Ideology and Party Pressure In Congress: A (New) Data-Based Approach* 

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Abstract

The role of parties and influence of party pressure on congressional voting is one of the questions central to the study of congress. How best to measure this influence has been hotly debated. In this paper, I propose a new approach to estimating the effect of party pressure by using two new previously unexplored sources of data: personal explanation data and leave of absence data. By combining personal explanation data (that include claims from members about how they would have voted on missing votes) with leave of absence data (that allow us to disentangle strategic from non-strategic abstention), we can calculate a pure position-taking metric that allows us to isolate the effect of party pressure on congressional voting in a variety of temporal, legislative, and electoral contexts. Preliminary results suggest that misaligned members (Democrats who represent Republican districts and vice versa) are 4 percentage points less likely to vote with their party and against their district’s preferences when party pressure is removed. I conclude by exploring how incorporating this new information changes our estimates of congressional ideology and which members (districts) experience the greatest change.

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The influence of political parties in congressional politics has been one of the most fiercely debated topics in legislative political science. At one end of the spectrum, Krehbiel argues that positive and significant party effects are rare (Krehbiel, 1993; 1998; 2000), while at the other end of the spectrum and with slightly different underlying approaches, Cox, McCubbins, Aldrich and Rohde have argued in favor of substantial influence (Rohde, 1991; Aldrich, 1995; Cox and McCubbins, 1993; 2005; Aldrich and Rohde, 2001). In addition, how best to measure this influence has been the subject of substantial disagreement (Snyder and Groseclose, 2000; Bianco and Sened, 2005). In this paper, I propose a new approach to estimating the effect of party pressure by using two new previously unexplored sources of data: personal explanation data and leave of absence data.

I have constructed these two new datasets—personal explanation data and leave of absence data—by drawing on information contained in the Congressional Record. A Personal Explanation is a claim from a member about how he or she would have voted (yea or nay) had he or she been present to cast a vote. They are without legislative impact and have no bearing on the outcome of the vote. But rather they are purely an exercise in position-taking recorded in the Congressional Record. A Leave of Absence is a notation in the Congressional Record from a Member’s Party Leader indicating that a given member had a non-political reason not to be present for a particular vote or time period. In essence, we can use congressional Leave of Absence records to disentangle strategic from non-strategic abstention.

By combining personal explanation data with leave of absence data, we can calculate a pure position-taking metric that allows us to isolate the effect of party pressure on congressional voting in a variety of temporal, legislative, and electoral contexts. We can use this approach to explore how legislators vote when party pressure is removed, and, in particular, we can explore how members who face the greatest difference between party preferences and constituency preferences behave. Preliminary results suggest that misaligned members (Democrats who represent Republican districts and vice versa) are 4 percentage points less
likely to vote with their party and against their district’s preferences when party pressure is removed. I conclude by exploring how incorporating this new information changes our estimates of congressional ideology and which members (districts) experience the greatest change.

1 Scrutinizing Roll Call Voting Data & Metrics

In recent years, several new studies have challenged the discipline’s complacency with regards to the widespread use (and occasional misapplication) of roll call voting data and metrics (Noel, 2014; Caughey and Schickler, 2014; Bateman, Clinton and Lapinski, 2014; Roberts, 2007; Clinton and Lapinski, 2008; Jessee and Theriault, 2014; Crisp and Driscoll, 2012). Despite this recent burst of additional scrutiny, the problem of missing votes and abstention has been notably absent. In the following section, I review the extant research on abstention and the missing vote problem, before discussing the new Personal Explanation Data and Leave of Absence Data that I use to augment the existing roll call voting data record.

Congressional roll call voting data and the metrics derived from it are at the heart of the modern study of legislative politics. The ubiquity of roll call voting data in the field of Congress has given rise to a general complacency regarding the quality of these measures. Recent years, however, have seen scholars increasing scrutinizing the assumptions and hidden details too often overlooked in such widely used data (Roberts, 2007; Clinton, 2012; Noel, 2014; Caughey and Schickler, 2014; Bateman, Clinton and Lapinski, 2014). One important and frequently ignored problem that with a handful of exceptions has yet to receive such attention is the problem of missing roll call data in the form of abstentions from voting.

The problem of how to treat this missing data may appear to be a trivial technicality

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1 An important and related line of research involves the question of ideal point estimation and modeling (Clinton and Jackman, 2009; Clinton, Jackman and Rivers, 2004; Clinton, 2012, 2007; Clinton and Meirowitz, 2003).
until one considers exactly how widespread and common congressional abstention is. At different periods of congressional history, the missing data problem (in the form of abstention rates) has been as high as 38% and as low as 7% (Poole and Rosenthal, 2007). This means that in some congresses, ideological estimates of members policy positions are based on a non-random selection of 62% of the votes taken. This large and non-randomly introduced missingness has the potential to substantially bias our estimates of members ideological positions, thus calling into question many of our answers to classic questions of congressional representation.

With few exceptions, missing roll call vote data is treated by scholars as if it is “missing at random” (MAR) and dropped or ignored in any subsequent analysis or metrics based on the roll call data (Rubin, 1976). This assumption may prove problematic if member’s abstentions are non-random, as may be suspected by the classic calculus of voting theory proposed by Downs (1957) and refined by Riker and Ordeshook (1986). While some work has been done to diagnose the potential implications of this problematic assumption (notably Poole and Rosenthal (1997) and Rosas and Shomer (2008); Rosas, Shomer and Haptonstahl (2015)), to date none have attempted to fill in the missingness with auxiliary information from the Congressional Record. To that end, I have constructed two new datasets: 1) Congressional Leave of Absence Dataset and 2) Personal Explanation Dataset that cover the 101st to 112th Congresses (1989-2012).

1.1 Missing Data Problem: How to Handle Abstention in Roll Call Voting Data

The classic calculus of voting theory proposed by Downs (1957) and refined by Riker and Ordeshook (1986) explicitly addresses the fundamental participatory question of whether or not it is rational to vote. Although most often applied to citizens’ participatory decisions,
similar logic applies to that of legislators:

\[ EU(Voting) = pB - C + D \]  \hspace{1cm} (1)

Where the expected utility of voting equals the probability of a vote impacting the outcome \((p)\) times the utility benefit (difference in utility between candidates), minus the cost of voting \((C)\), plus the democratic duty (goodwill feeling, \(D)\) of voting. This calculus of voting becomes somewhat more complicated when we adapt it to legislators voting on roll call votes, when they may care about their personal policy preferences, the electoral ramifications of their constituents’ preferences, the preferences and potential rewards/punishments handed out by party leaders, and finally the potential electoral costs of frequent shirking, in addition to the traditional cost benefit calculus items.

This classic calculus of voting, so often applied to turnout decision of voters, is frequently ignored by legislative scholars. There are sound reasons why academics have chosen to ignore this problem. Foremost among them, is the pragmatic need for data, need for ideological measures, and the non-trivial problem of the lack of any solution about how to address the problem. But there are also other, more substantive reasons for ignoring the problem. In his seminal work, *The Logic of Congressional Action*, Arnold (1990, pg. 62-63) alludes only briefly to the possibility of abstention on roll call votes by noting the irrationality of strategic abstention. He argued that media attention (often highlighted by congressional challengers) was so focused on participation rates that it “rarely makes political sense.” Further, he argued that interest groups view those who do not vote with them, as having voted against them, such that members abstaining would take a double political hit to both their participation rate and loss of favor with the interest group.

Thus the literature provides theoretical explanations both for and against strategic abstention (shirking). The empirical literature on the subject is likewise mixed. 

\[ ^{2} \] A related strain of literature examines the last period problem of how retiring legislators who no longer...
Noll (1991) took an early innovative approach to studying abstention by exploring repeated House roll call votes over a number of years regarding appropriations for a nuclear reactor during the 1970s and 1980s. They provide a formal model and estimated a binary logistic regression conditional on voting and found that supporters of a bill are more likely to abstain than opponents, conflicted legislators are more likely to vote on the losing side, but will abstain on close votes, and indifferent legislators will abstain on lopsided votes and trade their votes otherwise. Turning to abstention and roll call voting more broadly, In Chapter 10 of their seminal Ideology & Congress book, Poole and Rosenthal (1997, 2007) briefly explore the question of abstention and find evidence that abstentions are correlated with the cost of voting, the vote margin, and ideological indifference on the subject of the vote.

Most of what we know on the topic of strategic abstention and legislative roll call voting comes from a series of papers by Rothenberg and Sanders (Rothenberg and Sanders, 1999, 2000a, 2002). They find that many of the classic calculus of voting factors that might influence the probability of being pivotal (closeness of the vote, and the polarization of the vote) have no impact, rather they emphasize the relationship between the day of the week of the vote and potential electioneering tradeoffs faced by members. Their findings contradict those of Forgette and Sala (1999)’s study of the U.S. Senate which finds (consistent with Conditional Party Government theory) that abstention rates lower on party votes. Most recently, Cohen (2012) demonstrated a relationship between temperature (heat) in Washington DC and abstention, and Brown and Goodliffe (2013) explored abstention in state legislatures finding state legislative shirking on both close votes and important (major) votes, in addition to variation in legislative professionalism and salary impacting absenteeism. Perhaps of greatest relevance for future work on this project, Rosas and Shomer (2008) and Rosas, Shomer and Haptonstahl (2015) examine non-random abstention cross-nationally, face re-election constraints behave both in terms of abstention and substantive voting. See Lott (1987, 1990); Zupan (1990); Bender and Lott (1996); Rothenberg and Sanders (2000b); Nokken (2013).
documenting its existence, and build a “competing principals” model for estimating ideal points with strategic abstention.

While all of these studies shed light on the scope and nature of the problem of abstention and missing data, they are limited in what they can do to address problems of missing data and abstention without additional information to augment the voting matrix. In the following sections I introduce this new personal explanation data and leave of absence data, explain how they can augment and address our understanding of roll call voting data and abstention, and conclude with some preliminary explorations of three questions that can be answered with this data.

2 Introducing Personal Explanation Data

The first, and simplest step, we can take toward combatting the problem of missing roll call vote data is to complete the data wherever possible. Namely, if we knew how members would have voted had they been present, then using that vote intention would be (likely) preferable to dropping the vote entirely. Fortunately, the House of Representatives has a commonly used procedure by which members can do exactly that. Members who miss a vote for any reason (with a formal Leave of Absence or without one), may insert a “Personal Explanation” into the Congressional Record, in which members note how they claim they would have voted on the issue had they been present for the vote (Koempel, Straus and Schneider, 2008).

Figure 1 below shows the Personal Explanation of Rep. Adam Smith (D-WA) and is typical of how most personal explanations appear in the Congressional Record.

3 The verbatim rules regarding a “Personal Explanation” are included in the Appendix A, Figure 3, last paragraph.

4 Since the advent of electronic voting in the 93rd congress, members may use the same procedure if they believe their vote was incorrectly recorded, though the Congressional Research Service estimates that incorrectly recorded electronic votes has had no impact on the outcome of any roll call votes (Koempel, Straus and Schneider, 2008). In their survey of 30 years of electronic voting issues in personal explanations, Koempel, Straus and Schneider (2008) find electronic voting errors comprise less than 1% (0.62% to be precise).
The term “Personal Explanation” is a bit of a misnomer, and imprecise to say the least, in that members provide no explanation for either their absence or the direction of their vote. Rather, it is simply a record of what they claim they would have done had they been present to do so. As Koempel, Straus and Schneider (2008) explain in their Congressional Research Service report this practice dates to at least the 29th Congress (1845-1847), and is purely symbolic having no impact on the outcome of the vote.

To the best of my knowledge, aside from the examination of electronic voting errors by the Congressional Research Service the only previous attempt to collect this data was by Congressional Quarterly (Annual). In their annual almanacs, they printed these personal explanations and used the data to create a summary “On the Record Score” of each member’s participation –namely the fraction of votes on which he or she publicly declared a position either by voting, issuing a personal explanation in the congressional record, or responding

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5 In using the term “claim” to describe the members’ stated voted intention, I cast no aspersions on the veracity of the stated vote intention, but rather am attempting to distinguish between actual votes with legislative consequences and stated vote intention with no binding legislative consequences (in essence a pure position-taking exercise).
to a Congressional Quarterly Poll asking how they would have voted. It was this summary “On the Record Participation” metric that Fiorina used in his work on abstention in the 85th, 88th and 91st Congresses in Representatives, Roll Calls, and Constituencies (Fiorina, 1974). Fiorina (1974)”s study is the only academic work I have found to examine personal explanation data (it looked at how personal explanation data impacted aggregate abstention (participation) metrics). Thus, we know very little about how the inclusion of personal explanation data may, or may not, impact our roll call based metrics of legislative behavior.

3 Introducing Leave of Absence Data

Once member’s stated vote intention is incorporated into the roll call voting data, one natural next step is to harness additional information to assess whether an abstention is deliberate or missing at random. Here again we can turn to a commonly used but rarely studied procedure whereby members who miss a roll call vote for any non-political reason may request a “Leave of Absence” from the House of Representatives. This “Leave of Absence” procedure is analogous to an excused absence from high school in which a parent or guardian writes a note vouching for the appropriateness of the absence. In this case, it is a member’s Party Leader inserting a note into the Congressional Record on the member’s behalf vouching that it is a non-political absence. Figure 2 below shows a typical Leave of Absence notation in the Congressional Record.

The leaves of absence noted in the Congressional Record above (from May 6, 2014) are fairly typical. Most of the time, though not always, members will offer a brief explanation for why the member was requesting a leave of absence. In this example, three members requested a leave for a single day due to recent tornado activity in their home states (Alabama, Arkansas, and Mississippi), and the final member (Rep. Holt) requested leave because he was “attending to a family matter.” Typically, the excuses offered fall in one of eight cate-
categories: personal illness/medical, official business, personal reasons/business, travel, funeral, family reasons, emergency, and primary elections. I’ve coded the excuses offered into these eight categories, and in future research, I plan to further explore this auxiliary information.

One complicating feature of the leave of absence notes in the Congressional Record is that they typically specify a day, or certain hours during the day, but do not mention specific roll call votes. In collecting and entering the leave of absence notes into a roll call dataset, one of the most time consuming tasks was to hand code the day and partial day descriptions into specific roll call votes. For the purposes of this paper, the leave of absence data is analyzed at the vote rather than the date level.

Although it has gone largely unnoticed by political scientists, this Leave of Absence practice dates back to at least the 53rd Congress (1893-1895) when missing votes was so widespread and problematic for the functioning of the House that members without a Leave of Absence were fined for missing votes [Hinds 1907 Section 3011].

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6Recently, Rep. Charles Boustany (R-LA) has attempted to revive the practice of fining members for missing votes...
Absence data, we can attempt to distinguish between strategic (political) and non-strategic (apolitical) abstention. This is not to say that the Leave of Absence procedure is fully immune from political manipulation. To carry the academic excuse analogy one step further, college professors are well-aware of the perils of exam time for the health of grand-parents (or at least the frequency of excuses received). While there may be some manipulation of the Leave of Absence procedure, on average, absences excused by “Leaves of Absence” should be less strategic (political) than absences not excused.

4 The Fundamentals: Leave of Absence and Personal Explanation Descriptive Data

For pragmatic reasons, I have collected the data from the 101st to 112th Congresses. While earlier periods of congressional history which featured even higher levels of abstention might be more interesting and important for a variety of substantive reasons, pragmatically, the fact that the Congressional Record is not text searchable until the 101st Congress means that the earlier Congresses are much more time-consuming and difficult to collect.

Table 1 below shows the overall count of roll call vote responses and incorporating: actual roll call votes, leave of absence information, and personal explanation information. While I collected the leave of absence data and the personal explanation data from the Congressional Record, I should note that the original roll call data matrices here come from the voteview.com website.

7 The 101st roll call data and codebook was originally created by the ICPSR and was modified and cleaned by Keith Poole. The 102nd-108th congresses were compiled by Keith Poole and Nolan McCarty. The 109th-112th congresses were compiled by Jeff Lewis and Keith Poole.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not in Congress</td>
<td>92,941</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yea</td>
<td>1,798,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paired Yea</td>
<td>290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Announced Yea</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Announced Nay</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paired Nay</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nay</td>
<td>1,618</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present</td>
<td>266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Voting</td>
<td>106,257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missed + Leave of Absence</td>
<td>16,984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted Yea + Leave of Absence</td>
<td>766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voted Nay + Leave of Absence</td>
<td>689</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paired Yea + Leave of Absence</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Announced Yea + Leave of Absence</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Announced Nay + Leave of Absence</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paired Nay + Leave of Absence</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present + Leave of Absence</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not a Member + Leave of Absence</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missed + Explan: Yea</td>
<td>5,690</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missed + Explan: Nay</td>
<td>5,212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missed + Explan: Present</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nay + Explan: Yea</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yea + Explan: Nay</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nay + Explan: Present</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yea + Explan: Present</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yea + Explan: Yea</td>
<td>418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nay + Explan: Nay</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missed + Leave of Absence + Explan: Yea</td>
<td>2,923</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missed + Leave of Absence + Explan: Present</td>
<td>2,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yea + Leave of Absence + Explan: Nay</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yea + Leave of Absence + Explan: Yea</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nay + Leave of Absence + Explan: Nay</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For the most part the descriptions are self-explanatory, but there are some surprising results. There are instances in the data in which a member had a leave of absence but voted anyway, and there are also instances in the data in which a member voted one way, and then offered an explanation that they wanted to vote the other way. These instances are fairly rare given the approximately 6.7 million cases in the data. Given the volume of hand-coding involved, there may be errors that remain in the data, but I’ve done a substantial amount to eliminate coding error. Each vote was coded by two separate RAs, and any discrepancies were cross-checked by a third RA. I’ve further hand-checked some of the usual cases, and they do indeed exist.

The coverage of the leave of absence data and personal explanation data is fairly widespread. Table 2 below shows the coverage of personal explanation and leave of absence data in two recent congresses (111th and 112th).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Coverage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Members without any missing votes</td>
<td>17 members (2%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members entered at least one leave of absence</td>
<td>292 members (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members entered at least one personal explanation</td>
<td>629 members (71%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members w/ least one personal explanation and/or leave of absence</td>
<td>692 members (78%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As seen in Table 2 above, the overwhelming majority of members (78%) entered at least one leave of absence or personal explanation over the two most recent congresses (111th and 112th). An additional 2% of members (17 people) had no reason to enter either a leave of absence nor a personal explanation, because they did not miss a single vote during this four year period.

5 How does pure position-taking differ from actual voting record?

To explore the question of how pure position-taking differs from actual roll call voting, I began by looking at how party voting differs across these two contexts. Of particular interest is how misaligned members (what Grimmer (2013) calls “marginal” representatives—Democrats who represent Republican districts and Republicans who represent Democratic districts—differ when they are engaging in purely symbolic position-taking and when they are engaging in consequential “real” voting behavior.

For the dependent variable, I follow Poole and Rosenthal’s definition of a party unity vote as a vote in which at least 50% of the Democrats vote against at least 50% of the Republicans. This analysis is run on the subset of party votes, and the dependent variable is a dichotomous variable in which voting with your party is coded as a 1, and voting against your party is coded as 0.

For this preliminary analysis, I have included two explanatory variables: member misalignment, and ideological extremism. Theoretically, we would expect members who are misaligned to behave quite differently across these two different contexts. In the traditional roll call voting context, members who are misaligned often face difficult voting decisions, particularly so on party votes in which there is clear disagreement between the parties on the desired outcome. Consider, for example, a Democrat who represents a Republican district.
On a party vote, they face a difficult decision between siding with their party and siding with their district. In these consequential voting situations their party will often pressure them to vote with their party and against their district, while their constituents and re-election motivated members will want them to vote against their party. By contrast in the pure position-taking context of the personal explanations, we would imagine the parties to exert substantially less influence as this is an effectively costless way for the member to ingratiating him or herself to the district.

To measure misalignment, I’ve created a dichotomous variable that is coded 1 under two circumstances: 1) when a district is represented by a Democratic member of Congress, and in the most recent presidential election the Democratic presidential candidate received less than 50% of the vote in that district, 2) when a district is represented by a Republican member of Congress and in the most recent presidential election the Democratic presidential candidate received more than 50% of the vote in that district. In all other circumstances, members are coded as properly aligned (0).

The second variable I control for is a roll call voting based measure of ideological extremism, which is measured as the absolute value of the 1st Dimension DW-Nominate score. Almost by definition (in fact, mechanically so), members who receive ideologically extreme roll call voting scores should be substantially more likely to vote with their party in both contexts.

Finally, we want to synthesize both the leave of absence data and personal explanation data to understand differences in member behavior across three different contexts: actual roll call votes, how legislators claim they would have voted on vote they missed for a non-political reason, and how legislators claim they would have voted on a strategic abstention (when they did not obtain a leave of absence).

The advantage of comparing pure position-taking claims across different types of abstem-

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8I am grateful to Gary Jacobson for sharing his presidential election voteshare data.
tion (leave of absence and abstention without a leave of absence) is that on average, we would expect leave of absence to be more randomly distributed and less deliberately chosen as a vote the member wanted to avoid. As discussed previously, the chamber and party rules regarding Leave of Absence dictate that they only be given for non-political reasons (See Figure 4 in Appendix A for the detailed guidelines), so that we would expect on average abstentions covered by a Leave of Absence to be less strategic than other abstentions.

Given the potential electoral costs of accruing too many missed votes, and the desirability of obtaining a leave of absence when they can do so, we would imagine misaligned members might be most likely to shirk on votes that put them in the most difficult position between party and electoral pressure. Therefore, as we compare a member’s decision to vote with his or her party across these two different types of pure position-taking exercises, we would expect members who are misaligned to less likely to vote with their party in either case, but particularly in cases of strategic abstention.

To examine how misaligned members behave on party votes and controlling for ideological extremism, I ran three separate logistic regressions. Table 3 below displays the results of these regressions.

In Table 3, Model 1 (far left column) represents Pure Position-Taking personal explanations given by members who received a leave of absence, and the dependent variable is whether or not the explanation was in the direction of voting with the member’s party. This analysis is run on the subset of party votes, so that the party’s preferred vote direction is clear, and the subset of cases in which a member received a leave of absence and offered a personal explanation on a party vote. Model 2 (middle column) represents Pure Position-Taking personal explanations given by members who did not receive a leave of absence (presumed strategic abstention), and the dependent variable is whether or not the explanation was in the direction of voting with the member’s party. This analysis is run on the subset of party votes, so that the party’s preferred vote direction is clear, and the subset of cases in which
Table 3: Excused Absence Position Taking, Strategic Abstention Position-Taking and Actual Roll Call Votes: Logistic Regression Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pure Position-Taking</th>
<th>Actual Roll Call Votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Excused Absence</td>
<td>Strategic Abstention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misaligned</td>
<td>-0.268**</td>
<td>-0.406***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.136)</td>
<td>(0.108)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.024***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.005)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideological Extremism</td>
<td>4.238***</td>
<td>4.705***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.424)</td>
<td>(0.330)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5.258***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.015)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>0.511***</td>
<td>0.263*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.189)</td>
<td>(0.145)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.192***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.006)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>4,213</td>
<td>6,307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log Likelihood</td>
<td>-1,295.575</td>
<td>-1,937.786</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akaike Inf. Crit.</td>
<td>2,597.149</td>
<td>3,881.572</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01
a member did not receive a leave of absence and offered a personal explanation on a party vote. Model 3 (far right column) represents voting behavior on actual roll call votes.

To ease the interpretation of the effect of being from a misaligned district in these different voting contexts, Figure 3 below shows the first differences.

Figure 3: Effect of Party Pressure for Misaligned Members

On actual roll call votes, members who are misaligned vote no differently than other party members. To be precise, they vote fractionally more often with their party than their properly aligned peers do, though the difference is not statistically significant. When as political scientists we rely upon traditional roll call voting measures, or ideology estimates derived from these traditional roll call votes, this is the behavior we observe and how we
measure representational outcomes.

In both the leave of absence context and the strategic abstention context, members who are misaligned are substantially less likely to say they would vote with their party than they do on actual roll call votes. If we compare the relationship between party voting and misalignment across the excused absence and strategic abstention context, we see a stronger relationship where members who are misaligned are even less likely to vote with their party in the context of strategic abstentions (-3.6% mean first difference) than they are on excused absences (-2.3% mean first difference). It should be noted that the 95% confidence intervals on the first differences (impact of moving from aligned to not aligned) for Excused Absences and Strategic Abstention overlap, though consistent with our expectations the effects for strategic abstention are larger.

This difference between how members vote on actual roll call votes and how they claim they would have voted during a strategic abstention provides a new method of precisely identifying the effect of party pressure for these members. When party pressure is removed, and members are engaging in pure position-taking for their constituents, they are more likely to rebel against their party’s wishes. Thus we can identify the effect of party pressure on misaligned members to be approximately 4%.

6 Conclusion

In this paper, I introduced two new datasets: leave of absence data and personal explanation data, and suggested they can help augment existing roll call voting data by addressing problems of missing votes and strategic abstention. My preliminary findings suggest that members who are electorally misaligned claim they would have voted with their district and against their party much more often than they actually do on roll call votes, and this holds even after controlling for ideological extremism.
These results are suggestive of the idea both that representatives from districts that are misaligned are less likely to represent their constituents’ opinions on meaningful roll call votes than they are on symbolic position-taking exercises; instead they appear to be caving to party pressure substantially more often. Further, and perhaps, of greatest importance for those seeking to use roll call voting based ideology metrics, it is suggestive that these metrics may be distorted by party pressure, and do not capture a member’s true ideological preferences. Indeed, if we extrapolate beyond just the individual metrics, they may be exaggerating the true degree of ideological polarization in the chamber.

In sum, leave of absence and personal explanation data can be used for a variety of purposes–as a solution to missing data problems, to identify the effect of party pressure, and to assess the quality of congressional representation. These results provide preliminary evidence in support of biases in representation. Representatives from misaligned districts are less likely to represent their constituents’ opinions on meaningful roll call votes than they are on symbolic position-taking exercises. Instead they seem to be caving to party pressure substantially more often on actual roll call votes.

The new data and results presented here suggest a variety of avenues for future research. By augmenting the roll call voting data, new ideal point estimates can be created that can be used to overcome problems of missing data and that capture different aspects of congressional representation–both how a member presents himself to his constituents (pure position-taking) and how a member votes on consequential legislation. In addition, by expanding the data collection to earlier periods of congressional history, we can explore variation in the effect of party pressure, and address troubling missing data problems when abstention levels approached 40%.
References


Bateman, David, Josh Clinton and John Lapinski. 2014. “A House Divided?: Policy Differences and Polarization.” Presented at the Conference on Congress & History at the University of Maryland, College Park.


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Appendix: Leave of Absence Rules and Personal Explanation Procedure

Verbatim rules regarding a “Leave of Absence” and the procedure for entering “Personal Explanations” into the Congressional Record from the Republican Cloakroom website of the Speaker of the House John Boehner (The Republican Cloakroom, Speaker of the House John Boehner [2014]).

Figure 4: Republican Party Rules

**Leave of Absence**

If a Member is absent and misses votes for a substantial period of time, the Member or his staff may request a Leave of Absence from the House. Upon request, the Cloakroom staff will complete a Leave of Absence form which states the dates of the Member’s absence and the reason for his/her absence. The form is signed by the Republican Leader and laid before the House at the conclusion of legislative business for the day.

Decades ago, an absent Member was fined by the House. That is no longer the case. But a Leave of Absence is printed in the Congressional Record and announces the reason for one’s absence. Members may choose reasons that are general, such as “official business” or “illness,” or something more specific such as “having my appendix removed” or “inspecting damage in the district from Hurricane Katrina.” Members may not use political reasons for an absence. Members may choose not to request a Leave of Absence if he/she believes it would draw unnecessary attention to his/her absence.

Whether or not one chooses to request a Leave of Absence, a Member may wish to prepare a statement on how he/she would have voted on the votes that were missed. These statements, like any statement for the Congressional Record, must bear an original signature of the Member. If a statement is submitted to the Cloakroom within a few hours of the missed vote, it will be printed in the Record immediately following that vote. A typical statement would be:

**Mr. Speaker, on Roll Call #_____ on the _____ amendment on HR 12234, I am not recorded (because I was absent due to illness.) Had I been present, I would have voted (Aye/nay.)**

In addition to the above, Members should notify the Republican Whip of their absence.