

*Institutions, Information, and Faction:
An Experimental Test of Riker's Federalism Thesis
for Political Parties*

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As nearly all observers have pointed out, political parties are highly decentralized in the United States. They lack unity on a national level with respect to both platforms and leaders...The consequence is, not that states control national decisions—it would take more than local control of nominations to bring about that effect—but that the nation cannot control state decisions. The result is a standoff, which is what, I suppose, is intended in the federal bargain. (Riker, 1964, p. 91)

This year marks the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of William Riker's landmark *Liberalism Against Populism*. (LAP) One of the authors (Aldrich) of the current paper was a Rochester graduate student in the early 1970s. He had seen William Riker develop the insights and background for the book over the previous decade. Among Rochester graduate students, many of the theoretical claims that underpinned Riker's argument had been developed, refined, and tested in seminars and discussions. In a way, by the time Riker wrote it all down, he was simply recording a set of claims that many people at Rochester took almost for granted.

But for another of the coauthors of the present paper, the argument, the book, and William Riker himself were all new and being encountered for the first time. Munger was fortunate enough to be taking a class from Prof. William Riker, who was visiting the economics graduate program at Washington University in fall of 1982. Riker's then new book, *LAP*, had just been published, and was used as a text in the class. The experience of that class, and that book, redirected Munger's interests and research in a way turned him away from "mainstream" economics, and toward institutional, "Rochester" style public choice.

In this thirtieth anniversary year of the publication of *LAP*, we are glad to take the opportunity to look back at some of the questions and insights that had shaped Prof. Riker's interests in institutions. In particular, we will examine some of Riker's earlier work on federalism, and the political bargaining that resulted in a federal system for the U.S. This

bargain still has important implications today, especially for party organizations, which operate at the national, state, and local levels with goals that sometimes coincide and sometimes conflict.

We then test a Rikerian thesis about an implication of the “federal bargain.” Having power shared by states and federal governments also means that party organizations are obliged to serve multiple masters with conflicting goals. To put it differently, federalism is a bargain between national and local interests. Any party system must likewise constantly negotiate conflicts between national and local interests. In a number of his early writings (Riker, 1955; Riker and Schaps, 1957; Riker, 1964), William Riker explored the stresses and cracks in partisan institutional structures. Focusing on the American system, and to a greater extent under the Constitution than under the Articles, Riker concluded that the decentralization of the party system effectively blocks presidents from being able to control partisans, using either ideology or organizational tools.

Riker identified two central problems of partisan politics in a federal system. First, how can parties control the voting behavior of “their” legislators in the Congress, given the need for the legislator to answer to a specific geographic constituency that may bear little resemblance to the national party? Second, Riker suggests a measure of “disharmony”: the frequency with which one party controls both the federal and state governments. He saw systematic disharmony (one party controls the national legislature, the other party controls state legislatures) as a fundamental conflict, a strain on the capacity of institutions to act as effective intermediaries between voter desires and policy actions.

In this paper we review these theoretical claims, in light of more recent work on party control and the federal “bargain.” The second section considers the particular problems faced by parties in a federal system. Third, we describe a unique data set, used for the first time in this

paper, as a setting to test an implication of this theory. Finally, we describe the results of confronting the theory with those data.

I. Riker's Theory of Federalism as a "Bargain"

William H. Riker wrote on a variety of topics, including the fundamentals of political tactics and rhetoric, as well as the philosophical problems of the representation and meaning of democracy. But he had, from the beginning of his career, a substantive interest in the institutional problem of federalism. In this work (Riker, 1955, 1957 1964, 1975, 1987; Riker and Schaps, 1987), there was a consistent theme: Federalism is a stable (if the constitution can be sustained) between several sets of actors with partly convergent and partly divergent interests.

The clearest statement of this credible, stable bargain argument starts on p. 12 of Riker (1964). It can be summarized as follows:

1. The *offer* of the federal bargain comes from political elites with two goals: a. Effect an expansion of the territory of the federalized nation. b. Protect the expanded territory from foreign aggression.
2. The *acceptance* of the federal bargain comes from political elites that would otherwise prefer to remain independent of, or perhaps even opposed to, the coalition that offers federalism. But the accepters of federalism see two advantages: a. Improved security, in terms of protection, because of the economies of scale in the technology of defense and counter-threat. b. Improved wealth because of trade and participation in the implied territorial expansion captured by the federal bargain.

Later in the same book (Riker, 1964, p. 91), Riker considers the implication of the federal bargain for political parties. It is perhaps an understatement to say that parties in the U.S. are

decentralized, compared to party systems in other nations, even those that are “federal” but not in the US sense of federal. As Riker puts it (and as we quoted at the outset of this paper):

As nearly all observers have pointed out, political parties are highly decentralized in the United States. They lack unity on a national level with respect to both platforms and leaders...The consequence is, not that states control national decisions—it would take more than local control of nominations to bring about that effect—but that the nation cannot control state decisions. The result is a standoff, which is what, I suppose, is intended in the federal bargain. (p. 91).

This “standoff” Riker is concerned with occurs not just between national and local officials, but even between the President from a party and Congressional officials putatively from the “same” party.

Consider the President’s relationship with Congress: If parties were nationally oriented, then the President would be able to count on substantially complete support from his partisans in Congress. But one of the most well-known facts about our system is that he cannot. Instead, to put any measure through he must bargain, even with his own partisans, whom, in the classic (but false) theory of parties, he has already bought with the cheap currency of ideology. (p. 93)

The bargain, then is a means of capturing mutual benefit for parties that have largely, but not completely, opposed interests. Riker had concluded, in earlier work (Riker and Schaps, 1957) that this tension or opposition would find itself worked out in the actions and strategies of parties, both as a theoretical matter and in terms of measurable results.

In particular, political parties are manifestation of the tension, or “disharmony” (Riker and Schaps, 1957, p. 277), among different levels of the federal bargain. The institutional rules that govern and restrict candidate selection and election law have powerful effects on the balance of power between federal and state governments. There are important economies of scale in the promulgation of a reputation for a particular ideological world view, but there are also incentives for state parties to free ride on this reputation.

Worse, it may be possible for one party to specialize in issues that appeal to voters as national issues, and another party to appeal to voters on regional grounds. Riker (1955, 1964)

was very interested in the tensions in the logic of Madison's "Federalist #10," because the "large republic" solution to faction only works at the national level. To the extent that federalism is a compromise bargain, with some powers and locus of decision left to the states, faction will be focused in the states, and in particular in the state parties.

Bringing our review full circle, Riker (1982, 233-234) returns to the theme of majoritarianism, party control, and the federal bargain. Riker claimed that Madison and others argued that "majorities are temporary" (p. 233). In *Liberalism Against Populism*, this "majorities are temporary" argument is buttressed by the full array of Rikerian arguments, ranging cycling to heresthetics to the problem of coalition formation.

II. Parties in a Federal System

A number of scholars have taken up Riker's claims about parties and federalism. Schwartz (1989) claimed that parties should be thought of as "long coalitions," a means of preventing devolution into a divide the dollar bargaining game. So, while parties in this view provide stability, they are also likely to thwart some of the dynamic trends that Riker argues for, and attributes to Madison and other founders.

Aldrich (1995) argued that parties served two important functions, solving problems of collective action and collective choice. This was not a correction of Riker's insights, but an extension, and it suggested some problems of "brand name" and "franchising" at the state level. What this meant is that state party units would try to cheat on the franchise agreement while at the same time free-riding on the reputation that the national parties had invested in. Grynaviski (2010) showed that this neo-Rikerian approach could unify the original Riker and later Aldrich arguments in the same theoretical framework.

Aspects of Riker's theory have been tested, but existing work has focused solely on the empirical disharmony measure (Alexander, 1987; Gordin 2004) or on extensions. McKay (2004) reviews the empirical literature, but only work on federalism, not its implications for parties.

Our goal is to state and test some predictions of the combined theory proposed by Riker, and extended by Aldrich and Grynaviski. The predictions of this combined theory are as follows:

H1: There should be no difference between majority and minority party identifiers, because the chances of cycles or heresthetic dynamics in the electorate make partisanship itself, not majority party status, the key variable.

H2: Partisan identifiers should exhibit reduced support for blanket primaries if they understand that blanket primaries weaken state party control over candidates.

H3: Voters with no partisan identification should prefer the blanket primary, because it would allow non-partisan identifiers to have the widest freedom of choice among candidates, precisely because it weakens party control.

H4: For non-partisans, having blanket primaries explained should increase their attractiveness.

III. The Data and The Experimental Sample

The data are taken from the 2010 version of the Cooperative Congressional Election Survey (CCES) in an original module of questions designed by scholars (including the authors) at Duke University.¹ Details of the survey are reported below.² Basically, it is a national representative internet survey, of which 1000 of its respondents were asked our questions. The questions were

¹ The module is also paid for by Duke University, of the support from which we gratefully acknowledge.

² The CCES is a 30,000+ person national stratified sample survey administered by YouGov Polimetrix. Half of the questionnaire consists of Common Content asked of all 30,000+ people, and half of the questionnaire consists of Team Content designed by each individual participating team and asked of a subset of 1,000 people (taken from <http://projects.iq.harvard.edu/cces/book/study-design>).

designed by the authors, and they included a survey-embedded experiment based on question wording.

The experiment was designed to test for the effect of including higher amounts of information about the proposed electoral system. In particular, each respondent was asked the same question stem:

Some states are considering changing how they nominate candidates for each elected office in the November elections. Currently, states use party primaries where each party selects one person to be their nominee for the November election. The new system is one where for each office all candidates run in a single primary, with the two candidates receiving the most votes running against each other in the fall. How about you, which do you prefer?

The experiment took the form of random assignment of each respondent into one of two conditions. A randomly selected half of the sample was asked to choose between these two alternatives, what we refer to as the “low information” condition about a blanket primary:

- (a) Party primaries or caucuses in which the winners of each party's primary or caucus run against each other in the November election
- (b) A primary in which all voters vote for any candidate running.

The remaining half-sample was asked to choose between the same first half (or “a” alternative) and the “high information” (c) version of the blanket primary method::

- (a) Party primaries or caucuses in which the winners of each party's primary or caucus run against each other in the November election
- (c) A primary in which all voters vote for any candidate running. The two candidates receiving the most votes run in the November elections, whether they are members of the same party or different parties.

In both cases, the “a” alternative is the same. But half of the sample was asked to compare (a) to (b), a very simple description of a blanket primary, and half the sample was asked to compare (a) to (c), a more detailed description of the specific partisan implications of a blanket primary.

All respondents were also asked to indicate their party identification, using the disciplinary standard measure tapped by two questions. We employ the first question that asks, “Generally speaking, do you consider yourself to be a Democrat, a Republican, an independent, or what?” Our hypotheses concern not which party, per se, but whether one identifies with the majority party in the state or the minority party. The CCES included the actual election results from the 2008 election in their aggregate data, which we use to classify which party is the majority party in the state, which is the minority. Finally, those who responded “independent” or some other party were classified as “unaffiliated” with either the majority or the minority party.

IV. Experimental Results

The implication of Riker’s “bargain” thesis is that state-level partisans will seek local control over the choice of the candidates who will represent the party. To make the implications of the theory clearer in the context of our experiment, the following sign predictions should be highlighted:

H1: No significant difference between majority and minority party identifiers.

H2: Party identifiers in the (a) vs (c) condition should be less favorable to blanket primaries than party identifiers in the (a) vs. (b) condition.

H3: A higher proportion of unaffiliated voters should prefer blanket primaries, compared to party identifiers.

H4: Unaffiliated voters in the (a) vs (c) condition should be more favorable to blanket primaries than party identifiers in the (a) vs. (b) condition.

The results of the experimental survey are presented in Table 1. Table 1.A. presents the comparison for testing H1, and Table 1.B, 1.C, and 1.D do the same for H2, H3, and H4. majority party voters (a) vs (b) condition (top row) and the (a) vs. (c) condition (bottom row).

Tables 1.B and 1.C. give the same comparison for minority party identifiers and unaffiliated voters, respectively. There is reported the tabular analyses, a chi-square test of significance of that cross-tab, and a simple logit-regression.

Hypothesis 1 is supported by the results. There is a slight, 7 point, difference in the effects of the treatment between majority and minority partisans. That difference is not statistically significant in either version. This is, of course, a weaker form of hypothesis test, as the “null” or no effects hypothesis is actually our hypothesis of interest. We can say, however, that the magnitude of the effect is slight.

Hypothesis 2 is likewise supported by the results, in this case in the more conventional sense. Using either the standard chi-square from the table or the estimated effect of the coefficient in the logit, we find that both majority and minority partisans react in the predicted direction to a statistically significant degree. More information reduced the support for the proposed reform by a substantial amount, nearly 15 percentage points.

Hypothesis 3 is supported by the results also, and to about the same degree as is hypothesis 2. That is, the effect is statistically significant, in the predicted direction, and reasonably substantial. Support for the blanket primary is about 15 percent higher among unaffiliated respondents than among those expressing a partisan affiliation. This effect is true regardless of treatment in the experimental manipulation of information.

Hypothesis 4, however, is not supported. This is the sort of “cross-partial” hypothesis. That is, do the more highly informed unaffiliateds favor the blanket primary more than the affiliated respondents who were provided little information. This is probably the most difficult hypothesis. The comparison, however, is not statistically different. It is in the predicted direction. Its magnitude is fairly slight. It should not be directly compared to hypothesis

one, even though the magnitudes involved are approximately the same, because of the different construction of the two hypotheses and especially because this one is the more conventional. We can only speculate whether an even larger contrast in information in the experimental manipulation would have made the “treatment” effect larger.

V. Conclusions

It has been nearly a half-century since Riker published his magnum opus on federalism (1964), and it has been well over that mark since he and Schaps wrote about, and studied empirically, the effects of the “disharmony” caused by divided partisan control of government at the various levels (1957). To the best of our knowledge, we offer the first test of these relationships that define one of the singular contributions that Riker made to the study of political institutions. We do so in a context of a proposed reform that has been discussed for some time and that has reasserted itself recently. And we find that the population appears able to respond just as Riker claimed. With the unaffiliateds now amounting to a plurality (and apparently growing plurality, even when restricted purely to self-described “independents”), the support for such reforms is presumptively growing as well. And it is doing so in a context in which there has been relatively little public discussion and campaigning over these institutional matters. Indeed that the public is able to respond in patterns that reflect, by and large, their institutional self-interests, without their being a rich informational context in which to formulate such induced preferences speaks volumes of the approach championed by Riker at and through Rochester, let alone the detailed consideration of these specific claims derived from his theory of federalism.

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Appendix: Specific Survey Question

Please randomize respondents into two groups and show 1/2 the group response option (b) and 1/2 response option (c). All should receive response option (a). (The labels a, b, and c should not appear on the questionnaire the respondents see but are used here for labeling purposes only).

Some states are considering changing how they nominate candidates for each elected office in the November elections. Currently, states use party primaries where each party selects one person to be their nominee for the November election. The new system is one where for each office all candidates run in a single primary, with the two candidates receiving the most votes running against each other in the fall. How about you, which do you prefer?

- | | | |
|-------------|---|--|
| Either / Or | { | <ul style="list-style-type: none">(c) Party primaries or caucuses in which the winners of each party's primary or caucus run against each other in the November election(d) A primary in which all voters vote for any candidate running.(e) A primary in which all voters vote for any candidate running. The two candidates receiving the most votes run in the November elections, whether they are members of the same party or different parties. |
|-------------|---|--|
-

In the table that follows, the *top row* subjects are presented with choice (a) vs. choice (b). The *bottom row* subjects are presented with choice (a) vs. choice (c).

Table 1:
Tests of Hypotheses

Table 1.A: No significant difference between majority and minority party identifier:

		Blanket Reform	
		Supports	Opposed
Party Identifiers	Majority Party	154 (50.0%)	154 (50.0%)
	Minority Party	113 (43.1%)	149 (56.9%)

$\chi^2_1 = 2.415, p \leq 0.13$

Logit Regression

	Estimate	S.E.	t value	P test
Intercept	0.500	0.028	17.596	0.000
Minority Party	-0.69	0.042	-1.639	0.102

AIC: 828.43

Table 1.B: Hypothesis 2: Party identifiers in the (a) vs. (c) condition should be less favorable to blanket primaries than party identifiers in the (a) vs. (b) condition

		Blanket Reform	
		Supports	Opposed
All Party Identifiers	a & b	168 (53.3%)	147 (46.7%)
	a & c	99 (38.8%)	156 (61.2%)

$\chi^2_1 = 11.3, p \leq 0.001$

Logit Regression

	Estimate	S.E.	t value	P test
Intercept	0.533	0.028	19.137	0.000
PIs between a & c	-0.145	0.042	-3.482	0.001

AIC: 819.08

Table 1.C: Hypothesis 3: A higher proportion of unaffiliated voters should prefer blanket primaries, compared to party identifiers

	Blanket Reform	
	Supports	Opposed
Unaffiliated Voters	247 (61.3%)	156 (38.7%)
All Party Identifiers	267 (46.8%)	303 (53.2%)

$\chi^2_1 = 19.201, p \leq 0.001$

Logit Regression

	Estimate	S.E.	t value	P test
Intercept	0.613	0.025	24.879	0.000
Party Identifiers	-0.144	0.032	-4.488	0.000

AIC: 1395.3

Table 1.D: Hypothesis 4: Unaffiliated voters in the (a) vs. (c) condition should be more favorable to blanket primaries than party identifiers in the (a) vs. (b) condition

	Blanket Reform	
	Supports	Opposed
Unaffiliated: a & c	127 (60.2%)	84 (39.8%)
All Party Identifiers: a & b	168 (53.3%)	147 (46.7%)

$\chi^2_1 = 2.141, p \leq 0.150$

Logit Regression

	Estimate	S.E.	t value	P test
Intercept	0.602	0.034	17.624	0.000
DV Dummy	-0.069	0.044	-1.554	0.121

AIC: 759.27