Political Analysis, 8:4

A Further Look at Universalism and Partisanship in Congressional Roll-Call Voting

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We extend Collie's "Universalism and the Parties in the U.S. House of Representatives, 1921–80" (1988). Detecting a strongly negative correlation between the time series of universalism and partisanship in roll-call votes for the 67*th* through 96*th* US Houses, Collie concluded that consensus and partisanship are alternative, rival means of organizing legislative activity. If robust, this finding ought not to be time- or chamber-specific: it should be in evidence over the whole (partisan) histories of both House and Senate, session by session. Moreover, the inverse relationship should persist under alternative operationalizations of both partisanship and universalism. Using several measures of partisanship and universalism, mostly based on roll call votes, tabulated for sessions of Congress, we re-assess this relationship for the 43*rd* through 105*th* Congresses. Collie's core finding persists for both chambers over the longer time span provided that one uses her measures. But results are weaker when sessions of Congress rather than Congresses are units of observation, and alternative operationalizations of partisanship and universalism do not strongly replicate the original finding.

1 Introduction

Nearly unanimous roll calls feature prominently in formal works on legislative voting, but they have received scant attention in empirical research. Noting this contrast, Collie (1988) initiated the study of very one-sided recorded votes, using data on the US House between 1921 and 1980. She found an inverse relationship between these votes and highly partisan ones: the more "partisan" votes occur in any given Congress, the fewer highly lopsided—or, hereafter, "hurrah"—votes, and vice versa. She inferred from this relationship that partisanship and "universalism" represent rival means of organizing legislative activity. Of late, there has been lively debate over whether there is any

Authors' note: Thanks to the panelists and discussants at the 1997 Southern Political Science Association meetings and the 1998 Midwest Political Science Association meetings for helpful comments and discussion.

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sound evidence for partisanship (in various forms) in American legislatures. Collie's finding stands as a "classic" on one side of these debates, but how compelling is her evidence?

We assess the robustness of Collie's conclusion in two ways. The proposition that universalism and partisanship compete as organizing principles for legislatures is neither uniquely House-oriented nor time-bound, so we expand the time frame and institutional setting by examining the incidence of hurrah and partisan votes in both chambers of Congress for the period 1873-1998.

Second, we examine alternative measures of both partisanship and universalism. Neither concept has a self-evident proxy, and a variety of measures exist in the literature. If it is true that "as partisan conflict diminishes, coalitions become more unstable, uncertainty more pervasive, and the preference for universalism more acute," (Collie, 1988: 875) any valid measure should uncover this dynamic.

2 Hurrah and Party Votes in the House and Senate, 1873-1998

In Figures 1 and 2, we replicate the centerpiece of Collie's empirical analysis by plotting rates of partisan voting and hurrah voting. Collie chose Congresses as her unit of time: we have added sessional rates as well. Here, we mimic her measures: "partisan" votes are those in which at least 50 percent of the voting Democrats opposed at least 50 percent of the voting Republicans; hurrah votes are those in which the margin of passage was at least 80%, i.e., on which at least 90% of those voting were on the same side. Neither standard requires excluding any vote from the calculations, so even the rare, non-binary votes—such as some 19th-century speakership elections—are included.[1]

Collie concluded that there was a "strong inverse relation between universalistic behavior and partisan conflict," evident to the naked eye and also in the –0.88 correlation between the two series in the 67*th* through 96*th* Houses (1988: 865, 872). Our figures confirm that her finding is neither time-bound nor House-specific. Over these sixty-three Congresses, the two House series are correlated at –0.81 and the Senate series at –0.72. For the session series, the corresponding figures are –0.80 (House, n=140) and –0.65 (Senate, n=154). The Congresses post-dating Collie's analysis lend added credence to her theory, insofar as reversals in the two series coincide: a recent revival in partisan voting is mirrored by a decline in the proportion of votes that are hurrahs, in both chambers.

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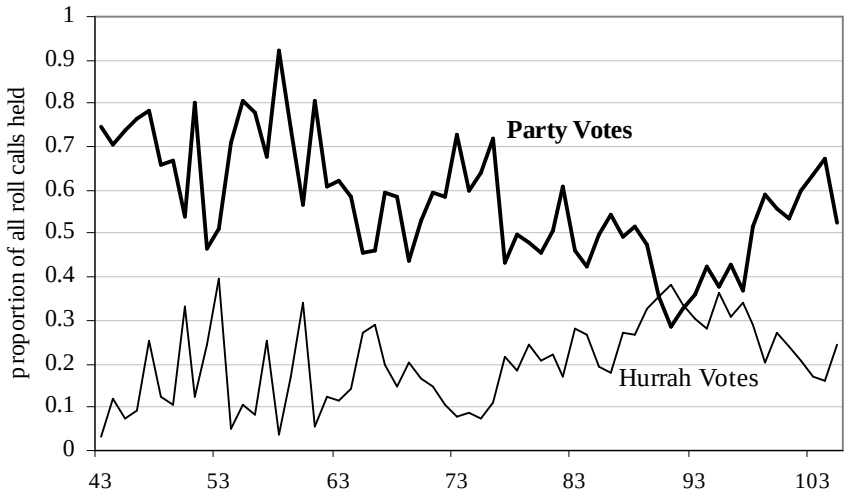
[1] Including these anomalous votes is only one of several coding decisions that affect the *exact* final figures. Our other choices in calculating the number of 50-percent-versus-50-percent votes were: (1) to count only votes with greater than 50% of a party on one side (rather than greater *or equal to* 50%); (2) to treat announced and paired preferences as equivalent to actual yeas and nays (we followed Poole and Rosenthal's example here); (3) to include votes of "Present" in the denominator; and, (4) to limit consideration to MCs with party codes 0100 (Democrats) and 0200 (Republicans) in ICPSR data set # 0004. Note that we have corrected for the inconsistent coding of the non-binary votes in ICPSR #0004.

A. By Congress



B. By Session

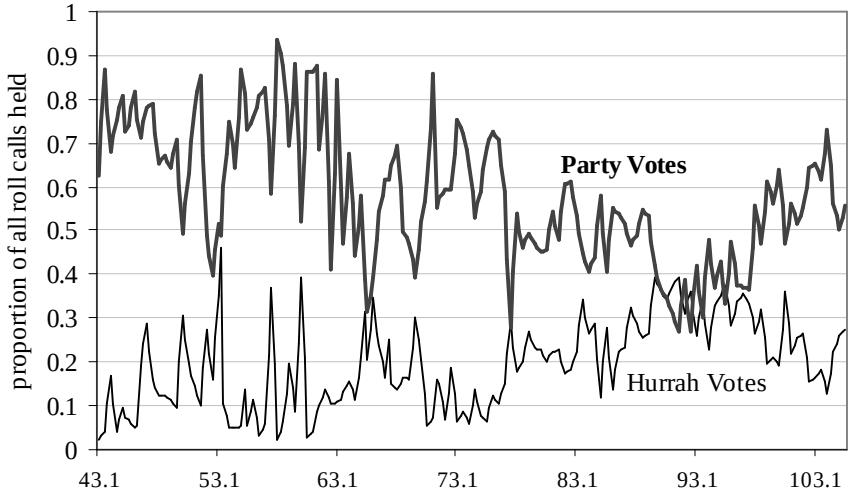
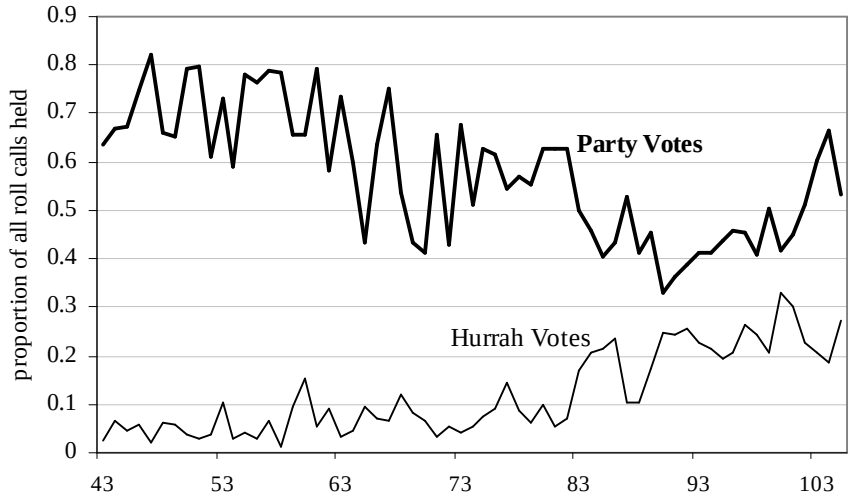


Figure 1 Hurrah and Party Votes, 43*rd*–105*th* US Houses (1873–1998).

A. By Congress



B. By Session

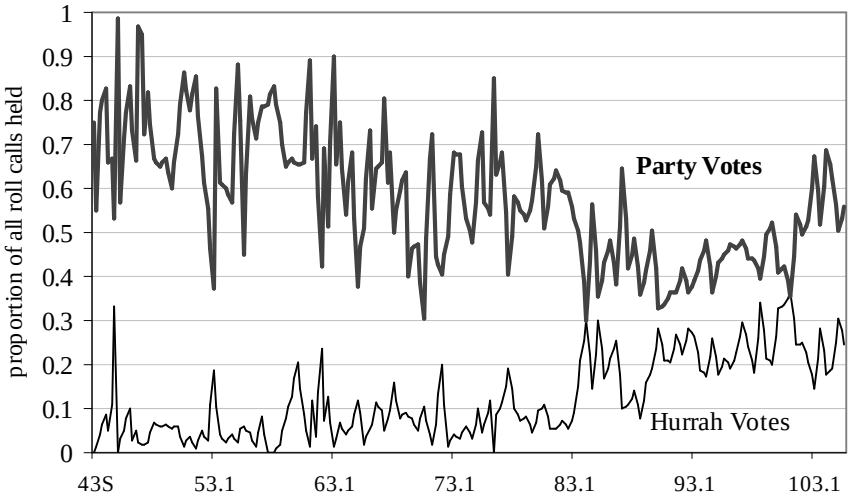


Figure 2 Hurrah and Party Votes, 43*rd*–105*th* US Senates (1873–1998).

These high correlations mask the next most striking feature of the time trends: the differences between the series in terms of their Congress-to-Congress and, especially, session-to-session variability, as suggested by the jaggedness of their respective plots. A general implication of this jaggedness is that short-term session characteristics may have played (play) a major role in determining the nature of voting. If Collie's finding is understood as originating in an ethos or mood of Congress, it is troubling that successive sessions often look so different. It is plausible that a chamber imbued with partisanship might become universalistic (or vice versa) following an election. But since successive sessions are (virtually) identical in membership, dramatic swings from partisan to universalistic spirits seem less sensible.[2]

A third interesting feature of these data is the comparison between House and Senate hurrah-ism in recorded votes. While the proportions of votes that meet the 80+% hurrah standard in each chamber correlate at 0.63 for the 43*rd*-104*th* congresses, the House proportion exceeds the Senate's in 54 of those 62 congresses.[3] Scholars of American politics nearly all concur that the Senate is the more consensual, less majoritarian chamber, yet these data suggest that for most of America's post-Civil War history, the House has seen more frequent unanimity in recorded voting. In contrast, the series on party voting in the two chambers are more highly correlated (0.76), but with no obvious leader (the House's proportion is larger in 35 cases, the Senate's in 27).

3 Exploring Alternative Measures

To what extent are these results robust to different measures of party conflict and unanimity? The attractions of the 50-50 standard for "partisan voting" are chiefly convention and computational ease. It finds its way into textbooks and articles alike as a proxy for degree of party conflict. It is not, however, without critics. Mayhew contends:

> …there is no evident relation between variation in this statistic and in the volume of notable lawmaking, or in whether a legislative program…was being successfully passed, or…in whether party control of the government was divided or unified. Nor does the statistic seem to rise and fall with intensity of conflict in Washington….its ups and downs do not seem to correspond to those of anything of importance that goes on in government (1991: 126).

Two pragmatic concerns are that it is deliberately insensitive to abstention and to the presence of minor-party MCs, and, relatedly, that, being based on observed roll-call votes, it might automatically be correlated with the proportion of votes that are highly

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[2] In Gaines and Sala (1998), we report tests showing that the Senate sessional series are consistent with different-ordered autoregressive processes, i.e. that we could not reject the null of no autocorrelation for the Senate hurrah series, while the 50-50 party voting series was consistent with an AR3 process.

[3] The seven oddball cases are the 85*th* (1957-59), 86*th* (1959-61), and 99*th* through 104*th (*1985-1997).

lopsided. Because party voting is defined vote-by-vote according to the actual sets of participating voters and not the elected party delegations, there is no *necessary* relationship between margin and "partisan-ism," or, therefore, between hurrah votes and partisan votes. For example, a roll call in which 91 Republicans and 4 Democrats vote yea, while 5 Democrats and 0 Republicans vote nay is a partisan hurrah vote. In practice, however, Democrat and Republican abstention levels are highly correlated, and votes of this sort almost never happen. Over the 62 Congresses we examine, neither chamber is ever so dominated by one party to include more than a negligible coincidence of partisan and hurrah votes. For practical purposes, then, hurrah-ism and partisanship are automatically related, as an artifact of how they are measured.

There is, moreover, an ambiguity at the center of this analysis, evident in our use of qualifiers such as "nearly" or "almost" to describe unanimity. The threshold of an 80% margin of passage for the "hurrah" designation is clearly arbitrary. Depending on the distribution of margins, Congress by Congress, the time series of 80%-hurrahs might well look quite different from, say, 70%+, 90%+, or 100% hurrahs. Accordingly, one might want to explore various different hurrah series.[4] This same point clearly applies to the 50-50 party-vote measure: it too is one of a family of measures, and 65-65 or 90-90 party vote series might better capture the degree of partisan conflict underlying a set of votes.

Regardless of the threshold or denominator chosen, though, any measure based on what proportion of all roll calls held betrays some level of partisan division is susceptible to the charge just broached: that its incidence is inversely related to hurrah voting by design and not necessarily because of any fundamental opposition between legislative activity being partisan or being universal. Some alternative approaches to gauging the parties' levels of opposition can escape this charge. First, consider Poole and Rosenthal's NOMINATE estimates of ideological positions of members. Any index grounded in these scores is, ultimately, derived from voting behaviour, which seems appropriate in an operationalization of party conflict *in voting*. One possible statistic to describe the realized partisan division over a series of votes is the distance between parties' median positions on the two main NOMINATE dimensions ("centroid distance" hereafter).

Still another take on how much conflict exists across parties is, following Cox and McCubbins (1993), to focus on those votes that seem to have been important to party leaders. We coded all recorded votes according to the actions of party leaders: for leaders in each chamber, we used the parties' official floor leaders and whips.[5] A vote was counted as a leadership vote only if both Democrat leaders took positions in opposition to both Republican leaders (e.g., two Democratic yes votes vs. two Republican no votes, etc.) We then considered the proportion of all votes in a Congress/session that were "leadership votes," thus defined. Like centroid distance, this

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[4] Elsewhere we present extensive analysis of the underlying distributions of roll-call margins, demonstrating that there are indeed quite different patterns in different eras. For example, the 70%+ and 80% + hurrah series do not always move in parallel over this era (see Gaines and Sala 1998).

[5] Official floor leaders and whips for both parties are available for all Houses since the 56*th* and for most Senates since the 64*th*.

measure has the advantage (in this context) that it is not immediately or automatically connected to proportion of all votes that passed some threshold of unanimity, since it is not derived from the behavior of *all* voting members on recorded votes.

A third approach is broached by Cooper and Young (1997). Their "partisan score" weights the proportion of votes that are partisan (i.e. 50–50) by the partisan structuring of these votes, where structuring refers to an appropriately re-scaled sum of the traditional Republican and Democratic party unities. Thus, it combines information on the prevalence of party divisions and on the average unity of the parties, when they divide. The resulting figure represents the maximum proportion of all structure in recorded votes that can be accounted for by partisanship, as against bi-partisanship or cross-partisanship.

Finally one rival hypothesis about these votes fairly leaps out of these data. The actual number of roll calls held in Congresses has varied considerably over modern history. A natural conjecture is that hurrah votes are, in a sense, frivolous, and so should be (relatively) more numerous when more roll calls occur. A reasonable conjecture, in other words, is that the number of roll calls held in a Congress or session will also correlate strongly with the incidence of hurrah votes.

Table 1 presents correlations between all of these measures for the House and Senate, using the Congress rather than session series. Values above the diagonal describe the Senate; below, the House. In both chambers, it matters little whether one uses a cutoff of 80% or 90% for hurrah-ism, as the series are very highly correlated. The 50–50 series, meanwhile, tend to move in synch with their 65–65 and 90–90 cousins. Centroid distance, leadership votes, and party scores, though positively correlated with all of these "*n*–*n*" indicators, are not as strongly related. A naïve measure of partisanship, majority size (labeled "|D–R|") is, predictably, essentially unrelated to the other partisanship measures.

Most interesting for us is that the negative correlation between hurrah-ism and partisanship, though it holds for all six reasonable measures of partisanship (and both measures of hurrah voting) varies considerably in its magnitude. The largest (absolute) value is obtained using Collie's proxies: by contrast, with the leadership-votes measure, one detects a correlation only about one-third to one-fourth as large (i.e. –0.24 or –0.21 instead of –0.81 or –0.75 in the House; –0.25 or –0.23 versus –0.72 in the Senate). Note that this weaker value is itself only about half as strong as the (expected) positive correlation we detect between the number of roll calls and hurrah-ism (about 0.40 in the House, 0.50 in the Senate). The main points of the table, then, are that the negative correlation between universalism and partisanship seems robust in direction, but not in magnitude. Hence, the substantive importance of this relationship remains in some doubt.

Table 1 Correlations Between Various Measures of Partisanship and Universalism, 43*rd* –104*th* Congresses (except as indicated)

	Partisanship							Hurrah-ism		other
	1. 50 vs. 50	2. 65 vs. 65	3. 90 vs. 90	4. centroid distance	5. leadership votes (a)	6. partisan score (b)	7. | D-R |	8. 80%+ hurrahs	9. 90%+ hurrahs	10. total roll calls
1. 50 vs. 50	**H** —	0.96	0.79	0.79	0.64	0.90	0.00	-0.72	-0.72	-0.29
2. 65 vs. 65	0.97	**O** —	0.87	0.84	0.76	0.97	-0.03	-0.60	-0.59	-0.25
3. 90 vs. 90	0.84	0.89	**U** —	0.79	0.66	0.67	-0.19	-0.40	-0.40	-0.08
4. centroid distance	0.72	0.76	0.77	**S** —	0.65	0.79	-0.18	-0.56	-0.57	-0.31
5. leadership votes (a)	0.66	0.62	0.51	0.72	**S E**	0.77	-0.57	-0.25	-0.23	-0.61
6. partisan score (b)	0.37	0.36	0.33	0.13	0.21	**E** —	-0.08	-0.43	-0.46	-0.31
7. | D-R |	-0.04	-0.02	-0.14	-0.17	0.34	-0.09	**N** —	-0.06	-0.07	-0.19
8. 80%+ hurrahs	-0.81	-0.72	-0.58	-0.47	-0.24	-0.48	-0.08	**A** —	0.99	0.53
9. 90%+ hurrahs	-0.75	-0.66	-0.52	-0.41	-0.21	-0.45	-0.10	0.98	**T** —	0.53
10. total roll calls	-0.29	-0.30	-0.31	-0.14	0.31	0.04	0.11	0.39	0.40	**E** —

a. from 68*th* through 104*th* only for House; 79*th* through 102*nd* only for Senate
b. from 73*rd* through 104*th* only for House and Senate

4 Conclusion

It is not immediately obvious what the purported relationship between partisanship and universalism signifies. Debate continues to rage over whether the kinds of partisanship variable we consider here are able to separate genuine party influence from non-partisan preference effects. We contend, moreover, that one must know more about the substance of hurrah votes to judge the plausibility of (or to elaborate on) the universalism-versus-partisanship theory. Since recorded votes are usually not required in Congress, controversy-free votes are inherently something of a puzzle. There can be various reasons to take the trouble to document (almost) complete agreement, and a full

typology of near-unanimous votes further highlights the difficulty in interpreting Collie's basic results (Gaines and Sala 1998). One might also pursue the time-series properties of these votes within Congresses, and how these have varied along with the mix of what sorts of lopsided votes are occurring. They remain little studied and, as a consequence, little understood by legislative scholars. Collie's (1988) pioneering work provides a jumping-off point for future research and poses some important theoretical challenges. We contend, however, that the jury remains out on whether there is, in fact, a meaningful theoretical sense in which universalism and partisanship are fundamentally opposed in legislative activity in any non-trivial way.

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