

Party Unity On Votes At Near-Record Levels Despite Dissension

A historic Republican majority in the House and GOP control in the Senate for the first time since 2007 translated into near-peak levels of party unity last year, despite deep dissension in the ranks that toppled John A. Boehner from the speakership.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's push for votes on amendments and bills — or what he calls regular order — in his first year managing the floor resulted in Republicans voting with their party an average of 89 percent of the time in 2015. That's a level of GOP unity not seen since President Barack Obama's second year in office in 2010.

In the House, tensions between hard-right conservatives in the Freedom Caucus and more pragmatic Republicans resulted in Boehner's resignation. But those strains didn't affect party unity: House Republicans voted with their party an average of 92 percent of the time, matching the previous high set in 2013.

"We are at a partisan ceiling. That puts a limit on possibilities," says Steve Schier, a political science professor at Carleton College in Minnesota. "Within that limit, leaders are figuring what they can do and what they can't do."

Across the aisle, minority Democrats in the House and Senate voted together at levels similar to the GOP majorities. House Democrats voted with their party an average of 92 percent of the time, matching peaks previously reached in 2007 and 2008. Overall, a majority of Democrats confronted a majority of Republicans 75.1 percent of the time — just slightly below the top mark of 2011.

The desire of McConnell and Speaker Paul D. Ryan of Wisconsin to demonstrate that Republicans could govern resulted in a raft of legislative accomplishments, many of them coming at the end of 2015 after Boehner helped negotiate a two-year budget deal and resigned from office.

They included a five-year surface transportation law, a rewrite of the No Child Left Behind education law, and an omnibus spending and tax package with permanent sweeteners for business and for low- and moderate-income families. In all, 115 laws were enacted last year, well above the 72 and 81 laws produced, respectively, in the first sessions of the 112th and 113th Congresses.

The Senate GOP average unity score of 89 percent is 5 percentage points lower than the peak set in 2003, while the average Democratic unity score of 91 percent was three notches below the party's 2013 benchmark. Majorities of both parties squared off on 69.3 percent of Senate roll call votes, the fourth-highest mark on record.

In the Senate, McConnell opened his first term as floor leader by emphasizing amendment votes and pragmatic bills aimed at helping the 54-member GOP Conference defend 24 seats in the 2016 elections. He put off retaliation against Democrats for ending filibusters of executive and most judicial nominees in 2013.

Although the 339 Senate floor votes in 2015 were slightly fewer than the prior year, McConnell executed 192 roll call votes on amendments, far more than the 15 such votes in the 2014 session, which was marked by the procedural fracas over confirmations.

Senate Majority Whip John Cornyn, a Texas Republican, says amendment votes had allowed both parties a chance to showcase priorities while clearing the way for bipartisan deals.

"The Congress was less partisan in 2015 than in the previous year," Cornyn says. "There were more amendment votes, and there was more bipartisan legislation being produced."

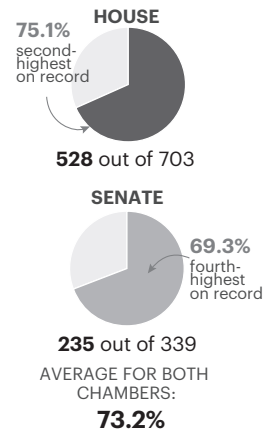
FEWER HURDLES

Senate Democratic Whip Richard J.

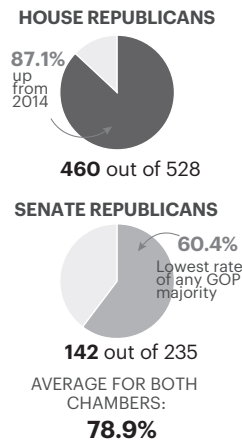
United as Ever

Senate Democrats fell just a single point short of last year's record display of unity. In the House, a majority of Republicans split with a majority of Democrats nearly three-quarters of the time.

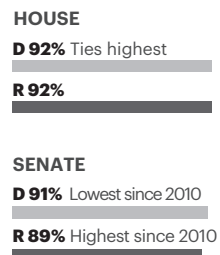
Frequency of party unity votes:



How often the majority won:



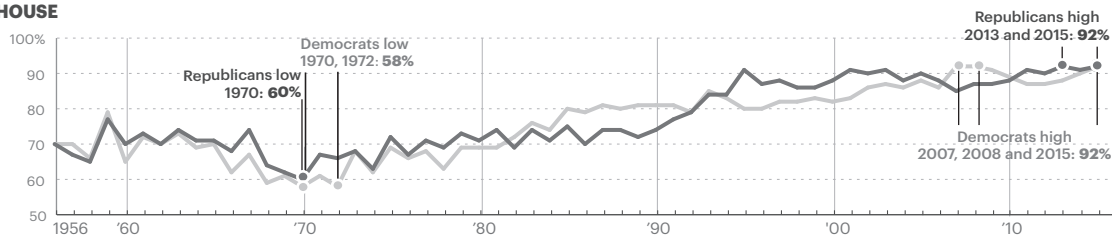
Average chamber party unity scores:



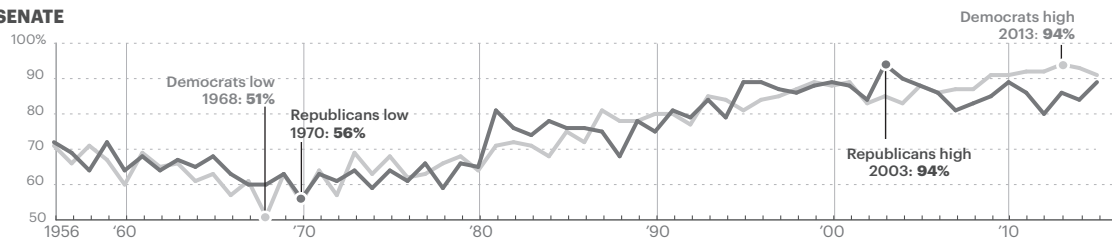
Party Divide Continues Near Record

Members from both parties on average voted with their caucus majorities at near-record levels in 2015. In the House, both hung together an average of 92 percent of the time, matching their previous peaks. In the Senate, Republicans who took control of the chamber in the 2014 elections stuck together 89 percent of the time, 5 points lower than the 2003 peak. Democrats' average score in the chamber was 91 percent.

HOUSE



SENATE



Durbin of Illinois says the uptick in laws and civility stemmed from his party's willingness to forgo blocking tactics used by the GOP in 2014 to prevent votes on nominations and Democratic proposals to raise the minimum wage, extend an expansion of unemployment insurance and prohibit gender-based wage discrimination.

"We didn't do that to them," Durbin says. "We let them call up an amendment for a vote. That's the difference."

Agreements to allow amendment votes helped to lay groundwork for bipartisan deals, including fast-track trade promotion authority for Obama, a five-year extension of the terrorism risk insurance program and a new Medicare framework for physicians, nurses and other medical professionals.

Several items passed without backing from a majority of Senate Republicans, including a clean fiscal 2015 Homeland Security appropriations bill and a federal surveillance rewrite to bar the collection of Americans' telephone records by the National Security Agency. The outcome reflected ideological tensions in the GOP and McConnell's willingness to wave through must-pass spending bills, as well as issues such as privacy and technology that did not break along party lines.

The Senate GOP leader, however, had scant success in wooing Democrats on partisan items. For example, McConnell lacked supermajorities needed to override Obama's veto of an authorization for the Keystone XL pipeline or to move the GOP's lowest victory percentages on record.

Senate Republicans won on 142, or 60.4 percent, of the total 235 party-unity votes. That was far below the Senate Democrats' 2014 win rate of 91.8 percent and

under the GOP score of 83.1 percent victories in 1981.

A trio of freshman senators ranked among the top backers of McConnell's pragmatic party line. Tom Cotton of Arkansas, Ben Sasse of Nebraska and Bill Cassidy of Louisiana sided with the GOP at least 96 percent of the time.

"I'm going to vote for that which I think can pass, which is the most conservative alternative," Cassidy says.

At the other end of the GOP spectrum, Republicans Susan Collins of Maine, Mark S. Kirk of Illinois and Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire had unity scores of 63 percent, 70 percent and 74 percent, respectively. Kirk and Ayotte face competitive re-election races this year.

Reid rallied his party to win 93 roll call votes, or 39.6 percent of the total. That included procedural victories to block fiscal 2016 appropriations bills that didn't increase nondefense spending. Democrats forced Republicans to abandon riders aimed at Planned Parenthood funding and restrictions on Syrian refugees.

While Reid and McConnell brokered marriages of necessity, the departure of Boehner brought a close to an era of open GOP feuding marked by tight votes, postponed votes and occasional floor defeats engineered by right-wing rebels.

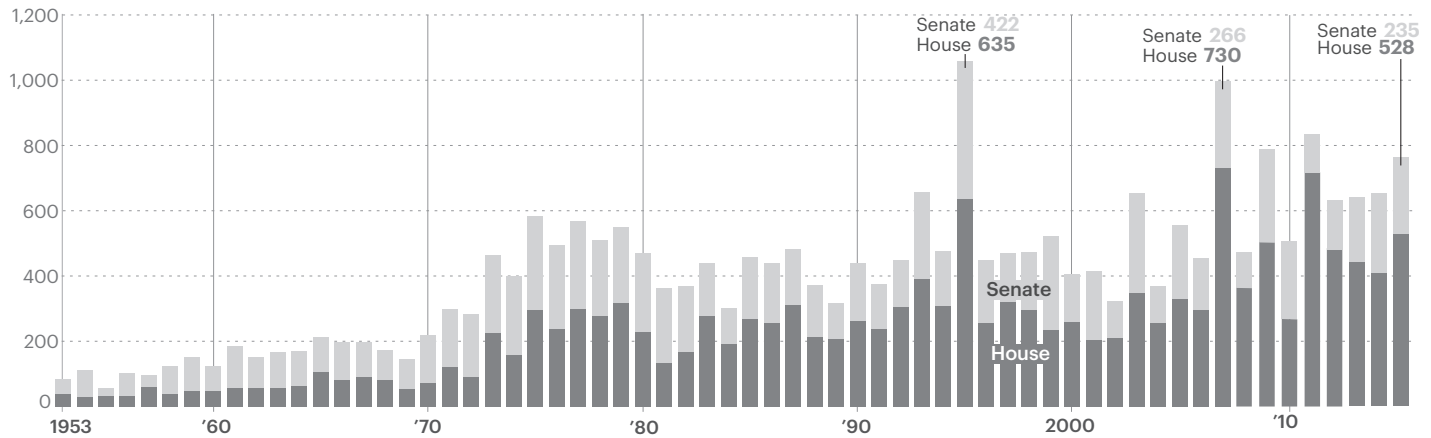
Ryan, who had never been an elected House leader, began his new job by vowing to be more transparent and inclusive in his decision-making, and by opening his door to dissidents, including members of the Freedom Caucus. In the session's final two months, the new top Republican was able to deliver more predictable outcomes with less drama.

Like Boehner, Ryan faced pressure to meet the "majority of the majority" floor-action threshold set by

House Divides at Record Rate

The rate at which a majority of Republicans voted against a majority of Democrats in the House hit a new record of 75.1 percent in 2015, slightly more than in 2011. In the Senate, the parties divided on 69.3 percent of votes, the fourth-highest rate ever. The number of split votes rose sharply in the House.

Party Unity Votes



former Speaker Dennis J. Hastert of Illinois while wooing enough Democrats to offset GOP defections and prevail on the floor.

Unlike his predecessor, Ryan could rely on a cache of political capital earned as the 2012 GOP nominee for vice president and as an architect of ambitious blueprints for deficit reduction while chairman of the Budget Committee.

Ryan made the case for bipartisanship in the near term to take steps toward long-range goals, even on legislation he did not view as perfect, such as on the omnibus spending and tax package. On that vote, a majority of Republicans, or 150 of the 246-member caucus, joined 166 Democrats to vote “yes” on the legislation.

LESS DRAMA

On balance, says John J. Pitney Jr., a professor of political science at Claremont-McKenna College, GOP leaders forged solid working ties with Democrats to clear the way both for symbolic votes on partisan items and for must-pass bills such as a two-year budget deal that included an extension of the debt ceiling.

“They avoided a government shutdown. They got certain things done. By the standards of government these days, that’s a win,” Pitney says.

Overall, House Republicans won on 460, or 87.1 percent, of 528 party unity votes. The Democratic minority scored 68 victories, or 12.9 percent of the total.

In one rare triumph, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi of California and her Democratic team won approval of a discharge petition to extend the charter of the Export-Import Bank, which had become a target of conservatives who depicted it as providing corporate

welfare. A similar step was enacted as an add-on to the highway bill, representing the first time a discharge petition forced a new law since the 2002 McCain-Feingold campaign finance legislation.

Despite such upset victories, House Democrats grumbled that GOP leaders set a modern record with 48 closed rules governing debate that prevented them from having votes on amendments. But a senior GOP aide says that milestone was part of a broader GOP strategy that included allowances for amendments by both parties under structured or open rules.

“The truth is that there has simply been an increase in the amount of legislation considered in the 114th Congress. This increase in legislation consideration is important to accomplishing the ambitious goals of our conference,” the aide said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

As GOP leaders pushed partisan themes, centrist House Republicans tended to switch sides most often. Chris Gibson of New York, Walter B. Jones of North Carolina, Robert J. Dold III of Illinois and Carlos Curbelo of Florida all had party unity scores of 80 percent or less, the lowest in their party. All except the unaligned Jones belong to the centrist Tuesday Group, known for fiscal conservative stands with moderate stances on some social and labor issues.

In the 2016 session, Schier and other political experts predict that Boehner’s parting budget deal will clear the way for another round of symbolic floor votes and high party unity scores. And they predict the two sides will be able to weigh more potential deals in a post-election session while preparing for fiscal firefights in the next Congress.