Cheap Talk and Party Organizations in State Legislatures

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Abstract

This paper addresses the issue of "cheap talk" in the legislative process. Specifically, it asks the question, "under what conditions do legislators introduce a large volume of bills, most of which are not likely to become law?" We introduce a new variable, party organizations, into Gamm and Kousser's (2010) investigation of bill introductions in state legislatures. We find tentative support that party organizations decrease the number of bills introduced per member by altering members' incentives for engaging in cheap talk.

Introduction

How do legislators choose which issues to focus on once elected to office? A satisfactory answer to this question does not yet exist in the American politics literature. The types and scope of legislation that office-holders choose to pursue have obvious and important implications for policy outcomes at all levels of government.

Using a new and extensively compiled dataset, Gerald Gamm and Thad Kousser (2010) examine this question in the context of American state legislatures. The authors ask, "when do lawmakers craft broad policies and when do they focus on

narrow legislation tailored to a local interest?" (Gamm and Kousser 2010, 1). The authors suggest that particularistic, local bills are more prevalent when the legislature is dominated by one party or when members receive relatively high salaries. Strong two-party competition, they argue, is necessary for legislators to address broad policy issues.

The authors use the number of local and statewide bills introduced, as a percentage of total bills, as their main dependent variable. We question whether percentages of bills introduced are the appropriate variables for a model of legislator preferences for broad bills or particularistic policies. Gamm and Kousser seek to test "V.O. Keys (1949) classic argument that two-party politics *produces* meaningful policies" [emphasis added] (2010, 4). However, the types of bills introduced need not correlate with the types of bills passed. Compared to the vast number of bills introduced, which in this dataset number over 10,000 in some legislature-years, very few bills survive to final passage.[1] There is nothing to suggest that the proportions of particularistic and broad policy signed into law resemble the proportions originally introduced. Indeed, the difficulty of securing passage may vary systematically across the types of bills the authors consider. Compared to the work required to build a coalition for passage, introducing a bill is relatively costless.[2] Therefore, these models may just be capturing "cheap talk" in the legislative process.

Our paper offers insights into the conditions under which cheap talk is prevalent. Although bills introduced is not a reliable measure of the types of policy produced – in that the distribution of bills introduced does not necessarily correspond with the distribution of legislative outcomes – bill introductions are a good measure of one type

[1] We have no data from state legislatures to support this comment. However, evidence from the U.S. Congress is suggestive. In the 99th and 100th Congresses, for example, only 236 of 2,683 and 300 of 2,772 bills introduced, respectively, became law (Schiller 1995, 186).

[2] In the United States Senate, for example, a senator can verbally introduce a bill on the floor every time they are recognized to speak (Schiller 1995, 186).

of effort exerted in pursuit of reelection. We ask, when are legislators likely to introduce bills just for the sake of signalling to their constituents that they are working? We posit that strong political parties in the legislature and strong party organizations in the electorate mitigate the need for individual legislators to signal their effort to constituents.[3] Because party affiliation offers legislators a "brand name," (Cox and McCubbins 1993) when party organizations are influential in elections, legislators have less of an incentive to cultivate a "personal vote." Absent strong parties, cheap talk should be more likely.[4]

To identify strong electoral parties, we introduce a new variable, "traditional party organizations" (TPOs), following Mayhew (1986) and Primo and Snyder (2010). Mayhew (1986) characterizes TPOs as "autonomous, enduring, and hierarchical" (Primo and Snyder 2010, 355). Building on Mayhew's work, Primo and Snyder (2010) find that strong party organizations constrain inefficient spending in Congress and offer legislators fewer incentives to deliver pork to their districts. We predict a similar effect on the number of bills introduced by members.

Our paper is organized as follows. In the first section, we replicate Gamm and Kousser's (2010) results and explain where our results diverge from the results of the paper. We also test their method of calculating missing data by using multiple imputation. None of the discrepancies in our results change the authors' substantive findings. In the second section, we introduce party organizations into Gamm and

[3]Signalling to constituents, in this discussion, can be considered a generalization of some of the reelection activities (advertising, credit claiming, and position taking) identified by Mayhew (1974). These activities are means by which members of Congress, acting individually, seek reelection, as opposed to running on a party brand. Mayhew's model of a legislature composed of single minded seekers of reelection explicitly rejects an active role for political parties. This is not the case in all state legislatures.

[4]There is a substantial literature arguing for the benefits of strong parties in promoting collective responsibility and reducing inefficiency. See, for example, Wilson (1885); Schattschneider (1942); American Political Science Association (1950); Ranney (1962); Fiorina (1980). Most of this literature deals with parties in legislatures. Similar forces in the electorate should likewise reduce inefficient behavior.

Kousser's model of bill introductions. The third section offers some avenues for future research and concludes.

Replication Results

Gamm and Kousser (2010) address the question of when legislators introduce broad bills versus narrower, locally oriented legislation by exploiting variation in American state legislatures. The authors use three types of bill introductions as their dependent variable: state bills, district bills, and general local government bills. The independent variables included in the model include majority party margin, legislative salary, session length, a measure of legislative turnover, and average district size. The authors also control for a home rule provision (which refers to whether or not cities have autonomy over their own policies), income per capita, and include state and year fixed effects. The data are 91 state-year observations from 13 states[5] at roughly 20 year intervals from 1881 to 1997.

The authors use "seemingly unrelated regressions," or SUR models, to account for possible correlation between the error terms across the equations.[6] The authors also weight their model by the number of bills introduced in each state-year observation to minimize the effect of potential coding error in an observation with a small number of bills (Gamm and Kousser 2010, 12). This generally results in a higher weighting for more recent state-years.

We were able to perfectly replicate the authors' results, a subset of which are reported in Tables 1 and 2 below. Because the three equations in their model use the same right-hand covariates, running these equations separately as weighted least

[5] Alabama, California, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New York, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington

[6] It is likely that the three dependent variables the authors use in their SUR model have correlated errors, given that they are three percentages drawn from a single observation.

squares (WLS) yields the same coefficients as the SUR model.[7]

However, as can be seen in the tables below, when the models are run separately, the standard errors on the coefficients are slightly higher than when the regressions are run together in a SUR framework. This raises concerns about model dependence. Though the authors' results are not substantively different, it is important to note that the significance of their results may be overstated by jointly estimating. If the authors were attempting only to estimate a model explaining one of their three dependent variables, WLS would be an appropriate method and produce the results reported below.

Table 1: Variation in Bill Introductions: District Bill Pct

	District Bill Pct	SUR SE	WLS SE
Majority Party Margin	0.08*	0.037	0.044
Salary of Legislators	2.60*	1.086	1.315
Session Length	0.01	0.018	0.022
Turnover	-0.18*	0.088	0.107
Average district size	-0.01	0.021	0.025
Size of biggest city	-0.28	0.188	0.228
Home Rule provision	-2.24	2.612	3.162
Income per capita	-2.15*	1.052	1.273
State Fixed Effects	Included		
Year Fixed Effects	Included		
(Intercept)	37.93***	9.335	11.300
N	85		
R^2	0.84		
adj. R^2	0.76		
Resid. sd.	291.85		

Models are WLS and SUR weighted by the number of bills introduced per observation.
The dependent variable is the percentage of district bills.
Non-partisan legislatures are excluded.
*** indicates significance at $p < 0.01$
* indicates significance at $p < 0.1$
R^2, adj. R^2, Resid. sd., and significance from WLS model

[7] It is always true that when all the right-hand side covariates of the equations in an *unweighted* SUR model are the same, running these equations jointly and running them separately as OLS models yield the same coefficients and standard errors.

Table 2: Variation in Bill Introductions: Statewide Bill Pct

	Statewide Bill Pct	SUR SE	WLS SE
Majority Party Margin	-0.08*	0.035	0.042
Salary of Legislators	-3.02**	1.037	1.256
Session Length	-0.03	0.017	0.021
Turnover	0.07	0.084	0.101
Average district size	0.04*	0.020	0.024
Size of biggest city	0.04	0.180	0.218
Home Rule provision	2.31	2.494	3.20
Income per capita	4.29***	1.004	1.216
State Fixed Effects	Included		
Year Fixed Effects	Included		
(Intercept)	50.07***	8.915	10.79
N	91		
R^2	0.80		
adj. R^2	0.72		
Resid. sd	276.97		

Models are WLS and SUR weighted by the number of bills introduced per observation.
The dependent variable is the percentage of statewide bills.
Non-partisan legislatures are excluded.
*** indicates significance at $p < 0.01$
** indicates significance at $p < 0.05$
* indicates significance at $p < 0.1$
R^2, adj. R^2 Resid. sd., and significance from WLS model

Running the models as WLS results in majority party margin, salary of legislators, turnover and income per capita with significance at the 0.1 level when looking at the proportion of district bills introduced (Table 1). The authors find that these covariates are all significant at the 0.05 level. In Table 2, where the proportion of statewide bills introduced is the dependent variable, we find that majority party margins and average district size are significant at the 0.1 level, legislator salary is significant at the 0.05 level, and income per capita is significant at the 0.01 level. In the authors' results, legislator salary is significant at the 0.01 level and majority party margin is significant at the 0.05 level.[8]

[8]We estimated WLS models with non-partisan legislatures included and found similar results: the

Missing Data: Testing Multiple Imputation

Some state legislatures in the United States are "non-partisan": the office-holders are elected in non-partisan elections and formal party organizations do not exist in the legislature. Because data on the partisan composition of these legislatures do not exist, the authors report two sets of results. The first set listwise deletes non-partisan legislatures for which party affiliations of legislators could not be identified.[9] The second set includes these legislatures by coding them as one-party legislatures (majority margin is one hundred percent). The authors' coding decision in the second set is premised on a major finding of Key (1949). Key finds that no-party legislatures behave like single party legislatures.

However, it is not clear that party dynamics were absent in these legislatures. State parties endorse candidates even in non-partisan elections. Elazar, Gray, and Spano (1999) find that Minnesota legislators consistently organized themselves along ideological lines while the legislature was officially non-partisan between 1914 and 1973. Although Gamm and Kousser acknowledge these potential complications with their coding strategy, they put more emphasis on Key's (1949) finding and code their missing data accordingly.[10]

We attempt to account for these missing data by using multiple imputation to impute new values for majority margins in non-partisan legislatures. Multiple imputation would allow us to make use of the data that would be otherwise coded incorrectly. However, imputing the data results in estimates outside reasonable bounds.[11]

same coefficients as the authors, with slightly larger standard errors.

[9] Minnesota 1921, 1941, 1961; Nebraska 1941, 1961, 1981. Party affiliations for Nebraska 1997 come from the *Nebraska Blue Book* (Gamm and Kousser 2010, 12).

[10] Gamm and Kousser find no substantive difference in their results when they include or exclude these data.

[11] Data are missing for "majority margin." These values should be bounded within 0 and 100. Imputed estimates include negative values and positive values greater than 100.

Due to these out of bounds estimates, we assume that there is non-ignorable missingness, and that multiple imputation is therefore not an appropriate way to account for these missing data. Going forward, this paper will use listwise deletion to account for the missing values.

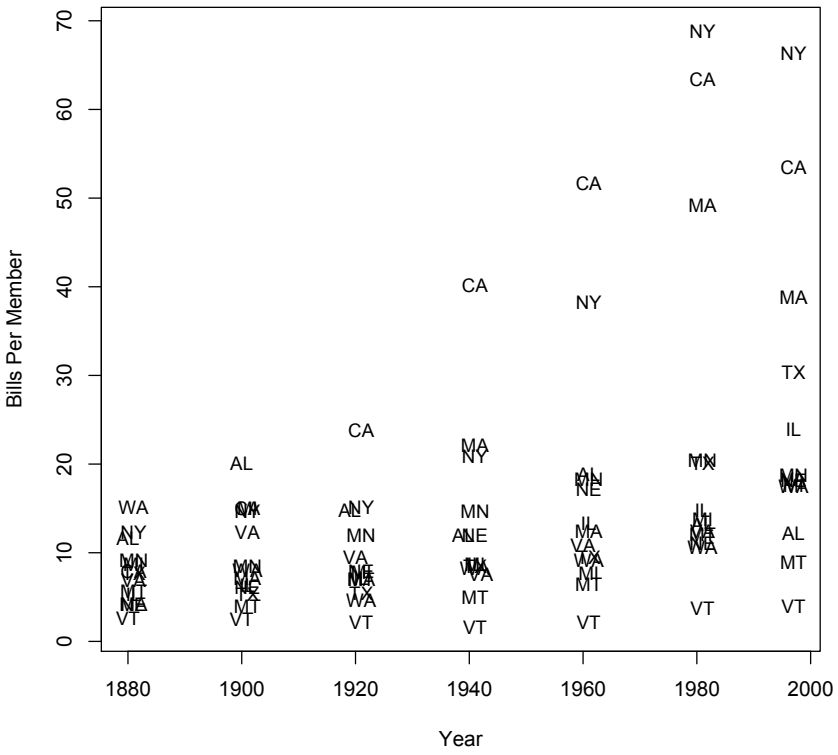
Explaining Variation in Bills Introduced

Hypotheses

Here we turn to the conditions under which more bills are likely to be introduced. We hypothesize that when party organizations are influential in the electorate, and when party competition exists in the legislature, the number of bills introduced by members should decrease. Introducing a bill is an electoral tool that is most useful to members in the absence of a strong party reputation to run on or a party organization to support their effort. Bill introductions send an inexpensive signal to legislators' constituencies that they are working for their constituency.

The number of bills introduced in a legislature in a year varies widely across our data. On average across all observations, an individual legislator introduces about 15 bills per year. The number of bills introduced by an individual member ranges, however, from 1.6 to almost 69. Within a legislature, the total number of bills introduced in a year ranges from 136 to 10,320, with a mean of 1,816 and median of 1,169. Figure 1 shows variation in mean bills introduced per member by year and state. Throughout the time-series, most states are clustered between 0 and 20 bills per member. The number of bills introduced per member in California, New York, and Massachusetts, in contrast, increase significantly in the 20th Century, reaching

Figure 1: Bills Introduced Per Member by State and Year



their peak in 1980, before declining slightly by 2000.[12]

To test our predictions, we run OLS models on the dependent variable *Bill Introductions per Member*. This is calculated as the total number of bills introduced in a legislature-year divided by the number of members in the legislature. Analyzing bills introduced per member is appropriate because our argument centers on the effects of party organizations on the individual incentives of members to signal effort to their constituents. The total number of bills introduced is likely to be determined largely by the length of sessions and size of the chamber.[13]

[12] Actual observations are from 1981 and 1997.

[13] We do, nonetheless, estimate negative binomial models with the count of bills introduced as our dependent variable and the same covariates described in this section. Results from these models are substantively similar to those presented here, and can be found in our replication R file.

Explanatory Variables

Party Organization. Strong party organizations reduce the incentives for legislators to engage in "cheap talk" because much of the work of campaigning, including fundraising, advertising, and discouraging primary challengers, is done by the party organization. This decreases the need for legislators to signal directly to constituents by introducing a large number of bills. In the absence of strong parties, such "cheap talk" would otherwise help establish a base of support among the electorate.

We operationalize strong party organizations as a dichotomous variable using Mayhew's (1986) coding of Traditional Party Organizations. We define *Party Organization*=1 for states with TPO scores of 4 or 5 (Mayhew used a 5 point scale). Among the states in our data, Illinois and New York historically had strong electoral party organizations (TPO=5). Following Primo and Snyder (2010), who note Mayhew's observation that even in strong party states, party organizations were in decline by the 1960s and 1970s, we code all observations in the years 1981 and 1997 as not having party organizations.[14] We expect the presence of party organizations to predict a decrease in the number of bills introduced per member.

Party Competition. One's ability to run on a party brand name, using party resources, should be enhanced when there is strong party competition in the legislature. Our expectation is similar to that of Gamm and Kousser (2010). They find that two-party competition increases the focus on introducing bills of statewide significance. We similarly make use of V.O. Key's (1949) insight that two-party competition promotes conditions favorable to government according to rule or general principle (305). If parties are engaged in passing broad policies, as both Key and Gamm and Kousser

[14]See the discussion of the rise and fall of local party organizations, and their replacement by candidate-centered fundraising organizations in Mayhew 1986, 329-30.

suggest, fewer bills should be introduced by an individual member. "Atomistic" policy making in the absence of party competition, in contrast, should encourage members to introduce more bills (Gamm and Kousser 2010, 5).

We operationalize party competition with the variable *Majority Party Margin*, coded on a 0 to 100 percent scale. Because we expect that party organizations in the electorate and party competition in the legislature should jointly reduce the number of bills introduced per member, we include an interaction of these variables in our model.

Legislative Professionalism. We expect that in professionalized legislatures, all else equal, members will introduce more bills. These legislatures offer more capacity to craft legislation and more incentives to seek reelection. We operationalize professionalism with two variables. Larger *salaries* should heighten the reelection ambition of members, because they indicate more desirable jobs relative to others in the state. This, in turn, should increase the value a member places on communicating effort to constituents.

The increased legislative capacity of a professionalized legislature, gained through longer sessions, more staff, or more efficient committee structures, should make it less costly to develop bills to introduce. Although introducing a bill is inexpensive relative to seeing it through to passage, it still takes time and some expertise about the issue area to produce. To operationalize capacity we use *session length*. A measure of staff would allow a better test of the capacity hypothesis, however, no data on state legislative staff are available given the range of the data.

Controls. We include the same control variables that Gamm and Kousser (2010) use in their original models. In addition to state and year fixed effects, we control for

turnover, average district size, the size of the biggest city, a home rule provision (which effects the amount of control the state has over localities and thus the number of bills the legislature might introduce), and income per capita (as a control on salary). Most of these are self-explanatory. *Turnover*, which is the percentage of legislators who have never served in that house before, accounts for the degree to which legislatures are stable bodies with members likely to seek reelection. During the early periods captured in the data, many states had informal norms encouraging turnover, which may affect the degree to which legislators pursued reelection through these signalling means. (A more thorough discussion of these norms can be found in Gamm and Kousser (2010, 7).)

Empirical Results

We run four separate models, the results of which are displayed in Table 3. We include state fixed effects in models 1 and 2, and exclude them in models 3 and 4. Models 2 and 4 include an interaction between majority margin and party organization.

In models 1 and 2, we find that the party organization variable has a negative coefficient, consistent with our theory. Moving from an observation with no party organization to one with a party organization, holding all other variables at their medians, party organization predicts a decrease of approximately 10 bills introduced per member. To make this effect concrete, consider New York, which had a party organization in 1960 but not by 1980. From 1960 to 1980, the model predicts an increase of approximately 30 bills per member.

In the second model, we include an interaction term as per our hypotheses that the effects of majority margin and party organization are conditional on each other. We find that the interaction is significant. Figure 2 plots the marginal effect of party

Table 3: Bill Introductions and Party Organizations

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Majority Party Margin	0.02	0.02	0.08**	0.09**
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Salary of Legislators	-3.19**	-2.90**	-1.25	-1.18
	(1.49)	(1.42)	(1.65)	(1.68)
Session Length	0.02	0.00	0.03	0.03
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Turnover	-0.10	-0.16	-0.01	-0.02
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Average District Size	0.13***	0.13***	0.14***	0.14***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.02)
Size of Biggest City	-0.49**	-0.50**	0.24	0.25
	(0.20)	(0.19)	(0.15)	(0.15)
Home Rule Provision	3.96	1.98	2.38	2.23
	(3.12)	(3.04)	(2.72)	(2.77)
Income per capita	1.13	1.12	2.05	2.05*
	(1.11)	(1.05)	(1.12)	(1.13)
Party Organization (PO)	-10.22*	-2.46	-4.68	-3.80
	(5.30)	(5.75)	(5.35)	(5.96)
Majority Margin*PO		-0.52***		-0.07
		(0.19)		(0.20)
State Fixed Effects	Included	Included	None	None
Year Fixed Effects	Included	Included	Included	Included
(Intercept)	25.22**	31.32***	-3.97	-3.93
	(10.84)	(10.49)	(8.56)	(8.62)
N	85	85	85	85
R^2	0.84	0.86	0.70	0.70
adj. R^2	0.76	0.79	0.64	0.63
Resid. sd	7.05	6.67	8.76	8.81

Dependent variable is number of bills introduced per member

Non-partisan legislatures were dropped from this analysis

Standard errors in parentheses

*** indicates significance at $p < 0.01$

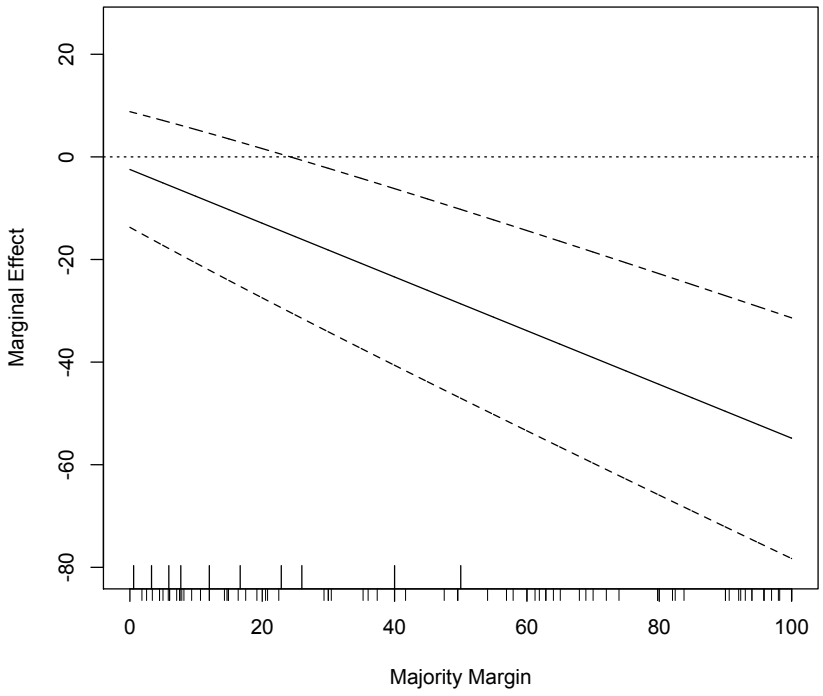
** indicates significance at $p < 0.05$

* indicates significance at $p < 0.1$

organization on bill introductions. The figure shows that party organizations have a negative effect on the number of bills introduced for all levels of majority margin. These results are only suggestive: our data contain only two observations of party

organizations in the significant portion of the figure and none where the marginal effect is largest. However, our results point to an interesting phenomenon. Even as majority margins increase - as party competition decreases - party organizations continue to play a role in decreasing the number of bills introduced by legislators.

Figure 2: Marginal Effect of Party Organization on Bill Introductions



Ticks above the x-axis represent observations with strong Party Organizations.
Ticks below the x-axis represent observations without strong Party Organizations.

These results demonstrate the nature of the incentives that legislators face in a state with strong party organizations. If the party organization is fundraising, campaigning, and expending resources for the legislator's reelection, the legislator has little or no incentive to appeal to their constituents - via cheap talk or otherwise - and every incentive to please the party organization. Thus, if a legislator is operating in an environment with strong party organizations and low party competition (majority

margin is high) introducing bills for signalling purposes will not affect the legislator's reelection chances.[15]

We hypothesized that increased majority margins (decreased party competition) will predict more bills introduced per member. Majority margin is a predictor of the number of bills introduced only when state fixed effects are excluded from the model. Models that include state fixed effects yield more conservative estimates, restricted only to variation within states. In sum, we find only weak evidence to support this hypothesis.

Legislative salaries are a significant predictor of bills per member, but in the opposite direction that we would expect. One reason this might be the case is that as in Gamm and Kousser (2010) show, higher salaries result in more district bill introductions but fewer statewide bills. Given that there are more statewide bills overall (Gamm and Kousser 2010, 2), this might explain the sign on our coefficients.

The most consistent predictor of the number of bills introduced per member is district size. This is not surprising: we would expect that members from larger districts are busier.

Our models suggest that party organizations do matter in predicting the number of bills introduced per member. The next section will lay out some ideas for further research in this area.

Conclusions and Further Research

This paper offers preliminary evidence that strong party organizations decrease the number of bills introduced per member. This is interesting because the vast majority

[15] We are not concerned with the fact that 'majority margin' on its own is not significant in our model. The 'majority margin' variable does not capture the competitive nature of the *seat*, but rather the competitive nature of the legislature as a whole. It is easy to imagine a scenario in which a geographically divided state has a very competitive legislature, but relatively uncompetitive seats.

of bills introduced by members likely capture "cheap talk" in the legislative process. Despite the scarcity of data in this area, this paper raises a number of interesting opportunities for further research.

Mayhew's (1986) paper classifies 13 states as having traditional party organizations. Our data contain only two of these thirteen states, so our results should be treated as preliminary. Future research in this area would be greatly strengthened by including more states, particularly those that Mayhew (1986) coded as having party organizations.

While Gamm and Kousser (2010) place emphasis on majority margins in state legislatures and the organizing power of political parties in predicting the types of bills that legislators introduce, further research should also incorporate other institutions that organize interests within the legislature. In particular, states legislatures vary on whether or not they have legislative committees. Research has shown that committees tend to coordinate the interests of high-demanders, and we would therefore expect that state legislatures with committee structures would predict more district-oriented bills. Incorporating the presence of committees in the model would be particularly interesting considering the authors' arguments about the role of parties. Does committee presence in state legislatures strengthen or substitute for the effect of political parties on the types of bills that legislators introduce?

Further research should also take into consideration other measures of professionalism of the legislature, particularly the type of staff that state legislatures retain. If legislators are more likely to interact with party or committee staff, we would predict that legislators would pursue boarder, state-oriented agendas, while more personal staff would likely result in more district-oriented agendas. Staff interactions are interesting especially in the context of Gamm and Kousser's (2010) results regarding professionalism in state legislatures, which predict that more professional legislatures

(as measured by legislator salary) would result in more district-oriented bills.

This paper offers one avenue for testing cheap talk and signalling models in varying institutional settings. A logical next step is to test whether or not the number of bills introduced actually results in electoral payoffs. There exists extensive formal work in this area that considers variation in types at the individual level (Crawford and Sobel 1982). Our work suggests that extending these formal models to varying institutional settings, and testing these models empirically, would be a fruitful avenue for future research.

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