Opening the Gates

Interest Group Influence on Partisan Agenda Control

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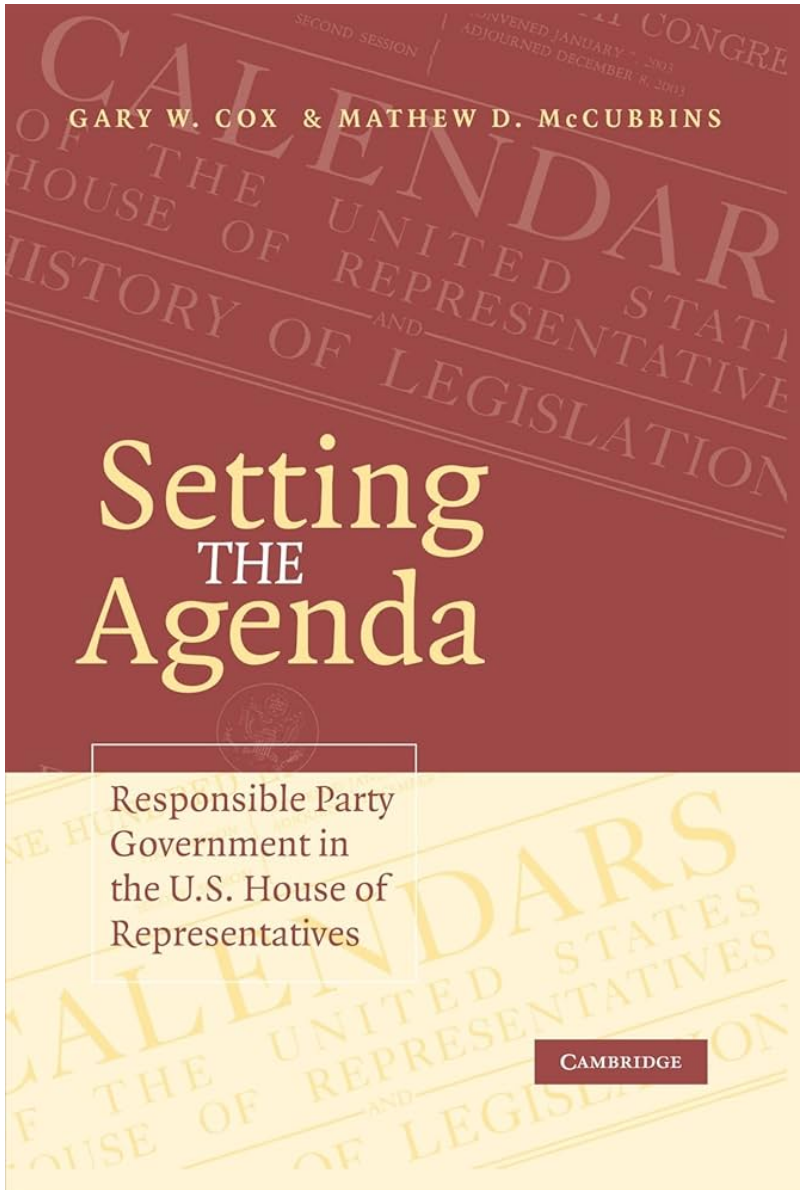
Extending Cox and McCubbins and Solving a Puzzle



Majority Party Gatekeeping

Central claim of Setting the Agenda: a key source of party power is blocking legislation the majority does not like

- Positive agenda influence (passing bills) is hard, but negative agenda control (killing bills) is easy

Post-*StA*, numerous studies of negative agenda control in:

- The US House and Senate (Den Hartog and Monroe 2011; Gailmard and Jenkins 2007; Jenkins and Monroe 2012, 2014)
- State legislatures (Anzia and Jackman 2013; Clark 2012; Cox, Kousser and McCubbins 2010; Shor and Kistner 2024; Thieme 2021)
- Legislatures across the globe(Calvo and Sagarzazu 2011; Crisp et. al. 2011; Chandler, Cox, and McCubbins 2006)

The Puzzle

"The idealized agenda control model...assumes that the majority party can *costlessly* control the legislative agenda. **Given costless control...the model predicts that the majority party should never be rolled**."

– Cox and McCubbins 2005 (p. 106)

"[T]he so-called cartel agenda model cannot account for variation in majority party roll rates because the model predicts a constant roll rate of zero. This observation, in turn, begs the question: **can factors besides disproportionate party influence** or **majority party agenda control** account for such variation?"

– Krehbiel 2007 (p. 3)

One Source of Costs and Benefits: Organized Interests

Our argument: pressure from organized interests can overcome majority party gatekeeping

- Groups control important electoral + legislative resources
- Groups have close connections to majority party gatekeepers

Prior work on interest group influence does not consider the role of majority party gatekeeping (e.g., Baumgartner et. al. 2009; Bertrand et. al. 2014; Butler and Miller 2021; Deardorff and Hall 2006; Groseclose and Snyder 1996; Hall and Wayman 1990, Lorenz 2019)

- Groups wield influence by shaping preferences on bills (via persuasion, vote-buying, etc.)

Empirical Challenges

A major obstacle to studying negative agenda control: the theory makes predictions about bills that never receive a vote

Krehbiel (2007) makes two important points

1. Roll rates are functions **solely of bills that receive floor consideration**
2. In a non-partisan world where parties are just labels attached to preference clusters, **roll rates should be higher for the minority** party

Can we evaluate how interest groups affect negative gatekeeping taking 1) and 2) into account?

Modeling interest group influence on gatekeeping

We construct a simple two-player, one-period model of agenda control

Players: Majority gatekeeper G, chamber floor F

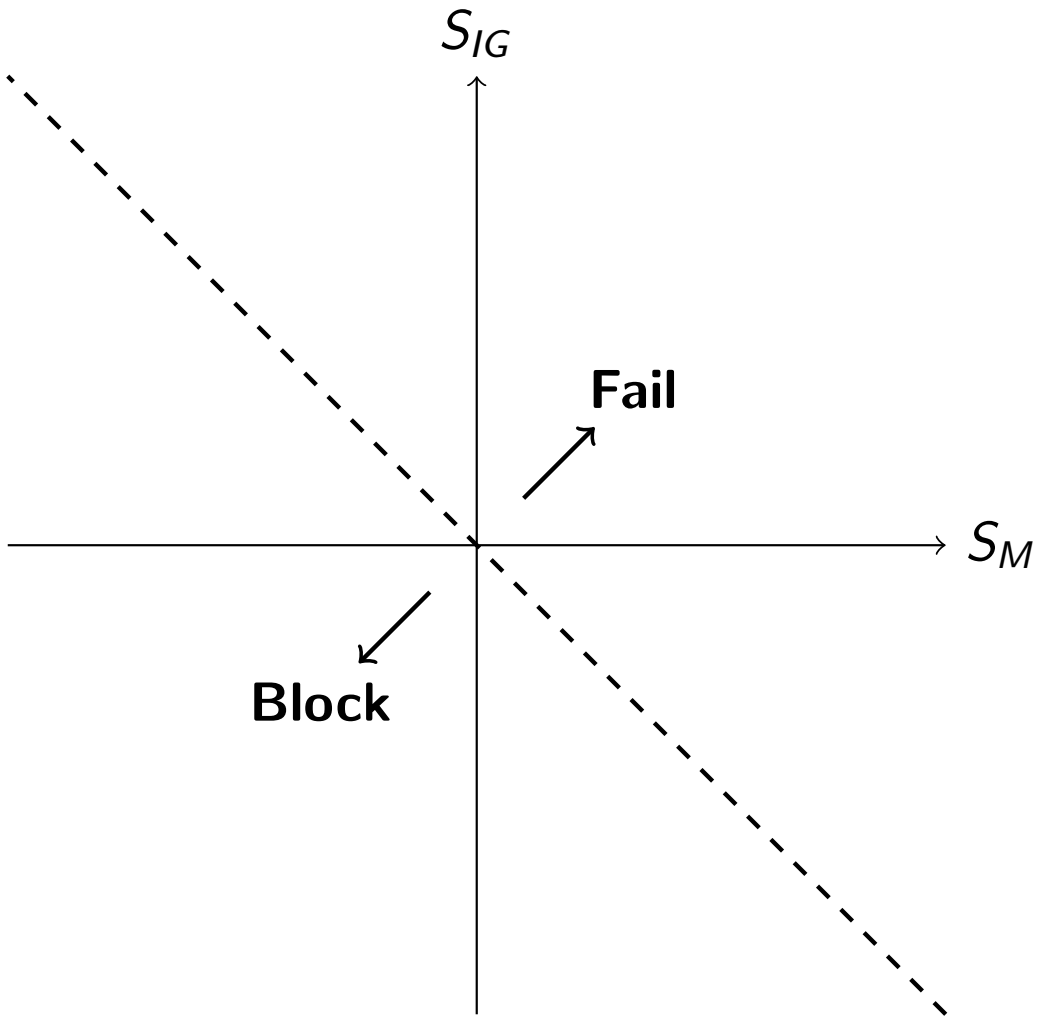
Strategy space:

- G - Advance or block a bill
- F - Pass or reject bill
- Bills characterized by three parameters $S_M, S_F, S_{IG} \in \mathbb{R}$, indicating Majority, Floor, and Interest Group support respectively

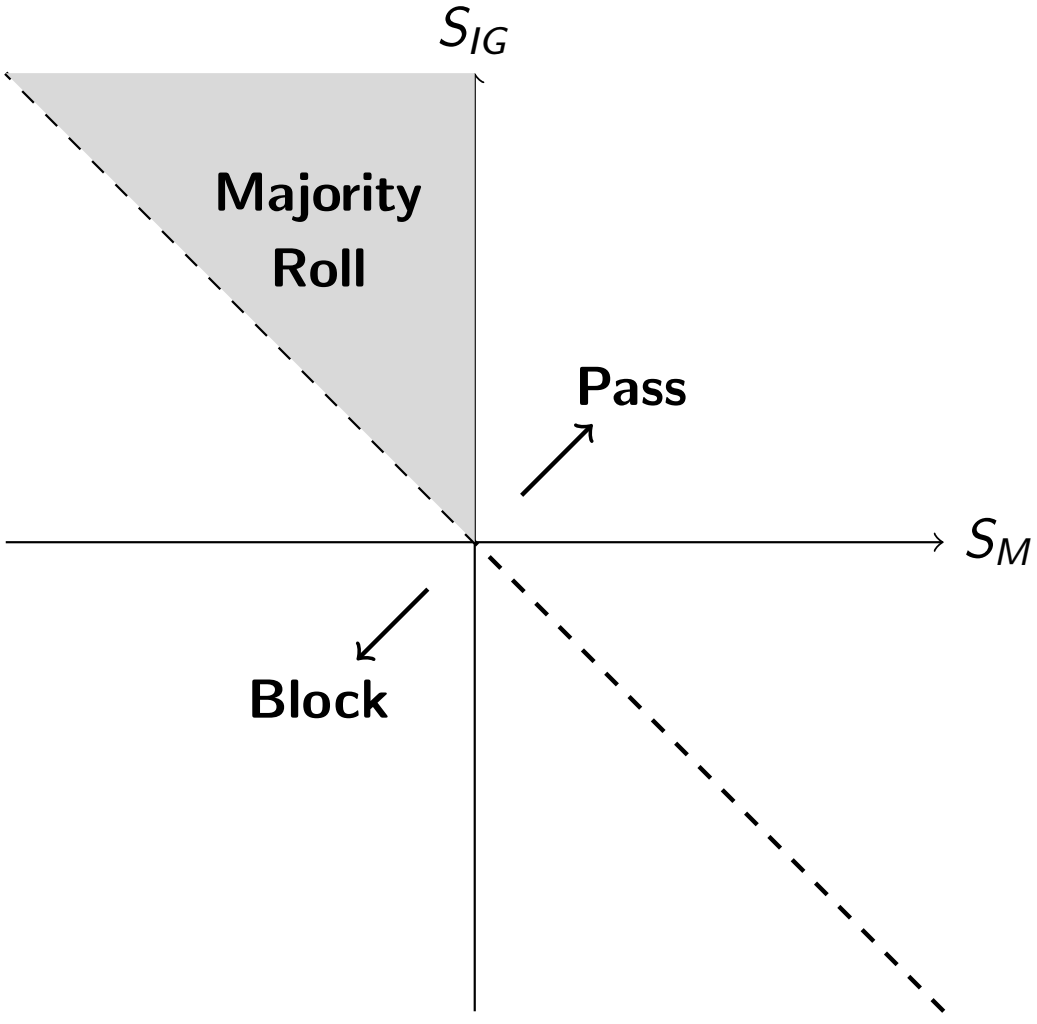
Utility functions:

- $U_F = S_F$ if bill passes, 0 otherwise
- $U_G = S_M + S_{IG}$ if bill advances, 0 otherwise

Bill Outcomes ($S_F <= 0$)



Bill Outcomes ($S_F > 0$)



Empirical Implications

Passage Probability Hypothesis $\Pr(Pass|S_M < 0)$ is increasing in S_{IG}

- *Interpretation*: Among bills opposed by the majority party, bills are more likely to pass when group support is high

Weak Coalition Composition Hypothesis: $\Pr(S_M < 0|Pass)$ is increasing in S_{IG}

- *Interpretation*: Among bills that pass, bills are more likely to roll the majority when group support is high

Strong Coalition Composition Hypothesis: $\Pr(S_M < 0|Pass, S_F)$ is increasing in S_{IG}

- *Interpretation*: Conditioning on floor support (margin of passage), bills are more likely to roll the majority when group support is high

Data Sources

To test the theory, we use roll call voting and lobbying data from 3 states (CO, MT, NE) over a ten-year period (2011-2020)

- Groups required by law to report lobbying activity by bill
- Includes whether they support or oppose the bill

CO + MT have polarized parties + majority gatekeeping institutions

- In CO, there are **kill committees** that party leaders send unacceptable bills to
- In MT, there is gatekeeping at both the **committee** and the **calendar** stage

In contrast, NE is a non-partisan legislature without gatekeeping institutions

- Provides a placebo test for our empiris

Qualitative Evidence on Gatekeeping

"There are certain bills that are philosophically untenable for us," explained Republican Senate President Kevin Grantham. "And there has to be a place for that to go without turning everything into a circus." To put it another way, Grantham often sends bills he doesn't like to the [kil] committee. He trusts its members to derail legislation before it reaches the floor of the GOP-controlled Senate. So far this session, 80 percent of Democratic bills have failed in the committee. The same game plays out in the Democratic-controlled House, where 86 percent of Republican bills have been put out to pasture so far this year

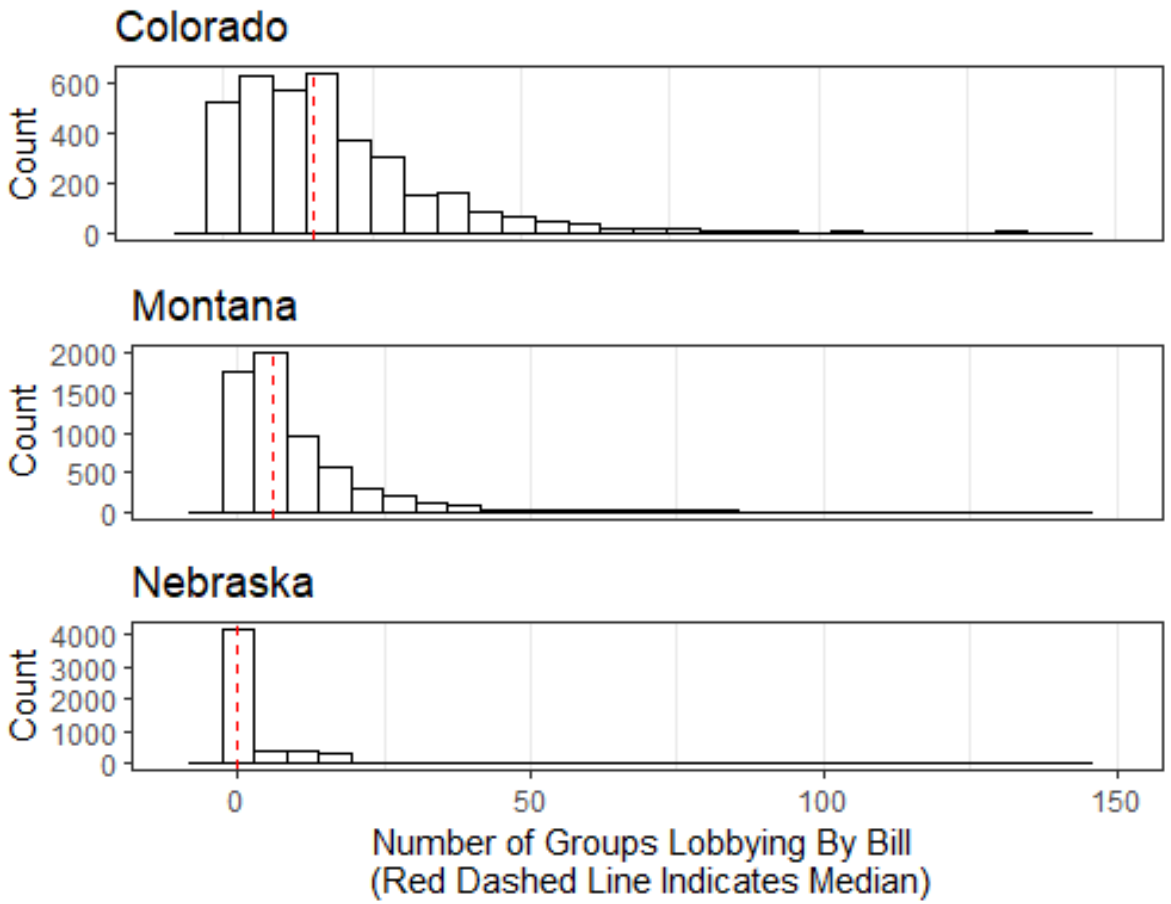
Clear evidence of partisan gatekeeping, but also some exceptions

Quantitative Evidence on Gatekeeping

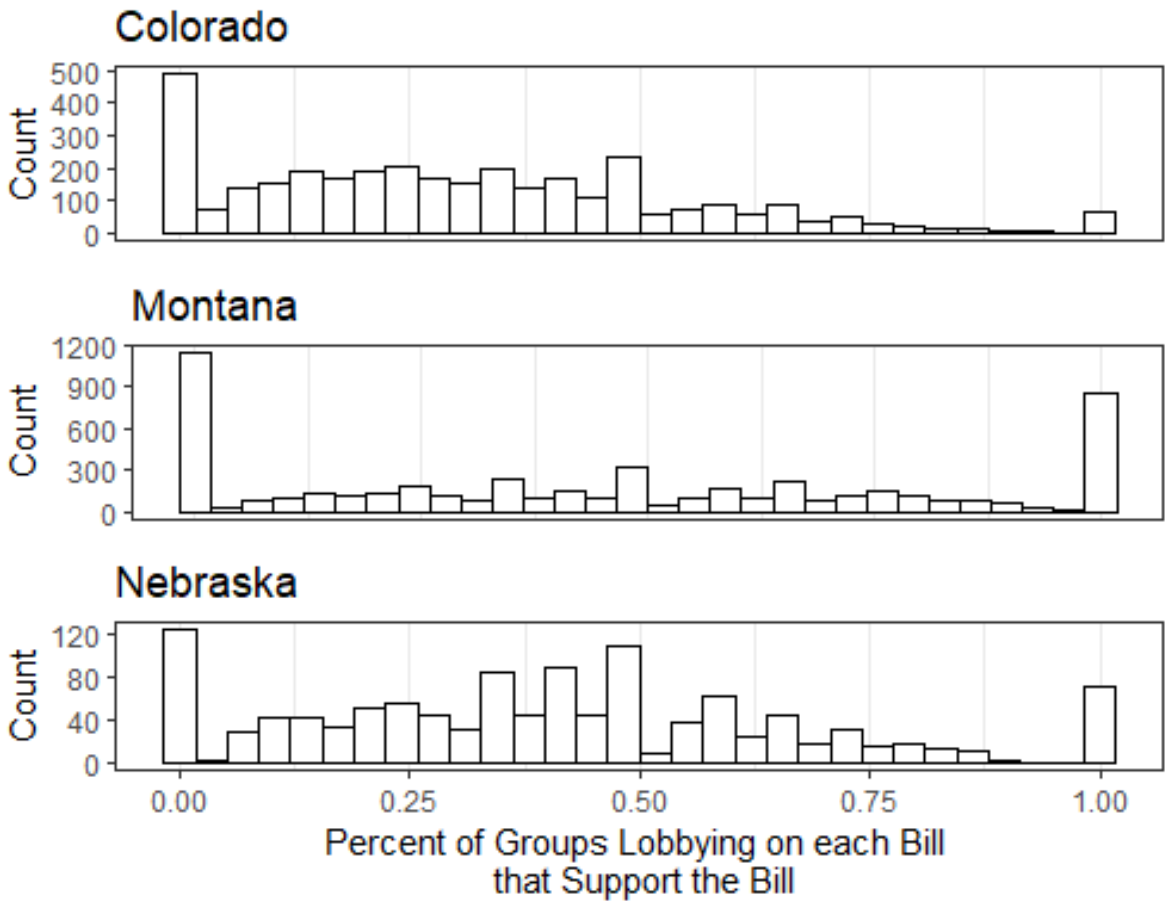
Table 2: Partisan Gatekeeping, Seat, and Roll Ratios for Chambers in Study

State	Chamber	Control	Gatekeeping	Majority / Minority Seat Ratio	Minority / Majority Roll Ratio
CO	Upper	Partisan	Committee	1.1	3.2
CO	Lower	Partisan	Committee	1.4	63.9
MT	Upper	Partisan	Committee	1.4	2.2
MT	Lower	Partisan	Committee/Calendar	1.6	2.1
NE	Upper	Nonpartisan	None	1.8	0.5

Distribution of Lobbying Data



Distribution of Lobbying Support



Evaluating the Model's Prediction

To operationalize the model, we measure our key parameters using

- **Majority support** ($S_M < 0$) – Did a majority of the majority party vote no on final passage?
  - A majority roll is a bill that passes despite a majority of the majority voting against
- **Floor support** (S_F) – Percent Yeas on final passage vote
- **Interest group support** (S_{IG}) – Net group support, defined as log(# Supporting Groups + 1) - log(# Opposing Groups + 1)

Evaluating The Passage Probability Hypothesis

Does group support predict bill passage for majority opposed bills?

	DV: Bill Passage			
	Pooled	Colorado	Montana	Nebraska
Group Support	0.10*	0.08*	0.11*	0.04
	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.04)
Chamber-Session FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Num.Obs.	2,898	877	1,824	197
R2	0.16	0.18	0.10	0.14

Clustered standard errors shown in parentheses. *p<0.05

Evaluating The Weak Coalition Composition Hypothesis

Does group support predict a majority roll among bills that pass?

	DV: Majority Roll			
	Pooled	Colorado	Montana	Nebraska
Group Support	0.01*	0.01*	0.02*	0.00
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.01)
Chamber-Session FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Num.Obs.	12,451	4,835	6,330	1,286
R2	0.03	0.02	0.01	0.01

Clustered standard errors shown in parentheses. *p<0.05

Evaluating the Strong Coalition Composition Hypothesis

Does group support predict a majority roll among bills that pass by identical margins?

	DV: Majority Roll			
	Pooled	Colorado	Montana	Nebraska
Group Support	0.02*	0.01*	0.04*	0.00
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Chamber-Session FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Margin of Passage FEs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Num.Obs.	12,451	4,835	6,330	1,286
R2	0.03	0.02	0.01	0.01

Clustered standard errors shown in parentheses. *p<0.05

Accounting for Alternative Explanations

Would alternative mechanisms of group influence (e.g., persuasion or vote-buying) produce similar results?

To assess this possibility, we conduct simulations in a world with interest group influence but without partisan gatekeeping

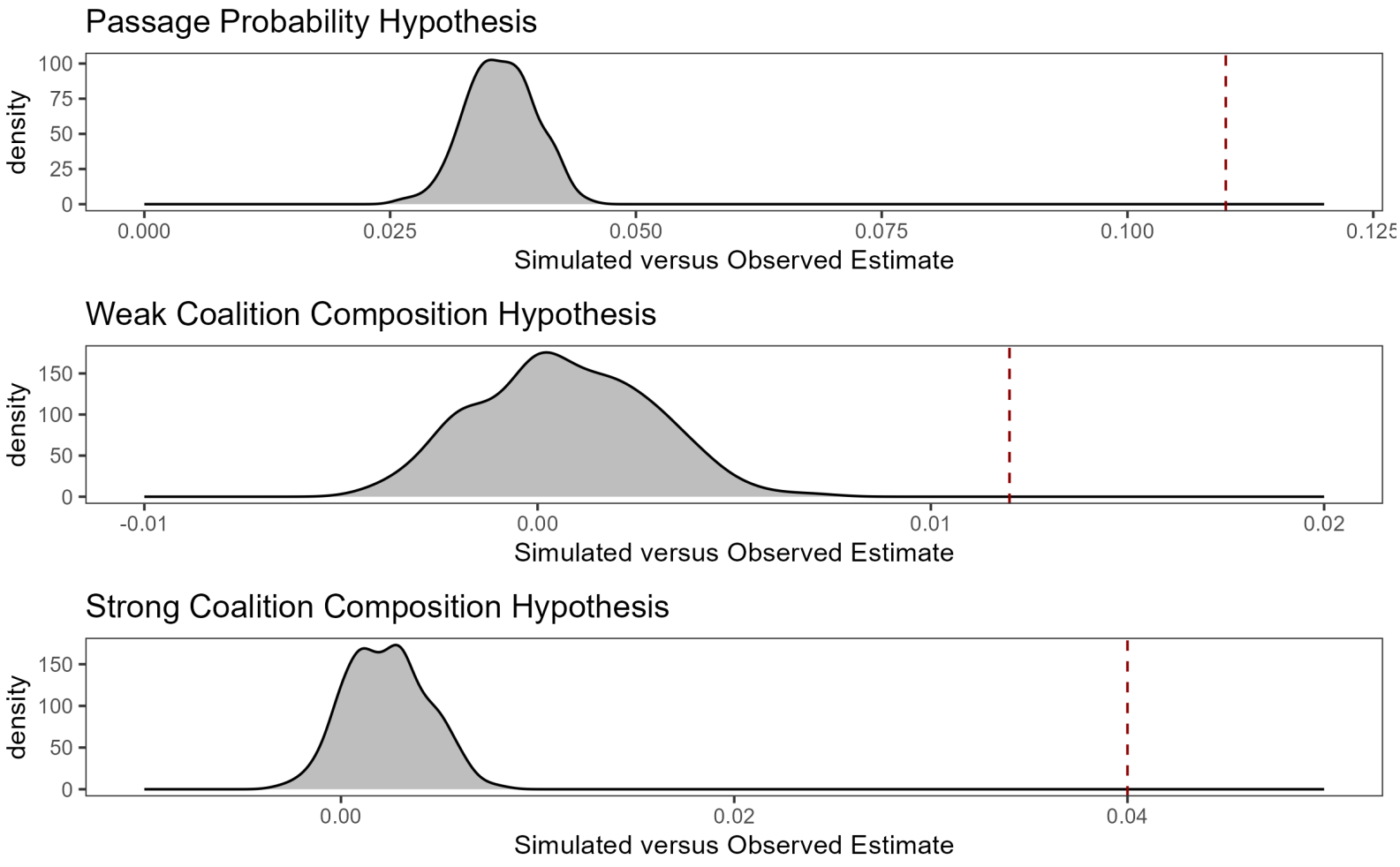
- Generate seat shares and ideal points of majority and minority parties that resemble chambers in our data
- Assume no gatekeeping (proposers drawn randomly among all members) and sincere proposals

Voting rule:

$$\text{Yea}_{ij} \quad \text{iff} \quad |SQ_j - Ideal_i| - |Proposal_j - Ideal_i| + \gamma_j + \epsilon_{ij} > 0$$

where γ_j is a mean-zero RV representing interest group support, with same SD as ϵ_{ij} (a mean-zero non-IG related error)

Simulation Results



Conclusion

Opening the gates provides one explanation for why bills roll the majority party even when majority parties set the agenda

- Other explanations are possible, and merit further study

Counterintuitively, the theory suggests majority party rolls might be evidence of majority party *strength*, not weaknes

- By controlling the gates, majority parties can derive rents from interest groups eager to see legislation pass

Extensions:

- Looking to incorporate group campaign contribution data
- Other ideas?

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