. Hibbing. 1981. "Increased Incumbency Advantage in the House." *Journal of Politics* 43 (4): 1042–61.

Ansolabehere, Stephen., John Mark. Hansen, Shigeo Hirano, and James M. Snyder, Jr. 2010. "More Democracy: The Direct Primary and Competition in US Elections." *Studies in American Political Development* 24 (02): 190–205.

Brady, David W., Morris P. Fiorina, and Arjun S. Wilkins. 2011. "The 2010 Elections: Why Did Political Science Forecasts Go Awry?" *PS: Political Science & Politics* 44 (02): 247–50.

Cox, Gary W., and Mathew D. McCubbins. 2005. *Setting the Agenda: Responsible Party Government in the US House of Representatives.* Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Cox, Gary W., and Mathew D. McCubbins. 2007. *Legislative Leviathan: Party Government in the House.* Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Crook, Sara B., and John R. Hibbing. 1985. "Congressional Reform and Party Discipline: The Effects of Changes in the Seniority System on Party Loyalty in the US House of Representatives." *British Journal of Political Science* 15 (2): 207–26.

Fair, Ray C. 1978. "The Effect of Economic Events on Votes for President." *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 60 (2): 159–73.

Fiorina, Morris P. [1977] 1989. *Congress, Keystone of the Washington Establishment.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Gelman, Andrew, and Gary King, 1990, "Estimating Incumbency Advantage without Bias." *American Journal of Political Science* 34 (4): 1142–64.

Hastie, Trevor J., and Robert J. Tibshirani. 1990. *Generalized Additive Models.* New York: Chapman & Hall.

Hibbs, Douglas A, Jr. 2010. "The 2010 Midterm Election for the US House of Representatives." CEFOS Working Paper 9. Accessed September 2011. http://www.douglas-hibbs.com/house2010election22september2010.pdf.

Hirano, Shigeo, James M. Snyder, Jr. Stephen Ansolabehere, and John Mark Hansen. 2010. "Primary Elections and Partisan Polarization in the US Congress." *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 5 (2): 169–91.

Kramer, Gerald H. 1971. "Short-term Fluctuations in US Voting Behavior, 1896–1964." *American Political Science Review* 65 (1): 131–43.

Krehbiel, Keith. 1993. "Where's the Party?" *British Journal of Political Science* 23 (2): 235–66.

Mayhew, David R. [1974], 2004. *Congress: The Electoral Connection.* NewHaven, CT: Yale University Press.

McCarty, Nolan M., Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal. 2006. *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Ornstein, Norman J., Robert L. Peabody, and David W. Rohde. 1977. "The Changing Senate: From the 1950s to the 1970s." *Congress Reconsidered.* eds. Lawrence C. Dodd and Bruce I. Oppenheimer. New York: Praeger Publishers, 3–21.

Remini, Robert V. 2006. *The House.* New York: Smithsonian.

Shaw, Macolm 1981. "Congress in the 1970s: A Decade of Reform." *Parliamentary Affairs* 34 (3): 272–90.

Warsh, David. 2011. "Obama Smartens Up." Accessed September 3, 2011. http://www.economicprincipals.com.

Andrew B. Hall is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Government at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138.

Kenneth A. Shepsle is the George D. Markham Professor of Government at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA 02138.