

Power and Policy in Congress

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Abstract

In this paper we attempt to locate in unidimensional space the loci of power and public policy in each Congress since Reconstruction. We accomplish this in two steps. First, we use the W-NOMINATE scaling procedure to generate two sets of minimally-winning theoretical coalitions in each Congress from 1881 to 2021 — one symmetrically centered around the median Member on the floor and the other symmetrically centered around the median Member in the majority party. Second, we test each theoretical coalition in each Congress for its ability to accurately predict realized coalitions on final passage votes. We find that the party-centric theoretical coalition consistently outperformed the floor-centric theoretical coalition in predictive ability, particularly in both the modern and Progressive eras. Our results would indicate that during the aforementioned eras, public policy generated by Congress was approximately reflective of the preferences of the majority party, whereas during the “textbook Congress” era public policy was balanced between the preferences of the floor and the majority party.

Introduction: Coalitions in Congress

The two major questions asked about the Congress are: who holds power and what do they use it to achieve? Like virtually everything else in the study of Congress, these questions trace back at least to Woodrow Wilson (1885) and follow through to the great majority of research on the Congress today. The centrality of these questions is consequential: Debating where power lies leads to different understandings about what American democracy produces as public policy.

In this paper, we offer a way to understand – and to observe – the consequences of different holders of power and therefore of different policies they produce. We will focus empirically on the differences between a *floor-centric* and a *party-centric* (or more precisely a *majority party-centric*) Congress to see what differences they would make in the kinds of coalitions that form and in the kinds of policies they produce. However, the account is easily extended to different versions of these theories, including to theories of pivot points such as veto overrides, to several theories of committees, and to the Senate as well as the House.¹

We begin with the idea of an election bringing new and newly energized returning Members of Congress (MCs) to the House, each MC armed with a set of ideas that they believe brought them to office and will return them there in another two years. If enough MCs hold preferences for policies sufficiently removed from the status quo, then there is a window opened for imagining passage of new legislation. Of course, each MC knows for sure only what she thinks she might be willing to support, and each would find it especially difficult to solve on their own the collective action problem of figuring out just what form legislation should take to

¹ We have data for the Senate and for a wider variety of coalitions than discussed here, all available on request. We have reported on some of these data in Aldrich and Whyman, 2020 and in Aldrich, Ramjug, and Whyman 2021.

attempt to replace the status quo. MCs therefore empower their leaders to seek just such proposals, to pay the costs of resolving this collective action problem (and how might they avoid the principal-agent moral hazard problem when doing so). Our question is which MCs are empowering their leaders and therefore what new policy options might they support?

Here we ask whether the newly elected or reelected Speaker is really the head of the full Congress (and thus of the floor or chamber as a whole) or the head of his or her majority party delegation.² The first question is what policy would the group that empowers the Speaker like to see proposed. The second question is which MCs that leadership would turn to first to seek to begin to build a winning coalition. This initial attempt to form a winning coalition represents something like the first 218 MCs a party or floor leader would turn to in hopes of getting them to agree to support the proposed policy.³ Our first empirical section traces out just who would make up such an expected theoretical party-centric or theoretical floor-centric coalition in each Congress from the end of Reconstruction to modern times. Then, we turn to assess how well the make-up of each theoretical coalition in each Congress reflects the realized coalitions formed to actually pass policy in the House. In particular, we take as our “proof of concept,” empirically, the assessment of final passage votes on legislation from 1881 to 2021. Final passage votes (the great majority of which are passed, at least to forward to the Senate if not enacted into law) are

² Both theories assume that it is the full set of House members or the full set of members of the majority party in the House who select and instruct their leaders. Thus, “leading” means ensuring that the interests of the majority party or of the whole House are realized. This is how Aldrich and Rohde, for example, usually present their theory of “conditional party government,” emphasizing that if there is no collective interest to achieve, the majority party provides no instructions or resources to the leadership, rendering it ineffective. While clearest there, all theories considered here assume that the leadership is empowered and given resources by either the majority party as a whole or by the whole House, respectively.

³ While modern congresses require 218 MCs to achieve a simple majority, different sized chambers meant there were different sized majorities in different years prior to 1913. For those congresses prior to 1913, one can imagine the party or floor leader attempting to build the winning coalition from whatever number of MCs required for simple majority.

useful lenses because these votes are particularly public: Members of Congress might have misgivings about legislation and express those through negative votes on such indirect indicators as the special rule for the bill or other procedural votes, but it is very difficult to deny that the MC supported (or opposed), say, The Affordable Care Act, if they actually voted aye (or nay) on final passage of the bill.

A Thought Experiment on Coalition Formation

In this paper we are considering the case of party and floor leaders who have been granted power and want to use it to attempt to enact new policy. This leads to the thought experiment for the newly selected Speaker of just how she or he should exercise their newly won power. Speakers might be seen as asking themselves, what policies am I able to achieve as head of my party or head of the chamber, and to whom would I turn first to achieve them? The Speaker might reify this to ask what point in the policy space would fulfill my obligation to those who empowered me? Should it be moderate, toward the center of the full chamber for the floor-centric origin of Speaker powers, or should it be more toward the center of the Speaker's party as a majority party-centric account would imagine? The Speaker would then ask, who are the 218 or so MCs who are most likely to support that initial policy proposal? Only then would the hard work of translating those thoughts into action begin. In the end, the particular policy that passes might be modified to find at least 218 supporters, before introduction, during committee deliberations, or on the floor. It is usual, of course, for the end result to be supported by considerably more than 218 MCs, because the choice reduces not to the current proposal compared to the MCs ideal policy or a potentially wide array of hoped for compromises, but to the final bill, as amended, compared only to the status quo (or reversion point). Still, we would

imagine, in this thought experiment, that the Speaker would turn to the 218 or so MCs closest to the proposal to be the surest and strongest initial supporters.

There are, of course, many accounts of how this, that, or the other institutional feature helps shape policy selection. We greatly simplify our problem by limiting our consideration to party-centric and floor-centric coalitions in a unidimensional policy space, as we believe these two to be the most consequential starting points. We have proposed (and have already offered data to study, available upon request) the role of veto overrides (the major pivot point, as Krehbiel [1998] calls them, in the House), surely one of the most important additional institutional features of the chambers, beyond the formal institution of majority rule at the center of the floor-centric account. We also consider the role of other informal institutions than the Democratic and Republican parties in the House, especially the special role played by southern Democrats in the twentieth century, but as we will see, the majoritarian and partisan features we do study take us a great way toward answering the two fundamental questions: who holds power in the House and what do they want to do with it?

Theoretical Perspectives

Our thought experiment is made precise by being two derivations from two theories. We begin both by assuming a strictly unidimensional policy space where all MC preferences are unidimensionally single-peaked, in the sense of Black (1948; 1958). Because we are examining final passage votes, we are by definition examining application of the theory to the special cases of party- and floor-centric coalition formation in which there is an attempt at positive policy making, and we are thus pointing toward accounts of positive agenda control. And final passage votes means that the choice is always binary, between the proposed bill, with whatever

amendments, and the status quo (or reversion point), and this vote is determined by simple majority.

We examine the unidimensional case in this paper for a number of reasons, the most important being that the special case of floor-centric dominance does not have a natural extension to two or more dimensions, as the party-centric account does.⁴ The floor centric or “majoritarian” theory (Krehbiel, 1998; Mayhew, 1974) rests on Black’s median voter theorem (1948; 1958). Black deduced that, if all preferences are unidimensionally single-peaked, if every vote is between pairs of options, and if every option will be available to be proposed and to be voted upon, then there will be a (Condorcet) winner, and it will be the floor median. We assume the members of the coalition will be recruited around that policy and therefore, perhaps by application of Axelrod’s minimization of conflict-of-interest theorem (1970), will be the ideal points clustered compactly around that ideal point location. The floor-centric coalition thus will be a coalition of moderates.

Recently, the two principal (but not the only) theories of majority party control of the chamber, those due to Cox and McCubbins and to Aldrich and Rohde, were brought together into a unified account of the unidimensional case, in an explanation they call “conditional party cartel theory” (Aldrich, et al., 2022). Their account differs from Krehbiel and Mayhew’s only in the rejection of Black’s axiom that every policy option makes it to the floor. Instead they apply Romer-Rosenthal’s type of logic to assess what happens if the majority party is able to shape both the policies that do not make it to the floor (negative agenda control) and the policies that

⁴ Bianco and Send (2005) make a strong case for the uncovered set to be the generalization of the median in multidimensional spaces, and that choices are unstable but generally contained by the uncovered set. We have not yet used the uncovered set technology to generate the uncovered set in, say, the first two dimensions of DW NOMINATE to assess at least this limited generalization of the majoritarian theory.

do make it to the floor, perhaps with a restrictive special rule (specifically a closed rule) thus implementing positive agenda control. Aldrich, et al. (2022) thus combine the “Block-Out Zone” of Cox and McCubbins’ negative agenda control with Aldrich and Rohde’s “Majority Party Preferred Set” that specifies conditions under which the majority party can achieve policies preferred by the majority party over the floor median. This theory predicts that restrictive special rules make possible enacting policies that diverge from the floor median toward the ideal location of the median member of the majority party (moving toward the majority party median as the reversion point moves farther toward the extreme), culminating in the best case of party-centric explanations to enact the majority party median.⁵ This point depends upon the exact location of the status quo (reversion) outcome, and is thus variable over the range of policies between the floor median and the party median.⁶ By reference again to Axelrod’s conflict of interest minimization theorem, we take it that 218 majority party members’ ideal points closest to the party median will serve as our measures of the prediction of “conditional party cartel” theory. It is thus, in a very real sense a majority-party centered account.⁷

⁵ The Majority Party Preferred Set is thus a point in the space $[p_m - f_m]$, where p_m and f_m are the majority party and floor medians respectively. We assume that the House will select the floor median under a fully open rule and will select the point as close to the majority party median as the status quo makes possible (see the next footnote) under a completely closed rule, with restrictive special rules leading to a point between those two extremes, depending on the specifics of the restrictions. We are developing conditions under which the majority party would adopt restrictive or closed rules.

⁶ If SQ is the status quo and f_m is the floor median, $d = |f_m - SQ|$ is the distance between those two points. The Majority Party Preferred Set is the set of points of distance d from the floor median “on the other side” of it from SQ, or from $d' = |p_m - f_m|$, whichever distance is smaller, where p_m is the ideal point location of the median member of the majority party.

⁷ In both cases, we apply closeness to the 108 or 109 ideal points just to the left and the other half just to the right of whichever median we are examining, rather than the full 217 ideal points closest to whichever median is under consideration. Ideal points are generally estimated as ordinal and thus, especially for the floor median with its currently mostly empty center, is difficult to assess which 218 idea points have the smallest variance, a cardinal measure. We do know, however, that the 108 ideal points closest to the median on the left (on the right) will generally have the smallest variance about the median point on that side of the median.

In sum, our theoretical base for this paper is a contrast of the two predictions. The first is the floor-centric majoritarian theory, which we assess by considering whether the symmetric cluster of 218 MC ideal points about the MC whose ideal point is the location of the floor median provides a good base for understanding what passes on the floor of the House. The second is the party-centric conditional party cartel theory, which we assess by considering whether the majority party median MC and the nearest cluster of 218 majority party MC ideal points is instead a better base for understanding the composition of successful enacting coalitions on the House floor.

In the next few sections we detail measurement issues to turn these thought experiments and theoretical formulations into empirical observable coalitions and address several other empirical specification issues. We then examine the distributions of these party- and floor-centric coalitions from the end of Reconstruction to modern times. We pause the movement toward testing for the time being to consider what the floor-centric coalition instructs us about what moderate coalitions and their possibilities over time, and look briefly at other instructive aspects of party-centric coalitions. Then we examine final passage votes from 1881 to 2021 to test the adequacy of the two structures for explaining the coalitions that actually formed in the last 140 years. In particular, we find that the party-centric coalition design distinguished itself from the floor-centric alternative both in the approximate periods 1890-1920 and 1995-present.⁸

Measurement Considerations

⁸ Using what we consider to be the most important of our three measures of coalition “success” in terms of final passage votes, “average accuracy,” neither coalition was particularly distinguished in its account of coalitions before the 1980s, and the floor-centric coalition never has been throughout this period.

W-NOMINATE: In order to measure the predictions of the two theories, we first generate theoretical party-centric and floor-centric coalitions for each Congress from the end of Reconstruction to 2021.⁹ We begin forming the theoretical coalitions by estimating first dimension W-NOMINATE ideal point scores for each MC¹⁰ in each of our listed congresses (Poole and Rosenthal, e.g., 1985; 2016).¹¹ The primary advantage of using W-NOMINATE here instead of the more frequently used DW-NOMINATE is that the former procedure estimates MC ideal points from the voting matrix of a single Congress, meaning that any given MC may have different scores from one Congress to the next. We believe this empirical choice is a better reflection of our theory of coalition formation, in which the Speaker must choose anew at each Congress from which MCs to rely on to build legislating coalitions.¹²

Measuring Coalitions: With the theoretical coalitions then set in each Congress, the second major empirical question of the paper will be to ask how closely those coalitions come to reflecting realized final passage coalitions. As noted, neither theory expects final passage votes to be anything as small as a minimal winning coalition of S votes in general. But they well might expect the concentration of votes to come from those S MCs clustered near the bill's position,

⁹ We examine each congress from 1881 to 2021 (47th – 116th congresses). We have the comparable results from using DW Nominat (available upon request) as well, and they point to the same conclusions as here, to a very close approximation. Thus, W Nominat is chosen to fit measurement closer to theory, rather than to maximize empirical fit.

¹⁰ Scores were only generated for each MC in each Congress who cast a sufficient number of votes.

¹¹ There are, of course, many other methods that could be used in place of W-NOMINATE. W-NOMINATE, however, correlates very highly with most other methods that we are aware of and this is especially so for the ideal point located away from the extreme edges, and that (very generously defined) middle is where our predictions cluster. W-NOMINATE is also convenient in that its assumptions about MCs' preferences are consistent with single-peakedness.

¹²We begin by estimating the first dimension W-NOMINATE score for each MC in each of our congresses. We then sort the estimated ideal points from low to high in each Congress and apply a simple algorithm to generate each Congress' theoretical (that is, specified according to our thought experiment) coalitions. The details are reported in Appendix A.

which is either near the center of the floor or the center of the majority party. Our question is which of these set of 218 MCs provides the better accounting of final passage votes.

Assessing Coalitions and Roll-Call Votes: We offer three summary measures testing the ability of each theoretical coalition to predict realized final passage coalitions:

1. Sensitivity: The true positive rate; the number of MCs who were both in the theoretical coalition and who voted yes on final passage, divided by the total number of MCs in the theoretical coalition. This measure tests how well the theoretical coalitions predict which MCs cast aye votes on final passage of the (possibly amended) bill.
2. Specificity: The true negative rate; the number of MCs who were both not in the theoretical coalition and who voted no on final passage, divided by the total number of MCs not in the theoretical coalition. This measure tests how well the theoretical coalitions predict which MCs cast nay votes on bill final passage.
3. Accuracy: A combined measure of sensitivity and specificity; the number of true positives plus the number of true negatives, all divided by the total number of MCs in the chamber. This measure tests how well the theoretical coalition is able to differentiate the aye and nay votes on bill final passage.

Floor-Centric Coalitions:

In Figure 1 we report the location of the median MC on the first dimension of the W-NOMINATE scaling procedure in each Congress from the end of Reconstruction (the 47th Congress) through to modern times (the 116th Congress). In addition, in this figure we report for each Congress the single dimension scores of the most liberal (negative) and most conservative (positive) boundary MCs within the floor-centric coalition: These are the boundaries denoting

the range of ideal points needed to be included in creating a majority coalition via, in this case, the floor-centric structure. The variation in the location of the floor median from Congress to Congress is noteworthy. In Figure 2, we present the same data as in Figure 1 in three dimensions, with the third dimension being MC density. In Figure 3, we parse out Figure 2 into the five time periods separately for ease of examination.¹³

Figure 1

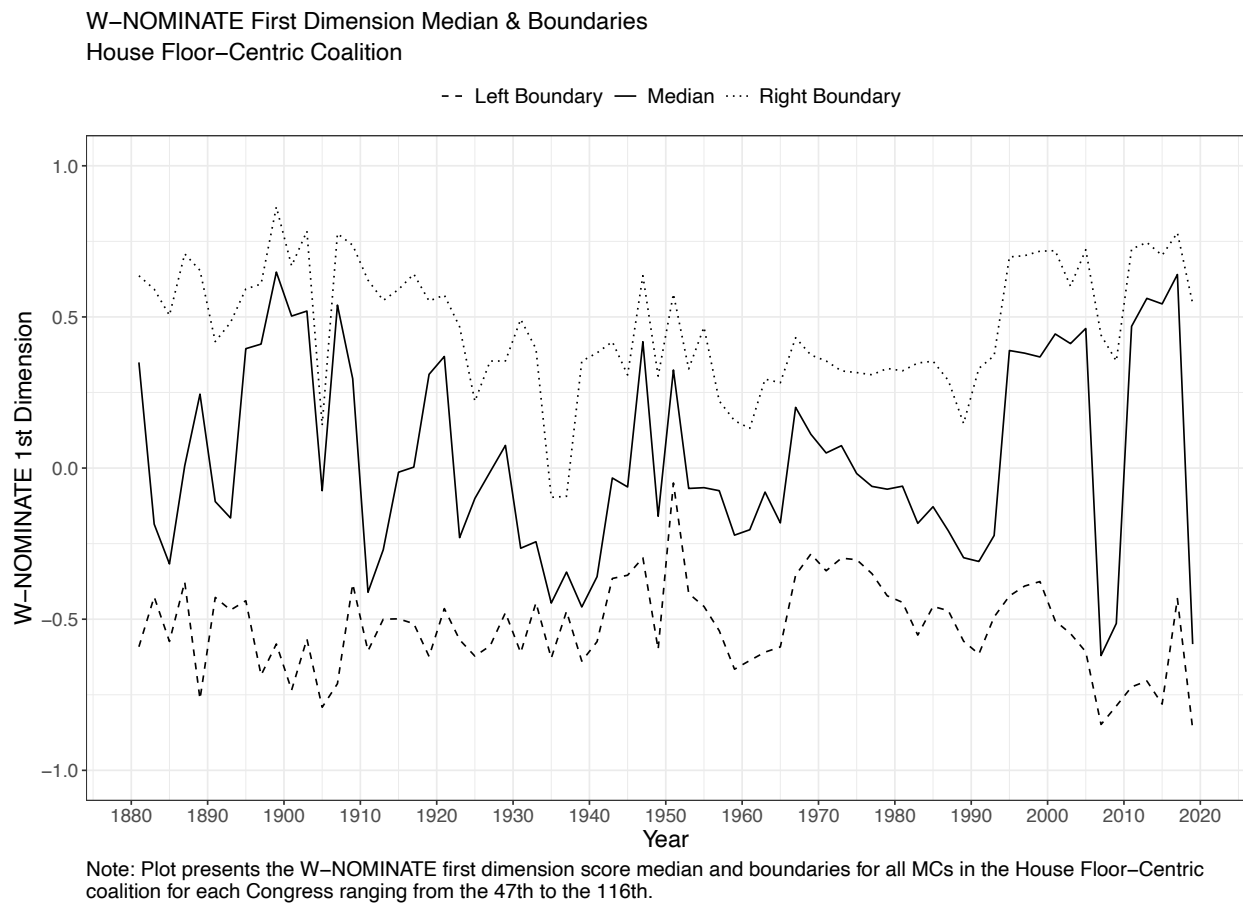


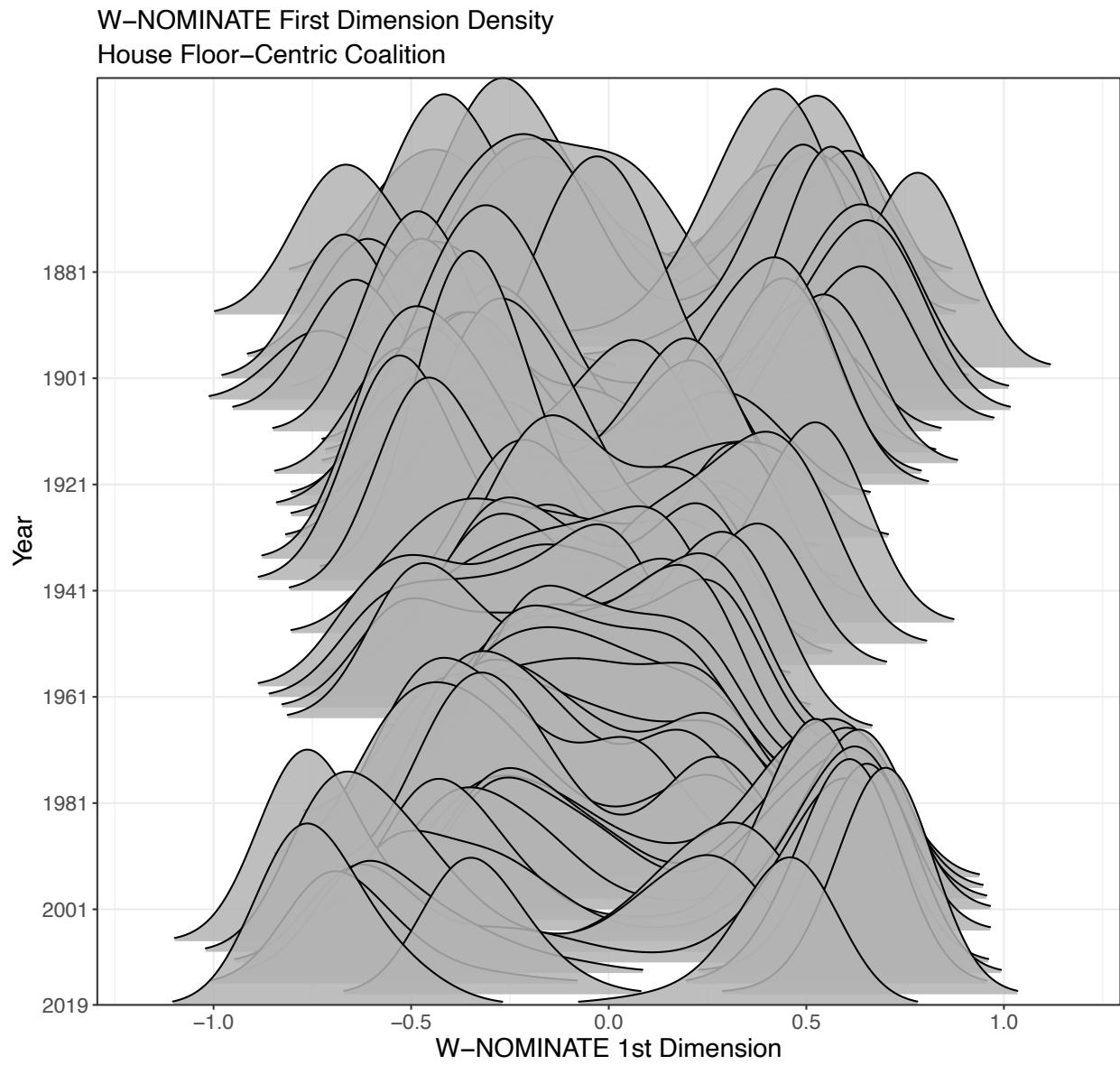
Figure 3 makes the five periods clear. The first (1881-1911) and fifth periods (1995-2021), which approximately map onto the progressive era (until the Revolt against Cannon) and the modern partisan era, have wide bimodal shapes with visible gorges in between many

¹³ The dividing points for the five periods are chosen to make the data easiest to observe, but they are also natural divisions in the history of Congress (and the US). We will exploit that pairing more fully in the future.

congresses. The modes are clearly defined and quite distinct, with a nearly empty middle dividing “left” from “right,” even though we are examining the 218 most moderate-voting Members of each Congress. This would indicate that during these times even the most centrist winning coalitions were and are largely bimodal.

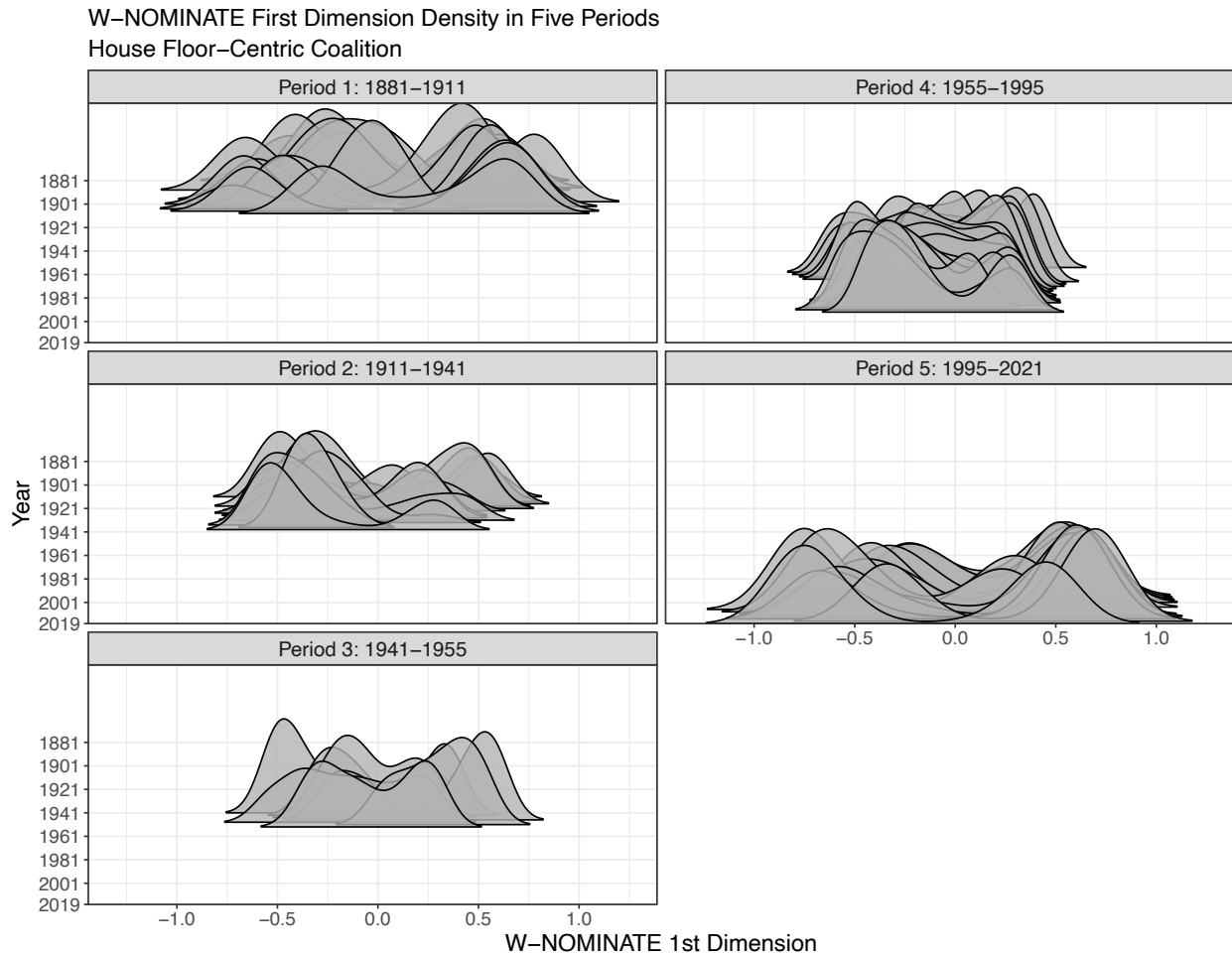
The third (1941-1955) and fourth (1955-1995) periods, which approximately correspond to the end of the New Deal congresses and the “textbook Congress” era of Democratic dominance, have narrow plateau shapes and therefore contrast sharply against the first and fifth periods. The third and fifth periods show a much more cohesive and centralized floor-centric coalition, indicating less spread in preferences in the middle of the Congress. Centrist coalitions are seemingly much easier to imagine being able to form in these periods than in either polarized period.

Figure 2



Note: Plot presents W-NOMINATE first dimension score densities for all MCs in the House Floor-Centric coalition for each Congress ranging from the 47th to the 116th.

Figure 3



Note: Plot presents W-NOMINATE first dimension score densities for all MCs in the House Floor-Centric coalition for each Congress ranging from the 47th to the 116th. Densities are separated by period to highlight differences.

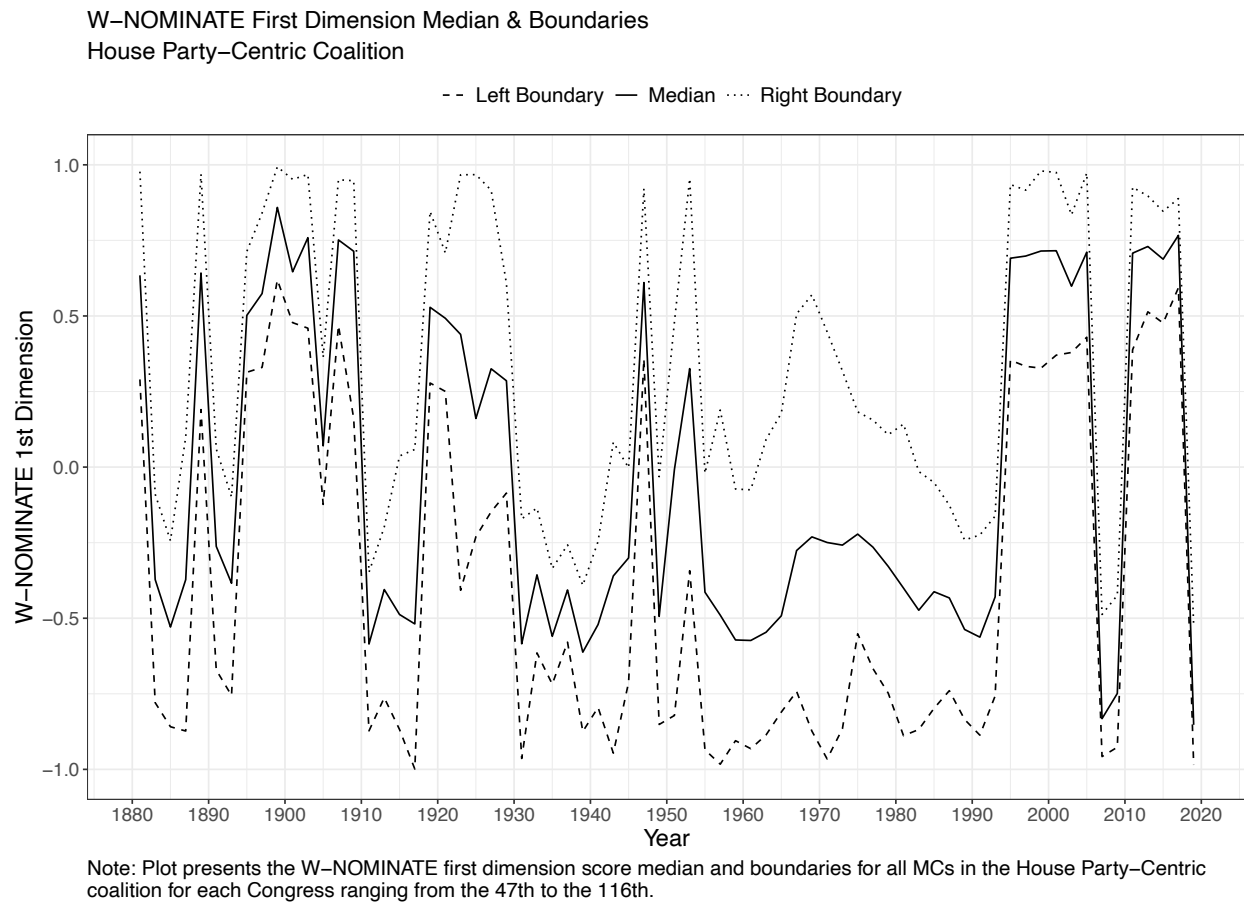
Party-Centered Coalitions

The same type of three figures are presented for the party-centered coalitions, as reported in Figures 4, 5, and 6. Figure 4 makes a clear contrast with Figure 1 in that the consequences of forming coalitions consisting only of MCs in the majority party are clear. Before turning to those, however, note that, while we found that there are greater differences between House and Senate (see on-line appendix) for party than for the floor-centered majorities that is primarily due to periods of divided control of Congress. Bicameral politics, at least with respect to the range of

potential simple majority coalition formation, is less about different means and manners of election, it appears, than it is about majority-party control of the chamber.

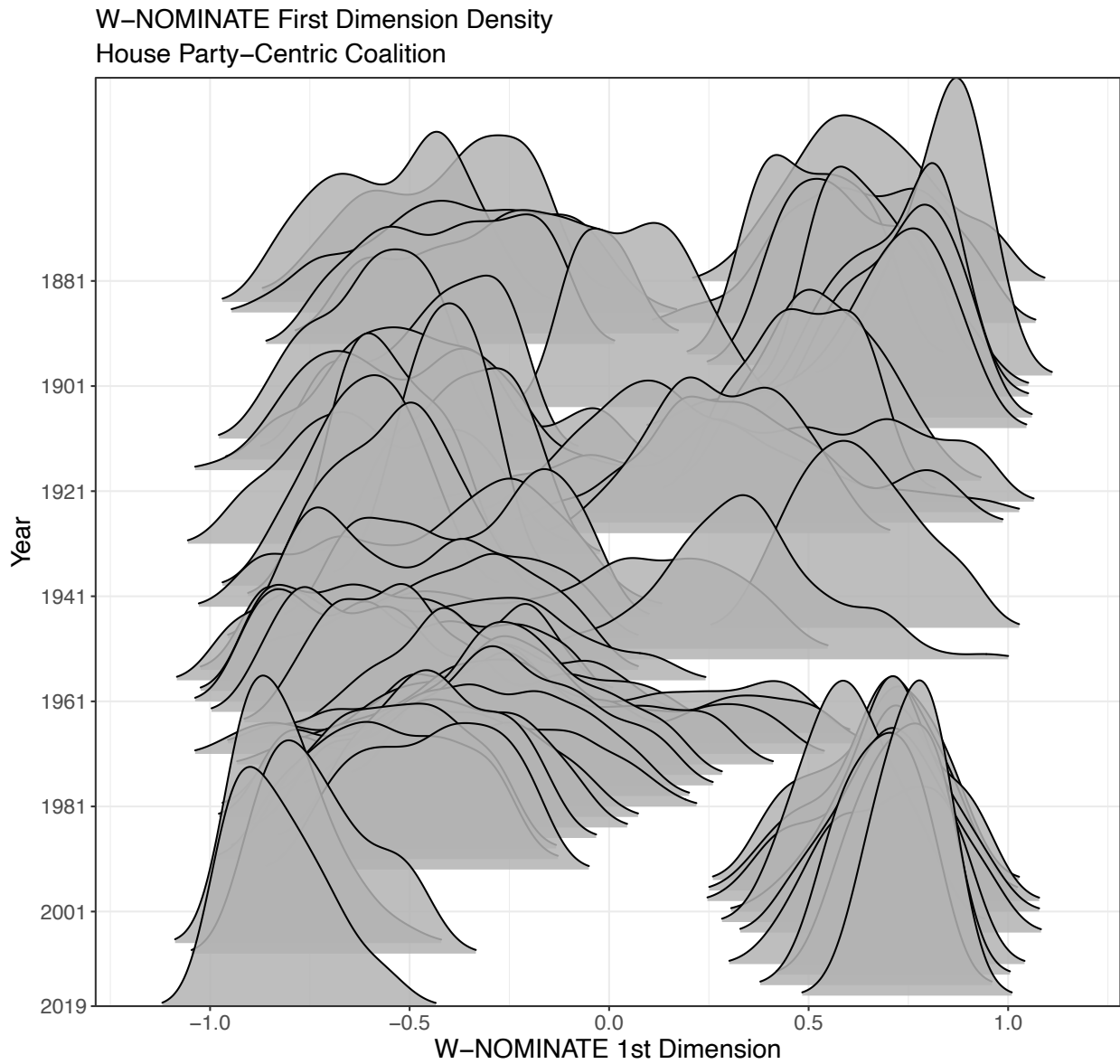
Figure 4 is dominated visually by the changes in party electoral fortunes. The two Republican majorities in the 80th and 83rd congresses contrast sharply to the otherwise long periods of Democratic control from the onset of the Great Depression through to the mid-1990s. Still, as Figures 5 and 6 vividly demonstrate, the highly-partisan first and fifth periods differ greatly from the textbook Congress in the third and fourth periods. The core of Members of any party-centered coalition in the first and fifth time periods would be quite removed from the other party. In the middle time periods, the partisan coalitions are to the left/right of the center, of course, but their reach approximates a more central point on the W-NOMINATE dimension, such that the idea of finding common ground with at least some significant number of Members of the minority party is not entirely fanciful.

Figure 4



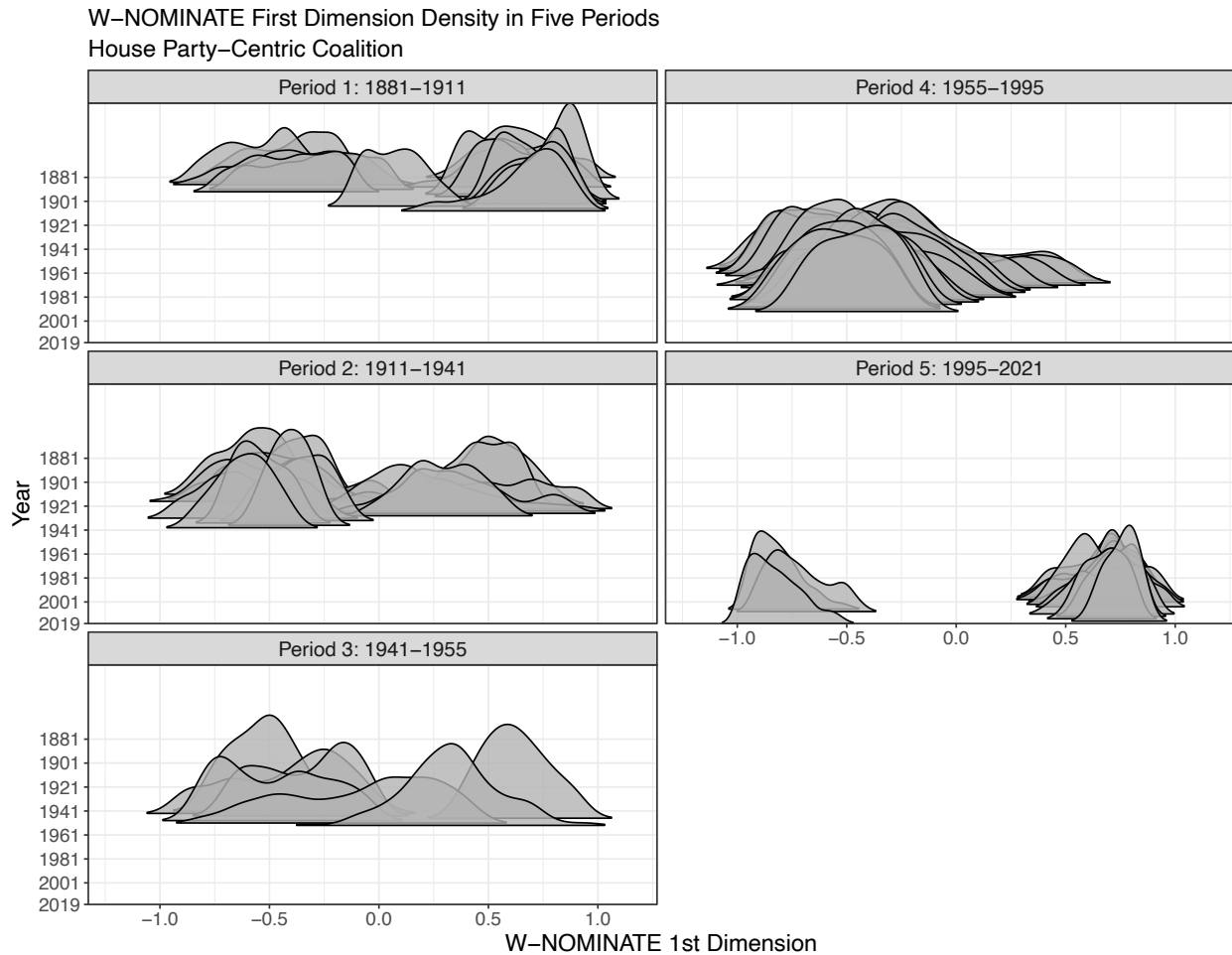
As was true for the floor symmetric coalitions, the party symmetric coalitions look different in period five compared to time period one with respect to the continual growth in partisan differentiation. That is to say that the typical members of the majority party are polarizing with respect to each other ever more deeply over time in the third period. While the W-NOMINATE scores are technically bounded, the partisan polarization of recent decades has not stopped nor, apparently, reached their extreme boundaries.

Figure 5



Note: Plot presents W-NOMINATE first dimension score densities for all MCs in the House Party-Centric coalition for each Congress ranging from the 47th to the 116th.

Figure 6



Variation in Coalitions over Time: What is evident, leading in fact to the creation of the five time periods, is that there is considerable variation in the location of the median member of the House over time. The variation appears to be due, overwhelmingly, to changes in partisan control of the chamber.¹⁴ This is true especially in the first and last time periods, and appears to be due to partisan polarization. But it is not just the location of the median that changes in this regard. It appears likely that the second moment about the mean for each coalition also varies

¹⁴ Which, of course, emphasizes the point that party and policy are fundamentally intertwined, at least empirically.

substantially with era, with partisan control, and with the degree of partisan polarization. In Figures 7 and 8 we plot (among other things, as described below) the standard deviation of the distribution of estimated ideal points in the first dimension of W- NOMINATE for each coalition in each Congress. It is obvious that the first and fifth periods differ dramatically from the middle periods. Given what we have discussed to this point, these differences in periods are no longer surprising, but it is one of the most important (and often little examined) findings about the history of American congressional roll call voting patterns.

Figure 7 shows the overall variance (standard deviation) in W-NOMINATE scores within the floor coalition over time, and the variance of the Democrats and the Republicans who are counted in the floor coalition.¹⁵ Here, even though it should be evident from the above figures, the low overall floor coalition variance in the moderate, floor-centric coalition during the New Deal to Reagan years is dramatically obvious. We put the overall floor coalition variance in context by comparing it to the variances of ideal point estimates of the partisans within that coalition. This comparison clearly demonstrates that the variance trend over time for the entire floor symmetric coalition is driven not by increased variance within the parties but rather between the parties. In the first and fifth periods there is low variance among the Democrats just as there is low variance among the Republicans in the floor symmetric coalition — yet, the overall floor coalition displays large variance in these periods, indicating that even the most centric coalition in the first and fifth periods would have been comprised of Democrats and Republicans quite some distance apart from one another. In the middle periods, we can see that the Democratic variance increases slightly, reflecting the broad nature of the Northern and

¹⁵ We present variation by use of the standard deviation, so that the metric is the same as used in presenting medians, ranges, etc., as above.

Southern Democrat coalition. The bump in overall floor symmetric coalition variance in these middle periods then is likely due to the increased intra-Democratic variance.

Figure 7

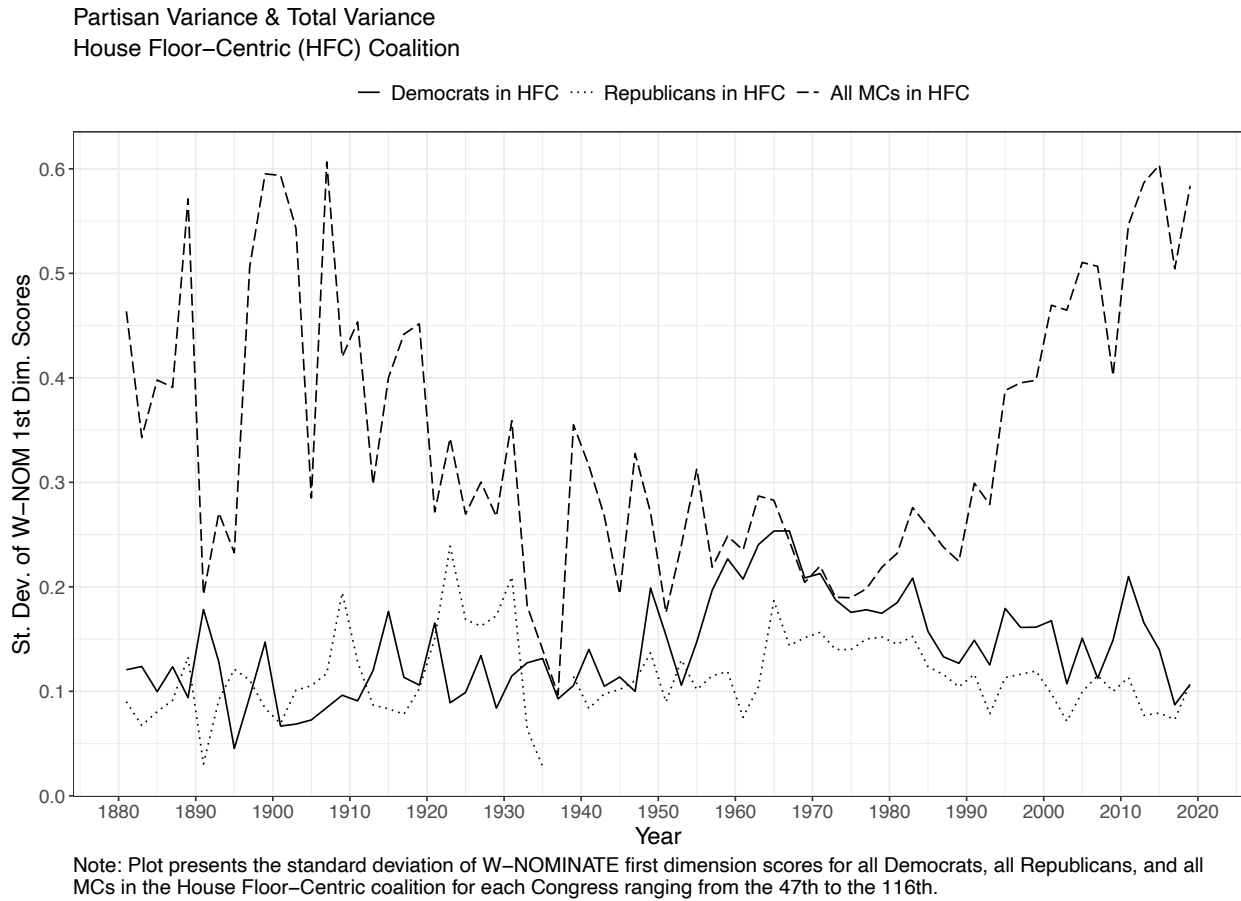


Figure 8

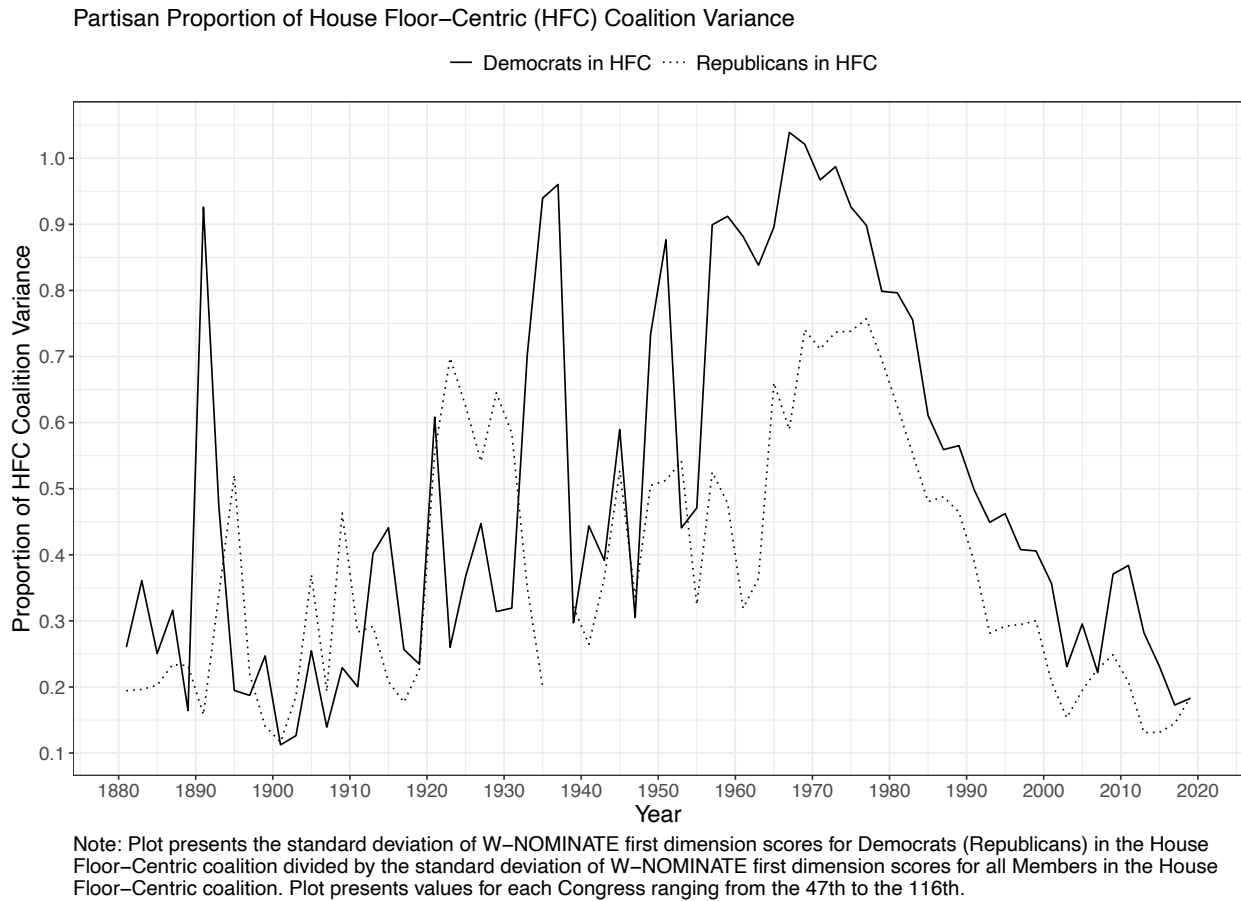


Figure 8 presents for each Congress the first dimension W-NOMINATE variance of the Democrats and Republicans in the floor-centric coalition divided by the variance of all Members in the floor coalition. In other words, Figure 8 presents the intra-partisan proportions of the overall ideal point variance in the floor coalition.¹⁶ In the first and fifth periods for both Republicans and Democrats, the variance of Members in the floor coalition was approximately equal and often a relatively low proportion of the overall floor coalition variance. In the middle periods, the proportion of overall floor-centric coalition variance attributed to intra-partisan variance underwent a more sustained rise and fall, particularly among the Democratic Members

¹⁶ Please note these proportions need not add to 1 and may add to >1, as the range of Democrat and Republican ideal points within the floor coalition may or may not overlap.

of the floor coalition. In contrast to the first and third periods, then, we can see that the second period was characterized by a heterogeneous Democratic majority that overlapped significantly with a relatively more homogenous Republican minority.

Figure 9

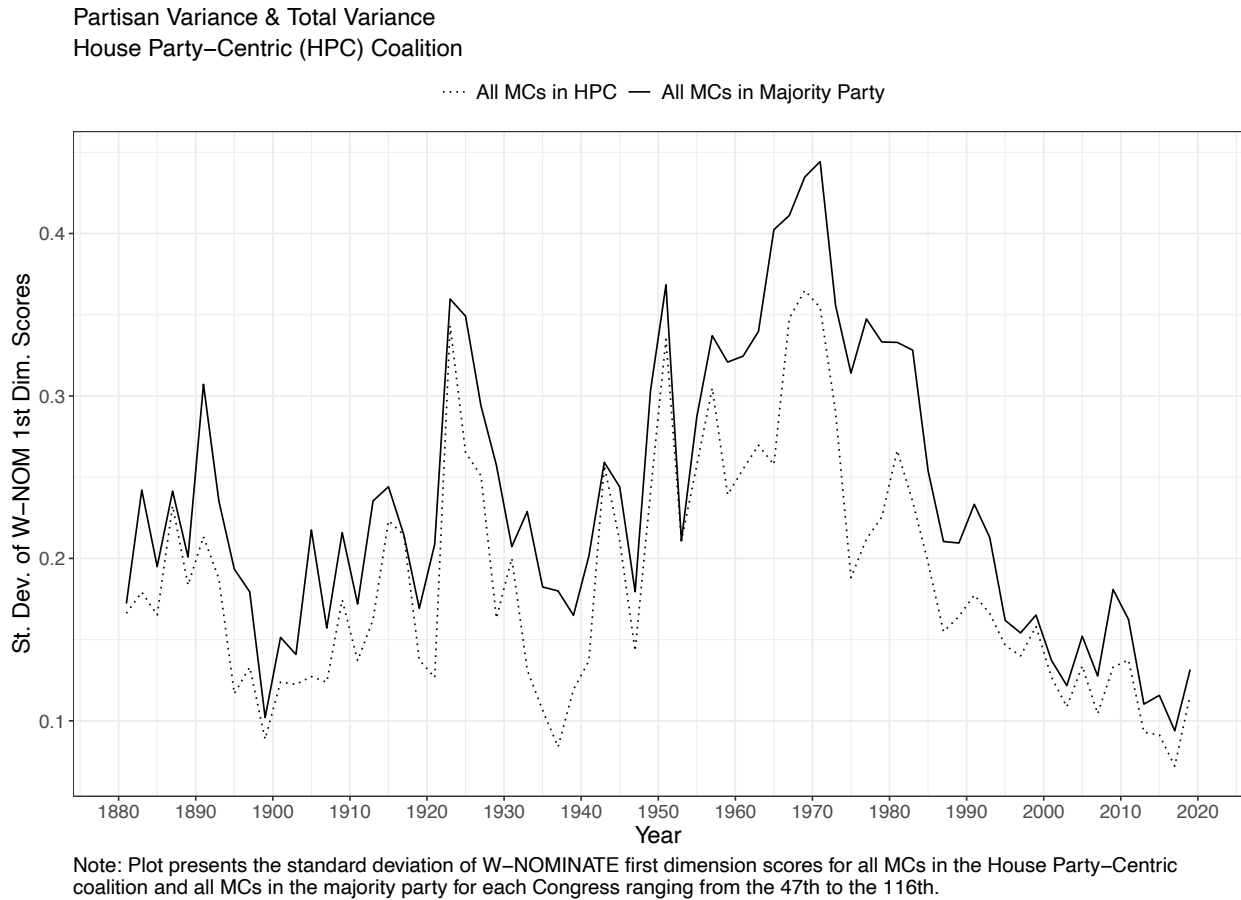


Figure 9 presents the standard deviation of ideal points in the party-centric coalition over time and compares that to the variation of preferences in the majority party as a whole, whether or not included in the party coalition. Here, the most important observation is that the standard deviation of the party symmetric coalition tracks that of the full majority party reasonably closely. Of course, the party symmetric coalition is filled with a large proportion of the majority party, so that is to be expected. However, the gap between what variation there is in preferences in the most central parts of the majority party and the full majority party show the eras of deep

division in that party. The Republicans were split between the old establishment and progressives from the “revolt” against Cannon in 1910 until about American entry into WWI (or, at least, it was covered over by the War only to remerge in the early 1920s), and of course, the Democratic Party was deeply divided by region over nearly the full third and fourth time periods, that is the period when there was the New Deal majority in conjunction with Jim Crow South. The high variation in the full majority party and noticeably lesser (even if still rather high) variation in the party symmetric coalition captures the frustration (in whichever party held the majority) in the inability to use that majority party status effectively.

A Note on Floor-Centric Coalitions: The floor-centric coalition provides us evidence about the nature of bipartisan potential in each Congress and yields some observations about congressional politics in general. For most of the nearly century and a half since the end of Reconstruction, the left and right halves of the Congress are divided from each other, reflecting a voting polarization that is typically partisan polarization. Even the most moderate members of whichever “half” of the W-NOMINATE distribution contains the larger, more populous mode (that is, formed, most of the time, by the majority party MCs), roll-call voting demonstrates that they are unlikely to gather much support from the other mode. Indeed, this is a defining feature of the first and fifth time periods. Every such Congress has a deep and nearly or actually hollowed-out center, making the ability to reach toward the minority side revealed as being difficult (or as not being seriously attempted). This peaks in the most recent period where the middle ground between the two modes is literally empty and the modes are separated by an increasingly large distance. Bipartisan and/or ideologically broad coalitions are therefore rare.

A second major feature of Figure 1, especially, is its demonstration of how elections often generate congresses with very different floor medians. These are observable in the first

and fifth periods. They reflect, virtually always, an electorate that choose a new majority party in Congress. While the median does change from election to election in the long run of Democratic majorities, the changes are very slight. While legislating focuses, naturally enough, on actions within the Congress by MCs, elections make up a very strong driving force in shaping the actions available to MCs in between the elections. As President Obama (and Republicans after him) said, “elections have consequences,” and these data illustrate that point vividly.

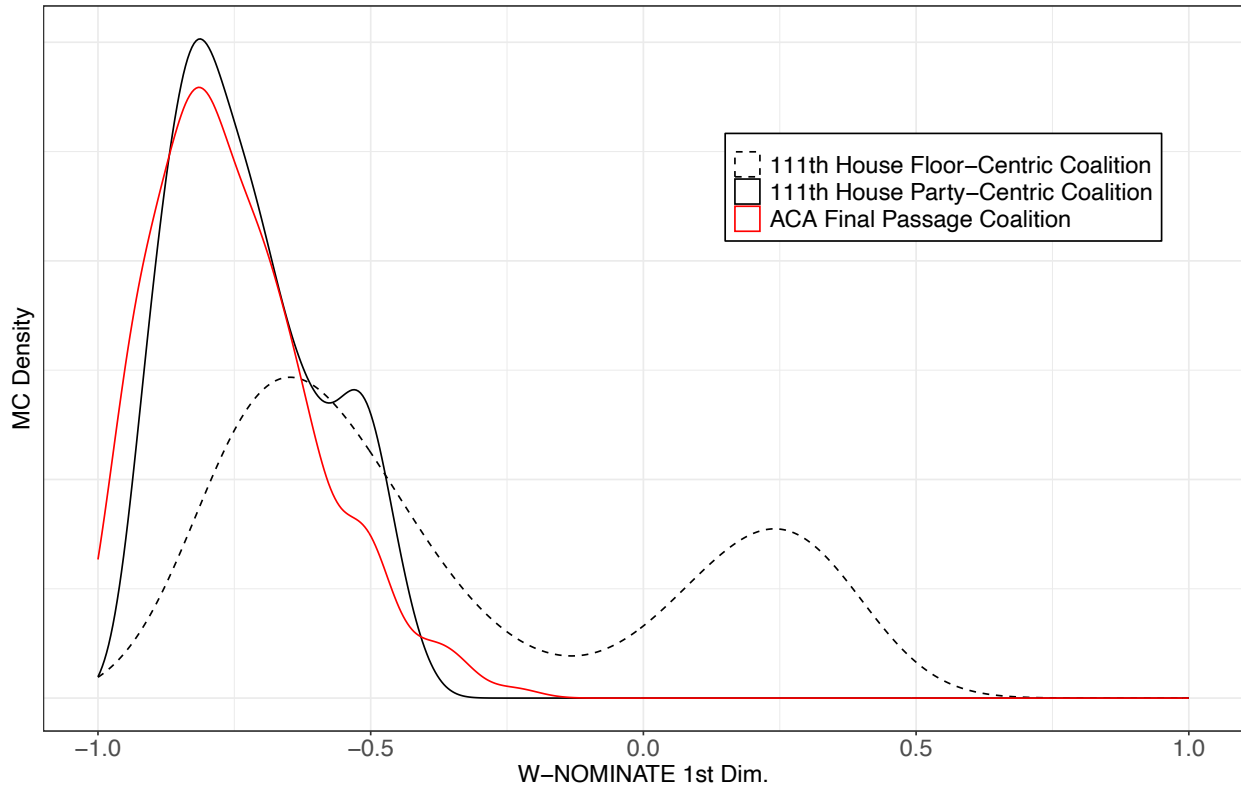
Party- and Floor-Centric Coalitions and Final Passage Votes

In this section we look at final passage votes and what they suggest about the efficacy of party- and floor-centric explanations of policy-making in Congress. In order to provide more context around the concept of testing each coalition for its ability to predict final passage coalitions, let us consider the passage of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and the passage of the 2010 Tax Relief Act. Figure 10 depicts three smoothed distributions of Member first dimension W-NOMINATE ideal points: all Members in the 111th House floor coalition, all Members in the 111th House party coalition, and all Members in the ACA coalition.¹⁷ We can see plainly that the ACA coalition closely mirrors the party symmetric coalition and does not mirror the floor symmetric one. Figure 11 also shows the 111th House floor and party coalitions, this time including the 2010 Tax Relief Act coalition instead of the ACA coalition. This figure shows that the 2010 Tax Relief Act coalition clearly resembles the floor symmetric coalition and not the party symmetric coalition. These two figures together illustrate that, even within the same Congress, some major policies are passed to reflect the preferences of the floor and some are passed to reflect the preferences of the majority party.

¹⁷ “All Members in the ACA coalition” refers to all Members voting aye on final passage of the Affordable Care Act.

Figure 10

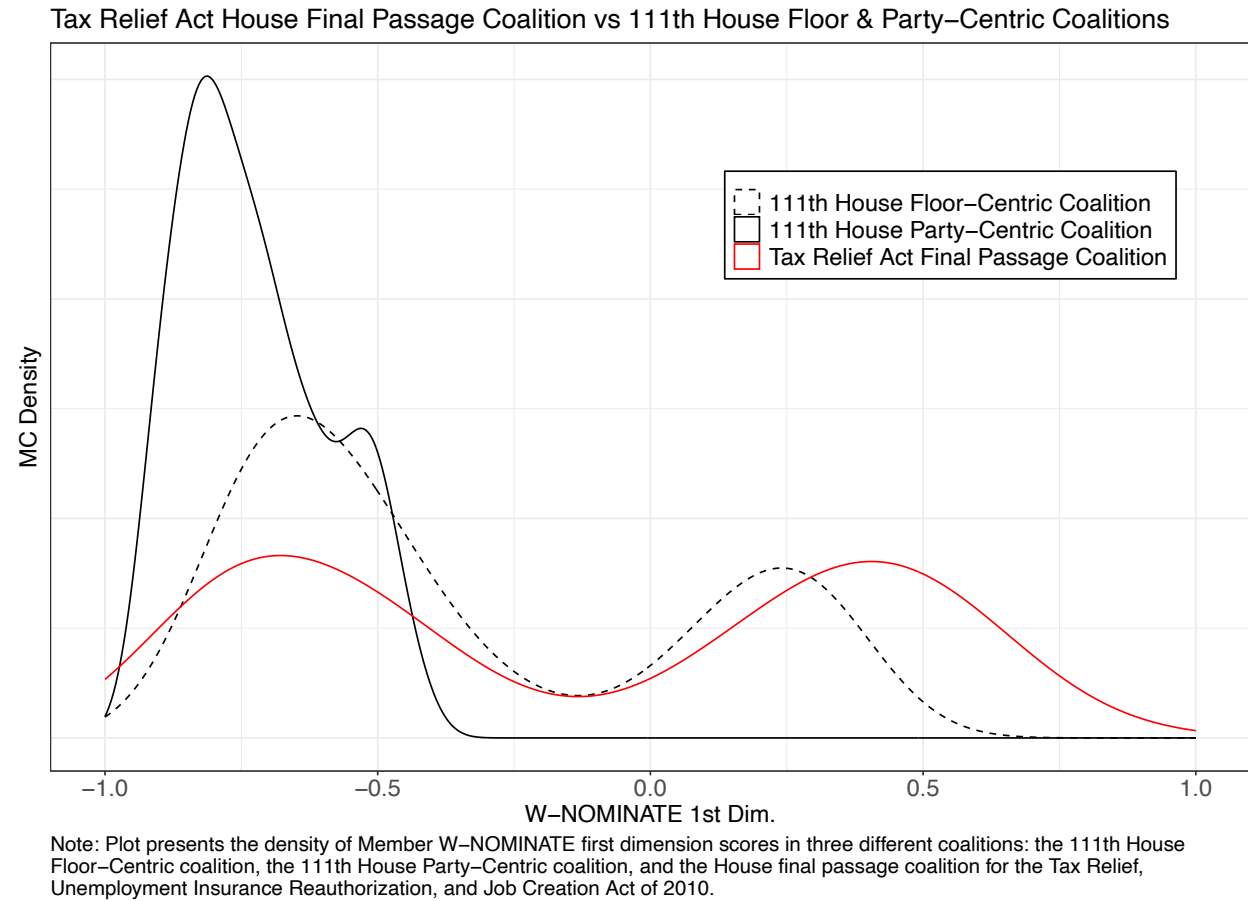
ACA House Final Passage Coalition vs 111th House Floor & Party-Centric Coalitions



Note: Plot presents the density of Member W-NOMINATE first dimension scores in three different coalitions: the 111th House Floor-Centric coalition, the 111th House Party-Centric coalition, and the House final passage coalition for the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act.

Our final consideration is a systematic analysis of the above examples: how well do the party and floor coalitions relate to votes for final passage? As noted, we calculate three measures to get a well-rounded view on the relationship between our coalitions and final passage coalitions in each Congress of interest.

Figure 11

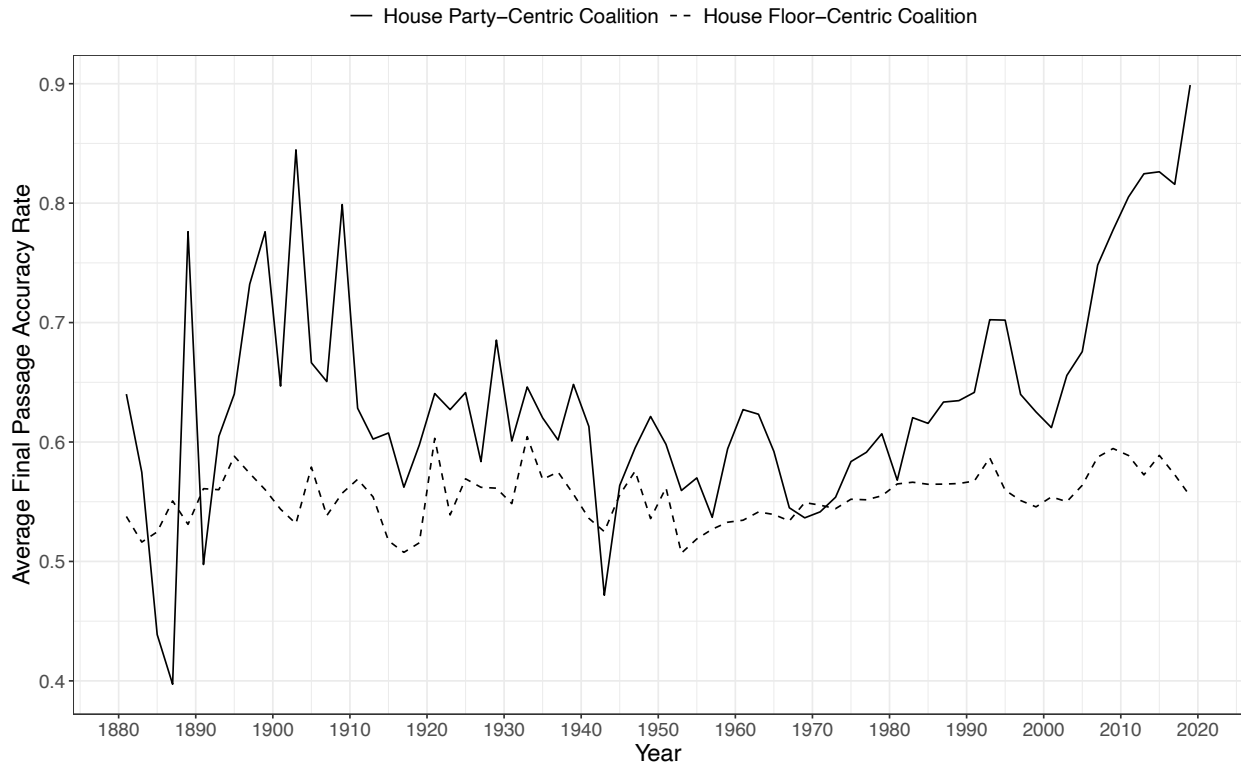


In Figure 12 below, we report the first of these measures, average accuracy, for both the floor- and party-centric coalitions in each Congress from 1881 to 2021. Recall that accuracy is defined here as the number of true positives (the number of MCs both in the theoretical coalition and in the bill's observed coalition) plus the number of true negatives (the number of MCs both not in the theoretical coalition and not in the bill's observed coalition), all divided by the total number of MCs in the House. We present the average accuracy of all final passage votes for both types of coalitions. Figure 13 presents the difference in means between the House floor-centric and party-centric coalitions' average final passage accuracy rates.

Figure 12

Average Final Passage Accuracy Rates

House Floor-Centric and House Party-Centric Coalitions

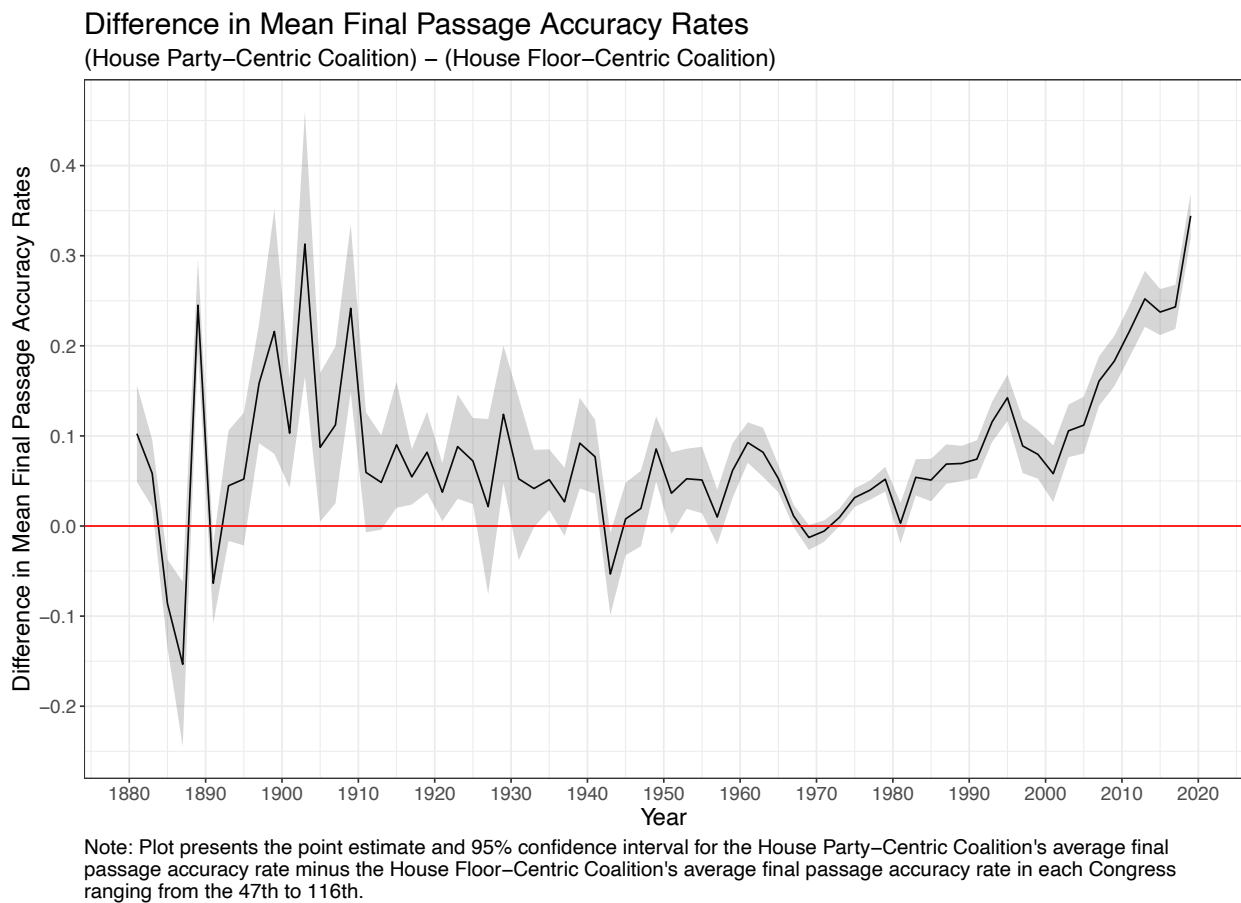


Note: Plot presents House Floor and Party-Centric coalitions' accuracy rates averaged over all House roll call votes on the final passage/adoption of bills, joint resolutions, and conference reports in each Congress ranging from the 47th to 116th.

The average accuracy results are an easy story to tell. In the FDR to Reagan era, party and floor coalitions were each nearly a flip of a coin, that is, only barely exceeding a 50-50 proposition to vote for that bill. Neither is a particularly useful guide to understand what passes in the House. While the periods in and around the New Deal and Great Society congresses marked a noticeable increase in party-centric coalitions being a better guide, that fell back to more or less even with floor-centric coalition accuracy, neither being much above 60%. In the 1890s (until the revolt against Speaker Cannon) and beginning in the 1990s, however, party polarization appears to be driving a dramatic increase in the accuracy of the party-centric coalition, while the floor-centric coalition remains essentially flat, not far from 50-50 in their

support for bills on final passage. By the most current congresses, the party coalition remains intact at nearly the 90% level of accuracy, while the floor-centric coalition remains unhelpful in understanding final passage votes. In short, the emergence of party-centric coalitions is clear and, by now, totally dominant in terms of accuracy. These data appear to provide powerful support for the conditional party cartel theory.

Figure 13



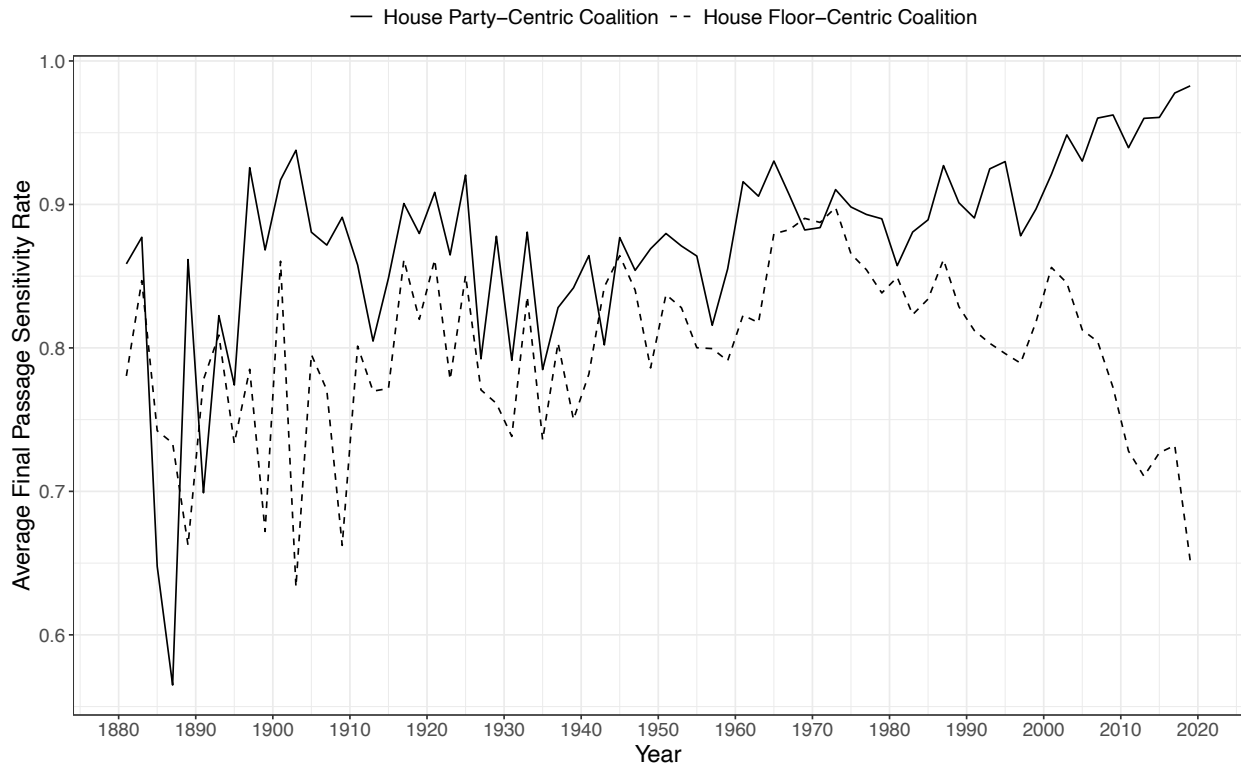
For the sake of completeness, we also present in Figures 14-17 the primary components of the average accuracy measure, average sensitivity and average specificity, for each type of coalition in each Congress from 1881 to 2021. Sensitivity refers to the true positive rate, which we define here as the number of MCs both in the coalition and in the observed coalition for final passage. Specificity refers to the true negative rate, which we define here as the number of MCs

both not in the coalition and not in the observed coalition for final passage. We get our average sensitivity and specificity measures by averaging the respective rate over all final passage votes in a given Congress.

While both measures show firm support for conditional party cartel theory, we believe that the average sensitivity rate is the better measure for our theory of coalition formation. Here, we are focusing on positive agenda control – how to change the status quo. Thus, we are attempting to systematically determine whether the core of final passage coalitions is centered around the median of the majority party or the median of the floor. While final passage coalitions often end up larger than minimally winning, we argue that what matters for policy substance is this core from which the final winning coalition can be built — from which MCs can one expect the first 218 votes in support of any bill, and how will the bill be located in policy space in order to accommodate those first 218 MCs. To that end, then, we conceive of the more valuable measure being the true positive rate, the measure of which MCs form the coalition in favor of the bill.

Figure 14

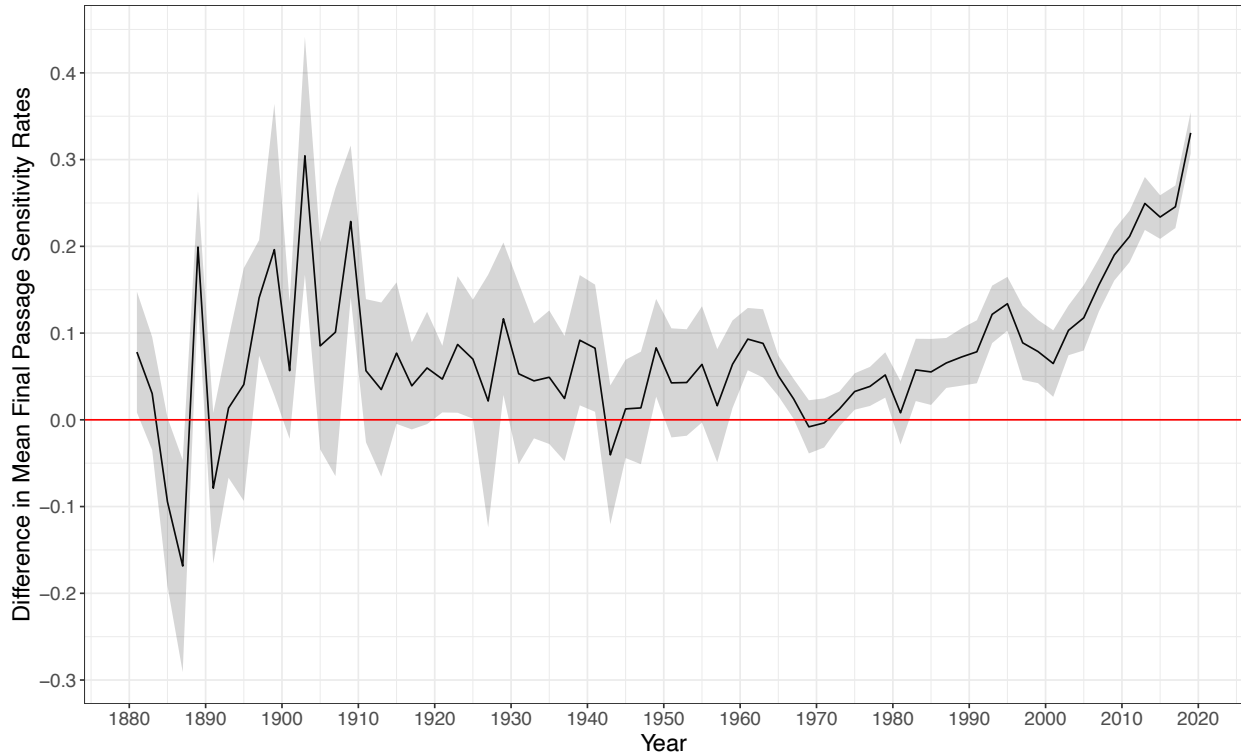
Average Final Passage Sensitivity Rates House Floor–Centric and House Party–Centric Coalitions



Note: Plot presents House Floor and Party–Centric coalitions' sensitivity rates averaged over all House roll call votes on the final passage/adoption of bills, joint resolutions, and conference reports in each Congress ranging from the 47th to 116th.

Figure 15

Difference in Mean Final Passage Sensitivity Rates
 (House Party–Centric Coalition) – (House Floor–Centric Coalition)



Note: Plot presents the point estimate and 95% confidence interval for the House Party–Centric Coalition's average final passage sensitivity rate minus the House Floor–Centric Coalition's average final passage sensitivity rate in each Congress ranging from the 47th to 116th.

For the party coalition, we can see the high and steadily rising contemporary average accuracy results in Figure 11 are driven both by high and steadily rising average sensitivity and specificity rates in Figures 14 and 16, respectively. This finding contrasts with floor coalition results, which show relatively flat average accuracy results in the post-war period being driven by declining average sensitivity rates and rising (but still below the party coalition) average specificity rates. These results indicate that the median core of the majority party consists of a highly predictive set of which MCs will and will not make up final passage coalitions. In other words, given that the final passage coalitions are regularly made up of the MCs surrounding the median of the majority party—and excludes those MCs not surrounding the majority party median—we can extrapolate that House policy is written at or very near the ideal point of the

median majority party MC. Further, we can extrapolate that the centrality of the median majority party MC to the substance of House policy has increased dramatically in the post-war period.

Figure 16

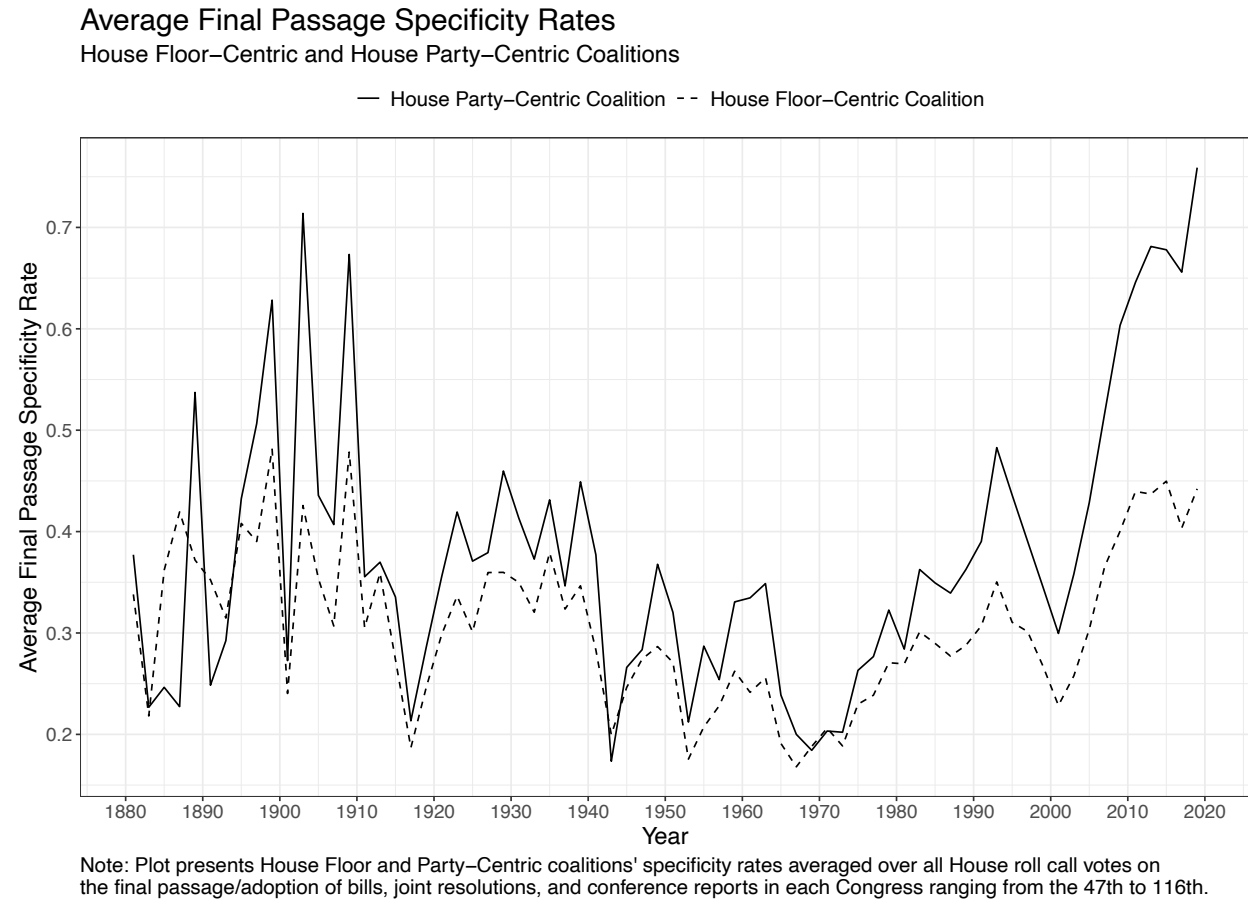
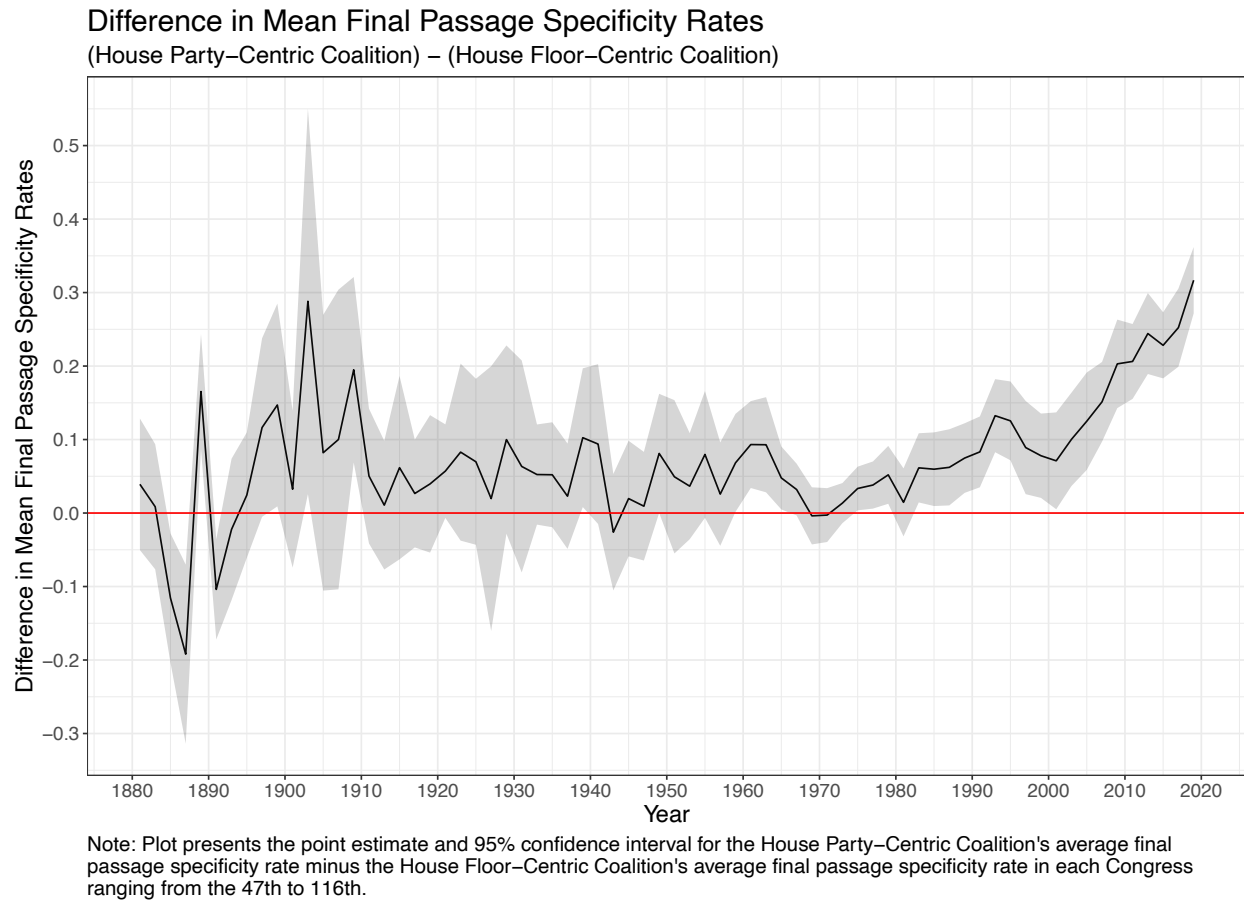


Figure 17



Conclusion

In this paper, we offered a way to think about floor coalition formation in the US House of Representatives. This thought experiment tied together the ideas of what bills the Speaker might oversee forming and moving to the floor as an exercise in positive agenda control to be combined with the set of MCs most likely to be asked initially to support the bill. These 218 MCs are different depending upon who it is that gives the Speaker the powers s/he possesses. We then related this thought experiment to two of the prominent theories of the allocation of powers in the House, majoritarianism and condition party cartel theory (the recent merging of conditional party government and party cartel theories). We developed the unidimensional

version of these theories and the 218 MCs most likely to be asked to support such legislation at the outset of the process. We called these the party- and the floor-centric coalitions, because these are the 218 MCs clustered most closely around the bill locations predicted from either type of coalition, respectively.

We used W-NOMINATE estimates to translate these ideas and more formal, testable hypotheses into empirical predictions. We observed that the results of this process differed over the post-Reconstruction to nearly the current date in congressional history. The most visually obvious observations are that the initial period through about the coming of the Great Depression and New Deal coalition era was typified by partisan polarization and thus large differences between party centered and floor centered coalitions. The New Deal through approximately the Reagan and “Republican Revolution” era was, instead, typified by much tighter clustering around the floor median with low partisan polarization, and low variance in estimated policy preferences. Often, indeed, the few Republican congresses here differed little in expected coalitions from those when the Democrats were in the majority. Of course, in recent decades, partisan polarization has returned and large differences between times when the Democratic Party held the majority and the Republican Party did are observed in both the location of floor centered coalitions and party centered coalitions.

We tested our hypotheses as to whether the party-centric or floor-centric coalitions appeared to better approximate those that actually formed by looking at final passage votes. We take these as a proof of concept of our approach. But we also think of them as perhaps the best roll call votes for assessing what policy position the MC wants to act of and to convey in public. We also suspect that these might be difficult tests in a particular sense. Final passage votes are binary choices between the bill as amended and the reversion point (or what is commonly called

the status quo). Rarely will bills be proposed when the status quo is close to the new bill as being formulated. Why spend the effort to make tiny changes? As a result, while there may be keen competition among sets of MCs in how the bill is formulated, such as between Democrats and Republicans under the party-centric account, or between liberals and conservatives under the floor-centric explanation, final passage might result in particularly large coalitions when the status quo is unsatisfactory, that is far from whichever median is at the center of House politics and far from the policy preferences of many MCs.

The evidence from final passage votes traces the degree of partisan polarization observed in our ideal point estimates. All three of our measures of majority party and of floor centered voting coalitions showed the same result, that party tended to dominate floor in both the early and the current times of high degrees of partisan polarization while neither the party nor the floor centered accounts were more clearly at the core of voting coalitions in New Deal era in between (although the majority party version generally held a small edge over the floor centered version Congress after Congress in this period). We point particularly to the “final passage accuracy” measure (Figure 11 above). It measures how many of the thought-experiment 218 MCs in the majority party or in floor-centric coalitions actually voted for the bill on final passage. That measure seems to hit at the center of the thought-experiment and formal theoretic accounts most directly. Conveniently it also yields the strongest evidence support our proof of concept.

However, the other two measures are consistent with that as well. This point is especially clear for the contemporary period. All three of our measures indicate that the party-centric coalition account is far more powerful empirically than the floor-centric account. Thus, we conclude that the underlying logic of at least the positive agenda control portion of conditional party cartel theory is strongly supported. The majority party shapes roll call voting coalitions (at least on

final passage) very strongly when the condition of the theory appears to be well satisfied and the majority party plays a much smaller role, a role very similar to that of the full chamber on the floor, when the condition is apparently not well satisfied.

There is a great deal more work to be done in pursuing the logic and the empirics of the approach we outlined here. We believe, however, that we have shown its promise for demonstrating the nature of roll call voting coalition formation, with a strong indication that the political party often plays an outsized role in congressional legislating in long eras of American history. It does not always do so, however. Indeed, while we claimed only “proof of concept” for final passage votes, they are an especially important class of votes. For it is only on final passage that the House moves new public policy from its chamber out to the Senate and President, and often to the public. And these votes are particularly conspicuous for MCs in demonstrating where they stand and what they support and thereby providing the public with compelling evidence of how they have represented their constituents in the central task of governing and for what the public can hold them accountable.

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Appendix A

Specification of the Party and Floor “Theoretical” Coalitions

Floor-Centric Theoretical Coalition:

- Take F to be the number of MCs on the floor for which ideal points have been estimated in a given Congress and S to be the number of MCs required for a simple majority on the floor in the same Congress.¹⁸
- If F is even, there are then two median MC ideal points on the floor: a higher median, M_H , and a lower median, M_L .¹⁹
 - If F is even and S is even, then the coalition includes all MCs with ideal points within the set lower bounded by the MC at the $[M_L - [(S/2) - 1]]$ position and upper bounded by the MC at the $[M_H + [(S/2) - 1]]$ position.
 - If F is even and S is odd, then the coalition includes all MCs with ideal points within the set lower bounded by the MC at the $[M_L - (F/4)]$ position and upper bounded by the MC at the $[M_H + (F/4)]$ position. If the absolute value of the ideal point corresponding to the lower bound MC is greater than the absolute value of the ideal point corresponding to the upper bound

¹⁸ F , and therefore S , change congress-to-congress throughout the dataset. This is due, in part, to changes in apportionment concluding in 1910 with the allocation of 435 representatives to the House. For all congresses since then, changes in F and S are due to vacancies in the House (due to deaths, resignations, etc) causing a lower number of MCs than 435 to receive ideal point estimations under the W-NOMINATE procedure.

¹⁹ While we anchor the floor theoretical coalition symmetrically around the floor median ideal point(s), please note that one could well imagine three different ways of composing a floor majority: one that starts at the floor median and counts S MCs to the left of it, another that counts S to the right of it, and the one we use, that counts evenly left and right of it. In this case, it seems evident that open voting on the floor would lead to the floor median via Black and Condorcet reasoning, and with only policy considerations in the final passage vote, those closest to the floor median, whether to the left or to the right of it, would be most enthusiastic in support of getting the floor median through the congressional labyrinth and on to the floor, assured that it should pass.

MC, then the lower bound is contracted by one MC—otherwise, the upper bound is contracted by one MC.²⁰

- If F is odd, then there is one median MC ideal point on the floor, M .
 - If F is odd and S is even, then the coalition includes all MCs with ideal points within the set lower bounded by the MC at the $[M - (S/2)]$ position and upper bounded by the MC at the $[M + (S/2)]$ position. If the absolute value of the ideal point corresponding to the lower bound MC is greater than the absolute value of the ideal point corresponding to the upper bound MC, then the lower bound is contracted by one MC—otherwise, the upper bound is contracted by one MC.
 - If F is odd and S is odd, then the coalition includes all MCs with ideal points within the set lower bounded by the MC at the $[M - [(S - 1)/2]]$ position and upper bounded by the MC at the $[M + [(S - 1)/2]]$ position.

Party-Centric Theoretical Coalition:

- Same as above, replacing F with P , the number of majority party MCs for which ideal points have been estimated in a given Congress.²¹

²⁰ The bound contraction is done to approximate as closely as possible a symmetric distribution of an odd number of MCs around the two median MCs. We choose to reduce the coalition by the more extreme MC on either the right or left instead of the more moderate MC.

²¹ Similarly to the floor theoretical coalitions, one could imagine three majority party coalitions, one that starts at the party's extreme and counts "in" S partisan toward the center, one that starts with most moderate party affiliate and counts S members toward the extreme, or the one we report here, the one that starts at the party center and works outward. Of course, if the majority party holds only a small majority, as in recent congresses, these will not differ very much. But when they hold a more substantial majority, we could imagine the Speaker working to negotiate a more extreme party proposal and contrast that especially with one that seeks to protect the most moderate (and thereby presumably electorally vulnerable) affiliates of the party. In short, we take seriously the idea of party-centric and floor-centric in both the specification of a possible bill at the party/floor median and a working coalition clustered closely around that center.