On Measuring Agenda Setting Power

Jeffery A. Jenkins
Department of Politics
University of Virginia
jajenkins@virginia.edu

Nathan W. Monroe
Department of Political Science
University of California, Merced
nmonroe2@ucmerced.edu

April 8, 2013

Abstract

In this paper, we consider a broader typology for measuring agenda setting success and failure in a legislative setting. Our typology goes beyond the most commonly used measure (“rolls”) and includes the full range of agenda setting outcomes: “rolls,” as well as “blocks” (when an agenda setter opposes a proposal that is subsequently defeated), “successes” (when an agenda setter supports a proposal that subsequently passes), and “disappointments” (when an agenda setter supports a proposal that is subsequently defeated). Our typology thus takes into account instances of both positive and negative agenda power. We discuss these measures, and the theoretical questions around them, with the hope that this paper will offer some guidance to scholars taking another look at the House, as well as those analyzing agenda power in other chambers, such as the Senate, the various state legislatures, legislatures in other countries, and international bodies.

Paper prepared for presentation at the 2013 annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, IL.
I. Introduction

As studies of legislative agenda setting originated with the U.S. House in mind and focused primarily on the majority party’s ability to exercise negative agenda control (i.e., to successfully block proposals), the literature has tended to focus on “rolls” (when an agenda setter opposes a proposal that nonetheless passes) as the appropriate measure of agenda power. But rolls are not the whole story when it comes to assessing agenda power, and in fact rolls may not always be the most appropriate or useful measure for investigating negative agenda power. Moreover, these origins have led the literature to overemphasize party as the unit of analysis when looking at agenda setting.

In this paper, we consider a broader typology for measuring agenda setting success and failure in a legislative setting. Our typology includes the full range of agenda setting outcomes – “rolls,” as well as “blocks” (when an agenda setter opposes a proposal that is subsequently defeated), “successes” (when an agenda setters supports a proposal that subsequently passes), and “disappointments” (when an agenda setter supports a proposal that is subsequently defeated) – and thus takes into account instances of both positive and negative agenda power. We also spend considerable time thinking about the link between these various measures and the agenda setting theories they are meant to empirically assess.

A key motivation of the paper is to provide more nuance in measuring agenda power, and to provide more points of connections between theories and measures of agenda setting in various forms. While we hope that this paper will offer some guidance to scholars taking another look at the House, our primary motivation is to set the stage for more appropriate

---

1 Note the separate use of agenda “control” and agenda “power.” Throughout the paper we use both terms but not entirely interchangeably. By agenda power, we mean to reference the abstract ability an agenda setter has to affect the agenda, whether actualized or not. By agenda control, we mean the manifested results of actual attempts to affect the agenda.
analyses of agenda power in other chambers, such as the Senate, the state legislatures, legislatures in other countries, and international bodies.

In the remainder of the paper, we first describe our measurement typology in more detail, and then turn to a discussion of using these measures as counts versus rates (or, put another way, “numerator” vs. “denominator” studies). In the fourth section, we offer a brief discussion of different considerations for choosing the unit of analysis in agenda setting studies, and then turn to a description of the way measures follow from formal spatial theories of agenda setting (using the “Cartel Agenda Model” and “rolls” as our example.) In the final two sections before the conclusion, we offer a detailed discussion of how and when measures of positive and negative agenda power, respectively, follow from agenda setting models.

II. Moving Beyond Rolls

Our typology of agenda setting outcomes is illustrated in Table 1. The rows and columns in this simple 2 x 2 table represent the two pieces of information necessary to construct a measure of agenda setting power: (1) whether a relevant actor or group supports or opposes a given proposal (rows) and (2) whether the proposal passes or fails (columns). This yields four distinct outcome cells, which we label “success,” “disappointment,” “roll,” and “block.”

[Table 1 about here]

As noted, much of the agenda setting literature to date has focused on the case in the lower left cell, a “roll,” where an agenda setter opposes a proposal that nonetheless passes. This is an indicator of a failure to effectively exercise negative agenda control. However, this measure may not fully capture the presence of negative agenda power. If we move beyond the contemporary U.S. House, where defeating objectionable proposals is largely a pre-floor activity and thus only failures (or rolls) are easily observable using roll call data, and examine a chamber
where most screening is done by manipulating floor votes or through a mix of pre-floor and floor-vote agenda power, then looking at “blocks” – instances where an agenda setter opposes a proposal that is subsequently defeated (lower right cell) – would be equally or more instructive in measuring negative agenda power.

The logic for the cells in the top row, which are indicators of positive agenda power, is slightly different. If a proposal supported by the agenda setter gets to the floor and passes – resulting in a “success” (upper left cell) – this indicates the favorable exercise of positive agenda control. But, to get a full picture of positive agenda power, one must also look at “disappointments,” those cases in which an agenda setter supports a proposal that subsequently goes down to defeat (upper right cell). While disappointeds may not be numerous in the contemporary U.S. House, where the majority party rarely moves forward on a proposal unless it knows it has the votes, the same may not be true in other legislative settings where agenda setting power typically manifests through vote buying at the floor stage.

Combinations of these four outcome categories can also be helpful, especially in the context of understanding whether an agenda setter effectively gets what he wants. If one seeks a measure of how often an agenda setter “wins” in his pursuit of agenda power, then “successes” and “blocks” can be aggregated. Likewise, if one seeks a measure of how often an agenda setter “loses” in his pursuit of agenda power, then “disappointments” and “rolls” can be aggregated. Thus, while agenda power type is organized left to right by row (categories of negative agenda power outcomes in the top row, categories of positive agenda power outcomes in the bottom row), the end result of agenda power (for the agenda setter) is organized along the diagonals (wins on the positive slope, losses on the negative slope).
III. Numerators and Denominators

To this point, we have talked about agenda setting outcomes, like rolls and their companion categories, in terms of distinct units. This would lead to the construction of a measure based on a “count” of such outcomes. A count of rolls, for example, would suggest that, for the agenda setter, four rolls (in Congress $x$) is twice as bad in terms of exercising negative agenda control as two rolls (in Congress $y$). Such a count-based approach is often referred to as a numerator study. Alternatively, a count of actual agenda setting outcomes, like rolls, could be compared to a similar count of possible or hypothetical outcomes. For example, a ratio-based measure of rolls (or “roll rate”) could be constructed – the count of actual rolls over the count of possible rolls (or roll opportunities). A higher roll rate (in Congress $x$) for an agenda setter would be worse than a lower roll rate (in Congress $y$), as this would indicate a worse performance in exercising negative agenda control controlling for the size of roll opportunities. This ratio-based approach is often referred to as a denominator study.

Both numerator and denominator approaches appear in legislative politics studies. And a spirited debate has appeared in the literature on lawmaking as to which approach is better, more appropriate, or more informative, with some (Mayhew 1991; 2005) arguing in favor of numerators while others advocating the use of denominators (Edwards, Barrett, and Peake 1997; Binder 2003).\footnote{Much of the debate centers on the validity of the chosen denominator in denominator studies. Numerators (counts) are readily observable, but denominators are often hypothetical – or must be constructed from different sources, based on certain assumptions. For specific arguments regarding the value of numerators versus denominators in lawmaking studies, see Mayhew (1991, 34-37; 2005, 200-02) and Binder (2003, 35-38).} In the literature on agenda setting power, numerators (counts) are typically provided as descriptive data, but denominators (rates) are more often used as dependent variables in multivariate analyses. The most common denominator is the roll rate developed by Cox and McCubbins (2002; 2005), but other denominators include the success rate (Jenkins and Nokken
2008) and the win rate (Lawrence, Maltzman, and Smith 2006; Smith 2007; Jenkins and Stewart 2013).³

All else equal, if methodological issues are not serious, denominators seem preferable to numerators, since “performance” is relative and must be interpreted in the context of opportunity. For example, how often an agenda setter gets rolled is dependent, in part, on how many would-be rolls he is confronted with – a rate (ratio) better captures the environmental context. In some cases, however, numerators might be preferred, if denominators cannot be constructed easily or validly. On the broader issue of numerators (counts) versus denominators (ratios) in analyzing agenda setting power, we believe that the measure used should first and foremost reflect the theory being tested. And here a discussion of the roll rate devised by Cox and McCubbins (2002; 2005) is useful.

Cox and McCubbins construct their roll rate measure for minority and majority parties by Congress, using final-passage votes as the set of cases. This roll rate measure was developed with the intent of testing their model/theory of negative agenda control. Very simply, Cox and McCubbins examine how often a majority of the majority opposed a bill on final passage that nevertheless went on to pass, relative to the full set of final-passage votes considered in a Congress. Looking back at our 2 x 2 table (Table 1), one can see that their roll rate measure considers rolls (lower left cell) relative to outcomes in all four cells. That is, their roll rate is constructed by dividing rolls by \([\text{rolls} + \text{blocks} + \text{successes} + \text{disappointments}]\).

The problem with this construction is that outcomes associated with both positive and negative agenda control get conflated in what is, ostensibly, a measure intended to test only

---

negative agenda control. For example, imagine a majority party that is active and energetic in pushing a positive agenda – if this is the case, the number of outcomes that fall in the top two cells (successes and disappointments) of Table 1 will be large. This active display of positive agenda power – trying to get new policies that the majority favors onto the agenda and passed into law – will in fact lead to a decrease in the majority’s roll rate, as constructed by Cox and McCubbins. This result is, of course, perverse, as a true measure of negative agenda control should not be affected by cases involving positive agenda control.⁴

Given the problematic nature of the Cox and McCubbins roll rate measure, what can be done? Two options seem available: (1) using rolls as a count (numerator) or (2) constructing a new ratio (rate) that is more closely tied to the theory in question (negative agenda control). If the latter is chosen, a new denominator is needed. One option is to try to assemble a hypothetical set of cases that might have rolled the majority party, if such bills would have been allowed on the agenda (and thus were not excluded by the majority). Because negative agenda control is directly tied to pre-floor behavior, and the roll rate is a floor-based measure, the connection between the observed cases (numerator) and the hypothetical cases (denominator) is slippery. Another option is to consider only those cases that cannot be excluded at the pre-floor stage by the majority – in which case, the roll rate would be premised on rolls relative to rolls + blocks. A low roll rate, therefore, would indicate that the majority party on the floor is able to successfully defeat (block) most of the proposals that it would have preferred to exclude at the pre-floor stage.

A set of simple regressions indicates how results can be sensitive to the composition of the dependent variable (i.e., whether numerators or denominators are used, how the denominator

---

⁴ This criticism can also be leveled against the success rate developed by Jenkins and Nokken (2009), which divides final-passage successes by all final-passage votes (even those associated with negative agenda control outcomes, like rolls and blocks). The various win rate measures seem immune to this criticism, however, as they relate to agenda control success generally and thus divide “wins” (successes + blocks) by “wins” + “losses” (successes + blocks + rolls + disappointments).
measure is constructed, etc.). Table 2 provides three columns of results, based on regressions that focus on the minority party in the House between the 45th (1877-79) and 105th (1997-98) Congresses. The dependent variable in the column 1 regression is the basic roll rate measure developed by Cox and McCubbins (2002; 2005); the dependent variable in the column 2 regression uses a count of minority rolls (and thus not a rate); and the dependent variable in the column 3 regression uses a “corrected” roll rate measure (where rolls are divided by rolls + blocks). (Note that the correlation between the “standard” and “corrected” roll rate measures is a significant, but somewhat modest, 0.459.) Independent variables include a distance measure (the absolute value of the first-dimension DW-NOMINATE distance between the floor median and the minority-party median by Congress) and dummy variables for (a) Congresses that have operated under the Reed Rules, (b) Congresses between the revolt against House Speaker Cannon and the packing of the Rules Committee, and (c) Congresses in the post-Reform era.5

For the count regression (column 2), we also used a linear time trend variable, to account for the increase in final-passage votes over time (and thus the greater possibility of rolls occurring).

We first note some continuity; specifically, the key prediction from Cox and McCubbins’ theory is that distance should be positive and significantly related to the roll measure.6 And this is true of all three of our measures – with the strongest results attached to the two roll rates (the roll count falls just outside of the 10% level). Beyond this continuity, there is some interesting variation across the columns of results. The Reed Rules variable is positive and significant in the

---

5 We follow Cox and McCubbins (2005) in our coding of these dummy variables. Reed takes on a value of 0 in Congresses 45-50 and 52, and 1 otherwise. Revolt takes on a value of 1 in Congresses 62-86 and 0 otherwise. Reform takes on a value of 1 in Congresses 93-105, and 0 otherwise.

6 That is, because the minority party in the House doesn’t possess negative agenda power, it will not have a “blockout zone” like the majority. Rather, the minority has a “roll zone.” Distance, therefore, is positively related to the minority’s “roll zone,” in that greater distance indicates (all else equal) more status quos that can be readjusted to the floor median (to the harm of a majority of the minority).
standard roll rate regression, but washes out in the other two. The revolt period, which
decentralized power in the chamber and whittled away at majority party power, is negative in all
three regressions (as expected), but significant in only the first two. The reform era is especially
important in accounting for an increase in rolls, but is not significantly related to the roll rate
(however constructed). And the time trend is positive and significant in the roll count regression
(as expected).

This simple set of regressions indicates that results are (or, at least, can be) clearly
sensitive to measurement. That is, the basic structure of the dependent variables (whether a
numerator/denominator, how to construct the denominator) will affect the type and magnitude of
results that are generated. This underscores that one must be especially careful in variable
construction, and that the best justification for a particular variable (in this case, a dependent
variable) – at least in our minds – is the closeness to which it approximates the theory being
tested. We return to this idea after a short digression in the next section.

IV. A Slight Digression: Considering the Unit of Analysis

In conceptualizing measures of agenda power, one thing to consider is the possible (and
proper) units of analysis, which might range from the individual level all the way up to the
chamber level. Here we briefly discuss four possible units of analysis, not as an exhaustive list,
but as a guide for the most common levels of agenda power measurement.

Recall that, as shown in Table 1, in constructing measures of agenda power, we are
cconcerned with two dimensions: whether a proposal passes, and whether an agenda-setting actor
supported or opposed it. Identifying whether a proposal passes or fails if largely invariant across
and unrelated to different levels of analysis. However, properly identifying which are the
relevant “agenda-setting actors,” in order to measure support or opposition, varies across levels, and is not always obvious.

At the most disaggregated level, one might look at individual-level measures of agenda power. In effect, this means looking at whether a single political actor supported or opposed a proposal (usually as indicated by a recorded vote), and looking at whether that proposal passed or failed. In some cases, the theoretical motivation for looking at individual-level data could be an assumption that a particular actor (or set of actors) unilaterally exercises agenda power (e.g., committee chairs). More commonly, though, individual-level analysis will be employed to test hypotheses regarding whether and how much individuals are hurt or helped by the agenda power of other actors (e.g., are rank-and-file House members protected by the negative agenda control exercised by majority party leaders?).

Moving up in aggregation, parties are the most common units of analysis in measuring agenda power. Here, measures typically assess whether the party supports or opposes a proposal based on which way a majority of the membership votes. Thus, for example, a “majority party roll” is a proposal that passes with at least a majority of the majority party voting against it. Note that measures of this sort usually follow explicitly from theoretical assumptions about the nature of party agenda setting agents. Specifically, these theories often assume that party agenda setters are delegated power that they use to further the interest of the majority of their party. In this sense, then, the translation from theory to measure is quite direct. However, inasmuch as that assumption does not hold (e.g., party leaders act in the interests of only the party elite), one must adjust the measure to reflect this.

Note that, in general, one can employ less aggregated measures to test theories that focus on more aggregated units (e.g., individual-level data to test a theory of partisan agenda power), but not the reverse.
For scholars looking at multi-party systems (or instances where strong party factions exist, such as the conservative coalition during the mid-20th Century U.S. House), one can use a coalition-level unit of analysis. In other words, one might be interested in whether and how effectively a coalition of parties manages the agenda. Note that at this level of analysis, there are many possible ways to measure support or opposition. For example, it may be the case that within a coalition of parties, the members *within* each party act very cohesively, and thus the important variance is across parties within the coalition. If so, one might construct a measure that tracked whether each party’s leader supported or opposed a proposal. However, where parties are of significantly different sizes, or are ideologically far afield, some sort of weighting scheme (guided by theoretical assumptions) may be appropriate.

Finally, though rare, for some theories it may be useful to treat legislative chambers, as well as executive and judicial actors, as the units of analysis. Here, we have in mind theories of separation of powers, where the legislative agenda (or perhaps even a more broadly conceived domestic policy agenda) are determined through inter-institutional processes. A naive, baseline approach in this case would be to simply consider the votes of a majority of the legislative chambers and courts, and the preference of the executive actor. However, as with the coalitional level, the possible ways to measure support or opposition vary widely, and depend heavily on theoretical assumptions about the internal procedures of each actor/body.

**V. From Theory to Measures**

As noted, the heavy emphasis on rolls is a product of the relationship between that measure and the “cartel agenda model,” as developed and tested by Cox and McCubbins (2002; 2005). Their model is a one-dimensional representation of a policy space, where pivotal actors’ ideal points play the essential role in generating various hypotheses.
More formally, the model assumes that the majority median $M_j$ (or party leaders acting in the interests of $M_j$) decides whether to allow consideration of any bills dealing with the given policy dimension $j$. If consideration of a bill dealing with dimension $j$ is allowed, the bill is considered under an open rule and passes at the ideal point of the floor median $F_j$. As shown in Figure 1, $M_j$ therefore blocks consideration of any bills that propose to amend the status quo $SQ_j$, if $SQ_j$ is in the “majority blockout zone” between $2M_j - F_j$ and $F_j$. If $SQ_j$ is outside the majority blockout zone, however, then policy on dimension $j$ will be moved to $F_j$.

With this in mind, it is easy to see how predictions about rolls follow naturally from the theory. Recall that a majority party roll is an instance where a majority of the majority party votes against a bill that then passes. In the theory, by assuming a one-dimensional arrangement of member preferences, the cartel model then necessarily assumes that the preference of the median member of the majority party will always be in concert with a majority of her co-partisans. Thus, by coding outcomes as rolls when a majority of the party votes against, the measure is in close harmony with the assumptions of the model.

Moreover, the measure lends itself to straightforward, testable hypotheses. If the majority party is perfectly successful at screening out bills that address status quos in the blockout zone, then no rolls should occur. And, short of perfection, the more effective they are at controlling the agenda, the lower the roll rate should be.

Given Cox and McCubbins’ model, rolls are a well conceived measure. But that is a function of very specific assumptions contained in their model. In this paper, our aim is to consider how we might broaden our measurement tool kit, and accordingly we move beyond the narrow confines of the cartel model. In doing so, however, it is crucial that we keep theory in
mind. And while our intent is to suggest a class of measures that might be applied in a variety of theoretical settings, we can rest our measures on some general theoretical principles that are likely to apply across a number of contexts.

In the next two sections, we consider when and how different measures of negative and positive agenda power are theoretically appropriate.

**VI. Measuring Negative Agenda Power: Rolls vs. Blocks**

In attempting to measure negative agenda power, the measure of choice has overwhelmingly been rolls. But this preference is at least in part due to a path dependence that began with the theoretical foundations laid down to explain a very specific legislative environment: the U.S. House of Representatives.

In pursuit of an explanation of agenda power in the House, the dominant partisan theories (Rohde 1991; Cox and McCubbins 1993, 2005) assume that the mechanisms of agenda control happen predominantly at the pre-floor stage. That is, party leaders are able to filter what makes it to the House floor by leveraging committees, special rules, and scheduling discretion to keep unfavorable proposals from ever reaching a vote of the whole chamber. Thus, if the majority party is exercising effective negative agenda control, there should be no direct evidence of this when we observe floor actions. Instead, scholars are left to look for what Gailmard and Jenkins (2007) refer to as the “fingerprints” of partisan agenda control.

In this context, given the choice of either blocks or rolls, employing rolls is the correct course of action. If all of the agenda control occurs at the pre-floor stage, then it is not clear what a theory would predict about blocks (or a block rate). Recall that a block, in this case, is an instance where a majority of the party votes against a proposal on the floor and it subsequently fails. But given the assumption that bills of this sort should be *screened out*, one might view
blocks as agenda control failures. On the other hand, since they do not pass, they ultimately do not harm the party (at least in a policy-change sense). Thus, observing a higher versus lower block rate is theoretically ambiguous in this setting.

Rolls, on the other hand, are clear failures, and thus theoretically unambiguous. If the majority of the party votes against the bill that nonetheless passes, it demonstrates a failure of negative agenda control. Accordingly, pre-floor agenda control theories make a clear prediction: more effective agenda control leads to a lower roll rate.

So when are blocks the right measure of negative agenda power? In short, the answer is that as the exercise of negative agenda control shifts from the pre-floor stage to the floor stage, blocks become a more useful measure. The more proposals that are let through to the floor with the intent to kill them by manipulating the floor votes of members, the more blocks are a pure reflection of effective negative agenda power.

To see this more formally, consider Figure 2. Here, we have constructed a model similar to the cartel model shown in Figure 1, with three key differences. First, we have relabeled the actors to fit a broader set of theoretical conditions. Namely, we refer to an “agenda setter” rather than a majority median, and a “median voter” instead of a floor median. Second, in the present example, we still assume that the agenda setter is the median member of some relevant group of actors, but we assume that agenda control takes place on the floor, rather than at the pre-floor stage. Third, we show two iterations of the model: in the top version, the agenda setter is further from the median voter than in the bottom version, and thus, importantly, the agenda setter’s blockout zone is smaller in the bottom version.

[Figure 2 about here]
This comparison between the two iterations illuminates a key contrast we wish to make between blocks and rolls. In a world where the agenda setter exercises perfectly effective agenda control, whether it is prior to the floor or on the floor, the roll rate should be constant regardless of the size of the blockout zone. Rolls are failures, and thus only observable when there is a lapse in agenda control, regardless of how many possible status quos might fall in the interval that could roll the agenda setter.

The same is not true of blocks. Since blocks are measures of successful negative agenda control outcomes, they will increase and decrease with the number of bills that threaten to roll the agenda setter. As we see in the bottom version of Figure 2, there are fewer of status quos that would roll the agenda setter, as denoted by the gray box to the left of the blockout zone. Thus, all else equal, we would expect the number of blocks (and the block rate) to be lower in the bottom version of Figure 2.

Note, however, that rolls remain relevant. To better understand the relationship between blocks and rolls as agenda control shifts toward the floor stage, consider the extreme case where negative agenda control is employed entirely on the floor. Here, every bill that is a threat to the party comes up for a floor vote. Thus, as discussed in Section III, these bills are captured entirely by the sum of all blocks plus rolls. Thus, the block rate and the roll rate (assuming, in each case, that blocks plus rolls are used as the denominator) are mirror image indicators of the effectiveness – or lack thereof – of negative agenda control.

**VII. Measuring Positive Agenda Power: Disappointments vs. Successes**

Where negative agenda power may take place at either the pre-floor or floor stage (or both), positive agenda power must at least exist at the floor stage in order for an agenda setter to
exercise effective positive agenda control. However, the theoretically expected relationship between agenda power and “success,” as defined by our measurement matrix in Table 1, depends on where in a given policy space the targeted status quo resides. Thus, in order to illuminate “where successes come from”, it will be useful to ask, what is the minimum level of agenda power required to produce a “success” for any given status quo?

To illustrate this discussion, Figure 3 takes our previous policy space, with an agenda setter and a median voter, and breaks it up into four regions. To begin, recall that the basic median voter model suggests that in this single dimension, in the absence of any agenda control, any status quo that is addressed will be moved to the median voter’s ideal point. Also recall that a “success” (as we have defined it) requires that a bill pass with the support of the relevant agenda setter or group.

[Figure 3 about here]

With this in mind, notice that for any status quo in Regions 1 and 4, successes will accrue to the agenda setter as long as she has a monopoly on negative agenda power. That is, as long as there is no other agenda setter with the ability (and incentive) to block status quos in Regions 1 and 4, the agenda setter can simply allow proposals that move these status quos to the center of the policy space, where they will pass (by the median voter theorem) with the agenda setter’s support (and the support of at least a majority of the members she represents).

The support of the agenda setter, in this case, comes from the basic spatial distances defined by the region. The median inflection point represents the point at which the agenda

---

8 Consider that one important distinction between measuring positive and negative agenda power is the nature of the unobservables. When measuring negative agenda power, successes are often unobservable, whereas positive agenda power suffers from unobservable failures. Imagine, for example, that a given agenda setter wishes to advance a proposal, but recognizes that it will ultimately fail. In that case, she may not make the proposal at all, which is the product of ineffective positive agenda control – but this is difficult or impossible to measure. A less extreme version of the same problem comes from failures that occur prior to the measurement stage. Where proposals are screened out at the pre-floor stage, roll-call based measures of positive agenda power will not include these cases.
setter would be indifferent between a status quo and a new policy at the median voter’s ideal point. Thus, the agenda setter will prefer the median voter’s preferred policy to all status quos in Region 1. The same logic more obviously applies to status quos in Region 4.

This logic sets the stage for understanding the dynamics within Regions 2 and 3. The agenda setter prefers every status quo in these regions to a new policy at the median voter’s ideal point. Thus, in a basic negative agenda control model, where the agenda setter’s only options are to block proposals or allow them at the median voter’s ideal point, the agenda setter will simply block any proposals that address status quos in these regions.9

Thus, the minimum conditions to produce successes from status quos in Regions 2 and 3 are higher. First, consider what is necessary for Region 2. The agenda setter will prefer to move all of these status quos closer to the median voter (simply due to the fact that both the agenda setter and the median voter are on the same side – to the right – of these status quos), and thus any proposal the agenda setter will make will pass. However, in order for proposals to pass with the support of the agenda setter, the proposal must stop short of the median voter’s ideal point, such that the proposal is closer to the agenda setter’s ideal point than is the status quo. Thus, in addition to having a negative agenda power monopoly, the agenda setter must also have proposal placement power in order to generate successes in Region 2. This is akin to the agenda setter being able to make take-it-or-leave-it offers to the median voter. The typical mechanism, in the context of the U.S. House, is through the use of a closed rule.

Now consider what must be true in the toughest case, Region 3. Here, status quos are in perfect tension between the agenda setter and the median voter. That is, any move toward the agenda setter will be rejected by the median voter, and thus will fail. But the agenda setter will

---

9 More generally, the combination of Regions 2 and 3 represent the “blockout zone” in Cox and McCubbins’ Party Cartel Model.
not propose (or will block) any move toward the median voter, as she would prefer the status quo in that case.

Thus, in order to generate a success in this region, the agenda setter must propose to move policy away from the median voter, but persuade the median (and some individuals to his left) to vote for the proposal, and against their sincere policy preferences. In order to achieve this vote buying, the agenda setter might employ some combination of side payments, threats, and bargaining (Snyder 1991, Jenkins and Monroe 2012). Thus, in region three, the minimum conditions for a success are all three positive agenda setting powers: negative agenda control monopoly, proposal placement, and vote buying.

So how do “disappointments” come about? Recall that a disappointment is when a proposal fails to pass, despite the support of the agenda setter. To understand how these outcomes occur, we can piggyback on the logic just used to understand successes. In Regions 1 and 4, any proposal that will pass will also have the support of the agenda setter. Thus, since failing proposals by definition cannot be disappointments, then disappointments are not expected to occur for status quos in these regions.

Region 2, on the other hand, can have proposals that pass without the support of the agenda setter (including all proposals made at the median voter’s ideal point). But these failures (i.e., letting proposals slip too far towards the median voter) will produce rolls, not disappointments. Thus, disappointments are not expected in this region either.

Of course, by assuming proposal power and/or vote buying for status quos in Regions 1, 2, and 4, we could produce expected disappointments in those cases too. And we would encourage anyone using disappointments as a measure to careful think through these theoretical
issues. But, for the purposes of illustrating this fundamental typology, and confining ourselves to a relatively simpler set of assumptions, disappointments can only come from agenda-setting failures vis-à-vis status quos in Region 3. That is, they only occur when the agenda setter attempts to move policy away from the median voter’s ideal point, but fails to successfully buy enough votes – which results in the proposal failing. Understandably, then, disappointments in the modern U.S. House are very rare, both because there are few status quos that are capable of producing a disappointment and because the agenda setter will likely have the votes lined up well in advance of the proposal being considered by the full chamber.

In sum, choosing which measure(s) of positive agenda power is appropriate depends both on the assumed powers of the agenda setter and on the range of status quos being addressed. By viewing positive agenda power as an additive typology of specific types of agenda control, scholars will not only have more conceptually satisfying measures, but will perhaps also be able to generate cleaner, clearer predictions from their theoretical models.

**VIII. Conclusion**

Our goal in this paper has been to draw greater attention to issues of typology, measurement, and theory estimation in research on legislative agenda setting power. Much of the existing literature relies too heavily on one measure – “rolls” – while neglecting the existence and appropriateness (given the particular theoretical question being pursued) of other such measures. Thus, we first lay out a typology, based on how an agenda setter behaves (supporting or opposing a legislative proposal) and what the outcome of the legislative process is (whether the proposal passes or fails). For any given proposal, this leads to four possible outcomes – the

---

10 Probably the most likely theoretical scenario for disappointments outside of Region 3 would involve the agenda setter attempting to “leap frog” policy over the median voter (Monroe and Robinson 2008). In this case, the agenda setter could take a status quo from Region 4 and make a proposal in Region 3, but place it too far away from the median voter to draw his support, and fail to successful buy enough votes to get the proposal passed.
now-ubiquitous “roll,” as well as a “block,” a “success,” and a “disappointment.” We then spend considerable time talking about how such outcomes, when aggregated, might be used effectively as dependent variables in multivariate studies. The rub is whether such an aggregation is sufficient on its own (leading to a count variable, or a numerator study), or whether the aggregation must be compared to some larger aggregation of possible/hypothetical outcomes that could have occurred (leading to a ratio or “rate” variable, or a denominator study). Invariably, as we show in a simple set of minority-party regressions, the choice of dependent variable will influence the types of results that are generated.

These typology/measurement issues then lead us into a broader discussion of the issues involved in moving from theory to measures. More than likely, in our pursuit of theory estimation, any measures that we develop/adopt will be flawed in some way. We note, for example, that the Cox and McCubbins roll rate measure conflates positive and negative agenda control outcomes in what is ostensibly a measure simply of negative agenda control. Our own “corrected” roll rate measure, which only taps negative agenda control outcomes (rolls + blocks), is likely inflated (and perhaps considerably so), because it excludes a distribution of block outcomes at the pre-floor stage (when the majority successfully blocks agenda items, and when the minority doesn’t move forward with proposals in anticipation of being blocked) that are unobservable in the roll-call data. In the end, the lesson here is: measures can be constructed to better match the theory being tested, but all such measures will involve some inferential loss. The goal is to have a sense of the inferential limitations of each possible measure, such that the estimated results can be interpreted properly and ascribed the appropriate confidence. In this imperfect empirical world, one strategy is to pursue is a kind of “triangulation,” whereby a theory is tested using different measures with different (but well understood) inferential
limitations. If multiple flawed measures can each tell us something – and perhaps something different – about a theoretical phenomenon, we are likely better off than proceeding with only one measure (regardless of its popularity or widespread usage).
References


Neto, Cox, and McCubbins 2007


Table 1: Typology of Measures of Agenda Setting Power

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agenda Setter Position</th>
<th>Proposal Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pass</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Support</strong></td>
<td>Success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disappointment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Oppose</strong></td>
<td>Roll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Block</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2: Estimating Minority Party Roll Rates in the House, 45th-105th Congresses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Explanatory Variable</th>
<th>C&amp;M Roll Rate</th>
<th>Roll Count</th>
<th>“Corrected” Roll Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>63.54***</td>
<td>17.58</td>
<td>19.01**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(9.80)</td>
<td>(10.72)</td>
<td>(8.58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reed</td>
<td>25.44***</td>
<td>-5.85</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(5.94)</td>
<td>(4.92)</td>
<td>(4.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revolt</td>
<td>-10.33**</td>
<td>-4.62*</td>
<td>-2.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4.78)</td>
<td>(2.53)</td>
<td>(4.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reform</td>
<td>-5.85</td>
<td>17.39**</td>
<td>4.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(4.62)</td>
<td>(6.80)</td>
<td>(3.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Trend</td>
<td>0.52**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.22)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-13.38*</td>
<td>-4.62</td>
<td>78.84***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(6.99)</td>
<td>(7.85)</td>
<td>(6.32)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Each column is a separate model of the Senate or House majority roll rate. Entries are OLS parameter estimates with robust standard errors in parentheses. * denotes significance at α = .10 or less; ** denotes .05 or less; *** denotes .01 or less (all two-tailed)
Figure 1: The Cartel Agenda Model
Figure 2: A generic agenda setting model

![Diagram of a generic agenda setting model showing the agenda setter's blockout zone and the effects on the median voter and agenda setter.]
Figure 3: Minimum Conditions for “Successes” by Region

Region 1
NAC Monopoly

Region 2
Proposal Placement

Region 3
Vote Buying

Region 4
NAC Monopoly

Median Inflection
Agenda Setter
Median Voter