

Minority Party Power Capacity in Congress

Abstract

The growing polarization of political ideology and perception of compromise within the United States Congress has impacted the minority party's significance in conducting legislation. We argue that the capacity of the minority party to exert legislative influence is a function of three factors:

- 1) Constraints on the majority party, which create opportunities for the minority party
- 2) Minority party cohesion on the issue at hand
- 3) Sufficient motivation for the minority to engage in legislating rather than electioneering

Building on previous research conducted by FSU Political Science Professor Andy Ballard, who analyzed the 99th through 109th Congressional sessions, this examination fills in the gaps, compiling data from bills proposed during the 116th Congress. Utilizing an Excel spreadsheet to assess these legislative proposals, their language retrieved from the Library of Congress, we coded each by two criteria:

- 1) Major topic of the bill
- 2) Minor topic of the bill—derived from the Topics Codebook of the U.S. Policy Agendas Project Updated Spring 2019 edition

Ultimately, bills were more likely to reach the floor and become law when majority constraint was high and minority cohesiveness was high, underscoring the importance of the minority party's influence in the legislative agenda and lawmaking. Our updated assessment has important implications for theories of congressional party power and our understanding of minority party influence on Capitol Hill.

Methodology

We reviewed all bills called to the floor during the 116th Congressional session, their language retrieved from the Library of Congress. Utilizing an Excel spreadsheet to assess these legislative proposals, we coded each by two criteria:

- 1) Major topic of the bill
- 2) Minor topic of the bill

The distinction of these 21 major and 217 minor categories was derived from the Topics Codebook of the U.S. Policy Agendas Project Updated Spring 2019 edition. Drawing on three primary independent variables:

- 1) Majority party constraints
- 2) Minority party cohesion
- 3) Minority party motivation

We analyzed two dependent variables for our quantitative analyses:

- 1) Whether each bill received a final passage vote on the floor
- 2) A dichotomous measure of whether each bill became a public law

FIGURE 1. The Number of Bills Reaching a Vote From Each Issue in Each Period Studied

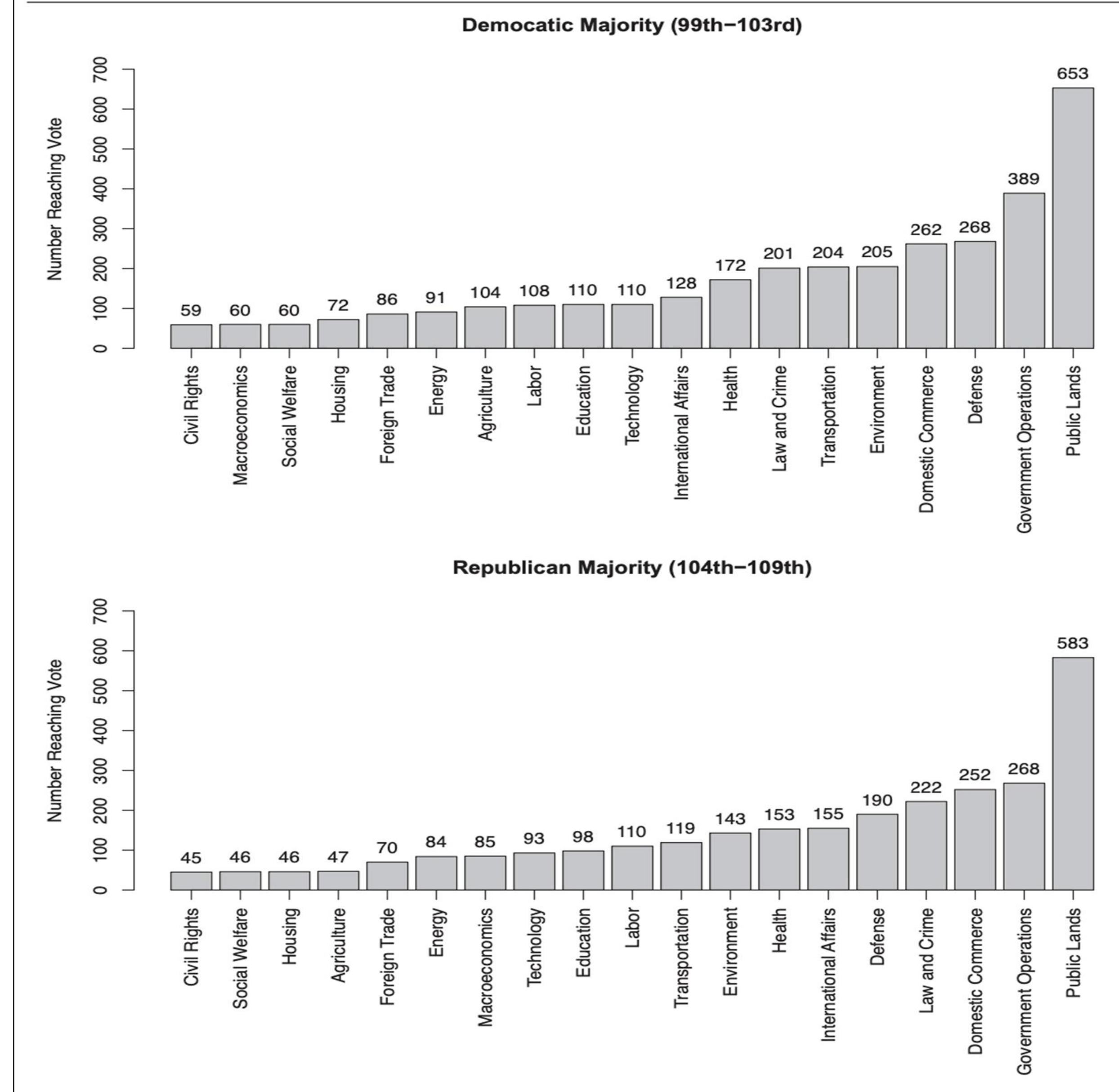


FIGURE 5. Predicted Probability That Bills Became Law as a Function of the Interaction among Majority Spread, Minority Spread, and Minority Priority

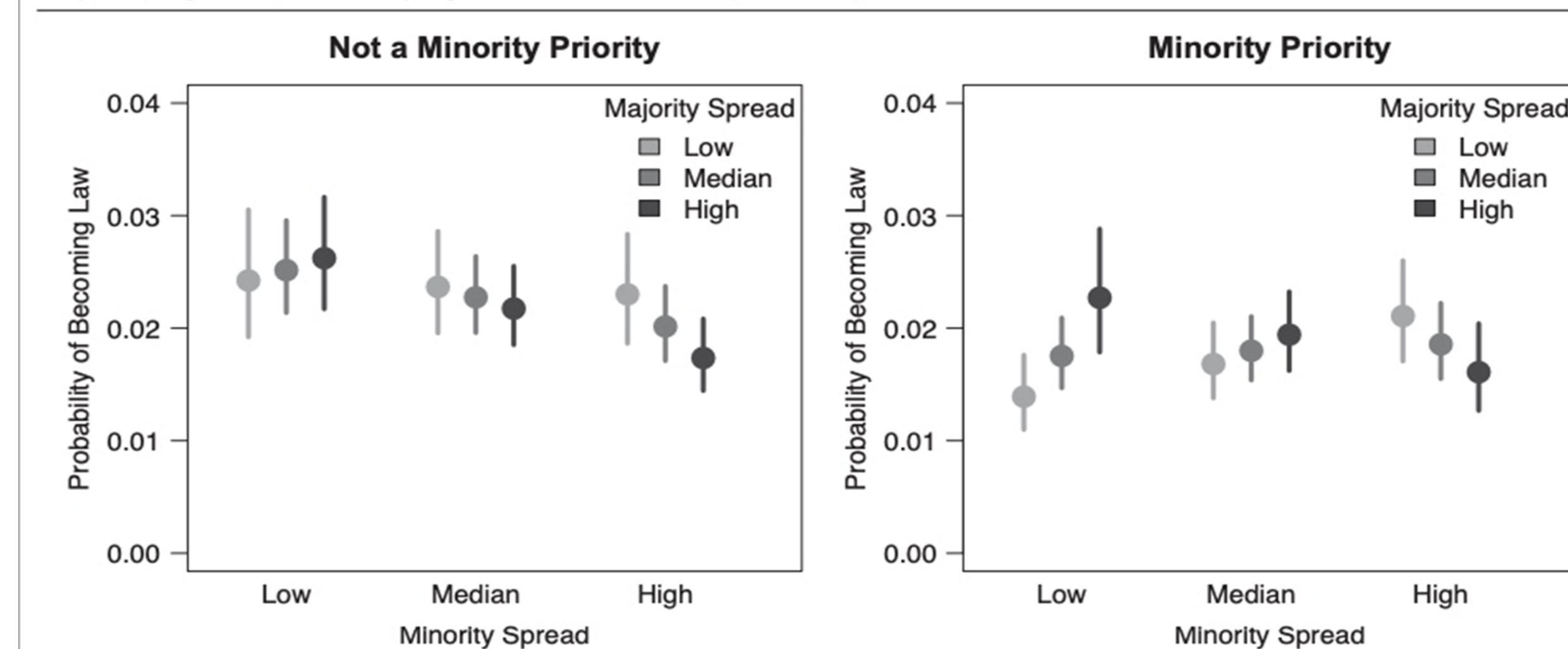
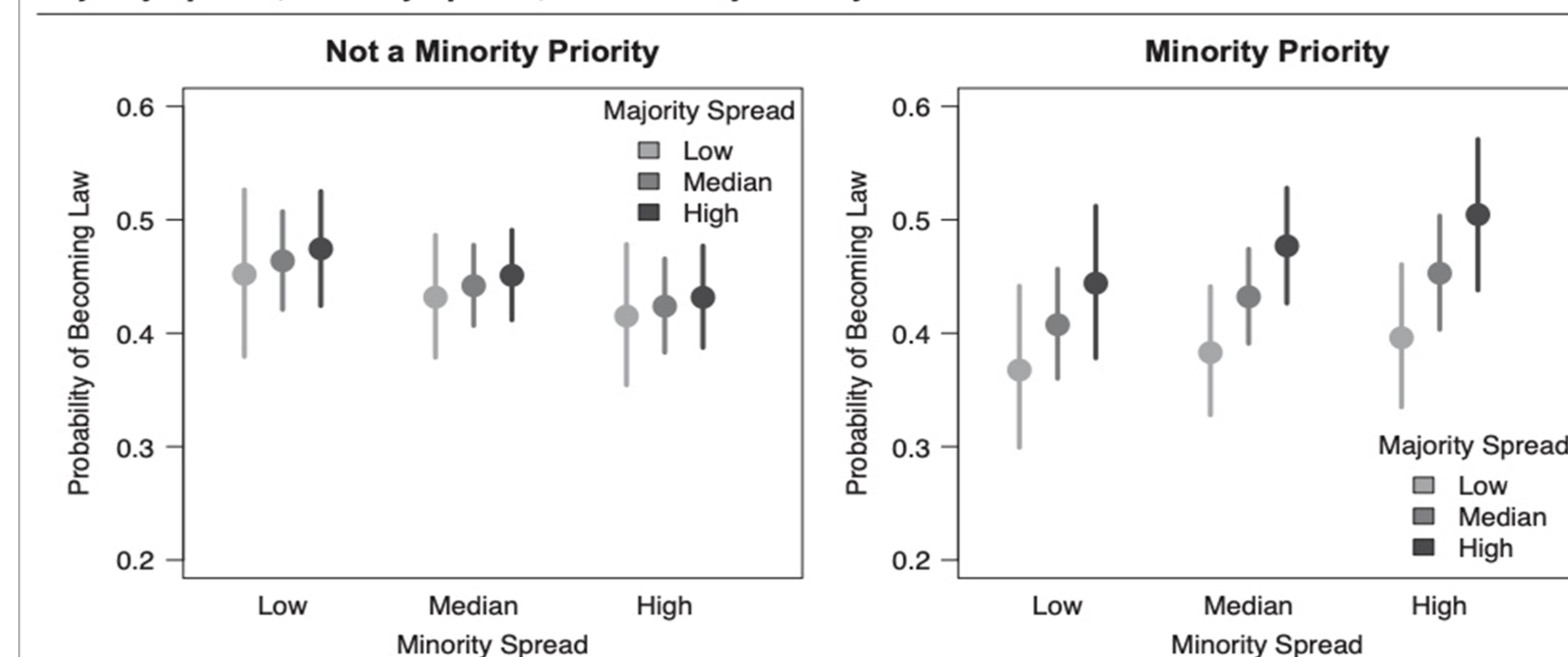


FIGURE 6. Predicted Probability That Bills Became Law as a Function of the Interaction among Majority Spread, Minority Spread, and Minority Priority for Bills That Passed the House



Results

While our continuation of Dr. Ballard's research is incomplete, we can rely on his previous discoveries to predict the capacity of minority party power in conducting legislation. His previous findings displayed that both dependent variables:

- 1) Bills reaching the floor
- 2) Bills become law

held a casual, positive correlation to the three independent variables:

- 1) Majority party constraint (high spread)
- 2) Minority party cohesiveness (low spread)
- 3) Minority party motivation

With this in mind, we can look at the figures to see that the bills with the most debated topics had fewer bills to reach a vote compared to the more compliant topics. Ultimately, bills were more likely to reach the floor and become law when majority constraint was high, and minority cohesiveness was high. The results show that the minority party holds a great deal of power when it comes to the success rate of a passing bill.

Conclusion

Based on our findings, we conclude that minority party power can significantly impact bills proposed and laws passed in Congress. Dependent on the constraint of the majority party, as well as the cohesion and motivation of the minority party, legislation has a greater likelihood of relying on the minority's support. Our updated assessment has important implications for theories of congressional party power and our understanding of minority party influence on Capitol Hill, regardless of Democratic or Republican control. Filling in the gaps in government records, which stopped coding bills by topic in 2019, can continue predicting Congressional influence for the years to come.

References

Ballard, Andrew O., and James M. Curry. "Minority Party Capacity in Congress." *American Political Science Review*, vol. 115, no. 4, 2021, pp. 1388-1405. Cambridge University Press, 10.1017/S0003055421000381.

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