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Reply to "Vetoes, Bargaining, and Boundary Conditions"

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Edited by Jonathan Katz

Professor Cameron's comment on "Override Rates" notes that formal models of veto politics "are rather thick on the ground." This was precisely the motivation for writing the paper: to sift through the proliferation of models with various and often incompatible assumptions, each apparently consistent with empirical evidence in the form of comparative statics with the correct signs. The aim was to demonstrate that by fully working through the logic of the models, one could, with only very crude empirical data, put much tighter constraints on the set of plausible models than those provided by comparative statics alone. Most of Cameron's points are well taken, and I appreciate his effort to comment thoughtfully on the paper. However, I have a few points of contention that I will discuss briefly here: first, two specific comments on the "blame game" section of the paper, and then, two broader points on the methodological approach.

First, Cameron asserts that in the override-augmented "blame game" model, overrides will never occur and hence the statistical tests of this model in the paper are irrelevant. This is not true. Overrides are possible under configurations of preferences in which the veto choice does not divide presidential types. For instance, when voters know that the position of all possible presidential types is to the right of the status quo, and Congress is to the left, then all presidential types can costlessly express disapproval of a proposed leftward shift in policy by issuing a (sure to be overridden) veto. Such a veto provides no new information to the electorate.

Second, Cameron objects that the tests in the paper apply the blame-game model to situations in which it is not applicable, namely minor vetoes to which the public is not attentive. (I do respect the other "boundary condition" of the blame-game model, by including only vetoes occurring under divided government in the sample.) I attempted to address this concern in two ways in the paper. Both provide reason to be skeptical that restricting the sample on the basis of some voter-salience classification scheme would change the results:

- Figure 6 reports the results of a subsampling experiment in which I randomly assigned each veto to either the major or minor category and recomputed the estimates on only the "major" vetoes. If there truly were a set of vetoes to which the public pays attention and a set to which it does not, then this exercise ought to produce a bimodal distribution, with one mode at zero (the minor vetoes) and another away from zero (the major vetoes). The results do not show any indication of bimodality, and in fact look strikingly normal. One possible alternative explanation is that true audience vetoes are so rare that this exercise cannot uncover them. But according to the evidence in Gilmour (2011), journalists who cover Congress, at least, do not believe audience vetoes to be particularly uncommon.
- I ran the original Groseclose–McCarty specification, which pooled together sustained and overridden vetoes, using my sample of data. Although I included all vetoes rather than only "major" vetoes, and used a different (though overlapping) time period, I got strikingly similar results to those in the original paper. I replicated the finding that vetoes are

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associated with negative changes in approval, with a nearly identical point estimate of −2.1 percentage points, as compared to −2.2 percentage points in the original paper.

Third, while it is clearly true that multiple strategic motives can exist in the same situation under different circumstances—Cameron's notion of "boundary conditions"—inherent in the concept is something of a slippery slope toward over-parameterization that can be dangerous for the empirical researcher. To identify a mixture model, one typically needs at least as many covariates as there are regimes, but Cameron's discussion seems to suggest that the same factor—bill salience or importance—makes a bill more likely to be both an audience veto and an override-pivot-uncertainty veto. For such theoretically attractive mixture models to be practically implementable, we need more thoroughly worked-out theories of boundary conditions.

Finally, one purpose of formal theory in political science is to deduce what conclusions about the underlying motivations of political actors and the structure of their interactions can be inferred from observed outcomes; in other words, to learn something about the world that could not be learned from observation alone. The goal of this article is certainly not to discredit the entire class of bargaining models; rather, it aims to demonstrate that the framework allows researchers to draw some fairly precise conclusions about the nature of the uncertainty in veto interactions using only an exceptionally coarse data set of override successes and failures.

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