# 1. Party Competition and Electoral Accountability

In modern democratic nations, political parties are a common, even universal institutional feature of government. Political scientists have argued for decades that democracy is "unthinkable" (Schattschneider 1942) or "unworkable" (Aldrich 2011; Aldrich and Griffin 2010) without parties. Parties, these scholars claim, are an important mechanism through which voters can hold their elected representatives accountable, a key feature of democratic government. However, the ideal of responsible party government, in which strong, ideologically distinct parties compete for votes on a national scale for extended periods of time, has not been realized in many portions of American history. During a period of almost uninterrupted Democratic control of Congress from the 1950s through 1995, the strength of America's two major political parties was thought by many observers to be in decline (Aldrich 2011; Wattenberg 1990), and electoral accountability seemed to have disappeared as a result (Fiorina 1980). At least part of this decline in accountability is attributable to the inability of the Republican Party to compete meaningfully in the "Solid South," which effectively functioned as a one-party system during this era. Since 1980, however, as the Republican Party has made significant inroads in the South, the responsiveness of members of Congress to public opinon has increased significantly in that region (Aldrich and Griffin Forthcoming), in turn making Congress more responsive overall. In short, scholars argue that without strong parties, citizens may not have any way to hold elected officials accountable for their actions, and those elected officials will have less incentive and ability to listen to their constituents.

How have changes in party competition affected electoral accountability and responsiveness to public opinion in the US? Aldrich and Griffin (Forthcoming) provides initial evidence that responsiveness has increased along with party competition since the 1980s. In this chapter, I propose to conduct further tests of this hypothesis. In addition, I will take this analysis a step further by examining whether the policies (specifically, adopted bills) that emerge during periods of greater party competition are more representative of preferences overall. I expect to find that increased party competition does indeed lead to increased responsiveness to public opinion, both at the level of the individual legislator and at the aggregate level, as well as increased mass participation in politics. By empirically supporting this link between political institutions and electoral accountability, this research will increase our understanding of the role political parties play in democratic government. Despite over a century of scholarship on parties (Epstein 1986; Ranney 1975), we are just now beginning to make this link (Aldrich and Griffin 2010), and further empirical testing is in order. The tests I perform will also yield potential avenues for reform of political parties to achieve more desirable policy outcomes.

## Background

**(Need to get more details and citations from Aldrich and Griffin 2010 to fill out, support the two paragraphs below.)**

Political parties are institutions that organize both electoral and legislative politics. Political parties are most often viewed as a creation of elite politicians as aids in the realization of their personal political goals (Aldrich 2011). One fundamental goal of politicians in a democracy is to win election to government office (Fenno 1973; Mayhew 1974). This is not necessarily their only goal, however, as those who seek office generally seek it as a means to some end, rather than as an end in itself (Aldrich and Rohde 2001). Thus, parties serve not merely as vehicles for winning election and ensuring reelection through enactment of party platforms, but also as ongoing purveyors of specific policy goals. In these roles, parties attract benefit-seeking activists in addition to candidates (Aldrich 1983), and it is these activists who provide much of the resources and support for the party's candidates (Aldrich 2011; Aldrich and Griffin 2010). The set of all parties in a given nation comprise the party system,

In legislative bodies like the US Congress, parties provide structure to the legislative process beyond that prescribed by formal constitutional institutions. Parties also provide great flexibility for groups of legislators to change the way legislative business is conducted from time to time, depending on the needs and circumstances of the party. However, this flexibility also means that the majority party will not always govern as a cohesive unit enacting an ideologically coherent platform and overruling the minority party's opinion. According to the conditional party government model (CPG; see Aldrich and Rohde (2001)), legislative parties will act cohesively when there is more ideological consistency within the party (especially the majority) and less overlap across parties. During the decades of Democratic control of Congress, it was not until around 1980 that Democrats began to "rule" in any meaningful sense, following significant reforms within the majority party that took power from the committee chairs (mostly Southern conservatives) and gave it to chamber leaders who would be more in tune with the views of more orthodox liberal Democrats (Aldrich and Rohde 2001; Rohde 1991). According to CPG, this occured because the Democratic party became more consistently liberal, Republicans more consistently conservative, and the level of overlap and cooperation between the two decreased.

While parties are created by elites to serve elite purposes, they may also provide for political accountability of elected officials to the voters, an important element of any functioning democracy. However, the act of voting has multiple purposes, and therefore may be a somewhat ambiguous signal for politicians. On one hand is the prospective or mandate model of voting, in which voters their votes to the candidate who espouses their most preferred policy platform, and the winning candidate is elected with the understanding that he/ she will proceed to enact the platform on which he/ she ran. Many influential theories of representation, such as the median voter model of Downs (1957), are based on this concept of voting. This model preserves the meaningfulness of substantive policy proposals in campaigns, but does not provide for any enforcement of the electoral mandate once the candidate is installed in office [Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes (1999); CITES]. On the other hand is the retrospective or accountability model of voting, which posits that voters will vote for the incumbents if they have performed well in office or if good conditions around election time are attributed to the incumbents. If conditions are bad and voters think the incumbent government is to blame, they will vote for the challengers and "throw the rascals out" [Stokes (1996); Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes (1999); CITES]. While this model induces representation of the public by elected officials when the public has complete information, it fails to do so when information is less complete [CITES]. Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes (1999) suggest that voters may actually use their votes in both ways, and that it is rational to do so, but with the result that governments may be somewhat less accountable when such dual-purpose voting is employed. Thus, we might expect parties to be somewhat responsive to the public, but not completely so. Other institutions affect the level of accountability a governing party faces in future elections.

There is a long-running debate in political science on the marginality hypothesis, which essentially states that elected officials are more responsive to public opinion when elections are competitive. The debate has produced a large body of work both supporting (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Griffin 2006) and refuting (Fiorina 1973; Gerber and Lupia 1995; Groseclose 2001) this prediction. However, as Aldrich and Griffin (2010) point out, studies along these lines do not generally measure *party* competition. Incumbent candidates in one-party systems may occasionally face strong challengers, and intra-party factional struggles may break out temporarily, but the incumbent party will not face any strong competition. This is important because the retrospective voting (voting based on the incumbent party's record in office) on which electoral accountability is based (Aldrich and Griffin 2010; Downs 1957; Manin, Przeworski, and Stokes 1999) requires a strong alternative party that can serve as a real choice for dissatisfied voters. Individual politicians and non-partisan factions do not face the same incentives parties face, because they do not recruit candidates and have no need to cultivate an inclusive group brand that is favorable to a majority of voters across both time and place. These non-partisan actors, therefore, will not be as sensitive to electoral pressures as parties.

What the marginality studies have been missing is the fact that accountability comes not from electoral competition in general, but rather from competition between parties in particular. Individual elected officials, therefore, will be more accountable to voters when the party brand with which they have chosen to affiliate is challenged by a candudate with a somewhat equally competitive and significantly different party brand that offers voters a real choice. In an election in which this condition obtains, we might expect representatives ultimately elected and reelected under these conditions to be more responsive to public opinion.

It is not as clear from the outset that greater party competition will lead to greater policy responsiveness on the whole. For a party to compete meaningfully in a given election, it must field strong candidates who have a real chance of winning. This means candidates so fielded must be sensitive to what the voters want from their candidates. However, the party also needs to present a clear choice to voters in order for the party label to have any meaning. Parties need to be sufficiently distinct from each other in order to convey meaningful information to the voters. This tension might also be thought of as a tension between a party's "establishment" leaders, who want to win elections and seek to recruit candidates who can win, and the activist wing of a party, which is more concerned with keeping the party's brand "pure" and making sure candidates and elected officials don't betray the party platform. Without the activists, parties would nominate candidates they thought would win, and parties would essentially converge on the median voter in each district (as predicted by Downs (1957)), become ideologically spread out across the country given ideological differences across districts, and cease to provide meaningful information about any particular candidate's ideological views. In the long run, party competition in any meaningful sense would break down. Parties would compete in every district, but would not compete as parties with any clear agenda or platform. On the other hand, without the establishment, activists would only nominate their ideological favorites, leading to national convergence of elected officials to the two party medians (as set by the activists, see Aldrich (1983) for a description of these dynamics), but no district-level convergence on the district medians. This would result in very distinct parties, but ones that are not competitive in any but a few districts in the ideological center of the country. Once again, party competition breaks down, as parties do not compete meaningfully in most districts. The ongoing struggle between the establishment and the activists, however, leaves some middle ground for parties to be electorally competitive in more districts, but also to preserve their distinct ideological positions. This dynamic allows for more individual responsiveness throught the dynamics of party competition described above. Based on the CPG model, it also provides better conditions for maintenance of cohesive parties and therefore greater responsiveness of governments in general.

**[The idea in the preceding paragraph needs to be explored more thoroughly, either through existing literature or through my own theoretical development.]**

Some of this responsiveness may come as a result of changes in party control of the government, rather than changes in the public views and behavior of individual representatives. Past research has shown that legislators tend to "die with their ideological boots on", and that overall ideological change in policy happens more through replacement of old legislators with new, more representative ones than through conversion or evolution of legislator views and behaviors (Poole 2007; Poole and Rosenthal 1997). This explains the recently obcerved pattern of "leap-frog representation," whereby the ideal points of a district's representatives change wildly about a district median that does change as much, but enough to defeat an incumbent in favor of the other party's candidate (Bafumi and Herron 2010). Still, there are some factors that may lead individual members of Congress to be more (or less) responsive... **[get citations for this point from Ensley/Tofias/DeMarchi working paper]**

In addition to increasing responsiveness, we might also expect party competition to increase mass participation in electoral politics. Competitive elections in general tend to increase participation (Caldeira, Patterson, and Markko 1985; Cox and Munger 1989; Patterson and Caldeira 1983). Parties and other political organizations can make voting easier by lowering information costs and opportunity costs of participation (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1992; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Wielhouwer 2003). However, such changes in participation might not be recognized equally across all classes of voters. Parties have incentives to mobilize only certain kinds of voters, particularly those who will support their candidates (Goldstein and Holleque 2010). Samuel C. Patterson (1984) find that competitive state and local parties are associated with stronger activist networks in those jurisdictions. Still, we might expect higher participation on the margins in districts characterized by party competition. When both parties have incentives to mobilize (to fend off electoral threats from the other party), then they will both reach out to at least their bases. This would not occur in a less competitive area in which one party was assured of victory and therefore had no need to mobilize.

* Powell and other citations
* bring in the Thomassen book/ CSES studies on party context, particularly what those studies suggest about what we could expect in the American context (majoritarian; etc.); there are implications of majoritarian systems for turnout and participation

## Data and Planned Analysis

To test these hypotheses, I will construct measures of party competitiveness at the state and congressional district level using election returns from as many federal, state, and local (partisan) elections as I can. I will average all of the major party election results over a reasonable time span leading up to and including a particular election. Alternative specificaitons of this measure could exclude the elections in which the member of Congress for whom the measure is constructed are directly involved. For example, I could exclude the election returns for the Alaska at-large House elections in measuring the level of party competition candidates running for that seat would expect to face. I could also experiment with using multiple regression to calculate the party competition measure, which would allow me to control for incumbency, redistricting, and other factors. For competition measures in House districts, I will certainly need to think about and control for the effects of redistricting somehow. In addition to party competition measures based on election returns, a possible alternative specification could employe measures of funding or other support from national and state party committees (perhaps including leadership PACs).

I will use the competition measure(s) to predict representative behaviors, including roll call voting and cosponsorship. I will also control for public opinion in some form, probably using polling data, ideal point estimates from my Catalist data, and presidential vote share in the district[[1]](#footnote-24) in various alternative specifications.

To test the hypothesis about individual legislator responsiveness, I will use the independent variables mentioned above at the state and district level (for House and Senate respectively) to predict individual legislative behaviors. If party competition interacts with the public opinion measure in such a way that responsiveness to public opinion is increased as party competition increases, I will count that as support for the hypothesis. I will perform this in a multiple regression context, using logit models for binary dependent variables and OLS for scaled overall ideology scores. In tests using polling data as the public opinion measure, I will restrict the analysis to voting and cosponsorship of bills related to the issue for which opinion data is available.[[2]](#footnote-25) I hope to use

Testing the hypothesis about responsiveness of the legislature as a whole will require some aggregation of party competition and public opinion measures, probably an average of district/ state averages. Rather than individual legislative behavior, I will predict actions taken by the legislature as a whole. The most obvious of these is whether or not a bill was passed (regardless of whether it was signed by the President). Other possible dependent variables could be budget appropriations, introduction of certain types of bills, and committee hearings on a topic. I could also test for differences in the responsiveness of the two chambers separately, which might be an intersting qualtitative look at the effects of legislative institutions on representation. Depending on how much data I have available, I may only be able to provide descriptive statistics related to this hypothesis.

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1. Using presidential vote as a proxy for public opinion would be problematic if it were also included in the party competition measure. However, I can get around this by excluding presidential vote from the competition measure. I could also correct presidential vote share for partisan effects using the party competition measure (excluding presidential vote), or I could base the party competition measure on midterm and odd-year election results. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
2. I will determine the relevance of a bill to a survey question by using the Policy Agendas Project topic code that most closely corresponds to the question. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)