

Observational Analysis of Tie-Break and Veto Powers Utilized within the U.S. Government

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Introduction:

In the current political climate today, the media and the public express clear concerns over how the trend of political polarization causes problems with intergovernmental functions. Many attribute bad legislation, poor decisions, non-optimal leaders, etc. to be caused by this polarization. Some studies have worked to explore the effect of political parties on committees and decisions made, but there is still not clear work discussing specific procedural powers, or in other words “hard powers” held by committee chairs to affect these decisions–such as tie-breaking power and veto power. Furthermore, not many studies focus on all three branches of government and how they interact with each other, especially considering their niche functions, including tie-breaking and veto power. These powerful checks and balances are often overlooked, however, they reflect significantly on the political climate of our country and trends in government. Our study focused on the power of governmental committee chairs and how they hold influence over the committee and the decisions made within them. Some of the powers held by committee chairs included veto power and tie-breaking power, both of which contribute to the decisions made within government. Our study aimed to discover why these powers had the trends that they do and how significant their effects were. To do this, we collected and analyzed data, using case studies and quantitative graphs, in order to test our hypothesis. Overall, based on scholarly work collected thus far, our proposed hypothesis is that political polarization has become a scapegoat for problems discussed within committees and there are more nuanced influences upon decisions than just this factor alone.

Abstract:

The research goal examines tie-breaking and vetoing powers used in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches to affect decisions in the U.S. This investigation is significant because currently, there is only speculation to how these hard powers influence political division within the country, so observing the historical data reveals patterns. Research was first started by compiling scholarly articles with instances of tie-breaking and veto powers to narrow the focus to the three branches of government. Data was put into tables/graphs to specifically show-- in the legislative: when Vice Presidents had the most amount of tiebreaking votes in the Senate; in executive, which Presidents utilized veto powers the most; and in judiciary, how many tiebreaking votes were necessary in the Supreme Court Justices decisions. Patterns can be determined from this mapping to predict and possibly prohibit their use in future instances. The Vice President's tiebreaking votes have showcased that political party division is not the most contributing factor to the most tiebreaking votes; rather, significant events happening in the U.S. that spark controversy are more indicative of tiebreaking votes occurring. For executive veto powers used, data predicts that higher amounts of vetoes will occur when the legislature majority party contradicts the current President's. Data on the use of tie-breaking powers in the Supreme Court Justices predicts that tie-breaks occur when there are divisive cases within the country. A nuanced understanding of hard powers in committees demonstrates the need to understand governmental processes due to lasting implications on citizens' everyday lives.

Methodology:

The subject of this study was governmental committee chairs' powers, specifically veto power and tie-breaking power, and their respective committees in the United States government. However, the project was mostly focused on influence and power within committees rather than individual subjects. To accomplish the study, several measures of tie-breaking and veto powers were analyzed across U.S. history as they operated within the three branches of government.

Data was compiled into graphs to better assess changes over time and their correlations to factors such as political party, time period, and term length. However, quantitative and qualitative data were both utilized. Numerous examples were found to highlight the influence of committee chairs, and novel conclusions were drawn based on these case explorations. Empirical data were created based on existing information in various databases, and the observational analysis was imperative to determine the significance of such cases.

Executive: Presidential Veto Powers

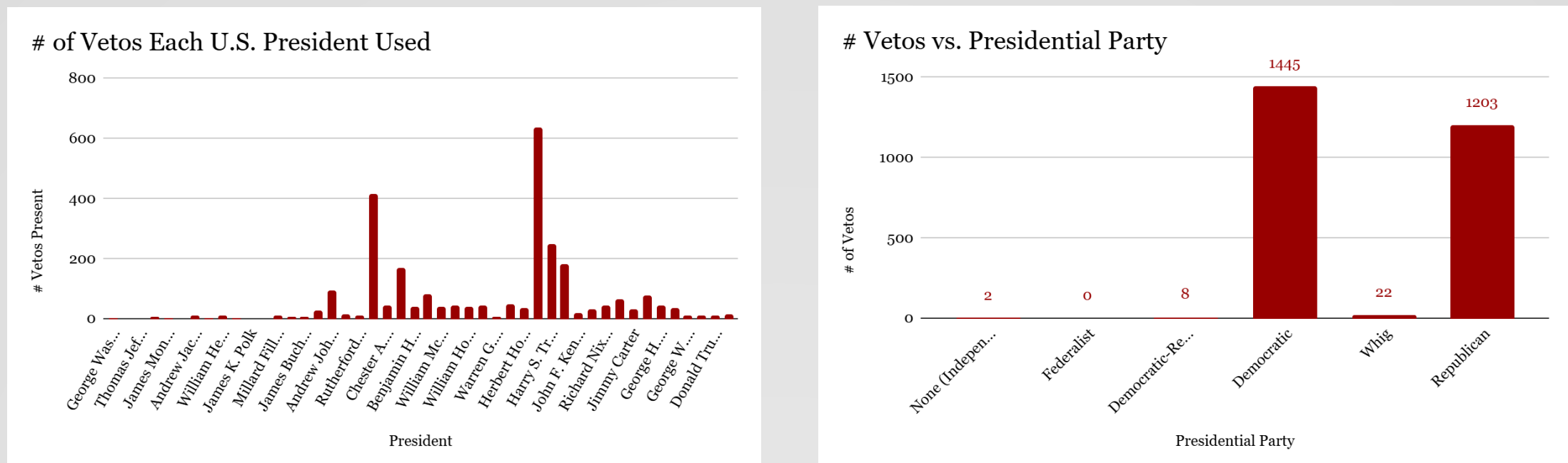


Figure 1: Number of Vetoes used by U.S. Presidents across history.

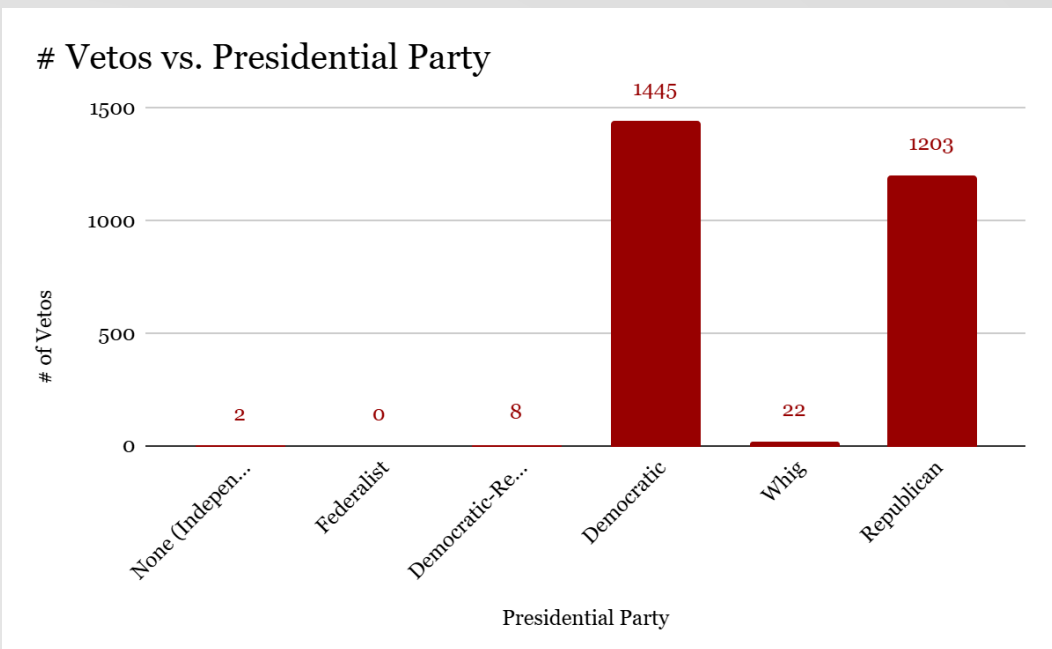


Figure 2: Number of Vetoes used for each Presidential Party in the U.S.

Legislative: Tie Break Powers

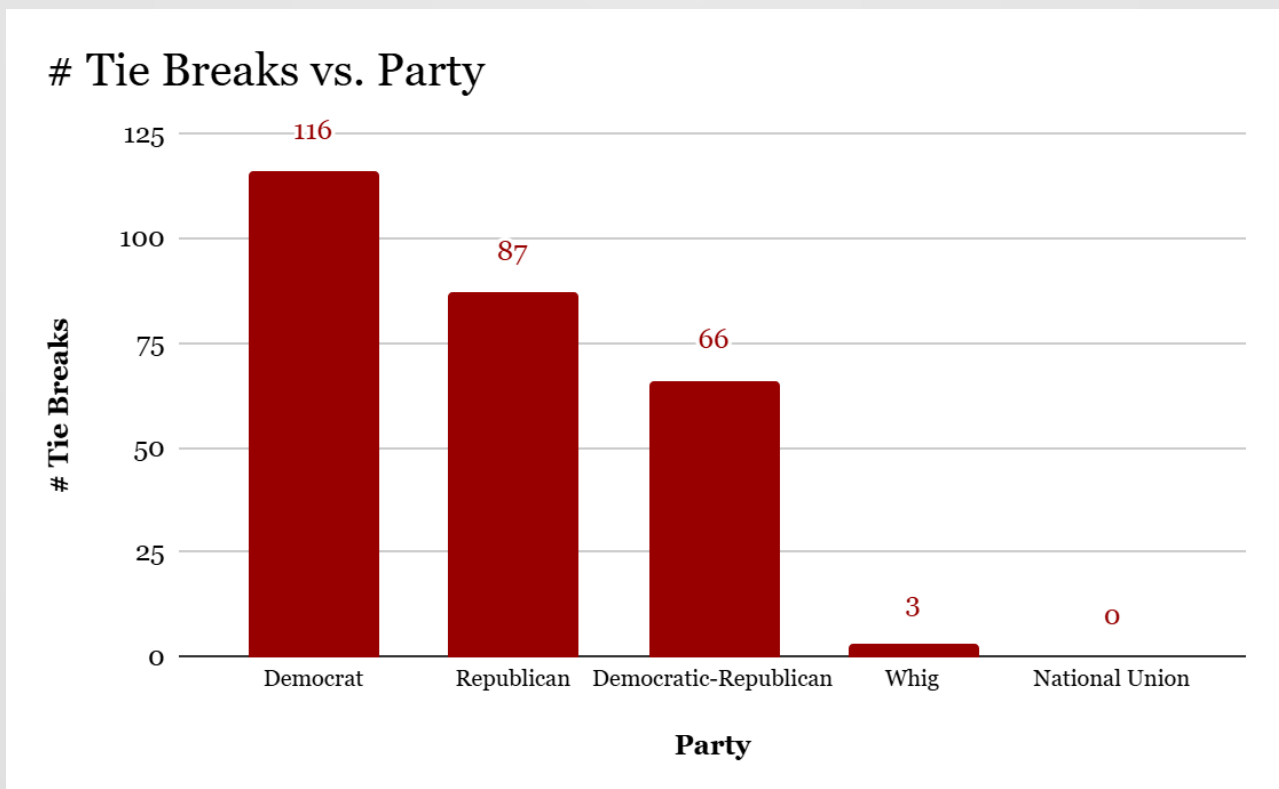


Figure 3: Number of Tie Breaks used by Vice President in the Senate by Presidential Party across U.S. history.

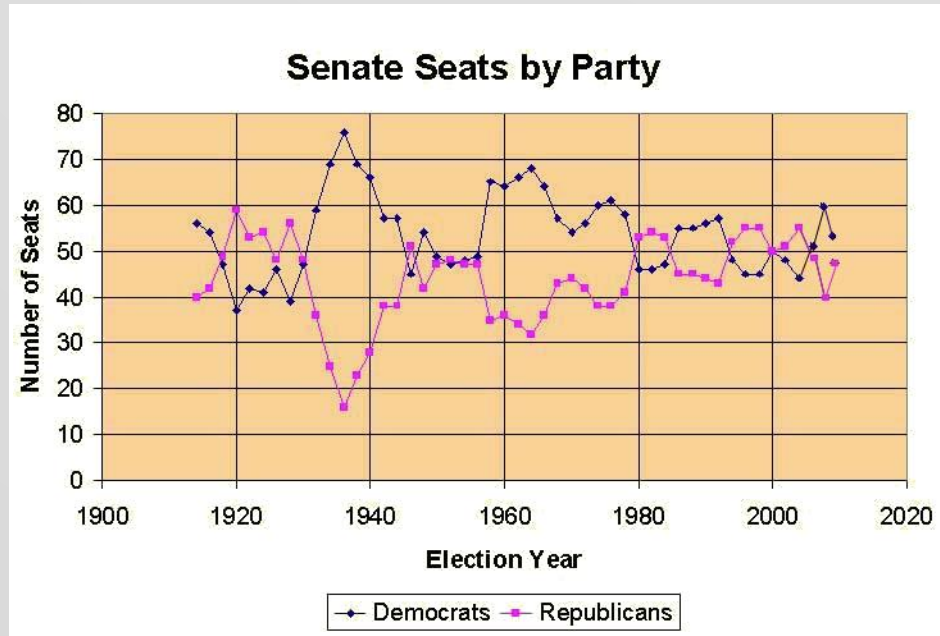


Figure 4: Number of seats held by Democrat vs. Republican Party in the U.S. Senate from 1900-2020.

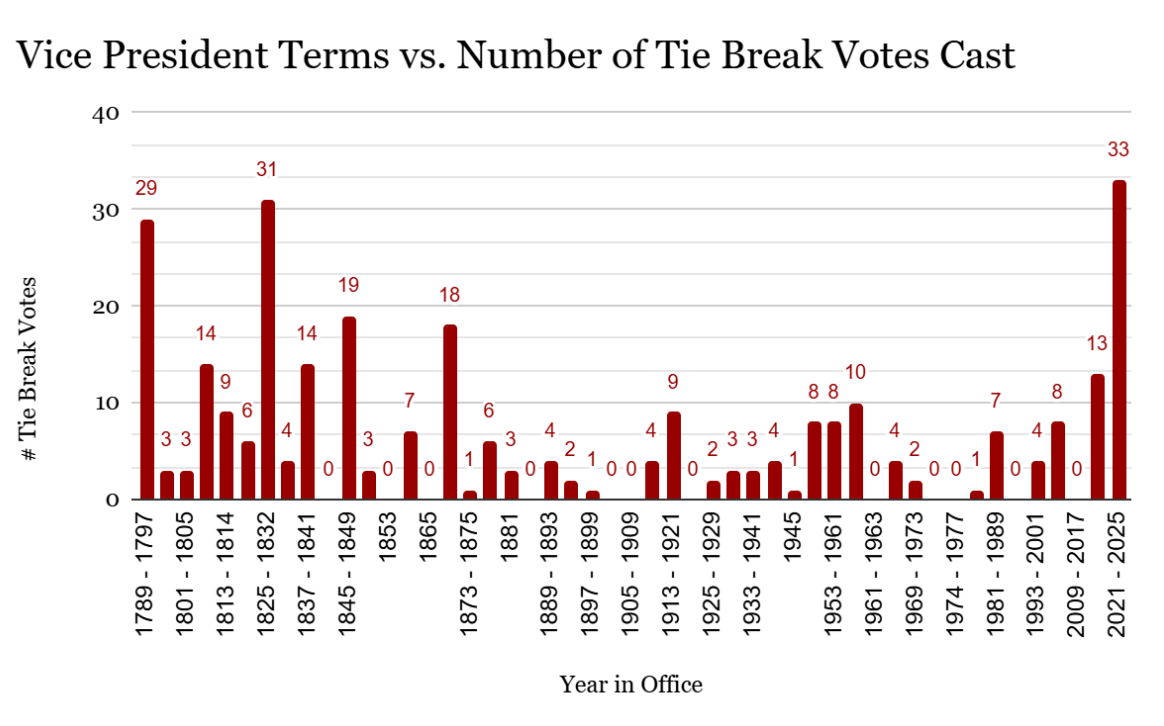


Figure 5: Number of Tie Break votes used by each U.S. Vice President (term) as Senate President in U.S. history.

Judicial: Instances of Ties

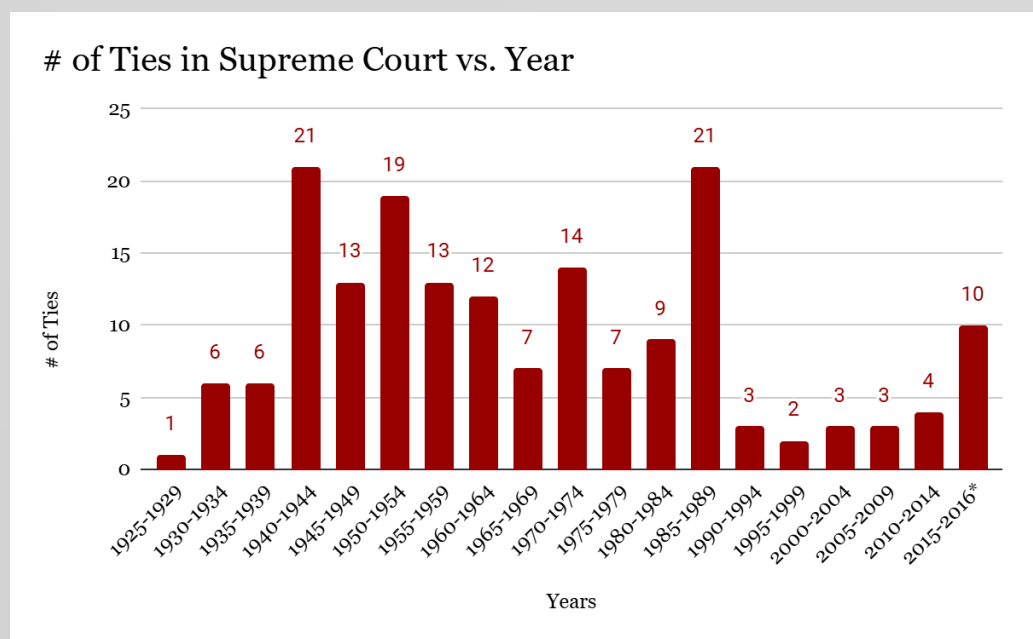


Figure 6: Number of tie votes cast in Supreme Court Decisions for each 5-year segment.

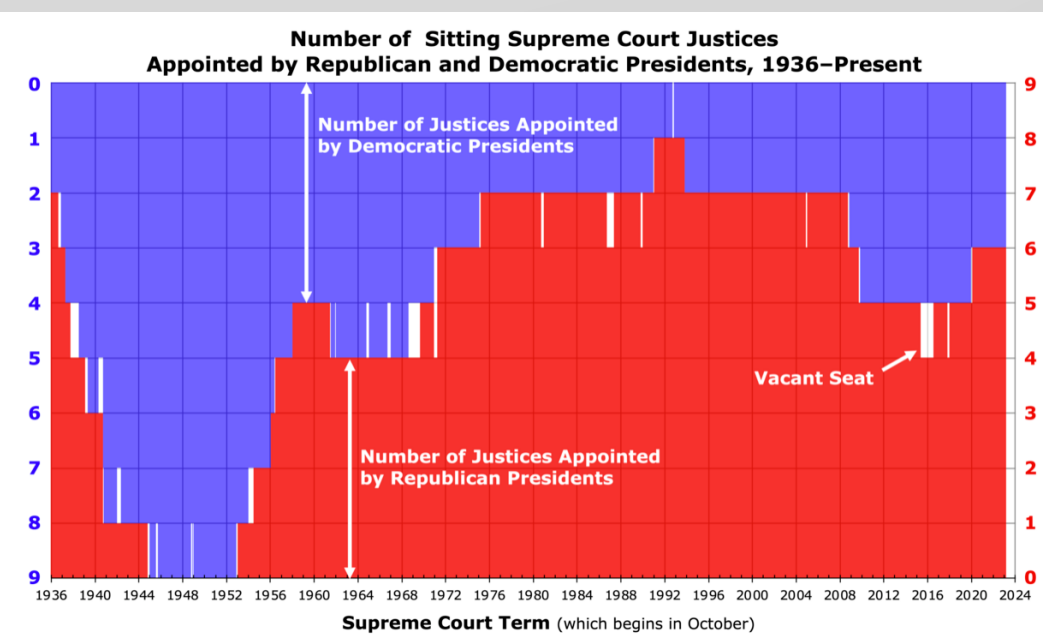


Figure 7: Ratio of Democrat vs. Republican Party Supreme Court Justices from 1936-2024.

Results & Analysis:

The research aimed to investigate the power of governmental committee chairs and how they hold influence over committees and the decisions made within them. The research specifically focused on political division and its effects on abilities such as tie-breaking and veto power. It was discovered that:

Senate:

In the legislative branch, the Senate President is given high amounts of influence with the use of the tie-breaking power, especially in instances of executive appointment. However, contrary to predictions, there was a limited connection between the use of tie-breaking power and political party division. In the cases where the highest amounts of tie-break powers were used, all were during the most turbulent and controversial times in U.S. history, such as during the Civil War. Shown in spikes in Figure 4 & 5.

Judicial Branch:

Observations found that while there is no allotted use for tie-breaking power, their processes can be used to contrast the legislative use of the power. The Supreme Court witnesses ties in decisions when the court briefly has an even number of justices, either due to a vacancy or someone choosing to abstain. Whenever a tie is present, the courts automatically reinstate the previous court's decision. The instances of this happening sparked public disapproval; however, again, contrary to the believed connection between political party division and an increase in ties, there was no apparent correlation as shown in Figures 6 & 7. The most substantial instances of ties did not depend on a split court, and even an all-Democratic party panel of Justices had high instances of ties (Figure 7).

Executive Branch:

The use of the veto power the President holds was also not determinant based on political party. Mapping across the history of the power used overall by U.S. presidents showed no significant increase for Republican or Democratic presidents (Figure 2). However, some extreme cases, like those of President Roosevelt and the unprecedented 635 vetoes used during his time in office, showed how the veto has the potential to increase the powers of the Executive drastically (Figure 1).

These results are significant because they showcase the mistake of assuming the blame for problems in the U.S. today to be due to the continuing polarization in the U.S. political parties. Systematic use of tie breaks and veto powers showcase imbalances of power that need to be addressed instead of shifting focus onto the fiery conversations between opposing Democrats and Republicans. This issue may change in the future as politics are constantly evolving, however, we see a relatively consistent theme throughout the past.

Future Directions:

Future research can expand this discussion and observational analysis through further examination in statistical significance and in more niche areas of governmental committees. Also, this research can be applied to ideological influence on committees in other sectors, such as business, finance, foreign governments, industry, etc. For future research, it is recommended that further statistical analysis be applied to the case studies and trends observed throughout U.S. history in all three of the governmental branches. While observational data and conclusions have been helpful in drawing conclusions, more concrete statistical data will further cement the idea that political party division is less important than what was commonly thought.

Resources:

