The Tea Party in Congress: 
Examining Voting Trends on Defense and International Trade Spending Legislation

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I test how members of the United States House of Representatives associated with the Tea Party movement vote on four pieces of legislation relating to both defense and international trade spending. Members with high FreedomWorks scores, an interest group rating associated with the Tea Party, were found to have distinctly different voting patterns than the House of Representatives in general, while representatives that self-identified themselves as Tea Party showed no distinct voting patterns.
Research Question

Since the Tea Party’s emergence in American politics in 2009 and its role in the Republican takeover of Congress in the 2010 midterm elections, political scientists, politicians, media outlets, and special interest groups have sought to understand exactly what makes the movement unique. While those associated with the Tea Party often call themselves Republicans, there must be differences that set the two apart; otherwise there would be no reason for such a movement. Until now, investigations into the Tea Party have typically discovered that members of the movement are in favor of smaller government, decreased spending, and economic freedom, elements shared with the Republican Party (Scherer, Altman, Cowley, Newton-Small, and Von Drehle, 2010; Courser, 2011; Bullock and Hood, 2012). Is there anything more significant that can be used to distinguish between the Tea Party and the rest of Congress? Drawing inferences from commonly accepted ideas about the Tea Party, this paper investigates whether or not members of the Tea Party extend their beliefs in smaller government and decreased spending to the defense budget and the international trade budget. Members of the United States House of Representatives associated with the Tea Party are found to vote distinctly differently than the rest of Congress on defense spending and international trade funding legislation, and can almost be seen as a tightening of conservative values in Congress. Discovering that there are indeed voting trends that distinguish the Tea Party from the rest of Congress helps those seeking to predict the activities of Congress make smarter and more informed projections as to the results of future defense and international trade budgets.
Literature Review

In order to understand what sets the Tea Party apart from the broader Republican Party and the rest of Congress, an examination of previous literature analyzing characteristics of the movement is necessary. Also, before any conjectures about the Tea Party in relation to defense spending and international trade spending can be made, one must understand what previous literature and research has discovered about influences on these two legislative issues. This review of the existing literature will address both areas of study and place the current research question into context.

Since the Tea Party has only recently emerged in American politics, a full understanding of the goals of those who claim to be members of the Tea Party is not yet fully developed. However, there is no shortage of literature seeking to investigate exactly what makes the movement unique. First of all, it has been universally agreed that the Tea Party is not the Republican Party, despite the fact that politicians associated with the Tea Party also join the Republican Party. Members of the Tea Party are, “not enamored of the Republican party,” and many are simply anti-government all around, disliking Republicans and Democrats equally (Courser, 2011). The Tea Party can even be viewed as a revolt within the GOP. Members of the Tea Party are dissatisfied with the current government and are seeking politicians that represent what the people want, instead of voting along party lines (Scherer, Altman, Cowley, Newton-Small, and Von Drehle, 2010). This division is evidenced by the fact that many Tea Party associated interest groups chose to endorse candidates that were challenging Republican incumbents in the primaries of the 2010 midterm elections (Bullock and Hood, 2012).
So if the Tea Party is not the Republican Party, what exactly are its members’ political beliefs and stances? Literature has also sought to explain this. The common consensus is that economic issues above all else drive the Tea Party (Courser, 2011). “Dreams of a radically smaller government, unfettered financial markets, defanged regulation and shrinking federal entitlements,” are what motivate those associated with the Tea Party to become involved in politics (Scherer, Altman, Cowley, Newton-Small, and Von Drehle, 2010), and those associated with the Tea Party often believe, “Problems are better solved by individual efforts than through government programs,” advocating for a much smaller federal government (Von Drehle, Newton-Small, Jewler, O’Leary, Yan, and Malloy, 2010). For example, members of Congress associated with the Tea Party often vote against economic stimulus packages since they increase the national debt and weaken the economy (Bullock and Hood, 2012). Some political scientists went as far as running statistical tests in order to analyze roll call votes in Congress to determine how those associated with the Tea Party voted on different issues including spending cuts, the debt ceiling, and federally funded technology grants. In regards to both spending cuts and raising the debt ceiling, Tea Party associated members of Congress were more likely than traditional Republicans to support bigger spending cuts and keeping the debt ceiling low. However, in regard to federally funded technology research, the Tea Party did not seem to vote much differently than the Republican Party (Bailey, Mummolo, and Noel, 2012).

Overall, prior research suggests that the Tea Party is driven by economic motives, specifically a free economy with small and limited government intervention. However, some literature also describes a specific divide within the Tea Party. “Palinites,” or those aligned with Sarah Palin, and “Paulites,” those aligned with Ron and Rand Paul, have vastly
different opinions on foreign policy (Baker 2010, Rathbun, 2013, Shear, 2013). Palinites are aligned with the Jacksonian tradition of foreign policy, which focuses on a well-funded and prevalent military, while Paulites align with the Jeffersonian tradition of isolationism and a military funded specifically for self-defense. This divide is not fully understood however, with the only common consensus being that those associated with the Tea Party have no unified foreign policy stance (Baker, 2010). This paper will seek to show that those associated with the Tea Party tend to be more unified than expected, at least in Congressional roll call voting patterns, voting typically for decreased domestic military spending.

In order to more fully understand what makes the Tea Party different than the Republican Party and what the goals of its members are, various areas of legislation must be investigated. This will allow politicians, political scientists, and those studying American politics to more accurately classify what makes a certain stance likely to be supported by the Tea Party. This is where defense spending legislation and international trade spending legislation become relevant. Vast amounts of literature and research have been written about what influences members of Congress’s votes on defense bills, and a number of different theories have been developed. First off, it is a commonly accepted theory that influences on defense spending revolve around ideology (Fleisher, 1985, Carter, 1989). Fleisher (1985) investigated congressional votes on funding for the B-1 bomber and found that ideology was the main influence and distinguishing factor between votes in favor of funding the B-1 bomber and votes against it. He found that conservatives tended to support defense spending for the bomber while liberals opposed it. Carter (1989) affirmed this, finding that the ideology of the president and his stances on defense spending influenced
those with similar ideology to support his stance. It has also been shown that due to the strengthening of party leadership in Congress, the political elites in each party strongly influence how members of their party vote on defense legislation (Souva and Rhode, 2002). Since party leadership determines committee assignments in Congress, members of parties are compelled to vote in accordance to what their leaders want in order to remain in good standing with them (Souva and Rhode, 2002). In the Senate, it has also been shown that ideology and those with higher conservative interest group scores were more likely to support defense spending than their liberal colleagues (Abdolali and Ward, 1998). These findings remained consistent with theories that ideology and party membership are the most important factor in determining why a member of Congress voted a certain way on a defense bill.

More recent studies have surfaced that disagree with the claim that ideology is the most important influence on defense legislation voting in Congress, however. It has been proposed that ideology cannot be the most important influence since the two distinct ideologies in American politics, conservative and liberal, have completely changed stances on defense spending since the late 1950s and early 1960s to modern day (Fordham, 2008). In the pre-cold war era, liberals supported large spending on defense legislation while conservatives opposed legislation that increased defense spending. However, those two stances have now been reversed, with liberals tending to oppose defense spending and conservatives tending to support it (Fordham, 2008). Instead, it was found that the economic interests of their districts influenced members of Congress’s votes on defense legislation; this was done by investigating how different defense legislation affected the
imports and exports of each Congressman’s district and comparing how they voted on those bills (Fordham, 2008).

Much literature has also been written about what influences members of Congress’s roll call votes on issues of international trade. Most of this literature suggests that party and ideology are the most statistically significant influences on votes (Baldwin and Magee, 1998; Crichlow, 2002; Seo, 2010). Some political scientists have examined how members of Congress voted on different trade issues with China and China’s status as a Most Favored Nation (MFN) in regards to United States international trade. They found that ideology was a statistically significant indicator of how certain members of Congress voted on this issue (Baldwin and Magee, 1998; Crichlow, 2002; Seo, 2010). As one political scientist summarized it, “Republicans and conservatives are more likely to favor removing barriers to trade than Democrats or liberals” (Crichlow, 2002). Similar findings in investigations of US and Chinese trade policy indicate party to be the most significant indicator of a stance on international trade with ideology ranking just behind (Tao, 2006; Seo, 2010). Xie (2006) did this by showing that members of Congress would either choose to support or oppose an international trade bill depending on their party and the president’s party. If they were in the same party as the president, Congressmen would support him, even if this meant changing their stance from an earlier vote on the same issue under a different president. Seo (2010) affirmed this through a study of “vote-switching,” showing that members of Congress will switch their stances on China’s status as a MFN based on how the current president votes, as evidenced by Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell and California Democrat Nancy Pelosi, who, “Siding with the president [and] sharing the same party label,
the two leading congressional critics of China [...] gave up their hostile positions [towards China]” in order to support the president (Seo, 2010).

Besides party and ideology, political scientists have found other, less agreed upon influences on how a member of Congress votes on international trade issues. Contributions from labor unions and businesses have been found to be significant influences on how Congressmen view the benefits of international trade (Baldwin and Magee, 1998). The extreme ideological Congressmen (extreme conservatives and liberals) have been found to both be more opposed to international trade than moderates are (Xie, 2006). Also, a Congressman’s constituency has a significant influence on his stance to support international trade or not (Seo, 2010). “Strong district interests toward China trade—either favorable or hostile—have members’ hands held tightly,” Seo (2010) writes, indicating that US Congressional districts that see benefits of trading with China only elect Congressmen that support this trade.

Additionally, there is also literature indicating which factors do not influence how a member of Congress will vote on an international trade issue. Baldwin and Magee (1998) found a member’s constituents to not be a statistically significant indicator of how they will vote, contradictory to Seo’s (2010) findings. They did however find certain details of the constituency to be significant, such as Hispanic population, although these findings lack broader support.

Regarding both defense spending legislation and international trade spending legislation, it has been shown that generally in Congress, members of the committees of jurisdiction will vote for bills written by their committees (Sprague, 2008). For example, members of the Congressional Armed Forces Committees have been shown to be more
likely to vote in support of defense legislation since they are responsible for writing a majority of the bills that form broad defense policy. However, they are also likely to form the bills in ways that will help their districts (LeLoup, 2008 and Goss, 1972). Members of the defense committees will likely vote to pass all defense legislation since the bills usually contain pork barrel legislation that helps their home district (LeLoup, 2008). Members of the Senate Armed Forces Committee have also been shown to be more likely to vote in favor of defense bills in the Senate, as they were responsible for forming the policy and also inserted their own interests into the bills (Abdolali and Ward, 1998).

After examining the previous literature on the Tea Party and what makes it unique, as well as what factors lead to voting decisions on defense and international trade spending in Congress, a few key theories have developed. It has been made clear that members of the Tea Party support a smaller federal government, decreased spending, a strong US economy, and more individual choices in government. However, it is also clear that Republicans typically vote for bills that support defense spending and international trade. With only Republican members of the House of Representatives joining the Tea Party Caucus, and typically only Republicans being endorsed and supported by the Tea Party’s special interest groups, questions remain. How will a Republican House Representative associated with the Tea Party vote on defense and international trade spending bills? On one hand, they want to vote to pass legislation championed by their party, but on the other hand, they also want to cut spending wherever they can to lower the debt and shrink the federal government. With an annual US defense budget typically exceeding half a trillion dollars and US trade accounts holding hundreds of millions of dollars, these two sectors of the government are key for those looking to cut federal spending and to reduce the deficit.
Hypotheses

After examining the broad theories about the Tea Party, as well as broad theories of defense and international trade spending and legislation, further key investigations into these topics can be conducted in order to increase understanding of the issues, starting with defense spending.

Hypothesis 1: If a member of the United States House of Representatives is a member of the Tea Party Caucus, they are more likely to vote in favor of legislation that cuts defense spending.

Hypothesis 2: The higher a member of the United States House of Representatives FreedomWorks score is, the more likely they will be to vote in favor of legislation that cuts defense spending.

These two hypotheses are similar, yet they provide two unique measurements of a Congressman's Tea Party affiliation. The first, membership of the House of Representatives Tea Party caucus, is a self-identified Tea Party affiliation, while the second, FreedomWorks score, is a third-party rating of Tea Party affiliation. The special interest group FreedomWorks was used as the third-party measurement since it is considered one of the leading Tea Party political organizations (Beckel, 2013). The reason for using two different measurements of Tea Party affiliation comes from literature related to position taking, which is the act of a Congressman making some sort of public action, such as joining a caucus, in order to gain the support of voters that support the position he is taking (Mayhew, 1974). Using both Tea Party caucus membership and FreedomWorks scores controls for those Congressmen that have joined the Tea Party caucus simply for the
electoral advantage versus those that generally reflect larger FreedomWorks and Tea Party goals through their roll call voting record.

As previous literature has demonstrated, there are also different factors that can lead to voting decisions on defense spending. While investigating a relationship between the Tea Party and defense voting, an opportunity to investigate other influences arises, and I propose two additional hypotheses.

**Hypothesis 3:** Members of the United States House of Representatives with high populations of military veterans in their district are more likely to vote in opposition of legislation that cuts defense spending.

**Hypothesis 4:** Members of the United States House of Representatives that are military veterans are more likely to vote in opposition of legislation that cuts defense spending.

Both of these hypotheses investigate whether or not there is any relationship between military exposure and opposition to legislation that cuts defense spending. Hypothesis 3 is intuitive since a district with a high population of military veterans will likely see benefits in their economy when military spending is increased. Also, those that are military veterans will be more likely to encourage their Representatives to support military spending. This does include the assumption however, that military veterans live in districts with economies highly reliant on defense spending. This assumption will be further explored by testing the hypothesis. Hypothesis 4 investigates how much a member of Congress’s past influences their voting habits. Prior research has suggested that a Congressman who has spent time firsthand in a military career will be more likely to support funding for his previous career (Bianco, 2005). Investigating these second two
hypotheses will contribute more understanding to the influences of defense spending stances.

Moving to international trade, I develop two final hypotheses.

**Hypothesis 5:** *If a member of the United States House of Representatives is a member of the Tea Party Caucus, they are more likely to vote in favor of legislation that cuts international trade spending.*

**Hypothesis 6:** *The higher a member of the United States House of Representatives FreedomWorks score is, the more likely they will be to vote in favor of legislation that cuts international trade spending.*

Both hypotheses are proposed to remain consistent with literature demonstrating that those affiliated with the Tea Party are devoted to limited government spending (Bullock and Hood, 2012; Scherer, Altman, Cowley, Newton-Small, and Von Drehle, 2010). The results of testing these hypotheses will allow us to judge if this devotion to limited government spending specifically applies to the trade budget.

**Methods and Data**

While testing the six proposed hypotheses, all data used comes from the 112th Congress of the United States. In order to test the first four hypotheses which all relate to defense spending, two amendments on H.R. 1540, the Defense Reauthorization Act, are used: House Amendment 344, which would reduce the defense budget by ending the costly war in Afghanistan, and House Amendment 329, which would reduce the defense budget by reducing the number of Department of Defense employees. In order to test the last two hypotheses relating to international trade spending, two amendments on H.R. 5326, the Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, are used: House
Amendment 1036, which would reduce the trade budget by lowering US trade accounts by $277 million, and House Amendment 1066, which would reduce the trade budget by cutting overall spending to H.R. 5326 by 12.2%, excluding funds appropriated for the US Marshals Service, the FBI, and NASA, as well as all other funds in the bill made available by law. The exclusion of these parts of the bill from the 12.2% funding cut essentially make this spending reduction a trade spending reduction. These four different amendments serve as dependent variables for four different logistic regression models.

For the two defense spending amendment models, four independent variables are used to test my four different hypotheses: membership in the Tea Party caucus, FreedomWorks score, military population of each Congressman’s district, and whether or not each Congressman is a military veteran. In addition to these four independent variables, four more control variables that relate to the literature are initially tested: whether or not members of Congress were endorsed by FreedomWorks during their campaign, membership on the House Armed Forces Committee, ideology, and party. However, after testing the correlation of all eight variables, ideology and party were found to be highly correlated to FreedomWorks score and were dropped from the final models. Data for the independent variables is obtained from the Almanac of American Politics, excluding Tea Party rating, FreedomWorks Endorsement, and Ideology. Tea Party rating comes from FreedomWorks and is based off twenty Congressional roll call votes related to economic freedom, with higher scores being associated with more Tea Party aligned members of Congress. FreedomWorks endorsement also comes from FreedomWorks, and determines whether the candidate is believed to be an ideal Tea Party candidate during the time of their 2010 Congressional campaign. Ideology comes from the American Conservative
Union, which rates members of Congress on a 100 point scale based on voting history, with 100 being the most conservative, and 0 being the least conservative (or most liberal).

For the two trade spending amendment models, two independent variables are used to test the two hypotheses: membership in the Tea Party Caucus and FreedomWorks score. Four additional control variables relating to the investigated literature were originally included: membership on the House Appropriations Committee, FreedomWorks Endorsement, ideology, and party. Again however, ideology and party were dropped from the final models since they were highly correlated to FreedomWorks score. All data again comes from the Almanac of American Politics, FreedomWorks, and the American Conservative Union.

Results and Findings

Running logistic regression models for all four amendments yields some promising and interesting results, shown in table 1.

Table 1

<table>
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<th>Legislative Votes on Four House Amendments</th>
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<td><strong>Member of House Armed Forces Committee</strong></td>
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Note: These are logistic regression coefficients with the standard errors in parentheses. Variables with a * are statistically significant at the 90% confidence level. Variables with a ** are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. Variables with a *** are statistically significant at the 99% confidence interval.
Starting with the results for Amendment 344 on HR 1540, an amendment to cut defense spending by ending the war in Afghanistan, 3 independent variables are shown to have statistical significance. Both Tea Party Rating from FreedomWorks and Military Population of Congressional district are statistically significant at the 99% confidence level while FreedomWorks Endorsement is statistically significant at the 95% confidence level; all three are negatively related to a vote in favor of the amendment. The negative coefficients show that the relationship between having a high Tea Party rating, having a large military population, and being endorsed by FreedomWorks are all related to a “no” vote on the amendment. Running a first differences test after the initial logistic regression allows for more information to be understood, explaining the predicted probability of voting in favor of the amendment when the three significant variables move from one standard deviation below their mean to one standard deviation above their mean. When Tea Party rating moves from one standard deviation below its mean to one standard deviation above its mean, the chance of voting for the amendment decreases 56%. The same change for military population decreases the chance of voting for the bill 30%, while the same change for FreedomWorks endorsement decreases the chance of voting for the bill 34%.

For Amendment 329 on HR 1540, an amendment to cut defense spending by reducing the amount of Department of Defense employees, two variables are found to have statistical significance. Tea Party rating from FreedomWorks is significant at the 99% confidence level and positively related to a vote in favor of the amendment. Member of the House Armed Forces Committee is significant at the 95% confidence level and is negatively related to a vote in favor of the amendment. First differences shows that the chance of
voting for the amendment increases 34% when Tea Party Rating moves from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean, while the chance of voting in favor of the amendment decreases 13% when Member of the Armed Forces Committee moves from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean.

For Amendment 1036 on HR 5326, an amendment to cut trade spending by reducing US trade accounts by $277 million, only one variable is shown to have statistical significance. Tea Party rating from FreedomWorks is significant at the 99% confidence level and is positively related to a vote in favor of the amendment. First differences shows that the chance of voting for the amendment increases 73% when Tea Party rating goes from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean.

For Amendment 1066 on HR 5326, an amendment to cut trade spending by reducing the overall amount of money in HR 5326 by 12.2%, two variables show statistical significance. Tea Party rating from FreedomWorks is significant at the 99% confidence level and positively related to a vote in favor of the amendment, while membership of the House Appropriations Committee is shown to be significant at the 95% confidence level and negatively related to a vote in favor of the amendment. First differences explains this further by showing that the chance of voting for the amendment increases 92% when Tea Party Rating moves from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean, while chances of voting for the amendment decreases 27% when Member of the House Armed Forces Committee moves from one standard deviation below the mean to one standard deviation above the mean.
Discussion

Through the results of the logistic regression analyses, I am able to evaluate support for my hypotheses. My first two hypotheses that relate Tea Party affiliation to a vote in favor of defense spending cuts were somewhat contradictory. On the first amendment, which would reduce spending by ending the costly war in Afghanistan, Tea Party caucus membership yields no statistical significance, while FreedomWorks rating yielded statistical significance in the negative direction, contradicting my hypothesis. The control variable for FreedomWorks endorsement shows statistical significance in the negative direction, aligning with FreedomWorks rating and contradicting my hypothesis as well. On the second amendment, which would reduce spending by downsizing employment in the Department of Defense, Tea Party Caucus yields no statistical significance, while FreedomWorks rating yields statistical significance in the positive direction, supporting my hypotheses. These contradictory results suggest that the members with high Tea Party ratings have different views on defense spending dependent on the context of the spending. Representatives associated with the Tea Party are not willing to reduce defense spending in regards to foreign conflict, but they are willing to reduce the size of the Department of Defense domestically. This aligns with the general ideas about the Tea Party being in favor of a smaller federal government, but still committed to the Jacksonian ideal of a strong global military presence (Baker 2010, Rathbun, 2013, Shear, 2013). My control variable for Member of the House Armed Forces Committee shows statistical significance in the negative direction on the second defense amendment, suggesting that members of the committee are opposed to reducing the Department of Defense. This finding is in alignment with past literature about committee preference outliers (Sprague, 2008).
My third hypothesis relating military population of a Congressman’s district to a vote against military spending cuts only yields statistical significance on the first defense spending amendment. Members representing high military populations voted to continue the war in Afghanistan, but had no significant voting patterns in regard to downsizing the Department of Defense. Since both amendments did not yield statistical significance, I cannot make any final statements on the influence of a large military population on a Congressman’s votes against military spending cuts.

My fourth hypothesis relating a member of Congress’s military background to a vote against military spending cuts yields no statistically significant results. This suggests that military background does not encourage a Congressman to support the military by voting against spending cuts.

My fifth and sixth hypotheses that relate Tea Party affiliation to a vote in favor of trade spending cuts are somewhat affirmed by my models. Tea Party caucus is not statistically significant on either amendment, but a high FreedomWorks Tea Party rating is statistically significant in the positive direction on both amendments. This shows that those who are rated as being the most affiliated with the Tea Party as measured by FreedomWorks are in favor of reducing US trade accounts and reducing spending in trade related bills. My control variable for membership of the House Appropriations committee shows statistical significance on the second amendment in the negative direction, showing that members of the committee that wrote the trade related bill were opposed to cutting spending out of their own bill. This aligns with past literature relating to committee preference outliers (Sprague, 2008).
The most interesting finding from my research relates to a measure of Tea Party affiliation. Tea Party caucus membership turned up no statistical significance on any of the four amendments, while FreedomWorks Tea Party rating showed large statistical significance on all four amendments. This suggests that members of Congress that choose to join the Tea Party Caucus do not necessarily vote in alignment with the Tea Party’s beliefs. I believe that this is related to Mayhew’s (1974) research and literature about position taking. Members that chose to self-identify as Tea Party most likely did so in order to gain the support of their Tea Party supporting constituents. Furthermore, the high correlation between FreedomWorks Tea Party Rating and Ideology (specifically conservativeness) at 81% suggests that the Tea Party is simply a movement to renew traditional conservative values, and is in fact not as unique as media outlets and politicians claim it is. Further research into the influences on a member’s decision to join the Tea Party caucus should be conducted in order to find out what exactly drives a member to join the caucus, as well as a comparison of voting trends of the most conservative members of Congress and the most Tea Party members.

Conclusion

Understanding how the Tea Party votes in Congress is a pressing matter for those looking to understand American politics. A political movement that is capable of getting over 70 of its endorsed candidates elected to the United States House of Representative in one election cycle is bound to be an influential policy determiner. The Tea Party has shown that they are capable of determining the success of different pieces of legislation by either voting with or against their Republican colleagues. Comprehending how those associated with the Tea Party vote on different types of legislation can help other legislators
determine how to write bills in order to gain maximum support, as well as helping interest
groups and donors know which politicians they can trust to help them accomplish their
policy goals. This study suggested key connections between third-party rated Tea Party
affiliation and votes to reduce military and international trade spending, and will be helpful
to those looking to understand more about the emerging Tea Party.
Works Cited


Jungkun, Seo. 2010. "Vote Switching on Foreign Policy in the U.S. House of Representatives." *American Politics Research*


## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Variable Summary Table

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Appendix 2: Correlation Table

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