

Ideological Polarization and the Appropriations Process

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In October 2013 the federal government shut down for 16 days. Democrats and Republicans were unable to agree on an appropriations bill; a bill allowing government to spend money. It was a reminder of the ideological and partisan polarization that is now commonplace in American politics. What is remarkable about this turn of events—but is rarely remarked upon by political observers—is that the politics of appropriating money was long a matter of bipartisan accord. The Appropriation Committee that writes the spending bills attracted the House’s most skillful and pragmatic members who sought to responsibly exercise the “power of the purse.” Other members of the House were generally supportive of the committee’s bills because the programs that were funded had important implications for their districts. As ideological polarization increased in the House, appropriation politics was somewhat immune. In recent years, however, the politics of appropriations, and the Appropriation Committee itself, has been swallowed up by the same ideological polarization that is rampant in the House.

This paper examines the increasing polarization surrounding appropriation measures and members of the House Appropriation Committee using roll call data. We begin by briefly discussing developments within the committee. We then introduce an approach aimed at measuring polarization on votes on appropriation measures, Poole and Rosenthal’s NOMINATE algorithm.¹ Our results suggest that the politics of appropriations, the last vestige of bipartisanship, has collapsed under the weight of ideological polarization.

Background

Traditionally the Appropriations Committee has been one of the most efficient and bipartisan committees within Congress. Appropriation Committee members were selected to serve on the

¹ Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal have analyzed over 13 million individual roll call votes and found that over 81% of voting decisions, by legislators, can be attributed to ideological preference.

committee for their ability to look beyond political differences in order to agree on important spending legislation. Their votes did not appear to be “ideologically bound.” Richard Fenno’s account of the Appropriations Committee stresses its ability to maintain internal standards and practices that promote unity and non-partisan policy-making.² Joseph White’s account of the House Appropriations Committee, in the 1980’s, however, demonstrates a shifting ethos in the committee’s priorities.³ Rather than finding places to cut expenditures, the committee began stretching resources in order to serve the needs and interests of their colleagues. According to White, the committee, unlike the committee described by Fenno, seemed more concerned with maintaining control over executive activities, and less concerned with preserving committee cohesiveness.

Despite the erosion of committee standards, a combined interest in maintaining prestige and power unified its members to create legislation that would garner bipartisan support. By the early 2000’s this common interest wasn’t enough to make members of the Appropriations Committee coalesce, as the Republicans under Newt Gingrich began opposing their role as minority party in the House. As a method to undermine the institutional norms, Republicans began to sever all social ties with Democrats and began creating ideological ties that forced Republicans together. According to Joshua Gordon this “Republican Revolution”, destabilized the internal norms of the committee, and was a contributing factor to the dissipation of the ideological center.⁴ Buhl, Frisch and Kelly argue that the increasing involvement of partisan leaders in the appropriations process in order to promote the partisan agendas of leaders undermined the last vestiges of bipartisanship in the committee.⁵ The result, they say, is that the appropriations process has gone into complete meltdown.

Methodology

To examine this progression, this study utilizes roll call votes on appropriations bills in the

² Richard F. Fenno. *The Power of the Purse: Appropriations Politics in Congress*. Boston: Little-Brown 1966.

³ Joseph White. *The Functions and Power of the House Appropriations Committee*. Berkley: University of California Berkley 1989.

⁴ Joshua B. Gordon. *The Power of the Purse Reconsidered: Partisanship and Social Integration in the House Appropriations Committee*. Florida: University of Florida 2002.

⁵ Geoffrey Buhl, Scott Frisch, & Sean Kelly. “Appropriations To the Extreme” in Scott A. Frisch and Sean Q Kelly, Ed., *Politics to the Extreme: American Political Institutions in the 21st Century*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2013.

House of Representatives between the 91st and 111th Congresses. Using Poole and Rosenthal's NOMINATE algorithm, which is routinely used to estimate the ideal points of legislators, we estimate policy positions for legislators on appropriations bills. NOMINATE is a three step algorithm that generates the best values for thousands of parameters describing individual roll call votes. In the context of this algorithm we are able to locate Appropriation Committee positions in a two dimensional policy space over time (1969-2011).

Utility of a legislator taking a position on a vote is a function of the distance between the legislator and the position. The x-axis illustrates ideological extremities; further left symbolizes being more liberal, further right more conservative (see Figure 1). The y-axis (horizontal) represents each individual's affinity towards the Appropriation Committee, i.e. the member's level of support for committee proposals.

Figure 1 depicts three main points extracted from the generation of ideal points. The red dots represent Republican members and blue dots show Democrat positions. We calculate the median position of each party (represented as red P and blue P), and the medians of each party's Committee membership (represented as red A and blue A). We then calculate: 1. The intra-party difference between the median party member and the median position of the committee (the distance between red A and red P, and blue A and blue P); 2. The inter-party differences: a) Between the two party medians (red and blue P), and; b) between the two committee medians (red A and blue A).

Results

As demonstrated by Figure 2, when comparing the 94th Congress to that of the 111th, a noticeable pattern of ideological deviation from the center can be seen. There are noticeable shifts in Republican positions toward the right, especially the Republican median point. Figure 2 exhibits how Republican shifting appears more acute than does democratic movement across the x-axis. This means that while Democrats have remained relatively moderate in their voting behavior, Republicans have begun to support increasingly conservative policies. This ideological deviation may explain the

Committee's recent inability to pass spending bills. The priorities of committee members became more about political agendas than about the mission of the Committee.

The real revelation however, is the intra-party movement indicated through Republican member votes. The 111th Congress shows the distance, between the Republican Party median the committee median, nearly doubling, as well as an increase in the affinity towards Committee decisions (see Figure 2). This pattern is not repeated in the Democrat party. The distance between the Democratic median and the committee median remains almost constant. Additionally, the Democrats do not appear to move noticeably towards the left, indicating they are not showing transitions towards more liberal policy positions on spending issues.

There is a greater distance growing within the Republican Party between most of the Committee members, and the Republican Committee median, especially apparent between the 104th, and 111th sessions (Figure 3). Until the 102nd Congress, Republican and Democrat votes are nearly steady represented in Figure 3 by the leveling of the solid line. The disparity between parties grows almost steadily after the 104th Congress. Democrats became the new minority, began voting more collectively, and focused on their disagreements with Republicans. At the same time, the emergence of new Republican leaders influenced the party's internal divide over Appropriation Committee decisions, and partisan politics began to determine more of their votes. Changing party dynamics demonstrates how partisan interests have impacted appropriation decisions, especially for the Republican Party. This differences arising within the Republican Party may reveal reasons for the recent inefficiency of the Appropriations Committee.

Conclusion

The Appropriation Committee's transition from responsible, and effective law making, exemplified by recent budget-related crises (e.g., "the fiscal-cliff," and the government shutdown) motivated this research. This paper focused on the relationship between the increase in partisanship, and ideological polarization, and the dysfunction that has developed within the House Appropriation

Committee. Using votes on spending bills in the House and utilizing the NOMINATE algorithm, this research illustrates the ideological and partisan polarization that has affected appropriation policies. The ideological polarization infiltrating Congress has diminished the prestige and power once afforded to the Appropriation Committee. Recently, Republicans in the Appropriations Committee have put inner party relationships above committee efficacy. Representatives need to align positions first and foremost with the interests of the committee, and conduct business without partisanship influence. Following the example of the previous Congressional sessions, like those mentioned by Richard Fenno, House Representatives would need to adhere to the standard blueprint and procedures, set by the Congressional Budget and Impoundment Act of 1974, and make decisions that focus more on the integrity of the Appropriations Committee than ideological preference.

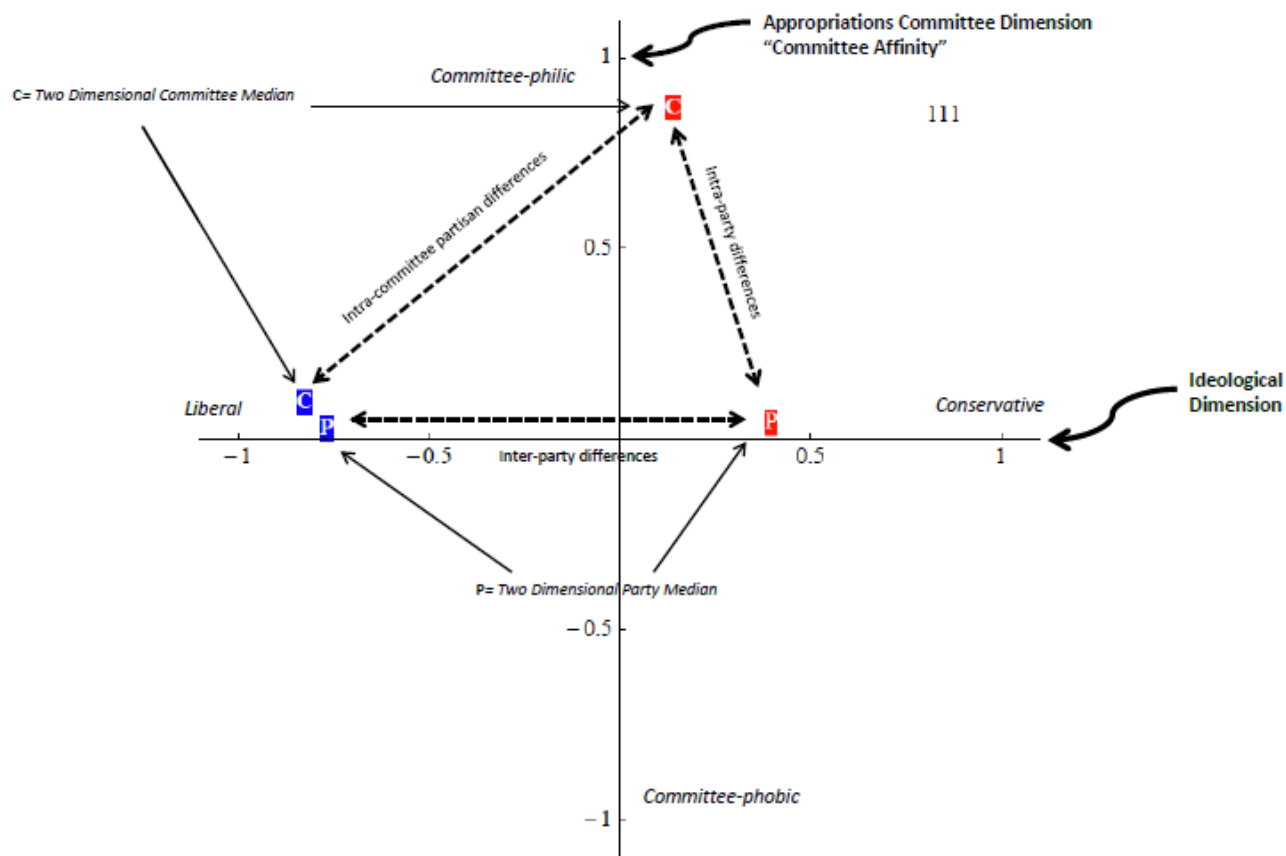


Figure 1: Two-Dimensional NOMINATE. The x-axis represents the ideological dimension, with liberal on the left, and conservative to the right. The vertical dimension (y-axis) represents member's affinity toward Appropriation Committee bills. Higher positions on the y-axis show disapproval of Committee action, and lower on the y-axis represents positive attitudes toward Committee decisions. Red and blue P indicates Party median positions, red for Republicans, blue for Democrats, and red and blue C shows Committee medians for Republicans and Democrats, respectively.

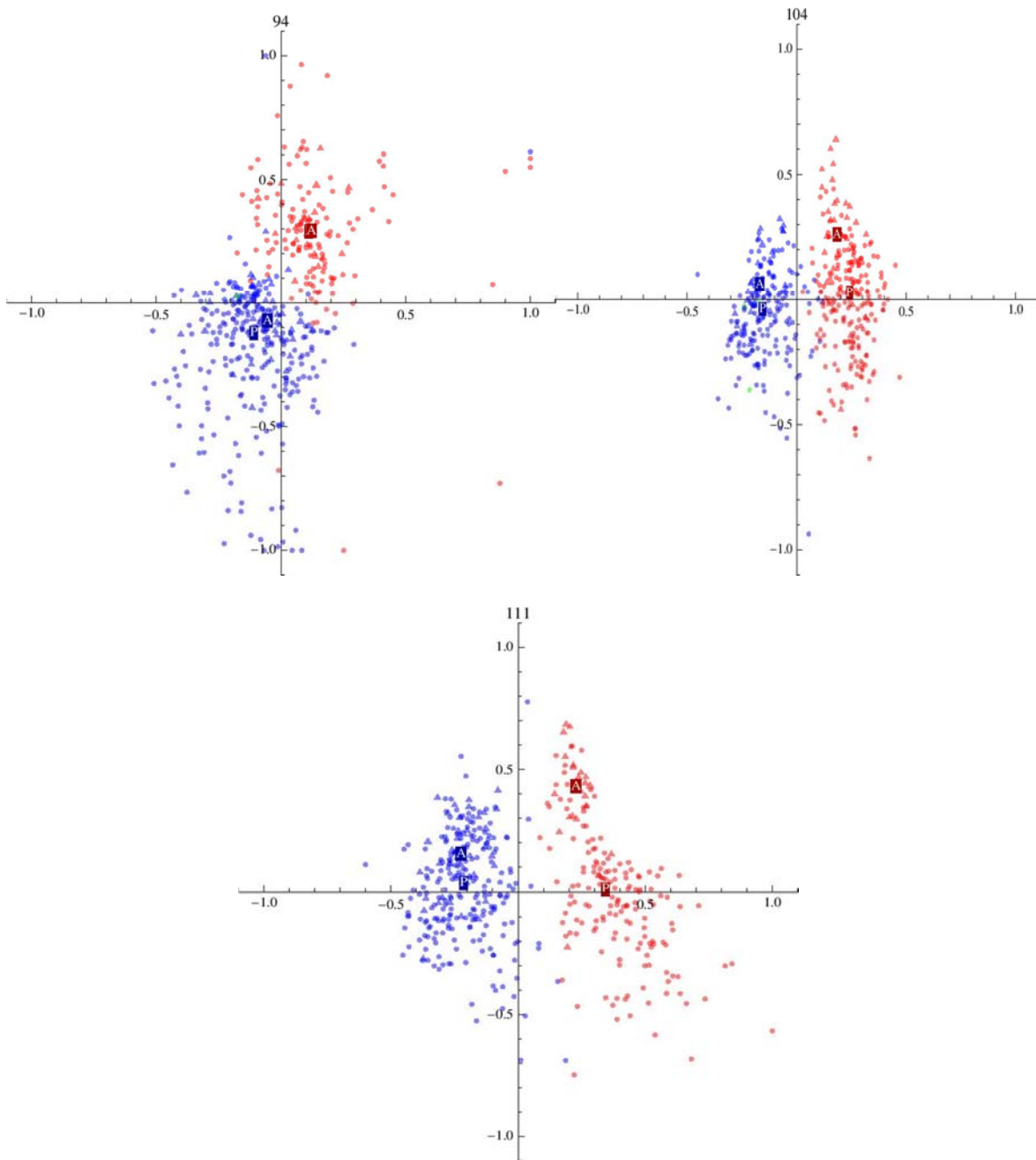


Figure 2: Scatter Plots measuring Appropriation votes within a two-dimensional Nominate space for the 94th, 104th, and 111th Congresses. This graph synthesizes policy positions of House Appropriation Committee members. The x-axis (horizontal) measures the ideological dimension, further left means more liberal, further right means more conservative. The vertical y-axis shows the member's alignment with Committee decisions, their affinity. Red dots represent Republican members, while dark blue dots indicate Democrats. Red (A's) show the median point of the Republican Party Chairs, Red (P's) show the position of the median Republican member. Likewise, blue (A's) show the points of Democrat Appropriation Chairs and blue (P's) show the Democrat party median.

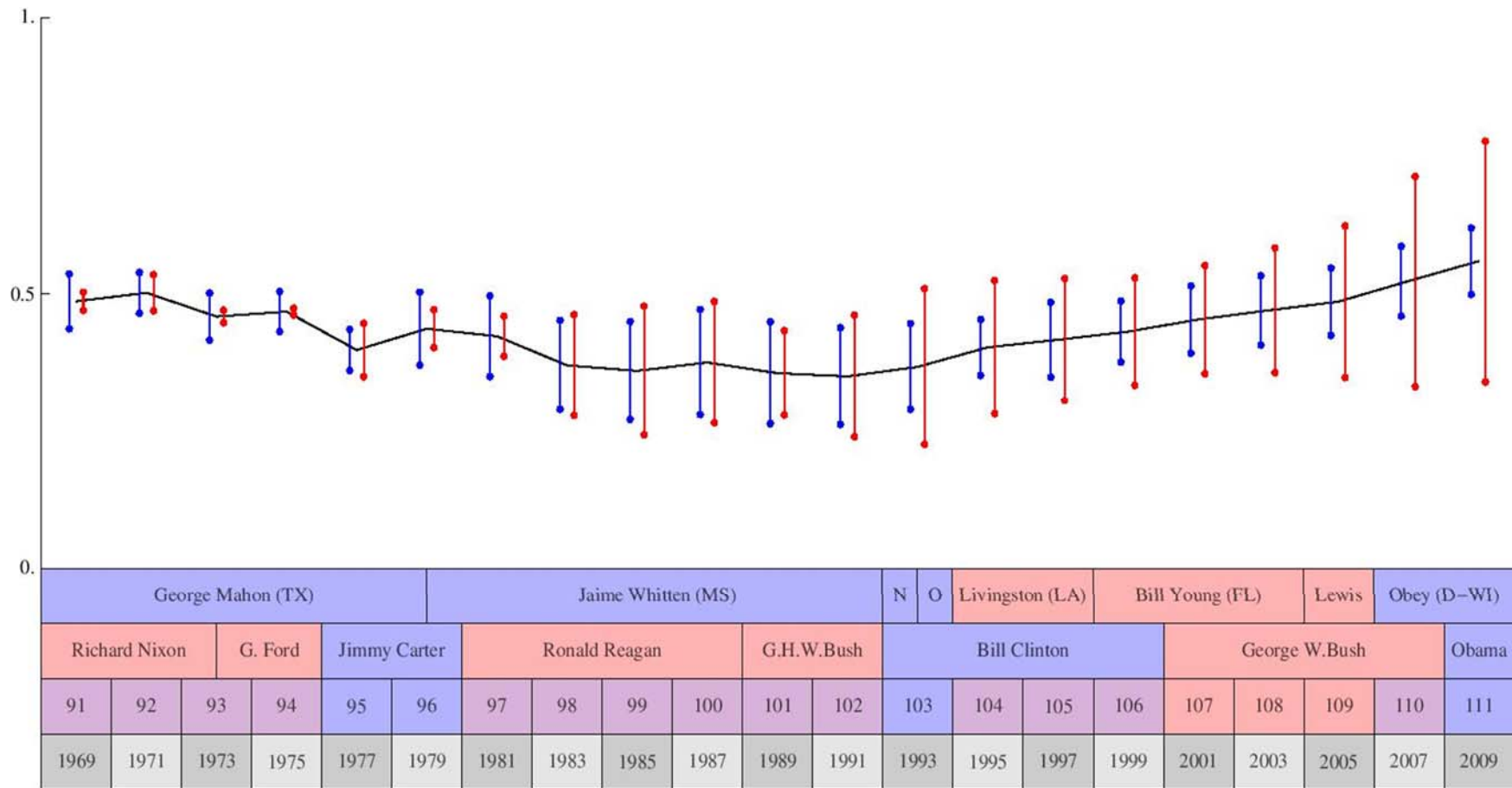


Figure 3: Intra- and inter-party comparison on Appropriations bills in the House. The solid line represents the distance between party medians, and the “fishbones” are the difference between the party median and the committee median. Red lines represent Republicans, and dark blue lines indicate Democrats. Through time, inter-party differences increase notably between the 103rd and 111th congresses.