

# Agenda Control in the States: Parties, Interests Groups, and Majority Rolls

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## **Abstract**

An extensive literature on partisan gatekeeping argues that majority parties use negative agenda control to prevent bills that divide their parties from coming up for a vote. Despite this, majority party rolls – bills that pass despite being opposed by a majority of the majority – are routinely observed. We use newly collected bill- and roll call-level data from state legislatures to understand when and why majority parties get rolled. Three main findings emerge. First, there is a stark and consistent partisan difference in roll rates. Republican majorities get rolled approximately three times as frequently as Democratic majorities, and most of these rolls occur on legislation that is sponsored exclusively by the minority party rather than in a bipartisan fashion. Second, spatial factors are an important predictor of variation in roll rates. Moderate bills (relative to majorities) are more likely to roll majorities. Here, too, we find partisan differences with Republican majorities much more subject to this effect. Finally, lobbying disclosure data from three states reveal that majority party rolls are more common on bills supported by lobbying from organized interests, suggesting that outside actors are capable of overcoming partisan gatekeeping. Together, these results provide a clearer picture of how parties wield agenda power.

“[N]egative agenda power forms the bedrock of party government. Even when the majority is internally divided, our theory predicts that the rules of the House will ensure that the majority is able to block bills it dislikes, and that it will exact a minimal fiduciary standard from its officeholders. . . not pushing bills that would roll the party.”

— Cox and McCubbins 2005, p. 223

“Obviously, minority and majority roll rates both vary. Less obvious but undeniable is the fact that the 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

Since Cox and McCubbins first laid out their agenda cartel theory of party influence in 1993, numerous studies on legislative agenda setting in the US context and beyond have analyzed partisan control of the agenda using the concept of *majority rolls*, or votes that pass despite being opposed by a majority of the majority party (e.g., Anzia and Jackman 2013; Calvo and Sagarzazu 2011; Cox, Kousser, and McCubbins 2010; Den Hartog and Monroe 2011; Gailmard and Jenkins 2007). Such scholarly attention is unsurprising given the enormous amount of power control of the legislative agenda entails. Which policies get passed is inherently a function of which policies are considered in the first place.

Despite voluminous research on partisan agenda control, there is still much we don’t understand about *why* majority parties get rolled and *what* bills manage to overcome the obstacles that majority party gatekeepers put in their place. As the Krehbiel quote above indicates, in its simplest form Cox and McCubbins’ cartel agenda model implies that majorities never get rolled. Only later in their book do they speculate on the reasons majoritarian negative agenda power is not absolute. In the years since most research on majority gatekeeping in the American context has focused on differences in institutional powers given to majority parties, such as the ability to determine committee composition and control the legislative calendar. However, majority roll rates often vary even when such institutions do not change, suggesting important influences on the way parties wield agenda control beyond those previously considered.

In this paper, we bring new evidence to bear on the factors influencing majority gatekeeping using bill- and roll call-level data from all fifty state legislatures over a decade-long period. Leveraging state legislatures as a data source to understand majority party rolls allows us to maximize statistical power in analyzing a

relatively rare political phenomena across a variety of different institutions. Doing so produces two main findings. First, we uncover a partisan asymmetry in majority agenda control not previously recognized. Republican majorities are rolled at approximately three times the rate that Democratic majorities are rolled. After analyzing how the confluence of party and ideology interact in majority party rolls, we discuss potential reasons for this partisan imbalance.

Second, using unique data from three states in which interest groups report lobbying activity we provide evidence that pressure from organized interests is capable of overcoming negative agenda control. Bills supported by large coalitions of lobbying groups are more likely to roll majorities. Notably, we find this relationship holds even in analyses using matching and nonparametric methods that condition on the margin of passage. Such analyses imply that interest group support enables bills rolling the majority to pass not via persuasion or vote-buying of individual legislators, but rather, by convincing majority party gatekeepers to allow legislation to advance despite being opposed by their party at large. In doing so, we contribute to a literature suggesting that interest groups have substantial influence on the policymaking process via at the agenda setting state (Butler and Miller 2021; Hall and Deardorff 2006; Hall and Wayman 1990; Lorenz 2020).

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we summarize existing research on partisan agenda control using majority rolls as a primary variable of interest, highlighting existing explanations for variation in roll rates and their limitations. Second, we discuss the new data the paper uses to evaluate the determinants of majority party rolls across the states. Third, we use the data to examine differences in roll rates by party as well as the partisan and ideological identities of legislators who sponsor legislation that rolls the majority. Fourth, we analyze the relationship between interest group support and majority rolls across the three states reporting lobbying data. We conclude with a discussion of the implications our results have for what types of policies overcome partisan gatekeeping and some next steps in the project.

## 1 Prior Research on Partisan Agenda Control

While early work on party influence in Congress focused on whether parties could persuade members to vote against their individual preferences (e.g., Krehbiel 1993; Snyder and Groseclose 2000), Cox and McCubbins (1993, 2005) considered an alternative way that parties could wield power: controlling what legislation makes it onto the formal agenda. In their theory, a cartel consisting of party leaders and committee chairs protect the party brand by preventing bills opposed by a majority of the majority party from coming up for a vote. When such legislation does come up for a vote and passes, the majority is rolled. To support their claims, they demonstrate that majority rolls in the US House, the chamber of their focus, have historically been

rare. Fewer than 5% of bills coming up for final passage votes roll the majority party during the years of their study, while minority parties in the House are rolled at much higher rates.<sup>1</sup>

Following the publication of Cox and McCubbins' seminal work, a large literature has used the concept of majority rolls to further study how parties wield agenda influence. For example, research has found that majority parties in the US Senate get rolled at similarly low rates as the House of Representatives (Den Hartog and Monroe 2011; Gailmard and Jenkins 2007), despite the absence of specific institutional features giving House leaders more control over the agenda (e.g., the Rules Committee, germaneness requirement for amendments, etc.). Instead, Den Hartog and Monroe (2011) argue that Senate majorities have alternative advantages in shaping the agenda, such as priority in recognition rights on the floor, as well as tools for controlling the open amendment process (such as filling the amendment tree or motions to table) that would otherwise give minority groups an opportunity to access the agenda.

Others have examined roll rates in state legislatures, linking the frequency of majority party rolls to a variety of institutional features giving majority parties control over what legislation is considered and advances. For example, Anzia and Jackman (2013) uses data from the 1999-2000 legislative session in all 50 states to show that chambers where committee membership is determined by the majority party and where committees have the ability to block bills have lower roll rates than chambers where majorities do not possess such control. Similarly, Jackman (2014) shows that majority gatekeeping is undermined by the presence of floor-wide approval votes on committee membership or discharge petitions allowing floor majorities to extract specific bills from committees. In addition, Cox, Kousser, and McCubbins (2010) analyze natural experiments in two states where the rules governing majority party control over the agenda change. In each case, rules guaranteeing bills a vote in committee and, upon successful passage, a vote on the floor, are associated with an increased roll rate.

Despite these advances, questions remain about when majority parties will set the agenda and to what degree. Most research on majority gatekeeping in legislatures has focused on differences in institutional rules as explaining variation in roll rates (although see Krehbiel (2007) on majority party size as an exception). However, there exist substantial differences in roll rates within chambers from session to session despite the absence of any obvious institutional changes, suggesting other political factors may be important in shaping the agenda setting powers majorities wield.

One largely unexplored component of agenda setting power is the difference between the Republican and Democratic parties. Agenda control in Cox and McCubbins' work has no party-specific differences. The parties are animated by institutional incentives and are otherwise substantively identical. On the other hand,

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<sup>1</sup>In 2013-2021, the frequency of majority party rolls has declined even further, with fewer than 0.5% of bills in the US House rolling the majority in final passage.

studies of political phenomena such as party organization, polarization, and public opinion find important asymmetries exist between the two major political parties (e.g., Grossmann and Hopkins 2016; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2016).

With regards to negative agenda control, there are several reasons to suspect that Democratic majorities might differ from Republican majorities. First, previous research suggests that the Democratic Party is a coalition of diverse social groups with often conflicting preferences, in contrast to a more ideologically cohesive Republican Party (Grossmann and Hopkins 2016). Maintaining the Democratic coalition may require more negotiation on the part of Democrats, even occasionally allowing legislation to be considered and pass despite the opposition of a majority of fellow Democrats. Second, conservative Republicans are more likely to be satisfied with keeping legislation from passing and thus allowing status quo policies to remain in place. More policy-demanding Democratic leaders may be willing to bargain and allow the passage of legislation opposed by a majority of their party in order to achieve policy successes elsewhere. Both of these possibilities imply roll rates might be higher for Democrats than Republicans. The lone study to consider partisan differences in majority rolls (Carson, Monroe, and Robinson 2011) examines roll rates in the US House prior to and after the Republican takeover in 1994 and does indeed find that Republicans were rolled less frequently than earlier Democratic majorities. However, as the authors acknowledge, several institutional changes also occurred during the same time period, such as House Speaker Newt Gingrich asserting greater control over committee composition. Further work disentangling institutional and partisan influences on agenda powers is thus necessary.

A second factor that has been largely ignored in the literature on partisan gatekeeping is influence by organized interests. While many scholars acknowledge that interest groups play a key role in shaping the policy agenda (e.g., Schattschneider 1960), few have studied the interaction between external interests and the majority party gatekeepers inside the legislature. To the extent that interest groups influence agenda setting, most work implies that interest groups are more effective at keeping legislation off the agenda or killing it than promoting the passage of favored policy (Baumgartner et al. 2009; Gerber 1999; McKay 2012).

Despite this, two recent articles suggest that interest group support can help bills overcome various obstacles in the agenda setting process. Lorenz (2020) uses data from Maplight on the positions taken by lobbying organizations in Congress to demonstrate that bills supported by a broad coalition of organized interests are more likely to be considered by committees and reported to the floor. Lorenz argues that diverse interest group support provides an informative signal to committee gatekeepers that the legislation is viable and will successfully pass on the floor if allowed to advance.

Along similar lines, Butler and Miller (2021) examine the relationship between interest group support (as well as opposition) and bill advancement in three state legislatures where directional data on lobbying

activity is publicly available. Butler and Miller provide evidence that the number of groups lobbying for a bill is associated with a higher probability of bill passage. Furthermore, the impact of lobbying appears to be primarily at the committee stage, as bills with greater interest group support are more likely to advance past committee consideration. In contrast, they find little evidence that lobbying support or opposition is associated with changing legislators' votes.

While these articles reveal that lobbying plays a role in determining what legislation advances and ultimately passes within a legislature, neither considers whether interest groups are capable of overcoming gatekeeping when legislation is opposed by the majority party. On one hand, given the damaging nature of majority rolls to the party brand, majority gatekeepers may be unwilling to allow viable legislation to advance despite intense pressure from interest groups. Public airing of division within the party is embarrassing, and parties may try to prevent such conflicts from being given agenda time at all costs. If this is the case, then the positive agenda-setting influence studied in Lorenz (2020) and Butler and Miller (2021) may be limited to only legislation that a majority of the majority does not oppose.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, support by allied interests can be critical to electoral success for both individual legislators as well as political parties as a whole. Interest groups are a major source of campaign funds (Denzau and Munger 1986), can mobilize members and the general public for or against specific causes (Kollman 1998), and can nominate and support challengers to incumbents they oppose (Bawn et al. 2012). Given this, majority gatekeepers might be willing to allow legislation to advance despite its potential to divide the majority party, as the electoral costs of angering key supporting groups may be greater than the electoral costs of the majority being rolled. Furthermore, majority party gatekeepers such as leaders and committee chairs are often themselves particularly targeted recipients of interest group attention, both in the forms of campaign funds and lobbying (Fourinaies 2018; Fourinaies and Hall 2018). Considering the principal-agent challenges inherent in ensuring leaders advance the interests of the party after being delegated authority (Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991), gatekeepers may accede to interest group pressure for personal benefit even if the decision hurts the party as a whole.

Interestingly, such an explanation for majority rolls mirrors a separate one advanced by Cox and McCubbins (2005). One possibility Cox and McCubbins consider to explain the existence of majority rolls in the US House is pressure applied by the President. They suggest that presidents' ability to "go public" (Canes-Wrone 2006; Kernell 2007) allow them to force otherwise intransigent legislative leaders to allow bills to come up for a vote. Our argument is that organized interests might play a similar role, in that they can engage in outside lobbying to magnify the visibility of particular pieces of legislation as well as use tools

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<sup>2</sup>Using similar logic, the agenda influence that Hall and coauthors (Hall and Deardorff 2006; Hall and Wayman 1990) suggests interest groups have at the committee stage and elsewhere via campaign contribution or legislative subsidy should be limited only to bills that majority gatekeepers support and are willing to let advance.

of inside lobbying to convince gatekeepers to allow legislation to advance. Indeed, executives and outside groups may at times work in tandem to overcome partisan gatekeeping when their interests are aligned. In our analyses, we include the party of the current governor to account for the role that governors may play in agenda setting.

## 2 Data

### 2.1 New Data on Bills and Voting in State Legislatures

We use a new, extremely granular data source on state legislative behavior that goes far beyond the individual roll call votes previously available (Shor and McCarty 2011). This includes detailed data on each bill introduced and each roll call associated with that bill. The quantity of data is very large, but the panel is limited to the 2011-2021 period. Within that time period, we have a total of 16,331 legislators, 1.2 million bills, 370 thousand committee votes, and 691 thousand floor roll calls in all 50 states.<sup>3</sup> Notably, in a subset of 24 states, we have data on voting in committees as well as on the floor votes, allowing us to examine whether findings on majority party rolls on the floor extend to committees as well. In these states, we have data on 342 thousand committee votes.

We also include data on all roll call votes, including procedural votes, amendments, required readings, and final passage. Due to differences in how votes are recorded across states, there is no simple way to distinguish final passage votes. In future work we hope to develop a working classification of final passage votes to more directly compare our findings with those of others who focus on final passage votes.

#### 2.1.1 Roll Call and Committee Vote Level Variables

The key measures at the roll call and committee vote level are vote outcomes – the margin of passage or failure with voting broken down by party. In particular, we measure majority rolls in both contexts as a vote passing despite a majority of the majority party voting against.

#### 2.1.2 Bill Level

The key bill level measures are bill outcomes (pass or fail), and a proxy for the content of the bill via bill sponsorship. The partisan measure of bill sponsorship includes three categories: Republican-only, Democratic-only, and bipartisan, and the first two are translated to majority and minority party as appropriate. As an approximate measure of bill ideology, we use the ideal point of the median bill sponsor. This is justified by a

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<sup>3</sup>The number of bills exceeds the number of roll calls because the median bill is introduced and dies without any votes.

presumed majoritarian inter-sponsor bargaining process and low cost for introducing alternative bills if that negotiation deadlocks.

## 2.2 Aggregate Data on Legislature Level Ideology and Institutions

We use data from Shor and McCarty (2011) and (Shor:2021?) on state ideology and party aggregates for the 2011-2021 period. The partisan measures are those for chamber and legislative control. The crucial measure for our paper is the ideological location of the majority party median. The majority party median is a first-pass approximation of the majority party’s preferences decided under simple majority rule (Cox and McCubbins 1993). The signed difference between the majority party median and the bill sponsor median is our primary spatial variable of interest. Zero on this measure would indicate a bill located directly at the majority party median, positive values would mean bills more conservative than the median, and negative values the opposite. We also use an index measure of state legislative professionalism from Bowen and Greene (2014) (using their first dimension), to account for differences across different types of institutions.

## 2.3 Interest group data

To evaluate whether interest group support for legislation is capable of overcoming majority party gatekeeping, we take advantage of unique data from three states – Colorado, Montana, and Nebraska – where interest groups are required by law to file reports on their lobbying activities in each legislative session. These reports allow us to identify the number of organized interests lobbying in some form on each bill and whether they support or oppose the bill (or neither). Similar data from such reports has been used in recent research on interest group activity in state legislature (Butler and Miller 2021; Thieme 2021).<sup>4</sup> Lobbying data in our study covers the years of 2016 to 2020 in Colorado, 2011 to 2019 in Montana, and 2015 to 2020 in Nebraska.

## 3 Majority Agenda Control: Party and Ideology

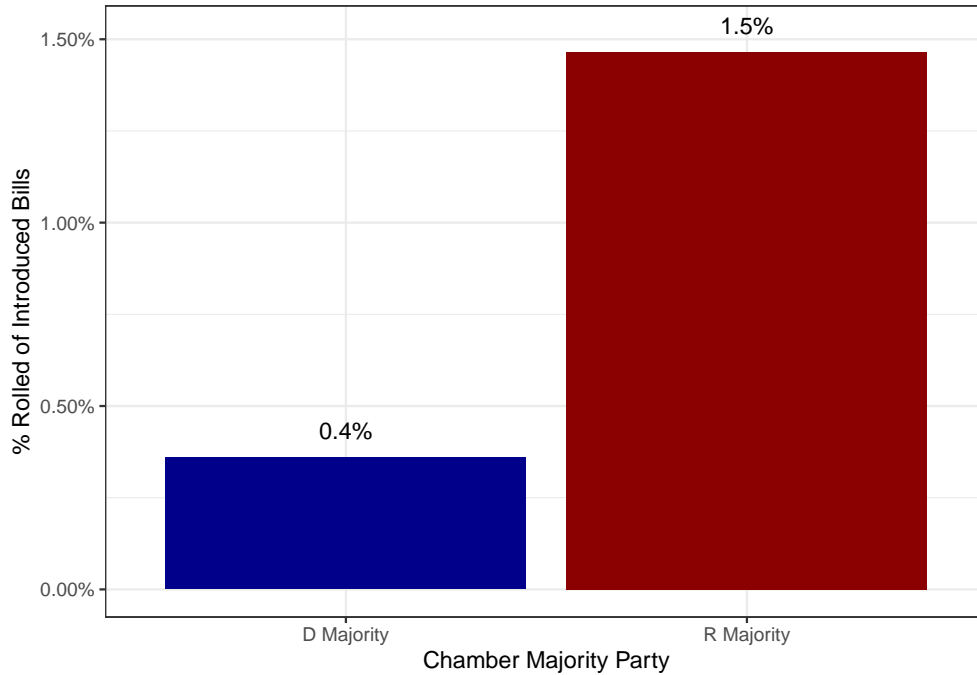
We observe a large number of majority party rolls in the 2011-2021 period. Whereas in Congress, majority party rolls have become incredibly infrequent, at the state level we see about a 1.1% majority party roll rate. While that roll rate is high in comparison to Congress, it obscures a large party asymmetry. Figure 1 shows that Republican majority chambers experience a roll rate nearly *quadruple* that of Democratic majority chambers.

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<sup>4</sup>Butler and Miller (2021) look at data from Colorado, Nebraska, and Wisconsin, while Thieme (2021) uses data from Iowa, Nebraska, and Wisconsin. For our lobbying analyses, we exclude Iowa and Wisconsin as we observe zero majority party rolls in the former state and only a single majority party roll in the latter.



Figure 1: Majority Roll Rate by Majority Party



When viewed through the lens of sponsorship, Figure 2 shows roll rates for exclusively Democratic-sponsored bills are nearly twice as high as that of Republican- or bipartisan-sponsored bills.

Next, we put these two forms of partisanship together in Figure 3. The figure displays a more nuanced story. First, minority party-authored bills roll majorities more than bipartisan or majority-party-only bills by about *five* times. Second, the base roll rate asymmetry between majority parties remains. Republican majorities appear to do a much worse job than Democratic majorities in controlling the agenda, at least to the extent of preventing their being rolled. Not only are they quite frequently rolled on Democratic-sponsored bills, they are even not infrequently rolled on *Republican* bills, revealing deep internal divisions.

An alternative visualization is by the ideology of bill sponsors. Figure 4 visualizes bill sponsor ideology by division into terciles (within-state, across-party). Similar to the picture above, liberal bills roll majorities in Republican states much more than moderate or conservative bills. The converse is true for Democratic majority states.

Mechanically, we should expect larger majorities to be rolled less often. And Figure 5, which averages majority sizes across chamber-state-majorities, shows exactly that. Democratic majorities in states like Rhode Island and Republican majorities in states like Wyoming are huge, and are rolled less frequently than more tenuous Democratic majorities in Pennsylvania or Republican majorities in New Mexico.

The effect of legislative professionalism on rolls is ambiguous. On the one hand, amateur legislators could be more likely to roll their own parties if their careers are shorter and less tied to the party brand, and if they

Figure 2: Majority Roll Rate by Sponsor Party

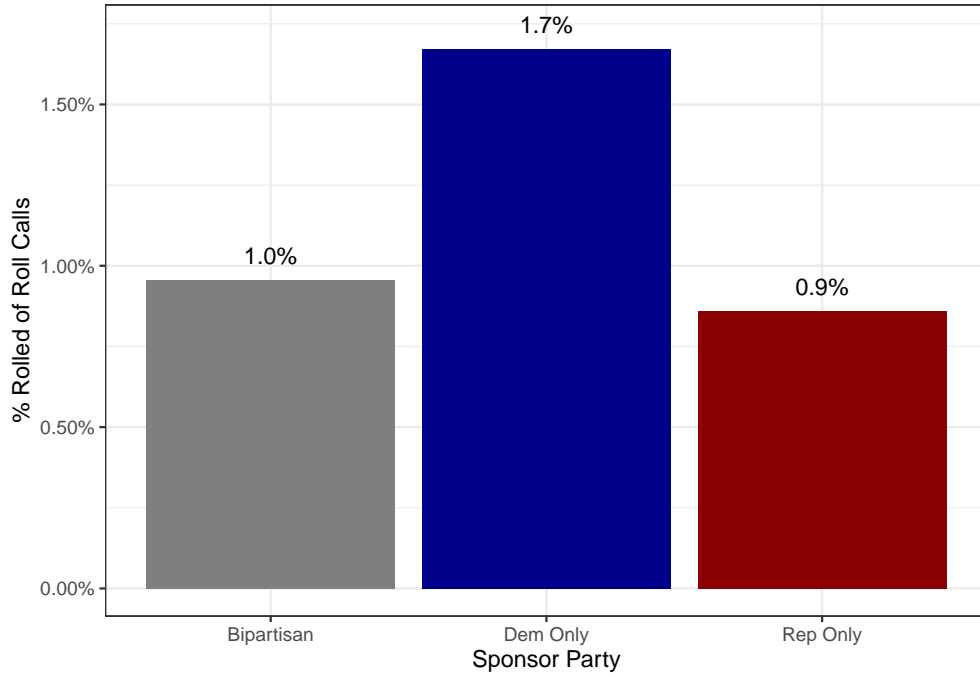


Figure 3: Majority Roll Rate by Majority and Sponsor Party

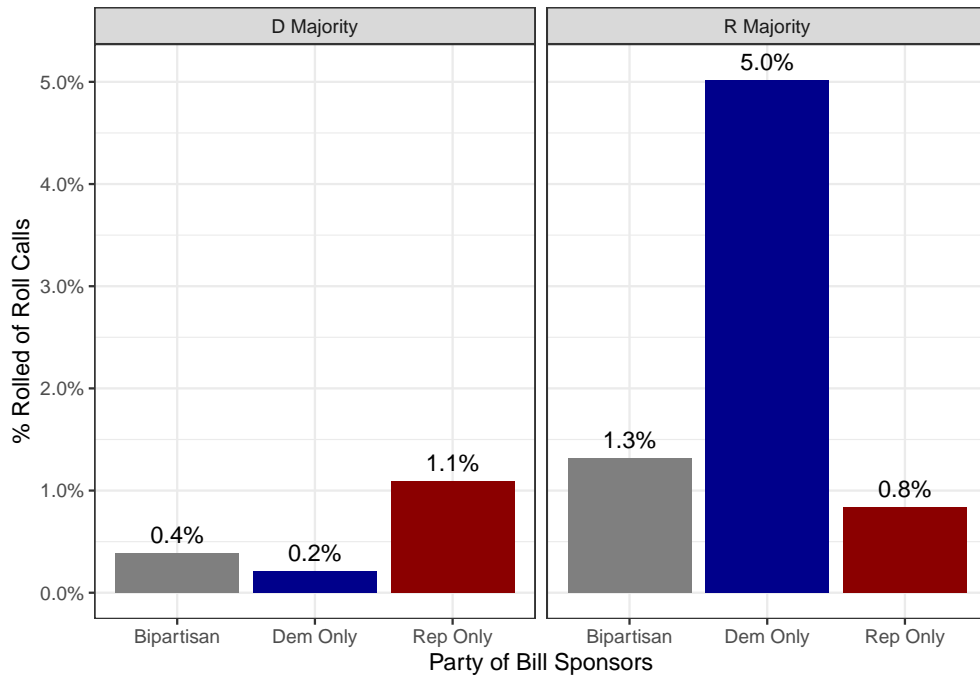


Figure 4: Majority Roll Rate by Majority Party and Sponsor Ideology

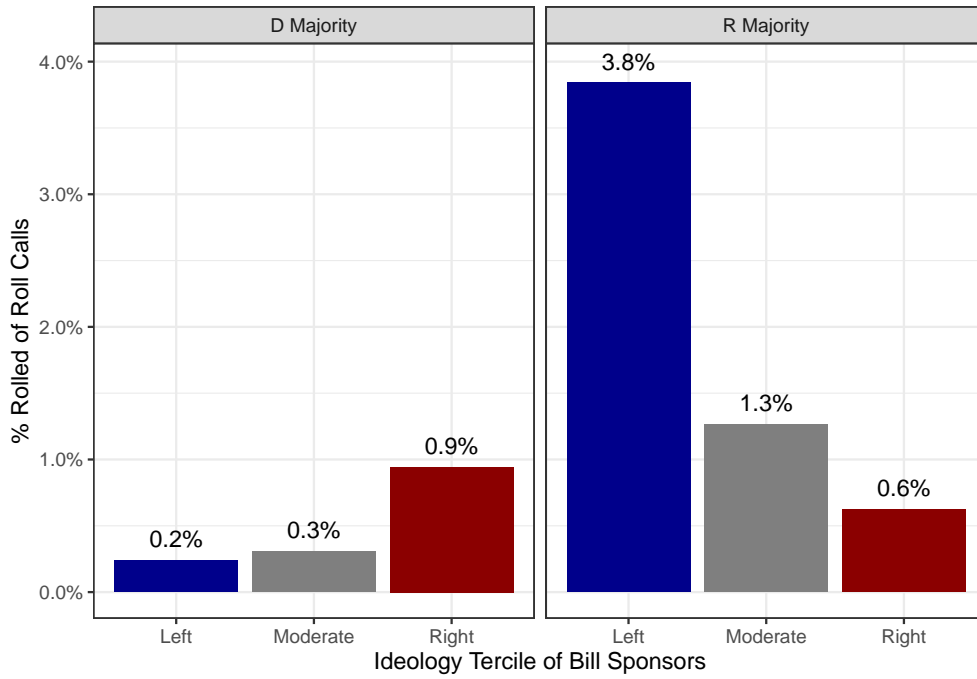
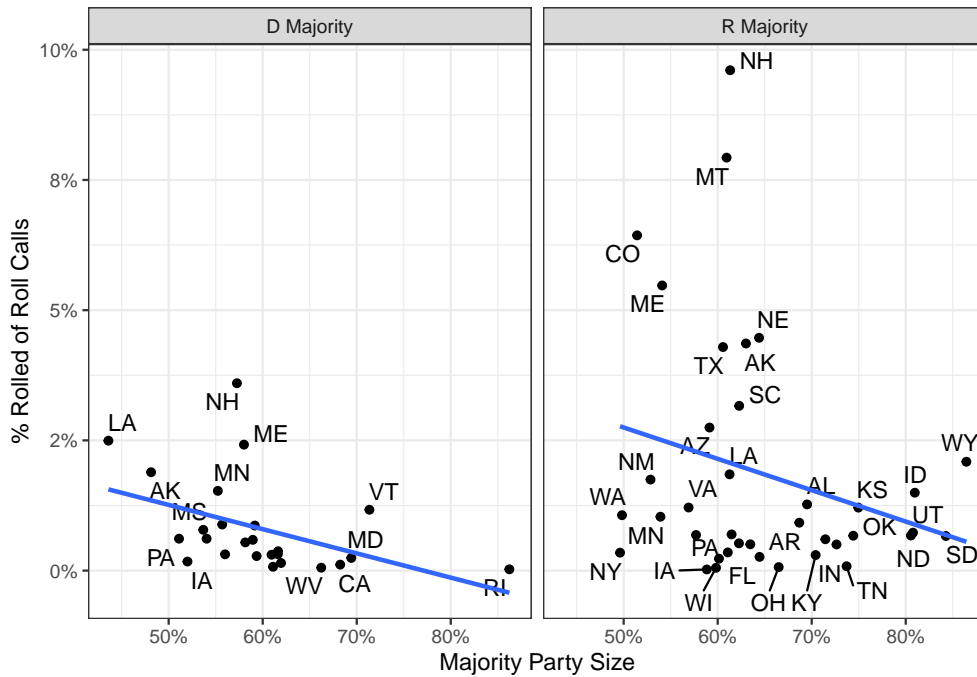


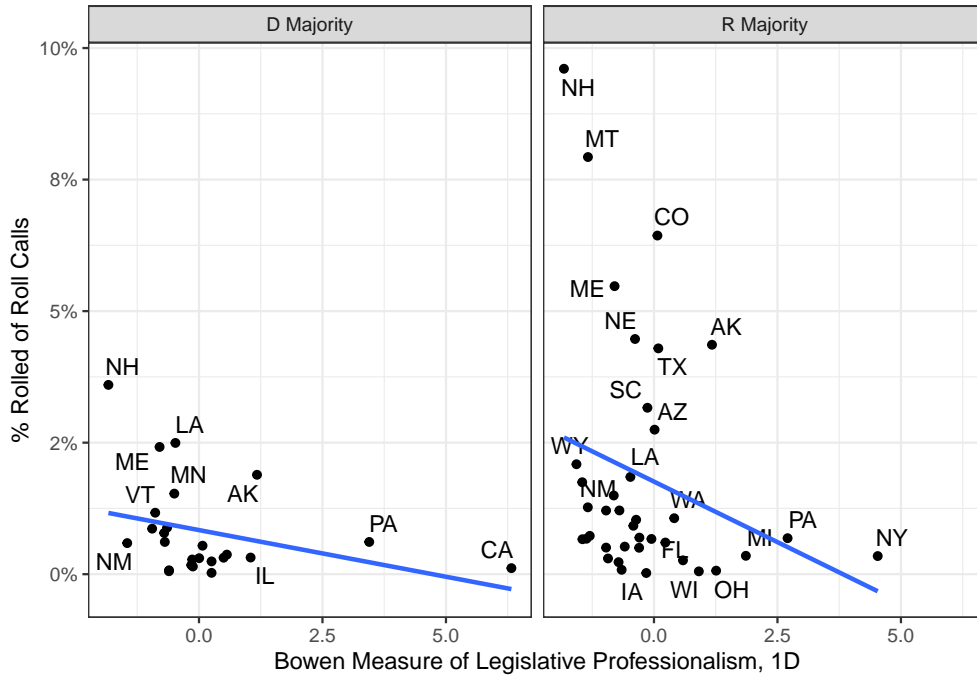
Figure 5: Majority Roll Rate by Average Majority Size



are less likely to fully understand the consequences that rolls could do to that brand. On the other hand, amateur legislators could be *more* likely to delegate voting and agenda decisions to leadership compared with more confident professional legislators.

Figure 6 averages the Bowen and Greene (2014) measure of professionalism and compares it to average roll rates. In both partisan majorities, more professionalized legislatures appear to be rolled less often.

Figure 6: Majority Roll Rate by Legislative Professionalism



### 3.1 Multilevel Models of Majority Gatekeeping

In this section we estimate a series of multilevel models of majority party rolls at the roll call level. Our key outcome variable is a dichotomous measure of a majority party roll.

#### 3.1.1 Floor voting

We start with models of roll rates for all states, with separate models for Democratic and Republican majority chambers. These are estimated using multilevel models with random effects (varying intercepts) for states and bills. These are included to account for baseline differences in roll rates across these units, and are similar to but more flexible than including fixed effects in an OLS setup.

Table 1 shows the results. The key spatial predictor, signed distance between majority party median and median bill sponsor, is statistically significant at the  $p < .001$  level for both parties. The positive sign for the Republican model indicates that the further bills are to the left side of the majority party median, the more likely they are to roll the Republican majority. The opposite is true for Democrats: increasingly conservative bills are more likely to roll Democratic majorities. Notice that the coefficient is considerably larger for Republicans than for Democrats.

The key partisan indicator is the partisanship of bill sponsors. The results in Table 1 confirm the descriptive results for minority party bills. Bills authored solely by the minority party in each type of chamber majority are more likely to roll the majority than bipartisan bills. Here, too, we see party asymmetry, with the Democratic sponsors in Republican chambers having more rolling success than Republican sponsors in Democratic chambers.

Taken together, Democrats in state legislatures appear to have an important coalitional advantage relative to Republicans. They can write bills that advance towards passage, even in hostile territory, at rates far exceeding that of Republicans. Surprisingly, liberal bills do particularly well. Of course, conservative bills in Republican majorities need not overcome as many hurdles to get passed. But just like diving, we can marvel at the success of bills operating under a high degree of difficulty.

#### 3.1.2 Committee Voting

Agenda control operates in large part through the committee system of modern American legislatures. It is useful, then, to see whether majority power is exerted similarly in committee and floor voting. If committees are merely agents of the majority, then we should see largely similar effects. If they have policy-specific interests that tie majority and minority party members together, we might see weaker effects.

Table 2 shows fairly similar results to the floor models above. We see a spatial effect with moderate being

Table 1: Multilevel Model of Majority Rolls on the Floor

	D Majority	R Majority
Bill Distance to Majority	0.002*** (0.000)	-0.014*** (0.000)
Majority Party Only Sponsors	0.000 (0.000)	-0.001* (0.001)
Minority Party Only Sponsors	0.004*** (0.001)	0.012*** (0.001)
Majority Party Size	-0.013*** (0.004)	-0.039*** (0.004)
Republican Governor	0.001* (0.000)	0.001 (0.001)
Professionalism, Bowen 1D	0.002** (0.001)	0.000 (0.002)
Num.Obs.	198 542	369 809
State REs	Y	Y
Bill REs	Y	Y

Standard errors displayed in parentheses below coefficients. \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

bills more likely to produce a roll and a partisan effect with minority party-only authored bills more likely get a roll. Partisan asymmetry in both baseline rates and coefficient sizes appear here as well, but not in the spatial effect.

Table 2: Multilevel Model of Majority Rolls in Committee

	D Majority	R Majority
Bill Distance to Majority	0.004*** (0.000)	-0.005*** (0.001)
Majority Party Only Sponsors	0.001* (0.001)	-0.006*** (0.001)
Minority Party Only Sponsors	0.006*** (0.001)	0.021*** (0.002)
Majority Party Size	-0.016* (0.007)	-0.038*** (0.006)
Republican Governor	0.002 (0.001)	0.000 (0.001)
Professionalism, Bowen 1D	0.004*** (0.001)	-0.016** (0.005)
Num.Obs.	155 193	156 237
State REs	Y	Y
Bill REs	Y	Y

Standard errors displayed in parentheses below coefficients. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

### 3.2 The Role of Interest Group Support in Majority Gatekeeping

Next, we consider whether there is a link between interest group support for legislation and its ability to roll the majority party. This section analyzes data from floor voting in Colorado, Montana, and Nebraska, the three states for which lobbying data exist.<sup>5</sup> Over 65.5% of bills across the three states are lobbied by at least one group, with the median bill being lobbied by 5 unique interest groups.

Figure 7 displays the distribution of groups lobbying by bill for each of the three states. While Nebraska has the fewest lobbying groups and Colorado the most, the shape of the distribution is similar across all three states. For most bills only a few groups are actively engaged in lobbying legislators, while a small number of bills feature lobbying by many different groups.

Figure 8 displays the distribution of organized interest support versus opposition for bills in each state. A value of 1 indicates that 100% of groups lobbying on the bill who take a position support the bill, while a value of 0 indicates that 100% of the groups lobbying on the bill who take a position oppose it. In all three states there are a large number of bills that are either supported by all groups or opposed by all groups. For bills where interest groups take opposing positions, support tends to be evenly divided. On many bills approximately half of the groups support and half of the groups oppose the legislation.

In the analyses that follow, two measures of interest group support for each bill are used to determine the relationship between interest group support and majority party gatekeeping. The first measure is simply the number of groups reporting that they lobbied in support of an individual piece of legisla-

<sup>5</sup>As only one of the three states has voting data at the committee level, we exclude committee votes from these analyses.

Figure 7: Lobbying Groups per Bill by State

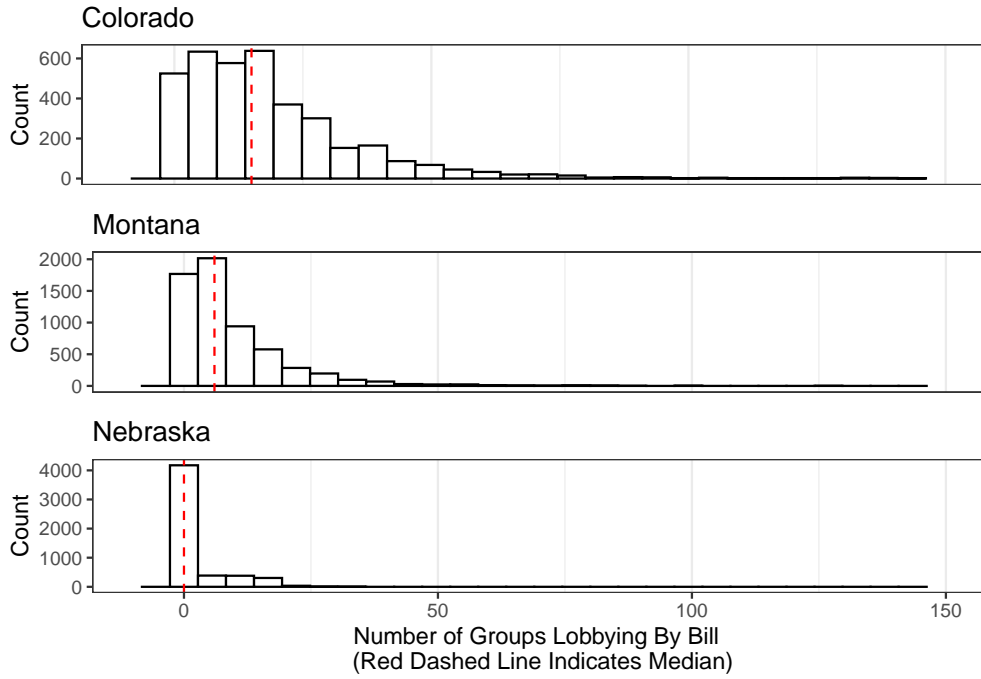
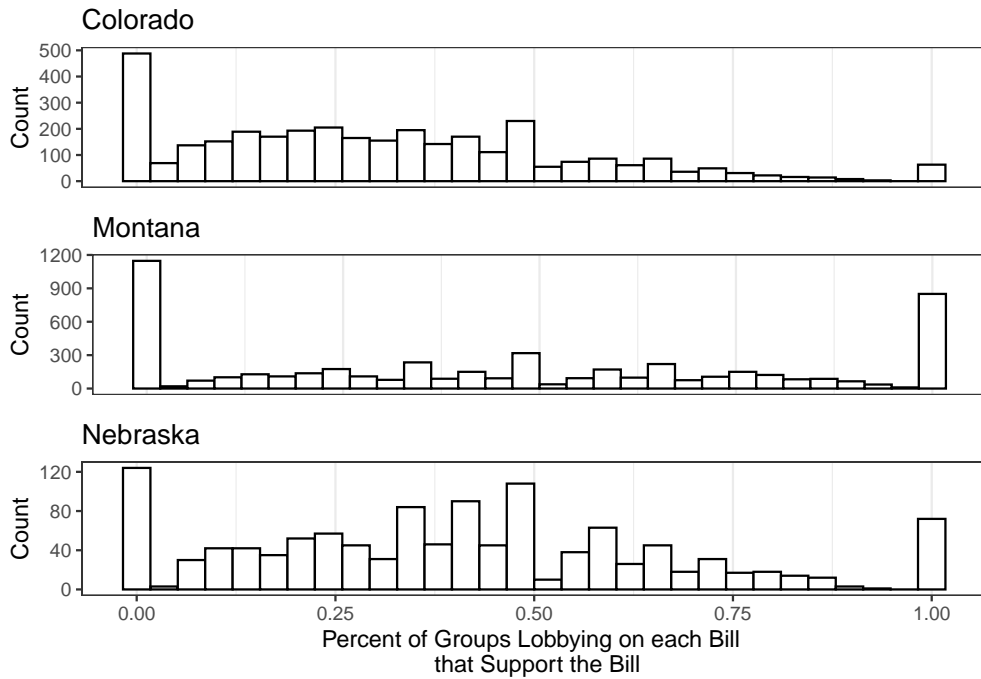


Figure 8: Lobbying Support versus Opposition by Bill

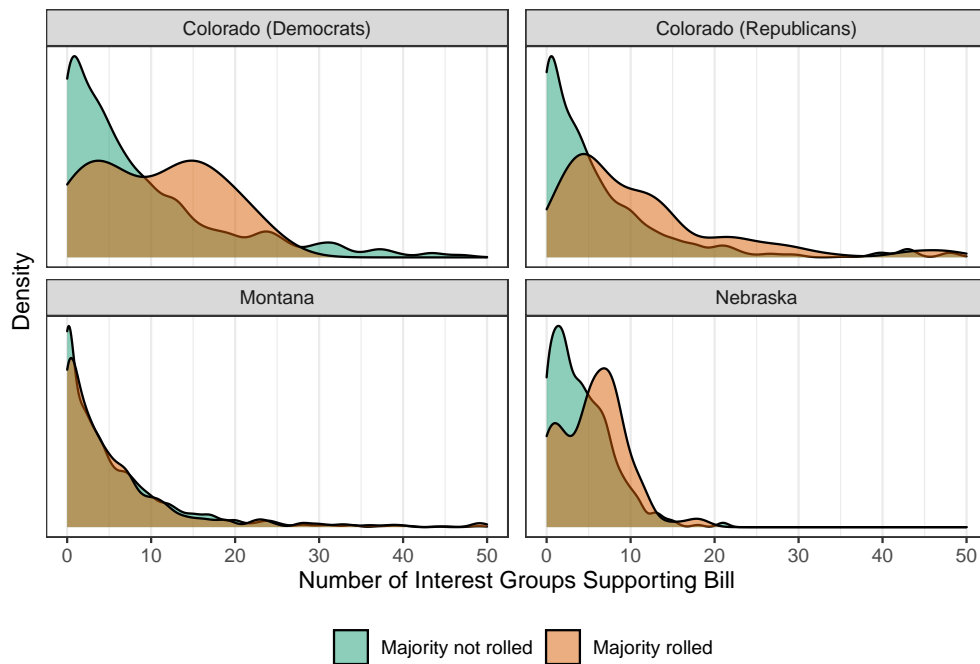




tion. To address the right-skewed nature of the Number Supporting variable we take its log, calculated as  $\log(\text{Number Supporting} + 1)$ . In all regressions using Logged Number Supporting, we also include Logged Number Opposing, to account for the possibility that group lobbying against the bill might counteract the positive agenda influence of groups lobbying for the bill. The second measure used, Percent of Groups Supporting, is the proportion of all groups taking a position on the bill that report supporting the bill and ranges from 0 to 1.

Figure 9 provides some initial suggestive evidence that interest group support may a role in overcoming agenda control by the majority party. For each of the states for which lobbying data exists, the figure displays a density plot of interest group support for bills on which the majority party is rolled versus bills where they are not. We display the results separately by majority party in CO; in the other two states, the majority party is always Republican. In all four cases votes that roll the majority party on average have more interest groups lobbying in support of the bill than those that do not, although the difference is less obvious in Montana than the other two states.

Figure 9: Number of Lobbying Groups on Majority Rolls versus non-Rolls



To more formally ascertain whether interest group support allows legislation to bypass majority party agenda control, we first estimate a series of linear probability models using OLS. For these regressions the dependent variable is a binary variable coded as 1 if the majority party is rolled on a given roll call vote and 0 otherwise. In addition to the interest group support variables described earlier, we include fixed effects for each unique chamber-session, ensuring that all comparisons are within-chamber and thus hold fixed all

institutional characteristics as well as the distribution of party and preferences within the chamber. These regressions also include all variables from the previous regressions that vary within a given chamber-session. Since the unit of analysis for these models are an individual roll call vote, of which several may be for the same bill, the standard errors are clustered at the bill level. The primary hypothesis is that each of the interest group support variables (Number of Supporting Groups and Percent of Groups Supporting) is positively associated with the probability a majority roll.

One potential objection to this approach is that the analysis involves all legislation, including non-controversial bills that are either certain to pass or certain to fail. Such bills are unlikely to marshal strong support (or opposition), while bills that pass without a majority of the majority party supporting are by definition contested pieces of legislation. We address this concern in two ways. First, we estimate models that control non-parametrically for the the closeness of the vote using fixed effects for the margin of passage, or the number of yes votes minus the number of no votes. Second, we conduct a matching analysis where bills are matched based on margin of passage. Matching is performed using Exact Matching implemented with the MatchIt package in R. Each of these methods allows us to compare interest group support for legislation that passed by the exact same margin of victory (succeeded by one vote, succeeded by two votes, etc.), where the only difference is one set of roll call votes passed with a coalition featuring a majority of the majority party, while the other set of roll calls passed without majority party support. These analyses also allow us to eliminate persuasion or vote-buying of individual votes as a mechanism driving our results. If lobbying has an effect on legislative outcomes via either persuasion or vote-buying rather than bypassing majority party gatekeeping, the number of votes in favor is all that lobbying should affect, rather than the partisan composition of the winning coalition.

Table 3 displays the results of estimating the baseline linear probability model using the (logged) Number of Supporting Groups variable. Results are shown for both the pooled data for all three states as well as each state individually. As predicted, as the number of interest groups lobbying in support of legislation increases a roll call vote on the bill is more likely to result in the majority party being rolled. The estimated impact of interest group support is slightly higher for Nebraska than the other two states, but otherwise the estimates are similar.

To help understand the magnitude of these predictions, Figure 10 plots the predicted probability of a majority roll across the observed range of the logged Number of Supporting Groups variable, with a density plot of the variable displayed below. As the graph shows, without any interest groups lobbying in support approximately 3.5% of roll calls rolled the majority party. At the middle of the distribution (2 on the log scale, or roughly six supporting groups), the majority is predicted to be rolled approximately 5.5% of the time, an increase of over 50% above the baseline rate.

Table 3: Linear Probability Model of Majority Rolls by Number of Supporting Groups

	Pooled	Colorado	Montana	Nebraska
Number of Supporting Groups (Logged)	0.013*** (0.003)	0.013*** (0.003)	0.013*** (0.004)	0.010 (0.009)
Number of Opposing Groups (Logged)	0.001 (0.003)	-0.003 (0.002)	0.000 (0.004)	0.032** (0.012)
Bill Distance to Majority	0.025*** (0.004)	-0.001 (0.003)	0.125*** (0.019)	0.060*** (0.018)
Minority Only Sponsors	0.082*** (0.009)	0.053*** (0.014)	-0.087* (0.035)	0.021 (0.019)
Bipartisan Sponsors	0.000 (0.005)	0.007 (0.004)		
Num.Obs.	26 191	7362	16 414	2415
R2	0.073	0.027	0.072	0.069
R2 Adj.	0.072	0.026	0.071	0.067
Chamber-Session FEs	Y	Y	Y	Y

Standard errors clustered at bill level. \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

Figure 10: Predicted Effect of Interest Group Support on Probability of Majority Roll

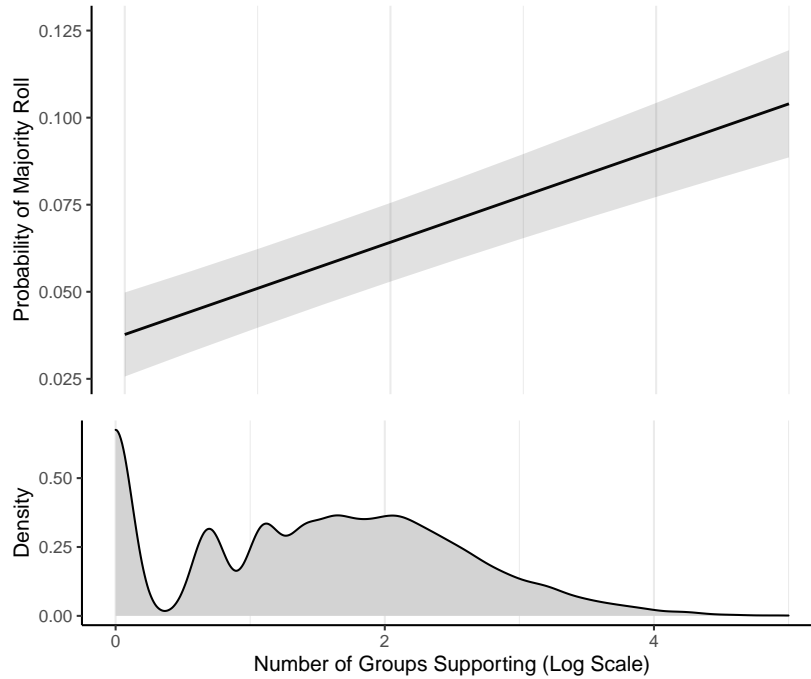


Table 4: Linear Probability Model of Majority Rolls by Percent Groups Supporting

	Pooled	Colorado	Montana	Nebraska
Percent of Groups Supporting	0.024** (0.009)	0.021** (0.008)	0.020 (0.011)	0.033* (0.017)
Bill Distance to Majority	0.024*** (0.004)	-0.002 (0.003)	0.122*** (0.019)	0.055** (0.017)
Minority Only Sponsors	0.083*** (0.009)	0.052*** (0.014)	-0.085* (0.035)	0.022 (0.019)
Bipartisan Sponsors	0.001 (0.005)	0.008* (0.004)		
Num.Obs.	26 191	7362	16 414	2415
R2	0.071	0.019	0.070	0.061
R2 Adj.	0.070	0.018	0.069	0.059
Chamber-Session FEs	Y	Y	Y	Y

Standard errors clustered at bill level. \*p<0.05; \*\*p<0.01; \*\*\*p<0.001

Table 4 displays the results from running a similar set of regressions using the percent of lobbying groups that support the bill as the measure of interest group support. Similar to before, the estimated impact using the Percent of Groups Supporting variable is positive and fairly consistent across the three states. In the pooled sample, shifting from one-quarter of interest groups being in support of a bill to three-quarters supporting is predicted to increase the probability of a majority roll occurring by approximately 1.2 percentage points; given the small baseline probability of majority rolls, this is a substantial impact.

In Table 5, we use both measures of interest group support to estimate similar models using margin of passage fixed effects. This strategy allows us to nonparametrically control for how close each individual roll call vote was. The comparison in these models is solely based on whether the winning coalition included a majority of the majority party or not. The positive coefficients on the Number of Supporting Groups and Percent of Groups Supporting variables (significant in the pooled model as well as CO and MT) indicate that roll call votes that roll the majority party feature more supportive lobbying than roll call votes that pass by identical margins but are in line with majority party preferences. In other words, successful passage of legislation opposed by the majority requires more interest group support to overcome majority party gatekeeping than legislation supported by similar numbers of legislators from the majority party. Table S1, displayed in the Supplemental Materials, shows the results of a similar research design implemented using matching on margin of passage rather than the use of margin of passage FEs. The results are substantively identical to those presented here.

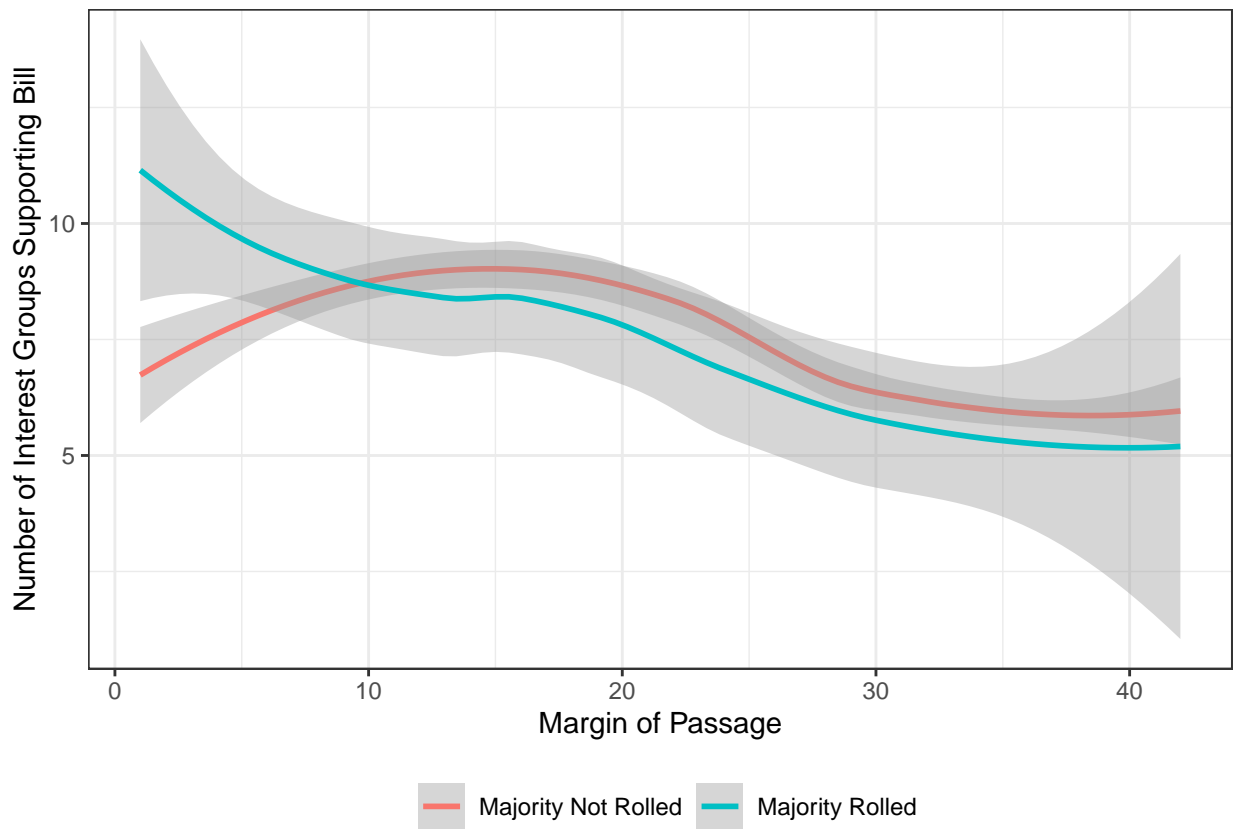
Table 5: Margin Fixed Effects Model of Majority Rolls by Interest Group Support

	Pooled	Pooled	CO	CO	MT	MT	NE	NE
Number of Supporting Groups (Logged)	0.014*** (0.002)		0.009** (0.003)		0.022*** (0.004)		0.003 (0.005)	
Number of Opposing Groups (Logged)	-0.050*** (0.003)		-0.022*** (0.005)		-0.062*** (0.004)		-0.012 (0.009)	
Percent of Groups Supporting		0.074*** (0.008)		0.023** (0.007)		0.094*** (0.011)		0.019 (0.013)
Bill Distance to Majority	0.032*** (0.003)	0.035*** (0.003)	0.005 (0.003)	0.005 (0.003)	0.113*** (0.015)	0.116*** (0.015)	0.035** (0.011)	0.036*** (0.010)
Minority Only Sponsors	0.077*** (0.008)	0.083*** (0.008)	0.077*** (0.014)	0.079*** (0.014)	-0.059* (0.029)	-0.052 (0.029)	0.015 (0.011)	0.015 (0.011)
Bipartisan Sponsors	0.031*** (0.006)	0.042*** (0.006)	0.032*** (0.005)	0.038*** (0.006)				
Num.Obs.	24 768	24 768	6595	6595	15 863	15 863	2310	2310
R2	0.280	0.267	0.161	0.152	0.314	0.296	0.529	0.529
R2 Adj.	0.277	0.263	0.151	0.142	0.309	0.291	0.520	0.520
Chamber-Session FEs	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Margin of Passage FEs	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Standard errors clustered by bill. \*p&lt;0.05; \*\*p&lt;0.01; \*\*\*p&lt;0.001

Finally, Figure 11 probes these results further by examining what type of bills interest group support is pivotal for. The figure plots the number of interest groups lobbying in support of the bill on the y-axis for roll call votes that roll the majority party compared to those that pass without rolling the majority party. The margin of passage is displayed on the x-axis. As the figure shows, the difference in lobbying between bills that do and do not roll the majority is largest when the margin of passage is smallest. Put differently, interest group support matters most for whether a bill is allowed to roll the majority when there are barely enough votes for a motion to pass. When a vote has massive support, despite being opposed by the majority party, interest group activity is less important.

Figure 11: Interest Group Support by Margin of Passage on Majority Rolls versus non-Rolls



## 4 Discussion

Understanding the conditions under which majority parties wield negative agenda powers is crucial to knowing what policies will pass and what policies will fail. As we demonstrate, a key indicator of agenda control, majority party rolls, varies considerably both across and within institutions. In this paper, we build off previous research in two ways. First, across all states, we show Republican majorities are rolled much more frequently than their Democratic counterparts. A further asymmetry is found in the spatial effect of bill location. More moderate bills appear to generate more rolls, but this effect is much stronger for Republicans than for Democrats. These results hold constant the institutional characteristics of the chambers and states, showing that Democratic majorities control the agenda in substantively different ways than Republican majorities.

Second, we find evidence in three states that pressure from organized interests is capable of overcoming partisan agenda setting. Legislation supported by large coalitions of lobbying interest groups are more likely to roll majorities than legislation without interest group support. Further analyses suggest that this relationship is not attributable to persuasion or vote-buying of individual legislators, implying that groups can convince gatekeepers to allow legislation to advance that otherwise would not.

If pressure from organized interests is capable of prying loose broadly-supported legislation that would otherwise be blocked by obstinate majorities, it is important to consider what policy is being passed. Much of this legislation – which is ultimately passed via a coalition of legislators from both parties – is likely centrist in ideological terms. In places with more active and influential interest groups, we would expect interest group pressure to lead to less gridlock and more moderate policy being passed. On the other hand, as many have noted, there is considerable inequality in terms of which interests get organized and advanced (Gilens and Page 2014; Schattschneider 1960; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2013). Policies favoring corporate or affluent interests may be particularly capable of overcoming agenda control efforts, while policies benefiting other groups may be less so. Additional research could consider whether the amount of resources interest groups possess is systematically connected with their ability to overcome majority party gatekeeping.

Further work also needs to be done to understand why Republican-controlled chambers feature so many more majority party rolls than Democratic chambers. While we outlined in an earlier section some reasons to believe agenda control may operate differently across parties, the explanations we considered all suggested Democratic majorities would be rolled more frequently than Republican majorities. As we find the opposite relationship to be true, more work needs to be done to develop a theory that might account for the differences we observe between the two parties. Although an answer as to why Democratic parties wield agenda control more effectively than Republicans remains elusive, the consistency and magnitude of the relationship suggests

this is an important clue to more fully understanding how agenda control works. Given the critical role of agenda setting in the policymaking process, answering this question should be a priority.



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# Supplemental Materials

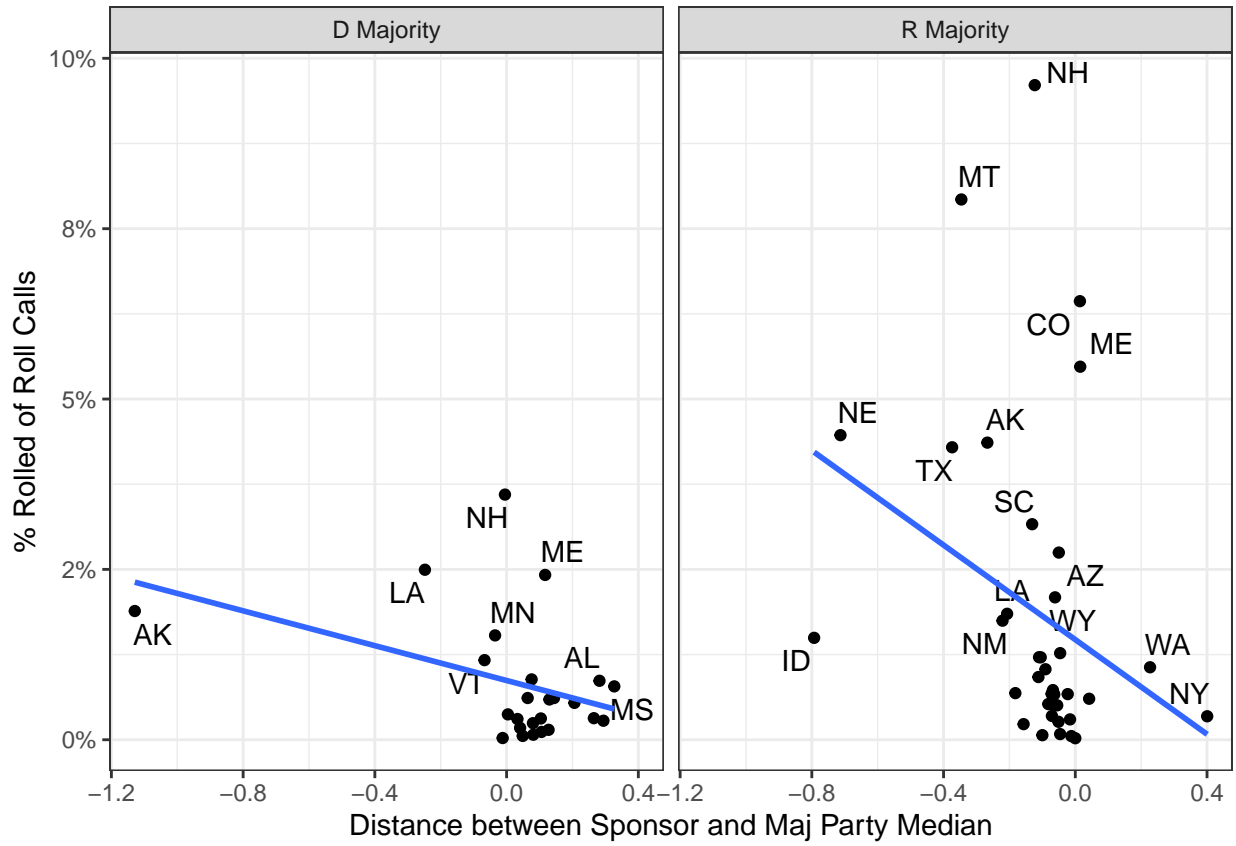


Table 6: Matching Model of Majority Rolls by Interest Group Support

	Pooled	Pooled	CO	CO	MT	MT	NE	NE
Number of Supporting Groups (Logged)	0.025*** (0.004)		0.039*** (0.011)		0.029*** (0.007)		0.029 (0.033)	
Number of Opposing Groups (Logged)	-0.034*** (0.004)		-0.029*** (0.008)		-0.053*** (0.006)		-0.046 (0.041)	
Percent of Groups Supporting		0.115*** (0.016)		0.090* (0.038)		0.135*** (0.021)		0.322** (0.116)
Bill Distance to Majority	0.072*** (0.008)	0.075*** (0.008)	0.045** (0.017)	0.050** (0.017)	0.320*** (0.034)	0.324*** (0.034)	0.297*** (0.072)	0.302*** (0.068)
Minority Only Sponsors	0.273*** (0.022)	0.275*** (0.022)	0.408*** (0.086)	0.422*** (0.086)	-0.154* (0.068)	-0.143* (0.069)	-0.001 (0.127)	-0.015 (0.123)
Bipartisan Sponsors	-0.032*** (0.010)	-0.018 (0.009)	0.046* (0.018)	0.063*** (0.018)				
Num.Obs.	12 459	12 459	1454	1454	6658	6658	400	400
R2	0.286	0.283	0.184	0.169	0.325	0.318	0.334	0.352
R2 Adj.	0.285	0.282	0.178	0.164	0.324	0.317	0.324	0.344
Chamber-Session FEs	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y

Standard errors clustered by bill. \*p&lt;0.05; \*\*p&lt;0.01; \*\*\*p&lt;0.001