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Parties, Pivots, and Policy: The Status Quo Test

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Identifying policy status quo locations is a precondition for testing key predictions of many spatial models of legislative politics, but such measures have proved to be extremely difficult to construct. This study applies a novel technique that measures policy locations in relation to legislators' preferences. The resulting status quo estimates allow for a direct test of the policy consequences predicted by pivotal politics and party cartel theories of legislative politics. The empirical tests indicate that parties interact with pivotal politics to contribute to policy gridlock and shape policy change. By bringing pressure to bear on pivotal politics "pivots" and by blocking policy changes that would "roll" the party, parties increase the range of policies subject to gridlock in the American political system.

"Who is pivotal in U.S. lawmaking?"

—Krehbiel, 1998, p. 20

Understanding how legislative institutions condition the translation of individual legislators' wants into enacted legislation has been a central area of research over the past several decades. In recent years scholars have proposed theories of legislative politics (e.g., Cox and McCubbins 2005; Krehbiel 1998) that make clear predictions about how changes in the policy preferences of key institutional actors will influence policy outcomes. However, the literature contains almost no direct tests of these predictions because it is difficult to identify the locations of policy status quos in terms of legislators' policy preferences. In this article, I apply a novel approach able to estimate policy status quo locations across legislative sessions. The estimation strategy uses legislators' survey responses in conjunction with their roll call votes to identify the ideological position most likely associated with a preference for no policy change—the status quo. I use these estimates to test predictions made by prominent theories of legislative politics for the U.S. Congress from 1994 through 2008.

The past decade has seen an extended debate between advocates of contending models of legislative politics. Pivotal politics theorists argue that institutional rules such as the filibuster and the presidential veto constrain action by floor majorities in the U.S. Congress, but that parties are epiphenomena with little influence on legislative outcomes (Krehbiel 1998). In contrast, partisan theories (e.g., Chiou and Rothenberg 2003; Cox and McCubbins 2005; Rhode 1991) contend that parties have substantial real power to make and/or block policy change. The partisan and pivotal models make clear and conflicting predictions concerning policy outcomes and legislative gridlock.

Despite the clarity of the theories, previous studies have not been able to provide direct evidence that partisan (or pivotal) theories do a better job of explaining policy outcomes. Because the locations of the current policy "status quo" and of bills proposed to change the status quo are not well identified in spatial models of roll call voting (Poole 2005; Poole and Rosenthal 2007), previous tests of pivotal politics and partisan policy predictions have used indirect measures.

Indirect tests in the literature have produced contradictory and ambiguous results. The results of some previous tests support partisan theories, whereas others have rejected both partisan and pivotal theories, and still others support pivotal politics. Indirect tests by Chiou and Rothenberg (2003) rely on gridlock rates. They report evidence consistent with their party unity model. Tests by Covington and Bargen (2004) rely on a measure of the percentage of the time conservatives "win" in Congress. They find evidence for majority party effects. Cox and McCubbins (2005) also examine the direction of policy movement in the U.S. House of Representatives, finding a pattern consistent with the party cartel model. Lawrence, Maltzman, and Smith (2006) assume a uniform distribution of initial status quo locations and use this to derive predictions concerning the composition of legislative majorities. Their results favor a majority party agenda-setting model. Krehbiel, Meirowitz, and Woon (2005) examine theoretical predictions concerning the distribution of roll call cut points. Although they find stronger evidence against the pivotal politics model, they note that the party gate-keeping model faces less risk in their tests. Clinton (2007) attempts to use roll call cut points to infer the nature of the legislative process, but encounters ambiguous results. Stiglitz and Weingast (2010) examine the distribution of cut points and variation in the uncertainty with which legislators' preferences are estimated in an analysis of votes taken in the U.S. House of Representatives. They find shifts in cut points consistent with a partisan model. Saeki (2009) finds evidence that the policy preferences of veto players (but not their partisan identities) influence the prevalence of gridlock.

This article presents a novel method able to identify status quo locations across time. The resulting status quo estimates from the 103rd through 110th Congress are used to test the pivotal politics (Krehbiel 1998) and party cartel (Cox and McCubbins 2005) models of congressional lawmaking. These tests are much sharper

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and more direct than any previous tests in the literature. The empirical analysis provides evidence that both parties and pivots influence policy outcomes and legislative gridlock in Congress. The best-fitting model is one in which the majority and minority parties are able to exert pressure on pivotal members of their caucuses to prevent policy changes that would otherwise have taken place.

MEDIAN, PIVOTAL, AND PARTISAN PREDICTIONS

This study uses status quo estimates to test four models of legislative politics: (1) the median voter model, (2) the pivotal politics model (Krehbiel 1998), (3) an open rule version of the party cartel model (modified from that proposed by Cox and McCubbins 2005), and (4) a closed rule version of the party cartel model (Chiou and Rothenberg 2003; Cox and McCubbins 2005). Comparing the partisan models with the pivotal politics model provides a basis for judging whether parties add to our understanding of legislative outcomes in Congress. Comparing the partisan models with each other provides a basis for evaluating the nature and scope of party influence. Each model makes a set of distinct predictions concerning the distribution of status quo locations, the degree to which particular status quo will change, and the final policies selected when status quo are altered. I discuss each model in turn. Figure 1 illustrates how each model relates initial status quo locations to predicted final status quo locations. Appendix A provides outcome-mapping functions for each model.

The simplest model of legislative politics examined here is the *median model* in which the floor median of each legislative chamber determines policy choices in that chamber. Under bicameralism, policy outcomes are the result of compromise between the chamber medians such that all policies will be moved to locations at or between the ideal points of the House and Senate medians. Although the bicameral core typically includes multiple points, I assume that bicameral negotiation always produces an outcome at the location of the chamber median closest to the original status quo in order to simplify calculation of predicted outcomes (Hammond and Miller 1987).

Hypothesis 1. Each issue status quo that is between the preferences of the two chamber medians will remain unchanged, and all other status quos will be altered to the location of the nearest (House or Senate) chamber median.

The *pivotal politics model* (Brady and Volden 1998; Krehbiel 1998) modifies the median voter model by adding veto players who can prevent enactment of policy change favored by the medians. Krehbiel examines the presidential veto, the two-thirds threshold needed in the House and Senate to overcome presidential vetoes, and the 40th senator opposite the president (the filibuster pivot). The floor median proposes legislation that must then avoid a filibuster and win the approval of either the veto pivots or the president. Because policy status quo located between the preferences of veto players cannot be readily revised, a gridlock interval is generated within which most policy status quos should be located. Status quo outside the gridlock interval will be altered to a location as close as feasible to that of the nearest (House or Senate) floor median. Three predictions of the pivotal politics model are tested in this study.

Hypothesis 2. Status quo will be clustered in the gridlock interval.

Hypothesis 3. Status quo initially outside the gridlock interval will change more from the beginning of a session of Congress to the end than status quo initially inside the gridlock interval.

Hypothesis 4. Each status quo will be moved to the best feasible policy location for the floor medians, consistent with the constraints imposed by the gridlock interval.

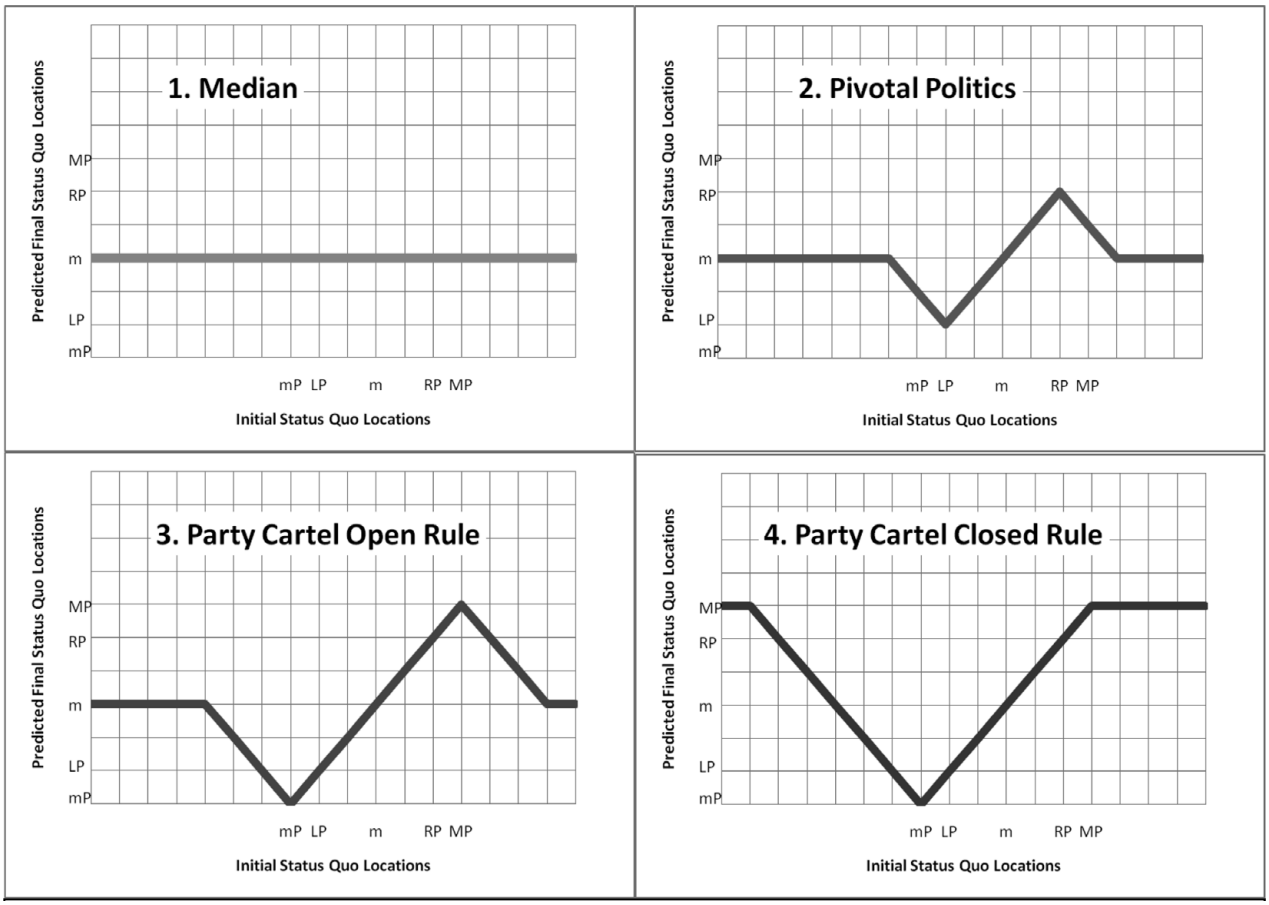
Although the pivotal politics model is self-consciously free of a role for parties (Krehbiel 1998, 26–28), party theorists typically argue that parties influence legislation along with nonpartisan pivotal politics aspects of the legislative process. Different researchers propose different mechanisms for party influence, some of which give parties a stronger role than others (e.g., Chiou and Rothenberg 2003; Cox and McCubbins 2005). I focus on open rule (negative agenda) and closed rule (positive agenda) extensions of the party cartel model (Cox and McCubbins 2005).

Cox and McCubbins (2005) argue that parties exert influence in two ways: positive agenda power and negative agenda power. Negative agenda power is exercised when party members prevent consideration of legislation opposed by a majority of their party. In the *open rule party cartel model*, parties exercise negative agenda power because party members who hold powerful positions "block" policy changes opposed by a majority of the party. Positive agenda power is the ability to advance (to consideration) bills favored by the party. Cox and McCubbins' (chap. 10) discussion of positive agenda power encompasses both power to push legislation to floor consideration and power to pressure party members to support that legislation. I follow Chiou and Rothenberg (2003) in developing a *closed rule party cartel model* in which majority party leaders exercise positive agenda power by offering floor medians and other pivotal actors a restricted choice between the current status quo and the party-anointed alternative.[1] Although such a closed rule model may be accurate for the House of Representatives, it is admittedly less plausible as a model of the entire legislative process during the period examined in this study because of the relatively weak positive agenda powers of the Senate majority party.

[1] Following Cox and McCubbins (2005) and Chiou and Rothenberg (2003, 2009), I assume that majority party leaders' preferences are those of the majority party (MP) median when they set the agenda or block consideration of legislation.

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FIGURE 1. Mapping Initial Status Quo to Predicted Outcomes: Expectations for Gridlock and Policy Change in the Median, Pivotal Politics, and Party Cartel Models of Lawmaking



Key: LP, left pivot; m, floor median; RP, right pivot; MP, majority party median (assumed to be on right); mP, minority party median.
Note: Hypothetical preferences. In each subfigure, a positive (45-degree) slope indicates a region in which the status quo remains unchanged because it is gridlocked or blocked.

The party cartel model proposed by Cox and McCubbins (2005) is focused on the House of Representatives. Extending this model to encompass the entire legislative process requires incorporation of presidential vetoes and filibusters [as Cox and McCubbins (2005, 177–81) do in their "cartel-pivot hybrid model"].[2] My particular synthesis draws heavily on the work of Cox and McCubbins, and also builds on Chiou and Rothenberg (2003). I assume, along with Cox and McCubbins, that key members of the majority party avoid advancing legislation that would "roll" their party. At minimum, this means that status quo on which floor medians and majority party medians disagree about the appropriate direction of policy change will not change—they will be in the partisan *blockout zone*.[3] The assumptions that I make about the role of the *minority* party mark my most substantial departure from Cox and McCubbins' cartel-pivot hybrid model. As Chiou and Rothenberg (2003) note, combining parties with pivotal politics makes it important for us to consider the possibility that those minority party members who hold "pivotal" positions may be subject to pressure from their copartisans. For instance, it seems likely that moderate Republican senators in the 111th Congress were under substantial pressure to remain loyal to their party on

[2] Instead of the *cartel-pivot hybrid model*, one might simply apply the Cox and McCubbins (2005) model of the House of Representatives as if it was a model of the entire legislative process. This makes little theoretical sense, however, because Cox and McCubbins acknowledge the existence of filibusters and presidential vetoes. Partisan models that ignore filibusters and presidential vetoes also do a poor job of explaining status quo locations relative to partisan models that include pivotal politics.

[3] Although the party cartel model of Cox and McCubbins (2005) assumes further blocking beyond the preferences of the majority party median, this assumption makes less sense in a model of the full legislative process. My assumption that status quo more extreme than the majority party medians will not be blocked makes sense institutionally because party leaders can delay votes on and otherwise influence conference reports, allowing them to exercise an ex post veto on legislation and forcing other actors to pass nonmedian compromises analogous to those predicted with filibuster and veto pivots in the pivotal politics model. It also makes sense theoretically. If Congress proceeds under my assumption, then all players are at least weakly better off.

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critical votes as President Obama pushed for passage of his legislative agenda. I assume that pivotal members of the minority party follow a directive identical to the "first commandment" that Cox and McCubbins suggest motivates powerful members of the majority party—they will block passage of legislation opposed by a majority of their party. For the 103rd through 110th sessions of Congress examined in this study, the party cartel model yields a partisan *blockout zone* larger than the pivotal politics gridlock interval. With few exceptions, the parties were expected to block any efforts to change status quos located between the preferences of the minority and majority party medians: the Senate minority party had a capacity to block change by filibustering in every Congress, and divided government gave the House minority party capacity to block change by upholding presidential vetoes in the 104th, 105th, 106th, and 110th Congresses.

The party cartel model, as extended to the full legislative process, yields four hypotheses, two of which are common to both the open rule and closed rule versions of the model. The policy outcome predictions of the open rule and closed rule models (Hypotheses 7a and 7b) are also graphed in Figure 1.

Hypothesis 5. Status quo will be clustered in the blockout zone.

Hypothesis 6. Status quo outside the blockout zone will change more from the beginning to the end of a session of Congress than will status quo inside the blockout zone.

Hypothesis 7a. In the open rule model, status quo will be moved to the best feasible policy location for the floor medians, consistent with the constraints imposed by the blockout zone.

Hypothesis 7b. In the closed rule model, status quo will be moved to the best feasible location for the majority party medians, consistent with the constraints imposed by the blockout zone.

IDENTIFYING STATUS QUO LOCATIONS

Tests of the model predictions described previously require information on policy status quo locations. Although the status quo plays a key role in many formal models (e.g., Grofman 1985), including the theories of lawmaking tested in this article, the location of policy "status quo" in relation to legislators' preferences is often extremely difficult to identify (Poole 2005; Poole and Rosenthal 2007). Purely roll call–based models lack sufficient information to identify policy locations. The typical roll call matrix is inadequate because an infinite number of status quo and bill locations can account for the estimated cut line that divides yeas from nays. Consequently, scholars have developed several approaches that incorporate additional information. The method developed in this study is the only one that provides status quo estimates for the same issue across multiple sessions of Congress.

Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal developed an extension of the roll call voting model able to partially identify bill and status quo locations (Poole 2005; Poole and Rosenthal 2007). Variation in the "error" rate of an empirical spatial voting model is used in conjunction with the functional form of the utility function to identify locations. However, this approach has several identification problems, including the problem that status quo locations will be biased by variability in the underlying predictability of specific issue dimensions (Poole 2005, 100). Furthermore, the specific location is identified using the functional form of the voting model. Different functional forms (e.g., quadratic and normal utility) produce dramatically different bill and status quo locations. Because of these issues, Poole and Rosenthal (2007, 28) advise that analysts not place much confidence in the status quo or bill locations produced by their models: "[o]ur estimates of roll call outcomes are much less reliable than the estimates of legislator locations or roll call cuts. Consequently, this book contains no discussion of the outcomes for individual roll calls."

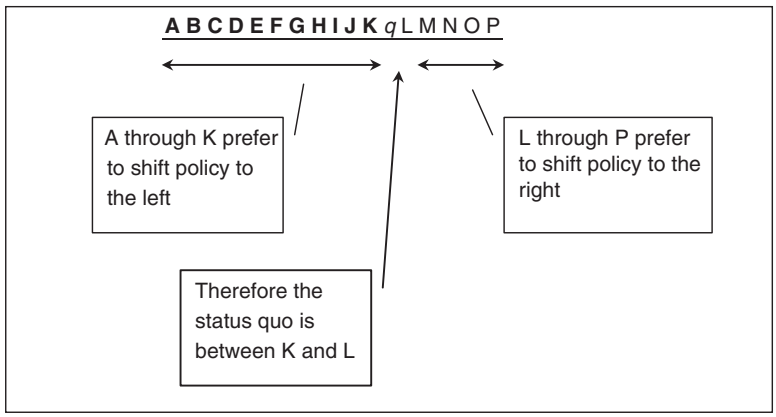
Without moving much beyond roll call data, information on the broader agenda of votes on the same issue can sometimes provide useful information. When numerous votes are taken on the same piece of legislation, incorporating a series of amendments that are known to move policy in particular directions, more precise bill and status quo locations can be estimated (Clinton and Meirowitz 2001, 2003, 2004; Jeong 2008). Although intriguing, this approach has only been used to estimate a few bill and status quo locations. The ability to characterize status quo locations is restricted to instances when many votes are taken on an issue, and identification of status quo locations requires strong assumptions about the alternatives and the utility function.

An alternative strategy for estimating bill locations involves use of cosponsor data. The crucial assumption of this approach is that cosponsors choose to support or oppose a piece of legislation based purely on their proximity to the bill, with those closest to the bill most likely to cosponsor (Woon 2008). The ability to infer status quo locations dissolves, however, if the cosponsorship decision is just like a roll call vote (as asserted by Krehbiel 1995, 910), and it is weakened if cosponsorship is influenced systematically by nonideological considerations such as friendship networks (Fowler 2006). If the assumptions of the approach are met, then this allows for accurate identification of bill locations for bills with a sufficient number of cosponsors. When bills are subsequently subjected to a roll call vote, it is possible to estimate the status quo location as well (Peress 2008).

This study presents a novel status quo identification approach that combines survey-based ordinal measures of legislator preferences on particular tax and spending issues with roll call data. Roll call data provide an overall map of legislator preferences, whereas survey data provide information that identifies status

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FIGURE 2. Status Quo Location Identification Example



quo locations in relation to those preferences. Unlike any of the other approaches, this study tracks policy status quos for the same issue across multiple sessions of Congress.

The approach to estimating policy locations is straightforward. The location of a policy status quo in ideological space can be estimated *if we know legislators' ideal points and the direction of change favored by each legislator on that policy issue*. An analytical example illustrates this point. Imagine that there are 16 members of a legislature (A–P in Figure 2), with ideal points that line up perfectly on a single dimension. If each of these legislators reports whether he or she would support a slight shift in policy to the right or the left or prefer to maintain the same policy, then it is easy to identify the interval where the status quo is located. To the right of the status quo, legislators will prefer shifting policy to the right, and to the left of the status quo, they will prefer that it move to the left.[4] In the spatial model shown in Figure 2, members who prefer shifting the status quo to the left (A–K) are in boldface, and the status quo location can be identified. The status quo (q) is in the interval between K and L.

Legislator survey data to estimate status quo locations come from the National Political Awareness Test (NPAT) survey administered by Project Vote Smart (2008) in all congressional elections from 1994 through 2008.[5] Each survey includes a series of questions that use ordinal responses to evaluate candidates' attitudes toward tax and spending issues. For each tax and spending question, responses were selected from among the following categories: eliminate, greatly decrease, slightly decrease, maintain status quo, slightly increase, and greatly increase. Question topics range widely, covering many areas of policy. For instance, I analyze questions involving spending on the arts, education, defense, intelligence, national parks, and welfare (among others) alongside tax questions covering capital gains, inheritance, gasoline, alcohol, cigarette, corporate, and personal income taxation, as well as earned income tax credit. The NPAT has the characteristics needed in a measure designed to estimate status quo locations. The ordinal measure in the NPAT has a maintain status quo response and multiple other responses that allow candidates to indicate the degree to which they want to increase or decrease a particular tax or spending policy. Furthermore, the responses members of Congress give on the NPAT align with their voting behavior. Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2001a) calculate a single ideological dimension from the 1996 NPAT. Analysis of their data reveals that members' NPAT responses correlate at 0.92 with First-Dimension DW NOMINATE scores for the 104th Congress. Although some close votes are likely subject to party pressure (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001b), the overall roll call voting record in Congress closely aligns with the preference information supplied by the NPAT.[6] The public context of the survey responses ensures that legislators will be motivated by nearly the same incentives that shape their votes.

To estimate status quo locations, the NPAT responses must be merged with a measure of legislator preferences, derived here from roll call votes. Legislators' preferences are measured using the first dimension of Keith Poole's DW-NOMINATE common space scores (Poole 2008). DW-NOMINATE common space scores provide an excellent overall summary of members' preferences across a range of issues, for members of the House and Senate, along with the president. To check that the main dimension provides an adequate map of policy preferences across issues examined in this project, I estimated separate dimensions using W-NOMINATE for Defense, Foreign Policy/Foreign Aid, Tax and Budget, Energy and Environment, and Welfare and Human Services roll call votes, using issue codes supplied by Rohde (2004) for the 105th House of Representatives. All dimensions correlated with the

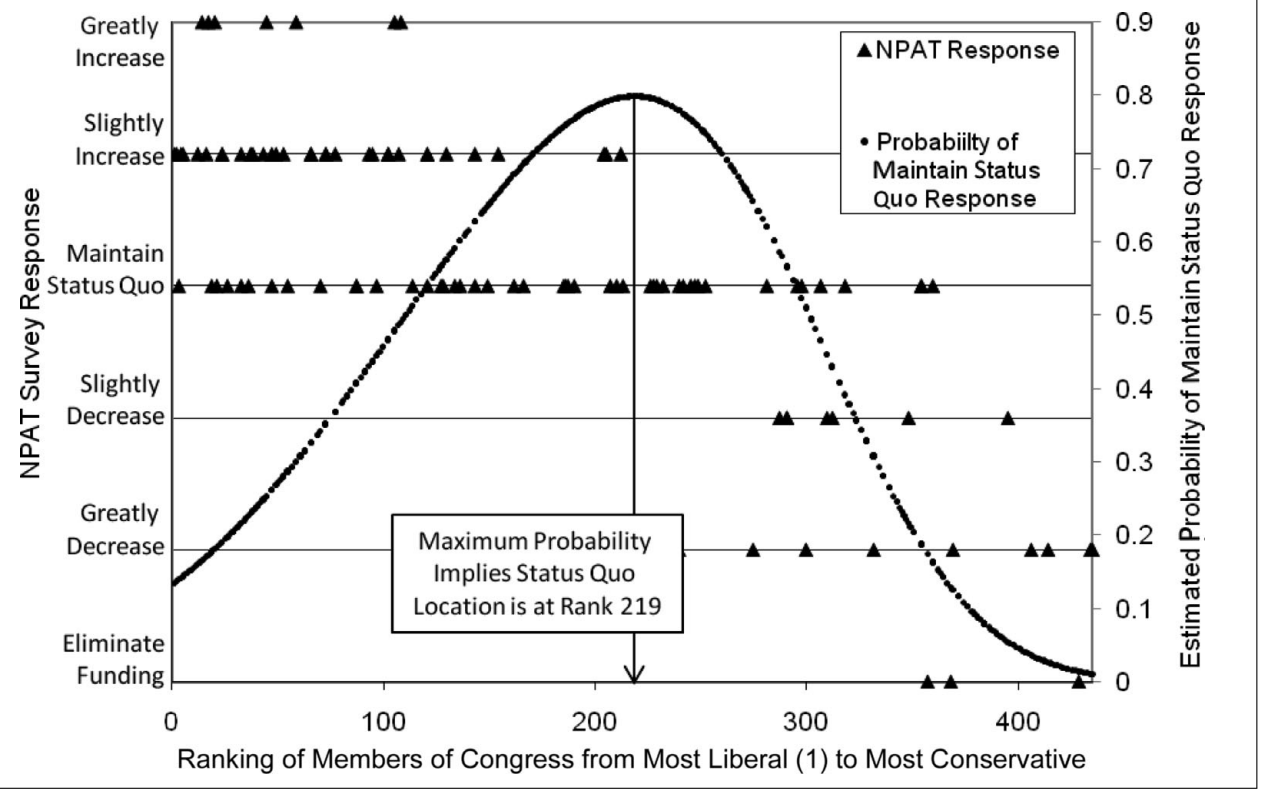
[4] Note that this is different from examining the data derived from roll calls on particular bill because bills may involve more than a slight shift in the status quo.

[5] NPAT survey results have been used in a number of studies, including Wright and Schaffner (2002) and Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (2001a, 2001b).

[6] Data made available by James Snyder at http://web.mit.edu/17.251/www/data_page.html#6 (accessed January 9, 2011).

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FIGURE 3. Estimated Status Quo Location for Spending on the Arts in 2006



main NOMINATE dimension classified from all roll call votes at 0.92 or higher, with most correlated at above 0.97. With highly correlated preference orderings across issues, status quo locations estimated on the general dimension are close approximations of status quo locations estimated on issue-specific dimensions. Estimating status quo for multiple issues in a single common space facilitates statistical tests of theory predictions.[7]

Figure 3 illustrates the result of merging roll call–derived preference locations with policy change preferences from the NPAT. On the *x* axis, members of the 109th House of Representatives are rank ordered from the most liberal at the far left to the most conservative at the far right (Poole 2000). The *y* axis indicates legislators' NPAT spending change preferences for the arts in 2006, ranging from some liberal members who wanted to greatly increase spending to a few conservative members near the far right side of the figure who wanted to entirely eliminate spending on the arts. The graph shows that as members became more conservative, support for government funding for the arts dropped, with a transition point near the middle of the graph from members favoring increases in spending to members favoring decreases. Representative Ramstad (rank 212) is the most conservative member to prefer an increase in spending, whereas Representative Emerson (rank 239.5) is the least conservative member to prefer a decrease. This suggests that the status quo was likely between rank 212 and rank 239.5.

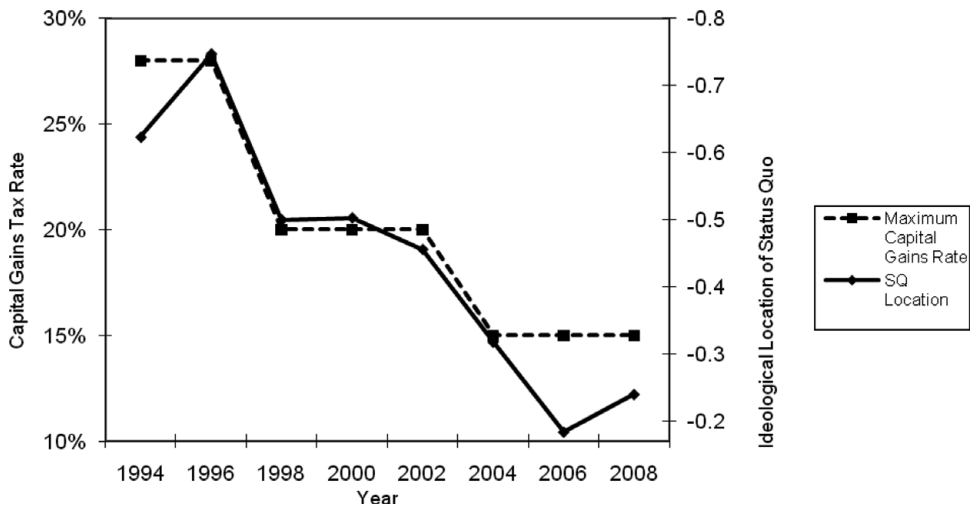
I estimate status quo locations more precisely by using maximum likelihood estimation to identify the point that divides the ideological locations of legislators who prefer an increase above the status quo from those who prefer a decrease below the status quo. The particular approach involves using an ordered probit model to estimate survey responses on the basis of legislator preferences, and then calculating the probability of the "maintain status quo" response as a function of preferences.[8] In the example shown in Figure 3, the predicted probability of a maintain status quo response is superimposed on the survey responses. The rank with the highest predicted probability of responding with a preference for maintaining the status quo is rank 219, which suggests that the status quo is near this point. This estimate is, of course, necessarily somewhat imprecise. To characterize the uncertainty associated with particular estimated status quo, I construct bootstrapped standard errors by reestimating each status quo 1,000 times on samples drawn with replacement. The bootstrapped standard error of the status quo estimated in the figure is 13 ranks.

[7] For a full exploration of reasons why low-dimensional spatial models successfully explain votes across diverse issues, see Poole and Rosenthal (2007).

[8] I use the gologit2 function in STATA 10 to compute ordered probit models (Williams 2006). The autofit feature automatically identifies and appropriately models instances in which the parallel lines assumption of the ordered probit model should not be made.

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FIGURE 4. Capital Gains Tax Rates and Status Quo Locations



Source: Tax rate data from Citizens for Tax Justice (2011). "Top Federal Income Tax Rates since 1916," www.ctj.org/pdf/regcg.pdf (accessed January 9, 2011).

The estimated DW-NOMINATE status quo locations do a reasonable job of predicting NPAT spending preferences across a wide range of issues. Appendix B provides estimated status quo locations for 2008, along with bootstrapped standard errors and the proportion of NPAT responses (increase or decrease) correctly accounted for by the estimated status quo location. Appendix C provides information on the number of NPAT responses and issues, along with mean bootstrapped standard errors and mean percent predicted correctly by issue and year. Overall, 91% of NPAT increase or decrease responses are correctly explained by the estimated status quo location. All analyses that follow focus on issues where the DW-NOMINATE coefficient in the ordered probit model was statistically significant ($p < .05$, two tailed), with the estimated status quo within the $(-1, 1)$ bounds of preferences in the DW-NOMINATE model. This excludes from consideration issues on which politics tends to be distributive rather than ideological, including agriculture policy, transportation policy, and (for most years) the NASA budget. Also excluded, because the NPAT survey does not include appropriate responses, are nonbudget and nontax issues (e.g., support for partial birth abortion).

A possible concern is that although Project Vote Smart claims to make an extensive effort to persuade candidates to complete its surveys, response rates are modest (see Appendix C for details). In addition, from the 106th Congress on, members of Congress with more conservative voting records (assessed using DW-NOMINATE first dimension) have responded less frequently to the NPAT than those with more liberal voting records. To test the estimates' vulnerability to response bias and low response rates, I ran Monte Carlo simulations with low response rates and/or biased response rates. Neither random nonresponse nor nonresponse conditioned on ideology produced biased estimates, although lower response rates do decrease the precision of the estimates.[9]

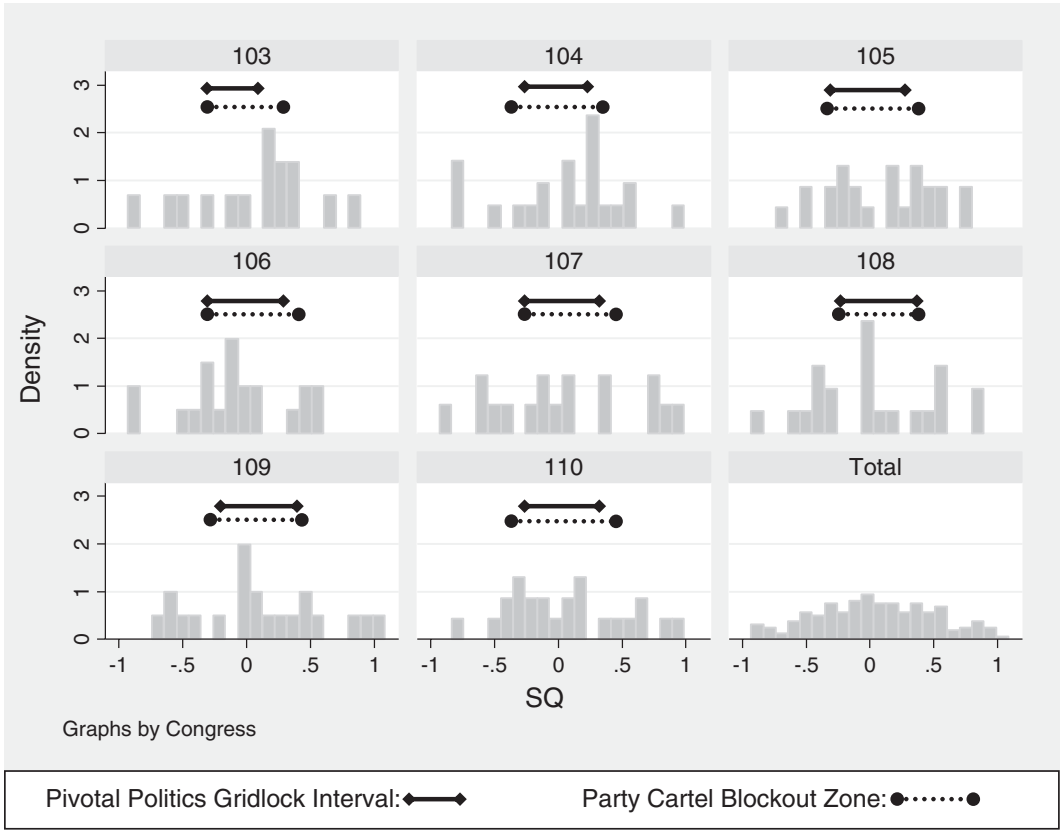
The resulting estimates change in ways that make sense. Figure 4 compares estimated status quo locations for capital gains taxes from 1994 to 2008 with the maximum capital gains tax rate. As shown, shifts in the estimated location of the status quo (right axis) closely parallel changes in the maximum capital gains tax rate. Because the tax rate was cut from 28% to 20%, and then cut again to 15%, the estimated status quo location became successively more conservative. Members of Congress responded to policy change by revising their preferences concerning future policy change, producing revised status quo location estimates.

Figure 5 provides histograms of estimated status quo locations by session of Congress, with superimposed bars indicating the range of the pivotal politics gridlock interval and the party cartel blockout zone. The status quo locations charted in Figure 5 are the data analyzed in the remainder of the article. It is immediately clear that status quo are not tightly clustered at the center (e.g., at floor median)—that they are dispersed across a broad range of locations in each session of Congress.

[9] In the simulations, 400 legislators with preferences ordered from 1 to −1 on a spatial dimension responded to the current status quo with an "NPAT" ordinal response. Legislators with ideological locations less than 0.15 from the status quo gave the "no change" response subject to a small probability of misperceiving the status quo location, with similar thresholds and errors associated with other NPAT response categories. To create a particularly challenging response bias problem, I assumed that response probabilities were 0.3333 for legislators below the status quo and 0.1666 for legislators above the status quo. The ordered probit estimate was not appreciably biased by this disproportionate nonresponse pattern, differing on average by only −0.002 from the estimate derived from all members on 450 randomly generated biased response patterns. Because raw NPAT responses are used to estimate an ordered probit response function that forms the basis of status quo location estimates, ideologically biased response rates do not cause problems for the model.

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FIGURE 5. Status Quo Location Histograms by Congress



A substantial portion of these locations are within the pivotal politics gridlock interval, and an even larger portion falls within the party cartel blockout zone.[10]

STATUS QUO LOCATION TESTS

As discussed previously, each model predicts that status quo will be clustered in a particular gridlock interval or blockout zone. Table 1 reports the density of status quo in each hypothesized interval, along with the density in selected subintervals.

The results reported in Table 1 indicate that both the pivotal politics and party cartel models are successful to a degree: they appropriately anticipate that issue status quos will tend to be clustered within the postulated gridlock interval or blockout zone.[11] Nonetheless, the best-performing model is clearly the party cartel model. The density of status quo within the pivotal politics gridlock interval is 11 per 0.1 units of space, whereas the density in the party cartel blockout zone is 12.2. Conversely, the density of status quo is 7.1 outside the pivotal politics gridlock interval and only 5.8 outside the party cartel blockout zone. Because it is a model with partisan pivots, the party cartel blockout zone encompasses the pivotal politics gridlock interval, so these results reflect the fact that the region within the blockout zone but outside the gridlock interval contains a particularly dense concentration of status quo (14.8 per 0.1 units of ideological space). The distribution of status quo supports the party cartel model in another way as well. Because status quo outside the gridlock interval or blockout zone should be moved into the interval, we would expect to see a drop off in the density of status quo just outside the politically relevant interval. For the party cartel model, just such a drop off is observed. The density drops from 11.3 just inside the blockout zone to 9.7 just outside. For the pivotal politics model, however, the pattern is reversed: density increases from 8.0 just inside the gridlock interval to 12.7 just outside. These results suggest that parties matter in conjunction with pivotal politics as posited by the party cartel model: minority party pivots seem to be subject to partisan pressure and the majority party appears to be able to block policy change.

RATE OF POLICY CHANGE TESTS

Central to the concept of the gridlock interval or blockout zone is the idea that policies within this interval will be more difficult to change because pivotal ac-

[10] It is possible that some status quo are relatively extreme because of other constraints not identified in the models, including budget constraints, committee power, interest group activity, or insufficient time to fully address particular issues.

[11] A range of statistical tests using various distributional assumptions (e.g., that status quo follow a normal distribution or that status quo follow a uniform distribution) indicate that the increase in density within both intervals is statistically significant $p < .05$.

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TABLE 1. Status Quo Locations in 103rd through 110th Congresses: Consistent with Party Cartel or Pivotal Politics?

Theory	Density in Interval	Density Outside Interval	Density Shift Is in Expected Direction	Density Just Inside Interval (0.15 or Closer to Boundary)	Density Just Outside Interval (0.15 or Closer to Boundary)	Density Shift Is in Expected Direction
Pivotal politics	11.0	7.1	Yes	8.0	12.7	No
Party cartel	12.2	5.8	Yes	11.3	9.7	Yes

Notes: 167 status quo locations were assessed using (NPAT) survey at the end of each Congress, and gridlock/blockout zones were calculated using One-Dimensional DW-Nominate Common Space scores. Density is per 0.10 units of the ideological space.

TABLE 2. Rate of Status Quo Change in 103rd through 110th Congresses: Consistent with Party Cartel or Pivotal Politics?

	Mean Absolute Change in SQ Location from Beginning to End of Each Congress			Mean Absolute Change in Spending or Tax Level from Last Year of Previous Congress by Final Year of Each Congress		
	Initial SQ within Gridlock or Blockout Interval	Initial SQ Outside Interval	Difference (*T* Statistic)	Initial SQ within Gridlock or Blockout Interval	Initial SQ Outside Interval	Difference (*T* Statistic)
Pivotal politics	0.110 (52)	0.204 (77)	0.094** (2.61)	6.24% (43)	13.7% (65)	7.48%* (2.53)
Party cartel	0.120 (71)	0.240 (58)	0.120** (3.04)	5.89% (61)	17.0% (47)	11.14%** (3.98)

Notes: Number of issue status quo in each group is in parentheses. Mean SQ spending change measures are weighted by the bootstrapped standard error of the status quo estimate.
*$p < .01$; **$p < .005$ (one tailed).

tors or party leaders disagree about the appropriate direction for policy change. Issues with status quo that begin a session of Congress within the gridlock interval or blockout zone are expected to experience less change by the end of the session than issues that were initially outside the interval because any major legislative change is likely to be vetoed, filibustered, or blocked.[12]

I use two measures of policy change to test this expectation. The first measure evaluates changes in estimated status quo locations—the difference between an issue's status quo location at the beginning and end of a session of Congress measures how much members of Congress perceived that a particular status quo changed. The analysis of status quo changes includes 129 observations. A problem with this measure is that extreme status quos are often measured with less precision because there are fewer members in this region of ideological space; thus, these issues will tend to change more simply because they are subject to more measurement error. I address this problem in two ways: by weighting the mean so status quo that are measured more precisely receive more weight, and by including a second change measure that does not suffer from this measurement error. The mean values reported in Table 2 are weighted using an analytic weight based on the inverse of the bootstrapped standard error of the status quo.[13] The second change measure assesses the degree to which the underlying policy (tax rate or spending level) did in fact change. For each issue, I attempted to identify a measure of the actual budgeted spending level (Office of Management and Budget 2010; True 2009) or the actual tax rate. Unfortunately, it was not possible to make this match for every issue. For example, CIA appropriations (an issue measured by the NPAT for several years) are not publically available and spending on AIDS research does not constitute a separate budget subfunction, so this analysis includes only 108 observations. I measure changes in spending and taxes by contrasting the spending or tax level in the last budget year fully under the control of one Congress

[12] It is not appropriate to assume that no change will take place when policies are within the relevant gridlock interval or blockout zone. The budget must be passed each year, and changes in spending will reflect the specific compromises reached in budget negotiations. Furthermore, even if the underlying tax rate or spending level remains unchanged, its ideological location is likely to shift. Inflation, for example, can alter the political implications of taxes on certain income groups.

[13] Unweighted results support the same interpretation.

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(e.g., the 2010 budget for the 111th Congress) with the spending or tax level at the same point in the previous Congress.[14]

Table 2 reports on tests that evaluate whether status quo change less when they are within the gridlock interval or blockout zone. The results provide some support for both models, although the party cartel model once again appears to outperform the pivotal politics model.[15] Issues outside the pivotal politics gridlock interval changed on average by 0.94 points more than issues within the gridlock interval ($p < .005$), whereas issues outside the party cartel blockout zone changed 0.12 points more than issues within the blockout zone ($p < .005$). These results are corroborated by the analysis of real tax and spending changes. Issues outside the gridlock interval changed on average by 7.48% more than those inside the interval ($p < .01$), whereas issues outside the party cartel blockout zone changed by 11.14% more than those inside the blockout zone ($p < .0001$). Overall, the pivotal politics model performs well, but the party cartel model outperforms it. Apparently, parties matter in combination with pivotal politics as posited by my adaptation of the party cartel model.

PREDICTING POLICY CHANGE

The panel data analysis reported here models change over time in status quo locations as predicted by each theory. This provides the sharpest and most precise test of the theories' predictions. For each Congress, the status quo for each issue starts out at some initial location (q_{it-1}), and each theory provides a prediction concerning how this initial location will be shifted to a new final location (q_{it}). The main independent variables in the analysis are the predicted final status quo locations from each model as described previously and in Equations (1) through (4) of Appendix A. In the analyses reported here, each observation is transformed to adjust for the heteroscedastic errors implied by variation in the precision with which particular status quo are estimated (Hardin 1997).

In addition to policy action, inflation may be expected to alter the locations of particular status quo. If gridlocked or blocked issues cannot be changed through positive action, then they might nonetheless be adjusted through inaction in the face of inflation. Issues where inflation-diminished spending or inflation-altered tax receipts should lead policy to drift toward policies preferred by conservatives are coded 1 (e.g., education, gasoline taxes, and the environment). Issues where inflation should lead policy or tax rates to drift away from policies supported by conservatives are coded −1 (e.g., defense spending and the child tax credit). Issues where inflation should not matter are coded 0 (e.g., the inflation-adjusted earned income tax credit). Given the coding, the inflation parameter should have a positive sign. Inflation should principally influence status quo location when issues are initially within the gridlock interval or blockout zone because policy makers will have less opportunity to address the consequences of inflation. Therefore, the inflation drift parameter is nonzero only when the initial status quo location is in the relevant gridlock interval or blockout zone.[16]

The model to be estimated is:

$$q_{it} = \beta_1 prediction_{it} + \beta_2 inflation_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}.$$

In the model, q_{it} is the status quo for issue i in Congress t, $prediction_{it}$ is the predicted location of the status quo for issue i in Congress t as derived from each model so its coefficient is expected to equal 1, and $inflation_{it}$ reflects the direction inflation is expected to move the status quo of issue i during periods when its status quo is gridlocked or blocked. Because theory implies that the intercept should be zero, I do not include a constant term in the models.[17]

Table 3 reports the results of a linear regression model with panel corrected standard errors.[18] The dependent variable is the status quo estimate at the end of a session of Congress. Equations (1) through (4) test each model separately. The key independent variable in each equation is the predicted final status quo location derived from that model. Predicted locations are regressed on actual final locations while controlling for the effect of inflation within the gridlock interval or blockout zone.

The simple median model proves to be the weakest. Although the median model coefficient is statistically significant in Table 3 ($p < .05$), the R^2 of only 0.05 suggests that it accounts for a relatively small portion of

[14] Spending levels for the 2010 fiscal year were determined entirely through negotiations between President Obama and members of the 111th Congress, whereas spending levels in the 2009 fiscal year reflected a combination of influences, including a role for both President Bush and President Obama, as well as influences from both the 110th and 111th Congresses. The final fiscal year also aligns appropriately with the survey window for the NPAT. According to Project Vote Smart staff, surveys are typically distributed following the primary elections in each state, with the first surveys mailed in late May of the election year and the last surveys mailed in September. Thus, the final fiscal year of Congress (e.g., the 2010 fiscal year for the 111th Congress) is the fiscal status quo in place during the period in which candidates complete the survey.

[15] The results in Table 2 could also reflect a simple median voter model. However, the median voter model performs poorly in the tests in Table 3, suggesting that the institutional features incorporated in the other models do matter.

[16] I experimented with a slightly more sophisticated measure using the interaction between the inflation drift variable and the level of inflation (urban CPI) in each two-year period, but this more sophisticated variable typically performed worse in the statistical analyses. Perhaps the relatively small differences in the inflation rate during the study period make including CPI variation superfluous or perhaps CPI variation does not accurately reflect variation in the costs of accomplishing particular policy objectives.

[17] Inclusion of a constant term does not alter the conclusions.

[18] I have also analyzed the data using a wide range of assumptions, including ordinary least squares, fixed effects by issue, random effects with and without AR(1) errors, panel heteroskedastic errors with an AR(1) process, and dynamic GMM models without analytic weights. All analytic approaches produced statistically significant effects in the expected direction (except for the median model), and all produced the same relative ranking of the median, pivotal politics, and party cartel open rule models. Results are available by request.

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TABLE 3. Modeling Status Quo Locations and Policy Changes in 103rd through 110th Congresses

	Equation (1)	Equation (2)	Equation (3)	Equation (4)
Medians only	0.49 (0.24)*			
Pivotal politics		0.85(0.11)**		
Party cartel open rule			0.87(0.09)**	
Party cartel closed rule				0.81(0.09)**
Inflation (within interval)	0.07 (0.07)	0.07(0.02)**	0.07(0.02)**	0.07(0.02)**
N	120	120	120	120
R^2	0.05	0.35	0.56	0.54

Note: Linear regression model with panel corrected standard errors.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .001$ (two tailed).

the variance in status quo locations. Although simple, this model is apparently too simple to explain status quo locations with much accuracy.

The predictions of the pivotal politics model are substantially more accurate [Equation (2)]. The pivotal politics location prediction is statistically significant ($p < .001$) with the expected sign. The associated R^2 is 0.35. Thus, adding pivotal politics dramatically improves on the predictions that can be made using the median model. The estimated coefficient of 0.85 is not statistically distinguishable from the theoretically expected value of 1. Clearly, pivotal politics outperforms the median model.

Adding parties further improves predictive accuracy. The open rule party cartel model [Equation (3)] substantially outperforms the pivotal politics model. The prediction is statistically significant ($p < .001$), with an associated R^2 of 0.56 that reflects a substantially better fit than the pivotal politics model. The estimated coefficient (0.87) is also not statistically distinguishable from the theoretically expected value of 1. This result is consistent with my assumption that both the majority and minority parties exert influence in the U.S. Congress by pressuring pivotal party members to uphold Cox and McCubbins' "first commandment" to not support legislation opposed by a majority of their party.[19]

The closed rule party cartel model assumes that parties exert substantially more influence. In particular, the majority party can use positive agenda power to "pull" outcomes toward the majority party medians. The closed rule party cartel model performs slightly worse than the open rule model, but the difference in fit between the models is modest enough that no definitive conclusions can be drawn. The estimated coefficient is statistically significant ($p < .001$), but it is slightly smaller than the coefficient for the open rule model (and it is significantly different from the theoretically expected value of 1, which suggests that status quo locations do not change as much as the closed rule model predicts). The R^2 of 0.54 is marginally smaller than that for the open rule model. Thus, although there is substantial evidence that parties engage in blocking (negative agenda control), assuming that they engage in positive agenda control as well does not appear to improve (or greatly degrade) predictive accuracy. Perhaps this reflects a mix of open rule and closed rule influences. Although the House majority uses closed rules to exercise positive agenda control, the Senate majority has far fewer powers. Once in conference, House negotiators will consider alternatives that were ruled out by their closed rule. Even for the House of Representatives, Cox and McCubbins (2005) argue that negative agenda power (e.g., blocking under open rule) is a constant source of party influence, whereas parties only exercise substantial positive agenda control in some circumstances.

In each equation, the inflation parameter performs as expected. Inflation shifts status quo in a conservative direction when it reduces effective spending on liberal priorities (e.g., education spending) and conversely inflation moves conservative priorities in a liberal direction (e.g., defense spending). Across analyses inflation has a consistent effect, shifting status quo by roughly 0.07 points on the ideological dimension. Inflation appears to have substantial policy consequences for gridlocked issues.

CONCLUSION

This study applies a new method to identify policy status quo locations across sessions of Congress. The resulting status quo location estimates permit the first direct tests of the policy predictions of nonpartisan and partisan models of legislative politics, including the median model, the pivotal politics model, and the party cartel model. In the absence of such status quo

[19] To test the assumption that minority party "pivots" are partisans, I also estimated open and closed rule versions of the party cartel model while assuming that minority party pivots would support or oppose policy in a nonpartisan fashion as in the pivotal politics model. In most cases, these models performed slightly better than the pivotal politics model on its own, but neither performed as well as the open rule party cartel model.

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location estimates, the literature has relied on indirect tests.

My results have important implications for the recent sessions of Congress that I examine, although parties may well have been less important for policy outcomes during periods when parties lacked the unity and discipline seen in the 1994 through 2008 period of this study. Because the 103rd through 110th sessions of Congress saw historically high levels of partisan conflict, it is possible that the parties were less successful at turning pivotal politics to their own ends in less partisan eras.

I find that that pivotal politics (Krehbiel 1998) involving the filibuster and the presidential veto plays key roles in shaping the content of legislation, but that pivotal politics is often controlled by parties. The party cartel model outperforms the pivotal politics model in every test. In my adaptation of the party cartel model to the full legislative process, the pivotal politics "pivots" are occupied by partisans who obey Cox and McCubbins' "first commandment" not to support legislation opposed by a majority of their party. Thence, the minority party can prevent passage of legislation provided it has within the caucus at least one of the pivots.

With the minority party often able to block change, polarized parties with clear policy positions should be expected to generate intense partisan conflict but little policy change in the absence of broad bipartisan compromise or one party obtaining a filibuster or veto-proof supermajority. To illustrate the implications, consider that under the pivotal politics model the predicted consequence of Republican Scott Brown's victory in the January 2010 Massachusetts special election to replace Senator Edward Kennedy is minor: the filibuster pivot shifts from Senator Nelson, a moderate Nebraska Democrat, to Senator Snowe, a moderate Maine Republican.[20] In contrast, under the party cartel model, the effective location of the filibuster pivot in the Senate shifts from Nelson to the Senate Republican median because Snowe will (be pressured to) side with the majority of her party. Parties and pivots together cause policy gridlock and shape policy change in American politics.

APPENDIX A: OUTCOME MAPPING FUNCTIONS

Median Model

$$\mathrm{b}(q;x) = m \tag{1}$$

Pivotal Politics Model (Krehbiel 1998)

$$\mathrm{b}(q;x) = \begin{cases} m & \text{if } q > 2RP - m \\ 2RP - q & \text{if } q \in (RP,\ 2RP - m) \\ q & \text{if } q \in [LP,\ RP] \\ 2LP - q & \text{if } q \in (2LP - m,\ LP) \\ m & \text{if } q < 2LP - m \end{cases} \tag{2}$$

Party Cartel Model with Open Rule

$$\mathrm{b}(q;x) = \begin{cases} m & \text{if } q > 2MP - m \\ 2MP - q & \text{if } q \in (MP, 2MP - m) \\ q & \text{if } q \in [mP, MP] \\ 2mP - q & \text{if } q \in (2mP - m, mP) \\ m & \text{if } q < 2mP - m \end{cases} \tag{3}$$

Party Cartel Model with Closed Rule

$$\mathrm{b}(q;x) = \begin{cases} MP & \text{if } q > MP \\ q & \text{if } q \in [mP, MP] \\ 2mP - q & \text{if } q \in (2mP - MP, mP) \\ MP & \text{if } q < 2mP - MP \end{cases} \tag{4}$$

Key: b(q;x) is an outcome mapping function that relates an initial status quo q and preferences x to a predicted final status quo. LP, left pivot; m, floor median; RP, right pivot; MP, majority party median (to simplify exposition, MP is assumed to be to the right of RP); mP, minority party median (assumed to be to the left of LP).

Note: The exposition of both party cartel models assumes that at least one pivotal politics pivot is controlled by the minority party, as was the case for the sessions of Congress examined in this study.

[20] This is based on a rank ordering of Senators in the 111th Congress (Lewis and Poole 2009).

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APPENDIX B: ESTIMATED STATUS QUO LOCATIONS AT END OF 110TH CONGRESS (2008)

Issue	Estimated Status Quo Location (SE)	Proportion of NPAT Responses Correctly Predicted (%)
Alcohol taxes	−0.15 (0.15)	73
Arts	0.13 (0.06)	98
Capital gains taxes	−0.24 (0.05)	96
Cigarette taxes	0.35 (0.24)	100
Corporate taxes	−0.08 (0.05)	97
Defense	−0.22 (0.07)	88
Earned income tax credit	0.90 (0.58)	98
Education	0.62 (0.42)	97
Environment	0.49 (0.19)	98
FEMA	0.88 (0.45)	95
Gasoline taxes	−0.14 (0.16)	76
Inheritance taxes	−0.44 (0.06)	89
International aid	0.01 (0.09)	85
Military hardware	−0.42 (0.12)	92
Modernization of weaponry and equipment	−0.81 (0.25)	85
National missile defense	0.20 (0.05)	94
National parks	0.55 (0.49)	100
Public health services	0.67 (0.62)	98
Research and development	−0.26 (0.12)	80
of new weapons	−0.26 (0.12)	80
Tax on incomes $100,001−$180,000	−0.52 (0.16)	90
Tax on incomes $180,001−$350,000	0.05 (0.04)	100
Tax on incomes >$350,001	0.20 (0.04)	96
United Nations	−0.28 (0.06)	90
Welfare	0.05 (0.04)	97

Notes: Includes all statistically significant estimated status quo locations in the (−1 to 1) preference interval. Percent predicted correctly is portion of increase or decrease preferences correctly predicted by status quo location. Bootstrapped standard errors are derived from 1,000 status quo estimates per issue using random sampling with replacement. FEMA, Federal Emergency Management Agency; NPAT, National Political Awareness Test; SE, standard error.

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APPENDIX C: FIT STATISTICS BY CONGRESS AND ISSUE

Congress	No. of NPAT Responses	Mean Predicted Correctly (%)	Mean SE	No. of Issues
103rd	170	90.59	0.131	15
104th	183	88.93	0.124	22
105th	161	90.07	0.097	23
106th	134	90.25	0.114	22
107th	98	92.64	0.173	18
108th	126	91.08	0.123	22
109th	108	89.46	0.135	21
110th	75	92.17	0.190	24
Issue				**No. of Sessions**
Spending on AIDS research		89.23	0.046	3
Alcohol taxes		79.93	0.108	8
Spending on the arts		94.23	0.043	7
Capital gains taxes		95.31	0.124	8
CIA appropriations		88.19	0.047	2
Cigarette taxes		94.93	0.110	8
Corporate income taxes		95.90	0.044	7
Spending on defense		90.21	0.065	6
Spending on defense plan conversion		77.56	0.159	3
Earned income tax credit		92.10	0.278	7
Spending on education		95.09	0.218	8
Environmental programs spending		91.48	0.075	8
Gasoline taxes		85.72	0.155	5
Spending on housing projects		82.15	0.048	2
Income tax for families earning $75,000–$150,000		94.39	0.248	6
Income tax for families earning >$150,000		95.11	0.041	7
Inheritance taxes		93.86	0.190	7
Spending on international aid		85.07	0.065	7
Spending on job training		89.57	0.040	3
Procurement of military hardware		85.10	0.075	6
Spending on military space shuttle missions		80.99	0.097	3
Modernization of weapons and equipment		88.69	0.161	3
NASA		81.34	0.348	2
National missile defense		90.71	0.042	6
National parks		96.03	0.300	4
Public health services		96.43	0.337	4
Research and development of new weapons		83.04	0.092	6
Scientific research		95.91	0.341	3
Taxes on retiree income (>$40,000)		95.50	0.363	7
Welfare		89.69	0.056	6

Note: Includes all issues with multiple statistically significant coefficients and status quo within the (−1, 1) interval. CIA, Central Intelligence Agency; NASA, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, NPAT, National Political Awareness Test; SE, standard error.

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