

The Causes of Split-Ticket Voting

Split-ticket voting is an interesting and important phenomenon, given the problems it poses for the “responsible party” model of democracy. By voting for a president of one party and a member of congress from another, voters decrease both the incentives of parties to formulate clear and distinct platforms and, just as importantly, their ability to implement those platforms once in office. Various explanations have been offered for the motivations of the split-ticket voter and the set of conditions under which ticket splitting takes place. However, it is not just important to know why split-ticket voting occurs, but also when and where it is likely to happen. To this end Grofman, Koetzle, McDonald, and Brunell have developed a theory to explain ticket-splitting in the aggregate.¹ Essentially, they argue that split-ticket voting is caused by different median policy positions of voters in district and nation-wide elections. They present persuasive evidence that split-ticket voting is most likely to occur in ideological outlying districts, that is, districts that are a typical of the party that represents them. The purpose of this paper is to examine this proposition by analyzing more recent data than that included in their study: the 1996 and 2000 elections.

I find that under two different measures of district ideology Grofman et al’s results do not appear to hold in recent national elections. In this new data, split ticket voting seems more likely to occur in ideologically moderate districts than in extreme ones. While this study certainly does not destroy the comparative midpoints argument they advance, it does raise questions about its veracity in more recent times. I explore

¹ Grofman, et al. (2000). “A New Look at Split-Ticket Outcomes for House and President: The Comparative Midpoints Model”. *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 62, no. 1 pp. 34-50.

reasons for why this might be, focusing on the changing nature of congressional districts and political parties.

The Comparative Midpoints Model

The comparative midpoints model is actually quite simple.² It rests on three assumptions that generally appear to be true. First, the model assumes that candidates for office in a particular constituency do not converge to the same policy platforms, identical to the median voter in their district. Rather, all other things being equal, “we may expect the Democrat...to be to the left of the Republican”.³ Second, constituencies differ across an ideological spectrum—their median voters are to the left of the national center in some places and to the right of center in others. For these purposes one must also remember that the nation as a whole is a constituency for national elections, with a median voter to the right or left of center. Finally, these facts mean that candidates running for office in different districts adopt different policy platforms. More precisely, “in general, we expect candidates of a given party to be located somewhere between their party’s median voter in the constituency and the overall median voter in that constituency”.⁴ Thus, Democratic representatives from a conservative constituency will be more conservative than most Democratic representatives, but not as conservative as a Republican from the same constituency would be, and vice-versa.

These assumptions lead to an important conclusion: most congressional districts will have a different median policy position than the nation as a whole, falling either to the left or to the right of the national median voter. And therefore, “in most

² Grofman et al. go to great lengths to point out that we should not fault them for this.

³ Grofman et al. (2000). p. 36

⁴ Ibid, 37.

congressional districts will be a set of voters who are to the Democratic side of the midpoint between, say, the Democratic and Republican candidates for House or the Presidency, but who also are to the Republican side of the midpoint between the Democratic or Republican candidates for president, or the House”.⁵ For instance, a voter in a conservative district might prefer the more moderate conservatism of the Democrat running in his district while also preferring the conservative Republican presidential nominee over the liberal Democratic presidential nominee.

So if there is a split vote in a liberal constituency, we would expect the Republican to win the House seat and the Democrat the presidential vote, while in conservative constituencies we should expect the opposite. In moderate districts either outcome is possible. As Grofman et al. put it, “in general, for winners of a given party, we would expect the highest proportion of split outcomes to occur in those districts that are ideologically extreme in a fashion that is atypical of that party”.⁶ That split-ticket voting should occur most often in ideologically extreme districts is the central conclusion of the comparative mid-points model.

Having laid out their case, Grofman et al. provide some compelling evidence for the comparative midpoints model. They measure the location of split-ticket outcomes from 1964-1992, assuming that the liberalism or conservatism of a district can be represented by that district’s representative’s ADA score.⁷ They show that among Democratic congressional victories, almost 60% of their conservative or very conservative districts split their votes. Similarly, nearly 40% of Republican winners had

⁵ Ibid, 37.

⁶ Ibid, 39.

⁷ The ADA is Americans for Democratic Action, a leftist organization. Grofman et al. acknowledge that Democrats in conservative districts will misrepresent the liberalism of the district and vice-versa, but argue that the measure is still useful.

their liberal or very liberal districts spilt their tickets. Interestingly, in moderate districts Democratic winners resulted in split tickets about 55% of the time, while Republican winners in moderate districts only had split results 20% of the time. Clearly though, Grofman et al.'s data show that the lion's share of ticket splitting takes place in ideologically extreme districts, exactly as the comparative midpoints model predicts.

Testing the Model in 1996 and 2000

Do these patterns still hold? Important to remember is that the American political landscape has changed significantly since 1964, and even since the last election cycle included in the study, 1992. To find out, I compiled data from the 1996 and 2000 elections. I used both Grofman et al.'s measure of ideology, the ADA score of the congressional winner, and another measure of district ideology, the percentage of the vote that the Democratic candidate for President received in each district.⁸ These data are displayed in the appendix.

At first glance, there are some superficial similarities between my results in table one and Grofman's results in table two. Among Republican congressional winners there is a clear decline in the percentages of split outcomes as we move from ideologically extreme districts to the more conservative median of the Republican Party. Indeed, one might argue that these data more clearly demonstrate the comparative midpoints model, since the embarrassing hiccup indicating that moderate Republican districts rarely split their ticket has been cleared up. The data show a comparable trend among Democratic

⁸ All data come from Barone, Michael and Ujifusa, Grant. *The Almanac of American Politics 1998 and 2002*. National Journal Inc., Washington D.C., 1998 and 2002. All cases for which data were available are included. This makes for 744 cases by Grofman's measure and 849 by mine. Excel files enumerating these cases are included in the appendix.

congressional winners, with the percentage of split tickets generally increasing from the liberal to the more extreme conservative districts.

However, there is a large anomaly in this trend that should cause us to reconsider the similarity of the two data sets. Among very conservative Democratic districts, ticket-splitting falls to thirty-three percent in the new data, down from sixty-three percent among conservative districts. This contradicts the prediction that ticket splitting should be more prevalent as districts become more ideologically extreme within a party. Looking at the aggregate numbers of ticket splitting explains why this discrepancy has occurred—small sample size—but raises some even more disturbing facts about the data.

Overall, there are a very small number of ideologically extreme districts among winners of both parties, which in part accounts for the seeming good fit described above. There are only thirteen cases of very liberal, liberal, or moderate Republican districts, and only fourteen cases of very conservative or conservative Democratic districts. Almost all of these districts split their tickets, creating the nice ideological difference the comparative midpoints model predicts. Had one more very conservative Democratic district split its ticket, moving the percentage to sixty-six, the data would have looked perfect. Furthermore, the aggregate numbers show that most of the ticket splitting is occurring in conservative or very conservative *Republican* districts, a fact not at all consistent with the comparative midpoints model. What, exactly, do these discrepancies mean?

To determine whether the data sets were substantially different, I ran some rudimentary statistical analyses. Using the mean number of ticket splits per ideological category from Grofman et al.'s data as the hypothesis to be tested, I determined Z-scores

for the new data across all groups.⁹ These results are presented in table three. Of the ten different ideological groupings (very conservative through very liberal, for both Democratic and Republican winners), half of them have Z-scores that place them outside of a 95% confidence interval for the Grofman et al. hypothesis. Of the five remaining groups, four of them have such low sample sizes that any number of splits would have passed a Z-test, rendering their successful pass more or less meaningless. Only moderate districts among Democratic congressional winners came close to the expected value for ticket splitting in a meaningful way. Clearly, my data and Grofman et al.'s are substantially different, indicating that perhaps the comparative midpoint model is poor fit in more recent elections.

So as to confirm that there is still non-random variation in the data, I ran a Pearson's chi-squared test on the new data. With a score of 104.19, the sample far exceeded the 95% level of confidence at four degrees of freedom (9.49). Some systemic factor, then, is causing the variation. Finally, I ran a series of bi-variate regressions in order to determine if the level of ideology (as measured by ADA score) was the factor causing the variation, either in the sample as a whole, or within each subgroup.

The results of the regressions were essentially fruitless, and are attached in the appendix. They showed that over all ideology has a significant but tiny effect on the likelihood of split-ticket voting—for each unit increase in ADA score, the likelihood of a split-ticket decreases by .2%. Within each ideological group there was seldom any significant effect, the exceptions being very conservative districts won by Republicans

⁹ I calculated the predicted mean as the percentage of split tickets in Grofman et al.'s data times the total number of cases in mine, to achieve a raw number of expected split tickets per group. I calculated the standard deviation as the square root of npq , with n , p , and q derived from Grofman et al.'s data.

and liberal districts won by Democrats, both of which showed small effects consistent with the large sample regression.

The two data sets look to be inconsistent with each other, but the source of this variation remains a mystery. So, I decided to compile an alternate measure of district ideology, and test the comparative midpoints model using the new measure. Recall that using ADA score as a measure of a district's ideology has some inherent problems: it measures the ideology of the Representative very well, but not necessarily that of the district. Indeed, the ADA score will likely overstate the extremity of each district's median voter, since according to the comparative midpoints model, each candidate will converge around the median voter in their party, not the district as a whole.¹⁰

It could be that the percentage of the two-party vote won by the Democratic candidate for President in each district is a somewhat purer measure of the median voter's position in each district.¹¹ While Grofman et al. essentially held the district ideological continuum constant and looked for variation on the national continuum, this measure does the opposite. Theoretically, more liberal districts should vote more heavily for the Democratic candidate, while less liberal districts should cast fewer votes for the Democratic candidate. If the comparative midpoints model holds, we should expect the same results that we expect from the Grofman et al. measure; extreme districts that vote very heavily for the Presidential candidate of one party could also vote for a congressional candidate of the other party if that candidate was actually closer to the

¹⁰ Grofman, 41.

¹¹ During the editing of this paper I was dismayed but not surprised to learn that this measure is not original with me. For a method similar to the one I employ, please see Richard Carson and Joe Oppenheimer (1984), "A Method of Estimating the Personal Ideology of Political Representatives", *American Political Science Review*, pp. 163-178.

district median voter. Thus, we should still expect ticket splitting to occur in higher percentages in extreme groupings.¹²

Table four shows the reformulated ideology measure, divided into six different types of groups by Presidential vote share. A quick glance shows that this data does not look good for the comparative midpoints model. By far, the lion's share of the ticket splitting occurs in the most ideological moderate districts. More than twenty-six percent of those districts that gave the Democratic nominee between forty-five and fifty percent of the Presidential vote split their tickets. This number increases to a whopping fifty five percent in districts that gave the Democratic nominee between fifty and fifty five percent of the vote. By contrast, in the ideologically extreme districts ticket splitting was at a minimum: districts voting heavily Republican surrendered only ten percent of their congressional seats to the Democrats, while the most heavily Democratic districts split their tickets only four percent of the time. One data point that doesn't quite fit the pattern is the behavior of districts that gave the Democratic candidate between fifty-five and sixty percent of the vote—these districts split their tickets fairly often, more than forty-three percent of the time. Nonetheless, even if the opposite result is not completely proven, the comparative mid-points model takes quite a blow from this new measure. Almost no ticket splitting occurs in ideologically extreme districts, while the majority of split tickets occur in districts of moderate ideological character.

To determine whether increments of presidential vote share had any effect on ticket-splitting, I ran regressions on the new vote share measure, both overall and within

¹² Obviously some problems exist with this measure as well. For instance, district ideology is likely to be overstated one way during years of large Presidential victories; this could possibly affect the 1996 data in this study. Also, the comparative midpoints model does not necessarily predict that there will be few ticket splits in moderate districts, only that they will be unsystematic and likely less prevalent than in the extreme districts.

subgroups. Alas, once again these regressions can tell us little. Over all a percentage point of Democratic presidential vote share decreases the likelihood that ticket splitting will occur by about .2 percent. Within sub-groups there were only two statistically significant results: the most heavily Democratic districts were slightly more than .3% less likely to split their tickets, while conservative districts that gave the Democratic candidate between forty and forty-five percent of the two-party vote were about five percent more likely to split their tickets. These numbers are roughly consistent with the tiny overall effect of presidential vote share. In this case, though, these small effects are not very useful in telling us anything about what looks like a large amount of variation.

Discussion and Conclusions

So what does all this analysis mean? I believe that the failure of the comparative mid-points model in recent elections stems not from a flaw in its causal logic, but rather from the changing nature of the American electorate and institutions. Three major changes have occurred in the American political landscape: the major parties have become more ideologically cohesive, the electorate has polarized, and the Republican's are the new majority party on Capitol Hill.

To begin with, the median policy positions of the two major parties have polarized, and candidates are packed more cohesively around those medians. The days of the conservative southern Democrat have long since passed. The Regan Democrats can only be found in captivity (most having become Republicans), and the last known Rockefeller Republican, Connie Morella (R-MD), was recently driven to electoral extinction. Meanwhile conservative back-benchers in the House of Representatives have

become the dominant force in Congress, while fewer and fewer Democrats cross party lines and stand against the liberal position. It seems as though the median position of each party has moved away from its extreme.

This helps to explain some interesting facets of the data, most notably the radical difference from expected values of ticket splitting in most sub-groups. These differences occur largely due to low sample size in ideologically extreme districts—they simply are not any Republicans with ADA scores above forty, or any Democrats scoring below forty. This fact, in turn, explains the screwy percentages that surface; seventy-eight percent of Republican moderates split their tickets because there are only nine of them. Thus, the comparative mid-points model may still operate as stipulated, but because the party medians have moved so far apart it has become impossible for the median voter in an ideologically extreme district to be close enough to the opposite party's median to cause a split. In short, the new cohesiveness of the parties has eliminated the very districts Grofman et al. focused on.

A second major change is that the electorate itself has polarized. In part due to gerrymandering, but in part due to natural change, congressional districts tend to have median voters close to one of the party medians, and away from the political center. Truly moderate districts, with centralized median voters, are becoming fewer and farther between. Look at the sub-groups in the new measure of district ideology by Presidential vote share—the two most extreme sub-groups outnumber any other combination of two sub-groups by almost one hundred districts in each case. This helps explain the decline in split-ticket voting generally, from about a third of all districts in Grofman et al.'s data, to less than a quarter in the past two Presidential cycles. If split-ticket voting is becoming

impossible in extreme districts, and those districts are multiplying at the expense of the center, then split-ticket voting should drop. Furthermore, a polarized electorate will cause what ticket splitting remains to occur away from the poles, that is, in the more moderate districts. As table four shows, this result holds under the new measure of district ideology, as the greatest amount of ticket splitting occurs in the middle.

Finally, the Republican Party has become the majority party in Congress, supplanting the position the Democrats held for all the elections in Grofman et al.'s data. The Republican numbers in the new data are similar to the Democratic numbers in the data Grofman et al. collected. There is more ticket splitting among Republican districts now than in Democratic districts, whereas the reverse is true in Grofman et al.'s data. Moreover, the highest aggregate numbers of ticket splits (but not the highest percentage) happen in the most conservative districts, whereas the more liberal districts used to hold that honor. Perhaps there is some unknown mechanism associated with majority party status that causes some ticket-splitting in the ranks; in any event, the reversal of the data is striking.

Clearly, this elementary study is not the last word on ticket splitting. However, it has provided some useful corrections to the comparative mid-points model. By two different measures of district ideology, the comparative mid-points model does not seem to have held in the most recent Presidential elections. Indeed, when ideology is measured as a percentage of Presidential vote share, it appears that most ticket splitting now occurs in ideologically moderate districts. This fact is most likely due to the changing nature of the major parties, the American electorate, and the control of congress. The comparative

mid-points model may still be logically valid, but it is ill-suited to the empirics of a new age.

APPENDIX

Table One: New Data

	V. Liberal (80-100)	Liberal (60-79)	Moderate (40-59)	Conservative (20-39)	V.Conservative (0-19)
Dem total	224	89	34	11	3
Dem Split	12	18	18	7	1
Percentage	5.3	20.2	52.9	63.6	33.3
Rep total	2	2	9	58	311
Rep split	2	2	7	36	72
Percentage	100	100	77.7	62.1	23.2

Table Two: Grofman's Data

	V. Liberal (80-100)	Liberal (60-79)	Moderate (40-59)	Conservative (20-39)	V.Conservative (0-19)
Dem total	668	499	351	226	280
Dem Split	170	249	190	129	168
Percentage	26.4	49.9	54.1	57.1	60
Rep total	8	53	101	250	939
Rep split	3	22	20	50	142
Percentage	37.5	41.5	19.8	20.0	15.1

Table Three: Z-scores

	V. Liberal	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative	V.Conservative
Dem	-7.7	7.71	.11	.37	-.94
Rep	1.83	1.70	4.35	8.0	3.97

Table Four: Ideology as a Measure of Presidential Vote Share

	D<40	40<D<45	45<D<50	50<D<55	55<D<60	D>60	Total
Split	12	15	33	78	46	9	193
Unified	116	106	92	65	60	217	656
Total	128	121	125	143	106	226	849