# Majority Heterogeneity and Leadership Power in the U.S. House of Representatives

Puzzle

Since 2010, Congressional Republicans have grown increasingly conservative due to the departure of moderate members and an influx of Tea Party-inspired insurgents. Instead of bringing ideological unity, however, this development has led to a fracturing of the party between mainstream and hard-right factions that has arguably prevented the achievement of conservative policy goals shared by all members. I propose a spatial framework to account for this phenomenon and demonstrate its efficacy by applying it to two case studies: the contemporary conservative insurgency and the progressive revolt of 1910 against Speaker Joe Cannon.

Theory

Consider a legislature with three blocs: the majority party (median at M), the minority party (m), and a faction within the majority party centered at F. The faction in question can be either centrist:

$$m \quad F \qquad M$$

or extreme:

$$m \qquad M \qquad F$$
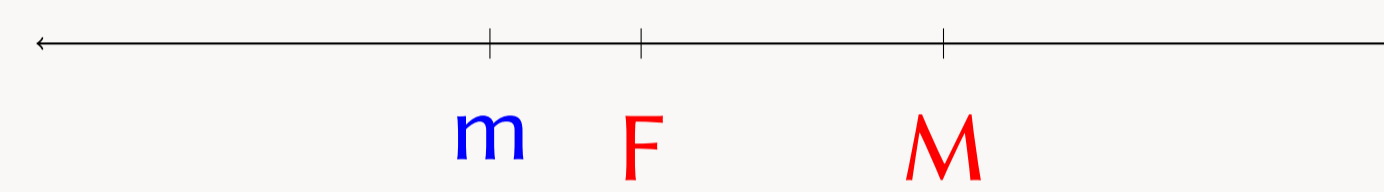
A centrist faction will be pivotal on many issues, and accordingly benefits from weak majority leadership that cannot control what proposals come to the floor or regulate debate on them. Conversely, an extremist faction must work through the majority to pass bills it supports, and therefore will want to empower the majority leadership to push legislation through the chamber, while retaining some discretion over which measures the majority advances (since their preferences differ from the majority median's).

Literature

This framework modifies Aldrich and Rohde's Conditional Party Government theory, which proposes that majority party legislators will empower House leadership as the majority becomes more internally unified and externally distinct from the minority. I argue that while majority parties polarized from the opposition will delegate power over the chamber to their leadership (the difference between the centrist and extreme faction), only unified majorities (those lacking an organized faction) will allow leadership to decide what legislation to advance with this power.

Case Study 1: Revolt Against Speaker Cannon

THE POLITICAL CHESS-BOARD
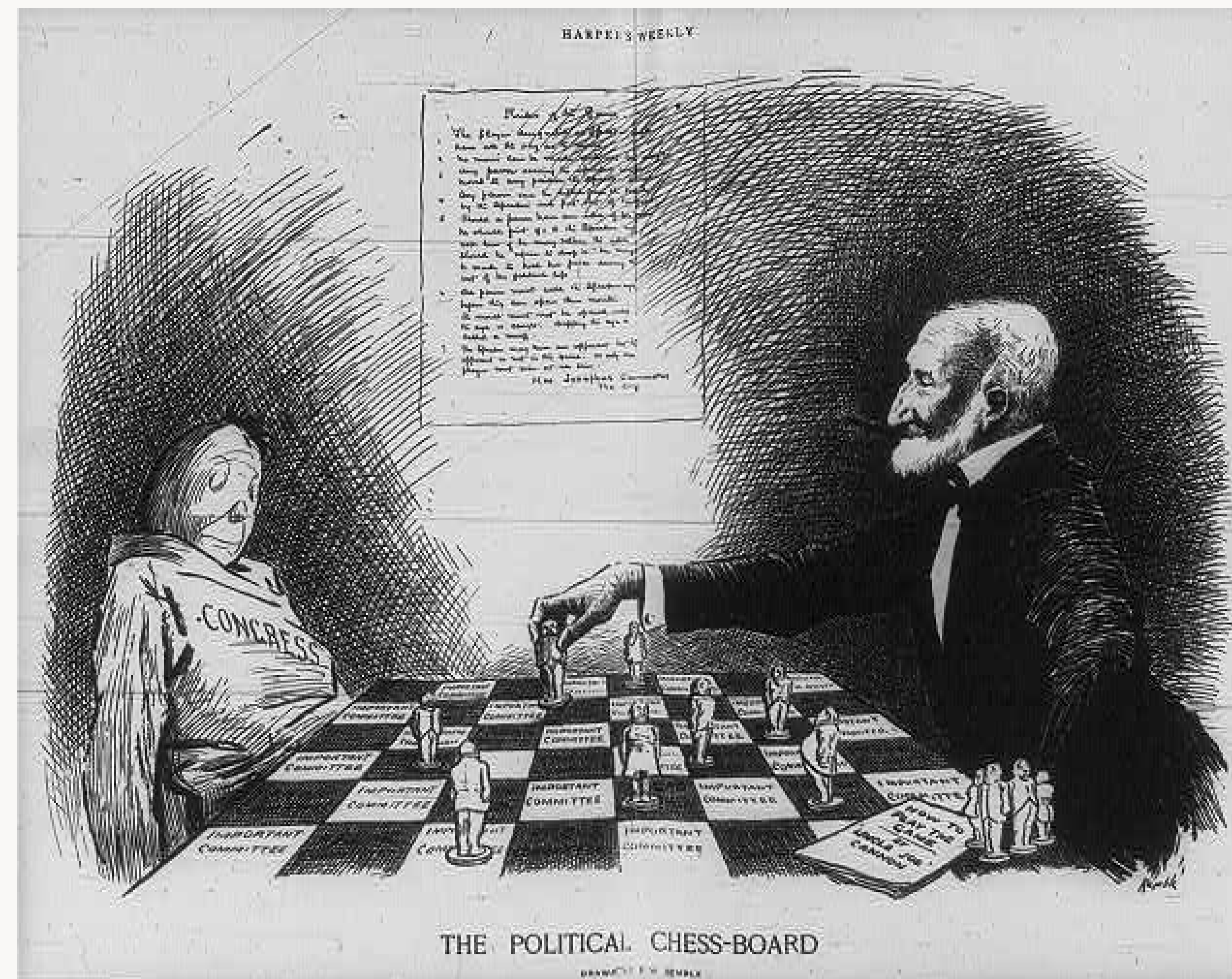
► Sharp polarization between Republicans and Democrats in Fourth Party System; began to decline in early 1900s as with influx of progressives into the Republican ranks
► Conservative Republican Speaker Joe Cannon (pictured) controlled floor debate and committee assignments, in part through his position as chair of the Rules Committee
► Dissident faction of progressive Republicans combined with Democrats to remove Cannon from Rules Committee, diminishing his and majority's power to run the chamber
► Regression analysis demonstrates representatives from Western states (where the Progressive movement was strong) were more likely to support the revolt; other district-level characteristics also mattered but not to the same degree

Western State	0.196
	(0.062)
Presidential Margin	−0.000
	(0.003)
Per Cap. Manufacturing Output	−0.345
	(0.224)
Foreign-Born Population	0.002
	(0.000)
N	184
$\log L$	−71.17

Logit marginal effects, SEs in parentheses

Case Study 2: Tea Party and Freedom Caucus

► High levels of polarization accentuated by entrance of very conservative 2010 freshmen Republicans ("Tea Party" class)
► Although modern Speakers are not as powerful as Cannon, they do effectively control Rules Committee and can therefore govern which items come up for a vote and how they are debated
► Very conservative Republicans opposed leadership initiatives to compromise with Obama administration, leading to the resignation of Speaker John Boehner
► After his resignation, far-right House Freedom Caucus requested concessions from new Speaker Paul Ryan giving them greater say in caucus deliberations and allowing rank-and-file Republicans greater access to tools leadership uses to expedite floor debate
► Regression analysis shows importance of district-level presidential vote and election in the 2010 wave in predicting opposition to leadership on three key fiscal votes and Freedom Caucus membership, in contrast to other district-level characteristics

	Approps	Debt	Fiscal Cliff	HFC
Tea Party Cohort	0.13	0.15	0.23	0.15
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.04)
Repub. Pres. Margin	0.46	0.77	0.81	0.42
	(0.21)	(0.20)	(0.21)	(0.17)
Southern State	−0.04	−0.04	0.25	−0.01
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.04)
Prop. College-Educated	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
N	237	239	236	250
AIC	−114.46	−117.24	−112.13	−89.10

Logit marginal effects, SEs in parentheses

Conclusions

Both case studies appear to support the comparative statics of the proposed model. When the majority Republicans became more heterogeneous toward the center, the most progressive members pressed for decreased leadership control over the party and chamber; in the case where they became more heterogeneous toward the extreme, the most conservative members pressed to reduce leadership power over the conference but not over the chamber. Further tests of the theory could involve applying it to all major rule-change votes throughout modern Congressional history, or developing some less ad-hoc way of measuring ideology.

Connor Phillips
connorphillips@g.harvard.edu
Harvard University