Understanding the Party Brand*

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Abstract

A party’s reputation, or brand, is a central component of many party-based theories of legislatures that has been far less scrutinized than other aspects of these theories, because of the difficulty associated with studying legislators’ motives. We conduct a relatively rare set of survey experiments on legislators that show (1) that legislative party leaders pressure members more on votes when the outcome affects the party brand, and (2) that the value of the party brand can directly affect how legislators vote, but only when constituents are split on the measure. Our results help unify the disparate Conditional Party Government and Cartel Theory approaches thus providing a clear direction for future research on party reputation theories. Further, the results provide a rationale for why legislative leaders engage in media spin battles and suggest that the parties’ bad reputations have made it harder for party leaders to pass their agenda.

Word Count: 8,492.

*We wish to thank Mo Fiorina, Justin Fox, Don Green, Greg Koger, David Mayhew and Eric Schickler for helpful comments.
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Introduction

Congress is unpopular. Both congressional parties are disliked. In recent years, approval ratings for Congressional Democrats, Congressional Republicans, and Congress as a whole have hit record lows (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995, Newport 2011). While much has been written about the societal factors that have contributed to the deplorable reputations and approval ratings of congressional parties, much less is known about the legislative consequences of party reputations.

Donald Stokes, in his seminal article on “Spatial Models of Party Competition” (Stokes, 1963), outlined two aspects of a party’s reputation, or label, that influence voters’ decisions (and subsequently, legislative action). First, labels can convey information about members’ ideology, what Stokes termed “positional” information. Second, party labels can influence voters’ decisions because of what Stokes termed its valence component. Valence can be conceptualized as a term in voters’ utility function where voters reward parties that engage in good government activities and pass legislation in a timely manner (and punish them for scandal and other bad, non-ideological actions). Scholars have built on the valence argument to theorize about legislative organization, suggesting that it is legislators’ desire to gain this electoral advantage that leads rank-and-file legislators to give their party leaders both the power and incentives to pressure them on roll-call votes (Cox and McCubbins, 1993; Lebo, McGlynn and Koger, 2007). Legislators are willing to make this sacrifice, because they want a reputation for getting good things done and the electoral benefits that such a reputation creates.

In this paper, for reasons we elaborate upon below, we focus exclusively on the valence component of the party brand. Despite its importance, scholars have done little to empirically test the valence-based arguments related to the party label. This striking omission may, in large part, be due to the fact that the valence argument for legislative organization relies on assumptions and has implications for three different sets of actors: voters, rank-and-file legislators, and legislative leaders. While technological improvements have made it cheaper and easier to conduct experiments on voters, it is difficult to experimentally test the behavior and beliefs of legislators and therefore difficult to test the valence argument. We attempt to fill that gap here by conducting our own set of survey experiments on both legislator and voter samples. The lack of empirical evidence
in the valence models of party reputation literature has inhibited progress, and, we argue, caused unnecessary discord in the literature. Rather, by testing three empirical claims about legislators’ and voters’ party label based behavior, we believe that two of the most influential arguments about how parties shape legislative outcomes—the Party Cartel Theory (Cox and McCubbins, 1993, 2005, 2007) and the Conditional Party Government Theories (Rohde, 1991; Aldrich, 1995; Aldrich and Rohde, 2000, 2001; Aldrich, Berger and Rohde, 2002; Aldrich, Rohde and Tofias, 2007) can be unified, marking an important step forward in party reputation research.

We conduct experiments to test aspects of the valence argument for each of the three actors involved (voters, rank-and-file legislators, and legislative leaders). We begin by testing if voters reward/punish legislators for the non-ideological actions of their party. While this assumption is not controversial in the literature, it also has not been tested despite being a fundamental assumption on which other predictions are based. Our results show that voters reward legislators for their party’s record of legislative performance and also punish them if their party is caught in scandal. Significantly, this means that voters give rank-and-file legislators and legislative leaders the incentives to improve the value of their party label.

Having shown evidence for the basic assumption of the valence argument, we then use a series of survey experiments1 on state legislators to study essential and previously untested questions of whether legislative leaders act in anticipation of affecting their party’s reputation and whether a party’s reputation ever influence legislator’s voting decisions directly in the absence of pressure from party leadership. By providing the empirical answers to those questions using a robust, causally identified survey experiments of the target population—i.e. legislators—we bring fresh evidence and a new perspective to a decades old debate about party reputations.

We find that legislators believe party leaders will be more likely to pressure members to vote for a bill when the outcome affects constituents’ vote choice in the upcoming legislative election. Significantly, the value of the party label also directly affects whether legislators will vote with their party leadership, but only when public opinion is split on the issue. When a clear majority

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1To conduct these experiments we created an internet-based survey for state legislators in the United States. The state legislators who agreed to participate in the survey were given one of several vignettes. In each vignette we randomly varied some part of the hypothetical scenario to see whether our experimental manipulation changed how the legislator responded.
of constituents oppose the bill, the value of the party label has no effect on how legislators vote. However, when the constituents are split on the measure, legislators are more likely to vote for the measure when their party label’s value is high.

Our experiments highlight the need to study both the direct and indirect ways that legislative leaders influence legislators. If creating a positive label leads legislators to vote more often with the party, this may explain why legislative leaders spend so much effort trying to win the media spin battle about what goes on in the legislature. If leaders can create a positive label for their party by taking credit for good legislative action and deflecting blame for bad legislative actions such as delays and gridlock, then leaders can indirectly increase the likelihood that legislators will support their agenda.

By a similar logic, these same results suggest that the increasingly bad reputations of both parties have made it harder for party leaders to muster the necessary votes for politically unpopular legislation necessary for governance such as budget votes and fiscal compromise. Further, they suggest that empowering legislative leaders with tools they can use to affect how members vote may provide benefits to constituents in the form of increased efficiency and good governance.

In addition, our results have implications for the conditional party government and party cartel theories. While these two theories are often presented as being in direct competition, our results suggest that they can be viewed as complementary theories with the party label providing the connection. In particular, the conditional party government can be viewed as an argument about when the party cartel theory is most likely to work - when the party label is most salient because of the ideological homogeneity of the party’s members.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. We begin by reviewing the theoretical arguments about the party label. Our subsequent survey of the empirical literature on the party brand highlights how the empirical literature has not tested arguments about the valence aspect of the party brand. Because the valence arguments have not been tested, we start our empirical analysis by running experiments on voters to test whether they punish/reward legislators for the actions of their party as a whole. Having shown that this basic assumption holds, we transition to our experiments on state legislators. After describing this unique survey sample, we present our experiment on
whether party leaders are more likely to pressure party members when they expect that passing the measure will improve the value of the party label. In our third and final empirical section we present the results of our experiments on whether the value of the party label ever directly affects whether legislators vote with their party leaders. We conclude the paper by discussing the implications of our findings for legislative theory and American politics today.

**The Party Brand and Legislative Theory**

Stokes (1963), in discussing voters’ decision-making process, draws the distinction between the positional and valence components of the party brand. Subsequent scholars have built on these two arguments about how constituents vote to theorize how these incentives influence legislative leaders and rank-and-file members. The first set of arguments focuses on the party label as a type of valence advantage/disadvantage.\(^2\) In this formulation, the party label is modeled as an intercept term in the voter’s utility function. When a party label is good (or takes a positive value), constituents are more likely to vote for a member of that party in the election. When a party label is bad, the candidates from that party all receive fewer votes. The second set of arguments focuses on how the candidates’ ideological position affects constituents’ voting decisions. Often these arguments rely on the idea that the party brand is an informational shortcut voters use to make inferences about candidates’ ideological positions.

Significantly, the valence argument is prominent in the theoretical literature on legislative organization, but not in the empirical literature. Instead the empirical literature has focused on the ideological arguments related to the party label. Although this article exclusively tests the valence arguments, we discuss both arguments in our review of literature to highlight how our study relates to existing research on the party label.\(^3\)

Valence based arguments about the party brand such as Cox and McCubbins (2005)’s Procedural Cartel Theory (see also Lebo, McGlynn and Koger, 2007) typically rest on two assumptions

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\(^2\)For some recent examples discussing models of valence advantage as it relates to a given candidate see: Groseclose (2001); Snyder and Ting (2002); Aragones and Palfrey (2003); Hummel (2010); Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita (2009).

\(^3\)In the survey experiments that comprise the empirical portion of this paper, we explicitly vary the valence of a party’s reputation while holding ideology constant.
related to the party brand. First, that the party brand influences a member’s personal probability of re-election and majority status (in other words the party label is a valence term in voter’s utility). Second, the value of a party’s brand depends on its “legislative record of accomplishment.” As an example of how legislative accomplishment can influence the party brand in a negative fashion, Cox and McCubbins (2005) point to the 1995 government shutdown. They argue that the Republican party label was dramatically hurt as voters blamed them for the shutdown.

If voters hold parties accountable for their legislative accomplishments (or lack thereof), then legislators have incentives to create a positive label by helping pass their party leadership’s agenda. However, this does not mean that legislators will necessarily vote with their party leaders. Although they have incentives to pass their party’s agenda, legislators also have a strong incentive to vote in line with their constituents’ preferences. Because the party label is a collective good, legislators will under-invest in its maintenance without some type of intervention. In the cartel model, party leaders provide that intervention. As Brady and McCubbins (2002, pg. 4) describe it, “...incumbents' probability of reelection is in part a function of their party's reputation among voters and that maintaining that reputation requires collective action by members of the party caucus. So party members delegate to party leaders the authority to enforce cooperation and maintain the party’s ‘brand name.’ ”

In contrast, the ideological (or positional) based argument focuses on the party label’s potentially informative function. In elections, voters must be sufficiently informed (or at least act as if they are sufficiently informed) to create meaningful non-random decisions (Druckman, 2001; Arce- neaux, 2008). Parties, or more precisely party labels, serve as heuristic cues to voters about a candidate’s ideology (Snyder and Ting, 2002; Grynaviski, 2010). Because voters punish politicians for changing positions (Tomz and Van Houweling, 2010, 2012), party members who will be running

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4This description leaves plenty of room for a variety of interpretations. As Smith (2007, pg. 134) describes, “Ambiguity reigns. Plainly, being ‘associated’ with popular causes, as Mayhew emphasizes, establishing a ‘legislative record of accomplishment,’ as Cox and McCubbins emphasize, and avoiding floor losses are not identical recipes for a favorable party record.... Effort and accountability are expected. Thus, there remains a gap in the causal argument. A favorable record of accomplishment surely is important to the majority party, but it is hardly the only way to establish a favorable party record. If it is not, then the majority party may be willing to lose a legislative battle in order to realize a net gain in party reputation and public support. Avoiding losses on the floor is not a necessary or a sufficient strategy for enhancing party reputation.”

5See Stimson (2004) for a more detailed discussion of the reputational consequences faced by the Republican party following the shutdown.
in the future, which includes most incumbent legislators, have incentives to maintain a consistent party label (see also Wittman, 1989; Jones and Hudson, 1998).

The primary difference between the arguments is the motive behind voters’ decisions (and thus the motive that legislators respond to). This difference in motives, in turn, leads to different expectations about the bills party leaders will exert pressure on. The ideological arguments suggest that pressure will come on the more ideological, and thus more divisive bills. In contrast, valence arguments focus more on the party’s reputation for efficiency and accomplishment. While this will include passing some divisive bills, it will also include other good government issues that are not necessarily partisan. Because the two theories differ in their normative implications and much less is known empirically about how the valence aspects of the party label influence legislative behavior, we focus our study on this aspect of the party label.

What Do We Know about the Party Brand Empirically?

In terms of the ideological component of the party label, Woon and Pope (2008) use the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Survey to demonstrate that voters recognize the ideological content of party labels (see also Pope and Woon, 2008; Tomz and Sniderman, 2005; Grynaviski, 2010). Peskowitz (2012) further shows that the party’s ideological brand (position) has a meaningful effect on the vote share of non-incumbent challengers who are less well known to voters (though little effect on incumbents’ vote share).

Another group of studies focus on the electoral cost incurred by members who vote with their party at high levels and accrue more ideologically extreme voting records (Canes-Wrone, Brady and Cogan, 2002; Bovitz and Carson, 2006; Carson et al., 2010; Lebo and O’Geen, 2011; Koger and Lebo, 2012). Consistently these studies find that voters appear to punish the more ideologically extreme incumbents who contribute to the creation of a strongly ideological brand.  

At first glance studies showing that individual members pay an electoral price for acting in a partisan manner appear to contradict theories involving a valence conception of the party brand;

6Relatedly, Harbridge and Malhotra (2011) find, using a survey experiment on attitudes toward partisan conflict, that while voters are opposed to party conflict in general, strong partisans support individual members behaving in a partisan manner.
the party brand is supposed to help legislators not hurt them. However, it is important to remember that these studies generally compare the outcomes across legislators serving together. The party brand argument, however, is about the overall value of the label to the party and not about the variation observed between members serving together. As Cox and McCubbins (2007, pg. 102) write, “A party’s record, thus, is a commonly accepted summary of the past actions, beliefs and outcomes with which it is associated. Of course, it is quite possible under this definition that some aspect of a party’s record (some particular action, belief, or outcome) will help some of that party’s incumbents, have no effect on some, and hurt still others. This does not mean that the party’s record varies from district to district, just that evaluations of it vary.”

Similarly, Lebo, McGlynn and Koger (2007), in their theory of Strategic Party Government, argue that partisan voting has a direct negative effect when members are voting with the party and against their constituents interests, but has an indirect positive effect through legislative victories that enhance the party’s reputation. As these arguments imply, we cannot evaluate the valence aspects of the party label argument by simply looking at whether legislators who act in a more partisan way do better or worse on Election Day. Analogously, we cannot look at the candidate-level valence to test claims about the valence of the party label. Although good studies have examined the candidate-level valence directly (e.g. Stone and Simas, 2010), these studies cannot tell us about the party-level valence.

In sum, the empirical literature on voters has largely focused on the ideological aspect of the party label. Perhaps even more glaring, researchers have rarely tested the implications of the theoretical claims on legislators’ behavior (for recent exceptions see Lebo, McGlynn and Koger, 2007; Grynaviski, 2010). We do not mean this as indictment of the existing studies, they are quite good. Rather, we suggest that previous studies have only looked at one component of the larger

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7Taking this logic a step further, Grynaviski (2010) argues that “centrist” members have an incentive to develop a private candidate brand name to differentiate him or herself from the party. To that end, Grynaviski (2010) finds that centrist incumbents are more likely to contact their constituents than their more ideologically extreme peers.

8One could look at partisan electoral tides (Cox and McCubbins, 2007, pg. 104), however, there is disagreement about whether this is evidence for the party label. Cox and McCubbins note that if one accepts the view that these tides are the result of actions outside of congressional control, say the result of rewarding the president’s party for a strong economy, then the prospects for “the remainder of [Cox and McCubbins’s] argument—or for any argument that views congressional parties as instruments to improve the collective electoral fate of their members—are bleak.” (Cox and McCubbins, 2007, pgs. 111-112).
What is a party label (brand) to voters?

We test the valence aspect of the party label by looking at the behavior of both voters and legislators. We begin with survey experiments on respondents in the Cooperative Congressional Election Survey (CCES) that test whether voters respond to the record of the incumbent candidate’s party as the valence argument assumes.

By using survey experiments to study the electoral impact of party labels we can avoid concerns about other confounding effects. For example, observational approaches may struggle to distinguish between whether electoral swings against a party result from a poor legislative reputation or simply because bad things were happening. In contrast, our experiments allow us to isolate effects by presenting hypothetical scenarios to voters and legislators that hold all other non-treatment factors constant.

For our experiments on voters we followed the template of Tomz and Van Houweling (2009), by providing the CCES respondents with a brief summary of two competing candidates’ biographical information and issues positions. We placed a survey experiment designed to test the electoral effects of both positive and negative valence information about a party’s brand on the October wave of the 2010 CCES. For the 2010 experiment we provided respondents with the following information about Candidates A and B:

Candidate A is the incumbent from the majority party who has served in the legislature for 4 years. During the previous session [TREATMENT]. He supports caps on carbon emissions and supports fining businesses that hire illegal immigrants.

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9We designed the experiments to only discuss incumbent candidates because in the extant theoretical models the party brand assumption explains only how legislators behave while in office in anticipation of upcoming elections (Cox and McCubbins, 2007) - thus a focus on incumbents seeking reelection.

10For both of our experiments we chose issues that were part of the planning document for what questions would be asked as part of the common content for the CCES (Ansolabehere, 2010). In both cases at least one of the two issues we chose was either not asked on the common content or was only asked to a randomly chosen subset of the sample. In the Supplementary Materials we present results that control, when possible, for the constituent’s positions on these issues.
Candidate B is the sitting mayor of a mid-size town in the district. During his time in office, his town has experienced slightly above average economic development and population growth. He opposes caps on carbon emissions and opposes fining businesses that hire illegal immigrants.

We assigned respondents, with equal probability, to one of the four treatment conditions given below (where the text in quotes was substituted into the text above in place of [TREATMENT]). We designed these treatments to capture non-ideological information about a party’s actions that affect the party label, including good actions (such as passing the budget on time) and bad actions (such as being caught in a scandal).

**Treatment 1 - Passed the Budget on Time:** “his party passed the budget on time for the first time in 20 years”

**Treatment 2 - Passed the Budget Late:** “his party passed the budget late for the first time in 20 years”

**Treatment 3 - Rated as being Ethical:** “ethics watchdog groups have praised his party for being the most ethical in recent years”

**Treatment 4 - Rated as being Unethical:** “ethics watchdog groups have condemned his party for being the least ethical in recent years”

In the experiment, we showed respondents two candidates’ bios and then asked them which candidate they would vote for. The results of the experiment on our 793 respondents are presented in the first column of Table 1 and show that voters are sensitive to the party label. Respondents who were told that Candidate A’s party passed the budget on time were 12 percentage points more likely to vote for Candidate A than those who were told that his party passed the budget late; a statistically and substantively significant difference. The effect of the ethical ratings was even larger. Respondents who were told that Candidate A’s party was praised for being the most ethical in recent years chose Candidate A 60 percent of the time. In contrast, those who were told that Candidate A’s party was condemned as being the least ethical in recent years, chose Candidate A only 43 percent of the time. This 17-percentage point difference is also statistically significant.

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11 Figure A1 in the Appendix provides a screen shot of what the 2011 CCES experiment looked like. The 2010 experiment was the same except for the candidate descriptions.
In the Supplementary Materials we present the results when estimating both OLS and probit regression models that control for the respondent’s partisan identification, ideology, and positions on the two issues that the candidates in the vignette took positions on. Controlling for those factors does not change the results.

While this strong evidence is consistent with the claim that that the party’s actions, and hence the party brand, affects voters’ support for the incumbent, one possible interpretation is that this result is driven by respondents using the party’s ethical rating to make inferences about the incumbent legislator’s ethical behavior. In other words, the effect of the party’s brand in this area might be confounded with (inferred) information about the individual legislator.

In actual practice this may be a reason that party labels matter. Legislators try to claim credit for their party’s good actions (even if they did not contribute) and voters may assume that they are guilty by association when fellow party members are caught in scandal (even if they themselves did nothing wrong). With that said, we ran a follow up experiment on the 2011 CCES to see if the party label still had an effect even if respondents were given clear information about the behavior of the individual legislator.

For the 2011 CCES, we again provided respondents with short bios for two candidates that provided information about their previous office-holding experience and their issue positions (see Figure A1 in the Appendix for the full text). In the 2011 CCES vignette we provided the following information about the incumbent (Candidate B):

Candidate B is the incumbent from the majority party who has served in the legislature for 4 years. He supports caps on carbon emissions and supports a free trade agreement with South Korea. The state’s ethics watchdog group gave the following ratings to Candidate B and his party:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Candidate B</th>
<th>Candidate B’s Party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>A-</td>
<td>A-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>A-</td>
<td>A-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>A-</td>
<td>[TREATMENT]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We designed the experiment to provide ratings of both the candidate and his party to minimize the possibility that respondents were using the ratings about the party to make inferences about the ethical behavior of the incumbent candidate. We manipulated the ethical rating of the party
such that half of the respondents were randomly chosen to learn that the party received an “A-” rating in 2011 and the other half were informed that the party received a “D” rating in 2011.

The last column of Table 1 shows the difference in how likely voters were to vote for the incumbent (Candidate B in this scenario) as a function of what rating his party received from the ethical watchdog group. In the 2010 study we found a 17-percentage point difference between having the party rated as the most ethical versus least ethical. When we isolate the effect of the rating for the party the effect is only an 8-percentage point difference, roughly half the size. Still the difference is statistically significant and the results presented in the supplementary material show that this difference holds when we control for the respondent’s partisanship, ideology, and issue positions.

The fact that the result is about half the size may be an indication that the 2010 study was confounding the effects of the party label with possible inferences about the incumbent’s own behavior. However, we need to be cautious in reaching any conclusions because the results may also be different because we used a different rating system (A-/D versus most/least ethical). Either way, when we isolate the party’s rating separately from any information about the individual legislator’s behavior, the party’s rating (and hence party brand) significantly affects voters’ decisions.

These experiments show that a party’s brand, as influenced by the party’s actions, has a spillover effect on the individual members. Whether it reflects the party’s legislative performance or their ethical behavior, the party brand affects the electoral fortunes of the individual legislators.

Do Leaders Act in Anticipation of Affecting the Party Brand?

Cox and McCubbins (1993, 2005, 2007) argue that that rank-and-file legislators give their party leaders power to pressure them to act against their constituents’ preferences because the party’s ability to get things done influences the party label, which in turn influences constituents’ vote decisions. In the previous section, we showed that voters reward individual legislators for their party’s record of legislative performance. Legislators thus have incentives to care about their party label. In this section, we test whether legislative leaders respond to those incentives by pressuring members to vote with the party when poll results show that passing legislation will improve the
party brand in future elections.

A major advantage of our study is that we test this prediction using a survey experiment on state legislators. The experiment was part of a survey that was conducted in March 2012 and sent to all of the roughly 7,000 state legislators in the United States. The survey was created with the web-based program Qualtrics and a link to the survey was sent to the state legislators via email. To help account for the possibility that some staff members would fill out the survey, our first question on the survey asked the respondent whether they were a state legislator or a staff member. We present all of the results with the self-identified state legislator sub-sample; the results with the full sample are presented in the Supplementary Materials and are, if anything, even stronger.

In designing the survey we tried to keep the survey under five minutes because of concerns about burdening state legislators. To keep the survey within the short time frame, we administered some of the longer questions (including the survey experiments in this and the next section) to only a subsample of the respondents.\(^{12}\) The supplementary appendix provides more details about the survey and our respondents.

The party pressure experiment presented respondents with a short vignette about party leaders who can only pass the budget on time if two members who come from districts that are not happy with the current budget vote to pass it anyways (Figure A2 in the Appendix shows the full text of the vignette). We chose to use a bill that was close to passing because this is where leaders are most likely to exercise pressure and where it would be most important if they did so (Snyder and Groseclose, 2000). The vignette ends by asking the respondents whether they think that the leaders will pressure these members to pass the budget. The key to the experiment is that the vignette randomly varies how important passing the budget on time is for the party label by reporting the results of the following public opinion poll question:

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\text{Is the \{Adjective Form of Legislator’s Party\} majority’s ability to pass the budget on time likely to be a deciding factor in whether you would vote to return the \{Adjective Form of Legislator’s Party\} majority to power next year?}
\]

Respondents were randomly assigned to either see that 72% of voters answered yes (and 28% answered no) or see that only 18% of voters answered yes (and 82% answered no). In other words,\(^{12}\) The overall response rate for the survey was about 15 percent.
half of the respondents were told that voters would use this roll call in deciding how to vote in the next legislative election and half were told that voters would not use this as a major consideration. Table 2 shows that legislators who learned that the budget vote would affect the party label were 12 percentage points more likely to say that the party leaders would exert pressure on the moderate members to vote with the party. State legislators believe that their party leaders are more likely to exert pressure when the vote is likely to affect the party label.

Further, although these results are already sufficiently large to warrant attention, they may be a lower bound because of a potential ceiling effect. Over 70 percent of respondents thought the party leaders would pressure the members to vote for the budget even if passing it on time did not affect the party label. Assuming that legislators care about policy (Fenno, 1973), they have incentives to help the budget pass on time because it affects many of the policies that the legislators and their party leaders care about. If we were to look at an issue that had less policy significance for so many legislators but still had a strong effect on the party label, we would expect an even larger treatment effect.

Does the Party Label Directly Affect Legislators’ Votes?

We have shown that legislative leaders work to build their party brand when they expect an electoral return for their party. However, because leaders have a limited amount of capital (carrots or sticks), they only pressure members on a small portion of the many votes taken. Although such party pressure on close votes is an important way in which party labels can affect legislative outcomes, only looking at party leaders’ behavior will underestimate the importance of the party label if it also has a direct effect on how legislators vote. In this section we test if legislators directly respond to the value of their party label when deciding how to vote. In other words, we test whether the party label would matter even if party leaders never pressured legislators.

We conducted two survey experiments on state legislators, as part of our state legislative survey (see the description in the Supplementary Appendix), to evaluate whether the party label has a direct impact on how legislators vote. Again, we asked some of our longer questions to only a subsample of the respondents in order to keep the survey close to the targeted five-minute time
For these experiments respondents read a vignette about a legislator who was considering whether to vote for a bill supported by their party leaders (Figure A3 in the Appendix shows the full text of the vignette). The respondents were given two pieces of information from a recent public opinion poll of voters in his/her district: (1) what percent of voters in the district favored the bill, and (2) the generic party ballot for voters in the district (i.e., what percent of voters intended to vote for the legislator’s party in the next election). We varied the results of this second poll question to see whether legislators were more likely to vote with the party leaders when the value of the party label was higher (i.e., when more people intended to vote for the party in the next election). In the low-valued party label treatment only 29 percent of the voters indicated that they were planning to vote for the legislator’s party (and 65 percent planning to vote for the opposite party with 6 percent undecided). In the high-valued party label treatment the numbers were reversed with 65 percent of the voters indicating that they were planning to vote for the legislator’s party (and 29 percent were planning to vote for the opposite party with 6 percent undecided).

In the first experiment we portrayed the voters in the district as being split about the merits of the bill with 45 percent favoring passage, 46 opposing passage, and 9 percent expressing no opinion. In the second experiment the voters were against the bill with only 34 percent favoring passage (with 57 percent opposing passage and 9 percent expressing no opinion). In all other ways, the two experiments were the same. We did not conduct a third experiment where voters supported the measure because theoretically it is a much less interesting case; when constituents and party leaders both support the measure (and no other information is given) legislators have no reason to vote against the measure.

The first column of Table 3 shows the results from the survey experiment where voters in the vignette are split on the measure. Note that the modal response in both treatments is the same: 93 percent of the respondents exposed to the high-valued, party label treatment and 74 percent of the respondents exposed to the low-valued, party label treatment thought that the legislator would vote with the party leaders. Krehbiel (1998) argues that one reason legislators from the same party vote together is they have shared preferences and not because leaders effectively pressure them to
change their votes. Our results provide partial support for that view. The legislator in the divided public opinion vignette faces no pressure from party leaders or voters (who are split on the issue). Instead the only information for them to rely upon is that the party leaders support the measure. Respondents seem to have used that information to infer that the legislator would also support the measure because they have shared preferences. Thus, part of the reason that legislators vote together is that they have similar preferences.\textsuperscript{13}

The results in the first column of Table 3 also show that legislators are responsive to the value of their party label. Respondents exposed to the low-valued, party label treatment were about 19 percentage points less likely to think that the legislator would vote with the party leaders than were their counterparts who saw the high-valued, party label treatment.

This result stands in contrast to how legislators behave when constituents are clearly opposed. The last column of Table 3 shows that when when constituents opposed the bill (only 34 percent favored passage), there was almost no difference between the low-valued and high-valued, party label treatments.

Significantly, the value of the party label only has a direct effect on how legislators vote in cases where voters are split. What might explain why the party label has a heterogeneous treatment effect? Significantly, it cannot be explained by the idea that legislators simply vote against the party when they are unpopular as a way to bolster their own electoral position (Carson et al., 2010). If that was occurring, we would expect the value of the party label to have a treatment effect in both experiments.

Bianco (1994) provides a possible explanation for the observed heterogeneous treatment effect. Bianco argues that legislators have leeway on their votes when two conditions are met: (1) constituents are uncertain about the proposal and (2) constituents trust the legislator to act in their interest. The logic is that when voters know exactly what they want, legislators need to respond to those preferences and they have no leeway. However, when the constituents are uncertain about an issue (e.g., when they are split on the measure), the legislators can exercise more discretion if

\textsuperscript{13}Alternatively, it is possible that in addition to using leadership support to impute the legislator’s position on the issue, it is possible that they are also responding to partisan incentives to vote with the leadership in the hopes of abstract rewards for party loyalty. However, any abstract party loyalty rewards legislators may assume, are effectively held constant across the experimental manipulation, such that our results should be unaffected by this interpretation.
voters trust them. One possibility is that the party label’s value captures constituents’ level of trust for the legislator’s party (and thus the legislator) and the opinion poll about the bill captures constituents’ uncertainty about the proposal. This view suggests that there is no treatment effect when constituents are opposed to the bill because the legislator has no leeway in that case; legislators respond to their constituents’ clear preference. In contrast, when voters are split on the measure, legislators can exercise leeway to vote more with their party if constituents trust her party. In other words, when the value of the party label is high, we would expect to see more support for the position supported by the party leaders – because it is likely to be the legislator’s own position (Krehbiel, 1998) – but only when constituents are split on the issue.

Discussion

Scholars have made tremendous progress in understanding legislators and how they behave by connecting their actions in the chamber to their electoral incentives (Mayhew, 1974). While most of these studies were interested in the behavior of the individual legislator, recent studies have also considered legislators’ electoral incentives to understand how the party as an organization works. The party brand is the key theoretical concept that connects the behavior of the party organization in the legislature to their electoral incentives. The basic idea behind the party brand is that voters hold politicians accountable for the actions of the party as a whole and not just the behavior of the individual legislator. Because the party brand thus affects incumbents reelection prospects, legislators and their party leaders have incentives to improve the value of their party’s brand.

Despite the party brand’s importance to explaining how parties in legislatures function, there has been a disconnect between the theoretical and empirical work on the party brand. To evaluate the theoretical claims about the party label and its effect on how parties function in legislatures, we need to answer some basic questions about party labels. In this paper, we have answered three of those fundamental questions. Figure 1 lists the questions we have posed and summarizes our finding. Our findings have important theoretical and practical implications for understanding politics.
Implications for Theories of Legislatures and Representation

The party cartel (Cox and McCubbins, 1993, 2005, 2007) and the conditional party government theories (Rohde, 1991; Aldrich, 1995; Aldrich and Rohde, 2000, 2001; Aldrich, Berger and Rohde, 2002; Aldrich, Rohde and Tofias, 2007) are two influential arguments about how parties shape legislative outcomes. Although these theories are typically presented as competing claims to explain party voting in legislatures, we argue that they are better viewed as complimentary theories that can be connected through the party label. In particular, the foundational assumptions of both theories can be framed in terms of two key questions about the party label: (1) Do voters hold incumbents responsible for their party’s record/label? (2) Do leaders act in anticipation of affecting those outcomes. These two questions are explicitly at the heart of the party cartel theory. Further, and quite significantly, they also provide another way of understanding the conditional party government argument.

The key independent variable in the conditional party government theory is the ideological homogeneity of the party’s members. When legislators are more ideological homogeneous, the conditional party government theory predicts that we should observe more party pressure (and hence more party voting). Rohde (1991) argues that this occurs because members of the party delegate power to their leaders to enforce party discipline when they become more ideologically homogeneous. This step in the argument could instead be explained by the party label. As the members of the legislature become more ideologically homogeneous, voters view the party labels as being more informative about the legislators’ ideology and accomplishments (Levendusky, 2009). In other words, the increased homogeneity of the party members increases the salience of the party label to voters. As the party label becomes more salient to voters, voters will hold incumbents responsible for what their parties do, which in turn means that leaders have incentives to pressure members to pass the parties’ agenda. In this light, the conditional party government can be viewed as an argument about when the party cartel theory is most likely to work (i.e., when the party label is most salient because of the ideological homogeneity of the party’s members).

Rather than competing with each other, the conditional party government and party cartel theories are complementary with the party label providing the connection. The key assumptions
needed to make that connection are that voters care about party labels when deciding how to vote for the incumbent and that party leaders act in anticipation of affecting the value of their party’s label. We have found strong evidence for both of these claims.

Further, while many party reputation theories have suggested that party brands have an indirect effect on legislator behavior, we have also found evidence that the value of the party label has a direct effect on how legislators vote. In particular, when voters are split on an issue, a stronger party label causes legislators to be more likely to vote with the party leaders. This is consistent with Bianco (1994)’s argument that on issues where the voters are uncertain about what to do, the legislators have leeway when constituents trust them. In this case, the party label is an indication of the trust voters have in the legislator’s party.

Significantly, this result suggests that party leaders can influence legislative outcomes by working on their party label (and/or harming the opposing party’s label). In other words, party leaders can affect how legislators vote both directly (by pressuring them or giving them direct incentives) and indirectly (by working to affect party labels). Because most theories about parties in legislatures have only considered how leaders directly influence their members, researchers may be underestimating the influence that leaders have on affecting legislative outcomes.

One way that party leaders can affect the party label is through how they discuss legislative actions with the media (Sellers, 2010). Party leaders engage in spin to take credit for good outcomes and shift blame to the other party for bad outcomes. This behavior is certainly partly about electioneering, but it also is about achieving the more immediate goal of passing legislation on the party’s agenda. When leaders successfully build up the party brand, legislators are more willing to vote for the party agenda because they have leeway that comes from having their constituents’ trust. The desire to pass legislation also explains why leaders engage in this type of label building activities at the beginning of a legislative session when elections are two years away. As researchers, we cannot fully evaluate the impact that party leaders have on legislative outcomes without evaluating both the direct and indirect paths through which they influence rank-and-file members.

We hope that these findings shed new light on the most promising future directions of party research. Rather than attempting to distinguish between Conditional Party Government and Cartel
Party theories, these citizen and legislator survey results provide the empirical support found here for the necessary assumptions to unify these theories. Future research should also evaluate the relationship between the valence and ideological components of the party label. In this paper, we have focused exclusively on the valence component of the party brand, which we believe has been under-studied empirically to this point. While for the purposes of this analysis we have set aside the ideological component of the party brand, we believe that both ideological and valence components of the brand are likely operating simultaneously. The integration of these two aspects of the brand is a promising avenue for future research, and potentially has wide ranging consequences for legislative behavior, voter behavior, and the policy-making process.

**Implications for American Politics Today**

Our results also highlight the need to understand changes in the electoral environment that affect the salience of the party label. Changes that make the party label more salient to voters should cause leaders to be more likely to try to pressure members to vote for policy that will affect the party label in a positive manner. In recent decades there have been changes that have worked in both directions. For example, in 1942 eighty-one percent of states included an option that allowed voters in their state to vote a straight party ticket by marking one box (Albright, 1942); in 2012 only thirty percent of states have that option (National Conference of State Legislators, 2011). The move away from making straight ticket voting easy should decrease the salience of the party label.\(^{14}\) On the other side of the equation, the media environment has also changed in recent decades. The decline of local media means that voters hear more about the national party and less about their own local representatives. These changes in the media industry mean that the party brand is more salient to voters because they hear more about the party as a national entity and less as a collection of local, individual representatives.

Our results also suggest that the changes to the value of the party label have made it harder for party leaders to pass legislation. In particular, we have shown that legislators are less likely to vote with their party if their party label is bad. In recent years, the approval ratings for both

\(^{14}\)See Carey and Shugart (1995) for a discussion of how other electoral rules incentivize voters to use the party label.
political parties and Congress as a whole have been at record lows (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 1995; Newport, 2011). We are in a period of bad party labels. We have shown that legislators are less likely to exercise leeway to vote with their party leaders when the value of their party label is low. Thus it has gotten harder to pass legislation that does not appeal to the constituents represented by the majority party because legislators have less leeway. This effect is compounded by the effects of returning to higher levels of polarization in recent years (McCarty, Poole and Rosenthal, 2006) which have made it harder for leaders to get votes from members across the aisle. In a period of high polarization and bad party labels, it is hard for leaders to get the votes they need to pass legislation.

While we are in an era of poor party reputations, we are also in an era of seemingly very strong parties. Despite the parties’ attempts to improve their brands, the results have been, from their perspective, unsatisfactory. While these two disparate facts may seem paradoxical, we believe that they may instead reflect the reality that a tremendous amount of partisan activity is aimed more at harming the opposition party’s reputation rather than helping their own reputations. This negative flip-side to the valence component of the party brand is entirely consistent with the evidence and theoretical arguments presented here, yet it is an under-appreciated component of these theories that in many ways best mirrors the empirical reality of American politics today.

Finally, the results suggest that legislators and their party leaders can change the value of their party label. Parties can earn and maintain a reputation for ethical behavior, can pass the budget and other major bills in a timely manner, and can generally engage in actions related to good government. If parties can engage in these activities they can build their party label and gain leeway to pass the bills important to their agenda.
Figure 1: Gaps in the Literature and the Answers We Find.

1. Does a party’s record of legislative accomplishment influence constituent’s voting decisions?

   A: Yes. Voters reward legislators for their party’s record of legislative performance. (Performance is conceived as a valence “good” government sense, not specific policies that might move the status quo.)

2. Do Leaders Act in Anticipation of Affecting the Party Brand?

   A: Yes. Legislators believe that leaders exert more pressure when the outcome of a legislative performance vote (passing the budget) is likely to affect constituents’ voting decisions at the polls. (Elite perceptions).

3. Does the party label ever influence legislator’s voting decisions directly in the absence of pressure from the leadership?

   A: Yes and no. When constituents are strongly opposed to a bill, a stronger party brand will not induce a legislator to vote with the party. When constituents are split on a bill, a stronger party brand will induce legislators to vote with the party.
Table 1: Do Voters Punish Incumbent Candidate’s for their Party’s Behavior?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment Variables (Info about Incumbent’s Party)</th>
<th>DV: Percent Voting for Incumbent</th>
<th>2010 Experiment</th>
<th>2011 Experiment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Party Passed Budget on Time</td>
<td>65.3%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Passed Budget Late</td>
<td>53.6%</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage Point Difference</td>
<td>11.7**</td>
<td>(t=2.34)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Rated as being Ethical</td>
<td>60.2%</td>
<td>50.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party Rated as being Unethical</td>
<td>43.2%</td>
<td>42.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage Point Difference</td>
<td>17.0***</td>
<td>(t=3.49)</td>
<td>(t=3.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>793</td>
<td>1,579</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

T-statistics in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1
Table 2: Do Leaders Pressure in Expectation of Improving the Party Label?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment Variables (Reaction to Party Passing Budget Late)</th>
<th>DV: Percent who Say that Party Leaders will Pressure Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voters will Punish Legislators</td>
<td>84.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voters will NOT Punish Legislators</td>
<td>72.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage Point Difference</td>
<td>12.1* (t=1.79)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N = 145

*t-statistics in parentheses. *** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.1*
Table 3: Does the Party Label have a Direct Effect on Legislators’ Votes?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party Label Treatments</th>
<th>Voter Support for Measure in Vignette:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Voters Split on Measure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority Support in Poll:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...For Legislators’ Party</td>
<td>92.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...For Opposition Party</td>
<td>74.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage Point Difference</td>
<td>18.6***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(t=3.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dependent Variable: Legislator would Vote with Party Leaders.
t-statistics in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1
Appendix: Survey Questions - Screen Shots

Figure A1: 2011 CCES Survey Experiment

Non-partisan groups often rate legislators’ performance and provide voter guides that include short descriptions of both legislative candidates. We would like your opinion about two candidates who we refer to as Candidate A and Candidate B.

Candidate A is the sitting mayor of a mid-size town in the district. During his time in office, his town has experienced slightly above average economic development and population growth. He opposes caps on carbon emissions and opposes a free trade agreement with South Korea.

Candidate B is the incumbent from the majority party who has served in the legislature for 4 years. He supports caps on carbon emissions and supports a free trade agreement with South Korea. The state’s ethics watchdog group gave the following ratings to Candidate B and his party:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethics Rating for Candidate B</td>
<td>A-</td>
<td>A-</td>
<td>A-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics Rating for Candidate B's Party</td>
<td>A-</td>
<td>A-</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on these descriptions, which candidate would you vote for?

- [ ] Candidate A
- [ ] Candidate B
Figure A2: Party Pressure Experiment

${e://Field/Party_Adjective}$ leaders who control the state legislature are two votes short of passing the budget on time. Days before the budget vote, a reputable firm releases the following poll result:

**Question:** "Is the ${e://Field/Party_Adjective}$ majority's ability to pass the budget on time likely to be a deciding factor in whether you would vote to return the ${e://Field/Party_Adjective}$ majority to power next year?"

- **Yes** - 72% / 18%
- **No** - 28% / 82%

To pass the budget on time, two ${e://Field/Party_Adjective}$ members who come from moderate districts where voters are unhappy with the current budget need to vote for the budget. Do you think that ${e://Field/Party_Adjective}$ leaders in this situation are likely to pressure these members to vote for the budget?

- **Yes**, they will pressure these members to vote for the budget
- **No**, they will not pressure these members to vote for the budget

---

Figure A3: The Party Label's Direct Effect

The day before the legislature votes on a bill that the ${e://Field/Party_Adjective}$ leaders in the chamber are trying to pass, a reputable polling firm releases the following poll of 600 voters in a ${e://Field/Party_Adjective}$ legislator's district:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question 1: Attitude on the Bill.</th>
<th>Question 2: Vote Intention in Next Election.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Favor Passage - 45/34%</td>
<td>${e://Field/leg_party} - 65/29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppose Passage - 46/57%</td>
<td>${e://Field/leg_otherparty} - 29/65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Opinion - 9%</td>
<td>Undecided - 6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How do you think the ${e://Field/Party_Adjective}$ legislator who represents this district would vote on this bill?

- **Vote** to pass the bill
- **Vote** against the bill
References


Cox, Gary and Mathew McCubbins. 2007. Legislative Leviathan. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


