

Chasing Fiscal Responsibility Through Balanced Budgets: The Collision of Ideology with Political Realities

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Abstract

For decades, a central element of the Republican Party brand has been to call for fiscal responsibility through balanced budgets. We study the extent to which the party has been able to implement those ideological principles. In order to answer this question we study macro-level trends in the federal budget across multiple dimensions, and exploit Congressional Budget Office reports to study legislative behavior on specific bills. Evidence of Republican politicians behaving in ways that would suggest a systematic commitment to balanced budgets is mixed, with some evidence of decline across time. Finally, we explore possible explanatory mechanisms.

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1 Introduction

Republican Party messaging emphasizes the importance of small, inexpensive government. But Republican politicians at the federal level have overseen decades of deficits when the party had sufficient control across the executive and legislative branches to stop any major spending: in 36 out of the 40 years, Republicans either controlled the veto-pen or at least one chamber of Congress. During this period, the only meaningful decline in spending came from decreases in defense spending during the Clinton years after the Cold War.¹

What explains this inconsistency between proclaimed party ideology and behavior? A number of possibilities receive attention in existing scholarship. Researchers note the majority of federal spending goes to mandatory entitlement programs that are popular and therefore difficult to reverse (Pierson 1996; Boeri, Börsch-Supan, and Tabellini 2001; Shaw and Mysiewicz 2004; Herwartz and Theilen 2014; Brodie, Hamel, and Norton 2015). However, cutting taxes is also popular and has become a cornerstone of the Republican Party's political identity (Prasad 2018). Others have noted that even sincere political beliefs can easily be waylaid by the necessity of responding to current events (Quaglia, Epp, and Madel 2022; Bevan and Jennings 2014; Jones, Larsen-Price, and Wilkerson 2009; Sulkin 2005). For example, the COVID-19 pandemic ushered in trillions of dollars in stimulus spending during Trump's presidency with Republicans in control of the Senate. Finally, a lengthy literature on US welfare policy implies that GOP rhetoric about small, fiscally responsible government is at least partially cheap talk, useful for providing politicians cover in their goals of dismantling safety-net programs that are thought to help racial minorities rather than a reflection of real ideological beliefs about fiscal policy (Gilens 2009; Hancock 2004).

We enter into this milieu by seeking to document the degree to which the Republican Party has strayed from its self-proclaimed goal of fiscal responsibility through inexpensive government and balanced budgets. First, we want to know if the Republican Party has ever lived up to this goal. Second, we want to better understand if inconsistencies emerge at the party level, at the member level, or both. That is, are Republican members of Congress generally trying to pass legislation that would reduce the deficit by cutting spending only to see these efforts thwarted by the necessities

¹Alesina (2000) discusses the politics of the budget surplus under Clinton and argues that the decline in defense spending was the major driver. Sobel makes a special interest group based argument for why budget deficits declined under Clinton (2001). Another explanation comes from the Gramm–Rudman–Hollings Act of 1985, which created binding spending constraints (Grammlich 1990); it was largely replaced by the Budget Enforcement Act of 1990.

of compromising with Democrats or responding to current events? Or are members themselves much less committed to reducing the deficit than political rhetoric and convention wisdom would suggest?

Our investigation proceeds in two parts using a mixed methods approach. First, we offer a vivid proof-of-concept with the cases of Medicare Part D and war funding where the actions of Republican politicians were clearly incompatible with a programmatic commitment to balanced budgets. Second, to place these cases in historical context, we conduct two empirical studies: 1) a macro-econometric analysis that looks at spending, deficits, tax expenditures, debt, and budget projection trends relative to party control from 1946 to 2019, and 2) an analysis of bill-level data that exploits Congressional Budget Office (CBO) scores to study how the cost of proposed legislation affects member behavior. Together, these analyses allow us to characterize the extent to which Republicans have contributed to deficits and whether their attitudes have changed over time. Various dimensions we study include big-ticket vs small spending, discretionary vs mandatory, pro- vs counter-cyclical, and outlays vs implicit tax expenditures. In all, we provide the most comprehensive look at the budgetary behavior of the two major parties at the national level to date, drawing from six different budgetary data over 70 years of history.

Results provide little evidence that Republicans at the federal level have ever had systematic or long-term success at reducing budget deficits. On this point, the macro-trend analysis and CBO analysis looking at individual members are complimentary. The partisan differences and statistically meaningful trends that do emerge from our analysis are highly situational: for example, Republican Party control is associated with smaller deficits during recessions but larger in non-recessionary periods, Republican control is also associated with more costly long-term budget projects, and our bill-level analysis reveals that Republicans are more likely to behave in a fiscally restrained way on bills that fail to pass suggesting some degree of cheap talk. We also find evidence that Republican members of Congress have become more likely to vote to extremely costly legislation over time.

Finally, we look for potential mechanisms driving these results by highlighting two political trends that might affect the fiscal behavior of parties and their members: the dual rise of safe seats and political spending from corporate lobbyists. If safe seats weaken party discipline (Kustov, Cerda, Rajan, and Shapiro 2021), then this might explain why it is increasingly challenging for

majority party leaders to pursue cohesive policy agendas based on ideological priorities (Curry and Lee 2019). Likewise, it could explain why the Republican Party has failed to make good on ideological commitments for balanced budgets. In a similar fashion, the need to cultivate donations might cause parties to stray from the path of ideological orthodoxy, if, for example, tax cuts or spending programs are called for by rich lobbyists. Our exploratory analysis is suggestive, but does not provide clear evidence that either element is systematically related with fiscal behavior.

Given these results, how should we understand Republican rhetoric on the subject of fiscal responsibility? Is it a sincere ideological guidepost to which GOP politicians repeatedly fall short, or it is politically expedient cheap talk? We propose that it is both and that the GOP position has evolved from a period of sincere belief in the 1940s and 1950s when Republicans were more likely to pursue deficit-reduction policies, to a period in the 1970s and 1980s of intellectual gesturing through appeals to supply-side economics and “starve-the-beast” when Republicans supported policies that added enormously to the debt but still tried to justify them as fiscally responsible, to the modern period (characterized by unfunded wars and Medicare Part D) when the Republican Party has all but given up the pretense. More than anything this evolution is reflective of the difficulties of producing balanced budgets at the national level. Members of both parties may wish to do so, but not at the risk of alienating a public that wants crises addressed and costly entitlement programs protected.

2 Background

“Reagan proved that deficits don’t matter.” Whatever the economic merits of Vice-President Cheney’s assertion in 2002, he seemed to be on firm political ground. Reagan had tripled the national debt and George W. Bush would go on to double it, yet both were rewarded with second terms. Moreover, Republican increases in deficit spending are often unrelated to the business cycle: some of the largest increases have come when no recession was in sight. When these have resulted from tax cuts, an economic rationale has often been supplied—usually the supply side argument that the cuts will pay for themselves. From Reagan to Trump Republicans have made that argument, albeit in the face of considerable evidence. In addition, any broad electoral benefits from some of these tax cuts are uncertain (Lacy 1998; Hacker and Pierson 2005; Bartels 2006). But Republi-

can administrations have also initiated major increases in deficit spending that have no economic rationale at all.

Medicare Part D, enacted hard on the heels of the Bush tax cuts in 2003, was a massive new program that gives free prescription drugs to seniors. In the first few years the cost was about \$50 billion a year, but it has grown steadily. Since 2016 has been double that or more, so that the ten-year cost is now more than a \$1 trillion (CBO 2022). With less than a fifth of the cost covered by premiums and the transfers from states, this is a huge unfunded mandate on the federal government. It was enacted when the Republicans controlled both Houses of Congress and the Presidency, all the more notable since the projected costs were about a third above what the actual cost has turned out to be (Oliver, Lee, and Lipton 2004; CBO 2022). Support from Democrats and the AARP was predictable. Republicans wanted to pass it, however, because they expected that a future Democratic bill would include cost containment that the government would be extract by negotiating prices with the drug companies. The companies lobbied heavily against cost-containment, after which they supported the bill (Bartlett 2013; Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018).

Since the program's inception, Medicare Part D has paid substantially more for brand name drugs than other providers who have negotiated substantial rebates. For instance, a 2021 CBO study of 176 top-selling brand-name drugs found that the Medicare Part D paid an average price \$343 for a 30-day supply as compared with \$118 by Medicaid. CBO also compared the cost of more expensive specialty drugs, finding that on average Medicare paid \$4,293 for a 30-day supply whereas Medicaid paid \$1,889 (CBO 2021). The pharmaceutical industry lobbies heavily to retain this status quo, giving to on both sides of the aisle to prevent efforts by Republican and Democratic administrations to negotiate Medicaid Part D drug prices even when successful candidates run on platforms advocating this—as Presidents Obama and Trump both did (Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018). In 2021 alone the pharmaceutical industry spent \$263 million on campaign contributions lobbying, employing three lobbyists for every member of Congress (Van Cleave 2021).

War funding also exemplifies the trend toward secular increases in deficit spending that are unrelated to the business cycle or the economy. Through fiscal year 2022, the U.S. Federal government spent or obligated \$8 trillion on post-9/11 wars.² Unlike all previous wars, which were

²The \$8 trillion is composed of Congressional appropriations; war-related increases to the Pentagon base budget; veterans care and disability; increases in the homeland security budget; interest payments on direct war borrowing; foreign assistance spending; and estimated future obligations for veterans' care (Watson Institute 2021).

substantially funded by war bonds and tax increases, these costs have been funded almost exclusively on debt. The Truman Administration raised the top marginal tax rate to 92 percent during the Korean conflict, with the president defending “pay as you go” in more than 200 speeches. In 1967 the Johnson Administration imposed a Vietnam war surcharge that raised to top marginal tax rate to 77 percent. By contrast, the GW Bush Administration cut taxes in 2001 and 2003 as the US was going to War in Afghanistan and Iraq, with Republicans in control of both the House and the Senate (Bilmes 2017). Despite this, by the time Bush left office he had more than doubled defense spending to over \$650 billion, a number that would come down modestly in the second Obama Administration but go back to \$700 billion under President Trump who, like GW Bush, nonetheless cut taxes in 2017 when there was no recession and Republicans controlled the entire government (Crawford 2021).

Whatever the policy merits of the post-9/11 wars might have been, the buildup in defense spending has been hugely profitable to the U.S. defense industry. Total Pentagon spending in the first two decades of this century exceeded \$14 trillion (in 2021 dollars), at least 4.4 trillion of which went for weapons procurement and Research and Development. In recent years, between a quarter and a third of all Pentagon contracts went to five major weapons contractors: Boeing, General Dynamics, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, and Raytheon. From FY 2001 to FY2020 these five firms alone split over 2.1 trillion in Pentagon contracts (2021 dollars). U.S. contractors have also made tens of billions of dollars out of logistics and reconstruction contracts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Halliburton, through its Kellogg, Brown, and Root subsidiary, had contracts with the federal government that grew more than tenfold from FY2002 to FY2006 to rebuild Iraq’s oil infrastructure and provide logistical support for U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Between 2001 and 2008 KBR had earned \$30 billion from these contracts (Hartung 2021).

With so much at stake, it is not surprising that the defense industry has made major investments to influence U.S. defense policy. Since 2001, the industry has spent \$2.5 billion on lobbying, funding more lobbyists than there are members of Congress. The industry has also been a major campaign contributor. Over the same period defense contractors have made \$285 million in campaign contributions. Some of this has gone to presidential candidates and the Congressional leadership, but members of the House Armed Services, Senate Appropriations and other oversight committees have been the biggest winners. Defense PACs and employees have given \$135 million

to the campaigns and leadership PACs of members who sit on the key committees that oversee them, accounting for 60 percent of all giving to members of Congress (Auble 2021). This is not to mention their investments to influence defense spending by funding think tanks and reports that purport to identify threats that require continuous increases in defense spending (Grazier 2018).

In 2001 Grover Norquist, who had founded Americans for Tax Reform six years earlier at the urging of President Reagan, famously declared: “I don’t want to abolish government. I simply want to reduce it to the size where I can drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub.” (Nelson 2019). These examples suggest that his “starve the beast” philosophy obscures a reality in which Republican candidates are unable to resist pressure from lobbyists and campaign contributors, but also incapable of voting to raise the revenue to pay for what they dole out. Even if they judge it irresponsible not to raise taxes to pay for their spending, as GHW Bush did when abandoning his 1988 “Read my lips, no new taxes!” pledge once in office, they know this will be too costly for them with the Republican base that turns out disproportionately in primaries (Graetz and Shapiro 2011). If so, when they are in government we should expect to see secular increases in deficit spending that are unrelated to the business cycle or other economic considerations. That possibility motivates our inquiry here.

3 Macro Trends

Budgeting is a complex legislative process that takes place under some degree of uncertainty. The exact costs or externalities of bills are rarely known, so understanding how and when a political party has contributed to the national debt is complicated. For example, party leaders may make last minute compromises that change final budget numbers to the chagrin of their members. Or policymakers may try to cut spending most of the time but also support a few extremely expensive programs, driving up the debt. In short, aggregate budget numbers while clearly an essential piece of the puzzle we are trying to unravel can mask dynamics that have bearing on our inquiry.

To investigate, we therefore draw upon a wide variety of (inflation adjusted) data sources, including macro data on spending, deficits, debt, tax expenditures, budgetary projections, polls, and bill-specific cost estimates. Altogether, these datasets allow us to take a detailed look at the budgetary behavior of Republicans and Democrats at the national level, considering both aggregate

budgets and their compositional procedural elements. It is important to evaluate multiple variables as there could be many channels through which the parties might try to follow through on an ideological commitment to balanced budgets. We therefore conduct a series of tests with the idea that there may be partisan differences along some dimension and that through exhaustive analysis we can find it, if it exists.

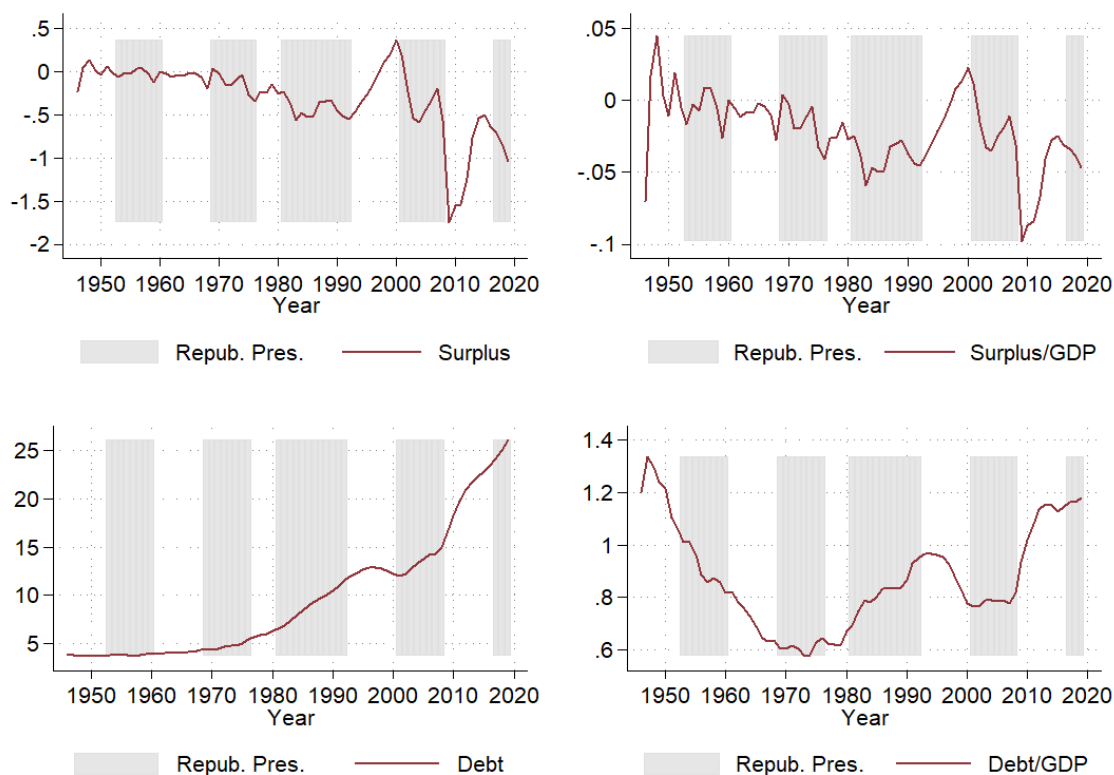
3.1 National Budget Trends

Our macro analysis consists of three parts. First, we study national budget trends to explore partisan differences in fiscal outcomes. Second, we look at budget projections as an alternative to study partisan differences in the expectations of future deficits. Third, we look at national party platforms and polls to characterize the evolution of opinions on budgetary issues across party lines.

We use yearly aggregate fiscal information from the Office of Management and Budget. In particular we look at spending (outlays), revenues, deficit, and debt. Our period of study for these data is from 1946 to 2019. Figure 1 shows surpluses and debt in total terms and as a ratio of GDP from 1949 to 2019; it also shows the years of Republican presidencies. Thus the only two periods of surpluses were the late 1940-1950s and the 1990s. Presidents Reagan and GW Bush oversaw substantial deficits with the 2008 recession under President Obama having the largest deficit since World War 2. Republican Presidents have on average seen larger deficits than Democratic presidents: -2.39% of GDP for Republicans and -1.99% for Democrats.

Subsetting to non-recession years (what might be considered business as usual economically speaking), Republican Presidents oversaw larger debts and deficits; they also saw higher economic growth, hence the smaller slopes when looking at spending relative to GDP. Policies such as tax breaks were followed by economic growth and deficit increases, with the latter being proportionally larger. Republican congresses often oppose Democratic President discretionary spending and will pressure them for spending cut deals (e.g. after the midterms under Presidents Clinton and Obama), but debt and deficits still increase largely due to mandatory spending which grows in step with demographics regardless of party control. The extent to which these trends are driven by domestic policy or global shocks is difficult to separate, but we can still characterize whether the parties differ in their budgetary outcomes in ways incongruent with the party ideologies.

Figure 1: Surpluses and Debt Over Time



This graph plots surpluses and debt (in trillions and divided by GDP) with intervals of Republican presidencies from 1946 to 2019.

Of course, the Republican Party can block legislation even without occupying the White House by controlling a majority of either congressional chamber, which we call a Republican blocking coalition. This type of divided government is common in our dataset, occurring for two years under Truman, six years under Clinton, and six years under Obama. Empirically, a Republican blocking coalition has a stronger effect on the surplus: blocking coalitions oversaw 2.15% of GDP deficits compared to 2.33% for other years. This is a consequence of the high surplus during Clinton and the great recession recovery post 2010, both of which coincide with these blocking coalitions.

Table 1 shows differences-in-means tests for surpluses and debt across party control measures. Republican presidents oversaw similar deficits to Democrats (which changes to significantly larger deficits if we include 2020) and slightly lower debt. Republican controlled Congresses (both houses) oversaw statistically higher debt in total and relative to GDP, but also higher surpluses (driven by Clinton years). Republican blocking coalitions also saw worse debt. Overall, there is

no evidence of greater fiscal discipline by Republicans on average from 1946 to 2020.³

Table 1: Mean Differences by Party

	President			Congress			Blocking Coalition		
	Dem	Rep	p	Dem	Rep	p	Dem	Rep	p
Surplus	-302.60	-301.67	0.99	-322.38	-239.07	0.44	-272.70	-313.77	0.69
Surplus/GDP	-0.01	-0.02	0.49	-0.02	-0.01	0.02	-0.02	-0.02	0.78
Debt	9991.05	9226.18	0.61	8370.51	13375.5	0.00	6426.17	10840.72	0.00
Debt/GDP	0.93	0.81	0.00	0.83	0.98	0.00	0.85	0.87	0.62
Observations	74			74			74		

This table shows p-values for difference in means tests for surpluses and debt (in billions and by GDP) across Republican control of the Presidency, Congress, and either presidency or at least one chamber.

Republican control of Congress (both House and Senate) is correlated with lower discretionary spending but that is waning with a positive time trend. Republican Congresses also oversee statistically higher debt levels. The other budget variables are insignificant but their coefficients typically indicate upward trends for Republicans. To build on these descriptive statistics, we consider a linear model of a federal finances variable in Appendix A.1, and find similar small effects.

Beyond spending and interest payments, there is an additional source of deficits. Tax expenditures are the implicit budgetary costs of tax policies, such as tax deductions. While not formally an outlay, they contribute to the deficit via lost revenues. The large cost of tax expenditures on budget deficits are well documented (Hungerford 2006; Rogers and Toder 2011; Burman and Phaup 2012). Faricy and Ellis (2014) show that indirect spending like tax expenditures are not easily internalized like direct spending and instead tend to fly under the radar for the American public. Tax expenditures are thus an additional metric for evaluating whether Republican control of government is correlated fiscal constraint. We retrieve yearly tax expenditure information from 1978 to the present from the Joint Committee on Taxation by digitizing their records.⁴ We do not find significant trends (see Appendix A.2).

³While there may be no clear difference on average across the whole time series, there may be significant changes across time. We test for multiple structural breaks with unknown dates using the Bai and Perron (1998) method, and find that there are break points before the Reagan administration, after HW Bush, and at the tail end of GW Bush. Prior to Reagan, Republican presidents suppressed deficit spending; during Reagan deficits increased, and during Clinton they again curbed it. During the GW Bush administration they allowed deficit spending and opposed it again under President Obama. Thus we see evidence for partisan trends in Republican opposition to deficit spending.

⁴They provide scanned documents detailing tax expenditures by category. We use a Optical Character Recognition program with human checkers to validate and format the documents.

3.1.1 Heterogeneity in Recessions

Next, we consider economic heterogeneity. This is motivated by the distinct economic philosophies between the two parties on the role of government in curtailing swings in the business cycle. Under Republican presidencies, the average deficit relative to GDP was -2.4% and under Democrats it was -2.0%. The gap widens during recessions: when there is negative GDP growth, Democrats increase spending (going from -1.9% to -2.7%) but Republicans contract relative to GDP (-2.5% to -2.2%). Table 2 shows the average differences in surpluses under Republican Presidents across recessions. Republican Presidents oversee larger deficits in non-recession years but smaller deficits during recessions; this suggests that they do not engage in as much Keynesian stimulus.⁵

In Appendix A.3, we control for automatic stabilizers, which ramp-up during recessions acting as counter-cyclical spending. These are budgetary mechanisms that do not require votes in Congress to allocate funds during recessions, such as unemployment insurance and the progressive tax system. We find some evidence of a shift towards less fiscal constraint during Republican administration.

Table 2: Surplus/GDP by Party and Recessions

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Obs.
Rep. Pres. = 0, Rec = 0	-0.018	0.030	31
Rep. Pres. = 0, Rec = 1	-0.032	0.046	4
Rep. Pres. = 1, Rec = 0	-0.029	0.018	24
Rep. Pres. = 1, Rec = 1	-0.016	0.017	15

This table shows statistics for surpluses/GDP across Republican presidencies and recessions from 1946-2019.

3.2 Cumulative Deficit Projections

The previous datasets give us the realized budgetary trends of the government. We also look at Congressional Budgetary Office (CBO) budget projections stemming from their 6 and 10 year reports starting from 1984. These give us point-in-time analysis of the expected effects of policy

⁵In Appendix A.4, we study the related issue of pro-cyclical spending, highlighting a less economically purposeful form of spending and we find a lack of party differences.

in a given year. The CBO provides estimates for the deficit and debt in the future based on the existing budget and legislation. This allows one to determine how a given President's agenda is projected to affect the future budget, capturing their potential long-term contribution to the debt.⁶

The analysis so far has only captured how spending in a given year is correlated with the party in control. While this is useful, it does not precisely capture under whose control did the policies that most affected the budget (over the long term) get passed. For example, the debt was projected to decline at the tail end of the Clinton administration, partially based on the policies enacted under his watch. However this debt decrease would never materialize under the Bush administration, providing an illustrative contrast. Simply comparing the deficits and debt accumulated under Presidents Clinton and GW Bush do not fully capture these dynamics.

Such an analysis requires determining what the main sources of the structural deficit are and when those materialized. This better captures under whose watch the long-term budget outlook worsened. But CBO projections at a given point in time provides insight into these dynamics. In the CBO reports, at year t , the "deficit projection over next 10 years" is the cumulative estimate based on bills up until that point in time. At year $t + 1$, there is a new projection: Δ_{t+1} , which is effectively how much the $t + 1$ government added to the "long-term deficit". For example, the 2015 CBO budget projection report estimated a deficit in 2016 of \$467 billion, but the following year this was updated to \$544 billion. Thus the new information on the economy and policies that year resulted in an additional \$77 billion in the deficit projection.

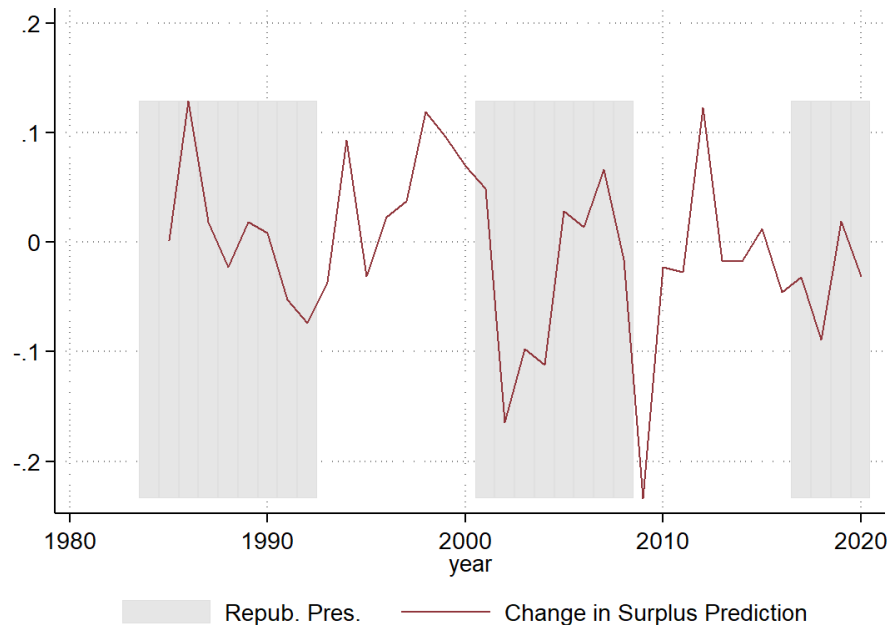
Using the full set of data available, we calculate Δ_{t+1} using 6 year projections with starting years of 1984 to 2020. Under Republican presidents, the Δ_{t+1} divided by GDP is -1.7%, whereas it is 0.9% under Democratic presidents. Thus on average, bills passed under Republican presidents were expected at the time they were passed to increase the deficit over time more than bills passed during Democratic administrations.

Figure 2 shows the CBO's surplus projections changes over time. Given the small time horizon and limited observations, we do not find statistically significant trends. The CBO projected that policies passed during the Reagan administration would significantly increase the deficit. Projections saw GW Bush increasing the deficit as well, Clinton decreasing the deficit, and Obama-era

⁶The accuracy of the prediction is not a major concern as we want to know how politicians acted based on expectations of cost; this only requires assuming a certainty degree of confidence in CBO projections by the politicians at the time. Miller (1991) studies the accuracy of their reports and shows they have improved over time.

projections predicting similar increases to those during GW Bush’s tenure. Thus, the CBO has estimated that policies passed during Democratic administrations will add less to the debt.

Figure 2: Surplus Projections Over Time



This graph plots surplus projection changes (in trillions) with intervals of Republican presidencies from 1984 to 2019.

In summary, having looked in detailed at a variety of macro budgetary variables and controlling for various economic and partisan configurations, Republican political leadership is clearly not associated with more balance budgets either in terms of the realized outcomes or projections (i.e. what was expected at the time). If anything, we find that any semblance toward fiscal discipline for the Republican Party has eroded over time. We gage whether these effects are expected by looking at party platforms and polls on the importance of budget deficits in Appendix A.5. We find that budgetary issues are consistently higher when Republicans control the government; this may indicate that the party’s rhetoric still echoes concerns over deficits. Next, we explore the micro-level individual behavior of Republican legislators.

4 Micro Analysis

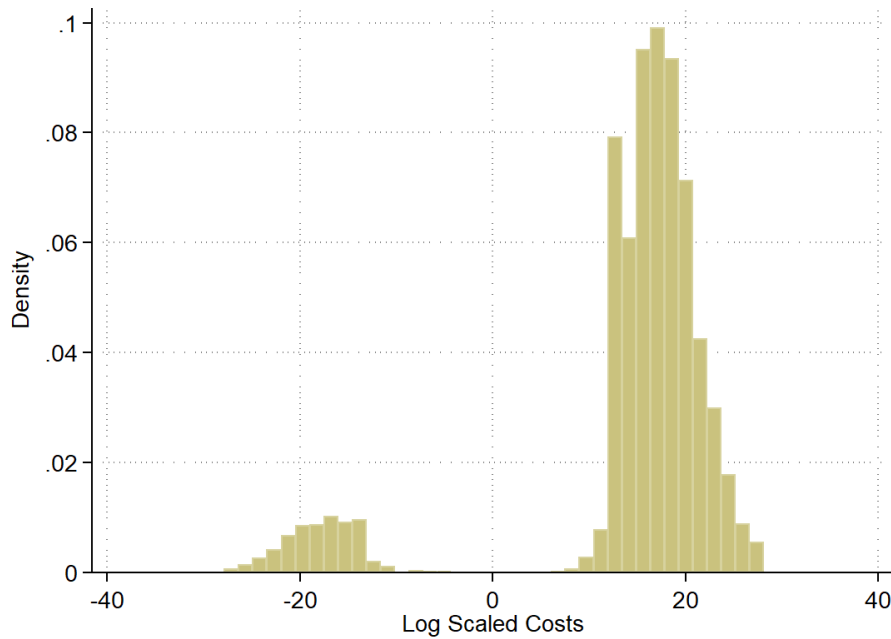
4.1 CBO Bill Data

Beyond budget projections, the CBO also creates estimates for the cost of bills being put to a vote in either chamber of Congress. In these reports, the CBO provides estimate for the amount and type of spending called for by a bill and any revenue implications. They only publish reports on the bills that members of Congress request, but there are strong congressional norms that bills are “scored” by the CBO before voting. Quaglia, Epp, and Madel (2022) was the first paper to our knowledge that systematically collected and analyzed CBO data. They studied the relationship between bill sponsor party and cost. They hand-collected the reports from 1997 to 2018. We update their dataset by scraping the CBO’s repository up until 2020. This novel pairing of newly created CBO cost data with roll call votes allows us to evaluate voting behavior based on the budgetary effects of a given bill.

As defined in the reports, “direct” spending is mandatory spending and “appropriations” is discretionary spending. Mandatory spending is a bigger share of the overall budget than discretionary, but we observe the opposite in this data because most bill introductions concern discretionary programs. It is also the case that enacted bills are on average less expensive than non-enacted bills, which is not surprising because intuitively more costly bills would receive greater scrutiny from legislators. There are selection issues with only using bills that have a CBO report, as most bills are never scored. We separate enacted and non-enacted bills to alleviate this issue. There are very few bills that are not scored, have non-trivial effects on the budget, and pass into law.

Our full CBO cost database contains 10,608 proposed bills from the 105th to the 115th congresses. Out of these, 67% have a non-zero effect on the budget. Their log distribution is shown in Figure 3; most bills have a positive cost, while a few are revenue generating bills. The cost is defined as the direct plus appropriations spending minus revenues. The distribution is skewed as most bills have trivial effects; 87% of bills affect the budget by less than a billion dollars (either positively or negatively). The mean deficit effect of for CBO estimated bills is \$6.9 billion with a standard deviation of \$75.4 billion. The largest in magnitude are bills generating \$1.19 trillion in revenues and contributing \$1.66 trillion to the deficit. The vast majority of these bills never pass and the effect of these cost estimates on that voting behavior is our primary interest.

Figure 3: Bill Cost Distribution (Log Scaled)



This graph plots the $\text{sign}(\text{cost})\log(|\text{cost}|)$ distribution for bills.

A limitation of this dataset is that it is only available starting in the late 1990s. This means our bills analysis misses the Republican deficit increases under Reagan (in contrast to the relatively more constrained Republicans during the 60s/70s). We also hand-collected CBO reports from various congressional report sources from the mid-1980s but were only able to find 75 bills between 1986 and 1991 with a report.⁷ We did not find any significant trends when studying this limited pre-1997 set.

4.2 Bill Cost and Member Voting Behavior

We want to know how individual members vote on costly legislation. It may be that Republican fiscal discipline emerges at this level as members promote bills that would cut spending only to see these efforts thwarted by sociopolitical forces outside their control. We join CBO data at the bill level with roll call votes. We use the final roll call available when there are multiple. There are

⁷The only bills of note were the Farm Emergency Credit Act of 1985, Caribbean Basin Economic Recovery Expansion Act of 1987, Public Buildings Authorization Act of 1987, HUD Reform Act of 1989, Clean Air Act Amendments of the 101st Congress, and an attempt at amending Social Security in 1990 by Republican Rod Chandler. None of these had deficit effects greater than 6 billion and not all passed.

few bills that get scored and never receive votes, and we do not consider those for this analysis.

We estimate a linear probability model predicting the voting decision of a member i to vote on bill b in year t .⁸ We include the log cost variable for the bill $Cost_{bt}$ and a time/year variable defined by congressional session.⁹ We run the fully interacted model by party $p \in \{D, R\}$, which is equivalent to the following separated party regression:

$$yea_{ibt} = \alpha + \beta_1 Cost_{bt} + \beta_2 \cdot T_t + \beta_3 Cost_{bt} \cdot T_t + \varepsilon_{ibt} \quad \text{if } party_{it} = p \quad (1)$$

We can then compare the β_3 term across parties to find differing trends across party lines in the members' willingness to vote on bills by cost. We focus on bills with nonzero spending (either positive or negative) because bills that have no fiscal consequences are not relevant to our research question. This analysis uses only bills that were enacted and we subsequently compare these results to an analysis using non-enacted bills.

Table 3 shows the results for equation (1) for five different cost measures and enacted bills. The trend for Republicans is positive on overall spending, deficits, revenues, and mandatory spending, as shown in columns 1-4. This hints at a weakening over time in resistance to bills based on their fiscal impact. However, there is a negative effect for appropriations spending, indicating that the source of Republican supported deficits is nuanced. Finally, column 6 shows the effect for bills with non-zero spending and we find a stronger effect. Overall the consistent negative interaction term between Republican membership and cost hints at Republican support for spending cuts, but, as the triple interaction with time indicates, this hawkishness is waning over time.¹⁰

The effect on spending overall is actually positive in logs but negative in levels. The effect flips for revenues as well (positive with logs, negative with levels), which indicate both mixed effects and sensitivity to outliers. Finally, across various specifications, there is a discontinuity in effects for bills that increase deficits and decrease them, as both are correlated with Republican support.

⁸Our preferred specification is the linear probability model due to its flexibility and robustness (Angrist and Pischke 2008); we acknowledge its limitations, particularly for predicting tail events. For robustness, we consider logistic and probit models in the appendix.

⁹The exact log transformation is $X' = \text{sign}(X) * \log(\text{abs}(X) + 1)$ to allow for non-positive spending.

¹⁰We also include party interactions with dummies for whether the member is in the Senate and party control of the legislature and executive. Not surprisingly, for both a Republican Senate and President, Republican members are much more likely to support bills; the effect is weaker for House control, which is intuitive as each vote is less marginally pivotal.

This points towards a willingness by Republicans to simultaneously support big spending cuts and big spending increases.

Table 3: Bill Vote on Cost, Party, and Time Regressions

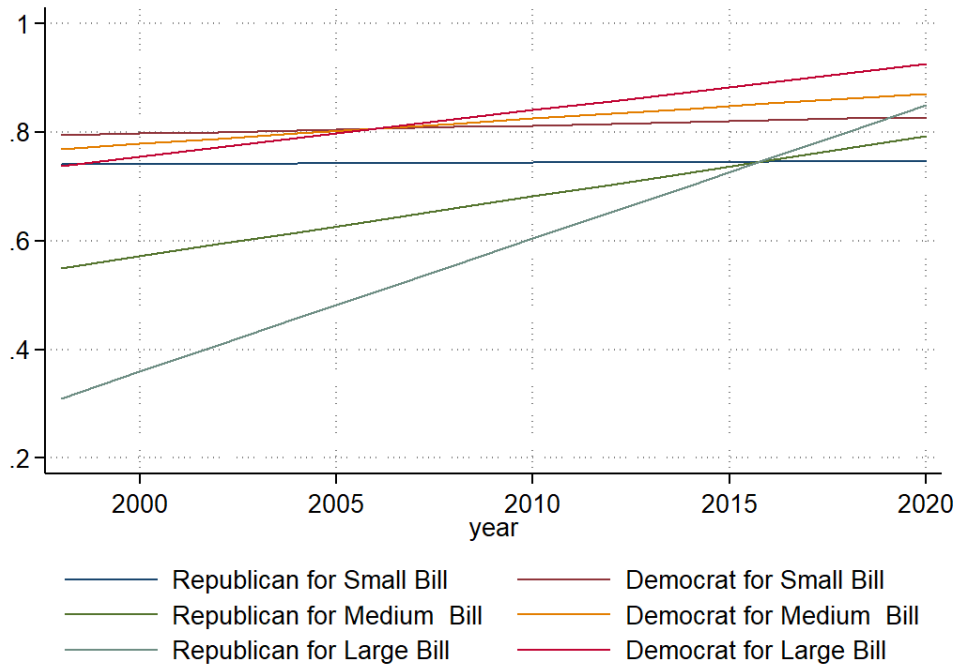
	Dependent Variable: Yea Vote on Bill					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Cost Variable in Logs	Spending	Deficit	Revenue	Mand.	Appr	Pos. Spend.
Cost Var.	-0.0047*** (0.0003)	-0.0026*** (0.0003)	0.0020*** (0.0003)	-0.0002 (0.0003)	-0.0152*** (0.0007)	-0.0169*** (0.0008)
Year	-0.0040*** (0.0007)	0.0004 (0.0007)	0.0057*** (0.0009)	0.0028*** (0.0008)	-0.0282*** (0.0016)	-0.0030 (0.0021)
Cost Var. × Year	0.0007*** (0.0000)	0.0005*** (0.0000)	-0.0002*** (0.0001)	0.0001 (0.0000)	0.0021*** (0.0001)	0.0006*** (0.0001)
Republican Member (Rep.)	-0.0574*** (0.0078)	-0.0225** (0.0074)	0.1808*** (0.0132)	0.0055 (0.0101)	-0.0652*** (0.0149)	0.2558*** (0.0189)
Rep. × Cost Var.	-0.0014*** (0.0004)	-0.0030*** (0.0004)	-0.0029*** (0.0005)	-0.0058*** (0.0004)	-0.0001 (0.0008)	-0.0179*** (0.0011)
Rep. × Year	-0.0047*** (0.0009)	-0.0054*** (0.0009)	-0.0078*** (0.0014)	-0.0079*** (0.0011)	0.0149*** (0.0019)	-0.0282*** (0.0030)
Rep. × Cost Var. × Year	0.0002** (0.0001)	0.0001 (0.0001)	0.0007*** (0.0001)	0.0007*** (0.0001)	-0.0009*** (0.0001)	0.0014*** (0.0002)
Constant	0.8797*** (0.0052)	0.8445*** (0.0053)	0.6078*** (0.0096)	0.7804*** (0.0069)	1.0428*** (0.0119)	1.1182*** (0.0138)
Observations	181834	187603	47856	81690	139927	157524
R^2	0.016	0.015	0.019	0.017	0.024	0.050

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. This table shows member-bill level regressions for enacted bills of voting ‘yea’ on a bill based on the interacted between its budgetary effect, party affiliation of the member of congress, and time. The six budgetary variables are cost (in terms of spending), deficit effects, revenue effects, mandatory spending cost, appropriations spending cost, and cost conditional on positive cost. We also include but suppress a dummy for Senate member, dummies for Republican House, Senate, and Executive control, and all four interactions with Republican member.

To illustrate and quantify these findings, Figure 4 shows the predicted vote probability for bills of varying mandatory spending levels (\$10 billion, \$50 billion, \$100 billion) by each party over time based on the coefficients from regression (1). These illustrate how Republicans have shifted more over time with bigger changes on larger bills. The effects are non-trivial as the voting probability goes from below 0.4 to above 0.75 in only 15 years. These are meant to capture these voting probabilities based only on the covariates included.

For contrast, Table 4 shows the same regression but conditions on non-enacted bills. There is a strong negative coefficient on all types of spending, a slightly positive on deficit, and a strong negative trend on revenues. In other words, Republicans strongly oppose spending and revenue increases on bills that do not pass. One rationalization of this is that if the Republican member believes their vote is non-pivotal or the bill has little chance of passing, then they can signal their

Figure 4: Vote Probability for Bill Type by Party over Time



This plots the estimated voting probability (from the linear probability model) for Republican and Democratic members over time based on the cost of the bill (\$10 billion, \$50 billion, \$100 billion).

ideology towards fiscal conservatism by voting down spending and tax increases.¹¹ These are in stark contrast to the enacted bills; with those not enacted, Republicans are clearly more aggressively anti-spending. This may indicate that fiscal conservatism is still part of the Republican core “principle,” but that it is simply not possible to bring these principles into action on bills that are able to pass.

In Appendix A.6, we study heterogeneity of the main results based on various factors including the bill sponsor, different levels of variation, bill categories, economic factors, and functional forms. We largely find results consistent with the main findings.

4.2.1 Variation by Political Control

The macro-level regressions looked at fiscal outcomes by political control and the bill-level analysis so far has looked at voting by individual members. Next we look at heterogeneity in individual

¹¹However one cannot fully rule out the instances of bills not passing because Republicans oppose them in force.

Table 4: Bill Vote Regression Non-Enacted Bills

	Dependent Variable: Yea Vote on Bill				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Spending	Deficit	Revenue	Mand.	Appr
Cost Var.	-0.0021*** (0.0002)	0.0017*** (0.0002)	-0.0034*** (0.0002)	-0.0001 (0.0003)	-0.0013** (0.0005)
Year	0.0000 (0.0006)	0.0086*** (0.0005)	0.0011 (0.0007)	-0.0010 (0.0006)	0.0074*** (0.0012)
Cost Var. × Year	0.0006*** (0.0000)	0.0001*** (0.0000)	0.0005*** (0.0000)	0.0004*** (0.0000)	0.0003*** (0.0001)
Republican Member (Rep.)	-0.0168* (0.0070)	0.0679*** (0.0062)	-0.0423*** (0.0103)	0.0424*** (0.0090)	-0.0665*** (0.0127)
Rep. × Cost Var.	0.0037*** (0.0004)	-0.0024*** (0.0003)	0.0137*** (0.0003)	0.0029*** (0.0004)	0.0076*** (0.0007)
Rep. × Year	-0.0121*** (0.0008)	-0.0225*** (0.0007)	-0.0106*** (0.0009)	-0.0145*** (0.0009)	0.0000 (0.0017)
Rep. × Cost Var. × Year	-0.0006*** (0.0000)	0.0001* (0.0000)	-0.0016*** (0.0001)	-0.0008*** (0.0001)	-0.0014*** (0.0001)
Constant	0.7483*** (0.0047)	0.6782*** (0.0043)	0.6267*** (0.0070)	0.7110*** (0.0061)	0.7146*** (0.0089)
Observations	436141	448898	100277	155870	369739
R^2	0.038	0.042	0.077	0.061	0.029

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. This table shows member-bill level regressions for non-enacted bills of voting ‘yea’ on a bill based on the interacted between its budgetary effect, party affiliation of the member of congress, and time. The five budgetary variables are cost (in terms of spending), deficit effects, revenue effects, mandatory spending cost, and appropriations spending cost. We also include but suppress a dummy for Senate member, dummies for Republican House, Senate, and Executive control, and all four interactions with Republican

behavior by political control; this will highlight the extent to which the individual members change their behavior based on whether their own party is in power.

Table 5 shows the same regression in terms of the deficit, but separated by which party controls the House, Senate, and Presidency. When Democrats control the House, Republicans are more likely on average to vote yes on bills that increase the deficit but that effect is decreasing over time. The effect is flipped when Democrats control the Senate: Republicans are less likely to support deficit increasing bills but have become less hesitant over time. Finally, when Republicans control the House, their members behave similarly to when the Democrats control the Senate.

This means there is heterogeneity in how members act based on if they can (in theory) pass things through their chamber on a party-line basis. When the President is Democrat, Republican lawmakers are notably stingy, and this flips when the President is a Republican. This is not surprising as one expects a Republican-controlled Congress to be less cooperative with Democratic

presidents, even on spending that they may support.¹²

Table 5: Bill Vote Regression by Political Control

	Dependent Variable: Yea Vote on Bill					
	(1) D-House	(2) D-Senate	(3) D-Pres	(4) R-House	(5) R-Senate	(6) R-Pres
Deficit	-0.0115*** (0.0022)	-0.0019*** (0.0003)	-0.0101*** (0.0005)	-0.0006 (0.0003)	0.0004 (0.0004)	-0.0031*** (0.0004)
Year	-0.0014 (0.0062)	0.0013* (0.0007)	-0.0222*** (0.0014)	0.0062*** (0.0007)	0.0031*** (0.0009)	0.0052*** (0.0009)
Deficit × Year	0.0017*** (0.0003)	0.0004*** (0.0000)	0.0015*** (0.0001)	0.0001** (0.0000)	0.0003*** (0.0000)	0.0001* (0.0001)
Republican Member (Rep.)	0.3783*** (0.0663)	0.0536*** (0.0063)	0.0631*** (0.0142)	0.0427*** (0.0068)	0.0583*** (0.0081)	0.0198* (0.0083)
Rep. × Deficit	0.0344*** (0.0036)	-0.0046*** (0.0004)	-0.0075*** (0.0008)	-0.0030*** (0.0004)	-0.0030*** (0.0005)	-0.0057*** (0.0005)
Rep. × Year	-0.0666*** (0.0103)	-0.0083*** (0.0009)	-0.0149*** (0.0020)	-0.0041*** (0.0009)	-0.0120*** (0.0011)	-0.0070*** (0.0012)
Rep. × Deficit × Year	-0.0053*** (0.0006)	0.0002*** (0.0001)	0.0008*** (0.0001)	-0.0000 (0.0001)	-0.0001* (0.0001)	0.0009*** (0.0001)
Senate Member	-0.0193* (0.0088)	-0.0583*** (0.0054)	-0.0032 (0.0058)	-0.1018*** (0.0072)	-0.0573*** (0.0062)	-0.0417*** (0.0068)
Senate Member × Rep.	-0.2477*** (0.0151)	0.0297*** (0.0076)	-0.1818*** (0.0099)	0.1078*** (0.0094)	-0.0362*** (0.0094)	-0.0224* (0.0099)
Constant	0.8592*** (0.0400)	0.8368*** (0.0048)	1.0046*** (0.0092)	0.8106*** (0.0052)	0.8117*** (0.0062)	0.8469*** (0.0061)
Observations	36013	151590	79861	107742	92001	95602
R^2	0.040	0.012	0.037	0.011	0.017	0.020

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. This table shows member-bill level regressions for non-enacted bills of voting ‘yea’ on a bill based on the interacted between its deficit effect, party affiliation of the member of congress, and time. We include a full interaction with whether the member is in the Senate. We separate each regression by party control of House/Senate/President.

4.3 Possible Mechanisms For Legislator Behavior

What explains the lack of fiscal responsibility among Republicans, particularly some of the recent trend? One factor might be weakening parties, and we explore this by looking at the general election safety of each seat; this captures how beholden the incumbent is to primary voters while at the same time free from party leadership control. We also consider lobbying as an additional factor interacted with cost in explaining voting behavior.

¹²We also find that the Republican trend is stronger when the Democrats control at least one chamber and the President is Republican. Such an environment may lead the President to pressuring Republican lawmakers to go along with spending, which the President may think is popular nationwide.

Republican incumbents becoming more polarized, due to the increased importance of primaries, reduces the ability of the party leadership to keep the platform cohesive and targeted at the median voter. Thus even if the Republican leadership wants a fiscally constrained platform, their polarized members may be unwilling to support any long-term deficit cutting policy, such as revenue generation or entitlement reform.

At the aggregate (yearly) level, variation in the share of seats that are safe does not predict higher deficit spending. In fact, since 1946, mean safety in the latest House election is positively correlated with surpluses that year. The biggest declines in the number of swing districts has been taking place over a longer period of time (Kustov, Cerda, Rajan, and Shapiro 2021). However there is variation in this effect over time: before 1990, safety was negatively correlated with surpluses, but changed to positive afterwards.

Table 6 shows bill-level results across safe seats. We interact the Presidential Voting Index (PIV), which captures district partisanship, with various cost measures for Republican legislators. As the seat becomes safer, the Republican member is less likely to vote yes on appropriations, more likely on mandatory spending and overall spending, and insignificantly higher on revenues and deficits. This hints at the possibility that those in safer seats are less governed by fiscal constraint.

Next we consider lobbying; interest groups may be able to capture legislators and convince them to vote against their platform. Our case study highlighted the influence of pharmaceutical companies in pushing the costly Medicare Part D legislation, and this corporate activity may influence legislators beyond these examples. In particular, lobbyists may target Republicans who are hesitant to spend, but may be swayed to support a costly bill. We use the Open Secrets lobbying disclosure database to find the list of bills on which at least one company lobbied. We also include the amount spent on lobbying by those firms.

Table 7 shows results across lobbied bills. The extensive measure of lobbying negatively affects the “yea” rate; this is intuitive as a primary objective of lobbying is to buy negative agenda power, preventing the passage of bills (Baumgartner et al. 2009). The effect is even stronger for Republicans. The inclusion of lobbying does not significantly change the trend on anything except spending: there the trend is wiped out, implying that the trend was related to lobbying activity. Some of the effects change when using an intensive measure for Republicans. Just being lobbied does not always affect outcomes, but as the amount spent increases, members are more affected.

Table 6: Safe Seats Heterogeneity

	Dependent Variable: Yea Vote on Bill				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Spending	Deficit	Revenue	Mand.	Appr
Cost Variable	-0.0042*** (0.0007)	-0.0046*** (0.0006)	0.0007 (0.0013)	-0.0084*** (0.0009)	-0.0025*** (0.0007)
Seat Safety	-0.1156*** (0.0122)	-0.1102*** (0.0116)	-0.0883*** (0.0103)	-0.1103*** (0.0102)	-0.0691*** (0.0124)
Cost Variable \times Seat Safety	0.0021* (0.0010)	0.0009 (0.0010)	0.0026 (0.0020)	0.0092*** (0.0014)	-0.0033** (0.0011)
Rep. House	0.0123*** (0.0031)	0.0147*** (0.0031)	0.0110*** (0.0031)	0.0169*** (0.0031)	0.0038 (0.0031)
Rep. Senate	0.0001 (0.0023)	0.0038 (0.0022)	-0.0033 (0.0022)	-0.0049* (0.0022)	0.0071** (0.0023)
Rep. President	0.0137*** (0.0020)	0.0186*** (0.0020)	0.0019 (0.0020)	0.0063** (0.0020)	0.0119*** (0.0020)
Constant	0.9243*** (0.0084)	0.9234*** (0.0080)	0.8905*** (0.0073)	0.9038*** (0.0072)	0.9111*** (0.0085)
Observations	139203	139203	140041	139599	139645
R^2	0.009	0.017	0.002	0.005	0.015

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. This table shows member-bill level regressions for non-enacted bills of voting ‘yea’ on a bill based on the interacted between its budgetary effect and the safety of the seat for Republican House members. Seat safety is measured with the “Presidential Voting Index” which is based on the relative presidential vote per district.

5 Conclusion

We evaluated the extent to which well-known GOP rhetoric on fiscal constraint is consistent with reality. Across numerous datasets and levels of variation, we find that it is not. Neither GOP controlled governments nor individual Republican legislators pursue policy agendas that can be considered more fiscally disciplined than their Democratic counterparts. Of course, few close observers of federal budgets would fully buy into partisan rhetoric about prioritizing balanced budgets.¹³ What sets our study apart is that it is nearly comprehensive, assembling every publicly available element of federal budgets and looking for partisan differences in iterative fashion. This reveals that it is not simply a matter of Republican budgetary priorities being occasionally thwarted by contextual realities such as divided government. Rather, along every dimension of budgeting that can be measured, looking at the macro and individual member levels, any systematic pursuit of balanced budgets by the Republican Party is conspicuously absent.

¹³The strategic nature of rhetoric is well known (Cameron, Lapinski, and Riemann 2000).

Table 7: Lobbying Heterogeneity

	Dependent Variable: Yea Vote on Bill				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Spending	Deficit	Revenues	Mandat.	Approp.
Cost Var.	-0.0035*** (0.0002)	-0.0039*** (0.0002)	-0.0016*** (0.0003)	-0.0021*** (0.0002)	-0.0052*** (0.0002)
Lobbied	-0.0655*** (0.0023)	-0.0584*** (0.0022)	-0.0604*** (0.0019)	-0.0587*** (0.0019)	-0.0658*** (0.0023)
Lobbied × Cost Var.	0.0012*** (0.0002)	0.0004* (0.0002)	0.0041*** (0.0004)	-0.0007** (0.0003)	0.0017*** (0.0002)
Rep. House	0.0184*** (0.0031)	0.0208*** (0.0031)	0.0167*** (0.0031)	0.0216*** (0.0031)	0.0124*** (0.0031)
Rep. Senate	0.0018 (0.0022)	0.0048* (0.0022)	-0.0012 (0.0022)	-0.0026 (0.0022)	0.0076*** (0.0022)
Rep. President	0.0174*** (0.0020)	0.0235*** (0.0019)	0.0084*** (0.0020)	0.0145*** (0.0019)	0.0150*** (0.0020)
Constant	0.8751*** (0.0032)	0.8728*** (0.0032)	0.8566*** (0.0031)	0.8542*** (0.0031)	0.8881*** (0.0032)
Observations	151111	151057	151917	151519	151563
R^2	0.013	0.020	0.009	0.011	0.017

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. This table shows the yea-vote regressions with a full interaction of whether the bill was lobbied with cost.

Our results therefore point to an important paradox of American politics. Budgeting is a highly partisan and fraught endeavor but budgetary outputs, at least in terms of overall spending, debt, deficits, and revenue are largely consistent across party lines. This speaks to the power of the status quo where mandatory spending combined with popular discretionary programs and defense account for the bulk of federal commitments. These programs tend to endure and grow over time.

The belief that fiscal responsibility is a core Republican party tenet is so strong that moderate Democrats, such as President Clinton, emphasized cutting deficits as part of their electoral strategy. This became known as triangulation (Graetz and Shapiro 2011); Democratic candidates would pick fiscally moderate positions to siphon votes from the center knowing that their left-wing flanks would still support them in the general election. This tactic however has the flaw of allowing the other side, namely Republicans, to shift the goalposts on what defines the middle; Republicans are able to do so, without losing general elections, as long as they are in safe seats. Our exploratory findings on this matter hint at the weakening of parties and interest group influence as possible mechanisms that deserve future study.

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A Additional Results

A.1 National Trend Regressions

Consider a financial variable like government spending in year t , Y_t , and how it is predicted by Republican political control variable P_t and a time trend T_t .

$$Y_t = \alpha + \beta_1 P_t + \beta_2 \cdot T_t + \beta_3 P_t \cdot T_t + \varepsilon_t \quad (2)$$

If $\beta_1 > 0$, then there is more spending on average when Republicans are in control. If $\beta_3 > 0$, then as time has passed, Republican control is even more strongly predictive of higher spending, indicating an evolution of their attitudes on spending. Our analysis is largely descriptive in that parsing out the causal marginal impact of Republican control on deficits is difficult and beyond our scope. We aim to broadly characterize whether there is evidence of differences in outcomes across parties. Unexpected shocks to the economy may jeopardize a President’s agenda, which would confound identifying the effects of their intended policies; however, this is a regular part of governance.

The basic specification is in Table 8 for Republican presidents and Table 9 for Republican congresses. The question here is whether there is evidence for changes in Republican commitment to fiscal restraint. For surpluses, the coefficient being negative implies the deficit increases. Republican executive control has a lower trend on mandatory spending (with a higher overall average). In terms of coefficient magnitude, column 3 indicates that mandatory spending as a percent of GDP is on average 3 percentage points higher under Republican administrations (relative to Democratic presidents), has been increasing by 0.2 points per year across all types of administrations, and the trend for Republican presidents is smaller by 0.05 points per year. These are fairly small effects but add up over time.

Table 8: Basic Trend Differences for Republican Executive Control

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Budget variable divided by GDP	Surplus	Discretionary	Mandatory	Debt
Rep. President	-0.0112 (0.0116)	-0.0020 (0.0067)	0.0296** (0.0086)	-0.2037 (0.1244)
Year	-0.0007** (0.0002)	-0.0010*** (0.0001)	0.0016*** (0.0001)	0.0003 (0.0017)
Rep. President \times Year	0.0002 (0.0003)	0.0000 (0.0001)	-0.0005*** (0.0001)	0.0019 (0.0024)
Constant	0.0078 (0.0102)	0.1407*** (0.0055)	0.0122* (0.0049)	0.9208*** (0.0965)
Observations	74	58	58	74
R^2	0.246	0.769	0.860	0.116

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. This table shows regressions of four budgetary variables on the full interaction of Republican presidencies and a time trend.

Table 9: Basic Trend Differences For Republican Legislative Control

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Budget variable divided by GDP	Surplus	Discretionary	Mandatory	Debt
Rep. Congress	0.0171 (0.0150)	-0.0624*** (0.0095)	-0.0200 (0.0113)	0.3683** (0.1270)
Year	-0.0008*** (0.0002)	-0.0009*** (0.0001)	0.0014*** (0.0001)	0.0016 (0.0017)
Rep. Congress \times Year	0.0002 (0.0003)	0.0008*** (0.0001)	0.0002 (0.0002)	-0.0045 (0.0025)
Constant	0.0050 (0.0077)	0.1380*** (0.0042)	0.0216*** (0.0053)	0.7709*** (0.0786)
Observations	74	58	58	74
R^2	0.403	0.841	0.847	0.157

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. This table shows regressions of four budgetary variables on the full interaction of Republican congressional control and a time trend.

A.2 Tax Expenditures

Table 10 shows the results of regressing tax expenditure relative to GDP with Republican Party control interacted with time. We consider various tax expenditure categories, including commerce and housing, health, income security, and the total per year. We do not find any strong trends with the exception of a slight positive average and negative trend for Republican presidents. This may indicate that for Republican presidents, relative to Democrats, tax expenditures were utilized more in the past as a means of spending and their usage has decreased over time.¹⁴

¹⁴The results are similar when using the log of expenditures instead of per GDP.

Table 10: Tax Expenditure Trend Differences & Republican Control

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Tax Expenditure divided by GDP	Commerce	Health	Income Security	Total
Rep. House	0.003 (0.005)	-0.002 (0.004)	-0.006*** (0.002)	-0.008 (0.005)
Rep. Senate	-0.005 (0.008)	-0.002 (0.004)	0.001 (0.002)	0.005 (0.006)
Year	0.00004 (0.00005)	0.0003*** (0.0001)	0.0001*** (0.00002)	0.0002* (0.0001)
Rep. Pres	0.021*** (0.007)	-0.001 (0.002)	0.007*** (0.002)	0.009* (0.005)
Rep. House \times Year	-0.0002 (0.0002)	-0.00000 (0.0002)	0.0001 (0.0001)	0.0001 (0.0002)
Rep. Senate \times Year	0.0002 (0.0003)	0.0001 (0.0002)	0.00003 (0.0001)	-0.0001 (0.0002)
Rep. Pres \times Year	-0.001** (0.0002)	-0.00001 (0.0001)	-0.0002*** (0.0001)	-0.0003 (0.0002)
Constant	0.022*** (0.001)	0.003*** (0.001)	0.011*** (0.0004)	0.012*** (0.002)
Observations	43	38	42	44
R^2	0.564	0.643	0.702	0.164

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. This table shows regressions of four categories of tax expenditures per GDP on the full interaction of Republican executive/House/Senate control and a time trend.

A.3 Automatic Stabilizers

Regression results with automatic stabilizers are in Table 11. We see that Republican control has on average higher surpluses, but this trend lessens over time, implying a shift towards less fiscal constraint. We find similar effects for Republican congresses and presidents across absolute and per-GDP surpluses. Controlling for the stabilizers serves the purpose of removing non-discretionary variation in Keynesian counter-cyclical responses.

A.4 Pro-cyclical Spending

Counter-cyclical fiscal policy has Keynesian economic justification; pro-cyclical spending on the other hand is more easily argued to be wasteful. We look at the pro-cyclical nature of US spending by regressing the percent change in spending on the percent change in GDP (Hercowitz and Strawczynski 2004; Woo 2009). A positive correlation indicates that spending is positively correlated with the business cycle. We test whether these effects change across party control and over time in Table 12. Republican presidents used counter-cyclical spending but this effect has waned, switching to Democratic Presidents. Republican legislative control was more pro-cyclical but this trend has decreased over time. These effects are somewhat driven by the decrease in pro-cyclical spending from 1950s-1980s with strong counter-cyclical spending in 2008.

Table 11: Surpluses with Automatic Stabilizers

	(1) Surplus	(2) Surplus/GDP	(3) Surplus	(4) Surplus/GDP
Rep. Congress	1100** (396.6372)	0.0674** (0.0214)		
Year	-9.4515* (4.6044)	-0.0003 (0.0002)	-1.9731 (2.7045)	0.0001 (0.0002)
Rep. Congress \times Year	-14.2514* (6.7701)	-0.0008* (0.0003)		
Auto Stab.	1.1451* (0.5368)		1.7756*** (0.4218)	
Auto Stab./GDP		0.7204* (0.2911)		1.1754*** (0.3294)
Rep. President			452.5106* (179.4433)	0.0234 (0.0127)
Rep. President \times Year			-8.9408* (3.7848)	-0.0004 (0.0002)
Constant	186.7927 (175.0469)	-0.0098 (0.0083)	-1300 (124.7368)	-0.0282* (0.0107)
Observations	55	55	55	55
R^2	0.599	0.417	0.573	0.323

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. This table shows regressions of surpluses (in billions and divided by GDP) on the full interaction of Republican congressional/executive control and a time trend controlling for automatic stabilizers.

A.5 Platforms and Polls

We retrieve the text from national party platforms each presidential cycle from the University of Texas at Austin’s “Policy Agendas Project” searchable database created by Guy Freedman. They categorize the text and we focus on budgetary priorities. We calculate the share of sentences and words devoted to these issues by both parties. We compare Republican and Democratic platforms from 1944-2020. We find a small but significantly higher amount of words/sentences devoted to budgetary issues by Republicans compared to Democrats. We do not find any significant time trends; both parties do not emphasize fiscal issues in their platforms, with budgetary issues averaging less than 2% of words.

We also track “what do you think is the most important problem facing the USA today” style question of polls back to 1954 (Gallup and Pew using the Roper Center iPoll database). We record whether a budget deficit topic was one of the possible issues respondents could consider at the time and the percent that considered it. The budget deficit was not a mainstay item until the Reagan era when it was permanently featured as an item, indicating its growing perception of importance. Figure 5 shows the trends in the percent indicating it as the most important issue. It peaked during the Reagan era, declined, and then resurged again during the Obama presidency. This may suggest that it aligns often with the political arguments at the time: Reagan’s stated focus on cutting the government and the Obama era Republican Congress focus on the debt ceiling.

Table 12: Pro-Cyclical Party Control Regressions

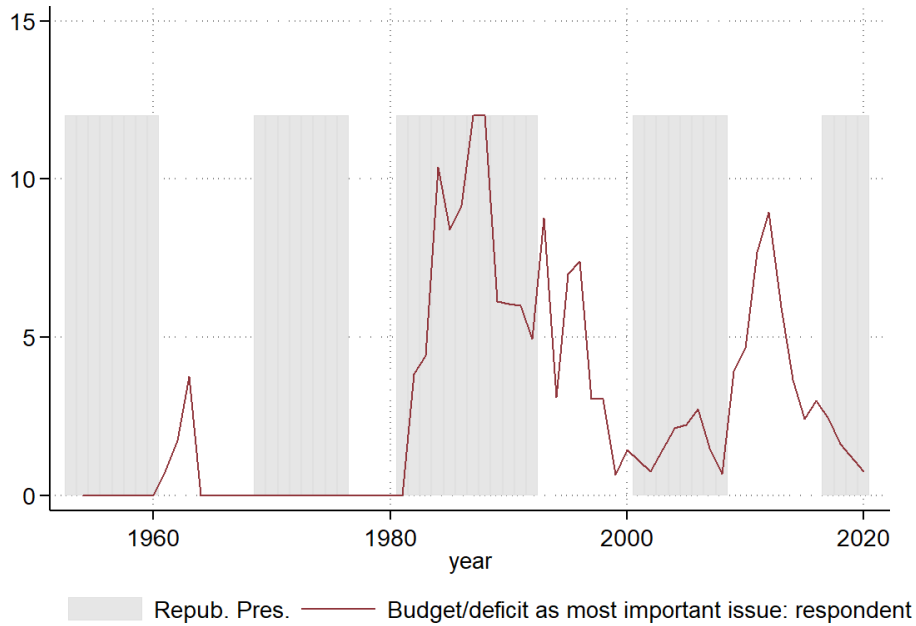
$\Delta\text{Log Spending}$	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Rep. Block=0 $\times \Delta\text{Log GDP} \times \text{Year}$	-0.1144 (0.0689)			
Rep. Block=1 $\times \Delta\text{Log GDP} \times \text{Year}$	-0.0391 (0.0251)			
Rep. Block=1 $\times \Delta\text{Log GDP}$	-1.5836 (2.8445)			
$\Delta\text{Log GDP}$	4.7628 (2.5662)	4.4574*** (1.2497)	2.4978 (1.3263)	2.5841* (1.2233)
Rep. President=0 $\times \Delta\text{Log GDP} \times \text{Year}$		-0.0807** (0.0285)		
Rep. President=1 $\times \Delta\text{Log GDP} \times \text{Year}$		0.0064 (0.0120)		
Rep. President=1 $\times \Delta\text{Log GDP}$		-3.9447** (1.3473)		
Rep. House=0 $\times \Delta\text{Log GDP} \times \text{Year}$			-0.0500 (0.0306)	
Rep. House=1 $\times \Delta\text{Log GDP} \times \text{Year}$			-0.0669** (0.0207)	
Rep. House=1 $\times \Delta\text{Log GDP}$			2.6956 (1.7079)	
Rep. Senate=0 $\times \Delta\text{Log GDP} \times \text{Year}$				-0.0553 (0.0283)
Rep. Senate=1 $\times \Delta\text{Log GDP} \times \text{Year}$				-0.0684** (0.0222)
Rep. Senate=1 $\times \Delta\text{Log GDP}$				2.3752 (1.6592)
Constant	-0.0206 (0.0252)	-0.0065 (0.0216)	-0.0035 (0.0243)	-0.0017 (0.0234)
Observations	74	74	74	74
R^2	0.377	0.439	0.444	0.431

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. This table shows the regression of the change in log spending on the change in log GDP which captures the degree of pro-cyclicality in spending. We interact this term with party control and a time trend.

We find that the importance of the issue is significantly higher (3.5% versus 2.5%) when the Republicans control the House, but not significantly different when the Republicans control the Presidency. This may indicate that the Republican House is particularly adept at making the budget a national issue when there is Democratic president (Clinton/Obama) but that Republican Presidents do not emphasize it as much when pursuing their agenda.

We also find that when the deficit is higher, the budget important percentage is also higher, but this relationship has been declining over time. Thus the public's concern with the budget is declining relative to the actual fiscal conditions. This may indicate that neither party has an interest in consistently making the budget a priority and that other issues are increasingly defining the partisan differences, as opposed to fiscal responsibility.

Figure 5: Budget/Deficit Importance to Public Over Time



This graph plots the % of Gallup/Pew respondents who indicate the budget/deficit is the most important issue.

A.6 Bill Results: Heterogeneity and Robustness

Following Quaglia, Epp, and Madel (2022), we look at the kinds of bills being introduced across the party of the sponsor to see if there is heterogeneity in that measure of party attitudes. Table 13 shows these specifications where we condition on enacted bills with Congress fixed effects for the specifications without time trends.

In column 1, we regress how much the bill costs on the party of the sponsor for bills that have positive cost bills. We find a positive coefficient, indicating that Republicans are introducing bills that often cost more than Democratically proposed bills. However overall, they propose cheaper bills: the second column includes bills that have negative cost, i.e. deficit reducing. Here Republicans have a negative average, implying they propose bills that reduce costs more frequently. In column 3, we look for a time-trend in these effects, and find a negative trend, and find the same for bills that increase the deficit overall (although noisier). Thus Republicans reveal their spending preferences in the bills they sponsor, even those that are eventually enacted. Thus their deficit increasing voting behavior is driven by their votes on Democratically proposed bills. Overall, Republicans seem more likely to introduce bills that cut spending and less likely (but not significant) to introduce bills increasing spending. When we subset on enacted the relationship goes away so it looks like they are only getting cheaper on bills that are proposed rather than passed.

Table 14 shows the yea-vote regressions from different angles with respect to members. Column 1 consider within-member variation by including member specific fixed effects. Column 2 aggregates to the average across all members per party to capture the overall support by the party. We find the positive Republican trend in support of deficits to be consistent across these two levels

of variation. Columns 3 and 4 repeats column 2 but separately across the party of the bill's sponsor, Democrat and Republican respectively, but we do not find any noticeable heterogeneity.

Table 15 shows the yea-vote regressions separately for the top 5 spending categories (across all years), with categories defined by the Comparative Agendas Project. We consider macroeconomic funding, health, transportation, defense, and government operations. Republicans have on average higher support for macro and transportation, with negative trends on all except macro. This is evidence for Republicans being willing to challenge spending on specific categories, but unwilling to stop the big ticket structural items that affect the long-term budgetary outlook. For example, their tepid and failed attempts at reforming entitlements have not stopped the continued growth of mandatory spending in both absolute value and relative to discretionary spending.

Table 16 shows aggregated results of how political and economic variables predict the budgetary effects of enacted bills. In columns 1-3, we regress the cost variable (deficit, spending, and revenues) on the interaction between whether the president is Republican and a time trend. While noisy, the results indicate that enacted bills under Republican president seem to contribute to the deficit by both increasing spending and reducing revenues.¹⁵ In column 4, we check for whether enacted bills are getting more or less pro-cyclical over time. We find a positive interaction term indicating that the deficit spending since the 105th Congress has become more pro-cyclical. In columns 5 and 6 we look for heterogeneity in this effect by the party of the President. Republican Presidents have significant pro-cyclical spending behavior compared to a negative (and noisy) effect from Democratic Presidents.

Table 17 shows different functional forms for the main specification. Column 1 duplicates the linear specification for spending, column 2 shows a logistic regression, and column 3 shows a probit model. We calculate the marginal effect of the time trend for Republicans at the average spending level, and all three are nearly identical at 0.003.

¹⁵We also aggregate to the yearly level across all bills, and find similar noisy results.

Table 13: Sponsor Party Regressions

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	Spending	Spending	Spending	Deficit
Republican Sponsor	0.9477*** (0.2139)	-1.2566* (0.5214)	3.7988 (2.7256)	4.0525 (2.9703)
Senate Member	3.5435** (1.1654)	-6.6712 (4.5314)	-15.3012 (14.4147)	-15.0405 (14.4984)
Year			0.0031 (0.1315)	0.0280 (0.1526)
Rep. Sponsor \times Year			-0.3911 (0.2096)	-0.3592 (0.2272)
Senate Member \times Rep. Sponsor			12.8425 (15.4947)	7.8989 (15.8229)
Rep. House			3.0696* (1.5448)	3.3818* (1.6597)
Rep. House \times Rep. Sponsor			-4.1293 (2.5985)	-3.4225 (2.8569)
Rep. Senate			0.1004 (1.0219)	0.6151 (1.2181)
Rep. Senate \times Rep. Sponsor			1.0331 (1.4732)	0.2321 (1.6225)
Rep. President			0.8165 (1.2022)	0.5773 (1.2487)
Rep. President \times Rep. Sponsor			1.7717 (1.4249)	1.5970 (1.4758)
Constant	16.1179*** (0.3246)	15.2134*** (0.8432)	10.6231*** (1.7076)	9.2849*** (1.7793)
Observations	2059	2312	1301	1340
R^2	0.058	0.048	0.028	0.029

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. This table shows heterogeneity in log spending across the sponsor of the bill. Column 1 includes bills with a positive cost and column 2 adds bills with negative costs.

Table 14: Member Heterogeneity Bill Vote Regressions

	Dependent Variable: Yea Vote on Bill			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Deficit	-0.0016** (0.0005)	-0.1427 (0.1705)	-0.0539 (0.0490)	-0.0445 (0.1151)
Year	0.0012 (0.0015)	-0.3079 (0.3889)	-0.1013 (0.0896)	-0.0933 (0.2662)
Deficit \times Year	0.0001 (0.0001)	0.0131 (0.0171)	0.0071 (0.0056)	0.0032 (0.0114)
Rep. \times Deficit	-0.0134*** (0.0007)	0.2060 (0.1752)	0.0456 (0.1041)	0.0157 (0.1634)
Rep. \times Year	-0.0184*** (0.0021)	0.4651 (0.4006)	0.0857 (0.2193)	0.0389 (0.3762)
Rep. \times Deficit \times Year	0.0011*** (0.0001)	-0.0203 (0.0176)	-0.0062 (0.0129)	-0.0017 (0.0162)
Constant	0.9392*** (0.0072)	3.7874 (3.8985)	1.3498 (0.8341)	1.5751 (2.6311)
Observations	157425	44	40	40
R^2	0.018	0.061	0.035	0.067

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. This table shows yea-vote regressions from different perspectives. Column 1 includes member FE. Column 2 aggregates to the year-party level. Column 3 (4) repeats column 2 but only includes Democratic (Republican) bill sponsors. Column 1 also includes but suppresses a dummy for Senate member, dummies for Republican House, Senate, and Executive control, and all four interactions with Republican member.

Table 15: Topic Specific Bill Vote Regressions

	Dependent Variable: Yea Vote on Bill				
	(1) Macroeconomics	(2) Health	(3) Transportation	(4) Defense	(5) Gov. Operations
Deficit	-0.0035** (0.0012)	-0.0195*** (0.0017)	-0.0109*** (0.0013)	-0.0154*** (0.0010)	-0.0044*** (0.0006)
Year	-0.0212** (0.0080)	-0.0747*** (0.0049)	-0.0110** (0.0042)	-0.0217*** (0.0025)	-0.0045** (0.0017)
Deficit × Year	-0.0003 (0.0002)	0.0036*** (0.0003)	0.0027*** (0.0002)	0.0012*** (0.0001)	0.0006*** (0.0001)
Republican Member (Rep.)	0.2884*** (0.0834)	-0.2377*** (0.0490)	0.3161*** (0.0422)	-0.3067*** (0.0341)	-0.1560*** (0.0221)
Rep. × Deficit	-0.0020 (0.0017)	0.0073** (0.0025)	-0.0086*** (0.0019)	0.0132*** (0.0013)	0.0097*** (0.0008)
Rep. × Year	-0.0495*** (0.0119)	0.0433*** (0.0067)	-0.0126* (0.0057)	0.0328*** (0.0035)	-0.0109*** (0.0023)
Rep. × Deficit × Year	0.0017*** (0.0003)	-0.0015*** (0.0004)	-0.0012*** (0.0003)	-0.0009*** (0.0002)	-0.0025*** (0.0001)
Senate Member	0.1582*** (0.0210)	0.1005*** (0.0286)	0.0929*** (0.0165)	0.1320*** (0.0116)	-0.1346*** (0.0137)
Senate Member × Rep.	-0.6655*** (0.0281)	-0.4017*** (0.0378)	-0.0061 (0.0257)	-0.2159*** (0.0192)	0.0034 (0.0199)
Rep. House	0.0656** (0.0228)	0.1142*** (0.0098)	-0.0529*** (0.0127)	0.1165*** (0.0136)	0.0273*** (0.0075)
Rep. House × Rep.	-0.0111 (0.0434)	0.0654*** (0.0156)	-0.1415*** (0.0217)	-0.0084 (0.0191)	0.1200*** (0.0139)
Rep. Senate	-0.5336*** (0.0219)	-0.0390*** (0.0086)	0.0583*** (0.0137)	-0.0187* (0.0092)	-0.0511*** (0.0081)
Rep. Senate × Rep.	0.6569*** (0.0313)	-0.0302* (0.0123)	0.1834*** (0.0192)	0.0136 (0.0124)	0.0222 (0.0129)
Rep. President	-0.1478*** (0.0250)	0.0686*** (0.0075)	0.1284*** (0.0114)	-0.0003 (0.0098)	-0.0016 (0.0078)
Rep. President × Rep.	-0.1764*** (0.0354)	-0.1056*** (0.0117)	-0.4225*** (0.0173)	0.0692*** (0.0137)	0.0190 (0.0126)
Constant	1.0832*** (0.0576)	1.1919*** (0.0333)	0.8030*** (0.0304)	0.9571*** (0.0226)	0.9626*** (0.0140)
Observations	3995	17566	10402	20646	18680
R^2	0.359	0.093	0.192	0.047	0.172

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. This table shows yea-vote regressions for five different categories of bills.

Table 16: Bill Budgetary Effects

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	Deficit	Spending	Revenue	Deficit	Deficit	Deficit
Rep. President	0.7382 (1.0122)	1.2810 (0.9281)	-3.1091 (4.0845)			
Year	-0.3188* (0.1306)	-0.3019* (0.1270)	0.2203 (0.4036)	-0.9758** (0.3298)	0.6976 (0.9458)	-1.4018* (0.5969)
Rep. President \times Year	0.1892 (0.1875)	0.1432 (0.1756)	-0.1822 (0.8051)			
Δ Log GDP				-1100 (58.5330)	222.7931 (203.0014)	-1600 (98.1910)
Year \times Δ Log GDP				30.6032** (10.3106)	-29.0231 (30.6291)	43.3555* (19.0183)
Constant	13.4967*** (0.6027)	13.7653*** (0.5755)	2.7162 (1.8129)	17.1746*** (2.0622)	5.1557 (7.5770)	19.5454*** (3.0559)
Observations	1437	1399	334	1437	703	734
R^2	0.010	0.013	0.014	0.015	0.011	0.022

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. This table regresses the budgetary impacts of bills on Republican Presidents, time trends, and the change in log GDP.

Table 17: Functional Form Robustness

	Dependent Variable: Yea Vote on Bill		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Linear	Logistic	Probit
Spending	-0.0047*** (0.0003)	-0.0370*** (0.0025)	-0.0194*** (0.0012)
Year	-0.0040*** (0.0007)	-0.0319*** (0.0056)	-0.0155*** (0.0029)
Spending \times Year	0.0007*** (0.0000)	0.0057*** (0.0003)	0.0031*** (0.0002)
Republican Member (Rep.)	-0.0574*** (0.0078)	-0.3464*** (0.0650)	-0.2098*** (0.0334)
Rep. \times Spending	-0.0014*** (0.0004)	-0.0079* (0.0035)	-0.0035* (0.0017)
Rep. \times Year	-0.0047*** (0.0009)	-0.0339*** (0.0078)	-0.0171*** (0.0040)
Rep. \times Spending \times Year	0.0002** (0.0001)	0.0006 (0.0005)	0.0003 (0.0002)
Constant	0.8797*** (0.0052)	1.9815*** (0.0458)	1.1536*** (0.0238)
Observations	181834	181834	181834
R^2	0.016		

Robust standard errors in parentheses. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. This table shows the yea-vote regressions for spending across linear, logistic, and probit probability models. We also include but suppress a dummy for Senate member, dummies for Republican House, Senate, and Executive control, and all four interactions with Republican member.