

#14

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CALENDAR
OF THE UNITED STATES
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
AND
HISTORY OF LEGISLATION

Setting THE Agenda

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

CAMBRIDGE

at which the House is faced with a binary choice between rules that cartelize the agenda and rules that let the floor decide the agenda. If the House chooses to cartelize the agenda, it then operates according to the Cartel Agenda Model, outlined earlier. If, on the other hand, the House chooses not to cartelize the agenda, it then operates according to the Floor Agenda Model. The question is, under what conditions will the House choose to cartelize the agenda?

The quick answer is that all members of the majority party will favor cartelizing the agenda, to the extent that this conveys office and distributive benefits to them. By "office benefits," we mean that holding high office carries with it a flow of *nonpolicy benefits*, in addition to any influence over policy it may confer. Being chair, for example, brings in campaign contributions, confers prestige, affords the opportunity to hire and direct staff, and so on. By "distributive benefits," we mean a larger share of the pie in any distributive issues that the House decides.¹³ The only downside to cartelizing is that consistently centrist members may suffer a net policy loss from the majority's veto. This loss must be counterbalanced by office and distributive benefits in order to secure the centrists' support.

The payoff to a given majority party legislator from adopting rules that cartelize the agenda, rather than leaving the agenda to the floor, can be written:

$$\text{Payoff to adopting cartel rather than floor agenda rules} \\ = \text{Policy gain} - \text{Policy loss} + \text{Office benefits} + \text{Distributive benefits}$$

The legislator may enjoy policy gains from the majority party veto on some dimensions (Policy gain), may suffer losses due to the veto on other dimensions (Policy loss), and may – regardless of these policy gains and losses – accrue some nonpolicy office and distributive benefits.¹⁴ The larger are the latter benefits,

¹³ The real-world Congress faces a variety of issues. Some of these issues can be formally represented as spatial or left-right policy dimensions of the kind that our model envisions – and for which it is meaningful to talk of a median legislator. Others, however, are closer to the purely distributive issues envisioned, for example, in Baron and Ferejohn (1989) – in which Congress must decide how to divide the federal budget pie among members' districts, and *there simply is no median legislator*. We might have based our model on the Baron-Ferejohn framework, by adding an agenda-setting stage in which the majority party's senior partners could veto proposals. Had we done so, we would still have found that such agenda power conferred a clear advantage on the majority party's members. Indeed, if any proposal that did not command the support of a majority of the majority party would be vetoed, then the central prediction of our spatial model would transfer to the distributive setting: the majority party would never be rolled. Yet, in a distributive setting, there would be no puzzle as to why the majority party's members would vote for rules to sustain a cartel because all members would be strategically symmetric. There would be no median legislator who had to sacrifice his strategic advantages for the sake of the party. Thus, as the ratio of distributive to spatial issues increases, the median legislator's preferences pose an increasingly small constraint on policy outcomes (cf. Jackson and Moselle 2002).

¹⁴ More formally, for legislator k , Policy gain $_k = \sum_{i \in G_k} |F_i - x_i^k| - |q_i - x_i^k|$, where $G_k = \{i: x_i^k \text{ is closer to } q_i \text{ than to } F_i, \text{ and } M_i \text{ is closer to } q_i \text{ than to } F_i\}$. The cartel blocks consideration of bills dealing with the dimensions in G_k , and this benefits k as he prefers the status quo to the floor median on such dimensions. In contrast, Policy loss $_k = \sum_{i \in L_k} |q_i - x_i^k| - |F_i - x_i^k|$, where $L_k = \{i: x_i^k \text{ is closer to } F_i \text{ than to } q_i, \text{ and } M_i \text{ is closer to } q_i \text{ than to } F_i\}$. The cartel blocks the floor median to the status quo on such dimensions.

and the more widely distributed they are among the majority party's members, the more likely it is that every majority-party member will vote to cartelize the agenda (if the only other alternative is to leave the agenda up to the floor).

Would centrists – those at or near the floor median on most dimensions – really benefit from a cartel, by the preceding calculus? They suffer mostly policy losses, in the sense that particular bills that they would support are blocked from reaching the floor by the cartel, whereas such bills would not be blocked if the floor controlled the agenda. To see why this net policy loss will not typically carry the day, we note three points.

First, the "policy loss" that the consistently centrist members suffer is not overt. These members are asked to forego the opportunity to change policy on some dimensions. They are never asked to vote straightforwardly for the status quo against a bill moving policy to the legislative median. Rather, they are simply asked not to lift a finger in forcing one of the banned bills onto the floor. If their constituents come to complain, their only complaint can be about lack of effort (hard to prove), not about voting the wrong way. If things go well, the bill will never make it out of committee, and so most majority-party members will not be forced to vote even on a procedural motion involving the bill, much less on a final-passage motion. From this perspective, the electoral costs to centrist members of cartelizing the agenda are minimized.

Second, we believe that the office and distributive benefits noted previously are very substantial. We defend this notion at length in the second edition of *Legislative Leviathan* but can review the argument briefly here. First, the majority party's senior partners get all committee and subcommittee chairs, super-proportional shares of seats on the most important standing committees and on virtually all conference committees, and the speakership. Second, the majority party's leaders also take the lion's share of staff allocations in the House. Third, the majority party's members enjoy a significant fund-raising advantage, estimated at \$36,000 per member per electoral cycle in the House (Cox and Magar 1999; Ansolabehere and Snyder 2000). Fourth, the majority party's members never receive a smaller share and sometimes receive a larger share of pork-barrel projects. Fifth, districts served by senior members of the majority party exhibit higher economic growth rates (Levitt and Poterba 1999). Thus, we believe that the payoff to cartelizing the agenda (as opposed to letting the floor decide its own agenda) is positive for all majority party members.

Third, consistently centrist members can in principle be given larger office and distributive benefits to counterbalance their policy losses. This line of argument suggests that consistently centrist members should receive more office and distributive benefits than other members of the party. We are not aware of any systematic evidence that centrists do receive greater office and distributive benefits, but we can point out that the conventional wisdom regarding Southern

where $L_k = \{i: x_i^k \text{ is closer to } F_i \text{ than to } q_i, \text{ and } M_i \text{ is closer to } q_i \text{ than to } F_i\}$. The cartel blocks consideration of bills dealing with the dimensions in L_k , and this harms k , who prefers the floor median to the status quo on such dimensions.

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