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Special Orders

“Blue Dog” House Democrats: Lead Dogs or Mythical Beasts?

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As the 2008 presidential and congressional elections came into focus during the summer and early fall, the centrist band of Blue Dog Democrats in the U.S. House aroused considerable interest. With 49 members in a chamber in which Democrats held a 35-seat margin, this coalition of fiscal moderates could well hold the balance of power on the close, party-line votes that have characterized the contemporary Congress, both in the waning days of the 110th Congress and in the crucial early days of the next administration. Not only did journalists pay real attention, so did Barack Obama, who established solid communication lines to the group.

At the same time, critics on the Democratic left, frequently expressing themselves in blogs, argued consistently that the Blue Dogs should be ignored, or even purged, given their reluctance to embrace progressive changes across an array of policies. For example, at the blog *Open Left*, Chris Bowers argued:

As long as the Blue Dogs are extracting right-wing policy promises from the Obama administration, giving credence to Republican opposition to even to tepid legislative proposals that are probably inadequate to solve our myriad crises, and making not so subtly veiled threats to cut Social Security and Medicare in the form of “fiscal responsibility summits,” progressives should not be assisting them in elections. In fact, progressives should not only deny assistance, but they should be loud in clear in their denial.¹

Conversely, some conservative voices, such as the *Wall Street Journal*'s editorial page and columnist David Brooks, argued that there would be no brakes on a liberal, big-government Democratic majority. Said Brooks, “What we’re going to see, in short, is the Gingrich revolution in reverse and on steroids... In normal times, moderates could have restrained the zeal on the left. In an economic crisis, not a chance.”² In other words, Blue Dogs would act more like Democrats in a historically liberal Congress than like centrist power brokers.³

The Blue Dogs themselves, who represent disproportionately rural and Southern districts, have consistently traded on their position at the center of the House’s ideological spectrum, especially on fiscal issues, most notably PAYGO (pay-as-you-go) budgeting that offsets spending increases or tax cuts. As Rep. Mike Ross (D-AR) observed, “We see our role as ensuring that not only Democrats but Republicans adhere to this House role [PAYGO] in ensuring that bills are paid for.”⁴ Even as the economy was worsening in mid-

2008, Blue Dogs made the case that deficit reduction and fiscal discipline were crucial to their survival. Iowa Representative Leonard Boswell pointed out, “So many of us come from...so-called swing districts, we understand that you can’t just keep accumulating unbelievable debt.”⁵ Thus, coming into the 2008 elections, not only did Blue Dogs sit at the center of the House ideological spectrum, they saw their survival as crucial to the maintenance of a Democratic majority. Given a strong sense of internal loyalty and camaraderie, coupled with a formal institutional presence as a caucus, the Blue Dogs have taken their commitment to fiscal conservatism very seriously, as they have sought to remain united as a centrist block in order to affect final votes and particular elements of the House Democratic agenda. But serious questions remained as to if and how this could be accomplished, especially as the 2008-9 economic crisis came to a head.

Even before the 2008 election campaign took shape, congressional scholars took stock of the Democratic control of the 110th Congress and looked forward to a new era of unified government, which would provide more evidence and insights as to the nature of agenda control and party impact on policy outcomes.⁶ While Democrats would definitely control the congressional agenda, examining the nature of that control – and the policies that would be forthcoming – seemed sure to be illuminating. In terms of congressional scholarship, the Blue Dogs would continue to reflect the median legislator within the House, but they would also be part of a Democratic majority, whose leaders would expect loyalty, especially with a fellow partisan as president.

More generally, those who wrote about the Blue Dog Democrats in the House often mis-characterized them and used “Blue Dog” as shorthand for centrism in general or for given policies, such as abortion or Iraq, on which the caucus explicitly refused to commit itself. Ironically, no matter how carefully the members of the Blue Dog Coalition sought to focus on fiscal matters, largely PAYGO and a balanced budget, journalists and outside critics would paint the caucus in broad, metaphorical brushstrokes.

Still, as of August and early September 2008, the Blue Dogs did appear to be on their way to represent fifty-plus fiscal centrists in a House that would likely include 250 or more Democrats. If they could stick together, keep up their dialogue with the prospective president, and focus tightly on fiscal issues, they might well be able to exert disproportionate influence.

To examine how this prospect has fared, this article will briefly examine who the Blue Dogs are, how they have sought influence, and how successful they have been, both in the waning days of the 110th Congress and the early ones of the 111th. In so doing, the findings will comment directly on the role of party in the Democratic House under an Obama administration.

The Blue Dog Coalition (BDC)

The Coalition has been particularly active on fiscal issues, relentlessly pursuing a balanced budget and then protecting that achievement from politically popular “raids” on the budget.... In the 110th Congress, the Coalition intends to continue to make a difference in Congress by forging middle-ground, bipartisan answers to the current challenges facing the Country. A top priority will be to refocus Congress on truly balancing the budget and ridding taxpayers of the burden the national debt places on them. The group also expects to be involved in education, regulatory reform, taxes, defense and veterans affairs.⁷

Although BDC members do address issues beyond the budget and fiscal restraint, these emphases permeate their approach to most issues, such as welfare reform. As Blue Dog veteran Rep. Dennis Moore (D-KS) observed in an interview, “Our focus is key – on the economic issues of balanced budget and PAYGO. We don’t take positions on social issues.” Both Moore and caucus staffer Kristen Hawn argue that neither the Democratic Left nor the Republican Right truly understand the Blue Dogs. Hawn said, “Blue Dogs are misunderstood a lot, because their positions are often complicated, although based on principle; [those on the left and right] tend to stereotype them.” As we shall see, much of this stereotyping comes in the way many observers use “Blue Dogs” as a metaphor for any compromise-oriented, centrist politicking, across a wide range of issues.

In the real (sic) world of Congress, the Blue Dogs are a well-defined caucus, to anyone who is paying attention. In the 111th Congress they consist of 49 Democrats (50 before New York Representative Kirsten Gillibrand was nominated to replace Hillary Clinton in the Senate), who have applied and been accepted for membership. They caucus regularly, without staff, and require members to attend 60 percent of their meetings; before taking a position on a given issue, sixty percent of the members must vote to approve.

More important than the formal rules are the social bonds that Blue Dogs have knit among themselves. In interviews, both Rep. Moore and Hawn emphasized the “member-driven” nature of the caucus. Said Hawn, “They do almost everything together – sit together on the floor [near the center aisle]. They’re friends, they trust each other.... Essentially the contact is member-to-member, although personal staffs do provide some support.” The Blue Dog network provides a counterweight to the power of the Democratic leadership, whose agenda and organization often push them farther to the left than their publicly held positions would indicate.

It is no wonder that journalists turn to the Blue Dogs as a good story; they present potential conflicts by providing some opposition to the powerful party leadership and offering a centrist counter-narrative to that of Speaker Pelosi and a liberal majority. Recent analyses illustrate the popularity of the Blue Dog story line. For example, in the last three months of 2008, a Lexis-Nexis search found 993 mentions of the Blue Dogs, as opposed to 93 for the Progressive Caucus.⁸ This attention was unusual, in that, from their founding in the aftermath of the historic 1994 election until 2007, Blue Dogs had little leverage in the House, because Republican leaders could muster consistent partisan majorities on crucial votes. In the 110th Congress, however, the BDC potential for influence grew, given their numbers (between 47 and 49) and the modest size of the Democratic majority (in the vicinity of 236–199). Still, as one Democratic legislator put it, “Being in the majority didn’t make that much difference, in that not so much could get through the Senate. And the president had the veto.”⁹

To address their lack of impact, the Blue Dogs have become active in congressional electioneering, endorsing 10 House candidates (four eventually won) and Mark Warner in the Virginia Senate race that he won convincingly. Blue Dog leader Rep. Mike Ross (D–AR) noted in October 2008: “It’s been a very productive and frustrating two years in the Democratic majority for the Blue Dogs. Out of frustration, we’ve decided that we need to get involved in Senate races.”¹⁰ These sentiments may reflect a conclusion that the real action in congressional centrist politics and fiscal restraint is at least as likely to occur in the Senate as the House.

In the 110th Congress, Blue Dog members clustered around the chamber median on measures such as DW-Nominate scores and *National Journal*’s ideological scores. The most liberal Blue Dog, California’s Jane Harman, stood as just the 100th most liberal Democrat in the House; the most conservative Blue Dog, Georgia’s Jim Marshall, ranked as the 235th most liberal member of the chamber, and his *NJ* score of 43.5 was not that far from the chamber mean (50.3). Nominally, Coalition members could have chosen not to support the Democratic leadership, but that simply was not the case. The average Democratic House member’s CQ Party Unity Score was 92 (first session, 110th Congress), while the average Blue Dog came in at 88, a score that was equal to or higher than the mean for the entire Democratic caucus in any congress since CQ began its analysis in 1956.

Moreover, in the final 110th Congress DW-Nominate scores,¹¹ all Democrats stood farther to the left than did all Republicans, and while Blue Dogs did cluster around the center, they remained aligned with their party colleagues, rather than with the corporal’s guard of moderate Republicans.

In short, Blue Dog Democrats do have centrist tendencies, but they are also – and perhaps first and foremost – Democrats. Under Speaker Pelosi, who has fostered generally positive relationships with the Caucus and its members, Blue Dogs have voted much more like their fellow partisans than as independent individuals or a centrist bloc.

Federal Spending and the Economic Crisis: Testing the Blue Dogs

Despite their strong party unity rankings, Blue Dogs did demonstrate their centrism during the first session of the 110th Congress (at least as indicated by NJ scores). They remained the subject of many articles that played up their moderation, and they continued to talk about the Coalition as an independent bloc, which would continue to seek to affect outcomes in the House, either in votes or within the Democratic caucus. As former congressman and original Blue Dog Charlie Stenholm argued, “No legislation, good or bad, will be passed without the Blue Dogs. Anything they support will pass.”¹² Although there are some examples of Blue Dogs affecting the agenda, as in 2008 farm legislation, Stenholm’s analysis was flawed, in that the members of the BDC voted very much like the entire Democratic caucus.

The most profound tests for the Blue Dogs would come in the fall of 2008 with the TARP legislation, and in early 2009, with the passage of the \$800 billion stimulus package. Taken together, these economic packages generated approximately \$1.5 trillion in new debt, and challenged the core beliefs of the Coalition. But when given the chance, the Blue Dogs did not, for the most part, bark. In a series of votes, they supported the banking bailout in the fall, as well as the auto industry bailout (later killed in the Senate) and the February stimulus package. Both before and after the 2008 elections, in both the 110th and 111th Congresses, the Blue Dogs generally, though not unanimously, supported the Democratic position on the floor.

Table 1				
110th Congressional Votes on Original and Amended TARP Packages and Auto Industry Bailout				
		<i>All Democrats</i>	<i>Blue Dogs</i>	<i>Republicans</i>
TARP 1 (Sept. 29, 2008)	Yea (205)	140	25	65
	Nay (228)	95	22	133
	NV (1)			1
TARP 2 (Oct. 3, 2008)	Yea (263)	172	31	91
	Nay (171)	63	16	108
	NV			
Auto Industry (Dec. 10, 2000)	Yea (237)	205	36	32
	Nay (170)	20	9	150
	NV (26)	11	2	* 15
* includes one “present” vote				
Source: Thomas (http://thomas.loc.gov/)				

Blue Dogs did vote proportionately more than other Democrats against both TARP packages and the auto stimulus; they gave all three issues majorities; and for TARP 2 and the auto stimulus, sizeable majorities. More important, while they could have changed the TARP 1 result, the fact that 73 other Democrats opposed the measure argues against pinning any “blame” on the BDC; TARP 1 had many more problems than losing Democratic centrists. On the other votes, the Blue Dogs could not have changed the outcome, and they generally offered substantial support for both initiatives – even the auto industry bailout, which failed to garner enough support in the Senate for passage.

Indeed, even before the presidential election, many Blue Dogs acknowledged that their issue positions on PAYGO and a balanced budget simply had to give way, at least temporarily, in the face of the economic crisis. In part, BDC members were willing to put aside their preferences because Obama as a candidate had directed both public and private statements at them, offering reassurance that he would in the future behave with fiscal discipline.

As president, Obama has continued to court the House Blue Dogs, most notably by inviting them to the White House as the stimulus package vote approached in February. And he has argued consistently for long-term fiscal restraint, even as he has put forward the costliest legislative package in history, as well as

offering his support for extensive executive/independent agency bailouts to the financial community. In the end, Blue Dogs did make some marginal changes in the stimulus bill, but those did not account for their overwhelming backing of this record-setting proposal. Of the 49 House Blue Dogs, 43 voted for the final stimulus package, and four of the six dissidents came from conservative southern districts. In January, Blue Dogs accounted for 10 of 11 defections on an earlier version of this legislation, which still reflected an almost 80 percent support level. In short, the Blue Dogs again acted more like Democrats and responders to an economic crisis than hard-line advocates of fiscal restraint.

To be sure, the BDC is an active, formal coalition, which provides real benefits to its tight-knit band of members, but there is a legitimate question as to whether it deserves the attention that it has received. With an identifiable brand name, the Blue Dogs – as they are portrayed in the press – may be more important as a point of media emphasis than a key set of congressional actors. Moreover, the media’s focus on the House BDC may divert attention from the Senate, whose centrist Democrats do not operate as an easily identifiable caucus, but where their political clout may be far more consequential.

The Blue Dog Metaphor

Writing in the liberal *Nation*, Christopher Hayes wonders why the Blue Dogs have continued to garner a lot of attention in the 111th Congress, even when (he argues mistakenly), “the Democrats’ margin is big enough to pass legislation without a single...Blue Dog vote.”¹³ He’s wrong on the numbers (255-49=206), but overall his point is valid, given the consistent support that BDC members have given large-scale spending packages. Hayes sees the caucus’s unity as significant, as well as what he calls “the Beltway love affair with ‘fiscal conservatism.’”¹⁴ And even though their focus is narrow – on fiscal issues – many commentators expand the Blue Dog notion to policies far beyond the caucus’s announced scope.

It is true that Blue Dogs, as centrists, become targets for moderate/conservative initiatives, on a host of issues, such as the Military Commissions Act or bankruptcy legislation. The widely available list of Blue Dogs gives all organized interests a clear set of targets. So when 23 BDC members vote against the Military Commission Act, their actions are labeled as that of Blue Dogs, even though the caucus made no formal recommendation. Still, using the “Blue Dog” label to denote Democratic centrists has become common, as in remarks by Democratic Majority Leader Steny Hoyer and even BDC Chair Mike Ross (D-AR) when they discussed the FISA bill in 2008, another issue on which no formal caucus position had been taken.¹⁵

The “Real” Blue Dogs?

Although House Blue Dogs have, on occasion, meaningfully modified the House Democratic agenda, in the end Democratic leaders, especially from 2007 on, have been able to control the House agenda, almost always with the support of large numbers of Blue Dogs. With thirty or so votes to spare, Speaker Pelosi could be thwarted only by a close-to-unified BDC.

All the attention on Blue Dogs in the House, however, has obscured the fact that Senate Democratic centrists may well be accomplishing a good deal of what metaphorical Blue Dog moderates in the House might be expected to do. Indeed, Senator Evan Bayh (D-IN) attempted to create a Blue Dog caucus in the Senate after the 2008 elections, when it became clear that Democratic centrists might exercise real negotiating power. But the individualistic Senate is less receptive to caucuses than is the House, and there is less need for them given the chamber’s smaller size and its members stronger personal relationships.

Still, as the politics of the 111th Congress began to take shape in early 2009, for all the media attention given the Blue Dogs, it is a set of 12-to-14 Senate Democrats, led by Bayh, who are exercising some leverage in addressing the size of spending bills. Bayh noted, “If we’re going to get 60 [to end debate], we have to have the pragmatists, the moderates in the Senate, in the Democratic caucus working together and reaching out to those on the other side, of like minds.”¹⁶ Without the Blue Dog label, the Senate moderate Democrats are behaving much like the BDC has sought to act in the House. Given the structural requirements of

contemporary Senate legislating on most issues,¹⁷ this group has more potential leverage than do their House counterparts with their formal caucus.

A Blue Dog by Any Other Name?

In the end, the very existence of the House Blue Dog Coalition can fit within both Krehbiel's median legislator perspective on congressional decision-making and the Cox/McCubbins emphasis on majority party agenda control.¹⁸ At the same time, the actions of moderate Senate Democrats, absent any formal caucus organization, look a lot the same, as they threaten to vote against the party leadership (on the 2009 budget package, for example), while simultaneously seeking to alter the content of the legislation, as well as the future policy agenda.

So does the existence of the Blue Dog Coalition matter? Its members argue strongly that it does, both as an institution that brings them closer together and that provides a voice for fiscal moderates. When it comes to impact, however, the answer is less clear; as a voting bloc, despite the fears of some liberals and the attention of many journalists, there is little evidence that the Blue Dogs have made much of a difference. Whether they have significantly altered the Democrats' agenda in the House may be in the eye of the beholder, with leaders acknowledging few adjustments, while Blue Dogs may see real modifications on given issues, such as PAYGO. Ironically, one such issue – the FISA bill amendments in 2008, was depicted as a victory for the Blue Dogs, even though a key letter supporting immunity was sent to the Speaker by “21 Democrats in the conservative Blue Dog Coalition.”¹⁹ Less than half the Blue Dogs sent the letter, on an issue that was not central to the BDC mission. A Blue Dog victory or the actions of a set of moderates, only incidentally or indirectly connected to the Caucus. No matter, the Blue Dog brand name was easy to use, as it stood for moderate-conservative Democrats. The story was told, even as the influence of the caucus remained less than well demonstrated.

Notes

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[Return to Contents](#)

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