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Appendix to "The Coefficient of Party Influence"

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This note provides examples of passages susceptible to misreading in Snyder and Groseclose's seminal article on estimating party influence in roll call voting.

The primary objective of "The Coefficient of Party Influence" was to clarify why the method proposed by Snyder and Groseclose (2000) leads to findings that are limited in what they can say about the magnitude, and the specific partisan type, of influence that occurs on roll call votes. Such clarification was regarded as important in its own right, but particularly so in light of the degree to which researchers have interpreted this method as providing support for a specific type of party influence: influence by the majority party on its own members.

This appendix purses a secondary objective: to consider findings in the original paper as stimuli to which the likely responses are inferences that cannot be substantiated because of the indeterminacy of the method. The four examples that follow are intended to heighten the awareness of readers, and the caution of users, so that the incidence of faulty inference is reduced.

Ex. 1. Early in their article, Snyder and Groseclose view variation in their findings as consistent with variation in measures of "party voting" and "party difference." They assert that changes in preferences cause such variation and instead attribute the change to "a genuine decline in the parties' ability to enforce discipline" (p.194). While this is not an uncommon interpretation, the coefficient cannot differentiate between preference homogeneity and discipline. Furthermore, the authors cite several articles which, when discussing strong party effects, invariably mean strong majority-party effects (e.g., works by Sinclair, Brady, Cooper, Hurley, Collie, and Wilson). This makes it tempting to interpret the Snyder-Groseclose findings as supporting majority-party discipline. The temptation should be resisted, however, because nonzero coefficients cannot discriminate between majority- and minority-party discipline or influence.

Ex. 2. In discussing their findings, the authors often use language that suggests that the magnitude of party influence can be ascertained from findings. For example, they write: "several features in figure 1 are noteworthy. First, party influence is quite high by our measure… (198)." As the analysis in "The Coefficient…" shows, however, a large value of the Snyder-Groseclose coefficient does not necessarily denote more party influence to a large value than to a small value. So, to say that party influence is higher on one vote than another, or higher in one Congress than another, or high overall, cannot be justified. An arguable exception might be if, by "high," the analyst is referring to frequency of nonzero coefficients, as Snyder and Groseclose sometimes do. Even in this case, however, it should be noted that the frequency of statistically significant nonzero coefficients is a function of the absolute magnitude of the coefficient and its standard error, and the former bears no necessary relationship to the magnitude of actual party influence.

Ex. 3. Some of the Snyder-Groseclose analysis examines subsets of legislation to see whether the coefficients tend to be higher – or alternatively, nonzero with greater frequency – on roll calls selected by other researchers as being import to majority party leadership. When finding that such coefficients are more likely to be positive on the majority party's Leadership Task Force votes, the authors write that this finding "strongly support[s] our expectations (201)." Such an inference would be defensible were it the case that a positive coefficient is unambiguous evidence of majority-party influence. It is not, however. In fact, the inability in the presence of a nonzero coefficient to refute the hypothesis that the minority party successfully pressured majority party legislators means that the behavior that appears to "strongly support… expectations" may actually be behavior that is of exactly the opposite form of researchers' expectations. This possibility is inescapable in light of the ambiguous nature of the coefficient.

Ex. 4. Snyder and Groseclose also attribute substantive significance to a null finding: the so-called "dog that didn't bark." In this case inferences are drawn from zero coefficients on issues where it is expected the parties' leaders do not have great disagreements and therefore would not apply pressure to backbenchers (e.g. on moral issues and gun control -- see p. 203). The inherent nature of the coefficient, however, is that these null findings may be manifestations of non-null partisan behavior. Specifically, as shown in "The Coefficient…," if each party exerts effective influence within or across parties, but if such influence is balanced, the coefficient will be approximately zero.

In light of these examples – which, it should be stressed, are extracted from researchers who are most aware of the true nature of the coefficient of party influence – it is understandable that researchers who are less informed about the method fall prey to plausible, but ultimately untenable, interpretations of findings based on the coefficient. The purpose of "The Coefficient of Party Influence" and this appendix has been to improve researchers' understanding of, and appreciation for, the subtleties and limitations of Snyder and Groseclose's innovative method.

References

Snyder, James M., and Timothy Groseclose. 2000. Estimating Party Influence in Congressional Roll-Call Voting. American Journal of Political Science 44: 193-211.