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# Is Bipartisanship Dead? Policy Agreement and Agenda-Setting in the House of Representatives

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# Book Review

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*Is Bipartisanship Dead? Policy Agreement and Agenda-Setting in the House of Representatives.* By Laurel Harbridge. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

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The title of Laurel Harbridge's book *Is Bipartisanship Dead?* poses an important question, even if the answer is ultimately ambiguous. Although Harbridge persuasively concludes that "bipartisanship is not dead" (170), this book provides plenty of reason to worry about its health.

This study merges measures of cosponsorship with bill histories and information on roll-call voting—combining several huge Congress data sets in a novel way. Critically, this allows Harbridge to place the roll-call voting record in context—to measure directly the partisan contours of the population of bills awaiting legislative attention and to examine how bipartisan and partisan legislation fares at all stages including floor consideration, roll-call votes, and enactment.

Harbridge suggests that bipartisanship has not died but, rather, has been hidden from view. The largest declines in bipartisanship (through the 108th Congress) obtained in the floor voting stage, with much more muted declines at the bill cosponsorship, voice vote, and legislative enactment phases. Harbridge provides convincing evidence that the extent to which partisan legislation reaches a roll-call vote varies substantially over time. In some eras (e.g., the mid-1970s) bipartisan legislation was relatively advantaged. Today partisan legislation is more likely to achieve a roll call, particularly when it is on an issue central to the "issue-ownership" identities of the parties.

Why these changes? The central causal argument—strategic partisan agenda-setting—is that party leaders decide which bills to bring to the floor (and which bills to bring to a roll-call vote) in order to strike a balance between contending and often incompatible goals. On the one hand, the majority party needs to develop a record of legislative accomplishment and a reputation for competence. Bipartisan

legislation can help here, since bipartisan bills have historically been easier to enact. On the other hand, partisan bills lead to partisan policy if enacted, and they highlight the differences between parties. In theory, the balance struck between partisan and bipartisan legislative modes depends on electoral interests and in particular the extent to which Congressional districts are sorted such that members represent seats carried by their party's presidential candidate in recent election cycles. When more seats are sorted, incentives favor partisan bills for the floor roll-call agenda because fewer members are put at risk by partisan votes. Nonetheless, leaders may balance this show of conflict on the floor by moving bipartisan bills through voice votes.

There are important broad implications for the study of Congress that Harbridge suggests but neglects to fully develop. If, over time, bills with partisan cut-lines are more likely to reach a roll call, this will increasingly bias estimates of ideology by exaggerating the distance between parties. Are scholars who fill volumes on the ideological polarization of Congress bemoaning a measurement artifact? Perhaps future work will tell.

The hidden nature of ongoing bipartisanship also provides an alternative angle by which to assess responsiveness to constituents. Although members have become less responsive to variation in district ideology at the roll-call vote state, responsiveness has increased at the cosponsorship stage. Members from moderate districts use bipartisan cosponsorship bona fides as a shield from the electoral risks posed by partisan voting records.

One interpretation of *Is Bipartisanship Dead?* is quite optimistic concerning the robustness of bipartisanship. Although floor roll calls have become more partisan, the main analysis (through the 108th Congress) found that bipartisanship continued almost unabated across most other stages and venues in the legislative process.

The prognosis in the final chapter turns darker, however. Here Harbridge updates selected analyses with data through

the 112th Congress. By the 112th steep declines in bipartisanship were apparent at all stages of the legislative process including the initial cosponsorship phase. Members became increasingly unlikely to cosponsor bipartisan legislation, and bipartisanship declined across other legislative stages. Al-

though this may reflect the consequences of strategic agenda setting in an increasingly well-sorted Congress, another plausible interpretation is that the parties have moved sharply apart on the issues, killing off many prospects for bipartisan cooperation.