

Negative Agenda Control and the Conservative Coalition in the U.S. House

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While it is widely believed that a “conservative coalition” of Southern Democrats and Republicans sometimes formed on floor votes in the mid-twentieth-century House to block liberal policy initiatives, a fully fleshed-out picture of what the coalition was and how it operated is lacking. In this article, we investigate whether the conservative coalition wielded negative agenda control, that is, whether it used positions of power in the House to block bills from floor consideration that would have harmed a majority of its members. We find that the likelihood that the conservative coalition was rolled increased significantly after the Rules Committee packing in 1961—especially for bills that came from standing committees chaired by nonsoutherners. These results are consistent with the notion that Rules systematically protected the conservative coalition from unfavorable floor votes and that southern committee chairs continued to offer some blocking power after the Rules packing.

From the late-1930s through the mid-1980s, a coalition of Southern Democrats and Republicans sometimes formed in the House of Representatives and influenced the course of policymaking.¹ The conventional wisdom in both journalistic and academic accounts is that this “conservative coalition” acted as a barrier to many liberal policy initiatives proposed by Northern (non-Southern) Democrats. By the late-1980s, however, the foundational basis of the conservative coalition had largely melted away, as a generation of liberalizing electoral change following the Voting Rights Act of 1965 had replaced most conservative (white) Southern Democrats with (white) Republicans and liberal-to-moderate (white and black) Democrats.

While the general contours of the conservative-coalition story are clearly true—roll-call voting data show the frequent aligning of Southern Democrats and Republicans against Northern Democrats in the decades surrounding the mid-twentieth century (Stewart 2001, 120)—a fully fleshed-out picture of what the conservative coalition was and how it operated is lacking. Was the conservative coalition merely a floor voting coalition? That is, did Republicans and Southern Democrats simply come together at the voting stage based on a similarity of preferences?

Or was the conservative coalition something more? Was it, for example, a group that proactively took advantage of institutional mechanisms of agenda control—like the Rules Committee and committee chairmanships—to prevent policies from receiving floor consideration? Simply stated, while the literature is quite consistent in describing the conservative coalition as an obstructionist entity, the *nature* of the obstruction has rarely been examined in a systematic way.

In this article, we perform such a systematic examination. Specifically, we investigate whether the conservative coalition wielded *negative agenda control*, that is, whether conservative Southern Democrats and Republicans used positions of power in the House to block bills from floor consideration that would have harmed (or “rolled”) a majority of their members. In envisioning the conservative coalition as an institutional (prefloor) negative agenda setter, we incorporate the basic logic of Cox and McCubbins (2005) but consider the possibility that the majority party (the House Democrats, during this time period) was not the *only* group that could block bills from floor consideration.

In addition, our focus on committees as the key positions of power in a conservative-coalition story

¹Data and supporting materials necessary to reproduce the numerical results in this article are available at faculty.ucmerced.edu/nmonroe2/.

jibes well with traditional views of House politics in the mid-twentieth century. Specifically, the “Textbook Congress” perspective, detailed most explicitly by Shepsle (1989), holds that the House was dominated by standing committees after the revolt against Speaker Joe Cannon in 1910, as centralized majority-party control gave way to decentralized committee government. Committee assignments were dictated by a strong seniority norm, and the path to chairmanships (the key nodes of power) was based on committee longevity. From the late-1930s through the mid-1980s, Southern Democrats were often the chamber’s elder statesmen, and thus they chaired many of the most important policy committees, as well as the Rules Committee.

A key moment that will help guide our analysis is the “packing” of the Rules Committee in 1961. Specifically, at the beginning of the 87th Congress (1961–62), the liberal majority in the Democratic Party was finally able to overpower its southern wing and expand the size of Rules by three members; once enlarged with two more “reliable” members, Rules tilted in a liberal direction. This institutional alteration provides an important break in various data series and allows us to derive separate hypotheses regarding the conservative coalition, i.e., whether it was simply a floor voting coalition or whether it operated as a negative agenda-control institution.

Though some may view our investigation as purely historical in its relevance, we instead consider it to be an application of “history as a laboratory” (Cooper and Brady 1981, 411).² It has, of course, been decades since the conservative coalition gave way to two distinct, cohesive parties that have dominated contemporary congressional politics. However, in the most recent Congresses, the Republican Party has begun to fracture. Intraparty discord, caused in large part by the Tea Party movement, has resulted in the occasional reemergence of cross-party coalitions—this time between moderate Republicans and a cohesive Democratic minority party. To understand and explain this brand of cross-party agenda politics—present and future—we take advantage of the “laboratory” offered by the conservative-coalition era in the House. By testing contemporary theories of agenda setting in historical context, we can better understand and predict contemporary legislative behavior.

²This approach to developing and testing theories of legislative organization and behavior with an eye toward history has become considerably more common in recent years (Brady 2006; Brady and McCubbins 2002; Jenkins 2012).

The article proceeds as follows. We first cover the debate regarding the precise nature of the conservative coalition before describing the power of committee chairmen in the conservative-coalition era (and the role of the Rules Committee in particular). We then move from the historical to the theoretical, deriving hypotheses regarding the effects of the Rules packing using a modified version of the “Cartel Agenda Model” (Cox and McCubbins 2005) for guidance. The remaining sections describe our research design, data, and empirical results. To summarize, we find that (1) the likelihood that the conservative coalition was rolled increased significantly after the Rules Committee packing, (2) especially for bills reported from committees chaired by nonsoutherners. This latter result suggests that southern committee chairs continued to offer some protection to the conservative coalition after packing.

The Conservative Coalition: What Was It?

In the Congress literature, the conservative coalition is most commonly characterized as an empirical phenomenon. A “conservative-coalition vote” is when a majority of Southern Democrats joins with a majority of Republicans in opposition to a majority of Northern (non-southern) Democrats (Katznelson, Geiger, and Kryder 1993; Key 1949). As such, the conservative coalition is assumed (either implicitly or explicitly) to have been a floor voting coalition (or “bloc”) that formed along ideological lines, as Southern Democrats and Republicans voted together based on shared conservative preferences to defeat liberal policies pushed by Northern Democrats. And, in this vein, various studies have examined what factors contributed to conservative-coalition activity (support) across time (Nye 1993; Shelley 1983).

A less frequent characterization of the conservative coalition suggests a level of organization that goes far beyond the reactive floor-voting coalition story. Manley is the strongest proponent of this perspective. While acknowledging the floor-based conventional wisdom, he argues that a good deal of informal institutional coordination was also taking place between Southern Democratic leaders and Republican leaders at the *prefloor stage*:

Simple policy agreement may be the single most important element holding the Conservative Coalition together, but the claim that the Coalition is no more than an accidental meeting of minds is excessive.

There is substantial evidence of joint planning on the part of Coalition leaders, and Coalition observers have detected a number of cases of overt bipartisan cooperation among conservatives. In the face of this evidence, the fact that no regular formal caucuses of conservatives are held, and the fact that Republicans sometimes vote with northern Democrats against the southern Democrats, are insufficient to support the claim that the Coalition is purely accidental. *The Coalition is, in fact, many times a consciously designed force in the legislative process, and this is true for both the committee stage and the floor stage of that process.* (1973, 231, emphasis added)

Thus, for Manley, the conservative coalition was not just a group of like-minded individuals from different partisan backgrounds who voted together on the floor to block liberal initiatives; rather, the conservative coalition operated at multiple levels, and using institutional positions of power to *block agenda access* was as (or perhaps more) critical to achieving policy success.

As evidence for this perspective, Manley cites interviews conducted with Reps. Howard W. Smith (D-VA) and Joseph Martin (R-MA), leaders of the conservative coalition in the House during the 1950s and 1960s. Both Smith, who was Chairman of the Rules Committee from the 84th (1955–56) through 89th (1965–66) Congresses, and Martin, who was the Republican Minority Leader in the 84th (1955–56) and 85th (1957–58) Congresses, affirmed that informal meetings between Southern Democratic and Republican leaders routinely took place during this time and that a coalition did in fact exist and explicit cooperation occurred. More direct evidence of organizational behavior would be hard to uncover, according to Manley, because the conservative coalition operated “in subtle, hard-to-observe ways” (1973, 230).

While Manley’s characterization of the conservative coalition as a “coalition” is the most explicit in the literature, others have noted the negative alliance between Southern Democrats and Republicans on Rules. For example, Jones asserts that “as chairman [of Rules], Smith was free to exercise his considerable powers to stifle legislation which he and his southern Democratic and Republican colleagues opposed” (1968, 635). He goes on to speak of this coalitional activity in explicit negative agenda-control language: “The Committee on Rules was a roadblock to the majority. It was not allowing the House to vote on measures which a majority in the House wished to vote on” (639). Still others have linked conservative-coalition activity and negative agenda control to House committees more generally. Rohde (1991) and Sinclair (2006), for example, note that a major component of the Democratic Caucus rules changes

in the 1970s was to make committee chairmanships elected positions; this reform was intended to make sitting chairmen, many of whom were southern and acting as steadfast veto gates, more responsive to the overall (liberal) position of the caucus on a host of issues.

Brady and Bullock reject the Manley perspective of informal organization and instead support the conventional view of the conservative coalition “as a voting alliance based on shared ideology among Southern Democrats and Republicans” (1980, 550). To make the case that the conservative coalition did not wield negative agenda control, Brady and Bullock calculate correlations between presumed conservative-coalition strength on committees and conservative-coalition floor activity on a per-Congress basis. Their presumption is that if the conservative coalition acted as a negative agenda setter, greater internal organization at the prefloor (committee) stage should lead to (be correlated with) less activity at the floor stage. They find such correlations to be weak, however, and not always in the expected direction.

More recently, the possibility that the conservative coalition exercised *positive agenda control* in the House has been explored at some length; the issue is whether the Rules Committee sought to actively move policy in a conservative direction by opening the gates on legislation that would roll the Democratic majority. While a vigorous debate has ensued, no consensus has been reached (see Cox and McCubbins 2005; Schickler 2001; Schickler and Pearson 2009). That said, all sides in the positive agenda-control debate seem to acknowledge that the Rules Committee *did* exercise negative agenda control and that it explicitly served the preferences of the conservative coalition. Schickler, in particular, responds directly to the main criticism raised by Brady and Bullock, recalling arguments made by Manley earlier:

It has often been observed that conservatives lacked a formal organization during the supposed era of conservative coalition rule (Brady and Bullock 1980). Yet with the Rules Committee securely controlled by conservative Democrats and Republicans who consulted with one another regularly, there was little need for a formal, extrapartisan organization to coordinate coalition activities. (2001, 164)

Cox and McCubbins make a somewhat more general argument than Schickler, but the take-away point is the same:

In what sense was Rules an “agent of the opposition” during the years of peak conservative control? The most frequently encountered view is that Rules acted to *block* liberal legislation. As most liberal bills were proposed by

members of the majority party and as many of these were supported by its leadership, blocking liberal bills entailed frustrating the plans of majority-party leadership. There are many accounts of how Rules did this, and we do not dispute them. (2005, 130)

Our goal is to examine these negative agenda-control claims more systematically. (As such, we do not engage the positive agenda-control debate.) We will investigate whether the conservative coalition served as an institutional (prefloor) blocking mechanism before the Rules Committee packing in 1961. We will also explore whether committees more generally performed a negative agenda-setting role—as the next line of defense—after the Rules packing.

The Power of Committee Chairmen in the “Textbook Congress” Era

As we noted above, the conservative-coalition era overlapped with the “Textbook Congress” period of committee dominance in the U.S. House. Committee chairmen during this time were selected based on seniority almost without exception, and Democratic Party leaders (and the Democratic Caucus in general) had few tools for disciplining these chairs. Because virtually all legislation flowed through committees, chairmen possessed substantial power to prevent bills from receiving floor consideration.

During this era of strong committee chairs, the most powerful of all was the chairman of the Rules Committee. Nearly all legislation during this time (as well as today), once reported from the standing committee of jurisdiction, required Rules Committee approval to gain floor consideration. Such approval first necessitated a hearing, which was scheduled solely at the discretion of the Rules chairman. Even with external pressure by the House leadership for a hearing, the Rules chairman could forestall action. As Robinson notes: “There are always enough pending requests for hearings that the Chairman can conveniently schedule bills he favors and postpone those he opposes, thus delaying consideration of some matters” (1963, 86).

Rules first became a thorn in the side of the liberal wing of the Democratic Party in 1937, after conservatives broke with FDR on a host of issues, and little had changed in the ensuing two decades. Then, in the midterm elections of 1958, an opportunity to reshape the legislative terrain emerged—the Democrats took 48 Republican House seats, with almost all of these gains occurring outside of the South. As a result, the liberals were emboldened to

challenge the conservatives’ dominance, but Chairman Smith was defiant and turned away the threat with some deft parliamentary maneuvers. After John F. Kennedy’s narrow election to the presidency in 1960 (and House Democrats giving back almost half their gains from two years earlier), Democratic House leaders, led by Speaker Sam Rayburn (D-Tex.), realized a change would need to be made in order to save the new president’s legislative agenda (Galloway and Wise 1976; Jones 1968).

Rayburn’s plan was to enlarge Rules from 12 to 15 members, with two of the additions being Democrats who were loyal to the Administration and the House Democratic Caucus. If accomplished, this would tip the committee as a whole away from the conservative bloc. In challenging Chairman Smith, Rayburn framed the issue simply: “Shall the elected leadership of the House run its affairs, or shall the chairman of one committee run them?” (quoted in Hardeman and Bacon 1987, 451). Less than three weeks into the 87th Congress (1961–62), on January 31, 1961, a showdown vote was held, which the liberals won, 217–212, thanks in large part to an assortment of carrots and sticks employed by Rayburn, Majority Leader John McCormack (D-MA), Vice President Lyndon Johnson, and various White House officials (for a detailed summary, see Hardeman and Bacon 1987, 458–65; Zelizer 2004, 56–60).³ The result was a temporary enlargement of Rules, which was made permanent two years later.

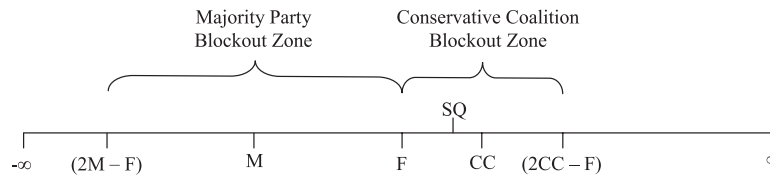
After the Rules Committee was enlarged, and better aligned with the Democratic Caucus, conservative hopes of prefloor bill screening now hung on the various standing committees themselves. Southern committee chairs would now be responsible for negative agenda setting within their jurisdictions, as they (and their conservative brethren more generally) were no longer protected by a conservative Rules Committee.

Implications of Conservative-Coalition Negative Agenda Control

In order to investigate how Southern committee chairs—either on Rules or on standing committees with control over particular issue jurisdictions—might have offered protection for the conservative coalition,

³This was a conservative coalition vote, as Northern Democrats voted 148–1, Southern Democrats voted 47–63, and Republicans voted 22–148.

FIGURE 1 Blockout Zones in the Conservative-Coalition Era



we need to identify how outcomes vary across two alternative formulations: (1) one in which the conservative coalition acted as a floor-voting coalition but nothing more, and (2) one in which the Rules Committee and Southern Democratic committee chairs acted as agents of the conservative coalition, screening out bills that conflicted with coalition interests at the prefloor stage.

The mechanics of this comparison operate identically to the Cartel Agenda Model (CAM) of Cox and McCubbins (2005), but for our purposes the key veto actor is a Southern Democratic committee chair. To see an illustration of the dynamics, consider Figure 1, which is a modified version of the basic CAM. As in that model, a bill (in one-dimensional policy space with an open amendment rule) proposes to move a status quo policy (SQ) to F , the floor median's ideal point. Members are assumed to vote based on sincere policy preferences—and choose the closer of the SQ and F (and thus, by the basic median voter rule, the bill always beats the SQ).

M is the majority party median (under a Democratic majority, in this case) and creates a “majority-party blockout zone,” as all SQs that are closer to M 's ideal point than M is to F 's ideal point are blocked from receiving a floor vote. That is, because all alternate proposals will be located at F and will pass, M has an incentive to block all SQs that fall between $2M - F$ and F ; if M does not, each proposal will pass, thus moving policy away from his ideal point and the ideal points of at least half of the majority-party caucus.

To this foundation, we add a second veto actor: CC , a Southern Democratic committee chair. We assume that the chair has an ideal point that is (1) to the right of F and (2) at the median of the conservative coalition (i.e., he is the median member of all Southern Democrats and Republicans).⁴ Though

the chair's sincere preferences may not place him at the coalition median, we assume that he “acts” like the median out of duty, as an agent of the conservative coalition, even if that is not his true ideal point. (This is similar to the basic CAM, where leaders and committee chairs operate as agents of the majority-party median.)

Next, consider the SQ shown in Figure 1, which lies just to the left of CC . If a bill is proposed at F and allowed to come up for a floor vote, it will pass with the support of a majority of the Democratic Party (and almost certainly a majority of Northern Democrats) and over the opposition of a majority of the conservative coalition. Thus, if CC is acting in the interest of the coalition, he will block floor consideration of this bill, along with any other bills addressing SQs between F and $2CC - F$, which we have labeled the “conservative-coalition blockout zone.”

Contrast the negative agenda-control scenario (just detailed) to the alternative scenario where the conservative coalition is nothing more than a floor-voting coalition. If the Southern chair is not using his authority to screen harmful legislation before it reaches a floor vote, then some of the SQs in the conservative-coalition blockout zone will be moved to the left over the objections of most of the conservative-coalition members.

Consider what this suggests about floor outcomes in the conservative-coalition era, both before and after the Rules Committee packing in 1961. The conservative-coalition-agenda-control conceptualization implies that the Rules packing, which ostensibly removed an important source of negative agenda control, should have exposed the coalition to many more bills that would pass against their will. Put another way, it should have led the conservative coalition to have been “rolled” significantly more often, where a “roll” is understood as a bill that passes over the nay votes of at least a majority of Southern Democrats and a majority of Republicans.⁵ Accordingly, we seek to test the following hypothesis:

⁴If we assume instead that CC is between M and F , then the conservative-coalition blockout zone is subsumed by the majority-party blockout zone. If this were the case, we would *not* expect packing to have mattered, as the conservative coalition would have been protected by the majority party's exercise of negative agenda control in *both* the pre- and post-packing periods.

⁵Rolls are the most often used measure of the presence and effectiveness of negative agenda control (Cox and McCubbins 2005; Gailmard and Jenkins 2007; and Jenkins and Monroe 2012).

H1: After the Rules Committee packing in 1961, the conservative coalition should have been rolled more often on the House floor, all else equal.

Note that the null hypothesis here implies that the conservative coalition was a floor-voting coalition and nothing more. If that were the case, then the Rules chair would not have tried to protect the coalition from unfriendly floor votes even prior to 1961, and thus the packing should have had no effect on floor rolls.

A second, somewhat more nuanced, implication of the Rules Committee packing relates to the influence of other standing committee chairs. If the Rules chairman was in fact acting as an agent of the conservative coalition, it is likely that Southern Democratic chairs of other standing committees were acting with the same mandate. This broader institutional effect should have been apparent after packing, in the asymmetry between bills from southern and non-southern chaired committees. Once the Rules chair could no longer protect the conservative coalition, bills from non-southern chaired committees had an open pathway to the floor. On the other hand, bills from southern chaired committees could have still been killed by the chair acting in the interest of the conservative coalition. Accordingly, after packing, bills from southern and non-southern chaired committees should have been marked by different levels of agenda protection for the coalition and produced different roll rates. Thus, we also seek to test the following hypothesis:

H2: After the Rules Committee packing of 1961, the conservative coalition should have been rolled less often on the House floor on bills from committees chaired by southerners, as compared to bills from committees chaired by nonsoutherners, all else equal.

Again, the null hypothesis here is that the conservative coalition was a floor-voting coalition and nothing more. If so, then the Rules packing should have had no effect on floor rolls—in which case, the likelihood of southern and non-southern chaired committees being rolled should not have varied significantly across pre- and post-packing regimes.⁶

⁶What if southern committee chairs reacted to the Rules packing by altering their behavior to avoid a similar fate? That is, what if they became more accommodating in their handling of liberal bills in order to avoid enlargement of their committees with proadministration members? If that were the case, then it makes for a *tougher* test of Hypothesis 2.

Data and Research Design

To evaluate these hypotheses, we use House roll-call data from the 81st (1949–50) through 97th (1981–82) Congresses, compiled in the Political Institutions and Public Choice (PIPC) House Roll-Call Database (Rohde 2010) and in Cox and McCubbins' (2005) data on House rolls. Since our hypotheses focus on the Rules Committee packing, which occurred at the beginning of the 87th (1961–62) Congress, the appropriate research design requires that we have sufficient observations before and after that event. We exclude the 83rd (1953–54) Congress because the Republicans were the majority party in that House, thus making it an irrelevant comparison for the rest of the time series. We end with the 97th (1981–82) Congress because it was a natural break point in coding data on committee chairs.

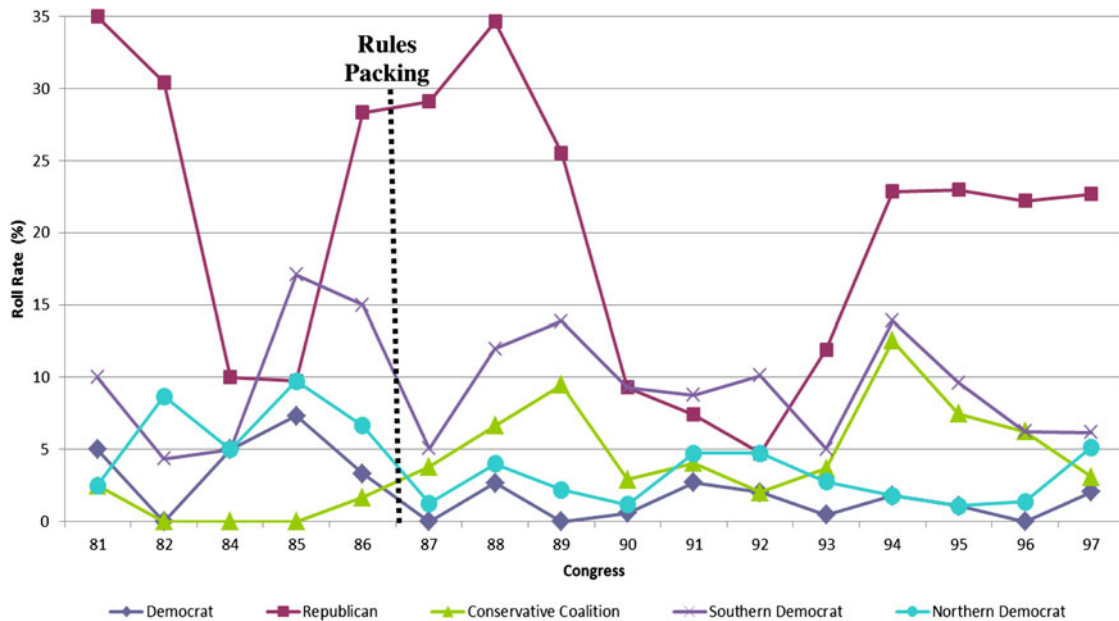
Throughout the rest of our discussion, the base unit of analysis is a final-passage roll call on a House bill only; thus, we exclude Senate bills and simple, joint, and concurrent resolutions from both chambers. This restriction was driven largely by data limitations: to get committee bill referral data (which are necessary for testing Hypothesis 2), we merged our roll-call data with the Congressional Bills Project data (Adler and Wilkerson, n.d.), which only tracks the referral of House bills to House committees.⁷ However, when we include Senate bills, where those data are available for a shorter time span, it does not change the substantive conclusions drawn from the results.

Our basic research design is straightforwardly implied by the nature of our hypotheses: we structure our empirics to evaluate the “treatment” effect of the Rules Committee packing, and in the case of our second hypothesis, the interactive effect of that treatment with the “Southern Chair” condition. (We follow the standard ICPSR convention in coding “South” as the 11 states of the former-Confederacy plus Kentucky and Oklahoma.⁸) As a first cut, we look at raw “roll rates”—the proportion of all final-passage votes on which a “roll” occurs—for various groups, including the conservative coalition. We then turn to a multivariate analysis of roll likelihood for the

⁷Data on the identity of committee chairs are drawn from Nelson (n.d.).

⁸We also employed an alternative coding of South, used in Katznelson and Mulroy (2012), which added four states (Delaware, Maryland, Missouri, and West Virginia) to the 13 from the ICSPR coding. None of our main empirical results were affected.

FIGURE 2 Roll Rates by Party and Coalition, 81st (1949–51) through 97th (1981–82) Congresses



Note: 83rd (1953–54) is not included, as that Congress was controlled by the Republicans.

conservative coalition to confirm the impressions offered by the raw data.⁹

Results

Based on the expectations set out in Hypothesis 1, we should see the conservative-coalition roll rate increase significantly after the packing of the Rules Committee, which occurs at the very beginning of the 87th (1961–62) Congress. If we simply compare the mean roll rate from the prepacking Congresses (81st–86th; 1949–60) to the mean roll rate from the post-packing Congresses (87th–97th; 1961–82), we see some initial support for the hypothesis. Before packing, the mean conservative-coalition roll rate is 1%; after packing, it is 6%.

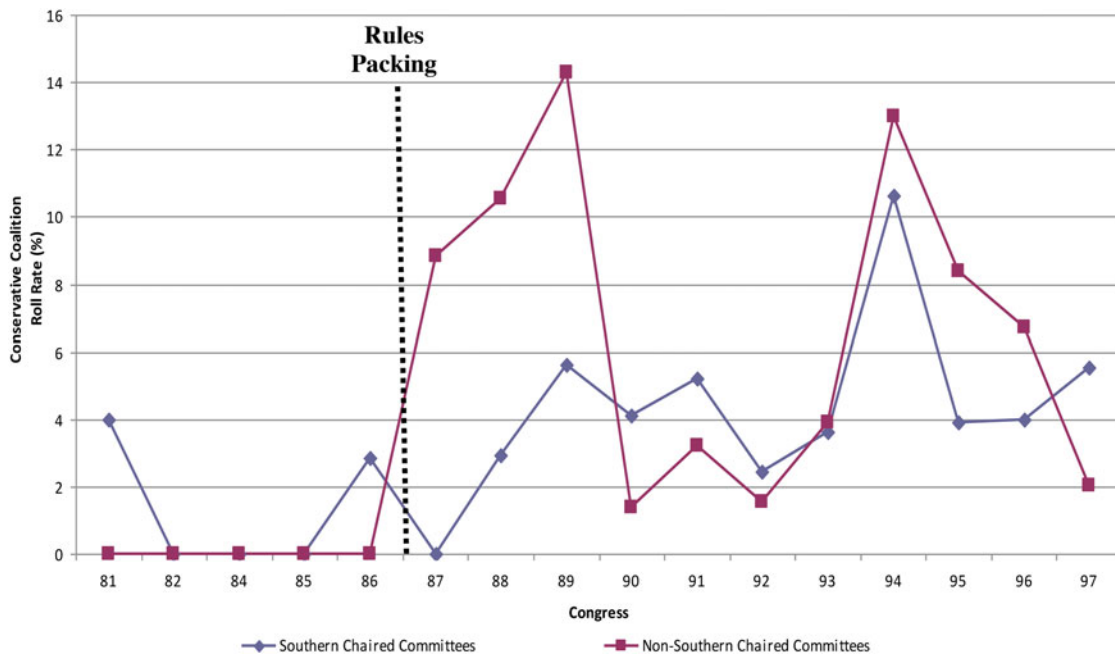
Figure 2 offers a more fine-grained look at the relevant data, plotting roll rates for five (overlapping) groups—All Democrats, Southern Democrats, Northern Democrats, Republicans, and the Conservative Coalition—for each Congress from the 81st through the 97th (1949–82). As expected, for

most of the period, the (minority) Republicans are rolled at considerably higher rates than the Democrats. Per the expectations of the Cartel Agenda Model and consistent with Cox and McCubbins' (2005) findings, the Democratic (majority) roll rate is at or near zero for almost the entire period. The Northern Democratic roll rate is only slightly higher and tracks closely the overall Democratic roll rate. Southern Democrats, on the other hand, are rolled just over 4% of the time at their *lowest* point and hover around 10% for much of the time period, with the exception of roll rates at or above 15% in the 85th (1957–58) and 86th (1959–60) Congresses.

The conservative coalition's roll rate does seem to respond to the Rules packing, though the full magnitude of response is a bit delayed. After a 2.5% roll rate in the 81st (1949–50) Congress, followed by 0% roll rates during the next three, there is an increase to 1.7% in the 86th (1959–60) Congress, just prior to packing. Immediately after packing, in the 87th (1961–62) Congress, the conservative coalition is rolled more than twice as often at 3.8% and that increases to 6.7% and 9.5% in the 88th (1963–64) and 89th (1965–66) Congresses. The roll rate then falls and hovers around 3% for the next four congresses (1967–74), before jumping to nearly 13% in the 94th (1975–76) Congress and then declining thereafter. Thus, while there is some interesting variation in the conservative-coalition roll rate after packing, the roll rate in all but one postpacking Congress is higher than

⁹We note "roll likelihood" here to denote the change from rates to probabilities. In the figures, we look at the roll rate for a given coalition in a given Congress. However, in our multivariate analysis, we estimate the likelihood of a conservative-coalition roll, as our data are at the roll-call vote level rather than the Congress level.

FIGURE 3 Conservative-Coalition Roll Rates on Bills from Southern and Non-Southern Chaired Committees, 81st (1949–51) through 97th (1981–82) Congresses



Note: 83rd (1953–54) is not included, as that Congress was controlled by the Republicans.

in every prepacking Congress—the exception being the 92nd Congress (1971–72), which is less than a half percent lower than the 81st (1949–51).

Next, we look at the differential effect based on who chaired the committee that reported each bill. Per Hypothesis 2, we should see divergent patterns of conservative-coalition roll rates after packing, depending on whether the bill was considered by a committee with a southern or non-southern chair. Recall the logic of this expectation: after packing, the conservative coalition should still be “protected” on the floor from unfavorable bills, as they could be bottled up in committee by a southern chair. However, with the conservative blockade on Rules out of the way, bills from committees chaired by nonsoutherners now have an open path to the floor, even if they promise to roll the conservative coalition when they get there. Thus, Hypothesis 2 suggests that, after packing, the conservative-coalition roll rate should have increased more for bills from non-southern chaired committees than for bills from southern chaired committees.

Figure 3 provides a first look at the relevant data, plotting conservative-coalition roll rates on bills from southern and non-southern chaired committees from the 81st through 97th Congresses (1949–82). Through most of the period, southern chaired committees tend to produce lower or very similar roll rates. But the most striking divergence—along the lines suggested by

Hypothesis 2—occurs in the three Congresses immediately after packing. In the 87th (1961–62), 88th (1963–64), and 89th (1965–66) Congresses, the southern chair roll rate is 0%, 2.9%, and 5.6%, respectively, compared to non-southern chair roll rates of 8.8%, 10.5%, and 14.3%. The differences in the rest of the time series are not as striking (though southern chairs produce 5–10% lower conservative-coalition roll rates from the 94th through 96th Congresses, 1975–80). And, in some Congresses the southern chair roll rate is actually slightly higher (e.g., the 90th through 92nd Congresses, 1967–72). But the comparison of the three pre- and postpacking Congresses offers compelling initial support for Hypothesis 2.

We evaluate our hypotheses more systematically in the logit analyses presented in Table 1. The dependent variable in each analysis, *Conservative-Coalition Roll*, is coded 1 if a majority of Republicans and a majority of Southern Democrats voted against a bill on final passage but it passed nonetheless, and 0 otherwise. The unit of observation is therefore a final passage vote-Congress. The key independent variables are *Post Packing*, which is coded 1 if the vote occurred after the Rules Committee was packed (87th–97th Congresses, 1961–82), and 0 for Congresses prior to packing (81st–86th Congresses, 1949–60); *Southern Chair*, a dummy variable coded 1 if the vote occurs on a bill reported from a committee chaired

TABLE 1 Logit Estimation of the Rules Packing and Southern Chair Effects on Conservative-Coalition Rolls, 81st–97th Congresses (1949–82)

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>Post Packing</i> (H1)	1.8562* (0.5399)	13.5135* (0.5383)	15.2864* (0.5121)	13.6847* (0.6884)
<i>Southern Chair</i>		12.0151* (0.7307)	13.8100* (0.7124)	12.8316* (0.7090)
<i>Post Packing x Southern Chair</i>		-12.4939* (.7474)	-14.2738* (0.7078)	-13.1822* (0.7395)
<i>DW-NOM1</i>			-0.00009 (0.0001)	-0.0001 (0.0001)
<i>Committee Chair Sponsor</i>			-0.2974 (0.2458)	-0.3402 (0.2252)
<i>Majority Size</i>				0.0191* (0.0054)
<i>Total FPVs</i>				0.0028 (0.0022)
<i>21-Day Rule</i>				0.2003 (.3774)
<i>Post Reform</i>				0.0371 (0.2772)
Constant	-4.6151* (0.4962)	-16.0923* (0.4937)	-17.7669* (0.4913)	-21.9105* (1.3694)
N	1832	1697	1675	1675
Wald- χ^2	11.82*	638.57*	940.09*	–
Pseudo R ²	0.016	0.026	0.030	0.058
<i>Southern Chair + Post Packing x Southern Chair</i> (H2)	–	-0.4789* (0.1615)	-0.4638* (0.2348)	-0.3506 (0.1866)

Note: Logit estimates with robust standard errors in parentheses; errors are clustered by Congress in all models. 83rd (1953–54) is not included, as that Congress was controlled by the Republicans. *Dependent Variable*: Coded 1 if conservative coalition (majority of Southern Democrats + majority of Republicans) is rolled on a final-passage vote of a House bill. * $p < .05$ (two-tailed tests).

by a Southern Democrat, and 0 otherwise;¹⁰ and *Post Packing x Southern Chair*, an interaction of the two variables. In Model 3, we add two bill-level controls: *DW1*, which is the bill sponsor's first dimension DW-NOMINATE score (Poole and Rosenthal 2007), and *Committee Chair*, which is coded 1 if the bill's sponsor was a committee chair, and 0 otherwise. In Model 4, we add four Congress level controls: *Majority Size*, which is the number of seats held by the majority party during the Congress in which the roll call was held; *Total FPVs*, which is the total number of final-passage votes on House bills in that Congress; *21 Day Rule*, which is coded 1 in Congresses (the 81st and 89th, 1949–51 and 1965–66) where the 21 Day Rule, which made bypassing the Rules Committee easier, was in effect, and 0 otherwise; and *Post Reform*, which

corresponds to the reemergence of strong party power in the House and is coded 1 for all Congresses from the 93rd on (1973–82).¹¹ We estimate each model with robust standard errors, clustered by Congress.¹²

In Model 1, the *Post Packing* variable captures the effect described in Hypothesis 1: the change in the conservative-coalition roll rate from pre- to post-Rules packing.¹³ As predicted, the coefficient is positive and significant at the $p < .01$ level. Interpreting this result in substantive terms, we find that the Rules packing increased the likelihood of a conservative-coalition roll almost sixfold: from 1.1% in the prepacking period to 6.1% after packing.

¹¹We also estimated each of these models with committee fixed effects; the results were substantively unchanged.

¹²We were initially inclined to cluster at both the committee and Congress levels, but Cameron, Gelbach, and Miller (2011) argue that clustering at the highest level of aggregation is sufficient.

¹³In each subsequent model, *Post Packing* captures this effect for bills from non-southern chaired committees.

¹⁰We coded bills that were multiply referred as coming from a southern chaired committee only if all of the committees they were referred to were chaired by southerners. When we excluded these bills from the analysis, however, the results were substantively unchanged.

Model 2 adds *Southern Chair* and a *Post Packing***Southern Chair* interaction term, which allows us to evaluate Hypothesis 2.¹⁴ In this specification, *Southern Chair* captures the comparison between bills from committees chaired by a southerner and a non-southerner *before* packing, while *Packing***Southern Chair* compares the change in likelihood of being rolled from the pre- to the postpacking period for southern chaired bills, to the same change for non-southern chaired bills. In other words, this variable captures a difference-in-differences. To compare the southern and non-southern chair postpacking roll likelihood, as implied by Hypothesis 2, we do a linear combination test of *Southern Chair* plus *Post Packing***Southern Chair*. This allows us to isolate the comparison in the postpacking period, across southern and non-southern chaired committees. The result of this test, reported in the very bottom row of Table 1, shows a significant, negative effect at the $p < .01$ level. Thus, for bills reported from committees chaired by a southerner, as predicted in Hypothesis 2, the likelihood of being rolled is significantly lower than for nonsoutherners after packing.

Our main results hold across Models 3 and 4 as we add in bill-level (Model 3) and Congress-level (Model 4) control variables (though our Hypothesis 2 result weakens slightly, to $p < .10$, in Model 4). In terms of our controls, we uncover little in the way of significance. The 21-Day Rule was designed to weaken the power of the Rules Committee (Cox and McCubbins 2005; Galloway and Wise 1976; Schickler 2001),¹⁵ and, in theory, we might expect

to see a positive and significant relationship vis-à-vis conservative-coalition rolls. But while positive, the *21 Day Rule* coefficient is not close to being significant ($p < .60$). *Post Reform* captures the notion that committee power began to rapidly decline, starting in the 93rd Congress, due to extensive House reforms that recentralized power in the (liberal) Democratic Party leadership (Rohde 1991); and while the variable's coefficient is positive, it is not significant ($p < .90$). The only significant control result shows up in Model 4, where larger majorities seem to have increased the likelihood of a conservative-coalition roll—and as larger Democratic majorities during these years were produced mostly by adding seats (members) *outside of the South*, this result makes sense.

To investigate the magnitude our main results, we derive predicted conservative-coalition roll probabilities (from Model 2) for bills from southern and non-southern chaired committees in both the pre- and postpacking periods. In the prepacking period, the predicted conservative-coalition roll probability for southern chaired committees is higher (1.9%) than for non-southern chaired committees (0%). After packing, however, the relationship changes: the predicted conservative-coalition roll probability for non-southern chaired committees is considerably higher (7.2%) than for southern chaired committees (4.6%). Thus, overall, for bills from non-southern chaired committees, the postpacking increase of 7.2% was almost three times as large as the 2.7% increase for bills from southern chaired committees.

Conclusion

According to the Congress literature, the conservative coalition was the phantom menace of the mid-twentieth-century House: always lurking and occasionally imposing its will on chamber decisions but never clearly surfacing as a coherently institutionalized group. In this article, we have taken steps to reveal the specific nature of its influence. In particular, we have asked whether the conservative coalition was simply an accidental floor coalition, occasionally brought together because Southern Democrats and Republicans shared similar preferences on certain issues, or something more closely approaching a procedural coalition, which utilized legislative positions of power to prevent harmful bills from receiving floor consideration.

Focusing specifically on the period surrounding the packing of the Rules Committee—widely believed to be the event that eliminated the conservative

¹⁴Note that since the two main effects here are both dummy variables, one indicating a cross-sectional dimension (i.e., comparison across two types of committees) and one indicating a temporal dimension (i.e., comparison across two time periods), by adding an interaction we can compare different combinations of the main effects and interaction to look for cross-sectional, temporal, and combined differences. To better understand this, imagine the possible scenarios residing within a two-by-two table, where the two periods occupy the columns, and the two committee types occupy the rows. Consider an example for comparison: for a bill in the prepacking period, reported from a southern chaired committee, *Post Packing* = 0 and *Southern Chair* = 1, and thus *Post Packing***Southern Chair* = 0. For a bill from the prepacking period, reported from a non-southern chaired committee, we need to “turn off” the *Southern Chair* variable, changing it from 1 to 0; for that bill, all three variables take on a 0 value. Thus, we see that the *Southern Chair* variable in this specification offers us the comparison between committees in the pre-packing period. By turning each variable on and off like this (i.e., identifying which equals 1 and which equals 0 for each cell), we can get from one cell to another and thus achieve the appropriate variable combination for any desired comparison.

¹⁵Note that the rules change in the 89th Congress also weakened the power of committee chairs generally, not simply the Rules Committee. See Cox and McCubbins (2005, 62).

coalition's most potent weapon for exercising negative agenda control—we find systematic evidence of pre-floor coalitional screening. The conservative-coalition roll rate increased significantly after packing, and this effect was especially pronounced for bills reported from committees chaired by nonsoutherners. Though not a perfect substitute for the security provided by the Rules committee chair, southern committee chairs managed to offer some protection for the conservative coalition after packing.

Our results also have important implications for broader contemporary debates about the intersection of majority-party advantage and legislative agenda control. Most notably, Cox and McCubbins (2005) claim that, even in the conservative-coalition era, the majority party possessed “unconditional” negative agenda control in the House. That may be true, and nothing we find undermines it. But one might also read their argument to imply that the majority party is the *only* institutional entity that enjoys negative agenda control in the post-Reconstruction House. Our results call this interpretation into question. Not only was the conservative coalition a regular floor coalition that gave national Democrats fits in the mid-20th Century, it was also an institutionally empowered procedural coalition that, at times, shared in the prefloor screening of bills.¹⁶ This conclusion does not undo Cox and McCubbins' party-cartel theory, but it *does* add a layer of complexity that helps us better understand how a strong majority party can, under some conditions, maintain coexistent agenda power with a cross-party coalition.

Moreover, the utility of this alteration is not limited to backward-looking explanation; rather, we suspect it will be important for understanding future legislative decision making. The emergence of the conservative coalition was made possible by a deep regional split within the Democratic Party over race and labor policies, which coincided with a relatively unified Republican minority on the same issues. This configuration, along with the ascent of Southern Democrats to committee chairmanships thanks to the House's strong seniority norm, created the conditions for the conservative coalition to operate as a procedural coalition for a time.

¹⁶One implication of multiple procedural cartels existing and wielding negative agenda control, of course, is that the range of status quos that are available for policy reconsideration should shrink. This is a point that we think deserves additional theoretical and empirical attention.

With the seniority system relegated to the historical dustbin (Cann 2008) and the past several decades dominated by intraparty cohesion and interparty conflict (Aldrich and Rohde 2001; Sinclair 2006), one might be suspicious of the claim that the conditions for a cross-party agenda coalition are likely to reemerge. Admittedly, we may not be at the doorstep of another such era. But recall that the seeds of the conservative coalition were planted in the 1930s and took two decades to come to full fruition. Moreover, the seniority system did not simply vanish by happenstance but rather fell out of favor beginning in the 1970s when the parties became more homogeneous and, consequently, had a greater need for reliable agency at the heads of committees. This institutional endogeneity reminds us that the rules and norms of the chamber will mold themselves to the needs of the members. Thus, while it would be overzealous to point to the recent Tea Party cleavage in the Republican Party as a sure sign of a shift towards cross-party agenda setting, we do think that this or some other intraparty cleavage, if left to fester long enough, could breed the conditions for cross-party agenda setting once again.

Returning to the specific, substantive focus of this article—we sought evidence of conservative-coalition negative agenda control by examining the post-WW II era and focusing on roll rates and likelihoods. Though we think these are the most obvious places to look for evidence of conservative-coalition negative agenda control, and the most likely places to find it, there is more to be done. Examining the origins of the conservative coalition might reveal additional dynamics. And incorporating other measures, such as coalition sizes, whip counts, and individual roll rates, will help identify further the precise nature of the conservative coalition's influence in the post-WW II era. We leave these extensions for future work.

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