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Killer Amendments and Strategic Voting in the Senate

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Abstract

One place we still do not understand senators' voting patterns is the arena of strategic votes. Every senator has a set of preferences on the issues; however, researchers cannot reach into the brains of senators to extract these vital positions. The goal of this paper is to determine whether killer amendments induce strategic voting in the Senate, using data from the 109th Congress.

KILLER AMENDMENTS AND STRATEGIC VOTING IN THE SENATE

A Research Note

Erin Strauts

Introduction

Understanding the inner workings of legislatures should be a central objective of those wishing to comprehend and evaluate the work of democracies. In the modern United States Senate the votes of senators can be predicted with 85 percent accuracy (Poole and Rosenthal 1997). Legislators are likely to vote with their party, but when they do not vote with their ideological brethren we often cannot explain their motives.

One place we still do not understand senators' voting patterns is the arena of strategic votes. Every senator has a set of preferences on the issues; however, researchers cannot reach into the brains of senators to extract these vital positions. Traditionally, legislator preferences are inferred from their votes on bills and amendments, but these votes may not be a reliable measure. The legislator may vote against an amendment because he or she believes it will decrease the chances of getting their least favored outcome on the bill and not because of his or her attitude toward the amendment itself. This would be a strategic vote. The type of amendment which provokes this kind of strategic vote is a "killer" or a "poison pill" amendment. These amendments manipulate the agenda by interjecting a step before the vote on the bill which lowers the chance of the bill passing. The goal of this paper is to determine whether killer amendments really do induce strategic voting in the Senate, using data from the 109th Congress.

Data and Methods

To test whether amendments cause strategic voting I used two measures: the D-NOMINATE scores developed by Poole and Rosenthal[1] and my own Weighted Error Score based on the ideas of Poole and Rosenthal.

The D-NOMINATE score (Dynamic NOMINAl Three-step Estimation) is a score given to each individual senator and is based on all the roll call votes he or she has made in the senate. The first dimension score, which is used here, is a measure of the legislator's ideology and partisanship. The score ranges from -1 as extremely liberal to 1 as extremely conservative. It is not an absolute measure of ideology, but rather ranks legislators relative to their peers.

The Weighted Error Score (WES) is a measure of the number of classification errors (predicted nay, but actual yea and vice versa) found at the liberal and conservative ends of the NOMINATE scale. The location of the cutting point (divide between the predicted yeas and the nays) is essential to finding the classification errors. I found the cutting point by calculating the median NOMINATE score for the yeas and again for the nays. The cutting point is the average of the two medians. If the yeas have a more negative median than the nays, then liberals are predicted to vote yea and conservatives nay. Classification errors are expected to exist around the cutting point, but strategic voting should have errors at the ends of the scale. WES penalizes for errors very far from the cut point and for a large number of errors. The higher the WES the more likely a vote is to have been strategic.

[1] The NOMINATE data used can be found on Keith Poole's website, www.voteview.com

$$WES = \Sigma \mid NOMINATEscore_i - \text{cut point} \mid * \#ofErrors$$

In order to collect the data, I searched the *Congressional Record* for mentions of killer, poison pill, and gutting amendments.[2] By using the *Congressional Record* instead of a data driven method, this project makes two assumptions. First, in order to have an incentive to vote strategically on the amendment a legislator must know that the amendment is indeed a killer amendment. Second, if the legislator knows it is a killer he or she will tell the other legislators.

Findings

After finding the killers, I sampled non-killers and calculated the WES for all the votes. I then ran a t-test on the two groups to test the significance of the average difference in scores. The average WES score for the killers was 25.60 and 15.53 for the non-killers, a difference of 10.06. The t-test gave a p-value of .63 which is not significant. The hypothesis of strategic voting being induced by killers is not supported by the WES scores. The total number of killers found in the 109th Senate equaled 17 (10 in the first session and 7 in the second session) out of over 600 votes. This small sample size made it nearly impossible to achieve significance. With the given difference and variation, a p-value of .05 would require a sample size of 280 killer amendments.[3]

Conclusions

While the WES did not prove to be significant, some evidence was still found that some of the amendments were killers. Killer amendments and strategic votes have gotten quite a bit of attention in recent years, but there is still much more that is worth learning. It seems that legislators do not take much advantage of strategic actions in Congress. While this makes Congress easier for the masses to understand, I would argue that it is normatively better to have a Congress aware enough to act sophisticatedly.

Research on a grander scale then that already tried needs to be done. A comprehensive database of all known killers needs to be created in order to achieve sample sizes large enough to test differences between killers and non-killers and between subgroups within the set of killers. Since the number of legislators who actually vote strategically on killers is fairly low, the differences between the strategic voters and the non-strategic voters should be analyzed.

[2] Searching the Congressional Record for key phrases was the idea of Wilkerson. He was able to find the killers, but his results were insignificant (Wilkerson 1999). However the measure Wilkerson used to test the killers included errors close to the cutting point which may have drowned out the differences between killers and non-killers.

[3] $t = (Xbar_{killer} - Xbar_{non}) / sqr(Var_{killer}/n_{killer} + Var_{non}/n_{non})$, for a p-value of .05 the equation must be greater than a t-value of 1.96