Parties, Coalitions and the Internal Organization of Legislatures

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How Strong are Parties in Legislatures?

Parties can have:

- Electoral effects
- Legislative effects

**Definition:** Party strength = the ability of a party to exert independent influence over the outcomes of legislative votes.
Two Opposing Views

"Modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties."

E.E. Schattschneider – Party Government (1942)

"The fact is that no theoretical treatment of the U.S. Congress that posits parties as analytic units would go very far."

Parties and Legislative Organization

If parties are weak …

• Why do legislatures develop internal structures (presiding officers, directing boards, committees) dominated by the majority party/coalition?

If parties are strong …

• What are the legislative instruments they use to exercise their influence?

• How do they obtain the power to use those instruments?

• What is the ultimate effect of strong parties on policy outcomes?
Literature

• Non-Partisan Theories
The U.S. House is organized to:
  ➢ Help reelection of incumbents
  ➢ Produce gains from legislative trade
  ➢ Promote specialization and production of information
  ➢ Aid in bargaining with other chamber or president
    Diermeier and Myerson (1999), Epstein and O’Halloran (1999)

• Partisan Theories
  ➢ Conditional party government
    Rohde (1991), Aldrich and Rohde (2001)
  ➢ Agenda Setting
    Cox and McCubbins (1993, 2005)

• The Debate Goes On ...
Voting Cohesion: Preference Affinity or Enforced Discipline?

Arguments for weak parties:

- Little party unity voting (cohesion)
  Example: 105th Congress:
    11% of roll call votes 90%DEM-90%REP
    50% of roll call votes 50%DEM-50%REP
- Krehbiel (1998) Even perfect cohesion does not imply parties matter. There must be discipline (members pressured to vote against their preferences).

Arguments for strong parties:

- Party leadership have legislative instruments to change party members votes:
  ➢ on the floor (Aldrich and Rhode 2001)
  ➢ on procedural matters (Cox and McCubbins 2005)
Bottom Line of the Debate

Are punishments effective?

- Krehbiel: NO, members vote as they wish
  Too costly, not enforceable, cancel each other

- Cox and McCubbins: YES, members vote as they are told
  - on floor votes
    Snyder and Groseclose (2000)
    Of all 1871-1996 close roll call votes 50% exhibited statistically significant party influence.
  - on procedural votes
    Cox and McCubbins (1999)
    Majority roll rates $<<$ Minority roll rates (1870s-1980s)
Our Theoretical Approach

- Shift the current literature’s focus on discipline as the driving force behind party effects.

- Discipline is a problematic assumption because:
  - takes as given the existence of party leadership
  - makes testing of party influence hypothesis difficult

- Rule out disciplining of members by leadership (like Krehbiel)

- Study what generates party effects starting from underlying legislator preferences
Results

Our results:

• Both partisan (as in Cox and McCubbins, Aldrich and Rohde) and non-partisan (as in Krehbiel) outcomes are possible.

• Median prevails when:
  ➢ bargaining is costless
  ➢ median monopolizes agenda power

• Majority prefers policy outcomes biased away from the median: between majority median and legislative median

• Majority votes for inegalitarian agenda power: higher polarization, more inequality

Our contribution: Encompass the predictions of competing theories in a unified theoretical framework.
1. **Organizational Stage**: bargaining over the distribution of agenda power \((\rho_1, \rho_2, \ldots, \rho_{2k+1}) \in \Delta_{2k}\).

2. **A Policy Issue Arises**: ordering of ideal points becomes common knowledge.

3. **Policy Stage**: bargaining over policy \((p_1, p_2, \ldots)\) given a distribution of agenda power and the issue-specific ordering of ideal points.
### Organizational Stage

- **Structural Stage**
  - Pure majority rule to decide the number of agenda-setting positions $n$, where $1 \leq n \leq 2k + 1$
  - Status quo: equal sharing of agenda power (Cox’s “legislative state of nature”):
    \[
    (\rho_1, \rho_2, \ldots, \rho_{2k+1}) = \left(\frac{1}{2k + 1}, \frac{1}{2k + 1}, \ldots, \frac{1}{2k + 1}\right)
    \]

- **Assignment Stage**
  - Majority voting to fill agenda positions
  - In case of ties, winners are determined randomly
Organizational Stage

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• **Assignment Stage**
  - **Majority voting** to fill agenda positions
  - In case of ties, winners are determined randomly

**Remark**: equal voting power and equal agenda power across the legislature and within parties (cf. Cox and McCubbins).
Policy Stage

Recognition
Legislator $i$ is selected with probability $p_i$.

Proposal
Legislator $i$ makes a proposal $p_i$.

Vote
The proposal is put to a majority vote against the status quo.

Implementation
$p_i$ forever

Proposal accepted

Proposal rejected
$q$ one period
Remark: equal voting power but possibly unequal agenda power.
Both **partisan** (as in Cox and McCubbins 2005, Aldrich and Rohde 2001) and **non-partisan** (as in Krehbiel 1998) outcomes are possible.
Results

NON-PARTISAN

• Issue median prevails when:
  ➢ bargaining is costless
  ➢ median monopolizes agenda power

• If no preference polarization, policy outcomes are unbiased on average.
Results

PARTISAN

• If preference polarization, majority prefers policy outcomes biased away from the median: between majority median and legislative median.

\[
\hat{x}_1 \quad q \quad \hat{x}_2 \quad \hat{x}_3 \quad 0.83 \quad \hat{x}_4 \quad 0.33 \quad 0.33 \quad \hat{x}_5 \quad p
\]

Social Acceptance Set

Median

• If preference polarization, majority votes for inegalitarian agenda power: higher polarization, more inequality. (In the picture, majority dictator.)
Summary of This Paper’s Argument

Suppose that:

- Voting on policy is determined entirely by basic preferences (i.e. there are no rewards and punishments for changing one’s vote)
- Voting on legislative structure is by majority rule
- Legislative structure is stable
- Voting on policy is by majority rule
- Legislatures face a plenary bottleneck (i.e. there are non-negligible opportunity costs of debating and voting on proposals).

Then:

- Equilibrium distribution of agenda power is more unequal with more preference polarization
- Policy outcomes are biased towards the majority median.
## Comparison with Previous Theories

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