

**A Decline in Ticket Splitting and  
The Increasing Salience of Party Labels**

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The voice of the people is but an echo chamber. The output of an echo chamber bears an inevitable and invariable relation to the input. As candidates and parties clamor for attention and vie for popular support, the people's verdict can be no more than a selective reflection from among the alternatives and outlooks presented to them. (Key 1966, p. 2)

Split party control of the executive and legislative branches has been a defining feature of American national politics for more than thirty years, the longest period of frequent divided government in American history. Even when voters failed to produce a divided national government in the 2000 elections, the party defection of a lone U.S. senator (former Republican James Jeffords of Vermont) created yet another divided national government. In addition, the extremely close competitive balance between the two major parties means that ticket splitters often determine which party controls each branch of government. These features of American politics have stimulated a lot of theorizing about the causes of split-ticket voting.

In recent years, the presence of divided government and relatively high levels of split ticket voting are commonly cited as evidence of an electorate that has moved beyond party labels (Wattenberg 1998). Another theory holds that some voters split their ballots in a strategic fashion to produce divided government and moderate policies (Fiorina 1996; Alesina and Rosenthal 1995). However, the 2000 and 2002 elections narrowly produced a unified national government as ticket splitting declined to the lowest levels in over thirty years. What explains the decline in ticket splitting? How strong is the public preference for divided government, and what happened to divided government and ticket splitters in the 2000 election?

Under what might be called a party salience theory of voting, the decline in ticket splitting is best understood as a public response to elite polarization along party and

ideological lines. The ideological distance between the major parties determines the salience of party labels and ideological considerations when voters cast their ballots. Voters who see important differences between the parties are more likely to rely on party and ideology when casting their ballots. In contrast, voters who see no ideological differences between the parties are more likely to rely on non-policy considerations when voting, and are more likely to be ticket-splitters. As the political parties have engaged in sharp policy disputes and become more unified around ideological messages, voters have come to see politics in more partisan terms. Thus, ticket splitting has declined as the ideological gulf between the major political parties has grown wider. These developments reinforce the idea that the collective choices of American voters are, in part, a response to the ideological reputations of the parties in government.

### **The Recent Decline in Ticket Splitting**

By a number of measures, major-party ticket splitting in national elections declined substantially in the last twenty years. Figure 1 displays the percentage of split congressional districts (i.e., districts carried by a presidential candidate of one party and House candidate of another party), the percentage of split Senate delegations (since 1900), and the percentage of major-party President-House ticket splitters (since 1952).<sup>1</sup> The same pattern is evident from all three measures: increasing levels of ticket splitting

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<sup>1</sup> The split district figures for 1900-96 come from Stanley and Niemi (2000). The split district calculation for 2000 is from Polidata © (2001). The ticket splitting estimates are calculated from surveys conducted under the auspices of the National Election Studies (Sapiro et al. 1997; Burns et al. 2001). Elections before 1900 are excluded because ticket splitting was extremely rare prior to the Australian ballot reforms just before the turn of the century (Rusk 1970). In addition, direct election of U.S. Senators was constitutionally mandated in 1913.

from the 1950s to the 1980s and a significant decline thereafter. In addition, the 2000 elections produced the lowest levels of ticket splitting observed in several decades. The frequency of president-House ticket splitting in 2000 (18%) is the lowest observed since 1968. The number of split districts in 2000 (86) is the fewest since 1952, and the number of split Senate delegations in 2000 (14) is the lowest observed since 1956.

[Figure 1 about here]

Given the closely competitive partisan environment in recent elections, there remains a non-trivial amount of ticket splitting in the United States. However, the frequency of ticket splitting in national elections has dropped to levels last seen in the 1950s and 1960s. This substantial drop in ticket splitting is consistent with evidence of increased partisanship in the mass public during the last twenty years (Miller 1991; Bartels 2000; Hetherington 2001; Jacobson 2001; Weisberg 2001). These developments require an explanation, and they provide an opportunity to test theories of split-ticket voting.

### **Theories of Ticket Splitting**

Theories of split-ticket voting abound. One explanation attributes the bulk of ticket splitting behavior to “candidate-centered politics” (Wattenberg 1991). According to this point of view, weakening party loyalties among voters, an increasing reliance on mass media communications in campaigns (often bypassing party organizations), a growing incumbency advantage, and (until recently) a Democratic advantage in fielding quality candidates for Congress, produced increasing levels of ticket splitting

(Wattenberg 1991, 1998; Jacobson 1990). From this perspective, ticket splitting is a by-product of independent voting decisions that rely heavily on candidate characteristics as opposed to partisan or ideological considerations (Burden and Kimball 2002, 1998).

From the candidate-centered perspective, a potential explanation for the recent drop in ticket splitting might focus on congressional incumbency. Abundant evidence indicates that the incumbency advantage in congressional elections is an important source of ticket splitting (McAllister and Darcy 1992; Alvarez and Schousen 1993; Born 1994; Burden and Kimball 1998; Born 2000a; Mattei and Howes 2000; Garand and Lichtl 2000). Perhaps the incumbency advantage has declined during the 1990s, prompting a concomitant decline in ticket splitting? As it turns out, however, one common measure (Gelman and King 1990) indicates that the incumbency advantage remained large throughout the 1990s. In fact, the 2000 election produced the largest incumbency advantage observed during an on-year election over the past 100 years.

The candidate-centered approach also emphasizes the strength of partisanship among voters. It is well-documented that strength of partisanship is inversely related to ticket splitting: strong partisans are less likely to split their tickets than independents (Campbell et al. 1960; Campbell and Miller 1957). The recent drop in ticket splitting can be partly explained by a slight drop in the proportion of pure independents and a slight increase in the proportion of strong partisans in the electorate (Weisberg 2001; Bartels 2000). In addition, there is evidence that party loyalty in voting has increased since the 1980s (Bartels 2000). The candidate-centered approach provides a sound explanation for rising ticket splitting in the 1960s and 1970s, but requires some elaboration to account for the recent drop in ticket splitting. In particular, this chapter argues that growing party

polarization among elites has helped the parties overcome, to some extent, the candidate-centered nature of campaigns by strengthening mass partisanship.

Another theory of ticket splitting emphasizes certain structural features of the American electoral system. The Australian ballot (Rusk 1970) increased the likelihood of ticket splitting, while straight-party (“one-punch”) ballot devices and the party column ballot format (Campbell and Miller 1957; McAllister and Darcy 1992; Kimball 1997; Burden and Kimball 1998) reduce ticket splitting by modest amounts. However, ballot format cannot account for the drop in ticket splitting, since states have gradually been eliminating the party column ballot and one-punch devices designed to promote straight-party voting (Kimball, Owens, and McLaughlin 2002).

A third explanation of ticket splitting is "policy balancing" (Fiorina 1988, 1996), which posits that moderate voters behave strategically and split their ballots in order to strike a balance between two ideologically extreme parties and produce divided government and middle-of-the-road policies (also see Alesina and Rosenthal 1995; Ingberman and Villani 1993; Lacy and Niou 1998; Lacy and Paolino 1998; Smith et al. 1999; Mebane 2000; Mebane and Sekhon 2002). With national elections in the 1990s perpetuating divided government, it has become common for political pundits and leaders of both parties to speculate that American voters prefer divided government and strategically split their tickets as a result (Kimball 1997; Lang et al. 1998).<sup>2</sup>

One way in which policy balancing theories might explain the recent decline in ticket splitting is if fewer voters see divided government as desirable. However, slightly more than half of the respondents to the 2000 survey conducted by the National Election

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<sup>2</sup>This has not always been the prevailing view. For example, David Broder (1972) and Kevin Phillips (1975) argue that ticket splitting increased in the 1972 elections because voters did not perceive meaningful

Studies expressed a preference for divided government, and earlier surveys show similar levels of support for divided government (Petrocik and Doherty 1996). While this survey question is not a good predictor of voting behavior (Beck et al. 1992; Sigelman et al. 1997; Lacy and Paolino 1998), it suggests that voters have not grown weary of divided government. Alternatively, perhaps moderate voters (those with the strongest ideological motivation for ticket splitting) comprise a smaller share of the voting public today than in the 1970s. However, the share of moderates in the electorate has remained stable for the last twenty years, including 2000 (National Election Studies 1995-2000). Thus, it does not appear that a substantial change in voter preferences led to the decline in ticket splitting.

However, if moderate voters are inclined to balance control of government between two ideologically polarized parties, and if the share of moderates in the electorate remains stable, then ticket splitting should increase in frequency when the parties move further apart on the ideological spectrum. As Fiorina hypothesizes:

"When the parties are relatively close, near the center of gravity of the electorate, ticket splitting declines. When the parties move away from each other, following their own internal dynamics toward the extremes of the voter distribution, they open up a large policy range in which ticket splitting is the voter response" (Fiorina 1996, p. 81).

Thus, the policy balancing perspective suggests that the recent decline in ticket splitting could be explained if the two major parties had moved toward the center of the ideological spectrum. Instead, however, the parties have polarized during the last twenty years, especially in Congress as more extreme factions in each party have gained control

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policy differences between the two major parties.

of the leadership positions (Rohde 1991; Poole and Rosenthal 1997; Carmines and Layman 1997).<sup>3</sup>

A final perspective argues that ticket splitting is the result of sincere policy-based proximity voting (Frymer 1994; Frymer et al. 1997; Grofman et al. 2000; Brunell et al. 2001). Since American parties are diverse coalitions, congressional candidates may hold ideological positions quite different from the presidential candidates of their own party. In addition, median voter and party preferences vary from one district to another, even within the same state. As a result, some voters may find themselves closer to the policy positions of a presidential candidate of one party and a congressional candidate of the opposite party. This argument may be best understood when considering white southerners who regularly voted for Republican presidential candidates and conservative Democratic House candidates in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. This theory may also explain the recent drop in ticket splitting. As the parties (and their candidates for Congress) have polarized, fewer candidates are trying to run away from their party's positions. As a result, fewer voters find themselves proximate to presidential and congressional candidates of opposite parties. However, there is more to the decline in ticket splitting than the growing ideological homogeneity of each party's candidates for Congress. Increased party polarization has the added effect of making voters view politics in more partisan and ideological terms.

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<sup>3</sup> To be fair, more recent studies have revised Fiorina's initial policy balancing theory by focusing more specifically on voter expectations of election outcomes and subsequent government policies (Lacy and Paolino 1998; Smith et al. 1999; Mebane 2000; Scheve and Tomz 1999; Mebane and Sekhon 2002). However, the revised balancing theories still depend on ideologically polarized parties as the central motivation for moderate voters to engage in strategic balancing behavior.



## **A Party Salience Theory of Ticket Splitting**

It is possible to make sense of the recent decline in ticket splitting using by noting the growing ideological gulf between the two major political parties. When parties offer clear choices to voters, then party labels are more salient decision aids when voters cast their ballots, thus reducing the chances that voters will cast split ballots. A fuller explanation and empirical test of these ideas follows.

This argument rests on two primary claims. The first is that voters rely on party labels to make inferences about the ideological positions of candidates and the policies candidates will pursue if elected. This inferential process is especially important in low-information races (like many congressional contests), where voters often do not learn much about the candidates during a campaign. For example, Franklin (1991) finds that voters' perceptions about the ideological position of an incumbent legislator depend, in part, on the ideological location of the incumbent's party.

The second tenet is that the degree to which voters make ideological inferences based on party labels depends on the ideological distance between the two major parties. The salience of party labels depends on the degree to which the two parties offer clear and contrasting policy positions. Party labels are less useful to voters when both parties have similar policy positions. This is certainly not a new idea. As the introductory quotation suggests, V.O. Key (1966) argues that voters rely on policy preferences when parties and candidates provide clear choices during the campaign. However, when voters confront indistinguishable or vague policy alternatives, they rely on other considerations,

such as candidate traits and experiences (see also Downs 1957, 137; Campbell et al. 1960, 170).

There is empirical evidence based on candidate statements and positions to support this conditional view of issue voting. When competing candidates offer similar or ambiguous policy proposals, voters often rely on character assessments and personal traits when making voting decisions (Page 1978; Asher 1988). In contrast, ideological considerations have a stronger influence on vote choice when opposing candidates take clear and contrasting policy positions (Page 1978; Wright 1978; Abramowitz 1981; Wright and Berkman 1986).

I argue that the ideological positions of the major parties have a similar effect on voters. As the ideological distance between the two major parties increases, party labels become more informative, and it becomes easier for voters to identify and vote for the candidate or party closest to their policy preferences. In contrast, as the parties converge toward the ideological median, it becomes harder for voters to recognize ideological differences between the parties, issues become less relevant, and voters rely on non-policy criteria. Assuming that non-policy characteristics (such as appealing candidate traits) are distributed to candidates independently of party affiliation, then voters will be more likely to split their ballots when the parties converge toward the center.

In sum, the party salience explanation offers predictions at the individual and aggregate level. At the individual level, the party salience theory predicts that voters who see no policy differences between the parties are less likely to rely on party labels and ideological positions, and are thus most likely to cast split ballots. At the aggregate level, the party salience theory predicts that ticket splitting should be more common when party

positions move toward the center. Thus, Key's (1966) echo chamber metaphor illustrates why ticket splitting should decrease when the parties polarize. When parties offer a meaningful choice, voters respond by clearly selecting one of the parties in several different races. In contrast, when parties and their candidates move toward the ideological center and blur their differences, the response from the electorate should be equally vague: ticket splitting and divided government. Clarity from the parties begets clarity from the voters; confusion begets confusion.<sup>4</sup>

### *Have Voters Recognized Growing Party Polarization?*

There is ample evidence of growing ideological distance between the two parties nationally during the last thirty years, especially when examining Congress and convention delegates (Rohde 1991; Cox and McCubbins 1993; Poole and Rosenthal 1997; Green, Jackson and Clayton 1999). In order to link this development to the recent decline in ticket splitting, it is first necessary to determine whether voters have recognized this growing party polarization. If voters are generally unaware of the relative ideological positions of the two major parties, the motivation for making policy inferences and voting decisions based on party labels largely disappears.

The simplest test is to compare an objective measure of party polarization to a measure based on public perceptions of the parties. Figure 2 plots the percentage of NES respondents who see “important differences” between the parties against the ideological distance between the Republican and Democratic parties in the House of Representatives.

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<sup>4</sup>Indeed, Key advocated more distinctive issue-oriented party platforms (as well as stronger party organizations) as a way to revitalize partisan ties in the electorate (Epstein 1983).

The ideological distance measure is the difference between the mean DW-NOMINATE scores (Poole and Rosenthal 1997) for Republicans and Democrats in the House during the session preceding each presidential election from 1952 to 2000.<sup>5</sup> As the figure indicates, there is a strong positive correlation ( $r = .84, p < .01$ ) between the two variables. As the ideological distance between the parties in the House increases, more voters perceive “important differences” in what the parties stand for. This relationship encompasses significant party polarization during the last thirty years. In 1972, the mean policy distance between Republicans and Democrats in the House was .4 on the DW-NOMINATE scale and only 46% of NES respondents saw important differences between the parties. By 2000, the mean distance between the parties in the House was over .8 and 66% of NES respondents saw important differences between the parties. Other public opinion measures of perceived party polarization show similar movement over the last several decades (Hetherington 2001; Weisberg 2001; Mockabee 2001).

[Figure 2 about here]

Interestingly, the party differences measure is not correlated with the ideological distance between presidential candidates ( $r = -.19, p = .59$ ), or the relative extremism of the two candidates for the White House ( $r = .08, p = .82$ ).<sup>6</sup> Thus, public perceptions about party positions seem to depend more on the aggregate positions of party members in Congress than the relative positions of the two presidential candidates.

### *Do Perceptions of Party Differences Influence Voting Decisions?*

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<sup>5</sup> There is no data point for 1956, when NES did not ask the “important differences” question.

<sup>6</sup> Measures of presidential candidate positions were created by Zaller and Hunt (Zaller 1999).

Having established that public perceptions of party polarization are closely related to an objective indicator of party positioning, the next question is whether these perceptions make any difference in voting decisions. The party salience theory hypothesizes that voters who see a wide ideological gap between the parties should be more likely to cast their ballots on the basis of party labels and ideological considerations than voters who see no differences between the parties.

It is possible to test this hypothesis using data from the NES Cumulative Data File and the 2000 Election Study. I estimate a model of vote choice in presidential elections (first column) and House elections (second column) using three main factors: party, ideology, and candidate attributes.<sup>7</sup> In the presidential model, the candidate factor is measured by the candidate affect differential: the sum of the number of likes for the Republican and dislikes for the Democrat minus the number of likes for the Democrat and dislikes for the Republican (up to 5 mentions). Incumbency (coded -1 for a Democratic incumbent, 0 for an open seat, and +1 for a Republican incumbent) measures the candidate factor in the House model. Only contested House races, where voters have a choice between at least 2 candidates, are included in this analysis.

To test the hypothesis, I interact each of the three main factors with the “important party differences” NES variable (coded 1 if the voter sees important differences between the parties, 0 if not). The interaction terms should be positive and significant for the party and ideology factors, indicating that party and ideology weigh more heavily in the voting decisions of people who see major policy differences between

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<sup>7</sup> Party identification is measured on a 7-point scale (-3 is a strong Democrat, +3 is a strong Republican). Ideology is measured using the 3-point self-placement summary (-1 is a liberal, 0 is a moderate, +1 is a conservative). Both variables are coded so that they should be positively correlated with the vote measures. The 3-point ideology summary is used to minimize data lost in the 7-point ideology measure.

the parties. The interaction term should be negative and significant for the candidate factor, indicating that candidate attributes weigh more heavily in the voting decisions of people who see no policy differences between the parties.

[Table 1 about here]

The results are presented in Table 1. The dependent variable in each case is dichotomous (coded 1 for Republicans, 0 for Democrats), so logistic regression is used to estimate the voting models. For voting in presidential and House elections, the results support the first two parts of the proposition but fail to support the third. All three factors are significant predictors of vote choice for voters who see no differences between the parties, as indicated by the logit coefficients for the main factors. The positive and significant interaction terms for party identification and ideology in both models indicates that people who see important differences between the parties indeed rely more heavily on party and ideology when making voting decisions. In contrast, the interaction between party differences and the candidate factor falls well short of statistical significance. Apparently, incumbency and candidate affect equally shape the voting decisions of all voters, regardless of their perceptions of party positions. Nevertheless, voters' perceptions about party differences shape the degree to which party and ideology influence voting decisions.

*Is Ticket Splitting Less Common Among Voters Who See Important Differences Between the Parties?*

If voters who see no important differences between the parties place less emphasis on party and ideology, their votes are more likely shaped by non-partisan and non-policy considerations, such as other candidate traits. Assuming that other candidate traits (experience, speaking ability, appearance, etc.) are evenly or randomly distributed between the parties, voters who see no differences between the parties should be more likely to vote for candidates of different parties in different contests.

To see whether perceptions of party differences are an important determinant of ticket splitting when controlling for other factors, I estimate a multivariate model of president-House ticket splitting using data from the National Election Studies. Several independent variables are included in the model to test different theories of ticket splitting. In an era of candidate-centered politics, it is commonly stated that ticket splitting reflects a weak psychological attachment to either major party (Campbell et al. 1960; Wattenberg 1998). Thus, strong partisans (as opposed to independents) and those who care a great deal about the outcome of the presidential contest (as opposed to those who don't care) are less prone toward ticket splitting (Campbell and Miller 1957; Beck et al. 1992; Mattei and Howes 2000). Both measures are included in the analysis here.<sup>8</sup> Since both measures are strongly correlated with perceptions of party differences (Hetherington 2001), including them in a multivariate model makes it more difficult for perceptions of party differences to account for any variation in ticket splitting.

Second, the multivariate model includes a measure to test policy balancing theories of ticket splitting. Other things being equal, ideological centrists should be more motivated to split their ballots than other voters. Thus, the model includes a dichotomous variable indicating whether a voter places herself in between the two major parties on the

liberal-conservative spectrum. Similar measures have been used in other studies (Born 2000b; Mattei and Howes 2000; Garand and Lichtl 2000).

Third, it is important to control for the quality of the competing House candidates. One obvious determinant of ticket splitting is incumbency. Voters are more likely to split their ballots when confronting an incumbent of the opposite party on the ballot (McAlister and Darcy 1992; Alvarez and Schousen 1993; Born 1994; Brody et al. 1994; Sigelman et al. 1997; Born 2000a, 2000b). Thus, the model includes two measures indicating whether the House contest features an incumbent of the same or opposite party of the voter's chosen presidential candidate.

Given that incumbency is a crude measure of candidate quality, it is important to also control for candidate familiarity. Some incumbents face strong, highly visible challengers while many others face relatively unknown, token opposition. Ticket splitting should be more common in the latter contests. To account for these variations in candidate quality (especially for challengers), the model includes measures indicating whether voters can recall the names of the House candidates from their own party and the opposite party.

Fourth, one must allow for the quality of the presidential candidates to influence ticket splitting. Some voters may split their ballots simply because they find the presidential candidate from their party to be inferior to the opposition candidate (Mattei and Howes 2000). Thus, the model includes two dichotomous variables indicating whether partisans are cross-pressured by finding the opposition presidential candidate more appealing.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> A complete description of each variable is included in the appendix.

<sup>9</sup> I follow the coding used by Mattei and Howes (2001) in creating the presidential cross-pressure variables.



Finally, I include controls for region and ballot format. A dummy variable for residents of southern states accounts for higher rates of ticket splitting among those voters (Alvarez and Schousen 1993). There is a historical pattern unique to the South of selecting Republican presidential candidates while electing Democrats to Congress, although this regional distinction has gradually disappeared (Burden and Kimball 2002). An additional dummy variable indicates states with a straight-party device on the ballot, which reduces ticket splitting (Campbell and Miller 1957; McAllister and Darcy 1992; Burden and Kimball 1998).

The results of a multivariate analysis of president-House ticket splitting can be seen in Table 2. The sample used for this analysis includes NES respondents from 1980 to 2000 and excludes third party votes and House races that were not contested by both major parties.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the analysis covers a period in which president-House ticket splitting declined substantially (from 27% in 1980 to 17% in 2000 among voters in this sample). The first column provides the estimated logit coefficients and standard errors for each explanatory variable. Since logit coefficients are not easily interpreted, I also calculate the change in predicted probability of casting a split ballot when varying each independent variable from its minimum to maximum value while holding the other explanatory variables constant (see the second column of Table 2).<sup>11</sup> The change in probability values provides a more substantive comparison of the relative impact of each explanatory variable.

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<sup>10</sup> Uncontested races afford the voter no choice between casting a split ticket or a straight ticket. Third party votes are relatively rare and confound tests of policy balancing. The name recall questions were not included in the NES battery before 1978. Otherwise the variables used for this analysis go back to 1972.

<sup>11</sup> The strength of partisanship variable is held constant at 1 (pure independent) and all other variables are held constant at 0. These are the median values for each variable except for strength of partisanship (median is 3, a weak partisan), important party differences, and care about outcome (where the median is 1, someone who does care about the outcome). These values were chosen to simulate a voter susceptible to

[Table 2 about here]

As expected, perceptions of important party differences is a significant predictor of ticket splitting even after controlling for several other important factors. While candidate-centered factors (incumbency and name recall in House contests, candidate affect in presidential contests) have the strongest impact on ticket splitting, a fair amount of ticket splitting can be attributed to voters who blur any distinctions between the parties (i.e., political independents, those who don't care about the outcome of the presidential election, and those don't see important party differences).

Furthermore, the decline in ticket splitting from the 1970s to 2000 can be explained almost entirely by changes in the composition of the electorate for these three variables. In 2000, 79% of the voters in the sample see important differences between the parties, as compared to 55% in 1976. In 2000, 89% of the voters cared a great deal about the presidential outcome, as compared to 67% in 1976. In 2000, 41% of the voters are strong partisans, as compared to 32% in 1976. This represents a significant increase in the salience of party labels among voters, and provides a compelling explanation for the recent decline in ticket splitting. None of the other variables in the model, with one exception (discussed below) move in a direction that would lead to less ticket splitting over the last twenty years.

Another factor contributing to the decline in ticket splitting is greater unity among Democrats in affection for the party's presidential candidate. Only 5% of Democrats in 2000 were conflicted in their evaluations of the presidential candidates, down from 11% in 1976. In addition, increased electoral competition in the South, the result of a gradual shift of voters to the Republican party, also accounts for the recent drop in ticket splitting

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many forces that produce ticket splitting.

(Aistrup 1996; Brunell and Grofman 1998; Burden and Kimball 2002). In the three most recent presidential elections, president-House ticket splitting was no more common in the South than in any other region of the country.

It is worth noting that there is some support for policy balancing theories in Table 2. Ticket splitting is positively associated with being located between the parties on an ideological spectrum (note the positive logit coefficient and change in probability score for the “place self between the major parties” variable). On the other hand, the model coefficient barely reaches conventional levels of statistical significance, and the substantive impact of being a moderate is weaker than the other explanatory variables, including whether one lives in a state with a straight-party ballot mechanism. In addition, the number of voters who place themselves in between the two major parties has remained constant over the last twenty years (at around 23%), so ideological moderation does not help account for the recent decline in ticket splitting. On the whole, the evidence in Table 2 provides support for a party salience theory of ticket splitting. When party labels are less salient and less informative about candidate policy positions, there is less to prevent a voter from crossing party lines.

### *Does Ticket Splitting Increase When the Parties Offer Similar Policies?*

A final hypothesis from the party salience theory is that aggregate ticket splitting should be more common when the parties converge ideologically and less common when the parties diverge. One way to test this hypothesis is to examine the number of congressional districts with split outcomes each year (i.e., districts carried by a

presidential candidate of one party and a House candidate of a different party). I estimate a regression equation in which split-district outcomes from 1900 to 2000 are modeled as a function of party polarization, presidential victory margin, and incumbency.

As in Figure 2, Poole and Rosenthal's (1997) DW-NOMINATE scores are used to measure party polarization. I simply calculate the difference between the mean Republican and Democratic DW-NOMINATE scores in the House for the Congress preceding each presidential election as my measure of party polarization. According to the party salience theory, party polarization should be inversely related to ticket splitting. In contrast, policy balancing theory predicts a positive relationship between party polarization and ticket splitting.

In an era of "candidate-centered" politics, many argue that ticket splitting occurs when an appealing candidate manages to attract voters from the opposite party (Wattenberg 1991; Beck et al. 1992). The multivariate analysis includes the president's margin of victory (in percentage points) to account for the expectation that popular presidential candidates may generate more ticket splitting by attracting an unusually large number of votes from the opposition. The final explanatory variable is a measure of the incumbency advantage in House elections developed by Gelman and King (1990). Given that incumbency is a strong predictor of ticket splitting, when the incumbency advantage increases, we should observe more ticket splitting.

It is possible that presidential landslides only influence ticket splitting in the modern candidate-centered campaign era with smaller presidential coattails. Thus, I estimate a second regression model that includes as an explanatory variable an interaction between the margin of victory in the presidential race and a dummy variable marking

elections in the “candidate-centered” period of modern American politics. I choose 1952 as the beginning of the candidate-centered era, since Dwight Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson were the first presidential candidates to use television ads in a presidential campaign (Ansolabehere et al. 1993). The main effect for victory margin should be insignificant, while the interaction term should produce a positive and significant coefficient, consistent with the idea that candidate-driven ticket splitting is a characteristic of the modern era of American politics.

[Table 3 about here]

As the regression estimates in Table 3 indicate, party convergence, incumbency, and lopsided presidential elections are associated with higher levels of President-House ticket splitting. These results hold in both models presented in Table 3, with one caveat discussed below.<sup>12</sup> Thus, we find more support for a party salience theory of ticket splitting. When the parties converge toward the ideological center, ticket splitting increases. When the parties polarize, ticket splitting decreases.<sup>13</sup> Again, a substantial increase in party polarization since the 1970s goes a long way toward explaining the decline in split districts during the last twenty years. In the 1970s and 1980s, over 30% of congressional districts produced split results in presidential and House elections. In 2000, only 20% of districts generated split outcomes. The difference between mean party

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<sup>12</sup> Diagnostic tests indicate that 1920, 1984, and 2000 were influential observations in model 1, with Cook's  $d$  values slightly larger than the critical value of .18 (Fox 1991). In model 2, none of the observations generated influence statistics exceeding the critical value. The results for both models are the same when influential cases are dropped or when a robust regression method, which corrects for outliers and influential cases (Fox 1991), is used. See Brunell et al. (2001) for similar results. Brown and Wright (1992) examine the relationship between ticket splitting and state-level party polarization and also find an inverse relationship.

<sup>13</sup> It is possible that moderate voters are more comfortable splitting their votes between two centrist parties rather than two ideologically extreme parties. Voters may be less certain about the likely policy outcomes negotiated by elected officials occupying opposite poles on the ideological spectrum (Lacy and Niou 1998). However, this argument subverts the basic motivation for policy balancing: the need to strike a balance between ideologically extreme parties and their elected officials.

DW-NOMINATE scores in the House has increased from .39 in 1972 to .87 in 2000 (on a scale that runs from -1 to +1). According to the regression equations in Table 3, this increase in party polarization should have reduced split districts by about 12 to 15 percentage points, not far from the decline that actually occurred.

The results in Table 3 also suggest that the association between the president's winning margin and split districts is stronger for the latter half of this century. As expected, the interaction term is positive and significant in the second model, while the main effect for the victory margin variable is not statistically significant.<sup>14</sup> Landslide presidential elections generally failed to produce divided government before the 1950s because the fate of congressional candidates was closely linked to the performance of the party's presidential candidate. In contrast, lopsided presidential contests are more likely to produce divided outcomes today because congressional campaigns are more independent of the race at the top of the ticket.

## **Conclusion**

It is still commonly argued that party attachments among voters are weakening and that ticket splitting is on the rise (Lawrence 1999, 173; Wattenberg 1998, 27; Patterson 2001, 221). It is apparent that the conventional wisdom regarding partisan decline and ticket splitting needs to be revised. There is abundant evidence of increasing partisanship among the mass public and a substantial decrease in ticket splitting in recent elections. The increased ticket splitting of the 1960s and 1970s is certainly related to

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<sup>14</sup> An F test indicates that the coefficients for the interaction term and the main effect for victory margin are statistically different from one another at the .05 significance level.

weakened party attachments and the rise of candidate-centered campaigns during that period. More recently, however, we have witnessed the converse of this relationship: resurgent partisanship and decreased ticket splitting as party labels and ideological positions have become more relevant to voters.

Voters have correctly perceived the widening ideological differences between the major parties in the United States. In addition, voters who perceive important differences between the parties are more likely to vote on the basis of party affiliation and ideological positions. As the ideological gulf between the parties in Congress has grown, mass partisanship has come to be defined more by ideology than in the past. The correlation between a voter's ideological position and party identification has increased substantially in the last twenty years (Knight and Erikson 1997; Levine, Carmines, and Huckfeldt 1997; Abramowitz and Saunders 1998). One result has been a decline in ticket splitting.

The fact that the 2000 and 2002 elections both produced unified government underscores the recent decline in split-ticket voting. The ubiquitous losses suffered by the president's party in midterm congressional elections (until recently) are often interpreted as a sign that voters prefer the opposition party to control Congress and serve as a check on the president (Alesina and Rosenthal 1989; Erikson 1988; Mebane and Sekhon 2002). In the midterm elections of 2002, voters had a chance to elect more Democrats to serve as a check on a Republican president, and yet Republicans actually gained seats in both the House and Senate. With very few exceptions, the Republican gains in the 2002 elections came in states and districts where George Bush had run well ahead of Al Gore in the 2000 election. Thus, recent elections have strengthened the correlation between presidential and congressional voting (Campbell 2003). In addition,

since 1952 divided government has ensued after 9 midterm elections and 7 presidential elections, so the midterm loss phenomenon is not an adequate explanation of the prevalence of divided government in the last forty years.

In addition, an examination of the House incumbents who survive in competitive districts highlights the importance of ideological positions in elections. The list of incumbents who won in districts carried by the opposite party's presidential candidate in recent elections is primarily a roster of moderate Republicans (such as Chris Shays, Wayne Gilchrest, Jim Leach, and Jack Quinn) and moderate Democrats (such as Ken Lucas, Charlie Stenholm, Colin Peterson, and Dennis Moore).<sup>15</sup> In the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress, the average DW-NOMINATE score of Democratic incumbents in districts carried by Bush was -.14, as compared to an average of -.45 for Democrats representing districts that Gore won. Similarly, the average DW-NOMINATE score of Republican incumbents in districts carried by Gore was .52, as compared to an average of .74 for Republicans representing districts that Bush won. Politically moderate incumbents obscure party differences, which helps them appeal to voters from the opposite party and survive in competitive districts. Even in cases where ticket splitting occurs, the salience of party labels and party positions is still important.

The rise and fall of ticket splitting can be understood in terms of a fall and rise in the salience of party labels. It is important to consider American voting behavior in light of the actions of the parties in government. In recent years, ideological disputes in Washington have highlighted the policy differences between the parties. As a result, voters have come to see government and candidates in a more partisan and ideological

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<sup>15</sup> Of the 33 conservative Blue Dog Democrats in the 107<sup>th</sup> House, 22 represented districts that Bush won in the 2000 election.



light, which increases the salience of party labels in the voting booth. Voters who see important differences between the parties rely more heavily on party and ideology and thus are less likely to cast split ballots. As a result, ticket splitting has declined during the last twenty years.

The extremely close competitive balance between the two major parties makes it difficult to predict the future of divided government in the United States. However, the ideological differences between the parties and the salience of party labels are important indicators to follow. The bipartisanship that prevailed in the capital immediately after September 11, 2001 obscured party differences on the major issues of the day. Had it continued, it would have produced an increase in ticket splitting in the coming elections. However, national government has since returned to ideologically charged partisan disputes on a variety of issues from tax cuts to judicial nominations. The continuing party polarization in American politics means that ticket splitting should continue to decline, even below the relatively low levels seen in the 2000 election.

## **Appendix – Summary of NES Variable Codes**

*Split ticket voting*: coded as 1 for respondents who voted for presidential and House candidates of opposite parties, 0 for respondents who voted for candidates of the same party.

*Party Identification*: The standard seven-point party identification scale, ranging from strong Democrats (coded as -3) to strong Republicans (+3).

*Strength of Partisanship*: coded 1 for pure independents, 2 for independent leaners, 3 for weak partisans, and 4 for strong partisans.

*Ideology*: Summary of a respondent's self-assessed ideology, coded as -1 for liberals, 0 for moderates, and +1 for conservatives. This summary measures preserves a lot of missing data that is lost when using the seven-point ideological self-placement.

*Incumbency*: coded +1 for a Republican incumbent, 0 for an open seat, and -1 for a Democratic incumbent.

*Presidential Candidate Affect*: Based on open-ended questions about the presidential candidates, this variable is the sum of the number of likes for the Republican and dislikes for the Democrat minus the number of likes for the Democrat and dislikes for the Republican (up to 5 mentions each). Values range from -10 (extreme affect advantage for the Democrat) to +10 (extreme advantage for the Republican).

*Important Party Differences*: Coded as 1 if the respondent says there are "important differences" in what the two major parties stand for, 0 if the respondent says "no" or "don't know."

*Care About Outcome*: Coded as 1 if the respondent cares "a good deal" about who wins the presidential election, 0 if the respondent doesn't care very much or doesn't know.

*South*: Coded as 1 for resident of one of the eleven former Confederate states, 0 for all others.

*Straight-Party Ballot Device*: coded 1 if the respondent resides in a state with a straight-party option on the ballot, 0 if not.

*Place Self Between the Major Parties*: coded as 1 for those who place themselves to the left of the Democratic party and to the right of the Republican party on the seven-point ideology scale, and 0 otherwise (including those who fail to place themselves or both parties on the scale).

*House Incumbent of Own Party*: coded 1 if the respondent resides in a congressional district where the incumbent is from the same party as the respondent's chosen presidential candidate, 0 otherwise.

*House Incumbent of Opposite Party*: coded 1 if the respondent resides in a district where the incumbent is from the opposite party, 0 otherwise.

*Recall Name of Own Party House Candidate*: Coded as 1 if the respondent accurately recalls the name of the House candidate from the same party as his chosen presidential candidate, 0 otherwise.

*Recall Name of Opposite Party House Candidate*: Coded as 1 if the respondent accurately recalls the name of the House candidate from the opposite party, 0 otherwise.

*Presidential Pull on Republicans*: coded as 1 if a Republican partisan rates the Democratic presidential candidate better than the Republican candidate on the presidential candidate affect scale, 0 otherwise. Leaners are treated as partisans.

*Presidential Pull on Democrats*: coded as 1 if a Democratic partisan rates the Republican presidential candidate better than the Democratic candidate on the presidential candidate affect scale, 0 otherwise. Leaners are treated as partisans.

### **Summary of Aggregate Variables**

*Split Districts*: the percentage of congressional districts with split outcomes (carried by presidential and House candidates of different parties) in on-year elections.

*President-House Ticket Splitting*: the percentage of NES respondents who report voting for presidential and House candidates of opposite major parties.

*Split Senate Delegations*: the percentage of states with U.S. senators of different parties after each on-year election.

*Important Party Differences*: the percentage of NES respondents who report that there are "important differences" in what the parties stand for.

*Mean Distance Between Parties*: the difference between the mean DW-NOMINATE score for House Democrats and the mean DW-NOMINATE score for House Republicans in the Congress preceding each presidential election.

*President's Victory Margin*: the difference (in percentage points) between the presidential candidate with the most popular votes and the second-place finisher.

*Incumbency Advantage*: Gelman-King measure of the House incumbency advantage in each on-year election.

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**Table 1**  
**A Multivariate Analysis of Voting in National Elections**  
**1984-2000**

Independent Variables	Dependent Variable: Vote Choice	
	President	House
Constant	.14 (.09)	-.04 (.07)
Party Identification	.53*** (.05)	.54*** (.03)
Ideology	.43*** (0.10)	.19* (0.08)
Incumbency	----	1.23*** (0.07)
Presidential Candidate Affect	.59*** (.04)	----
Important Party Differences	-.11 (.13)	-.03 (.08)
Party Identification * Important Party Differences	.19** (.07)	.14** (0.04)
Ideology * Important Party Differences	.29* (.14)	.31** (.10)
Incumbency * Important Party Differences	----	-.04 (.09)
Presidential Candidate Affect * Important Party Differences	.05 (.06)	----
Number of cases	4584	5290
Model Chi-square	4403.8***	2911.1***
Pseudo-R <sup>2</sup>	.69	.40

Note: The House vote model only includes races contested by both major parties. The dependent variables are coded 1 for Republican votes and 0 for Democratic votes. Cell entries are logit coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).

\*\*\*p<.001 (two-tailed)

\*\*p<.01 (two-tailed)

\*p<.05 (two-tailed)

+p<.1 (two-tailed)

Sources: NES Cumulative Data File 1948-96, 2000 Pre- and Post-Election Study

**Table 2**  
**A Multivariate Analysis of President-House Ticket Splitting**  
**1980-2000**

Independent Variables	Coefficient (Std. Error)	Change in Probability
Important Party Differences	-.49*** (.10)	-.11
Strength of Party Identification	-.34*** (.05)	-.20
Care About Outcome	-.27* (0.11)	-.06
South	.19+ (.10)	.05
Straight-Party Ballot Device	-.20* (.09)	-.05
Place Self Between the Major Parties	.18+ (.10)	.04
House Incumbent of Own Party	-1.12*** (.16)	-.22
House Incumbent of Opposite Party	1.09*** (.14)	.27
Recall Name of Own Party House Candidate	-.96*** (.12)	-.19
Recall Name of Opposite Party House Candidate	.95*** (.11)	.23
Presidential Pull on Republicans	1.32*** (.18)	.31
Presidential Pull on Democrats	.91*** (.17)	.22
Constant	-.10 (.20)	---
Number of cases	4200	
Model Chi-square	1152.6***	
Pseudo-R <sup>2</sup>	.26	

Analysis only includes House races contested by both major parties. The dependent variable is coded 1 for a split ticket and 0 for a straight ticket. Cell entries are logit coefficients (std. errors in parentheses). Change in probability values are calculated by moving the variable of interest from its minimum to maximum value while holding all other variables constant at modal values. \*\*\*p<.001, \*\*p<.01, \*p<.05, +p<.1 (two-tailed)

Sources: NES Cumulative Data File 1948-96, 2000 Pre- and Post-Election Study

**Table 3**  
**A Multivariate Analysis of Split-District Outcomes, 1900-2000**

Independent Variables	Model 1	Model 2
Constant	27.73** (7.13)	27.52** (7.01)
Mean Distance Between Parties (D-NOMINATE)	-31.65** (8.34)	-25.42** (8.47)
President Victory Margin (Percent)	0.28+ (0.15)	0.01 (0.19)
Incumbency Advantage (Gelman-King)	2.26*** (0.45)	1.75* (0.67)
Modern Era (since 1952)	----	-1.99 (5.67)
President Victory Margin * Modern Era	----	0.60* (0.28)
Number of cases	26	26
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.75	.79
Std. Error of Estimate	5.97	5.50
Durbin-Watson <i>d</i>	1.95	2.18

Note: The dependent variable is the percentage of House districts won by a presidential candidate of one party and a House candidate of another party. Cell entries are OLS coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).

\*\*\*p<.001 (two-tailed)

\*\*p<.01 (two-tailed)

\*p<.05 (two-tailed)

+p<.1 (two-tailed)

Sources: Stanley and Niemi 2000; Keith Poole

Figure1: Indicators of Ticket Splitting

1900-2000

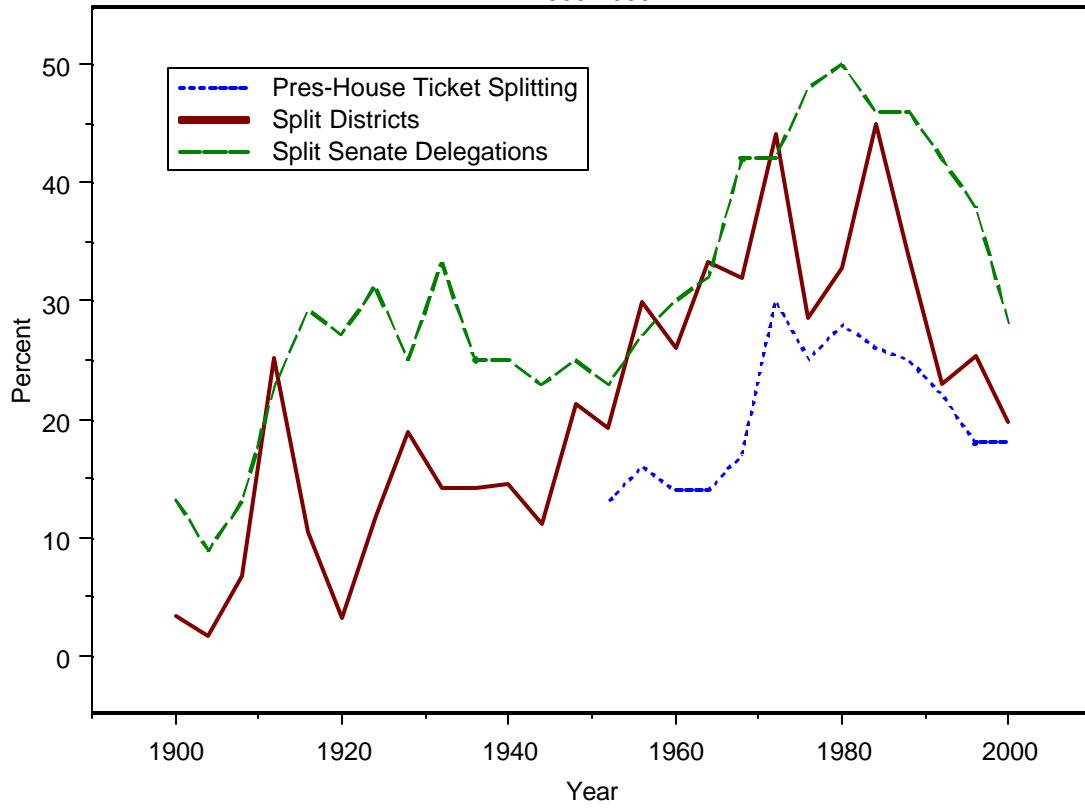


Figure 2: Comparing Measures of Party Distance

