Architect or Tactician?
Henry Clay and the Institutional Development
of the U.S. House of Representatives

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Draft of August 24, 1998

Abstract: Henry Clay is rightly regarded as the most significant personality in the antebellum House of Representatives. Still, there is dispute about whether Clay's genius was primarily as a legislative *tactician* (working to manipulate an established set of rules) or *architect* (working to change the rules). This essay makes the case for Clay's position as the preeminent tactician of his day, rather than architect. On the way to making this argument I first examine the difficulties of making any firm empirical claims about the role of Clay in the institutional development of the House. I then explore three important cases in which Clay played an active role in policymaking through the use of institutional tools at his disposal—declaration of war against England, the evolution of the House committee system, and the passage of the two Missouri compromises.

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I. Introduction

Henry Clay is widely regarded to be the most significant personality in the antebellum House of

Representatives. He is the only pre-Civil War Speaker to be subjected to major biographies, and

the *only* Speaker whom each generation of American historians feels compelled to reexamine

(Schurz 1898; Clay 1910; Mayo 1937; Van Deusen 1937; Eaton 1957; Peterson 1987; Remini

1991). To students of congressional history, Clay is most importantly remembered for

transforming the office of Speaker into a partisan one. Mary Parker Follett wrote

> As a presiding officer Clay from the first showed that he considered himself not the
> umpire, but the leader of the House: his object was clearly and expressly to govern
> the House as far as possible. In this he succeeded to an extent never before or
> since equalled [*sic*] by a Speaker of the House of Representatives. Clay was the
> boldest of Speakers. He made no attempt to disguise the fact that he was a
> political officer. (Follett 1896, pp. 71–72)

As historians have reviewed the life of Henry Clay and reflected on his time in the House,[1]

two themes have emerged to organize these assessments. The first concerns Clay's personality

and general political skills. Like many "great men" in American history, he was larger than life.

Clay received a first-rate legal education in his youth in Richmond, was a part of the considerable

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[1]Clay's first congressional service came as he twice filled unexpired Senate
terms—between November 19, 1806 and March 3, 1807 and January 4, 1810 and March 3, 1811.
He served in the House in the 12th Congress and part of the 13th. Clay resigned in the 13th
Congress to be part of the American delegation to negotiate a peace treaty with England. Clay
returned to the House in the 14th Congress and served until the 16th. He returned again to the
House in the 18th Congress. After serving as Secretary of States from 1825 to 1829, he served
two terms in the Senate, from 1831 to 1842 and 1849 to until his death in 1852. Clay was
Speaker of the House throughout his House service, except for the second session of the 16th
Congress.

high legal society of that city in the late 1700s, and then set out to seek his fortune in Lexington, Kentucky. With the raw Western frontier as his political base, he combined a well-honed legal intelligence with a cagey myth about humble frontier beginnings to craft a political persona that allowed him to navigate deftly the political worlds he encountered.[2]

His rough-hewn personality served him well with his frontier constituents. His legal training and acumen made Clay a natural legal advocate on behalf of the western commercial classes who also needed representation of their legal interests with the federal government in Washington.[3] Clay's outgoing personality and *joie de vivre* put him on the "A List" of Washington society and earned him a reputation as quite a lady's man. This combination of attributes served him well not only in American politics, but in his international dealings, as well, where his hobnobbing with royalty during negotiations for the Treaty of Ghent earned him the nickname "Prince Hal."

Taking all his personality together, the best modern analogy to draw is between Clay and Lyndon Johnson. Like Johnson a century and a half later, Clay was an exceptional student of

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[2]Clay coined the phrase "self-made man" to describe the trajectory from his supposedly humble beginnings to his rise to fame. Remini (1991, chap. 1) thoroughly demolishes Clay's claims about his humble upbringing and early education.

[3]An under-appreciated function of early representatives and senators was their moonlighting as private attorneys for back-home commercial interests in their dealings with the federal courts sitting in Washington. Clay, himself, was an active participant in the Washington bar, and it is claimed that his two early terms in the Senate came about because Kentucky business leaders wished to have him in Washington pleading their court cases. The classic case of legal moonlighting during this period was Daniel Webster, who apparently was willing to obtain legal retainers in exchange for legislative favors (Josephy 1979; Baker 1985; Peterson 1987; Stewart 1994). Nor were Clay and Webster alone: Roughly 80% of senators and 55% of House members in the 1820s were lawyers (Stewart 1994, Fig. 1), compared to 54% of the Senate and 39% of the House in the 104th Congress (Ornstein, Mann, and Malbin 1996).

others' motives, an expert manipulator of existing parliamentary forms, and willing to use either quiet persuasion or fiery bluster, where appropriate, to get his way.[4]

The second theme that emerges in scholarship about Clay's House experience is his role as an institutional innovator and tactician. No doubt betraying their professional proclivities, political scientists have tended to emphasize his institutional innovations, while historians have tended to emphasize his tactics. The earliest appreciation for Clay's role as an institutional innovator came from Harlow (1917, pp. 199–219). Binder's recent research systematically confirm's Harlow's characterization of Clay, by demonstrating convincingly that the adoption of the previous question motion by the House in 1811 was a Clay-led effort at "choosing war and choosing rules" (Binder 1997, pp. 58–60)

Another institutional stream flowing within political science has focused more specifically on committee development than on rules of debate and floor procedure. Gamm and Shepsle (1989) argued that Clay's desire to keep together his fragile War Hawk coalition after the War of 1812 prompted Clay to innovate in the use of standing committees as a tool for keeping his coalition together. This argument is amplified by Jenkins (1998), who maintains that Clay's manipulation of the House committee system in the early 1820s was a result of his vying for advantage in the upcoming presidential election of 1824. Strahan et al (1998) argue for a more complex understanding of Clay's committee appointment strategies, but they nonetheless consider the committees the primary source of Clay's strategic maneuvering once the war was over.

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[4]Richard Russell's famous statement about Johnson seems aptly applied to Clay, too:

He doesn't have the best mind on the Democratic side of the Senate; he isn't the best orator; he isn't the best parliamentarian. But he's the best combination of all those qualities. (Quoted in Evans and Novak 1966)

Of Clay as a skilled legislative tactician, many stories abound. Some of Clay's tactics amount to an implementation of grand strategy. The best-known case of Clay as a grand strategist concerns his leading the House to declare War on England in 1812. Getting the House to this point of declaring war necessitated his stacking the committee system with War Hawk supporters, buying-off pivotal old-line Republicans (like former-Speaker Nathaniel Macon) with attractive committee assignments, and then commanding the House floor so that the renegade John Randolph could not filibuster the Clay-stacked legislative process from doing its will (Remini 1991, pp. 78–80; Fritz 1977).

In other cases, Clay's quick wits cemented important legislative victories. An important example of this came at the end of legislative proceedings on the "first" Missouri Compromise in 1820. Having secured passage by the House of a bill providing for the conditional admission of Missouri to the Union, John Randolph moved reconsideration of the vote (*Annals,* 16-2, pp. 1588-90; Remini 1991, p. 184). Clay, noting the lateness of the hour, asked Randolph to postpone his motion until the next day. On the following day, when Randolph rose to make his reconsideration motion, Clay ruled that Randolph had to wait until morning business was finished. In the intervening hour or so, Clay signed the house-passed version of the compromise and a clerk spirited it away to the Senate. Upon renewing his motion and learning of Clay's actions, Randolph's tirade was interrupted by a messenger from the Senate announcing that the upper chamber had agreed to the House's plan.

It is indisputable that Clay was *the* legislative personality in the antebellum House of Representatives. Yet an important question remains about how best to partition this dominance between his skills as a *legislative tactician* and his skills as an *institutional architect*. In making

this distinction between Clay as tactician and architect, I am distinguishing between two general lines of attack that a leader such as Clay can use to achieve his goals. Basically, he could take the rules as given, using them to his advantage by creative manipulation (tactician), or he could change the rules, not only allowing short-term political victory, but also helping to perpetuate those victories into the future (architect). As tactician, he had a range of options at his disposal, such as "stacking" committees to his liking and using the Speaker's right of recognition to control the direction of floor action. As architect his range of options was more limited, involving essentially the formal amendment of the House's rules.

Within the confines of a single paper, it is impossible to assign credit to Clay's architectural and tactical sides once and for all. Indeed, as I will argue, it is unlikely that the evidence will ever exist to bring cloture to this issue. Yet attempting to address these questions is an important undertaking, and not simply a semantic exercise, for at least three reasons.

First, for students of Congress, it is important to understand the mix of motives and conditions that have given rise to the organizational form of the most capable legislature on earth. The "Clay era" coincides with the earliest congealing of the core congressional structures, especially committees, that undergirded its power in the American political system.

Second, for historians of the antebellum period, attending to the institutional development of the House helps to provide needed balance in understanding how the perilous politics leading up to the Civil War unfolded. Histories of this period, when they have taken an institutional focus at all, have tended to rest their gaze on the Senate (where the north-south balance was institutionalized), the Supreme Court (which produced the infamous *Dredd Scott* decision), and the presidency (which was became a focus of party and electoral politics). Yet it was the House,

apportioned by population and elected popularly, where the fast-growing industrial North held its greatest strength and the careful regional balances maintained in the other institutions were so easily upset.

Third and finally, scholars in the field of American Political Development are deeply concerned with the tradeoff between individual agency and determinism in understanding how American politics unfolds (see, for example, Skowronek 1993). America is, after all, a "nation of laws, not of men," suggesting that its politicians act within a fairly confining set of institutional boundaries. At the same time, through an exercise of sheer will or extraordinary persuasiveness, particular historical moments may conspire to allow well-positioned individuals to lead to the transformation of politics despite those institutional boundaries. Since Clay found himself at most of the critical junctions of pre-Civil War American politics, a study of how Clay moved between the worlds of architect and tactician provides a glimpse into how agency and determinism interacted during an important era of American history.

The rest of this paper provides a glimpse into how one would approach the role of Henry Clay in the House's early institutional development by focusing on three well-known episodes in Clay's House career—first, the declaration of war against England in 1812, second, the transformation of the House committee system from select- to standing-committee-dominated, and third, the passage of the first and second Missouri Compromises in 1820 and 1821. These cases are explored, respectively, in Sections III, IV, and V. Preceding these cases, I examine the empirical difficulties that are inherent when political scientists take on such an task. That is Section II. Section VI provides a discussion and conclusion.

II. Henry Clay and the Problem of Evidence

Even if students of Congress do not know from first-hand experience how difficult it is to

assemble evidence when researching political history, they can probably intuit that the chasm of

time separating 1998 from 1812 is vast and that the instruments available to bridge the gap are

crude. Doing modern research is hard, too. Equivalent historical research is just harder. For

every modern social science technique, there is an unsatisfying historical analogue. Moderns can

rely on interviews; historians rely on diaries and letters. Modern congressional students readily

peruse newspapers (*New York Times, Washington Post*, etc.) and specialized publications (*CQ*

Weekly Report, Roll Call, etc.). Historians can also use newspapers and specialized publications

(*Nile's Weekly Register*), too, but access to them is limited and indexing is even worse. The

business of the modern Congress is recorded verbatim (plus or minus some redaction) in the

Congressional Record and televised via *C-SPAN.* The earlier Congress was also reported, though

not verbatim, and not always by congressional-employed reporters.[5] Once a session is completed,

original documents and records are available for research at the National Archives. Older records

are available, too, but much more sketchily (See National Archives 1987a and 1987b). The class

of evidence that is most comparable across time is the roll call record, which has been put to

creative use by scholars such as Poole and Rosenthal (1997). Even here the evidence is shakier in

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[5]The *Annals of Congress,* which is the report of congressional debates until 1824, was not based on live reporting on the House floor. Rather, Gales and Seaton used newspapers and other contemporary sources to created a retrospective debate record of Congress. Their *Register of Debates* was a contemporaneous reporting of congressional debates, covering 1824 to 1837. The *Congressional Globe* began publication in 1833, beginning the practice of first-person accounts of verbatim congressional activities. The *Congressional Record* began publication in 1873. See National Archives 1989a, p. 13.

past years, due to the paucity of roll call votes, particularly at the amendment stage, before the

onset of recorded teller votes in Committee of the Whole in 1973.[6]

Moving back in time, it grows increasingly difficult to acquire high-quality and reliable

evidence about congressional behavior *in general*, since the general sources such as newspapers

and congressional records grow spotty, even when well-preserved. Evidence about *individual*

legislators does not grow monotonically worse, however, since significant effort has gone into

preserving the records of prominent individuals who participated in formative historical moments.

Thus, acquiring evidence about the activities of the most prominent legislators, such as Henry

Clay, John C. Calhoun, and Daniel Webster, is orders of magnitude easier than acquiring the same

evidence about the average House members in the 1810s and 1820s.

All is not rosy, however. In the particular case of Henry Clay, for instance, the primary

documentary evidence is uneven.[7] The historiography of Clay was not created with the

institutional development of the House high on the priority list. Students of American history are

mostly interested in Clay for two reasons. First, he was Speaker who led the nation into the War

of 1812. Second, later in his life he was one of the nation's most prominent politicians. Clay was

the Harold Stassen of anebellum America. He was also a pivotal player in the stories of regional

crisis until his death in 1852. He was, after all, one-third of the "Great Triumvirate," along with

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[6]To provide just one measure of the relative richness of the roll call record now compared
to the early 1800s, consider the following: In the 104th Congress, the Senate engaged in 919 roll
calls, the House, 1,310. This is roughly the same total number of roll calls held in the first ten
Congresses combined.

[7]See Hay (1988) for a critical review Clay biographical sources.

Daniel Webster and John C. Calhoun, who so dominated American politics for nearly half a century.

Unfortunately, students of American history have been much more interested in Clay for the latter part of his official life than the early part. Of his speakership, scholars tend to be much more interested in the strategic maneuvers of the War Hawks or in the blow-by-blow unfolding of the Missouri crisis than in the nitty-gritty work of how Clay might have behaved as an institutional innovator. Clay's first serious biographer, Carl Schurz, spent 122 of his 797 pages on Clay's Speakership, focusing almost exclusively on Clay's contribution to the War and to the Missouri Compromise. Remini's recent 800-page biography of Clay spends only 83 pages on his Speakership, attending to more of Clay's foreign policy interests and his designs upon the presidency. Peterson's (1987) collective biography of the *Great Triumvirate* contains even less about Clay's speakership: 6 pages. All of these histories are primarily interested in painting a portrait of Clay the tactician, not Clay the architect.

Lest we blame historians for overlooking obvious material about Clay's institutional engineering, it is important to note that this imbalance starts with Clay himself. Of the ten thousand pages contained in the *Papers of Henry Clay*, only about fifteen hundred cover the period when he was Speaker. Most of that material pertains to his personal affairs, not to his official duties. Virtually all of the material that addresses his official acts was culled from published sources, particularly the *National Intelligencer,* so there are few fresh insights to be gleaned about Clay's speakership from Clay's private correspondence.[8]

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[8]Material from Clay's speakership is contained in the first three volumes of his *Papers,* plus a small amount of material in the fourth volume and the supplement. The correspondence in Clay's *Papers* mostly address his business affairs and law practice, plus the national political

Scholars trying to assess the role of Clay in either transforming or manipulating the House as an institution have to contend with the historical inheritance from Clay's biographers. Looking for a strong political figure on which to focus the story of the War of 1812, nineteenth century historians lionized Clay for his decisiveness and cunning, particularly in light of the reluctant and indecisive James Madison. However, a major problem with telling a convincing story of Clay's decisive legislative hand during the war is that he left no clear fingerprints on the institution. This is the "no smoking gun problem" that Gamm and Shepsle (1989) refer to in constructing their interpretation of Clay's role in the development of the House committee system. Neither newspaper accounts (such as *Niles' Register* or the *National Intelligencer*) nor Clay's papers comment directly on his personal role in either developing the standing committee system or in manipulating them, nor about his direct role in reforming the rules of floor debate. Even reporters in the House chamber were so lax in recording Clay's speeches for posterity that Remini (1991) has to reconstruct indirectly several of Clay's most important speeches on the House floor by using Clay's *opponents'* remarks in response to Clay.

We are sometimes left with the papers and remarks of Clay's contemporaries to gain insights into his actions and motivations. Here we have to proceed with extreme caution. For instance, the best-informed and most prolific contemporary diarist was John Quincy Adams who, while clearly respecting Clay's abilities, mostly held him in personal contempt.

If we are to understand the significance of Clay's House activities from the perspective of contemporary political science, we need (1) a theoretical framework that allows us to put broad historical claims about Clay's behavior into some sort of tractable system (so that we might

climate, once his presidential ambitions had solidified.

generate hypotheses, null and maintained) and (2) strategies of measuring the variables we need to test these hypotheses. In the following three sections, I will suggest ways in which Clay's behavior, as specified by traditional historians, can be cast in contemporary political science terms. In each of those cases, it will be necessary to characterize carefully Clay's preferences, the preferences of those around him (inside and outside of the House), and the policy instruments he was attempting to manipulate. That is because all claims about Clay's legislative/institutional prowess can be reduced to claims that he was able to affect the quality of the policies chosen. Thus, we need some way of characterizing a counterfactual—what would have happened had Clay not acted?—and of characterizing how Clay intended to perturb policy away from this counterfactual.

Coming up with good quantitative measures of Clay's goals and behavior as Speaker is particularly vexing, for two reasons. The first is because Clay was House Speaker virtually non-stop from the moment he walked into the House chamber in 1811 until he left for the last time in 1825. Except for the second session of the 16th Congress, when he was a (mostly absent) rank-and-file member, Clay almost never took the opportunity to vote on the floor. The one exception was the fateful twelfth Congress, where Clay voted twelve times (out of a total of 314 roll calls). He voted only once in the 14th, 15th, and 17th Congresses, and never cast a recorded vote in the 13th (ICPSR Study # 0004). There is consequently no reliable roll call record with which to anchor more qualitative descriptions of Clay's goals and behaviors while he was a House member.

Historians have been diligent about identifying the issues Clay cared about throughout his career. During the House years, those issues included war with England (of course), support for internal improvements and a protective tariff (the embodiment of Clay's "American System"),

moderate opposition to slavery restrictions, and support for American recognition of newly-liberated Latin America.

Historical research into Clay's political endeavors has been useful to political scientists in placing Clay's behavior in broad political context. Beyond that, though, the standard biographies are not particularly useful for shining light where most political scientists are interested in looking. The first scholar to pick up on this was James Sterling Young (1966), who noted that although Clay held an iron grip on the Speaker's chair, he had a terrible batting average getting the House to do his bidding once the War was underway. Even more embarrassing is the fact that Clay could not translate the virtually unanimous margins by which he was elected Speaker into a simple majority of votes for president when the election of 1824 was thrown into the House of Representatives, over which he presided. But why was Clay so unsuccessful? Was it because, as Young speculated, Clay distributed committee assignments to members of too many boardinghouse group? Or was it something else? Absent an equally rich analysis of the political stances and skills of the other 708 House members Clay served along with, assessing the significance of Clay's poor legislative track record after 1813 and placing it alongside the heady days of the 12th Congress was virtually impossible.

Research research by Strahan has revisited Young's dismissal of Clay as an effective party leaders after 1812 (Strahan 1994; Strahan, et al, 1998). Using the accumulated historical record, they have reconstructed Clay's policy positions on important issues of the day, mapping those positions onto roll calls, so that they can create "Clay support scores" for the rank-and-file House members he led. Based on this technique they discover that Clay was able to exercise strategic

leadership on a limited range of issues, notably the tariff. On issues where he just could not prevail, he allocated committee resources simply to maintain his procedural majority.

Strahan's research is an important step forward in more rigorously assessing the independent contribution of Clay to House decisionmaking during his Speakership. But, because Clay took so few positions on contemporary political questions, compared to the total roll call record he presided over, these Clay support scores must be particularly noisy. It would be preferable to map Strahan's analysis onto more robust measures of House member preferences, such as D-NOMINATE or Heckman-Snyder linear factor scores (Poole and Rosenthal 1997; Heckman and Snyder 1997). There, we run into a new problem, however.

In addition to the fact that we cannot directly calculate D-NOMINATE scores for Clay during most of his House service, due to a lack of roll call votes, Clay's House tenure also perfectly coincides with the most "spatially chaotic" period of American history. Prior to the 15th Congress, the House and Senate can be easily arrayed along a single dimension, mostly on account of attitudes toward beligerants in the Napoleonic conflicts (See Poole and Rosenthal 1997, chap. 3). After the 18th Congress, a left-right structuring re-emerges, now based mostly on attitudes toward federal government activism in the economy. In the interim, the best-fitting scalings still do not predict roll call votes very well. For these Congresses of the transitional era—the 16th, 17th, and 18th Congresses—the primary political cleavage was regional, reflecting the anamosity stirred up by the Missouri controversy.

Furthermore, while the research of Poole and Rosenthal reveals that legislators tend to have stable preferences throughout their careers, the major exception is the Clay era, at least as far as methods like NOMINATE are concerned. An examination of graphs of estimated ideal

points from consecutive Congresses during this period reveals that the space was "rotating," with

representatives who had previously favored internal improvements and government activism (the

primary issue structuring the second dimension) moving "rightward" year-to-year, and those who

had previously opposed governmental activism in this realm moving "leftward" (see Jenkins and

Stewart 1998).

This rotation of the space is illustrated in Table 1, which reports D-NOMINATE scores

for a select few House members—those who had House service *both* before the 13th Congress

and after the 25th.[9] Erstwhile Republicans who later became Whigs (such as Clay), were a

diverse lot before the 13th Congress, on average in the middle of the left-right space, but also

spanning the entire ideological spectrum. Following the 25th Congress, those same House

members were somewhat more to the "right," but more importantly, they had become

ideologically cohesive. Republicans who later emerged as Democrats shifted a bit to the left,

while old line Federalists who eventually took on the Whig moniker moved even further (and

more cohesively) to the right.

Can we place Clay more precisely within this pattern of ideological migration? The

qualitative historical record is consistent with the notion that Clay, himself migrated across the

ideological map during this period. He started off as an orthodox small-government Jeffersonian,

in the bosom raised, and ended his life the best-known antebellum Hamiltonian except, of course,

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[9]Although the *n*'s are small in this table, the analysis is borne out in other more detailed
analysis that uses many more House members, though over shorter periods of time. See Jenkins
and Stewart 1998.

for Hamilton.[10] The sketchy D-NOMINATE record we have is also consistent with this

movement. In Figure 1, I have graphed out the spatial locations of Clay that we can be confident

of, based on separate analysis of his House voting behavior in the 16th Congress and his Senate

voting behavior beginning in the 22nd Congress. Clay's late-career House spatial location is in

the middle of the ideological space, indicated by the single solid circle in the middle of the figure.

By the time he had acquired a Senate roll call record in the 22nd Congress, he had clearly taken

up residence on the right, which is indicated by the several open circles trending downward on the

right.

It might be possible to fill in this measure of Clay's ideological positioning through a deft

combination of historical analysis and quantitative research. For instance, support for declaring

war against England is almost perfectly predicted by first dimensional D-NOMINATE scores in

the 12th Congress. Thus, would be safe to place Clay somewhere in the far left of the issue space

for that Congress. Regression of Strahan's Clay Support Scores on the first two dimensions of

the D-NOMINATE scores reveals that in the interim Congresses, Clay's strongest supporters

tended to be in the northwest quadrant of the ideological space, which is what we would expect if

Clay were traversing the space from left-to-right.

Thus, surveying both qualitative and quantitative data, the best we can say about Henry

Clay is that he was an ideological and political moving target for all of his House career. That

makes drawing general conclusions about Clay's behavior during this years dicey. Nonetheless, it

may be possible to inquire into Clay's motivates and behavior at particular times in congressional

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[10]It is ironic, on this score, that Clay's first nationally-prominent legal client was
Hamilton's murderer, Aaron Burr.

history. In the following sections I turn my attention to the integration of qualitative and

quantitative data about Clay, his followers, and the policy environment at important moments in

Clay's House career in an attempt to build a general conclusion about Clay's legacy from the

ground-up.

III. Clay and the War Hawks

Scholars trying to assess the role that Clay himself played in bringing the nation to war against

England face the same problems that any scholars face in assessing the independent role of "great

men" in times of crisis. Crises tend to focus the attention of scholars on the principal *dramatis*

personae. The danger of this type of selective attention, of course, is that it may blind us to the

pursuit of similar strategies by leaders in less crisis-filled times. In the case of Clay, for instance,

his attention to using the House rules to pursue his policy ends has been regarded as precedent-

setting by his biographers. Yet Clay was not the first avowedly partisan Speaker. Theodore

Sedgwick (6th Cong., 1799–1801) claims that prize, for his attempts to use the Speaker's

prerogatives to serve majoritarian ends. Follett notes that Sedgwick "made many enemies by

decided and even partisan acts. . . . So great was the feeling against him that the customary vote

of thanks at the end of Congress recorded the names only of his party associates." (Follett, 1896,

pp. 67–68)

What were Clay's parliamentary tactics as Speaker in the Twelfth Congress? Which were

architectural? Which tactical? What were their effects? Harlow (1896, p. 219) claimed that "the

man who made the speakership was concerned primarily with improvements in the methods of

transacting business, and it is in this field that Clay made his great contributions." Recently

Binder (1997), though her quantitative study of minority procedural rights in the House, has confirmed Harlow's claims about Clay's attentiveness to expediting the House's business.

The best measures of legislative pace that we can construct confirm Harlow's and Binder's conclusions. I say the "best measures . . . we can construct" because it is impossible to reconstruct Committee of the Whole proceedings in the House—where most legislative work was actually done—with any accuracy in the Twelfth Congress. We are left, therefore, with the records of the formal House proceedings, about which there are no reliable, contemporaneous verbatim accounts. However, one indirect measure of legislative delay is simply the number of recorded roll call votes on the floor, both the number in general and the number associated with parliamentary maneuvers. To test whether Clay was successful in putting down dilatory tactics in the 12th Congress, I examine both the total number of roll call votes in the House and the fraction of roll calls that were held on the question of adjourning the House.

Figure 2 graphs out these two time series from the First to Thirty-second Congresses (1789 to 1853). The total number of roll call votes had been increasing secularly from the First Congress, free-falling in the Twelfth. Adjournment roll calls had been rare until the Eleventh Congress, when it became a motion frequently made by Federalists to bottle up consideration of measures intended to show contempt or resolve toward England. Such roll call votes again became relatively infrequent in the Twelfth Congress. Both time series began to march upward following Clay's departure from the House, reaching new-record levels once regional animosities began to boil again toward mid-century.

The other tactic Clay reportedly employed to his advantage as Speaker was the manipulation of the House committee system. One manifestation of this manipulation was his

stacking House committees with War Hawks in the 12th Congress, which I will examine here.

The other manifestation, his willingness to expand the range of the standing committee system to

bolster his political support, will be examined in the next section.

Remini (1991, p. 80) writes that upon ascending to the Speaker's chair,

> In a bold and determined move he started off by assigning all the War Hawks to
> the important committees, and he saw to it that they held control of each one.
> Peter B. Porter, a House veteran of two years, was named to head the Committee
> on Foreign Relations. Clay also assigned Calhoun, Harper, Joseph Desha, and
> Grundy to that committee.

In documenting Clay's "stacking" of the Foreign Affairs Committee, most historians rely

on an identification of "War Hawks"—Clay's anti-English ideological cadre—that derives its

lineage from John Randolph's attack on pro-war Republicans. Since Randolph was by far the

most outrageous member of the small band of "quids" who clung to the most conservative

principles of Jeffersonianism, one should take with a grain of salt Randolph's attempts at

ideological scaling (Cunningham 1963; Carson 1986). Furthermore, upon surveying the historical

literature, it appears that identification of the War Hawks is largely inferred from the institutional

position of people like Porter, Harper, and Desha, making the whole business of assessing Clay's

behavior prone to tautology.[11] Because Clay was such a skilled parliamentary manipulator, he

certainly would not appoint people to the critical Foreign Affairs committee who were not

ideological soul mates. Hence if Porter, for example, was appointed to *chair* this committee, he

certainly must have been in the pocket of Clay. Conversely, anyone who did not bear the stigmata

of being a War Hawk—principally being a freshman from the West or South—must not have been

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[11]The one majority exception is Hatzenbuehler (1972; 1976).

an ideological true believer, and therefore does not count as evidence of Clay's stacking of

Foreign Affairs.

Fortunately, social scientists have made tremendous strides over the past decade,

empirically and theoretically, in developing ways to assess whether committees are "stacked" in

non-majoritarian ways. Taking a cue from Keith Krehbiel's (1991; 1993) recent critique of the

"outlier" view of congressional committees, a committee should be called stacked only if it is

actually composed of members who have atypical preferences with respect to the whole chamber.

Relying on the empirical work of Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal (1997) and their

D-NOMINATE scores, we have one objective measure of the underlying preferences of House

members in the Twelfth Congress. Was Clay's Foreign Affairs Committee composed of outlying

fire-breathers?

Yes and No. We begin to graphically illustrate this point using the first dimensional

Poole-Rosenthal scores, comparing the distribution of ideal points among committee members

with that of the whole House.[12] (See Figure 3.) Using these scores, we see that Clay appointed a

majority of Foreign Affairs Committee members from among the anti-English side of the

Republican party. Note that three committee Republicans are virtually on top of each other in the

figure. These three members constituted the median of the committee. They occupied a position

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[12]Throughout this paper, I rely on committee data drawn from the committee rosters in
Cannon and Stewart (1996, 1997). The Poole-Rosenthal D-NOMINATE scores used in this
paper were downloaded from Keith Poole's web site, URL http://k7moa.gsia.cmu.edu/dwnl.htm.
On the NOMINATE methodology generally, see Poole and Rosenthal (1997).
        Even though Poole and Rosenthal (1997) note that their technique does not do especially
well in classifying votes during the 1810s, the first dimensional D-NOMINATE scores do an
excellent job in explaining whether House members voted for or against declaring war with
England. Therefore, I interpret these scores as tapping anti-English sentiment during the early
1810s.

close to the most anti-English quartile of the Republican party. Thus, it is fair to say that the

Foreign Affairs Committee, which bore the responsibility of reporting most of the legislation

leading up to the War, was more anti-English than even the majority of Republicans.

Clay's tactic of stacking the Foreign Affairs Committee with anti-English House members

is put into context if we widen our focus a bit, peering back to the Eleventh Congress, when

belligerent rhetoric was heating up, and comparing House behavior with the Senate—which is

where Clay had first observed deadlock over relations with England. I do this in Figure 4 by

examining D-NOMINATE scores in the two chambers for both the Eleventh and Twelfth

Congresses—both the scores of the chambers themselves and the scores of the two chambers'

committees on Foreign Affairs.[13]

The first thing to note in Figure 4 is that I have indicated where the two parties' members

were ideologically located using a series of boxes. The boxes themselves indicate the location of

the interquartile ranges of each party's contingents. The D-NOMINATE technique makes it

impossible to compare scores across chambers, but it is possible to compare the movement of

scores within each chamber across Congresses. Note that the elections of 1810 and 1811

changed the ideological compositions of both chambers only slightly from the 11th to 12th

Congresses: the Senate became a little bit less anti-English and the House became a little more

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[13]The House had a select committee on Foreign Affairs each session of both Congresses.
The Senate had no single Foreign Affairs committee in the first session of the Eleventh
Congress—legislative items were dispersed among several select committees. In the second
session of the Eleventh Congress the Senate appointed a select committee to "Consider relations
with Great Britain and France." A select committee by the same name was appointed again in the
third session and in the first session of the Twelfth Congress. In the second session of the Twelfth
Congress the Senate appointed a select committee on "Relations with Great Britain and te
Military Establishment."

anti-English. Therefore, it is inaccurate to conclude that the movement to war in 1812 was due to a sea change in the ideological compositions of the two houses.

Next, note that ideological composition of the Senate foreign affairs committees. The Senate committee appointed in the second session (no single committee was appointed in the first session to consider foreign affairs) had a much more pro-English cast than the Senate as a whole. While the composition of the committee moved against England in the third session, this much smaller committee was at most representative of the Senate on the most pressing foreign policy questions. Upon convening in the Twelfth Congress, with the War Hawks in the House agitating for war, the Senate appointed a select committee on relations with England and France that was considerably more amenable to conciliation with England than even the Senate chamber as a whole. It was to *this* committee that most of the House-passed war measures was referred and, not surprisingly, it was in this committee that so many measures languished, including the ultimate declaration of war. Once war had been declared, in the second session the Senate appointed a staunchly anti-English committee to oversee the war's conduct.

Evidence about the House Foreign Affairs committee's composition is also graphed out in Figure 4. Unlike the Senate, the House committee was more anti-English than the whole chamber throughout the Eleventh Congress. *Indeed, in the third session Speaker Varnum appointed a select committee that was just as anti-English as the one Speaker Clay appointed in the first session of the Twelfth Congress.* Hence, the stacking of the House Foreign Affairs committee was not a War Hawk innovation, but a strategy that had been tried in the previous Congress.

The strong anti-English cast of the House Foreign Affairs Committee in the Twelfth Congress is only part of the story about Clay's construction of that committee. Even though he

appointed a comfortable anti-English majority onto the Foreign Affairs Committee, Clay also

appointed two Republicans who did not share their co-partisans' revulsion toward England, along

with one Federalist who was outright pro-English.

The two outlier Republicans are particularly noteworthy: The first was John Randolph,

easily the most hated Republican to the fire-breathers, who eventually led the effort to apply the

brakes in declaring war on England. The second was Peter Porter, the chair of the committee,

who is often identified by historians as a fire-breathing War Hawk, by virtue of his position.

Porter was in fact one of the *least* loyal Republicans on issues of foreign policy during the 12th

Congress, dutifully voting to declare war on England, but opposing the fire-breathers on other

matters (see Hatzenbuehler 1972, p. 377; 1976, p. 6).[14] Porter's ambivalence about a war with

England was honestly acquired: He had begun his political life as a Federalist and represented a

district with Federalist leanings. Porter's support for war against England elicited strong

reactions from his constituents. Feeling the political heat, he declined to run for reelection, and

instead entered the military service during the War of 1812. Porter's successors in the House

from his upstate New York district, Samuel Hopkins and Nathaniel Howell, were both

Federalists.[15]

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[14]Hatzenbuehler's (1972, 1976) two essays on the War Hawks, which are grounded in quantitative roll call analysis, provide clear evidence of Porter's questionable *bona fides* as a War Hawk. What Haztenbuehler does not do is move beyond the descriptive account that the roll call record provides. He does not, for instance, directly test the various committee stacking hypotheses that exist in traditional historiography about the 12th Congress.

[15]In the reapportionment of 1811 New York gained seats in the House. The legislature chose to have two House members elected from Porter's former district in the 13th Congress. Therefore Porter had two immediate successors.

With a more accurate understanding of Porter's ambivalence about declaring war on England, Clay's political genius may even be clarified. In addition to providing the Foreign Affairs Committee with a strong anti-English majority, Clay also used the leadership of this important committee to reach out to more moderate members of his party, in an attempt to assemble a coalition in favor of his hardline agenda. The final vote in favor of declaring war illustrates the success of Clay's tactic.[16]

One of the things that this analysis makes clear is that histories of Clay's activities in moving the country toward war in 1812 have failed to appreciate the opposition that Clay faced *from the Senate*. The Senate, like the House, contained a clear anti-English majority in both the Eleventh and Twelfth Congresses. Unlike the House, the Senate had weaker mechanisms to convert policy majorities into policy. It lacked a motion to cut off debate, as did the House. But, Clay's first procedural move as Speaker was to change the House's rules to add the motion for the previous question. Likewise, the Senate's rules at that time provided for the appointment of committees by ballot. Balloting for committee allowed cohesive minorities to do better in setting the composition of committees than if the majority party strictly controlled the appointment of

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[16]There is another misclassification in this story of the stacking of the Foreign Affairs Committee, but in this case it comes on the other end of the ideological spectrum. In relying on traditional qualitative sources, historians have misidentified the position of Ebenezer Seaver, who was the most ideologically-extreme Republican on the Foreign Affairs Committee. Any argument that Clay was stacking the Foreign Relations Committee in favor of war with England should include Seaver as part of the pro-War bloc. Seaver is missed as an ardent opponent of England because of his demographic characteristics. Being from Massachusetts, it is not likely that Seaver went around in Clay's social circles. Because boarding house populations were at least as geographically segregated as they were ideologically distinct (see Bogue and Marlaire, 1975), it is unlikely that Seaver would have shown up in the famous "War Mess." And finally, because Seaver had already served in the House for a decade, he is unlikely to be mentioned in the same breath as Calhoun, Grundy, and the other first- and second-term fire-breathers that historians like to write about.

committees. Clay did not have to change the rules to be able to construct a clear anti-English

majority on the House's Foreign Affairs committee. Of course, neither did his predecessor,

Speaker Varnum, who also employed a similar committee-packing strategy himself.

Taken as a whole, then Clay's activities as Speaker were aimed at reducing delay as much

as possible, rather than in manipulating agenda-setting mechanisms to coerce a reluctant House

into a war it did not want. In his activities in changing the House rules, he was an architect,

insofar as he was the sponsor of the rule that most distinguishes the House from the Senate—the

motion for the previous question. In his activities in stacking the Foreign Relations Committee,

he was a tactician, following the lead of Speakers before him who had also crafted committees to

his liking.

IV. Clay and the Committee System

Recent scholarship about the development of the standing committee system in the early

nineteenth century has taken it as axiomatic that Henry Clay was the political figure around whom

the committee system's transformation revolved. This plausible assumption arises because of

Clay's leadership of the War Hawks. If there were only nine standing committees in the House

when Clay arrived in 1811 and twenty-four when he finally left in 1825, he must have been the

principal champion not only of using standing committees, but of manipulating them to achieve his

policy goals.

Because "Congress in committee is Congress at work," the remarkable transformation of

the congressional committee system in the early nineteenth century demands an accounting.[17]

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[17]Even though the congressional literature has focused on the early evolution of the House
committee system, the abrupt transformation of the committee system in the *Senate* is even more

Within the past decade, at least three explanations have emerged for the change that occurred in the House, associated with Gerald Gamm and Kenneth Shepsle (1989), Jeffery A. Jenkins (1998), and Randall Strahan (1994). While each of these has important and subtle differences, they are unified by at least one characteristic: Speaker Henry Clay is the chief protagonist.

For Gamm and Shepsle, the supplanting of select with standing committees was related to Speaker Clay's political situation.[18] The end of the war with England removed the unifying impulse of the ideologically-diverse Republicans. The committee system amounted to a convenient political stockpile that could be looted for Clay's advantage. In particular, by shifting legislative work from *ad hoc* select committees to more permanent standing committees, Clay discovered how to distribute the work of the chamber to also shore up his political support. He relinquished to the new standing committees detailed control over legislation. In return, he got from his followers continued support for reelection as Speaker.

For Jenkins the logic of committee development is similar in spirit to Gamm and Shepsle's, though different in particulars. Jenkins takes note of Clay's presidential ambitions, suggesting that by creating politically-valuable property rights in committee assignments and distributing those rights widely throughout the chamber, Clay was essentially buying support within the House in his quest for higher office.

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astounding. Swift's recent (1996) research on the early evolution of the Senate remarks (pp. 131–33) on the "big bang" in Senate committees in 1816 — the Senate added 11 legislative standing committees to its 2 minor housekeeping committees in one fell swoop—but the committee system itself is not her focus. See Canon and Stewart (1998) for a recent review of new statistical evidence about the transformation of the Senate committee during this era.

[18]Also see Rohde and Shepsle (1987) for the precursors to the Gamm-Shepsle argument.

Finally, taking a fundamentally different route, Strahan suggests looking at Clay's speakership in "political time." By focusing on political time, Strahan argues that political institutions periodically face critical moments (or crises) which are mostly defined by developments outside the institutions themselves. In these moments, institutions may have at their helm either innovators or traditionalists. The period surrounding the War of 1812 was one such critical moment in congressional history. Clay, an innovator, was endowed with certain legislative skills and *je ne sais quoi*. He used his considerable political talents to seize control of the House, transforming it in the process.

These accounts of and explanations for the transformation of the House committee system in the early decades of the nineteenth century have been good starting points, but they have been incomplete for at least two related reasons. First, by focusing on Henry Clay they have tended to overly personalize the transformation of the committee system during this era. Clay was an important player in the early institutional development of the House, but he was not alone, even among his contemporaries. Clay served in the House with 708 different men. Some of them—such as John C. Calhoun, John Quincy Adams, John Tyler, and Daniel Webster—are remembered in American history books despite the fact that they served in the House. Scores of others were important national and regional politicians, adept at manipulating the electoral and legislative mechanisms of their day. Thus, it is certainly a mistake to overly-credit the political ambitions and genius of a single individual when we could easily develop counterfactuals, with others of Clay's contemporaries taking the lead in his stead.

Stated another way, recent accounts of the evolution of the early House committee system have tended to be "supply-driven," with Clay providing entre into the benefits of a standing

committee system in return for political support. There is likely a "demand-side" half of this story

which demands at least equal emphasis.

Second, virtually all accounts of the rise of standing committees seem to take a rather

simple view of House and, consequently, a simple view of how the standing committees were

used. It is usually enough simply to note that the number of standing committees grew and, with

it, the amount of legislation considered by committees. Yet, committees—then as now—were

useful for more than writing legislation. They were convenient graveyards for bothersome

constituents claiming special government benefits.[19] They formed a base for harassing executive

branch officials (White, 1951). In the immortal words of David Mayhew (1974), they were used

to "take positions, take credit, and advertise." In the words of Richard Fenno (1974), they were

used to pursue "good public policy, power within the House, and reelection."

Many of the committees created during the "Clay years," from the 12th to the 18th

Congress did not consider legislation at all, but were instead a way for the House to scrutinize the

actions of bureaucrats. Some committees considered legislation of sweeping national importance.

Others adjudicated disputes over land titles. The transformation of the committee system that was

contemporary with Henry Clay did more than simply re-channel the flow of legislation within the

House. It also provided new constituency service opportunities, on the one hand, and a new

capacity to affect the implementation of legislation, on the other. Therefore, a full accounting of

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[19]The *Congressional Serial Set* (untitled, Serials 653–55, 32nd Con., 1st sess.) contains an index to all private claims presented to the House from 1789 to 1851, including not only private petitions but memorials, government reports, etc. That three-volume set lists about 59,000 private claims submitted to the House during this period, or about 1,900 per Congress. Because they were not introduced as bills, these petitions do not show up in bill-based workload statistics, even though a substantial fraction of the House was assigned to committees that processed these claims.

why standing committees eventually dominated the organizational landscape of Congress must

appreciate the full range of uses to which legislative majorities can put their committees.

While it is true that Clay was a master parliamentarian who used the tools at his disposal

to the utmost, in extolling the virtues of Clay as an institutional innovator, it is important to keep

his contributions in perspective.[20] In the case of the evolution of the committee system into one

dominated by standing committees, the drift in favor of standing committees began before Clay

assumed the speakership, made important gains during his occasional absences from the Speaker's

office, and did not reach equilibrium until Clay had left the House for good.

This point is illustrated by two figures that summarize the drift toward the use of standing

committees in the early years of the nineteenth century. The first of these is Figure 5, which is a

time line that indicates when each of 24 standing committees was created in the House from 1800

to 1831. To help orient our understanding of Clay's participation in the creation of these

committees, I have also noted with thick black lines the periods when he was Speaker of the

House.

The time line prompts two preliminary remarks about the development of the committee

system during this time. First, the lion's share of committees created in the House from 1800 to

1831 pertained to internal housekeeping matters, private claims, and military pensions.

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[20]It is also important to keep in sight the principal-agent relationship that is the core of
leader-follower dealings in the House. Clay was a bold, new Speaker who took a more active
role in policymaking. But he could not do it unilaterally: he needed the support of the
membership, otherwise he would be voted out of power. If he was a stronger leader than
previous speakers, then the membership must have wanted such (or at least showed a latent
demand that Clay recognized and exploited). This point comes into sharper focus during periods
of Clay's absence from the House, where the men chosen to be Speaker were perhaps less
talented, leading to more costly and less seamless institutional arrangements to organize the
House, and more legislative friction along the way.

Committees overseeing significant policies of national scope were clearly in the minority. Second, while many new standing committees were created during the years of the Clay speakership, it is important to note both what types of committees were created and which standing committees were delayed in their creation during Clay's leadership. Of the 11 new committees created during Clay's tenure, only two handled substantive policy — Manufactures and Agriculture.[21] One of these, Manufactures, was created via a motion from the floor when the committees were being appointed in the early days of the 16th Congress. The rest were either aimed at overseeing expenditures within the executive branch (the six expenditure committees assigned to individual agencies in the 14th Congress) or private claims.

The motion to create a Committee on Manufactures provoked opposition from the chair of Commerce and Manufactures and two supporting floor speeches that survive. The yeas and nays were not taken on the vote to amend the rules, but on a division the motion carried by a 88–60 (*Annals*, 16-1, pp. 708–10). The *Annals* and the *Journal* both report that the committee was appointed immediately upon the passage of the resolution. It is noteworthy that, using the D-NOMINATE metric, the newly-constituted Manufactures Committee was a significant outlier on second dimension, which Poole and Rosenthal report is associated with votes on the tariff during the 16th Congress (Poole and Rosenthal, 1997, p. 49). The Commerce Committee membership

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[21]We can treat the division of the Commerce and Manufactures committee in two during the 16th Congress as the creation of a single committee—Manufactures. That is because Manufactures was created in the opening days of the 16th Congress via a floor amendment to the House rules in which the jurisdiction of the Commerce and Manufactures committee was left unchanged. Commerce and Manufactures had already been appointed, and none of the original members of the Manufactures Committee was taken from Commerce and Manufactures. Hence, Commerce was considered the successor committee to Commerce and Manufactures.

was uniformly distributed across the second dimension. Hence, Clay stacked the committee once it was created, but he was not clearly responsible for its creation.

Only one resolution was submitted during the Clay speakership to significantly expand the number of standing committees with substantive legislative jurisdictions. It died in the Rules Committee (*Annals,*14-1, pp. 380–81; Harlow, 1917, pp. 215–16). Thus, the most important expansion of the standing committee system in the realm of substantive legislation occurred in the 17th Congress, when Clay was a thousand miles away from the House.[22]

As the number of standing committees grew, so, too, did the fraction of the House that was assigned to them. This is illustrated in Figure 6, which contains time series that show the percentage of the House and Senate holding at least one select or standing committee assignment. Two trends stand out in these figures. First, the fraction of the House assigned to at least one standing committee rose at a steady clip throughout this entire period. By comparison, changes in the Senate came more abruptly. Second, while the transformation of the House as a standing committee-dominated legislative body continued under the speakership of Henry Clay, it was not

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[22]Although some scholars treat the 17th Congress as a continuation of the Clay Era with a Clay surrogate in the Speaker's chair, evidence from speakership elections in the 16th, 17th and 18th Congresses suggest otherwise (Lientz 1978, pp. 70–72). When Clay left the House to attend to business back home, it took three days and 22 ballots to choose a successor. That succession fight developed into a regional battle (the Missouri Compromise was the looming political issue), tempered by regional politics and personal ambition. In the end a fierce opponent of slavery expansion, John W. Taylor (N.Y.), was elected Speaker. The political center-of-gravity shifted in the next Congress. Taking two days and 12 ballots to settle matters, the Virginian Philip P. Barbour eventually defeated Taylor for the speakership. Clay returned to the House in the 18th Congress, defeating Barbour for reelection, 139-42.

Thus, over three Congresses the House deposed the incumbent speaker twice, electing in turn a northerner, southerner, and westerner. It is this sort of chaotic cycling, which also manifested itself in legislating, that has given rise to the observation that no natural majority existed in the House beginning in the late 1810s.

until the 23rd Congress, during the Speakership of Andrew Stevenson, that standing committee membership was finally universal.

While some scholars have described the committee system during the Clay speakership as undergoing a sea change, it is not obvious that the changes wrought by Clay (or at least under the sufferance of Clay) were entirely discontinuous. If one desires a look at significant and abrupt change in the congressional committee structure during the Clay years, the place to look is the Senate, not the House. At the very least, it is ironic that in a literature that claims to examine Clay's transformation of the system of *standing* legislative committees, the most prominent stories of his manipulating committees to his advantage are in his appointments to *select* committees in the 12th Congress.

Consistent with Clay's behavior preceding the War of 1812, his use of the committee system during the 1810s more generally was one of tactician rather than architect. He was associated directly with no major reform of the committee system during his reign as Speaker. Others around Clay, fellow leaders and the rank-and-file, were the ones more interested in the transformation of the committee system into one dominated by a small number of standing committees with fixed jurisdictions. And it was they, not Clay, who accomplished this important work of institutional reform.

V. Clay and the Two Missouri Compromises

On February 13, 1819, less than a month before the expiration of the 15th Congress, a bill reached the House floor providing for the admission of Missouri to the Union. During its consideration, James Tallmadge, a rookie and lame duck congressman from New York, moved an amendment to

prohibit the further introduction of slaves into the territory and to free those born in the territory

upon their twenty-fifth birthday. When Tallmadge made his motion, few apparently realized that

before the month was out the old organization of national politics, which took much of its

structure from how elites thought America should respond in the face of the Napoleonic wars,

would be replaced with a new fundamental cleavage, organized regionally and taking most of its

energy from the slavery issue. Tallmadge's motion shifted the primary axis of political conflict in

Congress so that it became regional, leaving a second dimension that split North and South along

questions of internal improvements and the tariff.

The central role of Henry Clay in eventually resolving the Missouri question marked him

as one of the leading spokesmen for national union, earning him the nickname "Great

Compromiser." Research into Clay's activities over the two years in which the question was

burning makes it clear that he was a determined worker on behalf of compromise. *How* did he

achieve this compromise? Was it sheer skill as a legislative draftsman and coalition-builder? Or

was Clay able to convert his powers as Speaker to his advantage? The major powers at Clay's

disposal were two: first, the appointment of committees; second, the right of recognition. In the

end, the many committees Clay had a hand in appointing were powerless in setting and controlling

the agenda on the Missouri question. Thus Clay's influence lay in his ability to push the issue to

the eve of adjournment, where the option of not acting at all proved unacceptable to a small

number of pivotal House members.

Even though the interjection of slavery into congressional debate brought national politics

to a high boil and upset established ideological coalitions, the House as an organization did not

disintegrate immediately. Debate on the Talmmadge amendment in the 15th Congress quickly

grew sharp and divisive, still proceedings on the Missouri statehood bill were expeditious in the House. Both sections of Tallmadge's amendment (prohibiting the importation of new slaves and the emancipation of existing slaves at age 25) passed the House, 87 to 76 and 82 to 78, and the bill was sent to the Senate in less than a week (Spann 1957, pp. 169–95). The bill failed when the conference report, which omitted the Tallmadge amendment, was rejected by the House (*Journal,* 15-2, pp. 335–39; *Annals*, 15-2, pp. 1436–38).[23] The 15th Congress then adjourned.

Upon the opening of the 16th Congress, the Missouri question, and the new related question about whether to admit Maine as a free state, hung over the Congress. When the House organized itself at the start of the 16th Congress, appointing the standing committees and typical select committees, it also created two new selects, one to bring in a bill admitting Missouri, the other for Maine (*Journal,* 16-1, pp. 18–19). The next day the Missouri bill was reported back almost immediately with no mention of slavery, and the furor began again. John W. Taylor, a Representative from New York who had spoken in favor of the Tallmadge amendment the previous Congress, moved that the Missouri bill be tabled and that a select committee on the issue of slavery in the territories be appointed (*Journal,* 16-1, p. 44; *Annals,* 16-1, pp. 732, 734–35). The Select Committee on Slavery in the Territories was unable to reach an agreement on whether or how slavery should be restricted in the territories, prompting Taylor to ask for the committee to be discharged on December 28, 1819 (*Journal,* 16-1, p. 82; *Annals,* 16-2, pp. 801–04).

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[23]Once the debate over Missouri ended, the House took up the bill to establish a Territory of Arkansas out of the residual of the Missouri Territory not slated for statehood. Here, John Taylor moved the inclusion of the "Tallmadge Amendment" to the Arkansas bill, and the House was off to debate the issue of slavery again. Eventually the Arkansas Territory bill was signed into law without having any slavery restrictions attached.

As Missouri and the slavery issue were being debated, the Select Committee on the Admission of Maine was grinding along, finishing its work on December 21 (*Journal,* 16-1, p. 60). Although the House eventually passed the Maine bill two weeks later, Clay was the first to note publicly that the issue of Maine's admission would likely be paired with Missouri's in the near future (*Annals*, 16-1, p. 841).

With Maine out of the way for the moment, the House returned to the issue of Missouri and slavery. The House was in the midst of a renewed Missouri debate when the Maine bill, having been amended to admit Missouri as well, arrived from the Senate on February 19, 1820. The House immediately took up the Senate bill, removed all mention of Missouri, sent the bill back to the Senate, and then returned to work on the House Missouri bill again. When word reached the Senate of the House's action, the upper chamber asked for a conference committee, which was granted (*Annals,* 16-1, p. 1558). Deliberation on the Missouri bill still continued in the House, even though a conference committee was working on a bill to admit both Maine and Missouri. For a short while, statehood politics had literally become a three-ring circus, with separate statehood bills for Missouri and Maine still being debated in the House and Senate and a conference committee trying to arrive at a compromise.

By early March, the House had passed a bill admitting Missouri with a prohibition of slavery west of the Mississippi (this prohibition was termed the "Taylor amendment"), the Senate had passed a bill admitting Missouri with a prohibition of slavery north of the 36" 30' parallel, excepting Missouri (this form of the prohibition was labeled the "Thomas amendment"), and the conference committee submitted a report that was essentially the Senate position on both slavery and the Maine-Missouri linkage (*Annals,* 16-1, pp. 430, 472, 1572–73, 1576). In the end,

enough erstwhile restrictionists in the House changed their votes to side with the Senate, so that

on March 3, 1820 the Missouri compromise, admitting Missouri and Maine and restricting slavery

above the 36" 30' parallel (excepting Missouri), was passed and sent to President Monroe for his

signature. All that was left for Missouri to write a constitution and report back to Congress.

During the second session of the Fifteen Congress and the first session of the Sixteenth,

the House created four select committees, charging them with the task of crafting a statehood

compromise and reporting back to the House. Under the rules of the House, this gave the

Speaker, Henry Clay, four chances to manipulate the agenda by his appointment of the

committees. What course did Clay pursue in his committee appointments? How successful were

these committees in achieving Clay's goals?

Evidence of Clay's appointment strategy is contained in the preferences of the members of

these select committees: he stacked them with pro-slavery majorities. Figure 7 illustrates the

array of ideological preferences represented on the committees appointed by Clay in the first

session of the Sixteenth Congress to consider the admission of Maine and Missouri, using the first

dimension of the D-NOMINATE scores to indicate members' preferences for slavery

restrictions.[24] Positive values are pro-restriction, negative values, anti-restriction. Aside from the

Maine committee, each was dominated by pro-slavery forces. Figure 7 also notes the location of

the House median on the D-NOMINATE scale. Unlike the committees, the House majorities

were moderately pro-restrictionist. Therefore, it is not surprising that each time one of the

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[24]Recall that even though Poole and Rosenthal report that their D-NOMINATE scores do a relatively poor job of explaining how House members voted during this period, the issues that the scores *do* predict well are regional ones. Therefore, it is reasonable to use the first dimension as a measure of preferences for slavery restrictions.

committees reported a bill without a slavery restriction, it was rolled by the floor, which added the strongest versions of slavery restrictions then under consideration. The only pro-slavery committee that prevailed was not a select committee, but the final *conference* committee, which operated under special rules that allowed it to offer the House a take-it-or-leave-it proposition: a weak restriction or no bill at all. Only then could the restriction most palatable to southerners pass, presumably because the pivotal restrictionist preferred a weak form of slavery restrictions to protracted debate over Missouri and the uncertainty that would have flowed from that.

After the completion of the first session of the 16th House, Clay resigned from the speakership, unable to the maintain this position because of financial problems brought on by the Panic of 1819 (Peterson 1987, pp. 66–68; Remini 1991, pp.176–77; cf. Adams 1875, vol. V, p. 59). It appears that Clay favored John W. Taylor as a successor, figuring that the Missouri question was behind the House and that Taylor was the most able House leader on the issue of the protective tariff—which interested Clay more than slavery restrictions (Ravenal 1901, pp. 208–209; Spann 1957, p. 224).

The battle to replace Clay at the start of the second session rapidly became structured along regional lines. Taylor emerged as the predominant northern candidate, but support was sufficiently split among others that repeated balloting proved inconclusive. After two days and 22 ballots, Taylor was eventually elected Speaker by a margin of one vote. Critical to Taylor's election was support from the "Bucktail" (anti-Clinton) faction from his home state, which had been a major source of northern opposition to Taylor in the early balloting, but which eventually swung to Taylor after he pledged to Bucktail supporters his neutrality in New York politics (*Annals* 16-2, pp. 434–38; Spann 1960, p. 384; Leintz 1978, pp. 69–71).

Clay's earlier prediction that Missouri was behind the House—and that Taylor therefore was a safe successor—proved immediately wrong. As soon as Taylor was elevated to the speakership, the House received the Missouri constitution, which included a provision excluding freed Blacks from entering the new state. The Missouri constitution rekindled debates that many had thought had been put to rest only a few months before. The presidential election of 1820 only stoked the flames higher: With the Missouri constitution the center of congressional debate, a constitutional crisis was nearly created over the question of whether Missouri's electoral votes should be counted (Peterson 1987, p. 64; Remini 1991, p. 188–90)

Preoccupation with the Missouri constitution ground virtually all other lawmaking to a halt. Immediately upon receiving the Missouri Constitution, Taylor appointed a three-person committee to examine it and report to the House. Consisting of two moderate slavery expansionists (William Lowndes of South Carolina and Samuel Smith of Maryland) and one moderate restrictionist (John Sergeant of Pennsylvania), the committee split on the propriety of restricting the movement of free Blacks into Missouri (*Annals,* 16-2, p. 440). The report back was only a prelude to a three-month debate.

As the debate stretched into January and toward February, patience began to wear thin. Clay, who had been absent from the House all this session, returned in late January and was immediately drawn into efforts to extricate the House from endless debate (Brown 1926, pp. 35–43, 65; Peterson 1987, pp. 62–66; Remini 1991, p. 185). Now a rank-and-file member, Clay stepped into the leadership position on Missouri. Adopting a similar tack to the one he had attempted as Speaker, Clay moved that the resolution admitting Missouri be referred to a select committee. The House complied and Taylor proceeded to appoint 13 representatives to the

committee, selecting from a list that Clay had prepared (Spann 1957, p. 241; Remini 1991, p. 187). Unlike the earlier committees on Missouri that Clay had a role in appointing, this one was a surprisingly faithful mirror image of the entire House. Still, the relationship between Clay's committee and the floor was similar to past efforts. The committee recommended the acceptance of the Missouri constitution, on the condition that the Missouri legislature pledge "by solemn public act ... never to pass any law preventing any description of persons from coming to or settling in said State, who are or hereafter may become citizens of any State of this Union" (*Annals*, 16-2, p. 1080). However, the restrictionists on the committee were all indisposed toward the proviso, favoring instead a rejection of the Missouri constitution altogether. The proviso favored by the select committee was interpreted by northern restrictionists as a victory for the south, and it was defeated by a close vote, 82 to 88 (*Annals,* 16-2, p. 1146).

The session dragged on with no resolution to whether Missouri "was a river, an Indian tribe, a territory, or a state" (Spann 1957, p. 240). Finally, Clay moved again to appoint a committee on the Missouri question, this time as a joint committee with the Senate, referred to as the "Committee on Compromise." The House acceded to this request, with the House members this time selected by ballot (Spann 1957, p. 244; Remini 1991, pp. 190–91). The pattern of the ballot suggests that the slavery expansionists were more united in their preferences for joint committee members than restrictionists, since the ranking of the committee (which was based on number of ballots received) tended to have expansionists on the top and restrictionists on the bottom (*Annals,* 16-2, pp. 1219–20).[25] However, the overall membership of the committee again

[25]The first 12 elected to the committee had an average first dimension D-NOMINATE score of -0.207, compared to the next 11 whose average was 0.216 (t=4.74). Remini (p. 190) reports that Clay circulated a list of names beforehand, indicating whom he desired to serve on the

closely mirrored that of the House. And yet again, the committee recommended the admission of

Missouri under essentially the same conditions that the House had rejected before. This time,

under the pressure of adjournment, the bill passed, 87–81 (*Annals,* 16-2, p. 1239).

According to Spann (1957), whose study of Speaker Taylor's actions during the Missouri

debate constitutes the most extensive institutional analysis of the controversy, the House agreed

to the eventual passage of the Missouri resolution because "the House was now ready to vote for

almost anything and ... rushed it through..." (p. 245). In fact, the two votes on Missouri's

constitution were virtually identical, and thus closure on the Missouri question did not come

through the wholesale conversion of House members. Nine House votes, out of a membership of

186, shifted over the course of the debate on whether to accept the Missouri constitution—five

were originally abstentions and four had been restrictionists.

Spann's interpretation of the outcome of the final vote is correct in noting the importance

of one strategic detail, however: The final vote on Missouri was held 5 days before the Sixteenth

Congress adjourned. Failure to resolve Missouri's status in the Union threatened western

violence and continued secessionist rhetoric from the South. Thus, just like the end of the first

session, closure on the Missouri issue in the second came not because a committee had induced

stability to a chaotic debate—looming adjournment was what mattered.

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committee. Although Remini—citing other sources in support of this view—takes this to be indicative of the wide-ranging support within the House for a resolution to the contest, its sectarian cast is still betrayed by the fact that pro-slavery elements still resided at the top of the committee as it was finally chosen. Furthermore, simple quantitative analysis reveals that the 101–55 vote to support the naming of this committee was strongly structured along ideological lines—ardent restrictionists opposed it, ardent pro-slavery Representatives supported it, and the middle of the ideological space was moderately supportive. Thus, while a majority was being built in favor of a compromise on Missouri, it simply is not the case that the "growing temper of the representatives to resolve the problem" (Remini, p. 191) was universal.

Yet again, Clay's behavior during the Missouri controversy saw him operate in a formal setting of rules and committees, and in a more rough-and-tumble tactical setting of trying to work a political coalition so that a small number of pivotal voters came his way. Using what was by now a well-worn strategy of stacking committees, Clay was a failure. Clay was much more successful, however, in using the flow of the legislative calendar—in particular, the deep, dark night of adjournment—to his advantage.

VI. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been two-fold. First, I have attempted to supplement traditional historiography about the legislative legacy of Henry Clay through the use of political science data and analytical techniques. Doing so casts some new light on the legislative moments in the House that have been closely associated with Clay. The research of Poole and Rosenthal, and their construction of estimated ideal points, allows us to understand more precisely when and how Clay attempted to stack committees to his advantage. Clay, it turns out, was a committee stacker. He did not invent the practice, however, nor was he especially successful when he did it.

At one level, *why* Clay was unsuccessful is made clear when we apply another technique of modern legislative analysis to his behavior: rational choice analysis, and particularly the spatial voting variant. Students of legislatures who study committee-floor interactions always want to know two things about the rules governing these interactions: First, does the committee have *gate keeping power*? Second, can the committee report legislation under a *closed rule*? In other words, can a committee keep off the floor policy proposals in its legislative domain that a majority of the committee disapproves of, and if a proposal makes it to the floor, can the committee

restrict amendments to its proposals? For the period when Clay was Speaker, committees in both

chambers had virtually no closed rule authority. The only exception was conference

committees—an important exception to which I will return. They had limited gate keeping

authority, however, and right of first proposal.

Clay appeared most successful in stacking committees in the Twelfth Congress. What

Clay was wrestling with in this Congress was not the problem of protecting an anti-English

majority on the floor—the House was overwhelmingly anti-English. The problem was delay, both

within the House and in the Senate. On the House side, his biggest prospective headache was

John Randolph and his followers, who were growing sophisticated in their use of delaying tactics

on the floor. Thus, the passage of the previous question motion at the start of the Twelfth

Congress was an important parliamentary innovation aimed at stemming the sort of delay they had

pioneered in the Eleventh Congress. On the Senate side, Clay's biggest worry was the prospect

that the Senate would appoint weak-willed committees, unwilling to report pro-war measures.

His experience as a senator in the third session of the Eleventh Congress acquainted him first-

hand with this problem, and the Senate behaved no differently at the start of the Twelfth

Congress. Although Clay could not directly influence the appointment and activity of the Senate

committees, he had it in his power to construct House committees that were dedicated to acting

quickly. On the margin, he also used a few appointment in an attempt to broaden the base of

support in the House for war with England. In the end, Clay's tactical genius in the Twelfth

Congress was aimed not at moving a reluctant Congress to war, but in overcoming the ability of

the minority to delay.

Later on, Clay was less favored substantively, and so his committee-stacking often came to naught. A majority of the House was moderately restrictionist toward slavery during the Missouri question, and there was no way that the recommendation of a regular House committee to strip Missouri statehood bills of their restrictionist content would prevail, as is evident from what actually transpired. Here, Clay used to his advantage a feature of legislative life that is often overlooked by legislative scholars, with the notable exception of Baron and Ferejohn (1989): the costs of legislative delay. When the House was offered the alternatives of Missouri without slavery *versus* Missouri with slavery, a majority always chose Missouri without slavery, and there was nothing in the agenda-setting powers of various select committees that could alter that fact. But, when the House was offered the alternatives of Missouri with limited slavery *versus* potential armed conflict during the congressional recess, a small number of House members switched, changing the outcome. Whether Clay consciously sought delay on the Missouri question until the end of the two sessions is unclear, but what is clear is that delay worked to Clay's advantage in these cases.

The second purpose of this paper has been to assess more broadly the nature of Clay's contribution to the institutional development of the House. In this review, the bottom-line conclusion seems clear: Clay was a brilliant and dogged tactician, but not an institutional architect. Others in the House served the architectural role. Unfortunately, none of them shone as brightly in the antebellum firmament as Clay, and therefore we may never know, with any satisfaction, the details of why the House evolved as it did.

Citations

Abbreviations:

Annals: Annals of Congress, followed by Congress, session, and page number.
Journal: House *Journal,* followed by Congress, session, and page number.

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Figure 1. D-NOMINATE scores of Henry Clay, 16th, 22nd–27th, and 31st Congresses.
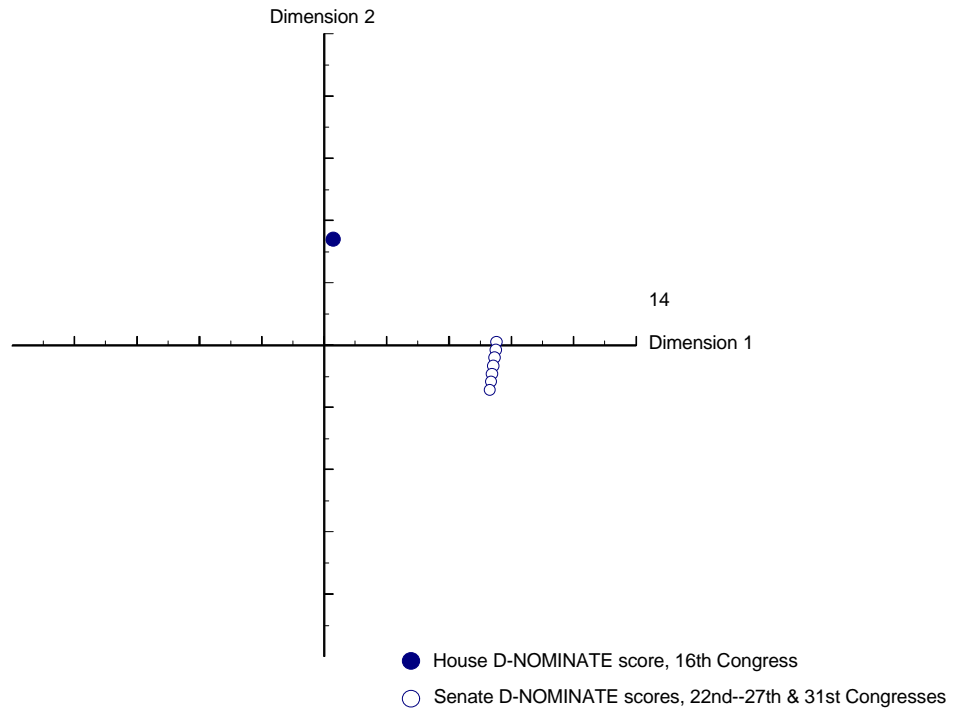
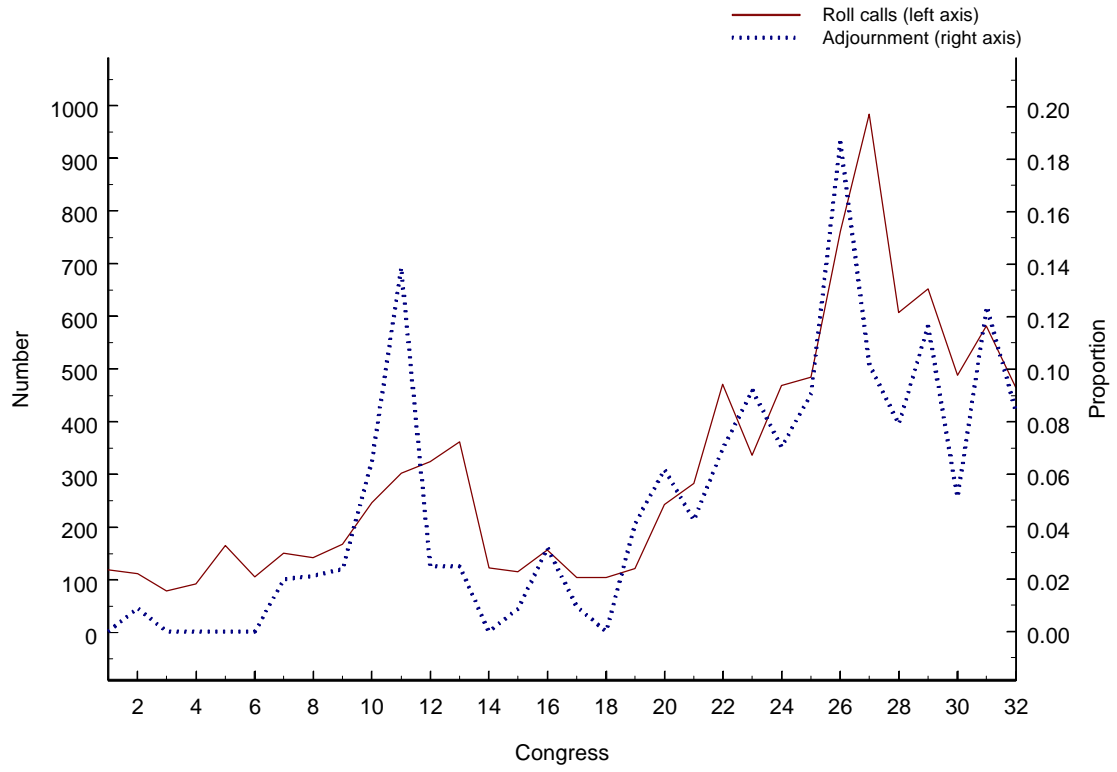Figure 2. Roll call votes in the House, 1st–32nd Congress (1789–1853).

Figure 3. D-NOMINATE coordinates, first dimension, for members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, 12th Cong., 1st sess.
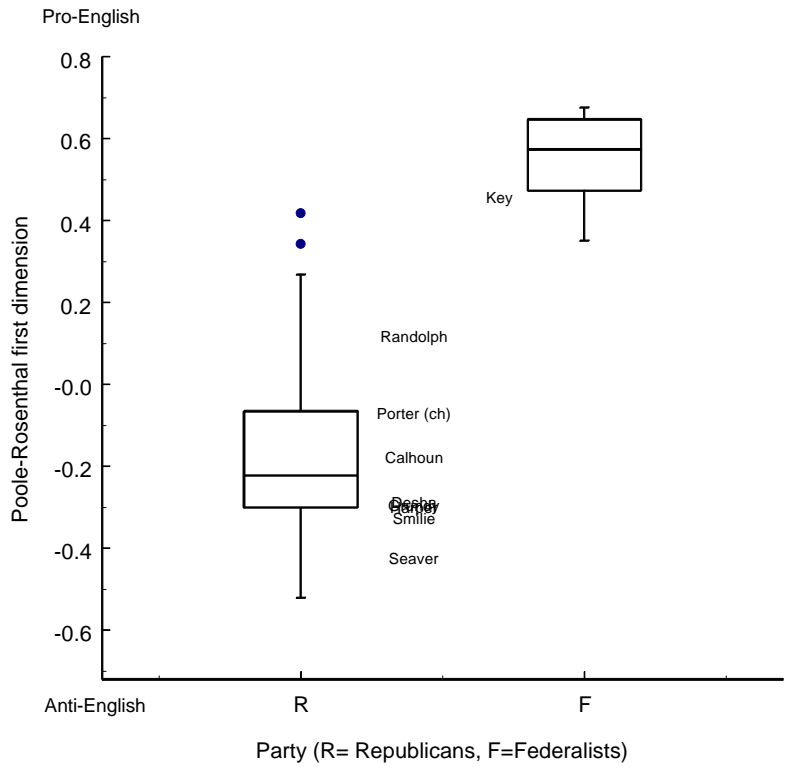
Figure 4. Comparison of ideological (D-NOMINATE) locations of House and Senate members
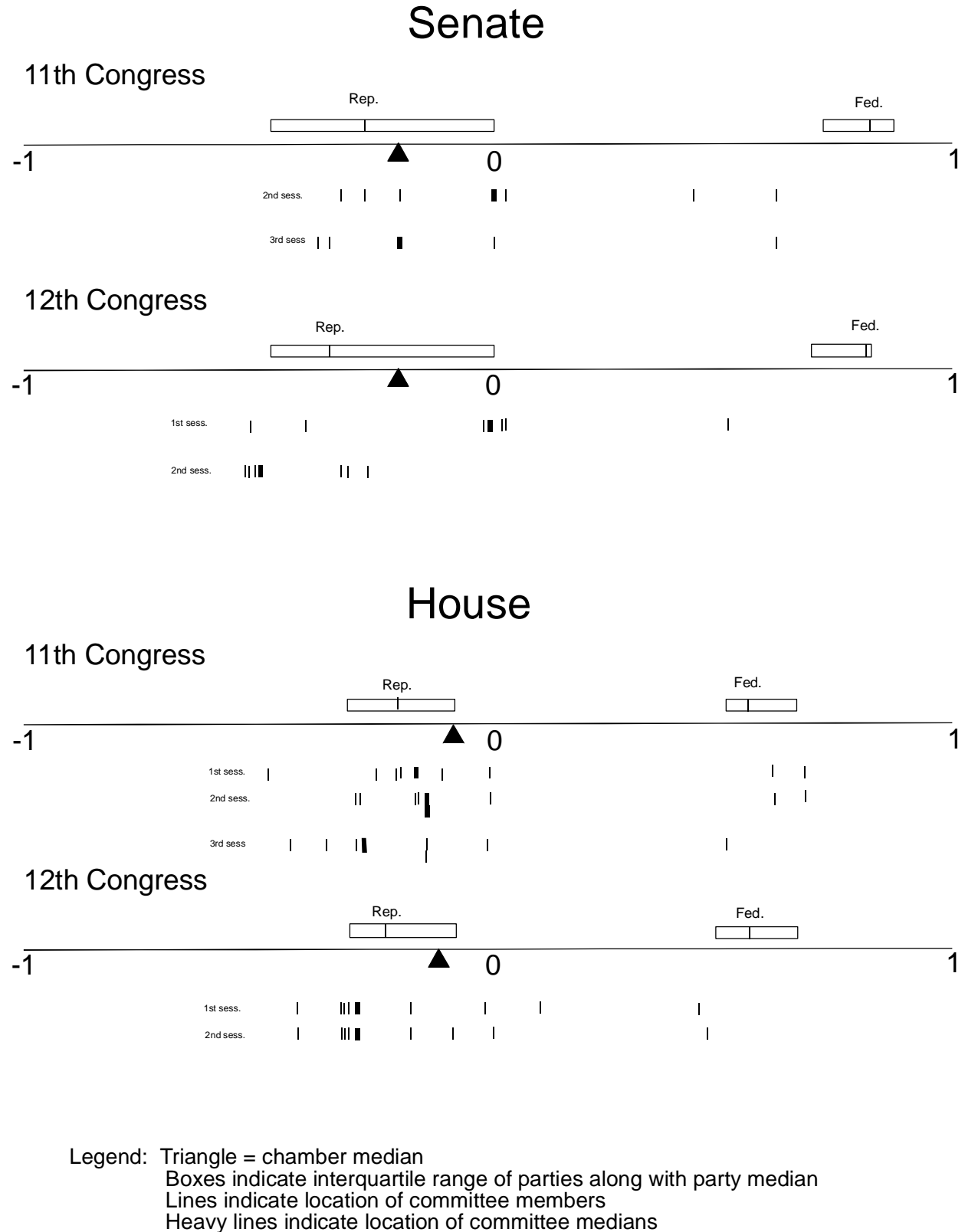of foreign affairs committees, 11th and 12th Congresses.

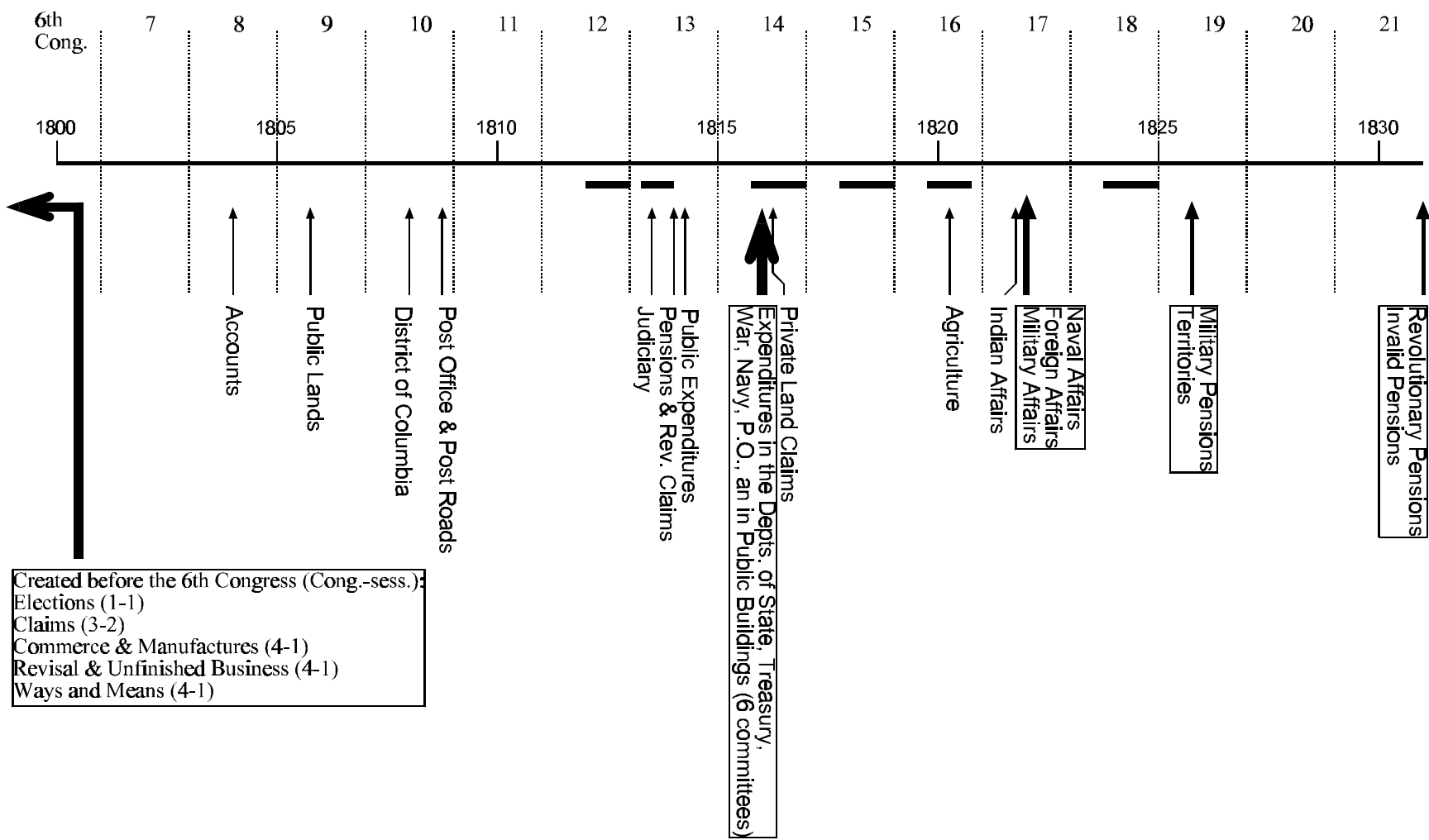Figure 5. Time line of House committee creation, 1800 – 1831.

| 6th Cong. | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 |

1800   1805   1810   1815   1820   1825   1830

Accounts

Public Lands

District of Columbia

Post Office & Post Roads

Judiciary

Pensions & Rev. Claims

Public Expenditures

Private Land Claims

Expenditures in the Depts. of State, Treasury, War, Navy, P.O., an in Public Buildings (6 committees)

Agriculture

Indian Affairs

Military Affairs
Foreign Affairs
Naval Affairs

Territories
Military Pensions

Invalid Pensions
Revolutionary Pensions

Created before the 6th Congress (Cong.-sess.):
Elections (1-1)
Claims (3-2)
Commerce & Manufactures (4-1)
Revisal & Unfinished Business (4-1)
Ways and Means (4-1)

Figure 6. Percentage of House and Senate members holding at least one standing and select committee assignment, 1789–1855.
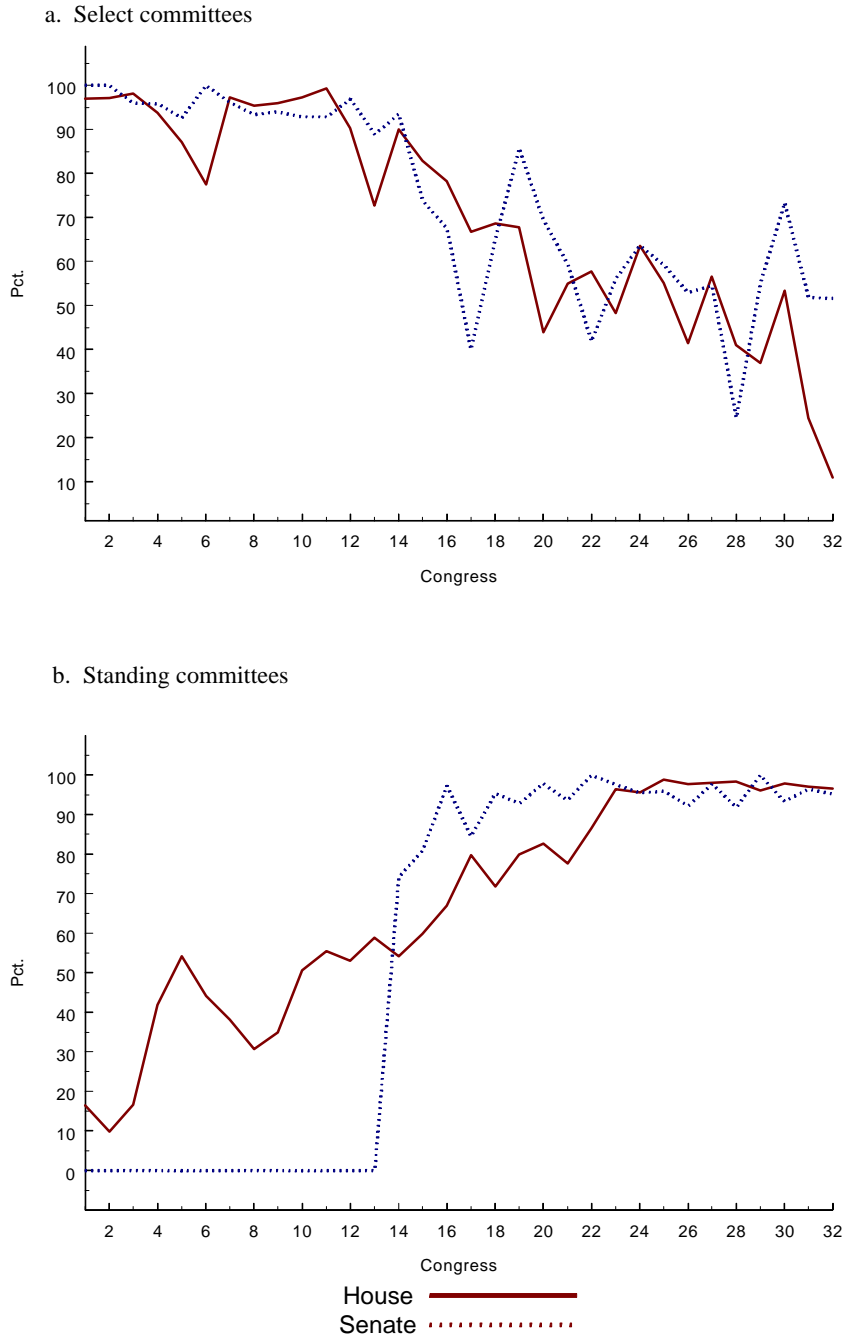
a. Select committees

b. Standing committees

Figure 7. First dimension D-NOMINATE scores of Missouri committees appointed in the first session of the 16th Congress.
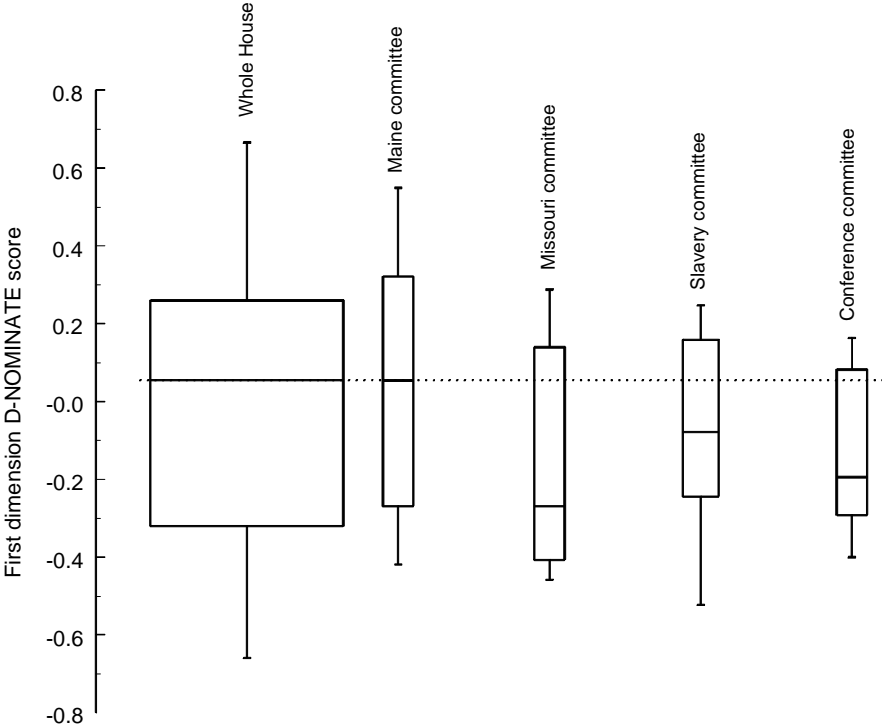
Table 1. D-NOMINATE scores of House members with service both before the 13th Congress and after the 25th.

Party before the 13th Cong.	Party after the 25th Cong	n	Avg. scores before the 13th Cong. (s.d.)		Avg. scores after the 25th Cong. (s.d.)	
			Dimension 1	Dimension 2	Dimension 1	Dimension 2
Rep.	Whig	7	0.10 (0.40)	-0.06 (0.29)	0.26 (0.07)	0.04 (0.20)
Rep.	Dem.	7	-0.21 (0.17)	-0.08 (0.10)	-0.34 (0.14)	0.03 (0.20)
Fed.	Whig	4	0.18 (0.34)	0.04 (0.14)	0.49 (0.04)	-0.08 (0.15)