

Divisions Between Congressional Republicans and the Politics of Ideologically Extreme Reversion Points

Justin Buchler

Justin.Buchler@case.edu

Department of Political Science
Case Western Reserve University

abstract

Since the 2010 election, the previously-unified Republican caucus in the House of Representatives has been marked by intense divisions on issues such as the debt ceiling and continued funding of the federal government. Conventional explanations for these divisions have focused on the newfound fear of “Tea Party” primary challenges that gives many rank-and-file Republicans incentives to resist bipartisan compromises negotiated by their party leadership. This paper argues that while these primary threats play a role, the divisions between Republicans are actually the result of a change in the legislative agenda. The unique combination of extreme polarization and divided government created by the 2010 election took away any incentive for the House to take up normal legislation that moves policy from a relatively centrist status quo point to some fixed alternative point. Instead, the legislative agenda has focused on items that merely avoid ideologically extreme reversion points with which some Republicans are actually quite comfortable. These agenda items pit Republican Party leaders against the extremists in their own caucus rather than against the centrists, and create unusual challenges for party leadership.

Paper prepared for delivery at the 2014 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Washington, D.C.

Until the 2010 midterm elections, conventional analysis of Congress held that the Republican caucus was the more disciplined and unified of the parties, echoing the famous line from Will Rogers, “I am not a member of any organized political party-- I am a Democrat.” By the early 2000’s, Republicans had reached a consensus on the primacy of tax cuts and a form of social conservatism associated with evangelical Christianity, and that consensus has kept the Republican legislative caucus unified on major issues. Astute observers will point out that President George W. Bush’s failed attempts to unify his party behind Social Security privatization and immigration reform after his 2004 victory revealed that Republican unity was never absolute, and that the Republican consensus on tax cuts and social policy remains strong enough that in aggregate, party unity scores for Republican legislators even after 2010 remained remarkably high by historical standards. However, the divisions that emerged after 2010 have been intense. Disputes over management of the debt ceiling in particular have pitted Republican leaders against not the moderates within their own caucus, but against the most vocal conservatives associated with the “Tea Party.” Why have these conflicts developed, and what do they portend for the future of the Republican caucus?

Conventional explanations for intra-party divisions among Republicans have centered around the threat of primary challenges. According to this line of reasoning, rank-and-file Republicans are afraid that if they vote for certain pieces of legislation viewed as insufficiently conservative, they will face “Tea Party” primary challenges, and potentially lose their seats because Republican primary voters seek ideological purity. Relatedly, a bevy of independent organizations have promised funding and institutional support for Republican challengers who attempt to unseat incumbents who seem too open to ideological compromise, and organizations

like the Club for Growth threaten to “score” roll call votes on bipartisan deals so that incumbents cannot maintain their conservative voting scores when they vote for compromises. Primary challengers may even attract the attention of party-aligned media outlets and high-profile endorsements from nationally-known conservative figures. Of course, journalists and pundits also like to blame “gerrymandering” for every perceived ill in the political system, and in the case of intra-party divisions among Republicans, one might be tempted to assert that the partisan contours of Republican districts protect them from general election challenges, magnifying the importance of potential “Tea Party” primary challenges despite the ample research demonstrating that redistricting has very little to do with legislative polarization (see, for example, Abramowitz et al. 2006; Brunell 2006, 2008; Buchler 2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2011; McCarty et al. 2009).

While the roots of that legislative polarization are complex, this paper poses a more simple explanation for the newfound divisions among congressional Republicans. The legislative agenda did it. The 2010 election produced an historically unprecedented mix of extreme ideological polarization and divided government. That combination has made “normal” legislation not only impossible to pass, but pointless to even consider. Without “normal” legislation on the agenda, the congressional agenda has focused on must-pass pieces of legislation such as Continuing Resolutions to avoid government shutdowns, and more perilously, the debt ceiling. What distinguishes such legislation from, for example, healthcare reform is that these pieces of legislation do not move policy from a relatively centrist *status quo* point towards the preferences of the bill’s supporters. Instead, their passage maintains the *status quo* rather than allowing policy to revert to positions that are so ideologically extreme that only the most extreme conservatives prefer them to the *status quo*, such as government shutdowns and federal

defaults. These agenda items pit party leaders against their own most extreme rank-and-file members and, when combined with the threat of a primary challenge, produce unique collective action problems for party leaders to solve. The underlying divisions between party leaders and their rank-and-file, then, are not necessarily new. They may have existed and been just as strong prior to the 2010 election. They are simply revealed by the type of legislative agenda that results from the combination of extreme polarization and divided government produced by the 2010 election.

“Normal” legislation

We normally think of the legislative process as the process of moving policy from a fixed *status quo* point to a fixed *alternative* point. In a unidimensional spatial model, both points can be placed somewhere in along a continuum, and legislators vote yes whenever their locations are closer to the *alternative* than to the *status quo*, and no whenever the reverse is true. What can we say about most *status quo* points? On most policy issues, they are likely to lie between the opposing party leaders’ ideal points. On tax policy, current tax rates are higher than Speaker Boehner (R-OH) would like, but lower than Minority Leader Pelosi (D-CA) would like. Spending on social programs is higher than Speaker Boehner would like, but lower than Minority Leader Pelosi would like. There are more abortion restrictions than Pelosi would like and fewer than Boehner would like.

There are compelling theoretical reasons for this pattern. Consider three points within a policy dimension: the *status quo* point, SQ, the minority leader’s ideal point, ML, and the Speaker’s location, SP. Suppose $SQ < ML < SP$. This status quo point would be trivially easy to

change because there would be broad bipartisan support for moving policy to the right.

Alternatively, if $ML < SP < SQ$, there would be broad bipartisan support for moving policy to the left. Thus, a *status quo* location outside the range $[ML, SP]$ should be unstable because it should be trivially easy to change, which explains why on issues ranging from tax policy to spending to social policy, current status quo points tend to lie between opposing party leaders' ideal points.

Moreover, there would be no reason to vote on any bill proposing an *alternative* point outside that range. If $A > SP > SQ$, then the Speaker would prefer to weaken A with amendments to bring it closer to his ideal point. If $A < ML < SQ$, the bill would never be reported out of committee in the first place. Thus, if all normal *status quo* points and all normal *alternative* points fall within the range of $[ML, SP]$, then all roll call cutpoints will fall within that range.

Moreover, for obvious reasons we should expect votes primarily on *alternative* points that move policy to the right with a Republican majority. Thus, we should normally observe $ML < SQ < A < SP$. The next consideration is the Floor Median, FM. There would be no reason for the Speaker to bring a bill to the floor if that bill cannot pass a floor vote, so normal legislation will be such that $SQ < (SQ + A)/2 < FM$. However, we might also expect the Speaker to instruct the Rules Committee to prohibit votes on amendments that weaken A unnecessarily. Thus, $SQ < (SQ + A)/2 < FM < A$.

Roll call votes subject to this rule will pass and move policy towards the preferences of the majority party leadership. The question is whether or not the majority party leadership needs to do anything to ensure passage. If everybody simply votes sincerely, then no. The Floor Median prefers the *alternative* to the *status quo*, so a majority of the chamber must as well. The constraint is that under normal circumstances (i.e. when legislators are more worried about

general elections than primaries), legislators have electoral incentives to position themselves as centrists, so voting for A under this rule may be electorally suboptimal for the Floor Median. So let us introduce one more constraint, to be called the “electoral divide,” shown in Figure 1.

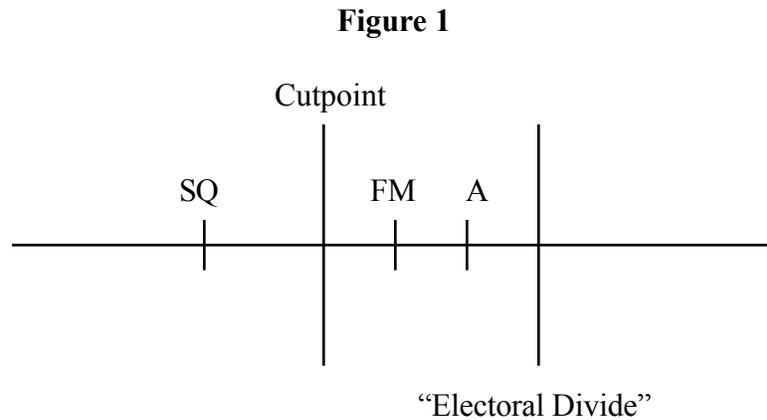


Figure 1 shows the relationship between five locations along a policy dimension: the *status quo* point (SQ), the *alternative* point (A), the location of the floor median (FM), the cutpoint, which is the midpoint between the *status quo* and *alternative* points, and a new concept called the “electoral divide.” The “electoral divide” represents a systemic gap between legislators’ personal preferences and their constituents’ preferences. Let us assume that legislators’ ideal points are correlated with their district median voters’ ideal points, but that they are systematically more extreme than their district median voters. We can formalize this bias as follows. Any legislator with an ideal point to the right of the “electoral divide” represents a district in which the median voter is sufficiently extreme to prefer the *alternative* to the *status quo*. However, any legislator with an ideal point to the left of the “electoral divide” represents a district in which the median voter prefers the *status quo*. Thus, legislators whose ideal points are

located between the cutpoint and the “electoral divide” are cross-pressured. They personally prefer the *alternative* to the *status quo*, but voting for the *alternative* will incur an electoral penalty because they represent more moderate districts in which the voters prefer the *status quo*. Thus, voting for the *alternative* would be electorally suboptimal. As long as the floor median and several other legislators are located between the cutpoint and the electoral divide, they are subject to a collective action problem of sincere voting. They all personally prefer for the *alternative* to pass, but would pay an electoral penalty for voting yes. Moreover, since no single legislator in this range can ensure passage, the Nash equilibrium solution if they simultaneously cast their votes is for each legislator to vote no, similar to the prediction of Groseclose and Milyo (2010) and their strategic voting model. Nobody has an incentive to deviate because to do so would entail an electoral penalty without a policy victory. Thus, they all cast electorally optimal “no” votes, and the bill fails even though they prefer passage. Without someone to solve the collective action problem of sincere voting, they cannot rationally vote yes. The function of party leadership, then, is to maintain party unity by solving the collective action problem of sincere voting. Solving collective action problems, of course, is a primary function of parties (Aldrich 1995; Cox & McCubbins 1993, 2005; and most relevant here, Patty 2008). In this case, their task is to prevent the moderates in the caucus from breaking from the party and voting insincerely for the *status quo* point, thereby sacrificing policy gains for sake of electoral positioning. They can approach the task through a combination of rewards for the legislators who tow the party line, threats to punish those who don’t, or simple coordination to ensure that enough legislators cast the tough votes to ensure passage without sacrificing the incumbents in the most vulnerable districts. The important point here, though, is that the task of party

leadership on these “normal” votes is to maintain party unity by pressuring moderates to side with the extremists for the sake of maintaining party unity. This is a simplification, but one compatible with common descriptions of the legislative process and the role of party leadership in that process. However, that doesn’t describe intra-party conflicts among House Republicans since 2010.

The debt ceiling and the post-2010 House of Representatives

With a weak economy, a relatively unpopular Democratic president, and a controversial healthcare reform law passed earlier that year, the midterm elections of 2010 switched control of the House of Representatives to the Republican Party. However, the Republicans failed to acquire a majority in the Senate, much less veto-proof majorities in both chambers.

Consequently, their midterm seat gains did not give Republicans the ability to enact substantive policy changes. So, while the caucus was unified in its desire to repeal the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, their inability to succeed made their repeated votes to do so merely examples of what Mayhew (1974) would call “position-taking.” From the perspective of actual policy outcomes, the important votes since 2010 have been on issues such as the continued funding of government, and perhaps more dangerously, the so-called “debt ceiling.” It is on these votes that critical internal divisions within the Republican caucus have developed in ways that differ from the simplified model above.

The “debt ceiling” has been the most difficult issue for the Republican Party since 2010. Statutory law instructs the Treasury to disburse money according to a combination of annual appropriations and existing “entitlement” programs whose funding is governed by pre-set

formulae (primarily Social Security and Medicare). However, Congress has not given the IRS the authority to collect enough money in tax revenue to pay for all of it. The Treasury can only make all required disbursements if it issues bonds to raise money. However, a statutory law known as the “debt ceiling” caps the value of outstanding bonds that the Treasury may issue. If that statutory limit is reached, the Treasury must either violate Congress’ instructions on disbursements, or violate Congress’ instructions on the debt ceiling by issuing more bonds in order to bring in the money that it has been instructed to disburse. Moreover, failing to disburse that money could have dire economic consequences. If bond-holders are not paid, investors would lose confidence in the security of Treasury bonds, causing interest rates to spike. Even if bond-holders are paid, though, many people owed money by the government would not be, which would both directly reduce economic activity, and potentially cause bond-holders to lose confidence anyway since they would worry that someday they may not be paid. Either way, the result would be a shrinking economy, a flood of lawsuits, increased interest rates, and the indirect economic consequences of rising interest rates. According to all but the most ideologically extreme economists, breaching the debt ceiling would risk economic calamity.

However, raising the debt ceiling has historically been politically uncomfortable, especially for Republicans since the 2008 financial crisis. The phrase, “raise the debt ceiling,” sounds analogous to a debt-ridden family asking its credit card company to raise its credit limit so that members of the household can continue recklessly spending themselves deeper into debt. Voting against “raising the debt ceiling,” then, is a convenient position-taking method to define oneself as “fiscally responsible.” The flaw in the analogy, of course, is that once a family “maxes-out” its credit cards, merchants will reject those cards, thereby preventing the family

from incurring new financial obligations beyond the accruing interest and penalties. In contrast, a debt ceiling breach only occurs if Congress chooses to incur financial obligations that it doesn't give the Treasury the authority to cover. Those financial obligations remain legally binding even if the Treasury has reached its borrowing authority, which is precisely what makes a debt ceiling breach so dangerous. Nevertheless, minority party legislators have regularly looked for opportunities to vote against a "debt ceiling increase" in order to take a symbolic position in favor of balanced budgets, thereby forcing majority party members to cast the uncomfortable "yes" votes. As a Senator, Barack Obama was among the many to do so.

For the new Republican majority in the 112th House, though, the problem was more complicated. In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, Republican politicians rallied around the claim that excessive government spending was a primary cause of the crisis, and that resolving the crisis necessitated reducing government expenditures. Moreover, the "Tea Party" activists who formed the electoral base of the Republican Party frequently insisted that their primary political objective was to reduce government spending. Thus, Republican legislators feared that if they voted to "raise the debt ceiling," their electoral base would see it as a betrayal. In principle, that could lead to a "Tea Party" primary challenge. However, as the majority party in the House, they needed to supply at least some Republican votes to raise the debt ceiling unless they wanted to face the economic consequences of not doing so, and the political consequences of that economic damage.

In the summer of 2011, Treasury warned that a debt ceiling breach was imminent, and the new Republican majority needed to find a way to avert a breach that would minimize the risk of a backlash from its electoral base. Republican Party leaders managed to thread that needle by

using the debt ceiling as what Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) called, “a hostage that’s worth ransoming.” Rather than face the risk of a Tea Party backlash for simply raising the debt ceiling, Republican leaders insisted that they would refuse to raise the debt ceiling unless President Obama and Senate Democrats agreed to a set of Republican demands. Specifically, Speaker Boehner demanded that every dollar increase in the debt ceiling be accompanied by a dollar in spending cuts.¹ If he could convince Democrats to make concessions on spending, then Republican leaders could pacify Tea Party opposition to raising the debt ceiling with the concessions acquired by doing so. Moreover, Republican leaders could claim that they didn’t actually *want* to raise the debt ceiling-- they only agreed to do so in order to achieve other goals.

Extracting concessions, though, requires being willing to vote for a deal that includes raising the debt ceiling once the opposing party agrees to concessions. However, as deliberations began in the 112th Congress, many Republicans in the House issued a blanket refusal to vote for any debt ceiling increase. Some simply feared that the Democratic concessions would not satisfy Tea Party activists who opposed raising the debt ceiling on principle, and others likely agreed with those activists.

To make matters more complicated, many Democrats were unwilling to agree to the types of concessions Republicans were demanding for a debt ceiling increase. The strategic challenge that Speaker Boehner first faced in the 112th Congress, then, was to cobble together a bipartisan coalition in the midst of an historically polarized Congress for a debt ceiling increase, unless he wanted Republicans to take the blame for the fallout from not raising the debt ceiling. That

¹ By 2013, that demand evolved into a repeal, defunding or delay of the PPACA.

required convincing Republican legislators to vote for a bill containing a debt ceiling increase, even if doing so might risk a primary challenge fueled by Tea Party activists.

In August of 2011, the new Republican majority passed its first debt ceiling increase as part of the Budget Control Act of 2011. The bill matched a debt ceiling increase with a set of deficit reduction measures equal to the value of the debt ceiling increase. The bill specified some spending cuts directly, and mandated the creation of a “super-committee” to propose the rest of the deficit reduction measures with the fall-back position that if the “super-committee” failed, a set of broad and intentionally reckless spending cuts known as “sequestration” would go into effect.² The Budget Control Act passed the House by a vote of 269-161, with both caucuses divided. Democrats were divided because many balked at the magnitude of the spending cuts. More interesting, though, were the divisions among House Republicans. Speaker Boehner considered the bill a victory, claiming to have achieved “98%” of what he wanted because the bill included extensive spending cuts and no tax increases. However, achieving that victory required convincing House Republicans to support the bill even though many of them either wanted even more extensive cuts, opposed raising the debt ceiling in principle, or both. Moreover the fear of a “Tea Party” primary challenge made a simple “no” vote electorally appealing because any Republican voting “no” could simply assert that the bill was insufficiently conservative for them, which would protect them from any future charges of being insufficiently conservative if the standard for “conservative” continued moving to the right. It was not clear until the end that Boehner would find enough Republican votes to pass the bill. In the end, with

² Unsurprisingly, the super-committee failed because Democrats on the committee insisted that at least some of the deficit reduction come from revenue increases, while Republicans insisted that the package consist entirely of spending cuts. Sequestration then went into effect.

95 Democrats voting yes and 95 voting no, Boehner needed 122 primary-fearing Republicans to support the deal. He got 174. Many from the most conservative wing of House Republicans voted against the deal, either because of the debt ceiling increase itself, or because the spending cuts were insufficiently large to satisfy their goals.

While the bill did pass, there was so much uncertainty about its success leading up to the final vote that the ratings agency of Standard & Poor's reduced the credit rating of U.S. Treasury bonds based on the fear that someday, the increasingly dysfunctional Congress might miss the deadline and permit a debt ceiling breach. Fearing both the economic and electoral consequences of that, it became important for Speaker Boehner to pose a credible threat to punish intransigent legislators who refuse to vote for deals to increase the debt ceiling.

Shortly after the 2012 elections, House Republicans shuffled committee assignments, and three very conservative legislators who had bucked party leadership on important votes such as the debt ceiling were stripped of their powerful committee assignments-- Rep. Justin Amash (R-MI), Rep. Tim Huelskamp (R-KS) and Rep. Dave Schweikert (R-AZ).³ The event sticks out for two reasons-- the specific targets and the severity of the punishment. When Democrats removed three committee chairs after relaxing seniority rules as part of the 1970's reforms, they were directing pressure at the moderate-to-conservative members of the caucus, which is how one normally thinks of party discipline. However, Amash, Huelskamp and Schweikert were extremists, not centrists. Moreover, this is an unusually harsh punishment because of reappointment norms.

³ Additionally, the somewhat more moderate Rep. Walter Jones (R-NC) was stripped of his committee assignment, which was an extreme measure, but less surprising given his relative moderation.

Immediately afterwards, the debt ceiling returned to the legislative agenda, with a breach looming in February 2013 unless Congress acted. Unlike in 2011, though, President Obama insisted that Republicans agree to a debt ceiling increase with no concessions. If they didn't, he would hold them publicly responsible for the economic consequences. Still, Republicans were nervous that if they voted to raise the debt ceiling, particularly without associated spending cuts, they would face primary challenges.

Despite that nervousness, having recently made examples of Amash, Huelskamp and Schweikert, Speaker Boehner was able to secure Republican votes for a debt ceiling increase without spending cuts. Instead, the deal included a pair of symbolic concessions intended to allow Republicans to vote for an increase while saving face. First, according to the technical language of the bill, it did not "raise" the debt ceiling-- the bill just "suspended" it. However, that was merely a rhetorical gimmick. The slightly less symbolic concession addressed a common Republican criticism of congressional Democrats, and in particular, Senate Democrats. Republicans objected to the fact that the Senate had not "passed a budget" in years, so the debt ceiling deal required Senate Democrats to "pass a budget," or else not receive their pay. However, the demand was merely that Senate Democrats pass a non-binding resolution called "a budget," even though the elements of that non-binding resolution were included, in binding form, in the Budget Control Act of 2011. Nevertheless, including the requirement in the debt ceiling deal allowed Republicans to claim to have won something significant without the Democrats actually giving up anything substantive. So, would primary-fearing Republicans vote for a deal that included a face-saving symbolic concession but no spending cuts? Boehner found enough Republican votes-- electorally *suboptimal* and *non-pivotal* votes-- to pass it by a vote of 285-144,

with Republicans supporting the bill by a margin of 199-33. It should be noted that this was *more* Republican support than Boehner got for the 2011 Budget Control Act, even though that prior bill contained extensive policy concessions to Republicans, and the new bill contained none of any substance. Perhaps making examples worked. Still, though, Boehner found himself at odds, not with the moderates in his caucus, but with the extremists, continuing to confound expectations about the normal relationship between party leaders and the competing factions within their parties.

In October of that year, the debate played out somewhat differently. Failure to pass a Continuing Resolution by September 30, 2013 led to a partial government shutdown that began on October 1, and without a debt ceiling increase, the Treasury was predicted to run out of “extraordinary measures” to avoid a default on October 17. Consequently, negotiations to end the shutdown and raise the debt ceiling were combined into one process. After a debt ceiling increase with no real concessions earlier that year, Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) convinced many of his Republican colleagues in the House, and a few in the Senate, to demand either a delay or defunding of the PPACA as a condition for reopening government and raising the debt ceiling, but Democrats insisted that they would not offer any concessions in exchange for either reopening government or raising the debt ceiling. As far as they were concerned, agreeing to a Continuing Resolution with spending levels set by the “sequester” was already enough of a concession, and acceding to more demands would simply reinforce the Republican view that the debt ceiling was, in Sen. McConnell’s (R-KY) words, “a hostage that’s worth ransoming.” Ultimately, the Republicans agreed to a Continuing Resolution and debt ceiling increase with no substantive concessions and hardly even any face-saving symbolic concessions. Upon reaching

an agreement, Speaker Boehner admitted that the Republicans had “lost” the battle, in stark contrast to how he had described the Budget Control Act in 2011. While the deal passed by 81-18 in the Senate, the House once again saw a divided Republican caucus. All present 198 House Democrats voted for the bill, while a majority of House Republicans voted against it, by a margin of 144-87.

The split was a high-profile example of a “Hastert rule” violation. Party agenda control models in Congress, like the Cartel model (Cox & McCubbins 1993, 2005), suggest that the majority party will prevent a bill from reaching a floor vote whenever two conditions are met: a majority within the majority caucus prefers for the bill to fail, but enough majority party members would defect to allow the bill to pass. In popular dialog, this strategy has become known as the “Hastert rule,” even though the practice predates Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-IL). However, under Hastert’s speakership, Republicans had a semi-formalized agreement that any bill opposed by a majority of the majority caucus would not receive a floor vote. However, Speaker Boehner could not adhere to that “rule” because the only way to pass a debt ceiling increase in 2013 was to find most of the support from Democrats. Boehner has repeatedly found himself in the position of having to pass some version of a bill in order to avert a policy disaster, even though his caucus is reluctant to vote for any deal. On an issue like the debt ceiling, even many conservative legislators sincerely want a bill to pass. They just fear the electoral consequences of voting for it because of a recently-developed fear of “Tea Party” primary challenges. Part of the solution became abandoning the Hastert Rule, allowing Democrats to cast many of the votes necessary for passage, allowing a significant number of Republicans to cast the electorally optimal “no” votes. As is always the case when votes involve private negotiation,

it is difficult to determine precisely how Speaker Boehner convinced enough Republicans to split off from their most conservative colleagues in order to cast what are likely sincere, electorally suboptimal, non-pivotal roll call votes. On some votes, particularly in October 2013, it was not clear that the Speaker needed to apply any pressure at all-- he may simply have needed to allow a Hastert rule violation without provoking a revolt among the most conservative wing of his caucus. Regardless of the mechanism, though, the tension between a Speaker and the most extreme rather than moderate members of his caucus is historically unusual, and begs explanation.

Status quo points vs. reversion points

The sequence of debt ceiling votes described above does not match the narrative of the simplified model presented earlier. Rather than pressuring moderates within the caucus to vote with the extremists, Boehner has tried and often failed to get the extremists to vote with the moderates, and wound up encouraging the moderates to break from the party to vote with the minority caucus. Why? Conventional analysis suggests that the most important change is that Republicans have come to fear primaries more than of general elections. Thus, they believe that the electorally optimal bundles of roll call votes are those associated with extreme rather than centrist locations in the policy space. While perhaps true, there is more to the story. The unusual dynamic that has developed between Speaker Boehner and his fractious caucus has resulted from a complicated interaction between extreme polarization and divided government, which has altered the structure of the legislative agenda in ways that shift the political lines of cleavage.

The 2010 election created the largest ideological gap between the President and the House majority in modern history. While the new House majority voted repeatedly to repeal the PPACA, the impossibility of doing so in the Senate, much less overriding an inevitable veto, made these efforts entirely symbolic. By the same token, there was no point in even considering normal legislation in the House because any bill that would be acceptable to the House majority would be unacceptable to the President, and vice versa. Thus, the dynamic in Figure 1 simply disappeared along with anything resembling a normal legislative agenda that would move policy from a fixed *status quo* point to a fixed *alternative* point.

What remained, then, were the pieces of legislation that are normally considered “routine.” Despite occasional haggling, debt ceiling increases were generally low-profile events prior to 2011, and not the type of bills that get the attention of S&P for the purpose of assessing the credit rating of US Treasuries. However, when purged of any other substantive items, the legislative agenda necessarily centers on these types of bills, with policy changes only possible when those changes are attached to must-pass legislation like debt ceiling increases. A legislative agenda built around items such as healthcare reform is very different from a legislative agenda built around averting a debt ceiling breach.

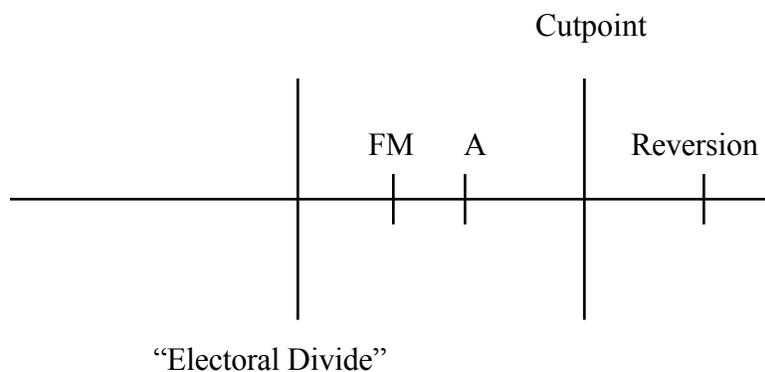
Instead of a choice between a fixed *alternative* point and a fixed *status quo* point, a debt ceiling bill is a choice between a fixed *alternative* point and what may be called a “reversion” point. A “status quo” point reflects where policy is at any given point in time, and a “reversion point” represents what would happen if no legislative action is taken. In most contexts, they are the same. If a bill to change abortion law does not pass, abortion policy remains fixed. On issues such as the debt ceiling, though, that isn’t the case. When the Treasury reaches the limit of

its authority to issue bonds, failure to raise the debt ceiling results in the government's sudden, newfound failure to meet all of its financial obligations. That changes the nature of the choice, and that changes the dynamic between party leadership and its rank-and-file.

The key difference is that while most *status quo* points are relatively centrist for reasons discussed earlier, the *reversion* point on the debt ceiling is very ideologically extreme. The most ardently conservative "Tea Party" legislators may sincerely believe that refusing to raise the debt ceiling would be harmless at worst and possibly beneficial by forcing the spending cuts that could not be achieved through the normal appropriations process. Rep. Ted Yoho (R-FL), for example, claimed in 2013 that breaching the debt ceiling would, "bring stability to the world markets." However, this is a very extreme position, rejected by economists across the ideological spectrum as well as the formal leaders of the Republican caucus. When the legislative agenda is built around items with ideologically extreme *reversion* points, though, the agenda necessarily violates the $ML < SQ < A < SP$ rule. Suddenly, cutpoints outside the [ML, SP] range become the norm, dividing the Speaker from the extremists in his own caucus because on bills that involve ideologically extreme *reversion* points, a set of extremists in the majority party, like Rep. Yoho, may sincerely prefer the *reversion* point to any plausible *alternative* point.

To make matters more complicated, even Republicans who believed that the debt ceiling must be raised seemed to fear that voting to do so might provoke a Tea Party primary challenge, suggesting an alternative "electoral divide." Consider Figure 2

Figure 2



In Figure 2, rather than a relatively centrist *status quo* point, there is a *reversion* point, e.g. breaching the debt ceiling, that is so ideologically extreme that only the most extreme conservatives sincerely prefer it to the *alternative* point, which is still to the right of the floor median’s ideal point. In this case, though, the electoral divide is to the left of the floor median’s ideal point. Legislators whose ideal points lie to the left of the electoral divide are Democrats. Since they do not run in Republican primaries, they do not fear losing primaries to Tea Party challengers if they vote to raise the debt ceiling. While Democrats have looked for opportunities to vote against debt ceiling increases in the past, they have been willing to support increases at least since 2010.

The challenge is that there aren’t enough of these legislators to pass a debt ceiling increase on their own. Legislators whose ideal points lie between the electoral divide and the cutpoint prefer the still-very-conservative *alternative* to the *reversion* point, but fear electoral punishment if they vote for the *alternative*, not because of a general election challenge, but because of a primary threat. Moreover, since the floor median falls in that range, we have a modified collective action problem of sincere voting. If only legislators with ideal points to the left of the electoral divide are voting for the *alternative*, then any one cross-pressured legislator who sides with the minority will be casting a sincere but electorally suboptimal, non-pivotal roll

call vote. That would mean paying an electoral penalty for no policy gain. If the *reversion* point is to be avoided, some of these cross-pressured legislators must join with the Democrats by casting sincere but electorally suboptimal roll call votes for the *alternative*. The only way for that to happen is if the majority party leadership somehow convinces the moderates within his caucus to break from the conservatives, dividing rather than uniting the majority caucus. The structural factor that creates this odd dynamic is that the majority party is not trying to move policy away from the center. They are trying to avoid an extreme *reversion* point with which some of the caucus are actually comfortable.

There are two difficulties for someone in Speaker Boehner's position when faced with a circumstance like Figure 2. The first, and most obvious, is that avoiding the *reversion* point actually alienates a subset of the caucus on policy grounds since caucus members who have ideal points to the right of the cutpoint actually prefer the *reversion* point to the *alternative* point. The larger that faction is, the less tolerant the caucus will be of the Speaker encouraging moderates to vote with the minority caucus, and the greater the risk of backlash against the Speaker. Second, the precise circumstances that create the division in the majority caucus also limit the Speaker's disciplinary options. In general, manipulation of the committee assignment process can be a critical tool for party discipline, and it even allows for variation in the severity of punishment. Removing legislators from powerful committees, for example, is a strong measure, but refusing to grant a transfer to a modestly better committee is a weaker measure. However, committee assignments are only truly important when the House is taking up regular legislation. Since floor amendments are generally limited in the House by the Rules Committee, a legislator who wants a significant degree of control over the content of a piece of legislation needs to be on a committee

with jurisdiction over the bill. However, the dynamic that developed between Republican leaders and their rank-and-file since 2010 has done so precisely because the House stopped working on normal legislation. There was no point working on major tax reform or major immigration reform if any bill passed by the House would be too conservative for the Senate and the President, and even the funding of government was managed, not through normal Appropriations bills, but through Continuing Resolutions negotiated on the floor at the last minute under threat of shutdown (or in the case of October 2013, an *actual* shutdown). In such an environment, committee assignments simply are not worth as much. To be sure, they are not *worthless* because eventually, the House will probably take up normal legislation again, and in December of 2013, the chairs of the House and Senate Budget Committees, Rep. Paul Ryan (R-WI) and Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA) respectively, arrived at something closer to a normal legislative bargain to prevent the next shutdown, suggesting that at some point, Congress may return to more “normal” legislative processes in which committee assignments have power and value. However, the diminished legislative activity since 2010 has reduced the value of committee assignments, thereby weakening party leadership by limiting their disciplinary tools. With a legislative agenda built around ideologically extreme reversion points, the Speaker has the difficult challenge of leading by *fracturing* his caucus, and even his strongest disciplinary tools aren't as strong because of the exact same circumstances that create the dilemma in the first place.

This describes the politics of the debt ceiling quite well. While Democrats have looked for opportunities to vote against debt ceiling increases in the past, their eagerness to do so evaporated in the post-2010 partisan environment. Those who opposed the Budget Control Act

of 2011 did so, not because they preferred the *reversion* point, but because they opposed the spending cuts included in the bill.

Even so, since Democratic votes alone would not be enough to pass a debt ceiling increase after 2010, Speaker Boehner has been forced to supplement those Democratic votes with some number of Republican votes in order to avoid a debt ceiling breach. Doing that, though, required solving a collective action problem because while the less extreme Republicans may sincerely prefer a debt ceiling increase to a breach, they face electoral incentives to vote against an increase, and if no one is pivotal, then voting to raise the debt ceiling implies paying an electoral cost for no policy benefit.

Moreover, solving that collective action problem requires a credible threat of punishment in an environment in which committee assignments have diminished value. That requires ramping up the punishments. Consequently, the Speaker must demonstrate that he is willing to carry out extreme punishments, like removing legislators from powerful committees if they fail to bow to party pressure, as Boehner did with several dissidents at the start of the 113th Congress. But why punish Amash, Huelskamp and Schweikert? Perhaps Boehner simply needed to punish *someone* in order to give credibility to his threats, and if Amash, Huelskamp and Schweikert were likely to vote against any debt ceiling increase anyway, he loses nothing by punishing them. They simply serve as examples to the real targets-- those legislators with ideal points located between the cutpoint and the electoral divide. If Boehner is to solve the collective action problem that they face, he needs a credible threat to punish them, and that requires a demonstration of his willingness to carry out punishments that in the past would have seemed too

extreme to be credible threats because the new political environment makes committee assignments less valuable anyway.

This model also demonstrates the inherent instability of party leadership in a circumstance like Figure 2. In conventional versions of Conditional Party Government (Aldrich 1995; Aldrich & Rohde 2000; Rohde 1991), the critical condition for party strength is ideological homogeneity. However, Figure 2 presents a challenge for the Speaker precisely because the caucus has heterogeneous preferences, and since the function of party leadership here is to exacerbate that policy division, the Speaker necessarily makes enemies in the process.

Since this dynamic relies on policy disagreement within the majority caucus, can we say that the 2010 election introduced more ideological heterogeneity into the Republican caucus?

Not necessarily. Ideological distinctions are either hidden or revealed by the structure of the legislative agenda. Normal legislative agendas can obscure differences between party leaders and extremists within their own caucus because they involve relatively centrist “status quo” points, putting all or nearly all party members on the same side of the roll call cutpoint.

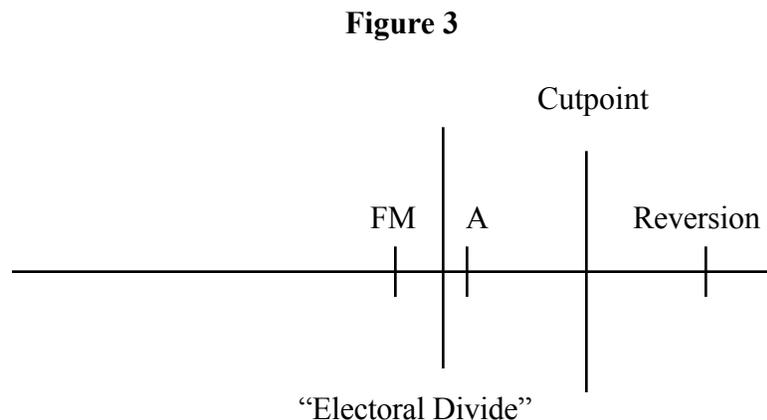
However, agenda items with extreme *reversion* points violate that principle, thereby uncovering previously hidden ideological distinctions. The Republican caucus after the 2010 election may have been no more ideologically heterogeneous than it was before 2010. The distinctions were simply hidden by the structure of the agenda in the 111th House, and revealed by the agenda in the 112th House. That revelation, though, created a collective action problem. More importantly for Boehner, solving that collective action problem alienates the more extreme caucus members, putting the process starkly at odds with standard models of Conditional Party Government.

Since the games of budgetary brinkmanship began in the wake of the 2010 election, speculation

has run rampant that if Speaker Boehner fails to balance the conflicting preferences of his caucus, he will face a revolt, perhaps mirroring the one against Speaker Cannon, except from his right. One might even interpret the votes against Boehner’s Speakership at the beginning of the 113th Congress as a warning shot to that effect. That is precisely what we would expect given Figure 2, and the basic principles of CPG. When party leadership operates by splitting the caucus apart rather than unifying it, one must wonder how stable that leadership model can be. The politics of extreme reversion points pit party leaders against their own most extreme elements rather than against centrist electoral pressure.

A simple question of agenda control?

There is another model compatible with the GOP’s intra-party divisions since 2010. Consider Figure 3.



Now, the electoral divide is actually to the right of the floor median. As long as the alternative is brought to the floor for a straight up-or-down vote, the bill will pass, and the ideologically extreme *reversion* point will be avoided. There is no collective action problem of sincere voting since a floor majority has both policy and electoral incentives to vote for the

alternative. The challenge for the Speaker here is the question of whether or not to bring the bill to the floor at all. Doing so may be a violation of the “Hastert rule.” Any legislator to the right of the cutpoint will sincerely prefer to block a floor vote, so if the Speaker permits a floor vote, he faces the possibility of a revolt for *not* exercising negative agenda control. Moreover, majority caucus members located between the electoral divide and the cutpoint, while sincerely preferring the *alternative* to the *reversion* point, may have electoral incentives to join in a revolt against the Speaker for his failure to *block* a floor vote. This, too, would be compatible with at least some post-2010 brinkmanship.

The challenge is distinguishing between Figure 2 and 3. The question is whether the constraint on the Speaker is that too many caucus members fear a primary backlash, as in Figure 2, or that failure to block a floor vote will alienate the extremists, as in Figure 3. Figure 3 may be a better explanation for the October 2013 debt ceiling increase than the Budget Control Act. In October 2013, 87 Republicans joined 198 Democrats to vote for a debt ceiling increase without concessions, leaving 144 Republicans to vote no. With 429 voting legislators, only 215 votes were needed for passage. That means that of the 87 Republicans who voted for the deal, 70 could have voted against the deal without changing the result. If 80% of the Republican yes votes were unnecessary for passage, then had they wanted to vote no in order to fend off a primary challenge, many more could have done so. The fact that they didn’t suggests that they weren’t as worried about a Tea Party primary challenge, and the question was merely whether or not Speaker Boehner would permit a floor vote. Most likely, Republicans had been chastened by strongly negative polling for the Republican Party during the shutdown, which moved the electoral divide, or at least perceptions of its location. Thus, the challenge for Speaker Boehner

in October 2013 was not the need to whip votes, but the need to violate standard agenda restrictions.

In 2011, though, Speaker Boehner had less room to maneuver. First, the conditions attached to the debt ceiling increase to bring Republican votes on board meant that Boehner could *not* count on a unified bloc of Democrats. That meant he needed far more Republican support. Moreover, the political environment in 2011 was very different from the environment in 2013. The 2011 Budget Control Act came to the floor at the height of the Tea Party, shortly after a record Republican landslide election, and without a government shutdown tilting the polls against Republicans nationwide. Thus, the collective action problem of sincere voting was a more significant factor in 2011 than in 2013. Where the 2011 vote broke from Figure 2, though, was that the Democrats were not unified in their support. As discussed earlier, though, this was because they didn't support the conditions attached to the debt ceiling increase, not because they didn't support the debt ceiling increase itself. So, Figure 2 represents how the *Republican* caucus viewed the 2011 debt ceiling increase rather than how the entire *House* viewed the bill.

In each case, though, the central point is that the tension between Republican rank-and-file and their leadership is created, not just by idiosyncratic primary pressure, but by a legislative agenda structured around ideologically extreme *reversion* points rather than centrist *status quo* points. Avoiding the ideologically extreme *reversion* point requires taking actions that alienate part of a caucus characterized by a form of ideological *heterogeneity* that is only revealed by a legislative agenda stripped of "normal" legislation.

Conflicting evidence from tax disputes

While Republicans' intra-party disputes over the debt ceiling make spatial sense when we consider the difference between a centrist *status quo* point and an ideologically extreme *reversion* point, the history of roll call votes on tax policy since the 2010 election breaks from this pattern in important ways. In 2001, President George W. Bush signed into law a set of tax cuts that would expire after ten years. Had the votes been available, Republicans would have enacted tax cuts without an expiration date, but such a proposal would have been filibustered in the Senate, and Republicans didn't have the votes to invoke cloture. However, Senate rules automatically limited the amount of time allocated for debate on bills considered under "budget reconciliation" rules. However, bills considered under those rules could not increase the deficit beyond ten years. So, by writing the tax cuts to expire after ten years, Republicans could bring their bill to the Senate floor under "budget reconciliation" rules and pass it with only a simple majority. Their hope was that the tax cuts would later be either extended or made permanent because failure to do so would be functionally a tax increase.

Before their expiration in 2011, the cuts were extended for two more years, setting them to expire on January 1, 2013 unless extended again by the lame duck session concluding the 112th Congress. Few members of either party actually wanted all tax cuts to expire. Cutting taxes has been the central, unifying purpose of the Republican Party since the Reagan administration, and while most Democrats wanted the tax cuts on the top income bracket to expire, most didn't want the rest to expire because of the continued weakness of the economy. Keynesian principles suggest that increasing taxes in a weak economy, particularly on those with the highest marginal propensity to consume, would be economically damaging. President Obama's position, shared by most congressional Democrats, was that the cuts should be made

permanent on income up to \$250,000 per year. The area of disagreement, then, was on income above \$250,000 per year. As the deadline approached without a deal, Speaker Boehner developed what came to be called “Plan B,” which would be for the House to pass a bill permanently extending the tax cuts on income up to \$1,000,000 per year. Thus, if a deal were not reached before the deadline, Republicans could insist that the Democratic-majority Senate pass the House’s bill, and for the President to sign it. That way, Republicans might avoid blame if negotiations failed resulting in across-the-board tax increases. That would give Republicans a credible threat to walk away from negotiations, allowing them to extract more concessions.

However, getting the Republican House to vote for Plan B would not be not easy. It would require convincing legislators to vote for a bill for which they might be accused of raising taxes since some viewed a vote for any bill that did not extend all tax cuts as a vote to raise taxes. The \$1,000,000 threshold was actually far higher than what most voters wanted, but Republicans weren’t worried about the consequences for their prospects in the general election. They were worried that if they voted for Plan B, they would face primary challenges for supposedly voting to increase taxes. To purists (i.e. Tea Party activists), it didn’t matter on whom.

Moreover, since the purpose of passing Plan B was not to set policy, but to strengthen the party’s bargaining position, the concern was a position-taking one. Why cast a vote that might risk a primary challenge when even the passage of the bill would have no direct policy effect? Since Plan B was not intended to become law, nobody had anything to gain directly by passing it. They just risked electoral backlash in the primaries. Perhaps, then, we should not be surprised that Speaker Boehner was unable to muster the votes to pass Plan B. Instead, he pulled the bill from the floor before a vote. Ultimately, a compromise was reached, making permanent

all tax cuts on income up to \$400,000, but while it passed by an overwhelming bipartisan majority in the Senate, it garnered most of its support in the House from Democrats, meaning another “Hastert rule” violation similar to the October 2013 debt ceiling increase.

There are several obvious similarities between this story and the saga of the debt ceiling. Most importantly, many Republicans would have preferred to have a bill pass rather than to have no bill pass, but they felt electoral pressure, due to the perceived threat of a primary challenge, to vote against any deal. The result was that Speaker Boehner was forced to pass a bill that was closer to the preferences of most Republicans than the *reversion* point, but to do so primarily with Democratic votes. However, there is a critical difference between the tax cut debate and the debt ceiling-- the location of the *reversion* point.

With the debt ceiling, the *reversion* point was an extremely conservative location, so only Republican extremists like Rep. Yoho sincerely preferred it to any given *alternative*. With respect to extending the 2001 tax cuts, though, the actual *reversion* point would have been a return to the higher tax rates set under the terms of the 1993 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act. That is not a conservative location. If anything, it was too far to the left for most *Democrats* at the time, suggesting that the midpoint between that *reversion* point and the eventual compromise should have put all or nearly all Republicans on the side of the *alternative* rather than the *reversion* point. And yet on the final deal, most House Republicans voted for the *reversion* point. How can we explain this?

One possibility is a direct application of Groseclose & Milyo (2010). As with the debt ceiling, the strategic dilemma for Republicans was that the *status quo* point was not the same as the *reversion* point. In the absence of any bill passing, taxes would not remain fixed at their

post-2001 levels. They would revert to their 1993 levels. So, the order of policies along the liberal-conservative dimension was as follows: *reversion* < *alternative* < *status quo*. However, if Republican primary voters do not understand that the choice is between the *reversion* point and the *alternative* point rather than between the *alternative* and the *status quo*, then they might treat a vote for the *alternative* as a vote for the more liberal rather than the more conservative option. Thus, Republicans would have to decide whether to cast a “position-taking” vote against the *alternative*, or an “outcome”-based vote for the *alternative* in a circumstance in which constituents share the “outcome” preferences of their Representatives, but fail to understand the strategic process. Groseclose and Milyo argue that the equilibrium solution is for everyone to ignore their outcome preferences and cast position-taking votes. That implies precisely the type of collective action problem with which Boehner seemed to be faced.

However, there is another explanation. Gilmour (1995) observes that parties can have a strategic incentive not to accept a compromise if they believe that doing so will either take away an issue that will be electorally beneficial, prevent getting a better policy later, or both. Republicans debating whether or not to accept a compromise by extending only part of the 2001 tax cuts had to ask themselves two questions. First, what would be the electoral consequence of a compromise, and second, what would a subsequent Congress be able to accomplish?

Consider the following scenario. President Obama and House Republicans are unable to come to a deal over partial extension of the 2001 tax cuts. Consequently, taxes revert to their 1993 rates. Republicans then blame President Obama and the Democratic Party for a tax increase, and ride that issue to subsequent electoral victory, giving Republicans sufficient power to restore all of the 2001 tax cuts. On the other hand, if Republicans agree to a deal, and more

dangerously, *vote* for a deal, then they can no longer use a middle class tax increase as an electoral weapon, nor can they criticize the deal without being subject to claims of hypocrisy. Moreover, even if they win the next election, they cannot simply restore the rest of the tax cuts because doing so would mean passing a tax cut *exclusively* on income above \$400,000. If that is an accurate characterization of the dilemma, then Republicans voting against the *alternative* were not really voting for the 1993 tax rates, but for the 2001 tax rates.

So, what is the real *reversion* point? If Republicans accept the logic of the Gilmour-based argument, then voting against a compromise will *eventually* cause taxes to revert to their post-2001 rates, not their 1993 rates. If Republicans reject that argument, then the *reversion* point is the 1993 tax system. Rationalizing Republican Party divisions on tax legislation, then, simply requires understanding that legislators may differ not only in their policy preferences, but in their strategic assessments of what the *reversion* point actually is.

However, this explanation also leaves something to be desired. We cannot simply add stages to the model until behavior that initially appears irrational suddenly yields a positive outcome, and then stop the game. Doing so comes dangerously close to losing a game, and demanding “best two out of three.” The even more complicated issue here, though, is that spatial theory itself becomes a questionable technique when different actors have different beliefs about the policy locations of the alternatives between which they are choosing.

However, if the logic of Gilmour’s “strategic disagreement” reflects the substantive thought processes of congressional Republicans, then perhaps we should accept that when *reversion* points differ from *status quo* points, that just complicates the model, which is the essential argument of this paper anyway. Moreover, this suggests that the divisions within the

House Republican caucus since 2010, revealed by the politics of *reversion* points, run even deeper than one might suspect, encompassing both policy preferences and strategic assessments.

House-Senate differences

It is worth noting that the divisions within the House Republican caucus, while present to some degree in the Senate, have not created the same leadership challenges in the upper chamber. The first obvious point to be made about this is that even after 2010, the Republicans remained the minority caucus in the Senate, leaving most of the onus on Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) to manage the process. Perhaps more importantly, though, the Senate Republican caucus simply isn't as ideologically extreme. The median DW-NOMINATE score for House Republicans in the 112th Congress was .674. In the Senate, the Republican median was .465. If Senate Republicans were not as ideologically extreme as House Republicans, then they were less likely to sincerely prefer ideologically extreme reversion points. Thus, there would be no reason to expect the same tension in the Senate as in the House.

The future of intra-party divisions and party leadership in Congress

If intra-party divisions among House Republicans since 2010 have resulted not merely from a newfound fear of primary challenges, but from a legislative agenda that results from the combination of extreme polarization and *divided* government, then the question is what would happen with a return to *unified* government?

Of course, there are two possibilities for unified government-- unified Democratic control and unified Republican control. In the hypothetical case of a return to unified Democratic

control of the White House and both chambers of Congress, there is little reason to expect anything to be different from the 111th Congress, in which Democratic leadership struggles to keep its cross-pressured members from casting insincere “centrist” votes. More importantly, though, the now-fractious Republican caucus would once again be free to simply vote “no” on any Democratic proposal since even must-pass legislation could do so on party-line votes. Moreover, since they would be unable to force floor votes on any of their own proposals, none of the currently-existing divisions would have any reason to manifest given the new structure of the legislative agenda.

The more interesting possibility of unified government is if the Republicans win the Presidency, as well as majorities in the House and Senate. That is at least plausible for 2016. What kind of relationship would we expect to see between the Speaker and a similarly composed Republican House caucus? The popular explanation for divisions among congressional Republicans is that they stem from a caucus that drifts continually rightward in response to the threat of primary challenges. If that were the whole story, then a return to unified government would change nothing about the tension between Republican leaders and their rank-and-file. However, the analysis here suggests otherwise. Understanding what would happen under unified Republican control requires addressing several points.

First, what would be the contours of the legislative agenda? The items that have split the Republican caucus in recent years would still need to be addressed. Congress needs to fund the government, which requires either Appropriations bills or Continuing Resolutions. Furthermore, without a balanced budget, Congress will still need to raise the debt ceiling, and even the budgets proposed by Rep. Paul Ryan (R-WI) continue to run deficits for an extended period of time.

Hence, the bills with ideologically extreme reversion points would remain on the legislative agenda. However, the dynamic that has split the Republican Party in response to these agenda items would not. Since 2010, Republican leaders have managed these bills by using them as “hostages,” in Senator Mitch McConnell’s (R-KY) words, with which to extract concessions from a Democratic-majority Senate and a Democratic President. That allowed Republicans to use these concessions as carrots to attract enough Republican votes to avoid the reversion points, while simultaneously telling “Tea Party” activists that they don’t actually *want* to raise the debt ceiling-- they just do it because it is the only way to extract spending cuts from Democrats. If Republicans have unified control, though, they cannot use Democrats as foils in the negotiating process. Without Democratic foils, Republicans would need a way to raise the debt ceiling as quietly as possible, suggesting a return to something like the “Gephardt rule.”⁴ The most plausible approach, then, would be to pass very ideologically extreme Appropriations bills that avoid shutdowns on strict party-line votes, while quietly including debt ceiling increases in these ideologically extreme bills. After all, one cannot play games of brinksmanship without an opponent, and by definition, a return to unified control would take away the Republicans’ opponents, thereby making it difficult for even the most extreme Republicans to object to their own party’s bills on the grounds that the non-existent concessions to Democrats are too high. The bills themselves would just become that much more conservative to meet the expectations of an increasingly extreme majority caucus. Thus, while Congress would continue to address the

⁴ Former Rep. Richard Gephardt (D-MO) began the practice of attaching a self-executing rule to House spending bills that would “deem” a debt ceiling increase “to have passed” (hence the nickname for the procedure of “demon pass,” as in, “deem *and* pass”). That way, the Treasury was never instructed to disburse more money than it could raise through some combination of tax revenue and bond issuance. In order to avoid separate debt ceiling votes, a unified Republican Congress with a Republican President would likely quietly include debt ceiling increases in spending bills.

types of bills that involve ideologically extreme reversion points, there would be no reason for a Republican Speaker to continue pushing cross-pressured caucus members into coalitions with the minority party.

Moreover, if it is the combination of extreme polarization and divided government that reduces incentives for the House to take up “normal” legislation, then the return of unified control would give the House incentives, once again, to take up bills that move policy from a fixed status quo to some specific alternative. Such bills would not pit Republicans against each other in the same way that debt ceiling votes have in the past because they don’t involve ideologically extreme reversion points, thus giving us more examples of bills on which Republicans’ ideological preferences are unified. What happens on these bills, then, depends on whether or not Republicans continue to perceive ideologically conservative votes as electorally optimal because of a persistent fear of primaries.

If Republicans’ fear of “Tea Party” primary challenges is real and remains a stable force in American politics, then when a Republican majority takes up “normal” legislation, floor votes would not be subject to a collective action problem of sincere voting. Republicans’ policy preferences and *perceived* electoral pressure would both push them to vote for conservative alternative points rather than centrist status quo points. For all practical purposes, the caucus would be both ideologically and electorally homogeneous, allowing the caucus to achieve policy goals through sincere roll call voting without any party pressure. Party leadership would be superfluous, and the model would revert to essentially a Krehbiel (1998) model of the legislative process in which policy outcomes are determined by the distribution of ideal points. What we would *not* observe is any attempt by majority party leadership to push caucus members into

coalitions with the minority party in order to create violations of the “Hastert rule,” as Speaker Boehner has repeatedly done.

Alternatively, suppose that the phenomenon of “Tea Party” primary challenges is a temporary historical curiosity. If Republicans’ fears of primary challenges dissipate under unified Republican control, then the model simply reverts to the process described in Figure 1, in which case party leaders solve the collective action problem of sincere voting by counteracting the electoral pressure to cast insincere “centrist” votes. Again, what we would *not* see is Republican leadership attempting to fracture rather than unify the caucus.

The key point is that without divided government, there would be no need for Republicans to make any concessions to Democrats, and hence no fractures within the party over whether or not the party has conceded too much in order to avoid ideologically extreme reversion points that some caucus members don’t really mind anyway. Consequently, the Speaker would have no need to cobble together bipartisan coalitions that violate the “Hastert rule.” The unusual intra-party divisions currently observed within the Republican Party, then, would be unlikely to survive a return to unified control under either party.

It is also possible that budgetary brinksmanship and associated intra-party conflict within the GOP come to an end without unified government. In the aftermath of the October, 2013 shutdown, some within the Republican caucus decided that they had little strategic interest in pursuing similar conflicts going forward. When asked about the possibility of future shutdowns, Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-KY) said, “There is no education in the second kick of the mule. The first kick of the mule was in 1995.” Shortly afterwards, Rep. Paul Ryan (R-WI) and Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA) reached a compromise to avoid the next shutdown in a more conventional

negotiation process. This suggests the possibility that until unified government returns, the caucuses will simply agree to small-bore deals before the ideologically extreme reversion points are close enough to turn the process into a game of brinksmanship. Even in that case, substantive deals that move policy from a conventional status quo point remain unlikely, though, and Congress will do little more than “keep the lights on.”

Ultimately, though, if intra-party divisions merely reflect Republicans’ newfound fear of primary challenges, as conventional wisdom holds, then regardless of whether or not anyone regains unified control, the divisions will remain as long as the fear of primaries remains. However, if the intra-party divisions result from the diminished legislative agenda that we observe as a consequence of combining extreme polarization with divided government in addition to primary fears, then regardless of whether or not Republicans continue to fear primaries more than general elections, a return to unified government would eliminate the intra-party divisions by suppressing the conflicts over bills that involve ideologically extreme reversion points.

References

Abramowitz, Alan I., Brad Alexander and Matthew Gunning. 2006. "Incumbency, Redistricting, and the Decline of Competition in U.S. House Elections." *Journal of Politics* 68: 75-88.

Aldrich, John H. 1995. *Why Parties?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Aldrich, John H. and David W. Rohde. 2000. "The Consequences of Party Organization in the House: The Role of the Majority and Minority Parties in Conditional Party Government." In *Polarized Politics: Congress and the President in a Partisan Era*. Jon R. Bond and Richard Fleisher eds. Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press.

Brunell, Thomas L. 2006. "Rethinking Redistricting: How Drawing Uncompetitive Districts Eliminates Gerrymanders, Enhances Representation, and Improves Attitudes Toward Congress." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 40: 77-85.

Brunell, Thomas L. 2008. *Redistricting and Representation: Why Competitive Elections Are Bad For America*. New York: Routledge.

Buchler, Justin. 2009. "Redistricting Reform Will Not Solve California's Budget Crisis." *California Journal of Politics & Policy* 1: article 3.

Buchler, Justin. 2010a. "The Redistricting Process Should Be Nonpartisan: Con." In *Debating Reform*, Richard Ellis & Michael Nelson (eds.) Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press.

Buchler, Justin. 2010b. "The Inevitability of Gerrymandering: Winners and Losers Under Alternative Approaches to Redistricting." *Duke Journal of Constitutional Law and Public Policy* 5: 17-36.

Buchler, Justin. 2011. *Hiring and Firing Public Officials: Rethinking the Purpose of Elections*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Cox, Gary W. and Mathew D. McCubbins. 1993. *Legislative Leviathan: Party Government in the House*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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

Gilmour, John B. 1995. *Strategic Disagreement: Stalemate in American Politics*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Groseclose, Tim and Jeffrey Milyo. 2010. "Sincere Versus Sophisticated Voting in Congress." *Journal of Politics* 72: 60-73.

Krehbiel, Keith. 1998. *Pivotal Politics: A Theory of U.S. Lawmaking*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mayhew, David. 1974. *Congress: The Electoral Connection*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

McCarty, Nolan, Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal. 2009. "Does Gerrymandering Cause Polarization?" *American Journal of Political Science* 53: 666-680.

Patty, John W. 2008. "Equilibrium Party Government." *American Journal of Political Science* 52:636-655.

Rohde, David W. 1991. *Parties and Leaders in the Postreform House*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.