On the Decline of Party Voting
In Congress

The literature on roll-call voting in the House of Representatives has found a secular decline in the importance of party throughout most of the twentieth century (1910–80). This finding takes two basic forms: first, party votes—that is, votes in which a majority of Republicans oppose a majority of Democrats—have decreased as a proportion of all votes; second, intraparty cohesion on party votes has declined. We argue that these two measures of the importance of party voting are not clearly enough connected to the activity of parties as organizations. Accordingly, we propose other measures based on the activity of each party’s floor leader and whip. Using these measures, we find a somewhat different pattern for the majority party in the post-New-Deal era. We do not examine the earlier part of the century but believe that our measure would corroborate the major finding in the previous literature—that is, a substantial decline in party strength after the downfall of Speaker Cannon.

The literature on recorded votes in Congress is vast (for recent surveys, see Collie 1984; Thompson and Silbey 1984). Most of it, including the portion that deals with the postwar House of Representatives, concludes that party is the single best predictor of congressional voting behavior (Marwell 1967; Matthews 1960; Truman 1959; Turner 1951; Turner and Schneier 1970). At the same time, however, those who take a historical view emphasize the declining importance of party voting in Congress during the twentieth century (Brady, Cooper, and Hurley 1979; Clubb and Traugott 1977; Collie 1988; Collie and Brady 1985; Cooper, Brady, and Hurley 1977). Collie summarizes recent research in this vein showing “an erratic but overall decline in the levels of both intraparty cohesion and interparty conflict since the turn of the century” (Collie 1984, 8).

Our purpose in this paper is threefold: first, to discuss some recent work on trends in party voting in the 1980s, a period not included in the literature cited above; second, to review the methods and results in the literature on the pre–1980 period; and third, to provide a new perspective on historical trends in party voting since the
New Deal, one that centers on the activity of party leaders rather than party majorities.\textsuperscript{1} Thus, for example, instead of focusing on such standard measures as the number of party votes—defined as roll calls in which a majority of Republicans oppose a majority of Democrats—we look at party leadership votes, defined as roll calls in which the Republican and Democratic leaderships oppose one another. If one seeks to assess the importance of parties as organizations, we argue, the appropriate measures are the cohesion of each party in support of its leadership, on those roll calls on which the leadership takes a clear stand, and the number and importance of such roll calls. When we reexamine the data from this perspective, we find little indication of a secular (i.e., long-term) decline in the importance of party voting cues in the period after the New Deal—at least for the majority party.\textsuperscript{2}

\textbf{Party Voting: Trends in the 1980s}

Systematic study of historical trends in party voting in Congress first became feasible in the mid-1970s, with the compilation of machine-readable roll-call votes by the Inter-university Consortium on Political and Social Research. Soon thereafter, the first entries into the field appeared in print, providing and analyzing long time series of data on party voting (Clubb and Traugott 1977; Cooper, Brady, and Hurley 1977). Obviously, these works could not cover the later 1970s and 1980s, nor does most of the subsequent literature look beyond the 1970s.

The chief exceptions to this characterization are a recent series of papers by David Rohde (1988, 1989, 1990).\textsuperscript{3} Rohde, using essentially the same methodology as previous researchers, has extended the time series of the late 1980s. His findings are important. They show, first, an increase in the frequency of party votes (as a percentage of all roll calls) from the mid-1970s to 1988\textsuperscript{4} and, second, a strong increase in cohesion on these party votes. “Democratic party unity, which had stabilized at a low point between 70 and 72 percent during the first Nixon term (1969–72), began increasing sharply in the 1980s. . . . The average for the 100th Congress (1987–88) was 88 percent, and to find a Congress in which that level was exceeded one has to go back to the 61st (1909–11)” (Rohde 1990, 6).\textsuperscript{5}

The importance of Rohde’s findings, for present purposes, is not merely what they show—a significant increase in party voting in the 1980s—but also what they suggest about previous studies. As Rohde notes, most previous researchers did not indicate that they expected the long-term decline in party voting to end, much less
reverse itself (although some may have had this possibility in mind). In the general literature on party, the view developed that party decline in the legislative arena was linked to party decline in the electoral arena. Both seemed to have a considerable inertia behind them, due to the cumulative and long-term effects of a host of party-weakening forces (starting with the Progressive era reforms and ending with the rise of candidate-centered elections). As Rohde points out, however, "the apparent immutability of partisan decline that was explicit or implicit in earlier research has to be taken as disproved" (Rohde 1990, 32).

**Party Voting: Trends from 1910 to the 1970s**

Even if reversible, the decline in party voting down to 1980 may still have been substantial and steady. Was it?

To answer this question, we shall consider the evidence in greater detail, concentrating on the two variables that have received the most attention in the literature: the relative frequency of party votes and average levels of party cohesion.

**Party Votes**

Consider first the relative frequency of party votes. Cooper, Brady, and Hurley (1977) provide the appropriate figures for the 50th (1886–87) through the 90th (1966–67) Congress. Regressing these figures on time, they find a slope of -.52, indicating that party votes as a percentage of all roll calls fell, on average, by about half a percentage point per Congress. If the time series is extended forward 10 congresses and the same regression is performed for the 60th through the 100th Congresses, the result is a slope of -.45, only slightly smaller (and still statistically significant).

What do these results mean? The answer depends on what one considers to be evidence that parties are important in structuring floor voting. Cooper, Brady, and Hurley stake out a clear position on this issue, arguing that both intraparty cohesion and interparty conflict must exist before one can say that parties are important. Indeed, to measure the importance of party in structuring floor votes, they multiply intraparty cohesion (measured by Rice's coefficient) and interparty conflict (measured by party vote percentages). They clearly state that high internal cohesion alone is not evidence of party strength: "In a context of low divisiveness [internal cohesion] does not testify to the strength of party as a determinant of voting" (Cooper, Brady, and Hurley 1977, 35–36).
Given this view of party strength, it follows that the decline in the relative frequency of party votes is straightforward evidence that party strength is declining. We do not share this view of party strength, however, because we do not think that interparty conflict is a necessary condition of party strength.

To see why, consider a hypothetically cohesive majority party that succeeds in passing its program against an opposition so divided (or coopted) that the relative frequency of party votes is very low (Collie 1988b). By Cooper, Brady, and Hurley’s measure, party strength for the majority party would be low because, although the party’s cohesion is high, the level of interparty conflict (measured by the party vote percentage) is very low. But is the majority party really not very strong in this situation? It is, by hypothesis, both internally cohesive and successful in passing its program. It is the minority party that seems weak.

We do not deny the general point that party strength is a function both of the frequency with which a party springs into action and of its cohesion when it does act. Indeed, our entire paper is structured around this notion. But we certainly disagree with Cooper, Brady, and Hurley’s measuring the frequency of party action by the frequency with which it disagrees with the other party. If one were trying to measure how frequently a gang acted as a gang, would one count only the instances in which it fought another gang, or would one also include the cases in which it acted against an unorganized opponent or no opponent at all? The Cooper, Brady, and Hurley measure seems to us a better indicator of the overall state of the party system than of the strength of individual parties. Here, because we are interested specifically in the latter, we attempt a different tack in measurement. Nonetheless, as will be seen, both of the measures that we suggest below also rely to some extent on interparty conflict as a clue that the party is acting.

In light of the foregoing discussion, what should one make of the trend in party votes? Recent work by Collie (1988a) tracks both party votes and votes in two other categories: roll calls on which at least 90% of the voting members vote in the same direction (called universal votes) and a residual category of roll calls, those that are neither party votes nor universal votes. At least for the period that Collie studies (1933–80) the decline in party votes as a percentage of all roll calls is not mirrored by an incline in the residual category of votes. Collie finds that the trend over time in the residual category is essentially nil. The bulk of the action is in party votes and universal votes, with the latter increasing as the former declines. Thus the relative decrease in party votes reflects not so much the increasing activity of shifting
crossparty coalitions as the increasing activity of universal coalitions. The chief question is not why moderately sized bipartisan coalitions have become more prevalent but why nearly unanimous coalitions have become more prevalent.

The answer to this question need not damage one’s image of how important parties are in determining floor votes. For example, there may be increased incentives to record votes on “motherhood and apple pie” issues or increased incentives for small minorities to push things to a vote. Neither of these explanations would entail less powerful or important parties.

Suppose one excluded the nearly unanimous votes from analysis, as is often done in computing internal cohesion. Would there still be any substantial trend? The answer is less clear than when dealing with all roll calls. If one regresses party votes (as a percentage of non-universal votes) on time for the period examined by Collie, the negative declivity is still significant, but not if one deletes the 73d Congress (1933–34). Moreover, the decline is far from steady. The average party vote percentages by decade for the 1930s through 1970s are 73.1, 60.3, 65.5, 62.1, and 57.0. The decline from the 1930s to the 1940s seems relatively large; but not much happens from the 1940s to the 1960s.

How much should one make of the 8 to 13 percentage points that separate the House of the 1930s from that of the succeeding three decades? This difference is not always clearly interpretable as party decline. Suppose, for example, that the Republicans stopped opposing core New Deal programs in the later decades, after their popularity became obvious. Then votes on such programs should have been passed by bipartisan majorities, where previously they had been passed by the Democrats alone. Such a change says that the minority party is throwing in the towel, not that party—the majority party in particular—is less important in explaining what policy is passed and what is not. On the basis of the party-vote evidence alone, it would be hard to argue that the congressional parties were markedly less important in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s than they were in the 1930s.

*Intraparty Cohesion*

Let us consider also the evidence on intraparty cohesion. This can be divided into two subcategories, depending on whether cohesion is averaged over all roll calls or just over party votes. The first type of evidence (cohesion on all roll calls) is presented by Cooper, Brady, and Hurley (1977) and Clubb and Traugott (1977). Both studies find little
trend over the periods that they examine (1887–1969 and 1861–1974, respectively). As Clubb and Traugott report, based on an investigation of the longer period: “The average index of cohesion for the Republicans is effectively uncorrelated” with time, while the correlation for the Democrats is “at best only moderately higher” (Clubb and Traugott 1977, 394–95). They conclude, “Taken in total, it appears that declining trends in party voting in the House can best be characterized as involving diminution of differences between the parties [as reflected in the decline in the relative frequency of party votes] rather than generalized and increasing partisan disunity” (Clubb and Traugott 1977, 397).

Nonetheless, the cohesion figures in certain subperiods do show a decline. In particular, Clubb and Traugott report regressions on time for the period from 1897 to 1933 and find large and significantly negative slopes for both parties.

Clubb and Traugott also examine party cohesion on party votes alone rather than on all roll calls. These data corroborate the negative slope for both parties in the 1897–1933 period and show a continuing decline in the 1933–74 period. Collie (1988a) reports similar results for the period 1933–80; she finds that the average percentage of party members voting with a majority of their party falls from near 90% in the 73d Congress (1933–34) to less than 75% in the 91st and 92d Congress, recovering thereafter.

Although the trends in cohesion on party votes are fairly clear, what the trends tell us about parties is less clear. Some roll calls concern minor issues on which the parties do not oppose one another; those who discard universal votes before computing average cohesion are usually attempting to correct for such minor issues. For a similar reason, others look at cohesion only on party votes, since roll calls on which party majorities oppose one another are more likely to involve important partisan issues.

Even roll calls on which party majorities oppose one another, however, may not be “party votes” in one sense—votes that some party leader wished to bring on, was active in organizing support or opposition for, or held out the possibility of punishment or reward for. Yet if one is interested in the strength of parties as organizations, then the attitude of party leaders is a crucial factor.

British politics distinguishes between “whip” votes and “open” votes. Whip votes are those on which a party’s whip organization is active—and this activity demonstrates that the party leadership is united in favor of the position the whips are urging. Open votes, in contrast, are those on which the party leadership—hence the whip or-
ganization—is silent. No one would think to measure the strength of the leadership of British parties by the levels of party cohesion on open votes. We think a similar restriction should apply to studies of party cohesion in the United States.

It is true, of course, that the power of party leaders is much smaller in the United States than in the United Kingdom. But that is beside the point. The leadership of a U.S. party varies in the degree to which it is united and in the degree to which it communicates its united intent to its followers. The importance of party leaders as voting cues should be measured by the frequency with which they give fairly clear clues and the cohesion of their followers when they do.

Following this line of thought, we shall adopt the following definitions: for a given party, the party agenda is the set of all roll calls on which its top leadership is active and unified, while a party agenda vote is a roll call in the party agenda. A party leadership vote is a roll call on which the top leadership of one party is unified in opposition to the top leadership of the other. (We will give operational definitions of both these terms in the next section. We also provide a brief glossary as an Appendix, to which the reader can refer when the distinction between party votes, party agenda votes, and party leadership votes begins to blur.)

Cohesion on party leadership votes and on party agenda votes seem more readily interpretable than does cohesion on party votes conventionally defined. On party leadership votes, for example, the parties clearly confront one another in a meaningful sense. On party votes as usually defined, however, issues devoid of organized partisan conflict may very well find majorities of the parties opposed, simply because of the like-mindedness of members of the same party. If like-mindedness is of interest, then perhaps such roll calls should be included. But if the issue is the strength of the parties as organizations then one presumably wants to isolate those roll calls on which the organizations are indeed active. The appropriate measures of a party’s strength then are the size of the party’s agenda and the party’s cohesion in support of its leadership on the party agenda. In the next section, we take this approach.

Party Agendas and Party Leadership Votes

One might identify roll calls on which the leadership of a given party was active in any of a number of ways. One method would be to include only those roll calls prior to which the party’s whip organization had polled the membership and made clear the leadership’s
position. Another method would be to include roll calls only on issues that the party leaders had identified publicly as of concern to them as leaders of the party.

In most postwar congresses these methods would identify relatively few votes that would be analogs of the British whip vote. Getting information on the relevant actions is difficult: we simply do not know the issues on which the parties’ whip organizations have been active, except for a few congresses (Froman and Ripley 1965), and there is no single forum in which party leaders have announced their agendas, so that one could be assured of comparability across time once one has identified “litmus test” votes.

We have therefore relied on more readily observable actions to identify party agendas. On each roll call, we have ascertained how the floor leader and whip for each party voted. If a party’s leader and whip both voted on the same side, then that side was taken to be the party leadership’s position (which, henceforth, we shall also refer to as the party’s position). In practice, however, this method would yield party agendas that are too large, constituting 70–75% of all roll calls in the typical congress (at least in the period 1933–89). Moreover, on many votes the leaders of both parties are on the same side of the issue, indicating that the vote is not a partisan division. A refined definition of the party agenda—the one that we shall use in what follows—excludes these votes. The *party agenda* is the set of all roll calls on which the party leaders have a position and on which the leaders of the other party take either no position or an opposed position. If both parties have a position and these positions are opposed, then the roll call is considered to be a *party leadership vote*.

These operational definitions obviously do not perfectly capture our original conceptions of party agendas and party leadership votes. On the one hand, the operational definitions are likely to be too inclusive. The floor leader and whip of a party may both vote on the same side of a roll call without taking any stand or exerting any effort specifically as party leaders. On the other hand, the operational definitions may also be too exclusive on occasion. Illness or unavoidable commitments may prevent a leader from voting, even on an issue to which the leadership has devoted considerable attention.

Nonetheless, our definitions have the considerable advantage of being systematically implementable for a large number of congresses. Party floor leaders and whips are both identifiable by the opening decade of the twentieth century. There are several gaps in the lists of Democratic whips in the first three decades of the century, but by the 1930s the lists are complete and the office well established.
Decline of Party Voting

We have chosen to begin our analysis with the New Deal, conforming to one of the conventional cutting points in the literature (cf. Clubb and Traugott 1977; Collie 1988a). We have data through the 100th Congress but concentrate on that portion of the time series that ends in the 96th Congress, in order to make our results comparable with those of earlier studies. Thus, all the regression results reported below refer, unless otherwise noted, to the period from the 73d to the 96th Congress. The tables and figures, however, include the data from the 97th through the 100th Congress, so that the interested reader can see what has happened in the 1980s.

Party Agendas

The first questions concern the size of party agendas, the levels of support that leaders got on these agendas, and the trends in these two variables. The measure of size is simply the number of roll calls in the party agenda as a percentage of all roll calls. The relevant figures for both parties are presented in Table 1. For the Democrats, the relative size of the party agenda ranges from a low of 23.6% of all roll calls to a high of 67.7%, with a median of 45.4%.12 The Republican figures are similar but generally lower. Over the period stretching from the 73d to the 96th Congress, regressions on time reveal a decline in the size of the agenda for both parties. However, the decline is statistically discernible from zero only for the Republicans.

Support for the party agenda is measured by a leadership support score, calculated as the percentage of times a legislator voted with his party leaders or paired in their favor on party agenda votes (the denominator for the percentage being the total number of party agenda votes on which the legislator participated, either voting or pairing).13 The average of these leadership support scores for each party and each Congress is reported graphically in Figure 1 (Democrats) and Figure 2 (Republicans). Regressions on time of these averages show a large (−.66) and significant (t=7.1) decline for the Republicans and a small (−.09) and insignificant (t=.4) decline for the Democrats.

These results merit some consideration. Previous investigators have found that cohesion declines significantly for both parties when averaged over all party votes (see the party unity scores presented in Table 2, below). Our results show a significant decline only for the Republicans. What explains this difference in conclusions?
TABLE 1
The Size of Party Agendas, 73d–100th Congress
(in percentages)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Congress</th>
<th>Democratic Party Agenda</th>
<th>Republican Party Agenda</th>
<th>Party Leadership Votes</th>
<th>Number of Roll Calls</th>
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Note: For each party, the party agenda is calculated as a percentage of all roll-call votes. For definitions of party agenda and party leadership vote, see the Appendix.

\*For the 100th Congress, data were available for the first session only.

The difference is not due to the use of average support scores rather than average cohesion coefficients. These measures correlate at a very high level, when averaged over the same roll-call base. Indeed, if every legislator votes in every roll call, then the average across legislators of party support scores must equal the average across roll calls of cohesion coefficients.\(^{14}\)

So the difference in results must be traced to the difference in roll calls used: the set of votes on which a party's leadership takes a
FIGURE 1
Average Leadership Support Scores on the Democratic Party Agenda, 73d–100th Congress

Note: For a definition of leadership support score, see Appendix.

united stand (and is not joined by the other party’s leaders) is not coextensive with the set of party votes as conventionally defined. Consider some figures for the 84th through the 86th Congress. There were 255 party votes in these three congresses, only 177 of which were in the Democratic party agenda. The other 78 (or 31%) belong to three classes: 10 votes on which the Democratic leader and whip voted against one another; 36 votes on which either the leader or the whip abstained; and 32 votes on which the Democratic leadership and the Republican leadership agreed. Clearly, there were enough party votes not in the Democratic agenda—and, for that matter, enough party
agenda votes that were not party votes—so that cohesion figures calculated over party votes and cohesion figures calculated over party agenda votes need not be the same in any given congress. Thus trends over time in the two measures may differ, and indeed we found that they do: Democratic cohesion declined over time on party votes but not on party agenda votes.

This difference should probably have been expected. The regional split in the Democratic party between north and south is well known and well represented among party votes (Rohde 1988, 1989, 1990; Poole and Rosenthal 1987). Thus, as the north/south split in the Democratic party worsened over time (with the civil rights move-
ment), it automatically reduced the cohesion figures for party votes. But there are two reasons why this split is probably underrepresented on the Democratic party agenda. First, our construct of party agenda reflects leaders’ choices. If the top leaders of the majority party seek to avoid being drubbed on the floor, they may choose to abstain on certain issues. But abstention by either leader or whip removes the roll call from the party agenda. Second, on issues that split the Democratic party, the floor leader and whip may themselves be split. This split would also remove the roll call from the party agenda.

The primary effect of the north/south split, therefore, should not have been to reduce cohesion on the party agenda but to reduce the size of that agenda. Assuming that the leadership got neither better nor worse over time at anticipating defeats and avoiding them, one would expect no particular trend in cohesion but a decline in the size of the agenda. Similarly, if the floor leader and whip became neither better nor worse as barometers of splits in the party, then one would again expect a decline in the size of the agenda but no decline in cohesion.

We do find no significant trend in Democratic cohesion and a decline in the size of the agenda, but that decline is not significant. If the north/south split was large enough to reduce cohesion on party votes significantly and if cohesion on the party agenda shows no significant change, shouldn’t the party agenda therefore have shrunk significantly? There are two points to consider in this regard.

First, if one looks at the size of the majority party’s agenda, rather than at the size of the Democrats’ agenda (using the Republican figures for the 80th and the 83d Congress), one finds a significant decline. Two of the smallest Democratic agendas occur in these congresses, when the Democrats were in the minority. As both congresses are in the first half of the period investigated, they tend to flatten the slope of decline. In contrast, two of the largest Republican agendas occur in these congresses, so substituting the Republican figures strengthens the downward trend in the size of the majority party’s agenda.

Second, the 74th Congress was an unusual one for the Democrats. Their floor leader, William B. Bankhead, was seriously ill throughout the first session and did not vote at all. This poor attendance record translates into the smallest party agenda for the Democrats in the entire period: 23.6%. If the 74th Congress is omitted as an outlier, then the decline becomes significant.

If either or both of these changes are made in the data considered, there is an average decline of .73 to 1.09 percentage points per congress in the size of the majority party’s agenda, this decline being
statistically discernible from zero. Over the span of about 20 congresses, the proportion of all roll calls that are in the majority party’s agenda would then decline from about 65% in the early 1930s to about 45% in the late 1970s.17

Party Leadership Votes

A set of questions similar to those just asked about party agendas can also be asked about party leadership votes (i.e., those roll calls in the intersection of the two parties’ agendas). How many party leadership votes have there been, relative to all roll calls? How much support from their followers have the top leaders received? How have these two variables changed over time?

The last column of Table 1 shows that party leadership votes have declined significantly as a percentage of all roll calls. This decline was to be expected, since the size of both parties’ agendas declined and since the set of all party leadership votes is the intersection of the two party agendas.

One might at this point ask which set—the set of party agenda votes or the set of party leadership votes—better approximates our original conceptual variable of “votes on which the party leaders are active and united.” The answer is that neither is fully satisfactory. The set of party agenda votes is too inclusive because it excludes only votes on which the top leaders were either obviously inactive (in the sense that one or both did not vote) or clearly disunited (in the sense that they voted against one another). Thus in party agenda votes the party leaders pass only a weak test of activity and unity: they are active and united enough to give a consistent voting cue. While the set of all votes on which the top leaders give a consistent voting cue and the level of support they get when they do are interesting questions in their own right, they are not precisely those we set out to answer. Indeed, the party agenda vote may be hard to interpret as a measure of party activity for reasons similar to those we used to criticize party votes: there is too high a chance that the party leaders are voting not as party leaders but simply as members of Congress.

On party leadership votes, one has the extra clue of interparty conflict to indicate that the floor leader and chief whip voted as party leaders. However, in looking only at votes on which the leadership of the two parties disagreed, one risks underestimating the activity of a single party. Thus there is a tradeoff between these two measures. Our own view is that the real party agenda lies somewhere between the two operational versions we offer. Since both operational measures show a
Decline of Party Voting

decline, we can be fairly confident that the real party agenda declined as well.

Average levels of support for the leadership on party leadership votes decline for both parties (see Table 2 and Figures 3 and 4). The decline for the Republicans, however, is much larger and much steadier. The decline for the Democrats, although statistically discernible from zero, needs to be hedged about by caveats similar to those made above concerning the size of the party agenda. First, if one excludes the 74th Congress (in which the Democrat’s floor leader was absent unusually often), then the decline in average leadership support scores is no longer statistically significant for the Democrats. Second, if one looks always at the figures for the majority party, using the Republican averages in the 80th and the 83d Congress, then again there is no statistically significant decline.

Moreover, if one looks at the plot of average leadership support scores for the Democrats over time (Figure 3), one sees virtually no trend from the 73d to the 88th Congress (confirmed by a regression slope of .003 for this period). Subsequently the support scores decline in the 89th and 90th Congress, fluctuate in the 91st through the 95th Congress, and increase substantially and monotonically thereafter. The story one would tell to explain this pattern is not one of secular party decline. Rather, it would seem that when civil rights and the Great Society came to dominate the Democratic agenda, southern Democrats abruptly became more disloyal to the leadership. This conjecture is confirmed by Figure 5, which plots separately the average leadership support scores for northern and southern Democrats. The figure reveals essentially no trend over time in the loyalty of northern Democrats. The drop-off in the overall figures in the 89th through the 95th Congress is produced primarily by the decline in southern loyalty. Similarly, the marked recovery in Democratic party loyalty in the late 1970s and 1980s is primarily due to the return of southern loyalty to pre–civil rights era levels.

Table 2 also presents party unity scores for both parties, in order to facilitate comparison between our results and those from the previous literature. The correlation between our loyalty scores and the party unity scores in the last two columns is quite high for the Republicans (.95), somewhat lower for the Democrats (.77). The Democratic trend depicted by the party unity scores differs in several respects from that depicted by leadership support scores. The trend in party unity scores from the 73d to the 88th Congress is slightly downward (−.20) and approaches significance at the .10 level (t=1.4); the decline continues into the 91st Congress and becomes somewhat steeper. There is
TABLE 2
Average Measures of Party Cohesion, 73d–100th Congress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Congress</th>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Leadership Support Scores</th>
<th>Party Unity Scores</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Democrats</td>
<td>Republicans</td>
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<tr>
<td>73</td>
<td>1933–34</td>
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<td>93.6</td>
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<td>1939–40</td>
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<tr>
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<td>90.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79</td>
<td>1945–46</td>
<td>77.9</td>
<td>84.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>80</td>
<td>1947–48</td>
<td>79.3</td>
<td>91.5</td>
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<td>81</td>
<td>1949–50</td>
<td>81.5</td>
<td>84.1</td>
</tr>
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<td>1951–52</td>
<td>76.5</td>
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</tr>
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<td>83.5</td>
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<td>100</td>
<td>1987–88</td>
<td>88.8</td>
<td>78.8</td>
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Note: The party unity scores are from Cooper, Brady and Hurley 1977, 138 (for the 73d to 90th Congress) and Rohde 1990, Table 1 (for the 91st to 100th Congress).

For a definition of leadership support score, see the Appendix. The leadership support scores reported in this table are based only on party leadership votes (as defined in the Appendix) rather than on all party agenda votes (also defined in the Appendix).

little fluctuation from the 91st through the 95th Congress, and the recovery thereafter is not monotonic, although it is basically the same in size and timing as that indicated by leadership support scores. Our interpretation of events—wherein there is little trend in party cohesion until civil rights hits the national agenda—is not supported by the party unity data as much as by the loyalty score data. It is nonetheless possible to argue a similar position with these data (cf. Rohde 1988, 1989, 1990).
FIGURE 3
Average Democratic Leadership Support Scores on Party Leadership Votes, 73d–100th Congress

Note: For a definition of leadership support score, see Appendix.

Conclusion

The previous literature on roll-call voting in the House of Representatives has been essentially unanimous in finding a secular decline in the importance of party throughout most of the twentieth century (1910–80). This finding takes two forms: first, party votes—that is, votes in which a majority of Republicans oppose a majority of Democrats—have decreased as a proportion of all votes; second, intraparty cohesion on party votes has declined.

This paper has criticized these two measures of the importance of party voting, arguing that they are not clearly enough con-
FIGURE 4
Average Republican Leadership Support Scores on Party Leadership Votes, 73d–100th Congress

Note: For a definition of leadership support score, see Appendix.

connected to the activity of parties as organizations. Party votes can occur even when the two parties' leaders have taken no stand and no action. The frequency with which party majorities oppose one another on such votes and the internal cohesion of parties on such votes are surely more important questions in the United States than in Britain. But these questions fail to get at the strength or importance of the party organizations in the United States any more than they would in Britain.

We have also emphasized that the percentage of party votes is not well-suited to measuring the activity of individual parties, because it requires both parties to be active at the same time on the same
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FIGURE 5
Average Leadership Support Scores on Party Leadership Votes for Northern and Southern Democrats, 80th–100th Congress

Note: For a definition of leadership support score, see Appendix.

issues. This criticism can be leveled at any measure that identifies party activity with interparty conflict (as our party leadership vote percentage does). For example, a hypothetical majority party that was active (and perfectly cohesive) on every roll call but faced a minority party that never opposed it would be judged inactive by both the party vote and the party leadership vote percentages.

We have argued that the appropriate way to measure the importance of a party organization in structuring the vote is first to identify votes on which the top leadership of the party is active and united (the analog of whip votes in the United Kingdom) and then to answer two questions. How many such votes (collectively referred to as
the party agenda) are there, relative to all votes? How cohesive is the party on such votes? The first question explores how often leaders take a stand, and the second whether they are supported when they do.

The method we have used to identify votes on which a given party's leaders are active and united begins by identifying votes on which the party's floor leader and whip both voted on the same side of the issue at stake. We then use interparty conflict as a further clue, excluding those votes on which the leaders of both parties were in agreement. Finally, we ask how many votes there were in which a party's floor leader and whip gave a consistent cue (not offered by the other party's leaders) and what level of support they received when they did.

Following this procedure, we find that the roll-call evidence does not suggest a secular decline for both parties in the post-New Deal era. The decline for the Republicans is secular: both the size of their party agenda and their cohesion on this agenda diminish considerably, and fairly steadily, from Franklin Roosevelt's administration to Ronald Reagan's. But the story is different for the Democrats. Their party agenda does shrink (growing again in the 1980s), but there is no evidence of a long-term erosion of party cohesion on the party agenda. Rather, there is a sharp dip in the 89th through the 95th Congress, produced mainly by the reaction of southern Democrats to the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War, with a substantial recovery thereafter.

Measures that depend on the actions of both parties—such as the widely-used party vote percentage—tend to hide the difference between the Republican and Democratic experiences. It is important to note, however, that the evidence for secular decline is substantially weaker for the majority party than for the minority party.

A final way to underscore this point is to look directly at the percentage of all party leadership votes that the majority party won. In the 73d through the 79th Congress (1933–46), the majority party leadership won, on average, 75% of the time; in the 80th through the 88th Congress (1947–64), 77% of the time; in the 89th through the 95th Congress (1965–78), 74% of the time; and in the 96th through the 100th Congress (1979–88), 81% of the time. There is little support for any notion of secular decline in the strength of the majority party in these figures.

Gary W. Cox and Mathew D. McCubbins are Professors of Political Science, University of California—San Diego, La Jolla, California 92093.
Decline of Party Voting

APPENDIX

Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>party vote</td>
<td>A roll call in which a majority of nonabstaining Republicans oppose a majority of nonabstaining Democrats (with pairs counted as nonabstaining).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>party agenda vote</td>
<td>A roll call in which both the floor leader and the whip of a party vote on the same side and in which the floor leader and whip of the other party do not also vote on this side.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>party agenda</td>
<td>The set of all party agenda votes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>party leadership vote</td>
<td>A roll call in the intersection of the two parties' agendas, in which the floor leader and whip of one party oppose the floor leader and whip of the other party.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leadership support score</td>
<td>For votes on which a party's floor leader and chief whip voted together, the percentage of times a given legislator of the same party also voted in that direction (or paired with another legislator in favor of the party leadership's position); the score can be calculated either with the denominator being the number of party agenda votes on which the legislator participated (cf. Figures 1 and 2) or, more restrictively, with the denominator being the number of party leadership votes on which the legislator participated (cf. Table 2; Figures 3, 4, and 5).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>universal vote</td>
<td>A roll call in which over 90% of nonabstaining members vote on the same side.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

NOTES

This research was supported by NSF grant SES–8811022.

1. For a general discussion of the motivation of party leaders, see Cox and McCubbins forthcoming.

2. We use the term secular to mean "extending over . . . a long period of time," as the dictionary defines it. The only further connotation we attach is that of steadiness: we think of secular trends as those which take a long time to unravel and which, during the period of unraveling, are more or less continuously in evidence. Thus, secular trends should be quite amenable to ordinary least squares regression.

3. See also Schlesinger 1985.

4. Party votes are defined as recorded votes in which a majority of nonabstaining Republicans oppose a majority of nonabstaining Democrats (with pairs counted as nonabstaining).

5. Party unity scores are computed as follows: First, the number of times that a member supported his or her party in a party vote is divided by the number of times
that that member voted in party votes. Second, the average of this party unity score is
calculated across all party members.

6. Their frequency is measured relative to the total number of recorded votes.
7. They measure "time" by Congress number, as do we in the regression
reported next in the text.
8. Rice's coefficient of cohesion is computed for a single roll call and party by
taking the absolute value of the difference between the percentage of a party's member-
ship voting aye in the roll call and the percentage voting no. Averages are then computed
over a set of roll calls in the usual (unweighted) fashion.
9. In the early 1880s in Great Britain, Irish obstructionists forced a huge
number of divisions on the issue of Home Rule. Both major English parties opposed
these initiatives overwhelmingly, and consequently the party vote percentages for these
years are much lower than for either preceding or succeeding years. Yet no one argues
that any significant decline in the strength or opposition of the parties occurred.
10. The 73d Congress is the first in the series and has the second highest party
vote percentage in the dataset. That the regression slope is no longer significant when
this Congress is excluded reflects the well-known sensitivity of bivariate OLS regres-
sions to the value of the dependent variable corresponding to extreme values of the inde-
pendent variable.
11. Here we borrow from the approach taken by Cooper, Brady, and Hurley,
by using interparty disagreement as evidence of what really is a party stand.
12. The variability in the relative size of the Democratic party agenda, as
measured by the standard deviation (.117), is similar to that in the party vote percent-
ages for the same year (.113). The correlation between the two variables is .58. The stan-
dard deviation of the size of the Republican party agenda is a bit smaller, at .088, and its
correlation with the party vote percentage is a bit larger, at .76.
13. This measure of party loyalty or leadership support is essentially the same
as that used in Mayhew 1966.
14. This point also holds, simply as a mathematical identity, if the support
scores used tally the percentage of times a legislator agrees with the majority of his or her
party. It holds for the leadership support scores used here only if unified party leader-
ships are always supported by a majority of their followers. Even if this condition does
not always hold, however, so long as it holds in the vast majority of cases the claim is
approximately true and, more important, the broader point made in the text is largely
valid.
15. There were 56 such votes in the 84th through the 86th Congress.
17. As Table 1 shows, the majority party's agenda grew substantially in the
1980s, reaching 63.5% in the 100th Congress.
18. These figures were obtained as follows. First, within each period, the total
number of party leadership votes was counted, excluding votes that required a two-
thirds majority—that is, those pertaining to a suspension of the rules or an attempted
override of a presidential vote. Second, within each period, the number of party leader-
ship votes won by the majority party was counted (with the same exclusion just noted).
Third, the latter number was divided by the former to yield the majority party
leadership's batting average on votes requiring a simple majority. The cut points were
chosen to correspond to the periods "through the war," "early postwar textbook Con-
gress," "civil rights transition," and "the 1980s."
REFERENCES


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Gary W. Cox and Mathew D. McCubbins