

Do Voters Balance Partisan Control of the Federal Government During the Partisan Era? Assessing the Case of the 2021 Georgia U.S. Senate Runoffs*

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Abstract

Recent work on American presidential election cycles posits that voters engage in anticipatory balancing, with voters being more likely to vote against a legislative candidate if they believe the candidate's party will win the presidency. This theory predicts split-ticket voting on the basis that voters prefer divided government to moderate collective policy outcomes by forcing agreement among institutions controlled by opposing parties. We test this theory within the context of the 2021 Georgia U.S. Senate runoffs, which solely determined whether Democrats would have unified control of the federal government by determining majority control of the Senate. This context provides a crucial test of the theory by providing an environment of perfect information in which partisan control of the presidency and the House of Representatives is already determined and not conditional on standing election outcomes across states. Leveraging an original survey of Georgia voters, we find no evidence of balancing within the general electorate and among partisans across differing model specifications. We confirm this lack of balancing in qualitative content analysis of voter electoral runoff intentions. We reconcile this lack of evidence for balancing to original analysis showing the unprecedented partisan nature of contemporary Senate elections since direct-election began in 1914.

Key words: Electoral balancing, policy balancing, voter electoral knowledge, partisanship, nationalized elections

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