Setting the Agenda

Responsible Party Government in the U.S. House of Representatives

Scholars of the U.S. House of Representatives disagree over the importance of political parties in organizing the legislative process. On the one hand, nonpartisan theories stress how congressional organization serves members’ nonpartisan goals. On the other hand, partisan theories argue that the House is organized to serve the collective interests of the majority party. This book advances our partisan theory and presents a series of empirical tests of that theory’s predictions (pitted against others). It considers why procedural cartels form, arguing that agenda power is naturally subject to cartelization in busy legislatures. It argues that the majority party has cartelized agenda power in the U.S. House since the adoption of Reed’s rules in 1890. The evidence demonstrates that the majority party seizes agenda control at nearly every stage of the legislative process in order to prevent bills that the party dislikes from reaching the floor. Given our empirical evidence, we question the validity of theories that do not take into account the substantial influence of political parties.

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Contents

Figures and Tables  page  viii
Acknowledgments  xi

  1 Introduction  1

PART I: WHY PARTY GOVERNMENT?
  2 Procedural Cartel Theory  17

PART II: NEGATIVE AGENDA POWER
  3 Modeling Agenda Power  37
  4 The Primacy of Reed's Rules in House Organization  50
  5 Final Passage Votes  87
  6 The Costs of Agenda Control  106
  7 The Textbook Congress and the Committee on Rules  124
  8 The Bills Reported from Committee  149
  9 Which Way Does Policy Move?  171

PART III: CONSEQUENCES OF POSITIVE AGENDA POWER AND CONDITIONAL PARTY GOVERNMENT
  10 Positive Agenda Power  201
  11 Conclusion  220

Appendix  231
Addendum  253
Bibliography  307
Index  329
Author Index  333
Figures and Tables

Figures

1. Illustration of leftward and rightward policy moves  page 3
2. Majority-party agenda control and legislative success  8
3. The idealized Cartel Agenda Model  43
4. Status quo that will and will not be put on the agenda and amended to  F  66
5. Identifying the direction of policy change  67
6. Effect of Reed’s rules on the proportion of bills moving policy toward the majority party  72
7. Majority-party roll rate in House and Senate, Congresses 45–105  94
8. Minority-party roll rate in House and Senate, Congresses 45–105  94
9. The Rules Committee as an agenda setter  128
10. Kernel density plots of roll rates on special rules  136
11. Location of the Rules Committee median and party rolls  139
12. Estimated dissent rates for (majority) Democrats and (minority) Republicans, by W-NOMINATE score  164
13. Estimated rate of voting against a bill for (majority) Democrats and (minority) Republicans, by W-NOMINATE score  165
A.1 Illustrating the member dissent and committee block zones  167
9.1 Proportion of bills that move policy leftward in the House  173
9.2 Agenda-setting and bill passage stages of the legislative process  174
9.B.1 Proportion of leftward moves under the Floor Agenda Model  193
9.B.2 Proportion of leftward moves under the extended pivot model  195
Figures and Tables
ix

9.B.3 Proportion of leftward moves under the Cartel Agenda Model 196
10.1 The consequences of increasing homogeneity 218

Tables

4.1 The Effects of Rule Changes on the Proportion of Final-Passage Bills That Move Policy Toward the Majority, Congresses 45–105 70
5.1 House Rolls on Final-Passage Votes for Majority and Minority Parties, Congresses 45–105 92
5.2 Predicted and Estimated Effects of Distance on Roll Rates, Majority and Minority Parties, Congresses 45–105 97
5.3 Effect of Preference Shifts on Roll Rates 101
5.A.1 OLS, MLCS, and EBB Estimates of Effects of Distance on Roll Rates, Majority and Minority Parties, Congresses 45–105 104
6.1 Extended Beta Binomial Estimate of the Effects of Distance and Important Rule Changes on Minority-Party Roll Rates, Congresses 45–105 112
6.2 Probit Estimates of the Effect of Republican Presidents and Senates on Democratic Majority Rolls in the House, Congresses 84–103 116
7.1 Majority-Party Roll Rates on Rule-Adoption Votes, Congresses 54–74 133
7.2 Majority-Party Roll Rates on Rule-Adoption Votes, Congresses 54–105 134
7.3 Minority-Party Roll Rates on Rule-Adoption Votes, Congresses 54–105 135
7.4 Effects of Distance from Rules Committee Blockout Zone on Majority- and Minority-Party Rolls on Rule-Adoption Votes, Congresses 62–100 140
7.A Majority and Minority Tolls on Rule Adoption Votes, by Order of Rules Committee, Majority-Party, and Floor Median Ideal Points, Congresses 62–100 142
8.1 Determinants of Dissent on Committee Reports, Congresses 84–98 (even-numbered) 162
8.A.1 Determining the Dissent Zone as a Function of x, C, and F 168
9.1 Six Models of the Legislative Process 177
9.2 Explaining Variations in the Proportion of Final-Passage Bills That Propose to Move Policy Leftward, If Bills Move Policy to the Floor Median 180
9.3 Explaining Variations in the Proportion of Final-Passage Bills That Propose to Move Policy Leftward, If Bills Move Policy as per the Pivot Model 182
9.4 Explaining Variations in the Proportion of Final-Passage Bills That Propose to Move Policy Leftward, If Bills Move Policy to a Constitutional Weighted Average 184

9.5 The Effect of Reed’s Rules on the Proportion of Leftward Moves 185

10.1 Extended Beta Binomial Estimation of the Minority-Party Roll Rate, Congresses 45–105 208

10.2 Majority- and Minority-Party Roll Rates by Committee, Congresses 84–98 (even-numbered) 212

11.1 Majority-Party Roll Rates Throughout the Legislative Process 227
Acknowledgments

Setting the Agenda is the product of our interest in the role the majority party plays in the U.S. House of Representatives. Throughout the book, we analyze how the majority party seizes agenda control at nearly every stage of the legislative process, in the process arguing that a version of responsible party government can and does exist in our polity. The results, arguments, and conclusions contained within represent countless hours of analyzing data, crafting arguments, and drafting chapters, but, fortunately for us, we were not alone in this process.

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