

Coalition Size in the Senate and House of Representatives*

Sean Gailmard[†] and Jeffery A. Jenkins[‡]

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Abstract

We explore the size of coalitions voting in favor of successful roll calls in Congress, across time and across the House and Senate. Departing from previous literature, we measure coalition size in a session of Congress by the average proportion of members of a chamber voting in favor of non-unanimous roll calls that won a majority of votes in that session. Surprisingly, House coalitions so measured are larger than Senate coalitions on average, supermajority cloture requirements in the Senate notwithstanding. This finding is consistent with a pivots-based explanation with a one-dimensional policy space if the Senate lies between the House and President in the policy space. This pivots explanation also implies that the margin between House and Senate coalition sizes grows as the House departs from the president, and shrinks as the Senate departs from the president. Statistical evidence shows that both of these relationships hold over the period 1881-2003. Overall, the results suggest that coalition size within a chamber is in part determined by the ideological position of the chamber (and its pivotal actors) relative to other actors in the legislative process, and that explanations of chamber coalition size based only on internal chamber factors overlook important factors outside the chamber.

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[†] Assistant Professor, Charles and Louise Travers Department of Political Science, UC Berkeley. Email: gailmard@berkeley.edu.

[‡] Associate Professor, Woodrow Wilson Department of Politics, University of Virginia. Email: jajenkins@virginia.edu.

The size of groups supporting new measures passed by Congress is an important indicator of the spread of social benefits through the political process. Assuming Congress has addressed important policy issues (rather than feel-good “motherhood and apple pie” issues), large coalitions standing behind new legislation suggests that Congress has tapped into a useful solution with widespread appeal. Coalition size is also important theoretically in understanding how the institutional structure of the US legislative process affects the distribution of gains among representatives, and by implication, the electorate. Different theories of the process highlight different determinants of coalition membership, and therefore, when those determinants vary, make different predictions about coalition size.

Coalition size also provides an interesting point of comparison across chambers of Congress, and a signal about the effects of institutional arrangements within chambers on the legislative process more broadly. The evidence and argument in this paper suggests that coalition size within a chamber is a function not only of its own internal institutions and voting rules, but also the chamber’s ideological position relative to other actors and veto players in the legislative process. Thus, even if one chamber’s internal rules require larger coalitions to pass a measure than the other chamber, it can, under specific conditions we identify, nevertheless have smaller coalitions supporting a measure than the other chamber.

We provide a new measurement of chamber coalition size, based on a much broader selection of legislative activity in each chamber than previous literature. This measurement shows that House coalitions are significantly larger than Senate coalitions, by about a standard deviation on average, a result that contrasts with chamber differences based on the more common measure of votes on “major laws.” Given the difference in minority rights and supermajority requirements across chambers, larger House coalitions pose a challenge to

conventional understanding of the effect of these rules. However, a pivots-based explanation (Krehbiel 1998) is able to account for systematically larger coalitions in one chamber than the other, under specific conditions. These conditions specify the relative ideological position of pivotal actors in the House and Senate, as well as the president, in a one-dimensional policy space. In brief they require the Senate to exhibit greater ideological congruence with the president than the House exhibits, a congruence that appears to hold by at least one measure. Furthermore, a pivots-based account satisfying these specific conditions has other implications for coalition size across chambers: first, that the margin in House coalition size over Senate coalition size grows as the House departs from the president, and second, that the margin in House over Senate coalition size shrinks as the Senate departs from the president. A statistical model of the margin of House over Senate coalition size suggests that these relationships do in fact hold for the period 1881-2003.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. In the next section we discuss the measurement of coalition size and present our measure and some baseline comparisons across chambers. In section 2 we address the ability of prevailing theories of legislative institutions, in particular pivots-based and partisan explanations, to account for the chamber differences reviewed in section 1. In section 3 we present statistical tests of two implications derived from a pivots explanation in section 2. Section 4 discusses some of the limitations of the analysis and concludes.

1. Coalition Size: Measurement and Comparisons

Like other work on coalition size and institutional arrangements (Krehbiel 1998, Wawro and Schickler 2004), the key premise in our conception of coalition membership is support for a

bill or measure being considered by a chamber of Congress. Thus, a member of the chamber is a member of a coalition supporting a measure if she or he simply votes in favor of it. This is a weak and encompassing notion of coalition membership. Others might be more restrictive, such as the set of sponsors of a bill or the set of principal authors. These conceptualizations of coalition membership would also be useful to explore, but not so immediately for the questions of direct interest in this paper.

Most previous work on coalition size in Congress has restricted attention to “landmark legislation.” Coalition size in a session of Congress is the proportion of “yea” votes to all votes, averaged across landmark legislation that passed in that session. We opt instead for a broader sample of legislative business: all roll calls considered by a chamber in a given session of Congress. Within this set we focus on all roll calls that won majority support in a non-unanimous vote. There are several reasons for this departure. First, without a clearly superior operationalization of the concept to work from, it is best for the literature not to become too focused on any one specific measure. Rather it is useful to investigate several facets of the concept, so that any conclusions are not overly sensitive to idiosyncracies of a specific measurement scheme.

Second, not all the important business of Congress is limited to landmark bills. For example, annual appropriations votes usually would not count as “landmarks,” but have obvious importance for both the distribution of political gains and the structure of coalitions. Moreover, landmark bills seem likely to cover measures on which roll calls are disproportionately likely to be known and discussed in campaigns. Therefore, votes on these measures may be disproportionately influenced by “position taking” motivations of legislators as distinct from actual policy preferences – particularly since so few of the votes on landmark bills present any

chance that an individual legislator casts the pivotal vote. Thus, while scholars have occasionally defended a focus on major laws as a way to avoid “bias” due to the large number of trivial bills considered by Congress, the *a priori* bias from the influence of position taking on final passage votes on major bills does not seem clearly less severe.

Third, in a given session of Congress there are typically only a small handful of “major laws” passed, so averaging coalitions supporting them gives an imprecise, high-variance index of “typical” coalition size in that session, even on major bills. On the other hand there are several hundred successful non-unanimous roll calls in each chamber per session of Congress. Therefore their average allows a much more precise measure, which seems a worthwhile price to pay for measuring a slightly different, and not necessarily inferior, concept.

Figure 1 displays the average coalition size (so measured) in the Senate and House, by session of Congress, from the 47th (seated in 1881) to 108th (seated in 2003). Two features are consistent with previous findings on coalition size across chambers, measured as the share of “yea” votes on major laws. First, there is a general upward drift in coalition size in each chamber. Second, there is no obvious break in the time series coinciding with cloture reform in the Senate.

[Figure 1 here]

Perhaps the most surprising feature of the times series is that House coalition size seems to be greater than Senate coalition size. Indeed, the average across sessions of Congress 47-108 for the Senate is 69.2% voting yea, while for the House the average is 72.3%, a difference of about one standard deviation. Statistical tests confirm that the difference is significant: the test

statistic in a matched pairs t -test (two tail, as are all tests in the remainder) is 7.65 (H_0 : mean of $[[\text{HR coalition size}] - [\text{Senate coalition size}]] = 0$). Likewise, the proportion of sessions 47-108 in which the average Senate coalition is larger than the average House coalition is only 0.127; the z -statistic in a test that this proportion equals 0.5 is -5.92 .

This finding is somewhat surprising given a mechanistic view of supermajority cloture requirements in the Senate, requirements lacking in the House. Because of these requirements the conventional wisdom is that the Senate requires supermajorities to conduct any business but the House only requires bare majorities. Indeed, if that is so, a Rikerian analysis of the cost coalition members face by diluting their benefits to include a new member suggests House coalitions should be close to simple majorities. Even if cloture requirements in the Senate affect coalition membership in the House (because bills and joint resolutions must pass both chambers; cf. Wawro and Schickler 2004) should bring House coalitions up to the size of Senate coalitions, but not above. The relative size of House and Senate coalitions is also somewhat surprising given that the Senate has come to resemble the House more in general since the 17th Amendment changed the basis of election of US Senators to statewide popular vote (Crook and Hibbing 1997). Yet conditioning on neither the adoption of the Amendment nor cloture reforms in the Senate negates the difference between House and Senate coalition size.

Notably, this pattern for all roll calls is reversed for final passage votes on Mayhew's (2005) "landmark bills." In that case, in an average session of Congress, House coalitions contain 80.6% of the voting members, while Senate coalitions contain 83.6% of the voting members. This difference is significant at about the 0.0004 level in a matched pairs t -test. This may even understate the difference between chambers because the Senate also conducted voice votes about twice as often on these bills.

Overall, then, the evidence on comparative coalition sizes in the Senate and House is somewhat mixed. However, since the conventional wisdom seems to be that Senate coalitions should be larger, even a mixed result presents a challenge.

2. Explanations of Coalition Size Differences across Chambers

The natural supposition that Senate coalitions should be larger than House coalitions, due to the former's supermajoritarian procedures combined with a logic of minimal winning coalitions, does not account for the position of each institution's members in a policy space. Policy is not enacted by a single chamber of Congress. The strategic imperative for coalition builders in chamber requires not only securing passage in that chamber, but navigating the legislative process outside of that chamber as well. Successful bills must be packaged in such a way that they secure approval of a decisive coalition in the other chamber, as well as of the president. Moreover, a chamber may of course not even originate the measures on which it votes. In such cases the originating chamber may find that obtaining support in the non-originating chamber requires supermajority support in the originating chamber. Overall, the logic of minimal winning coalitions is not fundamentally flawed in a bicameral, presidential system, but it requires further specification. The coalition supporting a policy change will seek to dilute its favored measure as little as possible to achieve support from each veto player in the system. This may, in specific situations (depending on the configuration of preferences), require measures that secure support from larger coalitions in one chamber than the other, differences in the minimal hurdles of their formal voting rules notwithstanding. This logic is, of course, very much in the style laid out by Krehbiel in *Pivotal Politics* (1998).

To be specific, consider a configuration in which some pivotal actor in the Senate stands in a one dimensional policy space between a pivotal actor in the House on its left and the president on its right, *i.e.*, $H < S < P$. For simplicity suppose this pivotal actor in each chamber (as identified by its internal voting rule) is simply the median member of the chamber, *i.e.*, the member whose ideal point is the median of the set of all ideal points of chamber members. In such an arrangement it is possible that the coalition in the House supporting change from a status quo is larger than the coalition in the Senate. Suppose for example that a status quo policy to the right of the president is moved to the Senate median, and this point is a smaller distance from the president's ideal point than the status quo. Then if the Senate and House have roughly equal range in their distributions of ideal points, the policy change will receive support in the House at least as great as its support in the Senate.

The reason is that all voters with ideal points left of the alternative policy must prefer it to the status quo, since the status quo is even further right than the alternative. By construction half of all Senators have ideal points left of the alternative policy in this example, while (barring pathological preference distributions with no House members between the House and Senate medians) strictly more than half of all Representatives have ideal points left of the alternative. Moreover, if ideal points to the right of the median in each chamber are similarly spaced in the House and Senate, House members to the right of the alternative policy are just as likely as Senators who lie to the right of the alternative to prefer it to the status quo.

This scenario implies several other relationships that are amenable to empirical testing. First, as the pivotal actor in the House diverges further from the president, and the rest of the spread of the distribution in the House (as well as the Senate) remains fixed, the difference between Senate and House coalition sizes should grow. The reason is that the House in general is

pulled further from the Senate and president under such a change: it must as a result support the alternative policy (at the Senate median) over the status quo (right of the president) at least as much as it did before this movement.

Second, as the pivotal actor in the Senate diverges from the president and moves toward (but does not cross) the House pivot, the difference between House and Senate coalition sizes should shrink. In particular, such a change in the Senate should erode supermajority support *in the House*. The reason is simply that such a change puts the Senate and House pivots closer together. Thus there are fewer members of the House between the House and Senate pivots. Then when the status quo is right of both the Senate and House pivots, and the alternative policy is set at some point between the Senate and House pivots, there are fewer House members beyond the House median to the left of the new policy. Since those members are exactly the ones that make House coalitions larger under such a policy change, this change in the Senate should shrink the difference between Senate and House coalitions. This is a cross-chamber effect that is not necessarily obvious, and not widely analyzed in the literature, so it makes for a good test of this explanation.

Unexplained in this scenario is why the alternative policy should be disproportionately pulled by the Senate's pivotal actor in the first place. The reason is that the pivotal politics model (and for that matter the US Constitution) does not specify an allocation of proposal power among chambers. In Krehbiel (1998) this is simply because there is only one chamber in the legislature, and its median, following Krehbiel's majoritarian logic, has proposal power to start the game. However, we can imagine altering the game so that either the House or Senate is randomly chosen to propose a bill, with its pivotal actor setting the content of the proposal. Given a status quo to the right of the president, each chamber will seek to exploit proposal power and extract

rent by reflecting the status quo to its most preferred point left of the president that will win approval from the other chamber and president. Because the House pivot is further from the president than the Senate pivot, the former is more likely than the latter to have to accept a best feasible policy that is to the right of its ideal point. That is, a constraint on policy acceptance that the proposer must respect is that the alternative is no further from the president than the status quo. Since the House pivot's ideal point is further from the president than the Senate pivot's, by construction, the House pivot's ideal point is at greater risk of falling outside the set of points the president prefers to the status quo, and the House pivot is more likely to be forced to make a concession by proposing a policy right of its ideal point.

What this reasoning shows is that even with somewhat more serious consideration of the proposal process across chambers, the proposed policy is likely to be to the right of the House pivot's ideal point than the Senate pivot's ideal point; it is instead more likely to be exactly at the Senate pivot's ideal point. Furthermore, when the alternative is to the right of the House pivot's ideal point, then the size of the House coalition in support of the bill is greater than minimal winning, given its own voting rule. Greater than minimal winning coalitions are less likely to occur in the Senate, given that its pivot's ideal point is more likely to fall in the range of points the president prefers to the status quo.

Of course, when the status quo lies in the interior of the set of ideal points $\{H, S, P\}$, no policy change is possible, and when it lies to the left of H 's ideal point, either House or Senate can move policy to their respective pivots' ideal points. If each chamber has some chance of obtaining proposal power, then in expectation the alternative policy lies between the House and Senate pivot ideal points.

The logic of pivotal politics can explain larger House than Senate coalitions only in specific circumstances. The previous argument no longer holds if the House pivot lies between the president and Senate, for example. But while pivotal politics can account for the observed data only under restricted circumstances, at least it can do so in principle. Partisan theories, by contrast, are not as yet well suited for this explanatory task – which, to be fair, is not the reason they were designed. The best specified such theory is the party cartel model laid out by Cox and McCubbins in *Setting the Agenda* (2005). However, their theory focuses on parties as gatekeepers in the agenda setting process within a chamber – parties are effective, in the cartel model, by preventing consideration of items the party majority does not favor. This negative agenda control is crucially related to the size of the *roll zone*, the distance between the chamber median and majority party median within a given chamber. The size or width of the roll zone is the key explanatory variable behind the empirical work in *Setting the Agenda*. It is not clear what effect, if any this variable, or another measure of partisan negative agenda control, should have on coalition sizes across chambers.

Theories of party influence on individual members' votes are less well specified than the party cartel model, and do not naturally suggest relationships for testing. For example, it could be contended that House coalitions are larger than Senate coalitions because House parties are stronger than Senate parties, in the sense of better able to induce rank and file members to join and stay in a party coalition. Moreover, such inducements may be easier to mete out on “everyday” legislation than landmark legislation, on which members are more likely to feel needs for position taking (see above discussion) or vote with constituency sentiment. This would nicely explain the difference in relative House and Senate coalition sizes on all roll calls vs. landmark bills. Unfortunately, existing theories of positive party influence on voting do not offer

explanations for why the difference between House and Senate coalition sizes on “everyday” matters should grow or shrink over the years. This is simply because they do not offer a reason why House parties would be stronger than Senate parties; by extension, they cannot offer a reason why the strength of House parties grows relative to that of Senate parties.

3. Tests of a Pivotal Politics Explanation for Coalition Size Differences across Chambers

In this section we operationalize and test the key hypotheses from the pivotal politics explanation of coalition size differences laid out in Section 2. These hypotheses are, first, that House-Senate coalition size differences should grow when the House pivot gets further from the president (all else constant); and second, that House-Senate coalition size differences should shrink when the Senate pivot gets further from the president (all else constant).

The unit of observation in our tests is a session of Congress; we restrict attention from sessions 47 to 108.¹ As noted, a chamber’s coalition size in a session is the mean of votes in favor divided by all votes on non-unanimous roll calls in the session that won majority support. The dependent variable implicated in these hypotheses is the House average coalition size minus the Senate average coalition size. This is a simple difference, not an absolute value, so its range in principle is -1 to 1 . The actual range from sessions 47 to 108 is -0.053 to 0.079 , with a mean of 0.031 and standard deviation of 0.032 .

We measure proximity of the chambers to the president by the share of chamber membership in the same party as the president. While ideal point estimates for presidents are available (e.g., DW-NOMINATE scores), and would allow for measurement of the difference in

¹ Data is available for sessions prior to 47 but because of disruptions either to the membership of Congress or the spatial structure of political conflict due to the Civil War and slavery we do not think it is helpful for this analysis.

chamber medians and president locations on the first dimension, they are not as reliable as estimates for legislators.² We opt instead for a partisan measure of preference similarity, taking advantage of the preference cues provided by party labels. In the Senate this variable ranges from 0.347 to 0.781, with a mean of 0.543 and standard deviation of 0.088. In the House it ranges from 0.264 to 0.766, with a mean of 0.521 and standard deviation of 0.106. Notably, the Senate share of the president's party is significantly greater than the House share of the president's party in the sessions we investigate (p -value in a matched pairs t -test is 0.02). The pivotal politics explanation we identify above explains larger House coalitions only when the Senate lies between the House and president ideologically. This test result shows that, just as House coalitions are larger than Senate coalitions on average, the Senate is indeed between the House and president on average.

We control for four other variables in estimating the relationship between chamber-president proximity on the difference in coalition sizes. First, as a crude control for party-based explanations of coalition size differences, we control for the difference in majority party size in each chamber, *i.e.*, the share of seats held by the House majority minus the share of seats held by the Senate majority. If the difference in coalition sizes is simply a matter of larger Senate majority parties with more members to hold in a party coalition, given whatever inducements are available to party leaders, a pivotal politics explanation should have no bite. Second, we control for the distance between the first-dimension median DW-NOMINATE scores in the Senate and House. This is because very different preferences across chambers could lead to smaller coalitions within each chamber, and larger differences in coalition sizes, because the chambers

² For example, Grover Cleveland, a conservative "Bourbon Democrat," looks rather liberal in comparison to Woodrow Wilson in DW-NOMINATE scores. For a thorough description of NOMINATE scores, see Poole and Rosenthal (2007).

do not see eye to eye on desirable policy changes. Third, we control for differences in party polarization between chambers. Within a chamber, party polarization is the distance between first-dimension median DW-NOMINATE scores for the majority and minority parties. The difference in party polarization between chambers is simply the party polarization in the House minus the party polarization in the Senate. The effects of polarization on coalition size are not well understood, but it is possible that a chamber's coalitions shrink as its party polarization grows; this could be a party effect, or could simply reflect that party labels convey more information about preferences in a more polarized chamber. In any case, given such an effect, differences in coalition sizes across chambers could then be explained by differences in polarization having little to do with a pivotal politics account. Finally, to ensure we are not spuriously picking up time trends common to both the explanatory and dependent variables, we control for year as well.

We use OLS regression to estimate the relationship between the dependent variable at the explanatory and control variables. Serial correlation is a natural concern given the time series data we use; for example, factors (such as chamber leaders that are very skilled coalition builders) that push House coalition sizes unusually high in one session (and therefore push the dependent variable above the regression line) may persist into future sessions as well. To mitigate the effect of this concern on hypothesis tests we use Newey-West standard errors with a 1 period lag in the autocorrelation.³

Regression results are in table 1. The two key theoretical variables, share of the Senate and House sharing the president's party, are statistically significant in the predicted direction.

³ Unlike Prais-Winsten regression, OLS regression with Newey-West standard errors does not require a correct model of the serial correlation to preserve consistency of the parameter estimates, yet it provides standard errors that are robust to autocorrelation with a specified lag, 1 period in our model.

Substantively, a one standard deviation increase in the share of the House in the same party as the president increases the difference in House-Senate coalition sizes by almost half of a standard deviation. The p -value on the null hypothesis of no effect is 0 to three decimal places. A one standard deviation increase in the share of the Senate in the same party as the president *decreases* the difference in House-Senate coalition sizes by almost one third. The p -value on the null hypothesis of no effect is 0.063.

[Table 1 here]

Given how little is known about determinants of coalition size, the control variables are interesting in their own right. All are statistically significant at the 0.10 level or lower, except the difference in within-chamber party polarization. For that variable the p -value on the null hypothesis of no effect is 0.459. The difference in the size of chamber majorities is positively associated with the difference in coalition sizes, an association significant at the 0.081 level. When the share of seats held by the majority in the House increases relative to the share of seats held by the majority in the Senate, the difference between House and Senate coalition sizes increases as well. This is consistent with a party effect on coalition sizes, though obviously not dispositive because party may simply proxy for preference. Additionally, the distance between House and Senate chamber medians is positively associated with differences in House and Senate coalition sizes, an association significant at the 0.069 level. When the Senate and House medians grow further apart, so do their average coalition sizes. Finally, not only is average coalition size within each chamber trending upward over time, but the margin of House over Senate coalition size, conditional on these other factors, is growing over time as well.

4. Discussion

The analysis above suggests some possibly interesting relationships but it is still highly exploratory. A few more steps would make the evidence much more convincing. First, even if the broad selection of chamber business we use to measure coalition size adds value to the literature, it should, in order to match up with the conceptual discussion, only include roll calls that are considered across chambers. Presently the coalition size measures are based on all roll calls, but restricting attention to action on bills and joint resolutions, and possibly concurrent resolutions, would be an improvement. Considering only final passage votes on these resolutions may be an improvement as well.

Second, there are a variety of ways to approach the statistical modeling in section 3. Most obviously, especially given how little is known about determinants of coalition size, there are probably a variety of other control variables that would be interesting to explore in their own right, besides the ones considered in section 3. Moreover, rather than treating the difference in House and Senate coalition sizes as the dependent variable, we could model each chamber's coalition size as a function of factors internal and external to the chamber. This would help sort out whether changes in House and Senate congruence with the president affect the difference in coalition sizes by affecting only House coalition sizes, or coalition size in both chambers.

Third and relatedly, there are a few other implications of the specific pivots explanation laid out in section 2. For example, this explanation assumes that the Senate lies between the House and president. It follows that the relationships implied by the theory should be stronger in sessions of Congress when this condition in fact holds than when it does not. Based on the measures and variables in section 3 this appears to be the case but the matter could use more attention. Additionally, the use of DW-NOMINATE medians from the Senate for measures of

party polarization and ideological conflict with the House obviously does not recognize that the pivotal member of a Senate coalition is (since 1975) the 60th member of it, rather than the 51st. Here as well, preliminary analysis suggests that the findings in table 1 are robust to these changes but more work is necessary to be completely satisfying.

The main points of this paper that seem to hold up notwithstanding these points are the following. First, for a broad selection of legislative activity, House coalitions are significantly larger than Senate coalitions on average, a difference of about a standard deviation. Second, this finding is not necessarily at odds with the obvious effect of Senate supermajority rules on coalition size. The reason is that coalition size is determined not only by internal chamber institutions (or the operation of parties within the chamber), but also by the location of the chamber's pivotal actors in a policy space, relative to other actors in the legislative process and the status quo.

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Figure 1. House and Senate Coalition Sizes, by session of Congress

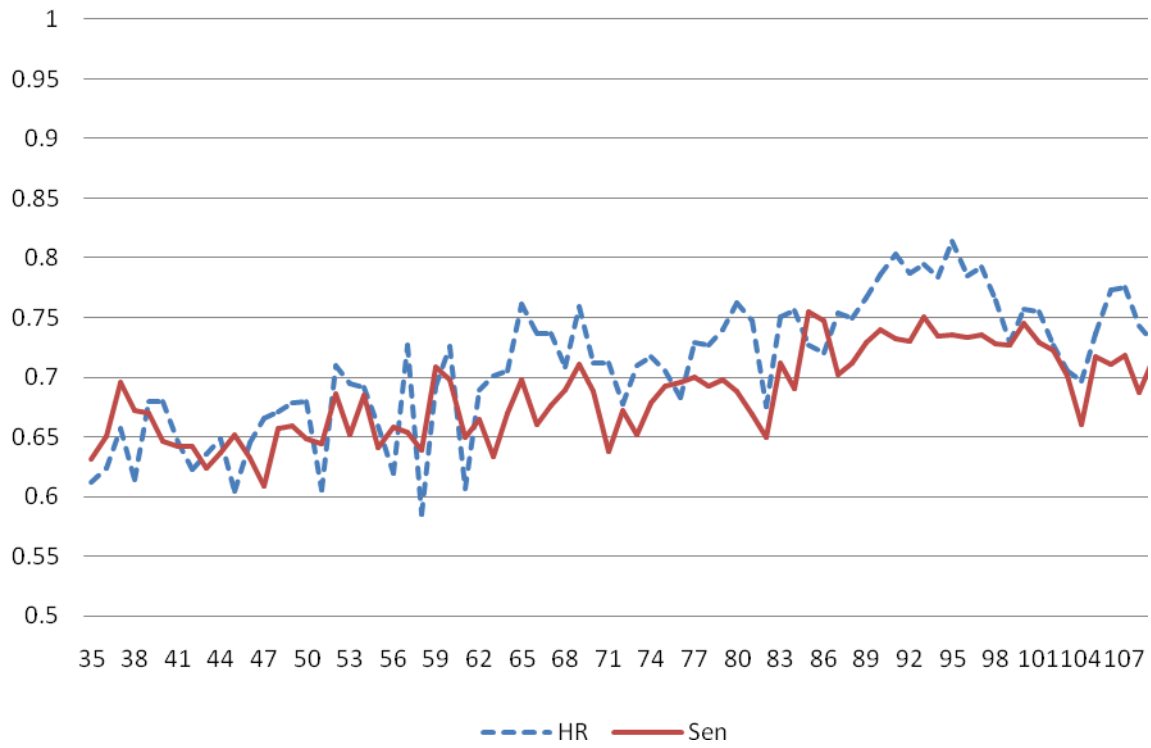


Table 1. OLS regression for [mean HR coalition size] – [mean Sen coalition size]. Newey-West standard errors are robust to first order autocorrelation. Unit of observation is a session of Congress, 47-108 (1881-2003).

Explanatory Variable	OLS Estimate	Newey-West Standard Error	<i>p</i>-value
Senate share in president's party	-0.112	0.059	0.063
House share in president's party	0.157	0.036	0.001
Sen-HR difference in majority seat share	0.103	0.057	0.081
Sen-HR difference in DW-NOM 1st dimension medians	0.078	0.042	0.069
Sen-HR difference in party polarization	0.048	0.064	0.459
Year	0.0003	0.0001	0.012
Constant	-0.573	0.235	0.018
<i>N</i> = 63, <i>F</i> _{6,56} = 7.07			