Article

Party Competition and Conflict in State Legislatures

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between party competition for control of governing institutions and legislative party polarization. Although the competition/cohesion thesis dates to the 1940s, it has never before been subject to a test with data from the 50 states. Drawing upon newly available data, we take stock of the evidence. Five measures of party competition are used: (1) the number of recent shifts of party control, (2) an index of party competition for state offices, (3) the closeness of presidential elections in the state, (4) the effective number of political parties in the state, and (5) the ratio of Republicans to Democrats in the electorate. Nearly all of these measures correlate with higher levels of party polarization in both the lower and upper chambers, and none are associated with a lower level of polarization.

Keywords

legislative politics, legislative elections, legislative behavior, roll-call voting, parties in legislatures, parties and elections

The intensification of two-party competition is one of the most striking changes in the American political landscape since the 1950s. "Within a large proportion of states only by the most generous characterization may it be said that political parties compete for power," wrote Key (1956, 13–14). The picture was not much different at the national level, where Democrats maintained nearly unbroken control of Congress for almost half a century after the New Deal. But after Republicans won control of the Senate in 1980 and the House of Representatives in 1994, neither party has maintained a secure grip on Congress. Since 1994, two-party competition also spread across the remaining

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historically one-party states in the South. The vast majority of states are now two-party competitive (Holbrook and La Raja 2013, 88).

An even balance of power between the parties often leads pundits and politicians to claim that the voters want the two parties to find common ground. Close elections, especially those that give rise to divided party control, are typically interpreted as mandates for bipartisan cooperation. After the 2014 midterm elections, for example, Senate Democratic Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., issued a statement: "The message from voters is clear: They want us to work together."[1] For his part, Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said, "When the American people choose divided government . . . it means they want us to look for areas of agreement."[2] One could find numerous examples of similar rhetoric following other elections in which parties won narrow majorities or only partial control of governing institutions.

This conventional political wisdom stands at odds with a long tradition of scholarship in the field of comparative state politics. Instead of promoting bipartisan cooperation, scholars since the late 1940s have seen close competition between parties as a driver of partisanship and party conflict. "The parties in the most competitive states," wrote Ranney (1976, 59), "are likely to have . . . the highest cohesion in the legislatures. . . . [Meanwhile,] party cohesion is generally very low in the one-party and modified one-party states."

The underlying logic is intuitive. When a political party either fears the loss of power or perceives opportunities to win power, its members have stronger incentives to step up their organizational efforts (Key 1949; 1956). By the same logic, a lack of competition in one-party dominant contexts tends to atrophy party organization. Parties have little reason to invest in organization when the party in power perceives no threat and the party out of power sees no prospects for change (Schlesinger 1985; 1991).

Partisan incentives are by no means confined to the organization and waging of electoral campaigns external to the legislature. They extend into internal legislative politics. "Opposing parties have as a prime objective defeating each other in elections," wrote Rosenthal (1990, 59), "To do this, each tries to discredit the other, not only during an election campaign but also during the conduct of government." Close competition for party control fosters partisan contentiousness, as legislators look for opportunities to criticize and embarrass their opponents: "As more states and more state legislatures have become competitive, partisan posturing and positioning and shifting blame back and forth have become part of the process" (Rosenthal 1990, 58). More broadly, Cox and McCubbins (2005) theorized that the whole structure of legislative organization itself is grounded in members' incentives to pursue a collective partisan strategy aimed at winning or holding governing majorities.

Despite the long-standing nature of the thesis that party competition promotes party conflict, the relationship has never before been subject to a comprehensive test across all 50 state legislatures. Drawing upon new data made available (Shor 2014; Shor and McCarty 2011), we take stock of the evidence. Five measures of party competition are used: (1) the number of recent shifts of party control in the legislature, (2) an index of party competition for state offices, (3) the closeness of presidential elections in the state, (4) the effective number of political parties in the state, and (5) the ratio of Republicans

to Democrats in the state electorate. All of these measures of competition are associated with higher levels of party polarization in the lower chambers of state legislatures, and most are associated with party polarization in the upper chambers. No measure of party competition is associated with lower levels of polarization in either chamber. These patterns are robust to a variety of controls and alternative specifications.

Party Competition and Partisan Differentiation

The idea that two-party competition promotes legislative party conflict is central to the literature on comparative state parties, where it is often referred to as the competition/cohesion thesis. This insight dates to Key's (1949) landmark work *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, in which he found that the politics of one-party states was characterized by a transient factionalism. States without two-party competition were "no party states," rather than merely one-party states.

Early scholarship found that voting in one-party state legislatures was less structured than in two-party competitive legislatures, with coalitions shifting across time and across issues (Jewell 1955; 1962; Jewell and Patterson 1973; Patterson 1962). In one of the only longitudinal studies documenting the emergence of two-party organization in a formerly one-party legislature, Harmel and Hamm (1986) found that after the long-standing minority Texas Republicans elected a governor in 1978 and reached 25% of the state legislative seats in 1981, legislative party organization finally began to emerge in the Texas House, and roll-call voting became less factionalized. More recent scholarship reconfirms the pattern. Legislatures without two-party politics tend to exhibit a relative lack of structure in roll-call voting (Wright and Schaffner 2002). Meanwhile, individual legislators in two-party competitive states are more reliably partisan than legislators in states where one party dominates (Carroll and Eichorst 2013).

This traditional line of research may seem to stand at odds with Downs (1957). Downs, after all, is famous for the proposition that two-party competition induces parties to converge to the ideological center. By that logic, legislatures where parties are more closely competitive ought to exhibit centrism and less ideologically distinctive political parties.

But Downsian theory also provides a foundation for the opposite claim. Central to its logic is the concept of the "expected party differential" (Downs 1957, 39), which refers to the difference in utility that citizens derive if one party is in power as opposed to its opposition. Gauging the expected party differential is beyond the informational capacities of most voters (Downs 1957, 98–100). To ease voters' task, a party that wants to win office will seek to enlarge the expected party differential so as to persuade voters to prefer it to the competition (Downs 1957, 98–100). As long as no single ideological position is "demonstrably more effective than the rest" in winning votes, Downs (1957, 101) argued that party ideologies will remain distinct from one another. In a country where public opinion is typically characterized by "operational liberalism and ideological conservatism" (Free and Cantril 1967, 37), there is little consensus among the political elite on precisely where the median voter is. In the presence of uncertainty about the

median voter's ideological location, even Downsian-style theory would predict strong and clearly defined party differences. Indeed, McCarty et al. (2014) developed a model showing how increased uncertainty about the ideological location of the median voter will lead candidates to diverge ideologically.

Setting aside questions about Downsian theory, parties seeking to win power must offer some kind of answer to the question: "Why should you support us and not our opponents?" In doing so, they have to establish some ways in which they differ from their party opponents.[3] These differences do not need to be framed around ideological disputes. Valence issues, such as accusations of corruption and incompetence, serve partisan purposes admirably well (Lee 2009, 103–30). The governor's prestige also serves as a rallying point for legislative parties: "Governors and their programs are prime targets for the opposition. If the governor can be discredited, then the governor's legislative party will suffer as well" (Rosenthal 1990, 59; see also Bernick 1978; Jewell and Patterson 1973, 457–60; Morehouse 1998). Whether or not partisan differences center on ideological questions, they are valuable for reducing voter apathy and motivating supporters.[4]

By the same token, legislative bipartisanship undercuts party differences. "Do you want a deal, or do you want an issue?" is a strategic question familiar to political professionals everywhere. When the two parties succeed in negotiating an agreement that both support, the expected party differential is narrowed and voters have less reason to prefer one party to the other, at least on that issue. It thus becomes harder to argue that it matters which party holds the majority. As a result, parties often perceive political benefits from preserving issues for campaigns, rather than seeking legislative resolution (Gilmour 1995; Groseclose and McCarty 2001). Put simply, there are numerous reasons to expect that party competition will enhance the political incentives for lawmakers to seek out opportunities to define differences with their party opponents and to thereby make their case to the electorate.

Prior Work on Comparative State Parties

Most research examining the effects of party competition on state politics, however, examines other topics aside from state legislative roll-call voting. Beginning with Dawson and Robinson (1963), there is an enormous body of work examining whether two-party competition promotes the creation of more generous social welfare policies.[5] As one of the most notable recent entries in this literature, Barrilleaux, Holbrook, and Langer (2002) found that party competition has a polarizing effect: Democrats in power facing more two-party competition spend more on social welfare benefits, but Republicans in power under competitive conditions produce more conservative policies. Another body of work examines whether party competition fosters more centralized control over party nominations, with the dominant finding at best a slight relationship (Gimpel 1996; Key 1956; Ranney 1976, 65–74).

Most relevant for the analysis here, there is evidence that party competition encourages the two parties to draw starker ideological contrasts in their state party platforms. Coffey's (2007, 87; 2011) content analysis of party platforms between 2000 and 2004

found that "the greater the level of party competition between the state parties, the more conservative the Republican platform and the more liberal the Democratic platform becomes."

There has been comparatively very little work examining whether state legislatures in two-party competitive states are more party polarized. There was a signficant decline in research on state legislative roll-call voting starting in the 1970s (Wright 2010). The main obstacle was difficulty in obtaining data on state legislative roll-call votes. Before Shor and McCarty (2011), the only previous effort to compile data on legislative voting behavior across all 50 states was led by Gerald C. Wright, whose data set covers 1999–2000 and 2003–2004 (Clark et al. 2009).

Some smaller scale studies examine the relationship between party competition and roll-call voting. Based on data from 5 states, Jenkins (2006) found that party had a greater effect on legislative voting in more party competitive contexts. Aldrich and Battista (2002), based on an analysis of 11 states, found more party polarization in state legislatures where the two parties held more evenly balanced shares of legislative seats. Drawing on an analysis of a different set of 11 states that "differ only very slightly in the overall competitiveness of the two parties," Shor, Berry, and McCarty (2010, 437) uncovered no effect of competition on party polarization. In a more recent study drawing on the Wright data on 50 states from 1999 to 2000, Carroll and Eichorst (2013) demonstrated that state legislators' voting behavior is more predictably partisan in states where the two parties are more evenly matched in electoral terms.

Data and Measurement

The data used here include all 50 state legislatures for over a decade, with some variation in coverage (Shor 2014; Shor and McCarty 2011).[6] One strength of these new data is that they better enable scholars to draw comparisons across states. Drawing upon a survey administered to state and federal legislative candidates (the Project Vote Smart National Political Awareness Test), Shor and McCarty (2011) created a common space score for each lawmaker who answered the survey. The placement of lawmakers in this space is then used to adjust the ideal points derived from state legislative roll-call votes to better allow for cross-state, cross-chamber, and overtime comparisons.

One of the challenges in analyzing the effects of two-party competition on state politics is deciding how to measure the central concept. The choice of measure can make a significant difference, in that states may look party competitive according to one measure (e.g., competition in presidential elections) and uncompetitive according to another (e.g., the majority party's margin of control in the state legislature). A variety of measures can be combined into a single index, as is often done (Ranney 1976), but this process can obscure as much as it reveals, if variation on one dimension cancels out variation on another. To deal with these issues, we separately examine five different measures of two-party competitiveness in the state.

All of the measures we use gauge the extent of two-party competition for control of state government. We are not focused here on how party competition at the level of the legislative district affects individual lawmakers' voting behavior (Shufeldt and Flavin

2012).[7] We are interested instead in the competitive balance between the parties as they seek to control state political institutions. With this being said, our measures capture both the competitiveness of statewide elections as well as the competitiveness between legislative parties for control of the legislature. Our different measures do not yield identical state rankings, even though they are all reasonable measures of two-party competition.[8] One obvious advantage of this approach is that it reveals whether relationships are robust to alternative specifications.

A second challenge for a study relying on observational data is causal inference. Our expectation is that legislative parties will be more polarized in states with more two-party competition. Multivariate analyses will allow us to control for other factors that drive party polarization and thereby help rule out spurious correlation. But such an analysis nevertheless remains vulnerable to reverse causality. Is there reason to believe that the causal arrow is reversed, such that partisan polarization in state legislatures affects the degree of party competition in the state?

One way of addressing concerns about reverse causality is to identify measures of party competition that could not plausibly be affected by the behavior of state legislators. This is one of the advantages of our approach of using five different measures of competition. Even if one might wonder if state legislative party polarization might have some influence on the degree of party competition in state legislative elections, it seems very unlikely that the behavior of state legislators would affect the competitiveness of presidential elections in the state or the balance of partisan identification in the state electorate. Partisan identification is generally used in the political science literature as a key independent variable with some scholars even referring to it is as an "unmoved mover" in politics. Even if one does not view partisanship as a stable identity resistant to any influences, no scholar has identified the behavior of state legislatures as an important influence on voters' partisan identification.[9] Similarly, presidential elections are highly salient contests, far more visible to voters than state legislatures. It is hard to imagine that the behavior of state legislators could make any systematic difference for the degree of competition in the state's presidential elections. Showing that these two independent variables affect party polarization in the state legislature enhances confidence that the causal arrow runs from party competition toward party polarization, rather than vice versa.

A second way of addressing concerns about reverse causality is to carefully weigh the assumptions involved in each underlying theoretical model. To theorize, as we do here, that the degree of competition for state offices affects partisan conflict in state legislatures only requires one to make assumptions about the incentives and behavior of political elites. Under this model, that a party might potentially win or lose control of state institutions provides stronger incentives for lawmakers to engage in partisan collective action. The prospect of collective gains or losses in political power gives lawmakers more motive to organize themselves along party lines, to meet in caucus to plot strategy, to look for issues that might yield political advantage against their party opponents, to muster better legislative cohesion, and to frame issues and develop campaign arguments for retaking control. All of these activities are likely to spark both improved party unity (Carroll and Eichorst 2013) and heightened conflict along party

lines in the legislature (Jewell 1955; 1962; Jewell and Patterson 1973; Key 1949; Patterson 1962). By contrast, the incentives for all these forms of collective action are less under conditions when lawmakers do not perceive any likelihood of either losing or winning power. As discussed above, the competition/cohesion thesis has a long lineage in the literature on comparative state legislatures. It also has support from the literature on party organizations more generally (Schlesinger 1985; 1991).

To theorize that party polarization in the state legislature affects the degree of party competition in the state electorate requires one to make assumptions about voter knowledge and behavior. The argument is that a state legislative party might move too far to the left or right, causing increased polarization in the legislature, and then subsequently be punished by voters at the polls, increasing competition for state offices. For this to occur requires that voters first know about the behavior of their state legislators. However, voter knowledge of state legislative politics is exceptionally low. While most voters know which party controls higher levels of federal and state government, most do not know which party controls their state legislatures, and very few can name their state representatives and senators (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 78; Rogers 2013). Compounding the lack of information, newspaper reporting on state Houses has also been steadily declining since the 1990s (Pew Research Center 2014). Second, this knowledge would have to affect voters' decisions in state legislative elections. To the contrary, research has found that evaluations of the state legislature or its performance have little to no effect on the outcomes of state legislative elections (Rogers 2013, 35; Tucker and Weber 1987). Instead, people's votes in state legislative elections closely follow their vote for Congress and often strongly reflect presidential popularity. Dating back to Key (1956), scholars have raised concerns about lack of accountability in state elections, in which the outcomes of these elections seem to hinge on factors entirely separate from what state lawmakers do or fail to do (Campbell 1986; Reif and Schmitt 1980, 9; Simon, Ostrom, and Marra 1991).

Finally, to argue that party polarization in the state legislature drives party competition also requires one to assume that when voters mete out punishment to extreme parties, such actions will systematically enhance party competition, rather than depress it further. Even if one might grant that it is possible for voters to turn against an extreme legislative party, why would this necessarily lead to increased party competition in the state? It may be that the party being punished is already weak, holds few legislative seats, and has no prospect for regaining control in the near term. Punishing such a party would make the state *less* not *more* party competitive. To date, no scholarship has shown that elite party conflict can narrow (or widen) the competitive balance between the parties in the electorate. Increased party conflict in Congress, for example, has likely contributed to the growth of party polarization and attitude constraint among voters (for a review, see Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006). Polarization in Congress, however, has not been found to have made the contest for control of Congress either more (or less) competitive.[10]

In the end, of course, we must acknowledge the limitations of our data. As such, we make no strong claims about having nailed down causality. Instead, our results are evaluated for consistency with the thesis, not as conclusive evidence for any causal

Table 1. State Legislative Party Polarization, by the Number of Shifts in Legislative Majority Party Control over the Preceding Decade, 1995–2013.

	Lower chambers[a]		Upper chambers[b]	
Shifts (*N*)	Polarization (*M*)	*N* (state-years)	Polarization (*M*)	*N* (state-years)
0	1.28	495	1.34	465
1	1.52	198	1.39	163
2	1.66	99	1.50	197
3[b]	1.73	38	1.92	55

Note. For the lower chambers, the overall mean of party polarization is 1.41, with a standard deviation of 0.48. For the upper chambers, the overall mean of party polarization is 1.4, with a standard deviation of 0.5. Legislatures with more recent switches in party control exhibit markedly higher levels of party polarization, for both lower and upper chambers. Comparing states with three or more party switches to those with zero switches, the difference is 93% of a standard deviation for the lower chambers and 116% of a standard deviation for the upper chambers.
[a]$F = 30.6$ ($p < .001$).
[b]$F = 26.4$ ($p < .001$).

claims. Despite these limitations, it strikes us that scholars might still be interested in knowing whether there is a consistent association between two-party competition and state legislative party polarization across the 50 states in the contemporary era.

A First Look: Bivariate Analyses

The dependent variable in the following analyses is the distance between the median Democrat and the median Republican in (1) the state Houses and (2) the state Senates. Under this measure, lower scores point to a less party polarized legislature; higher scores indicate more party polarization. We examine the lower and upper chambers separately. Although both upper and lower chambers must be apportioned on the basis of population, they nevertheless differ in terms of chamber size, constituency population, internal procedures, and the frequency of elections. In light of these differences, it is important to ascertain whether patterns are similar across both types of legislative institution.

Frequency of Shifts in Party Control

Our first measure of two-party competition is a count of the *number of shifts of party majority control in the chamber* over the preceding decade. Table 1 displays the average level of party polarization in state legislatures between 1995 and 2013 across different numbers of recent majority party shifts.

For both lower and upper chambers, state legislatures where there were more switches of party control exhibit higher levels of party polarization. For lower chambers that experienced no shifts in party control over the previous decade, the average level of party polarization was 1.28, whereas for chambers that experienced three or

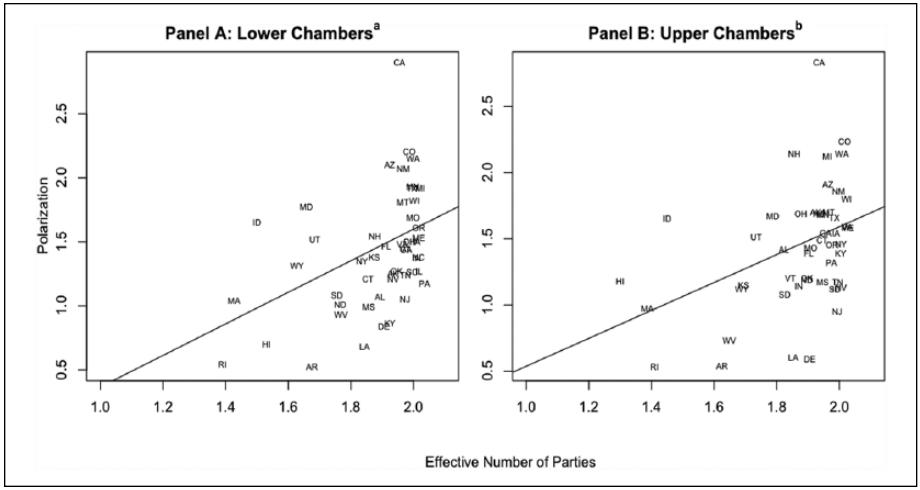

Figure 1. Mean state legislative party polarization, by effective number of parties in the state, 1995–2013 (N = 49).

Note. As the two parties become more equally sized, legislative party polarization tends to increase.

[a] b = 1.23 (p < .01); R^2 = .19.

[b] b = 1.05 (p < .01); R^2 = .16.

more shifts, the average level of party polarization was 1.73 (p < .001). For upper chambers that had no shifts in party control, the mean level of party polarization was 1.34; for chambers with three or more shifts, the average was 1.92 (p < .001). The size of this difference is fully 93% of the standard deviation in polarization among lower chambers and 116% of the standard deviation in polarization among upper chambers. For every year in the data set taken separately and for both chambers, state legislatures with more recent shifts in party control have higher polarization scores on average than state legislatures with fewer recent shifts in party control.

Effective Number of Political Parties

A second gauge of two-party competition is the *effective number of political parties* in the state (Aldrich and Battista 2002). Long used in the study of comparative politics (Lijphart 1994), this measure is the reciprocal of the Hirfindahl index.[11] In two-party systems, the measure reaches its maximum when the two parties hold equal shares of legislative seats. Figure 1 displays scatterplots of the effective number of political parties and the average level of party polarization in each state between 1995 and 2013 (N = 49, excepting Nebraska), with each state labeled.

In both lower and upper chambers, the expected positive relationship is evident. State legislatures where one party dominates tend to be less party polarized than state legislatures where the two parties are more evenly balanced. The relationships are statistically significant (p < .01), albeit not tight (R^2 = .19 for lower chambers and R^2 = .16 for upper chambers). These relationships are not dependent upon the high

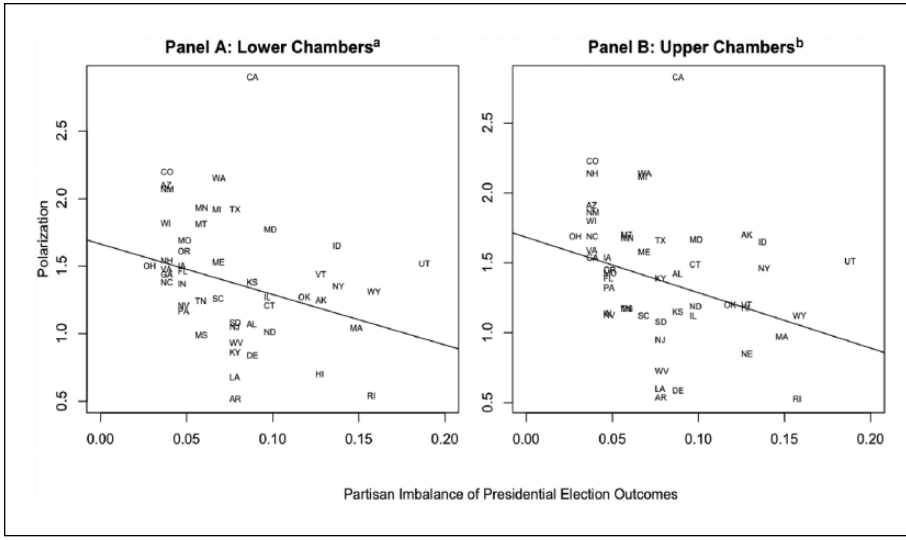

Figure 2. Mean state legislative party polarization, by competitiveness of presidential elections, 1995–2013 ($N = 49$).
Note. As presidential election outcomes in the state become more lopsided, party polarization in the legislature tends to decline.
[a]$b = -3.74$ ($p < .05$); $R^2 = .10$.
[b]$b = -3.97$ ($p < .05$); $R^2 = .11$.

leverage cases with exceptionally large legislative majority parties, such as those in Massachusetts and Rhode Island.[12] This finding reaffirms across all states the patterns identified in Aldrich and Battista's (2002) study of 11 states. This pattern is consistent with a theory that party competition exacerbates party conflict.[13]

Competitiveness of Presidential Elections

Voting behavior in presidential elections is often used as a gauge of a state electorate's partisan and ideological balance. Figure 2 plots states' average two-party margin in presidential elections against the average level of legislative party polarization between 1995 and 2013. The hypothesis is that there will be more legislative party polarization in states where presidential candidates win narrowly than in states where they prevail in a landslide. As is evident here, states where presidential elections are close do tend to have more party polarized legislatures ($p < .05$). Lower chamber legislative party polarization in the "blow-out" states (at the 90th percentile) is estimated at a distance between party medians of 1.20, whereas party polarization in the battleground states (at the 10th percentile) is projected at a distance of 1.54—a 28% increase. Again, although there remains a great deal of unexplained variance, the expected pattern is evident. This relationship is not just an artifact of the high leverage cases with the least amount of party competition.[14]

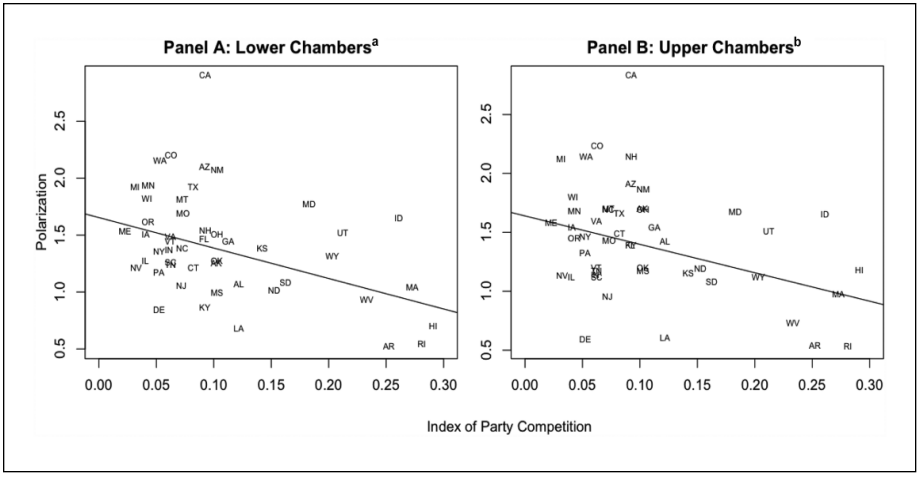

Figure 3. Mean state legislative party polarization, by index of state party competition, 1995–2013 (N = 49).

Note. The index averages the Democratic Party's proportion of the (1) gubernatorial two-party vote, (2) state House seats, and (3) state Senate seats. The averages are then "folded" by calculating the absolute difference from 0.5. Higher scores indicate lower levels of competition. As a single party wins a larger share of gubernatorial votes and state legislative seats, legislative party polarization tends to decline.

[a] $b = -2.66$ ($p < .01$); $R^2 = .18$.

[b] $b = -2.41$ ($p < .01$); $R^2 = .15$.

Competition for State Offices

A third measure reflects party competition for state offices generally. To create the *index of party competition*, we averaged over the preceding decade the Democratic Party's proportion of the (1) gubernatorial two-party vote, (2) state House seats, and (3) state Senate seats and then "folded" the average by calculating the absolute difference from 0.5. States where one party dominates state offices have high scores; states that are more two-party competitive have low scores.

By incorporating a measure of competition for the governorship into this measure of competition, we are able to take account of how legislative party polarization might be aimed at retaking or holding control of the governorship. Prior scholarship has shown that the governor's program often becomes a focal point for partisan conflict in state legislatures (Bernick 1978; Jewell and Patterson 1973, 457–60; Morehouse 1998; Rosenthal 1990). Competition for control of the governorship may be important for state legislative party politics, even in states that are not party competitive if measured solely by the contest for control of the legislature itself (such as Illinois).

Figure 3 plots the *index of party competition* against the average level of party polarization. Across both upper and lower chambers, the more two-party competitive states have more polarized legislatures ($p < .01$). This relationship is not fragile after excluding high leverage cases.[15]

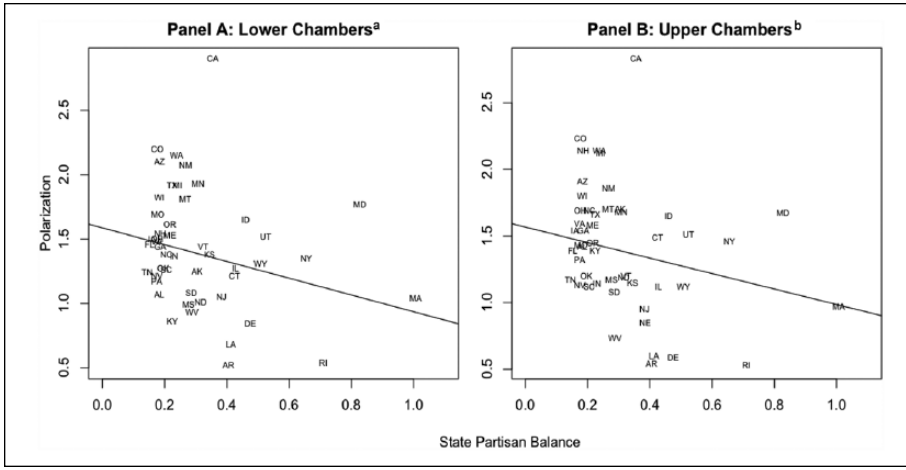

Figure 4. Mean state legislative party polarization, by balance of partisan identification in the state, 1995–2013 (N = 49).

Note. State partisan balance is measured by first finding the ratio of the percentage of constituents identifying with Republicans to the percentage identifying with Democrats and then calculating its divergence from 1. Low scores indicate that the electorate is evenly balanced between the two parties. States where one party's identifiers greatly outnumber the other party's have high scores. As party identification in the state leans more toward one party, legislative party polarization tends to decline.

[a] $b = -.65$ ($p < .05$); $R^2 = .11$.

[b] $b = -.58$ ($p < .05$); $R^2 = .08$.

Balance of Partisan Identification

The final measure of two-party competition is the *state partisan balance*. Drawing upon estimates of state partisanship generated from large national surveys via multilevel regression and poststratification (Enns and Koch 2013a), we calculate the ratio of the percentage of constituents identifying with Republicans to the percentage of state constituents identifying with Democrats and then find the ratio's divergence from 1 (Enns and Koch 2013b). States in which the electorate is evenly balanced between the two parties will have a score near zero; states where one party's identifiers greatly outnumber the other party's will have high scores.

Figure 4 plots *state partisan balance* against the average level of party polarization. The same pattern is apparent as with the other measures: states that have a closer balance of Republicans and Democrats in the mass electorate tend to have state legislatures that are more party polarized. According to the model, the most evenly balanced states (at the 10th percentile) have legislatures that are 19% more polarized as compared with states most tilted toward one party (at the 90th percentile). Despite a lot of unexplained variance, the relationship is consistent with theory and statistically significant for both lower and upper chambers ($p < .05$). These associations are still present and statistically significant excluding the high leverage cases where state electorates are most tilted toward one party.[16]

Multivariate Analyses

Our initial look at the data revealed more party polarization in legislatures in states with higher levels of two-party competition. The question is whether these relationships hold up after controlling for other factors likely to affect legislative party polarization. These controls include the following:

- *Income inequality*: Some studies have found that rising inequality in the United States correlates with higher levels of party polarization in Congress (Garand 2010; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006). Measures of the Gini index by state were obtained from Frank (2014).
- *Legislative professionalism*: The degree of professionalization—referring to a legislature's combination of compensation, full- or part-time status, and staff support—consistently appears as a significant factor affecting state government (Hamm and Moncrief 2013, 163–67). Measures were obtained from Squire (2007).
- *Traditional party organizations* (TPOs): Beginning with Mayhew (1986), scholars have found that political parties in states characterized by a history of patronage-oriented or machine organizations tend to be less ideological. Paddock (1998; 2005) reported that Republican and Democratic Party platforms are less ideologically divergent in such states. States with histories of TPOs exhibit less legislative party polarization (Krimmell 2013; McCarty 2013). The measure of states' history of TPOs is from Mayhew.
- *South*: The South's long history of one-party dominance and the recency with which it became two-party competitive may affect the extent of legislative party polarization.
- *Percent urban*: Previous work found that more highly urbanized states tend to be more two-party competitive and typically became so earlier (Patterson and Caldeira 1984; Ranney 1976). Data were obtained from the U.S. Census Bureau.
- *Chamber size*: The number of seats in the state legislature is included under the supposition that party organizations may be less formal and hierarchical in smaller legislatures.
- *Divided government*: Divided government often forces more bipartisan deal making. The variable is included in case it makes a difference for the extent of party polarization evident in legislative roll-call voting.
- *Time*: A time counter is included to capture the trend toward increasing polarization across most states (Shor and McCarty 2011, 546).

The dependent variable is *legislative party polarization*, the difference between the Republican and Democratic Party medians in each state (i) for each year (t) between 1995 and 2013.

These panel data present some difficult trade-offs with respect to the choice of modeling approach. A number of our control variables do not vary over time (e.g.,

South, TPOs) and will thus drop out of any model with fixed effects for states. Nevertheless, we are interested in knowing if these particular controls affect the relationship between party competition and party polarization, because they have been shown in previous scholarship to have systematic effects on state party politics.

A second, more serious problem is that there is limited variation with respect to most of the variables in the model. Our key independent variables measuring party competition change only modestly over time. States that are competitive or uncompetitive by our various measures tend to remain so throughout our time period (1995–2013). The same is also true for a number of our controls (e.g., legislative professionalism, percent urban). A fixed effects model is not only less efficient, given the loss of degrees of freedom. It is also very difficult for slowly changing independent variables to survive in a fixed effects model, because such variables will be highly collinear with the effects.

Considering these trade-offs, we opt to model the relationship between party competition and state legislative polarization using two different approaches. First, we used Prais–Winsten regression, an approach that allows us to include time-invariant independent variables while addressing state effects with panel corrected standard errors (Beck and Katz 1995).[17] Second, as a robustness check, we use a more conservative time-series cross-sectional (TSCS) regression model that includes fixed effects for states.

The full results of the Prais–Winsten regression models with panel corrected standard errors are displayed in Tables 2 and 3. Every one of the measures of party competition is a statistically significant predictor of state legislative party polarization for both lower and upper chambers in these models. Furthermore, the results of the fixed effects TSCS models (displayed in Appendices A and B) generally reinforce these findings. Most of the measures of party competition (*shifts in party control, state party competition index*, and *effective number of political parties*) remain statistically significant predictors of party polarization in the lower chambers. Two of the party competition measures continue to have statistically significant effects on party polarization in the upper chambers (*shifts in party control* and *state party competition index*). Regardless of the estimation approach, the coefficients for the party competition variables take the predicted directions in all the models.

To provide a better sense for the size of the effects, Table 4 shows the predicted effects on state legislative polarization across the range between the 10th and 90th percentiles of the independent variables, as gauged by models shown in Tables 2 and 3.

Results for Controls

Several of the control variables are highly important in accounting for variation in legislative party polarization across states. Remarkably, states with a history of TPOs have dramatically less party polarized legislatures.[18] Although patronage-based, hierarchical party organizations had almost entirely broken down by the 1970s, the states where

Table 2. Effect of Party Competition on State Legislative Party Polarization, Lower Chambers.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
	B (PCSE)	*B* (PCSE)	*B* (PCSE)	*B* (PCSE)	*B* (PCSE)
Shifts in party control	0.06***				
	(.01)				
State party competition index		−1.51***			
		(.20)			
Presidential competition			−0.77***		
			(.24)		
Party ID balance				−0.12***	
				(.04)	
Effective number of parties					0.47***
					(.08)
Gini index	0.12	0.09	0.06	0.03	0.04
	(.22)	(.24)	(.24)	(.24)	(.25)
South	−0.21***	−0.23***	−0.24***	−0.26***	−0.25***
	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)	(.02)
Professionalism	0.99***	0.86***	1.09***	1.16***	0.92***
	(.13)	(.14)	(.10)	(.11)	(.12)
Divided government	−0.001	−0.01	−0.004	−0.01	−0.02
	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)
Traditional party organizations	−0.12***	−0.12***	−0.13***	−0.13***	−0.13***
	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)
Urban (proportion)	0.01***	0.01***	0.004***	0.01***	0.01***
	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)
Chamber size	0.001***	0.001***	0.001***	0.001***	0.001***
	(.0001)	(.0002)	(.0001)	(.0001)	(.0002)
Time	0.02***	0.02***	0.02***	0.01***	0.02***
	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)
Constant	0.75***	0.97***	0.87***	0.80***	−0.06
	(.14)	(.15)	(.14)	(.14)	(.24)
Rho	.82	.82	.79	.77	.79
R^2	.67	.69	.65	.62	.66

Note. Prais–Winsten regression coefficients, with PCSEs in parentheses. The dependent variable is legislative party polarization. $N = 830$ (except for Model 4, $N = 700$, due to missing data on state party identification from 2010 to 2013); 49 states. PCSE = panel corrected standard error.
*$p < .1$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$.

such organizations had been most prevalent—such as Connecticut, Illinois, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Delaware—continue to have markedly lower levels of legislative party polarization than states without those histories.

Table 3. Effect of Party Competition on State Legislative Party Polarization, Upper Chambers.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
	B (PCSE)	*B* (PCSE)	*B* (PCSE)	*B* (PCSE)	*B* (PCSE)
Shifts in party control	0.03***				
	(.01)				
State party competition index		−0.99***			
		(.26)			
Presidential competition			−0.77***		
			(.21)		
Party ID balance				−0.08**	
				(.05)	
Effective number of parties					0.22***
					(.09)
Gini index	0.17	0.14	0.09	0.03	0.001
	(.24)	(.26)	(.25)	(.29)	(.25)
South	−0.21***	−0.22***	−0.23***	−0.21***	−0.23***
	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)	(.03)
Professionalism	1.37***	1.24***	1.38***	1.39***	1.33***
	(.14)	(.14)	(.14)	(.11)	(.14)
Divided government	0.01	0.01	0.01	−0.01	0.004
	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.02)	(.01)
Traditional party organizations	−0.13***	−0.13***	−0.13***	−0.13***	−0.13***
	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)	(.01)
Urban (proportion)	0.002	0.003	0.002	0.001	0.002
	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)
Chamber size	0.01***	0.01***	0.01***	0.01***	0.01***
	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)	(.001)
Time	0.02***	0.01***	0.02***	0.01***	0.02***
	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)	(.002)
Constant	0.82***	0.99***	0.95***	1.01***	0.55***
	(.17)	(.18)	(.17)	(.19)	(.22)
Rho	.85	.84	.84	.78	.83
R^2	.63	.63	.63	.57	.63

Note. Prais–Winsten regression coefficients, with PCSEs in parentheses. The dependent variable is legislative party polarization. $N = 825$ (except for Model 4, $N = 697$ due to missing data on state party identification from 2010 to 2013); 49 states. PCSE = panel corrected standard error.
*$p < .1$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$.

The findings here reinforce Paddock (1998; 2005) who found that in states with histories of TPOs, Republican and Democratic Party committee members were less ideologically distinct from one another, and party platforms were less ideologically divergent.

Table 4. Predicted Levels of State Legislative Polarization.

	Lower chambers			Upper chambers		
	10th percentile	90th percentile	Increase or decrease (%)	10th percentile	90th percentile	Increase or decrease (%)
Party competition measures						
Shifts in legislative party control (+)	1.36	1.49	+9	1.40	1.46	+5
State party competition index (−)	1.54	1.20	−22	1.51	1.29	−14
Presidential party competition (−)	1.45	1.35	−7	1.47	1.37	−7
Party ID balance (−)	1.40	1.34	−5	1.40	1.36	−4
Effective number of political parties (+)	1.28	1.48	+15	1.35	1.46	+8
Controls						
Gini index (+)	*ns*	*ns*	—	*ns*	*ns*	—
Legislative professionalism (+)	1.27	1.50	+18	1.88	1.99	+5
Traditional party organizations score (−)	1.55	1.04	−32	1.57	1.05	−33
South (−)	1.46	1.23	−16	1.47	1.26	−15
Urban (proportion) (+)	1.30	1.52	+17	*ns*	*ns*	—
Chamber size (+)	1.33	1.46	+9	1.35	1.49	−11
Divided government (−)	*ns*	*ns*	—	*ns*	*ns*	—

Note. *ns* = not significant; Predicted values based on regression results shown in Appendices A and B. Expected effects shown in parentheses next to variable names. *ns* means that the coefficient for the variable was not statistically significant.

States with professionalized legislatures are considerably more party polarized than amateur legislatures, for both lower and upper chambers. Based on anecdotal data, journalist Charles Mahtesian (1997) theorized that "professionalism, partisanship, and incivility are linked to each other." It is not clear, however, what precisely those linkages could be. Nevertheless, the findings here suggest that, even after controlling for a variety of other factors, more professionalized legislatures are systematically more party polarized.

Southern state legislatures exhibit less party polarization. The pattern is clear in models of both lower and upper chambers. Their relatively short histories of two-party politics may be a contributing factor.

Time takes a positive coefficient in all the models for both lower and upper chambers, reflecting an overall tendency toward increased party polarization across the United States. This trend is not consistent across all states, but the variable is positive and statistically significant ($p < .001$). The trend variable results point to a 20% increase in party polarization in both lower and upper chambers over the time period, controlling for other factors.

The other controls do not have a strong or consistent relationship with the level of legislative party polarization. Urbanization is associated with sharply more party polarization in the lower chambers ($p < .001$), but the coefficient is not statistically significant for the upper chambers. Neither divided government nor chamber size has the expected effect. According to the models in Tables 1 and 2, increases in *income inequality* are not associated with more legislative party polarization in either the lower or the upper chambers. In the fixed effects models (in Appendices A and B), *income inequality* tends to take a positive coefficient (though not in all cases), suggesting that increases in income inequality within particular states are associated with increases in legislative party polarization.

Main Results

After taking account of these alternative sources of variation, two-party competition for control of state government has measurable and statistically significant effects on the level of state legislative party polarization. More two-party competitive states have more party polarized legislatures.

Of the party competition measures, the *state party competition index* stands out as the strongest predictor of state legislative polarization across both chambers. According to the model, uncompetitive states by this measure (including Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Hawaii, West Virginia, Arkansas, and Idaho) had a predicted party polarization score of 1.17 in their lower chambers; meanwhile, highly competitive states (including Michigan, Maine, Nevada, Iowa, Oregon, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota) scored 1.41, a difference, equivalent to 70% of the standard deviation of party polarization. Similarly, upper chambers in uncompetitive states by this measure had a predicted party polarization score of 1.27, whereas upper chambers in party competitive states had a predicted party polarization score of 1.95, a difference equivalent to 136% of the standard deviation for the dependent variable.

Party Competition and Partisan Strategy

Taken together, we find a clear pattern in which state legislatures in two-party competitive states tend to exhibit more party polarization than do legislatures in states where one party is dominant. The findings are consistent across a variety of measures of two-party competition and across both upper and lower chambers. There is no evidence that state legislative parties in competitive circumstances tend to converge ideologically.

These findings comport with a theory that party competition for control of governing institutions encourages politicians to seek out ways to distinguish their party from the opposition. In a legislative setting, this is likely to take the form of bringing up issues designed to elicit and then communicate partisan cleavages to external constituencies. In the congressional context, this tactic is often referred to as staging "message votes" (Lee 2009; 2013). The relationship also mirrors the documented

effect of competition on individual congressional races: candidates in competitive elections are more likely to draw clear issue distinctions from their opponents whereas candidates in uncompetitive elections prefer to avoid controversy (Kahn and Kenney 1999).

States that are less two-party competitive may provide less reason for politicians to foreground party differences. Parties in such legislatures might be strongly at odds with one another on many policy questions, but they have fewer political incentives to pursue strategies designed to communicate party differences to voters and outside groups as a means of mobilizing support. In states where politicians have more reason to care about setting up issues for electoral purposes, by contrast, legislative parties are more likely to be differentiated from one another.

These results offer new evidence in support of a long-standing hypothesis in the literature on comparative state legislatures—that parties will be more internally cohesive and distinct from one another under conditions of two-party competition. Although scholars have never before had access to the wealth of data on state legislative roll-call voting that is now becoming available, earlier work on state legislatures had consistently pointed toward a relationship between party competition and legislative party cohesion. The pattern was starkest in the state legislatures lacking in two-party competition altogether, in which roll-call voting tended to be factionalized and poorly structured. Today, however, the range of variation in state two-party competitiveness has narrowed considerably. Most states now are two-party competitive, at least to some extent. If one were able to extend this study back in time, the patterns would likely be stronger.

As a whole, these findings point to continuing disappointment for pundits and politicians who hope that close elections will encourage politicians to seek common ground across party lines. There is no evidence here that close party competition incentivizes legislative bipartisanship. To the contrary, the findings suggest that party competition and bipartisan cooperation pull in contrary directions. State legislatures in more party competitive contexts exhibit sharper party conflict.

Finally, these findings shed more ambiguous light on the role of parties in legislative politics. Scholars of earlier eras did not disguise their hopes that party competition would spread across the one-party dominant states as a means of promoting greater accountability and making elections more meaningful for voters. Elections have indeed become more meaningful in terms of presenting choices to voters. However, elections may also have become a greater ongoing preoccupation of legislators, particularly those in the most competitive contexts. Looking toward the next elections, such lawmakers may have greater political motive to exploit legislative debate for purposes of electioneering and partisan mobilization.

Appendix A

Effect of Party Competition on State Legislative Party Polarization, Lower Chambers.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
	B (*SE*)	*B* (*SE*)	*B* (*SE*)	*B* (*SE*)	*B* (*SE*)
Shifts in party control	0.03*** (.01)				
State party comp index		−0.48*** (.12)			
Presidential competition			−0.08 (.12)		
Party ID balance				−0.02* (.02)	
Effective number of parties					0.13*** (.05)
Gini index	0.29* (.18)	0.19 (.18)	0.21 (.18)	0.50*** (.18)	0.14 (.18)
Professionalism	0.99*** (.21)	0.89*** (.21)	0.86*** (.21)	0.51** (.20)	0.82*** (.21)
Divided government	−0.0001 (.01)	−0.01 (.01)	−0.01 (.01)	−0.001 (.01)	−0.01 (.01)
Urban (proportion)	0.003* (.002)	0.003 (.002)	0.003 (.002)	0.003* (.002)	0.003* (.002)
Time	0.02*** (.001)	0.02*** (.001)	0.02*** (.001)	0.01*** (.001)	002*** (.001)
State fixed effects	X	X	X	X	X
R^2	.21	.23	.18	.16	.24
Constant	0.61*** (.18)	0.78*** (.18)	0.75*** (.19)	0.64*** (.18)	0.80*** (.18)

Note. Fixed effects regression model coefficients are presented. The dependent variable is legislative party polarization. $N = 830$ (except for Model 4, $N = 700$, due to missing data on state party identification from 2010 to 2013); 49 states. *$p < .1$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$.

Appendix B

Effect of Party Competition on State Legislative Party Polarization, Upper Chambers.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
	B (*SE*)	*B* (*SE*)	*B* (*SE*)	*B* (*SE*)	*B* (*SE*)
Shifts in party control	0.03*** (.01)				
State party competition index		−0.24* (.18)			

(continued)

Appendix B (continued)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
	B (*SE*)	*B* (*SE*)	*B* (*SE*)	*B* (*SE*)	*B* (*SE*)
Presidential competition			−0.03 (.18)		
Party ID balance				0.003 (.04)	
Effective number of parties					0.06 (.06)
Gini index	0.66** (.28)	0.50* (.28)	0.52* (.28)	0.64** (.29)	0.49* (.28)
Professionalism	0.61** (.32)	0.55* (.32)	0.55* (.32)	0.70** (.32)	0.55* (.32)
Divided government	0.05*** (.01)	0.04*** (.01)	0.04*** (.01)	0.06*** (.01)	0.04*** (.01)
Urban (proportion)	−0.01** (.003)	−0.01*** (.003)	−0.01*** (.003)	−0.01** (.003)	−0.01*** (.003)
Time	0.02*** (.001)	0.02*** (.002)	0.02*** (.002)	0.01*** (.002)	0.02*** (.002)
State fixed effects	X	X	X	X	X
R^2	.05	.04	.02	.05	.03
Constant	1.24*** (.28)	1.42*** (.28)	1.40*** (.28)	1.17*** (.30)	1.30*** (.30)

Note. Fixed effects regression model coefficients are presented. The dependent variable is legislative party polarization. $N = 825$ (except for Model 4, $N = 697$, due to missing data on state party identification between 2010 and 2013); 49 states.
*$p < .1$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$.

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Notes

1. Statement by Senator Reid Congratulating Senator McConnell, November 5, 2014, http://www.reid.senate.gov/press_releases/2014-04-11-statement-by-senator-reid-congratulating-senator-mcconnell.

2. News Conference, Senate Minority Leader McConnell on Midterm Elections, November 5, 2014, http://www.c-span.org/video/?322580-1/senate-minority-leader-mitch-mcconnell-news-conference.
3. Huntington (1950, 677) also argued that two-party competition leads to ideological divergence, not convergence. Interestingly, he concludes by predicting that as the United States becomes more two-party competitive, "the parties will strive to win not by converting their opponents but by effectively mobilizing their own supporters."
4. Of course, there are times when it is politically advantageous for a party to dodge partisan fights. On issues where a party stands on the wrong side of public opinion, it would prefer to narrow the party differential. In these cases, a party probably benefits from supporting bipartisan deals and avoiding party-line votes. Minimizing party conflict, however, is never a good way to increase the differences voters perceive between the parties.
5. Treadway (1985) offered a book-length assessment of this literature.
6. As of the 2014 data release, there are 14 states covered in 1995, 45 states in 1996, 48 or 49 states every year between 1997 and 2008, 27 states in 2009, 28 states in 2010, 44 states in 2011, 44 states in 2012, and 41 states in 2013.
7. Generally speaking, two-party competition at the level of the legislative district has been thought to encourage representatives to adopt moderate positions, and a line of scholarship has found that lawmakers from swing districts tend to be less party loyal than those representing districts that tilt decisively toward one party (see, for example, Erikson and Wright 2000; Griffin 2006). However, a recent article (McCarty et al. 2014) finds that state lawmakers from swing districts tend to be more ideologically extreme.
8. Our interval measures correlate with one another with statistically significant r coefficients ranging from .61 to .93.
9. For a recent review of the debate on whether party identification is an unmoved mover in politics, see Johnston (2006).
10. By most measures scholars use, for example, the Republican Party in Congress moved to the right throughout the Obama presidency, and congressional party polarization rose to levels unprecedented in the modern era. Meanwhile, the Republican margin of control in Congress steadily grew, and in the 114th Congress, the Republican share of seats in Congress stands at its post–New Deal high-water mark.
11. Historical data on the composition of state legislatures were obtained from Dubin (2007).
12. Excluding all cases with centered leverage three times the overall mean (Hawaii, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Idaho), the relationship between *effective number of political parties* and legislative party polarization holds up for both lower ($p < .01$) and for upper chambers ($p < .01$).
13. Of course, a narrow margin of control is likely to encourage intraparty cohesion for policy reasons, as well. A narrow majority's need for party discipline is greater if it is going to accomplish its legislative goals. A large minority will have more ability to block legislation, especially if the majority is not entirely unified.
14. Excluding all cases with centered leverage three times the overall mean (Utah, Wyoming, Rhode Island, and Massachusetts), the relationship between the competitiveness of presidential elections and state polarization holds up for both lower and upper chambers ($p < .04$).
15. Excluding the five states with high leverage on the regression line (Hawaii, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Idaho, and Arkansas) yields $N = 42$. Nevertheless, the coefficients remain negative and statistically significant ($p < .05$).
16. Excluding all the cases with more than three times the mean centered leverage (Hawaii, Massachusetts, Maryland), the coefficient for *state partisan balance* is −1.08 ($p < .05$) for lower chambers and −1.33 ($p < .01$) for upper chambers.

17. Given the variability of state coverage, there are a small number of year gaps for particular states. Missing cases are handled via pairwise deletion. Results do not substantially change, however, using casewise deletion.
18. This pattern is equally evident from simple bivariate analysis as well.

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