

# Partisan agenda control in the US house: A theoretical exploration

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## Abstract

While a number of scholars have focused on the importance of partisan agenda control in the US House, few have examined its uneven consequences within the majority party. In this paper, we explore ‘counterfactual’ utility distributions within the majority party, by comparing policy outcomes under a party-less median voter model to policy outcomes under party-based positive and negative agenda control models. We show that the distribution of policy losses and benefits resulting from agenda control are quite similar for both the positive and negative varieties. In both cases, moderate majority-party members are made worse off by the exercise of partisan agenda control, while those to the extreme side of the majority-party median benefit disproportionately. We also consider the benefit of agenda control for the party as a whole, by looking at the way changes in majority-party homogeneity affect the summed utility across members. Interestingly, we find that when the distance between the floor and majority-party medians decreases, the overall value of positive and negative agenda control diminishes. However, we also find support for the ‘conditional party government’ notion that, as majority-party members’ preferences become more similar, they have an increased incentive to grant agenda-setting power to their leaders.

## Keywords

negative agenda control; positive agenda control; US House

## 1. Introduction

In recent years the study of majority-party agenda control in the US House has received considerable attention. While emerging partisan theories in the 1990s touched on the subject generally (see, e.g., Aldrich, 1995; Cox and McCubbins, 1993; Rohde, 1991), a

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*specific* focus on agenda control exercised by the majority party only emerged in the last decade (see, e.g., Cox and McCubbins, 2002, 2005; Finocchiaro and Rohde, 2008). In so doing, scholars have worked to explicitly define what is meant by ‘agenda control’ and articulate its role in partisan theory – which has resulted in more theoretical clarity as well as greater complexity. That is, while the literature has moved steadily toward definitional precision, a common recognition has emerged that *two forms* of agenda control in fact exist: *negative agenda control* (NAC), or the ability to block items from floor consideration, and *positive agenda control* (PAC), or the ability to insure that items receive floor consideration. To this point, scholars have typically considered these two forms of agenda control separately, and treated them as mutually exclusive or independent of one another (cf. Finocchiaro and Rohde, 2008).

We build on the aforementioned literature by considering both NAC and PAC in a formal sense. To be sure formal treatments of partisan agenda control exist, most notably the NAC model developed by Cox and McCubbins (2005).<sup>1</sup> Yet, to date, there has not been an attempt to understand the *consequences* of agenda control – both negative and positive – within a common framework, using a systematic approach. We will do just that, by adopting a basic spatial model and framing ‘consequences’ in terms of the costs and benefits that accrue to majority-party members from the exercise of (1) NAC, (2) PAC, and (3) both sets of agenda control combined. The counterfactual baseline in each case will be a simple median voter model (MVM), wherein the floor member dictates policy decisions and partisan agenda control does not exist.

Our formally inspired analysis of partisan agenda control allows us to examine a number of issues that partisan theorists have only speculated on. Firstly, we can determine how the functional forms of the two types of agenda control compare, in terms of the distribution of utility across party members and what the overall functional form – when both NAC and PAC are in operation – looks like. Secondly, we can assess what effect partisan agenda control has on different types of majority-party members, especially moderates who, according to Cox and McCubbins (2005), are hurt disproportionately by the majority’s use of NAC. Thirdly, we can identify how the effect of partisan agenda control may vary based on the extremity of the majority party (as measured by the distance between the floor median and the majority-party median) and the internal homogeneity of the majority party.

In the following section, we provide a more general overview of the literature on NAC and PAC and discuss more precisely the definitions of each. We also discuss our conceptualization of each form of agenda control, which serves as the basis of our formalization and counterfactual exploration in the next section. We then perform some comparative statics, by altering the general spatial location of the majority-party median and the distribution of majority-party members. Finally, we conclude by summarizing our findings and identifying avenues for future research.

## 2. A short overview of partisan agenda control

Before discussing the tenets of PAC and NAC, we first consider the hypothetical baseline: a world in which *no* agenda control exists. In the contemporary literature on legislative studies, such a world is often characterized in terms of a one-dimensional policy space – a ‘line’ on which the legislators are arrayed from left to right based on their underlying

preferences – where decision making is determined by *pure majority rule*. That is, anyone in the legislature can offer a motion to alter the policy that is currently in place, that is, the *status quo* (*SQ*) policy.<sup>2</sup> Under such open-agenda conditions, the eventual outcome of the ‘legislative game’ will be the median position on the underlying dimension, as someone will move the median member’s preferred policy, and it will defeat any other alternative in pairwise voting. This is the well-known *median voter result* (Black, 1948; Downs, 1957). More generally, the MVM assumes that if (a) the number of voters is odd, (b) voters possess well-ordered (i.e. single-peaked) preferences in a one-dimensional policy space, and (c) the voting process follows pure majority rule, then the median voter’s ideal point will be the outcome.

Thus, *agenda control*, defined broadly, indicates a deviation from the MVM setting. In practice, this has meant a departure from the assumption of pure majority rule, as the open-agenda process is restricted in some way, typically by limiting who is able to make motions (or, alternatively, who is permitted to be recognized to make motions), how many motions may be made, which motions are allowed, etc. This restricting of the otherwise open-agenda process provides control or ‘power’ to the political actors who determine and employ the particular restrictions. When such control is determined and employed by the *majority party* in the House, this is known as *partisan agenda control*.

The most thoroughly elaborated form of partisan agenda control in the literature on the US House is *NAC*. Indeed, *NAC* serves as the foundation for the partisan ‘cartel theory’ developed by Cox and McCubbins (2002, 2005). In short, Cox and McCubbins posit that the majority party in the House operates in a coherent team-based way (as a ‘cartel’), securing all-important power nodes in the chamber (notably the Speaker, the standing committee chairs, and a majority of seats on the Rules Committee) that can be used for the benefit of the majority. The cartel’s rationale in acquiring these power nodes is *defensive*, as the chief goal is to protect the majority of the majority party from being harmed. This is accomplished by restricting the types of motions that can be offered – specifically, any motions that would alter *SQs*, such that a majority of the majority party would be made *worse off*, are blocked. Thus, the majority party uses these power nodes to limit access to the legislative agenda – ‘to block bills from reaching a final passage vote on the floor’ (Cox and McCubbins, 2005: 20) – as the Speaker, the standing committee chairs, and the Rules Committee all influence what makes it to the floor for a vote. *NAC* therefore serves as a form of *gatekeeping*.<sup>3</sup>

Formally, cartel theory inserts *NAC* into the basic MVM. In effect, the median of the majority party, via actions by its agents, can restrict the operation of the MVM and ‘block’ certain *SQs* from being reconsidered on the House floor. If we assume a floor median,  $F$ , and a majority-party median,  $M$ , then the set of *SQs* that is blocked extends from  $F$  to  $2M-F$  (the ‘reflection point’ of  $F$  through  $M$ , or the point that is equidistant from  $M$  on the *opposite* side of  $F$ ). This is because once a motion is made, per the assumption in cartel theory, voting is conducted under *open rule* (a House-based process akin to pure majority rule), which inevitably results in  $F$ ’s ideal point becoming the outcome. Thus,  $M$  is made *worse off* if the *SQs* that lie between  $F$  and  $2M-F$  are allowed to be reconsidered and moved to  $F$ . The set of points between  $F$  and  $2M-F$ , therefore,

is called the majority-party ‘blockout zone’ – as the cartel uses its agents’ procedural authority to prevent these *SQs* from being changed.

A less thoroughly elaborated form of partisan agenda control in the literature on the US House is *PAC*. *PAC* has been defined as ‘the ability to push bills through the legislative process to a final-passage vote on the floor’ (Cox and McCubbins, 2005: 20).<sup>4</sup> More generally, *PAC* assumes proposal power, or the ability to make motions. While the formal definition offered by Cox and McCubbins is broad in its application, and covers various layers of legislative decision making, the reality is that at the final-passage stage this form of *PAC* yields *identical* predictions to the MVM. That is, without additional assumptions, motions made to change *SQs* will occur under an open rule, leading to policies being moved to the floor median.

Over time, this ‘weak form’ of *PAC* has increasingly given way to a ‘strong form’, which has its theoretical origins in ‘conditional party government’ (CPG) theory (Aldrich, 1995; Rohde, 1991). CPG theory predicts, given certain conditional assumptions, that the majority party will ‘skew outcomes away from the center of the whole floor and toward the policy center of the [majority] party members’ (Aldrich and Rohde, 1995: 7).<sup>5</sup> This is a meaningful difference vis-à-vis the weak form of *PAC*, as the strong form of *PAC* yields different predictions than the MVM at the floor (final-passage) stage. Specifically, the floor median is no longer automatically privileged, as the majority-party median strives to pull policy toward its preferred point.

Monroe and Robinson (2008) formally develop this strong form of *PAC* through a simple alteration to the MVM. Specifically, if voting is conducted under *closed rule* (where no amendments are allowed), rather than under pure majority rule (or open rule), which the MVM assumes, then non-floor-median outcomes are possible. This ability of the majority-party median to play the role of ‘agenda setter’ (Romer and Rosenthal, 1978), and make take-it-or-leave-it offers to the floor median via closed rules, serves as the foundation of the strong form of majority-party *PAC*.

The strong form of *PAC* can be illustrated spatially. Like the *NAC* case, if we assume a floor median,  $F$ , and a majority-party median,  $M$ , then the key additional actor is  $2F-M$ , the ‘reflection point’ of  $M$  through  $F$ . For *SQs* located between  $2F-M$  and  $F$ ,  $M$  will move policy as close to her ideal point as possible (to the reflection point of ‘*SQx*’ through  $F$ ). For *SQs* on the extreme side of  $2F-M$ ,  $M$  will be able to move policy *exactly* to her ideal point. Thus, whereas the *NAC* case focuses on *SQs* within the majority-party blockout zone, the strong form of the *PAC* case focuses on *SQs* on the *other side* of  $F$ , opposite the majority-party blockout zone.

With these characterizations of partisan agenda control in hand, we begin to think more broadly about the consequences of each form of agenda control. That is, while plenty of attention has been paid to how the majority-party median benefits from *NAC* and *PAC*, the fact that the majority party is a collection (or distribution) of ideological viewpoints is often forgotten. Almost no attention, for example, has been paid to how different types of members of the majority party, on different sides of the majority-party median, may be affected by the exercise of *NAC* or *PAC* (or both in tandem). We hope to remedy this through a formal exploration of agenda control counterfactuals. This is the subject of the next section, to which we now turn.

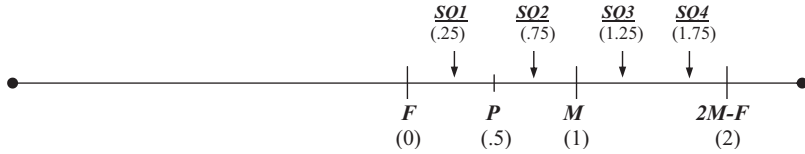


Figure 1. An example of policy utility loss due to majority-party negative agenda control (NAC).

### 3. Constructing agenda control counterfactuals

To better understand the effects of PAC and NAC, we construct a series of counterfactuals that consider the net policy utility for a given majority-party member under two conditions: one where the majority-party median possesses agenda-setting power and one where she does not. Under the latter condition, we assume that outcomes collapse to the floor median, following the tenets of the MVM. Thus, the MVM result constitutes our ‘baseline’ category for assessing the advantage or disadvantage afforded a given member. Under the former condition – where the majority-party median exercises agenda control – we imagine two versions of the counterfactual: one corresponding to NAC, in which the majority-party median can prevent *SQ* policies from being altered, and one corresponding to PAC, in which the majority-party median can move *SQ* policies as close to her ideal point as the floor median will approve. These two counterfactuals yield the same basic result in terms of pure policy utility (where utility decreases linearly as a policy moves farther from a legislator’s ideal point): the ‘net’ policy effect of majority-party agenda control is an uneven distribution of benefits across members of the caucus, where some moderate members will be made *worse off*.<sup>6</sup>

#### 3.1. Illustrating the mechanics of the counterfactuals

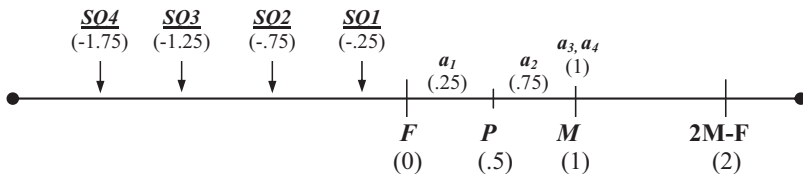
To see this result, we begin by presenting a couple of simple examples, demonstrating the basic mechanics of the NAC and PAC counterfactuals. We consider the NAC case first. Figure 1 illustrates a one-dimensional policy space housing several legislative actors and *SQ* policies. For illustrative purposes, it also represents a number line, where the floor median (*F*) has an ideal point at 0, the majority-party median (*M*) has an ideal point at 1, and a hypothetical moderate majority-party member (*P*) has an ideal point at .5. Assume that, without NAC, all *SQ*s will be moved to *F* (per the MVM). However, under majority-party NAC, all *SQ*s within the majority-party blockout zone – which stretches from *F* to  $2M-F$  (the reflection point, which is at 2 on the number line) – will remain unchanged.

Next, consider the net utility of *P* under NAC versus MVM conditions for the four *SQ*s that appear in Figure 1 – at .25, .75, 1.25, and 1.75, respectively. The calculations are presented in Table 1. Column (1) shows the distance between *P* and the policy outcome under the MVM condition (which, for every *SQ*, is *F*’s ideal point), while column (2) reveals the distance between *P* and the location of each *SQ* (the outcome under the cartel). Column (3) calculates the difference between columns (1) and (2), which yields the policy utility benefit or loss for *P* for each *SQ*, respectively, as a result of the NAC outcome. The bottom of column (3), then, shows *P*’s net policy utility across *all SQ*s that results from the NAC exercised by the majority cartel.

**Table 1.** Negative agenda control (NAC) utility calculations for a majority-party member at ‘.5’

Policy	$ P-F $ (1)	$ P-SQ $ (2)	Net NAC utility (3) [(1) – (2)]
SQ1 (.25)	.5	.25	.25
SQ2 (.75)	.5	.25	.25
SQ3 (1.25)	.5	.75	–.25
SQ4 (1.75)	.5	1.25	–.75
Total			<b>–.5</b>

Note: Column (1) calculates the distance between majority-party member *P* and the policy outcome under the non-agenda control condition (which, for every *SQ*, is the *F*’s ideal point), and column (2) calculates the distance between *P* and the location of each *SQ* (the outcome under the cartel). Column (3) then subtracts column (2) from column (1), which yields the policy utility benefit or loss for each *SQ*, respectively, as a result of the cartel outcome. The bottom of column (3), then, shows the net policy utility for *P* that results from NAC for all four *SQ*s.



**Figure 2.** An example of policy utility gain due to majority-party positive agenda control (PAC).

In this example, *P* suffers a net policy loss as a result of the majority party’s NAC. Although she benefits from the protection of *SQ1* and *SQ2* (each yields a utility ‘saving’ of .25), she must forgo an equal size policy gain with *SQ3* (of .25) and an even larger policy gain with *SQ4* (of .75); in the latter cases, she would prefer *F*’s ideal point to the current *SQ*. Thus, the package deal from the cartel leaves *P* with a total net policy loss of .5.

The mechanics of the PAC case are illustrated in Figure 2, and are similar to the previous example but with notable differences. Where the NAC case focuses on *SQ*s that *M* would prefer to keep in place, the PAC case revolves around what happens to *SQ*s that *M* would like to move. Thus, the *SQ*s of interest in the PAC example are distributed on the *minority*-party side of *F*, and accordingly, *SQ*s 1–4 in Figure 2 are located at –.25, –.75, –1.25, and –1.75, respectively.

Note that, even under the MVM, each of these *SQ*s would move towards *M*’s ideal point, as each would be pulled rightward to *F*’s ideal point at 0. Indeed, one could assert that simply allowing these moderate policy moves (while denying others, per the NAC example above) constitutes a weak form of majority-party PAC (Finocchiaro and Rohde, 2008). However, for present purposes, we have in mind the strong form of PAC that was discussed in Section 2, whereby *M* not only allows these *SQ*s to be moved, but also dictates which proposed alternatives are considered to replace them. Specifically,

**Table 2.** Positive agenda control (PAC) utility calculations for a majority-party member at '.5'

Policy	$ P-F $ (1)	$a^*$ (2)	$P-a^*  $ (3)	Net PAC utility (4) [(1) - (3)]
SQ1 (-.25)	.5	.25	.25	.25
SQ2 (-.75)	.5	.75	.25	.25
SQ3 (-1.25)	.5	1	.5	0
SQ4 (-1.75)	.5	1	.5	0
Total				<b>.5</b>

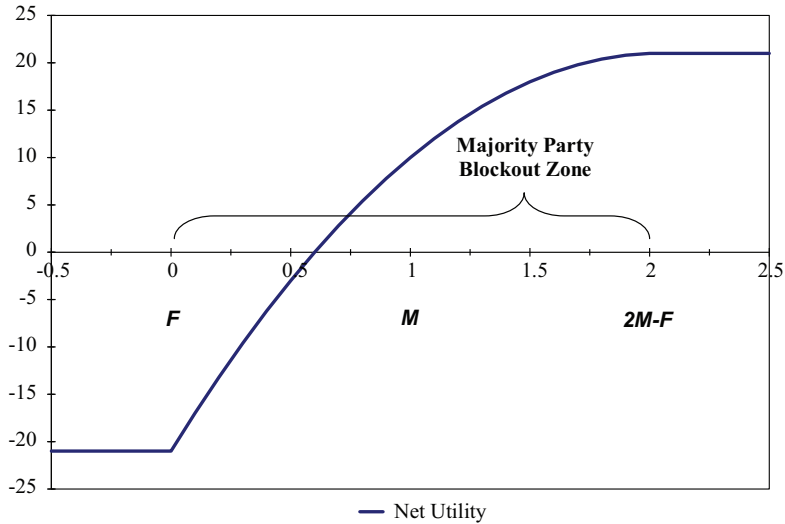
Note: Column (1) calculates the distance between majority-party member  $P$  and the policy outcome under the non-agenda control condition (which, for every  $SQ$ , is  $F$ 's ideal point), column (2) identifies the optimal location of the bill ( $a^*$ ) proposed by  $M$ , and column (3) calculates the distance between  $P$  and  $a^*$ . Column (4) then subtracts column (3) from column (1), which yields the policy utility benefit or loss for each  $SQ$ , respectively, as a result of the PAC outcome. The bottom of column (3), then, shows the net policy utility for  $P$  that results from PAC for all four  $SQ$ s.

the majority party uses PAC to secure non-floor-median outcomes (Aldrich and Rohde, 1995, 1998).

Accordingly, the equilibrium action for each of the  $SQ$ s in Figure 2 is for  $M$  to propose an alternative,  $a^*$ , that moves policy as close to her ideal point as possible, conditional on the alternative being at least as close to  $F$  as is the  $SQ$ .<sup>7</sup> Specifically, alternative  $a_1$  (located at .25) would be proposed to move  $SQ1$  (located at -.25),  $a_2$  (.75) to move  $SQ2$  (-.75),  $a_3$  (1) to move  $SQ3$  (-1.25), and  $a_4$  (1) to move  $SQ4$  (-1.75). Note that for  $SQ1$  and  $SQ2$ ,  $M$  will propose alternatives at the reflection points of those  $SQ$ s on her side of  $F$ . However, for  $SQ3$  and  $SQ4$ ,  $M$  can propose alternatives right at her ideal point.

With the spatial illustration in place, we now turn to Table 2, which performs the same basic calculations as in the previous (NAC) example, considering the net utility of  $P$  (at .5) as a function of our PAC versus MVM counterfactual. The main difference in this table (as compared to Table 1) is the addition of a new column (2), which identifies the optimal proposal,  $a^*$ , for each  $SQ$ . So, column (1) lists the distance between  $P$  and the policy outcome under the MVM condition (which, again, is 0), while column (3) shows the distance between  $P$  and the location of  $a^*$ . Column (4) then calculates the difference between columns (1) and (3), which yields  $P$ 's policy utility benefit or loss for each  $SQ$ , respectively, as a result of the PAC outcome, relative to the MVM baseline. The bottom of column (4), then, shows  $P$ 's net policy utility across *all*  $SQ$ s that results from the majority's exercise of PAC.

Unlike the previous example, here  $P$  realizes a net policy gain as a result of the majority party's PAC. She benefits from the extra distance (beyond  $F$ ) that policy is moved for  $SQ1$  and  $SQ2$  (each generates a counterfactual utility benefit of .25), and she is indifferent in the cases of  $SQ3$  and  $SQ4$ , between the MVM outcome (at 0) and  $M$ 's alternative proposal (at 1). Thus, overall,  $P$  gains .5 in total net utility because of the majority party's positive agenda-setting capacity. However, as we will show in the next section, the net utility difference between NAC and PAC in the previous two examples makes  $P$  more the exception than the rule.



**Figure 3.** Net policy utility from majority-party negative agenda control (NAC).

### 3.2. General distribution of counterfactual policy utility under NAC and PAC

Using the same basic method as above, we can derive the general distribution of counterfactual policy utility for majority-party members whose ideal points are distributed across the policy space. Again, assume a policy space overlaid onto a number line where the floor median ( $F$ ) is at 0, the majority-party median ( $M$ ) is at 1, and the extreme edge of the majority-party blockout zone ( $2M-F$ ) is at 2. Following the mechanics of the two examples described in the prior section, we consider NAC and PAC in turn.

To derive the NAC distribution, we mimic a uniform  $SQ$  distribution by assuming a  $SQ$  policy at every .1 interval from .1 to 2 (i.e. .1, .2, .3, .4, . . . , 2). Figure 3 illustrates the net utility for majority-party members across this space.<sup>8</sup> Moving from left to right, we see that a significant portion of the space is, hypothetically at least, occupied by majority-party members who suffer a net policy loss as a result of our counterfactual. Any majority-party member on the minority-party side of  $F$  (less than 0, on the  $x$ -axis) shares a constant, negative policy utility with respect to  $SQ$ s that reside in the majority-party blockout zone.

Perhaps more interesting, however, is the interval just to the right of  $F$  (between 0 and .6 on the  $x$ -axis). Majority-party members with ideal points in this space are theoretically necessary for the majority-party cartel to survive, since the cartel requires the support of at least a bare majority of the chamber; however, each suffers from negative net utility under the cartel. Put another way, 30% of the space covered by the majority-party blockout zone is negative utility territory for any members who reside therein.<sup>9</sup> This represents the net policy loss zone under NAC.<sup>10</sup>

To the right of .6, net utility is positive and continues to increase to the far edge of the majority-party blockout zone, where the net benefit from NAC peaks and remains constant for all members on the extreme side of  $2M-F$ . Thus, in terms of pure policy



utility, without considering any side payments or party brand-name benefits, all members to the right of .6 in our example are made better off by the majority party's NAC.

We next consider the general distribution of counterfactual net utility for majority-party PAC. Although the setup is very similar to the NAC case, the region of relevant *SQs* is much less well defined. In the NAC case, the only relevant *SQs* are those that fall within the majority-party blackout zone, since all other *SQs* are assumed to move to *F* under both NAC and the MVM. Conversely, in the PAC case, the majority party could generate outcomes that deviate from the MVM for every *SQ* outside of the interval that runs from *F* to *M* (i.e. the moderate half of the majority-party blackout zone). For present purposes, in order to try to match our PAC and NAC examples as closely as possible, we consider *SQs* on the minority-party side of *F*, and again try to mimic a uniform *SQ* distribution by assuming a *SQ* policy at every .1 interval from  $-1$  to  $-2$ .

As in our basic PAC example (Figure 2 and Table 2), we assume a strong form of majority-party PAC, where the majority-party median (*M*) will propose an alternative as close to her ideal point (at 1) as possible, conditional on it also being at least as close to the floor median (*F*) as is the *SQ*. Thus, under majority-party PAC, all *SQs* from  $-1$  to  $-9$  will be moved to the reflection point on the other side of *F* (from .1 to .9, respectively), and all *SQs* from  $-1$  to  $-2$  will be moved to 1. These outcomes are then compared to the outcomes under the MVM, where all of these *SQs* would instead be moved to *F*'s ideal point at 0.

Figure 4 illustrates the distribution of net utility for this counterfactual. The distribution of net benefits across members for PAC follows a similar pattern to the NAC case. Majority-party members on the minority-party side of *F* suffer the most, with uniformly negative net utility. Moving across *F*'s ideal point toward *M*, utility begins to increase, such that the hypothetical majority-party member that does equally well under PAC and the MVM is located at about .4. In other words, about 20% of the majority-party blackout zone is negative net utility space in terms of PAC alone. In addition, unlike the NAC case, the maximum benefit from PAC is achieved uniformly for all members to the right of *M* (whereas, for the NAC case, the maximum does not occur until the right edge of the majority-party blackout zone).

To get a better sense of how NAC and PAC compare, and how they combine, Figure 5 includes functional form lines from Figures 3 and 4, as well as a 'Combined AC' line, which is simply the sum of the NAC and PAC net utility for each majority-party member across the space. Two key observations from Figure 5 deserve emphasis. Firstly, the PAC and NAC functional forms are remarkably similar. Although, at the extremes, NAC produces a lower low and a higher high, they follow a very similar path of counterfactual utility across the entire space. Thus, while the tactics and motivations may be quite different for the two types of agenda control, this exercise offers some evidence that, in terms of net policy utility across majority-party members, they are actually quite similar. Secondly, and related, moderates suffer in a pure policy utility sense from majority-party agenda control *generally*.<sup>11</sup> As we see in the figure, when NAC and PAC are combined, the hypothetically 'indifferent' majority-party member is at .5, meaning that 25% of the majority-party blackout zone is negative net utility space. In addition, in terms of magnitude, we see that moderates in our counterfactual exercise suffer essentially a double penalty when both NAC and PAC are in effect – as indicated by the large negative values on the Combined AC line near *F*'s ideal point.

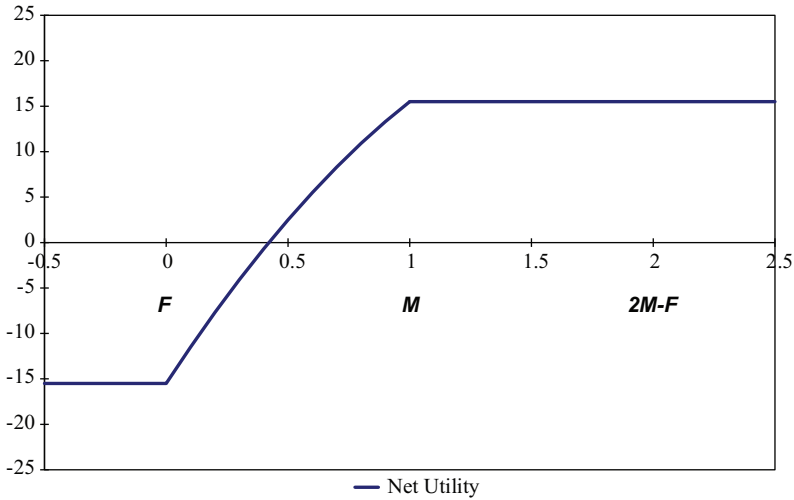


Figure 4. Net policy utility from majority-party positive agenda control (PAC).

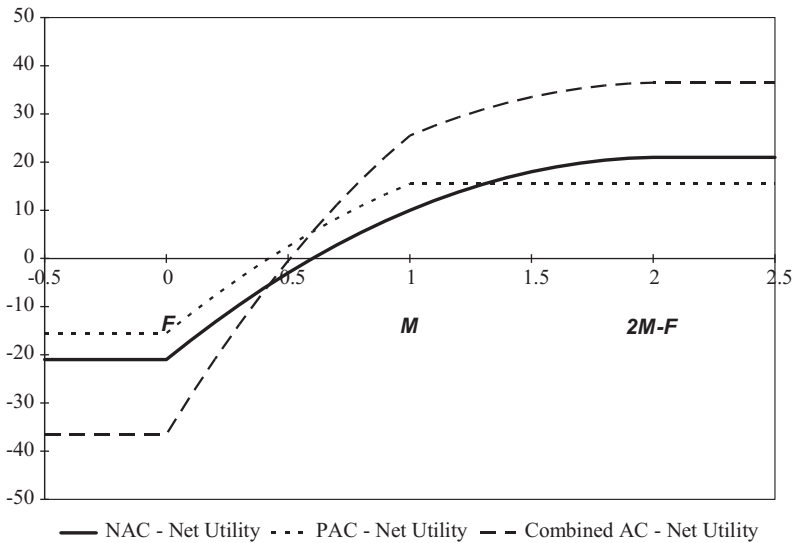


Figure 5. Net policy utility from majority-party positive (PAC) and negative agenda control (NAC).

#### 4. Changes in homogeneity and the benefits of agenda control

To this point, we have treated both NAC and PAC as static state alternatives to the MVM. Yet, advocates of CPG maintain that as preferences within the majority party become more similar, the rank and file *as a whole* will be more likely to delegate agenda-setting power to the leadership (Rohde, 1991). Put another way, CPG seems to imply

that as majority-party preferences become more homogeneous, the expected agenda-control payoff (or, perhaps, the average or sum of expected payoffs) across all members should increase. In this section, we consider this argument by altering our PAC and NAC counterfactuals to explore the effect of a change in majority-party homogeneity.

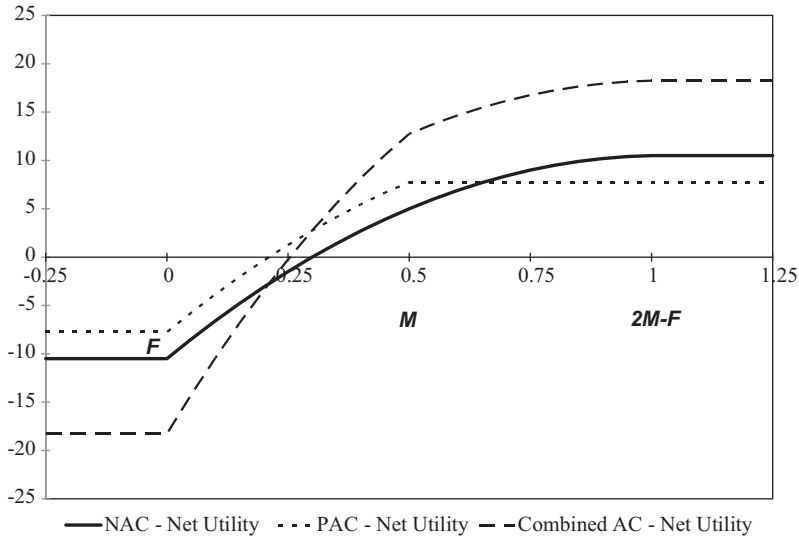
#### 4.1. Reducing the distance between $F$ and $M$

As a first cut, we simulate an increase in homogeneity by modifying the counterfactual from the previous section so that the distance between the floor and majority-party medians is reduced by half. In terms of our numerical assignments, this means that  $F$  continues to occupy the 0 spot on the number line, but  $M$ 's ideal point moves from 1 to .5 and, thus, the extreme edge of the majority-party blackout zone,  $2M-F$ , moves from 2 to 1. To construct the same basic NAC and PAC counterfactuals under this more truncated distribution of majority-party members, we then calculate the net utility for members based on  $SQ$ s at every .05 interval from 0 to 1 for the NAC case and from 0 to  $-1$  for the PAC case.<sup>12</sup> From this, we get an initial sense of how increased homogeneity affects the distributions of net policy benefits.

Figure 6 illustrates the NAC, PAC, and Combined AC functions for the increased homogeneity counterfactuals. Comparing Figures 5 and 6, we see that the functional forms are identical. However, if we note the scale of the  $x$ - and  $y$ -axes in each figure, we see that by compressing the distribution of majority-party members in Figure 6, the range of net utility from our NAC and PAC counterfactuals is cut in half as well. For example, a hypothetical member at  $F$  suffers a  $-36.5$  combined agenda control net utility in our original counterfactual (Figure 5), but in the increased homogeneity case this is reduced to  $-18.25$ . Similarly, the combined agenda control benefit to the hypothetical member at  $M$  in our original counterfactual was  $25.5$ , but is cut to just  $12.75$  in the condition shown in Figure 6.

The mathematical properties that drive this result are perhaps tautological and trivial, but two conceptual points deserve emphasis. Firstly, if we consider the overall benefit to the majority party, this increase in homogeneity actually decreases the summed and average counterfactual policy benefit. If we look at the 21 hypothetical majority-party members at every .1 interval from 0 to 2 in our original example, they have a summed counterfactual utility benefit of  $304.5$ , and an average utility benefit of  $14.5$ . Alternatively, if we look at the 21 hypothetical majority-party members at every .05 interval from 0 to 1 in our increased homogeneity example, the summed benefit is  $152.25$ , with an average of  $7.25$ .

This makes sense when we recall the implications of counterfactual utility. In each case we are considering the *relative* utility of two scenarios: one with agenda control and one without. So, in *absolute terms*, the majority party may get much more of what it wants as homogeneity increases, and perhaps with less effort. Imagine, for example, the extreme case where  $M$  and  $F$  are at nearly the same ideal point, with most majority-party members clustered nearby and most minority-party members ideologically distant. In that case, there would almost never be any advantage to exercising agenda control, and yet most majority-party members would do very well relative to minority-party members in absolute terms.<sup>13</sup> This is not to suggest that the majority party cannot or does not use agenda control when homogeneity is high – our point, simply, is that when greater



**Figure 6.** Effect of reduced homogeneity on the net policy utility from majority-party positive (PAC) and negative agenda control (NAC).

homogeneity correlates with a decrease in the distance between  $F$  and  $M$ , the majority party may get less *added* benefit from exercising agenda control, relative to the more heterogeneous condition.

Secondly, although the overall benefit across majority-party members is lower in the increased homogeneity condition, the plight of the moderates is mitigated by this increase in homogeneity. The six hypothetical moderates in the first 25% of the majority-party blockout zone (every .1 interval from 0 to .5 in the original counterfactual; every .05 interval from 0 to .25 in the increased homogeneity condition) see their utility losses cut in half. In the original case, they have a summed utility loss of  $-107$ , with an average of  $-17.8$ , compared to a sum of  $-53.5$  and average of  $-8.9$  in the increased homogeneity condition.

This improved circumstance for majority-party moderates may offset some of the loss in summed counterfactual policy benefit across all members that follows from the increase in homogeneity. Inasmuch as the majority party has to compensate moderates for their policy losses in order to exercise agenda control – through committee assignments (Cox and McCubbins, 1993), earmarks (Crespin et al., 2009), campaign contributions (Jenkins and Monroe, 2009), or some other form of side payment – and, inasmuch as these side payments to moderates are commensurate with counterfactual policy utility losses (Jenkins and Monroe, 2009), then exercising agenda control might be more ‘affordable’ in the high homogeneity condition. In this case, exercising agenda control may be appealing even with lower total counterfactual policy benefits across all majority-party members.

#### 4.2. Reconsidering our operationalization of changes in homogeneity

It is useful to consider the effect of the distance between  $F$  and  $M$ , because only a change in the size of that interval can affect the counterfactual value of agenda control for *any*

given hypothetical member within the majority party.<sup>14</sup> We should be cautious, however, in drawing conclusions about the effects of changes in homogeneity – in terms of summed utility for majority-party members – based solely on this operationalization.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, most of the literature conceptualizes increased majority-party homogeneity as a reduction of the standard deviation of party members. Thus, rather than performing a uniform compression of the members within the majority-party blackout zone, as in our previous example, we consider instead a case where members become disproportionately clustered around the majority-party median.

The calculations for this example are generated in identical fashion to our first set of counterfactuals, discussed in Section 3 and graphed in Figure 5. But recall that in Section 4.1, we considered the summed utility from these initial counterfactuals by adding the net utility for members at each .1 interval from 0 to 2. In other words, our calculation assumed a uniform distribution of majority-party members within the majority-party blackout zone. Here, we assume instead that three members from the moderate 25% of the blackout zone (at 0, .2, and .4) and three members from the extreme 25% (at 1.6, 1.8, and 2) have moved closer to  $M$  (to .75, .85, .95, 1.05, 1.15, and 1.25, respectively). In the uniform example, recall that the Combined AC counterfactual utility for the 21 members (at each .1 interval) from 0 to 2 yielded a summed counterfactual utility benefit of 304.5, and an average utility benefit of 14.5. In our new ‘clustered’ example, where homogeneity has increased as several members have moved closer to  $M$ , the summed utility increases to 402.6, with an average of 19.2.

So, contrary to the results from our first operationalization of increased homogeneity, here we find an improvement in counterfactual value across members of the majority party; as homogeneity increases, the party as a whole *does* have an extra incentive to implement agenda control. The underlying mechanism driving this result is that as the proportion of majority-party members occupying negative net utility space decreases (and, thus, the proportion occupying positive net utility space increases), all else being constant, the summed counterfactual utility for the party will increase. In addition, because our example includes three moderate members moving from negative to positive net utility areas, while no members move from positive to negative net utility areas, there is an overall improvement for the party. Moreover, if moderates were to disproportionately become more extreme *without* extremists also becoming more moderate (i.e. a distribution skewed toward the extreme end of the blackout zone), the improvement would be even more pronounced.

## 5. Conclusion

Despite the importance of partisan agenda control in studies of the US House – and the centrality of agenda control as a feature of theoretical treatments of the institution – few scholars have sought to understand its uneven consequences *within* the majority party. Moreover, while the literature has widely acknowledged that two forms of agenda control – positive and negative – exist, scholars have rarely considered them together, in a common framework. In this article, we have made strides in filling these gaps.

By considering ‘counterfactual’ utility distributions within the majority party, where outcomes under the party-less MVM are compared to those generated using partisan-based PAC and NAC, we show that the distribution of policy losses and benefits is quite

similar for both the positive and negative varieties. In both cases, moderate majority-party members are made worse off because of the majority's use of agenda control, while those to the extreme side of the majority-party median benefit the most. When we consider a scenario where both PAC and NAC are in effect, the moderate 25% of the space in the majority-party 'blockout zone' is negative counterfactual utility territory.

We also consider the benefit of agenda control for the party as a whole, by looking at how changes in majority-party homogeneity affect the summed utility across majority-party members. Interestingly, we find that when the distance between the floor and majority-party medians decreases, the overall value of PAC and NAC diminishes (although this is mitigated because moderates suffer less). However, when we operationalize increased homogeneity in a more conventional way – by clustering members around the majority-party median – we find support for the CPG notion that as majority-party members' preferences become more similar, they have an increased incentive to grant agenda-setting power to their leaders.

While we believe our results break new ground in the study of agenda control in the US House, a variety of underexplored research avenues remain. For example, more work needs to be done to understand differences in the 'market structure' governing the use of PAC and NAC in the House. That is, while each type of agenda control yields similar distributions of utility within the majority party, we suspect that the dispensation of side payments to compensate member losses is likely different across the two varieties. Specifically, NAC is founded on institutional powers – such as committee chairmanships, Rules committee appointments, and Speaker scheduling prerogatives – that are granted by votes of the caucus at the *beginning* of each Congress and remain in place, without need for further action by the rank and file, for the duration of the Congress. To keep a bill off the agenda, the party leadership need only use one or more of these relatively permanent mechanisms. PAC, on the other hand, can be partially achieved through these same mechanisms, but in order to actually push a policy through to passage, leaders will sometimes need to secure votes on a case-by-case basis. This sort of vote buying, achieved via a mix of carrots and sticks, requires that the leadership compensate policy losers in a more piecemeal fashion.

Thus, future work might consider NAC to be like the purchase of a 'seat license' in professional sports. To be part of the majority-party cartel, and enjoy the brand-name benefits that the cartel provides, a member might need to pay a (sizeable) license fee at the outset, to reserve his 'seat' in the caucus. PAC, on the other hand, might operate more like a 'spot market,' as leaders and members make discrete transactions as the majority's policy agenda is pursued throughout a Congress. In envisioning NAC and PAC through these analogies, and further fleshing them out both theoretically and empirically, we might gain a deeper appreciation for how the different forms of agenda control work and what is necessary for party leaders to effectively wield them.

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## Notes

1. Explicit formal treatments of positive agenda control, by comparison, have been underexplored in the literature (cf. Monroe and Robinson, 2008).
2. This might also be conceived as every member possessing the same probability of being recognized to offer a motion (see Stewart, 2001). This is often referred to as a process of ‘random recognition’; such a process also typically lacks a formal (institutional) mechanism to end the recognition generator, which only draws to a close when the median member is selected (and a preference-induced equilibrium is achieved).
3. Gatekeeping has a long history in formally inspired legislative studies, going back to Denzau and Mackey (1983).
4. More accurately, the quote refers to positive agenda *power* (PAP). PAP and PAC are often used interchangeably and meant to convey the same phenomenon. From our perspective, ‘control’ creates ‘power,’ so we are more comfortable using PAC.
5. See, also, Aldrich and Rohde (1998). The conditional nature of this ‘strong form’ of PAC is qualified at length in Aldrich and Rohde (2000).
6. For other evidence of the uneven distribution of utility within the majority party, see Carson et al. (2011) and Lawrence et al. (2006).
7. This restriction is based on the assumption that on a final up-or-down vote, under majority rule,  $F$  must prefer the bill to the  $SQ$  or it will not pass. Note also that we have implicitly assumed (for simplicity of exposition, to avoid using extra notation to differentiate knife-edge cases) that  $F$  would approve the alternative to the  $SQ$  if indifferent between the two. The substance of the results are unaffected by this assumption.
8. The actual calculations were done for hypothetical majority-party members at every .1 interval in the space. However, the basic shape of the curve does not change if we use different intervals, as long as they are uniformly spaced. We relax this assumption in the next section.
9. The 30% figure is based on the fact that the interval from 0 to .6 (or 60% of the distance between  $F$  and  $M$  in our example) is a negative utility region, and the majority-party blackout zone is twice the distance from  $F$  to  $M$ .
10. If we treat  $SQs$  within the space as continuously dense, this net utility loss zone contracts slightly, with the right edge shifting from .6 to .585.
11. Throughout the paper, we implicitly assume that members line up in the same order across all possible issue dimensions, and thus refer to the ‘moderates’ as though they are an identifiable and consistent group within a given Congress. However, recent work has suggested that members do not line up in the same order across roll calls in different issue areas (Crespín and Rohde, 2010), implying that a member might suffer negative net utility in some issue areas but not others.
12. For the PAC counterfactual, choosing which  $SQs$  to use in our utility calculations for each member has an effect on the functional form of net utility across members. However, when we redo the calculations using  $SQs$  at every .1 interval, either from 0 to  $-1$  or from 0 to  $-2$ , our substantive conclusions from the discussion that follows still hold.
13. This is a point made most forcefully by Krehbiel (1993), although his motivation is to call into question the various empirical results that are marshaled as evidence of party effects.
14. This assumes that the basic agenda-setting rules remain constant.
15. An additional concern is that a reduction in the distance between  $F$  and  $M$  may not necessarily imply an increase in homogeneity. Imagine a scenario where, from one Congress to the next, the majority party captures several new seats, but the new members share the exact

same ideology as the exiting minority-party members. Assuming those new members' ideal points reside on the minority-party side of  $F$ , then  $F$  would remain unchanged but  $M$  would move closer to the center of the chamber. In this case, the reduction in the distance between  $F$  and  $M$  would actually be the result of a *decrease* in homogeneity.

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