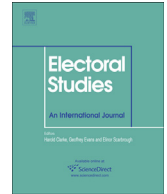




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## Balancing act? Testing a theory of split-party U.S. Senate delegations<sup>☆</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

Why do some states elect split-party U.S. Senate delegations? Fiorina (1992) suggests that his own “balancing” theory might account for the emergence of such opposite-party pairs of Senators. Due primarily to data limitations, previous empirical assessments of whether balancing can appropriately explain the emergence of mixed delegations in the Senate have been limited to aggregate-level analysis. This paper builds on previous scholarship by offering the first individual-level examination of whether balancing theory can appropriately explain divided Senate delegations. We find that individual-level balancing is limited and that when controlling for individual and contextual factors thought to influence vote choice, there is no discernible evidence that voters are considering the makeup of their state’s overall Senate delegation when choosing between Senate candidates on offer. Ultimately, our results suggest that candidate-centered campaigns, heterogeneous electorates, and idiosyncratic electoral forces are better explanations for split-party Senate delegations than is any type of strategic, non-proximate voting on the part of citizens.

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Among the institutions of America’s national government, the United States Senate is unique in that each state sends two members to serve staggered terms in the upper chamber. Because partisan identification is such a powerful determinant of individual vote choice, and because electorates retain fairly stable preferences and turnout habits over time, we might expect that the overwhelming majority of states will choose two senators from the same party. Yet in every Congress from the 90th (1967–1969) through the 114th (2015–present), the number of states sending split Senate delegations to the Senate at any one

time has never been fewer than 13 (see Fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, during this same time span, 49 of the 50 states have at some point elected a split-party delegation to the U.S. Senate.<sup>2</sup> Such a disconnect between expectations and reality presents a fundamental puzzle that this paper seeks to address. Namely, why do we see so many split-party Senate delegations?

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<sup>1</sup> While the percentage of states with split-party delegations has indeed remained at greater than 25% throughout the modern era, it is worth mentioning that in recent years, we have seen somewhat of a decline in such delegations, as Fig. 1 demonstrates. Given that the data we use covers Senate contests from four recent election cycles (2006–2012, during which time that was in fact a slight uptick in the number of divided Senate delegations) empirical analysis explaining this longer-term downward trend is beyond the scope of this paper. However, for insightful discussions of how increased partisanship among voters might be a reason for the overall decline in split-party Senate delegations, see Kimball (2003) and Lee (2012).

<sup>2</sup> The sole exception is Kansas, which has had two Republican Senators since 1938, when incumbent Democratic Senator George McGill was defeated for re-election.

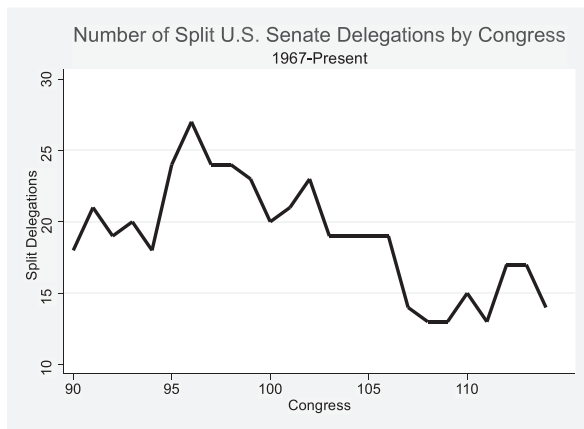


Fig. 1. Split-party Senate delegations across time.

## 1. Competing theories of split-party Senate delegations

The phenomenon of split-party Senate delegations has been heeded relatively little attention by political scientists. Research seeking to explain this phenomenon, however, tends to follow two schools of thought. Some scholarship argues that split Senate delegations are the result of idiosyncratic campaign and electoral factors, whether it be electoral realignments (Brunell and Grofman, 1998), challenger quality (Burden and Kimball, 2002), campaigns that are candidate-centered rather than party-centered (Segura and Nicholson, 1995), or heterogeneous electorates (Bafumi and Herron, 2010; Bullock and Brady, 1983; Poole and Rosenthal, 1984; Schiller, 2000). While the particularities of each of these explanations are different, all are premised on the assertion that across time, Senate elections within a given state are independent of one another and that partisan divisions within a state's dual-member Senate representation are the result of factors specific to the individual elections which produced such splits. None of these theories rejects—and some even embrace—the standard model of spatial voting which suggests that in each election, voters choose the candidate to whom they are most ideologically proximate (Downs, 1957). Thus, we consider all of these theories as falling under the rubric of “proximity theory,” even if these works vary in the mechanisms by which they arrive at this conclusion.

Others argue that split Senate delegations, rather than being an artifact of large-scale political forces, are the result of purposive behavior on the part of at least some segment of the electorate. Motivating this proposition is the “policy balancing” theory put forth by Morris Fiorina (1992) and others (Alesina et al., 1991). While originally devised to explain ticket-splitting between the Presidency and the U.S. House, “policy balancing,” argue Fiorina and his colleagues, can be extended to U.S. Senate delegations as well (see also Heckelman, 2000). Specifically, in a two-candidate race, a moderate voter might deliberately choose the candidate to whom she is less ideologically proximate, should that candidate bring the state's overall Senate delegation closer to the voter's moderate ideal point. This also suggests that

Senate elections within a given state are sequentially dependent, with the winner of an election held at time  $t$  influencing citizens' voting behavior at time  $t + 1$ . Finally, another important implication of balancing theory is that it should, if we make the relatively uncontroversial assumption that Democratic Senate candidates will be left-of-center and Republican Senate candidates right-of-center,<sup>3</sup> advantage the party opposite that of the Senator whose seat is not up for election at time  $t$ .

Importantly, the idea that individuals might prefer to balance their Senate representation has not escaped the minds of those who serve in the legislative body themselves. For example, in discussing his role as one-half of Iowa's long-serving split-party Senate delegation,<sup>4</sup> Democratic Senator Tom Harkin stated:

Keep in mind, Iowa is a state where we're half and half. We have [Republican Senator] Chuck Grassley and me. ... I think Iowa is a little more unique. ... *They like a balance*, and one thing they know about me and Chuck Grassley is that although we don't agree philosophically, when it comes to Iowa, we're in harness together. *So I think people like to have that kind of balance.* (O'Keefe, 2013) (emphasis added).

## 2. Senate balancing: individual-level data for an individual-level theory

While informative, previous work assessing Senate election balancing (Alesina et al., 1991; Butler and Butler, 2006; Segura and Nicholson, 1995) has nonetheless been hampered by data limitations. Specifically, each of these works, the details of which are subsequently elaborated in this paper, employ aggregate-level election data to assess a theory about individual-level behavior. This paper uses individual-level data to look specifically at individual-level behavior, focusing particularly on voters for whom proximity theory and balancing theory yield different predictions. Employing data collected over four separate election cycles from voters across all fifty states, this paper is the first, to our knowledge, to offer an individual-level test of balancing theory in the context of U.S. Senate elections. We find that proximity theory is a far better explanation for candidate choice within U.S. Senate elections than is a theory of Senate delegation balancing, and that the notion of individuals conditioning their vote upon the overall state delegation that would result from it enjoys little empirical support. Ultimately, our results suggest that theories of split-party delegations ought to focus on

<sup>3</sup> While eras pre-dating the 2006–2012 period covered by this study saw a substantial number of conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans serving in the U.S. Senate, the contemporary era is one defined by polarization of the two parties in a manner posited above. For a thorough treatment of this matter, see Poole and Rosenthal (2007).

<sup>4</sup> Republican Charles Grassley and Democrat Tom Harkin served as Iowa's two Senators from 1985 until 2015, when the latter Senator retired and was succeeded by Republican Joni Ernst. During the 113<sup>th</sup> Congress (2013–2015)—the last in which the Grassley/Harkin delegation served—the two Senators ranked 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>, respectively, in the upper chamber's seniority ladder.

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