



The Monkey Cage

Democracy is the art of running the circus from the monkey cage -- H.L. Mencken

On Potential Deals in the Super-Committee

by **John Sides** on [November 8, 2011](#)

Political scientists [Regina Smyth](#) and [William Bianco](#) have written a pithy and interesting analysis of the sorts of deals that might emerge from the Super-Committee and, perhaps more importantly, the kinds of side-payments that party leaders might have to make if one of those deals is to win enough support in each chamber. Here is [their analysis](#). Here is short excerpt:

“ Many predictions about the shape of a potential deal emerging from the Debt Supercommittee (SC) process have centered on the personal chemistry of committee members, or the dearth of good feeling between congressional Democrats and Republicans. These analyses do not recognize the substance of bargaining, including the set of programs and policies that might be on the chopping block and the degree of overlap in members’ preferences over these specifics. In considering the shape of the potential deals, we base our analysis on measures of legislator preferences, as mediated through the fundamental congressional institution, majority rule, using uncovered sets and two-dimensional NOMINATE data.

Our analysis shows that many different deals can emerge from bargaining among SC members. But if negotiations center on deals that are enactable in the House or Senate, then only two kinds of deals are plausible. The first is a deal in which the House leadership is able to use its influence to accommodate the preferences of moderate Senate Democrats. This outcome is most likely in the case that House Republican leadership perceives the political cost of the reversion point as just too high with election a year away, and expects that the blame for a failure to cut the deficit will fall squarely on House Republican incumbents. However, this possibility becomes unlikely insofar as schemes to avoid defense cuts emerge. Conversely, if political costs are thought to be small, and bargaining is driven by policy concerns, then the pressure of the reversion mechanisms is likely to force House and Senate Democrats to agree to a deal that gives House Republicans most of what they want.

The analysis also reveals the critical role of side payments in securing enactment of a budget deal. Given the configuration of chamber uncovered sets, even if a deal emerges from the SC with

strong bipartisan support, it cannot be enacted in both Houses without support from legislators who oppose it on the merits, a problem magnified by the inability to use policy concessions along the second dimension to attract support for a deal. If congressional leaders do not have enough side payments to compel a majority in one chamber to accommodate the preferences of the other – for a deal couched mostly in terms of the size and scope of government – then it is hard to see how Supercommittee process will produce a successful budget deal.

In the end, rather than taking power away from party leaders, the SC process puts them at the center of negotiations from beginning to end, and makes their support an essential component of any successful deal. Given policy deadlock between the House and Senate, leaders' deployment of side payments is critical for success. Moreover, party leaders can provide important political cover to their caucuses. Leader support of an SC proposal gives their backbenchers a ready-made response to constituent criticisms of a yea vote – in Fenno's terms, an explanation of Washington activity. It is not surprising, then, that as negotiations on the SC proceed, committee members from both parties are frequently consulting party leaders on both sides of the aisle – these leaders know as well as anyone which deals might be enactable, and control the political and policy resources needed to secure these outcomes.

Finally, our analysis highlights a dilemma facing the Republican leadership. While these leaders might prefer take automatic budget cuts off the table, either because they dislike the policy implications or feel that they and their party will feel the brunt of voter wrath, doing so erodes their bargaining position in budget negotiations. Thus, Republicans leaders must decide which outcome they consider to be more troubling: the prospect of a budget deal that favors Democrats, or the possibility of automatic cuts on programs they and their constituents favor, along with the possibility of significant political costs. Such concerns are consistent with attempts to find a way to sidestep the cuts in defense spending that will be triggered by a failure to enact a deficit-cutting deal. How Republicans resolve these issues will shape what sort of deal emerges from the SC and its prospects for success in the House and Senate.

(We are extraordinarily grateful to Sarah Binder, David Canon, and Larry Evans for their comments on earlier versions of this analysis, and to Keith Poole for providing NOMINATE data. The analysis and findings are our own and do not represent the views of the Fulbright Program or the U.S. Department of State.)