

*Rejoinder to “Sense and Sensibility”**

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“Restrictive Rules Reconsidered” focuses on the relationship between procedural majoritarianism and policy outcomes in the United States House of Representatives. Is the conventional wisdom correct in holding that rules are tools used regularly by the majority party and/or the Rules Committee to produce “noncentrist outcomes” (Dion and Huber 1996)? Or are rules majoritarian instruments used to facilitate centrist outcomes and collective benefits such as specialization and information transmission?

“Sense and Sensibility” (Dion and Huber 1997) neither mentions the issue of procedural majoritarianism nor bolsters the authors’ earlier assertion about noncentrist policy outcomes. These omissions are unfortunate but understandable. It is impossible to deny credibly that rules are selected by majority votes in the House rather than dictated by an “autonomous Rules Committee,” and it is exceedingly difficult to substantiate the important claim that policy outcomes are regularly noncentrist. Dion and Huber instead confine their comments to narrower issues of context and model specification. I will first discuss “Sense and Sensibility”¹ and then return to the more important substantive issue.

Context

Dion and Huber state they “are only making a theoretical claim” (1997) and suggest that I took their comprehensive summary out of context by omitting their newly italicized prefatory sentence, “If we begin with the premise that the Rules Committee plays an autonomous part in the legislative process, our understanding of restrictive rules changes” (1997, 945). First, surely their conclusion was jointly theoretical and empirical; otherwise, why all the data analysis? Second, readers may ask and answer for themselves whether Dion and Huber believe their premise. If the answer is no, then the purpose of a “theoretical claim” based on a false premise should be questioned. If the answer is yes, then the sentences I quoted reflect Dion and Huber’s substantive views accurately, and nothing is taken

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¹Evidently, to *oppose* “Sense and Sensibility” would be nonsensical.

out of context.² Clearly, the more reasonable supposition is that Dion and Huber believe both the premise and the conclusion of their passage.

Significance of Restrictive-Rule Profile

Using my data, Dion and Huber estimate and present twice as many rule-level equations as presented in my paper. In these, the statistical significance of the restrictive-rule-profile variable returns. Most first-round specifications are variations of those reported in an appendix of my book but omitted in my recent paper for the sake of brevity and simplicity. In retrospect, I may have erred in confining my attention to simpler specifications, but, if so, the consequence of my relative parsimony is not of great substantive significance. On the positive side, the findings in Dion and Huber's first round of extended analysis (Table 1) include not only a legislative-profile comeback but also evidence of further robustness of many information-theoretic variables. On the negative side, none of the new specifications confronts the lingering ambiguity. Significant or not, what does the coefficient for restrictive-rule-profile mean?

Meaning of Restrictive-Rule Profile

In an attempt to clarify whether the restrictive-rule-profile variable reflects Rules Committee autonomy or heterogeneity in disguise, Dion and Huber construct a new argument that is theoretically intricate and empirically clever but substantively misleading. It begins with the theoretical observation that in the heterogeneous-committees model the expected utility of the median voter is enhanced by open rather than closed rules beyond a critical point of the committee's outlying property. This is analytically true but not nearly as empirically useful as the new analysis suggests. To see why, we must retrace carefully the construction and content of the variables Dion and Huber label "homogeneous preference outlier" and "heterogeneous preference outlier" and which they regard as good measures of heterogeneity.³

²Also regarding context: is Dion and Huber's theory a party theory or is it not? The record is mixed. However, since it seems highly implausible that "noncentrist outcomes" facilitated by an "autonomous Rules Committee" would regularly favor the *minority* party, the alignment between conventional wisdom and Dion and Huber seems much tighter than implied in "Sense and Sensibility." In any event, I have taken greater care here via "and/or" loopholes to allow Dion and Huber to have it either way or both ways. Readers, likewise, can form independent interpretations about the implied form of "noncentrism."

³Dion and Huber abruptly dismiss my measures of heterogeneity and confirmatory signaling—standard deviations of committee members' ADA ratings, and number of Republican cosponsors (in Democratic Congresses)—by saying "we feel that none of the[se] heterogeneity variables permit a direct test of informational theories" (1997, 951). My defense of admittedly imperfect measures need not be repeated (see Krehbiel 1991), but I will repeat

The new measures both use a crude dummy variable that I had used in a quite different context to supplement an analysis of committee composition (Krehbiel 1990). Specifically, Dion and Huber regard committee heterogeneity as effectively measured by a variable equal to one when Democratic and Republican ADA medians are on opposite sides of the chamber median, and zero otherwise. Because this condition holds for all committees in the data set except Armed Services—for 197 of 208 observations, to be precise—Dion and Huber’s core heterogeneity variable has almost no variation. The effect this has on the meaning of the so-called heterogeneity measures is important but disguised in “Sense and Sensibility.” First, the variable called “homogeneous preference outlier” is essentially a dummy variable for the Armed Services Committee.⁴ Second, the variable called “heterogeneous preference outlier” has no real heterogeneity content; it is simply my preference-outlier measure for all but the 11 Armed Services observations.

Dion and Huber then exclude from Table 2 all continuous measures of heterogeneity, because they “do not feel [these measures] adequately test the predictions of informational models” (1997, 953). If, as implied, this is a judgment call, then readers who wish to make an informed judgment must be clearly informed of what has happened. Explicit, continuous, and statistically significant variables (committee heterogeneity and confirmatory signaling) have been expunged from the equation and replaced with two variables that, in spite of their labels, capture at most a pittance of heterogeneity: a *de facto* dummy variable for Armed Services and a preference outlier variable. Given this fact, Dion and Huber’s three main findings and interpretations require clarification, too.

“*Restrictive Rule Profile continues to have the correct sign, is substantively large, and has a t-statistic of approximately 4. Informational theories predict less well*” (1997, 953). This claim is only half-true; the wealth of the finding should be shared. As discussed in detail in “Restrictive Rules Reconsidered” (see especially Table 4), restrictive rule profile is a coarse but surprisingly good proxy for committee heterogeneity.⁵ When relatively

that improvements are always welcome. Shortly we shall see whether an improvement is at hand. As for directness, I grant that tests of informational theories are not direct, but indirect tests are hardly unusual or undesirable in a maturing discipline (see Kramer 1986).

⁴There is one minor qualification to this assertion. Instead of having a value of 1, the virtual dummy variable has a value of 29.5 (for the 98th Congress) or 27.5 (for the 99th Congress). These are ADA units.

⁵As a thought experiment bearing further on validity, contemplate asking Congress-watchers the following questions: “Is the Committee on X among the most homogeneous committees in the House?” where X = Agriculture, Armed Services, Merchant Marine and Fisheries, Science and Technology, Small Business, and Veterans’ Affairs. A high percentage of “yes” answers supports my assertion.

refined, statistically significant, and continuous measures of committee heterogeneity and confirmatory signaling are omitted, what do informational theories suggest should happen? Heterogeneity effects should be picked up in the variable called "restrictive rule profile." Therefore, although Dion and Huber's first sentence is true, their second sentence does not follow, nor does their introductory assertion that "Restrictive Rule Profile *cannot* . . . be interpreted as an informational effect in disguise" (1997, xxx). It most certainly can insofar as it is a good proxy for committee heterogeneity. In short, the finding is consistent with both theories.

"As expected, Homogeneous Preference Outlier is not statistically significant and has the wrong sign," (1997, 953). This claim is misleading, too, but it is reparable in a mutually supportive way. First, the coefficient is essentially zero, so the finding means that, controlling for other variables in the equation, the Armed Services Committee (a.k.a. "homogeneous preference outlier") is not treated differently from other committees. Neither the Dion-Huber theory nor informational theories give any special status to Armed Services, so there is no basis for a "wrong sign" charge.⁶ Second, why not inspect directly the rule assignments for these 11 observations in light of the two theories? Contrary to Dion and Huber's interpretation but happily for us all in the end, these are bill-rule situations in which predictions of informational theory and the Dion-Huber theory largely coincide. Informational theories roughly predict that because Armed Services is a homogeneous preference outlier, it should receive open rules.⁷ Dion and Huber's theory predicts that because the chamber median is between the Rules Committee and Armed Services medians, it should receive open rules. The doubly corroborative news is that eight of 11 Armed Services bills received open rules.

"The significant negative coefficient for Heterogeneous Preference Outlier is very disconcerting from the point of view of informational theory" (1977, 955). In contrast to previous claims, this one requires a major amendment: strike "disconcerting" and insert "encouraging." For 197 of 208 observations, the variable that Dion and Huber call "heterogeneous preference outlier" is the simple preference-outlier variable in my analyses. Informational theories imply that as preference divergence increases, the probability of a restrictive rule decreases. This is the finding. It is not disconcerting.⁸

⁶Furthermore, in one equation the coefficient has the "right" sign, and, more important, in no equation is it significantly different from zero, in which case sign hardly matters.

⁷For the sake of brevity and because it cannot be tested with these data, I ignore a qualification regarding low-cost specialization (see Krehbiel 1991, chap. 2).

⁸A somewhat tedious technical qualification arises here. Dion and Huber argue that because these are all heterogeneous committees, the prediction should go the opposite way.

In summary, Dion and Huber squelch the heterogeneity effect predicted by informational theory only nominally and via dubious means. First, they omit entirely two imperfect but nonetheless relatively fine-grained and statistically significant measures of committee heterogeneity and bill-specific confirmatory signaling. Second, they obfuscate the true meanings of their substitute variables to imply that they capture heterogeneity when, in fact, they do so only in the coarsest manner: by singling out the Armed Services Committee. Third, they interpret the revised findings either one-sidedly or incorrectly: one-sidedly with respect to “restrictive rule profile” (heterogeneity), and incorrectly in the cases of “homogeneous preference outlier” (Armed Services) and “heterogeneous preference outlier” (preference outlier).

Conclusion

As stated at the outset, the main issue is not committee heterogeneity versus restrictive rule profiles. The main issue is whether the majority party and/or the Rules Committee regularly and predictably use restrictive rules to pass noncentrist outcomes. The claim that this happens is not only Dion and Huber’s. It is conventional among legislative researchers and Capitol Hill reporters.

Can the conventional wisdom about procedural choice and noncentrist

This argument rests on an unsubstantiated assumption and a large leap of faith. The leap of faith is that the crude party-median-based heterogeneity measure captures committee heterogeneity in the manner of the Gilligan-Krehbiel heterogeneous committees model. I think that it does not, but I concede that my opinion is subjective and reiterate the call for better measures of committee heterogeneity than an off-the-shelf dummy variable. The unsubstantiated but essential assumption implicit in Dion and Huber’s model specification is that *all* dummy-defined “heterogeneous committees” (197 of 208 observations) have preference outlier measures greater than the critical point at which the rule prediction flips. Technically, this occurs when $x_c > 1/8$ in units of variance of the random variable (see their note 9 and surrounding text). But we cannot measure such variance, and, even if we could, we do not know how to transform variance units into ADA units. Fortunately, we can find within the data set some clues that bear on the inappropriateness of Table 2 specifications. First, 75% of the observations in the sample are from *non*-outlying committees—that is, committees for which we cannot reject the null hypothesis of no committee-floor difference. It seems inconceivable that these are beyond the critical point. Second, as a more charitable illustration, 58% of the observations are from committees less than 10 ADA units from the chamber median. Therefore, even if it were to be established that 1/8 in variance units equals 10 in ADA units, the prediction that Dion and Huber extract is still erroneously extracted for 58% of the observations. At the very least, it should be clear that there is a formidable methodological problem which Dion and Huber either are not aware of or chose not to bring to readers’ attention. All things considered, it seems best to stick with more straightforward specifications of “Restrictive Rules Reconsidered” or “Sense and Sensibility,” Table 1.

outcomes survive not only as journalistic or political folklore but also as a well-verified scientific claim? I do not think so, but I may be wrong. More to the point, if the conventional wisdom is to earn scientific status, the following questions must be confronted. Why doesn't the majority party always stack the putatively autonomous Rules Committee?⁹ Why are rules often defeated, or withdrawn before defeat, when moderates defect, or credibly threaten to defect, from the majority party's desired coalition? When restrictive rules are adopted by the House, why are they often accompanied with speeches that stress bipartisan agreements within the diverse committee(s) that toiled over and reported the legislation? And why, in a formerly Democratic era, was Republican cosponsorship (but not Democratic cosponsorship) strongly, positively, and significantly related to the adoption of restrictive procedures? No extant party theory and/or "autonomous Rules Committee" theory accounts for any of these anomalies, and it is unclear how a theory that is consistent with the conventional claim of noncentrist outcomes could provide such an account. On the other hand, these observations are not anomalous with respect to the informational theory of legislative organization.

Finally, it bears repeating that Dion and Huber have been singled out in this series only because, much to their credit, they uniquely articulate a theory in which noncentrist outcomes and other more directly observable phenomena emerge as clear predictions. Regardless of where readers come down on the various narrow issues at hand, Dion and Huber's work must be regarded as a significant and positive development in drawing attention to the important puzzle of whether and, if so, how collective choice in majoritarian bodies yields noncentrist outcomes. Formal theories such as Dion and Huber's make indirect tests about majoritarianism possible. Informal theories and descriptive accounts that are prevalent elsewhere and that more or less define conventional wisdom are less useful for hypothesis extraction, data collection, measurement guidance, and empirical testing. Therefore, the current exchange provides a much-needed illustration that the enterprise called rational choice is not a theory but rather a paradigm. Moreover, it is a vibrant paradigm to the extent that researchers conduct empirical tests of propositions derived from competing theories. To the extent that exchanges such as this one become more common and continue to explicate the mechanics of theory-building and theory-testing, improvements in theory and methods will follow. Likewise, our understanding not

⁹According to Dion and Huber (1996), it was stacked in the late part of their time series but not the early period. According to results presented in Cox and McCubbins (1993), the Democratic "legislative leviathan" (inexplicably) stacked the Rules Committee with *conservatives* in an earlier era.

just of restrictive rules but of collective choice more generally will be enhanced.

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